Text, History, and Philosophy

Abhidharma across Buddhist Scholastic Traditions

Edited by

Bart Dessein
Weijen Teng

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Contents

CHAPTER 1

Abhidharma and Indian thinking

Johannes Bronkhorst

1 Introduction

Much could be said, and has been said, about the influence of Buddhism on other currents of thought in India. This chapter will deal with this same topic, but limit its attention to one specific form of Buddhism: Abhidharma. And even here, it will only take into consideration the form of Abhidharma that was created in the northwestern corner of the Indian subcontinent, in an area that nowadays belongs to three different political entities: Pakistan, Afghanistan and Kashmir. This form of Abhidharma is primarily, but not exclusively, associated with the Sarvāstivādins, and the region in which it arose is often referred to as "Greater Gandhāra," a somewhat vague term, to be sure, but appropriately so, for it is hard to determine with certainty which regions can legitimately be included in it, and which cannot.[1] Kashmir and Gandhāra may be taken to belong to it, and if we add Bactria, we can call it, with David Gordon White (2012), KGB.

The Abhidharma of Greater Gandhāra (I will call it Gandhāran Abhidharma) exerted a major influence on Buddhist thought in India, to be sure. Most, if not all, of the philosophical schools of Indian Buddhism – both Main Stream and Mahāyāna – are based on the foundations laid here. I have argued elsewhere that already the very earliest Mahāyāna texts we possess are based on Abhidharma thought; these texts may date from the first century BCE.[2]

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* This paper brings together a number of observations made and conclusions drawn in other publications, duly referred to in the footnotes, along with new observations. In its present form it has profited from various critical remarks, most notably by Collett Cox and Shoryū Katsura. Bronkhorst, 1996 overlaps to some extent with parts of this paper, but concentrates on Buddhist notions of language and their influence on Brahmanical philosophy.

1 A Buddhist presence in this region from at least the 2nd century BCE seems certain. Cp. Behrendt, 2004: 256: "[Phase I] began with the founding of the earliest Buddhist centers in Greater Gandhāra: Butkara I and the Dharmarājikā stūpa in Taxila […]. An early 2nd century BCE date seems a conservative benchmark for the beginning of this period." On the extent of Greater Gandhāra, see also note 6, below.

2 Bronkhorst, 2013.

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In this chapter, I will concentrate on Abhidharma influence outside Buddhism. I will begin with a short sketch of some important features of Abhidharma thought, then turn to a number of Indian schools of thought that took over one or more of those features.

Gandhāran Abhidharma, it should be emphasized right from the beginning, was different from other forms of Abhidharma, most noticeably so from the Abhidharma preserved in Pāli by the Theravāda Buddhists of Sri Lanka and some countries of Southeast Asia. It is not my intention to give an exhaustive characterization of the two Abhidharmas and their differences, even if I had the competence to do so. I will rather concentrate on Gandhāran Abhidharma, emphasizing those of its features that will play a role in the remainder of this chapter.

Gandhāran Abhidharma, like Theravāda Abhidharma, is based on old lists of items, and therefore on old material. Gandhāran Abhidharma dealt with this old material in its own manner, and in doing so went far beyond the old heritage. Already in our oldest documents, it presents itself as the result of an attempt to rethink this traditional material, to systematize and modify it so as to make it part of a coherent philosophy. The emphasis in this philosophy is on ontology: the question "what exists?" is central to this form of Abhidharma, and inspired a number of highly original, and surprising, answers.[3]

What does exist? Put very briefly, the answer is: the *dharma*s. *Dharma*s are the items that had been enumerated in lists, apparently with the purpose of preserving the essential elements of the Buddha's teaching. Unsurprisingly, given the nature of the Buddha's teaching, many *dharma*s were of a psychological nature; they referred to mental states. But not all of them did so. It is not always easy to figure out why certain *dharma*s were included in the lists, and presumably the early Gandhāran scholiasts faced the same problem. They offered an easy yet radical solution: the *dharma*s are the ultimate elements of existence. Everything that exists is made up of *dharma*s. This applies to human beings, of course. After all, we have numerous psychological constituents. But the same vision also applies to material objects; fortunately there were a number of *dharma*s in the traditional lists that are of a material nature and can therefore account for the existence of material objects, too.

