

UBC PANEL
“THE TRANSMISSION OF THE
ABHIDHARMA SOURCES BY XUANZANG
AND HIS DISCIPLES”

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Outline

- In this talk I focus on two major difficulties with understanding the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (henceforth AKBh), and then illustrate how the translations and the commentaries by the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang 玄奘 (602-664 CE) and his disciples prove to be extremely helpful for resolving those difficulties.
- I also share with you some of the joys I have had while translating the AKBh.
- I conclude by drawing attention to the works by Xuanzang and his disciples, which I believe are extremely useful for us to better understand not only the AKBh but also its larger Abhidharma context.

AKBh as a Technical Text

- By now, all of you should already know that the AKBh is not an easy text meant for audience with little background. It's not like Plato's dialogues which ordinary people with no knowledge of philosophy can still follow quite well.
- The AKBh is a highly technical text, representing the culmination of a long Abhidharma tradition.

Two Major Aspects of Technicality

- There are two major aspects of technicality of the AKBh:
- (1) The phrasing itself is highly condensed and difficult to unpack;
- (2) The doctrines discussed are somewhat obscure and not always easy to follow the argument;
- These two aspects are often compounded and hence make the AKBh even more difficult to understand.
- I shall give examples to showcase such difficulties, and then suggest a good way to resolve them.

Challenge (1): Condensed Phrasing

- E.g., AKBh on AK I.41-42 discusses the issue of whether the eye-faculty (*yangen* 眼根; *cakṣur-indriya*) **sees** objects.
- The main issue is that there are different opinions about whether it is the eye-faculty that sees an object since the eye-faculty itself does not make any judgements about the object. The opponent instead suggests that it is the visual consciousness that sees an object.

- Xuanzang's translation reads:
- 若爾，眼根不能決度，云何名見？以能明利觀照諸色故亦名見。若眼見者餘識行時亦應名見？非一切眼皆能現見。誰能現見？謂同分眼，與識合位能見非餘。若爾則應彼能依識見色非眼？不爾眼識定非能見。所以者何？傳說...若爾所執眼識云何？...若識能見誰復了別。見與了別二用何異？以即見色名了色故。譬如少分慧名能見亦能簡擇。如是少分識名能見亦能了別。
- [My tentative translation reads:]

•If so, since the eye-faculty does not make a settlement (*juedu* 決度; *santīrika/tīraṇa*), why is it named “seeing” (*jian* 見; *dr̥ṣṭi*)? Because it sharply observes various pieces of matter, it is also named “seeing.” If it is the eye-faculty that sees [objects], then it should also see even when other types of consciousness (than the visual consciousness) operate? It is not the case that eye-faculty in all circumstances sees. Then who (i.e., eye-faculty under which circumstances) sees? It is the homogeneous (*tongfen* 同分; *sabhāga*) eye-faculty arising together with the [visual] consciousness that sees but not eye-faculty in the other circumstances.

- If so, then let it be the case that it is the [visual] consciousness rather than the eye-faculty that sees. No, the visual consciousness definitely does not see. Why? Because some [masters] claim...(Summary: If it were the case that it is the visual consciousness that sees, then it should see objects even when they are blocked by a wall). If it is the [visual] consciousness that sees, then what would perform the [function] of cognizing (*liaobie* 了別; *vijānāti*)?... What is the distinction between seeing and cognizing? [We affirm that there is no difference here] because: Seeing a piece of matter is named cognizing it. For example, certain types of discernment (*hui* 慧; *prajñā*) are named “seeing” but they also investigate (*jianzi* 簡擇; *prajānāti*). Likewise, certain types of consciousness are named “seeing” but they also cognize.

Good News: Chinese Commentaries Can Be Helpful!

- I hope you agree with me that the above passage is difficult to unpack.
- It reads like a debate back and forth between two parties, but we are not sure who is talking what.
- The passage becomes much clearer when we consult the commentary by Puguang 普光 (7th century CE), a disciple of Xuanzang.

Puguang: Vasumitra vs. Dharmatrāta

- According to Puguang's commentary (T1821:41. 48c5-8), the above passage represents a (probably imaginary) debate between two masters from the Sarvāstivāda tradition:
- Vasumitra (100 BCE): it is the sense faculty that sees (*dr̥ṣṭi*) → “Faculty” camp;
- Dharmatrāta (around the end of the 2nd C BCE): it is the sensory consciousness that sees. → “Consciousness” camp.
- Puguang clearly parses the passage as follows:

- [Consciousness]若爾，眼根不能決度，云何名見？
- [Faculty]以能明利觀照諸色故亦名見。
- [Consciousness]若眼見者餘識行時亦應名見？
- [Faculty]非一切眼皆能現見。
- [Consciousness]誰能現見？
- [Faculty]謂同分眼，與識合位能見非餘。
- [Consciousness]若爾則應彼能依識見色非眼？
- [Faculty]不爾，眼識定非能見。
- [Consciousness]所以者何？
- [Faculty]傳說...若識能見誰復了別。見與了別二用何異？
[Consciousness]以即見色名了色故。譬如少分慧名能見亦能簡擇。如是少分識名能見亦能了別。

