
On the Buddhist Conception of Human Beings as Dream Apparitions¹

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Introduction

The present paper was written for the 5th World Humanities Forum, held in Busan from October 31 to November 2, 2018. Corresponding to the theme of the conference, “The Human Image in a Changing World,” the paper addresses an important but underrepresented strand of Buddhist thought and belief, namely the idea that the whole world, including the bodies of human beings living in it, are a mere mental creation. In the classical texts of this tradition, the whole of existence is described as a dream, formed collectively by the minds all living beings. In the formation of this dream, human beings are not more or less important than other forms of life. This article is aimed at a general audience and outlines some of the implications, historical developments, and modern interpretations of this world-view.

1. The Place of Human Beings in the Universe: When Medieval Europe Met Buddhism

In medieval Europe, human beings saw themselves in a clearly defined place in nature: 1. God had firmly placed them in the middle of the universe, on a solid earth around which sun and moon revolved. 2. The whole world, including animals, had been created for the sake of human beings. Only human beings had a soul, and God had formed them in His own image, as the crown of creation. 3. Human beings had a free will to choose what they wanted to do. Just like Adam and Eve had made a free, independent choice to eat forbidden fruit, human beings were free to choose between good and evil.

This proud and stable self-image of human beings received serious blows in the modern era: 1. Copernicus and others showed that the earth revolves around itself and around the sun. Human beings were no longer at the center of the universe. 2. Darwin outlined how the *homo sapiens* had

1. I am indebted to Antonio Ferreira-Jardim, Russ Jacobs, Ralf Kramer, and Robert Kritzer for their valuable comments. Research for this article was supported by grant number AKS-2012-AAZ-2102 (KSPS), awarded by the Academy of Korean Studies and funded by the Government of the Republic of Korea (MoE).

evolved from earlier species, just like any other animal on earth. 3. Darwin later turned to human body language and showed that that much of human behavior correlates to the behavior of other animals.² This suggested that humans were not completely “free” to choose between good and evil. An animalistic part of human consciousness was hidden from plain sight, controlling human thoughts and wills in obscure ways. The uncontrollable parts of the human mind were later unveiled by Freud, who presented his theory of the three humiliations in 1917.³ Human beings were no longer in control, no longer the crown of creation. Paradoxically, technical and intellectual progress had factually brought Europeans unprecedented control over nature and other humans, while it had gradually deprived them of their assumed position as the natural rulers of the world. While they were spiritually dethroned, they were factually empowered.

Even after the discoveries of Columbus and Galileo had set the spirit of critical inquiry and exploration in motion, the breakthrough to modernity was basically limited to Europe and European settlements overseas. When non-European cultures were confronted with European modernity, they were, on the one hand, overwhelmed by modern military technology, while on the other hand, they looked back on cultural developments quite different from what had happened in Europe (and her overseas settlements) before and after 1492. Pre-modern cultures all over the globe held different beliefs about the place of humanity in the universe, and modern advances in biology and cosmology affected their beliefs in different ways. Buddhism, in particular, seemed to have always advised a rather humble place for humans in the universe.

2. No Self: Buddhist Meditation and Theories of Human Nature

Buddhist traditions transmit hundreds of speeches by the Buddha, who lived in India in about the fifth century BCE. Since he lived several centuries before the widespread use of writing in India, it is not quite sure which of these speeches go back to the Buddha himself. The oldest manuscripts of Buddhist doctrines date from around the first century CE. They were found in the Hindukush mountain range between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, in modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. According to these manuscripts, Buddhism denied that there is a pure, immortal “self” (in Sanskrit: *ātman*) at the core of living beings, while all other Indian religious traditions euphorically praised the *ātman*.

In order to realize that there is no *ātman*, Buddhists practiced a specific meditation that is widely popular to the present day: first, the meditator visualizes his or her own body, looks at its different parts, the internal organs, and so on, and asks whether a “self” can be found in each of the parts. Having not found a “self” in the body, the meditator then examines his or her feelings, conceptions,

2. Darwin does not dwell on the questions of free will and the soul in his 1872 *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* but acknowledges that the subject he is dealing with is broadly related to the “relations between the physical and moral realms” (Darwin’s translation of M. Lemoine’s phrasing “rapports du physique et du moral”). See Darwin 1998: 8.

