

Brief Discussion on Origin and Development of Self-nature

-Centered on the Sarvāstivāda and Mūlamadhyamakakārikā

Kang Wang

(Guangzhou Kelin Academy, Guangzhou, 510000, China)

Abstract: In the Abhidharma texts, the term self-nature (svabāva) is described as the basis of the actual existence of dharmas. This paper seeks to compare the self-nature of the Sarvāstivāda and Mūlamadhyamakakārikā of Nāgārjuna. There is no arising and ceasing of self-nature in the Sarvāstivāda, but only the function of arising and ceasing. In contrast, Mūlamadhyamakakārikā assumes that a description of self-nature should have a concept, and the concept as a name should be extinguished. One of the arguments of the Sarvāstivāda for the actual existence of self-nature is that there is perception (*buddhi). The attachment to conceptualization in Nāgārjuna's doctrine is not limited to language or thought but covers all directed cognitive activities. My hypothesis is that there is a difference in scope between the self-nature rejected by Mūlamadhyamakakārikā and the Sarvāstivāda's self-nature that is neither arising nor ceasing; moreover, from the epistemological point of view, the self-nature rejected by Mūlamadhyamakakārikā is the self-nature that is perceived by the Sarvāstivāda.

Keywords: Self-nature · Sarvāstivāda · Mūlamadhyamakakārikā · *buddhi · conceptualization

1. Introduction

The Sarvāstivāda believed that all dharmas which are not a nominal existence mixed with some other materials have nature and actually exist. This idea originates from the negation of the human self (sattvātman). If there is no human self, there can only be the five aggregates. The Sarvāstivāda started from the denial of the human self, recognized the five aggregates, and finally recognized the existence of all dharmas. Mūlamadhyamakakārikā of Nāgārjuna, developed in opposition to the "actual existence of dharma" and finally proposed the idea that "dharma has no self-nature", that is, "self-nature is empty". The Sarvāstivāda also believed that these self-natured dharmas exist in the form of dependent arising (pratītya-samutpāda), that is, they are mutually causal in the connection of cause and effect. The idea of emptiness of Mūlamadhyamakakārikā is to eliminate the attachment to dharma and to refute self-nature. Therefore, this paper will seek answers to the following questions.

- (1) What is the difference between the categories of self-nature in the Sarvāstivāda and Mūlamadhyamakakārikā?
- (2) How did Mūlamadhyamakakārikā object to the Self-nature of the Sarvāstivāda?

2. The three times are real, as are the essences of phenomena

It is said that all dharmas exist because the Sarvāstivāda asserted that all dharmas have self-nature and that past, present, and future all actually exist. Concerning this core view of the Sarvāstivāda, Lv Cheng said, "The Sarvāstivāda starts from denying the human self and recognizes the five aggregates because the five aggregates in all three times actually exist, and finally they must come to recognize the existence of all dharmas."¹

2.1 Self-nature (svabāva) and Self-characteristic (svalakṣaṇa)

In analyzing dharma, the Sarvāstivāda first clarified what the self-nature of the dharma is, and then illustrated the basis of the name of the dharma. Thus, it can be seen that the relationship between "self-nature" and "name" is a kind of juxtaposition, and there is a further explanation of "self-nature", as follows.

What is the self-nature of these four meditations? Each of them takes the five aggregate of their own stage (svabhūmika) as the self-nature. This is called the self-nature of meditation based on the separation of the characteristics of "subject" and "object".²

The self-nature has been illustrated. So now we should explain why it is called meditation. It is called meditation because it can eliminate affliction (prahīṇa-kleśa) and can observe correctly.³

From the above quotation, we can understand how the Sarvāstivāda defines dharma. This quotation shows that the reason why "meditation" is called "meditation" is because it is "able to eliminate affliction" and "able to observe correctly". The two words "able" indicate that the Sarvāstivāda decided that the "name" of dharma should be based on its "function" (kāritra). In addition, the self-nature of meditation is the nature based on the separation of the characteristics of "subject" and "object". That is, self-nature is essentially the nature of the subject and the object as a result of the dichotomy, and it is clear that "self-nature" is the same as "self-characteristic". What is more, self-nature is explained more clearly by the Sarvāstivāda in MVŚ.

What is self-nature? The self-nature of the intrinsic characteristic, just as the self-nature of the dharmas is the self-characteristic of the dharmas. Homogeneity is the shared characteristic.⁴

It can be seen that the "self-nature" of the dharmas is the "self-characteristic" (sva-lakṣaṇa) of the dharmas, or it is called the special

1 Lv cheng. *Yindùfóxié yuánliùlièjiāng*. pp.53.

2 MVŚ, 411b

3 MVŚ, 411b

4 MVŚ, 179b

characteristic.

