

*Twenty Verses with Auto-Commentary*¹

Vasubandhu

From

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Translated by Nilanjan Das.

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Vasubandhu (4th to 5th century CE).

Vasubandhu was a Buddhist monk and philosopher, born in Peshawar (in present-day Pakistan), then in the Kingdom of Gāndhāra, which included part of present-day Afghanistan. Vasubandhu is one of the founders of the Yogācāra school of Buddhism, and his many philosophical and religious works have been highly influential in Buddhist thought.

I. A Statement of the View

[Proponent:] In the Mahāyāna system, it has been established that everything in the three realms is nothing but appearance.² This is obvious from the canonical utterance [of the Buddha himself], “O sons of victorious ones! Everything in the three realms is nothing but mind.” The expressions ‘mind’, ‘mental faculty’, ‘awareness’, and ‘appearance’ are synonyms. Here, the term ‘mind’ is meant to include associated mental factors [such as feelings, perception, etc.]. The expression ‘nothing but’ is meant to rule out the existence of external objects.

Verse 1. This is all appearance only; for even non-existent objects are presented to us, as, for instance, a person with faulty vision sees unreal hair, etc.

II. Objections and Responses

II.1 Objections

...

[Opponent:]

Verse 2. If appearances do not arise from external objects, then there is no reason why appearances should arise at particular times and places, or why they should be produced across different minds, or why objects of such appearances should have causal efficacy.

What is being said?

If color-appearances are produced, not by the colors themselves, but in their absence, then why are such appearances produced at some places, and not everywhere?

Even then, they are produced only sometimes, and not always.

Such appearances are [also] produced in the minds of all thinkers located at the relevant places and times, and not just in that of a particular thinker. The latter is the case with the appearances of unreal hair, etc., which are produced only in the minds of people with faulty vision, but not in those of others.

Why do the hair, flies, etc. perceived by people with faulty vision fail to be causally efficacious in the way hair, flies, etc. should be? But others [i.e., the hair, flies, etc. seen by people with normal vision] are causally efficacious in that way. The food, drink, clothes, poison, weapons, etc. that we encounter in dreams aren’t causally efficacious in a manner that food, etc. ought to be. But others [i.e., the food, etc. seen outside of dreams] are causally efficacious in that way. An

² “Mahāyāna system”: major tradition of Buddhism; “three realms”: three worlds into which one may be reborn.

illusory city in the sky, in virtue of being non-existent, isn't causally efficacious in the way a city should be.³ But others [i.e., real cities] are causally efficacious in that way.

Therefore, without external objects, one cannot make sense of the production of appearances at particular times and places, or the production of appearances across different minds, or the causal efficacy of their objects.

II.2 Responses

[Proponent:] It is not the case that these constraints on appearances are unexplained, because

Verse 3. The production of appearances at particular times and places is established, just as in the case of dreams.

...In dreams, even without the presence of any external object, certain objects like flies, gardens, women, men, etc. are seen, only at certain places [within those dreams] and not everywhere. Even when a particular place is fixed, they are only seen only at certain times [in the course of those dreams], and not always. Hence, even without the presence of any external object, appearances may arise only at particular places and times.

Verse 3 (continued). The production of appearances across different minds is established, just as in the case of hungry ghosts.⁴

...How is the analogy with hungry ghosts established?

Verse 3 (continued). Because all of them [i.e., all hungry ghosts] experience a pus-river, and so on.

...When placed in the same predicament with respect to the ripened fruit of their previous acts, all hungry ghosts—and not just one of them—see a river full of pus. They also see a river full of urine and excrement, governed by men armed with swords and clubs, etc.⁵ This is captured by the expression “and so on.” Thus, the production of appearances across different minds is established even in the absence of external objects.

Verse 4. The causal efficacy of objects of appearances is established just as in the case of nocturnal emissions.

...The analogy is that even though there is no sexual intercourse in a dream, the dreamer still discharges semen.

³ Vasubandhu is alluding here to a *fata morgana*, a kind of mirage involving multiple images, e.g., of buildings, which appears just above the horizon and which thus could get mistaken for a city in the sky.

⁴ In Buddhist cosmology, hungry ghosts are beings who in previous lives had committed acts of lust and greed, and, as a result, find themselves in a state of unquenched thirst and unsated hunger. They linger at the margins of the human world, and where ordinary humans see streams of clear water, they undergo shared visions of rivers of pus.

⁵ According to the classical Indian doctrine of *karma*, agents who perform morally equivalent acts are subjected to the same experiences in the afterlife or when reborn.

In the same manner, the four constraints on appearances, namely the production of appearances at particular places and their production at particular times, etc., are established by other examples too.

Verse 4 (continued). All four constraints on appearances are established as in the case of hell.

How is the analogy with hell established?

Verse 4 (continued). Through the perception of the wardens of hell, etc., and through torture at their hands.

