

CHAPTER 3:

THE THIRTY VERSES (*TRIMŚIKĀ*)

CHAPTER 3

THE THIRTY VERSES (*TRIMŚIKĀ*)

3.1 Introduction

In the *Trimśikā*, Vasubandhu has described the dynamics of consciousness. He does so by explaining each of the three transformations of consciousness which are acknowledged in the Yogācāra tradition. He also talks about the theory of triple nature of reality, another important epistemological concept in Yogācāra. The text can be called a brilliant exposition of human psychology with the entire range of human thought - with its conscious as well as unconscious aspects, mental factors and other dispositions - described in a lucid way by Vasubandhu.

This text, like the *Vimśatikā* has also been subjected to varied interpretations by different scholars. A few of them like P. T. Raju see the text as a classical case of metaphysical idealism and observe that the text describes the evolution of the world from consciousness (Raju, 1953, p.269) while there are others like Kochumuttom who believe that such an idealist interpretation of this text has no firm logical foundations (Kochumuttom, 1982, p.127). For Kochumuttom, the *Trimśikā*, like the other half of the *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* - the *Vimśatikā* - seems more compatible with the philosophy of realistic pluralism than with that of idealistic monism.³⁴ Vasubandhu has not explicitly stated his intentions in writing this text. In any case, I would like to argue that that the text, like *Vimśatikā*, does not commit itself to the position of either realism or idealism and its primary task seems only the analysis and description of human consciousness and the various transformations that it undergoes. Such an interpretation of the text in terms of an analysis of human psyche goes very well with the overall schema of the Buddhist way, where the emphasis would always be on the alleviation of human suffering rather than on answering metaphysical and ontological questions.

The text is more descriptive in nature, unlike the *Vimśatikā* which consists mostly of philosophical arguments in the form of objections and replies on the nature and scope of human experience. *Trimśika*, on the other hand mainly describes the workings of consciousness as is

³⁴ “But I maintain that the entire system, when understood in terms of realistic pluralism, makes better sense and that, therefore, even those passages which apparently support idealistic monism, have to be interpreted in terms of realistic pluralism.” (Kochumuttom, 1982, p.1).

understood by the Buddhist Yogācāra tradition. However, as was the case with *Viṃśatikā*, this text also does not get itself involved with the real-ideal debate and can in no way be taken as favoring one position over the other.

In the subsequent pages, I have presented a verse by verse analysis of the *Triṃśikā* as I understand it. Various comments and notes are added to enhance the analysis wherever such additions are found necessary.

3.2 The Transformations of Consciousness

1. *Various indeed are the usages of
the terms atman and dharma:
They [all] refer
to the transformations of consciousness.*

In the opening verse, Vasubandhu points out that the various usages of *ātman* and *dharma* all refer to the transformations of consciousness. The term *upacāra* in the verse³⁵ has been variously translated by different scholars. Thus whereas Anacker translates it as ‘metaphors’ (Anacker, 2005, p.186), Sthirmati has translated it as ‘constructions or superimpositions’ (Chatterjee, 1980, p.33). However, Kochumuttom has again gone into the etymological roots of the term *upacāra* and shown that it can be best translated as ‘usages’. He writes

...Now from the above discussion one arrives at four meanings for the term *upacāra*: (i) social manners (ii) (secondary) use of terms, (iii) environs, and (iv) access...thus, in the end there is only one meaning of the term *upacāra* that is relevant to the context, and, that is ‘(secondary) use of terms’. Hence my translation of *upacāra* as usage. Thus *ātma-*

³⁵ *Ātma-dharma-upacāro hi vividho yaḥ pravartate
Vijñāna-pariṇāmo'sau. (Triṃśikā, Verse 1)*

dharma-upacāra in the text means ‘the usages of the terms *ātman* and *dharma*.’ (Kochumuttom, 1982, p.132)

Thus by different usages of *ātman* and *dharma* are meant various concepts that are used to refer to *ātman* and *dharma*. Sthiramati, in his commentary on *Triṃśikā* has given examples of such conceptual usages that Vasubandhu is talking about. Sthiramati writes, in his *Triṃśikā-Bhaṣya*

The word *vividha* (in the *kārikā*) means various kinds (of constructions). ‘*ātmopacarā*’ stands for imposed constructions like *ātmā* or soul, *jiva* or the living being, *jantu* or animal, *manuja* or *mānava* or human beings and the like. *Dharmopacāra* means constructions like the *skandhas*, the *dhātus*, the *āyatanas* (*rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saṃjñā*, *saṃskāra*, *vijñāna*) and the like. (Chatterjee, 1980, p.33)

The terms *ātman* and *dharma* can be translated as self and elements. Now in a broader sense, the notion of self and elements stand for the wider notions of subjectivity and objectivity respectively. Thus concepts like *ātmā*, *jiva*, *jantu*, *mānava* etc. belong to the category of an epistemological subject whereas the concepts like *skandhas*, *āyatanas*, *dhātus* etc. belong to the category of an epistemological object. So Vasubandhu means that the various concepts that refer to the notions of subjectivity (self) and objectivity (elements) are nothing but the transformations of consciousness itself. Thus what we consider as a permanent self (*pudgala*) as well as what we consider as external objects or elements of experience (*dharma*) are both not real in the true sense but are only illusions which are formed because of the action of consciousness’s transforming itself into various modes, subject to certain conditions. These transformations of consciousness result in the illusions of the self as well as of the elements in the psyche of unenlightened persons.

