CHAPTER 4:

REALISM AND IDEALISM IN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY
4.1 Introduction

Unable to get a definite answer regarding the exact status of the Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi in terms of realism and idealism from the analysis of both the Viṃśatikā and the Trīṃśikā, I have gone back to the roots of the Buddhist philosophical tradition in this chapter and tried to trace the history of realism and idealism in Buddhist thought. This has been done to get a holistic picture of the realism-idealism debate in the tradition so as to observe if Vasubandhu’s philosophy can be placed somewhere in this historical schema.

Since every school of Buddhism whether realist or idealist claims itself to be the true representation of the teachings of the Buddha, it is indeed crucial to analyse if to the Buddha could be ascribed the position of either a realist or an idealist, based on his recorded teachings. This chapter starts, therefore, with an analysis of the Buddha’s approach towards metaphysical problems. Although he dealt with various philosophical problems, the Buddha did not categorically commit himself to any metaphysical position. Moreover, he even warned his followers from getting entangled in the mesh of philosophical viewpoints at the expense of the noble pursuit of liberation. Notwithstanding the Buddha’s refusal to commit to any metaphysical position, the second part of the chapter is an examination of the attempt to subscribe to the Buddha a realist or an idealist position. For this task, I have used as reference the work of Mathew Humble (1999) in which he has decisively shown that even if one tries to make a philosophy out of the Buddha’s noncommittal metaphysical attitude, one would inevitably fail in that purpose.

After showing the impossibility of constructing realism versus idealism debate from the recorded teachings of the Buddha, the possible causes for the subsequent rise of Buddhist philosophy after the mahāparinirvāṇa of the Buddha are explored in the third part of the chapter. The next part of the chapter presents a brief exposition of the realist schools in Buddhism. In the fifth and final part, the idealist trends in Buddhism are analyzed and two important texts of Yogācāra Buddhism - The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra and the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra are critically
analyzed to see if they are really advocating idealism and if they do, what brand of idealism can they be identified with.

### 4.2 Searching the Roots: The Philosophy of the Buddha

To interpret a text which is separated from us by such a historical and cultural distance, and understand what its author had exactly in mind while penning it down, is indeed an arduous job which will always keep the threat of hermeneutical errors waverling over our mind. Still there have been some brilliant scholars who have undertaken this task - right from Sthiramati in the 6th century AD to Dan Lusthaus (2002) just a decade ago. However, the philosophical standpoint which the Yogācārā in general and Vasubandhu in particular really stood for – idealism, realism, phenomenology or something else – is still undecided. This in no way takes anything away from these scholars who have toiled hard in working on this valuable ancient tradition of the Yogācārā. It is in fact the nature of many philosophical problems that they are sort of insoluble by their very nature and no interpretation of such problems can be called final or conclusive. In this chapter, my humble effort is to see the Yogācārā from a different aspect – a more historically oriented one – which in my opinion can be an invaluable tool in understanding the import of Vasubandhu’s words. I have tried to interpret the text by analyzing not just the fruits of the vast tree of the Buddhist tradition but rather by going right to the seed that has given rise to this big tree, of which Yogācārā is but only a single branch, Vasubandhu and his text being just the fruits of that particular branch. The seed which I am talking about is the historical Buddha himself, the originator of this vast tradition of life and philosophy called Buddhism. Although the Buddha forbade taking even himself as a final authority to settle the issues concerning the nature of truth, it is nevertheless obvious that he commands a deep reverence and respect - both from spiritual seekers and intellectuals - and his words carry a lot of weight in deciding about matters related to the Buddhist principles. Thus although the magnitude and intensity of Vasubandhu’s original and creative genius is unquestioned, any serious scholar of Buddhism would surely agree that he was far more likely to present the original teachings of the Buddha in a more explicit manner rather than to invent a new philosophy out of his own fancy, as notable Buddhist scholar Walpola

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52 The *Vimśatīkā* and the *Trīṃśikā* were written sometime in the 4th century A.D.
53 One of the earliest commentaries on the *Trīṃśikā* was written by the 6th century scholar Sthirmati. The English translation of this work is done by Dr. K.N. Chatterjee (1980).
Rahula (1978) also believes.⁵⁴ For this reason it is essential for us to understand what the Buddha himself stood for in terms of a philosophical standpoint.

