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ABBREVIATIONS

A	<i>Āṅguttara-nikāya</i>
AO	<i>Acta Orientalia</i>
AM	<i>Asia Major</i>
As	<i>Aṭṭhasālinī</i>
BEFEO	<i>Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient</i>
BHSD	F. Edgerton, <i>Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary</i>
BM	<i>Burlington Magazine</i>
BSOAS	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
BSR	<i>Buddhist Studies Review</i>
CIS	<i>Contributions to Indian Sociology</i>
CPD	<i>Critical Pāli Dictionary</i>
CSSH	<i>Comparative Studies in Society and History</i>
CSLCY	<i>Chin-so liu-chu yin</i> , in TC, no. 1015
D	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
Dīp	<i>Dīpavaṃsa</i>
EA	<i>Études Asiatiques</i>
EFEO	<i>Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient</i>
EJS	<i>European Journal of Sociology</i>
EI	<i>Epigraphia Indica</i>
ERE	<i>Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics</i> , edited by James Hastings, Edinburgh, T.&T. Clark, 1911
HJAS	<i>Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies</i>
HR	<i>History of Religions</i>
IASWR	<i>Institute for Advanced Studies of World Religions</i>
IBK	<i>Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū</i>
IHQ	<i>Indian Historical Quarterly</i>
IJ	<i>Indo-Iranian Journal</i>
IT	<i>Indologica Taurinensia</i>
JA	<i>Journal Asiatique</i>
JAS	<i>Journal of Asian Studies</i>
JHR	<i>Journal of the History of Religions</i>
JIABS	<i>Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies</i>

<i>JNCBRAS</i>	<i>Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>
<i>JNRC</i>	<i>Journal of the Nepal Research Centre</i>
<i>JPTS</i>	<i>Journal of the Pali Texts Society</i>
<i>JRAS</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>
<i>JS</i>	<i>Journal des Savants</i>
<i>Kv</i>	<i>Kathāvatthu</i>
<i>Kv-a</i>	<i>Kathāvatthu-aṭṭhakathā</i>
<i>MCB</i>	<i>Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
<i>Mhbv</i>	<i>Mahābodhivaṃsa</i>
<i>Mhv</i>	<i>Mahāvāṃsa</i>
<i>Mp</i>	<i>Manoratha-pūranī</i>
<i>MSMS</i>	Monumenta Serica Monograph Series
<i>Paṭis</i>	<i>Paṭisambhidā-magga</i>
<i>PTS</i>	Pali Text Society
<i>RH</i>	<i>Revue Historique</i>
<i>RO</i>	<i>Rocznik Orientalistyczny</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
<i>SBE</i>	Sacred Books of the East
<i>Saddhamma-s</i>	<i>Saddhamma-saṅgaha</i>
<i>SLJBS</i>	<i>Sri Lanka Journal of Buddhist Studies</i>
<i>Sp</i>	<i>Samantapāsādikā</i>
<i>SSAC</i>	<i>Studies in South Asian Culture</i>
<i>T</i>	The Taishō edition of the Buddhist Canon in Chinese (vol. no.)
<i>Th</i>	<i>Theragāthā</i>
<i>TMKFTCC</i>	<i>Tao-men k'o-fa ta-ch'üan-chi</i> , in TC, no. 1215
<i>TP</i>	<i>T'oung Pao</i>
<i>TC</i>	The Taoist Canon, text numbered in accordance with the Harvard-Yenching Index to its titles
<i>TTD</i>	Tibetan Tripiṭaka, sDe-dge Edition
<i>TTP</i>	Tibetan Tripiṭaka, Peking Edition
<i>UCR</i>	<i>Univeristy of Ceylon Review</i> , Colombo
<i>VBA</i>	<i>Visva-bharati Annals</i>
<i>Vin</i>	<i>Vinaya-piṭaka</i>
<i>Vism</i>	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>
<i>WZKSO</i>	<i>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- (und Ost) asiens</i>
<i>ZDMG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>

Samvṛti, Vyavahāra and Paramārtha in the Akṣayamatīnirdeśa
and its Commentary by Vasubandhu

Ch. E. Freeman

1. In defence of dichotomies

Dichotomies are rather out of fashion at the moment. The traditional divisions into sacred and profane, religious and secular, mystical and scientific and so on are being dismantled: carving up the world in this way is no longer thought to be very helpful methodologically (or ontologically for that matter) and approaches are being adopted which stress either the non-difference of things previously presented as different, or the multiplication of categories to provide a much more complex scheme than that afforded by the old binary oppositions. This process undoubtedly has some value in Religious studies especially where the divisions of the investigator (the etic side) have imposed a structure on the investigated (the emic side) which, in failing to take into account the divisions consciously made within the investigated itself, is unfaithful to it. If this process is taken too far, however, the baby is in danger of being thrown out with the bathwater. This is certainly the case with the Buddhism of the great Mahāyāna *sūtras* and their commentaries and in the following investigations the dichotomy will once more take centre stage.

The reason for this is simply that such dual divisions are to be found as elements of the inner presentations, or self-descriptions, both of the canonical literature of the Mahāyāna and of its hermeneutical tradition. They are not only to be found but are of central importance as heuristic or soteriological devices. Indeed, it may not be too much of an exaggeration to claim that the entire system of philosophical speculation combined with spiritual practice (not intended as a dichotomy) of the Mahāyāna rests, in the final analysis, upon one crucial fundamental opposition: the distinction between *saṃvṛti*, the conventional, and *paramārtha*, the ultimate. Or, more specifically, between *saṃvṛtisatya*, conventional truth; and *paramārthasatya*, ultimate truth.

This distinction is already made in the Hīnayāna schools. The Vaibhāṣikas, for example, distinguish between conventional truths as those entities, such as pots etc., which are capable of being broken up, either physically or by a mental

operation, and ultimate truths as those which cannot be so treated, such as space, form and so on.¹ This rather narrow, scholastic usage, and the failure of the *śrāvakas* to realise the profound implications of these ideas mark them out, according to Vasubandhu wearing his Mahāyāna hat, as inferior in understanding. For the Mahāyānanists, who invest the notions with much deeper soteriological meaning, *saṃvṛtisatya*, very roughly speaking, refers to the relative world of appearances—things not seen directly as they are but mediated through language and obscured by dualistic and ‘realistic’ thinking;² and *paramārthasatya* is the emptiness of all *dharmas* of inherent, or independent, existence.

