

Svabhāva-problematic in the Abhidharma

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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 Suttapīṭaka excepts in comparatively later texts such as *Apadāna*, and *Milindapañha*.¹ 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 *Saṅgītiparyāya* and the *Dharmaskandha*.

The *Saṅgītiparyāya* and the *Dharmaskandha* are thought to be the oldest among the Sarvāstivāda's Abhidharma texts. In the *Saṅgītiparyāya* the term *svabhāva* is found only at two places. The first is used to refer to the quality of the dharmas such as *śilavyasana*, *dr̥ṣṭiviyasana*, *śīlasampatti*, *dr̥ṣṭisampatti*. Its quality is *iṣṭa* or *aniṣṭa*.² The second is *tatsvabhāvaiṣīya*, the fourth of seven *adhikaraṇa-samathā dharmāḥ*.³ It refers to the personal character of the accused monk in the Saṅgha. In the *Dharma-skandha* 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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¹We can find the only one usage of the term *svabhāva* in *Vinaya* v. 1, p. 87: *dve 'me bhikkhave paccayā nāgassa sabhāvapātukammāya*. Here the term *sabhāva* means "one's real nature."

²*Saṅgītiparyāya* (集異門足論), ChT26, p. 373c-374a: 此法自性不可愛, etc. Cf. Valentina Stache-Rosen, *Dogmatische Begriffesreihen im Älteren Buddhismus II, Das Saṅgītisūtra und sein Kommentar Saṅgītiparyāya*. Berlin 1968, pp. 57-58.

³*Ibid.* p. 440c: 四求彼自性毘奈耶. Cf. Valentina Stache-Rosen, *op. cit.* p. 187. *tassa-pāpiyyasikā* in Pāli *Vinaya* is to be compared. Cf. *Vinaya: Cullavagga* p. 85.

1.2 The *Vijñānakāya*, the *Dhātukāya* and the *Prakaraṇapāda*.

In the *Vijñānakāya* the term *svabhāva* is used three times. In every case where the *adhipatipratyaya* is defined to be all other dharmas than itself, the term *svabhāva* refers to “dharma itself.”⁴ However, there are three passages where the phrase “諸法性有等有” (*The 性 hsing of dharmas do exist.*) is stated. In his translation de La Vallée Poussin suggested that the Chinese term “性” (*hsing*) here might be *svabhāva*.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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.⁸ In two other places we find the phrases, “自性生念” (*the innate memory*) and “染淨自性住不增不減” (*the impurity and the purity neither increase nor decrease while remaining in the original state*).⁹ The original Sanskrit of the former may come from *prakṛtijātismara*, the latter from *prakṛtistha*.¹⁰

⁴ *Vijñānakāya* (識身足論), ChT26, p. 547b27, 547c3, 586a19: 除自性餘一切法 (all other dharmas excepting *svabhāva*).

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 543c9, 544b2, 544c24. Cf. L. de La Vallée Poussin, “La controverse du Temps et du Pudgala dans le *Vijñānakāya*” In: *Études Asiatiques, publiées à l'occasion du vingt-cinquième anniversaire de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient I.* 1925, p. 367: “性有等有 *svabhāvataḥ samvidyante* ?”

⁶ *Dhātukathā* (界身足論), ChT26, pp. 617b–625b: 此何爲餘謂受自性 (What remains? It is *vedanāsvabhāva*), etc.

⁷ *Prakaraṇapāda* (品類足論), ChT26, pp. 735a–764a: 除其自性 (excepting that *svabhāva*).

⁸ *Prajñāprasthāna* (發智論), ChT26, p. 919a10: 不知自性及此相應俱有諸法 (It does not know *svabhāva*, its associated and coexisting dharmas.) The old translation of *Prajñāprasthāna* (阿毘曇八韋度論), ChT26, p. 773a24: 不知自然。不知共有法。不知相應法也。 *Prajñāprasthāna*, p. 919a13: 不了自性及此相應俱有諸法。 Old translation, p. 773126: 不識自然。不識共有法。不識相應法。 *Prajñāprasthāna*, p. 921a9: 一切法爲能作因除其自性。 Old translation, p. 777a9: 如是諸法所作因中因除其自然。

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 923c22 and p. 1022a29, b2. Cf. Old translation, p. 778a and p. 904b29.

