

Mahāyāna Philosophies: The Varieties of Emptiness

The Mahāyāna *kind of motivation*, of compassionately aspiring for perfect Buddhahood, is typically set within a framework of Mahāyāna *doctrine*. One should not forget, however, that such motivation has also existed in a minority of those whose doctrinal framework has been that of one of the early schools, such as the Theravāda. There are also those whose doctrinal context is Mahāyāna, but who aim for worldly protection, or a good rebirth, or their own liberation, so as to not (yet) have a motivation-level that is Mahāyāna.

The Mahāyāna doctrinal perspective is expressed in both *Sūtras* and a number of *Śāstras*, ‘treatises’ written by named authors. These systematically present the outlook of particular Mahāyāna schools, based on the *Sūtras*, logic and meditational experience. Each school is associated with a particular group of *Sūtras*, whose meaning it sees as fully explicit (*nītārtha*); other *Sūtras* may be regarded as in need of interpretation (*neyārtha*). In India, the Mahāyāna developed two main philosophical schools: the Mādhyamika, and later the Yogācāra. Both have been key influences on Northern and Eastern Buddhism.

THE PERFECTION OF WISDOM LITERATURE AND THE MĀDHYAMIKA SCHOOL

Sources and writers

The Mādhyamika school was also known as the Śūnyatā-vāda, the ‘Emptiness Teaching’, for its key concept is that of ‘emptiness’, also central to the *Prajñā-pāramitā*, or ‘Perfection of Wisdom’ *Sūtras* (BTTA.141–8). Among these is the oldest extant Mahāyāna text, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (*Asta.*), or ‘8,000 Verse’ Perfection of Wisdom *Sūtra*. Originating in the first centuries BCE and CE, its contents were expanded, in the period to 300 CE, to form works of 18,000, 25,000 (*Panca.*) and 100,000 verses. Short versions were

also composed. The 300 verse *Vajracchedikā* (Vc. (BSI.164–8; BS2.51)), or ‘Diamond-cutter’ may date from 300 to 500 CE, though in some form may have existed in the early phase of this literature. The one-page *Hṛdaya*, or ‘Heart’ Perfection of Wisdom *Sūtra*¹ dates from after 300. Jan Nattier² has argued that it was composed in China as a condensation of ideas in the 100,000 verse version, then introduced into India, perhaps by the pilgrim-monk Xuanzang, and translated into Sanskrit, as Indian Mahāyānists recognized its great merits. The 300 to 500 CE period also saw the composition of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, attributed to the *Bodhisattva* Maitreya, an exegetical work much used in Tibet.

The Mādhyamika school was founded by Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE), a south Indian monk, philosopher and mystic. The school’s foundation-document is his (*Mūla*)-*madhyamaka-kārikā*, ‘Verses on the (Fundamentals of) the Middle Way’ (*Mmk.*). This argues for what Nāgārjuna sees as the true ‘Middle Way’ of the Buddha (see p. 69), seeking to convince those not accepting the Mahāyāna *Sūtras* that the early scriptures, properly understood, lead to seeing that everything is ‘empty’ of both inherent, independent existence and inherent nature (an essence) (Westerhoff, 2009). Many other works are attributed to Nāgārjuna, though several were probably by later writers of the same name. Among the more reliable attributions (Williams, 2009: 64–5) is the *Vigraha-vyāvartanī*, ‘Averting the Arguments’ (*Vigv.*), which critiques objections to his ideas. While his outlook seems close to that of the Perfection of Wisdom *Sūtras*, he does not quote from them or refer to the ‘Mahāyāna’ or ‘*Bodhisattva*’ in the *Madhyamaka-kārikā*. It was left to his other works, if authentic, or his key disciples, Āryadeva (*BP*.32) and Nāga, to make such explicit connections.

Buddhapālita (c. 470–540) and then Bhāvaviveka³ (c. 490–570) built up the popularity of the school. The latter improved its logical methods, drawing on the ideas of the Buddhist logician Dignāga (c. 480–540) and developed a new interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s ideas, thus forming the Svātantrika-Mādhyamika school.⁴ Its interpretation was then disputed by Candrakīrti (late sixth century), who built on the work of Buddhapālita to found the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika school as a definitive statement of Mādhyamika. Candrakīrti’s ideas are expressed in such works as his commentary on the *Madhyamaka-kārikā*, the *Prasannapadā*, or ‘Clear-worded’, and Śāntideva (c. 650–750) drew on this perspective in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*

¹ BSI.162–4; EB.4.2.2; Conze, 1958 contains both this and the *Diamond-cutter*.

² 1992; cf. Williams, 2009: 48–9, 284. ³ Also known as Bhavya and Bhāviveka.

⁴ Also known in Tibet as the Sautrāntika-Mādhyamika.

(*Bca.*; *BP*.14; Berkwitz, 2010: 121–5), an influential overview of the path of the Mahāyāna *Bodhisattva*. Śāntarakṣita (c. 680–740) and his pupil Kamalaśīla (c. 700–50) also added some Yogācāra ideas to those of the Svātantrika-Mādhyamika, thus forming the Yogācāra-Mādhyamika school. The above later Mādhyamika writers had a great influence in Tibet, but were unknown in China, where the Mādhyamika had a less lasting influence. The Chinese version of the Mādhyamika was the Sanlun, or Three Treatise, school, founded by the great translator Kumārajīva (334–413).

The Śūnyatāvādin orientation

The Perfection of Wisdom literature extols wisdom (*prajñā*) and also the other transcendent ‘perfections’ (*pāramitā*) involved in the *Bodhisattva* path. While it and Nāgārjuna’s works were clearly for intellectuals, they re-emphasized the Buddha’s rejection of all speculative ‘views’, claiming that *Abhidharma* analytical thinking could lead to a subtle form of intellectual grasping: the idea that one had ‘grasped’ the true nature of reality in a neat set of concepts. In later Zen, such an endeavour was seen as like trying to catch a slippery catfish in a equally slippery gourd. The new literature also saw, in the *Abhidharma*’s contrasting of *Nirvāṇa* with the conditioned *dharma*s that make up a ‘person’, the basis of a subtle form of spiritual self-seeking: the desire to ‘attain’ *Nirvāṇa* for oneself, to *get* something one did not already have; in Sarvāstivādin terms, to have it linked to one by the *dharma* ‘possession’ (*prāpti*). The new texts sought to re-emphasize that the goal was to be attained by totally ‘letting go’, so as to produce a thought, or state of consciousness (*citta*), transcending any sensory or mental object as support (cf. p. 76): ‘the *Bodhisattva* . . . should produce an unsupported thought, i.e. a thought which is nowhere supported, a thought unsupported by sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touchables, or mind objects’ (*Vc.* sec. 10c).

Empty dharmas and Conditioned Arising

A key Perfection of Wisdom criticism of *Abhidharma* thought – primarily Sarvāstivādin – was that it did not go far enough in understanding that everything is non-Self (Skt *anātman*), or ‘empty’ (*śūnya*) of Self (see pp. 58 and 81). It understood the ‘absence of Self in persons’ (*pudgala-nairātmya*), but when it analysed ‘persons’ down into *dharma*s, each with an inherent ‘own-nature’ (*svabhāva*; see pp. 93–4), it was seen not to have understood the ‘absence of Self(-nature) in *dharma*s’ (*dharma-nairātmya*): that they are essence-less. The Perfection of Wisdom literature holds that a *dharma*

(and also an ordinary ‘thing’) is not an ultimate fact in its own right, for it cannot be anything by ‘itself’; its arising and very nature are dependent on other *dharmas*, which are in turn dependent on others, etc.: it is ‘empty’ of any *svabhāva*. Edward Conze explains that for the Perfection of Wisdom, *svabhāva* means: ‘Natural or inherent condition of something existing through its own power alone, having an invariable and inalienable mark, and having an immutable essence. In its “own-being” a thing is just itself, and not merely as it is relative to ourselves, or to other things’ (*Asta.* transl., p. 320). Paul Williams argues that while the term meant ‘inherent nature’ for the Sarvāstivādins, in the Mādhyamika, it underwent a subtle shift in meaning, to “intrinsic existence” (or “inherent existence”) in the sense of a causally independent, fundamentally real existence’ (Williams, 2009: 68); that is, its meaning was still seen to include ‘inherent nature’, but this was seen to also imply ‘inherent existence’. Aspects of the critique of inherent existence are then seen to imply a critique of the idea of inherent nature.

Nāgārjuna’s critique of the notion of *svabhāva* (*Mmk.* ch.15) argues that anything which arises according to conditions, as all phenomena do, can have no inherent existence/nature; for what it is depends on what conditions it. Moreover, if there is nothing with inherent existence, that is, self-existence, there can be nothing with ‘other-existence’ (*para-bhāva*), that is, something which is dependent for its existence and nature on something *else* which has self-existence. So there is not anything with a true, substantially existent nature (*bhāva*); hence no non-existent (*abhāva*), in the sense of a true existent that has gone out of existence. Like Nāgārjuna, the Perfection of Wisdom literature therefore regards all *dharmas* as like a dream or magical illusion (*māyā*) (*BTTA*.166; cf. p. 58). This does not mean that they are simply unreal. Their ungraspable nature is, rather, wholly different from what it seems, like the trick of a conjurer; or, we might now say, like an illusion in a ‘virtual reality’ electronic medium – except that all components of the medium would also be seen as perceptual illusions too . . . There is something there in experience, and one can describe it well in terms of *dharmas*, so it is wrong to deny these exist; yet they do not have substantial existence either. What we experience does not exist in an absolute sense, but only in a relative way, as a passing interdependent phenomenon. The nature of *dharmas* lies in between absolute ‘non-existence’ and substantial ‘existence’, in accordance with an early *Sutta* passage⁵ quoted by Nāgārjuna (*Mmk.*15.7; cf. *EB*.4.2.3). This is what Nāgārjuna means by the

⁵ S.11.17 (see p. 72), known in Sanskrit as the *Kātyāyanāvavāda Sūtra*.

