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**Vijñaptimātravijñaptimātratāvibhāga:**
Translating *Vijñaptimātra* and *Vijñaptimātratā* in the Philosophy of Vasubandhu

Roberto Pinheiro Machado

This essay springs from a discussion that was carried out recently in a seminar on Buddhist philosophy. During a panel on Yogācāra, I was met with considerable skepticism from my colleagues when I argued that Vasubandhu employed the terms “vijñaptimātra” and “vijñaptimātratā” with very different meanings. My point was that Vasubandhu used the first in reference to what early Buddhist doctrine called “conventional reality,” and the second as a description of what the doctrine termed “ultimate reality.” Given the skeptical response, I decided to analyze a number of scholarly texts that mentioned the two concepts, and I noticed that although the difference that I was pointing out seemed obvious to me, it had in fact been largely overlooked by scholarship. Above all, I realized that most English translations do not render the distinction with sufficient clarity.

In what follows I will thus approach the issue of translation and discuss the available English renderings of Vasubandhu’s texts where the two concepts appear. I believe that the difference between *vijñaptimātra* from *vijñaptimātratā* is fundamental to the correct apprehension of the soteriological principles that underlie Vasubandhu’s philosophy. The translations’ shortcomings create the sort of difficulties that lead readers to overlook the main function of the two concepts in the philosopher’s system.

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My analysis will proceed through the following steps:

Firstly, I will point to the difficulties that arrive through the English translations of Vasubandhu by presenting the background in which the two concepts are developed, setting them in the context of the notion of “vijñapti,” as well as in that of the trisvabhāva theory (as it appears in the Samdhinirmocana Sūtra, the works of Asaṅga, and is discussed by Willis, Keenan, and Yamada). With such background in mind, I will work comparatively through eight translations of Vasubandhu and Asaṅga where the concepts are rendered primarily in an undifferentiated manner. Secondly, I will proceed to a close reading of Vasubandhu’s Vīṃśatikā, Vīṃśatikāvṛtti, and Trimśikā in the original Sanskrit, pointing to the nuances in his employment of the two concepts. In this vein, an analysis of the five instances where the two concepts appear in the Vīṃśatikā and Vīṃśatikāvṛtti will be approached in reference to the discussion of the role played by the suffix “tā” in the Sanskrit language (a discussion started in the Buddhist scholarly context by Takeuchi).

Thirdly, I will further develop my thesis by means of an inferential analysis where the usages of the two concepts will be seen in reference to the soteriological project that underlies Vasubandhu’s philosophy. At this point I will refer to passages from selected sūtras that are relevant to the Yogācāra tradition in which the philosopher is inscribed, and which will corroborate with the demonstration of the distinct connotations of the two terms in question.

Finally, I will propose an alternative translation to the term “vijñāptimātratā” that will differentiate it more clearly from “vijñāptimātra.”

Before we begin our inquiry, it is important to bear in mind that in the past decades Buddhist scholars have recurrently emphasized the need of more and better translations of original Sanskrit Buddhist texts (in this vein, Janice Willis and Bruce Cameron Hall present two instances where such necessity is discussed at considerable length). This essay follows such an emphasis in an attempt to stress, and hopefully help clarify, some of the difficulties involved in the task of rendering Buddhist philosophical ideas in English in a way that does not remove their soteriological implications from our sight.
1. Background on *vijñapti* in relation with the *trisvabhāva* theory and comparison of English translations

1.1 The two truths and the three *svabhāvas*

In order to observe how *vijñaptimātra* and *vijñaptimātratā* operate in relation to conventional and ultimate reality (*samvṛti sat* and *paramārtha sat*, respectively), we need first have a clear understanding of the role played by the doctrine of two truths as it underlies nearly the entirety of Vasubandhu’s system of thought. The necessity for clarifying such a role springs from the fact that instead of drawing directly on early Buddhist scripture and, in doing so, immediately embracing its twofold division of reality, the philosopher adopts the new doctrine of *trisvabhāva*, a tripartite classification of the nature of phenomena that was first formulated by Asaṅga (following, primarily, the Mahāyāna *Samdhinirmocana* and *Lankāvatāra* sūtras). As Willis points out-

> For Asaṅga, the two-truths theory was insufficient. He therefore devised a schema which states that all phenomena have three natures: (1) a mentally constructed and therefore imaginary (*parikalpita*) nature; (2) a dependent, or relative (*paratantra*) nature; and (3) a perfected or absolute (*parinिस्पन्नa*) nature. (Willis 1979: 18).

Such a tripartite classification was adopted and further developed by Vasubandhu, who, as I argue below, added to it the dimension of non-being (*abhāva*). By asserting the presence of non-being together with that of being, Vasubandhu established the ground for the equation of being and non-being in ultimate reality and with it supplied a new support to the primary goal of the *trisvabhāva* theory as established by Asaṅga, that is, that of clarifying the Mahāyāna doctrine of śūnyatā and providing, in Willis’ words, “an insulation against nihilism.” (Willis 1979: 18).

Be that as it may, what interests us here is to observe that the *trisvabhāva* theory, while in fact intended to further develop and extend the older Buddhist doctrine of two truths, was never meant to deny it. And it is in this sense that, as we will see, the

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1 Yamada (1997: 167) suggests that Vasubandhu would have developed his *trisvabhāva* theory from the argument appearing in the *Madhvāntavibhāga* of Maitreya. As the five books of Maitreya have been commonly ascribed to Asaṅga himself, for the purpose of this paper I will consider Vasubandhu’s theory as a further development of the Asaṅga’s.
The older division of reality into samvrti and paramärtha sat still holds validity both in the trisvabhāva theory, as well as in the whole of Vasubandhu’s system. The point to be kept in mind here is that the purpose for the adoption of a new category of phenomena was primarily that of finding a middle ground that would account for the conversion from the first form of reality to the second. Such a middle category is, following Asaṅga’s abovementioned formulation, the paratantra-svabhāva or “dependent nature.”

In order to further clarify the meaning of paratantra-svabhāva in Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, we must look at the source of the trisvabhāva theory in the Samdhinirmocana Sūtra. It is in its sixth chapter that we find the tripartite analysis of being appearing in its most basic formulation. As the Buddha pronounces the following speech to the Bodhisattva Guṇākara, the notion of the paratantra-svabhāva is expounded as that which adheres to phenomena that, by arising under the rubric of co-dependent origination (pratītya-samutpāda), are ultimately empty of self-nature:

Guṇākara, in dependence upon names that are connected with signs, the imputational [parikalpita-svabhāva] character is known. In dependence upon strongly adhering to the other-dependent character as being the imputational character, the other-dependent character [paratantra-svabhāva] is known. In dependence upon absence of strong adherence to the other-dependent character as being the imputational character, the thoroughly established character [pariniśpanna-svabhāva] is known. (Powers 1995: 87)

As that which adheres to the constructed nature of phenomena, the paratantra-svabhāva stands as a middle category where ignorance abides and suffering originates. The equation that expresses the relation among ignorance, suffering, and co-dependent origination appears in the sūtra as follows:

Guṇākara, what is the other-dependent character of phenomena? It is simply the dependent origination of phenomena. It is like this: Because this exists, that arises; because this is produced, that is produced. It ranges from: “Due to the condition of ignorance, compositional factors [arise],” up to: “In this way, the whole great assemblage of suffering arises.” (Powers 1995: 83).
We thus understand that, in opposition to both parikalpita-svabhāva, the category of the being of objects (vastu or grāhya) that exist only by means of (illusory) thought-construction (vikalpa), and to parinispanna-svabhāva, the one where reality is perfected and free of thought construction, paratantra-svabhāva stands as the category of the subject (grāhaka), which, following the traditional Buddhist doctrine of anātman, is in fact ultimately non-existent, that is, is itself a mind construct. From this we can assume that when the sūtra claims that the paratantra-svabhāva is made known by the adherence of “the other dependent character as being the imputational character,” it is claiming precisely that the paratantra-svabhāva is made known when that which grasps mentally constructed phenomena is taken to exist in the same mode as such grasped phenomena themselves, that is, as existing in and by themselves outside of consciousness.

