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Philosophy of mind in the Yogacara Buddhist idealistic school

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After some general introductory remarks on Indian philosophy, this essay deals with the structure of mind in the Yogacara Buddhist idealist school. Mind can be conceived as having two 'parts': the receptacle consciousness, constituted by the vasanas, or 'marks' left by any individual experience, which 'remains' in the mind in an unconscious state; and the function consciousness, constituted by these same vasanas transforming themselves into conscious ideas and representations, which are either of a cognizing ego or of cognized objects and beings and similar to the experiences that gave rise to them. Since a beginningless eternity, vasanas have been produced without anything real corresponding to them, in a fantasmagorical process.

Keywords: *Buddhism; idealism; mind; vasanas; Yogacara*

Introduction

History of philosophy in India is characterized by two great and profound oppositions: on one hand, the opposition between *substantialism* and *phenomenism*, and, on the other hand, the opposition between realism and idealism.

Substantialism postulates the existence of *Brahman*, which exists *in se* and *per se*, eternal and unchanging, and which is conceived sometimes as an impersonal and abstract Absolute and sometimes as a personal Ishvara (Lord, God) possessing the most sublime qualities. Substantialism manifests itself in the most ancient *Upanishads* which go back to the eighth century BC. This is an essential characteristic of philosophical thought and religious beliefs in Brahmanism and in Hinduism which derives from it.

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Phenomenism is proper to Buddhism, which arose in India around 500 BC. Buddhism does not admit the existence of a substance *in se et per se*; all is constituted by *dharmas*, factors, elements, components of existence, unsubstantial, impermanent, which as soon as they come into being immediately cease to be. Several centuries after the appearance of Buddhism, some of its thinkers showed a substantialistic tendency, which brings them near to Hinduism.

Idealism and realism exist both in Hinduism and in Buddhism. In Hinduism the Nyaya-Vaisheshika, the Samkhya-Yoga, the Uttara-Mimamsa schools and several branches of the Vedanta school (such as those of Ramanuja and Madhva) undoubtedly adhere to realism: they accept the real existence of the empirical world, they have no doubt about this. In Buddhism, the sects that constitute Hinayana Buddhism (the first form of Buddhism that at present dominates in SE Asia) adopt a realistic position.

As for the idealistic tendency (which denies the real existence of the empirical world and considers it a mere illusion, a false product of mind submerged in error, as the creation of delusion), we find already in some ancient Hinduist texts – *Upanishads*, *Puranas*, *Mahabharata*, etc. – a series of passages which could be interpreted as idealistic. In the seventh century AD, Gaudapada, who showed an undeniable influence of idealistic Buddhist schools (see below), developed a philosophical system based on the *Upanishads* in which he adopted a clearly idealistic position. Afterwards, around 700 AD, Shankara, whom his rivals accused of being a hidden Buddhist, affirmed the illusory and consequently mental nature of the world, of the empirical ego and of the personal God, as conceived by people. He reduced them all to mistaken and unreal perceptions of *Brahman*, the Absolute, the only truly existing entity. Because of Shankara's genius, and the fact that his works are the best known in the Western world, people frequently attribute an excessive importance to idealism in Hinduist thought.

In Buddhism the situation is different. In Mahayana Buddhism (which appeared in India around the beginning of the Common Era, and which afterwards spread through Tibet, China, Mongolia, Korea and Japan), the dominant tendency is idealism, contrary to what happens in Hinayana Buddhism. It is sufficient to say that the two great Mahayanist philosophical systems, the Madhyamika and the Yogacara schools, assert systems of idealistic inspiration.

The Madhyamika, with its implacable eliminating analysis, causes the totality of what exists to fade away, making it possible to say that the reality we perceive is in some way a mere creation of our mind.

The Yogacara school

We shall now deal more in detail with the Buddhist Yogacara school, because the present essay concerns a characteristic doctrine of that school.¹ The

Yogacara school develops an idealistic theory in a very systematic way. Idealistic theories had already been formulated in Buddhism by some sutras (canonical works attributed to the Buddha himself, although they belong to an epoch later), as for instance *Samdhinirmocana-sutra*, *Lankavatara-sutra*, *Dashabhūmika-sutra*, etc.