3. See Freud 1917: 3–7.

intentions, and perceptions, and asks, again, whether they are as permanent and self-reliant as a true “self” is expected to be. The meditator finds feelings, conceptions and so on in constant change, without a permanent core. Notably, it was presupposed that a pure and unchangeable “self”, if it exists, must be *in control* of itself, and upon contemplation, the meditator found that there was neither control over the ailing and ageing of the body, nor was there control over feelings, thoughts, and sense perceptions.⁴ Buddhist monks and nuns probably first used this meditation technique merely as a practice in humility and non-attachment, without attempting to challenge other traditions. Still, over time, “no self” (*an-ātman*) emerged as the unique trademark of the Buddhist tradition. What humans (and animals) instinctively perceive as “myself” (distinct from the environment) is merely a conglomerate of changing, impermanent parts that are not under their control.

Some Buddhist monks and nuns practiced this meditation for many hours every day, developing its various stages. In order to overcome the instinctive idea that the body is in any way stable, lasting, or the self, some even went to funeral sites and looked at corpses in different stages of decay. They would then, in meditation, recall those images vividly, to the point that these images appeared to them just as real as the actual bodies they had seen.⁵

3. What is Real? Atomism and Hellenic Buddhism

Already in ancient India, more than two thousand years ago, not everybody was pleased to hear that there was no true self. Already the Buddha, it seems, adapted his teaching style to the mindsets of his listeners, depending on the occasion. The solid and simple layman would mostly receive teachings on living life in a peaceful and successful way. The teachings on the absence of a self were mostly given to monks and nuns, who had abandoned their homes in search for the higher truths, and to spiritual seekers of other traditions who came to ask or challenge the Buddha on philosophical issues. Lay Buddhists mostly relied upon Buddhist monks and nuns for prayer and blessing, and followed the Buddha’s advice on how to maintain peace and stability in one’s family and community.

Since the laity supported the monastic order with donations, the enthusiastic meditators could devote much of their time to the visualizations and contemplations about the absence of the *ātman*. The disassembling of the human body and mind led to further insights: to be sure, no lasting “self” can be found anywhere within the body, but if that is so, is there actually a “body” as such, or is there no more than an assembly of various parts? While the term “body” is a convenient description for this assembly, a real “body” does not exist, just like the self. And even looking at the liver within the body, is there a real liver, or is it, again, only a convenient term for something that only mind considers as an entity? When deconstructing the human body in this way, one may ask, where

4. See Buswell and Lopez 2013, s.v. *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*.

5. See Schmithausen 2018, n. 69.

does this analysis stop? Normally, one can rightly demand from a religion to provide a somewhat assuring, comforting truth. Nonetheless, the possibility that the body could be disassembled to infinity was potentially less comforting.

An influential Buddhist group in northern India thus decided to make a distinction between, on the one hand, unreal things which consist of smaller parts, and on the other, real smallest building blocks, the atoms of which composed things consist.⁶ The theory is basically consistent with Democritus' doctrine of indivisible (Greek: *a-tomos*) particles and was particularly strong in the Hindukush mountain range where Alexander's invasion of northern India (BCE 326–324) had established Hellenic dynasties. There, monks and nuns lived in monasteries built of stone (while in the Ganges plains, straw or wood were predominant) and began to write down the Buddhist teachings on manuscripts, a practice probably inspired by the literal culture of the Hellenic kings. The manuscripts were easier to preserve in the cool and arid northern mountains, while they would quickly rot in the Indian plains, where the hot and humid climate had once brought Alexander's army to its knees. The meditations of "no self" were still practiced and passed on orally to novices, but at the same time, scholars began to write down their insights and exegeses in manuscript and founded monastic colleges for higher education where these manuscripts would be kept and explained.

