WAS THE BUDDHA A BUDDHA?


The four noble truths may be considered not only as the starting point of Buddhist philosophy, but also as a conceptual framework within which almost all Buddhist philosophical theories may be subsumed. The truth of suffering may include all theories answering the question what the world is in general and living beings (especially humans) in particular. The truth of the arising of suffering may include the theories of causality. The truth of the cessation of suffering may include theories of the absolute, that is, of Nirvana, of Buddhahood, of *tathatā*, etc. And the fourth truth may include theories of practice, especially ethics and theories of meditation. These are, roughly speaking, the traditional themes dealt with by Buddhist philosophers. However, it is less than obvious whether, and if so how, the Buddhist *pramāṇa*-school, which deals mainly with epistemological and logical problems, is to be related to this conceptual framework; all the more so as Dignāga, the founder of the school, as well as all the other logicians who came after him, did not recognize scripture or authoritative verbal communication (*āgama, śabda*) as an independent means of knowledge.

In a short but most edifying case-history Professor Steinkellner pointed out that the majority of modern scholars who dealt with the
spiritual place of epistemology and logic in the Buddhist tradition may be classified under two categories: Those, like Conze, who stressed the practical and religious ideas of Buddhism, and considered the epistemological tradition as a deplorable distortion and corruption of the basic Buddhist values; and those, like Stechertsky, who considered the epistemological tradition as the greatest achievement of Indian philosophy, but who equally considered it as un-Buddhistic in its spirit. The assumption common to all these approaches, concludes Steinkeller, "is that the epistemological tradition presents an essential deviation from the spirit of Buddhism. And the methodical fault common to all these approaches is that none of them raises the question of the tradition's self-understanding."

However, Steinkeller notes one important exception to these approaches, namely, that of Professor Vetter, who gave a "fully acceptable" explanation of this relationship in his *Erkenntnisprobleme bei Dharmaṇītī.* Surprisingly enough, Vetter's explanation has been ignored by the vast majority of scholars, and it is indeed disconcerting to observe that a book by a well-known and respected scholar, which was published in the well-known and easily available series of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, remains largely unknown; especially as Vetter's book is, to the best of my knowledge, the one and only monograph on Dharmaṇītī in any European language. Partly it is no doubt due to the fact that it was not written in English, and it might serve as an alarming indicator that German is becoming something of an esoteric language. Partly it is also due to the extremely condensed style of the book which makes its reading an arduous task. Whatever the case may be, I sincerely hope that the book under discussion here will not share the fate of its predecessor, and will draw the attention it deserves as a major contribution towards the understanding of Dharmaṇītī's Buddhism.

The relation between the *pramāṇa* theory and Buddhist spirituality was laconically stated by Dignāga in the *maṇḍalaśloka* of the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* and in the *Vṛtti* thereon. It consists of five epithets of the Buddha which stand in causal relation to each other. These are usually represented in the following scheme:

It should be noted, however, that this scheme, albeit correct, is incomplete, for it fails to account for the relation among the four last epithets (*jagaddeśiṣṭā* etc.), as well as the relation between perfection in cause and perfection in effect. (Are they cause and effect of each other, or of a third and even fourth party?) Dharmaṇītī, who raised the question, claimed that each of the four is a necessary condition for the next one (i.e., *jagaddeśiṣṭā → saśrīva → sugata → tāyitva*), and this enables him to infer the epithets from each other in the following order: Because the Buddha is a protector (as is evident from his revealing of the four noble truths), he is *sugata* (the root *sau* is interpreted as "to know", and together with the three meanings of *sa-* it means that the Buddha's knowledge is true, lasting and complete); because he is *sugata* (i.e., because he has far more knowledge than what is necessary for a simple *arhat*), he is a teacher; because he is a teacher (i.e., because he exerts himself for the sake of others), he is full of compassion, that is, seeking the benefit of all living beings. And because of all four taken together the Buddha is a means of valid cognition or authority. Note, however, that this inference does not account for the complexity of relations among the four terms; as far as the Buddha's motivation is concerned, Dharmaṇītī construes them in a different order: Because the Buddha is full of compassion he wants to become a protector, and the best way to become a protector is to
become a teacher, but in order to become a teacher one has first to experience the way and its result (i.e., to become sugata).