The Yogacara school was founded by Maitreya, who lived around 300 AD. Important members of this school were Asanga (315–390) and his brother Vasubandhu, and Sthiramati (6th century). Happily, many works written by them in Sanskrit have been preserved. We owe a most important treatise of this school to a Chinese Master, Hiuan Tsang (7th century), the celebrated *Ch'eng wei shih lun*, whose aim was to demonstrate that all is only mind. The interest of these authors was centred on metaphysics. Afterwards, authors belonging to this school were more interested in logic and epistemology; important among them were Dinnaga (480–540) and Dharmakīrti (7th century).

The principal theories of the Yogacara school are: the sole existence of consciousness (*cittamātra*, *vijñaptimātra*); the mental, illusory, unreal character of the empirical world; the structure of mind; the subconscious (*alayavijñāna*) and the subliminal impressions (*vasanas*), both of which have an important function in the theory of cognition; the three natures or forms of being (*svabhāva*); the two truths or levels of reality; the *tathagatagarbha* or Buddha-Nature which exists in all living beings; the Absolute; the Pure Mind (*amalavijñāna*).

The three natures or forms of being

According to the Yogacara school, there are three *svabhāvas*, natures or forms of being: the imagined (*parikalpita*), the dependent on other (*paratantra*), and the perfect or absolute (*pariniṣpanna*). Asanga, in his commentary of *Mahāyanasūtrālamkāra ad XI*, 41, says that *tathata* is the definition (*lakṣhaṇa*) of *pariniṣpanna*, and *tathata*, which literally means 'suchness', is commonly used to designate the Absolute.

The importance of this doctrine is extrinsically revealed by the fact that it is frequently referred to in many treatises of the school, as for instance in Asanga's *Mahāyanasamgraha* and *Mahāyanasūtrālamkāra*, Hiuan Tsang's *Ch'eng wei shih lun* and Vasubandhu's *Trisvabhākarika* and *Trimśhika*. This importance is intrinsically evident, since two of these natures (the dependent and the imagined) constitute the empirical reality, and the third one, the Absolute. To study these three natures is to study the empirical reality and the Absolute; to define the essence of these three natures is to define the essence of the empirical reality and of the Absolute; and to establish the relation which links both of them, and to show the mechanism by means of which the imagined nature comes forth from the dependent nature, is to show the process of how the empirical world is created from the mind, *that is nothing else than the dependent nature*. This is the most important point, not

only for the Yogacara system but for any idealistic system, because when an external world, objectively and autonomously existent, cause and object of our representations, is not accepted, it is essential to explain *why* and *how* do representations of a world arise in us.

The subject of the present article

Only one aspect of the theory of the three natures will be dealt with here: the structure of mind. This study (a) outlines the conception the idealist school had of man empirically considered, and (b) helps us to understand the process, already referred to, through which the perceptible reality comes forth from mind, and *only from mind*.

The dependent nature, mind, the *asatkālpa* (unreal mental creation), 'what appears'

The dependent nature

The second nature is called 'dependent' because in order to arise and to subsist it depends on causes. These causes are the *vasanas*:

If the dependent nature is only mind, support of the manifestation of the object, why is it dependent, and why is it called 'dependent'? – Because it is born out of its own impregnations-seeds (*vasanas*), it is dependent on conditions. Because after its birth it is unable to subsist by itself a single instant it is called 'dependent'. (Asanga, *Mahayanasangraha*, II, 15,1, Lamotte edn)

In which sense the dependent nature is 'dependent'? – In so far as it depends on something else for being born: the impregnations-seeds (*vasanas*). (II, 17)

Vasana means 'the impression of anything remaining unconsciously in the mind' (according to Monier-Williams' *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*), a 'subliminal impression'.² We shall refer to this term again later, but for now let us say that all representations, ideas, cognitions, volitions, experiences, etc., which reach the mind leave a trace in the subconscious part of the mind (*alayavijñāna*), just as perfume leaves in its bottle a scent, a 'memory' of its having been there. The following could be relevant to this idea: 'But in any case they [experiments with LSD drugs] suggest how much of what we have felt and thought is registered permanently in the brain and accessible to consciousness in various transmutations.' (Grinspoon and Bakalar. 1979: 146).

