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Does Memory Reflect the Function of Smṛti? Exploring the Concept of the Recollecting Mind in the Cheng Weishi Lun

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Abstract: In the majority of Abhidharmic Buddhist schools, smṛti serves the crucial function of ensuring the recollection of past events and is thus conceptualized as memory in scholarly discourse nowadays. Nevertheless, upon closer examination of various doctrinal perspectives, the interpretation of smṛti diverges significantly among different schools. Notably, it is deemed to be omnipresent in every moment of perception within the Sarvāstivādin tradition, while in Yogācāra, it is regarded as a specific response to an experienced object. This paper seeks to delve into the concept of smṛti within the latter tradition, with a specific focus on the Cheng Weishi Lun (成唯識論, henceforth: CWSL). Drawing upon the foundational principles of Yogācāra doctrine, which posit the ālayavijñāna as an underlying substratum responsible for retaining past information, I contend that smṛti embodies a cognitive faculty that intensifies the apprehension of learned objects when they are present. Furthermore, I argue that smṛti serves as the inception point for a series of cognitive processes acquiring knowledge that helps decision-making. Additionally, I will demonstrate that the function of smṛti in the CWSL diverges from both traditional Buddhist conceptions of memory and contemporary understandings thereof.

Keywords: Cheng Weishi Lun; smṛti; memory; recollection; Yogācāra

1. Preface

Undoubtedly, smṛti (Chinese: 念) holds considerable significance in Buddhism owing to its incorporation into several crucial Buddhist lists of practice. Notably, it is one component of the eightfold noble path, denoting the correct memory facilitating the practice that releases one from suffering. Also, smṛti appears to be the famous contemplative method, one of the four applications of mindfulness, aiming for complete extinction. The implementation of such a practice is recorded already in both Nikāya and Āgama, which exert a substantial influence on the evolution of later dhyāna texts.1

While the initial emphasis on smṛti pertained to its soteriological perspective, the Abhidharmic treatises introduce an additional focus: an approach towards its epistemological function. When it is one element of cognition, smṛti functions closely to what its etymology suggests: to memorize or to keep in mind.2 The character of smṛti that seems to concern the retention of information is thus considered to be similar to memory nowadays and was suggested to be understood as so from time to time.3 However, understanding of smṛti is not coherent due to variations in doctrinal positions or different approaches in elaboration. Though there is divergence among schools in explicating the mechanisms by which smṛti operates in retaining information, two approaches in the Buddhist commentarial literature are employed to elucidate its capability to remember. First, in the Sarvāstivāda tradition, an omnipresent smṛti operates in every cognitive moment, enabling the transitions of a continuous perceptive identification. Second, in the Yogācāra tradition, smṛti arises only for the fixation on an object that one experienced before.

The two trends, as Cox pointed out, distinguish their understanding of smṛti based on their different attitudes toward a substratum of consciousness (Cox 1992, pp. 88–90). Proceeding from this, this paper is dedicated to elucidating the specific psychological state represented by smṛti within the framework of Yogācāra philosophy, with particular emphasis...
on utilizing the *Cheng Weishi Lun* (成唯識論, henceforth: CWSL) as the primary material. Moreover, it will delve into Yogācāra’s comprehension of memory and the role that *smṛti* plays in the process of memorization.

