Description of the Ultimate Reality

by Means of the Six Categories in Mahāyāna Buddhism

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To describe the characteristics of the *tathāgatagarbha* (the matrix of the Tathāgata, i. e. the Buddha's nature), The Ratnagotravibhāga (RGV) uses in Chap. I the following ten categories: namely, (1) *svabhāva*, (2) *hetu*, (3) *phala*, (4) *karman*, (5) *yoga*, (6) *vṛtti*, (7) *avasthāprabheda*, (8) *sarvatraga*, (9) *avikāra*, & (10) *asambheda*. Similar terms are used in Chap. II as categories for describing the ultimate reality, i. e. the *phala* aspect of the *tathāgatagarbha*. Of its eight categories in all, the first six categories are the same as those used in Chap. I, i. e. (1) *svabhāva* to (6) *vṛtti*, while the remaining two are (7) *nitya* and (8) *acintya*.

As for the ten categories in Chap. I, the RGV says in the commentary that there is a (tenfold) category by which all kinds of explanation of the meaning of the *tathāgatagarbha* exist (i. e. are made) with no variance anywhere in the scripture. After a brief explanation of the threefold meaning of the term *tathāgatagarbha* made on the basis of v. I, 27⁽¹⁾, the statement mentioned above probably means that these ten categories are commonly used in the scripture for describing the *tathāgatagarbha*, while the threefold meaning is unique to the RGV.

This statement, however, needs to be corrected to some extent by the

(1) *yenārthena sarvatrāviśeṣeṇa pravacane sarvākāraṃ tad (=tathāgatagarbha)-arthasūcanam bhavati tad api.....*. RGV, p. 26, ll. 10-11.

(2) RGV. p. 26, ll. 5-10. The 3 meanings are: *dharmakāyapariśpharaṇārtha*, *tathātāvyatirekārtha*, & *gotrasambhavārtha*. About this threefold meaning, see my article: The Tathāgatotpattisambhavanirdeśa of the Avatamsaka and the Ratnagotravibhāga (Uttaratantra), with special reference to the term *tathāgatagotrāsambhāva*, Journal of Indian & Buddhist studies, Vol. VII, no. 1, 1958, pp. 348-343.

following descriptions in the same RGV; namely, after explaining the sixth category, *vr̥tti*, the commentary says:

After this passage, with reference to very this category of *vr̥tti*, other (remaining) four categories are to be known through separate explanations.⁽³⁾

And also:

All those teachings on the immaculate Ultimate Reality (*anāśra-vadhātu*) taught by the Lord in detail through various forms of doctrines are contracted in brief into these six categories, i. e. *svabhāva*, *hetu*, *phala*, *karman*, *yoga* and *vr̥tti*.⁽⁴⁾

What we come to know from these passages is that a set of categories which is commonly used and hence the basic one is not the 'whole of the ten categories, but the first six categories beginning with *svabhāva*, and that the object to which is applied this set of six categories is not the *tathāgatagarbha* alone, but is the Ultimate Reality in any aspect inclusive of the aspect of *tathāgatagarbha*, and thirdly that the RGV added four categories to the regular set in order to explain the mode of manifestation (*vr̥tti*) of the *tathāgatagarbha*. This is proven from the use of the same set of categories in Chap. II, where the seventh and the eighth categories are said to be included in the sixth, *vr̥tti*,⁽⁵⁾ as showing special characteristics of the *vr̥tti* aspect of the Ultimate Reality characterised as *bodhi* or *āśrayaparivr̥tti*,

Then how is this set of six categories used in the scripture (*pravacana*) and what is meant by the term *pravacana*?

At first, we shall see how it is applied in the basic verses (*śloka*) of the RGV.

(3) *ataḥ param etam eva vr̥ttiyartham ārabhya tadānye catvāro 'rthāḥ prabhedanirdeśād eva veditavyāḥ*. RGV, p. 40, ll. 5-6.

