



Hartmut Buescher. *The Inception of Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda*. Beiträge zur Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens Series, vol. 62. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2008. xxix + 229 pp. \$74.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-7001-6099-1.

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An Archaeology of a Buddhist Doctrinal System

This is not a book for those who are not already at least moderately familiar with the intricacies of Yogācāra doctrine. Nor is it a book for those who have no appreciation of the historico-philological method. Nor will it be entirely comprehensible to readers who have not already gained some understanding of Lambert Schmithausen's two-volume *Ālayavijñāna*—indeed, at times Hartmut Buescher's study almost reads like a commentary on Schmithausen's work.[1] In this review, however, I will try to make some of the findings of Buescher's study accessible even to those who may feel excluded by these conditions. I will begin with a summary of Buescher's work and conclude with my own thoughts.

Buescher's study aims to determine precisely *when* the Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda trajectory of thought began. His thesis in this regard can be stated straightforwardly: "The thesis that will be defended in the following pages is that the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* constitutes, with sufficiently clear evidence, the birth of Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda" (p. 4). Two clarifications are in order here. First, by "Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda" Buescher means to exclude other branches of Buddhist doctrinal thought (e.g., Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika, and Madhyamaka), while at once including and distinguishing the original and earlier stages of the broad stream of thought that would come to be variously referred to as Yogācāra, Cittamātra, or Vijñānavāda (three terms that occur in classical Indian and Tibetan works). Second, Buescher takes the defining

feature of Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda thought to be the employment of a new ontological model based on the three concepts of *svabhāvatraya* (threefold nature), *vijñaptimātra(tā)* (representation-only, or "purely noetic constitution" in Buescher's terms), and *ālayavijñāna* (store consciousness, as this is often rendered, or "latent consciousness" in Buescher's translation).

Before putting forward detailed arguments in support of his thesis, Buescher aims to clear the field of contenders. Buescher takes the two principally competing theories regarding the origins of Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda to be: the theory (defended by Christian Lindtner) that the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* (in its earliest stages) had already presented the fundamental concepts of Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda before the composition of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*; and the theory that the concept of *ālayavijñāna* had already been presented in an early stratum of the *Yogācārabhūmi* before the composition of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* (as argued by Schmithausen in his *Ālayavijñāna*). Thus, the basic structure of Buescher's study consists in five parts (following his labeling of the sections): (I.0) an introduction, (I.A) a refutation of Lindtner's *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* theory, (I.B) a refutation of Schmithausen's *Ālayavijñāna* theory, (I.C) an argument in support of Buescher's own *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* theory, and (I.D) a brief recapitulation.[2]

Regarding the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* theory, Buescher points out that the stratification of this text has not

yet been worked out in a satisfactory manner, which makes it difficult to establish that the “proto-stage(s)” of that text precede the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* (p. 23). Buescher explains that Lindtner’s *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* theory is based on the view that Nāgārjuna refers to Yogācāra concepts in the *Acintyastava* and *Bodhicittavivaraṇa*, and that the ultimate source of these concepts must have been the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*. Buescher argues, however, that the attribution of these texts to Nāgārjuna is not warranted, thus eliminating the basis of Lindtner’s theory for the priority of the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*. Furthermore, Buescher points out that the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* incorporates Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda terminology in a “peculiarly eclectic (‘post-classical’)” manner, and argues that it is actually later than the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* (which is, in fact, the general consensus of scholars in this area) (p. 40).

Turning to Schmithausen’s *Ālayavijñāna* theory, Buescher begins by pointing out that “Schmithausen’s methodological presuppositions, [and] the textual basis as roughly outlined by him will generally be accepted” as Buescher’s own working hypothesis (p. 42). Briefly, Schmithausen’s aim in his *Ālayavijñāna* is to identify the first passage in which the concept of *ālayavijñāna* was introduced. Schmithausen specifies two criteria for identifying such a passage: that the exegetical situation presented a problem that could not be addressed with the current models of consciousness, making it *inevitable* that a new form of consciousness had to be introduced; and that it seems *plausible* that the term *ālayavijñāna* would have been chosen for this new form of consciousness. Schmithausen argues that the problem that makes a new concept inevitable centers on the meditative “attainment of cessation” (*nirodhasamāpatti*)—a state in which intentional mental events are held to cease, making it difficult, in light of various other Buddhist commitments, to explain how a series of such mental events can then resume for a subject emerging from this state. Schmithausen’s thesis is that the “initial passage” introducing the concept of *ālayavijñāna* occurs in the *Samāhitā Bhūmi* of the Basic Section of the vast *Yogācārabhūmi*, where the new concept is invoked to address precisely such a problem. Buescher’s aim here, then, is to argue that Schmithausen’s presumed “initial passage” is not actually the earliest extant passage in which *ālayavijñāna* was presented. Buescher does this by making the case that in Schmithausen’s presumed “initial passage,” the *ālayavijñāna* is not presented as a new type of consciousness at all, but rather is presented as a continuation of a previous model, a model

