

YOGACARA PART TWO

(18/08/24)

Note:

Please be aware that this discussion will be **audio-recorded** and placed on the OzZEN website **Study Guide** along with the text. Therefore, it is implied that you give your consent to be recorded if you participate in the discussion.

I will pause throughout the lecture for questions and/or comments, like we do in the reading group on Friday mornings. I prefer a more participatory style of interaction rather than a “lecture” followed by Q&A. If there are no questions and comments I will read the next paragraph and so on.

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Introduction

I know these lectures can be challenging. I find it challenging – many of these philosophical points are finely nuanced and sometimes it’s hard to follow how they apply to our everyday life practice. I therefore ask for your patience. But an important point to understand is that Buddhist philosophy, and much of Western philosophy, is not about sitting around discussing ideas at a coffee table – *philosophy is a practice* – just like Zen. It is relevant to our everyday life. It’s about how to live a good life, a compassionate life – a life free from unnecessary suffering and how to appreciate the wonder of life. This can be clearly seen in Greek Philosophy,

especially the Hellenistic period (323 BC to 31 BC) as found in the philosophical schools of Epicureanism and Stoicism.

In this lecture today, we will first review the discussion about the “three natures” that I introduced last month from the work of the Yogacara philosopher, Vasubandhu. Then we will begin to discuss a contemporary philosophical school called Phenomenology and its similarities to Yogacara. We will then finish today’s lecture by reading and discussing a chapter from Joko Beck’s first book called *Experiencing and Behaviour* which I think will help us make the link between what these Yogacarins and Phenomenologists are on about because Joko has this way of being able to express these complex ideas in a simple and straightforward way.

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The Three Natures

“The *imaginary nature* of things is what you *think* they are and is sometimes translated as the *imputational, constructed or fabricated nature*. Their *dependent nature* is that they appear to manifest due to other conditions. Their complete, realised nature, is the truth that whatever appears isn’t what it appears to be (Connelly 2022, 2).

“Like images in a magic show, we *imagine* the world is populated with fixed entities and unchanging essences, the conjured names and images in everyday expressions. But by understanding how

these appearances arise in *dependence* on our underlying cognitive processes and linguistic predispositions, we can stop imagining things have unchanging essences or natures and come to see the thusness of all phenomena, their *real nature*" (Waldron 2023, 151).

Images in a magic show – the illusion of the elephant:

Like an elephant that appears

Through the power of a magician's mantra -

Only the percept appears;

The elephant is completely nonexistent.

The imagined nature is the elephant;

The other-dependent nature is the visual percept;

The non-existence of the elephant therein

Is explained to be the consummate.

“Buddhism contends that we habitually and incessantly misinterpret our experience, due to a lack of insight into the conditions of experience. Our misinterpretations are driven by our desires, fears and anxieties. According to Yogacara our mental experience is changing, altering every moment. In this fluctuating stream we tend to posit two constants against which and through

which we cognize and evaluate all that we experience. We interpret the varying alterations of our mental experience in terms of *atman* (an independent, unchanging observer or witness) and *dharmas* (affective, categories of experience and ‘objective’ circumstances). Forgetting that these positive constants are constructions fabricated through our attempt to suppress the anxieties and fears which change, impermanence, uncertainty, instability, and death aroused in us, we invest our invented constants with ultimate sanctity and significance. Desire - which is always the expression of a thirst that what now is should become otherwise at some future point - formulates these constants to which it can anchor itself and measure its progress toward that ‘otherwise’ (Lusthaus, 2002, 1).

The elephant takes on many forms. It especially takes on the form of an independent, substantially existent self. The elephant is also projected onto others – creating substantially existent, independent others – people, cars, nation states and so on.

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Phenomenology and Yogacara

The philosophy that is called *phenomenology* is probably the tradition that most clearly emphasises the importance of understanding philosophy as a practice in modern times. The practice of phenomenology has a lot in common with Buddhism and what has become known in the west as Mindfulness.

