

## 24.11.24 Yogacara Part Five

We are now going to apply the Yogacara analysis of the three natures to understanding a few excerpts from Joko Beck's chapter entitled "New Jersey Does Not Exist". Before we do that I will remind you about the Three Natures:

### 1. What is the imaginal nature?

Conscious experience arises in dependence on the interaction between stimuli and our cognitive faculties. But we are so tricked by our linguistic and conceptual categories that we *imagine* that these stimuli are independent objects with their own essential characteristics. This *superimposition* of essential natures onto the interdependent world is the basic sense of the *imagined nature*.

### 2. What is the dependent nature?

The *dependent nature* is another name for *dependent arising*. It takes interaction as primary and seemingly separate entities as secondary.

### 3. What is the real nature?

Once we stop imagining essential characteristics where none can be found, we begin to see the incessant arising and falling of all phenomena and eventually come to see reality as it is, in all its wondrous thusness. In short, we realise its *real nature*, which impermanence and interdependence (emptiness). The terms thusness or

suchness refer to the experiential realisation of emptiness.

### THE THREE NATURES AS NO-NATURES

Each of these three natures refers to different ways that phenomena are empty and lack an essential nature – that is, the three “natures” refer to three kinds of *no-nature* (*nihsvabhava*).

The distinction between imaginary and interdependent natures is the key. In a sense, “imaginary” is really synonymous with language. We live in a “languaged” world and language (including thoughts) shapes how we experience ourselves and the world in terms of substantial things having their own independent natures. For example, possessive pronouns precondition us to take relations of possession as if there are “things” that can be “owned”. This is in contrast with our interdependent nature – which is simply the reality of impermanence and interdependence.

### New Jersey Does Not Exist, by Joko Beck

*We assume that reality is as we see it and that it is fixed and unchanging. [The imaginary nature].*

*Once when I was flying across the United States and I knew we were roughly in the middle of the country, I looked down and thought, where is Kansas? [Imaginary Nature] There was no way of saying where Kansas was.*

*Yet we really think that there's Kansas, and Illinois, and New Jersey, and New York, when in reality there is just land going on and on. We do the same thing with ourselves. I think I'm New Jersey and he's New York. I think that New York is to blame for New Jersey's problems. (It sends all its commuters over to New Jersey.) New Jersey, if it thinks of itself as New Jersey, immediately acquires its own set of problems. It has to identify with all the wonderful things about New Jersey; and certainly it hasn't got much use for Pennsylvania over there. In fact these boundaries are arbitrary; but if we indulge in our emotion thought which separates, we think there is a boundary between ourselves and others. If we work with emotion-thought intelligently the boundaries gradually dissolve, and we realize the unity that is always right there. If our mind is open, just dealing with the sensory input that life presents, we don't have to strive for something called "great enlightenment." If New Jersey does not have to exist as a separate entity, it doesn't have to defend itself. If we do not have to exist as a separate entity, we have no problem. But our lives are absorbed with the question of "what would be best for me? How can I make things nice for me?" And we include other people and things only to the degree that they are willing to play our game. Of course they're never really willing because they're all doing it too. So the game never can work. For example, how can a marriage work if two people see themselves as New Jersey and New York? It may look as if it works sometimes; but until they see that there is no boundary (and that means the dissolution of the*

*blockage of emotion-thought), there will be a running war between them.*

***we haven't learned how to live as human beings; we've created a false world pasted on top of the real one.***

***we confuse the map with reality itself. [Imaginary Nature]** Maps are useful; but if we just look at the map we don't see the unity that is the United States. There is no Kansas as a separate entity. Like the white blood cell, we're designed to have a certain function within this enormous energy pattern that we are. We do have to have a certain form in order to function, just as the white blood cell has to form its little legs to do the cleaning. We have to have a certain form in order to function; we have to look as though we're separate, in order to play this wonderful game we're in. But the trouble is we're not playing the real game. We're playing a game that we pasted on top of the real one; and that game will wreck us. If we don't see through it, we live out our days on this earth without ever enjoying any of it. The game when well played is for the most part a good game. It includes sorrow and joy and disappointment and problems. But it's always real and rich, and it's not unsatisfying or without meaning. The white blood cell does not ask "what is the meaning of life?" It knows. And when we break through that blockage of emotion thought, then we also begin to know who we are and what we are meant to do in life. What are we to do in life? If we don't confuse ourselves too much*