2. On the Meaning of *Smṛti*: From Sarvāstivāda to Yogācāra and the CWSL

In the Sarvāstivāda system, *smṛti* is regarded as one of the “factors of great extension” (*mahābhūmika*, 大地法)⁴. It is a fundamental component in every mental process, facilitating the emergence of all mental factors. This critical aspect of psychological functioning is detailed in Sarvāstivāda treatises. Both the *Mahāvibhāṣa* and “*Nyāyānusāra*” describe *smṛti* as encompassing the essential quality of “non-forgetting” (不忘). This implies that the primary function of memory is to preserve the object of attention, thereby upholding the objective support for continuous cognitive processes. The Sanskrit term for “non-forgetting” is *asampramoṣa*, which, alongside *ālambana*, denotes “the non-loss of the objective support.” The expression “*smṛtir ālambanāsaṃpramoṣaḥ*”⁶ in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, defining the principal characteristic of *smṛti*, is rendered by Xuanzang as “念謂於緣明記不忘” (*smṛti* is clearly memorizing and non-forgetting of the object). In this interpretation, “non-loss” is understood as “non-forgetting” and the act of “clearly memorizing” the objective support. Indeed, maintaining the sensory object within the framework of perception is intricately linked to the concept of remembrance.

Except for *asampramoṣa*, the other description often used to delineate memorizing is *abhilapana*. This expression can be found already in the *Milinda-pañha* of Pāli postcanon where *apilāpana* is stated as the definition of *sati*. It is elaborated with a metaphor of a storekeeper who reminds the king of the content of his store in *Aṭṭhasālinī*⁷ and explained as “plugging” into the objective support or a state of “not drifting” in other Theravāda Abhidhamma treatises.⁸

This concept is also presented in Abhidharma texts such as Yaśomitra’s *Abhidharma-kosārvākhyā*, where *abhilapana* is equated with *asampramoṣa*.⁹ Similarly, the early Yogācāra text, the *Yogācārabhūmi*, defines *smṛti* as “abhilapana in respect to the familiar object (*samśṭuta-vastu*, 串習事)”¹⁰. Both Sthiramati¹¹ and Xuanzang¹² adhere to this doctrinal stance, viewing memorization as the mental capacity to recall the learned object from the past when the present objective aligns with it. Furthermore, Xuanzang adds one more point in the definition of *smṛti*: the capacity to support the arising of concentration. In the CWSL, *smṛti* is comprehended as so,

> What is *smṛti*? With respect to the object that has been learned previously, causing the mind to record clearly and not to forget is its nature. Supporting concentration (*samādhi*, 定) is its activity. That means, because [memorizing] recurrently recollects and maintains the object which was once perceived and causes [the mind] to not forget and lose the object, it can induce concentration.¹³

While in Yogācāra, the primary function of *smṛti* appears to be closely associated with the psychological capacity to store and recollect information about previously perceived objects; its unique classification, distinct from that in Sarvāstivāda, becomes evident in its necessity for activation only in the presence of a cognitively learned object. Unlike in Sarvāstivāda, *smṛti* acts only on a specific object (*viniyata*, 別境) in Yogācāra tradition and does not serve as an essential requirement for the arising of perception.

3. Concept of *Smṛti* in Sarvāstivāda Tradition

Having demonstrated the textual descriptions, we are to analyze the causes that result in the different categorization of *smṛti*—a factor of omnipresence and a factor acting on a specific object—namely, to investigate their dissimilar doctrinal bases that lead to their divergent understanding of *smṛti*. I shall start with Sarvāstivāda’s view in this section.

Before delving into the specific doctrinal assertions of various schools, it is important to address the conflicts arising in the Abhidharma discourse regarding the epistemological functions of *smṛti*. Firstly, in accordance with the Buddhist principle of efficacy, every emerging phenomenon must have a preceding cause acting as its dependent condition.
Therefore, asserting that *smṛti* functions as memory to elucidate the psychological experiences of individuals necessitates the justification of past causes for present recollections. This poses a challenge within Buddhist philosophy, as it adheres to a doctrine of no-self applicable to all phenomena. Consequently, all observable events or thoughts, whether sensory or mental, are contingent and emerge with dependent causes, lacking inherent essence. Events such as physical sensations or the occurrence of mental images are compositions of transient conditions, disappearing once their supporting elements cease. Consequently, sustaining psychological recollection encounters challenges: if past events exist momentarily without a permanent essence, how can they serve as causes supporting future recollections? Furthermore, even if past events could serve as causes, how is the characteristic of the past remembered object retained as information over time, given that the object itself appears momentarily?

