Swabhāva-problematic in the Abhidharma

Seiki Miyashita

1. The usage of the term "svabhāva" in the early Abhidharma texts.

At first it is noted that the term "svabhāva" (sabhāva in Pāli) is not found in the Pāli Suttapitaka except in comparatively later texts such as Apadāna, and Milindapañha. The term "svabhāva" was not used in early Buddhist texts. It was in the Abhidharma text that the term "svabhāva" came to be used as a technical term of the Buddhist doctrine. Here I will examine how the term had been used in early Abhidharma texts.

1.1 The Saṅgitiparīyāya and the Dharmaskandha.

The Saṅgitiparīyāya and the Dharmaskandha are thought to be the oldest among the Sarvāstivāda’s Abhidharma texts. In the Saṅgitiparīyāya the term "svabhāva" is found only at two places. The first is used to refer to the quality of the dharmas such as śīlasyasana, drṣṭiyasana, śīlaspattī, drṣṭispattī. Its quality is iṣṭa or anīṣṭa. The second is tātsvabhāvaśīya, the fourth of seven adhikaraṇa-śamathā dharmāḥ. It refers to the personal character of the accused monk in the Saṅgha. In the Dharmaskandha not even a single use of the term "svabhāva" is found.

Now we can know that the term "svabhāva" was not used as a technical one in the oldest text of the Abhidharma.

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*This paper was originally presented at the 35th International Congress of Asian and North African Studies (ICANAS) in Budapest, July 7–12, 1997.

1 We can find the only usage of the term "svabhāva" in Vinaya v. 1, p. 87: dve 'me bhikkhave paccayā nāgassa sabbānapātukammāya. Here the term sabbāva means "one’s real nature."


1.2 The Vijñānakāya, the Dhātukāya and the Prakaraṇapāda.

In the Vijñānakāya the term svabhāva is used three times. In every case where the adhipati-pratyaya is defined to be all other dharmas than itself, the term svabhāva refers to “dharma itself.” However, there are three passages where the phrase “諸法性有等有” (The 性 hsin of dharmas do exist.) is stated. In his translation de La Vallée Poussin suggested that the Chinese term “性” (hsing) here might be svabhāva. My interpretation will be given later.

The term svabhāva is often found in the Dhātukāya. Also here it refers to dharma itself and it is used to state that dharma such as vedanā, etc. is not associated (samprayukta 相應) with vedanā itself. In the seventh chapter of Prakaraṇapāda also the term is used in the same way, i.e. as the dharma itself is excluded from the associated dharmas.

1.3 The Prajñāprasthāna and the Vasumitraśāstra.

There are six places where the term svabhāva is used in the Prajñāprasthāna. In two places the term refers to dharma itself like the case above. In two other places we find the phrases, “自性生念” (the innate memory) and “染著自性住不増不減” (the impurity and the purity neither increase nor decrease while remaining in the original state). The original Sanskrit of the former may come from prakṛti-jñātmara, the latter from prakṛṭisthā.

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4 Vijñānakāya (識身足論), ChT26, p. 547b27, 547c3, 586a19: 除自性餘一切法 (all other dharmas excepting svabhāva).
6 Dhātukāthā (界身足論), ChT26, pp. 617b–625b: 此何為餘謂自性 (What remains? It is vedanāsvabhāva), etc.
7 Prakaraṇapāda (高顒足論), ChT26, pp. 735a–764a: 除其自性 (excepting that svabhāva).
One of the remaining two places refers to the essence of dharma. There is a question about the svabhāva of prahāna-parijñāna and the answer is: ‘通自性謂貪欲斷識斷一切煩悩永斷’ (The svabhāva of parijñāna means the complete elimination of rāga, dveṣa and moha, that is, the complete elimination of all klesas.)

This is the first usage we have seen so far of svabhāva being used to mean essence. But we cannot find the term in the corresponding section of the old translation of the Prajñāprasthāna.

Lastly we come to the following phrase: “諸法決定無有雜亂恆住自性不捨自性” (Dharmas are established and are not in confusion. They are always settled in svabhāva and do not leave svabhāva.)