None of these interpretations seems particularly faithful to Dignāga. Unfortunately, however, we do not have any other commentatorial tradition except Dharmakīrti’s, and, therefore, in order to understand Dignāga we should better look at his predecessors rather than his successors, for at least one could determine the direction from which his thought developed. One important passage which seems to bear directly on our subject matter here is found in the Abhidharmakosabhāṣya on 7.34, where Vasubandhu explains the similarities and dissimilarities among the different Buddhas. The similarities consist in the accumulation of all merit and knowledge, in having the dharmakāya and in being helpful to all living beings. These three are called perfection in cause, perfection in effect and perfection in means (hetu-, phala-, upakārasampat). Dignāga seems to have had this passage in mind while composing his maṅgalaśloka, although he uses the terms in a different sense and one to one relationship of the sub-divisions is difficult, not to say impossible, to establish. In any case the epithet pramāṇabhūta could correspond to perfection in means which is explained by Vasubandhu as perfection in liberating from the three bad destinies and from the suffering of samsāra, or, alternatively, in putting people in the three yānas (i.e., śrāvakayāna etc.) and in good destinies. As far as the term pramāṇabhūta itself is concerned, it could have been borrowed from the Mahābhāṣya where Pāṇini is thus called. This could hint at Dignāga’s aspiration to grant his epistemology the status of the highly respected science of Vyākaraṇa, and further perhaps to establish an epistemology which would be acceptable to, and used by different philosophical schools, just as is the case with grammar. But I shall leave the matter at that because Vetter’s book is not about Dignāga, but about Dharmakīrti’s interpretation of Dignāga, which is, as usual, something completely different.

The book consists of a most interesting, daring and intriguing introduction (pp. 13—35) and a translation of verses 131cd—285 of the pramānasiddhi—chapter. Vetter’s view of Dharmakīrti’s view of the Buddha’s career may be summarized as follows. There was a person who practiced compassion for a long time during many lives. None of the other perfections (pāramitā) known from Mahāyāna texts is mentioned by Dharmakīrti, and, therefore, he considered that compassion alone is necessary for becoming a Buddha. The best way to help someone in the long run is to become his teacher. A good teacher has first to experience for himself what he teaches, and that is why the Buddha undertakes the necessary steps towards liberation, although he is not interested in liberating himself but only in liberating others. The Buddha already knew from tradition (āgama) and argumentation (yukti) that suffering has a cause, that this cause is not eternal, and that it is absent where the apprehension of Self, desire, etc., are absent; he also knew that their opposite (i.e., the apprehension of Selflessness etc.) had to be practiced in order to destroy them. However, he had to employ different methods in order to find out the best way for his purpose. He practiced many different methods for a long time, understood their advantages and shortcomings, and realized that the only definitive way to realize his aim is the apprehension of Selflessness (naîrātyadārśana). From this interpretation of the first three predicates Vetter reaches the conclusion that Dharmakīrti’s Buddhism is unique of its kind (p. 19):


It seems to me, however, that Vetter’s interpretation is improbable, for in the final analysis it would leave no room for the Buddha to innovate anything, not even to improve a previously existing way to liberation. According to Dharmakīrti the practice of apprehension of Selflessness is not only the best way to Nirvana, it is also the only way. And if it is
accepted by tradition that certain persons reached liberation before the Buddha, it follows that they also reached it by practicing the very same method. This, however, implies that they also knew and understood its presuppositions, such as the five skandhas being suffering, etc. The only thing left for the Buddha to do was to give his approval to a way with the discovery of which he had nothing to do. In other words, not only are the four noble truths not originally discovered by the Buddha, they were not even rediscovered by him. Though it is not explicitly stated, I think Vetter will actually accept this conclusion in some form or another, as he says (p. 18): “Der Buddha wusste zwar durch Ágama und Argumentation (yukti), dass das Leid eine Ursache hat, und dass diese Ursache keine ewige Natur hat (132c—133b, vgl. 179) . . . und was die Ursache ist (132c—134, vgl. 183—185) . . . er wusste damit auch, dass die Gegensätze zu diesen Fehlern zu üben seien.” Such a belittling of the Buddha seems odd, but before pronouncing any judgement on it one should, of course, ask what Vetter adduces as evidence for it. As far as I can see, his evidence amounts to one single word — Ágama — in v. 132: yuktiyāgamābhīyāṃ vimśāṃ duḥkhaḥetum parikṣate/ “Reflecting with [the help of] reason and tradition he examines the cause of suffering.” Vetter, however, translates as follows: “Forschend mit Hilfe von Argumentation und Überlieferung stellt er die Ursache des Leides fest.” Of course, there is some difference whether one examines something with the help of tradition or whether one determines something with the help of tradition. And obviously the role of tradition is strengthened under the latter alternative. However, the rendering of parikṣate with “stellt fest” is very strange; as far as my reading experience goes, I never saw it used that way, and none of the dictionaries available to me (I checked the MW, PW, Apte and Renou) glosses the word in this meaning. I do not doubt for a minute that Vetter knows what the verb usually means, and, therefore, I fail to understand why — if he wanted to convince us that Dharmakīrti uses the verb in this highly unusual meaning — he did not adduce some evidence for it, or add a few words of explanation. Failing that, one could suspect that Vetter twists the text to support his theory.