But what is most important to notice is that paratantra-svabhāva, besides being the nature of the phenomenon whose very nature constructs parikalpita-svabhāva, is also the one that permits the conversion from this same parikalpita-svabhāva to parinispanna-svabhāva. The conversion itself is worked out by Asaṅga and Vasubandhu under the name of “āśrayaparārvṛtti,” a term commonly translated as “revolution of the basis.” The point is thus that through āśrayaparārvṛtti the paratantra-svabhāva is converted in parinispanna-svabhāva, and as such loses its “dependent” nature, that is, it ceases to depend on mentally constructed objects in order to exist, and as such ceases all grasping. Āśrayaparārvṛtti is, then, the key soteriological aim for which the trisvabhāva theory was built. As Keenan notes,

The theory of the three patterns (trisvabhāva) strove to show that the basic other-dependent pattern of consciousness accounts both for the genesis of imagined illusion and for the possibility of its transformation into perfect awakening and wisdom. (Keenan 1989: 50)

Such transformation, understood as the perfection of reality occurring in the paratantra-svabhāva as a revolution of its basis (āśrayaparārvṛtti), amounts, in traditional Buddhist terms, to the

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2 For a detailed discussion of āśrayaparārvṛtti see Keenan 1989: 11. In Keenan’s words, āśrayaparārvṛtti is the conversion of consciousness from the “imagined to the perfected pattern.”
overcoming of conventional reality towards the achievement of ultimate truth.

1.2 Vijñapti, vijñaptimātra, and vijñapimātratā

Intrinsically related to the process of āśrayaparārvtti, it must be noted, is the notion of vijñapti, put forth by Vasubandhu to further characterize the being of paratantra-svabhāva. Here we arrive at our first major point in the attempt to understand the difference between vijñaptimātra and vijñapimātratā. For, as will become clear, it is the very notion of vijñapti with its role in the transformation from parikalpita to parinispama-svabhāva that will provide us with the basis for correctly apprehending the different functions assumed by vijñaptimātra and vijñapimātratā in Vasubandhu’s philosophical system. In order to demonstrate such distinct functions, I will proceed first to an examination of the concept of vijñapti itself, and then to an analysis of the meaning it acquires when supplemented by the term mātra. The difficulties involved in correctly grasping the new concept, now “vijñaptimātra,” will be observed through the disagreement on its basic meaning seen in the work of two scholars, Janice Willis and Bruce Cameron Hall. After a brief analysis of their basic assumptions, I will look into the concept’s appearance in the first verse of Vasubandhu’s Viṃśatikā, and call forth two translations that, while agreeing on its basic meaning, support Willis’s understanding of the concept. Following this, I will then call forth passages in Vasubandhu’s text where “vijñaptimātra” appears accrued by the suffix “tā,” forming now “vijñapimātratā,” and point to how in such instances not only does agreement in translation further slacken, but also the accretion of the suffix “tā” is not, in most cases, properly taken into consideration by the translators.

1.2.1. Vijñapti

Going back to the concept of vijñapti, then, we should now observe how such foundational notion has been met with difficulties in scholarly interpretation, and how such difficulties gave rise to a wealth of translations that are for the most part
unhelpful in arriving at a clear understanding of the concept. Yamada (1997: 163), for instance, explains viññapti as follows:

In our world of experience, “being conscious,” (vijñāna) means that the three modes of transformation of vijñāna (vijñāna-parināma) have taken place. Moreover, “being conscious,” can take place only in the form of “being conscious of something.” Thus vijñāna is inevitably double-faceted. Within consciousness there are two things present at one and the same time, one being being conscious (vijñāna) of something and the other being something (vijñeya) of which one is conscious. This double-faceted consciousness is called viññapti, representation.

Here the concept of viññapti appears in phenomenological terms as the reflexive consciousness that apprehends itself in the processes of apprehending the external world, creating thus a double perspective on reality. Such understanding of viññapti, however, is unsatisfactory to the extent that it does not account for many of the nuances it assumes under Vasubandhu’s usage. As we will see after looking closely into the philosopher’s original words, and attempting a new translation for the concept, this limited understanding of viññapti is very likely one of the causes of scholars’ failure to properly differentiate viñaptimātra and viñaptimātratā. At this point, however, we should notice that Yamada himself does seem to be aware that the above understanding of viññapti is in fact not the only possible one. A clear indicator that such is the case is that throughout the abovementioned essay he translates the term viññapti in as many as seven different ways: as “appearance” (p. 162); “internal mind” (p. 169); “mental function” (p. 169); “discursive mind” (p. 167); “relative subject” (p. 168); “empirical cognition” (p. 170); and “representation” (p. 163).

As a discussion of each of the above renderings would only lead us into a maze of confusion, we should keep in mind that the difficulty lies in the fact that nowhere in Vasubandhu can we find a clear specification that viññapti necessarily implies a dualistic form of perception. As a mental image, viññapti can be understood both as a basic “perception” that does not assume anything about that which is perceived, as well as a “representation” that implies a subjective construction of what is found in the perceptive field. It must be noted, however, that the level of discussion at which viññapti must perforce be understood as a “representation,” is
solely that where all perceptions must be understood as such. This level is the one where it is assumed that the object perceived has already changed by the time it is apprehended by the senses; at this level a *vijñapti* would naturally amount to a “representation,” but not necessarily to a “representation” as opposed to a “perception.”

1.2.2 From *vijñapti* to *vijñaptimātra*: Willis vs. Hall

Be that as it may, from the variegated assortment of translations we see in Yamada—which manifest the flagrant difficulty in rendering the term *vijñapti* in a single and more precise way—we could expect further complications in scholarly translation when Vasubandhu adds first the word “*mātra,*” and then the suffix “*tā,*” to “*vijñapti.*” Starting then our comparative approach to the translations, we should begin by observing Willis’s understanding of *vijñaptimātra*:

> It is here that we find the Yogācāra’s important epistemological point that in every ordinary cognition, what is cognized is not an accurate portrayal of an object existing outside the mind but merely an object-like mental image (*vijñaptimātra*) of that; only a “conceptualized” object, one that is solely the product of constructive imagination. (Willis 1979: 26).

Here *vijñaptimātra* is defined as “merely an object-like mental image.” We should pay careful attention to the appearance of the term “merely” in Willis’s fragment. While the term *vijñapti* alone could be translated as “object-like mental image” (a notion close enough to Yamada’s “representation”), “*mātra,*” has an adjectival function, qualifying *vijñapti* into what translates now as “merely an object-like mental image” [my italics].

While the difference may seem slight, such understanding of *mātra* as “merely” leads to a definition of *vijñaptimātra* that will provide the term with the capacity to describe what is expounded in traditional Buddhist thought as “conventional reality.” The point here is that in order to assert that every ordinary cognition, or every *vijñapti,* is not the cognition of an object that exists in itself—that is, of an object that, were it in fact to exist in itself, would consequently pertain to ultimate reality—Vasubandhu adjoins the term *mātra* and by doing so qualifies *vijñapti* as a cognition or representation that is “merely” conventional. In other words, such
cognition is defined as a “mere” representation precisely to the extent that it is incapable of accounting for the object itself, or for ultimate reality in general. Needless to say, Willis’s understanding of vijñaptimātra as “merely and object like mental image” is valid.

Although all this may sound like common sense, such an interpretation of the term mātra as functioning in the context of Vasubandhu’s texts with a meaning akin to that of the English word “merely” is not unanimously agreed upon by scholars. For this reason, the work of one scholar deserves special attention. In “The Meaning of Vijñapti in Vasubandhu’s Concept of Mind,” Bruce Cameron Hall (1986) counters with considerable vehemence the notion that the concept mātra functions in the context of Vasubandhu’s philosophy with a meaning akin to that of the English “merely.” Attempting an historical analysis of the concept of vijñapti, Hall starts his essay pointing to the shortcomings of the available English translations of the term vijñaptimātra as “representation-only” (Hamilton: 1938), “ideation-only” (Chan: 1957), and “perception-only” (Anacker: 1984), and then proposes an analysis of the term’s usage in the original Sanskrit as the alternative to a new English translation of it.

Hall then proceeds to examine the concept’s appearance in the Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma, and stresses Vasubandhu’s appropriation of the term and employment of it in a special sense. Aptly citing the philosopher’s Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya, Hall demonstrates how in that work the concept of vijñapti is intrinsically related to that of vijñāna. There, he argues, vijñapti is understood as the very apprehension of consciousness with respect to the various sense objects (p. 12). Another important factor in understanding the term, Hall contends, relates to Vasubandhu’s equation of it with other concepts used to define the notion of “mind,” a contention followed by a thorough analysis of such concepts as they mutually interact.

