

Article

What Is the Ultimate Nature of the Process of Reality? A Quantum Buddhist Mind-only Solution (Part I)

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ABSTRACT

The metaphysical implications of the *Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda* ‘consciousness-only’ school of Buddhist psycho-metaphysics has become an issue of some debate amongst some Western philosophers with an interest in Buddhist philosophy. The ‘canonical’ view amongst many significant scholars is that, as the name suggests, this perspective asserts that the ultimate nature of the process of reality is nondual primordial consciousness/awareness. On this ‘Idealist’ view the external apparently material world is considered to be a mind-created illusion. However, some contemporary Western philosophers are offering seemingly more materialist, or non-committal as to the existence of an external material world, versions. This article examines such claims and exposes their deficiencies. A quantum-Mind-Only *Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda* perspective is explored.

Keywords: Engaging Buddhism, consciousness-only, mind-only, three-nature theory, quantum consciousness potentiality, quantum Darwinism, ground-consciousness, store-consciousness, collective karma, quantum mind-created reality.

The distinguished philosopher Jay L. Garfield has an impressive academic profile, having Professorships in both Philosophy and Tibetan Studies. He is also a member of a group of philosophers who call themselves “The Cowherds.” This appellation is derived from a comment made by the seventh century Indian Buddhist practitioner-philosopher Chandrakirti indicating that ‘conventional truth/reality’ (*saṃvṛti-satya* – also translated as ‘seeming’, ‘relative’, and ‘everyday’ truth or reality, as opposed to *paramārtha-satya*, ‘ultimate truth/reality’) is the way that the world is experienced by unenlightened people such as cowherds; ultimate reality, according to Buddhist philosophy, of course, is the way that reality is experienced by enlightened beings. The ‘Cowherds’ describe themselves as being:

... scholars of Buddhist studies ... [who] are united by a commitment to rigorous philosophical analysis as an approach to understanding Buddhist metaphysics and epistemology, and to the union of philology and philosophy in the service of the greater understanding of the Buddhist tradition and its insights.¹

There are a couple of things one can say about this project at the outset. There are many impressive *practitioners* who are trained in both the meditative practices and the philosophical perspectives of the various Buddhist traditions, as opposed to people who are only academic “scholars.” Contemporary Buddhist practitioners such as Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, Dzongsar

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Khyentse Rinpoche, and Ringu Tulku, to mention just three I have had experience of, clearly have degrees of realization which derives from consistent and committed meditation practice, as well as profound knowledge of Buddhist philosophical/metaphysical perspectives, perspectives that perhaps become more understandable with some degree of meditation competence. Teachers like these are fully conversant with the Western world and speak fluent English and therefore are able to explain Buddhist philosophy, which has been handed down through a line of teachers within various traditions, clearly for a Western audience. In the light of this it seems perhaps slightly incongruous for Western “scholars” to decide that they are required to sort out what various Buddhist philosophical perspectives *really* amount to. And the notion that a Western *analytic* philosophical approach is going to get the job done properly is, as we shall see, questionable. The fact that the various ‘cowherds’ come to significantly different conclusions points to this conclusion.

Furthermore, there are a few significant Western scholar-*practitioners*, working within Buddhist traditions under the guidance of accomplished Buddhist teachers, who are able to articulate Buddhist metaphysical viewpoints with great precision and clarity. To my mind a remarkable contemporary example of such a scholar-practitioner is Karl Brunnhölzl, who works alongside respected Tibetan teachers such as Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche. Brunnhölzl has translated and written introductions and commentaries to important Buddhist texts, and his brilliant elucidations of such texts are clearly in line with traditional Buddhist perspectives, whereas some of the accounts presented by some of the ‘cowherds’ are a little misleading. In this article I will primarily be concerned with Garfield’s account of *Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda* psycho-metaphysics, which, when viewed from the perspective of ‘canonical’ *Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda*, is both bizarre and misleading.

It must be said that Garfield is an academic who has done a great deal of significant work in the field of Buddhist Studies, translating texts and writing and editing several books. And he should be heartily congratulated for championing the view that Buddhist philosophy should be treated seriously by Western philosophers:

People in our profession are still happy to treat Western philosophy as the “core” of the discipline, ... So, for instance, a course that addresses only classical Greek philosophy can be comfortably titled “Ancient Philosophy,” not “Ancient Western Philosophy,” and a course in metaphysics can be counted on to ignore all non-Western metaphysics.... It is simply irrational to ignore most of world philosophy in the pursuit of truth, and immoral to relegate any literature not written by Europeans as somehow beneath our dignity to read.²

Such an attitude is indeed refreshing. However, the fact that Garfield, through a misguided use of a Western ‘analytic’ philosophical attitude, misrepresents a core Buddhist philosophical perspective is, obviously, less laudable. The fact that someone holding a weighty list of academic positions, and a significant stature within Buddhist Studies, manages to misconstrue and misrepresent the *Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda* (yoga/meditation-practice-consciousness-only-vehicle), which is the basis for what later became the Tibetan school of *Chittamatra* or Mind-Only Buddhism, is disturbing.

The *Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda* school of Buddhist psycho-metaphysics developed in Indian Mahayana (Great-Vehicle) Buddhism around the fourth century C.E., largely as a result of the metaphysical explorations of the practitioner-philosophers Vasubandhu and Asanga. The term *Yogācāra* indicates that the exponents of this school considered the practice of meditation was a central aspect of the Buddhist path ('yoga' here refers to meditation, not physical postures), and the term *Vijñānavāda*, 'consciousness-way', indicates that the metaphysics associated with this school asserts the primacy of consciousness in the process of reality. This viewpoint was in contrast to the *Madhyamaka*, Middle-Way, school which held that it was mistaken to ascribe either existence or non-existence to ultimate reality. As the philosopher Roger Zim points out:

The fundamental doctrine of the Yogacara school is "that all phenomenal existence is fabricated by consciousness." Consciousness is the basis of all activities from birth to attaining enlightenment; "...all is based upon the coming into being and the ceasing to be of consciousness, i.e., of distinctions in the mind." Consciousness is the distinction making activity of the mind, both in making and having distinctions, including the states we consider the conscious as well as the unconscious. Consciousness, in making distinctions between self and other, becomes the subject which treats everything else as object. Consciousness itself is real. It exists as a series, or stream, of successive momentary awareness of events, each immediately replaced by consciousness in the next moment. Consciousness "has no substantiality ...and is dependent on the consciousness of the preceding instant."³

Thus the foundational feature of *Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda* would seem to be that all phenomena, including the appearances of apparently external objects, ultimately derive from the activities of consciousness.