While there is reasonable agreement among the various philosophical schools—Yogācāra, Mādhyamika, Svātantrika etc.—on the subject of *paramārthasatya* discord arises over the exact sense of *saṃvṛtisatya*, in what way the concept may properly be applied, and its relationship to *paramārtha*. Vasubandhu makes an interesting contribution to this debate in the *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa-ṭīkā*, the gist of which will be given in Part 2.

Generally, where the words *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* are used (appropriately inflected) without the accompanying *satya* they may be rendered in English adverbially as ‘conventionally’ and ‘ultimately’, or as nouns, ‘the conventional’, ‘the ultimate’. No great significance need be attached to the separation, it is merely a kind of shorthand. Given, however, that two semantically distinct concepts are in fact present in the compound *saṃvṛtisatya* it is possible for an interpreter, in certain contexts, to stress the difference between ‘mere *saṃvṛti*’ and *saṃvṛtisatya*. Candrakīrti does this in his *Madhyamakāvatāra-bhāṣyā*³ in order to make what is essentially a doctrinal point. When Vasubandhu comments on the constituent elements of a similar compound, *vyavahārasatya*, his primary concern is

¹ Louis de La Vallee Poussin, *L’Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu*, Paris, 1923–31, ch. 4, 139 ff.

² Three definitions of *saṃvṛti* are given in Candrakīrti’s *Prasannapadā Madhyamakavṛtti*, 492, 10. According to the third “by *saṃvṛti* is meant a symbolic system (*saṃketa*): the ordinary means of communication of the world involving verbal expression and referent; cognition and cognised etc.” In the commentary to *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa-sūtra* Vasubandhu operates mainly with this more ‘linguistic’ aspect of *saṃvṛti* rather than the epistemological or ontological ones under which it refers to the way things appear so as to conceal the ultimate truth.

³ *Madhyamakāvatāra-bhāṣyā*, TTP, vol. 98, 124-1-8. This brief, but obscure, passage bristles with interpretational difficulties. What it appears to say is that whatever is taken to be ultimate by ordinary people (inherent existence) is mere *saṃvṛti* for the *āryas*, for it is the essential emptiness of things which is ultimate. As for *saṃvṛtisatya*, it is because it *deceives* that it is not *paramārthasatya*. The point is probably that while ordinary people accept unquestioningly the apparent inherent existence of things as their ultimate nature, i.e. accept as true that which is false, and so do not really possess the truth, only the *āryas*, or Bodhisattvas, perceive the distinction between *paramārthasatya* and *saṃvṛtisatya* and can know their relationship. See Michael Broido: “Padma dKar-po on the Two satyas”, *JIAS*, 8.2, 1985, 15.

to establish a formal principle of interpretation. In other words Candrakīrti answers the question “why did the Buddha teach so and so?” While Vasubandhu answers the question “what do the words *vyavahāra* and *satya* mean when considered separately?” The principle can be applied to other Sanskrit compounds of an analogous structure, e.g. *satyavacana* and will be shown in some detail later on.

It is not easy to find a single English word capable of translating adequately the Sanskrit *vyavahāra* whose meaning includes both the broad notion of established social conventions and practices, in particular, in the context under consideration, conventions associated with communication in the natural languages, whose operations are decided by common consent; and convention in the more technical sense of the ability of a word to convey a sense of the function of its referent.⁴ Broadly, then, it denotes “conventions used in communicative acts based on what is heard, seen, judged and cognised”,⁵ i.e. based on everyday experience involving sense perception and conceptual thought. It is the means of articulation, which Vasubandhu firmly dubs the work of Māra.⁶ The correlation between the terms *saṃvṛti* and *vyavahāra* in the *ṭīkā* is sufficiently close—*saṃvṛti* is usually explained in terms of *vyavahāra*—to warrant the assumption that the treatment given to *vyavahārasatya*, which is outlined in the extracts provided in Part 2, may be applied to *saṃvṛtisatya* too.

The division of truth into *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* carries with it another opposition which, while present in the *sūtras* couched in the poetic and allusive style that is typical of them, finds a more systematic working out in the *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa-ṭīkā*. This is the opposition between what is expressible in language together with language itself as the instrument of expression, and what is wholly beyond words: the ‘effable’ versus the ‘ineffable’.

This distinction came under attack in a previous paper presented at the Buddhist Forum⁷ where the following argument (if I have understood it rightly) was advanced: William James’ use of the term ‘ineffable’ to describe one of the qualities peculiar to mystical experience is unsatisfactory because many other types of experience can legitimately claim to possess this quality—the drug-induced, the aesthetic, the nuclear physical and so on. So either the term mystical must be extended from its narrow Jamesian field of reference, which limited it to the purely

⁴ Anne Klein: *Knowledge and Liberation*, New York, 1986, 184–185.

⁵ *Dṛṣṭaśrutamataviññātavyavahāra. Sandhinirmocana-sūtra*, TTP, vol. 29, 4-5-6. I have not use the English word ‘convention’ to translate *vyavahāra* in this paper partly to avoid confusion—I have used it for *saṃvṛti*—and partly because I wanted something more general, hence ‘communication’ which is not really very satisfactory either. However, on the ‘conventionalist’ view taken by Vasubandhu communication is simply a matter of various, chiefly linguistic, conventions.

⁶ *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa-ṭīkā*, TTP, vol. 104, 190-5-8.

⁷ B. Siklós, “Topics in Mysticism: Words, Science and Methods”, unfortunately not included in this volume.

religious, to include these too, or it must be admitted that ineffability is not peculiar to mystical experience. In any case a formal typological division of experience into ineffable and effable is inaccurate since it fails to take into account the pragmatics of the situation. It is these which dictate whether a particular experience is expressible in words or not. Ineffability claims, because they rest on a confusion, are not especially helpful in trying to understand what the great religions have to say.

