

Article

Reconsidering the Relationship Between Sengzhao's *Things Do Not Shift* and the Doctrine of *Kṣaṇikavāda*—With a Reassessment of Whether His Thought Reflects Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* Doctrinal Affiliation

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Abstract

International scholars have frequently interpreted Sengzhao's 僧肇 *Things Do Not Shift* (*wubuyan-lun* 物不遷論, hereafter *TDNS*) as reflecting the doctrinal positions of the *Sarvāstivāda* or *Sautrāntika* schools. This paper argues that the core issue lies in the relationship between Sengzhao's concept of “not shifting” and *Kṣaṇikavāda* (the theory of momentary arising and ceasing). A genealogical examination reveals that this interpretive view originated during the Tang dynasty—particularly in Chengguan's 澄觀 citation of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (hereafter *AKBh*), which includes a dual-layered implication: both “not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda* (*cha'na shengmie buqian* 剎那生滅不遷)” and “not shifting based on *śūnyatā* (*xingkong buqian* 性空不遷)”. However, Chengguan did not make a conclusive judgment. This dual implication was already clearly distinguished by Yanshou 延壽 in the late Tang period. Yanshou pointed out that “not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*” presupposes the real existence of dharmic entities, whereas Sengzhao's view belongs to the *Mahāyāna* orientation of “not shifting based on *śūnyatā*”—thus marking a fundamental doctrinal distinction. In contrast, by the late Ming period, Zhencheng 鎮澄 misinterpreted Chengguan's argument out of context and reduced it to a heterodox doctrine of “not shifting based on the abide of inherent nature (*xingzhu buqian* 性住不遷)”. Later Ming masters such as Deqing 德清, Zhenjie 真界, and Huanyou 幻有 also emphasized the dual aspects in Chengguan's explanation and directly refuted Zhencheng's misreading. Therefore, the issue in equating Sengzhao's *TDNS* with “not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*” does not lie in the difference between “not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*” and “not shifting based on *śūnyatā*” as this distinction was acknowledged on both sides. Rather, the key lies in identifying the doctrinal basis of Sengzhao's argument: to which category does it properly belong? To answer this, the paper analyzes the conceptual structure of *TDNS* in contrast to the idea of “not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*”, and finds a fundamental divergence in their understanding of whether phenomena are subject to arising and ceasing. Sengzhao's notion of *TDNS* is not the same as the concept of “not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*”. It will then analyze the differences between the two in their understandings of substance and time, revealing a fundamental divergence in their perspectives on whether phenomena undergo arising and cessation. Sengzhao's concept in *TDNS* is not equivalent to the notion of “not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*”, nor are they congruent in terms of the consequent conceptions of entities, time, and the view of temporal flow that emerge from these respective frameworks.



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1. Introduction

Sengzhao 僧肇, a renowned Buddhist monk of the Eastern Jin Dynasty in China, was a disciple of Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什, the great master of Buddhist scripture translation. Sengzhao is widely recognized as a pivotal founder in the dissemination and development of the *Madhyamaka* school in China, and he is often regarded as the first Chinese thinker who could fully and accurately grasp the essence of Indian *Madhyamaka* philosophy; moreover, the ideas in *Sengzhao's treatises* (*Zhaolun* 肇論) have exerted a profound influence on later generations. However, among the five core treatises in *Zhaolun*, *Things Do Not Shift* (*wubujianlun* 物不遷論, hereafter *TDNS*)—which specifically explores “whether things are in flux and change”—has sparked continuous and intense academic debates since its inception. The controversy has always centered on whether the ideological essence of *TDNS* faithfully inherits the fundamentals of Indian *Madhyamaka* philosophy, yet there remains no fully unified conclusion to this day.

In the 1960s, (Robinson 1967, p. 154) questioned the extent of Sengzhao's alignment with Nāgārjuna's philosophy. After extensive analysis, Robinson concluded that, while Sengzhao did not adopt Nāgārjuna's model, his thought accurately interprets *Madhyamaka* theory. Nonetheless, (Liebenthal 1968, p. 53) argued that Sengzhao misunderstood Nāgārjuna. He further claimed that Nāgārjuna arrived at the conclusion that causes cannot produce effects based on their invariability, whereas Sengzhao mistakenly believed that Nāgārjuna intended to prove the invariability of causes.

The academic debate over whether Sengzhao's *TDNS* aligns with Indian *Madhyamaka* philosophy emerges as a result. Scholars who align with Sengzhao's perspectives and identify with *Madhyamaka* Buddhism emphasize his employment of a distinctively Chinese mode of thought, arguing that while this mode differs from Indian *Madhyamaka* philosophy, it does not undermine its correctness. Scholars such as Kantor (2008), Li and Dessein (2015), and Ho (2018) affirmed that Sengzhao accurately conveyed *Madhyamaka* thought but expressed it in a uniquely Chinese philosophical form.

Interestingly, there has emerged a scholarly tendency to interpret *TDNS* as aligned with “*Hīnayāna*” with this view primarily focusing on the *Sarvāstivāda* and *Sautrāntika* schools. For instance, (Yinshun 2003–2016, pp. 82–83) emphasized that if this treatise is not grounded in the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, it easily devolves into a *Sarvāstivāda* theory. Y. Luo (2001) further argued that these two, Sengzhao's perspective and the *Sarvāstivāda* theory, bear striking similarities. Even (Li 1989, pp. 188–89) interpreted “not shifting” as referring to the momentary arising and ceasing of phenomena across different temporal points, thereby drawing Sengzhao's thesis into *Kṣaṇikavāda*¹. However, this interpretation has faced criticism. For instance, (Liao 2006, p. 108) explicitly argued that Li's interpretation departs from *Madhyamaka* thought. Additionally, Liao questioned the idea that Sengzhao's perspective on momentariness originates from *Madhyamaka* doctrines, highlighting inconsistencies between this concept and the core structural principles of *Madhyamaka* as presented in Sengzhao's own works. Nevertheless, Goodman and Luo (2024) contends that under Kumārajīva's tutelage, Sengzhao likely engaged in comparative reflection between the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* and *Sarvāstivāda* doctrines. He suggests that Sengzhao's temporality in this treatise can be viewed as a development upon the *Sarvāstivāda* theory of time, yet with significant revisions and improvements in key respects. At the same time, many scholars have objected to the identification of Sengzhao's thesis with *Sarvāstivāda* thought. (Lv 1970, p. 103; Ren 1985, p. 477; Fang and Yu 1980, p. 30), for instance, argue that the treatise was explicitly aimed at refuting “*Hīnayāna*” doctrines. Drawing upon these perspectives, G. Luo (2013) proposed that Sengzhao ultimately steered the argument toward *Mahāyāna Madhyamaka* philosophy. Similarly, (Tang 2015, p. 206) and (Hong 2001, p. 436) interpreted the treatise as simultaneously deconstructing both the common man's delu-

sion attached to movement and the metaphysicians' attachment to stillness. Scholars such as (Dippmann 1997, p. 244) also argue that Sengzhao's critique of the School of Names (*mingjia* 名家) parallels Nāgārjuna's opposition to *Sarvāstivāda* doctrines during his time, highlighting that Sengzhao's treatise was crafted with specific polemical targets in mind.

The scholarly debates outlined above are deeply concerned with the doctrine of momentariness, and the divergence between the *Sarvāstivāda* and *Sautrāntika* schools is inextricably linked to broader controversies regarding the doctrinal positioning of the Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (hereafter *AKBh*)—two sets of issues both tied to the doctrine of momentariness. In order to address this issue, the meaning of “not shifting (*buqian* 不遷)” in the reception history of *TDNS*—particularly the interpretation of “not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*”—offers valuable insight into how the Chinese Buddhist tradition has understood and attempted to resolve this doctrinal tension about how to comprehend the connotation of “not shifting” in *TDNS*.

This paper contends that the widespread tendency among contemporary scholars to associate Sengzhao's thesis with the *Kṣaṇikavāda*—specifically, their interpretation of momentariness as propounded in “*Hīnayāna*” traditions such as *Sarvāstivāda* or *Sautrāntika*—has deep roots in a historical trajectory of interpretation within Chinese Buddhism, one that first took shape in the Tang and culminated in explicit debates during the late Ming.

