Chapter 5: Three Natures in Sūtras

5.1 Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra

The Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra is a Buddhist scripture classified as belonging to the Yogācāra or Consciousness only school of Buddhist thought. The SDS\(^1\) is variously romanized as “Sandhinirmocana Sutra and “Saṃdhinirmocana Sutra”\(^2\). Considering the broader history of Yogācāra discourse, the SDS has certainly been the most important and influential sutra for the Yogācāra, and the Yogācārabhūmi is the largest Yogācāra śāstra, containing some of the oldest extant Yogācāra material.\(^3\) Yogācāra thought represented by the works of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu.

Many early Mahāyāna scriptures, precise dating for the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra is difficult to achieve. Etienne Lamotte believed that the text was assembled from earlier, independent fragments. Other scholars believe that the apparently fragmentary nature of the early versions of the scripture may represent piecemeal attempts at translation, rather than a composite origin for the text itself. The earliest forms of the text may date from as early as the 1st or 2nd Century CE. The final form of the text was probably assembled no earlier than the 3rd Century CE, and by the 4th Century significant commentaries on the text began to be composed by Buddhist scholars, most notably Asaṅga. The sūtra was likely composed in Sanskrit in India, but currently exists only in Chinese and Tibetan translations.

The SDS is one of the most important texts of the Yogācāra tradition, and one of the earliest texts to expound the philosophy of Consciousness only. Divided into ten sections, the sūtra
presents itself as a series of dialogues between the Buddha and various Bodhisattvas. During these dialogues, the Buddha attempts to clarify disputed meanings present in scriptures of the early Mahāyāna and the early Buddhist schools. The title of the sūtra promises to expound a teaching. That is “completely explicit” and requires no interpretation in order to be understood.

The Yogācāra School as one of its primary scriptures adopted the SDS. In addition, it inspired a great deal of additional writing, including discussions by Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Xuanzang, Woncheuk, and a large body of Tibetan literature founded on Je Tsongkhapa’s writings concerning the scripture.⁴

The first four chapters of the sūtra discuss the concept of ultimate truth. The fifth and sixth chapters discuss the concept of ālayavijñāna or “storehouse consciousness” and the three characteristics of phenomena (trilakṣana), which refer to the incomplete and absolute truth of various phenomena.⁵ Chapter seven outlines a theory of textual interpretation in light of the Buddha’s various teachings, and chapter nine discusses meditation. The chapter nine is devoted to a discussion of the Bodhisattva Path.

The doctrine of the three natures is one of the principal tenets in the teaching of the Yogācāra School in Indian Buddhism, and already in the SDS, the earliest extant Yogācāra text.

The three natures are “imaginary nature” (parikalpita-svabhāva), “dependent nature” (paratantra-svabhāva) and “perfect nature” (parinispanna-svabhāva). An entire chapter is devoted to the elucidation of the concept, where the three natures are called “character” (lakṣaṇa) instead of “nature” (svabhāva).⁶
“It is said that in brief, the characters of dharmas are of three types. What are these three? They are: first, “imaginary character”, secondly, “dependent character”, and thirdly, “perfect character”. What is “imaginary character”? It indicates names and conventions, which attribute to all dharmas self-nature and distinctions, and as a consequence, language arises. What is “dependent character”? It indicates the conditioned nature of all dharmas, as is meant (by the Buddha when he declares), “When this is, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises. Conditioned by ignorance are the karma-formations, ... and such is the origin of the whole mass of suffering.” What is “perfect character”? It indicates the equal and true nature of all dharmas. Bodhisattvas due to their courage and energy, their well-directed mental effort and their abstinence from false thoughts comprehend this true nature. As a result of the gradual attainment of this comprehension, they realize fully the supreme, perfect enlightenment.”

From this passage, the three natures are given as “characters of dharmas,” they have more to do with the destinies of sentient beings relative to their ability to realize the conditioned nature of their existence than with the nature and constitution of the physical and mental world. It is a common Buddhist belief that our world and its objects are produced from causes and as such are impermanent and devoid of self-essence. However, one of the most deep-seated prejudices of man is his tendency to take the impermanent as permanent and to attribute the character of independent being to them. As a consequence, all sorts of false distinctions arise. These distinctions, which do not correspond to the true nature of things and are reflected in the distorting influence of ordinary language, are termed “imaginary character” by the sutra. “Dependent character” is related here to the doctrine of dependent origination, and as such, it indicates not only the conditioned nature of things but also the endless cycles of birth and death as well as their ground.
The totality of conditioned existence (the whole mass of suffering) in which man is imprisoned due to his inclination to look on the “imaginary” as real. “Perfect character” refers to the state when all discriminating activities have come to an end, when the nature of dharmas is comprehended, as it actually is, impermanent and without essence. Since the comprehension of the true nature of dharmas would lead to “the supreme, perfect enlightenment”, it is given the epithet of “perfect”.

The sūtra goes on to outline the relation of the three natures as follows:

“Imaginary character comes into being due to the attaching of names to phenomena. Dependent character comes into being due to the grasping of imaginary character (attributed to) dependent character. Perfect character comes into being due to the non-grasping of imaginary character attributed to dependent character. Sons of good family! If bodhisattvas comprehend exactly the imaginary character attributed to dependent character, they would comprehend exactly all dharmas, which are without (self) character. If bodhisattvas comprehend exactly the dependent character, they would comprehend exactly all soiled dharmas. If bodhisattvas comprehend exactly the perfect character, they would comprehend exactly all pure dharmas.”

Men wrongly believe that there are self-sufficient objects with definite properties corresponding to the names people use to designate them. These properties, which men wrongly imagine into phenomena, which are actually conditioned in nature, are their “imaginary character”. That is why the sutra asserts; “Imaginary character comes into being due to the attaching of names to phenomena... If bodhisattvas comprehend exactly the imaginary character attributed to dependent character, they would comprehend exactly all dharmas, which are without (self) character”. As a consequence of this misapprehension, men
remain forever in the realm of dependent origination, driven by their ignorance from one form of karma-existence to another, and are completely oblivious of the real nature of their being. That by “dependent character” the sutra refers primarily to this benighted state of existence is attested by the description of it as “soiled” and as the outcome of “the grasping of imaginary character attributed to dependent character”. So the sutra continues:

“Sons of good family! If bodhisattvas comprehend (exactly the imaginary character attributed to dependent character, they would comprehend exactly all) dharmas, which are without (self-) character. (On comprehending exactly all dharmas, which are without self-character). They would put an end to dharmas, which are soiled. On putting an end to dharmas, which are soiled, they would realize dharmas, which are pure.”

Finally, “perfect character” is the “non-grasping of imaginary character attributed to dependent character”, a condition which is depicted as “pure” in the sūtra because in this state, the fallacy of misplaced concreteness has finally come to an end. Realizing the transient and illusory nature of conventional life, men are at last ready to be delivered from it.

5.2 Laṅkāvatārasūtra

The LAS is indicated by the earliest Chinese translation 443 C.E, it is quite difficult to establish the date more exactly for several reasons. First, being referred to in the works of Nāgārjuna they also refer to him. Accounting for these facts, Lindtner presupposes an earlier original LAS and later additions. The problem is how to establish exactly what parts are original on the basis of criteria other than reference to main Yogācāra dogmas. Second, since two passages in the LAS bear a striking resemblance to The TSK, it could be assumed that Vasubandhu was influenced by it, given the validity of the common supposition that sūtras
preceded śāstra. Questions arise then, why Sthiramati, being acquainted with the LAS,\textsuperscript{15} did not quote these passages in his commentary on the TSK and why the name of the LAS never appears in the works of Maitreya, Asaṅga or Vasubandhu. However, phrases precede these passages may indicate that they, among quite a few in the LAS, are quotations of other texts. This would mean that these major Yogācāra tenets were even older than LAS or that The TSK is the very source of these passages.

