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## Vasubandhu's *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* (*Treatise on the Three Natures*)

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The *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* (*Rang bzhin gsum nges par bstan pa*) is one of Vasubandhu's short treatises (the others being the *Treatise in Twenty Stanzas* [*Viṃsatikā*] and the *Treatise in Thirty Stanzas* [*Triṃśākārikā*]) expounding his Cittamātra, or mind-only philosophy. Vasubandhu and his older brother Asaṅga are regarded as the founders and principal exponents of this Buddhist idealist school, which developed in the fourth or fifth century c.e. as the major philosophical rival within the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition to the older Madhyamaka tradition. The latter school, founded by Nāgārjuna, urges the emptiness—the lack of essence or substantial, independent reality—of all things, including both external phenomena and mind. Vasubandhu, however, reinterprets the emptiness of the object as being its lack of *external* reality, and its purely mind-dependent, or ideal, status. At the same time, however, he argues that the foundational mind is nonempty since it truly exists as the substratum of the apparent reality represented in our experience. The position is hence a kind of idealism akin to, but different in important ways from, the idealisms defended by such Western philosophers as Berkeley, Kant, and Schopenhauer.

The text introduces the fundamental doctrine of Buddhist idealism, and clarifies in remarkably short compass its relations to the other principal doctrines of that school—that all external appearances are merely ideal and originate from potentials for experience carried in the mind. The central topic of the text is the exposition of how this view entails the cittamātra theory of the three natures—the view that every object of experience is characterized by

three distinct but interdependent natures. Vasubandhu's idealism is distinctive in its insistence that a coherent idealism requires the positing of these three natures—the *parikalpita* or imagined nature, the *paratantra* or dependent nature, and the *pariniṣpanna* or consummate nature—and in its subtle analysis of the complex relations between the natures themselves, involving the thesis of their surface diversity but deep unity.

The translation into English of the terms denoting the three natures is no straightforward matter. Each denotes a *nature* (Tib.: *rang bzhin*, Skt.: *svabhāva*). But each of the three qualifiers added to this term to denote one of the three natures creates a subtly ambiguous compound, and plays on this ambiguity form part of the structure of Vasubandhu's ingenious verse treatise. On the one hand, each characterizes the nature itself—part of what it is to be a phenomenon. On the other hand, each characterizes the relation of the subject to the phenomenon, or the character of the subjectivity that constitutes the representation of the phenomenon. The text is hence simultaneously an essay in ontology and in phenomenology. As far as Vasubandhu is concerned, what it is to be a *phenomenon* is to be an *object* of a mind, and this treatise is an exploration of what it is to be an object so conceived. So questions about subjectivity and questions concerning the ontology of the object are closely intertwined.

"Imagined" translates the Tibetan *kun brtags* or Sanskrit *parikalpita*. These terms connote *construction* by the mind more than they do nonexistence—hallucination rather than fiction. But this simile can be misleading. To be imagined in this sense is not to be hallucinatory as opposed to being real—it is to be constructed as an object by the operation of the mind. "Other-dependent" translates *gzhan gyi dbang* or *paratantra*. Something that is other-dependent in this sense exists only in and through dependence on another thing. In this case, the emphasis will be that phenomena exist in dependence on the mind and its processes.

I use "consummate" to translate *yongs.su grub pa* or *pariniṣpanna*. This is the most difficult of these three terms to translate. Others have used "perfect," "perfected," "thoroughly established," "thoroughly existent," "completed," and "ultimate." Each of these choices has merit, and the variety of options illustrates the range of associations the term has in Tibetan or Sanskrit. When affixed to "nature," it connotes on the objective side the nature an object has when it is thoroughly understood. On the subjective side, it connotes the nature apparent to one who is fully accomplished intellectually and meditatively. It represents the highest and most complete understanding of a phenomenon.

There is a grammatical feature of the Sanskrit terms that deserves mention as well. *Parikalpita* and *pariniṣpanna* are each past participles, whereas

1. Kochumuttom (1982), Thurman (1984), Wood (1991), John Powers (*Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* [Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1995]), Anacker (1984), Nagao, G. (1991), and Cabezon (1992), respectively.