This trajectory began with Chengguan 澄觀 in the Tang dynasty, whose interpretive strategy laid its foundational stones: by drawing parallels between Vasubandhu's *AKBh* and the conceptual framework of Sengzhao's treatises, and highlighting their affinities, he established an interpretive lens that linked Sengzhao to momentariness-oriented thought—thus planting the seeds for later controversies. This lens was further scrutinized and rearticulated by Yanshou 延壽 during the late Tang-early Song transition, before evolving into heated debates in the late Ming. A pivotal shift occurred here: Ming scholar-monk Zhencheng 鎮澄 reinterpreted *TDNS* as aligned with heterodox, non-Buddhist ontologies, redirecting the debate's focus toward reconciling the treatise with doctrines like “not shifting based on *śūnyatā*” or “*tathagatagarbha* (matrix of the *tathāgatas*)/*buddhadhātu* (buddha nature).” This redirection, while sidelining the treatise's relation to momentariness, inadvertently solidified a conceptual binary—“not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*” versus “not shifting based on *śūnyatā*”—that would later be reinscribed in modern scholarship.

Crucially, this historical lineage reveals two layers of connection to modern discussions: First, a historical link: contemporary scholars' emphasis on Sengzhao's purported ties to *Kṣaṇikavāda* echoes the Tang-Ming interpretive tradition's initial framing of this association, even if unconsciously. Second, a typological resonance: just as Ming debates pivoted on how to interpret Sengzhao's evidentiary basis (e.g., whether his arguments relied on momentariness or *śūnyatā*), modern scholarship similarly grapples with competing readings of his relationship to Indian *Madhyamaka*—mirroring the same tension between textual evidence and doctrinal alignment.

Against this backdrop, this study argues that such associations have obscured the distinctiveness of Sengzhao's thesis. Through a conceptual disentanglement of *TDNS* and *Kṣaṇikavāda*, it becomes clear that Sengzhao's “not shifting” is by no means reducible to “not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*.” Adopting a dual framework integrating reception-historical analysis (tracing the Tang-Ming trajectory) and textual-rational inquiry (scrutinizing Sengzhao's original arguments), this research clarifies that his thesis diverges fundamentally from the doctrine of momentary arising and ceasing.

2. Examining the Historical Origins and Controversies Regarding the Connection Between TDNS and Kṣaṇikavāda Thought Within the History of Its Reception in Chinese Buddhism

This section explores the historical origins and development of the theory of TDNS in relation to the view that TDNS represents Kṣaṇikavāda from the perspective of Chinese Buddhist history. I argue that this connection can be traced back to the Tang dynasty, when Chengguan cited the AKBh, which asserts the view that “things arise and cease in an instant without undergoing any movement or change,” to interpret TDNS.

Subsequently, significant divergences emerged in the understanding of Chengguan’s views. One renowned late Tang dynasty monk Yanshou, held that Chengguan’s emphasis lay in highlighting that Sengzhao’s TDNS conforms to Mahāyāna Buddhism. The other school, represented by Zhencheng of the late Ming dynasty, argued that what Chengguan identified as the doctrine of Kṣaṇikavāda belongs to “Hīnayāna”, which is still within the sphere of Buddhism; however, he put forward that Sengzhao’s TDNS is *tīrthika* (heterodox doctrine).

My research demonstrates that, when examined against the criticisms of Zhencheng by many eminent monks of the late Ming dynasty, it becomes evident that Zhencheng quoted Chengguan’s views selectively or took them out of context. Through such historical analysis, I believe that, at least from the perspective of Chinese Buddhist history, we can unravel the mystery surrounding the relationship between Sengzhao’s TDNS and the view that TDNS represents Kṣaṇikavāda.

2.1. Chengguan Cited the Kṣaṇikavāda Concept from the AKBh to Associate It with TDNS During the Tang Dynasty

The interpretation of the ideas in TDNS as aligned with Nikāya Buddhist thought has ancient roots. After Sengzhao’s death, TDNS became associated with the doctrines of the *Tattvasiddhi* School (*chengshi zong* 成實宗). This association is encapsulated in the saying, “Sengzhao’s philosophical thought is rooted in the *Tattvasiddhi* School’s doctrine of *paramārthasatya* (absolute truth) and the *Daśabhūmiśāstra* School’s (*dilun zong* 地論宗) ‘shared doctrine’ (*tongzong* 通宗)² teachings” (Sengzhao, p. 150b) during the Liang dynasty³.

However, TDNS was also regarded as the thought of the Kṣaṇikavāda, particularly in Chengguan’s *澄觀Further Interpretation on the Basis of the Annotation of the Buddhāvataṃsakasūtra* (*dafangguangfo huayanjing suishu yanyichao* 大方廣佛華嚴經隨疏演義鈔, here after FBAS). In this work, he addresses the issue of motion discussed in the AKBh, particularly in the section on the *Chapter on Karma* (*Karmanirdeśa*, *fenbie ye pin* 分別業品), which contrasts the views of the Sautrāntika schools concerning the physical acts of the body. The FBAS states the following:

Arising and ceasing occur without reaching other places, which aligns with the meaning of “not shifting.” However, affirming the existence of factors that undergo arising and ceasing is contrary to Mahāyāna theory. Mahāyāna Buddhism holds that factors are empty in inherent nature; from the perspective of emptiness, there is no truly existent thing that arises, nor is there any truly existent thing that ceases, so “shifting” is equivalent to “not shifting.” Thus, while the two views may seem similar, they are fundamentally different... I believe Master Sengzhao’s meaning is that, based on the inherent nature of factors, they can remain “not shifting,” which I think is consistent with Hīnayāna views. But later in Sengzhao’s treatise, it states, “Only from the ultimate truth can the concept of “not shifting” arise, while shift is only discussed from the *saṃvṛtisatya* (conventional truth).” This phrase shows that Sengzhao’s view of “not shifting” is expressed from the perspective of ultimate truth, without manifesting

the characteristics of ultimate reality. According to this interpretation, the previous statement about the inherent nature of things being unmoving could refer to the lack of shift in ultimate truth, which, of course, aligns with *Mahāyāna's* theory of the emptiness of nature. Therefore, I believe that Sengzhao's *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* (*buzhenkonglun* 不真空論) reveals the doctrine of the emptiness, while *TDNS* explains “not shifting” from the perspective of conventional truth 此生此滅不至余方，同不遷義。而有法體是生是滅，故非大乘。大乘之法，緣生無性，生即不生、滅即不滅，故遷即不遷。則其理懸隔……觀肇公意，既以物各性住而為不遷，則濫小乘無容從此轉至余方。下論云“故談真有不遷之稱，導物有流動之說。”此則以真諦為不遷，而不顯真諦之相。若但用於物各性住為真諦相，寧非性空無可遷也。不真空義方顯性空義，約俗諦為不遷耳。 (Chengguan, T36, p. 239b–c)

Chengguan interpreted *TDNS* as conveying two distinct meanings of “not shifting”: the first is from the *Nikāya* Buddhism perspective, which holds that all conditioned factors arise and cease momentarily, thereby lacking any shift or movement—thus termed “not shifting.” The second is from the *Mahāyāna* perspective of emptiness: considering that all factors are dependent and empty by nature, their arising and ceasing are illusory and untrue. Hence, shift and “not shifting” are not distinct and are thus considered “not shifting”. Chengguan first suggested that Sengzhao's treatise might not be *Mahāyāna*, but he did not specify which “*Hinayāna*” school. However, some scholars think that Chengguan referred to the *Sarvāstivāda* school or *Sautrāntika* school, particularly emphasizing the *Sarvāstivāda* concept of *svabhāva* (Lin 2019). But, a closer examination reveals that Chengguan's statement originates from the *AKBh* and is generally viewed as reflective of the *Kṣaṇikavāda* perspective by later Chinese Buddhist exegetes. In fact, the *AKBh* by Vasubandhu contains the following in *Chapter Four: Exposition of Action* (*Karmanirdeśa*):

According to another school, (the *Vātsīputrīyas*⁴) bodily informative action is displacement (*gati*), for [bodily informative action] takes place when there is movement [*prasyandamānas*; LVP: *iñjita?*], not when there is no movement.