This usage of the term svabhāva is peculiar to the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma doctrine. But here also we can not find the correspondent phrase in the old translation. There is a gap of over 270 years between A.D. 383 when Saṅghadeva made the old translation of the Prajñāprasthāna, and A.D. 657–660 when Hsüan tsang made his translation of that. It can be said that the phrase was added to the text after the doctrinal development of Sarvāstivāda’s Abhidharma.

We can find the new term svalaksana many times in the Vasumitraśāstra. And also find here the term “自然” which is thought to be the old translation of svabhāva. According to the Preface to translation, the translators did not have enough time to revise the translation due to war and other conditions so that the text remains hard to read. It is very difficult for us to understand the terminology of the text.

However, the following line can be seen in the text: “有為法於三世各有自相” (Each samskṛtadharm has svalaksana in three periods of time.) The theories of four great masters of Sarvāstī-
vāda are also found there. So we can say that this text belongs just before the Vibhāṣā.

1.4 The Vibhāṣā.

The term svabhāva appears frequently in the Vibhāṣā. All usages that we have seen above are included. There are two special usages to be noted in the Vibhāṣā.

In its beginning the Vibhāṣā states the following: "问。阿毘達磨自性云何。答。無漏慧根以自性。一界一處一蘊所緣（Question: What is the svabhāva of abhidharma? Answer: it is anāsrava-prajñā-indriya, and it is subsumed under one dhātu, one āyatana, one skandha.)

After giving detailed arguments concerning the svabhāva of abhidharma, the Vibhāṣā states the following: "已說自性。所以今當說。以何義故名阿毘達磨。阿毘達磨諸論師言。於諸法相能善分別故極決擇故名阿毘達磨” (The svabhāva has been said. Now the reason is to be said. Why is abhidharma named so? Āhidharmikas have said that it is named abhidharma because it well and completely discerns dharma-lakṣaṇas.)

The discernment or analysis of dharmas is the essence of both abhidharma and prajñā. Because they are one in essence, abhidharma is subsumed under prajñā. This is called the subsumption of dharma by svabhāva” (svabhāvena dharmasamgrahah). So we can say that svabhāva here means essence.

However, the question about svabhāva here does not concern just its essence. This is because the svabhāva of abhidharma is explained to be prajñā in the answer to the first question, and then the essence of abhidharma is explained in the answer to the second question. Therefore, here, svabhāva does not simply mean essence.

The following points are repeated in the Vibhāṣā. First, a dharma is not associated with svabhāva, and a dharma cannot

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15 Ibid. p. 724b-19.
16 Vibhāṣā (愛色論), ChT27, p. 2c23-24. Cf. 2nd old translation of the Vibhāṣā (阿毘達磨愛色論), ChT28, p.2c26-28: 閃回。阿毘達磨為何者是耶。答曰。無漏慧根自體。不一界一處一蘊。1st old translation of the Vibhāṣā (阿毘達磨愛色論), ChT28, p. 417b3-4: 閃回。何者阿毘達磨。答曰。無漏慧根自體。不一界一處一蘊。
18 Cf. Ibid. p. 306b-307a. Here is given the detailed arguments of dharmasamgraha. Also see 2nd old translation, p. 232a-c.
know its *svabhāva*. This means that dharms are separated from each other. This has been seen in the *Dhātukāya*, the *Prakaraṇapāda*, and the *Prajñāprasthāna*.

Second, *svabhāva* of dharma is same with *svalakṣaṇa* of dharma. It is true that the term *svabhāva* has been used to mean essence, but the term *svalakṣaṇa* more properly means essence. So it is noted in the *Vibhāṣā* that the term *svabhāva* implies the meaning of *svalakṣaṇa*, i.e. essence. Therefore the term *svabhāva* is used to refer to both the dharma itself and its essence. Thus dharmas are subsumed under a more elemental dharma by the analysis of their essence.