However, the extent to which consciousness determines the process of reality, in particular the status of apparently external objects, has for Western philosophers become a matter of dispute. The most prevalent understanding of *Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda* is that the process of reality is in somehow entirely orchestrated by mind:

The basic ontological question - what is there in the world? - is answered unambiguously by the Indian Yogācāra theorists of the classical period: they say there is nothing but mind (*cittamātra*).⁴

As Brunnhölzl writes regarding the views of the 4th century *Yogācāra* practitioner-philosopher Vasubandhu:

The beginning of Vasubandhu's *Vimsatikavṛtti* says:

In the mahayana, the three realms are presented as being mere cognizance (*vijnaptimātra*). The sutras say, "Oh sons of the Victor, all three realms are mere mind (*cittamātra*)." ... "Mere" has the meaning of excluding referents.

All this is mere cognizance
Because of the appearance of nonexistent referents,
Just like the seeing of nonexistent strands of hair
In someone with blurred vision.

Like many other *Yogācāra* texts, Vasubandhu's indeed continues by denying the existence of material outer objects...⁵

This view is sometimes termed ‘Idealist’, although the details of *Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda* (henceforth denoted simply by ‘Yogācāra’) are much more complex and detailed than most Western notions of Idealism.

However, Garfield, whilst sometimes conceding an Idealist aspect of the Yogācāra worldview, also suggests that it does *not* necessarily indicate that consciousness is involved in the actual production of the appearance of the apparently material external world. Thus in his discussion of the famous ‘brain in a vat’ scenario in relation to Yogācāra he writes:

...Vasubandhu is an important partner in this conversation – that this conclusion is not necessarily idealistic. It is neither to deny the materiality of the brain, nor the vat, nor to deny the reality of the world to which I have only unmediated access.⁶

And:

Vasubandhu ... calls upon us to challenge neither the reality nor the illusory character of the objects we perceive, but rather our instinctive view that they, we, and our experience of our own being are given to us just in the way that they exist, or that anything ever could be.⁷

In other words there may be objects ‘out there’ but we cannot know their true and ‘real’ nature. The Buddhist scholar Georges B. J. Dreyfus writes concerning this kind of approach to *Mind-Only*:

Modern scholars have tried to come to terms with this difficult topic. One interpretation is that this system is Idealist. Another view is that this is a misinterpretation of a philosophy that emphasizes the mind dependency of perceptual elements but remains neutral as far as the status of external objects are concerned. I have not seen anything in the Tibetan tradition supporting the latter interpretation.⁸

This would mean that Garfield’s claim would amount to indicating significant incompetence on the part of Tibetan scholars. But, as we shall see, the notion that the Yogācāra perspective is neutral concerning the nature of the apparently external material world is in the mind-only of some misguided Western philosophers.

Examples of misleading presentations of the Yogācāra perspective are provided by Garfield’s account of Yogācāra psycho-metaphysics in general and his treatment of Vasubandhu’s magic elephant analogy in particular. This analogy comes towards the end of Vasubandhu’s Yogācāra text *Trisvabhavanirdeśa (Verses Explaining the Three Natures)*. Garfield proffers his idiosyncratic vision of Yogācāra both in his recently published book *Engaging Buddhism: Why it Matters to Philosophy* and in an essay entitled ‘*I am a Brain in a Vat (Or Perhaps a Pile of Sticks by the Side of the Road)*’, this essay is contained in a recently published collection of essays *Madhyamaka and Yogācāra: Allies or Rivals?* Garfield has translated and interpreted Vasubandhu’s thirty-eight verses, as have several others, including Brunnhölzl, and it is interesting to compare the difference between Garfield’s version, concocted with the help of an analytical philosophical attitude, and a correct reading of Yogācāra. It is also illuminating to view the Yogācāra, consciousness-mind-only viewpoint presented by Vasubandhu in the context of modern quantum discoveries, rather than analytic philosophy. We shall explore the possibility of a quantum-Yogācāra, which is in line with Menky’s quantum psycho-metaphysical perspective, later in this article.

We shall examine Garfield's approach after a fairly comprehensive exploration of the Yogācāra worldview. The 'cowherds' are not the first academics to subject Buddhist philosophy to Western philological and philosophical treatment. The philosopher William S. Waldron focuses on the Yogācāra and its dialogue with modern thought, and he writes in a review of a book titled *Yogācāra Phenomenology*⁹ by another Western academic, Dan Lusthaus, that:

There is still no consensus in the West as to how to best interpret, or even approach, the vast collection of Buddhist teachings and practices falling under the rubric 'Yogācāra.' A recently completed annual seminar at the American Academy of Religion, for example, hosted an impressive array of papers on an extensive range of topics for five years running without, however, finally addressing exactly 'What is, or isn't, Yogācāra?'¹⁰

What this means, of course, is that there is no consensus amongst Western academic scholars of Buddhism. The Western academic practitioner of Buddhist Studies Dan Lusthaus, in particular, has forcefully asserted, in the book reviewed by Waldron and also in an article '*What is and isn't Yogācāra*', that Yogācāra does not involve the claim that the primary ontological nature of the process of reality is of the nature of mind or consciousness. In his article Lusthaus writes that:

Yogācārins' sustained attention to issues such as cognition, consciousness, perception, and epistemology, coupled with claims such as "external objects do not exist," has led some to misinterpret Yogācāra as a form of metaphysical idealism. They did not focus on consciousness to assert it as ultimately real (Yogācāra claims consciousness is only conventionally real since it arises from moment to moment due to fluctuating causes and conditions), but rather because it is the cause of the karmic problem they are seeking to eliminate.