We can conceive the *vasanas* as weak reproductions, as weakened copies of the representations, ideas, cognitions, experiences, volitions, etc., that produced them. These *vasanas* remain in the subconscious part of the mind (*alayavijñāna*) in a latent, potential form until the moment when, due to adequate circumstances, they are reactivated, they become conscious,

passing to constitute the conscious part of the mind (*pravrittivijñana*), giving rise by means of that reactivation to actual, conscious representations, ideas, cognitions, volitions, experiences, etc., similar to those which left them, and which constitute the individual.

The dependent nature ‘depends’ on these *vasanas* (subliminal impressions), as we have already said, because if there are *vasanas*, there is a dependent nature; if there are not, there is no dependent nature.³ Later, we shall explain the dependence relation between the dependent nature and the *vasanas*.

The mind

The dependent nature is the mind. This identification is clearly expressed in the *Trisvabhavakarika* of Vasubandhu (Pandeya edn):⁴

What appears is the dependent (nature) ... (2)

And what does appear? The unreal mental creation ... (4)

And what is the unreal mental creation?

The mind ... (5)

For Buddhism, mind is only the series, succession or current of *vijñanas* (conscious states), cognition acts, representations, ideas, volitions, etc. These *vijñanas*, etc., constitute the mind; outside of these *vijñanas*, etc., there is nothing else; the mind is a *whole*, an abstract mental creation, which has no existence different and separate from its components. It is the same with humanity: it is not an entity different and separate from the human beings which constitute it. For Buddhism, behind or under the mind there does not exist a spiritual entity, eternal, a soul, which transmigrates from one existence to another; transmigration is explained – without having recourse to the notion of ‘soul’ (*atman*) – through the theory of ‘series, succession, current of *vijñanas*’ (conscious states).⁵

The representations or ideas, the components of the mind, are of two classes: (1) subjective, of an ego who knows; (2) objective (simultaneous with the first class), of beings and things which are known. This series, succession or current of conscious states, cognition acts, representations, etc., has had no beginning and is *anadi a parte ante*.⁶

The asatkalpa

The dependent nature is also called *asatkalpa* (in Vasubandhu, *Trisvabhava*, 4), *abhutakalpa* (8), *vikalpa* (30; also Vasubandhu, *Trimshika*, 21), *parikalpa* (Sthiramati, Commentary *ad* Vasubandhu’s *Trimshika*, 21), *abhutaparikalpa* (Asanga, *Mahayanasutralamkara*, stanza and commentary *ad* XI, 15). All these terms are synonyms and could be translated by ‘unreal mental creation’, i.e., something to which nothing real corresponds outside the mind.

This term is aptly given to the dependent nature or mind because, for the Yogacara school, all the contents of mind (representations, ideas, cognitions,

volitions, experiences, etc.), which are what the mind only and really is, are nothing other than the reactivation of the *vasanas*; and all these contents of the mind are as unreal as the dreams which are also produced by the reactivation of *vasanas*. Nothing real corresponds to them.

‘*What appears*’

The dependent nature, the mind (i.e., its contents as indicated above or the *asatkālpa*, is also said to be ‘what appears’:

What appears is the dependent (nature) ... (Vasubandhu, *Trisvabhavakarika*, 2)

What is this (unreal mental creation)? ... in a peculiar sense it is the imagination of the object and the subject. There the imagination of the object is the consciousness appearing under the form of things and beings; the imagination of the subject is the (consciousness) appearing under the form of a self and of knowledge. (Sthiramati, *Tika* to *Madhyantavibhaga*, I, 2, Pandeya edn, pp. 11–12)

We must understand this expression ‘what appears’ as having two meanings: (1) the representations, ideas, cognitions of the ego, beings and objects are the only things that are manifested, the only things which appear, the only things that are perceived, known; (2) the empirical reality which appears, which presents itself before us, is nothing other than these representations, ideas and cognitions. Besides these mental representations, which are a product of the reactivation of the *vasanas* (subliminal impressions) and as such unreal, nothing appears, nothing is perceived, nothing exists. This is precisely the characteristic thesis of the Buddhist idealistic Yogacara school – the thesis of ‘only-consciousness’, ‘only-mind’.

