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*Traces of ālāya-vijñāna in the Pāli Canon***

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## Traces of *ālāya-vijñāna* in the Pāli Canon

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In the history of Buddhist thought, Buddhism went through a stage of successive development. We may say that Yogācāra's concept of *ālāyavijñāna* belongs to one of such doctrinal developments in the last phase of Indian Buddhism. Each school paved the way for the next school to arise either directly or indirectly. The dependency relied on the fact that some of the most fundamental doctrines of Buddhism had remained intact with only further interpretation and development. The change was necessarily felt as it had to fit to the needs of that particular geography, culture, language and even individuals. That fact does not surprise any serious readers of Buddhism, as Buddha made it pretty clear that his teachings could be further cleared, interpreted, and if necessary do minor changes especially with regard to the minor rules or even terminologies, but as long as it doesn't violate the fundamental teachings. The whole development of Buddhist philosophy is the result of a continuous discussion on certain Buddhist concepts needed to be further drawn out. The concept of "*ālāyavijñāna*" was one such topic of heated discussion.

In the *Yogacara*<sup>1</sup> School of Buddhism, *ālāyavijñāna* is one of the most important doctrines developed by Asanga<sup>2</sup>. He divides the *vijñanaskandha* (Aggregate of Consciousness) the fifth of the five *skandhas*, into three different aspects or layers, namely, *citta*, *manas* and *vijñāna*. In the Theravada *Tipitaka* as well as in the Pāli Commentaries, these three terms - *citta*, *manas*, *vijñāna* - are considered as synonyms

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the term '*Vijñānavada*' is also used synonymously.

<sup>2</sup> Around the 4th century C.E.

denoting the same thing. The Sarvāstivāda<sup>3</sup> also takes them as synonyms. Even the *Lankāvatārasūtra*, which is purely a Mahāyāna text, calls them synonyms although their separate functions are mentioned elsewhere in the same *sūtra*. Vasubandhu, too, in his *Vimsatikavijñapti-matratasiddhi* considers them as synonyms. Since any one of these three terms - *citta*, *manas*, *viññāna*- represents some aspect, even though not all aspects, of the fifth Aggregate *viññānaskandha*, they may roughly be considered as synonyms.

However, for Asanga, *citta*, *manas* and *viññāna* are three different and distinct aspects of the *viññānaskandha*. He defines this Aggregate as follows:

'What is the definition of the Aggregate of Consciousness (*viññānaskandha*)? It is mind (*citta*), mental organ (*manas*) and also consciousness (*viññāna*).

"And there what is mind (*citta*)? It is *ālāyaviññāna* (Store-Consciousness) containing all seeds (*sarvabijaka*), impregnated with the traces (impressions) (*vasanāparibhāvita*) of Aggregates (*skandha*), Elements (*dhatu*) and Spheres (*āyatana*) . . .

'What is mental organ (*manas*)? It is the object of *ālāyaviññāna* always having the nature of self-notion (self-conceit) (*manyanatmaka*) associated with four defilements, viz. the false idea of self (*atmadṛṣṭi*), self-love (*atmasneha*), the conceit of 'I am' (*asmimāna*) and ignorance (*avidyā*) ...

'What is consciousness (*viññāna*)? It consists of the six groups of consciousness (*sadviññānakayah*), viz. visual consciousness (*cakṣurviññāna*), auditory (*śrotra*), olfactory (*ghraṇa*), gustatory (*jihva*), tactile (*kāya*), and mental consciousness (*manovijñāna*)

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<sup>3</sup> Sarvastivada was the most powerful school in the north-east of India and contributed greatly to the development of *ālāyaviññāna* along with Sautrantika School.

Thus we can see that *viññana* represents the simple reaction or response of the sense-organs when they come in contact with external objects. This is the uppermost or superficial aspect or layer of the *viññanaskandha*. *Manas* represents the aspect of its mental functioning, thinking, reasoning, conceiving ideas, etc. *Citta*, which is here called *alayaviññana*, represents the deepest, finest and subtlest aspect or layer of the Aggregate of Consciousness. It contains all the traces or impressions of the past actions and all good and bad future potentialities. The *Sandhinirmocana-sutra* also says that *alayaviññana* is called *citta* (Tibetan *sems*).

