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The Three Types of *Vasana* in the Relation of *Alayavijnana* and *Manas*

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ABSTRACT

This paper surveys the relationship between the three types of *vāsanā* (*nimitta-vāsanā*, *nāma-vāsanā*, *vikalpa-vāsanā*) with the subconscious *ālayavijñāna* and *manas* in the system of the Yogācāra tradition. Through philosophical and theoretical analysis, the article focuses on clarifying the meaning of three types of *vāsanā* and their role in forming self-attachment through perfuming. This paper points out that three types of *vāsanā* are latent energy contributing to the continuity of the stream of consciousness, maintaining the system of cognition event when sleeping or unconscious state. The result of the article shows that the operation together of *vāsanā* with *ālayavijñāna* and *manas* is the fundamental cause leading to defilements and suffering. Then, this paper hints at potential solutions for cultivation by transforming all habitual energies.

Keywords: *vāsanā*, *nimitta*, *nāma*, *vikalpa*, *ālayavijñāna* and *manas*

1. Introduction

In the Yogācāra tradition, the concept of *vāsanā* plays a crucial role in explaining the complicated operation of the mind. *Vāsanā* is usually understood as the latent tendency or impression of past thinking and actions that strongly affects present perceptions, thinking, and actions. Yogācāra builds the subconscious, with the most important of *ālayavijñāna* as a foundation for all other consciousnesses and *manas* as a self-attachment consciousness, both of which contain and maintain *vāsanā*. To clarify the role of *vāsanā* in the operation of the mind, it is necessary to explore the relationship between *vāsanā* and the subconscious and how *vāsanā* has been used in the operation of the subconscious.

Although *vāsanā* has an essential position in the cognitive process, it seems to have been invested equally as a vice member in the extensive explanation of *bīja* (seed). It is generally considered to have the same meaning as the concept of *bīja* in *Abhidharmakosabhaya* despite its different meanings in *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra* (Gao, 2021). In addition, the intimate relationship between *vāsanā* and *ālayavijñāna* and their interactions, creating continuity in the individual mental stream, has also been explored (Bayer, 2012). These two perspectives raise a question: With the relatively similar characteristics and functions of *bīja* and *vāsanā*, are they *bīja* and *vāsanā* one or different? Which situations can be viewed as one or different?

Additionally, some papers have focused on *vāsanā* in other aspects, such as its role in the formation of *karma* (Franco, 1994), or it is the object of debate in various schools about its beginninglessness and its association with the concept of time (Prueitt, 2020). These studies are fundamental to understanding this concept. However, explaining the relationship between *vāsanā* and its role in the relation of the *ālayavijñāna* and *manas* is an essential gap that needs to be explored thoroughly.

Investigating the *vāsanā* role in the subconscious and the detailed relationship with *ālayavijñāna* and *manas* is valuable to see how it influences spiritual cultivation according to Yogācāra's perspective; then we can positively exploit its potential.

It can be said that *vāsanā* seems to be present in all Buddhist doctrines, from Early Buddhism to Mahayana Buddhism. This paper discusses in detail the aspects of *vāsanā* relating to the subconscious, including *ālayavijñāna* and *manas*. The most unique aspect of this paper is that instead of explaining the concept of *vāsanā* in all its various meanings, it will mainly focus on the particular definition given in *Vijnaptimatratasiddhi* by XuanZang. According to XuanZang, there are three main types of *vāsanā*. This division is appropriate for explaining the strict relationship between *vāsanā* and *ālayavijñāna* and the reason for the self-attachment of *manas*.

2. What is *vāsanā*?

Semantically, *vāsanā* is a Sanskrit word derived from the root verb “√*vās*,” meaning perfumes, fumigates, scents, or fragrances (Sanskrit Dictionary, n.d.). The suffix “*anā*” turns the root verb into a noun, pointing to the state or result of the actions. In the context of the Yogācāra tradition, *vāsanā* means “perfuming,” “impression,” “latent tendencies,” “habit,” and so on (Buswell & Lopez, 2014, entry “*vāsanā*”).

