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 focus 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.
³ Cfr. e.g. CAILLAT 1960: 41 sv. A greedy monk might be reborn as an insect, cfr. NANDGAJUNA, Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra, k. 17, p. 182a = LAMOTTE 1981: 998-999.
The most detailed account of it is found in the Abhidhamakośa (AK) —Kārikā's and Bāṣyā— written by Vasubandhu in the 5th c. CE and commented by several subsequent Buddhist doctors.

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

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

§ 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 Pāli. These are two examples:

- In the Dīghanikāya and Ariyuttaranikāya, Buddha, speaking of the material food (but not only), states: «All that lives subsists on food».

- 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».

4 For an electronic version of the text according to Pradhan’s edition, see GRETIL. 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 1930 and translated in English by Bhikkhu NĀSAMOLI 1991, 5th ed.; French translation by C. MAES 2002. The beginning of book XI is devoted to the four nourishments. Sometimes a fifth ābhava is mentioned: the duḥkha-ābhava (cfr. Kathāvatthu: 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 Śrāvakabhūmi, has been preserved in Sanskrit. The quotation infra § 8 n. 36 is contained in the 6th part (Samādhiḥbhūmi) of the «Basic Section» (Maulībhūmi) of the work.

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


11 Samyuttanikāya in PFR 1884-98: II 13, where the text of the quotations is as follows: (1) ko nu kbo bhante v iṣṭā āṭṭham; (2) ādāreti abha na vaddāmi; (3) kessa nu kbo bhante viissāṇābāro; (4) viissāṇābāro sāyati punabbhavābhinibbattiyā paccayo.
§ 3. THE FIRST NOURISHMENT: THE USUAL FOOD (*KAVAPIKĀRA*)

In the frame of the theory, the material (*audārika*) food — e.g. rice, sweet— is called *kavapikāra-abāra* «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 smell³⁴.

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 same³⁵.

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 enjoyment³⁶. However, the corporeal confort 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 (*nīṣyanda/nīḥsyanda* «outflow»)³⁷.

§ 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 time³⁸.

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*

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³² Examples cited in the *Amṛtarasa* of Ghoṣaka. *Cf.* VAN DEN BROECK 1977: 100. In *AK* III 38d (= ed. Pradhan, p. 152 | 11 in GRETIL, p. 201) = tr. LVP 1971, 2nd ed.: II 119, this nourishment may be coarse (*audārika*) or subtle (*sūkṣma*).

³³ The food is named *abhava* because it «bears» or «increases» the body or the life of beings, *Cf.* tr. LVP 1928: I 202.

³⁴ These sense-qualities are named *āyatana*. *Cf.* *AK* III 39a-b (ed. Pradhan, p. 152 | 18 in GRETIL p. 202) = tr. LVP 1971, 2nd ed.: II 120.

³⁵ *Cf.* the gloss of LVP o.c.: II 121 ad *AK* III 39 c-d (= ed. Pradhan pp. 152 | 02-03 in GRETIL, p. 202).

³⁶ *AK* III 39c-d (= ed. Pradhan, pp. 153 | 02-03 in GRETIL, p. 203) = tr. LVP o.c.: 121.

³⁷ *AK* III 38d (= ed. Pradhan pp. 152 | 12 in GRETIL, p. 201) = tr. LVP o.c.: 119.

of low level is sustained by a foul smell, whereas the one of high level is delighted by a good smell\(^9\).

Paradoxically, somewhat further in the same passage, we are told of short-lived creatures (alpåyur jantuḥ) fond of smell and flavour. These are krими «worms», and are said to be nothing else than people (?) who died (śālaṃ kr) while conveying a retributive act that, at the best of times, would bring about a worm-existence\(^{25}\).

Finally, if we go down to the hells, we meet damned people who are poised to swallow red-burnt iron and smelted copper\(^{26}\).

§ 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 body\(^{22}\),
- its tool, the skin, is in immediate contact with its object, which is not the case for the eye or the ear\(^1\),
- according to some of the Indian scholars (e.g. the Theravādins), touch is the first sense-faculty to appear in the embryo\(^{23}\),
- touch is linked to an idea of enjoyment\(^24\).

Touch is crucial in some biological processes as well. We meet with a compound: sparśa-ābāra «contact-food» that denotes brooding\(^{26}\).

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.

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\(^{19}\) AK III 14 (= ed. Pradhan, p. 125|19-20 in GRETIL, p. 165) alpēśākhyas tu durgandbhābāro/mabēśākhyam sugandbhārakaḥ = tr. LVP II 197, 2\(^{\text{nd}}\) ed.: 48.


\(^{22}\) This is the reason why «touch» (sparśa) is also called kāyendriya or «bodily sense-faculty». Cfr. SCHMITHAUSEN 1987: II n. 257; Nāgārjuna, Mabāprijāpāramitāśāstra: k. 17 p. 282 = LAMOTTE 1981, 2\(^{\text{nd}}\) ed.: 1000.