*paratantra* is nominal. *Paratantra-svabhāva*, the dependent nature, hence has a special place in the trio as a kind of basis of the other two. The central doctrine of Buddhist ontology is that all phenomena are dependently arisen. The dependent nature captures this fact. It hence has a claim to a *kind* of primacy or ultimate status. Imagination, though, is something that is *done*. The imagined nature that we ordinarily experience is a superimposition on the dependent nature. When we imagine things, we take them to be objects distinct from, or dually related to, our own subjectivity; to exist independently, and externally. Consummating our understanding is also something that is *done*. When we achieve consummate knowledge, we stop imagining, and experience the dependent nature as it is, empty of the duality, independence, and externality we once imagined it to have. The consummate nature of things is the fact that they are not as they are imagined to be.

Things appear to us as independently existent. But the objects of our experience, as we experience them, exist only in dependence on our minds. Without our subjectivity, there can be no objects. But given their actual mind-dependent status, of which we can be aware through careful philosophical reflection or through extensive meditative accomplishment, we can say that these *apparent things*, such as independently existent elephants and coffee cups, are always nonexistent. States of mind exist in their place, *experiences of elephants and coffee cups*, masquerading as independent phenomena. That nonexistence—the nonexistence of the apparent reality—is the consummate nature that all such phenomena have.

Vasubandhu also distinguishes the mind in its role as transcendental subject from its role as object, as it appears to itself. In the first aspect, to which Vasubandhu refers as the "foundation consciousness" (Tib.: *kun gzhi*, Skt.: *ālaya-vijñāna*), the mind functions as the condition of the appearance of phenomena, and hence as the ground of the possibility of the imagined and other-dependent natures. But in its second aspect—the "emerged consciousness" (Tib.: *'jug pa'i shes pa*, Skt.: *pavṛtti-vijñāna*)—the mind exists as the object of introspection, and is conditioned both by external phenomena that appear in perception and by its own phenomena. Hence it constantly evolves, and emerges in new states as a consequence of experience. The seven aspects of the mind to which Vasubandhu alludes in verse 6 are the five sensory consciousnesses, the introspective consciousness apprehending the self as object, and the reflective consciousness of the transcendental subject of experience.

Vasubandhu also thematizes subject/object duality in this text, arguing that although ordinary subjectivity presents its objects as distinct from itself, this is illusory, and the consummate nature is in fact nondual. His account is subtle and is always pitched in both a metaphysical and a phenomenological voice. He asks of each of the natures in what sense it implicates such a duality as part of the structure of the object of experience and in what sense it is in fact nondual. But he also asks these questions regarding the nature of the corresponding object of subjectivity itself. So in each case he asks whether,

or in what sense, in a subject considering things *as other-dependent*, and so on... there is such a duality, as well as asking whether, or in what sense, each nature implicates such a duality in the structure of the object.

Consider, for example, a teacup from the standpoint of its other-dependent nature: From this standpoint, the cup as I experience it, the only cup I see, exists as an entity dependent on the mind. The cup so-considered certainly exists: It exists as a mental phenomenon—as a representation. On the other hand, we can ask what the objective character<sup>2</sup> of that representation is. Then the answer is simple, and takes us back to the imagined nature: The cup considered *objectively* is the real, independent cup of naïve understanding, which, when we understand it from the standpoint of the dependent nature, does not exist at all, just in virtue of the fact that from this standpoint it is dependent. So, from the perspective of the dependent nature, the cup—the dependent mental phenomenon we mistake for a real cup—like the refraction pattern we mistake for water in a mirage—exists. But that real cup that is the *content* of that mental episode does not.

Now we come to the consummate nature of our cup. The cup we have been considering all along, whether from the standpoint of the imagined or the dependent nature, is, in an important and common sense, dual in nature. In its imagined nature, it is an independent object of mind, and so is distinct from the subject which apprehends it. But in its dependent nature, as an episode of mind, it is still, as a mere episode or mental act, distinct from the mind, which is its agent or subject. In the consummate nature, this duality vanishes. For the consummate nature of the cup is the very fact of its illusory status—that it is nothing other than an aspect of mind. Hence the apparent, dual, cup is, in its consummate nature (or, equivalently—from the point of view of one of consummate attainment) utterly nonexistent. *But that nonduality really exists.* That is the final nature of the cup.<sup>3</sup> And in this sense, the consummate nature embraces both existence and nonexistence: the non-existence of the cup as dual is its true existence as nondually related to the mind apprehending it. This consideration of duality and nonduality as the mediators of existence and nonexistence in the consummate is a distinctive feature of *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*.