‘Middle Way’. He argues that something with inherent existence would substantially exist and be eternal; to believe in such an entity is to hold to the eternalist view, while to believe that such a thing could go out of existence is to hold to the annihilationist view; both these views being condemned by the Buddha.

The Mādhyamika interpretation of Conditioned Arising sees it as meaning that phenomena are not only mutually dependent for their ‘arising’ in time, but are so in their very nature. Thus they cannot really be spoken of as separately identifiable entities which interact. By ‘itself’, a thing is nothing. It is what it is only in relation to other things, and they are what they are in relation to it and yet other things. In his examination of the process of seeing (*Mmk.* ch. 3), Nāgārjuna argues that there is no activity of vision which is presently not seeing. Therefore, one cannot say that there is something, ‘vision’, which may then go on to perform the separate action ‘seeing’: ‘vision’ and ‘seeing’ are mutually dependent, and cannot be separately identified. As the Perfection of Wisdom literature would paradoxically put it, vision is ‘empty of’ vision. There is, then, no real activity ‘vision’ which ‘sees’. But if vision does not see, then non-vision certainly does not see, so how can one identify a ‘seer’ who is characterized by his ‘seeing’? Without a seer, how can there be anything seen? All such concepts, and the more general ones of subject and object, are meaningful only in relationship to each other. Similarly, what is short depends on what is long; for long and short are correlative concepts. By such reasoning, Nāgārjuna even says that the ‘unconditioned’ (traditionally a term for *Nirvāṇa*) is conceptually dependent on the conditioned, its opposite (*Mmk.* 7.33).

As illusion-like and empty, *dharmas* are not to be seen as ultimately existing existents/processes (Williams and Tribe, 2000: 134–6). No ‘bed-rock existence’, so to speak, can be found – even *Nirvāṇa* – but fully knowing and accepting this gives one, so to speak, a bedrock.

Tibetan writers of the Gelugpa school (see p. 208), who follow the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika view, thus see a threefold aspect to something’s being empty of *svabhāva*:

1. Things (e.g. persons, moods, tables, mountains) that can be analysed into their parts – which may be themselves further analysable – lack *svabhāva* as they are dependent on those parts (be these physical or mental), and have no true existence of their own, in this sense lacking both inherent existence and inherent nature.
2. *Dharmas*, which is what one reaches by rigorous analysis into parts, are dependent on other *dharmas* for their arising; they lack *svabhāva* as they are not independent, hence are lacking in inherent *existence*.

3. Both everyday things and *dharmas* are also dependent on imputation by mental designation, in relation to other things or *dharmas*: they lack an inherent *nature*, one 'from their own side'. Even *Nirvāṇa* is dependent in this sense.

Abhidharmists would all agree with point 1. They would agree with point 2, as long as this only concerned conditioned *dharmas*, not *Nirvāṇa*; though the Sarvāstivādin idea of *dharmas*, as in some sense existing timelessly, compromised the idea of *dharmas* other than *Nirvāṇa* being dependent. It is on point 3 that there is more of a break made with *Abhidharma* ideas. It should be noted, though, that there is a suggestion of 3 in the Vibhajyāvāda/Theravāda idea that *duḥkha* (Pali *dukkha*), conditioned phenomena, can be known in the same moment that their stopping, *Nirvāṇa*, is known (see p. 96).

Conventional truth and language

The Mādhyamika school holds that confusion over the nature of phenomena arises because people do not understand how the Buddha taught according to two levels of truth or reality: 'conventional truth/reality' (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and profound 'ultimate truth/reality' (*paramārtha-satya*) (*Mmk.*24.8–9). The concept of two levels of truth already existed in *Abhidharma*. There, 'conventional truths' were those expressed using terms such as 'person' and 'thing'; 'ultimate truth' is more exact, expressed by talking of *dharmas*, ultimate realities. For the Mādhyamika writers, however, talk of *dharmas* is just another kind of provisional, conventional truth. Such conventional truths should not be confused with ultimate truths, that is, truths about supposedly essential, ultimate realities; to see them like this is delusion.⁶ The real ultimate truth is that all things discussed in terms of conventional truth are empty of ultimate, essential reality; they are, indeed, *conventional*. Seeing them thus is wisdom, leading to *non-attachment* to conventional realities, but a greatly enhanced ability to *skilfully work with* them.

To think that because a word exists, there must be some real self-enclosed entity in the extra-linguistic world that it refers to, is to make the mistake of reification: turning words into things. Ordinary language references to such things as 'self', 'space', 'time', 'road', 'thought' or 'hunger' do not mean that reality includes any of these as essential entities: they are simply useful concepts in certain contexts. For the Mādhyamikas, true statements at the

⁶ *Mmk.*24.8–10; Williams, 2009: 76–9.

conventional level are ‘true’ because humans agree to use concepts in certain ways; because of linguistic conventions. ‘Ice is cold’ is true because ‘ice’ is a term used to describe a form of ‘water’ which is experienced as ‘cold’. The terms of language arise because, from the continuous flux of experience, discriminating conceptualization (*prapañca*) abstracts various segments and takes them to be separate entities or qualities, with fixed natures. These then become focuses of attachment. The language-constructs (*prajñapti*) which are labels for them are interrelated in many ways. They gain their meaning from how they are used, in relationship to other concepts, not by referring to objective referents existing outside language.⁷ Yet while language determines how we experience the world, it does not bring things into existence; it too is a dependent, empty phenomenon. A particular ‘thing’ enters the human world by being discriminated through a name or concept, but this exists in relation to a ‘something’ to which it is applied: both ‘name’ and perceived ‘form’ exist in relationship to each other (*Mmk.* ch. 5).

Emptiness

In the Śūnyatāvādin perspective, each phenomenon lacks an inherent nature, and so all are said to share an empty ‘non-nature’ as their ‘nature’ (*Asta*.192). Thus one *dharma* cannot ultimately be distinguished from another: the notion of the ‘sameness’ of *dharma*s. Their shared ‘nature’ is ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*). As the *Heart Sūtra* says, ‘whatsoever is material form, that is emptiness, and whatsoever is emptiness, that is material form’ (and similarly for the other four ‘bundles’ making up a ‘person’). ‘Emptiness’, though, is not some ultimate basis and substance of the world, like the *Brahman* of the *Upaniṣads*. It implies that no such self-existent substance exists: the world is a web of fluxing, interdependent, baseless phenomena. Nāgārjuna, in fact, equates emptiness with the principle of Conditioned Arising; for this logically leads to it:

Whatever is conditioned arising,
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation (*prajñapti*).
Is itself the middle way (*pratipat . . . madhyamā*). (*Mmk.* 24.18)

Emptiness, then, is an adjectival quality of ‘*dharma*s’, their dependent non-ultimacy, not a substance which composes them. It is neither a thing

⁷ This view is reminiscent of the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), which critiqued his earlier idea that language works by ‘picturing’ facts in the world.

nor is it nothingness; rather it refers to the essencelessness of reality, which cannot be captured by concepts, with their tendency to breed reification.

Some have seen modern physics as containing parallels to this perspective (Wallace, 2003). When the 'solid' objects of common-sense reality were first analysed, they were seen to consist of empty space and protons, neutrons and electrons. Classical physics saw these as hard, indivisible particles, the ultimate building-blocks of matter; but further analysis showed them to consist of a whole range of odd particles such as 'quarks', whose nature is bound up with the forces through which they interact. Matter turns out to be a mysterious field of interaction, with 'particles' not being real separate entities, but provisional conceptual designations.

Critics from the early schools saw the emptiness teaching as implying that the four True Realities for the Spiritually Ennobled were themselves empty, thus subverting the Buddha's teaching. In reply, Nāgārjuna argued that it is the notion of *dharmas*-with-inherent-nature – and hence inherent existence – which subverts the teachings on the four True Realities (*Mmk.* ch.24; *EB*.4.3.1). If *duḥkha* had inherent existence, it would be causeless and eternal, and could never be brought to an end. If the Path had inherent existence, it could never be gradually developed to perfection in a person; for he or she would either have it or not have it. In a world of entities with inherent existence, all change and activity would be impossible; everything would be static and eternal. It is because everything is empty that there can be activity, including spiritual development. An analogy, here, is that the decimal number system would collapse without the quantity zero.⁸

Skilful means and the transcending of views

Nāgārjuna emphasizes that ultimate truth, indicated by talk of emptiness, completes rather than subverts conventional truth. Indeed, it can be understood only if the conventional teachings on the four True Realities for the Spiritually Ennobled have been understood (*Mmk.* ch.24.10). This relates to the concept of 'skilful means', which in the Śūnyatāvādin perspective is developed to mean that *all* Buddhist teachings – including Śūnyatāvādin ones – should be regarded as provisional devices that can at most hint at or indirectly indicate ultimate truth. The teachings, especially on Conditioned Arising, are simply to induce in people a skilful frame of mind: one in which

⁸ A concept which derives from India, with the term 'zero' coming, via the Arabic *ṣifr*, from the term *śūnya*, empty.

there can be insight into that which transcends all such teachings – the inexpressible empty-of-essence nature of things.

