

ŚUBHAGUPTA

An Externalist Outsider Within the Dharmakīrtian Tradition

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Introduction

Śubhagupta (Tib. Dge [b]srung[s]) was an eighth-century philosopher in what is referred to as the Buddhist tradition of logic and epistemology (*pramāṇa*). Much of his intellectual work is related to the discussion of Dharmakīrti's theories. However, unlike some figures in this tradition, he is not strictly an exegete of the master's works. Rather, he systematizes, elaborates on, and, in some cases, even refutes Dharmakīrti's doctrines.

Śubhagupta's thinking is distinguished by his syncretic method of drawing on the views of different Buddhist traditions to conceive his own original ontological and epistemological theories. This may be why his doctrinal affiliation was, and has continued to be, debated.¹ Śubhagupta's innovative views are especially apparent in the *Verses on the Demonstration of External Objects* (**Bāhyārthasiddhikārikā*), his magnum opus, which remains his most valuable work by far. Particularly, in this text, he tries to validate, within the "logico-epistemological" tradition, a form of externalism and a form of *nirākāravāda* (namely the doctrine that cognitions are not shaped by the images of their objects). It is this specific theory on externalism (*bāhyārthavāda*) on the ontological level (as well as the *nirākāravāda* standpoint on the epistemological level) that is his most distinctive position.

Śubhagupta's novelty as an author is also reflected in his adopting the genre of short digests, arguably for the first time within the Buddhist epistemological tradition. He composed brief "manuals for debate," organizing them by single subjects that were relevant at the time. These writings are indeed synopses of arguments and theories that are already found (in part or in whole) in works by previous Buddhist authors, especially Dharmakīrti. However, Śubhagupta articulates (and reworks) them as effective proofs to use against non-Buddhist opponents and to establish Buddhist truths. Most likely, these compendia were intended for pedagogical reasons, in order to instruct the monks. At the same time, they could also have been compiled with the aim of fostering the monks' own rational conviction in the truths defended therein. This holds true especially with regard to Śubhagupta's four other extant works, though less so for the *Demonstration of External Objects*. This "literary genre" was continued by subsequent authors, such as Jitāri (tenth century).

As for specific contributions to the logico-epistemological tradition, Śubhagupta also innovated by stimulating further refinement of the theories of other Buddhist philosophers, both