that Buescher terms the “bi-polar *bīja*-model.” Buescher argues that according to the bi-polar *bīja*-model, both the sensory faculties and consciousness “were meant to exist potentially within each other, with the capacity mutually to effect each other’s re-arisal,” hence accounting for the continuation of consciousness after the attainment of cessation (*nirodhasamāpatti*) (p. 52). So on Buescher’s account, there already was a model in place to address the issue that Schmithausen’s hypothesis presumes problematic, and therefore the “exegetical situation” had *not* “reached a stage that made the introduction of a new *vijñāna* inevitable” (p. 82).

Buescher’s own thesis is that the concept of *ālayavijñāna* was actually introduced in the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* as “a really new consciousness within the contextual setting of a larger conceptual framework” (p. 54). In arguing for his theory, Buescher adheres to the same two criteria specified by Schmithausen: that the introduction of a new form of consciousness had become *inevitable*, and that it seems *plausible* that this new form of consciousness would be named *ālayavijñāna*. Buescher believes that the introduction of a new form of consciousness in the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* had become inevitable because the concept of *ālayavijñāna* was a key component of a new ontological model. He explains that this ontological model was introduced to resolve a dilemma that had arisen in Mahāyāna thought. On the one hand, Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda could not return to the “phenomenological realism of Hīnayāna Abhidharma,” because according to the Mahāyāna, “all forms of existence ... are linguistic constructions,” including the elements of existence (*dharmas*) thought to comprise reality according to the Abhidharma (pp. 169, 165). But on the other hand, “the logical deconstruction of the Mādhyamikas”—the earlier branch of Mahāyāna thought—did not allow for the conceptual resources necessary to account for “the heightened awareness of the inner dynamic structure of reality” (p. 169). In other words, while it was impossible to return to the realism of Abhidharma, Madhyamaka doctrine did not allow Yogācāra-Vijñānavādins to account for everything they thought it necessary to account for. Thus the introduction of a new ontological model became *inevitable*, according to Buescher. And the concept of *ālayavijñāna* was an intrinsic part of this new ontological model.

To elucidate a bit further, Buescher argues that the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* rejects the “early Mahāyāna trend of conceiving ultimate reality as utterly groundless,” and posits that “the ultimate ... is essentially not separate from consciousness”; rather, the “ordinary experiences”

of “apparently real sensory forms” are “not different from the psyche” itself (pp. 163, 164). Representations are not representations of some extra-mental reality, but rather are simply representations: “a purely noetic constitution (*vijñaptimātram eva)” (p. 164). Their source is the mind itself, the mind containing all the seeds of consciousness, i.e., the subliminal consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*). And the realization of these “various levels of reality” is explained in terms of the three natures (*svabhāvatraya*) (p. 189). Thus the new ontological model presented by the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* brings together the three key concepts that Buescher identifies as central to Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda thought.

Thus far I have not discussed the second of Schmithausen’s (and Buescher’s) two criteria for identifying the earliest passage in which *ālayavijñāna* was presented, i.e., the criterion of the *plausibility* of its being styled “*ālayavijñāna*.” It should be noted that, as Buescher himself points out, in the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* the term *ādānavijñāna* (“appropriating consciousness”) is the “preferred designation” for the newly introduced form of consciousness, a fact that had not escaped the attention of Schmithausen (p. 134).[3] Buescher goes to some lengths to address this as a possible objection to his theory, and I will not enter into the details here. I will state, however, that while his arguments in this regard are not unconvincing, it does at least initially seem odd to argue that the earliest extant passage presenting the concept of *ālayavijñāna* is one in which the name *ādānavijñāna* is preferred. I refer the reader to Buescher’s discussion to determine how successfully this initial oddity is dissolved.