Does this negative evaluation hold when we come to examine what is meant by *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* in the *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa-sūtra*, one of the most widely quoted and influential of the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, and in its commentary? It is perhaps worth a reminder here that Buddhism provides room for numerous presentations of the Doctrine and even more numerous interpretations of it: Vasubandhu's view is only one among many on this extremely complex subject.

He defines the two terms very succinctly thus: “*saṃvṛti* is whatever is expressible and thinkable; *paramārtha* is the opposite of this for it can be reached neither by expressions nor by thought”.⁸ As such it is often described using the Sanskrit word *anabhilāpya* (Tib. *brjod du med pa*) which does mean simply ‘inexpressible’, ‘ineffable’.⁹ *Samvṛti*, on the other hand, is almost always connected by Vasubandhu with linguistic activity—the communication of something via the vehicle of language which is bound up with the series of mental operations we call thought. This preserves the traditional association made in Indian philosophising between language and thought given, of course, that their systems allow for a different type of experience from this thought, the yogic or meditational, where the aim is to quieten all mental activity and attain a state of calm concentration. Buddhism has always valued the meditative states above mere ratiocination dependent on the use of language,¹⁰ these alternative states of ‘mind’ are rarely taken into consideration in any Western discussions of the thought/language nexus. So the fact that once more we are faced with a dichotomy within the object of investigation—this time between the effable and the ineffable, correlated with the original distinction between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*—obliges us to take it seriously.

The word *anabhilāpya*, however, is used with a narrow reference that the English word ‘ineffable’ lacks. The latter is used on a number of occasions when

⁸ *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa-ṭīkā*, TTP, vol. 104, 193-1-8.

⁹ F. Egerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, *anabhilāpya*: “inexpressible; that cannot be put into words.”

¹⁰ The Buddha manifests the Buddha-actions, foremost of which is preaching, without ever stirring from his *samādhi*, but though he may make use of *prapañcas* (discursive proliferations) and *vikalpas* (conceptualisations) while delivering a *sūtra* his language and thought are purified and he does not fall into the trap of hypostatisation that these two set for the ignorant.

anabhilāpya, as a qualification of *paramārtha*, or any of its synonyms such as *śūnyatā*, *tathatā* or *nirvāṇa*, would not be used. Its use in the texts is extremely specific; no other things are so described, or could be, for reasons which I hope will emerge during the course of this discussion.

It is necessary, then, to look first at some of the things or states which might be said to be ineffable when English is spoken. For example, the general claim could be made that all the objects that populate the inner and outer worlds are ineffable in the sense that it is inherent in language that it can only ever be about these objects. All signs point to, refer to, something beyond themselves and it is the function of language to indicate, represent, whatever it might be from simple physical entities to the most highly personal and profound experiences. It cannot be them. At first sight, given the gulf according to this view between transcendent things and the words that designate them, such a state of affairs appears ripe for assimilation to the duality of *paramārtha* (beyond language) and *saṃvṛti* (the sphere of language). But this would be to misconstrue what exactly it is about things that is said to be *paramārtha*. Ultimate truth refers to their emptiness, not to their thinghood—be it the tableness of table or the quintessence of some more abstract objects of thought or experiential states. Thinghood is precisely what is denied of things in post-Prajñāpāramitā Buddhism. Or, to use an idiom more natural to Buddhism, their essential nature is that they are empty of essential nature; their own mark is that they are devoid of own-mark and so forth. The position outlined here, the most extreme, can be reduced to a truism: we may trivially say that all language, all words, are merely about something else—in the world, in the mind, or just other words. What is needed is a sense in which *saṃvṛti* can only be about *paramārtha* in a way that it is not about what falls within its own domain: a non-trivial sense of ‘about’. It may be possible to distinguish such a sense by making use of a hypothesis enjoying some influence in Western linguistics at the moment which stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from this ‘complete ineffability’ thesis. This hypothesis will be considered after some other uses of ‘ineffable’ have been disposed of.

While most people, the above reflections notwithstanding, will cheerfully admit that all sorts and conditions of human experience are perfectly well captured and communicated by language, certain exceptions may be acknowledged in the anomalous situations cited earlier. The rather peculiar status of qualia, for example, is currently excercising both philosophers and psychologists alike. As Jerry Fodor remarks: “If... qualitative contents are in some sense ineffable, it would hardly seem reasonable to require a philosophy of qualia to eff them”.¹¹ What is it, then, about the perception of red, the L.S.D. experience, any intense aesthetic

¹¹ Jerry A. Fodor, *Representations: Philosophical Essays on the Foundations of Cognitive Science*, Brighton, 1981, 18.

sensation or the most arcane reaches of scientific discovery, for which ineffability might be claimed, that distinguishes them from the Buddhist inexpressible ultimate?

One way of answering this would be to invoke yet another key dichotomy maintained by Buddhists of all denominations—that between the mundane (*laukika*) and the supramundane (*lokottara*)—for it is closely allied to the other two under consideration. It should be emphasised, however, that mundane and supramundane do not map neatly onto our categories of profane and sacred since the mundane, from the Buddhist point of view, includes the non-Buddhist (but to our mind sacred) activities and postulates, such as the worship of deities or the immortality of the soul, while only the activities of the Buddhas and of the *āryas* and the *dharma*s of the Path are classed as supramundane. Even this classification is not immutable as Vasubandhu demonstrates in one of the extracts given in Part 2.

