

VASTU AND NIMITTA IN THE *YOGĀCĀRABHŪMI*: IN CONNECTION WITH THE THREE-NATURE THEORY AS FOUND IN THE *MADHYĀNTAVIBHĀGABHĀṢYA*

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1. Introduction

In this paper I want to investigate *vastu* and *nimitta* in the *Tattvārtha* chapter of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and in the same chapter of the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* in the *Yogācārabhūmi*. In the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* the locus of verbal designation (*prajñāptivāda*) is *vastu*, whereas in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* it is *nimitta*. There, *nimitta* is one of the five *vastus*, consisting of *nimitta* (phenomenon), *nāma* (name), *vikalpa* (conception), *tathatā* (true reality), and *samyagjñāna* (correct insight).

Generally, *vastu* in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and *nimitta* in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* are thought to be the same in definition, and the two are regarded as *paratantrasvabhāva*.¹ But in my investigation of the *Yogācārabhūmi*, especially in the *Tattvārtha* Chapter of the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*, I found that they are regarded as different in definition. Actually, both are described there as the locus of verbal designation. But while *vastu* is emphasized as *pariniṣpannasvabhāva* or *tathatā* when verbal designations are removed, *nimitta* is emphasized as *paratantrasvabhāva* which is a thing of the mundane. Given this difference, we need to re-investigate the relation between *vastu* in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and *nimitta* in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*.

¹ See Ikeda [1996a] [1996b] [1996c]; Takahashi [2001: 1002(39)]; Willis [2002: 190]. Ikeda says that *vastu* and *nimitta* are represented as a foundation of verbal designation and both are same thing as *paratantrasvabhāva* in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*. And he regards that this *paratantrasvabhāva* remains also in the world of supra-mundane. Takahashi says “The *vastu* is indeed connected with the *paratantrasvabhāva* in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* of *Yogācārabhūmi*”. Takahashi [2005] investigates the developments from the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* to the *Bodhisattvabhūmiviniścaya* from the point of view of development of the conception of *vastu*. Willis [2002: 190] says “In accordance with Asaṅga’s “three nature” theory, the *vastu* is the key representative of the *paratantra* (i.e., dependency) nature”.

As part of this investigation, we will also consider the structure of the Three-nature (*Tri-svabhāva*) Theory in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*. Furthermore, the difference between *nimitta* and *vastu* is very helpful for thinking about the relationship between *paratantrasvabhāva* and *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*, because *nimitta* is included in *paratantrasvabhāva*, while *tathatā*, which is represented as *vastu* in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*, is included in *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*.

We will consider the structure of the Three-nature Theory in the *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya* as well. Generally, in the Three-nature Theory of the *Yogācāra* School, especially in the *Mahāyānasamgraha*, *paratantrasvabhāva*, the axis of the changing of the world from mundane to the supra-mundane, is regarded as the locus of *parikalpitasvabhāva* and *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*.² However, in the investigation of the Three-nature Theory of the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* we find that the locus of the Three-nature Theory is *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*, not *paratantrasvabhāva*. Furthermore, we also find that this structure of the Three-nature Theory corresponds to that found in the *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya*.³

This paper has three parts. First of all, we will examine the meanings of *vastu* and *nimitta* in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*. Second, using the results of this examination, we will consider the structure of the Three-nature Theory in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*.⁴ Finally, we will examine the structure of the Three-nature Theory in the *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya* compared with the Three-nature Theory in the *Yogācārabhūmi*.

2. *vastu* in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*

The text there concerns truth for *bodhisattvas* and *Buddhas*:

² See Suguro [1982], who regards *paratantrasvabhāva* as neutral thing which is the foundation of *parikalpitasvabhāva* and *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva* in the *Mahāyānasamgraha*.

³ See Motomura [2004]. I investigated the structure of the Tree-nature Theory in the *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya*. In this text, I found that the *paratantrasvabhāva* is presented as impure, not neutral. Furthermore, the relationship between *paratantrasvabhāva* and *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva* is that when *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva* is covered with *parikalpitasvabhāva*, *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva* changes into *paratantrasvabhāva*. Moreover, Vasubandhu comments on this as the relationship between *āgantukamala* and water, gold and space. This relation is similar to the relationship between *āgantukamala* and *tathāgatagarbha* in the *Tathāgatagarbha* Thought. For this type of Three-nature Theory, its foundation is *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*. Ikeda [1998] says that the position of *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva* is regarded as foundational, and it remains in the world of supra-mundane in the *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya*.

⁴ For more details, see Motomura [2005].