And that:

The school was called Yogācāra (Yoga practice) because it provided a comprehensive, therapeutic framework for engaging in the practices that lead to the goal of the bodhisattva path, namely enlightened cognition. Meditation served as the laboratory in which one could study how the mind operated. Yogācāra focused on the question of consciousness from a variety of approaches, including meditation, psychological analysis, epistemology (how we know what we know, how perception operates, what validates knowledge), scholastic categorization, and karmic analysis. Yogācāra doctrine is summarized in the term *viññapti-mātra*, "nothing-but-cognition" (often rendered "consciousness-only" or "mind-only") which has sometimes been interpreted as indicating a type of metaphysical idealism, i.e., the claim that mind alone is real and that everything else is created by mind. However, the Yogācārin writings themselves argue something very different. Consciousness (*viññāna*) is not the ultimate reality or solution, but rather the root problem. This problem emerges in ordinary mental operations, and it can only be solved by bringing those operations to an end. Yogācāra tends to be misinterpreted as a form of metaphysical idealism primarily because its teachings are taken for ontological propositions rather than as epistemological warnings about karmic problems. The Yogācāra focus on cognition and consciousness grew out of its analysis of karma, and not for the sake of metaphysical speculation. Two things should be clarified in order to explain why Yogācāra is not metaphysical idealism: 1.

The meaning of the word “idealism”; and 2. an important difference between the way Indian and Western philosophers do philosophy.¹¹

There is much that is completely correct in Lusthaus’ perspective. It is indeed true that the Yogācāra perspective held that *vijñāna*, which is *dualistic* consciousness, is a “root problem” and did not assert that dualistic consciousness was the ultimate ontological nature of the process of reality. It is also correct that Yogācāra is not ‘metaphysical idealism’ as this term is generally understood in Western philosophy. However, this still leaves the issue of what the Yogācāra position is regarding the ultimate nature of the process of reality. Lusthaus claims that “There is no Universal collective mind in Yogācāra,” however, we shall see that Yogācāra indicates that the ultimate nature of the process of reality must be *of the nature of mind*.

The first essential point concerning Yogācāra psycho-metaphysics is that it indicates that the world is experience-only, or consciousness-only (*vijñānavada*), cognition-only (*vijñapti-mātra*), or information-only and therefore outer, external, apparently material objects do not exist in the manner that they appear to, they are akin to collective illusions appearing, in a coordinated and coherent way, within the mindstreams of all sentient beings. The reason for the coherent and coordinated appearances within a group of sentient beings is the fact of collective karma. According to fully developed Yogācāra psycho-metaphysics ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness’ is a field – the cognitive field of the buddhas¹² - (analogous to a quantum field, as we shall see) of awareness and experience energy-potentiality which can take various forms. In particular there are two levels of mind/consciousness, as Vasubandhu indicates (the following verses from Vasubandhu’s *Trisvabhava-nirdeśa* are Garfield’s translation):

Because it is cause and effect,
The mind has two aspects.
As the foundation consciousness it creates thought;
Known as the emergent consciousness it has seven aspects.¹³

The ‘foundation consciousness’ or ‘store consciousness’, the *alayavijñāna*, is an undifferentiated level of experience/awareness potentiality which underlies the manifested levels of consciousness which ‘operate’ within sentient beings. When this foundation level consciousness ‘emerges’ in sentient beings it manifests as “seven aspects.” These aspects are the consciousnesses which are associated with the various sense faculties: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and two mental faculties, which are ‘thought’ and ‘self-awareness’, the latter is also termed the ‘afflicted consciousness’ because the sense of self-identity is actually, according to Yogācāra psycho-metaphysics, delusional.

The ‘foundation consciousness’, the *alayavijñāna*, is also called ‘store consciousness’ because it ‘stores’ impressions or ‘seeds’ which are generated by the perceptions, thoughts and actions of all sentient beings. In other words, all the activities of the seven emergent consciousnesses leave traces in the foundation consciousness, and on the basis of these traces the activities of future emergent consciousnesses are conditioned. Vasubandhu’s verses describe this:

The first [the foundation consciousness], because it collects the seeds
Of suffering is called “mind.”
The second [the emergent consciousnesses], because of the constant emergence
Of the various aspects of things is so called [i.e. ‘mind’].

One should think of the illusory non-existent
As threefold:
Completely ripened, grasped as other,
And as appearance.

The first, because it itself ripens,
Is the root consciousness,
The others are emergent consciousness,
Having emerged from the conceptualization of seer and seen.¹⁴

The “foundation” or “root” consciousness, then, “collects seeds” which then “ripen” as future “emergent” consciousnesses. The “appearances” experienced through the functioning of the emergent consciousnesses are “illusory” and “non-existent,” furthermore, they are “grasped” as being “other.” This means that they are “conceptualized” as “seer and seen,” which means they appear ‘dualistically’, in the guise of subject and object. This is the continuous cycle of *samsara*, the conditioned and dissatisfactory realm of cyclic dualistic experience. Within this cycle, the universal law of *karma-vipaka*, cause and effect, operates; karmic ‘seeds’ (*bija*) will produce similar future effects. Furthermore this universal karmic law operates on all aspects of the process of reality, including the appearance of the collective material world:

...since beginningless time we have been perceiving sights, sounds, smells, tastes and bodily sensations and these perceptions have been creating imprints or latencies in the ground consciousness. Habituation of having experienced a certain visual form will create a latency for that very form. Eventually, that latency will manifest from the ground consciousness as a visual form again, but it will be perceived as external to ourselves.¹⁵

Within this process there are aspects which are common to groups of sentient beings because of common karma, like the apparently ‘material’ world which is common to humans and animals, and also individual aspects:

The samsaric appearances that arise from these causes and conditions are of two kinds: common and individual. Some appearances are the result of identical causes created by many beings, so that something will be seen by everyone in common, such as everyone in a particular room seeing that it has two pillars. However, there are certain individual causes and conditions which result in beings having their own individual experiences of happiness and discomfort. ... These different perceptions are due to different latencies that have been laid down in the ground consciousness.¹⁶