2.2 Self-nature and Function

Since the function (*kārita*) is the cause of the difference between the three times, it must be different from the self-nature. But since the function is dependent on the self-nature, why does the invariably existing self-nature have the function that is sometimes absent? Therefore, in AKB, Vasubandhu asked the following question.

If the function is the self-nature, and the self-nature is constant, the function should also be constant. Then how can the past and future be established? Therefore, the theory of the times [established by the Sarvāstivāda] is no longer justified.⁵

Now, the question is, is this function equivalent to the essence? If it is, it means that the essence and the function are “one” and there is no difference at all, which still raises the question of why the essence of the past dharma had no function. But if they are not “one”, how should the relationship between the two, which is neither the same nor different, be explained? According to Saṃghabhadra, their relationship can be interpreted through essence and function as follows.

The essence of dharma exists constantly, and the characteristic of dharma varies. It is said that when the dharma acts in the world, it does not give up its self-nature and it arises into function according to its cause. From the immediate cessation of the function, it is said that the nature of the dharma is constant, but not permanent, for the characteristic of the dharma varies.⁶

Saṃghabhadra was pointing out the nature of dependent arising (*paratantra*) of all dharmas. That is, all conditioned dharmas have the function of projecting fruit, which makes it necessarily a branch in the chain of dependent arising. Saṃghabhadra believed that conditioned dharma has an essence, and that the impermanence and non-self of all dharmas are mainly embodied in the change of their three times, and that this change is a description of the function of projecting fruit of the dharma. Therefore, the essence of the dharma is not arising and ceasing, and the so-called “arising and ceasing” is a description of the state of existence of the dharma from the perspective of its function. In this way, the essence of dharma in all three times actually exists and at the same time, it is momentary.

2.3 Epistemological Determination of Actual Existence by Sarvāstivāda

According to the descriptions of Saṃghabhadra in Ny, the way the Sarvāstivāda discerned the actual existence (*sad-bhāva*) or nominal existence (*prajñapti-sat*) of the dharmas is to analyze them and see whether there exists perception.

As the aggregates of compounded form are broken into subtle parts, the perception of them is nonexistent. Thus, like vases and so forth, they are called conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*).⁷

If things differ from these, they’re called the ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*). It means that the perception is not nonexistent after they are broken and their remainder is analyzed by wisdom. They’re called the ultimate truth, for the perception is still existent, like form (*rūpa*) and so forth.⁸

It can be seen that the method of determining the actual existence or nominal existence of the dharmas is based on the decomposition or rational analysis of things, and on whether the subject’s initial sensation or impression disappears or changes after the analysis.

3. Negating Statement of Nāgārjuna

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā of Nāgārjuna, developed in opposition to the “actual existence of dharma” and finally proposed the idea that “dharma has no self-nature”, that is, “self-nature is empty”. The method of negating statement is the most basic method used in Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. The “negating statement” is to deny the unreasonable points of the opponent according to the interpretation, without making a direct statement on the topic.

3.1 Core of Negating Statement -Conceptual Confine

The core of the negating statement is the principle of “conceptual confine”.⁹ The principle of “conceptual confine” means that the thing indicated by a concept must always be in the state described by this concept, and can not possess any characteristics that violate the connotation of the concept; otherwise, the thing is no longer the indicative object of the concept.

The strategy of Nāgārjuna’s critique of the self-nature of the Sarvāstivāda is the principle of “conceptual confine”, cf. the following quotation.

To think that there are things is grasping permanence, and to think that there are no things is grasping nihilism. Therefore, a wise person does not cling to existence and non-existence.¹⁰

If one admits that there are things, it leads to the faults of eternalism and nihilism. For what exists is either permanent or impermanent.¹¹

In that case, when you realize that the thing exists, you have a perception of “this is something”, and you either fall into eternalism or nihilism. As long as you think that this thing exists, you have defined it. As long as you say “milk”, this “milk” will always be “milk”, which is eternalism. If you say, “The milk is gone, now there is only yogurt left”, which is nihilism.¹²

5 AKB, 105b

6 Ny, 633c

7 Ny, 666a

8 Ny, 666a

9 Ye Shaoyong. *Lóngshù zhōngguānzhéxuézhōngde zìxìng*. pp. 150.

10 MMK, 20b

11 MMK, 28c

12 MMK, 18b

The things we perceive are invariably confined by concepts, and “conceptual confine” means that any expression of our thinking is contradictory. As soon as we perceive something or define it, it will be confined by the definition. It is contradictory that the defined thing can exist and change at the same time. The inevitability of this contradiction has been related by Nāgārjuna as follows.

