

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 55 (2001)

Heft: 2

Artikel: Sarvastivda Dhyna and Mahyna Prajñ : observations about their development in India and in China

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147537>

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SARVĀSTIVĀDA DHYĀNA AND MAHĀYĀNA PRAJÑĀ.
OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THEIR DEVELOPMENT
IN INDIA AND IN CHINA.*¹

Charles Willemen

1. India

a. *The First Century B.C.E.*

The Sarvāstivādins, who say that everything exists, sarvam asti, had scholars who systematized their abhidharma both in Bactria, i.e. Dharmaśreṣṭhin's Abhidharmahṛdaya, and in Gandhāra, i.e. Kātyāyanīputra's Aṣṭaśāstrā. Both works may have been written in the first century B.C.E. in Gāndhārī, in Kharoṣṭī script. This would be proof enough of the considerable influence of this school in Central and in South Asia. One can combine this information with the emergence of prajñā sūtras in roughly the same area. The Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, the Perfection of Wisdom in 8 000 lines, probably the earliest of its kind, may date back to this same first century B.C.E.² Could this emergence be seen as an intellectual reaction to the successful theories

- 1 What follows builds on the author's "New Ideas about Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma", in *Indian Journal of Buddhist Studies*, X/1-2, 1998, pp. 82-94, and "Nieuwe ideeën betreffende de boeddhistische sarvāstivādascholastiek", Koninklijke Academie voor Overzeese Wetenschappen, Mededelingen der Zittingen, Nieuwe reeks 45 (2), Brussel, 1999, pp. 137-147.
- 2 Ch'en, K., *Buddhism in China*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1973, p. 59.

* This article is the result of lectures delivered at Banaras Hindu University, Department of Philosophy, on December 1999.

of the Sarvāstivādins?³ In that same period a devotional movement was gaining popularity among the nomads and merchants and in the vihāras of Central Asia, and in North-West India. Maitreya immediately comes to mind. And Avalokiteśvara. Maitreya gained considerable popularity during the first centuries C.E.⁴ So, Sarvāstivādins were on the other hand confronted with a devotional belief. The elaborate meditational practices of the Sarvāstivādins and a devotional movement were developing side by side in Central Asia. The first century B.C.E. must have been truly important. In the South monks committed Buddha's word, the Tipiṭaka, to writing.

b. The Second Century C.E.

Kaniṣka, the Kuṣāṇa emperor, made Kaśmīra the centre of sarvāstivāda learning, using Sanskrit, Āryabhāṣā. The Aṣṭagrantha was revised and called Jñānaprasthāna. This "body" obtained six "feet" and a large commentary, the Mahāvibhāṣā. The Sarvāstivādins in Kaśmīra were considered to be the orthodox ones, also called Vaibhāṣikas. At the end of the seventh century, after Xuanzang's departure from India, their influence had waned enormously.⁵ In the second century and the early third century, Nāgārjuna, the Mādhyamika thinker, said that nothing exists. Nāgārjuna was a man from the South. He is said to have received the patronage of the Śātavāhana royal family during the Āndhra period.⁶ Andhradeśa was a Mahāsāṃghika area. So, while the Vaibhāṣikas in Kaśmīra were organized, relying on Kuṣāṇa power, in the South Mādhyamika was organized by Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva. The Sarvāstivādins to the West of Kaśmīra, the traditional Sarvāstivādins, did not immediately accept the Vaibhāṣika views. They accepted the authority of the sūtras, the āgamas, not of a Kāśmīra Abhidharmapiṭaka with seven texts. By the way, seven is also the number of texts in the

3 See Hirakawa, A., *A History of Indian Buddhism*, Buddhist Tradition Series vol. 19, Motilal Banarsidass Publ., Delhi, 1993, pp. 253-254.

4 Lamotte, E., *History of Indian Buddhism*, Publications de l'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain, Louvain, 1988, pp. 699-710.

5 Idem, p. 357 and p. 368.

6 Idem, p. 345 and p. 348.

Theravāda Abhidhammapiṭaka. Kumāralāta (Gandhāra, second century) is considered to be the mūlācārya of the Sautrāntikas, those western Sarvāstivādins. The Sautrāntikas were a heterogeneous group, but all were non-Vaibhāṣikas. The term Dārṣṭāntika indicates those Sarvāstivādins who use “comparisons, parables”, as the Chinese interpretation makes clear. Nāgārjuna’s Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa⁷ informs us that the Vinaya of Mathurā comprised eighty sections, including many stories, avadānas and jātakas. The Vinaya of Kaśmīra removed the stories, keeping the essentials in ten sections. One may hypothesize that the Dārṣṭāntikas kept to the old, extensive Vinaya, while the Vaibhāṣikas had a Vinaya in ten parts, the Daśādhyāya. Some non-Vaibhāṣikas may also have adopted this shorter Vinaya. So, it seems that some non-Vaibhāṣikas, Sautrāntikas, the Dārṣṭāntikas had the long Vinaya, and others had the short one. In the second century we must not forget to mention the devotion for Maitreya and for bodhisattvas. It was popular especially in Central Asia, in the Kuṣāṇa empire. The fifth century saw the work of Vasubandhu (ca. 400-480): (a) the Kośa, via the Saṃyukta / Miśrakābhidharmahṛdaya based on Dharmaśreṣṭhin’s work in Bactria, and (b) also, after his conversion by his brother Asaṅga, his yogācāra works. The “orthodox” Sarvāstivādin Saṃghabhadra had to defend his “orthodoxy” against Vasubandhu’s abhidharma. At the end of the seventh century the Vaibhāṣikas had almost disappeared. The other Sarvāstivādins, the Sautrāntikas, or at least a good number of them, the Dārṣṭāntikas (?), reaffirmed themselves as Mūlasarvāstivādins, using the extensive Vinaya.

