

SEPTIMO CENTENARIO DE
LOS ESTUDIOS ORIENTALES
EN SALAMANCA



The theory of the four nourishments according to the Buddhist doctrinal literature

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I. THE FOLLOWING PAGES do not address the gift of food by a layman to a monk¹, nor the qualities of the food fit for a monk², nor the behaviour of a monk towards the food³. They will focuss on a tiny section of the enormous Buddhist speculation: the theory of the four nourishments.

These are:

- the usual nourishment, i.e. the material one like rice, sweet and so on,
- the nourishing touch,
- the mind operating as a nourishment,
- the consciousness operating as a nourishment.

This theory is presented in a series of treatises and encyclopaedias of northern and southern Buddhism.

¹ *Cfr.* e.g. HEIM 2004.

² HEIM 2004: 127-132.

³ *Cfr.* e.g. CAILLAT 1960: 41 sv. A greedy monk might be reborn as an insect, *cfr.* NĀGĀRJUNA, *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*, k. 17, p. 182a = LAMOTTE 1981: 998-999.

The most detailed account of it is found in the *Abhidharmakośa* (AK) –*Kārikā*s and *Bhāṣya*– written by Vasubandhu in the 5th c.CE and commented by several subsequent Buddhist doctors⁴.

Another source, more or less independent of the former, is the *Visuddhimagga* written by Buddhaghosa during the same century in Sri Lanka⁵.

We can also mention the *Yogācārabbūmi* attributed to Maitreya or to the brother of Vasubandhu, Asaṅga⁶. Although the work does not elaborate on the theory in question that might have been subsequently developed⁷, it supplies us with plenty of details about the transition from one life to the next, an event in which the fourth nourishment (*viññāna*) intervenes.

We should also add the commentary of the *Mahāyānasamgraha* of Asaṅga by Xuang-zang, that gives us a short but clear explanation of the nourishments⁸.

§ 2. The doctrine of the four nourishments is the scholastic synthesis of some of the Buddha's views on «food» scattered all over the Buddhist Canon in Pāli⁹. These are two examples:

- In the *Dīghanikāya* and *Aṅguttaranikāya*, Buddha, speaking of the material food (but not only), states: «All that lives subsists on food»¹⁰.
- When Phagguna Moliya questioned the Buddha as to (1) who feeds on the consciousness-sustenance, the Buddha replied that it was not the right question, for (2) «I do not say that someone eats». The correct question would have been: (3) «of what is consciousness the sustenance?»; and then the fitting answer would be: «Consciousness-sustenance is the condition to renewed becoming, to rebirth in the future»¹¹.

⁴ For an electronic version of the text according to Pradhan's edition, see GRETEL The French translation of this huge work (6 vols.) was completed by Louis de LA VALLÉE-POUSSIN (LVP). Here, the reprint of 1971 is used. The French version has been rendered into English by L. PRUDEN 1988-90. The passage here dealt with is in chapter III, 38d ff = LVP 1971 2nd ed.: II, p. 119 sv. Among the commentators of the AK, the only one quoted below is Yaśomitra.

⁵ The *Visuddhimagga* was edited in the HOS by H. C. WARREN and Dh. KOSAMBI 1950 and translated in English by Bhikkhu ÑĀṆAMOLI 1991, 5th ed.; French translation by C. MAËS 2002. The beginning of book XI is devoted to the four nourishments. Sometimes a fifth *ābhāra* is mentioned: the *dukkha-ābhāra* (cfr. *Kaṭṭhāvatthu*: II 6) «painful food», but it is not an item of the canonical list.

⁶ This lengthy compilation is known by its Chinese and Tibetan translations. One of its chapters, the *Śrāvakabbūmi*, has been preserved in Sanskrit. The quotation infra § 8 n. 36 is contained in the 6th part (*Samābhītibbūmi*) of the «Basic Section» (*Maulībbūmi*) of the work.

⁷ Whereas the *Yogācārabbūmi* was compiled around 300 CE (?), the doctrinal treatment of the 4 nourishments might have taken place between 300 and 450 CE (?).

⁸ Edition of the Tibetan and Chinese versions of the *Mahāyānasamgraha* and French transl. of the treatise and of the commentary of Xuang Zang (= Hiuan-tsang) by É. LAMOTTE 1938. The passage in question (I 37) is translated tome II, fascicle I: 59-60.