[What is the truth of knowledge completely purified of obscurations to the object (*jñeyāvaranaviśuddhijñānatattva*)?] It is the domain (*gocara-viśaya*), which is for *bodhisattvas* and the *Buddha-Bhagavans* to enter into the selflessness of dharma (*dharmanairātmya*), and having entered and been purified, [they] obtain the inexpressive essential nature (*nirabhilāpyasvabhāvatā*) of all *dharmas*, and which [is related to such of their] knowledge corresponding to the object without any verbal designation (*prajñaptivāda*) and [to] perception of the essential nature (*svabhāva*). That is true reality (*tathatā*), there being nothing higher, the extreme limit of knowables, [and] from which all analyses of the *dharmas* do not turn back and arise.⁵

Here, especially through the phrase underlined, it is argued here that *bodhisattvas* and *Buddhas* have pure understanding of the inexpressive essential nature of all *dharmas*. This means that all *dharmas* have in essence an inexpressive nature, and are essentially without expression in words.

But even at this level of the selflessness of dharma, *bodhisattvas* and *Buddhas* grasp something. In the next sentence, it is said that *bodhisattvas* grasp *vastu* itself and *tathatā* itself at the level of the selflessness of dharma.

Indeed, the *bodhisattva*, who truly (*yathābhūtam*) understands that all *dharmas* are without expressive nature with the knowledge of the selflessness of dharma (*dharmanairātmya*) deep inside, does not perceive anything. Otherwise [he] would not grasp *vastu* itself, that is, *tathatā* itself.⁶

In this sentence, we learn that *bodhisattvas* grasp *vastu* itself and *tathatā* itself at the level of the selflessness of dharma. In other words, this means that at the level of the selflessness of dharma, *vastu*, namely *tathatā*, does exist. But what is *vastu*? For the rest of this section, we will be considering *vastu*.

The one who denies (*apavadamāna*) *vastu*, which is *nimitta* as the foundation for verbal designation and is *nimitta* as the basis for verbal

⁵ *BBh(D)*, p. 26,12-15, *BBh(W)*, p. 38,22-28: *tat punaḥ katamat. bodhisattvānām buddhānāṃ ca bhagavatām dharmanairātmyapraveśāya praviṣṭena suviśuddhena ca sarvadharmānām nirabhilāpyasvabhāvatām ārabhya prajñaptivādasvabhāvanirvikalpaññeyasamena jñānena yo gocaraviśayaḥ śāsau paramā tathatā niruttarā jñeyaparyantagatā yasyāḥ sarva samyagdharmaṃ pravicaṣyā nivartante nābhivartante.*

On English translation, I have used Dutt edition of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*.

⁶ *BBh(D)*, p. 28,9-11, *BBh(W)*, p. 41,15-18: *sa khalu bodhisattvas tena dūrānupraviṣṭena dharmanairātmyajñānena nirabhilāpyasvabhāvatām sarvadharmānām yathābhūtam viditvā na kiñcid vikalpayati nānyatra vastumātram grhṇāti tathatāmātram.*

designation, [and also,] which exists as an absolute reality (*paramārthasadbhūta*) owing to its inexpressible nature (*nirabhilāpyātmaka*), destructs [everything saying] that completely nothing does exist.⁷

Here, *vastu* is explained as follows; it is existence as an absolute reality, having an inexpressible nature, and it is *nimitta* as the foundation and basis for verbal designation. From this explanation, we can see that *vastu* is an existence as an absolute reality, and it is located as the foundation and basis of verbal designation, and also that *vastu* is described as *nimitta*.⁸ In another sentence, an explanation concerning this is offered in terms of the theory of emptiness found in the *Cūlasuññatasutta*.

And then, how is emptiness rightly perceived? It is perceived truly (*yathābhūtam*) that “When something does not exist there, the latter (the place) is empty with regard to the former. Further, there is something that remains there. That does exist”.⁹

This is a quotation from the *Cūlasuññatasutta*. According to this theory, there is something that remains. And this remainder is described as a place where something exists. When we apply this theory to the relationship between *vastu* and verbal designation, this sentence means “When verbal designation does not exist on *vastu*, *vastu* is empty with regard to verbal designation. Further, there is something that remains there”. This remainder is then described as follows;

Then what does remain on *vastu* whose name is “form (*rūpa*),” etc.? That is just the basis of the verbal designation “form,” etc.¹⁰

⁷ *BBh(D)*, p. 30,29-31,2, *BBh(W)*, p. 45,16-19: *yaś cāpi prajñāptivādanimittādhiṣṭhānaṃ prajñāptivādanimittasanniśrayaṃ nirabhilāpyātmakatayā paramārthasadbhūtaṃ vastv *apadamāno nāśayati sarveṇa sarvaṃ nāstīti. (*apavadamāno BBh(W))*

The parts marked with an asterisk are supplied from Wogihara edition of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*.