3 It is true that this question is rarely, if ever, explicitly formulated in the technical texts of early Abhidharma. However, this aspect is emphasized, presumably at least from the time of King Menander onward, in texts that draw the consequences of this form of Abhidharma, including the *Milindapañha* and *Prajñāpāramitā* texts right from the beginning. See Bronkhorst 2013.

This, then, was the first step taken by the Gandhāran Ābhidharmikas. They introduced an atomic vision of reality, in the sense that they maintained that there are ultimate constituent elements of all that exists, and that these ultimate elements are the *dharma*s which they had collected in lists. But they did not stop there. The next step was the claim that *dharma*s are the *only* things that exist. The objects that they *constitute* – this covers all there is, including the macroscopic objects of our everyday experience – do *not* exist. And the list of *dharma*s is an exhaustive enumeration of all that exists.

This second step can easily be understood in the light of the persistent Buddhist tradition that the self, or the person, does not exist. If the person is conceived of as the aggregate of all its constituent *dharma*s (and this became the generally accepted way in Buddhism to think about it), this can easily be interpreted to mean that the person does not exist *because* it is an accumulation of *dharma*s. Other accumulations of *dharma*s therefore do not exist either.

The Gandhāran Buddhist scholiasts found themselves in this way in the possession of an exhaustive enumeration of all there is, viz., the inherited and slightly adjusted list of *dharma*s. These *dharma*s were now thought of as momentary, i.e. as each lasting no more than one single moment. Once again, a traditional Buddhist doctrine could be invoked in defense of this new view: the Buddha had taught that all conditioned factors are non-eternal. This could easily be interpreted to mean that all *dharma*s are momentary, and this is what happened.[4]

Gandhāran Abhidharma reduced in this manner the whole world, both animate and inanimate, to an uninterrupted sequence of some seventy-five momentary *dharma*s; more precisely, some seventy-two momentary *dharma*s, plus three eternal ones, the so-called *asaṃskṛta* 'non-conditioned' *dharma*s. The world of our experience thus turned out to be ultimately unreal, with the real world of momentary *dharma*s hidden below it.

How could we possibly be misled into believing that we live in a world of persons and other macroscopic objects? The Buddhist texts frequently respond by pointing out that this or that macroscopic object is a mere name and does not really exist. This is what, in the *Milindapañha*, Nāgasena pointed out with regard to King Milinda's chariot, and numerous other Buddhist texts state the same. The objects we are familiar with in our everyday world owe their relative existence – or rather our mistaken conviction that they exist – to the words of language.

There is one more point I wish to add to this brief characterization of Gandhāran Abhidharma. Words, as we have seen, are responsible for our

4 On the beginning of Buddhist momentariness, see Rospatt, 1995, along with Bronkhorst, 1995.

mistaken belief in the reality of a world of persons, chariots and much else. But words, one might object, are themselves ultimately non-existing entities. Does this not undermine the system in some vital manner?

It is possible that the Gandhāran scholiasts were aware of this objection. All we know for certain is that they introduced some *dharma*s in their list that we might call linguistic *dharma*s. There are three of them, originally perhaps only two. They correspond to individual speech sounds, words and sentences. If we concentrate on words, this means that, beside the sequence of speech sounds that make up a word, there is a momentary *dharma* (or perhaps better: a series of identical momentary *dharma*s) that are the word. The word exists in this way beside, and independently of, the speech sounds. This is a highly remarkable conception, and the only justification for its existence I can think of is to save the reality, the real existence, of words and with it the fundamental coherence of the Abhidharma system that was being developed.

2 Grammar

It is time to leave the details of the Abhidharma system and turn to the schools of non-Buddhist thought on which it exerted an influence. The first to be considered is the tradition of Pāṇinian Sanskrit grammar, and more in particular one specific text that belongs to it, Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* "Great Commentary". It is known that Patañjali wrote this work during the decades following the middle of the second century BCE, and that he was at some time in the service of King Puṣyamitra, one of the successor kings of the Mauryan empire. He was already alive during the inroads of Indo-Greeks into northern India, around 150 BCE. There is some evidence to believe that he settled in Kashmir, and this may explain his interest for us at present.[5] For Kashmir was on the one hand a part of Greater Gandhāra,[6] with a substantial Buddhist presence. On the other hand, Kashmir was conquered by Puṣyamitra, a Brahmanical ruler who, as we saw, had scholars like Patañjali in his service. Kashmir may therefore have been the place *par excellence* for Buddhist philosophy, i.e. Gandhāran Abhidharma, and Brahmanical scholarship to meet. Judging by certain features of Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*, this is what actually happened. Let me explain.