In the second part of his essay, Hall inquires on the meaning of the concept “mātra,” pointing to its various possible translations. One such translation, that is, that of mātra as “mere,” is readily dismissed. Still, Hall recognizes that an important question remains, namely, why does Vasubandhu employ the term vijñaptimātra in his works instead of remaining faithful to the earlier notion of “cittamātra” that appears in several sūtras, as well as in the works of Asaṅga.
Hall then offers, somewhat against his originally stated purpose, what amounts to a translation of *vijñaptimātra*, rendering the concept as “percept” and engaging it in an East/West comparative analysis where “*vijñaptimātra*” and “percept” are seen as equivalent. Hall’s claim is that, just like a percept, a *vijñapti* is a representation that is independent on the existence of an external object. Such type of representation is understood by Hall as a purely mental product, and as such is equated with the notion of “mind-only.” In Hall’s words, and within his attempt to justify his linking of “*vijñaptimātra*” and “percept,” “when *vijñapti* is qualified as ‘mind-only,’ it cannot be meant as a representation of anything else, especially not of an external object.” (Hall 1986: 14).

Equating the notion of *vijñapti* with “mind-only,” however, will lead us into serious difficulties if “mind-only” is to be understood not as a qualifier of external reality—that is, as an explanation that any object represented in consciousness does not exist outside of consciousness itself (and, in this particular sense is “mind-only”)—but as a state of being in which mind abides without being linked to the representation, or mental construction, of any object. We should be attentive, then, to these two possible understandings of “mind-only,” namely, one that is a description of the world in its quality of a mind-constructed entity, and another that describes the state of a pure mind that does not apprehend objects as external to itself. The point to be kept in mind here, however, is that when cross-analyzing the scholarship on Vasubandhu, such a distinction between the two possible understandings of “mind-only” is—as we soon will see—largely overlooked.

Be it as it may, as such double capacity of the concept of “mind-only” is based precisely on the perception of the dual nature of reality, and in this sense is fundamental to the correct grasping of Vasubandhu’s soteriology, my contention at this point is that Hall, by mistakenly applying the second sense of “mind-only” to *vijñaptimātra*, blurs the doctrine of the two truths out of Vasubandhu’s enterprise.

In the same vein, by losing sight of the aforementioned double sense of “mind-only,” Hall appears to overlook the fact that a *vijñapti* cannot be regarded simply as an objectless representation, or as something that “cannot be meant as the representation of anything else,” for even if the object represented
in a *vijñapti* had no equivalent in external reality, such representation would still be not objectless to the extent that it would still exist as a mental object. In other words, regardless of whether or not such representation has a bearing on external reality, it still implies the presence of the very mental representation that it itself is. If we followed Hall’s argument, then, *vijñaptimātra* would amount to something scarcely different then *vijñapti*: it would be a sort of “*vijñapti*-only” where the external object would, given its non-necessity, be ruled out. Such understanding of *vijñaptimātra*, however, is also unable carry the connotation, actually implied in Hall’s analysis, of “mind-only” in the sense of “mind-itself,” or of a mind free from representation or thought construction. For such a free mind would not be the one that abides in a state of objectless representation, even if an “objectless representation” were in fact possible, but the one that would exist in the very absence of any representation. Such would be the mind in the state of what the Yogācāra tradition calls *nirvikalpa-jñāna*, or “non-discriminative perception.”

This second understanding of “mind-only,” as a state of being, as opposed to an adjective that qualifies external reality, will in fact appear, as we will see, in Willis’s translation of the term “*vijñaptimātratā*” as it occurs in Vasubandhu’s *Trīṃśikā*, verse 25. My point here, however, is not to assert that the term “mind-only” should be employed only in one of the two senses discussed above, but that, given the evident difficulties the term is prone to create, the employment of another term altogether might be a better option. At any rate, were the employment of the term to be insisted upon, we should expect that the above two senses would, at least, be clearly distinguished.

Be that as it may, before we can move look into more translations of Vasubandhu’s work, it is important to emphasize that what lies at the heart of Hall’s misunderstanding of the meaning of *vijñaptimātra*, and of his dismissal of the obviously valid translation of the term *mātra* as “mere,” is, besides his inattentiveness of the difference between *vijñaptimātra* and *vijñaptimātratā*, the perception of a positive connotation pertaining to the concept of *vijñaptimātra* as it appears in Vasubandhu’s system. Linked to such perception is Hall’s assertion that Vasubandhu’s use of “*vijñapti*” in the compound *vijñaptimātra*
instead of “vijñāna” or “citta,” “seems to indicate an intent to avoid the idealist extreme.” (Hall 1986: 15).

In spite of the fact that we can find no clear evidence that to “avoid the idealist extreme” is anything that Vasubandhu himself had in mind, such avoidance would seem, to Hall, to account for a positive quality inherent in vijñaptimātra, a quality that the negative adjectival function of the word “mere” would perforce downplay. Nevertheless, were we to grant the positive quality claimed by Hall, vijñaptimātra would appear not as a critique of reality, that is, not as a warning that the world of objects in its entirety is nothing more than, or “merely a,” mind construct, but as something else that, on the contrary, should be striven for. And it is precisely here that Hall misses the soteriological principle that directs the whole of Vasubandhu’s philosophy. For the perception of a positive connotation to vijñaptimātra leads Hall (1986: 15) to assert that “mind itself is vijñaptimātra”, an assertion that not only Vasubandhu himself is not willing to make, but that also contradicts the simple logic that if vijñaptimātra can be understood as “representation only,” then “mind itself,” in the context of Vasubandhu’s soteriology, cannot be such “representation only,” but, on the contrary, it must, again, be mind free from such representation.

Another important point is that what appears to be lying at the heart of Hall’s misunderstanding is a failure to effectively recognize the adjectival function assumed by the notion of vijñaptimātra in Vasubandhu’s texts. As we will see below, although the term is employed in different ways (as for instance, a “teaching,” as that which is “responsible for the false notion of the self,” and as that which “accounts for the perceptual arising of form”), its primary grammatical function in Vasubandhu’s usage is that of an adjective, that is, as a description of reality. As we will see below, if we take the first paragraph of the Viṃśatikāvṛtti as paradigmatic, we will notice that all Vasubandhu asserts at that point is that the trailokadhātu, or the external world in its tripartite conception, is vijñaptimātra, and not that “mind itself” is so. Paying close attention to the grammatical function of vijñaptimātra in the texts themselves, then, will lead us to see that the term qualifies the external world of objects in a negative way, that is, as something that is nothing but, or that is “merely,” a mind construct. The point to be kept in perspective is thus that since vijñaptimātra
describes and qualifies the mentally constructed world, it can only describe and qualify conventional reality. And if this is correct, it then remains for us to learn what the concept would be that would describe and qualify ultimate reality.

In spite of the above misapprehensions, Hall (1986: 18) is in fact correct when, at the end of his essay, he points to the fact that “it is, after all, saṃsāra that is declared to be vijñaptimātra.” And, if this is so, then here again we should pose the question: if Vasubandhu uses the term vijñaptimātra to account for experience of saṃsāra, then what term does he use to account for nirvāṇa?

1.2.3. A range of translations

In order to arrive at a clear understanding of the difference between vijñaptimātra and vijñaptimātratā, and of the rapport between the latter concept and that of paramārtha sat, we must now look into Vasubandhu’s actual texts and verify how his employment of “vijñaptimātra” is consistent with the translation of the term mātra as “mere.” After doing this, we will be in a position to look into the philosopher’s usage of “vijñaptimātratā,” and to work comparatively between the two terms, with the double purpose of demonstrating their difference while at the same time showing that the blurring of their boundaries occurs, for the most part, at the level of translation.

In the first verse of the Viṃśatikā Vasubadhu writes:

\[
\text{vijñaptimātramevaitadasadarthāvabhāsanāḥ/}
\text{yathā taimirikasyāsatkeśacandrādīdarśanam} \ ||| \ ||
\]

Below we find Kochumuttom’s translation of the passage. Notice that “vijñaptimātra” is correctly rendered by the word “mere”:

It is all mere representation of consciousness,
Because there is the appearance of non-existent objects;
Just as a man with a cataract
Sees hairs, moons, etc.
Which do not exist in reality. (Kochumuttom 1982: 166)

In the same vein, Anacker’s translation of the term, albeit not inclusive of the word “mere,” does not get in the way of understanding the negative connotation of vijñaptimātra:
All this is perception only, because of the appearance of non-existent objects, just as there may be the seeing of non-existent nets of hair by someone afflicted with an optical disorder. (Anacker 1984: 161).