Then he comments that such a transformation of consciousness is threefold.

1. (contd). *Threefold is such transformation*
2. *They are, namely,*
Maturing, thinking, and perception of sense objects.

The three types of transformations of consciousness are called the maturing consciousness (*vipāka-vijñāna*), the thinking consciousness (*manana-vijñāna*) and the perception of object of consciousness (*viśaya-vijñapti*). Vasubandhu then goes on to describe the nature and working of these three types of transformations of consciousness. In the subsequent verses, Vasubandhu drafts a brilliant exposition of his understanding of human consciousness and shows how the entire psycho-somatic organism functions and how these transformations of consciousness operate. It becomes very clear after carefully reading these verses that the *vijñāna-pariṇāma* (transformation of consciousness) is responsible for the workings of the human psyche and in no way is the world a transformation of consciousness, as is supposed by any form of metaphysical idealism. Nowhere in this text does Vasubandhu comment on the ontological status of the external world; all he is doing in this text is making us aware of the functioning of the human psyche so that we can be aware of its dynamics, which can further help us to alleviate suffering.

3.2.1 The Store-Consciousness

2. *There the maturing [consciousness]*
is otherwise called the store consciousness,
which carries the seeds of all [past experiences]

The first transformation of consciousness known as the *vipāka* (maturing) is also called the *alāya-vijñāna* (store consciousness). This transformation of consciousness carries within it the seeds of all past experiences of the individual. These seeds can then ripen at some appropriate future time and result in good or bad fruits according to the law of karma. This transformation can roughly be compared to what the psychoanalysts called the unconscious, although there are marked differences between the two terms.³⁶

³⁶ Unconscious is a term that was used by Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, to refer to the mental activities that go on inside an individual, without the individual being consciously aware of them. These 'hidden' mental processes, however, affect in a major way the behavior of an individual throughout her life. The unconscious

3. *It has [within itself]*
The perceptions of consciousness
Of unknown objects and places;
It is always associated with
Touch, attentiveness, knowledge,
conception, and volition.

The *ālaya-vijñāna* carries within itself the perceptions of consciousness of unknown objects and places. These are called unknown in the sense that such objects and places in the *ālaya* are not distinctly apprehended in cognitions like ‘It is there’, ‘It is that’ and the like. They are, so to say, unknown to our conscious cognitive processes and present themselves to our active consciousness only at some appropriate time. Further, since the *ālaya-vijñāna* is a transformation of consciousness, it is associated with some *caittas* or mental concomitants, as is the case with any consciousness.³⁷ Vasubandhu states that these mental concomitants are five in number namely touch (*sparśa*), attentiveness (*manaskāra*), knowledge (*vid*), conception (*saṃjñā*) and volition (*cetanā*).³⁸

4. *The feeling therein is that of indifference*
It is unobscured and undefined;
Similarly indifferent are touch etc;
And it [the store-consciousness] is like a
Torrent of water;
5. *And it ceases to exist at the attainment of arhattva*

can be accessed, according to most psychoanalysts, by attending to the content of our dreams or slip of tongues or through the use of psychoanalysis.

³⁷ For the Buddhists, a consciousness (*vijñāna*) is always intentional and hence it must be associated with some mental concomitants (*cāittas*).

³⁸ In Buddhist epistemology, these five elements are associated with every kind of consciousness and accordingly these are known as *sarvtraga* (universals).

The store consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*) is not associated with either good (*kuṣala*) or bad (*akuṣala*) feelings. It is neutral to such feelings. It is unobscured as it is not covered by either *kleśa āvaraṇa* or the *jñeya āvaraṇa*.³⁹ It is called undefined because it can be labeled as neither good nor bad, as is the case of the five universal concomitants like touch etc. This neutrality of the *ālaya-vijñāna* can be attributed to the fact that it is the root consciousness underlying the entire range of our conscious activity. In it, there is no scope for any feelings of pain and pleasure as these cannot be conceptualized without a self. The illusion of the self however is formed in the *manana* stage only. As there is no judgmental and discursive self in the *ālaya*, it is indifferent to such feelings as those of good, bad, pain or pleasure. Vasubandhu then tries to make us understand the notion of *ālaya* through the analogy of a torrent of water. Thus the store consciousness is like a flowing stream of water. This flowing stream flows on uninhibited and it can stop only when one has reached the stage of enlightenment (*arhattva*).

As we can see, verses 2-5 of *Triṃśikā* describe the workings and nature of the first transformation of consciousness that is the *ālaya-vijñāna*, and are in no way involved with the real-ideal debate about the nature of the world. Thus, any attempt to understand the verses as trying to advocate either realism or idealism would be mistaken.

3.2.2 The Thinking-Consciousness

5. *The consciousness called manas*

has the store-consciousness for its support and object.

It is essentially an act of thinking.