Sampajanna is the Pali term for the quality of mind the Buddha taught in the Satipatthana Sutta (The Four Foundations of Mindfulness) as “clearly knowing”, “clear comprehension,” or “fully aware” (Goldstein, 2013, 11) in order to see things as they are. A similar practice in phenomenology is called the *epoche* and the *reduction*. The catch cry of the founder of modern phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, was the need to return to “the things themselves”. The *epoche* involves the suspension or bracketing of our *natural attitude*, our taken for granted assumptions about reality, especially our taken for granted assumption that the world we encounter in experience also exists independently of us. The *epoche* is the first step and must be followed by what Husserl called the *transcendental reduction*. Transcendental here is a philosophical term, with its origins in Kantian philosophy. It refers to what is prior to or necessary for us to experience things the way we experience them. Kantian philosophy was a criticism of a kind of naive empiricism that believed external reality imprinted itself on our minds through our senses. Husserl wanted us to pay attention to how consciousness works and to pay very close attention to how we actually experience ourselves in the world (phenomena).

In doing this we discover what Husserl called our *intentional acts* – how consciousness or perception is always directed – it is always directed to or about something. A sense is always of a sensation,

hearing is always of a sound, remembering is remembering a memory, judgment is judging something or somebody and so on. There are two kinds of intentionality that he described. The first is *act intentionality* – this is when we are focused on a separate object, like when we take an object like the breath in meditation or focus on sounds. We experience ourselves as a witness experiencing an object. This is a form of reflective consciousness. However, there is another form of consciousness that is more fundamental and primordial, known as pre-reflective consciousness. This is characterised by what Husserl called *operational or procedural intentionality*. Like when we move across a room, not bumping into the furniture – we don't have to think or reflect about our movement. In this form of intentionality perception is inseparable from the object that is perceived. In meditation we can at times drop into this state. The sense of being a witness experiencing an object drops away. This is sometimes referred to as primordial perception in phenomenology, which is synonymous with what Yogacara philosophy called “thusness” and what Joko Beck calls “experiencing”. Like the epoche in phenomenology, Zazen returns us to this primordial experiencing or during Zazen we awaken to this primordial state. When we say, “Zazen wipes away immeasurable crimes” it means it loosens us up from all our historical prejudices and predispositions. When we repeatedly return to direct experiencing in our Zazen practice, we loosen up all the intentional threads we normally live by and return to the direct experiencing. Similarly, in phenomenology, the practice of the transcendental reduction leads from the natural attitude back to its transcendental foundation – a kind of primordial experiencing.

Both Yogacara and phenomenology practice to see things as they are, or as they are becoming, as distinct from our preconceptions, habits of thought, our prejudices, or stories about what we think we are experiencing. This includes suspending subject and object duality, or the default assumption of inside and outside, to see how both the body (perception) and world are mutually constituting or co-arising or interdependent. Perception is synonymous with what Joko Becks calls experiencing. All perception/experiencing is immediacy and hence non-dual. Immediate perception is not an act, it is not something we do. It is who we are. (Operational or procedural intentionality).

Both Yogacara and Phenomenology agree on this interdependence between perception and world and make a distinction between what we might call primordial perception or experiencing (first order experience) and categorical or interpretive experience (second order experience). The argument is that it is because we take the second order version of experience to be reality (rather than relatively real) we end up suffering. It is only through the practice of mindfulness meditation (shamatha and vipassana) in Buddhism or through the practice of the phenomenological epoche and reduction, that we can free ourselves from these fabrications and hence awaken to the primordial wonder of our unmediated being-in-the-world.

Phenomenology like Yogacara seeks to awaken us to our original face – the world as it is prior to our theoretical interpretation of the world – it returns us to our pre-reflective embodied presence in the world. It seeks to describe things as they are becoming – what Yogacara called the “thusness” of things.

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Demonstration

The distinction between immediate or pre-reflective perception and mediated or reflective perception.

Volunteer required.

Call out their name: Andrew! Are you here?

Then say, Andrew, what are you really feeling right now?

The difference between responding when I call out your name – its immediate, no reflection and reflecting when I say, how are you really feeling?

Experiencing and Behavior, by Joko Beck

By experiencing, I mean that first moment when we receive life before the mind arises. For example: before I think, “Oh, that’s a red shirt,” there’s just seeing. We could also speak of just hearing, just touching, just tasting, just thinking. This is the absolute: call it God, Buddha-nature, whatever you wish. This experience, filtered through my particular human mechanism, makes my world. We cannot point to anything in the world, seemingly inside or outside ourselves, which is not experiencing. But we couldn’t have what we call a human life unless that experiencing were transformed into behavior. By behavior, I just mean the way something does itself. For example, as a human being, you do yourself: you sit, you move, you eat, you talk. In this sense even the rug has a behavior: the rug’s behavior is just to lie there. (If we looked at it under a powerful microscope, we’d see it’s by no means inert. It’s a flood of energy, moving with incredible speed.