The author answers: —No, because all conditioned factors are momentary (*kṣaṇika*)...

Indeed, every conditioned factor does not exist beyond the acquisition of its own being [*sarvaṃ hi saṃskṛtaṃ ātmaābhād ūrdhvaṃ na bhvati*]: it perishes at the place where it arises; it cannot go [*saṃkrānti*] from this place to another. Therefore, bodily informative action is not displacement. (de La Vallée Poussin et al. 2012, p. 1286) 有餘部說：動名身表，以身動時由業動故。為破此故，說非行動，以一切有為皆有剎那故……諸有為法才得自體，從此無間必滅歸無。若此處生即此處滅，無容從此轉至余方。 (Xuanzang T29, p. 67c)

The *Sammitīya* or *Vātsīputrīyas* school holds that movement constitutes a bodily action, as the physical manifestation of shift or movement is visible and represents action (*karma*, *ye* 業). However, this moving action does not occur in a momentary fashion, as Chengguan explained: “The mental and psychological factors in the *Sammitīya* school are momentary, but this moving physical form is not momentary” (T36, p. 239b). Conversely, Vasubandhu refuted *Sammitīya's* view by proposing that all conditioned factors perish in a moment, meaning that momentary arising and ceasing cannot generate what we understand as movement or shift. A factor that arises and ceases instantaneously cannot form a continuous action; hence, it cannot move from one location to another, nor can it travel from its point of origin to a destination.

Chengguan argued that Vasubandhu in *AKBh* affirms the existence of a real substance and emphasizes that this substance undergoes arising and ceasing. This is different from the *Mahāyāna* view of dependent origination, which holds that arising and ceasing are

illusory and unreal, with no truly existing substance that undergoes genuine arising and ceasing. Therefore, Chengguan believed that the concept of “not shifting” in *TDNS* might be similar with the *Exposition of Action* in *AKBh*, which concludes that conditioned factors, arising and ceasing momentarily, cannot produce movement, thus leading to the doctrine of “not shifting.”

2.2. Two Approaches to Interpreting Chengguan's Views: Yanshou's Judgment as *Mahāyāna* and Zhencheng's Classification as *Tīrthika*

The interpretation of *TDNS* through the lens of *Kṣaṇikavāda* thought gained some influence by the Tang dynasty, and it had already been challenged as early as the late Tang dynasty. The renowned monk Yanshou, in his *Records of the Source Mirror* (*zongjing lu* 宗鏡錄), offered a comprehensive response to Chengguan's suggestion that *TDNS* might align with the *Kṣaṇikavāda* notion of momentary arising and perishing without shift. Moreover, Yanshou referenced sections from Chengguan's *FBAS*, where Chengguan affirmed “not shifting” as an expression of emptiness. The text states the following:

The entity of temporal arising and ceasing movement or shift of factors lacks inherent nature; they do not actually reach the places they seem to occupy. It is precisely because of this absence of inherent nature that the factor of flow appears, though in reality, no actual shifting occurs. The flowing is merely an illusion, not the shift of an inherently existent entity. This is what Master Sengzhao meant when he said, “Although there is the appearance of flowing in rivers and streams, in truth, there is no actual flow.” ...Similarly, *Hīnayāna* Buddhist teachings assert that things arise and cease in every moment and cannot undergo real transformation from one place to another. However, they do not realize that things are fundamentally empty of true existence and that no genuine change occurs... If we say that something arises and ceases here without reaching there, this aligns with the concept of “not shifting.” However, if one assumes that an entity has a real, inherent existence and undergoes arising and ceasing or shift, this is not a view that *Mahāyāna* Buddhism can accept 是則前後互不相至，各無自性，只由如此，無知無性，方有流注，則不流而流也。肇公云：江河競注而不流。即其義也.....小乘亦說當處生滅，無容從此轉至余方，而不知無性緣起之義耳.....若此生此滅，不至余方，同不遷義。而有法體是生是滅，故非大乘。 (Yanshou, T48, p. 450c)

Yanshou validated that the *Kṣaṇikavāda* doctrine of momentary arising and ceasing, which suggests that factors do not transfer from one location to another, differs from the *Mahāyāna* concept of dependent origination and emptiness of inherent nature. The *Kṣaṇikavāda* emphasizes the real existence of dharmas and their arising and ceasing. Contrarily, Yanshou, following and quoting Chengguan's *FBAS*, affirmed *TDNS* as expounding the doctrine of “not shifting based on *śūnyatā*”. Furthermore, he interpreted Sengzhao's theory of “not shifting” as being based on the idea that flowing water lacks inherent nature. Given that it lacks inherent nature, not only does the flowing water itself lack true existence, but also the movement of the water is an illusion—a false movement. Therefore, while water appears to arise, it does not truly arise, and although it appears to flow, it does not truly flow. This illustrates the doctrine of emptiness, which negates all arising and ceasing factors, as well as the notion of coming and going. It asserts that in the realm of dharma, there is no true arising, ceasing, coming, or going. This is fundamentally different from the *Kṣaṇikavāda* emphasis on the real existence of dharmas undergoing arising and cessation.

Yanshou clarified Chengguan's expressions, and this clarification conforms to the ideological purport of Chengguan, because Chengguan even took a more concrete step

by employing *TDNS* to verify a verse from the *Garland Scripture* (*Huayan jing* 華嚴經, *Avatamsakasūtra*), in which the *bodhisattva* Jueshou 覺首 states the following:

Just as water in a river, rushing and flowing swiftly, each part unaware of the other, so too are all factors 譬如河中水，湍流競奔逝，各各不相知，諸法亦如是。 . (Śikṣānanda, T10, p. 66b)

However, this gave rise to significant controversy in later generations, most notably in the great debate over *TDNS* sparked by Zhencheng during the Ming dynasty. It should be clarified that Zhencheng's argument in this debate was based on a selective extraction and misrepresentation of Chengguan's ideas—Chengguan himself never explicitly questioned whether Sengzhao's treatise belonged to "*Hīnayāna*." Instead, what Chengguan actually noted was that the conceptual framework Sengzhao employed in his work shared some similarities with the theory of *Kṣaṇikavāda* elaborated in the *AKBh*, a core text of "*Hīnayāna*" thought, as he noted in his responses to Deqing 德清 and Daokai 道開:

There are only two possible interpretations: one is that conditioned factors perish in each moment and thus do not shift from one place to another; this is the correct *Hīnayāna* explanation. The second is that all things abide in their inherent nature, and what existed in the past does not undergo transformation. Because their nature remains fixed in the past, they do not shift; this is the eternalist view held by non-Buddhist schools (heretics) 然不出二義：一謂有為之法剎那滅，故不從此方遷至余方，此小乘正解也。二謂物各性住，昔物不化，性住於昔故不遷，此外道常見也。 . (Zhencheng, T54, p. 924b)

According to the Buddha's teachings, same as above two types of "Dharma seals": one is the principle of conditioned arising and ceasing. The scripture says, "Conditioned factors perish in each moment, so there is no possibility of shift from one place to another." This place is the previous moment, and that place is the subsequent moment. Since the previous moment perishes, it cannot reach the subsequent moment 據聖教有二說，不出二種法印：一因緣生滅義。經云：有為之法，剎那滅故。無容從此，遷至余方，夫此方前念也，余方後念也，是以前念滅故不至於後念也。 . (Zhencheng, T54, p. 923a)

Zhencheng, rather than fully adopting Chengguan's overall perspective, selectively drew on Chengguan's observation that Sengzhao's viewpoints bore similarities to the theory of *Kṣaṇikavāda*, arguing that "not shifting" could be explained through the doctrine of the momentary arising and perishing of factors. According to this view, a previous moment of thought perishes instantly, and once it has ceased, it cannot give rise to a subsequent moment. Therefore, the preceding moment does not shift or continue into the following moment. From this, Zhencheng concluded that no shift or connection exists between earlier and later moments, thus affirming the *Kṣaṇikavāda* concept that conditioned factors perish momentarily, without any movement or shift.

