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THE CENTRAL CONCEPTION OF BUDDHISM
AND
THE MEANING OF THE WORD “DHARMA”

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VOL. VII

THE CENTRAL
CONCEPTION OF BUDDHISM
AND THE
MEANING OF THE WORD “DHARMA”

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PREFACE

THIS short treatise was originally conceived as a contribution to the Royal Asiatic Society's *Journal*: its size induced the Council to publish it as a monograph, and my best thanks are due to the Council for this kind decision. I must also express my gratitude to Mrs. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, who was always ready to help with her vast knowledge of Pali literature. Professor H. Jacobi kindly went through the proofs, and to him I am indebted for many a valuable suggestion. Dr. McGovern contributed some of the references to Chinese sources. But my deepest gratitude is due to Dr. F. W. Thomas, who devoted much of his precious time to the revision of my work and to carrying it through the press.

In transliteration I have usually not distinguished the guttural, etc., nasals, when occurring before the consonants of their respective classes.

TH. STCHERBATSKY.

July, 1923.

The central conception of Buddhism and the meaning of the term *Dharma*

I. PRELIMINARY

IN a recent work Mrs. M. Geiger and Professor W. Geiger have made an attempt to solve the uncertainty which still prevails about the meaning of the term *dharmā*.¹ They have drawn up a concordance of almost every case where the word occurs in Pali canonical literature, and established a great variety of meanings. Among them there is, indeed, only one that really matters, that is the specifically Buddhist technical term *dharmā*. The other significations which Buddhist literature shares with the Brahmanical do not present any serious difficulty. About this meaning the authors rightly remark that it is a “central conception of the Buddhist doctrine which must be elucidated as far as possible”. They also contend that the method followed by them is “purely philological”. This is also an indication of the limitations of their work, because the central conception of a highly complicated system, a conception which in its varied connotations includes almost the totality of the system, cannot be expected to be fully elucidated by “philological” methods only. We therefore propose, in addition to Mrs. and Professor Geiger’s most valuable collections, to consider the matter from the philosophical standpoint, i.e. to give, with regard to this conception, a succinct account of the system in which it admittedly occupies the keystone position. Our chief source will be, not the Pali Canon, but a later work, the *Abhidharma-kośa* of Vasubandhu.² Although late, it is professedly

¹ *Pali Dhamma*, von Magdalene u. Wilhelm Geiger, Munich, 1921.

² A plan of an edition and translation of the whole work has been outlined and partly carried through by the *Bibliotheca Buddhica* at Petrograd. There have appeared, (1) *Abhidharma-kośa-kārikā* and *Bhāṣya*, Tibetan

only a systematized exposition of a much earlier work—the *Abhidharma-vibhāṣā-śāstra*, which, in its turn, is but a commentary on the *abhidharma* of the Sarvāstivādin school. This school is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, of Buddhist sects. The question upon which it dissented and from which it received its name had a bearing on the essence of what was called a *dharma*, so that an exposition of its views will afford the best opportunity of examining the full connotation of this term.¹ It must be left to later investigation to determine the points where Vasubandhu's exposition may be at variance with the primitive doctrine; but, generally speaking, he seems to have rendered the original doctrine very faithfully. Since his age is about the same as that of the Pali commentaries,² the difference between him and the

text, pt. i, edited by Professor Th. Stcherbatsky, Petrograd, 1917; (2) *Sphuṭārthābhīdharma-koṣa-vyākhyā* of Yaçomitra, Sanscrit text, pt. i, edited by S. Lévi and Th. Stcherbatsky, Petrograd, 1917. The second parts of both these works, Tibetan text edition by Professor Th. Stcherbatsky and Vyākhyā (Sanskrit) by Professor W. Wogihara of Tokyo, are being printed in the *Bibliotheca Buddhica*. An English translation of the ninth (additional) part has been published by Professor Th. Stcherbatsky under the title "The Soul Theory of the Buddhists" in the *Bulletin de l'Académie des Sciences de Russie*, Petrograd, 1920 (pp. 823–54 and 937–58). A review of the system has been published by the late Professor O. Rosenberg, of Petrograd University, under the title *Problems of Buddhist Philosophy*, Petrograd, 1918 (in Russian). This scholar has also issued an index of Buddhist technical terms in Chinese and Japanese under the title *An Introduction to the study of Buddhism from Chinese and Japanese Sources*, Tokyo, 1917. Professor de la Vallée Poussin has published in Brussels a French translation of the third part, and is now engaged in printing a translation of the first and second parts of the *Abhidharma-koṣa*.