To some extent, the term *vāsanā* is a verbal noun that describes an active process: the accumulation and affection of mental tendencies with our perception and mental activities. It is not just the latent tendencies or mental habits of bygone, but also the capacity to create impressions that can spread and activate the new mental states. This creates new habits in the present and becomes the foundation for future experiences. In some situations, it is described as “a kind of energy that is left behind when an act is accomplished” (D.T Suzuki, 1999, p. 99) so it is also like an inspiration constantly impacting how we experience and interact with the universe.

The concept of *vāsanā* demonstrates the complexity of the mind through various expressions. This term, *vāsanā*, translated as “habit”, is the thought patterns that sink deeply into the subconscious, and silently dominate how we perceive and reflect with the world around us. This finding explains the repetition of mental reactions beyond conscious control. Moreover, *vāsanā* is understood as the impressions of whatever is unconsciously saved in mind, and also called the subtle impressions. In other words, all experiences impacting on mind always leave their impression in the subconscious (*ālaya-vijñāna*), like the lingering fragrance in tea after scenting, a ‘memory’ of its representation having been there (Fernando Tola, 2005, p. 456). This sense expresses *vāsanā*'s accumulated characteristics. This shows that *vāsanā* results from significant life events and numerous tiny everyday events. The concept of “perfuming,” another meaning of *vāsanā*, provides a unique perspective on forming and accumulating *vāsanā*. This metaphor expresses that the mind, like a cloth, gradually is penetrated by all subtle impacts from the environment and experiences. This process is silent and unconscious but profoundly impacts on how we perceive and interact with the world. When *vāsanā* is described as the latent tendencies, this concept shows clearly the result of the perfuming process, and perfuming is the reason for creating the latent tendencies. While perfuming is the silent process of stimulation of impressions through experiences, latent tendencies result from that process. It presents as a potential or inclination that affects on how we perceive the external world in the future. Especially describing *vāsanā* as “latent tendencies” is known as sleeping seeds in the subconscious, waiting for a suitable situation to sprout and manifest itself in order to navigate future experiences.

The diversity of meaning of *vāsanā* not only reflects the multi-dimension of *vāsanā* but also demonstrates that *vāsanā* is an active process that continuously develops or changes. It is like a constant flow of mental impacts formed, accumulated, and changed depending on the related condition.

For example, during meditation, a person may experience a peaceful state. This experience is the first impression, leading to a latent tendency that motivates one to re-experience that peaceful state. Subsequently, one decides to practice meditation for 30 min per day. The repetition of practice creates many new impressions and reinforces previous impressions. This repetition is also a process of being mentally perfumed. Over time, meditation has become a habit, practiced daily without conscious effort. After some time, the practice may be interrupted because of being busy. When one sees something, such as posters or books reminding one about meditation, the seeds (*bīja*) of meditation immediately reactivate, and one tends to practice meditation again and quickly adapt to meditation practice.

This process illustrates how *vāsanā* is used as a continuous chain, from the first experience to creating impressions, reinforcing and establishing a habit, and the ability to reactivate all latent tendencies. This information indicates that *vāsanā* is continuously developing and affecting human perception and activities. That is also the reason why *vāsanā* is also understood as energy. It has the ability to promote our thinking, speech, and action accompanying its tendency.

3. The division of *vāsanā*

It is necessary to see how Zen Master D.T. Suzuki defined it in The Studies of Lankāvatāra Sutra, an important Sutra of Yogācāra, as having a more in-depth look at the *vāsanā* in the Yogācāra tradition.

