THE OXFORD HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy

Jan Westerhoff

T H E O X F O R D H I S T O R Y O F P H I L O S O P H Y
The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy

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of Indian Buddhist
Philosophy
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लोकोत्तरे लौकिके च प्रज्ञापारमितेऽमिते ।
दश पारमिताकारे प्रज्ञे देवि नमोऽस्तु ते ॥

In the world and world-transcendent,
Beyond the Wisdom Gone Beyond,
In ten-perfected form resplendent,
Wisdom-goddess, praise to you!
(From a hymn to the Perfection
of Wisdom, Pandey 1994: 125)

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Diagrams of Schools and Thinkers

The following two diagrams are intended to provide the reader with a synoptic

survey of the main schools and thinkers discussed in this book. For the sake of

simplicity I have omitted schools and thinkers that only play a subsidiary role

in the following pages. Both diagrams take the form of a 'subway map', each

line represents a school, and each stop or circle its approximate date of origin.
Connections between lines represent linkages between individual schools. Even

where there is no explicit 'interchange', spatial proximity indicates conceptual

affinity; it is no accident that tantra and tathāgatagarbha run on either side of

the Yogācāra line.

The first diagram simply identifies the different lines in terms of the different

schools they represent. In the second diagram all the names of schools are

omitted for the sake of simplicity; instead, the names of thinkers and of some

key texts associated with these schools are superimposed on the respective

lines. A section at the right-hand side lists names of the main non-Buddhist

thinkers that make an appearance in the following pages.

These diagrams are supposed to supplement the discussion in the following

pages, not to replace it. Given the considerable uncertainty about the dates of

individual thinkers, about what constitutes a 'school', how these schools are

interconnected, and which thinkers are supposed to be associated with which

schools the pieces of information provided by the diagrams should be taken as

pointers, not as facts. Unfortunately, the history of Indian Buddhist thought is

considerably more complicated than what can be summarized in two diagrams.
Nevertheless, I hope that the simplified picture they represent will help the

reader to navigate the complexities of the development of Buddhist philosophy

in India.

The Main Schools of Indian Buddhism
Mahāsam
· ghika
Sthaviranikāya
–300
Sarvāstivāda

Pudga-
Vibhajya-
–200
lavāda
vāda
Theravāda
–100
Mahāyāna
0
Madhyamaka
Sautrāntika
100
Yogācāra
200
300
Tathāgata-
garbha
400
Yogācāra-
Sautrāntika
Svātantrika
Prāsan· gika
500
Madhyamaka-
600
Yogācāra
700
Tantra
800
900
1000
Diagram of philosophical schools

Major Indian Buddhist Philosophers and Texts

**Non-Buddhist
philosophers**

–300

Dharmatrāta

Ghosaka Vasumitra

.

–200

Buddhadeva

–100

Prajñā-
pāramitā-
sūtra

0

Lankāvatārasūtra

.

Nāgārjuna

100

Aksapāda

Samdhinir-

.

Āryadeva

.

(Nyāya)

mocana-
sūtra

200

Maitreyanātha

Asanga

.

300

Buddhaghosa

.

Ratna-

Vasu-

Vātsyāyana

gotra-

bandhu

(Nyāya)

vibhaga

400

Buddhapālita

Dinnāga
·

Kumārila
(Mīmāmsā)
Dharmakīrti
·

500
Bhāviveka
Candrakīrti
Uddyotakara
(Nyāya)
Śānta-
Gaudapāda
600
raksita
·

(Vedānta)
Kamalaśīla
Hevajra-
Śankara
·

Śāntideva
tantra
(Vedānta)
700
800
Ratnā
Atiśa
kara-
900
śānti
1000
Ratnakīrti

Diagram of thinkers and texts

Introduction
To the modern historian, Buddhism is a phenomenon which must exasperate him at every point, and we can only say in extenuation that this

religion was not founded for the benefit of historians.[1]

1. Buddhist Philosophy in India:
A Wheel Ever Turning

One of the most famous of all Buddhist metaphors is, without doubt, the The whe

description of the Buddha's teaching, the dharma, as a wheel. The very first meta

Buddhist doctrine
teaching of the Buddha, after all, came to be known as the 'discourse turning

the Wheel of the Doctrine' (dharmacakra-pravartana-sūtra). Why precisely

the teaching should be compared to a wheel might not be altogether obvious to

us, and it was also not obvious to some of the Buddhist scholastics, who

discussed the matter in considerable detail. Vasubandhu describes a specific

realization of the teaching as the wheel of dharma, namely the so-called 'path of

seeing' (darśana mārga), the first direct, non-conceptual insight into empti-
ness.[2] This is considered to be like a wheel because it moves quickly,[3] conveys

the meditator to further spiritual realization, and crushes the defilements under

it. The Sarvāstivāda master Gho:saka considers the noble eightfold path to be a

wheel, because some of its parts correspond to the spokes, others to the hub

and to the rim.[4] Later Tibetan commentators explain the wheel metaphor by

reference to the universal monarch (cakravartin), whose attribute is a wheel.[5]

[1] Conze 1980: 15.
[2] Abhidharmakośa 6: 54c: dharmacakra :m tu d:rn˙mārga:h, which the bhā:sya ex
myāddarśanamārgo dharmacakram, Pradhan 1975: 371: 4–
5, Poussin and Pruden 1988–90: 3. 995.

[3] According to Sarvāstivāda theory, the path of seeing lasts only for fifteen mome

followed in the sixteenth moment by the 'path of meditation' (bhāvanā mārga). S

Pruden 1988–90: 3. 996; Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 451.
[4] Pradhan 1975: 371: 7–9, Poussin and Pruden 1988–90: 3. 996.
[5] This idea derives probably from the image of the wheels of the monarch's chari

the territories of his realm. Such a monarch is also said to be born with the mark

hands. See Stutley and Stutley 1977: 58.

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As the king's dominion extends from country to country, so the Buddha's

teaching extends from master to successive disciples.[6]

Buddhist thought

A fairly obvious feature of a wheel is its combination of the static and the

in India:

dynamic. After a 360-degree revolution a wheel returns to its original position

permanence
and change

while also having moved to another place. In this respect it resembles the

development of Buddhist thought in India. In one sense it stays always the

same, to the extent that all of its manifold developments can be traced back to

some element of the Buddha's original teaching (though not necessarily a very

explicit one); in another sense it is continuously changing, varying the way the

Buddhist message is conveyed relative to different audiences and different

times. Our discussion in the following pages attempts to be faithful to both

aspects, giving an account of the changing manifestations of Buddhist philoso-

phy while also examining the extent to which it is a coherent enterprise drawn

from the single source of the Buddha's insight.

2. Philosophy as a Game

The game as a

The development of Buddhist philosophy in India is a complex phenomenon

heuristic device for that stretched over more than one millennium and a half, and

understanding
philosophy
intricate web of schools, thinkers, texts, and concepts, all embedded in the

wider context of Indian philosophical and cultural history. In order to under-
stand complex phenomena, humans need simple models. One such a model is

a game. Philosophy is occasionally compared to a game,[7] and indeed there are a

number of parallels between the two: there are players and teams (philosophers

and their schools), rules (the canons of argumentation), matches (encounters

between thinkers or schools), wins and losses (successful and unsuccessful

arguments), and there is development through a series of games. While it is

easy to list the ways in which philosophy is not like a game (in games it is

usually clear who has won, unlike in philosophy; philosophy is about funda-
mental features of the world, while games are not about anything; and so on),

the similarities are sufficiently numerous to employ the example of a game as a

heuristic device for explaining the structure of my exposition of Buddhist

philosophy in India.

Four factors
I am first going to describe a number of factors that shape the dynamics

shaping a game
of philosophical developments. We can distinguish four: arguments, texts,

meditative practices, and historical background. Arguments correspond to

the techniques players use in the game, while thinkers may be compared

to the players, and their debates to the games played. The influence of medi-
tative techniques may be compared (somewhat crudely) to the inner states of

[6] Cabezón 1994: 37.
[7] Huizinga 1949: 146–57.

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the players and how these affect their playing techniques, while the historical

background functions like the condition of the pitch, the temperature, humid-
ity, and so on.
Once we have the factors in place, we can begin narrating the game. Our Narratin

narrative will be largely one of the performance of different teams (philosoph-
game

ical schools), and within this larger frame we will be looking at individual

players (particular philosophers), their own accounts of games they played

(texts), and at distinctive moves in those games (concepts characteristic of the

individual schools).
Before beginning the actual narrative, it is important to give some consid-
Sources the

eration to the sources it is going to be based on. The history of a game may be na

based on
based on recordings or descriptions of famous matches, comparisons of sets of

rules, interviews with players, and so on. In the context of a history of Buddhist

philosophy our resources are largely[8] text-based. These texts are, on the one

hand, foundational texts like the Buddhist sūtras (and, in the context of

our present investigation, these are to a large extent Mahāyāna sūtras)[9] and, Foun

on the other hand, commentarial texts that in some way explicate or expand on ar

the meaning of the foundational texts. These can be direct commentaries, or

works that attempt to explicate the meaning of a group of foundational texts in

a more summative manner. All of these then can give rise to further comments

and explications, forming the basis of an inverted scholastic pyramid of more

and more commentarial layers.
Of course the description of a match is considerably different from the Philosoph

match itself, and if the commentary may correspond to the description of a debate

India
match, the actual matches correspond to the philosophical debates that took

place in ancient India. In this context the comparison with games is quite apt

for describing what constituted a kind of ancient Indian intellectual spectator

sport. Unfortunately we do not have any transcripts of these debates, but

commentarial works are often structured in the debating mode, written as if

the explicator was giving his interpretation of the text in front of an audience of

heckling interlocutors. The author will present his view of what a specific

passage means, and then suggest answers to objections from (real or imagined)

opponents trying to undermine his interpretation. Gaining an understanding

[8] I say 'largely' because, unlike other ancient philosophical traditions (such as th

Greece and Rome), the Buddhist philosophical tradition is a living one. The game

played, and while this is helpful for the scholar of Buddhist philosophy in many r

not forget that while present practice can give us some pointers towards what phil

in ancient India was like, it is necessary to keep in mind that about a millennium

development and conceptual history separates the current philosophical tradition

Indian ancestor.
[9] As a matter of fact the Buddhist tantras should be included amongst these found

as well. However, the philosophical foundation of Buddhist tantra is not very wel

present, and our exposition will only make occasional references to tantric texts.

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of the debating context helps us to understand what doing philosophy in

ancient India really amounted to.
Doxographical
Apart from the foundational texts and their commentaries there is one

works
further set of sources that is useful for our present discussion. These are

doxographical works, expositions of a variety of Buddhist or non-Buddhist

views that give us an insight into the way the ancient Indians made sense of the

diversity of philosophical ideas that surrounded them. These texts did not

present a historical narrative, a story of how philosophical views developed

successively, but arranged thinkers, texts, and concepts into groups of philo-
sophical schools and usually set out their discussion in opposition to a specific

position that was deemed correct and superior to all of these. This could take

place by simply pitching the different schools against each other, or by arranging them in a hierarchy, where different schools are taken to approach the one true theory more or less closely. Doxographic presentations provide us with a bird's eye view of matches between different philosophical 'teams', even though we have to take into account that they are always composed with a specific philosophical agenda in mind.

The game's view

After looking at what kind of sources are at our disposal for narrating the

of the game

game, a final thing to consider is the game's view of the game. When we narrate the history of a complex game with a long history, we do so from our own perspective, and from our own historical position—indeed, how else could we possibly narrate it? Yet the players of the game will have had their own view of the nature of the pursuit they were engaged in, and if their assumptions differed considerably from those we use in narrating the game, it is worthwhile to make them explicit and to determine whether this discrepancy leads to problems for our narrative.

3. Factors Determining the Game

Histories of

There are various histories of Buddhist philosophy currently available in

Buddhist

Western languages, some of them composed by eminent scholars in the

philosophy as
partial pictures

field.[10] What, then, is the purpose of writing yet another one? The most obvious reason is that Buddhist philosophy is a vast topic spanning two-

and-a-half millennia and the cause of significant intellectual developments in

practically every country in Asia. As such, any monograph of the topic can at

best be a partial snapshot, delineating some of the major developments, and

barely mentioning or leaving out countless others. Such a snapshot is invari-
ably the result of what appears most salient to its author, and different histories

will thereby present different facets of the complex history of Buddhist

[10] See e.g. Conze 1962, Zotz 1996, Guillon 1997.

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philosophical thought. This book is no different. What, then, are the key

aspects of the history of Buddhist philosophy that this books seeks to describe?
First of all, I am not attempting to cover the whole development of Buddhist Peri

thought from the historical Buddha up to the present through all Buddhist Abhidh

to Dharmakīrti
cultures, but focus on a specific, seminal place and period: the golden age of

Buddhist philosophy in India, from the composition of the Abhidharma texts

(about the beginning of the first millennium CE) up to time of Dharmakīrti

(sixth or seventh century CE), with some, albeit limited, consideration of its

history between Dharmakīrti and the end of the Buddhist scholastic tradition

on the Indian subcontinent at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Within

these temporal and spatial parameters, I want to describe how the development

of Buddhist philosophy was influenced primarily by three key factors: argu-
ments, texts, and meditative practice.[11] Each of these three factors determined

the shape of Buddhist philosophy in important ways.

We will only occasionally mention the fourth factor mentioned above, Social, ecc

historical background. This is not because I believe that considerations of politica

social, economic, and political factors are of no importance for understanding

the history of Buddhist philosophy in India. There is no doubt that such factors

contributed to shaping the history of Buddhism as a whole,[12] even though the

danger that the political flavour of the day may influence or distort the

conception of India's intellectual past presented in histories with a strong

emphasis on the political dimension is not to be underestimated. Two particu-
larly clear examples are Frauwallner's theories of the Aryan basis of Indian

philosophy,[13] and Ruben's history of Indian philosophy along Marxist lines.[14]
In addition, how relevant the social, economic, and political events that

might have had an effect on the development of the Buddhist religion in general

are for explaining the history of Buddhist philosophy in particular is frequently

difficult to determine. Even for times and places where we have plenty of

information about social, political, and economic factors (say, post-
Enlightenment

Europe), writing the history of philosophical ideas of this period in terms of

these factors seems hardly straightforward and possibly of limited importance

for illuminating their contents. In the case of ancient India our knowledge of

these matters is extremely limited and fragmentary, and while it would be

[11] We can line these up with the three epistemic instruments (pramāṇa) distinguis

Buddhist authors such as Vasubandhu (Gold 2015a: 100): inference (anumāna), s

(āgama), and perception (pratyak:sa) understood as perception arising as the resul

practice (yogipratyak:sa). Note that there is no overall consensus within Buddhist

number of the epistemic instruments. Candrakīrti appears to accept the set of four

instruments given by Nyāya, Din˙nāga restricts them to two, perception and infer

Nāgārjuna seems to reject all of them (at least if understood in a substantialist ser
[12] See e.g. Ling 1973.
[13] Frauwallner 1939.
[14] Ruben 1954. See Franco 2013: 6–
16 for a good discussion of the background of both of

Frauwallner's and Ruben's approaches.

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foolish to deny that society, economics, and politics did influence the history of

philosophy in India to some extent, it is hard to establish potential correlations

with a high degree of certainty.[15] As any influence they might have had also

appears to be less decisive than that of arguments, texts, and meditative

practices, we will only mention connections with these historical factors in a

few instances.
a. Arguments
Arguments as
When thinking about the history of philosophy we might be forgiven for

driving the history thinking that it is the arguments that drive its entire developme

of philosophy
certain answers to certain philosophical questions, and philosophers come up

with arguments to back up some of these answers. Whoever has the most

successful argument, the story goes, will create the most successful philosoph-
ical theory, which then attracts various refutations and counter-arguments, the

best of which will then become the most notorious, and so on. This picture

is certainly too simplistic to account for the history of any philosophical

tradition, but it contains the fundamental insight that arguments and the

competition between them is one of the key driving forces of philosophical

development. In the context of Indian Buddhist philosophy it is also important

not to focus solely on the argumentative exchanges within the Buddhist

tradition, but also on the debates Buddhists had with exponents of the different

schools of classical Indian philosophy, as there are numerous instances where

the expository framework and also the contents of Buddhist philosophy are

Development of
influenced in important ways by its interaction with non-Buddhist schools.
Buddhist
Roger Jackson proposed a three-stage model of the development of Buddhist

philosophy:
three stages
thought in India.[16] During the first stage (roughly the first three centuries of

Buddhism's existence) Buddhism participated in inter-sectarian discussion

with various non-Buddhist schools (such as the Jains, Cārvāka, and Ājīvika

schools), thereby making its own doctrinal position more precise. This was

followed by a second stage (beginning around the time of Aśoka in the third

century BCE) during which Buddhists were primarily debating with Buddhists.
At this time of mainly intra-sectarian debate the bases of the four Buddhists

schools distinguished in traditional doxographies were established; the aim of

the game was not so much to establish the truth of Buddhism in the face of its

detractors, as to refute interpretations of the Buddha's words that were con-
ceived as erroneous. In the third stage the Buddhists appear to be turning

outwards again. Over the centuries Indian philosophical schools had developed

a plethora of more advanced philosophical techniques which could be used to

[15] For recent interesting work on potential correlations between ancient Indian ph

political factors see Bronkhorst 2011a, Eltschinger 2013, Walser 2015.
[16] Jackson 1993: 99–107.

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address old disputes once again, but this time from a new perspective.[17] They Del
began to argue with each other in a manner that did not presuppose the validity B

of any one of their particular worldviews, and tried to base their entire

argumentative exchanges on premises that both opponents could accept,

together with a set of shared logical and epistemological assumptions.[18] The

influence of non-Buddhist arguments on the development of Buddhist phil-
osophy was obviously most pronounced during stages 1 and 3. Given the focus

of this work on the first millennium CE, I will be looking primarily at phase 3 to

find out how the interaction with non-Buddhist arguments influenced the

development of Buddhist philosophy. After a period of intra-Buddhist debate

of considerable complexity, which could, nevertheless, take all of the familiar

Buddhist assumptions as agreed upon, Buddhists

suddenly found themselves defending the existence of past and future lives agains

Cārvāka materialists, the possibility of liberation against both materialists and

Mīmā :msākas, their denial of universals against the Vaiśe:sikas, their rejection o

creator God against the Naiyāyikas, the theory of momentariness against the Sā :ɪ

and Jainas—and the theory of no-self (anātman) against virtually everybody.[19]
This necessity to provide arguments for claims that were previously simply

assumed is a clear example of how the dynamics of argument acts as a driving

force behind Indian Buddhist philosophy. But arguments are not everything,

and especially for forms of philosophy developed against a religious back-
ground, sacred texts are another key factor that influences the way their history

takes shape.

[b. Sacred texts](#)
In an important sense the sacred texts—in this case, the Buddhist canon—

provide the goal of philosophical argumentation. The claims made in the

canon are the claims which are to be argued for, analyzed, and expanded on

in Buddhist philosophical texts. However, that does not mean that the Bud-
dhist philosophical enterprise is simply trying to provide arguments for already

established conclusions. First of all, which texts are to be regarded as canonical

is far from straightforward, as the multiplicity of Buddhist canons testifies.
Secondly, even within the context of a set of texts that are regarded as

authoritative, the Buddhist hermeneutic distinction between the interpretable

[17] It is interesting to note that once Indian Buddhism is translated to Tibet we finc

of phase 2, with a nearly exhaustive dominance of intra-
sectarian disputes, because there are

virtually no proponents of other schools to debate with.
[18] Of course this did not work quite as smoothly as the participants might have ho

for example, the Nyāya and Madhyamaka disagreements about the status of rules

discussed in Nāgārjuna's Vaidalyaprakaraṇa (Westerhoff 2018).
[19] Jackson 1993: 105.

 THE GOLDEN AGE OF INDIAN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY
Interpretable/
(neyārtha) and the definite (nītārtha) texts allows for a surprising amount of

definite distinction variation amongst Buddhist positions. If there are specific utte

as source of
variation in
Buddha that are to be taken literally, and others that require interpretation,

Buddhist
variations of which ones are to be put in which category can produce a

philosophy
considerable divergence between different interpretative positions. The fore-
grounding of specific texts or sets of texts to support particular interpretations

of the Buddhist doctrine is therefore to be understood (alongside the dynamics

of argumentative exchanges) as a second key factor that shaped the course of

Buddhist philosophy in India.
c. Meditative practice
Finally, we have to keep in mind that Buddhist texts are not just meant to be

read, but supposed to be practised. In particular, they constitute a set of

instructions to bring about a gradual (or perhaps sudden) cognitive shift that

is indicative of the mind changing from the unenlightened to the enlightened

state. It is sometimes pointed out that the formation of the Buddhist canons was frequently open-ended, insofar as during the development of Buddhism new texts appeared that were later regarded as canonical.[20] This, together with the natural open-endedness of argumentative exchanges, contributed in an important way to the dynamic development of Buddhist thought. But there is yet another source of open-endedness involved. The Buddha (and subsequent

The need to
classify meditative
experiences

Buddhist masters) taught a set of meditative techniques which their disciples were supposed to put into practice in order to develop certain their teaching at the experiential level. These techniques generated a plethora of inner experiential states in the practitioners, and the ensuing phenomenology needed to be conceptualized within a suitable framework, answering such questions as what these states were, how they were related to ordinary experiences, what the reason for their soteriological efficacy was, and so forth. As the set of meditative techniques Buddhist practitioners employed was elaborated and enlarged during the development of Buddhism, the philosophical frameworks employed to account for these kept developing too. As such, a significant part of the development of Buddhist philosophy can be understood as responding to the need to account for a phenomenology of meditative states.

Three factors as
gravitational
forces

It is usually impossible to draw very precise distinctions between the three factors of arguments, texts, and meditative practice, claiming, for example, that

a given position solely arose because it was a response to a specific non-Buddhist argument, or because if featured dominantly in a text that had just become popular, or because it was needed to a account for some particular item [20] Whether these were in fact authored later, already composed at the Buddha's ti hidden, or were somehow produced in a realm other than the world we inhabit is question which we need not settle here.

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of meditative phenomenology. These factors overlap and influence each other,

and it may therefore be best to think of them as three bodies with different

strengths of gravitational attraction, and of the trajectory of Buddhist philoso-phy as corresponding to that of a particle moving between them, approaching

closer to one, and thereby being attracted more by it, then moving more into

the gravitational field of another, and so on.
It is also helpful to think of the relation of these three factors in terms of the Exap

evolutionary concept of exaptation. Exaptation describes a case where a feature p

concepts
was evolutionarily developed for one purpose (such as the bird's plumage for

temperature regulation) but subsequently served another (in this case, flight).
In the same way, a specific concept might originate from a particular doctrinal

position, argument, or meditative experience, and may later prove useful to

elucidate another textual passage, underpin a quite different argument, or help

to conceptualize further forms of meditation. It is not implausible to suggest

that the concepts that proved to be especially successful in the development of

Buddhist philosophy were those that displayed the greatest degree of exaptive

functionality, that is, concepts that, though originating from a specific doctri-
nal, dialectical, or meditative context could be usefully employed in quite

different contexts. Understood in this way, it will be easier to see how reference

to each of the three factors allows us to get a better grasp of the different twists

and turns of the development of Buddhist philosophy in India over the course

of time.

4. Narrating the Game: How to Structure the Material

There are various possible ways of structuring a history of philosophy. We can C

understand it as a succession of thinkers (as is frequently done in histories of stru

history of Indian
Western philosophy), or as a series of philosophical texts, or as a progression of p

philosophical schools, or as a sequence of philosophical ideas.
Each approach has its drawbacks. When dealing with ancient Indian

thinkers it is frequently unclear when they lived, what they wrote, and even

in some cases how many of the same name there were in the first place.[21]
Focusing exclusively on the texts makes establishing a historical progression

not necessarily easier, since dating the texts and establishing their mutual

temporal relations is often far from straightforward. The doxographical

[21] Dasgupta (1922: 1.62) notes that 'it is hardly possible to attempt a history of In

Philosophy in the manner in which the histories of European philosophy have bee
Dasgupta's methodological reflections are still pertinent, though his view that 'al

of their [i.e. the Indian philosophers'] thinking was limited and enchained by the

to which they were attached' (63) needs to be reconsidered in the light of the con

discussion we find e.g. in Ganeri 2011.

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approach that divides the history of Buddhist thought by schools, a device

favoured by Indian and Tibetan historians, faces the challenge that much of the

seemingly clear division between the different schools is an ex post facto

arrangement, and that the individual thinkers concerned would have been

unlikely to ascribe themselves to the specific schools they are supposed to

have belonged to quite so readily. We certainly find numerous Indian Buddhist

philosophers who cross the supposed doxographical divides. Vasubandhu

made key contributions to the Abhidharma and to Yogācāra, Diṅnāga and

Dharmakīrti were important Yogācāra thinkers but also form what is usually

considered to be a separate logico-epistemological school. Kambala, a lesser-
known author from the sixth century, seems to occupy a position straddling

Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. Finally, writing a history of Buddhist thought

organized solely by concepts, a Begriffsgeschichte, would be a fascinating

enterprise, but it is an undertaking that presupposes much more philological

and philosophical groundwork than is available at present.
A hybrid structure
Being aware of the drawbacks and advantages of each organizational prin-
ciple, our history opts for a hybrid approach. We will structure the history of

Buddhist thought according to the traditional and plausible historical sequence

Four schools
Abhidharma—Madhyamaka—Yogācāra—Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti, while
paying attention to their mutual interrelations,[22] and discuss the difficulties

in clearly differentiating between them.[23] No account of Buddhist thought in

India would be complete without discussing the manifold philosophical inter-
Buddhist–non-
actions between the schools of Buddhist thought and non-Buddhist classical

Buddhist debates
Indian philosophy. The amount and scope of their debates is vast, and in the

limits of a concise history such as this our approach has to be selective. We will

look in more detail at three sets of debates between Buddhist and non-Buddhist

schools: between Madhyamaka and Nyāya, between Yogācāra and Vedānta,

and between the school of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti and Mīmā :msā.
Key thinkers
Within the general doxographic and historical framework of the four schools

we discuss the key thinkers of each school. It is clear, however, that many of thes

have produced work crossing the doxographical divisions, and that we might

sometimes be dealing with two or more historical personalities that have been

Key texts
merged in the traditional view. While looking at individual thinkers it is also

necessary to provide accounts of key works, of philosophical treatises (śāstras)

[22] We discuss the relation between Madhyamaka and Abhidharma in Chapter 2 (p
101,

107–
15), that between Yogācāra and Abhidharma and Madhyamaka in Chapter 3 (pp.
16),

and that between the theories of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti and those of the other

Chapter 4 (pp. 259–70).
[23] Questions of differentiation become particularly interesting when considering a

combine Madhyamaka and Yogācāra approaches (see e.g. the essays by Westerho

and Blumenthal in Garfield and Westerhoff 2015) and when investigating the rela

theories of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti with those of the other three schools.

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with clearly identified authors, and of important sūtras associated with the

different philosophical traditions, texts which are supposed to comprise the

essence of philosophical views subsequently elaborated in the more technical

treatises. Unfortunately the dating, authorship, mutual relationship, and some-
times scope of the individual texts is often far from clear. Finally, we will need

to provide substantial discussion of the key concepts indispensable for under-
Key concepts

standing the philosophical outlook of each school. Our aim is to make the

limitations of each organizational principle evident while ensuring that an

informative account of the history of Buddhist thought emerges through

their joint presence.
5. The Sources of the Game
a. The bases of Buddhist philosophy
The main source from which all of Buddhist philosophy flows is, unsurpris-
Early discourses

ingly, the teaching of the Buddha. In the context of the history of Indian and Mah

sūtras

Buddhism during the first millennium CE, 'the teaching of the Buddha' is not

just taken to comprise the discourses of early Buddhism, but also a variety of

other texts, such as the Mahāyāna sūtras, as well as the tantras. All of these are

traditionally considered to have been authored by the Buddha in some form or

other, whether in his physical form during the present world-age (kalpa) as

Buddha Śākyamuni during the time of his life in ancient India, or in another

manifestation, or in another space and time altogether. These texts became

known gradually over time as Buddhism developed in ancient India; the first

Mahāyāna sūtras appeared around the beginning of the Common Era, and the

first Buddhist tantras around the third century CE. The Mahāyāna Buddhist

tradition does not see the later origin of these texts as detracting from their

claim to authenticity. It argues that these teachings were indeed all authored by

the Buddha, though not all were made public at the very beginning, as some

doctrines would only be beneficial for beings that lived a considerable time

after the Buddha's death. As such, the teachings were hidden until a suitable

time for their propagation arose.

Some parts of contemporary Buddhist studies are very interested in determin-
The 'original

ing the 'original teachings' of the Buddha,[24] and separating them from the teachir

Buddha
historical overlay that later generations have added as embellishment, distinguish
ing supposedly earlier hard conceptual substance from later fluffy pious fiction.[25]

[24] Gombrich 2009, Siderits 2010.

[25] This approach finds its counterpart in attempts to extract the 'historical core' of
ical accounts, such as the traditional accounts of the Buddha's life or biographies

luminaries. This strikes me as particularly problematic in the Buddhist case; see p
34 below for

further discussion.

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This is not an approach the Buddhist tradition itself adopted, and although not

every Buddhist thinker would consider every text as genuine, the conception of

the later development of Buddhism as an obscuring force that is somehow

clouding the original clarity of the Buddha's teachings is not one we find in

ancient Indian texts.[26] For the purpose of discussing the history of Buddhist

philosophy, attempting to distinguish which philosophical positions form part

of the 'original thinking of the Buddha' and which are later scholastic develop-
ments that depart from his original message is not very helpful. This distinction is

Different ways of
therefore not one we are attempting to draw in the following pages. It is in fact

construing
questionable whether this distinction makes sense at all. As will be seen from

'original teachings' various examples in our following discussion, the Buddha's t

variety of conceptual seeds that later germinate in the development of different

philosophical traditions, with different traditions placing different emphases on

specific concepts.[27] Each tradition creates its own image of 'what the Buddha

really taught' by focusing on those concepts that feature prominently in the

philosophical approach the tradition under consideration develops. The different

emphases of the different traditions were shaped by the intellectual needs and

circumstances of the times in which these traditions developed, and given the

importance the Buddha accorded to teachings being suitable for the time, place,

and audience that receives them, arguing against the authenticity of later teachings because they go beyond the discussions found in the early sūtras is hardly

satisfactory. This approach overlooks how much the exposition of the dharma

needs to be shaped by the beliefs and preconceptions of the audience in order to

be soteriologically effective.

Frameworks of

The sūtras therefore form the basis on which the activity of doing philosophy

philosophical

in the Buddhist context took place. It is worthwhile to spend some time consid-

activity: debates,

commentaries,

ering the different forms of intellectual presentation that shaped both the outward

doxographies

appearance and the contents of the activity that constituted ancient Indian

philosophical works. We will look at three main frameworks in which

Indian philosophizing took place: debates, commentaries, and doxographies.
[26] The modern distrust of the scholastic Indian commentarial tradition is not confi

commentaries on the teachings of the historical Buddha. Kalupahana (2008: 517)

central subsequent commentators misunderstood the meanings of Nāgārjuna's, V

Diṅnāga's works, and that their messages need to be rediscovered by a direct rea

unencumbered by the conceptual frameworks of the commentarial tradition.
[27] This fact needs to be taken into account when considering the development of t

schools of Buddhist philosophy, and the association of particular thinkers with sp[...]
Each school created its own 'conceptual lineage', rooted in the Buddha's teachin[...]

specific ideas backwards through a selection of sūtras and commentarial material[...]

therefore, to be aware that the association of specific authors and texts with a giv[...]

be primarily the outcome of such a retrospective process of lineage creation, and [...]

themselves might not have identified themselves with that specific school. While [...]

classifying Buddhist philosophers in terms of the main ideas they defend, the idea[...]

association of each one with a specific school is in many cases a doxographical fi[...]

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To some extent these are all present in the current form of Western

philosophy most readers will be familiar with. The questions after a philo-
sophical lecture can often be best described in terms of a debate: they are

objections put forward by the audience, the speaker responds by a defence of his [...]

position. Major works in the history of philosophy (such as Kant's first Critique [...]

or Wittgenstein's Tractatus) give rise to works of secondary literature calling

itself 'Commentary on . . . ', and histories of philosophy can often be under-
stood as doxographies organized by thinkers who held the respective doxa.
In ancient Indian philosophy these forms of presentation are both more

elaborate and more influential than their contemporary Western variants,

which may sometimes appear somewhat anaemic. In order to understand

what ancient Indian philosophers did and how they did it, it is important to

have some understanding of the structure of these forms of presentation, and

of the purpose they are supposed to serve.

b. Debates

It is hard to overestimate the importance of debates in Indian intellectual life. Public debates constituted the most important and most visible forms of Public de

philosophical exchange. They were an intellectual spectator sport, sometimes

held in the presence of a ruler,[28] that attracted considerable audiences. The

stakes were high: not only could they make or break a scholar's career; they

could also have important consequences for their followers. We frequently read

about scholars defeated in debates who not only have to adopt their opponent's

position, but have to make all their disciples convert as well. Sometimes even

more is at stake (though we have to take these accounts perhaps with a pinch of

salt): the defeated debater is expected to cut out his tongue or even to kill

himself.[29] Xuanzang (玄奘), a Chinese scholar who travelled through India at

the beginning of the seventh century, has this to say about Indian debates:

Assemblies for discussion are often held to test the intellectual capacity of the mo

order to distinguish the superior from the inferior, and to reject the dull and prom

the bright. Those who can deliberate on the subtle sayings, and glorify the wonde

theories with refined diction and quick eloquence, may ride richly caparisoned ele
phants with hosts of attendants preceding and following behind them. But those t

whom the theories are taught in vain, or who have been defeated in a debate, expl

few principles in a verbose way, or distorting the teachings with language that is

pleasant to the ear, are daubed with ocher or chalk in the face, while dust is scatte

[28] For further discussion of the royal patronage of debates see Bronkhorst 2011a:

9.

[29] Eckel 2008: 10, 13–
14. A variety of historical documents informs us that tortures reportedly

inflicted on the loser of debates were equally gruesome and inventive. In addition

of tongues and banishment they include the defeated opponent being 'bruised to ᵒ
mills

of stone' (Verardi 2014: 26), being boiled in oil (211), having their heads cut off

being thrown into a wooden mortar and ground to powder (209).

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over the body, and are expelled into the wilderness, or discarded into ditches. In t

the good and the evil are distinguished, and the wise and the ignorant are disclose
Reading accounts such as these, we indeed get the impression that 'debaters

were the rock stars and sports heroes of classical India'.[31]
Debate manuals
Around the first century CE the first explicit manuals for conducting debates

were composed. Debates were no informal exchange of ideas where two

contestants had a discussion until one gave up, but highly formalized affairs

with rules about what responses could be made, what reasons could be given,

what unfair tricks an opponent might employ, and, most importantly, how to

Nyāya: three
tell when a debater had lost a debate. The Nyāyasūtra, a highly influential text

kinds of debate
on logic and debate composed in its first form during the first century CE,

distinguishes three forms of debate: debate proper (vāda), which does not have

winning as its main objective, but aims at determining the truth about some

disputed matter; tricky debate (jalpa), where desire for victory is the main goal

for both parties; and destructive debate (vitaṇ :dā), where the aim is only to

prove the opponent wrong, without attempting to prove one's own position.
Only debates proper end in the determination of a true conclusion; tricky

debates and destructive debates are over as soon as the opponent has nothing

left to say. It is only the first, debate proper, which is to be regarded as a

philosophical tool; the other two are merely degenerated versions that occur

when debates are primarily considered as public performances. Yet debate

proper is not only a means for a joint inquiry, but also a tool for teaching

philosophy. In this form it continues in Tibetan monastic education (drawing

directly on Indian models) up to the present day.[32]

Influence on
We find that the practice of debate has influenced the structure of Indian

philosophical
philosophical works to a considerable extent. A very clear example of this is

works
Vasubandhu's Vi :mśikā. It begins by a verse in which Vasubandhu states that

Debate and
all things are only mental in nature. But instead of elaborating this point

Vasubandhu's
further and supplying arguments for the position, the text goes immediately

Vi :mśikā
into objections the opponent makes against this counterintuitive position;

Vasubandhu then develops this point further by responding to these objec-

tions. Even though not all Indian philosophical texts of the first millennium CE show their connection with the debating ground so clearly, in virtually all of

them, be they independent works or commentaries, we find some space given

to an opponent (or a sequence of opponents that will not necessarily agree with

one another); the author then uses the opportunity to explain his account

further by answering the opponents one by one.
The influence of debates on the development of Indian Buddhist
philosophy is a clear example how the first of the three factors distinguished

[30] Li 1996: 58.
[31] Eckel 2008:15.
[32] Perdue 1992, 2014.

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above—arguments—shape its contents. Buddhist philosophical texts from the

first millennium CE are not just expositions of the words of the historical Texts a

Buddha, but are responses to the claims of its philosophical rivals. While to philo

rivals
their aim is to establish the truth of the Buddha's fundamental insight,

they do so in a way that replies to actual or hypothetical criticisms that were

brought forward by the proponents of the non-Buddhist schools. Buddhist

philosophy would not be what it is today if it had not developed in a complex

interplay with opposing positions that defended radically different views

of the world.
c. Commentaries

Commentaries form an immensely important part of the philosophical texts of ancient India. The interrelations between Indian philosophical texts can be visualized in the form of a tree, with a small number of 'root texts' at the bottom, and an ever-expanding structure of commentarial stems, branches, and foliage on top. At the bottom of the tree are the sūtras, texts that attempt to C exemplify the ideals of exceeding conciseness (laghutā), as well as completeness (k:rtsnatā) in the treatment of a particular subject matter, though often doing so at the expense of clarity (vaiśadya), the third ideal traditionally associated with theoretical texts in ancient India.[33] A sūtra presents material in a series of short, often metrically structured sentences, a format that aids memorization of frequently very large conceptual structures. In fact, calling sūtras short is a considerable understatement, and 'even so laconic a document as a telegram would be prolix compared to a sūtra'.[34] What a sūtra has gained in compact-ness and completeness it loses in clarity, and a text in sūtra format is decidedly not intended to be understood on its own. We can compare a sūtra to a computer file that needs to be decompressed before it can be read, or to bullet-points on a lecture handout. In the latter case the bullet-points are meant to be accompanied by the speaker's oral presentation, and a sūtra may be elucidated in the same way by the teacher's verbal explanation, often after the student has committed the text of the sūtra itself to memory. The explana-tory expansion of the compressed sūtra format can also be provided by a Differen written commentary. Within the Indian scholastic context a variety of different cc

types of commentary are distinguished. It is indicative of the often cryptic

style employed in the sūtra genre that one type of commentary, called viv:rti

[33] Ganeri 2010: 192–
3. The Buddha's discourses, though also called sūtras, do not fall under this

notion of what a sūtra is.
[34] Maurer 1981: 8–9. A well-
known saying states, with reference to authors of grammatical

treatises, that if they can save as much as half a syllable in the formulation of thei

rejoice as they would at the birth of a son (ardha-mātrā-
lāghavena putrotsava :m manyante

vaiyākaraṇā :h). Kielhorn, Abhyankar, and Abhyankara 1960–2: 122.

vivaraṇa
or vivaraṇa, focuses almost exclusively on grammatical issues. Such a com-
mentary would indicate the division of the words of the sūtra (word-breaks are

not indicated by spaces in Sanskrit written in devanāgarī script), explain the

meaning of obscure or technical terms by synonyms, analyse grammatical

compounds, in particular long nominal compounds beloved by authors of

Indian scholastic literature, and explain how the meaning of the sūtra is to

be construed on the basis of this analysis.[35]
bhā:sya
A second kind of commentary, a bhā:sya, operates at a somewhat higher level of

abstraction. Its purpose is to connect the individual sūtras so that they form a

coherent argumentative whole. It does so by imposing an overall structure on the

sequence of the sūtras. This involves grouping the sūtras into smaller units that

belong together, and establishing breaks between the discussions of different topi
On the basis of this division into thematic groups it is then possible to give more

specific explanations of the individual sūtras according to the way in which they

into these groups. In addition, the bhā:sya will attempt to structure the sūtras

according to a dialectical narrative, specifying some sūtras as the text's own

assertions (siddhānta), others as objections raised by the opponent (pūrvapak:sa)

or hypotheses only entertained for the sake of argument. It is evident that there is

considerable flexibility in the way a structure may be imposed on a very concise

of sūtras. A text will usually not indicate when the author himself is speaking,

stating his own views, and when he is giving voice to his opponent's position, wh

he does not share. Such identifications will most often be carried out by commen-
taries, and a difference in opinion about who is speaking in different sections of t

text is obviously going to give rise to very different readings of a single text.
It is therefore the very terseness of the root texts, lacking indication of

divisions or structuring, or of objection and reply, that makes it possible to

structure them in more than one way, making very different commentarial

approaches possible.
It is at this stage that the necessity of a third kind of commentary, a vārttika,

vārttika
arises. This is a commentary on a commentary (i.e. a bhā:sya) and presupposes th

presence of a variety of commentarial approaches to the underlying sets of sūtras.
The vārttika's role as a subcommentary is to assess and compare the specific

interpretative choices of the different commentaries to each other, and to establish

the superiority of the bhā:sya it is a subcommentary on over the others.
The hierarchy of commentaries can obviously be extended beyond the level

of subcommentaries. The range of commentarial activities all fundamentally

[35] These four, together with the answering of objections that one might raise agai

made in the sutra, constitute the five functions usually attributed to 'commenting'

texts (Tubb and Bose 2007: 3–
5). Note that there is nothing in these five functions that entails a

restriction to philosophical texts. A commentary on a poetical text, for example, v

to provide information on these five topics as well.

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concerned with a single text (i.e. the underlying set of sūtras) will, one might

expect, eventually obtain an equilibrium, a balanced position where the various

interpretative possibilities of the text raised so far have been explored, and

where some sort of consensus about how to understand it has been reached.
Nevertheless, at this stage we may also find authors who are dissatisfied with

the conclusions obtained at this stage, who will compose an entirely new

commentary on the root text, bypassing the accumulated rhetorical layers

and attempting to establish a fundamentally new reading of the text.[36]
The sūtra-
commentary style genre appealed to Indian philosophical writers kārikā
so much that they composed new texts, called kārikās, that were formally very

similar to the received sūtra texts, and which presented a new, concise, and

complete discussion of a philosophical topic. In some cases they would then

compose their own commentary on this new sūtra, using this opportunity to

expand in prose on the points made in the compressed sūtra format.
The framework of root texts and commentaries which is so central to Buddhist

classical Indian philosophy was adopted by Buddhist philosophers as well. comm

The Buddhists did not, of course, have foundational sūtras of the kind that

formed the basis of the six orthodox darśanas, like Patañjali's Yogasūtra,

Kaṇāda's Vaiśe:sikasūtra, and so on. The foremost textual basis of Buddhism

are the Buddha's discourses, also called 'sūtra' (or sutta in Pāli); despite the fact

that they are formally very different from the compressed telegraph style of the

sūtras of classical Indian philosophy, they became the subject of considerable

commentarial activity.[37] More important for the present discussion, however, Buc

are the independent, sūtra-style works, the Buddhist kārikās that later philo-
and their auto-
commentaries
sophers composed in order to express in concise form what they took to be

the philosophical message of specific sūtras (often Mahāyāna sūtras). These

kārikās were frequently supplied with auto-commentaries. We know very little

about the way these kārikā-commentary compounds were composed. One

historical account, however, relates the way that Vasubandhu composed his

famous Abhidharmakośa,[38] describing how he would lecture during the day,

and then sum up the day's teaching in a verse, the sequence of which became

the Abhidharmakośa. In this case, the detailed oral exposition would have

preceded the succinct expression in a series of sūtras, and it is not unlikely

to assume that Vasubandhu's auto-commentary on the sūtras expressed the

content of the very lectures they are supposed to have summarized.[39]

[36] In early modern India, for example, new interest arose in composing fresh com

some of the most ancient of all Indian philosophical texts, the Nyāyasūtras and th

(Ganeri 2011).

[37] Ganeri 2011: 113.

[38] See below, pp. 155–6.

[39] The matter is slightly complicated by the doctrinal tension between the root tex

commentary (see below, p. 156). Whether Vasubandhu first interpreted the root t

oral explanation and in another way in his subsequent commentary in the Abhidh

 THE GOLDEN AGE OF INDIAN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

Even though there are accounts where teachers are supposed to have composed

a sequence of sūtras directly (this, for example, is the way Śāntideva is said to

have first taught the Bodhicaryāvatāra),[40] it seems generally plausible to

assume that the order in which a text/commentary compound is studied

(first sūtra, then commentary) is the inverse of the order in which the two

were composed.

Commentarial

The very conciseness of the sūtra style makes raises the probability that

practice and

different commentators come up with very different interpretations. Jonardon

authorial intent

Ganeri discusses a telling example of two different commentaries on two verses

from the Vaiśe:sikasūtra.[41] The first commentary reads the first verse as

Conflicting

expressing the view of a Vedānta opponent, and the second verse as presenting

commentarial

the text's own view, while the second commentary understands the first verse

interpretations

as the sūtra's own view, and the second verse as that of a Buddhist opponent!
Such examples of divergence underline the need for vārttika-style commentaries that evaluate the different conflicting interpretations and select the best

one. Eventually, it would seem at least, that such evaluation leads to an

interpretative consensus on how a specific text is to be best understood, a

consensus that in the best possible case manages to approach as closely as

possible the meaning that the author originally wanted to convey in the text.
Understood in this way, a philosophical tradition that places as much

Sterility and

emphasis on the production of commentaries may be considered as instanti-

arbitrariness?

ating a peculiar combination of sterility and arbitrariness. It is sterile because

the primary aim of the philosophical enterprise is not any kind of conceptual

discovery or innovation, but to understand and faithfully reproduce the meaning of a set of texts handed down from the past, whether these are the

foundational sūtras of the schools of classical Indian philosophy or the

Buddha's discourses. It is arbitrary because in the process of doing so it

produces a set of very divergent, sometimes contradictory readings of the

same texts, a divergence that is caused largely by the opacity of the very texts

the tradition tries to elucidate. This opacity makes it impossible to decide

which, if any, of the different interpretations suggested expresses the 'true

meaning' of the root text, so that we are left with an enterprise that unsuc-
cessfully navigates between what is—in all likelihood—a vast array of differ-
ent misunderstandings of a text, with little hope of ever finding out what the

author really wanted to say.
something we do not know. In any case, apart from being in tension with the histo

the composition of the Abhidharmakośa, the idea that all of the verses of the Abh

first composed as an independent work would also not cohere well with the fact t

not seem to be comprehensible without the commentary provided by the Abhidha

[40] See Paul Williams's introduction to Crosby and Skilton 1995: ix–
x, and above, pp. 271–2.
[41] Ganeri 2011: 111.

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Yet it turns out that the picture of the commentarial tradition as a joint The text's

enterprise of zeroing in on the authorial intent,[42] convincing as it may initially int

the Abhidharma-
appear, is quite unable to account for the complexity of the commentarial kośa

endeavour in ancient Indian philosophy. A particularly clear example of this is

the case of Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośa and its commentary, the Abhid-
harmakośabhā:sya. The root text presents a comprehensive description of

Abhidharma metaphysics from the perspective of the Sarvāstivāda school.
The bhā:sya, on the other hand, is usually taken to be written from the

perspective of the rival Sautrāntika school, frequently criticizing the Sarvāsti-
vāda positions set out in the root text.[43] Interestingly enough, another Buddhist

philosopher, Sa :mghabhadra, then set out to write a separate commentary on

Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośa, called Nyāyānusāra, correcting the author's

mistaken interpretation of his own text by producing a commentary that

accords with Sarvāstivāda orthodoxy.[44] In another text, Sa :mghbhadra makes

the following remarks on the motivation for his commentarial undertaking:
When the sūtra master's [i.e. Vasubandhu's] statements conform to reasoned argu

and scriptural authority, I will reproduce them as they are and not attempt to refut

them.
[However,] if they contradict the basic purport of the Abhidharma or the sūtras in

any way, I am determined to scrutinize them further and vow to purge them.

In contrast to the sūtra master's erroneous explanations, I will present the correct

interpretation and will manifest the true and extraordinary meaning of the accepte

doctrines of our school.[45]

It is clear that Sa :mghabhadra's aim was not to elucidate what Vasubandhu

meant when he composed the Abhidharmakośa, for he considers Vasubandhu's

understanding of his own work as mistaken. His aim is to produce an inter-
pretation that he considers to be in accordance with the Buddha's discourses

and the (Sarvastivāda) Abhidharma texts. But if a commentator could not even

be expected to try to recover the authorial intent of the author of the text

he is commenting upon, what should we think the Indian philosophical

commentators were trying to achieve?

Jonardon Ganeri[46] made the suggestion that a commentary's aim is to Commenta

establish a connection between a contemporary readership and a philosophical co

and present
text from the past. This suggestion has the advantage that it allows us to gain

better insight into the appeal of the commentarial genre for Indian philo-
sophers, and explains why doing philosophy in a commentarial context, as the

ancient Indian authors did, can proceed without falling prey to either sterility

[42] For more discussion of the notion of authorial intent with reference to Buddhis

works see Garfield 2015: 322–6.
[43] See below, pp. 155–6, for further discussion.
[44] See Cox 1995: ch. 3.
[45] Cox 1995: 55–6.
[46] Ganeri 2011: 102.

or arbitrariness. It is a curious fact that many Indian philosophical works that

could easily be conceived of as independent treatises were composed in the

form of commentaries on earlier works.[47] There is a continuity of form

beginning with texts that are inextricably bound up with the root text they

are commenting upon (as in the case of commentaries that are primarily

concerned with unpacking the grammar of a set of sūtras) up to commentaries

that use the work commented upon as mere pegs on which to hang an

independent argument.[48] Even at the latter end of this continuum the author

attempts to explain his own thought through the lens of an ancient text,

underlining the continuity of his thought through its connection with earlier

works. The attempt here is not simply to give an exposition of the author's

thought (as the example of Sa :mghabhadra's commentary clearly indicates) but

to explain a present philosophical position against a conceptual background

inherited from the past. The text commented on is a tool of philosophical activity.
Commentarial
Conceived in this way, we can understand the Indian commentarial activity as a

activity as a
creative enterprise, rather than as an attempt at philosophical archaeology.
creative enterprise Because the aim is not simply philosophical paraphrase[49] but ı
tion of philosophical insights for a contemporary audience, the tradition

escapes the sterility of repeating an inherited orthodoxy. And because such

reconceptualization entails rethinking a set of philosophical positions in

a systematic way, the charge of arbitrariness fails to have any traction, as it is

based on the assumption (which we have now seen to be overly simplistic) that

the goal of the commentarial enterprise was to rediscover the unique true

meaning of the root text.
The importance of commentarial activity in the work of Indian Buddhist

philosophers clearly shows the influence of the second of the three main factors

mentioned above: sacred texts. Buddhist philosophy is not an intellectual

enterprise that is simply driven by the desire to go wherever the argument

takes it, but sees as its aim to analyse, explain, and defend the Buddha's

message, and to thereby facilitate its goal to reach liberation from cyclic

Buddhist
existence. The focus on commentarial activity provides evidence of Buddhist

philosophy as a
philosophy's linkage to the primary texts of Buddhism, the sūtras, those of

commentary on
the sūtras
early Buddhism and the Mahāyāna sūtras, as well as later texts by authors other

than the historical Buddha Śākyamuni that were accorded similar authoritative

status. This focus is less constraining on the development of Buddhist thought

as philosophy than one might think. On the one hand it is true that its

philosophical conclusions are fixed at the outset in the form of the basic

[47] See Tubb and Bose 2007: 2–3.
[48] Ganeri 2011: 111.
[49] There are, of course, commentaries that have a mainly exegetical aim, but the i

to keep in mind is that exegesis is not a universal, and not even a dominant featur

conducted in the commentarial mode.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhist doctrines. To this extent we would not expect individual philosophers

to come up with a wholly original philosophical message. But on the other

hand it is also evident that the amount of philosophical concepts even in the

earliest Buddhist texts is so rich that different emphases in their explication can

lead to very different philosophical accounts. The idea of a commentarial

philosophical tradition as essentially sterile thus could not be further from

the truth. As each commentarial enterprise interprets the text's message anew

for its specific audience, the resulting philosophical explication has the poten-
tial to be as original and unique as the audience for which it is intended.
d. Doxographies
Apart from root texts and the scholastic architecture of commentaries built on
top of them, another important source for our understanding of ancient Indian

philosophical thought are doxographic texts. Such doxographies give an over-
view of the views of different philosophical schools. Of course, we might say

that any philosophical text that considers objections is to some extent doxo-
List of objections

graphic, since it describes positions other than the ones held by the author. Yet vs

what characterizes doxographic texts as a genre is that they do not treat rival

views as one-off actual or hypothetical objections to some philosophical pos-
ition, but associate them with a specific group or school of thinkers. Objections

do not come on their own, so to speak, but emerge from a family background

of interconnected beliefs that would give rise to precisely the kind of criticism

an objector makes. A good example of the difference is provided by the

Kathāvatthu, an Abhidharma text that consists of objections and replies to

various doctrinal positions (see below, pp. 49–53 for further discussion of this

text) and its commentary by Buddhaghosa.[50] The objections in the Kathāvat-
thu itself might be little more than a systematic collection of objections made to

expositions of the Buddhist teachings. The commentary then identifies the

objections as coming from different rival Abhidharma schools, thereby chan-
ging the reading of the text from that of an early Abhidharma Q&A to a

doxographic text.
In the Indian context philosophical doxographies primarily arose from Buddhist i

Madhyamaka Buddhism, from Jainism, and somewhat later, from Vedānta. in do:

Why the Buddhists should have been particularly concerned with doxography

is an interesting question. Two answers suggest themselves right away. First,

the Buddhists, like the Jains, were newcomers to the Indian philosophical

scene. As such their systems lacked the foundation in Vedic texts and founda-
tional sūtras that characterized the different branches of classical Indian

[50] This commentary, the Kathāvatthuppakaraṇa-
a:t:thakathā (Law 1969), is of particular interest

since it connects the different doctrinal positions with specific schools of early Bu

further information on the works and thought of Buddhaghosa see Law 2007, Hei

 THE GOLDEN AGE OF INDIAN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY
philosophy. It was therefore necessary for them to underline the fact that they

Establishing
defended a worked-out philosophical position not shared by any of the other

uniqueness
systems. To make a claim for its independent doctrinal status, it was important

that Buddhism would not simply be understood as a variation of an extant

system of Indian philosophy. Doxographical discussion allowed the Buddhists

to describe how their system was unique and how it differed from other

philosophical approaches.
Anti-
Second, we will see below that some parts of Buddhist philosophy have a

substantialism
strong focus on the refutation of substantialist assumptions (assumptions

that phenomena exist with svabhāva; see pp. 107–15 for further discussion).
Indeed, making such assumptions is then seen as the key source of philosophical

error, and as the ultimate cause that traps us in cyclic existence. The doxographic

approach presents a natural framework for demonstrating how substantialist

assumptions pervade philosophical theorizing, for non-Buddhists as well as

for rival Buddhist schools, and how these can be refuted.
Types of
Indian doxographical works can be divided into three main classes.[51] The

doxographies
first type takes the form of a dialogue between the defender of a position and

a. Defender and
one or more interlocutors who ask questions, challenging the defender to

interlocutors
uphold his position in the light of their criticism. Here the role of the

opponent or opponents is clearly subservient to that of the defender; their

purpose is to bring out the defender's system in the clearest possible manner.
b. Exposition and
A second type breaks up the discussion, so that the opponent (pūrvapak:sa)

refutation
describes his position in the first section, while the second section describes

the view of the proponent (uttarapak:sa), refuting the opponent's position.
While this second type still describes the different philosophical schools in

such a way that one comes out as the single correct one, they present the

opponent with an opportunity to describe his own system in a connected

c. Non-
manner, rather than in a way that simply provides a set of cues for the

hierarchical
proponent's discussion of his position. The third type, finally, simply sets out

presentation
the teachings of the different schools without defending the superiority of any

one of them over the rest.
Example of b:
A key example of the second type of doxography is Bhāviveka's Madhya-
Bhāviveka
makah:rdayakārikā, together with its auto-commentary.[52] After three chapters

[51] Following Qvarnström 1999: 174.
[52] The beginnings of Buddhist doxography may be seen already in texts such as tl
phalasutta of the Dīghanikāya and the Apaṇṇakasutta of the Majjhimanikāya, as v

Brahmajālasutta and Sūtrak:rtān˙gasūtra with their lists of 62 or 363 views (d:r:s:

doxographical works include Āryadeva's *Skhalitapramathanayuktihetusiddhi (k

rigs pa gtan tshigs grub pa) and the second chapter of Bhāviveka's Madhyamakar

his Pramāṇasamuccaya Diṅnāga mentions 'investigations' (parīk:sā) of the Nyāy

Sā :mkhya system he composed (Hattori 1968: 9; Eckel 2008: 20); unfortunately

to be lost. The Indic tradition of doxography was later continued in Tibetan schol

was there confined primarily to differentiating various Buddhist schools.

INTRODUCTION

that describe his own philosophical position, Bhāviveka then spends the next

six chapters discussing the views of two rival Buddhist schools, the Śrāvakas

and the Yogācāras, followed by an account of four non-Buddhist philosophical

systems, Sā :mkhya, Vaiśe:sika, Vedānta, and Mīmā :msā.
Note that the order of presentation in this (and other) Indian doxographical

texts is not historical. The authors of doxographical works were not interested

in tracing the development of philosophical schools, beginning with the earliest

thinkers and discussing how their thoughts were transformed and expanded in

later times. Although this work by Bhāviveka is not the clearest example, it

shows how doxographies of this type tend to group systems according to a Doxog

hierarchy of conceptual sophistication, with the 'worst' views (those regarded hie

to be furthest away from the position that the doxography advocates) discussed

first. The order of the discussion of the Śrāvaka and the Yogācāra positions is

an indication of this. The Madhyamaka point of view sees the former, with its

postulation of material substances, to be further removed from the correct

position than the Yogācāra idealism, which is then regarded as a stepping-stone to the correct view of the Middle Way. Hence the Abhidharma position is discussed first, followed by Yogācāra. In a similar manner, the Sarvadarśaṇa-samgraha,[53] a fourteenth-century doxography by Mādhava written from the Vedānta perspective, begins with a discussion of the materialist Cārvāka system as the least sophisticated philosophical approach, followed by a discussion of the Buddhist position,[54] working its way through different schools of classical Indian philosophy like Vaiśe:sika, Nyāya, Sā :mkhya, and Yoga, to culminate in a description of the Vedānta point of view.

The paradigm example of the third type of doxography is the Example of c: :Sa:d:darśanasamuccaya, composed by the Jaina monk Haribhadra (c.8th Haribha century CE). Haribhadra describes six main doctrines, distinguished by their founder or associated deity (devatā): the Buddhists, and the doctrines of Nyāya, Sā :mkhya, Vaiśe:sika, Jainism, and Pūrvamīmā :msā.[55] Unlike examples of the second kind, Haribhadra's doxography does not present the rival views in order to refute them, but describes the six doctrines without arguing for the superiority of any one. This may be seen as a manifestation of the Jaina 'doctrine of manifold aspects' (anekāntavāda), resulting in the view that all the different philosophical discussions contain important insights that help us

[53] Cowell and Gough et al. 2006.
[54] Ranking the Buddhist position as the 'second worst theory' might strike us as frequent perceptions of Buddhism and Vedānta as closely similar or even identica

systems. (See Ingalls 1954; Nakamura 1983: 131–265; Qvarnström 1989: 101–4; 1999: 175–6.) Yet

this perception would have provided additional motivation for the Vedāntin to str

difference of his teaching from that of the Buddhists, in order to show that his the

simply an offshoot of Buddhism, but an independent account in its own right.
[55] For further discussion see Qvarnström 1999.

to approach liberation. Basing a choice of a specific philosophical system

simply on its originator is therefore unhelpful. Haribhadra points out that:

I have no predilection for Mahāvīra, nor do I hate Kapila, etc. What one must do

embrace one whose words are reasonable. He who has no fault at all, he who has

virtues—to him I pay homage—be it Brahma, Vi:ṣṇu or Maheśvara![56]
Doxography and
This attitude justifies the composition of doxographies not simply in a negative

soteriology
manner, as a foil to offset and better explain one's own view, but as an integral

part of philosophical methodology: if the aim of philosophical investigation is

soteriological, and if different systems of thought contain soteriologically

efficacious elements, then the study of doxography forms part of the path to

liberation.
6. The Game's View of the Game
The account of the history of Indian Buddhist philosophy given here is

presented from our own twenty-first-century Western perspective. Like any

perspective, it does not present a neutral view of phenomena but comes with a

set of fixed assumptions. While such assumptions are an inevitable character-
istic of any perspective, problems may arise when these assumptions of the

narration clash with some of those of the tradition being narrated. This, I want

to argue, is the case in the contemporary historiography of Buddhist thought,

and this clash presents a problem that is not discussed sufficiently often or with

sufficient clarity. While the solution cannot be to throw out the conflicting

assumptions that form part of our perspective (since without them it is unlikely

to be the perspective it is), it is important to be at least aware of the existence of

this clash in order to be able to find a suitable way of working with it.
Conflicting
The 'clash' I have been referring to here concerns diverging assumptions

assumptions
about the existence of the past. These are assumptions that indicate where the

about the existence
of the past
perspectives of the modern historian of philosophy and those of the ancient

philosophers studied conflict at a fundamental level.
Maxim of charity
On the one hand we want to adopt the maxim of charity relative to the

ancient Indian sources we are studying. This means that we want to minimize

the number of false beliefs we attribute to these materials, when in doubt try to

interpret them on the assumption that what they say is justified, and be

suspicious of any interpretations that leave the position in question open to

simple yet devastating objections. However, when it comes to considering the

[56] Lokatattvanirṇaya 1: 38: pak:sapāto na me vīre na dve:sa:h kapilādi:su | yuktiɪ

yasya tasya kārya¸h parigraha :h || yasya nikhilāś ca do:sa na santi sarve guṇāś ca

na viːṣṇur vā maheːsvaro vā namas tasmai, Qvarnström 1999: 180, 188.

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Buddhists' account of their own history this assumption of charity does not

seem to extend very far.
Consider two simple examples. First, traditional Indian and Tibetan histor-
Nāgārjuna's

ies of Buddhism ascribe to Nāgārjuna an extraordinary long lifespan of several lif

centuries. The modern historian is likely to disregard this as a hagiographical

falsification with the aim of accounting for the fact that we have various texts

from authors called 'Nāgārjuna' that were composed several centuries apart.
According to the traditional histories these were all written by the same person,

for he lived for a very long period of time. Second, we also find traditional

sources claiming that Nāgārjuna taught at Nālandā University, though our best Th
archaeological evidence suggests that Nālandā was only founded several cen-
tradition

turies after the most plausible date for Nāgārjuna. Buddhist historians appear

to try to construct a fictitious lineage of a 'Nālandā tradition' that associates

most of the major Buddhist philosophers of ancient India with a single

educational institution.[57] It thus appears that the modern historian of Buddhist

philosophy has to be able to cut through the overgrowth of fabricated agenda-
driven history expounded in traditional historical accounts in order to get to

the real historical facts behind them.
The difficulty with this approach is not simply that it treats traditional 'the way it

Buddhist historians (rather uncharitably) as either fraudulent or gullible, but was'

that its central underlying assumption, the idea of a set of historical events 'as it

really was', contradicts some of the basic ideas that feature prominently within

the history of Buddhist thought.

We can get a first idea of the problem at issue by considering the history of

Buddhist canon formation. Since the early history of Buddhism, Buddhists Canor

have wondered which texts should be considered as the Buddha's words

(buddhavacana) and therefore as immediately authoritative, and which texts

should only be considered as authoritative in a more restricted way. From a

contemporary perspective of historical realism we might want to say that all or

most of the instances of speech uttered by the historical Buddha in the fifty or

so years between his enlightenment and his death should be considered as the

true and only buddhavacana.[58] But as Matthew Kapstein rightly observed:

[57] For a contemporary take on the 'Nālandā tradition' see Geshe Ngawang Samte

2005: 78 notes that 'Nāgārjuna's associations with Nālandā are confined to Tibet;

sources that are concerned with placing him in the transmission lineage for the Gu

a text that was important in the curriculum at Nālandā.' The place of Nāgārjuna a

Madhyamaka masters in the 'Noble Lineage' of the transmission of the Guhyasar

fact a complex issue that raises numerous historiographical and philosophical con

more to say on this issue in our discussion of Candrakīrti below, on pp. 137–8.

[58] The question how we can know what the Buddha really said is bracketed here.

with the ontological point of what the Buddha's teaching could be said to be, rath

epistemological question of how we can subsequently reconstruct its contents.

there is no evidence to suggest, however, that anyone within the Buddhist traditio

actually held such a rigid position; the view must be softened in order to admit in

class of buddhavacana not the spatiotemporally determinate speech acts of Śākya

alone . . . [59]
And indeed, such a 'softening' is what we find in the Buddhist discussions. In

the Mahāparinibbānasutta we find the enumeration of a set of four 'great

authorities' (mahāpadeśa) to be appealed to in the process of determining

4 criteria for
whether some teaching is really the word of the Buddha.[60] These four author-
authenticity
ities are the Buddha, the community of senior monks, a smaller community of

elder learned monks, and a single learned monk. If someone claims to have

heard a teaching from any of these four, the monastic community should then

investigate whether this teaching corresponds to those of the sūtras and the

vinaya, the monastic code for monks and nuns. We also sometimes find an

additional criterion of authenticity, namely that the teaching should corres-
pond to the way things are (dharmatā).
It is clear that agreement with sūtras and vinaya is the criterion with the

greatest practical role to play. Reference to the four great authorities is primar-
ily an entry criterion for teachings to be evaluated in this way, and judgments

about their correspondence to 'the way things are' are hindered by the fact that

for Buddhists any comprehensive reference to the way things are needs to be

determined by reference to the Buddha's teaching. We therefore see that the

Historical and
key membership criterion for being buddhavacana is not the 'hard' criterion of

hermeneutic
being expressed by a theoretically dateable utterance of the historical Buddha,

understanding of
buddhavacana
but the 'softened' one of being a teaching that in a suitable sense 'says the same

thing' as the Buddha's other teachings. This turns the question of what texts

count as canonical from a historical to a hermeneutic one. Instead of utterance-
tokens we are now concerned with what texts (when properly understood)

mean the same. And we might have wanted to leave matters at that, combining

a strict understanding of the Buddha's word as historical utterances with an

extended conception that also includes other teachings from different histor-
ical contexts that agree with the message of the former. However, what we find

in the Buddhist case is the merging of the hermeneutical buddhavacana with

the historical buddhavacana. A Mahāyāna text, the Adhyāśayasañcodanasūtra,

points out that 'All which is well-spoken, Maitreya, is spoken by the Buddha.'[61]
This conception, which can be found frequently in Mahāyāna texts,[62] is

helpfully summarized by Matthew Kapstein:

[59] Kapstein 2000: 124.
[60] Bikkhu Anālayo 2014: 73.
[61] 'Well-
spoken' (subhā:sita) refers here to meaningful statements that lead to the removal

defilements and propound the benefits of nirvāṇa.
[62] Bhāviveka (Eckel 2008: 61) even notes that 'everything that is well spoken in t

taught by the Buddha' (vedānte ca hi yat sūkta :m tat sarva :m buddhabhā:sitam).

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Indeed, a realist reading of the relevant texts places in high relief the conclusion t

though it may seem strange to certain modern sensibilities, figured prominently ir

Mahāyāna attitudes to scripture throughout Central and East Asia right down to tl

present day: any text meeting the normative doctrinal criteria for buddhavacana n

be genuine buddhavacana taught by the historical Buddha Śākyamuni himself.[63]
Once that move is made, however, contemporary realist understandings of Buddh

history have already been left far behind. What drives the Buddhist conception pl

the existence
of what has happened when the Buddha taught the dharma is not what series of or

dateable events took place, but what must have been taught by him, given that

the contents of the dharma properly understood were comprehensively pre-
sented. Moreover, the realist conceptions of the past that drive our common

understanding of history also do not sit well with a variety of philosophical

positions we find defended in Buddhism.
The first of these ideas is presentism, the view that only the present moment 1. Pr

is real, espoused by the Sautrāntika branch of the Abhidharma. If we accept this

position, there is obviously no past (or future), and all that history can amount

to is a theory based on traces the past left on the present. There can be mutually

inconsistent theories that fit all the facts, and there are no facts about the past to

validate one of these theories to the exclusion of all the others. According to

this view, the past 'as it really was' is a non-existent object.
Yet even if we accept that past and future do exist, and are distinguished

from the present merely by their lacking efficacy, as the Sarvāstivāda Abhi-
The past as a

dharma did, this would hardly be sufficient to supply us with a series of conceptu

superimposition
historical events in their pure form. For what there really is (or was, or will

be), according to these Abhidharma theories, is a complex interaction of

fundamental, momentary mental and physical entities, the dharmas. The

world as we experience it, and the world of the past we would be appealing

to in the context of confirming historical claims, is only the highest level of a set

of conceptual overlays that are superimposed on the underlying reality.
This brings us to the second idea, more prominently expressed in later 2. Absence

Buddhist texts: the view that there is no uniform object of perception for all a con

perception of
observers, even in the present. It is vividly and memorably expressed in an the wo

episode of Buddhist traditional history, that of the meeting of Asaṅga with the

bodhisattva Maitreya. When Maitreya finally appears to Asaṅga after years of

propitiation, he tells him that he has in fact always been by his side, but that

Asaṅga's perception was too impure to see him. Asaṅga is sceptical, and

Maitreya suggests testing his claim by having Asaṅga carry him around town

on his back. And indeed, the story continues, what various people saw in place

of Maitreya varied with the purity of their perceptual faculties. Nobody saw the

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whole Maitreya, most saw nothing at all, some saw Asanˑga carrying an old dog

on his shoulders, and only one (a prostitute, according to one rendition of the

story) was able to see Maitreya's feet. This story is obviously making a

philosophical point, a point that is elsewhere expressed with respect to trad-
itional Buddhist cosmology by the simile of the three cups of liquid. Where

human beings see a cup of water, it is argued, beings reborn in the realm of

hungry ghosts see a cup of pus, blood, or similarly unclean substances, while

beings in the hell realm see a cup of molten metal. The exact philosophical

impact of this example has been subject to a considerable amount of debate,

but the central point is clear. When considering beings that inhabit some of the

Perception
realms of cyclic existence (such as ourselves), the reality we experience is at

depends on
most partly determined by a mind-independent reality, and is heavily influ-
karmic
conditioning
enced by our perceptual and cognitive setup, which is in turn a result of our

karma. What this means is that we cannot expect there to be a shared reality at

the experiential level even within a given realm, such as the human one, since

beings at different levels of realization may have more or less 'purified' per-
ceptual capacities (as is evident from the story of Asanˑga). If the present is

therefore considered so highly dependent on intersubjective, but not objective,

factors, such as the shared karmic potential of groups of observers, it is not

surprising that Buddhist authors adopted similar views about the past. Provid-
ing a historical account of some event could not simply consist in a record of

'what really happened' but had to take into account the perceptive capacities of

the beings who perceived the event, and presumably also those of the presumed

recipients of the account.
While the two philosophical positions just described are the subject of

considerable internal debate within the Buddhist tradition (the first primarily

in the intra-Abhidharmic discussion between Sarvāstivādins and Sautrāntikas,

the latter in connection with Yogācāra), and are defended by various argu-
ments, the following two philosophical points, though equally important for

developing a nuanced account of the Buddhist conception of history, are of a

somewhat different nature. Even though the positions in question are stated

quite explicitly, it is difficult to find direct arguments backing them up in

traditional Buddhist accounts. The reason for this may be that they appeared

sufficiently obvious to Buddhists at the time, or that they directly followed from

other equally obvious assumptions (such as those concerning the supernatural

powers of enlightened beings). As our aim here is first and foremost to come up

with a plausible account of what the Buddhist account of history (and specif-
ically of the history of Buddhism) amounts to, rather than to defend its truth,

the question of how the following two positions may be supported by philo-
sophical arguments is not one that we have to settle here.
3. Trans-historical
One aspect of traditional Buddhist history that may appear particularly

activities
challenging to the contemporary historian is the apparent ease with which the

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activities of different figures seem to cross several centuries. One explanation

that is sometimes offered for this is the extraordinarily long lifespans of some

Buddhist teachers, often connected with claims about their mastery of life-extending alchemical practices. Another possible way of accounting for this,

and one that is probably even less palatable to modern Buddhist historians

than the idea of Ancient Indian elixirs of eternal life, is to argue that enlight-ened beings can assume immaterial mystical forms which allow them to Mystical

manifest at times after their disappearance from this world of dust. The manifesta

of teachers
Tibetan historian Tāranātha (1575–1634) uses this idea to explain the existence

of tantric works probably composed towards the end of the first millennium CE
by Madhyamaka masters that lived in the first or second century.[64] He argues

that by assuming such forms these masters could actually compose the given

treatises at a later time, and then teach them to disciples living at that time,

disciples that would not have been born when they disappeared in their

physical form. Another example of an account of a historical figure being

instructed by an enlightened being without a material body is the case of

Asaṅga and the teachings he received from the bodhisattva Maitreya we have

discussed before. These cases are of course very difficult to account for if we

consider history (and, more specifically, philosophical history) as being com-
posed solely of the interactions of human agents. But as the sources make

abundantly clear, this is not the Buddhist understanding of history.
The history of Buddhist philosophy is intricately connected with the life of 4. His

Buddhist teachers, that of the Buddha as well as those of the monks, saints, and te

sages that came after him. Buddhists texts sometimes mention the idea that in

the case of these teachers there is no real difference between the facts of their

lives (the events that happened to them) and their teaching activity (the

propagation of the Buddha's teaching they caused to happen). The contem-
porary Tibetan Buddhist teacher Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche says the following Ex

about one of the most important Indian Buddhist masters introducing Tibetan autl

Buddhism to Tibet:
Guru Padmasambhava, the glorious Master of Uddiyana and king of the Dharma,

single embodiment of the activities of the Victorious Ones throughout the three ti
According to the ways in which sentient beings perceive reality, there exists an ir
ceivable number of life stories of the three mysteries of his body, speech, and mir
Connecting with the point just made about the absence of a shared perceived

world for beings with different karmic potentials, this stresses that the lives of

Buddhist masters are conceived not as lived events they undergo, but as

[64] Wedemeyer 2007: 20. Tāranātha refers to these master as assuming the form o

(rig pa 'dzin pa), 'knowledge-holder' for these purposes.
[65] Foreword by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Ye shes mtsho rgyal (1993: 1).

teachings they manifest for the sake of instructing other beings. The same point

is made by Tāranātha in his biography of the Buddha,[66] when he comments on

the difference between the accounts of the Buddha's life found in the early

Buddhist scriptures compared to those of the Mahāyāna. David Ruegg sum-
marizes Tāranātha's conclusions as follows:
[T]he Buddha's action manifested in common for all those living nearby at that ti

and possessed of the necessary qualifications—
including even those who had erroneous

views, Tīrthikas, and also animals—
relates to the system of the common Yāna, or to the

Śrāvaka system. As to the manner in which his activity was manifested to those p

to be trained specifically by the Mahāyāna in particular, this is recounted in the

Mahāyāna-
Sūtras. Therefore, in general, there are various versions concerning these

matters; and there is in particular a great difference with respect to the greater or s

amount of blessing in each case. Consequently, although the two systems are not

substantially contradictory, it is necessary not to mix the two ways of relating the

Buddha's life. Of these two systems that Mahāyānist system is much more elabor

it belongs to the realm of inconceivable wisdom, it is accessible to the best discip

it concerns highly secret action. Nevertheless, the events in the Buddha's life as

commonly known to all beings, the length of his life, the order of events in it, the

he visited and so forth relate to the common system; but they are not the Mahāyāı

system since its scope is inconceivable, for in it it is difficult to determine a matte

having been exactly so and so with regard to place, time, and action.[67]
The key point Tāranātha makes is that the acts of the Buddha as described in

the Mahāyāna texts are actions manifested for a specific audience, with specific

karmic potentials, while those described in the early Buddhist texts have

been manifested for a different group of disciples. This makes it difficult to

account for the lives of Buddhist masters against the background of familiar

historical realism,[68] as the fifth Dalai Lama pointed out, again with reference to

Padmasambhava:
You make manifest transformations befitting each creature's vision,

Changing æons into moments, and moments into æons;
Laughable, then, to calculate the months and years
As if your life were that of a common pandit or siddha![69]
Accounting for
The challenge of the Buddhist historiographer is not just to account for various

different versions
miraculous events in the life-stories of Buddhist masters, but, more specifically,

of the same events
[66] bcom ldan 'das thub pa'i dbang po'i mdzad pa mdo tsam brjod pa mthong bas
[67] Ngawang Gelek Demo 1971: 2–3.
[68] Conze (1962: 232) notes that, '[u]nlike official Christianity Buddhism is not a

religion, and its message is valid independent of the historicity of any event in the

"founder", who did not found anything, but merely transmitted a Dharma pre-
existing him since

eternity'.
[69] In his colophon of the 1755 Beijing edition of the Padma bka' thang of O rgya

Kapstein 2015: 12.

to account for different versions of the same set of events. Traditional accounts solve this problem by combining three ideas: that of a view of reality that is crucially influenced by the karmic potential of different beings, that of history as teaching, and that of a succession of graded teachings.[70] A well-known explanatory device to account for teachings of the Buddha that seem to contradict each other is to point out that these were teachings given to different audiences, audiences which consisted of listeners with different potentials for understanding and with different background assumptions.[71] As the Buddha tailored his teaching to the respective audience, so a realized master could tailor the events of his life, which are in fact nothing but teachings as well, to fit the audience experiencing them.

It is important to note, however, that this departure from a historical realist stance that postulates that there can only have been a single way things happened, which history should set out to record, does not entail that the Avoidan Buddhist historians embraced a thoroughgoing relativism according to which rela any account is as good as any other. Tāranātha, for example, notes right at the beginning of his history of Buddhism in India that earlier accounts of the early history of the dharma contained numerous faults, and that his work sets out to eliminate the defects of these previous histories.[72] This is, of course, very much in keeping with a general concern in Buddhist thought of trying to ensure that any criticism of ultimate reality (be this a theory of fundamentally real objects,

or a view of the existence of an objectively real past) does not affect our ability

to make assertions at the conventional level. That the realist account must be

rejected does not entail that we cannot make a reasonable choice between

various non-realist accounts.
The preceding remarks show that the maxim of charity leaves us in a curious Ten

position with respect to the historiography of Buddhist philosophy. The maxim of

naturalism
charity suggests that we should maximize the rationality of the texts in question

and proceed from the assumptions that the arguments the authors of the text

presented are defensible. In doing so, we will then also reason from the premise

that many, or indeed most, of their conclusions were defensible. As I have argued

above, some of their central conclusions have important implications for how the

[70] See Westerhoff 2009: 89–90.
[71] In commenting on verse 30 of Nāgārjuna's Yukti:sa:s:tikā, Candrakīrti explain

introduce beings who are intellectually uneducated to the view of reality—
emptiness—they become

utterly confused. Consequently, the noble do not teach them emptiness right at fir

seeking truth motivated by their habitual self-
preoccupation tend to be attached to things, so first

you must teach them that "everything exists", and then correctly describe [for the

their desire, since they delight in analyzing the natures of those things.' Loizzo 20
1.
[72] Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1970: 5, 350. See also 187–
8, where Tāranātha dismisses views

of Madhyamaka chronology according to which Buddhapālita was reborn as Can

Bhāviveka was a direct disciple of Nāgārjuna. He says that such views are 'irratic
and ask 'how can a person with a critical faculty believe all these?'

past in general, and the history of Buddhist philosophy specifically, are to be

understood. Yet these consequences stand in direct conflict with the assumptions

of twenty-first-century century naturalism that usually operate in the background

when writing the history of Buddhist philosophy. At this stage we seem to be

faced with two similarly unappealing options. The first is to drop the naturalist

assumptions, the second to assume that some of the key premises the Buddhist

philosophers argued from are false, and that the conclusions based on these are

mistaken. The first appears to deprive us of some crucial conceptual tools we

successfully employ for thinking about the world; the second deprives the study c

the history of Buddhist thought as it is presented by the scholars of ancient India

of much of its systematic value, since significant parts of the conclusions argued

for cannot be rationally defended.
Bracketing
I suggest addressing this problem not by giving up the maxim of charity, nor

naturalist
by relinquishing the conceptual framework in which we are presently operating

assumptions
(an attempt that is likely to be doomed from the very beginning), but by

momentarily bracketing some of the naturalist assumptions we hold. What

this means is that when our views of the world conflict with claims that are

relevant for developing an account of the history of Buddhism (such as claims

about maximal human lifespans, the objective existence of the past, and so on),

we temporarily suspend those views in order to find out how far we can go in

our analysis without appealing to them.
By doing so, and by taking into account the ideas about historiography

developed by Buddhist writers themselves, it becomes apparent that neither

disregarding traditional historical records concerning matters such as Nāgār-
juna's lifespan or the members of the 'Nālandā tradition' nor considering them

as convenient historical fabrications allows us to address the full complexity of

the matter.
Soteriological
The purpose of histories of Buddhism as we find them within the Buddhist

purpose of
tradition is neither exclusively nor dominantly to serve as a report of facts

histories of
Buddhism
about the past; they rather fulfil a soteriological purpose. There are various

reasons for this.
A given description of events may be considered as showing how events

had appeared to witnesses with sufficiently purified perception. As such, the

Buddhist historian would not be greatly worried by our own lack of historical

evidence to support such claims; in fact he might argue that even if we (in our

present state, with our present karmic propensities) had been there we would

not have seen what other observers with less deluded cognitive faculties would

have seen. One of the aims of the historical narrative would then be to acquaint

the listener with how events appear to purified perception in order to act as an

incentive to produce this kind of perception in oneself.
Alternatively, a historical account could be conceived as a manifestation of

upāya, of skilful means: matters are related in a certain way not because this is th

---

way things happened as observed from an objective stance, but because describin

them in this way is conducive to the liberation of those who hear the account.
Taking into account this soteriological dimension of the history of

Buddhism has the consequence that we will not simply try to purge traditional

Buddhist historical narratives of all elements that appear to contradict the

twenty-first-century Western naturalistic view of the world, and then attempt

to extract whatever kernels of fact might be present in the remainder. Instead,

bracketing some parts of this view allows us to inquire why a historical

narrative is presented in the way it is,[73] why one would want to assume that

the world appears in this way to one who has undergone an extensive amount

of mind-training as described in the Buddhist texts, or why one would consider

that composing a narrative in this specific way creates the kind of mental

attitude that is conducive to liberation.
If we consider the case of Nāgārjuna again, the idea of the continuity of

the 'Nālandā tradition' to which all the major Indian Buddhist philosophers

belonged can be understood to signify the unity of the Buddhist philosophical

project and the idea that the various systems proposed by these philosophers

are all elaborations of the same central message. The elements in Nāgārjuna's

biography which relate to his long lifespan have to be understood in the context

of tantric techniques which are considered to make such lifespans possible,

and which are in turn based on conceptions of the body very different from the

ones familiar in contemporary Western anatomy.

It is important not to regard these narratives as simply an attempt at post

facto lineage-building of later authors, or as advertisements for the efficacy of

tantric techniques, but to keep in mind that many Buddhist writers themselves

would have believed that the world as described in these narratives appears in

this way to some beings with purified perceptions, and that mental qualities

conducive to liberation could be produced by following the examples set out in

these accounts. It is theoretically unsatisfactory to regard these accounts as

later pious fabrications, or as driven by obvious religious or political agendas in

a way that obscures what really happened, simply because Buddhist thinkers

have significant objections to the assumption that there is such a thing as the Exis

past as it really happened. The assumption of the objective existence of the past p

theoretical posit

is not a claim that is open to empirical confirmation, it is a theoretical posit

that historians may or may not avail themselves of, and a philosophical thesis

that can be supported by arguments or undermined by them. The Buddhist

[73] In the Tibetan perspectives, hagiographies (rnam thar) are understood not simp

descriptive but also in a normative manner: they are handbooks for how the pract

way to liberation should progress along the Buddhist path: 'The rnam thar is a pe

inspiration about how to live that is sent from the founder of the lineage or brgyu

through the centuries to each generation of students' (Chodrung-
ma Kunga Chodron 2013: 19).

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philosophers were convinced that their arguments provide a successful

criticism of it. This constitutes a difference between the Buddhist case and

many other instances where we might be tempted to 'uncover the facts behind

the myth' or the historical basis of a religious narrative. While in these cases the

idea of an objective past is usually not questioned, in the Buddhist case it is. For

this reason, we risk failing to understand important aspects of the tradition

if we simply import the assumption of the objectivity of the past (as intuitive

as it may seem to us) with the conviction that this is as self-evident as it is

irrefutable.

1
Abhidharma
1. Introducing the Abhidharma

'Begin at the beginning,' the King of Hearts famously said to the White Rabbit,

'and go on till you come to the end: then stop.' Our account of Buddhist

thought in India will do neither. First, even though Buddhism continued to

develop in India up to the destruction of the great monastic universities in the twelfth century, a caesura sufficiently significant to identify it with the end of the Indian Buddhist scholastic tradition,[1] the majority of our account will focus on thinkers before the time of Dharmakīrti (6th–7th century CE), with not much more than a cursory glance at some of the thinkers from the five to six centuries after him. This is not because the period after Dharmakīrti is of less philosophical interest,[2] but due to reasons of space; the last half-millennium of Buddhist thought in India deserves a volume of its own.

Nor will we begin at the very beginning, with the enlightenment of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, the event that marks the source from which two-and-a-half millennia of Buddhist thinking flow. The Buddha's enlightenment marks the beginning of his life as a teacher, producing the set of discourses or sūtras that constitute the first division, or 'basket', of the Buddhist canon. The second basket, the vinaya, consists of the rules and regulations for the monastic order that the Buddha founded, together with a detailed description of the specific situation that gave rise to the introduction of each rule.[3] As such, the vinaya is a rich mine of historical information about the living conditions of the monastic orders of monks and nuns in particular, and about Indian society at the time of the Buddha more generally.

It is with the third and final basket, the collection of Abhidharma texts, Abhidharm that we begin our account of how Buddhist thought in India developed. 3rd baske

The Abhidharma texts are fundamentally an attempt to systematize, and

[1] Even though Buddhism did not subsequently disappear completely from the Ind
tinent (the Italian missionary Roberto de Nobili, for example, found Buddhists an

at the beginning of the 17th century (Rajamanickam 1972)), Buddhist scholastic

India did not survive the destruction of the great centres of learning like Nālandā
[2] Though some Buddhist historians thought so—
see Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1970: 255–6.
[3] For a good survey of the vinaya literature see Prebish 1994.

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systematically expand, the Buddha's teachings as they are recorded in his

discourses. Taking into account the way the Buddha taught, the need for

Systematizing the
such systematization is evident. During the fifty years between his enlighten-
sūtras
ment and his death the Buddha taught a large number of discourses, all of

which were tailored to the capacities and background assumptions of their

respective audiences. As such they inevitably contained repetitions, topics that

were only very sketchily presented in some discourses but in much more detail

in others, and points where there seemed to be tensions or contradictions

between different discourses. The aim of the Abhidharma was to proceed from

the series of audience-relative expositions that constitute the sūtras to a

comprehensive and systematic account of the Buddha's teachings. In doing

so a process of carefully examining arguments, systematizing doctrinal posi-
tions, providing commentaries on obscure passages, and countering hypothet-
ical and actual objections was set in motion that would characterize all of the

subsequent Buddhist philosophical activity in India.

The term
Before considering the contents of the Abhidharma texts, let us briefly look

'abhidharma'
at the term 'abhidharma'. It consists of the prefix abhi and the noun dharma.

Depending on how the prefix is understood, there are two different ways of

interpreting the term compounded in this way. Abhi can just mean 'about', or

'with regard to', in which case the Abhidharma is the teaching that has the

dharma (the teaching the Buddha expounded in the sūtras) as its object—it is

teaching about the dharma. Alternatively, abhi can have the meaning of

'higher'; in this case the Abhidharma would be a teaching higher or going

beyond the dharma. One way in which the Abhidharma could go beyond the

teaching of the sūtras is in terms of comprehensiveness. In the Pāli commen-
tarial tradition we find the idea that sūtras explain the main concepts of

Buddhist thought only in part (ekadesen' eva, presumably restricted to that

part that was necessary for the audience in the specific situation in which the

sūtra was taught), while the Abhidharma explains them in full.[4]

Motives for
The Abhidharma texts differ considerably from the other two baskets, the

composing the
discourses and the monastic rules. Given this difference, we might wonder

Abhidharma
what motivated the composition of the Abhidharma texts, and how they might

have been influenced by these other kinds of texts. We can distinguish at least

three possible motivations for the composition of the Abhidharma: to provide

an expansion of matrices (māt:rkā); to expand texts composed in a question-
and-answer format; and to develop a comprehensive ontological theory.
[4] Ronkin 2005: 26. Interestingly we also find a differentiation of the teachings of

Abhidharma insofar as the former is sometimes described as merely a 'way of pu
(pariyāya-
desanā), while the latter does not require further explication (nipparyāya-
desāna), an

understanding that coheres well with the idea that the Abhidharma framework de

matters are at the level of ultimate truth.