### 4.2.1 The Buddha: Realist or Idealist?

The Buddha’s devotion towards understanding the causes and cessation of suffering and his indifference towards metaphysical speculations is a key theme in many of the Buddhist suttās of the Pāli canon. From the moment he got enlightened at Bodhgaya to his first sermon at Sarnath to his mahāparinirvāṇa at Kushinagar, one can observe the Buddha’s inclination towards the lived experience of being, the importance of practicing the Buddhist path and the avoidance of unnecessary scholastic formulations. It is true that in order to teach the Dhamma to his disciples, he made use of many concepts and tools which can be suitably accommodated in a philosophical schema.⁵⁵ However, he continuously stressed that no grand philosophical system should be built out of his teachings as his sole aim was to lay bare the causal nexus of existence in front of people so as to help them overcome suffering, and nothing more than that.⁵⁶ In many of his sermons, he pointed out the fact that his teachings were provisional tools which were to be used only as a means to the realization of Nibbāna (enlightenment) and never as a philosophy to be obsessively clung to. This subordination of philosophical speculation to the pursuit of the Dhamma is wonderfully presented in one of the most famous suttas of the Majjhima Nikāya of the Sutta Pitaka - the Cūla-Mālunkyaputta sutta⁵⁷ (The shorter instructions to Mālunkyaputta). One of his disciples named Mālunkyaputta asked the Buddha certain metaphysical questions pertaining to the existence of world in space and time, on the relationship of the self and the body and on the state of a Buddha after his physical death. The Buddha instead of answering his disciple simply remained silent. He then told Mālunkyaputta why those questions were not

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⁵⁴ “Some scholars seem to have thought that great Buddhist doctors like Nagārjuna, Asaṅga or Vasubandhu were expounding their own systems of philosophy…Their contribution to Buddhism lay not in giving a new philosophy, but in providing, in fascinatingly different ways, brilliant new interpretations of the old philosophy.” (Rahula, 1978, p.79)

⁵⁵ For example the four noble truths, the eightfold path or the theory of dependent origination can provide strong foundations to a theory of ethics or that of causality.

⁵⁶ “Both formerly & now, it is only stress that I describe, and the cessation of stress.”

The Buddha, as quoted in the Anuradha Sutta, Samyutta Nikāya
http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.086.than.html, accessed on 3-12-2012

(The English translation of the Pāli Canon is available on the website: www.accesstoinsight.org. I have used this website for all the translations of the Pāli suttās which I have used in my thesis).

⁵⁷ Cūla-Mālunkyaputta sutta, Majjhima Nikāya
answered by him. The Buddha said that he does not answer such questions because they are irrelevant in the pursuit of *nibbāna* and the cessation of suffering. Whether the world is finite or infinite, whether it is eternal or non eternal etc., makes absolutely no difference to the fact that suffering exists and answering these questions does not in any way help in the cessation of that suffering. As such one must avoid such metaphysical speculations and instead focus on the immediate fact of suffering and the method of its removal. The Buddha added that he answers only those questions which pertain to the fact of suffering, its arising, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation because only such questions contribute in leading a holy life and help in the cessation of suffering.

In the same *sutta*, the Buddha presents the famous parable of the poisoned arrow and conveys the point that it is better to focus on the immediate fact of suffering that one is inflicted with rather than to keep pondering over futile metaphysical questions which are really of no use in the removal of suffering and hence in leading a holy life. He compares a person asking metaphysical questions to a man who, when he is shot and wounded by a poisoned arrow (the Buddha’s allegory for suffering), starts asking questions about the identity of the person who shot him, his height and complexion, the size and make of the bow etc., instead of instantly removing the arrow. The Buddha then states that if he persists in getting all the answers to his curiosities first, the wounded one would surely die. In a similar way, if a person is more interested in finding answers to metaphysical problems rather than acting upon the fact of suffering, she will eventually die without the removal of the suffering that is inflicted on her as a part of being in the cycle of *samsāra*.

In another famous *sutta*, namely the *Alagaddupama sutta*58 (The discourse on the simile of snake) of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Buddha explains that his words and discourses are to be understood for the purpose for which they are intended (the cessation of suffering) and not to be taken as a word of absolute authority on the nature of things. In this *sutta*, the Buddha stresses on the understanding of suffering and its cessation through his teachings and advises not to take his spoken word literally and make a philosophical doctrine out of it, much less use it as a philosophical weapon against the rival schools of philosophy. This passage also brings to light his disdain for philosophical argument for argument’s sake only as well as the primacy which he

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58 *Alagaddupama sutta*, *Majjhima Nikāya*  
grants to the true purpose of the Buddhist way of life (which by all means is the cessation of suffering) over any doctrinal formulations.

In the same *sutta*, the Buddha makes use of another wonderful and often quoted simile, that of the raft. He says that his teachings are like a raft which is to be used in order to cross the ocean of *samsāra*. But once this crossing is made, only a fool would carry the raft over his head when he starts walking from the shore towards the mainland. Thus once the Buddha’s teachings have fulfilled their intended purpose, that is once they have helped the individual in crossing the ocean of *samsāra*, they are also to be dropped and not to be carried over in one’s mind. This *sutta* again shows the Buddha’s philosophical views (or rather non-views) and the status that he gives to his own teachings. The crux of this parable is that his teachings are to be taken only as a means to overcome the fact of suffering and can in no way be taken as the final words about the nature of reality and hence are not to be clung to.

