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Alayavijnāna
(Store-Consciousness)

Original Conception found in Theravāda Pali Canon

BY THE VENERABLE DR. WALPOLA RAHULA

In the Yogācāra (→ Vijñānavāda) School of Buddhism, ālayavijnāna is one of the most important doctrines developed by Asanga (4th century A.C.). He divides the vijnānakṣandha (Aggregate of Consciousness), the fifth of the five skandhas, into three different aspects or layers, namely, citta, manas and vijnāna. In the Theravāda Tipiṭaka as well as in the Pali Commentaries, these three terms—cittra, manas, vijnāna—are considered as synonyms denoting the same thing.¹ The Sarvāstivāda also takes them as synonyms.² Even the Lankāvatārasūtra, which is purely a Mahāyāna text, calls them synonyms³ although their separate functions are mentioned elsewhere in the same sūtra.⁴ Vasubandhu too in his Vinītānikā-vijñānapimātratāśādīḍīh considers them as synonyms.⁵ Since any one of these three terms—cittra, manas, vijnāna—represents some aspect, even though not all aspects, of the fifth Aggregate vijnānakṣandha, they may roughly be considered as synonyms.

However, for Asanga, cittra, manas and vijnāna are three different and distinct aspects of the vijnānakṣakṣanda. He defines this Aggregate as follows:

“What is the definition of the Aggregate of Consciousness (vijñāna-skandha)? It is mind (cittra), mental organ (manas) and also consciousness (vijñāna).

“And there what is mind (cittra)? It is ālayavijnāna (Store-Consciousness) containing all seeds (sarvasājā), impregnated with the traces (impressions) (vijñānaparibhāvita) of Aggregates (skandhas), Elements (dhātu) and Spheres (āyatana). . . .

“What is mental organ (manas)? It is the object of ālayavijnāna, always having the nature of self-notion (self-conceit) (manyañāmaka) associated with four defilements, viz., the false idea of self (ātman, self-love (ātmasesha), the conceit of ‘I am’ (asmimāna) and ignorance (avidyā). . . .

“What is consciousness (vijñāna)? It consists of the six groups of consciousness (sadviṣṇānakāśayāḥ), viz., visual consciousness (caksurviṣṇāna)

¹ In the Vibhaṅga (PTS) p. 403, to the question kathāni satta cittāni "What are the seven minds?" the answer is: cakkhu-viṣṇānam, sota-ghāna-fāyāh-kāyaviṣṇānam, manodhātu, manoviṣṇānakadāhu. So cittra, mano and viṣṇāna are synonymous. Dhs. also (p. 209, § 1187) to the question kathā dharmam cittā? gives the same answer as the above in Vibhaṅga. Visuddhimagga p. 452 says: viṣṇānam cittām manoti athato ekam. See also Dīgha Nikāya I, p. 21; Samyutta Nikāya II, pp. 94-95; Vibhaṅga p. 87.
² Cittām mano lāṭa viṣṇānam ekārhām. Kośa, II, 34.
³ Cittām vihālpo viṣṇāptiḥ mano viṣṇānam eva ca ālayam trihavaśaṣṭā teti cittasya paryayāḥ. Lankā, p. 322.
⁴ Ibid. p. 48: Cittena cīyate karma, manasā ca cīyate, viṣṇānam viśnu, dṛṣyam kalpeḥ pārścakhiḥ.
⁵ Cittām mano viṣṇānam viṣṇāptiḥ ceti paryayāḥ. Vinītānikā, p. 3.

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auditory (śrotra)—olfactory (ghraṇa)—gustatory (jīvha)—tactile (kāya)—and mental consciousness (manoviṃśāna). . ." 1

Thus we can see that viṇṇāna represents the simple reaction or response of the sense-organs when they come in contact with the external objects. This is the uppermost or superficial aspect or layer of the viṇṇānasākhā. Manas represents the aspect of its mental functioning, thinking, reasoning, conceiving ideas, etc. Citta, which is here called ālayavijñāna, represents the deepest, finest and subtest aspect or layer of the Aggregate of Consciousness. It contains all the traces or impressions of the past actions and all good and bad future potentialities. The Sandhinirmocana-sūtra also says that ālayavijñāna is called citta (Tibetan sems). 2

It is generally believed that ālayavijñāna is purely a Mahāyāna doctrine and that nothing about it is found in the "Hinayāna." But in the Mahāyānasangraham 3 Asanga himself says that in the Śrāvakayāna (= Hinayāna) it is mentioned by synonyms (paryāya) and refers to a passage in the Ekottarāgama which reads: "People (prafā) like the ālaya (ālayaratā), are fond of the ālaya (ālayarāma), are delighted in the ālaya (ālayasammuṇḍita), are attached to the ālaya (ālayābhiritā). When the Dharma is preached for the destruction of the ālaya, they wish to listen (ṣūṣrūṣāti) and lend their ears (śrotam avadādhati), they put forth a will for the perfect knowledge (ājñācitam upasthāpayati) and follow the path of Truth (dharmānudharmapratīpana). When the Tathāgata appears in the world (prādurbhāva), this marvellous (āścaryā) and extraordinary (āśbhuta) Dharma appears in the world."

