

Yogachara buddhism and twenty-first century consciousness: the “fourth turning of the wheel of dharma”.

He meditates on extinction but does not embrace extinction.....He meditates on Nonaction but continues always his acts of service and education.

Thich Nhat Hahn, quoting from the Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra -
'Not dwelling on the Nonconditioned'

Many now believe we are in the midst of a revolution in consciousness. Climate change may be about the necessity of reducing our fossil fuel emissions to zero and addressing our over-consuming way of life in the modern world, but it is also an existential life-and-death crisis, a crisis of consciousness which prompts us to ask how we have contributed to causing the climate emergency in the first place. It is also, at the same time, an opportunity to re-examine our relationship to the world and universe around us.

Fritjof Capra referred to this crisis/opportunity in the title of his 1980s book as *The Turning Point*¹ and David Korten and the Buddhist thinker, Joanna Macy, have written and talked about it as “The Great Turning”,² while Ken Wilber, the American philosopher of consciousness, has called it, in the context of Buddhist history, “the fourth turning of the wheel of dharma”.³ While the first turning is ascribed by buddhists to the practical and ethical teachings of Gautama Buddha in the sixth century BCE, the second developed the wisdom teachings on the truth of the “emptiness”, or interdependence, of everything, as expounded particularly in the second century CE writings of the Indian sage, Arya Nagarjuna.⁴ Early twentieth century quantum physics may have discovered the emptiness of matter, though there was no corresponding insight in modern psychology. except as a personal unconscious.

¹ Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture*, 1988

² David C. Korten, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*, 2006.

³ Ken Wilber, *The Religion of Tomorrow: A Vision for the Future of the Great Traditions*, 2017. See “Part One: A Fourth Turning of the Dharma”

⁴ See *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, Nagarjuna’s *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, translation and commentary by Jay L. Garfield, 1995.

Yogachara, or third turning.

The third turning of the wheel of dharma, the fourth century “consciousness- or mind-only” teachings of the *Yogachara* school, were inspired by the Indian half brothers, Asanga and Vasubhandhu and could be said to find a resonance in the interest today in neuroscience and in the subjective turn towards mindfulness. In fact Yogachara provides a depth of thought that might help us face the ecological crisis of our time. We might do well to return to their developed understanding of a universal consciousness, in view of its absence in the modern Western mind.

The late Vietnamese Zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh, has written about Vasubhandhu’s understanding of consciousness extensively in his translation and commentary on fifty of his verses.⁵ Hahn was the modern master of mindfulness⁶ and linked Vasubhandhu’s insights on the senses with the direct experience of recognising and embracing the nature of our feelings and perceptions. He also provided a commentary on Vasubhandhu’s relationship of the self with the store - or universal - consciousness,⁷ which has been referred to as “the Buddhist Unconscious”.⁸

Another contemporary Zen priest, the American, Ben Connelly, explained, in the introduction to his own more recent book on Vasubhandhu, that Yogachara means “yoga practice”.⁹ As Connelly says, while *yoga* may mean bending and stretching to many people today, in its original sense it referred to joining together or uniting: “Yogachara, therefore, is about integration, connection, and harmony....(and its) teachings in particular emphasise compassionate living and meditation”.¹⁰ As Connelly further pointed out, Yogachara arose as an attempt to integrate the most powerful aspects of the earliest Buddhist teachings with the spirit of later Mahayana, and to address the growing sectarian arguments between these two traditions of teaching: “Yogachara sought to

⁵ Thich Nhat Hahn, *Understanding Our Mind*, 2006. “Fifty Verses on the Nature of Consciousness”.

⁶ Thich Nhat Hahn, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation*, 2008, (1975)

⁷ *Alaya-vijnana* is the Sanskrit for “store consciousness”, *alaya* - store, *vijnana* - consciousness.

⁸ See William S. Waldron, *The Buddhist Unconscious: the “alaya-vijnana” in the context of Indian Buddhist thought*, 2003.

⁹ Ben Connelly, *Inside Vasubandhu’s Yogachara: A Practitioner’s Guide*, with a new translation from Sanskrit by BC and Weijen Teng and Foreword by Norman Fischer, 2016. “Thirty Verses on Consciousness Only”. Introduction and commentary by BC.

