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## Madhyamaka and Yogacara Philosophy:

### Samsara and Rebirth



### Introduction

The Buddhist tradition has been known for its view that entities are reborn over various lifetimes based on the consequences of their actions in previous lifetimes. However, this view has sparked much confusion because of the Buddhist view of ‘no self’ or the lack of an inherently existent entity. Thus, one might ask, if there is no inherently existent self or entity, how is one reborn? In this paper, I introduce two important Mahayana traditions – the Madhyamaka and Yogacara– that address this philosophical conundrum. These two schools rely upon opposing theories of dependent origination and consciousness to come to the same conclusion: rebirth occurs in the mind. The Madhyamaka and Yogacara both posit that it is the mind that distinguishes between illusion and ultimate reality. They therefore both argue that

samsara and rebirth (which they equate with illusion) occur in the mind, as does nirvana (which they equate with ultimate reality).

### **Madhyamaka**

The Madhyamaka philosophy was founded by a scholar, logician and “holy man” named Nagarjuna, who lived between the end of the first and beginning of the second century of the common era.<sup>1</sup> Nagarjuna’s contributions to the Mahayana tradition are profound, as he is widely acknowledged as a Bodhisattva among Mahayana Buddhists in India, Tibet, China, and Japan.<sup>2</sup> The Madhyamaka, or the “Middle Way” philosophy, is often considered the bedrock of the Mahayana philosophy, and the philosophy of Buddhism in general.<sup>3</sup> However, the Madhyamaka philosophy has been said to be a far-reaching departure from earlier forms of Buddhist thought based on its principle belief that everything, including human beings and phenomena, have “no real origination and no real destruction” and are therefore empty (*sunyata*).<sup>4</sup> While the conviction that human beings dependently arise and therefore do not contain an independent or fixed nature is shared among all Buddhist traditions, the assertion that all *phenomena* are essence-less or empty is a direct contrast with earlier forms of Buddhism and non-Mahayana Buddhist traditions, which posit that phenomena or conditions maintain a fixed essence to explain cause, effect, and change.<sup>5</sup>

In the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Nagarjuna sought to disprove the independent nature and inherent existence of all physical and mental phenomena through a unique interpretation of

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Della Santina, *The Tree of Enlightenment: Introduction to the Major Traditions of Buddhism*, (California: Chico Dharma Study Foundation, 1997), 186, [http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/tree-enlightenment.pdf](http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/tree-enlightenment.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>5</sup> James Blumenthal, “Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism,” in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed S. M. Emmanuel (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 89, doi: 10.1002/9781118324004.ch5.

causality or in Buddhist terminology, “dependent arising.”<sup>6</sup> Essentially, Nagarjuna argued that because all things are dependent on causes to arise, the external world that entities perceive as independent of the conceptualizing activity of the mind is the illusion that binds entities to cyclic existence (samsara).<sup>7</sup> The basic focus of Nagarjuna’s argument is that all physical objects and phenomena are interdependent, arising dependently on causes and effects that bring them into existence. For example, if an object or phenomena were inherently existent, it must arise from an essence, meaning that it independently arises without a cause. Nagarjuna refutes this argument by pointing out that it would be impossible for a thing to arise without a cause because the object or phenomena would always exist and continue to exist without cessation. In the alternative, if an inherently existent object or phenomena failed to arise by its own essence independently, it would be forever non-existent. Thus, if one were to impute essences and independent origination of physical and mental phenomena, things would not arise or things would always exist independent of entities which would prohibit interaction with dependent entities would be impossible.<sup>8</sup> Fundamentally, Nagarjuna posited that the dependent origination, or emptiness of all physical and mental phenomena, allows for the arising and changing of objects and phenomena.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> David Burton, “Emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism,” in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed S. M. Emmanuel (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 153, doi: 10.1002/9781118324004.ch9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>8</sup> Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 220-4.

<sup>9</sup> Santina, *The Tree of Enlightenment*, 196-197.