Gandhāran Abhidharma was preoccupied with ontology; this we have seen. There are reasons to think that the Buddhists who created it were the first to

5 Aklujkar, 2008; Bronkhorst, 2016: 43–46 and § III.3.2.

6 The map given by Salomon, 1999: 2 suggests that he includes Kashmir in "Greater Gandhāra"; Behrendt, 2004: 16, 22 does so explicitly.

introduce this preoccupation. It is absent from all contemporary Indian sources, which includes grammatical treatises. Pāṇini does not show the slightest interest in the question what exists. This changes with Patañjali. His *Mahābhāṣya* discusses the ontological status of words and speech sounds, and proclaims that both have independent existence and are eternal. This is highly remarkable. To begin with, there is no discernible reason why Patañjali should be interested in the ontological status of sounds and words. As a matter of fact, his claim that words exist eternally obliges him to reinterpret Pāṇinian derivations of words. No longer do words come about by adding suffixes to stems, as had been the case in Pāṇini. No, since words are eternally existing independent entities, there can for Patañjali be no question of parts of words, whether they be stems or suffixes. He therefore has to justify grammatical derivations differently. The details do not concern us at present. The main thing is that Patañjali had come to look upon words as ontologically existing entities, and that this forced him to interpret grammatical derivations differently.[7]

But why had Patañjali come to look upon words as ontologically existing entities? And why do his ontological interests stop at words? The obvious answer is that Gandhāran Abhidharma exerted an influence on him. This does not only explain his ontological preoccupations, but also the fact that he took the audacious step of postulating that words are not just a sequence of sounds, but independently existing things. This is exactly what Gandhāran Abhidharma had done. There the preoccupation with ontology was not surprising, for its philosophy was deeply interested in ontology. In the case of Patañjali, on the other hand, ontology played no useful role in his grammatical reflections; it even made them more complicated.

A closer look at grammatical derivations as conceived of by Patañjali reveals that Abhidharma influence had gone further, and caused him greater and more subtle difficulties than the ones just described. Patañjali, it turns out, imposed upon grammatical derivations a scheme that is completely parallel to the vision the Buddhist scholiasts had imposed on reality in general.

What is the Abhidharma vision of reality in general? Basically it is a linear vision. All the things we know are successions of momentary *dharma*s. Each *dharma* is replaced, after a moment, by another *dharma*. This next *dharma* is usually similar to the preceding one. After all, a cow does not become a horse from one moment to the next; this continuity is explained by the regularity with which *dharma*s are succeeded by identical or similar *dharma*s. Moreover, the nature of each next *dharma* is largely determined by the *immediately* pre-

7 For details, see Bronkhorst, 1987: 46 ff.

ceding *dharma*, not by *dharma*s that occurred earlier and that have gone long since, nor indeed by *dharma*s that are still to appear.[8]

A grammatical derivation, too, is a succession of stages. What determines each next stage? For Pāṇini this could be any of the preceding stages, or occasionally even a stage that was still to come. Patañjali changed all this. For him, each next stage was completely determined by the immediately preceding one. He imposes in this way a linear scheme that is in all essential respects parallel to the linearity of Gandharan Buddhism. This imposition confronted him with major difficulties, for Pāṇini had never intended anything of the kind. Patañjali was therefore obliged to introduce new procedures, add metarules and use various other tricks to make derivations conform to his vision.

But this vision was extraneous to Pāṇini's grammar. Patañjali imposed it, without telling us why. However, it seems safe to assume that the explanation of this strange change imposed by Patañjali lies in his acquaintance with the Abhidharma vision of the world.[9]

3 Jainism

One of the old texts of the Śvetāmbara Jaina canon, the *Sūyagaḍa* (in Sanskrit: *Sūtrakṛtāṅga*), shows awareness of a number of characteristics of Buddhism. It mentions the five *skandha*s, but also – and this is more interesting in the present context – the notion of momentariness. Momentariness, as we have seen, is one of the innovations introduced by Gandhāran Abhidharma. We may assume that the author of this text (or of this portion of the text) was acquainted with the developments that had taken place in north-western Buddhism.