These two *suttas* - one exhibiting the Buddha’s avoidance of metaphysical speculations and the other emphasizing the provisional nature of his teachings - collectively point to the fact that he was least interested in taking any committed philosophical position on a wide variety of philosophical issues. His project, unlike that of most philosophers, was never to prepare a metaphysics or ontology explaining the entities of this world; rather as he emphasized again and again, he was interested only in showing a way towards an end to suffering. He was by no means a metaphysician or philosopher but was instead a spiritual guide to countless sentient beings immersed in the vicious cycle of birth and death.

It can be objected that the Buddha was just a monk and a spiritual person who did not have much grounding in philosophy proper and hence wanted to ignore that field itself. I would like to counter such objections by showing that the Buddha was completely aware of the entire range of philosophical traditions that existed during his time. Himself being an intense spiritual seeker and wanderer for six years before he attained enlightenment, he understood the futility of various grand philosophical doctrines as far as the pursuit of liberation was concerned. His in-depth understanding of philosophical doctrines comes to light in the *Brahmajāla sutta*\(^5\) (The discourse on the net of the perfect wisdom) in the *Dīgha Nikāya* where he talks about as many as sixty-two philosophical positions that were prevalent during his times. This long *sutta* explains in

\(^5\) *Brahmajāla sutta*, *Dīgha Nikāya*  
http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.01.0.bodh.html, accessed on 5-12-2012
detail this vast array of philosophical views. Eighteen of these views pertain to theories about the past and forty-four pertain to theories about the future. In these views are expounded a wide variety of philosophical positions like Eternalism (*Sassata-vāda*), Semi-Eternalism (*Ekaccasassata ekacca-asassata-vāda*), Extensionism (*Antānantika-vāda*), Eel-wriggling (*Amarāvikkhepa-vāda*), Fortuitous-origination (*Adhīccasamuppan-a-vāda*), Existence after death (*Uddhamāghātanika-vāda*), Annihilationism (*Uccheda-vāda*) and Hedonism (*Diñña Dhamma-nibbāna-vāda*), the doctrine of happiness in this life.

After explaining all these views, the Buddha teaches the monks whom he is addressing that all such views arise because of contact of the six sense-bases with the corresponding objects of these senses which leads to sensation (vedanā) and in turn to craving (tanhā) for sense objects which ultimately results in rebirth and suffering according to the chain of dependent origination, thus continuing the cycle of life and death. Hence none of these views is like the right knowledge of the Buddha which surpasses all these views as he can clearly see the causes and conditions of the arising and cessation of suffering. He compares people holding each of these views to various fishes in a pond. He then gives the analogy of a fisherman’s net to accommodate all these philosophical positions under a single umbrella by understanding these as various schemas arising out of the workings of contact, feeling and craving.

The *sutta* clearly explains that the Buddha was aware of the variety of philosophical views that were prevalent during his lifetime and wanted the seeker to bypass them since he thought that they were all mental fabrications and nothing of importance could be gained by the seeker by clinging to any of these views.

Thus we observe that the Buddha’s approach towards philosophical problems as well as philosophical views was really revolutionary in that he did not give much importance to such problems in the course of leading a noble life. Metaphysical problems for him were something which could and must be avoided so that one remained focused on the meditative path of liberation and did not have oneself immersed in futile speculations on the nature of reality. In any case, even if his teachings were to be understood in terms of a coherent philosophical structure, he made sure to emphasize that such a philosophy as he preached should only serve a

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60 In Buddhism, the entire range of human experience can be understood as a dynamic interaction between six internal sense bases and six external sense bases. Thus, there are six internal-external (organ-object) pairs of sense bases (*āyatanas*): These are eye and visible objects, ear and sound, nose and odor, tongue and taste, body and touch, mind and mental objects.
pragmatic value as a means to *nibbāna* and that therefore there was no point of clinging even to his own philosophical discourses. Further, he understood philosophical positions merely as various ways of thought for understanding the sense data which came into contact with one’s sense bases, and nothing else. However, in spite of the Buddha’s clear and intuitive approach towards philosophical speculations, unfortunately a web of Buddhist philosophy was woven after his death and ultimately the Buddhist tradition itself became the centre for metaphysical speculations and debates of all kinds.

4.2.2 The Buddha: Impossibility of the debate

It is clear from the previous sections that the Buddha was very much against metaphysical speculations and as such there is not even a remote possibility of ascribing him the metaphysical position of either realism or idealism. Still, even if we try to place him in any of these camps (realist or idealist) for the sake of philosophical convenience, there would be a great difficulty in doing so and such an exercise would not result in any positive output. This difficulty stems from the fact that the very basic presuppositions of a realist or idealist position are actually bypassed by the Buddha. This bypassing of the real-ideal framework is wonderfully addressed by Mathew Humble (1999). In the subsequent paragraphs, I would like to present a brief summary of his argument in order to support my point that there is no possibility of constructing a realist or an idealist thesis from the discourses of the Buddha.

Humble’s main contention is that the inner-outer divide is a necessary condition for the real-ideal debate to take place and such a distinction is actually absent from the discourses of the Buddha.