One group of scholars wrote down a list of seventy-five "real" building blocks of mind and matter, a periodic table from which all phenomena derive. Some of those elements could appear in combination, others could not, and it was discussed how and why that was so. This analytic approach laid the foundation for significant advances in Buddhist systematics, as well as in geography, medicine, architecture, grammar, formal logic, mathematics and other "wordly" subjects. In this way, the colleges of the Hindukush brought a wave of progress to the Indian subcontinent and the regions where Buddhism later spread.⁷ The resident colleges in the north were the models for the famed Buddhist colleges in the Indian plains, such as Nālandā which housed several thousand resident scholars by the sixth century, and they inspired foreign monastic schools such as Samyé in Tibet or Nara in Japan.⁸

Although "atomist" scholars of the north in the northern mountains greatly advanced education and science in the pre-modern world, many Buddhists considered such theoretical pursuits unessential to the Buddhist path. Buddhist monks and nuns were expected to aim at overcoming the world spiritually, gain insight into the supramundane, and guide others along the Path. Explaining how things work *in* this world (in terms of physics, medicine, astronomy and so on) was not necessarily seen as the task of monks and nuns but rather as a diversion from the Path. When Buddhist scholars wrote treatises in those days, they often by declaring their *motivation* for writing this particular treatise, and clarifying how it fits the overall aim of liberation from suffering, for

6. On atoms in Buddhism, see Buswell and Lopez 2013, s.v. *paramāṇu*.

7. These developments are outlined in Beckwith 2012.

8. See Bayer (forthcoming 2019).

themselves and for all sentient beings. Still, as a matter of fact, many had tasted the sweetness of free and factual inquiry and found delight in more “worldly” sciences, not directly related to the liberation gained by the Buddha. This was not liked by everyone, and furthermore, it was rightly questioned whether those atoms (or smallest building blocks) factually existed.

4. No Self in Living Beings, No Self in Things

While early Buddhist meditators had looked at body and mind and found no “self” in it, the northern atomists had concluded that there must be indivisible building blocks of mind and matter. Not everybody, though, saw this as a necessary consequence. Why should things be divisible down to a smallest part and no further? In the second century CE, the South-Indian monk Nāgārjuna emerged as the speaker of a scholastic tradition that directly opposed the atomism from the northern mountains.⁹

Nāgārjuna questioned whether mind, matter, and even time factually consisted of indivisible units. For the sake of simplicity, let us here focus on material atoms only: Nāgārjuna objected that however small an atom may be, it must still be divisible into smaller parts. It must have a certain length and height, however miniscule. Atoms without length or height cannot possibly be combined into “things” with a palpable length or height. In order to form any larger structures, the atoms would have to combine, and in order to combine, they would at least need a left side and a right side at which they could connect (or, top and down, front and back), and in order to have sides, they would need to have size. Thus, one can always speak of a left part and a right part of an atom, however small it may be.¹⁰ An indivisible atom without parts is logically impossible. While things always appear to us as consisting of smaller units, they must ultimately be quite different from that. In Nāgārjuna’s terms, material things and so-called atoms are “empty” (*śūnya* in Sanskrit), and so are mind and time. However far one seeks for a core, there is no core.

Does this mean that matter does not exist at all? Certainly not, as a simple thought experiment can demonstrate. For this experiment, let us assume that Demokritos and the Indian atomists imagined an atom to be something like an extremely small and solid ball or marble. If we were to cut this ball in half, we would find no core. Nonetheless, on the left and right of us, the halves would still be there. Cutting all atoms in the universe in half would mean a lot of cutting, and we would still have two huge piles of half atoms to the left and right of us. Nothing would ever disappear, even if we were, then, to cut the halves in half, their halves in half, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Matter is empty, but at the same time, matter is not nothing. Nāgārjuna’s way of explaining this fact was more abstract, but the above thought experiment explains it quite well.

Although his argument was compelling, Nāgārjuna produced only a *logical* proof that atoms still

9. The questioning of reality as a whole, and the specific theory of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) probably predates Nāgārjuna by two hundred years or more. See Buswell and Lopez 2013, s.v. *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*.

10. See Vaidya 1960: 301 (verse I.71 of Nāgārjuna’s *Ratnāvalī*).

consisted of parts and must be divisible—theoretically. At his time, there was no evidence that this would work in practice, and the northern atomists continued to flourish for centuries. Humanity had to wait for Lise Meitner and Otto Hahn to finally split the atom, and as could be expected, nothing on a sub-atomic level has yet been found that would qualify as an inseparable singularity.

