A Study of the Theory of “Consciousness-Only with No External Objects”
Discussed in Dharmapāla’s Vijñaptimātratāsiddhiratnasāṃbhava

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1. Introduction

This paper examines Dharmapāla’s interpretation of the consciousness-only theory as discussed in his Vijñaptimātratāsiddhiratnasāṃbhava 1) (hereafter VMSRS), a commentary on the Vimśatikāvṛtti (hereafter VV), and particularly focuses on the sections in which Dharmapāla positively demonstrates the theory that this world is “consciousness-only with no external objects.” In demonstrating this theory, Dharmapāla applies two levels of analytic reasoning. One is a logical argument closely related to the critique of the Ābhidharmika theory of paramāṇu found in the VV. The other is a cognitive argument that vijñaptimātratā (consciousness-only) is ultimately realized only within a Buddha’s self-consciousness, an argument that is also closely related to the discussion found in the last part of VV in which the vijñaptimātratā of the Buddha is briefly mentioned. 2)

2. Debate between Ābhidharmika and Dharmapāla on “Whether Rūpa Exists Apart from Vijñāna or Not” (Taishō 31, p. 91 a.11–b.6)

In the VMSRS, Dharmapāla mentions the Ābhidharmikas as criticizing the Vijñānavādins for their idea that, if vijñāna (consciousness) exists apart from words, rūpas must exist really apart from the words and have real svabhāva (own nature). 3) Dharmapāla, who understands that rūpa cannot exist apart from vijñāna, counters the Ābhidharmika argument by saying that, if vijñāna exists apart from words, as the Ābhidharmikas argue, then rūpas must also exist apart from words. This is just like saying that because one loves honey (as vijñāna), he eats yogurt (as rūpa). Dharmapāla continues in this vein. If vijñāna produces effects just as a sprout produces a fruit, since all vijñānas are different from each other, phenomena that result from each vijñāna are not the same. Therefore, when one vijñāna becomes a cognitive object of the other vijñāna, the former vijñāna can become an object

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to be grasped by the other vijñāna. When the phenomenal images of this former vijñāna become the cause of the arising of various dharmas as its effect, then it seems that rūpas, as dharmas arising as the effect of a vijñāna, can also become the cause of the arising of various dharmas, since they can become objects to be grasped, too. All dharmas originate dependently (pratītyasamutpāna). Then, like vijñāna, can rūpas become causes and conditions for the arising of dharmas? The five aggregates (pañcaskandhas) all arise dependent on conditions (paratantra), and there is paratantrasvabhāva (self-nature arising dependent on conditions) as the ground of dharmas that are parikalpita (produced from conceptual construction). However, if one maintains that rūpas are paratantra because they exist apart from vijñāna, just like vedanās (sensations), this reasoning is faulty. This point is based on Dharmapāla’s understanding that citta (mind, or vijñāna) and caittas (mind-concomitants) are conventionally distinguished as separate substances. Caittas exist apart from vijñāna, but rūpas cannot exist apart from either citta (vijñāna) or caittas. Although the nature of catuhskandhas (vedanā, saṃjñā [ideation], saṃskāras [conditioned forces] and vijñāna) is pratītyasamutpāna, i.e. paratantra, they are, conventionally speaking, not dissolved into citta (vijñāna). Rūpas, however, are dissolved into citta (vijñāna) and caittas (vedanā, saṃjñā, saṃskāras) both conventionally and ultimately.  

Dharmapāla also points out that by trying to prove that rūpas are paratantra, one falls into the fallacy of re-establishing something that has already been established. Rūpas have svabhāvas of vedanā, etc. (vedanā, saṃjñā, saṃskāras, vijñāna). Since it has already been proven that catuhskandhas are paratantra, one does not need to re-prove that rūpas are paratantra. Rūpas arise from citta (= vijñāna) and caittas and do not exist as real substances. The essences of caittas, such as vedanā, etc., and citta, are svasamvedana (self-consciousness). The fundamental position of Dharmapāla’s criticism of the Ābhidharmika theory of the real-existence of rūpas in the external world is based on his use of the theory criticizing the real-existence of paramāṇus (atoms). Dharmapāla’s critique is a logical demonstration of the fault of the Ābhidharmika theory of the real-existence of rūpas. He also mentions svasamvedana of each individual but he does not negate the existence of cittas (mind) of others.