¹⁰ Ibid. p 3

show how the teachings were not in conflict and to allow for practitioners to access the profound benefits of both traditions. Yogachara provides a beautiful model for how to work with the great range of Buddhist traditions that have arrived in the West from all over Asia in the last fifty years".¹¹ It also comprises a model of how we might begin to integrate the detailed and specialist forms of knowledge and activity of the modern world

Absolute and relative truth

Buddhism, known in the East as *buddha dharma*, has always emphasised the characteristics of absolute truth - the truths of **suffering** ("dissatisfaction", due to the impermanence, or the transience, of all things), "**emptiness**" (or the dream-like nature of all finite phenomena) and **no-self** (the purely relative, or dream-like nature of the personal self) - but it has also described the relative progress of evolutionary, or historical, truth. Hence, the descriptions of the three turnings of the dharma wheel in the thousand years between the life of Shakyamuni Buddha and the development of the mind-only school.

Yogachara's emphasis on consciousness and *buddha nature* sought to redress any tendency to interpret the "emptiness" teachings of the second turning as negative, or even nihilistic, in that, as the third turning of the dharma wheel, it taught a more positive form of consciousness, experienced subjectively as a special awakened awareness, known as "buddha nature". Given that we in the West no longer subscribe to any notion of absolute truth, and that Buddhism hasn't changed much since the fifth century CE, it might also make sense to think how the teachings of the Yogachara tradition - the third turning - might have something to teach us about consciousness and human nature in the twenty-first century.

While Asangha was a Mahayana - "great vehicle" - buddhist, his brother, Vasubandhu, was an advocate of the earlier Theravada and Abidharma schools. Later, persuaded by Asangha, he converted to Mahayana. *Hinayana* is sometimes referred to as the "narrow" school of the *Arhat* - an individual sage who teaches realisation in solitude - while *Mahayana* is the great vehicle of the *bodhisattva* tradition, which emphasises caring for others and seeking the liberation of all humankind. Of course, *Hinayana* and *Mahayana* are not opposites because caring for others is about understanding and caring for oneself at the same time. But a knowledge of Mahayana compassion would go a long way to

¹¹ Ibid. p 4

tempering the degree of hatred, over-attachment, and delusion that haunts the world today.

The store conscious

Vasubhandhu was a great synthesiser of thought and, in his much revered “Thirty Verses”, translated and commented on by both Hahn and Connelly, set out a systematic account of consciousness. The Abidharma - the philosophical system of early Buddhism - conceived of consciousness as emerging from the six senses - seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching - with mind - the sixth sense - as the consciousness joined to the five material senses. Vasubhandhu added *manas* - the personal self - and the store consciousness - the buddhist unconscious - to the original six, which, for Yogachara, made for eight levels of consciousness.

The Store Conscious is the base consciousness, the ground on which the other seven levels - the five bodily senses, mind (also a sense), and *manas* (the personal self, or ego) - depended. It is a universal unconscious, unlike the modern psychoanalytic unconscious of the personal self. Conceived as a store of karmic, formative seeds, or potentials, the store consciousness can lead to an understanding of absolute nature and future development, depending also on a person’s individual and collective - or cultural - context. Thich Nhat Hahn expounded in some detail the nature of the store consciousness, and showed how the quality of our lives depends on the quality of the seeds (karmic potentials) in our minds. ¹² As he observed, through the transformation of the seeds of suffering and through nourishing the seeds of joy, the understanding, love, and compassion of Mahayana can also flower.

The transition from early individual-focused Buddhism to the more liberated Mahayana, committed to serving others, required a transformation in thinking. The process of this can be observed in the analytical sutras of the new CE millennium, such as the *Sandinmochanasutra* - “the Scripture Unlocking the Mysteries” ¹³ and the *LankavataraSutra*, ¹⁴ which expounded the ultimate truths of emptiness, absolute

¹² Thich Nhat Hahn, 2006. See the verses on the store consciousness and Hahn’s commentary on them.

¹³ *Buddhist Yoga: A Comprehensive Course*, translated by Thomas Cleary, 1995.

¹⁴ *The Lankavatara Sutra: An Epitomized Version*, translated by D.T. Suzuki, compiled and edited by Dwight Goddard, foreword by John Daido Lori, 1932.

interdependence, and nonduality. What they also stressed was that these ultimate truths could really only be experienced and understood through a contemplative practice. They are less accessible to the rational intellect, which will always find them paradoxical and mysterious.

