

The Definition of Ālaya in Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra 5.3 (v. 3)

The Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra, of which the final version was most probably composed in the 2nd c. CE, is generally viewed in a historical perspective as the most important scripture of the Yogācāra school of thought. In one of its chapters its central concept ālayavijñāna, often translated as “storehouse-consciousness”, is introduced, and in one location in that chapter there is an etymological statement about ālayavijñāna. Etymological statements in the form of “x is called A because...”, provide essential meta-level information, and can be valuable as definitions.

1. The Chinese Taishō 676 Version

In the 1995 translation of Thomas Cleary, which is based on the Chinese Taishō edition Vol. 31 no. 676, we have the following English rendering for Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra 5.3:

It is also called repository consciousness, because this consciousness receives and stores in the body, indifferent to good or bad.

In this etymological statement, of model “It is called A because it B₁' and B₂'”, there exists a special relationship between A' (repository consciousness) and at least one of the verbs B₁' (receives) and B₂' (stores). (The accents after A, B₁ and B₂ signify that these are translations of, in this case, a Chinese original.) Here, the relationship between A' on the one hand and B₁' and B₂' on the other, that is between “repository consciousness” and “receives” and “stores”, is evident, as a “repository” is a place where objects are “received” and “stored”. A' and B₁' and B₂' have a strong correspondence here. We can forget the subordinate clause “indifferent to good or bad” for our purpose here, because our interest is in this special relationship between A' and B₁' and B₂', in which ālayavijñāna is defined.

A' = repository consciousness

B₁' and B₂' = receives and stores (in the body)

The word repository is not a translation for the original Chinese 阿賴耶, ā lài yé, which is phonetic for Sanskrit ālaya, but it is close to the original Sanskrit meaning of house, abode, dwelling, or receptacle. (cf. Monier-Williams) There is an understood object in this interpretation, as opposed to other translations. We could ask ourselves what would be received and stored by ālaya in the body? In Chinese we may have doubts at this point, but from the Tibetan version of the text it is clear that ālaya should be (referred to by) the subject of the main clause.

We might take a closer look at the two verbs B₁' and B₂', the verb compounds 攝受, to receive, and 藏隱, to conceal. The element of "hiding" is important in the latter, so "to store" is not completely adequate as a translation, and may be inspired by definitions as a store-house in other instances. There is another connection between 藏隱, to conceal, and ālaya, because as it happens the first character of the verb compound 藏隱 is 藏, zàng, which is the character used in many Chinese translations for the store-house in the context of ālaya. We might assume that the translator, Xuán Zàng, implanted this connection on purpose, but to us it is only a side track. From a modern point of view it is important to realise that each text is an independent philosophical universe, and moreover that many of these scriptures are composed of smaller texts from different authors over a longer period of time.

2. The Tibetan Kanjur Version

Étienne Lamotte's 1935 French translation (based on the Tibetan version from the Derge Kanjur) of the sentence, in Chapter V.3, pp. 184-185, is:

Elle est aussi appelée "Connaissance-réceptacle", parce qu'elle se joint et s'unit à ce corps dans une commun sécurité et dans un risque commun.

which would convert to English as:

It is also called "receptacle-Consciousness", because it joins and unites with this body in common security and common risk.

Here we have a bit of a problem. Why would it be called *receptacle-Consciousness* if it *joins* and *unites* instead of *receives*? This sentence, which is quite literally translated from Tibetan, strictly does not explain anything about why ālaya is called as it is.

A' = "receptacle-Consciousness"

B₁' and B₂' = joins and unites (with this body)

In Tibetan, ālaya is rendered as kun gzhi rnam par shes pa, which is something like "universal base-consciousness" and not "receptacle-Consciousness". If we substitute this into Lamotte's translation, the problem more or less remains:

It is also called “universal base-consciousness”, because it joins and unites with this body [...]

In practice it is of course virtually impossible to translate etymological statements into intelligible sentences in a not closely related language.

The verb forms B1' and B2', “joins” and “unites”, are rendered in Tibetan as “kun tu sbyor ba” and “rab tu sbyor bar byed”. The general meaning of sbyor ba as a verb would be to join, to connect, to apply, to affix, to prepare, to establish, or to practice. (Jeffrey Hopkins' dictionary) Heinrich August Jäschke's dictionary has, for example, to affix, stick, apply, impress, put together, join, unite, to prepare, procure etc. With kun tu, “in every way”, it becomes something like “to thoroughly join”, or “to connect”, and with rab tu (completely) it becomes “to completely join”, which is more like “to unite”. With the causative modal verb byed, it becomes “to make unite” which is “to unify”. Hence Lamotte's “joins and unites”.

3. The Chinese Taishō 675 Version

To my knowledge, there is no Western translation of the Chinese Taishō Vol. 31 no. 675 version:

亦名阿梨耶識。何以故。以彼身中住著故。一體相應故。

In English this would be something like

It is also called “ālayavijñāna” [in Sanskrit]. That is because it is residing within the body, and because together they should be a unit.

A' = “ālayavijñāna”

B' = it is residing within the body

Here the two verbs are rendered as one gerund (住著): residing. The verb root 住, to reside, corresponds exactly to the meaning of the Sanskrit word ālaya, which is an abode, dwelling, etc. Because again ālaya is left untranslated (phonetically: 阿梨耶), no semantic discrepancy is necessary to arise here in the translation.

4. The Lost Sanskrit Original

The three versions we have looked at are all translations directly from Sanskrit. We can however not be sure that they are translations of the same Sanskrit text. In the case of Taishō 675 the second verb (B₂') is missing, perhaps because it was missing in the Sanskrit text on which it was based. The verbs used in the different version are semantically very different, as we can see in Table 1.

