Yogācāra

Matthew T. Kapstein
École Pratique des Hautes Études, PSL Research University, France, and the University of Chicago, USA

Introduction

The system of Buddhist thought called Yogācāra – the "practice (or the practitioner) of spiritual discipline" – arose in India during the fourth century CE and within the space of a few generations was known as far away as China, where it came to be eagerly studied. As one of the two major philosophical systems of the Mahāyāna – the "Great Vehicle" of BUDDHISM that aspires to the liberation of all beings through the emulation of the *bodhisattva*, the individual bent on attaining a Buddha's enlightenment – Yogācāra remained a vital dimension of Indian Buddhism throughout its later history and considerably influenced the development of Buddhist traditions in East and Central Asia. It continues to be the basis for one of the living schools of Buddhism in Japan and is a major part of the course of study in Tibetan monastic colleges. An essential topic for Buddhist studies, Yogācāra is of much importance for broad aspects of Indian and Chinese intellectual history as well. Its distinctive emphasis on mind and consciousness has served to arouse considerable contemporary interest in Yogācāra, in part owing to the prospects for drawing connections with such disciplines as psychology, cognitive science, and the philosophy of mind. As Yogācāra has been the subject of voluminous research in recent decades, readers seeking fuller bibliographical orientation than can be provided here should avail themselves of such resources as Powers (1991) and Kragh (2013), which together document much of the work accomplished in this field, including editions of texts and translations.

Historical outlines

Yogācāra emerged with the formation, beginning during the fourth century CE, of the sprawling corpus of the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra* (Treatise on the foundations of Yoga practice) and the abundant literature associated with it (refer to Kragh 2013). Three figures are attributed with seminal roles in the composition or redaction of many of the texts concerned – Maitreya, ASAṄGA, and Vasubandhu – and all three present problems for contemporary historians. According to traditional Chinese Buddhist accounts, Maitreya, named as a *bodhisattva* dwelling in the heavens who will take birth in our world in the future to become the next Buddha, taught the five texts constituting the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra* to the human teacher Asaṅga when the latter, in his visions, ascended to meet the *bodhisattva*. Tibetan traditions mostly agree with this, but differ as to the five texts forming Maitreya's revelation to Asaṅga and regard the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra* as the latter's own composition. Although some scholars

The Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion. Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro (Editors-in-Chief).

DOI: 10.1002/9781119009924.eopr0422

have sought to explain Maitreya as a human teacher who subsequently became the object of myth, most concur that the divine *bodhisattva* is indeed the figure intended, and that he is to be regarded as the supramundane patron of the early Yogācāra movement, perhaps a source of inspiration through the visionary experiences of adepts. Asaṅga would therefore be the first named human master of the tradition. According to Tibetan sources, the "Five Doctrines of Maitreya" that he promulgated were the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* (Ornament of the scriptures of the Great Vehicle), *Madhyāntavibhāga* (Distinction of the middle and extremes), *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* (Distinction of phenomena and noumena), *Mahāyānottaratantra* (Supreme continuum of the Great Vehicle), and *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (Ornament of realization). Though the first two are now generally agreed to be early Yogācāra works closely associated with the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra*, the third may be somewhat later. The remaining two, though still relatively early, are less clearly related to the main doctrinal currents of the early Yogācāra movement. They concern, respectively, the concept of an innate principle of enlightenment, a "buddha-nature" (see BUDDHA-NATURE [*TATHĀGATAGARBHA*]), inherent in all conscious beings, and the principles governing the interpretation of the important class of Mahāyāna scriptures called "Perfection of Wisdom" (*Prajñāpāramitā*).

Asaṅga is credited with numerous works, of which two are particularly important for Yogācāra philosophy. The *Abhidharmasamuccaya* (Summation of Abhidharma), like earlier Abhidharma treatises (see ABHIDHARMA/ABHIDHAMMA), systematizes the categories and technical concepts of Buddhist thought, but does so adding much that is derived from Mahāyāna sources in conformity with the plan of the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra*. The *Mahāyānasaṅgraha* (Compendium of the Mahāyāna) turns to a focused account of particularly Mahāyāna doctrines, emphasizing soteriology and buddhology (in the sense of the inquiry into the nature of buddhahood).

