

13/10/24 YOGACARA PART FOUR

*“Perceptual awareness in its multifaceted forms is the beginning and end of our conscious lives”
(Coseru, 2012, p. 1).*

“I am my body” - Barry Magid

Phenomenology – First Person Experience

This lecture series presents Yogacara as a form of Buddhist phenomenology, rather than a form of Buddhist Idealism. The teaching that all is impermanent is what distinguishes Buddhism from Brahmanic teachings such as Advaita Vedanta and Kashmir Shaivism, which are forms of monistic idealism (reality is one undivided cosmic consciousness).

The key thing to remember about Yogacara is its emphasis on *first person experience*. We could therefore translate Yogacara to mean the *Mere Perception* school, or *Experience Only* school, which is why it has come to be called a Buddhist Phenomenology.

“According to Yogacarins, the elimination of substantial selves was a first move towards the ‘right view’, which will eliminate craving, and so suffering. The recognition of the non-substantiality of reality as a whole was an important second move. But this must be completed by a third step: the return to the reality of experience” (Carpenter, 2014, p.140-41).

To interpret Yogacara as a form of monistic idealism, as D. T. Suzuki did, misses the point that perception is how we experience ourselves as *embodied* being in the world. It is the nature of perception to be embodied in a world – we experience our bodies as perceptions. We don’t have a body – we are our bodies!

This is why Yogacara is often interpreted these days as a form of Buddhist Phenomenology. Phenomenology was a movement in western philosophy away from metaphysics and towards the attempt to *describe* our *subjective experience* or the *conscious mind*, from a first-person perspective. For example, phenomenology bracketed such metaphysical questions as, does consciousness arise from the brain? It neither denied or affirmed these questions, rather they suspended these questions and instead started with experience. This is very similar to the historical Buddha, who also suspended metaphysical questions in order to focus our attention on studying the conscious mind because our suffering is caused by the mind and hence if we wish to end suffering we need to study the mind, because “the world we inhabit is

inseparable from our perception of it” (Coseru, 2012, p. 1).

The Pre-Reflective Mode of Experience is Nondual

It is therefore misleading to think there is an object out there that is imprinted on a perceptual screen. The commonsense notion of “inside” and “outside” can be seen to be a conceptual overlay superimposed upon direct perception. The world is not “outside” our mind, our mind is “in” the world and inseparable from the world. The object we are perceiving is inseparable from the immediacy of the perception. The Yogacarins also had a similar understanding but used a different language – they saw that experience is nondual. There is no outside and inside. When we hear the magpie singing on the tree in our garden, we assume it’s coming from outside the window but if we pay close attention to our actual experience, the sound is only to found in our experiencing, not outside in the garden. The world is inseparable from our perception – even though we assume there is a world out there. This is what Edmund Husserl called the “natural attitude”¹ and he said we need to bracket it. The natural attitude is formed through common sense and science. Science itself is founded upon the Cartesian paradigm

¹ “Husserl calls this attitude of being straightforwardly immersed in the world ‘the natural attitude,’ and he thinks it is characterized by a kind of unreflective ‘positing’ of the world as something existing ‘out there’ more or less independently of us (Garfield, 2015, p.175).

which promotes subject-object and mind-body duality. We experience the illusion that the thought is internal and the tree is outside but when we go to what Husserl called the things themselves we can verify that both the thought and the tree are manifestations of perception - they are both inseparable from perception.

Intentionality

In the phenomenological tradition, consciousness is always consciousness of something. This is referred to as the intentionality of consciousness (Gallagher and Zahavi 2021):

“Intentionality” is a generic term for the pointing-beyond itself proper to consciousness (from the Latin *intendere*, which means to aim in a particular direction, similar to drawing and aiming a bow at a target). Intentionality has to do with the directness or “of-ness” or aboutness of consciousness, that is, with the fact that when one perceives or judges or feels *or* thinks, one’s mental state is about or of something.

All perception has this characteristic of intentionality - and, it is also the case that the object that is perceived is inseparable from being perceived - hence we can say there is no separation as such.

Why is this important? Because it allows us some freedom in how we interpret the actions of others and therefore respond to others. We have a capacity for mentalisation – we know that other people have minds and intentions just like us. We can only perceive their behaviour BUT we can interpret their intentions behind their behaviour. When someone acts in a manner that “offends” us rather than interpreting their actions as an attack, we can interpret their actions as being caused by an emotion such as fear or shame and interpret their actions as an attempt to protect themselves. This enables us to step back and empathise with them, even though they are being critical towards us. Hopefully this can lead to a dialogue and a genuine person to person meeting.

Reflexivity (Self-Luminosity)

Another characteristic of perception that caught the attention of the Yogacarins is what they called the self-luminosity of perceptual awareness. At the same time *we are* aware that we are perceiving the “thought” or the “tree” we are simultaneously aware that we are perceiving the thought or the tree. This is called the reflexivity of perception – it turns back onto itself – we see the tree and at the same time we know we are seeing the tree.

“Literally all the major figures in phenomenology defend the view that a minimal form of self-consciousness is a constant structural feature of conscious experience. Experience happens for the

experiencing subject in an immediate way and as part of this immediacy, it is implicitly marked as *my* experience. For the phenomenologist, this immediate and first personal character of experiential phenomena must be accounted for in terms of a “pre-reflective” self-consciousness” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2021).

This pre-reflective self-consciousness is sometimes called “self-intimacy” and needs to be distinguished from reflective self-consciousness (the feeling of being embarrassed) which is a form of reflective or dualistic self-consciousness.

These two characteristics of perception - *intentionality* and *reflexivity* are what constitute nondual awareness. Nondual awareness is not something that needs to be cultivated it is already the way things are.

References

Beck, C. J. (2021). Ordinary Wonder: Zen Life & Practice.
Gallagher, S. and D. Zahavi (2021). The Phenomenological Mind. London and New York, Routledge.