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The Ethical Dimensions Of Knowledge: Moral Implications Of *Prajñā*, *Jñāna*, And *Vijñāna* In The Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam

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Abstract

This study examines the epistemological foundations of ethics in Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam, focusing on how different modes of knowledge *vijñāna* (consciousness), *jñāna* (knowledge), and *prajñā* (wisdom) inform moral development within Buddhist soteriology. Unlike philosophical systems that separate epistemology from ethics, the Abhidharmic framework presents an integration where cognitive refinement directly corresponds to ethical advancement. Through textual analysis, this research demonstrates that the transformation of ordinary consciousness into liberating wisdom constitutes the cognitive basis for ethical perfection. As dualistic consciousness gives way to non-dual wisdom that comprehends emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and selflessness (*anātman*), the cognitive roots of unwholesome action are systematically undermined. This study contributes to our understanding of Buddhist ethics as fundamentally grounded in epistemological transformation, revealing how moral development is inseparable from the cultivation of wisdom.

Keywords: *Buddhist ethics, Abhidharma, Vasubandhu, consciousness, wisdom, moral psychology*

I. Introduction

Within Buddhist thought, few connections are as profound as the relationship between epistemology and ethics. Unlike philosophical traditions that treat knowledge acquisition as divorced from moral development, Buddhism presents a seamless integration where what one knows fundamentally shapes how one acts (Williams, 2009). This integration reaches its systematic apex in the Abhidharma literature,

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where mental factors, cognitive processes, and ethical development are meticulously analyzed. The present study examines this relationship through the lens of the Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam, Vasubandhu's influential commentary that synthesizes centuries of Abhidharmic thought while establishing a comprehensive framework for understanding the moral dimensions of knowledge.

The research problem addressed concerns how different forms of knowledge specifically the triad of *viññāna* (consciousness), *jñāna* (knowledge), and *prajñā* (wisdom) inform moral development and ethical conduct in the Buddhist soteriological framework. Despite extensive scholarly attention to Buddhist ethics and epistemology as separate domains, insufficient work has examined how the Abhidharmic analysis of knowledge forms provides the cognitive foundations for Buddhist moral theory (Gold, 2015).

The Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam offers an ideal textual basis for this investigation as it represents a systematic culmination of Abhidharmic thought, integrating diverse strands of analysis into a coherent philosophical system. The central thesis of this study is that the transformation of consciousness (*viññāna*) into wisdom (*prajñā*) provides the necessary foundation for ethical behavior in the Buddhist path. This transformation constitutes a fundamental reorientation of one's cognitive relationship to reality with profound moral implications.

II. Theoretical and Historical Background

Vasubandhu's Ethical Framework in the Abhidharmic Context

Vasubandhu's ethical vision represents a sophisticated synthesis of earlier Abhidharmic moral theory within a systematic philosophical architecture (Pruden, 1988-1990). Working within the broader *Sarvāstivāda* tradition while introducing critical innovations, Vasubandhu develops an ethical framework fundamentally grounded in cognitive transformation. Unlike many Western ethical systems that begin with normative principles, Vasubandhu's approach begins with a detailed analysis of consciousness (*viññāna*) and its relationship to afflictive mental states (*kleśa*).

The Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam presents ethics as inseparable from its psychological and epistemological foundations. In Chapter IV (Karma), Vasubandhu defines moral action primarily in terms of intention (*cetanā*) and the mental factors that accompany it, establishing that ethical value derives from mental states rather than merely from external behavior (Vasubandhu, 1975, IV.1). This cognitivist approach is further developed in Chapter V (Afflictions), where he analyzes how defiled mental states rooted in fundamental misapprehension of reality lead inevitably to harmful action.

What distinguishes Vasubandhu's ethical framework is his systematic correlation of specific cognitive errors with particular moral failings, and his detailed analysis of how progressively refined forms of knowledge counteract these failings (Gold, 2015).

