

Johannes Bronkhorst: Review of

Alexander von Rospatt: *The Buddhist Doctrine of Momentariness. A Survey of the Origins and Early Phase of this Doctrine up to Vasubandhu*. Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart, 1995. (Alt- und Neu-Indische Studien, 47.) 285 pp.  
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Several publications have been dedicated to the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness in recent years, all of them dealing with its later phases. The origins and early history of this doctrine has been largely neglected, the most important earlier studies being some articles by Louis de la Vallée Poussin, written more than half a century ago. The present book is therefore a most welcome addition to the scholarly literature, filling a major gap in Buddhist studies. Its author, Alexander von Rospatt (henceforth AvR), obviously aware of the neglect which this particular topic has suffered, has made an appreciable effort to rectify the situation. His book discusses an impressive array of passages from early Buddhist literature, covering most notably Abhidharma and early Yogācāra. Many important passages are identified and discussed; they are translated, usually in the footnotes, from the Sanskrit, Pāli, Chinese or Tibetan, thus providing future research with a rich collection of material. Given the enormous dimensions of the literature dealt with, it is but natural that the author observes on several occasions that further research may have to be carried out in order to settle this or that point. All in all, however, with this book research into the origin and early history of Buddhist momentariness is catapulted, after what seemed to be a still-birth, into adulthood.

The main portion of the book is divided into two parts. The first of these discusses the early phase as we know it through the texts. The earliest clear references to the doctrine of momentariness appear to occur in the (Mahā-)Vibhāṣā of the Sarvāstivāda tradition, where this doctrine seems to be taken for granted. Other texts of the same tradition pay little attention to it. A study of the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* leads AvR to the conclusion that these did not, originally, presuppose the doctrine of momentariness. This doctrine appears however regularly in texts of the early Yogācāra school.

Part two considers a number of possibilities concerning the possible origins of the doctrine of momentariness. No final solution is offered here, but AvR considers it likely that the doctrine is primarily based on the analysis of change. Other possibilities are explored, such as "the deduction of momentariness from the momentariness of the mind", "the deduction of momentariness from destruction", "the experience of

momentariness". They are dealt with in separate chapters which carry those names. However, the conclusion of the book is embodied in the "contention that the doctrine of momentariness is primarily based on the analysis of change in terms of substitution and on the conviction that things are always changing" (p. 217).

An appendix provides an annotated translation of the analysis of *anityatā* and of the proof of momentariness in the fourth chapter of the Hsien-yang, an early Yogācāra text. This translation, AvR notes in his introduction, "may serve as a convenient summary of, or — in case of the reader who decides to skip over this or that chapter of the present study — introduction to, the treatment of the doctrine of momentariness in the early Yogācāra school". A detailed bibliography and a number of indexes complete the volume.

The observation that this book contains a large collection of relevant passages from the early texts bears repetition. These passages, always translated, are very carefully discussed, and evidence is weighed with the greatest possible circumspection. In spite of this, one key aspect may not have received the attention it deserves. This is the intellectual context in which this doctrine appears to have arisen.

This intellectual context may be described with the term '*dharma*-theory'. It is precisely in the Sarvāstivāda tradition, the very same tradition in which we find the earliest testimony for the doctrine of momentariness, that the *dharma*-theory has been given a new impetus (see below). It is also in texts of this school — for the first time perhaps in Dharmaśreṣṭhin's Abhidharmahṛdaya — that the idea of material atoms makes its explicit appearance. Both the *dharma*-theory and the idea of material atoms give expression to the fundamental tendency to analyse things right down to their final constituents. The ultimate constituents, moreover, are all that really exists; composite objects are nothing but names. This idea may find its clearest, but perhaps not even earliest, expression in the oldest parts of the Milindapañha, it also shows up in Sarvāstivāda texts like the (Mahā-)Vibhāṣā. Wouldn't it seem reasonable to link these two developments in Sarvāstivāda, the search for ultimate constituents on the one hand, and the preoccupation with moments — the "ultimate constituents" of time — on the other? AvR rejects this possibility implicitly already at the beginning of his introduction, where he claims that spatial atomism is "independent from this doctrine of momentariness"; he gives no arguments to support this position. Atoms are not mentioned again in his book, except in connection with the idea that one moment is the time required for an atom to leave one point and reach the next one (p. 97 n. 215, p. 103 f.); AvR thinks that this idea has been borrowed from Jainism. The link between momentariness and the *dharma*-theory is not explored either. The parallelism between

the two yet suggests that the doctrine of momentariness, like the developed *dharma*-theory, might be a product of (Sarvāstivāda) Abhidharma.