Other texts of the Śvetāmbara canon – all of them no doubt younger than the *Sūyagaḍa* – do not only know the notion of momentariness: they have adopted it themselves. The moment (*samaya*) as the smallest unit of time appears to occur for the first time in the *Uttarajjhayaṇa*, and this same text further knows the notion of *santati*, the sequence of moments that is also common in Buddhism. Beside moments, other significant notions are found in the *Uttarajjhayaṇa*, among them *pradeśa* (the smallest unit of space) and *paramāṇu* (atom). In other words, we find here an atomic vision of time, space and matter. It is true that Buddhism does not appear to have accepted the

8 The justification for this way of viewing the succession of *dharma*s lies in the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

9 For details, see Bronkhorst, 2004. See further Bronkhorst, 1994; 2002b.

atomic nature of space, it *did* accept and elaborate the atomic nature of matter, and of course of time.

The *Sūyagaḍa* is also acquainted with the Buddhist notion of the person as a collection of *skandha*s. It tells us that the Buddhist person is neither different nor not different from the *skandha*s; this is a position that was held by the Buddhist Pudgalavādins. The *Sūyagaḍa*, we learn from this passage, was already aware of the issue regarding wholes and their parts that occupied the Buddhists. Most Buddhists, with the exception of the Pudgalavādins, rejected the existence of wholes; subsequent texts from the Śvetāmbara canon accept it.

Perhaps the most surprising feature that Jainism took over from Abhidharma Buddhism, if my reflections are correct, is the use of the word *pudgala*. In Buddhism the *pudgala* is the person, conceived of as the combination of the *skandha*s, i.e. of the *dharma*s, that make up a person. Many Buddhists thought that this conception does not correspond to any reality; the Pudgalavādins were of a different opinion, and specified that the *pudgala* is neither different nor not different from the *skandha*s. All this we know.

Interestingly, Jainism too adopted this word *pudgala*. For them, it does not refer to the person, but rather to material objects. A closer study of the relevant passages brings to light that one of the earliest occurrences of this word in the Jaina canon *does* refer to a person. In subsequent Jaina developments the emphasis is more and more on the aggregate. We know that in Buddhism *pudgala* refers to an aggregate, but only to one special kind of aggregate: the person. In Jainism it comes to include other aggregates as well: early texts use it in the sense of "portion, quantity". It appears indeed that within Jainism the meaning of this word developed from "person" (the meaning also used in Buddhism) to "material object". This development only makes sense if we start from the Buddhist notion of the person as an aggregate.

It is not possible to enter more deeply into this discussion. Further reflections and textual references can be found in another publication, to which I must refer for details.[10] Here a few words must be said about the time and place of the interaction between Gandhāran Abhidharma and Jainism. Jainism was not present in Gandhāra.[11] Gandhāra is beyond the lands where a Jaina monk is allowed to travel, which extend westward until Thaneshwar.[12] However,

10 Bronkhorst, 2000.

11 See however Pal, 2007, which shows that Jaina merchants may have ventured into Gandhāra and Afghanistan.

12 See Jain, 1984: 23–24 (with note 2), 337 ff.; further PPN II s.v. Saṃpai (Samprati), with references. *Kalpasūtra* 1.50 reads: "monks and nuns may wander eastward as far as

Jainism was strongly present in Mathurā under the Kuṣāṇas, i.e. at a time when Buddhism, too, had a strong presence in that region. There are also reasons to think that Buddhism and Jainism interacted in other respects in this region during this period. It seems, for example, that Jainism at that time abandoned the worship of relics of the Jina and of stūpas that contained them. This would not be an example of Jainism borrowing from Buddhism but rather of Jainism consciously differentiating itself from Buddhism. Once again, there is no space to pursue this issue further at present.[13]

4 Brahmanical Philosophy

Let us now turn to Brahmanical philosophy. The influence of Gandhāran Abhidharma is here most obvious in the case of the Vaiśeṣika school of thought. Vaiśeṣika philosophy imposes an ontological scheme on the world, and it can easily be seen that this scheme has been inspired by Gandhāran Abhidharma.