All of this is central to Vasubandhu's creative union of ontology and phenomenology. Vasubandhu's characterization of the status of the objects of experience is at the same time self-consciously a characterization of the character of subjectivity itself. Not only does Vasubandhu argue that we can only make sense of objects if we ascribe to them these triune natures,

2. In the scholastic or Cartesian sense—the character of the mental object itself.

3. Note how this account of the ultimate nature of a phenomenon contrasts with that given by Mādhyamika philosophers such as Nāgārjuna or Candrakīrti, according to whom not even the emptiness of the cup can be said to exist in this sense. It is at this crucial point in ontology that Cittamātra and Madhyamaka are utterly discontinuous.

but he also argues that a complete account of experience—especially of the experience of a sophisticated and accomplished philosopher or meditator—requires an account of three distinct aspects of subjectivity, which are related to one another as are the three natures themselves. Our experience involves a superimposition of illusory externality and independence on states of consciousness; deep reflection allows us to understand and to eliminate this illusion.

This phenomenology is crucial to the soteriological purport of the system. For this is not speculative philosophy for its own sake but a philosophical system designed to guide a practitioner to buddhahood in order that he or she can work to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings. And buddhahood requires a clear understanding of the nature of one's own mind, of the objects of one's own experience, and of the nature of dependent origination that makes up their reality, as well as the unreality of our misleading experience of them, which is the source of all suffering.

*Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* is unique in Vasubandhu's corpus in its exposition of idealism as involving the doctrine of the three natures, in its detailed analysis of the natures themselves, and in its exploration of their relations to one another. In *Viṃśatikā-kārikā*, Vasubandhu clearly defends idealism against a series of objections but does not explicitly articulate the roles of the three natures in his idealistic theory or expound its structure. In *Triṃśikākirikā*, Vasubandhu explores the relation between the three natures and the three naturelessnesses (naturelessness with respect to characteristic [*lakṣaṇa-nisvabhāvatā*, *mtshan nyid ngo bo nyid med*], naturelessness with respect to production [*utpatti-nisvabhāvatā*, *skye ba ngo bo nyid med*], and ultimate naturelessness [*paramārtha-nisvabhāvatā*, *don dam pa'i ngo bo nyid med*]) adumbrated in the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* but does not explore their relation to idealism, *per se*, or their relations to one another. It is only in the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* that he explicitly analyses idealism as implicating the three natures, and explains in detail how they are interconnected.

Sthiramati, in his commentary on *Triṃśikākirikā* (*Triṃśikākirikā-bhāṣya*) argues that the three natures and the three naturelessnesses are equivalent. His understanding of the three natures as equivalent to the three naturelessnesses of the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* is adopted uncritically by such Tibetan doxographers as Tsongkhapa<sup>4</sup> and Khedrupjey (mKhas grub rje).<sup>5</sup> The adoption of this commentarial tradition, which emphasizes the homogeneity of the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* with Vasubandhu's and Aśaṅga's thought, along with the exposition of the three natures as presented in *Triṃśikākirikā* and *Viṃśatikā*, reinforces the elision of this more mature and explicit articulation of Vasubandhu's theory from subsequent developments of Yogācāra. The emphasis of the dominant Madhyamaka school on naturelessness as a fundamental metaphysical tenet and its need to see Yogācāra

4. See *Legs bshad snyings po*, translated in Thurman 1984.

5. See *sTong thun chen mo*, translated in Cabezón (1992).

as the penultimate step to its own standpoint lends further impetus to this tendency to assimilate these two doctrines. Of all of the Mādhyamikas, only Candrakīrti really takes the *trīsvabhāva* doctrine itself seriously as a target for critique (*dBu ma la jugs pa, Madhyamakāvātāra*).<sup>6</sup>

The thirty-eight verses of the text divide neatly into six sections. In the first six verses, Vasubandhu introduces the three natures and provides a preliminary characterization of each. He emphasizes that the other-dependent is experienced in ordinary consciousness through imagination, and that the consummate nature is the fact that that imaginary nature is nonexistent. In verses 7–9 he sketches two schemata for thinking about the character of mind from the standpoint of three nature theory. On the one hand there is the foundation consciousness, which is the repository of the seeds of experience and action, and on the other hand there are the constantly evolving introspectible sensory consciousnesses that we experience through the ripening of these potentials.