¹ Beside Mrs. and Prof. Geiger the question has been treated by Mrs. Rhys Davids, *Bud. Psy. Ethics*, xxxiii; Walleser, *Grundlage*, 97–104; Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*, 116, 209; S. Z. Aung, *Compendium*, 179 n., 254–9; S. Lévi, *Sūtrālamkāra*, 18, 21; L. de la Vallée Poussin, *Notes sur les corps du Bouddha*, Muséon, 1913, pp. 263, 287. The question has been put in the proper light and brilliantly treated by Professor O. Rosenberg, *Problems*, chap. vi: but, since his work is written in Russian and inaccessible at present, some of his results are repeated here.

² The date of Vasubandhu is not yet quite settled; cf. the references in V. Smith, *Early History*, 3rd ed., pp. 328 ff. At the end of chap. viii Vasubandhu remarks that in his time the *āgama* had had an existence of

Pali sources is not so much one of time as of school. Nothing is more instructive than the study of the divergent views of different schools, since it allows us to watch the builders of the Buddhist doctrine at work.

The formula of the Buddhist Credo (*ye dhammā*, etc.)—which professedly contains the shortest statement of the essence and the spirit of Buddhism¹—declares that Buddha discovered the elements (*dhammā*) of existence, their causal connexion, and a method to suppress their efficiency for ever (*nirodho*). Vasubandhu makes a similar statement about the essence of the doctrine: it is a method of converting the elements of existence into a condition of rest, out of which they never will emerge again.² From the first days of the Buddhist church the novices, before obtaining admittance into the order, went through a course of instruction in what may be termed the Buddhist catechism, i.e. an exposition of the elements (*dharma*) of existence and their different classifications into *skandhas*, *āyatanas*, *dhātus*.³ The same training was considered indispensable for the aspiring nuns.⁴ These conditions have not changed down to the present day in all Buddhist countries. In the whole of Mongolia and Tibet, in those parts of Siberia where Buddhism is spreading against the primitive Shamanism among the Tunguz tribes of

1,000 (not 900) years, and the *adhigama* (= *abhidharma*) somewhat less than that. That there were two Vasubandhus is not "a guess with no solid basis"; the Koṣa actually quotes the opinions of a *vriddhācārya* Vasubandhu and rejects them (i, 13, Tibetan text, p. 23; cf. Yaçomitra's comment). There remain the dates of the Chinese translations of the works of Asanga and Vasubandhu, which alone, if correct, would be sufficient evidence to assign them to the fourth century. Otherwise one feels inclined to bring Vasubandhu nearer to Dignāga, whose teacher he was.

¹ Cf. *Mahāvagga*, i, 23.

² *Ab. K.*, i, 1, Tib. text, p. 3, ll. 12–13.

³ Cf. *Theragāthā*, 1255:

*tassāhaṃ vacanaṃ sutvā khandhe āyatanāni ca
dhātuyo ca veditvāna pabbajim anāgariyaṃ.*

⁴ Cf. Geiger's references to *Therigāthās*, op. cit., p. 65; the *dhātus* there mentioned are probably the eighteen *dhātus* (not the six); a number of other divisions into *dhātus* are mentioned in the *Bahu-dhātuka-sūtra*, cf. *Ab. K.*, i, 27, Tib. text, p. 46.