ABHIDHARMA

a. Matrices

The term māt:rkā (etymologically related both to the term 'matrix' and the term

'mother') denotes lists of terms and topics found in the sūtras. In the beginning

these matrices were quite simple, comprising lists such as the four levels of

meditative states (jhāna), the five aggregates (skandha), the six sense bases

(:sa:dāyatana), the eighteen elements of cognition (dhātu), and so on. Their

function as mnemonic devices was obvious. The formation of such lists helped M

to keep distinct parts of a discourse in memory as a single unity. In their further n

elaboration these lists became extremely complex and comprehensive, and

they are frequently regarded as the nucleus of the Abhidharma,[5] which is in

fact sometimes referred to as the māt:rkāpi:taka, the basket of matrices. The

Abhidharma could therefore be understood as a project that spells out the

matrices already provided in the sūtras, in order to produce a comprehensive

account of the Buddhist conception of the structure of the world, and the

structure of the path in this world that would lead to liberation.
A further motivation to develop the matrices in the way the Abhidharma did Matr

may be found in the meditative practice of early Buddhism. Even though of medi

states
meditation is a private, introspective enterprise, the observations made and

the results achieved are supposed to be intersubjectively communicable. The

meditator is not shut up in a world of private experience, but can relate the

phenomena he encounters with observations made by meditators who have

employed the same kinds of techniques before him. In order to do so he needs

to be equipped with a map that gives an account of all the mental phenomena

he is likely to encounter, the way they are related to each other, and the way

they are related to the path of liberation. The elaborate lists of the Abhidharma

provide such a map, a map that makes it possible to traverse the world of

internal experience without becoming lost in a chaos of incommunicable

mental events.[6] At the same time, the existence of such matrices generates a

feedback loop between knowledge and awareness: by knowing which mental

phenomena to look for, one will distinguish more of them, thus increasing the

detail of the matrix, leading to yet finer distinctions, and so on.
Despite these obvious connections between the matrices and the Abhidharma,

it is questionable to what extent the matrices were associated with the

Abhidharma alone. The Pāli commentarial tradition, for example, associates

them specifically with the vinaya.[7] When mentioned in connection with the

vinaya they also play the role of digests of longer texts; some monk may not be

[5] For a comprehensive list of modern scholars discussing the connection between

and the matrices see Bhikkhu Anālayo 2014: 22, n. 26.
[6] See Ronkin 2005: 29–30 and ch. 4; Gethin 1992: 165.
[7] Bhikkhu Anālayo 2014: 22–4.

able to recite the vinaya but still be able to recite its matrix.[8] It is therefore

Matrices and oral
sensible to regard the matrices (and the fondness for lists in Indian philosophy

culture
more generally) as first and foremost a characteristic feature of an oral culture.[9]
By structuring topics that are discussed in different places and by providing

concise versions of longer texts, they facilitated the retention of the material

without the need for written versions. Matrices should therefore be considered

as a general background of the Abhidharma tradition, rather than the single

nucleus that gave rise to it.
b. Question-and-answer format
A second motivation for the composition of the Abhidharma may be seen in an

expansion of texts composed in a catechetical style of questions and answers.
Q&A and debate
Such texts may be considered to have their natural precedent in discussions

between Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools.[10] In this case the questions

would consist of the opponent's challenges to the Buddhist theory, and the

replies would provide the Buddhist response.[11] While this format may have

originally been used to provide sample answers to questions a Buddhist monk

might actually face when debating with his brahmanical opponents, the frame-
work can easily be expanded beyond this immediate practical use. Question-
and-answer formats can also be used to discuss purely hypothetical replies. On

the one hand these may be useful for training in debate, but on the other hand

such questions would allow the student to develop a deeper understanding of

Q&A as an aid to
the material independent of the debate context. In this case questions could

understanding
function as a set of problems or exercises, challenging the student to come to an

understanding of a complex body of material by attempting to produce

answers of a similar quality as those provided in the text. The Abhidharma

texts may therefore have been motivated by the desire to provide a tool

for presenting the whole of the Buddhist doctrine in outline form by

adopting the framework of earlier texts composed in question-and-answer

form. Nevertheless, we should note that, as in the case of the matrices, the

question-and-answer format is not a unique characteristic of the Abhidharma

literature. Texts dealing with the vinaya and with other matters have been

composed in this format,[12] and there is no reason why it is in any way

specifically connected with the kind of topics the Abhidharma discusses.
[8] But see Ronkin 2005: 27–
8 for an alternative interpretation. She argues that the term mātikā
in this context did not denote a kind of digest, but 'a set of key words' elaborated

of the teaching.
[9] Bhikkhu Anālayo 2014: 24–5.
[10] Ronkin 2005: 30.
.
[11] See the Mahā-
/Cūḷavedallasuttas and the division of the Vibhangasuttas of the Majjhimani-
kāya for examples of early suttas incorporating this question-and-answer format.
[12] Bhikkhu Anālayo 2014: 27–8.

ABHIDHARMA

c. Providing a comprehensive theory
The final motivating factor to mention is the desire to provide a comprehensive

yet concise presentation of the entire extent of the Buddha's teaching. Rather

than simply clarifying and expanding on the contents of the sūtras through the

discussion of matrices and the consideration of actual and possible objections,

the Abhidharma strove towards a maximally comprehensive presentation of the

entire Buddhist worldview. Some authors have suggested that in doing so the

Abhidharma lost sight of its own aim as a soteriological instrument. The doctrine

'seems to have become an end in itself ',[13] 'in its final stage, Abhidharma texts in
became complex philosophical treatises . . . whose purpose was the analysis and

elaboration of doctrinal issues for their own sake'.[14] This perceived opposition of

soteriology and philosophy strikes me as somewhat artificial. When philosoph-
ical questions are investigated at a sufficient level of depth, often various

subsidiary questions have to be addressed first before any progress with the

main question can be made. The subsidiary questions may in themselves be quite

complicated, and they may presuppose the answer to yet further questions. At

this stage it may appear as if the original problem has vanished out of sight, but

this is no more the case than, for example, the discussion of fairly technical

architectural problems arising during the design of a house would indicate that

we are not engaged in building this particular house anymore. The depth of the

Abhidharma analyses should be seen as indicative of the depth of conceptual

penetration the early Buddhist schools achieved, rather than as a symptom of

scholastic decadence that is somehow losing sight of the soteriological dimension

of the Buddhist project. This point is underlined by the fact that the early

Buddhist thinkers believed they had good reason to suppose that each of the

somewhat technical problems that arose in the discussion of the Abhidharma

really had a solution. This reason is the supposed omniscience of the Buddha.
Buddhists assume that with his enlightenment the Buddha obtained univer-
The Buddha's

sal knowledge, not necessarily knowledge of each individual fact, but compre-
omniscience

hensive insight into the nature of all things.[15] This kind of omniscience implies

[13] Tilakaratne 2000: 12; Bhikkhu Anālayo 2014: 117.
[14] Cox 2004: 4.
[15] There are parts of the Buddhist canon that seem to conflict with this idea, such

Buddha's claim that those who attribute omniscience to him misrepresent him (M

71, Bhikkhu Bodhi 2001: 587–
8) or the fact that the Buddha frequently adjusted monastic

regulations because earlier versions led to unforeseen problems. Whether this is e

the Buddhist tradition changed its view on the matter of omniscience, or whether

accounted for by distinguishing between omniscience in terms of knowing all fac

obtaining liberation and omniscience as a form of philosophical super-
knowledge, cannot be

decided here. It is worth noting, however, that in the Si :msāpasutta (Sa :myutta I

Bhikkhu Bodhi 2000, 1857–
8) the Buddha points out that the amount of things he has taught

relate to those he knows, but has not taught, as the amount of leaves in his hand r

leaves in the grove: 'So too, bhikkhus, the things I have directly known but have

numerous, while the things that I have taught you are few.'

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Abhidharma as
having answers to all the questions about the fundamental nature of reality[16]
representing the
that the Abhidharma is trying to answer, and the Pāli tradition does in fact

Buddha's
omniscient mind
draw a connection between the Abhidharma and the Buddha's omniscience,

pointing out that one who refuses the Abhidharma refuses the Buddha's

omniscience, and is therefore a danger for the unity of the monastic commu-
nity.[17] For this reason it seems plausible to assume that one of the motivations

for composing the Abhidharma treatises was to develop a kind of substitute of

the Buddha's omniscient knowledge of the nature of existence and the path to

liberation. To this extent it is evident how the abhi in Abhidharma could refer

to a teaching above or beyond the dharma. If we assume that the dharma

taught in the early Buddhist sūtras always represented a specific perspective

into the Buddha's omniscient mind, determined by the context in which the

discourse was taught and by the capacities of the audience, the Abhidharma set

out to go beyond or above this and present a comprehensive picture. To the

charge that this involved acceding 'to doctrines that may sometimes have

imposed more meaning on the earliest Buddhist teaching than it originally

had',[18] the Ābhidharmikas would have replied that this complete meaning was

always there in the mind of the Buddha, though its presentation in the sūtras

only lets us see specific parts. For them, the aim of the Abhidharma is not to

impose additional meaning, but bring out and systematize meaning that was

there all along.

View of the

It is worthwhile to point out that the belief in the Buddha's omniscience is a

supernatural

manifestation of a more general view of the supernatural status of the Buddha

status of the
Buddha & its

that shaped Buddhist thought in interesting ways. Some Pāli sources hold that

consequences

the Buddha was already omniscient as a bodhisattva, that is, prior to his

enlightenment.[19] According to this view, the Buddha is not just conceptualized

as an ordinary person who became extraordinary through his experience of

enlightenment, but as somebody who already possessed extraordinary proper-

ties for a long time prior to his life as the historical Buddha. Such a view of the

Buddha as in many respects superhuman found its expression in the comprehensive exposition of the teaching in the Abhidharma, attempting to encapsulate some of the insights of his omniscient mind, but it also contributed, via the

focus on the extraordinary pre-enlightement qualities of the Buddha as a

bodhisattva, to the arising of the Mahāyāna with its emphasis on the ideal of

a bodhisattva over and above that of an arhat, the soteriological aim of early

Buddhism. Moreover, the view of the Buddha as a being transcending time and

[16] Later developments in Buddhist philosophy set out to provide arguments why t

pronouncements on matters that cannot be verified by ordinary human beings (at)

should be considered as authoritative. See below, p. 239.
[17] Bhikkhu Anālayo 2014: 126.
[18] Ronkin 2005: 249.
[19] Bhikkhu Anālayo 2014: 121.

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space provides the foundation for such later developments as the theory of

Buddha-nature, or the quasi-theistic forms of Buddhism we find in some

versions of Pure Land doctrines. Whether the origin of the conception of the

supernatural Buddha was a response to a kind of emotional need after the

historical Buddha's nirvā :na[20] or whether it arose for other reasons is not a

question we can settle here. It is, however, important to note that it is a

conception that, even though it would not strike us as particularly philosoph-
ical, had an astonishing number of consequences in the later development of

Buddhist philosophy.
It is worthwhile to point out how the motivations for the composition of the Moti

Abhidharma we have just described line up with the three factors influencing con

Abhidharma
Buddhist philosophy mentioned before. First, the composition of the Abhi- & thr

dharma is influenced by the Buddhist scriptures, and specifically by the desire

to spell out the matrices found in the Buddha's discourses. Second, there is an

obvious influence of debating and argumentation on the Abhidharma texts.
They answer actual and hypothetical objections to the positions defended in

the sūtras and attempt to correct mistaken interpretations. Third, important

parts of the explication of the matrices and the attempt to provide a compre-
hensive theory can be seen as providing a 'meditator's roadmap', a description

of states and phenomena a meditator is likely to encounter in meditation. The

Abhidharma (like all of Buddhist thought) should therefore not be conceived simply as argument-driven philosophy, but as a conceptual enterprise that is to be located within the coordinates of the Buddha's teachings, and takes account of the meditative experiences resulting from techniques that are part of this teaching.

2. The Question of Authenticity

When considering the Abhidharma treatises, we are immediately confronted with a complex conceptual problem: how to establish the authoritative status of a set of religious texts. To a smaller extent this problem already arises in the case of the sūtras, but there the question is merely whether a given discourse was in fact spoken by the Buddha. In the case of the Abhidharma, the problem is more comprehensive, since it affects the whole of the Abhidharma collection of texts. What is our justification for regarding them as the authentic word of the Buddha (buddhavacana), rather than as later fabrications?

Why Abhidharma = buddhavacana?

[20] Bhikkhu Anālayo (2014: 126) explains it as 'to some degree a response to the e of the disciples at a time when the teacher had passed away', providing 'a sense c needed in the struggle to ensure the survival of the fledgling community of Budd their competition with outsiders'.

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Amongst the three baskets that make up the Buddhist canon the Abhi-dharma obviously stands out. The first two baskets provide us with a clear picture of the discourse situation in which they arose, the sūtras as teachings

the Buddha gave to a variety of audiences, the vinaya as a set of regulations he

put into place in order to structure the life of the communities of monks (and

later, nuns). The Abhidharma is nothing like this, but consists of a set of fairly

technical treatises that give detailed lists and classifications of topics the

Strategies for
Buddha taught in the sūtras. Different strategies were employed in order to

establishing
establish the authenticity of the Abhidharma. The Sarvāstivāda school of

authenticity
Abhidharma believed that their Abhidharma texts had authors other than

the Buddha, who compiled topics scattered throughout the discourses in

more systematic form (though they consider its main text, the Jñānaprasthāna,

to have at least been authenticated by the Buddha during his lifetime). So even

though the Abhidharma could not be considered as buddhavacana in the same

sense as the sūtras, the Abhidharma texts could be included in the Buddha's

word according to the criterion we met earlier: they accord with the teaching of

the Buddha, and are therefore to be considered authentic. In addition, all the

topics of the Abhidharma have been discussed in the Buddha's own teaching,

just not in that order. The Catuh:pratisaran:asūtra gives the following hermen-
eutic rule: 'One must rely upon the doctrine, not on the person; upon the

meaning, not on the sound; upon a discourse that can be taken literally

(nītārtha), not on one that must be interpreted (neyārtha); upon direct cogni-
tion (jñāna), not on discursive cognition (vijñāna).'[21] Considering the doctrine

taught in the Abhidharma and its meaning, it has to be regarded as the word of

the Buddha, though the person who composed it was not the Buddha and the

sounds that first uttered it did not belong to him. A related consideration

makes the claim that the Abhidharma is not just a remix of the teachings of the

sūtras, but that the original matrices on which the Abhidharma is based were in

fact taught by the Buddha, so that the Abhidharma consists merely of an

expansion of that teaching.
Supernatural
The Theravāda tradition is unique insofar as it is the only school that

origin of the
considers the Abhidharma to have originated in a superhuman realm. Their

Abhidharma
account holds that because the Buddha's mother, Mahāmāyā, died seven days

after the birth of the future Buddha, the Buddha had to find a way to express his

filial piety by teaching her the dharma later in his life. Because of the tremendous

store of good karma that caused her to become the mother of a future Buddha in

the first place, she was reborn in the heavenly realm of the Thirty-three.[22]
[21] Bronkhorst 2009: 177.
[22] There is a minor problem with this account, since the Theravāda tradition also l

Buddha's mover was reborn in Tu:sita Heaven, not in the Heaven of the Thirty-
three. See Bhikkhu

Anālayo 2014: 163–4.

The Buddha went to this divine realm during one rains retreat and taught her the Abhidharma there, as a result of which she accomplished the first major step on the way to enlightenment, stream-entry. After he had descended to earth again by means of a jeweled staircase, he then repeated this teaching to Śāriputra, who passed it on to another 500 disciples. This idea of the Abhidharma originating from a superhuman realm interestingly parallels the belief that the Perfection of Wisdom texts were retrieved from the realm of the nāgas.[23] As in the case of the nāga realm, the Heaven of the Thirty-three also seems to function as a depository in which teachings that are no longer accessible on earth have been preserved.[24]

3. The Abhidharma Schools

As a matter of fact there is no such thing as a single Abhidharma; rather there is a multiplicity of Abhidharma traditions. In the centuries after the Buddha's The 1 death his followers split up into what is traditionally conceived of as a division into eighteen schools. What motivated this division is still a matter of debate, though it is clear that the grounds for the disagreements between the schools were not just philosophical, but frequently involved different conceptions of the vinaya, that is, disagreements about which rules monks should follow.

With the split into the eighteen schools came a split into different traditions of transmitting the three baskets of sūtras, monastic rules, and Abhidharma. How much the baskets of the different schools differed from each other is difficult to say, as the collections of their canonical texts often do not exist anymore. The canons of two schools are still extant in their entirety, that of the Theravāda,

preserved in Pāli, and that of the Sarvāstivāda, preserved in Chinese and

Tibetan. The greatest difference between the two canons are their Abhidharma

collections, which consist of different texts. While it is likely that there will

have been differences between the sūtras and vinaya of all of the different

schools, their respective Abhidharma texts provide us with the clearest insight

into the philosophical views peculiar to the different branches of early Bud-
dhism. Unfortunately we can only reconstruct these views in a partial manner

for all the schools other than the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda, relying on

quotations and paraphrases of the positions of these schools we find in Five Abhi

schools discussed
later texts. In our discussion we will look at five different schools; in addition her

23 See below, pp. 91–
2. In fact it is intriguing to note that all three schools of Buddhist thought,

:
Abhidharma, Madhyamaka, and Yogācāra (whether the school of Dinnāga and D

should be considered as a school in the same sense is debatable: see below, ch 4,
9) are

considered by traditional accounts to have a superhuman, magical origin: the Abh

realm of the Thirty-
three, the Madhyamaka (via the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras) in the nāga

realm, and the Yogācāra in the realm of the future Buddha Maitreya.
24 Bhikkhu Anālayo 2014: 150.

to Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda we will discuss the Mahāsa :mghika, the

Pudgalavāda, and the Sautrāntika. The main emphasis will be put on the discussion of the Sarvāstivāda, simply because of the degree to which it influenced the subsequent development of Buddhist philosophical thought in India. The Theravāda (or, to be more precise, the doctrinal predecessor of what we nowadays refer to as the Theravāda) was transmitted to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE. Its importance on the Indian subcontinent began to decline soon afterwards, and from about the second century BCE its literature developed very much in isolation from the philosophical discussion in India, having little influence on the later development of the Indian Abhidharma tradition. There is, however, one text in the Pāli Abhidharma that forms part of the Theravāda canon, the Kathāvatthu, that we want to look at in more detail, because it relates discussions of Theravāda's predecessors to other Buddhist schools, and because it constitutes an important record of early Indian Buddhist philosophical debate.

Reasons for the
division

The exact chronology of the division of early Indian Buddhism into different schools, the precise nature of the differences, and even how many schools one needs to distinguish in the first place are all questions that have still not been satisfactorily resolved. It is, in fact, unlikely that they are ever going to be, given the fragmentary and often second-hand nature of the information we have on the different Buddhist schools. Fortunately, for our purposes a rough indication of the relationship between the five schools we shall discuss will be sufficient.

sufficient.

The first important division occurred during the second council, held at

Vaiśāli about a century after the Buddha's death. Since the passing away of the

historical Buddha a number of such councils (sa :mgīti, literally 'recitation') had

been held, where monks communally recite the three baskets and thereby agree

on and determine their contents. The first of these is said to have taken place at

Rājag:rha shortly after the Buddha's death. During the second council a split

into two schools, Mahāsa :mghika and the Sthaviranikāya occurred. Accounts

differ on what the cause of the split was. According to one account the reason

was a dispute over the status of a set of ten monastic rules (such as whether it

was allowed to drink milk after mealtime, or whether monks could accept

gold and silver). The monks that did not accept the ten rules were the

Mahāsa :mghikas. Their name, the 'great assembly', might have been chosen

because they were in fact the majority, or because they considered themselves

to be such. According to other accounts, the split did not actually have its

origin in differences about monastic discipline, but resulted from a set of five

controversial theses about the nature of an arhat, held by a Mahāsa :mghika

monk named Mahādeva. All of these theses assume that an arhat, despite his

liberated status, is still subject to certain limitations (such as being subject to

doubt, or erotic dreams). The Mahāsa :mghikas are said to have accepted this

---

more restricted conception of the abilities of an arhat, while the followers of the

Sthaviranikāya did not.[25] The Sthaviranikāya later split into three major further

schools: the Sarvāstivāda, the Pudgalavāda (also sometimes referred to as

Vātsīputrīya), and a third group called Vibhājyavāda ('the theory of differen-
tiation'). The only school descending from the Sthaviranikāya that is still extant

today is the Theravāda ('the theory of the elders'), though its relationship with

the Sthaviranikāya is not entirely straightforward. It might have descended

from the Vibhājyavāda,[26] though the term Theravāda as the identification of a

school of Buddhism was certainly not commonly used before the twentieth

century. The Sautrāntika, finally, most likely arose as a development out of

the Sarvāstivāda, disagreeing with the latter's focus on Abhidharma treatises

and replacing it by a focus on the sūtras (hence their name, the 'followers of

the sūtras').

a. Mahāsa :mghika

The Mahāsa :mghika school is of particular interest for our study of the devel-
opment of Indian Buddhist thought because it incorporated various ideas that

were developed further in Mahāyana schools, in Madhyamaka, and to a lesser

extent, in Yogācāra. We are fortunate insofar as part of the Mahāsa :mghika

canon has come down to us; its Abhidharma is extant in Chinese translation.[27]
Studying the doctrine of the Mahāsa :mghikas underlines that the Mahāyana

was not so much a radical break with the traditions of early Buddhism, but the

focus on and development of certain ideas that were already present in early

Buddhist texts, though occupying a considerably less central status.[28]
There are certain elements in Mahāsa :mghika thought that prefigure the

illusionist doctrines we find in later Buddhist material. We have already

mentioned the limitations of the abilities of the arhat the Mahāsa :mghika Limitat

accept. The majority of these concern epistemic limitations: an arhat may be the a

ignorant of some matter, may be uncertain, or may learn something from

another person. This should not be understood simply as a proto-Mahāyāna

denigration of an ideal figure of early Buddhism, but needs to be taken into

account as having two main consequences. First, it anchors the ideal of arhat-
Consequences of

ship within the context of the world around us. To be able to claim liberation this

[25] An unfavourable interpretation of Mahādeva's theses is that he himself was sub

faults mentioned in his five theses, and that he only used them to protect his own

arhatship.
[26] Conze 1962: 32, 119–20.
[27] As the history of Buddhist thought advanced, the Mahāsa :mghika also split int

sub-
schools. We can distinguish three main brances, the Lokottaravāda, the Kaukku:t

divided into Bahuśrutīya and Prajñaptivāda), and the Caitya (Conze 1962: 195 di:

subdivisions of these). For the purposes of this chapter we will largely ignore the

the various subdivisions of Mahāsa :mghika.
[28] For a clear exposition of key Mahāsa :mghika positions see Bareau 2013: 55–

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from suffering, it is not necessary to display a variety of magical abilities, such

as knowing the names of people before being introduced, never having to ask

for the way when travelling, and so forth. Second, it draws a distinction

between the figure of the arhat and that of the omniscient Buddha.
The omniscient
Ascribing omniscience to the Buddha happened quite early in the history

Buddha
of Buddhism, and is not confined to the Mahāsa :mghika, but includes the

Sthaviranikāya as well.[29] There is considerable unclarity about the range of this

omniscience (whether it only covers matters connected with liberation, or every-
thing there is to be known), and about the motivation of this doctrine in the first

place. Some authors claim that it is the result of a desire to metaphysically keep u

with the Joneses,[30] but we might equally assume that it has its source in the

reluctance to claim equality between the attainment of arhatship, considered as a

clearly achievable goal, and the attainment of the historical Buddha.[31]
The Buddha as
Bringing the arhat down to earth, so to speak, and emphasizing its difference

supramundane
from the Buddha, in particular by stressing his omniscience, facilitated the

elevation of the Buddha from a historical person to a transcendent entity, an

omniscient being without imperfections, supramundane and not tainted by

worldly impurities. Of course, this position conflicts with what the canonical

texts tell us about the Buddha, as they mention various imperfections: the

Buddha got sick, went begging for food without receiving anything, changed

monastic rules because they had consequences he did not foresee at the time

(and thus could not have been able to see into the future), and so on. One way

to respond to this was to argue that there is more to the Buddha than meets the

The illusory
eye when the historical figure is considered. The historical Buddha was a

Buddha
mere fiction, an illusory creature projected onto the world in order to teach

worldly beings.[32] His material body (rūpakāya) is not his real body but a

transformation-body (nirmān:akāya), which is shaped in such a way as to

facilitate teaching the dharma. Like his life, the Buddha's death and passing

into nirvā :na was just a display; the Buddha has not really disappeared, but we

can expect that his great compassion will send further emanations in the future

to guide sentient beings to enlightenment.[33]
It is likely that the introduction of the idea of the transcendent nature of the

Buddha also led to a form of ontological degradation of the manifest world. If the

appearance of the Buddha in the world was only supposed to be a manifestation

[29] Warder 2000: 211–12, Bhikkhu Anālayo 2014: 117–27.
[30] Bhikkhu Anālayo 2014: 123–
4 notes that omniscience was attributed to Mahāvīra, the

founder of Jainism.
[31] Apart from the fact that the Buddha achieved enlightenment unaided, whereas l

achieved it through his teaching (Warder 2000: 211).

[32] For the criticism of this view by the Sthaviranikāya see p. 52 below.
[33] Bareau 2013: 60–1, Conze 1962: 197.

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of another, distinct reality, and therefore not really what it appeared to be, how

much trust would one then be able to place in other worldly phenomena?
In addition, the Mahāsa :mghikas also expanded the range of the notion of

emptiness. While the focus of the Sthaviranikāya was the emptiness of persons T

(pudgalanairātmya), which amounts to the fact that the person can be exhaust-
emptiness

ively reduced to a group of impersonal elements (dharmas), the Mahāsa :mghika

considered it to cover the emptiness of dharmas (dharmanairātmya) as well. An

analogy from the Kāśyapaparivarta illustrates the distinction, comparing the

former to the emptiness of holes termites bore into a piece of wood, the latter to

the emptiness of empty space.[34] The emptiness of the termite holes is based on

the non-emptiness of something else, namely the wood surrounding it, whereas

space does not need such surroundings. In the same way, the emptiness of

persons is formulated against a background of substantially existent dharmas,

while the emptiness of phenomena generalizes this notion, including the dhar-
mas in the domain of emptiness as well.[35] For the Prajñaptivāda sub-school of

the Mahāsa :mghika this means that phenomena such as the five skandhas,

which together form the basis on which the person is imputed, do not acquire

their designation on the basis of yet smaller components, all the way to the

fundamental dharmas, but in terms of their mutual relationship with one another.[36] Emptiness is not a notion that only applies at the higher levels of the ontological hierarchy, leaving the lower strata untouched, but pervades the entirety of what there is because of the reciprocal dependence of its elements. With their conception of a division between the two truths that relegated even some of chief the objectives of the Buddhist teaching (enlightenment and nirvā :na) to the level of conventional reality, regarding it as a merely illusory display, and the expansion of the notion of emptiness to cover all dharmas, rather than just specifically the notion of a person, the Mahāsa :mghika doctrines, frequently regarded as predecessors to the Mahāyāna, have direct points of and M conceptual contact with Madhyamaka theories. In fact it may even have been the case that the founder of Madhyamaka, Nāgārjuna, had particularly close contact with the Mahāsa :mghikas; Joseph Walser has recently argued that Nāgārjuna may have lived as a Mahāyāna monk in a Mahāsa :mghika monastery in Andhra Pradesh during some part of his life.[37] Walser further argues

[34] Conze 1962: 198.
[35] Takakusu (1975: 122–
3) lists as one tenet of the Ekavyāvahārikas that all dharmas are to be regarded as 'nominal or mere names (ākhyātimātra or nāmamātra). All elements a and of no reality'.
[36] Walser 2005: 221. See also 222, 230.
[37] Walser 2005: 89. The theoretical differences between the different schools of e seem not to have been too divisive in other terms. Lamotte (1988: 519) points out

were cordial and easy between members of the different sects', and Warder (2000

9) remarks

that, 'for all that they denounce each other's propositions in their theoretical work

different schools are found later to live side by side in the same dwellings (vihāra

that the positions and arguments developed in Nāgārjuna's main work, the

Mūlamadhyamakakārika, were developed in such a way as to highlight similar-
ities between the Mahāsa :mghika (and Sā :mmitīya) and Mahāyāna positions,[38]
emphasizing its difference from Sarvāstivāda by its criticisim of this

Abhidharma school, in order to ensure the survival of the new Mahāyāna

movement. Interpreting the Madhyamaka ideas as developments of concepts

already present in Mahāsa :mghika texts, rather than describing them as new

conceptual innovations, would be one way of underlining the authoritativeness

of the Madhyamaka views for an audience sceptical towards the Mahāyāna.
Mahāsa :mghika
In addition to its affinity with later Madhyamaka ideas the Mahāsa :mghika

and Yogācāra
theories also incorporate various conceptual seeds that can be considered to

fully flourish in later Yogācāra theories. The Mahāsa :mghikas accept a form of

Foundational
foundational consciousness (mūlavijñāna) that persists even through states of

consciousness
deep meditative concentration, a form of consciousness that is originally

pure,[39] though in its present state soiled by passions.[40] It is distinct from the

individual sense faculties and acts as their basis, as the root of the tree supports

its branches.[41] The resemblance with the conception of the ālayavijñāna that is

going to play a key role in later Yogācāra is hard to overlook.

Luminosity of
consciousness

According to the Mahāsa :mghika, consciousness is also naturally luminous

(prabhāsvara), a conception that has close similarities with reflexivity of

consciousness (svasamvedana) that the Yogācārins discuss; such natural lumi-
nosity making it possible that consciousness does not just apprehend other

things, but can also apprehend itself. This idea of the luminosity and intrinsic

purity of the mind can in fact be traced back to the Pāli sūttas: in the

:

Anguttara-nikāya the Buddha points out that 'The mind is luminous,

O monks, but it is defiled by adventitious defilements.'[42] This is a notion that

is destined to have a long history in Buddhist philosophical thought, not just in

the works of the Mahāsa :mghikas and Yogācārins, but also later in Buddhist

tantra, where this luminosity is itself considered to be the cause of mind.[43]

Buddha-nature

Finally, some of the Mahāsa :mghika ideas appear to come close to a concept

of Buddha-nature that is further developed in later Mahāyāna texts. In the

harmony, and wandering monks were not troubled by questions about their affilia

when seeking lodgings among distant communities.'
[38] Walser 2005: 266.
[39] In this Tarkajvāla (Eckel 2008: 117, 312) Bhāviveka attributes the view that mi

by nature (prak:rtiprabhāsvara, rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba) to the Ekavyāvahārik
school of

the Mahāsa :mghika).

⁴⁰ Silburn 1955: 237; Conze 1962: 132; Kimura 1927: 152.
⁴¹ Bareau 2013: 80.
⁴² 1.6.1, pabhassaram ida :m bhikkhave citta :m tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilese

see Bhikkhu Bodhi 2012: 97, 1597–9.
⁴³ Āryadeva quotes the Jñānavajrasamuccayatantra in his Caryāmelāpakapradīpa

that consciousness itself that is arisen from luminosity is mind (citta) and thought

(yat prabhāsvarodbhava :m vijñāna :m tad eva citta :m mana iti | tan-
mūlāh: sarva-dharmāh:,

Wedemeyer 2007: 401).

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Buddhasvabhāvaśāstra, a text ascribed to Vasubandhu only preserved in

Chinese translation, their views are characterized as follows:
If we look at the doctrines of the Vibhājyavādins⁴⁴ we see that they preach that 'ś
is the origin of all human beings—
both wise and ignorant. Because, these classes of men

all came into being out of the same 'śūnyatā'. This 'śūnyatā' is the nature of Bud

(buddha-svabhāva), and this buddha-svabhāva is the mahānirvān:a.⁴⁵
This passage ascribes to the Mahāsa :mghikas the idea that emptiness (śūnyatā)

is a universal property of all beings, and that this emptiness, which is the same

as liberation, corresponds to an enlightened nature to be found in all beings.
From this view it is only a small step to the view that all beings are already

identical to a Buddha—not because they have the potential to achieve liber-
ation, but because the Buddha's enlightened mind is already present in them,

even though it is currently obscured by ignorance.

It is important to point out that despite all these similarities the Mahāsa:mghika

were, of course, no Mahāyānists, and accepted various positions the Mahāyāna

does not agree with. What is interesting, however, is how many of the key

positions of later Mahāyāna schools are already present in the Mahāsa:mghika

theses, underlining the fact that the development of Buddhist philosophy is not So

characterized by single-
handed innovations of autonomous thinkers, but by innovations in

Buddhist
gradual shifts in emphasis on particular concepts, shifts which, in the fullness phi

of time, can lead to very distinct philosophical positions, but which proceed by

never losing sight of anchoring their innovations in the continuity of the

Buddhist tradition, thereby attempting to underline their authoritativeness as

the genuine word of the Buddha.
b. Sthaviranikāya: Theravāda
We mentioned above that the present discussion will not have much to say on

the Abhidharma of the Sthaviranikāya as it continued in the Theravāda

tradition, mainly because its influence on the subsequent development of

Buddhist philosophy in India was very limited when compared to that of

other Abhidharma schools. We will, however, make an exception for the last

of the seven books of the Theravāda Abhidharma collection, the Kathāvatthu. Ka

This work on 'Points of Controversy' is traditionally ascribed to Moggali-
puttatissa, who is supposed to have composed it at the conclusion of the third

council, held in Pā:taliputra in the third century BCE.[46] The council is said to

have been preceded by a purging of the monastic community of corrupted

monks by the emperor Aśoka. After this, Moggaliputtatissa convened a smaller

group of monks in order to recite (and thereby agree on an authoritative

[44] The Mahāsa :mghikas are meant here—see Kimura 1927: 152.
[45] Kimura 1927: 151.
[46] As accounts of this council only appear in Pāli sources its historicity has been (

version of) the Pāli Tripi:taka and its commentaries. Subsequently the

Kathāvatthu was composed as a way of rebutting interpretations of the

Buddha's teaching deemed to be incorrect.
The Theravāda tradition sees no difficulty with including this text, which

was manifestly composed by an author other than the Buddha, in the Buddhist

canon. They hold that the underlying structure of the text was actually com-
posed by the Buddha himself, anticipating the various ways in which his

doctrine might be misunderstood.
The text is traditionally divided into twenty-three books, which each treat a

variety of controversial points (219 altogether), one at a time, followed by the

views of different early Buddhist schools contrasted with those of the Thera-
vāda. Unfortunately our information on which school entertained which

position is somewhat sparse; the Kathāvatthu does not provide this at all,

and its commentary 'lacks either the will, or the power to enlighten us much

regarding the schools [it] names'.[47] Two possible reasons for this spring to

mind. First, the association of specific views with certain authors or groups

would have been familiar to the author of the Kathāvatthu and to his intended

audience, so that there would be no need to note it specifically. Second, it may

be that the Kathāvatthu was meant to be understood first and foremost as a

systematic work, describing the correct interpretation of the Buddha's teach-
ing, rather than as a doxographical manual.
Refutation of
In general, the Kathāvatthu tries to establish the correctness of the

views opposed to
Theravāda response to the various controversial points (kathā) raised. It does

Theravāda
so either by citing relevant passages from the sūtras that are taken to support

their own rather than the opponents' reading, or by drawing out implications

of the opponents' position. In this case it will attempt to show that the

opponents' position has some implications that the opponents themselves

deny. Thus, for example, regarding the claim that the inhabitants of the

god-realm, the devas, do not practise the Buddhist path,[48] the Theravādin

points out that their opponents (identified by the commentary as Sā :mmitīyas)

also deny that the devas have any moral failings. But if such failings (such as

lacking faith in the three jewels) are absent, how could their opponents

consistently deny that they follow the Buddhist path? We can clearly

observe two of the forces that shape Buddhist philosophy at work here:

striving for consistency with the Buddha's own assertions, and striving for

consistency in one's argumentative position, that is, not admitting contra-
dictory statements.[49]

[47] Aung and Davids 1915.
[48] Aung and Davids 1915: 71–6.
[49] The Kathāvatthu is an interesting example of the logical techniques Buddhists

relatively early stage of the development of Buddhist philosophy in India. See Au

1915: xlviii–li for some further discussion.

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However, this description might give the misleading impression that the A defenc

Kathāvatthu is a neat, point-by-point attempt to establish a Theravāda ortho-
orthodoxy?
doxy. This does not correspond to several parts of the texts, where the author's

own position is not the one where the discussion ends. For example, section

XVIII opens with a discussion of the question whether the historical Buddha

was really a human being. The commentary informs us that the opponent's

position here is that the Buddha never left Tu:sita heaven (the last place where

he is traditionally assumed to have taken birth before being reborn as Prince

Siddharta). Instead, he produced a magical creation that lived on earth, but

this was in fact not an ordinary human being, but rather something like a

mirage in human form. In response to this idea the Kathāvatthu first lists

events from the Buddha's life, and second various canonical statements where

the Buddha says that he was dwelling at one particular place, the idea

presumably being that these could not be attributed to a phantom. The

opponent (identified by the commentary as a Vetulyaka) then responds with

a sūtra passage describing the Buddha as one who was 'born in the world and grew up in the world, but having overcome the world, he dwells unsullied by the world',[50] pointing out that, as such, the Buddha could not have lived a life of flesh and blood. With this, the discussion of the matter ends. In a work attempting to defend a certain orthodoxy, such a passage would indeed be strange. How could the opponent have the last word, given that this is clearly not a position that the author of the Kathāvatthu endorsed? There are at least two different ways to explain this puzzling fact. First, it is highly unlikely that the text as we have it today was from beginning to end composed by Moggaliputtatissa at the time of Aśoka. Several of the schools referred to may have only arisen several hundred years after this date. As such, it is likely that the Kathāvatthu might have been the subject of various additions throughout Add its history (in fact, in a work with relatively unclear organization such as this the additions of this kind could be easily made without disturbing the balance of the entire structure). In this case, additional objections made by the opponents might have been added to the relevant sections, but without also composing at the same time a Theravāda response that refutes the new objection. Another The possibility[51] is that part of the point of the Kathāvatthu was to acquaint the as a p tool

student with a variety of (often inconsistent) ways of answering a particular

[50] Aung and Davids 1915: 324. The passage is from Sa :myuttanikāya 3.94 (Bhi

2000: 950).
[51] Suggested by Cousins 1984: 67, n. 2: 'In spiritual traditions the world over, ins

frequently employed apparent contradictions as part of their teaching method—
perhaps to induce

greater awareness in the pupil or to bring about a deeper and wider view of the su

Pāli Canon contains many explicit examples of such methods. (Indeed much of th

makes better sense in these terms than as sectarian controversy.) . . . Any attempt

"contradictions" as representing different textual or historical strata is puerile. Su

have been present from the beginning.'

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question or problem in order to deepen the student's understanding. In this

case, the fact that the Kathāvatthu does not resolve every disputed point by

presenting the official party line to be followed would not be a defect arising

from the fact that more and more strata were piled on top of each other, but

would be indicative of the text's pedagogical approach. Through being con-
fronted with different ways of addressing a question the student is encouraged

to bring his own intellectual and meditative resources to bear in order to

resolve the matter. Such a process will lead to greater understanding and

penetration of the problems than merely accepting the 'model answers' con-
stituting the way they are resolved in an Abhidharma text.
The Kathāvatthu
Overall, the main value of the Kathāvatthu for the understanding of the

as a depository of
development of Buddhist philosophical thought in India is its presentation of a

philosophical
concepts
rich variety of different positions in nuce, many of which can be seen to

germinate into elaborate philosophical theories in later times. One example is

Docetism
the docetic conception of the Buddha already mentioned, the idea that the

Buddha was not a real human being but a manifestation projected into

the world. It finds a later reflection in the Saddharmapun::darīkasūtra,[52] where

the Buddha declares that 'the Tathāgata has an endless span of life, he lasts for

ever. Although the Tathāgata has not entered nirvā :na, he makes a display of

entering nirvā :nā, for the sake of those who have to be educated'. Section XVIII.
Illusory teaching
of the Kathāvatthu raises the idea that, due to his phantasmagoric nature, the

Buddha did not really teach the dharma. It is hard not to notice the parallel

with Nāgārjuna's point in verse 25:24b of his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā
that 'no dharma whatsoever was ever taught by the Buddha to anyone'.[53]
Section XXII.4 makes the suggestion that an arhat may obtain liberation in

Dreams and reality alternative cognitive states, such as dreams. It is possible to dr

trajectory between this suggestion and the later Yogācāra point that there is no

fundamental, ontological difference between waking consciousness and dream-
ing. Indeed, if the goal of the Buddhist path, liberation, was accessible in the

dream state as well as in the waking state, as the opponent in this section believes

there seems to be a good reason to assume that both states do not really differ in

their basic nature. Such examples can easily multiplied. Section XXI.6 holds

that the Buddhas exist in all directions of space (a position the commentator

tantra
ascribes to the Mahāsanghikas), XXI.4 raises the point that the Buddha and his

disciples have supernormal powers (siddhi), ideas that become very important in

the later development of Buddhist tantra.
When considering the different positions raised in the Kathāvatthu there

might be a certain tendency to regard the text's own position as defending

[52] Saddharmapun::darīkasūtra XV, Conze 1995: 142, Kern 1963: 302.
[53] na kva cit kasyacit kaścid dharmo buddhena deśitah:. Some scholars consider t

final verse of the Mūlamadhyamkakārikā, see Siderits and Katsura 2013: 304–5.

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Buddhist orthodoxy against a whole variety of fanciful deviations, such as Orthod

phantom Buddhas, Buddhas that dwell in all places of the universe, magical devi

powers connected with spiritual realization, and so forth. This, I think, is a

tendency to be resisted. Even though the Kathāvatthu's position may often

appear to be more commonsensical than that of its opponents, we know too

little about the history of these positions to be able to decide in all cases which

view is prior to which. It is certainly not satisfactory to ascribe greater doctrinal

faithfulness to the positions endorsed by the Kathāvatthu simply because

they appear to cohere more frequently with the common sense of twenty-
first-century readers than the opposing views it describes.
c. Sthaviranikāya: Pudgalavāda
In order to achieve a clear understanding of the Pudgalavāda position it is first

of all necessary to say something about the no-self theory held by the remain-

der of the Abhidharmic schools.

The mainstream Abhidharma interpretation of the Buddha's teaching of non-

Non-Reductionism

self is a form of reductionism about persons. The person or self is regarded as abo

ultimately non-existent, even though this does not entail that all talk of persons

or selves is false or unhelpful. Rather, such talk is a mistaken way of talking abou

something else, namely the five physico-psychological constituents (skandha).
These constituents exist at the fundamental level of reality, and the notion of a

person or self is falsely superimposed on them. Reductionism about persons is a

specific instance of a more general reductionist position concerning wholes that

the Abhidharma defends. Complexes or wholes, from medium-
sized dry goods Special case of

to complexes consisting of a few dharmas, do not really exist. The only things me

reductionism
that do are their underlying parts, the dharmas, which constitute the basis of

reality. Wholes do not constitute any addition of being, talk of them is simply a

convenient shorthand for talking about the parts being arranged in a special way.
The chief reason for denying the existence of wholes is that the most plausible Or

alternative, namely the view that both wholes and parts are fundamentally real, no
self theory:

doctrinal and
leads to various problems. It seems that they cannot be the very same entity, med

since the whole is one, and the parts are many, and nothing can be both one and

many, nor does it sound plausible to say that they are distinct. We certainly

never encounter a whole separately from its parts, and if the whole is just at the

very same place where the assembled parts are, it has to take up space. In this case we have a right and a left part of the whole, and now the problem of the part–

whole relation looks as if it is repeating itself, in this case with the whole and its parts, instead of the original object and its parts. The most plausible way of avoiding these difficulties, the Ābhidharmikas argue, is to reject the existence of wholes and assume that only the parts, the dharmas, form part of reality. Persons are no exception to this general account. As partite objects consisting of a physical component and a succession of mental events that constitutes

our mind, they, too, are fictions employed to talk about the interacting complex of physical and psychological components that is us.

The thesis that there is no substantially existent self, no ātman, lies at the very heart of the Buddhist philosophical conception of the world and is its central point of disagreement with non-Buddhist schools of Indian thought.[54] It is clearly stated by the Buddha that such a substantial self cannot be found amongst any of the five psycho-physical constituents that make up the person; indeed, the absence of an ātman is, together with unsatisfactoriness (du :hkha) and impermanence (anitya), one of the 'three seals' (trilak:san:a) that are considered to characterize all of reality. The meditator examines the five constituents one by one in order to realize that there is no self hiding behind them, and this realization has a profound soteriological impact: it will eventually lead to the overcoming of thirst (t:r:sn:a) for sensory and mental experiences

that is the cause of the origination of suffering.

Non-self theory:

In addition to these doctrinal and meditative origins of the non-self theory,

argumentative

the history of Buddhist philosophy also contains detailed arguments to support

support

it. It is sometimes argued that these arguments for the selflessness of the person

(pudgalanairātmya) develop the non-self theory in a direction quite different

from the way it was originally intended. These arguments set out to establish

that there is no substantial self, while there are explicit passages in the Buddha's

discourses where the Buddha rejects both the idea that there is a substantial self

and the idea that there is none.[55] Sometimes this argument is based on the

assumption that the Buddha's aim in formulating the non-self theory was

practical and soteriological, while later Buddhist authors tried to build a

Soteriology vs. theory-building?

metaphysical structure on a teaching that was itself not interested in philo-sophical theory-building.[56] While the present volume is not trying to establish

'what the Buddha really taught', and while I am sceptical of some of the

methodological presuppositions behind such a project in the first place,[57] it is

useful to be aware that the later argumentative support of the non-self theory

need not be regarded as aiming at something other than a practical and

soteriological purpose. Indian Buddhist authors are clear that there is a differ-ence between an intellectual understanding of the non-self theory and its

meditative realization. Only the latter brings with it the cessation of thirst

and of the origination of suffering. Yet in order to bring about this realization,

and to ensure that it is a realization of the right kind of understanding,[58] it is

essential to develop a clear and detailed conception of the view under

[54] Bhattacharya 1973.
[55] Sabbasāvasutta, Majjhimanikāya I, 2, Bhikkhu Bodhi 2001: 92–3.
[56] Gombrich 2009: 166.
[57] See my remarks in the Introduction, pp. 24–34.
[58] And not, for example, the view that there is an inexpressible self distinct from

our acquaintance. See Oetke 1988: 163–4.

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consideration in the first place. To this end, argumentative support of the

non-
self theory is indispensable. Arguments supporting the absence of a Mutual suppo

substantial self are therefore not only of relevance for those who want to meditati

argument
defend the Buddhist view against its opponents, but are equally important

for the non-debating meditator. To this extent the meditative and the argu-
mentative aspect of this fundamental Buddhist concept support one another.
The term pudgalavāda ('personalism') refers to a set of schools that The personal

developed out of the Sthaviranikāya; they are characterized by accepting the

existence of persons (pudgala).[59] Their two main schools are the Vātsīputrīyas

(named after their founder, Vatsīputra, according to some accounts a disciple

of Śāriputra), which arose around 280 BCE, and the Sā :mmitīya (possibly named

after their founder, Sa :mmata),[60] which appeared later, around 100 BCE.[61] Their belief in the existence of a person seems to be in tension with the Buddha's doctrine of anātman, which denies the existence of a self, and their Buddhist opponents indeed thought the Pudgalavādins failed to account for a central teaching of the Buddha. Yet we should not make the mistake of considering them as a minor heretical sect that quite obviously misinterpreted the Buddha's teachings. First, other Buddhist sects did not regard them as non-Buddhists Their status (tīrthika); they are counted as one of the eighteen schools of early Buddhism. amo schools

Second, their opponents must have regarded the Pudgalavādins as sufficiently serious to merit a detailed response. The first section of the Kathāvatthu and the final section of Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhā:sya contain long and intricately argued refutations of their position.[62] Finally, they appear to have been a very popular branch of early Buddhism. If the reports of Chinese pilgrims in India are to be trusted, they constituted as much as a quarter of all Buddhist monks in seventh-century India.[63]

What, precisely, was the position that the Pudgalavādins set out to defend? They regarded themselves as Buddhists (and were so regarded by others), The no consequently their conception of the pudgala is certainly not identical with the pu that of the brahmanical ātman. On the other hand they also want to deny that the pudgala is nothing but the five physico-psychological components put together, which is the position of their Buddhist opponents. For the Pudgala-

vādins, 'the person is known in the sense of a real and ultimate fact',[64] it is not

simply a conceptual superimposition on something else that is ultimately real. Put in this way, the Pudgalavādins can appeal to the familiar Buddhist topos of

[59] For a comprehensive account of this school see Priestley 1999.
[60] Bareau 2013: 153.
[61] Conze 1962: 123.
[62] We do not know, however, whether both texts deal with the same form or stage ment of the Pudgalavāda ideas. While some Pudgalavāda texts have come down t

translation, forming a clear understanding of their position from their own perspe ously difficult.
[63] Conze 1962: 123.
[64] Kathāvatthu I.1.VIII, Aung and Davids 1915: 51.

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the middle way, defending a position that is neither a belief in a permanent soul

nor a position that denies the person anything but merely nominal status. (Needless to say, their Buddhist opponents had a different view of what

constitutes a middle position and regarded the Pudgalavādins as having strayed

Its theoretical use
too far in the direction of the eternalistic extreme.) What use the Pudgalavādins

saw for their notion of a person is fairly clear. It should be what provides the

continuity of a single sentient being throughout this life (being equally present

in the infant, the adult, and the old man), as well as across different lives

(ensuring that the sower of the karmic seeds is the same one that reaps the

results). It can equally be appealed to in an explanation of how memory works,

and in an explanation of Buddhist soteriology (showing how the one trapped in

sa :msāra is the same one that later obtains nirvā :na).

Inexpressibility of

One thing that makes it difficult to assess the Pudgalavāda position in detail

the pudgala

is that they consider the nature of the person to be inexpressible (avaktavya).
This makes sense on the basis of the Abhidharma metaphysics they espouse:

for the Abhidharma the only ultimately real things are the individual dharmas.
For the Pudgalavāda the person is not identical with any particular dharma

(such as those that make up the five skandhas), nor is it a mere projection onto

a group of dharmas. Yet at the same time the person is supposed to exist 'in the

sense of a real and ultimate fact', though 'not known in the sense of a real and

ultimate fact',[65] not known in the way other real and ultimate things are

known. If the Ābhidharmika's ontological framework forms the basis of our

talk about what there is, ultimately, then the Pudgalavāda position is simply

inexpressible, for neither the Abhidharma's candidates for what is real nor its

candidates for what is unreal correspond to the Pudgalavādin's understanding

of a person. The only things that are ultimately real for the Ābhidharmika are

the dharmas, and if the person is not a dharma, it cannot be ultimately real.
Nevertheless, it is hard to see how an entity that is simply inexpressible could

account for mental continuity, karmic responsibility, and so on. We seem to

be able to express something when we speak about the potential bearers

of continuity or responsibility, so are we simply mistaken about this and do

not, in fact, manage to express anything at all? It is particularly difficult

to explain how this apparently quite obscure position could be dialectically

so successful to be able to account for the strong presence of the Pudgalavāda in

the Indian Buddhist culture of the time.

The pudgala as

An interesting recent attempt to spell out the Pudgalavāda position in a way

accounting for the that resolves at least some of these worries has been suggested
apparent existence
of persons
She tries to argue that at the heart of the debate between the Pudgalavādin and

his opponents is the question of how the Buddhist reductionist position can

[65] Kathāvatthu, I.1.I, Aung and Davids 1915: 9.
[66] Carpenter 2015.

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account for the apparent existence of persons. On the Abhidharma account, all

there is at the most fundamental level of reality is a causal network of dharmas

coming into existence and passing out of existence at high speed. A key

challenge for the Abhidharma ontology is getting from this ultimate theory

of the world to the manifest image of a world containing persistent, medium-
sized dry goods, as well as persons. There obviously needs to be some account Cl

of how this vast network of flashing dharmas can be decomposed into distinct Ab

network view
causal sub-networks that can plausibly be taken to constitute the tables and

chairs we are acquainted with on an everyday basis. This is particularly

challenging as some of the causal events that occur will connect an object

with its later stages, or will be causal events amongst the object's own constituents, while other causal events will connect it with distinct objects. In the case of a person, considered as a stream of physical and mental dharmas, causal events can link one mental state (say, a perception of red) with its successor (the perception of red in the next moment), or they can link various physical and mental states in a person (a certain event in my retina causing a mind-moment perceiving red), or they can link different persons (my raising my arm causing a perception in you). If we want to identify persons as causally connected sub-networks, we will need a way of distinguishing the first two cases of causation from the last one, without already presupposing that we have a way of telling persons apart. If we cannot do this, all the persons I causally interact with would have to be regarded as somehow part of me, and this does not correspond to the way the world presents itself to us in the manifest image, as it appears to be divided into separate persons.

One way of understanding the Pudgalavāda proposal is as suggesting a way Pudg of solving this problem. If we cannot provide an adequate account of what a as a connection person is in terms of the structure of causal connections as such, we have to postulate that the causal connections that link one person-moment to its successor, and those that link the person-moments amongst each other, are in some way special. The reason why there is an important difference between my physical state causing my mental state and my physical state causing your mental state is because one causal connection is special, and connected to me,

while the other operates between you and me, and is not to be distinguished

from other kinds of causal interaction. Thus, what the Pudgalavāda wants to

say when arguing that the person is ultimately real is that the specific kinds of

causal connections that unify a person cannot be reduced to something else; in

particular, they are not just normal causal relations arranged in a specific

pattern. They exist sui generis, as causally related elements that belong together

ultimately and thereby ensure that the person has a privileged place in the

Pudgalavāda ontology. Note, however, that this is still arguably a non-self

theory, a reductionist theory of persons, and an account that is very far

removed from the idea of a permanent ātman defended in non-Buddhist

schools. There is no core to the person in the Pudgalavāda sense, but simply a

network of physical and mental dharmas that come into existence and go out

of existence at a very quick pace, a network on which the mistaken notion of a

permanent, unchanging self is imputed. It is, however, a special kind of

network, and because of this persons are to be distinguished from other causal

networks mistakenly conceived of as individuals (the causal network that

constitutes a teacup, say). When considered in this way, it is also clear why

the Pudgalavāda account is inexpressible in the familiar framework of Abhid-
harma ontology. For all this makes allowance for are momentary dharmas that

exist at the ultimate level, connected with each other in a framework of causal

connections. This framework is uniform, however, and none of its parts differ

from other parts in terms of the kinds of connections (rather than the patterns

of connections) that hold between its members, which is exactly the position

the Pudgalavādin wants to defend.
Whether the Pudgalavāda assumption of privileged connections is really

necessary in order to provide a reductionist account of persons from an

Abhidharma perspective is a complex question, and one that we will not be

able to resolve here. It is worthwhile to note, however, that the Pudgalavādin's

opponent has a range of conceptual tools available that he can use in order to

provide an account of the distinctness of persons amongst each other, and of

the distinctness of persons from other things.[67]
An alternative
Starting from a single mental event, we can examine its cause and effects,

solution
then the causes of the causes and the effects of the effects, moving successively

through an entire causal network. Some of the cause–effect chains branching

out in different directions will be connected with one another to a greater

extent than others (for example, events on my tongue and nose will cause a

causal cascade of olfactory and gustatory events, and these will also causally

influence one another). When constructing a causal network beginning with a

single event there are two maxims for the inclusion of further events we can

appeal to. These are to make the network as large as possible by including the

Maximally

Maximally
greatest number of events, and to make the network maximally connected, to

connected causal
enlarge the amount of connections between the different events included. The

networks
two maxims pull in different directions, yet we can argue that a network that

balances both in an optimal way (making it any bigger would reduce overall

causal connectedness) is a plausible candidate for a person, since what char-
acterizes a person is not just that it is a bunch of mental and physical events

that cause each other, but that these are intricately connected amongst them-
selves. My physical states might cause your mental states, but their causal

[67] The ideas outlined in the following are based on Siderits 2003: ch. 3.

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connection with my mental states is considerably more complex than their

causal connection with yours.
At this stage the Pudgalavādin's opponent still has to answer the claim that

even though we might be able to isolate certain sections of the overall causal

network that is cyclic existence by purely structural means (as was just argued),

it is still unclear why we should put an emphasis on a particular subset of these

rather than on any other of the countless types of structurally distinct parts of

the network. Would it not be the case that without a pre-existent notion of a

person there would be no way for us to zero in on the maximally connected,

maximally inclusive networks? Yet the notion of a person is something we

want to get out of this construction, not something we want to put in.
One possibility in replying to this charge is to refer to ethical considerations. Ethi

Assuming that the reduction, and indeed elimination, of suffering is an overall co

goal of the Buddhist path, and moreover a goal that is not identical with any

personal goal, and therefore does not in turn presuppose the concept of a

person, we could argue that the causal complexes structurally isolated in the

manner above are special because they play an instrumental role in trying to

bring about this goal. The complexes isolated in this way are able to analyse,

control, and revise their own behaviour, and are for this reason better suited for

achieving the goal of minimizing suffering than other complexes that lack these

features.
Of course there are various ways in which the Pudgalavādin can respond to

this,[68] and we do not have the space here to follow the further course this

discussion might take. Suffice it to say, however, that the Pudgalavāda theory is

capable of quite sophisticated systematic development; and if some arguments

like the ones just made were put forward by the ancient Pudgalavāda philo-
sophers it is not too surprising that their school exerted a considerable influ-
ence on the intra-Buddhist philosophical discussion of the time.
Despite the inherent systematic interest of their position, it is also worth-
Substitute selves?
while to consider the Pudgalavādins as one of a series of Buddhist teachings

that try to (or at least are seen by their opponents as trying to) develop a notion F

of a self or person that escapes the Buddhist critique.[69] The Yogācāra's concept c

[68] One worry the Pudgalavādin might voice is that there is a certain tension betwe

justification of introducing the notion of a person on consequentialist grounds, as

causal complex for reducing suffering, and the idea that it is precisely the notion

is responsible for the suffering of cyclic existence in the first place (Carpenter 20
A second question is why, following the reductionist argument, we should assum

complexes considered as persons (or, more generally those corresponding to livin

supposed to have particular ethical impact. Buddhists would want to claim that th

consequence of killing an ox are worse than those of destroying an ox made of cl

would the reason for this be, given that both are causal complexes that simply dif

structural features? (See Priestley 1999: 66.)
[69] See Conze 1962: 122, Bhikshu Thích Thiên Châu 1999: 138–
41; Collins 1982: 230–44.

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of a foundational consciousness has been sometimes charged with reintroducing

the notion of a substantial self through the back door, a charge substantiated

by the observation that the foundational consciousness, like the Pudgalavādin's

concept of a person, was taken to fulfil some of the theoretical functions

believers in substantial selves ascribe to such selves: to account for the

mental continuity in this life, for continuity across different lives, and for the

working of karma. These notions, the proponent of no-self theories will

point out, do not only look like crypto-selves, they also function like one.
A similar charge has been brought forward against the later theories of

Buddha-nature
Buddha-nature of tathāgatagarbha,[70] postulating an enlightened core in

every being that is presently obscured by ignorance but is made fully apparent

once enlightenment is achieved. Here similarities with a permanent, transcend-
ent ātman of the kind non-Buddhist schools postulate may be brought out

much more easily.[71] Whether the notions of the pudgala, the ālayavijñāna, or

the tathāgatagarbha are in fact inconsistent with the Buddha's teachings, or

whether they are legitimate ways of spelling out ideas it already contains, is a

question beyond the scope of the present discussion. Nevertheless it is worth-
while to keep in mind that concurrent with the development of no-self theory

in the history of Buddhist philosophy there is also an intellectual stream that

appears to pull in the other direction, introducing entities that at least prima

facie look rather self-like.[72]

d. Sthaviranikāya: Sarvāstivāda

We have good evidence to believe that the Sarvāstivāda school was established

as a distinct school by the middle of the third century BCE, around the time of

the reign of Aśoka.[73] It remained the dominant Abhidharma school until about

the seventh century CE, when it was eventually replaced in terms of popularity

by the Pudgalavāda.[74]

The Sarvāstivāda
The Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma, like that of the Theravāda, consists of seven

Abhidharma
distinct texts, although the individual texts are not identical. The most import-
ant of these is the Jñānaprasthāna, attributed to Kātyāyanīputra and probably

Jñānaprasthāna
composed during the first to third century after the Buddha's death. Its

importance is underlined by the fact that the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma was

also referred to as the 'Abhidharma with six feet' (:sa:tpādābhidharma), where

⁷⁰ See Chapter 3, pp. 186–93.
⁷¹ A point underlined by the fact that even some Buddhist writers used the term ā

referring to Buddha-
nature, though the precise import of this apparent inconsistency between

anātmavāda and tathāgatagarbha merits a more detailed discussion (such as provi

2014).
⁷² See below for the discussion of substantialism in the context of Sarvāstivāda on
6.
⁷³ The tradition itself locates itself a bit later (in the early second century BCE, th

inscriptional evidence is from the first century CE (Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 5
6)).
⁷⁴ Lamotte 1988: 543.

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the Jñānaprasthāna is considered to be the body, and the remaining six texts

are its feet. The text bears its name 'basis of knowledge' because it is considered

as the foundation or starting point of the knowledge of the ultimate (para-
mārthajñāna).⁷⁵ Its high status is closely connected with the fact that it

represents the viewpoint of the Kashmir Sarvāstivāda, which was recognized

as the orthodox variety of the Sarvāstivāda school.
A second extremely important Sarvāstivāda text is the Abhidharma-Vibhā:sā
mahāvibhā:sa (or Vibhā:sā for short), a gigantic work said to have been com-
piled by a council of Kashmirian Sarvāstivādin monks during the time of King

Kani:ska.⁷⁶ Because the authority of the Vibhā:sā was so central for the Kash-
mirian Sarvāstivādins they were also referred to as Vaibhā:sikas, or 'commen-
tarians'. The Vibhā:sā follows the structure of the Jñānaprasthāna, for which

it acts as a commentary. However, this work is best understood not as a

commentary, but as an encyclopedic work comprising a wide range of

early Buddhist viewpoints; not simply orthodox Sarvāstivāda tenets but also

viewpoints of other Sarvāstivāda teachers, and doctrines of rival Buddhist

schools. It frequently lists the positions of the four great Sarvāstivāda masters

(Dharmatrāta, Buddhadeva, Gho:saka, and Vasumitra),[77] often declaring

Vasumitra's position as the best.

Sarvāstivāda, 'the theory that everything exists', tells us its central assump-
sarvam asti &

tion already in its name. The Sarvāstivādins accounted for the somewhat argumer

position

unintuitive theory of momentariness, the view that we live in a kind of

cinematographic reality in which every dharma only flashes up very briefly

on the screen of existence, but at such speed that reality appears to be

temporally extended, by the arguably even more unintuitive theory that past,

present, and future all exist.

The Sarvāstivādins present a number of arguments in support of the exist-
1. Testimony

ence of these three times. A first argument is an argument from testimony. As

the Buddha has stated that one of the motivations of striving for liberation is

the experience of disgust with material things that have now passed away, we

must assume that these things exist in some way to explain their causal

efficacy in bringing about the present state of disenchantment with material

existence.[78] A second consideration is based on the observation that moments 2. (

needs a presently
of consciousness need to be based on an object they are about. If there were no e

[75] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 94–5.
[76] Cox 1995: 33, Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 103.
[77] The dates of these four great teachers of the Sarvāstivāda are not settled. A ran

century BCE (for Dharmatrāta) to the 1st and 2nd century CE (for Gho:saka) has

(Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 139–40, n. 28).
[78] 'It is because past matter exists that the learned śrāvaka becomes disgusted wit

matter', yasmāt tarhy asty atīta :m rūpa :m tasmāc chrutāvān ārya-
śrāvako 'tite rūpe 'napek:so bhavati,

bhā:sya on Abhidharmakośa 5:25a, Pradhan 1975: 295: 11–
12, Poussin and Pruden 1988–90: 3. 806.
See also Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 63.

past entities, thoughts about these entities would be objectless, and therefore

could not exist.[79] The thought underlying this argument becomes particularly

pressing in the presence of the theory of momentariness. Given such a theory,

every mental state is about a past object, since mental processing takes time,

and the object observed will have passed out of existence by the time the

processing is finished. As such, it would seem impossible to have any content-
ful thoughts at all.
A specific version of this argument points out that the Buddhists of course

want to assume that the mind has various introspective capacities (we can know,

for example, when an instance of mental craving has arisen). The Sarvāstivāda

also claims that a mental event (citta) cannot be simultaneous with another

citta,[80] and if the craving cannot be simultaneous with the mind knowing it, the

craving must be past relative to it, and, if it is correctly known, must exist.
3. Karmic
A third argument is based on the necessity to account for karmic responsi-
responsibility
bility. Karmic traces are supposed to give rise to results at a later time. But if an

action that I did in a past life can bear fruit now, this seems to suggest that the

past act must in some sense still be in existence, otherwise it could not be

efficacious now.
4. Three times as
Finally, past, present, and future are mutually interconnected notions. If past

mutually
(and future) were deemed to be non-existent, it seems difficult to see how we

interdependent
could still make sense of the existence of the present. If we do not understand

the present as wedged in between past and future, how are we to understand it?
And if we believe that that the three times depend existentially on one another,

how could it be the case that the present exists, while past and future do not?[81]
In this case the entire process of dependent arising conceived of as a temporal

process cannot be established, with obvious detrimental consequences for the

framework of Buddhist thought as a whole.
Possible responses
It is worthwhile to note in passing that the opponent of the Sarvāstivāda

would not find it too difficult to come up with a response to these arguments.
The argument from testimony can be countered by appealing to the familiar

theory of interpretable and definite teachings. The mere fact that the Buddha

appealed to the existence of past entities does not imply that Buddhist philosophers need to take these entities ontologically seriously. They may have been

only mentioned as a display of skilful means. The consideration that consciousness needs an object hinges on the further assumption that such objects

always have to exist. This is precisely denied by the Sautrāntikas, who claim

that in special cases conscious states may be directed at non-existent objects.[82]
[79] Or, alternatively, the consciousness would arise by itself, without requiring an

Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 161–2.
[80] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 61, 225.
[81] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 63.
[82] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 63–5; see discussion below on p. 79.

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Finally, the notion of karmic responsibility may be accounted for by finding a way of moving the karmic potential into the present moment, as is done, for example, in the theory of karmic seeds. An act done in the past leaves a karmic seed in a moment of the mind-stream which is then 'copied' into its successor moment, until it bears its karmic fruit in the present moment. In addition, the argument of the interdependence of the three times, which the Sarvāstivādin uses as part of a reductio of the denial of the existence of any of them, would be embraced by Madhyamaka, at least when considering the intrinsic existence of time.

While there appear to be a number of considerations that can be put in place in order to support the existence of the three times, a major challenge the Sarvāstivādin has to overcome is the necessity of accounting for the fact that past and future entities lack the power of entities that are present. The present glass of water can quench thirst, yet past or future water cannot. The Sarvās-
The notion of

tivāda accounts for this by the theory of 'efficacy' (kāritrā). Even though past kar and future objects all exist, only the present objects possess efficacy, and for this

reason they are able to perform functions that past and future objects cannot. Sautrāntika opponents were quick to identify problems with this attempt to

split existential from causal status. They pointed out that there are numerous

examples of things that are perfectly existent yet not efficacious. A person in a Pr

dark room has an existent visual capacity, but this capacity is not efficacious, as v
it does not produce any visual impression.[83] The Sarvāstivāda responds to this

by pointing out that there are various things we can mean by efficacy, and as

long as some of these obtain, the object can be considered as existent. The

person in the dark room cannot see, so their eyes temporarily lack the capacity

(sāmarthya) to generate visual impressions. Yet their visual system still exists

because it is efficacious in bringing about its own successor-moments (phala-
pratigrahan:a). Each moment of the visual system produces the next (hence the

visual system persists during the period of darkness and we can still see when

the light is switched back on), and for this reason each moment is efficacious.[84]
There must have been considerable internal debate about how the doctrine Differ

of the existence of everything is to be understood, for the Sarvāstivāda com-
interpretations of

'everything exists'
mentarial literature lists no less than four possible interpretations, each asso-
ciated with one of the great Sarvāstivāda teachers, and each illustrated by a

particular example.[85]
[83] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 126.
[84] As Sa :mghabhadra points out: 'If a sa :msk:rta dharma serves as a cause for th

own fruit, it is said to be [exercising its] kāritra. If it serves as a condition assistin

of the fruit of] a different [series], it is said to be [exercising] its efficacy/function

Dhammajoti 2009: 130).
[85] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 119–20.

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1. Dharmatrāta

The first account, due to Dharmatrāta, compares the change of the temporal

status of a dharma to melting down a golden vessel to produce another golden

artifact. This account is described in terms of bhava-anyathātva, a 'difference

in terms of mode of being'. The underlying substance of the dharma (such as

the gold) stays the same, while its mode of being in terms of temporal

properties changes (as the piece of gold first has the shape of a vessel and

then that of a statue, for example). The difficulty with this approach is that we

now need to make sense of the change of temporal properties. In this case it

looks as if we need to postulate a second-order time, such that relative to it

some entity first has the property of pastness and then of presentness. This is

unattractive because we now require another, third level notion of time relative

to which the second level changes, and so on, all the way up the hierarchy.
Alternatively, we need to think of the notion of 'transformation' appealed to

here as itself non-temporal. Such notions do exist (consider, for example, the

transformation of one mathematical equation into another), though how this

would help in explaining the notion of change relative to temporal properties

is, unfortunately, far from clear.

2. Gho:saka

The second account, due to Gho:saka (described as lak:san:a-anyathātva,

'difference of characteristics'), presents a relational view of temporal properties.
He argues that in the same way one man can be simultaneously attached to

three women, so one dharma can at the same time have the different charac-

teristics (lak:san:a) of being past, present, and future. In the example of the

womanizer the strength of his attachment to the individual women can vary,

and by transferring this to the temporal case we can, for example, argue that as

a past dharma becomes present, its link with the past declines and its link with

the present becomes stronger. This view might strike us as problematic if we

believe that the three temporal properties are mutually incompatible: nothing

that is present can be either past or future, not even to a minute degree. Yet the

trichromatic theory of vision tells us that we see all the colours we can

distinguish by perceiving a mix of simultaneously seeing red, blue, and green.
So why would we not be able to conceive of every temporal predicate as a

mixture of being present, past, and future? Conceiving of time in this way

would give us a possibility of distinguishing, for example, between the recent

past and the remote future, by arguing that the former is a time with strong

relations to the past and weaker relations to the present, while the latter has

much stronger relations to the future and much weaker relations to the present.
3. Vasumitra
Account number three, associated with Vasumitra (referred to as avasthā-
anyathātva, 'difference of state'), also explains temporal properties in a rela-
tional manner, though by using a model that differs from Gho:saka's. In the

same way in which the balls in an abacus do not represent different numbers by

intrinsic differences, but by being placed in a specific position relative to

another, so the difference between temporal properties is just one of state

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(avasthā), and can be accounted for in terms of relations but not in terms of a difference in substance. One way in which we could spell out this account is in terms of the relation of an object to its function. Present fire is present because it is connected to its function and can therefore heat; fire which cannot do so is either past or future. According to this account, present fire is not intrinsically different from past fire (in the same way as the counter for the thousands in the abacus is not a bigger ball than the counter for the hundreds), but the difference between the two is to be accounted for in relational terms.

The final account, due to Buddhadeva, continues the relational understand-

4. Buddhadeva

ing of temporal properties by observing that roles in a family structure are also not monadic but relational. This account is described as anyathā-anyathātva, 'difference of difference'. The idea is that as the same person is labelled as a mother relative to one person and as a daughter relative to another, so entities receive their temporal designation relative to other periods of time. In the same way, something may be past relative to the present and future relative to the very remote past.

It is worth noting that, apart from the first (which is also likely to be the earliest), all accounts characterize temporality in relational terms without implying any change of substance. Of these accounts the Sarvāstivādins selected the third account, that of Vasumitra, as the most satisfactory one. It

conceives of temporal properties in terms of a specific state (avasthā), which in this context is the phenomenon's efficacy (karitrā). As a ball of an abacus receives its numerical value according to where it is placed relative to the framework of the abacus, so the event's temporal status depends on its relation to its karitrā.

Various Buddhist opponents have criticized the Sarvāstivāda notion of sarvāstitva existence of the three times,[86] and it does indeed appear to be a curious form of substantialism interpretation of the doctrine of momentariness. For it now seems that there is some unchanging underlying basis after all (the continuous existence of all phenomena), which is then transformed when it takes on the efficacy of karitrā to form present entities. It interesting to note that the Sarvāstivāda notion of transtemporal existence may be regarded as one of a number of concepts in Buddhist philosophy that appear to go against the non-self, insubstantialist picture usually regarded as a central characteristic of Buddhist thought. The Pudgalavāda's account of a person is obviously another instance that belongs in the same category, as are later notions such as the Yogācāra's foundational consciousness and the theory of Buddha-nature (tathāgatagarbha). We would not necessarily want to presuppose that all these 'substantialist' currents are introduced for similar reasons, though there are certain aspects that may still

[86] bhā:sya on Abhidharmakośa 5: 27, Pradhan 1975: 297–300, Poussin and Pruden 1988–90: 3.
810–16, Dhammajoti 2009: ch. 5, see also Aung and Davids 1915: 242.

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be shared amongst them. As noted above, the dynamics of Buddhist philosophy are not simply determined by following wherever the argument leads, but require (like all philosophical endeavours that claim to spell out the details of a certain religious worldview) a connection with the key tenets of fundamental texts. How exactly these texts are to be interpreted, and what qualifies as 'key', are of course matters that are themselves open to debate. Nevertheless, while there are many ways a text can be read, it might not be interpretable in any way whatsoever, and any interpretation of the Buddha's teaching that ascribes belief in a form of ātman to him is unlikely to have been accepted by the Buddhist community.[87]

Substantialism as a

One way in which the introduction of these 'substantialist' motives could be rhetorical strategy explained that does not simply understand them as a flirtation views is as a rhetorical strategy, that is, as an attempt to attract attention to specific philosophical texts. Ostensibly Buddhist texts that appear to contradict core Buddhist tenets are more likely to attract criticism (and hence interest) from fellow Buddhist authors, and if it can be shown that the contradiction is only apparent, so much the better for the chances of the text to be regarded as both innovative and authoritative.[88] A somewhat more benign view (though not necessarily one that excludes the one just mentioned) is to consider the Substantialism

exposition of 'substantialist' views as an attempt at inclusivism. This means

and inclusivism
that Buddhist doctrines would be presented in the conceptual framework of

non-Buddhist points of view in order to make them more widely understood.
Closely connected with this idea is that of the graded teaching of the Buddhist

doctrines. The Buddha is supposed to have adapted his exposition in relation to

the preconceptions of his audience, and later Buddhist thinkers claim to have

embraced this technique. As such, the 'substantialist' views could be under-
stood as a form of teaching the Buddhist doctrine that at a later stage has to be

supplanted by more adequate expositions that bring out the teaching of

emptiness in a comprehensive manner.
Centrality of
Causation plays a central role for Sarvāstivāda, in fact the school was also

causation
known by the name hetuvāda, 'the theory of causes'. The intrinsic nature

(svabhāva) of the ultimately existent dharmas is causally produced,[89] and the

ability to be causally efficacious is what the Sarvāstivādins consider to be the

mark of existence. Causal efficacy is a notion that is more comprehensive than

[87] Though certain kind of tathāgatagarbha texts came quite close to this, even em

term ātman in the exposition of the Buddhist position (Jones 2014). See above, p.
[88] It has been suggested that Madhyamaka authors pursued a similar strategy in th

of the theory of emptiness, giving the appearance of embracing a nihilistic (and th
Buddhist) view, without in fact doing so.
[89] Strictly speaking, this only applies to the conditioned dharmas, though these co

greatest part of the Abhidharma ontology. Though not causally produced, the unc

dharmas still possess causal power (Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 164).

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karitrā, the mark of the present. Past and future entities, though devoid of

karitrā, still exist because they are causally efficacious in being able to function C

as objects (ālambana) of mental cognitions of past and future.[90] Causation and ex

the ability to produce effects therefore stands at the very centre of the Sarvā-
stivāda ontology; if we cannot show that something is causally active we cannot

show that it exists at all.
The most controversial notion in this context is the Sarvāstivāda idea of the Simu

simultaneity of cause and effect (sahabhū-
hetu). They argue that in certain cause and effect

cases cause and effect arise at the same time, rather than sequentially. Such

cases are the four great elements which mutually produce one another at a

single time, or mental events (citta) and their accompaniments (cittānuvart-
tin), which arise together at the same moment. This view of causation is hardly

intuitive; in most of the cases of causation we observe, the cause happens first

and the effect takes place at a later time. The Sarvāstivādins motivate the theory

of simultaneous causation with two examples. The first is the example of the

fire and its illumination. The fire and the illumination are distinct things, one

causing another, but when we bring the existence of the first about the

existence of the second is immediately entailed. The second is the example of

a bundle of mutually supporting reeds. The cause of each reed staying upright

is the other reeds staying upright, but all the reeds stay upright simultaneously,

hence the causes and effects all happen at the same time.[91]
The theory of simultaneous causation plays its greatest part in the Sarvā-
Epistemology

stivāda epistemology. According to their theory of knowledge the sense organ,

the sensory object, and the perception all exist at the same time. As the former

two are causes of the latter as an effect, this account presupposes that cause and

effect can temporally coincide. This in turn allows the Sarvāstivādins to

endorse a realist epistemology. Without the theory of simultaneous causation

an epistemology presupposing the theory of momentariness is inevitably Moment

pushed in the direction of some form of representationalism. If the perception and
tationalism
that is the effect happens in the moment after the cause that consists of the

sensory organ and object, the cause will already have passed away when the

perception exists. If we want to assume that perceptions have any objects at all,

we will have to postulate some kind of simulacrum (such as a representation)

that can stand in for the object that no longer exists.[92] The Theravāda Variable sp

attempted to solve this difficulty by introducing the idea that mind-
moments of moments

and matter-moments could run at different speeds (one matter-moment was

[90] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 72: 'the possibility of a cognition necessarily impl

ontological status of the object cognized', 147.
[91] The Yogācārins also use the same example to support the simultaneous causal

between the foundational consciousness and the defiled dharmas. See Bhikkhu D

2009: 160.
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2 See Abhidhammatthasangaho, IV. 8, Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007a: 174; Kim 19

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supposed to last sixteen mind-moments). As a short person and a tall person

can walk in unison, as long as the short person takes more steps than the tall

person during the same amount of time. In the same way, if mind-moments are

shorter than matter-moments, a matter-moment could persist during the

existence of two or more mind-moments. The difficulty with this approach is

that it does not sit well with the Abhidharma arguments that nothing lasts

longer than an instant (k:san:a). Given that these arguments apply to any k:san:a,

it is hard to see how they could support the claim that k:san:as of one kind last

longer than k:san:as of another kind.[93]
Simultaneity and
Simultaneity of causation, on the other hand, allows for a realist epistemol-
realism
ogy, since the object cognized and the thought cognizing it exist at the same

time.[94] In his *Abhidharma-nyāyānusāra-śāstra, Sa :mghabhadra argues that

this is the only sensible way of understanding how perception works. If the

object of perception had already passed away at the time when the perception

happens, perception would appear to arise either uncaused or caused purely by

itself, since it has no object. Moreover, how could we be in any way more

justified in saying that visual perception perceives a visual object rather than a

sound, given that both are equally absent when the perception occurs?[95] On the

other hand, if the object perceived as present is not actually present but past,

what is the basis of determining which past object is perceived here? If the past

objects are all equally non-existent, any one seems to be as good as any other in

order to function as an object of visual perception.[96]

Sautrāntika
Nevertheless, the coherence of the idea that cause and effect can exist at the

criticism of
same time was questioned by different schools of Buddhist thought, first and

simultaneous
causation
foremost by the Sautrāntikas.[97] They argued that when two things arise at the

same time, as in the case of two horns of an ox, we cannot determine which

causes which. Is it the left horn causing the right horn, or the other way round?
Moreover, when we consider our everyday experience of causation, involving

seeds and sprouts, potters and pots, or fire and ashes, causation seems to be

precisely not simultaneous; rather, we observe that the cause exists first and the

Sarvāstivāda
effect only arises some time afterwards. The Sarvāstivādin seems to have a good

response
reply to the first objection, namely that the two horns are not causally related at

all, but rather have a common cause, namely the ox. When one horn is broken

off the other is not thereby damaged, indicating that neither is cause or effect of

[93] According to Xuanzang, the assumption that only mental phenomena are mome

material objects last for a longer time, was also made by the Sā :mmitīyas (Bhikk

2007a: 174).

94 Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 243.

95 Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007a: 137, see also 153.

96 Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007a: 140.

97 For a discussion of the simultaneity of causation in the context of Madhyamaka

Westerhoff 2009: 120–1.

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the other.[98] Regarding the second point, the Sarvāstivādin can repeat his

examples of the light and the bundle of reeds. Even though not all instances

of causation involve the simultaneity of cause and effect, some of them do.[99]
How successful such examples (and similar ones, like the two ends of a

seesaw, or a leaden ball and the depression in a cushion it produces)[100] are is

of course debatable. In the case of the light and its illumination, it is

important to be clear about whether the term 'light' refers to whatever

holds and sustains the flame (such as an oil-lamp, wick, and oil) or to the

flame itself. In the context of this debate the latter seems to be intended.[101]
But in this case the illumination appears to be just a property, rather than an

effect of the light, in the same way as an object's shape is. The appearance of

simultaneity seems to be due to a specific way of conceptualization that

regards properties as effects. In the case of the bundle of reeds, one might

similarly claim that reconceptualizing the situation removes the appearance

of simultaneous causation. If we consider the effect to be the fact that all the

reeds stand up together, and the cause to be the ground, the surface structure

of the individual reeds, and so on, cause and effect would no longer turn out

to be simultaneous.
A clear advantage of the Sarvāstivāda theory of simultaneity of perception

and percept is that it can account for the 'vividness and immediacy'[102] of the

results of the perceptual process. The reason why perception appears to us as Dire

direct is because there is a temporally direct (i.e. simultaneous) connection and se
cognition

between the external entity perceived and the mental event perceiving it.
Representationalist theories of perception face the difficulty that they have to

regard the immediacy of perception to be illusory, since there is strictly speaking

no 'direct perception'—we are only acquainted with a standin for the perceived

object, in the Sautrāntika case a present recollection of an object existing earlier.
The Sautrāntikas address this challenge by arguing that the act of perception is

self-aware.[103] Because at the same time as apprehending a perceptual object our

mind also perceives itself, we have the impression of perceptual immediacy, an

immediacy that is not the immediacy of immediate contact with the entity

[98] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2003: 37.
[99] By arguing in this way the Sarvāstivādin can also escape the Humean point tha

causation implies that everything happens at the same time. If only some causes a

temporally coincide causal sequences can still be temporally extended.
[100] Westerhoff 2009: 121.
[101] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2003: 38–
9 quotes Sa :mghabhadra's discussion during which the

Sarvāstivādin claims that 'it is not perceived that when the lamp first arises, there

without the light. It has never been observed that a lamp exists without light.' As

encounter unlit oil-
lamps we should assume that the lamp's flame is denoted by terms such as

pradīpah:, agnih:, or mar me ni mun pa in passages like Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 12, Vigra-
havyāvartanī 34–9, and Vaidalyaprakaran:a 6–11.
[102] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007a: 159.
[103] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007a: 159.

perceived but with the perceptual act itself. The Sarvāstivāda, on the other hand,

does not accept this Sautrāntika idea of reflexive awareness (svasa :mvedana).[104]
The matter of reflexive awareness becomes very important in later Yogācāra

discussions. For the Sarvāstivādins, the awareness that something is directly

experienced by me (ida :m me pratyak:sam iti) is a clear indication of the existen

of external objects. Perception, a key epistemic instrument (pratyak:sa :m

pramān:ānā :m gari:s:tham) establishes the existence of objects causally simultan
eous with it.[105] The Yogācārins, like the Sautrāntikas, accept reflexive awareness
and therefore have a response to the objection that our experience appears vivid

and direct to us, even though on the Yogācāra account there are not any external

objects whatsoever.
svabhāva
While there is no enduring person, Buddhists still need to find a way to

account for karma. If there is no self that travels from life to life, or even from

moment to moment, how can we be assured that positive and negative karmic

potential actually attaches to the mental stream in which it originated, rather

than to some other one? Different schools of Buddhism tried to account for this

problem in different ways. As we have just seen, the Sarvāstivādins came up with an ingenious idea that is reflected in the school's name sarva-asti-vāda, the doctrine that everything exists. They claim that dharmas do not arise from a non-existent future, become existent, and then, as they become past, vanish into non-existence again. Rather, dharmas exist during all three times. In order to accommodate the blatant implausibility of this view (we cannot use yesterday's or tomorrow's fire to cook today's rice) they had to introduce a couple of additional terms. They used the term svabhāva to denote a constant essence persisting through the three times which is the basis of differentiating between things. But while past and presence fire would have the same svabhāva, only the present fire would also have efficacy (kāritra), a property produced by causes and conditions, which ensures that the dharma is actually able to carry out a function. This has the curious property that the dharma's svabhāva is actually not to be found in the properties we use to perceive it: the brightness, heat, destructive power, and so forth of the fire are something that manifests in the present, but cannot be part of the fire's atemporal essence.

The relation of the two concepts svabhāva and kāritra is far from straightforward. On the one hand they cannot be the same, since the former exists throughout the three times, whereas the latter exists only in the present. Yet they cannot be completely distinct either, since what makes the fire the fire is the possession of its intrinsic properties like heat, but if these are completely

¹⁰⁴ Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007a: 109–10, 141.
¹⁰⁵ Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007a: 141. The Sanskrit citations are from Vasubandhu

commentary on verses 15 and 16 of his Vijñāptimātratāsiddhi (Ruzsa and Szeged 2).

[106] See above, pp. 184–5.

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removed from the svabhāva and only associated with the fire's efficacy, it is then unclear what role this 'intrinsic nature' of fire still has to play. Fittingly, we find Abhidharma sources pointing out that one cannot 'say with any certainty that they are the same or different'.[107]

The notion of a dharma is commonly defined in an etymological fashion, The Ab based on the root dh:r (to hold, to bear) as 'something that holds its own notion o characteristic'.[108] This 'own characteristic' (svalak:san:a) is unique and remains unchangeable throughout the dharma's existence; it is frequently identified with the dharma's svabhāva.[109]

Within the Abhidharma texts we find two important criteria for what makes 1. M a dharma a dharma. The first is mereological independence. Something that has i parts only borrows its nature from these parts, and such a thing is not sufficiently fundamental to count as a dharma. Vasubandhu points out that whatever disappears when its parts are separated is no dharma. When the pot is broken, we are left only with shards; when the chariot is disassembled, there is no chariot any more, but only wooden parts.[110] Pots and chariots are therefore no dharmas.

The second criterion is a more abstract version of the first. It is not 2. Conceptual

concerned with the physical parts of an object, but with its conceptual parts: inde[

this is the criterion of conceptual independence. Vasubandhu points out that if a

thing disappears when dissolved by the mind it also cannot be regarded as a

dharma. The example he provides is that of a water atom. Such a partless

particle is mereologically simple, and therefore not ruled out by the first

criterion. But a water atom has different qualities: shape, colour, stickiness,

and so forth. If we break the atom apart mentally, we are left with no water but

only with a conglomeration of properties that collectively characterized it. The

only entities that qualify for dharmahood by this more stringent second

criterion appear to be property instances (sometimes referred to as particular-
ized properties or tropes): this blue colour over here (which is not the same as

that blue colour over there), this circular shape over here, and so on.[111]
This double understanding of dharmas as mereologically and conceptually

independent is not restricted to the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma. In a Theravāda

source[112] we learn that a chariot, a house, and a fist are designated in depend-
ence on their parts put together, but also that time and space are similarly

[107] Frauwallner 1995: 199.
[108] svalak:san:a-dhāran:āt dharmah:, Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 19.
[109] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 19, 123; Williams 1981: 242.
[110] Abhidharmakośa 6:4, Poussin and Pruden 1988–90: 3. 910–11.
[111] The Abhidharmamahāvibhā:sa notes that 'the entity itself is [its] characteristic

characteristic is the entity itself; for it is the case for all dharmas that the character

predicated apart from the dharma itself ' (Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 19).
[112] Walser 2005: 242–3.

designated in dependence on the revolution of sun and moon. The chariot is

mereologically dependent on its parts, but the revolution of sun and moon are

no mereological parts of time and space. They are, rather, complex concepts

derived from other concepts and, having been broken down into their con-
stituent concepts, disappear, as the chariot does when it is disassembled.
Mereological independence is not sufficient for something to qualify as a

dharma; what keeps complexes of matter from being a dharma also keeps

complexes of concepts from being one.

dravya and

The notion of a dharma (and of its existence by svabhāva) is essential for

prajñapti

establishing the key Abhidharma distinction between those things that exist

substantially (dravyasat) and those that exist only as designations (prajñapti-
sat). Yaśomitra's commentary on the Abhidharmakośa points out that 'to

be existent as an absolute entity is to be existent as an intrinsic characteris-
tic'.[113] These svalak:san:as, which are the svabhāvas of dharmas, are simply

the particularized properties; the medium-sized dry goods of our everyday

acquaintance are superimpositions that the mind makes on the basis of

conglomerations of such properties.[114] Some will be regarded as a pot, some

as a chariot, and others as a person.

Existential status

What exactly the existential status of designated entities amounts to is

of prajñapti

a topic on which opinions differ in Abhidharma. In the most extreme

case designations are regarded as not amounting to anything over and

above mere talk, a convenient shorthand without any existential impact. According to this perspective, the distinction between the two truths boils

down to the existence of a single truth, since only the entities that are

fundamentally real exist at all. When we speak about the two truths we do

not have different kinds of entities in mind, but rather mean two different

ways of looking at the same entities. The Abhidharmamahāvibhā:sa[115]
points out that:
There is indeed only one truth, the absolute truth. . . . The two truths are establish

terms of difference in perspective, not in terms of real entities: in terms of real en

there is only one truth, the absolute truth; in terms of difference in perspective, tw

types [of truth] are established.
This difference in perspective depends on who is looking: ultimate truth is the

way enlightened beings (āryas) see the world, conventional truth is that which

is reflected in way ordinary beings conceive of it.[116]

[113] paramārthena sat svalak:san:a sat ity arthah:, Wogihara 1990: 889; see Bhikkh

2009: 19.
:
[114] For the later development of the notion of svalak:san:a in the thought of Dinn
1
below.
[115] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 66.
[116] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 67.

