Omniscience in the Mahāyānasūtrālāṅkāra and Its Commentaries*

§1 Methods and Goals

After about the second century of the Christian era the intellectuals of the Indian Buddhist traditions came to regard omniscience as an essential property of Buddhahood, a vital part of being a Buddha. It is true that in early Buddhism there seems to have been, at best, an ambivalent attitude towards omniscience considered in this way, or at least a somewhat limited idea of what it is logically possible for an omniscient being to know. But by the time of the Kathavatthu, the epithets of the Buddha were normally taken to include sabbāññū and sabbadassavi (“all-knowing” and “all-seeing”), and a strong claim is made for the possibility and importance of omniscience in the Patisambhidāmāgga.

This notion has as yet been given rather little attention, systematic or historical, by Western scholars. Padmanabh Jaini’s brief comparative analysis of Buddhist and Jaina ideas about omniscience draws almost all its Buddhist materials from early Theravāda texts, and thus has little to say about the complex terminological and conceptual innovations which took place in India between the first and sixth centuries of the Christian era. And almost everything else available in Western languages on this topic deals exclusively with much later materials. For example, Ernst Steinkellner’s study of what can be reconstructed of Jñānaśrīmitra’s Sarvajñasiddhi is suggestive and offers very important materials for an analysis of the late (post-Sāntideva) Indian Buddhist position on omniscience. The same is true of Gudrun Bühnemann’s recent translation and study of Ratnakīrti’s Sarvajñasiddhi; it is considerably more detailed than Steinkellner’s work, and is the most systematic presentation to date of the late Indian Buddhist arguments for and against the possibility of omniscience. But because both Steinkellner and Bühnemann deal with late authors, thinkers whose work presupposes all the philosophical innovations that postdate Dignāga, their work is of little help in tracing or understanding the earlier terminological and conceptual developments surrounding the idea of omniscience as an essential property of Buddhahood.

There is, then, no study in a Western language of which I am aware that explores terms for and ideas about omniscience in scholastic Indian

Buddhist texts from an earlier period, specifically from the fourth to sixth centuries CE, a period which saw that great flowering of Buddhist scholastic thought connected with the names of Vasubandhu and Asaṅga. Such terminological analyses are, of course, needed in almost every area of Buddhist studies, but their lack is especially obvious in the study of the technical philosophical texts of this period, and even more especially in the study of those texts connected with the Yogācāra tradition.

An example: a distinction was made by some Indian Buddhist thinkers as early as the second century CE between straightforward omniscience, denoted by *sarvajñāna* and similar compound terms, and a more exalted kind of omniscience denoted by the compound *sarvākārajñāta*. This latter is not present in the texts of early Buddhism: it does not, for example, appear anywhere in the *Nikāyas*. It is used, however, in some *Prajñāpāramitā* texts,7 where the distinction between the two kinds of omniscience is conceptually fairly clear and the semantic distinction between the terms used for each is well-marked. Commentaries to this literature often at least mention this distinction, as, for example, does the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra* and they sometimes make a great deal of it, as most obviously in the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* and the commentarial tradition following that text.9

Several terms for omniscience (including *sarvākārajñāta*) are also found in the texts of the early and classical Yogācāra, most often as one element in a more-or-less systematized list of the good qualities (*guna*) of a Buddha,10 a list some of whose members go back to the texts of early Buddhism but which appears to have become fully standardized as a list only by the time of the systematic Yogācāra works of Asaṅga (ca. late fourth century CE).

One way of pursuing the study of what Buddhist intellectuals meant by claiming that the Buddha was omniscient, then, would be to trace the elaboration of terms for omniscience (with special attention to *sarvākārajñāta*) in the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra- corpus*. Since this corpus is large I shall not undertake that task here, although it would prove a fascinating complement both to the studies already mentioned and to that under way here.11 Instead, I shall analyze the use of terms for omniscience (and especially *sarvākārajñāta*) in one important early Yogācāra text, the *Mahāyānasūtrasūtra-laṅkāra* (MSA), and three of its Indic commentaries. My goal, briefly, is to examine all those terms which appear to denote (some form of) omniscience; to arrive, through an analysis of all the relevant text-places, at a more precise sense of the semantic range of these terms than has hitherto been available; and to show, by examining the contexts within which talk about omniscience is found in this literature, how ideas about omniscience fit into Yogācāra