Thus seeing “emptiness” as the nature of matter, Nāgārjuna and his followers boldly propagated that emptiness manifests as matter, a doctrine known from the the “Perfection of Wisdom” *sūtras*.¹¹ Matter is empty, but conversely, emptiness is also matter. In the same way, since time has no smallest units, time must be empty. Since our feelings, conceptions, wills, and perceptions have no smallest units, they must be empty, too. Emptiness manifests as time, and emptiness manifests as mind.

However much we search for independent things, or smallest parts, we will not find them. What we will find, though, is interaction. Although things have no real core, they somewhat miraculously work in relation to each other. The interaction of things works reliably, and still, ultimately, there are no “things” that interact. An Indian clay jar, for example, surely holds water. It effectively interacts with water, but if we break it and look at the parts, we will find no “real” jar in them, even on the subatomic level. This quite closely corresponds to Bertrand Russell’s realization that “events, not particles, must be the ‘stuff’ of physics.”¹² Nonetheless, while Russell was still in search for common-sense physics, Nāgārjuna felt no obligation to look for any “stuff” and said that interaction is the same as emptiness.

5. A Universe from Nothing: How?

Although Nāgārjuna’s reasoning was irrefutable, he did not answer the fundamental question how these empty things come about. If matter was at the core empty, how can it manifest? How can emptiness generate the illusion of a tangible reality? Nāgārjuna and his followers contented themselves with pointing out what was ultimately true: “things” are an illusion. The somewhat “worldly” question how the illusion was generated was of little concern for them.

This time, the response came again from the north, where there was more of a taste for such worldly issues. It seems that some scholars in the north saw that the “Perfection of Wisdom” and Nāgārjuna’s reasoning were ultimately correct, but that they lacked a solid explanation for the “worldly” phenomena that the atomists had discussed in detail. While Nāgārjuna vaguely referred to the world as a dream, this was not a scholastic explanation of the origin of illusion, especially when compared to the sharpness of atomist scholasticism and Nāgārjuna’s refutation thereof.

Perhaps unexpectedly, help came from those meditators who had practiced the visualizations of the human body with great intensity. In their hours of practice, some Practitioners of Meditation (Sanskrit: *yogācārāg*) visualized the human body so intensely that they saw it *just as real* as the

11. See Buswell and Lopez 2013, s.v. *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasūtra*.

12. Russell 1945: 832.

bodies they had seen *in natura*, in front their physical eyes.

The vivid, clear images of meditative visualization proved that mind as such had the capacity to produce a reality *just as real* as our everyday perception. The visualized image was a much stronger argument than just saying that our reality is like a dream or an illusion: even though dreams appear to the human mind clearly and vividly while dreaming, there is a mental mechanism that leads us to either forget dreams completely or to remember them in a somewhat hazy way. The visualized image, though, is vividly perceived in waking consciousness.

While it can be proved that matter cannot possibly be what we assume it to be, it can also be proved that mind has the capacity to produce the illusion of matter.¹³ Scholars were now sure that the world was generated by mind alone, and this allowed for a continuation of the worldly analyses of the atomists, under the premise that all phenomena were ultimately empty, as Nāgārjuna had taught.

The situation was in a way similar to modern science: In fields such as chemistry or mechanics, the specific laws and questions of the subatomic level rarely play a role, and much of modern science can be conducted *as if* atoms were rather stable combinations of “real” electrons, neutrons and positrons, *as if* time was a stable, linear continuum, and so on. In the same way, monks in the monastic colleges of northern India could study the natural philosophy of the atomists and applied sciences such as architecture or medicine in some classes, while studying emptiness and the creation of the world by mind in others.