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:
The fifth-century writer Sanghabhadra, on the other hand, ascribes a limited

existential status to designated entities; like substantial entities they play a role

in acquiring knowledge about the world. He notes that:
when the idea is produced with regard to a thing without dependence [on other th
this thing is dravyasat. When it is produced with regard to a thing in dependence

other things], that thing is prajñaptisat, for example, a jug or an army.[117]
According to this understanding, substantial objects produce knowledge about

themselves in an unmediated fashion. In most cases, however, knowledge is

only produced in a mediated fashion: to know the jug we need to be acquainted

with the pieces of clay that make up the jug; to know the army we need to know

individual soldiers. To know a dharma, on the other hand, we do not need to

:
rely on anything else. For Sanghabhadhra, designated objects are not just bits of

language: they also play an important role in how we get to know objects in the

world.[118]
e. Sthaviranikāya: Sautrāntika
It is commonly agreed that the Sautrāntikas developed out of the Sarvāstivāda,

and this school has acquired considerable subsequent doxographic prominence

by being considered (together with the Sarvāstivāda or Vaibhā:sika) as one of the

two schools of the 'lower vehicle' in Indo-Tibetan explications of the different

schools of Buddhist philosophy. The name of the school tells us that the sūtras

were of particular importance for its followers, and Yaśomitra, a commentator

on Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhā:sya, defines them as those who regard

the sūtras, but not the commentaries (śāstras), as authoritative.[119] The second of E

these epithets tells us more than the first, since all Buddhists can reasonably be ov

expected to regard the Buddha's discourses as authoritative. The term śāstra is

here to be understood as referring to the Abhidharma treatises, and it is these,

therefore, which the Sautrāntikas were considered to reject. For the Sautrānti-
kas, it is argued, the authority of the Abhidharma was not simply derivative

relative to the sūtras, but was no authority at all. This, however, does not yet tell

us anything about the positions the Sautrāntikas defended, and in fact, for a Limit

school that is by some considered to be the second major division of non-
information

available
Mahāyāna Buddhism, there is an extremely limited range of information on its

views. No Sautrāntika treatises have come down to us,[120] and it does not appear

[117] Walser 2005: 212.
:
[118] The later development of this ontological dualism by Dinnāga in terms of the

svalak:san:a and sāmānyalak:san:a is closer to this understanding: both are taken

the former is fundamental. See pp. 220–1 below.
[119] ye sūtraprāmānikāh na tu śāstraprāmānikāh

—

—

—
:, Swami Dwarikadas Shastri 1970: 15.
[120] Walser 2005: 229. As Bareau (2013: 204) laconically puts it: 'we know nothin

domain . . . neither do we know anything of their literature.'

as if there ever was a distinct Sautrāntika ordination lineage.[121] The term

'school' here refers to doctrinal distinctions, not to the fact that the Sautrāntikas

would have had their own set of monastic rules differing from those of other

schools. Most of our information about their positions is based on Vasuband-
hu's Abhidharmakośabhā:sya, which is supposed comment from a Sautrāntika

perspective on a root text that describes Sarvāstivāda doctrines. It is unlikely

that Vasubandhu was the first Sautrāntika (though the term is not attested

before his usage in the Abhidharmakośabhā:sya),[122] yet how these early Sau-
trāntika views of 'an anti-Abhidharma Hīnayāna tradition with no literary

remains'[123] would relate to Vasubandhu's position, and whether it in turn

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agrees with the positions of Dinnāga and Dharmakīrti,[124] which have also

sometimes been labelled as 'Sautrāntika' positions,[125] is a moot point.
Rejection of
What seems to be relatively clear, however, is that the Sautrāntikas (at least

Sarvāstivāda view
as described by Vasubandhu) disagreed with the eponymous doctrine of the

of time
Sarvāstivāda, the idea that things in all three times exist.[126] Some authors

argued that the Sautrāntikas do not appear to be 'a group having a defined

set of doctrinal positions', apart from the fact that their 'perspective can be

characterized only by a rejection of the definitive Sarvāstivāda position that

factors exist in the three periods of time'.[127] So far it might be most satisfactory

to consider the term 'Sautrāntika' to refer to a broader range of positions

unified by the fact that they put special emphasis on the sūtras and reject the

Sarvāstivāda theory of transtemporal existence.
The Dār:s:tāntikas

The Dār:s:tāntika school, which is described in Abhidharma treatises as

disagreeing with the Sarvāstivāda tradition, was closely related to the Sautrān-
tika, but the exact nature of their relation is not entirely clear. It may be that the

Dār:s:tāntikas represent an earlier school and that the Sautrāntikas split off from

this,[128] though Yaśomitra claims that the Dār:s:tāntikas are a particular type of

Sautrāntikas, not the other way round.[129] Matters are further complicated by

the fact that when both schools are referred to the term Dār:s:tāntika frequently

[121] Willemen, Dessein, and Cox 1998: 109.
[122] Gold 2015a: 5, Kritzer 2003a: 210. Kuījī (窺
基) mentions three Sautrāntika teachers: Kumār-
alāta, the founding teacher of the Sautrāntikas who is supposed to have lived abou

the Buddha's death, Śrīlāta, and a third, who is presumably identical with Vasuba

1928–9: 221–2).
[123] Jackson 1993: 112.
[124] Singh 1984, 1995. Note, however, the very critical considerations raised by H:
[125] Or at least as the strange hybrid of 'Yogācāra-
Sautrāntika'. Indian and Tibetan doxography

also mentions the categories of Sautrāntika 'following scripture' (āgamānuyāyī) a

'following reasoning' (yuktyānuyāyī), the former referring to the kind of Sautrāṇ

:
Vasubandhu, the latter to the systems of Dinnāga and Dharmakīrti.
[126] Bareau 2013: 206, bhā:sya on Abhidharmakośa 5: 27, Pradhan 1975: 297–
300, Poussin and

Pruden 1988–90. 3. 810–16.
[127] Willemen, Dessein, and Cox 1998: 109.

[128] Willemen, Dessein, and Cox 1998: 108.
[129] Cox 1988: 70, n. 4.

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appears to have a pejorative ring to it, a connotation not present in the case

of the term Sautrāntika.[130] Their name, derived from d:r:stānta ('example'), may

result from the assumption that they 'were known for their active effort in

popularizing the Buddha's teachings, employing poetry and possibly other

literary devices . . . and were particularly skilled in utilizing similes and allegor-
ies in demonstrating the Buddhist doctrines'.[131]
If, as the Sautrāntikas hold, the Sarvāstivāda account is to be rejected, what

then is the status of past and future entities? According to the exposition of

Sautrāntika we find in Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhā:sya, everything lasts

only for a moment. Not only do past and future entities fail to exist in any

substantial way,[132] the present also does not possess any temporal thickness; Mon

immediately after coming into existence each moment passes out of existence.
The theory of momentariness therefore claims that all constituents of the

world, all dharmas, whether mental or material, only last for an instant

(k:san:a) and cease immediately after arising. Permanence is a mere appearance

produced by the fact that very similar moments rapidly arise and cease one Cinen

after another, succeeding each other in such quick succession that we are concept

reality
ordinarily unable to perceive them as moments, but only see change that is

underpinned by objects that endure through time. This peculiar cinemato-
graphic conception of reality conceives of the world as a kind of three-
dimensional film projection. Individual dharmas succeed each other like

frames in a movie, and blur into each other because our perception lacks the

temporal discrimination necessary to tell them apart.
Vasubandhu's argument for momentariness[133] takes as its first premise the Vasub

idea that everything is impermanent, a position that is, of course, well sup-
argument for

momentariness
ported by the Buddha's theory of the three marks of existence.[134] If everything

eventually perishes, what brings this about in each particular case? There may

be an external cause operating on each object, moving it from existence to

non-existence, or each object may eventually destroy itself without any external

[130] Willemen, Dessein, and Cox 1998: 109.
[131] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 74.
[132] Candrakīrti, commenting on Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 22:11 in the Prasannapa

that for the Sautrāntika past and future are empty, though other things are not (tat

mate 'tītā anāgata :ṃ śūnyam anyad aśūnyam, Poussin 1913: 444: 15). Their bein

that they exist only by force of conceptual construction (prajñapti), though not in

real way. When the Sautrāntika denies the existence of past and future he does no

meaningfully talk about past and future, though he denies that such talk has any o

import.
[133] See Siderits 2007: 119–23; von Rospatt 1995, section II.II.D (pp. 178–
95) for further

discussion of the argument for momentariness from the spontaneity of destruction
[134] That everything is impermanent does, of course, not entail that everything (or

anything) is momentary, and von Rospatt (1995: 14) points out that 'there can be

the theory of momentariness cannot be traced back to the beginnings of Buddhisn

Buddha himself '. Like many Buddhist concepts, the theory of momentariness is l

fruit produced from a conceptual seed present in the Buddha's own teaching.

influence. Once its existential power is exhausted it simply vanishes. The first

possibility seems to be what accords most closely with the manifest image of

the world, where windows are shattered, flowers wither, and humans die, all

because of the influence of external causes (the brick, the heat, the tumor in the

brain). Yet there are difficulties with conceptualizing these as causing non-
existences, unless we assume that non-existences are real objects, first-class

ontological citizens of the world, and not merely linguistic hypostatizations, as

the Buddhists assume. The second premise of the argument is therefore the

claim that particular non-existences are not things that can stand in causal

relations.[135] When something causes the non-existence of something else there

is no thing that is causally brought into existence.
One way of conceiving of this situation is to argue that because absences are

just language-based constructions, nothing perishes at all. There is simply a

transformation of the window into shards, but nothing has ceased to exist. We

merely label the transformed object in a new way. Alternatively, even if some x

did really go out of existence (rather than being transformed into something

else), what the cause has brought about is the total state of affairs that does not include x, or alternatively, the last moment in the succession of moments that constitutes x.[136] In neither case has a non-existent object played a part in a causal chain.

If we hold on to the assumptions that things really perish, the second possibility, that everything eventually self-destructs without any need for outside influence, is the one to follow. This self-destruction could happen after a period of time, or immediately after the object comes into existence. Again, the first possibility seems more plausible. Here each individual object is treated like an individual clock that keeps on ticking as long as energy is provided by its coiled spring, but once this is exhausted the clock stops. For each thing there is an internal process such that once this has run its course, the thing goes out of existence. But there is a difficulty with trying to apply this horological imagery to the Abhidharma's fundamental dharmas. This is the third premise required for the argument, namely that dharmas do not change.

For their internal change could neither be understood in terms of the inter-action of its internal parts (because dharmas have no parts), nor could it be conceived of as a successive gaining and losing of properties. For any thing that gains and loses properties must be ontologically complex, consisting at least of one individual and one property, and dharmas are not supposed to be objects of this kind. Vasubandhu spells out his argument against change at the

Criticism of
fundamental level in the context of his criticism of the Sā
Sā

:mkhya theory of
:mkhya
transformation (parin:āma). The picture under discussion here is one in which

[135] Bareau 2013: 208, Kritzer 2003a: 206.
[136] See von Rospatt 1995: 185, and, more generally, section II.D; Gold 2015a: 10 9.

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there is a set of unchanging background entities which gain and lose properties,

just like a banana loses its green colour and acquires a yellow one. Yet if this

background entity is linked by instantiation relations to these properties, the

same background entity would first have the property of 'instantiating property

x' and then the property of 'instantiating a different property y', and thus

would change. But if the background entity does not change, and is completely

untouched by the changing set of properties, it does not seem to play any

ontological role at all. For all we know it might as well not be there, and then

the question arises what motivation is still left for postulating such a back-
ground. It simply does not seem possible to link up unchanging entities with

entities that do change.[137]
But in this case, and if dharmas cannot change, we have no choice but to

pick the other alternative, namely that the destruction is a result of a thing's

inner nature, and that this destruction happens immediately once the thing is

produced, since there is no ontological space for any mechanism that could be

the cause of a delay.

Within the Buddhist philosophical tradition we can distinguish at least three Thre

kinds of arguments developed for establishing momentariness. We have just argu

momentariness
met the first, which we might call the argument from the spontaneity of

destruction. We will discuss the other two, an argument from the momentari-
ness of cognition and an argument from change, later on.[138] Forms of all three

arguments make their reappearances in different guises at different stages in

Buddhist philosophy.[139]
In accordance with the factors influencing the development of Buddhist

philosophy in India mentioned above, we can distinguish at least three major

reasons responsible for the popularity of the theory of momentariness in

Indian Buddhist philosophy, reasons based on argumentative, doctrinal, and

meditative considerations. Which of these is the most influential is difficult to

determine, though each plays an important role. We have just seen an example

of an important argument for momentariness, based on the notion of the

spontaneity of destruction. We will now consider the other two factors that

contributed to the prominence of the doctrine of momentariness.
Doctrinally, the theory of momentariness is underpinned by the Buddha's Doctrir

teaching of the 'three seals' that characterize all things: that all existence is for m

suffering, without self, and impermanent. Obviously impermanence has a more

comprehensive meaning than momentariness; that everything is impermanent

[137] See Gold 2015a: 30–1.
[138] Feldman and Phillips 2011: 17 distinguish four kinds. In our discussion we gr

call arguments from causal efficacy together with arguments from change.
[139] For a comprehensive discussion of the various forms these arguments can take

Rospatt 1995: 122–95.

is perfectly compatible with the view that objects persist for more than a

moment (everything may cease to exist after a minute, say). Yet the theory of

momentariness is one legitimate way of spelling out the impermanence of

all things.

Meditative factors

One of the motivations for spelling it out in precisely this way may well be

influencing the

based on the results of meditative practice. The idea is that specific meditative

theory of
momentariness

techniques based on refining the practitioner's capacity for attention (such as

the 'foundations of mindfulness', sm:rti-upasthāna), closely examining the

body, sensations, and other mental states involve being mindful of the arising

and ceasing of these states, and eventually lead to a realization of their

momentariness. In the Abhidharmakośabhā:sya Vasubandhu points out that

the foundation of mindfulness with respect to the body is realized once one

perceives the body as a conglomerate of atoms and a succession of moments.[140]

Soteriological

The result of this realization is the ability to free oneself from the unwholesome

implications of

emotional attitudes directed at the material objects, sensations, and mental

realizing
momentariness
states that are responsible for our continued existence in sa :msāra. In his

:

commentary on the Mahāyānasūtrālankāra Vasubandhu makes this point

explicitly: when meditators direct their attention at the arising and ceasing of

conditioned phenomena they perceive that they cease during every moment

and dissolve into momentary instances. Otherwise they would not feel disen-
chantment, would not be free from defilements and obtain liberation, like

ordinary beings who also experience cessation, as in the case of death (without

being thereby freed from defilements).[141] When the momentariness of all

dharmas is realized at the experiential level, Vasubandhu argues, the basis for

developing attachment and aversion towards conglomerates of these dharmas

ceases, as there is nothing staying around long enough to get attached to it, a

consequence that does not follow if we simply realize the impermanence of

things at a coarser level (such as the fact that everybody must die). Schmithau-
sen[142] suggests that the consideration of these meditative experiences might

have led to understanding the general claim of impermanence we find in the

second seal in terms of the more radical idea of universal momentariness. This

may be motivated by the attempt to establish an ontological basis for a

meditative practices that are considered to be soteriologically efficacious. The

thought is that if the fact that the meditator perceives all dharmas as split up

into rapidly succeeding moments allows him to free himself from defilements,

this must be because this realization allows him to see the world as it really is.
[140] sāmāhitasya kila kāya :m paramān:uśah: k:san:ikataśca paśyatah: kāyasm:rty

ni:spanna :m bhavati, Pradhan 1975: 341:14–15, Poussin and Pruden 1988–
90: 3. 926.
[141] manaskāren:a ca yoginā :m | te hi sa :mskārān:ām udayavyayau manasikurvar

te:sā :m nirodha :m paśyanti | anyathā hi te:sām api nirvidvirāgavimuktayo na sy

maran:akālādi:su nirodha :m paśyantā :m, Lévi 1907: 150: 3–5.
[142] Schmithausen 1973: 197.

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The realization of momentariness is not a form of therapeutically useful make-
belief that alleviates our emotional entanglement with the world, but an

understanding of how the world works at a deep level that is usually hidden

from ordinary beings.
Precisely because the realization of momentariness is only available to Belief vs.
practitioners after long meditative training, Buddhist philosophers have also reali:

come up with arguments to convince those without access to such direct

experience of the claim that the entire world consists of a sequence of

moments. Nevertheless, even if successful, all these arguments can hope to

accomplish is establishing that the theory of momentariness is true. They do

not generate an insight into it at the experiential level (in the same way in

which our belief that a film in a cinema consists of quickly succeeding still

frames does not allow us to see the frames), and it is only the insight at the

experiential level that is deemed soteriologically efficacious.

The theory of momentariness has immediate consequences for the Sautrān-

Theory of

tika's account of perception. Perception appears to require temporally perception

extended objects, and the argument just given seems to show that there are

no such things. Perception takes place in time, and so the earliest a perception

of any dharma at moment t can arise is at the moment after t. At the moment

after t, however, the dharma has already passed out of existence. Yet when we

perceive something, we presumably perceive something that exists. The Sar-
vāstivāda solved this issue by their assumption that the past object, though Percei
currently not efficacious, still exists. The Sautrāntikas, on the other hand, existent

accepted that we can perceive non-existent objects, such as past or future

entities.[143] Their disagreement with Sarvāstivāda lies primarily in their view

of whether there needs to exist a separate object-support condition (ālambana-
pratyaya) for every perception, something the Sarvāstivāda affirms and the

Sautrāntika denies. The basic idea behind the Sautrāntika account is that at one

mental moment, t, an object is grasped, though no knowledge of the object is

produced.[144] This moment t then causes its successor moment, t', which

produces an inferential knowledge of the object that was grasped at t.[145] At t'
the object-support condition no longer exists, and this object-support condi-
tion is also not what is causally responsible for t', which is rather brought about

by the immediately preceding condition (samanantara-
pratyaya) t.[146] The The ākāra and its

knowledge of the external object at t' appears under an aspect or form functions

(ākāra). This aspect can be understood both as a specific way of apprehending

[143] The Dār:s:tāntikas also subsume the cognition of illusory objects, such as the

a whirling firebrand, of objects perceived in meditation, dreams, magical creation
dictory objects like the son of a barren woman amongst perceptions based on non
existent objects

(Cox 1988: 49).
[144] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007b: 245–72.
[145] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007a: 158–2.
[146] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007b: 248.

an object, and as an entity corresponding to the object so apprehended.[147] This

ākāra fulfils various theoretical functions. One is to tell apart different

instances of knowledge,[148] given that they cannot be differentiated by the

external objects they are knowledge of, as these objects no longer exist. Since

all knowledge-episodes are without object-support condition, their respective

ākāra allows us to differentiate one from the other. In addition, the ākāra can

play a role in distinguishing perceptions of non-existent objects that we

intuitively consider as veridical (such as that of a momentary phenomenon

like a vase, that has already passed out of existence when we acquire knowledge

of it) from those that we do not (such as a mirage). In neither case is there an

object-support condition, but in the latter case, as there was never an object in

the first place, the ākāra cannot resemble it, whereas it does so in the former.[149]
Perceiving past
When past and future objects are cognized, Vasubandhu argues in the

and future

Abhidharmakośabhā:sya, even though the object-support (ālambana) of their

cognition no longer exists (or does not yet exist), a past or future phenomenon

'is in the way in which it is an object', characterized as having existed in the

past, or as going to exist in the future.[150] Thus characterized, the cognition

resembles the way the objects existed in the past, thereby supporting the

accuracy of such perceptions without object-support from equally objectless

illusory perceptions.[151] In this way, when we perceive a past object our per-
ception is directed at the recollection of this object as having existed; when we

perceive a future object it is the anticipation of it as going to exist. We do not

have to assume that the object itself exists at the time of the perception.[152]
Sautrāntika view
The ability to perceive non-existent entities is important for Sautrāntika

of nirvā :na
epistemology, not only in order to explain how we can meaningfully refer to

past and future, but also to show how we could be in epistemic contact with

other absences, such as nirvā :na. The Sautrāntikas, in disagreement with the

Sarvāstivāda and the Sthaviravada, held that nirvā :na, being a mere absence

(abhāva), is not a fundamentally existent thing (dravya).[153] In this respect nirvā :n

is comparable to space, another absence from resistance (saprathigadravya) that

[147] Kellner 2014: 289.
[148] Krishnamacharya 1942: 26–7.
[149] '[T]he Sautrāntika notion is that the ākāra corresponds exactly to the external

allows no possibility of a cognitive error in a genuine pratyaksa experience' (Bhil

‒

2007b: 254).

150 yadā tad ālambana :m tathā asti katha :m tad ālambanam abhūt bhavi:syati cet

299:25, Poussin and Pruden 1988–90: 3. 815.
151 Cox 1988: 66–
7. From this perspective the Sarvāstivāda account of the continuing existence

of past objects would be problematic, since we might then assume that we experi

as presently existent, which we do not.
152 The Sautrāntika's opponents object at this point by arguing that rather than pe

non-
existent, what we are dealing with here is the misperception of an existent, namel

phenomenon, that is mistakenly considered to be something non-
mental (Cox 1988: 67). See also

Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007b: 255.
153 Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007a: 472, 478.

ABHIDHARMA

allows things to move, insofar as nirvā :na denotes freedom from karmic potentia

to act, and freedom from the necessity of rebirth.154 The Sautrāntikas refer to the

conceptualization of nirvā :na as the 'blowing out' of a flame, pointing out that as

flame gone out fails have ontological status, so does liberation.155 This obviously

leads to the question how we can have any knowledge of nirvā :na, especially as

cannot exert any causal influence on our perceptual system, because absences

have no causal powers. As such, a theory of perception that can explain epistemic

contact with non-existent entities is required for the Sautrāntikas.

Like all Buddhist schools, the Sautrāntikas needed a way of accounting for Menta

karmic continuity. For this they introduce the concept of a 'support' (āśraya), and

which is the series of physical and psychological moments that make up the

person.[156] Even though each moment is very short-lived, individual moments

can be 'perfumed' (to use the metaphor given) by a trace (vāsanā) of the

wholesome or unwholesome character of the action. This karmic scent is

then passed on to the moment's successor-moment, which passes it on to its

successor, until it finally brings about its karmic fruit at a later time,[157] all

moments constituting a continuity of 'subtle mind' (sūk:smacitta) that under-
lies the working of karmic causality.[158] Some of the wholesome seeds in a

persons's mind-stream continue to abide and cannot be destroyed; they will,

instead, give rise to further wholesome dharmas.[159] This idea can be seen as

prefiguring a notion that would later become much more prominent in the

Mahāyāna, namely the theory of the Buddha-nature, an indestructible,

undefiled essence present in each mental stream which, though presently

hidden, would be uncovered through progress on the Buddhist path.
The positions we have described above seem to bear some considerable Similariti

similarity with ideas that are later elaborated in greater detail in Yogācāra.[160] betv

Sautrāntika and
Yogācāra
[154] Bareau 2013: 206. See Conze (1962: section III.3.1) for a comparison of the c
tions of nirvā :na and of space in early Buddhism.
[155] Kritzer (2003a: 206) notes the tendency that in Sautrāntika and Dār:s:tāntika '

entities that are said by Sarvāstivāda to be real are reduced in status to mere desig

(prajñapti)'.
[156] Yogācāra writers used the term 'transformation of the substratum' (āśraya-parāv:rtti) to

describe the process of awakening as the removal of the unwholesome potentials

mental continuum. See p. 188 below.
[157] Conze 1962: 141–3, Bareau 2013: 206.
[158] Bareau 2013: 209; Warder 2000: 400. Warder notes that most schools of Abhi

assumed the existence of some form of a series of moments of consciousness. Ap

necessity of explaining karmic connections, another problem Buddhist accounts r

the continuity of consciousness after periods of deep meditative absorption, and i

Dār:s:tāntikas appealed to the notion of subtle consciousness in this respect (Krit:
[159] 'Both Sautrāntikas and Yogācārins maintain that some innate wholesome dhar

be annihilated; they remain in the form of "seeds" intact in the "continuity", and i

dharmas will arise from them under favourable conditions' (Conze 1962: 133. Se

246–7).
[160] See Kritzer 200a3: 207.

 THE GOLDEN AGE OF INDIAN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY
The representationalist position resulting from the Sautrāntika theory of

momentariness can be naturally extended into an idealist position if we are

able to argue (as Yogācārins indeed did later) that our perception of the world

can be accounted for just in terms of these representations, without postulating

a distinct level of represented objects as well. If we can perceive non-existent

objects, it is far easier to understand how it can appear to us that we are living

in a world of material objects, even though there are no such things. The

Sautrāntika conception of mental continuity can be seen as being developed

into a theory of foundational consciousness along Yogācāra lines, and the

notion of permanent, wholesome factors within mental continua has obvious

affinities with tathāgatagarbha theory.

Yogācāra as
All of this would make it appear as if there is a line of ideas beginning when

continuation of
the Sautrāntika split off from the Sarvāstivāda, a line which is then later taken

Sautrāntika?
up by Vasubandhu and used to criticize the Sarvāstivāda position in the

Abhidharmakośabhā:sya, acts as a seed for various Yogācāra ideas, and is

:
later incorporated into the systems of Dinnāga and Dharmakīrti, systems

which have at least a strong affinity to Yogācāra.

There are, however, good reasons to be sceptical about this supposed

germination of Yogācāra from Sautrāntika. The main difficulty is that we do

not have a clear conception of the kind of Sautrāntika that is supposed to have

preceded Vasubandhu. As Walser[161] points out, they 'left no physical trace of

themselves—no inscriptions, no cache of manuscripts, nothing to locate them

either geographically or physically'. Most of the information we have about

Sautrāntika beliefs stems from Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhā:sya. Did he

accurately report their positions? Lacking the original documents to compare

Vasubandhu's position with, it is impossible to tell. It has been suggested

recently that Vasubandhu, rather than endorsing the Sautrāntika position

when composing the Abhidharmakośabhā:sya, was in fact already a Yogā-
cārin.[162] This argument is based mainly on the fact that a considerable amount

of the Sautrāntika positions (or positions very much like them) that Vasu-
bandhu puts forward against the Sarvāstivāda can already be found in the

Yogācārabhūmi, an earlier Yogācāra treatise. If this argument is accepted, an

alternative to the 'germination' model mentioned above suggests itself. If

Sautrāntika as
Vasubandhu explains the Sautrāntika position while in fact holding Yogācāra

bridging
positions, it is likely that he did so with two goals in mind. The first is to show

Abhidharma and
Mahāyāna
that certain positions that are very much like Yogācāra positions have a strong

basis in non-Mahāyāna scriptures. The orthodoxy of these views can then be

underlined by their support from the earliest Buddhist sources. Referring to

[161] Walser 2005: 229.
[162] Kritzer 1999, 2003b. For some criticism of Kritzer's position see Bhikkhu Dha
2007b: 2.

this position as Sautrāntika ('followers of the sūtras') helps to make this

message even more explicit: the views under consideration are not Mahāyāna

distortions but are well entrenched even in a non-Mahāyāna context. Second,

the Yogācāra views could consequently be regarded as merely spelling out what

is already said more or less implicitly in the sūtra-based ('Sautrāntika') posi-
tions. The Sautrāntika position described by Vasubandhu would therefore have

functioned as a philosophical bridge between non-Mahāyāna and Mahāyāna

positions, linking back to the authority of the Buddha's discourses (as opposed

to the Abhidharmic treatises), and looking towards the Mahāyāna elaboration

of the concepts it already contains in nuce.
As we have noted above, the development of Buddhist philosophy is not just

determined by the desire to develop better arguments than one's opponents,

but it is also requires one to make the case that the conclusions argued for agree

with what the Buddha actually wanted to say. As such, Vasubandhu's con-
structing Sautrāntika as a means to support the authority of Yogācāra as a

teaching endorsed by the Buddha would appear to be a sensible move to make

by a thinker defending a Mahāyāna position against its non-Mahāyāna crit-
ics.[163] An immediate consequence of this position is that the similarity of

Sautrāntika and Yogācāra positions would lose much of its interest, as it

would seem that the former was described precisely in such a way to make it

resemble the latter. Moreover, there is very little we can say about Sautrāntika

as an Abhidharma school if the main source we have for information on their

views has been composed with an agenda in mind that the early Sautrāntikas

would not have shared.
[163] The same attempt has been attributed to Nāgārjuna, who has been argued to ha

his Madhyamaka arguments in a way that stress their similarities with one Abhidl

over others. Again, the objective would have been to improve the chances of non-mainstream,

Mahāyāna views being passed on by pointing out that they move argumentatively

direction as mainstream, non-
Mahāyāna views. For more details see Chapter 2, section 00.

2
Madhyamaka

1. The Rise of the Mahāyāna and Its Relation to Buddhist Philosophy

Mahāyāna: new
The most important development in Buddhism during the period we are

developments
considering here was the rise of the Mahāyāna. The Mahāyāna movement

brought with it an enormous amount of new (or, as the Mahāyāna would put it:

previously unknown) sūtras, a new spiritual ideal (that of the bodhisattva,

considered as a superior aspiration than the quest for arhatship), and, it would

appear, exciting new philosophical developments. A key distinction between

the Abhidharma on the one hand and Madhyamaka and Yogācāra on the other

is that they are commonly associated with different kinds of Buddhism: the last

two are philosophical schools of the Mahāyāna, while the Abhidharma phil-
osophy belongs to what is pejoratively called the 'Hīnayāna' ('little vehicle'),

and more neutrally, the Śrāvakayāna.
The history of the beginning of the Mahāyāna and the causes that led to its

development are still quite unclear.[1] There is some consensus, however, on

What the

what the Mahāyāna was not. It was not a lay movement[2] that tried to shift the

Mahāyāna
balance of power away from the monks and nuns, nor a group of stūpa

was not
worshippers,[3] nor was it the result of a doctrinal schism between different

Buddhist schools,[4] along the lines of the split between Roman Catholicism and

Protestantism. The majority of the Mahāyāna's early supporters (when it

achieved more widespread support towards the middle of the first millennium

CE, several centuries after its inception) were monastics.[5] Stūpa worship was

not confined to the Mahāyāna,[6] and the notion of a split of the monastic

community on doctrinal grounds is quite alien to Buddhism; traditionally such

splits took place because of a difference about which monastic rules a given

community should follow. This is not too surprising, given that a difference

about which rules to adopt can be highly disruptive to the functioning of a

[1] For a survey of recent scholarship on the matter see Drewes 2010, 55–65, 66–74.
[2] This position is particularly associated with Przyluski 1934, Lamotte 1954, and
[3] Hirakawa 1963.
[4] Silk: 2002: 355–405.
[5] Schopen 1997: 31–2.
[6] Sasaki 1999: 191–3; Schopen 2005.

monastic group, while the beliefs of an individual monk about what he is doing

when he is practising meditation tend not to be.

The difficulty of connecting the early Mahāyāna with any kind of histor-
Mahāyāna as a

ical or archaeological evidence have led some to argue that it was a purely textual

textual movement, with a focus on the exposition and transmission of the

revealed Mahāyāna sūtras, without developing alternatives to the social and

institutional framework of Buddhism at the time.[7] This accounts well for

the profusion of Mahāyāna sūtras we see in the development of Indian

Buddhism, a profusion based on a kind of continuous revelation of the

Buddha's teaching, with the emergence of texts that are regarded as authori-
tative even though they may not have been taught by the Buddha during his

life on earth.[8] The surprising amount of textual documents the Mahāyāna

produced may by itself seem to justify a conception of it as a 'cult of the

book'[9] (or, more precisely, if less concisely) a collection of different cults of

different books.

Insofar as it is possible to identify unifying conceptual features underlying An alt
the vast corpus of Mahāyāna sūtras, one prominent feature is a different vision vi:
Buddha
of what the Buddha is. The Buddha is considered as not having completely

disappeared after his parinirvāṇa, but as in some sense still present and helping

beings to achieve enlightenment. This idea of the Buddha as an enlightened

being perpetually acting out of his great compassion began to be considered as

an ideal to be emulated, and as preferable to that of an arhat,[10] and linked up

with an interest in the previous existences of the Buddha as a bodhisattva, or

Buddha-to-be. The previous lives are recorded in the jātaka stories, which

describe the future Buddha as helping other beings out of his great compassion,

often by giving up his own life. With this came an intention to follow the ideal

of the bodhisattva to become, in due course, a compassionate enlightened

[7] Drewes 2007: 101–43.

[8] The way the status of these texts as buddhavacana is assured differs. Some of th

have been taught by the Buddha during his earthly life, but given to a group of bo

safekeeping, who, after a stay in some divine realm, brought the texts back to ear

1990). Sometimes the sūtra will present itself has having been taught in such a di

first instance (see Powers 2004: 106). Sometimes Buddhas will appear to the prac

meditative absorption; when emerging from meditation he will then propagate an

teachings (Harrison 1978: 43, 52–4).

[9] Schopen 2005.

[10] From a relatively early stage in the development of Buddhism a distinction is d

the enlightenment of the Buddha and that of his disciples, the arhats. A Buddha is

having specific powers that an arhat lacks, such as omniscience (Weber 1994; Jai

addition, the Mahāyāna holds that the achievement of the arhat falls short of that

insofar as the former has only overcome the afflictive obstructions (kleśāvaraṇa)

subtle cognitive obstructions (jñeyāvaraṇa) connected with the fundamental misap

the nature of reality. The Mahāyāna did not reject the ideal of the arhat but presen

swift path to a loftier goal, Buddhahood, though this path is one that could also be

pursuing the more limited goal of an arhat (see Harrison 1987).

being like the Buddha himself.[11] This changed conception of the Buddha might

be considered as a source for the prominence of the bodhisattva ideal in

Mahāyāna, the emphasis on the quality of compassion, and also the profusion

of Mahāyāna texts. An important difference between Buddhas and arhats is

that the former were taken to be omniscient, and as Buddhas-to be the

bodhisattvas could therefore be expected to require more knowledge than the

arhats. This additional knowledge was helpfully supplied by the newly emer-
ging sūtras specifically aimed at the needs of bodhisattvas.

Connection
However, so far it is not clear what the connection between Mahāyāna and the

between
philosophical developments of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra was. Even though it

Mahāyāna,
Madhyamaka, and has been argued by some scholars that the connection is rather
Yogācāra
tioning whether Nāgārjuna was a Mahāyānist at all, and pointing out that the

difference between Mahāyāna and 'Hīnayāna' thought cannot have been that

great if a school like that of Dinˈnāga and Dharmakīrti could actually be describe

as combining both in a form of 'Yogācāra-Sautrāntika', the historical connection

between Mahāyāna and the schools of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra is too obvious

to deny. What is worthwhile investigating, though, is whether the connection is

more than a historical accident. Was the Mahāyāna simply a religious develop-
ment that became associated with specific thinkers and their schools, without

having much of an influence on their philosophy,[12] or is there a more fundamenta

connection between Mahāyāna ideas and those later developed in Madhyamaka

and Yogācāra texts? Does the Mahāyāna have any specific philosophical ramifi-
cations apart from its religious, doctrinal, and soteriological consequences?
Philosophical
In fact, the changing view of the Buddha in Mahāyāna texts just mentioned

consequences of
is a particular case of a widening of the Buddhist vision of the world we find in

the Mahāyāna
view
these sūtras: a more comprehensive soteriological goal, more extensive cosmo-
logical accounts, including 'celestial' Buddhas residing in pure lands, a wider

corpus of teachings to be considered as the Buddha's word, describing sets of

new, powerful practices.
This extended vision incorporated the pre-Mahāyāna view of the Buddhist

path; in particular, it subsumed and endorsed the ideas of the śrāvaka and the

pratyekabuddha.[13] Yet in order to present the conceptions that preceded it as

[11] Williams 2009: 20.
[12] Snellgrove (1987: 90) believes there to be no systematic connection between th

emptiness, the Mahāyāna bodhisattva ideal and the Mahāyāna emphasis on comp

the combination of these two teachings, the Bodhisattva ideal and the emptiness c

probably come about in these texts quite fortuitously without any immediate awa

that so extreme a philosophical view might have upon what is probably the highes

aspiration to be found anywhere in this imperfect world.' Bronkhorst (2009: 118)

the main conceptual innovations behind Madhyamaka and Yogācāra 'had nothing

[i.e. Mahāyāna's] main aspirations'.

[13] Śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas are distinguished by the way they reach the goal

(the śrāvakas by relying on a teacher, the pratyekabuddhas without doing so in the

special cases to be included in the wider compass of the Mahāyāna, it was De-
ontologizing

necessary to de-
ontologize them. Both the ordinary, unenlightened conception of reality

of the world, as well as the theory of dharmas that formed part of the

Abhidharma and claimed to describe the ultimate truth about how things

exist at the ultimate level, had to be considered as lacking fundamental reality,

as fundamentally illusory, though of pragmatic and instrumental value, in

order to be able to conceive of them not as conflicting with, but as forming a

part of the Mahāyāna vision. The development of a more comprehensive view

of the Buddhist world could not consider the more restricted and sometimes

contradictory pre-Mahāyāna conception as a complete and ultimately true

account, but could only incorporate it as true 'in a manner of speaking'. The

world as it appears and the world as early Buddhist dharma theory analysed

it had to be regarded as a mere illusory reality, in order to be regarded as a

reality at all.
It is this broadly illusionistic view of the world, I would argue, that forms the Illu

best point of connection between the Mahāyāna sūtras and the philosophical cons

link
developments of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra.[14] To be sure, early illusionistic

views exist in Buddhism outside of Mahāyāna sūtras,[15] and there is much more

to the extremely complex philosophical systems of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra

than simply the idea that the world is just like a magic show.[16] Yet if we ask

ourselves which ideas from the Mahāyāna sūtras these philosophical texts

developed, and which they in turn referred to in order to back up their

philosophical perspective by texts considered to be the Buddha's words,

the illusionistic view of the world occupies a prominent place. In addition to

the possible conceptual reason for the arising of this view just mentioned, the Illu

illusionistic view may have a foundation in the meditative practices of early medi

practice
Mahāyānists. While the theory that the entire Mahāyāna arose as the reflection

of meditative practices of contemplative ascetics is unlikely to be true,[17] we

have textual evidence for meditative exercises supposed to bring about the

perception of the Buddha as present in this very world. The Pratyutpanna-
buddha-sa :mmukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra, a Mahāyāna text from the second

century CE or earlier, teaches a form of meditation (samādhi) enabling the

instead contemplating the principle of dependent origination). Morevover, pratye

not teach other beings about their attainments, whence their name 'individually e[...]
[14] A very similar point has already been made by Bronkhorst (2009: 122–3).
[15] See e.g. p. 46 above.
[16] It is certainly the case that the bodhisattva ideal, the development of compassi[...]

are not the first things that come to mind when considering what the central new [...]

Madhyamaka and Yogācāra are. The point suggested above, however, is that the [...]

view of the world, like the ethical views revolving around the bodhisattva ideal, c[...]

as resulting from the enlarged vision of what the Buddha is, while also playing a [...]

philosophical visions developed by Madhyamaka and Yogācāra.
[17] Drewes 2010: 61–2.

practitioner to stand face-to-face (sa :mmukhāvasthita) with the present

(pratyutpanna) Buddha. After completing a set of meditative exercises, the

meditating bodhisattva:
does not see the Tathāgata through obtaining the divine eye; he does not hear the [...]

dharma through obtaining the range of the divine ear; nor does he go to that worl[...]
system in an instant through obtaining magical powers—
Bhadrapāla, while remaining

in this very world-
system that bodhisattva sees the Lord, the Tathāgata Amitāyus, and

conceiving himself to be in that world-system he also hears the dharma.[18]
Sight of the
The text makes clear that the sight of the Buddha in this case is not due to

Buddha in the
worldly epistemic super-
powers such as the 'divine eye' (divyacak:su:h) allowing

present world
one to see things very far away, or through magical travel to a distant world to

observe the Buddha there. It then becomes an intriguing question what the

nature of these Buddhas—on the one hand present in this world, on the other,

disappearing when the practitioner leaves meditative absorption—actually is.
The sūtra clarifies this as follows:
Having thought: 'Did these Tathāgatas come from somewhere? Did I go anywher

understands that those Tathāgatas did not come from anywhere. Having compreh

that his own body did not go anywhere either, he thinks: 'These triple worlds are

mind. Why? Because however I mentally construct things, so they appear'.[19]
The world as
The illusionistic position that things are not as they appear (but, in this case,

mentally
possess a very different, mentally constructed reality) appears to arise here in

constructed
order to make sense of specific meditative experiences. In order to account for

the meditator's experiences of the Buddha as actually present in the world, it is

necessary to regard the ordinary perception of the world, post-meditative

experience, and even the meditatively trained perception of the world of the

Abhidharma practititioner according to which the Buddha is not present in

this world, as unable to undermine meditative experience, simply because these

former two kinds of perception are not grounded in the way the world really is.
These ways of viewing the world (which are the ways the world appears to most

[18] lha'i mig thob pas de bzhin gshegs pa mthong ba yang ma yin | lha'i rna ba'i kl

dam pa'i chos nyan pa yang ma yin | rdzu 'phrul gyi stobs thob pas 'jig rten gyi k

'gro ba yang ma yin gyi | bzang skyong | byang chub sems dpa' de 'jig rten gyi kl

bzhin du | bcom ldan 'das de bzhin gshegs pa tshe dpag med de mthong zhing bd

khams de na 'dug ba snyam du shes la | chos kyang nyan to, Harrison 1978: 43. N

though this passage refers the Buddha Amitāyus, a form of the 'celestial' Buddha

passages of the same sūtra make it clear that any Buddha can be the object of this

exercise.
[19] de 'di snyam du | de bzhin gshegs pa 'di ga zhig nas byon tam || bdag ga zhing
snyam pa las des de bzhin gshegs pa de gang nas kyang ma byon par rab tu shes s

gang du yang ma song bar rab tu 'du shes nas | de 'di snyam du | khams gsum pa

mo || de ci'i phyir zhe na | 'di ltar bdag ji lta ji ltar nram par rtog pa de lta de ltar s

1978: 46.

people most of the time) are grounded in illusion and have no implications for

what exists. The illusionistic worldview therefore coheres naturally with the

way the world would be conceived by a practitioner of the kind of early

Mahāyāna meditative exercises described in this sūtra.
Having now considered a possible conceptual connection point between the

Mahāyāna and the subsequent developments in Buddhist philosophy in India,

we are ready to turn to the first of its two main schools: Madhyamaka.
2. The Madhyamaka School
The Madhyamaka school is one of the most puzzling (and most intriguing)

branches of Buddhist philosophy. On the basis of a casual acquaintance with

Madhyamaka texts it is far from clear what precisely their doctrine amounts to.

David Ruegg has put this well by pointing out that it
has been variously described as nihilism, monism, irrationalism, misology, agnos

skepticism, criticism, dialectic, mysticism, acosmism, absolutism, relativism, non
ism, and linguistic analysis with therapeutic value.[20]
Since the day these lines have been written numerous other -isms, such as

deconstructivism, dialetheism, and ontological non-foundationalism, have

enlarged the menu of interpretative options even further.
In fact our puzzlement with Madhyamaka is likely to begin already with the Nāga

biography of its founder. We know that the school was founded by Nāgārjuna,

an Indian monk and philosopher, and one of the two or three greatest thinkers

that Indian intellectual history has produced. It is only exaggerating slightly to

say that this is already where our certainties end. When it comes to Nāgārjuna

we are unclear about when he lived, where in India he spent most of his time,

what texts he composed, and even how many Nāgārjunas there were in the

first place.
Nāgārjuna's biography is transmitted to us in a variety of accounts that The proph

abound with hagiographical detail. But Nāgārjuna has entered the history of

Buddhist thought even before we get to these biographies. If we follow trad-
itional Buddhist accounts, the arising of the Madhyamaka school was no

historical accident, but a development already predicted by the historical

Buddha Śakyamuni. Nāgārjuna (referred to just as Nāga) is mentioned at

various places in the Mahāyāna sūtras and tantras.[21] The most famous of

these is a prophecy in the Laṅkāvatārasūtra.[22] Addressing the bodhisattva

Mañjuśrī, the Buddha declares that:

[20] Ruegg 1981: 2.
[21] Walser 2005: 66, 71–3.
[22] Though it is not contained in the earliest version of this sūtra: see Walser 2005,

In Vedalī, in the southern part, there will be a monk widely known as Śrīmān, wh

be called Nāga. Destroying the positions of existence and non-
existence he will teach my

vehicle, the unsurpassed Mahāyāna to the world. He will attain the stage called m
['joyful', the first Bodhisattva ground] and will pass on to the pure realm of Sukh
Other scriptures add detail to this, such as that Nāgārjuna is going to be born

400 years after the death of the historical Buddha, or that he will live for

600 years, but what makes this prophecy particularly interesting is that it says

Nāgārjuna will achieve the first Bodhisattva ground (bhūmi).[24] This achieve-
ment requires realization of emptiness. It ensures that Nāgārjuna not only

knows what he is talking about, but has realized it directly.

The biography

The majority of details of Nāgārjuna's life are transmitted to us in a variety

of colourful accounts from later writers such as Kumārajīva, Bu ston, and

Tāranātha, accounts that exhibit surprisingly little agreement with each other. Jan

Yün-Hua gives a succinct account of the common themes, and points out that:

he came from a Brahminical family, was well versed in magic power, and had a r

life when he was young. After renouncing his worldly life and being initiated into

Buddhist Saṅgha, he studied Mahāyāna texts on the Snow Mountain, went to an

obtained more important Mahāyāna scriptures from the palace of the Nāgas unde

the sea, and won the mind and support of the king of Sātavāhana dynasty. These s

also say that he settled in South India until the last days of his life. He had a long

lasting several hundred years.[25]
Some of these points merit further comment. The 'romantic life' refers to a

period in Nāgārjuna's pre-monastic days reported in Kumārajīva's account and

connects with a dominant theme in his biographies, his mastery of magical

powers. Nāgārjuna and his friends are said to have procured an invisibility

potion and used it to enter into the royal harem unawares, to enjoy the

company of the royal consorts. The king finds out about this and is not

amused. He sets them a trap and observes the footprints the invisible men

leave in the sand, then sends in his soldiers to aim their swords at where their

heads would be. All are killed save for Nāgārjuna, who stands immediately

behind the king, out of reach of the swords. After this brush with death,

Nāgārjuna 'conceives a dislike of the idea of desire'[26] and becomes a monk.
Magical elements
The association with magical powers mentioned here plays an important

part in Nāgārjuna's biographies. He is, in fact, counted as one of the famous set

[23] dak:siṇāpathavedalyā :m bhik:su:h śrīmān mahāyaśā:h/
nāgāhvaya :h sa nāmnā tu sadasatpak:sadāraka:h//
prakāśya loke madyāna :m mahāyānamanuttaram/
āsādya bhūmi :m muditā :m yāsyate 'sau sukhāvatīm//
10:165–6, Vaidya 1963: 118, Suzuki 1932: 239–40.
[24] See also MacDonald 2015: 11–12, nn. 34–5.
[25] Yün-Hua 1970: 140–1.
[26] Walleser 1990: 28.

of eighty-four siddhas, Indian tantric masters renowned both for their spiritual

accomplishments and for their displays of magical powers. Magical elements

feature already at the very beginning of his life. Initially his life is predicted to

be very short; his parents therefore send him to study at the famous monastery

of Nālandā at the age of 7. There the abbot, Rāhulabhadra, is supposed to have

taught him to prolong his life by means of the recitation of mantras. Nāgārjuna

becomes highly proficient at tantric practice, achieving, amongst other things,

the elixir of long life.[27] According to Bu ston, Nāgārjuna managed to extend his

life for 600 years. Even after this period he did not die a natural death, but

allowed the son of a king to behead him—the king's and Nāgārjuna's lifespan

having somehow become linked through their respective longevity practices,

the prince was understandably concerned that he should never succeed his

father on the throne.
Some biographies describe Nāgārjuna as finding an elixir to make gold, a feat

he used in order provide food for the monastic community during a famine.
According to other accounts, Nāgārjuna is carried through a river by a cow-
herd. He creates an illusion of crocodiles that seem to attack them, and when

the cowherd has carried him across the river unperturbed, he grants him a

boon. The cowherd wants to be a king, and so Nāgārjuna turns him into one,

creating elephants, armies, and all kinds of other kingly possessions to go

with it. The king, called Śālābhanda, later becomes his disciple, and Nāgārjuna

composes the Ratnāvalī for him.[28]

The second important recurring motive in Nāgārjuna's life-stories men-

tioned above is already evident in his name: his association with the nāgas. Perfeͨ

His name is a compound of two nouns, nāga and arjuna. The nāgas are

mythological snake-like creatures[29] who live in palatial aquatic abodes, in an

underwater city called Bhogavatī (longs spyod can), under the earth or in

mountain caves. Nāgas are often depicted as beings that are half-snake, half-
man, with a human torso and a lower body in the form of a coiled snake,

and are renowned for their great beauty. They are guardians of tremendous

wealth (they are sometimes said to have a jewel embedded in their heads), wise,

and powerful.

Arjuna, Bu ston informs us, refers to someone 'who has procured worldly

power'. According Kumārajīva's account, however, the term is a name of a kind

of a tree, Nāgārjuna's mother having given birth to him under a tree.[30]

According to a third account, the second half of Nāgārjuna's name refers to

[27] Walleser 1990: 9.
[28] Dowman 1985: 115.
[29] A group of tribes from eastern Assam is also collectively referred to as nāgas.
[30] Walleser 1990: 30. As was Buddha Śākyamuni. The similarity of this 'second ̄

historical one is frequently stressed in traditional accounts. According to Tāranātʰ

adorned with the 32 auspicious signs that characterized the Buddha's physical bᴑ

1970: 110–
11). Nāgārjuna is also one of the few figures in Tibetan iconography (together wi

the Pāṇ :dava brother from the Mahābhārata known for his skills in archery,[31]
since Nāgārjuna is able to spread the Mahāyāna as securely as Arjuna shoots

his arrows.[32]
Be this as it may, Nāgārjuna's association with nāgas is of central importance

in the story of his life. His biographies speak of two ladies from the retinue of

the king of the nāgas listening to his teaching, filling the place with the scent of

sandalwood.[33] Nāgārjuna then travels to the palace of the nāga king under the

sea, a place overflowing with a variety of gems and jewels. Amongst these

valued possesions of the nāgas, the most important one is a rare treasure of

Buddhist scriptures, the Perfection of Wisdom (prajñāpāramitā) sūtras. These

are said to have been entrusted by the historical Buddha to the nāgas for

safekeeping. Their content is supposed to be so subtle that it may be easily

misunderstood. For this reason these scriptures must wait for their right

interpreter who can correctly explain their meaning. This interpreter is, of

course, Nāgārjuna, who brings the scriptures back to the human realm.
The Perfection of
The Perfection of Wisdom sūtras are a family of highly influential Buddhist

Wisdom sūtras
texts of varying lengths. Their length is usually indicated in their titles, so we

have texts like the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 verses, the Perfection of

Wisdom in 25,000 verses or even the Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 verses.
These kinds of titles might give rise to two misunderstandings. First, we might

think the texts are in verse, even though they are generally in prose. Neverthe-

Different lengths
less, their length is measured by how many units of thirty-two syllables (verses,

of these texts
or ślokas) they contain. The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 verses, for example,

is about 110,000 words long in English translation—about the length of the

book you are reading just now. The second mistaken impression we might have

is that the version in 100,000 verses, for example, contains four times as much

information as the 25,000-verse version, because it is four times as long. In fact

the longer versions of these sūtras differ from the shorter ones not so much by

including more information, but by spelling out lists in full that are only given

in part in the shorter versions.[34] The Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 verses

spells out the claim that 'x is emptiness, and emptiness itself is x' by going

through a long list of about 200 items one by one. The shorter versions provide

abbreviated forms of these lists, and sometimes only mention their first and

last elements.
Asanˑga, dGa' rab rdo rje, and Guru shakya seng ge, a manifestation of Padmasaɪ

depicted with the Buddha's protuberance (u:ṣṇī:sa) on the top of his head.
[31] MacDonald 2015: 2. 7, n. 13.
[32] Tsonawa 1985: 4.
[33] Walleser 1990: 10.
[34] Despite being very critical of Abhidharma ideas, the Perfection of Wisdom texɪ

fondness of lists (māt:rkā). For the understanding of later developments of the Peɪ

Wisdom literature it is worth keeping in mind that māt:rkā both means 'mother' a

according to Monier-
Williams, denote 'an epithet of certain diagrams written in characters to

MADHYAMAKA

As their name makes clear, the Perfection of Wisdom texts are sūtras; they Conte

begin with the customary words 'Thus I have heard', and purport to give an Perfe

Wisdom texts
account of discourses of the historical Buddha held in front of his disciples (such

Śāriputra) and an assembly of bodhisattvas. They describe the practices a bodhi-
sattva should follow in order to achieve enlightenment. A key element of these

practices is the development of the six perfections, generosity (dhāna), moral Prac

virtue (śīla), patience, (k:sānti), effort (vīrya), meditation (dhyāna), and wisdom b

(prajñā). Special prominence is given to the final perfection, the perfection of

wisdom; it is sometimes considered to include all the other perfections within it.
The conceptual core of this final perfection is the realization of emptiness, Empti

the understanding of the insubstantiality of all phenomena. Despite the fact

that the notion of emptiness is the dominant theme of the Perfection of

Wisdom texts, they do not present a great number of arguments for the

claim that everything is indeed empty, nor do they discuss potential objections.
It was Nāgārjuna's aim to provide a set of arguments in support of the claims of

the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras, to explicate their contents, and to demon-
strate their philosophical feasibility.
The composition (or at least the scripturalization) of the Perfection of Developme

Wisdom texts is characterized by a process of textual expansion followed by of th

of Wisdom

textual abbreviation. We can divide the development of the Prajñāpāramitā literat

texts into four broad sections: the early phase, the phase of expansion, the

phase of contraction (each lasting about two centuries), and a final, tantric

phase.[35] The earliest phase (about 100 BCE to 100 CE) sees the appearance of the

earliest layer of the Prajñāpāramitā texts, a section of the Perfection of Wisdom

in 8,000 verses (A:s:tasahāsrikaprajñāpāramitā), which may go back as far as

100 BCE,[36] though the process of composition of the text is likely to have

extended over two centuries. This would date the writing down of the first

Mahāyāna texts to the same time as (or possibly earlier than) the scripturaliza-
tion of the Pāli canon.[37]
During the second phase (100 CE to 300 CE) the Perfection of Wisdom texts 2. T

expanded, resulting in such works as the Perfection of Wisdom in 18,000, expans

25,000, or 100,000[38] verses (there are even references to a version 125,000 verses

[35] This division follows Conze 1978: 1–16.
[36] Conze 1994. Even though there are no extant manuscripts of the Prajñāpāramit

back as far as this, a recently discovered manuscript of the Perfection of Wisdom

written on birch-bark in the Gāndhārī language can be dated to about 47–
147 CE (Falk and

Karashima 2011–12; Karashima 2012–
13). This manuscript itself appears to be a copy of an earlier

text, lending additional plausibility to Conze's assumption that the early Perfectic

texts pre-date the beginning of the Common Era.
[37] According to traditional accounts, the Pāli canon was scripturalized during the

Sri Lankan king Va:t:tagāmaṇī between 32 and 35 BCE (Gómez 2002: 59).

[38] This latter version was given to the nāgas for safekeeping, even though this is r

abbreviated version when compared to versions kept—according to Bu ston—
in other realms:

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in length)—all substantially the same text, but differing in the extent to which

repetitive lists are spelt out. During the same period commentarial works on

the Perfection of Wisdom texts started to be composed, most importantly a

gigantic commentary on the Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 verses, the

Mahāprajñāpāramitā-upadeśa-śāstra (大智度論), ascribed to Nāgārjuna,

which was translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva. The Sanskrit original, now

lost, is supposed to have been even longer (100,000 verses); Kumārajīva only

translated the first chapter in full, and provided abstracts of the remaining

eighty-nine.
3. The phase of
In the third phase (300–500 CE) the expansive tendency of the Perfection of

contraction
Wisdom literature is reversed. It is understandable that at this stage of its

development the Perfection of Wisdom literature became very hard to read: the

texts are difficult in themselves, and the enormous number of repetitions made

it difficult to keep the main points in focus. If we are to believe the famous

commentator Haribhadra, even scholars of the calibre of Asaṅga had difficul-
ties dealing with them, finding that they 'could no longer ascertain its meaning,

because of the great number of repetitions, their inability to distinguish the

different words and arguments, and its profundity'.[39] It is therefore hardly

surprising that various shorter versions made their appearance during this

phase. Two of these are amongst the most famous Buddhist texts: one is the

so-called 'Heart Sūtra' (Prajñāpāramitāh:rdayasūtra), a work that occupies an

important role in virtually all Mahāyāna traditions, the other the 'Diamond

Sūtra' (Vajracchedikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra). Both of these texts are quite short

(the English translation of the former fits easily on one or two pages), but the

abbreviation of the Prajñāpāramitā texts was taken to its extreme

in the shortest of all versions, the Perfection of Wisdom in One Letter

(Ekāk:sarāprajñāpāramitāsūtra). Subtracting the usual preamble and conclu-
sion it just consists of the letter A. This might appear a little bit less peculiar if

we take into account that the sound A is not only the first sound of the Sanskrit

syllabary, but can also be prefixed to nouns and adjectives to form their

negations. Given the emphasis of the Perfection of Wisdom texts on negating

various categories assumed by the Abhidharma, the idea of encapsulating

the essence of the Perfection of Wisdom in the word 'not' is not entirely

far-fetched.
Significance of
Even though the Perfection of Wisdom texts have a special affinity with

the texts for all
Madhyamaka, they are certainly not of exclusive interest to proponents of the

Mahāyāna schools Middle Way. Prajñāpāramitā texts continued to appear from al
through the entire history of Indian Buddhism up to its demise in the twelfth

a 10,000,000-
verse version in the realm of the king of the gods, and 1,000,000,000-
verse version in

the realm of the king of the gandharvas (Conze 1978: 18, n. 1).
[39] Conze 1955: 13.

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century, and have been studied, summarized, and commented upon by a

variety of authors from different Indian Mahāyāna schools. The most famous

of these is the Abhisamayāla :mkāra traditionally ascribed to Maitreyanātha,

Asanˑga's teacher. It is a 273-
verse table of contents of the Perfection of Wisdom

in 25,000 verses which has dominated the understanding of the text in India

and Tibet. Hybrid versions that inserted the divisions of the Abhisamayā-
la :mkāra into the Prajñāpāramitā text itself appeared around the fifth and

sixth centuries.
The Prajñāpāramitāsūtras form a thread that can be traced through

the entire development of Buddhist philosophy in India (and beyond). It

is no over-generalization to say that every Mahāyāna school of Buddhism

in India has in some way sought to explicate the Perfection of Wisdom

texts, attempting to show how their specific philosophical positions provide

the best explanation of the theory of emptiness that these texts set out.
All the great Yogācāra masters have composed commentaries on Perfection

of Wisdom texts; apart from Maitreyanātha's Abhisamayāla :mkāra, Asanˑga

wrote a commentary on the Diamond Sūtra (Vajracchedikaprajñāpārami-tāsūtra), Vasubandhu (at least according to the Tibetan tradition) composed

a commentary on the Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 verses, and Diṅnāga

wrote a summary of the principal topics discussed in the Perfection of

Wisdom in 8,000 verses, the Prajñāpāramitāpiṇ :dārthasa :mgraha. Unlike

other Mahāyāna sūtras that rose to prominence only within specific philo-
sophical schools, the Perfection of Wisdom texts are of universal significance

for the interpretation of any post-Abhidharma school of Buddhist thought

in India.
In the last phase of the development of the Perfection of Wisdom texts 4. The tan

(600
phase
CE–1200 CE) various works clearly inspired by tantric modes of thought

appeared. In these we find the attempt to reduce the essence of the Perfection of

Wisdom to a single mantra or spell. Such as attempt can already be found in

the Heart Sūtra, which encapsulates the text in the mantra of the Perfection of

Wisdom (gate gate pāragate pārasa :mgate bodhi svāhā). In some of these texts

we also find the Perfection of Wisdom personified, accompanied by specific

rituals for worshipping her. She is depicted in female form, usually with four

arms, the inner ones placed in the gesture of teaching the dharma, the outer

ones holding a book (the text of the Perfection of Wisdom itself) and a rosary

(for the repetition of her mantra).
After these brief remarks on the nature of the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras Multip

we can now return to Nāgārjuna's biography. We may wonder whether its Nāgārj

different elements do not pull in different directions. On the one hand there is

the alchemist and magician, on the other the monk and philosopher who

composes treatises to defend the Mahāyāna position. Modern Buddhologists

have been wondering this too, and have suggested that we may be dealing with

distinct persons living at different times who have all been labelled with the

same name.[40]

Nāgārjuna the philosopher

At least three Nāgārjunas have been distinguished in the literature. The first,

and the Nāgārjuna most frequently referred to, is the philosopher who lived

during the first and second centuries CE. He is also frequently connected with

the famous Buddhist university of Nālandā, though this association faces

certain difficulties.[41] We do not have evidence for Nālandā as a major monastic

establishment before the year 425 CE, a considerable time after the period

during which Nāgārjuna is supposed to have lived. Moreover, neither of the

Chinese pilgrims Xuanzang (玄奘), nor Yijing (義淨), both of whom spent

some time at Nālandā, refer to Nāgārjuna as a famous alumnus.[42]

Other Nāgārjunas

The second Nāgārjuna sometimes discussed is a tantric master who probably

lived around 400 CE,[43] and the third is an alchemist, probably to be dated

around the seventh century.[44] (We also occasionally find references to a fourth

Nāgārjuna, an author of medical works.)[45]

This division also leads to a breaking up of the set of over a hundred works

attributed to Nāgārjuna: all the philosophical works are considered to be

composed by the first Nāgārjuna, while the tantric and alchemical works are

taken to have been composed by the later ones. Traditional Buddhist narratives

see no particular difficulty in accounting for the fact that different parts of this

considerable number of works are likely to have been composed over the span

of several centuries, since they argue that Nāgārjuna's alchemistical experi-
ments allowed him to extend his lifespan up to 600 years.
Advantages of the
There are certain advantages to this theory of multiple Nāgārjunas, the chief

'multiple
one being that we can account for most of the motives in the various accounts

Nāgārjunas'
account
of Nāgārjuna's life without appealing to anything that would contradict

the standard twenty-first-century naturalistic worldview. However, we should

note the difficulties we see in traditional accounts of Nāgārjuna's life (the

reference to magical abilities, the long lifespan, the diversity of his literary

output, the confusion of times and spaces associated with his life) are very

much the product of a specific perspective chosen for looking at these accounts.
[40] At this point it is important to distinguish two claims. One is uncontroversial, r

over the course of Indian history many authors have answered to the name 'Nāgā

not mean that they were all operating under the pseudonym of the Madhyamaka r

their works claimed to be authored by him (see Walser 2005: 69). The other, mor

claim states that the different facets we find attributed to the Madhyamaka author

biographies (the philosophical, alchemical, medical, and tantric aspects) have to b

applying to different persons, not just to one.

[41] Note, however, the interesting connection with the nāgas: both the Buddhist un

Nālandā and Tak:saśīla are supposedly named after nāgas, the former after Nanda

Tak:saka. Walker 1968: 2. 107.

[42] Walser 2005: 78.

[43] Lindtner 1982: 11, n. 12.

[44] Walser 2005: 69, 75–9, Eliade 1969: 415–16.

[45] Winternitz 1968: 3. 547, 552–3.

As we have seen in the prophecy from the Lanˑkāvatārasūtra cited above, Cohere

Nāgārjuna is considered to have obtained the first bodhisattva ground. As the trad

made about
bodhisattva ascends the different grounds or levels of spiritual accomplish-
Nāgārjuna's life

ment, he acquires, in addition to the direct realization of emptiness that

characterizes reaching the first bodhisattva ground, different sets of abilities.
For the first ground these include the ability to live for 100 aeons, magically

generate 100 versions of his body, and to teach 100 kinds of teaching.[46] On

the basis of this assumption it becomes clear that the traditional biographies

of Nāgārjuna, including their descriptions of his various magical powers,

being able control his lifespan or the place of his birth, being able to work

miracles and so forth, are exactly the kinds of account one would expect.[47]

The fantastic, confused, or miraculous appearance of Nāgārjuna's traditional biography only arises if we consider him to have been an ordinary human being, and assume that there is an objective set of truths out there about what happened during the life of that human being. As we noted before, the difficulty with this approach is that it does not cohere with several of the central claims of Buddhist philosophy. We can, I argue, achieve a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of the history of Buddhist thought by provisionally bracketing our contradicting assumptions, rather than attempting to 'straighten out' traditional accounts on the basis of contemporary historiography.

The number of works attributed to Nāgārjuna is large (more than 100 Nāgārjunas according to the Tibetan canon), but not all of them play the same important work

Homer
role. They include not only the highly theoretical works Nāgārjuna is famous for, but also contain some extremely practical texts: the Dhūpayogaratnamālā preserved in the Tibetan canon, for example, contains a recipe for making incense ascribed to Nāgārjuna.[48]

His single most important work is the Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā), a set of 450 verses which is considered as intrinsically linked with Nāgārjuna as the Iliad is with Homer: what we speak about when refer to them are the authors of these respective texts.

The central works of Nāgārjuna can be divided into three broad categories: technical philosophical writings, letters, and hymns. The technical philosophical

[46] The higher bodhisattva grounds are characterized by an increase of these numb

is nothing in the basis of the realization that differentiates the grounds from each
See MacDonald 2015: 2. 356.
[47] Yün-hua 1970: 151–2.
[48] McHugh 2012: 267, n. 6, Laufer 1896. If we are to believe Yijing, Nāgārjuna a

advice on dental hygiene. According to him, the Indian monks he encountered us

rough root of the Northern Burrweed . . . It hardens the teeth, scents the mouth, h

or relieves heart-
burning . . . This is the means of securing a long life adopted by Bodhisattva

Nāgārjuna' (Yün-hua 1970: 28). See also Takakusu 1896: 34–5.

Philosophical
works include six major texts,[49] sometimes referred to as the yukti-corpus, or

works: the
the 'six texts on reasoning' (rigs pa'i tshogs drug), and comprise, in addition to

yukti-corpus
the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, two shorter works on the notion of emptiness, the

Sixty Verses on Reasoning (Yukti:sā:stikā) and the Seventy Stanzas on Emptines

(Śūnyatāsaptati), the Dispeller of Disputes (Vigrahyavyāvartanī), a discussion of

more complex issues raised by the theory of emptiness in question-and-answer

format, and the Vaidalyaprakaraṇa, a criticism of the sixteen 'categories' con-
cerned with logic and debate discussed by the non-Buddhist Nyāya school.
A sixth text, the *Vyavyhārasiddhi, seems to be no longer extant, apart from a

few verses quoted by later authors.[50]
Letters
Nāgārjuna also composed two letters of advice to a king that contain some

metaphysical discussion but are primarily concerned with ethical matters. These are the Jewelled Garland (Ratnāvalī) and the Friendly Letter (Suh:rl-lehka). These letters also offer a possibility of locating Nāgārjuna somewhat

more firmly in space and time. The texts themselves do not give the name of

the kings they were addressed to, though their Tibetan and Chinese transla-tions provide us with the names bDe spyod ('good conduct') and Chantaka.
Nāgārjuna and
Even though records of kings with these names have not come down to us,

the Sātavāhana
there is some possibility that the terms do not refer to individual kings, but to

dynasty
the Sātavāhana dynasty or one of its major sites.[51] The Sātavāhana empire was

based around Amaravati in today's Andhra Pradesh, and lasted for four and

a half centuries, from about 230 BCE to 220 CE. Based on a verse from the

Ratnāvali, where Nāgārjuna mentions an image of the Buddha seated on a

lotus,[52] and the fact that images such as this were available only during the late

part of the Sātavāhana dynasty in the Eastern Deccan, Joseph Walser has

argued that Nāgārjuna composed the text during the reign of King Yajña Śrī Sātakarṇi (about 175 to 204 CE).[53] The uncertainties inherent in such reasoning

are apparent; nevertheless, it is valuable as constituting the best attempt so far

at linking up Nāgārjuna's philosophical activity with some dateable events in

Indian history.

Hymns

Nāgārjuna's hymns, finally, are a group of short texts on the Buddha and his

transcendent nature, interesting for their positive characterization of ultimate

reality. In the Niraupamyastava, for example, we find characterizations of

the 'Dharma-body' (dharmamayakāya) as blissful (śiva), stable (dhruva), and

[49] In addition, a set of shorter, but nevertheless interesting works are frequently a

Nāgārjuna. See Ruegg 1981a: 26–30 for a concise discussion.
[50] Lindtner 1982: 94–9.
[51] Walser 2005: 63–5. See also Ruegg 1981a: 26–7, n. 59.
[52] 'Please construct from all precious substances images of the Buddha with fine

well designed and sitting on lotuses, adorned with all precious substances', rin ch

yi | sang rgyas sku gzugs dbyibs mdzes shing | legs par bris pa padma la | bzugs p

stsol, Walser 2005: 80, Hahn 1982a: 78, Hopkins 1998: 124–5.
[53] Walser 2005: 61, 86.

permanent (nitya). There at least appears to be a certain tension between such

characterizations and Nāgārjuna's conception of ultimate reality as empty, yet

they also provide an interesting link of Nāgārjuna's thought with the theory

of Buddha-nature (tathāgatagarbha) expounded by some Mahāyāna sūtras.
What the precise relation between the notion of universal emptiness

described by the Prajñāpāramitāsūtras and the notion of Buddha-nature

found mainly in sūtras ascribed to the 'third turning of the wheel of doctrine'
(see below, p. 186) amounts to is a question that has occupied the hermen-
eutical abilities of Buddhist commentators ever since. The main interpretative

choice to be made is whether these notions are, despite their seeming tension,

somehow compatible with each other and therefore to be assigned to the

same level of truth, or whether they are inconsistent, so that one of the two

has to be assigned to the category of provisional teachings (neyārtha) while

only the other can be held as expressing the Buddha's definite position

(nītārtha).[54]

3. The Teachings of the Perfection of Wisdom

A good way of approaching Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka teachings is by looking

at certain prominent topics within the Perfection of Wisdom literature and

considering how they were philosophically developed in his works. The scope

of the Prajñāpāramitā literature is vast, and its teachings are complex. Never-
theless, there are certain recurrent themes one can identify. Particular import-
ant amongst them are:
1. a criticism of the Abhidharma project;
2. the doctrine of illusionism;
3. an explicit acceptance of contradictions.

a. Criticism of the Abhidharma project

The characters that speak in the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras are the

historical Buddha Śākyamuni, as well as usually various bodhisattvas, and the

Buddha's disciple Śāriputra. This 'general of the doctrine' (dhammasenāpati) is

characterized in these texts as a 'representative of an inferior kind of know-
ledge',[55] and this signifies the attitude towards earlier schools of Buddhism, Criti

and towards the Abhidharma in particular. The Perfection of Wisdom texts soteri

ideals of early
frequently criticize the ideals of realized practitioners of earlier Buddhism, Buddl

the arhats and the pratyekabuddhas, and focus instead on the ideal of a

[54] See Ruegg 2010: 176, n. 32. For some discussion of the later Tibetan debate ar

question see Brunnhölzl 2007: 43–55.
[55] Conze 1978: 6.

Bodhisattva. Here is how the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 verses[56] characterizes their difference:

A Bodhisattva should not train in the same way in which persons belonging to the

vehicle of the arhats and Pratyekabuddas are trained. How then are the arhats and

Pratyekabuddhas trained? They make up their minds that 'one single self we shall

single self we shall pacify, one single self we shall lead to final nirvana'. . . . A B

should certainly not in such a way train himself. On the contrary, he should train

thus: 'My own self I will place into Suchness, and, so that all the world might be

I will also place all beings into Suchness, and I will lead to nirvana the whole imr

world of beings'.

What is criticized here is not the validity of the realization of the arhats and

pratyekabuddhas, but their limited scope. The Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000
verses compares the arhats and pratyekabuddhas to glow-worms, and the

bodhisattvas to the sun.[57] Both have kindled the flame of enlightenment, but

the formers' light only illuminates their own immediate surroundings, whereas

that of the latter can potentially light up the whole world.

Criticism of the

The Prajñāpāramitā texts also set out to reject the metaphysical doctrines

metaphysical

of the Abhidharma, in particular its conception of fundamentally existent

assumptions of
early Buddhism

dharmas. A concise example is provided by the Heart Sūtra, which explains

matters as follows:

O Śāriputra, any son or daughter of noble family who wishes to practice the cond

within the profound Perfection of Wisdom, should observe in this way:

He properly sees the five aggregates, and sees them as empty of intrinsic nature

(svabhāva) . . .
Therefore, Śāriputra, in emptiness there is no matter, no feeling, no notion, no for
tions, no consciousness;
no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind, no form, no sound, no sme

flavour, nothing to be touched, no dharmas;
there is no eye-sphere up to no mind-
sphere, no sphere of dharmas, no sphere of mental

consciousness,
no knowledge, no ignorance, no destruction, up to no destruction of old age and c

no suffering, no arising, no cessation, no path,
no cognition, no attainment, and no non-attainment either.
This passage is a negation of all the categories that form the heart of the

Abhidharma's ontological enterprise. The bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, speak-
ing through the inspiration of the Buddha, goes through the core categories of

the Abhidharma system, beginning with the key dichotomy between nāma and

[56] Conze 1994: 163.
[57] Conze 1955: 33.

rūpa as represented by the five skandhas,[58] through the twelve āyatanas, the

twelve dhātus, the twelve links of dependent origination, up to the four noble

truths and even enlightenment itself, and states that none of them exist in

emptiness.

It is hard to overestimate how radical this step was. The theory of dharmas Reject

was the standard Buddhist account of how reality was constituted at the Abhidha

ontological
fundamental level, a theory that accounted both for what there is at the rock foun

bottom, and what kind of phenomenology is based on this. If all this is rejected,

the audience of the Prajñāpāramitā texts (who we have to imagine as well

trained in the theories of the Abhidharma) might well have wondered what, if

anything, was left.
b. The doctrine of illusionism
What seems to be left is a world that is not quite what it seems, a mere

ephemeral creation similar to an illusion. In the Perfection of Wisdom in

8000 verses the gods question Subhūti, one of the disciples of the historical

Buddha:
THE GODS: Beings are like a magical illusion, are they not just an illusion?
SUBHŪTI: Like a magical illusion are those beings, like a dream. For

magical illusions and beings are not two different things, nor are

dreams and beings. All dharmas also are like a magical illusion, like

a dream. The various classes of Saints,—from Streamwinner to
Buddhahood—also are like a magical illusion, like a dream.
THE GODS: A fully enlightened Buddha, also, you say, is like a magical

illusion, is like a dream? Buddhahood also, you say, is like a magical

illusion, is like a dream?
SUBHŪTI: Even Nirvāṇa, I say, is like a magical illusion, is like a dream.
How much more so anything else!
THE GODS: Even Nirvāṇa, holy Subhūti, you say is like an illusion, is like

a dream?

SUBHŪTI: Even if perchance there would be anything more distinguished,

of that too I would say that it is like an illusion, like a dream. For illusion

and Nirvāṇa are not two different things, nor are dreams and Nirvāṇa.[59]

[58] In tracing the ancestry of the illusionism of the Prajñāpāramitā texts to the pre-Mahāyāna

level it is interesting to note that in the Sa :myuttanikāya (22: 95(3), Bhikkhu Boc 2) the

Buddha elucidated the five skandhas by five illusionistic similes, comparing matt

foam, feeling to a water bubble, perception to a mirage, volitional formations to t

banana tree, and consciousness to a magical illusion. See also Bhikkhu Ñāṇanand 7.
Verses 12–
13 of the Bodhicittavivaraṇa ascribed to Nāgārjuna cite this comparison, see Lind

1982: 188–9, 259–60.
[59] Conze 1994: 98–9.

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The illusionism propounded by the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras is comprehensive. We are here not faced with a view of the world that relegates our

Comprehensive
everyday surroundings to the status of mere appearance in order to underline

illusionism
the truly real status of some religiously transcendent world. Rather, the entire

applicable to all
entities
round of existence including all beings, all dharmas, various degrees of realized

practitioners, the Buddha, and even nirvāṇa are considered illusory in nature.
Even the process of leading beings to liberation is compared to a magician

dissolving a previously created illusion. Just as we would not want to say that the magician made an elephant vanish, because there was no elephant present in the first place, in the same way, the Perfection of Wisdom texts argue, there are no beings that are led to liberation.[60]

This illusionistic doctrine runs through the entire corpus of the Perfection of Wisdom literature, but, rather surprisingly for such an unintuitive position, the texts do not in fact offer any arguments for why we should believe everything is illusory in the first place. Some scholars have suggested that the origin of this

Illusionism and

illusionistic doctrine is not the conclusion of a set of philosophical arguments,

meditative

but a reflection of a particular mental state experienced in meditative absorp-

experience

tion.[61] The texts would then reflect the particular way the world appears to the meditator, thereby also acting as a guide by providing a description of the kind of state the associated practices are supposed to lead to. Sometimes the 'attainment of cessation' (nirodhasamāpatti) is mentioned in this context, an advanced meditative state in which all sensory perceptions and all mental activity are supposed to cease.[62] Whether the world appears in any way to a meditator in this state where all mental activity has been suspended, and whether it could thus appear as a wholly illusory entity, is difficult to say. However, even if the illusionistic experience is not specifically connected with the 'attainment of cessation', the idea that at the core of the description of the world from the perspective of the Perfection of Wisdom texts lies a set of

meditative experiences opens up fruitful ways of understanding the origin and

the aim of the Prajñāpāramitā.

One way of understanding the illusionism of the Perfection of Wisdom texts

Ontologizing
(as well as other instances where meditative practices appear to be a factor in

meditative
shaping Buddhist philosophy) is as an ontologizing of meditative phenomen-
phenomenology
ology. Because the world appears to the meditator in a specific way, and

because meditative cognition is regarded as a particularly reliable route to

knowledge, the world must also exist in the way in which the meditator

experiences it. There is certainly some truth to this idea, but especially in the

Madhyamaka context it is important to understand it in a sufficiently nuanced

way. The idea seems to be that because of the intrinsic epistemic superiority of

[60] Conze 1994: 90.
[61] Schmithausen 1973: 181.
[62] Poussin 1937: 191; Frauwallner 1956: 353–4; Staal 1975: 88.

meditative experience, and because of the soteriological efficacy of the

corresponding meditative states which play a key part in progressing on the

path to enlightenment, the meditator's phenomenological claims should also

be regarded as authoritative ontological claims. Yet the Mādhyamika would

disagree with the some key premises of this argument. For them there are no

epistemic instruments that by their very nature lead to knowledge of ultimate

reality, and it is furthermore mistaken to believe that the efficacy of a theory

(including its soteriological efficacy) must rest on the ultimate truth of that

theory. As an insubstantial (ni :hsvabhāva) chariot can fulfil its function of

carrying wood, so an empty theory, a theory not grounded in ultimate reality,

can lead to liberation. Instead of arguing that the salvific efficacy of specific

meditative states and experiences shows that they correspond to the way the Med

world works at the most fundamental level, their very efficacy is sufficient to phe

need not be
argue why they, rather than other non-
standard phenomenological states,[63] grounded in

should be cultivated, independent of any claims to ultimate truth. We should ultim

therefore be aware that the 'ontologization' of meditative phenomenology

happens in Buddhist thought, and that it can explain a great deal about the

development of Indian Buddhist philosophy, but that the Buddhist philo-
sophers themselves (certainly the Mādhyamikas amongst them) finally move

beyond it when spelling out the theory of the emptiness of emptiness.
It is also worthwhile to note the somewhat different role that the Buddhist Illusion

illusionistic worldview plays in the development of different Buddhist schools. th

of different
We find early forms of this idea already in some of the canonical sūtras, when Bu

the Buddha says that 'sensual pleasures are impermanent, hollow, false, decep-
tive; they are illusory, the prattle of fools'.[64] The immediate aim of these

teachings, that compare phenomena to foam,[65] bubbles, mirages, the coreless

trunk of a banana tree, and so on is to enable the practitioner to rid himself of

attachment and aversion towards these insubstantial things. The Perfection of

Wisdom texts added another turn of the screw by extending the illusionistic

doctrine from the five psycho-physical constituents (skandhas) to nirvāṇa and

even to the Buddha himself. The reason for the popularity of this comprehen-
sive illusionism in the development of the Mahāyāna is not difficult to deter-
mine. One of its implications is the insubstantiality of the soteriological goal of

the non-Mahāyāna Buddhist schools; another is the fundamental equivalence

of cyclic existence and liberation. Both of these entail that for a practitioner

[63] For an interesting comparison between the states created by the meditative prac

by schizophrenics see Beyer 1988: 84: 'The yogin consciously bases his magical

understanding and hence upon his control of himself and his reality; the schizoph

based not on control but on chaos.'
[64] Āneñjasappāyasutta, Majjhimanikāya 106: annicā bhikkhave kāmā tucchā mus
hammā māyākatam eta :m bhikkhave bālalāpanam, Bhikkhu Bodhi 2001: 869.
[65] Phenasutta, Sa :myuttanikāya 22:95, Bhikkhu Bodhi 2000: 951–5.

who has gained insight into the illusory nature of reality, the idea of leaving

Illusionism and
sa :msāra in order to obtain nirvāṇa must appear absurd. This view provides

the bodhisattva
strong support for the ideal of the bodhisattva, a practitioner who, out of

ideal
compassion for all beings, remains within cyclic existence until he has suc-
ceeded in liberating all of them as well. If there is no distinction between

sa :msāra and nirvāṇa at the ultimate level, there is nothing the bodhisattva

needs to escape from in order to obtain liberation. He can remain in sa :msāra in

order to help sentient beings, increasing his insight by means of great com-
passion, and finally, once all beings have been liberated, can make the cognitive

shift that transforms sa :msāra into nirvāṇa and the bodhisattva into a Buddha.
Consistency of the
At this stage we might wonder about the consistency of the Prajñāpāramitā's

Prajñāpāramitā's
worldview. On the one hand it rejects all the Abhidharma categories, and

position
seems to come close to the view that there is nothing at all; on the other

hand it does speak about bodhisattvas, about illusory appearances, Buddhas,

and nirvāṇa, all of which it appears to take to exist in some way. How can these

positions go together?
c. An explicit acceptance of contradictions
Contradictions (or, at least apparent contradictions) abound in the Perfection

of Wisdom literature. How does the Perfection of Wisdom procure all-
knowledge? We learn that, 'In so far as it does not procure, to that extent it

procures.'[66] How do dharmas exist? 'As they do not exist, so they exist.'[67] What

does the profundity of the Perfection of Wisdom consist in? 'It cannot be

developed by anything, nor by anyone, nor is there anything to be developed.
For in perfect wisdom nothing at all has been brought to perfection.'[68]
Edward Conze, one of the most important Western scholars of the Prajñā-
pāramitā texts, sums up this perplexing situation in a concise manner:

The thousands of lines of the Prajñāpāramitā can be summed up in the following

sentences: 1. One should become a Bodhisattva . . . 2. There is no such thing as a

Bodhisattva, or as all-
knowledge, or as 'being', or as the perfection of wisdom, or as

attainment. To accept both these contradictory facts is to be perfect.[69]
It is important to be aware that there is a sense in which the claim that 'there is

Non-existence of
no such thing as a Bodhisattva' is uncontroversially accepted by early Bud-
bodhisattvas
dhism, namely the idea that each person (including a bodhisattva) is only a

superimposition on a shifting coalition of psycho-physical aggregates, the

skandhas. But the Perfection of Wisdom texts go further than this. As we saw

above, their aim is the rejection of dharmas, not just the rejection of higher-level

appearances based on dharmas. We frequently find the phrase 'bodhisattva or

[66] Conze 1994: 136.
[67] Conze 1994: 87.
[68] Conze 1994: 191.
[69] Conze: 1978: 7–8.

bodhisattvadharma' (bodhisattva :m vā bodhisattvadharma :m vā) as something

to be negated, that is, not just the bodhisattva, in the sense of a person existing

by svabhāva, but also the set of dharmas identified in the Abhidharma that can

be collectively designated as a bodhisattva are rejected.[70]
It is therefore evident that the Perfection of Wisdom texts left Buddhist Developi

philosophers with a formidable task: first, to determine what precisely they are ar

Prajñāpāramitā
saying, and second, to come up with a justification for why what they are saying

is true, that is, a justification that does not simply rely on their authority as buddhavacana. Would it be possible to come up with arguments in support of the Prajñāpāramitā's startling statements?

The first Buddhist philosopher to develop the philosophical position of the Perfection of Wisdom texts in a systematic manner, developing arguments for their conclusions and considering replies to actual and potential objections, was Nāgārjuna. Before we can consider how the three themes just discussed feature in his texts, however, we must first consider a curious historical fact.

If Nāgārjuna's role is really to be understood as that of the recoverer (literally or metaphorically) and explicator of the Perfection of Wisdom texts, we would expect him to say so quite explicitly, and to quote the Prajñāpāramitā texts (and Mahāyāna texts in general) frequently in his works. In fact this is not the case at all. Of course matters depend to some extent here on what we consider Nāgārjuna's authentic works to be. If we assume that the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-upadeśa-śāstra (大智度論) was written by Nāgārjuna, his association with the Perfection of Wisdom tradition is fairly obvious, and even other texts for which the attribution to Nāgārjuna seems more plausible contain a certain amount of Mahāyāna references. The Suh:rllekha, for example, encourages the king it addresses to emulate the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and the transcendental Buddha Amitābha; the fourth chapter of the Ratnāvalī explicitly praises the virtues of the Great Vehicle. Nevertheless, this picture is slightly different if we concentrate on the other five works of the yukti-corpus, specifically on the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. The only sūtra Nāgārjuna refers to by name

here is the Kātyāyanāvavāda (the Sanskrit parallel to the Kaccānagotta-sutta);[71] in addition a variety of other sūtras from the Tripi:taka are quoted,

but without explicitly giving their source.[72] Based on this, some twentieth-century Buddhologists have argued that Nāgārjuna's association with

the Mahāyāna that forms part of traditional Buddhist history should be

questioned.[73] Far from being an explicator of the Prajñāpāramitā texts, or a

[70] On this point see Schmithausen 1977: 45.
[71] In Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 15:7. Sa :myutta Nikāya 12.15 (Bikkhu Bodhi 200(
[72] Warder 1973: 79–81.
[73] See Warder 1973, Kalupahana 1991: 5–8. Ruegg 1981a: 6–7, Lindtner 1982: 21, n. 67, and

Bronkhorst 2009: 136 remain unconvinced.

Mahāyāna proselytizer more generally, Nāgārjuna's aim in the Mūlamadhya-makakārikā, it is argued, was merely to refute the excesses of scholastic

overlay that the Abhidharma works had deposited on the structure of early

Buddhism. Their philosophical positions, such as the view of the continuous

existence of entities in the past, present, and future, or the notion of svabhāva

(a term that is not mentioned in the sūtras of the Tripi:taka), are something

Nāgārjuna argues against, in order to recover the pure and unfalsified teach-ing of the historical Buddha.
Both the idea of the rediscovery of historically unpolluted Buddhism,[74] as

well as the characterization of Nāgārjuna (and of the Buddha) as 'empiricist

philosophers'[75] owe more to modern intellectual concerns than the originators

of these 'back to the basics' calls might have thought. Nevertheless, there are

certain aspects of this view that seem plausible. From the evidence available in

Nāgārjuna did not Nāgārjuna's works it is clear that he did not consider himself a

see himself as a
defender of the 'new' Mahāyāna creed against the benighted Abhidharma

philosophical
innovator
heretics.[76] What Nāgārjuna set out to do in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā and

his other works is to explicate what he considered the true meaning of the

Buddha's words. He saw this meaning as expressed both in the Perfection of

Wisdom texts and in the sūtras of the Tripi:taka, and Nāgārjuna was striving to

explain the unified philosophical vision of these texts, to supply arguments

that are not present or not explicit in these texts, and to defend them against

variant interpretations he regards as erroneous, such as those found in the

Abhidharma. Still, we might ask ourselves, why does he then not explicitly quote

Abhidharma and Prajñāpāramitā texts side by side? Why do all the quotations in

the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā come from texts of early Buddhism?
Salutary verses of
First, a fact that earlier authors overlooked, even though it had already been

the Mūlamadhya-
pointed out by Conze[77] some time ago, is that the salutary verses (nāmaskāra)

makakārikā
in praise of the Buddha by which Nāgārjuna begins his Mūlamadhyamakakār-
ikā are clearly derived from a passage in the Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000
verses. Interestingly, though, this citation consists largely of phrases that occur

individually in the early Buddhist sūtras, though not in the form in which they

[74] Schayer 1931: ix rightly criticizes this 'protestant' conception of Buddhism: 'L
Philologie so auffallend wenig zur Aufhellung der philosophischen Grundlagen d

beigetragen hat, damit hat es seine eigene Bewandnis. Die falsche Suggestion, da

einer Religion nur das Ursprüngliche echt, alles Jüngere dagegen mehr oder weni

"Entartung" sei, hat von Anfang an den Gang der Studien, ihre Richtung und ihre
[75] Warder 1973: 85, 87.
[76] The concept of a Mahāyāna group identity that could have formed the basis of
identification took a long time to develop. The earliest use of the term 'Mahāyāna

Indian inscriptions dating from several centuries after the appearance of the first I
Williams (2009: 28) notes that for 'a monk in the first or second century CE the N

visible institution was scarcely evident'.
[77] Conze 1975: 595, n. 11.

are put together here.[78] The nāmaskāra thereby fulfils a curious double

function: on the one hand putting a section of a Prajñāpāramitā text at the

very beginning of this key treatise conveys a clear signal about the intellectual

lineage in which Nāgārjuna wants to position his work. On the other hand,

nothing forces this reading. All the terms Nāgārjuna uses here can be found in

the sūtras of the Tripi:taka. The reason for this, and for the prevalence of

non-Mahāyāna citations in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, as well as for the

absence of explicit reference to Mahāyāna texts, Walser has argued[79] lies in the

specific historical situation the Mahāyāna movement found itself in during

Nāgārjuna's times. As a minority school, it was trying to promote the accept-
ance of its interpretation to a majority of Ābhidharmikas. It would obviously

have been of very little use to try to do this by reference to Mahāyāna sūtras;

even though these explicitly endorsed the superiority of the Mahāyāna inter-
pretation, they were not accepted as authoritative by the Ābhidharmikas.
Nāgārjuna's strategy, therefore, was to argue for Mahāyāna conclusions by

restricting himself to explicit references to texts that both the Ābhidharmikas and

the Mahāyānists would consider as authoritative. We see here a milder form of

the problem Buddhists later faced when debating with non-Buddhist opponents.
Obviously such debates could not make any reference to scriptural authority,

since the two parties did not acknowledge each other's canon. But in the Buddhis

case there was such a shared canon, and Nāgārjuna set out to demonstrate that

the Tripi:taka texts that the Ābhidharmikas regarded as authoritative could be given a Mahāyāna reading. This procedure might remind us of the cuckoo and her eggs, but there is no reason to believe that matters appeared in this way to a thinker like Nāgārjuna. His aim was to bring out what he considered to be the authentic meaning of the Buddha's teachings, and to do so in a manner that would convince the largest possible number of his co-religionists.