¹⁰ Cf. *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, p. 431.1, and p. 365.21.

One of the remaining two places refers to the essence of dharma. There is a question about the *svabhāva* of *prahāṇa-parijñāna* and the answer is: “遍知自性謂貪永斷瞋癡永斷一切煩惱永斷” (*The svabhāva of parijñāna means the complete elimination of rāga, dveṣa and moha, that is, the complete elimination of all kleśas.*)¹¹ 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.*)¹² 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.¹³ 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 *svalakṣaṇa* 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.¹⁴ It is very difficult for us to understand the terminology of the text.

However, the following line can be seen in the text: “有爲法於三世各有自相” (*Each saṃskṛtadharmā has svalakṣaṇa in three periods of time.*). The theories of four great masters of Sarvāsti-

¹¹ *Prajñāprasthāna*, p. 924c11–14: 所遍知法謂五取蘊。遍知自性謂貪永斷瞋癡永斷一切煩惱永斷。能遍知者謂阿羅漢諸漏永盡。 Cf. Old translation, p. 779a5–8: 云何智。答曰。婬怒癡盡無餘。是日智也。云何知法。答曰。五盛陰是。云何已知人。答曰。漏盡阿羅漢。

¹² *Ibid.* p. 923c17–24: 又涅槃不應有學有無學有非學非無學。若如是者應成二分諸法。不決定故應有雜亂。是則不應施設諸法性相決定。佛亦不說涅槃有學有無學性。以涅槃恆是非學非無學。諸法決定無有雜亂。恆住自性不捨自性。涅槃常住無有變易。是故涅槃但應言非學非無學。

¹³ The old translation of the *Prajñāprasthāna*, p. 778a21–26: 若當泥洹非學非無學有學有無覺。此二種法亂法。不定法則有壞法。亦不可知住法。世尊亦不說泥洹非學非無學有學有無學。但泥洹不有學有無學。以是故。當一切時一切住。不腐敗無變易法。泥洹非學非無學。

¹⁴ *Vasumitraśāstra* (尊婆須蜜菩薩所集論), ChT28, pp. 721–808. This text was translated by Saṅghabhūti, Saṅghadeva and others in A.D.384. See the Preface to the *Vasumitraśāstra* (婆須蜜集序) in the catalog of Sūtras translated (出三藏記集), ChT55, p. 71, and the Preface to the *Madhyama Āgama* (中阿含經序) *op. cit.* p. 63.

vāda are also found there.¹⁵ 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: “問。阿毘達磨自性云何。答。無漏慧根以爲自性。一界一處一蘊所攝” (*Question: What is the svabhāva of abhidharma? Answer: it is anāsrava-prajñā-indriya, and it is subsumed under one dhātu, one āyatana, one skandha.*)¹⁶ 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。於諸法相能善決擇能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 dharmalakṣaṇas.*)¹⁷

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 dharmasaṃgrahaḥ*). So we can say that *svabhāva* here means essence.¹⁸

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

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 724b4–19.

¹⁶ *Vibhāṣā* (婆沙論), ChT27, p. 2c23–24. Cf. 2nd old translation of the *Vibhāṣā* (阿毘曇婆沙論), ChT28, p. 2c26–28: 問曰。阿毘曇體爲何者是耶。答曰。無漏慧根自體。攝一界一入陰。1st old translation of the *Vibhāṣā* (鞞婆沙論), ChT28, p. 417b3–4: 問曰。何者阿毘曇性。答曰。無漏慧根也。攝彼同性故。攝一界一入一陰。

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 4a12–14. Cf. 2nd old translation, p. 3c4.