The other special usage of the term *svabhāva* in the *Vibhāṣā* appears in the following argument that all dharmas have their own established *svabhāvas*. It is stated in the *Vibhāṣā*: “一切法各住自性” (all dharmas are settled in their own *svabhāvas*), “恆住自性不捨自性” (dharms are always settled in *svabhāva* and do not leave *svabhāva*), and “自相決定” (*svalakṣaṇa* is established). In the same context the term 性相 (hsing hsiang) also is used as the following: “諸法相決定無有銛髒” (*svabhāvas of dharmas are established and are not in confusion”), “阿羅漢斷諸煩惱非令全無。過去未來煩惱性相猶實有故” (When an arhat has eliminated klešas, they are not completely annihilated. Because there still exist *svabhāvas* of klešas of the past and the future).

That dharmas have their own established *svabhāva* is the most important principle for the Sarvāstivāda’s Abhidharma doctrine. This is because the theory of dharma’s existence in

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19 See notes 6, 7, 8. In *Vibhāṣā* everywhere. Cf. 19b26: 與自性不相應 etc.; 42c26-27: 不知自性及此應有諸法, etc.


21 *Abhidharmakosābhidharmayukti* *Tattvārtha*, Peking ed. To80a7-8: 一切法相決定無有銛髒。阿羅漢斷諸煩惱非令全無。過去未來煩惱性相猶實有故


23 Ibid. p. 171b4-5 (2nd old transl. 127c: no corresponding passage).

It is difficult to assume the original sanskrit term for 性相. I can show an instance where its equivalent is *svabhāva*. Sanghabhadra’s *Nyāyānusārīṇī* (順正理論), ChT29. 394c2: 諸法性相最殊極難知. This is quoted in *Tattvārtha* To 233b1: 諸法性相最殊極難知故，宜可科別。
three periods of time is maintained on the basis of this principle. What is meant by the term svabhāva here is the constant oneness of dharma itself and its essence, i.e. the identity of a dharma.

2. The theory of existence of dharmas in three periods of time.
2.1 Initial argument in the Vijñānakāya.

In the Vijñānakāya we find the initial argument of the theory of existence of dharmas in three periods of time. Here Sarvāstivādins repeatedly maintain that all objects which have been cognized exist.\(^{24}\) Also they argue that there is no mind which has non-being as its object. This is because the cognition arises mainly by two conditions (pratyaya), i.e. the cognizing faculty (indriya) and the cognized object (ālambana).\(^{25}\) If the cognized object does not exist, the cognition does not arise. Future dharmas and past dharmas are actually cognized. Therefore all dharmas exist in three periods of time. In short, whatever has been cognized actually exist.

Pudgalavāda maintains that a pudgala is born to a gati after leaving another gati. The Vijñānakāya refutes this by arguing that the five gatis are established and are not confused with each other (五趣決定安立不相雜亂).\(^{26}\) It is also argued that “性” (hsing) of dharmas do exist (諸法性有等有).\(^{27}\) The Chinese term “性” here is used in almost the same way as svabhāva as noted above. As we have seen, it was in the Viḥāṣa that the term svabhāva was initially used to mean the identity of dharmas. For this reason, “性” cannot be the translation of the term svabhāva. This could be the equivalent of the term bhāva which is seen in the Kathāvatthu.

2.2 Sarvāstivāda found in the Kathāvatthu.

In the Kathāvatthu the argument that all exist (sabbam-atthiti-...
“kathā” is introduced in the following lines:

\[\text{paccuppannā} \ \text{rūpaṃ} \ \text{niruṣjhamānaṃ} \ \text{paccuppannabhāvaṃ} \ \text{jahatīti. āmantā.} \]
\[\text{rūpabhāvaṃ jahatīti, na h’ evaṃ vattabbe.} \]

Does the present form which is going to disappear leave the situation of the present? It does.
Does it leave the situation of form? No, it does not.

\[\text{rūpaṃ rūpabhāvaṃ na jahatīti. āmantā.} \]
\[\text{rūpaṃ niccaṃ dhuvanā sassaṭaṃ avipariṇāmadhamman ti. na h’ evaṃ vattanotbbe....} \]

Does the form not leave the situation of form? It does not.
Is the form eternal, firm, permanent, and unchangeable? No, it is not.

\[\text{rūpaṃ rūpabhāvaṃ na jahatīti. rūpaṃ aniccam adhuvanā vipariṇāmadhamman ti.} \]

The form does not leave the situation of form. The form is not eternal, not firm, impermanent, and changeable.