If, after observing something, one cannot say, “This is something”. How can a wise argue that this thing actually exists?¹³

The existence of a thing cannot be regarded as real if it cannot be reasonably verified, no matter how true the perception of it is. If the wise fail to say, “This is something”, he will never assume that this thing really exists. Therefore, existence and non-existence have to be described by words, by discernment. When the thing is coming into the definition, it is impossible to describe its state of being and its change. That is, perception is not available to prove external existence.

From an epistemological point of view, Nāgārjuna argued that what exists must first be described by a concept. The following are examples of the application of the “conceptual confine”.

If karma has a self-nature, karma undoubtedly becomes permanent and never extinguishes.¹⁴

If suffering had the self-nature, it would be impossible to extinguish it, because it would be confined by the “self-nature”. You are slandering the Four Noble Truths.¹⁵

Here is to elaborate “suffering” of the Four Noble Truths. According to the Buddha’s teachings, all experiences are [ultimately] suffering. How can there be no suffering? Based on the analysis above, the logic of “conceptual confine” is that if there is suffering, there is an identity that can afford the concept of suffering. If suffering is suffering, it must always be suffering, and it cannot be defined as “non-suffering”. If such suffering is to exist, there should be no extinction. Therefore, if there is very suffering, those who think that they are advocating the Four Noble Truths, are slandering them, because suffering cannot be extinguished on account of “conceptual confine”.

Similarly, under the premise of “conceptual confine”, this subject of identity, which could have overridden various phenomena, ought to have a property. Self-nature should also have a property that is its definition. Once the self-nature is defined, the two-layered structure of function and essence is combined in one with arising and ceasing. It is in this way that Nāgārjuna refuted self-nature.

4. Self-nature Refuted through Conceptual Confine

The fundamental principle of Buddhism is dependent arising (pratītya-samutpāda). According to the above analysis of the Sarvāstivāda, all dharmas that arise from causes and conditions actually exist. Nāgārjuna’s doctrine holding that all dharmas have no self-nature is mainly directed at the Sarvāstivāda. To further identify Nāgārjuna’s rejection of self-nature, it is necessary to understand the definition of self-nature in Mūlamadhyamakakārikā.

That self-nature actually exists in myriad conditions is unreasonable. If this self-nature is born out of the conditions, it is conditioned dharma.¹⁶

If self-nature is made out of conditions, how can this be justified? [Because] the self-nature is unconditioned and does not depend on other things.¹⁷

It is obvious that the self-nature refuted by Nāgārjuna is related to the self-nature of the Sarvāstivāda, but it is not the same. Mūlamadhyamakakārikā indicated that self-nature is produced from causes and conditions. The Sarvāstivāda assumed that the self-nature is unarisen, while only the function is arising and ceasing. This is a two-layered structure: one for the perpetual self-nature, the other for the function of arising and ceasing.

The Sarvāstivāda claims that self-nature is immutable and constant. What Nāgārjuna criticized is such a sameness of identity, because this sameness is also to be confined by the concept. If it is not confined, the self-nature can serve as the base of the phenomenon. However, Nāgārjuna indicated that this base is invalid. The self-nature in itself is the object indicated by the concept. If the concept is right, there is something that matches the concept. According to Nāgārjuna, if there is any concept for this indicative object, the content of the concept confines the object to a certain state, that is, the object has certain properties. Therefore, the self-nature that Nāgārjuna rejected is the indicative object that is conceived and confined by the concept.

5. Self-nature Refuted by Mūlamadhyamakakārikā from Perspective of Cognition

5.1 Negation of Subject from Cognition

Nāgārjuna assumed that sensation and sensible objects are interdependent, both of which have no self-nature. For example, the eye faculty does not see itself, because the visual function is directed to the visible object and cannot see itself. Since it cannot see itself, how can it be said that the eye faculty exists absolutely? If its seeing function is self-realized, it should be able to see itself; if not, it has no self-nature.¹⁸ If the eye faculty does not exist, the object seen by the eye, i.e., form, does not exist either. Since the eye faculty and the form do not exist, according to the same reasoning, the other five roots, i.e., the ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind, and the five objects, i.e., sound (śabda), odors (gandha), flavors (rasa) and the tactile (spraṣṭavya) and mental objects (dhammāyatana) have no self-nature.¹⁹