(4) *ye kecid anāśravadhātunirdeśe nānādharmaparyāyamukheṣu bhagavatā viṣtareṇa nirdeśāḥ sarve te ebhir eva samāsataḥ ṣaḍbhiḥ svabhāva-hetu-phala-karma-yoga-vr̥ttiyarthaiḥ saṃgrhitāḥ*..... RGV, p. 40, ll. 12-14.

(5) *tribhir gāmbhīryaudāryamahātmyaprabhavitair buddhakāyair nityam a bhavagater acintyena prakāreṇa vartanaṃ vr̥ttiḥ*. RGV, p. 79, ll. 16-18.

sadā prakṛty-asamkṛṣṭaḥ śuddharatnāṃbarāmbuvat/.....(1)

dharmādhimukty-adhiprajñā-samādhi-karuṇānvayaḥ/ (v. I, 30).....(2)

śubhātmasukhanityatva-guṇapārmitā-phalaḥ⁽⁶⁾(3)

duḥkhanirvic-chamaprāpticchandapraṇidhi-karmakaḥ/ (I, 35)(4)

mahôdadhir ivā 'meyaguṇaratnâkṣayâkaraḥ/

pradīpavad anirbhāgaguṇayukta-svabhāvataḥ/ (I, 42).....(5)

prthagjanārya-sambuddha-tathatāvyatirekataḥ/.....(6)

sattveṣu jinagarbho 'yaṃ deśitas tattvadarśibhiḥ/ (I, 45)

(Being always undefiled by nature, like the pure [character] of a treasure,
the sky and water :

Following after faith in the [Mahāyāna] doctrine, the excellent intellect,
Meditation and Compassion : —

Having the climax of qualities with respect to purity, unity, happiness
and eternity as its result ;

Having aversion from the Suffering and desire for and vow to the
attainment of the Quiescence as its functions ; —

Being, like an ocean, an imperishable receptacle of treasures of innumerable qualities,

As being by nature united with its properties inseparably, as a lantern
[is inseparable from its light and others] ; —

And as its [various manifestation in the forms of] ordinary beings, the
sages and the Buddhas are not differentiated from the Reality,
[there exists] this Matrix of the Victor (= Tathāgata) among the living
beings ; —

Thus is taught by those who perceived the Truth.)

These four verses, though they are interrupted by the commentary passages, are no doubt composed in a series, whose subject word is 'jinagarbha'⁽⁷⁾ in the last verse and in which is applied a mode of the set of six

(6) -*ta phalam* / in the text. The reason of correction will be shown below.

(7) Being appositional to 'jinagarbho 'yaṃ', the reading '-*pāramitā-phalaḥ*' as a Bahuvrīhi comp. should be accepted. See note 6.

categories previously known to the author.

Quite a similar application of the same mode of description in a series of verses is found in the Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra (MSA).

- sarvadharmadvayāvara-tathatāviśuddhi-lakṣaṇaḥ* |
vastujñāna-tadalamba-vaśitākṣaya-lakṣaṇaḥ || (v. IX, 56).....(1)
sarvatas tathatājñāna-bhāvanā-samudāgamaḥ |(2)
sarvasatva-dvayādāna-sarvathākṣayatā-phalaḥ || (IX, 57)(3)
kāyavākācittanirmāṇa-prayogōpāya-karmakāḥ |(4)
samādhi-dhāraṇī-dvāradvayāmeva-samanvitaḥ || (IX, 58).....(5)
svabhāva-dharmasaṃbhoga-nirmāṇair bhinnavṛttikāḥ |(6)
dharmadhātuvīśuddho 'yaṃ buddhānāṃ samudāhṛtaḥ || (IX, 59)

(Its characteristic is the purification of the two kinds of obscurations
 with regard to the Reality of all the phenomena,

And is the inexhaustible controlling power on the knowledge of the
 nature and the object of its cognition; —

It is originated from the practices of wisdom with regard to the Reality
 in all respects;

It is the result of the inexhaustible formation of the two [i. e. benefit
 and happiness] by all possible means for the sake of all the livings;

Its function is the transformation of body, speech and mind as the
 means of appliance;

It is endowed with the gates of meditation and mystical formulae and
 with the immeasurable accumulation of the two [i. e. bliss and
 wisdom]; —

It manifests itself variously by the Body of its own essence, by that
 of Enjoyment of the doctrine, and by that of incarnation: —

[Thus] is explained this immaculate Ultimate Reality of the Buddhas.