Remember the important features of Gandhāran Abhidharma I enumerated earlier, and consider the following three:

1. Gandharan Abhidharma interpreted its lists of *dharma*s as exhaustive enumerations of all there is.

2. These *dharma*s, these elements of existence, can form aggregates, but these aggregates do not themselves exist; no wholes exist, only their ultimate parts.

3. These aggregates yet play roles in our daily lives and experience, but ultimately they owe their relative existence to words. There are no chariots beyond their ultimate parts, yet we believe there are on account of the word "chariot".

These features reappear in Vaiśeṣika, though the details are different.[14]

1. Like Abhidharma, Vaiśeṣika has an exhaustive enumeration of all there is. These are its well-known categories (of which there are six, or seven, or ten, depending on the sub-school concerned), and a large number of well specified subcategories.

Anga-Magadha, southward as far as Kosambī, westward as far as Thūṇā and northward as far as Kuṇālā. They may wander thus far, (for) thus far there are Āryan countries, but not beyond unless the Dhamma flourishes there" (tr. Bollée, 1998: xxiv). According to PPN I s.v. Thūṇā (Sthūṇā), this place is Thaneshwar, north-west of Mathurā.

13 See Bronkhorst, 2016: Appendix VIII.

14 For a different opinion, see Lysenko, 2011.

2. Vaiśeṣika, too, recognizes the importance of aggregates; but contrary to Gandhāran Abhidharma, it considers these aggregates as really existing. Chariots therefore exist, as do their parts.

3. In Vaiśeṣika, as in Gandhāran Abhidharma, words correspond to aggregates. But where these words ultimately did not correspond to anything real in Abhidharma, words correspond to reality in Vaiśeṣika. This is true to the extent that the existence of certain entities is concluded from the fact that there is a word for them.

Once again, it is not possible to enter into details.[15] It seems however clear that the Vaiśeṣika philosophy is indebted to Gandhāran Abhidharma, not just in some details, but in its very structure. It is further appropriate to recall that Vaiśeṣika ontology was taken over by the Nyāya school of thought, virtually wholesale. It was taken over in part by numerous other thinkers, and we can safely state that Vaiśeṣika ontology is the most important Brahmanical ontology of classical India. The fact that it was more or less a mirror image of Gandhāran Abhidharma ontology shows the historical importance of the latter.

5 Influence Elsewhere

It cannot be the purpose of this chapter to give a complete survey of the ways in which Gandhāran Abhidharma has influenced non-Buddhist traditions in India. Some of its notions, such as that of momentariness and that of the person as an aggregate, appear unexpectedly in texts such as the medical *Caraka Saṃhitā*.[16] Instances could no doubt be multiplied.

Here I will mention one more feature of Gandhāran Abhidharma that was enthusiastically taken over by certain Brahmanical thinkers. Recall that in this philosophy the world of our experience is ultimately unreal. This became a central element of Buddhist systematic philosophy, one that distinguished it for a long time from the Brahmanical systematic philosophies with which it coexisted.[17] This changed around the middle of the first millennium CE, when philosophies like Advaita Vedānta joined the inter-philosophical debate. One of its most important early thinkers was Śaṅkara, and it is not surprising that some of his contemporaries accused him of being a crypto-Buddhist:[18]

15 See Bronkhorst, 1992.

16 See Bronkhorst, 2002a.

17 Bronkhorst, 2012.

18 Bronkhorst, 2009: 187, with note 440.

Śaṅkara's philosophy had adopted the essentially Buddhist notion that the world of our experience is not ultimately real. There is no need to recall that Advaita Vedānta became in due time India's most popular philosophy, and Śaṅkara its most famous thinker.

There is one more case of Abhidharma influence that deserves to be mentioned. However, for reasons that will become clear, it makes most sense to deal with this case after a brief discussion of the origin of Gandhāran Abhidharma. That is therefore the topic to which I will turn now.