4. Key Themes of Nāgārjuna's Thought

After this brief discussion of the nature of Nāgārjuna's relation with the Abhidharma, let us now get back to the question how the key themes of the Perfection of Wisdom literature that we identified above get taken up in Nāgārjuna's works.

a. Nāgārjuna and the criticism of the Abhidharma project

There are two obvious areas of the Abhidharma project that Nāgārjuna criticizes: their idea of the goal of the Buddhist path as obtaining the stage of a śrāvaka or pratyekabuddha, which he replaces by the ideal of the bodhisattva, and the Abhidharma metaphysics of dharmas as ultimately real entities. In the

[78] Walser 2005: 170–83.
[79] Walser 2005: ch. 5.

advice to a king Nāgārjuna gives in the Ratnāvalī he is very explicit in pointing out that the Mahāyāna (and the bodhisattva ideal it teaches) constitutes a set of teachings of the Buddha for beings with higher spiritual capacities than those for whom the sūtras of the Tripi:taka are intended:

Just as a master of grammar teaches even the alphabet to disciples,

Even so the Buddha teaches his doctrine to those to be tamed as it is accessible to
He taught his doctrine to some so that they turn away from evil deeds,

To others so that they could accomplish meritorious deeds, to others [a teaching]

on duality.
To some others [he taught a doctrine] beyond duality, deep, terrifying those who

afraid [of such teachings];
The heart of compassion and emptiness, the means of obtaining enlightenment.
Therefore the wise ones must destroy any feeling of aversion towards the Mahāyā

And generate special faith in order to attain to complete enlightenment.[80]
This idea of a progression of doctrines (a common topos in Indian philosophy

and doxography) suggests that the idea frequently found in the secondary

literature, that Nāgārjuna's aim was 'to refute the Abhidharma', needs to be

Nāgārjuna's
seen in a more nuanced manner. In another passage in the Ratnāvalī Nāgār-
endorsement of
juna advises the king to 'definitely realize with vigour' a list of fifty-seven

the Abhidharma
ethical faults in order to avoid them.[81] This list most plausibly derived from

an Abhidharma text.[82] A list of seven kinds of pride given in the same work[83]
also derives from Abhidharma sources, and is later included in Vasubandhu's

Abhidharmakośabhā:sya.[84] Nāgārjuna's attitude is therefore very far from a

wholesale rejection of the teachings of the Abhidharma; in this context he

explicitly recommends the close study of one of its topical lists (māt:rkā). In fact

there would have been no reason for rejecting Abhidharma doctrines tout

court. They are, after all, an attempt to systematize, explicate, and develop

the teachings contained in the Buddha's sūtras of early Buddhism, and the fact

[80] yathaiva vaiyākaraṇo māt:rkām api pā:thayet |
buddho 'vadat tathā dharma :m vineyānā :m yathāk:sama :m ||
ke:sā :mcid avadad dharma :m pāpebhyo viniv:rttaye |
ke:sā :mcit puṇyasiddhyartha :m ke:sā :mcid dvayani:hśritam ||
dvayāniśritam eke:sā :m gāmbhīra :m bhīrubhī:saṇa :m |
śūnyatākaruṇāgarbham eke:sā :m bodhisādhanam||
iti sadbhir mahāyāne kartavya :h pratighak:saya:h |
prasādaś cādhika :h kārya:h samyaksa :mbodhisiddhaye ||
Ratnāvalī 4: 94–7, Hahn 1982a: 128–31, Hopkins 1998: 147, verses 394–7.
[81] Hopkins 1998: 149.
[82] Walser 2005: 226–7.
[83] Ratnāvalī 5: 7–12, Hahn 1982a: 134–7, Hopkins 1998: 150–1, verses 407–12.
[84] bhā:sya on Abhidharmakośa 5.10 (Pradhan 1975: 284–
5, Poussin and Pruden 1988–90: 3.
784–5).

that Nāgārjuna considered some of these explications (even very central ones)

as mistaken does not mean that he would have rejected them all. Even though it

is difficult to be definite about this, there may have been a political (or, to use a

favourite Mahāyāna term, 'skilful' (upāya)) dimension to Nāgārjuna's accept-
ance or endorsements of certain Abhidharma positions. We know that the

different pre-Mahāyāna schools of Indian Buddhism had distinct but concep-
tually overlapping Abhidharma texts, even though only two, the Sarvāstivāda

and the Theravāda, have come down to us in their entirety. It is not entirely

implausible to assume that some of the Abhidharma positions Nāgārjuna takes

on board were those defended by the Abhidharma of the monastery in which

he was staying. Like the references to Tripi:taka sutras, the references to this

canon would have allowed Nāgārjuna to underline the legitimacy of the

Mahāyāna outlook in the eyes of his non-Mahāyānist fellow monks.[85]
The key metaphysical notion of the Abhidharma that Nāgārjuna attacks is

that of svabhāva or intrinsic nature. His theory of emptiness means simply that Eɪ

all things are empty of intrinsic nature. In early Buddhist teaching the doctrine pe

dharmas
of emptiness was primarily spelt out as the selflessness of persons (pudgala-
nairātmya), arguing that there is no permanent, self-sufficient personality core

that notions like 'I', 'me', or 'mine' picked out. With Madhyamaka the domain

of emptiness expanded so that it covered all non-persons as well; in addition to

the selflessness of persons, it gave a prominent position to the selflessness of all

dharmas (dharmanairātmya). The idea of the emptiness of dharmas is not

entirely straightforward. Whereas persons might be considered to possess a

substantial soul or ātman, other things do not do so in any obvious sense. For

this reason we need a more general notion of what all empty things, persons

and non-
persons, are empty of, and this is the notion of svabhāva. Nāgārjuna svabhāva

characterizes svabhāva by two important properties: it is not adventitious

(ak:rtrima :h) and not dependent on something else (nirapek:sa:h paratra).[86] If

we recall the notion of svabhāva we find in the Abhidharma,[87] we remember

that an object has some property as its svabhāva if this property does not

depend on other things, apart from the thing that brought the object into

existence in the first place. Thus a chariot is no chariot by svabhāva because it

borrows its nature from its simultaneously existent components. The great

elements (mahābhūta) like water, fire, and so on do not derive their nature

from anything else. They have their nature by svabhāva, yet the Abhidharma sval

has no difficulties with accepting that they are causally produced. But we just cau

saw Nāgārjuna say that dependent things cannot exist by svabhāva, and a

causally produced dharma is of course dependent on the causes and conditions

[85] On this see further Walser 2005: 225–
63. He rightly points out that 'Nāgārjuna's arguments

should be examined in terms of the alliances they forge instead of merely whom t
[86] Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 15:2.
[87] See pp. 70–1 above.

that brought it into existence. It seems as if the Abhidharma and Nāgārjuna

meant quite different things when they spoke of svabhāva, and if that is the

case we might wonder whether Nāgārjuna's rejection of svabhāva, setting out

to explicate its rejection in the Perfection of Wisdom texts, is really a rejection

of the svabhāva the Ābhidharmikas had in mind, or whether it is the rejection

of something else.
The reason why Nāgārjuna regards being causally produced as incompatible

with having svabhāva, while the Ābhidharmikas did not see a conflict between

these, lies in their different concepts of causation. In order to see why this is the

case we need to look more closely at Nāgārjuna's causal argument against

svabhāva.
The causal
Nāgārjuna's argument is based on some important assumptions about time.

argument against

The first is presentism. This is the idea that only the present moment, and

svabhāva

neither the past nor the future, exists. The second is momentariness, the

view that nothing has any temporal 'thickness', that all things, once arisen,

last only for a moment and disappear immediately afterwards. Causal pro-
cesses happen in a sequence: first there is a cause (say, a spark), and at a later

time the effect arises (the explosion).[88] But this entails that the causal relation is

always missing one related object. When the cause exists the effect does not yet

exist, and when the effect exists the cause has already passed out of existence.
Since the joint premises of presentism and momentariness have squeezed the

whole of reality into the present moment, and since the causal relation requires

at least two successive moments, one relatum of this relation will always fail to

exist. It seems as if this shows that causation does not exist, since there cannot

be two-place relations without two relata. Yet the world appears to us as causal

through and through, and the Mādhyamika has to find a way to account

for this. He does so by suggesting that even though the effect cannot exist at

the same time as the cause, the idea of the effect can. When the cause exists,

the effect is supplied by anticipation (when the spark flashes, we expect the

explosion); when the effect has arisen, the cause is supplied by memory (we

Causation

remember the spark when the explosion happens). What this means is that the

essentially involves causal relation inevitably contains one relatum that is a conce

conceptualization

conceptualization

and if this is the case, causation cannot be an objective relation that obtains in a

mind-independent manner. Moreover, causally produced things have the

property of being causally produced essentially, they would not be what they

are without being so produced. If the teacup in front of me had not come into

being from a set of causes and conditions it would not be that cup. But this

means that the essence of such things involves conceptual construction, and

[88] It is occasionally suggested that cause and effect are sometimes simultaneous,

going down on the seesaw causes Jack's going up. However, such cases give rise

complexities we do not have the space to go into in the present discussion.

anything that does so cannot exist by svabhāva, since it entails that the object is

not what it is all by itself, but in dependence on other things, such as concep-
tualizing minds. For this reason all causally produced things must be empty.
It is now easier for us to understand why Nāgārjuna considered having a Abhidha

cause as incompatible with having svabhāva, while the Ābhidharmikas saw no M

views of svabhāva
incompatibility. We recall that for the Sarvāstivādin, the property of having and c

svabhāva applies to dharmas atemporally. Whether a dharma presently exists,

has existed or is yet to be, its svabhāva is there; the only thing that changes

is the dharma's efficacy. But in this case causal production or destruction

does not affect the existential status of svabhāva, and as such there seems

to be little motivation for thinking that such causal relations detract from its self-sufficiency or 'own-being'. Of course, as we have seen, not all schools of Abhidharma accepted this curious idea of continuous existence. The Sautrāntikas considered dharmas as momentary phenomena, with no persistent svabhāva in the background. Rather, they suggest that as soon as a dharma passes out of existence, it causes its similarly momentary successor-dharma. Instead of a fire-dharma with a continuous svabhāva that gains its efficacy only in the present moment, we have a string of fire-dharmas, each causing the next. The Abhidharma's criteria for being a dharma (and hence for having svabhāva) were formulated in terms of analysis at one point in time. If something does not disappear once it has been taken apart, either physically or conceptually, it is a dharma. The fact that a particular fire-dharma is caused does not conflict with the fact that as long as it exists in cannot be broken down into more basic constituents in either of these two ways. It is also worthwhile to remember that the reason for denying objects with parts a svabhāva is that they are taken to borrow their nature from objects that do not have that nature. A chariot thus borrows its nature from the axle, wheel, and so forth, none of which is itself a chariot. We would not even be able to say that a momentary fire-dharma borrows its nature from its cause in this way, for the reason that its cause is a fire-dharma too. The fire-dharma does not seem to depend on anything that is not a fire-dharma. But once we replace the Abhidharma conception of causation with the one we find in Madhyamaka, entities that were formerly regarded as unproblematically possessing svabhāva suddenly

do not do so any longer. Being causally produced now incorporates an

element of conceptual construction, since, the Mādhyamika argues, without

the mind's handiwork there would be no causal relation in the first place.
The Sautrāntika's momentary dharmas are caused by their very nature, and if

we properly understand what that means we realize that upon taking their

nature apart there is, after all, an element there that, when taken away, will

make the dharma disappear. If the fire-dharma is not causally produced,

and thus ultimately dependent on our conceptualization, there would be no

fire-dharma. The Ābhidharmika and the Mādhyamika do not operate with

different conceptions of svabhāva and are therefore not talking past each other.
They do, however, have different concepts of causation, and this has repercus-
sions on their views of the kinds of things to be considered as having svabhāva

in the first place.

The mereological argument against svabhāva

The second main argument against svabhāva Nāgārjuna discusses is not
based on the notion of causation, but on the problem of identity or difference

of wholes and parts. The argumentative structure will be familiar to us from

Abhidharma arguments setting out to show that wholes cannot be ultimately

real objects (dravya) but must be conceptually constructed (prajñapti).[89] Their

reason was that if wholes were ultimately real they should stand in a clearly

defined relation to their parts. But it turns out that both the assumption that

the whole is identical with the parts and the assumption that it is a separate

entity distinct from them leads to problems. From this the Ābhidharmikas

infer that wholes are no entities in their own right, that they do not exist in

the same sense as the parts, but are merely conceptual superimpositions on

the parts.

Nāgārjuna now continues this argument on the level of the dharmas, that is,

he applies it to the entities that came out as ultimately real according to the

mereological argument of the Ābhidharmikas. Of course he cannot do so with

reference to the first criterion for being a dharma (mereological simplicity), as

the dharmas have no parts. Instead, he focuses on the second, the idea that

ultimately real objects must also be simple not just in terms of material

decomposition, but also when it comes to conceptual decomposition.

The question Nāgārjuna is now asking is whether a dharma as a conceptual

whole is identical with or distinct from its parts. If we consider one of the 'four

great elements' (mahābhūta), such as the water-element, as a dharma, we will

naturally want to characterize it as an individual (the dharma) that has a

number of properties (wetness, stickiness, and so on). Is the dharma distinct

from its properties, or are they one and the same thing? Suppose they are

distinct. In this case we have an individual on the one hand, and various

properties attached to it. What is the nature of the individual? If it really is

distinct from all its properties, it is just what is left when all its properties have

been abstracted away—what in common philosophical terminology is called a

bare particular. Is this bare particular what it is by its intrinsic nature, that is, by

svabhāva? If it is, a water-dharma would come with two svabhāvas or natures,

that of being a bare particular and that which is the specific characteristic or

svalak:saṇa of water, namely being wet. But nothing can have two natures, since

a thing's nature makes it what it is in contrast with other things. So it would

be safer to say that a bare particular is not what it is by its own nature.
[89] See above, pp. 71–2.

This, however, just means that it borrows its nature from something else, and,

far from having reached ontological rock-bottom with this peculiar idea of an

object with no qualities, we now have to continue our analysis. Being a bare

particular would in turn be a property of something else, an even barer

particular to which this property attached in the same way as the property of

being wet attached to the original bare particular. At this stage we can of course

repeat the whole argument, and the unappealing prospect of an infinitely

descending sequence of barer and barer particulars opens up.
These kinds of problems might suggest that we took a wrong turn earlier on. dhar

We should have rather said that the dharma, the whole, is not distinct from its pr
particulars
properties, the parts. Of course the literal identity of the two is hard to make

sense of, as the dharma is one, but its properties are many, and nothing can be both one and many. But we could still spell out this idea by arguing that the entire concept of an individual as a metaphysical condensation nucleus to which properties attach is superfluous in the first place. Instead, we could say that the water-element is not a dharma itself, but that it is simply a collection of coexisting property particulars, sometimes referred to as tropes.[90] These property-particulars would then be the real dharmas. The water-element is just a conceptual construction; while there is a wetness-trope and a stickiness-trope and so on, which congregate, the dharma as an individual is simply superimposed on these in the same way the chariot is superimposed on its parts.

Nāgārjuna now raises the question of what makes all these different par-
How are property-
ticularized properties distinct. On the face of it, the answer seems to be obvious: ɪ

apart?
a particularized property is particularized because it is the appearance of a

property at a specific space-time location. What distinguishes two wetness-
tropes is that one is wetness here now, and the other wetness there then. But

the matter is not a simple as it looks, for if particularized properties are really

the only fundamental category we assume (and this is the case with the

Abhidharma's dharmas) then they should account for all properties, including

spatial and temporal properties. That means that 'being at a certain place' and

'being at a certain time' are both tropes as well. They then lose their status as

privileged individuators of other tropes.

One way of fixing this problem is as follows. We do not really need special

properties in order to individuate one trope from the next. In fact, we do not

even need to know which trope is which in order to tell one from the other.
Tropes do not exist in a lonely state, but in complexes with other tropes. We

can then simply individuate each trope by determining which other tropes it

[90] See above, p. 71.

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co-occurs with in a complex we conventionally label as an 'invididual'. This

will be different for every trope.
Despite its elegance, this procedure has a crucial weakness. Tropes are no

longer individuated according to inner own nature or properties, but with

reference to other tropes they co-occur with. This means that each trope

depends for being the kind of thing it is on other tropes; it is only through

the existence of tropes other than the wetness-trope that not all wetness-tropes

coalesce. If this is the case, tropes can no longer be considered as possessors of

svabhāva.
It thus appears that all ways of spelling out the relations of the parts of

dharmas to the whole either lead to problematic conclusions or to positions

that cannot ascribe svabhāva to them.
The argument
The last of Nāgārjuna's arguments against svabhāva I want to consider takes

from change
as its starting point the observation that things around us change. The world

we observe is not static but characterized by things continuously changing

their properties, coming into existence, and going out of existence. Nāgārjuna

sees a conflict between this fact and the potential existence of svabhāva.
He points out that:
there is the lack of svabhāva of things due to the observation of change. . . . If sva

found, what would change? Neither the change of a thing itself nor of something

is suitable: as a young man does not grow old, so an old man does not grow old e
Change as arising
Let us consider the problem at the level of tropes. If water is hot now, and

and ceasing
cold later, what could account for this change? One suggestion might be that

the heat-tropes that inhere in this conglomeration of tropes that is the hot

water turn into something else. This seems impossible, given that these tropes

have heat as their nature. If this is the core of what they are, how could they

ever turn into anything else? (This is the point of Nāgārjuna's remark that an

(intrinsically) young man could not grow old.) What would rather happen is

that the heat-tropes go out of existence, and other, different tropes arise in their

stead. This leaves open the problem of what causes these other tropes to arise.
Obviously not tropes of the same kind (else there would be no change), nor

does it seem satisfactory to assume that they have arisen without a cause. Yet it

seems that one of these two possibilities has to obtain if there is to be change at

all. If all the tropes only give rise to further tropes just like them, everything will

always be the same: a man who is already old will not change into an old man.
[91] Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 13: 3a, 4b–5
bhāvānā :m nihsvabhāvatvam anyathābhāvadarśanāt | [. . .]

kasya syād anyathābhāvaḥ svabhāvo yadi vidyate ||

tasyaiva nānyathābhāvo nāpy anyasyaiva yujyate |
yuvā na jīryate yasmād yasmāj jīrno na jīryate ||

A final possibility one might consider is that the tropes are actually perman-
Change as
ent, do not come into existence or go out of existence, and that change is just to re
be explained by a local rearrangement of these tropes. When hot water cools
down the heat-tropes neither change nor pass out of existence, they will just go
somewhere else. The difficulty with this suggestion is that it does not explain
why the permanent tropes arrange themselves in ever-changing combinations.
It cannot be anything going on inside them, like the arising and ceasing of
some repulsive force, since in this case the tropes would precisely not be
permanent, but would be changing. Yet it is this notion of change that we
want to explain in the first place, and a theory that involves entities existing by
svabhāva seems to face considerable challenges in doing so.
We have thus seen that Nāgārjuna underpins the Prajñāpāramitā's criticism Argu
of the ontological part of the Abhidharma project, and of the central notion of suj
claims of the
dharmas that exist by svabhāva that this involves, with a variety of arguments Pei
involving such different concepts as causation, parthood, or change. These are W

certainly not all the arguments against svabhāva we find in Nāgārjuna's texts,

nor are they all we find in the Madhyamaka literature that follow him.
But they constitute a representative sample of argumentative approaches to

backing up a set of claims made in the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras that

also have considerable systematic potential as philosophical arguments in

their own rights.

b. Illusionism in Nāgārjuna's thought

We noted above that the Perfection of Wisdom texts expound a thoroughgoing

illusionistic theory; for more-or-less any concept that forms part of the

Buddhist path we can find a section of a Prajñāpāramitā text that says that

this concept is not real. However, the theory expounded there is not one that

defends a kind of appearance/reality distinction such as we can find, for Not a vie

example, in Vedānta. Its aim is not to show that the world we find around us 'app
reality'
is all empty and hence illusory, while that there is another world separate from

this one that is the only real one. The Abhidharma account, on the other hand,

can be interpreted as endorsing this appearance/reality distinction: composite

objects are the appearance, but the only real things are the individual dharmas.
Nāgārjuna employ's the Perfection of Wisdom's illusionistic metaphors

frequently in his own works. At the conclusion of chapter 17 of the Mūlama-
dhyamakakārikā he notes that:
31.
Just as the Teacher by his supernatural power fabricates a magical

being that in turn fabricates yet another magical being,
32.
so with regard to the agent, which has the form of a magical being, and

the action that is done by it, it is like the case where a second magical being is

fabricated by a magical being.

33.
Defilements, actions, and bodies, agents, and fruits, are similar to the

city of the gandharvas; they are like a mirage, a dream.[92]

The example of one of the Buddha's miraculous performances, in which he

produced a phantom magician who then produced another phantom in turn,

illustrates the claim that action is not fundamentally real, nor is the agent who

brings it about. Things that lack svabhāva can be brought about by other things

that lack svabhāva, and this point can be generalized: unlike in an appearance/
reality scenario where appearances are finally grounded in something substan-
tial, in this case it is insubstantial entities all the way down. The dharmas that

serve as the basis of partite entities are not any more real than the partite

The charge of
entities themselves. It is perhaps not too surprising that both non-Buddhist

ontological
and Buddhist critics quickly accused Madhyamaka of nihilism because of

nihilism
arguments such as these.[93] Asaṅga, for example, accuses the Mādhyamikas

of misunderstanding the meaning of the Mahāyāna sūtras. He claims in the

Bodhisattvabhūmi that:
Hence, some who have heard the sūtras connected with the Mahāyāna, which are

difficult to understand, and associated with profound emptiness, manifest an indir

meaning, do not know the meaning of the description of reality as it really is. Inac
ately, they have views without cogency obtained through mere inference (tarka) a

'All this is in reality just a designation. Who sees matters in this way sees them co
For those, the designation does not exist in any way, because of the non-
existence of a

given thing (vastumātra) that is the basis of designation. But how will reality be n

designation? In this manner both reality and designation are rejected. Because of

rejection of designation and reality they are to be known as the most extreme kind

nihilist (pradhāna nāstika).[94]
Yet the Mādhyamikas take great care to distance themselves from the nihilist

position. As their name, 'followers of the middle way', indicates they emphasize

the fact that they reject both the extreme of nihilism as well as the extreme of

[92] yathā nirmitaka :m śāstā nirmimītārddhisa :mpadā | nirmito nirmimītānya :m sa
punah || tathā nirmitakākārah kartā yat karma tatkrtam | tadyathā nirmitenānyo nir

nirmitas tathā || kleśāh karmāni dehāś ca kartāraś ca phalāni ca | gandharvanagarā

marīcisvapnasa :mnibhāh || Siderits and Katsura 2013: 191. The 'city of the gandl

popular Indian example of an unreal appearance: a city seen in the sky that is not
[93] For further discussion of this point see Westerhoff 2016a.
[94] ato ya ekatyā durvijñeyān sūtrāntānmahāyānapratisa :myuktā :m gambhīrā :m s
sa :myuktānābhiprāyikārthanirūpitā :m śrutvā yathābhūta :m bhā:sitasyārthamavi
pyāyogavihitena tarkamātrakeṇa iva :m d:r:s:tayo bhavanty eva :m vādina:h | praj

sarvam etat tattvam | yaś ca iva :m paśyati sa samyak paśyatīti | te:sā :m prajñapty

vastumātrasyābhāvātsaiva prajñapti:h sarveṇa sarva :m na bhavati | kuta:h puna:h

tattva :m bhavi:syatīti | tad anena paryāyeṇa tais tattvam api prajñaptir api tad ubl

apavādita :m bhavati | prajñaptitattvāpavādāc ca pradhāno nāstiko veditavya:h, W
6: 1. 46.
See Willis 1979: 161, Engle 2016: 81–2.

postulating substantially existent entities. Nāgārjuna stresses the fact that even

though things like chariots and pots are neither fundamentally real nor based

on something fundamentally real, they can still perform various functions such

as carrying wood or water. As a monetary economy does not need anything

intrinsically valuable to serve as a guarantor of the value of currencies, but can sv

function by relying on the beliefs and expectations of the participants in its requir

functionality
economic exchanges, so things do not need to be grounded in something

existing by svabhāva to do what they are supposed to do. As long as sufficiently

many people participate in a process of joint designation the entities thus

designated will continue to exist. This point about the functional efficacy of

everyday entities is particularly important for the Mādhyamika, since a charge Th

he sees himself confronted with frequently is that of moral nihilism. If, as the mo:

opponent claims, the Mādhyamika rejects the existence of all things, he will

also reject the existence of karmic potentials. But if this is rejected it seems as if

a main incentive for moral behaviour for ordinary people is gone. How can

those not yet convinced of the virtues of altruism be held in check without arguing that their non-virtuous actions will, via their karmic fruits, undermine their own selfish desires? Add to this the fact that the Perfection of Wisdom texts the Madhyamaka is based on do not exempt bodhisattvas, the Buddha, and liberation from its all-encompassing view of emptiness, and we may be forgiven for asking to what extent we are still dealing with a form of Buddhism here. It is therefore essential that the Mādhyamika distinguishes existence without svabhāva (the way all things exist) from non-existence (as, for example, flowers in the sky and sons of barren women are non-existent), and underlines that the emptiness characterized by absence of svabhāva does not entail emptiness of functional efficacy. The fact that things are insubstantial does not mean that they cannot interact with one another, and for this reason cyclic existence, the Buddhist path, and its goal, liberation, have a firm place in the Madhyamaka worldview.

c. Contradictions and Nāgārjuna's thought

A casual reading of Nāgārjuna works is likely to give the reader the impression that contradictory statements form an essential part of his philosophy. He frequently employs of a specific form of argument, the tetralemma or catu:sko:ti, which lists four apparently exclusive and jointly exhaustive possibilities, all of which are then rejected. Consider the following example from the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā:

'It is empty' is not to be said, nor 'It is non-empty,' nor that it is both, nor that it is

neither; it is said only for the sake of instruction.[95]

[95] 22:11 śūnyam iti na vaktavyam aśūnyam iti vā bhavet | ubhaya :m nobhaya :m

prajñaptyartha :m tu kathyate, Siderits and Katsura 2013: 247.

When we reject the view that things are empty, does that not mean that we say

that they are non-empty? Denying both seems to be contradictory. But even if

we have managed to do so, Nāgārjuna then points out that the denial of both is

to be rejected as well. How are we supposed to make sense of passages such as

these? Moreover, contradictions do not seem to be limited to tetralemma-style

arguments. At the end of the twenty-fifth chapter of the Mūlamadhyamaka-
kārikā Nāgārjuna points out that: 'This halting of cognizing everything, the

halting of hypostatizing, is blissful. No dharma whatever was ever taught by the

Buddha to anyone.'[96] After spending twenty-five densely argued chapters to

explain the teachings of the Buddha (whom Nāgārjuna praises as the 'best of

teachers' at the beginning of the work), we now learn that the Buddha never

taught anything. We seem to find ourselves in the territory of the Perfection of

Wisdom texts again, where one sentence asserts something which the next one

then goes on to deny.

Non-classical logic

Some modern interpreters have tried to address the puzzling occurrence of

contradictions in Nāgārjuna's arguments by suggesting that he may have

adopted a non-classical logic that tolerates contradictions.[97] While these inter-
pretations do not lack a certain technical ingenuity, they appear to be more of a

further development of certain Madhyamaka ideas than an attempt at a

rational reconstruction of what Nāgārjuna might have had in mind when he

composed these verses. Neither in Nāgārjuna's own writings nor in those of

his Indian commentators do we find clear evidence that they were trying to

develop a non-classical logic, nor that he challenged the principle of the

excluded contradiction as a logical law.[98] To this extent we need to under-
stand the contradictions proclaimed by the Perfection of Wisdom texts that

the Mādhyamikas set out to explicate as merely apparent, but not as actual

contradictions.
There is, however, another hermeneutic device to help us understand what is

going on with these apparently contradictory statements that has a clearly

The theory of the
attested historical status. This is the theory of the two truths. This doctrine

two truths
occurs in some form or other in most systems of Buddhist philosophy, though

the Mādhyamikas are probably those that made the greatest use of it. It claims

that we have to distinguish two different kinds of truth (or two different kinds

of reality—the Sanskrit term satya can refer to either), a conventional truth of

everyday reality (sa :mv:rtisatya) and an ultimate truth (paramārthasatya). Note

that we are dealing here with two kinds of truth, not with a truth and a falsity.

[96] 25:24 sarvopalambhopaśamah prapañcopaśamah śivah |

—

—

—

na kva cit kasyacit kaścid dharmo buddhena deśitah, Siderits and Katsura 2013: 3

—

97 See Priest and Garfield 2002, Garfield and Priest 2009, Priest and Routley 198

Tillemans (2009) for a discussion of dialetheism in view of the fact that 'contradi

anathema . . . for later Mādhyamikas' (96).
98 Ruegg 1969: 384.

Both conventional and ultimate truth have their uses, though they differ in

soteriological efficacy. Conventional truth allows us to achieve innerworldly

aims (build an aeroplane, calculate the value of π), while ultimate truth is what

we have to realize in order become liberated from sa :msāra; it describes the

ultimate nature of reality.[99]
We can then use this distinction to dispel the appearance of paradox in

instances of the tetralemma such as the one given above, by arguing that not all

its negations relate to the same truth. Rather, when properly understood, what

the passage from Nāgārjuna says is that we should not assert that things are

conventionally empty, since our daily interaction with them relies on the

mistaken assumption that they exist with svabhāva. Nor should we say that

they are ultimately non-empty, since when we apply Madhyamaka reasoning

to them, reasoning which is designed to uncover ultimate truths about them,

we do not find that their existence with svabhāva can be supported. If we do

not assert these two, we obviously do not assert them both. What about

rejecting them both? We cannot do so if we assume that this rejection then

gets at the ultimate truth of what reality is. When Nāgārjuna says that these

assertions about emptiness are made 'only for the sake of instruction', he

rejects the notion that they are in the business of telling us anything

about what the world is like at the most fundamental level. The Madhyamaka

only asserts them in order to refute specific misunderstandings his opponent

may have.

Similarly, we can agree that ultimately 'no dharma whatever was ever taught

by the Buddha to anyone', because at the level of ultimate truth there is no

Buddha, no dharma, and nobody listening to it. These are all only super-
impositions valid on the conventional level, and for this reason it is conven-
tionally false to say that the Buddha did not teach.

The distinction between the two truths therefore provides us with an The interpol

effective means to make sense of the seemingly contradictory statements we proc

find in Nāgārjuna's writings, and also in the Perfection of Wisdom literature.

The drawback with this interpretation is that we have to presuppose that the

sūtras and commentaries in question are incomplete; whenever they say

'there is no x' what they really mean is that there is no x at the level of

ultimate reality, even though we are still allowed to speak about x at the

level of conventional reality. There is certainly justification for this view, and

the later Tibetan scholar Tsong kha pa (1357–1419), who put great emphasis

on this 'interpolation procedure', provides a passage of from the Laṅkāvatā-
rasūtra to support it.[100] The Buddha points out to the bodhisattva Mahāmati:

[99] Whether these two characterizations of ultimate truth coincide is a complex qu

interpretation of Madhyamaka. See Siderits 2007: 200–4 for some discussion.

'Mahāmati, thinking that they are not produced intrinsically, I said that all

phenomena are not produced.'[101]

Ultimately real

The difficulty that arises when this procedure is applied too widely is that the

simulacra
negations we find in the Prajñāpāramitā literature or in Madhyamaka works

can easily look as if they only concerned a kind of scholastic epiphenomenon,

and not any kind of entity we are familiar with from everyday experience.
When the Heart Sūtra says that there is no matter, it means ultimately real

matter; when the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 verses says that a bodhisattva

cannot be found, it means an ultimately real bodhisattva; and when Nāgārjuna

says in the Vigrahavyāvartanī that he has no thesis, he means an ultimately real

thesis. We might then ask ourselves first of all what these strange ultimately

real simulacra amount to (just what is the difference between holding an

ultimately real thesis and just holding a thesis?) or why it would matter that

there are no such things (if there is no ultimately real matter, can mere matter

not equally give rise to the kind of attachment the Buddhist path tries to show

us to transcend)?[102]

If concerns such as these are raised the method of interpolation has probably

been over-applied, not only dissolving seeming contradictions but domesticat-
ing various Madhyamaka denials by restricting them to the realm of the

ultimate. But this in itself is, of course, no criticism of the distinction between

the two truths as a key hermeneutic principle for understanding Nāgārjuna's

writings, as well as the Perfection of Wisdom texts they set out to explicate.

5. The Commentators

After considering some of the origins of Madhyamaka in the Prajñāpāramitā
literature and tracing the continuity of a set of its key themes in Nāgārjuna's

works, we want to look at what happened to Indian Madhyamaka in the

roughly one thousand years between the composition of the Mūlamadhyama-
kakārikā and the eventual disappearance of scholastic Buddhism in India. This

development has produced a vast body of literature of dazzling philosophical

complexity, and attempting to do justice to it in a part of a chapter might easily

seem like a foolish undertaking. What we can do, however, is point out some

conceptual cross-sections, like a trench cut through a field of archaeological

excavation, in the hope that at least parts of the major sights come into

view. One such possible cross-section is the sequence of commentaries on

the school's foundational text, the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. In true Indian

scholastic fashion, variant interpretations and divergent conceptions of how

[101] svabhāvānutpatti :m sa :mdhāya mahāmate mayā sarvadharmā anutpannā ity u

in Candrakīrti's Prasannapadā, Poussin 1913: 504: 5–6.
[102] For a modern Tibetan criticism of this 'interpolation procedure' see Lopez 200
60.

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MADHYAMAKA

Madhyamaka was to be understood were most frequently made in the form of

commentaries that aimed to clarify what Nāgārjuna meant when composing

his major work.

Commensurate with its importance, the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā is a work Comm

that has been frequently commented on in ancient India. Of the commentaries the
makakārikā
we know of, only a single one, Candrakīrti's Prasannapadā, is preserved in its

Sanskrit original. An early commentary, the Akutobhayā (sometimes con-
sidered to be an auto-commentary by Nāgārjuna), Buddhapālita's commen-
tary, and Bhāviveka's Prajñāpradīpa are still extant in Tibetan, and further

commentaries by Piṅgala and Sthiramati are preserved in Chinese translations.
Four further commentaries, by Devaśarman, Guṇaśrī, Guṇamati (Sthiramati's

teacher), and Rāhulabhadra are, apart from some occasional quotations, lost.[103]
It is particularly interesting to note that Yogācāra masters such as Guṇamati

and Sthiramati composed commentaries on the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā.
This indicates that Nāgārjuna's main work was not primarily conceived of

as a treatise with a specific sectarian orientation, but as a fundamental

Mahāyāna text with relevance for thinkers with different basic orientations.
In our present discussion we will focus on 'the great triumvirate of Madhya-
maka commentators',[104] three scholars who are particularly important for

understanding the different kinds of interpretations Madhyamaka thought

attracted during its development in India: Buddhapālita, Bhāvikeka, and

Candrakīrti.

a. Buddhapālita

In order to discuss Buddhapālita and his commentary it is necessary to first go Th
back to a somewhat enigmatic earlier text, the Akutobhayā. This is an influ-
ential work belonging to the earliest stratum of Madhyamaka after Nāgārjuna.
The other prominent works from this period are those of Āryadeva, who is

believed to have been Nāgārjuna's direct disciple, but did not compose any

commentaries on his master's work. Already in fourth-century India there is a

tradition considering the Akutobhayā as going back to Nāgārjuna himself, a

tradition that would explain the high regard in which this text was held.[105] The Its

relationship between this text and Buddhapālita's own commentary (which, Budd

commentary
unlike the later commentaries, has no specific title—it is simply called the

[103] In addition there is also a partial Chinese version of a commentary ascribed to
[104] Huntington 1986: 17.
[105] The ascription of the Akutobhayā to Nāgārjuna has been repeatedly questione

because it quotes a stanza from Āryadeva. It is not clear, however, how conclusiv
First, the text of the Akutobhayā appears to have been somewhat fluid in the way

transmitted, so we cannot rule out that this quotation is a later interpolation. In ad

unthinkable that Nāgārjuna may have cited a work of one of his disciples, especia

renditions of the text in which Āryadeva is not referred to by the term ācārya ('ma

more modest bhadanta ('venerable', a term used to address Buddhist monks).

Buddhapālitav:rtti, 'Buddhapālita's commentary') is interesting. On the one

hand the Akutobhayā is only half the length of Buddhapālita's commentary,

and often only provides a straightforward paraphrase of Nāgārjuna's argu-
ments, while Buddhapālita often expands on the arguments and offers a greater

amount of analysis. On the other hand Buddhapālita borrows extremely

liberally from the Akutobhayā; in fact the final five chapters of both commen-
taries are virtually identical. On the whole, about a third Buddhapālita's

commentary comes straight from the Akutobhayā. What is peculiar about

this is not so much the extent of the borrowing but the fact that Buddhapālita

nowhere points out that he is citing large passages from an earlier commentary on Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. Huntington[106] has made the intriguing suggestion that the reason for this was that the Akutobhayā was not considered to be a work properly separate from Nāgārjuna's root text, but a set of explanatory notes transmitted in a somewhat fluid form together with that text, notes that may go back to oral explanations of the root verses by Nāgārjuna himself. If this was the case, it would not be so surprising that Buddhapālita does not acknowledge a previous commentator he is citing, since he is simply selecting from an elucidatory tradition considered to have co-originated with the root text itself.

This textual history is interesting because it shows that with Buddhapālita's commentary we can to a certain extent reach back to a relatively early stratum Buddhapālita's life of commentaries on Nāgārjuna's root text. Biographical infor Buddhapālita is scarce. We can approximately date him to c.470–540, and like many great Indian philosophers he seems to have been born in South India. The Tibetan tradition regards him as a direct disciple of Nāgārjuna, a claim that requires us either to accept an extraordinarily long lifespan for Nāgārjuna, or a fairly wide understanding of what 'discipleship' is taken to amount to. Tāranātha, for example, explicitly raises the possibility of Nāgārjuna taking up a vidyādhara ('knowledge-holder') form to teach disciples after having quit his earthly body.[107] In this way they would still be considered direct disciples of Nāgārjuna, even though they did not meet in human form.

The only extant work of Buddhapālita's is his commentary on Nāgārjuna's

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā; the Tibetan tradition also considers him as the

author of various other commentaries on the sūtras and tantras, but none of

these appear to have come down to us.[108]
Buddhapālita's
In his commentary Buddhapālita analyses and expands on Nāgārjuna's

commentary
arguments, and he does so exclusively in terms of prasaṅga methodology,

[106] Huntingdon 1986: 149.
[107] rig pa 'dzin pa'i lus nyid kyis [. . .] skal ldan rnams la bstan ba yang yin srid d

2007: 20.
[108] Tsonawa 1985: 14.

that is, demonstrating how Nāgārjuna's arguments identify contradictions in

the opponent's own assumptions. At the time of Buddhapālita we have already

reached a stage where marked differences in interpretation arise—Bhāviveka,

who would severely criticize Buddhapālita's expository methodology, can be

dated to about 500–570. But as we know that the textual relation between the

Akutobhayā and Buddhapālita's commentary is quite close, and since the

former did not spell out the arguments of Nāgārjuna in anything but prasaṅga

terms, we may feel more justified to understand Buddhapālita not just as an

individual commentator but as representative of a tradition of understanding

Madhyamaka arguments that considerably preceded him.[109]

b. Bhāviveka

Bhāviveka, another master of likely South Indian descent, most probably

overlapped with Buddhapālita at the beginning of the sixth century, though

we have no information on whether they ever met.[110] Unlike in the case of

Buddhapālita, who left us only one text, various of Bhāviveka's works have

been preserved.

Of primary interest for us is his 'Lamp of Wisdom' (Prajñāpradīpa), a very The

detailed commentary on the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, and one that seems to Prají

have attracted considerable attention in the Indian philosophical world. At

least two sub-commentaries were written on it, Avalokitavrata's massive work

(the longest single work in the Tibetan collection of commentarial works, the

bsTan gyur), and one by Guṇadatta, which is no longer extant.

Bhāviveka's commentary is best known for its criticism of Buddhapālita's

commentary, and for its introduction of new argumentative tools for the

exposition of Madhyamaka. In explaining Nāgārjuna's arguments, Buddhapā-
lita presents the reader with prasaṅga arguments, arguments that start by

provisionally adopting some of the opponent's theses, in order to show that a

contradiction can be derived from them. Note that this differs in at least one

important respect from a reductio ad absurdum argument. In the case of a

reductio we begin with a hypothetical premise (e.g. that there are only finitely

many prime numbers) and derive a contradiction from this. As a result, we can

[109] This is not necessarily to be understood as an argument for the greater philoso

accuracy of Buddhapālita's interpretation over later ones. That a specific commen

is earlier does not necessarily mean that it more accurately expresses the author's

greater claim to systematic validity. But it is important to be aware of the historie

interpretative approaches in order to provide a nuanced picture of their later intera
[110] We have not much biographical information on Bhāviveka, but one noteworth

his afterlife is that the Tibetan tradition considered him to have been later reborn

Lama (the lineage of the Panchen Lamas contains various Indian sages before the

Lama (1385–
1438)). Bhāviveka is also sometimes referred to as 'Bhāvaviveka' or 'Bhavya'. T

choice 'Bhāviveka' seems to be supported by the majority of evidence currently a

the matter has not been settled definitely. See Ames 2009.

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prasaṅga
then not only reject the original statement but also take the negation of the

methodology
hypothetical assumption (there are infinitely many prime numbers) as estab-
lished. A prasaṅga argument takes the first step, but not the second: the

contradiction-generating hypothesis must obviously be rejected, but the argu-
ment does not commit us to adopt its negation instead.
Bhāviveka argues that we should not just explain Nāgārjuna's arguments by

showing how they allow us to derive contradictions from the opponent's

Supplementing
assertions. In addition to this destructive enterprise, which can be best

destructive by
conceived of as clearing the ground by removing erroneous views, the

constructive

reasoning

Mādhyamika also needs to construct a set of positions of his own, and should

provide complete syllogistic proofs of these. The contrast between their differ-
ent ideas of how Nāgārjuna's thought should be explained can already be seen

from their remarks on the very first verse of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā,

where Nāgārjuna says that:
Not from themselves, not from another, not from both, nor from no cause,

do any originated entities ever exist anywhere.[111]
An example:
In commenting on Nāgārjuna's rejection of the first kind of origination,

absence of self-
origination from itself,[112] Buddhapālita points out that:
causation
To begin with, entities do not originate from their own selves, because their origin

would be pointless and because there would be no end to origination. For there is

purpose in the origination again of entities that exist by their own selves. If they c

originate again even though they exist, never would they not be originating. That,

not accepted.[113]
We can clearly see here how Buddhapālita backs up Nāgārjuna's claim (who, in

this verse, has not provided us with any reason why entities do not originate

from themselves) by providing an argument in support. The argument is a

Absurd
prasaṅga: it draws out two contradictory consequences from two slightly

consequences of
different conceptions of self-causation. First, causation is a process by which

self-causation

an existent cause brings about a not-yet-existent effect. If, as self-causation

presupposes, cause and effect are the same thing, the effect is already there

when the cause is, so that no causal relation would in fact have to take place.
Secondly, the opponent might think that things are actually more short-lived

than they appear: they pass out of existence frequently, but are immediately

replaced by near-identical copies caused by the thing that existed in the

[111] na svato nāpi parato na dvābhyā :m nāpy ahetutah | utpannā jātu vidyante bhāv

̠

̠

kecana, Siderits and Katsura 2013: 18.
[112] It is likely that one of the positions Nāgārjuna had in mind here is that of the pː
existence of

the effect in the cause (satkāryavāda) defended by Sā :mkhya. For further discuss
causation see Westerhoff 2009: 99–104.
[113] Ames 2003: 46.

previous moment. If this thing is the only cause of the copy that is produced in

the next moment, this scenario could plausibly be described as one of self-
causation. The difficulty in this case is that it is hard to explain how anything

could ever go out of existence. If all that is needed as a cause is the previously

existent thing, everything should be permanent, since the conditions for self-
copying always obtain.
Given that neither of these scenarios accurately describes how causation

occurs to us (effects follow their causes, and we regularly see things passing out

of existence), Buddhapālita can argue that these absurd consequences allow us

to reject the idea of self-causation.

Here is Bhāviveka's response to Buddhapālita's exposition:

That is not right, because no reason and example are given, and because faults sta

the opponent are not answered. Because it is a prasaṅga argument, a property to

proved and a property which proves that are opposite in meaning become manifes

reversing the original meaning: Entities originate from another, because originati(

a result and because origination has an end.[114]

Bhāviveka manages here to condense a number of points into a few words,

and it is worthwhile to unpack them carefully. First of all, he points out that

reason and example are missing from Buddhapālita's exposition. Bhāviveka
Three membered

thinks that Nāgārjuna's arguments should be presented in a commentary in syllog

the form of three-membered syllogisms, which would include reason and

example.[115] Such a syllogism would include:

1. a thesis (pratijñā) which ascribes the inferred property (sādhya-dharma)

to the subject of the argument (pak:sa);

2. a reason (hetu) which ascribes the inferring property (sādhana-dharma)

to the subject of the argument (pak:sa); and

3. an example (d:r:s:tānta) of something that has both the inferred and the

inferring property.

The syllogism that Bhāviveka supplies[116] in support of Nāgārjuna's claim

that entities do not originate from themselves is the following:

1. Thesis: The six sense-organs [the subject] do not originate from them-
A syllogism

selves [the inferred property];
establishing

absence of
2. Reason: because the sense-organs exist [the inferring property];

self-causation
3. like consciousness.

114 Ames 2003: 46–7.
115 This form of the syllogism was introduced by Diṅnāga (c.400–
80) and constitutes a stream-
lined form of the five-membered syllogism familiar from Nyāya.
116 Ames 2003: 50.

Bhāviveka only presents us with a particular instance of a general thesis

(Nāgārjuna is not specifically talking about the sense-organs), but he clearly

presupposes that a similar syllogism can be produced for any potential candi-
date for self-production. The sense-organs do not cause themselves because

they already exist, and anything that presently exists no longer requires causal

production. With the example Bhāviveka mentions, consciousness (caitanya),

he makes a reference to the Sā :mkhya satkāryavāda theory of the pre-existence

of the effect in the cause. The Sā :mkhya consider caitanya to be another name

of puru:sa, a pure consciousness that is eternal, non-arising, and therefore

also not self-arising.[117] However, one need not follow Sā :mkhya in order to

accept this example. Mādhyamikas also accept the existence of consciousness

at the conventional level, and things that are already there do not need to

be produced.

When Bhāviveka speaks about 'reversing the original meaning' he has in

mind a reader of Buddhapālita's commentary who, having been convinced by

the prasaṅga argument that self-causation has the contradictory consequence

of producing something that is already there and continuing to produce it

perpetually, might then infer that for this reason objects must be caused by

what is different from them, as we experience causation to produce what is

not there, and not doing so incessantly. In other words, the reader would have

Misunderstanding misunderstood the prasan
˙ga argument as a reductio, where the rejection of
prasan˙ga as
one alternative entails the adoption of the other. Bhāviveka believes that

reductio
this is a danger connected with employing the prasaṅga methodology. As it

does not endorse any positive thesis, people might mistakenly adopt the

negation of a rejected option, even though it is fundamentally as deficient as

the original position.
Two kinds of
He underlines this point by referring to the difference between two kinds of

negation
negation, implicative (paryudāsa) and non-implicative negation (prasajya-
prati:sedha). Originally a grammatical distinction, it was first given a substantial

philosophical role by Bhāviveka. An implicative negation automatically

endorses one of the remaining alternatives, as when saying that a man is a

non-Brahmin we assert that he is a member of one of the other castes. On the

other hand, we can also formulate matters slightly differently by saying that a

man is not a Brahmin, and mean by this that he does not belong to any of the

other castes either (because the system of castes is not applicable to him, or

because he lives at a time when there are no castes, and so on). The exact way in

which implicative and non-implicative negation are expressed grammatically

does not matter; what is important is that we mean different things by them.
Now Bhāviveka argues that when Nāgārjuna negates a proposition, such as

¹¹⁷ Ames 2003: 51.

that things are self-caused, he does so in a non-
implicative manner, without Nāgārjuna as

committing himself to any of the other ways in which a thing could be causally e
implicative
produced. From a Madhyamaka perspective this makes sense, since non-
negations

implicative negations are usually employed when we want to reject a presup-
position made both by a statement and its negation. When we deny that the

number three is red, we do not want to say that it has another colour instead

(that is, negate it in an implicative manner), but deny that numbers could have

any colour at all. In the same way, the different alternatives rejected in

Madhyamaka arguments have the shared property of presupposing the exist-
ence of objects with svabhāva in some form, and if we negate them individually

by non-implicative negation that is motivated by our rejection of this under-
lying assumption.
Bhāviveka's insistence on spelling out Madhyamaka arguments in the form Abse

of syllogisms seems to conflict somewhat with the fact that Nāgārjuna himself sy

Mūlamadhya-
did not provide these in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. If they are so important, ma

why were they not provided by the Master himself? Bhāviveka's explanation is

that Nāgārjuna, as the author of a root text (sūtrakāra), obviously wants to

condense a considerable amount of complex material into the shortest possible

form. This is fine for those students who have the mental capacity to under-
stand the text in this form, but for all the others more extensive forms of

explanation have to be provided. It is the task of the commentator to draw out

the reasoning implicit in the root text and to unwrap it as much as possible in

order to make it comprehensible to its audience. Explaining arguments by

rendering them explicitly in syllogistic structure makes their underlying

machinery visible and thereby generates maximal perspicuity. This is the

reason, Bhāviveka claims, why the commenators of Nāgārjuna should explain

his arguments in this way, even though he did not do so himself.[118]
Bhāviveka's explication of Madhyamaka arguments in terms of syllogisms Madh

implies the ascription of a thesis (or a multitude of theses) to Nāgārjuna, since arg

philosophical
it is such theses that syllogisms set out to establish. For Bhāviveka, this has these

the immediate advantage of preventing the danger of a student getting

lost amongst the profusion of prasaṅga arguments, where seemingly every

proposition is negated. The student may then endorse the wrong kind of

positive thesis, namely one that is simply the opposite of a negated thesis and Pre

that is rejected as well (as in the case of someone who thought that Nāgārjuna's v

thesis
denial of self-origination implied origination from other things). Of course,

[118] Candrakīrti later replies that Nāgārjuna, when writing his auto-
commentary to the Vigra-
havyāvartanī, did not spell out his arguments in syllogistic form, so why should w

commentators like Buddhapālita to do so? (Ruegg: 2002: 42–
3). Bhāviveka might respond by

pointing out that such syllogistic elaborations are specifically for the benefit of la

can no longer understand the original meaning in its full complexity, so that there

suppose that the Master himself would have composed a commentary in this way

Bhāviveka has to defend himself against the charge that such an attempt,

helpful as it may seem, goes against certain key assertions of Nāgārjuna's,

who seems to reject that he holds a philosophical thesis quite explicitly. One of

the most famous passages in this respect is verse 29 of the Vigrahavyāvartanī,

where Nāgārjuna asserts that:
If I had any thesis, that fault would apply to me. But I do not have any thesis, so t

indeed no fault for me.[119]
Quotations such as these can easily be multiplied.[120] What Bhāviveka needs

to argue (and there is a certain leeway for doing so) is that the type of 'thesis'
svabhāva-free
(pratijñā) Nāgārjuna rejects here is a specific kind of thesis (one, we would

theses
think, existing in terms of svabhāva, and thereby based on an objective,

mind-independent world–language link),[121] and that the theses ascribed to

Nāgārjuna in his explicative syllogisms are of an altogether harmless,

svabhāva-free kind that is not affected by Madhyamaka criticism. Still, do the

theses Bhāviveka ascribes to Nāgārjuna not concern the ultimate, and does

Nāgārjuna not hold that the ultimate is beyond concepts?
Bhāviveka points out that while it is indeed true that there is a sense in which

the ultimate truth is free from conceptualization (ni:sprapañca) and hence is

Different kinds of
inexpressible and cannot be captured by any thesis, there is also another sense,

conventional truth which he calls 'purified worldly knowledge'(śuddha-laukika-jñāna), which is

accessible to concepts.[122] Bhāviveka therefore takes the position that not all

mundane knowledge is equally bad, and that below the level of enlightened

beings, who can access the ultimate truth in a non-conceptual sense, there is

also room for improved worldly cognitions, cognitions that are philosophically

more sophisticated than those of the common cowherd, while at the same time

still firmly located in the realm of the conceptual.
Apart for seeing them as ensuring that Nāgārjuna's message would not be

misunderstood because of its largely negative methodology, Bhāviveka had at

Theses and
least two other reasons to stress the ascription of specific theses to Nāgārjuna's

debates
Madhyamaka enterprise. The first has to do specifically with debate. We will

remember that debates were of tremendous importance in ancient India for the

promotion of ideas, for the prestige of individual scholars and scholarly

communities, and for the patronage and its benefits that came with this

prestige. In order to ensure the intellectual standing of Buddhism and the

worldly endowments of its institutions, it was essential for Buddhist scholars to

participate in debates, and one of Bhāviveka's aims in his works is to facilitate

[119] yadi kācana pratijñā tatra syān na me tat e:sa me bhaved do:sa:h | nāsti ca man tasmān naivāsti me do:sa:h; Westerhoff 2010: 63, Williams-Wyant 2017.
[120] Huntington 2003: 71–4.
[121] For more on this idea see Westerhoff 2009: 17–18, 194–8; 2010: 63–5.
[122] See Eckel 2008: 50, 210–11.

such debate for the Mādhyamikas.[123] Unfortunately, Madhyamaka looks like a

philosophical school that does not seem to sit well with debating conventions.
If the Mādhyamika wants to enter into a debate with non-Buddhist parties he

would have to play by the rules. And the rules of debate, such as those found in

the Nyāyasūtra, specify that opponent and proponent must have a thesis they

each want to defend. Mere intellectual sniping is not allowed; the Naiyāyikas

specify a particular violation of debate rules called vitaṇ :dā in the case of a

debater who only wants to refute his opponent, without having a position he

himself defends.
Bhāviveka is clear in pointing out that the Madhyamaka does not commit The Ma

the vitaṇ :dā-
fault. In fact, according to him, Nāgārjuna himself came up with a thesis about th

nature of reality
thesis about the nature of reality he sets out to establish in verse 18:9 of the

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, where he says:
Not to be obtained by means of another, pacified, free from hypostatization, with

conceptualization, not having many separate meanings—
that is the nature of reality.[124]
Of course, it is evident that all the terms Nāgārjuna uses in this verse are

negative. However, we have something here that is presented in the form of a

thesis 'to encourage those who are just beginning'.[125] Even though reality is

ultimately beyond words, such negative characterizations can provide the basis

of an eventual non-conceptual realization of the nature of reality.[126] From his

commentary on this passage we can see clearly how Bhāviveka tries to bring

together the need for a thesis to be defended on the one hand, and the

Madhyamaka reluctance to make any pronouncements on the ultimate nature

of reality on the other. Elsewhere, Bhāviveka is more explicit, formulating the

basic thesis of Madhyamaka himself: all things are empty of intrinsic nature

(svabhāva), and that is their nature.[127]

By establishing that Madhyamaka has a thesis to defend, Bhāviveka could

ensure that the thought of Nāgārjuna was able contend in the intellectual arena

of ancient Indian debate, demanding responses and setting out to refute

contending positions. Ascribing a thesis to Madhyamaka thus appeared not

just to have benefits for the Buddhist account seen from the inside (ensuring

that amongst all the negations the wrong affirmative statement was not

embraced by mistake), but also from the outside perspective, making sure

[123] See Bouthillette 2017.
[124] aparapratyaya :m śānta :m prapañcair aprapañcitam | nirvikalpam anānārtham

lak:saṇam, Siderits and Katsura 2013: 202.
[125] skye bo las dang po dag yang dag par dbugs dbyung ba'i phyir, D 3853, dbu n

Eckel 2008: 52.
[126] Eckel 2008: 52.
[127] kho bo cag gi phyogs la ni ngo bo nyid stong pa nyid yin te | chos rnams kyi n

Eckel 2008: 52–3, Ames 2003: 46.

that Madhyamaka philosophy could effectively debate with its Buddhist and

non-Buddhist opponents.
Theses and
The final reason for Bhāviveka's concern to elucidate the Madhyamaka

doxography
thesis is connected with this interest in doxography. His Madhyama-
kah:rdayakārikā and auto-commentary constitute the first surviving example

of the doxographical genre in which separate philosophical schools are dis-
cussed in individual chapters. In this work Bhāviveka deals with two Buddhist

and four non-Buddhist schools, the Śrāvakas and Yogācāras, as well as with

Sā :mkhya, Vaiśe:sika, Vedānta, and Mīmā :msā. The chapters begin with the

opponent stating his position, followed by Bhāvavikeka's reply. This structure

makes a detailed discussion of rival positions possible, and presents them with

the opportunity to describe their positions in a connected way, rather than

using the opposing viewpoints as a mine from which objections are drawn

more or less at random in order to explain certain aspects of the main theory

being discussed. In also allows one to show how Buddhist thought relates to

various non-Buddhist schools, achieving a greater integration of the Buddhist

debate within the larger intellectual context of the time. Furthermore, one key

aim of such doxographic treatises was to establish a doxographic hierarchy,[128]
that is, to set out different schools in ascending order of truth. This idea

mirrors the early Buddhist distinction between sūtras with interpretable mean-
ing (neyārtha) and those that did not need to be interpreted but could be taken

literally (nīthārtha). Applied to doxographies, this distinction entails that

different doctrines are not described as a set of varying wrong views that differ

from the one correct view the author wants to defend; instead they are arranged

in a hierarchy with the view to be defended at the top. The remaining doctrines

can then be arranged in a sequence of positions that succeed in approaching

the final view more and more closely. It is then natural to assume that if

Madhyamaka is to be included in these doxographies it is essential that it is

described as having a set of views to defend, and if a Madhyamaka author

wants to structure a doxography such that Madhyamaka comes out at the top,

all other positions have to be described as more or less accurate approxima-
tions of this final view.

If we look at Bhāviveka's spelling out of Nāgārjuna's arguments in terms of

syllogisms, and the specification of Madhyamaka theses this implies, he seems

to follow a very sensible expository strategy. He worries that a purely negative,

prasanˑga-style exposition of Nāgārjuna that, 'based on what their opponents

[128] See Ames 2003: 75. The construction of such hierarchies is very widespread i

philosophical texts. Already in the Chāndogya Upani:sad we find the sage Prajāp

Indra about the nature of the real self by guiding him through a series of gradual

sophisticated views (8: 7–15, Radhakrishnan 1969: 501–12, Olivelle 1996: 171–
6). It is interesting

to note that Prajāpati does not simply tell Indra that all the lower views are defici

work out the limitations of each view for himself before introducing a more soph

accept, evokes a consequence that is unacceptable to their opponents',[129] might

be misunderstood by generating unwarranted affirmative statements. He is also

concerned that Madhyamaka should find its rightful place in Indian intellec-
tual life. To this end it was necessary to present Madhyamaka positions in a

way that could be defended in debates and included in doxographical hier-
archies. Why, then, would these apparently harmless and reasonable exposi-
tory points generate such forceful criticisms by later Mādhyamika authors, and

why does the Buddhist tradition consider Bhāviveka's works to mark the

beginning of a key division of Madhyamaka into two incompatible sub-
schools, the Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika? Before addressing this question we

need to consider the other central figure in this dispute: Candrakīrti.
c. Candrakīrti
Candrakīrti lived during the first half of the seventh century; as with most

Indian thinkers, very little is known about his life. According to Tibetan

accounts he was born in southern Indian and was a monk at Nālandā.[130]
Like Nāgārjuna, Tibetan sources describe him as either very long lived or as

having obtained a form of immortality.[131] Traditional accounts mention his

magical abilities, which include milking a picture of a cow drawn on a wall in

order to supply the monks of Nālandā with milk and butter, and animating a Lege

stone lion to frighten away a hostile army threatening the monastery, which Cand

philosophical
promptly flees in terror.[132] There is a clear philosophical significance to these sigr

stories that make their connection with a Madhyamaka master particularly apt.
The theory of emptiness entails that things exist without an intrinsic nature or

substantial core (svabhāva), but that this does not keep them from fulfilling

their function at a conventional level. In fact this is precisely the point

Nāgārjuna's opponent raises at the beginning of the Vigrahavyāvartanī, and

Nāgārjuna responds by saying that empty things can still fulfil their functions,

an empty chariot can carry wood, an empty blanket can warm, and so on.[133]
These stories about Candrakīrti underline the efficacious power of the merely

conventional by ascribing additional powers to things that are nothing more

than representations. A painted cow cannot give milk, and a stone lion cannot

roar, but the story that they can (or the illusory appearance produced by

Candrakīrti that they can, depending on how we interpret the story), when

[129] This is Jayānanda's definition (Cabezón 2003: 310).
[130] Once again contemporary Buddhist scholarship distinguishes various authors t

called Candrakīrti. Of particular importance is a commentator on the Guhyasamāj
times referred to as Candrakīrti II or the 'tantric Candrakīrti'.
[131] Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1970: 199. In contradiction to contemporary acco

Candrakīrti is also sometimes described as having lived during the later part of N

(Tsonawa 1985: 16.). This is of course less strange than it sounds if one accepts t

long lifespan traditionally attributed to Nāgārjuna.
[132] Tsonawa 1985: 17–18.
[133] 22, Yonezawa 2008: 218: 8–11; Westerhoff 2010: 27.

read in a Madhyamaka context, stresses that all causal efficacy there is ever

going to be flows from the merely conventional.
Candrakīrti's
Candrakīrti's key works are, first, a comprehensive commentary on Nāgārjuna's

works

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, the 'Clear Words' (Prasannapadā), and second, a

major independent work in verse together with an auto-commentary,

called 'Introduction to Madhyamaka' (Madhyamakāvatāra). This latter text

subsequently became extremely influential in Tibet. Rather than Nāgārjuna's

own foundational work, Tibetan scholars regarded the 'Introduction to

His status in Tibet Madhyamaka' as the seminal text for the study of Madhyamak

from all schools of Tibetan Buddhism wrote commentaries on this text, and

it was included as one of the five 'key texts' into the curriculum of the dGe lugs

pa school.

Given his exalted status in the Tibetan intellectual world, we might think

that Candrakīrti's thought was also very influential in India. Surprisingly, this

is far from the case. Even though Candrakīrti's works were preserved (and in

His status in India fact his Prasannapadā is the only one of all the commentaries c

main work that is still extant in Sanskrit), Candrakīrti's place in the Indian

intellectual landscape was—to put it mildly—inconspicuous during several

centuries after he composed his works. We know of only one commentator

on Candrakīrti's works, Jayānanda, who lived during the twelfth century and

wrote a commentary on his Madhyamakāvatāra. What is even more surprising

is that Candrakīrti did not leave more of a mark in interactions with views

he criticized. Given his sustained criticism of Bhāviveka's commentary on

Nāgārjuna, we might expect that Avalokitavrata (about 700 CE), the author of

the massive subcommentary on Bhāviveka's commentary, would devote a

significant amount of space to defend the text he is commenting upon against

Candrakīrti's attacks. In fact all Avalokitavrata does is mention Candrakīrti as

one of the eight authors who wrote commentaries on Nāgārjuna's Mūlamad-
hyamakakārikā, without discussing Candrakīrti's sustained criticism. While

this fact does not allow us to infer too much about Avalokitravrata's own view

of Candrakīrti's arguments (he might have thought that they were so deficient

as to be unworthy of response, or so devastating that he did not know what to

say), it does provide good evidence that Avalokitavrata thought that it was

possible to write a commentary on Bhāviveka's exposition of Nāgārjuna with-
out giving an account of Candrakīrti's criticism, and nobody would think he

was leaving out anything obvious or declining to discuss trenchant criticism.
Even highly influential later Madhyamaka authors, such as Śāntarak:sita

(8th century) and Kamalaśīla (c.740–95), whose views do not at all cohere

well with Candrakīrti, fail respond to his arguments or even mention him. This

neglect of Candrakīrti's writings continued with the early transmission of

Indian Buddhism to Tibet, from its first introduction up to about 1000 CE.
While practically all of the key Indian Madhyamaka writers were translated

into Tibetan, Candrakīrti's main texts were not translated until the eleventh

century.[134]
Candrakīrti strongly disagreed with Bhāviveka's exposition of Nāgārjuna's

arguments and tried to defend Buddhapālita's interpretative stance against Conne

Bhāviveka's exposition. His main point is the observation that, due to the betwee

argumentative
curious nature of Madhyamaka thought, apparently procedural or exegetical proc

matters, such as what format to present them in (in terms of prasaṅga-
philosophical

content
arguments or as syllogisms), could in fact not be confined to the merely formal,

but have direct implications for the status of conventional reality. We can

clearly see this in connection with Bhāviveka's emphasis on spelling out

Madhyamaka arguments in terms of syllogisms. Such syllogisms bring with

them a thesis that the syllogism is an argument for, a thesis that the Mādhya-
mika holds independent (svatantra) of whatever their opponent accepts. As we

have noted before, there seems to be a strong current in Nāgārjuna's works to

reject the acceptance of exactly such theses. We are no longer concerned here

with the purely topic-neutral question of the best framework for explaining

Madhyamaka teachings, because certain frameworks bring assumptions with

them that have relevance at the level of the contents of the theory.[135]
That syllogisms bring theses with them is not the only reason Candrakīrti

distrusts them as expository devices for Madhyamaka. If we accept a syllogism

we also have to be acquainted with its different parts, the subject, the inferred

property, and so on, as well as with the various formal properties their relations

must exemplify for the syllogism to be valid. According to the traditional Indian S

conception, all such knowledge is based on epistemic instruments (pramāṇa), epis

instruments
such as perception or inference. Yet early Madhyamaka is very critical of these

epistemological notions; Nāgārjuna discusses them at length in the Vigrahavyā-
vartanī, and Candrakīrti spells out his reasons for rejecting them in a variety of

places in his works. In the Madhyamakāvatāra he points out that:

If ordinary cognitions were epistemic instruments (pramāṇa), then mundane cogn
tions would see reality as it is. Then what necessity would there be for those othe

beings? What purpose would the noble path serve?[136]

[134] Two exceptions are his commentaries on Nāgārjuna's Yukti:sa:s:tikā and Śūny

presumably because they were the only Indian commentaries on these texts. See V
20.

[135] The closest example of this difficulty in the contemporary context may be the

kinds of proof that an intuitionist mathematician can appeal to. Because the intuit

assume that all mathematical facts are eternally settled in some Platonic realm, he

example, prove a statement by use of a reductio. Such proofs presuppose that sin

A obtains, showing that A leads to a contradiction allows us to prove not A. But t

is something that the intuitionist cannot accept. The introduction of some suppose
neutral

machinery in terms of allowed proof techniques has thus been shown to reintrodu

philosophical assumptions through the back door.

[136] 6:30, loka :h pramāṇa :m yadi tattvadarśī syāl loka evety aparai:h kim āryai:h

bhavec ca kāryam mūdha :h pramāṇa :m na hi nāma yukta:h, Li 2015.

Yet it is a common topos of Buddhist thought, going back to the very beginning

of Buddhism, that the naive, unreflected, untrained cognition of the world get

its nature thoroughly wrong. This is the reason why we need 'noble beings'
such as the Buddha with sufficiently purified cognitions to show us a path we

can follow so that we ourselves can see reality as it is. Ordinary cognition is so

shot through with mistaken superimpositions resulting from ignorance that we

cannot rely on it to give us a dependable account of conventional truth.
Candrakīrti fears that Bhāviveka's appeal to syllogisms will bring in its wake

the traditional Indian epistemological picture of things that are by their

inner nature instruments we can use to obtain knowledge of the world (pra-
māṇas), and others that by their nature are mind-independent objects this

knowledge is knowledge of (prameya). This picture cannot be accepted by the

Mādhyamika.[137]
Madhyamaka and
Candrakīrti also sees problems with Bhāviveka's emphasis on the import-
debate
ance of Madhyamaka entering into a debate with rival systems. First, he holds

that Nāgārjuna did not teach the arguments in his various works 'out of

fondness for debate',[138] that is, to defeat the opponent's position and to

establish his own view. In his Madhyamakāvatāra he makes it quite clear

that attachment to one's own view is something to be given up:
Attachment to one's own view, and likewise anger at the view of others, are mere

conceptions.
Therefore, those who eliminate attachment and anger and analyse correctly swiftl

attain liberation.[139]
Yet it seems as if engagement in debate in this way brings about precisely the

kind of attachment to one's own position that the Mādhyamika wants to avoid. Second, debates must obviously begin from a common ground; assumptions

that are not common ground cannot be expected to have any probative force

for both parties (a Buddhist and a Naiyāyika will not, for example, regard each

svabhāva at the
other's foundational sūtras as authoritative). But since the Buddhist's opponent

level of
will conceptualize certain parts of the world as existing by svabhāva, the

conventional
reality?
Buddhist will have to accept these claims at least at the level of conventional

reality. This, Candrakīrti argues, reduces Madhyamaka to a kind of crypto-realism.
[137] Both Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti do, however, set out to develop a conception

instruments and objects that does not appeal to intrinsic natures. They argue that

can profitably employ both these concepts, it is essential that we realize that they

on each other for their existence: there cannot be epistemic instruments without o

cognize, nor can there be epistemic objects without instruments. For further discu

Westerhoff 2010, Siderits 2011a.
[138] Madhyamakāvatāra 6: 118, na vādalobhād vihito vicāras tattvam tu śāstre kath
tyai, Li 2015, Huntington 2003: 77.
[139] Madhyamakāvatāra 6:119, svadrstirāgo 'pi hi kalpanaiva tathānyad

:r:s:tāv api yaś ca ro:sa:h |
vidhūya rāga :m pratigha :m ca tasmād vicārayan ksipram upaiti muktim, Li 2015

MADHYAMAKA

We are no longer dealing with a system that rejects entities existing by svabhāva, but rather with one that sides with the Mādhyamika's opponent in accepting such entities, the only difference being that he follower of Bhāviveka will relegate the existence of svabhāva to the conventional, not the ultimate level. The denial of intrinsic natures characteristic of Madhyamaka seems to be no longer on the table, instead the argument now appears to be about what kind of reality should be assigned to them.[140] Candrakīrti believes that something has gone radically wrong here. First of all, Nāgārjuna spends a considerable amount of time in his foundational work to demonstrate the contradictory nature of entities existing by svabhāva. How could we then believe that the Buddhist should incorporate them into their own theory of what reality is like at the level of everyday interaction? Secondly, we might well wonder whether the conventionally real intrinsic natures we have now intro-duced will not be able to function as objects of clinging just as well as the previous ultimately existent ones. If the key quality that keeps us locked in cyclic existence is grasping, why does it matter whether we develop unwhole-some emotional attitudes towards our existent self, a self that exists with svabhāva conventionally (or other conventionally existent objects)? The overall result seems to be the same. We now see that what originally looked like a methodological disagreement about how to spell out Nāgārjuna's arguments Onto has at this stage been transformed into an ontological debate about what kind disa

between
of things exist (this dimension of the dispute between Candrakīrti and Bhāvi-
Candrakīrti and

veka was later stressed by the fifteenth-
century Tibetan scholar Tsong kha pa). Bhāviveka

A final point of Bhāviveka's exposition that might create problems for the

Mādhyamika is his fondness for doxography. If we arrange various systems of

thought in a doxographic map, and additionally consider this to be hierarch-
ically organized, with the systems discussed earlier being regarded as less

accurate than the later ones, we have to assume that there are different ways

of organizing conventional reality. Obviously none of the systems discussed

(apart from possibly the final one, Madhyamaka) is able to provide us with an

account of ultimate reality, so what they must do is provide us with gradually

better accounts of the conventional reality, that is, the world we all live in. But Nō

Candrakīrti makes it clear that he does not accept such a stratification of the of co

reality
conventional that is based on its philosophical analysis. According to him,

conventional truth is to be identified with 'what even people like cowherds and

women recognize' (gopālān˙ganājanaprasiddha), that is, with a view of the

world that treats the regularities of the conventional world at face-value,

without trying to come up with a series of theories of what is going on at the

underlying metaphysical level.

140 See Tillemans 2003: 108.

Candrakīrti is therefore convinced that Bhāviveka's commentarial technique

is not just to be assessed as an expository device one may or may not

find useful, but that it brings with it a host of philosophical assumptions that

a Mādhyamika should be wary of accepting. It comes with the idea that

Nāgārjuna held particular theses he sets out to establish (rather than just

refuting those who, according to the Mādhyamika view, see the world incor-
rectly), that there are reliable epistemic instruments, that entities with intrinsic

nature (svabhāva) exist at the level of conventional reality, and that a philo-
sophical analysis of the conventional can supply us with better and better

(though no best) theories of the nuts and bolts that underlie the working of

the world. As we have just seen, Candrakīrti believes that all of these contra-
dict key Madhyamaka ideas and is for this reason highly critical of Bhāvive-
ka's interpretation.

The Prāsanˑgika–
The later Buddhist tradition saw Candrakīrti's criticism of Bhāvikeka as the

Svātantrika
decisive point where the Madhyamaka tradition broke up into two distinct sub-
distinction
schools: the Prāsanˑgika-Madhyamaka, who follow Candrakīrti and his defence

of Buddhapālita against Bhāviveka, restrict themselves to prasanˑga arguments

and do not endorse any of the consequences that Bhāviveka's style of expos-
ition brings with it; and the Svātantrikas, who follow Bhāviveka, and accept

theses, epistemic instruments, and svabhāva at the conventional level, defend-
The distinction as
ing the utility of the philosophical analysis of the conventional. Understood in

a doxographic

this way, the split into two sub-schools is certainly a doxographic fiction. Even

fiction
though Bhāviveka was highly critical of Buddhapālita, his commentator

Avalokitavrata does not appear to draw a distinction between the understand-
ing of the two truths the two authors held.[141] If Bhāviveka had perceived a great

rift between his interpretation of Nāgārjuna and that of Buddhapālita, it is

certainly peculiar that he mentions them all in the same breath. More straight-
forwardly, even the terms Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika were not used by Indian

Mādhyamikas to describe their own positions, but are retranslations from

terms later Tibetan doxographers used in order to provide a systematic

description of the different views Madhyamaka authors held. Apart from

matters of terminology, it is also highly doubtful that Candrakīrti would have

considered himself to be defending one sub-school of Madhyamaka, while his

opponent Bhāviveka defended another one. Even though Candrakīrti does not

refer to Bhāviveka by name, it is clear that he refers to him when saying:

Even though a logician may take the side of the Madhyamaka school out of a des
parade the extent of his own dialectical skill, it is evident that the presentation of

svatantra reasoning becomes, for him, an enormous reservoir where faults pile up

after another.[142]
[141] Lopez 1987: 57–8.
[142] Huntington 2003: 82.

For Candrakīrti, Bhāviveka is not a Mādhyamika at all, but a logician

(tārkika) who only takes the side of Madhyamaka in order to show off

his argumentative abilities. From Candrakīrti's perspective we do not have

two possible interpretation of Madhyamaka, including one that counten-
ances syllogisms and conventionally real intrinsic natures, but only one.
According to him, Bhāviveka's system is not a form of Madhyamaka, but is

simply wrong.

It is difficult to determine how Candrakīrti rose from a relatively obscure Candral

Indian philosopher to becoming a highly influential thinker and chief expositor fr

of Madhyamaka. One intriguing suggestion[143] is that Candrakīrti's sudden

prominence is intimately connected with the growing popularity of tantric

scriptures. We find the triad of Madhyamaka authors Nāgārjuna, his direct

disciple Āryadeva, and Candrakīrti repeated later in Indian Buddhism as a Candra

triad of tantric authors bearing the same names, living somewhere between tantra

850 and 1000. They are key figures in the so-called Noble Lineage ('phags

lugs) of transmission of a central tantric work, the Guhyasamājatantra. The

relationship between these two triads is complex. Traditional accounts

believe these to be the same authors, while modern Buddhologists often

consider such identification as either the result of fraud (later tantric authors

claiming their works were penned by the Madhyamaka luminaries) or

confusion (even though the later authors did not claim to be identical with

the earlier ones, the tradition has mixed them up because they share the

same name). Neither of these claims is particularly helpful in trying to

understand what is going on between these two triads, considering the Tantric wo

traditional accounts as rather more gullible than they really are. Traditional Mādh

Buddhist historians like Tāranātha are very explicit in asserting that

the tantric works of these authors were not spread when Nāgārjuna and

Āryadeva 'were actually residing in this world',[144] and that some of their

works were not even composed then.[145] Yet they are also, as Tāranātha

stresses, 'uncontroversially composed by the father [Nāgārjuna] and son

[Āryadeva]'.[146] To reconcile these claims we have to make assumptions

that contemporary Buddhist studies are reluctant to accept, such as extra-
ordinarily long lifespans of the Madhyamaka masters, or assume that the

tantric works were written in the second century but then hidden and only

circulated towards the end of the first millennium, or that they were com-
posed or taught by the Madhyamaka masters at that later time in some form

other than their earthly body.
[143] Raised by Kevin Vose (2009: 27–36).
[144] 'phags pa yab sras 'dzam bu gling du dngos su bzhugs pa'i dus, Wedemeyer 2
19.
[145] mdzad [. . .] ma yin te, Wedemeyer 2007: 19.
[146] yab sras de rnams kyi mdzad par rtsod pa med la, Wedemeyer 2007: 20.

Madhyamaka and
Our knowledge of the connection between Madhyamaka as a philosophical

tantra
school and tantra is very limited, and much more work is necessary to obtain

a clear picture of the relation between the two systems of thought.[147] There

are, however, some noteworthy facts we can point out. One is that certain

conceptual distinctions in tantra were explained according to distinctions

in Madhyamaka, sometimes even mirroring the phrasing of Madhyamaka

texts.[148] Others are specific claims made in Madhyamaka works (especially

by Candrakīrti) that seem to cohere well with specific tantric claims, such as the

denial of established epistemic instruments, or a conception of ultimate reality

that is not within the purview of human cognitive activities.[149] There are also

examples of tantric writers critical of Yogācāra background assumptions,[150] a

position that again resonates with Candrakīrti's criticism of the Yogācāra

school. Vose[151] suggests that the rise in popularity of Candrakīrti's philosophy

is a result of an increased popularity of the Noble Lineage. This would mean

that the increased interest in the Guhyasamājatantra and its commentaries

towards the end of the first millennium led to an increased interest in the other,

non-tantric works of Candrakīrti, since the Buddhist tradition draws no

A backwards
boundaries between the Madhyamaka Candrakīrti and the tantric Candrakīrti.
reflection of
This may be in part a backwards reflection of popularity, where the later works

popularity?
of an author lead to an increased appreciation of the earlier ones, and in part a

result of the fact that there is some systematic affinity between some of the

positions the Madhyamaka works defend and interpretations of the tantric

texts the Noble Lineage set out to propagate. This suggestion is somewhat

speculative and needs to be investigated in much more detail. Yet if further

research supports this idea, it would supply us with a good example of the

complexity of interactions of texts, authors, schools, and styles of thinking that

characterize Indian philosophy, and of the necessity to keep these various

interacting factors in mind in order to achieve a nuanced understanding of

the way Buddhist philosophy developed in ancient India.
With the works of Candrakīrti our account has reached the middle

of the seventh century. Buddhist philosophy (and with it Madhyamaka

philosophy) had about another 500 years of activity to look forward to

before the decline of Indian Buddhist scholastic tradition at the beginning

of the thirteenth century. What characterized this subsequent phase of

Madhyamaka thought?
[147] It is usually assumed that the more natural philosophical background for tantra

we will discuss this point further in Chapter 3.
[148] An example is the adaptation of Nāgārjuna's verse on the two truths in 24:8 or

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā by the Guhyasamājottaratantra, noted by Isaacson (Wed

2007: 40, n. 83).
[149] Vose 2009: 28–9.
[150] Vose 2009: 33–4.
[151] Vose 2009: 31.

6. The Great Synthesizers: Śāntarak:sita and Kamalaśīla

Two key thinkers in the further development of Madhyamaka were Śāntarak:sita

(725–88) and his disciple Kamalaśīla (c.740–95). Their importance has a

systematic and a historical dimension. They produced an interesting synthesis

of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, and were two of the Indian teachers playing a

crucial role in the transmission of Indian Buddhism (and of Madhyamaka

thought more specifically) to Tibet in the eighth century. Thanks to this

transmission, even after its decline in the country of its origin Buddhist

philosophy of clearly Indian appearance would continue to develop in Tibet

up to the present day.

Śāntarak:sita's philosophical importance is most clearly demonstrated by two Śāṃ

of his works, the Madhyamakāla :mkāra and the Tattvasa :mgraha. The first is a r

major source for an attempt to bring together the distinct philosophical schools

of Mahāyana thought, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. We will have more to say

on this project in the following chapter.[152] The second is a long work of

over 3,000 verses, which is preserved in its original Sanskrit together with

Kamalaśīla's commentary. The Tattvasa :mgraha is of particular interest as a The

doxographical work. It discusses a wide range of philosophical concepts, such Ta

as primordial matter (prak:rti), the creator god (īśvara), words and their

referents (śabdārtha), perception (pratyak:sa), inference (anumāna), the exist-
ence of past, present, and future (traikālya), and the authoritativeness of

scripture (śruti), and gives specific attention to the views of different philo-
sophical schools on these concepts. There are, for example, detailed discussions

of the account of the self (ātman) from the perspective of Sā :mkhya, Nyāya,

Vaiśe:sika, Mīmāmsā, Advaita Vedānta, and Jainism. The Tattvasa :mgraha is a polemical work to the extent that it endeavours to show the mistakes inherent in all these non-Buddhist views (and some Buddhist ones, such as those of the Vātsīputrīyas) in order to demonstrate the truth of Śāntarak:sita's Buddhist position. Yet independent of its success in this respect, it offers us a fascinating inside view of the state of philosophical debate in eighth-century India, a time that may be considered (both in terms of the variety of theoretical options explored, and in terms of their depth of conceptual penetration) as the peak of its development. Śāntarak:sita's encyclopedic work demonstrates the extent to which Buddhist thought during this period was not an intellectually insulated enterprise, but interacted argumentatively with all the main philosophical currents of the time.

[152] See below pp. 205–12.

Śāntarak:sita and
Śāntarak:sita was also a philosopher with considerable historical significance.
the transmission
Khri srong lde btsan, the second of the 'three great dharma kings' (chos rgyal),

of Buddhism to
Tibet
invited him to Tibet, where he became the first abott (upādhyāya) of the newly

founded monastery of bSam yas, the first Tibetan monastic centre from which

the establishment of Tibetan Buddhism began. The details of the transmission

of Indian Buddhism from Nālandā monastery to the remote ranges of the

Himalayan plateau lie beyond the scope of this history, but it is important just

to recall at this point to what extent our knowledge of Indian Buddhist

philosophy is indebted to the wholesale adoption of Indian Buddhist intellec-
tual culture by the Tibetans, thereby preserving an immense amount of

philosophical works long after their disappearance in their country of origin.

Kamalaśīla and the
Śāntarak:sita's disciple Kamalaśīla played an equally important historical

council of bSam
role, primarily by determining the direction the development of Buddhism

yas
took in Tibet. He is traditionally believed to have played a decisive role at the

council of bSam yas, which took place around 797 CE. There Kamalaśīla is

supposed to have defended the Indian model of a gradual approach to enlight-
enment, which saw enlightenment as the culmination of a process of purifica-
tion based on ethical behaviour (śīla), meditation (samādhi), and insight

(prajñā), against that of the Chinese model of sudden enlightenment defended

Gradual vs.
by his opponent Heshang Moheyan (a Chinese rendering of 'Mahāyāna').
sudden
Heshang Moheyan's account saw the mind as intrinsically pure, and so all

conceptions of
enlightenment
that was required for achieving enlightenment was a direct, non-conceptual

insight into its nature. According to the Tibetan sources, the king judged

Kamalaśīla to be the winner of the debate and declared his exposition of

Madhyamaka as the official philosophical approach to be followed. Kamalaśīla

is said to have been assassinated soon afterwards by jealous members of the

defeated Chinese party.

Unclarities about

Most of the claims made about the council of bSam yas are contestable and

the council of

remain contested: whether there really was a face-to-face debate, or merely a

bSam yas

succession of texts written in response to the opponents' views; whether there

was a clear outcome of the debate; the precise nature of Heshang Moheyan's

views;[153] and even the very historicity of the Chinese monk himself.

Some facts, however, are uncontroversial. First, after this debate Tibet would

import all of its Buddhism from India (which, unlike China, was not a military

rival at the time), and Chinese Buddhism would not exert any noticeable

influence on the further development of Buddhism in Tibet. Second, there is

Kamalaśīla's

no doubt about Kamalaśīla's view of enlightenment as a result obtained after

Bhāvanākrama

following a stepwise procedure of training. One of his most important works, a

text in three parts called Bhāvanākrama ('Stages of Meditation') describes how

[153] For a detailed account see van Schaik 2015.

the progression of the path to Buddhahood proceeds in stages that build on

one another, such as the kinds of insight resulting from a succession of

study, reflection, and meditation (śrūtamayī-prajñā, cintamayī-prajñā, and bhāvanāmayī-prajñā), different successive forms of meditative concentration (samādhi), calm abiding (śamatha) and insight (vipaśyana) meditation, a sequence of meditative objects (ālambanavastu), and so on.

The parts of the Bhāvanākrama partly overlap and repeat discussions of topics. This suggests that they may have not been supposed to form part of one single treatise, but that they were related writings dealing with a common topic composed on separate occasions. It is not implausible to suggest that they might have formed part of the debate at the council of bSam yas, which may have been conducted by the exchange of texts, or may have at least involved such an exchange of texts. In the third part of the Bhāvanākrama Kamalaśīla presents an explicit refutation of the view of:

those who think that beings, under the influence of virtuous and non-virtuous acts, born Criticism of the

from mental conceptions, wander in cyclic existence after enjoying heaven etc. as

activity

result of their actions, but those who do not think of anything or do not do anythin

hope to be liberated from cyclic existence without needing to think anything or de

virtuous actions, believing that conduct such as giving has been taught only for ig

fools. In this way the entire Mahāyāna becomes negated.[154]

Absence of mental activity (amanasikāra) is, according to Kamalaśīla, not sufficient for achieving liberation. To escape sa :msāra it is not enough to put oneself into a quietistic state in which conceptual thought no longer arises, but

both skilful means (upāya) (crucially involving the practice of moral perfec-
tions such as generosity) and insight (prajñā) need to be cultivated in order to

achieve enlightenment.
Whether the approach of Heshang Moheyan was simply to 'switch off your

mind', as the above passage suggests, may reasonably be doubted.[155] Even

though in later Tibetan scholastic literature the antinomian view of Heshang

became a prime exemplar of a position beyond the pale, it is important to note

that some of Heshang's position were not suggested for the first time in the

history of Buddhist thought, and that as Kamalaśīla could quote numerous sūtra

passages in his refutation, so could Heshang in support of his own position. Once

again, a more nuanced view of the matter than simply asking 'who has got it

right' can be achieved by asking ourselves what the different terms and concepts

[154] yastu manyate cittavikalpasamutthāpitaśubhāśubhakarmavaśena sattvā :h svar

phalamanubhavanta :h sa :msāre sa :msaranti | ye punarna kiñciccintayanti nāpi k
vanti te parimucyante sa :msārāt | tasmānna kiñciccintayitavyam | nāpi dānādikuś
kevala :m mūrkhajanamadhik:rtya dānādikuśalacaryā nirdi:s:teti | tena sakalamah

bhavet, Namdol 1984: 232.
[155] van Schaik 2015: 133.

already present in the Buddhist teachings were that could be used as a basis to

develop such different views as the positions of Kamalaśīla and Heshang.

Later development

We do not have the space here to describe further details of the last phase of

of Madhyamaka

the development of Madhyamaka in India, or of its relation to the development

of tantrism for which it, together with Yogācāra, provided the conceptual

basis.[156] Let me mention two related points, however. First, the Yogācāra-

Waning of the
Madhyamka synthesis developed by Śāntarak:sita and Kamalaśīla does not

synthetic
constitute the conceptual endpoint of Indian Madhyamaka. Later, the tide began

approach
to turn again in favour of 'pure Madhyamaka', and when Dīpa :mkaraśrījñāna

(982–
1054), better known as Atiśa, added a list giving the lineage of Madhyamaka

teachers in the auto-commentary to his best-
known work, the Bodhipathapradīpa,

neither Śāntarak:sita, nor Kamalaśīla, nor any other defenders of the synthetic

approach are included.[157] And despite the initial introduction of their

system into Tibet, the approach to Madhyamaka taken there was not the

Yogācāra-Madhyamaka synthesis of Śāntarak:sita and Kamalaśīla, but

from the twelfth century onwards the interpretation of Madhyamaka proposed

by Candrakīrti, which is very critical of the Yogācāra approach, became the

dominant reading.
Madhyamaka
The second point to note is that by the beginning of the second millennium

beyond India
Madhyamaka is no longer an exclusively Indian enterprise. One way of making

this point is by considering that at this time important Madhyamaka works

were composed at places quite far away from the Indian subcontinent. One

of Atiśa's teachers, Dharmakīrti (not to be confused with the Dharmakīrti of

the logico-epistemological school discussed in Chapter 4), composed his

major work, a commentary on the Abhisamayāla :mkāra, in Suvarṇadvīpa

(modern-day Sumatra or Java), and Jayānanda, a scholar from Kashmir active

between 1050 and 1100, authored the only Indian commentary still extant on

Candrakīrti's Madhyamakāvatāra close to Wutai shan, in China's Shanxi

province.[158] In the nine centuries since its beginning in India, Madhyamaka

thought developed into a philosophical school that was studied and developed

in Central, East, and South-East Asia.

7. Madhyamaka and Nyāya

We will have an opportunity to look in greater detail at the relation between

Madhyamaka and the other schools of Mahāyāna thought in the following

[156] See Ruegg 1981a: 104–8 for some remarks.
[157] Sherburne 2000: 237–
41. Śantarak:sita is cited only once in the text (235, see also 272, n. 24).
[158] Ruegg 1981a: 109–10, 113–
14. A significant portion of the Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa

(see p. 94) might also be of Central Asian or Serindian origin (Ruegg 1981a: 32–
3).

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chapters;[159] I would like to conclude this chapter by considering the

relationship between Madhyamaka and the non-Buddhist school of Nyāya.
The fundamental text of the Nyāya system are the Nyāyasūtras, said to have

been compiled by Ak:sapāda Gautama in the second century CE. Nyāya and

Madhyamaka thus seem to have appeared in close historical proximity, and the

two schools have debated with each other from the very beginning of their

existence. Two of Nāgārjuna's shorter works discuss Nyāya arguments at great

length. In the Vigrahavyāvartanī a Naiyāyika, together with an Ābhidharmika,

are the main interlocutors;[160] the Vaidalyaprakaraṇa is explicitly formulated as

a refutation of the sixteen Nyāya categories.[161] An extensive commentary on

the Nyāyasūtras, the Nyāyasūtrabhā:sya, was composed in the fourth century

by Vātsyāyana and later became the target of Dinʿnāga's attacks; in the seventh

century Uddyotakara came to defend Nyāya against Buddhist criticism in

another elaborate commentary, the Nyāyavārttika.
We are here most interested in the early Buddhist interaction with Nyāya.
When Nāgārjuna criticized the Nyāya system he interacted with a very early

form of it, a system which cannot be uncritically equated with the one that has

come down to us in the Nyāyasūtras as we know it today and is expounded in

its main commentaries.[162] It is likely that various of the objections the Naiyāyika'

opponent raises in these texts, and which are then subsequently provided with a

Nyāya reponse, have their source in Madhyamaka.[163] The two systems shaped on

another, and their texts exhibit traces of their mutual influence.
Nāgārjuna engages mostly with the epistemological and logical parts of the

Nyāya system. His criticism of these Nyāya positions is particularly interesting,

since these are not just topics on which Nyāya happens to have views that differ

from the Buddhist ones, but because they concern subject matters of sufficient inf

Nyāya system
generality to be of relevance to all philosophical discussion, Buddhist or not. It

is important to be aware that Nyāya was not just one philosophical system

among many, one of the six darśanas of classical Indian philosophy, but in its

later development, particularly in a form that came to be known as Navya-
Nyāya ('new Nyāya')[164] extended its influence far into other fields, beyond

what we might identify as the philosophical claims of the Nyāya(-Vaiśe:sika)

system. Navya-Nyāya created a technical philosophical language that was not

[159] We consider the relationship with Yogācāra in section 5 of Chapter 3, and dis

relationship of Madhyamaka with the schools of Din˙āga and Dharmakīrti in sect

Chapter 4.
[160] Westerhoff 2010, Meuthrath 1999.
[161] Westerhoff 2018.
[162] It is generally assumed that the first and fifth chapters or adhyāyas constitute t

of the text (Meuthrath 1996: x). Some form of the material covered in these chapt

what Nāgārjuna was familiar with and directed his criticism against.
[163] Oberhammer 1963–4: 68, 70; Bronkhorst 1985.
[164] Udayana (c.1050) and Gan˙geśa (c.1200) are generally regarded as the founde
Nyāya tradition.

just employed in the context of the discussion of the Nyāya itself, but also in the

discussion and development of other philosophical schools, such as Advaita

Vedānta, Sā :mkhya, and Mīmā :msā, as well as in non-philosophical contexts

such as grammar, poetics, and law.[165]

Of course Navya-Nyāya is removed from Nāgārjuna by a distance of nearly a thousand years. Nevertheless, his engagement with the early Nyāya system in the Vigrahavyāvartanī and the Vaidalyaprakaraṇa shows that the dispute is not simply about which of two philosophical systems should be regarded as superior, but also about the right methodological framework in which to pursue philosophy.

Criticism of Nyāya logic and epistemology

Yet if Nāgārjuna criticizes not only some of the Nyāya positions, but also the logical and epistemological techniques it recommends for use in philosophical debates, this raises two immediate questions. First, why do the Mādhyamikas not consider it possible to adopt the fairly sophisticated logical and epistemological frameworks Nyāya describes, even if they disagree with the content of some of their assertions? And second, what do they propose to put in their place?

