Debates on the Concept of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* in Dharmapāla's *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhiratnasamḥava*

NASU Enshō

Introduction

In this paper, I discuss Vijñānavādin's understanding of the concept of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* by examining Dharmapāla's *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhiratnasamḥava*¹⁾ (hereafter VM-SRS), a commentary to the *Viṃśatikāvṛtti*, particularly focusing on his doctrinal debates with Abhidharma and Mādhyamika scholars. The concept of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* (non-existence of self-nature in *dharma*s), or *dharmanairātmya* (selflessness of *dharma*s), is a distinctively Mahāyāna doctrinal concept developed to understand the theory of no-self (*anātman*) in contrast with that of Abhidharma Buddhism which only admits *pudgalanairātmya* (selflessness of persons). While debating with Abhidharma and Mādhyamika scholars, in the VM-SRS, Dharmapāla introduces a Vijñānavādin interpretation of the concept of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* based on the theory of mind-only (*vijñaptimātratā*), i.e., that there are no external *dharma*s (elements) other than *vijñāna* (or *vijñapti* [mind]).

1. Ābhidhārmika Critique of the Mahāyāna Theory of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* and Dharmapāla's Answer

In the VMSRS (90.a.26-27), the debate over the concept of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* begins with an Abhidharma scholar's critique against Dharmapāla. The Abhidharma position states that the Buddhist concept of the twelve bases of existence (*āyatana*) is the Buddha's skillful means for explaining the concept of *pudgalanairātmya* (90.a.4-26). Dharmapāla responds that the Ābhidhārmika's criticism is not valid because he does not take into account the Mahāyāna concept of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva*. The true intention of the Buddha, according to Dharmapāla, is that *dharma*s, such as *rūpa*, etc., are *niḥsvabhāva* (non-existence of self-nature) (90.a.27-29).

Dharmapāla continues that although *dharma*s such as *rūpa*, etc., manifest as if they are

(114) Debates on the Concept of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* in Dharmapāla's *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhiratnasambhava* (E. NASU)

real external existences, ultimately they are phenomenal manifestations of *vijñāna*, and these *dharma*s are in reality *niḥsvabhāva* (90.b.2-4). *Svabhāva* of all *vastus* can be manifested through the workings of one's own *vijñāna*. All perceptible *vastus* cannot be cognizable without *vijñāna*. *Vijñāna* is the only real existence, and all phenomenal manifestations arise out of *vijñāna* (90.b.4-6). Therefore, according to Dharmapāla, all external *dharma*s are *niḥsvabhāva*, and when we understand this we can realize the principle of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* (90.b.6-8). In this section, Dharmapāla is trying to convince the Abhidharma scholar of the necessity of the concept of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* based on the mind-only theory of the Vijñānavāda.

2. A Mādhyamika's Critique of the Vijñānavāda Interpretation of the Concept of *Dharmanīḥsvabhāva* and Dharmapāla's Answer

Following Dharmapāla's answer to the Ābhidhārmikas, a Mādhyamika scholar presents his criticisms of the Vijñānavāda interpretation of the concept of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva*. The Mādhyamika scholar argues that we must understand *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* from the perspective of ultimate reality (*paramārthasatya*). The realm of our external observation is nothing but confusions caused by ignorance. From the perspective of ultimate reality, however, the original nature (*svabhāva*) of all *dharma*s is empty (*śūnya*) (90.b.9-10). Although he admits the concept of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* as a Mahāyānist, the Mādhyamika scholar maintains that the concept of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* can be better understood by applying the Mādhyamika theory of the two truths of *paramārthasatya* (ultimate truth) and *saṃvṛtisatya* (mundane truth). *Dharma*s are empty in *paramārthasatya*, yet, the same *dharma*s exist externally in *saṃvṛtisatya*. *Svabhāva* of *dharma*s exists conventionally like phantoms in *saṃvṛtisatya*, but ultimately these *svabhāva* of *dharma*s are non-existent (or empty) in *paramārthasatya* (see, Ui 1963, p.743).

Dharmapāla allows that the Mādhyamika scholar's argument — that if there were no external objects to be seen, there could not be *vijñāna* to see them — is in accordance with the Mādhyamika theory that admits *niḥsvabhāva* of all *dharma*s only in *paramārthasatya* (90.b.10-11). As a Vijñānavādin, however, Dharmapāla does not agree with this Mādhyamika theory. Ui Hakuju, in his study on the VMSRS, explains that Dharmapāla understands that *vijñāna* exists in *paramārthasatya*, but *dharma*s do not exist in *saṃvṛtisatya*. Although *parikalpitasvabhāva* (self-nature produced from conceptual construction) in *saṃvṛti-*

Debates on the Concept of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* in Dharmapāla's *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhiratnasambhava* (E. NASU) (115)

satya is to be abandoned, the existence of *vijñāna* in *paratantrasvabhāva* (self-nature arising dependent of conditions) continues to exist. Therefore, the Mādhyamika's theory, which does not recognize the existence of *vijñāna* in *paratantrasvabhāva*, is not acceptable to Dharmapāla (see Ui 1963, p. 743).