3. Three Ābhidharmika Critiques of Vijñānavādins and Dharmapāla’s Answers (Taisho 31, p. 91 b.6–27)

The Ābhidharmikas criticize the Vijñānavādins by raising the following three questions.

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1. If there are no objects like rūpas, etc., viñānas cannot exist at all, because a consciousness depends on objects. However, just as a sword cannot harm itself, mental factors cannot cognize themselves. In this case, then, what are the objects of cognition of viñānas? 2. If a viñāna is a real existence, does this viñāna become the object of other viñāna? In this case, we cannot name this situation as viñānapārātimātrata (consciousness-only). 3. If there are dharmas as the Buddha’s cognitive objects, they are cognitive objects of the Buddha’s viñāna. Then, if the Buddha does not cognize his own mind, can we say that this is a true viñānapārātimātrata?

Dharmapāla’s answer to the first question is that, in the viewpoint of Viñānavāda, although there are no external objects, viñāna arises without tangible external objects as if there are objects which are touched by viñāna, because viñāna is the cause of mental-linguistic phenomena which compose this world. Physical sounds of voices arise and disappear and we cannot hear these voices when there is no talking. However, the voice’s intrinsic nature arising from viñāna is mental factors. Therefore, we can hear mental voices even if physically sounds are not being pronounced by a mouth. 6)

Dharmapāla’s answer to the second question is that, for the non-Buddhist realist Indian philosophers, when one receives the result of one’s deed, the subject involved in this process is called a real ātman. But Buddhists do not accept the existence of the real ātman that receives the result of deeds. Dharmapāla explains that, in the process of cognition, if one viñāna cognizes another viñāna, then Buddhists need both viñānas to exist simultaneously, because viñānas can only exist momentarily. If that is the case, there arises the problem of how to explain the simultaneous occurrence of causes and effects, which contradicts the Buddhist theory of the momentariness of all existences. A viñāna which arose in a previous moment cannot be cognized by another viñāna which will arise in the following moment. How then can one viñāna know the existence of objects arising in a different moment if it does exist? Dharmapāla explains that viñāna constructs sāmānyalakṣana (common characteristics) as if it can know the existence of other objects. However, this construction is nothing but knowing, and sāmānyalakṣana is not substantial. This section means that viñāna cannot cognize another viñāna whether they exist successively or simultaneously. 7)

Dharmapāla’s answer to the third question is that, if the Tathāgata had superior natures, you may say that non-Buddhist Vaiśeṣikas can also know these superior natures. But the
Buddha’s superior natures are his āvenikabuddhadharmas (Buddha’s special natures), and they are not sāmānyalakṣaṇas that are substantial cognitive objects of the realists, such as the Vaiśeṣikas’ cognitive objects. Therefore Vaiśeṣikas cannot know these āvenikabuddhadharmas, and the Tathāgata does not know sāmānyalakṣaṇas as real existences. The Vaiśeṣikas accept sāmānyalakṣaṇas as a category of sāmānya (commonness) that is substantial. For the Vijnānaśādīn, however, this sāmānyalakṣaṇa is not an external object but is constructed by citta (mind) and caittas (mind-concomitants).\(^8\) The Buddha does not cognize this sāmānyalakṣaṇas as an ultimate existence because he only cognizes his pure mind as ultimate. Dharmapāla’s answers to the second and the third questions focus on the logical problem that if a vijnāna cognize another vijnāna, we cannot say this is a true vijnānapitimātratā. His answer to the third question ultimately leads to the point that only the Buddha’s self-consciousness is the true vijnānapitimātratā.