- [Consciousness] If so, since the eye-faculty does not make a settlement (*juedu* 決度; *santīrika/tīraṇa*), why is it named “seeing” (*jian* 見; *dr̥ṣṭi*)?
- [Faculty] Because it sharply observes various pieces of matter, it is also named “seeing.”
- [Consciousness] If it is the eye-faculty that sees [object], then it should also see even when other types of consciousness [than the visual consciousness] operate?
- [Faculty] It is not the case that eye-faculty in all circumstances sees. Then who (i.e., eye-faculty under which circumstances) sees? It is the homogeneous (*tongfen* 同分; *sabhāga*) eye-faculty arising together with the [visual] consciousness that sees but not eye-faculty in other circumstances.

- [Consciousness] If so, then let it be the case that it is the [visual] consciousness rather than the eye-faculty that sees.
- [Faculty] No, the visual consciousness definitely does not see. Why? Because some [masters] claim...(Summary: If it were the case that it is the visual consciousness that sees, then it should see objects even when they are blocked by a wall). If it is the [visual] consciousness that sees, then what would perform the [function] of cognizing (*liaobie* 了別; *vijānāti*)? ...What is the distinction between seeing and cognizing?
- [Consciousness] [We affirm that there is no difference here] because: Seeing a piece of matter is named cognizing it. For example, certain types of discernment (*hui* 慧; *prajñā*) are named “seeing” but they also investigate (*jianzi* 簡擇; *prajānāti*). Likewise, certain types of consciousness are named “seeing” but they also cognize.

- Both de la Vallée Poussin/Pruden (Vol. 1, pp. 114-8) and G.L. Sangpo (Vol. 1, pp. 287-92) found Puguang useful and both translations incorporate Puguang's commentary.

Yaśomitra Is Not So Helpful

- In contrast, Yaśomitra's (7th centuries CE) *Sphuṭārthā Abhidharmakośavyākhyā* (Wogihara 1936, 1971, 1989: pp. 79-83), the only extant commentary on the AKBh written in Sanskrit, turns out to be not so helpful because:
 - ** It is not so clear that this whole passage from the AKBh was a debate between those who claim “It is the eye-faculty that sees the object” versus those who claim “It is the eye-consciousness that sees the object.”
 - ** The names of Vasumitra and Dharmatrāta do not appear.
- Puguang might have preserved an interpretation that became unknown in later Indian Buddhism.

More Commentaries on the AKBh by Xuanzang's Lineage

- T1821 Puguang 普光 《俱舍論記》 (30 fascicles)
- T1822 Fabao 法寶 《俱舍論疏》 (30 fascicles)
- T1823 Yuanhui 圓暉 《俱舍論頌疏論本》 (30 fascicles)
- X836 Shentai 神泰：《俱舍論疏》 X836 (7 fascicles)
- X841 Dunlin 遁麟 《俱舍論頌疏記》 (29 fascicles)

- I suggest that we try to consult all those commentaries while studying the AKBh.

Challenge (2) Obscure Doctrines

- A major reason why the doctrines discussed in the AKBh are sometimes obscure is that the AKBh **mixes the doctrines from the Sarvāstivāda (說一切) 有部 and the Sautrāntika 經 (量) 部 traditions.**
- According to the biography of Vasubandhu attributed to Paramārtha 真諦 (499-569 CE), Vasubandhu followed the orthodox Sarvāstivāda doctrines when he composed the verses of the AK, but when he later composed the prose commentary, i.e., the AKBh, he sometimes deviated from the orthodox Sarvāstivāda doctrines by following the Sautrāntika doctrines.

Little Is Known about Sautrāntika

- However, it remains somewhat mysterious regarding what exactly the Sautrāntika tradition was.
- The most famous Buddhist epistemologists such as Dignāga (5th -6th century CE) and Dharmakīrti (7th century CE) are often regarded as Sautrāntikas, which speaks to the importance of this tradition.
- Sautrāntika criticizes the Sarvāstivāda and paves the way towards Yogācāra Buddhism. But we really don't know much about it.

- AKBh turns out to be the best sources to understand what the Sautrāntika views are.
- Xuanzang's translation mentions the term 經部 (Sautrāntika) 20 times.

Nyāyānusāra vs. AKBh

- Moreover, Xuanzang’s translation of the *Nyāyānusāra* 順正理論 by Saṃghabhadra 眾賢 (ca. 5th century CE) is invaluable because it provides further clues about the Sautrāntika views. The *Nyāyānusāra* defends the orthodox Sarvāstivāda doctrines and criticizes AKBh whenever the latter adopts the Sautrāntika positions.
- For example, the *Nyāyānusāra* mentions the author of the AKBh (*jingzhu* 經主 “Scripture-master”) more than 200 times and the name Sautrāntika (*jingbu* 經部) more than 30 times.
- In its criticism the *Nyāyānusāra* usually provides more details than what is said in the AKBh and hence sheds light on the AKBh.