6 Whence Gandhāran Abhidharma?

It should be clear from what has been mentioned so far that Gandhāran Abhidharma has been extremely influential in the subsequent development of Indian thought. Not only did it to a large extent determine the shape of subsequent Buddhist philosophy in all of its forms. Non-Buddhist philosophies and other forms of Indian thought, too, were profoundly influenced by it. I think therefore that we can state without hesitation that Indian philosophy – or at any rate systematic, rational philosophy in South Asia – began in Greater Gandhāra.

How did this happen? Hard-headed philologists rarely ask this question. They often feel that it is difficult enough to extract from the texts what their authors thought, and that those same texts rarely, if ever, tell us *why* these authors thought the way they did. There are some exceptions. T.R.V. Murti – whose book *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (1960) was once widely admired, but whose influence seems to be beyond its peak – emphasized the importance of intellectual strife and the resolution of contradictions in the development of new ideas. According to him, "the Ābhidharmika schools [...] grew as the rejection of the *ātmavāda* of the Brāhmanical systems".[19] This cannot be right. To the best of our knowledge there were no, or few, Brahmins in Greater Gandhāra at that time.[20] Gandhāran Abhidharma cannot therefore have been based on a rejection of the Brahmanical *ātmavāda*.

I have elsewhere dealt with Murti's ideas in general, which I do not accept.[21] However, it does seem right to assume that revolutionary new ideas tend to arise in appropriate surroundings, especially in challenging intellectual surroundings. It does therefore make sense to ask, if there were no Brahmins in

19 Murti, 1960: 8.

20 Bronkhorst, 2011: 202–205; 2016: § 1.1.3.

21 Bronkhorst, 2006.

Greater Gandhāra at that time, who else may have been there to challenge the Buddhists into creating a vision of the world that was to inspire Indian thinkers, directly or indirectly, for the next two thousand years.

The answer to this question seems simple and straightforward. Gandhāra and most of what we call Greater Gandhāra (with the exception of Kashmir, see above) fell again in the hands of the Indo-Greeks around 185 BCE, at the time of the collapse of the Mauryan empire. At that time, and perhaps already before that time, the Buddhists of that part of the subcontinent had to deal with Hellenistic rulers. And we know that Hellenistic rulers had a tendency to surround themselves with philosophically cultivated sages, and that discussions of a philosophical nature had become part of Hellenistic tradition. It is hard to imagine that representatives of the clearly numerous Buddhists who inhabited those regions were not sometimes challenged to take part in such discussions. However, to take part in a sophisticated discussion, you better present, and represent, a coherent position yourself. Presumably the Buddhist scholiasts of Gandhāra realized this, and the result is that they created, for the first time in Buddhist history, a coherent philosophical ontology: Gandhāran Abhidharma was born.

I realize that these few words about the possible origin of Gandhāran Abhidharma do not but scratch the surface of an important and complex historical question. I have tried to do it more justice in some other publications,[22] and I remain aware that the question has not been fully explored even there. Others may take it up and, who knows, they may come to different conclusions. However, I do wish to emphasize that, if it is true that Indian systematic philosophy began in the north-western region we call Greater Gandhāra, reflections as to how this happened, and why, cannot be ignored.

After these summary reflections about the origin of Gandhāran Abhidharma, we are ready to address a theory recently launched by Christopher Beckwith in his book *Warriors of the Cloisters: The Central Asian Origins of Science in the Medieval World* (2012). Beckwith's theory concerns what he calls the *recursive argument method* that, he claims, came to be used in Indian philosophical texts, but not only there. The recursive argument method, according to Beckwith, ended up being used in medieval Europe which borrowed it from the Islamic world. The Islamic world itself, still according to Beckwith, took it from Buddhism in Central Asia. This recursive argument method supposedly played a crucial role in the development of European science. This is why the

22 Bronkhorst, 1999; 2001.

subtitle of Beckwith's book is *The Central Asian Origins of Science in the Medieval World*.[23]

Where did this recursive argument method ultimately come from? Beckwith writes the following about it (p. 56):

