General Introduction

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1. Buddhist Philosophy of Mind in East Asia

Modern scholars have come to distinguish two major streams of early East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. Both of these were based on Indian antecedents, and both conducted thorough examinations of the constitution and transformative potential of human consciousness, particularly the potential for sentient beings to be liberated from the suffering of cyclic existence. These are the doctrinal streams of Yogācāra and Tathāgatagarbha. Although these two currents of Buddhist thought held differing views on such matters as the basic moral quality of the human mind and the possibility of universal enlightenment, they did share extensively in the content of their doctrines and practices, as well as their technical terminology. These were the two most significant philosophies of mind to be received, studied, and interpreted by Wŏnhyo (617–686), and they provided the basic framework for his own philosophical perspectives.1 We will pay special attention to Wŏnhyo’s treatment of these two doctrinal streams below, but first we will briefly review their general course of development, paying special attention to their symbiotic relationship.

1.1. Grounding in Basic Buddhist Philosophical and Soteriological Approaches

The Buddhist philosophies of mind received by Wŏnhyo were the product of many centuries of reflection on psychological, epistemological, and soteriological questions, whose origins lay as far back as the first couple of centuries after the passing of Śākyamuni Buddha. As Buddhism developed in the philosophically sophisticated and religiously variegated milieu of India, there arose the need to provide rational explanations for those aspects of its doctrines that contradicted the general tenets of the non-Buddhist Indian religious worldview, which are generally subsumed under the rubric of Brahmanism. Such basic Buddhist teachings as anatman (no-self) and pratītya-samutpāda (dependent arising), for example, were formulated as critiques of various Indian theories of causation, both Vedic and non-Vedic. These schools countered Buddhist paradigms with their own sophisticated arguments, making it necessary for Buddhists to explain and defend their positions.

Like most of his contemporaries in the ancient Indian philosophical world, Śākyamuni Buddha was interested in attaining spiritual liberation (mokṣa) from the cyclic flow of conditioned existence (samsāra) characterized by suffering and unsatisfactoriness (duḥkha). And like most of his contemporaries, the Buddha emphasized that this liberation could be realized only by means of an accurate insight into the true nature of the world—that is, through a direct and correct apprehension of reality.2 Yet while Śākyamuni shared the aim of spiritual
liberation—and the indispensable role of insight in attaining it—with most of his Brahmanical contemporaries, his explanations of these processes attempted to avoid the “essentialist” views endemic to Brahmanism.3 In other words, the Brahmanical philosophers thought that liberation could be attained through a realization of the ontological identity between one’s true self (ātman) and the cosmic self (Brahman), both of which are characterized as immutable, changeless, and independent.4

The Buddhist view, further elaborated by later Abhidharmic schools, analyzed our experience of the world into sets of evanescent events referred to as dharmas, which are not fixed entities but physical and mental processes in a continual state of flux. As identified in a relatively early stratum of Buddhist literature, these dharmas are subsumed within the dynamic relationship between the six internal sense bases (āyatana), their six types of respective objects, and the six types of consciousness that arise when these two come into contact.5 These three sets of six added up to eighteen fundamental factors (dhātu) constituting our basic cognitive processes.

The standard Buddhist analysis of cognition focuses on the relations between, on the one hand, what we perceive through our sensory and mental faculties—i.e., the six classes of objects—and, on the other hand, a sheer awareness (vijñāna) of those objects that is accompanied by various mental factors (citta), such as feelings (vedanā), perceptions (samjñā), and volitions (samskāra). These mental factors can be either wholesome or unwholesome in moral quality, depending on the motivations associated with them. Buddhist analysis of bondage and liberation, its soteriology, is thus grounded on the recognition that we engage the world both cognitively and affectively.

