Observation of the Body in the Bodhisattvabhūmi: Significance of the kāyānupāśyanā in the Early Yogācāra Philosophy

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The smṛtyupasthāna or establishment of mindfulness is well known as one of the most important meditative practices in Buddhism. It originated from canonical texts, and then was interpreted by the Abhidharma philosophers. In general, the smṛtyupasthāna is divided into four steps, and they are respectively associated with four sorts of observation or anupāśyanā: the observation of the body (kāya), feeling (vedana), mind (citta), and dhammas. Mahāyāna Buddhism also introduced this meditative method. Especially, Yogācāra appears to be concerned about it. In the Bodhisattvabhūmi, one of the oldest portions of the Yogācārabhūmi, they explain the smṛtyupasthāna as follows:

And then, how does the Bodhisattva correctly analyze the 37 bodhipakṣya dhammas by the principle of Mahāyāna?

In this case, [when] the Bodhisattva dwells observing the body with regard to the body, he does not imagine the body as something existing as a body. However, he does not completely [imagine it] as nonexistent. But he correctly comprehends that the body is a dharma possessed of the inexpressible essence. This is his supremely real observation of the body with regard to a body, [namely] the establishing of mindfulness.

While [it] should be understood [that] by the principle of convention, as for the Bodhisattva, the establishing of mindfulness as the observation of the body with regard to a body obeys the knowledge about the principle for infinite differentiation.¹

This statement can be found in the description about the 37 bodhipakṣya dhammas in Chapter 17 entitled “Bodhipakṣya-patala.” The Bodhisattvabhūmi explained only the observation of the body, the first member of the fourfold of smṛtyupasthāna, shortening the statement of the rest. But it is considered that the Bodhisattvabhūmi also took account of three other members, because just before the sentence cited above it referred to the smṛtyupasthāna in the Śrāvakabhūmi, one other oldest portion of the Yogācārabhūmi, which expounded the whole of the four elements in detail.

The opinion about the smṛtyupasthāna in the Bodhisattvabhūmi, however, seems to be
distinguishable from the general understanding of this meditative practice. This short paper aims to consider the peculiarity and significance of the smṛtyupasthāna in the Bodhisattva-bhūmi by focusing on the kāyānupaśyanā or observation of the body.  

What is the kāyānupaśyanā?

To understand the characteristics of the observation of the body in the Bodhisattvabhūmi, I will briefly explain the general interpretation of the smṛtyupasthāna. Some canonical texts are possessed of the formula of this meditative way. According to this, the smṛtyupasthāna is the only way for purifying the sentient beings, overcoming sorrow and lamentation, eliminating suffering and distress, attaining the right manner, and realizing Nirvana. In short, the purposes of the meditation are the purification of ordinary people, elimination of pain, and realization of Nirvana. Some studies found that in the canonical texts the kāyānupaśyanā/kāyānupassanā might be regarded as the most significant element in the four observations. They also showed that this observation was associated with the comprehension of impurity with regard to the body in order to make monks indifferent to the soiled body. 

As for the Abhidharma/Abhidhamma schools, one study says that they have a tendency of emphasizing the recognition of impurity with regard to the body by the kāyānupaśyanā/ kāyānupassanā. Added to that, some Abhidharma/Abhidhamma texts show the noticeable interpretation that the term smṛtyupasthāna/satipaṭṭhāna means the object of meditation, even though they acknowledge one of the meanings of this term as wisdom (prajñā/ pañña) or mindfulness (smṛtisati). According to the former understanding, the establishment of mindfulness with regard to the body represents “matter” or rūpaskandha which the body consists of.

Mahāyāna Buddhism also introduced this meditative practice. A study suggested that the Dā zhīdù lún 大智度論 (*Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa) explains the fourfold of smṛtyupasthāna in detail. The study said that the kāyānupaśyanā in the work also leads to the realization of the impurity with regard to the body.

In summary, manifold Buddhist texts from āgama/Nikāya to Mahāyāna sāstra generally use the observation of the body in order to make a monk leave the adherence to the body by recognizing its impurity.
The kāyānapaśyanā in the Śrāvakabhūmi

As mentioned above, the Yogācārabhūmi also attempted to adopt the smṛtyupasthāna in their philosophical system. In particular, the Śrāvakabhūmi introduced the diverse interpretations about the meditative practice under discussion. It is conspicuous that the Śrāvakabhūmi investigated the smṛtyupasthāna in the extremely analytic way. With regard to the observation of the body (kāyānapaśyanā), it enumerated 35 sorts of bodies, namely the inner body, the outer one, and so on, and declared the various ways to observe these bodies.