Historical Development of Knowledge Concepts

The triad of knowledge modalities *viññāna*, *jñāna*, and *prajñā* underwent significant evolution before reaching their systematic formulation in the Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam. In early Buddhist suttas, these terms often appear with overlapping meanings, gradually acquiring more technical precision through Abhidharmic systematization.

The *Sarvāstivāda* Abhidharma tradition significantly refined these concepts into distinct epistemological categories with specific ethical implications. As Dhammajoti (2009) demonstrates, *Sarvāstivāda* thinkers distinguished *viññāna* as the basic cognitive awareness that apprehends objects in a dualistic manner from *prajñā* as penetrative understanding that discerns the true nature of phenomena. *Jñāna* assumed an intermediate position, representing correct but still conventional knowledge that could serve as a stepping stone toward wisdom.

This progressive differentiation reflected the *Sarvāstivāda* concern with mapping precise causal relationships between mental states and their moral consequences. Most significantly, the *Mahāvibhāṣā* establishes an explicit correlation between *āsrava-kṣaya-jñāna* (knowledge of the destruction of defilements) and the attainment of moral perfection, thus cementing the epistemological foundations of ethics (Dhammajoti, 2009).

The Role of Knowledge in *Sarvāstivāda* Ethical Thought

Within *Sarvāstivāda* ethical theory, knowledge occupies a position of paramount importance. As Cox (1995) has shown, the *Sarvāstivāda* tradition conceptualizes moral development primarily as a process of replacing ignorance (*avidyā*) with increasingly refined forms of knowing. This approach shapes a distinctive cognitive ethics in which moral failings are understood fundamentally as epistemological errors.

The *Sarvāstivāda* analysis of moral causation establishes that unwholesome actions invariably arise from misapprehension of reality. This misapprehension manifests in three primary forms: perceiving the impermanent as permanent, the unsatisfactory as satisfactory, and the selfless as possessing selfhood (Dhammajoti, 2009). These cognitive errors directly generate the afflictions (*kleśa*) that motivate harmful actions.

According to *Sarvāstivāda* analysis, ordinary consciousness (*viññāna*) operates with inherent limitations that predispose it toward ethical failure. By dichotomizing experience into subject and object, it creates the fundamental conditions for attachment and aversion. Conventional knowledge (*jñāna*), while more refined, still operates within the framework of conventional truth (*samvṛti-satya*) and thus cannot completely eliminate the cognitive roots of unethical action. Only transcendental wisdom (*prajñā*) that directly apprehends ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) can eradicate these roots entirely (Williams, 2009).

III. *Viññāna* (Consciousness) and Moral Cognition: Critical Analysis

Definition and Ethical Limitations of Ordinary Consciousness

Vasubandhu defines *viññāna* in primarily functional terms as the discernment of specific objects (*viṣayaprativijñapti*). In the first chapter, he states: "Consciousness (*viññāna*) is the discernment of each object-domain. Visual consciousness is the discernment of visible form, auditory consciousness is the discernment of sound, and so on" (Vasubandhu, 1975, I.16). This definition establishes consciousness as fundamentally dualistic, operating through a subject-object structure that divides experience into a perceiving subject and perceived objects.

This dualistic structure, while necessary for conventional cognition, embeds ethical limitations within consciousness itself. As Vasubandhu elaborates in his analysis of the mental factors (*caitta*), ordinary

consciousness cannot operate without the accompaniment of feeling (*vedanā*), apperception (*saṃjñā*), and volitional formations (*saṃskāra*) (Vasubandhu, 1975, II.24). These co-arising mental factors condition consciousness toward affective responses that easily become entangled with attachment and aversion.

How *Vijñāna* Relates to Unwholesome Mental States

The relationship between *vijñāna* and unwholesome mental states receives extensive treatment in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*. Vasubandhu establishes that consciousness itself becomes defiled through its association with afflictions (*kleśa*), which arise from fundamental misapprehension of reality.

In Chapter V, Vasubandhu explicitly connects consciousness with the primary root afflictions: "The afflictions arise dependent on the consciousnesses and defile them. Desire (*rāga*), aversion (*dveṣa*), and delusion (*moha*) are the primary defiled states arising in dependence on the sixfold consciousness" (Vasubandhu, 1975, V.3). This passage reveals that consciousness serves as both the necessary condition for afflictions to arise and the substrate that becomes ethically compromised through this association.

