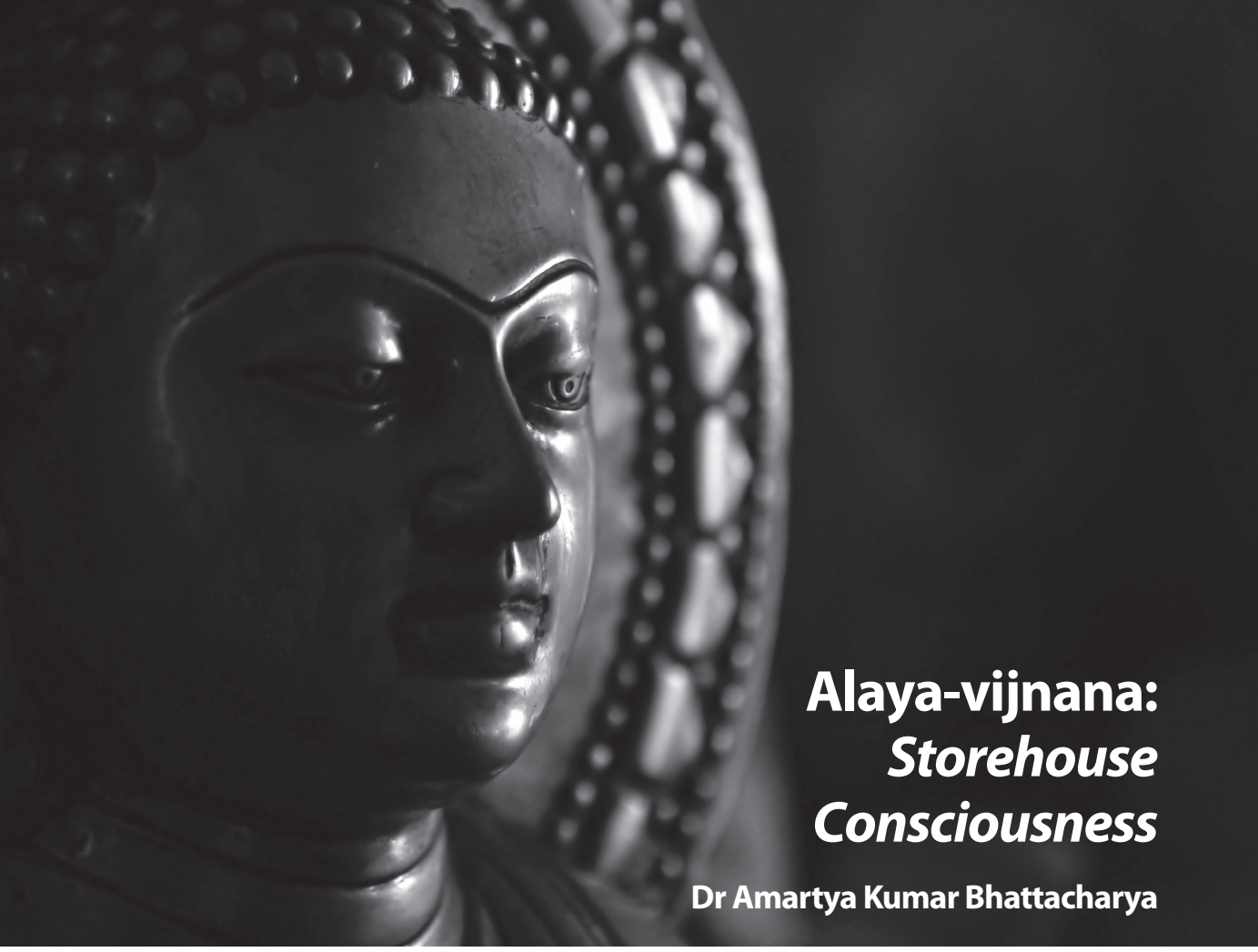

Alaya-vijnana: *Storehouse Consciousness*

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What we think, we do. Our mind determines our personality. This article deals with the definition of personality according to Buddhism. Buddha says: 'I say *bhikkus* that volition is action. Having thought, one acts through body, speech, and mind.'[1] The Yogachara or Vijnanavada school of Mahayana Buddhism deals with human personality in great detail. Yogachara, which had its genesis in the *Samdhinirmochana Sutra* (second century CE), was largely formulated by Acharyas Asanga and Vasubandhu. The *Samdhinirmochana Sutra* is the seminal text of the Yogachara school. The *Lankavatara Sutra* (fourth century CE) is another very important text of this school. The *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* is also considered important. There are innumerable philosophical schools of Buddhism but the four principal ones are: Madhyamika, with its doctrine of *shunya*, nihilism; Vijnanavada, and its subjective idealism; Sautrantika, representationists; and, Vaibhasika, realists.

