

The Examples of Illusory Cognitions in Buddhist Epistemology and Their Sources

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0. Introduction

Mahāyāna Buddhists, either Mādhyamikas or Yogācāras, have traditionally adduced various types of illusions, such as a dream cognition, as examples to illustrate their thesis that everything in the world is unreal, or that there is no external reality apart from cognition. With the trend of times in India, they were eventually induced to prove their thesis in a more logical manner, that is, with a formal argument (*prayoga*), in which an illusory cognition serves as an illustration (*dr̥ṣṭānta*). In my previous paper (Kobayashi 2011), I have traced a historical development of the logical argument of this kind and the conclusion I arrived at was that it is likely Vasubandhu who first introduced the formulation in question.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the sources of the examples of illusory cognitions found in the Buddhist epistemological tradition, tracing the history back to pre-Vasubandhu.

1. “Ten Examples” in the the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*

To begin with, in the Mahāyāna tradition, especially in China and Japan, “ten examples” (十喻) have been widely known to show that everything in the world is unreal. The reason why these “ten examples” are familiar to people in China and Japan is probably because there appears a set of “ten examples” in such renowned Mahāyāna texts as the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (PVSPr, 二万五千頌般若經), the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra* (MPrŚ, 大智度論), and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* (VN, 維摩經). These three texts have been read over and over again for a long time and play important roles in both Chinese and Japanese culture.

Let us first see ten examples in the PVSPr translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什) and Xuanzang (玄奘) respectively.

PVSPr(K) (T No. 223, Vol. 8, 217a21–23):

解了諸法 (1) 如幻 (2) 如焰 (3) 如水中月 (4) 如虛空 (5) 如響 (6) 如捷闍婆城 (7) 如夢 (8) 如影 (9) 如鏡中像 (10) 如化。

PVSPr(X) (T No. 220, Vol. 5, 1c3–5):

於諸法門勝解觀察 (1) 如幻 (2) 如陽焰 (7) 如夢 (3) 如水月 (5) 如響 (4) 如空花 (9) 如像 (8) 如光影 (10) 如變化事 (9) 如尋香城。

In the above Chinese translations, we can see that there is a difference in the order between them, but both refer to the same ten examples in common: (1) a magical illusion (幻/*māyā*), (2) a mirage (焰/陽焰/*marīci*), (3) the moon in the water (水中月/水月/*udakacandra*), (4) the sky (虛空/空花/*ākāśa*), (5) echoes (響/*pratiśrutkā*), (6) a city of Gandharvas (捷闍婆城/尋香城/*gandharvanagara*), (7) a dream (夢/*svapna*), (8) a shadow (影/光影/*pratibhāsa*), (9) a reflection in a mirror (鏡中像/像/*pratibimba*), and (10) a magical incarnation (化/變化事/*nirmita*).

The author of the MPrŚ, who is traditionally said to be Nāgārjuna, devotes one separate chapter (大智度論初品中十喻釋論第十一) to the above sentence, though it is just one sentence, in order to elaborate the respective roles of each example.¹⁾ This may also help Chinese and Japanese people build up clear images of the examples.

However, the original Sanskrit text of the PVSPr is as follows:

PVSPr 1, 24–26: ... (1) *māyā*- (2) *marīci*- (3) *dakacandra*- (7) *svapna*- (5) *pratiśrutkā*- (8) *pratibhāsa*- (9) *pratibimba*- (10) *nirmāṇopama*- *dharmādhimuktaiḥ* ...

It is obvious that the above text refers to only eight examples and (4) and (9) are missing there. This means that there is a possibility that the well-known “ten examples” are not ten in its original form.

Moreover, let us examine another passage of the PVSPr. The Sanskrit text and its Chinese translations are as follows:

PVSPr 1, 159: *tathā hy āyūṣman śāriputra bodhisattvo mahāsattvaḥ sarvadharmān nirīhān samanupaśyati* (1) *māyopamān* (7) *svapnopamān* (2) *marīcyupamān* (5) *pratiśrutkopamān* (9) *pratibimbopamān* (8) *pratibhāsopamān* (10) *nirmitakopamān* (6) *gandharvanagaropamān samanupaśyati*.