Humble starts his argument by stating that the metaphysical positions of realism and idealism have their basis in the kind of mind-body dualism that started with Descartes. Thus, for a realist, the external world of extended physical bodies would be independent of the mind that perceives this extended world. For an idealist, this physical ‘outer’ world is a product of the operation of the mind itself. He writes

The metaphysics of realism and idealism rely on a distinction that has been central to Western philosophy since Descartes: that
between the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’. Descartes characterized this ‘real distinction’ as setting apart ontologically body and mind. The former’s essential feature is that it is extended; the latter’s that it is a thinking thing... this division has persisted throughout modern philosophy in one form or another (be it epistemic, ontological, or logico-linguistic), and forms the basis of the idealist-realist debate. (Humble, 1999, p.21)

Humble then shows that in the modern times, two prominent philosophers namely Heidegger and Wittgenstein have avoided this distinction by their respective philosophies, in which they have refused to accept this explicit distinction of the world into inner and outer, and by doing so have stayed away from committing themselves to either side of the real-ideal debate. (Humble, 1999, pp.22-24)

In the end, Humble argues that the Buddha’s philosophy, although different in style from these modern scholars, nevertheless belongs to the same zone as it also avoids making any claims regarding an inner and an outer world. He substantiates his claim by showing that the Buddha’s analysis of a person in terms of the five aggregates (Pancaskandhās) - when put to careful inspection - reveals that there is no inner-outer divide in the Buddha’s epistemological framework. A casual reflection might lead one to think that the division between the Rūpakhanda (Rupa) and Arūpakhandās (Vedanā, Samjñā, Saṃskāra and Vijnāna) is equivalent to the Cartesian dualism of mind and body. However, this is a misreading since the Rūpakhanda and Arūpakhandās are not ontologically distinct entities, like Descartes’ body and mind, but only ‘states of processes’ that occur at different levels on a spectrum of density. He writes

Those states of processes which are designated by the term arūpa occur at levels of the spectrum which do not have any of the characteristics associated with rūpa. In fact, the fivefold division of the khandhās specifically blurs the edges between inner and outer. (Humble, 1999, p.24)

Humble further elaborates some aspects of the teachings of the khandhās to substantiate his claim. He says that for the Buddha consciousness is always intentional (it is always
This amounts to a causal theory of perception wherein something external to consciousness causes consciousness to arise. However, the Buddhist causal theory of perception differs from the Western one in a very important regard. Whereas there is a clear division in the Western theories between the outer external world and the inner mental world, no such distinction is made in the Buddhist schema. There is no epistemic hierarchy of physical and mental events and both are given an equal footing in the Buddhist epistemology. This explains the ability of the enlightened beings to see the thoughts of others since thoughts or ideas are not as private as a dualist theory would suppose them to be and with proper cultivation of mindfulness and meditative practices one can get into that level of focus where one can see the thoughts of others. Furthermore, in the Buddhist schema, there is no distinction between mental causation and physical causation, each being subject to the same causal laws.

Humble then says that it is because of this non-distinction between inner and outer that many problems which emerge as a result of a Cartesian dualist framework do not arise in the schema of the Buddha’s analysis. He writes

This interpretation also explains why “the physical location of the *Manas*, the sixth sense, is never mentioned in the *Sutta Piṭaka* and neither the function of *Manas* nor the identity of *Dhammā* is clearly defined.” These concepts are simply unproblematic for the Buddha. It only seems problematic for us with our preconception of an inner-outer division, which makes us believe that mental objects must be a different type of thing from physical objects, that they must belong to a different ontological category. (Humble, 1999, p.26)

In the end, Humble also refutes the idea that the Buddha’s lack of an inner-outer divide can be understood in terms of a program of eliminative materialism since in that case the Buddha would have clearly given more priority to the *rūpa khanda* over the *arūpakhandās*. But such a
claim is nowhere to be found in the Buddhist scriptures. Hence all the khandās are equally important for the Buddha.

Humble concludes this refutation of inner-outer with the following observation which is an important one with regard to my thesis.

I am not concerned here to assess the tenability of the Buddha’s view and in fact there are problems with its philosophical cogency (notably one concerning the status of the senses). However, the above points are intended to demonstrate conclusively that the Buddha held no distinction of type and no epistemic distinction between inner and outer as we would understand it. This, in turn, means that it is extremely difficult for the realist-idealist debate to get started, and given the Buddha’s central concern with soteriology, makes such a debate totally irrelevant to Buddhist philosophy. (Humble, 1999, pp.26-27)

This entire argument from Humble shows why it is philosophically impossible for the real-ideal debate in Buddhism to start at the first place. The next section of this chapter would present a very brief summary of the growth of Buddhist metaphysics and will try to analyze the reasons for the emergence of definitive metaphysical positions like realism and idealism from the anti-metaphysical ground prepared by the Buddha.