Verses 5-7 of the *Triṃśikā* describe the second transformation of consciousness which is called the thinking consciousness (*manana-vijñāna*). It has *ālaya-vijñāna* as its supporting consciousness and the object of its operation is also *ālaya*. It manifests through the act of

³⁹ “There are two factors, according to Mahayana, which cause a being to remain unenlightened and unmeshed in *saṃsāra*. They are (1) The obscuration of the defilements (*kleśa āvaraṇa*) and (2) The obscuration of the wrong and perverse view about the nature of reality (*jñeya āvaraṇa*).” (Keown, 2003, p.25)

thinking. Unlike *ālaya*, most of whose contents lie dormant and become accessible to our perceptions only at a certain time, the *manana* manifests itself through an act of thinking only. It operates essentially in the zone of conscious thought and hence is called an act of thinking. It is this transformation of consciousness which is responsible for the illusion of a permanent self in the free flowing stream of consciousness.

6. *It is always associated with four defilements,
which are themselves obscured and undefined;
Those four defilements are, namely,
Belief in self, ignorance about self,
Pride in self, and love of self.*

Due to the activity of *manas*, the ceaselessly flowing stream of *ālaya* is falsely considered as a permanent self. When such a false notion of self arises, there arise with it four defilements, namely belief in a self (*ātma-dṛṣṭi*), ignorance about self (*ātma-moha*), pride in self (*ātma-māna*) and love of self (*ātma-sneha*). These four defilements are obscured and undefined. The defilements are obscured because they are afflicted. They are undefined in as much as they are not manifest as good or bad at this stage.

7. *It [i.e. mano-nāma-vijñāna] is associated
Also with others like touch etc.
which are all of the same nature
as the region in which one is born.
It does not belong to one in the state of arhataship;
Nor does it operate
in the state of suppressed consciousness,
nor in the supra-mundane path.*

The *manas*, like the *ālaya* is associated with the five *sarvtragas* - touch, attention, knowledge, conception and volition. These associates are of the same nature as the region (*loka* or *dhātu*)⁴⁰ in which one is born. Thus if one is born in the region of desire (*kāmadhātu*), the nature of associates would correspond to this realm only. The thinking consciousness does not operate in a person who has attained liberation by following the path of the Buddha. It is also absent in the state of suppressed consciousness (*nirodha samāpatti*) and in the supra-mundane path (*lokottara-mārg*). These states where the *manas* is non operational have been very clearly described by Sthirmati in his *Triṃśikā-Bhaṣya*. He writes

The arhat does not have it. Not in the stage of *nirodha samāpatti* (a force stopping consciousness and producing the highest semiconscious dreamy trance), nor in the *lokottara mārg* (or transcendental stage) (is it ever present). (Chatterjee, 1980, p.57)

These verses describe the nature of second transformation of consciousness. It is once again clear that Vasubandhu is just describing the functioning of individual consciousness and not stating any ontological position about the birth of the world from consciousness.

3.2.3 The Active-Consciousness

8. *It is the second transformation [of consciousness]*

The third transformation of consciousness

is the same as the perception of sixfold object;

It could be good or bad or indifferent in character.

⁴⁰ In Buddhism, there are three realms of existence - *kāmaloka*, *rūpaloka* and *arūpaloka*. The first of these, the *kāmaloka* is the realm of desire and attachment and includes existence in the form of humans, animals, demons and hell-beings. The second realm, namely the *rūpaloka* is the realm of form without desire and attachment. This is inhabited by some Gods who have attained this zone through their meditations. The third realm or the *arūpaloka* is the realm which is without desire and without form. The sages who have mastered the four formless stages of meditations are born in this zone.

The verses 8-16 of the *Triṃśikā* deal with the third transformation of consciousness, namely the active consciousness (*pravṛtti-vijñānam*). Vasubandhu starts its description by saying that this transformation is same as the perception of the sixfold object. Kochumuttom has taken this definition as implying that Vasubandhu is talking about the presence of an external object when he talks about the perception of the sixfold object.⁴¹ However the sixfold object is defined by Sthiramati in his *Triṃśikā-Bhaṣya*⁴² and he sees no reason to accept the object as something external. For Sthiramati and other Buddhists holding an idealist view of reality, the six active-consciousnesses and their respective objects (*viśaya*) can all be explained in terms of consciousness only without the need of positing an object external to consciousness, and elaborate arguments like *sahopālabana*⁴³ etc. are given in defense of their thesis. However, Kochumuttom takes a realist reading while interpreting the word ‘objects’ and believes that Vasubandhu is admitting to the existence of external objects. I would again emphasize that both Sthiramati and Kochumuttom have offered sound reasons in favor of their respective views and no amount of argument would seem to end this debate in a decisive manner. However, what is important to note here is the fact that without wasting time on any metaphysical debate or getting involved in the question about the nature and ontological status of the sixfold object, Vasubandhu moves forward to define the dynamics of *pravṛtti-vijñāna*.

9. *It is associated with three kinds of mental factors*

Universal, specific and good;

It is associated, similarly,

With primary as well as secondary defilements;

It is subject to three kinds of feelings, too.