AvR has a different idea. His impression is rather that the notion of momentariness originated outside the mainstream Abhidharma tradition (p. 27, with n. 42). He bases this impression on the fact that the notion is not referred to in texts which may be younger than the (Mahā-)Vibhāṣā, which does refer to it. Momentariness is not referred to in the Abhidharmāmṛtarasa of Ghoṣaka and in the Abhidharmasāra (= -hr̥daya) by Dharmasrī (= Dharmasreṣṭhin). Moreover, "[in] other post-canonical Abhidharma texts of the Sarvāstivāda tradition ... the doctrine of momentariness hardly features at all, though there can be little doubt that it was known and not rejected. In the \*Saṃyuktābhidharmahr̥daya[śāstra](?) ... ascribed to Dharmatrāta and in the Abhidharmāvatāraśāstra by Skandhila, for instance, the doctrine of momentariness, though presupposed in at least one passage in each text, seems to be ignored for the most part. This is particularly stunning in the case of Skandhila who is contemporaneous with Vasubandhu and Saṃghabhadra ... and hence must have been acquainted with the debates on momentariness as they are recorded in the [Abhidharmakośa] and in the [\*Nyāyānusāra]."

AvR offers the 'assumption' that among the Sarvāstivādins the doctrine of momentariness first gained ground in a milieu that is closely connected to the tradition recorded in the (Mahā-)Vibhāṣā, but far removed from the commentary tradition associated with Dharmasrī and Ghoṣaka. Alternatively, he considers the possibility (less favoured by him) that all passages testifying to the notion of momentariness in the (Mahā-)Vibhāṣā were only added after its compilation in (probably) the second century C.E.

There is of course a much simpler solution, which has, however, some serious consequences. It is at least conceivable that the authors of all the texts mentioned above accepted the doctrine of momentariness more or less as a matter of course, but did not write about it, perhaps because momentariness did not directly affect their discussion. This doctrine may very well have been basic knowledge in the Sarvāstivāda tradition, which needed, at least within the tradition itself, no further proof. This is the impression the later texts create, and I see no reason not to accept the same for the earlier ones.

The consequence of this solution is, of course, that the non-mention of this doctrine in texts older than the (Mahā-)Vibhāṣā does not, by itself, justify us to conclude that the doctrine was not yet accepted by their authors. Be it noted that AvR is careful not to draw such a conclusion, pointing out that "it cannot be excluded completely that the momentariness of all conditioned entities is presupposed in some ... portions of the [Jñānaprasthāna] or even in one of the other (exclusively earlier) canonical Abhidharma

works of the Sarvāstivādins". It must here be added that, in view of the above, the momentariness of all conditioned entities cannot be totally excluded, even if these texts do not contain portions which demonstrably presuppose it. This, of course, makes the search for the origin of this doctrine particularly difficult.

Here, however, we have to consider the question how new ideas become generally accepted. How do we have to imagine that the notion of momentariness of all conditioned entities spread, supposing that indeed someone hit upon this idea on the basis of the analysis of change in terms of substitution and of the conviction that things are always changing. If this was a new idea, it must somehow have been propagated, and subsequently accepted by the school. AvR discussions create the impression that this idea spread almost surreptitiously, first perhaps among the Sarvāstivādins, and then also among other Buddhists. It is not, of course, possible to prove that this did not happen in this way. For a doctrine of such fundamental importance, and which shows such fundamental similarities with the equally important *dharma*-theory, such a development seems to me however highly unlikely.

If we consider the possibility, not really envisaged by AvR, that the doctrine of momentariness was established school-doctrine at the time of the (Mahā-)Vibhāṣā, the question presents itself when this might have started? Seen in this way, one answer recommends itself strongly. It is known that the tradition preceding classical Sarvāstivāda has undergone at least one major overhaul. It is the introduction of the Pañcavastuka, a completely new categorisation of *dharmas*, accompanied by the insertion — or perhaps: redefinition — of a number of *dharmas*. It is true that subsequent authors tend to return to the older Pañcaskandhaka, but without completely rejecting the Pañcavastuka and the innovations it entailed. Is it conceivable that the introduction of the Pañcavastuka included the introduction of the doctrine of momentariness of all conditioned entities?

Among the new *dharmas* introduced in connection with the Pañcavastuka we find the three or four *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* "marks of conditioned [entities]". AvR dedicates a chapter to these marks, in which he also pays attention to their occurrence in the early Sarvāstivāda texts. We find here the following passage (p. 46):

[The doctrine of the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* as postulated by the Sarvāstivādins] is ... already to be found in the Abhidharmasāra by Dharmaśrī ... and reproduced among others in the Abhidharmāmṛtarasāśāstra by Ghoṣaka ... In this classic form there is no trace of the conception that the conditioned entities are momentary. By contrast, the very fact that they are said to endure and to undergo change presupposes that they exist for a stretch of time. Moreover, the terminology chosen by the Sarvāstivādins (viz. birth [*jāti*] for origination and

age [*jarā*] for change) leaves no doubt that the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* originally referred to the entire span of one existence. This is confirmed by the definition in the Pañcavastuka that "birth causes the origination of the *skandhas*" (i.e. the groups of factors constituting a sentient being) and that "age causes the transformation (lit. maturation) of the *skandhas*" ... That the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* were originally correlated to existence over a span of time follows, furthermore, from the fact that the [Mahāvibhāṣā] not only treats the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* in terms of momentariness but also in terms of extended existence, though with the qualification that the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* in this context are only conceptually given and not to be identified with the causally efficient *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* which qualify momentary conditioned entities ...