Discrimination is the result of memory (*vāsanā*) accumulated from the unknown past. *Vāsanā* literally means “perfuming,” or “fumigation,” that is, it is a kind of energy that is left behind when an act is accomplished and has the power to rekindle the old and seek out new impressions. Through this “perfuming,” reflection takes place which is the same thing as discrimination, and we have a world of opposites and contraries with all its practical consequences. (D.T.Suzuki, 1999, p. 99)

This detailed definition indicates that *vāsanā* plays a role as mental impressions that are accumulated from past experiences and mental actions. These impressions do not disappear after completing the experiences but exist as a kind of latent energy that can activate the old and seek out new impressions. Because of “perfuming”, discriminated perception (*vikalpa*) is formed, creating a world of opposites and contraries. It affects thoroughly how we perceive and reflect reality. The discriminated perception (*vikalpa*) does not derive from the initial ability but is the result of the accumulation and interaction of *vāsanā*. How we categorize all the phenomena in the world such as good and bad, right and wrong, self and others, all are shaped by these impressions. Thereupon, the reality that we are perceiving is not totally their nature but the manifestation of impressions that sink deeply in the subconscious. This explains why each person has different perceptions about the world, depending on *vāsanā* that is accumulated through individual experiences.

From the definition of Dr. Suzuki about “discrimination” and “a world of opposites and contraries,” it is easy to understand the importance of dividing *vāsanā* into three types as, in Vijnaptimatratasiddhi (Ch’eng Wei-shih Lun), Xuan Zang describes *vāsanā* as traces and lists it in 3 types. They are “traces in terms of image (*nimitta-vāsanā*); traces in terms of name (*nāma-vāsanā*); and traces in terms of figurative (*vikalpa-vāsanā*)” (Poussin, 2017, p. 257).

The term *nimitta* (image) is also known as “marks” or “signs” that help to recognize or identify the image of something or someone (Buswell & Lopez, 2014, entry “*nitmitta*”). This means that *nimitta-vāsanā* refers to impressions of the objects’ images. For example, when someone reminds us about coffee, we think about its black color, intense flavor, and bitter taste; all the marks are *nimitta-vāsanā*, and these impressions are the basis for attachment to the image of the object. *Nimitta-vāsanā* plays a foundational role in “the dual structure of the perceptual activity” (Tao Jiang, 2005, p. 258). The dual structure here is two-way perception, that is the process of receiving the information and then manifesting or categorizing the received information. This

directly affects the perception and processing of sensory information from the external world. The presentation of *nimitta-āsana* not only shapes how we perceive the world but also affects our feelings, creating the foundation for all sensory experiences.

While *nimitta-vāsanā* creates a tendency to realize objects through their image, *nāma-vāsanā*, as its name, directly relates to attributing the name and concept to the objects. Xuan Zang also focuses on two kinds of names and concepts. The first is the sound of language, the words used to express the meanings of something or all phenomena. The second is the cognitive process of recognizing an object, relating to how the mind attributes and resolves information (Poussin, 2017, p. 582). This division suggests that *nāma-vāsanā* relates to external verbal expressions and internal cognitive processes. It expresses the close relationship between language and thinking. The distinction between external sound and language within the cognitive process indicates that *nāma-vāsanā* relates to perception, feelings, and mental states.

Vikalpa-vāsanā is also known as a latent tendency that creates conceptual discrimination (Tao Jiang, 2005, p. 258). This is the process that relates to the conceptual categorization, comparison, and judgment of the experiences or objects, creating the difference between this and that, self and others. With this meaning, it is easy to recognize that *vikalpa-vāsanā* is closely related to *manas*, afflicted consciousness, the origin of all discriminations between self (*atman*) and phenomena (*dharma*), and our cognition is also shaped by *vikalpa-vāsanā*. According to Lankavatārasūtra, “owing to seeds of habit-energy [that grow from the recognition] of an outer world, discrimination takes place; and thereby the relativity aspect is grasped, and that which is grasped is variously imagined.” (D.T. Suzuki, 2020, p. 257). This points out that imprints are the causes of conceptual discrimination, and conceptual discrimination results from the discrimination process, creating new impressions. This also means that *vikalpa-vāsanā* creates a vicious cycle between impression and discrimination. This process expresses that human beings tend to see the world through layers of conceptualization and demonstrates why it is challenging to see all phenomena as they are. Additionally, *vikalpa-vāsanā* contributes to building a dependent and stable “self” by creating a continuous chain of impressions and discrimination in our minds.

