A Premise of the *Trilakṣaṇa* Theory in the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra*

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[1]

As is well-known, the *trīsvabhāva* or *trilakṣaṇa* theory is one of the important doctrines of the Yogācāra school. The *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* (hereafter: SNS) also deals with the *trilakṣaṇa* theory. However, previous studies have pointed out that it is not integrated with the Yogācāra's idealism (cf. Hyōdō 1990, Takemura 1995: 70). The most remarkable feature of the theory in the SNS can be found in the explanation of the "dependent character," i.e. *paratantralakṣaṇa*. It is well-known that the SNS describes it as "dependent co-origination," i.e. *pratītyasamutpāda*, which is taken over by the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* of the *Yogācārabhūmi* (hereafter: ViSg). In contrast, later Yogācāra texts such as the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* and so on obviously depict the *trīsvabhāvas* from the viewpoint of idealism because the "dependent character" is explained as a "false conception," i.e. *abhūtaparikalpa*, etc. This difference certainly gives the impression that the *trilakṣaṇa* theory in the SNS is not associated with Yogācāra idealism, unlike in the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, etc. A more detailed investigation has shown that the "dependent character" in the SNS can be identified with the notion of **saṃskāranimitta* (cf. Hyōdō 1990: 29, 7-9). This term appears to point to the substance of the "dependent character" in the SNS. Therefore, this present paper attempts to investigate the relationship between the *trilakṣaṇa* theory and the notion of *saṃskāranimitta* in order to reveal the background to this theory.

[2]

In chapter VI, the SNS defines the *trilakṣaṇa* theory as follows:

Guṇākara, among them (**trilakṣaṇas*), what is the imagined character, i.e. **parikalpita-lakṣaṇa*, of *dharmas*? [It is that] which is established by name and terminology as an essential nature or a peculiar attribute of *dharmas* in order to designate by convention.

Guṇākara, what is the dependent character, i.e. **paratantralakṣaṇa*, of *dharmas*? [It is] the dependent co-origination of *dharmas*....

Guṇākara, what is the completed character, i.e. **pariniṣpannalakṣaṇa*, of *dharmas*? [It is that] which is the suchness, i.e. *tathatā*, of *dharmas*....

SNS P 15b1-6, D 14a5-b2: *yon tan 'byung gnas de la chos rnam kyī kun brtags pa'i mtshan nyid gang zhe na/ ji tsam du rjes su tha snyad gdags pa'i phyir chos rnam kyī ngo bo nyid dam bye brag tu ming dang brdar rnam par gzhas pa gang yin pa'o//*

yon tan 'byung gnas chos rnam kyī gzhan gyi dbang gyi mtshan nyid gang zhe na/ chos rnam kyī rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba nyid de/...

yon tan 'byung gnas chos rnam kyī yongs su grub pa'i mtshan nyid gang zhe na/ chos rnam kyī de bzhin nyid gang yin pa ste/...

Although the term **saṃskāranimitta* is not mentioned here, in chapter VII the dependent character is replaced by this notion. According to the explanation given in this chapter, it is the object of a conception and the foundation of the imagined character.¹⁾ In addition, in chapter I, the SNS states as follows:

When sentient beings who are ... recognizing the inexpressible essence of all *dharmas* see or hear the composed or **saṃskṛta* and the uncomposed or **asaṃskṛta*, [then] they think as follows: That which appears as composed and uncomposed does not exist, but the **saṃskāranimitta*, on the basis of which the consciousness of composed and uncomposed ... arises, [which] has arisen from the conception and is similar to an illusion, exists....

Son of the Buddha, in this way, superior people, through superior wisdom and superior vision, completely realize that that entity or **vastu* is inexpressible, [and then] in order that the inexpressible essence may be recognized, [they] designate [it] by the names “composed” and “uncomposed.” (SNS P5a2-8, D 4b6-5a3)²⁾

According to this explanation, sentient beings recognizing the inexpressible essence of all *dharmas* can understand the existence of the **saṃskāranimitta*, which is a product of consciousness and similar to an illusion. They deliberately use verbal expressions in order to clarify this essence of the object. The SNS does not explicitly mention the relationship between the **saṃskāranimitta* and **vastu*, but the **vastu* can be regarded as a foundation of designations in the sutra, because it is stated that

the verbal expression *saṃskṛta* does not exist without **vastu* (SNS P3b3-4, D3b5).³⁾ Therefore, the **saṃskāranimitta* can be considered to represent an aspect of **vastu* which provides a basis for verbal expressions.