The inhabitants of hell undergo visions of hell-wardens. These visions arise at particular places and particular times. The expression “etc.” refers to the visions of dogs, crows, and iron-mountains, of comings and goings, etc. Such visions arise in everyone, and not just in one person. And even though hell-wardens don’t exist, the suffering that the hell-wardens cause to the inhabitants of hell is still established [as real]; for the ripened fruit of their past morally equivalent acts holds sway [over their present experiences]. It is to be known that in this manner, in other cases too, all these four constraints on appearances are established.

....

III. The Argument for Idealism

[Opponent:] Then, why is it to be understood that the Buddha spoke about the existence of the external bases of sensory cognition like color, intending to convey that there is no external object which is presented by each appearance, e.g., by the appearance of color?

[Proponent:] Because

Verse 11. This object [presented by appearances] cannot be simple, nor can it be a plurality of atoms. It cannot be the latter even if the atoms are conjoined to each other; for atoms themselves cannot be established.

What is being said?

[Option 1:] The external basis of sensory cognition, such as colour, etc., which appears as an object of our awareness can be simple, e.g., the *part-possessing form* accepted by the Vaiśeṣikas.⁶

[Option 2:] Or, it can be a plurality of atoms.

[Option 3:] Or, it can be a unified collection of atoms [which are conjoined to each other].

⁶ A school of classical Indian philosophy.

[Response to Option 1:] The object of awareness cannot be simple, because we are never aware of an object without also being aware of its parts.

[Response to Option 2:] Neither can a plurality of atoms be the object of awareness, because we are never aware of an individual atom.

[Response to Option 3:] Nor can a unified collection of atoms be the object of awareness, because the status of an atom as a simple substance⁷ isn't established.

[Opponent:] Why not?

III.1. The Argument against Option 3: The Status of Atoms as Simple Substances Cannot Be Established

[Proponent:] Because

Verse 12. If an atom could be simultaneously conjoined to six other atoms on its six sides, then it would have six parts.

If an atom could simultaneously be conjoined to six other atoms on its six sides [so as to produce a composite object], then each atom would have six parts; for the region which is in contact with one atom cannot be occupied by another.

Verse 12 (continued). Moreover, if the six atoms were to occupy the same location, the composite object consisting of the atoms would also be an atom.

Suppose each atom is located at the same place where all six are. In that case, since all the atoms are at the same place, all composite objects would just be an atom; for the atoms which constitute such objects now wouldn't be distinct from each other. Thus, no unified collection of atoms would now be visible.

The Kashmiri Vaibhāṣikas⁸ say, “Atoms are not conjoined to each other, because they don't have parts. So, this unacceptable consequence doesn't follow [on our view]. Rather, unified collections of atoms are in contact with each other.”

They are to be asked this: “A unified collection of atoms isn't something distinct from the atoms themselves. So,

Verse 13. If atoms cannot be conjoined, whose conjoining do we see in unified collections of atoms?”

...

⁷ An independently existing thing or entity; see **substance**.

⁸ An early Buddhist subschool from Kashmir, a region that overlaps both present-day India and Pakistan.

Verse 13 (continued). So, unified collections of atoms cannot be established by appeal to the conjoining of atoms, because atoms have no parts.

Well, even unified collections of atoms are not conjoined to each other! Therefore, it cannot be said that the reason why the conjoining of atoms cannot be established is that they don't have parts; for even the conjoining of unified collections of atoms—which are objects with parts—cannot be accepted. Thus, the status of atoms as simple substances cannot be established.

Whether or not you accept the conjoining of atoms,

Verse 14. Anything which is spatially extended cannot be simple.

If atoms were spatially extended, having a region facing east or a lower region, why would such atoms be simple?

Verse 14 (continued). [If atoms weren't spatially extended,] how then could they have shadows or be concealed?

If no individual atom were spatially extended, how could shadows be cast at dawn at one place and sunlight at another? For [without spatial extension] the atom would have no region which was untouched by sunlight. How could one atom be concealed by another atom if atoms were not spatially extended? For, in that case, there wouldn't be any front region of an atom such that when another atom arrives at that region, it blocks the original one. If one atom didn't block another, all unified collections of atoms would be reduced to a single atom. This has been said.

III.2 Against Composite Wholes

[Opponent:] Why don't you accept that only composite wholes are subject to shadows and concealment?

[Proponent:] Do you think that there is a composite whole over and above the atoms themselves, which is subject to shadows and concealment? That cannot be. It is said:

Verse 14 (continued). If the composite whole isn't distinct from its constituent atoms, then they [i.e., the shadows and the concealment] are not its properties [i.e., properties of the composite whole].

If you don't accept the view that the composite whole is distinct from its constituent atoms, then the shadows and the concealment are not properties of the composite object. The composite object is just a constructed idea.