4.3 The Rise of Buddhist metaphysics

In spite of the Buddha’s warnings against metaphysical speculations on the nature of reality and despite there being no way of categorizing him as a realist or an idealist (given the non-separation of inner and outer realms in his teachings), it was not long after his death that metaphysical/ontological elements started to creep into the organized sects of early Buddhism. Shortly after the Buddha’s death, the teachings of the Buddha were divided into the Tipitakas61 - the Three Baskets. Among these, the Abhidhamma Pitaka dealt exclusively with matters of philosophical relevance. The Abhidhamma Pitaka was quite a positive attempt of early Buddhist

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61 The Tipitaka (The Three baskets) containing The Vinaya Pitaka, The Sutta Pitaka and the Abhidhamma Pitaka are the earliest collection of the Buddha’s teachings and the only texts which are considered canonical by all branches of Buddhism.
scholars to make explicit and clarify the implicit teachings of the *Sutta Pitaka* which was more religious and ethical than philosophical in character. But slowly the *Abhidhamma* oeuvre became a storehouse of divergent philosophical speculations and various Buddhist scholars started giving their own interpretations of the Buddha’s discourses as part of the *Abhidhamma* texts.

The beginning of the *Abhidhamma* tradition in Buddhism thus sowed the seeds which would later on produce some of the grandest philosophical theories in the history of Indian philosophy. Among many possible ones, we observe two prime reasons why the *Abhidhamma* writers started to pursue hardcore philosophy and metaphysics in an otherwise ethico-spiritual schema of the Buddha’s original discourses.

Man by his very nature has been inquisitive to know about the world which he finds himself situated in. Although many of his queries are solved by rational and scientific enquiries, there are questions which the human brain is unable to answer but is still interested in since times immemorial. Metaphysical questions pertaining to God, soul or the real nature of the world come in the domain of such perennial yet unanswered questions. In modern times, this thirst is partially answered by the pursuits and advancements in the field of science. However, in addition to making empirical and rational enquiries about the nature of things, man since his earliest days has also been taking resort to the testimony of teachers and masters whose knowledge is considered infallible in the eyes of admirers of such knowledgeable beings.

The persona of the Buddha, as described in many historical accounts, was so charming and charismatic that his being regarded a man of infinite knowledge by most of his followers comes across as no wonder. To such people, his words could be taken as the final answer for all unresolved questions since this could then pacify in their curious minds many a philosophical perplexities. This led many Buddhist commentators to carve out complex metaphysical theories out of the Buddha’s relatively straightforward psychological and ethical teachings in order to get final answers on many a philosophical question. This on the one hand calmed the curiosities of many followers of the Buddha, but on the other hand, it turned the Buddha into a philosopher and a theoretician who supposedly had answers to all the metaphysical questions about the nature of things.

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62 “Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason.” (Kant, 1998, p.99)
of the world. This was something quite contrary to the spirit of the Buddha’s teachings which favored rational enquiry over blind faith.63

Another important reason for the growth of Buddhist philosophy was the fact that there was already a lot of debate, right after the death of the Buddha, on what was the true and explicit meaning of the Buddha’s words as recorded in the Pāli Suttas. Since the Buddha used to instruct through methods and teachings which were different for different categories of disciples - the laymen, the novice monks and the senior monks - it became essential that there be a method of agreement on the true import of his teachings so that the growing schisms in Buddhism due to disparate philosophical standpoints, sometimes irreconcilable and totally in conflict with each other, could be avoided. This was one of the reasons why many Abhidhamma writings came into being. In pursuit of philosophical clarity, the Abhidhamma writers attempted to make the Buddha’s epistemological framework clearer and exact, unfortunately building up in the process a comprehensive ontology out of the Buddha’s teachings, a move that the Buddha himself must have detested given his thrust on avoiding metaphysical speculations. With the passage of time, the Abhidhamma writings - whose initial intent on clarification of the Buddhist thought was appreciable - started to move towards extreme forms of philosophical speculations, and as is the case with many philosophical theories, sometimes went to the extremes of philosophical thought, presenting various theses and conclusions about the nature of reality. In any case, a number of philosophical schools took birth from such philosophical practices. One such early school was that of the Sarvāstivādins who sought to propound a realist doctrine with their theory of mind independent dhammās.

4.4 Realism in Early Buddhism

4.4.1 The Sarvāstivādins:

The Sarvāstivāda (Everything exists) school posited that there are real particles of existence which they called the ‘dhammās’ which exist independently of any cognizing agent and on their

63 In the famous Kālāma Sutta of the Anguttara Nikāya of the Sutta Pitaka, the Buddha advises the Kālāmas to favor rational enquiry over blind faith and dogmatism. Kālāma Sutta, Anguttara Nikāya, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel008.html, accessed on 10-12-2012
own. The dhammās are the elements of experience which have an intrinsic nature which exists at all times (past, present and future). They also have a causal efficacy which arises and perishes away in the present moment but through which the dhammās are able to influence the subsequent moment of reality. Further, by arguing that we can cognize these dhammās in the same way as they actually exist, they presented a direct realist theory of perception. This clearly shows that the Sarvāstivādins were adhering to realism.

