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A Genealogy of the Concept of "Neither Identical nor Different": From Abhidharma to Vijñānavāda

"Neither identical nor different" is a Buddhist concept demonstrating "relationship." In Abhidharma thought (the *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā-śāstra* of Sarvāstivādins), it is used to explain the neither identical nor different relationship between "self-nature" (*svabhāva*) and "activity" (*kāritra*) of dharmas. Self-nature, in this case, is identified as the self-nature of a "conditioned" (*saṃskṛta*) and "defiled" (*āsrava*) dharma. According to the Sarvāstivādins, the self-nature of a dharma exists permanently in the three periods of time (the future, present, and past), but its activities exist only in the present.

However, Vasubandhu criticizes this position in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, saying that it is contradictory to claim that the self-nature of a dharma and its modes of existence (*bhāva*; or activities [*kāritra*]) are neither identical nor different. By applying Sautrāntika theory, Vasubandhu understands that the self-nature of a conditioned, defiled dharma and its activities exist only in the present and are identical.

Originally Vasubandhu had understood ultimate *nirvāṇa* nihilistically as the state of total extinction of body and mind, as demonstrated in his theory of *nirvāṇa* discussed in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*. Later, Vasubandhu changed his position from that of the Sautrāntikas to the Vijñānavādins, having been influenced by Saṃghabhadra's theory in the *Nyāyānusāra* that *nirvāṇa* is the real and dependable existence, as well as the *Yōgācārabhūmi*'s discussion on the neither identical nor different relationship between the realm of nonresidual *nirvāṇa* (*nirupadhiśeṣaṃ nirvāṇam*, which is unconditioned [*asaṃskṛta*] and undefiled [*anāsrava*]) and all conditioned and defiled dharmas. In this case, the relationship between ultimate reality (*tathatā*; i.e., the unconditioned and undefiled) and dharmas in this phenomenal world is neither identical nor different because the difference between *asaṃskṛta* and *saṃskṛta* disappears due to the fact that conditioned dharmas transcend time and space.

In the *Triṃśikākārikā*, Vasubandhu maintains that the relationship between the nature of ultimate existence (*pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*) and the nature of conditioned existence (*paratantrasvabhāva*) is neither identical nor different. In the *Madhyāntavibhāṅgaśāstra*, he argues that the relationship between emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and delusory discriminations (*abhūtaparikalpa*) is neither identical nor different.

Although Vasubandhu did not allow that a conditioned dharma's self-nature and its activity are neither identical nor different, he admitted that the relationship between supramundane and mundane existences is neither identical nor different. By applying this concept, Vasubandhu discovered the connection between the realms of *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*.

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