Negation

One clear example where some of the Nyāya logical machinery gets in the way of Madhyamaka arguments is provided by their understanding of negation. Nāgārjuna has the Nyāya opponent object to the Mādhyamika that: 'to the extent to which the negation "there is no pot in the house" is precisely a negation of an existent, your negation is a negation of an existing substance.'[166] The issue here is that, according to the Nyāya understanding, absences can only ever be local absences. If we negate the existence of the pot in the house, we are committed to the existence of pots elsewhere (in the garden, say, or in

the potter's workshop), for if the negated thing was not anywhere, how would

we even know what we talk about when we negate it? How could we have ever

had any epistemic contact with it?

Problems with

Yet this way of viewing negations leads to problems if we apply it to the

negating svabhāva Madhyamaka understanding of emptiness, which is simply the

intrincally real entities (svabhāva) anywhere. The Madhyamaka could not even

state his theory in a framework in which the assertion of the emptiness of a

chariot (that is, the assertion of the absence of svabhāva in it) entailed the

presence of svabhāva elsewhere.

Nyāya syllogisms

A related worry arises when trying to express Madhyamaka inferences in the

Nyāya framework of the five-membered syllogism.[167] Such a syllogism needs to

incorporate two types of examples, a concordant example (sādharmya) and a

[165] Bhattacharya 2001: 102; Ganeri 2008: 109–24.
[166] 11: sata eva prati:sedho nāsti gha:to geha ity aya :m yasmāt | d:r:s:ta:h prati:se

svabhāvasya te tasmāt, see Westerhoff 2010: 109–10.
[167] Compare Vaidalyaprakaraṇa 28–9, Westerhoff 2018.

discordant (vaidharmya) one. If we consider the stock example of such a

syllogism, 'there is fire on the hill because there is smoke there' (as whenever

there is smoke, there is fire), a concordant example is 'as in the kitchen',

while a discordant one is 'as in a lake'. The concordant example is a case

where the property to be established (fire) and the mark helping in establishing it (smoke) are co-instantiated in one object, while the discordant

example is an object that instantiates neither.[168] This seemingly unproblematic demand for concordant and discordant examples faces difficulties if we

try to formulate a common Madhyamaka inference such as 'all things are

empty because they are produced dependent on causes and conditions'. As

emptiness is considered by the Mādhyamika to be a universal property of all

things, any object could be introduced as a concordant example, though he No dis

would not be able to provide a discordant example, as there are no things example

emptiness
that are not empty.[169]

This issue is of considerable importance for Mādhyamikas (and for Buddhists

more generally), since the reference to entities that seem to exist (composite

wholes, persons, entities existing with svabhāva) but in fact do not is an integral F
part of the Buddhist theory of the world. Composite wholes and so forth are exist

conceptual imputations on other entities (some of which are ultimately real for

the Ābhidharmika but not the Mādhyamika) that have no more reality than

horns of rabbits or sons of barren women: they are mere words (or mere

concepts), but without anything behind them that they refer to. Yet the

Naiyāyika finds it very difficult to find a place for such objects in his semantics,

epistemology, or ontology.[170]

It is therefore apparent that the Naiyāyika's logical machinery[171] cannot

simply be used as a philosophical framework for formulating the Madhyamaka

theory. What, however, should an alternative framework be? If the Mādhyamika

wants to compete with the schools of classical Indian philosophy in debate, he

cannot simply reject all of the logical and epistemological standards according

to which such a debate is conducted. One cannot take part in playing the game

without accepting the rules.

168 The counterexample of the lake may have been picked because a lake might s

as if there was smoke present in it (when there is mist rising from the lake), thoug

examined we realize that there is neither smoke nor fire.

169 Matilal 1970, 83–110.

170 Matilal (1970: 91) notes that the Naiyāyika 'wants to exclude from logical dis

sentence which will ascribe some property (positive or negative) to a fictitious en

remarks that we can neither affirm nor deny anything of the fictitious entity, the r
As a consequence, Nyāya 'does not admit that a totally ficititious entity can be th

cognitive state, even of an error. . . . [C]orresponding to each fundamental elemer

or cognitive state there is a fundamental element of reality. The so-
called fiction is always

constructed out of real elements' (95).

171 The same, Nāgārjuna sets out to argue, is true of the Nyāya epistemology.

This, the Mādhyamika would agree, is true, but there is also no need to

Use of logic
accept them as something more than rules. Rather than rejecting the oppon-
without accepting
ent's logical and epistemological standards altogether, the Mādhyamika wants

its ontological
implications
to accept them in a form that is compatible with emptiness. One way of doing

so is exemplified in the prasaṅga methodology. If the Mādhyamika does not

endeavour to establish any position, but only tries to reduce the opponent's

svabhāva-involving position to absurdity, all he needs to do is demonstrate this

according to the logical standards the opponent takes to be required for the

demonstration of absurdity; there is no need for the Mādhyamika himself to

adopt these standards. Similary, the Mādhyamikas accept epistemological

standards from their opponents, as long as they are sufficiently modified to

exclude appeal to svabhāva.[172] In this way, dialectical exchange can take place,

but in a way that does not already presuppose metaphysical assumptions that

are in fact being debated.

[172] I argue in Westerhoff 2018 that Nāgārjuna's main aim in Vaidalyaprakaraṇa is

desubstantialized account of the Nyāya categories, that is, an understanding of the

much of their methodological usefulness but dispenses with the idea that any of t

svabhāva.

3
Yogācāra
1. Five Stages of Yogācāra's Development
Yogācāra, the second major school of Mahāyāna philosophy, is, together

with Madhyamaka, one of India's most successful intellectual exports. While

Madhyamaka took hold and flourished in Tibet, Yogācāra became a dominant

influence on East Asian thought, continuing its philosophical development in

China and Japan after the decline of Buddhist culture in India.
For expository purposes we can divide the development of Yogācāra thought

into five successive stages. The first includes the arising of the earliest Yogācāra

ideas in Mahāyāna sūtras that became crucial texts for the later development of

this school. The next four stages comprise the works of specific Yogācāra

authors. As Madhyamaka is considered to spring from the thought of one

particular author, Nāgārjuna, so Yogācāra can be connected with two Buddhist

:

masters who are usually considered as its founders, the brothers Asanga

(stage 3) and Vasubandhu (stage 4). But in the same way that Madhyamaka

is traditionally considered to hail from a supernatural realm, through the

Perfection of Wisdom sūtras that have been passed on to Nāgārjuna by the

:

nāgas, so Asanga is considered to have received his instructions directly from

the bodhisattva (and future Buddha) Maitreya, who is also considered to have

authored key Yogācāra texts on his own (stage 2). The final, fifth stage

:

encompasses the development of Yogācāra in India after Asanga and Vasu-
:
bandhu, first and foremost in the works of Dinnāga and Dharmakīrti, two

scholars commonly regarded as the founders of the 'logico-epistemological'
school. In the following chapter we will deal with their contributions to logic

and the theory of knowledge in detail; in this chapter we will focus on their

specific contributions to Yogācāra.
In the following discussion we will first provide an overview of the main

Indian Yogācāra philosophers in their historical sequence (section 1). We will

then have a closer look in section 2 at key Yogācara concepts that characterize

the specific philosophical outlook of this school. On the basis of this discussion

we can then pay more attention to the specific argumentative, textual, and

meditative factors that shaped the Yogācāra viewpoint (section 3). The final

two sections consider the relation of Yogācāra to the other main schools of

Buddhist philosophy and to the non-Buddhist school of Vedānta.

a. Stage 1: The early Yogācāra sūtras

We have seen in the previous chapter that the first Madhyamaka themes did

not just make their appearance in the works of Nāgārjuna, but were already

present in certain Mahāyāna sūtras, the Perfection of Wisdom texts. In the

same way we find two sūtras in particular that contain key Yogācāra ideas, and

that pre-date later systematic developments of this school in the works of later

:

:

Lankāvatārasūtra

Yogācāra philosophers. The first of these, the Lankāvatārasūtra,[1] in fact shows

interesting connections with the Prajñāpāramitāsūtras in terms of its narrative

framing. The title of the text refers to the 'appearance' (avatāra) of the Buddha

:

on the island of Lankā (present-day Sri Lanka), having just returned from a

:

week of teaching the nāga king Sagara in his palace. In Lankā he then teaches

:

the discourse that is the Lankāvatārasūtra to King Rāva :na. Rāva :na is the king

of yak:sas, a race of spirits inhabiting various places in nature, in particular

:
trees. They have a close connection with the island of Lanka, and their ten-
headed, twenty-armed king Rāva :na is well known in Indian literature as the

villain responsible for the abduction of Sītā described in the Rāmāya :na.
Date of the
It is most likely that the sūtra first appeared in India around 350 CE,[2] though

:
Lankāvatārasūtra
its first versions may be considerably older. Lindtner has argued that the

earliest versions of this text were in fact available at the times of Nāgārjuna

and Āryadeva and influenced their writing.[3] Not only can we find various

:
parallels between the Lankāvatārasūtra and Nāgārjuna's key works, there is

also a short work of just over fifty verses, called Bhāvanākrama, ascribed in the

colophon to Nāgārjuna, which is fundamentally an extract of verses from the

:
:
Lankāvatārasūtra. In fact the Lankāvatārasūtra must consider itself as pre-
dating Nāgārjuna, since his birth is prophesied in a later part of the sūtra.[4]
:
The main part of the Lankāvatārasūtra is set up as a dialogue between the

Buddha and the bodhisattva Mahāmati. Its contents are very diverse, and its

structure far from transparent. There is a chapter on the benefits of vegetar-
ianism, one in which the Buddha imparts several magical formulae to Mahā-
mati, and a final chapter consisting entirely of more than 800 verses; about a

quarter of these already occur in other parts of the text. The sūtra covers a wide

range of material, and it is no exaggeration to say that it refers to nearly all of

Introducing key
the central doctrinal concepts of the Māhāyana. Of primary interest in the

Yogācāra concepts present context are the key Yogācāra ideas it introduces, the n

mind, that of the eight kinds of consciousness, and in particular that of a

foundational consciousness, which we will discuss in greater detail below. It

would be unrealistic to expect of a sūtra a detailed systematic development of

[1] For a translation from the Sanskrit see Suzuki 1932; a good recent translation fr

is in Red Pine 2012.
[2] Red Pine 2012: 2.
[3] Lindtner 1992.
[4] See above, pp. 89–90.

these ideas, and this is in fact not the point of the text. It puts particular

emphasis on the direct realization of these concepts, as becomes apparent at

the very beginning of the sūtra, when the Buddha says:
Also by earlier tathāgatas, arhats and fully enlightened Buddhas this dharma was

:
in this city of Lankā on Malaya peak, the supreme knowledge (āryajñāna) realize

each for himself [5] which is beyond the argumentative views of the philosophers, 1

śrāvakas and the pratyekabuddhas.[6]
A key aim of the sūtra is to give a description of this 'inner realization' and

indicate what path needs to be taken to generate it at the experiential level. The

systematic development of arguments for the theoretical vision this realization

expresses is a task for later Yogācāra thinkers.
Despite its discussion of some of the most important Yogācāra concepts, the

:

Lankāvatārasūtra is not actually quoted by the earliest systematic Yogācāra

:

authors, Asanga and Vasubandhu, unlike the second sūtra we want to consider Sa
here, the Sa :mdhinirmocanasūtra. This text, which probably appeared in the cana

third century CE (its first Chinese translation was made around 440) is one of

the main texts subsequent Yogācāra authors refer to. It discusses a variety of

Yogācāra notions, the foundational consciousness, the three natures, and most

famously, the three turnings of the wheel of the doctrine. We recall that the

:

opening of the Lankāvatārasūtra connects that text with the Buddha's teaching

to the nāgas and hence the Perfection of Wisdom literature, suggesting that

:

teaching of the Lankāvatārasūtra succeeds, and perhaps supercedes, this earlier

doctrine. The opening of the Sa :mdhinirmocanasūtra is similarly interesting for T

understanding the philosophical direction of the text. We learn that when the the t

Buddha was teaching this text he 'was dwelling in an immeasurable palace

arrayed with the supreme brilliance of the seven precious substances, emanat-
ing great rays of light that suffused innumerable universes'. This palace was

'limitless in reach, an unimpeded mandala, a sphere of activity completely

transcending the three worldly realms, arisen from the root of supreme virtue

that transcends the world'.[7] Unlike the early sūtras, the Prajñāpāramitāsūtras,

:

and the Lankāvatārasūtra, which are reported as having been taught at iden-
tifiable places on earth, this sūtra is taught at a place beyond this world. The Mag

commentaries on the sūtra inform us that the 'supreme virtue' that generated

the palace is non-conceptual wisdom, and that it, and all its decorations, are

merely mental creations emanated by the Buddha.[8] The idea of magically

[5] On the term (sva)pratyātmāryajñāna see Suzuki 1930: 421–3.
[6]

:

pūrvakair api tathāgatair arhadbhi :h samyaksa :mbuddhair asmi :mllankāpurīmal
pratyātmāryajñānatarkad:r:s:titīrthyaśrāvakapratyekabuddhāryavi:saye tadbhāvitc

Vaidya 1963: 1, Suzuki 1932: 3–
4. The Sanskrit text is problematic, see Suzuki's note on this passage.
:
See also the passage from the Lankāvatārasūtra cited above on p. 198.
[7] Powers 1995: 5.
[8] Powers 1995: 313, n. 3.

created surroundings is taken up again in the first chapter of the sūtra, when it

points out that the perception of ordinary beings is in important ways similar

to watching a magic show:
For example, a skilled magician or his skillful student, located at a crossing of fou

roads, having gathered grasses, leaves, twigs, pebbles, and stones, displays variou

aspects of magical activities, such as: a herd of elephants, cavalry, chariots, and in

collections of gems, pearls, vaidurya, conch-
shells, crystal and coral; collections of

wealth, grain, treasuries and granaries.
Ordinary observers are taken in by this display, others (corresponding to

realized Buddhist practitioners) are not so easily deceived:
Having thought: These deceive the eye, they do not emphatically apprehend or m
festly conceive in accordance with how they see and hear, and thereupon they do

subsequently impute conventional designations: This is true, the other is false.
Yet the nature and purpose of these illusionistic examples is importantly

different from the ones we find in the Prajñāpāramita texts. Rather than

suggesting an infinite hierarchy of illusions built on illusions, these examples

indicate that the magic show that is the ordinary perception of the world is

grounded in the mental. As commentators on the sūtra explain, the magician is

the underlying mental reality who takes mental items (the sticks and stones of

Mental nature of
the example) and gives them the appearance of material objects (gems, pearls,

the world and of
and elephants).[9] The framing of the sūtra, locating it in a virtually existent

the Buddha's
teachings
palace, underlines the fact that the Buddha's teachings do not constitute an

exception to the overall claim of the text that everything is mind-made. Like all

other things, they may appear external yet they are in fact of the same nature as

the mind.
While these sūtras introduce key Yogācāra concepts and often illustrate

them by intriguing examples, the systematic development of Yogācāra thought

happens at a later stage. Therefore, having looked at the prehistory of Yogācāra in some early Mahāyāna sūtras, let us now consider the succession of brilliant thinkers who developed the full complexity of the Yogācāra system.

[b. Stages 2 and 3: Maitreya and Asanga](#)

We can approximately date Asanga somewhere between the years 350 and 450 CE.[10] His mother, Prasannaśīlā, is said to have given birth to three brothers from two different fathers. Asanga, the eldest, was fathered by a kṣatriya, a member of the warrior caste, while the two later brothers, Vasubandhu and

[9] Powers 2004: 45.

[10] Some date ranges for Asanga suggested by scholars are 375–430, 290–360, and 365–440 CE (Willis 1979: 49–50). For a survey of the main current debates concerning the figure of Asanga see Sakuma 2013.

:

Viriñcivatsa, had a Brahmin for a father. Unlike many Buddhist masters, these As

philosophical brothers did not come from southern India but from what is now br

Pakistan. All three brothers eventually became monks; according to Para-
mārtha's biography they all belonged to the Sarvāstivāda tradition. There is,

:

however, some evidence that Asanga instead belonged to a different Abhid-
harma school, called the Mahīśāsakas.[11] Members of this school were known

for their 'talent for penetrating the subtlety of absorptive meditation'.[12] At this

stage we have already encountered two biographical facts that are indicative of

prominent features of the Yogācāra system we will come back to later. The first Y

is the intimate connection between Yogācāra and meditative practice. The Abhidl

second is the much closer conceptual connection between Abhidharma and

Yogācāra than between Abhidharma and Madhyamaka, where the former

mainly functions as an interpretative background against which the latter's

arguments are to be interpreted. Unlike Nāgārjuna, whose Mahāyāna associ-
ations are evident throughout his works,[13] the founding masters of Yogācāra

began their philosophical careers in a non-Mahāyāna context.

:

From the quotations in Asanga's own works we can infer that he must have

been a devoted and capable student, with a comprehensive knowledge not only

of the early Buddhist sūtras but also of key early Mahāyāna texts and their

:
associated commentaries. The texts he found particularly challenging to master A

were the Perfection of Wisdom texts, and he realized that he was in need of Perfe

Wisdom
conceptual clarification from an authoritative source. According to Tāranātha,

he received a tantric initiation from his teacher and began the practice of the

bodhisattva Maitreya. This is the beginning of a frequently described episode in

:
Asanga's life, an episode that combines biography, religious instruction, and

the illustration of philosophical ideas in an interesting way. The eighth-century

commentator Haribhadra summarizes it briefly by noting that:
:
though noble Asanga understood all the meanings of the words [of the Buddha in

general] and had gained realization, he was still not [able to] determine the meani

the Prajñāpāramitā [sūtras] because of their profundity, their numerous repetition:

and his not recognizing the precise significance of individual phrases in the nonre
titious parts [of these sūtras]. He became depressed about this, upon which the

Bhagavān Maitreya expounded the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras . . . for his sake. After tl

:
noble Master Asanga had heard these [texts], he as well as Vasubandhu and furth

[masters] explained them [to others].[14]
:
Asanga's difficulty in grasping the Perfection of Wisdom texts must have

completely disappeared as a result of this enlightened instruction, as he

[11] Though this view is criticized in Kritzer 1999: 7–13.
[12] Bareau 2013: 242.

[13] Though see pp. 105–6 above.
[14] Brunnhölzl 2010: 47.

would later compose a—still extant—commentary on the Diamond Sūtra

(Vajracchedikaprajñāpāramitāsūtra).

:

:

Asanga's
Asanga propitiated Maitreya for twelve years in all, but at first without any

propitiation of
:
success. The traditional accounts relate that whenever Asanga became despond-
Maitreya
ent during his long period of practice he encountered various symbolic situations

which convinced him to continue with his efforts. In one somewhat comical

:
episode Asanga comes across a man rubbing an iron bar with a cotton cloth,

:
telling Asanga that he is in the process of making a needle. He then goes on to

show him a set of needles he has already made in this manner, which convinces

:
Asanga that, given so much devotion can be shown to accomplish a merely

mundane task, his spiritual efforts deserve greater efforts than he has shown so

:
far. After twelve years, Asanga encounters a dying dog by the side of the road, its

:
open sores infested with maggots. Asanga is overcome with great compassion,

not just for the dog but also for the maggots. He resolves to take the maggots out

of the dog's wounds and to transfer them to a piece of flesh he cuts from his own

thigh. As he bends down to transfer the maggots with his own tongue the dog
:
disappears, and Maitreya stands in front of him. Asanga immediately starts to

complain to Maitreya that he has been practicing diligently for a long time, and

still he was nowhere to be seen. Maitreya responds by saying that:

Though the king of the gods sends down rain, a bad seed is unable to grow.
Though the Buddhas may appear, he who is unworthy cannot partake of the bliss.
:
Maitreya points out that he was always there when Asanga was practising, but

his deluded mind made it impossible to see him. The two of them set out
:
immediately to demonstrate this. Asanga takes Maitreya on his shoulders and

carries him through town. Maitreya is completely invisible to most people,

though some (with lighter karmic obscurations) are able to see him in some

distorted form: some are only able to see Maitreya in the form of a dog on
:
Asanga's shoulders, some only see his feet, and so on. Maitreya then tells
:
Asanga to hold on to a corner of his robe, and together they ascend to Tu:sita

Maitreya's five
heaven, Maitreya's own celestial realm. According to traditional accounts, he

treatises
spends between six months and fifty years in Tu:sita, listening to Maitreya's

teaching of the Mahāyāna. In particular, Maitreya teaches five texts to him, a

highly important set of Yogācāra texts known as the 'five treatises of Maitreya',

which includes the Abhisamayāla :mkāra, a versified summary of the Prajñāpār-
:
amitāsūtras, meant specifically to dispel Asanga's doubts concerning the

Perfection of Wisdom texts.
There are at least three noteworthy points about this account. The first is the

:
fact that what causes Asanga to directly see Maitreya is an act of great

[15] Willis 1979: 8.

compassion that has on the face of it very little to do with the practices he has Co

been carrying out for twelve years before this. Illustrating the central Buddhist wi

compassion
idea of the inseparability of wisdom and compassion, this event underlines the

importance of compassion for bringing about the kind of crucial shift in

perspective that is essential for progress on the meditative path. Secondly, the Ro

account of some townspeople only being able to see Maitreya in distorted percept

forms is a good example of the Yogācāra idea of the constitutive role our

karmic potential plays in the perception of the world. Vasubandhu later relies

on this idea at an important point in his argument in the Vi :mśikā, when he

argues that the realms experienced by the beings reborn in hell are not real, but

are a collective result of their shared karmic potentialities.:

The final intriguing aspect of this story is of course Asanga's encounter with The

Maitreya and his subsequent visit to heavenly realms.
Maitreya
Various modern scholars have argued that Maitreya should in fact be

:
considered as a human teacher of Asanga, rather than as a transcendent,

enlightened being.[16] The reasons given for this claim vary. What is sometimes

meant by saying that Maitreya was a 'real person' is that the works ascribed to

:
:
Maitreya as a
him were not simply written by Asanga. When Asanga transmitted Maitreya's 're
works, or composed works under his guidance, the line of argument goes, he

was not just writing under a pseudonym, but there was actually a second

author involved.[17] This reason finds support in the colophons to Maitreya's

:
works, which clearly state Maitreya, not Asanga, as their author. Moreover—

and this brings us to the second reason—this author is there sometimes

referred to as Maitreyanātha. Tucci[18] believed that this name could not possibly

refer to the bodhisattva Maitreya, but was rather the name of a human who

worships or is under the protection of the lord (nātha) Maitreya. How decisive

these points are is not entirely clear. The nominal compound 'Maitreyanātha'
can be understood in two different ways. One is Tucci's 'who has Maitreya as a

lord', in which case it would clearly refer to a human, or it could mean 'the Lord

Maitreya', in which case it would refer to the future Buddha himself.[19]
A main reason behind the interest in the question whether Maitreya was a

bodhisattva or a mere mortal is, of course, the issue of dating his works. If these

:

were not composed by Asanga himself but by his human teacher, they would

:

have been composed some time before Asanga, and so we would have a better

:

idea of how to date these earliest Yogācāra works relative to Asanga.
[16] Ui 1929; Tucci 1930.
[17] Ui (1929: 100) notes that '[i]f he [Maitreya] has so many works to his credit, th

doubt whatsoever as to his historical existence.'
[18] Tucci 1930: 8.
[19] In fact there are other examples where reference to the 'Bhagavat Maitreya' is

which in Buddhist contexts only denotes a Buddha.

Yet the whole problem of the historicity of Maitreya seems to rest on some

Questionable
questionable assumptions. First of all, arguing that the bodhisattva Maitreya is

assumptions
the Maitreya we are talking about does, of course, not entail that no second

:

author was involved and the works in question were all composed by Asanga

himself. It is only if we assume that bodhisattvas without physical bodies

cannot author texts that we might feel ourselves pushed to the theory that

:

Asanga composed all these texts under a pseudonym. This is an assumption we

would at least want to present an argument for, since it is completely at odds

with some of the key assumptions behind the traditional understanding of

Buddhist history discussed above.
But even if we accept the claim that a disembodied bodhisattva could not

have composed the works in question, it is still not entirely clear what the claim

that Maitreya was a 'real person' would actually amount to. If the issue is just

:

whether Asanga's teacher taught him in a physical body, there seems to be no

great difficulty in accounting for this from the traditional perspective. Accord-
ing to the doctrine of the 'three bodies' (trikāya), enlightened beings can

manifest in the world in a wholly physical form (nirmā :nakāya). So Maitreya-
nātha could both have lived at a precisely dateable historical time and have

been the emanation of a wholly enlightened being without a physical body.
:
Concerning Asanga's trip to Tu:sita heaven, it is important to keep in mind

the extent to which visits to celestial realms can be understood as reports of

:

meditative experiences. Xuanzang writes about Asanga going to Tu:sita heaven

at night, and explaining the treatises he received there by day to the monks of

his monastery.[20] One way of reading this is that the visits to Tu:sita and the

instructions received from Maitreya in this way took place either during

:
:
Asanga's nightly meditative experiences, or formed part Asanga's dreams.
:
:
Asanga's own
In addition to the five treatises of Maitreya which Asanga took down from

works
Tu:sita and transmitted to his disciples, he also composed his own works. His

magnum opus is the voluminous Yogācārabhūmiśāstra, the 'Treatise on the

Stages of Yogācāra'. It contains a variety of material; its most famous section,

the Bodhisattvabhūmi, provides an extremely detailed discussion of the stages

of the bodhisattva path. The text is also important because it introduces and

discusses a variety of key terms of Yogācāra philosophy, such as the eight kinds

of minds, the foundational consciousness, and the three natures.
c. Stage 4: Vasubandhu
:
The third member in this triad of early Yogācāra masters besides Asanga and

:
his teacher Maitreya is Asanga's brother Vasubandhu. While in the case of

Maitreya contemporary Buddhologists wonder whether he existed at all

[20] Beal 1884: 226.

(at least whether he existed as an actual human being), for Vasubandhu the

question is not whether there was anyone of that name, but how many there

were in the first place.
In order to see the motivation for the entire discussion about the existence of Dive

multiple Vasubandhus it is necessary to appreciate how diverse Vasubandhu's wo

textual output actually was. One of his traditional epithets is 'Master of 1,000
teachings' (千部論師); he is considered to have composed 500 Hīnayāna and

500 Mahāyāna works. Even though these numbers are most likely to be

understood in a symbolic fashion, the works that have come down to us as

authored by Vasubandhu cover an impressive spectrum of different aspects of

the Buddhist philosophical landscape. As a matter of fact, with the exception

of Madhyamaka, Vasubandhu wrote seminal treatises on all of the different

branches of Buddhist philosophy in existence at his time: on the two

Abhidharmic schools of Vaibhā:sika and Sautrāntika, as well as on Yogācāra.[21]
:
Vasubandhu was born as Asanga's younger half-
brother in Puru:sapura Vasubandhu's life

(present-day Peshawar), in the kingdom of Gāndhāra;[22] he shared his

Brāhma :na father with the youngest of the three of his mother's sons, Viriñci-
:
vatsa. Unlike Asanga, Vasubandhu was ordained as a monk in the Sarvāstivāda

school. In order to study their doctrines in greater detail he moved to Kashmir,

at that time the centre of Sarvāstivāda learning. He probably stayed there for

four years.[23] After his return to Puru:sapura he embarked on the enormous Compo

project of composing a detailed exposition of the entire Sarvāstivāda system. the
kośa
According to Paramārtha's account, Vasubandhu lived there unattached to any

particular Buddhist order and supported himself by lecturing on Sarvāstivāda.
At the end of each day he would compose a verse that would form a summary

of that day's teaching. This, the colourful account of this episode continues, he

would then engrave on a copper plate, hang it around the neck of a drunken

elephant, and challenge anyone to refute it. That this literally took place might

not be very likely, but the symbolic contents of the story are clear. In the same

way in which an elephant, drunk after eating fermenting fruit, indiscriminately

crushing everything in its way, can only be controlled by an enormous degree

of power and strength, so the would-be opponents of Vasubandhu would have

to employ the entirety of their intellectual resources in order find fault with his

[21] This claim has to be taken with a small grain of salt, though. As Gold (2015: 4)

recent evidence is telling us that "Sautrāntika" is not definitely attested as a doctr

Vasubandhu, and "Yogācāra" definitely postdated him. When Vasubandhu uses t

"Yogācāra" he is generally referring to practitioners of meditational exercises, no

philosophical school' (Gold 2015a: 10).
[22] 'Determining the date of Vasubandhu (or Vasubandhus?) is one of the thornies

history of Indian Buddhism' (Deleanu 2006: 1. 186). A good overview of the pro

with dating Vasubandhu is given in Deleanu 2006: 1. 186–
94. He suggests placing Vasubandhu

between the years 350 and 430 CE.
[23] From about 342 to 346, according to Anacker (2002: 16).

exposition. The engraving onto plates of copper also echoes the fourth Bud-
dhist council in Kashmir, where the words of the Buddha were fixed for

posterity in the very same way. This daily exercise, we are supposed to assume,

continued for nearly two years, and the over 600 verses Vasubandhu composed

in this way formed his most famous work, the Abhidharmakośa, the 'Treasury

of Abhidharma'. We learn that Vasubandhu then sent this text, together with

the enormous sum of fifty pounds of gold, to his old teachers in Kashmir. They sent the sum straight back, and added another fifty pounds, asking Vasubandhu to also compose a commentary to what they perceived as a brilliant defence of Sarvāstivāda doctrines, though one that is expressed in an often very terse

Its bhā:sya

and condensed way. The result of this request is the Abhidharmakośabhā:sya, particularly noteworthy for what it does not do. Far from a detailed exposition of Sarvāstivāda orthodoxy, the commentary is frequently very critical of the Sarvāstivāda ideas developed in the root text. It is common practice for commentators to raise a variety of criticisms associated with different rival schools in exploring the ramifications of a specific verse of a root text. But in these cases the position of the root text always comes out as the victorious one in the end.[24] Not so in the case of the Abhidharmakośabhā:sya. There the Sautrāntika position, not that of the Sarvāstivāda, is the one that Vasubandhu frequently seems to go for.[25] The reasons for this discrepancy between the apparent doxographic affiliations of two parts of the same text are not entirely transparent. Did Vasubandhu change his mind about some of the philosophical beliefs that he set out in the Abhidharmakośa? Or was he always critical of the Sarvāstivāda system and is only coming out into the open with this work? In any case, when he sent them the Abhidharmakośabhā:sya his former teachers were not amused, and we find clear examples of their very critical attitude in later Sarvāstivāda texts.[26]

Vasubandhu and

Up this point Vasubandhu's stance towards the Mahāyāna, and particularly

the Mahāyāna
:
towards the works of his half-brother Asanga, had been hardly complimentary.
:
Bu ston tell us that he remarked about Asanga's prolific output: 'Alas, for twelve

:
years Asanga practiced meditation in the forest without success and has written

:
a philosophical system only an elephant can carry.'[27] This changes after Asanga

sends two of his disciples to recite two Mahāyāna sūtras to Vasubandhu. He

quickly becomes convinced of the merit of these texts and, feeling great

shame about his previous criticism of the Mahāyāna, looks for a razor to cut

out his tongue. We are reminded here of the severe punishment the loser of

[24] For a possible exception see the earlier discussion of the Kathāvatthu, pp. 49–53.
[25] As always, we have to treat these doxographic terms with some caution. 'Sautr

certainly the label Vasubandhu employs for the position he himself favours (Gold

this usage relates to that of other writers, and whether all these uses speak about a

tenets, is far less clear.
[26] Anacker 2002: 17–18.
[27] Bu ston 2013: 242.

YOGĀCĀRA

Indian philosophical debates was supposed to undergo in some cases. But in

the same way in which a magnanimous opponent usually keeps the worst

:

outcome from happening, Asanga's students quickly suggest that seeing his

half-brother and learning more about the Mahāyāna from him might be a

wiser course. Vasubandhu does so, and Bu ston's account of their interaction

provides us with an interesting commentary on the interplay between argu-

The philosopher

ments and meditative practice in shaping Buddhist philosophy. In their dis-

vs. the meditator

:

cussion Vasubandhu proved to be the quicker thinker than Asanga, but even

though his older brother was slower, the replies he did produce in the end were

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often of higher quality. Asanga explained this fact to Vasubandhu by pointing

out that Vasubandhu has been a scholar during his last 500 lifetimes, so

constructing arguments came naturally for him. This was not the case for

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Asanga, who, whenever he got stuck with a philosophical problem, had to

consult with the bodhisattva Maitreya who provided him with the answer.

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While Asanga was lacking lifetimes of philosophical training, Vasubandhu was

lacking the necessary meditative ability that would have allowed him to purify

the obscurations of this mind sufficiently to consult with enlightened beings

directly. We can see here how historians of Buddhist philosophy saw its

development as being shaped by two distinct routes, one coming from the

dynamics of argumentative exchanges, one coming from insights gained dur-

ing meditative realization, here personified by the two brothers. In this account

we also get a clear sense that the latter is regarded as ultimately more authori-
tative: Vasubandhu carries out special practices to be able to see Maitreya

:
himself as well, while we do not read about Asanga training to improve his

argumentative skills.
:
After his instruction by Asanga, Vasubandhu immersed himself in Mahāyāna

scriptures. Tāranātha reports that he read through the whole of the Perfection of

Wisdom in 100,000 verses in an uninterrupted session of fifteen days and nights,

which he spent (for reasons not entirely clear) immersed in a tub of sesame-oil.
In his later life as well he would read the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 verses as

a daily exercise.[28] The output of Mahāyāna works by this 'Master of a thousand M

teachings' was prolific, including commentaries on the two sūtras recited by the

:
students of Asanga that triggered his adoption of the Mahāyāna stance (the

Daśabhūmikasūtra and the Ak:sayamatinirdeśasūtra), commentaries on some of

the five works of Maitreya, on the Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitāsūtra, as well

has his most famous later works, the 'Twenty Verses' (Vi :mśikā), 'Thirty Verses
(Tri :mśikā), and the 'Instruction on the Three Natures' (Trisvabhāvanirdeśa).
The traditional biographies report that he died in his eightieth year.
[28] Lama Chimpa 1970: 171.

Multiple
When this was is not entirely clear, and in fact the dating of Vasubandhu is

Vasubandhus?

still subject to dispute. Anacker dates him to c.316–96 CE,[29] Takakusu to

420–500, Mochizuki to 433–533, Hirakawa to 400–80.[30] We are thus looking

at a span of 200 years, the fourth and fifth centuries, in which to place

Vasubandhu. A suggestion that has introduced additional complications is

one due to Erich Frauwallner, claiming that there were in fact two Vasuban-
dhus rather than one.[31] Frauwallner argued that we would have to distinguish

two writers with the name Vasubandhu who lived in close temporal proximity,

an elder Vasubandhu who lived roughly between 320 and 380 CE, and a

younger Vasubandhu who lived from about 400 to 480. If we take into

The split between
account Vasubandhu's biography as we find it in the traditional accounts, it

the Ābhidharmika is evident where the motivation for this split comes from. Vasu

and the Mahāyāna
scholar
to have two very distinct sides to him: that of an Abhidharma scholar (again

subdivided into a Sarvāstivāda scholar who composed the Abhidharmakośa,

and a Sautrāntika who wrote the commentary), and that of a Mahāyāna teacher

who authored some of the most spirited defences of the system of thought that

later systematizers regard as the Yogācāra school of Buddhist philosophy. For

Frauwallner, the older Vasubandhu is the Yogācārin, while the younger com-
posed the Abhidharmakośa. Apart from arguments based on the earliest

biographical accounts of Vasubandhu (which, Frauwallner claims, look as if

two separate biographies have been spliced together), one of the main reasons

for this split are occasional references by Yaśomitra, a commentator on the

Problems with
Abhidharmakośabhā:sya to an 'older Vasubandhu (v:rddhācāryavasubandhu)',

the hypothesis of
which give the impression that Yaśomitra is himself referring to another

multiple
Vasubandhus
author also called Vasubandhu who lived some time before the author of the

Abhidharmakośa. Contemporary scholars do not regard these considerations

as decisive enough to uphold the 'two Vasubandhus' hypothesis,[32] especially

as it, though solving some interpretative problems, generates others. If the

Abhidharmakośa was composed a whole century after such key Yogācāra works

as the Yogācārabhūmi, why does this book, filled as it is with references to specif

positions and authors, not refer to this school, and why does it use the term

'Yogācāra' in a way that clearly does not presuppose any doctrinal identity, but

merely refers to practitioners of yoga? Moreover, there seem to be a variety of

ways of explaining the references to the 'older Vasubandhu'. The term might her

not literally mean older, but could have been used in an honorific sense,[33] or it

could refer to an earlier stage in Vasubandhu's philosophical development,[34]

[29] Anacker 2002: 23.
[30] Tola and Dragonetti 2004: 154–5, n. 2.
[31] Frauwallner 1951.
[32] For some criticism see Jaini 1958; Bhikkhu Pāsādika 1991; an extended discuss

2015a, 2–21.
[33] Anacker 2002: 24–6, n. 13.
[34] Mejor 1989–90.

or finally, it may indeed refer to a different Vasubandhu, but in quite another

way. Paramārtha's biography tells us that all the three sons of Vasubandhu's

mother were called 'Vasubandhu', though two of them were also called by

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different names in order to tell them apart: Asanga ('no attachment') and

Viriñcivatsa (child of Viriñci, another name of his mother Prasannaśīlā). In

this case the term 'older Vasubandhu' could refer to the oldest of these three

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Vasubandhus, namely Asanga.
It seems as if the main force that makes the hypothesis of the two Vasu-
The main force

bandhus attractive is one that often stands in the way of a nuanced under-
behind the

hypothesis
standing of the history of Buddhist philosophy: the view that Buddhist

philosophers can be clearly divided into different schools of thought, that

each of these schools of thought has a core set of unique beliefs that distin-
guishes them from all other schools, and that all of a philosopher's intellectual

activity takes place within the limits of this framework. While there is no doubt

that doxographic frameworks are propaedeutically useful for trying to explain Dif

the rough outlines of development of Buddhist thought (as they are used in the do

frameworks

present work), the overly simplistic nature of their key assumptions is obvious once these are properly formulated. Buddhist philosophers did not compose their treatises in order to found new schools, and did not subsequently regard themselves as their chief exponents, but the identity of these schools is projected backwards with the benefit of historical hindsight, in order to stress certain similarities amongst the views of temporally contiguous sets of thinkers. These schools developed, often over considerable time, and their views developed with them; there is no fixed set of theses that is common to every work by every author ascribed to a given school and thereby constitutive of that school's intellectual identity. Finally, the views of philosophers change over the course of time, sometimes in radical ways, a fact that is as true today as it was in ancient India. To ascribe philosophical texts to authors on the basis of the fact that the positions described in them diverge, if at all, only in the most minimal fashion is unlikely to lead to a satisfactory account of authors and the development of their work. The fact that the framework incorporating these views is not simply regarded as propaedeutic tool but as authoritative in its own right lends support to the idea of 'splitting up' Vasubandhu into two, despite the fact that the traditional accounts always consider Vasubandhu to be a single author with a unified body of works. The split allows us to distinguish the Ābhidharmika Vasubandhu from the Yogācārin, ascribe to each a set of unique Abhidharma and Yogācāra beliefs, and consider their intellectual

activity as wholly contained within these respective frameworks. However,

once we question the intrinsic cogency of the framework motivating this

split we realize that the justification for the division slips away, and that the

historical evidence brought forward to support it can equally be explained in

other ways.

d. Stage 5: Later Yogācāra
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After Asanga and Vasubandhu the history of Yogācāra thought continued in

India for about another seven centuries. Unfortunately we are not able to provide

a detailed account of this intellectually very fertile period here, but have to limit

ourselves to mentioning a few particularly noteworthy episodes. The most

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important thinkers of later Yogācāra were without question Dinnāga, a disciple

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Dinnāga and
of Vasubandhu, and Dharmakīrti, a disciple of one of Dinnāga's disciples. Both

Dharmakīrti
of them are known first and foremost for their work on logic and epistemology,

in fact their works are often regarded as the foundation of a separate 'logico-
epistemological school' alongside Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. We will discuss

their ideas on reasoning, debate, and the theory of knowledge in more detail in

the next chapter. In this chapter we will focus on some of their other works that

are not primarily concerned with logico-epistemological matters.

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Dinnāga's

Dinnāga's most noteworthy treatise in this group is his Ālambanaparīk:sā, a

Ālambanaparīk:sā work that we will meet again below in the context of the Yogā

atomism.[35] This text is extremely short, consisting of only eight verses, together

with a brief auto-commentary, a mere two-and-a-half Tibetan folios long

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(the Sanskrit original is lost).[36] Despite its brevity, this work of Dinnāga's proved

to be fairly influential, not just in terms of the later commentaries it attracted, but

also by generating various responses from non-Buddhist thinkers.[37] As the title

of the work indicates, it is an investigation (parīk:sā) of the support (ālamba:na)

Conditions for

of the perceptual state, that is, whatever it is in the world that makes a certain

supporting a

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state a perceptual state. Dinnāga argues that for something to act as a support of

perceptual state

a perception, it must satisfy two conditions: it must be caused by it and it must

exist in the way in which the perception makes it appear. If something does not

enter into causal contact with our sensory apparatus it is hard to see how we

could say that we perceive it. And if the way the something exists and the way it

appears to us wholly diverge we should rather speak of a misperception than of a

perception. Perception should not only hook us up with the world, it should also

:
get the world more or less right. As we have will see below,[38] Dinnāga argues tha

neither atoms nor conglomerates of atoms can fulfil both conditions, and for that

Representations as reason they cannot be what we perceive. Is there anything that

supports
conditions? Consider internal representations. Such representations are intro-
duced by views according to which we are unable to perceive an object just as it

is, but require the mediation of an internal intermediary, some representation

that brings together all the different features of an object our different sensory

[35] See below, pp. 172–3.
[36] For a translation together with a set of Indian and Tibetan commentaries see D

et al. 2016.
[37] Sastri 1942: xi–xii.
[38] p. 172–3.

faculties have perceived. For this reason internal representations are causes of

perception as well; they are closer to us than the object itself, but they are

nevertheless part of the causal field that gives rise to the perception. Moreover,

the internal representation exists in the way in which perception makes it appear;

certainly more so than the external object itself.
:
Dinnāga is thus runs a transcendental argument for idealism. He identifies

what the preconditions for us to have any perceptions at all must be (there

must be causes that exist in the way they appear), and argues that, given that we

have perceptions, and given that the familiar candidates such as atoms and

their conglomerates fail to fulfil this condition, what we really perceive are

internal representations.

2. Proofs of Buddhist Doctrines

If we consider the development of Buddhist thought, and that of Yogācāra in

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particular, from the times of Dinnāga onwards, it becomes apparent that

Buddhist philosophy has entered a phase of increased debate and argumenta-
tive interactions with non-Buddhist schools. One manifestation of this is a

series of proofs of specific Buddhist concepts that Indian Buddhist philo-
sophers debated at the time. Such proofs would obviously be of little use in

an intra-Buddhist debate, where the basic assumptions of Buddhism were not

questioned, and the issue was rather how specific doctrinal disputes about the

interpretations of concepts were to be resolved. But once Buddhists debated

more extensively with non-Buddhists, the necessity to provide specific argu-
ments establishing points of view that the opponent is unlikely to share

becomes more pressing. We will be looking at three such proofs here: a proof

of rebirth, a proof of the falsity of solipsism, and a proof of momentariness.

a. Rebirth

This argument, which Dharmakīrti gives in the Pramā :nasiddhi chapter of his

Pramā :navārttika, is actually meant to establish two positions at the same time:

the existence of rebirth and the non-
material nature of the mental, that is, the Arguing for the

establishment of a form of interactionist dualism. Dharmakīrti puts this argument

epistemic
forward in the context of arguing for the Buddha as a source of epistemic authorit

authority (pramā :nabhūta). The reason he provides is that the Buddha is infinitely

compassionate. We might think this is a curious way of justifying an epistemic

point by an ethical observation. After all, the fact that someone is very compas-
Infinite

sionate does not necessarily entail that he has a privileged insight into how the co

during infinitely
world works. However, as Indian commentators on this passage point out,[39] that r

[39] See Franco 1997: 23–6.

the Buddha has practised compassion over the course of countless lifetimes

means that he has invested all his powers in finding a way to liberate all beings

from suffering and its cause. It is because of this that he has developed insight int

the nature of reality that made it possible for the Buddha to become liberated

himself and to show the way to liberation to others. Compassion, when pursued

to the limit, will inevitably have epistemic consequences, and it is these conse-
quences that justify regarding the Buddha as an authority about how to become

free from sa :msāra.
Of course, if the Buddha's great compassion differs from the compassion

ordinary beings may experience by having been cultivated over an infinite

number of lifetimes, Dharmakīrti then has to say something establishing that

the Buddha, and indeed all other beings, have lived through an infinite number

Conditions for
of lives prior to this one. The background of his argument is the standard

the arising of
Abhidharma account of what there needs to be in order for a moment of

consciousness
consciousness to arise. This list includes four conditions, which include a

properly functioning sensory faculty (adhipatipratyaya), an object of aware-
ness (ālambanapratyaya), and an immediately prior moment of the same type

of awareness (samanatarapratyaya). The final condition is the key. If for each

moment of consciousness we need a prior moment to play a part in producing

Infinite regression it, consciousness must stretch back infinitely backwards. This

of consciousness
have existed before we were born, thereby entailing both an unending succes-
sion of lives stretching back into the past, as well as the ability of the mental to

exist without a physical basis (as there is nothing physical that has been

transmitted from the body of my previous birth to this one, the mind must

have existed in the intermediate state between the two births without any

body supporting its existence). This latter claim is, of course, essential for a

Yogācārin: if the mind could not exist without the physical we could hardly

claim that everything physical is in fact only the mental in disguise without

depriving the mental of its existential support. In fact all major religious and

philosophical schools in India accepted the existence of rebirth and the exist-
ential independence of the mental in some form—all, that is, apart from the

Cārvāka
Cārvākas, a school of materialism that denied the existence of irreducibly

materialism
mental phenomena. They argued that as the sound of a drum does not

continue elsewhere when the percussionist stops playing,[40] but ceases, or as

once the intoxicating properties of some alcohol[41] dissipate they do not become

attached to another liquid, so the destruction of the body entails the destruc-
tion of the mind, not just its move to another locus. It is this kind of

materialism, a theory nearly universal in the current sciences of the mind, yet

[40] Bhattacharya 2013: 6–7.
[41] Bhattacharya 2002: 604, 612.

one that appeared uniformly absurd to the ancient Indian thinkers, that

Dharmakīrti's arguments are chiefly directed against.
This is obviously not the place to go into a detailed discussion of the Two challen

systematic prospects of Dharmakīrti's argument as a refutation of material-
ism,[42] but it is useful to briefly note two obvious challenges his argument faces.
First of all, on its own it is strictly speaking not a proof of rebirth but a proof of P

past lives, since it attempts to show that the present mental moment had not of rel

infinitely many mental predecessors, not that it is going to have infinitely

many mental successors. Dharmakīrti was aware that inferring the cause

from the effect is an altogether more satisfactory move than trying to infer

effects from potential causes.[43] Other factors might intervene, and the 'cause'
might never bring about the effect, and a given mind-moment might never

cause its successor. In order to argue for the extension of mind into the future

we would therefore need to argue that it is the nature of mind-moments to

bring about their successor, and that because the relation of the immediately

preceding mind-moment to the present one is essentially the same as that of

the present mind-moment to the immediately succeeding one, the present

moment will always produce a successor moment.
A second difficulty is connected with accounting for periods of unconscious-
Accounting for

ness, such as deep sleep or coma. If a person wakes up from a coma, their first un

waking moment would have to have been produced by the last pre-coma

moment, since there are not any mind-moments in between. This leads to

the curious consequence that the 'immediately preceding' mind-moment can

be separated from the 'immediately succeeding' one by a considerable temporal

distance. Yet Dharmakīrti's commentators point out that this is a consequence

to be endorsed, since the only other alternative is that something in the body

should restart consciousness, and in this case consciousness should always be

able to re-arise in a body, which is manifestly not the case.[44] This argument

might not strike us as too convincing (after all, we now believe that there is a

physical difference between a dead body and one in a coma), but it is worth-
while to note that once we hold on to the idea that mental causation can be

suspended by temporal gaps, it becomes straightforward to explain how the

loss of consciousness at the moment of death could be followed by the re-
arising of a causally successive consciousness in another body, simply because

no transfer of physical matter, nor an unbroken connecting chain of mind-
moments, is required for one episode of consciousness to be regarded as a

continuation of another one.
[42] For some discussion of this see Franco 1997: 128–32; Arnold 2012.

[43] See Franco 1997: 109.
[44] See Arnold 2012: 39–40.

b. Other minds

A second problem that is of considerable interest for Yogācāra philosophers is

the problem of other minds. Solipsism, the position that there is only one

mind, namely my own, and no others, is not per se a problem for idealism,

since arguing that all is mind does not commit us to accepting that all is just my

mind. But the issue becomes particularly pressing in the case of Yogācāra, since

it is not just a denial of material objects. It also argues for a denial of external

objects, as a way of undermining the duality between the subject (the self in

here) and the objects (the world out there) that is supposed to lie at the root of

our continuing transmigration through sa :msāra. Other minds are, of course,

external objects too, and we might wonder whether the same unwelcome

consequences the Yogācārin assumes to follow from the postulation of mind-
independent objects cannot simply be reinstated by reference to mind-
independent minds. If the subject–object duality can arise with respect to

atoms and their conglomerates, can it not equally arise with respect to distinct

Solipsism as
mental states and their conglomerates? Yet it is evident that the acceptance of

problematic for
solipsism must appear as highly problematic from a Buddhist perspective.
Buddhism
A relatively minor worry is that canonical sources tell us that one of the special

powers the Buddha acquired as part of his enlightenment is the ability to know other minds directly. Yet if there are no other minds to know, what precisely would the Buddha's knowledge be knowledge of? Presumably the knowledge of his own mind would not qualify as the kind of knowledge that presupposes liberation for its obtaining. More importantly, the entire point of the Mahāyāna path seems to disappear on the solipsist picture of the world. If its aim is to lead all beings to liberation, how could this be any different from just liberating myself if there are no other beings whatsoever apart from me? Dharmakīrti's

To reject the appearance of an affinity to solipsism that one might ascribe to Santānāntara-Yogācāra, Dharmakīrti composed a separate, short treatise, the Santānāntar-siddhi asiddhi. In this text Dharmakīrti argues that knowledge of other minds does not arise in fundamentally different ways for the idealist and for the realist. The realist does not have direct knowledge of other minds, but infers their existence from the appearance of purposeful actions. The same is true for the idealist. He does not have direct access to other minds either, but receives a variety of impressions that are wholly mental in nature. Some of these are correlated with specific mental states that appear to him to be internal (e.g. my intention to move my arm, and the subsequent impression that my arm goes up), while others are not (the impression of your arm going up is not reliably preceded by specific intentions of mine). On the basis of this the Yogācārin can infer that in

the same way in which my arm-lifting is preceded by a specific mental state, so

is your arm-lifting, even though I cannot access it directly. The only difference

seems to be that for the realist the impression of arms going up is to be

regarded as an objective, external fact involving material objects, while the

Yogācārin consider such facts to be wholly mental. An objection that is raised

at this stage is that, according to the Buddhist understanding of mind, caus-
ation does not happen across separate mental streams. One mental event of

mine can cause another event of mine, but a mental event of yours cannot

directly cause a mental event of mine (such as the thought that you lift your

arm because you intended to do so). Dharmakīrti points out that the connec-
Our knowledge

tion is not one of direct causation, but of inference. If I see smoke on a distant of

is inferential
mountain and infer the presence of fire, I do not know the fire because it

entered into direct causal contact with my perceptual system. All the idealist

and the realist can hope to achieve is inferential knowledge of other minds.
What Dharmakīrti points out is that, to use modern terminology, we are

justified to apply the intentional stance to other people, thereby treating their

behaviour as if it was the result of their inner mental life. The belief that there is

such an inner life counts as knowledge according to Dharmakīrti's epistemol-
ogy, since it allows us carry out actions that fulfil our desires (in this case, we

achieve the impression of successfully interacting with other people). Dharma-kīrti's argument seems to be successful in preventing Yogācāra from sliding into solipsism, though we might wonder whether it does not provide a licence to attribute intentionality to all kinds of phenomena, such as plants, the weather, and even the random behaviour of a roulette wheel. If I am rewarded by the fulfilment of my desires with respect to these (as I may well be), would I not be equally justified in ascribing minds to them as I would be ascribing them to the people around me? The Yogācārin does not seem to be able to provide an external reason why we are more justified in one ascription than in the other, yet if all the reasons for differentiating between them are internal, the spectre of solipsism seems to rise once more.[45]

Indeed, Dharmakīrti's argument was not able to put the issue of solipsism to Ratn rest for the Yogācārins. Towards the very end of the history of Buddhism in Indi dū:saṇa
the eleventh-century scholar Ratnakīrti composed the Santānāntaradū:sa:na, a short treatise on the refutation of the existence of other minds, and what appears to be a defence of solipsism. Ratnakīrti argues that there is no real possibility of differentiating consciousness as a whole into different streams, one for each mind thereby establishing the existence of minds other than one's own. His key point is that mental events that occur in our mind do not specifically identify themselves as belonging to our own mental stream.[46] The simple reflexivity of consciousnes which the Yogācārins accept, is not enough here. Neither consciousness being aware of itself, nor the fact that I consider my thoughts to be mine, is sufficient fo

making them mine; there needs to be some internal way of identifying them as

[45] For this point see Reat 1985: 270.
[46] See Ganeri 2007: 205–9.

mine and as not belonging to somebody else. Simply thinking of a thought that it

is mine will not be sufficient, since another person will think the very same thing

of their thought, and this will be theirs, not ours. We would therefore need a

unique way of connecting each set of mental events with some kind of unique

identifier, like 'JCW's thought', in order to regard them as mine. This kind of

thought-tagging cannot just boil down to belonging to a specific set of mental

events forming a maximally connected series, the standard Buddhist reductionist

account of a person. This would not rule out solipsism, since if solipsism was true

my thoughts would obviously belong to such a series, which would be the only

one there is. Rather, the 'JCW' tag of each thought would need to be internally

accessible, and distinguishable from the 'ABC' tag, the 'DEF' tag, and so on. But

such branding of thoughts in terms of irreducibly distinct persons that have them

is of course not possible within the Buddhist conception of the mind. If we are

reductionists about persons, it seems, then we have to accept the consequence that

Solipsism at the
we cannot really differentiate between different streams of consciousness. This

level of ultimate
theory does not entail all the problematic consequences for the Buddhist path,

realıty
since Ratnakīrti confines the solipsistic picture to the level of ultimate reality.[47] A

the level of conventional truth the division into individual minds, and all the

ethical and soteriological consequences that come with it, still hold.

c. Momentariness

The final notion we want to discuss here is that of momentariness, the idea that

all existents only last for a moment and immediately disappear upon arising, so

that our perception of temporally persisting objects is simply an illusion akin to

that we experience every time we watch a film in the cinema. Like the idea of

rebirth and the existence of other minds, momentariness has been the object of

considerable attention by Yogācāra masters, though they were by no means the

first who tried to provide argumentative support for this initially quite unin-
tuitive concept.

We noted above that in addition to the argument for momentariness from

the spontaneity of destruction we find in Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośa-
bhā:sya, there are two more forms of argument for momentariness that make

their appearance in the history of Buddhist philosophy. These are the argument

from the momentariness of cognition and the argument from change.

Argument

Arguments from the momentariness of cognition, put forward, amongst

from the

others, by Vasubandhu,[48] take as their premise the claim that all mental

momentariness
of cognition

phenomena are momentary, and arise and cease moment by moment, without

temporal thickness. Now these mental phenomena depend causally on their

bases, which are the physical sense faculties, and thus the momentariness of the

[47] McDermott 1969: 1.
[48]
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In the Mahāyānasūtrālankārabhā:sya, see von Rospatt 1995: 125.

mental phenomena must be inherited from the momentariness of the physical

phenomena that give rise to them. An example sometimes used to illustrate this

argument is that of a passenger in a carriage. The rise and descent of the Mental

passenger (the mind) is only due to the rise and descent of the carriage (the mome

inherited from
body), and the passenger's movement is nothing but a replication of the pattern m

of movement of the cart.[49] This argument derives its force from the generally of p

accepted view within Buddhist philosophy that permanent and impermanent

entities are fundamentally different kinds of thing, and so could not be

connected by a causal relation. A permanent cause could therefore not bring

about an impermanent effect. (Of course, this only helps in establishing

momentariness if the impermanent is identified with the momentary, and

the permanent with the non-momentary,[50] so that there could not be imper-
manent phenomena that are in fact non-momentary.)
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An early form of the argument from change was put forward in Asanga's The arg

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rāvakabhūmi. The best way of understanding the point Asanga makes in this from

text[51] is that entities change their properties unceasingly throughout time, and

that such a change is not a substitution of one property by another on the basis

of some persisting substance, but a replacement of one object (having the first

property) by a distinct, though similar one (having the second property). If this

is the case, the constant change of objects entails their inability to persist, since

each instance of change is characterized by the cessation of one object and its

substitution by another.
Further versions of arguments from change have been explored by

Dharmakīrti, and later Ratnakīrti presents another development of them in

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his K:sa :nabhangasiddhi. Ratnakīrti puts forward an indirect and a direct argu-
Ratnakīrti's

ment. The indirect argument attempts to show that the assumption of the indirect

temporal thickness of objects, the idea that they last for more than one moment

and are therefore extended in time, leads to a contradiction. Consider a material

object that appears to be temporally extended, such as a pot. The pot at midday

can be regarded as an effect of the pot at midnight, insofar as an object stays in

existence by causing its later time-slices. But now consider the pot at two

immediately successive moments, t and t'. The pot at t can bring about an effect

at t' that is either the same, or different, or it may bring about no effect at all. The

last can be ruled out immediately, since Ratnakīrti understands existence

precisely in terms of causal efficacy, as the ability to bring about effects. But if

the pots at t and t' are the same, the former would bring about an effect that

[49] Von Rospatt 1995: 126. Section II.II.B (122–
52) presents a detailed discussion of various

forms of this argument.
[50] See von Rospatt 1995: n. 334, 148 for a passage from Sthiramati's Mahāyānasūtra
:
lankārav:rttibhā:sya where he makes this very identification.
[51] See von Rospatt 1995: 153–5, and section II.II.C (153–
77) for further discussion of arguments

from change.

already exists, a position that is also not satisfactory. So the pots at the two

moments have to be different. But since this argument applies to any two

successive moments of the pot's existence, the pot cannot be temporally

extended. This is the contradiction entailed by the denial of momentariness.[52]
Ratnakīrti's direct
Ratnakīrti's direct argument for the momentariness of an arbitrary object

argument
such as a pot proceeds as follows. As we have already seen, to exist means

having causal efficacy. Ratnakīrti also argues that such efficacy, once present, is

discharged immediately. We might consider this premise as not particularly

plausible, since there are various existent, causally efficacious things that do not

presently bring about an effect. Take a grain in the granary: it has the power to

sprout, but it does not currently do so. But, we may argue, this is only because

we conceive of it without the causal field (sāmagrī) of background conditions

such as water, soil, warmth, and so on that make the arising of the effect

possible. Without the causal field, the seed cannot produce any sprout, yet once

all the constituents of the causal field are assembled, the effect is produced

without delay. If we then consider a given pot at various successive moments in

time, t, t', and t", it is clear that the pot at t cannot bring about the pot at t",

since it has discharged its causal power immediately, bringing about the pot at

t'. Only this pot at t' has the ability to bring about the pot at t". For Ratnakīrti,

the causal capacities of an object are not only intricately connected with its

existence, but also with being the kind of object it is. So if the pot at t and the

pot at t' have different causal powers, they must be different kinds of thing.
Therefore, as the theory of momentariness claims, there is not a single pot

persisting throughout the three moments but a succession of pots that differ in

nature, one causing, and thereby replacing, the next.[53]
3. Key Yogācāra Concepts
After this survey of the historical development of Yogācāra thought in India we

will introduce some of its key concepts as described in the works of the three

:
Yogācāra masters Maitreya, Asanga, and Vasubandhu. Three of them can be

considered as constituting the conceptual core of Yogācāra thought: the idea that

everything is wholly mental (cittamātra), the notion of a foundational conscious-
ness (ālayavijñāna), and the doctrine of the three natures (trisvabhāva).
a. cittamātra
If there is anything deserving to be called the signature doctrine of Yogācāra[54]
it is the idea of 'consciousness-only' (cittamātra), the view that all things are

[52] See Feldman and Phillips 2011: 30–1, 67.
[53] See Feldman and Phillips 2011: 34–7, 70.
[54] Certainly from the time of Vasubandhu onwards, though things look somewha

consider earlier Yogācāra literature such as the Yogācārabhūmi (Kellner 2017a: 3

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merely mind. This view is, to put it mildly, somewhat unintuitive, not just from

the perspective of contemporary Western naturalism, but also for any Buddhist

trained in the Abhidharma framework that considers matter (rūpa), the first of Ar

the five skandhas, as one of the fundamental ontological categories. The material

Yogācāra thinkers have developed a variety of arguments to deny the existence

of material objects.[55] Amongst them we can distinguish three main groups,

correlated to three epistemic instruments (pramā :na): arguments relating to the

possibility of inferring material objects, arguments regarding their being estab-
lished by scriptural authority accepted by the Buddhists, and arguments con-
cerning the possibility of perceiving such objects.
It appears as if our best theories of the world distinguish between entities 1. Infer

that are only subjectively observable (such as dreams and illusions), and those ma

that are objectively observable (such as tables and chairs), and that this

epistemological distinction is matched by an ontological one between objects

that are merely mental and external, material objects. The well-known discus-
sions of illusory appearances we find in many Yogācāra texts challenge this

assumption. Following the illusionistic doctrines of the Prajñāpāramitā texts

and the examples they provide, Yogācāra writers point out the phenomeno-

logical indistinguishability of our everyday experience from dreams, magical Dre

performances, mirages, and visual illusions. The first in particular provides

them with an example of a complex experience that shares key features with

waking experience. Waking experience exhibits temporal and spatial structur-
ing (events do not happen in a random order, or at random places, but follow a

spatio-temporal trajectory), and so do events in a dream. Events in the waking

world display causal efficacy (when we drink water, our thirst is quenched), but

so do events within the dream.[56]

But if we are unable to distinguish from the inside between a world in which Post

all is mental and a world in which there is also matter in addition to mind, how m

explanatorily idle
could we make the inference from the appearance of matter to our senses to its

existence? We could be in a phenomenologically indistinguishable situation

(such as in a dream), and our inference would then be erroneous. Moreover,

what is the advantage of postulating material objects? The Yogācārin argues

that they are a mere idle wheel that does not confer any explanatory benefits.
A related point can be made by reference to the well-
known example of the Example of the

'three cups of liquid', which presupposes some specific beliefs about Buddhist 'th

liquid'
cosmology. The idea is that when the same cup of water is presented to beings

[55] For a concise discussion of five types of arguments against the existence of ma

associated with Dharmakīrti see Kellner 2017a, b.
[56] In fact dream events cannot only be causally efficacious with respect to dream

also bring about effects in the waking world, as Vasubandhu points out by his ap[
of wet dreams, in Vi :mśikā 4, see Tola and Dragonetti 2004: 82.

born into different realms of existence they will perceive it as substantially

different things. Human beings will see a cup of water, gods will see a cup of

ambrosia, hungry ghosts will see a cup filled with blood, pus, and other

unsavoury substances, while beings born in hell see a cup of molten metal.[57]
Once more, the appearance of water does not warrant our inference that there

is an external object with the properties of water out there. The properties

water seems to have, of being cool, transparent, pleasant to the taste, and so on,

appear to be artefacts of our cognitive system, since they disappear when other

kinds of being apprehend it. But it is then difficult to explain what kind of

external object there might be that has the ability to appear in these protean

shapes. It cannot be hot, or cold, or sweet, or salty, or clear, or opaque; in fact, it

is difficult to see how we could have knowledge of any of the properties such

objects have by themselves.
Restriction to
Apart from the argument from illusion and considerations of how much our

invariable
sensory capacities (which are ultimately due to our karmic potentials) influ-
co-cognition
ence our perception, we also sometimes find reference to a third argument,

called sahopalambhaniyama. This 'restriction to invariable co-cognition',

which is developed in detail by Dharmakīrti,[58] points out that objects of

awareness (such as a blue patch) and acts of awareness (cognition of something blue) always go together. We can never catch any object in an unperceived state, since the very process of perceptually 'catching' it already implies some form of cognitive access to it. But this means that there is something problematic with inferring from our perception of the world mind-independent, eternal objects, that is, objects that could exist independent of them being cognized by anybody. If object and perception are invariably conjoined, what reason would we have to conclude that one of them could exist on its own? It might look as if this argument could easily backfire, since if blue and the awareness of blue are always combined, how could we infer, as the Yogācārin does, that there is only the mental half of the pair? The answer to this problem is that the Yogācārin has other reasons for denying that the 'blue'/'awareness of blue' pair could be reduced to the material factor, namely the rejection of the Cārvāka assumption that matter could give rise to mind.[59] Of course, mind cannot give rise to matter either, but it can at least give rise to the erroneous appearance of matter, which is all the Yogācārin needs in order to claim that the invariable concomitance should be considered as indicating that there really only is the right half of the pair. It would be mistaken to argue that in general the invariable

[57] While particularly vivid, the appeal to different realms of existence is not essen example. The Bodhicittavivara :na (ascribed to Nāgārjuna) mentions the example woman being seen as a potential lover by a man, a walking corpse by an ascetic, eat by a dog (20, Lindtner 1982: 190–1).

[58] Iwata 1991.
[59] Bhattacharya 2002: 603–5.

concomitance of two entities implies that there is only one of them (that

the stars in the Big Dipper always occur together does not mean that there is

only one star there), but the argument does not make this general claim: in

the case of the Big Dipper, the individual stars can be inspected in isolation;

in the case of blue and the awareness of blue this is not possible.[60]
A clear argument for the existence of material objects that all Buddhists must 2. S

accept, it seems, is based on the fact that the Buddha himself spoke in his authori

existence of
discourses as if such things existed. When the Buddha speaks about the absence r

of a substantial self, and claims that there is only the mistaken superimposition

of such a self on the five skandhas, he seems to acknowledge that there is a

mind-independent, external rūpa-skandha, in accordance with the common-
sense view and in contradiction with the Yogācāra position that there is only

mind. The Yogācārin can, of course, respond (and this is in fact what Vasu-
Interpretable vs.
bandhu does) by pointing out that such teachings are to be understood as definite

interpretable (neyārtha), not as definitive (nītārtha), that this, that they were

given in a specific context to a specific audience that would have been insuf-
ficiently equipped to deal with the full complexities of the mind-only system.
For this reason the Buddha spoke to them in a mere as-if manner, playing

along with their mistaken idea that external objects exist. However, a defender

of the traditional interpretation of these texts might not be very impressed by this move. Why, he will ask, do we have to choose this more convoluted explanation if we can have the simpler (and therefore theoretically preferable) explanation that the Buddha meant what he said when he referred to external things? Even if the previous argument about the difficulties of inferring the existence of external objects goes through, we have still the authority of the straightforward interpretation of the Buddha's own discourses to vouch for them. At this point the Yogācārin responds that the Buddha could not have meant his talk about matter literally, since when we analyse our best theories of matter they turn out to be internally contradictory. Vasubandhu[61] points out intern

contradictory

that there is something inherently problematic about the notion of an atom, since it is both supposed to be partless and should also collectively fill up space. Yet it is unclear how this could happen. If we line up three atoms in a row, the at right side of the leftmost atom and the left side of the rightmost atom do not touch, since there is the middle atom between them—this is why we have a row three atoms long. But this means that the part of the middle atom where it touches the left side of the rightmost atom, and the part where it touches the right side of the leftmost atom cannot be the same, otherwise the left and right atom would touch each other. But this is already to admit that the middle atom

[60] Chakrabarti 1990: 34–5.
[61] Vi :mśikā 11–14. See Kapstein 2001.

can have two separate parts, which contradicts our initial assumption that

atoms are partless.

More generally, the worry is that if we put a lot of atoms of zero spatial

extension together we get another thing of zero spatial extension, in which case

the theory of atoms could not explain how there can be an extended world of

external objects.

Atoms and optics

A related difficulty can be expressed with reference to light and shade. If one

atom blocks the light falling on another atom, so that the other atom is in the

shade, the shading atom will have to have a light side and a dark side, and

thereby two distinct parts. For if it did not, the back of the shading atom would

be as bright as the front, where the light touches it, and so the shaded atom

behind it would actually be in the light. Therefore, if we postulate partless atoms

it seems impossible to account for familiar optical phenomena such as shade, a

consideration that counts against adopting such a theory in the first place.

:

Atomism cannot

In his Ālambanaparīk:sāv:rtti Dinnāga raises a different worry for the materi-

be a basis for

alist supporter of atoms. First, when we see a medium-sized object such as a

epistemology

cup, we obviously don't see the atoms that compose it. They are too small to be

seen, and in any case they all look the same, whereas what we see in the world

around us does not all look the same. Do we then see an agglomeration of atoms that is a cup? The difficulty with this suggestion is that it is not entirely clear to what extent we are here dealing with an external object, since picking out medium-sized objects does not seem to be possible without relying on mental constructs that distinguish one collection of atoms from another. Consider a simple example. In a black-and-white dot matrix picture the image is entirely composed of black dots. The dots are all the same, and too small to be seen with the naked eye. What we see when we see part of such a picture as a cup, another as a vase, and so forth are different arrangements of these indistinguishable dots. But how do we tell which set of dots represents the cup, which the vase, and which might not represent anything at all, because it is just part of the background shading? We already have to have an image of what cups and vases look like in order to identify the cup-collection, vase-collection, and so forth in the picture. But in this case we have not come up with something perceived that is wholly external, since we rely crucially on mental images to see anything at all in the picture, rather than just random
:
visual noise. Therefore, Dinnāga argues, what is supposedly external (the atoms) we do not perceive, and what we do perceive (the collections) is
:
inextricably bound up with mental, and hence internal phenomena. Dinnāga's point is not the same as Vasubandhu's, namely, that the notion of an atom is intrinsically contradictory; rather, he wants to point out that the atomist is not

able to base a satisfactory theory of how we know the world around us on his

atomistic theory. The Yogācārins present a set of reasons why theories of

matter (and the chief ancient Indian representatives of these were atomistic

theories) cannot be worked out in a satisfactory manner. For this reason the

Buddha's references to material objects cannot be taken literally, but must be

considered as interpretable, as intended to work on the basis of a mistaken

assumption of the existence of matter that the audience shares.

We might think that the strongest argument in favour of material objects is 3. Per

neither the fact that they can be inferred on the basis of our best theories of the m

world, nor that the Buddha said that there are such things, but that we can

continuously and unambiguously observe them through our senses. Yet the

Yogācārin will object that such sensory experiences are possible without the Repr

existence of external objects. Suppose you believe that external objects such as a

cup exist because this cup was perceived by you. Yet when you think 'I saw this

cup', you are not dealing with an external object, but with a mental object, a

representational form (ākāra), since the cup-perception is already a thing of

the past and is no longer present in front of you. What about when you are

presently looking at a cup? This does not help, at least as long as we accept the

theory of momentariness. If all things last only for an instant, since forming

perception takes time the cup-moment that caused your cup-perception no

longer exists when that perception arises. Your perception always lags behind

reality. Since the perception of the cup you are presently experiencing cannot

link you to a presently existent thing (as that cup-moment has disappeared),

and since whatever might be presently existent (the current cup-moment) is

not experienced, your present perceptions are always perceptions of something

merely mental. So even if experience seems to provide us with strong evidence

that we are in contact with external objects, the principle of momentariness

shows this to be a mistake.

The Yogācārin can therefore argue that whichever one of the three epistemic

instruments inference, scriptural testimony, or perception we want to rely on

in order to establish the existence of external objects, we always draw a blank,

and that for this reason the position of 'mind-only' (cittamātra) is established.

It is worthwhile to note at this point that there was considerable discussion Realit

within Yogācāra about the degree of reality to be ascribed to the representa-
representational

forms
tional forms (ākāra). In Indian sources we find a doxographical distinction

between those schools that believe perceptual cognition to take place via

representational forms (sākāravāda) and those that deny the place of such

forms in epistemology (nirākāravāda).[62] Examples of the former are

[62] The reader should be aware that amongst Indian authors there was no agreemer

precisely an ākāra was thought to be, and which thinkers were supposed to be sul

terms like sākāravāda and nirākāravāda (Funayama 2007: 189–

90, Seton 2015). The outline

I present in the following pages provides some guidance for navigating this very

often confusing section of Indian Buddhist thought. Nevertheless, I had to simpli

resulting account is, unfortunately, imperfect in a variety of respects. Still, I belie

imperfect map is better than having none at all.

 THE GOLDEN AGE OF INDIAN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

sākāravāda vs.
Sautrāntika and Yogācāra,[63] both of which consider perception to be mediated

nirākāravāda
by a representational form. Nirākāravāda theories like Nyāya or Sarvāstivāda,

on the other hand, hold that cognition can access objects directly; the content

of a cognition is settled by the object, the cognition itself is without form.[64]

satyākāravāda vs.
The sākāravāda approach may be in turn be subdivided into two positions,

alīkākāravāda
depending on the view they take concerning the nature of the ākāra. One

considers representational forms to be true (satya, bden pa), the other takes

them to be false (alīka, rdzun pa).[65] What precisely this division between these

two takes on representational form, satyākāravāda and alīkākāravāda,

amounts to is not entirely clear.[66] It is fairly straightforward to see why a

representationalist like a Sautrāntika would be considered to follow the satyā-
kāravāda. For him the representational form represents the external object of

perception, and the form represents the object truly or accurately.
Since the Yogācārins deny the existence of external objects, it is not imme-
diately obvious what role the notion of the 'truth' or 'accuracy' of an ākāra

could play for them. If there is nothing out there that the representational form

represents, how could it do so more or less accurately?
Yet even a Yogācārin could claim that our perception of a grey elephant, say,

is only deceptive with respect to the externality ascribed to the elephant,[67] but

not with respect to the phenomenal properties of appearing as grey or appearing as an elephant. This is what a satyākāravādin will assert; for him the

representational forms are really present in consciousness.[68] In opposition to

this satyākāravāda interpretation of Yogācāra, the alīkākāravāda reading

denies the accuracy of representational forms. Here the forms that appear to

the mind are taken to be simply the product of delusion; they do not succeed in

accurately representing anything. What is real is the reflexive awareness

[63] Even though Yogācāra is commonly classified as belonging to the sākāravāda,

281–
2) argues that a nirākāravāda reading of Yogācāra may be possible. According to

cognition happens without recourse to an ākāra, while the object of cognition is s

in nature. Such a view would deny material objects, but not that the nature of the

cognition can be independent of being cognized by a cognition.
[64] See Kajiyama 1965: 429, Della Santina 2000, Komarovski 2011: 72–84.
[65] This way of grouping the schools was adopted by the 11th-
century Tibetan rNying ma scholar

Rong zom chos kyi bzang po. Needless to say, Tibetan scholars did not agree on

systematization of the different theories of ākāra (see Almogi 2013: 1334–5).
[66] Additional confusion between the terms may be avoided by being aware that e

cannot simply conflate satyākāravāda and sākāravāda, and alīkākāravāda and nirā

(McClintock 2014: 328), some authors treat them as synonymous or use the latter

the former distinction (Ruegg 1981a: 123; 2010: 347, Della Santina 1992; 2000: 3

Tillemans 2008: 41, n. 91. Unlike the terms sākāravāda and nirākāravāda, the terr

and alīkākāravāda are reconstructions from Tibetan and are not found in extant Sa

(Moriyama 2014: 431, n. 4). This does not mean, of course, that the distinction th

present in Indian sources, but simply that (at least in the texts that have come dow

distinction was not drawn using terms denoting specific theories or vādas.
[67] Moriyama 1984: 11–12.
[68] Dreyfus 1997: 433.

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(svasa :mvedana), free from perceiver and perceived representational form, an

awareness which is thus a non-dual form of cognition (advayajñāna).[69] The

diversity of representational forms is a mistaken appearance superimposed on

a singular phenomenon, the reflexive awareness of consciousness.
The difference between satyākāravāda and alīkākāravāda is not concerned

with the question whether representational forms exist. As both are forms of

sākāravāda, both accept that they do. The difference concerns the truth or

accuracy of these forms, a difference that is obviously not cashed out in terms

of their accuracy in representing external objects, but in terms of whether or

not these representational forms exist in the way they appear. Do the repre-
sentational forms appearing as grey or appearing as an elephant and so on exist

as entities (dngos po)[70] within consciousness, or do they in fact have a different

nature quite distinct from appearing as grey or as an elephant?
The eleventh-
century scholar Bodhibhadra underlines this way of drawing Representational

the distinction between satyākāravāda and alīkākāravāda in terms of the forms an

three natures

Yogācāra theory of the three natures,[71] pointing out that the satyākāravāda

assumes that the representational forms should be subsumed under the

dependent nature (paratantra-svabhāva), while the alīkākāravāda interpret-
ation includes them amongst the imaginary nature (parikalpita-svabhāva).[72]
What this alignment of the two accounts of representational form with the

theory of the three natures is supposed to demonstrate is that, according to

the satyākāravāda understanding, the ākāra is the really existent basis for the

erroneous appearance of external objects, whereas for the alīkākāravāda the

ākāra, despite appearing as a mistaken projection arising from a distinct basis,

is fully non-existent.[73]
The debate about the status of representational forms is interesting not only

because it attracted a considerable amount of scholastic discussion in India,[74]
and subsequently in Tibet, but also because, despite being prima facie simply

an internal Yogācāra debate, it raises intriguing questions about this school's

relation to Madhyamaka. We will therefore come back to this debate below,

when we examine the relationship between Yogācāra and Madhyamaka in

more detail.[75]
[69] Moriyama 1984: 23. For more on svasa :mvedana see pp. 184–5 below.
[70] Dreyfus 1997: 557.
[71] See below, pp. 182–4.
[72] Moriyama 1984: 10–11, Seton 2015: 144–5.
[73] This way of understanding the distinction between satyākāravāda and alīkākāra

course generates a tension with the above attempt to subsume both under sākārav

argue that if the alīkākāravāda's ākāra is fully non-
existent in this way, alīkākāravāda should be

considered to be a form of nirākāravāda.

Is Yogācāra a

We now have some idea how Yogācāra can be understood as arising out of

form of idealism?

Sautrāntika representationalism, yet we might still be unsure what kind of

theory Yogācāra is. In fact, what exactly the Yogācāra position amounts to is

still a matter of debate. One way of understanding it is simply as a denial of the

rūpa-skandha, as the thesis that there are no material objects. Others claim that

Yogācāra's aim was not primarily ontological, but that its proponents were

more interested in epistemological matters and did not consider themselves to

be in the business of defending a uniquely correct theory of ontology. The first

interpretation is usually what one has in mind when referring to Yogācāra as a

form of idealism. Whether this is an altogether fortunate choice of terminology

is debatable. Yogācāra certainly shows little more than superficial similarity

with an idealism of the type Berkeley defended, and has even less in common

with idealism of the Hegelian variety.

On the other hand, understanding what precisely the non-idealist under-
standing of Yogācāra amounts to is no straightforward matter.[76] The best

Ontology vs.

interpretation of this reading seems to be the claim that Yogācāra authors

epistemology
were not seeking to prove the ontological statement that there are no material

objects, but simply wanted to establish the epistemological statement that we

have no good evidence for assuming that there are any such things. It seems,

however, as if the gulf between the idealist and these non-idealist interpret-
ations is not as wide as the authors of the latter assume. It is, after all, fairly easy

to move from the epistemological to the ontological claim by appealing to

principles that the ancient Indian authors were well aware of.
The 'lack of
If we focus on Vasubandhu and the Vi :mśikā, which contains a particularly

evidence' principle popular exposition of the cittamātra position, we can fruitfully

argument given there with the same author's rejection of a substantial person

(pudgala) in the ninth chapter of his Abhidharmakośabhā:sya.[77] What Vasu-
bandhu does there is to investigate various ways in which we could look for the

person, and if there was a person we would expect it to show up. Perception

and inference being our chief means of epistemic access to the world, a

substantial self should be either perceivable or inferable. And if, as Vasuban-
dhu's co-religionists do, we regard the Buddha's teachings as authoritative, his

references to persons should establish their existence.
But because the self is neither perceivable and inferable, as Vasubandhu

shows in detail, and because the Buddha's teachings in this respect need to be

understood in relation to the specific context in which they were made, there is

no route through epistemic instruments that leads to the self. If we are justified

in concluding that Vasubandhu's position in the Abhidharmakośabhā:sya is

[76] Some contemporary authors who defend a non-
idealist reading of Yogācāra include

Kochumuttom 1982, Hayes 1988, Oetke 1992, and Lusthaus 2002.
[77] See Kellner and Taber 2014 for a sustained discussion of this comparison.

that there is no substantial self, can we not similarly conclude that, at least in

the Vi :mśikā, he wants to defend the position that there are no external objects?
After all, in this text Vasubandhu points out that the various ways in which our

epistemic instruments appear to provide evidence for external objects do not

actually provide any evidence at all. By appeal to the principle that we are justifie

to infer that there is no x if there is no evidence for x, we are able to move from th

epistemological reading of Yogācāra to the ontological interpretation.[78]
A second principle that can help us to bridge this gap is an appeal to the The prine

principle of lightness (lāghava). This principle says that if we are faced with two l

conflicting theories that explain the same facts, but one makes fewer onto-
logical assumptions than the other, we should choose the former. In the

Vi :mśikā, Vasubandhu points out that even if we drop the assumption of

external objects, we can still explain everything that the believer in such objects

can explain. The Yogācārin's theory is therefore the lighter one, as it only

assumes one kind of object (namely mental objects), while his opponent has to

assume that there are two kinds of object, mental and physical ones. So meta-
theoretical principles such as the principle of lightness suggest that the epi-
stemic statement that there is nothing in our experience properly understood

that points towards the existence of external objects can be used to justify an

ontological claim. This is the claim that a theory of the world that does not

entail the existence of external objects is preferable.

It therefore looks as if the non-idealist interpretation, when made suffi- Non-idealist

ciently precise, can lead to the idealist interpretation by appeal to some interpreta

and philosophical

plausible and historically attested philosophical principles. It is interesting to zeit

speculate why the non-idealist interpretations are so popular in contemporary

Western discussions of Yogācāra. One cannot help but suspect that this is a

product of the philosophical zeitgeist. Idealism is, to understate matters, a

minority position in contemporary philosophy. So it might appear as if there

is a certain hesitation in attributing to the ancient Indian thinkers a philosophical

position that seems to be so thoroughly discredited.[79] We might even support

this by reference to the maxim of charity: if we should provide historical

philosophical texts with the strongest reading possible, that is, interpret them

in such a way that the arguments they make come out sound, should we not

avoid reading the Yogācāra texts in a straightforwardly idealist manner?

[78] Of course this principle has to be qualified. The early Indian materialists argue

existence of future lives by appeal to the same principle, saying that there is no pe

for them (see Preisendanz 1994: 530). This argument did not find much favour ar

thinkers. There clearly are various things that we cannot perceive yet which still e

behind the wall, subatomic particles, etc.). We therefore have to exclude that the r

perception is

not simply due to some kind of obstruction between us and the object, or due to o

limitations, and we have to extend the reach of our argument to all the epistemic i

enable the non-evidence argument to carry substantial argumentative weight.
[79] Compare Schmithausen 2005: 49.

Wrong appeal to
But a moment's reflection reveals that this idea, if it really is what motivates

the maxim of
non-idealist interpretations of Yogācāra, is mistaken, and that its appeal to the

charity
maxim of charity is flawed. The principle does not suggest that we interpret

historical philosophical texts according to whatever is the philosophical flavour

of the day. Rather, once we have determined (by considering the text itself

together with its cultural context) what position it is setting out to support, we

reconstruct its arguments in such a way that they give the strongest possible

support for that position. It would be very peculiar if the fact that contempor-
ary philosophy is not particularly interested in idealism should have any

bearing on what we think specific Indian authors wanted to establish when

they composed their texts. The maxim of charity is useful when reconstructing

individual arguments, but not when trying to determine what a text's overall

position is likely to be.
Absence of explicit
Yet there remains one fact about early Yogācāra texts that needs explaining,

denial of material
objects
and this may well have acted as a motivation for various non-idealist inter-
pretations as well. The early Yogācāra authors do not say explicitly that there

are no material objects.[80] Considering Vasubandhu's Vimśikā as an example,

we do not find him saying directly that there is no matter, but that there is only

mind. Even his argument for the impossibility of atomism need not be under-
stood as 'a metaphysical assertion of a transcendent reality consisting of

"mind-only"', but can be taken merely as 'a practical injunction to suspend

judgment' concerning the existence of anything beyond the perception.[81]
Why are the early Yogācārins such as Vasubandhu not more explicit in

pointing out that they are making an ontological claim, rejecting the existence

of matter, and postulating only mental objects in its place? One possibility is

Ultimate reality
that this reticence is ultimately due to the belief that the true nature of reality

only knowable
can only be known through meditation. If there are aspects of the theory of

through
meditation
mind-only that cannot be known in a purely discursive manner,[82] it is under-
standable that Yogācāra writers did not present their theory in a way that

would convey the appearance that the proof of a specific ontological claim was

all that was at issue.

[80] Though it is worthwhile in this context to ask how explicit 'explicit' has to be.

Taber (2014: 718–
19) note that '[i]t is likely that any statement to the effect that "we are not aware

of external objects", and possibly even any statement to the effect that "there are

objects", will be able to be construed phenomenologically, as pertaining just to ou

meaning that the things we are experiencing are not external, physical objects, an

as denying that there are material objects outside of consciousness . . . ' If not eve

statement 'there are no external objects' could not rule out the non-idealist interpretation one may

well wonder what would.
81 Hayes 1988: 100, quoting Hall 1986: 18.
82 It is obvious that there are, for Buddhism consistently distinguishes between th

insight into a proposition and its realization at the experiential level (see Kellner

747–8).

YOGĀCĀRA

Commenting on verse 10 of the Vi :mśikā, Vasubandhu points out that the

emptiness of all things (dharma-nairātmya) is to be understood as having an

indescribable essence known only by enlightened beings,[83] and he concludes

the work by saying that the notion of mind-only 'is not conceivable in all

aspects, but is the Buddha's domain'.[84] One way of understanding this is by

considering the Yogācāra arguments against matter, such as those found in the

Vi :mśikā, as having primarily the negative purpose of clearing away the wrong

view of what dharmas are like, namely, that there is a sharp distinction between

the mental and the physical, and between the perceiving subject and the

perceived object. Yogācāra arguments examine the various reasons we could Yog

give for why external objects exist, and the theories we develop about the argume

clearing away the
existence of these objects, and show that the reasons do not justify our beliefs wro

and that the theories are intrinsically problematic. This, however, does not lead m

to a kind of sceptical position where we have just refuted the claim that we have

any knowledge of external objects, and must now suspend judgment about

their real nature. Instead, the Yogācārin holds that once the erroneous con-
ceptions of reality have been cleared away, meditative practice will provide an

avenue to gain a realization of their true nature. This, it seems, could be at least

one of the reasons why the early Yogācāra texts are not as explicit about stating

claims concerning the non-existence of external objects as we might expect.
True philosophical insight, the Buddhist philosophers hold, does not come

from studying a philosophical treatise, understanding its arguments, refuting

objections, and assenting to its conclusions. What is at issue is the transform-
ation of the way the world appears to us in our experience, not just of the way

in which we think about the world that appears to us. Once again it has become

clear that, in trying to understand Buddhist philosophy in India, we cannot just

focus on the arguments and the doctrinal texts containing ideas that the

arguments support and develop. We also have to take into account the

dimension of meditative practice that such arguments and the views they

defend are connected to. Only by being aware of this additional, extra-
argumentative factor influencing Buddhist thought can we hope to develop a

nuanced understanding of the positions the texts themselves defend.
b. ālayavijñāna and the eight types of consciousness

Yogācāra divides consciousness (vijñāna) into eight kinds (two more than

most other Buddhist schools), five correlated with the sense powers, as well

as thinking, namely visual consciousness (cak:sur-vijñāna), auditory conscious-
ness (śrotra-vijñāna), olfactory consciousness (ghrā :na-vijñāna), gustatory con-
sciouness (ji :hva-vijñāna), tactual consciousness (kaya-vijñāna), and mental

[83] anabhilāpyenātmanā yo buddhānā :m vi:saya, Ruzsa and Szegedi 2015: 145.
[84] Verse 22: sarvathā sā tu na cintyā buddhagocara:h, Ruzsa and Szegedi 2015: 1

consciousness (mano-vijñāna). In addition there is the defiled mind

(kli:s:tamanas), and the foundational consciousness (ālayavijñāna). These

eight kinds of consciousness are correlated with meditative states insofar as

Disappearance of
they gradually drop away as higher levels of meditative absorption are realized.
consciousness in
The first five are obviously dependent on the various kinds of sensory data that

meditative states
constitute their objects. Mental consciousness arises continuously, except in

special mental states such as deep sleep, coma, or deep meditative states such as

the meditative absorption without perception (asa :mjñisamāpatti). Only after

having attained the further state of meditative absorption without perception

(nirodhasamāpatti), a state in which meditators are said to remain in a kind of

suspended animation, unperturbed by blazing fires or dangerous animals

approaching, will the defiled mind disappear as well. The foundational con-
sciousness persists through all of these states.
The defiled mind

The defiled mind is directed at the foundational consciousness and mistakenly conceives of it as a self. By doing so it generates a split between the self as the subject and the various other phenomena as objects, and takes over the first six types of consciousness, with the result that their deliverances are also conceived of in terms of subject and object. As such it is the ultimate cause of the various unhealthy mental attitudes directed at the self, and thereby the cause of our continuous existence in sa :msāra. It only ceases once the meditator has attained the state of an arhat.

The foundational
consciousness:

The eighth type of consciousness, the foundational consciousness, is an intriguing concept that brings with it a variety of theoretical benefits. First,

explanatory
benefits

the foundational consciousness makes it possible to explain how specific states of deep meditative absorption in which all sense consciousness and all thinking

1. Meditation and
the continuity of
consciousness

are said to cease are still a kind of conscious state. The state of nirodhasamā-patti ('attainment of cessation') is at the heart of the problem here. For if intentional mental events cease during this kind of absorption, and if consciousness is considered to be nothing but a chain of mental events, one causing the next, it is unclear how consciousness can ever get restarted once the meditator emerges out of the meditative state. The first successive mental event does not appear to have a predecessor that could have caused it. The idea

of a continuing foundational consciousness can solve this problem.[85] As the

foundational consciousness continues to run in the background, though all

intentional mental events have ceased, in the post-meditative state new mental

events can simply arise from it. Recent authors have argued that the full-blown

notion of a foundational consciousness would not have been necessary for

Yogācārins to account for the continuation of consciousness after nirodhasa-
māpatti. Buescher[86] introduces an idea with the rather cumbersome name

[85] For more on this see Schmithausen 1987.
[86] Buescher 2008: 51–3.