[Opponent:] As long as the defining characteristics [of various objects of awareness] such as color, etc. remain uncontradicted, why even bother speculating whether the object of awareness is an atom or a unified collection of atoms?

[Proponent:] What, then, is the defining characteristic of the object of awareness?

[Opponent:] “Being an object detected by the eye, etc.,” and “being blue”, etc.

[Proponent:] This is being considered: Is the thing which is blue, yellow, etc., and which is also taken to be the object of visual perception, etc., a simple substance, or a plurality?

[Opponent:] What is the point of this question?

III.3 Back to Option 1

[Proponent:] The problem with its being a plurality has already been stated [in response to Options 2 and 3].

Verse 15. If it were simple, gradual traversal wouldn't be possible; nor would simultaneous perception and non-perception [of the same object with respect to different parts] be possible; nor could separate objects reside at different places; nor would very small objects be imperceptible.

If one imagines that the object of visual perception is just one unbroken substance—not many—, then gradual traversal across the earth would be impossible, where “traversal” means *motion*; for, in a single step, the whole earth would be traversed.

Neither could the near part of an object be perceived at the same time as the distant part isn't perceived; for perception and non-perception of the same thing at the same time isn't possible.

Nor could elephants, horses, etc., which are separate and distinct, be located at different places; for, wherever one was, there would be the other. Then, how could they be separated by distance? Or, [if you deny that they are separated by distance], how could the places that they occupy and do not occupy be one, given that empty space is apprehended between them?

[Furthermore], if the difference between distinct substances is only to be explained in terms of their defining characteristics, and not otherwise [i.e., not in terms of their parts], then very small aquatic creatures which have the same characteristics as large ones wouldn't remain unperceived. Thus, [in order to distinguish such creatures from one another,] we have to accept that different substances can differ with respect to their atomic compositions.

III.4 Conclusion

Therefore, the object of awareness cannot be established as a simple entity. If the object of awareness cannot be established as a simple entity, then the status of color, etc. as external objects of vision, etc., is also disproved [since Options 2 and 3 have already been rejected]. Hence, these are nothing but appearances.

IV. Further Objections

IV.1 Perceptual Thought, Memory and Dreams

[Opponent:] Existence and non-existence are determined by various means of knowing. Amongst all the means of knowing, perception is the best. If there is no external object, then how does the thought, “[This is] perceived [by me]” arise?

[Proponent:]

Verse 16. The perceptual thought arises as in the case of dreams.

That is, without any external object. This has already been made clear.

Verse 16 (continued). When the perceptual thought arises, the object isn’t seen; why then is that object treated [by the opponent] as perceptible?

When the perceptual thought arises in the form, “This object is perceived by me”, then the external object isn’t seen; for it is by mental awareness that the object is then discerned, since visual awareness by then has ceased. Why, then, is that object to be treated as *perceptible*? More specifically, if the object of visual awareness is momentary, then [its properties such as] color, etc. are indeed gone [when the perceptual thought arises].⁹

[Opponent:] That which hasn’t been directly apprehended cannot be recalled by mental awareness. So, the mental awareness must indeed be generated by a direct apprehension of an object. Such direct apprehension just is perception. Therefore, the objects of such apprehension, such as color, etc., are to be treated as perceptible.

[Proponent:] This principle, namely that only directly apprehended objects can be recalled, cannot be established, because

Verse 17. It has already been said that appearances present objects as if they were real.

It has been said that even without the presence of an object, appearances constituted by visual awareness arise, presenting things as if they were real.

Verse 17 (continued). The same goes for recollection.

From such an appearance, a mental awareness which makes manifest the previous appearance, but is infused with constructions like color, etc., arises due to recollection. Therefore, the direct apprehension of an object cannot be established by appealing to recollection.

[Opponent:] If appearances that arise when one is awake were about unreal objects just like appearances produced in dreams, then one would oneself recognize the non-existence of such objects. This doesn’t happen. Therefore, it cannot be the case that all awareness is objectless like dreams.

⁹ Here, Vasubandhu is appealing to the Buddhist theory of momentariness, according to which there are no objects that persist over time. So when you think, “*This object* is perceived by me,” the object no longer exists at the time you have the thought, and so “isn’t seen.”

[Proponent:] This isn't helpful, because

Verse 17 (continued). The absence of objects in dreams isn't recognized unless one is awake.

The ordinary person—enwrapped in the sleep of traces left by her habits of false imaginative construction—sees as in dreams unreal objects. Thus, she fails to recognize the absence of such objects in that unawakened state. But suppose she wakes up, having gained the transcendent awareness which is free from imaginative construction and thus is opposed to that earlier state of sleep. Then, faced with the purified worldly awareness that arises as a result of that transcendent awareness, she recognizes the absence of external objects. Therefore, appearances that arise while one is dreaming are no different from the appearances that arise while one is awake.