Since detailed discussions of these matters lie outside the scope of my thesis, I shall confine myself to stipulate the existence of an original Laṅkavatāra prior in time to the main body of Yogācāra works consisting mainly of the verses of the Sagāthakam. The vast majority of verses quoted by Nāgārjuna and those in the Laṅkavatāra quoted by Vasubandhu are actually located in the Sagāthakam, a fact, which makes my stipulation more useful.

I will try to outline the major characteristics of the imagined nature as the presents it marks (nimitta) are said to give rise to the imagined nature because the dependent nature manifests itself in the form of objects (vastu), marks and characteristics. The three forms of knowledge has known as Svabhāvalakshanatraya are more or less a recapitulation or reclassification of the five Dharmas. Svabhāva, literally means “self-nature,” “self-substance,” or “existence as it is in itself,” and lakshana is the “characteristic mark” or marks that distinguish one thing from another. The combination thus literally understood looks as if it had nothing to do with knowledge. The meaning however is this, that as existence (bhava) is conceived or cognized by mind, it allows itself to be understood in three different and characteristic ways, and that each of these three ways of understanding or three views of existence is taken as final and true to the self-nature of existence by those who may hold that particular view. Thus, the phrase svābhāvalakṣaṇa may apply to the nature of knowledge itself and also to its object, that is, to
existence in general. The motive underlying the classification is to see what knowledge or view of existence is required for the attainment of the truth that brings release from the pain and bondage of existence, and the three characteristic marks so-called will more properly describe the nature of knowledge than that of its object. Svabhāva in this case is to be understood as an epistemological term.

The first of the three svabhāva is known as the Parikalpita (pari+kalpita, contrived or imagined), wrong discrimination of judgment, and proceeds from rightly comprehending the nature of objects, internal as well as external, and also the relationship existing between objects as independent individuals or as belonging to a genus.

The second is the Paratantra, literally, “depending on another,” is a knowledge based on some fact, which is not, however, in correspondence with the real nature of existence. The characteristic feature of this knowledge is that it is not altogether a subjective creation produced out of pure nothingness, but it is a construction of some objective reality on which it depends for material. Therefore, its definition is “that which arises depending upon a support or basis (āśraya).” And it is due to this knowledge that all kinds of objects, external and internal, are recognized, and in these individuality and generality are distinguished. The Paratantra is thus equivalent to what we nowadays call relative knowledge or relativity; while the Parikalpita is the fabrication of one’s own imagination or mind. In the dark a man steps on something, and imagining it to be a snake is frightened.

This is Parikalpita, a wrong judgment or an imaginative construction, attended with an unwarranted excitement. He now bends down and examines it closely and finds it to be a piece
of rope. This is \textit{Paratantra}, relative knowledge. He does not know what the rope really is and thinks it to be a reality, individual and ultimate.

While it may be difficult to distinguish sharply the \textit{Parikalpita} from the \textit{Paratantra} from these brief statements or definitions, the latter seems to have at least a certain degree of truth as regards objects themselves, but the former implies not only an intellectual mistake but some affective functions set in motion along with the wrong judgment.\textsuperscript{16} When an object is perceived as an object existing externally or internally and determinable under the categories of particularity and generality, the \textit{Paratantra} form of cognition takes place. Accepting this as real, the mind elaborates on it further both intellectually and affectively, and this is the \textit{Parikalpita} form of knowledge. It may be after all more confusing to apply our modern ways of thinking to the older ones especially when these were actuated purely by religious requirements and not at all by any disinterested philosophical ones.

The third form of nature is the \textit{Parinispāna}, perfected knowledge, and corresponds to the Right Knowledge (\textit{samyagjñāna}) and Suchness (\textit{tathatā}) of the five \textit{Dharmas}. It is the knowledge that is available when we reach the state of self-realization by going beyond Names and Appearances and all forms of Discrimination or judgment (\textit{vikalpa}). It is Suchness itself. It is the \textit{Tathāgatagarbha-hṛdaya}. It is something indestructible (\textit{avināśa}). The rope is now perceived in its true perspective.\textsuperscript{17} It is not an object constructed out of causes and conditions and now lying before us as something external. From the absolutist’s point of view, which is assumed by the \textit{LAS}, the rope is a reflection of our own mind, it has no objectivity apart from the latter, it is in this respect non-existent. But the mind out of which the whole world evolves is the object of the \textit{Parinispāna}, perfectly attained knowledge.
The following gāthās are translated from the Sanskrit text, where the relation of the three Svabhāva is treated somewhat in detail. This is one of the difficult series of the gāthās to be found in the LAS, for the meaning is obscure. This series of gāthās is broken up into five sections and is reproduced with more or less variations in the “Sagāthakam” part of the sutra.

When the mind (citta) is bound by an objective world, the intelligence (Jñāna) is awakened and reasoning takes place; but the highest wisdom (prajñā) obtains where there are no images, a higher level of consciousness. Owing to the Parikalpita conception of existence it appears real; from the Paratantra point of view there is no such reality; the Parikalpita discrimination holds good as long as there is a state of confusion; in the Paratantra view of existence there is no (subjective) discrimination. Though a variety of things may be produced by māyā, there is no validity (siddhi) in them; so also in the Parikalpita discrimination, which causes the multiplicity of appearances, there is no validity. Appearance is due to the evil way of the past, the effect of a fettered mind; it becomes for the ignorant the object of their Parikalpita conception, which is formed on the Paratantra (relative) nature of things. Existence of which the Parikalpita conception is formed (by the ignorant) has the nature of relativity; and it is as regards this relative nature of existence that the discrimination creates multitudinous appearances. There is worldly (knowledge, saṁvṛiti), and ultimate truth (paramārtha), and a third is the doctrine of Causelessness; the Parikalpita belongs to worldly knowledge; when it is cut asunder, there is revealed the realm of the wise. As in the case of the magician who reveals multiplicity out of oneness, though there is really no multiplicity so is the nature of the Parikalpita view of existence. If the Parikalpita is non-existent because of the nature of Relativity (paratantra), what is existent has no existence, and what is existent is produced from non-existence. Depending upon the Parikalpita, discrimination there obtains Relativity.
(paratantra); from the relationship of Names and Appearances there rises the Parikalpita-discrimination. But the Parikalpita is not ultimately complete, it has no other way of birth (than depending upon Relativity); thus it is known that Ultimate Truth is pure in its self-nature". When, however, (existence) is truthfully discerned (vivecya) by the intelligence (buddhi), there is neither Paratantra nor Parikalpita discrimination. Nor is there anything to be called Perfect Knowledge (parinispanna), and how can there be anything to be discerned by the intelligence? That which is Perfect is beyond the dualism of being and non-being; how can there be these two views of existence (known as Parikalpita and Paratantra)? In the Parikalpita view of existence dualism is established, and with these dualistic establishments, multiplicity is seen discriminated, but pure is the realm of the wise. Multiplicity is discriminated indeed, it is discriminated depending upon Relativity (paratantra); if a man’s discrimination takes place in any other way, and he follows the doctrines of the philosophers. The discriminating is said to be the discriminated; the idea of causation grows from trying to formulate philosophical views; when the dualism of discrimination is gotten rid of, there is indeed that perfect view of existence (parinispanna).

5.3 Mahāyānasutrālaṃkāra

This paper will examine that theory as it is presented in the MSA. The MSA refers to the trisvabhāva in a number of contexts, but there are three locations in which extended discussions of the three natures (or three characteristics) occur.

LAS also refers to these three truths by stating that parikalpita is purely imaginary like a hare’s horn or sky flower, or dream… and paratantra is relative, depends on causes and condition; it comes under the realm of phenomenal and parinispanna is the Paramārtha satya absolutely
real, which transcends subject-object duality and which is purely based on spiritual experience. Asaṅga explains these three truths in an exhaustive manner. His conception of three truths needs to be explained separately.