Nāgārjuna's method in the *Madhyamaka-kārikā* is to criticize all views and theories about ultimate entities or principles. This he does by showing that their necessary consequences (*prasaṅga*) contradict either the views themselves, which are thus reduced to absurdity, or experience. Moreover, he seeks to show that *all* logically possible views on specific topics, such as motion and time (*Mmk.* chs.2 and 19), are untenable; that our notions of them are self-contradictory inasmuch as we take such things as realities in themselves. In this, he uses his method of 'four-cornered (*catuskoṭi*) negation', the device of examining and refuting all the four logically possible alternatives on a topic: *x* is *y*, *x* is non-*y*, *x* is both *y* and non-*y*, *x* is neither *y* nor non-*y*.

In [chapter 1](#), he examines theories on causality. The first of the logical possible views on this is 'self-production': that an effect arises from a cause ultimately identical with itself, part of the same underlying substance (as in the Hindu Sāṃkhya school⁹). This would lead to pointless self-duplication, however, and if a thing reproduced itself, there would be nothing to stop it continuing to do so for ever. The world is not observed to be like this. If the same substance is said to manifest itself differently only when conditions are appropriate, 'self-production' has already been given up.

The second possibility, 'other-production', is that, ultimately, an effect arises from a cause that is inherently 'other' than it, with a different inherent nature. This is seen as an *Abhidharma* view, to the extent that it is said in this that both a *dharma* and the *dharma*s that condition it have specific own-natures or essences, which are thus essentially *different* from each other. Here, Nāgārjuna argues that, if really distinct entities existed, all would be equally 'different', so anything could 'cause' anything. A cause and its (supposedly different) effect may always occur together,¹⁰ but to point this out is to *explain* nothing about how causality works. What is inherently 'other' than something cannot be its cause. A 'cause' is not a 'cause' in itself, then, but only in relation to its 'effect' (*Mmk.* I.5). If cause and effect were essentially different entities, there could not be a link between them. This is an instance of a general problem: a relation of *any* sort has to (i) *connect* two terms, unifying them, and (ii) to connect *two* terms, differentiating them. A relation cannot obtain between essential entities which are either identical

⁹ The Sāṃkhya saw all things in the world as different forms of one underlying substance, *prakṛti* (nature).

¹⁰ In the words of the Scottish empiricist philosopher David Hume (1711–76), being 'constantly conjoined'.

with or different from each other. All essentialist views ‘freeze’ reality into bits, identical with (as in ‘self-production’) or different from each other (as in ‘other-production’), but then cannot coherently account for how these bits interact to form the world as it is experienced. As emphasized in early Buddhism, Conditioned Arising avoids the extremes of everything being a single unity and it being an unconnected diversity (see pp. 72–3).

The third theory is that causality involves both ‘self-production’ and ‘other-production’. If this means that some parts of the cause and effect are the same, and some are different, the problems of the first two views apply. If it means that all of the cause is both the same as and different from all of the effect, this is impossible. The final possibility is that things originate by neither ‘self-production’ nor ‘other-production’: spontaneously, without a cause. But if this were true, everything would be an unpredictable chaos, which it is not.

The fourth view, note, is not that of Nāgārjuna. His ‘position’ seems to be that at the conventional, phenomenal level, causality can be observed, with ‘one’ thing (with the support of other conditions) causing ‘another’ to originate; yet none of the logically possible theories of causality can explain how it ‘works’. This is because, at the ultimate level, no real ‘things’ can be found which ‘originate’; no things exist with inherent existence, ‘they’ *only* exist conventionally. Moreover, no supposed ‘cause’ has an actual power to make something else happen; effects arise from a combination of various conditions, with none of them ‘making’ the effect happen. As argued by Jay Garfield (*Mmk.* transl., pp. 103–23), Nāgārjuna sees causality as simply a matter of observed regularities in an essence-free world; one cannot actually go further or deeper than this, except by explaining one kind of regularity in nature by reference to a wider or more general form of regularity. For example an explosion may be explained by reference to the presence of a source of combustion, an explosive gas and oxygen; the quality of an explosive gas can be explained by reference to its chemical make-up, and this can be explained by reference to the physical make-up of atoms, etc.

The Mādhyamikas’ talk of emptiness, then, is intended as the antidote to *all* theories: ‘Emptiness is proclaimed by the victorious ones (Buddhas) as the refutation of all views; but those who hold “emptiness” as a view are called incurable’ (*Mmk.* 13.8; cf. *BS* 2.38, vv. 6–7). Nāgārjuna examines the views of others to provide a form of spiritual therapy, to help liberate people from all constricting viewpoints. In doing this, he claims not to have any presuppositions of his own, but to work with those of his opponents in a kind of logical judo, using conventional logic. The insights which this produces are also to be deepened by meditative contemplation of phenomena.

The Svātantrika-Mādhyamika school held that logic itself is not empty, but has an autonomous existence (*svatantra*), such that valid positive statements can be made from a Mādhyamika perspective. The inferences made at the conventional level are a real bridge to at least some aspects of ultimate truth. The Prāsaṅgika school, on the other hand, emphasized that the Mādhyamika contained only a negative dialectic, to disprove the views of others, and that to understand ultimate truth is to know the limits of logic, words and concepts, culminating in a direct, non-conceptual experience. This seems to accord with the Perfection of Wisdom *Sūtras*, which certainly sought to avoid setting up any views, or indeed to 'say' anything: 'There is nothing at all to understand, nothing at all to understand. For nothing in particular has been indicated, nothing in particular has been explained' (*Asta*.38; cf. *EB*.4.4.4; *BT*.271–6).

Ultimate truth and thusness

At the ultimate level, even talk of 'emptiness' is to be finally given up: as the things which are said to be empty do not ultimately exist, one cannot even say that 'they' are 'empty' (*Mmk*.22.11): 'the emptiness of all *dharma*s is empty of that emptiness' (*Panca*.196). The ultimate truth, then, is that there are no ultimate realities; existence is inconceivable and inexpressible as it has no ultimate ground: 'When the domain of thought ceases, that which can be stated ceases' (*Mmk*.18.7). The Perfection of Wisdom literature contains an elusive series of subtle allusions to that which lies beyond words. An indicator which it uses for this is the notion of *tathatā*: 'thusness' or 'suchness'. The thusness of something, equivalent to its emptiness, is its very as-it-is-ness, what it is such as it is, without conceptually adding anything to it or taking anything away from its actuality: it is simply '*thus*: ...'. Thusness is 'immutable and unchangeable, undiscriminated, undifferentiated', it belongs to nowhere, is neither past, present nor future, and the same thusness is found in all *dharma*s (*Asta*.307). 'True reality' (*tattva*) is 'not conditioned by something else, peaceful, not elaborated by conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*)' (*Mmk*.18.9; as is also typically said of *Nirvāṇa*). Ultimate truth is known when spiritual ignorance is transcended and the limitations of language are totally seen through, with no further generation of, or attachment to, dream-like linguistic constructs, just perfect even-mindedness (*Mmk*.25.24). Empty, conditioned phenomena are seen as worthless and are thus no longer constructed, so that insight into ultimate truth is attaining the bliss of *Nirvāṇa*.

Nirvāṇa and saṃsāra

In Śūnyatāvādin thought, the *Nirvāṇa* which is thus attained is not seen as a *dharma* different from *dharma*s of *saṃsāra*, the conditioned world of suffering and rebirths: ‘there is not the slightest bit of difference between the two’ (*Mmk.*25.20; *EB.*4.3.1). How can this be? The very fact of the ‘unconditioned’ *Nirvāṇa* being contrasted, at the conventional level, to *saṃsāra*, makes its nature a *relational* one, such that it is empty of inherent nature. *Nirvāṇa*, indeed, was held to be ‘the empty’ (Pali *suññata*) even by the early schools of Buddhism, in the sense of being empty of defilements, known through seeing all as empty of Self, and being beyond conceptualization in any positive terms (see pp. 81, 96). For Nāgārjuna, the conditioned and the unconditioned cannot, then, be differentiated because ‘both’ are found to ‘be’ emptiness: Selflessness, essencelessness, free of any essentially existing defilements. What is more, while *Nirvāṇa* is seen by all schools of Buddhism as ‘unborn’, ‘deathless’ and not impermanent, in the Śūnyatāvādin perspective, conditioned *dharma*s can be similarly described. This is because, if they lack inherent existence, and do not exist as such, they cannot be said to ‘originate’ or ‘cease’ (*Mmk.*7.33); their thusness is not subject to arising or ceasing, but is constant (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (*BTTA.*148)). Consequently, they cannot be said to be impermanent (not that they are permanent): they remain ‘unoriginated’ (the *Heart Sūtra*), ‘unborn’, and without differentiation from *Nirvāṇa*. Thus *Nirvāṇa* is not attained by the eradication of anything real, namely defilements, but by the non-construction of the conditioned world of *saṃsāra*:¹¹ for ‘all *dharma*s are unthinkable . . . equal to the unequalled. For they are *Tathāgata-dharma*s’ (*Asta.*280), and ‘the thusness of all *dharma*s and the thusness of the *Tathāgata* are simply this one single thusness’ (*Asta.*512). *Nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* are not two separate realities, but the field of emptiness, seen by either spiritual ignorance or true knowledge (*Mmk.*25.9). As the *Heart Sūtra* again says, ‘In emptiness there is neither material form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor constructing activities, nor consciousness . . . There is no *duḥkha*, no origination, no stopping, no path’. When the emptiness of the five ‘bundles’ of a ‘person’ is seen, they as essentially existing entities ‘disappear’ – though as conventional realities, they remain.