The text elaborates how ordinary consciousness (*vijñāna*) operates through four primary "inversions" (*viparyāsa*) that directly generate unwholesome mental states: "There are four inversions: perceiving the impermanent as permanent, the unsatisfactory as satisfactory, the selfless as having self, and the impure as pure. These inversions of consciousness become the basis for the arising of desire, aversion, and other afflictions" (Vasubandhu, 1975, V.9).

The Ethical Problem of Subject-Object Duality

The dualistic structure of consciousness dividing experience into perceiving subject and perceived objects constitutes a fundamental ethical problem in Vasubandhu's analysis. This subject-object division is not merely an epistemological issue but the cognitive foundation for moral error.

In Chapter IX, Vasubandhu explicitly identifies the subject-object dichotomy as the basis for attachment and aversion: "From the grasping of objects as separate from the subject arises desire for what appears pleasant and aversion toward what appears unpleasant. This duality is the root of all afflictions" (Vasubandhu, 1975, IX.1). This passage reveals that dualistic consciousness inevitably generates preferential attachment to certain objects and aversion to others, thereby initiating the causal sequence that culminates in harmful action.

Vijñāna 's Role in Perpetuating Harmful Actions

The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* presents consciousness as playing a crucial role in perpetuating the cycle of harmful actions through its entanglement with ignorance. This analysis appears most explicitly in Vasubandhu's discussion of the twelve links of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) in Chapter III. Vasubandhu identifies consciousness as the third link, conditioned by volitional formations (*saṃskāra*) and itself conditioning name-and-form (*nāmarūpa*). He states: "*Consciousness, conditioned by volitional formations that are rooted in ignorance, becomes the seed for future existence. This consciousness, defiled by ignorance, projects itself into a new existence and generates the entire complex of suffering*" (Vasubandhu, 1975, III.19).

IV. Jñāna (Knowledge) and Ethical Discernment: Analysis

Definition and Moral Significance of Refined Knowledge

Between ordinary consciousness (*viññāna*) with its inherent ethical limitations and the liberating wisdom (*prajñā*) that characterizes fully awakened beings, Vasubandhu identifies an intermediate epistemological category: knowledge (*jñāna*). In the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, *jñāna* serves as both a corrective to the ethical deficiencies of *viññāna* and a necessary precursor to the development of *prajñā*.

Vasubandhu characterizes *jñāna* functionally through its various manifestations and operations. In Chapter VII, he offers a general characterization of *jñāna* as "penetrative discernment that correctly apprehends its object" (*prativedhalakṣaṇam samyag viśayābodhanam*) (Vasubandhu, 1975, VII.1). This definition establishes *jñāna* as epistemologically superior to ordinary consciousness (*viññāna*) in that it penetrates beyond superficial appearances to discern objects more accurately.

The moral significance of *jñāna* emerges most clearly in Vasubandhu's discussion of the relationship between knowledge and afflictions. He states: "Knowledge (*jñāna*) serves as the direct antidote to ignorance, which is the root of all afflictions. By eliminating specific forms of ignorance, specific forms of knowledge counteract corresponding afflictions and therefore prevent the unwholesome actions that arise from them" (Vasubandhu, 1975, V.34).

Types of Jñāna and Their Ethical Implications

The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* presents a sophisticated typology of *jñāna*, with each type serving specific ethical functions. In Chapter VII, Vasubandhu identifies ten primary forms of knowledge, which can be grouped into conventional and transcendental categories with distinctive ethical implications.

Conventional knowledge (*laukika-jñāna*) encompasses five types that operate within the framework of *saṃvṛti-satya* (conventional truth), including *dharma-jñāna* (knowledge of dharmas), *anvaya-jñāna* (subsequent knowledge), and *saṃvṛti-jñāna* (conventional knowledge) (Vasubandhu, 1975, VII.2). Each serves specific ethical functions by providing correct understanding within conventional frameworks.

Transcendental knowledge (*lokottara-jñāna*) includes modes of knowing that begin to penetrate ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*), such as *kṣaya-jñāna* (knowledge of destruction) and *anutpāda-jñāna* (knowledge of non-arising). These forms of knowledge directly perceive the cessation and permanent eradication of specific mental defilements.

Knowledge of Karmic Consequences as Ethical Guidance

Among the various forms of *jñāna*, Vasubandhu accords particular ethical significance to knowledge concerning karmic causality. In Chapter IV (Karma), he explicitly connects ethical conduct with correct understanding of action and its consequences: "Wholesome and unwholesome actions are distinguished by their roots, their nature, and their results. Knowledge that correctly discerns these distinctions provides the necessary basis for ethical choice" (Vasubandhu, 1975, IV.8).

This knowledge operates through several distinct modes: retrospective karmic knowledge that discerns how past actions have produced present conditions, prospective karmic knowledge that anticipates future consequences, and momentary karmic knowledge that discerns the ethical character of present mental states as they arise (Pruden, 1988-1990).

The Moral Distinction Between Conventional and Transcendental Knowledge

The Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam establishes a crucial ethical distinction between conventional knowledge (*laukika-jñāna*) and transcendental knowledge (*lokottara-jñāna*), with each serving different functions in moral development.

Conventional knowledge operates within the framework of *saṃvṛti-satya* (conventional truth) and engages with conceptual distinctions between wholesome and unwholesome, meritorious and non-meritorious. The ethical limitation of conventional knowledge lies in its continued operation within subject-object duality, which maintains the potential for subtle forms of attachment and aversion.

Transcendental knowledge (*lokottara-jñāna*), by contrast, begins to penetrate *paramārtha-satya* (ultimate truth) and moves beyond conceptual distinctions. Vasubandhu characterizes its ethical function: "Transcendental knowledge discerns phenomena as empty of inherent existence (*svabhāva-sūnyatā*). This penetration of emptiness eliminates the cognitive basis for appropriating certain phenomena and rejecting others, thereby removing the root of both attachment and aversion" (Vasubandhu, 1975, VII.11).

IV. *Prajñā* (Wisdom) as Ethical Perfection: Analysis

Definition and Ethical Dimensions of Wisdom

In the epistemological hierarchy presented in the Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam, *prajñā* (wisdom) represents the culmination not only of cognitive refinement but of moral development. Beyond the dualistic consciousness (*viññāna*) that characterizes ordinary perception and the refined knowledge (*jñāna*) that correctly discerns conventional truths, *prajñā* emerges as the transformative insight that directly penetrates ultimate reality and thereby establishes the foundation for ethical perfection.

Vasubandhu defines *prajñā* in the Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam as "discernment of dharmas" (*dharmapracaya*), but this seemingly straightforward definition belies the term's profound ethical significance (Potter, 1999). In Chapter II, Vasubandhu elaborates: "Prajñā is the distinct understanding of objects that discriminates their nature correctly. It functions to eliminate confusion and serves as the direct antidote to ignorance (*avidyā*)" (Vasubandhu, 1975, II.24).

The ethical dimension of *prajñā* emerges most clearly in Vasubandhu's discussion of the mental factors (*caitasika dharma*) in Chapter II. He classifies *prajñā* among the "good mental factors" (*kuśala mahābhūmika dharma*) that are intrinsically wholesome and necessarily accompany all virtuous mental states (Vasubandhu, 1975, II.25). This classification reveals that for Vasubandhu, *prajñā* is not value-neutral but inherently ethical in nature wisdom and virtue are inseparable aspects of the same mental quality.

Prajñā's Function in Eliminating the Root Causes of Unethical Behavior

The distinctive ethical function of *prajñā* in Vasubandhu's system lies in its capacity to eliminate not merely specific moral failings but their root causes. In Chapter V, Vasubandhu identifies ignorance (*avidyā*) defined as "non-knowledge of the four noble truths" as the fundamental condition that generates all other afflictions and consequently all unwholesome actions (Vasubandhu, 1975, V.3). *Prajñā*, as the direct antidote to ignorance, therefore strikes at the very source of unethical behavior.

Vasubandhu elaborates on this function in his analysis of the path of seeing (*darśana-mārga*) in Chapter VI: "When wisdom directly realizes the four noble truths, it eliminates the conceptually acquired afflictions (*parikalpita kleśa*) at their root. This elimination occurs not through suppression but through the complete removal of their cognitive basis" (Vasubandhu, 1975, VI.27).

Of the cognitive inversions that generate afflictions, Vasubandhu identifies the misconception of selfhood (*ātma-dr̥ṣṭi*) as the most fundamental. He states: "The view of self is the root of all afflictions. From it arise attachment to what appears beneficial to the self and aversion toward what appears threatening to it. Wisdom, by directly realizing selflessness (*anātman*), cuts off this root and thereby eliminates the basis for both attachment and aversion" (Vasubandhu, 1975, V.12).

The Inseparability of Wisdom and Compassion

While the Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam emphasizes *prajñā*'s cognitive function in eliminating the roots of unwholesome action, Vasubandhu also establishes the inseparability of wisdom and compassion (*karuṇā*), thereby articulating a comprehensive ethical vision that encompasses both cognitive and affective dimensions.

In Chapter VII, Vasubandhu explicitly connects the realization of selflessness with the arising of compassion: "When wisdom directly perceives the selflessness of persons (*pudgala-nairātmya*), the misconception of separate, autonomous selves dissolves. This dissolution naturally gives rise to compassion, as the suffering previously attributed to 'others' is now understood as no different from one's own" (Pruden, 1988-1990, Vol. 4, p. 1168).

How Prajñā Transforms Moral Understanding and Conduct

The culmination of Vasubandhu's ethical vision lies in his account of how *prajñā* fundamentally transforms both moral understanding and actual conduct. This transformation occurs through a radical restructuring of cognition that naturally manifests as ethical perfection.

In Chapter IX, Vasubandhu describes how wisdom transforms moral understanding: "The ordinary person (*prthagjana*) understands ethics in terms of rules to be followed and virtues to be attained. The arhat, whose consciousness has been transformed by wisdom, no longer perceives ethics as a deliberate adherence to principles but as the natural expression of clear seeing" (Vasubandhu, 1975, IX.7).

Most significantly, this ethical transformation becomes irreversible once wisdom directly realizes selflessness. He states: "When wisdom directly perceives the selflessness of persons, the seeds of those afflictions eliminated by the path of seeing (*darśana-heya-kleśa*) are permanently destroyed. This destruction ensures that specific forms of ethical misconduct can never again arise, as their cognitive foundation has been eliminated" (Vasubandhu, 1975, VI.32).

VI. The Ethical Journey: Transforming Knowledge into Virtue

The progression from ordinary consciousness to liberating wisdom unfolds through a systematic process of ethical-epistemological development presented as the threefold model of wisdom cultivation: wisdom derived from hearing (*śruta-mayī prajñā*), from reflection (*cintā-mayī prajñā*), and from meditation (*bhāvanā-mayī prajñā*).

Wisdom from hearing (*śruta-mayī prajñā*) establishes correct view (*samyag-dṛṣṭi*) regarding karma and its results, providing the conceptual foundation for ethical conduct (Pruden, 1988-1990, Vol. 3, p. 921). Despite its value, this initial wisdom "remains primarily conceptual and has not yet become one's own direct understanding" (Pruden, 1988-1990, Vol. 3, p. 922).

Wisdom from reflection (*cintā-mayī prajñā*) internalizes and deepens this understanding through reasoned analysis. Through reflection, ethical principles initially accepted on authority become integrated into one's own understanding. One no longer avoids unwholesome actions merely because they are declared harmful by the teachings but because one has personally verified their harmful nature through reasoning (Pruden, 1988-1990, Vol. 3, p. 923).

Wisdom from meditation (*bhāvanā-mayī prajñā*) transforms conceptual understanding into direct realization that fundamentally reconfigures consciousness itself. This final stage establishes ethical achievement that transcends circumstantial fluctuations and represents the complete integration where understanding and conduct become indistinguishable (Pruden, 1988-1990, Vol. 3, p. 930).

VII. The Moral Psychology of Knowledge Transformation

Ignorance (*Avidyā*) as the Root of Unethical Behavior

The Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam presents a sophisticated moral psychology in which ethical transformation occurs primarily through cognitive refinement. For Vasubandhu, immoral behavior stems not from inherent wickedness but from specific cognitive errors that distort perception and motivate harmful actions.

In Vasubandhu's framework, ignorance (*avidyā*) functions as the fundamental condition giving rise to all forms of unethical behavior. He defines *avidyā* as "non-knowledge with respect to the four noble truths" and identifies it as "a distinct entity that actively misconceives its object rather than a mere absence of knowledge" (Pruden, 1988-1990, Vol. 3, p. 808).

Vasubandhu identifies ignorance as the primary root of unethical conduct through its position in the causal sequence of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*): "Ignorance is the first link in the twelve-membered chain of dependent origination. From ignorance arise the volitional formations (*saṃskāra*) that constitute karma" (Pruden, 1988-1990, Vol. 2, p. 402).

The Cognitive Basis of Moral Afflictions (*Kleśa*)

In Vasubandhu's psychological model, ignorance generates ethical misconduct through the intermediate production of afflictions (*kleśa*)—mental factors that disturb the mind and motivate harmful actions. The cognitive basis of afflictions is explicitly stated: "All afflictions arise in dependence on mistaken beliefs (*mithyā-dṛṣṭi*) generated by ignorance" (Pruden, 1988-1990, Vol. 3, p. 812).

This analysis reveals that Vasubandhu understands moral development as fundamentally a matter of cognitive transformation. By replacing ignorance with wisdom, the practitioner eliminates not only the symptoms of moral defilement but their very foundation. This represents a profound departure from purely behavioral approaches to ethics, establishing instead a comprehensive psychology of moral transformation grounded in epistemological refinement.

Conclusion

This study has examined the intricate relationship between knowledge and ethical transformation in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, focusing on the triad of *viññāna* (consciousness), *jñāna* (knowledge), and *prajñā* (wisdom). Through detailed textual and philosophical analysis, it has demonstrated that Buddhist ethics in the Abhidharmic context is inseparably grounded in epistemological refinement. Unlike Western moral theories that often treat knowledge and ethics as distinct domains, the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* advances a unified model in which cognitive transformation constitutes the very foundation of ethical purification and spiritual liberation.

Viññāna, as dualistic consciousness, was shown to carry inherent ethical limitations due to its subject-object dichotomy, which fosters attachment, aversion, and ignorance. *Jñāna*, while conceptually accurate, still operates within the bounds of conventional truth and thus plays an intermediate but essential role in undermining afflictive cognition. Only *prajñā* liberating wisdom that realizes emptiness and selflessness can eradicate the root causes of moral defilement and establish irreversible ethical transformation.

The study further emphasized that Vasubandhu's ethical vision is not grounded in external moral prescriptions but in the internal reconfiguration of awareness. The movement from *viññāna* through *jñāna* to *prajñā* outlines a progressive ethical trajectory in which moral conduct emerges spontaneously from clear seeing, rather than from effortful adherence to rules. In this framework, wisdom is not merely intellectual insight but a transformative force that eliminates ignorance and actualizes compassion (Kapstein, 2001).

Ultimately, the ethical dimensions of knowledge in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* reveal a profound Buddhist moral psychology, one in which liberation is both cognitive and ethical. The cultivation of knowledge is not an abstract epistemic exercise but the very means by which beings purify their minds, dismantle harmful patterns, and realize the highest good. This study thus contributes to contemporary Buddhist ethics by elucidating how moral development is structurally embedded within the Buddhist path of knowledge, offering insights that remain relevant for contemporary discussions of ethics, consciousness, and human transformation.

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