IV.2 Causation and Moral Responsibility

[Opponent:] If appearances are produced in sentient beings not by external objects, but rather by events within their own minds, then how can we establish that particular appearances arise in particular sentient beings from the company of good or bad friends, or from hearing good or bad teaching? For such good or bad company, and good or bad teaching don't exist at all!

[Proponent:]

Verse 18. Appearances are mutually constrained, in virtue of their dominance over one another.

In all sentient beings, the appearances that belong to those beings are mutually constrained in virtue of their dominance over each other, as the case may be. Here, the expression "mutually" means "by one another." Therefore, it is a specific appearance in one mind—not any specific external object—which produces a specific appearance in another mind.

[Opponent:] If the appearances produced in a wakeful state have no object just like appearances produced in a dream, then why do good and bad acts performed in wakeful states and dreams not have the same desirable and undesirable consequences in the future?

[Proponent:] Because

Verse 18 (continued). In dreams, the mind languishes in a state of torpor; that is why the fruits of acts are different [in the two states].

That is the cause here, not the absence of objects.

[Opponent:] If all this is just appearance, then no one has a body or speech. Then, how do butchers kill approaching sheep? If they do not kill the sheep, why are the butchers subject to the sin of killing?

[Proponent:]

Verse 19. Death is a change brought about by a mental event that arises in another being, just as certain mental powers of demons bring about the loss of memory, etc., in others.

The mental powers of demons can induce loss of memory, dreams, and possession by spirits in others. Similarly, the mental powers of those with supernatural abilities give rise to such effects: for example, Sāraṇa saw a dream due to the influence of Ārya Mahakātyāyana, while the mental sins of the forest-dwelling sages led to the conquest of Vemacitra.¹⁰ Analogously, it is to be understood that due to the influence of one being's mental events, a change opposed to the life of another being arises. This interruption of the homogeneous continuum [that constitutes the mind of the latter being] is called *death*.

Verse 20. How else could the Daṇḍaka Forest have been emptied owing to the anger of the sages,

if one doesn't accept that mental events of one being can bring about the death of another?

The householder Upāli was asked by the Buddha, who wanted to establish the sinfulness of mental torture, "O householder, have you heard that the Daṇḍaka Forest, the Forest of Mātaṅga, and the Forest of Kaliṅga, were emptied and turned into grounds fit for sacrificial rites?" And he said, "I have heard, o Gautama! It was through the mental sins of the sages."

Verse 20 (continued). How else would the sinfulness of mental torture be established by that [action]?

If one imagines that the beings living in those forests were destroyed by demonic creatures who were pleased with the sages, and not killed by the mental sins of the sages, then how can that action establish that mental torture is the greatest sin? It can only be established if the death of those beings came about solely due to the mental sins of the sages.

IV.3 Our Knowledge of Other Minds

[Opponent:] If all this is just appearance, do knowers of other minds become aware of other minds, or not?

[Proponent:] Why is this relevant?

[Opponent:] If they are not aware of other minds, how are they knowers of other minds?

[Proponent:] Well, then, they are aware of other minds. [But]

¹⁰ Sāraṇa, a monk, asked the permission of his teacher, Ārya Mahakātyāyana, to leave monastic life and wage war against King Pradyota; Ārya Mahakātyāyana, in turn, made Sāraṇa undergo a nightmare by means of his mental powers. The King of Asuras, Vemacitra, who after receiving the curses of the sages he once scorned, experienced nightmares, subsequently becoming fearful and angst-ridden.

Verse 21. Awareness of other minds is illusory. How? Just like one's awareness of one's own mind.

[Opponent:] Why is the latter illusory?

[Proponent:]

Verse 21 (continued). Because one's own mind is unknown to one in the manner in which it is known to the Buddhas.¹¹

Since one isn't acquainted with the ineffable manner in which the mind [both another's and one's own] is known to the Buddhas, one's awareness of both another's and one's own minds turns out to be illusory; for [in such awareness] the misleading appearance of a distinction between the graspable object and the grasping awareness isn't dispelled.¹²

Even though the doctrine of appearance-only is comprised of innumerable theories and distinctions, and is unfathomably profound,

Verse 22. I have established the doctrine of appearance-only according to my capacities; but it is in fact not thinkable in its entirety.

This doctrine cannot be reflected upon under all its aspects, because it outruns the limits of inquiry. How then can it be fully grasped? It is said:

Verse 22 (continued). It is grasped by the Buddhas.

This doctrine, under all its aspects, is grasped by the supreme Buddhas; for nothing stands in the way of their grasping graspable things of all forms.

¹¹ The Buddhas are those who have achieved perfect spiritual enlightenment.

¹² Vasubandhu is alluding here to a central teaching of the Yogācāra school of Buddhism, that there is no distinction between awareness and its object.

