THE USES OF THE FOUR POSITIONS OF THE CATUŚKOTI
AND THE PROBLEM OF THE DESCRIPTION OF REALITY
IN MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ABBREVIATIONS


MAVT Madhyāntavibhāgatikā of Sthiramati, edited by Ramachandra Pandeya, Madhyānta-Vibhāga-Śāstra, Delhi, 1971.


MSA Mahāyānasūtra-lāmākāra attributed to Maitreyā, edited by S. Lévi, Paris, 1907.

MSABh Mahāyānasūtra-lāṁkārabhāṣya attributed to Vasubandhu, edited by S. Lévi, Paris, 1907.


TSP Tattvasamgrahapañjikā of Kamalaśīla, edited together with TS.

I. THE FOUR POSITIONS IN EARLY BUDDHIST THOUGHT

In the early philosophical literature of Buddhism the notion of four alternative positions (koti) making up what is often termed a catuṣkoti or 'tetralemma' appears in discussions on the questions whether a tathāgata exists after death, whether the world has an end and whether the world is eternal. In each of these cases the nature of a postulated entity and its relation to a predicate is investigated in such a way that all conceptually imaginable positions are exhausted; for an entity and its predicate can be conceptually related only in terms of these four limiting positions. Thus it is asked whether a tathāgata exists, does not exist, both exists and does not exist, or neither exists nor does not exist after death;¹ whether the world (of living beings loka) is finite,
infinite, both finite and infinite, or neither finite nor infinite; and whether
the world (of living beings) is eternal, not eternal, both eternal and not
eternal, or neither eternal nor not eternal.\(^2\) In addition to these questions, the
canonical literature mentions that of the relationship between a vital principle
(jjīva 'soul') and the body which is envisaged under only two headings, viz.
whether they are different or not different.

Thus in the Buddhist canonical texts up to fourteen points have been
mentioned, twelve concerning three topics each investigated with respect to
four positions and two relating to a single topic investigated in terms of only
two positions. In the canon the Buddha is represented as having declined to
answer any of these moot points when questioned about them by
Mālunikaṇṭa, Vacchagotta (Vatsagotra) and other questioners; and he has
thus come to be suspected of either ignorance or agnosticism. However, these
questions are treated in Buddhist thought rather as ones to be set aside
(sthāpanīta, thapanīta) because they cannot be explicated either usefully or
meaningfully, and for this reason they are frequently referred to as the
unexplicated points (avyākṛtavastu).

Such questions cannot be usefully answered and are to be set aside since
from the soteriological point of view their solution can contribute nothing to
progress on the path to Awakening.\(^3\) And they cannot be meaningfully
decided because of a certain logical and semantic vagueness in their terms. These
questions are to be met in one form or another throughout Buddhist literature
beginning with the canonical texts, and they have accordingly been extensively
discussed also in the modern literature on Buddhism and Indian philosophy.\(^4\)

In the following pages certain uses and interpretations of the last two
positions (koti) of the 'tetralemma', and of 'neither . . . nor' sentences in
particular, will be examined with respect to their applications in the philo-
sophical analysis of linguistic and conceptual fictions, the conditioned
(saṃskṛta) factors of existence on the relative level of dependent origination,
and the unconditioned (asaṃskṛta) factors on the level of ultimate reality
(paramārtha). And the question whether the Mahāyāna Śāstras developed a
special language and logic of mysticism\(^5\) apart and quite distinct from the
language and logic of philosophical analysis as well as ordinary usage will be
touched on in connexion with certain uses of the 'neither . . . nor' formula.
This study will be based on some older treatises of the Madhyamaka and
Vijñānavāda schools and on the Ratnagotravibhāga, an old Mahāyānist text
that deals especially with the positive characterization of ultimate reality.