But even if we assume, at least for the sake of argument, that Vetter is correct in his translation, this would still not be enough for his far-reaching conclusions. For Dharmakīrti does not say that the four noble truths are a part of the tradition referred to in the verse; as a matter of fact he does not say anything about the content of this tradition. Moreover, I must admit that I do not know what Vetter means by tradition (or rather the tradition, since he uses the definite article). Does it mean that the four noble truths were common knowledge, at least among certain groups of renouncers? If so, how is this compatible with the epithet pramāṇabhūta? For one of Dharmakīrti’s criteria for being a pramāṇa is to reveal something which was not previously known (ajñātārthaprakāśa). Or should we assume that we deal with a secret tradition which was made public by the Buddha? Should we connect this tradition with the ancient belief, found already in the Pāli canon, that there were other Buddhas before the historical Buddha? Is it possible that the term “tradition” refers to non-Buddhist tradition? Could it refer to the theories of the teachers of the Buddha, or to other theories (such as the śāśvatavāda and the ucchedavāda or all the other theories which appear in the Brahmajālasutta) which were rejected by the Buddha as too extreme, dangerous, or inappropriate? Couldn’t it be that Dharmakīrti used yuktiyāga as a ready-made expression without taking into account all its implications? Finally, is it not possible (or even likely) that the subject of this verse is not the Buddha? Dharmakīrti’s laconicism does seem to leave room for more than one interpretation.

Furthermore, there is another problem which immediately arises in this context: One of the things which distinguish a Buddha from a simple Arhat is that a Buddha reaches enlightenment by himself. For all Buddhas are said to have gained their knowledge without having received instruction (cf. for instance AKbh on 7.34 p. 415.23; jñānasampat punaś caturvidhā — anupadiṣṭajñānam . . . de la Vallée Poussin: “Perfection de savoir: 1. savoir non enseigné . . .”: cf. also Yaşomitra ad loc.: anupadiṣṭajñānam iti svayambhīsaṃbo-
dhanārtha — “Untaught knowledge [is used] in the meaning of becoming enlightened by oneself”). Thus Vetter’s interpretation of Ágama is incompatible with one of the most important characteristics of a Buddha. Vetter may have been aware of this problem when he says that according to Dharmakīrti the Buddha’s teaching is not the result of a single enlightenment, and that Dharmakīrti does not use
the word Buddha. If I understand him correctly, what he actually claims is that the Buddha was not a Buddha and the four noble truths (give or take a few minor improvements) are not originally his own. (All this in the name of Dharmakirti, of course.) This is a very strong and interesting claim indeed, but, unfortunately, I do not see that Vetter has any conclusive evidence for it. As for the fact that the word Buddha never occurs in the Pramāṇavārttika, this, of course, does not prove anything.

Although it is not explicitly stated, it is clear from the context that Vetter draws his conclusion from v. 136:

*bahuṣo bahudhopāyaṃ kālena bahunāṣya ca/
gacchanty abhyasyataḥ tatra guṇadoṣāḥ prakāśatam#

"Ihm, der intensiv (*bahuṣo*) und über eine lange Zeit hin (*kālena bahunāṣya*) auf vielerlei Weise (*bahudhā*) ein Mittel übt [um die aus Überlieferung und Nachdenken gewonnene Einsicht zu verwirklichen und dann diese und die zu ihrer Verwirklichung einsetzbaren Mittel anderen zu lehren], gelangen diesbezüglich [d.h. bezüglich der verschiedenen Mittel] die Vor- und Nachteile zu [voller] Klarheit."