⁹ MALALASEKERA. 1963. *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, fascicle: Acala-Ākaṅkheyya Sutta, s.v.ābhāra: 280-283.

¹⁰ *Sabbe sattā ābhāraṅgikā*. Cfr. *Dīghanikāya* in T. W. RHYS-DAVIDS-J. E. CARPENTER 1960-67, 2nd ed.: III, 211; *Aṅguttaranikāya* in R. MORRIS-E. HARDY 1955-60, 2nd ed.: V, 50-51.

¹¹ *Samyuttanikāya* in FEER 1884-98: II 13, where the text of the quotations is as follows: (1) *ko nu kbo bhante v i= āñāhāram?*; (2) *ābhāretūi abam na vadāmi*; (3) *kissa nu kbo bhante vi= āñāhāro?*; (4) *vi= āñāhāro āyatim punnabbhavābhīmbhattiyā paccayo*.

§ 3. THE FIRST NOURISHMENT: THE USUAL FOOD (*KAVAḌIKĀRA*)

In the frame of the theory, the material (*audārika*) food –e.g. rice, sweet–¹² is called *kavaḌikāra-ābāra*¹³ «lump of food» or «mouthful», because it is absorbed by the mouth in contrast with the other three nourishments.

The «mouthful» is not conceived of as a unity/whole, but as an association of three sense-qualities: touch, flavour and smell¹⁴.

Touch is here a component of the human food, but later, as we shall see it, it is a form of nourishment in its own right.

Smell and [remembrance of] flavour are introduced because Buddhism must tackle the problem of the eating in the immaterial spheres of existence (*dhātu*), e.g. the heavens. The inhabitants of the low heavens –the ones of the *kāmadhātu* or «sphere of desire»– still feed themselves, but with the help of something immaterial, and smell and flavour are regarded as more immaterial than the food itself. The heavenly creatures are thus satisfied by them and, on earth, the perfect monk must do the same¹⁵.

Among the sense-faculties, hearing is irrelevant in our context, but sight plays a secondary role, since, through the contact between eye and aliment, it brings about an increase in enjoyment¹⁶. However, the corporeal comfort is achieved by absorbing and digesting the food.

A question remains: is it right to call «nourishments» smell and [remembrance of] flavour since they are not accompanied by a swallowing? Moreover the inhabitants of the lowest heaven –the one of the «Four Great Kings»– who are sustained by both of them do not produce excreta (*nisyanda/niḥṣyanda* «outflow»)¹⁷.

§ 4. The more we go up in the scale of the spheres of existence (*dhātu*), the more eating becomes immaterial. In one of the loftiest heavens –the *Bṛhatphala* viz. «The [heaven] the fruit of which is great»–, the inhabitants are supported by their memories, the only possible sustenance since no material food is available to them at the time¹⁸.

Some sectarian traditions in Buddhism –e.g. the one of Vasubandhu– endorse the idea of an entity subsisting during the period between two lives (*antarābhava*) and called «gandharva». The latter is sustained both by a smell and by the [remembrance] of flavour tallying with his social status before his death. The *gandharva*

¹² Examples cited in the *Amrtarasa* of Ghoṣaka. Cfr. VAN DEN BROECK 1977: 100. In AK III 38d (= ed. Pradhan, p. 152 | 11 in GRETEL, p. 201) = tr. LVP 1971, 2nd ed.: II 119, this nourishment may be coarse (*audārika*) or subtle (*sūkṣma*).

¹³ The food is named «*ābāra*» because it «bears» or «increases» the body or the life of beings, cfr. tr. LVP 1928: I 202.

¹⁴ These sense-qualities are named *āyatana*s. Cfr. AK III 39a-b (ed. Pradhan, p. 152 | 18 in GRETEL p. 202) = tr. LVP 1971, 2nd ed.: II 120.

¹⁵ Cfr. the gloss of LVP o.c.: II 121 ad AK III 39 c-d (= ed. Pradhan pp. 152 | 02-03 in GRETEL, p. 202).

¹⁶ AK III 39c-d (= ed. Pradhan, pp. 153 | 02-03 in GRETEL, p. 202) = tr. LVP o.c.: 121.

