Book of Dzyan Research Report

Technical Terms in Stanza II

There are seven technical terms in stanza II of the "Book of Dzyan" as translated in H. P. Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*: "ah-hi" (*ahi*) and "paranishpanna" (*parinişpanna*), which are also found in stanza I, so were discussed in a previous report; *manvantara* and *māyā*, which are commonly found in Hindu Sanskrit texts in the same meaning, so require no comment; "devamatri" (*deva-mātṛ*) and "matripadma" (*mātṛ-padma*), which though rare in Sanskrit texts, still pose no particular problem; and "svābhāvat," a fundamental concept in *The Secret Doctrine* which poses fundamental problems. Among the doctrinal issues raised by the teachings of *The Secret Doctrine*, none poses greater problems for its philosophy than svābhāvat. While Theosophists who in the innocence of reading only their own books remain blissfully unaware that there are any problems here, for outside investigators, once they have gotten past the fraud charges and begun to investigate the actual doctrines, and leaving aside historical questions, it is the doctrine of svābhāvat which raises the most serious questions in the philosophy of *The Secret Doctrine*.

In the "Summing Up" section immediately following the seven stanzas from the "Book of Dzyan" given in volume I of *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky recapitulates the system of the Secret Doctrine. There she says (p. 273):

> The fundamental Law in that system, the central point from which all emerged, around and toward which all gravitates, and upon which is hung the philosophy of the rest, is the One homogeneous divine SUBSTANCE-PRINCIPLE, the one radical cause.
>
> It is called "Substance-Principle," for it becomes "substance" on the plane of the manifested Universe, an illusion, while it remains a "principle" in the beginningless

> and endless abstract, visible and invisible SPACE. It is the omnipresent Reality: impersonal, because it contains all and everything. *Its impersonality is the fundamental conception* of the System. It is latent in every atom in the Universe, and is the Universe itself.

Near the beginning of the "Proem," which precedes the seven stanzas given in volume I of *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky quotes (p. 3) what she had written earlier in *Isis Unveiled*, to show what "will be explained, as far as it is possible, in the present work":

> The esoteric doctrine teaches, like Buddhism and Brahminism, and even the Kabala, that the one infinite and unknown Essence exists from all eternity, and in regular and harmonious successions is either passive or active. In the poetical phraseology of Manu these conditions are called the "Days" and the "Nights" of Brahmā. The latter is either "awake" or "asleep." The Svabhāvikas, or philosophers of the oldest school of Buddhism (which still exits in Nepaul), speculate only upon the active condition of this "Essence," which they call Svābhāvat, and deem it foolish to theorise upon the abstract and "unknowable" power in its passive condition.

Earlier, the Mahatma K.H. in the first of a series of letters of instruction to A. O. Hume wrote (*The Mahatma Letters*, #11):

> To comprehend my answers you will have first of all to view the eternal *Essence*, the Swabhāvat not as a compound element you call spirit-matter, but as the one element for which the English has no name. It is both passive and active, pure *Spirit Essence* in its absoluteness and repose, pure matter in its finite and conditioned state—even as an imponderable gas or that great unknown which science has pleased to call *Force*.

A few months later, after some rather exasperating exchanges which led the Mahatma K.H. to comment, "All this reminds one

of wrangling for seniorship," he again advised A. O. Hume to study this fundamental concept (*The Mahatma Letters*, #22):

> Study the laws and doctrines of the Nepaulese Swabhavikas, the principal Buddhist philosophical school in India, and you will find them the most learned as the most scientifically logical wranglers in the world. Their plastic, invisible, eternal, omnipresent and unconscious Swabhavat is Force or *Motion* ever generating its electricity which is life.

What sources could Hume have studied the laws and doctrines of the Nepalese Svābhāvikas from? The only sources on this, available either then or now, are the essays of Brian H. Hodgson published in *Asiatic Researches*, etc., starting in 1828, and later collected into a book entitled *Essays on the Languages, Literature and Religion of Nepál and Tibet*, London, 1874. Hodgson had been British Resident in Kathmandu, living there from 1821 through 1843. Since Nepal was otherwise closed to foreigners, Hodgson's writings were for nearly a century the only source of information on Nepalese Buddhism. All the early Buddhist scholars, including Eugène Burnouf, Samuel Beal, Joseph Edkins, Hendrik Kern, etc., most of whom were quoted by Blavatsky and K.H., relied on these writings.