⁴¹ “That is, a sense consciousness involves a sense and its object, the latter being in most cases an external thing.” (Kochumuttom, 1982, p.140).

⁴² “The word ‘ṣaḍvidhasya’ means the perception or grasping or the definite cognition of the six kinds of objects viz. *rūpa* (visual sense-data), *śabda* (auditory sense data), *gandha* (olfactory sense-data), *rasa* (taste sense-data), *sprṣṭavya* (tactile sense-data) and *dharma* (non-sensuous)”. (Chatterjee, 1980, pp.59-60)

⁴³ “*Ṣahopālabana-niyama* (invariable co-apprehension) is an argument that we can attach no sense to the notion of physical reality existing apart from minds. Since the awareness of blue is simultaneous with the blue thing, and blue and the awareness of blue never occur separately, we must assume that they are the same.” (Bartley, 2008, p.128)

Vasubandhu further elaborates that the active consciousness (*pravṛtti-vijñāna*) is linked with three kinds of mental factors. These are universal, specific and good mental factors. It is also associated with primary and secondary defilements and further, it is associated with three kinds of feelings, viz., good, bad and indifferent. It is interesting to note that the complexity of the transformation of consciousness increases as we move from store consciousness to active consciousness. The *pravṛtti-vijñāna* seems to be most complex of them all. It is because unlike the *ālaya* and the *manas*, which are relatively less complex and more stable than the *pravṛtti-vijñāna*, this *pravṛtti-vijñāna* belongs to the stage of our active perceptual experience which is always being affected by the ceaseless flux of sense data received by our senses.

10. *Of those associates the first, [namely the universal] ones,
are touch etc.,
[The second namely] the specific ones,
are desire, resolve and memory,
Together with concentration and knowledge;
Faith, sense of shame, fear of censure.*

The universal associates are touch, attentiveness, knowledge, conception and volition. They are called the universal associates because they are associated with each and every kind of consciousness. The specific associates are described by Vasubandhu as desire, resolve, memory, concentration and knowledge. These are called specific associates because they are tied to a particular consciousness and the intentional objects of their association are specific and not universal.

11. *The triad of non-covetousness etc., courage,
Composure, equanimity along with alertness,
And harmlessness are [the third, namely] the good ones.
The defilements are passionate attachment,
grudge, stupidity...*

The good associates are enlisted as faith, sense of shame, fear of censure, non-covetousness, non-anger, non-ignorance, courage composure, equanimity, alertness and harmlessness (all these are enlisted in verse 10). The primary defilements are described by Vasubandhu as passionate attachment, grudge and stupidity.

12. *Pride, [false] views and doubt.*

Anger, hatred, hypocrisy, envy, jealousy, spite

Along with deceit,

Vasubandhu adds to the list of primary defilements he enlisted in previous verse. The list continues with pride, false views, doubt, anger, hatred, hypocrisy, envy, jealousy, spite and deceit.

13. *Dishonesty, arrogance,*

harmfulness, shamelessness, defiance of censure,

sluggishness, conceit, unbelief, indolence.

Vasubandhu continues elaborating the primary defilements in this verse also. He adds dishonesty, arrogance, harmfulness, shamelessness, defiance of censure, sluggishness, conceit, unbelief and indolence to the list.

14. *Carelessness, bad memory*

Distraction of mind,

Thoughtlessness, remorse, sleepiness,

Reasoning and deliberation,

are the secondary defilements.

The latter two couples,

[namely, remorse and sleepiness, reasoning and deliberation]

can be of two kinds, [namely, defiled and undefiled].

The secondary defilements are carelessness, bad memory, distraction of mind, thoughtlessness, remorse, sleepiness, reasoning and deliberation. Out of these, remorse, sleepiness, reasoning and deliberation can be of two kinds - defiled and undefiled. For example, a process of reasoning is desired for acting efficiently in the world and when one does use reasoning in such a situation, it is a case of undefiled reasoning. However, making use of reason where it is not required, for example for thinking negative thoughts or thoughts harmful to somebody, can be a case of defiled reasoning.

15. *Depending on the conditions available*

The five sense-consciousnesses,

Together or separately,

Originate on the root-consciousness,

Just as waves, originate on water.

In this verse, Vasubandhu says that these five sense consciousnesses originate on the root consciousness in the same manner as waves originate on water. Just as waves on water may arise in the form of either a single wave or a multiplicity of waves, similarly sense consciousnesses can arise on the root-consciousness as a single consciousness (e.g. only the eye consciousness) or a multiplicity of consciousness (in the case of simultaneous arousal of eye, ear and smell consciousnesses).

Now this phrase 'depending on the conditions available' can again become a point of debate between the realist and idealist. The realist can argue that by these conditions Vasubandhu means the external objects whereas the idealists would argue that Vasubandhu

means only the seeds of the previous impressions which ripen at a particular moment according to the law of karma and give us the illusion of an external.⁴⁴ However, as already stated, Vasubandhu seems in no mood to get into any such philosophical debate. He therefore proceeds into his analysis of the human psyche.