The third celebrated figure of the Yogācāra triad, Vasubandhu, traditionally said to have been Asaṅga's younger half-brother, has been the object of much controversy in recent scholarship and opinion is divided as to whether this name refers to just one major thinker or to two or even more. Whatever the case may be, the Yogācāra writings attributed to Vasubandhu include substantial commentaries on the first three of the "Doctrines of Maitreya" and other works, as well as several influential treatises, including the *Viṃśikā-Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* (Proof of ideation alone in twenty verses), which offers a refutation of the existence of mind-independent objects. This would be much discussed in later Indian philosophy, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. His *Triṃśikā-Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* (Proof of ideation alone in thirty verses) provides an account of the Yogācāra philosophy of mind and was the object of voluminous commentary both in India and in China.

Subsequent developments in Indian Yogācāra include the formation of an extensive commentarial literature, through the work of figures such as Dharmapāla, Sthiramati, and Vinītadeva. Vasubandhu's disciple DIGNĀGA (c. mid-fifth century) focused his efforts on questions of logic and epistemology (*pramāṇa*), giving rise to an important new current in Buddhist thought specializing on these subjects, but in which aspects of the earlier Yogācāra inheritance remained prominent as well.

The study of Yogācāra became an established department of contemporary Buddhist studies in large measure thanks to the pioneering efforts of three francophone scholars – Sylvain Lévi (1863–1935), Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1869–1938), and the latter's student Étienne Lamotte (1903–1983) – whose works in this area (surveyed in May 1971), remain fundamental. The field has been particularly active in Japan, where major contributors have included Susumu Yamaguchi (1895–1976) and Gadjin Nagao (1907–2005), and in Germany, above all under the leadership of Lambert Schmithausen (1939–; see Schmithausen 2014). Yogācāra is now also an important aspect of the emerging dialogue between Buddhist thought and current Anglo-American philosophy.

Doctrinal and philosophical contributions

The ideas that are considered most characteristic of Yogācāra became fully evident in the final chapters of a scripture of perhaps the fourth century, the *Sandhinirmocanasūtra* (The sutra disclosing the Buddha's intent; on which see Powers 1993), and subsequent writings influenced by that work, including the later parts of the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra*. While often drawing on earlier Buddhist thought, including elements of Abhidharma and of MADHYAMAKA, the new trend that emerged in connection with the *Sandhinirmocanasūtra* – now often called "Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda" (Buescher 2008) – was distinctive in many respects. Three specific concepts are particularly regarded as hallmarks of Yogācāra thought, and, though the first two may in fact have originated prior to Yogācāra's appearance, the elaboration of the three together as integral parts of a single, comprehensive system may be regarded as a major innovation defining this tradition. The three are: the concept of a sublimi-

nal consciousness, or unconscious, called the "ground consciousness" (*ĀLAYAVIJÑĀNA*, often "store consciousness" in works translated from Chinese); the notion of three existential modes, called the "three natures" (*trisvabhāva*) or "three characteristics" (*trilakṣaṇa*); and the idea that, in the final analysis, all that there is is "ideation alone" (*vijñaptimātra*). They may be considered in turn.

Ālayavijñāna, "ground consciousness"

Early Buddhist thought had analyzed consciousness (*vijñāna*) as being of six kinds, corresponding to the five physical senses (i.e. visual consciousness, etc.), with the addition of mental consciousness (*manovijñāna*) as the sixth. However, several puzzles suggested that this model was inadequate. If, for example, one were thoroughly unconscious for a protracted period, as was believed to occur when adepts became absorbed in certain rarified states of trance, what could explain the continuity holding between the individual who entered trance and the one who emerged from it, given the complete hiatus in the operations of the mental consciousness? Similarly, if one assumes the non-self (*anātma*) theory of Buddhism (see *ANĀTMAVĀDA*) but nonetheless affirms continuous rebirth, how is continuity between different lifetimes to be explained?

In response to these and other conundrums, Yogācāra expanded the sixfold scheme of early Buddhism and posited eight types of consciousness. The "ground consciousness" was imagined to operate subliminally and to remain operational even in states in which the mental consciousness was suspended. Some texts compare it with an ocean in relation to which events belonging to the six consciousnesses are like waves. The ground consciousness is impregnated with seeds (*bīja*) planted by our actions throughout innumerable lifetimes and these lie dormant as traits or dispositions (*vāsanā*) that mature according to circumstance until they give rise to ostensible conscious events.

The second additional type of consciousness posited was "afflicted mentation" (*kliṣṭamanas*), by which Yogācāra thinkers sought to explain our apparent egoity, even in the absence of something corresponding to a self, and the role this has in the coordination and synthesis of our conscious lives.

