

***ākāra* in Buddhist Philosophical and Soteriological Analysis: Introduction**

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The articles in this issue of the *Journal of Indian Philosophy* arose from a panel on the concept of *ākāra* in Buddhist soteriological and philosophical analysis at the 16th Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies (Dharma Drum College, Jinshan Mountain, Taiwan, 20–25 June, 2011).¹ For practical reasons, the articles are arranged in alphabetical order according to their authors' names and not according to any structured progression. The increasing access to academic journals online is now in any case beginning to obliterate the importance of such arrangements of thematically linked articles in the printed journals. Readers often come across individual articles through search engines, or through cross-references in other online resources, and then proceed according to the logic offered by the interfaces in which the article files are embedded. This is similar to the ways in which, in the domain of music, collections of music files are beginning to render obsolete the concept of an album with a carefully designed sequence of tracks aimed to articulate a particular artistic vision. Music listeners can now freely and at the press of a button or the click of a mouse move through music collections according to their own preferences and tastes, oblivious to whatever designs artists might have had for them. Still, readers of the printed issue may wish for some guidance with reference to the connections among the individual articles, and this brief introduction is thus designed to sketch a path that connoisseur readers may wish

¹ The papers by Patrick McAllister and Hiroko Matsuoka were presented in other sessions of the conference, and were included in this issue because of their thematic relevance.

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to follow when considering these contributions on *ākāra* in Buddhist philosophical and soteriological analysis.

The term *ākāra* literally means shape or form, with a secondary meaning of appearance, aspect, or image. Classical Indian philosophers, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, have long debated the status and role of *ākāra* in cognition and in consciousness more generally, with major questions including whether the forms in awareness are intrinsic to cognition and whether such forms can be taken as evidence of an external world. As with most technical terms, however, the continuity of the word may mask the history of the development of its meaning. Birgit Kellner's contribution to this issue thus brings us back to some of the earliest technical uses of the term *ākāra* in Indian Buddhist Abhidharma and Yogācāra treatises, showing how those usages should not too quickly be conflated with later uses in the logico-epistemological or *pramāṇa* tradition stemming from Dignāga (ca. 480–540 CE) and elaborated by Dharmakīrti (between mid-sixth and mid-seventh century CE). In particular, she points to another meaning of the term *ākāra* found in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (ca. second half of fourth century CE) in which the word indicates "a mode of mental functioning" such that all mental events (*citta*) and their associates (*caitta*) can be said to have their own distinct manner of operating. The term *ākāra* plays an important role also in discussions of the path to liberation, as indicated in the well-known rubric of the sixteen aspects (*ākāra*) of the four noble truths. Although Kellner concludes ultimately that this usage can be seen as a sub-species of the mode-*ākāra* she has already delineated from the object-*ākāra* prevalent in Buddhist epistemological use, her search for an "umbrella concept" that would unite these various usages leaves her unsatisfied. In the end, Kellner calls into question the widely-held but generally unexamined view that the term *ākāra* in Buddhist *pramāṇa* literature has any easy continuity with the varied usages of the same term in prior Abhidharma and Yogācāra treatises.

Variations in the meaning and usage of the term *ākāra* in Buddhist texts is just one of the complicating factors in any thematic study of *ākāra* across time. Just as Buddhist thinkers have used the term variously and have adapted meanings and usage in relation to previous lines of penetrating analysis, Buddhists have also been involved in intricate and controversial debates with Brahminical thinkers. Disagreements have most characteristically revolved around the question whether the *ākāra* of a cognized object—its "form," its particular way of presenting itself—may be said to "belong" to the external world or more properly to cognition alone. The question seems to have been explicitly raised first in Sabara's Bhāṣya on the *Mīmāṃsāsūtras* in the late fifth century, and it continued to occupy thinkers for centuries. Given the intensity and degree of polemics in this period, it is impossible to evaluate the Buddhist theories of *ākāra* without attending to the attacks and rebuttals in both directions. Alex Watson's article in this issue accordingly investigates the ninth-century Naiyāyika Jayanta Bhaṭṭa's refutation of the Buddhist Vijñānavāda (or Yogācāra) position that the form with which all agree objects are perceived belongs to cognition alone and cannot belong to the external world. In one of his arguments presented in the *Nyāyamañjarī* the Vijñānavādin starts from the premise that cognition must be grasped before its supposed external object is grasped. If cognition is grasped, it obviously has form—but since both the Naiyāyika and the Buddhist agree that only one of the two, cognition