'bi-polar bīja-model'.[87] According to this, sense-
faculties and consciousness The 'bi-polar

(vijñāna) can stand in a mutually causal relationship where they 'exist poten-
bīja-model'
tially within each other, with the capacity mutually to effect each other's re-
arisal, or re-actualization, after the functional presence of any one of them had

been interrupted for more or less extended periods of time'. The sensory

organism produces consciousness when encountering sensory objects, but

this organism also has the latent potentiality (bīja) for consciousness residing

within it, so that once the meditator emerges from nirodhasamāpatti cognitive

experiences can re-arise because the meditator's body is still present.
Interestingly, the underlying idea of mutual causality (sahabhūhetu), found

in the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma,[88] where one item causes another, and the

other causes the first (as the legs of a tripod keep each other standing up), is criticized by Vasubandhu in the Abhidharmakośabhā:sya, where he sets out to establish that causation only flows in one direction. It is interesting to specu-late[89] that if Vasubandhu had already held Yogācāra views when composing the Abhidharmakośabhā:sya[90] he might have used this argument in support of the theory of foundational consciousness as the only satisfactory way of accounting for the continuation of consciousness after nirodhasamāpatti.[91]

Second, once the Sarvāstivāda theory of the existence of the three times has 2. Tr been done away with, Buddhists obviously needed some way of accounting for ar the way the transmigration of consciousness and the law of karmic causality works. If consciousness is momentary, how can one mind take rebirth in a new body? And if the past mind-moment that has acted on a specific intention no longer exists, why does a later mind-moment manifest as an experience of the consequences of this intention? The notion of the foundational consciousness provides a way of accounting for both at the same time. It functions as a repository in which karmic seeds (bīja) can be deposited at the time of action, and from which they manifest once the result has ripened. Of course, since the foundational consciousness is as momentary as everything else, what we are really looking at here is a staccato succession of moments of foundational consciousness, each one causing the next. The entire collection of karmic seeds is (so to speak) copied onto each successive moment of foundational con-sciousness, as each gives rise to its following moment. Once a seed ripens in the

foundational consciousness it leads to a perception in which the foundational

consciousness splits into one part that is perceived as an external object, and

[87] Buescher 2008: 53.
[88] See Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2003, 2009: 154–5, Tanaka 1985: 91–
111, Ronkin 2005: 217.
[89] Gold 2015a: 261–2, n. 69.
[90] As is argued by Kritzer 2005.
[91] Note, however, that the notion of simultaneous causation is accepted by several

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:
authors, such as Asanga (Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 159–
60) and Dignāga (Tola and Dragonetti

2004 46–
9, n. 10) and plays an important role in Yogācāra thought, where the ālayavijñāna

are considered as being related by simultaneous causation. See Bhikkhu Dhamma
3.

another that is perceived as a substantially existent subject that perceives the

object. This response based on a subject/object duality leads to the deposition

of further karmic seeds in the foundational consciousness which will ripen at a

later time.
It is therefore evident that the theory of the eight types of consciousness is

both motivated by meditative concerns, corresponding to a hierarchy of states

of consciousness with varying degrees of subtlety, and explaining the continu-
ity of consciousness after states of deep meditative absorption, as well as by

doctrinal considerations, namely the need to explain the transmission of

karmic seeds.

c. trisvabhāva

Another highly important conceptual distinction within Yogācāra is that

between the 'three natures' (trisvabhāva). It is discussed at length in the

Sa :mdhinirmocanasūtra, and Vasubandhu devotes one of his best-known

works, the Trisvabhāvanirdeśa, exclusively to this topic. Given the very explicit

rejection of the very idea of svabhāva by Madhyamaka, it might be surprising

that Yogācāra is going to adopt not just one but three different forms of

svabhāva. In fact, however, the theory of the three svabhāvas can be better

understood as a theory of three ways in which svabhāva can be absent.[92]
The three natures are the imputed nature (parikalpita-svabhāva), the

Mirage example
dependent nature (paratantra-svabhāva), and the perfected nature (parini:s-
panna-svabhāva). A common way of explaining the distinction between them

is by reference to a mirage seen in the desert. The imputed nature corresponds

to the water the deluded traveller sees, while the dependent nature corresponds

to what underlies the illusory appearance: a combination of air at different

temperatures and light-waves refracted by it. The perfected nature is simply the

fact that there is no real water anywhere in the combination of causal factors

that underlies the illusory appearance.
Three kinds
It is thereby evident that, far from postulating three kinds of substances

of absence
(svabhāva), Yogācāra describes three kinds of absences. The imputed nature

(the water) is simply not there, it is a mistaken superimposition of a subject/

object duality, heavily reliant on linguistic conceptualization, and is wholly

non-existent. The dependent nature is there, but it is not what it seems. Instead

of water there is something else there, in our example a nexus of interdepend-
ent causal factors involving air and light that have nothing to do with water.
[92] See Trisvabhāvanirdeśa 26: 'The three natures are characterized as non-
dual and as without

support, because of the non-existence [of one], because of [the other's] non-
existence like that

[in the way it appears], [the third] is the nature of the non-
existence [of one in the other]', trayo

'pyete svabhāvā hi advayālambalak:sa:nā:h | abhāvād atathābhāvāt tad-abhāva-
svabhāvata:h

(Anacker 2002: 465).

The illusory appearance is absent from it. The perfected nature, finally, is the

fact that there is no imputed nature in the dependent nature. This, too, should

not be conceptualized as a substantially existent thing (or even a substantially

existent nature of the world), since its existence essentially involves a mistaken

projection of something non-existent. We only need the concept of the per-
fected nature because we have the erroneous idea of an imputed nature in the

first place.[93]
The Yogācāra concept of the three natures can be fruitfully compared to the Three

Madhyamaka notion of the two truths. Both sets of distinction are proposed in an

order to conceptualize the difference between the world as it appears to us, as

possessing intrinsic nature, and the world as it is seen to be once analysed by

the Buddhists' arguments, namely empty. While they share a common pur-
pose, seeing how these two distinctions are supposed to line up is less straight-
forward. One way of comparing them is by identifying the conventional Three na

truth with the imagined nature and the ultimate truth with the dependent from a

Madhyamaka
nature, with the perfected nature being simply a fact about the relation between p

the two, that is, the fact the conventionally imputed truth is in fact nowhere to

be found once analysis investigating the ultimate truth is applied. This would

be a way of understanding the Yogācāra distinction very much along Madhya-
maka lines. We could equally argue that the three natures manage to fill a

conceptual gap in the Madhyamaka picture of the two truths, particularly when T

understood in a semantic non-
dualist way where it is assumed that the only Yogācāra

perspective
truth there really is is the conventional truth. The three natures would instead

present an account according to which there is a basis of appearance (the

dependent nature) that exists conventionally, as well as an inconceivable

ultimate reality (the perfected nature). In this way the Yogācārin can respond

to what he considers the conceptually problematic non-foundationalist

assumption of the Mādhyamika that it is 'appearances all the way down'.
The appearances themselves (the imagined nature) can be considered to be

strictly non-existent, but this does not have to entail that there cannot be a

sufficiently real conventional nature that grounds all appearances, though it is

not itself an appearance.
Three further important concepts we should mention at this point are the

idea of the reflexivity of consciousness (svasa :mvedana), the Yogācāra concep-
tualization of the structure of the Buddha's teaching as described in the

[93] In the Trisvabhāvanirdeśa Vasubandhu uses a different example, that of an elephant

into existence by a magician who speaks a mantra on a piece of wood, letting it appear

elephant. In this example the imagined nature corresponds to the non-
existent elephant seen, the

dependent nature to the magic trick that brings it into existence, and the perfected

absence of the elephant. The mantra corresponds to the ālyavijñāna and the wood

(tathātā). See Garfield 2002.

framework of the three turnings of the wheel of the doctrine, and the notion of

Buddha-nature, or tathāgatagarbha.
d. svasa :mvedana
The notion of svasa :mvedana denotes the ability of conscious states not only to

be aware of the object of the state (as when our visual consciousness perceives

something coloured red, for example), but at the same time of the conscious

experience itself.[94] It is important to note that svasa :mvedana, or reflexive

awareness, is not the same as introspective awareness aiming to observe one's

own mental states.[95] If I drink a cup of tea and think 'I am now tasting the tea',

I exercise introspective awareness. This awareness comes and goes, and in most

cases our perceptions are not accompanied by a meta-level commentary of what

is currently going on in our mind. Reflexive awareness, on the other hand, is always present when there is an object-directed instance of consciousness. It is considered to be what makes the consciousness of some object conscious in the first place,[96] and is also associated by some interpreters with the phenomenological quality, the 'what-it's-likeness' of an episode of consciousness.[97]

No fundamental Yogācāra requires this idea of the reflexivity of consciousness since it denies division between the existence of external objects. If there is no apple the perception of an apple minds could be a perception of, the perception must ultimately be directed at a mental thing. For this reason, one mental object (the perceptive event) is directed at another one (the seemingly external apple). And as there is ultimately no distinction between different mental streams, one corresponding to me, one to the apple, this must be a case of the mind being directed at itself.[98] Once the fact that the superimposition of the subject/object duality is a mere superimposition is realized, the practitioner becomes aware that what he previously regarded as the perception of external things has in fact an underlying non-dual nature where the mind directly knows itself.

Of course, the fact that the Yogācāra denial of external objects requires the reflexivity of consciousness is not an argument for it unless we are already convinced of the truth of the Yogācāra position. Later Yogācāra authors therefore tried to develop arguments for reflexivity that did not rely on specific Yogācāra premises.

:

Dinnāga presents several arguments aimed at establishing that each cogni-

tive event is simultaneously aware of itself,[99] instead of suggesting (as the

[94] The existence of svasa :mvedana becomes a major point of contention in later

elaborations of Indian thought. See Williams 1998, Garfield 2006.
[95] Williams 1998: 7. See also Matilal 1986: 148.
[96] Śāntarak:sita (Tattvasa :mgraha 2021) argues that if an act of consciousness of

was not reflexively self-
aware, it could also not be conscious of x (Jha 1991: 2. 1032).
[97] Ram-Prasad 2007: 54.
[98] Ram-Prasad 2007: 69–70.
[99] Kellner 2010: 210.

Naiyāyikas did) that reflexivity could be accounted for by appealing to a second,

higher-order mental state that is aware of the first state.
The first argument focuses on a straightforward infinite regress.[100] If a

:
Dinnāga's regress
mental state becomes conscious by being the object of second-
order state, we argument

will then want to know what makes this second state conscious. For if it is not

conscious itself, and therefore not cognitively available to us, the content of this

second-order state, namely the first-order state, would not be available to us

either. But then we need to assume the existence of a third-order state, and so

on, without a chance of ever completing the chain in order to make any of the

states in the chain conscious. In order to break the chain we have to assume

that it is the first-order mental state itself that makes it cognitively available to

us via its reflexive nature.

:

Dinnāga's second argument combines considerations of an infinite regress

:

Dinnāga's
with references to memory.[101] Assume, for reductio, that there was a mental mem

event M of me cognizing the teacup, as well as another, distinct event M*, of me

:

cognizing me cognizing the teacup (i.e. cognizing M). For Dinnāga these two

mental events cannot happen at the same time, so when M* occurs, M* must

involve M as a memory.
Now it seems fairly uncontroversial that you can only remember what you

have experienced at an earlier time,[102] otherwise you are just dealing with a

pseudo-memory, with a psychological illusion. M* is supposed to be the

memory of your cognizing the teacup at an earlier time. But at that time

your experience was not that of cognizing a teacup, it was just an experience

of a teacup. The example seems to demand that you remember something that

you did not experience. In order to fix this, we would have to assume that there

was another mental event, M', between M and M*, where this is the event of

experiencing cognizing the teacup, and the content of the memory at M*. But

the relation between M and M' is just the same as the one between M and M*
used to be, and we would have to insert another event, M", between the two in

order to ensure that M' is actually an act of memory. This procedure is

obviously unending, and for that very reason unsatisfactory. Memory can

only reproduce experiences we have had, but is not able to move our cognitions

to a higher order. If all we had at time t is the experience of a teacup, no later

memory will turn this into an experience of cognizing a teacup.
:
Since the higher-order view of cognition leads to an infinite regress, Dinnāga

argues that the only way we can account for the cognition of cognition is by

assuming that one act of cognition can do both, cognize an object and cognize

itself as well.[103]

[100] Hayes 1988: 141.
[101] Kellner 2011: 414–16.
[102] Matilal 1986: 153.
:
[103] In his criticism of the notion of svasa :mvedana Śankara also refers to an infin

resulting from each cognition being cognized by another, but resolves it not by co

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e. Three turnings
Yogācāra texts conceptualize the range of the Buddha's teaching in terms
of three set of discourses, or 'turnings of the wheel of the doctrine'
(dharma-cakra-pravartana). According to the Sa :mdhinirmocanasūtra, the

first contained the doctrine of the four noble truths (catu:hsatya) and comprises

the teachings found in the non-Mahāyāna sūtras. The second, the 'wheel of

signlessness' (alak:sa :na), includes the teachings of emptiness in the Perfection

of Wisdom texts that form the basis of the Madhyamaka, and the third, the

Historical and
'wheel of good differentiation' (suvibhakta) or 'wheel for ascertaining the

philosophical

ultimate' (paramārtha-viniścaya), taught the doctrine of the three natures

sequence
(trisvabhāva) characteristic of Yogācāra. The three turnings, which correspond

to the sequence in which the corresponding texts appeared in the history of

Buddhism, are also considered to represent an ascent in terms of philosophical

sophistication and authoritativeness. The first two turnings belong to the

interpretable teachings of the Buddha (neyārtha), while the final one is defini-
tive (nītārtha). This is an example of a kind of doxographical framework

extremely widespread in Indian philosophy, which simultaneously allows for

the comprehensive description of an entire body of teachings (all teachings

of the Buddha are supposed to find their place somewhere in this system) and

lets the system that stands behind the description come out on top. Needless to say

Madhyamaka authors who adopt the system of the three turnings regard the

second turning as definitive, and the other two as aimed at disciples endowed with

less penetrating intellects, even though this means losing the ability of correlating

philosophical sophistication with the order in which the teachings appeared.

f. tathāgatagarbha and Yogācāra

It would be mistaken to regard the notion of the tathāgatagarbha, the 'essence'
or 'womb' or 'container' (garbha) of the 'Thus-gone' (tathāgata), the Buddha,

as a specific Yogācāra concept. The idea that there is a potential in all sentient

beings to become a Buddha is rather a pan-Mahāyānist notion that is taken up

by Buddhist philosophers across different schools.[104] There are, nevertheless,

sufficiently many connections between this concept and the Yogācāra school

to discuss it at this place. The concept is brought up in key Yogācāra texts

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such as the Lankāvatārasūtra, where it is identified with the foundational

cognizing themselves, but by reference to a witnessing self (sāk:sin), an uncogniz

:

terminates the regress of cognitions. See Śankara's bhā:sya on Brahmasūtra II.2.2

314–17).
[104] Within the Indian (and Tibetan) Buddhist tradition it does not make much exp

sense to consider the tathāgatagarbha theory as a separate philosophical school. T

different in Chinese Buddhism, where the tathāgatagarbha texts were sometimes

fourth turning after the three distinguished by Yogācāra. See Williams 2009: 103

consciousness (ālayavijnāna).[105] The sūtra describes it in terms of a

well-known acquatic metaphor:
A great ocean's waves roll on continously, its body [i.e. the ālayavijnāna] is unint
rupted, free from the fault of impermanence, disassociated from a view of a self,

perpetually pure in its substance.[106]
One of the central texts of the tathāgatagarbha theory, the Ratnagotravib-
hāga,[107] a text probably dating from the fourth century CE,[108] is regarded in the

:

Tibetan tradition as one of the 'five works' that Maitreya revealed to Asanga;

:

Asanga composed a commentary to it, the Mahāyāna-uttara-tantra-śāstra-
vyākhyā. Furthermore, the notion of the tathāgatagarbha lines up more nat-
urally with the characterization of ultimate reality we find in Yogācāra than

with that we find in Madhyamaka. The latter's characterization of ultimate

reality in terms of emptiness is a primarily negative one, it describes it in terms

of what is not there (a substantially existent core, svabhāva),[109] while the

former's is more positive, postulating a foundational consciousness that is

the source of all appearance.

As with all concepts that rose to any prominence within Buddhist philoso-

Conceptual

phy in India, that of the tathāgatagarbha has conceptual predecessors in the prede

the concept of

early Buddhist sources, predecessors that can be regarded as seeds that later tathā

sprouted into the diversity of concepts and theories that characterize Buddhist

thought in India.

One of these predecessors is the idea of the natural purity of mind that Natural pu

continues to exist in a defiled state. Versions of this can already be found in the o

early Buddhist suttas, when Buddha advises that 'this mind is luminous,

O monks, but it is defiled by adventitious defilements'.[110] This can be under-
stood as saying that luminosity is an inner or intrinsic property of the mind, to

the extent that it illuminates or makes known the objects that are before the

mind. Despite the fact that this luminosity is part of the mind's inner nature, it

can be temporally impeded by factors such as the defilements that block its

manifestation.[111] It is evident how this can be developed into the idea of an

enlightened potential, or even a fully formed enlightened mind constituting the

[105] Suzuki 1932: 203.
[106] mahodadhitara :mgavannityamavyucchinnaśarīra:h pravartate anityatādo:saral

viniv:rtto 'tyantaprak:rtipariśuddha:h, Vaidya 1963: 90. See Suzuki 1932: 190, R
[107] Holmes and Holmes 1985.
[108] Frauwallner 1956: 255 dates the text to the middle of the 3rd century CE. Des
early date of this text, the tathāgatagarbha theory only rose to greater philosophic

India at a later time, around the 11th century (Williams 2009: 101).
[109] Takazaki 1974 argues that tathāgatagarbha theory has in fact arisen in opposit
Madhyamaka theory of emptiness. See de Jong 1979: 585.
:
[110] Anguttaranikāya 1.10: pabhassaram ida :m bhikkhave citta :m tañ ca kho āgan
lesehi upakkili:t:tha :m, Bikkhu Bodhi 2012: 97, Harvey 1995: 166–79, 217–26.
[111] For a version of this interpretation see Bikkhu Bodhi 2012: 1598.

core of all sentient beings, present even though their current status in cyclic

existence means that this core is almost entirely hidden.

'transformation
More specifically, in the Yogācāra context we find the idea that the eradica-
of the basis'
tion of defilements (kleśa) required for obtaining liberation brings with it a

'transformation of the basis' (āśraya-parāv:rtti). There are different ways of

understanding what this 'transformation' amounts to. It is sometimes said to

consist of the elimination (prahī :na) of the foundational consciousness that

contains the karmic potentialities responsible for the continued appearance of

cyclic existence.[112] Sometimes the focus is on the eradication of the latent

badness (dau:s:thulya) inherent in the ālayavijñāna itself, and if the ālayavij-
ñāna is seen as more than simply another term for this collection of bad

potentialities,[113] we can conceive of the emergence of an understanding of

the 'transformation of the basis' as one according to which the defilements and

unwholesome karmic seeds contained in the ālayavijñāna are removed,[114]
leaving behind an undefiled consciousness (amalavijñāna).[115] It is only a

short step from this to the idea that an originally pure nature of the mind

was present all along, and that bringing this nature to light is what liberation

consists in.
tathāgatagarbha
A second predecessor of the tathāgatagarbha theory are attempts[116] to

as a substitute self
introduce a kind of substitute self, an entity that escapes the criticism of the

Buddha's no-self theory but is at the same time robust enough to fulfil some of

the theoretical roles sometimes played by the self. The Pudgalavāda's pudgala

and the Yogācāra's ālayavijñāna can be seen as two similar attempts that go in

the same direction. The Mahāparinirvā :nasūtra[117]explicitly identifies the tathā-
gatagarbha with the ātman,[118] and states that the ātman is real:

All things are not without self. The self is real, it is permanence, it is a [positive]

it is unchanging, it is firm, it is peace; thus, like the good milk remedy of the phys

the Tathāgata also teaches in accordance with reality.[119]
[112] Schmithausen 1987: 499–500, n. 1337; King 1998: 5–17, 8.
[113] Unlike, for example, its portrayal in verse 18 of Vasubandhu's Tri :mśikā: 'Co

just all the seeds, and transformation takes place in such and such a way, accordin

influence, in which such and such a type of discrimination may arise', sarvabīja :

pari :nāmastathā tathā | yātyanyonyavaśād yena vikalpa:h sa sa jāyate (Anacker 2
[114] Conze 1962: 230.
[115] Radich 2008.
[116] See above, pp. 59–60.

[117] Habata 2013. This is a Mahāyāna text quite distinct from the Mahāparinibbāna

preserved in the Pāli canon; see Radich 2015.

[118] 'the self is the nature of the Tathāgata', bdag ces bya ba ni de bzhin gshegs pa

to, Habata 2013: sections 375–6.

[119] chos thams cad ni bdag med pa yang ma yin te | bdag ni de kho na nyid do || b

yid do || bdag ni yon tan nyid do || bdag ni ther zug pa nyid do || bdag ni brtan pa ı

zhi ba nyid do zhes sman pa bzang po'i 'o ma bzhin du de bzhin gshegs pa yang ɗ

ldan pa ston par mdzad do, Habata 2013: section107.

YOGĀCĀRA

Statements such as this are somewhat baffling in the light of the Buddhist non-
self doctrine that explicitly denies the existence of a self. Such endorsements of

a substantial self are qualified to some extent in texts like the Śrīmālādevī-
si :mhanādasūtra, where it is pointed out that this 'self ' is different from that

postulated by other non-Buddhists. Nevertheless, the introduction of self-
related terminology in the tathāgatagarbha texts remains puzzling.[120]
While we may not be able to resolve this puzzle altogether, two things are The tat
nevertheless worth noting. The first is the fact that the key tathāgatagarbha garbh

acceptance
texts arose during the time of the Gupta empire (c.320–
550 CE), a period of an ātman

sometimes described as the 'golden age' of India, marked by important devel-
opments in many fields commonly regarded as classical brahmanic culture.
While it would be certainly too crude to explain the whole tathāgatagarbha

theory as a kind of metaphysical 'keeping up with the Joneses', supplying

Buddhism with a notion of self that its brahmanic critics might have seen as

lacking, the texts themselves raise the point that the tathāgatagarbha theory

was taught in order to convert non-Buddhists who would otherwise be scared

off by the seemingly nihilistic character of a theory that does not allow for an

ātman in whatever form. To this extent the teaching of Buddha-nature can be

interpreted as yet another instance of expedient means (upāya), a teaching that

aims at producing the intended result for a specific audience, not one that

faithfully mirrors a transcendent reality.
In any case, the relationship of influence between Buddhist and brahmanical

concepts is an intricate one, and one that in all likelihood was not one-way.
While it may have been the case that a historical and intellectual context (such

as India during the Gupta period) in which theories according a central place to

the notion of an ātman were successful and well developed brought about the

development of specific ideas already present in the Buddhist teaching, and

resulted in something like the tathāgatagarbha teaching, it is also likely that

there were statements within the Buddhist teachings that triggered develop-
ments in classical Indian thought.[121] One example of this may be Gau :dapāda's

seventh-century commentary on the Mā :n:dūkya Upani:sad, one of the earliest

texts on Advaita Vedānta. This is often considered to show 'a marked propen-
sity for Buddhist arguments and terminology', being specifically influenced by

ideas found in Madhyamaka texts.[122]
Second, the embracing of the notion of the ātman by some tathāgatagarbha Positi

texts can be seen as part of a larger group of doctrines that arise at prominent app

with the Buddha's
positions at different points of the development of Buddhist philosophy in teachir

India, doctrines that appear to take up views directly opposite to those the

Buddha taught. These include doctrines that seem to conflict with the Buddha's

[120] For further discussion see Jones 2014.
[121] Ruegg 1989.
[122] King 1997: 140.

Substantial self

rejection of the view of substantial existence (astivāda), in particular the

rejection of the existence of the ātman. Some of the tathāgatagarbha texts

are particularly clear examples, but the Pudgalavādin's pudgala and the Yogā-
cārin's foundational consciousness can equally be regarded as attempts to

reintroduce some kind of substantial entity into the void that the non-self

teaching has left behind.

Nihilism

At the other extreme are the positions that appear to embrace nihilism

(nāstivāda), which the Buddha also rejected. Mādhyamika philosophers have

frequently been accused of being guilty of nihilistic tendencies,[123] but similar

claims can also be found in Mahāyāna sūtras. The Samādhirājasūtra, for

example, records the teachings of a Buddha called Abhāva ('non-existence'):

As soon as he was born, he proclaimed, risen to the skies, the non-existence of all the

dharmas. . . . And as many as there were sounds in that world, so manifold was the

utterance of this Tathāgata, Leader of the world: 'All, indeed, is non-existent, nothing is

existent.'[124]

Antinomian

Finally, we find ethical claims that appear to clash directly with the pronounce-injunctions
ments in early Buddhist sources. These are frequently found in tantric

texts; the following passage from chapter 2 of the Hevajratantra is not

uncharacteristic:[125]

[The bodhisattva] Vajragarbha said: 'What usage and observance should one foll
The Lord replied:
'You should slay living beings,
you should speak lying words,
you should take what is not given,
you should frequent others' wives.'
These doctrines were obviously not intended as refutations of the Buddhist

positions, but as forms of the Buddha's teaching, in fact usually as a way of

expressing its true intent. Yet in view of such very different understandings of

Hermeneutic
what the Buddha's teaching was, some way of restoring consistency has to be

strategies for
found. An obvious way is to declare the texts in question mistaken and non-
restoring
consistency
Buddhist. This strategy was comparatively rare. A more common strategy is to

argue that the text, while authentic, is elliptical. In order to be understood

[123] Westerhoff 2016a.
[124] sa jātāmatro gagane sthitvā | sarvā :na dharmā:na abhāvu deśayī [. . .] yāvanti

lokadhātau | sarve hy abhāvā na hi kaści bhāva :h | tāvantu kho tasya tathāgatasya
lokavināyakasya, Régamey 1990: 36–7.
[125] II.iii: 29: vajragarbha āha || kena samayena sthātavya :m kena sa :mvare:neti ||
prā :ninaś ca tvayā ghātyā vaktavya :m ca m:r:sāvaca:h || adattañ ca tvayā grāhya
yo:sita:h, Snellgrove 2010: I: 97, II: 56. See also ch. 5 of the Guhyasamājatantra (

5).

properly, specific qualifiers need to be inserted.[126] Most frequently, however,

the apparent inconsistency is dissolved by reference to the distinction between

interpretable (neyārtha) and definitive (nītārtha) teachings, arguing that one of

the contradictory positions only holds provisionally, and was exclusively

taught to a particular audience given its specific explanatory needs, while

the other holds in an unqualified, ultimate manner.[127] These latter two her-
meneutic strategies gave the Buddhist philosophical enterprise a surprising

flexibility, while at the same time minimizing the need to label teachings that

self-identify as Buddhist to be inauthentic. A commentator who regarded a

position A as the final intent of the Buddha's teaching could also accept one

reporting him as saying not-A at the interpretable level, as long as one could

argue that there was a position even less conducive to liberation than not-A

that the teaching of not-A was supposed to dispel, even if the view to be

realized for achieving liberation was A.
Despite the conceptual connections between the tathāgatagarbha theory and The t
Yogācāra, the theory can be interpreted both in Yogācāra and in Madhyamaka ga

modes:
modes. A key difference between these two modes is the way the emptiness of M

the tathāgatagarbha is to be understood. According to the Madhyamaka Yogācāra

understanding, the tathāgatagarbha is empty in the same way as everything

else (including emptiness) is empty: lacking svabhāva, devoid of intrinsic Madhy

nature, unable to stand existentially on its own. To this extent the tathāgata-
tathāgatagarbha

as a conventional
garbha is not a kind of ultimate reality present at the core of every being, but a te

doctrine taught, like all teachings of the Buddha, in order to lead a specific

audience to liberation, in this case an audience that needed a quasi-ātman to

hold on to. As such, these teachings are not different in kind from those where

the Buddha affirms the existence of a person in order to teach about the

regularities of karma, regularities that some might see as presupposing the

existence of a person to whom these regularities can apply. Both of these are

teachings that require further interpretation (neyārtha).[128] What the tathāga-
tagarbha teaching emphasizes is that the mind's defilements are, like all

properties of the mind, changeable. As such, each being has the potential to tathā

become a Buddha, insofar as the defiled nature of the mind can be changed, by as

continuous practice, into the enlightened nature of the Buddha's mind. To the

[126] See above, pp. 119–
20, for more discussion of the 'interpolation procedure' based on this

assumption. In the tantric case the apparently antinomian statements are often acc

by interpolation but by giving them non-
literal interpretations. In explaining the above passage the

commentary Yogaratnamālā points out that 'taking of life' refers to the non-
arising of thought,

'lying speech' to the fact that the beings the bodhisattva vows to liberate are not u

so forth (Farrow and Menon 2001: 193–4).

127 For more discussion of the stratification of philosophical views into inferior an

ones this involves see Hacker 1983; Kiblinger 2005.

128 Ruegg (1989: 53) is critical of this move as a means 'evacuating' the theory o
garbha by confining it to the realm of the Buddha's provisional teachings.

extent that the defilements are not substantial the mind is intrinsically pure,

and this purity can also be understood as permanent, insofar as, whenever

there is mind at all, it will be accompanied by its impermanent nature which

brings with it the possibility of transformation into the enlightened mind.
Yogācāra:
Understood in the Yogācāra mode, on the other hand, the emptiness of the

tathāgatagarbha
tathāgatagarbha is not seen as an emptiness of intrinsic existence, but as an

as emptiness of
defilements
emptiness of defilements.129 There is an intrinsically pure, eternal, and inher-
ently existent ultimate nature of all sentient beings that remains the same in the

unenlightened as in the enlightened. Its teaching is not merely provisional, but

constitutes the Buddha's final teaching (nītārtha) on the nature of reality.
It is therefore clear that the division between different Madhyamaka and

Yogācāra takes on the theory of Buddha-nature was not created by different

views on the authenticity of the tathāgatagarbha scriptures. Neither side

considered them to be inauthentic or created in a fraudulent manner. Rather,

the division resulted from differences about which category of the Buddha's

teaching they should be assigned to: to those that are to be taken literally, or to

those that have to be interpreted relative to a specific context.
The two interpretations of tathāgatagarbha theory competed with each

other in the continuation of the history of Indian Buddhist thought in Tibet,

Self-emptiness vs.
where they were known as the teachings of 'self-emptiness' (rang stong) and

other-emptiness
'other-emptiness' (gzhan stong). Even though our account cannot follow these

developments here, it is worthwhile to note that the debate about which of the

two interpretations should be accepted as correct can be spelt out in terms of

the different factors contributing to the development of Buddhist philosophy

we have discussed above. A textual dimension of this dispute concerns the

question which group of Nāgārjuna's works, the texts comprising the yukti-
corpus, or the set of hymns, expresses his final philosophical theory.[130] Another

dimension of the discussion consists of the question which of the other two

factors, argumentative reasoning or meditative experience, should have the final

say. The proponents of the 'other-emptiness' were clear in asserting that

philosophical reasoning (as embodied by the 'self-emptiness' theory) could

only get you so far, and that the realization of the tathāgatagarbha lay beyond

what could be accessed in this way, and was something that could only be

realized by means of direct meditative insight.[131] It is important to note,

however, that the difference between these two factors need not just be seen

as a reflection of the opposition of an apophatic Madhyamaka understanding

of emptiness and a kataphatic Yogācāra one. Rather, both approaches can be

seen as upāya, as means that convey different kinds of practitioners to a

[129] Compare the characterization of the tathāgatagarbha in the Śrīmālādevīsiṃha

(Wayman and Wayman 1974: 99). See also Ruegg 1969: 319–46.
[130] Ruegg 1968: 507.
[131] Williams 2009: 114–15.

specific realization that turns out, when properly analysed, to be the same

liberating insight.[132]

4. Factors That Shaped Yogācāra Philosophy

At this point we might ask ourselves where these new and unusual Yogācāra

ideas came from. Yogācāra presents a distinct step in the development of

Buddhist thought in India, but it is not immediately clear what caused this

step to be taken in the first place. In the Introduction we distinguished three

different factors influencing the development of Buddhist philosophy: argu-
ments, texts, and meditative practices. All three can be seen to play some part

in the genesis of Yogācāra philosophy.

a. Argumentative factors

First, Yogācāra might be regarded as a natural response to the arguments for
universal emptiness that the Mādhyamikas have put forward. Because Mad-
hyamaka does not allow for substantial entities at any level, there cannot be any

ontological ground for founding phenomena anywhere. Throughout the his-
tory of Madhyamaka some of its opponents have considered this view as

tantamount to nihilism. For if everything is only made up of something else,

and therefore empty of intrinsic nature and 'not really there', there must be

something not made up of anything else at the bottom of the chain, for

otherwise nothing is 'really there'. Yogācāra can therefore be understood as a

reaction to an argument they considered as taking the idea of the emptiness of

emptiness found in the Perfection of Wisdom texts too far.[133] While Yogācāra

still saw itself as providing a philosophical explication and argumentative

defence of the claims the Prajñāpāramitāsūtras make, its proponents wanted

to backtrack from the anti-foundationalist picture the Madhyamaka arguments

introduced, and instead develop a theory of emptiness that could be considered

compatible with some substantialist assumptions.

b. Textual factors

Second, we can regard Yogācāra philosophy as driven by the appearance of

specific texts. What the Yogācāra thinkers might have been trying to do is to

provide a series of arguments to show how the claims of a set of new or newly

discovered texts could be philosophically supported. Traditional accounts

certainly place great emphasis on the role of texts in the origination and

[132] This stance was taken by the Tibetan scholar Shākya mchog ldan. See Brunnh
3.
[133] This position is also taken by Masuda 1926: 25, though he locates the problem

general difficulty with non-
foundationalism, but argues that Nāgārjuna also denies the existence of

consciousness, and sees Yogācāra as an attempt to avoid this allegedly implausib

development of the Yogācāra school. The work of Asanga, the school's

founder, is crucially influenced by the five treatises of Maitreya revealed to

: him. The Daśabhūmikasūtra, one of the two texts Asanga has his students read

to Vasubandhu to convert him to Mahāyāna, contains a key claim of the

Yogācāra position: 'All of this, consisting of the three spheres, is merely

mind.'[134] According to this conception, the development of Yogācāra philosophy was not primarily pushed by the intention to counterbalance the position

of the Mādhyamikas, but to develop a framework for making sense of a newly

prominent set of Buddhist sūtras.

c. Meditative factors

Finally, a third factor that may have influenced Yogācāra's development are meditative practices. The basic idea of those who believe in such meditative

influence is that Yogācāra's aim was to provide a cogent systematization of the

results of meditative practice and the phenomenology that goes with such

practices. Without denying that argumentative dynamics or the responses to

specific texts were essential for the development of Yogācāra, it will be useful to

spend some time discussing the specific interrelation between philosophical

development and meditative practice in Yogācāra,[135] as the latter is a factor

that is often not sufficiently accounted for when discussing the history of

Buddhist philosophy.

The 'practice A connection between Yogācāra and meditative practice is already evident

of yoga' from its name, a compound noun comprising yoga and ācāra, making it the

school of the 'practice of yoga'. What exactly yoga was meant to denote at the

time when the school's name was coined is not entirely straightforward, but it is uncontroversial to assume that it involved some techniques of mental training or cultivation. From the very beginning of Buddhism, Buddhists have employed a variety of meditative techniques as part of the path to liberation. Usually these techniques involve focusing one's attention on a specific object; this might be an outer object, such as a decomposing corpse (part of the 'meditation on the impure' (aśubhabhāvanā) employed to combat attachment), or an inner object such as the breath, or the flow of mental phenomena, as in śamatha and

The nature of
vipaśyana meditation. A natural question that arises is what kind of things

meditative
the objects experienced in meditation are. In some Buddhist texts we find the

experiences
idea that they are made of a specific subtle kind of matter, a kind of matter that

[134] cittamātram ida :m yad ida :m traidhātukam (Vaidya 1967: 31). It is interesting

:
is one of only two texts that Asanga quotes in his Mahāyānasa :mgraha as scriptu

of the cittamātra doctrine (the other being the Sa :mdhinirmocanasūtra ii, 7, Lamo
4).
[135] Deleanu (2006: 1. 158) considers a possible development of the Yogācāra trad

active community of meditation practitioners' in the Sarvāstivāda tradition: 'the b

Śrāvakabhūmi as well as much of the rest of the Yogācārabhūmi was most probal

connected to such a yogic milieu' (159).

YOGĀCĀRA

is not accessible to ordinary sense faculties. Later discussions also raise the

possibility that these objects are of a purely mental nature.
In the Sa :mdhinirmocanasūtra, a key Yogācāra text, the issue is raised by the

bodhisattva Maitreya in a conversation with the Buddha:[136] Asked by Maitreya

whether the image that is the focus of meditation is the same as the mind or

different from it the Buddha replies:
Maitreya, it is 'not different'. Why is it not different? Because that image

Their merely
is simply cognition-only. Maitreya, I have explained that consciousness

mental nature
is fully distinguished by [the fact that its] object of observation is

cognition-only.
Bhagavan, if that image, the focus of samādhi, is not different from the

physical mind, how does the mind itself investigate the mind itself?
The Bhagavan replied: Maitreya, although no phenomenon apprehends any

other phenomenon, nevertheless, the mind that is generated in that way

appears in that way. Maitreya, for instance, based on matter, matter

itself is seen in a perfectly clear round mirror, but one thinks, 'I see an

image'. The matter and the appearance of the image appear as different

factualities. Likewise, the mind that is generated in that way and the focus

of samādhi known as the 'image' also appear to be separate factualities.
Bhagavan, are the appearances of the forms of sentient beings and so

forth, which abide in the nature of images of the mind, 'not different'
from the mind?

The Bhagavan replied: Maitreya, they are 'not different'. However,

because childish beings with distorted understanding do not recognize

these images as cognition-only, just as they are in reality, they miscon-
strue them.

The sūtra points out that the phenomena experienced in meditation are merely

mental in nature,[137] and because of this the mind must be observing itself

[136] byams pa tha dad pa ma yin zhes bya'o || ci'i phyir tha dad pa min zhe na | gz

rnam par rig pa tsam du zad pa'i phyir te | byams ba rnam par zhes pa ni dmigs pa

tsam gyis rab tu phye ba yin no || zhes ngas bshad do || bcom ldan 'das ting nge '

gzugs brnyan de gal te gzugs sems de las tha dad pa ma lags na | sems de nyid ky

ltar rtog par bgyid lags | bka' stsal pa | byams pa de la chos gang yang chos gang

byed mod kyi | 'on kyang de ltar skye pa'i sems gang yin pa de de ltar snang no |

dper na | gzugs la brten nas me long gi dkyil 'khor zhin tu yongs su dag pa la gzu

gzugs brnyan mthong ngo snyam du sems te | de la gzugs de dang | gzugs brnyan

dad par snang ngo || de bzhin du de ltar skyes pa'i sems de dang | ting nge 'dzin

brnyan zhes bya gang yin pa de yang de las don gzhan yin pa lta bur snang ngo ||

sems can rnams kyi gzugs la sogs par snang ba sems kyi gzugs brnyan rang bzhin

pa de yang sems de dang tha dad pa ma lags zhes bgyi'am | bka' stsal pa | byams

zhes bya ste | byis pa phyin ci log gi blo can rnams ni gzugs brnyan de dag la rna

nyid yang dag pa ji lta ba bzhin mi shes pas phyin ci log tu sems so, Powers 1995
7.
:
[137] However, Asanga rules out the most obvious interpretation, namely that they a

memory images, since phenomena experienced in meditation are experienced as

during meditative practice. How this can happen is explained by the example

of a mirror. As looking in a mirror can give the impression that there are two

people in the room, myself and the person in the mirror, so the mind watching

itself can give rise to a similar apparent split between observer and observed

Generalization of
object, even though the separate existence of the observed object is merely

this claim to
illusory. What is more surprising is the next statement of the Sa :mdhinirmo-
include other
objects
canasūtra, which says that other things, such as the bodies of sentient beings,

are also not different from the mind. This is an astonishing generalization

from an intuitively quite plausible claim about objects observed in meditation[138]
to an intuitively considerably less plausible claim about tables and chairs. At

this stage it is worthwhile to ask two different questions. First, why would this

view seem attractive to Buddhists in the first place? And second, why would we

think it is actually true—what are the arguments that can be given in its

support? The second question is addressed extensively in the works of

Yogācāra authors, and we have already considered some arguments for the

'merely mind' thesis above.
Meditative
Regarding the first question, one reason why this generalization might have

cognition as an

seemed attractive is the fact that cognitions achieved through meditative

epistemic
instrument
training were considered as epistemic instruments of a special sort, as epistemic instruments that are distinguished from other such instruments by

being non-conceptual (nirvikalpa) and able to conceive of the world without

the habitually added conceptual overlay in a non-erroneous manner (abhrānta), since they could not be misled by this very overlay. If such an epistemic

instrument investigates its objects and determines that they are mental in

nature, there is a certain justification for arguing that its insights are also

applicable to objects of other epistemic instruments (such as the objects of

sense perception) as well, simply because this epistemic instrument is more

memory images reflect something that is past. Yet even if they were memory ima

help the Yogācārin's opponent: since memory images concern things that are pas

therefore do not exist anymore, they are mere mentation (vijñaptimātra). The clai

memory images could not be used to support the thesis that there must be externa

images are images of. (Mahāyānasa :mgraha ii, 8, Lamotte 1973: 2. 96–7).
[138] It is interesting to note in this context that the Bhadrapālasūtra (translated into

179 CE) takes this view even about objects of meditation we might have thought

ascribe a more objective existence to. In the context of visualizing the Buddha Ar

paradise Sukhāvatī, the text underlines that there is no contact with the real Buddl
Rather, the visions obtained are considered to be purely mind-
made: 'The Buddha is mind-made,

only the mind sees the Buddha. The Buddha is just my mind, the Tathāgata is jus

kyis sangs rgyas byed pa ste || sems nyid kyis kyang mthong ba'o || sems nyid nga
sems nyid de bzhin gshegs pa'o), Schmithausen 1973: 175, n. 45. Schmithausen's

connection between meditative experience and metaphysics in Buddhism first des

1973 article encountered substantial criticism from Buddhist scholars (see Sharf 1

2000), and the battle appears to continue. For the latest instalment see part 4 of Sc
(pp. 597–641), itself primarily a response to Franco 2009.

successful in seeing the world in the way it really is. This view of meditative

perception as qualitatively superior to other epistemic instrument is also

pointed out in the Śrāvakabhūmi section of the Yogācārabhūmi. Schmithausen

notes that the
contemplation process does not merely lead to a mental reproduction of the objec

is so clear and vivid as if the object itself were directly perceived. Rather, the con
plation process culminates in a non-
conceptualizing (nirvikalpa) perceptual cognition

or insight (pratyak:sa :m jñānadarśanam) that transcends the mental image and di

apprehends the respective object itself.[139]
Meditative perception aims not simply at replicating ordinary epistemic instru-
Superiority of

ments (e.g. by producing a visualization of an object qualitatively indistin-
meditative

perception over
guishable from its visual perception), but strives at surpassing it by gaining a othe

kind of knowledge of the object that is not possible for other instruments.[140]
instruments

The mind-only view thus coheres well with the conception of meditatively trained perceptions as highly authoritative. An additional consideration that renders the mind-only view attractive becomes apparent when we consider another meditative practice, also mentioned in the Yogācārabhūmi.[141] Here the aim is not just to produce a specific vivid meditative image, but to produce such images in order to supersede the ordinary appearances. Subsequently the Meditati practitioner will dissolve the meditative images. This is considered to lead percep

dissolution of
not only to a disappearance of the objects of meditation, but at the same objects time to the disappearance of all other objects as well. The simile the text uses to illustrate this technique is to remove a big wedge by inserting another, smaller wedge. This meditative practice and the example illustrating it are very hard to make sense of unless we understand them against the background of a mind-only view. Meditative objects have the property that they can be produced and dissolved at will. But if all objects are of the same nature as meditative objects, that is, if they are all mental, then it is not unreasonable to assume that being able to dissolve one set of mental objects might also enable one to dissolve another set of mental objects. After the practitioner has dissolved the meditative images, he is left with the basis on which they arose, namely his own mind. Similarly, if the automatic superimposition of appear-ances that are ordinarily conceived of as external objects is stopped, the underlying basis of reality free from these superimpositions will appear.

[139] Schmithausen 2007: 231–2.
[140] See also Conze 1962: 53, 253, 256. Wayman (1965: 69) points out that it is a

doctrine of Buddhism through all its periods that the person whose mind is stabili
trated sees things as they really are. From the beginning, the theory was that an er

somehow visualized mentally in better, more real or truer form than in ordinary so
To remove error and illusion, one has to do something about the foundation of mi

or transform it.'

[141] Schmithausen 1973: 169–70.

The additional mental constructs that the practitioner has produced in his own

mind correspond to the small wedge that can then be applied in order to drive

out the larger wedge, which corresponds to the mental constructs that are

commonly misconceived as mind-independent external things.

Yogācāra position

That the Yogācāra perspective is intricately connected with meditative

based on
experience, rather than simply a philosophical position adopted because it

meditative
experience
appears to follow from specific philosophical arguments is also supported

:
by the Lankāvatārasūtra, which notes that:
Just as a physician provides medicine for the sick,
So indeed do the Buddhas teach mind-only (cittamātra) to sentient beings.
It is not an object for either philosophers (tārkika) or śrāvakas, indeed the Lords (

Buddhas) teach it drawing on their own experience.[142]
In addition to stressing the soteriological importance of the Yogācāra doctrine

for healing beings afflicted by suffering and its causes the sūtra points out that

the position of mind-only has its basis in the direct experience (pratyātmagati-gocara)[143] of enlightened beings, and is not just a position argued for by

argumentatively skilled thinkers.
Yogācāra and
It is thus apparent that the core Yogācāra belief of 'mind-only' is not only

tantra
supported by the Buddhist view of meditation, but also renders certain meditative

practices intelligible in the first place. In this context we should also briefly

consider the connection between Yogācāra philosophy and tantra. Tantric texts

began to appear in India in the seventh and eighth centuries CE. Whether they

were also composed at this time is a complex question. According to the

traditional account, the Buddhist tantras were taught either by the historical

Buddha or by some transcendent form of the Buddha, and were only revealed

at a later stage when the conditions amongst the practitioners were considered

to be optimal. These texts are characterized by reference to ritual formulae

(mantra), symbolic descriptions of the abode of deities (ma :n:dala), and ritual

gestures (mudra), which are all brought together in the performance of a tantric

rite after the practitioner has received an initiation (abhi:seka) from his teacher.
These rites would often involve visualizing the ma :n:dala, visualizing oneself in

form of the deity, together with the transformation of one's surroundings into the

deity's dwelling-place. With Yogācāra in mind, Stephan Beyer remarks that:

[t]he Buddhist philosophers in India had long made an axiom of the 'softness' of

and given an ontological status to the omnipotence of the imagination: it devolve

142
āture āture yadvad bhi:sag dravya :m prayacchati |
buddhā hi tadvat sattvānā :m cittamātra :m vadanti vai ||
tārkikā :nām avi:saya :m śrāvakā :nā :m na caiva hi |
ya :m deśayanti vai nāthā:h pratyātmagatigocaram || (Vaidya 1963: 22.) See also

:
from the Lankāvatārasūtra quoted above on p. 149
143 For further discussion of this term see Suzuki 1930: 421–3, Forsten 2006: 38–
9.

them to explain not why imagery is private, but why reality is public. Much of Bu

'ontological psychology' is an attempt to explain in historical terms why we mak

systemic epistemological error in our apprehension of the world, why we attribut

solidity that in fact it does not possess. In answering these questions, the philoso

planted many of the seeds that would flower in the Tantric manipulations of reali

asserted the possibility and provided a model, but the Tantrics built a contemplati

technique upon the structures of earlier meditation and gave it a new symbolic po

and the means of magic.144
Yogācāra thought seems to provide a natural philosophical background for Yogā

tantric rituals. If we want to explain why practices like the visualization of explai

efficacy of tantric
ma :n:dalas, offerings, the mental transformation of one's environment into the te

pure abode of the deity, and even the visualization of oneself as the central deity

in the ma :n:dala are supposed to lead to progress on the path to enlightenment,

rather than constituting a particularly ritualized form of daydreaming, we need

to presuppose that the world we ordinarily inhabit, the world of atoms, tables,

chairs, and galaxies, is of the very same nature as the constituents of tantric

practice. If the entire world is fundamentally mental in nature it is easier to

understand how it may be possible to transform it into a different world by

purely mental techniques.[145] If, as the Yogācāra believes, how we perceive the

world is crucially influenced by karmic imprints in our mind (that is, by purely

mental phenomena), we can understand how one might attempt to transform

the world of sa :msāra into the nirvā :nic world of a pure realm by trying to affect

these imprints, and to replace them by others so that the world then naturally

appears to us like a pure realm.
Of course, these tantric texts only appeared several centuries after the

Yogācāra materials we are currently looking at. Yet, as we can explain the

initial appeal of Yogācāra ideas by considering conceptions of meditative

techniques that were practiced when the first Yogācāra texts appeared, so we

can understand the ongoing attraction of Yogācāra thought in the Indian

Buddhist philosophical world by taking into account how it forms a natural

theoretical underpinning for the rituals practised in Buddhist tantra.
[144] Beyer 1988: 92.
[145] Beyer notes, regarding pre-
tantric visualization techniques that arose at the beginning of the

Common Era, that 'Buddhist writers have pointed out that there is a metaphysics

practice of eidetic visualization; it is the ontology of the vision and the dream. A

glittering and quicksilver change is precisely one that can be described as empty.

dream become the tools to dismantle the hard categories we impose upon reality,

eternal flowing possibility in which the bodhisattva lives. Such possibility exists

everything—rocks, flowers, Buddhas, Buddhafields—
is made of mind, and therefore empty.
These samādhis are interpreted as teaching us to de-
reify the world, obliterate the boundaries

between the real and the imaginal, and see all our experiences as a Buddhafield
—visionary, magical,

and full of meaning.' [<www.singingtotheplants.com/2014/01/visualization-before-tantra>.](www.singingtotheplants.com/2014/01/visualization-before-tantra)

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5. Yogācāra and Other Schools of Buddhist
Philosophy
Yogācāra and
On the face of it, Abhidharma and Yogācāra could be seen as fundamentally

Abhidharma
contradictory enterprises. One is distinctly dualist, postulating a variety of

fundamental phenomena, some of which are physical and some of which are

mental, while Yogācāra is a monist doctrine that considers all objects to be

:
merely mental. On the other hand, key Yogācāra philosophers like Asanga and

Vasubandhu also wrote important Abhiharma treatises, like the Abhidharma-
samuccaya and the Abhidharmakośa, which were in turn commented on by

influential Yogācāra commentators like Sthiramati. (Note, by contrast, that we

have no evidence of Abhidharma treatises from Madhyamaka authors.) The

Abidharma tradition is not simply limited to early Buddhism or to the early

period of Buddhist scholastic philosophy, but continued through its later

development, in particular through an interesting connection with Yogācāra.
While it is clear that the Yogācāra position is very different from that of the

Ābhidharmikas, the two systems are still connected not just in the biographies

of philosophers such as Vasubandhu, who changed from an Abhidharma

master to a Yogācāra master, but also systematically, to the extent that import-
ant Yogācāra ideas can be seen as developments of Abhidharma concepts.[146]

Mind-only

The notion of karma entails that our present experience is to a significant

degree influenced by potentialities generated by past actions. One way of

putting this is to say that the world we live in is the product of karma, and

Vasubandhu in fact describes matters in this way in his Abhidharmakośa-
bhā:sya when he notes that

it is said that the world in its variety arises from karma. It is because of the latent

dispositions (anuśaya) that actions accumulate, but without the latent dispositions

are not capable of giving rise to a new existence. Thus, the latent dispositions sho

known as the root of existence.[147]

In Yogācāra this idea is developed further to the extent that the karmic

formation of perception becomes so important that the world so formed drops

away completely. The picture is no longer, as in the case of the Abhidharma,

that of an experienced world shaped by karmic forces, but that of one

entirely produced from such forces. To this extent the Yogācāra theory can

be understood as an argumentative development of the representationalist

¹⁴⁶ See Schmithausen 1967.
¹⁴⁷ Commenting on Abhidharmakośa 4:1: karmaja :m lokavaicitryam ity uktam |

karmā :nyanuśayavaśādupacaya :m gacchanti antare :na cānuśayān bhavābhinirv

samarthāni bhavanti | ato veditavyā :h mūla :m bhavasyānuśayā:h, Pradhan 1975:
6, Poussin

and Pruden 1988–90: 2. 767.

YOGĀCĀRA

epistemology in Sautrāntika Abhidharma by one further step. As we saw

above,¹⁴⁸ for the Sautrāntika perception does not connect us directly with

external objects, since these objects disappear even before we could have

any knowledge of them. Instead, we perceive a mental object, a phenom-
enological aspect or representational form (ākāra) that resembles the exter-
nal object, and that can serve as a basis for inferring the existence of such

an external object as having caused our knowledge. The Yogācāra position

can then be construed as simply accepting the existence of the mental repre-
sentations, without assuming a necessity of inferring any entities behind

them. According to its account, such mental representations, embedded

within the framework of karmic causality, are sufficient to explain the entire

world as it appears to us. External objects are simply an explanatorily

idle wheel.
Not only the idea of 'mind-
only' (vijñāptimātratā) can be seen to have Foundational

Abhidharma ancestors, but even such specific concepts as that of a founda-
consciousness

tional consciousness (ālayavijñāna) may be considered as developed from pre-
existent Abhidharma ideas.[149] Once more we can find roots in the Sautrāntika

epistemology, specifically in the anudhātu[150] (a synonym of bīja, 'seed')[151] anudł

doctrine. Sautrāntika faces the difficulty of explaining how a specific mental

episode or moment can constitute knowledge of a particular object, even

though the object (as a momentary entity) has already passed out of existence,

and even though the mental moment was not caused by the object but by the

immediately preceding mental moment. They solve this by arguing that the

causal history of each moment is present within that moment (it is 'perfumed'
by it), and this history is passed on to its successor moment. The anudhātu

therefore acts as 'the serial continuity of the person . . . qua the presently

existing causal matrix that subsumes the total causal efficacies and content

of consciousness passed on from the preceding moment'.[152] Each moment

therefore has the potential for tracing our way back to the beginning of the

causal chain, rather like going through a list of names on a book's flyleaf in

order to identify the original owner. In this way the present instance of

knowledge can be linked back to the object that caused it in the past (though

this object no longer exists) due to traces left in the mental moment as it exists

now. The conceptual distance between this idea of potentialities caused by past

mental events that exist in the present mental moment, and the idea of a

foundational consciousness as a repository of karmically caused potentials,

is not vast.

[148] pp. 79–80.
[149] See Waldron 1994–5.
[150] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007b: 247.
[151] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007b: 265, n. 9.
[152] Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2007b: 247.

Moreover, in the Abhidharmakośabhā:sya we find the concept of the 'seed-
bījabhāva
state' (bījabhāva) described in a way that appears to clearly indicate a trajectory

leading to the idea of an ālayavijñāna:

By seed-
state one should understand a specific power to produce the defilement, an ability

belonging to the person under consideration and engendered by the previous defil
Likewise, in a given person, there exists the power to produce a thought that reme

power engendered by a consciousness of perception, likewise, the power to produ

which belongs to the plant, sprout, stalk, etc. is engendered by the seed of the rice
:
Asanga also points out explicitly that early Buddhist schools (the Śrāvakayāna)

already refer to the ālayavijñāna, even though they do so by means of syn-
onyms such as 'root-consciousness' (mūlavijñāna) and so forth.[154]
These examples show that there is an important and substantial historical

trajectory connecting Abhidharma theorizing in its Sautrāntika manifestation

and Yogācāra philosophy.[155] The systems differ in some of their core conclu-
sions about the nature of the world, yet specific Sautrāntika ideas can be

regarded as the beginning of a conceptual road that, once travelled on in a

specific direction, leads to ideas that show a considerable resemblance with

some we find in Yogācāra.[156]

Yogācāra and

Madhyamaka
One question that the consideration of Yogācāra's relation to other schools

raises is that of the unity of the Mahāyāna philosophical outlook. We have seen

that the Perfection of Wisdom texts, and the concepts of universal emptiness

and illusionism they expound, play an important role for Madhyamaka as well

as for Yogācāra. Still, the theories that Mādhyamikas and Yogācāracins have

Fundamental
developed in explaining what these texts mean are very different. So we are faced

divide in
with the question whether there is a philosophical divide within the Mahāyāna

Mahāyāna
philosophy?
tradition, containing two contradictory accounts, that of Madhyamaka and

of Yogācāra, or whether both are in fact only two different interpretative

[153] Commenting on Abhidharmakośa 5:2: ko 'ya :m bījabhāvo nāma | ātmabhāvas
kleśotpādanaśakti :h | yathānubhavajñānajā sm:rtyutpādanaśaktiryathā cā :nkurād
śāliphalotpādanaśaktiriti, Pradhan 1975: 278: 22–4, Poussin and Pruden 1988–
90: 3. 770.
[154] Mahāyānasa :mgraha I: 11: yang rnam grangs kyis kun gzhi rnam par shes pa

theg par yang bstan te, Lamotte 1973: 1. 7, 2. 26–8.
[155] King 1998: 9: 'many of the most important "new" Yogacara concepts . . . as u

various Mahāyāna śāstras attributed to Vasubandhu, seem to be philosophical ela

extensions of concepts and themes already found in the Abhidharmakośabhā:sya.

that whether we regard the relationship between Yogācāra and Sautrāntika as a ge

from the other, or whether we conceptualize it in other ways remains a moot poin

above, pp. 81–3.

156 As such, the doxographical label 'Yogācāra-
Sautrāntika' sometimes applied to the school of

:

Dinnāga and Dharmakīrti is less perplexing than it might otherwise seem. If there

trajectory from one to the other one, many, following Murti (Coward 1983: 288),

the adoption of a Sautrāntika position at the level of conventional truth and of the

position at the level of ultimate truth. On the idea of 'Yogācāra-
Sautrāntika' see also Bhikkhu

Dhammajoti 2007a: 23–31.

approaches that do not disagree in any fundamental way. If we consider the

history of Yogācāra/Madhyamaka interactions, matters are far from clear.
On the one hand there is the position that Bhāviveka's criticism of the Bhāviveka

Yogācāra position in his Madhyamakah:rdaya[157] is not only the first uncon-
the Yogācāra/
Madhyamaka
troversial example of the Madhyamaka/Yogācāra divide seen as a division distinc

between two schools with incompatible views, but that Bhāviveka is in fact

responsible for the antagonistic confrontation between Madhyamaka and

Yogācāra. Tāranātha points out that, 'before the appearance of these two

masters [Buddhapālita and Bhāviveka] all the followers of Mahāyāna remained

under the same teaching',[158] and that after the latter's death 'the followers of

the Mahāyāna debated amongst each other, split into two schools'.[159] This

passage can be taken to mean a variety of things. On the one hand it could say

that before the sixth century followers of the Mahāyāna were not aware of the

fundamental doctrinal incompatibilities between the two schools, and that it

was only Bhāviveka's analysis that brought these out into the open. On the

other hand it could be taken as indicating that the Mahāyāna position before

Bhāviveka interpreted both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra in such a way that their

doctrines did not conflict, and merely presented distinct, but complementary,

ways of understanding the doctrines of the Great Vehicle. Bhāviveka's under-
standing of Madhyamaka then interpreted it in such a way that it would in fact

appear as inconsistent with Yogācāra.
Bhāviveka certainly did not see matters in this way; for him, his work aims at

responding to the Yogācāra charge of nihilism directed at the Mādhyamikas, so

that it would have been the Yogācārins who not only regarded Madhyamaka

and Yogācāra as incompatible, but also declared the former to be internally

inconsistent.[160]
It is, in fact, hard to overlook the fact that the mutual criticism of the two Yogācā

schools stretches through most of the period considered in this volume. The Madl

inconsistent
Bodhicittavivarana, a work not implausibly ascribed to Nāgārjuna,[161] contains

a sustained discussion and criticism of Yogācāra concepts. In verse 27
the author points out that: 'The sage's doctrine that all is mere mind is intended

to remove the fear of fools, it does not concern reality.'[162] Similarly, the

[157] Eckel 2008.

[158] slob dpon 'di gnyis ma byon gyi bar du theg pa chen po mtha' dag bstan pa g

[159] legs ldan sku 'das pa'i 'og tsam nas theg pa chen po pa'ang nang du sde gnyis

pa byung ngo, Dorji 1974: fo. 133, Lama Chimpa 1970: 187.

[160] Eckel 2008: 66.

[161] Lindtner (1982: 11) considers this as one of twelve works ascribed to Nāgārju

the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā that 'must . . . be considered genuine' (see also the c

1982:180–

1). In fact it is one of the most frequently quoted works of Nāgārjuna in later Indi

commentarial literature.

[162] cittamātram ida :m sarvam iti yā deśanā mune:h | uttrāsaparihārārtham bālānā

tattvata :h, Lindtner 1982: 192.

 THE GOLDEN AGE OF INDIAN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY
:
Laṅkāvatārasūtra, one of the key texts of the Yogācāra tradition, contains

passages that seem to deny some Yogācāra positions.[163] We have already

:
considered the criticism Asaṅga brought forward against the Yogācārins

whom he suspected of falling into nihilism. On the other hand we also find

relatively late treatises that appear to combine the standpoints of Yogācāra and

Madhyamaka, such as Kambala's Ālokamālā.[164]
Foundationalism
If we focus on the philosophical contents of the two systems, it is clear that

vs. non-
they propound incompatible metaphysical positions. The Yogācāra system

foundationalism

describes a foundationalist scenario: the dependent nature is empty of the imagined nature, but the dependent nature, in the form of the foundational consciousness, is still there to act as the ultimate basis of all that exists. Even though there are no external objects, such as tables and chairs, there is the content of the foundational consciousness which, the Yogācārin claims, is

grotesquely misunderstood as a world of external objects by the deluded mind. Contrast this with the non-foundationalist picture we find in Madhyamaka. Because emptiness itself is empty, there is no bottom level we could postulate that is not conceptually imputed on something else and that could therefore act as an objective foundation of all that exists in the world. A manifestation of this incompatibility is that both schools accuse each other of falling into both the

Mutual
extremes of nihilism and excessive realism at the same time. For Madhyamaka,

accusations of
Yogācāra is a nihilist position since it denies that the imagined nature is

realism and
nihilism
conventionally real. For the Yogācārin, the imagined nature is not something that exists in a lesser sense; it simpy fails to exist and constitutes a wholly false superimposition on the dependent nature. But since the Mādhyamika does not accept the dependent nature as substantially real, he considers the complete denial of the imaginary nature as equivalent to nihilism. It is this acceptance of the dependent nature as a ground of appearances that makes the Yogācāra theory (from the Madhyamaka perspective) also guilty of postulating substan-

tial entities that do not exist, and thereby of falling into the other extreme view

as well. The Madhyamaka's concept of the emptiness of emptiness does not

allow for the existence of the kinds of ground that the dependent nature

constitutes.

The Yogācārin, on the other hand, can just run these charges the other way

round. He argues that the Mādhyamaka is a nihilist because he accepts no

foundation like the dependent nature to ground the appearance of everyday

:

[163] See e.g. the denial of foundational consciousness in Lankāvatārasūtra 3: 48: na

vijñaptirna vastu na ca ālaya :h | bālairvikalpitā hyete śavabhūtai:h kutārkikai:h, V
'There is no intrinsic nature, no conceptual construction, no substance, no founda
ness; these, indeed, are so many discriminations cherished by the ignorant who li

logicians.' Suzuki 1932: 145. This denial of foundational consciousness is not fo

versions of this verse, see Red Pine 2012: 196–7.

[164] 500–50?, Lindtner 2002.

reality that we see around us. But at the same time, he is not only denying too

much but also accepting too much, because he wants to elevate what the

Yogācārin regards as the non-existent and wholly false imagined nature to

the status of conventional reality, that is, to something that exists, even if only

in a manner of speaking.

At this point it would be easy to throw up our hands, suspecting that these

reciprocal charges of falling into the two extremes are little more than the

philosophical equivalent of name-calling. Yet the fact that each system can produce criticisms of the other that are exactly parallel gives us an indication that the two theories are actually closely related. It is not only the case that Madhyamaka and Yogācāra appear to be able to criticize each other with similar validity; the two systems can also interpret each other as being part of their own system.

For this interpretation Madhyamaka uses the conceptual scheme of the Yogācāra Buddha's graded teaching, that is, the idea that the Buddhist doctrine forms of M a hierarchy of increasing philosophical sophistication, where each step was taught to members of a particular audience to work with their specific assumptions and preconceptions. In this context the Yogācāra system would succeed the teaching of the Abhidharma, with its basic tenets of karma and non-self. On the basis of this teaching, disciples would still believe in the substantial, independent existence of dharmas, and even though they may have abandoned attachment to their self, they might still develop attachment to these dharmas. At this stage the Yogācāra theory comes in, arguing that all these dharmas are in fact only mind-dependent and do not form part of an external reality. In addition, it introduces a further route to understanding the non-self doctrine by pointing out that if there is no objectively existent grasped object there also cannot be any subject that does the grasping. In doing so Yogācāra introduces some other substantialist assumptions (such as the existence of the foundational consciousness) which have to be removed by the next highest system, Madhyamaka, but this is not to deny that Yogācāra itself is a perfectly good tool for removing some of the misconceptions of the Abhidharma.

This is the approach we find later in Śāntarak:sita's (725–88) attempt at Śāntarak:sita's

synthesizing Madhyamaka and Yogācāra in his Mādhyamakāla :mkāra,[165] synthe

where he notes:
By relying on the cittamātra system, know that external entities do not exist. And

relying on this [Madhyamaka] system, know that no self at all exists, even in that
Therefore by holding the reigns of reasoning, as one rides the chariots of the two

systems, one becomes a real Mahāyānist.
[165] 92–3, Blumenthal 2004: 171–
2. The main independent work of Śāntarak:sita's disciple

Kamalaśīla, the Madhyamakāloka, also contains a detailed exposition of this synt

The idea behind this syncretist approach is that Yogācāra is the best account of

conventional truth, while the Madhyamaka theory of universal emptiness is the

best account of ultimate truth. Both play a role in a gradual philosophical

de-substantialization of the world. First the Yogācāra analysis does away with

the conception of matter as we find it in the Abhidharma, and substitutes a

fundamentally mental reality for it. The Madhyamaka arguments then pull the

rug from under this idealist foundation, arguing that nothing, neither mind nor

matter, can function as an ultimately real basis of existence.
Madhyamaka as
The Yogācārins simply reverse the picture the Mādhyamikas use to interpret

part of Yogācāra
Yogācāra by referring to the idea of the three turnings. This, we remind

ourselves, has the Buddha teach Madhyamaka after Abhidharma but before

Yogācāra (this view of the historical sequence also happens to do justice to

the fact that the target of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka critique is primarily the

Abhidharma). In this framework it is possible to conceive of Madhyamaka as

an antidote to the teachings of the Abhidharma and their assumption of

substantially existent entities. However, after the second turning the Buddha's

teaching is not complete, for what has happened so far is merely clearing the

ground of various false conceptions. Madhyamaka has shown how various

concepts lead to contradictions when properly analysed, and therefore have to

be discarded. But what is to be put in their place? This is where the Yogācāra

teaching of the three natures comes in, specifying a basis of all appearances in

the form of the dependent nature, which is the foundational consciousness.
The 2nd and 3rd
A different, and somewhat more subtle, understanding of the three turnings

turnings as not
attempting to unify Madhyamaka and Yogācāra is based on the idea that the

differing in
content
second and third turnings do not actually teach a different kind of content.
Both turnings concern ultimate reality as described in the Perfection of

Wisdom literature, but they interpret the import of this teaching in different

ways. According to the second turning, we have a theory, the theory of the

emptiness of emptiness, that gives expression to ultimate reality; according to

the third turning, ultimate reality is beyond all expressions. From the perspective

of the third turning, the second turning does not misconstrue the theory of

emptiness, but it misunderstands what kind of position this theory points

towards: according to the second turning, it can be expressed by a set of

philosophical statements, according to the third turning, it has to be understood

as referring to something inexpressible by language and conceptualization, some-
thing that one can only become acquainted with through meditative practice.[166]
ākāra, Yogācāra,
In this context it is also worthwhile to consider how the notion of repre-
and Madhyamaka
sentationl form (ākāra) was used in order to conceptualize the relation

between Yogācāra and Madhyamaka.
[166] For an interpretation of this kind see Gold 2015b: 230.

Śāntarak:sita describes and rejects both Yogācāra positions on the status of Śānta

representational forms in the Madhyamakāla :mkāra.[167] One problem he raises re

accounts of
for the satyākāravāda is that it appears inconsistent to assume that conscious-
representational

ness, which is fundamentally real, is a single thing,[168] and that the various forms

representational forms are also fundamentally real, and that consciousness and

the forms are the same thing.[169] If the manifold representational forms really

exist, consciousness must be manifold, and hence not ultimately real, but if

consciousness is not manifold, the diversity of forms must somehow only be

apparent and they cannot exist in the way they appear. Śāntarak:sita then raises

a series of eight absurdities in refutation of the alīkākāravāda position.[170] One

of these concerns the fact that representational forms, because they are not

fundamentally real, cannot be part of the causal network.[171] They do not act as

causes, and they do not arise as effects. But this makes it very hard to explain

why representational forms arise and cease in an orderly manner, rather than

being present permanently, or flashing in and out of existence in random ways.
The alīkākāravādin seems to be incapable of accounting for the phenomen-
ology of the world as it in fact appears to us.
In familiar Madhyamaka manner, Śāntarak:sita argues that both views of the

nature of representative forms must fail because they share a common erro-
neous underlying assumption: that there could be ultimate truths about the

status of representational forms as they occur in consciousness.[172] As both the

ultimate reality of consciousness in particular and the existence of ultimately

true theories in general is rejected by the Mādhyamika, both satyākāravāda

and alīkākāravāda turn out to be based on mistaken presuppositions concern-
ing the ontological status of consciousness.
Later Indian authors like Ratnākaraśānti argue against Śāntarak:sita's criti-
Ratnākaraśānti

cism of the Yogācāra conception of representational form.[173] At the same on ākār

time, Ratnākaraśānti also tries to forge an alliance between Yogācāra and

Madhyamaka,[174] though, unlike Śāntarak:sita, he does this not by conceiving

[167] He treats satyākāravāda in verses 46–51 and alīkākāravāda in verses 52–
60 (Blumenthal

2004: 117–39, 266–75. See also Moriyama 1984).
[168] Della Santina 200: 28. Yogācāra accepts the Abhidharma position that manifo

entities cannot be ultimately real. See Mipham 2005: 241.

[169] Blumenthal 2004: 121–2.

[170] Blumenthal 2004: 127–

34. The problem mentioned here is the sixth absurdity (132). See

Yiannopoulos 2012: 140 for a discussion of Ratnākaraśānti's response to this crit

alīkākāravāda.

[171] Della Santina 2000: 31. For further discussion of causal efficacy as the mark o

below, Chapter 4, section 4, p. 000.

[172] Blumenthal 2004: 134–7, Mipham 2005: 261–

3, see also McClintock 2014: 328.

[173] See e.g. his Madhyamakālamkāropadeśa (Yiannopoulos 2012: 223–

49); Moriyama 2014.

[174] Ratnākaraśānti's approach has sometimes been labeled as 'Vijñapti-
Madhyamaka' (nam rig

dbu ma), and positioned explicitly against what was taken to be a misinterpretatic

by Candrakīrti (klu grub kyi dgongs pa 'chal ba, Yiannopoulos 2012: 23). See als

of Yogācāra as propaedeutic to Madhyamaka's ultimate point of view, but by

alīkākāravāda and focusing on the alīkākāravāda understanding of representationa

Madhyamaka
indeed, there seem to be intriguing similarities between a position regarding

representational forms as unreal and the Madhyamaka conception of empti-
ness. Tillemans notes that the alīkākāravāda's negation of the reality of

appearances is 'closer to those Svātantrika-Mādhyamikas who recognize an

object-qua-appearance, one which is conventionally established, but ultimately

illusory'.[175] Yet there remains the crucial difference that the alīkākāravāda still

assumes representational forms, understood as belonging to the imaginary nature (parikalpita-svabhāva), to have an ultimately real basis on which their existence depends, namely reflexive awareness. The Mādhyamika, on the other hand, explicitly denies the existence of any ultimate foundation of unreal appearances.

So does that mean that Yogācāra, in any form, has to be considered as a foundationalist theory and is as such intrinsically incompatible with the Madhyamaka theory of the emptiness of emptiness?

The answer to this question is not as clear as one might initially think. Note that we can regard the sequence of positions from Sautrāntikā-satyākāravāda

Progressive

through Yogācāra-satyākāravāda to Yogācāra-alīkākāravāda as a progressive

evaporation of

evaporation of the ontological content of the respective theories. In the

ontological
content

Sautrāntika case we still have a world of external objects causing and being mirrored by internal representational forms. Yogācāra lets go of these external objects in order to formulate a theory according to which 'the cause producing the aspect [i.e. the ākāra] is not an invisible external object but an internal propensity, and . . . reality consists of self-cognizing awarenesses mistaken for external perceptions'.[176] Yet this satyākāravāda version of Yogācāra still thinks of cognition as relating to objects, objects that are no longer external but have been replaced by internal objects, the representational forms that are con-

sidered as real enties. The Yogācāra-alīkākāravāda lets go of these objects as

well, and analyses them as mistaken projections on reflexive awareness. It

thereby rules out not only the duality of representational form and external

object, but also that of perceiver and internal object.
The four stages
This sequences maps nicely onto the first of the four stages (bhūmi) of

of yoga:
yoga distinguished by Ratnākaraśānti.[177] Having moved through a sequence

Ratnākaraśānti
of epistemological accounts where the percept (ālambana) takes the

form of external objects, internal representational forms, and nondual cogni-
tion, respectively, there is yet a fourth stage to obtain, a stage that consists of

'direct comprehension of the mahāyāna consisting in residence in gnosis

absolutely free from appearance (nirābhāsa), and in which nāman and lak:sa :na

[175] Tillemans 2008: 42, n. 92.
[176] Dreyfus 1997: 435.
[177] Yiannopoulos 2012: 175–85, Ruegg 1981a: 122–3.

as well as grāhya and grāhaka have disappeared'.[178] In his Prajñāpāramitopadeśa,

Ratnākaraśānti describes this fourth stage as follows:
In the fourth stage, the yogis pass beyond the subtlest conceptualisation of pheno
Without exertion and without conditioning, they realize experientially, through a

perception, the suchness of all phenomena. They realise the complete vanishing o

marks of phenomena and the nature of phenomena, the enlightened wisdom, whic

nondual, free of appearances and apprehension, the supra-mundane non-conceptual

calm abiding and penetrating insight.[179]

It is interesting to note that we encounter what looks like very much the same The

four-
stage model in Kamlaśīla's Bhāvanākrama.[180] In both cases the exposition Kama

:
is connected with an identical set of verses from the Laṅkāvatārasūtra.[181]
Kamalaśīla describes the final stage by noting that
things arise neither from their own selves nor from other things and when subject

object are unreal [alīka], the mind, being not different [from the two], cannot be t

either. Here, too, he must abandon attachment to ascribing reality to the cognition

nonduality [advayajñāna], and he must abide in the knowledge of nonmanifestati

of even nondual knowledge [advayajñānanirābhāsa-
jñāna]. . . . When the yogin abides

in the knowledge of nonmanifestation of nondual knowledge, he, being establishe

in the highest truth, sees [the truth of] the Great Vehicle.[182]

Whether these two accounts describe two fundamentally different insights into

reality that make a difference for Mahāyāna practice,[183] or whether they

express the same state of realization, is a moot point. It may be that only

those who have obtained this level of insight would be able to tell; in any case, it

is evident that at least Ratnākaraśānti believed that the Yogācāra and the

Madhyamaka understanding of the four stages are in fact the same.[184]

Attempts to develop a common vision of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka based Tibe

on alīkākāravāda and Ratnākaraśānti' s exposition of it continued in the later dev

alīkākāravāda
Tibetan development of Indian Buddhist philosophy. A prominent example of

[178] Ruegg 1981a: 123.
[179] Bentor 2000: 43. This translation is based on the Tibetan; the Sanskrit of the t

has been edited by Hong Luo (see Luo 2013: 17), though it remains unpublished
[180] Sharma 1997: 33–4, Driessens 2007: 48–51, see also Kajiyama 1991: 137–
40.
[181] 10:256–
8 (Ratnākaraśānti only cites the first two of the three verses): 'Having entered int

mind-
only, he would not conceptualize external objects, based on the foundation of suc

would go beyond mind-only. Having gone beyond mind-
only, he would go beyond signlessness,

established in signlessness the yogi sees the Mahāyāna. This effortless state is pea

vows, the highest knowledge is without self, being signless, it does not see', citta

bāhyamartha :m na kalpayet | tathatālambane sthitvā cittamātramatikramet || citta

nirābhāsamatikramet | nirābhāsasthito yogī mahāyāna :m sa paśyati || anābhogaga
pra :nidhānairviśodhitā | jñānamanātmaka :m śre:s:tha :m nirābhāse na paśyati (V

Suzuki 1932: 246–7).
[182] Kajiyama 1991: 139.
[183] Komarovski 2011: 80–1.
[184] Ruegg 1981a: 123–4. See also Seton 2015: 78.

this is the fifteenth-century Tibetan scholar Shākya mchog ldan.[185] He

regarded alīkākāravāda as on the same level as Madhyamaka,[186] without,

however, glossing over the various interesting distinctions in the ways

Yogācāra and Madhyamaka presented their views of ultimate reality. He

pointed out that while perceived through the argumentative dimension the

two systems were very close, though not identical, yet they were one and the

same when viewed through the meditative dimension: the understandings of

reality achieved by those perfecting the paths of alīkākāravāda Yogācāra and

Madhyamaka ultimately coincide.[187]
Mutual
The fact that Yogācāra and Madhyamaka are mutually interpretable in

subsumption and
the way described above provides a route to understanding views about the

the unity of
Mahāyāna thought original unity of the two systems such as we find in Tāranātha

Mādhyamika would be able to say that he accepts the truth of Yogācāra, and

any Yogācārin could say that he accepts the truth of Madhyamaka if the

relation between the two systems is understood such that either Yogācāra

acts as a preliminary account leading up to Madhyamaka, or such that

Madhyamaka essentially depends on Yogācāra meditative practice to achieve

its liberating potential. Though it may seem as if the unity of the Mahāyāna has

been preserved in this way, we might be justified in being suspicious. After all,

the Mādhyamika and the Yogācārin have different views about what it means

to accept the truth of both systems. For the former, Madhyamaka comes out as

the final true theory, while for the other this is Yogācāra. While it might look as

if the unity of the Mahāyāna meant that there are just different paths up the

same mountain, we might wonder whether Madhyamaka and Yogācāra do not

actually disagree about what is at the top and what is further down the

mountain. In this case the mountains they describe could be the same, but

would have to be two distinct peaks.
Yogācāra and
Apart from this argument from mutual subsumption, there is a different

Madhyamaka as
position one may adopt in order to establish the fundamental unity of

aiming at the same
inexpressible truth Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. Yogācāra has traditionally placed

on the claim that ultimate reality is inexpressible. Considering the background

assumptions of this school, this is understandable. Yogācāra emphasizes how

our view of the world is inevitably coloured and distorted by concepts, and puts

great emphasis on a perceptual shift caused by meditative practice. In order to

become acquainted with the way things really are, we therefore have to go

beyond the set of concepts we employ, and since they provide the framework in

which all our linguistic expressions take place, such a move implies that we

[185] Sometimes believed to be a reincarnation of Ratnākaraśānti (Komarovski 201
[186] Komarovski 2011: 83.
[187] Komarovski 2011: 79, 154–5. The 19th-
century Tibetan scholar Mi pham rgya mtsho seems

to have shared this position (Komarovski 2011: 80–1).

must go beyond the realm of what is expressible. Such a way of perceiving the world is also the one used by the Buddhas, who have completed their meditative training and moved beyond the distortions of subject/object duality to comprehend a reality that cannot really be expressed in terms of such a distinction. Yet if we consider the Madhyamaka perspective, we also find various remarks that it does not express a thesis,[188] or that one should not hold the theory of emptiness as an established philosophical position (d:r:sti).[189] Theses and philosophical positions are of course linguistically expressed entities, and if the conclusion of the Madhyamaka arguments cannot be rendered in terms of these, we might be justified in suspecting that it is not something that lends itself to linguistic expression. So Madhyamaka would accept the inexpressibility of ultimate truth as well, and since there is no sensible way of differentiating between a pair of inexpressible positions, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra would then appear to aim at the same position with regard to ultimate truth, namely that it is inexpressible. They differ, of course, when it comes to specifying the way in which the realization of ultimate truth is to be obtained. For Yogācāra it is the attainment of a nondual state of consciousness by sustained meditative practice, for Madhyamaka it is the use of arguments, that is, a form of conceptualization, in order to bring an end to conceptualization.

While this approach[190] avoids the difficulties of the mutual subsumption Differen approach we saw earlier, it not entirely clear that it manages to present a concepti inexpressibility faithful representation of both positions. While it is true that for the Mādhyamika there is no thesis, philosophical position, or other linguistic item that could

express ultimate truth, his reason for this view is not that conceptualization

necessarily distorts the reality it sets out to represent, as the Yogācārin would

have it, but a global anti-realism about truth. For the Mādhyamika there is no

way things are ultimately; for the Yogācārin there is such a way, but it is

inexpressible. When the Mādhyamika asserts that ultimate reality is inexpress-
ible (anabhilāpya) and non-conceptual (nirvikalpaka), he does not mean that

there might be some other way of epistemic access to this reality, one that does

not go via expressions or concepts, but that there is no access by expressions

and concepts because there is nothing for them (or any other epistemic

instrument) to access here: there is no ultimate reality, no way things are 'no

matter what'.[191] It therefore appears as if the difference between thinking that

[188] Such as verse 29 of Nāgārjuna's Vigrahavyāvartanī, see Westerhoff 2010: 63-
5, Huntington

2003: 72–3.
[189] Mūlamadhyamakakārika 13:8, Siderits and Katsura 2013: 145–6.
[190] For further discussion see the essays by Siderits and Gold in Garfield and Wes
[191] These expressions are therefore to be understood as incorporating non-
implicative negations

(prasajya-
prati:sedha), negations that reject an important presupposition of the proposition t

negated, as the negation in 'the number 5 is not red' rejects the presupposition tha

be coloured at all.

there is no ultimate reality, and the global anti-realism about truth that comes

with it, and thinking that ultimate reality is inexpressible marks the crucial

divide between Madhyamaka and Yogācāra,[192] a divide that seems to be

unbridgeable by all the attempts we have so far encountered. Our only options

seem to be to accept that there are two definite (nītārtha) incompatible

philosophical positions within the Mahāyāna, or that there is just one, sub-
suming the other, and that this second one must therefore be in need of

contextual interpretation (neyārtha).

6. Yogācāra and Vedānta

Amongst the relations of Yogācāra with non-Buddhist schools of Indian

thought that with Vedānta is particularly interesting. Not only do the two

systems share a certain surface familiarity, insofar as they are both frequently

labeled as forms of idealism, the seventh-century thinker Gau :dapāda, author of

the Mā :n:dukyakārikā (itself a commentary on the Mā :n:dukya Upani:sad)

:
and Śankara's supposed paramaguru, or teacher of his teacher,[193] is often

supposed to have been substantially influenced by Yogācāra (and, to an extent,

by Madhyamaka).[194]

Early Vedānta
Gau :dapāda describes the world as similar to a dream (svapna) and an

and Yogācāra
illusion (māya): 'Other creation-theorists, on the other hand, consider creation

to be the manifestation of divine power (vibhūti), creation is conceived by [yet]
others as having the same nature as a dream and an illusion.'[195] This echoes

Dreams and
similar characterizations we find in Yogācāra texts.[196] For the Yogācārin, the

illusions

world as it appears to us, that is, the imagined nature (parikalpita-svabhāva), is

wholly unreal, and hence fittingly characterized by similes like dreams and

illusions, where what the dream or the illusion shows is wholly non-existent.
Over and above such general Mahāyāna themes, like the illusoriness of the

[192] Gold (2015b: 237) disagrees. For him difference between these two positions

considered merely one of framing'.
[193] Some scholars date Gau :dapāda as early as the middle of the 6th century, in w

:
role as Śankara's grand-teacher would be more doubtful. See Joshi 1969: 11.
[194] Dasgupta 1922: 1. 423: 'I believe that there is sufficient evidence in his kārikā

that he was possibly himself a Buddhist, and considered that the teachings of the

with those of the Buddha'; Mayeda (1968: 87) notes that the fourth chapter or pra

Mā :n:dukyakārikā, called Alātaśānti, 'extinction of the wheel of fire', which mak

the 215 verses of the text, 'may well be regarded as a Buddhist text'. Whether all

were indeed composed by the same author is contested, see King 1997: ch. 1. For

some textual parallels between the Mā :n:dukyakārikā and Mahāyāna works see J
[195] Mā :n:dukyakārikā I:7: vibhūti :m prasava :m tv anye manyante s:r:s:ticintakā
ūpeti s:r:s:tir anyai:h vikalpitā, Swāmī Nikhilānanda 1974: 38.
[196] La :nkāvatārasūtra 10: 251, 279, 291, Vaidya 1963: 124–
6, Suzuki 1932: 246, 249–50.

world in which we live,[197] the Mā :n:dukyakārikā also takes up more specific

Yogācāra motives.
One such motive is the identity of knowledge (jñāna) and the known Identity of k

(jñeya),[198] or of the perceiver (grāhaka) and perceiving (graha :na), illustrated and

by the example of the 'wheel of fire' that gives the fourth chapter of the

Mā :n:dukyakārikā its name: 'Just as a firebrand, when in motion, appears

straight, crooked, etc., so consciousness in motion (vijñānaspandita) appears

as perceiver and perceived.'[199] When a torch is moved around in a circle various

static shapes such as glowing circles or ellipses can be seen, even though there is

no illuminated circular or elliptical object in front of us. In the same way,

consciousness can generate the appearance of perceiver and perceived, even

though no such things should be accorded any ontological status.
The notion of the motion, 'oscillation', or 'vibration' of consciousness vijñānaspa

(vijñānaspandita), which denotes the activity of consciousness that brings

out the indicated duality (corresponding to the motion of the torch that

produces the visual illusion) constitutes a close parallel to the Yogācāra idea

of the 'transformation of consciousness' (vijñānapari :nāma) that explains the

apparent split of the manifest world into the appearance of a substantial self

(ātman) and the objects this self perceives (dharma).[200]
The rejection of this epistemic dualism between knower and known also asparśay

appears to form the background of the notion of asparśayoga, the 'yoga of no

contact' that Gau :dapāda refers to. Instead of simply understanding it as a

specific meditative technique,[201] it may also be taken to be a specific epistemic

[197] We find similar characterizations also in Prajñāpāramitā texts, for example in

A:s:tasahāsrikāprajñāpāramita: 'For illusions and beings are not two different thin

and beings are not two different things. All dharmas and gods are also like an illu

māyā ca sattvāś ca advayametadadvaidhīkāram iti hi svapnaś ca sattvāś ca advaya

| sarvadharmā api devaputrā māyopamā:h svapnopamā:h (Vaidya 1960b: 20, see

and there are interesting connections between the Mā :n:dukyakārikā and Madhya

the phrasing of the illusionistic descriptions in fact follow very closely similar ch

Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyakakārikā (compare Mā :n:dukyakārikā II: 31: svapnamā

gandharvanagara :m yathā (Swāmī Nikhilānanda 1974: 116) with Mūlamadhyaka

yathā māyā yathā svapne gandharvanagara :m yathā). For further discussion see H

Bronkhorst 2011b: 62–3.

[198] Mā :n:dukyakārikā III: 33: 'It is asserted that knowledge that is free from ima

unborn is not distinct from the knowable', akalpamaja :m jñāna :m jñeyābhinna :ı
Nikhilānanda 1974: 187.

[199] Mā :n:dukyakārikā IV: 47 :rjuvakrādikābhāsam alātaspandita :m yathā | graha

vijñānaspandita :m tathā, Swāmī Nikhilānanda 1974: 260.

[200] See e.g. the opening verse of Vasubandhu's Tri :mśikā: 'The figures of speecl
and "nature", functioning in so many ways, arise in the transformation of conscio
dharmopacāro hi vividho ya :h pravartate vijñānapari :nāme, Anacker 2002: 422.

[201] Such as the withdrawal of the mind from sensory objects; see Bhagavadgītā 2:
2, 27
(Feuerstein 2014: 113, 153–5).

state brought about by such techniques.[202] This state would be a realization of

the absence of contact (sparśa) between the perceiving mind and the perceived

object, since the external objects fail to be present in the first place.[203] There is a

noteworthy parallel here with the goal of Yogācāra practice, an approach

aiming at the removal of the wrong superimposition of externality to objects

that fail to exist in a mind-independent way, and at the attainment of a way of

cognizing the world that is not subject to such superimpositions.

Vedānta criticism

Despite the intriguing historical and systematic connection between

of Yogācāra
:

Yogācāra and Vedānta, central Vedānta thinkers such as Śankara launched a

:

sustained attack on Yogācāra thought.[204] One point Śankara raises towards the

How can mental

beginning of his discussion is how the Yogācāra's idea of objects appearing 'as

objects be like

if ' they were external could be made sense of, given that they assume that there

external objects?

are no external objects in the first place.[205] How can something be like another

thing, if the second thing does not exist? Could a person behave like the son of

a barren woman behaves?

:

Our arguments

A second point Śankara mentions concerns the relation of the Yogācāra

must not

position to the epistemic instruments (pramā :na).[206] An understanding of these

undermine the
epistemic

'instruments' that provide us with an epistemic grip on the world is usually

instruments

taken to be at the very beginning of any philosophical inquiry. But if we accept

an epistemic instrument like perception, which seems to acquaint us with

entities external to our mind, how could any amount of Yogācāra arguments

subsequently convince us that such objects fail to exist? We determine what

can and what cannot exist on the basis of the epistemic instruments, and if our

subsequent philosophical conclusions appear to undermine one of the presup-
positions of these instruments, we would cut off the very epistemological

branch on which our conclusion is supposed to rest.