However, Vetter's interpretation is certainly not the only possible one. While commenting on this verse, Prajñākaragupta explicitly mentions the Buddha's enlightenment, for he considers that the verse refers to the time after the Buddha's enlightenment, or more precisely, when the enlightenment unfolds or blossoms (*prabodhavikāsa*). (The biographies of the Buddha usually mention four, or sometimes seven, weeks.) Although the Buddha is free from suffering, he further practices different means and perfects his qualities as a teacher; e.g., he exerts himself to eliminate his imperfections of speech etc. Or, alternatively, although his suffering is destroyed, the Buddha is not yet omniscient. Nothing in this implies or suggests that the content of the Buddha's teachings is not the result of a unique enlightenment.

Devendrabuddhi and Manorathananandin, on the other hand, do not mention the enlightenment at all, because they consider that the practice during long time refers to the time when the Buddha was not yet a Buddha, i.e., when he was still a Bodhisattva. Nothing in their interpretation implies anything unusual in their understanding of the future Buddha's enlightenment.

The interpretation of v. 136 bears directly on the problem of āgama in 132ed. For, if I understand them correctly, according to Devendrabuddhi and Manorathananandin the Buddha used āgama only in his previous lives when he was a Bodhisattva. This is probably the simplest solution to the problem. Cf. Pramāṇavārttikavṛtti (ed. D. Shastri. Varanasi 1968) p. 51.12—15: *etam duḥkhaḥetum tadvipaṃśaṃ cāgāmād upaśrutānāmānānāṃ niścītyā [niścītya or a lacuna?] bahuṣo nekaśa bahudhopāyaṃ anekaprabhāṣām kālena-ca bahunāṣya bodhisattvāśyābhyasano bhāvayatā-s tatra duḥkhaḥetu tadvipaṃśaṃ ca guṇadoṣāḥ yathāyogam prakāśatam gacchanti. "Having heard the cause of suffering and its opposite from tradition [and] having determined [these two] by inference, the advantages and shortcomings in respect to the cause of suffering and its opposite as it fits (i.e., in reversed order) become clear to the Bodhisattva who is practicing. [i.e. meditating, manifoldly (intensively?) in many different ways and for a long time on the means to destroy suffering through its cause], which has many different forms." This seems a perfectly sound solution. In any case, one cannot simply ignore it the way Vetter does.

It is only according to Prajñākaragupta's understanding of Dharmakirti that the role of āgama becomes problematic: and he proposes two different interpretations. According to the first, āgama makes known objects which are beyond the scope of perception and inference. According to the second, — and this is the one on which Vetter bases his interpretation (cf. p. 40, n. 1) — the examination of suffering etc., is done in a threefold succession of tradition, inference and meditation (āgama, yuktis and bhāvāna).

The issue is quite complicated, and many questions have to be raised and answered before a definitive solution can be accepted. Vetter has certainly given some thought to the subject, but unfortunately he does not share his deliberations with his readers. Failing that, one may assume that he was led astray by Prajñākaragupta.

The problem of the originality of the Buddha has arisen long before Dharmakirti, and he must have been aware of its traditional solution. Had he anything original, not to say revolutionary, to say on the
subject, I would expect him to state it explicitly, as he does in many other cases, and not to hide it behind such remote implications. It seems to me, therefore, that Devendrabuddhi's and Manorathananandin's interpretation does better justice to Dharmakirti's original intention, for if it is accepted, the problem of āgama does not even arise in the context of v. 132cd. As far as I can see there is nothing in Dharmakirti's words to indicate the innovations which Vetter reads in them, and inasmuch as the Buddha is considered as a person, and not as an abstract principle, Dharmakirti probably followed the traditional Buddhist doctrine, as it appears for instance in the Milindapañha\textsuperscript{20}, namely, that there were many Buddhas, and they all have exactly the same teaching, but each of them discovers the way by himself.