or external object, can have form, this effectively disproves external objects. The Buddhist supports his premise with the analogy of light, which illuminates objects as well as itself. Watson teases out different features of the light analogy, and arrives at a nuanced answer to the question whether the light analogy can achieve what it is meant to achieve. While some of its aspects may help to support the Vijñānavāda claim that cognition illuminates itself and must be grasped prior to its objects, others make the argument more problematic, and Watson ends by suggesting how it could be improved.

Watson's paper shows how the critique of external reality, as well as its defense, have been constant accompaniments of the exploration of *ākāras* in Indian philosophy. Several recent scholarly debates have turned on the question of whether the Buddhist thinkers Vasubandhu, Dignāga, and Dharmakīrti embrace one or another variety of idealism. Two basic varieties are articulated: an epistemic idealism in which external reality is held simply to be beyond the purview of cognition and a metaphysical idealism in which external reality is refuted in more absolute ontological terms. An important question, however, is whether such a distinction in the varieties of idealism was recognized by Buddhist authors themselves or whether it is only part of an analytical grid employed by contemporary interpreters. Isabelle Ratié demonstrates that recourse to non-Buddhist thinkers, in this case the Kashmiri Śaivas Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta (tenth to eleventh century CE), can offer unexpected aid in the interpretation of the Buddhist texts. Ratié not only shows how Buddhist ideas and arguments on *ākāras* were recycled and reused by the Kashmiri thinkers; she also adds an interesting twist to the idealism debate of recent times by questioning the basic premise that all participants in that debate appear to share without much discussion: that an ontological denial of external reality is a "stronger" position than a simple negation of epistemic access to it. Rather, if it is the case that external reality is inaccessible to cognition, then both its denial and its affirmation become rather pointless, just as the denial or affirmation of an imperceptible demon is beyond the scope of ordinary human perception as the Buddhist commentator Manorathanandin points out. But Abhinavagupta goes even further, as Ratié shows: for him, the epistemic argument against the perception of external objects is itself sufficient to refute them since at the end of the day such objects are, unlike demons, impossible even to conceptualize, much less perceive. Thus the so-called epistemic argument is not a weaker argument but is itself rather the argument *par excellence* for the impossibility of external reality.

While Brahmanical and Śaiva thinkers appear to concentrate on Buddhist Vijñānavāda arguments against external reality in their contributions to historical debates on "forms," there were also (post-Dharmakīrtian) Buddhists who contested the advocacy of "forms" within perceptual cognition. The eighth-century thinker Śubhagupta defended the perception of external objects against lines of Vijñānavāda criticism that go back to Vasubandhu's *Vimśikā Vijñaptimātratāsiddhiḥ* and Dignāga's *Ālambanaparīkṣā*, and appears to have maintained a Vaibhāṣika model of perception. While being regarded as an advocate of the thesis that cognition is without forms (*nirākāravāda*), Śubhagupta's views have been notoriously difficult to determine with any precision given that his *Bāhyārthasiddhikārikā*, like all of his