In the context of the theory of the three natures proper of the Yogacara idealist school of Buddhism, we can say that the nature or form of being of the mind, inasmuch as it is *dependent on the vasanas*, is the first nature (*paratantra*) and, inasmuch as it *appears as an illusory unreal creation* in which the subject-object duality manifests itself, is the second nature (*parikalpita*).

In relation to the problem of how there can be *vasanas* (subliminal impressions) if nothing external to the mind exists, which on being cognized could be the producer of these *vasanas*, we will now mention how the Buddhist idealist school solved it. This solution clearly shows the importance of the theory of the *vasanas* and of the theory of the beginningless *samsara* (succession of existences, reincarnations).

Kant in his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781/1998), in the third observation of the refutation of idealism, says that the existence of external objects is necessary in order that a determined consciousness of ourselves be possible. However, we cannot affirm that any intuitive representation of external things presupposes the simultaneous external real existence of those things, because that representation can be a simple effect of imagination, as in

dreams or in madness. Even in this case, the imaginative representation exists only through the reproduction of *previous external perceptions* that are possible solely due to the real existence of external objects.

This argument against idealism had already been adduced many centuries before Kant by the realistic thinkers of India: in order that the consciousness or mind can create the illusion or the hallucination of an external plural and differentiated world, it is necessary that there had previously been the perception of an external plural and differentiated world really existent; similarly, one cannot superimpose the image or idea of a serpent on a rope seen in darkness, if one has not previously had the perception, the knowledge of a real serpent.

The Buddhist idealist school answered this objection having recourse to the principle of a beginningless *samsara* and to the *vasanas* theory. The illusion or hallucination of the multiplicity and variety of the world is due to the reactivation of the *vasanas* left by the perception through the mind of the illusion or hallucination (created by the same mind) of a plural and differentiated world. And at its turn the perception, which produced the *vasanas* that are presently activated, is due to *vasanas* left by a previous perception equally illusory or hallucinatory – and so successively in a backwards alternating process (illusory perception – *vasana* – illusory perception – *vasana*, etc.) that had no beginning in time, and in relation to which it is consequently impossible to ask when did it begin (cf. Tola, 1985: 687–8).

To sum up: for the Yogacara school the empirical reality in its totality is reduced to be mere *vasanas* (subliminal impressions) either in their potential, latent, *in potentia* state or in their actual, manifest, *in actu* state, and both states have only an existence *in intellectu*.

The structure of mind

The empirical mind (*citta*, *vijñana*), designated also by the word consciousness, which, as already explained, is nothing else than the whole of the representations that constitute it, has two great aspects, or ‘parts’ which correspond to the two states, *in potentia* and *in actu* (see above): (1) the receptacle-consciousness (*alayavijñana* = *vasanas in potentia* state) which possesses the nature of cause; (2) the function-consciousness (*pravrittivijñana* = *vasanas in actu* state) that possesses the nature of effect; this is divided into seven.

Of course we must not think that mind or consciousness is *really* divided into two ‘parts’, and one of these into seven. The mind or consciousness, although it is a complex entity, is only one. When we speak of its ‘parts’ or ‘divisions’, all we want to indicate is that it has diverse activities, diverse forms of manifestations in the empirical reality – empirical reality that is created by the same mind or consciousness when it manifests itself. It is not a real concrete division; it is only a theoretical division, a product of the conceptual analysis.