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.* p. 306b–307a. Here is given the detailed arguments of *dharmasaṃgraha*. Also see 2nd old translation, p. 232a–c.

cf. *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* p. 12.8–12 (ad. I–18): *sa khalv eṣa saṃgraho yatra kvacid ucyamāno veditavyaḥ svabhāvena na parabhāvena. kiṃ kāraṇam. parabhāvaviyogataḥ.*

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 *Vibhāṣā* 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-atthīti*-

²⁴ *Vijñānakāya*, p. 531b3-5 : 若言觀過去，應說有過去。…若言觀未來，應說有未來。

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 535a8-b9. As for *pratyayas*, p. 533a22-24 : 苾芻，由彼彼因由彼緣發生於識。識既生已墮彼彼數。由眼及色發生於識。識既生已墮眼識數。

cf. *Mahātanhāsaṅkhasutta*, MN 38, vol. 1, p. 259 : *yaṃ yad eva bhikkhave paṭicca paṭicca uppajjati viññānaṃ tena ten' eva saṅkhaṃ gacchati. cakkhuṃ ca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati viññānaṃ cakkhuvīññānaṃ tv eva saṅkhaṃ gacchati.*

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 537b4-7 : 契經中世尊善語善詞善說如是。五趣決定安立不相雜亂。謂捺落迦趣傍主趣鬼趣天人趣。決定別有捺落迦趣，乃至決定別有人趣。

²⁷ See note 5 above.

kathā) is introduced in the following lines :²⁸

*paccuppannaṃ rūpaṃ nirujjhamānaṃ paccuppanabhāvaṃ
jahatīti. āmantā.*

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.

rūpaṃ rūpabhāvaṃ na jahatīti. āmantā.

*rūpaṃ niccaṃ dhuvaṃ sassataṃ 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.

*rūpaṃ rūpabhāvaṃ na jahatīti. rūpaṃ aniccaṃ adhuvaṃ vipari-
ṇāmadhamman 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 (*rūpabhāva*) is not abandoned. Buddhaghosa takes it as *khandasabhāva*.²⁹ But in the *Kathāvatthu* itself, the term *sabhāva* was not used.

The arguement 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 arguement of the *Vijñānakāya* could precedes that in the *Kathāvatthu*. Thus the term “性” (*hsing*) in the *Vijñānakāya* can be the equivalent of *bhāva*.³⁰

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

²⁸ *Kathāvatthu* p. 120–121.

²⁹ *Kathāvatthu Atthakathā*, p. 44: *sabbe pi atīdibhedā dhammā khandhasabhāvaṃ na vijahanti. tasmā sabbaṃ atthi yeva nāmā ti laddhi, seyyathāpi etarahi sabbatthivādānaṃ.*

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 *Vibhāṣā*.

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 *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. And it is confirmed in the oldest translation by Lokakṣema which was made in A.D. 178–189.³¹ Therefore it can be said that the *Vibhāṣā* must have been composed before the Lokakṣema's translation. This would support the words in the postscript of Hsüan tsang's translation of the *Vibhāṣā*, which says that the *Vibhāṣā* was composed in Kāśmīra at the time of the King Kaniṣka who is thought to have lived in about the middle of the 2nd Century A.D.

³⁰ This can be confirmed by Hsüan tsang's translation of *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* in the following: AKBh, p. 298. 21–22:

*svabhāvaḥ sarvadā cāsti bhāvo nityaś ca neṣyate/
na ca svabhāvād bhāvo 'nyo vyaktam tīsvaraceṣṭitam//*
ChT29, p. 105b2–3:

許法體恆有，而說性非常。
性體復無別。此真自在作。

³¹ *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, Vaidya's edition (*Aṣṭa*); Lokakṣema's transl. ChT8, No. 224 (LK); 支謙 (Chih ch'ien)'s transl. ChT8, No. 225 (CC); Kumārajīva's transl. ChT8, No. 227 (KJ):

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

LK. 426b25: 色離本色。

CC. 479b27: 於色休色本性; 479c1: 於色也休色自然。

KJ. 538a3: 色離色性; 538a7: 是法皆離自性。

Aṣṭa. 13.10 *evam asvabhāvānāṃ sarvadharmānāṃ...*

LK. 428b4: 如是法形亦無有本。

CC. 481b1: 如是諸法無有專着。

KJ. 539b12: 一切法性亦如是。

Aṣṭa. 93.8: *rūpāsvabhāvavāt*

LK. 441c25: 色之自然故。

CC. 488b8: 無形。

KJ. 551b11: 色真性。