

Yogacara Buddhism

Introduction

Yogacara (one whose practice is yoga meditation) is the second of the two main philosophical schools of Indian Mahayana Buddhism, the earlier being Madhyamaka Buddhism.¹ Its system of philosophy and psychology was so influential during the middle of the first millennium CE that most schools of Mahayana Buddhism drew upon it in creating their own doctrinal systems, including Zen. At the heart of Yogacara is the belief that our mind constructs our experiences. This emphasis is reflected in other names for the school like “mere mind” (*citta-matra*) and “consciousness-only” (*weishi*). However, the main impetus of the school was less philosophical than how consciousness (*vajna*) creates the experience of the painful cycle of repeated births and deaths humans go through until they attain nirvana (*samsara*). This insight was to be achieved through meditation and other yogic practices (thus, Yoga-cara).

Yogacara is less well known in the West than other Mahayana schools like Zen. But with the increasing availability of Yogacara texts and the growing presence of Tibetan Buddhism, it is becoming a standard focus of discussion in many Buddhist centers. This primer emphasizes the history and development of the school, its key teachings and practices, and how it relates to an emerging modern-day neuroscience conception of reality.

History and Development

Yogacara emerged as a cohesive school during the late fourth and early fifth centuries, largely through the teachings of the Brahmin brothers Asanga and Vasubandhu, and Maitreyanatha, perhaps the master of Asanga. Asanga (310-90?) is thought to have

written many key Yogacara texts like the *Mahayana-samgraha* (The Mahayana Compendium), the *Abhidharma-samuccaya* (the main Abhidharma text for Mahayana Buddhists), and the *Yogacarabhumi* (the Stages of Yogacara). Vasubandhu (4th century CE), who explained the details of Yogacara thought most clearly at the time, wrote three foundational texts: *Trisvabhava-Nirveda* (Treatise on the Three Natures), *Vimsatika* (Treatise in Twenty Stanzas), and *Trimsikaika* (Treatise in Thirty Stanzas). Maitreyanatha (270-350 CE), the most obscure of the three co-founders, may have written the *Madhyanta-vibhaya-karika*, a key work in 112 verses. Later commentators like Sthiramati (sixth century CE), Dignaga (ca. 480-540 CE), Dharmapala (sixth to seventh centuries CE), and Dharmakirti (seventh century CE) also made important contributions to Yogacara thought. Foundational ideas of Yogacara Buddhism are present in earlier Mahayana sutras, especially the *Pratyutpanna Samdhi* (early first century CE), the *Samdhinirmocana* (second century CE), and the *Dasabhumike* (pre-third century CE).²

The Yogacara system of thought entered China in the early fifth century CE in the form of translated texts, an example of which is the Lankavatara Sutra.³ These texts, whose message was commingled (and often distorted) with East Asian cultural interpretations, resulted in the formation of sub-schools like Faxian (Consciousness Only, among other names) in China, Beopang in Korea, and Hosso in Japan, though all sub-schools taught that the external phenomena we see are a product of our mind. Yogacara as a system of Buddhist thought entered Tibet through the efforts of Santaraksita (late eighth-century) and later of Atisa (c.980-1055), and in Japan by Dosho (629-700), a Japanese monk who studied Yogacara in China under Hsuan-tsang (when Dosho returned to Japan he founded the Hosso sub-school).

As a system of thought, Yogacara flourished most prominently in India into the sixth century, after which it merged with other systems of thought, such as a modified version of Svatantrika-Madhyamaka in the eighth century. Yogacara in India and China died out as a formal school by the eleventh century, though it continues on in some areas to the present day, as in Japan (the Hosso school), and is being currently revived in some areas like China.

Key Teachings

The Yogacara school emerged in India in response to logical problems some thinkers saw in both Abhidharma (study of the dharma) and Madhyamaka (middle way) thought.⁴ These and other concerns were eventually tied together into a “notoriously complex doctrinal system,”⁵ a feature that contributed (in conjunction with its Indian mode of thought, which was alien to East Asian worldviews) to its demise as an independent school in most areas of Asia. Unlike the externally focused analytical approach of Western science, Yogacarins derived their understanding of the nature of the mind and of experience from yoga-based meditational experiences, that is, through a subjective way of understanding that relied on a state of deep trance (samadhi). At least initially, their endeavor concentrated on ways of knowing things (on epistemologies) rather than on statements about what exists in reality (on ontology), for their goal was to extinguish the pervasive suffering caused by ignorance of the way we humans really create phenomena. In this section we review Yogacara’s key concepts of representation-only, the eight consciousnesses, the three natures, emptiness, and the five categories of beings.⁶