The view that samsara and rebirth are reproduced in the mind is shaped through Nagarjuna's analysis of the agent and action, karma, and samsara and nirvana. Nagarjuna advances the view that the agent and action are dependent on one another, meaning that they are empty of inherent existence. Since all entities lack inherent existence due to their dependency on causes to bring about causes and effects, the agent of action is also empty of inherent existence because of the agent's dependency on action to account for change, the agent's existence, and effects of the action.<sup>10</sup> Nagarjuna does not deny the existence of the agent and action, but the conventional existence of the agent and action. To demonstrate, the effects produced by an action are not inherently existent or real since the Madhyamaka deny the inherent existence of all objects and phenomena in ultimate reality, but they are conventionally real in the sense that entities cognitively construct and produce the mistaken illusion of what they perceive as reality through appropriation, mental labeling, and the view of mental and physical phenomena in conventional existence as independent and distinct from oneself.<sup>11</sup> Based on Nagarjuna's

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<sup>10</sup> Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, 179.

<sup>11</sup> Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, 182.

analysis of agent and action, one might ask, if there is no inherent existence of agent and action, how are the effects of one's actions experienced?<sup>12</sup>

Based on the prior discussion regarding the lack of inherent existence of all physical objects and phenomena, Nagarjuna also posits that there is no inherent existence of karma or the karmic link that is said to determine a further state of rebirth.<sup>13</sup> Based on the emptiness of agent and action, there is no existent agent to impute such karmic consequences. In summary, the karmic link lacks inherent existence because if it were inherently existent, there would be no way to cultivate a karmic consequence and impute it to a dependently originating actor and action.<sup>14</sup> However, the karmic link is conventionally real in a sense that it can be mistakenly perceived or viewed as an independent, and inherently existent phenomenon or process that occurs through mental labeling and appropriation.<sup>15</sup> Given that all things, including the agent, its action, and the karmic link lack inherent existence, it follows that samsara and nirvana are also empty of inherent existence.

For example, in the chapter "Examination of Bondage" Nagarjuna contends that samsara is not inherently existent and only conventionally real because if it were inherently existent, samsara would be unchanging and permanent. More importantly, if samsara were inherently existent, nirvana would be unattainable.<sup>16</sup> As stated by Santina, entities are imprisoned in samsara and experience the karmic link by viewing conventional reality as inherently existent and independent of the self by "discriminating the ideas of cause and effect, identity and difference, existence and nonexistence."<sup>17</sup> However, because samsara is the product of

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>16</sup> Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, 228.

<sup>17</sup> Santina, *The Tree of Enlightenment*, 195.

discriminating thought, there is no difference between samsara and nirvana. Santina states, “Samsara and nirvana are the same thing seen from two different points of view: from the point of view of ignorance (of causality, identity, and difference, existence, and nonexistence), reality appears as samsara; from the point of view of insubstantiality, relativity, and emptiness, however, reality appears as nirvana.”<sup>18</sup> Unlike non-Mahayana traditions, nirvana in the Madhyamaka view is not a place where one goes when the proper knowledge is attained, but the cognitive awareness of the emptiness of conventional reality.<sup>19</sup>



Finally, given that there is no inherently existent entity, action, karmic link, or cyclic existence, the Madhyamaka do not advocate the idea that rebirth occurs in a physical sense. For there to be a physical rebirth, something, such as the karmic link or entity, must inherently exist

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, 329.

to impute this consequence or inherent existence upon an agent. However, as demonstrated above, this is not the case. The Madhyamaka's focus on discriminating thought as a predicate to samsara establishes that entities experience 'rebirth' in samsara through the process of discriminating thought in a successive series of moments, rather than physical rebirth across lifetimes.<sup>20</sup>

## Yogacara

In the fourth century of the common era, two half-brothers named Asanga and Vasubandhu, developed the Yogacara philosophy<sup>21</sup> to rebut the Madhyamaka claim that everything lacks inherent existence.<sup>22</sup> In contrast with the Madhyamaka, the Yogacara only affirm the inherent existence of the stream of consciousness by asserting the external world and one's internal experience is a mental reflection or representation of one's consciousness.<sup>23</sup> Much like the Madhyamaka view of the independency of all objects and phenomena as an illusion, the Yogacara claim the true illusion is founded with a view of the external world as separate or independent from one's consciousness.<sup>24</sup>

To explain the way in which the mind or consciousness interacts with conventional reality, the Yogacara philosophy describes human beings as comprised of three natures: the imagined nature (*parikalpita*), the dependent nature (*paratantra*), and the perfect nature (*parinishpanna*).<sup>25</sup> The dependent nature and imagined nature constitute what we perceive as

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>21</sup> Santina, *The Tree of Enlightenment*, 198.