Bearing this in mind, let us see how Sarvāstivāda handles these problems addressed above on the basis of its fundamental doctrine. Sarvāstivāda is distinctive in conceptualizing that all existence of phenomena, i.e., the dharma, has its own intrinsic nature which sustains the characteristic of that particular dharma and allows it to last as time passes. On the basis of this claim, *dharmas* exist as real entities in the period of three times—the past, present, and future. This doctrinal stance is highly related to the Sarvāstivādin’s understanding of *smṛti*. Namely, since the existence of the past object is accounted as real, the Sarvāstivādin considers that the object that is perceived in the past can directly serve as the cause for the future manifestation. Memory, for the Sarvāstivādin, is the ability of *smṛti* to retain the intrinsic nature of past dharmas through each moment of consciousness and to bring the present recollection. Thus, *smṛti* is required in every moment of the mind so that the psychological action of recollection can be sustained. As Cox has already noted (Cox 1992, pp. 82–87), this understanding of *smṛti* is stated in the *Mahāvibhāṣā*; the main function of memorizing—the non-forgetting of the sense object—according to the Sarvāstivādin’s understanding of the mental continuum, keeps information from the last thought and connects it to the present thought. It clearly states the three conditions enabling the appearance of memorizing: (1) firmly grasping the previous object, (2) manifestation of similarity to the previous object in the present, and (3) the non-loss of the memorizing.

Other than that, *smṛti*, for the Sarvāstivādin, is a mental factor that is distinguishable from a bundle of psychological activities. It is distinct as it performs a specific function of noting or fixing the cognitive object which results in the non-loss of this object. One can tell this from the discussion between Samghabhadra and Śrīlāta presented in the *Nyāyānusāra*. In this passage, Śrīlāta first opposes Sarvāstivāda’s position considering *smṛti* as omnipresent by bringing up a common term in the canonical literature called “memory-loss” (失念) to argue that *smṛti* must not be present all the time. Then, he further argues that *smṛti* happens naturally when the mind acquires knowledge (智). And, thus, one does not need a specific psychic component to fulfill the matter that retains the past event and brings it into the present. Therefore, *smṛti* is only a name designated for the purpose of referring to the phenomenon of memory or memorizing. The first challenge is not difficult for Samghabhadra: since it is only a matter of how one elaborates the scripture, a memory loss can be caused by the weak functioning of memorizing but does not necessarily mean the absence of *smṛti*. The key point to note here is Samghabhadra’s additional critique of Śrīlāta’s assertions. Samghabhadra argues that if *smṛti* is merely a label for a single action linked to acquiring knowledge, there is no underlying cause to sustain present recollection. This is a clear rebuttal against the viewpoint that regards *smṛti* as just one aspect of the process of knowing.

Concluding from above, for Sarvāstivāda, *smṛti* is a really existing mental factor that is separate from other mental functions. It works on both the past and present object of memorizing by means of fixing or noting the information for subsequent recollection. To do so, it must be an omnipresent factor that appears in every perceptual moment.
4. Smṛti in Yogācāra Tradition

The assertion that dharmas endure through time due to their possession of a unique intrinsic nature provides the Sarvāstivādins with a foundation to support the phenomenon of memory. Examining the preservation of past information in the absence of psychological activities, and the evanescent nature of emerging phenomena after the cessation of their conditional circumstances, the Sarvāstivādin proposes attributing smṛti to each moment of the mind. This proposition posits that the substantiveness of every event’s arising facilitates the transmission of information from the past to the present. Critiqued for its disposition, the Sarvāstivādin perspective, however, enables the avoidance of presupposing a substratum component responsible for retaining past deeds until their later manifestation, a necessity for the occurrence of memory. This avoidance is crucial, as positing such a substratum would potentially conflict with the no-self doctrine, which asserts that a personage is merely a fictional conceptualization.