Following this division the cases in question would be dismissed as irretrievably mundane, and the mundane is never described as *anabhilāpya*. On the contrary it is not disputed that the ordinary means of communication in the world (*laukikavyavahāra*, Tib. *'jig rten gyi tha sñad*) is quite capable of conveying many kinds of experience or knowledge: the truths of art, philosophy and science which belong to the realm of the conventional. If language appears inadequate in this sphere, which it often does, whether to express a deeply felt emotion, describe a colour, or explain some recondite point of scientific theory, this would not be because it fails to express the ultimate truth. Werner Heisenberg may feel that everyday language is wholly unsuited to giving an account of the sub-atomic world but this does not prevent him from giving a successful account of it by switching from the signs and symbols of natural language to the signs and symbols of mathematics—just another form of *vyavahāra*. And although it is the case that in many specialist areas less out on a limb than this ordinary language is made to undergo considerable modification, and technical vocabularies are constructed impenetrable to the layman (though intelligible to initiates), superficially appealing comparisons with the esoteric symbolic languages generated by the spiritual traditions are not, in the end, very illuminating for the intentionality of the latter is wholly opposite. The aim and purpose of some sacred language is to give rise to a very different order of knowledge from mere information about the world. Ordinary language is inadequate, here, in the special sense that, in order to gain such knowledge one must go beyond language in a way that to say that one must go beyond language or mathematics to know, understand or be communicated the meaning of the concept 'electron' as a term of quantum theory would be nonsense. Prolonged training, theoretical and practical, is undertaken in order to understand the *language* of physics not to attain individual spiritual insight

into the ultimate truth of electrons which transcends all words and concepts. That insight requires quite another programme of training.

In the case of mundane discourse, therefore, to understand the ‘linguistic’ meaning of a word is sufficient; to understand the ‘linguistic’ meaning of certain words of Buddhist discourse is not sufficient, though through their possessing such a meaning we are able to use them at an intellectual or philosophical level, within the sphere of mind, mentality or consciousness, without necessarily having penetrated their deeper, ‘translinguistic’ meaning. And to understand the non-literal meaning of certain words of ordinary language that have undergone a semantic transformation within a given tradition—to know their esoteric meaning—is not sufficient either for the use of such language, together with its interpretation, forms part of a spiritual practice which is designed not to explain obscure and difficult words in terms of yet more words, symbolic or metaphorical, but to facilitate the individual insight that does not depend on any language or any verbal teaching. The mundane technical vocabularies are created for the purpose of getting better words; the vocabularies of the sacred traditions are created for the purpose of getting at something which the words alone are incapable of expressing.

However, the locating of our anomalies in the mundane sphere which, de facto, is not described as ineffable in the relevant literature does not really offer a reason why they could not be so labelled. A more powerful argument lies in the fact that being mundane they are *samvṛti* and so belong by definition within the limits of language and thought, and this is where a brief resume of the hypothesis referred to above might help. This hypothesis, advanced by J.J. Katz,¹² is built around a principle he has entitled “the principle of effability” based on the observation by Frege that the capacities of natural language are such that “a thought grasped by a human being for the first time can be put into words which will be understood by someone to whom the thought is entirely new”.¹³ It also has affinities with John Searle’s expressibility principle: that whatever a speaker might want to communicate can be said; and the principle of universality of Tarski: that natural languages can express whatever may be meaningfully spoken about. According to Katz, it follows from the effability thesis that “each natural language is capable of expressing the same body of thoughts and this implies...the claim that all natural languages are intertranslatable in the sense that, for any sentence in one natural language there is at least one sentence in every other natural language that expresses the same proposition”.¹⁴

¹² J.J. Katz, *Semantic Theory*, New York, 1982, 19–20.

¹³ *ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 20.

This is a very strong claim and others have sought to dilute it,¹⁵ but since effability is a principle—languages are in principle effable—the fact that speakers are often at a loss for words, or feel that their thoughts cannot be expressed by language is a contingent one, as Katz observes. They simply lack the ability to use language to its full capacity. So it is the speaker who fails and not language. In support of this contention he points to the distinction made by Chomsky between speaker’s competence (the linguistic knowledge) and speaker’s performance.

It seems quite possible to link up the effability thesis to *saṃvṛti* (*satya*), vastly different though their contexts of use may be. I have a strong feeling that Vasubandhu would not be in disagreement with the notion that language, which for him is the most significant aspect of *saṃvṛti*, is in principle wholly adequate to convey the *body of thoughts* comprising the Dharma of the Buddha, let alone the thoughts and sensations that are the product of mundane experience. The Buddha first and foremost, but also the great Bodhisattvas, who have perfected their correct knowledge of languages (*niruktapratīsamvid*), and their correct knowledge of eloquence (*pratibhānapratīsamvid*) represent ideal speakers whose performance matches their competence (in a rough analogy). The Buddha, after all, encouraged the transmission of his teachings in the various native languages of his human audience (and in the modes of speech of all classes of sentient beings) presupposing his acceptance both of the universality of the Dharma and its intertranslatability.

So if *saṃvṛtisatya* implies ‘complete effability’ then, in principle, there is no gulf between any mundane thought or mental state and its expression in language, though such a gulf may exist in practice. To say that the sentence ‘all conditioned things are impermanent’ is about the proposition that all conditioned things are impermanent (or about impermanence) is just to say that it expresses that proposition (or communicates that concept). In understanding the sentence we understand the proposition, we grasp the thought. But since the understanding of emptiness does not, in the end, involve the understanding of any proposition or concept but is the ultimate, direct, meditative experience, the *saṃvṛti* sentence ‘all *dharma*s are empty’ both expresses a proposition to be understood as a preliminary step, and, together with its propositional content is about, i.e. indicates, points towards but does not express, the *paramārthasatya* that is inexpressible.

We may assume that there are valid experiential grounds for claiming the ineffability of the ultimate truth which give rise to the logical: it is contradictory to suppose that what is in essence non-dual, the experience of emptiness, can be

¹⁵ Edward L. Keenan, “Some Logical Problems in Translation”, in F. Guenther & M. Guenther-Reutter, eds., *Meaning and Translation: Philosophical and Linguistic Approaches*, London, 1978.

articulated by language as a system of signs, for all signs have dualistic structure; or represented in thought which also entails duality.¹⁶

2. Conventional truth and ultimate truth in the *sūtra* and its commentary.

In this section I have compiled some of the most revealing passages both from the *sūtra* and the *ṭīkā* in which the terms *saṃvṛti*, *vyavahāra* and *paramārtha* occur. References to these three concepts are far more numerous in the latter than in the former, where they appear only sporadically. The one place where they are given more than a passing mention is translated below and even then the explanation provided is extremely brief. This does not mean, however, that the dichotomy between *saṃvṛti* and *vyavahāra* (the conventional) on the one hand, and *paramārtha* (the ultimate) on the other is not in implicit operation throughout the text as the chief classificational division according to which the understanding of its content should be structured. In the exegis the three terms figure as key elements of Vasubandhu's hermeneutical armoury. They are used to interpret many statements in the *sūtra* where they are not explicitly mentioned. I have not added much sub-commentary or speculation of my own (remarks in brackets are mine) partly for reasons of space but mainly because I hope that the texts, although dense, will speak for themselves with greater eloquence. Translation verbatim appears in quotation marks: double for the commentary and single for the *sūtra*. Otherwise paraphrases of Vasubandhu's comments are given without quotes.