The "three natures" theory

Classical Yogācāra proposed an analysis of reality in terms of three categories, called the "three natures" (*trisvabhāva*) or "three characteristics" (*trilakṣaṇa*): the "constructed," "conceptual," or "imagined" (*parikalpita*); the "dependent" or "heteronomous" (*paratantra*); and the "absolute" or "consummate" (*pariniṣpanna*). This may be taken in some respect as seeking to refine the "two truths" theory (see TWO TRUTHS IN BUDDHISM; see also Kapstein 2001, chapter 8) of the Madhyamaka, the superficial or relative truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*) corresponding to the "constructed" and the "heteronomous" taken together, and the ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*) being none other than the absolute. Whereas the two truths theory may seem to encourage a dualistic vision of the order of things – though Madhyamaka thought clearly resists a dualistic reading – the three natures theory in effect posits a single reality experienced in three differing modes.

It has been suggested that the varied discussions of the three natures found in the literature generally belong to one or the other of two distinct models. The "pivotal" model holds reality to be the heteronomous nature, which is experienced by deluded beings through the dualistic projections of the constructed nature, but realized by those who are awakened to be the absolute, devoid of duality. The second, "progressive" model treats the three as forming an ordered sequence, in which dualistic construction is first recognized as illusory, the heteronomous nature then found to be the locus of the "deeds and afflictions" (*karma-kleśa*) that must be renounced on the path to enlightenment, and finally the absolute is realized as the goal of the quest. In either case, the heteronomous nature is in fact tantamount to the ground consciousness, which may be regarded as the foundation of Yogācāra ontology.

It may be noted that the "Treatise on the Three Natures" (*Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*), attributed to Vasubandhu and frequently cited in recent scholarship about Yogācāra, is of uncertain authorship and is perhaps a late, apocryphal work (Kapstein 2018). Its approach to the three natures, which some interpret as an attempt to harmonize the

theory with Madhyamaka thought, is of interest for its apparent refusal to accept the division of the Mahāyāna into two incompatible schools (see Garfield and Westerhoff 2015).

Ideation alone

Yogācāra is characterized as having espoused a type of idealism, though often without adequately clarifying what is meant by this. Some, however, do go further and speak of "subjective idealism," suggesting an analogy with the philosophy of George Berkeley (see BERKELEY, GEORGE). Oppositely, some scholars maintain that Yogācāra is not properly qualified as idealism at all (notably Lusthaus 2002, but see also the critical comments of Schmithausen 2005). Conflict over the appropriate interpretation of Yogācāra in this regard is not just an artifact of modern Buddhist studies, for similar debates have arisen within Buddhist traditions themselves. Some Tibetan thinkers, such as Dölpopa (see DÖLPOPA SHERAB GYELTSEN), for instance, adamantly resisted the idealist reading of Yogācāra thought that was prominent in Tibetan scholastic circles, regarding it instead as the true expression of the Madhyamaka, the "great Madhyamaka propounding extrinsic emptiness" (*gzhan stong dbu ma chen po*).

Leaving such late developments aside, it is clear that the early portions of the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra* do not embrace idealism in any definite way. As the tradition matures, however, we find increasing employment of the phrase *vijñaptimātra*, "ideation alone," for which the later, better known synonym is *cittamātra*, "mind only." Citing a well-known scripture, Vasubandhu, in his *Viṃśikā*, asserts that the "three worlds," i.e. all possibilities of experience, are ideation alone, and then proceeds to a demonstration of immaterialism. Vasubandhu's reasoning is expressed as a mereological argument to the effect that the logic of part–whole relations entails that no coherent conception of physical matter can be formed. In a nutshell, the argument holds that atomism is both necessary and false (Kapstein 2001, chapter 7). But the upshot of this, for Vasubandhu, is not just skepticism about external reality, for he holds as well that what we experience is constituted by the activity of minds. Recognizing that earlier Buddhist conceptions of consciousness made "having an object" (s*ālambanatvam*) part of the essential definition of what it is to be a mental act, Vasubandhu holds that the elimination of the object entails the elimination of the subject as well. What is left is the notion of a "nondual mind" (*advayacitta*), though Vasubandhu clearly grants that this concept must remain to some extent paradoxical. Critics of Yogācāra considered it not merely paradoxical, but in fact incoherent, whether they favored realist alternatives (as did SAUTRĀNTIKA Buddhism, NYĀYA, etc.), or anti-realist ones (as did Madhyamaka and ADVAITA-VEDĀNTA). Among the Madhyamaka philosophers, BHĀVIVEKA and CANDRAKĪRTI were particularly severe in their criticisms of Yogācāra, while ŚĀNTARAKṢITA opted for a more conciliatory view, treating Yogācāra thought as a viable approach to superficial reality that was to be surpassed in the realization of the absolute. It might be argued, too, that the apparent paradox of the "nondual mind" aligns Vasubandhu with the anti-realists,

an approach that would support the thesis that Yogācāra and Madhyamaka are not fundamentally antagonistic at all.

