

PUTTING THE BUDDHISM/SCIENCE DIALOGUE ON A NEW FOOTING

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YOGĀCĀRA BUDDHISM: WAKING UP FROM OUR COLLECTIVE OBJECTIVIST SLUMBER



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Yogācāra Buddhism: Waking Up from our Collective Objectivist Slumber *William Waldron, PhD*

Waldron opened by explaining that, in planning the meeting, the purpose of asking participants to provide the personal context for their choice of studies was to evoke a more engaged dialogue. His own story involved the internal conflict of a typical upper middle class environment in the post-Vietnam era, and his acute awareness of the fragility of mental and emotional stability, in short, sanity. His initial exposure to Buddhism immediately “made sense” and led to years of travel in India and Nepal, followed by the academic study of Buddhism at the University of Wisconsin and Otani University, in Kyoto, Japan. He found that cognitive science and especially evolutionary biology provide perspectives that have helped him better understand Buddhist traditions.

He began his presentation with the early Buddhist understanding of experience through the lens of Yogācāra, an early Mahayana school of Buddhism that developed around the 3rd or 4th century C.E., and which seems consonant with the early teachings of the Buddha in the Pali texts.

A central question for the Yogācāra, equally important to cognitive science, is why we feel so strongly that we are a self, against all evidence to the contrary. Yogācāra philosophy views this in terms of Three Natures. The first, “false imagination,” is when the world is divided into objects and entities that are imagined to exist independently and essentially. This false imputation occurs due to our unconscious cognitive processes, in particular the subject/object dichotomy, as well as the influences of culture. Through analysis of these cognitive processes—the “dependent nature”—and their resulting insight, we can become liberated by seeing through them, realizing the “perfected nature.” That is, once we recognize that entities exist in causal, dependent relationships rather than being essential and independent entities then we can effect positive change by removing the causes of suffering. One difficulty in conveying these ideas to Western students arises because “self” is not an adequate translation of *atman*, which is a philosophical rather than psychological concept.

This view of life as a process of interactive relationships is shared by science, but whereas science tends to remove human experience from the equation, Buddhism focuses on it. It is less interested in an objective picture of reality than in how we relate to the world.

Waldron then described the Buddhist theory of how cognitive awareness arises, which is considered the result of causal interactions between objects and sensory faculties, instead of the subject or agent of action, as in the Cartesian view. In this model, cognitive awareness is a function of the world interacting with biology, inseparable from other simultaneous processes (and similar to George Lakoff’s analysis of color perception), such that the external world and our awareness of it are correlative and mutually defined. There is no possibility of a purely objective view of the world separate from our awareness of it. What we experience as unenlightened beings is a function of, and is delimited by, our cognitive faculties.

Thoughts, ideas, and memories are treated with the same analysis as the perception of external objects: they interact with a mental faculty to produce a mental form of cognitive awareness. These are traditionally seen as functions of speech (reflecting the influence of oral culture) and their ongoing ‘proliferation’ contributes to

the illusion of selfhood associated with the afflictive habits of greed, hatred, and delusion. Their habitual nature corresponds to the cyclic nature of samsara, and it is only at the very end of the path that the conceit of selfhood comes to an end.

This early schema eventually developed into the more sophisticated and elaborately detailed analyses and taxonomies of mental processes of the Abhidharmic period. We can consider these in multiple ways: as phenomenological systems of mapping experience, as semiological systems for creating formally distinct differences, as well as metapsychological “theories about theories” of mind, all converging on an ultimate account of “how things are”—similar on many levels to the approaches of modern cognitive science. The early Mahayana critique of Abhidharma also suggests similarities with science: being reductionist, Abhidharma cannot explain top-down causality in the lived world, thus failing to fulfill its initial rationale—the alleviation of suffering. The Mahayana thus framed the Abhidharmic analysis as conventional rather than ultimate truth. Nagarjuna explained conventional truths as dependent on the designation of the mind conceiving them; like maps, they are relative to a specific point of reference and never absolutely complete.

This also has implications for our efforts at transdisciplinarity, in that different disciplines construct different maps that offer particular utility and insight but that are not wholly reducible to each other. Waldron drew upon Michael Rose’s analyses to summarize how different levels of organization, such as different scientific disciplines, are fundamentally irreducible, each with its own integrity, laws, and autonomy. They relate best via the metaphor of translation, which should not be confused with simple equivalence.

Waldron invited discussion, and Sean Smith questioned the dependence of conventional truth on conceptual designation, given the many factors that are not conceptually organized that science has found to contribute to perception, particularly in non-human sentient beings. Waldron recognized Smith’s point as anticipating the Yogacāra position that developed two centuries after Nagarjuna, which called for a deeper understanding of role that cognitive schemas play in the construction of any given experience, and of a deeper notion of “concept,” almost a kind of proto-conceptuality.

Others raised questions as to whether the deconstructive Buddhist analysis of mental processes was soteriologically useful or just a further exercise in proliferating conceptualization. Waldron responded that this too was part of a traditional critique and that the schemas offered are merely models that may be helpful to elucidate experience. If not helpful, they need not be used.