16. *The thought-consciousness, however,
Manifests itself at all times,
Except with the non-attached
And barring the two fold trances
And also when one is intensely devoid of consciousness
Or when undergoes the stupefying stage of insensibility.*

In this verse, Vasubandhu says that the thought consciousness is active at all times in people except in certain special cases. These cases involve the cessation of mental life (a) in a persons who have lost the consciousness of the self (*Asamjñika-sattva*), and (b) in those who are in the state of either of the two yogic trances of *Asamjñika samāpatti* or *Nirodha samāpatti*.⁴⁵ It is also absent (c) in persons who are devoid of consciousness because of being in a state of extreme sloth and (d) in persons whose accidental imbalance in the three humors of the body (the wind, the bile and the phlegm) result in such persons getting unconscious.

3.3 Back to Perception-only

17. *This[threefold] transformation of consciousness
is the discrimination [between subject and object];
does not exist as [subject and object]
Therefore, this is all perception-only.*

⁴⁴ This debate has been discussed in the second chapter of the thesis as it occurs in verse 10 and 11 of the *Vimśatikā*.

⁴⁵ “The word, *samāpattidvaya* means the *āsamjñika samāpatti* (or a force that makes one lose the consciousness of the self) and the *nirodha-samāpatti* (or a force that stops the consciousness and produces the highest semi-conscious-dreamy trance).” (Chatterjee, 1980, p.99)

Vasubandhu states that this threefold transformation of consciousness which he has just described can also be understood as discrimination. This discrimination is between the subject apprehender and object apprehended, since these three transformations make sense only if we take the notion of subject and object for granted. Without the notion of subject and object, notions like thought consciousness, defilements, active consciousness etc. do not make any sense. All the three transformations operate in the zone of this distinction between the subject and the object, and all such distinctions like subject/object, grasper/graspable, self/elements are unreal constructions which do not exist in reality but are formed only by ignorance (*avidyā*) in the form of our mental constructions (*vikalpa*). Therefore in the final analysis, all these transformations are not real in the absolute sense and hence reality is perception-only.⁴⁶

3.4 The Ceaseless *Ālaya*

18. *The consciousness contains all seeds;*

Its such and such transformations

Proceed by mutual influence,

On account of which such and such [subject-object] discrimination arises.

The store consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*) contains all the seeds in itself and its such and such transformations, i.e., the active consciousness (*pravṛtti-vijñāna*) happen because of the mutual influence of *ālaya* and *pravṛtti-vijñāna* on each other. Thus a complete perceptual act involving active consciousness involves both

1. the object (*viṣaya* or *ālambana*) of consciousness which gives rise to any of the six active consciousness and

⁴⁶ It must be remembered that the claim ‘All this is perception-only’ is not to be taken as the strong metaphysical claim that all existence is nothing but perception. It simply means that all we can know is our perceptions.

2. subsequent conceptualization of the perceptual sense-data by the impressions stored in *ālaya-vijñāna*.

Thus, the sensation part of a perceptual act is given by the sense-object which gives rise to the six consciousnesses, together or separately. However, such a pure sensation is conceptualized on the basis of the existing impressions (*bīja* or *vāsanā*) in the *ālaya*. Such an act of transformation of consciousness in turn deposits newer seeds in the store consciousness. These seeds can then ripen in the future and act with any of the active consciousnesses to produce further acts of active consciousness. Thus these two, namely the existing seeds in the *ālaya* and the newer experiences by the active consciousness, mutually influence each other. It is only due to this constant interaction between the existing seeds of *vāsanās* in the *ālaya* and the newer experiences in *pravṛtti* that we can have any unit of conceptual knowledge. Any of these alone - either store consciousness or active consciousness - is insufficient to produce knowledge and judgment. Since a unit of knowledge or judgment occurs in the form of a subject-object schema, therefore, Vasubandhu says that the subject-object discrimination is the result of the mutual influence of store consciousness and active consciousness on each other.

19. Once the previous stage of maturation

Has been exhausted,

The impression of deeds

Along with those of the twofold grasping

Engender the next stage of maturation.

In verse 19, Vasubandhu explains how the *ālaya* keeps on running like an unending stream and how the seeds in the store consciousness do not get totally exhausted in spite of our continuous actions and in spite of the event of death. This is because every new action by the moment-series deposits newer seeds in the storehouse consciousness and also the habit energies of twofold grasping strengthens the *ālaya*. The twofold graspings are (a) the graspings of the graspable and (b) the grasping of the grasper. These two graspings, according to Vasubandhu, refer to the two illusions that ordinary mortals are afflicted with. The first is the illusion of the

object, that is, there are independently existing objects which can be known as they are in themselves, and the second is that there is an independent subject which can also be known to us.

The habit energies of these two graspings, along with the habit energies of the experiences that we undergo act as new seeds (*bīja*) and keep on filling the storehouse consciousness. As a result, the *ālaya* never gets exhausted. Even after the previous stage of maturation is exhausted, that is, even after the death of a person, these two factors help the *ālaya* to enter the next stage of maturation, viz., a new birth.

These last two verses discussed above also describe the internal mechanisms of consciousness and hence are not concerned with real-ideal debate in any way.