However, Zhencheng did not believe that the theory of "not shifting" in *TDNS* represented the *Kṣaṇikavāda* view. Instead, he categorized it as a *tīrthika* doctrine. Additionally, he argued that Sengzhao's theory was based on the concept of "abide of inherent nature (*xingzhu* 性住)", which affirms that this inherent nature does not perish. The difference between "not shifting" based on the unperishing inherent nature and *Kṣaṇikavāda*'s momentary arising and perishing of factors may appear slight but leads to vastly different conclusions. Thus, Zhencheng ultimately asserted that the *Kṣaṇikavāda* doctrine did not contradict the principle of emptiness, whereas the heterodox concept of "abide of inherent nature" in *TDNS* was contrary to the Buddha's teaching of emptiness. Therefore, he completely rejected *TDNS* as a doctrine of Buddhism.

Although Zhencheng criticized *TDNS* as a *tīrthika* view, his discussion, which stemmed from Chengguan's interpretation of *Kṣaṇīkavāda*, sparked a debate over the treatise. By the Ming dynasty, the idea that *TDNS* expressed the *Kṣaṇīkavāda* concept of momentary arising and perishing without movement had gained acceptance among some scholars. For instance, the Ming-era monk Wusi 無似 clearly stated in his postscript that “not shifting” has five meanings corresponding to the five teachings. He wrote the following:

There are five meanings of “not shifting”: (1) momentary arising and perishing, (2) emptiness of nature, (3) *Paramārthasatya* view, (4) unobstructed principle and factors, and (5) unobstructed factors and factors 據不遷義有五：曰剎那滅、曰性空、曰即真、曰事理無礙、曰事事無礙。 (Daoheng, X54, p. 911a)

The existence of these five interpretations first attests to the fact that multiple understandings of “not shifting” were already prevalent in the intellectual context of the time. Among these competing interpretations, the first one—“momentary arising and perishing”—exemplifies the influence of the *Kṣaṇīkavāda* framework. This further demonstrates that the *Kṣaṇīkavāda*-based interpretation of the *TDNS* had a far-reaching impact on how “not shifting” was conceptualized in this period. As noted, Wusi also explicitly engaged with the “emptiness of nature” interpretation of “not shifting”—a detail that further confirms the coexistence of diverse, influential readings of this concept, with *Kṣaṇīkavāda* being one of the prominent among them.

2.3. Criticisms by Various Monks of the Late Ming Period on Zhencheng's Interpretations

In addition to Yanshou, many eminent monks of the Ming period also stood in support of Sengzhao's *TDNS* as it integrates the *Mahāyāna* doctrine of emptiness, and they responded to Zhencheng's interpretations (Liu et al. 2020; Jiang 2006, pp. 338–71). They highlighted the two layers of meaning in Chengguan's *FBAS* critiquing Zhencheng for misinterpreting Chengguan's intent. Additionally, they addressed the subtle differences between the *Kṣaṇīkavāda* concept of momentary arising and ceasing, and Sengzhao's theory of “not shifting” grounded in the emptiness of inherent nature. For instance, Deqing examined how Zhencheng selectively quoted Chengguan, criticizing him for focusing solely on one interpretation while neglecting the second, which Chengguan considered crucial: connecting the doctrine of “not shifting” to the *Mahāyāna* teaching of emptiness of factors.

In Chengguan's writings, there appear to be two layers of meaning, and his statement that “this seems like the thought of *Hīnayāna* Buddhism” is evidently pointing toward *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. That is, factors are empty of inherent nature; thus, no real arising or perishing occurs. On a deeper level, the apparent flow and change of things and their “not shifting” are consistent with one another. If I were to restore Chengguan's original intent, then I believe that he was concerned that readers might, at this point, mistakenly adopt the *Hīnayāna* view of real arising and ceasing of factors. Hence, he employed this phrasing to guide readers toward understanding the deeper meaning. While Chengguan's writings only cite examples from *Hīnayāna*, when we examine the context, it becomes clear that there is ultimately no *Mahāyāna* theoretical example presented. Chengguan, however, concludes by affirming that Sengzhao's treatise addresses “not shifting” from the perspective of conventional truth. From a textual standpoint, it is evident that “not shifting” here encompasses both *Mahāyāna* and *Hīnayāna* interpretations. The text is simply somewhat obscure in its wording 然清涼疏中自有二意，且云：“顯文似同小乘”云云，其實意在大乘，生即不生，滅即不滅，遷即不遷。原清涼意，正恐後人見此論文，便墮小乘生滅遷流之見，故特揭此，表而出之，欲令人人深識論旨，玄悟不遷之妙耳。然鈔文但舉小乘，

一意辨之，未竟大乘之說，但結文，“此約俗諦為不遷耳”一語，義則長短相形，但文稍晦耳！. (Deqing, X73, p. 549a)

Deqing affirmed that, while Chengguan’s *FBAS* elaborates extensively on the argument of “not shifting” as being related to the *Kṣāṇikavāda* doctrine of momentary arising and ceasing without shift, his statements on the second viewpoint are notably brief. Nonetheless, Deqing argued that the unequal length of these discussions does not affect the equal validity of the two interpretations in terms of doctrinal significance. Deqing also verified that Chengguan’s detailed explanation of the former was intended as a caution readers, warning them against adopting the *Kṣāṇikavāda* position of momentary arising and ceasing without shift.

Alongside Deqing, monks such as Zhenjie 真界 and Huanyou 幻有 highlighted Zhencheng’s misunderstanding of Chengguan’s work. Huanyou even directly criticized Zhencheng for taking Chengguan’s words out of context, stating, “He [Zhencheng] did not base his interpretation on Master Sengzhao’s true intent regarding the “not shifting” of factors. Instead, he took provisional statements from the treatise as final conclusions. How could this not be a mistake?” (Huanyou, L153, p. 645b). Zhenjie, in his *Defense of TDNS* (*Wubuyanlun Bianjie* 物不遷論辯解), also affirmed that Chengguan’s view encompassed two distinct meanings and provided further clarification on Chengguan’s secondary interpretation.

Considering that Chengguan’s writings contain two meanings, it certainly cannot be affirmed that Chengguan considered Sengzhao’s views to be merely *Hīnayāna*... Moreover, in Chengguan’s works, it is stated: If “abide of inherent nature” is the manifestation of the ultimate truth, isn’t this the “not shifting” based on emptiness? This suggests that the ultimate truth is formless, having eradicated all characteristics of factors. Since “abide of inherent nature” is taken as the form of the ultimate truth, isn’t this speaking from the perspective of the ultimate truth, where factors have no inherent nature? 然疏鈔既云含有二意，則不獨小乘矣.....又云：“若但用於物各性住為真諦相，寧非性空無可遷者”，蓋真諦則泯一切法也，既以物各性住為真諦相，豈非是以無物無住而為真諦不遷者哉！. (Zhenjie, X54, p. 928b)

Zhenjie believed that Chengguan ultimately shifted the meaning of “not shifting” from the *Kṣāṇikavāda* school’s doctrine of momentary arising and ceasing toward the *Mahāyāna* concept of emptiness, wherein “not shifting” refers to the inherent emptiness of factors. The key to this shift lies in taking “abide of inherent nature” as the manifestation of the ultimate truth. Moreover, Zhenjie argued that the ultimate truth, being beyond all appearances, obliterates the characteristics of all dharmas. Thus, at the level of ultimate truth, all dharmas are unborn. Given that they are unborn, they cannot cease; therefore, there is no transformation or shift, which is called “not shifting.” From the perspective of ultimate reality, both shifting and not shifting are merely illusory manifestations arising due to conditions, fundamentally pure and nonexistent. Sengzhao’s concept of “abide of inherent nature” was a countermeasure to the doctrine of emptiness, but both emptiness and abide are merely “skillful means” (*upāyakauśalya*, *fangbian-shanqiao* 方便善巧). Emptiness holds nothing to be emptied, and abiding has nothing in which to abide. Hence, the so-called term “abide” in “abide of inherent nature” refers to “skillful means”, there is actually no real entity to abide in, as expounded in Master Huanyou regarding the nature of emptiness: “abiding for a lifetime is itself abiding in nonabiding” (Huanyou, L153, p. 673a).

