

Buddhist Externalism: Buddhist Theories on Matter and Space

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Within Buddhist philosophical literature, the subject of “Externalism” is primarily associated with the epistemological issue of the apprehension, and existence, of external, material objects of sense cognition. Specifically, the focus is on the reality of the smallest indivisible units of materiality—atoms. In some doxographical works, Buddhist atomistic theories are introduced as belonging to two traditions: the so-called "Vaibhāṣika" and "Sautrāntika". This lecture aims to explore the philosophical topic of "Externalism" and "atoms" by directly referencing textual sources from both traditions. These textual sources will be analyzed through comparison with parallel passages found in earlier and contemporary works, placing them within the context of earlier and coeval debates. Additionally, I shall show a method that combines philological and philosophical approaches, using the determination of the text's letter in order to understand its contents, and vice versa.

* Fig.: Teaching Nāgārjuna (Monastero di Chemrey, Ladakh). Datazione incerta, XVII-XVIII secolo. Luigi Singh, agosto del 2023.