13 Li Xuezhong, Ye Shaoyong. *Liùshíwúliù fānzàngànhéjiào dàodú yizhù*. pp. 40-41.

14 MMK, 23a

15 MMK, 33c

16 MMK, 19C

17 MMK, 19C

18 Yinshun. *Zhōngguānlùn jiāngjì*. pp.67.

19 Yinshun. *Zhōngguānlùn jiāngjì*. pp.68-71.

Nāgārjuna used the analogy of a burning fire and combustible fuel to describe the relationship between the “self” and the ability to perceive. His point of view is concentrated in this passage, “Fuel is not fire, there is no fire without fuel, and fire does not have fuel, there is no fuel in the fire, there is no fire in fuel.”²⁰ This means that fire is not fuel, but there is no fire apart from fuel. Fuel does not belong to the fire, and there is no fuel in the fire. In short, the sensory ability cannot be equated with “self”, but without the senses, there is no “self”, and “self” is not the master of the sensory ability. The “self” is not the master of the perceptive power, nor does it mean that the sensory power is in the “self”.

5.2 Negation of Perceiving Activity by Nāgārjuna

There are proofs that what Nāgārjuna called conceptual attachment should begin at the very beginning of cognition.

Whenever the mind moves, it is the sphere of activity of the devas.²¹

If the mind has a place of attachment, how can it be free from the poison of transgression? Even when the mind is indifferent, it is still devoured by the serpent of trouble.²²

Consequently, the conceptual attachment in Nāgārjuna’s thought system is not limited to words or thoughts but encompasses all cognitive activities. As long as a sentient being reflects the external world in his consciousness and recognizes that a stimulus is external, he will have the perception of “this is something”, and at this primary stage, self-contradiction can be derived. What happened in this stage is inevitably distorted by the concept, but cannot be expressed without the concept. Therefore, it can be said that every moment of cognition of all sentient beings contains self-contradiction.

In this way, what Nāgārjuna criticized is neither the target set by himself nor a wrong view limited to a certain period and a certain school of thought, but a basic concept common to all sentient beings. Nāgārjuna declared that everything has no self-nature and launched a comprehensive critique, regardless of whether the thing is arising or ceasing, static or moving, relative or absolute, mundane or ultimate, and even the concepts of Buddha, Bodhi, and Nirvāṇa are no exception. According to Nāgārjuna, all concepts are ultimately self-contradictory and therefore cannot point to any existence. Nāgārjuna established his view of emptiness indicating that the whole world seen and known by mortals is only a delusional conceptual attachment and that nothing exists where the concept refers.

6. Conclusion

There is a disagreement between the Sarvāstivāda and Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā on the scope of self-nature. The Self-nature of the Sarvāstivāda is neither arising nor ceasing and is the basis for the existence of dharma. In contrast, Nāgārjuna’s view was that self-nature has to be described by concepts so it is arising and ceasing, and should be rejected. One of the arguments of the Sarvāstivāda for self-nature is “perception”, and Nāgārjuna assumed that “perception” is also a sort of mental attachment, which should also be rejected. This paper concludes that there is a difference in the scope of self-nature between the Sarvāstivāda and Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. However, from the epistemological point of view, the self-nature refuted by Mūlamadhyamakakārikā is the one perceived by the Sarvāstivāda.

Abbreviations

AKB Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam Chinese tr. by Xuan Zang (T no. 1558).

MVŚ Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā-śāstra T27, No. 1545.

Ny *Abhidharma-nyāyānusāra-śāstra T29, No. 1562.

Reference

- [1] Amber D. Carpenter, Persons Keeping Their Karma Together: The Reasons for the Pudgalavāda in Early Buddhism, In *The Moon Points Back*. [M]. USA: Oxford University Press. pp.81-82, 2015.
- [2] A.K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism*. [M]. UK: Motilal Banarsidass. pp.203, 2008.
- [3] Lv cheng. *Yindūfóxié yuánliúlüèjiāng*, [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House. pp.53, 2018.
- [4] Li Xuezhong, Ye Shaoyong. *Liùshírúlisòng fānzànghànghéjiào dǎodú yìzhù*. [M]. Shanghai: Zhongxi Book Company. pp. 40-41, 2014.
- [5] Ye Shaoyong. *Lóngshù zhōngguānzhéxuézhōngde zìxíng*. [J]. *World Philosophy*, pp. 150, 2016(2).
- [6] Yinshun. *Zhōngguānlùn jiǎngjì* [M]. Peking: Zhonghua Book Company. pp.68-71, 2011.
- [7] Yinshun. *Zhōngguānlùn jiǎngjì* [M]. Peking: Zhonghua Book Company. pp.67, 2011.

20 MMK, 15c

21 Li Xuezhong, Ye Shaoyong. *Liùshírúlisòng fānzànghànghéjiào dǎodú yìzhù*. pp. 40-41.

22 Li Xuezhong, Ye Shaoyong. *Liùshírúlisòng fānzànghànghéjiào dǎodú yìzhù*. pp. 40-41.