Contemplative values and diamond mind

The latter is a crucial point since modern thinking has turned its back on a contemplative tradition. Science, for instance, emphasises the collection of sensory data and the disproving of hypotheses and theories, but neglects the means by which the intuitive capacity of the human mind comes to form its hypotheses in the first place. But our human arts have also neglected the discipline of the practical contemplative traditions. Romanticism, for example, the great movement rebelling against the purely mechanical spirit of modern industrial capitalism, lacked a rigorous contemplative and informed practice, which may be one reason it failed to prevail against modernity.

The essential truths of Mahayana - emptiness, nonself, nonduality - eventually came to be clearly and more simply expressed in later works such as the Diamond Sutra and the very brief but famous Heart Sutra. Along with the notion of Buddha nature, these truths were the essence of Yogachara thinking. The Diamond Sutra - *Vajrachedikaprajnaparamita-sutra*, literally “Sutra of the Diamond Cutter of Supreme Wisdom” - is the essential wisdom sutra.¹⁵ It contains the well-known lines, encapsulating the notion of emptiness:

*Like a star, an aberration, or a flame,
Like a magical illusion, a dewdrop, or a water bubble,
Like a dream, lightning, or a cloud,
Know all things to be this way.*

This reminds one of those famous lines of Prospero's - at the close of Shakespeare's *Tempest* - of life as a dream or sleep - “We are such stuff as dreams are made on...” As one succinct description has it, the Diamond Sutra shows that “all phenomenal appearances are not ultimate reality but rather illusions, projections of one's own mind. Every practitioner of meditation should regard all phenomena and actions in this way, seeing them as ‘empty, devoid of self, and tranquil’. The work is called *Diamond Sutra*

¹⁵ Mu Soeng, *The Diamond Sutra: transforming the way we perceive the world*, 2000

because it is ‘sharp like a diamond that cuts away all unnecessary conceptualisation and brings one to the further shore of enlightenment’.”¹⁶

The Heart Sutra is the shortest but most read of all the wisdom sutras for Mahayana Buddhism, particularly in China and Japan.¹⁷ It is recited by monks and nuns in many schools, especially in the Zen tradition. It formulates, in a particularly clear and concise way, the teaching on “emptiness” - *shunyata* In Sanskrit. The well-known pith sentence of the Sutra is:

Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness is no other than form

In other words form - phenomena - and emptiness - spirit - go together. You cannot have one without the other. Phenomena evolve through the infinite spirit which animates and breathes within and between them. Emptiness is what the English poet, William Wordsworth, referred to as “presence”, “ a sense sublime/ of something far more deeply interfused.....a motion and a spirit, that impels/ all thinking things, all objects of all thoughts/ and rolls through all things....”¹⁸

Buddha nature

Vasubhandhu’s verses described the Store Consciousness as the base and totality of consciousness. But Asangha, his brother, expounded something which went beyond consciousness. He did this in the *Mahayana Uttara Tantra Shastra*, (also known as the *Ratnogotra-vibhaga*). A Tantra was a sacred writing, more inspired than a sutra. (Asangha claimed it had been inspired by Maitreya, thought to be the Buddha in waiting.) This tantra has been recently translated into English. One version was originally the work of Katia Holmes in 1979. Her translation was refined and republished in 1985 by her and her husband, Ken Holmes, the director of studies at Samye Ling in Dumfries - the first Tibetan community in Europe - as *The Changeless Nature*.¹⁹ (The text is also known as “The

¹⁶ Entry on DS in *The Encyclopaedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion: Buddhism, Taoism, Zen, and Hinduism*, Ingrid Fischer-Schreiber (Buddhism and Taoism), Franz-Karl Ehrhard (Tibetan Buddhism), Kurt Friedrichs (Hinduism), and Michael S. Diener (Zen)

¹⁷ Tenzin Gyatso, The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, *Essence of the Heart Sutra: The Dalai Lama’s Heart of Wisdom Teachings*, 2005.

¹⁸ William Wordsworth, “Lines Written Several Miles Above Tintern Abbey”, 1798

¹⁹ Ken and Katia Holmes *The Changeless Nature, Mahayana Uttara Tantra Sastra* by Arya Maitreya & Acarya Asangha, 1985

Treatise on the Supreme” or “The Sublime Continuum” {the Dalai Lama refers to it as this in English}). Ken and Katia Holmes republished a new translation of it in 1999, *Maitreya on Buddha Nature*,²⁰ complete with a comprehensive commentary by the Tibetan Kagyu masters who had supervised their work throughout. Other translations and commentaries have also been published in English in recent years.²¹

The word Buddha means “awakened one” and Buddha essence is the capacity – the practice - to awaken to something changeless and timeless in ourselves.