Buddha's Teachings of Anatmata

Buddha, consistent with his teachings of conditioned existence and the law of universal change, denies through his doctrine of *anatmata*, or *nairatmya*, the existence of a permanent Atman unaffected by changes and which transmigrates from body to body. The Sanskrit word 'Atman', the Pali word 'Atta', and the Chinese word 'Shen' mean Self. The Buddhist wisdom, gained by

experience, is that the Atman is not found even in the deepest meditative state, that is, even during samadhi. Further, subscription to a belief in the Atman results in *ahamkara*, egoism, and attachment to mundane things. In its most fundamental sense, *nairatmya* implies selflessness, which has its external manifestation in selfless action in order to benefit others.

In the course of yet another sermon, at Shravasti in the Jetavana, Buddha says: 'There is an unborn, unchanging, uncreated, and unconditioned. If there were not that, which is unborn, unchanging, uncreated, and unconditioned, there could not be any escape from what is born, changing, created, and conditioned. But since there is an unborn, unchanging, uncreated, and unconditioned, there is an escape from what is born, changing, created, and conditioned.'[2] With these words Buddha indicates the *paramartha-satya*, ultimate Truth, which is nirvana. At another point Buddha mentions that *bhavatrishna*, desire for existence, is also one kind of desire that keeps us bound. The existence of a person depends on the collection of different constituents: material body, immaterial mind, and *vijnana*, formless consciousness, just as a chariot is a collection of wheels, axles, shaft and so forth. The so-called individual 'existence' dissolves when the constituents break up. In the *Dhammapada* it is said: '*Sarva dharma anatma*; all phenomena are not-self.'[3] 'The conception of a Self is thus replaced here by that of an unbroken stream of consciousness.'[4] It must be kept in mind that Buddha's attitude is practical, and his primary concern is the salvation of suffering human beings. His silence in response to speculative metaphysical questions such as whether the self is different from the body, whether it survives death, whether the world is finite or infinite, eternal or non-eternal, are called the great 'indeterminate questions'.

According to Buddhism, nothing animate or inanimate is exempt from the law of change. This is obvious from an inspection of the first and third of the Four Noble Truths enunciated by Buddha in the *Dharmachakrapravartana Sutra*. The first noble truth says that life in the world is full of suffering; the third maintains that it is possible to stop suffering. All changes imply suffering. 'All things, Buddha repeatedly teaches, are subject to change and decay' (135). A person cannot step into the same river twice. When one thing disappears, it conditions the appearance of another thing, creating thus a series of cause and effect. Everything is in a state of 'becoming' something else the very next moment. A wheel cannot be separated from its movement. There is no static wheel 'behind' the wheel in motion. Things change over time. Everything originates in function of other factors, that is, all things come into existence as the result of an interaction of various causes. This law of *pratitya-samutpada*, dependent origination, is central to Buddhism. For example, anger cannot arise by itself, without a cause. Swami Vivekananda graphically describes the process of dependent origination:

> This body is the name of one continuous stream of matter—every moment we are adding material to it, and every moment material is being thrown off by it—like a river continually flowing, vast masses of water always changing places; yet all the same, we take up the whole thing in imagination, and call it the same river. What do we call the river? Every moment the water is changing, the shore is changing, every moment the environment is changing, what is the river then? It is the name of this series of changes. So with the mind. That is the great Kshanika Vijnana Vada doctrine, most difficult to understand, but most rigorously and logically worked out in the Buddhistic philosophy.[5]

Alaya-vijnana

From the psychological point of view a person is analysable into a collection of *pancha-skandas*, five aggregates: *rupa*, *vedana*, *samjna*, *samskara*, and *vijnana*, all of which are identified as *anatma*, non-Self, by Buddha in the *Anatmalakshana Sutra*. The first is *rupa*, form, and the last four are categorized as *nama*, name. *Vedana*, sensations, of the physical world of *rupa* are received by the sense organs—the five physical sense organs and the mind are called the six sensory bases; sensations lead to *samjna*, perceptions, including understanding and naming; this in turn leads to *samskara*, pre-dispositions or tendencies generated by impressions of past experiences; lastly *vijnana*, consciousness, which is at the root.