The MSA is a verse-text composed of some 804 verses, of which only 794 are extant in Sanskrit. This verse-text appears as an independent text only in the Tibetan canon. Normally the verse text is accompanied by (embedded in) an extended prose commentary known as the MSL, which divides the text into 21 chapters. I date both the MSL and the MSA/MSAB to the fourth century CE. Two Sanskrit editions of the MSA/MSAB are available: Le´vi’s edition of 1907 (French translation: 1911) and Bagchi’s edition of 1970, which is based on Le´vi’s edition but adds corrigenda to the text. In this paper, I will quote directly from Le´vi’s edition, since this is the earliest edition based on the most complete Sanskrit manuscript available. The MSA/MSAB appears in the Chinese canon (Taisho, 1604) and in the Tibetan canon (MSA: Tōhoku catalogue no. 4020; MSA/MSAB: Tohoku 4026). There are also two Indian sub commentaries to the text, both extant only in Tibetan.

The first extended discussion of the three-nature theory in the MSA/MSAB occurs in the context of a group of verses dealing with the distinction between reality (tattva) and illusion (māyā).

“Yathā māyā tathābhūt-parikalpo nircyate/

“Yathā māyā-kṛtaṁ tadvat dvaya-bhrāntir nircyate//

Yathā māyā yantra-pariḥṛśaṁ bhrānti-nimittam kāśṭha-lośṭādikaṁ tathābhūta-parikalpaḥ paratantraḥ svabhāva veditacyah/ yathā māya-kṛtaṁ tasyāṁ māyāyāṁ hasty-aśva-
suvarṇāḍī-ākṛtiḥṝ́ tadbhāvena pratibhāsitā tathā tasminn abhūta-parikalpe dvaya-bhrātir
grāhya-grāhakatvena pratibhāsitā parikalpita-svabhāvākārā veditavya/"

“Unreal imagination is explained to be just like an illusion. Likewise, the error of duality is explained to be just like the effect of an illusion.

Unreal imagination – the dependent nature – should be known to be just like an illusion – something formed from a piece of wood or a lump of clay, for example, that has the mark of error, and is apprehended through magic. The error of duality – the mode of appearance of the imagined nature, which manifests as subject and object in unreal imagination – should be known to be just like the effect of an illusion – the appearance of an elephant, a horse, or gold, for example, in an illusion, which manifests through the production of the (illusion).”

Parikalpita: the word parikalpa itself indicates that is merely imagined truth and has no intrinsic existence of its own. It is illusory or utterly unreal even at the phenomenal level. It is purely mental construction. Thus it is absolutely unreal. This is the basis for believing in existence of non-existing thing. It really does not exist; it exists merely as a name. The imagined characteristic (parikalpa-lakṣaṇa) is explained at the imagined characteristic is said to be threefold: it is comprised of the sign of the conceptualization of objects in terms of discourse, the tendencies that arise due to that discourse, and the perception of objects that arises due to those tendencies. Thus the imagined characteristic is described as arising out of discourse: through discourse, objects are conceptualized, tendencies arise which are directed towards those conceptualized objects, and distinct objects are perceived.

Our mind is so deluded, that we cannot help perceiving in the images or reflection, something existent. Ignorant people are always under the delusion of imputing existence to non-existent
things. Many things, which people imagine, even dharma have existence only in one’s imagination, hence they are imagined, have nothing corresponding to them in reality. Asaṅga distinguishes *parikalpita* into three types:

a) The basis (*nimitta*) for one’s thought-constructions.

b) The unconscious impression (*vāsanā*) left by them upon one’s mind

c) The denominations (*arthakhyāti*) following the impression, these are taken as real.

The external objects and dharma are thought-constructions only.

They are believed to exist in reality by common ignorant people even though they do not exist in reality. Theses thought-constructions on our mind, lead us to act, taking them as real. *Parikalpita satya* is no truth at all. Ultimately it is believed to be existent, by ignorant people. It is, therefore, so called truth, truth as conventionally believed. It being purely imaginary cannot be said to be eternal and that which is not eternal cannot be existent ultimately. *Vasubandhu* also describes *parikalpita satya* in the same manner by saying that it is pure imaginary by the intellect thus; it does not exist in really.

Unreal imagination (*abhūta-parikalpa*) is said to be like an illusion, while the appearance of duality is said to be like the effect of an illusion. The trope of a magical illusion plays an important role. This trope is used because it allows for an important ontological distinction to be made, the distinction between the dependent nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*) and the imagined nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*). According to the commentary, two aspects of the illusion need to be understood: the illusion itself, and the appearance of unreal objects that are the effect of the illusion. The illusion itself is identified with unreal imagination, which is then
equated with the dependent nature. The effect of the illusion (i.e., the appearance of unreal objects) is identified as the error of duality; this is the mistaken construction of the play of appearances into subject (the self or ego) and objects (which are taken to be external to the self or ego). This construction of appearances into subject and object is equated with the mode of appearance of the imagined nature.

*Paratantra*: it is called *paratantra* (dependent) because it is caused by the causes and conditions. It is a false thought construction about the subject-object duality. It is infected with the subject-object duality of the intellect. It is considered as paratantra on the basis of its origin and existence. It is dependent on causality. This causality operates between the various moments of consciousness themselves, one idea generating another idea and so on. An idea is produced not by any external cause but by a previous idea. The moments of consciousness, therefore, are causally efficient.

In this sense it is relative and dependent as phenomenal. *Paratantra* includes the whole of phenomenal reality. *Asaṅga* say that even this subject-object duality is only a figment of imagination, creation of the mind, which has accustomed us to think in terms of subject-object duality. *Paratantra* is nothing but thought construction of subject-object duality only. *Paratantra* is an appearance of subject in three ways: as *manas* (kliṣṭa Manovijñāna). Five *vijñāna* and *vikalpa* or Manovijñāna and object as *pada* (word), *artha* (meaning) and *deha* (body or form). We see that the appearance of words, meanings, and forms is understood as one aspect of the dependent characteristic (*paratantra-lakṣaṇa*): it is the dependent characteristic considered under the aspect of an object. Considered under the aspect of a subject, the dependent characteristic is equated with the five sensory consciousnesses, mental consciousness, and the defiled mind. According to one standard *Yogācāra* model there are
eight forms of consciousness in all: the six basic forms of consciousness (mental consciousness and the five sensory consciousnesses); the defiled mind (kliṣṭa-manas) which serves as the basis of ego; and the store consciousness (ālayāvijñāna) which serves as the basis of all other forms of consciousness. The subject-aspect of the dependent characteristic corresponds to the first seven forms of consciousness.

The transformation of the appearance of words, meanings, and forms is the undefiled realm; it is due to the transformation of seeds; and it is a universal basis. Due to the transformation of seeds, means due to the transformation of the store consciousness. The transformation of consciousnesses – which have the appearance of words, meanings, and forms – is the undefiled realm, which is liberation. The liberation is the transformation of forms of consciousness, which have the appearance of words, meanings, and forms; i.e., conscious modes of appearance that participate in dualistic conceptual constructions. The verse states that this transformation comes about through the transformation of seeds, which the commentary specifies as the transformation of the store consciousness. The term ālayāvijñāna, which has come to be closely associated with the Yogācāra, appears only a limited number of times in the commentary, and it does not appear in the store consciousness is equated with seeds, as in the seeds that contribute to, and are contributed by, moments of defiled consciousness. So when there is the transformation of these seeds, of the store consciousness, the result is a transformation of the object-aspect of the dependent characteristic. These process the transformation of the object aspect of the dependent characteristic.