At the individual level, the human personality is analyzed both in terms of the twelve sense bases and the five psychophysical aggregates (pañca-skandha). These five aggregates include both the person and world—insofar as we perceive and experience it. There is, in the Buddhist view, no other immutable and substantial essence above, beyond, within, or below this. According to Sākyamuni, the arising of duḥkha and its eventual cessation, the whole drama of bondage and liberation, takes place within the five skandhas. As the Buddha remarks: “In this fathom-long body with its perceptions and thoughts there is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world and the path to the cessation of the world.”5 Since both bondage/delusion and liberation/awakening occur in terms of the five skandhas,7 it would be superfluous to posit another “self,” an immutable, eternal essence such as the Hindu ātman.8

One of the key differences between these two worldviews is that, for the Brahmanical thinkers, all change is illusory once one discovers the immutable Brahman, the ultimate cause and reality of the universe. For the Buddhists, however, it is exactly the opposite. Such immutability is nothing but the superimposition of deluded ideas onto a constantly flowing reality. And it is precisely our attachment to the superimposed concepts of a permanent self and its correlative, a permanent universe, that invites all kinds of cognitive and behavioral faults
These wrong views and the attachments they elicit are “unskillful” (akusala) because they bind sentient beings to samsara. To see the human personality (pudgala) as a form of eternal self (atman) is itself nothing but an illusion constructed out of a particular configuration of dharmas, which are, in fact, constantly changing from one moment to the next.9

The classification of our experience of the world into its irreducible events or “facts” is not unique to Buddhism—this philosophical approach is shared by other ancient Indian thinkers as well.10 But what sets the Buddha apart from his Indian predecessors and contemporaries is his focus on causality, described in terms of pratiya-samutpada, or dependent arising. According to this view, even the most basic factors of existence are impermanent—they too arise and cease from moment to moment. And it is precisely because of this constant flux that causation is possible.

In early Buddhist texts the principle of dependent arising is stated as follows:

When this is, that is (Imasmiṃ sati idam hoti);
This arising, that arises (Imasuppadā idam uppajjati);
When this is not, that is not (Imasmiṃ asati idam na hoti);
This ceasing, that ceases (Imassa nirodhā idam nirujjhati).11

Several important notions follow from this.

First, this principle of causality (idam-pratyayatā) is explained as the functional dependence of any specific element of experience upon a variety of other elements. “Real things” are not produced from causes and conditions that exist completely independently of them; nor is it possible to isolate a single principle as their ultimate cause. Nonetheless, even though Śākyamuni Buddha rejected the Brahmanical view that reduced everything in the universe to a single, ultimate, permanent cause, he also vehemently rejected the view of the materialists/nihilists, who denied causation altogether and thought that everything occurred just by chance. In response to both, he affirmed the reality of causal interaction.

Second, dependent arising is therefore characterized as the middle path that is free from two extreme views, namely, the annihilationist view (uccheda-vāda)—that the effects of actions cease as soon as they are over—and the eternalistic view (sāsvata-vāda)—that the true nature of all phenomena is an unchanging, eternal essence.12 From Śākyamuni Buddha’s perspective, annihilationism cannot account for continuity, rebirth, and the working of karma, whereas eternalism leaves no possibility for change. Both of these extreme views prevent an adequate understanding of causation: uccheda-vāda leads to the extreme of non-being, while sāsvata-vāda constitutes the extreme of being. In an early scripture, Śākyamuni declared to one of his disciples:

Kātyāyana, everyday experience relies on the duality of “it is” and “it is not.” But for one who relies on the Dharma and on wisdom, and
thereby directly perceives how the things of the world arise and pass away, for him, there is no “it is” and no “it is not.” “Everything exists” is simply one extreme, Kātyāyana, and “nothing exists” is the other extreme. The Tathāgata relies on neither of these two extremes, Kātyāyana; he teaches the Dharma as a Middle Way.\(^{13}\)

Śākyamuni Buddha’s understanding of causation, indeed his teaching as a whole, is thus designated the middle path (madhyamā-pratipada).\(^{14}\)

Third, dependent arising depicts the cessation as well as the arising of conditioned phenomena (samskṛta-dharma—phenomena that arise depending on causes and conditions). And it is this possibility of cessation—of nirvāṇa—that provides the foundation for the Buddhist path to liberation.