4.4.2 The Sautrāntikās:

Another major school holding a realist view about the nature of reality was that of the Sautrāntikās (those who rely upon the sūtras). Relying on the Pāli suttās, this school also asserted the existence of mind independent dhammās. However, they differed from Sarvāstivāda realism in that they denied any existence in past and future to the dhammās and claimed that these existed only in the present moment where they imparted causal efficacy and then perished, giving rise to the succeeding dhammās. Since a dhamma existed only for a single moment of time, it would already perish by the time one was able to perceive and know it fully with the conceptual framework working on it, and hence what we could really know was not the real dhamma but only a copy of it, which was formed by our mental faculty, in the subsequent moment of the point of contact between the sense organ and the dhamma. As a result of this metaphysics, the Sautrāntikās were committed to a theory of indirect or representative realism. Thus the Sautrāntikās favored an indirect form of realism.

It is believed that there might have been other early Buddhist schools that adhered to a philosophy of realism by subscribing to the theory of dhammās. However, it was primarily the work of these two aforementioned schools that assumed prime importance in the subsequent development of Buddhist philosophy. In any case, at the dawn of the new millennium, Buddhism had grown from a simple religious and ethical movement and had accommodated within its scope a new and profound philosophical movement also. We can postulate two major reasons for this rise of Buddhist philosophy.

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64 As a matter of fact, the philosophy of these two schools became immensely popular and important in the Indian philosophical arena because of the two great classics that Vasubandhu wrote to explain the position of both these schools - Abhidharmakośa representing the ideas of Sarvāstivāda-Vāibhāṣikās and Abhidharmakośa bhāṣya representing a critique of Sarvāstivāda philosophy by that of the Sautrāntikās.
An important catalyst for Buddhism’s engagement with philosophy was the vibrant philosophical culture prevalent in India in that period. The schools of Nyāya, Vaiṣeṣika, Mīmāṃśā etc. - although relying on the authority of the Vedās but nevertheless having a solid philosophical backup - used to justify the Vedic authority on the basis of strong philosophical premises. It was in this environment that even those Buddhists who were aware of the Buddha’s advice against going deep into philosophy would have felt inclined to seriously engage with philosophy in order to refute the position of their orthodox opponents and to give more logical grounding to the Buddha’s discourses.65

Furthermore, since the teachings of the Buddha demanded a continuous and extraordinary mindfulness (e.g. about the facts of momentary nature of sensations or conscious episodes or about the ‘self’ being a construction), a slightest slip from that level of awareness would push one into metaphysical deviations, hazarding the formation of some metaphysical view about the nature of reality, as came to pass after the Buddha’s death. Similarly, instead of justifiably recognizing the Buddha’s ‘silence’ on the metaphysical questions as his essential attitude towards metaphysics, his followers could not resist theorizing about this silence, thus giving rise to metaphysical theories wrongly attributed to the Buddha.

4.5 Idealism in Buddhist Thought

The idealistic tendencies in Buddhism can be observed in some of the earliest Mahāyāna Sūtras, such as the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra and the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra. These idealist trends could have arisen due to any number of reasons. However, the most plausible reasons in my opinion would be as follows.

From a psychological perspective, the idealistic tendencies in human thought can be seen as another disposition of the human mind, with people more immersed into their mental world going to an extreme and ultimately believing in the ideal nature of this world.

65 I believe it was only because of the relative absence of big philosophical traditions in Japan that the true spirit of Buddha’s notion of emptiness came to flowering in this country with the advent of Zen Buddhism. Japan, considered a relatively lesser philosophical tradition as compared to the intellectual civilizations of India and China, resurrected Buddha’s advise on avoiding philosophical speculations and directly entering into meditative practices. With little traditional baggage of grand philosophies like the Vedic philosophy of India or the Taoism and Confucianism of China, the Japanese culture received the Buddhist teachings with a relatively emptier mind and hence the philosophy (or rather the non-philosophy) of Emptiness developed there in its most subtle and religious form.
Secondly, the Buddha constantly stressed on cultivating the mind and understanding how it functioned, since for him it was primarily the mind which was the cause of suffering and not the things considered external to it. For this he recommended a life of reflection and meditation and put a lesser emphasis on engaging with the world whose sensory inputs were continuously disturbing one’s mental faculties. This emphasis on meditative practice in the Buddha might have been interpreted as his giving a primacy to mind over matter. This supposed primacy of the mind when taken to its extreme intellectual form would definitely culminate into the claim that it was only mind that existed and that matter was nothing but a manifestation or even a creation of that mind. This could have been another possible reason for the later idealist bent given to the teachings of the Buddha.

In any case metaphysical nitpicking in the name of the Buddha continued and all kinds of extreme idealist positions were formulated in Buddhism. Thus, in addition to the realist interpretations discussed above, some idealistic readings of the Buddha’s teachings also started creeping into Buddhism.