Verses 10–21 develop a dialectically complex and elegant discussion of how to view the polar pairs of existence/nonexistence, duality/unity, and affliction/nonaffliction in relation to each of the three natures, culminating in a discussion of the senses in which the natures are identical to one another and the senses in which they are different. For each nature, there is a sense in which it is real and a sense in which it is unreal; a sense in which it issues in subject-object duality and a sense in which awareness of it deconstructs that duality. The imagined and the other-dependent are essentially involved in affliction; the consummate is free from all affliction.

Verses 22–25 present the natures hierarchically from the standpoint of pedagogy and soteriology. The imagined nature is easiest to understand and most familiar to us, and so is presented first. Understanding the imagined nature leads one to understand the dependent, and to separate the dependent from the imagined, leading to an understanding of the consummate.

Vasubandhu presents the famous simile of the hallucinatory elephant conjured by the stage magician in verses 26–34. This is probably the most famous and often-cited moment in this text. In a vivid and simple image, Vasubandhu presents a way of understanding the three natures, their relation to one another, to idealism, and of the phenomenology they suggest to Buddhist soteriology. We are asked to imagine a magic show in which a magician, using some simple props and a mantra, induces the audience to see a nonexistent elephant. The elephant, which is seen, and is the intentional object of the perceptual and cognitive states of the crowd, is the imagined nature—it exists as illusion, gives rise to affective and conative states, to other cognitive states, and so on, but is not real outside of the minds that perceive it, and does not exist as it appears. The percept, as opposed to the elephant, is a real cognitive state that is in fact empty of the elephant. That is the dependent nature, mistaken for an elephant, but really only a cognitive

6. Translated in Huntington and Wangchen 1992 (see esp. pp. 162–168).

process. The fact that there is no elephant at all is the consummate nature of the elephant. All subject-object duality in the experience is illusory, and is tied up with the imagined. The foundation consciousness is compared to the mantra. It is the source of the illusion. Reality, the dependent nature stripped of all superimposition, is compared to the props used by the magician. They are not seen at all in the experience of the elephant, only once the mantra has stopped working or, less metaphorically, when the foundation consciousness is purged of all seeds of delusion.

The concluding four verses are devoted to the soteriological implications of the text. Understanding the nature of our phenomenology and of the nature of reality enables the cessation of the suffering that arises from attachment to and aversion from illusory objects, and leads to liberation.<sup>7</sup>

### Translation

1. The imagined, the other-dependent and  
The consummate:  
These are the three natures  
Which should be deeply understood.
2. Arising through dependence on conditions and  
Existing through being imagined,  
It is therefore called other-dependent  
And is said to be merely imaginary.
3. The eternal non-existence  
Of what appears in the way it appears,  
Since it is never otherwise,  
Is known as the nature of the consummate.
4. If anything appears, it is imagined.  
The way it appears is as duality.  
What is the consequence of its non-existence?  
The fact of non-duality!
5. What is the imagination of the non-existent?  
Since what is imagined absolutely never  
Exists in the way it is imagined,  
It is mind that constructs that illusion.

7. This translation is from the Tibetan text. The principal version used is that in the sDe dge edition of the Tibetan canon (Si 12a–14a). The Peking edition was used for comparison, and is in complete concordance. Anacker 1984 and Wood 1991 each reprint the original Sanskrit text. This translation originally appeared in Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 130–135. We gratefully acknowledge permission to republish this work.