⁸ As seen in footnote 1, Ikeda [1996b: 373(52)] regards *vastu* and *nimitta* as identical. Takahashi [2005] says that *vastu* in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* has two sides. The one, as the foundation of verbal designation, and the other, not as the foundation of verbal designation. And in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*, this *vastu* is analysed into two concepts. One is *nimitta*, and the other *tathatā* in the *Pañcavastu* Theory.

⁹ *BBh(D)*, p. 32,12-14, *BBh(W)*, p. 47,16-19: *kathaṃ ca punaḥ sugrhitā śūnyatā bhavati. yataś ca yad yatra na bhavati. tat tena śūnyam iti samanupaśyati. yat punar atrāvaśiṣṭam bhavati tat sad ihāstīti yathābhūtaṃ prajānāti.*

¹⁰ *BBh(D)*, p. 32,17-18, *BBh(W)*, 47,23-25: *kiṃ punas tatra rūpādisamjñake vastuny avaśiṣṭam. yad uta tad eva rūpam ity evamādiprajñāptivādāśrayaḥ.*

Here, the remainder is described as the basis of verbal designation. From this theory of emptiness, we can understand that when *vastu*, which is termed “form”, etc. is without such a verbal designation, *vastu* remains as the basis without verbal designation. We can also understand this from the description of *vastu* as absolute reality and as the foundation and the basis for verbal designation.¹¹

In the next section, we will examine the relationship between *vastu* and *nimitta* in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*. In the *Tatvārtha* chapter of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, *nimitta* is not important and is mentioned only a few times, therefore the relation between *vastu* and *nimitta* is not clear. But in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*, *nimitta* plays an important role in the Three-nature Theory.

3. *vastu* and *nimitta* in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*

In this section, we will consider the definitions of *vastu* and *nimitta*. Generally, *vastu* and *nimitta* are thought to be the same in definition.¹² But in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*, we find that the definition of *vastu* and *nimitta* are different, especially at the level of existence. First, it is said that *vastu* is equal to *tathatā*.

[Question:] What is true reality (*de bzhin nyid, tathatā*)?

[Answer:] It is *vastu* which appears as the selflessness of *dharma*, which is the domain (*spyod yul, gocara*) of recognition of a noble person (*'phags pa'i ye shes, āryajñāna*) [and] which is not the basis of any verbal designation.¹³

In this sentence, we learn that *vastu* is equal to *tathatā* and is not the basis of any verbal designation. This type of *vastu* corresponds to *vastu* which is without verbal designation in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*. Then in the next sentence, *nimitta* is described as follows;

[Question:] Does *nimitta* exist as a worldly thing (*kun rdzob tu yod pa, samvrtti*) or as an absolute reality (*don dam par yod pa, paramārtha*)?

[Answer:] It exists as a worldly thing. For two reasons: because it occurs as

11 Concerning this reading of the structure of *śūnyatā*, see Mukai [1974].

12 See footnote 1.

13 *VinSg(P)*, Zi302b4, *VinSg(D)*, Zhi287b3-4: *de bzhin nyid gang zhe nal/ chos bdag med pas rab tu phye bal 'phags pa'i ye shes [*kyi] spyod yul [*/] mngon par brjod pa thams cad kyi gzhi'i gnas su ma gyur pa'i dngos po gang yin pa'o/* On English translation, I have used the Peking edition of the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*. The parts marked with an asterisk are supplied from the *sDe dge* edition of the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*.

an impure thing, and because it is the basis of the false designation (*gdags pa*, *prajñapti*).¹⁴

In this sentence, *nimitta* is defined as worldly thing. This is different from *vastu* which is described as *tathatā*. Furthermore, and this is important, *nimitta* is defined as the basis of the false designation. From this sentence we can understand that *nimitta* is different from *vastu* in the form of its existence. In the next sentence, we can understand the relationship between *nimitta* and *vastu*.

[Question:] Is *nimitta* different from true reality or is it not different?

[Answer:] Both should not be said.

[Question:] Why?

[Answer:] Because both will be contradictory.

[Question:] What falseness is there when they are different?