Huanyou further highlighted that the *Kṣāṇikavāda* school’s view of all conditioned factors as momentarily arising and ceasing without shift emphasizes that “arising and ceasing are one single factor” (Huanyou, L153, p. 672b)—that is, the arising and ceasing are aspects of the same factor. Moreover, he highlighted that Sengzhao’s *TDNS* never suggests that

things remain abided in one location. Sengzhao merely stated that “each thing abides in its inherent nature” (*wu ge xingzhu* 物各性住), without mentioning the cessation of things, thereby distinguishing his view from that of the *Kṣaṇikavāda*. Huanyou’s interpretation clarifies the distinction between “not shifting” in Sengzhao’s treatise and *Kṣaṇikavāda*’s momentary arising and ceasing.

Nevertheless, Huanyou emphasized the importance of “skillful means” in adapting teachings to the capacities of different audiences. He argued, “When Master Sengzhao spoke of the abiding of each factors’ nature, it was in response to those who were attached to the concept of emptiness and the arising and ceasing of factors” (Huanyou, L153, p. 673b). Sengzhao’s teaching of “not shifting” in *TDNS* was addressed to those fixated on emptiness. However, Chengguan responded to the *Avatamsakasūtra* from the verse in which Jueshou bodhisattva answered Mañjuśrī bodhisattva’s verse, “likening the water in a river to flowing swiftly in torrents” (Huanyou, L153, p. 641b). He correlated Sengzhao’s verse on “not shifting” with Jueshou’s verse on flowing water, extending this connection to both the *Mahāyāna* concept of “not shifting” and *Kṣaṇikavāda*’s momentary arising and ceasing, each tailored to specific audiences. Nevertheless, many such teachings, Huanyou noted, are merely medicine for the disease. He lamented that scholars like Zhencheng had “mistakenly clung to the medicine and turned it into a bias,” (Huanyou, L153, p. 646a) solidifying these therapeutic “skillful means” into rigid beliefs. This misinterpretation transformed what was intended as a provisional method for dispelling illusions into a rigid doctrine, overlooking the fact that the original intent was to counter attachment rather than to establish a definitive philosophical position.

After tracing the reception history of Sengzhao’s *TDNS* in relation to the theory of “not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*,” it becomes evident that the historical Chinese Buddhist controversy did not center on the doctrinal distinction between these two frameworks. Rather, the key issue lay in whether Sengzhao’s argumentation in the *TDNS* surreptitiously or implicitly relied upon the *AKBh* of Vasubandhu, specifically the *AKBh*’s account of “not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*.” This distinction—between “not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*” and “not shifting based on *śūnyatā*”—was acknowledged and accepted by Zhencheng and his critics in the debate. The crux of the matter, therefore, concerns whether Sengzhao’s reasoning presupposes, borrows from, or tacitly employs the epistemological and ontological assumptions underlying Vasubandhu’s interpretation of momentariness.

3. A Comparative Study of the Similarities and Differences Between Sengzhao’s *TDNS* and Vasubandhu’s *AKBh*

The foregoing historical reconstruction offers not only an account of a doctrinal dispute within the Chinese Buddhist tradition, but also reveals an interpretive strategy by which that tradition sought to resolve the tension. Nevertheless, resolving this issue definitively requires further comparative analysis. Accordingly, this section begins by comparing the structure of Sengzhao’s argument in the *TDNS* with the conceptual contours of “not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*.” It then proceeds to contrast the *AKBh*’s metaphysical commitment to entity and its theory of temporal flow with Sengzhao’s theory of “abide of inherent nature” and his account of worldly transformation. This comparative study will demonstrate the profound divergence between the two, showing that Sengzhao’s argumentation in the *TDNS* is not grounded in the framework of Vasubandhu’s *AKBh* or in the logic of “not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*.”

3.1. A Comparison of *TDNS* and the *AKBh*’s Doctrine of *Kṣaṇikavāda*

The doctrine of the momentary arising and ceasing in Vasubandhu’s *AKBh* is focused on conditioned dharmas (Xuanzang T29, p. 105), is based on two fundamental premises:

the nature of conditioned dharmas (*samskr̥ta*) and their instantaneous arising (*jāti*, *sheng* 生) and ceasing (*vyaya*, *mie* 滅). In terms of conditioned dharmas, Sengzhao's *TDNS* presents his view in response to the common-sense notion of the flux of factors. His discussions on the movement of time from past to present and the coming and going of factors clearly fall within the scope of conditioned dharmas. Hence, both Sengzhao and the *Sarvāstivāda* engage with the topic of conditioned dharmas.

With regard to momentary arising and ceasing, *TDNS* also addresses this notion, but Sengzhao's approach is markedly different: he presents himself as critiquing and refuting the view of momentary arising and ceasing held by his opponents. Huanyou stated: "Since it has never been said that things are fixed and abide in one place, how can it be said that it is the excessive *Hīnayāna* view of momentary arising and ceasing, which does not allow transfer from here to other places, and that there is a dharma entity with arising and ceasing as a single dharma? 既未嘗言物偏死住於一處者，則何所謂是濫小乘此生此滅，無容從此轉至餘方，而有法體是生是滅為一法乎？ (L153, p. 673b)" From this Huanyou elucidated that the *Kṣāṇikavāda* emphasizes the instantaneous arising and ceasing of a single dharma, while Sengzhao did not explicitly discuss the arising and ceasing of a single dharma. Instead, he referred to the dharma's abiding without mentioning their cessation.

However, Zhencheng offered a completely opposite view:

Master Sengzhao sought to establish the existence of things in the past. He asserted, "In the past, one could grasp it, but in the present, it cannot be grasped." With this, Sengzhao indicated that things existed in the past but no longer exist in the present. In this way, he is illustrating the principle of impermanence rather than supporting the concept of "not shifting" ... Therefore, the fact that something existed in the past but no longer does in the present not only fails to achieve the goal of demonstrating "not shifting" but also proves the opposite: the doctrine of impermanence 肇公求向物，既曰“於向未嘗無，於今未嘗有”，是則此物向有而今無也。若物向有今無，是無常法，非不遷也……是則向有今無，不直不成不遷之宗，反成所遣遷滅宗也。 (Zhencheng, X54, pp. 913c–914a)

Zhencheng argued that Sengzhao's method of distinguishing between the past and the present in his discussion of "what was once present is now absent" (*xiangyou jinwu* 向有今無) aligns with the Buddhist concept of impermanence (*anityatā*, *wuchang* 無常), which appears to support Sengzhao's mention of extinction. Furthermore, Sengzhao presented the view that "what was once absent is now present" (*xiangwu jinyou* 向無今有), suggesting a notion of arising and implying that Sengzhao may have endorsed the doctrine of arising and ceasing. Nonetheless, the phrases "what was once present is now absent" and "what was once absent is now present" in Sengzhao's treatise do not aim to discuss the problem of arising and ceasing. Instead, Sengzhao used these expressions to demonstrate that things from the past do not move into the present, thereby proving the principles of "no coming" and "no going." As Sengzhao directly stated, "They are never existent in the present, so we understand that things do not come. Because they are never inexistent in the past, we know that things do not depart" (Robinson 1967, p. 229; Sengzhao, T45, p. 151b).

Thus, the disagreement between Sengzhao and Zhencheng centers on whether the phrases "what was once present is now absent" and "what was once absent is now present" serve to affirm the doctrine of impermanence. At the very beginning of *TDNS*, Sengzhao wrote:

What people mean by motion is that because past things do not reach the present they move and are not still. What I mean by stillness is that because past things do not reach the present they are still and do not move. [Others think that] in moving they are not still, because they do not come. [I think that] being

still they do not move, because they do not depart. (Robinson 1967, p. 229)
夫人之所謂動者，以昔物不至今，故曰動而非靜。我之所謂靜者，亦以昔物不至今，故曰靜而非動。動而非靜，以其不來；靜而非動，以其不去。(Sengzhao, T45, p. 151a)

This clearly illustrates that Zhencheng's interpretation, which assumes an arising and ceasing process marked by continuous change and motion, is based on the perspective held by Sengzhao's opponents in the debate. In ordinary terms, the statements "what was once present is now absent" and "what was once absent is now present" can be seen as indicators of impermanence. However, this understanding relies on the assumption that things from the past have flowed into the present, thereby forming the idea that something that existed in the past has now ceased or that something that did not exist in the past has now come into being. However, Sengzhao rejected the notion of any temporal flow between the past and the present. Zhencheng's view essentially conflates his own acceptance of the theory of the continuous transformation of the three times (past, present, and future) with Sengzhao's argument, thereby distorting Sengzhao's position.