Version	A'	B ₁ ' (1 st verb)	B ₂ ' (2 nd verb)	Location
Taishō 676 (Cleary)	repository consciousness	receives	and stores	in the body
Tibetan Kanjur (Lamotte)	receptacle- Consciousness	joins	and unites	with this body
Taishō 675	“ālayavijñāna”	is residing		within the body

Table 1: Summary of the translations of A', B₁' and B₂' of the three versions

In any case we may recognize that this definition is not about ālaya as the “store-house consciousness”, a depository of karmic remains. It is about some other function, it may be receiving something in the body, storing something in it, or perhaps receiving or storing ālaya in the body, joining or uniting with it, but from the Chinese and Tibetan versions we have no reason to suppose that it deals with vāsanās being stored in ālayavijñāna.

The interpretation of the compound 藏隱 as “to conceal” can (for example) be found in Akira Hirakawa's, *Buddhist Chinese-Sanskrit Dictionary* (1997), where the following Sanskrit equivalents are given: pracchanna, praticchanna and vasti-kośa. At first sight this does not look very interesting, as these three terms all have to do with hiding, and enveloping or clothing. (acchanna = clothed) If we think one step further this might give us actually a plausible explanation why ālaya is hidden in the body. It is not hidden but enveloped or clothed by the body, or bodies, in the sense that in esoteric literature often bodies are symbolized as clothes, vestitures, as they are seen as forms for the manifestation of consciousness, or vehicles of consciousness. The first part of the sentence in Taishō 676 becomes clear now, as this particular type of consciousness, ālaya, is received in the body and is embedded in it. The phrase 彼身中 in Taishō 675, the other Chinese version, in a way confirms this, because the character 中 signifies “in the middle”, or simply “within”.

Version	A'	B ₁ ' (1 st verb)	B ₂ ' (2 nd verb)	Location
Taishō 676	阿梨耶	攝受	藏隱	於身
Tibetan Kanjur	kun gzhi	kun tu sbyor ba	rab tu sbyor bar byed	lus 'di la
Taishō 675	阿梨耶	住著		彼身中

Table 2: A', B₁' and B₂' of the three versions

As we have seen, the Tibetan version does not reflect the receiving and storing (or concealing), as the basic verb used there is sbyor ba, to join, generally corresponding to the Sanskrit root yuj, to join. In the Mahāvīyutpatti, sbyor ba is also connected to yoga or prayogaḥ. (nos. 2143, 2317, 4402) If we look at another work which seems doctrinally and historically close to the Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra, the Yogācārabhūmi, we find in the surviving Sanskrit fragments, for constructions with Tibetan sbyor, only corresponding Sanskrit constructions with root yuj. In some dictionaries rab tu sbyor bar byed is interpreted as a whole, as Sanskrit prayujyamāna, which also occurs as such in the Yogācārabhūmi. Also Lamotte suggests saṃyunakti, joining together, and prayuṅakti, unifying.

The two prepositions before sbyor ba, kun tu and rab tu are usually translations of saṃ- and pra-. The second verb is a Tibetan (“weak”) causative constructed with -r byed. The fact that the two verbs are both rendered as sbyor ba, may suggest that in the original text they have the same Sanskrit root, but of course we can not be sure of that. Lambert Schmithausen, in his (great) 1987 study *Ālayavijñāna: On the Origin and the Early Development of a Central Concept of Yogācāra Philosophy*, proposes that the Sanskrit equivalent of sbyor ba could in this case be formed from the root lī. One sense of saṃ + vli is “to go into” or “to find room in”. (with Loc.) The Sanskrit form for kun tu sbyor ba could be saṃliyate. One sense of pra + vli is “to dissolve” or “to be reabsorbed into”. (with Loc.) The form for rab tu sbyor bar byed could be pralāyayati, which is not equal to 藏隱, however with a causative meaning it becomes “to make dissolve”, “to cause to be reabsorbed”, which is quite close to “to hide, conceal etc.”.

If we further analyse both verbs in Taishō 676 in their composing elements, we find for B₁’:

攝 take in, absorb; act as deputy; administer, assist
 受 receive, accept, get; bear, stand

The compound verb is a powerful expressive mechanism in Chinese, where the first character expresses an action or cause, and the second character, sometimes called the “complement of result”, expresses the effect. In this case the action is “to take in”, “to absorb”, and the result of this action would be “to receive”. A perfectly good translation would be “to receive” (cf. Cleary), or “to accept” but we also find “to gather”, “gather up” (Soothill), and “to take in”, or “uptake”. Perhaps we could even think of “to integrate” or “be integrated”. This is more than “to stick” (vli), as the “connecting” (vyuj) is the most important element.

The second verb, B₂', is composed of:

藏 hide, conceal; hoard, store up
隱 hide, conceal; hidden, secret

The action would be “to hide” or “store up” and the result would be “to hide”. Again “to conceal” is good enough, but we also find “to hide away”, “to lie/stay/be hidden”, and “to disappear”. We might even think of “to be implicit” or “to be assimilated”. (√yuj) This is might be slightly different than “to dissolve” (√li), where the essence disappears.

To conclude this: the definition in Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra 5.3 tells us how consciousness (ālaya) connects to (攝受, √yuj) and manifests itself through the physical body (lus 'di), or perhaps a body in general (lus, kāya, kośa), and lives (住著) hidden (藏隱) in it. From other definitions we learn that ālaya keeps it together, recording and preserving the essence of experiences through multiple incarnations. ■