The pramāṇasiddhi-chapter is anything but a systematic treatise, and Vetter has accomplished a veritable tour de force in reconstructing a whole system out of it. By the very nature of things he had to rely on odd bits and pieces scattered here and there; sometimes not even directly there, but only hinted at or alluded to by the employment of certain terms, by omission of what could be expected, etc. The reconstruction is indeed fascinating in certain aspects, but from the very nature of things highly speculative, and I feel that Vetter, in spite of his experience and intimate knowledge of Dharmakirti, ought to have been more cautious. For instance, how much can one read into a simple "etc."? Discussing the sixteen aspects of the four noble truths Dharmakirti mentions the first four by name and then adds "etc." (cf. v. 270). Vetter observes that the remaining twelve are not convincing and are merely a by-product of the first well-functioning four, which is a legitimate opinion for any modern scholar, but to say that Dharmakirti's "etc." corresponds exactly to this appreciation, is a bit far-fetched. Cf. p. 26—7:

Die nicht als solche genannten 12 falschen und 12 wahren Aspekte von den insgesamt 16 sind wenig überzeugend und wohl eher Ausfluss der bei der ersten edlen Wahrheit gut funktionierenden Reihe von vier Aspekten; Dharmakirtis blosses "usw." entspricht genau dieser Einschätzung.\textsuperscript{21}

One of the most provocative parts in Vetter's interpretation of the pramāṇasiddhi-chapter concerns the epistemological presuppositions of the way to Nirvana. Contrary to the usual affiliation of Dharmakirti to the Yogācāra school, or more precisely to the Sautrāntika-Yogācāra school, Vetter claims that for the last stages of the way to Nirvana Dharmakirti assumed a realistic theory of knowledge (p. 32):


Again, how does Vetter substantiate his assumption? As far as I can see his evidence is very meager. His main argument is that the cognition whose basis is transformed, and which apprehends the object correctly with no conceptualization, arises from the capacity of the thing (vastubalotpatti or similar expressions). But Dharmakirti does not say that the thing has to be a material object; at any rate Vetter produces no evidence to that effect. On the other hand such expressions as vastubalotpatti can easily fit in an idealistic epistemology where they would refer to the apprehension of the mind by itself, that is, a moment of cognition arises from the previous moment of cognition, carries the latter's form and apprehends this form as its object. It seems, therefore, that in this case, just as in many other cases, Dharmakirti is consciously using terms which are ambiguous enough to allow both realistic and idealistic interpretation. And, of course, it is the idealistic interpretation which reflects a higher level of truth.

Vetter wants to support his argument by the fact that Dharmākirti does not mention the apprehension of the unreality of the elements (dharmamāraṇyam) as a necessary condition for liberation. This could have been at most an argument from omission, but in fact one does not even expect Dharmakirti to include the unreality of the elements
as a part of the way; on the contrary, it would have been very surprising if he were to include it, because — unlike in Yogacāra properly speaking — in Sautrāntika-Yogacāra, or what should better be called Yogacāra with certain Sautrāntika presuppositions, as we know it for instance from the Vinaya-pitaka and Trimśikā, the mental elements are the final absolute reality. In other words, there is no relativisation of the mental elements into a higher level of reality usually called atilatā. This is in fact one of the most important criteria to distinguish the two schools. There is no place for the unreality of elements in Sautrāntika-Yogacāra, and, therefore, there is no reason to assume that Dharmakīrti deviates from it towards a realistic theory just because he does not mention it. (As for the term dharmanairatmya, when it appears in Sautrāntika-Yogacāra texts, it has a completely different meaning, namely, that cognitions lack the manifold nature of apprehending, apprehended, etc., but they do not lack the real unexpressible nature which is apprehended by the Buddhās.)

Furthermore, Vetter admits that the pratyakṣa-chapter in the Pramāṇavārttika does contain clear influence of later (i.e., idealistic) Yogacāra texts, but he does not attempt to reconcile the two chapters. Are we to understand that Dharmakīrti changed his mind in the time between writing the two chapters? Or that he was a crypto-realist?

To conclude, it seems to me that Dharmakīrti’s religious ideas are not so much original as they are reductionist. This is probably due to the logician’s mind which looks everywhere for the necessary and sufficient conditions, and has a distaste for encumbering a subject matter with unnecessary or superfluous factors. This tendency can be observed on several occasions, which have been duly noted by Vetter, though I am not sure whether he would agree with me in drawing from them a general conclusion, and in calling Dharmakīrti a reductionist. Thus, we have the reduction of the perfections to compassion; the reduction of all faults (doṣa) to one single cause, namely, satkāyadrsti, and its equation with avidyā (cf. p. 22); the reduction of desires to one main desire responsible for suffering, namely, the desire for existence (instead of the traditional three: bhavatṛṣṇa, kāmatṛṣṇa and vibhavatṛṣṇa); the reduction of the eightfold path to one main member, namely, samyagdrsti (which changes its meaning accordingly, cf. p. 26); the consideration of all spiritual exercises except nairatmya-

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Darśana as meaningless (cf. p. 27), etc. I think Dharmakīrti’s touch is best seen in these things. In theory of knowledge he reduced inferential relations into two (tādāmya, tadupati), and the objects of valid cognition into one (svatākṣaṇa), and one can feel that it is the same mind which now works in a religious field, trying to put some order into the world — making it metaphysically somewhat poorer, but as simple and coherent as possible. However, a note of caution should be added, for in developing these theses Vetter relies very heavily, almost exclusively, on an argument ex silentiō.