Upon studying Hodgson's essays, however, we find in his description of the Nepalese Svābhāvika school of Buddhism only the term svabhāva, not svābhāvat or svabhāvat or svabhavat (the spellings sva- or swa- are merely alternate transliterations). And yes, svabhāva is there described in the same terms used by Blavatsky and K.H. to describe svābhāvat. So why the final "t"? Svabhāva is a noun (which can also be used adjectivally); svābhāvat and svabhāvat are grammatically unintelligible; while svabhavat, as stated by G. de Purucker (*Occult Glossary*, p. 167), would be a neuter present participle. As such, it would function as a verb meaning "self-being," or "self-becoming." We would then expect to find this in the actual Sanskrit Buddhist texts; but we don't. We find only svabhāva, as reported by Hodgson, and occasionally svabhāvatā or svabhāvatva. The "-tā" and "-tva"

suffixes form abstract nouns, and can often be translated by the English suffix "-ness." Thus from *śūnya*, "empty," we get *śūnyatā*, "emptiness." Svabhāvatā, then, could mean something like "self-be-ness." In the case of words like svabhāva, however, which are frequently used adjectivally, these suffixes often serve only to fix their usage as a noun rather than an adjective, without any real change in meaning. Certainly, the exegetical tradition of Tibet treats them synonymously. It is possible, in terms of meaning, that svabhāvatā is what Blavatsky meant. A final long "ā", however, cannot be dropped like a final short "a" frequently is in north Indian pronunciation (e.g., rāj yog for rāja yoga); and it is the spellings ending in "t" that are found thoughout the early Theosophical writings. Blavatsky says in *The Secret Doctrine* (vol. I, p. 98) about svābhāvat: "The name is of Buddhist use . . ." and in a footnote, "As for Svābhāvat, the Orientalists explain the term as meaning the Universal plastic matter diffused through Space, . . ." I have checked the books on Buddhism referred to in Blavatsky's writings and available in her day, but found no svābhāvat, etc., only svabhāva. Although the theoretical form svabhavat as a present participle is grammatically possible, we do not find it in either Hodgson's essays, the only actual source on Nepalese Buddhism available last century in any European language, nor in the Sanskrit Buddhist texts where according to Blavatsky and K.H. it should be found. But with all this, our problems have only just begun.

Has nothing been published on the laws and doctrines of the Nepalese Svābhāvikas since Hodgson's early nineteenth century essays? Although Nepal was closed to foreigners until 1951, a few Buddhist scholars managed to get in earlier, most notably Sylvain Lévi and Giuseppe Tucci. Sylvain Lévi went in 1898, writing after his return to France, *Le Népal*, 3 vols., Paris, 1905-1908. He did not find any such school of Buddhism as the Svābhāvikas in Nepal, nor could the other three schools of Buddhism described by Hodgson (Aiswarika, Yātnika, Kārmika) and soberly discussed by generations of Buddhist scholars be found. Not only were there no Svābhāvikas in Nepal, but the supposed Buddhist doctrine of svabhāva was also called into question, since Buddhists existing elsewhere did not hold such

a doctrine. Recently, more detailed research has been carried on among the Buddhists of Nepal, the Newaris. An article by David N. Gellner in the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 12, 1989, entitled, "Hodgson's Blind Alley? On the So-Called Schools of Nepalese Buddhism," shows that the names Svābhāvika, etc., were merely used by Hodgson's Newari pundit informant as designations of what he felt were the diagnostic tenets of the main systems of ideas found in the Buddhist texts. These alleged schools of Nepalese Buddhism were questioned at the time Hodgson's account of them was first published, so that he felt compelled to later (1836) publish extracts from the Buddhist texts in support of them. Among the extracts he then published in support of the Svābhāvika school are two quotations from the *Buddha-carita*, a biography of the Buddha written by Aśvaghoṣa. Gellner points out in the above-mentioned article that the quotations in question give not the doctrines of the Buddha, but rather non-Buddhist doctrines spoken to the young Buddha-to-be by the councillor of the king, his father, in an effort to get him to give up his asceticism and return to the palace. These doctrines, of course, he rejected. Other quotations in support of the Svābhāvika school come from the *Prajña-pāramitā*, or Perfection of Wisdom texts. It is well known that these texts are said to have been received from the Nāgas by Nāgārjuna, and that he based his Madhyamaka system on them. It is equally well known that the basic tenet of his Madhyamaka system is emptiness, or the lack of svabhāva (*niḥsvabhāva*) in all things (*dharma*-s). The Madhyamaka school has a long history in India in the first millennium of the Common Era, from whence it was transferred first to China and then to Tibet. In Tibet it flourished; virtually all Tibetan Buddhists from then until now consider themselves to be Mādhyamikas, and thus as their basic tenet reject svabhāva (see, for example, Nāgārjuna's *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, chap. 15, "Examination of Svabhāva").