(8) '.....*ta phalam*/' in the text is corrected by the same reason as above. See
 also Tib., which has 'ḥbras-bu-can'.

These four verses in a series are said to be the *ślokas* on the topic of ‘*dharmadhātuviśuddhi*’ which is, at the same time, like ‘*jinagarbha*’ in the example of the RGV, the subject word for the whole sentence.

Thus in the application of the same mode of description, the RGV and the MSA show a close relationship between them and as the RGV quotes the MSA in the commentary, it was no doubt the RGV which imitated the MSA. It is especially sure about Chap. II of the RGV which, though there is no example of application of the same mode in a series of verses as above, has many traces of influences of the MSA in its doctrines (e. g. the triple *kāya* theory, *avikalpajñāna* and *tatprṣṭalabdha*, etc.)⁽⁹⁾

But the MSA cannot claim its originality of the use of the six categories, because according to Prof. Nishio’s information,⁽¹⁰⁾ almost the same verses as

- (9) The same is possibly said about the commentary passage of Chap. I, but, as for the *ślokas* or basic verses in Chap. I, the influences of the MSA are scarcely observed except for the application of the six categories mentioned above.
- (10) Kyōyū Nishio: *Bucchikyōron no kenkyū* (in Jap.) (Studies on the BBS and the Buddhahūmi-vyākhyāna, studies, translation & the Tib. texts), 2 Vols., Nagoya, 1940. The following is a comparative table of the 4 verses of BBS & MSA in their Tib. versions.

BBS (Nishio’s text. p. 23)

MSA (Peking Mdo-ḡgrel, Phi, 12b, 2-5; Repr. Vol. 108, p. 7)

/chos rnam kun-gyi de-bshin-ñid/
 /sgrib gñis ldan dag mtshan-ñid-can/
 /dños-po śes-pa de dmigs-pa/
 /dbañ tshad mi-śes mtshan-ñid-can//
 /de-bshin-ñid śes thams-cad-nas/
 /bsgoms-la yañ-dag ḡgrub-pa-can/
 /sems-can kun-la gñis bskyed-pa/
 /rnam-kun mi-bzad ḡbras-bu-can//
 /lus dan ñag dan sems sprul-paḡi/
 /sbyor-baḡi thabs-kyi las-can yin/
 /tiñ-ñe-ḡdsin dan gzuñs sgo dan/
 /dpag-tu med-pa gñis-dan ldan//
 /rañ-bshin chos-rdsogs loñs-spyod dan/
 /sprul-pas tha-dad ḡjug-pa-can/
 /sañs-rgyas rnam-kyi chos-kyi dbyiñs/
 /rnam dag ḡdi ni yañ-dag brjod/

/chos rnam kun-gyi de-bshin-ñid/
 /sgrib-gñis dag-paḡi mtshan-ñid-can/
 /dños-po śes-pa de-la dmigs/
 /dbañ zad mi-śes mtshan-ñid do//
 /de-bshin-ñid śes thams-cad-nas/
 /bsgoms-pa las ni yañ-dag ḡbyuñ/
 /sems-can kun-la rnam-kun-tu/
 /gñis bskyod mi-zad ḡbras-bu-can//
 /sku dan gsuñ dan thugs sprul-paḡi//
 /ḡbyor-baḡi thabs-kyi las-can te/
 /tiñ-ñe-ḡdsin dan gzuñs sgo dan/
 /dpag-tu med-pa gñis-dan ldan//
 /rañ-bshin chos-rdsogs loñs-spyod dan/
 /sprul de-dag-gi(s) tha-dad-ḡjug/
 /ḡdi-ni sañs-rgyas rnam-dag-gi/
 /chos-dbyiñs rnam-par dag-par bsad//

in the MSA mentioned above are found in the Buddhābhūmisūtra (BBS) towards the end of the text as a kind of concluding verses. Also there are other passages in the MSA where the doctrines taught in the BBS are summarised, and hence the originality seems better to be ascribed to the BBS.