Transbaikalia, in the governments of Irkutsk and Astrachan, where it is maintaining itself against orthodox Christianity—everywhere it invariably proceeds by starting religious schools (*chos-grva*), where manuals similar to the *Dhamma-saṃgaṇi* containing tables of *dharmas* are carefully studied, in the Tibetan original with explanations in vernacular, by the young generation aspiring to be admitted to the order and to be gradually promoted to the higher ecclesiastical ranks. Scholars of Buddhism in Europe will do well to follow this example.

A school of Buddhists which claims as its fundamental doctrine the principle that “everything exists” has very naturally been supposed to uphold some kind of realistic views.¹ Tradition affirms that the question which gave rise to this sect had been discussed at the time of Buddha himself. If a division arises in a community with the result that some of its members are declared to be, or claim to be, realists, one would naturally be led to suppose that there were others who were non-realists, i.e. idealists of some kind. But, as a matter of fact, we do not meet with views definitely idealistic, i.e. with the denial of the existence of external objects, until a comparatively late date. Considering, on the other hand, that these would-be realists, like all Buddhists, denied the existence of a soul or a personality (*ātman*, *puḍgala*), our uncertainty increases, and the suspicion arises that the battle between the Sarvāstivādins and their opponents was fought on an altogether different plane, about a question which had little to do with our conceptions of realism and idealism.²

¹ So Takakusu s.v. in *Hastings' Encyclopædia*. Mr. S. Z. Aung and Mrs. C. Rhys Davids, *Points of Controversy*, pp. 275–6, rightly observe that the question bears upon the existence of future and past *dharmas*, but this does not mean that “they believed in continued or immutable existence of everything”. This would be drifting into Sāṅkhya doctrine, against which Buddhist philosophers were always uttering warnings; cf. Appendix I.

² The Buddhists themselves ascribe the origin of their idealistic philosophy to Vasubandhu; cf. my article in the *Muséon*, 1905, ii. But this was evidently only a revival of a tendency which, in a different form, was already revealed

The occasion upon which Buddha himself is supposed to have put forward the watchword “everything exists” was a discussion with the Ājīvikas, who flatly denied the influence of past deeds upon our destinies, since they were past and non-existent.¹ This sect upheld a kind of extreme determinism which served as excuse for moral incontinence; it maintained that “all things are inalterably fixed. There is no cause, either proximate or remote, for the depravity of being, or . . . for its purity . . . There is no such thing as power or energy or human exertion. Everything that thinks, has senses, is procreated, and lives, is destitute of force, power or energy. Their varying conditions, at any time, are due to fate, to their environment and their own nature”.² Buddha's teaching, both in the moral domain and in ontology, was the reverse of this; it maintained moral responsibility and at the same time transformed all existing things into a congeries of subtle energies (*saṃskāra-samūha*). When pressed to say what was meant by the words “everything exists”, he answered “everything exists means that the twelve *āyatanas* exist”.³ Now the twelve *āyatanas* are merely one of the many classifications of the elements of existence of matter and mind. The Sarvāstivādin school admitted seventy-five such elements. These elements were called *dharmas*. The full meaning of the term will emerge at the end of this article;

in the works of Aṣvaghōṣa and Nāgārjuna. *Ab. K.* bears witness that idealistic views were already discussed in the *Vibhāṣā-śāstra*; cf. i, 42, Tibetan text, p. 77, 10, and Yaçomitra's comment.

¹ *Ab. K.* ad v, 24; cf. Appendix I.

² Cf. R. Hoernle's article in *Hastings' Encyclopædia*.

