

Good evening, this is the second talk of eleven on Yogacara or Mind Only Buddhist psychology. The root text is a 30 verse poem from the late 4th century Indian teacher Vasubandhu who was part of the Nalanda tradition in Northern India that traveled pretty directly into Tibetan Buddhism and also along the silk road to China to be part of Buddhist soup there that gave us Chan Buddhism and ultimately Zen Buddhism.

The big idea of this whole system of thought was expressed in the first verse of Vasubandhu's Treatise in 30 Verses:

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

Everything conceived of, us and everything else, is a manifestation of mind in other words. It's not real in the way we usually think it is. And this will turn out to have vast implications for suffering and the end of suffering, for joy, for real connection with others. But first we have to work our way through a re-thinking of how we perceive and understand the world and the way we think about the self that's doing the perceiving.

We did a little visual experiment last week to prove to ourselves that what we see isn't really what we see, it's what our eyes and brain assemble into an image for our mind to look at. We discovered that there's a little gap - a blind spot - in the optical sensors in our eyes and when the brain doesn't have any other information, like from the other eye, about what's in that part of the visual field it makes it up for us based on it's surroundings. So we say a section of white card where really there was a black dot.

And here's another meditation on this idea of reality and visual perception by a Zen student named Henry Frummer:

It was a beautiful day in June when I was waiting for a friend. I passed the time looking at the world through the eyes of a chemist. It is a game that I play from time to time. I had spent years looking at the world in just such a way to make a living. A

warm breeze played about my face. "Air: a colorless and odorless gas", I thought. (An old time physical description of air.) "That is a good thing if were not colorless we would have a hard time seeing!" I mused. My mind turned to color and I imagined a rainbow. ROYGBIV came to mind. It is the device that I learnt as child to remember the colors of the rainbow from red and orange through to indigo and violet. I was thinking about how colorless light was actually made up of bands of color and imagined how air would look on a spectrograph, a device that splits the light from an object into its component wavelengths so that it can be recorded then analyzed. Then it struck me that there are no bands on a spectrograph! The increasing frequencies of light look like a smooth line. I at once realized that we see a range of frequencies as red and another as blue. Combinations of frequencies give rise to all of the colors around us. These frequencies are created by light bouncing off objects but the sense of color is not in the frequencies. It is our reaction to them. We arbitrarily see a range of frequencies as red. Redness only exists as a sensation in our brains and is not a part of the object itself. The object will give off a reliable set of frequencies when it reflects visible light. It will not give off redness in any way. It is only the perceiving consciousness that generates the sensation of red. I am deeply struck by the fact that when I see a bright red apple, that color exists only in my mind. Redness has no existence or even meaning outside of my brain. It seems so vivid, so real to me, so a part of the apple. It was hard for me to comprehend that redness was a mere imagination, a mere creation of appearance and not a solid reality. It made me a little uncomfortable to think about the idea. To see that what I believed about my senses was not quite true. Little did I realize that this thought experiment, and subsequent understanding of its implication, prepared me so well for the study of the Samdhinirmocana Sutra.

The Samdhinirmocana Sutra being the core Buddhist text that Vasubandhu would have studied in writing these verses.

Everything's in the mind. Not real the way we think it is. In the terminology of Yogacara, everything occurs in the transformation of consciousness. The turning of consciousness, the process of consciousness. That's where the experience "redness" arises when we perceive an object we call "apple."

Vasubandhu then goes on to start introducing us to a powerful model that explains how this transformation of consciousness works. I've found that when I can bring up this model for others, and sometimes I even manage it for myself, it can really help us find a more spacious, patient relationship to ourselves, our experience, each other.

Here are the next three verses:

This transformation has three aspects:

The ripening of karma, the consciousness of a self, and the imagery of the sense objects.

The first of these is also called alaya, the store consciousness, which contains all karmic seeds.

What it holds and its perception of location are unknown.

It is always associated with sense-content, attention, sensation, perception, and volition.

Neither pleasant nor unpleasant: it is unobstructed and karmically neutral,

Like a river flowing.

In enlightenment it is overturned at its root.

We're meeting here a model of the process of consciousness - us - which is also called the 8 levels of consciousness. The 8 are grouped into 3 sets. 1, 1, and 6.

The first set, the first aspect, the 8th of 8 levels, is an amazing idea called the alayavijñana. Alaya means a "store" like a storehouse and vijñana is consciousness. This is a vast space, totally dark, where all of our impulses, tendencies, and deepest feelings are stored. It's a vast repository of potential: potential actions, potential attitudes, potential

thoughts, potential ideas and interpretations. The unit they are stored in is called a karmic seed - bija. When conditions are right any of these seeds will bear fruit and we'll have an experience that we're aware of.

A simple way to think about the storehouse is that when we do a positive action and feel good about doing so we're planting a positive seed in our storehouse. And since all of our potential future actions happen in relationship to the seeds in there we are more likely to do a positive action later. Karma. Cause and effect. This leads to that. Only there are usually so many factors we aren't aware of it's better to think "this usually leads to that, depending"

And the reverse of course: bad actions and bad experiences plant unwholesome seeds and a person is more likely to do unwholesome things in future. Makes sense.