It is however still difficult to regard the BBS as the only source of the set of six categories. Because the *yogācārabhūmi* (YB), in which is also found the mentioning of the same set of categories, has not so clear theory as found in the BBS on the *buddhakāya* or has no exposition of the four kinds of wisdom (i. e. *ādarśa-jñ.*, *śamatā-jñ.*, *pratyavekṣā-jñ.*, *kṛtyānuṣṭhāna-jñ.*), both of which are the central topics of the BBS, and at present we have no objective proof to fix the order of composition between the two treatises. Furthermore, curious enough is the manner of mentioning of the said categories in the YB. Namely, it is found in the passage where the science of grammar (*śabda-vidyā* or *vyākaraṇa*) is explained as one of the five sciences (*vidyā-sthāna*), but without any detailed comment. There seems to be no use of such a set of terms in Sanskrit grammars although most of terms used for the six categories are the technical terms of grammar. In this respect, I suppose that the set of terms are put or rather inserted in that passage in connection with the word '*artha*' (meaning) just because there was a traditional usage of those terms as a mode of description among the Vijñānvādins even in the days of composition of the YB. What is meant by the term '*pravacana*' in the RGV is, therefore, not necessarily to be fixed to any special scripture or treatise, but is to be understood as 'the word of predecessor'.

Now we shall proceed to examine the extent of application of the said categories. Besides their application to the *dharmadhātuvīśuddhi*, there is another mode of application in the MSA. It is found in a couple of verses at the end of the work, which are a kind of eulogy to the Buddha. They run as follows:

(11) YB. (Tib.) Peking Mdo-ḡgrel, Dsi, 230a, 5-6. (Repr. Vol. 109, p. 304); (Ch) Taisho. Vol. 30, p. 361a. The six terms in Tib. are as follows: *no-bo-nid*, *rgyu*, *ḥbras-bu*, *bya-ba* (*kriyā*), (*khad-par-du*) *sbyor-ba* (*viśeṣa-yoga*), *ḥjug-pa*.

niṣpanna-paramārtho 'si, sarvabhāmi-viniḥsṛtaḥ | (1, 2)
sarvasatvâgratām prāptaḥ, sarvasatvavimocakaḥ || (XX-XXI, 60) (3, 4)
akṣayair asamair yukto guṇair, lokeṣu dṛśyase | (5, 6)
maṇḍaleṣv apy, adṛśyaś ca sarvathā devamānuṣaiḥ || (61) (6)

(Thou art the one who is perfect-transcendental,
 who has come out of [the practises in] the all the stages,
 who has attained the highest point among all the living beings,
 and makes them liberate; —
 And who is endowed with virtues, inexhaustible and unequalled;
 Thou art perceived in various worlds and in the circles [of the
 assemble of Bodhisattvas through thy two apparitional Bodies],
 However invisible is thy [Body of Essence] by all means to those who
 belong to the world of gods and human beings.)

According to the commentary, these two verses refer to the characteristics of the Buddha (*buddhalakṣaṇa*), among which we find the triple Body theory under the category of *vṛtti*.

The same verses are quoted in the Mahāyānasamgraha (MS) of Asaṅga⁽¹²⁾ explaining that they refer to the highest qualities of the Absolute Body (*dharmakāya*), and to this is commented by Vasubandhu that 'the highest' means 'unique to the Mahāyāna, i. e. uncommon with the Hīnayāna'.⁽¹³⁾ It seems to show that the use of this set of categories is unique to the Mahāyāna.