Qualified and

Ś :
ankara also argues that the Yogācāra identification of the supposed external

qualifier must
object with a mental image leads to problems in differentiating different parts

differ
of the world.[207] When we distinguish a white cow from a black cow we identify

both as cows, though we tell them apart by different qualifications. Analogously,

Ś :
ankara argues, a mental image of a jar and a mental image of a pot are both

perceptions, though they are differentiated by what they are mental images of.
In both examples the qualified (viśe:sya) is the same ('cow', 'mental image'), but

[202] Gau :dapāda (Mā :n:dukyakārikā III: 39) notes that 'it is difficult for all yogins

asparśayogo vai nāma durdarśa :h sarvayogibhi:h, Swāmī Nikhilānanda 1974: 19

[203] King 1997: 148, Hixon 1976: 217, 234–5.
:
[204] Śankara's main criticisms of Yogācāra are set out in his Brahmasūtrabhā:sya (
32, Date

1973: 1. 325–
34). For an analysis of these, as well as the perspective of other Vedānta thinkers

:
them, see Darling 2007. A close paraphrase of Śankara's criticism is given by Kh
10.
Ingalls (1954: 298–
9, 303) argues that, unlike the preceding arguments against the Abhidharma

metaphysics (II.2.18–
27), which reflect traditional criticisms of the Buddhist tradition, the argu-
:
ments against Yogācāra are original to Śankara.
[205] Date 1973: 1. 328.
[206] Date 1973: 1. 328.
[207] Date 1973: 1. 328–9.

its qualification (viśe:sa :na, 'black'/'white', 'of a pot'/'of a jar') differs. If the

qualification was not different from the qualified a white cow would be the

very same thing as a black cow, as both are cows. Since this is not so, the mental

image (the qualified) must also be distinct from its object (the qualification),

contrary to what the Yogācārin asserts.
A fourth point raised concerns the coherence of the principle of momentariness,

:
Foundational
which all Buddhist schools accept, with the specific Yogācāra position. Śankara c

momentariness
claims that the postulation of a foundational consciousness is incompatible with a

the principle of momentariness.[208] If the foundational consciousness is itself

permanent, this contradicts the Buddhist conception that all compounded phe-
nomena (sa :msk:rta) are impermanent,[209] and are indeed only momentary

existents.[210] On the other hand, if the foundational consciousness is momentary,

how can it act as a receptacle of habitual tendencies (vāsanā) that is supposed to

:
span several lifetimes? For Śankara, this underlines the necessity to postulate a

permanent entity, a witnessing self (sāk:sin) 'connected with the three times', in

order to explain phenomena such as memory based on habitual tendencies.[211]
Later Vedānta authos such as Madhva identify a somewhat different problem Ma

for the compatibility of Yogācāra and the theory of momentariness, arguing that 1

the problem is not a conflict with the notion of a foundational consciousness,

but with the fact that internal and external objects have different properties, and

therefore cannot be identical: 'The momentariness of cognition and the per-
manence of things have been asserted, hence there is a discordance.'[212] Since

internal representations, qua mental phenomena, pass into and out of existence

at a rapid pace due to their momentariness, and since external objects remain

for a longer duration, Madhva argues that they cannot be the same thing.
Obviously the Yogācārin has some reply to each of these challenges; we will

not investigate them here, as doing so would take us deeper into the Yogācāra–

Vedānta debate than is possible in a historical survey such as this.
[208] Date 1973: 1. 332–3, Ingalls 1954: 302.
[209] Abhidharma metaphysics accepts some exceptions to the principle of universa
ness, in the case of uncompounded (asa :msk:rta) phenomena such as space and n

Bhikkhu Dhammajoti 2009: 38–9, 471–
99). However, these phenomena are, unlike the ālaya

with its continuous planting and ripening of seeds, unchanging, and, at least acco

interpretations, mere absences, so that it is plausible to assume that they may con

to universal momentariness.

[210] 'Yet when there is a permanent nature the tenet of [momentariness connected

foundational consciousness is abandoned.', sthirasvarūpatve tvāyalavijñānasya si

Brahmasūtrabhā:sya ad II.2.31, Joshi 2011: 2. 557.

[211] Date 1973: 1. 333, Kher 1992: 508–
9, Ingalls 1954: 301. Instead of postulating a witnessing

:

self, Buddhist thinkers like Dinnāga explain the existence of memory in terms of

awareness, arguing that if one cognition was cognized by another cognition (rathe

:

we would end up with an infinite regress (see pp. 184–
5 above). Śankara is not convinced by this

point, however, arguing that his witnessing self does not need another to establisł

thereby stop the regress.

[212] jñāna :m k:sa :nikam arthānā :m ca sthāyitvam uktam || ataś ca naikyam, Darli

:
Reasons for
A question that remains, however, is why Śankara does not adopt a doxo-
Ś :
ankara's attitude
graphically more inclusive line towards the Yogācāra views he describes. In the

towards Yogācāra
:
familiar tradition of the doxographic hierarchy, Śankara could have described

Yogācāra as an incomplete approximation of the final truth of Advaita

Vedānta, rather than as a deficient view to be refuted. Yet while Vedānta and

Yogācāra may appear relatively close from a contemporary perspective, with their rejection of material objects and their emphasis on the illusoriness of the world as it appears to us,[213] the crucial reason why Śankara would not want to regard the Yogācārin (or any Buddhist, for that matter) as a philosophical fellow-traveller is the latter's rejection of the existence of an ātman. Vedānta doxographies, such as the medieval Sarvadarśanasamgraha by Mādhava,[214] characteristically assign the second-lowest place to Buddhist theories, excelled in their distance from the truth of Vedānta only by the materialist Cārvāka system. Rather than constituting a philosophical runner-up, Śankara sees the Buddhist no-self theory as making a fundamental mistake, and as at best deceptively and misleadingly similar to Vedānta ideas.[215] For this reason it is essential for him to stress the difference between the two systems, demonstrating both the superiority of the Vedānta approach and its distance from the Buddhist theory.

[213] Śankara has sometimes been accused of being a crypto-Buddhist (prachanna-bauddha) who introduced Buddhist elements into the interpretation of Vedānta. See Darling 200 22.

[214] Cowell et al. 2006.

[215] I therefore disagree with Ingalls (1954: 304), who argues that the difference be Śankara's Vedānta and Yogācāra is to be spelt out 'psychologically and historically metaphysically.

4

The School of Diṅnāga

1. The Lives of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti

Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti form part of a lineage of teachers and disciples that Da

starts with Vasubandhu (Diṅnāga's direct teacher) and continues via Diṅnāga's

disciple Īśvarasena to Dharmakīrti. This gives us some limited help in dating

them, since we can assume that they all lived roughly in the two centuries

following the death of Vasubandhu. Diṅnāga is commonly dated to 480–
540 CE;

in the case of Dharmakīrti there is still considerable debate over whether he

should be placed in the sixth or in the seventh century. Frauwallner[1] dates him

to the period of 600–60 CE, based mainly on the fact that the Chinese pilgrim

Xuanzang, who visited India around the middle of the seventh century, did not

mention Dharmakīrti, though Yijing, who visited at the end of the seventh

century, did. This evidence is hardly decisive, however, and there are argu-
ments for dating Dharmakīrti considerably earlier, in the sixth century.[2] Based

on the discussion of Dharmakīrti in Jaina sources, Balcerowicz suggests that he

lived between 550 and 610 CE.[3]

The traditional accounts of Diṅnāga's life tell us that he was ordained as a

monk in the Pudgalavāda tradition. Having grown dissatisfied with their

theory of persons he left his teachers and eventually studied with Vasubandhu.
In these accounts we also find a colourful story of how Diṅnāga composed his D

main work, the Pramā :nasamuccaya.[4] Before he left on his alms-
round, Diṅ- Pramā:na-
samuccaya
nāga wrote the introductory verse on a piece of rock with a piece of chalk in the

cave where he was living at the time:
Having bowed down to Him, who embodies the epistemic instruments, who seeks

benefit the world, the teacher, the well-gone, the protector,
I here make a single compendium of my various scattered [writings],

to establish epistemic instruments.[5]
[1] Frauwallner 1961.
[2] Balcerowicz 2016: 475–6.
[3] Balcerowicz 2016: 477.
[4] Lama Chimpa 1970: 183–4, Bu ston 2013: 247–8.
[5] pramā:nabhūtaya jaggadhitai:si:ne pra:namya śāstre sugatāya tāyine | pramā:nas
tāt samuccaya :h kari:syate vipras:rtād ihaikata:h. For further discussion of this ve

Hattori 1968: 73–6.

 THE GOLDEN AGE OF INDIAN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY
In his absence a non-Buddhist teacher called K:r:s :namunirāja became aware of

Diṅnāga's undertaking and erased the verse. Diṅnāga wrote it down again, only

to find it again erased on his return. This repeated itself a couple of times until

Diṅnāga and K:r:s :namunirāja finally met and started to debate. Diṅnāga

defeated him in debate, but was no match for K:r:s :namunirāja's magical powers
Flames shot out of his mouth and burned Diṅnāga's robes and all his belong-
ings. Obviously very depressed by this turn of events, Diṅnāga threw the piece

of chalk up into the air, resolving to give up his motivation to work for the sake

of all living beings once it hit the ground. But it never did, since the bodhisattva

Mañjuśrī caught it in mid-air, encouraging him, and assuring him that the

work he was about to compose, the Pramā :nasamuccaya, would in time become

'the sole eye for all the other treatises'.
We encounter some of these motives from Diṅnāga's life-story (defending

one's position in a debate, adversarial encounters with non-Buddhist teachers)

in the accounts of Dharmakīrti's life again. Dharmakīrti studied Diṅnāga's

Pramā :nasamuccaya with the latter's disciple Īśvarasena, who realized that

Dharmakīrti's understanding not only surpassed his own, but was in fact

equal to that of his teacher Diṅnāga, and encouraged him to compose a

Dharmakīrti's
commentary on it.[6] This was to become his magnum opus, the voluminous,

Pramā :navārttika
though unfinished, Pramā :navārttika, expounding Diṅnāga's ideas using vari-

ous conceptual innovations that were, as far as we know, not anticipated by his

teacher Īśvarasena or by Dinˑnāga himself.[7]
Dharmakīrti's life-story includes some animated episodes that pitch him

against some of India's greatest non-Buddhist philosophers, including the

Dharmakīrti and
Mīmā :msakā Kumārila Bha:t:ta and the Advaita Vedāntin Śanˑkara. Kumārila,

Kumārila
who engaged very critically with the teachings of Dinˑnāga, is said to have

studied for a time at Nālandā, and hence had intimate acquaintance with

Buddhist doctrines[8] and skill in countering them in debate. Dharmakīrti is

supposed to have joined his household incognito as a servant, in order to learn

[6] Lama Chimpa 1970: 229, Bu ston 2013: 249.
[7] These two works, Dinˑnāga's Pramā:nasamuccaya and Dharmakīrti's Pramā:nav

central for understanding the key ideas of the logico-
epistemological school, and will also be

central for our exposition in the following pages. Though they are related to one a

text and commentary we should not think that they form a monolithic doctrinal bl

works are better conceived of as being like overlapping circles. There are some p

Dinˑnāga's that Dharmakīrti does not share, and the other way round, as well as a

of common positions. The position is complicated by the fact that Dinˑnāga's wo

been thoroughly destroyed at the time of the decline of Indian Buddhism (Warde
7),

making it necessary to rely on translations instead of the original Sanskrit. Descri

Dharmakīrti's system developed out of Dinˑnāga's is unfortunately beyond the sc

as this. We will focus on ideas that are common to both authors, sometimes notin

disagreement between them as we go along.

8 According to some sources Kumārila studied with various non-orthodox teachers (including

Buddhists) for twelve years. See Verardi 2014: 207.

all his doctrines so as to be able to refute the non-Buddhist teachers more

easily. He first worked on Kumārila's fields, and was later permitted to hear

him teach, and even questioned Kumārila's wife and children to learn his most

secret teachings that nobody else was permitted to hear.[9] Equipped with all he

wanted to know, he then made his escape, ready to face Kumārila during a

debate at a later time. Kumārila is supposed to have suggested that whoever lost

the debate should be killed, but once Dharmakīrti had defeated Kumārila he

and all his disciples converted to Buddhism.

Dharmakīrti's biography also tells us that he defeated Śaṅkara in debate, who Dl

was so distressed by this that he drowned himself in the river Ganges.[10] He was, ‹

however, reborn as the son of Śaṅkara's disciple who, when the time was ripe, al

challenged Dharmakīrti in debate, was also defeated, and drowned himself in the

Ganges. The whole process repeated itself one more time, with the difference tha

this third incarnation of Śaṅkara did not kill himself after being defeated by

Dharmakīrti at the very end of the latter's life, but converted to Buddhism.

What is interesting about the content of these two biographies is what they

reveal about the intellectual background against which the philosophical theories of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti were formulated. First, we note an increasing importance put on the ability to defend their interpretation of the Buddhist

doctrine in a debate. The greater part of their biographies does not focus on Increa

their accomplishments as meditators or teachers, but on their success as importan

debate with
debaters. Second, these debates were usually not intra-Buddhist disputes non-
Buddhists

between different Buddhist schools but public debates, often involving high

stakes, in which the Buddhist doctrine had to be defended against well-trained

non-Buddhist opponents.[11]
Within this context several features of Diṅnāga's and Dharmakīrti's theories

will appear less peculiar than they would otherwise have done. First, there is a

very strong emphasis on discussions of epistemology and logic. When chal-
Focus on logic and

lenging an opponent in a debate, it is first of all important to have a clear epistem

conception of what possible sources of knowledge are acceptable, and ideally to

[9] Bu ston's version of this story (2013: 249–
50) is peculiar. The teacher is not named here, but

identified as Dharmakīrti's maternal uncle. Asking the teacher's wife for the answ

questions about her husband's philosophical system, she agrees to put these quest

husband while having sex with him. Dharmakīrti, apparently listening in, then ste
sation as he 'tied a cord around her leg and pulled on it when difficult subjects we

he understood thoroughly, he left.'
[10] Lama Chimpa 1970: 233.
[11] Stcherbatsky (1994: 1. 35) regards the account of Dharmakīrti's encounter with

Śaṅkara as 'an indirect confession that these great brahmin teachers had met witl

to oppose them. What might have been the deeper causes of the decline of Buddh

proper and its survival in the border lands, we never perhaps will sufficiently kno

are unanimous in telling us that Buddhism at the time of Dharmakīrti was not on :

was not flourishing in the same degree as at the time of the brothers Asaṅga and

further discussion of the decline of Buddhism in India see Verardi 2014.

reach a consensus with the opponent about which sources either side may

appeal to. Obviously it would not do for each side to cite the sacred scriptures

of their respective school as authoritative, for the other side is unlikely to accept

them so a debate could not even get started. It is therefore essential to establish

some common ground both parties think can be legitimately appealed to in

order to resolve a dispute.
Second, it becomes clearer why in the tradition following Diṅnāga and

More arguments
Dharmakīrti we encounter an unprecedented number of arguments that set

for Buddhist
out to establish key Buddhist claims, such as arguments for the Buddha as a

claims
source of authority, his omniscience, the law of karma, rebirth, and so forth.
Such topics would not have to be supported when speaking to a Buddhist

audience, but in a situation in which Buddhist teachers engaged in debates with

non-Buddhist teachers who shared very little of their religiously motivated

beliefs, the ability to defend them in a way that had a chance of convincing the

as-yet unconverted was a highly desirable feature.

2. Epistemology

In accordance with the strong epistemological focus of this school, Diṅnāga

begins his Pramā :nasamuccaya with a chapter on perception, setting out some of

the key epistemological distinctions of his system.[12] In the salutation that begins

the work (quoted above) Diṅnāga addresses the Buddha by the term pra-
mā :nabhūta, 'embodying the epistemic instruments'. This does not mean that

the Buddha should be regarded as authoritative simply because of his enlight-
ened status,[13] but rather that his enlightenment is the fruit of, and therefore

flowing in its nature from, the correct application of epistemic instruments.
svalak:sa :na and
He first points out that there are only two kinds of veridical cognition

sāmānyalak:sa :na
brought about by epistemic instruments, perception (pratyak:sa) and inference

(anumāna). This distinction is nicely mirrored at the ontological level by a

distinction between two kinds of objects, the svalak:sa :na (literally 'self-
marked') and the sāmānyalak:sa :na[14] ('generally marked'). According to the

[12] See Hattori 1968.
[13] This attitude would be rather uncharacteristic of how the Buddha himself thoug

epistemic role of authority, advising his disciples to test his words like the purity

'Monks, just as experts examine gold by heating, cutting, and rubbing, so is my te

accepted, but not out of reverence for me', tāpāc chedāc ca nika:sāt suvar:nam iva
parīk:sya bhik:savo grāhya madvaco na tu gauravāt. This verse is found, inter alia

Tattvasa :mgraha (verse 3588) and in the Jñānasārasamuccaya attributed to Āryad

1968: 73, and, more generally, Mimaki 2008).

sāmānyalak:sa :na is also frequently translated as 'universal' or 'property', thou

more precisely understood as an object marked by a general quality (as is entailed

the term sāmānyalak:sa :na as a bahuvrihi compound). The idea is that such 'obje

be known without standing in direct contact with any specific instance. I can infe:

---

most common interpretation, the former are momentary particulars and the

latter are objects in general, particulars being exclusively accessed by sense

perception, while objects in general are apprehended by inference.

Din˙nāga describes these svalak:sa:na entities as free from conceptual construc-
tion (kalpanāpodha or nirvikalpaka) and indescribable, because they are not

associated with any name. Perception 'yields a total but unconceptualized,

prelinguistic image of this object: perception does not determine or ascertain

anything'.[15] If we read Din˙nāga's theory as a version of the Abhidharma project,

we can consider the svalak:sa:na entities to be the fundamental dharmas and Abh:

project
perception as a route that gives us access to them. (Again, dharmas can here be

usefully conceptualized as particularized properties or tropes.) Conceptual con-
struction (kalpanā, literally 'ordering' or 'arranging'), on the other hand, only

works on groups of dharmas, assembling them together as a property (e.g. by

disregarding the distinctions between different very similar blue-tropes) or an

individual object (e.g. by putting together a blue-trope, a shape-trope, and so on).
Perception is therefore never perception of the kind of medium-sized dry goods

of our everyday acquaintance, such as tables and chairs.[16] On this interpretation

the svalak:sa:na entities are sometimes compared to the sense data of twentieth-century Western epistemology.[17] This idea is helpful to the extent that both are

taken to be immediate objects of acquaintance. However, the analogy carries us

only so far. Sense data are supposed to really have the properties they appear to

have (thereby providing a foundation for our knowledge of the world), yet for

Din˙nāga there are no properties at the level of svalak:sa:nas.
The theory of perception that the logico-
epistemological school defends Perception and

faces the following apparent difficulty. On the one hand, perception is under-
ultimate reality

stood as non-conceptual (kalpanāpo :dha), non-erroneous (abhrānta), and dir-
ected at what is ultimately real, namely the svalak:sa :na entities. It also can only

perceive aggregates (sa :mcita) of ultimately real objects, such as infinitesimal

particles (paramā :nu).[18] They cannot be perceived in isolation, but only once

they form a collection together with other such particles. On the other hand,

the logico-epistemological school of Din˙nāga and Dharmakīrti, cohering with

the mereological reductionism we find in other Buddhist traditions, does not

accept collections or aggregates as ultimately real. As the example of the chariot

and its parts shows us, a whole is something that is conceptually superimposed H

upon the ultimately real parts, but nothing that is ultimately real itself. This is per

the impartite
obviously a problem for the account of perception described here, for if non-
conceptual?
perception perceives aggregates, and aggregates are conceptual constructs,

that my neighbour owns a piano (a 'piano in general'), though any particular pian

given rise to that instance of knowledge.

[15] Eltschinger 2010: 407.
[16] Hayes 1988: 138.
[17] Hayes 1988: 134.
[18] Dunne 2004: 99, 102, 109.

then how can perception provide us with access to the non-conceptual? Perception is seen here as based on a structural isomorphism between perception and the perceived,[19] but if a cognitive image (which is singular) can only

ever be an image of an aggregate (which is plural), since only aggregates can be

perceived, how could the two be structurally identical?[20]

Later authors have tried to solve this difficulty by arguing that the cognitive

image does not correspond to a single infinitesimal particle, or to a whole made

Not a singular

of many such particles, but to the fact that many particles together produce the

entity, but a

effect of being perceived. On the mental side we have the singularity of

singularity of
effect

appearance, and on the side of the object we do not need to accept a singular

entity, that is, an entity that somehow is one, despite having many parts, but it

is sufficient that there is a singularity of effect, or a singularity of causal

function. If this procedure works, we seem to be able to maintain that 'the

object of perception is a real, physical entity which, although ultimately

singular, somehow encompasses physical components that are ultimately

multiple'.[21] However, this solution does not suffice for giving the defender of

the logico-epistemological school everything he wants. The problem simply

arises once more if we consider the case of a mental object. Such an object can

be a single mental image, despite being phenomenologically variegated (citra;

consider, for example, the image of a multicoloured butterfly's wing). In the

case of infinitesimal particles the 'unity in multiplicity' is split across two levels.
The perception is unified, though the object is variegated. But in the mental

case there is no level we can turn to in order to repeat this trick. Both the unity

and the variegation have to be attributed to the perception in question.
Does this now mean that the logico-epistemological school has to drop its

account of perception? Interestingly, this is not what happens. What they drop

is the overarching framework in which this theory of perception is located,

Dropping realism
namely realism about external objects. We will discuss the background of this

about external
in more detail in our discussion of the 'sliding scales of analysis', but, to put it

objects
briefly, the external realist position, with its demand of a structural isomorph-
ism between perceptions and external infinitesimal particles, is not to be

considered to be the school's final view, but is to be replaced by an idealistic

ontology on Yogācāra lines. If we accept this, then the crucial premise that we

can only perceive aggregates disappears, as the notion of aggregation only

covers the realm of the physical, a realm the idealist conception dispenses with.
It is also worth noting in passing, with regard to the question how the theories

of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti relate to those of the Madhyamaka school, that the

difficulty with the theory of perception just described can equally be interpreted

[19] Eltschinger 2010: 408.
[20] For a detailed discussion of this problem see Dunne 2004: 98–113.
[21] Dunne 2004: 110.

as supporting the claim that any perception is by necessity intrinsically bound up

with conceptualization. That perception can only access aggregates, and that conc

and Madhyamaka
such aggregates are conceptual superimpositions, demonstrates that there can-
not be any direct perceptual contact that is based on a structurally isomorphic

reflection of the conceptualization-independent entities, a thesis that is at the

very centre of the Mādhyamika's philosophical vision.
We understand the logico-
epistemological school's theory of svalakṣa ṇa and Epistemic

sāmānyalakṣa ṇa as pursuing a reductionist project. Its aim is to construct a foun
theory based on a minimum of entities we have to consider as fundamentally

real, constructing everything else on the basis of these entities. Understood in

this way, it is tempting to understand it as a form of epistemological founda-
tionalism.[22] Such projects consider particular parts of our knowledge as

immune to sceptical doubt, and they proceed to reconstruct the rest of our

knowledge on the basis of such an unshakeable foundation. In the present case

this basis is supposed to consist of the momentary particulars, identified with

the svalakṣa ṇa entities. One reason that supports this idea is that for Dharma-

kīrti, perception is by its very nature immune from error.[23] The object of Percepti

perception causes an internal representation, a form (ākāra) or appearance immun

error
(ābhāsa) that corresponds to the object.[24] Diṅnāga criticizes the Nyāya defin-
ition of perception for incorporating the property of being inerrant (avyabhi-
cārin), because this property is already part of what it means to be a perception,

and not anything that needs to be included specifically in a definition.[25] The

apprehension of a momentary particular by a perception cannot be mistaken, Wha

since the perception cannot deviate from what it is in contact with.[26] In order as p
to make this claim cohere with the fallibility of human knowledge, all errors

must be relegated to the mind.[27] Part of the price to pay for error-proofing

[22] The project is also ontologically foundationalist insofar as the svalak:sa :na ent

existence of all other objects. They are the point where the process of ontological
[23] Pramā :naviniścaya 1.4: pratyak:sa :m kalpanāpo:dham abhrāntam, Steinkellne

(2010: 410) notes that Dharmakīrti's theory of perception has the curious consequ

'as far as perception is concerned, there is no difference between an ordinary min

liberated'. Once liberation has been obtained, the awakened being finds itself in d

un-
erroneous perceptual contact with reality (tattvadarśana) a contact that is free fro
tuality. It is only when teaching other beings that the Buddha would then again re

in his interaction with the world.
[24] Perception is thus connected with the world both through causation (as the exte

causes the ākāra via the relevant sensory faculty) and through resemblance (as th

form of the external object). This view of perception is commonly associated witl

(see Kellner 2014).

[25] Hayes 1988: 139.
[26] If we follow the interpretation in Hayes 1988: 139 Diṅnāga, even though, unli

he did not include immunity from error (abhrānta) in the definition of perception,

'cognition born of faculty–object contact is necessarily non-
erroneous', as Diṅnāga's criticism of

the Nyāya definition implies.
[27] This is a position of Diṅnāga's that Dharmakīrti did not share.

perception in this way is that hardly anything of what we would usually classify

as perception can be considered to be so by the present account. In particular,

our ordinary perceptions of medium-sized dry goods like shoes, and ships, and

sealing-wax do not count as perceptions.
Connection with
Some scholars have argued that the motivation for this foundationalist

Nāgārjuna's
project can be found in Nāgārjuna's criticism of epistemic instruments in his

criticism of
epistemic
Vigrahavyāvartanī.[28] The idea is that, after Nāgārjuna's argument that the

instruments
epistemic instruments could not be established by themselves, by something

else, by both, or neither, Diṅnāga's project constitutes an 'exasperated attempt

to secure the possibility of valid cognition',[29] defending the possibility of

epistemology against the 'onslaught of Nāgārjuna's dialectics that crumbled

the old foundations that used to support the entire Buddhist religion'[30] by his

notion of perception. Nāgārjuna's critique, it is argued, is based on the idea that all our cognitions are inevitably tarnished by a conceptual overlay (samāropa), and if Diṅnāga can establish that there is some sort of untainted epistemic access to the world that manages to avoid contamination by conceptualization he would have found a way to avoid Nāgārjuna's sceptical criticism. Diṅnāga's supposed reply would embrace an externalist conception of knowledge, where even though we might not know that our beliefs are justified, we would still be justified, because below the distorting user-interface of conceptualization there would be a level of epistemic access to the world that both provided the raw material for conceptualization, and also connected with things in a direct way, without a mistaken superimposition of entities that fail to be there in

the first place.
Nāgārjuna does
I am not entirely convinced by this supposed connection between Nāgārjuna

not pursue a
and Diṅnāga, primarily because I do not consider it to be very likely that in the

sceptical agenda
Vigrahvyāvartanī Nāgārjuna was in fact pursuing a sceptical agenda.[31] It is true that Nāgārjuna argues against a foundationalist conception of the epistemic instruments, a picture according to which these instruments by their nature (svabhāvatas) deliver authoritative knowledge. But an argument that knowledge cannot be grounded in this way is not an argument that there cannot be any knowledge at all, which is the position the sceptic would want to argue for. Nor does it undermine the foundations of the Buddhist religion. In fact,

Nāgārjuna makes the point[32] that it is precisely the assumption that auspicious phenomena, phenomena leading to liberation and so on, exist with intrinsic nature that undermines the Buddhist path, since it is otherwise unclear how these could be developed where they are not present.[33]

[28] Franco 1986: 86.
[29] Franco 1986: 86.
[30] Franco 1986: 89.
[31] For further discussion of my interpretation of this text see Westerhoff 2010.
[32] Vigrahavyāvartanī 52–6.
[33] Westerhoff 2010: 94–104.

At this stage it is worthwhile to note that there are various cognitive Three kinds processes that Din˙nāga subsumes under the notion of perception. So far we perc have just referred to sensory perception with the five external senses, but in the Indian context perception is always understood to also include the cognition of mental events in a manner that is as direct and immediate as the sensory cognition of external objects. In addition to the perception of external and of mental objects, Din˙nāga also includes yogic perception (yogipratyak:sa) as a third kind of perception. This is a form of perception that apprehends a thing in itself (arthamātra) without any form of conceptual construction based on scriptural authority (āgama).[34] Could the interpretation that svalak:sa :na-type objects cannot be known with more authoritative force than those with sāmānyalak:sa :na argue that it is yogic perception instead that puts us into

direct contact with how things are at the fundamental level? We shall come

back to this question when we have a closer look at the notion of yogic

perception in section 6 of this chapter.

3. Inference

The second epistemic instrument other than perception that Diṅnāga discusses In

is inference (anumāna). In the logico-
epistemological school inference extends conceptual

construction
much further than we would normally expect it to. What we would otherwise

call a perceptual judgment (say, 'this tomato is red') becomes the result of an

inference for Diṅnāga, since neither the property of redness nor the temporally

extended tomato are considered to be available for perceptual access. The

former is constructed via the process of exclusion,[35] the latter by running

together a series of quickly succeeding tomato-moments.[36] But in addition to

the form of inference that mediates between the world and us, there is also the

realm of those inferences we employ in debating with others. Diṅnāga and Infere

Dharmakīrti are the philosophers who contributed in the most significant way det

to the explication of rules of inference within the Buddhist theoretical enter-
prise. They built on the work of earlier Buddhist authors such as Vasubandhu,[37]
but it is only during their time, a time of intense debate between Buddhist

and non-Buddhist thinkers, that the study of inferential patterns occupied

centre-stage in the Buddhist philosophical world. The focus on the theory of

[34] Hattori 1968: 27. There is some disagreement on whether these three are all the

perception Diṅnāga accepted, or whether reflexive awareness (svasamvedana) sh

a fourth, rather than just being considered as a form of mental perception. See Fra

Yao 2004.
[35] See the section on apoha below (pp. 235–8).
[36] To this extent the notion of anumāna also covers what we would more commor

'conceptual construction'.
[37] Such as his Vādavidhi, see Anacker 2002: 29–48.

knowledge that is characteristic of the school of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti links

up clearly with the new prominence of inter-doctrinal debates.[38] Not only

would conducting such debates presuppose an agreement on what sources of

knowledge could be seen as authoritative in general, there also needed to be

specific agreement on which argumentative patterns would be accepted by both

parties as carrying probative force.
Characteristics of
Diṅnāga considered inference to be based on the idea that certain observed

inferences
features could be indicative of other unobserved ones, such as when we infer an

unobserved fire on a distant mountain pass, because we observe smoke there.
Such indicative relations cannot always be successfully appealed to, though.
That the ground is wet might be because it has rained recently, but we cannot

use the wetness to infer the rain, as there are other possible reasons (somebody

might have emptied a pot of water, for instance). In order to exclude such cases,

Diṅnāga defined acceptable inferences to be those characterized by a triple

The triple mark
mark (trairūpya).[39] In the context of the smoke–fire example mentioned above

the three characteristics are:
1. pak:sadharmatā: the subject of the inference (pak:sa), the mountain, is

characterized by the reason (hetu), smoke;
2. anvaya: there is at least one similar entity (sapak:sa) characterized by the

reason, smoke, and the property to be established (sādhya), fire;

3. vyatireka: there is no dissimilar entity (vipak:sa) characterized by the

reason, smoke, and lacking the property to be established (sādhya), fire.
Pervasion
The relation between the reason and the property to be established encoded

in these conditions is termed 'pervasion' (vyapti); in a fully formulated infer-
ence pervasion is spelt out in terms of examples that establish the second and

third conditions. Establishing the second condition requires a similar or

congruent example such as kitchen stove, where there is smoke and fire, the

third a dissimilar or incongruent example such as a lake, where there is neither

smoke nor fire. In the case of the spurious rain inference just mentioned, the

second characteristic does not obtain. There are examples of the ground being

characterized by the reason (wetness), but without it having rained recently.
anumāna is not
Inferences that exemplify the triple mark are formally valid, yet it is unsat-
formal logic
isfactory to regard the theory of anumāna put forward by the logico-
epistemological school simply as an attempt to construct a formal logic.[40]
Epistemological considerations play an important role in the thought of Diṅnāga

[38] In addition, inference concerns phenomena that are not immediately accessible

and these are particularly likely to give rise to differing opinions.
[39] See Hayes 1988: 112–31.
[40] We sometimes even find the tradition of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti as a whole

'Buddhist logic' (this is, for example, the title of Theodore Stcherbatsky's 1930–2 pioneering study

of this tradition).

and Dharmakīrti, and failing to appreciate this leads to an inevitable misunderstanding of their tradition, resulting in criticism of them for failing to carry

through a project they were never engaged with in the first place. Their

conception of anumāna incorporates formal features at a central place, but is

not restricted to them.

Din˙nāga argued that there are two kinds of inference based on the trairūpya Infer

model, inferences 'for oneself ' (svārthānumāna) and inferences 'for others' ones

others

(parārthānumāna). The former are inferences performed in one's own mind to

acquire inferential knowledge of some matter. The latter are inferences put

forward in a public context so that another person can use them to acquire

their own inferential knowledge based on them. The difference between the

two is not simply one of perspective. An inference for oneself is simply

the knowledge of the property to be established in the subject, since there is

the right kind of reason. It only involves two members, subject and reason,

whereas an inference for others involve three, the subject, the reason, and the

two examples. It might appear that the difference between them is little more

than a difference in formulation, and that in any case the logical structure of

an inference in its form 'for oneself ' and 'for others' is the very same.[41] This

overlooks, however, that the inference 'for oneself ' is about a sequence of

psychological states that lead to an inferential cognition, while the inference

'for others' is about the proper way in which such a sequence is to be expressed

in language. A helpful way of conceptualizing the difference between the two

types is by understanding the inference for oneself in terms of a mental

model.[42] The idea is that the reasoner constructs a model in his mind Mental mod

(a model that might well be not linguistic, but, for example, pictorial), a

model of situations that satisfy all the premises in order to test whether the

conclusion holds in all of them. If it does, the inference is valid. This insight can

then be expressed by putting all the premises and the conclusion in proper

linguistic form for the sake of conveying the inference to another speaker.
Inference 'for oneself ' is obviously the most important of the two, since it

delivers the aim of inference, inferential cognition, whereas inference 'for

others' merely fulfils the function of allowing others to create a similar cogni-
tion in their own minds. Nevertheless, in order to study the form inference Ways

takes in the Indian discussion we need to look at its public form as inference form

'inference for
'for others'. Different Indian logical traditions differ on how much of the above o
structure has actually to be stated in the proper expression of an inference. The

Nyāya conception of inference stands at one end of the scale, distinguishing

[41] Prasad 2002: 36.
[42] See Chatterjee and Sirker 2010. The authors also argue that the theory of menta

provides a good template for understanding the purpose of one of Diṅnāga's logi

Hetucakra :damaru.

five essential parts in what is essentially the pattern described above, including

stating the statement to be proven ('there is fire on the mountain') twice, at the

beginning of the inference, as a thesis to be argued for, and at its end, as a thesis

just established. Dharmakīrti's conception is at the parsimonious end of the

scale, requiring just two parts, the assertion of the subject having the estab-
lishing property (pak:sadharmathā, 'there is smoke on the mountain') and the

assertion of the pervasion (vyapti) of the establishing and the established

property ('wherever there is smoke there is fire'). That the inference

does not even require stating the thesis to be argued for coheres well with

Dharmakīrti's conception of the inference 'for others' as a means (sādhana)

for generating an inferential cognition in an audience, not as a self-sufficient,

comprehensive proof.
Inferences as
From the preceding discussion of inferences 'for oneself ' and 'for others' it is

tokens
evident that both kinds of inference are tokens, not types. The first is a

sequence of specific mental events in one's mind, the other a sequence of

speech acts intended to bring about such a sequence of mental events in the

mind of another. The sequence of mental events, the inference 'for oneself ', is

obviously the most important one. Yet this may suggest that Diṅnāga's and

Dharmakīrti's theory incorporates a kind of psychologism that Western logic explicitly sets out to reject. From the Western perspective, logic does not deal with things that go on in the mind but with abstract structures of implication. This is important, since the force of logical succession is altogether greater than that of psychological succession. In my mind I can make any thought follow a given other thought, but only certain conclusions follow from a given set of premises. For this reason, understanding logical sequences in terms of psychological sequences is bound to lead to problems. However, the logico-epistemological school does not assume that all there is to a sound inference is what goes on in the reasoner's head. Rather, it is the underlying facts in the world that determine whether an inference like the one from smoke to fire is successful. The thesis established (pratijñā, 'there is fire on the mountain') is not an abstract object towards which the act of inference is directed, but the structure of the result of a mental act that is underwritten by how things are in the world. If the properties in the world are not aligned in the way specified by the three characteristics the inference will not achieve its epistemic aim.[43]

The role of
Apart from the fact that the logico-epistemological school does not conceive
examples in
of inferences as abstract objects but rather as concrete tokens, there is another
inferences
fact that highlights a crucial difference between the Indian theory of inference

[43] This fact holds for the Indian logical tradition more generally, though opinions
what the 'underlying facts in the world' amount to. For a Naiyāyika it will be the

related to each other and to the objects they instantiate; for the followers of Diṅn

Dharmakīrti it will be spelt out as involving apoha-based ersatz constructions.

and the study of logic as it is familiar from the Western context. This is the use

of examples to spell out the similar and dissimilar cases. If the argument we are

considering is deductively valid, there is no need to introduce examples, apart

from heuristic purposes. The introduction of examples is more characteristic of

inductive arguments that attempt a proof by cases ('because these representa-
tive examples have a property, others have too').
What these differences indicate is that the Indian anumāna is to be con-
Logical and

sidered as distinct from its Western relative insofar as it merges a logical and an e

dimension of
epistemological dimension. The three characteristics of the reason indicate a anur

specific way in which properties in the world are related, and if they are so

related, making the associated inference ('there is fire, because there is smoke')

will result in knowledge. The purpose of the examples is to maximize the

likelihood that the person who draws the inference is really doing so in a

situation in which the properties are related as described.[44]
The positive example assures us that the property to be established, and the Positi

property that is to act as its indicator, are indeed real. In the case of fire and

smoke this is obviously not very contentious, but in the case of inferences

involving less straightforwardly empirical objects matters might not be so clear.

For properties to be taken ontologically seriously they must be instantiated in

some place or other,[45] and clearly the instantiation of the two properties

referred to in the inference cannot be used to settle this point, since the

inference is the very thing under dispute.[46]

The negative example,[47] on the other hand, is in place to show that we Negative

have applied due diligence in ascertaining that the threefold characteristic really

obtains in the world. The example of the lake illustrates this well. One might

well think that the mist rising from a lake is an instance of something that looks

very much like smoke, though it arises entirely without fire. Having understood

the nature of mist, however, and its difference from smoke, we can be assured

[44] For further discussion of this understanding of anumāna see Siderits 2016a.
[45] The reason that makes the tradition of Indian logic not particularly interested in

divorced from soundness (namely, that inferences are supposed to generate infere

about the objects of debate, rather than being of interest merely as abstract structu

what explains its lack of interest in uninstantiated properties.
[46] See Dunne 2004: 32.
[47] There is debate about whether both examples need to be present in all cases. A

this demand is problematic is when inferences establish a universal property (sucl

Buddhist case, 'everything is impermanent' or 'everything is empty'). If these co

the arguments establishing them could not refer to vipak:sa cases, as there would

permanent or non-empty. (See Dunne 2004: 30–
1, n. 39.) Very early Indian discussions of formal

inferences do not mention the counterexample. One explanation of this fact is tha

usually expect the discussion of counterexamples to come from the opponent in t[...]

from the proponent. If this is the case, including the two kinds of example in the i[...]

indicate that the form of inference changes over time as the conception of inferen[...]

something regarded as belonging primarily to a debating context, involving a pro[...]

something mainly seen as what individual epistemic agents do. (See Siderits 201[...]

that in the lake both smoke and fire are absent. Adducing the negative example

indicates that we have checked for potential cases that indicate that the infer-
ence we have drawn might, after all, not be supported by the way the world is.
This explanation also provides a good way of understanding the list of

Pseudo-reasons
'pseudo-reasons' (hetvābhāsa) we find discussed in most Indian texts on logic

and debate. One way of seeing them is just as a list of defects in the construction

of an argument that turn it into a fallacy and imply that the offender has lost the

debate. Another way of understanding them is to consider them as a list of

inferential pitfalls reasoners are prone to make. Taken in this way they could

function as a basis for checking that the most likely mistakes in constructing an

inference have been ruled out.
Fallibilism
Of course, despite our best efforts to determine how the property to be

and externalism
established and the establishing property are related, we could still be mistaken

in our view. There might be cases where the establishing property exists

without the property to be established that we have overlooked. The Indian

theory of anumāna considers it as fallible—a clear contrast with the Western

notion of a deductive inference, which is not fallible (though it may be based on

false premises).
The anumāna is also a good indicator of the externalist background of much

of ancient Indian epistemology, Buddhist and non-Buddhist. For an external-
ist, knowledge comes from standing in a specific relation to the object known,

whether or not one knows that this relation obtains. For the internalist, on the

other hand, knowledge requires knowing that we know. Reliable routes of

epistemic access are not enough for them, we also need to know that these

routes are reliable. The externalist conception renders the fallibilist conception

of inference unproblematic. We do not engage in inference in order to acquire

knowledge we know to be indefeasible in every possible way. What assures us

that our inferentially gained belief is knowledge is that the three characteristics

that describe the inference also hold true of the way the respective properties

are related in the world. When engaging in inference we attempt to make it

likely that we are in an epistemic situation where this relation of properties

obtains, and the two examples are means we employ to increase the likelihood

of being in that situation.
'good reasons' and
It has now become clear that the ideal of a good reason (saddhetu) the

validity
tradition of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti describes encompasses more than

simply formal validity. Formal considerations are of course present, the state-
ment that there is smoke on the mountain, together with the statement of

pervasion, encapsulates the (formally valid) modus ponens inference: 'if there is smoke there is fire, there is smoke on the mountain, so there is fire on the mountain.' But a good inference needs not just to be valid, it must also be sound, that is, have true premises. Otherwise the argument cannot give rise to an inferential cognition, and for this reason factual considerations form an

essential part of appraising the status of arguments. In addition, for a reason to be good there needs to be a relevant doubt (sa :mśaya) together with the desire to know (jijñāsā),[48] so epistemic considerations about who knows and doubts what must be taken into account as well. Finally, the fact that the contestants in a debate must be in certain epistemic states for a reason to be a good reason entails that there are also strategic considerations about when to make an argument that need to be considered. If a contestant does not have the requisite doubt or desire to know, giving an argument is pointless, even though the argument's intrinsic features have not changed.

Trying to understand the Indian theory of inference as doing substantially the same as logic developed in the Western tradition therefore inevitably fails to do justice to the complexity of the enterprise, and its connection with the wider Indian philosophical and religious landscape. While the two endeavours overlap at important points, we achieve the most nuanced description of the

theory of anumāna by considering it as a sui generis intellectual project.

4. Metaphysics

A crucial distinction that Dharmakīrti (though not Diṅnāga) draws between Caus

svalak:sa :na-and sāmānyalak:sa :na-type entities is that only the former, but not

the latter, have causal efficacy (arthakriyāsamārtha). Such efficacy has onto-
logical import, as it is the mark of the real. This point is made very clearly in his

Pramā :navārttika 3:3, here presented with the commentator Manorathanandin's

additions in brackets:

Whatever has causal powers, that really exists in this context [i.e. when we exami

reality]. Anything else is declared to be [just] conventionally existent [because it

practically accepted through mere conceptual fictions]. These two [i.e. the real an

conventional] are [respectively] particulars and objects in general.[49]

The possession of causal power (śakti) and the ability to act on and influence

other entities is therefore the tell-tale sign that distinguishes the real from the

unreal. This position has far-ranging implications for the whole of Dharmakīrti's

philosophy. An immediate consequence is that because objects in general or

object-types, failing to have a unique spatio-temporal location, fail to be causally

efficient in this way Dharmakīrti regards them as not real.

A characteristic of real things that, for Dharmakīrti, coincides with causal Momer

efficacy is momentariness. Clearly, if what is efficacious is momentary and vice a

efficacy

[48] This is a view that Dharmakīrti shares with the Nyāya tradition. See Dunne 20(

[49] arthakriyāsamartha :m yat tad atra [vastuvicāre] paramārthasat | anyat sa :mv:r

[kalpanamātravyavahāryatvāt] | te [paramārthasa :mv:rtī] svasāmānyalak:sa:ne, N

2:

42; Pandeya 1989: 64.

versa, objects in general cannot be efficacious (and hence not real) because they do not change from moment to moment—the very idea of an object in general entails its trans-temporal existence. It is important to note that Dharmakīrti's criticism applies both to what we might call 'horizontal' objects in general, as well as to vertical ones. Objects in general as trans-temporal, non-spatial objects such as redness or being extended obviously fail to satisfy the momentariness requirement for reality, but so do temporally extended objects, such as a red vase. They, too, are nothing but superimpositions on momentary particulars, and for that reason not fundamentally real.

Dharmakīrti's arguments for momentariness

What are Dharmakīrti's reasons for the thesis of universal momentariness? He puts forward two arguments, an 'argument from cessation' (vināśitvānumāna), a version of the argument from the spontaneity of destruction going back to Vasubandhu we met earlier, and an 'argument from existence' (sattvānumāna), a form of the argument from change.

Argument from cessation

The first argument starts from the empirically plausible premise that all things perish sooner or later. This presents us with two possibilities: either the perishing of an object is caused, or things perish without a cause. A straightforward example is the destruction of a pot (the effect) brought about by striking it with a hammer (the cause). However, when properly analysed, what the stroke brings about is a collection

of shards, on which the non-existence (abhāva) of the pot is superimposed. Vasubandhu and Dharmakīrti argue more generally that absences (such as the absence of the pot) are not real things, and as such cannot enter into causal relations.[50] This leaves us with the second possibility, that things perish spontaneously (ākasmika). And this perishing, it is argued, has to happen immediately after the thing has arisen. If it perished only after some time there would have to be some cause responsible for it perishing just then, rather than at another time. We then need to postulate a real cause of a mere absence, and the difficulty of how we can have a two-place causal relation relating an existing cause to something that is not real arises once more.

Argument from existence

The argument for momentariness 'from existence' argues that real things are always causally efficacious in some way, though their effects might not always be noted by us. One effect that even the most seemingly inert objects produce is the existence of a closely resembling object at the next moment in time. But, Dharmakīrti argues, if things are always producing effects they must always be changing. Why? If an object persisted permanently (nitya) through periods of time, what would explain that it produced a series of effects, and produced effects that differ from one another? If a permanent object produced first effect a, then effect b, and if a and b are distinct, the permanent cause cannot be responsible for this, as it has not changed between the time of producing a and

[50] For this reason absences could also not cause anything. Rather than a fire going

the absence of oxygen, the real cause would be the presence of something else (su

the time of producing b. The obvious reply would be that a persistent thing

generates different effects successively, simply by being put into different causal

surroundings. The same litmus solution turns red when mixed with an acid

and blue when mixed with a base. However, this view does not seem to sit well

with the way in which we actually analyse causal scenarios. When we compare

two situations such that an effect has arisen in one but not in another, we

consider the crucial causal factor to be precisely what is different between the

two situations, not what is identical.

Thus, if causally efficacious objects continuously change, and if we do not

assume that there is a constant substratum that underlies the change, we will be

dealing with a succession of different though closely resembling objects that

arise and cease in quick succession.

Dharmakīrti's identification of the real, the causally efficacious, and the Consequ

momentary allows him to exclude objects in general from the realm of the rejecti

in general

real. At first sight this rejection of objects in general might appear to us as a

fairly technical point of little consequence outside of the scholastic world of

Buddhist metaphysical theorizing. This appearance is deceptive, however. First

of all, note that this view has important implications for putting the Buddhist

position in sharp opposition to most of its non-Buddhist rivals. The argument

that permanent entities cannot enter into causal relations has obvious conse-
quences both for the conception of a permanent soul (ātman), as well as for ātman

any theistic view that postulates the existence of a creator god. The eleventh-
century scholar Mok:sākaragupta argues against the existence of a soul by

pointing out that the occurent cognition of the self or soul (aha :mkārajñāna)

arises only intermittently; it is sometimes present, and sometimes absent.
Therefore, as in the case of other kinds of cognitions that are sometimes

present, sometimes absent (like, for example, cognition of lightning, which is

only present when lightning is), we should infer that it must have a cause that is

also sometimes present, sometimes absent, and not a cause that is permanent.[51]
Inferring a permanently existent self on the basis of an intermittent sense of self

is as faulty as inferring the existence of a permanently existent bolt of lightning

on the basis of the momentary perception of its flash.
Ratnakīrti, another member of the logico-
epistemological school, argues that The creator god

momentariness is wholly incompatible with the characteristics of a creator

god,[52] implying not only that because such a god is permanent he could not

have created the world, but also that because he is not causally efficacious he

cannot be real.
In addition, the rejection of objects in general has important implication Caste

for the Buddhist view of the brahmanical concept of caste. Another term

[51] Kajiyama 1998: 141.
[52] Patil 2009: 199, 333.

for object-types, jāti, can also denote caste, and connections between the

non-existence of objects in general or object-types and the non-existence of

caste were explicitly made by later commentators on Dharmakīrti. A defining

feature of castes, according to the brahmanical understanding, is that they are

natural kinds, divisions of the world that do not have a human origin but are

grounded in the very nature of reality. Arguing for their non-existence allows

Buddhists following the logico-epistemological school to distance themselves

from other traditions and the social structures that come with them on strictly

ontological grounds.[53]
Finally, the rejection of objects in general not only had important conse-
quences for the Buddhist position in distinguishing it from other strands of

Indian thought, it also created pressing questions for the Buddhists themselves.
The bifurcation
Diṅnāga's distinction of two kinds of epistemic instrument and two kinds of

of knowledge
epistemic object corresponding to them led to a curious bifurcation of know-
ledge. Suppose we infer the existence of fire on some distant mountain by

observing smoke, and assume there is no smoke without fire. Later, when we

climb the mountain and perceive the fire by sight, we do not achieve (contrary

to what we might intuitively assume) a second epistemic perspective on the

same fire that we previously inferred. For Diṅnāga, perceived and inferred

objects are radically distinct. He rejects, in a word, what other schools of Indian

philosophy refer to as pramā :nasamplava, the mixing of epistemic instruments

to make it possible that several instruments produce cognitions of the same

object. This somewhat unintuitive position is not simply a consequence of his rejection of the reality of objects in general, for these sāmanyalak:sa :na are, for Diṅnāga, all that inference operates on, but also has a source in the Abhidharma background of the logico-epistemological school. This developed the theory that sensory perceptions such as sight, touch, and so on all only apprehended their particular objects. Diṅnāga can be seen as having taken up this 'epistemological atomism', combining it with the ontological split between particulars and objects in general, to end up with a theory in which each epistemic instrument only has access to one kind of object.[54]

Having created a theory with such a significant gap amongst the objects of knowledge, Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti obviously needed some way of bridging it. We have the impression that when we perceive a fire that we have previously inferred, we access the same fire from two epistemic perspectives, though,

[53] Eltschinger 2012. In assessing the political dimension of the logico-epistemological school

more generally it is worthwhile to note how the logico-epistemological school (as well as Buddhist

tantra) can be regarded as arising from the 6th century social dynamics where Bu

mounting pressure from its brahmanical opponents. In this context both epistemo

can be understood as constituting Buddhism's attempt to fight back, in dialectical

against increasingly powerful Brahmin adversaries (Eltschinger 2013; 2014: 174)

[54] Dreyfus 1997: 298.

according to Diṅ˙nāga and Dharmakīrti this is not the case, and we believe that

when we think and talk we refer to objects in general, even though Diṅ˙nāga and

Dharmakīrti deny that such things are real. Supposing the logico-epistemological school is right about its revisionist project, we still need some

account of how our mistaken ideas about epistemology relate to the ways we

really acquire knowledge, and how these ways can be successful, given the

constraints imposed by Diṅ˙nāga's and Dharmakīrti's theory.

5. Language

A key conceptual tool for building such a bridge between the manifest image of a

the world and the austere reductionist vision of the logico-epistemological

school is the theory of exclusion (apoha) developed by Diṅ˙nāga and Dharma-kīrti. They needed to provide some account of just what it is that we are talking

about when we talk about the blue colour of a blue vase. Clearly they could not

spell this out in the relatively straightforward manner of, for example, the

Naiyāyikas, by saying that we refer to the object-type blue that is present (via an

instantiation relation) in this particular vase. Since objects in general are not

admitted as part of the theory's ontology, we require some kind of ersatz notion

that can play the role of such objects without incurring all the metaphysical

criticism that Diṅ˙nāga and Dharmakīrti have voiced. This is what the notion of

exclusion is supposed to provide. Instead of identifying blueness with the

collection of individuals that all instantiate the property blue, we understand

it as those individuals that the term non-blue excludes.

At first sight it is difficult to see what might be gained by this. If we divide

our world into blue things and non-blue things, those things that the latter

excludes (the complement of the set of non-blue things) are just all the blue

things. All we have done, it seems, is to provide a cumbersome way of talking

about the set of all blue things.

Two things need to be taken into account at this point. First, Diṅnāga and Absen

Dharmakīrti appear to rely here on a general Buddhist intuition that absences less

presences

are less real than presences. If something turns out to be an absence, it is more

straightforward to understand it as a conceptual construction (and hence not

as fundamentally real) than if it happens to be a presence.[55] An empty table is

both the absence of an orange, and the absence of an apple, and what

distinguishes the two absences is that the first situation is one in which we

were looking for an orange and failed to find one, while in the second we were

looking for an apple. The very identity of an absence therefore turns out to

[55] Compare Cox 1988: 67.

depend essentially on something mind-made, namely our expectation to find

something there which turns out to be absent.

apoha and two

Second, the notion of apoha indeed looks redundant if we understand it just

kinds of negation

as applying negation twice over, as two negations that cancel each other out.

There is, however, a better way of understanding what the apoha construction

was meant to achieve, if we consider a difference between two kinds of negation Indian scholars appealed to.[56] We have already mentioned these above; the first, implicative negation (paryudāsa-prati:sedha), was used to negate an attribute of an individual while implying that a different attribute like it would apply, for example, by saying that someone is not a Brahmin while believing that he belongs to one of the other three castes. The second, non-implicative negation (prasajya-prati:sedha) makes no such assumptions. If we say, for example, that a tree is not a Brahmin, we do not imply that is perhaps belongs to the k:satriya or vaiśya caste. We can now use these two distinctions in the apoha construction by considering, for example, the non-implicative negation of 'being blue', then form the implicative negation of this negation, and treat the resulting complex as an ersatz for the object-type 'being blue'. What is the motivation for this? Non-implicative negations do not preserve certain assumptions about the negandum (in the above example, that whatever is not a Brahmin must belong to one of the other castes), stating that the thing negated does not have the property in question, nor another of the same kind. If we therefore form the non-implicative negation of the set of blue things, we end up with the set of non-blue things, but without assuming that this set is unified by another object-type, in the way in which the blue objects are unified by the object-type of blueness. Implicative negation claims that the negandum does not have the property in question, but another of the same kind. Forming the implicative negation of the non-implicative negation of the set of all blue

things preserves the assumption that there is nothing unifying all the objects in

the set, but returns us to the set of blue objects. It is evident that because two

different negations have been applied in this context we cannot just assume

The two negations that they cancel each other out.[57] We also see how moving thr

do not cancel each kinds of negation the metaphysical assumption that the set of ¿

other out
objects is what it is because all the objects instantiate the object-type of blueness

has been left behind. Diṅnāga can therefore employ the 'exclusion of what is

other' (anyāpoha), that is, the implicative negation of the non-implicative

negation of the original set as a substitute for object-types. When we speak

about blueness and other properties we can simply consider this talk as referring

[56] This interpretation of apoha semantics is explained in greater detail in Siderits
[57] The fact that double negation elimination does not apply to mixed sequences o

and non-
implicative negations is a key feature employed to explain certain puzzles connec

the tetralemma (catuṣkoṭi). See Westerhoff 2009: 68–89.

to the unproblematic exclusion, rather than to the ontologically dubious

objects in general.
In Dharmakīrti's exposition of apoha theory the notion of causal power, apoha an

which appears to be almost entirely absent from Diṅnāga's account, occupies a ļ

prominent role. By doing so, Dharmakīrti can address an important question

arising in connection with the apoha construction: where does the original conception of blue objects, which is then processed by the machinery of two negations, come from? We obviously cannot assume that it is due to some property that all blue objects share, since these properties are precisely what this account is trying to do without. Dharmakīrti argues that what the blue objects share is a causal power, an ability to bring about certain effects which other objects lack. Yet we might ask whether this is not itself indicative of a shared property amongst all the blue objects, thereby reintroducing objects in general through the back door? Dharmakīrti is not committed to this problematic consequence, however, since he argues that the causal power of objects is to be conceptualized relative to our desires. All particulars are unique and Caus without resemblance to any other particulars. Still, certain particulars may all rela human desires
fulfil some of our desires. Every fire-particular, for example, is distinct from every other one: some may be a wood fire, some may be caused by cow-dung, some may be smoky, some may be without smoke, some have red flames, some blue flames, and so on. Nevertheless, they all fulfil our desire when we want to warm ourselves. The needs at the root of our desires are usually sufficiently unspecific to allow a whole range of objects to satisfy them, and this makes it possible for us to group them all under the same concept 'fire'. We therefore see how these causal powers are crucially dependent on human conceptualization: they are picked out relative to human interests, and not by any characteristics

of the objects separate from such interests. Still, does this not merely show that

the objects instantiate certain causal powers, even though these powers are

only named relative to human concerns? Dharmakīrti denies that a group

of objects that answers to a specific human need can only do so if each member

instantiates a common underlying property. The example he gives are anti-
pyretic drugs. These all answer to the human need for a medicine that lowers

fever, but they do so in causally different ways. Dharmakīrti takes this as

indicating that there is nothing more behind grouping these objects together

than that they satisfy a human need. We need not assume a resemblance in the

objects themselves, and thereby some kind of object-type they all instantiate.
When considering the theory of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti and the role that The r

is played by a conceptual overlay superimposed on a set of fundamental entities c

we might think that their view of concepts and conceptualization is mainly

negative, seeing it as something that stands between us and a direct, concep-
tually untainted view of the world. The theory of apoha shows that this is far

from the case. Concepts are taken very seriously by Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti,

and the theory of exclusion goes to great length in describing how, despite the

unreality of objects in general, concepts can still play a role in our everyday

epistemic interaction with the world. Another reason for the importance of

concepts that we have not discussed so far and will address in the next section

is the role they play in yogic perception.[58]

[We mentioned earlier that the development of Buddhist philosophy in India was](#) influenced by three major factors: the necessity to conform with the teaching

of the Buddha and the teachings of the later Buddhist masters, the need to

develop its positions in a way that was rationally defensible in an argument

with an opponent, and the fact that Buddhist philosophy formed part of a larger

enterprise of meditative training that was ultimately intended to lead to the

liberation from cyclic existence. How the thinking of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti

was influenced by the need to defend the Buddhist doctrine against non-
Buddhist opponents has become clear from our discussion so far. But the

logico-epistemological school also has interesting things to say on the other two

factors, scriptural authority and meditative practice. In keeping with their dom-
inant epistemic interests, both of these factors are analysed with respect to their

ability to act as authoritative sources of knowledge. Are they able to be appealed

as epistemic instruments that can be applied on the way to liberation?
Given that Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti are Buddhist writers, their epistemo-
logical system has to have something to say on the status of religious texts,

Buddhist and non-Buddhist, as a source of knowledge. The status of scripture in

this respect is particularly problematic since religious texts purport to give us

insight into non-empirical matters, though they do not allow for cross-checking

this against other epistemic instruments. While I can sometimes confirm

inferential cognitions perceptually (going to the mountain to see whether

there really is a fire) or perceptions inferentially (I can confirm that the cup

I see in front of me is no hallucination because I can infer from my memory that

I put it there), in the case of claims made by religious scriptures this is generally

not possible. This on its own would not be too problematic if there was not also

a considerable divergence between what different sets of scriptures assert.
For this reason it is necessary to understand the nature of scripture as a

purported epistemic instrument. In the ancient Indian context we find two

different ways in which this done, by investigating the source of the scripture,

and by considering its intrinsic qualities.
[58] Dunne 2011: 103.

THE SCHOOL OF DIN
˙NĀGA AND DHARMAKĪRTI
There are two different strategies authors have pursued in order to establish Auth

the reliability of religious texts based on their source. The first is to argue that ari

source
the author of the scripture has various properties that make him trustworthy,

and for this reason we should trust the scripture he has produced. The second

is the claim that the scripture has precisely no author, and therefore no source

that could in any way be tainted by human imperfections. Its perfection resides

in the fact that, unlike all other kinds of text we know, it is authorless, and this

perfection is the reason that we should trust it. The first strategy is pursued by

the Buddhists, as well as by Nyāya, Sā :mkhya, Vaiśe:sika, and Jainism; the latter

is famously defended by Mīmā :msā, who argue that the Vedas are eternal and

without a human author (apauru:seya). This idea is criticized by the Buddhists

by pointing out that an uncreated text could not have a speaker's intention

behind it; it would be neither true nor false.[59]
Dharmakīrti formulates his argument for the reliability of the Buddha by a Diṅnā

detailed unpacking of the epithets that Diṅnāga employs in his praise to of the B

the Buddha in the verse of homage (nama :hśloka) that begins the Pra-
mā :nasamuccaya, which we cited above. We remember that the Buddha is

described there as one who 'embodies the epistemic instruments' (pra-
mā :nabhūta), 'seeking the benefit of the world' (jagaddhitai:sin), is a teacher

(śāst:r), a well-gone (sugata), and a protector (tāyin). Dharmakīrti believes that

these are not just generic terms of praise for the Buddha, but that they actually

embody an argument for his reliability. 'Seeking the benefit of the world' refers

to the Buddha's great compassion, directed at the end of eventually becoming a

protector of all living beings. In order to do so he has practised the means

leading to liberation for a long time to become a teacher. This led to his

becoming a sugata.[60] Dharmakīrti elsewhere telescopes this argument by

simply saying that 'compassion is the proof '[61] of the Buddha embodying an

epistemic instrument. The idea is that the Buddha's compassion caused him to

seek ways to help others, acquiring the knowledge that would do so and the

means of teaching it effectively.[62]

[59] See Karnakagomin's Pramā

:navārttikav:rtti:tīkā 405: 24–407: 9 (Sāṅ:k:rtyāyana 1943). I discuss

this point further below, in section 8b.

[60] Dharmakīrti reads this term as specifically applying to the Buddha's knowledg

19–20).

61 Pramā:navārttika 2: 34: sādhana :m karu:na, Miyasaka 1971–2: 8.
62 Tillemans (2008: 23, n. 59) suggests that the attempt to establish the authority ᴄ

not only had a theoretical function, but included 'important sociological and polit

One motivation for establishing the authority of a teacher in general, he suggests,

opponents' criticism about the impropriety of his behaviour or the questionable b

certain monks'. At least Candrakīrti's commentary on Āryadeva's Catu :hśataka ᾿

to 'erroneous views . . . after having focused chiefly on the Buddhists' temples, fᴏ

and the like' (Tillemans 2008: 130), might be understood like that (though it may

injunction not to confuse the qualities of the message with those of some of its mᴇ

supposedly cozy living conditions in Buddhist monasteries are mentioned repeatᴇ

Scriptural authority arising from internal characteristics

Dharmakīrti also mentions criteria for the authority of scripture that are based on characteristics of the texts themselves,[63] rather than on their origin. Later Tibetan scholastics referred to these as the 'threefold analysis' (dpyad pa gsum). This analysis amounts to checking whether the scripture in question contradicts perception, inference, or other propositions inferred from scripture, that is, whether it is in conflict with either of the two epistemic instruments identified by the logico-epistemological school, and whether it is consistent. In fact we find that this 'threefold analysis' forms the basis for an inductive argument for the reliability of scripture.[64] Within the logico-epistemological school we are presented with an exhaustive division of

Three degrees of epistemic distance

phenomena into three epistemic classes: the manifest (pratyak:sa), the imperceptible (parok:sa), and the radically inaccessible (atyantaparo objects are those literally 'in front of our eyes' (prati-ak:sa), like tables and chairs; the imperceptible cannot be accessed by the senses, but can be inferred. The fire on the distant mountain that we infer from the presence of smoke is a case in point, but the Buddhist tradition also subsumes metaphysical theses such as momentariness and universal emptiness under this class. The radically inaccessible finally include topics such as the lifespans of gods in the various

heavens of traditional Buddhist cosmologies, or the precise karmic connections

between actions and their results. Facts about these are inaccessible to human

reason, and to know them requires reliance on a qualified informant with

greater cognitive power than mere humans (such as a Buddha).

Inductive
The argument is then that, because the scriptures turn out to be correct in

argument for
cases that can be checked (that is, they are confirmed by, and do not contradict,

long-distance
reliability
perception and inference, and do not lead to conflicting implications), they

should also be deemed to be correct when talking about radically inaccessible

things. A source that has been shown to be reliable as far as we can see should,

according to this reasoning, also be considered as reliable when considering

what lies beyond what we can see.

It is interesting to note that this argument already goes back at least as far as

Āryadeva, who points out in his Catu:hśataka notes that:
Whoever doubts what the Buddha said
About that which is hidden
Should rely on emptiness
And gain conviction in him alone.
literature. See e.g. Bha:t:ta Jayanta's Āgama:dambara, Dezső 2005: 55–
9, as well as pp. 13–14
of the extended notes to this volume available at <http://claysanskritlibrary.com/e
CSLMuchAdoAnnotation.pdf>.
[63] It is worth noting that in this context Dharmakīrti does not draw a distinction be

scripture in the narrower sense (āgama) and śāstra, commentaries and treatises m
The same procedures are to be applied to assess the reliability of both. See Tillem
[64] Tillemans 1999a: 30.

THE SCHOOL OF DIN
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Those who find it hard to see
This world are ignorant of others.
Those who follow them will be
Misled for a very long time.[65]

The idea here is that emptiness is one of the Buddha's teachings that can be

demonstrated by reasoning,[66] and its correct explication by the Buddha should

give us confidence in also accepting his teachings about what is impercept-
ible.[67] Other doctrines, according to this approach, are not even empirically

adequate; they do not give a faithful representation of the world as we can grasp

it via the senses and reasoning, so, a fortiori, they also cannot be trusted when it

comes to making pronouncements about what is beyond this world.

These considerations lead us to the view that Buddhist scriptures should be Script

regarded as producing knowledge in an inferential way,[68] thereby subsuming sub

inference

scripture (āgama) under the epistemic instrument of inference. There is no

need to postulate an additional epistemic instrument, testimony (śabda), as

various non-Buddhist schools do. Instead of accepting the Buddha's pro-
nouncement just on the basis of the fact that it was said by the Buddha, we

can combine this fact as a premise with the claim of the Buddha's authorita-
tiveness previously argued for in order to infer the statement itself.

[65] 12: 5–
6: buddhokte:su parok:se:su jāyate yasya sa :mśaya:h | ihaiva pratyayas tena karta

śūnyatā :m prati || loko 'ya :m yena durdr:s:to mū:dha eva paratra sa:h | vañcitās t

ye 'nuyānti tam, Lang 1986: 111–12.

66 It is interesting to note that all of the 'three marks of existence' (trilak:sa:na), s

impermanence, and no-
self, are included amongst the manifest and the imperceptible, and are

therefore accessible to the conjoined forces of perception and reason. If it makes :

'conceptual core' of the Buddhist teaching, the trilak:sa:na is probably one of bes

inclusion in it. The examples of knowledge that is radically imperceptible we find

sources are located on the periphery of the teachings. They are certainly not thing

in order to achieve liberation.
67 This form of argumentation is also put forward by Nyāya authors like Gautama

Vātsyāyana. They argue that because the Vedas are reliable when it comes to mat

empirically tested (such as the efficacy of medical knowledge (āyurveda) and spe

are also to be trusted when it comes to non-
empirical matters. (Tillemans 2008: 32). The infor-
mation the Vedic texts provide on such practical matters not only testifies to their

intention to help others, but also to their ability to turn this intention into successf

such, their claims on matters that are not as readily observable as those relating to

forth should be considered as equally motivated by a combination good intention
(Hayes 1984: 652.) This position differs, however, from the one put forward by L

insofar as the latter wants to restrict the authority of scripture exclusively to radic

matters, whereas Nyāya does not. Verbal testimony (śabda), one of the four episte

that the Naiyāyika accepts, includes scripture and can, according to Nyāyasūtra 1

to empirical and to non-
empirical matters. This leaves open the possibility of cases where scriptural

testimony can provide knowledge even though the same matter is already settled

inference, a possibility that Dharmakīrti rejects.
[68] See Dharmakīrti's Pramā:navārttika 1: 216: 'Since the statements of a credible

generally trustworthy, a cognition arising from them is an instrumental inference'
vi:samvādasāmānyād anumānatā, (Gnoli 1960: 109).

A different kind
The question arising at this point is precisely what kind of inference this

of inference?
inference could be. The paradigmatic kinds of inference for Dharmakīrti are

inferences underwritten by how things stand in the world (vastubalaprav:rtta),

that is, inferences supported by the way entities such as fire and smoke are

related to one another. Inferences based on scripture do not appear to belong to

this kind, as the probative element in these seems to be not how two kinds of

properties are related, but what a specific religious text says.
The later Tibetan commentarial tradition attempts to minimize this appar-
ent difference, arguing that scriptural inferences are to be considered just like

any other inference. The inference is simply taken to say that some scripture

x is correct in teaching some (radically inaccessible) fact y because x is

characterized by the triple mark of a reliable scripture mentioned above. We

then just have to confirm that the subject has the property that constitutes the

reason, and that there is the necessary pervasion: whenever there is a triply

marked scripture the statements it makes are true.[69]
The Indian tradition, however, is considerably more cautious when it comes

to assessing the status of scripturally based inference. Dharmakīrti cautions us

against taking scripturally based inferences to be full-fledged epistemic instru-
ments, and his commentator Śākyabuddhi in fact claims that it is not actually
instrumental.[70]

Scepticism about

The reason for scepticism towards making a case for scriptural inference on

appealing to the

the basis of the authority of the Buddha is that nobody can actually know that a

Buddha's
authority

specific person, such as the Buddha, in fact has the properties that make him an

epistemic instrument when it comes to matters of liberation. Dharmakīrti

notes that those specific mental attitudes that would ensure such authorita-
tiveness are supersensible (atīndriya), and so:
they would have to be inferred from physical and vocal behaviour that arises from
And most behaviour can also be performed deliberately in a way other than the m

state they seem to reflect because those behaviours occur as one desires and becau

those behaviours may be intended for various aims. Thus, there is an overlap of tl

alleged evidence for faults and faultlessness.[71]
Appearances can be deceptive, and the display of a certain behaviour does not

give us certain knowledge of the source of the behaviour.

Scepticism about

Basing our support of scriptural inferences on the internal characteristics

appealing to the

of religious texts is not going to help us much either in securing the former's

internal
characteristics
of texts

[69] For further discussion see Tillemans 1999b: 37–41, 48, n. 4.
[70] Dunne 2004: 241.

[71] Svav:rtti on Pramā:navārttika 1: 218–
19: svaprabhavakāyavāgvyavahārānumeyā:h syū:h |
vyavahārāś ca prāyaśo buddhipūrvam anyathāpi kartu :m śakyante puru:secchāv:

citrābhisandhitvāt, Gnoli 1960: 218–19, Dunne 2004: 244.

status. One reason for this is that Dharmakīrti is sceptical about the

pervasion underlying a scripturally based argument since there is no neces-
sary relation of words to their objects.[72] But if the connection between words

and objects is merely due to human convention, then the force of an argu-
Conventionality

ment based on a scriptural passage must also be partially based on human of lang

conventions, and therefore cannot be considered to be purely founded in facts

(vastubala).
The other reason is that the consideration of the triple characteristic, being Scepti

an inductive argument, is not able to deliver certain knowledge. That someone in

has been reliable in the past, or is reliable on matters other than the ones

presently discussed, does not imply that he is also reliable now, or is reliable

regarding the matter at hand.[73] Dharmakīrti stresses his scepticism towards

inductive arguments by pointing out that we cannot determine that all the rice

in some pot is cooked merely by sampling and determining that individual

grains, or even most of the grains, are cooked.[74] In the same way, the correct-
ness of scripture regarding matters that can be determined by perception or

inference does not guarantee its truth when it comes to matters that cannot be

so determined.

What, then, is the status of scripturally based inference? Later commentators Scri

such as Kar :nakagomin and Śākyabuddhi point out that such inferences cannot in

be objective
be regarded as objective (vastutas); unlike the paradigm examples of inferential

knowledge (such as inference from smoke to fire), they do not draw their

epistemic power from a factual basis. Rather, they are inferences due to the

thought of the people having them (pu :mso 'bhiprāyavaśāt) because these

people want to follow the Buddhist path.[75]
The picture emerging from this seems to be that scriptural authority is a Practical

source that practitioners need to rely on in order to set out on the spiritual path of

scriptures
as a matter of practical necessity. There is no need for the path to the liberating

truth the Buddha discovered to be rediscovered by every Buddhist on their

own. Those who want to engage in Buddhist practices can, and should, rely on

scriptural authority, simply because of the absence of any other way (agatyā)[76]
leading to the aim of liberation. Someone who aspires to this goal 'cannot

proceed without relying on the validity of scripture'.[77] Yet there is no objective

[72] Pramā:navārttika 1: 213, Svav:rtti ad 1:217, Gnoli 1960: 107, 109; Tillemans 1
2.
[73] Śākyabuddhi makes this very clear in his Pramā:navārttika:tīkā: 'though we mi

people are non-
belying on certain objects, we also observe deviance [i.e. that they are in error]
concerning other objects' (Tillemans 1999a: 50, n. 9).
[74] Svav:rtti on Pramā:navārttika 1.13, Tillemans 1999a: 50, n. 9.
[75] Tillemans 1999a: 43.

[76] Svav:rtti on Pramā:navārttika 1.217, Tillemans 1999a: 42.
[77] nāya :m puru:so anāśrityāgamaprāmā:nyam āsitu :m samartho, Svav:rtti on Pra

1.213.

fact, independent of human interests and concerns, that underlies the authority

of Buddhist scriptures as epistemic instruments.[78]
No necessity for
However, this should not be understood as saying that scriptures need to

a leap of faith
be accepted by a leap of faith, and that such a leap is what makes Buddhist

scriptures authoritative and supports inferences drawn from them. The view of

the logico-epistemological school is not to accept beliefs for which we have no

evidence, just to be able to enter the Buddhist path. Rather, the idea is that the

would-be practitioner realizes that other beings have obtained certain results,

that they have done so following certain practices, and that he, should he want

to obtain the same results, should follow the same practices. Like someone who

wants to be able to drive a car, observing that all other drivers are able to do so

because they have practised with a driving instructor, then signs up with a

driving instructor himself, so the Buddhist practitioner will accept scripture on

pragmatic grounds.[79] There is no guarantee that the desired results will be

obtained,[80] just as taking driving lessons does not guarantee that we will ever be

able to drive a car. But if there is any possibility of obtaining this goal, it is this.
As Dharmakīrti notes, 'if one engages oneself on the basis of scripture, it is

better to engage oneself in this way [based on a scripture that shows all the internal evidence of being reliable]'.[81] The inferences we make on the basis of scripture are not supported by the power of fact (vastubala) but are the product of a rationally defensible choice, a choice which is responsible, insofar as we have done our epistemic duty in checking the triple characteristics of the scripture in question, but a choice that remains, nevertheless, fallible.[82]

Historical context

This view of religious scripture may appear quite surprising from the of the critical view perspective of a writer as obviously committed to the truth of

of scriptural
authority
teachings as Dharmakīrti was. Yet at least part of its motivation appears more transparent when we consider the historical and intellectual context in which Dharmakīrti worked. His was not an era of intra-doctrinal debate, where most of the discussions were between Buddhist and Buddhist, trying to clarify the minutiae of the interpretation of the Buddha's words. It was a time of vivid

[78] This view appears to be reflected in Bhāviveka's critical remarks on the status (āgama) in Madhyamakah:rdayakārikā 9:19: 'If scripture has the status of scriptur it has been handed down without interruption, then it is established that all [the 3(in the Sūtrak:rtān˙gasūtra] are scripture. One should hold on to what is true', sa :r dād āgamasyāgamatvata :h | sarvasyāgamatāsiddhe:hki :m tattvam iti dhāryatām, a survey of editions and translations of the various chapters of the Madhyamakah

Eckel 1992: 243–4.
[79] Tillemans 1999a: 46.

[80] For this reason the inference is inconclusive (śe:savat, literally 'with remainder

Eltschinger 2010: 420.

[81] varam āgamāt prav:rttāv eva :m prav:rttir iti, Svav:rtti on Pramā:navārttika 1: 2

109.

[82] It is therefore reason (yukti), rather than authority that should have the last wor

debates (Eltschinger 2010: 420).

debate between different Indian systems of thought, and Buddhism was clearly

interested in joining in with the debate. That the motivations for this were

entirely un-Buddhist[83] is at least not obvious. While the social, and indeed

material, dimensions of dialectical success in the arena of ancient India debat-
ing cannot be denied, it is likely that Buddhist authors were aware that setting

out to defend one's position in a debate, in particular to defend it against

somebody who might disagree with very fundamental assumptions, will not

only provide an opportunity for refining one's arguments but also for increas-
ing one's own understanding of the problem debated.
We might wonder at this point what the purpose of Diṅ˙nāga's, and espe-
Purpose of the

cially Dharmakīrti's, extended arguments for establishing the authority of the arg

the Buddha's
Buddha was, given that they conclude that scriptural inferences cannot be authori

classified as inferences fully grounded in reality. Why argue for the reliability of

the Buddha if reliance on him is then not considered as a separate epistemic

instrument? We might find an answer in an argumentative figure employed

already by Vasubandhu. Given the diversity of interpretations of the Buddhist

scripture, we cannot simply rely on one specific one. Yet at the same time the

Buddha's words should still be considered as reliable, as without him there

would be no Buddhism as we know it. Vasubandhu's answer is to conceptualize

the Buddha as a perfect source of knowledge to which we have only imperfect Im

access.[84] The reason for the divergence of interpretations lies in the fallibility of a

knowledge
contemporary commentators, not in its source. These commentaries can be

used as a guide to arrive at the Buddha's message, but they cannot be auto-
matically taken as authoritative in themselves, but must be scrutinized by

perception and inference. In the same way, the logico-epistemic tradition

considered it as valuable to establish the Buddha's trustworthiness, even

though this would not entail that reliance on the word of the Buddha could

just replace appeal to perception and argument. Appeal to scripture is a

shortcut on the path to liberation, but the fact remains that perception and

argument are the means we need to employ in order to access the knowledge

the Buddha obtained and which led to his liberation. This coheres well with the

externalist outlook of the logico-
epistemological school, that sees justification Coherence with

as flowing from a combination of facts that obtain in the world (the authority exte

of the Buddha), and our doing our epistemic duty by appealing to reliable

[83] Conze (1962: 256) claims that it is '[a]t variance with the spirit of Buddhism, i

tolerated only as a manifestation of "skill in means". Logic was studied "in order

adversaries in controversy", and thereby to increase the monetary resources of the

methods implied a radical departure from the spirit of ahimsā and tolerance . . .' I

addition, with reference to Dharmakīrti, that 'this branch of studies produces peop

boastful and inclined to push themselves forward.' Conze's remarks need to be as

mind the increased pressure on Buddhism from its brahmanical opponents at the t

and Dharmakīrti. See Verardi 2014.
[84] Hayes 1984: 653–4.

forms of confirmation (such as the three marks of scripture). The fallibility of

scripturally based inference is not a defect, but a reflection of our general

epistemic predicament in attempting to acquire knowledge about the world.

The double nature

It therefore becomes clear that the position of the logico-epistemological

of the logico-
school as developed by Dharmakīrti and his successors has a double nature.
epistemological
school

One side of it shows a considerable openness towards non-Buddhist schools

and a desire to engage in debate with them. It is worthwhile to keep in mind in

this context that roughly up to the seventh century the division between the

different schools of Indian philosophy (or what would later be classified as such

schools) was somewhat fluid. Borrowings of concepts and entire collections of

concepts were frequent.[85] In the development of the literature on debate

Interpenetration
(vāda), discussion goes backwards and forwards between Buddhist and non-
of philosophical
Buddhist traditions; Nyāya incorporated the whole scheme of Vaiśe

schools
:sika cat-
egories into its own account, Din˙nāga even composed an entire treatise by

lifting a set of verses from the non-Buddhist grammarian Bhart:rhari, changing

a few words and adding his own dedication.[86] Given this philosophical give-
Maximizing
and-take across different traditions, it is understandable that Dharmakīrti saw

impact on non-
some real potential for his ideas having import outside of the Buddhist

Buddhist audience tradition by presenting them in a way that did not make the en

hang on the acceptance of specific texts, but was open to examination on the

basis of epistemic instruments, perception and inference, that his interlocutors,

Buddhist or non-Buddhist, were likely to share. Some have argued that Dhar-
makīrti presented his theory of epistemic instruments by using concepts

familiar to and acceptable to non-Buddhist traditions, to maximize the likeli-
'double reading' of hood of them being taken up by different traditions, and that l

Dharmakīrti's
employs concepts used by other traditions but gives them a different sense,

arguments
achieving at least the appearance of conceptual continuity with some of these

other traditions.[87] These are not the only cases of potential 'double readings' of

Dharmakīrti's text; in other cases he phrases his position in such a way that it

can be given both a Sautrāntika and a Yogācāra reading, leaving it to the

interpreter to decide which understanding he wants to bring out as dominant.
Apologetic
The other side of this double nature is the clearly apologetic character of

character of
much of his writings, initiating a tradition that set out to establish not only the

Dharmakīrti's
writings
authority of the Buddha, but also other basic claims of the Buddhist worldview,

like the four noble truths, the law of karma, rebirth, momentariness, the

Buddha's omniscience, the existence of an innate Buddha-nature, and so on.
Whether it was for this reason that his reputation amongst Buddhists is the

[85] Franco 1997: 38.
[86] For discussion of the Traikālyaparīk:sā see Frauwallner 1982a: 821–
8; Houben 1995: 272–324.
[87] Franco 1997, ch. 2. In this way Dharmakīrti's approach to non-
Buddhist traditions would

resemble Nāgārjuna's approach to rival Buddhist traditions, such as the Mahāsa :
8.

direct opposite of his repudiation by members of non-Buddhist schools is

debatable. It is evident, however, that rather than convincing Nyāya, Vaiśe:sika, I

Mīmā :msa, and other thinkers of the merits of his system, their reaction to

Dharmakīrti was clearly negative, a reaction that may have contributed to the

formation of a more fixed system of philosophical 'schools' with relatively

inflexible boundaries.[88] Some have argued that it is possible to consider the

lineage of the logico-epistemological schoool as moving more and more from

the direction of open philosophical inquiry into the defence of Buddhist

orthodoxy.[89] While Diṅnāga's theory of epistemology was phrased in a rela-
tively neutral way (a neutrality we would expect, for example, from a theory of N
medicine or grammar), his successors successively moved into a greater inte-
orthodoxy

gration of these epistemological ideas with Buddhist doctrine, using them as a

tool for establishing the validity of core Buddhist beliefs. Whether the idea of a

'genuinely disinterested philosophical investigation'[90] that underlies this inter-
pretation is a useful concept for understanding ancient Indian thought appears

to me at least questionable. It is likely, though, that the interlinkage of epis-
temological, logical, and doctrinal matters in its presentation did not exactly

help it in achieving a sympathetic reading from non-Buddhist philosophers.
Dharmakīrti's opening and closing verses of the Pramā :navārttika are likely

to be a reflection on the fact that his work had limited success among his non-
Buddhist contemporaries. He points out that ordinary beings, attached to

common things, have only limited understanding, and are therefore unable

to grasp the profundity of his thought. Like the water of the sea, his work will

remain in itself, without being absorbed by anybody.[91]

b. Yogic perception

Yogic perception is mentioned quite briefly by Diṅnāga as one of the kinds of

perception, and it is characterized as a form of perception that is not associated It

(avyatibhinna) with the teacher's instruction[92] and perceives the thing as it is

(arthamātra). The commentator Jinendrabuddhi explains this latter phrase as

'without erroneous superimposition'.[93] Dharmakīrti expands on this concise

[88] Franco 1997: 38.
[89] Hayes 1984: 665–6.
[90] Hayes 1984: 666.
[91] Frauwallner 1982b: 685–

6. Frauwallner speculates that this sense of disappointment may have

been responsible for the fact that Dharmakīrti left the Pramā :navārttika incomple

similar melancholy vein sometimes attributed to Dharmakīrti see Franco 1997: 39

poet Dharmakīrti is identical with the philosopher Dharmakīrti is a moot point (B

though some of his poems show a definite acquaintance with Buddhist philosophi
Brough 1968: 134).
[92] Hayes (1984: 655–

6) sees this qualification as an expression of Diṅnāga's 'suspicion towards

scripture in general'. The teacher's instruction invariably influences the way we p

yogic perception is supposed to go beyond this, allowing us to experience phenon

influence of a doctrinally constructed conceptual overlay. This qualification appe

instructions, including those that make up the Buddha's teachings.
[93] mātraśabdo' dhyāropitārthavyavacchedārtha:h, Torella 2012: 474.

characterization of yogic perception (yogipratyak:sa) by explaining it as the

final one of a three-stage process beginning with intensity (prakar:sa) and

termination (paryanta).[94] The first stage, intensity, consists of the meditator's

persistently bringing the object of meditation before his mind. As a result of

this it appears to his mind more and more vividly until, at the stage of

termination, it appears almost as vivid as something perceived by the senses. Stage three, yogic perception is obtained when the appearance of the object has

achieved the same level of vividness as sensory perception.
Descriptions of yogic perceptions can be found in nearly all Indic philo-
Yogic perception
sophical traditions, and they often take the form of epistemic super-powers,

as epistemic
such as seeing things that take place at great distance. In the Vaiśe

super-power
:sika system
yogic perception enables the practitioner to have direct acquaintance with the

categories of Vaiśe:sika ontology, qualities, actions, universals, and so forth.[95]
Yogic perception is therefore a kind of enhanced perception that allows us to

perceive aspects of reality that are too subtle to be apprehended by our senses,

much in the way a microscope lets us see very small things and a telescope

things at great distance. What makes these epistemic super-powers authorita-
tive is that they detect real, though very subtle, features of the world around us.
This, however, is not the view of yogic perception we find in Dharmakīrti. For

him, yogic perception is not a kind of epistemic super-power[96] or mystical

gnosis of the underlying nature of being, nor directed at a momentary particular

Dharmakīrti:
out there in the world, but at a concept—this is what the meditator tries to bring

directed at
to mind in a vivid manner. Yet concepts are, for Dharmakīrti, unreal objects par

concepts
excellence. We should also note that Dharmakīrti sees yogic perception as

something that is very much part of a continuum on which other cognitive

states can be located too. He points out that: 'A trustworthy awareness that

appears vividly by the force of meditation—similar to cases such as the fear

[induced by something seen in a dream]—is a perception; it is nonconceptual.'[97]
Dharmakīrti elucidates what is meant by vivid appearance in this context

by further examples: 'Those confused by [states] such as derangement due to

[94] Woo 2003: 440.
[95] Isaacson 1993: 146–7.
[96] Dharmakīrti is very critical of such powers as having anything to do with the s

liberation. In Pramā :navārttika 2: 31–
2 he notes that 'persons longing for liberation should not look

for someone who, like vultures, perceives distant or even all things (sarvasya ved

total number of insects, (kī:tasa :mkhyā)' (Miyasaka 1971–
2: 8; Eltschinger 2010: 421).
[97] Pramā:naviniścaya 1.28: bhāvanābalata:h spa:sta :m bhayādāviva bhāsate | yaj

vādi tat pratyak:sam akalpakam, Steinkellner 2007: 27. How yogic perception ca

at concepts and nonconceptual is certainly somewhat puzzling. One possible ansv

vividness of yogic perception that subsumes it (like sensory perception) under co

conceptual construction (Woo 2003: 443). Another possibility is to point out that

perception of the first noble truth, for example, perceives the instance of suffering

a property-
particular) present in each svalak:sa :na without having to rely on the sāmanyalak

object in general, of suffering. As such it can be nonconceptual and yet directed a

conceptually expressed by the first noble truth.

desire, grief or fear, or those confused by dreams of thieves and so on, see things,

although unreal, as if they were in front of them.'[98] What is curious about these a

of mind
examples is that they seem to suggest that yogic perception can share charac-
teristics with clearly deluded states of consciousness.[99] A lover who concentrates

intensely on the features of his beloved might in the end be able to see her as

vividly as if she were standing in front of him, but what does this fact have to do

with yogic perception?[100] If yogic perception is directed at objects that are no

more real than thieves in a dream, or romantic fantasies, and is, moreover,

characterized by a vividness it shares with various unwholesome and deceptive

states of mind, to what extent can it be regarded as an epistemic instrument?
This is precisely the criticism Mīmā :msaka philosophers like Kumārila bring Mī
forward against the Buddhist notion of yogic perception. If yogic perception is cr

perception
directed at a mental object, like wishing something or remembering something,

how can it be regarded as epistemically authoritative?[101]
That the idea of yogic perception became a hotly contested topic in the

debate between the Mīmā :msā school and the school of Din˙nāga and Dharmakī

is hardly surprising. A chief aim of Mīmā :msā was to defend the authoritative-
ness of Vedic revelation, a set of texts that were taken to derive their authority

from their clearly non-human status due to their authorless origins. And if

human epistemic capacities could be enhanced in the way envisaged by the

notion of yogic perception, accessing the previously hidden, the justification

for Vedic revelation might seem threatened.[102] Yogic perception would provide

a means of gaining epistemic access to what lies behind the reach of perception

and inference, and in this case Vedic revelation could no longer be seen as the

sole interpreter of this radically different realm. On the contrary, yogic reve-
lation would then open up a way to liberating knowledge that does not rely on

revelation, a position in tension with a school like Mīmā :msā that regards Vedic

revelation as the only route to such knowledge.
It is clear that for Dharmakīrti the source of the authoritativeness of yogic

perception cannot lie in the fact that it gets the world right at the most

fundamental level. Unlike the Vaiśe:sika, who takes yogic perception to be a

means to access the most fundamental aspects of the structure of the world,

Dharmakīrti's version is not validated by revealing the ultimate features of the

world, so it is necessary to find another way of explaining that it is nonetheless

non-
erroneous (abhrānta). Its validation comes through the goal of yogic Yogic perce

perception. This goal is, of course, the obtaining of liberation, and the status as v

through its goal

[98] Pramā:naviniścaya 1.29: kāmaśokabhayonmādacaurasvapnādyupaplutā:h | abh

purato 'vasthitān iva, Vetter 1966: 74, note 3; Steinkellner 2007: 28; Dunne 2006
[99] It is, as Dunne (2006: 497) points out 'phenomenologically akin to hallucinatic
[100] See Kajiyama 1998: 54, n. 124.
[101] Woo 2003: 441. See also Kajiyama 1998: 54, where the opponent raises this v
[102] See Torella 2012: 473, 477.

of yogic perception as epistemically authoritative comes from the ability to

bring about this result.[103] As such, there is no difference in kind between it and

the vividly appearing dreams and fantasies mentioned above, though there is a

difference with respect to their results. The former trap us more and more

deeply in sa :msāra, while the latter provide us with a way of escaping from it.
This fact has implications for the soteriological efficacy of yogic perception

considered in isolation. If yogic perception is not authorized by linking us to

the basic structure of the world but by its effect in achieving liberation, the

practitioner needs to be sure that he is engaging in the right kind of yogic

Yogic perception
perception, that is, yogic perception directed at the right kind of object (the

needs to be
main example Dharmakīrti refers to are the four noble truths). This guidance

properly directed
on what yogic perception should properly be directed at has to come from the

instruction of earlier authorities and thus, ultimately from the authority of the

Buddha. Yogic perception therefore cannot be considered to be on its own

sufficient for generating liberating insight; it needs to be combined with

scriptural authority in order to achieve this effect.