In the Yogachara, application of yoga, school the concept of *alaya-vijnana*—literally, the abode consciousness—is introduced. They admit only a kind of reality that is of the nature of consciousness, and that objects, which appear to be material or external to consciousness, are but ideas or states of consciousness. One difficult question posed to this doctrine is this: how is it that the subject cannot create at will any object at any time? To explain this the Vijnanavadins say that the subject is a stream of *kshanika*, momentary, consciousness and within the stream there lie buried the samskaras of all past experiences. At a particular moment that a samskara comes to the surface of consciousness, for which the circumstances are most favourable, and attains maturity, that is, develops into immediate perception. The consciousness considered in its aspect of being a storehouse or substratum consciousness is called *alaya-vijnana*. This answers to the concept of Atman of other schools, with the difference that it is not one unchanging entity but a stream of continuously changing states.[6] Hence this school is also called the Chittamatravada or Vijnaptimatravada school. The fundamental concept of the Yogachara school may be expressed by the proposition that the *parinishpanna svabhava*, perfected self-nature, is realized when a person pierces through his or her *parikalpita svabhava*, imagined or illusory self-nature, and develops into the ideal state of nirvana.

Alaya-vijnana contains all the impressions of past actions and future potentialities. It gives rise to thoughts, desire, and attachments, which bind us to the fictitious external world. It is the basis of our personality. It is also called the *mula-vijnana*, the base-consciousness from which awareness and perception spring. *Alaya-vijnana* is not the bed of only attachments and suffering but it also contains the *tathagatagarbha*, Buddha-matrix, through which a person can become a Buddha. Therefore, the real basis of one's personality is the Buddha-like faculty called Buddha-*dhatu*,[7] latent in every being. The difference between an enlightened being and a deluded one is that the former has manifested his or her Buddha-*dhatu*, while the latter has not. Thus, broadly speaking, the Buddha-*dhatu* implies the ascertaining of that which allows a person to become a Buddha. The *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* states that Buddha-*dhatu* is everlasting, pure, and blissful. This work deals primarily with the doctrine of Buddha-nature, which is immanent in all beings.[8] In the same text it is said: 'That is why I [Buddha] speak about these four things [dharma, meaning, wisdom, and import-embracing sutras] and say that they are the things to be depended upon. "Dharma" is "Dharmata", "meaning" is saying that the Tathagata is Eternal and Unchanging, "Wisdom" is knowing that all beings have Buddha-Nature (Buddhata), "grasping the meaning" means being well versed in all Mahayana sutras.'[9]

The Noble Eightfold Path leads to spiritual enlightenment, which is nothing but the

full manifestation of the Buddha-*dhatu*, or the Tathagata-*dhatu*, in a person. As the Yogacharas lay stress on yoga practices, any person can develop the Buddha-*dhatu* through the appropriate practice of meditation and become a Buddha. The goal of life is to discover this reality, which is the basis of one's personality. *Avidya*, ignorance, is the cause of all suffering, whether past, present, or future; enlightenment destroys ignorance for ever. For an average individual the summation of all physical and mental processes, which are in constant flux, is perceived empirically as 'I'. The empirical 'I' is ephemeral and impermanent, and is *samvriti-satya*, conventional truth—the word *samvrita* literally means 'covered'. The concept of *satya-dvaya*, two categories of truth, which comprises *samvriti-satya* and *paramartha-satya* is an essential element of Buddhism. The *Mahayana Sutralankara*, written by Acharya Asanga, says that a *pudgala*, person, exists in *pragyapti*, designation; this is *samvriti-satya*, but not in *dravya*, substance. Acharya Asanga's lead is followed throughout this article, where the *samvriti-satya* of the empirical person is considered in the context of *anatmata* or *nairatmya*.

Nirvana is Supreme Bliss

Once Hui-hai Tai-chu came to the Zen—a school of Mahayana Buddhism developed in China and widespread in East Asia—master Ma-tsu Tao-i, the first of the possibly four greatest Chinese Zen masters. Ma-tsu asked him, 'Why are you here searching when you already possess the treasure you are looking for?' 'What treasure?', his interlocutor asked. Ma-tsu replied, 'The one who is questioning me right now.'[10] Ma-tsu had an unswerving ability to bring the empirical 'I' into focus just at the right moment. On another occasion, when asked, 'What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from India?', Ma-tsu replied with a classic Zen answer, 'What is the meaning of your asking this at precisely this moment?' (Ibid.).