Here the notion “perception only” works as a qualifier of reality that devalues its contents in view of assumed limitations in cognition. Such is the agreement on the basic meaning of vijñaptimåtra. When it comes to the term “vijñaptimåtratå,” however, there is less agreement as to translation. Before we can point out the discrepancies, however, it is important to notice that Anacker renders “vijñaptimåtratå” in a manner that does not differentiate it from “vijñaptimåtra.” Here is verse 25 of the Trîśikā, followed by his translation:

\[
\text{dharmāṅgadharma sa yatastathatā'pi saḥ|}
\text{sarvakālam tathābhāvāt saiva vijñaptimātratā ||25||}
\]

Anacker’s translation (1984: 188):

> It is the ultimate truth of all events, and so it is “Suchness”, too, since it is just so all the time, and it’s just perception-only.

As we can perceive, Anacker fails to distinguish “vijñaptimåtra” from “vijñaptimåtratå” in his translation, rendering both terms as “perception-only.” Kochumuttom’s translation (1982: 157) of Trîśikā 25, however, presents a development from Anacker’s:

That from which all elements have their ultimate reality, [Is the third naturelessness.] It is also called suchness, Because it remains always as such; That is itself the state [in which one realizes the meaning] Of mere representation of consciousness, too.

Here the word “state” indicates Kochumuttom’s perception of the difference between vijñaptimåtra and vijñaptimåtratå. Going from the first as “mere representation of consciousness” to the second as “the state [in which one realizes the meaning] of mere representation of consciousness,” however, may not sufficiently emphasize the difference, obscuring it for the reader who does not have prior knowledge of Vasubandhu’s arguments, or that lacks access to the original Sanskrit text. At any rate, and as we will see in more detail below, Kochumuttom’s rendering is valid.
Contrary to Anacker and Kochumuttom, Willis translates “vijñaptimātra” and “vijñaptimātratā” in a more clearly differentiated manner. Below, we find her translation of the same verse (Trimśikā, 25), which should be compared with the previously cited fragment where we observed her rendering of vijñaptimātra as “merely an object-like mental image”:

The supreme truth of all dharmas
Is nothing other than the True Norm (suchness).
It is forever true to its nature,
Which is the true nature of mind-only. (Willis 1979: 34)

Willis thus goes from vijñaptimātra as “merely an object-like mental image” to vijñaptimātratā as “mind-only.” Recalling Hall’s renderings of Vasubandhu’s concepts, and now cross-examining it with Willis’s, we observe that the former employs “mind-only” in reference to vijñaptimātra, and that the latter does so in regard to vijñaptimātratā. Such a double usage of “mind-only” hides from the reader the basic difference between the two Sanskrit terms.

With that in mind, we must now observe another translation of the passage. In the following fragment we will see that, as an alternative to the previously observed efforts of Willis, Anacker and Kochumuttom, Yamada opts for leaving the term “vijñaptimātratā” untranslated (notice that he joins verses 24 and 25 of the Trimśikā in his translation):

Thus, there is the next non-being-ness (nihsvabhāvatā),
for that [sa = nispanna-svabhāva] is the ultimate reality of all dharmas.
It is such-ness (tathatā), as it is such-being (tathābhāva) at all times.
This is, indeed, vijñaptimātratā. (Yamada 1997: 168)

If Yamada’s rendering of Trimśikā 25 does not provide us with a translation of “vijñaptimātratā,” at another point of the same essay where the above fragment appears he does seem to be attentive to the difference between vijñaptimātra and vijñaptimātratā. By rendering the latter term as “Vijñapti-Only-ness” (Yamada 1997: 172), however, Yamada once again falls short of providing us with a complete translation.

We are thus provided with four translations of “vijñaptimātratā”: Kochumuttom’s “state in which one realizes the
meaning of mere representation of consciousness,” Anacker’s “perception-only,” Willis’s “mind-only,” together with Yamada’s renderings. Given that the four previous examples tend to obstruct our way into a clear distinction between vijñaptimātra and vijñaptimātratā in translation, we should now look at a fifth rendering of Trimeṣikā 25. Richard H. Robinson’s translation accomplishes a more clear differentiation between the two concepts:

Because it is the absoluteness of the elements and their suchness,
Because it is ‘so’ forever. It alone is perception-only-ness.
(Lusthaus 2002: 299)

Here one sees the suffix “tā” added by Vasubandhu to “vijñaptimātra” being accounted for by the English particle “ness.” Such rendering allows for a more precise understanding of the concept than was possible with the previously cited translations. Robinson’s version of the following verse 26 of the Trimeṣikā provides us with another instance where a clearer understanding of vijñaptimātratā becomes evident:

\[
yāvad vijñaptimātratve vijñānam nāvatisthati|\]
\[
grāhadvayasyānuśayastāvanna vinivartate ||26||
\]

So long as consciousness does not remain in the state of representation-only,
The residues of the twofold grasping will not cease to function.
(Lusthaus 2002: 300)

Noticing that the Sanskrit suffix “tva” (appearing in the verse in the locative form “vijñaptimātratve”), possesses a grammatical function analogous to that of “tā,” we find Robinson replacing the previous particle “ness” of verse 25 with the word “state.” Such qualification of “representation-only” as a state of being arrived at by consciousness gives us a clear awareness of the import of “vijñaptimātratā” as something other than a qualifier of external reality. Below are alternative renderings of verse of 26:

Willis (1979: 35):

Inasmuch as consciousness in its unawakened state
Is not in the abode of the reality of mind-only,
The six-sense organs, their objects, and the seeds of evil desires
Cannot be controlled and extirpated.
Anacker (1984: 188):

As long as consciousness is not situated within perception only, the residues of a “dual” apprehension will not come to an end.


As long as consciousness does not abide
In the realization [that the subject-object designations]
Are mere representations of consciousness,
The attachment to the twofold grasping
Will not cease to operate.

Among the three translations, Kochumuttom’s is again especially worthy of attention. If we agree with the notion that the term “vijñaptimātratā” refers to the state of being where the mind is free from conceptualization, and that such freedom occurs precisely as the “realization that the subject-object designations are mere representations of consciousness” then Kochumuttom’s translation does in fact present us with a valid rendering of vijñaptimātratā, one that is, indeed, akin to that of Robinson.

The above identification of the mind free from thought construction with the realization that the dualism implied in the subject-object distinction is merely mind constructed, however, leaves room for extensive doctrinal debate. Although we can assert with a high degree of certainty that, within the Buddhist reflection, the realization that all duality occurs primarily at the mental level is in fact a prerequisite for mind’s abiding in non-conceptualization, such realization in and by itself, that is, in the sense of no more than a rational understanding, can hardly be equated with mind’s freedom from thought construction. To put in more clear terms, and always keeping in mind that we are dealing with problems at the level of translation, what we have at hand are two possible interpretations of the term “realization” that can give off two different meanings when applied in relation to vijñaptimātratā: the first, where “realization” is meant as an understanding that occurs primarily at the intellectual level, and the second where “realization” is intended as “actualization,” that is, as the coming into effect of something.

In the phrase “As long as consciousness does not abide in the realization [that the subject-object designations] are mere representations of consciousness the attachment to the twofold grasping will not cease to operate,” Kochumuttom appears to be
inattentive to the nuances of the term “realization,” and therefore employs it in the first sense described, that is, as a rational “realization” of a given idea.

Be that as it may, Kochumuttom’s implication of the term “realization” with vijñaptimātratā is useful to our inquiry in that it helps us clarify our own aims. Our task here is first to demonstrate that vijñaptimātratā indeed implies “realization” in the second sense described above, that is, as “actualization,” and second to arrive at a translation of the Sanskrit term where such “realization” would be rendered in the clearest way possible.