In short, dependent arising refers to the basic principle of causality that makes change and transformation possible, particularly as it applies to the arising and the cessation of cyclic existence. The specific causal patterns depicting this are typically described in terms of the formula of twelve-limbed (nīdāna) dependent arising.\(^ {15}\)

The twelve-limbed model of dependent arising serves two purposes: it reveals the causal patterns that perpetuate cyclic existence, and it shows how liberation from cyclic existence is achieved, first by understanding these causal patterns and then by reversing them. In Buddhist parlance, dependent arising describes both the perpetuation (pravṛtti) of cyclic existence as well as its reversal (nivṛtti). An understanding of how cyclic existence comes about from these causal patterns is necessary for realizing how they can be reversed through a process of pacification. In later soteriological language, this is to realize the original quiescence of things, or nirvāṇa. As the Buddha himself remarks:

There is, monks, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned. If, monks, there were no unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, no escape would be discerned from what is born, become, made, conditioned. But because there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, therefore an escape is discerned from what is born, become, made, conditioned.\(^ {16}\)

This soteriological model—that the attainment of an aboriginal quiescence is achieved through the realization that phenomena are conditioned—is first articulated in the Prajñāpāramitā texts\(^ {17}\) and was subsequently accepted by both the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra schools. This model also provides the foundation for the nondualistic philosophies of both these schools.

The contrast between the mistaken or “unskillful” way of seeing oneself and phenomena (i.e., as inherently existent, delimited entities) and the correct or “skillful” way of seeing them (i.e., as momentary and dependently arisen) clearly shows that the basic cause of human suffering is the mistaken way we understand the world. At bottom, Buddhists see the human problem as an epistemological
one, a problem with our modes of understanding. Thus, although Buddhist meditators clearly recognized and sought to remedy our emotional afflictions through such means as cultivating mental focus and observing moral precepts, they prioritized being able to identify and correct our cognitive errors through rational analysis and suprarational, direct observation.

1.2. Madhyamaka: Dependent Arising and Emptiness

Between the first and fifth centuries of the Common Era, the ideas and practices of Indian Buddhism underwent significant development. Philosophically, this period witnessed the emergence of the two principal Mahāyāna schools: Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. Both claimed to faithfully elaborate the philosophical positions enunciated by Śākyamuni, such as no-self, dependent arising, the middle path, and so forth, although they differed, sometimes radically, in their respective emphases and interpretations. These two schools made an indelible impact on the development of Buddhist philosophy throughout Asia.

The major contribution of the Madhyamaka school was, no doubt, the notion of “emptiness” (śūnya) as expounded by Nāgārjuna (ca. second century CE), its legendary founder, in his seminal work, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*:

Whatever is dependent arising, we declare to be emptiness.
It is also a provisional designation, it is indeed the middle path.
Any phenomenon that is not dependently arisen cannot obtain.
Therefore any phenomenon that is not empty does not exist.

Briefly, in Nāgārjuna’s view Śākyamuni Buddha taught dependent arising, not to show that phenomena are truly produced by a truly existent set of causes and conditions, but to show that dependently arisen phenomena are “empty” of any inherent nature or essence (svabhāva). It is because phenomena lack such an inherent nature that dependent arising is possible. As Nāgārjuna points out in the next verse, if phenomena were not “empty” in this sense—that is, if they were not dependently arisen (pratītya-samutpāda)—then nothing would be possible, since phenomena would neither arise nor cease. Nāgārjuna thus concludes:

All things are possible for someone for whom emptiness is possible;
All things are not possible for someone for whom emptiness is not possible.

Nāgārjuna then proceeds to apply the deconstructive logic of emptiness to the principal concepts of Buddhism such as the Four Truths, nirvāṇa, the skandhas, dhātu, and even to causality itself, each time demonstrating that none of these could function if they actually possessed an inherent, unchanging nature.
At first reading, it may seem that Nāgārjuna is engaging in a destructive logic that is tantamount to nihilism. Nāgārjuna’s true target, however, is the tendency in some major Abhidharmic schools—particularly the Sarvāstivāda school—to reinstate a substantialist view of reality and dependent arising. Nāgārjuna is pointing out that if phenomena were not empty of inherent nature, then there would be no causal interaction—and this would render Buddhist teachings effectively vacuous, for it is precisely because things are empty of inherent nature that change and transformation are possible. As the Buddha declared in his very first sermon, whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.