Now, as far as the translation is concerned, let me start by emphasizing that it is very good, and that it is a real help for the reader who tries to wrestle with Dharmakīrti’s Sanskrit. However, I must admit that it is not as good as I expected. I believe that every translation — even by the best of scholars — and especially of such a difficult text as the Pramāṇasiddhi, should be meticulously checked by at least another pair of eyes before it goes into print. This has apparently not been done in this case, and accordingly the translation contains some simple mistakes, which are probably due to momentary lack of concentration, and which could have been easily avoided. For instance, hetu (cause) in v. 139 is translated as “suffering” (“Leid”). I presume Vetter wanted to translate “cause [of suffering],” and that it somehow slipped his mind. This trivial mistake is indeed unfortunate, because Vetter drags it on for the next three verses as well, considering the giving up of suffering as the subject of the discussion where, however, one would simply expect the explanation of the particle sūrya (well) in the predicate sūrya (well-gone). Such cases, however, are rare. The problematic part of the translation lies not in the literal rendering of words but in their interpretation which is added in brackets, and which is sometimes three and four times as long as the translation itself. For instance v. 222:

prabhānir ičcādeviṣekam gauravarṇāntarbandhaḥ/va/tayor adṛṣṭa vināya na iti bāhyeṣu yāh kramah/

(Note that Vetter reads adṛṣṭa against all Sanskrit editions which read adṛṣṭa, from the Tibetan translation one would expect an instrumental.)

Vetter's interpretation is highly improbable, for it is clear from the context that Dharmakīrti is replying in this verse to an opponent who claims that one does not have to give up the notion of Self, but only desire; for the Self is free from all faults, it is only desire which is faulty (cf. v. 221ab: snehah sadosa iti cet tatah kim tasya (scil. ātmano) varjanami/). Against this opponent Dharmakīrti argues that one cannot give up a faulty desire in the manner one gives up a faulty object. One can give up a faulty object by seeing its faults, but in order to give up desire one has to see not the faults of the desire itself, but the faults of the object towards which the desire is directed. Therefore, as long as no faults are seen in the Self, the desire towards it cannot stop. In other words, what Dharmakīrti has in mind is not, as Vetter claims, a distinction between two kinds of desire, the one, desire as such, which in the final analysis is directed towards the Self, the other, a manifestation of the former, directed towards an external object. The distinction he made is simply between desire and external object. This is also how Devendrabuddhi, Prajñākaragupta and Manorathanandin understood Dharmakīrti, and I fail to understand why Vetter did not follow them. Furthermore, Dharmakīrti himself elucidates his argument in the next half-verse in a manner which hardly leaves any room for misunderstanding: na hi snehamāna snehah kim tv arthaṇamadārāṇā/ “For desire does not [arise] from the qualities of desire, but from seeing the qualities of an object.”

The weakest point of the translation is due, I think, to Vetter's unusual relationship to Dharmakīrti's commentators. Dharmakīrti was, no doubt, a great philosopher, but, as Collingwood once said of Kant, the stylist in him was not equal to the philosopher, and the way he expresses himself could sometimes make you wish he said what he meant in a simpler and clearer manner. Tradition tells us that he knew he would not be understood already by his contemporaries and recognized the need even for a simple word to word explanation of the Pramāṇavārttika — how much more so for his philosophical ideas, but for that purpose even his own disciples were not good enough for him. Whether the sad stories about Devendrabuddhi are true or not — they certainly have a ring of truth to them — it is clear that we cannot understand Dharmakīrti without some help by the commentators. This does not mean, of course, that we have to accept everything they say, but as a methodological rule I think they should be given the benefit of the doubt and considered innocent until proven guilty by using sound criteria. That holds especially for Devendrabuddhi's commentary which is supposed to have been approved by Dharmakīrti himself. And even if this is just a legend, at least this commentary has the advantage of being the oldest, and of not being written by an original and relatively independent philosopher like Prajñākaragupta. Of course, if one has some sound reasons, whether philosophical, philological, contextual or whatever, to disagree with a commentator, one should do so by all means. But if all three, Devendrabuddhi, Prajñākaragupta and Manorathanandin, agree on an interpretation of a certain verse, and Vetter proposes a completely different one, I would certainly expect him to state his reasons why he thinks they are all wrong, and explain in what manner his interpretation deviates from the traditional one; and the least he could do is to warn the reader about it. I checked the Pramāṇavārttikālañāna and -vrtti (which almost always agree with each other) and occasionally Devendrabuddhi's Vrtti (or Paññikā); and it is clear that Vetter deviates from them in dozens of cases.