The fullest treatment of the subject in the *sūtra* occurs in a passage¹⁷ which exposes the meaning of truth, considered here as one of the endowments of the Bodhisattvas. It is presented in four ways: as fourfold, threefold, twofold and as unique. The truth as fourfold is the four Noble Truths. The truth as threefold consists of:

“(1) Conventional truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*, Tib. *kun rdzob kyi bden pa*), (2) ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*, Tib. *don dam pai bden pa*), (3) the truth of signs (*lakṣaṇasatya*, Tib. *mtshan ñid kyi bden pa*). What, then is conventional truth? It consists of all the teachings given through the ordinary, worldly means of communication (*laukikavyavahāra*): through syllables and verbal expressions together with a semantic component. Ultimate truth is that which is devoid of any mental activity, let alone syllables.”

¹⁶ In Buddhism thought, by definition, is intentional; it is thought of something: the intentional object. It is therefore binary in structure as is its correlate, language. This is why the Yogācāra term *cittamātra* (mind only) is, amongst other things, an (intentional) contradiction. The theory and practice of objectless ‘thought’ is explored by Vasubandhu in his *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*

¹⁷ *Akṣayamatīrdeśa-sūtra*, TTP, vol. 34, 53-5-1.

In commenting on the word ‘truth’ Vasubandhu says:¹⁸

“It is conventional truth in that the conventional itself is true. This is because (conventions) operate in accordance with things merely as they appear, in the form of illusions or mirages”.

The emphasis, here, is on the conventional aspect of truth; why what is merely conventional may qualify as true. *Samvṛti* represents the world of appearances—things mediated through language and conceptual thought. Insofar as it is possible to make a formal distinction between the objective pole (appearances) and the subjective pole (perception of appearances and the subjective processes of thinking and expressing which name them, endow them with meaning, and make them communicable, intersubjectively, to others) the word *saṃvṛti* covers both. For the Yogācāras, in particular, there is no essential difference between them, they are all merely transformations of consciousness.¹⁹

But ‘the world’ appears the way it does (incorrectly) precisely because it is so mediated. Language and thought carry with them a mistaken ontological commitment to a duality—the inherent existence of persons (subjects) and the inherent existence of *dharmas* (objects). But although these are purely imaginary from the ultimate point of view, it must be admitted that they exist as facts of *saṃsāra* and to the extent that language, as defined in the *sūtra*, adequately reflects the ‘subjective’ sphere of thought or thinker, and the ‘objective’ sphere of the objects of thought, and facilitates communication among persons of unimpaired faculties, it is true. So even the ultimately bogus is ‘true’ if judged on its own terms. Truth becomes a matter of consensus within this world.

The commentary continues:

“It is ultimate truth in that the ultimate itself is true. This is because it is non-deceptive in its essential nature and without error. With regard to (*saṃvṛtisatya*) ‘the ordinary worldly means of communication’ is the chief concept and the rest is the explanation.²⁰ ‘Syllables’ refers to ‘A’, ‘Ka’ and so on which constitute the transmission of the sacred texts; ‘verbal expressions’ refers to sentences found in the sacred texts such as ‘conditioned things are impermanent’ etc; and a ‘semantic component’

¹⁸ TTP, vol. 104, 199-1-5.

¹⁹ The destruction of the subject-object duality is the goal; until this is achieved both experience and the language that articulates it are, of course, structured in this way, so we are obliged to speak as if subjects (streams of thought) and objects (what appears to these streams) existed, together with the ‘inner’ (*skandhas*, *dhātus* etc.) and ‘outer’ (sprouts etc.) *pratīyasamutpāda*, and other conventional dualities.

²⁰ The chief concept (Tib. *bstan pa*) and the explanation (Tib. *bzad pa*) are technical terms of the commentarial vocabulary used by Vasubandhu which serve to distinguish, within the root-text, between an item, or list of items, to be explained and the subsequent exposition thereof.

refers to what belongs to these sentences which makes them meaningful and enables them to be understood...²¹ In short (the *sūtra*), means to say that all verbal expressions that are part of the ordinary means of communication which takes into account the various different capacities of the sentient beings to be educated, are conventional truth. Thus in the *Ratnamegha-sūtra* it is said:²² ‘Son of Good Family, if a Bodhisattva is skilled in these ten *dharmas* he is called skilled in the conventional. Which ten? They are as follows: although he may make the designation ‘form’, ultimately, since he does not apprehend²³ any form he remains without attachment to it. Likewise, although he may make the designations ‘sensations’, ‘perceptions’, ‘motivational impulses’ and ‘consciousness’, ultimately, since he does not apprehend any consciousness etc. he is without attachment to them. (The same argument is applied to all the *buddhadharmas* right up to Awakening.) Therefore, son of good family, these names and designations which belong to the ordinary means of communication are called conventional truth. Yet even if these conventional *dharmas* are not ultimate, without these conventional *dharmas* it would not be possible to reveal the ultimate.’

The ultimate is the opposite of this and so in defining it (the *sūtra*) says ‘ultimate truth is that which is devoid of any mental activity, let alone syllables’. The ultimate, because it transcends all discursive proliferations such as arising and non-arising, conceivable and inconceivable, permanent and impermanent, effable and ineffable (!), cessation and non-cessation, knowable and unknowable etc. is ‘devoid of any mental activity’. It therefore transcends the sphere of mind and mental events and, since the ultimate and the pristine knowledge that knows it are non-dual, it cannot be an object of thought ‘let alone syllables’.”