This bears repeating: in Nāgārjuna’s view, for things to exist with an inherent nature means that they exist independently, by their own power, without being supported by other causes and conditions—they would not be dependently arisen. To say that things are empty, however, does not imply that they are absolutely nonexistent. To the contrary, it is precisely because phenomena are dependently produced that they interact and function. Therefore Nāgārjuna claims that it is exactly because phenomena are empty of essence that both the mundane (laukika—i.e., samsāra, or bondage) and the transmundane (lokottara—i.e., nirvāṇa, or liberation) are possible. It is because things are empty that the entire Buddhist tradition—whose philosophy, ethics, and soteriology are all predicated on the possibility of transformation—is plausible in the first place.

In order to counter the charge of nihilism—that if emptiness were ultimately true, then conventional causality could not obtain, and religious practice would therefore be futile—Nāgārjuna introduces the notion of the two truths:

> The true teaching of the Buddha is based on the two truths:
> Conventional truth and ultimate truth.
> Those who do not know the distinction between the two truths
> Do not understand the profound reality of the Buddha’s teaching.
> Without relying on conventional reality, the ultimate truth cannot be expressed;
> Without realizing the ultimate truth, nirvāṇa cannot be attained.

As a Buddhist, Nāgārjuna considers attaining nirvāṇa to be the final goal of the path. This, in turn, cannot be achieved without realizing the ultimate truth—that in the final analysis all phenomena are empty of inherent existence. However, ultimate truth can be revealed only by means of conventional truth, for ultimately reality itself is beyond predication by words, symbols, or doctrines. Although Buddhist teachings such as dependent arising and so forth are not considered accurate depictions of reality in an ultimate sense (paramārthas)—that is, they do not possess a one-to-one correspondence with reality—at the conventional or relative level (samvyrtitas) such teachings are perfectly capable of performing
their purported function: that is, they help dispel the two extreme views of being (eternalism) and nonbeing (annihilationism). As will be explained below, a proper understanding of the two truths is crucial for Wŏnhyo as well, and understanding the fluid relationship between them is basic to his larger project of reconciling an array of doctrinal disagreements (hwajaeng).

From the soteriological perspective, Mahāyāna Buddhism teaches dependent arising or emptiness, not in order to establish an absolute view about causality (which the Buddha rejects), but to prevent beings from seeing either the person (pudgala) or the elements (dhammas) that constitute its reality as inherently existent, and thereby to lead them to a realization of the aboriginally quiescent and peaceful nature of all phenomena. In the opening verse to his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, Nāgārjuna praises the Buddha for teaching dependent arising, which is characterized by “noncessation, nonarising, nonannihilation, noneternity, nonidentity, nondifference, noncoming, nongoing, which is the blissful pacification of all conceptual proliferations [prapañca].”

This amplifies a similar statement in the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra: “All things are without inherent nature, nonoriginated, nonannihilated, quiescent from the beginning, and peaceful by nature.”

1.3. Problems with Transmission of Karma and Abhidharmic Solutions

The logical problems between the ideas of no-self and dependent arising and the core Indian models of karma and transmigration—problems that even early Buddhists had to address—were only exacerbated by the Mādhyamika ideas of the emptiness of self and things. In the Buddhist view, all our intentional actions, words, and thoughts set into motion energies that eventually engender pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral effects. The moral qualities of one’s activities in the present moment, in other words, bring about effects that are bound to arise in succeeding seconds, minutes, years, or, in the Buddhist view, lifetimes. Buddhist moral theory largely rests on this law of karma, which claims that actions done in the past are justly connected to their consequences in the future, and to the same being who performed them.

But this raises a host of questions, for what ensures that every single intentional deed, word, and thought will in fact result in its just effect? If it is indeed the case that beings are reborn with specific potentialities and in circumstances determined by the quality of their prior actions, and yet that there is no real “I” connecting the past actor to the present or future consequence, how can the process of rebirth be explained? Exactly who, or what, is being reborn? And if karma is indeed accurately transmitted, if we will indeed experience the results of our previous actions, right and wrong, and in-between, then by what mechanism can this unfathomable process be explained? How is individual karma actually transmitted between lifetimes?
I.4. The Need for a More Detailed Map of Consciousness

Contemporaneous Buddhist thinkers devoted considerable effort and ingenuity to formulating systematic responses to these vexing questions. Indeed, constructing theories that could adequately explain our incessant coursing through cyclic existence, as well as the possibility of escape therefrom, became a large and diverse scholarly project.