3.5 The Triple Nature of Reality

20. *The subject-matter that is liable*

To [subject-object] distinction

By whatsoever sort of [subject-object] discrimination,

Its all just constructed nature;

It does not exist.

In verses 20-22, Vasubandhu talks about another important feature of the Yogācāra philosophy, that is, the *Trisvabhāvas* or the three own-beings. He explains that our phenomenal experience of the world can be understood by categorizing it into three different modes in which this experience can be meant by us.

For Vasubandhu, any phenomenal experience which is characterized by the subject-object distinction or discrimination by the mind comes under the constructed nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*) of the world. This is because, for a *Yogācārin*, this dichotomy of grasper/graspable knower/known, subject/object is not how the world is in itself but is only a charging that our mind imposes on the experience that we receive in the form of sense-data. Hence, our ordinary

experience which is based on the dichotomy of the perceiving subject and the perceived object is known as the constructed nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*).

21. *The other-dependent nature, however,
is the [act of graspable-grasper] discrimination;
It depends for its origin on conditions.
The fulfilled [nature]
is the latter's [i.e., the other dependent nature's] perpetual devoidness
of the former [i.e., the constructed nature].*

If the various forms of subject-object experience are what are known as the constructed nature, the fundamental ground of these forms is the other-dependent nature (*paratantra svabhāva*). It is called the other-dependent nature because it does not exist by itself but depends on external conditions for its existence, as per the law of dependent origination.

The fulfilled nature (*pariniṣpanna*) is here defined by Vasubandhu as the other dependent nature's devoidness of the constructed nature. Thus, when the other-dependent nature is free from the dual apprehensions of subject/object, then one experiences the fulfilled nature. This form of duality free experience is the way the Buddhas perceive the world.

This verse clearly indicates that these three own beings are not various ontological categories but only the way in which the phenomenal experience is meant by us. This is because the three are not separately existing worlds but are only the various ways in which we experience the given data which we receive through our sense faculties. Hence, the ground of experience is only the other-dependent (*paratantra*) nature. When *paratantra* is marred by duality, what one experiences is the constructed nature (*parikalpita*). Devoid of this false duality, the fulfilled nature (*parainiṣpanna*) is experienced.

22. *For that reason, indeed,
It is said to be neither different,
Nor non-different
from the other-dependent nature.
It is like impermanence etc.
As long as this [fulfilled nature]
is not seen,
That [other-dependent nature], too,
is not seen.*

Since the fulfilled nature is nothing but the other-dependent devoid of the constructed, it is called neither different nor non-different from the other-dependent nature. Vasubandhu clarifies the point with the example of permanence. He compares the relation between fulfilled nature and the other-dependent nature to the relation between impermanence and an impermanent object. One can never observe impermanence without it being instantiated by an impermanent object. However, that does not mean that ‘impermanence’ (taken as a concept) and an impermanent entity (taken as an object) are one and the same. Since both of them are observed in the same ostensive particular thing (a person can be referred to for explaining both the notion of impermanence as well as an example of an impermanent object), they cannot be different either. The relation between fulfilled and other-dependent nature is like between impermanence and an impermanent thing. The two are neither different nor non-different from each other.

Unless one realizes the state of fulfilled nature, one can never know that the world of our experience is only other-dependent nature. Without this realization, we will keep on taking the subject-object distinction to be real and the constructed nature to be the ultimate truth of our existence.

3.6 The Emptiness of the Three Natures

23. *Corresponding to the threefold nature*

There is also a threefold naturelessness;

Referring to this fact it has been said

That there is the naturelessness of all elements.

Vasubandhu now talks about the threefold naturelessness of the three own beings. Sthirmati rightly points out in his commentary that Vasubandhu is trying to reconcile the theory of the triple nature of reality with the important Buddhist notion of the emptiness of the elements (*dharmā-śūnyatā*).⁴⁷

Vasubandhu says that for each of the own beings, there is a corresponding lack of own being. Due to this reason it is known that everything is empty or there is the naturelessness of all elements.

24. *The first nature is natureless by its very definition;*

The second nature, again, does not come into being by itself,

And this constitutes the second kind of naturelessness.

Corresponding to the *parikalpita svabhāva*, there is the *lakṣana niḥsvabhāvatā* (naturelessness by definition) of the *parikalpita*. This is because the very definition of *parikalpita* - that which is constructed - takes out any possibility of having an essential nature. Since everything in *parikalpita* is constructed and hence not real, the *parikalpita* is devoid of any own-being or essence. It is like a sky flower. The *paratantra* is also devoid of own being because it depends on other conditions (*pratyaya*) for its existence and hence is relative and

⁴⁷ “If *paratantra* are the entities qua substance only then how is it that in the ‘*sutrā*’, it is so said that all elements are without any essence, without any origin and without any decay.” (Chatterjee, 1980, p.122)

without a fixed essence. Its naturelessness is called the *utpatti niḥsvabhāvatā* (naturelessness with reference to the origin) of the *paratantra*.

25. *That from which all elements have their ultimate reality,*

[Is the third naturelessness]

It is also called suchness,

Because it remains always as such;

That is itself the state [in which one realizes the meaning]

of perception-only, too.