Accomplishing the first task would thus imply a depiction of vijñaptimātratā as a realization that occurs not simply as a rational understanding of something, but as the actualization of a given element. As the element that is to be actualized is consciousness itself, the “realization” proposed would imply a transformation of consciousness, that is, its coming into a state where a change in its very nature has occurred. Such discussion, however, will inevitably fall under the doctrinal debate about the way in which such “transformation of consciousness” should be in fact described. As we will see, this debate is, in turn, inextricably linked to the inquiries into the meaning of āśraya-parāvṛtti, and on the role played by meditative practices in the development of Buddhist philosophical concepts. But before we can discuss the relation between vijñaptimātratā and āśraya-parāvṛtti, we must first look at yet another translation that will provide us with the basis to further clarify the role played by the suffix “tā” in the formation of the compound “vijñaptimātratā.” Only after we clearly understand the grammatical elements integrated in the Sanskrit term, will we be in a position to inquire on its doctrinal and philosophical implications.

Turning to Xuanzang’s Chinese translation of the Trimśikā, Dan Lusthaus offers us yet another rendering of “vijñaptimātratā,” presenting it now as “psychosophical-closure-hood (Lusthaus 2002: 299).” In spite of the obvious difficulty in arriving at what “psychosophical-closure” could possibly mean, we do find in Lusthaus the same sort of consistency seen in Robinson where the suffix “tā” (or “tva”) is taken into account in the formation of Vasubandhu’s compound. Rendering the particle “tā” as “hood” provides Lusthaus’ translation of vijñaptimātratā with the abstract
quality that removes it from the adjectival function of vijñaptimātra.

Here we must note that the question of the precise meaning of the suffix “tā” in Sanskrit Buddhist texts has been discussed at length by Shoko Takeuchi in her essay “Phenomena and Reality in Vijnaptimātra Thought (I): On the usages of the suffix ‘tā’ in Maitreya’s Treatises.” Although in this work Takeuchi does not approach the question of the difference between vijñaptimātra and vijñaptimātratā, her explanation of how the suffix “tā” came to be understood as having a meaning of its own within Buddhist scholarship will certainly be illuminating for our discussion.

After explaining how the suffix is employed in Sanskrit to form an abstract noun, and as such does not possess an independent meaning, Takeuchi shows how the Chinese Faxiang School understood the term “tathatā” to mean “absolute reality” by virtue of the suffix “tā” appended to it. In Takeuchi’s words (1977: 259),

Originally the relationship between ‘phenomena’ and ‘reality’ was explained as ‘neither identical nor different’ simply by adding the suffix “tā” to a word, e.g., dharma and dharmatā, tathā and tathatā, and so on. But the unique way in which the Fa-hsiang School explained this relationship originated in its interpretation that the suffix tā has an independent meaning of its own.

From the above we can derive two inferences that are closely related to our inquiry. The first, connected to our search for the clarification of the meaning of “vijñaptimātratā,” would be that the interpretation of the Faxiang School regarding the usage of the suffix “tā” in Maitreya’s treatises might be valid, and as such might hold true to Vasubandhu’s works as well. In such a case, that is, by possessing an independent meaning of its own, the suffix “tā” might be prone to conferring a completely new meaning to vijñaptimātratā, distinguishing it thus very clearly from vijñaptimātra. The second inference, this one moving along the lines of inquiring on a possible explanation for the shortcomings of the English translations, would surmise that the absence of direct contact with that specific Chinese interpretation referred to by Takeuchi may have lead Western scholars to overlook the change in meaning provided by accretion of the suffix “tā” to Sanskrit Buddhist concepts. Be that as it may, and with the second supposition in mind, it is important to notice that among the seven
renderings of *vijñaptimātratā* seen so far, that is, by Willis, Anacker, Kochumuttom, Yamada, Robinson, and Lusthaus, only the last three, that is, the one’s from scholars that appear to have had contact with the abovementioned Chinese interpretation, show a clear awareness of the import of the suffix “tā” in the formation of Vasubandhu’s compound concept.

Having thus approached the grammatical functions of the elements that form Vasubandhu’s compound, we can now proceed to the second part of our inquiry, where a more direct contact with Vasubandhu’s original Sanskrit text is required.

2. Analysis of the five instances where the concepts appear in the *Viṃśatikā* and *Viṃśatikāvṛtti* after the first verse

In order to demonstrate the difference between *vijñaptimātra* and *vijñaptimātratā*, I will now proceed to a close reading of the five instances where the terms appear in the *Viṃśatikā* and *Viṃśatikāvṛtti* after Vasubandhu’s initial statement to the effect that the entire universe (*trailokadhātum*) is *vijñaptimātra*. My purpose here is to call attention to the different meanings assumed by concepts throughout Vasubandhu’s text. In order to provide a clear view of how the terms function within their textual framework, I will provide my own translations for the passages cited while leaving the two Sanskrit terms untranslated. After proceeding through a commentary on their original formulation, I expect to find myself in a position where a new translation can be proposed.

2.1. *Vijñaptimātra* as a teaching (*deśanā*):

*anyatheti vijñaptimātraṁ vijñaptimātronā katham dharmanirāmyaprameśaṁ vijñaptimātramidām rūpādiharma-pratibhāsanumupadypate na tu rūpādilakṣaṇo dharmaḥ ko’pyastiti viddīvā.* (Vasubandhu 2004: 127)

Otherwise the teaching of *vijñaptimātra* refers to introducing the selflessness of phenomena. Thus, *vijñaptimātra* accounts for the perceptual arising of form, etc., without in fact phenomena characterized by form having at all been known.
Here we find the term “vijñaptimātra” followed by “deśanā,” a term commonly understood as “instruction” or “teaching.” Thus “vijñaptimātra” appears as the content of a teaching, that is, of something that can be passed on through language in introducing the notion of the selflessness of phenomena. Notice that such “teaching,” however, is not described as being, in itself, an abiding in the state of selflessness. It simply “introduces” (praveśah) a characteristic of phenomena, or, for that matter, of reality as a whole, namely, that of being without a self. The adjectival function of vijñaptimātra, then (that is, that of describing reality in a peculiar way), still takes precedence in the formulation of vijñaptimātra as something that can be taught. For what is taught is, once again, precisely a quality of reality. In the same vein, the negative import of such an adjectival function can be appraised in the next phrase, where Vasubandhu states that vijñaptimātra “accounts for the perceptual arising of form.” Here the concept clearly assumes the negative connotation that we saw being overlooked by Hall. As the perceptual arising of form is understood primarily as a source of delusion, the teaching of vijñaptimātra functions as the demonstration of something to be avoided or overcome, as opposed to something that, would it possess a positive quality, should be dwelled upon.

2.2. Vijñaptimātra as responsible for the false notion of the self (kalpitenātmanā):

\[
\text{evam vijñaptimātrasyāpi vijñaptyantaraparikalpitenātmanā nairātmyapraveśāt vijñaptimātravyavasthāpanayā sarvadharmanām nairātmyapraveśo bhavati na tu tadaśtityāpavādāt. itarathā hi vijñaptimerapi vijñaptyantaramarthah syādīti vijñaptimātravam na sidhyetārthavatītvādviñaptinām. (Vasubandhu 2004: 127)}
\]

Thus, the mentally constructed self, which is inherent to representation, is precisely that which appears as vijñaptimātra and which was introduced as selfless. One is introduced to the selflessness of all phenomena through this understanding of vijñaptimātra—not through the denial of their existence. Indeed, even if by means of representation the represented object should be understood as existing, vijñaptimātratva would not be established because this object is being apprehended on the basis of a double representation.
In the above fragment we find a very clear distinction between “vijñaptimātra” and “vijñaptimātratā.” While the first concept appears as that which is responsible for the upsurge of the false notion of the self, the second appears as precisely the locus where selflessness is established. Here it is important to call attention for the various possible translations of the term “siddhi” as it appears in relation to “vijñaptimātratva.” Anacker, for instance, translates “siddhi” as “demonstration,” and “vijñaptimātratva” as “state of perception-only.” Although “state of perception-only” seems at first to properly account for the difference brought forth by the suffix “tā,” Anacker’s translation of “siddhi” as “demonstration” does not satisfactorily set vijñaptimātratva as a “state,” apart from vijñaptimātra as the content of a teaching. Keeping in mind that the term “siddhi” can also be translated as “accomplishment, performance, fulfilment, or complete attainment,” translating it as “establishment,” as opposed to Anacker’s “demonstration,” brings “vijñaptimātratva” to function as the very accomplishment of the teaching of vijñaptimātra, that is, to be the locus where one abides after successfully learning what was presented in the teaching of vijñaptimātra. With that in perspective, in must be noted that, again, the establishment of selflessness per se occurs in vijñaptimātratva and not in vijñaptimātra.

