

# Seeing *avijñapti-rūpa*— meditation and the precepts in Indian and Chinese Buddhism

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## Abstract

The concept of “unmanifest matter” (*avijñapti-rūpa*; 無表色) is best known from its appearance within Sarvāstivādin explanations of karma, and the role played by this entity within Sarvāstivādin thought has been discussed and analyzed by many modern scholars. One point that has been overlooked, however, are the curious references to meditation practice that appear in the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* within Vasubandhu’s refutation of the Sarvāstivādin/Vaibhāṣika understanding that *avijñapti-rūpa* is a real (*dravya*) *dharma*. In this paper I will attempt to explain why meditation came to be discussed in connection with *avijñapti-rūpa*. The main sources for this inquiry will not be doctrinal texts, however, but rather a number of fifth-century Chinese meditation manuals that are either translations of texts associated with the Sarvāstivādin-influenced *yogācāra* meditators of Northwest India, or which are Chinese developments of the practices associated with these groups. As I will demonstrate, these traditions attached great importance to the possibility of experiencing visions that would confirm the integrity and purity of a meditator’s *śīla*, his or her precepts (*jie* 戒). These ideas amount to, I will claim, a connection between the visions obtained in meditation and *avijñapti-rūpa*. The discussion of meditation practice in the context of scholastic debates about *avijñapti-rūpa* should thus be understood, I will claim, as emerging not merely from the concerns inherent in systematic Abhidharma philosophy, but rather from a practical context where *avijñapti-rūpa* was implicitly significant for the interpretation and understanding of meditation and meditative experiences.