This is a key passage in that it tries to prove that there is no link between the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* as conceived in the original Pañcavastuka and the doctrine of momentariness. The passage deserves therefore detailed attention. I do not think that its arguments are conclusive.

Take first the remark to the extent that in the doctrine of the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* as found in the Abhidharmasāra and in the Abhidharmāmṛtarasaśāstra there is no trace of the conception that the conditioned entities are momentary. This is hardly surprising. These are two of the texts mentioned earlier which do not mention momentariness even though it must be assumed — esp. in the case of the second of the two — that they accepted this doctrine. And even if they contain no trace of the conception that the conditioned entities concerned are momentary, they contain no trace either, so far as I am aware, that the conditioned entities have an extended existence.

In connection with the remark "the very fact that [the conditioned entities] are said to endure and to undergo change presupposes that they exist for a stretch of time", AvR cites, in a footnote, the following explication from the Abhidharmasāra, which according to him clearly documents that remark: "All conditioned entities have four marks, [namely] origination, duration, transformation and destruction. Because it arises in the world (?): origination; because having arisen its essence is established: duration; because having endured it decays: change; because having been transformed it perishes: destruction." This explication certainly suggests that the four *dharma*s did not exist simultaneously, but this does not necessarily imply that the conditioned entities exist for a stretch of time. Consider, to begin with, that many Buddhists, among them some whose opinions are recorded in the (Mahā-)Vibhāṣā, looked upon a moment as having a fixed duration of time. This is shown by AvR in his chapter I.E called "The various definitions and usages of the term *kṣaṇa* in Buddhist sources". It is easily imaginable

that an entity comes into existence at one moment, exists the next moment, and disappears at the third one. Seen this way, origination, duration and destruction are not simultaneous, yet one could reasonably maintain that the entity concerned is momentary. The fact that the Sarvāstivādins recognize four, rather than three, marks, does not seriously affect this, for duration (*sthiti*) and age (*jarā*) do not necessarily have to be assigned different moments. Alternatively, the position may have been more or less similar to a certain position found in more recent texts. The Sarvāstivādins in the (Mahā-)Vibhāṣā and later give duration an exceptional position in maintaining that duration — unlike the other marks — "does not effect a change of the temporal localization of the qualified entity" (p. 42 n. 79).

AvR also draws attention to the position defended in the (Mahā-)Vibhāṣā, according to which the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas*, though simultaneous, are not causally active at the same time (p. 50): "The mark of origination, so the line of reasoning, discharges its function when the qualified entity arises, whereas the marks of transformation and destruction — the mark of duration is not envisaged because the discussion refers to the Trilakṣaṇasūtra where this mark does not feature — operate simultaneously at the time when the entity concerned undergoes destruction. Thus it was ensured that the marks of origination and destruction do not function at the same time and, to accommodate the doctrine of momentariness, that the qualified entity does not exist at any other time but that of its origination and destruction. This still invited the charge that the qualified entity is all the same no longer momentary as it thus exists at two necessarily distinct points of time. In order to preclude this, the moment was defined as the time taken by the completion of origination and destruction." If such a position was still possible at the time of the (Mahā-)Vibhāṣā, something more or less similar — i.e., successive activity, or even successive existence in spite of momentariness — is certainly conceivable for a period long before it.

It seems particularly hazardous to draw conclusions from the terminology used. AvR maintains in the above passage that terms like 'birth' (*jāti*) for origination and 'age' (*jarā*) for change "leave no doubt that the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* originally referred to the entire span of one existence". This is plausible enough as long as one discusses the real original use of these terms in the Buddhist tradition. But one cannot seriously maintain that these terms were used for the first time in the context of the Pañcavastuka. Terms sanctified by tradition were maintained, but this does not guarantee that their original meaning was preserved. This does not necessarily imply that the original meaning was no longer known. When, therefore, AvR claims that "the fact that the [(Mahā-)Vibhāṣā] not only treats the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* in terms of momentariness but also in terms of extended existence, though with the qualification that the

*saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* in this context are only conceptually given and not to be identified with the causally efficient *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* which qualify momentary conditioned entities" shows "that the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* were originally correlated to existence over a span of time", he seems to overlook this simple fact.