PVSPr (K) (T No. 223, Vol. 8, 269c20–22):

菩薩摩訶薩不見諸法有覺知想見一切諸法 (7) 如夢 (5) 如響 (1) 如幻 (2) 如焰 (8) 如影

(10) 如化。

PVSPR(X) (T No. 220, Vol. 5, 13c4–7):

若菩薩摩訶薩欲通達一切法 (1) 如幻 (7) 如夢 (5) 如響 (9) 如像 (8) 如光影 (2) 如陽焰 (4) 如空花 (6) 如尋香城 (10) 如變化事。

The above three differ from each other in terms of quantity, constitution, and even the order. In addition, neither of them has all of the ten examples.

From this, it can be said that, although the term “ten examples” (十喻) has been used almost as a kind of a technical term in China and Japan, it is highly possible that there is no such concept as “ten examples” in India. It can be assumed that the concept “ten examples” is that which originated from China and spread to Japan.²⁾

2. “Ten Examples” in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*

Next, let us turn to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* (VN), which is also famous for its reference to “ten examples.” The portion in question is as follows.

VN 176–183:

(1) *phenapiṇḍopamo* ‘yaṃ mārṣāḥ kāyo ‘parimardanakṣamaḥ. (2) *budbudopamo* ‘yaṃ kāyo ‘cirasthitikaḥ. (3) *marīcyupamo* ‘yaṃ kāyaḥ kleśatṛṣṇāsambhūtaḥ. (4) *kadalīskandhopamo* ‘yaṃ kāyo ‘sāratkvāt. (5) *yantrabhūto* batāyaṃ kāyo ‘sthisnāyuvinibaddhaḥ. (6) *māyopamo* ‘yaṃ kāyo viparyāsasambhūtaḥ. (7) *svapnopamo* ‘yaṃ kāyo vitathadarśanaḥ. (8) *pratibhāso* ‘yaṃ kāyaḥ pūrvakarmapratibhāsatayā saṃdr̥ṣyate. (9) *pratiśrutkopamo* ‘yaṃ kāyaḥ pratyayādhīnatvāt. (10) *meghopamo* ‘yaṃ kāyaḥ cittākulavigamalakṣaṇaḥ. (11) *vidyutsadr̥śo* ‘yaṃ kāyaḥ kṣaṇabhāṇigayukto ‘navasthitaḥ /

VN(Z) (T No. 474, Vol. 14, 521b2–7):

是身 (1) 如聚沫澡浴強忍。是身 (2) 如泡不得久立。是身 (3) 如野馬渴愛疲勞。是身 (4) 如芭蕉中無有堅。是身 (6) 如幻轉受報應。是身 (7) 如夢其現恍惚。是身 (8) 如影行照而現。是身 (9) 如響因緣變失。是身 (10) 如霧意無靜相。是身 (11) 如電爲分散法。

VN(K) (T No. 475, Vol. 14, 539b15–21):

是身 (1) 如聚沫不可撮摩。是身 (2) 如泡不得久立。是身 (3) 如炎從渴愛生。是身 (4) 如芭蕉中無有堅。是身 (6) 如幻從顛倒起。是身 (7) 如夢爲虛妄見。是身 (8) 如影從業緣現。是身 (9) 如響屬諸因緣。是身 (10) 如浮雲須臾變滅。是身 (11) 如電念念不住。

VN(X) (T No. 476, Vol. 14, 560c23–28):

是身 (1) 如聚沫不可撮摩。是身 (2) 如浮泡不得久立。是身 (3) 如陽焰從諸煩惱渴愛所生。是身 (4) 如芭蕉都無有實。是身 (6) 如幻從顛倒起。是身 (7) 如夢爲虛妄見。是身 (8) 如影從業緣現。是身 (9) 如響屬諸因緣。是身 (10) 如雲須臾變滅。是身 (11) 如電念念不住。

It can be seen at a glance that, while all three versions of Chinese translation have ten examples (for lack of (5)), the Sanskrit text has eleven: (1) a lump of foam (聚沫/*phenapiṇḍa*), (2) a water bubble (泡/浮泡/*budbuda*), (3) a mirage (野馬/炎/陽焰/*marīci*), (4) the trunk of a banana tree (芭蕉/*kadalīskandha*), (5) a machine (*yantra*), (6) a magical illusion (幻/*māyā*), (7) a dream (夢/*svapna*), (8) a shadow (影/*pratibhāsa*), (9) echoes (響/*pratiśrutkā*), (10) cloud (霧/雲/*megha*), and (11) a flash of lightning (電/*vidyut*). Thus, it can be said, from this also, that it is the Chinese tradition according to which the examples of the VN are called “ten.”

In addition, compare the examples of the VN to those of the PVSPr, it is clear that they do not correspond to each other. This means that there would be many different variations of the so-called “ten examples” in terms of both quantity and constitution.