6. The “Practitioners of Meditation” in the Golden Age of India

The northern Indian “atomist” tradition of periodic tables and classifications was fused with Nāgārjuna’s southern tradition of emptiness around the time when the south and north of India were fused into a single kingdom under the Gupta dynasty (c. 350–550 CE). Nāgārjuna had written his critiques of the atomists in the second century CE, while he was affiliated with a South-Indian dynasty in a real war with the North-Indian patrons of the atomists. In the fourth century, the Gupta dynasty conquered the territories of both opposing kingdoms. At that time, two famed scholars called Asaṅga and Vasubandhu came from the northern mountains to the Ganges plains, the homeland of the Guptas, and strove to unite different Buddhist traditions from all over India into a coherent whole. The name of their tradition derived from those Practitioners of Meditation (Sanskrit: Yogācārāḥ) who had achieved mastery in visualization. While Asaṅga focused on collecting and harmonizing doctrines from various Buddhist traditions, his younger brother Vasubandhu, who had formerly been a well-known master of the northern atomists, now used his fame in order to convince them of the new doctrines: emptiness and the world being generated from “mind only” (Sanskrit: *citta-mātra*).

13. See Duckworth 2011: 31.

7. Do Living Beings Create the World? Opposition to the New Doctrines

Although Asaṅga and Vasubandhu held sway over their times and were held in high esteem at the Gupta court, their fusion of doctrines was naturally not readily accepted by everyone in the older traditions. Many atomists were not in favor of the new illusionism and the somewhat nihilistic doctrine of emptiness. In order to convince them, Vasubandhu wrote treatises in which he pretended to uphold that the material world was real and independent of mind. Interwoven with such “realist” arguments, he skillfully inserted some dogmatic problems that would be unsolvable without accepting emptiness and “mind only” (*cittamātra*). This would hopefully cause his readers to take these problems seriously and eventually come to accept the Yogācāra world view.

In the beginning, the followers of Nāgārjuna’s tradition seem to have had no objections to Yogācāra doctrines. After all, Nāgārjuna himself might not have objected to studying the advanced scholasticism of the atomists under the premise that it was all ultimately empty. It was only years after the passing of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu that some admirers of Nāgārjuna began to voice objections. According to those critics, the Yogācāra tradition had not fully accepted the doctrine of emptiness and allegedly claimed that mind exists, while matter does not exist. Nonetheless, this is not what Asaṅga and Vasubandhu meant to say by the term “mind only”

(*citta-mātra*). Mind produces the illusion of objects, and it also produce the illusion of “existing” objects, as different from “non-existing” objects. “Existence” and “non-existence” play a role only on the level of mental projection; ultimately, they are obsolete categories. The very conception of “existence” versus “non-existence” is fundamentally flawed and applies to neither mind nor matter from the ultimate point of view. Mind and matter are ultimately in a state beyond existence and non-existence, of “non-dualism between existence and non-existence” (Sanskrit: *bhāva-abhāva-advaya*).¹⁴ This Yogācāra doctrine of non-dualism matches Nāgārjuna’s theory that mind and matter are emptiness, while emptiness is also mind.¹⁵ In the Yogācāra tradition, in order to produce the dreamscape of the world, mind does not have to “exist” in an absolute and static sense. Although this seems paradoxical, the realization of “mind only” (*citta-mātra*) brings with it a realization of a “mindless” (*a-citta*) state. The full understanding of this apparent paradox can only be gained through intense study and contemplation, and the meditative realization of “non-duality of existence and non-existence” constitutes the breakthrough to highest insight.

8. Preserving Public Sanity: Hidden “Mind-Only” Doctrines

On the meditative path of Asaṅga’s tradition, insight into “non-duality of existence and non-existence” leads to the peak of meditative insight, to the union of “mind only” and a mindless state. Nonetheless, the path does not end there. Similar to a mountaineering map, the treatises of the

14. Dayal 1932: 289.

15. Dayal 1932: 238.

Yogācāra tradition describe not only the way to the peak, but also the peak itself and the descent on the other side. Firstly, from the vantage point of highest insight, the meditator gains an overview of the condition under which humans and other living beings go through their lives: Being misled by their minds only (*citta-mātra*), they pass through birth, death and rebirth in a chain of interactions which they hold to be real. Having understood the condition of deluded beings, the realized Yogācāra practitioner does not remain in elevated contemplation but descends from the peak with a sincere interest in the different mindsets of living beings. Having understood different individual mindsets, he or she provides them with the best possible support, in view of their individual knowledge and aspirations.

A particular group of living beings, for example, were the erudite few who had already studied the extensive treatises of atomist analysis and classification. Vasubandhu composed tailor-made treatises for them, leading them gradually from their present mindset to the truths of emptiness and “mind only.”