Representation-only. A core and underlying feature of Yogacara philosophy is the concept *vijnapti-matra*, which has been translated as consciousness-only, mind-only, and mere representation, among other phrases. The notion is that we in our unenlightened state take our experiences as truly representing actual phenomena “out there,” a duality (between inner and outer) that obscures our understanding of reality as it really is. In early Yogacara this was not meant to imply that only consciousness is real, which is a form of idealist ontology, but rather that thinking in terms of “mind-only” (that our experiences are generated by the mind) is the most appropriate way of learning the truth about the nature of the world around us.⁷ Some later forms of Yogacara do maintain that only “mind” is real.

The eight consciousnesses. A key dissatisfaction with Abhidharma thought among Yogacarins was its scheme of six consciousnesses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and a mode of thinking that relies on language and mental images) as a model of how the mind constructs the reality we experience. Among the troubling problems were: If the six consciousnesses disappear at death, how is one’s karmic load and perhaps other past experiences transferred from one life to the next? Where is the knowledge that we gain, and at times forget, stored? How are we able to retrieve this information? How does the mind divide experiences into “good” and “bad” modes of activity? How is it that we are able to maintain cognitive awareness of anything at all, especially when the six consciousnesses become dormant when we sleep or are in a coma? and If there is no “I” (Buddhism’s no-self doctrine), how do we interact with our surrounding environment? Yogacara Buddhists response to questions like these was to add a subconscious layer to our mind, a seventh and

eighth consciousness. The added seventh consciousness (*manas*) attaches to the base eighth consciousness and assumes it to be an actual self (an *atman* or immutable essence), with the consequence that that assumption is the source of extreme self-centeredness and selfishness in human beings. Yogacara views this as the cause of all human problems. The eighth (storehouse or store) consciousness (*alaya-vijnana*) acts like a receptacle into which the latent karmic energy of past and present habitual tendencies or ingrained dispositions (*bijas*) are “perfumed “ into and stored. It came to be seen as the ultimate ground of existence, for it also contains the never-interrupted consciousness (unlike the intermittent six surface consciousnesses) that even continues to exist after death to form new beings in their next life.⁸

Since, according to the doctrine of karma, all freely chosen and intended moral acts have some kind of negative, positive, or neutral/indeterminant consequence, their imprints in the *alaya-vijnana* predispose one to behave in certain ways in the future. These dispositions, which are based on all of our past experiences through our many lives, serve as a first subconscious transformation of the objects of our cognition. A second subconscious transformation occurs in the *manas*, which perceives experiences from its’ own self-preserving and self-interested “what’s in it for me” perspective. A third now conscious transformation is then performed by the five sense consciousnesses and the thinking consciousness, especially through its entanglement with wholesome, unwholesome, and neutral mental factors like desire, indifference, arrogance, and resolve.⁹ As a consequence, we do not and cannot see things as they actually are, for our mind transforms cognized objects.

When the right sets of conditions arise and karmic impressions mature in the alaya-vijnana a new karma-generating individual is created. If the individual remains in ignorance of the way we cognize phenomena, the cycle of samsara continues.

The three natures. The Yogacara doctrine of the nature of perception (*trisvabhava*) is a further attempt to describe how we human beings experience (perceive) the world. The three natures are the dependent (*paratantra*), which is the flow of perceptions beyond language, the imagined or mundane (*parikalpita*), which is the product of the falsifying and misleading activity of language, and the perfected or fully accomplished (*parinispanna*), which is the true nature of things. The doctrine was perhaps intended as a corrective to the Madhyamaka theory of the two truths, which leaves a troubling disjuncture between everyday experience and enlightenment. The dependent nature in the three natures theory is an intermediary between everyday experiences on the one hand and enlightenment on the other, for it is imagined nature in one part and perfected nature in another. It was and is argued that all things that can be known fall under the umbrella of the three natures.¹⁰

Emptiness in Yogacara. The concept of emptiness or nothingness (*sunyata*) is a central notion of Buddhism, though it was interpreted in different ways in different schools and traditions. Most basically, the notion refers to the absence of something, but what that something is varied. For the Madhyamaka, all composite things are empty because they arise conditionally and are thus mere appearances. As a consequence, they are devoid of an essence or self-nature.¹¹ Yogacarins

reinterpreted the notion of emptiness to mean that while the construction of the nonexistent is empty of a subject-object duality, it nevertheless has intrinsic nature. Said another way, since things like phenomena and sense-data do not exist apart from the flow of perceptions in the mind (as in a dream), the mind itself as what remains has real existence and can be equated with emptiness. Consequently, to say that something is empty is to say that it is empty of something else (such as external existence in the above example).¹²