The following appearances of the two terms in the Viṃśatikāvṛtti occur as part of two objections posed to Vasubandhu by an opponent. I will comment on them conjunctly.

2.3. Objection in regard to the efficacy of mental phenomena as in dreams:

yadi vijñaptimātramevedaµ na kasyacitkāyo ’sti na vāk.

If this is in fact vijñaptimātra, then neither someone’s body nor their speech can possibly exist.

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3 See Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English dictionary p.1216.
2.4. Objection in regard to the possibility of communication if all is perception-only:

*yadi vijñaptimātramevedaṁ paracittavidah kim paracittam jānanyatha na kimcātah.* (Vasubandhu 2004: 133)

If this is in fact *vijñaptimātra* then how do those who understand the mind of others actually understand the mind of others?

Both objections are directed to *vijñaptimātra* with the aim of disproving its capacity to be causally efficient. The concept is here understood by the opponent as a representation of reality that is totally detached from the empirical, external world that it represents, and not as an account of what ultimate reality is or could be. Apart from Vasubandhu’s reply to the two objections, the two fragments clearly employ the term “*vijñaptimātra*” in the sense of a mental process that constructs reality rather than as ultimate reality itself. As will be clear from the following fragment, the concept of ultimate reality will appear when the suffix “*tā*” is added to “*vijñaptimātra*.”

2.5. *Vijñaptimātratā not vijñaptimātra as being of unfathomable depth:*

*anantaviniścaya prabheda-gūḍhagāmbhiryāyāṃ vijñaptimātratāyām. vijñaptimātratāsiddhi svaśaktisadṛśā mayā kṛteyā sarvathā sā tu na cintyā.* (Vasubandhu 2004: 133)

After being settled in the unfathomable depth of *vijñaptimātratā* much is to be gained. Although this demonstration of *vijñaptimātratā* was done to the best of my abilities, in its entirety it cannot be established by means of thought.

Here we find a clear demonstration a main point of our thesis, that is, that Vasubandhu employs the term “*vijñaptimātratā*”—and not “*vijñaptimātra*”—to describe *paramārtha-sat*. For what Vasubandhu asserts as being of “unfathomable depth,” that is, as being beyond language and subsisting in a realm free from thought construction, is precisely *vijñaptimātratā*. We should notice that, right at the end of his work, Vasubandhu employs the word “*siddhi*” with a meaning now
distinct from that of the previous passage where the “establishment” of vijñaptimāratā was explained. At this point the English term “demonstration” seems in fact fit in rendering the Sanskrit “siddhi,” for it denotes that, at the end, the soteriological gist of the work is that of explaining how vijñaptimāratā can be established through the understanding of vijñaptimātra.

From the previous examples of the usage of the two concepts, we can make the following inference: while, on the one hand, vijñaptimātra can be understood as any mentally constructed representation that exists independently of whether or not it finds an equivalent in reality, on the other hand, vijñaptimāratā is deep (gambhira), and cannot be established by means of thought (vijñaptimāratāsiddhi... na cintyā kṛteyam).

As the above proves a clear difference in Vasubandhu’s usage of the two concepts, we are now in the position to further discuss their place within Vasubandhu’s soteriology and propose an alternative translation.

3. The two concepts seen in relation to Vasubandhu’s soteriological project

After having observed the distinct implications of the two concepts, it is important to keep in mind that what is at the stake in properly distinguishing “vijñaptimātra” from “vijñaptimāratā” is the correct understanding of the soteriological project that underlies the whole of Vasubandhu’s philosophical endeavor. In order to clarify the relation between that project and the two concepts discussed, we must bring back to our inquiry the trīsvabhāva theory, and observe how vijñaptimātra and vijñaptimāratā fit into Vasubandhu’s tripartite description of reality.

Recalling that while parikalpita-svabhāva appears as the category of the being of objects that exist solely as thought-constructs, and as such are merely conventional, and that parinīṣpanna-svabhāva is the one where reality is perfected and free from this very thought construction, paratāntra-svabhāva is defined as the middle category responsible for the existence of the previous two, first as mentally constructing parikalpita-svabhāva, and second as arriving at parinīṣpanna-svabhāva after a
transformation occurs in its own nature. The relation between this tripartite understanding of reality and the concepts of *vijñapti*, *vijñaptimātra*, and *vijñaptimātratā* becomes clear when we observe that the above-mentioned transformation is accomplished precisely by the *paratantra-svabhāva*’s “self-cleansing” from nothing else than the dualistic epistemological flaws of understood as “representation.” Since such self-cleansing amounts precisely to the passage from conventional to ultimate reality, *vijñapti* must then show a qualitative change as it moves from the first to the second reality. This obviously brings us back to the above discussion of the nuances, and possible double meaning, of the term *vijñapti*. For if *vijñapti* in fact possesses distinct rapport with *parikalpita* and *parinispanna-svabhāva*, then, given the above formulation, it must function differently in the terms “*vijñaptimātra*” and “*vijñaptimātratā*.”

At any rate, we are now in a position to clearly identify the place occupied by the two concepts in the *trisvabhāva* theory: while *vijñaptimātra* (as we have seen in the first verse of the *Vimśatikā*) accounts precisely for what is constructed by the *parikalpita-svabhāva*, functioning thus as an appraisal of conventional reality, *vijñaptimātratā* (as was seen, for instance, on verse 25 of the *Trimśikā)* accounts for *paratantra-svabhāva*’s perfected nature, or to *parinispanna-svabhāva*, that is ultimate reality itself (notice that in verse 25 of the *Trimśikā* the term “*paramārtha*” is employed by Vasubandhu precisely in the sense of “*paramārtha-sat*”).

Given the above, the role of *vijñaptimātra* and *vijñaptimātratā* in the soteriological framework of Vasubandhu’s philosophy becomes obvious. For the path of salvation proposed by Vasubandhu appears now as precisely that where the passage from *vijñaptimātra* to *vijñaptimātratā* occurs. In other words, it is through the understanding of *vijñapti* as a tendency inherent in *paratantra-svabhāva* that we can properly perceive *parikalpita-svabhāva* as the realm of *vijñaptimātra* and *samvrūti-sat*, while distinguishing it from *parinispanna-svabhāva* as the locus of *vijñaptimātratā* and *paramārtha-sat*.

It cannot be overemphasized that the gist of such conversion will become clear only if one is attentive to the fact that what prevents consciousness from continuing in a state of attachment to the twofold grasping produced by *vijñapti* as
“representation” is not, as Kochumuttom presents in his translation of verse 26 of the Trīṃśikā, the realization that the subject-object designations are “mere representations of consciousness” (vijñaptimātra), but, once again, the realization of consciousness itself as it arrives in a state free from representation. In order to further clarify such notion, we must now look at Vasubandhu’s Trīṃśikā verse 27:

\[
\begin{align*}
vijñaptimātra \text{mevedamityapi} & \text{ hyupalambhataḥ} \\
sthāpayannagrataḥ kīḥcit tanmātre nāvātiṣṭhate
\end{align*}
\]

Simply stating that something is ‘representation-only’ (vijñaptimātra), does not make you stand in the suchness of it.⁴

Here Vasubandhu clearly asserts that the recognition of something as representation-only (vijñaptimātra) is insufficient for attaining realization of its suchness (tanmātre). As the following verses, 28 and 29, make clear, such suchness is, in fact, arrived at only in vijñaptimātratā (or vijñaptimātratva):

\[
\begin{align*}
yadālambanam jñānāṃ naivopalabhate tādā \\
sthitāṃ vijñānāmātratve grāhyābhāvē tadagrahāt
\end{align*}
\]

When consciousness does not recognize the object precisely as such [that is, as an object],

then, standing in vijñaptimātratā, it is beyond grasping.

\[
\begin{align*}
acitto’nupalambho’sau jñānam lokottaram ca tat \\
āśrayasya parāvṛttirdvidhā dausṭhulyahānītah
\end{align*}
\]

Without mind and object, it is then in the state of supramundane knowledge,

where the revolution of the basis does away with the two impurities.