Of all the Buddhist schools, the Yogācārins are considered to be Buddhist idealists par excellence. They adhere to two fundamental Mahāyāna sūtras and these sutras claim idealism in some implicit or explicit form, therefore I have presented a brief analysis of these two important sūtras in the next section.

### 4.5.1 The Mahāyāna Sūtras

The two basic Mahāyāna sūtras that point towards an idealist thesis are the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra and the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra. These two are considered the most revered texts of the Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda school. Given below is a brief analysis of both these sutras in terms of their idealistic overtones.

#### 4.5.1.1 The Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra (The Sūtra on unfurling the real meaning, hereafter SNS):

The SNS is considered one of the principal texts of the Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda school. It is in this text that some of the very important concepts of the Yogācāra, for example the storehouse
consciousness (Ālaya-Vijñāna) and the triple nature of reality (Trisvabhāva) are found in their earliest form. Therefore it is important that we analyze and see what this text has to say regarding the nature of reality.

The SNS is divided into ten chapters. In each of these, a particular Bodhisattva (e.g. Maitreya, Manjuśrī, Subhūti and the like) questions the Buddha on various issues and the Buddha enlightens each of them by clarifying their doubts (that is why it is called the Samdhinirmocana). In the first four chapters of the Sutra, the Buddha explains the nature of the Real when questioned by the various Bodhisattvās. Interestingly, the Buddha stresses the point that the essential nature of the Real is ineffable, beyond the categories of thought and hence indescribable in and through language. John Powers (1995), credited with translating this text from Tibetan into English, observes that on being asked by Bodhisattva Dharmodgata the ultimate nature of reality, the Buddha describes the real as beyond the discursive categories of finite intellect. Quoting Powers

In response, the Buddha teaches that the ultimate is realized individually, is sign-less, inexpressible, devoid of conventional and free from all dispute. Being caught up in desire, discursiveness, and the conventions of seeing, hearing, differentiating, and perceiving, as well as beings engaged in dispute, cannot even imagine what the ultimate is like. (Powers, 1995, p.17)

Interestingly, in chapter eight of the Sūtra (The Questions of Maitreya), where the Buddha describes the nature and method of the meditations of Śamathā and Vipaśyanā, a clear exposition of metaphysical idealism (although in the sphere of phenomena only) can be seen. On being asked by the Bodhisattva Maitreya whether the image which is perceived by mind is same or different from mind, an interesting discussion initiates between the Buddha and Maitreya in

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66 While reading Mahāyāna Sūtras such as the SNS, it must always be kept in mind that there is little reason to suppose that these are actually the words of the historical Buddha. The sūtra is laced with many entities which are beyond empirical verification. Moreover, it is set in a heavenly realm and talks about various Bodhisattvas who are not historical figures but only revered enlightened beings in Buddhist religion, whose status can be compared to Gods in the Hindu traditions. Although the SNS, like most Mahāyāna Sūtras claims to be the direct teaching of the Buddha, there is a high probability that these are the views of later Buddhist authors who have compiled these texts, with the contents somehow falsely attributed to the historical Buddha.
which the Buddha states that the image that is perceived by the mind is actually non-different from the mind, thus propagating idealism.\footnote{Maitreya asks the Buddha: “Bhagvan, are the appearances of the forms of sentient beings and so forth, which abide in nature of the images of the mind, ‘not different’ from the mind?” (Powers, 1995, p.155) To this the Buddha replies: “Maitreya, they are ‘not different’. However, because childish beings with distorted understanding do not recognize these images as cognition-only, just as they are in reality, they misconstrue them.” (Powers, 1995, p.155)}

It is clear from the above discussions that at the phenomenal level, the nature of reality is ideal; however, the nature of the reality at the level of the ultimate is beyond any categories of thought, and hence beyond real and ideal. Although this position can be taken as a form of idealism, yet it is closer to the idealism of Kant than that of Berkeley or Hegel. This is because it is only Kant who accepts that the nature of the noumena is beyond the scope of our thought. For Hegel, the real can be known by reason, and for Berkeley too, there is no ultimate reality which cannot be thought of. Thus we see traces of idealism (though not absolute) in the SNS and since the Yogācārins used this text as an authority, one can imagine why most interpretations of the Yogācārins as well as of Vasubandhu make an idealist out of them.

4.5.1.2 The Lankāvatāra sūtra (Discourse on the Descent into Lanka, hereafter LS):

This is the other chief sūtra of the Yogācāra School. Interestingly neither Asaṅga nor Vasubandhu refer to it in any of their works leading us to believe that it may be of a later date. In this sūtra, there is a frequent mention of the doctrine of mind-only (cittamātra), the store-house consciousness (ālaya vījñāna) and the womb of the tathāgata (tathāgatagarbha). This sūtra is also in the form of questions and answers, this time between the Buddha and Mahāmati. It is staged in the island fortress of Lanka, hence the name. The doctrine of mind-only appears at many places in the sūtra.