On the contrary, another perspective on memory posits a retention capability within conscious activities while steering clear of the concept of inherent individuality. This perspective relates to the seed, the latent state of passion, which remains subdued and does not manifest as an affliction disrupting one’s life. According to Jaini (1992, p. 53 and p. 57 in footnote 33), Vasubandhu elaborates on the seed, in the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya, as “the passion in their dormant stage is said to endure in the form of seed in the consciousness, just as the capacity to produce rice that belongs to the rice plant is engendered from the rice seed and carried through various stage in between.” On the basis of this, the past memorized event is understood as the latent passion that endured as the seed of smṛti (smṛti-bīja, 念種子) as a past karmic impression.

Yogācāra, in opposition to Sarvāstivāda, developed this trend which supposes a retention of past events during the passing of time together with their doctrine of eight forms of consciousness. In this form of explanation, the occurrence of memory is not necessitated by the omnipresence of smṛti. As in the refutation presented in the CWSL, the universal characteristic of smṛti is opposed.

There is no smṛti for an object which has itself never been perceived. If what has been perceived can’t be recollected clearly, smṛti also doesn’t arise. Therefore, smṛti must not be allocated to the factor which is always active. Some say that when the mind arises it must be accompanied by smṛti because it is the cause for subsequent recollection. This argument is unreasonable. [One] can’t say that if [one] arouses delusion, faith, etc., subsequently, it is because [these factors] have arisen before. Because of the previous mind, mental factors or the power of conceptualization (saṃjñā, 想) are sufficient causes for a subsequent recollection.17

The cause of the appearance of memory does not rely on the exact moment of the past cognition. Instead, the two listed conditions are already sufficient for the memorizing activity of the mind. Namely, memory either relies on “the power of the previous mind and mental factor” or one omnipresent factor in the Yogācāric system of epistemology: the “conceptualization”.

These two causes have to work in the framework of the seed theory and the stored consciousness, the underlying basis that substantiates the life force and structure of all the experiences of a sentient being. As Kuiji comments,

When the mind has apprehended the object, the efficacy is already impregnated (vāsanā, 熏) there in the root-consciousness. This is sufficient to be the cause for the later recollection. Why does one need the previous thought to produce sequentially the next? On the other hand, because the conceptualization apprehends images [which are similar between the previous and present thoughts] predominantly, it arises as the cause for the later thought. Why does one await the present thought to proceed to the next?18

In Kuiji’s commentary, once the mind engages with an object, the potential influence of that mental activity naturally integrates with the stored consciousness, shaping future
impacts. Moreover, when the perceiving agent presently requires the result of perceptual identification from a prior moment, they can abstract it using their current conceptualizing mental capacity to form an identical or similar identification, supporting the continuity of the mental process. This present “conceptualization” (想) is considered a constant mental factor that arises whenever the mind perceives, eliminating the need for a distinct psychological component to enable the successive emergence of thoughts.

Stored consciousness and the seed theory are possibly the most crucial doctrines of the Yogācāra school. The former is the accumulation of potential energy from karmic activities which one has done from beginningless time, it serves as a basal ground for all mental and physical manifestations. Seeds are those potential energies existing due to one’s own doing and become forceful because of the effectiveness of causality. Namely, with the assumption that a cause encompasses a compelling strength to become a consequence that produces impact in the future, a seed, a doing that is done in the past, is reserved in the stored consciousness together with its potential influences on the future and will manifest someday, complying with the situation.