<sup>22</sup> Blumenthal, "Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism," 154.

<sup>23</sup> Burton, "Emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism," 154-155.

<sup>24</sup> Roger Zim, "Basic Ideas of Yogacara Buddhism." Last modified Fall, 1995. para. 5, <http://online.sfsu.edu/rone/Buddhism/Yogacara/basicideas.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> Fernando Tola and Carmen Dragonetti, "Philosophy of Mind in the Yogacara Buddhist Idealistic School," *History of Psychiatry* 16, no. 4 (2005): 455, doi: 10.1177/0957154X05059213.

reality, and the perfected nature establishes the “Absolute” reality.<sup>26</sup> According to Tola and Dragonetti, the second nature is labeled ‘dependent’ because entities depend on causes (*vasanas*) to arise. *Vasanas* are described as “the impression of anything remaining unconsciously in the mind,” such as perceptions, experiences, thoughts, or desires, etc. which are said to leave a trace and remain in the subconscious mind until they are reactivated and pass into the conscious part of the mind.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the *vasanas* are a type of ‘karmic seed’ that are reproduced under a particular set of circumstances based on one’s past feelings, desires ideas, etc.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the dependent nature is the mind itself, which is a series of successive conscious states (*vijnanas*), or the flow of consciousness, comprised of one’s feelings, ideas, thoughts, experiences, etc.<sup>29</sup> Outside of the mind, nothing else truly exists.

The Yogacara philosophy holds the conscious states 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.”<sup>30</sup> Outside of consciousness, nothing is real, nothing exists, and nothing is perceived.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the mind and its dependency on the *vasanas* are the dependent nature (the mind), and the deceptive creation of subject-object duality is the imagined nature (the illusion).<sup>32</sup> The third nature, the perfected nature, is the “ultimate nature” and the only nature that is real as it is aware of the illusion of duality, and sees the world as it truly is, a representation of consciousness.<sup>33</sup> According to

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 456-457.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 457.

<sup>30</sup> Tola and Dragonetti, “Philosophy of Mind in the Yogacara,” 458.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 458

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 458

<sup>33</sup> Zim, “Basic Ideas of Yogacara Buddhism,” para. 39.

Yogacara philosophy, human experience with the external world is a mental construct and nothing else outside of the mind is truly existent.

In addition to the three natures, the Yogacara philosophy classifies consciousness into eight different categories. The first six are identical to the “Buddhist tradition at large,” but the last two originate with the Yogacara tradition.<sup>34</sup> The first five categories of consciousness are the perceptual consciousnesses, which correspond with the five senses (seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting).<sup>35</sup> Zim states, “the five perceptual consciousnesses interact with the thirty-one dharmas interactive with the mind and work in conjunction with the sixth consciousness which processes their input to construct a mental picture of reality.”<sup>36</sup> The seventh and eighth consciousness categories developed by the Yogacara tradition are the “afflicted mind” consciousness and the “storehouse” consciousness.<sup>37</sup> The afflicted mind consciousness is where the illusion of subject-object duality occurs, and is considered as a “go-between that mediates between the storehouse consciousness on the one hand and the six empirical consciousness on the other hand.”<sup>38</sup> The storehouse consciousness functions as a repository, as it collects and stores the *vasanas* in the mind. This consciousness is inherently non-dual in nature, but becomes distorted when the afflicted mind consciousness introduces the illusion of subject-object as the true nature of reality.<sup>39</sup> The *Lankavatara Sutra* uses an analogy of the ocean, wind, and waves to describe the afflicted mind, storehouse, and initial six consciousness categories. The afflicted

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<sup>34</sup> Santina, *The Tree of Enlightenment*, 180.

<sup>35</sup> Zim, “Basic Ideas of Yogacara Buddhism,” para. 27.