The third mode of application of the six categories is found in the first two of the dedicating verses placed at the head of the Abhidharmasamuccaya-vyākḥā, a commentary on the Abhidharmasamuccaya (AS) of Asaṅga.

(12) MS. Taisho. 31, 111a (No. 1592); 131a (No. 1593); 150b (No. 1594), Tib. Peking Ed. Mdo-ḥgrel, Li, 46 b3-6 (Repr. Vol. 112, p. 234)

(13) 於大小乘中不與他共故無有上 (Taisho 31, p. 258a). However this is found only in Paramārtha's translation (No. 1595), and Vasubandhu's authorship is somehow doubtful.

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(14)

They run as follows:

|*rtogs-pa des gnas dri-med don*|(1)

|*gañ spyod rgya-mtshoñ pha-rol gśegs*|(2)

|*chos-kun dbañ-phyug, bsam mi-khyab*|.....(3), (4)

|*ḥḍul-baḥi thabs-kyis ḥḍren-pa-can*||(4)

|*gshal-med legs gyur yon-tan ni*|(5)

|*rañ ḍaṇ gshan don gñis-la brten*|.....(6)

|*sañs-gryas chos ḍaṇ ḥphags-pa-yi*|

|*tshogs-laḥaṇ de-phyir phyag-ḥtsal-lo*||

(I bow to the Buddha, and to the Doctrine and Holy community as well,
because—

He is [by nature] the realization and the immaculate truth established
by it,

Having reached the other shore of the ocean of practices,
And having [attained] the controlling power over the phenomena,
He leads [the living beings] by skillful means and in an inconceivable
manner ; —

He is endowed with the immeasurable and marvellous qualities,
And is the foundation of the benefits of his own and of others.)

(15)

Commenting on these verses by himself, the commentator says that by
the first two verses there is shown the six categories with respect to the
excellent qualities of the Buddha, i. e. the categories of *svabhāva*, *hetu*, etc.
This explanation is exactly in the same line as in the MS.

Thus examining, we have got, I think, a fairly good account of the
idea of the six categories and their applications to the Ultimate Reality,
however it may be called, in treatises of the Vijñānavada. Before giving a

(14) AS. Vyākhyā, Peking Mdo-ḥgrel, Śi, 143b3-5 (Repr. Vol. 113, p. 141). Cf.

Taisho 31, p. 694b: 諸會眞淨究竟理 超聖行界昇彼岸 證得一切法自在 善權化
導不思議 無量希有勝功德 自他並利所依止 敬禮如是大覺尊 無等妙法諸聖衆。

(15) According to Chinese tradition, it is ascribed to Sthiramati, while in Tibet,
to Jinaputra (Rgyal-baḥi sras).

(16) AS. Vyākhyā, *ibid.*, p. 144a2-3.

conclusion to this investigation, I must lastly refer to the Abhidharmasamuccaya in which is an explanation of this set of categories as one of the seven methods for interpreting a topic in discussion (*saṃkathya-viniścaya*)⁽¹⁷⁾ under the the name of *artha-viniścaya*.

The Abhidharmasamuccaya is a kind of classified lexicon of technical terms of the Mahāyāna Abhidharma, i. e. the works of the Yogācāra school or the Vijñānavādins. It is divided into two parts, one is the collection of terms concerning to the phenomena (*lakṣaṇa*), the other is that of those concerning to the interpretation (*viniścaya*), and the Sāṃkathya-viniścaya is the last of the four chapters belonging to the latter part. Being thus situated and in comparison to other six methods, i. e. commentary (*vyākhyā*), exhibition of difference (*prabhidhyasaṃdarśana*), questioning (*saṃpraśna*), summary (*saṃgraha*), dialogue or logic (*vāda*), and implication (*abhisandhi*), this *arthaviniścaya* is clearly a mode of description or interpretation recognized by the authority of the Vijñānavāda.