One reacts mentally because one is conscious of something. Mental reactions are of two types: craving and aversion. It is evident that aversion results in suffering, and that craving too results in suffering in the absence of the desired object. Thus, ultimately, whatever is impermanent is *duhkha*, suffering. The renowned sage Buddhaghosha, writer of the *Vishuddhimagga*, Path of Purification, has dwelt elaborately on suffering. Taking the lead from Acharya Nagarjuna, the author posits that *duhkha* is transient; it arises from something else and also decays into extinction. *Duhkha* is not self-determining; its existence and character are attributable to factors that condition its origin and subsequent transformation. Coming into existence and dying out of existence, *duhkha* lacks any trace of permanence. It may be said that *duhkha* lacks *svabhava*, and is characterized by *nihsvabhava*, absence of Self-nature. The author is, therefore, led to formulate the proposition '*duhkhameva shunyam*, suffering is empty'. Because *duhkha* is ephemeral, the author can expand the Sanskrit sentence thus: '*Duhkhameva anityam evam shunyam*, suffering is finite and empty.' The perception of *duhkha*'s emptiness allows one to let go of *duhkha* and be released from the hold that it has on us. Therefore, we can proceed towards enlightenment and improve the quality of our meditation by remembering the Buddha-*dhatu* in us.

The capacity to tread the path to nirvana is already in us, we just have to use it. It is a process of uncovering one's Buddha-*dhatu*. The more our mind is defiled, the more unenlightened we are. Erasing the defilements leads to *bodhi*, enlightenment, and nirvana. In the *Dharmachakra-pravartana Sutra* Buddha says that nirvana is not subject to grief, defilement, disease, decay, and death. In other words, nirvana is beyond

cause and effect; it transcends the conditioned phenomena. Buddha also says that '*nirvanam paramam sukham*; nirvana is supreme bliss'. Nirvana is *apratitya-samutpanna* and *asamskrita*, unconditioned.

It is interesting to note that in the *Lankavatara Sutra*, a Mahayana text associated with the Yogachara school, nirvana is described as the seeing of everything as it is. Nirvana is a positive absolute and is also *nitya*, without beginning and end. Nirvana means a state of mukti, freedom, or *vimukti*, absolute freedom. Nirvana also denotes satya, truth, and shanti, peace. A synonym for nirvana is moksha, liberation. Nirvana is a state of absolute perfection. Sariputra, the famous historical disciple of Buddha, describes nirvana as the extinction of desire, hatred, and illusion. In mystical language nirvana is the experience of standing face to face with Reality. Nirvana is equated with *bodhi* and the *paramartha-satya*. Nirvana is sometimes expressed as the negative of negative, such as the cessation of suffering, of craving, of aversion, and so forth. This need not result in any confusion. In Sanskrit sometimes positive things are expressed as the negatives of negatives, like the word *arogya*, which means 'recuperation from illness', or the word *amrita*, which means 'immortal'. Further, as mathematics proves, the negative of negative is always positive. Nirvana is freeing oneself from the chains of a false sense of individuality. Nirvana is a state of non-duality, *advaita* or *advaya*; a state where the *parikalpita svabhava*, false sense of 'I', does not exist. Expressed differently, nirvana is liberation from the illusion of the separateness of the individual self from the whole.

Enlightened people are free because in them the contact of the six sensory bases with the external world does not produce any reactions. In their case the mind is like a lamp that does not flicker. Non-attachment towards all beings and towards any other thing, including the concepts of 'I' and 'mine', is a characteristic of an enlightened mind. The absence of ego in enlightened people leads them to adopt an attitude of dispassion and selflessness towards everything in their physical and mental world. They have risen above their previous mental samskaras. They are virtuous, always cheerful, happy, and optimistic. They radiate light wherever they go. They are wise and compassionate and do everything for the good of the world.

Notes and References

1. Sue Hamilton, *Identity and Experience* (London: Luzac Oriental, 1996), 109.
2. *Khuddaka Nikaya*, 'Udana', 8.1–4; translation by the author.
3. *Dhammapada*, 20.7.
4. Satischandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1984), 138.
5. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1990; 9. 1997). 3. 404.
6. See *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, 149–50.
7. The term Buddha-*dhatu*—*fo-hsing* or *fo-xing* in Chinese—was almost certainly coined in China. The *Lankavatara Sutra* speaks of *alaya-vijnana* as the same as the *tathagatagarbha*. Buddha-*dhatu* is a recent—about a century ago—re-translation into Sanskrit of the original Chinese equivalent. Buddha-*dhatu* may be considered a very good example of a Sanskrit word recently coined by translating from its Chinese equivalent.
8. See *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion*, eds I Fischer-Schreiber, S Schuhmacher, and G Woerner (London: Rider, 1989), 213.
9. *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, trans. Kōshō Yamamota, ed. Dr Tony Page (E-book, 2007), 87; available at <http://www.nirvanasutra.org.uk/>.
10. Dale S Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000), 215.