The followers of Nāgārjuna thought about these things quite differently and were in need of a different approach. Asaṅga is credited with compiling an extensive treatise that matches their particular mindset. In this book (the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*), we find the main ideas of Nāgārjuna rephrased and presented in a skilful way. At the same time, advanced scholars and practitioners are warned not to teach the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) to untrained people since “emptiness” could deeply unsettle them.¹⁶ There were indeed various risks in teaching emptiness to outsiders: Primarily, ordinary people could misunderstand “emptiness” as nihilism, as teaching that nothing at all exists and that nothing really matters, which could have a devastating effect on the functioning of society. This was surely not the real intention of “emptiness”, but there was a real danger that the Brahmanic rivals of Buddhism could accuse Buddhists of propounding such nihilism. By the time of the Gupta dynasty, India had developed a lively tradition of public debates, often held in the presence of the king or local policy makers. Since rulers were naturally interested in promoting economic growth and uplifting public morale, the accusation of nihilism could weigh heavily against the Buddhists.

In order to avoid such misunderstandings, the followers of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu chose not to mention the doctrines of emptiness and “mind only” in public debates with non-Buddhists. Rather, they reverted to the complex “realist” system of the atomists, albeit in moderate form. They did not strongly emphasize that the atoms “exist”, modified the list of indivisible parts of mind and matter, and only covertly hinted at the higher Yogācāra doctrines. For debates with non-Buddhists, they used Vasubandhu’s “hidden Yogācāra” treatises that he had once written in order to gently guide the atomists to the higher truths of Yogācāra. On this basis, two scholars in Vasubandhu’s tradition, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, wrote guidelines for Buddhist arguments against Brahmanic doctrines such as the pure self (*ātman*) or a creator god.

16. Dayal 1932: 248f. See also Buswell and Lopez 2013, s.v. *bodhisattvasaṃvara*.

9. Further Opposition to Yogācāra Doctrines in Tibet and East Asia

In the 8th century CE, the Tibetan king invited Indian Buddhist masters to spread Buddhism in Tibet. His vast Tibetan empire was still illiterate, and a Tibetan script had to be invented based on the Gupta script. The first Indian monks in Tibet were masters from the enormously successful Indian Buddhist colleges. They brought with them not only writing and state ritual, but also a philosophy that was a balanced combination of (moderate) atomism, emptiness in Nāgārjuna's tradition, and the "mind only" thought of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. Nonetheless, in the centuries that followed, Tibetan Buddhist orders were strongly involved in politics, and doctrinal arguments were used against political rivals. By the 18th century, those Tibetan scholars prevailed who claimed that the Yogācāra tradition had in fact held mind to be existent, matter to be non-existent. The question had become a political issue of highest order, and the older, more balanced view of the early Indian missionaries was marginalized.

In the Chinese Tang dynasty, "mind only" doctrines and higher learning were popularized by the imperial translator Xuanzang (c. 602–664) who had studied in the Buddhist colleges of India and Central Asia. Nonetheless, higher education in Buddhist monasteries was somewhat affected by the rise of Chan (Korean: Seon, Japanese: Zen) Buddhism. When Chan monks began to form a distinct tradition of East-Asian Buddhism, they considered Vasubandhu to be one of their Indian forerunners and basically accepted the doctrine of "mind only". Still, Chan masters came to emphasize silent, non-analytical meditation and poetry, at the expense of systematic study (such as the theories of the atomists) and ontological analysis. It remains to be investigated whether they had to act under rulers who thought that higher education should be in the hands of Confucian scholars, especially after Buddhism had been persecuted in the later Tang dynasty (845 CE).

10. Modernity: "Mind Only" Comes to the West

The above developments played a major role when Buddhism gained popularity in Europe, Australia, and the Americas after World War II. In the 1950s, Zen was popularized overseas by Japanese monks and lay practitioners. Zen brought an enormous cultural benefit to the West but also led to an image of Buddhism as being centered upon silent, non-analytical meditation and refined poetry. Even though the foremost proponent of Zen, D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966), was an academic Buddhologist and conducted research in Indian mind-only thought, his writings on mind only were far less popular than his Zen books.

