

Training in Wisdom 6

Yogacara, the ‘Mind Only’ School: Buddha Nature, 5 Dharmas, 8 kinds of Consciousness, 3 Svabhavas

The Mind Only school evolved as a response to the possible nihilistic interpretation of the Madhyamaka school. The view “everything is mind” is conducive to the deep practice of meditational yogas.

The “Tathagatagarbha”, the ‘Buddha Nature’ was derived from the experience of the Dharmakaya. Tathagata, the ‘Thus Come one’ is a name for a Buddha (as is Sugata, the ‘Well gone One’). Garbha means ‘embryo’ and ‘womb’, the container and the contained, the seed of awakening .

This potential to attain Buddhahood is said to be inherent in every sentient being but very often occluded by kleshas, (‘negative emotions’) and by cognitive obscurations, by wrong thinking. These defilements are adventitious, and can be removed by practicing Buddhist yogas and trainings in wisdom. Then the ‘Sun of the Dharma’ breaks through the clouds of obscurations, and shines out to all sentient beings, for great benefit to self and others.

The 3 svabhavas, 3 kinds of essential nature, are unique to the mind only theory. They divide what is usually called ‘conventional truth’ into two: “Parakalpita” and “Paratantra”.

Parakalpita refers to those phenomena of thinking or perception that have no basis in fact, like the water shimmering in a mirage. Usual examples are the horns of a rabbit and the fur of a turtle.

Paratantra refers to those phenomena that come about due to cause and effect. They have a conventional actuality, but ultimately have no separate reality: they are empty. Everything is interconnected.

The Yogacarin name for ‘ultimate reality’ is “Parinishpanna”, referring to ‘emptiness’. It is beyond conceptuality. This Ultimate Truth is beyond Samsara, but pervades Samsara, the world of suffering.

The 5 dharmas are epistemic categories that summarize the knowable:

1. Nama, ‘Name’ -the propensity of mind to substitute a name, sign or symbol of an object for the object itself.
2. Nimitta ‘sign’ here refers to the field of perception that one mistakes for external objects
3. Vikalpa ‘Discrimination’ distinguishes between various objects and qualities in the perceptual field.
4. Samyag-jnana ‘Right Knowledge’- focuses on the interrelatedness of things, rather than their separateness; the beginning of grasping total Reality.
5. Tathata ‘Suchness’ a name for Reality, for what is.

Eight kinds of consciousness:

All Buddhists accept the theory of 6 kinds of consciousness: that arising from the 5 sensory contacts (eye and appearance, ear and sound, etc.), and that arising from thoughts, the Vijnana, the ‘discriminating mind’. It separates subject and object, and generates dualistic mental formations.

Unique to the yogachara system are:

7. Manas or Klishta Manas. ‘occluded mind’. Called by the Hindus “Ahamkara” ‘ego maker’, It functions to generate the illusion of ego. Manas is a kind of “constricting valve” that reduces the vastness of the Alaya to the scale of an individual biological being.

8. Alaya-vijnana, the ‘storehouse consciousness’. It contains the seeds that result from karmic actions. In this analogy the seeds are dormant unless there is water, sunlight and good soil, the conducive conditions for them to sprout. So also the karmic seeds yield phenomena whenever conducive conditions arise. They can remain dormant for lifetimes and then sprout.

The Alaya was posited to explain the continuity of cause and effect over time. It was one way out of the difficulty generated by the view of classical

Buddhism, which sees the world as a series of momentary phenomena ever in the process of arising, abiding for a instant and then decaying back to emptiness.

9. Some schools posit a ninth consciousness, utterly pristine mind. This is merely the Alaya cleansed of all karmic seeds, by yogic practice. It is sometimes called “Kadak”, ‘Alpha Purity’. Mind is intrinsically pure and not defiled by adventitious stains. As the defilements are purified by practice, original mind, which is no mind, comes into view.

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