*with our false thinking, we know. When we turn away from our personal obsession with ourselves, the answer becomes obvious. But we don't do that easily, because we're attached to our self-righteous thinking.*

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It's important to remember when we use metaphors like the *imaginary* nature or the self-centred *dream*, this is where we actually live. We live inside the self-centred dream and we experience this as if it was reality. On the one hand, the self-centred dream is dualistic but on the other hand it has practical benefits. It was further embedded as reality with the Cartesian revolution from the seventeenth century onwards which cemented a mind body duality. It is how we have evolved – it has helped us to survive. The self-centred dream is a dream of duality, but it has practical utility – we couldn't cross the road without it. So, we are not trying to get rid of it; nonduality is inclusive of duality. We just want to be able to dance with it without becoming lost within it.

This duality that we experience as reality is a dream of an “inside” and an “outside”, a dream of permanence, a dream that there are things that can be grasped and a grasper who can grasp them. So, we

can make a distinction like a “dream” within a dream. This is exactly the point Yogacara is making – we can wake up from this dream of solidity into the realisation that our true nature is impermanence, and impermanence is very much like a dream – all that is solid melts into air, just like a dream. However, once we realise this, we can dream of a world and a way of being in the world that is no longer solid. We can travel lightly in this world. Knowing it is a dream and knowing that for most of the time the people we are in relationship with are caught in this dream – we don’t have to get caught in the dream with them – but this is exactly what often does happen – we can easily get pulled back by the gravity of habit into the self-centred dream. Similarly, even though we live in and share this imaginary nature with others we can still distinguish between facts and fiction, or lies and truth, or someone who suffers from psychotic delusions within this dream. For someone who suffers psychosis it is like a dream within a dream within a dream!

We live in this dualistic consciousness or “karmic” consciousness, which is gradually transformed as we begin to awaken to the self-centred dream and embrace life as it is – the dependent nature. Karmic consciousness is transformed into nirvanic consciousness. What we find is liberation from suffering not by letting go, but by realising there is nothing to hold onto in the first place. We cease resisting life as it is. This doesn’t mean we won’t experience physical or emotional pain – it simply

means that we are willing to experience our physical and emotional pain as pain. The end of suffering is the willingness to accept life as it is, which includes accepting suffering as it is.

### **Emptiness again**

We imagine that trees and people exist and then don't exist. We desire existence or non-existence but there are no things that exist or go out of existence. "Things" never come into existence and "things" never go out of existence. By things I mean things existing as "independent essences" with their "own nature". As with Nagarjuna, the imaginary or conventional only exists conventionally or imaginary. It is precisely the impossibility of finding an ultimate existence of anything in any moment that is the ultimate, the complete, realised nature.

Things are imaginary, but suffering generated by the imaginary feels real. One way in which we suffer is because of the way we imagine things to be permanent. But there is a paradox. There are two kinds of suffering – nondual suffering and dualistic suffering. So, for example, I am feeling grief because a loved one has died but I resist feeling the grief. This resistance often takes the form of self-judgment – for example, we feel guilt – in feeling guilt we complicate the grieving and maintain the grieving. On the other hand, we bring an end to suffering by opening up to and embracing the grief – we drop the resistance, we let go of identifying with

the judgmental thoughts. We simply feel the pain of the loss. The paradox is we bring an end to suffering by embracing suffering. The self-centred dream we are caught in, is basically the resistance to life as it is. The various ways we seek to control or avoid the reality of life as it is.