³ This passage (*Samyuktāgama*, xiii, p. 16 (McGovern)) cannot be traced in the Pali Canon. Evidently the Theravādins suppressed it because it did not agree with their particular tenets. They accused the Vātsīputriyas of having suppressed the passages which ran against their views (*Soul Theory*, p. 840), and evidently did themselves the same. But even in their school the word *sabba* seems to have been used rather like a technical term. It did not mean “everything”, but every item of the Buddhist table of elements. This table was supposed to be an “exhaustive division”: cf. Mrs. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Psychology*, p. 41; *Samyutta*, iv, 15–27; *Visuddhi-Magga*, ch. xiv; Warren, *Buddhism in translation*, p. 158; G. Grimm, *Buddhismus, passim*.

at present we take it to mean an ultimate entity, the conception of which, in the domain of matter, excludes the reality of everything except sense-data, and in the field of mind, of everything except separate mental phenomena. We will begin by reviewing the different kinds of elements and their various classifications, and then proceed to determine what was the Buddhist conception of an element of existence. This will lead us to ascertain more precisely in what sense the older Buddhist doctrine may have a claim to be called a realistic system.

XVI. SUMMARY

To summarize :—

The conception of a *dharma* is the central point of the Buddhist doctrine. In the light of this conception Buddhism discloses itself as a metaphysical theory developed out of one fundamental principle, viz. the idea that existence is an interplay of a plurality of subtle, ultimate, not further analysable elements of Matter, Mind, and Forces. These elements are technically called *dharmas*, a meaning which this word has in this system alone. Buddhism, accordingly, can be characterized as a system of Radical Pluralism (*sanghāta-vāda*)²: the elements alone are realities, every combination of them is a mere name covering a plurality of separate elements. The moral teaching of a path towards Final Deliverance is not something additional or extraneous to this ontological doctrine, it is most intimately connected with it and, in fact, identical with it.

¹ Op. cit., p. 150.

² As contrasted with the *ārambha-vāda*, which maintains the reality of the whole as well as of the elements, and the *pariṇāma-vāda*, which ascribes absolute reality only to the whole.

The connotation of the term *dharma* implies that—

1. Every element is a separate (*prthak*) entity or force.
2. There is no inherence of one element in another, hence no substance apart from its qualities, no Matter beyond the separate sense-data, and no Soul beyond the separate mental data (*dharma = anātman = nirjīva*).
3. Elements have no duration, every moment represents a separate element; thought is evanescent, there are no moving bodies, but consecutive appearances, flashings, of new elements in new places (*kṣaṇikatva*).
4. The elements co-operate with one another (*samskrta*).
5. This co-operating activity is controlled by the laws of causation (*pratītya-samutpāda*).
6. The world-process is thus a process of co-operation between seventy-two kinds of subtle, evanescent elements, and such is the nature of *dharmas* that they proceed from causes (*hetu-prabhava*) and steer towards extinction (*nirodha*).
7. Influenced (*sāsrava*) by the element *avidyā*, the process is in full swing. Influenced by the element *prajñā*, it has a tendency towards appeasement and final extinction. In the first case streams (*santāna*) of combining elements are produced which correspond to ordinary men (*prthag-jana*); in the second the stream represents a saint (*ārya*). The complete stoppage of the process of phenomenal life corresponds to a Buddha.
8. Hence the elements are broadly divided into unrest (*duḥkha*), cause of unrest (*duḥkha-samudaya = avidyā*), extinction (*nirodha*), and cause of extinction (*mārga = prajñā*).
9. The final result of the world-process is its suppression, Absolute Calm: all co-operation is extinct and replaced by immutability (*asamskrta = nirvāna*).

Since all these particular doctrines are logically developed out of one fundamental principle, Buddhism can be resolved in a series of equations:—

$$dharmatā = nairātmya = kṣaṇikatva = samskratva =$$

pratītya-samutpannatva = sāsrava-anāsravatva = saṃkleṣa-vyavadānatva = duḥkha-nirodha = saṃsāra-nirvāna.

But, although the conception of an element of existence has given rise to an imposing superstructure in the shape of a consistent system of philosophy, its inmost nature remains a riddle. What is *dharma*? It is inconceivable! It is subtle! No one will ever be able to tell what its real nature (*dharma-svabhāva*) is! It is transcendental!