When Tibetan scholars arrived in the West as refugees after 1959, Tibetan Buddhism gained an equally large following, which raised the question whether the Tibetan critique of "mind only" would apply to Zen. Some Western scholars, inspired by Zen, jumped to the assistance of "mind only", without, unfortunately, reading the original writings of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu sufficiently. Trying to defend the "mind only", they held that Yogācāra had never claimed matter to be a mere

mental projection.

This argument was meant to fend off the accusation that Vasubandhu had held mind to be inherently existent. Nonetheless, the two questions whether matter is a projection of mind and whether mind exists inherently were not necessarily connected in Buddhist discourse. They were necessarily connected in Western discourse only: Plato most famously held that individual things were unreal, while the ideas of these things were real. Thus, when the name for Plato's doctrine, "idealism", was applied to the world-view of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, this inevitably led to confusion. Now Western scholars debated whether or not "mind only" was idealism, mostly ignoring fact that they would have to define the term "idealism" in the first place, before any fruitful discussion could take place. Adding insult to injury, this all came at a time at which Bertrand Russell had rightly pointed out the risks and misuses of idealism, as exemplified in the authoritarian state outlined in Plato's *Republic*.¹⁷

It only added to the general confusion about "mind only" that after the end of European colonialism in the 1950s, Buddhist scholars in Asia searched for common ground among all Buddhist traditions, underestimating the fact that Yogācāra was quite distinct from the Theravāda tradition of Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand, and from the Gelugpa tradition of Tibet. Although classical Yogācāra meant as unifying doctrine between "emptiness" and atomism/realism, it rests on a thorough and explicit scholarly argument about the nature of mind, matter, and "existence," and naturally, not all traditions accepted these arguments had preserved their distinct doctrines into modernity.

As if that weren't confusing enough, there were also those treatises that Vasubandhu and his followers had written in order to convince the Buddhist atomists (Sarva-asti-vādins) and non-Buddhists of their ideas. In order not to overwhelm their somewhat "realist" opponents, Vasubandhu and his followers had (in these specific treatises only) hidden their "mind only" views behind other arguments, such as saying, for example, that mind can perceive itself (mental images) when reliving past events. In the 1970s to 1990s, some modern defenders of Yogācāra did not know the purpose of these treatises and took them to represent the real "mind only" doctrine.

And, as if that weren't confusing enough, still, some critics of Yogācāra in ancient India referred to the revealed sacred texts (*sūtras*) of Yogācāra and claimed that the scholastic Yogācāra commentators had misinterpreted them. The original *sūtras*, those critics claimed (against all evidence), had never taught matter to be a mental creation.¹⁸ The arguments that were, in seventh century India, used to denounce the Yogācāra scholastic commentaries, were now used by some Western scholars to defend the *sūtras* against the accusation of "idealism."

It should be clear by now that the situation in was highly confusing, especially for those who did not read the original revealed sacred texts (*sūtras*) and scholastic treatises of the Yogācāra tradition. And so it happened that, over several decades, some modern scholars (with the best of intentions)

17. See Russell 1945: 105.

18. See Bayer (forthcoming 2018).

argued against “mind only”, which they took to mean that mind inherently exists, to which other scholars (with the best of intentions) replied that “mind only” never meant that matter was a mere mental projection. Both parties somewhat missed the point. While the critics spoke about mind, the apologists spoke about matter, both not acknowledging that in classical Yogācāra, mind generates the world while mind itself is empty. The few scholars who specialized in reading the actual treatises of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu were first puzzled by the debate, and early words of caution remained unheard.¹⁹

Fortunately, the situation has now greatly improved. There has been some amount of insight that, in order to understand Asaṅga, one needs to read Asaṅga first, and in order to discuss the “idealism”, one needs to define the term “idealism” first. In public discourse, a number of recent introductions to Buddhism still contain the misinformation that Asaṅga never held matter to be a mere mental projection, and the same idea has been spread all over wikipedia. Still, the actual meaning of “mind only” is now documented in an entry on “Vasubandhu” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and there exist several articles countering the misinterpretation of “mind only” in detail.²⁰

11. Summary and Conclusions: The Human Image of Classical Yogācāra, Its Past, Present, and Future

Religious traditions have a natural tendency to provide uplifting and assuring explanations for our being in the world. The Abrahamic traditions placed human beings in control of a stable world, and most Indian traditions saw a pure self (*ātman*) at the core of the human condition. The Buddhist tradition went in the other direction and demanded that the spiritual seeker abandon even the instinctive the idea of a self, on the grounds that the changes in one’s body and mind were uncontrollable.