But of course it gets a lot more complicated. Ben has a great little story in his book that feels germane to me in a way I'll explain after I read it:

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So Raizelah and I were on our bikes waiting at a stop light of a busy street the other day. Kind of spacing out, waiting for the light: the walk sign turned green and I started out. I right away heard a wooshing sound to my left and I instinctively slammed on the brakes and even jumped back a bit to watch a speeding Volvo wagon taking the right turn right into where we were about to be at a pretty high speed. I saw the driver's face. She seemed mostly puzzled: what are those objects there in the road while I'm driving? Whew, close call. I felt my heart rate go up, the after effects of the jolt of adrenaline my brain must've triggered the minute it detected "something's not right here! Get out of the way!" to help me wake up, switch gears, and move quickly. But I didn't feel particularly angry. It was close. I did look down at my leg and imagine it being smashed into pulp by a speeding car which was actually more unpleasant than the near miss itself - yuck. I guess that was a way of planting a seed for myself that this is a very dangerous situation. And thinking of this system I said out loud to myself and Raizelah: "Always look - left, right, left - even if the light is green."

Thinking is a karmic action so that may have some little effect but I'll be even safer if I do start physically practicing that visual double check every time I step out. That's a more potent seed for the future.

I appreciate how Ben built in that seeds would have been planted in childhood and in this system, even before childhood, not around cars exactly but around emotional reactions to stress and survival. And the seeds from his parents and culture gave fruit and affected him in that way as a result of earlier seeds been planted in the previous generations.

The alaya storehouse consciousness is both individual and beyond the individual. Thich Nhat Hanh's verses about this say:

Some seeds are innate,
Handed down by our ancestors.
Some were sown while we were still in the womb,
Others were sown when we were children.

Whether transmitted by family, friends,
Society, or education,
All our seeds are, by nature,
Both individual and collective.

An interesting side store here is that this idea from nearly two thousand year ago is like a combination of how both Freud and Jung thought about the unconscious mind. Freud saw the unconscious mind as a kind of storehouse of impressions from what happens to us, past trauma and so, whereas Jung thought there was something much bigger than a separate individual having experiences and storing new seeds in a personal unconscious, he thought there was a vast interpersonal collective unconscious that we all share. They were active in the early 19th century, not so long ago, and as far as I know the idea of unconscious impulses and feelings wasn't a thing in our culture before that. It's really interesting how recent most of our basic cultural ideas about consciousness are. None of us may have studied Freud or Jung directly but their work influenced all of Western culture. Like the

term "ego" that we use is a translation of a Freudian term - although our use of it drifted away from his thinking a fair bit.

In verse two:

This transformation has three aspects:

The ripening of karma, the consciousness of a self, and the imagery of the sense objects.

The "ripening of karma" refers to the storehouse consciousness.

The "consciousness of self" refers to a really powerful and interesting process called manas which we'll talk about in the next talk. But briefly to start: manas is the consciousness that explains our feeling of "self" but it's not the contents of our mind like our thinking. Our experience of it is more like the feeling and process of "me-ness" than the thoughts in our minds. And manas plays a really powerful role in interacting with both the dark storehouse and the bright world of the senses. This manas is also translated as "deluded awareness" - so that's ominous. A lot more on that later. Manas is consciousness number 7.

And "imagery of the sense objects" is back to our sense experiences which we now know are not exactly a perception of what's really there but a process of mind. So it's not vision as much as visual consciousness. The 6 layers here are the usual 5 perceptions: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, feeling. And the 6th just like in Early Buddhist psychology is the mind that perceives thoughts is also a perceptual consciousness: one aspect of mind perceives sights, another aspect of mind perceives thoughts. That aspect of our mind has the awkward name Manovijñāna.

So it's a bit confusing in English since what we call "mind" is a pretty loose idea. More or less whatever we're thinking or experiencing and the feeling of doing the thinking and experiencing I guess is what we mean when we say "mind".

In the 8 consciousnesses model there are two levels that you could call "mind" - manas that Ben translated "consciousness of a self" and the

mental process - manovijñāna - that perceives thoughts. He sometimes called that mind/thinking. Thich Nhat Hanh uses "mind consciousness." We could say process of mind (manas) and contents of mind (mind consciousness) I suppose without losing too much nuance.

Verses 3 and 4 describe level 8, alaya, the storehouse. What it is and how it works:

The first of these is also called alaya, the store consciousness, which contains all karmic seeds. What it holds and its perception of location are unknown.

It's vast and contains all karmic seeds. The potential for everything that can happen for us.

But and this is really important for the usefulness of this model: you can't see into it. Your thinking mind experience that's a result of all of this can't see what's in there. We don't know, can never know, what all of these potentialities within us are. I'm not sure about the phrase "perception of location" but the "unknown" part is the key.

But we can infer what must be down there based on what happens, on how we react to things. When we react with anger to something we know a seed of anger was down there. But we don't know how many there are.