The definition of *vāsanā* in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra and XuanZang’s categorization of *vāsanā* into image (*nimitta*), name (*nāma*), and discriminating influence (*vikalpa-vāsanā*), provides a complete model to understand the complex operation of the mind. The three types of *vāsanā* cover the whole human perception, from feeling to abstract thinking and language. It shows the profound influence of *vāsanā* in all aspects of mental activity. The dual structure initially existing in image and discriminating influence reflects the division of the basic object-subject of human perception and thinking; it suggests that *vāsanā* influences what we perceive and shapes our perception. The presence of *vāsanā* shows the role of language in forming and maintaining *vāsanā* as well as *vāsanā* also rebounded how we use and understand language. Especially, the interaction between the *nimitta-vāsanā* and *nāma-vāsanā* creates a continuous process from image to conceptualization, while *vikalpa-vāsanā* develops the structure of cognition.

The relationship of the three types of *vāsanā* can be illustrated through the following simplified example. Suppose that one day, you walk on the street. Suddenly, you see a lovely flower. *Nimitta-vāsanā* is immediately activated, creating an initial impression about the flower’s form, color, and smell. About the same time, *nāma-vāsanā* transforms this impression into the concept - “a white lotus flower with ethereal fragrance” and attaches the image to language. Next, *vikalpa-vāsanā* activates complex associations and thinking. You might remember the nostalgia of the last summer, comparing the beauty of this flower with the others, thinking about the meaning of the lotus flowers, and so on. All these processes are in a moment, creating various experiences and multi-dimensions about lotus flowers, from the initial image to profound abstract thought.

Division *vāsanā* into three types image, word, and conceptual discrimination exposed the profound nature of *vāsanā* in the cognitive process. It shows the nature of *vāsanā*’s accumulation and permeation - they are established through gradually accumulating experiences and perfuming through different modes. The relationship between *vāsanā* and the subconscious is shown clearly through three types of *vāsanā*. *Nimitta-vāsanā* attaches direct perception about phenomena, *nāma-vāsanā* relates to the process of name and conceptualization, while *vikalpa-vāsanā* shows the aspect of discrimination, analysis, and judgment. These three types of *vāsanā* interact and reinforce each other, creating a complex net in the cognitive process. It deeply affects how human beings perceive and interpret reality. The importance is that all these three types of *vāsanā* are illusions (Gao, 2021, p. 19), they are unreal impressions creating illusions about a discriminating world; they are the origin of all attachment and defilements.

The systematical categorization of *vāsanā* not only manifests the detailed analytical method of Yogācāra tradition to understand more clearly the operation of the mind but also brings the essential applicability in transforming afflictions.

2. The interrelationship between *vāsanā* and the subconscious

As suggested by Dharmapāla, “the seeds arise from perfuming. If the seeds did not arise from perfuming, how would the first seven cognition be the condition qua cause for the store cognition” (Pousin, 2017, p. 235). This statement indicates that the relationship between *vāsanā* and subconscious *ālayavijñāna* and *manas* is shown through the seeds that arise from perfuming. That means if there was no *vāsanā*, how *manas* can activate *ālayavijñāna* to make sprout the seeds? So, *vāsanā* is an important element in connecting the past and future in the perception. That’s why it is necessary to understand the relationship between *vāsanā* and the subconscious.