The receptacle-consciousness

One of the aspects or parts of the mind is the ‘receptacle-consciousness’ or *alayavijñāna*. It is so called because the *vasanas* (subliminal impressions) are ‘deposited’ in it, in a latent, potential, *in potentia* form, until they become actual, manifest, *in actu*. This is only a metaphorical explanation. So it is necessary to point out the true nature of the relation between the *alayavijñāna* and the *vasanas*.

We have said that mind or consciousness is a series – a succession that comes from a beginningless eternity – of representations, ideas, cognitions, etc. The *alayavijñāna*, as a ‘part’ of the mind, shares the same nature; it is also a series – a succession that comes from a beginningless eternity – of representations, etc., but these are of a certain type and they have a special characteristic: they are of a *subliminal* nature. These subliminal representations, etc., are psychological or mental facts or processes that are registered in the subconscious without the intervention of consciousness. They are similar to the subliminal perceptions which take place when one is perceiving something without being aware of it; to the images created in the mind when one emerges from a faint or from a state produced by drug use; to some states resulting from hypnosis; and to some coma states.

The three texts from Yogacara authors quoted below clearly explain the subliminal nature of the receptacle-consciousness (*alayavijñāna*):

(2) If the receptacle-consciousness is different from the function-consciousness, then it is necessary to point out its object and its form [of knowing], since it is not logically possible a consciousness without object or without form [of knowing]. It is not claimed [by the Yogacara school] that it is without object or without form. How then? Its object and its form are undeterminate [*aparicchinna*] ... (3) Because of the extreme subtleness of its [= the receptacle-consciousness] object, [Vasubandhu] says: ‘That [= the receptacle-consciousness] is something in which there is an unconscious [= subliminal] knowledge of the seizing and holding (of the *vasanas*) and of the locus [= the situation in the world of the objects].’

(Sthiramati, Commentary *ad Trimshika*)

How is the object and the form [of knowing] of this knowledge? Its object and its form [of knowing] are unconscious [= subliminal].

(Vasubandhu, *Karmasiddhiprakarana*, para. 36, Lamotte edn)

The form of knowledge of the eighth consciousness [= the receptacle-consciousness, the *alayavijñāna*] is extremely subtle, therefore difficult to perceive. Or the eighth consciousness is said to be unconscious [= subliminal], because its internal object [= the *vasanas*] is extremely subtle ...

(Hiuan Tsang, *Ch’eng wei shih lun*, de la Vallée Poussin translation, pp. 141–2)

These subliminal representations, etc., these *vasanas* however weak they may be, leave in their turn new *vasanas* that replace them and which immediately become new subliminal representations. This is deduced from the nature of the *vasanas* (of being mental facts), and from the characteristics they possess: they are momentary, simultaneous with their fruits; they proceed in a continuous way; they depend on conditions; and they produce their own fruit.⁷ In this way the series or succession constituted by the subliminal representations (or, what is the same, by the *vasanas*) goes on without interruption, like the current of a river.

It is interesting to point out that Sthiramati, one of the most important philosophers and commentators of the Yogacara school of Buddhism, is concerned with the demonstration of the existence of a subconscious. In his 'Commentary *ad Trimshika*' (3 a–b), he asks himself how is it possible that there exists a consciousness having an indeterminate object and an indeterminate form of knowing; this amounts to asking how is the existence of the subconscious possible. And in the same commentary he answers:

[This is possible, because] this is similar [to what happens] in the concentration of mind with the total restraint of the functions of the mind and other similar states, even for those who do not accept the existence of the receptacle-consciousness (*alayavijñana*). And it is not possible to affirm that consciousness does not exist in the concentration of mind with the total restraint of the functions of the mind and in other similar states, because this is contradictory to reason and contradictory to the texts.

The concentration of mind with the total restraint of the functions of the mind (*nirodha-samapatti*) is, according to the texts, a state which can be attained in the practice of Yogic meditation, as well as abandoned when the practice is over. It is not possible to say that during this state mind or consciousness ceases to be, because, in this case, it would be impossible to explain the appearance of consciousness when that state is abandoned. The experience of Yogic meditation, so well known in India, offers an argument for the demonstration of the subconscious.