¹⁷ AK III 38d (= ed. Pradhan pp. 152 | 12 in GRETEL, p. 201) = tr. LVP o.c.: 119.

¹⁸ SAṄGHABHADRA. *Nyāyānusāra* 15.4. Cfr. COX 1995: 240-241, 242-243, n. 8.

of low level is sustained by a foul smell, whereas the one of high level is delighted by a good smell¹⁹.

Paradoxically, somewhat further in the same passage, we are told of short-lived creatures (*alpāyur jantuḥ*) fond of smell and flavour. These are *krimi* «worms», and are said to be nothing else than people (?) who died (*kālaṃ KṚ*) while conveying a retributive act that, at the best of times, would bring about a worm-existence²⁰.

Finally, if we go down to the hells, we meet damned people who are poised to swallow red-burnt iron and smelted copper²¹.

§ 5. THE SECOND NOURISHMENT: THE NOURISHING TOUCH (*SPARŚA*)

In the Indian philosophical tradition, touch is more important than sight for several reasons

- it is spread all over the body²²,
- its tool, the skin, is in immediate contact with its object, which is not the case for the eye or the ear²³,
- according to some of the Indian scholars (e.g. the Theravādins), touch is the first sense-faculty to appear in the embryo²⁴,
- touch is linked to an idea of enjoyment²⁵.

Touch is crucial in some biological processes as well. We meet with a compound: *sparsā-ābhāra* «contact-food» that denotes brooding²⁶.

By brooding their eggs, animals like birds provide their offspring with a form of nourishment, even if they do not put food in their mouth.

Thus we better realize why touch is a «nourishment». Actually, it maintains and nurtures the life of a number of creatures.

¹⁹ AK III 14 (= ed. Pradhan, p. 125|19-20 in GRETEL, p. 165) *alpeśākhyas tu durgandbābhāro/mabeśākhyam sugandhabārah* = tr. LVP II 197, 2nd ed.: 48.

²⁰ AK III 14 (= ed. Pradhan, pp. 126|03-05 in GRETEL, p. 165): *te taṃ gandham gbrātvā gandharasābhigraddbāḥ kālaṃ kurvantaḥ krimibhāvasaṃvaritanīyaṃ karma pravodhya tayā tṛṣṇayā krimiṣu-upapadyante* = tr. LVP l.c. [n. 19].

²¹ AK III 41 (= ed. Pradhan, pp. 154|27-28 in GRETEL, p. 205) = tr. LVP 1971, 2nd ed. II: 128.

²² This is the reason why «touch» (*sparsā*) is also called *kāyendriya* or «bodily sense-faculty». Cfr. SCHMITHAUSEN 1987: II n. 257; Nāgārjuna, *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*: k. 17 p. 182b = LAMOTTE 1981, 2nd ed.: 1000.

²³ The eye and ear's condition of being *prāpyakārin*, i.e. of moving towards their object and of sometimes being obstructed by a screen, appears as a handicap when compared with the immediate contact between the skin and the object.

²⁴ It is the first quality present in the proto-embryonic matter (*kalala-rūpa*), cfr. SCHMITHAUSEN 1987: II 305 and 307.

²⁵ Pāli words such as *phāsu* and *phāsuka* that could derive from the verb *Spars* «to touch» seem to allude to a shade of material and moral well-being and pleasure, cfr. CAILLAT 1960: 48.

²⁶ We find a hint at that in the Chinese version of the *Amṛtarasa*, ch. III = VAN DEN BROECK 1977: 100 n. 7.

But if touch is important in the biological realm, it is still more so in the intellectual realm since it supplies the mind with material coming from the outside world and keeps it in activity²⁷.

§ 6. THE THIRD NOURISHMENT: THE MENTAL VOLITION (*MANAḤSAMCETANĀ*)

In some cases, the physical brooding is not possible and is replaced by a mental brooding. This latter is documented in the *AK* and its commentary by Yaśomitra²⁸. In a passage, we are told of an *audārika prāṇin*, a «huge? (coarse?/greedy?) living creature», a sea-animal, presumably a tortoise, that gets out of the ocean, puts its eggs down in the sand of the beach and abandons them. It remains away several months, up to the time of the hatching of the eggs. But during this span of time, no normal brooding is possible. Therefore the tortoise does not stop –if only a short time– to think of its embryos in order to prevent the eggs from putrefying²⁹.