> The earliest text so far identified that uses a primitive version of the method, and indeed uses it throughout the text, is the Central Asian *Aṣṭagrantha* [or *Aṣṭaskandha*; Taishō 1543]. In this work, each topic argument is followed by a list of arguments about it – usually a rather long list – and then they are repeated and disputed, one by one, in order.[24] By contrast, the later *Jñānaprasthāna* [Taishō 1544] does not use the recursive argument method at all. It strictly follows the two-part Question: Answer format.
>
> The *Vibhāṣā*, a scholastic work of the Bactrian-Gandhāran branch of the Sarvāstivāda school dated possibly to the first century AD, during the Kushan Empire, contains the earliest known example of what eventually became the fully developed recursive argument method. The method apparently thus developed specifically within the Bactrian-Gandhāran branch of the Sarvāstivāda school, and was only later partially adopted by the Kashmiri Vaibhāṣika sect of Sarvāstivāda.
>
> Examples of the recursive argument do not occur in earlier Buddhist texts, earlier non-Buddhist Indian texts, or earlier texts connected to other branches of the Sarvāstivāda school.

23 Beckwith's theory does not only concern the recursive argument method, but also the development of medieval European colleges under the influence of Islamic *madrasa*s, which themselves presumably arose under the influence of Buddhist *vihāra*s. Beckwith claims, with a reference to Dutt, 1962: 62ff. and 211 ff., that "the plan of the *vihāra* is strikingly different from that of the *saṅghārāma*, the typical earlier, strictly Indian, Buddhist monastic design" and he adds that "[t]he *vihāra* design is […] a specifically Central Asian innovation developed under the Kushans and spread by them" (p. 41). These claims, and especially the second one, are not substantiated but cannot here be further examined; see however Schopen, 2004: 73–80; 2006.

24 Beckwith refers here to Willemen, Dessein & Cox, 1998: 223, where we read: "the two Chinese translations of the **Aṣṭaskandhaśāstra* (30 fascicles) and *Jñānaprasthāna* (20 fascicles) do differ in length, at least in part, as a result of a difference in format: the **Aṣṭaskandhaśāstra* lists the questions that will be addressed at the beginning of each section and then repeats the questions with each answer; the *Jñānaprasthāna* gives the questions only once prior to the answer."

This passage raises a number of questions, among them the following: Does Beckwith not overemphasize the role of Central Asia? Is the *Aṣṭagrantha* (or *Aṣṭaskandha*) really a Central Asian text?[25] And is the *Vibhāṣā* really a scholastic work of the Bactrian-Gandhāran branch of the Sarvāstivāda school?[26] At present we can leave these questions aside, and reformulate Beckwith's theory slightly, so that it now states that the *recursive argument method* originated in Abhidharma Buddhism. Put this way, Beckwith's claim is that the origins of science in the Medieval European world have to be looked for in Gandhāran Abhidharma.

What is this *recursive argument method*? Beckwith dedicates a chapter (Chapter Two) of his book to explaining and illustrating what he means by this. Here I will merely repeat his statement of its essence, which occurs on page 89 and reads:[27]

I. Argument (the Main Argument, Question, or Topic)
II. Subarguments$_1$ about the Argument
III. Subarguments$_2$ about the Subarguments$_1$ about the Argument

Suppose now, for argument's sake, that Beckwith is right in maintaining that examples of the recursive argument do not occur in earlier *texts*, whether

25 Beckwith refers to Willemen, but all Willemen says is, 2006: 6: "Kātyāyana's *Aṣṭagrantha* [...], *the main text of the Gandhārans*, [was] probably written in Gāndhārī and Kharoṣṭhī, in the late first century BCE. In the second century CE this text was rewritten in Sanskrit, and called *Jñānaprasthāna*." (my emphasis, JB). See also Willemen, 2012: 163–164: "The Sarvāstivāda 'orthodoxy' rewrote the old Gandharan *Aṣta-grantha* in Sanskrit, now called *Jñāna-prasthāna*. Because the old text had many *Vibhāṣā*s, commentaries, the new text needed a new commentary. This is the *Mahāvibhāṣā*."

26 On p. 59, Beckwith specifies that "[t]he earliest *vibhāṣā* preserved (in Chinese translation) [...] is the Central Asian work known as the *Vibhāṣā* [Taishō 1547]". And p. 62: "the Bactrian *Aṣṭagrantha* and *Vibhāṣā* are the models for the later *Jñānaprasthāna* and *Mahāvibhāṣā*." Contrast this with Cox's remark: "It is with the composition of the vibhāṣā compendia that the Sarvāstivāda school within Kaśmīra comes to be defined both doctrinally and textually." (Willemen, Dessein & Cox, 1998: 229). See also Willemen, 2006: 6–7: "The western [i.e. non-Kashmirian, JB] Sarvāstivādins, a very heterogeneous group, seem to have had more than one *Vibhāṣā* on the *Aṣṭagrantha*." Beckwith's concern with Central Asia finds expression in his earlier book *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (2009).