The idea that *Nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* are non-different plays a central role in the Perfection of Wisdom perspective. Once ‘established’, there followed

¹¹ Cf. the Theravāda view, that when the Path brings realization of *Nirvāṇa*, this is not the ending of past defilements, which no longer exist, or of present ones, which are incompatible with it; it is the stopping of the production of any future defilements, and their effects (*Vibh-a.*299–300).

other conclusions with consequences for the whole of Mahāyāna thought. Most importantly, the *Bodhisattva* need not seek to escape *saṃsāra* to attain *Nirvāṇa*. He can tirelessly work to aid ‘suffering beings’, sustained by the idea that *Nirvāṇa* is, so to speak, something already present in *saṃsāra*. As an advanced *Bodhisattva*, he directly experiences this non-duality of *saṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa*, this realization being fully matured when Buddhahood – *Nirvāṇa* in the highest sense – is reached. The nature of Buddhahood, ‘Buddhaness’ (*buddhata*), is of course emptiness, as is the nature of everything. Because of this, all beings are seen to have a nature which is non-different from Buddhahood. Without this, how could ordinary frail beings eventually become omniscient Buddhas?

Self-emptiness and other-emptiness

The implications of the above were seen in two kinds of ways within Mahāyāna traditions. In Tibet, these are called ‘self-emptiness’ (*rang stong*, pronounced *rang dong*) and ‘other-emptiness’ (*gzhan stong*, pronounced *zhen dong*).¹² The first is the perspective of the Gelugpa school (see p. 208), which takes the line of the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika. It sees the emptiness teaching as a ‘non-affirming negative’, on the lack of inherent nature/existence in anything. As beings are empty of a fixed Self, and their minds empty of inherent nature, they are capable of ultimate change and are not ultimately different from *Nirvāṇa*. Their defilements (attachment, hatred and delusion, etc.), which sustain *saṃsāra*, are also empty of inherent existence, and so can be transcended. This is seen initially through reasoning, then the result of this reasoning is the focus of meditative concentration, leading on to a non-conceptual direct insight into emptiness, at the path of seeing, at the start of the path of the Noble *Bodhisattva*. Along this path, as the perfections are developed, the tendency of ordinary perception to habitually see things in a non-empty way is gradually purified away.

The ‘other-emptiness’ view is held by people mainly linked to the Nyingmapa and Kagyüpa schools, drawing on ideas of the now extinct Jonangpa school (see p. 208). This perspective sometimes calls itself the ‘Great Mādhyamika’. In this view, the most important referent of the term ‘emptiness’ is a self-existent, unchanging reality that pervades all phenomena (*BS2.52*). Like *Nirvāṇa* as seen by the early schools (see pp. 81, 96), it is ‘emptiness’ in being empty of defilements – empty of what is other than it; however, this does not mean it is empty of its own positive qualities; rather

¹² Williams, 2009: 112–15; Powers, 2007a.

it is full of Buddha-qualities. Knowing the limits of concepts does not just show the limitations of conventional truths, it reveals the true, underlying absolute reality that is known in a non-conceptual way: emptiness, the radiant, non-dual consciousness of a Buddha. The task of beings, then, is not to ‘attain’ something that they do not already possess, but to *uncover* and know their Buddhanness. The task of the *Bodhisattva* is to skilfully help them in this. This view sees this ultimate emptiness as the *Tathāgata-garbha* (see below).

In the self-emptiness view, the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate reality, no reality with an inherent nature/existence; there are just non-ultimate conventional realities. Seeing *Nirvāṇa* is seeing emptiness, in the sense of seeing that everything is empty of ultimacy. In the other-emptiness view, while conventional realities are still seen as empty of ultimacy, there is seen to be an ultimate reality, emptiness, which is a positive reality, but is empty of defilements. This is the basis of everything. The self-emptiness view is akin to ideas in early Buddhism in finding no ultimate basis that is the support of everything else. The other-emptiness view is akin to ideas in early Buddhism in seeing *Nirvāṇa* as a reality in its own right, but unlike it in seeing this reality as the basis of everything, much like the *Ātman-Brahman* of the *Upaniṣads*.

The differences between these perspectives echoes the fact that in early Buddhism, the quality of being ‘empty’ (Pali *suñña*, Skt. *śūnya*) referred to a certain kind of lack, while ‘the empty’ (*suññam/suññatā*) referred to a reality that *has* a certain kind of lack. ‘Emptiness’ (Pali *suññatā*) sometimes refers to a quality of lack (e.g. *M.iii.105*), though the *Arhat*’s liberated mind is an emptiness that is that which *is empty of* attachment, hatred and delusion (*S.iv.297*). As will be seen below, the term ‘emptiness’ has a range of meanings in the Mahāyāna. When the term is used, one always needs to try to discern if it refers to a kind of lack – and if so, what kind (e.g. of inherent nature) – or to a positive reality that is lacking in certain negative features.

THE YOGĀCĀRA SCHOOL

Sources and writers

Ideas of the Yogācāra school were probably first adumbrated in the early strata of the *Yogācāra-bhūmi-śāstra*, attributed to Asaṅga (310–90?) but with ideas predating him (Williams, 2009: 85–7). They are also rooted in the ideas of certain *Sūtras* which began to appear in the third century CE. The most important is the *Samdhinirmocana* (‘Freeing the Underlying

Meaning'; Powers, 1995). The *Sūtra* sees itself as a 'third turning of the *Dharma*-wheel', surpassing the first two 'turnings': the teachings on the four True Realities for the Spiritually Ennobled, and the Perfection of Wisdom *Sūtras*. The *Mahāyāna-abhidharma Sūtra* is another such text. The influential *Laṅkāvatāra* ('Descent into Laṅkā') *Sūtra* (*Lanka.*), which gradually developed from around 300 CE, also contains many Yogācāra ideas in its unsystematic summary of Mahāyāna teachings.

The Yogācāra was founded as a separate school by Asaṅga, seen by tradition as a monk ordained in the Vibhajyavādin Mahīśāsaka fraternity. His 'teacher' was one Maitreya, or Maitreya, who may have been a human teacher, or seen by Asaṅga as the heavenly *Bodhisattva* Maitreya. In time, Asaṅga converted his half-brother to the Mahāyāna: Vasubandhu, seen as the Vasubandhu who composed the Sarvāstivādin *Abhidharma-kośa* and its *bhāṣya* (see p. 94). The scholarly debate as to whether the two Vasubandhus were actually the same person is as yet unresolved, though one can see a line of development from the *bhāṣya* to some ideas of the Yogācāra Vasubandhu (Berkwitz, 2010: 108–9; Williams, 2009: 301–2).

Asaṅga's works (Williams, 2009: 87) include the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* ('Compendium of the Mahāyāna': *Ms.*), the *Abhidharma-samuccaya* ('Collection of *Abhidharma*'), this being a Yogācāra version of the *Abhidharma*, and a commentary on the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*. Several other works associated with Asaṅga are attributed by either Chinese or Tibetan tradition to 'Maitreya', in the sense that this *Bodhisattva* inspired Asaṅga to write them. The most philosophically important of these is the *Madhyānta-vibhāga* ('Discrimination between the Middle and Extremes': *Mv.*). Vasubandhu's most important works are: the *Triṃśatikā-kārikā* or *Triṃśikā* ('Thirty Verses': *Trims.*); the *Viṃśatikā-kārikā* ('Twenty Verses': *Vims.*) and his commentary on this, the *Viṃśatikā-vṛtti* (*Vrtti.*); the *Triśvabhāva-nirdeśa* ('Exposition of the Three Natures': *Tsn.*) and his commentary on the *Madhyānta-vibhāga*, the *Madhyānta-vibhāga-kārikā-bhāṣya* (*Mvkb.*). In the sixth century lived two important Yogācāra teachers, Sthiramati and Dharmapāla, with the ideas of the latter being taken to China by Xuanzang, founder of the Faxiang (Fa-hsiang) school. Also associated with the Yogācāra are the logicians and epistemologists Dignāga (fifth to sixth century) and Dharmakīrti (c. 530–600; *BS2.21*; Berkwitz, 2010: 117–21).

The Yogācāra orientation

Asaṅga and Vasubandhu not only developed the characteristic ideas of the Yogācāra school, but also sought to systematize and synthesize all the

strands of the Mahāyāna along with some Śrāvakayāna ideas. While Vasubandhu was primarily a theoretician, and gave the school its classical form, Asaṅga's writings were deeply rooted in the practice of *dhyāna* (Pali *jhāna*), or meditative trance. Accordingly, 'Yogācāra' means the 'Practice of Yoga', referring to the *Bodhisattva*'s path of meditative development. While the Mādhyamikas and Yogācāras had their philosophical differences, they both had Buddhahood as their goal, and can be seen as being complementary in their approaches. The Mādhyamikas had an analytical, dialectic approach to reality, emphasizing *prajñā* (wisdom); the Yogācāras emphasized *samādhi* (meditative concentration) and the withdrawal of the mind from sensory phenomena. Just as the early Buddhists sought to transcend limiting attachment by seeing phenomena as impermanent, painful and non-Self, so the Mādhyamikas sought this by seeing them as 'empty' of inherent nature/existence, and the Yogācāras sought it by seeing perceived phenomena as mental constructions. The withdrawal of the mind from sensory phenomena in the Yogācāra seems related to what in early Buddhism is described as the apprehension of *Nirvāṇa* as the 'signless' (*animitta*) – that which is devoid of indications which the mind can latch on to or interpret (see p. 96) – just as the Mādhyamika path is related to seeing *Nirvāṇa* as 'the empty'.