On this point, there is a debate in the *AK* between some dissenter –the author(s) of the *Samgītiparyāya*– and Vasubandhu. According to the former, it is the mother-tortoise that must think of the embryos to sustain their life; according to Vasubandhu, it is these latter who must not forget their mother³⁰.

At any rate, in both cases, the power of the thought protects against death³¹. The commentary on the *Mahāyānasamgraha* adduces another example: people go on to live as long as they are sustained by hope; when this latter vanishes, they die³².

Mind may therefore be called, like consciousness (*viññāna*), a «mother» (*mātṛ*), a «nourishment» since it fosters (*poṣakatva*) life³³.

§ 7. THE FOURTH NOURISHMENT: THE CONSCIOUSNESS (*VIÑÑĀNA*)

Viññāna, viz. «consciousness», is a difficult word, cumbersome and elusive all at once. We can define it as the inner side of the matter, more precisely of the corporeal matter. This side is hidden behind the matter, it is stuck to it, it is the

²⁷ In *AK* III 41 (éd. Pradhan, pp. 154|16-17 in GRETEL, p. 204) = tr. LVP 1971, 2nd ed.: II 126, both material food and touch are called «nurses» (*dhātṛi*); comm.on *Mahāyānasamgraha* I 37 = LAMOTTE 1938: II/1 59.

²⁸ *AK* III 40c (= éd. Pradhan p. 154|02-04 in GRETEL, p. 203) = tr. LVP 1971, 2nd ed.: II 125; Yaśomitra ad loc. Cfr. LVP 1919: 12 et 66. This development also occurs in the *Samgītiparyāya*.

²⁹ *AK* III 40c (ed. Pradhan, p. 154|04-05 in GRETEL p. 204): *tatra yāsām mātṛṇām aṇḍāni ārabhya smṛtir na muṣyate, tāny aṇḍāni na pūṭṭhavantī* «The eggs do not putrefy for the mothers who, from the beginning, do not loose the memory of them».

³⁰ Cfr. VAN DEN BROECK 1977: 100 n. 7: *yāsām tu smṛtir muṣyate, tāni pūṭṭhavantī* «Of the [mothers] whose memory is lost [by the offspring] the [eggs] die».

³¹ We can mention here a sentence of the *Yogācārabbūmi* concerning the [*ālaya*] *viññāna*: *cittavaśena ca tan (= kalala-rūpam) na parikḥidyate* «It is by the power of thought that it (= the embryo in its initial state) is not destroyed». Cfr. SCHMITTHAUSEN 1987: II 290 (n. 184), 306 (n. 250).

³² Comm.on *Mahāyānasamgraha* I 37 = LAMOTTE 1938: II/1 59. Cfr. also *AK* III 40c (= ed. Pradhan p. 153|27-154|7 dans GRETEL, p. 230) = tr. LVP 1971, 2nd ed.: II, p.125.

³³ *AK* III 41 (ed. Pradhan pp. 154|16-17 in GRETEL, p. 204) = tr. LVP o.c: 126 and LVP 1919: 66.

support of it. Using the Buddhist wording, we will say that the *viññāna* appropriates (*upa-ā-DĀ*) the corporeal matter while being appropriated by it as well³⁴.

If it were not forbidden in Buddhism to speak of an *ātman*, of a «self» or a «soul», we could argue that *viññāna* is a dummy «soul». It is with it that we start hearing of rebirth.

It operates in two main occasions.

A. The first occasion takes place during the life of a perfect monk (*arhat*). Sometimes, this monk falls into a deep meditation named *nirodha-samāpatti* «absorption into cessation». It is a kind of cataleptic state where the monk does not move anymore (he is in *āniñjya*), does not react anymore, and even does not think anymore³⁵.

The questions are raised: how is it possible that the monk's mind can reawaken after such an unconscious (*acittakā*) period? How is it possible for the monk to come back to consciousness?

The *Yogācārabbūmi* raises this questions in the following words: «When [a person] has entered [absorption into] cessation, his mind and mental [factors] have ceased; how, then, is it that [his] mind (*viññāna*) has not withdrawn from [his] body?...»³⁶.