4.1 *Vāsanā* and *Ālayavijñāna*

In Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi, XuanZang developed a profound argument about the relationship between *vāsanā* and *ālayavijñāna*; *Ālayavijñāna* is active storing, and it is also passively what is being stored (Poussin, 2017, p. 218). So, calling *ālayavijñāna* active storage means *ālayavijñāna* is not an inactive store but an active environment that maintains and nourishes all seeds (*bīja*) and habit energy (*vāsanā*) (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2008, p. 49). It is the same as soil; it contains all seeds and provides the conditions for germination and growth. On the other hand, *ālayavijñāna* is passively what is being stored,

which means *ālayavijñāna* is an object that is perfumed (Poussin, 2017, p. 250). This characteristic points out that *vāsanā* is always in a variable state and interacts with *ālayavijñāna*. That is also the reason why *ālayavijñāna* is described as the ocean (Anacker, 2015, (v.4), p. 186). *Vāsanā* is like waves rising from the ocean. This metaphor is very profound because it also shows three essential things. Firstly, the ocean can not be separated from waves; in the same way, *vāsanā* can not exist independently with *ālayavijñāna*. Secondly, The ocean can create waves, which means *ālayavijñāna* has the potential to generate *vāsanā*. And lastly, waves can affect the state of the ocean. Similarly, *vāsanā* also has the opposite effect upon the *ālayavijñāna*. These characteristics indicate that the impressions are not only passively contained but transformed into dormant seeds (*bīja*) that produce new formations and then lead to new latent tendencies for the following experiences. This process is continual, like a nonstop cycle.

This relationship expresses the continuity and inheritance in the flow of mind. *Ālayavijñāna* contains and remains all impressions that it is perfumed, then turns them into latent seeds; then, when there are enough conditions, they become latent tendencies, habits, or energy to shape all future experiences. That's why some past habits or tendencies still affect the present or future life. It also explains some special situations, such as talents in a field without studying more or their unique tendencies or personalities.

4.2 *Vāsanā and Manas*

In the system of Yogācāra tradition, *Manas* plays a role as defiled consciousness (*kliṣṭa*) tending to intense attachment and constantly maintaining misperception about self (*ātman*) (Anacker, 2015,(v.5), p.184). According to CWL, *manas* is one of seven consciousnesses that perfume *vāsanā* into *ālayavijñāna* (Poussin, 2017, p. 253). *Manas* is inherently unconscious, has a strict relationship, and can not be separated from *ālayavijñāna* (Anacker, 2015, (v.5), p. 184). *Manas* attaches to *ālayavijñāna* and sees *ālayavijñāna* as self (*ātman*) and then continuously remains to conceive about self (Anacker, (v.6), p. 184). This process shows the two-way interaction between *manas* and *vāsanā*, especially, *vikalpa-vāsanā*. *Vikalpa-vāsanā* relates to conceptual discrimination and analysis of the world, corresponding to the impression about the categorization and comparison. *Manas*, with its characteristics, is the discriminative judgment on everything based on “self” and “mine.” On the one hand, *vikalpa-vāsanā* is energy from the *bīja* contained in *ālayavijñāna*, which becomes the source for the “self” or “mine” attachment or discrimination of *manas*. Through the process of *manas*' judgment and attachment, *vikalpa-vāsanā* is perfumed into *ālayavijñāna*. This process contributes to strengthening the *bīja* of conceptual discrimination. *Vikalpa-vāsanā* promotes *manas* to discriminate, compare, and judge all experiences, creating the self that constantly seeks to stand out from others. At the same time, this process leads to misunderstandings about the true nature of “self” because *manas* continually judges and analysis all experiences based on the previous impression of *vikalpa-vāsanā*. We can see that the relationship between *manas* and *vikalpa-vāsanā* is two-way. *Manas*' discriminative and judgmental tendency is both the cause and the result of *vikalpa-vāsanā*.

The state of continuity is perfuming, which means constantly reinforcing and nourishing the self. *Manas*, described as a self-reflexivity awareness, operates in a direct relationship with *ālayavijñāna* to maintain and develop mental tendencies (*vāsanā*). All that information indicate that *manas* does not work independently. It is always dependent on seeds (*bīja*) or *ālayavijñāna* to arise. However, it also plays an important role in perfume information into *ālayavijñāna* to reinforce the seeds (*bīja*).

