

Subversion through Exposition: Immanent Critique and the Uses of Sectarian Diversity in Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhāṣya

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Introduction

The question of how Buddhist traditions preserved unity amid doctrinal diversity is central to pre-institutional Indian intellectual history. Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (AKBh) presents a striking paradox: though revered for centuries as the definitive Abhidharma manual from Kashmir to Tibet, it systematically undermines the very school it claims to expound. Ostensibly an exposition of the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika tradition, the Kośa instead exploits internal doctrinal tensions as a lever for philosophical transformation.

This study examines Vasubandhu's treatment of *trikāla-vāda*—the existence of past and future dharmas—as the primary case for observing this critical procedure. The Sarvāstivāda claim that dharmas exist in all three times was foundational to Vaibhāṣika accounts of karma, causation, and continuity. Yet the AKBh records multiple competing explanations of temporal difference and subjects them to objections exposing tensions between trans-temporal existence, causal efficacy, and change.

Related discussions of unconditioned phenomena (*asaṃskṛta-dharma*) and atomic aggregation engage similar ontological and causal concerns, but this article limits its analysis to temporal existence, noting those fields only as cognate arenas.

The paper argues that Vasubandhu follows a consistent pattern: he presents the orthodox stance fairly, dismantles it through immanent critique, and introduces Sautrāntika or proto-Yogācāra alternatives with evident sympathy. The cumulative effect recasts the AKBh not as a neutral primer, but as a masterpiece of philosophical subversion—demonstrating that early Buddhist unity persisted not despite sectarian diversity, but precisely through its critical engagement.

Objectives

This study pursues three objectives. First, to show that the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* operates not as a neutral primer but as a sustained internal

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critique, systematically unsettling its own metaphysical foundations. Second, to analyze Vasubandhu's method through *trikāla-vāda*—a crucial ontological fault line—revealing how immanent logic exposes orthodox inconsistencies from within. Third, to trace conceptual continuities between this critique and his later *Yogācāra* turn, positioning the *Kośa* as a deliberate bridge toward *viññapti-mātra* (consciousness-only). Together, these aims illuminate how philosophical unity and sectarian diversity functioned not as opposites, but as mutually reinforcing forces within pre-institutional Buddhist intellectual culture.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, text-analytical methodology grounded in close philosophical reading of primary sources. The principal text is Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, consulted in La Vallée Poussin's authoritative translation (Vasubandhu, 1990) and the annotated critical edition by Sangpo and Dhammajoti (2012). Supporting materials include Saṃghabhadra's *Nyāyānusāra*, accessed via Cox's annotated translation (1995).

The analytical framework centers on immanent critique—assessing internal consistency using a tradition's own premises—as the primary lens for tracing Vasubandhu's subversive strategy. This is supplemented by rhetorical analysis, examining how the very arrangement and juxtaposition of competing views functions as an argumentative device. Secondary scholarship contextualizes findings within broader debates on sectarian diversity and doctrinal development, drawing especially on Gold (2015), Dhammajoti (2009), and Lusthaus (2002). No quantitative or empirical methods are employed.

Results

Analysis of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* reveals a consistent three-stage argumentative pattern: respectful exposition of orthodox positions, systematic logical dismantling, and sympathetic introduction of *Sautrāntika* alternatives. This operates with particular clarity in Vasubandhu's treatment of *trikāla-vāda*.

The Four *Vaibhāṣika* Positions and Their Refutations

Vasubandhu presents four competing *Vaibhāṣika* solutions with an archivist's neutrality, then dismantles each through immanent critique:

Scholar	Theory	Refutation
Dharmatrata	Change of state (bhava)	Reduces change to naming or destroys past existence.
Ghosaka	Change of characteristics (lakṣaṇa)	Leaves substance unknowable and stripped of definition.
Vasumitra	Change of condition (avasthā)	Makes time external, detaching existence from causal function.
Buddhadeva	Relational otherness (anyathātva)	Produces infinite regress or empty relabeling.

The cumulative result is total systematic failure: four independent strategies—covering state, characteristic, condition, and modal difference—each prove incapable of reconciling enduring substance with temporal modification (Gold, 2015; Dhammajoti, 2009). By assembling these mutually undermining hypotheses, Vasubandhu exposes the orthodox position not as monolithic truth, but as a collection of fractured, internally inconsistent theories.

The Sautrantika Alternative

In sharp rhetorical contrast, Vasubandhu’s presentation of the Sautrāntika position is constructive and sympathetic. Their model resolves causation through seeds (bīja)—carrying latent potencies forward—and the mental continuum (*saṃtāna*), replacing the static dharma-atom as the primary causal unit (Kritzer, 2003). Three outcomes prefigure his later Yogācāra turn: elevating the consciousness-stream over discrete dharmas, anticipating the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), and framing time as mind-dependent—a move extending naturally toward vijñapti-mātra (Lusthaus, 2002).

Discussion / Conclusion

The analysis confirms that Vasubandhu’s subversive project operates on three simultaneous levels. Rhetorically, he adopts the mask of scholarly neutrality, presenting his conclusions as the objective outcome of reasoned analysis rather than as the expression of a partisan agenda. Philosophically, by demonstrating the systematic failure of four independent Vaibhāṣika frameworks, he leaves the Sautrāntika process model as the only intellectually viable path forward. Historically, the AKBh’s triumph as the definitive Abhidharma manual—despite Saṃghabhadra’s sustained orthodox counter-efforts—confirms the ultimate success of this Trojan Horse strategy (Cox, 1995).

This pattern recurs across global intellectual history. Maimonides, in the Guide for the Perplexed, embeds transformative philosophical claims within rabbinic commentary, while Zhu Xi’s rereading of Confucian classics reconstituted the tradition under the guise of faithful restoration (Strauss, 1952; Bol, 2008). Like these figures, Vasubandhu succeeded not by rejecting tradition

but by mastering it so completely that he guided it toward its necessary evolution. The AKBh thus stands as a landmark case study in how scholarly commentary can function as a vehicle for revolutionary thought—embedding its most challenging claims so deeply within traditional apparatus that they cannot be excised without destroying the work’s pedagogical utility.

His treatment of trikāla-vāda is a precise microcosm of this entire project: a patient, rigorous exercise in immanent critique that reshaped Buddhist thought from within, laying the conceptual foundation for the consciousness-only (vijñapti-mātra) philosophy of his later Yogācāra works. It illustrates how a tradition preserves its vitality precisely by cultivating the philosophical resources for its own transcendence.

Viewed within the conference theme of Unity in Diversity, the AKBh offers a paradigmatic case. Vasubandhu demonstrates that the rich diversity of Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, and proto-Yogācāra positions was not a fragmentation of Buddhist truth but a vital dialectical continuum. Early Buddhist scholars did not experience sectarian differences as a crisis—they experienced them as the generative engine of philosophical refinement. The AKBh endures as proof that unity in Buddhist thought was never static consensus, but a living achievement continuously produced through rigorous engagement with diversity. In this sense, the text stands not merely as a historical document, but as a living demonstration that unity within Buddhist philosophy has always been achieved through diversity, not despite it.

Keywords - Vasubandhu, Abhidharmakośabhāṣya, Trikāla-vāda, Sautrāntika, Sectarian diversity.

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