The fulfilled own being is the one in which all elements have their ultimate reality. Since this nature is the fulfilled one and here consciousness is residing in perception-only, there arises no question of any essential nature of this state since it is beyond linguistic descriptions which are part of the subject-object duality. Hence nothing can really be said about this state and so it is also devoid of any essential nature. This is called the *paramārtha-niḥsvabhāvatā* of *pariniṣpanna* (naturelessness of elements in their absolute state of existence).

In the preceding verses, Vasubandhu defined the three own beings which are nothing but the ways in which we encounter the phenomenal experience that is given to us. Thus, Vasubandhu is dealing with epistemological categories here and he makes no claim for or against the existence of the world dependent or independent of consciousness.

3.7 Perception-Only: Knowledge and Realization

26. *As long as consciousness does not abide*

in the realization [that the subject-object designations]

are mere perception-only,

The attachment to the twofold grasping

will not cease to operate.

In verses 26-30, the mystical aspects of the *Triṃśikā* come to the forefront. In verse 26, Vasubandhu is trying to explain how one can be sure that one is residing in the state of perception-only. The paradoxes that such a realization of perception-only involves again suggest that any conventional reading of the *Triṃśikā* cannot do justice to the subtleties and depth that this text contains. In the final verses, the importance of taking the perception-only realization from theory to praxis as well as the hurdles and logical inconsistencies that might be encountered in such a move have been discussed by Vasubandhu. This is another reminder of the fact that in the Buddhist tradition, philosophy and praxis are strongly interwoven and any philosophy which is separated from the practical conduct of a seeker is incomplete. Thus, the job of a Buddhist philosopher and his philosophical arguments/texts is only to supplement the path of praxis which it does by making us understand the nature of the phenomena. A philosophy which is purely formal and does not respond to these issues is of no use. Ontology or metaphysics is pursued in such a tradition only to form a suitable basis for epistemology or psychology which is of obvious importance for any student of Buddhism since it is only an understanding of the mental framework that can help us understand ourselves and the cause of our sufferings in a better way.

In verse 26, Vasubandhu states that until an individual realizes the fact that every form of experience is just perception-only, her consciousness will keep on operating in the illusion of subject/object, grasper/graspable or knower/known dichotomy. This two fold nature of knowledge, considered the bedrock and foundation of the entire epistemological schema in modern philosophy, is not what can be called 'real' in the Buddhist tradition.

The real/ideal debate presupposes this dichotomy of subject apprehender and object apprehended as real. This is because the question whether the world is real or ideal is relevant only in a framework of knowledge in which the notion of subject/object, knower/known etc. are taken as real. Hence when this subject/object dichotomy is itself regarded as unreal and false mental construction, the real-ideal debate loses its epistemological foundation. Such an epistemology, in which the subject-object distinction is called unreal may seem too primitive to be classified in any western epistemological schema and this is exactly the point that I am trying to make here. The opinion that Wittgenstein held for philosophy in relation to natural sciences can be used as an analogy to understand the nature and scope of this text.⁴⁸ Thus the entire field

⁴⁸ "Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. (The word "philosophy" must mean something whose place is above or below the natural sciences, not beside the natural sciences)." (Wittgenstein, 1922/1999, p.52)

of discourse of these texts is something that can be placed above or below philosophy, but not besides it. Hence, there is no scope for a real-ideal debate in this text.

27. *One does not abide in the realization
of perception-only
Just on account of the [theoretical] perception
That all this is perception-only
If one places [sees] something before oneself.*

This verse again emphasizes the point that a purely theoretical/philosophical understanding of the fact that everything is perception-only is not equivalent to realizing this fact in its totality. The gap between knowledge and realization, a gap of immense significance in Buddhist as well as many other Indian traditions is again highlighted by Vasubandhu in this verse. Thus even if one realizes that there are no objects other than those being encountered in consciousness, and thinks that she - as a subject - understands that she is realizing perception-only, this is incomplete realization because even if the emptiness of the object is realized, the notion of the subject is still operating which again has to be totally dissolved (naturally by way of understanding/realization). This is what Vasubandhu points towards in the next verse.

28. *One does abide in the realization
of mere perception-only
When one does not perceive also a supporting consciousness,
For, the graspable objects being absent,
There cannot either be grasping of that,
[namely, the grasping of the supporting consciousness].*

Having negatively defined what it is not to realize perception-only, Vasubandhu now positively explains how a state of perception-only is realized. He states that once consciousness

realizes that there are no external objects but perception-only, and the illusion of the object goes away, the other pole of this dichotomy, that is the independently existing subject, also falls away. These two dichotomies, viz. subject/object, grasper/graspable etc. are created by the mind. Once these dichotomies fall away, there is no subject who can make the judgment - “this is perception-only” - since all linguistic judgments necessarily involve the subject/object structure. Thus in the true state of realization of perception-only, there is neither subject nor object but only the realization of the ceaseless flow of consciousness.