7 Idem, p. 174.

2. China

a. *The Second Century C.E.*

Late in the Han dynasty the Parthian (Ashkani) An Shigao introduced non-vaibhāṣika sarvāstivāda techniques and ideas. He introduced ānāpānasmṛti, the buddhist version of taoist respiratory exercises, and he added a buddhist theory of the five elements, xing, i.e. the scriptural text Wu Faxing (Five Dharma-elements, faxing translating vastu)⁸ to the widespread speculations about the five elements in his days. “Bodhisattva” An Shigao clearly brought those texts and techniques which had links with the existing intellectual climate in China. For practical reasons he introduced sarvāstivāda chan (dhyāna) yogic practices. On the other hand Lokakṣema’s version of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā, ca. 179 in Luoyang, really introduced prajñā sūtras.⁹ Also this literature was linked with taoism. It became popular in South China. So, China in the second century reflects what had happened in India and Central Asia since the first century B.C.E.

b. *The Fourth and Early Fifth Century*

Dao’an (312-385)¹⁰ was interested in dhyāna, but also in prajñā. These two apparently could complement one another as yang and yin. Dao’an also organized a Maitreya cult during his years in Xiangyang (365-379). Huiyuan (334-416)¹¹ continued the same development on Mt. Lu. He organized an Amitābha cult in 402. He helped Buddhahadra on Mt. Lu. Buddhahadra had left Chang’an and Kumārajīva behind. He was a man from Nagarāhāra (Jelālābād) and he taught the dhyāna techniques of the famous master Buddhasena.¹² After that chan, dhyāna, became very popular in southern China too. Huiyuan also helped Saṃghadeva, who translated both the Abhidharmahṛdaya and

8 See a.o. Ch’en, K., 1973, p. 43.

9 Hirakawa, A., 1993, pp. 247-252.

10 Ch’en, K., 1973, pp. 94-103.

11 Idem, pp. 103-112.

12 Idem, p. 109.

the Aṣṭa-grantha, and whose teaching of this abhidharma gave rise to an Abhidharma school, Pitan zong, in South China. It is noteworthy that even at the end of the fourth century the vaibhāṣika “orthodoxy” had not yet reached China. Huiyuan also knew Kumārajīva in Chang’an. Kumārajīva’s work is really the beginning of Nāgārjuna’s madhyamaka in China, the Sanlun school, early in the fifth century. Kumārajīva’s disciple Sengzhao (374-414) actually formed the school. So, Huiyuan came into contact with Nāgārjuna’s madhyamaka, and also with the sautrāntika abhidharma and its yogic dhyāna techniques. He was also at the beginning of Amitābha’s worship. Huiyuan’s time sees sarvāstivāda scholasticism and its opposite, śūnyavāda, and also the devotional movement in Mahāyāna, all at the same time.

c. Until the End of the Seventh Century

The fifth century sees a flourishing Sautrāntika Abhidharma school in China,¹³ but also sanlun, madhyamaka. After Sengzhao sanlun somewhat declined, but it was revived by Falang and especially by Jizang (549-623). Paramārtha, who arrived in Southern China in 546, introduced Vasubandhu’s work, both his Kośa and his yogācāra work. He also introduced Asaṅga’s work, the Mahāyānasamgraha.¹⁴ The Sanlun school and vijñānavāda ideas, introduced by Paramārtha, contributed to the rise of chan / zen in the seventh century. Chan also reacts against the influence of the Abhidharma school. It has been established that the patriarch tradition of the Chan school has a close relation with the tradition of the Sarvāstivāda patriarchs.¹⁵ It is only with Xuanzang (ca. 596-664) that the vaibhāṣika abhidharma is fully introduced in China, too late to be really influential. Xuanzang’s translation of the Kośa in 654, however, gave rise to a Kośa school, which replaced the older Abhidharma school. It is obvious that China

13 Willemen, C., Dessein, B., Cox, C., *Sarvāstivāda Buddhist Scholasticism*, Handbuch der Orientalistik Abt. II 11, Brill, Leiden, 1998, pp. 132-137.

14 Ch’en, K., 1973, pp. 134-135.

15 Wang Bangwei, “The Indian Origin of the Chinese Buddhist Chan School’s Patriarch Tradition”, in *Dharmadūta, Mélanges offerts au Vénérable Thich Huyên-vi*, Paris, 1997, pp. 261-270.

had always known that the Kośa and the Abhidharmahṛdaya were the same kind of abhidharma, a view which was continued in Japan. It is furthermore interesting to see that the Chinese Kośa school in 793 formed part of the Faxiang (Dharmākāra, i.e. Vijñānavāda) school. Vasubandhu would have agreed. The Faxiang school begins with Xuanzang's translations, but his disciple Kueiji (632-682) was the initial central figure.

The rise of chan / zen at the end of the seventh century¹⁶ may be understood as a reaction against sarvāstivāda abhidharma and its yogic practices. Prajñā and sanlun texts, which may be regarded as a reaction against sarvāstivāda too, were important, and so were the yogācāra ideas of Vasubandhu and Asaṅga, introduced since Paramārtha and Xuanzang. The role of taoism should not be minimalized either.

Finally, much of what precedes is hypothesis, but the ultimate test of any hypothesis is its capacity to coherently elucidate seemingly unrelated phenomena.

16 Most recent study: Yang Zengwen, Tang Wudai Chanzong Shi (*History of the Chan School during the Tang and the Five Dynasties*), Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 1999.