Sengzhao explicitly stated that his theory of "not shifting" was formulated in opposition to the idea that real entities undergo arising and ceasing. He argued that the statements "what was once present is now absent" and "what was once absent is now present" do not represent changes occurring between the past and the present; instead, they demonstrate that things abide separately in their respective temporal contexts. Thus, Sengzhao concluded that, while the factors observed are the same, the conclusions drawn from them are entirely different. How could one determine correctness merely by aligning with conventional views or judging by opposing them?

Sengzhao did not simply oppose the view of arising, ceasing, and changing; he precisely formulated his theory of "not shifting" to refute his opponents who upheld this view. His intention was to dissolve the duality of change and constancy, leading to a deeper understanding of the nonduality between movement and stillness. As Sengzhao stated in *TDNS*:

So, is it any wonder that the cosmic cyclone while toppling the mountains is forever still, that the Yangtzu and the Yellow River while surging down do not flow, that the 'wild horses' (spring vapors) while billowing and beating do not move, that the sun and moon while transiting the heavens do not circle...So, the four seasons rush past like the wind and the Great Bear revolves like lightning. If you understand the subtle points of this idea, then however they speed, they do not revolve. (Robinson 1967, p. 230) 然則旋嵐偃岳而常靜，江河競注而不流，野馬飄鼓而不動，日月曆天而不周.....然則四象風馳、璇璣電卷，得意毫微，雖速而不轉。(Sengzhao, T45, p.151a)

These metaphors (e.g., "the cosmic cyclone while toppling the mountains") are all manifestations of arising and ceasing, representing ceaseless change. However, Sengzhao perceived these factors as rapid yet unmoving, embodying the unity of movement and stillness, as well as arising and ceasing. Therefore, in *TDNS*, Sengzhao did not engage in a discussion about the rising and ceasing of things, nor did he acknowledge any continuous transformation of things across time. He neither one-sidedly denied the movement and transformation of things, nor did he fully accept the idea of their static, unchanging nature. Instead, he aimed to dissolve the dualism of movement and stillness, as well as arising and ceasing, thus transcending all dichotomies of action and cessation. This position clearly diverged from the *AKBh*'s doctrine of *Kṣaṇīkavāda*.

3.2. A Comparison Between the Doctrine of TDNS and the AKBh's Affirmation Factors Existing as Real Entities

To begin, it is crucial to clarify the relationship between AKBh's affirmation of the real existence (*shiyou* 實有, *asti*) of dharmas and the momentariness of conditioned factors. A famous example from the AKBh is the doctrine of "a dharma exists across all three temporal dimensions", While the *Sarvāstivāda* school itself underwent developments and changes (Dhammajoti 2009, pp. 55–60), with varying views on "all exists" (*yiqieyou* 一切有, *sarvāsti*)⁵ and the "a dharma exists across all three temporal dimensions"⁶ throughout history for the purposes of understanding the reception of TDNS, we can observe that from Chengguan to the Ming dynasty, scholars discussing this treatise have consistently relied on the interpretive tradition of Vasubandhu's AKBh.⁷ The text states the following:

The *Sarvāstivādins* are of four kinds according to whether they are advocates of (1) the difference in mode of existence [*bhāvānyathika*], (2) the difference in characteristic [*lakṣaṇānyathika*], (3) the difference of state [*avasthānyathika*], (4) the difference in (temporal) relativity [*anyathānyathika*]. The third is the best: the three time periods are established due to activity [*kāritra*]. (de La Vallée Poussin et al. 2012, p. 1699)

These four distinctions correspond to the four interpretations of the theory of the three times.

- i. *Bhāvānyathika* (mode distinction): The venerable Dharmatrāta 法救 emphasized that the arising and ceasing of factors are merely changes in their mode (*lei* 類, *bhāva*), while the nature of real entity (*dravya*) remains unchanged. This is similar to how the shape of a gold object may change, but its nature as gold does not, or how milk transforms into curd through changes in flavor and texture, while its fundamental visible qualities remain the same.
- ii. *Lakṣaṇānyathika* (characteristic distinction): The venerable Ghosaka 妙音 argued that the past, present, and future differ only in terms of their characteristics (*lakṣaṇa*). The presence of a phenomenon in one of the three times does not imply its complete disconnection from the other two. This is like a person's attachment to a particular woman—while their affection is focused on one, it does not preclude the possibility of attachment to others.
- iii. *Avasthānyathika* (state distinction): The venerable Vasumitra 世友 affirmed that the dharmas of the three times are like counting rods, which may bear distinct names based on their position or state (*avasthā*) but whose nature remains unchanged across all positions.
- iv. *Anyathānyathika* (relativity distinction): The venerable Buddhadeva 覺天 suggested that the three times are like a woman who can be a mother in relation to her daughter and a daughter in relation to her mother. These relationships are interdependent and can shift, yet the woman's fundamental identity remains unchanged.

These four interpretations—mode, characteristic, state, and relativity distinction—affirm the continuous arising and ceasing of factors. As conditions change, the modes of existence (*bhāva*) vary, but these changes are understood as differences in mode, characteristic, state, or relation, rather than alterations to the underlying nature (*svabhāva*) or real entity (*dravya*) of the dharma itself. Thus, Vasubandhu criticized the view of the real existence of the past and future advocated in various schools of thought, and proposed that the past and future "exist merely in accordance with the two natures of once-happened causality and to-be-happened causality, rather than having a substantial reality in themselves. 但據曾當因果二性，非體實有 (Xuanzang, T29, p. 105b)." However, whether it is the four aforementioned views—holding that dharma subsist across the three temporal dimensions (past, present, future)—or Vasubandhu's position, whereas the latter argues that dharma exists only in the present, the past amounts to

nothing more than what “existed once,” and the future is the necessary consequence grounded in causality, all these perspectives at the very least concur in affirming the existence of dharma in the present and acknowledge that dharma undergoes real, actual change.

The *TDNS* is commonly misunderstood as positing a substantive reality that undergoes changes in its active forms. While Sengzhao’s target of critique can be considered the flux of transformation, the theories he dismantled are frequently interpreted as affirmations of a substantial and unchanging entity. This misunderstanding is exemplified in Zhencheng’s critique of Sengzhao as adhering to a fixed reality from an externalist viewpoint.

Nonetheless, Sengzhao did not argue from the perspective of affirming an unchanging entity; rather, he refuted the notion of transformation through the lens of “not shifting.” Sengzhao did not seek to establish himself firmly within either the realm of movement or that of stillness. Consequently, he neither unconditionally affirmed the dynamic transformations of forms nor did he uphold the idea of a “not shifting” reality. As Sengzhao articulated:

Therefore, when he says “depart,” it is not necessarily “depart” — it stops people’s ideas of permanence. When he says “stay,” it is not necessarily “stay” — it dismisses what men think of as passing. He does not mean that in departing [a thing] can leave, or that in staying a thing can remain. (Robinson 1967, p. 230)
是以言去不必去，閒人之常想；稱住不必住，釋人之所謂住耳。豈曰去而可遣、住而可留也。(Sengzhao, T45. P.151b)

Both perspectives arise conditionally and serve as “skillful means” suited to specific contexts; adhering to either viewpoint fails to accurately capture the true nature of things. Ultimately, Sengzhao illustrated the inconceivable nature of reality through expressions like “the cosmic cyclone while toppling the mountains is forever still.” This portrayal embodies both movement and stillness. This notion not only refutes the idea of dynamic flux but also dispels the notion of static immutability. While it is possible to refer to this ultimate reality as “not shifting,” it should not be conflated with *AKBh*’s view of a substantial entity that remains fixed while exhibiting change.