The ‘foundation consciousness’ (*alayavijnana* or “ground consciousness” in the above quotes) operates within the overall space of the *dharmadhatu*, the ‘space of phenomena’. When a sentient being becomes enlightened the *alayavijnana* dissolves and the ultimate ‘truth body’ of reality – the *dharmakaya* manifests. The *dharmadhatu* is the eternal backdrop of potentiality within which all the phenomena of *samsara* and *nirvana* take place. *Samsara* is the unenlightened perspective of conditioned and dissatisfactory cyclic existence, and *nirvana* is the extinguishing of *samsara* and the dissolution of the *alayavijnana* which is the basis of *samsara*. When the *alayavijnana* dissolves, the qualities of the *dharmadhatu* shine forth as nondual wisdom, *jnana*. The term ‘*jnana*’ refers to the profound nondual awareness-wisdom of the

process of reality, the term *vi-jnana* indicates divided dualistic consciousness (the prefix ‘vi’ indicates a cut) which derives from *jnana*.

The opening verses of Vasubandhu’s text which outlines the three natures are as follows (Garfield’s translation):

The imagined, the other-dependent and
The consummate:
These are the three natures
Which should be deeply understood.

Arising through dependence on conditions and
Existing through being imagined,
It is therefore called other-dependent
And is said to be merely imaginary.

The eternal non-existence
Of what appears in the way it appears,
Since it is never otherwise,
Is known as the nature of the consummate.

If anything appears, it is imagined.
The way it appears is as duality.
What is the consequence of its non-existence?
The fact of non-duality!

What is the imagination of the non-existent?
Since what is imagined absolutely never
Exists in the way it is imagined,
It is mind that constructs that illusion.¹⁷

The next verses are those we have covered above, which elucidate the structure of mind, or consciousness, as operating at two levels, the ‘foundation/store/ground-consciousness’ (*alayavijnana*) and the dualistic consciousnesses which ‘operate’ within sentient beings. The last line in the above quote clearly indicates that the functioning of the *alayavijnana* “constructs that illusion.” The three natures, as translated by Garfield, are: *parikalpita*, or ‘imagined nature’, *paratantra*, or ‘dependent nature’, and *parinispanna*, or ‘consummate nature’. These terms are translated differently by others. The above verses, including those indicating the two levels of mind, as translated by Brunnhölzl are:

The imaginary, the other-dependent
And the perfect as well-
The three natures are held to be
The profound object to be understood by the wise.

What appears is the other-dependent
And the way that it appears is the imaginary,
Since it comes about through being subject to conditions
And since it exists as mere imagination.

The fact of the invariable absence

Of the way it appears in what appears
Is known as the perfect nature,
Since it is never otherwise.

What appears here? The imagination of what is non-existent.
How does it appear? By way of having the character of duality.
What is its nonexistence with that duality?
The very nature of nonduality in it.

What is the imagination of the nonexistent here?
It is the mind that imagines in certain ways what does not exist,
But its referents which it imagines like that,
Are absolutely never found in these ways.

Through being either cause or result,
The mind is held to be twofold:
The consciousness called “*alaya*”
And the one called “operating,” which is sevenfold.

The first is called mind, since it is accumulated
By the seeds of the latent tendencies of afflictions,
While the second is called mind
Since it operates under various aspects.

In brief, this false imagination
Is considered as threefold:
As maturational; likewise, as having characteristics;
And the other as involving appearances.

The first refers to the root-consciousness,
Since its character is the maturation of latent tendencies
The other refers to the operating consciousness,
Since it functions as cognition with the duality of seer and what is seen.¹⁸

Brunnhölzl, then, translates the three natures as 1) the imaginary, 2) the other-dependent and 3) the perfect, all consistent with Garfield’s terminology. Brunnhölzl elucidates the term ‘other-dependent’ by indicating that:

The “other” in “other-dependent” refers to the latent tendencies of various appearances of subject and object. Which in their entirety make up the *alaya-consciousness*.¹⁹

This identification of the other-dependent nature with the latent tendencies of dualistic appearances within the *alayavijnana* is validated by both analysis and other commentaries. Brunnhölzl, in his work *Mining for Wisdom within Delusion*, which is an extensive exposition of the Yogācāra text *Dharmadharmatavibhaga (Distinguishing Phenomena and the Nature of Phenomena)* as well as an exploration of both Indian and Tibetan commentaries, shows that this identification is natural and is made by all commentaries, Sthiramati for example:

...once the fundamental change of the *alaya-consciousness* (the dependent nature) occurs, the perfect nature is observed as the aspect of the freedom from duality, just like seeing a rope when one no longer sees a snake.²⁰

The situation, however, is subtle and needs to be understood with subtlety. The alaya-consciousness is the dependent nature operating dualistically and thereby seemingly ‘creating’ the illusion of the dualistic world of the manifested dualistic consciousnesses. When the “fundamental change,” which takes place within enlightenment, occurs, the dualistic appearances of the imaginary nature dissolve, and thereby the dependent nature appears to ‘transform’ into the perfect (consummate) nature. What appears to be a snake (the imaginary) is seen to be a rope, the ‘rope’ here represents the other-dependent operating within the ‘ultimate’ or ‘consummate’ nature. However, this is not a case of the imaginary being ‘taken out’, because it was never there as something extra, and there was no actual transformation from one thing into another. Brunnhölzl writes brilliantly about this:

Thus, the three natures are not three different “things.” It is not through taking away one (the imaginary nature) from the other (the dependent nature), that the third (the perfect nature) is obtained. Rather, Yogācāra takes the other-dependent nature as the experiential ground for a dynamic disillusioning and refining the way we see ourselves and the world, with the imaginary nature and the perfect nature being the two poles of mistaken and pure perception, respectively, right within that experiential ground. The other dependent nature stands for the continuity of experience, which is impure when blurred by the superimpositions of the imaginary nature and pure or perfected when the imaginary nature has been seen through and let go. However, since the realization of the perfect nature is an experience as well and not something abstract or just some nothingness ... the other-dependent nature in its pure aspect is the perfect nature. ... “other-dependent nature” is just a term for the compound ... of the imaginary nature and perfect nature, which points to the underlying experiential continuity of a mind stream that becomes increasingly aware of its own true nature.²¹

So Brunnhölzl characterizes the Yogācāra ‘three natures’ doctrine as primarily having to do with the process by which an individual mind-stream transforms its experiential continuum in order to become “aware of its own true nature.”