It is generally believed that *ālāyaviññana* is purely a Mahayana doctrine and that nothing about it is found in Hinayana. But in the *Mahayanasangraha* Asanga himself says that in the Sravakayana (= Hinayana) it is mentioned by synonyms (*paryaya*) and refers to a passage in the *Ekottaragama* which reads: 'People (*praja*) like the *alaya* (*alayarata*), are fond of the *alaya* (*alayarama*), are delighted in the *alaya* (*alayasammudita*), are attached to the *alaya* (*alayabhirata*). When the Dharma is preached for the destruction of the *alaya*, they wish to listen (*susrusanti*) and lend their ears (*srotram avadadhanti*), they put forth a will for the perfect knowledge (*ajnacittam upasthapayanti*) and follow the path of Truth (*dharmanudharma-pratipanna*). When the Tathagata appears in the world (*pradurbhava*), this marvellous (*ascarya*) and extraordinary (*adbhuta*) Dharma appears in the world.'

Lamotte identifies this *Ekottaragama* passage with the following passage in the Pali *Anguttaranikaya*<sup>4</sup>: *Alayarama bhikkhave paja alayarata alayasammudita, sa Tathagatena analaye dhamme desiyamane sussuyati sotam odahati annacittam*

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<sup>4</sup> A II, p.131

*upattapeti. Tathagatassa bhikkhave arahato sammāsambuddhassa patubhava ayam pathamo acchāriyo abbhūto dhammo patubhavati.*

Besides this Anguttara passage, the term *alaya* in the same sense is found in several other places of the Pali Canon. The Pali Commentaries explain this term as ‘attachment to the five sense-pleasures’, and do not go deeper than that. But this also is an aspect of the *ālāyavijñāna*.

In the *Lankāvatārasūtra* the term *tathagatagarbha* is used as a synonym for *ālāyavijñāna* and is described as ‘luminous by nature’ (*prakṛtiprabhasvara*) and ‘pure by nature’ (*prakṛtiparisuddha*) but appearing as impure ‘because it is sullied by adventitious defilements’ (*agantuklesopaklistataya*). In the *Anguttaranikāya*, *citta* is described as ‘luminous’ (*pabhassara*), but it is ‘sullied by adventitious minor defilements’ (*agantukehi upakkilesehi upakkilittam*). One may notice here that *ālāyavijñāna* (or *tathagatagarbha*) and *citta* are described almost by the same terms. We have seen earlier that the *Sandhi-nirmocana-sūtra* says that *ālāyavijñāna* is also called *citta*. Asaṅga too mentions that it is named *citta*.

It is this *ālāyavijñāna* or *citta* that is considered by men as their ‘Soul’, ‘Self’, ‘Ego’ or ‘Atman’. It should be remembered as a concrete example, that Sati, one of the Buddha’s disciples, took *viññāna* (*vijñāna*) in this sense and that the Buddha reprimanded him for this wrong view.

The attainment of Nirvana is achieved by ‘the revolution of *ālāyavijñāna*’ which is called *asrayaparavrtt*<sup>5</sup>*i*. The same idea is conveyed by the expression *alayasamugghata* ‘uprooting of *alaya*’, which is used in the Pali Canon as a synonym for Nirvana. Here it should be remembered, too, that *analaya* ‘no-*alaya*’ is another synonym for Nirvana.

The *alayavijñanaparavrtti* is sometimes called *bijaparavrtti* ‘revolution of the seeds’ as well. *Bija* here signifies the ‘seeds’ of defilements (*samklesikadharmabija*) which cause the continuity of *samsara*. By the ‘revolution of these seeds’ one attains Nirvana. Again the Pali term *khinabija*, which is used to denote an *arahant* whose seeds of defilements are destroyed, expresses the same idea.

Thus one may see that although the concept of “*alayavijñana*’ was not as developed as in the later Mahayana Schools, the original idea of *alayavijñana* had already existed in the Pāli Canon of the Theravada. The popular assumption, that it was purely a creation of the Yogācārin Mahayanist masters, cannot properly be supported in the light of historical its development. The emphasis on the mind has been never been a new thing to Buddhist thought. It ever existed since its dawn. So in pragmatic Buddhist terms, it could be well argued here that it has gone through a period of continuous development.

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<sup>5</sup> D.T. Suzuki translates it as “revolution” to emphasize its ruthless transformative nature.

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