However, the characteristics of the Śrāvakabhūmi can be found in the explanation about the motivation for teaching this meditative way. It explicated the Buddha's intention of teaching the smṛtyupasthāna by indicating four different interpretations. (1) The first interpretation is that the smṛtyupasthāna is taught in order to remove the four false views (viparyāsa), namely the view of purity, ease, perpetuity, and self. In this interpretation, the observation of the body is regarded as the method to remove the false view that the body could be pure.

(2) In the second interpretation, the disputed meditation is used to destroy the cling to the self, or ātman. (3) The third one seems to be associated with the action theory. It explained that the body is the base of action, the feeling is the motive, the mind is the agent, and the dharmas are instruments. (4) The fourth declared the base, the reason, the agent, and the instruments of soiling and purifying. In this case the body is also the base of contamination and purification.

Among these four interpretations, the third one seems to be peculiar to the Śrāvakabhūmi, because preceding texts did not deal with the smṛtyupasthāna or anupaśyanā from the viewpoint of action theory. The canons, Abhidharma works, and so on aimed to recognize the impurity of the body through the observation of the body (kāyānapaśyanā). The Śrāvakabhūmi, however, used the meditation under discussion as the method to comprehend that the body, feeling, mind, and dharma are four elements constituting the action. This work did not aim to make a monk indifferent to the impure body, at least in the third interpretation. In other words, it seems to deal with the body affirmatively, when the body is observed as the element of the action. This opinion appears to be beyond the general tendency found in the pre- or non-Yogācāra works.
The Significance of the kāyānupaśyanā in the Bodhisattvabhūmi

The Bodhisattvabhūmi did not relate the observation of the body (kāyānupaśyanā) to the recognition of impurity. Its claim can be summarized as follows: on one hand a Bodhisattva should not image the body as something existent as a body; on the other hand he should not completely deny its existence, because the Bodhisattva comprehends that the body has the inexpressible essence. The Bodhisattvabhūmi said that it is the smṛtyupasthāna with regard to the supreme reality or paramārtha. In this way, the Bodhisattva aims at discerning that the body could exist as something inexpressible in the sense of supreme reality, and should not be conceptualized as an object to adhere to. In other words, the Bodhisattva comprehends the real existence behind the conceptualized body.

The idea that all existences are essentially inexpressible is typical of the Bodhisattvabhūmi. It is well known that this work argued the inexpressibility of existence in detail in its fourth chapter entitled “Tattvārtha-pātala.” A study mentioned that the establishment of mindfulness in the Bodhisattvabhūmi seems to be under the influence of this opinion. The study investigated the various materials gathered from Yogācāra texts, and provided the useful overview of this meditative way in this School, but it discussed the contents of this meditation from the viewpoint of the development of the mind only theory, the doctrine peculiar to Yogācāra School, without taking into account of the pre-Yogācāra texts. However, the reason why the Bodhisattvabhūmi regarded its smṛtyupasthāna as being supremely true (pāramārthika) could be hardly intelligible, if we would ignore the tradition of this meditative practice expounded in the canons, Abhidharma texts, and so on.

Compared with the pre-Yogācāra texts, the Bodhisattvabhūmi has a discriminating feature that it does not intend the Bodhisattva to be indifferent to the soiled body. In contrast, it stated that the Bodhisattva should not regard the body as nonexistent, even though he should not falsely imagine it as something existing as a body. This position appears to show that the Bodhisattva must accept the body as existing without mistakenly clinging to the conceptualized one. In this sense, the kāyānupaśyanā in this text could show kind of positive attitude which is similar to the third interpretation of the Śrāvakabhūmi that the body could be the base of action.

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Conclusion

The statement about the smṛtyupasthāna and kāyānupāśyanā in the Bodhisattvabhūmi is not long enough to understand what it actually aims at, but a comparison with the pre-Yogācāra texts shows that the Bodhisattvabhūmi has the tendency to deal with the body affirmatively. Although it is expected that this tendency could relate to the Bodhisattva’s activity in Mahāyāna Buddhism, I will discuss this issue at other opportunity.