It is to be noted in this connection that the five examples in the above VN passage, are completely identical with those in the *Samyuttanikāya* (SN), one of the Pāli canons of Theravada Buddhism.

SN III, (PTS XXII. 95) :

- (1) *phenapiṇḍūpamaṃ rūpaṃ // vedabā* (2) *bubbūlupamā //*
 (3) *marīcikūpamā saññā // saṅkhārā* (4) *kadalūpamā //*
 (6) *māyūpamaṃ ca viññāṇaṃ // dīpitādiccabandhunā //*

It can be assumed that the author of the VN would obviously have in mind the above passage of the SN. Thus, at least, half of the examples in the VN can be traced back to the SN.

But then, the next question arises: Where did the other half in the VN come from? To answer this question, further comprehensive studies are necessary.

3. Why “Ten Examples”?

Let us turn to another problem. Whether do the Mahāyāna Buddhists require as many as ten examples to illustrate their thesis that everything in the world is unreal? Why do they enumerate such a number of examples?

To this question, the author of the MPrŚ gives an interesting answer as follows:

MPrŚ (T No. 1509, Vol. 25, 103b15–19):

問曰。一事可知何以多喻。答曰。我先已答。是摩訶衍如大海水。一切法盡攝。摩訶衍多因緣故。多譬喻無咎。復次是菩薩甚深利智故。種種法門種種因緣種種喻壞諸法。爲人解故應多引喻。

Question: A single example would suffice in understanding. Why is it necessary to multiply examples?

Answer: We have already answered this question [by saying] that the Mahāyāna doctrine contains entirely all *dharma*s like the waters of the ocean. The Mahāyāna deals with various situations. Therefore, if we adduce various examples, no blame attaches to us.

Moreover, the *bodhisattvas* have profound and sharp wisdom. Therefore, they eliminate [the substantial reality of] *dharma*s through a number of teachings, causal situations and examples. In order to make people understand, it is necessary to multiply examples.

In the above, two reasons are put forth by the author of the MPrŚ: one is that the Mahāyāna doctrine covers a broad range of topics, so that many examples are needed; while the other is closely related to one of the most important concept of the Mahāyāna Buddhism, namely, the *upāyakauśalya*, or skillfulness of the *bodhisattvas* in preaching. The *bodhisattvas* vary their teachings to suit the audience at his or her level of understanding, so that many examples are necessary.

The answer given by the author of the MPrŚ, to be sure, could be somehow convincing. However, if so, there is a possibility that the number of examples would increase infinitely. Nevertheless, this is not the case. In practice, the number of examples cited in the later period is decreasing. Above all, two examples, namely a dream (*svapna*) and a magical illusion (*māyā*), become a major topic of discussion.

4. Conclusion

We have examined the “ten examples” (十喻) as the sources of the examples of illusory cognitions found in the Buddhist epistemological tradition.

From the fact that a set of the “ten examples” cannot be found in the Sanskrit text, either of the PVSPr or of the VN, it is highly possible that the so-called “ten examples” are not ten in its original form. There is no such concept as the “ten examples” in India, and hence, it can be of China origin.

There would be many different variations of the so-called “ten examples” in terms of

both quantity and constitution. Further comprehensive studies, which will reveal their influence of each other and the respective roles of each example, are required in the future.

Notes

- 1) See T No. 1509, Vol. 25, 101c1–106b8.
- 2) This may enhance the possibility that the chapter which deals with the “ten example” of the MPrŚ is a post-canonical Buddhist text (偽經) written in East Asia.

Abbreviations

- MPrŚ Chinese version of Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtra. T No. 1509, Vol. 25.
PVSPr Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā. I-1. Ed. Kimura, Takatsu. Tokyo: Sankibobusshorin, 2007.
PVSPr(K) Kumārajīva’s Chinese version of PVSPr. T No. 223, Vol. 8.
PVSPr(X) Xuanzang’s Chinese version of PVSPr. T No. 220, Vol. 5.
SN Sanyuttanikāya PTS XXII.
VN Vimalakīrtinirdeśa. A Sanskrit Edition Based upon the Manuscript Newly Found at the Potala Palace. Tokyo: Taisho University Press, 2006.
VN(K) Kumārajīva’s Chinese version of VN. T No. 475, Vol. 14.
VN(V) Xuanzang’s Chinese version of VN. T No. 476, Vol. 14.
VN(Z) Zhi Qian’s Chinese version of VN. T No. 474, Vol. 14.

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