As Deqing emphasized in *A Brief Annotation of Zhaolun* (*Zhaolun lvezhu*肇论略注), “Thus, in the discussion of the proposition *TDNS*, it is not to be interpreted as implying that the phenomenal aspects of things flow and change while their essence remains unchanged. Instead, things themselves are ‘not shifting,’ and such an understanding of ‘not shifting’ constitutes the thatness (*tattva*).” (Deqing, X54, p.335b). Sengzhao’s work should not be interpreted as endorsing a perspective that affirms both “not shifting” and “shifting”. Conversely, it seeks to negate both dynamic transformation and static permanence while simultaneously expressing this inconceivable reality of things through the interplay of movement and stillness. In this respect, the so-called substantive reality remains within the realm of existence and nonexistence, fundamentally different from Sengzhao’s notion of “not shifting” based on thatness.

3.3. A Comparison of *TDNS* with the *AKBh*’s Concept of Time and Its Flow

The most significant connection between Sengzhao’s *TDNS* and the *AKBh*’s theory of time lies in its expression of the concept of temporal flow, suggesting that time moves from the future to the present and then to the past. The foundation of the *AKBh*’s concept of the three times rests on conditional activities that arise from dependent origination, as illustrated by the following statement:

The conditioned factor which has not arisen is called future; that which, having arisen, is not destroyed, is called present; that which is destroyed, is called past. (de La Vallée Poussin et al. 2012, p. 1703) 有為法未已生名未來，若已生未已滅名現在，若已滅名過去。(Xuanzang, T29, p. 105a)

In summary, the future encompasses what has not yet arisen, the present includes what has arisen and is currently active, and the past refers to what has ceased. This understanding resembles an “atomic”⁸ interpretation that spatially (Shiga 2018, pp. 437–54) divides time into past, present, and future. Once the concept of time is established, it is widely understood that the *AKBh* defines the direction of temporal flow as moving from the future to the present and then to the past, contrary to the common view of time flowing from the present into the future. As Vasubandhu quoted from Dharmatrāta, “a future factor passes from the future into the present...it passes from the present into the past. (de La Vallée Poussin et al. 2012, p. 1699; Xuanzang, T29, p. 104c)

Interestingly, *TDNS* adopts this notion of temporal flow, with phrases like the following:

This means that past things occupy the past of themselves, and do not reach the past from the present. (Robinson 1967, p. 229) 是謂昔物自在昔，不從今以至昔。 (Sengzhao, T45, p. 151b)

But when those who rely on the letters hear about not shifting they think that past things do not reach the present. When they hear about moving and flowing, they think that present things can reach the past. (Robinson 1967, p. 231) 而徵文者聞不遷，則謂昔物不至今；聆流動者，而謂今物可至昔。 (Sengzhao, T45, p. 151c)

Here, time is viewed as flowing from the present to the past. Sengzhao’s use of this atomic division and concept of temporal flow seems to diverge from Nāgārjuna’s approach in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, where time is integrated with factors, effectively separating the material existence of time from the motion of material things (Hong 2001, p. 415). However, Sengzhao critiqued the notion of temporal flow from the future to the present in statements like “This means that past things occupy the past of themselves and do not reach the past from the present,” directly opposing the idea of factors moving from the past to the present.

Moreover, Sengzhao explicitly addressed this issue in his *Commentary on the Vimalakīrtisūtra* (zhu weimojiejing 註維摩詰經, here after CVKS).

Sengzhao stated: “If factors remain constant, then there will be movement from the future to the present and from the present to the past, which would allow for the arising and ceasing of factors. Since factors do not remain constant, they do not arise and cease” 肇曰：法若常住，則從未來到現在、從現在到過去，法遷三世則有去來也。以法不常住，故法無去來也。 (Sengzhao, T38, p.347a)

Sengzhao argued that if factors were permanent, then it would indeed follow that they could exist continuously from the future through the present and into the past, pointing directly to the view of momentary arising and ceasing while maintaining a permanent entity. By asserting that factors are impermanent and do not arise and cease, he directly critiqued *Kṣaṇikavāda*’s perspective.

This critique of the time flow is also evident in the CVKS, where Sengzhao employed a *reductio ad absurdum* argument similar to Nāgārjuna’s to challenge the errors of the three times’ concept of arising and ceasing:

Sengzhao stated: “By analyzing the three times, it is clear that there is no arising. Past factors have ceased, and what has ceased cannot be called arising” 肇曰：別推三世明無生也。過去生已滅，已滅法不可謂之生也。 (Sengzhao, T38, p. 361b)

Sengzhao stated: “If current factors flow rapidly and do not abide, what can be considered arising? If arising and ceasing occur simultaneously, then both aspects would perish. If they occur at different times, then during the time of

arising there is no ceasing. If there is no ceasing during the time of arising, then factors lack the three characteristics; if factors lack the three characteristics, they are not conditioned. If all three characteristics are present, it leads to infinite problems. This concept of nonarising is fully supported in various texts. If the three times lack arising, how can there be any remembrance?" 肇曰：現法流速不住，以何為生耶？若生滅一時，則二相俱壞。若生滅異時，則生時無滅。生時無滅則法無三相，法無三相則非有為也。若盡有三相，則有無窮之咎。此無生之說，亦備之諸論矣。三世既無生，於何而得記乎？. (Sengzhao, T38, p. 361b)

By addressing the errors related to arising across the three times—unarise, arising, and ceased—and refuting the mistakes concerning the arising and ceasing of factors occurring simultaneously or at different times, Sengzhao directly engaged with Nāgārjuna's reductio ad absurdum argument regarding the characteristics of arising, abiding, and ceasing (Garfield, p.18, Kumārajīva, T30, p.9b). This reflects Sengzhao's critique of the notions of arising and passing away in his work *TDNS*, highlighting the absence of coming and going and the noncommunication between the past and the present. Although Sengzhao drew on the concept of temporal flow, he ultimately applied it to dismantle the arguments for temporal change and the coming and going of factors.

4. Conclusions

It can thus be seen that the phenomenon of conflating Sengzhao's thought in *TDNS* with "not shifting based on *Kṣaṇīkavāda*" originated in the Tang period. In particular, Chengguan's citations of Vasubandhu's *AKBh* contained the dual connotations of "not shifting based on *Kṣaṇīkavāda*" and "not shifting based on *śūnyatā*", without drawing a definitive conclusion. By the late Ming period, Zhencheng, however, quoted out of context and misinterpreted Chengguan's views, branding *TDNS* as the heterodox thought of *tīrthika*.

In fact, the dual connotations in Chengguan's interpretation had already been distinguished and emphasized by Yanshou in the late Tang and early Song dynasties. Yanshou pointed out that "not shifting based on *Kṣaṇīkavāda*" presupposes the real existence of dharma-entities, whereas Sengzhao's theory pertains to the *Mahāyāna* purport of "the fundamental non-arising of all dharmas," and that these two are fundamentally distinct. Late Ming eminent monks such as Deqing, Zhenjie, and Huanyou also emphasized the duality of Chengguan's interpretation and refuted Zhencheng's misreading.

Therefore, the key issue in the equation of Sengzhao's *TDNS* with "not shifting based on *Kṣaṇīkavāda*" does not lie in the difference between "not shifting based on *Kṣaṇīkavāda*" and "not shifting based on *śūnyatā*," since both Zhencheng and his critics in the debate acknowledge such a distinction. Rather, the question is: to which category does Sengzhao's argumentative basis belong?

To address this, this paper compares the arguments in *TDNS* with the concept of "not shifting based on *Kṣaṇīkavāda*," as well as the similar concepts of entity and temporal flux found in *TDNS* and *AKBh*. It ultimately concludes that there exist fundamental differences in their basic understandings regarding whether things truly exist, whether things truly arise and perish, and whether there is a flow of time. Sengzhao's *TDNS* is neither a proponent of the view that things do not shift due to momentary arising and perishing nor is it fundamentally aligned with Vasubandhu's views in *AKBh*.

It is precisely on this basis that we must revisit Chengguan's general characterization of Vasubandhu's adoption of the *Kṣaṇīkavāda* from the *AKBh* as a "*Hīnayāna*" position. The critical question here is: to which school, more specifically, does this label "*Hīnayāna*" refer? I argue that with the advancement of modern scholarship on Vasubandhu's *AKBh*, this

question has grown increasingly complex—so much so that the boundaries between the *Sarvāstivāda* and the *Sautrāntika* traditions have become blurred.

