

Dharam talk by Nomon Tim Burnett

Vasubandhu's 30 Verses on Consciousness - Intro and Verse 1

tonight we kick off an 11-talk series that I'll share with some of our other wonderful practice leaders. The talk series won't be every Thursday, we'll take breaks for the precepts ceremony, I heard you had a lovely one last week, and a guest speaker that takes us to late September on these Thursday evening talks. So rather than one-off talks on various subjects a series for a while.

I was thinking that this makes a kind of nice counterpoint to the Shuso's class during Winter Practice

Period to have a Summer Study Series led by me and the other teachers. It's also a graceful way to handle my annual 1-month sabbatical. That's usually in July but this year it's mostly August. That we can get an interesting theme and series going and other folks can give the talks while I'm gone as a part of a seamless whole. Anyway we'll see how it goes but I got really jazzed about the idea.

This is also closer to how our Founding Teacher, Norman Fischer, does his main meeting. A Dharma topic usually rooted in a text, that goes for several weeks. Although at Everyday Zen's weekly meeting they are lighter on zazen time and ritual. And by the way if you'd like to check that out it's shifted to Wednesdays at 3pm available to us on Zoom. If you have flexibility on Wednesday afternoons there's another Dharma treat that's available.

We'll continue on Thursday nights to also have the Precepts Ceremony on the 1st Thursday of the month. And I've not forgotten that we've had a sangha discussion/meeting format sometimes - Sangha Conversation. I'm looking for when to tuck those into the schedule so they work well, stay tuned on that.

So our topic is a powerful model and set of teachings on how the mind works. Which ends up meaning the same thing as what we are and what the universe is.

This set of teachings is from a group of connected Buddhist movements that emerged in the 4th century called the Yogacara teachings. Yoga just like we think of but with it's original meaning of "wholeness and integration" not a kind of spiritual stretching workout - and cara meaning "one who practices."

Like all history the actual situation was more complex than saying there was this school of thought that was distinctly different from that school of thought. Within and overlapping the Yogacara teachers was a movement called Vijñapti-mātra which is usually translated "mind only" or "consciousness only" pointing to how everything we experience is through a process of mind, a process of consciousness. Thich Nhat Hanh feels that translation leads to the wrong conclusion that there is a real thing called consciousness or mind and that saying "only" makes it sound like there's literally nothing but that in the universe so he liked "Manifestation Only" -

that everything we experience is a manifestation. Something that appears. An appearance. And doesn't imply much about what it appears from or if it's real or whatever.

So sometimes you hear Yogacara, sometimes Mind Only, occasionally Consciousness Only to point to this body of teachings - at least the accessible ones that we can work with. There's a vast literature in there and a ton of nuance that I'll probably never really touch in this lifetime.

The other thing that's interesting historically here is that while we automatically tend to think about separate schools who don't talk to each other much and you're either in this one of that one, actually in India and pretty much in China, any given Buddhist monastery had a group of monks, and sometimes nuns, who had a variety of interests and understandings and things they emphasized in their practice but they all practices together. Like a single church with Catholics and Methodists and Baptists all practicing together somehow. We know this mostly from the accounts of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims to travelled to India to see if they could learn more about Buddhism from the source in the 5th through 8th centuries. A famous one is Xuanzang who did a really long journey - 30+ years of travel and study and then hauling a huge backpack of texts back to India. Xuanzang and others took copious notes about what they saw in each monastery and notes that there were thing many monks who emphasized early Buddhist teachings, this many who emphasized Mahayana teachings, and how it all divided up into many schools.

The way Thich Nhat Hanh divides it up so you don't have to have a PhD in Buddhist Studies is that Buddhism over the centuries evolved in three overlapping periods: Original Buddhism, Many-Schools-Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism.

The Yogacara movement is one of several bridges between Many-Schools-Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism.

Our window into these teachings for these weeks is a teaching poem by a 4th century Indian Buddhist monk named Vasubandhu. We don't know much about his life beyond the writings that are attributed to him, but we do know he studied for a long time at the great Nalanda University in Northeast India. This was a truly amazing place. It existed for nearly 800 years and there were thousands of monks studying there at any one time.