I have included the truth of signs because although it is given separate treatment in the *sūtra* its relationship to the ultimate is analogous to that of the conventional, and signs, of course, form one of the elements of conventional truth.

²¹ Semantic component (*saṃketa*, Tib. *brda*): in traditional Sanskrit linguistics a word possesses denotational power (*abhidāśakti*) which “conveys to the understanding the meaning which belongs to the word by common consent or convention (*saṃketa*)”, V.S. Apte, *The Student’s Sanskrit Dictionary*. The *sūtra*, here, is speaking of *vyavahāra* in terms of language in its phonological, syntactic and semantic aspects.

²² *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa-ṭīkā*, TTP, vol. 104, 199-3-3.

²³ ‘Does not apprehend’, if unpacked, would yield ‘does not apprehend some referent/object existing independently of his act of designating it, for which attachment or aversion might arise.’

The *sūtra* says: ‘all signs are but one sign and that one sign is a non-sign: this is the truth of signs’. Vasubandhu then explains that all signs (a sign here being the particular identifying mark of a thing) such as the wetness of water, the resistance of form etc. are really only one sign and that sign is suchness. (All *dharmas* have different conventional signs but only one ultimate sign.) This is why the *sūtra* states that ‘that one sign is a non-sign’, for suchness transcends anything that can be counted as a sign. Since it is not a sign such as arising and ceasing, existence and non-existence, permanence and impermanence etc. it is a non-sign. As this truth of non-sign is ultimate truth itself and not different from it, why are two (truths) presented, namely, ‘the truth of signs’ (which is really the truth of non-sign) and ‘ultimate truth’? Although (the former) being true, is not different from (the latter) it is called the truth of signs because by means of it the ultimate is both indicated and finally understood. Therefore the truth of signs is established as the means of approaching the ultimate.

The *sūtra*, when it classifies the truth as twofold, divides it into the truth of the ordinary means of communication and ultimate truth. The first is ‘the timely speaking of the truth, viz: the truth of suffering, the truth of its origin, the truth of its cessation and the truth of the path; and whatever truths of worldly communication may be taught through syllables and verbal expressions, together with a semantic component. The ultimate is *nirvāṇa*, endowed with the quality of ineffability.’

Vasubandhu comments:²⁴

“It is the truth of the ordinary means of communication because these ordinary means are true in the sense that they are true merely in accordance with appearances. Thus it is said in the *sūtras*:²⁵ ‘whatever is true for the worldly ones is true’. It is ultimate (truth) in that the ultimate is indeed true because it is not other than what it is. (Unlike appearances, which are not how they seem.) And so it is also said in the *sūtras*: ‘conditioned things are false because they are deceptive, but the unconditioned is true’. Why, then, are two truths set forth? Two truths are set forth in order to teach both the Noble Path and the result of that Path. The truth of the ordinary means of communication is declared in order to teach the Noble Path; ultimate truth is declared in order to teach the result of the Path (*nirvāṇa*). Furthermore, the two truths are proclaimed with reference to the scope (*viśaya*, Tib.: *yul*)²⁶ of mundane knowledge and the scope of supramundane knowledge”.

²⁴ *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa-ṭīkā*, TTP, vol. 104, 200-3-3.

²⁵ The Hīnayāna *āgamas* and *suttas*.

²⁶ Finding an English equivalent to the Sanskrit *viśaya* is extremely tricky. In many instances ‘object’ will do but it cannot be used consistently here. I have used ‘scope’ instead for this section, and elsewhere, as this retains more of the objective flavour of *viśaya* than the more frequently employed ‘sphere’—see Webster’s Dictionary: “scope: goal, target...range, extent”. See also Michael Broido: “Padma dKār-po on the Two *satyas*”, 16.

It is at this point, having explained why it is necessary to introduce two truths, that Vasubandhu, comments separately on *vyavahāra* and *vyavahārasatya*. He maintains that:

“Vyavahāra refers to the numerous kinds of verbal expressions while *vyavahārasatya* refers to the truth which is to be understood by means of these expressions”.²⁷

He goes on:

“This truth of the ordinary means of communication is also twofold: (the truth which is) the scope of non-mistaken mundane knowledge, and (that which is) the scope of mistaken mundane knowledge”.

The former corresponds to the first half of the sentence in the *sūtra* up to ‘the truth of the path’, i.e. the four Noble Truths, which are objects of the knowledge that is attained subsequent to meditation (*prṣṭhalabdhajñāna*, Tib. *rjes las thob pai ye shes*).²⁸ The following illustration is given: when a person, having emerged from the *nirvikalpa samādhi* (the concentration devoid of conceptual thought) reveals the meaning of what he has experienced to those who are to be educated, using his *prṣṭhalabdhajñāna* to expound the Noble Truths correctly, this is timely speaking of the truth. The latter—the scope of mistaken mundane knowledge—corresponds to the second half of the sentence where whatever (truths of) worldly communication may be taught through syllables etc. are mentioned. Interestingly, the commentary twice omits the word ‘truth’ here when quoting the *sūtra*: it has *laukikavyavahāra* but not *laukikavyavahārasatya*. If the *sūtra* version is correct it would seem to be drawing a distinction between Buddhist truths and other mundane truths. If the commentary is correct (no scribal error), and the gist of Vasubandhu’s remarks appears to support the reading it gives, then the emphasis is on the deceptive qualities of the conventional modes of speech per se, though the messages which they communicate may be non-mistaken (Buddhist) or mistaken (non-Buddhist). Deceptive, not in the sense that they fail to convey some intended meaning, since they are within the domain of effability, but because of their intrinsic duality and inability, ex hypothesi, to convey *paramārthasatya*.

Again the commentary asks:

“When it is said in the *sūtra* that *vyavahārasatya* is ‘the timely speaking of the truth’ (*kāle satyavacana*) what is ‘truth’? It is the truth of

²⁷ *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa-ṭīkā*, TTP, vol. 104, 200-4-1.