As a rule the traditional interpretation is simpler than Vetter's, often more convincing, and I cannot help feeling that Vetter complicated things unnecessarily. Sometimes the difference between Vetter and the commentators is so great, you can hardly believe they were reading the same text. For instance v. 168ed—169ab, directed against the Cārvākas:

bhūtānāṃ prāṇītāh he'pyaṃ bheda yathāyuḥ/ tan nirvāsāsya-yavat tadbhāvāvī tiṁ hi hūpayet/

[Im allgemeinen führt ihr das Belebtsein auf eine Besonderheit in der Zusammensetzung der Elemente zurück.] Wenn nun trotz des unterschiedlichen Belebtseins (prāṇī-abbhe 'py, Tib. srog chugs khyad med kyi) der dem Körper formenden] Elemente dieser Unterschied [in Begierde usw. da ist, dann muss] die [Suche], worauf
There are several problematic things here, but let us concentrate on the last three words (tadbhāvāt tāni hāpayet). Devendrabuddhi comments (Derge ed. 73b 6–7): gan la ńams par 'gyur  že na / de yod pa las te (= *tadbhāvāt) / 'dod chags la sogs pa daṅ ldan pa niṅ las so (= *rāgādimattvāt) / de ltar na 'ga’ ėz skye bzin pa niṅ ni / sdu gshis bde ba la sogs pa med pa daṅ ldan pa daṅ / 'dod chags daṅ bral ba daṅ / že sdaṅ daṅ / phrag dog daṅ ser sna daṅ bral ba skye bar ‘gyur ro // Prajñākaragupta does not comment on these words directly and the text is partly corrupted, but nevertheless it is clear that he understands them in a similar manner (129.5–6): yatāḥ kāraṇād bhūtātisayavād (read with the Tibetan translation 25: atišayaḥ) bhṛdas tathā (tasā yaḥ) nirvṝṣaśārayam antare (read with the Tib. trans.: -atiśayasambhave) tyantāpačayo ‘piḥ vitarāgah śāyā. Manorathananandin also follows Devendrabuddhi (p. 61.13): tadbhāvād rāgādimattvāt tāni bhūtāni hāpayed bhṛnāśayaed iti nirāgo ‘pi kašcit sattvāḥ śāyā. According to all three commentators one should translate as follows:

"Although there is no difference of vitality in the elements [which constitute a living being] (i.e., one living being is not more alive or less alive than another), there is this difference in desires] (i.e., some living beings are stronger, some weaker desires); its basis (i.e., cause), which is characterized by increase and decrease, could make the [elements] lose that [property of possessing desire, etc.; thus, there could be a living being without desire]."

We have two completely different interpretations of the same verse; which one is to be preferred? I cannot evaluate Vetter’s interpretation, because he does not say what led him to it, nor why he thinks that Devendrabuddhi, Prajñākaragupta and Manorathananandin are so completely off the mark. I do see, though, that the traditional interpretation has the advantage of accounting better for the use of the causative (hāpayet).