preserved works, exists only in Tibetan translation. Margherita Serena Saccone reconstructs Śubhagupta's views on the cognitive process through a close reading of pertinent arguments from the *Bāhyārthasiddhikārikā* together with their refutation by the eighth-century thinkers Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla in the *Tattvasaṅgraha* and *-pañjikā*. Śubhagupta claims that atoms are grasped by perception, but they do not appear individually in cognition, as they never occur one by one but only arise together with other atoms, as atoms mutually assist each other in causal processes. While perception grasps individual atoms, conceptual cognition determines them as one. A "coarse form" (*sthūlākāra*), Saccone concludes against earlier interpretations of Śubhagupta's difficult text, is for Śubhagupta only constituted by conceptualization; perception grasps atoms without taking on their form. Continuing the concern with Śubhagupta's realism and its refutation by Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla, Hiroko Matsuoka moves the conversation more obviously into the realm of soteriology with her examination of the problem of the Buddha's cognition of other minds. Here we encounter an example of a context in which the term *ākāra* is used to indicate an aspect of cognition and in which the twofold aspect (*dvyaākāra*) of object-subject duality is understood to be a flaw that must be removed through the perfection of wisdom and other practices. Ultimately all cognition is devoid of the duality of an objective aspect (*grāhyākāra*) and a subjective aspect (*grāhakākāra*), and this means that the Buddha's omniscience must likewise be free of such duality. In contrast to Śubhagupta, who holds that the Buddha is held to be omniscient due to his "grasping" (*'dzin pa*) of the "grasped" (*gzung*) objects in the world, Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla hold that the Buddha knows everything in a manner that is devoid of seeing (*darśana*) or cognition (*upalambha*). Since this lack of seeing or grasping is in accord with reality, the Buddha is omniscient simply through his own self-cognition (*āmasaṃvedana*)—i.e. reflexive cognition of his own mind—which being free from ignorance is also free from any grasped-grasper distinction.

But even when Buddhist epistemologists are firmly committed to this kind of non-dualism, they still must give an account of ordinary epistemic events. Such accounts inevitably make recourse to notions of *ākāra*, and in the course of doing so post-Dharmakīrtian Indian Buddhist thinkers enter contentious territory filled with disputes concerning whether the *ākāras*—understood as phenomenal forms, mental images, or aspects of mental states such as subject or object—represent the true nature of the mind or are ultimately false. These disputes have been traditionally been approached through doxographical labels such as *sākārajñānavāda*, *satyākāravāda*, *alīkākaravāda* or *nirākāravāda*. While some such labels have been derived from Tibetan sources, others are indigenous to the Indian materials. But in any case, the existence of such terms has had the result that previous studies on *ākāra* have tended to focus on determining in which camp a particular thinker can be placed. Sara McClintock's paper takes Kamalaśīla as the focal point of an argument for a more nuanced approach which rather considers a range of positions a thinker is willing to endorse in different contexts. In connection with his *Tattvasaṅgraha-pañjikā*, she argues that none of his arguments in this text represent the ultimate position that Kamalaśīla takes as a Mādhyamika: it is hence his recourse to a position that rejects the unity and ultimate reality of the mind that allows him to make use of a range of options in both philosophical and soteriological contexts.

While Kamalaśīla's Madhyamaka stance may offer him a peculiar philosophical vantage point for a context-sensitive advocacy of *ākāra*-positions, Shinya Moriyama argues the Vijñānavāda stance espoused by the eleventh-century thinker Ratnākaraśānti—in doxographical terms an *alīkākāravādin*—motivates him to reformulate the classical Madhyamaka neither-one-nor-many-argument against the true existence of consciousness, as it had been employed in Śāntarakṣita's *Madhyamakālaṅkāra*. In discussing Ratnākaraśānti's proof strategies, Moriyama focuses especially on his **Madhyamakālaṅkāravṛtti/Madhyamapratipadāsiddhi*, a work that has so far not been taken into consideration in studies on this late Buddhist thinker's contributions to the *ākāra* debates. Mental images (*ākāra*) are neither completely identical with nor completely different from consciousness which presents them, although their identity with consciousness is provisionally accepted before it is subsequently revealed in analysis. Moriyama's reconstructions of Ratnākaraśānti's defense of *alīkākāravāda* accentuate the necessity to cast a fresh look at Jñānaśrīmitra's *Sākārasiddhiśāstra*, the most significant treatise devoted to the problem of *ākāras* in late Indian Buddhist philosophy, of which so far only partial studies have been undertaken.