²⁸ The status of *prṣṭhalabdhajñāna*, and the relationship of the meditational and non-meditational states to *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti* according to various different opinions, are discussed in La Vallée Poussin, *L’Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu*, ch. 6, 141, 142 ff.

suffering etc. And what is ‘speaking’? It is the ordinary worldly means of communication. So, in fact, *vyavahārasatya* is the teaching of the four truths through the syllables and verbal expressions, together with a semantic component, appropriate to the means of communication in this world.”

The distinction being made here is one between language itself as a means of expression and what is to be expressed through it. This does not correspond to one of the basic divisions of Linguistics which distinguishes between the formal syntactical, and the semantic, aspects of language since language as defined by Vasubandhu includes both a certain formal structure and a semantic component already given. The split, rather, is between language as the *form* of expression, including whatever everyday meanings may be attached to the words and sentences employed, and a very particular *content*—the spiritual truths of the Buddhist Path. Sentences in worldly discourse express propositions, but only those sentences which serve as vehicles for the teachings of the Buddha can be said to express true propositions.

There are actually two levels of *vyavahāra (satya)* implied here which may be illustrated in the following way. “The form of words ‘Granny takes snuff’ is the conventional vehicle of the very statement whose truth depends on whatever the contextually relevant Granny is snuffnut.”²⁹ The statement made (or proposition expressed) by this form of words is true if, and only if, the corresponding state of affairs in the world is true. This, according to the *sūtra*, would count as a mundane truth but it is not on the level of the Four Noble Truths. According to Vasubandhu’s version, although the statement may appear true by mundane standards, since it is not about one of the Buddhist truths which are true also in the sense of having soteriological value it is within the scope of mistaken mundane knowledge; to this extent it is mere *vyavahāra* and not *vyavahārasatya*. There is an abiding tension between the inherent ‘falsity’ of language as such, and its ability nonetheless to be used as a weapon of truth which impels the division into expressible and inexpressible truths.

Vasubandhu’s claim that the Four Noble Truths are the scope of non-mistaken *mundane* knowledge is more radical than the analysis given in the *Madhyamakāvātara*,³⁰ where the third truth at least, cessation, is classed as supramundane, let alone the more usual stipulation that all the *dharmas* of the Buddhist Path are supramundane. For him, however, in this context only *paramārthasatya*—emptiness—qualifies as the scope of supramundane knowledge, and emptiness is not one of the four propositions expressed by the Noble Truths.

²⁹ Jerry Fodor, *Psychosemantics*, Cambridge Mass., 1987, 81.

³⁰ *Madhyamakāvātara-bhāṣya*, TTP, vol. 98, 118-4-8 ff.

Thus the commentary goes on:

“Ultimate truth, ‘*nirvāṇa*, endowed with the quality of ineffability’, is ultimate because it is the result of the Path, and the scope of the ultimate supramundane knowledge... It is ultimate truth because in its own nature it neither arises nor perishes, partaking from the very beginning of the essence of clear light. It is suchness, endowed with the quality of non-deceptiveness.”

Paramārthasatya, here, although formally analysed into two separate concepts is, at bottom, largely tautologous unlike *saṃvṛtisatya*, or *vyavahārasatya*. The ultimacy of this truth lies in the fact that it is the final result of the Path. The final result is *nirvāṇa*; *Nirvāṇa* is suchness; suchness is truth. (We have shifted, here, from the propositional form of the third truth—there is cessation of suffering; cessation is *nirvāṇa*—to *nirvāṇa* as a purely symbolic term: *saṃvṛti* about *paramārtha*.) The dichotomy between means and end, or form and content implied by *saṃvṛtisatya* is not applicable in this case. It is clear, then, that the two expressions *saṃvṛtisatya* and *paramārthasatya* function differently. The former operates entirely on its own terms: it is an instance of ordinary language which may be used to express some propositional content. With the latter, the notion of propositional content is marginal. Ultimately, the words stand for, symbolise, something wholly other. Since the words *paramārthasatya* are *saṃvṛti* (conventional) this means that two kinds of *saṃvṛti* (as linguistic instrument) must be postulated: the first is used entirely within the domain of ordinary non-symbolic discourse where effability operates; the second, which is specifically *about* the inexpressible *paramārthasatya* consists of, or includes symbol terms that point beyond their content to non-content; in other words the language used to describe *paramārtha*, while still *saṃvṛti*, has a second aspect which ordinary *saṃvṛti* lacks. Sthiramati has something to say on this subject which is reproduced at the end of this paper.

An identifiable theme woven around the basic oppositions of ‘conventional’ versus ‘ultimate’, and ‘expressible’ versus ‘inexpressible’ emerges from these discussions, which also encompasses other related dualities such as activity and repose; ethical practice and spiritual insight; multiplicity and sameness and so on. Variations on this theme are presented in the *sūtra* and further explored in the commentary. For example, in the section on the four correct analytical knowledges (*samyakpratisamvid*) the *sūtra* speaks of the first two of these—knowledge of *dharmas* and knowledge of meaning—in the following way:³¹ *dharmas* are ‘the infinite variety of *dharmas*, beneficial and unbeneficial, defiled and undefiled etc. right up to *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*’, and their meaning is ‘that they are empty, signless, wishless, unarisen, unoriginated, substanceless’ and so forth.

³¹ *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa-sūtra*, TTP, vol. 34, 62-2-8.

Vasubandhu remarks:³²

“Here, although the *dharmas* themselves and their meaning are not different, meaning should be considered as that which is to be taught and understood (the end), and *dharmas* should be considered as that which effects the teaching and brings about understanding (the means)... Understanding the mark of all *dharmas* (emptiness) is the correct analytical knowledge of meaning; knowing that such and such a dharma has such and such a name is the correct analytical knowledge of *dharmas*”.

Again, a distinction is being drawn on the *saṃvṛti* level between the diverse forms of the *saṃsāra* represented in language, and the unity of their meaning. ‘Meaning’, in this case, is clearly not the normal linguistic meaning of a name but refers to the ‘translinguistic’ meaning of words mentioned in Part 1—the ultimate understanding of which is beyond words/names.