The Mādhyamikas regarded the normal experience of the world as a product of conceptual constructions, but had not concerned themselves with the psychological details of this process. The Yogācāras addressed this question and related ones. For example, if the Sarvāstivādin idea of past *dharma*s as still existing is not acceptable, how are memories and the effects of past karma transmitted over time, if a being is composed of a stream of momentary events, as described in the *Abhidharma*? Here, the Yogācāra answer built on those of earlier schools, such as the Sautrāntikas, who had posited a series of momentary karmic 'seeds' reproducing themselves over time, and the Vibhāgyavādins (and later Theravādins), who had posited *bhavaṅga* consciousness (see p. 92), which gave continuity to personality even through dreamless sleep. In continuing to wrestle with such questions, the Yogācāras developed a new *Abhidharma* literature set within a Mahāyāna framework (Guenther, 1976).

Central to the Yogācāra is an emphasis on consciousness; indeed an alternative later name for the school was *Vijñānavāda*, the 'Consciousness Teaching'. In early Buddhism (see p. 69), the flux of consciousness is seen as the crucial link between rebirths, and a transformed state of consciousness is associated with *Nirvāṇa*. The perceiving mind is also that which interprets experience so as to construct a 'world', and can be the basis for experiencing

the world-transcending *Nirvāṇa*. 'The world is led by mind/thought' (A.11.177). In the Yogācāra, the role of the mind in constructing the world is so emphasized that all concepts of an external physical reality are rejected: the perceived world is seen as 'representation-only' (*viññapti-mātra*) or 'mind/thought-only' (*citta-mātra*). In this, the Yogācāras went one step beyond the Sautrāntikas' theory, in which objects were seen as real, but were only known by inference from the representations that they caused in the mind.

The Yogācāra and the Mādhyamika views of each other

Both the Mādhyamikas and the Yogācāras saw themselves as preserving the Buddhist Middle Way between the extremes of nihilism (everything is unreal) and substantialism (substantial entities exist, see p. 72). The Yogācāras criticized the Mādhyamikas for tending towards nihilism, with phenomena supported by nothing but other unsupported phenomena, while the Mādhyamikas criticized the Yogācāras for tending towards substantialism, setting up mind as an ultimate entity when all was equally 'empty' of inherent existence/nature. The Mādhyamika assessment is reflected in a fifth-century schema, later used in Tibet, which grades the key schools according to their grasp of the truth: (i) Vaibhāṣika Sarvāstivāda, (ii) Sautrāntika, (iii) Citta-mātra (Yogācāra), (iv) Mādhyamika. To reach the Mādhyamika level, however, the other schools had to be progressively studied. Moreover, the Yogācāra-Mādhyamika later developed as a powerful syncretistic school: the Yogācāra emphasis on how the experienced world was a mental construct accorded with the Mādhyamika idea that things were 'empty' in part because they were dependent on imputation by mental designation. The 'substantialism' of the Yogācāras is in fact more apparent than real, as their theories on mind are essentially tentative devices, 'skilful means' to be used in conjunction with a series of meditations in leading the practitioner beyond all mental constructions, including all theories, to a direct experience of the true nature of reality. For them, one who cannot get beyond words and theories is like someone who mistakes a fingertip for the thing that it is pointing at, such as the moon (*Lanka*.196–7 and 224) – an image that is common in Zen Buddhism.

The Yogācāra view of the role and nature of consciousness

In previous *Abhidharma*, consciousness (Skt *viññāna*, Pali *viññāṇa*) or *citta* (thought/mind/heart) was seen to be of seven types: consciousness related to

each of the five physical senses, mind-consciousness, and mind-organ (Skt *manas*, Pali *mano*; *Dhs.* 1187; *AKB.* 1.16), with the latter processing the input from the senses, often in a way skewed by the ‘I am’ conceit. *Manas* was seen by the Yogācāras as a process of subliminal thought, which organizes data from the six consciousnesses into the experience of a meaningful world, according to set categories (cf. *M.* 1.295; *M.* 111.216–17). It contains the basis both for correct judgements and misperception of reality, and for both skilful and unskilful karma, which are generated by volitions accompanying the six consciousnesses (*Trims.* v. 6). As a basis for misperceptions, it is called *kliṣṭa-manas*, defiled or afflicted mind. As in earlier *Abhidharma*, each instance of a type of *citta* is seen as a momentary event, accompanied by an appropriate collection of ‘mental states’ (Skt *caitta* or *caitasika*, Pali *cetasika*; *Trims.* vv. 3–4).

Manas and the six consciousnesses represent only the surface of the mind, which is active and oriented towards ‘objects’. There is, though, an additional eighth form of consciousness, which is the *āśraya*, or ‘basis’ of the rest; it is their fundamental root.¹³ Devoid of purposive activity and only indistinctly aware of objects, it is an underlying unconscious level of mind known as *ālaya-vijñāna*, the ‘storehouse consciousness’. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (*Lanka.* 46–7, cf. 38–9) sees the seven active consciousnesses as related to the *ālaya* as waves are related to the ocean: they are not really separate from it, but are simply perturbations in it. These perturbations do not affect the ever-still depths of the ocean-like *ālaya*, though. Asaṅga equates the *ālaya* with what the *Mahāyāna-abhidharma Sūtra* calls the ‘Realm (or principle, *dhātu*) without beginning in time, which is the common basis of all *dharma*s’ (*Ms.* ch. 2). It is similar to the Theravādin *bhavaṅga* consciousness (see p. 92), except that the *ālaya* is seen to be simultaneous with the other forms of consciousness (Waldron, 2003: 106, 112), while *bhavaṅga* is the intermittent resting state of mind-consciousness.

When a person performs actions, or karmas, traces are left on his unconscious: ‘seeds’ of future karmic effects sink into the *ālaya*, a receptacle which actively stores them, ready to later mature. The *ālaya* consists of a series of *cittas* (*Trims.* v. 4), accompanied by both karmic ‘seeds’ and the ‘seeds’ of potential defilements and memories. These all reproduce themselves over time, thus accounting for the continuity of personality through death and periods of unconsciousness, when the seven active consciousnesses are absent (*Trims.* v. 16).

¹³ *EB.* 4.3.3 (*Trims.* 1–19); Waldron, 2003; Williams, 2009: 97–100.

The *ālaya* is also said to contain some intrinsically pure ‘seeds’, the source of religious striving.¹⁴ They arise from the profound depths of the *ālaya*, the *param-ālaya* or ‘*ālaya* which is beyond’ (*Lanka*.272). In the Shelun school, the earliest Chinese version of the Yogācāra, this is designated as a ninth, ‘immaculate’ (*amala*), consciousness. This school saw the immaculate consciousness as beyond the dualisms of subject and object, existence and non-existence, and as the *Dharma-dhātu*, the ‘*Dharma*-realm/principle’,¹⁵ or as ‘thusness’, equivalent to emptiness and *Nirvāṇa*. It also regarded it as beyond the individual unconscious, and as a universal reality which lies ‘within’ all beings. The other Yogācāra school in China, the Faxiang, saw immaculate consciousness as simply the *ālaya* when freed of the defiled aspects of it (Williams, 2009: 99).

Ālaya acts as the basis of the active consciousnesses by actually projecting them out of itself. The Yogācāra, then, regards a person’s perception of the world as a product of the unconscious mind. This notion is related to the observation that, in any situation, we only really notice what our mind is attuned to perceive, be this something that interests us, threatens us, excites us or disgusts us. We only ever get ‘edited highlights’ of the possible field of perception. What we perceive is clearly related to our nature, which is the product, among other things, of our previous actions (cf. pp. 41 and 69). That perception is not just a question of passively ‘seeing what is there’ is demonstrated by the many examples, in psychology books on perception, of ambiguous figures that can be ‘seen’ in different ways. It is also illustrated by the way in which one may take some time to recognize the subject of a photograph taken at an odd angle or in odd lighting. Once it is ‘seen’, though, it is hard *not* to recognize it. The Yogācāras emphasized this kind of thing to such an extent that perception is regarded as essentially a process of imagining, in which the mind generates mental constructions that are perceived as a world.

The Yogācāra philosophy explains the ‘mechanics’ of the process of construction as follows. Within the *ālaya*, the karmic ‘seeds’ are matured by the subtle influence of *vāsanās* or perfuming ‘impressions’ generated by ingrained attachment to mental constructions.¹⁶ The ‘seeds’ then ripen in

¹⁴ The Sautrāntikas also talked of an indestructible ‘seed’ of ‘goodness’ as the source of Nirvāṇic striving, and the Theravādins equated *bhavaṅga* consciousness with the ‘brightly shining’ *citta* referred to at *A*.1.10 (see p. 68).

¹⁵ In early Buddhism, ‘*Dharma-dhātu*’ referred to principles discovered by the Buddha: Conditioned Arising and the four True Realities for the Spiritually Ennobled (e.g. *S*.11.56–7), and the three marks (*A*.1.286): basic patterns of reality awakened to by the Buddha (*S*.11.25).

¹⁶ The terminology of ‘seeds’ and ‘impressions’ having already been developed by the Sautrāntikas.

the form of the flow of experiences which consists of *manas* and the six consciousnesses, each orientated to its own type of 'object', of which it is a 'representation' (*viññapti*) (*Lanka*.44, and *Trims.* v. 2). *Manas* splits the seamless flow of experience into an experiencing 'subject' and an experienced 'object', or 'grasper' and the 'graspable'. Building on this, it then generates other forms of delusory discrimination (*vikalpa*). In this process, language plays a large role. It is suffused with the subject/object distinction and provides concepts under which 'significant' forms (*nimitta*) can be separated out from the flow of experience and named, as supposedly fixed entities, such as 'a wheel' (*Lanka*.226).