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### **Compassion and the Imaginary**

Buddhism in general (including our practice principles) tend only to focus on the negative aspects of imagination. However, because we live in an imaginary world (by necessity) we can imagine alternative imaginary worlds – for example, we can imagine worlds that are not governed by greed, hatred and ignorance but that are governed by generosity, compassion and wisdom. Once we have some insight into the imaginary we can live in the imaginary and use the infinite possibilities of the imaginary as skilful means in the service of individual and collective liberation.

As previously discussed, sometimes you will see Yogacara teachings referred to as “Mind-Only” school, or “Consciousness-Only” school and it is often seen as a form of philosophical Idealism. However, I prefer to interpret it as the “Experience-Only” school. This does not deny there is a reality outside of my mind. It simply claims that we live on the



interface of Reality and my experience of reality. How I experience Reality will be shaped by the collective history of the human species and my own personal unique history. Buddha-nature is eternal – but that does not mean our awareness of it is eternal – it cannot be, because of the truth of constant change. All states of mind change (Bays 2011).

In summary, all we ever experience is our experience. This normally takes the form of living in the imaginary reality of subject and object duality, what we might call *conventional duality*. However, when we pay attention during meditation, we see that our immediate perceptions, what the phenomenologists call our “pre-reflective” mode of experiencing, is always free of subject and object duality. We can see this in meditation. Right now, the sounds are immediately inseparable from your awareness of the sounds. You are already intrinsically aware of being aware. But because of language, subject and object duality is superimposed on top of that. What the phenomenologists call our “reflective” mode consciousness is dualistic – this is what we mean when we feel “self-conscious” when we are giving a performance or when I invite you into reflecting on your experience when I say, how would you describe your mood right now? This is in contrast to simply viewing a tree or hearing a sound without any vestige of self-consciousness. However, even during meditation when we are free of self-consciousness, there is still a very subtle duality occurring – this is the presence of the witness – our *awareness* of being aware – what phenomenologists call basic sense

of “mineness” that accompanies all our experience. This basic sense of self is called the seventh level of consciousness in Yogacara, or “manas”. We have an awareness of being aware – this awareness of being aware is the witness or the observer. We can have a sense of witnessing “our” feelings and thoughts. Our ability to be the witness is an important aspect of mindfulness – to nonjudgmentally witness our feelings and thoughts allows us to experience them as “empty” – they simply vanish – they are insubstantial like a dream. However, the witness is also empty. We could call this realisation *enlightened duality* (Spira 2014). If we maintain our meditation practice with the awareness that the witness is also empty we may experience moments when our awareness of being aware disappears. And “when the witness vanishes, time vanishes”(Bays 2011). Dogen would say mind and body drops away and our original face is revealed! The door opens into vast emptiness! We joyfully disappear into the dynamic activity of just this moment – consciousness only (Connelly 2016, p. 35)

So, Yogacara reminds us that we only experience our experience and not “things”. “Things” are imputations that we superimpose onto our experience. Yogacara teaches that this superimposition of seeing things as objects is the form that ignorance takes. It feels like “I” (a subject) am observing the “tree” (an object or other). This fundamental duality of self and other, is also known as cognizer and cognized or seer and seen:

“what appears in each moment of experience is this false imagination of a self, which Yogacarins call manas, and a separate, observed world.”

Whereas when we see from the perspective of the dependent nature, self and world co-constitute each other as do self and other. We are INTERDEPENDENT beings. Separation is imaginary but dependence is relatively real – hence we need to practice this dependence intelligently.

From the point of view of ending suffering the main implications are when we are experiencing an afflictive emotion such as anger we can notice the duality founded in some kind of judgment of self and other – we can also be dualistic towards ourselves and turn on ourselves as well!

Firstly, if you can remember that the entirety of the situation is created by your mind, by your imagination, then you can wake up as if you were actually waking up from a dream at night.

Secondly, you can story or imagine or visualise a different world or a different narrative.

Our practice principles focus on the suffering that can be produced by our identification with the imaginary – however, the imaginary can also be used for liberation. We *can* imagine a more caring and compassionate world!

## References

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