



# Yogachara: a Buddhist form of idealism

## Can we ever know the external world?

Most philosophical and scientific systems of thought are based on the belief that the external world exists. There is a real world out there; it is not our imagination. Whether we know things directly or in a mediated way, through mental representation, they function in a predictable manner—planes take off and fly in the sky, they don't suddenly do something else entirely—and people consider that this proves they follow natural laws and have their own existence, independent of you and me. Indeed, our whole life is underpinned by this assumption.

This assumption masks two fundamental questions: Is there such a thing as an objective world? And, if so, can we ever know it 'objectively' just as it is? In other words, is objective truth possible, understood as a set of facts that pertain to an object and that are always true? Is grass always green, for instance, and is the sun always round?

Or is truth sometimes—or always—subjective and contingent, meaning that it is relative to the person who knows, and to circumstance? For example, doesn't the colour of grass vary according to whether one looks at it in the daytime or at night? Or according to whether or not it has rained in the last month?

If one claims that truth is objective, then there is only one truth about a thing. Grass is green, that is how it is, and this is a fact. If someone says otherwise they must necessarily be wrong. However, if we argue that truth is subjective and contingent, then we may have to accept that there are as many truths as there are people. What is true for you may not be true for me or, indeed, for anyone else. The fact you believe there is a man on the moon does not mean that I believe there is one, yet you might go out at night in order to talk to the man on the moon because you believe he is wise. Instead, I might believe there are rabbits on the moon or, if I am an astronaut, I might believe that there is not a single living thing on the moon at all. We can't all be called mistaken if there is no single objective truth that is right; instead, maybe each one of us is right in our own way. But is truth always subjective? Is there no hope of finding a truth that is true for everyone?

Buddhist scholars agree that the gross objects of our experience do not truly exist as independent entities in the way they appear to us, but Buddhists disagree on the status of our objects of knowledge. One of the main differences between the Nikaya and Mahayana schools is just this: Nikaya scholars accept that particles and indivisible moments of consciousness must be real, while Mahayana scholars do not. For this reason, Nikaya Buddhism is classified by Mahayanists as realist.

The Mahayana view turns common-sense upside down. It encourages us to question absolutely everything we hold as true. If the external world does not really (ultimately) exist, either on a macro level or on a micro level, then the awareness stimulated by perception does not really exist either, which means that neither objects nor subjects exist independently of each other or have any unique defining characteristics. We might wonder whether knowledge is possible at all.



## **Life is like a dream**

The Yogachara view is that the world we perceive is a mental construct. Every object we perceive and have a word for is simply the result of the arbitrary way our mind has of dividing up data. We never see reality as it is because our perceptions depend on the filtering and structuring processes of our mental apparatus. The world we apprehend is our projection. That is why the way I experience the world is unique, and different from the way anyone else experiences the world; none of us are dealing with objective reality. We are in our own bubble or, in more philosophical terms, our own cognitive closure.

For the Yogacharas, there may be a material world out there, who knows? The point is that, with our ordinary minds, we are incapable of ever knowing it directly and without distortion. Yogacharas say that mind can only relate to what is mental in nature and cannot be in direct contact with matter, if there were such a thing. For example, when I feel the softness of my new cotton shirt what I am feeling is not the shirt but the sensations of pleasure produced within my nervous system and within my consciousness.

We might wonder how images can be created in the mind if there are no external objects producing them. The Yogachara answer is that they are created by the mind itself from all the memories, associations, karmic seeds and so on that are stored there. If I see a table as a flat square with four legs, that image has more to do with the way my human mind structures sense data, and it does not mean that a table exists like that. We are always perceiving and relating to our own projections. Life is like a movie, and our mind is the bulb that lights up the film reel of karma and habit to create the illusion of a real situation.

This viewpoint is particularly useful in accounting for two problems that are unsolved by common sense or by the Nikaya philosophies: a) the process of dreams and b) the differences in perception between different types of being.

If we accept that the images in our minds are produced by our minds themselves, and not by external objects, then dreams are easy to understand. The reason that I dreamt of a rampaging elephant last night is because my memories and associations and emotions surfaced in that particular way. There is no need for a real elephant to enter my bedroom to explain why I had an elephant nightmare. Rather than being aberrations or exceptions, dreams are used as the main model to explain the mind's functioning. It is therefore no coincidence that Yogacharas say that the whole of life is like a dream. It is not said that life *is* a dream, in the sense that it's illusory and ultimately meaningless; rather life is *like* a dream. The way we perceive things and know things in life is similar to the way we perceive and experience things in dreams. The mental processes are the same. There are just two main differences. First, in our waking state, our perception is roughly shared by other members of the same species. And second, objects perceived correctly when we are awake function in the way they are supposed to whereas in dreams they don't. For example, in life a glass of water will quench my thirst, but a dream glass of water will not.

Yogachara scholars derived their theory of reality from insights they gained in meditation. Through meditation one can begin to recognize consciously that one's mind, and the experiences or objects that one's mind perceives, are one and the same.



*The practice of meditation over a long period dissolves artificial distinctions between subject and object—which in turn offers the perceiver the freedom to determine the quality of his or her own experience, the freedom to distinguish between what is real and what is merely an appearance.*

*Dissolving the distinction between subject and object, however, doesn't mean that perception becomes a great big blur. You still continue to perceive in terms of subject and object, while at the same time recognizing that the distinction is essentially conceptual. In other words, the perception of an object is not different from the mind that perceives it.<sup>i</sup>*

The Tibetan teacher Mingyur Rinpoche explains that to understand the world in this way is like lucid dreaming: recognising that you are dreaming while you are dreaming. You realise that the dream is merely occurring in your own mind, and this recognition is sufficient to free you from experiencing things as real. To return to our previous dream example, you won't be afraid because you know that it's not a real elephant. In the daytime you continue to experience situations as before, but you are no longer caught by the experience, and you no longer grasp on to anything, or on to yourself, as though they were real. The automatic response mechanism that makes ordinary people see things as real is out of order.

Through meditation and other related practices, the Buddhist path can free us of this automated response so that the grasping between subject and object is dissolved. Once the mind is freed of this habit then, and only then, is it able to directly intuit things as they are through its own natural enlightened wisdom.

Based on *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side



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<sup>i</sup> Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, *The Joy of Living*, p.82-3.