To most students of modern philosophy, the above verses may seem nonsensical or mystical claims which have nothing to do with the way philosophy should be done and is done in modern times. This is because it is impossible to imagine how such a state would be where one realizes that all is perception-only. If there is no subject who knows, then who is the one who is realizing perception-only? What would be the status of objects in such a state? Unanswered questions like these really seem to put a philosophical deadlock on this text. I believe this happens because in this part of the text Vasubandhu is clearly leaving the philosophical plane and entering the religious/spiritual plane - a plane which is quite unlike philosophy and is marked by mystique and paradox. This again brings out the non-philosophical nature of the text.

29. *That indeed is the supramundane knowledge*

When one has no mind that knows,

And no object for its support;

It follows the revulsion of basis

Through the twofold removal of wickedness;

The final two verses describe the state of realization where one has attained the state of an *arhat* by being settled in the knowledge of perception-only.

Vasubandhu says that the true state of perception-only is the state of supramundane knowledge and in this state, there is neither the subject apprehender nor the object apprehended. In order to explain this state, Vasubandhu says that such a state is obtained by *āśraya pravṛtti* which in turn is obtained when the two illusions of *kleśa āvaraṇa* (causes of affliction) and *jñeya*

āvaraṇa (obstacles that cover up the object of knowledge) are removed. The two *āvaraṇas* are removed by following the way of the Buddhas. This removal of the *āvaraṇas* results in a total change in the psychological being of an individual, called the revulsion at the basis (*āśraya parāvṛtti*) in the Yogacara tradition.⁴⁹

30. *That itself is the pure source-reality,
Incomprehensible, auspicious and unchangeable;
Being delightful, it is the emancipated body,
Which is also called the truth [body] of the great sage.*

Such a state is described by Vasubandhu as the pure source reality (*tathatā*) which is incomprehensible, auspicious and unchangeable. It is bliss itself as well as the emancipated body called the truth body of the great sage.

3.8 Concluding Remarks

The last verse clearly makes use of the terms which are more spiritual than philosophical in their connotation. It is describing the state of *Nirvāṇa*, in other words. The very fact that Vasubandhu ends not just the *Triṃśikā* but also the *Vimsatika*⁵⁰ with such mystical words suggests what he might be trying to convey in these texts. Had Vasubandhu's interests been merely philosophical, he might have finished his thesis with statements such as "there are no external objects" or "Consciousness is the only reality." However, throughout the length of these texts, he is not making any such claim. In both the concluding verses, he is describing the state of *Nirvāṇa* which clearly gives a clue that his intentions are in accord with the highest ideals of Buddhism which is spiritual salvation rather than philosophical speculation. The opening verse of the

⁴⁹ The revulsion at the basis (*āśraya parāvṛtti*) happens when through the removal of two kinds of obstructions (*āvaraṇas*), the store consciousness stops depositing any new seeds in the form of various *vikalpas* in it. With the new seeds of duality not entering the *ālaya* and the old ones slowly diminishing with time, there comes a stage when the *ālaya* is free of each and every impression of duality and consciousness attains total freedom. Such a stage of attainment is called the revulsion at the basis in the Yogācāra tradition.

⁵⁰ *Vijñāpti-mātratā-siddhiḥ sva-śakti-sadrśī mayā
Kṛtā-iyam sarvathā sā tu na cintyā Buddha-gocarā.* (Vimsatika Verse22)

Vimśatika - *All this is perception-only* - because of being read out of context has already generated so much confusion that Vasubandhu is more often than not seen as an idealist and the other aspects of his philosophical genius are overlooked. Although he has shown his skills as an ingenious philosopher in texts such as the *Abhidharmakośa*, the *Karma-siddhi-prakraṇa* or the *Vādaśāstra*, still I would insist that these particular texts contain more than an exercise in armchair philosophy. They pave a path towards self realization and in this path philosophical tools and analysis are used in order to make things and concepts clear to the reader. In spite of all this, if one still believes that Vasubandhu has categorically described the ontological nature of the world – whether real or ideal - or even assumes that his primary interest lies in settling this issue, one is definitely carrying the raft over one's head.⁵¹

I agree with Kochumuttom's thesis that Vasubandhu is not giving an idealist interpretation of the world in the *Triṃśika*. However, the important point to notice is that neither is he affirming the existence of extra mental thing in itself. Thus Vasubandhu is not advocating realism either. He can be read in a realist way, but that would just be a reading and not an explicit claim. In my opinion, Vasubandhu's main concern, especially in *Triṃśika* is to get the seeker out of the dichotomy of subject-object so that he can know himself as a stream of consciousness, get rid of the false notion of the self and hence put an end to his suffering. In such a schema, the question whether the external objects exist or not is an unnecessary metaphysical question which he would have anyways liked to avoid.

Thus the thrust of the perception-only doctrine is to show how the mind constructs our world, not in an ontological but in a psychological way. The key here is the removal of psychological suffering, and not the acquisition of ontological knowledge.

⁵¹ The parable of the raft appears in the *Alagduppamā sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*. In this parable, Buddha compares his teachings with a raft. Just as after crossing a river with the help of the raft, a wise man leaves the raft on the shore and does not carries it over one's head while walking off the shore, in a similar way, Buddha says that his teachings should not be psychologically carried over in one's mind once they have served their purpose of showing a path towards an end to suffering.