Parinispanna truth: Literally it means well-established truth (paritah nispannah). It is, thus, called “paramārtha satya” the highest truth. It is equated with the Absolute. It is non-dual, beyond speech and indescribable by verbalizing mind. Parinispanna is the only truth in
ultimate analysis. “Parikalpita” is purely imaginary; hence, it must be rejected as illusory. “Paratantra” is defiled aspect of the absolute; it requires purification from the clutches of adventitious impurities. Asaṅga says that this parinispāṇṇa Satya is the only existent (sat) reality and except for this nothing exists in reality. It is identical with Tathatā (thatness). It is beyond possible means of determinations. It is indescribable in the sense that in this ultimate stage there is no difference between knower and the known, subject and object. It does not have any differentiation and degrees. The positives and negatives are one and the same, is called parinispāṇṇa by Asaṅga. Parinispāṇṇa is that which is not subject to the unsteadiness of the constructive imagination. When paratantra is purified of the false duality imposed upon it by the parikalpita, or imagination; when defiled consciousness gets rid of subject-object duality, it becomes pure; it is its real nature, it is the state of parinispāṇṇa Satya, or paramārtha Satya. This parinispāṇṇa is the Absolute and it is non-dual, because it is free from five types of duality:

(a) It is non-existing under the aspect of parikalpita and paratantra and not non-existence under the aspect of parinispāṇṇa.

(b) It is neither existence nor non-existence because parikalpita and paratantra are not the same as parinispāṇṇa. The former two are not different from the latter,

(c) It is neither production nor destruction.

(d) It is neither increase nor decrease,

(e) It is neither pure nor impure. Paramārtha Satya is equated with dharmadhātu, i.e., essence or nature of all things. Dharmadhātu itself is originated, has no production, but it is
the Absolute immanent in the phenomenal World. \textit{Parikalpita} has no existence of its own, it is purely imaginary and thus, it is \textit{anitya}-not real. The \textit{paratantra} is superimposed on consciousness, it is relative, the cause of suffering and is momentary only. \textit{Parinispanja} is the only truth, where all imaginary things cease to exist.

From these three descriptions we can see that the perfected characteristic is described in terms of the text’s conception of reality itself: it is existent, originally pure, and without the nature of discursively. This point is made even clearer in the perfected characteristic is thusness (\textit{tathatā}). The dependent characteristic (\textit{paratantra-lakṣana}) is the object of perhaps the most interesting analysis in the threefold–threefold appearance has the characteristic of object and subject; it is unreal imagination, which is the characteristic of the dependent. The threefold appearance is the appearance of words, the appearance of meanings, and the appearance of forms. Also, the threefold appearance is the appearance of mind, apprehension, and conceptual discrimination. Mind is that which is always defiled. Apprehension is the five sensory consciousnesses. Conceptual discrimination is the mental consciousness. The first threefold appearance has the characteristic of the object; the second has the characteristic of the subject. This (threefold–threefold appearance) is unreal imagination, which is the characteristic of the dependent.

It is clear that among these three truths, \textit{parikalpita} has no intrinsic existence of its own, it is merely imagined to exist. It is unreal even on the phenomenal level; while \textit{paratantra} is phenomenal aspect of the Real; it is real on the empirical level; it is caused by the causes and conditions; thus, it has beginning, decay and death and lastly \textit{parinispanja} which is the only Reality and the only truth, is uncaused, unconditioned, non-conceptual and non-dual and is the Reality. \textit{Vasubandhu} also holds the same view. He says that the \textit{parinispanja} is the only truth;
it exists independently by itself. It is natural to raise the question about the necessity of explaining the parikalpita and paratantra, in details if parinispanna is the only truth and to be realized ultimately. But it is important to know that without proper understanding of the phenomenal truths, the highest truth (paramārtha Satya) cannot be realized at all. Paramārtha Satya is an end while phenomenal truths are means. Phenomenal truths are like ladder, which enables us to reach the goal. Asaṅga thus, preaching the transcendental truth, i.e., parinispanna, stresses the necessity of realizing the empirical truths viz. parikalpita and paratantra. Otherwise he could not have discussed these phenomenal truths in detail. To realize parinispanna the highest truth, one lias to realise unreality of empirical truths. Phenomenal truths are unreal ultimately but they need to be realized as such. They are not real in the ultimate analysis but they play a prominent role in empirical experiences. In the waking state only, we realize that dreams are unreal or illusory. In the same way, to realize the paramārtha Satya, there is no other way except realizing unreality of phenomenal truths.

These phenomenal truths are not really truths at all. They are called truths because they are taken as truths by ordinary people. These distinctions of three truths must not be misunderstood as construction of three independent real. No Absolutism will allow two or more real independently having existence of their own. If there are two or more real, which are equal then Absolutism will collapse immediately. It cannot be called Absolutism at all. Asaṅga was aware of this fact and, therefore, he accepted paramārtha satya as the only truth, which is non-dual. Two other truths are not truths at all ultimately. They have no independent existence of their own.

In fact there are no degrees of truth or Reality. There is only one truth-Paramārtha Satya and that is the only Reality. Parikalpita and paratantra are empirically real so long as one is
entangled in phenomenal activities. With the realization of philosophical wisdom i.e. paramārtha satya, these empirical realities disappear and some realizes this ultimate truth, the true nature of all things (dharmadhātu). He makes this point very clear by saying that ultimate distinction cannot be made between parinispanna (highest truth) and paratantra (dependent). The highest truth (parinispanna) itself becomes paratantra (dependent) owing to infection of the parikalpita (imagination). It is the pure consciousness that becomes defiled by ignorance. This pure consciousness as defiled by the imaginary subject-object duality is called paratantra. When this defiled consciousness gets rid of subject-object duality, it becomes pure and is called parinispanna. Parikalpita is merely imagined to exist and it is utterly unreal; it must hence be rejected. Paratantra is defiled aspect of the Absolute only. The parikalpita defiles it. It must be purified. If we remove Parikalpita, this paratantra itself is parinispanna. We can say that parinispanna +parikalpita=paratantra and paratantra+parikalpita is the Absolute.

The parinispanna (paramārtha) Satya is not another reality along with phenomenal truth but is the essence of phenomenal (paratantra) truth. Phenomena freed from the false notion of subject-object duality are the paramārtha satya or the Absolute. Purification of paratantra is parinispanna. Vasubandhu clearly points out that parinispanna may be called paratantra which is always devoid of subject-object duality, which is merely & play of imagination and hence absolutely non-existing. There cannot be more or less of truth. Paratantra is not less true than parinispanna; it is parinispanna free of subject-object duality. When we reject parikalpita, the defiled consciousness becomes parinispanna, when this pure consciousness defiled by the parikalpita becomes paratantra. This paratantra and parinispanna are not two different truths. Though they are not completely identical and ultimately not different from
each other, parinispanna is the essence of paratantra. Parinispanna is paratantra subject to space, time and causality.27

Asaṅga applies process of negation to reach the Absolute. All the three truths are declared as Nihśvabhāva (non-substantial or devoid of existence) in three different senses. Parikalpita is devoid of existence and essence, because it is absolutely unreal. It is unreal by its very nature. It has absolutely no being although it exists as a name or as an illusion. It has no specific characteristics of its own. Its existence is merely imagined. Parikalpita object, thus, cannot be characterized by any predicates. It has no signs, which are commonly attributed to a thing. Paratantra is devoid of independent existence or nature, because it’s apparent production is unreal, it does not exist ultimately. In reality, it does not have any production, it appears to be produced. It is considered to be devoid of existence on the basis of its origin. It has no existence (it is nihśvabhāva) means the absence of any particular form of existence that is imagined to be. Parinispanna is devoid of independent existence in the sense that it cannot be grasped by any category of thought. No empirical predicate can be attributed to it, though it exists independently and by itself. It has a most positive existence in itself.