According to Ui, the Vijñānavādins maintained that *citta* (mind) and *caitta* (functions of mind), and objects which are known by mind, all exist as *paratantrasvabhāva*, but confusions caused by ignorance arise by the manifestation of *parikalpitasvabhāva*, that is, false characteristics of existence. The Mādhyamikas, on the other hand, understood that from the perspective of ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*) there is no confusion and did not admit the existence of *paratantrasvabhāva*. Therefore, Dharmapāla maintained that the Mādhyamika's standpoint was invalid because only *vijñāna* exists (Ui 1963, p. 743, 90.b.11-17).

3. The Ābhidhārmika's View of *svabhāva*, Further Criticisms of the Mādhyamika Scholar, and Dharmapāla's Answers

Concerning the issue of the fundamental existence of *dharma*s, the Abhidharma scholar says that *svabhāva* (self-nature) does exist in *svarūpa* (self-form) (90.b.19-20). Dharmapāla disagrees, saying that *svabhāva* (*karaṇa*) cannot produce actions by itself. It needs other conditions (*pratyaya*). It is also not logical to say that one is held by oneself (90.b.21-22). According to Vijñānavāda theory, objects of the external world are manifested out of *vijñāna*. In return, manifested objects plant the *vāsanā* (or *bīja* [seeds]) in *vijñāna*. There is a reciprocal causal relationship between the external phenomena and *vijñāna*. External *dharma*s are *niḥsvabhāva*, and their existence depends on the *vijñāna* (see Ui 1963, p. 745).

The Mādhyamika scholar raises a critical question to Dharmapāla. If all phenomenal existences were non-existent, all *dharma*s would be *nairātmya* and *niḥsvabhāva*. In that case, because *vijñāna* is one of the *dharma*s, the nature of *vijñāna* would also be non-existent. Thus it would not be possible to establish the existence of *vijñāna* (90.b.23-27).

Dharmapāla answers that, although the Vijñānavādin posits that all *dharma*s are non-existent, he also accepts *dharma*s as *prajñapti-sat* (temporary existences). Even though there is no *svarūpa* (*svabhāva*) in these *dharma*s, we cannot say they are completely non-existent. For instance, there is no *svarūpa* in *pudgala* (self) and *saṃtāna* (continuity) when a nominal self moves from one *gati* (realm of existence) to another *gati* in the six *gatis* (90.b.27-28).

(116) Debates on the Concept of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* in Dharmapāla's *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhiratnasambhava* (E. NASU)

The Mādhyamika scholar is not satisfied with this answer. He contends that the nature of the *sattva* (sentient being) who moves from one *gati* to another is completely non-existent. When we say all *dharmas* are *niḥsvabhāva*, *vijñāna* must also be completely *niḥsvabhāva* and non-existent (90.b.28-90.c.2). Dharmapāla maintains that through the non-existence of *pudgala* (self), ultimately we can realize the truth of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva*. But such a process should be admitted as *upāyakauśalya* (skillful means) generally (90.c.2-3).

The Mādhyamika scholar does not concede and asks Dharmapāla, “In that case, why do you need to prove the *pudgalanairātmya* by using the concept of the twelve *āyatana* that is a skillful means?” (90.c.3-4) Dharmapāla answers that, according to the Vijñānavāda theory, *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* does not mean that all *dharmas* are completely non-existent. *Dharmas* arising by *pratyaya* are *nairātmya* and yet they are existent like a nominal self and the *nairātmya* of the *saṃtāna* and *pañcaskandha* (90.c.5-8). According to Uī, the Mādhyamika understands that *dharmas* that appear due to causes (*hetu*) and conditions (*pratyaya*) are *śūnya* (empty). On the other hand, the Vijñānavādin disagrees with the Mādhyamika and says that *dharmas* that appear due to causes and conditions are existent.

The Mādhyamika scholar demands that Dharmapāla explain the Vijñānavāda's definitions of *nairātmya* and *niḥsvabhāva* (90.c.8-9). Dharmapāla answers that, although *anātman* (no-self) is *pudgalanīḥsvabhāva*, the Vijñānavādin does not understand that *svabhāva* of all *dharmas* are completely non-existent. All *dharmas*, such as *rūpa*, etc. are partially *niḥsvabhāva*, but not completely non-existent. If *dharmas* were completely non-existent, we could not call them *niḥsvabhāva*. Those *dharmas* are non-existent as substances, but are existent as things that appear due to conditions (90.c.9-13).