To accomplish this, Abhidharma scholars developed earlier Buddhist models of mind into ever more elaborate schemata for analyzing mind and mental processes, along with an expanding technical terminology. They classified human cognition into six types, according to their specific cognitive functions based upon contact between the respective cognitive faculties and their correlative cognitive objects. This is readily intelligible today since it corresponds quite well with the basic model understood by modern psychology: the first five modes of cognition are none other than our five senses, while the sixth is “mind,” broadly interpreted. The principal activity of mind is thought, which is conducted chiefly through concepts—linguistic constructs and mental images. The faculty of mind, as understood by Abhidharmists, has three principal objects: (1) perceptions associated with the five sense consciousnesses, (2) linguistic constructs and concepts, and (3) images and other symbols generated through memory.

While this simple model of five sense consciousnesses along with a sixth, thinking consciousness, may suffice for understanding everyday cognition during a single lifetime, its inherent limitations become apparent when addressing the processes of death and rebirth in connection with the accumulation of karmic potential. When the body passes away, the sense faculties lose their material bases and mental consciousness loses its objects. Thus all six forms of consciousness effectively cease at the time of death. So how does consciousness continue from one life to the next if there is no transcendent, enduring self, or atman? And even during our present lifetime, there are occasions when thinking consciousness is completely interrupted, such as during deep sleep or meditative absorption. How is it that our entire being does not disintegrate during these times?

Leaving these questions aside for the moment, one could even ask how it is that we are able to maintain awareness of anything at all? Even in everyday life we do not experience completely continuous awareness—conscious and uninterrupted—of all the thoughts we have ever produced and all the experiences we have ever undergone. This is impossible; it would create an unmanageable burden on all our faculties almost immediately. Yet, after a thought or a sensory experience ceases, we are able to remember it in the future, even though it has long since passed from our conscious awareness. And not only can we recall things that we are no longer conscious of, but we are also able to accumulate and build upon distinctive forms of knowledge and specific mental and physical skills,
1.5. Yogācāra: The Middle Path and Mind-Only

It was precisely within this milieu, informed by Abhidharmic inquiries yet moderated by Mādhyamika analyses, that Yogācāra began to take form in the fourth and fifth centuries of the Common Era. On the one hand, it absorbed the deconstructive analytic of the Madhyamaka school, with its well-articulated notion of emptiness, while on the other hand it attempted to refine the psychological analyses of the Abhidharmists, especially concerning the continuity of consciousness.

The term “Yogācāra” is composed of two components, yoga and ācāra. Yoga in this context refers to meditative analysis, while ācāra means “practice.”²⁸ In short, this school arose as a system of meditative practices aimed toward liberation from ignorance and suffering. To this end, the Yogācāra masters sought to formulate a comprehensive and rational account of the psychological/spiritual processes involved in human experience, including a thoroughgoing deconstruction of our tendencies to reify experience in terms of selves and things.

The principal founders of the Yogācāra school are traditionally considered to be Maitreyanātha, Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu. While concrete biographical details on the first figure are vague at best,²⁹ the latter two—half-brothers who lived in India during the late fourth and early fifth centuries—³⁰ are the authors of the most important formative texts of the tradition. The Yogācāra school was subsequently developed by such figures as Dignāga (ca. 480–540)³¹ and Sthiramati (470–550)³² before it declined in India in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The school’s doctrines were exported to Tibet and East Asia, where they had significant influence.