The Theosophical doctrine is quite unequivocal about this teaching. If no Svābhāvika school of Buddhism can be found, and if no doctrine of svabhāva is taught by any existing Buddhist school, could we perhaps find this teaching under a different

name in Buddhism? When Blavatsky quotes H. S. Olcott's *The Buddhist Catechism* in *The Secret Doctrine* (pp. 635-36), she inserts svābhāvat as a partial synonym of ākāśa: "Everything has come out of Akāsa (or Svābhāvat on our earth) in obedience to a law of motion inherent in it, . . . " Ākāśa is there said to be one of the two eternal things, along with nirvāṇa, taught in Buddhism. This is a teaching of the Theravāda school of Buddhism, but shared also by other Buddhist schools. The old Indian Sarvāstivāda school of Buddhism teaches two kinds of nirvāṇa, so along with ākāśa holds three things to be eternal. It could possibly be considered "the principal Buddhist philosophical school in India" mentioned by the Mahatma K.H. in connection with the Nepalese Svābhāvikas; at least it may have been at one time. But of course there have been no Buddhist philosophical schools in India for nearly a thousand years, ever since the Muslim invasion destroyed Buddhism in India. The doctrines of the Sarvāstivāda school, "they who say (*vāda*) that all (*sarva*) exists (*asti*)," are studied in Tibet in the *Abhidharma-kośa*, a text which is memorized in most Tibetan monasteries. This text gives the Sarvāstivāda doctrines as taught by the Vaibhāṣikas of Kashmir. It is accompanied by Vasubandhu's auto-commentary which also gives counter-arguments by the Sautrāntika Buddhists. However, both the Vaibhāṣika Sarvāstivādins and their Sautrāntika opponents are considered as Hīnayāna or "lesser vehicle" schools. Their doctrines are systematically refuted in the Tibetan yig-chas, or monastic study manuals, by the Madhyamaka school. Thus Tibetan Buddhists do not hold these doctrines as ultimately true, since the eternal ākāśa is refuted along with everything else (see, for example, Nāgārjuna's *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, chap. 5, "Examination of the Elements").

Is there anywhere else we can turn to for support of the svabhāva doctrine? Perhaps to Hinduism: to the venerable old Sāṃkhya system, considered to be the oldest school of Indian philosophy. In a quotation from the *Anugītā* found in *The Secret Doctrine* (vol. I, p. 571), Blavatsky equates svabhāva with prakṛti, the substance-principle of the Sāṃkhya system: "Gods, Men, Gandharvas, Pisāchas, Asuras, Rākshasas, all have been created by Svabhāva (Prakriti, or plastic nature) . . . " The term prakṛti is