And then like so many great things one culture creates, another destroys. Around 1200 CE there was a huge cultural shift and a Persian/Muslim army from the north east of India took over. Nalanda was completely destroyed along with it's many thousands of books and everyone there was killed. A place of peace destroyed by war. What a wonderful and horrible species we humans are. It's depressing sometimes to contemplate history but maybe it also helps to dispel the idea that things are definitely the worst right now.

The cool thing even though all of Nalanda's records were destroyed we know a lot about the place from the visiting Chinese monks. Significant ones who did thorough jobs writing up everything they saw and learned who left behind written records that survived in China pop up every 100 years or so.

Shantideva whom we've also studied was at Nalanda in the 8th century. An important place for the development of Buddhism big time.

And, you might ask, is any of this strictly "Zen"? Well, not explicitly - I'm not aware of Japanese Zen writings on the particulars of the Buddhist models and teachings we'll look at with Vasubandhu's great poem but I deeply feel that the Zen feeling, the Zen understanding, is deeply resonant. And the funny thing about Zen literature, like the koan literature, is that they simply don't bother mentioning fundamental teachings of Buddhism because they all new that stuff. Those monks, especially in China but I think less so in Japan, studies a wide array of traditional teachings. Zen writings and teachings are trying to seriously shake the tree. Essentially saying, "yeah yeah yeah, that's all good stuff but what about *this!?*" to bring it all to the ground of immediacy and presence. And the style of Zen makes it sound like they put that stuff down: but actually they had all trained and grown and developed through those teachings. The Zen emphasis is on "don't stop there, go deeper." You hear Dogen saying this over and over and over again.

Here's a great example - this is a koan I'm practicing with currently and it uses extreme Zen language in this vein:

Buddhism teaches that we originally take refuge in our parents, but we must eventually kill our parents. Then, we can repent and take refuge in the great Bodhisattvas, our teachers. But we must also eventually kill our teachers. Finally, we can, then, repent and take refuge in the Buddha. However, Ch'an Master Yun-men said that he had already killed Buddha and fed him to a hungry dog!

Kill here doesn't mean kill like literally killing and violating the most important precept of all of the Buddhisms. It means let go. It means go beyond. Don't stop there. And the feeling for what we go beyond: parents, teachers, Buddha isn't scorn it's appreciation, it's love. The love in Zen language isn't so obvious but it's really there. I can feel it. And it's a love that can shake up a more sticky and clingy kind of love. "kill the Buddha!"

And historically we do know that the teachings from Nalanda did go north both to the Tibetan plateau where they are an integral part of Tibetan Buddhism and back to China through these pilgrims. And the rich mix of Buddhisms in China gave birth to Ch'an Buddhism which is Zen Buddhism.

So a little back story. I hope that's interesting to have a little context.

And also a remembering that we tend to be a little light on this fundamental background teachings that the Zen adepts of old would have practiced deeply for years before any of this "killing the Buddha" stuff would make any sense. I notice as I think about that a little wave of suffering and fear that we're undereducated about Buddhism.

And then I can let that go and feel a deep feeling of peace too. It's really fine. It's enough to sit so be together to chant and bow to learn what we can about ourselves from what sinks in. Dogen also reminding us that just sitting down is Buddha.

And there's the suffering of the mind wanting more that can show up in our spiritual life just like it can in our material life. There will always be so much more we could learn about practice, and about everything else, than any of us can learn in his lifetime. Peace and joy are in learning, for sure, learning that helps us see more clearly, learning that helps us connect with the mystery and depth of this world, learning that broadens us out of narrow views. And we need the counterbalancing understanding that there is peace and joy in letting go of learning too. Letting go of needing to know anything. Our famous Zen phrase "not knowing is most intimate" is the practice of a lifetime too.

So here's the practical point of all this stuff: Buddhism teaches us that our suffering, big and small, subtle and obvious, all of our suffering, is based on a big massive misunderstanding. A misunderstanding of who we, of what this world is. Deep peace joy and liberation are the natural result of clarifying this misunderstanding and seeing things in harmony which who things really are. That's the point.