If Madhyamaka’s main thrust is a recasting of the Buddha’s teaching of dependent arising and the middle path in terms of the theory of emptiness (sūnyatā), then Yogācāra arises as a reinterpretation of Madhyamaka’s teaching of emptiness—in the continuing context of the dependent arising of mind—in terms of Yogācāra theories of mind-only (citta-māra) or representation-only (vijñapti-māra). By refocusing on consciousness (citta/manas/vijñāna),³³ the Yogācāra school reasserts the fundamental Buddhist concern with direct human experience. The experience of suffering (duḥkha) and freedom from suffering (mokṣa), also called the “arising and cessation of the world (loka),” is considered a “transformation of mind” (vijñāna-parināma); that is, it occurs in terms of the complex of mind (citta) and its associated mental factors (caitta). This is the sense of mind-only or representation-only. It is only within our mental experience that the perpetuation (pravṛtti) of the world as well as its reversal (nivṛtti) occurs.³⁴ The perpetuation of the world is brought about by reifying the ongoing flux of experience into the static categories of persons (pudgalas) and phenomena (dharmas).
Reversing this process (nivṛtti) is liberating and is brought about by realizing that the reifications of persons and phenomena are merely modes of mental representation, merely transformations of consciousness. They do not reflect reality as it is (yathābhūtam). Rather, they reflect the way we mistakenly construe that reality—that is, in terms of the reified entities of selves and things.

Sthiramati succinctly summarizes this philosophical outlook in the opening statement to his commentary on Vasubandhu’s Trīṃśikā, one of the key Yogācāra texts:

This treatise [the Trīṃśikā] has been composed for those who are attached [to the view that] persons and phenomena [intrinsically exist] and do not correctly understand mind-only, [to help them] to gradually realize [the true meaning of] representation-only, together with its results, by showing the absence of self in persons and in phenomena.

Again, some think that, like consciousness, objects of consciousness are also real; others think that, like its objects, consciousness exists only conventionally but not ultimately. It is to refute these two extreme views that [the Master] composed this treatise.35

In these remarks, in addition to pronouncing on mind-only, Sthiramati enunciates the Yogācāra interpretation of the middle path (madhyamā-pratipad) between the extreme views of naïve realism (or essentialism) and annihilationism. Naïve realism takes both the subject (pudgala, or person) and its objects (vijñeya) as ultimately real—or, more precisely, it takes the elements that constitute the pudgala and its objects as ultimately real. The view of annihilationism is the opposite extreme in Sthiramati’s interpretation, since it denies that anything is ultimately real, even consciousness. For Yogācārin, though, consciousness (vijñāna)—a general label for the mind complex and its mental factors—must exist in some ultimate (paramārthatas) or irreducible (dravyatās) sense insofar as it serves as the basis for both the continuation and the reversal of cyclic existence. It is experientially ultimate or irreducible in the sense that conscious experience, awakened or otherwise, is something we never get outside of.

The Madhyamakas object to this formulation on the grounds that the mind complex and its objects36 are also empty of inherent existence and that the ultimate truth of emptiness cannot be predicated by any of the four logical possibilities (catuskoti) of existence, nonexistence, both, and neither.37 In their view, to apply the predicate “exists,” even to something as seemingly self-evident as experience, is misguided if not actually mistaken. For Yogācāris, however, the Madhyamakas’ relentless deconstruction tends toward annihilationism38 inasmuch as it denies the obvious fact that we experience the world through mind or consciousness, which is the basis of both samsāra and nirmāṇa. Moreover, in the post-Mādhyamika context the Yogācāris were operating in, to say that
something exists ultimately was not to say that it exists with an inherent nature (svabhāva) but to say that it was irreducible.

Nor do the Yogācārins deny that there is some kind of real world. For them, the main problem is how we perceive reality, not what the “world” might be like in and of itself, independent of our engagement with it. It is necessary to know reality as it actually is (yathābhūtam), since this leads to liberation, but for this we must see reality directly, unmediated by the representations (vijñapti) and reifications constructed by our deluded minds.