Brunnhölzl’s approach is in line with the presentation of Yogācāra philosophy by Gadjin M. Nagao:

This one unchanging world is originally neither contaminated nor purified, but rather neutral ... However, insofar as our interaction occurs directly or instinctively, like an animal, without reflection or self-consciousness – that is, in so far as we are not yet enlightened to its reality but remain in a deluded state – we speak of this world as a world of the imagined nature; it is an imagined world. Through our cognitions, or discriminations, or intellect, we are always projecting some kind of imagination ... This projection of false imagination changes or contaminates the world ... The sages and enlightened ones also live in this one, unchanged world. But, because they are enlightened and are free of all false imagination and attachment, for them, the world is no longer imagined and contaminated; it is pure and consummated.²²

Thus, we see that the core Yogācāra delineation of the structure of the process of reality can be delineated as a common world, which is not “unchanging” in its details, although the ‘stuff’ it is made of (*dharmata*) is unchanging in essence. This ‘world’ can be experienced in two different ways. The common world is the *paratantra*, the ‘dependent’ or ‘other-dependent’ nature, which

is the stream of ‘dependently’ or ‘other-dependently’ originated causal realm of experiential possibility. As Brunnhölzl indicates most people experience the common world of the *paratantra*, the dependent nature, through the mistaken projections of the *parikalpita*, the mistaken imaginary nature which is projected onto or into the dependent nature. A central and pervasive feature of the imaginary projection is the appearance of *svabhava*, the deep-rooted immediate experience of entities as having their own internal, independent cut-off core of ‘self-being’ or ‘inherent-existence’. The *paratantra*, the ‘other-dependent nature’ is an interconnected and interpenetrating field of causes and conditions, but when it is viewed through the projection of the imaginary nature it is experienced as being made up of independent, separate entities. And it is through a process of transformation of consciousness and mind-streams that Buddhist practitioners are able to withdraw the imaginary projection in order to experience the dependent nature in its consummated, perfected or perfect nature – the *parinispanna*.

Lusthaus uses the terms “the conceptually constructed realm” for the ‘imaginary nature’, “the realm of causal dependency” for the ‘other-dependent nature’ and “the perfectional realm” for ‘the perfected nature’. He writes:

The conceptually constructed realm is the erroneous narcissistic realm in which we primary dwell, filled with projections we have acquired and habituated and embodied. Paratantra (lit. ‘dependent on other’) emphasizes that everything arises causally dependent on things other than itself (i.e. everything lacks self-existence). The perfectional realm signifies the absence of *svabhava* (independent, self-existent, permanent nature) in everything. When the causally dependent realm is cleansed of all defilements it becomes “enlightened.”²³

So Lusthaus’ version of the meaning and relationships of the three natures is consistent with those of Brunnhölzl and Nagao. The ‘other-dependent’ realm of the ground/foundation/store-consciousness, wherein the seeds of future dualistic experiences are stored, is the foundational nature. But it has two possible modes of experience. The first mode is that which imputes or projects the solidity and inherent existence of the imaginary nature into or onto the other-dependent realm, this is the unenlightened mode. When the fictions of the imaginary nature dissolve then the enlightened mode of the perfected, perfect or consummate nature comes into being. This psycho-existential configuration is most precisely captured in Brunnhölzl’s translation:

What appears is the other-dependent
And the way that it appears is the imaginary...

It is the ‘other-dependent’ nature, which is the *alayavijnana*, the ground-consciousness, which actually does the appearing, and it produces appearances which appear *as if* a real, external, independent world of materiality were to stand over against an internal subjectivity. However, although the dualistic appearance is very powerful and persuasive, this “way it appears” is in actuality false, “the way that it appears is the imaginary.” The perfect nature manifests when the fact that the imaginary is imaginary and an illusion is directly seen:

The fact of the invariable absence
Of the way it appears in what appears
Is known as the perfect nature,
Since it is never otherwise.

This Yogācāra insight is actually a restatement, with added surrounding context and elucidation, of Madhyamaka emptiness – *sunyata*, the apparent external solidity of the apparently material world is in actuality not there. All phenomena, internal and external, lack inherent existence, or *svabhava*. However, it is also the case that all the phenomena of the apparently material world *appear* to have independent internal self-existence. The fact that this appearance of internal self-existence and solidity *is* an appearance, and not reality, means that the reality of the appearance is absent from reality.

Lusthaus' use of the phrase “the conceptually constructed realm” for the *parikalpita*, ‘the imaginary nature’, points to an important issue. The term ‘*parikalpita*’ literally means “fully conceptualized,” so Lusthaus' translation is, on the face of it, closer to the original meaning. However, Brunnhölzl points out that the term “*kalpana*,” from which “*kalpita*” is derived:

...is usually translated as “thought” or “conceptual thinking,” but basically refers to the deluded constructive activity of mind, which produces all kinds of dualistic appearances and experiences.²⁴

The hugely significant issue, however, is just how deep and efficacious the constructive activity of mind is? Lusthaus, for example, denies that the Yogācāra perspective asserts the non-existence of external entities:

Yogācāra tends to be misinterpreted as a form of metaphysical idealism primarily because its teachings are taken for ontological propositions rather than epistemological warnings about karmic problems. The Yogācāra focus on cognition and consciousness grew out of its analysis of karma, and not for the sake of metaphysical speculation.²⁵

And with regard to the material world he writes that:

...questions about the ultimate reality of non-cognitive things are simply irrelevant and useless for solving the problem of karma. ... Yogācārins emphasize that categories such as materiality (*rūpa*) are cognitive categories. “Materiality” is a word for the colors, textures sounds. Etc. ... that we experience in acts of perception, and it is only to the extent that they are experienced, perceived and ideologically grasped, thereby becoming objects of attachment, that they have karmic significance.