"So we can distinguish the arising—which is God, Buddha-nature, the absolute, just what is—from the world which is formed instantaneously, the other side of the arising. In fact, the two sides are one: the arising and what we call the world are not different. If we could really get this, we’d never again have any trouble in our

lives, because it would be obvious that there is no past or future—and we'd see that all the stuff we worry about is nonsense.

For the most part we are only dimly aware of our experiencing. But we vaguely know that in some way our behavior and our experience are connected. If we have a headache and act irritably we probably realize that there is some connection between the pounding in our head and our irritable behavior. So even though we're not fully aware of our own experience, at least we do not view ourselves as divorced from our experience. But if other people are irritable, we may divorce their behavior from their experiencing. We can't feel their experience; and so we judge their behavior. If we think, "She shouldn't be so arrogant," we only see her behavior and judge it, because we have no awareness of what is true for her (her experiencing, her bodily sensations of fear). We slip into personal opinions about her arrogance.

Behavior is what we observe. We cannot observe experience. By the time that we have an observation about an event, it's past—and experience is never in the past. That's why the sutras say that we can't touch it, we can't see it, we can't hear it, we can't think about it—because the minute we attempt to do that, time and separation (our phenomenal world) have been created. When I observe my arm lifting, it's not me. When I observe my thoughts, they're not me. When I think, "This is me," I try to protect the "me." In fact, however, whatever I observe about myself (even though it's an interesting phenomenon with which I am closely associated) is

not me. That's my behavior, the phenomenal world. Who I am is simply experiencing itself, forever unknown. The moment I name it, it is gone.

Behavior and experience are, however, not fundamentally separate. When I experience you (see you, touch you, hear you), you are my experiencing, just what is. But the human tendency is not to stop there; instead of you just being my experiencing, I add on to it my opinions about what you seem to be doing—and then I have separated myself from you. When the world seems separate, I think it has to be examined, analyzed, judged. When we live like this, rather than from experiencing itself, we are in trouble. We have to have memory, we have to have concepts; but if we don't understand their nature, if we don't use them properly, we create mayhem.

Like ourselves, other people are simply experiencing which looks like behavior. Yet we view them as behavior; we only see their behavior and are unaware of their experiencing. In truth experiencing is universal because that is what we are. When we can see the foolishness of our bondage to our thoughts and opinions and increase the amount of time we live as experiencing, we are more able to sense the true life—the true experiencing—of another person. When we live a life that is not dominated by personal opinion but is instead pure experiencing, then we begin to take care of everyone, ourselves and others. Then we cannot view

other people as objects, behavioral monkeys who are no more than their behavior.

All of practice is to return ourselves to pure experiencing. Out of that will emerge very adequate thinking and action. Usually, we are unable to do this, however; instead we act in obedience to the thoughts and opinions that spin in our heads—which is backwards.

Nearly always we view other people as just behavior. We're not interested in the fact that their behavior cannot be divorced from their experiencing. With ourselves we get it to some degree, but not totally. In zazen, we see that only a fraction of ourselves is known to ourselves; and as that capacity for experiencing increases, our actions transform: they come not so much from our conditioning, our memories, but from life as it is, this very second.

This is true compassion. As we live more and more as our experiencing, we see that while we have a body and a mind that behave in certain ways, there is something (no-thing) in which the body and mind are held. We intuit that everyone is held in that way. Even though the behavior of another person may be irresponsible, and while we may have to oppose that behavior firmly, yet we and he or she are intrinsically the same. Only to the degree that we live a life of experiencing can we possibly understand the life of another. Compassion is not an idea or an ideal, it is a formless but all-powerful space that grows in zazen.

This space is always present. It's not something we have to hunt for and try to achieve. It is always what we are because it is our experiencing. We can't be other than this—but we can cover it with our ignorance. We don't have to "find" anything—which is why the Buddha said that after forty years he had achieved nothing. What is there to achieve? It's always right here.

References

- Beck, C. J. (2021). Ordinary Wonder: Zen Life & Practice.
- Connelly, B. (2022). Vasubandhu's "Three Natures": A Practitioners Guide for Liberation. Somerville, MA, Wisdom Publications.
- Waldron, W. S. (2023). Making Sense of Mind Only: Why Yogacara Buddhism Matters. New York, Wisdom Publications.