The second possible causal condition is claimed to be “the power of conceptualization”, one of the mental components that support every mental activity. The main function of this factor is to conceptualize the perceived object and ascertain its distinctiveness from the others. It is defined as follows in the CWSL,

The nature of conceptualization is to take the [distinctive] image of the object.
To designate various names is [its] activity. This means that it is only when the distinctive characteristic of the object is established that the various names and words can be raised accordingly.19

This mental factor serves to conceptualize the objective support according to its distinctive features as perceived by the agent. These features encompass physical perceptions such as appearance, touch, tactile impressions, etc., as well as the feelings of pleasure, suffering, or neutrality experienced toward the object. At this stage of the perceptual process, conceptualization involves apprehending the perceived information and abstracting similar concepts from memory, enabling one to associate the objective support with words and names. For instance, when the perceiving agent comes into sensory contact with an apple, the mind’s conceptualizing ability abstracts a similar image, including the individual’s previous pleasurable feeling from eating it, from past experiences. This function of conceptualization enables one to recognize the currently perceived object as an apple and remember either having eaten an apple before or being taught that the present image is an apple.

5. Exploring the Nature of Smṛti: Is It Memory?

Having examined the textual sources that elaborate smṛti, we are coming to the part which analyzes how smṛti is conceptualized in the CWSL and how it relates to what we understand as memory nowadays.20 There is no doubt that smṛti refers to a mental activity regarding recollection. However, based on the text presented above, we have come to understand that while smṛti may arise at the moment of recalling, it does not seem to function like memory, which typically stores past events for future remembrance. To elucidate the nature of smṛti more clearly, we shall begin by excluding the characteristics that do not belong to smṛti:

(1) Not the past cause and present consequence that enable a memorizing event.

The CWSL does not consider smṛti as omnipresent, but as only arising in response to the learned object. This results from the fundamental doctrinal difference between Sarvāstivāda and Yogācāra. The former deems that all dharmas abide throughout time because each of them possess a distinct intrinsic nature. Therefore, the characteristic of the past cognition is capable of manifesting in the present as it is. However, the Yogācāra stance not only denies the essentiality of phenomena but also rejects the real existence of the three times, and, therefore, cannot explain memory in the same fashion as Sarvāstivāda. In Xu-
anzang’s refutation of those who insist on smṛti as always active, he rejects the idea that the hatred and greed arising now are due to their previous occurrences in the past. That is to say, the present mental state is contingent—it arises based on a complex process governed by the principle of cause and consequence, rather than being an identical repetition of previous dharmas. Because past events cannot reappear exactly as they were before, smṛti cannot be the past cause that brings about present recollection.

(2) Not the pinpoint of previous perceptual identification for subsequent recollection.

As stated in the CWSL, recollection of a learned object requires only the previous mind and mental factors or conceptualization. Namely, smṛti is not responsible for the perceptual identification of the previously learned object, nor is it responsible for subsequent recollection. However, the question arises: why are the previous mind and mental factors or conceptualization capable of performing these functions? The answer lies in the passage where the CWSL establishes the model of cognition within the framework of consciousness only. In this passage, one component is identified as the requirement for memorizing the previous mind and mental factors, namely, self-cognition (svasamvitti). The relationship between memory and self-cognition is already attested in Dignāga’s Pramāṇasamuccaya, where he considers memory as evidence to establish self-cognition.

According to Dignāga’s argument, each moment of cognition involves self-cognition capable of ensuring that the previously perceived object matches the later perceived one in terms of memory, owing to its reflective characteristic. Every moment of cognition is reflective because it involves two forms: the objective form and a self-cognition of that objective form. This enables every moment of cognition to be aware of the content of the cognitive object and also ensures coherence between the object in later recollection and the previous one (Kellner 2010, pp. 209–11). Following this claim, in the system of the CWSL, it is the reflective capacity of cognition—the self-cognition—that pinpoints the previous experience and securing the subsequent recollection.

(3) Not the retention of the past track.