Mystics throughout the ages have spoken of this single immanent reality which is ultimately the source, the substance and the real nature of everything which exists. In other words the same life – or spirit – runs through us as causes the world and the universe to exist. Theistic-minded faiths think of it as a God Who is “the ground of all being”. Though, in a Buddhist view, Buddha essence is ultimately beyond description, Buddhist writings abound with testimonies to its reality. In *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* it is viewed as an “uncreated naturally originating inner radiance” and “pristine cognition”. It is said to be “unborn and deathless”,²² a notion similar to Zen’s absolute “original face” - not the face we were born with, which will age and die, but the face we had before our parents were conceived, the face we have always had. This is the spirit in us which remains unrecognised. Because it is unrecognised, we go searching for it everywhere else except in ourselves.

Buddha essence is also thought of as a kind of original sinlessness, a primal perfection. To focus on the negative side of human life, as we sometimes love to do, is to ignore the benign and benevolent nature we also possess. There is a huge fund of good will in the world today, whether it is to be seen in the instinctive adherence of the majority

²⁰ Ken Holmes, *Maitreya on Buddha Nature*, A new translation of *Asangha’s mahayana uttara tantra sastra* by Ken and Katia Holmes, with a comprehensive commentary based upon traditional Kagyu explanations according to its contemporary masters, Kenchen Thrangu Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, 1999.

²¹ *Buddha Nature*, The Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra by Arya Maitreya, written down by Arya Asangha, commentary by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye “The Unassailable Lion’s Roar”, explanations by Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, translated by Rosemarie Fuchs, 2000. See also S.K. Hookham *The Buddha Within. The Tathagarbha Doctrine According to the Shentong Interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhaga*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992.

²² *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (English Title), *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States* (Tibetan Title), composed by Padmasambhava, revealed by Terton Karma Lingpa, translated by Gyurme Dorje, edited by Graham Coleman with Thubten Jinpa, introductory commentary by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 2005. See chapter 4, “The Introduction to Awareness: Natural Liberation through Naked Perception”.

to law and order and ethical values, in the countless acts of human kindness, solidarity and compassion throughout the world - that our sensational media for the most part ignores - or in the political and humane activities of innumerable official and non-governmental organisations that work within and across national and continental boundaries. This reflects an awakening awareness of something within us all in addition to what we historically understand as flawed human nature – whether we call it Allah, Jehovah, God, Christ consciousness, godhead, original mind, *Parabrahman* or Buddha essence.

The *Mahayana Uttara Tantra* of Asanga likens Buddha essence to three things in particular and indicates the means by which it can be realised:

*Like the purity of a jewel, space, or water,
It is always undefiled in essence.
It emerges through aspiration for dharma,
Highest prajna, meditation and compassion.* ²³

There are various metaphors for buddha nature, whether of a gem, a secret jewel sown in the lining of our coat or hidden in the foundation of a house, space as the element we do not see but which pervades and embraces everything, or simply water, the life-giving element that is the substance of all forms. These metaphors suggest that, while buddha nature is obscured by our tendency to lead a life centred on individual or personal occupations, it can be discovered through dharma practice - right ethical living - the pursuit of wisdom, the practice of mindfulness and contemplative meditation, and a compassionate approach in all our activities.

Conclusion

Buddhism has not progressed much - “turned” - since the end of the first millennium CE, though its subtle teachings have been kept alive in the spirit of Zen practice and in the remote Himalayan heights of Tibet, where it has married with the energies of their Bon traditions. The modern West, meanwhile, began to explore the material world with the 17th century scientific Revolution and the domain of human relations with the social and political innovations of the 18th century European Enlightenment.

²³ Ibid. Holmes 1999, p 103.

The 20th was a global and secular century. But, with the Revolution in communications of the 21st, we have seen the promotion, not just of a physical but also a virtual reality. Virtual consciousness may encourage delusional thinking but, at the same time, it offers the opportunity of a - potentially world-wide - integrative process towards a real reality, which could include the coming together, for instance, of Western science and Asian interiority. For buddhists this may look like a possible fourth turning of the dharma wheel. For the materialist and over-consuming West, this may, at the same time, be an opportunity to draw back from the destructive way of living that has resulted in climate change, ecological devastation and mass extinction.

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