That the concept of *ākāra* has significance beyond the better known debates concerning the status of external reality and the ultimate nature of consciousness is made evident in Patrick Mc Allister's contribution, which zeroes in on a disagreement between two Buddhist thinkers on the interpretation of the Buddhist theory of conceptual cognition as exclusion (*apoha*). His article considers the eleventh-century Buddhist thinker Ratnakīrti's criticism of his eighth-century Buddhist predecessor Dharmottara's position on the function of forms in conceptual cognition. The controversy centers on the nature of determination (*adhyavasāya*) in relation to the referent of a concept (or word). Determination is a key element in the Buddhist epistemologists' theories of successful action, and the question is whether such determination requires an *ākāra* which possesses similarity (*sārūpya*) to an external entity, and if so, what is the nature of that similarity. Following Dharmakīrti, both thinkers agree that the forms in cognition are caught up in a species of error that allows people to make the determination that *x* is the same as *y* even in the absence of any such real sameness. But there is an important difference between Ratnakīrti's and Dharmottara's understanding of how this error functions and the nature of the ontological status of the object of activity. For Ratnakīrti, the error involved in determination is just the error that understands forms to represent something external, which they do not since the forms in cognition are just mind manifesting to itself. For Dharmottara, determination involves an error of a slightly different sort, namely, the failure to recognize that the forms in cognition are not the same as the external natures that are superimposed upon them. Ratnakīrti is not satisfied with this explanation, since he questions how it can account for successful activity. Thus while both thinkers endorse an epistemological scheme that makes use of *ākāras*, their assessment of the nature of such forms in awareness impacts their interpretation of other key epistemological theories.

Returning to the larger questions that frame all these theoretical and epistemological controversies, we can consider one last contribution in this collection, that of

Vincent Eltschinger, who takes up Dharmakīrti's views on ascertainment (*niścaya*) and the four nobles' truths. Here, as we have already learned from Birgit Kellner's article, *ākāras* are mainly understood insofar as they play a central part of the elaborations on the mental states that constitute the path to liberation, elaborations which began at a much earlier stage within Abhidharmic analysis. Drawing connections between Vasubandhu's presentation of the sixteen aspects (*ṣoḍaśākāra*) of the four nobles' truths and Dharmakīrti's analysis of perceptual ascertainment, Eltschinger demonstrates the deep continuities between these two branches of Indian Buddhist scholastic philosophy. In particular, he shows how Dharmakīrti understands the ordinary person to superimpose sixteen unreal aspects onto reality, thereby failing to ascertain the actual structure of reality itself. By way of a tour of Vasubandhu's presentation of the Buddhist path with special attention to the sixteen aspects of the nobles' truths, Eltschinger sheds light on the mechanisms by which the yogins alone are capable of ascertaining the true structural aspects of reality through their perception. Linking this to Dharmakīrti's ontological and epistemological writings, he notes that the connections with Buddhist path literature do not render the great thinker's writings any less philosophical. Rather, they serve instead as "evidence that Dharmakīrti was, strictly speaking, a *Buddhist* philosopher."

As each of the papers in this issue can be singled out for its own distinctive contribution to the study of *ākāras*, there are also shared currents and common methodological points. Earlier scholarship on *ākāra* has focused on mapping the terrain of positions to which individual thinkers subscribed with the help of doxographical labels found in late Indian and Tibetan sources. While such classificatory grids as *sākāravāda*, *nirākāravāda* or *alīkākāravāda* are helpful guides through a bewildering amount and variety of literature, the contributions to this issue when taken together stress that such grids need to be complemented, and historicized, if a satisfactory understanding is to be obtained. The seemingly simple question whether a thinker subscribes to a position denoted by one of these labels masks a far more complex—and, we would venture to say, more interesting—intellectual universe. This is a universe where conceptual vocabularies undergo shifts in changing frames of thought, where views of a philosopher's own tradition may be shared only up to a point, where inherited arguments are reconfigured and imbued with new purpose and significance, and where sophisticated strategies of argumentation are deployed that open up ranges of positions rather than simply fixing one reified point of view. Add to which, earlier studies often left us with implicit assumptions on the philosophical significance of particular viewpoints and positions even while they pretended to merely propose historical analyses; bringing a philosophical mind to the study of this universe that is able to detect and question such assumptions is vital to progress in this field. To find one's path in this universe is a daunting task, infinitely more challenging than the simple orientating grid of our cherished doxographical labels. But it is a necessary task if we are to understand Buddhist thought, and Indian philosophy, in ways that are attuned to its own sophistication.