And there is a massive challenge in shifting how we understand experience. That we can only look through the eyes of one who's misunderstanding it all. Our glasses are distorted. Buddha said it doesn't exactly matter why, or how, or how long that's been true, but it is true. This is what's meant in Buddhism by "ignorance" - moha in Sanskrit. Ignorance doesn't mean you don't know the right stuff, it means you're looking at all the stuff wrong.

And an additional challenge to all this is language. The misunderstanding is deeply based in how we think about everything which is deeply based in, and limited by, language.

And what tools do we have available to transmit the corrections? Language again.

But, and this is an important but, we also have bodies, we also have presence, we also have whatever mysterious layers and levels of consciousness there are floating between us as we sit here together. So there is, for sure, something going on beyond language even as I speak with you using words. So, that's good.

Let's dive into Vasudandhu's poem. Our main text for this series is Ben Connelly's *Inside Vasubandhu's Yogacara* which is a nice accessible tour through one of Vasubandhu's great works called *Triṃśikā-vijñaptimātratā* "30 verses on Consciousness Only" - it's a teaching poem which is a common teaching device. The poem itself says a lot about the Yogacara/Manifestation Only way of understanding how things really are, but these kinds of texts also exist so that teachers can comment on them bringing the whole thing to life.

And a great supporting text if you want to go more deeply into all of this is Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Understanding the Mind* which is a newer edition of a book by him called *Transformation at the Base*. Thich Nhat Hanh explains that as a young monastic they all memorized

Vasubandhu's 30 verses and a second teaching poem: Vasubandhu's 20 verses. There's a role here for memorization. That's part of why we do our chanting so much. Getting these texts deeply into our hearts is like planting seeds. Another way of learning and study.

So what Thich Nhat Hanh decided to do is write his own teaching poem of 50 verses on these same points that Vasubandhu's making and then comment on each one. The order is his own as is the exact wording but the same points are being made. I can try to point everyone to how the two texts line up as we go if you like but it's also a good little challenge to figure that out for yourself. Last time I studied this stuff I found that challenging but this time I'm finding it pretty easy for whatever reason.

So, at long last, here's verse 1 of Vasubandhu's 30 Verses on Consciousness Only:

*Everything conceived of as self or other
occurs in the transformation of consciousness*

Everything runs through the mind. And nothing can be known or experienced or conceived of except through the mind. An ancient idea and a cutting edge modern one too: why I wanted us to study brain science last year.

Take sight for example. We conceive of our eyes like little windows we're looking out of and our little windows are simply showing us what's in front of our eyes. Right? Think about your seeing for a minute - don't you basically assume that?

And yet from a scientific point of view we know that's all wrong. The eyes have specialized cells at the back of the eye ball with a lens in front of them to focus the light - amazing yeah? - and our rods and cones at the back of the eyeball do not see people and chairs and pillars. They see patterns composed of different frequencies of light. Those complex patterns get processed by the mind into shapes and colors, and then those shapes and colors get processed based on experience and the mind shows us a little projection like a movie of a room with people and pillars on it. It's completely interpreted and assembled. It's not looking directly at anything, there are a ton of steps in between light bouncing on the eye ball and some character called "me" saying to myself "oh, look, there's Talus".

So what, you might say, Talus is really there, does it matter that we went through that whole process to "see" him?

Well do our eyes and brain always see what's actually there. Later we can ask the question about whether what's "actually there" is even a meaningful thing to think about, but let's keep it at this consensus reality level for the moment.

Let's do a little experiment here, and apologies to those on Zoom you're going to have to do this later but I'll send you the materials.

[Download Blind Spot Cards](#)

Download Blind Spot Diagram

So your brain is literally showing you something that isn't there on the card in this experience. It can't see the dot or the line or whatever's in the blind spot so it assumes that what's around the missing area is the same as what's in it and does a "filling in trick." But the thing is it's not like you have a thought, a particular awareness, like "well I can't see that exact spot but I betcha it's a patch of white cardstock" - no you just see white card stock where in fact there's a black dot. The movie your mind is making is actually wrong.

