

## YOGACARA TEACHING'S PART ONE

(21/07/24)

### **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**

The task of Buddhist philosophy is to free us from the confusion that maintains our individual and collective suffering. In Buddhist philosophy there are basically two ways of knowing – the first we might describe as conventional or inferential ways of knowing – that is conclusions reached on the basis of evidence and reasoning.

The other way of knowing is *perceptual* or experiential – I can try and describe what the

difference is between hot and cold but if you touch something that is hot and cold you know experientially what the difference is without making conceptual distinctions. In Buddhism therefore, we draw upon conventional ways of knowing *and* direct or experiential ways of knowing. The two are both important and inform each other. We move from deconstructing the belief things have an essential independent nature logically (Nagarjuna) to how to stop imputing them psychologically through meditation practice (Yogacara). The emptiness teachings of Nagarjuna set the stage for the experiential teachings of Yogacara.

Perceptual knowing is distinguished from conceptual knowing because conceptual knowing is dualistic. However, we still use concepts to arrive at direct realisation of nonduality. Our direct perception of the nonduality of experience also recognises how our conceptions influence our perceptions. This is sometimes referred to as *natural functioning*. We perceive the bird calling and our perception of the sound already incorporates the concept "bird call". You call out my name and I stop and turn around – this form of knowing is not inferential or reflective but reflexive or immediate. This is the nature of nondual perception – it is immediate and reflexive. Yogacara, or Yoga or Meditation Practice is concerned with clarifying the truth that

our experience is always already nondual and to understand what the barriers are to experiencing this truth.

The Yogacara (and Buddha-nature) teachings, like the Emptiness teachings, travel from India into China and influence the unique style of Chinese Buddhism, especially Chan (Zen). Bodhidharma (440-528) came to China carrying the scroll of the *Lankavattara Sutra* and Paramartha (499-569), considered the greatest of the Chinese translators, translated the *Buddha Nature Treatise (BNT)* into Chinese; both of these texts synthesise Yogacara and Buddha nature teachings and along with the *Prajnaparamita* teachings, provide the philosophical context for the development of Chinese Buddhism, and in particular Chan Buddhism. We can't really understand Chan (Zen) without some appreciation of these ancient texts:

"In terms of chronology the Madhyamaka teachings on emptiness were introduced in China by the great translator Kumarajiva (350-414) and popularised by his disciple, Sengzhao (374-414).

During the sixth century there was a shift in interest towards Yogacara and the tathagatagarbha (Buddha nature) doctrines.

## **Yogacara (Yoga-practice or meditation)**

Yogacarins argued that the “*purpose* of the emptiness teachings was not to get a correct view of how the world works. Rather, emptiness serves as a *remedy*, a means of breaking free from attachment to our own constructions” (Waldron 2023, 149).

Yogacara teachings present us with another insight into emptiness which is based on experiential insight – in particular the insight into the natural nonduality of experience when dualistic modes which are superimposed onto our natural mind fall away. This is echoed in our Zen teachings by phrases such as what was your original face before your parents were born? And Ordinary mind is the way. Our natural ordinary nondual mind needs no cultivation. I’m not sure how familiar Joko Beck was with the Yogacara teachings, but I think there is a remarkable similarity between Yogacara and our Four Practice Principles.

Yogacara teachings also provided the framework for Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings and his commitment to social engagement. Yogacara can inspire us to transform ourselves and the world and also prevent burn-out. He wrote a book called “Understanding Our Mind” in which he comprehensively presents his interpretation of Yogacara teachings.

In today's lecture and the next lecture, we will be *sampling* the Yogacara teachings of the Buddhist philosopher called Vasubandhu (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> Century).

I want to acknowledge the work of Ben Connelly, and I quote him extensively in what follows from his book on "Vasubandhu's "Three Natures": A Practitioners Guide for Liberation".

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## **Three Natures: Imagination, Interdependence and Liberation**

Who was Vasubandhu? Yogacara Buddhism arose sometime between the first and third century CE, and the main texts were written by the half-brothers Asanga and Vasubandhu in the fourth and fifth centuries. Yogacara shifts the emphasis from the use of reason to deconstruct the nature of reality to the use of meditation to help us understand the nature of our experience. It is by understanding how we *misunderstand* the

nature of experience that helps us to alleviate suffering and systems of harm within ourselves and in our communities.

Yogacara teachings also refer to the related barriers of afflictive emotion and the delusion of separateness which arise because of our identification with the duality of our imaginary nature or the self-centred dream (Connelly 2022, xvii).

Yogacara is concerned with the transformation of our dualistic or karmic consciousness and follows what are known as The Six Paramitas or Perfections: Generosity, Ethical living, Patience, Energy, Meditation and Wisdom. We will also see how Yogacara teaches *vispassana* (insight) and *samatha* (calm abiding) as forms of nondual or object-less meditation.

We are going to start with Vasubandhu's treatise on the Three Natures, which form the philosophical backbone of Yogacara. So, what are the three natures? They are three interrelated aspects of our experience: the imaginary, dependent and complete or realised nature. In a nutshell they are:

The imaginary nature of things is what we think they are.