glossed as pradhāna in Gauḍapāda's commentary on *Sāṃkhya-kārikā* verse 8. Earlier, in his commentary on verse 3, mūla-prakṛti was also glossed as pradhāna. Thus the three terms: prakṛti, pradhāna, and mūla-prakṛti are in some sense synonymous, and all are described as unmanifest (*avyakta*). But in the list of synonyms given in Gauḍapāda's commentary on *Sāṃkhya-kārikā* verse 22, of these only prakṛti and pradhāna are found, along with *brahma*, *avyakta*, *bahudhātmaka* and *māyā*, suggesting that the term mūla-prakṛti was reserved to indicate the more abstract aspect. Blavatsky says in *The Secret Doctrine* (vol. 1, p. 61): "Svābhāvat, the 'Plastic Essence' that fills the Universe, is the root of all things. Svābhāvat is, so to say, the Buddhistic concrete aspect of the abstraction called in Hindu philosophy *Mula-prakriti*." All this fits together, then, in supporting the idea that the Sāṃkhya prakṛti matches the svabhāva doctrine taught in *The Secret Doctrine*. But any gain from this match in supporting the teachings of *The Secret Doctrine* is soon lost. The Sāṃkhya school has been practically non-existent in India for centuries. Why is this? Because the Advaita Vedānta school, called in *The Secret Doctrine* the nearest exponent of the Esoteric philosophy (vol. I, p. 55), and its foremost teacher, Śaṅkarācārya, called in *The Secret Doctrine* "the greatest Initiate living in the historical ages" (vol. I, p. 271), refuted its substance-principle thoroughly and repeatedly (see, for example, Śaṅkarācārya's commentary on *Brahma-sūtra* 1.1.5 ff., and especially his summation at 1.4.28). Thus the Sāṃkhya doctrines were studied in India only to be refuted by the dominant Vedānta school, much as the Sarvāstivāda doctrines were studied in Tibet only to be refuted by the dominant Madhyamaka school.

The term svābhāvat occurs in the Stanzas seven times. It is supposed to be a Buddhist term, occurring in Buddhist texts, and known to orientalists. Yet this term is not to be found in either Buddhist texts nor in the writings of orientalists, but only the term svabhāva. It is supposed to be the doctrine of the Nepalese Svābhāvikas. Yet no such school was found to exist. It is supposed to be taught by Buddhism and Brahmanism. Yet there is no known school of Buddhism now in existence which teaches it; but on the contrary, for the Buddhists of Tibet where

the Book of Dzyan is said to have been preserved, it is the very doctrine they most pointedly reject. As for Brahmanism, while this doctrine may well have been found in the old Sāṃkhya school, Śaṅkarācārya's Advaita Vedāntins have refuted it and the Sāṃkhya school practically out of existence in India. Clearly, Theosophists have in front of them some homework to do.

If Theosophists have for more than a century been taking in support of their doctrines terms and schools which actually do not support them, it is time to correct this. The doctrine of the one substance-principle is consistent throughout the early Theosophical writings, being particularly clearly laid out in the article, "What is Matter and What is Force?" (*Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 4). It is no longer appropriate to say that it is the mūla-prakṛti of the Vedāntin and the svābhāvat of the Buddhist (e.g., SD I.46; BCW 10.304; BCW 14.234; etc.), since mūla-prakṛti is a Sāṃkhya concept which is refuted by the Vedāntins, and the term svābhāvat does not exist, while svabhāva is refuted by Buddhists existing today. If a term such as svabhāva is indeed found in the Stanzas, support for this doctrine should in fact be found in the Sanskrit Buddhist texts; and this requires research.

While studying Sanskrit during the summer of 1995 with Gautam Vajracharya, a Newari Buddhist from Nepal, I asked him about the supposed Svābhāvika school. I had written ahead with this question, and then in person asked him about it on two different occasions so as to minimize the possibility of my misunderstanding him. He was of the definite opinion that such a school of interpretation actually did exist in Hodgson's time, but he was equally sure that it does not exist at present in Nepal. The situation in Nepal then and now is that very few Buddhist pundits exist. They are somewhat scattered, and may preserve traditions within their Vajracharya family not preserved in other Vajracharya families. So Gautam felt that Hodgson's pundit probably had preserved an authentic Svābhāvika tradition, but that it has now died out. Gautam, himself a Vajracharya, was familiar with the other Vajracharyas living today, so was sure that such a tradition no longer exists. Hodgson, however, had provided four pages of quotations translated into English from

Sanskrit Buddhist texts in support of this doctrine. The texts quoted from, including the lengthy *Prajñā-pāramitā* texts, together total thousands of pages. Due to this bulk, few of these quotations have yet been traced, other than from the *Buddhacarita*. Perhaps a valid Svābhāvika doctrine can yet be found in the Sanskrit Buddhist texts. But Theosophists will have to find it, because no one else is likely to be interested.

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