7. How to Classify Diṅnāga's and Dharmakīrti's Philosophy

Did Diṅnāga and
We have mentioned before that the division of Indian Buddhist philosophy

Dharmakīrti form into schools is at best to be understood as a hermeneutic device

a distinct school?

to dig some conceptual trenches through a complex field of arguments, and not as a system of doctrinal allegiance the Indian thinkers would themselves have adhered to in any straightforward manner.[104] This is particularly noticeable in the case of the school Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti. Even though contemporary authors sometimes refer to it as the 'logico-epistemological school', it had no name in ancient India (the convenient term pramā:navāda is a modern coinage), and it is quite unclear whether Diṅnāga, Dharmakīrti, and their followers would have regarded themselves as members of a specific school of Buddhist thought distinct from other schools. They certainly did not form a separate ordination lineage, and even the question of their doctrinal distinctness (at least when considered from their own perspective) is unclear.[105] Doxographers sometimes classify these thinkers by the curious epithet 'Yogācāra-Sautrāntika'

[103] We find here another example of the important place causal efficacy plays in I system. In the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma karitrā indicated what was both real and arthakriyākāritva is the mark of the real and supplies the characteristic of the auth yogic perception.
[104] Hayes 1986: 167–8.
[105] It is also worthwhile to note that while the Abhidharma, Madhyamaka, and Yo regarded themselves as spelling out the teachings of a specific set of Buddhist sūt such set of texts associated with the logico-epistemological school.

THE SCHOOL OF DIN
˙NĀGA AND DHARMAKĪRTI
(on which more below), indicating that they combined specific Abhidharma

and Mahāyāna beliefs, rather than defending a radically new position.
Classifying Dharmakīrti's thought in relation to other schools of Indian What kin

Buddhist thought is a notoriously complex enterprise. Some have argued that thin

Dharmakīrti?
he should be included in the Sautrāntika school (and hence belonged to the

Abhidharma traditions).[106] One of the difficulties with this idea is that it is not Sa
clear what we mean by Sautrāntika. The school left no literary remains, and

although we have some information on its views from sources of rival tradi-
tions, the greatest part comes from Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhā:sya,

and, as we noted above, it is questionable whether this can be regarded as a

faithful representation of the Sautrāntika position that preceded him.
While there is little in Dharmakīrti's works that conveys an explicit Dharmakīrti a

Mahāyāna flavour,[107] there are parts that convey a clear Yogācāra message. the M

schools
In the pratyak:sa chapter of the Pramā :navārttika,[108] for example, he discusses

the ultimate identity of perceiver and perceived, a view that leads to a mere-
mind (vijñaptimātra) view of ultimate reality.[109] Later commentators, such as

Jitāri and Mok:sākaragupta, who lived at the end of the first to the beginning of

the second millennium, consider Dharmakīrti as a Mādhyamika,[110] and we

also find traditional accounts that consider him to be a tantric practitioner.[111]
It now looks as if association with every single one of the Buddhist schools has

been ascribed to Dharmakīrti. In fact, the aim of trying to resolve this issue is

not so much attempting to determine the correct box into which we should put

Dharmakīrti (after all, the often fluid nature of these schools and failure of

most Indian Buddhist philosophers to self-identify as members of one or the

other makes this an enterprise unlikely to yield much by way of important

insight into Dharmakīrti's thought), but to find a way of accounting for the

apparently inconsistent positions incorporated into Dharmakīrti's system that

form the basis for ascribing him to some of these schools. The strongest cases

can be made for associating Dharmakīrti's position with Abhidharma and with

Yogācāra views, but how can any consistent system include both? How could

[106] See Singh 1984, 1995, and the highly critical review of the former in Hayes 1!
[107] Such as quotations from the major Mahāyāna sūtras, discussion of the Bodhis;

focus on omniscient Buddhahood rather than arhatship as the goal of the path.
[108] 3: 320–73, 532–5 (Miyasaka 1971–2: 84–90, 110).
[109] See e.g. Dreyfus and Lindtner 1989: 27–52. We noted above (pp. 82–3, 200–
1) there is a case

to be made for locating Sautrāntika and Yogācāra as points on the same philosopl

the Tibetan doxographic literature we sometimes find an association of Sautrāntil

Yogācāra and with the system of Dharmakīrti via the division of Sautrāntikas int

scripture' (lung gi rjes su 'brangs pa) and those 'following reasoning' (rigs pa'i rj

former being based on works by Vasubandhu, the latter on works by Dharmakīrti

Sopa and Hopkins 1976: 92, Klein 1991: 22–3, Jackson 1993: 112).
[110] Steinkellner 1990.
[111] Tsonawa 1985: 49, Jackson 1993: 113.

one be both a Sautrāntika and accept the existence of mind-independent

objects and be a Yogācārin who denies precisely such things?
The Abhidharma

One reason for the Abhidharma flavour of much of Dharmakīrti's expos-
consensus
ition is that he regarded this position as a kind of lowest common denominator

of several strands of Buddhist thought. The disagreements between Abhid-
harma schools nonwithstanding, the intersection of their beliefs constitutes a

significant portion of basic doctrinal assumptions shared by different Buddhist

schools.[112] To this extent Dharmakīrti might have tried to achieve a maximum

of agreement with his philosophical position by formulating them in a way that

would not immediately disengage his audience by exposing them to Mahāyāna

or tantric beliefs that they might not share, and that are moreover irrelevant for

the success of the argument under consideration. This intuition has been

recently expanded by ascribing to Dharmakīrti a set of 'sliding scales of

'sliding scales of
analysis'.[113] This explains how a philosopher could hold a set of different,

analysis'
mutually inconsistent positions without collapsing into overall inconsistency.
The key idea is that for Buddhist philosophers theories can (and frequently do)

diverge in terms of philosophical accuracy and soteriological efficacy. Even if

out of two mutually inconsistent theories one is philosophically more accurate,

the other may have greater success in moving a specific audience closer to

liberation, for example, because the conceptual resources used by the first

theory exceed the comprehension of the audience. For this reason both theories

would be part of the philosopher's overall account, even though they would

never be taught at the same time to the same audience, thereby preventing

Graded teaching
inconsistency. This idea of 'graded teaching' (anuśāsana) has a long history in

Buddhist thought, going back to the very early distinction between the teach-
ings of the Buddha that were considered definitive (nītārtha) and those that

were considered in need of contextual interpretation (neyārtha). Verse 18:8 of

Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā ('All is so, or all is not so, both so and

not so, neither so nor not so. This is the Buddha's teaching')[114] is generally

considered as an example of a theory at four different levels of conceptual

sophistication.[115] In his Ratnāvalī, Nāgārjuna compares the Buddha to a

grammarian who will even teach some of his students something as basic

as the alphabet, in accordance with their different intellectual capacities.[116]

[112] With the exception of Madhyamaka, which does not share the Abhidharma's n

foundationalism. Yet even here the possibility remains open to conceive of the Al

metaphysical analyses as restricted to the level of conventional truth only.
[113] Dunne 2004: 53–79. The term was first introduced in McClintock 2003.
[114] sarva :m tathya :m na vā tathya :m tathya :m cātathyam eva ca | naivātathya :n

etad buddhānuśāsana :m.
[115] See Ruegg 1977: 5–
7. Further references to graded teaching by Nāgārjuna can be found in his

Ratnāvalī 3:94–6 and Yukti:sa:s:tikā 30.
[116] yathaiva vaiyākara :no māt:rkām api pā:thayet | buddho 'vadat tathā dharma :n

yathāk:samam, Hahn 1982a: 128.

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In his Bodhicaryāvatāra, Śāntideva explicitly refers to a hierarchy of succes-

sively more sophisticated philosophical positions when he points out that the perspective of the ordinary person is refuted by that of the yogin, and that this is in turn refuted by the perspectives of higher and higher yogins.[117] In expounding theories lower down the chain, the Buddhas therefore 'close one eye' to simplify their more sophisticated perception for the sake of a less conceptually refined audience.[118]

For explaining Dharmakīrti's approach it is necessary to distinguish four Four lev levels of philosophical analysis in ascending order of sophistication.[119] At the phi analysis lowest level we begin with the perspective of ordinary, unenlightened beings. Their view of the world is not to be faulted to the extent to which it is largely 1. O pragmatically successful: it allows them to successfully interact with the world. However, from a philosophical perspective it leaves much to be desired, as it is characterized by the chief fault of satkāyad:r:s:ti, the mistaken superimposition of a substantial self where there is none, both in the case of persons, as well as in the case of other phenomena. At the second level of the scale we come to the reductionist view that we find exemplified in the Abhidharma. Both persons as 2. well as other partite objects are analysed and found to be nothing but convenient verbal designations sitting on top of what is ultimately real, namely conglomerations of fundamentally existing dharmas. At this level, some elements are still characterized by spatial, temporal, or conceptual extension. Some objects, such as colours, are spread out in space, some objects have temporal extension, and, most importantly, some qualities of objects are shared across different instances of them: all earth-atoms are solid, all water-atoms wet, and

so on.[120] By and large this perspective accords with the Sarvāstivāda view we

find in Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośa. At the third level the reductionist

perspective is further refined into a form of particularism. According to this 3. Pa

position all three forms of extension are given up because they are considered

to be the products of cognitive errors. We perceive objects as spatially extended

because we confuse qualities of the mental image of the object with qualities of

what gives rise to the mental image. The assumption of temporal extension is

an artefact of the slowness of our perceptual system. Because we cannot keep

up with the rapid succession that marks the change of things, we simply group

together various successive phenomena that form part of a single causal chain

[117] 9:3b–
4a tatra prāk:rtako loko yogilokena bādhyate | bādhyante dhīviśe:se:na yogino 'py

Vaidya 1988: 183–5.
[118] As Dharmkakīrti points out in his Pramā :navārttika 3: 219: 'Therefore the Bu
garding the ultimate, close one eye like an elephant and propagate theories that in

objects merely in accord with worldly conceptions', tad upek:sitatattvārthai:h k:rt
kevala :m lokabuddhyaiva bāhyacintā pratanyate (Miyasaka 1971–2: 70).
[119] Our exposition follows Dreyfus 1997: 98–9 and Dunne 2004: 53–79.
[120] Dunne 2004: 57–8, 70–1.

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and construe it as one temporally persisting object. The same happens in the

case of shared objects in general or object-types. Even though every particular

is different from any other particular, we are often not able to register the

differences between distinct things. As in the case of temporal resolution, the

comparative coarseness of our conceptual resolution causes us to lump

together various distinct, though similar things. So despite the fact that all

there is out there in the world is a variety of things such as earth-atoms that are

distinct from one another, on account of some similarity we put them all

together and argue that they all instantiate the same object-type of solidity.
This view is often referred to as a Sautrāntika position, and the emphasis on the

extremely short-lived nature of all objects seems to justify this, even though, as

noted before, it is difficulty to be precise about the distinction between this

form of Sautrāntika, the form that we find in Vasubandhu, and those coming

from sources preceding Vasubandhu.[121] This particularist stance is the philo-
sophical position from which Dharmakīrti constructs most of his arguments.
This is a curious fact, since it does not represent his final view, the position he

wants to endorse after discussing various other positions that are all in some

way defective. For if we push our philosophical analysis yet further we get to a

4. Idealism
fourth level, an idealist theory, according to which the duality between the

perceiving subject and the non-material perceived object is illusory. All phe-
nomena have only one nature, and this nature is mental. The affinity of

this view with Yogācāra positions is obvious, and many commentators do

in fact gloss this as a Yogācāra position. Despite the fact that this is the

position Dharmakīrti wants to endorse, in the end it does not dominate his

philosophical exposition. In fact there is only one substantial section of the

Pramā :navārttika where he employs it consistently as a background for his

argumentation

argumentation.

Historical and

This sequence of four positions along the sliding scale of analysis is inter-

systematic

esting for a number of reasons. On the one hand it mirrors the historical

significance of the
four levels

development of Buddhist thought in India, from the confrontation with non-Buddhist believers in a substantial ātman through Abhidharma reductionism,

a thoroughgoing form of particularism, up to the idealism of Yogācāra. Yet this

sequence is at the same time considered to be a conceptual hierarchy, an ascent

to better and better philosophical theories or, what amounts to the same thing

in the Buddhist context, a hierarchy of views that result in less and less

erroneous superimposition (samāropa). It is obvious how the Abhidharma

reductionism is supposed to remove clinging to the mistaken belief in a

substantial self where there is none. Yet, as the particularist stage argues, the

[121] The unclarity of what precisely counts as a Sautrāntika position was inherited l

Tibetan commentators. Dunne (2004: 71) points out that we can find instances of

any of the three positions just described under the label 'Sautrāntika'.

reductionist is still bound by superimposing spatial, temporal, and conceptual

extension to a world consisting of non-extended, momentary, and utterly

distinct particulars. Removing those frees us from further superimpositions,

and thereby from the potential for further clinging, clinging that in turn leads

to suffering and continuing entanglement in cyclic existence. However, seen

from the idealist perspective this is still not enough. Further superimposition

takes place when the appearance of external objects is superimposed on some

purely mental phenomena, thereby creating the particularist picture in the first

place. A thoroughgoing removal of superimpositions must also dispense with

the erroneous distinction between perceiving subject and perceived object.
A single argumentative pattern can be understood as the driving force The neither one-
behind the movement through the four different levels. This is the neither-nor-many

argument
one-nor-many argument, well known throughout the history of Buddhist

philosophy.[122] When applied to the perspective of ordinary beings, this argu-
ment begins with the question whether an object and its parts are identical or

different. It appears that they cannot be identical (since the object is one and

the parts are many, and one thing cannot have contradictory properties), and

that they cannot be different (as the whole is never found as a separate entity

distinct from the parts). The reductionist argues that we should conclude from

this that wholes are not real in the first place, but merely conceptually con-
structed pseudo-entities. The same considerations can then be applied to

particulars and properties they supposedly share (here a key argument is that

distinct shared properties would have to be permanent, conflicting with the

principle of momentariness), and to the perceiving object and perception (if

they are distinct, why do we never encounter one without the other?).[123]
We might wonder whether stage four, idealism, is a necessary stopping-

point for the application of the neither-one-nor-many argument, or whether it

could be applied here too, moving to a fifth stage, and, more generally, whether

it could be applied to any stage in the analysis, leaving no level as the final view.
This question leads to the historically and systematically intriguing question

concerning the relationship between Dharmakīrti's system and Madhyamaka,

an issue we will return to below.[124]
In the meantime, though, note another curious feature of the system of these Spec

sliding scales of analysis, a feature that distinguishes Dharmakīrti's case from the

of analysis' model
that of other instances of historico-conceptual hierarchies of philosophical

views in Buddhist texts. Dharmakīrti argues mainly from a particularist per-
spective (only one of four chapters of his Pramā :navārttika consistently takes

up the idealist point of view), and thus from a perspective he knows to be false.
This is peculiar, insofar as the appeal to the hierarchy of views is usually

[122] Tillemans 1983, 1984, Dunne 2004: 63.
[123] Chakrabarti 1990.
[124] p. 257.

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THE GOLDEN AGE OF INDIAN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

Particularism is
intended to let the author's own view come out on top in terms of conceptual

not Dharmakīrti's sophistication. Yet in Dharmakīrti's case the particularist persp

final view
final word, and in the end needs to be replaced by the idealist one. One possible

reason for this is that he considered the particularist perspective to be the

lowest common denominator, the best balance between conceptual sophisti-

point for the application of the neither-one-nor-many argument, or whether it

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final word, and in the end needs to be replaced by the idealist one. One possible

reason for this is that he considered the particularist perspective to be the

lowest common denominator, the best balance between conceptual sophisti-

cation and widespread acceptance. Some claim that as we ascend the series of

views the positions get more and more counterintuitive,[125] and Dharmakīrti

would probably have agreed with this, if 'intuitions' are to be understood as the

conceptual superimpositions (samāropa) that the stages of analysis are sup-
posed to successively remove. As during Dharmakīrti's times there was a much

greater degree of debate with non-Buddhist opponents, it is evident that the

preservation of a certain degree of broader appeal for one's system would be

very beneficial to make sure that discussions are not ruled out from the start

due to lack of shared assumptions.

Heuristic use of
particularism

That the particularist position is not Dharmakīrti's final view also means

that he does not have to have worked out every detail of the system, nor would

he have to be prepared to defend every aspect of it. Like a teacher who explains

a physical phenomenon by an atomic theory he knows, strictly speaking, to be

false, he can accept that there are certain fatal objections to the theory, or that

there are some of its aspects that cannot be satisfactorily worked out. What is

important about explanations drawn from such a theory is not that they are

completely right about the way the world is, but that they get us to the next

level of understanding.

Dharmakīrti on
the reality of

Causation plays a central role in Dharmakīrti's philosophical system. It is the

one property that functions as the mark of the real. In answering the question

..

causation
which of the many things we think or talk about should be taken ontologically

seriously, Dharmakīrti looks for those entities that affect other things and bring

about a change in them.
What, however, about the status of the causal relation itself? Given the

central role it plays in Dharmakīrti's system characterizing the real, we should

assume that it is considered to be real itself. Curiously, this is not the case. The

causal relation is affected by Dharmakīrti's criticism in the same way as all

Criticism of the
other objects in general.[126] Relations are affected by the neither-one-nor-many

causal relation
arguments in the same way as object-types such as redness or heaviness. In his

Pramā :navārttika-svav:rtti,[127] Dharmakīrti asks whether a relation between two

objects is identical with the two objects or distinct from them. Since either

option leads to problems, this reinforces the picture of an austere ontology of

particulars in which relations have no place. This results in a curious dialectical

situation. The main reason for the particularist picture's ontological split

[125] Dreyfus 1997: 49, Dunne 2004: 67.
[126] See Dunne 2004: 79, n. 37.
[127] ad 1: 236–7, Gnoli 1960: 118–19.

between real particulars and unreal objects in general lies in their difference of

causal powers. But if the causal relation is unreal by the lights of the particular-
ist's own system, how can it be appealed to in order to establish that very

system? One way of addressing this puzzle (apart from simply saying that Dharmakīrti's system is inconsistent) is to point out that, given the system of sliding scales of analysis, Dharmakīrti is not obliged to defend the particularist position against all charges of inconsistency; in fact he can agree that the particularist's belief in the real existence of causal relations has to be dropped once we reach a more sophisticated level of philosophical analysis.

Some later commmentators have argued that the rejection of the reality of Dharm causal relations would act as support for the claim that Dharmakīrti adopted a Ma Madhyamaka position. The passage from Dharmakīrti's Pramā :navārttika usually appealed to in this context has an opponent respond to Dharmakīrti's equation of the causally efficacious, ultimately real, and the particular by pointing out that nothing has causal efficacy. Dharmakīrti replies that this is manifestly not true, as seeds have the causal capacity to bring about sprouts and so on. But the opponent replies that 'such things are considered to have such a capacity conventionally, not ultimately'.[128] Dharmakīrti's laconic (and somewhat enigmatic) response to this is astu yathā tathā, 'be that as it may'.

What is clear, however, is that commentators like Devendrabuddhi understood De Dharmakīrti here as conceding the opponent's point, arguing that he might as ulti of causation well call causation only conventional, given that all he needs for his purposes is the conventional reality of causation.[129] It appears to be uncontroversial that the opponent here is a Madhyamaka, holding that ultimately there is no

causal efficacy, even though causation does exist at the conventional level.[130] What there is disagreement about is whether Dharmakīrti here takes the

Madhyamaka position on board, or whether he considers this as an interesting

response, but one that is of little relevance for his present purposes.
Apart from the denial of the ultimate reality of the causal relation, two other

kinds of consideration are brought into play in order to argue for Dharmakīr-ti's support of the Madhyamaka position. The first is a passage from the

Pramā :navārttika[131] that may be interpreted as saying that—contrary to the

assumption that the fourth, idealist level of analysis is Dharmakīrti's final

view—consciousness itself is not ultimately real. The final reason is connected

[128] 3:3–
4: arthakriyāsamartha :m yat tad atra paramārthasat anyat sa :mv:rtisat prokta :m

svasāmānyalak:sa :ne | aśakta :m sarvam iti ced bījāder an˙kurādi:su d:r:s:tā śakti
(Miyasaka 1971–2: 42).
[129] Dunne 2004: 392–3, n. 3.
[130] Steinkellner 1990: 75. For further discussion of the ramifications of the unreal

in Buddhist thought see Siderits 2011b: 288–91.
[131] 3: 359 (Miyasaka 1971–2: 88), see Steinkellner 1990: 78–9.

with Dharmakīrti's frequent use of the neither-one-nor-many argument,[132] an

argument that is primarily known from its use in Madhyamaka arguments.
Motivation for
Nevertheless, in the context of our discussion of the question whether

reading
Dharmakīrti 'really' was a Madhyamaka (a question that we might find similarly

Dharmakīrti in a

Madhyamaka way unsatisfactory as such questions as whether the Buddha 'really

or the author of the Vi :mśikā 'really' was an idealist) is less interesting than wha

the attempts by Indian authors to interpret his thought in this way show us about

the forces that shaped the formation of Indian Buddhist thought.
What we can observe here is the interplay of appeal to scriptural authority

and employment of philosophical argument to establish a specific point of view

within the Buddhist philosophical context. As mentioned above, in the context

of a religiously shaped philosophical tradition such as the Buddhist one it is not

just important to come up with an argument; the views the arguments support

need also be linked back to the tradition itself. The tradition does not simply

consist of the words of the Buddha as recorded in various sūtras, but includes

the works of the luminaries of the Buddhist philosophical tradition such as

Dharmakīrti. Like a wildflower meadow, these works contain a variety of seeds

that can sprout under different conditions, and putting particular emphasis on

given features of a text allows it to be read in the light on one tradition or

another. What we find here in the attempts of Jitāri and Mok:sākaragupta to

interpret Dharmakīrti with a Madhyamaka spin is an attempt to support the

Madhyamaka set of philosophical arguments by arguing how ideas in the work

of one of the authoritative figures of Buddhist philosophy can be used to

develop his thought in a Madhyamaka direction (and possibly arguing that

this shows that this development is what the author himself had intended and

would have said more clearly had he expressed his views at greater length).
Based on the idea that causation is not ultimately real, one could argue that the

particularist stance on the basis of which Dharmakīrti constructs many of his

arguments can be regarded just as an expedient expository device with pro-
paedeutic potential, but without ontological import. If the key concept that

confers ontological status, the causal relation, and with it the notion of causal

efficacy is not itself fundamentally real, but a mere convention, the reality of

the entities labelled real in this way cannot reach beyond the conventional

status of whatever it is that constitutes their reality. Despite its prominence in

Lack of final level
Dharmakīrti's thought, the particularist level cannot be his final view, and he

of analysis
himself acknowledges as much in eventually replacing the particularist by the

idealist stance. But if we accept that consciousness is not ultimately real, then

the idealist stage cannot be the final view either, but must be replaced by

something that analyses the mental away in the same manner as the mental

[132] Steinkellner 1990: 76–8.

analysed the particulars away. Now it looks as if this process could go on

forever, and this is precisely what—according to this interpretation—the

reference to the neither-one-nor-many argument would suggest. If it can be

used to move us through all the levels of the sliding scales of analysis, from the

everyday perspective all the way up to idealism, could it then not equally be

applied to the idealist stage? If it can, then it seems to be the case that we will

never arrive at a level of analysis that provides us with an ultimate ground for

all the other levels, and this, of course, is precisely what the Madhyamaka

analysis would imply. It appears that, using ideas found in Dharmakīrti's Philoso

works, a case for developing or expanding his ideas in a Madhyamaka direction c

rather than
can be made, and that it is in this way, as an attempt at doing philosophy on doxo

the basis of texts regarded as authoritative rather than as an exercise in categoriza

doxographic categorization, that the claims of commentators like Jitāri and

Mok:sākaragupta are best understood. However, a difficulty for this reading

is that, for Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti, any stage after the idealist one will be

non-dual and inexpressible (anabhilāpya), and this is a characterization of

ultimate truth the coherence of which the Mādhyamikas regard as dubious (it

is, after all, a position saying something about that of which nothing can be

said).[133] To the extent that, according to Diṅnāga's and Dharmakīrti's account,

the last thing we can say about reality before inexpressibility rules out all

further philosophical assertion is that it is 'mind only', characterizing their

position as idealist may seem to be the best of all possible choices.
8. The School of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti
and Its Relation to Mīmā:msā
Regardless of our view of the historicity of Dharmakīrti's encounter with Kumāri

we can at least see the account as a representation of the sustained philosoph-

ical opposition between the logico-epistemological school represented by

Dharmakīrti and Mīmā :msā represented by Kumārila. The seventh-century

Kumārila was one of the main exponents of Mīmā :msā, founding a variety of

Mīmā :msā called Bhā:t:ta Mīmā :msā (bha:t:ta—'lord' or 'master'—
is an epithet

sometimes used for Kumārila), though the tradition itself is generally taken

to go back to the beginning of the first millennium BCE, when Jaimini is said to

have composed the school's foundational text, the Mīmā :msāsūtra.
The interaction between Mīmā :msā and Buddhist philosophy was sustained Deb

and extensive.[134] Kumārila responds to Dinˈnāga's criticism of the Mīmā :msā th

position in the Pramā:nasamuccaya, especially in his Ślokavārttika.[135] Dharmakīr

[133] See our discussion on pp. 210–12.
[134] Verpoorten 1987: 23–30.
[135] Hattori 1968: 15–16, Iyengar 1927: 603–6, Rani 1982.

subsequently defended the Buddhist position against Mīmā :msā criticism,[136]
and in his encyclopedic Tattvasa :mgraha Śāntarak:sita gives a detailed account

and criticism of Mīmā :msā.[137] The frequent citing of Kumārila's works by

Buddhist authors even allows us to get a reasonable idea of the contents of

his lost works from the fragmentary quotations they give.[138]
Mīmā :msā's aim
In the Mīmā :msāsūtra, Jaimini describes the 'desire to know dharma' (dhar-
majijñāsā)[139] as the aim of the Mīmā :msā enterprise. This dharma is charac-
dharma and the
terized as the 'purpose specified by a Vedic injunction',[140] and 'connects a

Vedas

person with the highest good';[141] the route to the knowledge of dharma is

through the Vedas. The main focus of the Mīmā : msā is their establishment of

the authoritative status of Vedic injunctions (codanā), themselves an instance

of the epistemic instrument of verbal testimony (śabda). For Mīmā :msā,

dharma is something that is continuously 'yet to be' (bhavi:syat).[142] One aspect

of it is the good existence in an afterlife (svarga), an aim that Mīmā :msā argues

is to be accomplished by sacrifice.[143] (Unlike other schools of classical Indian

thought, liberation from sa :msāra was not the aim of Mīmā :msā soteriology).[144]
This goal is obviously something not presently available and therefore 'yet

to be'. Another aspect of the dharma to be achieved is the continuous renewal

of the world by the performance of the Vedic rites. This performance is not just

considered to yield positive results for the performer; it also has the more

comprehensive function of continuously bringing into being the ritual world,

though never completing this process.[145]

[136] Dreyfus 1997: 15. For Dharmakīrti's criticism of the the Mīmā :msā theory of

Eltschinger, Krasser, and Taber 2012.
[137] See e.g. Ratie 2014.
[138] Frauwallner 1962: 78–
90. Kumārila is supposed to have composed this work as a response to

Dharmakīrti's criticism (Raja 1991: 109).
[139] Mīmā :msāsūtra 1.1.1, Thadani 2007.
[140] codanālak:sa :no 'artho dharma:h, Mīmā :msāsūtra 1.1.2, Thadani 2007.
[141] sa hi ni :hśreyasena puru:sa :m sa :myunakti iti pratijānīmahe, Śābarabhā:sya ᴏ

1.1.1, Frauwallner 1968.
[142] Arnold 2012: 201–2.

[143] As expressed in the famous injunction that 'one desirous of heaven should per
(svargakāmo yajeta. See Frauwallner: 1968, n. 16). Compare also Śābarabhā:sya

6.1.1: 'It follows that heaven is something that could (or should) be accomplishe

would be the instrument to accomplish it', svargasya kartavyatā gamyate [. . .] yā

syāt, Nyāyaratna 1889.
[144] '[T]he Mīmā :msā carries the heritage of the "pre-
karmic" past of the Indian tradition into an

epoch for which karma and sa :msāra have become basic premisses. As well as th

mok:sa, the concepts of karma and sa :msāra do not play any role in the Mīmā :m

neglibible in its oldest extant commentary, Śabara's Bhā:sya' (Halbfass 1991: 30

termed ni :hśreyasa ('something than which there is no better') is the aim of the N

rather than simply an elevated inner-
worldly state short of the goal of liberation (see Bronkhorst

2007: 4, n. 3).
[145] Clooney 1990: 129–61. See also Arnold 2005: 238–9, n. 15.

Mīmā :msā's defence of the authority of the Vedas rests on two main pillars.
One is constituted by its epistemology, the other by its philosophy of language.
The two positions are independent of one another (accepting one does not

commit us to accept the other too). It is only by putting them together that

Mīmā :msā constructs an argument for warranted belief in Vedic injunctions.
Mīmā :msā and the 'logico-
epistemological' school of Din˙nāga and Dharmakīrti

share interests in similar areas of philosophy (logic/philosophy of language and

epistemology), though the theories they advance in these fields are vastly

different.

a. Mīmā :msā epistemology

One way of understanding the direction Mīmā :msā epistemology takes is by

asking what makes an epistemic instrument an epistemic instrument, that is,

what is it about a pramā :na that makes it suitable for generating knowledge. Is it

something about the epistemic instrument itself, or is it the possession of some

additional qualities?

Kumārila argues that the second possibility leads to considerable philosoph-
ical problems. Consider the Buddhist proposal of appealing to the cognition of

the ability of fulfil its function (arthakriyājñānam)[146] in order to settle the

trustworthiness of the deliverance of some epistemic instrument. Here the

Buddhists would, for example, say that the specific instance of perception[147]
of a lake is veridical, rather than illusory (as in the perception of a mirage), if pra

the water thus perceived can in fact fulfil its functions, such as quenching thirst. b

other pramā :nas

However, Kumārila points out, if we settle the status of the first perception by

appealing to a second perception (the perception confirming that water is

causally efficacious), we have not actually made any progress, for the status

of the second perception is not any more secure than that of the first. Both

perceptions appear to be in exactly the same situation when it comes to

justifying their status as epistemic instruments.[148]
There are various ways in which the defenders of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti Poss

can respond here.[149] First, note that there are cases where the trustworthiness to tl

of the second perception will not have to be settled by appeal to a third, but the

ability of the object cognized to fulfil its function is part and parcel of having

the cognition in the first place. When we appear to see a fire in a distance we

[146] As Dharmakīrti notes in Pramānavārttika, 'trustworthiness is the cognition of

fulfil its goal', arthakriyāsthiti :h | avisa :mvādanam (Miyasaka 1971–
2: 2). See Dunne 2004: 280–1;

Arnold 2005: 98.
[147] Note that in this discussion the term pramā :na can be used both to refer to a s

epistemic practice (such as visual perception) and well as to particular instances c

seeing a lake).
[148] See Dunne 2004: 274.
[149] See Dunne 2004: 272–8 for a further discussion of these ideas.

might go closer to it to feel its warmth. We then do not need to appeal to

anything else to justify the trustworthiness of the warmth we feel, since given

that our aim was to warm ourselves at the fire in the first place, we are justified

in taking the perception (that of the fire) as veridical.[150] Second, we might

consider solving the regress problem by establishing a minimal notion of causal

efficacy, namely the ability of a mental state to have other mental states as

effects. A perception of water would then be considered efficacious simply

because it leads to other mental states, even if this is just the doubt whether the

first perception is veridical. (Of course we would then need to appeal to other

criteria to distinguish the trustworthy from the illusory perceptions, such as

distinguishing this minimal sort of causal efficacy of the water-perception from

a more substantial one that involves effects such as the quenching of thirst.)[151]

pramā :nas as
Be this as it may, Kumārila regards his criticism as sufficiently weighty to

intrinsically
support choosing the first alternative instead and argue that it is something

authoritative
about the epistemic instruments themselves that allows them to produce

knowledge, arguing that 'the validity of all epistemic instruments should be

accepted as intrinsic; for a capacity not already existing by itself cannot be

produced by anything else'.[152] Of course, this should not be taken to mean that

anything that some epistemic instrument delivers should therefore be con-
sidered as authoritative—the existence of perceptual and cognitive illusions

makes it clear that this would let all sorts of erroneous cognitions in. Rather,

the intrinsic authoritativeness of a veridical perception means that the causes of

its veridicality are among the causes of the cognition's arising in the first place.
We still need to rule out whatever extrinsic factors cause a cognition to be non-
veridical (like, for example, perceptual distortions or cognitive biases), but once

these are excluded, a cognition is to be considered as authoritative by default.
As long as some piece of information is delivered by some epistemic instru-
ment, and as long as no other epistemic instruments undermine it (as our

tactile sense would, for example, once we try to touch the water we see in a

mirage), our belief in whatever the instrument suggests there is will be justified.
pramā :nas produce
Note that we speak about justification, not about knowledge.[153] This might

justification, not
suggest watering-
down our epistemic standards, but in fact a case can be made that

knowledge
all we could ever need (or perhaps even all we could ever get) in our endeavours

find out about the world is an entitlement to believe something to be true. If we

additionally demand that all possible defeaters are ruled out, so that we are assure

that all kinds of illusion-inducing circumstances do not obtain, we end up in a

situation in which practically nobody could be taken to know anything.
[150] Dunne 2004: 274, 278.
[151] Dunne 2004: 275–6.
[152] svata :h sarvapramā :nānā :m prāmā :nyam iti gamyatām | na hi svato 'satī śak

śakyate, Ślokavārttika, codanā sūtra verse 47, Kataoka 2011.

While I would be reluctant to refer to the Mīmā :msā system as a form of

'common-
sense realism',154 given that in many senses their conclusions are so far Fundame

removed from what is commonsensically assumed to be common sense, there is i

a fundamental trust in the deliverances of the epistemic instruments that is

absent in the thought of Din˙nāga and Dharmakīrti. According to them, our

everyday, untrained awareness of the world is not to be relied on, and matters of

reality have to be settled by appeal to notions like the ability to fulfil its function.
For Kumārila, on the other hand, information coming in through the six sense

faculties can usually be accepted as showing just what it purports to show.
b. Mīmā :msā philosophy of language
The second pillar in the Mīmā :msā enterprise of justifying the authority of the

Vedas, the only way of knowing dharma,155 is their philosophy of language.
They do not build this defence on the establishment of the authority of the texts'
presumed author, Īśvara,156 as the Naiyāyikas do,157 but on the fact that the

Vedas precisely have no author.158 This argument from authorlessness (apaur-
Vedas as

u:seyatva) to authoritativeness might strike us as curious, since we would authorl

generally regard the fact that some piece of language had no author (if it was

produced by some randomizing device, say) as speaking against it having any

meaning, without even considering the further question of its truth. However,

in the Mīmā :msā context the implication between these two properties is

supported by the peculiar position that 'the relation between words and their Prim

referents is primordial'.[159]According to this view, the link between an entity in c

between words
the world and a piece of language (in fact, even a specific Sanskrit phoneme) is a

not anything established by the force of a conventional agreement between

speakers. The connection of the term gotva with the property of being a cow is

not derived from convention, but is written into the nature of existence.[160]

[154] As e.g. Dan Arnold does in his entry on 'Kumārila', The Stanford Encyclop

(Winter 2014 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/kuma

[155] 'dharma is stipulatively defined, or rather posited without argument, as a trans

and so is unknowable by any form of knowledge not itself transcendent', Pollock

[156] The Mīmā :msā philosophers do not believe there are any arguments for the e:

divine being like Īśvara. Their arguments against theism bear interesting similarit

the Buddhists. See Krasser 1999: 215–23.

[157] Jacobi 2010: ch. 3; Patil 2009: 31–99.

[158] One Mīmā :msā argument for the authorlessness of the Vedas is again routed :

common-
sense epistemology: everybody who has ever learned the Vedas has learned them

a teacher who in turn learned them from his own teacher, never from the author. I

existence of an unobserved author instead of the backwards infinite series of trans

mean disregarding the output of an epistemic instrument like perception without {

[159] autpattikas tu śabdasya-
arthena sa :mbandhana:h, Mīmā :msāsūtra 5, Thadani 2007.

[160] Although this view of the convention-
independent connection between words and mean-

ings finds its most elaborate formulation in the Mīmā :msā theories, parallels exis

Sanskrit grammarians such as Patañjali's Mahābhāsya (2nd cent.

B̄CE), 115–16 (Joshi and
Roodbergen 1986).

It is this natural connection between word and world[161] that provides us with

the knowledge of dharma.[162] The main difficulty Mīmā :msā sees in the intui-
tively more plausible view of language based on speaker agreement (which is

How could
also the position of the Buddhists) is that it is unclear how such an agreement

conventions ever
could have ever gotten off the ground: if two speakers agree to use a certain term

have begun?
in a certain way, they first have to have a framework in which they can

communicate their agreement, which would then have to be established by

further conventions, and so on ad infinitum.[163]
Dharmakīrti disagrees with this view of language for a variety of reasons.[164]
He points out that if the connection between word and meaning was indeed

grounded in the nature of reality, would it not be reasonable to expect that then

any listener could understand the meaning of given word immediately, without

having ever learned it?[165] This is manifestly not the case; one does not under-
stand the meaning of Sanskrit words without having studied Sanskrit. The

defender of the Mīmā :msā account might reply that, despite the fact that the

Convention
connection between word and meaning is not constituted by convention,

needed for
convention is still necessary to know this connection. Convention would then

knowing the
word–world link?
be an assisting factor in knowing the objective word–referent relation in much

the same way in which light is required to see an object placed in front of us.
Then, however, the 'natural connection' looks increasingly like a metaphysical

postulate that is epistemically idle, something that does not cohere well with

the Mīmā :msā approach to epistemology. In addition, the introduction of a set

Possibility of
misunderstanding
of conventions telling us which word denotes which meaning threatens to

the Vedas
introduce a divide between the status of the Vedas as authoritative texts and

[161] Mīmā :msā can therefore argue that a term like svarga, even though it does no

the world we live in (because no one has ever observed anyone going to heaven),

since it occurs in the Veda. It is the primordial nature of language, not a set of spe

that determines that an expression has a referent. See Wilke and Moebus 2011: 5

[162] See Śabara's commentary on Mīmā :msāsūtra 5, Abhyankar and Jośī: 1970–
4: 24: 3–15.

[163] This problem has been worrying philosophers of language up to the present. S

1969: 2.

[164] For a detailed account of Dharmakīrti's criticism of the Mīmā :msā theory of

see Taber 2012: 119–
66. Even though the Mīmā:sā view of language and the kind of convention-
alism we find in most Buddhist thinking about language represent opposite ends o
ical spectrum, it is worthwhile to be aware that there is at least one Buddhist acco

that bears certain similarities with Mīmā :msā and is likely to have been influence

Sarvāstivāda has developed the notion of the nāma-
kāya, an entity that is not identical with speech

in its spoken or written form, but is made manifest by sounds or letters, and conv
The nāma-
kāya is impermanent (it is a sa :mskāra), though in the case of the Buddha's word

also authorless (apauru:seya). It might strike us as peculiar to characterize the tea

historical person such as the Buddha as authorless. Nevertheless, the Sarvāstivādi

wanted to stress that the teaching of the dhātu, āyatana, and skandha was not just

discovery of a historically contingent character, but a trans-
temporal truth, an insight taught by

each Buddha anew, and therefore to a certain extent comparable to the Mīmā :ms

authorless Vedic authority. For further discussion of these matters see Jaini 1959.
[165] Pramānavārttika 1: 227, Gnoli 1960: 113.

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˙NĀGA AND DHARMAKĪRTI
our ability to use them correctly for ritual purposes. For even though some

word may be objectively connected with some entity in the world, if we have to

interpret the word according to a system of conventions, we might systemat-
ically misinterpret the words of the Veda. Nothing precludes one from taking

the famous injunction, 'one desirous of heaven should perform [the agnihotra]
sacrifice' as saying 'one should eat dog meat'.[166] That the world settles the

relation between word and world is not going to help us as long as we still need

conventions to establish the relation between word and thought.

Moreover, the Mīmā :msā conception of language is diametrically opposed to

the apoha theory of Diṅ·nāga and Dharmakīrti. The point of the apoha theory is

to explain how linguistic reference to phenomena like cowhood could still

occur in the absence of any features in the world that function as stable, non-
momentary objects in general that would not be able to participate in causal

processes that characterize the world as we know it. Mīmā :msā, on the other

hand, defends an extreme realism about language that not only postulates an

abstract level of linguistic structure behind an ephemeral reality of token

utterances made in different languages, but links the very phonemes of Sanskrit

to the fundamental structure of reality. This view has the immediate benefit of Mī

giving us some way of explaining the purported efficacy of the ritual use of effica

language, such as we find in the Vedas, for if the structure of the world is

intrinsically connected with the sounds of Sanskrit, it is at least conceivable that

these very sounds can then be used to manipulate the world by the use of some

of these sounds.
Once we have accepted that there is an objective, speaker-
independent, Why the truth of

permanent connection between a language and the world, it follows that a the Ve

implied
grammatically well-formed set of statements in that language must be mean-
ingful, since the structure we find in the expression is directly indicative of the

structure of the reality expressed, and as long as a piece of language indicates

how reality could be it is meaningful. Moreover, the expressions of the Vedas

are not just meaningful, but also true. For falsity in some statements a speaker

expresses results from some form of defect in the speaker, his limited epistemic

powers, drawing a mistaken inference, or downright untruthfulness. But none

of these defects can apply in the case of the Vedas, since they have no author.
Dharmakīrti objected to the view by pointing out that in the same way the Dharm

falsity of a view derives from defects in the speaker, so the truth of a view also tru

backed by speakers
derives from his reliability, which is based on other good qualities in turn (such

as, in the Buddha's case, compassion). A statement that had no author at all

would then either be false, since it is not backed by a reliable person that

composed it, or it would lack any meaning at all.[167]

[166] Pramānavārttika 1: 312–18, Gnoli 1960: 165–7, Dreyfus 1997: 222–
3, Taber 2012: 126–7.

[167] Svav:rtti ad Pramānavārttika 1: 225; Gnoli 1960: 112.

Connection of
In any case, we can see at this point how the epistemology of Mīmā :msā links

Mīmā :msā
up with its philosophy of language to support the authority of the Vedas.[168]
epistemology and
philosophy of
According to the former, we are justified in believing claims backed up by some

language
epistemic instrument, as long as there is no other evidence undermining them.
The Vedas are an instance of one such epistemic instrument (śabda, testi-
mony), and they inform us of various matters, such as dharma, or the ability to

join the heavenly realms conditional on the execution of suitable sacrifices. But

since the subject matter of the Vedas is transcendent and can only be revealed

through them,[169] it is inaccessible to the other epistemic instruments,[170] and

therefore can never be undermined. That the supposed result of a sacrifice is

not observed, for example, does not mean that the epistemic instrument of

testimony is undermined by that of perception. Frits Staal observes that:[171]
When a ritual performance is completed, no fruit is seen. The Yajamāna, on whos

behalf the rites have been performed, does not raise up, and go to heaven. Rather

opposite: he returns home and is, as the texts put it, the same as he was before. . .

Mīmā :msā concluded, quite logically, that the fruit of ritual activity is—
temporarily—

unseen. It will become apparent only later, e.g., after death.
arthāpatti
Mīmā :msā introduced a specific epistemic instrument (arthāpatti, presump-
tion, otherwise regarded as a form of inference) to help with this issue.
A presumption is made in order to allow for the proper explanation of a

given phenomenon. Given that Mīmā :msa infers on the basis of its philosophy

of language that the Vedas make meaningful claims, we must presume that

there is something they are about, and since this is, while accessible to

perception, not perceptible now, it must be accessible later.[172]
[168] We only have time to note, though not time to investigate, a potential tension

Mīmā:sā epistemology and philosophy of language. The tendency towards comm
sense realism

we observe in their epistemology is certainly no longer present when it comes to

here how people ordinarily use a word is no guide to what it means in the Vedas.

notes that 'mundane usage (lokavāda, prasiddhi) cannot be resorted to as a criteri
ing the meaning of Vedic statements, least of all by the Mīmāmsakas, who like to

what ordinary humans say is for the most part untrue—
hence, surely, how they commonly employ

words cannot serve as any kind of pramāna—
and who also routinely deviate from common usage

themselves in their Vedic interpretations.'
[169] Pollock 1989: 607.
[170] Mīmā :msasūtra 1.1.4 considers the inability of perception to know dharma: 'V

connection of the sense-
faculties [with an object], a cognition arises for a person. That is percep-
tion. [It is] not the cause [for knowing dharma], because because it is the apprehe

which is present', satsamprayoge puru:sasyendriyā :nā :m buddhijanma tat pratya

vidyamānopalambhanatvāt, Thadani 2007: 1. On the interpretation of this sūtra se

2006: 63–83.
[171] Staal 1996: 122.
[172] The notion of presumption is not restricted to the context of the efficacy of rit
Mīmā :msā argues, for example, that we cannot make sense of our use of languag

presuming the existence of language-
independent universals our terms refer to (Arnold 2014:

section 3.3).

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If none of the other pramā :nas can therefore undermine the claims that the

epistemic instrument of testimony (in the form of the Vedas) makes, we are

justified in believing their claims, and the authority of the Vedic texts is thereby

established.

c. Mīmā :msā, historiography, and history

Sheldon Pollock has developed the interesting claim that the particular philo-
sophical position Mīmā :msā developed in its defence of Vedic authority had

important consequences for the way Indians wrote their own history, and for

the role historical information played in Indian intellectual life in general. It is

certainly peculiar to observe how little historical information we can find in

many Indian texts.[173] There are works on statecraft that do not mention a

single historical state, works on literary criticism that do not mention the

names of poets or their works, and indeed, 'we can read thousands of pages

of Sanskrit on any imaginable subject and not encounter a single passing

reference to a historical person, place, or event—or at least to any that,

historically speaking, matters'.[174] One important reason for explaining this,

Pollock argues, is the Mīmā :msā construal of Vedic texts as fundamentally The (

ahistorical: they have no date of composition, no author, no context in which Ved

of excellence

they arose, resembling timeless laws of nature more than collections of texts.
Their immensely important status, and the fact that most kinds of learning in

classical and medieval India saw itself as in one way or other derived from the

Vedas,[175] led to the claim that any text describing these branches of knowledge

was also composed in a manner resembling the Vedas, that is, by systematically

downplaying the historical context of the work, its nature as an artefact that

arose at a specific point, composed by specific authors, in order to portray it

instead as an example of timeless authority. The lack of historical references

and historical emphasis of much of classical Indian literature is perhaps less

perplexing if we realize the philosophical background of construing the very

lack of historical situatedness as a mark of excellence rather than as a defect.
It is instructive to put the Mīmā :msā and the Buddhist philosophical Mīmā :msā

approaches side by side, so to speak, located, as they are, at two different Buddhi:

the big picture
ends of the philosophical spectrum. Mīmā :msā epistemology defends a position

that approaches the deliverances of untrained epistemic instruments and the

inferences usually drawn from them (also known as common sense) with a

great degree of trust, arguing that justified belief is to be found in parallel with E|

them. Buddhism, on the other hand, approaches the very same epistemic optimisr
pessimism
source with a great degree of wariness. As ignorance is the primary cause

[173] For some discussion of the cliché that 'India has no history' see Franco 2013:
19.
[174] Pollock 1989: 606.
[175] A culture-
wide process that Pollock labels 'vedicization' (Pollock 1989: 609).

that keeps beings trapped in cyclic existence, our untrained epistemic approach

to the world is shot through to such an extent with questionable default

assumptions and mistaken cognitive reflexes that we should be very suspicious

of whatever knowledge of the world it proposes to deliver.[176] In this way Mīmā :msā cannot only argue that much of the world is the way it seems to us, but also that we really are as we seem to us, namely, existing as permanent, substantial selves. We are entitled to believe that terms like 'being a cow' refer to what they seem to refer to (the abstract property of being a cow), not only because this is taken to be the best explainer for our use of such terms in language, but because for Mīmā :msā, all our perceptions are concept-infused. Perceptions disclose things to us as falling under concepts (such as cowness, or whiteness), and if there is not evidence to the contrary we are justified in believing that the referents of these properties are real. Similarly, the way memory appears to us, for example, is such that we seem to recognize that the currently remembering subject is the very same as the one involved in the experience remembered. As there are no other epistemic instruments undermining this view of a persisting subject, we are justified in accepting it.

The Buddhists, and specifically the school of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti, vehemently disagree with all of this. They reject an enduring self for the same reductionist reasons we already find in the Abhidharma, and argue that despite appearances, there is no such thing. Abstract properties might appear theoretically useful, but it is entirely unclear how these, qua permanent, unchanging entities, can interact with mental and physical phenomena characterized by momentariness. Furthermore, the conceptual overlay that seems to come with every perceptual act is a problem, given the falsifying roles conceptualizations play, and not a guide to what there is.

Historical
While I believe that we have to be quite cautious in trying to explain

background of this philosophical positions from the social and political condition

disagreement
proponents happened to find themselves, it is hard not to observe a certain

congruence between the general philosophical outlooks of Mīmā :msā and the

school of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti described in this very broad way, and the

social role of Brahmins and Buddhists in seventh-century India. Brahmins as a

group occupied a role of power at the royal courts and acted as political advisors,

in addition to offering spiritual advice and protection through mantras[177] and

[176] If we restrict our attention to the period roughly up to the middle of the first m

difference like this might even be considered to characterize the non-
Buddhist and Buddhist

schools of thought more generally, not just Mīmā :msā and the school of Diṅnāg

'roughly until the middle of the first millennium CE . . . all Buddhist philosophers

of the world of our everyday experience, and all brahmanical philosophers accept

2011a: 171.
[177] This included the pronouncement of curses, a task that the Buddhists were unv

perform (see Hahn 1982b: 331).

rituals, as well as astrological expertise and the interpretation of signs for Brahmi

predicting the future. Like the Brahmins, the Buddhists were dependent on the Bu

courts
royal courts as a source of protection and donation,[178] but Buddhism placed little

emphasis on ritual and prophecy, and was altogether less naturally suited for

giving political advice than Brahmanism. The Brahmins had clear ideas about

the nature of society and how it should be governed, while Buddhism was not

greatly interested in developing a view of the right social order, but was a path to

individual liberation from the unsatisfactoriness of sa :msāra.[179] Even the Buddha

himself, when speaking to kings, was reluctant to give them political advice.[180]
Switching to Sanskrit as a Buddhist doctrinal language some time in the

second century BCE may have been an attempt to minimize the disadvantage

the Buddhists had relative to the Brahmins in their connections with bearers of

political power.[181] More importantly, however, the Buddhists had a different

tale to tell, a philosophical outlook describing a route to spiritual perfection

and liberation aimed at each individual being, including kings. Of course, this

tale competed with the account given by the Brahmins, but it is interesting to

note that underneath the surface disagreements in religious matters is an

underlying epistemological message questioning the very philosophical

assumptions on which the Brahmins based their power. This message is a

form of scepticism towards the commonsensical appearance of the world. Differe

Being less invested in a position that emphasized the status quo, a position of phil

emphasis on the
where the way the world appeared to ordinary observers (including the social stat

and religious status of the Brahmins) was the way the world really was, and the

way the world should be according to the most fundamental structures of

reality, the Buddhists defended a philosophical outlook embodying distrust of a

world conceived according to the certainties of common sense. Their account,

doubting the results of untrained epistemic instruments, is more congruent

with being a theory that finds itself disconnected from the structures of power

[178] In the Buddhist case the establishment of monasteries brought with it the requ

'upkeep and maintenance; such maintenance required donations beyond mere sub

donations required the further maintenance of long-
term relationships with donors.' Schopen

2007: 61.
[179] It is interesting to compare in this context brahmanical texts with advice on go

as the Arthaśāstra and the Mānava Dharmaśāstra or Manusmrti with Buddhist tex

Nāgārjuna's Ratnāvalī or the Su :hrlekha. The advice the latter provide is arguabl

a king emulating the monastic ideal on the throne than for navigating the treacher

realpolitik. (See Bronkhorst 2011a: 104–
5). It is also noteworthy to note the absence of Buddhist

treatises on other fields of knowledge intimately connected with the Brahmins' po

such as astronomy, astrology, and mathematics.
[180] Bareau 1993: 38.
[181] Bronkhorst (2011a: 129) argues that the need to interact with Brahmins in the

their interests at the royal court explains the Buddhist adoption of Sanskrit as a te

order to engage with the Brahmins at a doctrinal level the Buddhists had to be abl

tongue.

affirmed by these very instruments, than with being one that derives an

important part of its legitimacy from considering that the world is more or

less the way most people take it to be.[182] Congruence is, of course, not

causation, but in order to achieve a nuanced understanding of the opposition

between a Mīmā :msā common-sense realism and fundamental distrust in

conceptualization à la Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti it is important to note that

there are more dimensions to their respective positions than just the philo-
sophical one.

9. The End of Buddhist Philosophy in India

The last 500 years
There is some justification for dating the end of the long tradition of Buddhist

scholastic philosophy in India that began with the composition of the great

Abhidharma treatises at the beginning of the Common Era as coinciding with

the destruction of the great monastic universities of Nālandā and Vikramaśilā
around the year 1200. This means that from the time of Dharmakīrti there are

at least five more centuries of Buddhist philosophical activity on Indian soil.
A decline in
Tāranātha is quite pessimistic about the state of philosophical sophistication

quality?
achieved during this period, claiming that nothing in Indian Buddhism that

came after the period of the 'six ornaments' (rgyan drug, Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva,

Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Diṅnāga, and Dharmakīrti) could quite compare to their

brilliance:

Before the great ācārya Dharmakīrti, the law of the Buddha was as bright as the s
After him, generally speaking, there were many great upādhyāyas who worked ex
lently for the law. But there was practically none equal to the older ācāryas. . . . D

the period of the six ornaments, the Mahāyāna ācāryas were great scholars of the

doctrine and the sa :mgha remained disciplined. . . . From this period on, the law

gradually weaker in the south and there eventually became extinct. . . . In other pl

survived in a scattered and feeble form.[183]
If we look at the amount and quality of philosophical work produced by Indian

Buddhist scholars after the time of Dharmakīrti, Tāranātha's judgment

seems unreasonably harsh. Yet we might at least agree with him that at this

[182] This point is raised by Bronkhorst (2011a: 171–
2). He notes that 'Brahmins . . . were much

more involved in courtly life and policy decisions than Buddhists: a political cour

lose much of his credibility if he maintains at the same time that the world of our

experience does not really exist' (2013: 359). Bronkhorst also argues, however, th

doctrines of Buddhism are not found 'in the teaching of the Buddha as traditional
(2011a: 171) and are later introductions. I believe that, as with all concepts that ac

prominence in the Buddhist philosophical discussion, seeds for the illusionistic id

found in the earliest Buddhist texts, even though the way these different seeds hav

highly dependent on the constitution of the intellectual soil onto which they woul
[183] Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1970: 255–6.

time all the major players have entered the stage.[184] The various positions of Con

Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and the logico-
epistemological school continued to be performance but

no new characters
developed, often with great philosophical sophistication, yet no further school

of similar philosophical status emerged during the final five centuries of

Buddhist thought in India. While the performance did not stop, the actors

would be familiar to anyone knowledgeable about what had happened in

Buddhist philosophy up to the time of Dharmakīrti.
We mentioned above that within the confines of this account we are not

able to go beyond casting a quick glance at some of the more noteworthy

figures who shaped philosophical activity during this time. A few of the major

scholars of this last period of Indian Buddhist philosophy, such Śāntarak:sita,

Kamalaśila, Ratnākaraśānti, and Ratnakīrti we have already met. In this section

we will add some brief discussion of two further important philosophers from

this final period we have not discussed so far, Śāntideva and Atiśa.
a. Śāntideva
Śāntideva is most likely to have flourished some time between 685 and 763 CE. S

He was a Buddhist monk, and is commonly associated with the monastic

university of Nālandā. The traditional accounts of his life[185] introduce a motive

familiar from the life of the Buddha: born as a son of a king and destined to

inherit the throne, Śāntideva nevertheless sees the spiritual dangers coming

from life as a ruler and flees the kingdom. In addition, Śāntideva receives

teachings from the very highest level from an early age. At the age of 6 he is

said to have been initiated into the practice of the bodhisattva Mañjusrī, a

bodhisattva specifically associated with wisdom, who appears to him in visions

and teaches him directly.

During his time at Nālandā he was regarded as somewhat lazy by his

fellow monks, who quipped that instead of the three activities prescribed for

monks,[186] study, meditation, and service to the monastery, all Śāntideva was

ever observed doing was eating, sleeping, and digesting. In order to show him

up they requested him to recite a text he had memorized. When the time came,

Śāntideva declared he would recite something never heard before, and began to

recite the Bodhicaryāvatāra, a text that would become his most famous work,

and one of the most well-known, and best-loved, Mahāyāna śāstras. When

reciting verse 34 of the ninth chapter, on the Perfection of Wisdom: 'When

neither entity nor non-entity remains before the mind, since there is no other

[184] It is interesting to note that for Bu ston the history of Buddhism in India also a

in the eighth century. The last philosopher he discusses before moving from the d

Buddhism in India to its development in Tibet is Śāntideva (Bu ston 2013: 257–
75). See also

Chattopadhyaya 1967: 82.
[185] See Tsonawa 1985: 60–4.
[186] Crosby and Skilton 1995: 118.

mode of operation, grasping no objects, it becomes tranquil',[187] Śāntideva is

said to have risen from his throne and ascended into the air until he could no

longer be seen, even though his voice was still audible until he had finished the

recitation of his work.

The Bodhi-

The Bodhicaryāvatāra, a long work of about 900 verses,[188] of immense

caryāvatāra

popularity and prominent status in Buddhist literature, constitutes an extended

investigation into the notion of the awakening mind (bodhicitta) characterizing

a bodhisattva. It is not a particularly uncommon type of work, belonging to the

kind of text that gives an account of the Buddhist path and the associated

practices that a bodhisattva follows from the preparatory stages to its final

goal.[189] It begins with praise of the treatise's subject matter, the awakening

mind, in the first chapter, in order to set out the motivation for pursuing the

path described later in the text. This is followed by preparing the ground for the

practice, by generating merit through going for refuge and the confession of

faults (chapters 2 and 3), and by teachings on how to uphold one's resolve in

the bodhisattva path (chapter 4). The remainder of the text then follows the set

of the six perfections (pāramitā): generosity (dāna), morality (śīla) (both

discussed in chapter 5), patience (k:sānti, chapter 6), effort (viryā, chapter 7),

meditation (dhyāna, chapter 8), and wisdom (prajñā, chapter 9). The text

concludes in chapter 10 by the dedication of merit and a series of vows

(pra :nidhāna). Particularly well known are the sixth chapter, on the Perfection

of Patience, where Śāntideva presents various arguments for developing the

basis of the bodhisattva's great compassion, and the ninth chapter on the

Perfection of Wisdom, containing an intricate discussion of the nature of

emptiness set up as a debate between Mādhyamikas and proponents of various

other Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools, most prominently Yogācārins.
Whatever our views on the facticity of the account of Śāntideva's first

recitation of the Bodhicaryāvatāra are, it provides an apt illustration of the

transformational potential the spiritual path described in it is supposed to have.
As the bodhisattva works his way up to the realization of emptiness set out in

the ninth chapter, the superimposition of a substantial self that constitutes the

bondage to cyclic existence dissolves into thin air, though his compassionate

activities continue to resonate in the world.
Śāntideva and
Like many thinkers discussed in these pages, Śāntideva was connected with

Nālandā
the great monastic university of Nālandā. This major monastic centre (together

[187] yadā na labhyate bhāvo yo nāstīti prakalpyate | tadā nirāśrayo 'bhāva :h katha

pura :h, Vaidya 1988: 204.
[188] This version is sometimes referred to as the 'canonical rencension'. There is a

about 200 verses shorter, discovered amongst the Dūnhuáng manuscripts. Resear

relation between the two is ongoing, see Saito 1993.
[189] Compare e.g. Āryaśūra's Pāramitāsamāsa (Meadows 1986) and Atiśa's Bodhi

(Geshe Sonam Rinchen 1997).

with others, such as Vikramaśīla, Odantapurī, and Tak:saśīla) was one of the

key locations where much of the development of Indian Buddhist philosophy

took place. Nālandā was founded by King Śakrāditya of Magadha, usually

identified with Kumāragupta I, who ruled around the period 415–55 CE,[190]
and flourished subsequently under the patronage of the Gupta and Pāla

dynasties. Traditional accounts describe how some of the greatest Mahāyāna

scholars lived and taught at Nālandā; besides Śāntideva this illustrious list

includes Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Dharmakīrti, Dharmapāla, Candrakīrti, Sthir-
amati, Śāntarak:sita, Kamalaśīla, and Nāropa.[191] Apart from archaeological

evidence, most of our information on how Nālandā functioned as a monastic

university comes from descriptions by Chinese pilgrims travelling to India in

search of Buddhist texts during the seventh century. Xuanzang (c.602–64)[192]
spent about two years in Nālandā, and Yijing (635–713),[193] whose travels took

altogether twenty-five years, lived there for about a decade.
Though Nālandā is commonly referred to as a Buddhist university, there Nālandā

were many sides to it that were not specifically or exclusively Buddhist. Its curric

Gupta patrons were not Buddhists but followers of Brāhma :nism.[194] Nor was

the Nālandā curriculum restricted to training in Buddhist subjects. In addition

to the study of the eighteen schools of Abhidharma and the Mahāyāna,

students were trained in grammar, logic, the Vedas, medicine, Sā :mkhya phil-
osophy, and Sanskrit literature.[195] Of the 'five sciences' (pañcavidyā) that

occupy a central place in monastic learning,[196] comprising grammar, prosody,

synonymics, and poetic forms (śabdavidyā), logic (hetuvidyā), medicine

(cikitsāvidyā), fine arts and crafts (śilpakarmasthānavidyā), and the study

of Buddhist texts (adhyātmavidyā), only the last is specifically and directly

[190] Dutt 1988: 329.
[191] Joshi 1967: 171. Smith (1908–
26: 9. 127) even claims that 'a detailed history of Nālandā
would be a history of Mahāyānist Buddhism'. Early authors also connect scholars
who lived considerably earlier than its foundation, or at any rate earlier than its fo

mahāvihāra—
most famously Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva. For some discussion of this and the

associated idea of the 'Nālandā tradition' see above, pp. 25, 32–3.
[192] Beal 1884.
[193] Takakusu 1896.
[194] The religious loyalties of Indian kings are a complex issue. King Har:savardha
50 CE)

is described as 'loading the Brahmans with gifts, and in his works he himself decl

worshipper of Śiva. . . . But the personal sentiments of the monarch were clearly l

the Mahāyāna school. In the Mahāyāna even, his sympathies appear to have attac

Yogācāra school, as it was taught in the monasteries of Nālandā . . . ' (Bronkhors
[195] Dutt 1988: 332–
3. Interestingly, astronomy or mathematics is not mentioned in this context

(on the other hand, see Joshi 1967: 161). See also n. 179 above, and Bronkhorst 2
The diversity of the Nālandā curriculum might not simply have been an expressio
mindedness or tolerant inclusivism. Another factor to take into account is that du

there was considerable external pressure on Buddhism from Brahmanism it was e

Buddhists to be familiar with the brahmanical systems so as to be able to defend t

debate. (Bouthillette 2017: 69).
[196] The five sciences are mentioned by Yijing, Xuanzang (Dutt 1988: 324), and B

42–7), see also Joshi 1967: 161.

concerned with Buddhist doctrinal matters. The importance of all five is

underlined by a verse from Asaṅga's Mahāyānasūtrāla :mkāra:[197]
Without diligence in the five fields of knowledge
Even the noblest person cannot obtain omniscience.
Therefore, to defeat challenges, to care for others,
And for complete understanding, persevere in these.
Grammar and logic are associated with the first of the three aims mentioned

here, to defeat challenges from opponents; medicine and the fine arts are part

of caring for others; and the study of Buddhism is directed at attaining full

understanding.
Nālandā and its
There may well be a connection between the extent of royal patronage and

patrons
the width of the Nālandā curriculum. We might consider it puzzling why non-Buddhist rulers treated a Buddhist institution with quite as much generosity as

the Guptas treated Nālandā. One reason may be that they did not perceive

Buddhism as in opposition to their own brahmanic beliefs. Buddhist and

brahmanic practices for the worship of images show significant similarity,[198]
and the Gupta period might have provided the foundation for the later

incorporation of the Buddha into the Hindu pantheon.[199] But another, perhaps

more important reason may be that they did not regard Nālandā as simply a

Buddhist institution providing teaching of exclusive interest to Buddhists, but

as a seat of learning and centre of instruction covering a wide range of subjects,

from a Buddhist perspective but without an exclusive restriction to the Buddhist canon.[200]

Nālandā and the Bodhicaryāvatāra

Does the Bodhicaryāvatāra show any traces of being composed in Nālandā?

Indian Buddhist treatises are not known for incorporating a great amount of

historical and contextual information. Nevertheless, there are some connections we can find. First, Nālandā was of course a monastery, and Śāntideva was

therefore addressing an exclusively male audience of monks. This does not

imply that there would have been no women on the premises, though—Yijing

mentions that during ritual ablutions of the Buddha image in Indian monasteries 'a band of girls plays music there'.[201] Men, however, were his primary

audience, and Śāntideva's extensive remarks on the repulsive qualities of the

human body (aśubhabhāvanā), which constitute a set of meditations to act as

[197] 11.60: vidyāsthāne pañcavidhe yogamak:rtvā sarvajñatva :m naiti katha :mcit
ityanye:sā :m nigraha:nānugraha:nāya svājñārtha :m vā tatra karotyeva sa yogam,

verse is quoted by Bu ston (2013: 43).
[198] Dutt 1988: 196.
[199] In the Daśāvatāracaritam composed by K:semendra in the 11th century the Bu

as one of the 10 avatāras of Vi:s :nu.
[200] Dutt 1988: 198.
[201] Takakusu 1896: 147–8.

an antidote for a meditator overcome by sexual desire, describe in great detail

the unattractive qualities of the female body.

Second, chapters 2 and 3 of the Bodhicaryāvatāra set out a Mahāyāna liturgy

referred to as 'supreme worship' (anuttarapūjā). Śāntideva did not invent this liturgy, a version of which can already be found in the Ga :n:davyūhasūtra, which dates from the fourth century CE or earlier. The liturgy aims to move the practitioner through a series of mental states, beginning with praise of and making offerings to the Buddhas, going for refuge, followed by the confessions of one's own shortcomings, rejoicing in the merits of others, requesting the Buddhas to teach, dedication of the merit generated, culminating in the generation of the awakening mind (bodhicittotpāda).

It is highly likely that the description of ritual actions described in these chapters corresponds to rites carried out by the monks at Nālandā on a daily basis, and that Śāntideva's audience was intimately familiar with them. It is certainly the case that the ritual actions concerning worship and offerings Śāntideva describes at the beginning of the second chapter, including the bathing of Buddha images, dressing them in fine cloths, offering perfumes, flowers, and incense to them accompanied by music and the singing of hymns, acts of prostration, and stūpa worship correspond closely to practices Yijing describes as having observed in Nālandā and other Indian monasteries at the time.[202]

A third connection between Śāntideva's texts and Nālandā, their place of composition, concerns his other major work, the Śik:sāsamuccaya, or 'Compendium of Training'.[203] This text consists of a set of twenty-seven verses on the training of the bodhisattva, together with a prose commentary and a selection of Mahāyāna sūtras illustrating and supporting the points Śāntideva

makes. In this work he quotes about a hundred different texts; these quotations

are particularly interesting, not only because they give us an idea which sūtras

Mahāyāna scholars at Śāntideva's time studied, but also because the original

Sanskrit version of many of these texts, apart from the quotations Sāntideva

preserves, have been lost. It is likely that Śāntideva had memorized most of the

texts he quoted there, but in order to get hold of them in the first place he

would have needed access to a fairly well-stocked library. Nālandā, of course,

was very well provided in this respect. Its library was a depository where

visiting scholars could acquire authoritative copies of texts; Yijing alone

departed from Nālandā with copies of 400 Sanskrit works.[204] Tibetan accounts

relate the existence of three library buildings, called Sea of Jewels (ratnodadhi),

[202] Compare verses 2: 1–25 of the Bodhicaryāvatāra and Takakusu 1896: 147–66.
[203] Bendall and Rouse 1922, Goodman 2016. Whether the Śik:sāsamuccaya was (

the Bodhicaryāvatāra or afterwards is unclear. The latter mentions the former, bu

be a later interpolation. For further discussion see Saito 2013.
[204] Joshi 1967: 170.

Ocean of Jewels (ratnasāgara), and Jewel-adorned (ratnarañjaka), and like all

legendary libraries of antiquity they perished in flames.[205]
b. Atiśa Dīpa :mkaraśrījñāna
Atiśa's early life
The second later Indian Buddhist philosopher we will consider here is

Dīpa :mkaraśrījnāna, frequently referred to as Atiśa.[206] Born into a royal family

in Bengal, Atiśa was ordained as a Buddhist monk comparatively late, at the

age of 29. Sources on what he did before this time vary, but there is consider-
able evidence that he studied and practiced tantric teachings.[207] According to

one account, he even spent three years in O :d:diyāna (a place sometimes

identified with the Swat valley in today's Pakistan), taking part in tantric feasts

in the company of dāki :nīs.[208] O:d :diyāna was a great centre of tantric studies,

well known as the birthplace of Padmasambhava, the Indian tantric adept

crucial to the early dissemination (snga dar) of Buddhism to Tibet in the time

of King Khri srong lde bstan during the eighth century CE.
Atiśa was ordained as a monk in the Mahāsa :mghika school, according to some

sources at Nālandā, after seeing a vision of Buddha Śākyamuni in a dream.[209]
His studies
In 1012, at the age of 31 and only two years after his ordination, Atiśa set out

to travel to Suvar :nadvīpa (current Sumatra and Java), then a major centre of

Buddhist learning. The journey, which Atiśa undertook in the company of

merchants, and which included an encounter with sea-monsters along the way,

took altogether fourteen months. His aim was to study in Suvar :nadvīpa with

a well-known teacher called Dharmakīrti (not identical with Dinˑnāga's

grand disciple discussed above).[210] Tibetan translations of six works of this

'Dharmakīrti Suvar :nadvīpi' are preserved in the Tibetan commentarial canon

(bstan 'gyur). His major work is a substantial commentary on Maitreyanātha's

Abhisamayāla :mkāra (more than twice the length of Atīśa's Bodhipathapradīpa

together with its auto-commentary), a work that is sometimes considered as

'one of the most outstanding representatives of the Mahāyāna philosophy of

the 10th–11th century'.[211] This text confirms Dharmakīrti Suvar :nadvīpi's

standing as an extraordinary scholar. Further evidence of his status is provided

by the fact that most of the training of the scholar that Atīśa himself came to be

must be due to Dharmakīrti Suvar :nadvīpi; Atīśa's previous monastic education

before coming to Suvar :nadvīpa only lasted for two years, while his stay with

[205] Dutt 1988: 343. Tibetan records also relate that many books were saved from
rations by an early miraculous sprinkler system: water rushing forth from the Gul

Prajñāpāramitā texts kept in the upper floors of the building.
[206] Atiśa is an abbreviation of atiśaya ('outstanding'). See Eimer 1977: 17–
22. For accounts of

Atiśa's life see Chatthopadyyaya 1967; Eimer 1977, 1979.
[207] Eimer 1979: 191.
[208] Chattopadhyaya 1967: 74–5.
[209] Chattopadhyaya 1967: 77, Eimer 1979: 192–3.
[210] Eimer 1979: 194–5.
[211] Chatthopadhyaya 1967: 94.

Dharmakīrti stretched for twelve years. Atiśa is recorded as having been

extraordinarily fond of Dharmakīrti, through whose instruction alone, he

claims, he understood the concepts of love, compassion, and bodhicitta.
Whenever he heard about Dharmakīrti later in life, Atiśa wept.[212]
After this extended period of training Atiśa, now in his mid-
forties, returned Teacher at

to India to teach. Atiśa is primarily associated with the other great Buddhist Vikra

monastic university in India apart from Nālandā, Vikramaśīla.[213] Vikramaśīla was founded considerably later than Nālandā, in the late eighth or early ninth century; for this reason we have no records from the early Chinese pilgrims that provided us with such detailed information about Nālandā. There are, however, Tibetan accounts of life at Vikramaśīla. As one of the leading centres of Buddhist scholarship in India it attracted a considerably number of foreign visitors, and is said to have had special residential quarters just for Tibetan students. At Vikramaśīla Atiśa's abilities as a scholar were recognized and he reached the position of an upādhyāya (mkhan po), which, though not actually the administrative head of the monastery,[214] constituted a role of academic leadership, possibly similar to a university's academic head. Another position that is attributed to him is that of an upadhivārika (dge skos), a kind of deanship that appears to have involved the disciplinary supervision of a group of monks.

Atiśa stayed in India for one-and-a-half decades, before, now nearly 60 years The voyage old, he embarked on what must have been his most ambitious journey, even for to somebody as well-travelled as him: the voyage to Tibet. Buddhism had already arrived in Tibet in the seventh century, a period referred to as the early dissemination (snga dar) of the teachings. However, after two centuries the expansion of Buddhism stopped under the persecution of King gLang dar ma, beginning with him killing his brother and predecessor in 838. When gLang

dar ma was assassinated in turn, the Tibetan empire fragmented, and after one-and-a-half centuries of decline Tibetans started to rekindle the Buddhist

tradition by reconnecting with its roots in India. Part of this undertaking was

to invite outstanding Indian scholars to teach in Tibet. King Byang chub 'od

(984–1078), king of the ancient Tibetan kingdom of Guge in Western Tibet,

and himself a Buddhist monk, sent out a search party to India to invite a

pa :n:dita to come to Tibet. The invitation of Atiśa was not an entirely straight-forward matter, as Vikramaśīla was reluctant to let him go and initially only

agreed to grant him leave of three years.[215] In the end his expected return never

[212] Eimer 1979: 195.
[213] Although he seems to have spent some time at Nālandā too. A colophon to a T

translation indicates that he completed it there together with a Tibetan translator (

1967: 100).
[214] Chattopadhyaya 1967: 129–31.
[215] Chatthopadyaya 1967: 133.

happened: Atiśa spent the rest of his life in Tibet, and died at sNye thang just

south of Lhasa in 1054 at the age of 73, having lived in Tibet for thirteen years.
His work in Tibet
After a year's journey up to Kathmandu and further on through Nepal, Atiśa

arrived at Tho ling, the capital of the kingdom of Guge, at the age of 60. This

year, 1042, is commonly regarded as the beginning of the later dissemination

(phyi dar) of Buddhism into Tibet. Atiśa's activities in Tibet were manifold,

and included teaching disciples,[216] blessing temples,[217] and translating and

authoring texts. Best known of the works originating in Tibet is his Bodhi-
pathapradīpa, which he composed during the first three years of his stay at the

special request of King Byang chub 'od. Though only sixty-six verses long,

Atiśa also wrote a comprehensive auto-commentary on it, the Bodhimārga-
pradīpapañjikā.

While the details of Atiśa's stay in Tibet, interesting as they are in them-
selves,[218] are of less direct relevance to a history of Indian Buddhist philosophy,

there are two aspects of his life that deserve particular attention in the context

of our present account.

Indian

The first is the way in which his life illustrates the ambivalence of Indian

Mahāyāna's

Mahāyāna towards tantra.[219] On the one hand, tantric and non-tantric Buddhist

ambivalence
towards tantra

practices are taken to share a common goal: the attainment of Buddhahood.
Tantric practices are considered to be a particularly swift path to this destination.
On the other hand the tantric practices are also considered to be dangerous, as

they make particularly high demands on the practitioner, and, if not carried out

with the right motivation, can by their very antinomian nature lead not towards,

but further away from enlightenment.[220] In addition, despite the fact that tantra

is supposed to be particularly able to bring about rapid progress on the path to

enlightenment, its sexual practices made it unsuitable for ordained monks,[221]
thereby relegating the path of the monk to something that appeared, at least

from the perspective of soteriological efficacy, second-rate.[222]

Atiśa's connection

As we saw, Atiśa began his spiritual life as a tantric practitioner before his

with tantra
ordination as a monk, and continued tantric practices in later life.[223] During his

[216] Chatthopadyaya 1967: 357–66.
[217] Davidson 2004a: 102.
[218] For an account of the complex political situation Atiśa found himself in during

Tibet see Davidson 2004a: 108–12.
[219] This doctrinal tension between sūtra and tantra had interesting political ramific

Tibetan society of Atiśa's time. See Samuel 1993: 471–3.
[220] We should note that the non-
tāntrika's suspicion that tantra is likely to lead to ethical

profligacy is matched by the tāntrika's worry that the non-
tantric scholastic approach is likely to

lead to greater acquaintance with the words than with the meanings of the Buddh
A classic example of this is constituted by the life-
story of Nāropa, a contemporary of Atiśa's and

himself a famous scholar at Nālandā before his transformation into a tantric pract

1993: 227–8).
[221] Davidson 2004b: 199–200.
[222] Snellgrove 1987: 483–4, Ruegg 1981b.
[223] Samuel (1993: 468) describes Atiśa in his combination of sūtra and tantra prac

'perhaps a typical product of the Indian monastic universities of the early eleventl

time in Vikramaśīla he agreed to the expulsion of a tantric adept who was

found in the possession of alcohol, though he claimed this was to be used for

ritual purposes in propitiating a yoginī.[224] While this gives the impression of

Atiśa as defending monastic discipline, which forbids the consumption of

alcohol, against the antinomian practices of tantra, the further development

of this account actually describes the expelled monk as a bodhisattva and as

innocent of any breach of monastic discipline (using his spiritual powers he

leaves the monastery by walking through a wall), and Atiśa as accumulating

significant bad karma by acquiescing in his expulsion. In order to purge this

karmic debt Atiśa is then considered to have taken the decision to teach the

Mahāyāna in Tibet.[225]
A key reason for inviting him to Tibet seem to have been the desire on the Tantra

Tibetan side to counteract certain developments of tantric practices then found

in Tibet.[226] 'Gos lo tsā ba notes in the Blue Annals, a central Tibetan historical

work, for example, that:
notwithstanding the fact that some of the tantric precepts were to be found [in Tib

tantric practices became defiled. Meditation on the ultimate reality was abandone

many coarse practices made their appearance, such as sbyor sgrol ('union and libe
ation', ritualized forms of sex and violence),[227] gtad ser (curses and magically prc

hailstorms), and others.[228]
In order to remedy this situation the Tibetan kings 'sent invitations to numer-
ous learned pa :n:ditas, who were able to remove these obstacles by placing living

beings on the path of purity'.
One reason Byang chub 'od requested the composition of the Bodhipatha-
Atiśa on the

pradīpa may have been to provide a theoretical underpinning, coming from the su

tantric practices
tradition of Indian Buddhism itself, for the rejection of such tantric prac-
tices.[229] What Atiśa actually says in the text is far more nuanced, however,

treading the middle way, as befits a Mādhyamika. On the one hand he points

out in verse 64 that initiations involving meditative exercises with a (visualized

or actual) female partner are unsuitable for ordained monks,[230] yet on the other

hand, in his commentary in this verse he is equally critical of those doubting

the efficacy of tantric practice, pointing out that it is 'the heart of the Buddha's

teaching. And he who condemns it as a field of activity for those who have the

capacity, disposition, and development for it is going to hell—have no doubt

[224] Eimer 1979: 212.
[225] Eimer 1979: 212–13.
[226] Eimer 1979: 216.
[227] For more on the symbolic and literary dimensions of these terms see Samuel 1
[228] Roerich 1979: 204.
[229] See Snellgrove 1987: 481–4, Samuel 1993: 470.
[230] 'The secret and wisdom initiations should not be taken by religious celibates, l

emphatically forbidden in the Ādi-buddha-mahā-tantra (i.e. the Kālacakra-tantra)'. Sherburne

2000: 293, 317.

about it—because he is belittling the word of the Tathāgata and rejecting his

profound doctrine'.[231] Atiśa thus points out that the tantric practices are the

authentic teaching of the Buddha, and can be very efficacious for practitioners

who have the necessary abilities (and who are not following the path of a

Mahāyāna monk), though, as becomes clear in the remainder of the Bodhi-pathapradīpa, any Buddhist practice, including tantra, must place a clear

emphasis on the teaching of the Mahāyāna sūtras: the teaching of the two

bodhicittas, great compassion and the realization of emptiness. Certainly Atiśa

himself translated[232] and wrote on a number of tantric texts, and remained

himself a tantric practitioner who put particular emphasis on devotion to the

goddess Tārā.[233]

Political

Far from being a purely doctrinal issue, the perceived tension between the

dimension of the
antinomian dimension of tantra and the monastic (and more generally ethical)

status of tantra
regulatory framework of Mahāyāna had a political side to it as well. In India as

well as in Tibet the magical abilities exercised by the tantric practitioner were

seen both as a way of legitimizing political royal power and—due to their

transgressive nature—as a potential threat to this power.[234] The Tibetans who

invited Atiśa were primarily concerned with the latter, a concern which

constituted a major reason for requesting him to come to Tibet and teach. It

would be mistaken, however, to view Atiśa's discussion of tantra solely in terms

of the agenda of his hosts. It should rather be understood as a reflection of a

more general tendency, in Buddhist and non-Buddhist thought, to reconcep-
tualize tantra in a less antinomian manner, stressing the soteriological rather

than the magical aspect of tantra, and removing or changing the more trans-
gressive elements from the actual to the symbolic level.[235]

Buddhist
The second aspect of Atiśa's life we should point out here is the extent to

scholasticism

which he, more clearly than any of the Buddhist philosophers we have dis-
beyond India
cussed so far, embodies the connection of Indian Buddhist scholastic culture

[231] Sherburne 2000: 297.
[232] Jackson 2004: 111.
[233] Samuel 1993: 471, Beyer 1988.
[234] For extensive discussion of this point see Samuel 1993, 2008. It is worthwhile

that the political dimension of Buddhist tantra is no unique Tibetan phenomenon,

the history of tantra in India. One aspect that is likely to have supported developm

India was its conceptualisation as a means of defending Buddhism against the inc

from Brahmanism. Tantric ritual provided a route to establishing royal protection

Brahmins, with their ability to provide astrological and divinatory services, as we

government in general were much better equipped for.
The martial dimension of Buddhist tantra in its fighting back against Brahmanism

that which 'by defeating the outsiders, removes the obstacles to the path toward li
ation' (Eltschinger 2014: 174) is hard to overlook; the depiction of Buddhist deiti

members of the brahmanic pantheon or holding the severed heads of Brahma (Be

one of its immediately obvious manifestations. (Though this iconographic aggres

gone both ways: we also find representations of the goddess Cāmu:n:dā seated o

of the Buddha: Verardi 2014: 289–92.)
[235] Samuel 2008: 324–38.

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˙NĀGA AND DHARMAKĪRTI
with the world beyond the Indian subcontinent. By the eleventh century this

culture had already spread considerably beyond India itself, and it becomes

more appropriate to speak subsequently of an Indic rather than Indian

Buddhist scholastic tradition.
In Atiśa's own life this is evident in his formation as a scholar. Most of

his training in Buddhist philosophy did not take place at one of the great

Indian monastic universities but in Suvar :nadvīpa, a long way from the Indian

subcontinent. Atiśa then brought the learning he had acquired during those

twelve years back to Vikramaśīla, and during the final years of his life set out to

develop the spread of the Buddhist scholastic tradition in the remote and

culturally, politically, and socially wholly different Himalayan realm.
The firm establishment of Buddhist learning in Tibet at the time of the 'later Lool

dissemination' seems to be a good point to end our discussion of the most from T

important centuries of the development of Buddhist philosophy in India.
Looking back from here we realize that our knowledge of the Indian Buddhist

philosophical world would be considerably more fragmentary without the

abundance of texts that have been preserved through the wholesale Tibetan

adoption of Indian philosophical culture and the large-scale translation effort

covering the entire canon of root texts and commentaries.
More importantly, the Tibetan tradition has maintained the continuation of

Indian Buddhist scholastic debate up to the present day, by thinking along with

their sources 'in a style and along lines that are typologically Indian without

being historically Indian'.[236] This is not to say that the particular philosophical

game that is scholastic Buddhism has not been shaped and changed in many

ways by its transmission to a different cultural sphere, and most importantly,

perhaps, by the fact that this sphere included no non-Buddhist opponents. Nevertheless, it is not least because of this continuity of the development of

Tibetan Buddhism that the scholar of Indian Buddhist philosophy is able to

encounter it not as a series of exhibits in the museum of the history of ideas, but

as a living tradition.
[236] Ruegg 2004: 328.

Concluding Remarks

The preceding pages constitute one account of the main trajectories of Indian

Buddhist thought during the first millennium CE. There is much we had to

leave out, and many thinkers, concepts, and dialectical exchanges deserve a

much more detailed treatment than we could provide here. Despite the inevitably partial nature of this account, three main conclusions about the Buddhist

philosophical enterprise have emerged that are worth repeating here.
First, it has become apparent that assessing different parts of Buddhist

philosophy according to whether they accord with 'what the Buddha really

taught' is not particularly helpful. By this I do not mean to discourage research

into the earliest Buddhist sources. Rather, I want to suggest that we can

understand more about Buddhist thought if we do not try to draw a dichotomy

(as we might do in the case of a pearl) between an original 'inner core' of

Buddhist thought and a later 'coating' of subsequent doctrinal developments.
Instead, I have suggested a 'germination' model according to which a variety of

conceptual seeds was present in Buddhism's earliest teachings, arguing that the

different philosophical systems of Buddhist philosophy then arose from a

selective emphasis on some of these seeds over others. As such, the task of
the student of Buddhist philosophy is not to 'strip away' all the external layers
in order to find the core of the pearl, but to understand how a given tradition
and the particular intellectual climate in which it was located developed its
specific views by focusing on certain aspects of the Buddha's teachings rather
than others, letting some intellectual seeds grow to philosophical greater height
than others. Nor do we have to assume that the focus of one tradition is more
justified than that of another. From its very beginning the Buddhist tradition
did not understand the Buddha's dharma as a single canonical exposition
opposed to all others. Instead, the Buddha taught to a multiplicity of audiences
in a variety of ways, and often on the basis of very different assumptions. It was
not that one exposition was more authoritative than another, but that each was
designed to meet the specific soteriological needs of its audience. We can think
of the subsequent development of Buddhist thought along similar lines. That
a specific set of concepts is stressed by a particular tradition at a particular
time can be seen as indicating that the resulting version of the Buddha's
dharma met the specific soteriological needs of the audience receiving it.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Those were the teachings that the practitioners and thinkers at that time and
place perceived as providing the best means for making progress along the path

to liberation.

Second, it has become abundantly clear above that Buddhist philosophy is not just about thinking. It is not even just about thinking in response to and within the context of Buddhist texts. Buddhist philosophy has been considered by all its proponents as part of the path to enlightenment and the liberation from suffering, and it has never been suggested that one can obtain this goal by thinking or philosophical analysis alone. The reason for this is that the unliberated state is not simply a product of false beliefs, even though false beliefs form an important part of this state. The Buddhist thinkers were not of the opinion that we could always simply get rid of a given false belief by encountering, analysing, and finally assenting to an argument that demonstrated its opposite. This is because certain beliefs (such as beliefs in a substantial self, or in intrinsically existent objects) are so deeply ingrained due to habitualized tendencies that keep reasserting themselves independent of the results of our philosophical deliberations. For this reason philosophical analysis has to be supplemented by a set of cognitive exercises that aim at weakening and finally removing the mental reflexes that bring about the constant and near-automatic reassertion of beliefs that our philosophical investigations have found to be deficient.

This does not mean, however, that such cognitive exercises or meditative techniques are merely intended to eradicate conclusions that philosophical analysis has previously undermined. The influence between philosophical investigations and meditative exercises is not one-way. From the classification

of phenomena in the Abhidharma up to meditative exercises for the dissolution

of visualizations associated with Yogācāra, we have seen examples of meditative

techniques and their results influencing the development of philosophical

theorizing. The philosophical and the meditative elements of the Buddhist

path are mutually supporting. Meditative exercises are used to turn beliefs

about the world supported by philosophical analysis into a deeply ingrained

comportment towards the world, while philosophical analyses provide a con-
ceptual background for experiences encountered during meditative training.
As such, the Buddhist philosophical tradition differs in an important way

from the Western one, at least if the latter is conceived as primarily providing

answers to puzzles about specific fundamental features of reality, an exercise of

reason for its own sake, independent of the authority of specific texts or

traditions.[1] Of course, there are certain elements of the Buddhist philosophical

enterprise resembling such an understanding of philosophy, but I believe that

[1] For a different take on the Western philosophical tradition see Hadot 1981.

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the preceding historical discussion will have convinced the reader that it is not

possible to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the Buddhist philosoph-
ical tradition without taking into account aspects like its meditative dimension,

features which do not play a large role in the way the philosophical enterprise is

understood in the West.

The third point I want to stress that has emerged from the brief survey of

Indian Buddhist thought I could offer here is the importance of a systematic

engagement with the problems and concepts the Indian texts are concerned

with. By this I mean the unwillingness to restrict our inquiry to what a specific

ancient Indian philosopher or text said, but to investigate whether the argu-
ments presented are valid, whether the position can be defended against

obvious and not-so-obvious objections, and whether the overall picture emer-
ging is an attractive one that we might be inclined to defend. I therefore

recommend doing philosophy with ancient texts. Why this should be of interest

to historians of philosophy is at least not entirely obvious. We would not

necessarily expect the literary historian to compose novels, or the art historian

to paint. But I believe that in the case of ancient Indian philosophical texts the

connection between writing the history of philosophy and doing philosophy is

particularly pertinent.

When studying ancient Indian philosophical texts, it is often not wholly

evident how a particular argument is to be understood. This is partly due to the

highly compressed sūtra-style of presentation, which provides an account of a

philosophical system that is not meant to be understood without a commentary. But such commentaries may be lost, or only preserved in translations in

different Asian languages, or may have been composed much later. So in order

to make sense of a sūtra and its associated commentaries we need to create a

framework of the different interpretative options, a map of different possible

arguments or solutions to a philosophical problem a given work could present,

in order to determine which of these provides the best possible reading of

the text.[2] The only way to develop such a framework is by thinking through a

philosophical question against the horizon of the given ancient text or tradition. This allows us to explore the different theoretical options available when

setting out to answer a given philosophical question.
We can draw a comparison between the history of philosophy and the

history of technology here. The historian of technology might not be content

with finding out how the ancient authors envisaged a machine to be constructed, but may also want to know whether such a machine would have in

[2] We need not commit ourselves to the claim that there is only one such 'best' rea

2015: 322–
30). In fact, the boundary between a commentarial exposition of a text, drawing c

what the text says, and a philosophical engagement with its contents, bringing it t

contemporary audience, was already fluid in the Indian scholastic context (Ganer

CONCLUDING REMARKS

fact worked. In order to do so, assessing the ancient constructions from the perspective of modern engineering, or building a working model following the description in the text, would be essential steps. But even if questions regarding the actual technological feasibility of machines described in ancient texts is not at the forefront of our minds, and we simply want to focus on trying to understand what the texts say, attempting to solve an engineering problem by means of technological methods known and available to an ancient author could be of crucial importance. This is because such a hypothetical construction could guide our interpretation of the text, suggesting to us what the text might be saying.[3] As knowledge of and engagement with engineering is essential for the historian of technology, so knowledge of and engagement with the systematic discussion of philosophical problems is essential for the historian of philosophy. In the case of Indian thought, and its often highly condensed and elliptical mode of presentation in particular, such an engagement is in fact an indispensable hermeneutic tool. In order to reach a sophisticated understanding of Indian philosophical texts, philological and historical accuracy need to be combined with argumentative acuity and philosophical creativity.

[3] Assuming, that is, that the author had indeed succeeded in constructing the macl describes. This assumption is a simple equivalent of the maxim of charity in inter assume that the author had some valid argument in mind when setting out his exp least we try our best in attempting to interpret the text as if he did.

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