The problem, then, is that our deluded or unawakened minds imagine that there are real pudgalas and real dharmas. In order to eliminate these tendencies, Yogācārins analyze how they occur, classifying these processes into three modes or transformations of consciousness: viśaya-vijñapti (representation of objects), manana (reflection), and vipāka (ripening). Each of these three modes fulfills a specific function in constructing and sustaining the apparent reality of pudgalas and dharmas. The first refers to the six forms of active consciousness (pravṛtti-vijñāna)—that is, the five forms of sensory consciousness and conceptual or mental consciousness, which arise in relation to their respective objects. The second is called manas (intellect) because mind is constantly reflecting; and insofar as it is constantly conceiving an enduring (yet illusory) self, toward which four basic afflictions continuously arise, it is also referred to as afflicted mind (kliṣṭa-manas). The third mode refers to the store consciousness, or ālaya-vijñāna. This level of consciousness is called ālaya, or “store,” because it retains and records the results of the activities of the other consciousnesses in the form of seeds (bija) and habitual tendencies (vāsanā). When conditions are appropriate, the store consciousness provides the seeds, the causes, for the arising of new forms of active consciousness. This is why the store consciousness is called sarvabijakam (containing all seeds).

The notion of the store consciousness is an important contribution to Buddhist thought because it resolves both the problems of continuity of mind and the preservation of the effects from past actions, problems that other Abhidharmic models had failed to adequately explain. Since the first seven forms of consciousness are constantly changing from moment to moment and therefore cannot “contain” the karmic seeds, it became necessary to conceptualize the dimension of consciousness that actually did persist, relatively unchangingly, throughout our present lives as well as across multiple lifetimes. The Yogācārins claimed that Śākyamuni Buddha himself taught the idea of store consciousness but that he refrained from teaching it to Hinayānists lest they mistake it as a self. As the Buddha purportedly taught in the Samdhinirmocana-śātra:

The appropriating consciousness [ādāna-vijñāna—a synonym for ālaya-vijñāna] is profound and subtle,
Flowing like a torrent with all the seeds.
I do not reveal it to the spiritually immature,
Lest they imagine it as a self.
1.6. Liberation in Yogācāra

The ultimate goal of the Mahāyāna Buddhist path has always been awakening (bodhi). For the Yogācārins as well as other Mahāyānist, to “be awakened” means to realize Buddhahood, with all its salvific implications. Philosophically, this is seen as a process of correcting or eliminating unwholesome mental processes, both affective and cognitive, and replacing them with wholesome emotions and accurate cognitions. This is accomplished through an intricate course of contemplative practice wherein one cultivates ways of seeing oneself and one’s environment as they actually are, not as we imagine them. After all, the elaborate Yogācārin analyses of cognitive processes were developed not to create a better theory of mind but to attain liberation. To this end, the Yogācārins devised a bodhisattva path consisting of forty-one stages (a better-known path consisting of fifty-two stages appears in Tathāgatagarbha, Tiantai, and Huayan works). In the final stages of the Yogācāra path, four classes of consciousness (the five sensory consciousnesses; the sixth, thinking consciousness; the seventh, afflicted-with-self consciousness; and the eighth, store consciousness) are said to be thoroughly purified and their mode of functioning radically transformed. Liberation is thus explained in terms of four transformations: (1) the five sense consciousnesses become able to transcend their normal physical limitations; (2) the sixth, thinking consciousness, is able to discern phenomena with perfect accuracy; (3) the seventh, afflicted-with-self consciousness, is stripped of its self-centeredness and able to perceive the equality of all phenomena; and (4) the store consciousness perfectly reflects all phenomena like a clear mirror, constituting what Mahāyāna Buddhists call omniscience (sarvajñā). The perfect accomplishment of these four purifications is called transformation of the basis (āśraya-parāvṛtti).44

1.7. Tathāgatagarbha

With its vast array of paths and stages, its obstructions of the afflictions and obstructions to liberation, the diverse proclivities of disparate practitioners, the multiple wisdoms of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and so on, Yogācāra is arguably the most complex and expansive soteriological system in all of Buddhism. Yet it is also clear that for many Mahāyānist, both in India and East Asia, Yogācāra was not just overly theoretical—it also failed to provide an unambiguously positive statement affirming the possibility of universal Buddhahood.

The Yogācārins did posit within the store consciousness the presence of “pure seeds” representing the potential for all sentient beings to attain liberation. And since the fundamental character of the store consciousness is karmically indeterminate, sentient beings could always improve themselves through meditative practice and self-reflection. But the doctrine of merely potential liberation, requiring an incalculable number of eons, did not satisfy every Mahāyāna thinker and practitioner, even those working within the same Abhidharma and Yogācāra...