The *nirodha samapatti* to which Sthiramati refers corresponds to the *nirbija samadhi* of the *Yogasutras of Patañjali*, Book I, *sutra* 51, analysed by Tola and Dragonetti (2001).

The receptacle-consciousness or alayavijñana as cause

The receptacle-consciousness (*alayavijñana*) possesses the nature of cause, because it contains – or rather it is constituted by – all the *vasanas* (subliminal impressions) produced by any cognition or experience that affects the individual; and it is the *vasanas* that, on being reactivated, give rise to the conscious life of the individual. The *alayavijñana* is the cause of the activity of the function-consciousness (*pravrittivijñana*).

The reactivation of the vasanas (subliminal impressions)

According to what has been said, it is necessary to understand that the process, which we have called 'reactivation' of the *vasanas*, is: a process of conversion of the subliminal representations, ideas, volitions, etc., that constitute the receptacle-consciousness (*alayavijñāna*) into *conscious* representations, ideas, volitions, etc.; the passage from the subliminal level to the conscious level; the replacement of the subliminal state of the *vasanas* (in the receptacle-consciousness) by the conscious state (in the function-consciousness or *pravrittivijñāna*).

There is only *one* mind (which is also called 'dependent nature', *asatkālpa*, 'what appears') with two aspects: a subconscious aspect (receptacle-consciousness or *alayavijñāna*) constituted by the *vasanas* in their subliminal state, and a conscious aspect (function-consciousness or *pravrittivijñāna*), constituted by the same *vasanas* in their conscious aspect.

As we have already explained, the Buddhist conception of mind is as a series, succession or current of *vijñānas* (conscious states), cognitive acts, representations, ideas, volitions, etc.; it is therefore necessary to take into account that these component elements of mind can be either in their subconscious or conscious state.

Importance of the receptacle-consciousness (alayavijñāna)

The notion of receptacle-consciousness is most important: (a) because of its preponderant function in the dynamics of mind, since it is constituted by the *vasanas*, which on passing to the conscious level, to the function-consciousness (*pravrittivijñāna*), constitute the individual; (b) because the *alayavijñāna* theory is a brilliant anticipation of the modern theory of the subconscious.

The function-consciousness or pravrittivijñāna

The function-consciousness, i.e., the totality of the conscious representations, ideas, cognitions, volitions into which the *vasanas* (subliminal impressions) are transformed, can be divided into seven forms of manifestation. Six of them are the five types of sensorial cognition (visual, etc.), and the mental cognition (*manovijñāna*) whose object is only ideas (*dharma*) in a broad sense; any cognitive act adopts necessarily one of these six forms. The seventh form is the *manas*.

The manas

This is the seventh aspect or theoretical part of the mind or consciousness, and it is the most difficult to define and explain.

The *vasanas* that are cognitive acts, as we have said, belong to the subliminal zone of the consciousness, to the *alayavijñāna*. In them, every

element is unconscious (*asamvidita*), indeterminate (*aparicchinna*), extremely subtle (*atisukshma*), weak: on one side, the subjective part of the cognition, the subject who has not a full and clear awareness of his condition as such; on the other side, the objective part of the cognition, the object which is not clearly perceived in a determinate way (*idam tat*), and consequently the cognition itself which is neither clear nor determinate.

At a certain moment in the life of the individual, when adequate conditions occur, the *vasanas* are transformed from unconscious into conscious, and from the receptacle-consciousness of the mind (*alayavijñana*) they become the function-consciousness (*pravrittivijñana*) of the one and the same mind. They are constituted, as before, by a subject who is in front of an object and cognizes it, but now that subject has a full awareness of this confrontation, he knows in a complete and determinate way what the object of his knowledge is, and also has a full awareness of his own cognitive nature, that he is a subject, an ego which knows; now he is provided with the consciousness of himself, he possesses self-consciousness, *manas*.