This is a great kind of antidote to one of the ways we beat ourselves up isn't it? Why am I still reacting in this way? What does this still bend me out of shape? With the regular me-centered model all we can think of to explain this is we're really a slow learner at best, that we're inherently flawed and useless at worst.

But the Yogacara conclusion is quite different. "Oh, another seed of anger has born fruit" I guess there are more of those seeds down there, darn, well at least one more is used up and I can do my best not to plant more. No way of knowing when they'll run out but I'll just keep practicing. It's a great example of that dictum "it's not my fault but it is

my responsibility" - some of those seeds of anger in the storehouse were probably a direct result of your actions but most weren't and anyway who cares how they got there? If they're there they're there. The question to you now is how to you respond when one ripens. Do you lash out? Do you blame? Or do you train yourself to take a breath and avoid planting a new unwholesome seed and eventually even get to where you can plant a new wholesome seed when an angry one bears fruit and you feel your blood start to boil.

This also gives us a great assignment in life to keep working on releasing the results of unwholesome seeds, refraining from planting new ones, and doing what we can to plant wholesome seeds. And not because we'll instantly feel better. We might not. We might feel terrible as conditions arise for other challenging seeds to bear fruit in the process of whatever it is we're working through. But in the long run, this system shows us, things are going to go better as a result. This helps short circuit short term thinking.

The last verse I tasked myself with for tonight goes further into the functioning of alaya and how central it is in the possibility of healing and awakening. It has a lot in it and we may need to circle back to some of

It is always associated with sense-content, attention, sensation, perception, and volition.

Neither pleasant nor unpleasant: it is unobstructed and karmically neutral,

Like a river flowing.

In enlightenment it is overturned at its root.

The first line is talking about how alaya is constantly in an interactive dance with everything that happens. The list there "sense-content, attention, sensation, perception, and volition" are mental factors that are always present. Of the 51 one different kinds of mental factors - dharmas in the sense of ways of experiencing - 5 of them are always present whenever we're consciously aware of anything. This is important in saying that absolutely everything is interacting with and colored by what's stored in your storehouse. ([Dharmas Chart](#))

The next line is telling us that it's just a process - relax.

Neither pleasant nor unpleasant: it is unobstructed and karmically neutral,

The storehouse isn't good or bad. It's just the process by which karma unfolds in your life. The seeds inside have the karmic charge. So no point getting too upset or too excited about anything, just do your best to learn how to cooperate with the process here.

And the next line
Like a river flowing.

is pointing out that "store house" sounds too fixed and permanent - we think of a building as just sitting here solidly but no, it's not like we have this solid unchanging thing in our hearts that stores seeds. It's more like a river flowing. You know that it's a river but there's really no one thing you can grab onto and say "this is the river" right? Always changing, flowing, the water makes it a river but a cup of water isn't the river and the river isn't exactly just water either. Cooperate with the flow.

And the last verse is a big teaser for the whole poem.

In enlightenment it is overturned at its root.

I was talking about gradually improving your seed stocks in there so things will go better and that's true but there's also a more radical transformational process supported by studying and practicing this stuff. You can actually change the entire function of this around as a Buddha who isn't tangled up in karma anymore at all. Overturn the whole thing at its root. But Vasubandhu's going to take a while to help us have any idea how that could be.

Thich Nhat Hanh fleshes out that one line into a whole verse in his version of Vasubandhu's verses:

When delusion is overcome, understanding is there,
And store consciousness is no longer subject to afflictions.
Store consciousness becomes Great Mirror Wisdom,
Reflecting the cosmos in all directions.
Its name is now Pure Consciousness.

This week we have some time to discuss in small groups so let's break into groups of 3 both in person and online. The topic is where we ended last week and perhaps informed by what we've learned this week: allowing flow vs. fixed views.

Remember I gave the example of a mindfulness student sharing her happiness that she was starting to release from a mental pattern - a transformation of consciousness - where where when something went wrong in the day she was likely to come to the strong view that the day was now ruined and would proceed to have a miserable rest of the day. A great example of believing in a fixed idea and how the mind can create a reality to go with. That these days she was feeling something difficult, taking a breath, feeling it - not trying to brush past it or ignore it, feeling it, but then moving on. Then letting the rest of the day flow through her. That the one bad thing has influence but it doesn't predict the rest of the day. A great example of, on the one hand: a challenging seed manifesting and then habitually planting a big nasty new seed "sad day" that bears such difficult fruit. Or on the other: the difficult seed fruits and you're able to plant a seed of mindfulness - feeling what's happening - followed by a seed that's open and curious about what comes next. A not knowing instead of a knowing, "oh man it's all downhill from here."

I asked you to think about what supports flow vs fixed. Or however you want to parse these ideas.

Or anything else you'd like to explore about the mind and especially this powerful idea of the storehouse consciousness.

[discussion]

And here's the assignment for the next two weeks. Notice moment of reactivity and see if you can pause long enough to ask yourself "what kind of seed do I want to plant now?" and see how that affects what happens.