6. Because it is a cause and an effect,  
The mind has two aspects.  
As the foundation consciousness it creates thought;  
Known as the emerged consciousness it has seven aspects.
7. The first, because it collects the seeds  
Of suffering is called "mind."  
The second, because of the constant emergence  
Of the various aspects of things is so called.
8. One should think of the illusory non-existent  
As threefold:  
Completely ripened, grasped as other,  
And as appearance.
9. The first, because it itself ripens,  
Is the root consciousness.  
The others are emergent consciousness,  
Having emerged from the conceptualization of seer and seen.
10. Existence and non-existence, duality and unity;  
Freedom from affliction and afflicted;  
Through characteristics, and through distinctions,  
These natures are known to be profound.
11. Since it appears as existent  
Though it is non-existent,  
The imagined nature  
Is said to have the characteristics of existence and non-existence.
12. Since it exists as an illusory entity  
And is non-existent in the way it appears  
The other-dependent nature  
Is said to have the characteristics of existence and non-existence.
13. Since it is the non-existence of duality  
And exists as non-duality  
The consummate nature  
Is said to have the characteristics of existence and non-existence.
14. Moreover, since as imagined there are two aspects,  
But existence and non-existence are unitary,  
The nature imagined by the ignorant  
Is said to be both dual and unitary.
15. Since as an object of thought it is dual,  
But as a mere appearance it is unitary,  
The other-dependent nature  
Is said to be both dual and unitary.
16. Since it is the essence of dual entities  
And is a unitary non-duality,

- The consummate nature  
Is said to be both dual and unitary.
17. The imagined and the other-dependent  
Are said to be characterized by misery (due to ignorant craving).  
The consummate is free of  
The characteristic of desire.
  18. Since the former has the nature of a false duality  
And the latter is the non-existence of that nature,  
The imagined and the consummate  
Are said not to be different in characteristic.
  19. Since the former has the nature of non-duality,  
And the latter has the nature of non-existent duality,  
The consummate and the imagined  
Are said not to be different in characteristic.
  20. Since the former is deceptive in the way it appears,  
And the latter has the nature of its not being that way,  
The other-dependent and the consummate  
Are said not to be different in characteristic.
  21. Since the former has the nature of a non-existent duality,  
And the latter is its non-existence in the way it appears,  
The other-dependent and the consummate  
Are said not to be different in characteristic.
  22. But conventionally,  
The natures are explained in order and  
Based on that one enters them  
In a particular order, it is said.
  23. The imagined is entirely conventional.  
The other-dependent is attached to convention.  
The consummate, cutting convention,  
Is said to be of a different nature.
  24. Having first entered into the non-existence of duality  
Which is the dependent, one understands  
The non-existent duality  
Which is the imagined.
  25. Then one enters the consummate.  
Its nature is the non-existence of duality.  
Therefore it is explained  
To be both existent and non-existent.
  26. These three natures  
Have the characteristics of being non-cognizable and non-dual.  
One is completely non-existent; the second is therefore non-existent.  
The third has the nature of that non-existence.

27. Like an elephant that appears  
Through the power of a magician's mantra—  
Only the percept appears,  
The elephant is completely non-existent.
28. The imagined nature is the elephant;  
The other-dependent nature is the visual percept;  
The non-existence of the elephant therein  
Is explained to be the consummate.
29. Through the root consciousness  
The nonexistent duality appears.  
But since the duality is completely non-existent,  
There is only a percept.
30. The root consciousness is like the mantra.  
Reality can be compared to the wood.  
Imagination is like the perception of the elephant.  
Duality can be seen as the elephant.
31. When one understands how things are,  
Perfect knowledge, abandonment,  
And accomplishment—  
These three characteristics are simultaneously achieved.
32. Knowledge is non-perception;  
Abandonment is non-appearance;  
Attainment is accomplished through non-dual perception.  
That is direct manifestation.
33. Through the non-perception of the elephant,  
The vanishing of its percept occurs;  
And so does the perception of the piece of wood.  
This is how it is in the magic show.
34. In the same way through the non-perception of duality  
There is the vanishing of duality.  
When it vanishes completely,  
Non-dual awareness arises.
35. Through perceiving correctly,  
Through seeing the non-referentiality of mental states,  
Through following the three wisdoms,  
One will effortlessly attain liberation.
36. Through the perception of mind-only  
One achieves the non-perception of objects;  
Through the non-perception of objects  
There is also the non-perception of mind.
37. Through the non-duality of perception,  
Arises the perception of the fundamental nature of reality.

Through the perception of the fundamental nature of reality  
Arises the perception of the radiant.

38. Through the perception of the radiant,  
And through achieving the three supreme Buddha-bodies,  
And through possessing Bodhi:  
Having achieved this, the sage will benefit him/herself and  
others.

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