The five categories of beings. Unlike other Mahayana schools, Yogacarins do not believe that every sentient being has an innate, enlightened buddhanature. Rather, individuals possess their own set of innate seeds that confine them to one of five varying states of enlightenment and to no other. The states range from the full capacity to realize their enlightened buddhanature on one end to a complete lack of that capacity on the other. The position is based on ideas in the Lankavatara Sutra and the Samdhinirmocana Sutra. The position was considered highly controversial and was roundly criticized by other schools and teachings (like the Lotus Sutra) that maintained there was universal buddhahood. It also led to despair at times among Yogacara practitioners, who fretted that all their practice could come to nothing, since they were unable to establish what category they fit into in their opaque storehouse consciousness.¹³

Practicing Yogacara

As in Buddhism in general, the goal of Yogacara is to relieve people of their suffering by bringing them to a state of enlightenment, which in Mahayana Buddhism is freedom from attachment to illusions, assumptions, and cravings. The practice is

based on a comprehensive understanding of the emptiness of self and things, the structure and psychological functions of the mind, and the uniqueness of individual human beings (mainly because of the unique composition of each storehouse consciousness). Since each person is unique, specific patterns of practice will vary, though the general framework is similar.¹⁴

Having learnt that intellectual understanding alone is insufficient for obtaining liberation from mistaken habitual modes of knowing things ingrained in us through innumerable lifetimes, Yogacarins engage in yoga-based meditation practices into their mistaken ways of knowing. They also rely on traditional Buddhist practices like the six paramitas (generosity, patience, and so on) and the four methods of winning people over (kind words, altruistic activity, and so on). Underlying the practice is faith that living a life in which positive karmic energy is continually deposited into the storehouse consciousness will eventually result in liberation from suffering. All of this activity and self-reflection is to be carried out in the midst of the world of people and not in isolation on a far distant mountain, and must be a constant and sustained exertion.

Yogacara practice is difficult for several reasons. First, practitioners must have an intimate understanding of Yogacara doctrine, and experience affirms that it takes on average three years to master that doctrine. And second, Yogacara is a form of gradual teaching that requires training over many hundreds of kalpas (three eons) because our mistaken understandings are so ingrained within us.¹⁵ The practice during this incredibly long period of training is generally divided into five stages of cultivation (preparation, application, insight, cultivation, and completion).

Neuroscience and Yogacara

If we are truly concerned with the ways we misunderstand phenomena, then we cannot be content alone with Buddhist psychologies some 1,500 years old, as insightful as they were at the time. Modern science and philosophy grapple with many of the same issues as Yogacara, especially with our ways of knowing and with what truly exists. An example is the work of cognitive scientist Donald D. Hoffman, who, using evolutionary game theory, concludes that our perception of an independent reality must be an illusion.¹⁶ A sampling of his other conclusions after three decades of research are: rather than being a reasonable decent simulation of reality, our perceptions are nothing like reality; there are no public objects sitting out there in some preexisting space; and our illusion guides our behavior and it hides a complex reality that we don't need to know.¹⁷ For Hoffman, the reason for our illusion is that evolution is about fitness, rather than truth; evolution has shaped us with perceptions that allow us to survive, and that's all.

Hoffman concludes that objective reality is just other conscious agents, just points of view; it is conscious agents all the way down (!), a view he calls conscious reality. This, of course, resembles mind-only forms of Yogacara! Still, since as human beings we are programmed to believe in a physical external world, it's a very difficult perspective to let go of, whether among neuroscientists, Yogacarins, or people in general.

The following notes and references provide a doorway into the complex and for many baffling world of Yogacara.