Lusthaus is suggesting, then, that the ‘existence’ or ‘non-existence’ ‘out there’, beyond our “cognitive categories” is irrelevant, all the Yogācārins are concerned with, according to Lusthaus, is the structures of cognition and consciousness which we throw over, so to speak, whatever, is, or is not, “out there.” Lusthaus calls this position “epistemological idealism” as opposed to ontological/metaphysical idealism. On this view, whether there is, or isn't anything “out there” is irrelevant. Lusthaus' perspective is, however, internally contradictory and incoherent. He tells us that Yogācārins are only concerned with its “analysis of karma,” and not interested in “metaphysical speculation.” What he seems to miss, however, is that the Yogācāra analysis of karma, which involves the notion of the ground consciousness (*alayavijñāna*) as a deep layer of consciousness that carries seeds of potentiality across lifetimes, automatically has the ontological-metaphysical implication that the material world must be a production of the *alayavijñāna*. All experiences which (unenlightened) sentient beings are subject to are the result of karma, their previous actions, and this must extend to experiences of materiality. It follows that experiences of materiality constitute what appears to be the material world, if there were a

‘truly material’ realm beyond our experience it would be beyond the influence of karma, and this would mean that this ‘real’ material realm would have no karmic influence on any sentient being’s world, therefore natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods and so on would have to be considered as random, not karmic, events, which is contrary to Buddhist doctrine.

In this context the Buddhist practitioner and teacher Alexander Berzin was asked:

...earthquakes are the inevitable outcome of our planet’s having arisen as it is; and it has arisen as it is as the result of the very broad collective karma of all the beings who have ever lived on this planet. Could you comment on this?

And he replied:

Karma, or more specifically, positive or negative karmic forces and karmic tendencies, whether individual or collective, ripen into various types of results. One of these results is a dominating result. A dominating result is our experiencing of the type of environment or society in which we are born or enter, and the way it treats us, or objects such as our possessions, and what happens to them.²⁶

If karma is ubiquitous in forming the experiences of all sentient beings then whatever the ‘material’ world is ultimately made up of *must* ultimately be orchestrated by the ground-consciousness. It would be a very odd situation in which a group of people were having earthquake experiences generated by their karmic cognitive categories of ‘materiality’ if the ‘real’, so to speak, unknowable “out there” world of materiality was not actually quaking. At this point it is worth quoting a conclusion the much admired twentieth-century physicist John Wheeler came to on the basis of his understanding of quantum phenomena:

Directly opposite to the concept of a universe as machine built on law is the vision of *a world self-synthesized*. On this view, the notes struck out on a piano by the observer participants of all times and all places, bits though they are in and by themselves, constitute the great wide world of space and time and things.²⁷

Wheeler suggested that the material world was constructed by the perceptions of all the sentient beings, the “observer participants,” who inhabit or have inhabited the universe. This notion he graphically represented by his ‘self-perceiving’ universe graphic image shown in figure 1. As we shall see this is a natural conclusion from the details of quantum theory. Wheeler made many such dramatic statements and indications. In 1978 he wrote that:

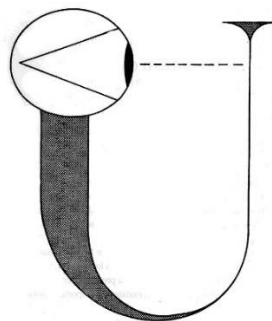


Figure 1

The universe does not ‘exist, out there,’ independent of all acts of observation. Instead, it is in some strange sense a participatory universe.²⁸

And speaking in April 2003 to the American Physical Society, he made the following remarkable, almost mystical, sequence of remarks:

The Question is what is the Question?
Is it all a Magic Show?
Is Reality an Illusion?
What is the framework of the Machine?
Darwin’s Puzzle: Natural Selection?
Where does Space-Time come from?
Is there any answer except that it comes from consciousness?
What is Out There?
T’is Ourselves?
Or, is IT all just a Magic Show?²⁹

Wheeler, and quite a few other physicists, have been ‘forced’ to the conclusion that in some way the perceptual activities of all sentient beings determines what appears to be an external material world. As we shall see in more detail later, quantum theory actually supports a Yogācāra-like ‘idealist’ or ‘idea-ist’ psycho-metaphysical worldview. Yogācāra is idealism in the sense that it denies the ontological primacy of the material world and asserts that the process of reality is a matter of mind-stuff, so to speak.

Wheeler asked, on the basis of his profound understanding of quantum physics, whether what appears to be a material world inhabited by sentient beings might be a “Magic Show.” Vasubandhu, a little under two thousand years ago, answered in the affirmative with his magic elephant analogy. The analogy involves a magician who by means of a magic spell, or ‘mantra’ is able to make a block of wood, or pile of sticks, appear in the form of an elephant. People deceived by the appearance might consider that an elephant really is “out there.” The magician, of course, knows that it is just an appearance. Here are the stanzas from Vasubandhu’s *Thirty Verses* as translated by Brunnhölzl:

Something magically created through the force of a mantra
May appear as if it had the character of an elephant,
But there is merely an appearing aspect there
And no elephant at all exists.

The elephant is the imaginary nature,
Its appearance is the other-dependent,
And the nonexistence of the elephant there
Is held to be the perfect.

Likewise, the imagination of what is non-existent
Appears from the root-mind as having the character of duality-
There is absolutely no duality there,

But a mere appearance does exist.

The root-consciousness is like the mantra,
Suchness is regarded as similar to the wood,
Imagination is considered like the appearing aspect of the elephant
And duality is like the elephant.

Once the true reality of things is realized,
Corresponding to the order of the [three natures]
The processes of knowing, relinquishment, and attainment
Are held to be simultaneous.