[3]

As has already been suggested by Hyōdō (1990: 33-35), the term *saṃskāranimitta* can also be found in the so-called “Maitreya’s Questions” in the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (hereafter: MQ). It is widely accepted that MQ treats of the three aspects of *dharma*s, namely, *parikalpita*, *vikalpita*, and *dharmatā*, and these are identified with the *trīsvabhāvas* (cf. Hakamaya 1975: (21),⁴⁾ Hyōdō 1990: 33-35). It states as follows:

Maitreya, that which is the imagination as form or *rūpa* itself depending on name, notion, convention, designation, and conventional expression, like form or *rūpa*, [which are applied] to the *saṃskāranimitta vastu*, that is the imagined form, i.e. *parikalpitam rūpam*.

Also, that which is the condition in which the *saṃskāranimitta vastu*, to which name, notion, convention, designation, and conventional expression, like form, [are applied], remains in the nature of mere conception, and the condition in which [the *saṃskāranimitta vastu* has] an expression depending on the concept, that is the conceptualized form, i.e. *vikalpita rūpam*.

That which remains whether Tathāgatas appear or not, that is the *dharmatā* of *dharma*s, the continuance of *dharma*s, the realm of *dharma*, [and] that which is the condition in which the conceptualized form is always and at all times lacking in the nature of the imagined form, the selflessness of *dharma*s, suchness, and the true goal, that is a form as *dharmatā*....⁵⁾

Although it is difficult to comprehend the statements of MQ literally and exactly because of their complexity, we can understand that the notion of *saṃskāranimitta vastu* provides a foundation for nominal designations through conception. Besides, this term is explained in detail just before the definition of the three aspects of *dharma*s. MQ states that the *saṃskāranimitta vastu*, to which adventitious designations like form are applied, is neither different from the inexpressible realm, i.e. *nirabhilāpya dhātu*, nor not different. This is because if they were not different, then even ordinary people could attain supreme enlightenment, and if they were different, then the *nimitta* through which the inexpressible realm should be penetrated could not be attained.⁶⁾

[4]

The relationship between the *saṃskāranimitta vastu* and the inexpressible realm seems to show a similarity with the relationship between *nimitta* and *tathatā* as elements of the fivefold categories, i.e. *pañcavastus*. The ViSg, the earliest work dealing with the *pañcavastus*, defines *nimitta* as an entity, i.e. *vastu*, which becomes a basis for verbal expression, and *tathatā* is also defined as an entity, but it does not become a basis of designation (ViSg P zi302b3-5, D zhi287b2-6).⁷⁾ According to the ViSg, both of them are neither different, nor not different. If they were different, the *yogin* would investigate *tathatā* without depending on the *nimitta*. On the other hand, if they were not different, *tathatā* would be also perceived when the *nimitta* was perceived (ViSg P 'i2b1-4, D zi2b1-5).⁸⁾ Therefore, *nimitta* in the *pañcavastu* theory is considered to be essentially inseparable from the inexpressible nature as well as the *saṃskāranimitta vastu* in MQ, even if it may become an object of verbal expression. Thus, both have very similar features.

[5]

It is worth noting that MQ explains the notion of *saṃskāranimitta vastu* in detail before describing the three aspects of *dharmas*. We could not anticipate the existence of the inexpressible realm behind this notion if MQ did not delineate it in advance. This means that the three aspects in MQ require a detailed description of this notion. In other words, they apparently presuppose the notion of *saṃskāranimitta vastu*, which cannot be separated from the inexpressible realm.

In the case of the SNS, however, this assumption cannot be immediately applied to the *trilakṣaṇa* theory, despite its resemblance to the three aspects in MQ. Certainly some passages in the SNS appear to be related to the *pañcavastu* theory (cf. Takahashi 2002), but the SNS does not refer to the notion of **saṃskāranimitta* in the definition of the *trilakṣaṇas* in chapter VI. This fact gives the impression that the SNS does not presuppose the notion of **saṃskāranimitta* when it defines the three characters. However, a manuscript of an early Tibetan translation of the SNS from Tun-huang indicates another possibility. It includes a definition of the imag-

ined character in a fragmentary form, providing the following rendering:

(missing) (64a4) *bye brag du smra ba'i phyir mying dang mtshan ma btags pa'o//* (Hakamaya 1986: (13), E8)

The underlined words can be regarded as a translation of **nāmanimitta*, although the SNS in the Tibetan Tripitaka reads *ming dang brdar*, i.e. **nāmasaṃketa* (see section 2 of this paper). In addition, the Chinese translation by Bodhiruci renders it 名相所說 (i.e. described by name and **nimitta*) (Taisho 16: 699c15). These examples would seem to be sufficient evidence to suppose that the imagined character was defined with the term **nimitta* in the early version of the SNS. Moreover, the term *tathatā* is used in the definition of the complete character in the SNS (see section 2 of this paper). Therefore, the three terms *nāman*, *nimitta*, and *tathatā*, which are also elements of the *pañcavastu* theory, are associated with the definition of the *trilakṣaṇas* in the SNS.