It is nihśvabhāva because there is negation of all phenomenal duality in it. The negation applies to it only from phenomenal standpoint. That it is nihśvabhāva does mean it does not exist. It is originating, unconditioned, self-existence. It has no empirical production. It is non-dual, indescribable; hence it is characterized in negative terms. It means nonexistence of a thing in the highest sense. When one understands non-existence of all the three truths in the different standpoint, he is really the knower of Sūnya i.e. pure consciousness. Vasubandhu describes nihśvabhāva of three kinds of truths in the same manner. He says that parikalpita has no sign or characteristic, which is commonly attributed to a thing (laksana); parikalpita...
object cannot be characterized by any predicates. Therefore, parikalpita is called non-existence on the basis of its characteristic i.e. lakṣaṇa niḥsvabhāva. Paratantra is niḥsvabhāva or devoid of self-nature or independent existence on the basis of its origin. It appears to be produced. Really it has no production. Its apparent production is unreal. Thus, it is called Utpattiniḥsvabhāvatā. Parinispanna is devoid of self-nature and independent existence because it cannot be grasped by the intellect. It is originated.

But for Asaṅga pure consciousness i.e. the Absolute (paramārtha satya) does appear. It is affected by the illusion. It appears as the manifold world of phenomena. It cannot remain indifferent to its appearances. It is involved in phenomena but it is not phenomenal. The parinispanna, which is the pure aspect of the real is defiled and appears in the form of subject object duality and as the manifold world of phenomena. This is paratantra aspect of the Real. This paratantra when purified becomes parinispanna. Therefore, all appearances cannot be brushed aside altogether. Parinispanna and paratantra axe thus two aspects of Reality, pure and defiled, respectively. Parikalpita is merely illusory and unreal. It states that in ultimate truth, no unreal objects actually exist in the illusion; there is only the appearance of unreal objects. And the perception of those objects of unreal imagination is to be understood as conventional truth. The commentary also states that the duality of the imagined nature does not exist in the dependent nature: although conventionally the dependent nature does appear to have the characteristic of duality, in ultimate truth, the dependent nature is devoid of the duality of the imagined nature.

The appearance of the illusion itself (earlier equated with the dependent nature) is said to be existent, but the objects that appear (earlier equated with the imagined nature) – the dualistic constructions that are the effect of the illusion–are said to be non-existent. So illusions and
other such appearances have the characteristics of both existence and non-existence. The following brief chart summarizes the text’s claims regarding unreal imagination and the appearance of duality. Again, two aspects are to be distinguished here. There is the occurrence of unreal imagination; unreal imagination does exist, just as an illusion itself may be said to exist; and unreal imagination is identified with the dependent nature in the MSA/MSAB tripartite ontological scheme. But there is also the appearance of duality, which is the false construction of unreal imagination into a distinct subject and distinct objects; this duality of subject and object does not actually exist, just as the objects, which appear in an illusion, do not actually exist; and the appearance of duality is identified with the function of the imagined nature.

The verse of interest to us in this section is the section:

“Just as in the absence of the (effect of an illusion) the manifestation of its cause is perceived so too in the transformation of the basis the unreality of imagination is perceived.”

Here the transformation of the basis (āśraya-parāvṛtti) is introduced into the discussion. According to the text, when the transformation of the basis occurs, the non-existence of imagination will be perceived. That is to say, when the transformation of the basis occurs, it will be understood that neither the conventional self or ego, nor the conventional objects, which appear to the self or ego actually exist as such. They will both be understood to be constructions built up from the manifold play of appearances. This verse is interesting in that it links the three-nature theory to the process (or, better, set of related processes) known as the
transformation of the basis. We will see this link clarified further in the next relevant section of the *MSA/MSAB*

The next extended presentation of the three-nature theory (here described in terms of the three characteristics) occurs in the context of a discussion of the indicator (*lakṣaṇa*), the indicated (*lakṣya*), and the process of indication (*lakṣaṇa*). In these verses the indicator is described in terms of the dependent, the imagined, and the perfected (*paratantra, parikalpita, and parinīspanna*, respectively); the indicated is described in terms of the five *Abhidharma* categories (*vijñāna, rūpa, caitasika, citta-viprayuktā, and asaṃskṛta*); and the process of indication – the process which allows for the association of the indicator with the indicated – is described in terms of the five stages of yoga (*pañcavidhā yogabhūmi*).

### 5.4 Mahāyānasamgraha-sūtra

The three-nature doctrine first formulated in the *SDS* is essentially a doctrine on religious deliverance, and as such, there is little in it that can be called peculiarly “Yogācāra”.\(^{30}\) It appears to be little more than a reaffirmation of the orthodox Buddhist view that the comprehension of the conditioned nature of things is a prerequisite of enlightenment.

Moreover, since no attempt is made in the *SDS* to relate the tenet to a particular ontological theory of reality, the doctrine in this rudimentary form is compatible with the teachings of all Buddhist traditions, alike including the *Mādhyamikas*. It was only when such typical *Yogācāra* concepts as the “storehouse-consciousness” (*ālayavijñāna*), “seeds”, were brought in to fill in the outline of the tenet as presented in the *SDS* that the three-nature doctrine began to take on *Yogācāra* character. Thus, much of the later *Mādhayamika* criticism of the doctrine was in many ways not a criticism of the doctrine in its elementary form as found in the *SDS*, but an
attack on many of the basic Yogācāra principles which had come to be associated with the doctrine when it was gradually transformed into an integral part of the system of thought of Yogācāra Buddhism.

The Yogācārins were not uniform in opinion in their formulations of the doctrine of the three natures, mentioned nine different versions of the tenet. Among the early Yogācāra expositions of the doctrine, the ones in the Yogācāryabhūmi-śāstra and the Madhyāntavibhāga-śāstra are the most interesting; but so far as the Chinese understanding of the concept is concerned, it is the version found in the MSS of Asaṅga which has proved to be the most influential. The view of the MSS on the problem of the three natures is found mainly in the second chapter of the work entitled “On the Character of the Cognizable”. The chapter opens with the following account of “dependent character”:

“What is dependent character? It refers to various ideas which have the storehouse-consciousness as seeds and which proceed from false discriminations.....

From these various ideas proceed all modes of being, all destinies and all impurities; and based on [ideas] dependent in character, (all forms of) false discriminations arise. Thus, these ideas all proceed from false discriminations and are in essence nothing more than ideas. Since they are the support of fictitious manifestations, they are described as “dependent character”.31

As for “imaginary character”, the śāstra comments, “it is the manifestation of objective (character, even though) there are on objects but ideas only”. Finally, “perfect character” is “the complete absence of objective character in dependent character”.

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The exposition of the three natures in the MSS outlined above corresponds in main with that of the SDS; but the analysis, which follows is far more intricate due to the design of the MSS to bring the doctrine in line with the ideation-only framework of Yogācāra philosophy. Like the SDS, “dependent character” is given out in the MSS as encompassing the entirety of common existence, both physical and mental. However, the conditioned nature of existence is no longer described in such general, orthodox terms as “when this is, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises”, but is explained by relating it to the Yogācāra thesis of the presence in every sentient being of a storehouse-consciousness, from which evolves the whole world which it experiences. Thus, according to the MSS, our world is dependent in character because it consists of ideas originating from seeds in the storehouse-consciousness. These ideas are further depicted as “proceeding from false discriminations”, for the storehouse-consciousness as conceived in the MSS and understood in Yogācāra Buddhism in general is the subject of transmigration, and as such, is associated with impurities of all forms from the beginning less past.” The śāstra traces the origin of imaginary nature as follows:

“Again, only at the presence of “imagination” and “the object of imagination” would “imaginary nature” come into being. What do we mean by imagination”, “the object of imagination” and “imaginary nature” here? It should be understood that the mind-consciousness is “imagination”, for it has the function of making discriminations. Why? Because the mind-consciousness has as seeds its own impregnation of names and speech, and it also has as seeds the impregnation of names and speech of all (other) consciousnesses. As a consequence, the mind-consciousness evolves with its myriad (forms of) discriminating activities. Since the mind-consciousness discriminates and construes in all manners, it is described as “imagination”.
Next, “dependent nature” is “the object of imagination”.

Finally, in the manner one (discriminates and) turns dependent nature into (objects) imagined, (the dependent nature) so (discriminated) is known as “imaginary nature”.