The answer is: *viññāna* has not departed because, if the consciousness withdrew from the monk, his corporeal matter would not be «appropriated», that is «intact», anymore and would start to rot³⁷.

So even if, in the *nirodha-samāpatti*, every other form of life seems to be absent, the *viññāna* is there to make the awakening of the monk sure and to prevent him from dying.

Therefore, like mind earlier, *viññāna* deserves to be named «a mother» or a «nourishment»³⁸, since it maintains and nurtures the life of creatures.

Accordingly, some Buddhist schools, especially the Theravādins and Sarvāstivādins, state that it is impossible for an *arhat* to die in *nirodha-samāpatti*³⁹.

B. The second occasion for the *viññāna* to intervene is the transition during a one life and the next one.

³⁴ This summary of the nature of *viññāna* is borrowed from the two parts of the fundamental study by SCHMITHAUSEN 1987 concerning the origin and history of the notion of (*ālaya*-) *viññāna*. This inquiry is essential in order to unravel the Buddhist thinking on this complex subject from out of a bulk of hazy data.

³⁵ Information about this meditative state is given at sundry places. Let us mention GRIFFITHS 1986: 17 etc.; SCHMITHAUSEN 1987: I 86.

³⁶ *Yogācārabbūmi*, Basic Section (*Maulī bbūmi*) 6 in SCHMITHAUSEN's translation 1987: I 18.

³⁷ SCHMITHAUSEN 1987: I, 23, 63; II 245 n. 16 (according the *Dharmadinnāsūtra*, that is a *sūtra* of the Canon of the Sarvāstivādin's corresponding to the Pāli *Cūlavēdallasutta* = *Majjhimanikāya* n.° 44, where Buddha is preaching to Lady Dharmadinnā), 416-417 n. 770 and 421 n. 796.

³⁸ AK, l. c. [n. 27].

³⁹ Cfr. BAREAU 1954: 231, thesis 151 = *Katthāvattbu* 15 9 (Theravādins). For the Sarvāstivādins, cfr. VASUMITRA, *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* 8 30 = BAREAU 1954: 254. We can emphasize that the *arhat* has more chance than the main character in one of E. A. Poe's «Tales», Mr. Waldemar («The Facts in the Case of Mr. Waldemar»), who passes away while being under hypnosis.

Cyuti, «death», refers to a form of «disconnection» and is defined as the withdrawal of *vijñāna*⁴⁰ from its support, the human body.

When death happens, the *vijñāna* does not perish, however. It is only changing its mission and starts to prepare a new conception for somebody somewhere. It is the clinging force that joins both existences through a *pratisandhi*, «reconnection», the contrary of *cyuti*⁴¹. In its task, it is assisted by both forces: the «life-force» (*ayuh*) and the «bodily heat» (*uṣman*)⁴².

But in this operation, it does not act as a personal soul similar to the one known in the graeco-judeo-christian tradition, but as a subliminal force and an impersonal energy. This energy could be metaphorically called «mother» or «nourishment» for the same reason as the mind earlier.

Nevertheless, even if it acts for the sake of life, it remains endowed with impurity and defilement (*kleśa*)⁴³, since it causes the transmigration to proceed further. So the perfect monk must strive to free himself from the *vijñāna*, so that the *samsāra*, this ultimate catastrophe, is interrupted once and for all.

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⁴⁰ SCHMITHAUSEN. 1987: II, n. 275: *cyutiḥ katamā...ya vijñānasya-āśrayād apakrāntiḥ* (*Yogācārabhūmi*) «What is death? [It is] the departure of consciousness out of the [corporeal] support».

⁴¹ SCHMITHAUSEN. 1987: I 69.

⁴² Cfr. AK II 45a-b (= ed. Pradhan pp. 73, 20-21 in GRETIL, p. 97) quoting *Saṅyuktanikāya* 21 14 = tr.LVP 1971, 2.nd ed.: I 215 ; cfr. SCHMITHAUSEN 1987: II n. 502.

⁴³ I. e. the notions of 'I' and 'mine', cfr. SCHMITHAUSEN. 1987: I 70, 75.

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