Here, knowing is nonobservation,
Relinquishment is held to be nonappearance,
And observation without characteristics
Is attainment, direct realization.

Through the nonobservation of duality,
The dualistic appearing aspect vanishes,
And since that vanishes, the perfect-
The nonexistence of duality-is discovered.

This is just as the nonobservation of the elephant,
The vanishing of its appearing aspect,
And the observation of the wood
In the magical illusion are simultaneous.³⁰

The following, and final stanzas indicate that when the magic illusion is ‘seen through’, and thereby disempowered, the reality of the ultimate sphere of the *dharmadhatu*, the spacious sphere of the ground of all phenomena is observed. This is the realm of “suchness” (*tathata*), which in Vasubandhu’s analogy corresponds to the wood. *Tathata* is also termed *dharmata* which is the ultimate immaterial nature of all phenomena. *Dharmata* is the ultimate immaterial ‘stuff’, using this term very loosely, which in various configurations make up all *dharmas*, all phenomena.

In Vasubandhu’s analogy the mantra, which corresponds to the root-consciousness or *alayavijnana*, operates upon the wood, which is suchness, the ultimate immaterial nondual-awareness of reality. This interaction results in the appearance of the elephant, which is the appearance of a world of duality – apprehenders and apprehended, subjects and objects. Furthermore, these dualistic appearances appear to be very ‘real’ and are taken, by unenlightened beings, to be real in the way that they appear, the imaginary nature is taken to be real. And because of this, the reality of the ultimate nature of suchness is not seen, not realized. However, “once the true reality of things is realized” the illusion dissolves and the “wood” of the ultimate reality of the nondual realm of *tathata*, or suchness, is immediately experienced and known.

The two penultimate stanzas of Vasubandhu’s exposition are as follows:

Through the observation of it being merely mind,
A knowable object is not observed.
Through not observing a knowable object,

Mind is not observed either.

Through not observing both,
The dharmadhatu is observed.
Through observing the dharmadhatu,
Mastery is obtained.³¹

These verses assert that when a practitioner fully comprehends, directly and experientially through profound meditation, that external dualistic phenomena are not as they appear to be, i.e. independent 'material' objects, but are actually collective projections of minds, then the subjective side of the duality dissolves as well. The term 'mind' refers to dualistic mind, and this dualistic mind dissolves into the non-dual experiential realm of the dharmadhatu. And the experiential nature of the dharmadhatu is the nondual *dharmadhatu-jnana* (wisdom-awareness). This nondual internally self-aware, self-luminous ground of dualistic appearances and dualistic mind (*vijnana*) is the fundamental nondual and *insubstantial* mind-energy-potentiality-awareness of the process of reality. As an advanced Yogācāra practitioner writes:

...from the moment an individual attains awakening, the absolute Reality that is the natural state of abiding is realized, and whatever exists is seen to be contained without duality in the uncreate Clear Light of the ground. When this is realized, then the practitioner recognizes that even though various phenomena arise and pass away on a continuous basis, all such phenomena have the one same flavour throughout, which is the single taste of existing in awareness. Were there no such awareness, no entities would exist ... When yogis realize the extra-temporal natural state of mind stripped naked as mere awareness, it is then that consciousness dawns no longer as consciousness but as gnosis (*jnana*, *ye-shes*) or 'non-dual knowing.' All phenomena dawn as innately pure. Thus the many synonyms, "basic goodness, Absolute Totality, Mahamudra, or the mind of uncreate Clear Light," refer not to the mind (*sems*) as such but to the essence of mind (*sems-nyid*), or mind in its original natural state ...³²

And also:

The metaphysical doctrine of the ancient Yoga tradition puts forth an understanding of the creation, progression and eventual destruction of the Universe that seems surprisingly modern, to the extent in which it agrees with leading edge advances in science, quantum mechanics and cosmology. Those who go deeply into this subject, will find this doctrine rooted in a profound understanding of a great mystery called PARAMĀRTHA, which in Indian philosophy means 'the Absolute', devoid it is said of all attributes, and essentially distinct from manifested finite Being. The manifestation (*pravṛtti*) and re-absorption of the Universe, or domain of finite Being, and how the latter relates to the transcendent infinitude of the Absolute has been central to Yogacara inquiry from the beginning of its history ... It is believed that by means of proliferation (*prapanca*, differentiation), the innate essence of being in three forms (*trisvabhava*) manifests or is transformed, as it were, into active mentation in the act of Creation. This is then explained as the coming into being of *alaya-vijnana*, universal or cosmic consciousness, which is a concept that has also been held in Western philosophy by many great thinkers, from Plato, Plotinus and others...³³

Here is the true meaning of *Yogācāra-Chittamatra*. And it turns out that there are in a sense two levels of mind-only. The first is the dualistic level of *vijnapti-matra*, or ‘cognition-only’, the dualistic world of subjects and objects are a matter of repeated and continuous cognition and perception, external objects are appearances which ultimately do not exist independently of perceiving minds. Once the illusion of this cognitive process is penetrated, the second, deeper level of insubstantial (as opposed to the substantialist *Chittamatra* perspective) nondual absolute mind-awareness becomes apparent. From this perspective it becomes apparent that all levels of the process of reality are transformations of mind-awareness-consciousness. The *paratantra*, which in unenlightened mode is also the *alayavijnana*, can be experienced as dualistic, whereby it manifests as the imaginary, or it may be experienced non-dualistically, in which case the *paratantra* is experienced as it really is, as an illusory play of appearances within the perfect nature of the nondual experiential realm of the *dharmadhatu*. As the ninth century Zen Patriarch Huang Po declared:

This pure Mind, the source of everything, shines forever and on all with the brilliance of its own perfection. But the people of the world do not awake to it, regarding only that which sees, hears, feels and knows as mind. Blinded by their own sight, hearing, feeling and knowing, they do not perceive the spiritual brilliance of the source substance. If they would only eliminate all conceptual thought in a flash, that source substance would manifest itself like the sun ascending through the void and illuminating the whole universe without hindrance or bounds.³⁴

In this depiction the ultimate ground of the process of reality, the perfect nature, which manifests when all of the imaginary projections of the dualistic sensory and mental consciousnesses are withdrawn, is portrayed as a “pure” mind-energy pervading the “whole universe.”