“Imaginary nature” comes into being when the mind-consciousness (imagination) applies its function of discriminating to ideas proceeding from the storehouse-consciousness, i.e., to “dependent nature” (“the object of imagination”). For example, being ignorant of the truth that all beings are ideation-only, the mind consciousness ascribes to them the property of independent reality, and comes up with such notions as “permanent self” and “permanent objects”. These properties, which the mind-consciousness falsely attributes to ideas but which are actually chimerical, are what are meant by “imaginary nature”. “Perfect nature” is the correct comprehension of the imaginary as imaginary, which arises when the objective character, which the mind-consciousness wrongly imputes to ideas, is finally realized to be void. In the teaching of the Yogācāra, this intellectual transformation is at once a spiritual transformation, which in Yogācāra terminology would mean the freeing of the storehouse-consciousness and its ideas (i.e., dependent nature) from their former union with false discriminations (i.e., imaginary nature), and their assuming a new form of being which is perfectly pure and good. The fact that “perfect nature” in the MSS is also taken to denote this new state of being is suggested by the quotation below, where “perfect nature” is characterized as “Immutable”, “the object of pure thoughts” and “the quintessence of all good dharmas”:

“If perfect nature is the complete absence of the character of the imaginary, why is it perfect? Why do we call it "perfect"? We call it perfect because it is immutable. Again, since it is the object of pure (thoughts) and the quintessence of all good dharmas, it is given the most excellent designation “perfect”.”
Several conclusions can be drawn from the above analysis of the three-nature doctrine in the MSS.

i) It agrees in outline with the characterization of the three natures in the SDS, but develops it further along the line of the ideation-only philosophy of Yogācāra Buddhism.

ii) Just as in the SDS, “dependent nature” in the MSS, refers to the realm of birth and death, which results from man’s failure to comprehend the conditioned nature of all entities. In the ontology of the MSS, this failure signifies the construction of an imaginary world of real selves and objects out of various categories of ideas. This is why “dependent nature” is depicted as “the support” of “false discriminations” (imaginary nature) on the one hand, and it is also said to proceed from them on the other hand\(^{37}\). Finally, “perfect nature” indicates the liberation from the cycle of mutual generation of the “dependent” and the “imaginary”, when all entities are perceived as they actually are, i.e. ideas only.

iii. So far as sentient beings are either non-enlightened or enlightened, “dependent nature” always exists either as “imaginary nature” or as “perfect nature”. For ideas are either the ideas of the non-enlightened and so are the product of false imagination; or the ideas of the enlightened, in which case all unfounded hypostatization have disappeared.

5.5 The Madhyāntavibhāga

As the title suggests, the MDV\(^{38}\) is the attempt of explaining the middle way and the extremes. Quoting Bu-ston:\(^{39}\)

“The Madhyāntavibhāga: Anta “extremity”, means the extremities of realism and nihilism, or otherwise those of eternalism and materialism. Madhya-“the middle”, is the
middle way shunning both these extremities. The treatise, as it gives an analysis (vibhaga) of both these points, is called the Madhyanta-vibhanga..."

The MDV can be divided into three categories. It is either found independently as in the Tibetan and Chinese tripitakas or with the commentary (bhāsyā) by Vasubandhu interspersed in between the verses (to which the text of Nagao’s edition belongs) or with Sthiramati’s sub commentary (ṭikā), but in this case only fragmentarily.

As for the date and authorship of this work, Chinese and Tibetan traditions as well as most Western scholars agree on assigning the MDV to Maitreya (natha), who is assumed to have lived 270-350 C.E. MDV’s relative chronological position within Yogācāra history is indicated quotation of the Saṃdhinirmocana which allocates it between the sutras and the works of Asaṅga.

The manuscript utilized by Nagao divides this śāstra into five chapters, which correspond to the chapter-divisions in the Tibetan translations and to Sthiramati’s ṭkā in Sanskrit, but not to the Chinese translations, which divide it into seven chapters. It also exhibits some orthographical peculiarities of which the doubling of a consonant, which comes after the letter “ṛ”, is noteworthy. Thus the words karma and sarva are written karmma and sarvva and this characteristic has been retained in Nagao’s edition. All kārikās except the last one are written in the Anuṣṭubh metre and are distributed in treatise.

The main doctrines of the Maitreya in general and the MDV in particular seem to the treatise be a well-balanced mixture of older tenets molded with original ideas. Sāramati’s notions of the ultimate being and his Buddhology make up an important component. To this is added older Yogācāra dogmas such as the trisvabhāva colure by Maitreya’s own thinking. Lastly, as
we have seen, he offers a new interpretation of the middle way to replace the Mādhayamika one.

The core of his teaching is the notion of the ultimate being expressed as the realm of dharmas (dhamadhātu), or suchness (tathatā), while emptiness (sūyatā) is discussed in relation to the notion of the middle way. This ultimate being is the only real phenomenon proper and is itself unexpressible (anabhilāpya) and without multiplicity (aprapaṇcātmaka).

The ideas of Sāramati consist mainly of the notion of pure, luminous (prabhāsvara) mind (citta). It is pure by essence so all defilements are adventitious (āgantuka). The phenomenal world comprises all phenomena (dharma), which depend on the ultimate being, which is the ground of phenomena (dharmatā).

To account for the fact of illusion, Maitreya introduces the concept of “the imagination of the unreal” (abhūtaparikalpa). Ignorance and illusion require a mind and this mind constitutes the imagination of the unreal subject (grāhaka) and object (grāhya) expressed as duality (dvaya). This very act of cognition is the dependent being (paratantra svabhāva), which is real while the cognitive images reflecting the bifurcation into duality make up the imagined nature (parikalpita svabhāva), which is unreal. The imagination’s sole reality is the pure and unified awareness expressed as emptiness, suchness, or pure mind, which is within it and in which it resides. This absence of discriminative thinking is the consummated nature (parinīspanna-svabhāva).

This state of mind is reached by a shift of basis (āśrayaparāvṛtti) as a result of which only non-discriminative thinking remains. By this shift only, the realm of dharrnas (dharmadhātu) which is pure by nature, is experienced and liberation is hence accomplished.
Imagination exists, the duality in it does not exist but the emptiness in it does exist. Therefore everything is neither empty nor non-empty. Consciousness exists insofar as it mirrors subject and object but since there is no object, there is no subject. Thus the imagination of the unreal is established though it does not exist the way it appears and from its cessation there is liberation. The imagined nature corresponds to objects, the dependent to the imagination and the consummated to the absence of duality. From knowing that all is mind, objects are no longer apprehended and therefore there is no subject and hence apprehension and non-apprehension are identical.

Basic reality is the three natures. The imagined nature is nonexistent and it is always so. The dependent exists but not really because of the illusive imagined nature and the consummated exists as the dependent but not as imagined nature. Three kinds of extremes correspond to the three natures. Impermanence and suffering in three senses correspond respectively to the three natures. Emptiness in three senses corresponds to the three natures. Selflessness (nairātmya) in three senses corresponds to the three natures. The three natures correspond respectively to knowledge, cessation and direct realization. The conventional and ultimate truths are discussed. The ultimate is due to the consummated nature, the three natures in relation to form (rūpa). The dependent nature is discussed.

I will try to separate the commentaries from the original works in order to arrange my sources chronologically. In the case of MDV, Vasubandhu’s Madhyāntavibhāga, which does not deviate from an obvious interpretation of the MDV. In the cases, Vasubandhu manifestly superimposes his own ideas in his interpretation of the MDV. The crucial verse for the understanding of trisvabhāva in the MDV is, since it plainly indicates the concepts associated with the three natures:
“The imagined nature, the dependent nature and the consummated nature are indicated
by objects, the imagination of the unreal and the absence of duality.”  

From this it is obvious that the properties of the constituent parts of *trisvabhāva* are to be extracted from the concepts “object”, “the imagination of the unreal” and “absence of duality”.