- Below I give two examples to highlight the criticism of AKBh and of earlier Sautrāntika masters (such as Śrīlāta 上座) by the *Nyāyānusāra*.

(2A) Name-collections, sentence-collections, and syllable-collections

- Sarvāstivāda: the linguistic elements, such as names, sentences and syllables are real entities (*dharma*) belonging to the dharmas that are neither material nor mental (*citta-viprayukta-saṃskāra* 心不相應行).
- AKBh: names, sentences and syllables are merely variations of sounds (*ghoṣa-viśeṣa*) and hence are not real entities.
- *Nyāyānusāra* (ad AKBh II.47ab) criticizes the AKBh position and defends the orthodox Sarvāstivāda doctrines.

(2B) Difficulty with Epistemology

- *Nyāyānusāra* also sheds light on the early history of Sautrāntika by criticizing the early Sautrāntika master Śrīlāta (ca. 4th C CE).
- *Nyāyānusāra* contends that if, according to Śrīlāta, everything stays only for a moment (i.e., momentariness [*kṣaṇikatva*]), then the mental consciousness, which does not arise until t_3 , cannot cognize the external object that exists only at t_1 .
- If the mental consciousness does not cognize any external objects, then the memory of a previously cognized object would not be possible because it is the mental consciousness that keeps the memory.
- But since memory is a fact that everyone agrees upon, the Sautrāntika position is untenable.

• t_1

t_2

t_3

• external object

• cause

• sensory consciousness

• effect

•

• mental consciousness

• (cannot be the effect of the external object at t_1)

A Final Remark About Xuanzang's Translations

- As mentioned earlier by my colleague Bibek, in addition to the AKBh and the *Nyāyānusāra*, Xuanzang's translations of Abhidharma also include the foundational texts of the Sarvāstivāda tradition before the AKBh, in particular:
 - 1, The **Abhidharma-jñāna-prasthāna* (阿毘達磨發智慧論) and its six subordinate texts;
 - 2, The *Mahāvibhāṣā* (大毘婆沙論)

Importance

- Xuanzang's translations are the only version we have and hence provide the only access to those central texts of the Sarvāstivāda school.
- Comparing the translations by Xuanzang, we can trace the development and changes among those Sarvāstivāda texts.
- For example, the arrangements of chapters vary among those texts:

Comparison of the Topics of the Chapters

	Ch. 1	Ch. 2	Ch. 3	Ch. 4	Ch. 5	Ch. 6	Ch. 7	Ch. 8
<i>*Abhidharma-jñāna-prasthāna & Mahāvibhāṣā</i>	雜蘊	結蘊	智蘊	業蘊	大種蘊	根蘊	定蘊	見蘊
AKBh	界品	根品	世間品	業品	隨眠品	賢聖品	智品	定品
<i>Nyāyānusāra</i>	本事品	差別品	緣起品	業品	隨眠品	賢聖品	智品	定品

What Are the Joys with Translating the AKBh?

- 1, Given the complexities and obscurities of the AKBh, we have to look for missing pieces (hidden hypotheses) here and there. For me, this is a real intellectual treat.
- 2, As mentioned earlier by my colleague Bruce, Xuanzang was a very learned scholar and had already translated several Abhidharma texts before he embarked on translating the AKBh. It is very interesting to monitor how he translated and interpreted the text (Translation is also an interpretation!).

- For example, towards the end of the passage quoted earlier, there is the sentence:
 - “For example, certain types of discernment (*hui* 慧; *prajñā*) are named “seeing” but they also investigate (*jianzi* 簡擇; *prajānāti*).”
- There is a playing of words here because the verb *prajānāti* and the noun *prajñā* are cognate. So literally the sentence means “certain types of discernment (*hui* 慧; *prajñā*) are named “seeing” but they also discern (*jianzi* 簡擇; *prajānāti*),” which sounds like just repeating itself.

- To avoid repetition and make the sentence clearer, Xuanzang here deviated from his convention and translated/interpreted *prajānāti* in terms of *jianzi* 簡擇 (“investigate”), whose common Sanskrit correspondent is *pravīcaya* (*pra-vi-√ci*) but not *pra-√jñā*.
- There are many examples like this. For me, it is very illuminating and enjoyable to ponder on why Xuanzang chose the term he used.
- My colleague Wei-jen will say more about Xuanzang’s translation shortly.

Conclusion

- In this talk, I pinpoint two major aspects of technicality that makes it difficult to understand the AKBh.
- I suggest that it would be very helpful to consult the Chinese translations and commentaries by Xuanzang and his disciples.
- I hope to draw more attention to the value of the Chinese Abhidharma sources, which are extremely helpful for shedding light on the AKBh itself as well as the larger Abhidharma background.

- Thank you for your attention!