Additional topics in Yogācāra thought

The encyclopedic character of early Yogācāra, seen most prominently in the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra*, embraces the entire range of Buddhist thought. Hermeneutics and philosophy of language were among the areas in which Yogācāra thinkers made notable progress and Vasubandhu consecrated one of his major works, the *Vyākhyāyukti* (Exegetical reasoning), to it.

A distinctive theory of the early Yogācāra concerned the classification of beings according to spiritual types, called "clans" (*gotra*, see Ruegg 1969). Though sometimes associated with the concept of "buddha-nature," this latter is in fact seldom if ever invoked in early Yogācāra sources, though in relatively late products of the tradition, notably the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, we find the elaboration of the buddha-nature doctrine within a distinctly Yogācāra framework.

Yogācāra also devoted considerable attention to the nature of buddhahood, refining the theories of the buddhas' embodiments (*kāya*) and gnosis (*jñāna*) along lines that merit comparison with theological developments in properly theistic traditions (see Griffiths 1994).

The legacy of Yogācāra

Indian Yogācāra is sometimes thought to have reached a conclusion in the contributions of Vasubandhu's successors, notably the sixth-century commentators Sthiramati and Dharmapāla. Nevertheless, Yogācāra in some sense lived on through a variety of new developments that determined the shape of Indian Buddhist thought down to its final phases in the early second millennium.

First and foremost of these was the emergence of a distinctive Buddhist tradition of PRAMĀṆA, the science of logic and epistemology. The Buddhist discipline of *pramāṇa* was in some respects a response to the rise, within non-Buddhist Indian traditions, of the specialized domain of Nyāya, both as a general field embracing epistemology and debate and as a particular Brahmanical school of thought, staking its claims on its mastery of this area. But Buddhists had been also interested in debate practice almost from the beginnings of the Buddhist order, so that *pramāṇa* was in part an outgrowth of important trends within Buddhism itself. This is seen in a growing concern with debate practice in the works of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, followed by the efforts of Dignāga and DHARMAKĪRTI to formulate a comprehensive Buddhist approach to the philosophy of knowledge. The continuing presence of Yogācāra ideas is seen in the importance of the problem of idealism for these thinkers, whether as an ontological commitment or a methodological posit. Later thinkers of importance in this area include PRAJÑĀKARAGUPTA, Jñānaśrīmitra, and RATNAKĪRTI. Some, such as Ratnākaraśānti, also emphasized Yogācāra in the hermeneutics of Buddhist tantric

esotericism, where the cultivation of an imaginal world of divine forms readily lent itself to idealist interpretation.

Yogācāra also impacted upon non-Buddhist philosophy in India. The idealism often attributed to it was very widely rejected, and critiques of idealism in later Indian philosophies often take it to be their prime target. At the same time, elements of Yogācāra thought were absorbed into several traditions, notably those of Yoga and ADVAITA VEDĀNTA, that were nevertheless critical of idealism; for classical Yoga (see YOGA: CLASSICAL [PĀTAÑJALA]) embraced a dualist ontology and Advaita Vedānta, though concurring largely with Yogācāra in its illusionism, explicitly rejected idealism as well, leading to a position that has been characterized as "anti-realist." The Śaiva Tantric tradition of Kashmir (see TANTRA, PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS OF), by contrast, embraced its own form of theistic idealism, sometimes using Yogācāra arguments in support of its views.

Yogācāra thought became known in China through the efforts of several prominent monks during the early sixth century, notably the Indian missionary-translators Bodhiruci and Paramārtha (499–569) (see CHINA, BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY IN). However, it was the Chinese pilgrim and scholar Xuanzang (602–664; see YOGĀCĀRA BUDDHISM IN CHINA) who produced the most systematic account of Yogācāra doctrines in Chinese. His *Cheng weishi lun* (Treatise on perfect conscious alone) provides a remarkable synthesis, presented as a commentary on Vasubandhu's *Thirty Stanzas*, and was further expanded by his student Kuiji (632–682). Though the Weishi school that he founded did not continue to play an important role as a distinct Buddhist sectarian tradition in China, it did significantly influence later developments in Chinese philosophical thought, particularly in the emergence of the Neo-Confucian "School of Mind" (Xinxue) under WANG YANGMING (1472–1529). Chinese interest in Yogācāra enjoyed a twentieth-century revival, too, stimulated in part by developments in Japanese Buddhist philosophy and increased contact with Tibetan Buddhism as well (Makeham 2014).