“The Imagination of the unreal (abhūtaparikalpa) exists. The Duality in it does not exist. But the Emptiness in it does exist and in that (Emptiness) the (Imagination of the unreal) also exists.”

Eckel as well as Kochumuttom distinguish three key-terms in these statements:

i. The imagination (of the unreal)  

ii. Duality  

iii. Emptiness  

What has been stated is the fact that the imagination is an undeniably real experience. In other words, it is constantly operative. Now, insofar as it is duality, that is, that the cognitive images reflect a bifurcation of the stream of awareness into subject and object, it does not exist. Insofar as it is emptiness is does exist. As for duality, it is emphatically denied. All discriminative thinking, any experience of anything objective, which of course presupposes a simultaneous subjective side of the experience, is utterly unreal. Emptiness, however, is asserted. It resides by sheer necessity within the imagination and the imagination resides within emptiness. It is pure awareness shed of all duality. In the latter there is more of a display of the formal relation between the natures as is indicated by the definition as the absence of the imagined nature. This is also by far the most common way of expressing the internal structure of *trisvabhāva*. In the former we find a more substantial picture of
The consummated nature is defined positively as residing in the imagination and the imagination in it.

The implications on behalf of the enigmatic concept of “emptiness” will be much clearer.

“All phenomena, therefore, are neither exclusively empty nor exclusively non-empty. This is so because of the existence of the “unreal imagination”, because of the non-existence of the duality of the subject and object, and again because of the existence of the emptiness of the “unreal imagination”, as well as the existence of the unreal imagination as the locus of emptiness. This whole schema is named the Middle Path.”

For Emptiness is defined as the absence (abhāva) of Duality, which is the presence of an absence. If it were not defiled, all beings would be liberated. If it were not pure, effort would be in vain. The logic indicates the direction of these ontological claims, which is also clearly displayed by Nagao above Again the three natures are connected, and their internal structure made obvious. This is possible and necessary from a structural point of view of the Yogācāra system. As an echo of the future axiom of Descartes’ cogito ergo sum, the MDV postulates the dependent nature as a container of both bondage and liberation, of the imagined nature as well as the consummated. We are told that emptiness must be both defiled and pure. This is all in accordance with the idea that the imagination resides in it, which it has to do to be real. Emptiness thus, resides in the imagination onto make liberation accessible. As is pointed out by both Eckel and Nagao, this came to be severely attacked by later Mādhayamika. Passing on to MDV, we encounter the notion of the impossibility of a mind devoid of contents. In other words, the concept of consciousness is meaningless without reference to its object: Consciousness exists in sofa as it reflects objects, living beings, self and ideas. It has, however, no object and as that is absent, it does not exist either. This idea is continued in the next verse
where it is argued that the consciousness' nature as the imagination of the unreal is established. What is perceived, as objects and so forth are of course no externally existing objects but imagination only?

However, the way the dependent nature which is equivalent to the imagination. But then again, to avoid the extreme of denial, it cannot be altogether absent. The illusive experience is still an experience however fundamentally unreal. The verse concludes by claiming that from the cessation of the illusive experience, that is from the cessation of the imagine nature, liberation follows. Depending upon apprehension, non-apprehension arises and depending upon non-apprehension, non-apprehension arises.

As has been shown as plausible, the trisvabhāva as well as the notion of avoiding the extremes of reification and denial should be used as a frame of reference as we proceed to interpret the MDV. Doing this, this verse is quite intelligible: There is no such thing as a valid apprehension of an external object since they are shown not to exist in an idealistic system. Yet there is an apprehension of an internal object since all is mind.

Therefore, it would be too great to claim the apprehension of objects and too much of a denial to claim the non-apprehension of illusion. In the MDV, we were informed that the image nature is unreal as duality, the dependent nature unreal insofar as it appears as imagination and real insofar as emptiness is inherent in it and lastly that the consummate nature is real as emptiness.

“The threefold nature: it is non-existing and it is eternal, it is existing and yet not really, it is really existing and non-existing and thus are the three natures recognized.”⁵²
We know that the image nature does not exist. It is evident that the apprehension of an object, however illusory, cannot be denied. Hence it both exists and not. It is non-exist in and it is eternal. The dependent nature is like wise existing (sat), as a container of emptiness and duality, does not exist. The same symmetry is found in the notion: It is really existing and not existing. The overriding importance of avoiding the extremes is once again displayed. In the following six or seven verses some central Mahayana-Buddhist concepts are related to trisvabhāva. Some examples will suffice, which is the conception of the extremes of reification and denial here concerning phenomena and persons, the grasper and the grasped and being and non-being does not developed in knowledge reality’s characteristic mark. By a quick glance at this verse we clearly notice the same order of the trisvabhāva as in the previous one. Thus the extremes of phenomena and person are related to the image nature. The mainstream of the older Buddhism refuted the notion of a person and adhered to the conception of “no self” (anatta). So did the Yogācārins as well as extending this refutation to the concept of “selflessness of person.” As faithful Mahayanists they also advocated the notion of “selflessness of phenomena” since there were no reason for assuming neither the sole existence of dharmas nor the existence of dharmas by virtue of themselves. So in relation to the imagination nature, which is the unreal appearance of objects, the extremes of person and phenomena are unwarranted. Neither it is found to exist; only mind does. The same pertains to the dependent in connection to which the extremes of the grasper and the grasped are to be avoided. These concepts are identical to the concept of duality, that is, the bifurcation of the cognitive stream into subject and object. None of these extremes are applicable to the dependent nature, which is in itself only a stream of awareness. The consummate nature is related to being and non-being. Since contradictory relationships are identical inasmuch as they are both self-contradictory in a similar way the argument seems tortuously mind bending.
This pattern is repeated in verses to come: thus we find impermanence discussed. The gross reality is designation, determination and practice whereas the ultimate is related to the one.

The measure of elaboration of each nature, the imagine nature is depicted in several ways in the MDV: as objects, duality, as defiled, as apprehension of illusory objects, it is non-existing and yet eternal, and it is related to the extremes of reification and denial concerning phenomena and persons. In the different contexts, it is displayed as non-existent objects, clinging, and emptiness as the absence of being and that, which has no characteristic. As for the dependent nature, it is expressed as the imagination of the unreal, as the container of emptiness, as consciousness and as the absence of the apprehension of external objects. It is moreover seen as existing as the container of emptiness and yet not as duality and it is linked to the notion of the extremes of subject and object, which should be avoided. In various contexts it is exhibited as impermanent objects of arising and ceasing, the characteristics of suffering, emptiness as the presence of the absence of anything and separated from the imagination nature. The absolute truth is variously designated as the absence of duality, emptiness, and emptiness as the presence of an absence of duality, non-apprehension of mind. In addition to this it is shown as really existing as the emptiness and yet not as duality.

The trisvabhāva is further elaborated by reference to the necessity of avoiding the extremes of reification and denial: phenomena are neither considered empty nor non-empty, since the former would constitute an unwarranted denial and the latter an unwarranted reification. The latter extreme would infringe upon the possibility of freedom from bondage and the latter would constitute an obstacle to the freedom to attain liberation, which guarantees the possibility of purposive action towards an attainable goal. The same pattern is exhibited a subtle balance between too much and to little existence is, maintained. Hence, the pattern
wherein there are three natures with regard to the assumption that phenomena are dependently co-originated and again three natures with regard to the notion that phenomena therefore are empty is molded into one condensed triple structure with which emptiness is integrated.