Vijñaptimātratā, then, is that which, being beyond grasping, pertains to ultimate reality.

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⁴ The source for Vasubandhu’s text is the Digital Sanskrit Buddhist Cannon (http://www.dsbcproject.org) http://www.dsbcproject.org/trīṃśikāvijñaptikārikāh/trīṃśikāvijñaptikārikāh The translations of verses 27, 28 and 29 are my own.
4. An alternative translation

Given the position vijñaptimātra occupies in Vasubandhu’s thought as a final realization towards which his project is directed, our task becomes, at this point, that of inquiring on the possibility of an alternative translation of the concept that would render it in a manner that more clearly expresses its soteriological implications. The first question to be posed in such inquiry, then, would be: how much differentiation from vijñaptimātra is appropriate to a rendering of vijñaptimātratā?

While the two concepts are morphologically similar in that both contain the notion of vijñapti, the above demonstration of the nuances the latter term acquires in relation to the cognitive capacities involved in the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality, that is, as “perception” as opposed to “representation,” may allow an English rendering that would not repeat a single meaning for “vijñapti” in both compounds “vijñaptimātra” and “vijñaptimātratā.” In any case, all we can assert at this point is that if vijñapti is in fact accepted as assuming different meanings in each concept, then that only would justify their being translated with a higher degree of differentiation. But even if the double meaning of vijñapti is left aside, the question still remains of whether in translating texts such as Vasubandhu’s it is valid to sacrifice morphological similarity in favor of clarity of philosophical content.

The point here is that, considering all that stands between classical Sanskrit and modern English, one might infer that for Vasubandhu and his audience the difference we are stressing was probably already sufficiently accounted for by the accretion of the abstract suffix “tā” to the word “vijñaptimātra.” For us modern readers of an ancient work in translation, however, things appear to be somewhat different. If we apply Vasubandhu’s procedure to the English language and simply add the suffixes “ness” or “hood” to terms such as “representation-only” or “psychosophical-closure,” our result, as we have seen, will fall short of providing a clear account of the subtleties implied in the Indian philosopher’s usage of the two concepts in question. The problem here falls under the difficulty we encounter when, as translators, we are met with the task of clarifying to the modern reader philosophical ideas that are presented in the context of ancient dialectics, where debate tended to be carried out in a mode where the opponent’s prior knowledge
of the arguments in question was usually assumed by the contenders. Such being the case, simply providing an accurate structural rendering of concepts as they are employed in the original language tends to be insufficient to the correct rendering of the ideas expounded.

At any rate, as far as this paper is concerned, my final aim now is still to propose an alternative translation for Vasubandhu’s concepts. My first step in this direction will be to look for an alternative that would not depart from the philosophical domain in which the ideas in question were developed. As the inquiry on cognition allows us to recognize the epistemological medium in which Vasubandhu’s ideas are developed, my search must be guided toward concepts that will effectively denote the perceptual subtleties involved in the difference between vijñaptimåtra and vijñaptimåtratå. In other words, keeping in perspective that our basic material is an epistemology that asserts a qualitative difference between what is barely cognized and the constructions that, by imputation, are accrued to such cognition, I will work with the two concepts employed above in the demonstration of the different possible meanings assumed by vijñapti in its distinct epistemological implications, “perception” and “representation.”

We must recall that while “perception” may denote simply a first moment of bare cognition, that is, a basic encounter with reality that is severed from any assumptions made about it, “representation” carries in itself the mark of intentionality together with the accrual of elements that are foreign to the bare data first cognized. With that in mind, I will propose a translation for Vasubandhu’s Trinśikā 28 that reads as follows:

When consciousness does not recognize the object precisely as such [that is, as an object], then, standing in pureness-of-perception, [vijñaptimåtratve] it is beyond grasping.

By translating vijñaptimåtratā as “pureness-of-perception,” I intend to reflect the essential purity of the bare cognition that is defined by Vasubandhu as being “beyond grasping.” While “vijñaptimåtra” is formulated as “pure” or “mere representation,” rendering “vijñaptimåtratā” with the word “perception” in the place of “representation” clearly distinguishes the two concepts. I believe that this procedure helps clarify the epistemological grounds on which Vasubandhu’s concepts function, while at the
same time expressing more clearly the doctrine of two truths that underlies them.

Accounting for the distinct epistemological spheres of operation of viññaptimātra and viññaptimātratā, then, must be regarded as the first step towards correctly grasping Vasubandhu’s soteriology. His soteriology is presented through a web of tightly interwoven concepts, where the two terms are a primary motor, leading the paratantra-svabhāva through āśrayaparāvṛtti into the level of a perfected reality free from dualism, where phenomena are encountered in their sheer immediacy, that is, that very region of phenomena that has achieved the lucidity of parinispanna-svabhāva. And if this lucidity is precisely what is indicated with the notion of “purity-of-perception,” the circularity becomes obvious: the passage from parikalpita to parinispanna-svabhāva must be the same as that from viññaptimātra to viññaptimātratā.

The relation between viññaptimātratā and āśraya-parāvṛtti leads us to the further and more complex relation between viññaptimātratā and ālayavijñāna. Although an in-depth inquiry into ālayavijñāna goes beyond my aims here, the question of its rapport with viññaptimātratā must be approached if we are to effectively indicate all the implications of the difference we are stressing between viññaptimātra and viññaptimātratā. Such rapport, it must be noted, can only be appraised through the use of an inferential procedure that will call forth several other concepts pertaining to the logical web expounded by Vasubandhu, and relate them mutually in a comparative manner.

Understanding ālayavijñāna as a basic or substratum consciousness that subsists under states of unconsciousness, and as such accounts for the general continuity of mental life, we must keep in mind that in order to clearly observe its rapport with viññaptimātratā we must first be aware of its role as the very basis for the occurrence of āśraya-parāvṛtti. For āśraya-parāvṛtti must be understood as, in Yamada’s terms, the “converting of the substratum” (Yamada 1997: 171), which, in fact, is ālayavijñāna itself. The logic then becomes very simple: if viññaptimātratā can be understood as the result of āśraya-parāvṛtti, it must also be regarded as the “converting of the substratum” that is nothing but the converting of ālayavijñāna itself. This logic is obviously based on our understanding of viññaptimātratā as “purity-of-perception,” for such “purity” will be in concord with the
elimination of all the unwholesome seeds (bija) of karma present in ālayavijñāna upon its conversion through āśraya-parāvrtti, as well as with the cleansing of all the badness (dauṣṭhulya) of which the neutral substratum consciousness (ālayavijñāna itself) is the receptacle.

The rapport demonstrated between viññaptimātratā and ālayavijñāna, however, remits us to a more fundamental question that transcends merely portraying the interrelationship between concepts. The question is: what would be left if the substratum consciousness that contains all the seeds of karma disappeared after its conversion through āśraya-parāvrtti? What is at stake here is the very sustainability of the entire soteriological project in which Vasubhandhu’s philosophy is embedded. Schmithausen (1987: 205) formulates the problem in the following way:

We simply have to accept that the text [Viniścaya Samgrahani] declares that, as soon as the process of Transmuting the Basis is completed (i.e. at the moment of attaining Arhatship), ālayavijñāna itself is abandoned, and not merely emptied of unwholesome Seeds, but preserved in some other form; i.e. we have to accept that ālayavijñāna is, in the Nivṛtti Portion, essentially bound up with, or even nothing but a hypostasis of, Badness (dauṣṭhulya). The problems that would seem to arise from such a position – e.g. how, after the extinction of ālayavijñāna, physical life can continue at all (especially in nirodhasamāpatti), or what would then be or contain the Seed(s) of the pravṛttivijñānas – were, so it appears, simply not envisaged by the author/compiler.

The problem with Schmithausen’s position is that, in approaching the text of the Viniścaya Samgrahani, he pursues a form of inquiry from which inference and intertextual analysis are, for the most part, ruled out. Although Schmithausen is correct in asserting that the text does not explicate what would be made of physical life once ālayavijñāna is done away with, suggesting that the author/compiler would not have envisaged such a question appears to be the result of the adoption of a perspective that avoids regarding the text in relation to the body of ideas that spring from the same tradition to which it belongs. Undoubtedly, such a problem is closely related to the historical form of inquiry that appears in much current scholarship. That form of inquiry operates on the basis of preconceived notions such as, for instance, the idea
that texts must necessarily have a history, that the analysis of the “history” of the text can grant some form of scientific knowledge over it, and that texts can, in any case, be categorized linearly into anything that would amount to a historical arrangement. As such notions are taken for granted, the historical perspective limits the scope of the text to that of a product that must be regarded only in relation to its own companion artifacts, and in doing so shuns a bolder comparative approach that would provide a larger perspective on the questions themselves, as they are posited by the text.