Following this point, self-cognition alone cannot satisfy all processes of memory, namely, the series of mental movements that remember the past object, retain it in the brain, and recall it when the present needs it. This process requires a system of eight forms of consciousness: in particular, the participation of ālayavijñāna. One of the reasons that allows the Yogācāra school to consider smṛti as a response only to specific objects is the seed theory. As modern science regards that memory is retained in the hippocampus for short-term memory and in the cerebral cortex for long-term memory, the Yogācāric assumes that the imprint of all actions has the potentiality to impact the future contingently. Potentialities, in this regard, are called the seeds. And seeds, because they can be analyzed as discrete causes for future events, are accounted as plural forms of a collection that look like they are stored in a place, metaphorically speaking, called ālayavijñāna. Memory is, actually, the manifestation of those stored seeds when they become mature. That is, ālayavijñāna together with the seeds, the retention of past information, serves the function of memory rather than smṛti. This is evident in the passage where the CWSL encounters the challenge of questioning the doctrine of no-self as it leads to the failure of psychological recollection. The justification is stated with the presupposition that every sentient being has a “fundamental consciousness that is homogeneous continuous contains the seeds of all dharmas” (Cook 1999, p. 15). And with such an assumption, what happened in the past forms a seed and collects in the ālayavijñāna, awaiting the mature timing to manifest.

Coming back to the definition of smṛti in the CWSL, there are several characteristics that we are sure about:

(1) Smṛti works on the present object when it is the learned object that was once perceived before.
(2) Smṛti is an intention that aims to enhance the memorization of the learned object.
(3) Smṛti supports the arising of concentration.
(4) Smṛti is absent when the object is never learned or could not be learned well in the past.
According to the definition in the CWSL, smṛti is the fixation of the mind on the learned object which brings the non-loss of that object to the mind. If this mental force of fixation happens recurrently, namely, if smṛti arises continuously together with learned objects that continuously appear and make the mind memorize, a state of concentration would be triggered. This tells us that smṛti, instead of functioning when one tries to put information in the mind, works only on the present object when the focused mind intends to remember the learned object again. This work of smṛti includes the awareness which notices that the present object was once learned and also the purpose to strengthen the impression of that object.

A stable fixation on a learned object is capable of causing deep absorption in such an object and leading to the attainment of knowledge. As stated in the definition of concentration, the mental factor that relies on the arising of smṛti,

What is concentration? [Concentration is] related to the examined object. Causing the mind to focus [on the object] without distraction is its nature. Giving support to knowledge is its activity. That means when examining the objects that are virtuous, defective, or neither virtuous nor defective on the basis of the concentration that causes the mind to focus [on the object] without distraction, “knowledge of penetration” (“prativedhajñāna, 決擇智”) is born.23

This is probably the most important activity that smṛti can bring about. With respect to epistemology, this function is a normal learning process that everyone must experience when trying to acquire a new skill. But, in terms of soteriology, the sequence of the mental continuum leads to the determined mind which helps one to make correct decisions without hesitation. Namely, one acquires the knowledge of penetration.

Based on the textual explanation in the CWSL and its theoretical background, memory as a retention of the past for future recollection relates to the maturation of the seed and the ālayavijñāna. However, smṛti relates to the moment one memorizes the past and reflects the mental strength to enhance the impression of the recalled object. According to the definition in the CWSL, the other important function of smṛti is to support the concentrated mind which brings the acquisition of knowledge that helps one to make correct decisions. The correct decision, as stated in Kuiji’s commentary, is to obtain “uncontaminated knowledge” (anāsravajñāna, 無漏智) and be able to judge in conformity with Buddhist teaching.24 That is to say, smṛti, besides being understood as the beginning moment of a succession of psychological actions from centering the mind on remembering a past event, concentrating on the content of memory, to determining an action accordingly, can also be the starting point for conducting a value judgment. Namely, as a mental process for firmly holding a certain view which one learned before, it unifies all thoughts based on such view, and makes determinations accordingly.