4. From Pudgalanairātmya to Dharmanairātmya (Taisho 31, p. 91 b.27–c.20)

In the following section, Dharmapāla explains the effect of the Vijnānavāda’s secret meaning and its cause. The teaching of Vijnānavāda becomes the cause of secret meaning that contradicts the Ābhidharma’s Āgama (scriptures) and nyāya (reasoning). The effect of secret meaning here most likely signifies the direct acquisition of dharmanairātmya (selflessness of dharmas) in the theory of Vijnānapitimātratā. Dharmapāla also maintains that rūpas known by caksurviñāna (eye-consciousness) are neither substantial nor eternal, because these rūpas arising in the past, future and present are momentary existences. All dharmas other than Vijnānapitimātratā that is the truth accomplished by the Āryas (Buddhist saints) transcending this conventional world are not real existents.\(^9\) The Buddha describes the twelve āyatanas (bases) and makes sattvas realize pudgalanairātmya (selflessness of persons). Moreover he makes them enter dharmanairātmya and makes them realize true Vijnānapitimātratā.\(^10\) Here Dharmapāla explains the intention of the Buddha’s description of the twelve āyatanas.\(^11\) The Ābhidhammikas say that rūpa and sabda, etc. do not have avayavas (parts) and each one of them has oneness as svabhāva. These rūpa and sabda, etc. are like the avayavins (totalities) posited by the Vaiśeṣikas as the oneness of each svabhāva. According to Dharmapāla, however, svabhāvas of rūpa, sabda, etc. can resist each other, are divisible, and have many parts. Therefore, he denies the oneness of svabhāvas of rūpa and sabda, etc. maintained by the Ābhidhammikas. In the second half of his discus-
sion, Dharmapāla explains his criticism of the theory of the real-existence of matter in the external world based upon his rejection of the Ābhidharmika theory of the real-existence of paramāṇus (atoms).

5. Conclusion

In the VMSRS, Dharmapāla criticizes those who accept the real existence of the external world, because objects in the external world are based upon the viññāna constructing sāmānyalakṣaṇa, which does not exist as real substance. And he concludes that material objects in the external world are "nothing" as a result of the negation of the real existence of paramāṇus. Moreover, he suggests that the true Vijñaptimātratā is not only the negation of the material existence of others. For the Buddha, in reality, it also means the negation of the mental existence of others. We see this in his expressions, such as svāsāmvedana, pure svāsāmvedana of own mind (citta), and the true Vijñaptimātratā apart from grāhyā (object) and grāhaka (subject). Later, in the sub-commentaries of the VV composed in India and China by Vinitadeva and Ci’en Dashi Ji 慈恩大師基 respectively, it is suggested that Vijñaptimātratās are Buddhas’ comprehensive svāsāmvedanas that should be named as the absolute and comprehensive mind-only theory, rather than simply understood as simple solipsism.\(^{12}\)

Notes:
1) The Sanskrit title is Uı Hakjuu’s reconstruction (Uı 1963, p. 607). Currently, the only extant version of this text is the Cengweishi baoxing lun 成唯識破生論, a Chinese translation by Yijing 義凈 (Taisho 31, no. 1591). All references to the VMSRS, including page and line numbers, are based on the edition of this text available in Taisho.
2) Although there are no direct commentaries to these particular parts in the VMSRS, we find that the latter model is related to the descriptions in the part of dharmamārātmya (selflessness of dharmas) of the VV saying that only the Vijñaptimātratā without grāhyā (object) and grāhaka (subject) (anabhiṣpyadharma [thusness without descriptions]) exists. In this part, Buddha’s viññaptimātratā is slightly mentioned.
3) Uı Hakjuu, in his study of the VMSRS, explains that, for the realist thinkers, such as Ābhidharmikas and Vaiśeṣikas, etc., words are nothing but signs, and things signified by the words are all independent from the words (Uı 1963, p. 751). But for Vijñānavādins, the phenomenal world which arises from viññānaparināma (transformation of consciousness) is the linguistic world and only the viññāna which exists in the ground of phenomenal world exists really apart from the words.
4) Within Ābhidharmikas, however, Sautrāntikas, who understand that caittus are ultimately dis-
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solved into citta ( = viññāna), accept the real-existence of rūpas and citta independently. Therefore, for Sautrāntikas, the reason that “Because it exists apart from viññāna” for the thesis that “rūpas are praṇītyasamutpanna ( = paratantra)” is asādhārana-naïkāntika (unique as well as equivocal). Because they do not accept the real-existence of asamskritadharmas (unconditioned factors) and cit-taviprayuktasamskāras (conditioned forces dissociated from thought).

5 ) Because the reason that “Because it exists apart from viññāna” can be applied to not only rūpas and citta ( = viññāna) but also ātman which is not paratantra for other Indian philosophical schools other than Buddhists, this reason is anaïkāntika. When the reason that “Because it does not exist apart from viññāna” is used, it is proved ultimately that rūpas, citta ( = viññāna) and caittas are paratantra.

6 ) Dharmapāla conventionally accepts the multiplicity of mental factors.

7 ) For Vijñānavāda the knowing of sāmānyalakṣaṇa by constructing is that we had grasped the rule of language world like sāmānyalakṣaṇa and then constructed and understood self-cognitively like practice of language. That is similar to the theory of modern philosophical analysis that we do Sprachspiel (language game) based upon the Familienähnlichkeit (familiar similarity) of languages. This would be based upon the Mahāyāna standpoint that the mental phenomena of subject and object are transierced each other.


9 ) This understanding contradicts with Ābhidharmika’s teaching. See the following passage in the VV.

yo bālair dharmānām svabhāvo grāhyagrahakādiḥ parikalpitas tena kalpitenātmanā teśāṁ nairātmyāṁ na tv anabhhilāpynātmanā yo buddhānām viśaya iti / evam viññaptimārtasvāpi viññaptyan-tarapaṇirkalpitenātmanā nairātmyapravēśād. . . . (Lévi 1925, p. 6, ll. 17–19)

By stupid people the svabhāva of dharmas as grāhya and grāhaka is constructed, Those dharmas are nairātmya (selfless) as that constructed nature. But those dharmas are not [nairātmya] as ineffable nature of Buddhists’ objects, In this way we enter the nairātmya as the nature which is constructed by other viññāpti (consciousness) regarding to Vijñaptimārtatā. Therefore . . . (See Tola and Dragonetti 2004, pp. 141–142; Sharma 1993, pp. 84–87; and Anacker 1984, pp. 166–167)


11 ) According to Uii, twelve āyatanas have multipleness as twelve elements in superficial sense. But they have oneness as pudgalanairātmya in profound sense. In these cases, oneness as pudgalanairātmya cannot become cognitive object, but twelve āyatanas can become cognitive object individually. Therefore pudgalanairātmya can be realized. In this case, in reality, the twelve elements as rūpāyatanas (the bases as color and shape) and sabdāyatanas (the base as sound) etc. arise from the svabhāva (own nature) of viññāna. Characteristics of rūpa, etc., then, arise from viññāna and the phenomena of rūpa become cognitive objects of viññāna. Therefore rūpa is rūpavijñāna (mental color and shape) and sabda is sabdavijñāna (mental sound), and other āyatanas are also viññānas (See Ui 1963, p. 758).

12 ) According to Vinitadeva, the Buddhhas, Bhagavats, supreme yogins (meditator, yogācāras) know the all objects of all kinds completely and penetratively. They also see laukika and alaukika dharmas
as if they put the āmaraka fruits on the palms of their hands directly and penetratingly (PVṬ: Peking, 231.b.3–232.a.7; Derge, 195.a.4–195.b.5). According to Ci’en Dashi Ji, Buddhās and Bhagavats know sāmāṇyaalakṣaṇa and svalakṣaṇas (special characteristics) completely and penetratingly, because they extinguished kleśāvaranas (hindrances as defilements) and jñeyāvaranas (hindrances as knowables) (Taisho 43, p. 1009.a.8–c.15). These interpretations are possible only from the standpoint of the Buddhās’ or Bhagavats’ absolute and comprehensive theory of mind-only.

Works Cited:

(Key words) Vīṃśaptimā-traśīsiddhirnasambhava, Vīṃśaptimātraśa, Ābhidharma, Dharmapāla

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