At the same time, Chinese Yogācāra had a considerable legacy in both Korea (see KOREA, BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY IN) and Japan, as may be seen in the works of the great Korean Buddhist masters Woncheuk (613–696) and Wonhyo (617–686), as well as in the persistence in Japan of a distinct Yogācāra school, called Hossō, that remains active at the present day.

In Tibet, much of the Indian Yogācāra corpus came to be translated during the eighth century, and, though there was never a distinct Tibetan Yogācāra school, the "Five doctrines of Maitreya" together with the major writings of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu were studied in depth in the monastic colleges. The debt of Tibetan thinkers to Yogācāra is evident throughout Tibetan Buddhist philosophical literature (see TIBET, BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY IN).

***See also*:** *ĀLAYAVIJÑĀNA*; ASAṄGA; BUDDHA-NATURE (*TATHĀGATAGARBHA*); BUDDHISM; CHINA, BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY IN; TIBET, BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY IN; YOGĀCĀRA BUDDHISM IN CHINA

REFERENCES

Buescher, Hartmut. 2008. *The Inception of Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda*. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Garfield, Jay L., and Jan Westerhoff. 2015. *Madhyamaka and Yogācāra: Allies or Rivals?* New York: Oxford University Press.

Griffiths, Paul J. 1994. *On Being Buddha: The Classical Doctrine of Buddhahood*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Kapstein, Matthew T. 2001. *Reason's Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian & Tibetan Buddhist Thought*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Kapstein, Matthew T. 2018. "Who Wrote the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*? Reflections on an Enigmatic Text and Its Place in the History of Buddhist Philosophy." *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 46: 1–30.

Kragh, Ulrich Timme, ed. 2013. *The Foundation for Yoga Practitioners: The Buddhist Yogācārabhūmi Treatise and Its Adaptation in India, East Asia, and Tibet*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Department of South Asian Studies.

Lusthaus, Dan. 2002. *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih Lun*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.

Makeham, John, ed. 2014. *Transforming Consciousness: Yogācāra Thought in Modern China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

May, Jacques. 1971. "La philosophie bouddhique idéaliste." *Asiatische Studien/Études asiatiques*, 25: 265–323.

Powers, John. 1991. *The Yogācāra School of Buddhism: A Bibliography*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press.

Powers, John. 1993. *Hermeneutics and Tradition in the Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra*. Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill.

Ruegg, David Seyfort. 1969. *La théorie du Tathāgatagarbha et du Gotra: Études sur la sotériologie et la gnoséologie du Bouddhisme*. Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient.

Schmithausen, Lambert. 2005. *On the Problem of the External World in the Ch'eng Wei Shih Lun*. Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies.

Schmithausen, Lambert. 2014. *The Genesis of Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda: Responses and Reflections*. Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies of the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies.

FURTHER READING

Asaṅga. 2016. *The Bodhisattva Path to Unsurpassed Enlightenment: A Complete Translation of the "Bodhisattvabhūmi."* Translated Artemus B. Engle. Boulder, CO: Snow Lion.

Brunnhölzl, Karl. 2018. *A Compendium of the Mahāyāna: Asaṅga's Mahāyānasaṃgraha and Its Indian and Tibetan Commentaries*, 1st ed. Boulder, CO: Snow Lion.

Chatterjee, Ashok Kumar. 1962. *The Yogācāra Idealism*. Varanasi: Banaras Hindu University.

Nance, Richard F. 2015. *Speaking for Buddhas: Scriptural Commentary in Indian Buddhism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sponberg, Alan. 1983. "The *Trisvabhāva* Doctrine in India and China: A Study of Three Exegetical Models." *Ryukoku Daigaku Bukkyo Bunka Kenkyo ujo*, 21: 97–119.

Tagawa, Shun'ei. 2009. *Living Yogācāra: An Introduction to Consciousness-only Buddhism*. Translated with an introduction by A. Charles Muller. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Tzohar, Roy. 2018. *A Yogācāra Buddhist Theory of Metaphor*. New York: Oxford University Press.