With a gap appearing between modern memory and smṛti, we should now go a bit deeper into which memory is understood to align with Buddhist thought. On the premise of the no-self doctrine, Buddhism sees every phenomenon as a coming together depending on the present condition.25 Therefore, memory, as a psychological phenomenon, appears contingently based on what the present moment needs. To be more precise, the nature of memory is not retained information which directly reflects the past moment and stays unchanged as it is in storage that holds spatial form. Instead, memory is a sense in which one feels like remembering the object which has been perceived previously. Namely, the occurrence of memory is a very present mental activity that brings the perception of the past along with current reality.26 The appearing and fading of memory, including the content recollected, follows the influence of the force of karma. Contingent on the various intentional actions of the illusional self, karmic retribution has a track that cannot be addressed27 with an unpredictable manifestation. Premised on this principle of cause and consequence, memory, as one form of karmic retribution, though is an effect of past deeds, does not have a direct reference to a certain past event. Furthermore, without a direct reference, a present memory, instead of representing the recollected object per se, is only a resemblance of it. That is to say, the information which is recalled now, although consid-
ered by the self as the same as at the moment when it was put in mind, is not identical to what manifested before.

That is to say, the modern conception of memory aligns more closely with the principles of karmic retribution, influenced by collective seeds and the ālayavijñāna, rather than the mental factors of smṛti, as it is an intentional action to intensify the memorization of a current object while recognizing its prior occurrence in one’s experience. Moreover, although memory relates more to the maturation of the seed it is not an identical process of the reproduction of the experienced object. Instead, it entails a form of recollection tailored to the current context necessitating remembrance.

6. Conclusions

On the basis of the no-self, the coherent experience of a mind is a stream of thoughts that is comprised of discrete mental factors which rise and fall momentarily. With those mental constituents that act sequentially, the cognitive operation could appear to be a whole psychological event. Smṛti which causes non-forgetting and non-loss in the mind is naturally related to the function of memory in scholarship.

However, smṛti as a crucial concept in both soteriological and epistemological contexts in Buddhism has brought a lot of attention in Abhidharmic debates. Focuses of those disputations lie in whether one agrees with the underlying basis of maintaining the past action since it might contradict Buddhist thought. For the Sarvāstivādin, experience in the past requires smṛti to pass on in every momentary rise and fall and, thus, should be omnipresent in every mind. For Yogācāra thought, which assumes a substratum consciousness that collects past deeds, smṛti does not need to be present in every cognitive moment. Instead of retention of information, smṛti works only on the present object when it was previously learned and brings the effect of remembrance.

In investigating the definition of smṛti and the description of memory in the CWSL, we can be sure of a few points. First of all, smṛti is not the past cause that remembers the object and brings it into present manifestation since smṛti, in Yogācāra thought, only works on the present object. Secondly, smṛti does not pinpoint the perceptual identification of the past object for subsequent recollection because it is the task of self-cognition. Third, smṛti is not the retention of the past track as Yogācāra assumes a ālayavijñāna which collects seeds. Disregarding the aforementioned interpretation of smṛti and examining the four elements outlined in its definition within the CWSL, leads me to conclude that smṛti functions as a cognitive faculty strengthening the imprint of recalled objects. It also serves as the inception point of a series of psychological actions for acquiring the knowledge of penetration, crucially aiding individuals in making accurate decisions.

Here, the understanding of smṛti, especially as delineated in the CWSL, differs slightly from the traditional Buddhist concept of memory. The latter is perceived as a dynamic phenomenon, encompassing a sense of recalling the past that depends on present circumstances and is influenced by the force of karma. Furthermore, smṛti clearly differs from the modern understanding of memory, which assumes a static repository of past events to be retrieved at a later time point. While modern memory may serve a similar function to ālayavijñāna by collecting past deeds for later manifestation, it does not align with smṛti, which focuses on enhancing the impression of the learned object in the present moment.

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Notes

1. The core teaching from the Buddha, the doctrine of the eightfold noble path, is addressed many times in the Sāvyukta Āgama (No. 28, 748, 749, and etc.). As to the contemplative method in the Satipatthāna Sutta, it is collected in the Majjhima Nikāya I 55 and the Dīgha Nikāya II 289. For Chinese tradition, it is collected in the Madhyama Āgama 98 and the Ekottara Āgama 12.1.