One of the most important commentators on the sutra has been D. T. Suzuki. He is also of the opinion that the main theme of the sutra is mind-only. Writing about the central theme of the LS in his Studies in the Lankāvatāra Sūtra (1930/1998), Suzuki notices

Speaking in the modern way, the theory of “Mind-only” is a form of pure idealism. All that we habitually consider having an objective value, such as our own body (deha), property (bhoga), and the land
(pratiṣṭhāna) where we have our bodies, are no more than our own mind, projected and recognized as externally extending and real. (Suzuki, 1998, p.244)

However, Suzuki is cautious enough not to stretch this idealism too far and he carefully balances this idealist claim with a deeper analysis of the text in the concluding remarks to the same chapter. Here he writes that it would be actually wrong to equate the philosophy of the LS with any form of philosophical idealism that we know since the intention of writing this text was of a totally different nature than those of conventional philosophers whose intention in writing a text might be to give a comprehensive theory about the nature of reality. He writes,

The Lankāvatāra was not written with a view of establishing a philosophical thesis to be called pure idealistic monism, its central motive was to make us realize that enlightenment comes when we are detached from the tyranny of language and discrimination, when we enter into the realm of anāśrva (non-leakage or non-outflowing), when going beyond all philosophical reasoning, we stand on the inner ground of consciousness and shine out in our own inner brightness.”

(Suzuki, 1998, p.276)

Similar views on the non-philosophical nature of the Lankāvatāra are echoed in an earlier part of the book. Suzuki claims that in the Lankāvatāra the primary intention is to take a spiritual seeker on the path of Buddhahood and not to present a theory about psychology or metaphysics. He writes,

As I wish to repeat, Buddhism being a religion has no abstract interest in logic, or psychology or metaphysics per se, and especially in the case of the Lankāvatāra the chief problem is to reach a state of self realization which is sine qua non of Buddhahood, and of the Bodhisattva as well. All efforts are to be directed towards this goal, and it would be entirely against the spirit of the Sūtra to discuss the
psychology of the *Lankāvatāra*. I am doing this simply for the benefit of the modern reader who wants to get a better perspective of the text than in its original confusion. (Suzuki, 1998, pp.169-170)

Thus we observe that although a purely philosophical reading of the *LS* would seem to be pointing towards a thesis of idealism per se, it must not be forgotten that the intention of the author(s)\(^{68}\) in this text is not to present a metaphysical thesis but only to make us understand the role that mind plays in the formation of experience. Since every form of our conceptual constructions that arise through the networks of language and thought is dependent on mind, it is said that everything is mind-only. Further, since the basic objective of Buddhism is the transformation of mind, it can only be done if we understand that our phenomenal reality is only the construction of mind or mind-only. In this sense only is the *Lankāvatāra* idealistic and not in a Hegelian sense. The ultimate reality which every Buddhist seeker yearns for - the state of *Nirvāṇa* - is clearly beyond the categories of real and ideal.

In the end it must be remembered that although Vasubandhu belonged to the Mahāyāna tradition and we can safely assume that as a Mahāyānist he must have full reverence for these two fundamental *ṣūtras*, it does not mean that Vasubandhu would himself subscribe to the sort of idealism that these *ṣūtras* advocate. Suzuki brings out this point clearly when he says that whereas Vasubandhu’s *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* deals with the epistemology of perception, the *Lankāvatāra* sutra is ontological with respect to its philosophical claims. (Suzuki, 1998, p.280)

### 4.6 Concluding Remarks

From the preceding paragraphs, it is clear that in spite of Buddha’s indifference to metaphysical pursuits, a large amount of philosophy and philosophical positions (like realism and idealism) eventually entered into Buddhism. This tendency of endless philosophical speculations in the name of the Buddha, which we believe was totally against the spirit of his teachings, however paved the way for the coming of the *Madhyamaka* doctrine and that of Nāgārjuna the Madhyamaka, which helped a great deal in reassembling the lost pieces of the essence of the Buddha’s message. Considered both a brilliant philosopher as well as a spiritual

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\(^{68}\) Like many other Mahāyāna *Ṣūtras*, there is no decisive knowledge about the authorship of the *Lankāvatāra Ṣūtra*.
master, Nāgārjuna used philosophy for the purpose which he thought it was best suited - to counter what was wrong in philosophy itself - so that one could be cured of the metaphysical sickness that one had cultivated, a sickness against which the Buddha always used to warn in his discourses. Although much work has been done on Nāgārjuna by noted scholars, I have devoted a little section to him in the next chapter in order to highlight the immense and unparalleled contribution he made to Buddhist philosophy as a whole. I will also argue that although Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu may appear to be belonging to different schools of philosophy, they are in fact pointing to the same reality, though they may have taken different philosophical approaches in their writings. Arguing along these lines, I will deal in the next chapter of my thesis with the revival of the Buddha’s essential message by two of the greatest lights of Buddhism - Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu.