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DISCOURSE IN THE LAÑKĀVATĀRA-SŪTRA

In the study of Mahāyāna Buddhism one finds again and again that certain philosophical contradictions, rather than undermining religious thought, actually serve to stimulate it, propelling it to greater heights of inventiveness and insight. Among these productive contradictions we can certainly count the problem of language. It is easily stated: What is the status of words which insist that all words are essentially empty of meaning? How can a philosophical system which makes full and rich use of its conceptual language contend at the same time that language is not a means of access to religious truth? From the Buddha’s refusal to answer metaphysical questions to the linguistic conundrums of Zen kōans, the Buddhist tradition has demonstrated an ongoing concern with the problem of expressing — or prompting — the ‘enlightenment’ experience with words. With the rise of the Mahāyāna shortly before the time of Christ, the language question took on a singular importance: the distinctive literature of the Mahāyāna thinkers displayed a new willingness to penetrate the potentially labyrinthine depths of the Buddha’s basic teachings, inaugurating a scholasticism which sought to formulate coherent theoretical accounts of the Buddhist experience. The appearance of sophisticated and dialectical works such as the Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra signalled a new current in Buddhist thought, one which led inevitably to a critical reflection on the nature of language itself, on its forms and limits, its strategies, and its power to transform direct experiencing. With this new reflection, moreover, came a revolution of rhetoric: language was recast as a valuable instrument of skillful means (upāya), a religious modality of the highest importance.

This essay is meant to explore a few of the ways in which a particular Mahāyāna text, the Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra (ca. 300 AD), pursued the new critique of language — and more particularly, how it sought to use language as a special means of sharpening and opening intuitive experience. For two quite separate reasons, what follows is intended as a phenomenological study. First, it attempts to show that the writers of the Laṅkāvatāra meant to make a point about how language interacts with perception and pre-conscious
experiencing — and thus undertook something akin to what we understand as a phenomenological investigation, or an inquiry which seeks to formulate a precise description of the experiential process. And second, this essay itself is meant to be a reflection on the process of interpreting a Buddhist text, on the interaction of language and direct experiencing in the activity of reading. I hope to demonstrate that the writers of the Laṅkāvatāra employed unique linguistic strategies in their attempt to present their views of the world and of Buddhism, strategies which directly condition our reading of what they have written. I have tried, therefore, to maintain a reflective point of reference throughout the essay, one which keeps a sort of phenomenological logbook of the reading process. For only by maintaining a degree of lucidity with regard to the methods we employ in reading Buddhist texts can we hope to appreciate what it is they express of Buddhist life. Both philosophical traditions, Buddhist and Western, have come to understand that theoretical constructs cannot simply “contain” experience; and accordingly, each in its own way has tried to uncover the nature of the reciprocal interaction of thinking and experiencing in the conduct of sentient life. It is at this level that the present study intends to address the Laṅkāvatāra.

The Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra, though it has played a pivotal role in the Mahāyāna tradition, continues to baffle and frustrate its readers by confronting them with a philosophical discourse which is at once disjointed, contradictory, and highly digressive. The usual response to the inherent difficulties of the text has been to assert that its composition was haphazard and unsystematic; following the lead of D. T. Suzuki, many in the West have believed the sūtra to be little more than a conglomeration of free-floating Mahāyāna ideas, pulled together loosely under a single title and a crude narrative structure. Typical of this response is Suzuki’s dismissal of the “108 questions/108 pādas” section, in which the Buddha “answers” the bodhisattva Mahāmati’s questions and declaims a series of metaphysical verses:

Whatever we may say about them, one thing sure is that these questions and answers are incoherently strung together, and we fail to find any logical interpretation to the whole body of the gāthās making up the first part of the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra . . . the 108 clauses (pādas) preached by the Buddhas of the past are a string of negations, negating any notion that happened to come into the mind at the moment, apparently with no system, with no special philosophy in them. These negations are another example of the irrationality of the Laṅkāvatāra.

(SLVS, p. 40)
Suzuki sifts briefly through the content of the questions and pādas, trying to relate their subject-matter to the rest of the text. Failing this, he dismisses the section as anomalous and unworthy of serious consideration.

The number of terms... does not matter very much. What does matter is the subject-matter and the ultimate significance of the negations. Are all these negations from the point of view of absolute Śūnyatā philosophy?... Are they all important notions for the emancipation of sentient beings? Are they subjects to be treated in the body of the Laṅkāvatāra? If so, how is it that the eight Vijñānas, which occupy a position of chief interest in the sutra, are not at all mentioned here? In short, the presence of these so-called 108 questions (praśna) forming the first section of the Laṅkāvatāra proper, can safely be cut off as not essentially belonging to the teachings.

(SLVS, p. 41)

Despite such a summary dismissal of the portions of the text he finds incoherent, Suzuki is interested enough in the issue of its composition to offer a number of tentative hypotheses regarding its origin. He wonders if perhaps the Laṅkāvatāra is merely a collection of shorter, independent sūtras compiled as a sourcebook or anthology. He argues, through a survey of extant versions of the sutra, that certain sections of the text (for example, the Rāvana and meat-eating chapters) are later accretions added by the Chinese and Tibetan translators. And finally, he suggests that the current versions are merely abridgements of a larger, more comprehensive edition now lost. This last theory gives him a possible explanation for the apparent incoherence of the 108 questions/108 pādas section:

... it is probable that the Laṅkāvatāra which we have at present... is an abridgement of a larger and fuller text, that is, selections made from it by a Mahāyāna scholar who took them down in his notebook for his own use; and that in the larger text not only the 108 questions (praśna) but the 108 clauses (pāda) are systematically answered and explained. In any event, something more than the present text of the Laṅkāvatāra is needed to understand it thoroughly and harmoniously.

(SLVS, p. 42)

Whatever the plausibility of Suzuki’s hypotheses from a strictly historical standpoint, it is clear that they represent an attempt to explain the difficulties of the text externally rather than internally. Under the sway of his massive Studies in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra (1930) this external interpretation has long held court among Western critics, apparently discouraging scholars from attempting a more modern reading of the work.³ It is time for us to try again to approach its very real difficulties and problems, giving due attention to
the internal semantics of the text. Since Suzuki's time much has developed in
the way of hermeneutic theory; for all his prodigious energy, that scholar of
Zen had at his disposal only a modest arsenal of critical tools and techniques.
The *Laṅkāvatāra* is a philosophical, discursive text which makes extremely
scant mention of meditation and other practice-oriented topics; therefore we
must analyze it philosophically — *textually* — in order to begin to make sense
of it. The hermeneutic of this essay will focus particularly on the linguistic
strategies of the *Laṅkāvatāra*: besides addressing the overt content of the
discourse it presents we will look carefully at its method, at its philosophical
style, and ultimately, at its implicit assumptions about the uses of language.
As even a cursory reading of Buddhist writers like Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga will
readily remind us, we must not err on the side of ascribing too little rhetorical
sophistication to writers in the Mahāyāna tradition; with their dramatic,
argumentative, and paradoxical moods the Mahāyāna texts confront the
reader with a wide spectrum of formidable challenges and puzzles. The
*Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* is no exception. If we are to read it meaningfully, we must
regard it not only as a collection of Māhāyāna theories, as Suzuki did, but as
a unique linguistic *production*, with all the subtleties and rhetorical nuances
entailed by that word.

### 1. VISUAL LANGUAGE AND MĀYĀ

The *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* opens with a spectacle, a play of illusions which serves
to introduce one of the central themes of the text: the doctrine of *māya*, the
dream-like quality of the phenomenal word. Asked by Rāvana, the ten-headed
king of the Rākṣasas, to expound the Dharma, the Buddha responds with
what seems to be a miraculous manipulation of reality:

Thereupon the Blessed One created jewel-adorned mountains and other objects
magnificently embellished with jewels in an immense number. On the summit of each
mountain the Buddha himself was visible, and Rāvana, the Yakṣa, also was found
standing there. Thus the entire assembly was seen on each mountain peak . . . here too
was the king of the Rākṣasas and with him the residents of Laṅkā, and the Laṅkā created
by the Buddha rivalling (the real one). Other things were there too, (like) the Aśoka
(garden) with its shining woods, and on each mountain peak Mahāmati was making a
request of the Buddha. . . .

(LVS, p. 8)

Each of the newly-created Buddhas, like the original one, lectures on the
teachings in a magnificent voice “varied in hundreds of thousands of ways”.
But then, to consummate the spectacle, the Buddha and his entourage disappear into thin air, leaving Rāvana completely alone. Bewildered, Rāvana tries out several explanations for what he has witnessed: “Is it a dream then? or a vision? or is it a castle conjured up by the Gandharvas?” (LVS, p. 8) Dissatisfied with these more traditional rationalizations, Rāvana realizes that what he has witnessed is a demonstration of māyā, the illusory nature of phenomenal reality. Anticipating the seminal argument of the sūtra, he concludes that “this is the nature as such (dharmatā) of all things, which belong to the realm of Mind . . . there is neither the seer nor the seen, neither the speaker nor the spoken . . .” (LVS, p. 9). Even the Buddha and the Dharma spring from the empty play of the mind: having once disappeared into nothingness, the Buddha now speaks directly to the newly-enlightened Rāvana:

Rāvana . . . found himself abiding in the Buddha-knowledge when a voice was heard from the sky, saying, 'It is to be known by oneself.'

'Well done, well done, Lord of Laṅkā! Well done indeed, Lord of Laṅkā, once again. The Yogīn is to discipline himself as you do. The Tathāgatas and all things are to be viewed as you view them . . . .' (LVS, p. 10)

Significantly, Rāvana wishes to see the invisible speaker, the Buddha, with his own eyes — thus further extending the play of illusion and reality. In imploring the Buddha to reappear, Rāvana expresses a quite understandable need to see an exemplar of the teachings before him, whether that exemplar be mere māyā or not.

I wish to see the Blessed One again, who has all the disciplinary practices at his command, who has turned away from the practices of the heretics . . . may I thus see again, by means of his miraculous powers, the Compassionate One in whom the fuel of passion and discrimination is exhausted, who is surrounded by sons of the Buddha . . . and seeing him may I attain what I have not yet attained, (retain) what I have already gained . . . . (LVS, p. 11)

This is a traditional setpiece: the revelation of a divine or at least suprahuman being to human eyes. Arjuna tells Kṛṣṇa, for example, that “I have heard thy words of truth, but my soul is yearning to see: to see thy form as God of this all . . .”. Similarly, Rāvana asks the Buddha to undo the spectacular disappearance in order to deepen his own enlightenment. The Buddha, seeing that Rāvana is on the verge of a profound insight, fulfills his request; but he does so by reinstating the first illusion — the panorama of Buddhas
spread across the mountains — not by reappearing in his ordinary and singular form:

At that moment, the Blessed One, seeing that the Lord of Laṅkā was receptive to the insight that states of existence have no origin (Skt. anutpatikadharmānitya, Tib. ma-skies pa'i-chos-la-bzod-pa), showed his glorious compassion for the ten-headed one by making himself visible once more on the mountain peak studded with many jewels . . . the ten-headed king of Laṅkā saw the splendor again as seen before on the mountain peak(s) . . . and he saw himself on each mountain peak, together with Mahāmati, in front of the Tathāgata . . . . (LVS, p. 12)

This last vision has many consequences, for it foreshadows several key philosophical points. Why does the Buddha reinstate the first illusion rather than restoring himself in a “normal” and unitary form? And what is the significance of the fact that Rāvana sees himself on each mountain peak?

The sūtra will argue at some length that there is an important distinction between absolute knowledge (Skt. prajñā, Tib. šes-rab) and relative knowledge (Skt. vikalpa, Tib. rnam-par rtog-pa). Prajñā will emerge as the sort of knowledge which grasps the “true” nature of phenomenal reality — its nature as māyā. Relative knowledge, or vikalpa, will prove to be a knowledge of “discriminated forms” — a knowledge which breaks up the world into a web of objects, each with its own individual existence or non-existence. In general, relative knowledge serves as a trap, mooring us in the delusion that “things” have unique existences and natures of their own; absolute knowledge is what springs us from the trap, liberating us from the error of believing in “things” as such. But where does the Dharma, the Buddha’s teaching, fit into this scheme? Where indeed does the Buddha himself belong? In keeping with its renunciation of the logical games of vikalpa, the Laṅkāvatāra must argue that all concepts, even the Buddha’s concepts, are fundamentally empty, as are physical forms. Words and things are both merely manifestations of māyā. But this presents a clear pedagogical problem for the sūtra: are the Buddha’s discourses worthless? Is there any point in discussing Buddhist ideas at all? How can one follow the Buddha’s way if both the Buddha and the way are empty?

The provisional solution suggested in the opening allegory of the sūtra is this: while words and concepts are empty by comparison with the absolute knowledge of prajñā, there are grades of soteriological value within the general framework of relativity. To wit: some concepts are useful in bringing about enlightenment, and some are not. Though truth is not to be found in
words alone, words can help push direct experiencing deeper and deeper until prajñā takes hold. This doctrine, which will emerge in greater detail as the work proceeds, is latent in the imagery of the opening scene: the Buddha speaks to Rāvana from empty space, graphically linking the phenomenon of language (as speaking) with that of emptiness (as space). When the Buddha then appears again at Rāvana's imploring, the text informs us that he does so because he senses that his appearance — though māyā — will push Rāvana to a yet deeper intuitive level. In order for this to work properly, he must arrange to appear in such a way that the emptiness of his image is unmistakable. Rather than reappearing as a conventional man, the Buddha reappears as spectacle, reduplicated endlessly atop the mountain peaks ringing Laṅkā. The very power of this extended illusion, as the text tells us, demonstrates to Rāvana the truth of emptiness.

Hand in hand with this foreshadowing of the doctrine of emptiness is a suggestion of the doctrine of egolessness (Skt. anātman, Tib. bdag-med-pa). Not only the Buddha, but Rāvana too appears on the mountain peaks: Rāvana witnesses his own māyā-nature as an integral part of the magical demonstration. If Rāvana appears on fifty mountain peaks, who can say which, if any, of the appearances is “real?” Much of the philosophical discussion of the sūtra is underpinned by the necessity of recognizing that the self is māyā — for only by doing so is the practitioner finally capable of breaking his attachment to things. This twofold suspension of self and object is suggested, in fact, after the first illusion mysteriously vanishes: Rāvana wonders to himself, “How is this? What does this mean? And by whom was it heard? What was it that was seen? And by whom was it seen? Where is the city? And where is the Buddha?” (LVS, p. 13). If the seen implies the seer, and the seen disappears, what can we say about the original reality of the seer? If the heard implies the hearer, and the heard disappears, what becomes of the hearer? This dual emptying of everyday reality-concepts will occupy a good part of the text. The opening allegory only hints at it, clothing the central philosophical problem in theatrical imagery.

The initial spectacle of the Laṅkāvatāra culminates in an even more precipitate demonstration of māyā.

Then the Blessed One, beholding again this great assembly with his wisdom eye, which is not the human eye, laughed loudly and most vigorously like the lion-king. Emitting rays of light from the tuft of hair between the eyebrows, from the ribs, from the loins, from the śrivatsa on the breast, and from every pore of the skin — emitting rays of light
which shone flaming like the fire occurring at the end of a kalpa, like a luminous rainbow, like the rising sun, blazing brilliantly, gloriously . . . — the one who sat on the peak resembling Mount Sumeru laughed the loudest laugh. (LVS, p. 13)

This visionary climax serves a particular verbal purpose: it causes Mahāmati, a bodhisattva, to ask the Buddha for an explanation of his behavior. Until this point the emphasis of the scene has been on visual semantics, with the issue of verbal language waiting in the wings. After the creation of the first vision, Rāvana reflects that “those who see things such as were seen before, do not see the Buddha; (even) when discrimination is not activated one does not see the Buddha; the Buddha, being fully enlightened, is seen where the world itself is not evolved.” (LVS, p. 9) Moments later, when the Buddha has dissolved the first illusion and addresses him from empty space, he tells Rāvana to “reflect on the signification of this as you did when seeing the Tathāgata before; for this indeed is seeing the Tathāgata.” (LVS, p. 11)

But now, after the Buddha’s enigmatic laugh, Mahāmati confronts the Buddha, wanting an explanation. This confrontation sets in gear the philosophical dialogue which will dominate the remainder of the sūtra. The Buddha applauds Mahāmati’s inquiry, and proceeds to offer to answer any questions he might have. The magical laugh—a special sort of verbal utterance, a special creation of māyā—thus serves as a transition from the almost purely visual level of māyā, as manifested in the succession of illusions, to the verbal or linguistic level of māyā, the level of words and their meanings. Mahāmati decides to confront the Buddha explicitly because he realizes that “beings to be born in the future would be confused because of their delight in the verbal teaching (deśanāpātha), because of clinging to the letter as (much as) the spirit (artha) . . .” (LVS, p. 14). The instances of visual māyā served to enlighten the ten-headed demon king Rāvana by demonstrating the emptiness of phenomenal appearance; now the Buddha sets out to enlighten Mahāmati and his troupe of bodhisattvas by using words—philosophical discourse—to lead to the same intuition of emptiness. Any phenomenon of māyā can seemingly be manipulated by the Buddha to achieve the same result: its self-revelation as emptiness. But certain sorts of practitioners require special efforts; it is the Buddha’s skillful means (upāya) that dictate the form his teaching will take. The mode for the rest of the text is discursive, since the Buddha’s intention is to lead his auditors through language toward an experience of enlightenment. In showing the flaws of everyday logic, laying out an alternative conceptual scheme, and then
emptying his own logical paradigm, the Buddha hopes to usher his interlocutors
toward a more direct encounter with reality as it is, or suchness (Skt. tathatā, 
Tib. yañ-dag-pa) — an encounter which, as we will see, reaches beyond the 
relative knowledge of logical vikalpa and engages the absolute knowledge of 
prajñā.

2. COUNTERFEIT AND REAL: THE ONTOLOGY OF THE WORLD

The opening allegory of the Laṅkāvatāra suggests a threefold ontological 
distinction. We may think of the experienced world as either: (a) Real; 
(b) Unreal; or (c) Realistic but empty. Though much of the early language of 
the text would seem to favor the second interpretation, later passages overtly 
contradict such a reading. The Buddha repeatedly cautions his listeners 
against simple nihilism — the mistake of believing that the phenomenal world 
is mere fantasy, an absolute unreality, a shadow play. The various Chinese 
versions of the sūtra in particular stress the importance of not being seduced 
by the conception of māyā elaborated in the Hindu tradition. Indian classical 
literature is full of whimsical stories which could lead to what the Buddha 
considers to be a “nihilistic” view of māyā; in the Purāṇas, for example, we 
find the following story about Nārada:

... the sage Nārada bathed in a pool and came up a woman; she married, had children, 
and lived to see them all slain, and when she threw herself upon their funeral pyre she 
emerged from the pool as Nārada ....

Though this sort of story is at least outwardly reminiscent of the Buddha’s 
multiple changes of state at the beginning of the Laṅkāvatāra, the Buddha 
carefully stresses the proper understanding of such phenomena: they do not 
indicate the absolute nothingness of things, but only the delusion which 
results from the operation of the human mind. It is the mind itself — in 
vikalpa — which mistakenly divides a phenomenal flux into a web of discrete 
objects; contradictions and paradoxes like that of Nārada arise as a second-
order result of the mind’s primary falsification, the discrimination of an 
objective world. Instead of the oblivion of a pure void, the Buddha would 
have his listeners understand that “an objective world, like a vision, is a 
manifestation of Mind itself.” “Mind” thus becomes the real core of 
ontological analysis, as we will see; the Laṅkāvatāra argues that it is 
impossible to understand the nature of physical or “phenomenal” reality
without first understanding the operation of the mind — chiefly, its discriminative conatus. Here epistemology must precede ontology.

In asserting the primacy of consciousness the writers of the sūtra set themselves apart from several of the pre-Mahāyāna schools which had attempted to reason out the nature of phenomenal objects and events without recourse to an in-depth analysis of consciousness (though they sometimes undertook such an analysis independently of the problem of ontology). The Sautrāntikas, for example, had erected an elaborate ontology around a theory of events, arguing that an event persists for only an instant, perishing as soon as it acquires its being. Its destruction is spontaneous, requiring no outside or psychological cause. By contrast, the Sarvāstivādins had believed events to consist of four distinct steps, origination, subsistence, decay, and destruction. Each step required a separate and distinct motive principle, a unique cause. Thus, an event was a complex of causal influences, arising in composite fashion from the web of dependent co-origination (pratītya-samutpāda). Both lines of thought represent attempts to think about phenomenal reality in a rather objectivist manner — a manner which de-emphasizes the role of mind in bringing about the succession of events and things.7

Between a simple nihilism and an objectivist materialism, then, the Laṅkāvatāra presents a doctrine which attempts to link the ontological status of the panorama of māyā to the operation of the mind. In essence, the text’s project is to explain how the mind generates the world of phenomena — not how that world sustains itself. But though it is a highly psychological text, preoccupied with the analysis of cognition and perception, it is far from the sort of psychologism which denies ontological independence to the world. The analysis of cognition will in fact ultimately serve to guarantee the “reality” of the phenomenal flux — though, as will become apparent, this “reality” is of a radical sort indeed. The key to understanding the text’s radical concept of reality lies in its analysis of māyā, an analysis which makes extensive use of the simile of dreams or counterfeits. The symbolism of dream is in some ways the root of the sūtra’s entire analytic.

What is the nature of a dream? We have suggested that the Laṅkāvatāra opts for the thesis that a dream — like phenomenal reality — is an instance of realistic but empty experiencing. Realistic, because its components possess a certain verisimilitude, an appearance of genuineness, presenting themselves as independent objects in an external world. And empty, because there “are”
no such objects and no such world; *individuation is an illusion*. The fact that things seem to rise up, sustain themselves, and pass away is a deception — a trick which in fact constitutes the mind’s normal procedure.

... all dharmas are like māyā because they are unreal, like a lightning flash which is seen as quickly disappearing. Mahāmati, just as fools speak of the appearance and disappearance of the lightning flash, so also are all beings understood as having the marks of generality and self-being — (in both cases) this is because of clinging to the marks of form. (LVS, p. 95)

By employing a familiar example — an example reminiscent of the Sautrāntika theory of events — the Buddha is able to add a new facet to the usual conception of māyā. Phenomenal components (Skt. dharma, Tib. chos) do not appear as individuals by virtue of their own nature, but because of the mind’s incessant attachment to the “marks” of form (Skt. laksana, Tib. mtshan). By the same token, they do not appear as members of a class (i.e., in their “generality”) until we divide them up and subsume them under categories. If their individuality and generality are functions of our cognitive process, then they cannot truly come into being and pass away; even their mutability must arise from the discrimination of the mind. It is mind, not things, which causes the apparent rise and fall of phenomena. The *Laṅkāvatāra* thus reduces the question of the spontaneity of things to a question about mind, not one about things per se. The elements of a dream do not come and go of their own accord, whatever the appearances to the contrary; they come and go because we make them do so. It is no more than a convention of speech (*yāgvikalpa*) to speak of “things” as “real”. The whole idea of an individual thing is rooted in the relative knowledge of *vikalpa*; “reality”, whatever it is, is something quite apart from the net of objects, relations, and events of which we speak in everyday parlance.

The language of dream and illusion in the sūtra sometimes gives way to a different, though fundamentally closely related, simile: that of the shadow or counterfeit. Like the dream language, this second simile cuts phenomena off from any domain of “essence” or individuated being.

Lord of Laṅkā, the appearance of beings is perceived like that of figures painted on the wall; they have no sensibility. Lord of Laṅkā, all that alights in the world possesses *karma* and *kriyā*; (but) because of the nonbeing of all dharmas, no one hears (phenomena), nor is heard. Lord of Laṅkā, all that alights in the world is like a magically created image ... those who see otherwise walk in discrimination; because of the discrimination of self-being, they cling to dualism. It is like seeing one’s shadow reflected in the mirror,
or one's shadow on the water, or in the moonlight, or seeing one's shadow in the house, or hearing an echo in the valley.

(LVS, p. 20)\textsuperscript{8}

None of the types of images here enumerated has an external object of essence; they are patterns without an "original". Here we have a play on the idea of the counterfeit: the shadow thrown by the (empty) image, the shadow of the (empty) shadow, and so on, \textit{ad infinitum}. The perceived "reality" of physical beings becomes mere illusion; their being is reduced to the being of the counterfeit, a being of falsity and deceit. (Plato works with a somewhat similar motif in \textit{Republic} 509c–517c: he sketches a mythical cave in which prisoners, bound in a fixed position, see only the shadows thrown by artifacts paraded in front of a strong light behind them, which they cannot see. Socrates concludes that "such men would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things" (515c) — and in fact relegates the counterfeit to the lowest reaches of the "divided line" which represents the progression of modes of knowledge and being. The difference, of course, is this: while the \textit{Lañkāvatāra} would well agree with Socrates' critique of any knowledge which is based on the apprehension of counterfeits, it would resist the general upward movement along the divided line toward the ultimate reality of the "forms" — the originals of which objects themselves are but crude images. Whereas the divided line implies a clear, upward progression toward greater and greater ontological clarity and concreteness, the \textit{Lañkāvatāra} disallows any such movement by emptying the very concept of \textit{being}. The image on the wall is no less "real" than the object which throws it, since the object itself is not strictly real; by the same token, no "form" can stand prior, as an absolute, to the phenomenal image.)

The ultimate conclusion of the \textit{Lañkāvatāra}'s deconstruction of \textit{māyā} seems inevitable: "Things are not as they are seen, nor are they otherwise". A dream is neither real (in that it reflects no external world of individuated objects) nor non-real (in that we have a concrete experience of it as we dream). Suzuki, in his translation of the sūtra, employs the term "unreal"; but perhaps a better coinage would be the modern term, \textit{irreal} — better only in the sense that it might avoid the error of nihilism, an error which the text adamantly cautions us against. The English language lacks a precise word to describe that peculiarly intermediate state of being which our text ascribes to \textit{māyā}. Since it makes constant mention of concepts such as \textit{tathatā} and \textit{dharmatā} we are compelled to leave the door open to a further permutation
of its basic ontological scheme, one which will perhaps supersede even the intermediate ontology articulated to this point. Early in the work the Buddha lectures that the bodhisattva attains enlightenment when he vaults over discrimination and achieves a state of “imagelessness” (LVS, p. 38) — at which point he grasps things “as they are”, free of egotistical distortions. But how can the sūtra speak of “things as they are” after so radically undermining the notion of thinghood? In order to answer this question we will have to examine carefully the model of consciousness presented by the Laṅkāvatāra Buddha. Our guiding question must now be: how does the illusion of māyā come about?

3. THE VIṄĀNAS

The fundamental component of the Laṅkāvatāra’s model of the mind is the viṄāna. The mind is described as an interlocking complex of viṄānas, the net function of which is to produce the phenomenon of māyā. Since the viṄāna is so pivotal to the meaning of the text, it will help if we pause for a moment to investigate the term itself more thoroughly.

The verbal stem of the Sanskrit word viṄāna is विज्ञान-, which means to discern, to distinguish, to know, to understand.9 The preverb, vi-, expresses a variety of operations, including division, distinction, distribution, arrangement, ordering, opposition, and deliberation. Interestingly, it is possible that vi- devolves etymologically from dvi “two” — a derivation which adds several more senses to the preverb, among them: asunder, apart, to and fro, in different directions, about, away, away from, off, and without. The usual meaning of the word viṄāna is “the act of distinguishing or discerning, understanding, comprehending, recognizing, intelligence, knowledge”10 — a meaning which certainly includes all of the senses recognized in the Laṅkāvatāra. But as we shall also see, the Laṅkāvatāra’s specialized, philosophical usage of the term brings forward the connotations of the preverb more forcefully, in particular its emphasis on division. The viṄāna will emerge as a faculty which divides up the world, yielding a knowledge which rests on the discrimination of opposites from one another. The result of the viṄānas’ activity is a fragmented worldview, one which artificially posits individuated objects where there are only temporary, ephemeral dharmas. This sense is carried through effectively in the Tibetan rendering of viṄāna: the Tibetan rnam-par śes-pa literally means “piece- or part-wise
knowing”. As indicated by the Tibetan terminology, the term *vijñāna* can have both a restrictive and a global connotation: restrictively, a *vijñāna* is a component or “faculty” of the mind which is linked to a particular type of “knowing” — sight, for example; globally, *vijñāna* serves to represent the composite activities of the separate *vijñānas*, in much the same way that we might refer to *Sensation* as a generic term for the *senses*.

The sūtra recognizes eight separate, though integrated, *vijñānas*. They are: eye-*vijñāna*, ear-*vijñāna*, nose-*vijñāna*, tongue-*vijñāna*, body-*vijñāna*, mano-*vijñāna*, manas, and ālayavijñāna. The first five, of course, parallel what we would call the five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. They are active faculties, helping to generate our “discrimination knowledge” of the world. But in order to do so, they require the agency of the sixth, *manovijñāna* (Tib. *yid-kyi-rnam-par-šes-pa*):

Along with this system of five *vijñānas*, there is what is known as the *manovijñāna*, whereby the objective world is distinguished and individual appearances are distinctly determined, and in this the physical body has its genesis. (LVS, p. 40)

While the five primary sense-*vijñānas* apprehend the sense-field “like a mirror reflecting objects,” the sixth *vijñāna*, *manovijñāna*, is what delimits the boundaries of each object and thus sets the stage for the appearance of a world. Simply: “the function of the *manovijñāna* is to recognize . . .” (LVS, p. 43). It is impossible to separate the operation of the “perceiving” *vijñānas* from that of this crucial sixth.

Mahāmati, between the two, the perceiving *vijñāna* and the object-discriminating *vijñāna*, there is no difference; they are mutually conditioning. In this way, Mahāmati, the perceiving *vijñāna* works through the transformation of unthinkable remembered impressions, while the object-discriminating *vijñāna* functions through the mind’s discrimination of an objective world and through impressions accumulated by erroneous reasoning since beginningless time. (LVS, p. 34)

We will have more to say about the role of “impressions” (*vāsanā*) shortly; the important thing at this point is the interlock of the perception and discrimination functions — or in the terminology of the model, the linkage of the five sense-*vijñānas* with the *manovijñāna*. The above passage argues, in essence, that they never operate singly: whenever a perception arises in one of the sense-*vijñānas*, it is discriminated by the *manovijñāna*. Likewise, the *manovijñāna* cannot operate without the underlying activity of the perceptual centers. There is no such thing as “pure sense”; nor is there such
a thing as “intuition of pure form”. We see objects, not a formless blur; by the same token, the forms we think of all have an imagic content. It is in this sense that the sense-faculties are engaged in a constructive process in tandem with manovijñāna: consciousness as presented here is a perpetual synthesis, a recompounding of dharma which maintains the illusion of a steady horizon of objects. But how does the “world” as such emerge from the spectrum of discriminated objects? How does the mind grasp an overarching unity behind individual appearances, such that it perceives itself to be “in space”, “in time”, and “in a world?”

The problem of constructing a world rests on the two vijñānas we have not yet discussed: manas and ālayavijñāna. Taken hermeneutically, these two terms dwell at a higher structural level than do the six other vijñānas — in fact, they are not properly vijñānas at all, but instead serve special integrative and directive functions which organize the discriminated data provided by the sense-vijñānas. One can think of them as the supportive network of the vijñāna system, its “administration”.

In early Buddhism, manas forms one strand of the vedanākkhanda (Pali), the “aggregate of sensation”, which in turn forms but one part of the fivefold scheme of the skandhas. But manas acquires a somewhat different set of connotations in the Mahāyāna, an additional texture which anticipates the Laṅka-avatāra’s rather unique understanding of māyā. The sūtra tells us that “manas is evolved along with the idea of an ego and its possessions, to which it clings and upon which it reflects” (LVS, p. 109). Whereas manovijñāna divides the world into a web of objects, manas polarizes this world around a falsely-discriminated ego or self. Manas develops attachments and aversions to the “things” which manovijñāna isolates. In this sense manas contributes substantially to the establishment of the “worldhood” of the world: it furnishes perspective, the absolute focus of an ego from which the “world” recedes as horizon. Secondarily, it works out a web of relations between objects upon which it bases its valuation of them; hence it feeds directly into the activity of discursive thought and rationality. In short, manas is the active center of ego-reifying activity, a process which works directly through the perceptual and cognitive discrimination of the world as such. Manas will presently lead us to the concept of vikalpa, or “discriminating knowledge”. But first let us look at the last of the eight vijñānas, the ālayavijñāna.

In order to grasp the full richness of meaning conveyed by the term ālayavijñāna, we must examine not only the term itself but also its synonym
within the text: *citta*. The word *ālaya* is a combination of the prefix *ā* and the root \(√\text{ī}\): to come close to, to settle down upon, to stoop, to crouch. *Ālaya* becomes, by extension, house, dwelling, receptacle, asylum. The word *himālaya*, for example, means “abode of snow”. In the philosophical context of the sūtra, then, we might assume that *ālaya-viśiṇāna* indicates the “abode of discrimination”; and in one sense this would be correct. But this reading would not suffice to make it the powerful concept that it was for the *Laṅkāvatāra* and for later Mahāyāna. We have yet to link it with its synonym, *citta*.

*Citta* generally derives from \(√\text{cit}\)_, “to think”; but in the *Laṅkāvatāra* it is also explicitly related to \(√\text{cit}\), “to pile up”, “to arrange in order” (LVS, p. xxi). This aspect extends the meaning of *ālayaviśiṇāna*: not only is the *ālaya/citta* the “abode” of discrimination; it is also the storehouse of discriminated forms. Here accumulate the many discriminations generated by the seven lower *viśiṇānas*. Once present in the *ālaya*, these discriminations impel the *viśiṇānas* forward as “unconscious impressions” (Skt. *vāsanā*, Tib. *bag-chags*), perpetuating the vicious circle of *samsāric* mind. In this manner *ālayaviśiṇāna* provides the second requisite condition for the experience of the world as such, in its “worldhood”: *phenomenal continuity*, the association of present (discriminated) perceptions with those of the past. To grasp the horizon of *dharmas* as constitutive of a “world” as such, we must: (a) implicitly assume a perspective or a vantage-point toward them; and (b) implicitly treat them as homogeneous, temporally continuous existents. The first is carried out by *manas*; the second by the *ālayaviśiṇāna*, through its maintenance of a stock of *vāsanā*. Together with the basic, object-discrimination activity of *manoviśiṇāna*, these two higher-level functions lock the unenlightened mind in its state of delusion and perpetuate the pageant of *māyā*. Their activities dominate the unenlightened mind, constituting its sole function (the Tibetan translation of *ālayaviśiṇāna* punctuates the point: *kun-gzi rnam-par šes-pa* literally means “the ground-of-all viśiṇāna”). For this very reason, *manoviśiṇāna* and *ālayaviśiṇāna* play absolutely essential roles in the enlightenment process: they are the pivots upon which spiritual progress or regress turns.

The *ālayaviśiṇāna* is certainly one of the most difficult concepts in the *Laṅkāvatāra* — and also one of the most controversial. Historically, its close cognates and relatives include the *tathāgatagarbha* popularized by the Ch’an writers and the *dharmadhātu* of the mainstream Yogācārins. Perhaps because
of its inherent difficulty, the ālaya is often described through similes and metaphors. The most common of these — and one which would become seminal for Mahāyāna — is the simile of the mind-ocean:

Like waves which rise on the ocean stirred by the wind, dancing and without interruption, the ālaya-ocean is, in a similar manner, constantly stirred by the winds of objectivity, and so is seen dancing about with the various viññānas-waves . . . . As the waves in their variety are stirred in the ocean, so in the ālaya is produced the variety of what is known as the viññānas. (LVS, p. 42)

Or similarly,

As the waves are seen on the ocean, or (images) in a mirror or a dream, so the citta is reflected in its own fields. (LVS, p. 43)

The ālayavijñāna, so it would seem, is the medium through which the various viññānas operate; it is a substrate of some kind. But is it a substance? If so, how can it stand above māyā? Isn’t substantia merely an illusion of the manovijñāna itself?

The ontological status of the ālayavijñāna presents a knotty problem not only for the present text, but for later Mahāyāna works as well. The crux of this problem is the attempt to cast the ālaya as two things in one: while it normally serves as the storehouse of discriminated forms and (somehow) the “medium” of the viññānas, it is also the essentially formless tathāgatagarbha (Tib. de-bzhin gšegs-pai snyin-po) or “womb of Buddha (hood)”. This dual role allows the ālaya, in tandem with the manovijñāna, to act as a soteriological pivot, a point marking the transformation from the unenlightened to the enlightened state of being. As a transitional agent, its ontological status is cast into doubt: is the ālaya “formal” as the storehouse of the viññānas, or “formless” as the womb of enlightenment? Moreover, is it the “whole” uniting the activities of the “partwise” viññānas, or is it without individual being in the “emptiness” of the absolute?

The answers to these questions seem to lie in the doctrine of upāya. The language of “form” and “formlessness” is applied to the ālaya merely as a device of skillful means:

... there are no such varieties of color in the waves (of citta/ālaya); it is for the sake of the simpleminded that the citta is said to be evolving in terms of form. There is no such evolving in the citta itself, which is beyond understanding. Where there is understanding there is also that which understands — just like the waves . . . . (LVS, p. 42)
To predicate qualities ("wavelike", "agitated", "formless") of the ālayavijñāna is to discriminate it — to describe it only within the falsifying framework of vikalpa. Even our philosophical terms are "waves" in the mind; as such, they cannot capture the "reality" which is pointed to by the term "formless". Only prajñā, as we will see, has the ability to grasp the formless — but prajñā is beyond ordinary language. To claim that ālaya/citta is "beyond understanding" is not to dismiss it as a phantom, but merely to assert that vikalpa is not a suitable means of access to its unique mode of reality.

And yet, there can be no doubt that the text ascribes a soteriological primacy to the "formless". We will see (in Section 5) that the mind's sudden turn away from the discrimination of form constitutes the decisive first step on the path of enlightenment. When the Buddha asserts the "formlessness" of citta/ālaya, a bodhisattva (probably Mahāmati) is prompted to ask:

The ocean is distinctly seen dancing in a state of wave-ness; how is it that the evolving of the ālaya (in terms of form) is not also recognized? (LVS, p. 43)

The Buddha responds by tempering his original simile, insisting that its justification depends on its utility as upāya; in doing so he points beyond simile itself:

The ālaya is compared to the ocean for the sake of the discriminating intellect of the ignorant; its likeness to waves in motion is drawn out only by way of illustration. (LVS, p. 43)

The implication here is that simile — and in a broader sense, analogy — is not a direct expression of the truth as it is known by a Buddha. Rather it is a tool; its terms do not necessarily bear a linear relation to the true. The Buddha observes:

As it is with a master of painting and his pupils, who arrange colors to produce a picture, so I teach. The picture is not in the colors, nor in the canvas, nor in the palette. A picture is presented in colors in order to make it attractive to all beings. What one teaches, transgresses — for the truth (tattva) is beyond words. (LVS, pp. 43-4)

These explanations quite conspicuously leave the ontological status of the ālaya rather ambiguous. By using the ocean simile to make a point about upāya, the Buddha skirts the issue of the identity of ālaya and the tathāgatagarbha; all that seems to emerge from the discussion is that the vijñānas, the ālaya, and the tathāgatagarbha share a relation which is similar, but not
identical, to that of ocean and waves. The simile of the ocean is dropped for
the present; after a brief interlude the text shifts to a discussion of image-
lessness. In radically criticizing analogous techniques the sūtra seems once
again to have brought itself up to a pedagogical blind alley: as a linguistic
product — itself a prime example of vikalpa — it has begun to reveal the limits
of its own descriptive project. As we will see, this type of critique actually
provides the occasion for an unusual restructuring of its discursive style —
and a yet more sophisticated use of upāyic language. The sūtra must formulate
new linguistic tools before it can readdress the problem of ālaya’s ontological
status, tools which do not depend upon the dualisms inherent in simple
analogical similes. To pursue the ocean simile further, the Buddha warns,
would be to risk falling into misleading discriminations.¹¹ Much later he
states unequivocally:

The garbha of the tathāgatas is indeed united with the seven (lower) vijñānas; when this
is clung to there arises duality. But when it is rightly understood, duality ceases.
(LVS, p. 193)

To “rightly understand” this relationship one must “intuitively experience”
(p. 192) the tathāgatagarbha; it is not a matter for “speculation”. And yet,
the sūtra refuses to abandon language as a means of guiding this intuitive
experience. What is at issue in the Buddha’s discussion of upāya is the proper
role of language — an issue intimately bound up with the entire project of
the text. The following section traces the Laṅkāvatāra’s exploration of the
interplay between language and direct experiencing, as well as its gradual
 evolution of a set of new linguistic strategies meant to diversify the
potentialities of upāya.

4. DUALISM AND DECONSTRUCTIVE DISCOURSE

We now have before us an eightfold scheme of the human mind. In reciprocal
interaction with the objectifying manovijñāna the five “lower” sense-vijñānas
establish for themselves a panorama of discrete and seemingly independent
objects. At a higher structural level, manas attaches to this panorama through
conceptual discourse, polarizing it around a perspectival concept of ego.
Finally, ālayavijñāna hoards conceptualized object-discriminations in its
“storehouse”, building a fund of largely unconscious impressions which
provide the illusion of temporal continuity — thus reinforcing the mind’s trust
in the reality of objects. The result of this ongoing process is our steadfast belief in an external, independent world in which things come and go according to their independent natures. Phenomenal flux is resolved into an interplay of transcendent forces which govern the appearance of "things" in a "world". The suffering of *saṃsāra* is the direct consequence of the unenlightened mind's attachment to this worldview. But what sets the process in motion? Do we choose it?

In discussing the origin of the various *vijñāna* processes, the text isolates a number of causal factors:

The reasons accounting for the arisal of eye-consciousness are four: what are they? They are: (1) The clinging to an external world, not knowing that it is of mind itself; (2) The attachment to form and unconscious impressions accumulated since beginningless time through false reasoning and erroneous views; (3) The inherent nature of the *vijñāna* itself; (4) The thirst for multiple forms and appearances. By these four factors, Mahāmati, the waves of the evolving *vijñānas* are stirred on the ālayavijñāna so that it resembles the waters of a flood. The same (can be said of the other sense-*vijñānas*) as of the eye-consciousness.

(LVS, p. 40)

The *vijñāna* system takes hold of us before we realize what is happening: emerging from the karmic background of our perceptual patterns and our ignorance, it seizes the experiential process before we catch a glimpse of things as they are in their "suchness" (*tathatā*). The key to the *vijñānas'* hold on us is our blindness to their functioning — which is only their blindness to themselves.

But the *manovijñāna* and the other *vijñānas* have no thought that they are mutually caused, nor that they are devoted to clinging to the discriminated thought of self. Thus the *vijñānas* go on functioning mutually related in the most intimate manner, discriminating a world of representations.

(LVS, p. 40)

The system is self-perpetuating; intellectual belief in the reality of an external world of existents is nourished by the continuing sensory discrimination of objects, a process which goes on below the usual level of awareness and thus escapes notice. In order to see things "as they really are", the practitioner must find a way to undercut this habitual process of discrimination, to get a direct look at the unconscious operations of the *vijñānas*. While other branches of Mahāyāna emphasize meditation as the only efficacious tool for the task, the *Laṅkāvatāra*, as is manifest on virtually every one of its pages, is much more concerned with *intellectual understanding*. Half of the reasons given for the emergence of the *vijñānas* rest on the way in which we
conceptualize consciousness: clinging to the discriminated *thought* of self and world, we carry forward the stored *vāsanā* of our past discriminations to feed the ongoing activity of intellectual discourse. By the same token, intellectual process becomes central to the process of enlightenment itself. Unlike more meditation-oriented tracts, the *Laṅkāvatāra* takes as its project the deconstruction of our everyday conceptual delusions regarding the externality/reality of the world.

Are these two techniques, meditation and discourse, contradictory? Perhaps not. The *Laṅkāvatāra* Buddha speaks often of the need for skillful means (Skt. *upāyakauśalya*, Tib. *thabs mkhas-pa*) in the conduct of the bodhisattva's life — the need to adjust one's approach to the disposition (*āsaya*) and circumstance (*gati*) of the student. We may recall an illustration of this principle from the opening allegory of the text: the Buddha makes full use of the visual magic of *māyā* in order to enlighten the ten-headed Rāvana; but when it come to the more intellectually preoccupied Mahāmati, he reverts immediately and seamlessly to his philosophical, deconstructive discourse. Moreover, the Buddha frequently responds to Mahāmati's conceptual doubts by declaring that he teaches certain doctrines only for the sake of the ignorant — since to teach such doctrines is a skillful means of bringing about their enlightenment. For one student of the teachings, skillful means may require a philosophical debate; for another, a slap in the face; for yet another, absolute silence on the part of the teacher. Each strategy represents a potentially effective way of conveying the Dharma; only situational factors determine which a Buddha will employ. Under such a rationale, concepts per se are not useless: while the truth is not to be found within them, properly drawn concepts can *point to* "things as they are" and thus lead a student along the path. More precisely, discourse can serve a vital function in dismantling "wrong views" and cultivating "right understanding". But in order for it to do so it must never be taken as an end in itself. This is why the Buddha-figure in the present text persistently empties his own logical constructs, just when his interlocutors had begun to place faith in them. In short, discourse becomes skillful means when it doubles back upon itself to destructure its own structures. The main body of the sūtra is comprised of a rigorous "deconstruction" of wrong views, a negative rhetoric which illuminates the essence of *māyā* as well as the self-deluding patterns of *samsāric* consciousness. In the course of pursuing its deconstructive method, the text must develop a series of new rhetorical devices which depart sharply from the
usual techniques of philosophical argument; these linguistic strategies will begin to emerge as we look more closely at the actual deconstructions it attempts.

We have learned that "it is a result of one's own clinging (to appearances) that the manifestations of one's own mind are taken to be realities as such (dharmatā)" (LVS, p. 18). This is the principle of māyā. But which of the illusions to which we habitually cling are the most forceful in perpetuating saṃsāra? The Laṅkāvatāra recognizes that certain sorts of clinging are more tenacious and disastrous than others. Each involves a dichotomous view of the world — a view which, in vikalpa, defines phenomena through their opposites. Later the deconstructive analysis of dualism would be applied to language itself: the Yogācārin Dignāga was to popularize the concept of apoha, which argued that the meaning of a word lies only in the negation of its opposite (thus A is only not-(not-A) — an elephant is only what is not a non-elephant). After Dignāga, Jñānaśrīmitra and his student Ratnakīrti extended the analysis of apoha to embrace the interaction of language and direct perception, asserting that a positive image is qualified by the discrimination of dissimilar things: upon hearing the word "elephant" we grasp the negation of not-elephant at the same moment in which we picture an elephant — since the former is the proper qualifier of the latter. The full unfolding of the concept of apoha in the works of the Buddhist logicians is directly adumbrated by the Laṅkāvatāra’s relentless deconstructive analysis of perceptual and linguistic dualism, an analysis which directed its attention to the pre-reflective level of consciousness where perception and language meet.

Early in the sūtra the Buddha addresses the problem of form. Is form (rūpa) merely the opposite of space (ākāśa)? The Buddha’s answer is unequivocal:

But, Mahāmati, space is form, and, Mahāmati, as space enters into the being of form, form is space. To establish the relation of supporting and supported, Mahāmati, one must separate the two, space and form. Mahāmati, when the elements begin to evolve (a world) they are distinguishable from one another; they do not abide in space, and yet space is not non-existent in them. (LVS, p. 48)

The problematic of form and space was a seminal one throughout the development of the Mahāyāna movement; to choose but one example, the Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya-sūtra asserts in parallel fashion that “form is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form.” Because space (ākāśa) was perceived by the
Mahāyānists to be intimately bound up with the emptiness (śūnyatā) of māyā, the attainment of a “right view” with regard to form was considered a vital step along the path to enlightenment. The understanding that all forms were intermingled with emptiness was absolutely necessary if one was to loosen the grip of the mind on objectified phenomena. But what does it mean to argue that “form is space” and “space is form”? If we devote a moment to trying to grasp the Buddha’s assertion on the basis of direct perceptual experience, the rest of his deconstructions will fall into place readily.

Let us imagine for a moment that we are given a piece of white paper containing nothing but a small shaded box, which is positioned in its center. For the sake of simplicity, this figure will serve as our “form”. We can say: I see a shaded region bounded by four straight lines, the intersections of which make four right angles. But what do we mean by “bounded by”? We mean that the shaded region is partitioned off, separated out from the space of the paper. We can readily invert our description and say: I see an expanse of space which bounds a shaded region. If we push this inversion yet further we might even say: I see a white form interrupted by an emptiness, an absence of whiteness, a “negative” space.

Two key operations are at work here, each corresponding to one of the higher vijñānas. The core of both the straightforward description and its inversion is the concept of a “boundary.” Our perception of the form as a form hinges on the mind’s ability to discriminate one area of the sense field from another by recognizing a limit or boundary condition. This ability, according to the Laṅkāvatāra, is the province of the manovijñāna, the directive faculty which organizes sensory data into a panorama of discrete objects. But a second operation complements that of drawing boundaries. When we “flipped” our original description to yield an “inverse” description we invoked the perspectival function which the sūtra ascribes to manas. In inverting the first description we shift our frame of reference, our gestalt, bringing forward the normally hidden mirror-image of what we perceive to be a discrete object. The boundary lines of the form, as determined by manovijñāna, serve as pivots for this shift of perspective: if we treat them as “belonging to” the contained region, we come up with our original characterization, which focuses on the positivity of the shaded region; if, on the other hand, we treat them as “belonging to” the white expanse, we invert our characterization and treat the page itself as a positivity (at which point the shaded region becomes “emptiness”). In essence, both descriptions are valid
accounts of experience; but convention usually dictates one over the other, suppressing the other so that we can understand objects as discrete existents. To draw out an inversion of the usual perspective is not to claim that convention is useless; quite the contrary. How could we ever pick up and use a hammer if we could not grasp it as an existent, distinct from the "emptiness" of the surrounding workbench? The discriminations of māyā do allow us to move through the ordinary world: the problem is that they deplete the richness of "things as they are", polarizing our experiencing around conventionalized concepts. By unpacking the implicit discriminations latent in such dualisms as space/form, the text hopes to restore this experiential richness and recover an experiencing which is not restricted by the boundary-locking of manovijñāna and the perspectivization of manas.

A second dualism tackled by the text is that of time. Ordinarily we think of time as a progressive line; but the Laṅkāvatāra asserts that

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\ldots\text{that which is spoken of as "earlier" belongs to discrimination; as "earlier" is thus a discriminated (concept), so also are the ideas of "not-yet" and "now".} \quad (LVS, p. 19)
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Here again we have a germinal Mahāyāna problematic. The Chinese Chao-lun of Seng-chao, for example, takes it up in relation to the problem of change: if a man goes on a journey and then returns to his village, is he the same man who left the village "in the past"? In a manner reminiscent of Taoism, Nāgārjuna, and Heraclitus, Seng-chao elegantly argues that the everyday conception of time is rooted in the illusion that things have an enduring self-nature (svabhāva), an idea which Buddhist logic adamantly denies. Only if we posit the belief that the man who returns is the man who left, can we begin to believe in linear time — since we may then readily conceptualize a unitary object moving along a fixed time-line. If we deny self-nature, time becomes a relative construct, a discrimination arising from concepts.

As for the Laṅkāvatāra's analysis of time, we can most clearly understand the meaning of past, present, and future by relating them to the space/form problem: just as neither space nor form intrinsically supports its complement, so also neither past, present, nor future intrinsically support the others. It is once again a matter of perspective. In one context (of manas), the assassination of President Kennedy is a "past" event; but "at one time" it was a "future" event, just as "at one time" it was a "present" event. Similarly, it can again become a "future" event for us if we read an account of the assassin's actions prior to the shooting — and so on. If we conveniently and
conventionally think of the assassination as strictly a thing of the "past", we blind ourselves to its "futural" dimensions — for example, in the sense that it can be thought of as a "negativity" interrupting the surrounding "positivity" of other events (just as we inverted the positivity/negativity aspect of the space/form relation above). Time is relative to our manas-directed conceptual perspective; through vāsanā it serves to reinforce manas' view of the phenomena of māyā as constituting a world of discrete existents polarized around the perspective of self.

A third deconstruction — one which springs naturally from the sūtra's analysis of space — is that of extension. Not only form in general, but also qualities of form, depend upon an oppositional dichotomy:

*Long and short, and so on, exist mutually bound up together; when existence is asserted, there is non-existence, and where non-existence is asserted, there is existence.*

(LVS, p. 49)

If we posit the existence of a quality such as "length", we can do so only in relation to its inverse, "shortness". Only in the conspicuous absence of one quality does its opposite become manifest. To extend our earlier analysis further, we might also observe that a quality like "length" is of necessity not inherent in the "object"; it is always relevant to a context of other "objects" — a world which exhibits independence, continuity, and perspective. Thus the discrimination of a concept such as "length" necessarily requires the interaction of manovijñāna (which establishes the independence of objects), ālayavijñāna (which establishes continuity through vāsanā), and manas (which furnishes perspective). A man standing next to a spider is tall; but if he stands next to an elephant he suddenly "becomes" short. When we speak of John as "tall", we implicitly posit an aggregation of other men in our "past" experience, the vast majority of whom are absent. It is not "John" who is "tall": "tallness" is an aspect of a moving process of experiencing, a process which is continually challenging the very meaning of "tallness".

This sort of analysis extends quite readily to the concept of "existence", as the above passage indicates. Existence can be conceptualized at two levels, one relative and one absolute. At the relative level, the non-existence of something in my experiencing can announce itself so forcefully that it seems like an existent: for example, the absence of someone who has died can be a disconcerting presence. But at the absolute level, according to the theory
of *vikalpa*, the distinction between being and nonbeing is merely an empty discrimination, like any other dichotomy. Things neither exist nor non-exist; the error is to discriminate a dichotomy of existence.

(The error of the heretics) is that they do not recognize an objective world to be of mind itself, wrongly discriminated; and, not understanding the nature of the *vijñānas*, which are also discriminations of the mind, like simple-minded ones that they are, cherish the dualism of being and nonbeing . . . . (LVS, p. 36)

The Buddhist logicians would later enhance this sort of analysis to encompass a general theory of negation which separates negation of the noun (*paryudāsa*) from negation of the verb (*prasajyapratīṣedha*). The Svātantrika Bhāvaviveka argued that *prasajyapratīṣedha* — since it cuts to the issue of *svabhāva* and phenomenal genesis — has in essence a higher soteriological value than *paryudāsa*. But such distinctions do not assume much importance in the *Laṅkāvatāra*. Again, the current text simply provides the seeds for what would later emerge in the full flower of Buddhist logical analysis.

The deconstruction of the concept of being or existence invites us to recall the sūtra’s use of the dream as an illustration of *māyā*. Is a dream real? The most that we can say, according to the text, is that a dream is *realistic*, in that it *seems* to point to world of real existents. As illusion it is neither real nor non-real, since to call it one or the other would be to dualistically discriminate it. In indicting the “heretics”, the *Laṅkāvatāra* sets itself apart from both the idealism of a system like Vedānta and the materialism of certain of the pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist sects. It most closely approaches (in certain respects) the Mādhyamika, the path which neither asserts nor denies being. For the *Laṅkāvatāra*, the right view of things is a view which *suspends* the question of being — for *prajñā*, not concepts, is the only way of seeing the immediacy of *tathatā*.

We have been progressing slowly toward an inevitable confrontation: the confrontation between the theory of the *vijñānas* and the theory of phenomenal emptiness. To put it most simply, what is the status of the mind — the experiencing “subject” — if forms are empty and the world is mere *māyā*? Isn’t the mind necessarily empty too, even in its capacity as *tathāgatagarbha*? If so, how can it possibly create the “world” of phenomenal appearance?

This is a difficult question for the sūtra to answer. Before the backdrop of the traditional Buddhist theory of no-self (*anātman*) the *Laṅkāvatāra* has
erected an elaborate conceptual machinery, all of which is meant to account for the arising and maintenance of the phenomenal "world". Now the text must dovetail its theoretical stance in such a way as to uphold its argument about māyā and, at the same time, turn that argument in upon itself by applying the māyā theory to the scheme of the viññānas. As one might expect, this undertaking finds itself almost continually skirting paradox.

The first step in this project is to extend the deconstructive analysis of dualistic māyā to "internal" phenomena: having shown that "external" phenomena like length and time are empty, the text must now turn this demonstration inward, linking vikalpa's discrimination of the outer world to its implicit grasp of consciousness. The demonstration centers on the ālayavijñāna:

The self-nature and the characteristic marks of body, property, and abode evolve when the ālayavijñāna is conceived by the ignorant as grasping and grasped; when this happens they fall into a dualistic view of existence in which they recognize its rise, abiding, and disappearance, cherishing the idea that all things are born and are subject to discrimination as being and nonbeing. (LVS, p. 56)

The conception of the mind as a "grasping" agent leads, by the implicit logic of dualism, to the reification of a world of objects to be grasped. By tracing back further and further its analysis of externalized vikalpa, the sūtra discovers its root in an internalized discrimination: the dualization of the ālayavijñāna and its object of consciousness. The panorama of māyā — the web of individuated existents — depends ultimately upon a prior, tacit attitude of the mind toward itself. This leads naturally to a decisive deconstruction: the emptying of the subject-object dichotomy. If the inner world is identifiable with the outer world in that both are brought about through the same discriminative process, the illusion of their discrete separability has already begun to erode. S. Dasgupta explains:

It is only due to māyā (illusion) that the phenomena appear in their twofold aspects as subject and object. This must always be regarded as an appearance (samvṛtisatyātā) whereas in the real aspect we could never say whether they existed (bhāva) or did not exist.12

Form and space, past and future, short and tall, being and nonbeing, subject and object — each of these dualisms has now been collapsed. And yet, the viññāna-māyā theory has hinged its entire analysis upon the reality of the mind as a discriminating mechanism. What it must now do is to attempt a
characterization of mind, using the discriminated concepts of *vikalpa*, which describes the special sort of “reality” that mind has. The sūtra emphasizes that mind cannot be captured by concepts; its challenge now is to frame concepts which *point to* mind, which point beyond simple discrimination toward the mental process itself. The only way to do this is to negate the discriminations which constitute the world we know, and to negate them so thoroughly that we are vaulted beyond discrimination toward a glimpse of the phenomenon of mind in its “suchness” (*tathatā*). At issue here is the possibility of formulating a new and non-dualistic descriptive language which, by collapsing ordinary language, somehow gains access to the principle of things as they are, *dharmatā*. The various deconstructions of common dualistic concepts have prepared the way for a larger deconstruction — an analytic step which raises the discourse of the sūtra to a new linguistic level.

The focus for this grand deconstruction is the *ālayavijñāna*, since the *ālaya* is at once the “storehouse” of dualistically discriminated forms and the “womb” of enlightenment. The *ālaya* serves as a point of juncture between the (relative) phenomenal world and the direct intuition of (absolute) suchness. *Reality*, in fact, in the only sense upheld by the text, is nothing but the watershed linking the phenomenal order with the absolute; we will return to this idea when we discuss emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in following sections. For now we must confine ourselves to the problem of how the *Laṅkāvatāra* can make use of *vikalpa* to point to the “real” nature of mind. In doing so, of course, it necessarily describes something which cannot even be visualized — since any visualization, through the interlock of *manovijñāna* and the sense-vijñānas, inevitably involves an implicit discrimination. Such a description may represent the final end to which discourse — in the deconstructive sense — may be usefully put; as a Korean monk commented on this type of Mahāyāna technique, “It is just as though one stops the voices with a voice”.

The way to this final clearing-away of dualisms is the characterization of the mind as a non-causal, non-evolving, markless irreal.

That such a characterization threatens to undo concepts, the *Laṅkāvatāra* is more than willing to admit. Its attempt to characterize the reality of mind through the use of philosophical descriptive machinery is meant as a final assault upon conceptual language, the problem which explodes conceptual thinking with finality. Dasgupta describes this stage of the argument:

All our phenomenal knowledge is without any essence or truth (*nīḥsvabhāva*) and is but
Is there any “thing” that we can name which lacks appearance, origination, existence, and extinction? Experience in the phenomenal world provides no ready example of such a thing, no concrete referent among the nearly infinite variations of māyā. By negating concepts which are, to the usual way of thinking, experientially absolute, the sūtra forces its conceptual apparatus to the limit. Although it coins a new term — “suchness” (tathatā) — to refer to the mode in which the ālayavijñāna dwells, even this term refers to a “reality” only within the provisionality of language. Suchness is no more than a label for that which, in an absolute sense, can never be compassed by words:

... the highest reality is an exalted state of bliss... discrimination does not express the highest reality... words are subject to birth and destruction; they are unsteady, mutually conditioning, and are produced through the law of causation. Again, Mahāmati, what is mutually conditioned and produced through the law of causation cannot express the highest reality... (LVS, p. 77)

Indeed, “words are not the highest reality, nor what is expressed in words” (p. 77). “Suchness” serves as a placeholder, a strictly empty word which clears a niche in the philosophical argument for prajñā. We must now examine the text’s exposition of enlightened knowledge, prajñā, though this exposition has already revealed its emptiness from the absolute perspective. In keeping with its emphasis on discourse as skillful means, the sūtra will attempt — at the risk of wandering into paradox — a vikalpa description of vikalpa’s opposite.

5. EMPTINESS AND THE INVERSION OF LANGUAGE

In turning toward the question of prajñā, we move from the sūtra’s description of everyday samsāric mind to a consideration of “enlightened mind” — that is, to a consideration of the prescriptive aspects of the text. The sūtra has examined at some length the “pathology” of dualistic thinking and perception; now it seeks a constructive response to suffering. Structurally, the scheme of “salvation” laid out in the Laṅkāvatāra is much simpler than its analysis of samsāric mind. But the simplicity is superficial: the difficulty
of the expressly soteriological concepts more than compensates for their brevity. For here the text embarks upon a discrimination of the undiscriminated; here it subverts language in an attempt to make it point to the indescribable. Let us begin with a sketch of the structural scheme of enlightenment presented in the sūtra, and then move directly to an investigation of each of its terms.

The possibility of overcoming the samsāra of discriminating mind rests on the way in which we handle the error of believing in the phenomena presented by māyā. Normally, of course, the mind takes things to be substantial, fixed in a temporal grid, and relatively permanent. When we look at a mountain, we imagine it to be eternal; we do not readily perceive that even it is slowly decaying. If we reflect scientifically, we may come to understand that mountains, like people, are in flux; but we nevertheless cling almost poetically to the illusion of the eternal. Just as we posit an absolute quality — permanence — of the mountain, so our discriminating mind categorizes and labels all things as though they belonged to a transcendental order. The most critical error we commit is our faith in the individual reality of things, both internal and external; it is this error which sustains the relative knowledge of vikalpa. But because the belief in māyā is the sine qua non of vikalpa, it can also be the beginning of prajñā. Here the theory of vikalpa receives a crucial inflection: if proper “non-discrimination” of the error is realized, one emerges onto the path of prajñā. “Non-discrimination” emerges as an activity, the soteriological foil of “discrimination”; it is not merely a passive receptivity, nor some vacancy of perception, but is in fact a process in its own right. With right views the practitioner can turn the phenomenon of māyā to advantage, using it as a tool of insight. If he does so, he sets in motion the process of enlightenment, which eventuates in the realization of what the text calls “suchness” or “actuality” (Skt. tathatā, Tib. yañ-dag-pa):

...this error (māyā) is discriminated by the ignorant as consisting of multiplicity; such a confused view is neither a reality nor an unreality. Thus, Mahāmati, when this error is non-discriminated by the wise it turns into tathatā with them. (LVS, p. 94)

The fact that the world presents itself in māyā is neither intrinsically positive nor intrinsically negative; its value, like that of all phenomena, depends on the situation and passes away when we cease to discriminate it. When the various phenomena of māyā enter the ignorant man’s interpretive faculties they give rise to a manifold of illusions, all based on dualism. But when they
enter the mind of the wise man, they give him the occasion to see through māyā to tathatā. Both wise man and ignorant man perceive the phenomenal panorama; but “while the imagination keeps on going with the wise as well as with the ignorant, the latter alone fails to see reality as it is . . .” (LVS, p. 142). The discrimination of the ignorant leads only to further delusion; the active “non-discrimination” of the wise, on the other hand, leads to insight. What matters is the response of the mind; māyā itself is neutral.

But what is meant by “non-discrimination,” and in what sense is it active? This concept (a good illustration of what the Buddhist logicians meant by “verb negation” or prasajyapratīṣedha) rests on the middle step of the enlightenment process: a step which the text refers to as the “revulsion” of the mind from everyday dualisms. When we understand the “revulsion” which causes the “non-discrimination” of the wise to grasp tathatā, we will be well along the way to understanding what the sūtra means by the term prajñā.

“Revulsion” (parāvṛtti) derives from parā- (meaning beyond, away, etc., as in parāṅc “turned the other way”) plus vṛt (“turn around, revolve, circumambulate, etc.”). The full meaning of parāvṛtti becomes “turning, rolling, exchange, substitution, end, termination”. The prefix parā- simply heightens the directional sense of the verb — hence the reading “revulsion”. (The Tibetan translation, Ngyur-ba, carries an extremely broad range of connotations, most of which are connected with the idea of transformation or change). In the sūtra, parāvṛtti is the sudden and decisive turn of the practitioner away from discrimination. It lays the groundwork for the active non-discrimination of prajñā, the renunciation of insightless vikalpa. But how does the turn manifest itself in terms of the eightfold model of consciousness? Is it the vijñānas themselves which turn?

Though the ālayavijñāna seems in many respects to be the most important of the vijñānas, it is the manovijñāna which plays the key role in the turn away from discrimination. The manovijñāna is the aspect of mind which breaks up the perceptual information of the lower sense-vijñānas into a spectrum of discrete objects; it would seem that this object-discrimination, from the standpoint of soteriology, is the wellspring of the entire eightfold system:

According to my teaching, Mahāmati, the surpassing of the discriminating manovijñāna is said to be nirvāṇa . . . With the manovijñāna as cause and supporter, Mahāmati, there arise the seven other vijñānas. Again, Mahāmati, the manovijñāna is kept functioning as
it discerns a world of objects and becomes attached to it, while with manifold unconscious impressions it nourishes the ālayavijñāna. The manas is evolved along with a notion of ego and its possessions.

(LVS, p. 109)

In coordination with the sense-vijñānas, then, manovijñāna fragments the field of perception into an array of discrete objects, all of which stray eventually to the ālaya-storehouse. The Buddha uses the parable of the magician to illustrate the way in which we mistake collocations of dharmas for individuated existents:

When the magician uses grass, wood, shrubs, and creepers to exercise his art, all beings and forms take shape; magically-created persons are produced which appear to be endowed with individuality and material body, and they are variously and imaginatively discriminated. While they are thus manifesting themselves, Mahāmati, there is no substantiality in them. Likewise, Mahāmati, as a result of the idea of relativity, the falsifying imagination recognizes a variety of appearances which are distinguished by a discriminating mind.

(LVS, p. 51)

Manovijñāna lays the foundation for the illusion of a world by culling discrete objects from the data of the lower vijñānas, drawing boundaries between “things” and thus suppressing the direct intuition of phenomenal flux. The first step of the enlightenment process hinges on an uprooting of this habitual activity — the active “non-discrimination” of the error of māyā. With this accomplished, the next move is to destroy the discursive concept of self, perpetuated by manas:

As long as there is a mind making conscious efforts, there can be no culmination regarding the various vehicles; when a revulsion takes place in the mind, there is neither a vehicle nor one who rides in it.

(LVS, p. 116)

The rooting out of manovijñāna and manas' discursive concept of self constitutes the core of the revulsion, parāvṛtti. But manas' conceptual faculty is called upon to render yet another discriminative concept: the concept of emptiness (śūnyatā). This very special concept serves as a springboard for the realization of tathatā through the absolute knowledge of prajñā.

The postulation of emptiness — the emptiness of both subject and object — is the mind's final attempt to reduce māyā to concepts. Though the sūtra gives due credit to the concept of emptiness, it is careful to collapse even śūnyatā in the same way it collapses other discriminations. The postulation of emptiness is certainly an instance of “right views”; but in the end it too is inadequate to the task of describing accurately the vision of tathatā.
this sense, we may regard emptiness as a leading concept, a concept which at once points beyond itself and beyond conceptualization in general. Asserting that phenomena are empty is a means of “transgressing” vikalpa, of employing language — in this case, a special language — to undermine language. As we will see presently, the text’s use of the concept of emptiness is strategic; it is not, as Suzuki seems to have believed, the ultimate ontological statement of the Laṅkāvatāra. The introduction of śūnyatā marks a transitional level of discourse in the sūtra, one which no longer deals solely in ordinary dualisms but has not yet discovered an appropriate language for the description of tathatā. This transition is critical: to fail to follow the text beyond it is to risk misreading its ontological position as one of absolute nihilism — an error which the text itself warns us against.

Nāgārjuna observes that “emptiness (śūnyatā), ill conceived, destroys a stupid man, as would a snake when handled improperly, or a spell badly executed”. What role does the postulation of emptiness play in the Laṅkāvatāra’s analytic?

We have watched closely as the text has unpacked several everyday concepts: form and space, being and nonbeing, long and short, perceiver and perceived. From this sort of deconstructive maneuver we have followed the emergence of a concept of māyā which casts it as realistic but empty experiencing, experiencing which seems to point to an external and independent world of existents but in fact makes this world up through the operation of the eight vijñānas. From this standpoint it now devolves that the world is “empty”. It is clear, though, that this emptiness is of a very special sort. It is not emptiness in the sense of nothingness, for that would ignore the fact that the text confirms the reality (in a relative sense) of the phenomenal flux itself; rather, it is emptiness in the sense that māyā-phenomena are devoid of self-nature or essence:

... there is no truth, no essence in all phenomena that appear ... as the phenomena have no essence they are neither produced nor destroyed; they really neither come nor go. They are merely the appearance of māyā or illusion. The void (śūnya) does not mean pure negation, for that is relative to some kind of position. It simply means that none of the appearances have any intrinsic nature of their own ...

Emptiness, then, is the emptiness of essence, of self-sustaining individuality. Certain Buddhologists have pointed to the structure of the word śūnyatā to highlight this concept analogically: śūnya derives from √śū, a weak form of √svi “to swell, grow, increase”; this denotation bears both a positive sense,
as in to expand by swelling (in the manner of a womb, for example), and a
negative sense, as in to “hollow out”.17 We might think of a basketball, for
example, as “swollen out” (positively) with air, or as “hollowed out” and full
of nothing (negatively). In the philosophical frame of the sūtra, phenomena
are “swollen out” with the semblance of individual being, and yet are
“hollow” in that they lack a self-nature. So their śūnyatā is both a positivity
(on the plane of māyā) and a negativity (on the plane of tathatā).

The most important root of this distinction, of course, is the ancient
Buddhist theory of dependent co-origination (Skt. pratītyasamutpāda, Tib.
rten-čiṅ Nbre-l-ba Nbyuṅ-ba). According to this doctrine, phenomena
originate and sustain one another mutually, without the necessity of an
external or a transcendent cause; the phenomenal world emerges from the
interplay of phenomenal components, or dharmas (Tib. chos), not from the
operation of a hidden animus of some kind. The Laṅkāvatāra, as we have
already seen, recasts this concept in terms of the process of the mind: one
single discrimination gives rise immediately to its opposite, and thence to a
whole web of mutually-referent dualisms.

It is the theory of mutual causation which lays the groundwork for the
sūtra’s speculations concerning the emptiness of self-nature. If phenomena
arise merely as a result of other phenomena, not with the priority of a
linear causation but with a non-prior parallel causation, then phenomena
possess no necessity, no self-sustaining independent nature. In the
Laṅkāvatāra’s language, they are merely momentary flashes of the mind.
We cannot speak of their production or destruction, since only a self-
sustaining thing can be produced or destroyed. But here the text runs into
a serious obstruction: what can emptiness possibly mean if there is no such
thing as a self-existing “fullness” or plenitude? What is the implicit standard
of comparison used in formulating an appraisal of the “emptiness” of
phenomena?

The answer to this seeming dilemma should be obvious by now: there is
no standard of comparison in the absolute sense, there is no “real” referent
for the term śūnyatā. By postulating the “reality” of emptiness, so the sūtra
says, we have slipped quietly back into a dualistic vocabulary. When we read
the word śūnyatā, we interpret it in relation to its tacit opposite — and thus,
set vikalpa in motion once again. Like all other concepts, the concept of
śūnyatā is dichotomous and relative. Yet, emptiness is a conceptual lever
which, though dualistic in itself, helps the practitioner to free himself from
dualism. It is an instance of pedagogic *upāya*, a relative concept which nonetheless possesses a clearcut soteriological value.

Emptiness, emptiness indeed! Mahāmati, it is a term whose self-nature is false imagination. Because of one’s attachment to false imagination, Mahāmati, we have to talk of emptiness . . . .

The idea of śūnyatā serves, by an inversion of linguistic function, as the definitive termination of logical *vikalpa*: having abandoned the being of the phenomenon to emptiness, we are now compelled to abandon even this emptiness as a negative concept. Emptiness is a symbol which *names* a state of affairs that concepts cannot *describe*. It is in this way that emptiness leads the practitioner out of *vikalpa*. Just as Platonic dialectic necessitates the contemplation of phenomenal emptiness en route to the *noesis* of the forms, so the present text insists that emptiness serve as a transition to the intuition of tathatā. If we wrongly interpret śūnyatā as the truth, we risk falling into the trap which Nāgārjuna so stridently warns us against. What is required is that the practitioner move beyond emptiness — and beyond its transitional language — toward a language of the absolute, of tathatā.

We have now plotted two of the steps on the path to enlightenment as conceived in the *Laṅkāvatāra*. The process of liberation from *samsāra* begins with the twofold “turn” away from discrimination, a turn which begins to see through the mutual reference of qualitative concepts such as long and short, being and nonbeing, subject and object. This turn results in the second step: the postulation of the “emptiness” of such dualistic concepts when considered in the light of their genesis (*pratītyasamutpāda*). But this postulation of emptiness must dismantle itself, since emptiness itself is revealed to be a dualistic construct. In reflecting back on itself, though, the idea of emptiness finalizes the break with discriminating *vikalpa* — thus clearing the way for *prajñā*, the intuition of “suchness”.

We can trace an interesting rhetorical progression underrunning the soteriological sequence described here. The text began with an analysis of the ordinary descriptive language of everyday speech, interrogating the hidden assumptions lurking in terms like “being” and “thing”. This analysis led to an understanding that such terms are descriptive only in the context of *other* such terms (a conclusion the linguist Saussure was to reach much later): they do not refer to an independent world of outer objects, though they pretend to do so. Language — and more broadly, the sort of *linguistic consciousness*...
which dualistically categorizes experiencing — thus began to emerge as an activity divorced from “the real” (loosely signified by the term tathatā). The problem arose: how can one describe this linguistic consciousness if description itself is fundamentally impossible (because true reference is impossible)? How, for example, can one use a word like “emptiness” to describe phenomena when the word itself implicitly posits something beyond phenomena? The sūtra’s answer to this problem lies in its recognition that even a word like śūnyatā is only what we have called a leading concept, a pointer with no real referent in the domain of tathatā. Its value is strictly pedagogical; it deepens insight while remaining, in a real sense, meaningless.

The sūtra is clearly taxing language to the utmost here. Language has become an instrument of insight; by collapsing it tier-by-tier the discourse is able to propel the reader beyond it. But we must be careful to notice the pattern underlying the sūtra’s destruction of language, for it is entirely systematic. We begin with a faith in the possibility of describing the world. This first stage of language, which we might call the naive phase, rests on the individuation of māyā into a spectrum of discrete existents. But soon it becomes clear that what we thought was description is actually illusion; we begin to think that concepts are only analogous to the world — as in similes — and thus enter the second or analogical phase of language. Presently, however, we learn that even this assumption is incorrect; analogies only rest on other dualisms. The world begins to emerge as indescribable, and language enters a third phase, an hermetic phase as an internally-referent system of signs completely removed from the real. Slowly we are shifting our emphasis away from a “natural” language toward direct insight of some kind. At this point, language is little more than a source of nominal pointers, words which are stripped so thoroughly of their usual meanings that they verge on non-dualism (and simultaneously, on non-sense). The words — śūnyatā, for example — are useful as leading concepts, concepts whose self-reflexivity at once announces their emptiness and points to a reality beyond language altogether. This is language’s fourth or nominal phase. Description has been abandoned in favor of the linguistic gesture — a signal directed toward indicating or signifying insight, not containing it conceptually. The nominal phase would seem to represent the final instrumental use of language; beyond it lies only the spontaneity of insight, prajñā.

But in the Laṅkāvatārasūtra, as in many of the Buddhist texts which surround it historically, insight itself puts language to one more task. When
insight has been attained, language can enter a final phase, one of expression—a phase in which it is a direct emanation of the enlightened state, a-creative medium in the highest sense. Though this mode of language is evinced perhaps most clearly by the responses of Zen practitioners to their masters’ kōans, the Laṅkāvatāra itself records at least one instance of what seems to be a genuinely expressive idiom: namely, the sūtra’s peculiar description of tathatā. We shall see presently that this description is articulated in seemingly blatant contradiction with the theory of māyā—a reversal which perhaps expresses the enlightened state. In taking up the problem of suchness, we also may now take up the question of prajñā, absolute knowledge. We have seen how words can probe the nature of phenomenal reality; now let us examine the ways in which they can express ultimate reality.

6. ENLIGHTENMENT AND EXPRESSION

In considering the nature of prajñā and tathatā, the two central terms in the prescriptive sections of the sūtra, it is tempting to draw a simple analogical parallel: prajñā is to tathatā as vikalpa is to māyā. Or, in cruder terms, the “object” of transcendental knowledge is suchness in the same sense that the “object” of dualistic knowledge is the irreal Tathatā, or suchness, would thus be what prajñā knows; it would be the epistemological object of the enlightened mind.

Though the philosophical structure of the sūtra certainly strongly suggests such a reading, other indications argue that we here face a point of stress in the articulation of concepts, a point at which the systematic nature of the philosophical logic implies a conclusion which is experientially unfounded. We have carefully traced the ways in which the author(s) of the Laṅkāvatāra quite effectively interrogate and collapse language, all for the purpose of freeing words to point to aspects of direct contemplative experience. The sūtra has continually prodded the precarious border dividing sense from nonsense. But now the text seems to have reached a juncture at which linguistic structure, in the narrow sense, threatens once again to lead insight astray by suggesting clean and persuasive analogical structures which may not, in the end, describe anything at all. This sort of seduction by logical structure is precisely what the text cautions us against: it is a trap of manas. Can the text mean to say that tathatā is simply the “object” of prajñā?

We can best approach this question along the soteriological plane of the
If enlightenment is merely a shift from one object-and-faculty to another, what is so unique about it? In fact, the text argues that the transcendental knowledge of prajñā is ontologically transformative: to attain transcendental knowledge is to be liberated from samsāra as a mode of being. To grasp the truth of tathatā through a realization of the irreality of māyā is to attain nirvāṇa, in the quite literal sense of escaping rebirth. Thus transcendental knowledge is a turning point which marks the emergence of a new mode of being, a being which dwells fully within the knowledge of suchness. Prajñā is not some static sort of perception, but is actually equivalent to ontological liberation or mokṣa:

Surrounded by good friends and the Buddhas, Mahāmati, the (bodhisattvas) are capable of knowing the citta, the manas, and the manovijñāna, which are the discriminating agents of an external world whose self-nature is only of the mind itself; they are capable of crossing the ocean of birth and death, which arises by reason of deed, desire, and ignorance. (LVS, p. 41)

The importance of this point is manifold. Not only does it link the inwound epistemological/psychoprocessual model of the sūtra to concrete Buddhist ontology and soteriology; it also serves, thereby, to reveal prajñā and tathatā as merged terms. If knowing the mind is tantamount to escaping samsāra, then the special knowing accorded to prajñā is a knowing which ontologically transforms experienced reality. In the unenlightened mind, māyā's panorama of existents is more than the mere “object” of vikalpa: it is in fact the creation of vikalpa. Similarly, in the enlightened mind tathatā cannot be merely the “object” of prajñā. Prajñā appears when the mind “dwells in” tathatā; tathatā is an expression of the mind's mode as prajñā. But this is not to claim that the two terms are “mutually caused” — for liberation (mokṣa) must free the mind from the pattern of pratītya-samutpāda. To define the enlightened mind in terms of mutual causation would be to fall into dualistic discrimination. “Prajñā” and “tathatā” are simply two ways of referring to a unitary process of transformation. No object-and-faculty dualism can capture their particular identity.

The merger of prajñā and tathatā is further indicated by a second textual clue: the rebuke of the knower/known dualism. The Buddha stresses this point by insisting that prajñā is “unobtainable” — for if the concept of “obtaining” rests tacitly on our trust in a world of discrete existents (which we may succeed or fail in obtaining), the turning-away from this trust must
dissolve the idea of "obtaining" entirely. Enlightenment is not the sort of thing a "knower" could seek and possess:

... when we know that there is knowledge gained independent of any supporting object, whatever statements we make about it are no more than thought-constructions. That (transcendental) knowledge is unobtainable is due to the recognition that there is nothing in the world but what is seen of the mind, and that these external objects to which being and nonbeing are predicated are nonexistent. As this (knowledge) is unobtainable, there is no evolving of knower and known, and as thus the triple emancipation is realized, there is unobtainable knowledge .... (LVS, p. 147)

To conceive prajñā as an object which we can obtain is to fall into a delusion, just as it is to conceive it as a faculty of the "knower" which grasps an "external object" "in the world". Prajñā is a type of knowledge which has no supporting object per se; it is beyond the duality of knower and known. Furthermore, any attempt we make to characterize it in a positive sense is merely an instance of discrimination. But having thus re-relativized the philosophical discourse which it undertakes, the sūtra goes on to attempt just such a positive characterization of prajñā. Here again we find an attempt to discriminate the undiscriminated, the effort to make language do what it cannot do. But what tools are still available for such a project? Has not nearly every key Buddhist concept been collapsed in upon itself, rendering language empty as a mere trick of māyā?

This is indeed the case. But precisely because the text has so fully stripped concepts of their common-sense meanings, showing that they cannot describe reality, it is now free to restructure them in order to maximize their efficacy as phenomenological pointers. Surrendering the hope that we can create concepts which contain reality, we can give our words a final inversion and let them speak from the direct experiencing of reality as tathātā — as "such." In the sūtra, this strategy works itself out as a sudden inversion of meaning-structure which, not surprisingly, appears as a paradox or an absolute contradiction. The text now resuscitates certain concepts it has already shown to be empty, applying them readily and rather oddly as qualitative signs expressing prajñā-tathātā. This is the opposite of a technique which we have seen once before; in fact, we may isolate the two methods as closely related linguistic strategies, equally central to the concerns of the text:

(1) The first strategy is to try to point to reality "as it is" by negating experientially absolute concepts such as being, genesis, and destruction. The fact that we can find no experiential referent for something which is described
as being beyond existence, birth, and cessation (as the sūtra describes māyā to be) tells us that we have never experienced reality "as it is", in its suchness. Language allows us, through its internal transformational structure, to posit a theoretical negation of such associated concepts; but it cannot provide us with a direct experience of their meanings as negatives. In this sense, language creates a “slot” for an experience which we have not yet had; this, by extension, is the first way in which we may employ language as a leading device which challenges and opens up felt meaning. This preliminary step leads to the concept of emptiness, śūnyatā, which only serves to unite the set of negatively-posited attributes under a single generic term.

(2) The second linguistic strategy asserts that even the concept of emptiness is void and thus converts our negatively-posited attributes into positive attributes. Having freed descriptive language from its dualistic underpinnings we now employ our terms univalently, dropping their common-sense oppositions as well as the rhetoric of śūnyatā. This is equivalent to allowing language to originate with prajñā-tathatā rather than with vikalpa-māyā. We assert attributive terms as an absolutive language, one no longer based on dualism. This set of absolute words evolves from the felt experience of suchness, not from the experience of māyā.

The origination of language in the experience of enlightenment constitutes the expressive phrase of language alluded to earlier; it is the alternative to the dualistic language of māyā-vikalpa, a language which, at its best, can only name reality abstractly — never express it meaningfully. The logical position of the second strategy, in short, is this: because we ground them in the felt experience of reality as it is, we can employ certain terms meaningfully to express the real; but in order to do so we must first free them of their implicit dualistic structure. The univalent assertion of "unborn" can, for example, meaningfully signify (point to) reality, while the dualistic born/unborn distinction properly signifies nothing but a transient condition of māyā. We move through the stage of emptiness as a way of freeing our descriptive language (and linguistic consciousness) from duality and rendering it univalent. Ordinary words are collapsed into emptiness so that they can be rebuilt on the foundation of the experience of enlightenment. And it is precisely this rebuilding process which yields a language as expressive as language can be, in Buddhist terms.

We have glimpsed the possibility of a language which expresses the unitary mode of knowledge-and-being denoted by prajñā-tathatā. We have now to
examine the sūtra’s attempt at a positive characterization of the enlightened state, one which points to reality “as it is” without recourse to the naively dualistic discourse of *vikalpa*. We will find that this project results in a startling reversal of certain positions maintained earlier in the text — a reversal which indicates not slipshod reasoning but a highly sophisticated sense of rhetoric and *upāya*.

Earlier, the text argued that the way of the bodhisattva is a way of “imagelessness”. This condition is said to arise when the illusion of the object-world finally lets go of the mind, when the mind “turns” from *māyā*.

When the mind (*citta*) is bound by an objective world, the intelligence (*jñāna*) is awakened and reasoning takes place; but the highest wisdom (*prajñā*) obtains where there are no images — a higher level of consciousness. (SLVS, p. 160)

This is a reflex, of course, of the sūtra’s original descriptions of *māyā*: “It is like seeing one’s own shadow reflected in the mirror, or one’s own shadow on the water, or in the moonlight...”. “Is it a dream then? or a vision?” The images of *māyā* are counterfeit, void, hollow; *prajñā* sees through them. But does this imply that the dawn of *prajñā* spells the complete disappearance of figurative appearance? Does the objective world go dark or blank? This question leads us directly to the first of the sūtra’s quixotic statements regarding *prajñā*:

If knowledge fails to see that which is existing before it, such is ignorance and not knowledge; this teaching belongs to the logicians. If knowledge fails to see, through various obstructions far and near, its own unique object which does not present itself as such, this is to be called wrong knowledge. (LVS, p. 148)

This is quite a strange comment, given the anti-objectivist tone of the bulk of the text. Hasn’t the sūtra almost ruthlessly demonstrated that the world is illusory, that what we call “objects” are merely the products of *manovijñāna*? If so, how can the sūtra employ such objective language?

We must here recall that, while the sūtra assures us that the world is *māyā*, it also adamantly cautions us against nihilism. While one is not to believe that the world exists in the sense of possessing self-nature, one also cannot believe that it non-exists, that it is nothingness. The sudden turn away from *māyā* (*parāvṛtti*) allows one to realize that the world is irreal, not unreal: as a creation of mind it is concrete, but its particulars lack independent being. The above passage, by continuing the renunciation of nihilism and yet reaffirming the psychological model of *māyā*, represents a first step toward a
positive characterization of prajñā: the "imagelessness" of the bodhisattva must arise from a realization of what objectivity is — that is, an irreal — and not from the simple annihilation of objectivity de facto. When we take the phenomena of māyā to be objective in the sense of self-sustaining, we commit an error; but we likewise err when we take them to be void, mere negativity. The path of insight grasps them as manifestations of mind — and thus, as neither existent nor nonexistent. By extension, an "image", for the present text, would seem to be something which presents itself as an existent; to recapitulate our earlier terminology, imaging is an instance of "realistic" experiencing. Prajñā reveals the phenomenon to be neither existent nor nonexistent, but simply irreal. It does not destroy phenomenal objectivity but only demystifies it, freeing the mind from its bondage.

With this restructuring of the concept of "objectivity", the text begins to reclaim certain key terms as attributive descriptions of prajñā-tathatā. More specifically, it starts to articulate a surprisingly concrete vision of reality "as it is" — a vision which contrasts pointedly with the māyā-dominated tenor of the earlier epistemology.

This reversal emphasizes the special ability of a Buddha's non-dualistic language to express the real.

There is an eternally-abiding reality according to the hidden meaning; it is something with neither antecedents nor consequences. The tathāgata (Buddha) points out the Dharma without deliberation, without contemplation, by means of words which are original and independent. Because of his right thinking and unfailing memory, he neither deliberates nor contemplates . . . and has relinquished the twofold hindrance of passion and knowledge.

(LVS, p. 208)

The Buddha's "original and independent" language is one of pointing: it is pure symbolic reference. What the Buddha's language expresses is the "eternally-abiding reality". How can we account for this sudden resurgence of objectivist language, this clear departure from the ongoing idealism of the rest of the text? Despite the heavy emphasis on the irreality of māyā, the work assumes a philosophical position which stresses not the extirpation of objective consciousness before the void, but the proper interpretation of objective consciousness before the panorama of māyā. It is in this sense that the text readily reformulates its objective language and uses it to "point to" the enlightened state.

This line of thought reaches its apogee in one of the most assertive and peculiar passages in the work:
The ancient road of essence, Mahāmati, has been here all the time, like gold, silver, or pearl preserved in the mine, Mahamati; the abode of Dharma abides forever, whether the tathāgata appears in the world or not. As the tathāgata eternally abides so does the essence, as such, of all things. Reality forever abides, reality keeps its order, like the road in an ancient city ... what has been realized by myself and by other tathāgatas is this essence, the dharma-stability (sthitīta), the dharma-regularity (niyamātā), the suchness of things (tathāta), being as such (bhūtatā), and the truth as such (satyatā).

Where could we hope to find a more realist pronouncement? What a startling claim, coming from a work which so consistently assures us that reality is only illusory māyā! But this pointed reversal is in fact largely consonant with the ultimate consequences of the epistemological model which underruns the discourse on māyā. Judging from the text's nagging concern with nihilism, it would appear that the author(s) considered themselves quite a bit less "idealist" than some of their contemporaries and forebears. The absolute idealism of the earlier philosophical logic is clearly but a stage in the process of enlightenment, a particular linguistic strategy employed by the Buddha to break through vikalpa. The pivotal vision of the text reveals the suchness of reality to be a self-stabilizing, self-regulating flux. It would appear that, for the Laṅkāvatāra, enlightenment consists at least partially in the direct intuitive apprehension of the phenomenal process as process. The momentary associations of dharmas which well up from this process are irreal (essenceless); yet the process itself is not only real — but is the only "real" accessible to human consciousness. Its direct intuition is the constitutive activity of the enlightened mind.

The two critical traditions, Buddhist and Western, have largely glossed the Laṅkāvatārasūtra as an idealist text, interpreting it retrospectively from the standpoint of the later Yogācārin movements which it influenced. But upon close scrutiny we have discovered certain anomalies to this reading, nuances of language and rhetorical strategies which fairly strongly suggest a less strictly idealist and a more realist persuasion. There is clear textual evidence to indicate that portions of the work are directed against idealism in its extreme forms (e.g., nihilism); moreover, the sūtra carefully works out the exact meaning of māyā, only to conclude that, in at least one sense, māyā is altogether "real." The reality of māyā hinges on its nature as process — as a self-regulating, perpetual rearrangement of dharmas, a magic show so seductive that we are led by it to believe falsely in a world of discrete existents. By passing through śūnyatā we are able to turn resolutely away from the dualistic
discrimination which nurtures this belief, and to return to the *māyā*-world with an enlightened understanding which grasps it as pure process. Only then are we capable of seeing reality as such: *tathatā*.

7. CONCLUSION: LINGUISTIC UPĀYA

Throughout this essay I have tried to focus attention upon the many subtleties of linguistic strategy which underpin the long discussion of Mahāmati and the Buddha. These strategies are something other than simple rhetoric; the *Laṅkāvatāra*, in fact, plainly lacks the rhetorical sophistication of works such as the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra* and the *Mūlamādhyamakakārikās*. Instead, they are the tangible evidence of a working conviction that language is instrumental in shaping and maintaining our view of the world — and thus, can also be instrumental in bringing about enlightenment. For the author(s) of the *Laṅkāvatāra*, the process of ontological liberation can be seen as a transformation of linguistic consciousness through several graded phases, culminating eventually in a phase of pure expression. This multiple transformation spurs the progress of insight, providing a catalyst for a metamorphosis of consciousness itself. Language holds an absolutely pivotal place in the sūtra’s assay of consciousness; its dualistic nature is the defining characteristic of human cognitive process. As such, it is also the key to realizing *prajñā* and *nirvāṇa*. As philosophers, the author(s) of the *Laṅkāvatāra* affirmed this fact by placing language — as the root of dualistic awareness — at the center of the *vijñāna* system. As pedagogues, they put it into practice by developing certain strategies of discourse intended to usher the reader along the experiential path toward enlightenment. The “irrationalities” with which Suzuki found the text to be riddled, while they are no doubt due in part to the vagaries of translation and revision, are often explicable through a careful consideration of the work’s overall symbolic structure — a structure which strategically incorporates both contradiction and paradox as powerful tools of *upāya*, skillful means.

The *Laṅkāvatāra* is a generative text, a text which was to help define key problematics for many later Mahāyāna thinkers. The Ch’an movement pursued the analysis of language to develop entirely new modalities of practice based on *kōan* study; the brothers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu articulated and expanded the doctrine of *māyā* into an intricate analysis of perception and consciousness; the Buddhist logicians focused on the theory of *apoha* and the
dualistic, prereflective discrimination of the conscious mind. Each of these later developments rests tacitly on the *Laṅkāvatāra's* basic understanding that consciousness is essentially dichotomous and linguistic. The writer(s) of the text insist that language and discourse are merely means to an end. They are not final; they are not capable of containing truth. But through skillful manipulation they are capable of pointing to the truth — and herein lies their unique religious utility. The key to the linguistic strategy of the *Laṅkāvatāra* is that it formulates a language which challenges the reader to surpass language itself toward the real. In doing so, it poises religious discourse on the precarious but revealing borderline between words and silence.

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NOTES

I would like to thank the following people, all at the University of Chicago, who have read this essay and provided helpful criticism: Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, Allen W. Thrasher, Edward Ch’ien, Frank Reynolds, and Julie McGarvey. I owe special thanks to Charles Hallisey for his invaluable help with the Sanskrit text and to William Sterner for his ongoing strong encouragement.

The following abbreviations are used through the text:


I have used the former work as a pagination reference, as it is still the most widely disseminated edition of the text. Suzuki largely follows the Nanjio edition of the Sanskrit text; his *An Index to the Lankavatara Sutra* (Kyoto: Sanskrit Buddhist Texts Publishing Society, 1934) furnishes cross-reference tables for the Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan versions. In almost all cases the translations given in the present essay differ from those of Suzuki’s work; instances of especially sharp divergence are noted individually.

1 The dates of the *Laṅkāvatāra* are far from clear. The first recorded Chinese translation, by Dharmarakṣa, dates from roughly 420 AD and is now lost. We have no firm information on the dates of the two Tibetan versions (both ascribed, somewhat uncertainly, to Chö-gnyi-grub). Some scholars (notably Dasgupta) have reasoned that close similarities between the LVS and the *Śraddhotpādasāstra* place the former at 100 AD or before; but this argument is based strictly on the now questionable attribution to Asvaghoṣa of the *śāstra*. (See Y. Hakeda, *The Awakening of Faith*, Columbia 1967, for a discussion.)
On the whole, we can only assume that the Sanskrit text was composed sometime between the third and fifth centuries AD, judging from its translation history and general style. It is entirely likely that the text went through a succession of revisions before reaching its present form.

To name but a few of its later routes, the *Laṅkāvatāra* was influential in both of the major Ch'ān schools (it is rumored to have been transmitted by Bodhidharma to Hui-k'e), in the composition of the *Śraddhotpādaśāstra*, in the Yogācārin doctrines of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, and in the debates of the later Buddhist logicians (Dharmakīrti, Ratnakīrti, and others).

Two early but notable exceptions are: Giuseppe Tucci, *Studio comparativo fra le tre versioni cinesi ed il testo sanscrito del 1° e 2° capitolo del Laṅkāvatāra* (in Atti della R. Accademia nazionale dei lincei, Memorie della Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche Roma, 1923) and J. W. Hauer's *Das Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra und das Saṃkhya* (Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer 1927).


Later (section 4) we will find a strong connection between the Mahāyāna concept of śūnyatā and the experience of spatiality.

The distinction, of course, is one of emphasis. Buddhism by its very nature recognizes an unseverable link between epistemology and ontology.

Suzuki misreads *karmakriyārahitah* as "devoid of karma and kriyā"; but *arahita* signifies "not deprived of, possessed of."

All etymologies from M. Monier-Williams.

See also the article on *vijñāna* in Edgerton's *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit* dictionary.


REFERENCES