To sum up, the study of other parts of Buddhist philosophy we must be study above texts, keep one thing always before our minds. Parikalpita and paratantra relate to worldly matters only. Parinispāna relates to nirvana, a state of peace where all imaginary things cease. It is thus, true knowledge of the real. It is beyond the scope of discursive thought, language and empirical activity. It is the object of the innermost experience of the Self. It is nirvana, the highest state in which man cannot distinguish himself from other beings. The perfected characteristic (parinispāna-lakṣaṇa) is discussed at this verse and its commentary the perfected characteristic is described in three ways: in terms of non-existence and existence. It is non-existent due to the imagined nature of all phenomena, but existent in the absence of that imagination; in terms of non-pacification and pacification – non-pacification refers to the adventitious nature of the defilements and pacification refers to the original purity of reality; and in terms of the absence of imagination. The perfected characteristic does not have the nature of discursively.
The Sutra of the Explanation of the Profound Secrets, This sūtra was translated from Sanskrit into Chinese four times, the most complete and reliable of which is typically considered being that of Xuanzang.


Ocean of Definitive Meaning: A Teaching for the Mountain Hermit (Ri chos nges donrgyamtsho), written in the first half of the 14th century, is considered the magnumopus of Dölpopa Sherap Gyaltsen (1292–1361).

The Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra is commonly regarded as the forerunner of Yogācāra Buddhism because it is the earliest extant piece of writing, which attempted to define in some detail such concepts as the “storehouse-consciousness” (Ālayavijñāna), “seeds” (bijā) and “three natures” (trisvabhāva), concepts, which later formed the basic furniture of Yogācāra philosophy. However, it should be stressed that its treatment of these concepts is far from systematic, and despite the fact that Asaṅga and Vasubandhu quoted it as authority on many occasions, it is basically a text on religious practice and differs considerably both in style and content from such well-known Yogācāra classics as the Yogācāryabhūmi-sūtra.

In most early Yogācāra texts, “svabhāva” (nature) and “lakṣaṇa” (character) are used interchangeably to designate the three natures.


The five phrases are found on Stog. p.16.2-17.4


These realities are not explained in the text. But we can state that they are so many kinds of Paramatha.
18 Regarded as self-nature (svabhāva) as far as the laṅkavatāra is concerned.

19 M5A mean Ornament to the Mahayana Sutras


21 Nagao (1958: xiii), following the Tibetan text, specifies that, Chapter 10, is comprised of 15 verses, rather than Le’vi’s count of 14. According to this reading, the three lines of commentary to Mahāyānasutrālaṁkāra 10.9 constitute an independent verse. Thus, the verse-text would be comprised of 805 (rather than 804) verses.

22 The two Indian sub commentaries are the Mahāyānasutrālaṁkāra-vaṁtī-bhāṣya of Sthiramati (Tohoku 4034; DT sems tsam MI 1b1–283a7, TSI 1b1-266a7) and the Mahāyānasutrālaṁkāra-tī of Asvabhāva (Tohoku 4029; DT sems tsam BI 38b6–174a7). These works may be considered sub commentaries in that they comment on both the Mahāyānasutrālaṁkāra (verse-text) and at least parts of the Mahāyānasutrālaṁkāra-bhāṣya (prose commentary). Sthiramati and Asvabhāva may be placed in the sixth century CE.

23 Note that the term ‘ākrti’ is only used by the text and has been translated as ‘‘appearance,’’ in the sense of ‘‘mere appearance.’’ The term ākāra , however, is used in a number of places throughout the text, and may be translated as ‘‘mode of appearance.’’ Furthermore, while the term ākrti has a negative connotation in the text, ākāra has a positive connotation an awareness of all modes of appearance.

24 Parikalpita svabhāvaḥ atyantamasatvāt

25 yathā nāmārthamarthhasya nāmnah prakhyānatā ca ya


29 Tad-abhāve yathā vyktis tan-nimittasya labhyate/

Tathāśraya-parāvṛttāv atas kalpasya labhyate//

30 Though the Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra propounds a theory of the evolution of the phenomenal world resembling the ideation-only philosophy of the Yogācārins in the chapter entitled, “On the Characters of the Mind”, no attempt is made to apply this theory to the exposition of the three-nature concept.


34 From the very beginning of its existence, Buddhism recognized the existence of six consciousnesses, i.e., eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness and mind-consciousness. With the emergence of the concept of the storehouse-consciousness in Yogācāra Buddhism, a system of seven consciousnesses was formed, and that is the system found in the Chinese. Yogācārins generally
believe in the existence of eight consciousnesses, adding another consciousness called manasto the original scheme of seven; but it is debatable whether this system of eight consciousness’s was taught in such early Yogācāra works as the Yogācārabhūmi.

35 In Buddhism, intellectual progress is meaningful only if it brings about spiritual progress, and there is no such thing as pure speculation or “knowledge for knowledge’s sake”. Much modern misinterpretation of Buddhist teachings stems from failure to apprehend this soteriological intent of Buddhist philosophy.


38 All quotations from Madhyāntavibhāga (Madhyāntavibhāga) and Madhyantavibhagabhasya (Madhyāntavibhāgabha) are taken from Nagao (1964).

39 Taranatha, p. 395.

40 “Distinguishing the Middle and the extremes”

41 On the discussion of whether Maitreya was a historical person or not, cf. e.g. Anacker 1984,p. 13-14 and notes 26-28 who also remarks that the works ascribed to Maitreya differ from those attributed to Asanga in their cryptic and compact style in contrast to the clarity and verbal abundance of the works of Asanga.


43 The central importance of the dependent nature as abhūtaparikalpa is also pointed out by Yeh 1968, p. 107.


46 Madhyāntavibhāga: There is nothing new in Vasubandhus commentary: Objects are the imagined nature. The imagination of the unreal is the dependent nature. The absence of grasper and grasped is the consummated nature.

47 Madhyantavibhaga 1.2: abhūtaparikalpo’sti dvayan tatra na vidyate /sūnyatā vidyate tvatra tasyām api sa vidyate//

48 The adjective “unreal” (abhiita) “...is used to qualify the notions or imagination that singlesout as existent things that are “non-reals”, that is, “empty”).” Nagao (1991), p. 53

49 “At the same time, however, this “unreal imagination”, in spite of emptiness, is constantly operative. Hence, unreal imagination again arises in emptiness” Nagao loc. cit.

50 The argument that these three categories could just as well be understood as two and that they are ontological claims, put forth by Eckel (Eckel 1985, p. 35), differs somewhat from my own understanding of trisvabhāva. First of all, the therapeutic strategy of Madhyāntavibhāga determines the superficial structure of trisvabhāva in this text so that emptiness can be accounted for. In other Yogācāra texts emptiness is accounted for by introducing the nīśvabhavata counterparts to the three svabhāva. This may account for the difference in the superficial structure of trisvabhāva in Madhyāntavibhāga. The logical structure, as far as I can see, is triple since trisvabhāva must be understood on two levels, one ontological and one epistemological.
The dependent nature just is and must rightly neutrally exist while the imagination nature and are epistemic modes of dependent nature. My argument is in as perfect an accord with the following quotation of Eckel as deviating from his previous claim: “To use the image of consciousness, the Imagination (of Madhyāntavibhāga 1.2) is a stream of awareness in which cognitive images follow one another in a continuos series.

The images themselves reflect a distinction between subject and object, cognizer and cognized. The Imagination itself is real, but the Duality that appears in it is not real. The Imagination’s only reality is the pure non-dual awareness (Emptiness) that resides in it and in which it resides. It is not too far-fetched to see in the terminology of just these few verses an outline of the Yogācāra conception of the Middle Path. The key, bridging concept is that of imagination (abhataparikalpa). This is the point where the stream of cognition occurs, so it guarantees, for good or ill, that the process of change and growth has reality. It also is identical in essence to pure Emptiness, so it guarantees that the goal is present and accessible” (Eckel 1985, p. 37)

51 Quoted from Nagao, loco cit. Madhyāntavibhāga 1.2: (na śūyaṃ nāpi cāṣūnyaṃ tasmāt sarvāṃ vidhiyate/ sattvād asattvāt satāc ca madhyamā pratipac ca sā)

52 svabhāvas trivighaḥ asac ca nityām sac cāpy atattvataḥ/ sadasattataḥ ceti svabhāvatraya iṣyate/