4. Dharmapāla's Interpretation of the *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* and His Answer to the Mādhyamika Scholar

The Mādhyamika scholar, however, insists that Dharmapāla must admit that all *dharmas*, in principle, do not exist (90.c.13). Dharmapāla explains him that *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* does not mean that all *dharmas* do not exist. It means that *dharmas* are *niḥsvabhāva* as they are in the state of *parikalpitasvabhāva*. But this does not mean that there are no *dharmas* at all. He explains attachment as being illusory and brought about by reversed views based on ignorance (*avidyā*). When seeds (*bīja*) ripen in the mind, they grow in accordance with the conditions they encounter, and various characteristics are manifested depending

Debates on the Concept of *dharmanihsvabhāva* in Dharmapāla's *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhiratnasambhava* (E. NASU) (117)

on various conditions they encounter while developing. Because of this, we give rise to our attachments and believe that there are *svabhāva* in the objects of the external world. The objects of these constantly arising attachments are called *vastu* (things [to be attached to]) (90.c.13-20).

The Mādhyamika scholar continues his criticism by saying, “If there are no *dharmas* for these attachments, how can you call these things attachments, which has no existences to attach to?” (90.c.13-22) Dharmapāla answers that attachments are illusory and produced by reversed views, and they appear nominally without substantial existences. On the other hand, if there were real existences with real *svabhāva* as the object to be attached to, they would not be attachments produced by blind passions. Meanwhile, objects that are not real existences in the external world but manifest from *viññāna* all become subjects that can produce attachments. When these objects manifested from *viññāna* become objects of cognition, they can be attached to. However, the *viññāna* which is to be attached is *niḥsvabhāva* and there is only *ālayaviññāna* as the *svabhāva* for all *viññāna*, which is the *viññaptimātratā*. Ultimately, objects in the external world are productions of *ālayaviññāna*. The eighteen elements (*dhātu*) of the external world cannot be grasped. But the *svabhāva* of *viññānas* (i.e. *ālayaviññāna*) that produce cognitive objects are not non-existent (90.c.23-91.a.2).

Dharmapāla continues elaborating his doctrinal position that *Vijñaptimātratā* is not merely a theory of negation of *rūpa*. Nor does *Vijñaptimātratā* admit a *viññāna* that has another *viññāna* as an object of cognition. If another *viññāna* could exist as an object of cognition for a *viññāna*, it would go against the theory that *viññāna* is admitted as the only subject. The *svabhāva* of objects is, however, indescribable when it is separated from the *viññāna* as the only subject. Such realm is the realm of all Buddhas and Bhagavats (91.a.2-6).

Dharmapāla concludes his response to the Mādhyamika scholar by stating that the existence of *citta* and *caitta* transcends conventional linguistic expressions. But he maintains that all *dharmas* are not non-existent that is not empty (*śūnya*). The right cause for the manifestation of all *dharmas* is *viññānas* and such *viññānas* exist by penetrating hindrances created by the net of false distinctions (*vikalpas*) (91.a.6-11).

Conclusion

In the VMSRS, Dharmapāla demonstrates his understanding of the concept of *dhar-*

(118) Debates on the Concept of *dharmanīḥsvabhāva* in Dharmapāla's *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhiratnasamḥava* (E. NASU)

manīḥsvabhāva based on the *Vijñānavādin* theory that there are no external *dharmas* other than *vijñāna* (or *vijñapti*) through debates with opponents who claim the real existence of all *dharmas* (*Ābhidhārmika* theory) or the complete non-existence of all *dharmas* (*Mādhyamika* theory).

Dharmapāla does not introduce any new doctrinal theory in the VMSRS to counter his opponents. Rather, he tries to demonstrate that the *Vijñānavāda* interpretation of the concept of *dharmanairātmya* can provide a better solution to understand the foundation of all phenomenal existences, without either simply accepting or negating the existence of all *dharmas*, by admitting the existence of *svabhāva* of mind (*vijñāna*).

Notes: 1) The Sanskrit title is Ui Hakuju's reconstruction (Ui 1963, p.607). Currently, the only extant version of this text is the *Chengweishi baoxing lun* 成唯識宝性論, a Chinese translation by Yijing 義淨 (Taisho 31, no.1591). All references (page and line numbers) to the VMSRS are based on the edition of this text available in Taisho 31. I also consulted a Japanese translation of the text in the *Kokuyaku issaikyō, Indo senjutsubu, Yugabu*, vol. 7.

Works Cited

Chengweishi baoxing lun 成唯識宝性論. Taisho 31, no. 1591.

Jōyuishiki hōshōron. In *Kokuyaku issaikyō, Indo senjutsubu, Yugabu* 7. Tokyo: Daitō Shuppansha, 1935.

Ui Hakuju [Ui 1953a]. *Shiyaku taishō Yuishiki nijūron kenkyū*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1953.

—— [Ui 1953b]. “*Jōyuishiki hōshōron kenkyū*.” *Nagoya Daigaku Bungakubu Kenkyūronshū* 6 (1953).

—— [Ui 1963]. “*Jōyuishiki hōshōron kenkyū*.” In *Daijō Butten no kenkyū*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1963.

〈Key words〉 *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhiratnasamḥava*, *dharmanairātmya*, *dharmanīḥsvabhāva*, Dharmapāla.

(Associated Researcher, Institute of Buddhist Cultural Studies, Ryukoku University, Ph.D.)