Notes

1. For a very readable introduction to Yogacara, see Tagawa (2009). For a sampling of other overviews from a variety of often-dense academic perspectives, see Siderits (2007:146-179), Jians (2010), Lusthaus (2002), Waldrow (2003), and Williams (2009:84-102). Yogacara developed, of course, within the context of standard Buddhist concepts like no-self, impermanence, dependent arising, right view, and karma
2. For a brief history of Yogacara scholars and texts in India, see Williams (2009:86-88); for East Asia, see Tagawa (2009:xix-xxi). Early Yogacara teachings are most strongly associated with Paramartha (499-569), Xuanzang (600-664), and Kuiji (632-682) in China, and Woncheuk (631-696) in Korea, each one of which wrote commentaries on Yogacara texts.
3. Not all scholars agree that the Lankaravata Sutra should be included as a Yogacara text, for it is a later text that combines tathagatagarbha concepts with elements of Yogacara theory in a manner unknown to the co-founders of the school.
4. For an accessible overview of the Abhidharma movement, see Siderits (2007:105-37). For the Madhyamaka, see the primer in this MZMC series.
5. Tagawa (2009:xxv).
6. Besides these and many additional terms, Yogacara thinkers also engaged in many other issues than those mentioned here. Examples of the many lists in Yogacara are the four aspects of cognition, the three categories of transformed objects, the three meanings of store, the six connotations of seeds, the four afflictions of the manas, the fifty-one mental factors, and the two aspects of the storehouse – and this is just a start!
7. That is, there might well be a world “out there,” but it is obscured by our mind.
8. The first six consciousnesses are sometimes referred to as the surface mind and the last two the deep mind. For the meaning of “perfuming” in the imprinting of karmic impressions in the Alaya-Vijnana, see Tagawa (2009:32-35).

9. For the three transformations and 51 mental factors postulated by Yogacarins, see Tagawa (2009).
10. For a somewhat dense but brief and lucid review of the three natures, see Williams (2009:88-92).
11. Which makes their development possible. This is not nihilism, which is the position that things do not exist, but rather the position that things are nothing besides appearances. In this interpretation the concept is equivalent in meaning to suchness (*tathata*) and ultimate reality.
12. Need an example here of how emptiness works in Yogacara.
13. Nonetheless, Tagawa (2009:130) maintains that regardless it is possible to make “steady and certain advancement long the Buddha-path.”
14. For Yogacara practice, see Connelly (2016)
15. A kalpa is greater than the amount of time it would take for a piece of silk to wear away a rock one cubic mile in size if it was rubbed against the rock only once every hundred years. It’s an incredibly long period of time!
16. See Hoffman (2000) and Gefter (2016). Also see Braver (2012), Epworth (2014), Hood (2012), and Loy (2010) for a small sample of a growing literature. Of course, a strong voice for this convergence between science and spirituality is the Dalai Lama (2005).
17. John Wheeler, a physicist, expresses it this way: “Useful as it is under ordinary circumstances to say that the world exists ‘out there’ independent of us, that view can no longer be upheld.” Cited in Berman (2016).

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Appendix: Yogacara Principles

The following sampling of Yogacara principles provides some idea of the thinking of the school (taken from Tagawa [2009], with page numbers):

- Intellectual understanding alone is not powerful enough to change (for Buddhists) innumerable lifetimes of habituation of the I-notion. (xi)
- It is nothing other than our mind that constructs things and determines their content. (4)
- What we actually perceive are images of the things of the external world as they are transformed by our own consciousness, and reflected onto our own mind. (5)
- We transform and perceive things in the way that provides the greatest convenience for carrying out our life. (6)
- What we call cognition is nothing but the the mind seeing the mind. (8)
- There is no reason to assume that we will ever see anything as it actually is. (8)
- Cognized objects have already been colored and transformed by our minds in the process of their manifestation. (10)

- We must assume that there is a subconscious mind that, while serving as the basis for our existence, is ceaselessly exerting great influence on our conscious daily lives. (15)
 - Objects of cognition are transformed by a deep attachment to the self, and the resulting tendency to protect and further that self. (17)
 - The religious world can only be established on sincere reflection in the course of our everyday living. (21)
 - Within the process of cognizing an object, our mind becomes entwined in the sensory awareness of liking and disliking. (22)
 - Suffering is produced from our attachment to life. (34)
 - Real, self-reflection can only happen in the context of everyday, normal activity. (47)
 - The responsibility for what occurs in our life is entirely our own. (51)
 - Neither our attachment to self not attachment to dharmas can be easily severed. (121)
 - The content of our cognition arises in dependence upon the Alaya-vijnana, after which it is subject to three distinguishable layers of alteration. (131)
 - This kind of practice is not so simple. (132)
 - People are nothing other than what they create by their own activities. (138)
- Here are two principles from versions of Yogacara that support some form of idealism:
- Nothing exists apart from the mind; once you understand this you realize that mind too is non-existent.
 - External objects are merely products of language.
- A few principles that Yogacara opposes:
- We [have] an ego that we see as possessing its own inherent existence. (xi)
 - We are accurately recognizing the people and events surrounding us as we carry out our daily lives. (5)
 - We see things as they actually are. (8)
 - Our daily lives progress according to our conscious intentions. (61)