Vetter seems to be aware, at least to some extent, of this problem as he says in the preface (p. 7) that “Man hat das grösste Recht, von mir zu erwarten, dass ich auch in jedem Punkt Rechenschaft ablege über die Meinung der frühen Kommentatoren Devendrabuddhi (7.Jh.?) und Prajñākaragupta (8. Jh.). Nur für Prajñākaragupta kann ich diese Erwartung zum Teil erfüllen.” This statement, however, could be misleading by its modesty, for it could give the false impression that Vetter uses only partly Prajñākaragupta’s commentary, and not at all Devendrabuddhi’s and Manorathananandin’s commentaries. A quick glance at the notes, however, reveals that Vetter does use all three commentaries (Manorathananandin is referred to several times; Devendrabuddhi seems to be used only occasionally and he is mentioned, I believe, only once in p. 156). Moreover, when one compares the translation with the commentaries, one sees clearly that Vetter relies on them quite heavily; sometimes he even brings utṣṭūras into the brackets. (Personally I would prefer utṣṭūras to be in footnotes — for which there is plenty of unused space in the book — and not as an integral part of the translation, for sometimes they do distort Dharmakīrti’s arguments.) One has to conclude, therefore, that in those cases where Vetter deviates from the commentators he is conscious of that (at least in respect to Prajñākaragupta and Manorathananandin), and for this reason it is unexplainable to me why he proceeded the way he did. The trouble is that Vetter hardly ever tells you whether he follows one of the commentaries or whether he goes his own way, and when he deviates from the commentaries, he often proposes interpretations which are far from being self-evident, but with very few exceptions he never explains how he arrived at them.

In spite of its shortcomings, and those mentioned above are not meant to be exhaustive but only a few of the most conspicuous ones, Vetter’s book is undoubtedly an important contribution towards the understanding of Dharmakīrti’s Buddhism. A perfect translation and interpretation of Dharmakīrti is not likely to be achieved by a single scholar in a single stroke, and Vetter’s study is certainly not, nor was it meant to be, the last word on the subject. However, it does form a solid starting point, and as such it is a considerable achievement. Therefore, one can only be grateful to Professor Vetter for a book which is interesting, stimulating and which will occupy, I am sure, a central position in future Dharmakīrti-studies.
NOTES

1. Cf. E. Steinkeiller, “The spiritual place of the epistemological tradition in Buddhism,” Nanto Bukkyo 49, 1982, pp. 1–18. To the second category Steinkeller adds modern Indian scholars like Sukumar Dutt, who share Steinkeller’s positive approach, but unlike the latter who made a case for the compatibility of Buddhist “atheism” with Marxism–Leninism, are motivated by nationalist ideology, discovering in the epistemological tradition the dawn of a Western-like rational secularism within the monastic culture.

2. Ibid., p. 6.


4. Cf. Conze, The Memoirs of a Modern Gnostic, Part I, Sherborne 1979, p. 12: “... and one of the greatest benefits of my return to England has been that I have been able to do my Buddhist work in English and not in German, a language scarcely worth writing in any longer on scholarly matters concerning the East.”


6. I cannot enter here the anuloma- pratīloma controversy in all the details which it implies. The conflicting positions of Devendrabuddhi and Manoranathandini have been clearly explained by M. Inami and T. J. F. Tillemans in “Another Look at the Framework of the Pramāṇavārttika Chapter of Pramāṇavārttika,” WZK 30, 1986, pp. 123–142. I believe they are methodologically right to prefer Devendrabuddhi’s interpretation, according to which the pratīloma starts in v. 146, to Manoranathandini’s who situates the break in v. 280. (The difference is not as big as it may seem; it depends on the answer to the question whether on the four noble truths is the last part of the anuloma or the first part of the pratīloma.) It seems to me, however, that in this particular case exception should be made, for Manoranathandini’s division of the text is more elegant, and further, it is more natural to interpret v. 146b (tāyā vai caatātāsatvapraṇāsām) as an alternative to v. 145a (tāyāt svaatamāryogātā), rather than as a beginning of the pratīloma-part. As for Prajñākāravpa’s interpretation, in order to accept the claim that it is quite possible that he situated the break in v. 146 and not in v. 280 (cf. ibid., pp. 125–126, n. 7), one has to have some reason why he should refer to this break while commenting on the latter and not on the former.

7. Cf. Abhidharmakosābhidhāyā of Vasubandhu, ed. P. Prahlad, 2nd ed., Patna 1975, p. 415.414: treśṭhā kārtānāt sāṃyam sarvāṇādhiśām, sarvāṇaśrāvyānāmabhāvabuddhiya-vāsanānām dharmāntāyāna-rāśiṣṭhānam. Ekātām eva ca trividhān samāpadya mūsāvumārvuṇaṇaṇaḥ vadhāh sarvāṇādhiśām bhagavatānaḥ anukāk veryānām vīyāyatam (perhaps: pramaṇāna vīyāyatam) quad kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā kartā 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