As far as the SNS is concerned, it is not clear whether **nimitta* is a synonym of **saṃskāranimitta*. However, **saṃskāranimitta* in the SNS has some features shared with the *nimitta* of the *pañcavastu* theory (cf. Takahashi 2002: 75-76). Also, the *saṃskāranimitta vastu* in MQ can be compared with the *nimitta* of this theory. Accordingly, **saṃskāranimitta* may be considered to correspond to **nimitta*, which the SNS probably chose for its definition of the imagined character instead of the former term. As a result, the *trilakṣaṇa* theory in the SNS may be considered to presuppose the notion of **nimitta* or **saṃskāranimitta*, which can be compared to the **nimitta* of the *pañcavastu* theory.

[6]

Compared with the *trisvabhāvas* in later Yogācāra texts, the *trilakṣaṇas* in the SNS certainly appear not to be connected with idealism. At least, the examination undertaken in this paper shows that they are delineated with notions related to the *pañcavastu* theory, through which the existence of the *vastu* is analyzed. Nevertheless, the SNS does not attempt to prove the relationship between **saṃskāranimitta* and **vastu* or the inexpressible essence, unlike MQ. Even in MQ, the *saṃskāranimitta vastu* is ultimately regarded as only conception (Conze & Iida 1968: (35): *vikalpamā-*

tram etad yad uta saṃskāranimittaṃ vastu). Therefore, it is to be surmised that these texts do not seek to construct their thought by accepting an ultimate existent like *vastu*, but propose to analyze the superficial phenomena covering reality. In other words, they simply refer to the *vastu* in order to investigate the phenomena that unfold on it, but do not stress the existence of the *vastu*. In this sense, the *trilakṣaṇa* theory in the SNS indicates rather the possibility of its being integrated in the next stage, i.e. idealism.

[7]

This short paper has discussed the background to the *trilakṣaṇa* theory in the SNS through an examination of the term **saṃskāranimitta*. As a result, the *trilakṣaṇa* theory in the SNS is considered to presuppose a system like the *pañcavastu* theory. However, this does not mean that the *trilakṣaṇa* theory in the SNS has nothing to do with Yogācāra idealism. Considering that the notion of *saṃskāranimitta vastu* in MQ is reduced to only conception, it is thought that the *trilakṣaṇas* in the SNS also acquired the possibility of being combined with idealism by presupposing **nimitta* or **saṃskāranimitta*, which is regarded as a product of conception, i.e. *vikalpa*.

SNS *Samḍhinirmocana-sūtra*, P: No. 774, D: No. 106.

ViSg *Yogācārabhūmau Vinīścayasamgrahaṇī*, P: No. 5539, D: No. 4038.

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- 1) SNS P 23b5, D 22b5-6: *rnam par rtog pa'i spyod yul kun brtags pa'i mtshan nyid kyi gnas 'du byed kyi mtshan ma gang lags pa de ni gzhan gyi dbang gi mtshan nyid lags te/*

The **saṃskāranimitta*, [which is] an object of conception [and] a base of the imagined character, is the dependent character. (cf. Hyōdō 1990: 28-29)

- 2) *sems can gang dag ...chos thams cad kyi brjod du med pa'i chos nyid mngon par shes pa de dag ni 'dus byas dang 'dus ma byas de mthong ngamⁱ thos na 'di snyam du sems te/ 'dus byas dangⁱⁱ 'du ma byas snang ba gang yin pa 'di ni med kyi/ gang la 'dus byas dang 'dus ma byas kyi 'du shes dang/...'byung ba/ rnam par rtog pa las byung ba/ 'du byed kyi mtshan ma sgyu ma lta bu 'di ni yod/...*

rigs kyi bu de ltar na 'phags pa rnam kyis dngos po de 'phags pa'i shes pa dang/ 'phags pa'i mthong bas brjod du med par sangs rgyas shing/ brjod du med pa'i chos nyid de nyid mngon par rdzogs par rtogs par bya ba'i phyir 'dus byas dang/ 'dus ma byas zhesⁱⁱⁱ ming du btags pa yin no//

ⁱP ngam, D ngam/. ⁱⁱP dang, D dang/. ⁱⁱⁱD zhes, P shes.

- 3) *brjod pa ni dngos po med pa can yang ma yin te/...* (a verbal expression is not lacking in **vastu*...)

- 4) Important earlier researches are given on pp. (21)-(22).