The relationship between *ālayavijñāna* and *manas* shows a vital aspect in forming and maintaining the conception of self. *Manas*, with its attachment to self, reinforces *vāsanā* because when an experience had formed in the past, it is not only simply stored but also labeled with image, name, and conceptual discrimination, creating a deeply attached loop. As mentioned above, three types of *vāsanā* divided by XuanZang play a crucial role in forming and remaining cognition. This interaction creates self-operation in the mind, in which *manas* is both the operating factor and origin of manifestation and development of these mental tendencies.

Nimitta-vāsanā, the impression relating to the image, represents the impressions relating to form and external manifestation of phenomena. With the ability to attach to self, *manas* causes increasing tendencies of image and manifestation, turning the marks of phenomena into fixed cognitive tendencies in *ālayavijñāna*. It receives the signs and interprets them through the lens of self-attachment with the help of *manas*, unconsciously reinforcing all the manifestations of image in the mind. The very relationship between *manas* and *nimitta-vāsanā* causes a fixed perspective about the world, contributing to the formation of attached tendencies into the images of the objects without separating between imputed nature and reality.

Nāma-vāsanā, the impressions relating to name, closely interact with *manas* because it maintains the discrimination between self and non-self through language and label. *Manas* attaches to a sense of self as a fixed label and creates a rigid perception, especially in the judgment about the self and others with the help of the sixth consciousness. In this mechanism, *manas* contributes to the fixation of concepts and names; it forms obstinate impressions about identities and the relationship between subject (self) and object (non-self). *Nāma-vāsanā* constantly shifts, reflecting *manas*' identified attachment and demand and making the division and attachment between the subject and the external world.

Through three types of *vāsanā*, *manas* operates as a maintained center of all impressions, turning all temporary latent tendencies into fix cognitive model. This process leads to the formation of a stable “self.” *Nimitta*, *nāma*, and *vikalpa vāsanā* gradually become the elements that are perfumed into *ālayavijñāna* and turn to the resource for seventh cognition. Based on three types of *vāsanā*, *manas* can maintain and deeply imprint the cognition about the separate self based on all the signs, names, and conceptual discriminations and then contribute to the activity of the four defilements: view of self, confusion of self, pride of self, and love of self which are always associate with *manas*. Additionally, the existence of *manas* and three types of *vāsanā* are the significant elements that create ignorance (*avidyā*) and suffering (*duḥkha*). The realization of these elements is also the key or requirement to transform the mind.

3. Conclusion

The studies about the relationship between three types of *vāsanā* with the *ālayavijñāna* and *manas* in the system of the Yogācāra tradition bring some important understanding about the structure and operation of *vāsanā* with the subconsciousness. The result shows that three types of *vāsanā* are not only latent energy but also critical promotion for defining the structure of cognition and individual activities.

The role of subconsciousness *ālayavijñāna* as the warehouse that contains all seeds and nourishes seeds to maintain its energy as the impressions, latent tendencies, or habits through its ability to be perfumed. Then, it can maintain all *vāsanā* from the previous experiences. *Manas*, self-attachment consciousness, is the important bridge to transfer and transform all *vāsanā* into particular perceiving, feeling, and activity.

The paper also indicates that the perfuming capacity of *manas* and the receptivity of *ālayavijñāna* to perfumation contribute to self-attachment and suffering. If the nature of *vāsanā* cannot be recognized, each individual is stuck in the vicious cycle of defilement and suffering.

From all the understanding above, we can see that instead of eliminating or oppressing our perception, recognizing and reflecting what we are thinking are very important, as well as being mindful in choosing which objects should be perfumed and which should not. This requires clarifying the nature of *vāsanā*, gradually reducing attachment, and opening up the possibility of liberation.

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