[Answer:] Absolute reality (*don dam pa*, *paramārtha*) of *nimitta* will not be true reality (*de bzhin nyid*, *tathatā*).¹⁵

From this sentence we can understand that *nimitta* and *vastu* are neither different nor not different. It is said also that the absolute reality of *nimitta* is *tathatā*. This means that *nimitta* has *tathatā*, namely *vastu*, in its own nature. Considering this relationship between *nimitta* and *vastu*, we can conclude that *nimitta* and *vastu* are both located as the locus (in this meaning, *vastu* and *nimitta* are identical), but *nimitta* is recognized as the basis of the false designation. This means that when *vastu* becomes the basis of verbal designation, *vastu* becomes *nimitta* as the basis of false designation, and when *nimitta* is without verbal designation, the absolute reality of *nimitta* appears as *vastu*.¹⁶

From this construction of *vastu* and *nimitta*, we can conclude that only *vastu* which is not verbal designation remains in the world of the supra-mundane. This means that although *vastu* and *nimitta* are

¹⁴ VinSg(P), Zi303b7-8, VinSg(D), Zhi288b7: rgyu mtshan kun rdzob tu yod par brjod par bya'am/ don dam par yod par brjod par bya zhe nal smras pa/ kun rdzob tu yod par brjod par bya 'o// rgyu gnyis kyis te/ kun nas nyon mongs pa kun nas slong ba'i phyir dang/ gdags pa'i gzhi yin pa'i phyir rol/

¹⁵ VinSg(P), Hi2b1-2b4, VinSg(D), Zi2a1- 2: rgyu mtshan las de bzhin nyid gzhan du brjod par bya'am/ gzhan ma yin par brjod par bya zhe nal smras pa/ gnyi gar yang brjod par mi bya'o// de ci'i phyir zhe nal *gnyi ga yang skyon du 'gyur bar thal bar 'gyur ba'i phyir rol/ gzhan nyid yin na skyon ci yod zhe nal rgyu mtshan gyi don dam pa nyid de bzhin nyid du mi 'gyur ba dang/ (*gnyi gar VinSg(D))

¹⁶ On this understanding of the relationship between *vastu* and *nimitta*, see footnote 18.

identical as the foundation of verbal designation, in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*, the existence of *vastu* which is not the foundation of verbal designation is emphasized as absolute reality which remains in the world of the supra-mundane.¹⁷

Given this relationship between *vastu* and *nimitta*, we can now apply it to the construction of the Three-nature Theory. In the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*, *paratantrasvabhāva* is included in *nimitta*, and *pariniṣpannasvabhāva* is included in *tathatā*. Also, *tathatā* is equal to *vastu* which is without verbal designation. This means that *paratantrasvabhāva*, namely *nimitta*, appears when *pariniṣpannasvabhāva*, namely *vastu*, is connected with verbal designation. And when *paratantrasvabhāva*, namely *nimitta*, is without verbal designation, it becomes *pariniṣpannasvabhāva* as its own nature. This structure of the Three-nature Theory is that *pariniṣpannasvabhāva* is the basis of verbal designation, and it changes itself to *paratantrasvabhāva* when it is connected with verbal designation. This structure is different from the structure that *paratantrasvabhāva* is the basis of *parikalpitasvabhāva* and *pariniṣpannasvabhāva*.¹⁸

In the next section I would like to compare this type of Three-nature Theory to that in the *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya*.¹⁹

¹⁷ It is supposed to be that *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* wanted to emphasize the real existence of *vastu* which is as *tathatā*.

¹⁸ Ikeda [1996b: 373(52)] says that *vastu* corresponds to *nimitta*, and he regards *vastu* and *nimitta* as *paratantrasvabhāva*. From this point of view, he says that *paratantrasvabhāva* remains in the world of supra-mundane. But he also says that *nimitta* which is explained as existence of worldly thing in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*, is contradictory to *nimitta* which is explained as existence of supra-mundane. But when we regard *vastu* and *nimitta* are different (*vastu* is a thing of the world of supra-mundane, *nimitta* is a thing of the world of mundane) and only *vastu* remains in the world of supra-mundane, *nimitta* which is explained as a worldly thing is not contradictory. Takahashi [2005] says about *vastu* and *nimitta* from the relationship with *Pañcavastu* Theory “*Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* is considered to have analyzed the usage of the *vastu* in *Bodhisattvabhūmi* into the notions of *nimitta* and *tathatā*”. I agree with his opinion. But when the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* analyzed *vastu* in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* simply into two sides, this type of Three-nature Theory is same as that in the *Mahāyānasamgraha*, which is described as that *paratantrasvabhāva* is neutral thing and it is the locus of *parikalpitasvabhāva* and *pariniṣpannasvabhāva*. When the type of Tree-nature Theory in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* is like this, it contradicts the statement that *tathatā*, namely *vastu*, is located as foundation, because in the type of Three-nature Theory in the *Mahāyānasamgraha*, *tathatā* must be a property of *paratantrasvabhāva* in the world of supra-mundane. But in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*, *tathatā* is described as the locus without verbal designation. I think, therefore *vastu* and *nimitta* is same as the locus, but both are different in the level of existence in the relation with the Three-nature Theory, and we can regard the structure of Three-nature Theory in relation with the *vastu* and *nimitta* as I represented. Kramer [2005: 27] says “*tathatā* itself is not foundation for verbal designation and hence also it is not *nimitta*”.