In the light of this, the picture of Yogācāra psycho-metaphysics which is presented by some Western ‘analytic’ philosophers is very mundane. In *Engaging Buddhism (EB)*, Garfield suggests that according to Yogācāra:

...the phenomena we experience are dependent on our conceptual imputation simply because they are all really nothing more than projections of our consciousness, mere ideas and not external phenomena.³⁵

In this connection Garfield cites Vasubandhu’s opening verse from his *Twenty Stanzas*:

All this is merely consciousness,
Because all intentional objects are non-existent.
It is just as one who suffers from ophthalmia
Sees such non-existent things as moons and hairs.

However, when Garfield turns his attention to Vasubandhu’s *Treatise on the Three Natures (Trisvabhavanirdesa)* he believes, bizarrely, that Vasubandhu has changed his philosophical tack in the direction of phenomenology:

...it is reasonable to say that Vasubandhu explicitly articulates an idealistic perspective in his *Twenty Stanzas* and *Thirty Stanzas* ... and Vasubandhu in his final work *Treatise on the Three Natures (Trisvabhavanirdesa)* as developing a phenomenology. We might also say that the *Entry into Lanka* grounds the idealism ... whereas the *Discourse*

Unravelling the Thought, particularly the *Paramartha-samutgata* chapter ... grounds the phenomenology.³⁶

He then makes the extraordinary, and mistaken, claim concerning “radical idealism” that:

Few in the West today, and even few contemporary Buddhists, take radical idealism seriously, but phenomenology is a central concern of contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science. As we shall see, Yogācāra phenomenology can be an important resource for contemporary thought.³⁷

However, as we shall see, Yogācāra is not phenomenology as practiced by Western philosophers. It is rather the case that some Western philosophers, such as Garfield, falsely imagine Yogācāra to be phenomenology in order to practice Western style philosophy in a Buddhist context. Furthermore, with regard to Garfield’s claim the possibility of taking “radical idealism” seriously, not only do contemporary Buddhists who are true to the metaphysical worldview of traditional Buddhism, rather than adherents to a misguided modified Western materialist Buddhism (which is not actually Buddhism at all), take the idea that the ground of the process of reality is mind-stuff seriously, but modern physicists are being forced into a quantum-Yogācāra “radical idealism” metaphysical perspective by quantum discoveries.

In his book *Engaging Buddhism* Garfield offers the following ‘phenomenological’ exposition of the ‘three natures’:

Every object, on this view, has these three natures. When I consider my coffee cup, for instance, it appears to me to be an independently existing external object that possesses all of the properties I naturally ascribe to it, including a color, feel, or some other property, that I simply register through veridical perception and cognition. This is its imagined nature. In fact the object as I experience is represented in my brain as a complex set of perceptive and cognitive processes, and may be experienced quite differently by beings with very different kinds of minds, for instance an insect or a dog. The fact that as an object of consciousness it is dependent on my cognitive architecture is its dependent nature. And seeing this leads me to see that as an object of experience, while it exists in one way (as dependent) but appears in another (the imagined). It is devoid of existence in the way that it is imagined, and this is its consummate nature.

At first sight this may appear to be a precise statement of the Yogācāra ‘three natures’ doctrine, but, because Garfield presents the delineation of the natures in a materialist guise, it is in fact a travesty. It is quite clear that all three of the natures within the Yogācāra worldview are of the nature of mind, and the appearance of the material world, including ‘brains’, derives from the karmic activities within the paratantra, the alayavijnana or the other-dependent nature, so ‘brains’ are appearances within the mind-stuff of the paratantra/alayavijnana. It follows, therefore, that to represent, as Garfield does, the paratantra, other-dependent nature, as being an aspect of the process of reality which highlights the fact that “objects” are “represented in my brain as a complex set of perceptive and cognitive processes” is highly misleading because it suggests that ‘brains’ and ‘coffee cups’ actually exist as fully paid up material entities. This amounts to an attempt to completely remove the Yogācāra from its Buddhist soteriological context in order to cast it into the context of a fundamentally materialist mode of Western analytic philosophy. And this is a crude and mistaken attempt to appropriate subtle Buddhist psycho-metaphysical analysis for the purposes of a much less precise, cogent and competent Western academic discourse.

Consider what the physicist Henry Stapp states about the ultimate existence of apparently material entities such as ‘brains’:

...no such brain exists; no brain, body, or anything else in the real world is composed of those tiny bits of matter that Newton imagined the universe to be made of.³⁸

According to Stapp and other significant physicists all material entities emerge from an “idea-like” quantum realm of potentiality:

We live in an *idealike* world, not a matterlike world. The material aspects are exhausted in certain mathematical properties, and these mathematical features can be understood just as well (and in fact better) as characteristics of an evolving idealike structure. There is, in fact, in the quantum universe no natural place for matter.³⁹

Much contemporary Western philosophy tends to ply its trade with the bizarre idea that metaphysical concerns can be decided by purely conceptual word-spinning without a look at what science has uncovered about the nature of the functioning of reality. As Stapp has pointed out:

Philosophers of mind appear to have arrived, today, at less-than-satisfactory solutions to the mind-brain and free will problems, and the difficulties seem, at least *prima facie*, very closely connected with their acceptance of a known-to-be-false understanding of the nature of the physical world, and of the causal role of our conscious thoughts within it.⁴⁰

Because of its soteriological concerns Buddhist philosophy was not isolated from a concern with the nature of apparently external material world as well as the apparently internal subjective world. The pursuit of enlightenment requires knowledge of the ultimate functioning of reality, and, because of this, Buddhist philosophy is not philosophy as practiced by many Western philosophers who *only* indulge in conceptual analysis, often with a hidden materialist bias, as if such a procedure is able on its own to decide metaphysical issues.

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(Continued on Part II)