

*Abhidharma Doctrines  
and  
Controversies on Perception*



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*Abhidharma Doctrines  
and Controversies  
on Perception*

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法光

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Buddhism, the fundamental cause that binds us in the saṃsāric process is ignorance: the fundamental cognitive error on account of which we see things topsy turvy (*viparītam*). Absolute liberation is achieved with the attainment of perfect insight through which we see things truly as they are (*yathā-bhūtam*). Our mind then comes to be perfectly appeased, completely unperturbed — completely freed from defilement. The Buddhists in the Abhidharma period, as much as the early Buddhists and the later Mahāyānists, are deeply concerned with this question of the cognitive error. From this perspective, it is no exaggeration to state that epistemological doctrines have been, without exception, the main part of what comes to be known — for want of a better term — as ‘Buddhist philosophy’. This said, however, it must be borne in mind that, for the Ābhidharmika schools, particularly the Sarvāstivāda, epistemological views are intimately connected with their ontological commitment. Often, one lends support to the other; and at times they even stand or fall together.

In spite of their divergent epistemological views, all the Abhidharma schools and individual masters accept the existence of the external reality in some form or another. The main issues of contention are:

- (1) the instrument of perception;
- (2) the ontological status of the cognitive objects;
- (3) the mental factors involved in cognition;
- (4) the process through which we acquire knowledge of this external reality.

In the following pages, we shall outline the Abhidharma doctrines and controversy on perception. The epistemological theories of the Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika are still little understood, and we hope here to be able to shed a little more light on them with the help particularly of the *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā* and Saṃghabhadra’s *\*Nyāyānusāra*. These two texts, authored by leading orthodox Sarvāstivāda masters and extant only in classical Chinese translations, are very valuable sources for our understanding of the Sarvāstivāda doctrines in their proper perspective. It is no exaggeration to say that modern discussion in the West on Sarvāstivāda doctrines have mostly been derived from Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*, Yaśomitra’s *Sphuṭārthābhidharmakośa-vyākhyā* and the partially preserved

*Abhidharmadīpa* with *Prabhā-vṛtti*. However, the expositions in the first two lean heavily on the Sautrāntika stance and often do not do justice to the orthodox Sarvāstivāda perspective. The *Abhidharmadīpa*, undoubtedly an important work representing the Sarvāstivāda orthodoxy, is unfortunately only partially preserved. It is our belief that Saṃghabhadra has most brilliantly defended the Sarvāstivāda theses, and an in-depth analysis of them simply cannot neglect his expositions and arguments. Besides, by studying his *\*Nyāyānusāra* alongside with the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, we can avoid the pitfall of hastily labelling some Vaibhāṣika doctrines not found in the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* as ‘neo-Sarvāstivāda’.

The additional importance of the *Mahāvibhāṣā* and the *\*Nyāyānusāra* lies in the fact that they also provide a wealth of information on the doctrines of the early Dārṣṭāntika and the Sautrāntika. For the understanding of the Sautrāntika doctrines, Western and Indian scholars generally rely heavily on the later Sanskrit tradition, and often through the comments and argumentations by Buddhist and non-Buddhist logicians. In this circumstance, the *\*Nyāyānusāra* which cites the teachings of the Sautrāntika master Śrīlāta extensively, often in great details, additionally constitutes an indispensable source for our understanding of the Sautrāntika. A study of Śrīlāta’s doctrines, alongside with those that can be gathered from the logical texts, should prove fruitful for a fuller picture of the Sautrāntika doctrines.

There is another important text, most probably belonging to the early Dārṣṭāntika lineage within the Sarvāstivāda tradition, which is relatively little known. This is the *\*Ārya-vasumitra-saṃgrhīta* (T28, no.1549, 尊婆須蜜菩薩所集論) which is now preserved only in Chinese. It is the only extant post-canonical Sarvāstivāda text that antedates the *Mahāvibhāṣā*. Unfortunately, the translation is very abstruse and inconsistent, and as a result not much study, to date, has been done on it.

It is through the process of the various vigorous Abhidharma controversies that Buddhist thoughts in India developed, and continued to exert their impact throughout the doctrinal development of the Mahāyāna. The disputant schools of thought which we shall be encountering in the following chapters are the Sarvāstivāda, Vaibhāṣika, Dārṣṭāntika and Sautrāntika (and to a lesser extent the Yogācāra). But we must admit that our present knowledge as to what these sectarian appellations standpoint for is far from being satisfactory.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The historical relationship among these schools has been a keen subject of investigation in recent years among some Japanese and Western scholars. But modern researches into their historical relationship have in a way raised more questions than answered — and this is in a sense undoubtedly also a positive advancement in Buddhist scholarship. Thus, for instance, while in the relatively later texts, the Sautrāntika and Yogācāra are mentioned as two distinct schools, often mentioned together with the Sarvāstivāda and the Mādhyamika as the four representative schools of Buddhism,<sup>1</sup> E. Lamotte remarks that the Sautrāntika represented a philosophical movement rather than a homogeneous sect, adding that no Sautrāntika monastery has ever been attested.<sup>2</sup> Other modern scholars recently propose that the Sautrāntikas belonged to the Sarvāstivāda sect and that Vasubandhu, when authoring the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*, was already a Mahāyānist Yogācāra basing his Sautrāntika doctrines on the *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra*.<sup>3</sup>

In this book, therefore, before we actually get into the Abhidharma doctrines and controversies, we shall begin in the next chapter with a fairly lengthy discussion on the question of the historical interrelation among these schools. Recently, a whole volume of the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (= JIABS),<sup>4</sup> was devoted to the studies on the Sautrāntikas. The discussion in the next chapter reviews some of the major views put forward by the scholars in this volume. While we may not be able to concur on most of their interpretations made by the scholars in the volume, we nevertheless greatly value their scholarly contribution which, among other things, offer fresh perspectives on the related historical issues.

## Notes

- 1 E.g., In Mokṣākara Gupta's *Tarkabhāṣā*, ed., Embar Krishnamacharya (Baroda,1942), 34 ff.
- 2 Lamotte, E. *History of Indian Buddhism* (English tr), (Louvain-La-Neuve, 1988), 526.
- 3 E.g., See views of Yoshifumi Honjō, Robert Kritzer, *et. al.* in JIABS, vol. 26, no.2. See also discussion on their views in the next chapter.
- 4 Vol 26, No.2, 2003.