It is well known that the *AKBh* is generally regarded as embedded within the doctrinal framework of the *Sarvāstivāda*. For instance, (Sakurabe 1969, p. 345) asserts that the text in both form and content represents a continuation and development of earlier *Sarvāstivāda* treatises, and he refers to it as the system's "mature form." Similarly, Yinshun (Y36, p. 116) delineates four developmental phases of the *Sarvāstivāda* tradition, classifying the *AKBh* within the "systematizing period."

However, what is particularly striking is that the doctrinal content of the *AKBh*, as noted by many scholars, appears to be heavily influenced by *Sautrāntika* thought. (Lamotte 1988, p. 180), for example, characterizes Vasubandhu's *AKBh* as a *Sautrāntika* synthesis designed to combat both the extreme realism of the *Vaibhāṣikas* and the idealism of the *Vātsīputrīya*. (Katō 1989, pp. 75–78) goes even further, conducting a point-by-point analysis and arguing that the *Sautrāntika* elements found in the *AKBh* are almost entirely at odds with the orthodox positions of both the *Sarvāstivāda* and the *Vaibhāṣikas*.

Some scholars specializing in the study of the *Sautrāntika* tradition have even proposed a developmental trajectory stretching from the so-called *Dārṣṭāntikas* to Vasubandhu's own version of the *Sautrāntika* school. (Park 2007, pp. 26–29), for instance, utilizes materials from the *Nyāyānusāra* to establish a doctrinal and historical link between the *Dārṣṭāntikas*, the *Sautrāntika* lineage, and the *AKBh*.

More strikingly, scholars such as (Kritzer 2003, pp. 331–83) have observed that a majority of the doctrines identified in the *AKBh* as belonging to the *Sautrāntika* school find close doctrinal parallels in the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra* (*Treatise on the Stages of Yogic Practice*, *yujiaoshi lun* 瑜伽師地論). Building on this observation, (Katō 1989, p. 36) goes so far as to employ the metaphor of the "concealing cloak" arguing that Vasubandhu's identification with the *Sautrāntika* school served merely as a rhetorical guise for concealing his own doctrinal stance. This view has given rise to the theory that Vasubandhu was, from the outset, aligned with the *Yogācāra* tradition but adopted the *Sautrāntika* label as a strategic cover (Kritzer 2005, pp. xxix–xxx).

Accordingly, although the doctrine of momentariness is generally associated with the *Sautrāntika* school as its primary proponent, it is important to note that within the *Sarvāstivāda* *Abhidharma* tradition, the theory of momentariness only gained significant prominence at some point between the completion of the compilation of the *Abhidharma Piṭaka* and the editorial development of its major commentarial texts—especially the *Mahāvibhāṣā* (von Rospatt 1995, p. 21).

Japanese scholars such as (Harada 1996, pp. 135–93) and Katō (Park 2007, p. 19) have argued that the momentariness theory found in Vasubandhu's *AKBh* reflects a strategic appropriation of doctrines with a more marked "*Hīnayāna*" character under the nominal guise of *Sautrāntika* thought, effectively serving to soften or conceal the underlying philosophical implications of Vasubandhu's own position. In their view, Vasubandhu's deployment of the "not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*" formulation in the *AKBh* represents a deliberate maneuver to mediate between competing doctrinal commitments. However, the broader issue is that these academic controversies have posed significant challenges to our assessment of this doctrine in Vasubandhu's *AKBh*, particularly the thesis of "not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*". Therefore, this paper merely points out that this controversy originates from the "not shifting based on *Kṣaṇikavāda*".

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Notes

- ¹ The object of the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness is not the nature of time but existence within time. Rather than atomizing time into moments, it atomizes phenomena temporally by dissecting them into a succession of discrete momentary entities. Its fundamental proposition is that all phenomena—more precisely, all conditioned entities (*saṃskṛta*, *saṃskāra*), that is, everything but those special entities which have not been caused (hence their designation as *asaṃskṛta*, “unconditioned”), but which have always existed in the past and which always will exist in the future—pass out of existence as soon as they have originated and in this sense are momentary.
- ² The term “shared teaching (*tongjiao* 通教)” here refers fully to the “*tongzongjiao* 通宗教,” which represents the development of the *Daśabhūmiśāstra* School’s classification of the Buddha’s teachings into three categories known as the “three teachings (*sanjiao* 三教).” These are the “separate teaching of the three vehicles (*sanjiao biecheng* 三教別乘),” primarily based on the *Daśabhūmiśāstra* and the *abhidharma*; the “shared teaching” centered on the idea of “the convergence of the three vehicles into one (*huisan guiyi* 會三歸一)” from the *Lotus sūtra* (*miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經); and the “comprehensive doctrine” mentioned here, which integrates the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* (*dabo niepan jing* 大般涅槃經, *Discourse on the Great Decease*), the *Avatamaṣakasūtra* (*huayan jing* 華嚴經, *Scripture of the Garland of Buddhas*), and the *Mahāsaṃnipātasūtra* (*Great Compilation*, *daji jing* 大集經). For further details, please see (Shi 2021, p. 334).
- ³ There is controversy over whether the author of this statement, who is also the author of the *Preface to the Zhaolun*, is similar to the author of the *Commentary on the Zhaolun* (*zhaolun shu* 肇論疏). Both are named Huida 慧達, but we believe that they were individuals from different periods: the author of the *Preface to the Zhaolun* should be Huida from the *xiaozhaoti* 小招提 Temple during the Liang dynasty, while the commentary was written by the monk Huida of the Jin dynasty. We concur with Zhou, Shujia’s 周叔迦 excellent and detailed five-point argument on this issue. For more information, see (Zhou 2004, pp. 65–67).
- ⁴ In contrast to Sangpo’s perspective, Chengguan viewed this as a repudiation of the *Sammitīya* standpoint. It is generally believed that the *Sammitīya* emerged as a split from the *Vātsīputrīyas*.
- ⁵ Dhammajoti argued that the contention of “*Sarvāstivāda*” (the doctrine that “all exists”) is first recorded in the *viññānakāya* (*Collection on Consciousness*), but it is not until the *AKBh* and the *Nyāyānusāra* (*Conformity with Correct Principle*, *shunzhenglilun* 順正理論) that we see a clear definition provided (see Dhammajoti 2009, p. 117).
- ⁶ Scholarly investigations have explored both the developmental connections between the four theories of the “three times” and their evolution over time. For instance, Erich Frauwallner (Dhammajoti 2009, pp. 117–26) posited that these four theories of the theory of “three times” are themselves the result of continuous modifications in the development of the *Sarvāstivāda* doctrine. However, (Dhammajoti 2009, pp. 117–26) raises objections to this perspective. There are also studies focusing on the intrinsic theoretical developments and transformations of the four theories of the “three times.” (Naofumi 2017, pp. 1193–95), for instance, pointed out that there are differences in the content of the theories regarding the real existence of the “three times” as critiqued by Sthiramati and Vasubandhu. The current research concludes that the reason for these differences lies in some *Sarvāstivāda* attempting to prove their traditional beliefs about the existence of all dharmas across the “three times” by altering the definition of functional activity (*kāritra*). Furthermore, (Akimoto 2020, pp. 9–13) examined Sthiramati’s critique of the *Nyāyānusāra* to elucidate the distinctions in the concept of the real existence of the “three times” at different levels of discourse.
- ⁷ (Dessein 2007, pp. 331–47) posited that the concept of “remoteness” (*dūratā*, *yuan* 遠) is adopted in the *prakaraṇapāda* (*exposition*), predating the *vibhāṣā* texts and subsequently utilized in the works of the *Sarvāstivāda abhidharma*. This notion was employed to elucidate the causes of existence across the three times (past, present, and future). It was later slightly modified in the *Samyuk-tābhīdharmahrdaya* (*Heart of Abhidharma with Miscellaneous Additions*) by Dharmasīri. The extant *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣā* (*Great Exegesis of Abhidharma*) further explicates this concept, culminating in Vasubandhu’s *AKBh*, which presents the final formulation of the *Sarvāstivāda* doctrine of the reality of the three times.
- ⁸ This method of time segmentation originates from an extremely minute, atomistic theory that predated its application. An atomistic and mathematical conception of time is, in fact, widely prevalent across various world cultures (see Whitrow 1961, pp. 153–57).

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