Their dependent nature of things is that they appear to depend on other things.

The complete, realised nature of things is that they are not what you think they are (Connelly 2022, xii).

### *The Imaginary Nature*

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).

In regard to Buddhist philosophy the imaginary and the complete realised nature correspond to well-known dyads: samsara and nirvana, form and emptiness, conditioned and unconditioned and the relative or conventional truth and the absolute or ultimate truth. The dependent nature relates to the twelvefold chain of dependent arising (Connelly 2022).

We live in the imaginary world. We imagine the world is populated with fixed entities and unchanging essences (imaginary nature). But I wouldn't (as some scholars do) describe the imaginary world as wrong. I would describe it as a survival map that has evolved within human beings since the beginning to enable us to survive. It is necessary but is formed around desire and aversion – we want to grasp onto

certain things to ensure our survival and get rid of unwanted things we perceive as aversive to our survival. This is the self-centred dream in action. It also sets us up for conflict because survival is based on duality - our language is based on binaries: black and white, right and wrong, them and us, possessed and dispossessed. It aligns with the survival of the fittest amidst the scarcity of resources.

“In the Yogacara approach to vispassana. Or insight, we begin to know truth by listening to the teachings. We know it more deeply through experiential investigation, and ultimately we know it by realising that it is what we knew all along”

(Connelly, 2022).

Yogacara teaches that when we see we don't have to identify with “either/or” distinction we leap beyond duality into the absolute. Just this or just is. Furthermore, we can work within the imaginary to transform the imaginary on the basis of our values. This is the liberatory project of Mahayana Buddhism.

“By understanding how these appearances arise in *dependence* on our underlying *cognitive* processes and linguistic predispositions (dependent nature), we can stop imagining things have unchanging essences or natures and come to see the thusness of all phenomena, their



*real nature*" (real nature) (Waldron 2023) which is nondual.

However, most importantly, like the emptiness of emptiness, all three natures are also empty. They are skilful mean to liberation from suffering.

We use the distinctions into the three natures to investigate the reality of our experience. For example, my red car outside my window is of the imaginary natures, it also has an dependent nature, and finally it just is what it is – simply an experience within my consciousness.

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Connelly writes the imaginary nature is characterized by a sense of being a self that perceives things that are other than me. This sense arises from our karma - our habitual tendencies to construct our experience dualistically – so that we experience ourselves as grasping onto something outside of ourselves. The act of seeing things as "other", is an inherent act of grasping, and this grasping is tied to wanting to push away or hold on (desire and aversion), which is informed by the fundamental delusion that there are a self and others. This world of imagination and perceived alienation is where we live. This matters because what we feel and see and say and do in this imaginary field is

where we know suffering. But the good news is it doesn't have to be that way!

### *The Dependent Nature*

The dependent nature is seeing that our "suffering arises from conditions: you might eat a bag of chips to avoid your feelings, or you might think of someone as evil after they insult you. It arises even when you ruminate on a mistake. We are reaping the pain of thousands of years of shared conditioning such as patriarchy and othering, untold trillions of karmic acts of ignoring, belittling, violating, objectifying, pigeonholing. It adds up to where we are.

Many other Yogacara teachings say that dependent nature is also a nonsuffering. It occupies a middle space between the imaginary and the complete, realized nature. When we see what arises from conditions as real, we see the imaginary nature and grasp it as real, and we suffer. When we see what arises from conditions as mere dependency, we see the complete, realized nature - and find liberation.

### *The Complete, Realised Nature*

The complete, realized nature is the act of seeing things as they are, and it is the end of suffering. It is the gateway to wonder, freedom, and peace; it is the refuge and the path leading to the refuge.

It is the realisation that this land is the lotus-land, and this very body is the body of the Buddha.

When there is nothing to grasp, there is no grasping. The complete, realized nature is simply that what appears to be when things are not. You're not going to get something later, you didn't have something before. There is no "you" that can control or be controlled and no "things" you can control. You are not a victim of circumstances or of your habits. There is freedom now to act for the liberation of all, for this right here is the destination and the path leading to the destination" (Connelly 2022, 112-113).

The complete, realised nature is not something we experience. It is something we recognise as the truth of our experience. The truth is simply that the imaginary is not real. You realise the sound of the bird is not outside in the garden but is inseparable from your own experience. This is verified only by your experience. This is not something you need to believe – it is something you can actually verify to be true.

This also means that suffering and nonsuffering are inseparable: samsara and nirvana are one. Seeing the truth about samsara is liberation, but not liberation *from* samsara – rather, liberation from within samsara (115). Nirvana is the transformation of consciousness – turning our consciousness around – a revolution in how we perceive reality.

I would argue that the perfect realised nature is empty of self-nature because it is simply the act of "seeing" the imaginary as imaginary and the dependent as dependent. There is no one doing the seeing, there is just the seeing.

Therefore, there is no ground to stand on other than being just this moment or enjoying the ground of groundlessness.

This is peace.

## **References**

Beck, C. J. (2021). Ordinary Wonder: Zen Life & Practice.

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Waldron, W. S. (2023). Making Sense of Mind Only: Why Yogacara Buddhism Matters. New York, Wisdom Publications.