*After completing the draft of this paper, I fortunately had an opportunity to talk with Dr. Lambert Schmithausen, He kindly informed me about his latest article dealing with the smṛtyupasthāna. It is regretful that this present paper could not discuss the contents of the article, but I would just introduce it here with my special gratefulness to Dr. Schmithausen:


1) BBh 259,15–24: kātham ca bodhisattvo mahāyānanayena saptātriṃśad bodhipakṣyāṃ dharmān yathābhūtam prajānāti, iha bodhisattvah kāye kāyānudarśi viharam naiva kāyaṃ kāyabhāvato vikālpayati, nāpi sarveṣa sarvam abhāvataḥ. tāṃ ca kāyānirabhilāpyasyabhāvadvadhamatāṃ yathābhūtam prajānāti, iyaṃ asya pāramārthiki kāye kāyānupāśyanāṃ smṛtyupasthānam, samvṛtīnayena punar bodhisattvasā ṣamāvāstā yavasthānaṇayājanayājanugataṃ kāye kāyānupāśyanāṃ smṛtyupasthānam veditavyam.

i) tāṃ em.; tam BBh ed. Wogihara; tāṃ BBh ed. Dutt. Cf. Tib lus brjod du med pa’i ngo bo nyid kyi chos nyid de yang. . . . (D wi 137a4, P zhi 156a5).

2) Cf. Schmithausen [1976: 260]. This article dealt with the historical development of the smṛtyupasthāna in the Āgama, Abhidharma and Yogācāra texts, but it did not mention to the Śrāvakabhūmi.

3) For example, the Satipaṭṭhānasutta says as follows:

ekāyano ayam bhikkhave maggo sattānaṃ visuddhiyā sokapariddavānaṃ samatikkamāya dukkhdosmanassanāṃ atthagāmāya nāyassa adhigāmāya nibbānassa sacchikiriyāya, yadidam cattāro satipaṭṭhāna, katame cattāro: tāha bhikkhave bhikkhe kāyaṃ kāyānupassī viharati atāpī sampajāno satimā vineyya loke abhijñādananassam. . . . (pp.55–56) (There is, monks, this one way for purifying the sentient beings, overcoming sorrow and lamentation, eliminating suffering and distress, attaining the right manner, [and] realizing Nirvana, namely the four establishments of mindfulness. What are four? Here, monks, a monk dwells observing the body with regard to the body, he is ardent, comprehends clearly, [and] is possessed of mindfulness, having put away the desire for and discontent with the world. . . .) Cf. Bucknell and Kang [1997: 19], Gethin [1992: 29].

4) Andō [1981: 146b] suggested that the Vijayasutta (vv.193–206) in the Suttanipāta had already showed the observation of the body in detail, the contents of which resembled those of the Satipaṭṭhāna.
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*nasutta* in Majjhima Nikāya. Tanaka [1982: 200–201] pointed that both Nikāya and Āgama contain the sutra treating just the observation of the body, namely the *Kāyatāsatisutta* and *Shēniān jīng* 身念经. Cf. Kwon [1997: (37)–(40)], Tobita [2006].

5) Tanaka [1982: 201–202].
7) Tanaka [1983: 15–16].
8) SBh pp.291.8–292.10. In the same way as the body, the SBh enumerated 21 kinds of feelings, 20 kinds of mind, and 20 dharmas. (Cf. SBh pp.293,18–295,7.)
9) SBh pp.299,18–303,3.
10) SBh pp.303,5–304,13. The observations of the feeling, the mind, and the dharma are used in order to remove the view of ease, perpetuity, and ego respectively.
11) SBh pp.305,10–306,3, *aparāḥ paryāyāḥ* yatra ca *karma* karotit/ *yadārtham* ca karotit/ *yas ca karma* karotit yena ca karotit/ tat sarvam ekadhyam [see SBh*] abhisamkṣipya catvāri *smṛtyupasthānāni* vyavasthāpitāni/ tatra kāye karotit/ vedanārthām/ cittena kuśalākulasālaś dharmaḥ/
12) At the end of the part about the establishments of mindfulness, the *Srāvakabhūmi* shows three types of interpretations of the term *smṛtyupasthāna*, but they are almost same as in the Abhidharma texts.
13) Cf. note 1.
14) Takahashi [2005: 18–33].

**Texts and Abbreviations**


SBht = *Yugaron Shōmonji daini yugashō* 瑜伽論 声聞地 第二瑜伽処 [Srāvakabhūmi the second chapter], Ed. Srāvakabhūmi Study Group, the Institute for Comprehensive Studies of Buddhism Taishō University, Tokyo: Sankibō Press, 2007.

*Saiipatṭhānasutta*, Majjhima Nikāya, vol.1, pp.55–63, PTS.

**Bibliography**


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