To gain a further sense of Buescher’s study, it might be helpful to consider it alongside William S. Waldron’s *The Buddhist Unconscious*, another study addressing the concept of *ālayavijñāna* and Yogācāra doctrine.[4] Like Buescher’s, Waldron’s work proceeds from the premise that in order to properly understand these texts and their theories, it is necessary to understand the historically situated problematics from which they emerge. The two works differ, however, in their aim and focus: Buescher’s aim is to identify the earliest extant text in which Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda doctrine was presented, and his focus is thus on sorting out the different strata of a textual corpus; Waldron’s aim is rather to elucidate the meaning of the concept of *ālayavijñāna* in the context of the doctrinal debates from which it arose, and his focus is on exegesis—on offering some ways to think about just what kind of conceptual *work* the notion of *ālayavijñāna* was doing. While Buescher criticizes Waldron for “un-

critically” accepting Schmithausen’s outline of the history of Yogācāra texts (p. 45), Waldron himself points out that Schmithausen’s historical outline suffices to allow Waldron to elucidate “the psychological and philosophical significance of the concept of the *ālaya-vijñāna* in the context of Indian Buddhist metapsychology,” a point that seems quite reasonable to me.[5] In any case, both authors emphasize the importance of stratification and elucidation—of sorting out the different historical strata of a text or corpus of texts, and of explaining the significance of any theory presented in terms of its own historically situated doctrinal problematic.

Turning to my own thoughts on this work, in considering Buescher’s thesis, and especially his arguments against Schmithausen’s conclusions, I would ask: what precisely is at stake here? At times in reading Buescher’s work, I wondered whether he might be attempting to establish more than what the available evidence allows. But what if it could be demonstrated with overwhelming evidence (a “smoking gun,” as it were) that the passage discussed by Buescher from the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* really was the precise passage in which the concept of *ālayavijñāna* was first introduced? What would follow from this? I am not entirely convinced that a whole lot would change in our interpretation of Yogācāra thought. It might lend further support to the interpretation of the concept of *ālayavijñāna* not just as a solution to a specific, technical problem—e.g., that of how to explain the resumption of a subject’s cognitive series upon emerging from *nirodhasamāpatti*—and help us to see *ālayavijñāna* as part and parcel of a new model of reality in Mahāyāna Buddhism. But it seems to me that that this is how we *should* interpret *ālayavijñāna* anyway, whether or not Buescher’s passage is the earliest extant one. As Friedrich Nietzsche points out, “the origin of the emergence of a thing and its ultimate usefulness, its practical application and incorporation into a system of ends, are *toto coelo* separate; that anything in existence, having somehow come about, is continually interpreted anew, requisitioned anew, transformed and redirected to a new purpose by a power superior to it ... in the process of which their former ‘meaning’ [*Sinn*] and ‘purpose’ must necessarily be obscured or completely obliterated.”[6] And so it may be that while a concept was developed to address one problem, it was put to work to address another. In fact, Nietzsche’s dictum might be used as the basis of a counterargument that Schmithausen could offer in reply to Buescher, along the following lines: maybe *ālayavijñāna* was presented in the *Yogācārabhūmi* to address one problem, but was then

adapted (or, as it were, “exapted”) to become the basis of an entirely new ontological model in the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*. From this perspective, it is perhaps less important to determine precisely which passage represents the initial introduction of the concept of *ālayavijñāna* than it is to decipher the concept’s various “incorporations” into different “systems of ends.” In any case, Buescher’s study does contribute to such an “archaeology” in a significant way, even if he does not explicitly thematize his study in such terms. This is because Buescher offers insightful interpretations of Yogācāra doctrine, substantiated with a wealth of textual information, allowing one to consider the issues with a richness of historico-philological detail. In short, Buescher’s study is a work of consummate scholarship.

Notes

[1]. Buescher states that an “acquaintance with Schmithausen’s theories is thus presupposed on the part of the reader” (p. 1). The key source here is Lambert Schmithausen, *Ālayavijñāna: On the Origin and the Early*

Development of a Central Concept of Yogācāra Philosophy, 2 vols. (1987; repr. with addenda and corrigenda, Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 2007).

[2]. It is unclear why the sections are thus labeled “I.0,” “I.A,” etc., as there is no part 2 (unless Buescher has a follow-up volume in the works).

[3]. Schmithausen states that “it would seem improbable that one single new concept should have been given two new names right from the outset” (Schmithausen, *Ālayavijñāna*, 12). Schmithausen takes this improbability to support his theory regarding the priority of the *Samāhitā Bhūmi*.

[4]. William S. Waldron, *The Buddhist Unconscious: The Ālaya-vijñāna in the Context of Indian Buddhist Thought* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

[5]. *Ibid.*, 92.

[6]. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 55.

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