2. According to the Monier-Williams Sanskrit Dictionary, \( \sqrt{\text{smṛti}} \) means to remember, recollect, bear in mind, call to mind, etc.

3. One popular translation of the Sanskrit term \( \text{smṛti} \) or the Pāli term sati is mindfulness, especially in the context of modern psychological treatment, i.e., the “Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction” (MBSR), established by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Criticism against this understanding is established on the basis of etymological investigation and also the Abhidharma source. As Gethin (2011) and Dreyfus (2011) have argued, the meaning of \( \text{smṛti} \) relates to the retention of information instead of a non-judgmental present mind. Other than that, Anālayo (2016, 2017) suggests that a high capacity to memorize facilitates the cultivation of mindfulness and engenders liberation accordingly. See also Thānissaro (2012) and Levman (2017).


5. See T 1562, pp. 384b7–8.

6. One could find this definition of \( \text{smṛti} \) in Abhidharmakosabhāṣya edited by Pradhan (1967, pp. 22, 54).

7. For the description in Atīṭhasālinī, see Bapat and Vadekar (1942, pp. 99–100).

8. One could find this description in Dhammasaṃgāti. See Müller (1885, p. 232).


10. \( \text{smṛtikh kataṁā/yat samścute vastuṁ tatra tatra tadanugābhilapanā.} \) See Bhattacharya (1957, pp. 4–5, 60).

11. Sthiramati’s doctrinal position is stated in his commentary on Triṃśikā. See Buescher (2007, pp. 1–2, 74).

12. Xuanzang’s acceptance on “familiar object” from the Yogācārabhūmi can be found in his definition of \( \text{smṛti} \) in the CWSL. See T 1585, pp. 28b18–19.

13. See T 1585, p. 28b18-20: 云何為念? 於曾習境令心明記不忘為性, 定依為業。謂數憶持曾所受境令不忘失, 能引定故。

14. The notion of the existent or real in Sarvāstivāda tradition is discussed by Dhammajoti in his Sarvastivāda Abhidharma. As he states, “The most notable and representative view of the Sarvāstivādins is that what is real is what abides uniquely in its intrinsic nature: What is real is what has a svabhāva.” See Dhammajoti (2009, p. 65).

15. This explanation of memorizing is attributed to Vasumitra. See T 1545, pp. 57c23–27.


20. Experimental studies on memory have been found in scientific research from the 19th century, with the pioneer psychologist being Ebbinghaus. Proceeding from his comprehension of memory as a store of simple association, scholars have developed several forms of memory depending on different functions and characteristics of the act of recollection, including, long- and short-term memory, working memory, episodic memory, etc. Though having different focuses, those different forms of memory usually refer to cognitive representation that assumes a mental ability to encode and restore information that can be retrieved again. See (Roediger and Uner 2024), and also (Ranganath 2024).


25. By presenting challenges from (hypothetical) Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā opponents, Chadha shows that Abhidharmic Buddhism, coinciding with the no-self doctrine, considers memory to operate through the causal connection between individual moments of consciousness. Memory does not merely replicate the past; instead, it is a current cognitive process intertwined with past experiences through the causal continuity of dispositions or formations (samskaras). As she concluded, “The Buddhist is very clear that there is no re-manifestation of the past cognition in the present memory; all cognitions are momentary. Episodic memory does not require that the earlier cognition reappears at a later moment, only that the content of the cognition is passed to successive cognitions in the stream of consciousness.” See Chadha (2023, pp. 79–80).

26. Not conceptualizing Buddhist memory as a reconstruction of the past but a “remolding of the past for the purpose of the present” is also supported by Yao. See Yao (2008, p. 224).

27. Besides some simple moral values such as a bad deed triggers bad karmic retribution and vice versa.
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