

THE CONCEPT OF A CONCEPT

In discussions about words and meanings (or objects), and in logical discussions involving terms and their extension, a distinction comes to be made between objects in the world and the signs, symbols, etc. used to denote them. In some philosophical discussions it may not be clear whether what is referred to is the words or their objects, but this question tends to be cleared up fairly soon and also to lead into interesting discussions about what 'exists', whether we can go beyond words to 'reality' and so forth. In the Buddhist schools, because of their initial epistemological and critical preoccupations, a categorical distinction was soon perceived between words and objects. Thus it was found at the outset that some words seemed to have no objects to 'mean', though apparently perfectly at home in everyday language. Consequently it was concluded that such meaningless words should be excluded from philosophical discussion, implying immediately that there were two types or levels of discussion or language, everyday and philosophical, with problems of translation from one to the other. For example, pronouns were found not to refer to anything which could be pointed to as their proper objects. The Buddha himself appears to have been responsible for this initial depronominisation of Buddhist philosophical discourse, moving on into a thoroughgoing depersonification of discourse. Thus instead of posing meaningless problems such as "who desires?" or "who is conscious?" or "is he who acts the same as he who experiences the result of the action?", one must substitute the proper formulations "through what condition is there desire?" or "through what condition is there consciousness?" or "through what condition does such and such a result occur?" (see e.g. *Samyutta Nikāya* II 13 / Taishō 99 section 15 No. 10; 75f. / section 12 No. 18 / *Nidāna Samyukta* ed. by Tripāṭhi, pp. 165-7). The doctrine of 'conditioned origination', without any 'agent' or 'subject' or 'person', is fundamental to all schools of Buddhism. In these discussions the Buddha rejects all such terms (which we would call 'concepts') as 'soul' ('self'), 'life-principle', 'person', 'being' and so on (in Sanskrit

ātman, jīva, pudgala, sattva; Pali *attan, jīva, puggala, satta*) as not meaning anything, defying his opponents to point out what they referred to.

The word which we are about to translate as ‘concept’, namely Sanskrit *prajñapti* or Pali *paññatti*, because that appears to be the nearest English equivalent to it as used in the Buddhist schools, rarely occurs in the presumed discourse of the Buddha himself (primarily the *Sūtra* or *Suttanta Piṭaka* as common to the available recensions of its text). However, it does occur there in some significant passages and thus lay at hand for later commentators and philosophers to develop as a more precise tool in discussion. One might observe here that the convenient word *iti* or *ti* in the Indian languages, marking the end of a quotation or quoted word, tended to make the overt description and labelling of something as a ‘concept’ seem superfluous. The development of the concept of a ‘concept’ by Buddhist philosophers was thus not inevitable and might itself seem meaningless.

In this paper we shall pursue this development through the work of several philosophers. First we shall note the more significant occurrences of ‘concept’ in the *Sūtra Piṭaka*. After that we shall take up the *Abhidharma Piṭaka*, with which we clearly leave the discourse of the Buddha himself and enter the discussions of the schools which claimed to be systematising his doctrine. To keep our task simpler, we shall confine ourselves to one of these schools, the Sthaviravāda (Pali Theravāda), where we are in the favourable position of having intact at least the literature which they considered of permanent value for philosophical study. It must be noted, however, that every known school of Buddhism operated with the same term ‘concept’ (*prajñapti*) in its discussions, using it apparently in the same way though in order to lead sometimes to different conclusions. Thus there was actually a ‘Concept School’, so-called (Prajñaptivāda), of the Mahāsaṃgha branch, whose special doctrine consisted in a particular set of distinctions between what was ultimately real and what was merely conceptual (see *Indian Buddhism* p. 278). The Saṃmitīya held their peculiar doctrine of the ‘person’ as a “concept based on the groups” (*Indian Buddhism* p. 276), which the Sthaviravāda attacked in their *Kathāvatthu* (see below). Nāgārjuna’s ‘emptiness’ is itself a “concept based on” (*upādāya prajñapti*, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XXIV.18). The *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* distinguishes the imagining of ‘concepts’ from that of ‘substances’ (so-called but false; I.36, V.6, 13, 30). After the