¹⁹ About the Three-nature Theory in the *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya*, see Motomura [2004].

4. The Three-nature Theory in the *Madhyāntavibhāḡabhāṣya*

There is an interesting sentence concerning *pariniṣpannasvabhāva* in the *Madhyāntavibhāḡabhāṣya*, in the commentary of Vasubandhu on stanza six of the chapter three.

Three natures are basic reality (*mūlatattva*).

In them, in order:

“impermanence of things” [means] non-existence of things

[“impermanence of things” means] arising and disappearance of things,

[and “impermanence of things” means] things having impurity (*samala*) and purity (*amala*).²⁰

Here, *pariniṣpannasvabhāva* is described as having both impurity and purity. This means that there is impure *pariniṣpannasvabhāva*, even though *pariniṣpannasvabhāva* is essentially pure. Moreover, this type of *pariniṣpannasvabhāva* is described also as an impure emptiness.

In what sense are varieties of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) recognized?²¹

It is phenomenalized (*saṃkṛīṣṭa*) and pure absolute (*viśuddha*). It is impure and pure. Just like a purity of water, gold or space, purity is to be recognized [with regard to emptiness].²²

Because it is cleared of accidental impurity (*āgantukamala*), and its essence never changes.²³

From these sentences, we learn that when emptiness is covered with accidental impurity, it becomes an impure emptiness. But that nature still keeps its purity. Important here is that Vasubandhu uses *āgantukamala*. It is supposed that Vasubandhu wanted to explain this relation from the point of view of *Tathāgatagarbha* Thought, but it's not clear by now.²⁴ Furthermore, we can understand that this impure

²⁰ MAVBh on MAV III. 6: *trayo hi svabhāvā mūlatatvaṃ. teṣu yathākramaṃ asadartho hy anityārtha utpādayayārthaḡ samalāmalatārthaś ca.*

²¹ MAVBh on MAV I. 16: *kathaṃ śūnyatāyāḡ prabhedo jñeyāḡ.*

²² *saṃkṛīṣṭā ca viśuddhā ca. samalā nirmalā ca sāl/ abdhātukanakākāśāsuddhivac chuddhir iṣyate// MAV I.16*

²³ MAVBh on MAV I. 16: *āgantukamalāpagamān na tu tasyāḡ svabhāvānyatvaṃ bhavati.*

²⁴ Hotori [1982: 34] says that *vastu* which is as without verbal designation, has a relationship

emptiness is equal to *abhūtaparikalpa*, which is as *paratantrasvabhāva*. This is because in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*, when *vastu* as *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva* is with verbal designation, it becomes *nimitta* as *paratantrasvabhāva*, and when *vastu* is without verbal designation, it is *tathatā* as *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*. In the same way, when emptiness is with *āgantukamala*, it becomes impure emptiness as *paratantrasvabhāva*, and when emptiness is without *āgantukamala*, it is pure emptiness as *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*. Since *abhūtaparikalpa* is regarded as *paratantrasvabhāva* in the *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya*, we can identify impure emptiness with *abhūtaparikalpa*.

5. Conclusion

First, *vastu* in the *Yogācārabhūmi*, especially in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*, has two types: one type is *vastu* as *tathatā*, which is without verbal designation; the second type is as *nimitta*, which is *vastu* with verbal designation. And *vastu* which is as *tathatā* is included in *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva* and *nimitta* is included in *paratantrasvabhāva*. Further, *nimitta* is defined as a existence of worldly thing and *vastu* is defined as a existence of the thing of supra-mundane. From this point of view, the structure of the Three-nature Theory in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* is such that when *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva* or *vastu* becomes a locus of verbal designation, it becomes as *paratantrasvabhāva* or *nimitta*. Therefore from the relationship with Tree-nature Theory, *vastu* and *nimitta* is different in the level of the form of existence. The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* wanted to emphasize the real existence of *vastu* as *tathatā*.

Furthermore, this structure of the Three-nature Theory corresponds to that in the *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya*. There is a possibility that Vasubandhu applied this relationship between *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva* and *paratantrasvabhāva* in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* to the Three-nature Theory in the *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya*.

with *Tathāgatagarbha* Thought.

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- MAV*: See *MAVBh*.
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