Linda Heuman commented on the “hegemonic rationalism” of our understanding of what a concept is: other forms of sentience operate with notions of home, safety, or predator, which are also in some sense concepts. Michael Sheehy noted that the Buddhist understanding of cognitive processes includes the assumption of knower and known in relationship in a world, which could apply to any form of sentience. Waldron added that the Yogacāra argue that classification and differentiation is constitutive of any object, and differs from a more fundamental process of apperception, all of which occur simultaneously. He also noted that, apart from our concerns over the translation of particular terms, the taxonomies generated by Buddhist tradition were in constant flux, and that any taxonomy is dependent on its purpose. Kalina Christoff expressed excitement at this topic, as many cognitive scientists recognize that their current, much-

used ontologies and taxonomies are not effective, and that Buddhism may contribute to correcting this, particularly in its emphasis on mental functions as processes rather than things. She criticized psychology and cognitive neuroscience for focusing on the contents of thoughts rather than on their processes and suggested that new taxonomies of processes might be developed.

Elena Antonova objected that the problem in her view was less the distinction between things and processes than the lack of attention to subjective experience. Christoff added that building more appropriate taxonomies of experience would help greatly to bring the study of subjective experience into the conversation. Clifford Saron responded to Antonova, suggesting on the possibility of self-reflexively applying the concepts from one's professional knowledge of cognitive science onto one's own subjective experience, much as a phenomenologist would.

Waldron now turned his presentation to the Yogācāra view, developed by Asanga and Vasubandhu, which is built on the Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness. The Yogācārins saw cognitive processes as dynamically constructive, most of whose processes operate unconsciously through the “store-house consciousness” (*ālaya-vijñāna*), where the seeds of karmic potential mature and develop. This form of subliminal awareness is itself dependent on the operation of the material sense faculties and of the predispositions for conceptual proliferation—including the social influences of language and culture. Our subliminal awareness of being in the world is thus informed and pre-structured by the processes associated with *ālaya-vijñāna*, resulting in an uninterrupted perception, from moment to moment, of the continuity of the shared world whose aspects are not clearly delineated. The task of ending one's grasping to a sense of self is thus recognized as all the more difficult, given these unconscious processes where the repetitions of habit reinforce our preconceptions and “fatten our predispositions.”

The same causal model operates not only from moment to moment, but with the operation of karma over multiple lifetimes. It also gives rise to the idea of shared, inter-subjective, species-specific worlds. Thus human perceptions are similar for all those who share the similar karma to be born as human beings. The world appears to us as it does because of the kinds of faculties that we have, including a capacity for abstract language, such that the specific contours of our shared world—configured by the specific lexicon and syntax of our particular language—inform how experience, construe, and respond to things. The very structure of language also shapes our self-referential habits of thought, which give rise to afflicted mental states.

Waldron then used the Yogācāra analysis of false imputation of the subject/object dichotomy to reflect on the transdisciplinary challenge of contemplative neuroscience as it attempts to merge third-person objective measures with first-person phenomenological reports. Both of these are themselves highly complex cognitive constructs and it may be problematic to assume that combining two such constructs, with all the unconscious processes that support and structure them, will give us a view of what is real. He questioned whether we can ever wholly explain something using even a single discipline, let alone the data and the methods of multiple disciplines: we may be in the Tower of Babel without realizing it. Trained investigators explicate data in ways that are only meaningful within a given theoretical framework, which has its own built-in blind spots. First-person and third-person modes of investigation are as plagued by these problems as

any other aspect of the taxonomic enterprise. We can't do without taxonomy but we should at least be clear about the constructed nature of all taxonomic systems.

In the final discussion, Saron acknowledged that Waldron's identification of the nested problems of neuro-phenomenology as a "solution" challenged much of the program of the Mind & Life Institute—a program that needs to move forward, but need not claim to have arrived at any final resolution.

David Germano raised the question of human agency in the scientific realm as a parallel to the problem of agency in the operations of individual and collective karma. Waldron reframed the question by asking under what causes and conditions intention arises, where first causes are both indiscernible and ultimately irrelevant to understanding intention as a driver of human behavior. Reframing the question in this way is typical of Indian Buddhist analyses of mind and this depersonalization of experience is intended to remedy our afflicted fixation on self. Germano continued by asking if Yogacāra theorizes contemplative experience as effortful or effortless, and if the *ālaya-vijñāna* is understood in relation to effortful path structures or an effortless manifestation of Buddha nature. Waldron explained that the concept of Buddha nature does appear in the earliest Yogacāra texts, but only in juxtaposition with, not systematically related, to the model of unconscious mind, and that this relationship was only systematically developed in later texts. Elena Antonova observed that the constructivist framework of progressive practice mapped easily onto the neuroscience view of brain functions, but that the innatist framework turns the neuroscience upside down—thus exposing a set of assumptions and schemas that have been tacitly brought into this very dialogue.

Antonova also noted that Francisco Varela had clearly conceived of the project of neuro-phenomenology in the context of Madhyamika philosophy where "Every examination is an interpretation." He called upon scientists to maintain awareness that every act of scientific observation is nothing other than an act of lived experience. It is very difficult to sustain the Madhyamika view, however, because it involves a whole transformation of being, even though science was originally conceived as knowledge that transforms the knower as it engages in its investigations. This aspect of science as transformational experience has been lost.