While all that is actually experienced is consciousness and its mental concomitants, then, discrimination produces the fiction that these are experiences undergone by an 'inner' subject, and are of a separate 'external' world, along with 'inner' feelings and emotions. For the Yogācāra, the flow of experiences is actually neither 'internal' nor 'external' – it just is. A rough analogy is afforded by the situation of interacting with a computer-generated virtual-reality world (cf. p. 117), where the viewer is led 'around' an apparently three-dimensional space through a seamless series of two-dimensional on-screen images, and may also identify with one of the characters depicted, as also happens when watching a television programme. The analogy is, of course, imperfect. It still contains a watcher of the computer- or TV-screen, whereas in the Yogācāra view the watcher 'himself' is like the on-screen picture! *Manas* takes the supposed 'subject' as a real permanent Self or I, partly due to a confused awareness of the *ālaya* which is its basis. This I-delusion is then the source of cravings related to 'objects', and of a variety of volitions which generate karmic 'seeds' – to be stored in the *ālaya* until they ripen into the future flow of experience. Thus the cycle of life and lives continues, with *ālaya* and *manas* mutually conditioning each other.

The world as 'thought-only'

The Yogācāra view has been generally taken as a form of philosophical idealism, which denies the reality of the material world and asserts that reality is mental. It can certainly sound idealist: 'Visible entities are not found, the external world is merely thought/mind (*citta*) seen as a multiplicity [of objects]; body, property and environment – these I call thought-only (*citta-mātra*)' (*Lanka*.154; cf. *BTTA*.183). The intention of the school, though, is not to propound a mere philosophical viewpoint, but to develop a perspective which will facilitate awakening. In doing this, it develops many

tentative theories which aim to articulate what is immediately experienced, and rejects theories which go beyond this to discuss a 'material world'. If an extra-mental reality exists, we never experience it. Our actual 'world' is merely 'thought' (and its mental accompaniments) or a 'representation' (*vijñapti*), produced by consciousness. Conscious experience may contain some shadowy reflection of extra-mental existences, but is so massively conditioned by mental constructs that it is these that must be the focus of analysis and spiritual change.¹⁷

To support this view, meditative experience is appealed to. In this, concentration on an object can generate a mental image such as a coloured disc of light, which in time becomes more vivid and clear than objects seen with the open eyes (see p. 326). Asaṅga argues that, however real such images appear, they are clearly nothing apart from thought/mind. If this applies to experiences had in a calm, less deluded state, how much more does it apply to ordinary experience? He also argues that, as some advanced meditators can change earth into water, then these are not really outside the mind. Moreover, dreams show that one can have pleasant and unpleasant 'sensory' impressions when there is no real object to cause them (*Ms.2.27.1–8* (*BTtA.184*)).

This perspective is not taken to mean that we all inhabit totally private worlds. The similarity in people's karmic 'seeds' means that our 'worlds' have much in common, though different types of being are seen as perceiving the 'same object' very differently: while humans see a river as a source of washing and drinking, for fish it is just their home environment, and for 'hungry ghosts' it is a stream of pus and excrement which cannot assuage their ravaging thirst (*Ms.2.4*). Note that this idea does imply that there is an extra-mental 'something' that is being perceived differently. Moreover, what one being does can help or harm another; Vasubandhu asserts that this is not through the action of material bodies and physically produced speech, but by one being's mental 'representations' causing an effect in those of another. While beings are, as far as we know, only streams of mental phenomena, these do interact (*Vims. vv. 18–20*) – as must also be so for people to partake of language, which the Yogācāra sees as shaping experience.

The three natures

While the Mādhyamikas talk in terms of 'two levels of truth', a central Yogācāra concept is that of three apparent 'natures' – the three *svabhāvas*

¹⁷ A side-effect of this is that non-karmic kinds of causality are neglected: everything experienced is seen as due to karma (including how other beings affect one).

(EB.4.3.2). Each is a perspective on experience which concerns both a type of real or supposed knowledge, and a degree of reality that this knowledge relates to. As in the Mādhyamika, the intention is to move from one's ordinary, vitiated experience to that of the highest degree of truth or reality. For the Yogācāras, there is also an intermediary level of reality, though the Mādhyamikas regarded this as an impossible mix of reality and unreality.

The first of the three 'natures' is the *parikalpita*, the '(mentally) constructed' or 'imagined'. This is what is structured by the subject/object discrimination: the common-sense world of self, people and things, and 'objects' of thought such as mental and physical *dharma*s, all wrongly seen as having real permanent essences ('own-nature'). Its 'degree' of reality is zero: it is just an illusory appearance. As a kind of 'knowledge', it is taken in by the illusion, engrossed in the perceptual signs (*nimitta*) that are its general forms, as well as related details (*Lanka*.67). It is the world of 'conventional usage' (*vyavahāra*; *Trims.* v. 23) mediated by language.

The second 'nature' is the *paratantra*, the 'other-dependent'. This is the level of relative reality, in the form of the flow of changing mental phenomena (i.e. *dharma*s properly understood), arising dependent on one another according to the principle of Conditioned Arising as in the system of eight forms of *citta* and accompanying mental states (*Mv*.1.9–10). It also refers to the relative knowledge which comprehends these phenomena as mutually dependent and impermanent. It is not the highest level of reality, however, for it is the very process which generates the subject/object duality and so projects the 'constructed' nature: it is the 'construction of the unreal' (*abhūta-parikalpa*; *Tsn.* v. 4).

The third and highest 'nature' is the *pariniṣpanna*, the 'absolutely accomplished'. This is the absolutely real level, devoid of the subject/object duality, in which knowledge is perfected due to directly knowing the world as 'representation only'. While the 'constructed' is like the water in a mirage, and the 'other-dependent' is like the mirage itself, the 'absolutely accomplished' is like the complete lack of real water in the mirage. Or the first is like the illusory hairs seen by a person with cataracts, the second is like that which produces these illusions, and the third is like the unconfused objects seen by one with sound eyes.¹⁸

Because it knows that the imaginary 'constructed' is empty of a real 'nature', and that the interdependent phenomena of the 'other-dependent' level are also individually empty of an inherent 'nature' (as in Mādhyamika thought), the 'absolutely accomplished' is knowledge of the very empty

¹⁸ *Samādhirimocana Sūtra* (Taisho 16, p. 693 a–b), as cited by Keenan, 1982: 11.

‘nature’ of all phenomena: emptiness. This ‘nature’ is also known as thusness (*tathatā*), the inconceivable as-it-is-ness of reality. As the knowledge which knows it has totally transcended the subject/object illusion, it *is* the very thusness which it knows. Thusness is the very nature of reality and the three ‘natures’ are just three different perspectives on it, of varying degrees of adequacy (*Tsn.* vv. 18–21).

While the Mādhyamikas use the term ‘emptiness’ only to denote simply the absence of inherent nature/existence in phenomena, the Yogācāras also see ‘emptiness’ as a term for something that is positively existing – in the form of the non-dual nature of the ‘other-dependent’ nature. Reality, understood according to the true Middle Way, is empty of duality but not empty of existence; it is that which is empty. The ‘other-dependent’, ‘construction of the unreal’, is not totally unreal, but exists ‘within’ emptiness, being neither separate from nor identical to it, just as impermanent things are neither separate from nor identical to impermanence (*Mvkb. ch. 1*, vv. 3 and 14). It has an ‘ineffable (*anabhilāpya*) nature’ known only by Buddhas (*Vrtti.* v. 10).

The Yogācāra path and goal

The first two natures are the basis of defilements and thus of suffering. The Yogācāra path therefore aims to understand the dualistic ‘constructed’ so as to undermine the aspect of the ‘other-dependent’ which is its basis, until this is finally cleansed away from it, to leave the ‘absolutely accomplished’. In deep meditative calm, the mind gradually overcomes the tendency to interpret experiences as indicating external ‘objects’. As this tendency wanes, consciousness still tends to be grasped at as a real ‘subject’, more real than ‘objects’. Finally, the full realization of ‘representation-only’ comes when the utter transcending of any ‘object’ leads to the collapse of any notion of ‘subject’, which is merely its dualistic contrast (*Tsn.* v. 36). Thus arises the experience of transcendent knowledge, which is an undifferentiated unity, beyond the subject/object duality and concepts of any kind, even ‘thought’. It is thought which is no longer what is usually meant by ‘thought’, as it is without object, contentless.¹⁹ This is the realization of the ‘absolutely accomplished’, and is said to be perception of the ‘unlimitedness’ of the *Dharma*-realm, awakening (*bodhi*) (*Tsn.* vv. 37–8).

The path to *Nirvāṇa* is a gradual development of virtue, meditative concentration, and insight into the emptiness of ‘other-dependent’

¹⁹ *Trims.* vv. 28–9 and commentary (*BTTA*.181; cf. p. 116).

phenomena. The final attainment comes suddenly,²⁰ however, as a momentous spiritual transition, a shattering upheaval which takes place at the root of the mind – in *ālaya* in its form as *manas*. This event is known as the ‘reversal of the basis’ (*āśraya-parāvṛtti*). It is where the usual flow of the worldly mind suddenly stops, so that the six sensory consciousnesses no longer present information.²¹ Having stopped discriminating ‘objects’ in the flow of the six consciousnesses, *manas* ‘turns round’ from these and attains direct, intuitive, noble knowledge (*ārya-jñāna*) of *ālaya* as its basis. Due to this, *ālaya* is no longer capable of carrying karmic ‘seeds’, the source of the consciousness of ‘objects’, as its deluding nature is seen through. The intuition thus penetrates to the non-dual depths of *ālaya*, the *Dharma*-realm which is ultimate reality, so that everything is seen as ‘thought-only’ in the highest sense. In the mirror of *manas*, the unknowing *ālaya* has gained knowledge of its inner nature, so that *Nirvāṇa* is ‘the *ālaya*-consciousness which is realized inwardly, after a reversal has taken place’ (*Lanka*.62). *Nirvāṇa*, then, is the transfiguration of *saṃsāra*, not its abolition: as in the Mādhyamika, ‘there is no difference between *saṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa*’ (*Lanka*.61).