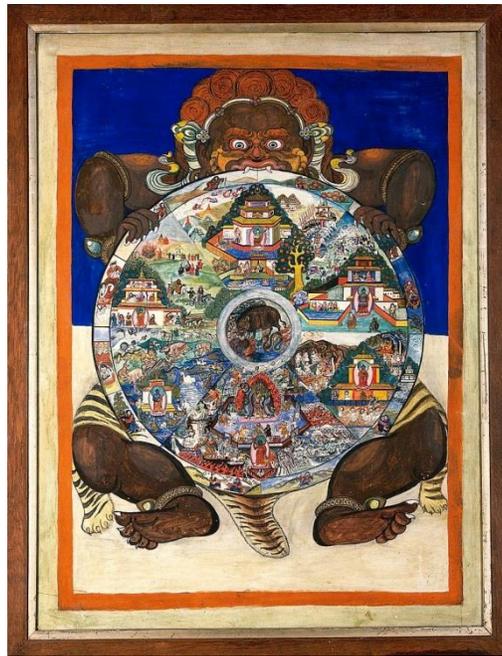
<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 28.

<sup>37</sup> Santina, *The Tree of Enlightenment*, 180.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

mind consciousness is said to be the wind that disrupts the depths of the ocean (the storehouse consciousness) by stirring up waves (initial six forms of consciousness).<sup>40</sup>



Thus, samsara is produced when the afflicted mind consciousness discriminates between subject and object, resulting in the transformation of the storehouse consciousness into the perceptual forms of consciousness. These perceptual forms are then cyclically reproduced through the storehouse's collection and reactivation of the *vasanas*. Therefore, the storehouse consciousness can be viewed as a karmic link or the repository of karmic seeds (*vasanas*) that turns the wheel of samsara through the perceptual consciousnesses. Likewise, our mental reflections or past *vasanas* dictate how one is reborn, and where one is reborn in the six realms of existence. As mentioned above, the storehouse consciousness is the karmic link and the mechanism that turns the wheel of samsara. In the momentary flashes of consciousness, one experiences rebirth in one of the six realms of existence based on the previous *vasanas* that are stored in the storehouse consciousness. Likewise, one's mental state or the realm of existence

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 180-181.

one is born into influences one's perception of material objects.<sup>41</sup> For example, a cup of milk "would appear as nectar to gods, as molten iron to hell beings, and as pus or blood to hungry ghosts."<sup>42</sup> Thus, the way one perceives the world is based on one's wholesome or unwholesome karma (*vasanas*), which is constructed in one's consciousness. It follows that the way one perceives the external world is based on one's karma, realm of existence, and more generally, their mental state or past *vasanas*.

As with all other Buddhist traditions and schools, the Yogacara believe that entities are reborn based on the karmic consequences of their actions. More distinctively, the Yogacara consider the storehouse consciousness as the "ultimate ground of existence" that stores and reproduces karma in a new life after death.<sup>43</sup> However, this new life is not on a physical plane, but rather, it occurs as a continuation of consciousness. Considering that the Yogacara view material objects, including the body, as illusory creations of the mind, rebirth in the Yogacara school is a continuation of consciousness rather than rebirth in a physical body.

## Conclusion

The central difference between the Madhyamaka and Yogacara philosophy is based in their view of the inherent existence of consciousness, but both emphasize the importance of the mind in distinguishing between samsara, which is illusory reality, and nirvana which is ultimate reality.<sup>44</sup> For the Madhyamaka, samsara is generated when one mentally labels and perceives the self, physical objects, and phenomena as independent and inherently existent.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, the

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<sup>41</sup> Santina, *The Tree of Enlightenment*, 180-1.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>43</sup> Tagawa Shun'ei, *Living Yogacara: An Introduction to Consciousness-Only Buddhism*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009), xviii, <https://books.google.com/books?id=1C4qAwAAQBAJ&lpg=PP4&dq=yogacara%20buddhism%20rebirth&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q=yogacara%20buddhism%20rebirth&f=false>.

<sup>44</sup> Santina, *The Tree of Enlightenment*, 208.

<sup>45</sup> Westerhoff, *Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka*, chapter 5, section 5.2.

Yogacara view the consciousness as the only inherently existent phenomena, and one's perception of the external world as independent of consciousness enables entities to be reborn through consciousness.<sup>46</sup> In conclusion, the Madhyamaka and Yogacara interpretation of dependent arising suggest that samsara and rebirth are not experienced physically, but in the mind.

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<sup>46</sup> Burton, "Emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism," 155.

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