In the centuries after the Buddha (c. 5th century BCE), progress in agriculture and statecraft were making the Ganges basin one of the most densely populated regions of the world. Freed from the immediate struggle for survival, Buddhist monks and nuns started to seek truth instead of immediate benefit, to the point of even denying the very core of our evolutionary struggle, the idea of a “self.” Paradoxically, this rejection of immediate benefit and the search for higher truths eventually contributed to the elevation of the human race. Critical inquiry led to advances in science and education, and from the fourth century CE, the “Golden Age of India” saw monastic colleges with thousands of students, leading to widespread literacy within the Buddhist order—while Europe was still trudging through the Dark Ages.

Nāgārjuna (c. 2nd century CE) had taken the willingness to abandon certainties to the next level and proved that there was nothing “real” in one’s body, mind, and surroundings, even on the most microscopic level. The doctrine of emptiness included a complete deconstruction, not only

19. See, for example, Hall 1988.

20. See Schmithausen 2005, Taber and Kellner 2014, Bayer 2017.

of common assumptions, but even of the intellectual achievements of Buddhist scholasticism. Obviously, emptiness, when misunderstood, can be dangerous. If human beings see themselves as non-existing in a non-existent world where nothing matters, they lose control and direction. In order to counteract such defeatism, the “mind only” doctrine of the Practitioners of Meditation allotted some amount of control to the mind, the subject. With their minds contributing to the creation of collective reality, living beings were to some extent “masters in their own house” (in Freud’s terms). “Mind only” encouraged personal responsibility and a sense of direction. While in Abrahamic traditions, the world was created for human beings (as the crown of creation), in “mind only”, human beings, along with animals, perpetually create their own world (as the root of creation).

Though effectively steering clear of nihilism, “mind only” brings along its own dangers and pitfalls. Human beings who fancy themselves the omnipotent creators of reality, unbound by external laws of nature, will either collide with these laws at some point, or cause their followers to collide with them. Asaṅga adamantly taught that “mind only” does not place us above the laws of cause and effect in everyday life, and Nāgārjuna had taught the same truth about emptiness.

When rightly understood, “mind only” further implies maintaining a reasonable distinction between self and others (the above-mentioned core of evolutionary struggle). Human beings are equipped with the ability to recognize themselves as separate from their natural surroundings and to recognize their own will as separate from the wills of others. When the healthy distinction between self and others is overridden by thinking the whole of existence to be a mere mental creation, this can lead to all kinds of exploitation against which our inborn sense of separateness was meant to protect us. Individual separateness is not true in the ultimate sense (and this is already implied in the contemplation of “no self”), but this separateness needs to be maintained once one rises from the meditation cushion.

Bertrand Russell saw a connection between the the lack of individual freedom in Plato’s *Republic* and Plato’s idealism. And indeed, modernity has seen no short supply of abusive religious cults claiming that reality is just a dream. For these reasons, contemporary traditional Buddhist orders seem to be partly reluctant to teach “mind only” and emptiness in public, but it is exactly these orders that continue to lose members to new religious cults. The question how to teach emptiness and mind only in public is as acute as it was 1700 years ago.

Regardless of social consequences, the ultimate question about “mind only” should probably be, “Is it true?” In 1945, Russell observed that “while physics has been making matter less material, psychology has been making mind less mental.”²¹ This tendency has continued to the present day. History has proved biology right: so far, no amount of immaterialism has freed a human being completely from the animalistic drives first pointed out by Darwin and later laid bare so masterfully by Freud. On the other hand, modern physics has proven that our normal perceptions of time, space,

21. Russell 1945: 833.

and matter need an update, as even the most unadventurous physicist will admit. The materiality of our neurons, synapses, and the electrons moving within them has been challenged. Still, whatever the future will reveal about the nature of mind and matter, it will probably not change the fact that we are animals, even if this is all just a dream.

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