27 See also pp. 25–26: "The recursive argument is, minimally, an argument that is disputed by an argument that is disputed by an argument, or more simply (but in reverse order), an argument about an argument about an argument."

Buddhist or non-Buddhist, whether Asian or European. It will yet be hard to believe that this way of *arguing* was unknown before the *Aṣṭagrantha* and the *Vibhāṣā*. Is this stylistic expression not simply a literary reflection of oral disputations in which the different participants are given the occasion to present their arguments in full and to refute, point by point, those of their opponents? After all, the recursive argument "is at heart a way to examine a problem systematically, logically, and in great detail" (Beckwith, 2012: 25). And do such oral disputations – systematic, logical, and detailed – not constitute the background against which Gandhāran Abhidharma arose and could arise? If so, the literary feature to which Beckwith draws attention is no more and no less than the reflection of the real life situation that allowed Gandhāran Abhidharma – and not just the *Aṣṭagrantha* and the *Vibhāṣā* – to arise.[28]

Beckwith may not be right in thinking that recursive arguments do not appear in texts older than the *Aṣṭagrantha* and the *Vibhāṣā*. The *Mahābhāṣya* of Patañjali is such a text, and it appears to use the recursive argument method. Here is what specialists say about it. According to George Cardona (1976: 253), the *Mahābhāṣya* is composed "in the form of dialogues in which take part a student (*śiṣya*) who questions the purpose […] of rules and their formulations, an unaccomplished teacher (*ācāryadeśīya*) who suggests solutions which are not fully acceptable, and a teacher (*ācārya*) who states what is the finally acceptable view." Hartmut Scharfe (1977: 156) analyzes a passage from the *Mahābhāṣya* and concludes: "With great stylistic art Patañjali has created the impression of a freely progressing debate with new disputants butting in now and then in which all possibilities of an interpretation are scrutinized". This, one might think, is precisely what Beckwith finds in the *Aṣṭagrantha* and so many other texts.

28 Beckwith emphasizes the difference between structure and content, but believes that the former can influence the latter (2012: 35–36): "The overt, explicit, formal structure of the recursive argument is its most crucial factor. It is not quite true that 'the medium is the message' in recursive method books, but because they typically consist exclusively of lists of recursive arguments, each of which contains many contrasting views on the same problem, they clearly did encourage scepticism and speculation by the authors. In that respect, therefore, it is true that the form of the recursive argument did have a significant indirect impact on the content of works written according to it. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the specific overt structure, per se, of a recursive argument is not directly or even implicitly connected, structurally or semantically, to its specific overt content or to the implicit logical structure of the internal content. In other words, in a recursive argument method, the *way* it is said has essentially nothing to do with *what* is said. It does, however, have a great deal to do with the general way the content is approached and understood […]."

Recall now that the *Mahābhāṣya* underwent the influence of Abhidharma Buddhism. Since it is older than the *Aṣṭagrantha* and the *Vibhāṣā*, it cannot have undergone the direct influence of these texts. However, it may have undergone the influence of earlier Buddhist Abhidharma texts that displayed this style, or perhaps not the influence of any particular text but rather the influence of the specific way of discussing that was the background of Gandhāran Abhidharma. In this way the *Mahābhāṣya* may add an interesting dimension to Beckwith's theory.

We have come to the end of this chapter. We have briefly touched upon many details related to the history of Gandhāran Abhidharma. Each of these may merit further discussion and critical assessment. But there is one conclusion that in my opinion cannot be seriously doubted: the historical importance of Gandhāran Abhidharma is beyond dispute. Anyone interested in the intellectual history of South Asia – and perhaps in the intellectual history of Eurasia in general – will have to pay serious attention to this system of thought, both in its origin and in its development, because of the tremendous influence it has exerted over the centuries.

Abbreviation

PPN *Āgamic Index, vol. I: Prakrit Proper Names* (ed. Malvania, 1970–1972)

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