The same pattern is discernible in the *sūtra*’s treatment of the first of the four reliances (*pratisaraṇa*): ‘to rely on the meaning, not to rely on the word’. The text says:³³ ‘word is the teaching of the mundane *dharmas* and activities; meaning is the understanding of the supramundane dharmas’.

Vasubandhu explains:³⁴

“‘Word’ refers to the teaching of what is designated in accordance with the ordinary means of communication (*vyavahāraprajñapti*): topics such as the mundane *dharmas* of action and result and so on. ‘Meaning’ refers to the understanding of what is meant by emptiness which, in transcending the *dharmas* designated in accordance with the ordinary means of communication of this world, such as action and result and so forth, is without a sign. Whatever is connected with the exposition of conventional *dharmas* is called ‘word’; its opposite, the understanding of the ultimate object itself, is called ‘meaning’.”

He goes on to say that while ‘word’ represents learning—the grasping and memorisation of all kinds of *dharmas* heard from *kalyāṇamitras*—‘meaning’ represents the knowledge of what is meant by ‘that which is empty is ineffable’, in the sense that, on the ultimate level, all *dharmas* transcend both exposition and learning. In short, ‘word’ is all the teachings concerning the set of eighty-four thousand *dharmas*, and ‘meaning’ is that, in reality, their essential nature is ineffable”.

³² *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa-ṭīkā*, TTP, vol. 104, 242-3-5.

³³ TTP, vol. 34, 63-5-2.

³⁴ TTP, vol. 104, 245-1-1.

In dealing with the third reliance—to rely on the *sūtras* of definitive meaning (*nītārtha*), not to rely on the *sūtras* in need of interpretation (*neyārtha*)—the *Akṣayamati* asserts that³⁵ ‘the *sūtras* which teach the establishment of the conventional are said to be in need of interpretation; the *sūtras* which teach the establishment of the ultimate are said to be of definitive meaning’.

Vasubandhu confirms,³⁶ unsurprisingly, that:

“The *sūtras* preached in order to establish what exists merely on the level of ordinary communication, through the numerous kinds of conventional worldly means, are in need of interpretation; the *sūtras* preached in order to teach the ultimate, which bears the mark of non-arising and non-perishing, are of definitive meaning.”

In distinguishing between the *neyārtha* and the *nītārtha sūtras* in this way Vasubandhu appears to have had in mind the division of the *sūtras* into Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna, for in commenting on the root-text’s assertion that the *nītārtha sūtras* teach ‘the profound, hard to perceive, hard to understand’, he claims that it is the *śrāvakas*, their knowledge being only partial, who find the profound—the selflessness of persons and dharmas, i.e. emptiness—hard to understand. He also speaks of the *neyārtha sūtras* as being concerned with worldly practices in putting the emphasis on verbal teaching “that delights the world”. The *nītārtha sūtras*, on the other hand, are said to rely less on wordy scholasticism and more on instruction in the techniques of meditation. This is a fitting interpretation for a celebrated ex-scholastic, who repudiated his own Śrāvakayāna background to become one of the luminaries of the Yogācāra system that valued the practice of meditation above all else.

There would appear to be enough evidence in these passages to support the contention that the dichotomy of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* entails a principled division into what can be said: a certain body of propositions governing the actual practice of the Buddhist Path, together with their linguistic means of expression; and what cannot be said at all: the ultimate goal, emptiness. All the teachings involving the Path in its theoretical and practical aspects are of course *saṃvṛti*, but even the words used in talking specifically about *paramārtha* are counted as *saṃvṛti*, as Sthiramati makes quite clear in his commentary on the *Madhyāntavibhāga*³⁷ which makes numerous references to Vasubandhu’s own *bhāṣya*. In the former the author says that while *paramārtha* belongs to the subtle, meditational sphere, *saṃvṛti* represents the coarse non-concentrated sphere. As such it is classified in three ways: 1) *saṃvṛti* consisting of designations; 2) *saṃvṛti* consisting of (incorrect) knowledge; 3) *saṃvṛti* consisting of symbolic terms. The

³⁵ TTP, vol. 34, 64-3-7.

³⁶ TTP, vol. 104, 247-2-8.

³⁷ TTP., vol. 109, 164-3-6.

last obtains when “the fully accomplished (*pariniṣpanna* = *paramārtha*) is taught by means of such ‘synonyms’ as ‘emptiness’, ‘suchness’, ‘the immaculate’ and so forth, even though it entirely transcends both conceptual thought and verbal expression”. This establishes the relationship between the essentially ineffable *highest*, i.e. not reducible to any proposition, meditational object/state and the discursive thinking and language that characterize the everyday states of consciousness, which provide the introduction through teaching to the realisation of the ultimate.

Finally, I include for good measure a marvellous piece from the *Ratnamegha-sūtra*, quoted by Vasubandhu,³⁸ which luminously conveys the Buddha’s teaching on the inexpressible ultimate truth:

“The Bodhisattva Sarvānīvaraṇaviṣkambhin inquired: “Lord, what is reality?” The Lord replied: “Son of Good family, reality is synonymous with truth”. The Bodhisattva inquired again: “Lord, what is truth?” The Lord replied: “That which is what it is, for that which is what it is cannot be mistaken; that which is what it is is not other than what it is.” The Bodhisattva inquired again: “Lord, what is that which is what it is?” The Lord replied: “Son of good Family, these are to be intuitively realised by each one individually, they cannot be designated by means of words. Why is this? These *dharma*s transcend entirely all words; they transcend entirely all modes of speech; they transcend entirely all avenues of language; they are free from all discursive proliferations; they are beyond all analysis, all limitations and all logic for they do not fall within the scope of investigation by any logical reasoning. Because they are devoid of individual marks they are wholly beyond the reach of fools and outside the domain of Māra. Since it transcends the scope of all impurities and the scope of consciousness, that which is the scope of the pristine knowledge of the *āryas*, the stillness which is neither the support of, nor supported by, anything, is a matter of their individual, intuitive realisation.”

³⁸ TTP, vol. 104, 187-3-8.