In undergoing many situations, the situation of form (rūpa-bhāva) is not abandoned. Buddhaghosa takes it as khandasa-bhāva. But in the Kathāvatthu itself, the term sabhāva was not used.

The argument quoted in the Kathāvatthu is very similar to the interpretation of Dharmatrāta, one of the four great masters of Sarvāstivādins, and it treats the issue of how the distinctions of three periods of time are effected, which was not taken up in the Vijñānakāya. Therefore the argument of the Vijñānakāya could preceded that in the Kathāvatthu. Thus the term “性” (hsing) in the Vijñānakāya can be the equivalent of bhāva.

\[28 \text{Kathāvatthu p. 120-121.} \]
\[29 \text{Kathāvatthu Anthokatha, p. 44: sabbe pi attādibhedā dhammā khandhasa-bhāvaṃ na vijohani. tasā sabbaṃ atthi yeva nāma ti laddhi, seyyathāpi etarahi sabbatthivādānaṃ.} \]

3. Conclusion.

In the Vijñānakāya Sarvāstivādins repeatedly maintain that whatever has been cognized actually exists. This is because the cognized object is a cause to bring about the cognition. Dharmas which are cognized exist with its bhāva and are established
without confusion.

What is meant by the argument is simply that form is always form. In other words, the form, whatever it may be the future, the present, or the past, can be cognized as a form because the form always holds the situation of form (*rūpabhāva*). The situation of form is a cause, a necessary condition for effecting the cognition.

This is the identity of dharma. The doctrinal system of Abhidharma can be built only on the basis of dharmas which are settled in their identities. This was first referred to by the term *bhāva*. Later, the concept of *svabhāva* came to be used in the *Vibhaṣā*.

In addition to the exclusive domination of the concept *svabhāva* in the later Sarvāstivāda, we can find the term *svabhāva* having the same meaning in the *Aṣṭasāhasriṇa* Prajñāpāramitā. And it is confirmed in the oldest translation by Lokakṣema which was made in A.D. 178–189. Therefore it can be said that the *Vibhaṣā* must has been composed before the Lokakṣema’s translation. This would suppot the words in the postscript of Hsien tsang’s translation of the *Vibhaṣā*, which says that the *Vibhaṣā* was composed in Kāśmīra at the time of the King Kaniska who is thought to have lived in about the middle of the 2nd Century A.D.

\[30\] This can be confirmed by Hsien tsang’ translation of *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* in the following: *AKBh*, p. 298, 21–22:

*svabhāvaḥ sarvadā cāśīdhāvo nityaś ca neṣyate/ na ca svabhāvād bhāvo ‘nyo vyaktam śvarācēṛitaṁ//*

ChT29, p. 105b2–3:

許法體徤有，而無性非常。

性體無別，此真自在作。

\[31\] *Aṣṭasāhasriṇa* Prajñāpāramitā, Vaidya’s edition (Aṣṭa.); Lokakṣema’s transl. ChT8, No. 224 (L.K.); Subhuti (Chh ch’ien)’s transl. ChT8, No. 225 (CC.); Kumārajiva’s transl. ChT8, No. 227 (K.J.)

Aṣṭa. 5.29–6.6: *rūpam eva virahitaṁ rūpasvabhāvena....*

L.K. 426b25: 色離本色。

CC. 47b27: 色色依色性；479c1：色色依色自然。

K.J. 538a3: 色離色性；538a7: 色法皆離自性。

Aṣṭa. 13.10: *evam asvabhāvānāṁ sarvadhrmānānāṁ...*

L.K. 428b4: 如是法相形亦無自本。

CC. 481b1: 如是諸法無有自本。

K.J. 599b12: 一切法性亦如是。

Aṣṭa. 93.8: *rūpasyavabhāvatvāt*

L.K. 441c25: 色之自然故。

CC. 488b8: 無形。

K.J. 551b11: 色自性。