The circumstance, finally, of "the definition in the Pañcavastuka that 'birth causes the origination of the *skandhas*' (i.e. the groups of factors constituting a sentient being) and that 'age causes the transformation (lit. maturation) of the *skandhas*'" cannot really be taken to confirm that the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* originally referred to the entire span of one existence. In a context where the reality of composite objects is doubted, or even rejected, the origination of the *skandhas* is the origination of the *dharmas*, and the transformation of the *skandhas* is the transformation of the *dharmas*. There is no need, as far as I can see, to take these expressions to mean that the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* cause the origination and transformation etc. of sentient beings.

AvR subsequently gives some further reasons to justify his position. I believe that these further reasons are not only non-decisive, but that they actually weaken his position. I will therefore, once again, cite the passage *in extenso*, emphasizing a few words which seem to me particularly important (p. 46-48):

In order to demonstrate that the doctrine of the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* is not intrinsically connected with the doctrine of momentariness, reference may also be made to the Vātsīputrīyas-Saṃmatīyas, who did not follow the Sarvāstivādins in their acceptance of the momentariness of all conditioned entities, but shared with them the doctrine that the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* are causally efficient factors which determine the existence of the entity they are correlated with, and which in turn are qualified by secondary marks. As in the case of the Sarvāstivādins, the number of entities tied by the Vātsīputrīyas-Saṃmatīyas to mental entities was not limited to those forces governing the course of the entity's existence, but included also a number of factors which determine the entity's quality. Thus they taught according to a commentarial tradition on [Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā] VII,4 that *dharmas* — this precludes material entities — are accompanied by seven entities, namely by origination, duration, age and impermanence, as well as by an entity "possession" (*samanvāgama*) correlating the qualified entity with a particular *santāna*, and by two further entities that determine its spiritual status ... . In accordance with the Sarvāstivāda doctrine, these seven accompanying entities are qualified by a set of further seven entities, so that always fifteen entities arise at a time, viz. the principle [sic] entity and seven primary and seven secondary accompanying entities.

In order to demonstrate that the doctrine of the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* is not intrinsically connected with the doctrine of momentariness, it would have been interesting to present a clear case where the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* are applied to non-momentary entities. The Vātsīputrīyas-Saṃmatīyas could in principle provide such an instance, for they do not accept the momentariness of material entities. Unfortunately for the demonstration, material entities are excluded from the range of entities accompanied by the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas*. This means that *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* accompany, even with the Vātsīputrīyas-Saṃmatīyas, only momentary entities. AvR confirms this in a note (p. 47 n. 94), where he invokes the commentator Avalokitavrata: "Avalokitavrata explains in his sub-commentary ... that the princip[al] entity occurs together with its primary and secondary marks in one moment [AvR's emphasis], which confirms, given the Vātsīputrīyas-Saṃmatīyas' opposition to the all-encompassing doctrine of momentariness, that material entities are not in view in the passage under consideration."

In view of all this it seems impossible to share AvR's confidence that the doctrine of momentariness is more recent than the three or four *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* of the (Sarvāstivāda) Pañcavastuka. This does not, of course, prove the opposite: that the doctrine of momentariness is as old as the *saṃskṛtalakṣaṇas* of the Pañcavastuka. I yet believe that this is a proposition that has much to recommend itself. It seems in any case unnatural to separate the question of momentariness from the *dharm*a-theory, with its pronounced preference for constituents as against composites.

One would have liked to see the parallelism between the doctrine of momentariness and the *dharm*a-theory taken into consideration elsewhere, too. As is well-known, the *dharmas*, the elements of existence of the Abhidharma schools, came to be looked upon as ultimately non-existent, especially in Mahāyāna. It is also in early Mahāyāna texts, as documented by AvR (p. 79 f.), that moments lose whatever duration they had. Indeed, at least one text "equates the denial of the duration of conditioned entities with the denial of their existence" (p. 80). Momentariness and *dharm*anairātmya amount here apparently to much the same.

A particularly interesting development takes place with Vasubandhu, who advances an argument "proving that destruction cannot by any kind of cause whatsoever be caused. He maintains that destruction cannot be caused, because it is mere non-existence and as such does not qualify as an effect." (p. 187) The consequence is, of course, that the entity is destroyed as soon as it comes into being, so that nothing exists for any duration whatsoever. Here one is reminded of the argument in the Viṃśatikā of

(the same?) Vasubandhu proving the impossibility of atoms of finite size. Is the parallelism due to coincidence, or does it reflect two sides of the same coin?

There is no reason to disagree with AvR's conclusion to the extent that it is likely that the doctrine of momentariness is primarily based on the analysis of change. Yet this analysis of change took place in a context in which also other forms of analysis took place, primarily into *dharmas*. This circumstance does not receive, as it seems to me, sufficient attention in this book. This is to be regretted, because in most other respects this is likely to remain the most thorough and complete investigation of the origins and early history of the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness for some time to come.