At the moment in which the transformation of the subliminal cognition into conscious cognition takes place, and in which the ego-consciousness, the self-consciousness is produced, the mind receives the name of *manas*, or its *manas*-aspect, its *manas*-function comes to being. The *manas* is, in other words, the self-consciousness, the ego-awareness. Of course this self, this ego, is not a real entity, but only an idea, only a perishable element of the equally perishable act of cognition.

Simultaneity of the indicated processes

The transformation of the representations, etc., from subliminal into conscious (their passage from the *alayavijñana* to the *pravrittivijñana*), the arising of the ego-consciousness (*manas*) and the birth of one of the six types of cognition or consciousness (*cakshur-vijñana* or visual consciousness, etc.) are not successive processes; they are totally simultaneous, i.e., they take place at the same moment. Moreover, none of the different aspects of the mind (*vasanas* = subliminal elements, the *vasanas* transformed into conscious experiences, the ego) can exist without the others; they are mutually dependent.

What does remain when the functioning of the receptacle-consciousness (*alayavijñana*) ceases?

We shall finish this essay by referring to a theme, which does not really belong to the theory of mind of the Yogacara school of Buddhism, but which contributes to an understanding of the theory.

What happens when, thanks to the intellectual and moral Buddhist discipline, there is no more production of subliminal impressions, and, as a

consequence, the receptacle-consciousness (*alayavijñāna*), constituted by these subliminal impressions, and the function-consciousness (*pravrittivijñāna*), constituted by the same subliminal impressions once they have being transformed into conscious processes, finish manifesting themselves?

Our perceptible world is, according to the Yogacara school, only a creation of mind, dominated by error; it is merely representations to which no external and real object corresponds; this mental world is simply the reactivation of the *vasanas*, which constitute the receptacle-consciousness, producing in turn new subliminal impressions. The only thing that appears, exists, is this mental universe, without beginning in time, closed in itself, which subsists and goes on by the power of its own dynamism, to which man believes himself to be chained by the fetters of reincarnations, and which is the seat of suffering, injustice, evil, impermanence.

The only way to escape from this intolerable stage to which man has been condemned since a beginningless eternity is the Buddhist discipline. This teaches him how to put an end to this imaginary existence, to this incessant series, succession, current of mental processes, which constitute the natural function of his mind, the indelible characteristic of human nature. This last feature happens also with Western man, but he is not threatened by the terror of infinite future reincarnations, although other horrors – if he is a religious person – may be his destiny *post mortem*.

When all this accumulation of unrealities ceases to be, thanks to the Buddhist teachings, the empirical reality also vanishes and there remains only what *truly* always existed, exists and will exist: the Absolute, the third nature, the third way of being (*pariniṣpanna*), defined as ‘the eternal *non-existence* as it appears of what appears’ (Vasubandhu, *Trisvabhava* 3), the total absence of the dependent and the imaginary natures with their accompaniment of the unreal subject-object duality – in other terms the *nirvana*, the final aim of Buddhist efforts.

Notes

1. On the Yogacara school, see Tola and Dragonetti (2004) in which we study three important treatises of this school. The Notes of Part III of the book reproduce in Sanskrit, accompanied by their English translations, all the texts that we quote in this essay, as well as a bibliography on each of the subjects dealt with.
2. On the *vasanas*, see: Asanga, *Mahayanasamgraha*, Ch. 1, para. 15; Hiuan Tsang, *Ch’eng wei shih lun*, de la Vallée Poussin translation, pp. 100–23. Among modern authors, see Masuda, 1926: 30–9.
3. Cf. the texts of Asanga quoted before, which explain why the dependent nature is so called.
4. Cf. Sthiramati, *Tika to Madhyantavibhaga*, I, 2, Pandeya edn, p. 11.
5. On this theory, see Tola and Dragonetti, 1986.
6. On the conception of beginninglessness, see Tola and Dragonetti, 1980.
7. Hiuan Tsang (translation of the commentary of Asanga’s *Mahayanasamgraha*, p. 329 c, lines 11–12) says that the *bijas* or ‘seeds’ (= *vasanas*) of the *alayavijñāna* produce only *alayavijñāna*.

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