A Premise of the Trilakṣaṇa Theory in the Samdhinirmocana-sūtra

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[1]
As is well-known, the trisvabhāva 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. pratityasamutpāda, which is taken over by the Viniścayasaṃgrahaṇi of the Yogācārabhūmi (hereafter: ViSg). In contrast, later Yogācāra texts such as the Mahāyānasūtrālāṃkāra and so on obviously depict the trisvabhāvas from the viewpoint of idealism because the “dependent character” is explained as a “false conception,” i.e. abhūtapaṭipāla, etc. This difference certainly gives the impression that the trilakṣaṇa theory in the SNS is not associated with Yogācāra idealism, unlike in the Mahāyānasūtrālāṃkāra, etc. A more detailed investigation has shown that the “dependent character” in the SNS can be identified with the notion of *samskāranimitta (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 samskāranimitta in order to reveal the background to this theory.

[2]
In chapter VI, the SNS defines the trilakṣaṇa theory as follows:

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Gunākara, among them (*trilakṣāṇas), what is the imagined character, i.e. *parikalpita-lakṣāṇa, 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.

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

Gunākara, what is the completed character, i.e. *parinispannalakṣāṇa, of dharmas? [It is that] which is the suchness, i.e. tathāta, of dharmas....

Although the term *samskāranimitta 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 *samsktta and the uncomposed or *asamskṛta, [then] they think as follows: That which appears as composed and uncomposed does not exist, but the *samskāranimitta, 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 *samskāranimitta, 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 *samskāranimitta and *vastu, but the *vastu can be regarded as a foundation of designations in the sutra, because it is stated that
the verbal expression samskrta does not exist without *vastu (SNS P3b3-4, D3b5). Therefore, the *samskāranimitta can be considered to represent an aspect of *vastu which provides a basis for verbal expressions.

As has already been suggested by Hyōdō (1990: 33-35), the term samskāranimitta 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 dharmas, namely, parikalpita, vikalpita, and dharmatā, and these are identified with the trisvabhāvas (cf. Hakamaya 1975: (21), 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 samskāranimitta vastu, that is the imagined form, i.e. parikalpitam rūpam.

Also, that which is the condition in which the samskāranimitta 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 samskāranimitta vastu has] an expression depending on the concept, that is the conceptualized form, i.e. vikalpitam rūpam.

That which remains whether Tathāgatas appear or not, that is the dharmatā of dharmas, the continuance of dharmas, 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 dharmas, suchness, and the true goal, that is a form as dharmatā....

Although it is difficult to comprehend the statements of MQ literally and exactly because of their complexity, we can understand that the notion of samskāranimitta 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 dharmas. MQ states that the samskāranimitta vastu, to which adventitious designations like form are applied, is neither different from the inexpressible realm, i.e. nirabhilapya dhatu, 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.
The relationship between the samskāranimitta 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 Viśg, 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 (Viśg P zi302b3-5, D zhi287b2-6). According to the Viśg, 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 (Viśg P 'i2bl-4, D zi2bl-5). Therefore, nimitta in the pañcavastu theory is considered to be essentially inseparable from the inexpressible nature as well as the samskāranimitta vastu in MQ, even if it may become an object of verbal expression. Thus, both have very similar features.

It is worth noting that MQ explains the notion of samskāranimitta 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 samskāranimitta 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 *samskāranimitta in the definition of the trilakṣaṇas in chapter VI. This fact gives the impression that the SNS does not presuppose the notion of *samskāranimitta 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-
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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. *nāmasamketa (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 trilaksana in the SNS.

As far as the SNS is concerned, it is not clear whether *nimitta is a synonym of *samskāranimitta. However, *samskāranimitta in the SNS has some features shared with the nimitta of the pañcavastu theory (cf. Takahashi 2002: 75-76). Also, the samskāranimitta vastu in MQ can be compared with the nimitta of this theory. Accordingly, *samskāranimitta 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 trilaksana theory in the SNS may be considered to presuppose the notion of *nimitta or *samskāranimitta, which can be compared to the *nimitta of the pañcavastu theory.

[6]

Compared with the trisvabhāvas in later Yogācāra texts, the trilaksana 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 *samskāranimitta and *vastu or the inexpressible essence, unlike MQ. Even in MQ, the samskāranimitta vastu is ultimately regarded as only conception (Conze & Iida 1968: (35): vikalpama-
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.

This short paper has discussed the background to the trilakṣaṇa theory in the SNS through an examination of the term *samskāranimitta. 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 samskāranimitta vastu in MQ is reduced to only conception, it is thought that the trilakṣasānas in the SNS also acquired the possibility of being combined with idealism by presupposing *nimitta or *samskāranimitta, which is regarded as a product of conception, i.e. vikalpa.
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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 *samskāranimitta*, [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 ngam¹ thos na ’di snyam du sems te/’dus byas dang” ‡ ’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 s天空 byas 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 zhes† ming du btags pa yin no//

¹P ngam, D ngam/. ²P dang, D dang/. ³D 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 & lida 1968: (39)-(41): (39) *ya maitreya tasmin samskāranimittte vastuni rūpam iti nāmasamjñāsamketaprajñaptivyavahārān niśritya rūpasvabhāvatayā parikalpanedam parikalpam rūpam...*

(40) *ya punas tasya samskāranimittasya vastuno vikalpamātradhatāyām avasthānātā vikalpapratītyabhilapanatā tatredam nāmasamjñāsamketaprajñaptivyavahārō rūpam iti...idam vikalpam rūpam...*

(41) *ya utpādād vā tathāgatānām anutpādād vā sthitaiveyam dharmānām dharmatā dharmasthitītā dharmadhātuḥ yat tena parikalpitarūpaṇa tasya vikalpitarūpaśya nityam ni-tyakālam dhruvam dhruvakālam niḥsvabhāvata dharmānairātmyan tathātā bhūtaikoṭir idam dharmatā rūpam...*

6) Conze & lida 1968: (30)-(31): (30) ‡ yat tat samskāranimittam vastus tan nirabhilapyād dhātuḥ nānyā nāpy ananyay, ... samskāranimittac ced vastunā maitreya nirabhilapyād dhātur nānyā syād apidānim sarvābālaprthagjanāh parinirvāyur anuttaram samyaksaṃ- bodhim abhisambuddheran. (31) anyaś cen maitreya samskāranimittād vastuno nirab- hilapyād dhātuḥ syād apidānim tad api nimittan nopalabhyeta, yatas tasya nirabhilapyas- ya dhātov prativedho bhavet,...

(30) Whatever the *samskāranimitta* vastu is, it is neither different from the inexpressible realm nor not different.... Maitreya, if the inexpressible realm were not different from the *samskāranimitta* vastu, then all ordinary people could enter complete nirvana [and]
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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 pa¹ thams cad kyi gzhi'i gnas su ma gyur pa'i dgos po gang yin pa'o//¹P 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 tathata? [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 ce¹ 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 pa '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/
¹D ce, P zhe. ²P 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, pañcaavastus, Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra, Maitreya's Question

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