The point here is that in dealing with philosophy, even the most blunt form of scholarship should be capable of perceiving connections among apparently unrelated texts, of pursuing an inferential form of analysis, and, most of all, approaching ideas in their own right, Schmithausen’s lack of such drive leads him to overlook the fact that even though the answer to the question of what is made of physical life after the extinction of ālayavijñāna may not have been made explicit in the Vinīścaya Saṃgrahāni, it does appear with a considerable degree of clarity in other texts of the Buddhist canon. Since Buddhist texts function in a web of interrelated works that, for the most part, circle around the same basic ideas, and since such ideas were very likely already known by the audience to whom many of these texts were directed, it is very possible that the author/complier of the Vinīścaya Samgrahāni did not find it necessary to explain how physical life appears in a state free from ālayavijñāna, simply because such explanation was already to be found in other texts. Given the interrelatedness of Buddhist texts, our task should be to bring them together as much as possible with the goal of clarifying the ideas they present. That would be a first step toward the further and more meaningful purpose of reworking such ideas in a larger world perspective.

With that in mind, my point here is that precisely by understanding vijñaptimātratā as the result of āśrayaparāvṛtti, and as such as the point where ālayavijñāna is done away with, we can conceive vijñaptimātratā as the epistemological state of being of parinispana-svabhāva, or a perfected reality that is free from representation. Such reality, in turn, becomes the one where perception is transformed, in Vasubandhu’s words, into “supramundane wisdom.” The fifth chapter of the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra provides us with an account of precisely
this sort of perception and, by implication, with an answer to what is left of physical life once ālayavijñāna is extinguished. In asking the Buddha how are Bodhisattvas wise with respect to the secrets of mind, thought, and consciousness, the Bodhisattva Viśālamati receives the following answer:

Viśālamati, those Bodhisattvas [wise in all ways] do not perceive their own internal appropriators; they also do not perceive an appropriating consciousness, but they are in accord with reality. They also do not perceive a basis, nor do they perceive a basis-consciousness. They do not perceive accumulations, nor do they perceive mind. They do not perceive an eye, nor do they perceive form, nor do they perceive an eye-consciousness. They do not perceive an ear, nor do they perceive a sound, nor do they perceive an ear-consciousness. They do not perceive a nose, nor do they perceive a smell, nor do they perceive a nose-consciousness. They do not perceive a tongue, nor do they perceive a taste, nor do they perceive a tongue consciousness. They do not perceive a body, nor do they perceive a tangible object, nor do they perceive a bodily consciousness. Viśālamati, these Bodhisattvas do not perceive their own particular thoughts, nor do they perceive phenomena, nor do they perceive a mental consciousness, but they are in accord with reality. These Bodhisattvas are said to be ‘wise with respect to the ultimate.’ The Tathāgata designates Bodhisattvas who are wise with respect to the ultimate as also being ‘wise with respect to the secrets of mind, thought, and consciousness.’ (Powers 1995: 76).

The question of what comes after the extinction of ālayavijñāna is obviously of the epistemological sort. For given the Mahāyāna Buddhist soteriological principle of salvation being a non-other-worldly affair, the question of life without ālayavijñāna becomes that of the possibility of doing away with mind’s evil doings while still staying alive. And by “doing away with mind’s evil doings” nothing but a clear, pure perception of the sort described above, is understood. The Samdhinirmocana Sūtra thus provides us with an answer to what seemed to have been left out from the Viniścaya Samgrahani.

But what interests us here most of all is to observe that the sort of perception described in the sūtra, that is, one where no objects are apprehended but accord with reality is still verified, can be regarded precisely as the one proposed by Vasubandhu as taking
place in *vijñaptimātratā*. Such objectless perception I called a “pure perception,” and the state of mind abiding in such pure perception, one of “pureness-of-perception.”

Yet again attesting to the interconnectedness of Buddhist philosophical concepts, such an understanding of *vijñaptimātratā* will allow us to perceive its rapport with what Asaṅga, in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, called “nirvikalpa-jñāna,” that is, knowledge free of conceptualization. As “pureness-of-perception,” *vijñaptimātratā* also acquires connotations that bring it close to other Buddhist concepts, such as, for instance, Paramārtha’s *amalavijñāna*. As Jonathan Gold has noted, what Vasubandhu’s texts share “is a unifying vision that fits a Yogācāra conceptual structure, but is not exclusively associated with any individual doxographic category.”

I would add that from a more overtly comparative perspective the correct understanding of Vasubandhu’s notion can lead us into an inquiry on its relation with more recent concepts found in Western thought, especially in the field of philosophy of mind. Here a comparative approach worked between *vijñaptimātratā* as a state of mind abiding in “pure perception,” and the notion of “pure-experience” as developed by Nishida and William James, might shed new light on the comparative study of Yogācāra philosophy and Western thought.

In this regard, the correct understanding of *vijñaptimātratā* might work also towards demystifying much of recent East Asian thought’s excessive emphasis on its own originality. In a broader sense, taking a correct grasp of Vasubandhu’s philosophy as a starting point, Buddhist philosophy’s existential ontological focus can be brought in perspective with Western forms of thought that propound a similar ontology, and, in this manner, work towards effacing the boundaries between ideas that have for too long been undervalued or kept apart, much at the fault, it must be said, of the scholarly approach that asserts that ideas must be kept locked.

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6 Here the foundational work is Dilworth 1969. Shaw 1987 does present an in-depth analysis of Vasubandhu’s thought in comparison to William James’s notion of “pure experience” without, however, taking into account the notion of *vijñaptimātratā*.
within their “historical context.” Finally, the correct apprehension of the notions propounded by a philosopher such as Vasubandhu can lead us to discover that not much is ever new in human thought, and that maybe paying closer attention to the Indian Buddhists might be a useful step towards understanding a reality that, ultimately, is a-historical.

**CODA: Vijñaptimātraviñaptimātratāvibhāga**

The title of this essay alludes to that of the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, one of the five books of Maitreya. The book has been translated into English with the title *Distinguishing Dharma and Dharmatā*, and published with a commentary by Tibetan scholar Thrangu Rinpoche. His commentary begins as follows:

This text is an exposition of the *Dharma-dharmatā-vibhāga* in Sanskrit or *Distinguishing Dharma and Dharmatā* in English. The word *dharma* means “phenomena” and *dharmatā* means “pure phenomena.” (Levinson, 2001: 1)

My reason for alluding to Maitreya’s title is that the relationship between “*vijñaptimātra*” and “*vijñaptimātratā*” in Vasubandhu’s work appears to be analogous to the one existing between “*dharma*” and “*dharmatā*” in Maitreya’s. With that in mind, some of us may want to reconsider our perchance too technical approach to Buddhist philosophy, and follow the simplicity and clarity of presentation demonstrated by Thrangu Rinpoche, whose understanding of the difference between Maitreya’s concepts can help us get a better grasp of Vasubandhu’s.

The same sort of parallel drawn between *vijñaptimātra* and *vijñaptimātratā*, and *dharma* and *dharmatā*, can be made between the notions of *śūnya* and *śūnyatā* as they are expounded in Madhyamaka philosophy. While the term *śūnya* promptly assumes an adjectival function in qualifying reality as *svabhāva-śūnya*, that is, as empty of self-nature, *śūnyatā* appears as a noun, commonly translated as *emptiness*, *nothingness*, or *openness*.

When we keep such parallels in mind, Vasubandhu’s concepts are freed from being misconceived as undifferentiated. Since their differentiation is, as we have seen, fundamental to the
correct grasp of the philosopher’s core ideas, this essay strove to
demonstrate how English scholarship, by overlooking such
distinction at the level of translation, created difficulties in
correctly grasping Vasubandhu’s philosophy. Admittedly, the
difference between vijñaptimātra and vijñaptimātratā may have
already seemed obvious to some. My hope, then, is that this essay
will work towards making it even more obvious.

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