\(^{23}\) The eye and ear's condition of being prāpyākārin, 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 (kañala-rūpa), cfr. SCHMITHAUSEN 1987: II 305 and 307.

\(^{25}\) Pāli words such as pāsū and pāsuka that could derive from the verb Sparś «to touch» seem to allude to a shade of material and moral well-being and pleasure, cfr. CAÎLLAT 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 activity.  

§ 6. THE THIRD NOURISHMENT: THE MENTAL VOLITION (MĀNAHSAṂCETANĀ)

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 Yāsomitra. 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 putrefying.

On this point, there is a debate in the Ak between some disserter — the author(s) of the Saṃgītīparīṣaya — 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 mother.

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

Mind may therefore be called, like consciousness (vijñāna), a "mother" (mātr), a "nourishment" since it fosters (pośakaṭva) life.

§ 7. THE FOURTH NOURISHMENT: THE CONSCIOUSNESS (VIJÑĀNA)

Vijñāna, 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

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27 In Ak III 41 (éd. Pradhan, pp. 154|16-17 in GRETI, p. 204) = tr. LVP 1971, 2nd ed.: II 126, both material food and touch are called "nurses" (dbātri; comm.on Mahāyānasamgraha 1 37 =LAMOTTE 1938: II/1 59.
28 Ak III 40c (= éd. Pradhan p. 154|02-04 in GRETI, p. 203) = tr. LVP 1971, 2nd ed.: II 125; Yāsomitra ad loc. Cfr. LVP 1919: 12 et 66. This development also occurs in the Saṃgītīparīṣaya.
29 Ak III 40c (éd. Pradhan, p. 154|04-05 in GRETI p. 204): tatra yāsāṁ mātrāṇi anāndāni ārūbhyā smṛtir na musyate, tāṁ anāndāṁ na pāṭhavavat'ī The eggs do not putrefy for the mothers who, from the beginning, do not lose the memory of them.
30 Cfr. Van Den Broeck 1977: 100 n. 7: yāsāṁ tu smṛtir musyate, tāṁ pāṭhavavat'ī Of the [mothers] whose memory is lost (by the offspring the [eggs] die).
31 We can mention here a sentence of the Yogācārābūmī concerning the [ālaya] vijñāna: cittāsāsana ca tan (= kālaka-rūpam) na parīkhyādīva 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).
support of it. Using the Buddhist wording, we will say that the viññāna appropriates (upāsā-Dā) the corporeal matter while being appropriated by it as well.

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 anīḥya), does not react anymore, and even does not think anymore.

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 Yogacārabhūmi 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?...».

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 rot.

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», 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.

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

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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 sunry places. Let us mention GRIFFITHS 1986: 17 etc.; SCHMITHAUSEN 1987: I 86.

36 Yogacārabhūmi, Basic Section (Maulī bhūmi) 6 in SCHMITHAUSEN’s translation 1987: I 18.

37 SCHMITHAUSEN 1987: I, 23, 63; II 245 n. 16 (according the Dharmadīnāsātra, that is a sūtra of the Canon of the Sarvāstivādin’s corresponding to the Pāli Cūḷavedālāsattu = Majhīmanikāya n.º 44, where Buddha is preaching to Lady Dharmadīnā), 416-417 n. 779 and 421 n. 796.

38 AK, I. c. [n. 27].

39 Cfr. BAREAU 1954: 231, thesis 151 = Kuttīvatthu 15 9 (Theravādins). For the Sarvāstivādins, cfr. VASUMITRA, Samayabhedoparacanaacakra 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. Waldeman («The Facts in the Case of Mr. Waldeman»), who passes away while being under hypnosis.
Cyuṭi, "death", refers to a form of "disconnection" and is defined as the withdrawal of vijnāna from its support, the human body.

When death happens, the vijnāna 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 cyuṭi. In its task, it is assisted by both forces: the "life-force" (ayuḥ) and the "bodily heat" (uṣman)."n

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), since it causes the transmigration to proceed further. So the perfect monk must strive to free himself from the vijnāna, so that the saṃsāra, this ultimate catastrophe, is interrupted once and for all.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ABBREVIATIONS

AK = Abhidharmakośa, cfr. La Vallée Poussin, L. 1971.
Gretil = Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages [i.e. the series of the Sanskrit texts published on internet by the University of Göttingen under the reference http://findodo.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1...]

40 Schmithausen. 1987: II, n. 275: cyuṭiḥ katamā...yā vijojanaśya-dśrayād apakrāṇīth (Yogācārabhūmi) "What is death? [It is] the departure of consciousness out of the [corporeal] support."
41 Schmithausen. 1987: I 69.
43 I. e. the notions of 'I' and 'mine', cfr. Schmithausen. 1987: I 70, 75.