An advanced *Bodhisattva* who has experienced *Nirvāṇa* does not rest content with this. He turns again to *saṃsāra* in the service of others, which the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* calls his ‘non-abiding’ (*apratiṣṭhita*) *Nirvāṇa*, not clinging either to *saṃsāra* or to *Nirvāṇa* as something supposedly separate from this (Nagao, 1991). He does this by meditatively sending forth a seemingly physical ‘mind-made body’ (*Ms*.2.27.8 ((*BT*TA.184)) – which is like a conjurer’s magical illusion and no more an external physical object than anything else – in which he tunes in to and perceives the apparent ‘world’ of those he is seeking to aid. *Lanka*.136–7 describes how an (eighth-stage) *Bodhisattva*, having attained ‘reversal’, enters a meditative concentration in which he attains two forms of mind-made body. With the first of these, he can travel at will to the presence of any heavenly Buddha in his ‘Buddha-land’, while in the second, he can take on the form of a variety of classes of beings, so as to work among them and help them towards liberation. Here one sees Yogācāra philosophical ideas connecting up with central Mahāyāna concerns.

Purity and defilement

The Yogācāras reflected much on the relationship between a ‘pure’ ultimate reality and a defiled, impure *saṃsāra* found ‘within’ it. ‘Reversal’ does not

²⁰ As does Arhatship in the early schools. ²¹ Cf. the ‘signless’ deliverance (pp. 81 and 96).

bring about a change in ultimate reality; for what is changeable is impermanent. Its purity is intrinsic to it: 'As is pure gold, water free from dirt, the sky without a cloud, so it is pure when detached from imagination' (*Lanka*.131). 'Emptiness' is seen as undefiled due to its very nature, the brightly shining state of the transcendental *citta*, but this purity is hidden by adventitious defilements (*Mv*.1.23, cf. p. 68). Vasubandhu comments that the existence of these alien defilements (at the 'other-dependent' level) explains why people do not attain liberation without effort, while the shining nature of ultimate reality explains why the effort to attain purity will not be fruitless. He also comments (on *Mv*.5.21): 'The *Dharma*-realm, being like space, is pure by nature, and the duality "pure" and "impure" is only adventitious, arriving later'. That is, only in contrast to 'impure' defilements is the ultimate reality 'pure'; in itself it is beyond all such dualities.

TATHĀGATA-GARBHA THOUGHT

According to the Chinese tradition, Indian Mahāyāna thought consisted of the Mādhyamika, Yogācāra and 'Tathāgata-garbha' schools. The Indian and Tibetan traditions did not count the latter strand of thought as a separate philosophical school, though: for it originated in the period between the origin of the Mādhyamika and Yogācāra, its ideas were in some ways intermediary between theirs, and they both drew on these ideas. Moreover, there were no great Indian teachers associated with this strand of thought. This was probably because it was not intended as a well-worked-out system, but arose among those seeking to articulate and support aspects of religious practice. Nevertheless, it made an important contribution to Mahāyāna thought.²²

Tathāgata-garbha sources

The earliest known Tathāgata-garbha text was the *Tathāgata-garbha Sūtra* (*BP*.7), composed c. 200–250 CE. The most important one, however, is the *Śrīmālā-devī-simhanāda Sūtra* (*Srim.*), 'The *Sūtra* on the Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā', composed between 250 and 350 CE. Also important is the single extant Sanskrit treatise on the *Tathāgata-garbha*. This is known as the *Ratnagotra-vibhāga* (*Rv.*), 'An Analysis of the Jewels and Lineages', or *Uttara-tantra*, 'The Treatise on the Supreme'. The Chinese tradition

²² Keenan, 1982; Ruegg, 1969, 1989a and 1989b; Williams, 2009: 103–28.

attributes this to a Sthiramati/Sāramati; the Tibetan tradition less plausibly attributes it to the *Bodhisattva* Maitreya, via Asaṅga. This text, which quotes liberally from the *Śrīmālā-devī-siṃhanāda Sūtra*, was probably composed soon after it. The (Mahāyāna) *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*,²³ a text which exists in various versions and which was influential in China, also contains many relevant ideas. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (*Lanka*.) assimilates Tathāgata-garbha thought to the Yogācāra viewpoint, and this assimilation is developed further in a text which was a widely used summary of the Mahāyāna in China. This is the *Dasheng qixinlun* (*Ta-sh'eng ch'i-hsin lun*), 'The Treatise on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna', composed, or possibly translated, around 550 CE.

The Tathāgata-garbha

The first word in the term *Tathāgata-garbha* literally means 'Thus-gone' or 'Thus-come', a term for a Buddha as one who is attuned to reality, while the second basically means either an embryo, or a womb or other container. Tibetan translations are based on the first meaning of *garbha*, while Chinese ones are based on the second. *Tathāgata-garbha* thus means something like 'embryonic Buddha' or 'matrix of a Buddha', though the earliest meaning may have been a reference to beings as 'containing a Buddha'. This 'embryo' is seen as existing within all living beings, indicating that, however deluded or defiled they are, they can mature into Buddhas. The *Tathāgata-garbha*, then, represents the 'Buddha-potential' within all beings. In the *Tathāgata-garbha Sūtra*, it is affirmed by the Buddha to be 'complete with virtues and not different from myself'. It is an emptiness which is itself full of possibilities; it is resplendent with the qualities of Buddhahood, beginningless, unchanging and permanent (*Rv.* vv. 51, 84). It is beyond duality, having the nature of thought and the intrinsic purity of a jewel, space or water (*Rv.* vv. 28, 30, 49). It is brightly shining with lucid clarity (*Rv.* v. 170) and is 'by nature brightly shining and pure' (*Lanka*.77). Beings are seen as ignorant of this great inner treasure, but the Buddha reveals it to them so as to encourage them in spiritual development. Moreover, it is the *Tathāgata-garbha* which responds to spiritual teachings and aspires for *Nirvāṇa* (*Srim.* ch. 13; *EB*.4.3.5). In some ways, this approach can be seen as an echo of the early idea of seeing *Nirvāṇa* as 'the aim-free' or 'wishless' (see p. 96): if one already has the supreme, what more could one wish for?

²³ A very different text from the Theravādin *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, and its Sanskrit parallels of other early schools.

The Tathāgata-garbha and the defilements

In the *Tathāgata-garbha Sūtra* and *Ratnagotra-vibhāga* (vv. 96–8 (BT TA.169)), a number of metaphors are used to illustrate the relationship between the intrinsically pure *Tathāgata-garbha* and the ‘stains of adventitious defilements’ – greed, hatred, delusion, etc. – which are said to obscure it. It is both like a Buddha-image wrapped in tattered rags, which suggests an unchanging perfection which has simply to be uncovered, and also like the shoots of a great tree piercing through the fruit from which it grows, suggesting that it is a potential in need of cultivation. Indeed it is to be seen as both ‘since beginningless time naturally present’ and ‘perfected through proper cultivation’ (Rv. v. 149). While these may be seen as in tension, perhaps the intention is to indicate that one must *first* uncover the *Tathāgata-garbha*, as a Buddha-potential, and *then* mature it to Buddhahood by activating qualities implicit within it. The *Ratnagotra-vibhāga* sees the *Tathāgata-garbha* as already present, ‘the immaculate true nature to which nothing need be added and from which nothing need be taken’ (Rv. v. 113). Yet it has to be separated from accompanying impurities, just as gold-ore has to be refined so as to bring out and manifest the intrinsic purity of gold. In *Bodhisattvas*, it is partly purified, and in Buddhas, it is wholly purified (Rv. v. 47).

The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* sometimes suggests that the *Tathāgata-garbha* is an already existent intrinsically pure essence, and sometimes that it is a specific seed-potency of future purity. That said, in a perspective which has in its background the Sarvāstivādin idea that future *dharma*s in some sense exist, the distinction between a potential for future Buddhahood and an existent Buddhahood that one just needs to uncover, is lessened. As argued by Ming-Wood Liu (1982), while the *Sūtra* says that sentient beings definitely ‘have’ the *Tathāgata-garbha*, which is identical to the eternal unconditioned nature of a *Tathāgata*, *Nirvāṇa*, they only ‘have’ it in a future sense. They have the ability to become Buddhas when the right conditions of spiritual practice come into play, just as milk has the potential to become cream or butter when treated in the right way, but does not already ‘contain’ cream or butter. A man may loosely say that he ‘has butter’ if he has some milk to churn, but he still has to churn it. For sentient beings, the Buddha-nature is existent in the future, but not in the present (Liu 1982: 73–4). Yet as sentient beings, with minds, they are ever-capable of becoming Buddhas. Liu thus reads the overall message of the *Sūtra* as that sentient beings are capable of awakening because they lack a fixed, definitive nature (1982: 84). This, in effect, is how the Mādhyamika school understands the

Tathāgata-garbha: as a way of talking about emptiness of inherent nature, which thus allows ultimate change (see p. 126). This interpretation, however, is not generally how the *Tathāgata-garbha* was understood in East Asia, where it often came to be seen as a pre-existent reality waiting to be uncovered.²⁴

The latest sections of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* translated into Chinese are notable for the idea that everyone, including very wicked people – *icchantikas* or ‘decadents’ – will eventually become Buddhas, due to their *Tathāgata-garbha* (EB.8.3). This refuted the idea, found in some strands of Yogācāra thought such as the Faxiang school, that such people were incapable of any kind of enlightenment because their storehouse-consciousnesses lacked the pure seeds that would enable this (Williams, 2009: 98 and 107).