The explanation of the six categories in the AS is, however, unsatisfactory for us. It shows us merely the terms of three to five kinds of each category⁽¹⁸⁾, but not any example of application of the whole set as examined above.

Rather it seems difficult to limit the application exclusively to the Ultimate Reality, because the sub-divisions of the six categories include all

(17) ÁS. (Tib.) Peking, Śi 344a4-345a8 (Vol. 113, No. 5555); (C.) Taisho. 31, 693b; (Sthiramati) ibid., 765b-c; (Skt.) ed. by P. Pradhan, Santiniketan, 1950, pp. 102-103 (This passage is restored from Tib. & G.).

(18) (1) *svabhāva*.....1. *parikalpita*, 2. *paratantra*, 3. *pariniṣpanṇa*.

(2) *hetu*.....1. *utpatti*-, 2. *pravṛtti*-, 3. *siddhi*-.

(3) *phala*.....1. *vipāka*-, 2. *niṣyanda*-, 3. *adhipati*-, 4. *puruṣakāra*- 5. *viśaṃyoga*-.

(4) *karman*.....1. *upalabdhi*-, 2. *kāritra*-, 3. *vyāvasthāyaka*-, 4. *pariṇāti*-, 5. *prāpti*-.

(5) *yoga*.....1. *sāmūhiko y.*, 2. *anubandhiko y.*, 3. *sāmbardhiko y.*, 4. *avasathiko y.*, 5. *vaikāriko y.*

(6) *vṛtti*.....1. *lakṣaṇa*-, 2. *avasthāna*-, 3. *viparyāsa*-, 4. *aviparyāsa*-, 5. *prabheda*-. (Skt. terms are acc. to Pradhan's text.)

the varieties so that by using one of them any kind of subject, *saṃskṛta* or *asaṃskṛta*, of impure or pure character, can be described. It may be natural from the logical point of view as the terminologies used for the six categories do not contain any evaluation in themselves. Actually, however, there is no example of their application to any subject other than the Ultimate Reality, and taking the explanation in the RGV referred at the beginning of this article into consideration, we may safely say that there was a traditional use of the set of six categories among the Vijñānavādins for describing the Ultimate Reality, and that its latest example available to us is observed in the AS Vyākhyā.

Additionally I will give a rough observation on the modified use of this set of categories in the works belonging to the so called Tathāgatagarbha theory. The RGV, though it is written by one of the Vijñānavādins (it may be sure at least from his knowledge on the use of the said categories), has established the system of the Tathāgatagarbha theory, and to describe its doctrine, it modified the six categories according to its own need but without losing their original character. But the modification was further going on until the character as categories of general use has disappeared by mixing of, or replacing of the new terms which show the characteristics of the Absolute unique to the *tathāgatagarbha* theory. As such examples we have the ten categories on the *tathāgatabodhi* in the Anuttarāśrayasūtra (AĀS 無上依經), the ten categories on the *tathāgatagarbha* in the Buddhagotrāśāstra (BGŚ 佛性論), and the twelve categories on the *bodhicitta* in the Dharma-⁽¹⁹⁾dhātaviśeṣaśāstra (DAŚ 大乘法界無差別論).

(19) AĀS, Taisho 16, p. 470c: 1. 自性, 2. 因緣, 3. 惑障, 4. 至果, 5. 作事, 6. 相攝, 7. 行處, 8. 常住, 9. 不共, 10. 不可思惟.

BGŚ, Taisho 31, p. 796b: 1. 自體相, 2. 因相, 3. 果相, 4. 事能相, 5. 總攝相, 6. 分別相, 7. 階位相, 8. 遍滿相, 9. 無變異相, 10. 無差別相.

DAŚ, Taisho 32, p. 892a: 1. 果, 2. 因, 3. 自性, 4. 異名, 5. 無差別, 6. 分位, 7. 無染, 8. 常恒, 9. 相應, 10. 不作義利, 11. 作義利, 12. 一性.

(All of these works are kept only in the Chinese Tripitaka, and their Skt. titles are restored from C.)