*Everything conceived of as self or other
occurs in the transformation of consciousness*

So that's an example of something we conceive of as other. We think I'm this person here and this is a piece of cardstock with an image on it. Clearly that occurs only in a transformation of consciousness. It's not what you see. What else am I mis-seeing? And extend this example of vision out to the other senses and out to the innumerable ways you conceive of the world. All of it isn't what's for sure "real" or "out there" is it? It's all running through the mind. It's all transformations of consciousness.

But these teachings take us a huge step further than that. Everything conceived of as a self occurs in the transformation of consciousness too. So my me-ness is probably full of ways that the mind is doing the same "filling-in trick" in my many blind spots. Much of what I think about who and what I am is probably wrong.

And these teachings keep going deeper and deeper. Not just the aspects of ourselves are a creation of mind but the very nature of a self here that's separate from an external world out there is also a transformation of consciousness. It's not just that the details of who I think I am are off but the very idea "I am" is off.

Which can be a massive kind of "woah" thought. Or it can also be easily dismissed by the mind that's generating the projection of me. "yeah right, bunch of weird mystical stuff, kind of interesting I guess." There is much resistance in this journey of understanding and transformation because we only have the mind that these teachings are kind of undermining to do the exploration with. Well and we have our bodies, our hearts, a subtle feeling, our presence and our togetherness. And we have deep patience and persistence with some really sticky thinking.

I appreciate how Reb Anderson of San Francisco Zen Center, writes about this in the introduction to Thich Nhat Hanh's book:

Although these teachings on mind are difficult, daunting, and complex, I have found that by going back to them when the time was right, not forcing myself to study them, but approaching them as an amateur, again and again, what was originally cold stone broke open, and revealed a

great, warm heart, the heart of Buddha's desire that we awaken to the wisdom which lives at the core of these teachings. I have joyously continued to study them up until this day.

If you get Ben's book, which I recommend, the chapters are quite short and digestible, you can read where he starts this journey with us towards understanding that everything is a transformation of consciousness. Here's the beginning:

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And to leave you with something that's actually useful we might think about this as a journey from the fixed to the flowing. When our understanding of who we and the world are - our conceptions of "self and other" - are fixed. Locked down. It is this way. I am this kind of person. Then there's more suffering. As we learn to flow more there is less. And eventually, these teachings promise we can flow so well that there's no suffering at all. Flow is a great metaphor here: water doesn't get annoyed when there's an obstruction in the stream, it flows around it. We're more likely to get annoyed right?

Here's a nice example of this. I'm teaching an 8-week class right now at Mindfulness Northwest and someone reported that she'd noticed an important change in how she perceives her days. She said her tendency has been that when things start to go wrong on any given day she'd get really upset and come to the conclusion that the day is ruined. It's a bad day. Nothing to do but hunker down and struggle through. The day is fixed in her mind as a bad day and sure enough it is that way. Eventually it will end at least.

But, she said, lately she's noticing that she doesn't have to do that. Something bad happens, she doesn't like it for sure, but she copes with it and is a lot more able to be open to what the next moment will bring. And sometimes things turn around and what was starting to look like a "bad day" turns out to be an "okay day." I don't think she went so far as to say a "bad day" could turn into a "good day" but there was a note of hopefulness in her that maybe she'd get there. Letting the day flow. Still caught in all kind of concepts like good and bad, self and other, sure but what an amazing shift towards less suffering. And what a great example of how suffering is created by our mind - more transformations of consciousness - something would happen that triggers a kind of mental cascade that creates misery for her regardless of what's going on.

So let's keep our focus on this idea of fixed vs flow. Does that have resonance for you? Can you think of examples of either, or of when you shifted between the two? If flow feels like the beneficial thing as I'm describing it what supports flow? And what triggers fixed?

[A 10 minutes small group discussion was held.]

Thank you very much. All of those many words to bring us this one short verse:

*Everything conceived of as self or other
occurs in the transformation of consciousness*

But it's a deep teaching I think. We'll see how Vasubandhu and his commentators, ancient and modern, help guide us towards a lived experience through these teachings that help us to become free.