Lamotte identified this Ekottarāgama passage with the following passage in the Pali Anguttaranikāya (A II, p. 131): Ālayaratā bhikkhave pājā ālayaratā ālayasammuṇḍita, sā Tathāgata na ālaye dhamme desīya- māne sussūtyati sotam odahati aṇṇacittam upaṭṭhāpethi. Tathāgataśa bhikkhave ārāhato sammāsambuddhassa pāṭubhāvā ayam pāṭhama acchariyo abhuto dhammo pāṭubhavati. (Mankind are fond of the ālaya, O bhikkhus, like the ālaya, rejoice in the ālaya; with the Tathāgata they pay honour to the Dhamma, they listen and lend an attentive ear to perfect knowledge. When, O bhikkhus, a Fully Enlightened Liberated Tathāgata appears in the world this marvellous and extraordinary Dhamma appears in the world).

Besides this Anguttara passage, the term ālaya in the same sense is found in several other places of the Pali Canon. 4 The Pali Commentaries explain this term as "attachment to the five sense-pleasures", 5 and do not go deeper than that. But this also is an aspect of the ālayavijñāna.

In the Lankāvatārasūtra the term tathāgatagarbhā is used as a

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4 E.g. Majjhima Nikāya I, p. 167; Samyutta Nikāya I, p. 136; Vinaya I, p. 4.

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Synonym for ālayavijñāna,¹ and is described as “luminous by nature” (prakṛti-prabhāsava) and “pure by nature” (prakṛti-pariṣuddha) but appearing as impure “because it is sullied by adventitious defilements” (āgantukālesopakāś-ṭataya).² In the Anguttaramikāya³ citta is described as “luminous” (pabhassara), but it is “sullied by adventitious minor defilements” (āgantukāhe upākāleshe upākhlīṭaḥ).⁴ One may notice here that ālayavijñāna (or tathāgatagarbha) and citta are described almost by the same terms. We have seen earlier that the Sādhinirmocana-sūtra says that ālayavijñāna is also called citta. Asanga too mentions that it is named citta.⁵

It is this ālayavijñāna or citta that is considered by men as their “Soul,” “Self,” “Ego” or Ātman.⁶ Here we may remember, as a concrete example, that Sāti, one of the Buddha’s disciples, took viññāna (vijñāna)⁷ in this sense and that the Buddha reprimanded him for this wrong view.⁸

The attainment of Nirvāṇa is achieved by “the revolution of ālayavijñāna” which is called āsrayaparāvṛtti or ālayaparāvṛtti.⁹ The same idea is conveyed by the expression ālayasamugghāta “uprooting of ālaya” which is used in the Pali Canon as a synonym for Nirvāṇa.¹⁰ Here we should remember also that anālaya “no-ālaya” is another synonym for Nirvāṇa.¹¹

The ālayavijñānaparāvṛtti is sometimes called bijaparāvṛtti “revolution of the seeds” as well.¹² Bija here signifies the “seeds” of defilements (sāmkleśikadharmabija) which cause the continuity of saṃsāra. By the “revolution of these seeds” one attains Nirvāṇa. Again the Pali term kхиñabija,¹³ which is used to denote an arahant whose “seeds of defilements are destroyed,” expresses the same idea.

Thus, one may see that, although not developed as in the Mahāyāna, the original idea of ālayavijñāna was already there in the Pali Canon of the Theravāda.

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¹ Lankā, pp. 221, 222.
² Ibid. pp. 77, 222. Suzuki (Studies in the Lankāvatāra-sūtra, p. 182) says: “... The Lankāvatāra differs from the Yogācāra in one important point, i.e., that while the latter maintains that the ālaya is absolutely pure and has nothing to do with defilements and evil passions, the Lankāvatāra and Āśvaghosha maintain the view that the Tathāgata-garbha or the Ālaya is the storage of the impure as well as the pure...” But this is not so. The Yogācāra also considers that the Ālaya is the storage of defilements. Cf. Sarvasāmkleśikadharmabijasthānakatād ālayam “It is called Ālaya because it is the place for the seeds of all the defilements”. Trimśikā, p. 18. Cf. also ālayavijñānāsritaduṣṭhulya, ibid. pp. 22.
³ A i p. 10.
⁴ The Commentary says that here “citta means bhavangacitta” cittantī bhavāṅgacittam.
⁵ Mahāyānasangrahā, p. 15.
⁶ Ibid. p. 14; Trimśikā, pp. 16, 22; Dīgha Nikāya I, p. 21.
⁷ Here it should be remembered that ālayavijñāna is one of the eight viññānas.
₁¹ E.g. A II, p. 34; III, p. 35: ... madamimmadano pīpāsavāna ālayasamugghāto vaṣṭuvacchedo taṇhākhayo virāgo nirodho nibbānām.
₁² S IV, p. 372; also: yo tassayeva taṇhāya asesavārājanirdho paṭṭinasaggo mutti anālayo, S V, p. 421 and passim.
₁³ Sārat-laṅkāra, XI, 44: bijaparāvṛtīt iṭī ālayavijñānāparāvṛtītīḥ.
₁⁴ The bija theory of the Yogācāra should be compared with the abhisamkhāra-vijñāna (=bijā) of the Theravāda.