- 5) Conze & Iida 1968: (39)-(41): (39) *yā maitreya tasmin saṃskāranimittē vastuni rūpam iti nāmasaṃjñāsaṃketaprajñaptivyavahāraṇaṁ nīśritya rūpasvabhāvatayā parikalpanedam parikalpitaṁ rūpam...*

(40) *yā punas tasya saṃskāranimittasya vastuno vikalpamātradharmatāyāṁ avasthānatā vikalpapratityābhilapanatā tatredam nāmasaṃjñāsaṃketaprajñaptivyavahāro rūpam iti...idam vikalpitaṁ rūpam...*

(41) *yā utpādād vā tathāgatānāṁ anutpādād vā sthitaiveyaṁ dharmāṇāṁ dharmatā dharmaṣṭhitiṁ dharmadhātūṁ yat tena parikalpitarūpeṇa tasya vikalpitarūpasya nityaṁ nityakālaṁ dhruvaṁ dhruvakālaṁ niḥsvabhāvatā dharmanairātmyan tathatā bhūtakotiṁ idam dharmatā rūpam...*

- 6) Conze & Iida 1968: (30)-(31): (30)...*yat tat saṃskāranimittam vastus tan nirabhilapyād dhātor nānyan nāpy ananyan, ... saṃskāranimittāc ced vastunā maitreya nirabhilapyā dhātūṁ nānyā syād apidānīm sarvabālaprthagjanāḥ parinirvāyur anuttarāṁ samyaksambodhim abhisambuddheran.* (31) *anyaś cen maitreya saṃskāranimittād vastuno nirabhilapyā dhātuḥ syād apidānīm tad api nimittan nopalabhyeta, yatas tasya nirabhilapyasya dhātoḥ prativēdho bhavet,...*

(30) Whatever the *saṃskāranimitta vastu* is, it is neither different from the inexpressible realm nor not different.... Maitreya, if the inexpressible realm were not different from the *saṃskāranimitta vastu*, then all ordinary people could enter complete nirvana [and]

attain supreme enlightenment. (31) Maitreya, if the inexpressible realm were different from the *saṃskāranimitta vastu*, then that *nimitta*, through which the penetration of the inexpressible realm could occur, would not be acquired.

- 7) *rgyu mtshan gang zhe na/ mdor bsdu na/ mngon par brjod pa'i tshig gi gnas su gyur pa'i dngos po gang yin pa'o'//...de bzhin nyid gang zhe na/ ... mngon par brjod paⁱ thams cad kyi gzhi'i gnas su ma gyur pa'i dgos po gang yin pa'o'//*

ⁱP pa, D pa tshig.

[Question] What is *nimitta*? [Answer] In short, [it is] that entity or **vastu* which becomes the basis of a verbal expression. ... [Question] What is *tathatā*? [Answer] [It is] that entity or **vastu* which does not become the basis of all verbal expression.

- 8) *rgyu mtshan las de bzhin nyid gzhan du brjod par bya'am/ gzhan ma yin par brjod par bya zhe na/ smras pa/ gnyi gar yang brjod par mi bya'o'//...
gzhan nyid yin na skyon ci yod ceⁱ na/ rgyu mtshan gyi don dam pa nyidⁱⁱ de bzhin nyid du mi 'gyur ba dang/ rnal 'byor pa rgyu mtshan la mi ltos par de bzhin nyid yongs su tshol bar 'gyur ba dang/ de bzhin nyid mngon par rdzogs par sangs rgyas na yang rgyu mtshan mngon par rdzogs par sangs rgyas par mi 'gyur ba'o'//
gzhan ma yin pa nyid yin na skyon ci yod ce na/ de bzhin nyid la bye brag med pa bzhin du rgyu mtshan thams cad la yang bye brag med par 'gyur ba dang/ rgyu mtshan dmigs pa na de bzhin nyid kyang dmigs par 'gyur ba dang/ de bzhin nyid dmigs kyang rgyu mtshan bzhin du rnams par dag par mi 'gyur ba ste/*

ⁱD ce, P zhe. ⁱⁱP nyid, D nyid de.

[Question] Should *tathatā* be declared to be different from *nimitta*, or should [it] be declared to be not different? [Answer] Both should not be declared....

[Question] If [they are] different, what disadvantage is there? [Answer] The reality of the *nimitta* cannot be *tathatā*. A *yogin* examines *tathatā* without depending on the *nimitta*. Even if *tathatā* were completely enlightened, the *nimitta* could not be enlightened.

[Question] If [they are] not different, what disadvantage is there? [Answer] There could be no difference in all *nimittas* in the same way in which there is no difference in *tathatā*. When the *nimitta* is perceived, *tathatā* will also be perceived. Even if *tathatā* were perceived, it could not be so purified as the *nimitta*.

〈Key words〉 *trilakṣaṇas*, *saṃskāranimitta*, *pañcavastus*, *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra*,
Maitreya's Question

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