If the *Tathāgata-garbha* is the pure basis of successful spiritual striving, however, it is necessary to account for the existence of the alien defilements which hold living beings back from awakening. How do they co-exist in a being? The *Ratnagotra-vibhāga* sees the defilements as a ‘shell’ as beginningless as the ‘stainless nature of mind’ that it covers (v. 129). The *Śrīmālā-devī-siṃhanāda Sūtra* says that defilements are ultimately rooted in beginningless ignorance, but that only a Buddha can comprehend how the mind, whose inner nature is the intrinsically pure *Tathāgata-garbha*, can be in *any way* associated with defilements. Here, in fact, one can see a Buddhist version of the problem of evil: from where does evil originate? Buddhism avoids the ‘theological’ problem of evil (see p. 37), but a similar problem arises here. This is because the *Tathāgata-garbha* is seen as the eternal foundation and support of both the unconditioned, including ‘inconceivable Buddha qualities’ (*Srim. ch. 13*), and the conditioned world of *saṃsāra*. Quoting from the *Mahāyāna-abhidharma Sūtra*, the *Ratnagotra-vibhāga* (ch. 9: Takasaki transl., p. 291) equates the *Tathāgata-garbha* with the ‘Dharma-realm/principle’ (*dhātu*) which is described thus (cf. p. 131): ‘The Realm is without beginning in time / It is the common basis (*āśraya*) of all *dharma*s / Because it exists, there also exist / All places of rebirth and full attainment of *Nirvāṇa*.’ This was probably not meant in the sense that there is a single, universal basis for the whole universe – for the *Tathāgata-garbha Sūtra* refers to a plurality of *Tathāgata-garbhas* – but in the sense that the minds of sentient beings are what sustain the round of rebirths, and also have a potential which makes possible the realization of *Nirvāṇa*.

²⁴ The idea that one can already be a Buddha, yet not know this, is not without its problems. The Mahāyāna emphasizes that Buddhas are omniscient, so if one is a Buddha, one should already know this!

Making the *Tathāgata-garbha* the basis of all clearly implies that it is also the basis of the defilements and ignorance. The *Ratnagotra-vibhāga* supports this implication by saying that karma and the defilements are based on unwise attention (which perceives the conditioned world as permanent and substantial); that this is based on ‘the mind’s purity’, but that this ‘true nature of mind’ is itself without any further basis (*Rv.* vv. 56–7). *Lanka*.220 actually says that the *Tathāgata-garbha* ‘holds within it the cause for both skilful and unskilful actions, and by it all forms of existence are produced. Like an actor it takes on a variety of forms’.²⁵ In the final analysis, though, the *Tathāgata-garbha* texts seek to avoid any notion that genuine evil comes from the pure *Tathāgata-garbha*. Thus the defilements are seen as insubstantial, unreal, but as imagined by the deluded mind. This is seen by the fact that the true *Nirvāṇa*, Buddhahood, is not regarded as the extinction of anything (the defilements), but as the ‘*Dharma*-body’ or *Tathāgata* (*Srim. chs.* 5 and 8). This already exists, for, ‘covered’ by defilements, it is the *Tathāgata-garbha*.²⁶ As in the *Mādhyamika* and *Yogācāra*, awakening is not realized by destroying real defilements, but simply by not originating illusory ones, and the illusory suffering to which they lead. Why these illusions should be imagined is still not explained, however: only a Buddha can know.

Tathāgata-garbha thought in relation to the Mādhyamika and Yogācāra

Both the *Tathāgata-garbha* writers and the *Yogācāras* assign a more positive meaning to ‘emptiness’ than is (explicitly) found in classical *Mādhyamika*. The *Tathāgata-garbha* is equated with ‘emptiness’, and is said to be empty of and separate from all defilements, but not empty of or separate from ‘the inconceivable Buddha-qualities, more numerous than the sands of the Ganges’ (*Srim. ch.* 9). This sets up a dichotomy between unreal defilements, and the truly real Buddha-qualities. This perspective differs from the *Yogācāra* one, where there are *three* levels of reality, the three *svabhāvas*. Thus the *Tathāgata-garbha* writers hold there to be two levels of reality, like the *Mādhyamikas*, but hold a more substantivist view of the highest reality than the *Mādhyamikas*.

In both the *Mādhyamika*/Perfection of Wisdom and the *Yogācāra* is found the notion of the ‘brightly shining *citta*’, which ultimately derives

²⁵ Cf. empathy – knowing how another being feels – makes possible both compassion and deliberate cruelty.

²⁶ Though in other texts, the *Tathāgata-garbha* is itself spoken of as what is obscured by defilements.

from an early *Sutta* (see p. 68) and is a key Tathāgata-garbha concept. In the Perfection of Wisdom literature, it is said of the ‘thought of awakening’ (*bodhi-citta*),²⁷ ‘That thought is no thought, since by nature it is brightly shining’, and that it is a state of ‘no-mindedness’ (*acittatā*) which is beyond existence and non-existence (*Asta.5–6*). This equates the brightly shining *citta* with the *bodhi-citta*, which Tathāgata-garbha literature sees as arising when a person becomes aware of the *Tathāgata-garbha* within. Nevertheless, the Perfection of Wisdom passage sees the brightly shining mind as empty of the own-nature of mind, and does not set it up as the basis of the world. In both Tathāgata-garbha thought and the Yogācāra, an aspect of mind *is* set up as the basis for both the conditioned world and attainment of the unconditioned. For the Tathāgata-garbha writers, this basis was the shining *Tathāgata-garbha*, while for the Yogācāras it was the depths of the *ālaya-vijñāna*.

It is notable that the *Ratnagotra-vibhāga* quotes from the *Mahāyāna-abhidharma Sūtra*, a Yogācāra text, and that another early Yogācāra text, the *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṃkāra*, emphasizes the brightly shining mind, which it says is the nature of the *Tathāgata* and a *garbha* that all beings have. These facts suggest a particular affinity between Tathāgata-garbha and Yogācāra thought. It may well be that they developed in similar circles (Keenan, 1982). While the Tathāgata-garbha writers retained an emphasis on the intrinsic purity of the mind, the Yogācāras moved on to explain the arising and working of defiled, empirical consciousness. In this, the origin of defilement, termed ‘the construction of the unreal’, was accorded a greater reality than in Tathāgata-garbha thought. In the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, the two strands of thought are united, for it is actually said that the *ālaya-vijñāna* is also known as the *Tathāgata-garbha* (*Lanka.221*).

A final problem is that *Lanka.77–8* describes the *Tathāgata-garbha* as ‘hidden in the body of every being like a gem of great value . . . it is eternal, permanent’. Given this description, how then does it differ from a permanent Self, which Buddhism had never accepted?²⁸ The texts seem somewhat ambivalent on this. On the one hand, the *Dharma*-body, the fully mature *Tathāgata-garbha*, is the perfection of permanence and of Self (*Srim. ch. 12*). On the other, while the *Tathāgata-garbha* may seem like either a Self or eternal creator to the ignorant, it is not so, for it is the same as emptiness

²⁷ In general, a term for the compassionate aspiration for Buddhahood, so as to be able to greatly help others, but it is also used for the mind-state which knows emptiness.

²⁸ The Self-like nature of the *Tathāgata-garbha* is an echo of the Pūṣṭalavādins’ idea of a mysterious inner ‘person’: see p. 93.

(*Lanka*.78). It may be Self-like, but is not a true Self, in the sense of an 'I': 'The Buddha is neither a Self nor the *skandhas* (Pali *khandha*), he is knowledge free from evil taints' (*Lanka*.358).

The Tathāgata-garbha and the self-emptiness versus other-emptiness debate

This Tibetan debate on the nature of 'emptiness' (see pp. 126–7) is of particular relevance to the *Tathāgata-garbha* (Powers, 2007a; Williams, 2009: 112–15). Those of the other-emptiness view see the other-empty pure reality as the *Tathāgata-garbha*, interpreted as a pre-existent reality that just needs uncovering: it is a radiance that is empty of defilements. Those of the self-emptiness view regard talk of '*Tathāgata-garbha*' as simply a way of saying that emptiness of inherent nature of the minds of beings means that they are capable of ultimate change, so that they can become Buddhas. The latter view downplays the idea of the radiance of the mind, uncovered in meditation, as the specific seed of future Buddhahood, whereas the other-emptiness view is contentious in holding that the *Tathāgata-garbha* does not and need not change, being an already present perfect Buddhahood that only needs to be uncovered.

In Tibet, the other-emptiness approach is seen, for example, in the approach of *Dzogch'en*, as found in the Nyingmapa school (see p. 205). This 'Great Perfection' practice is seen by its adepts as a wholly self-sufficient 'spontaneously perfect' way leading to a sudden realization of one's primordial perfection and wisdom. The approach is seen as one of simply allowing radiant clarity, the true nature of mind, to manifest itself. This involves allowing thoughts to come and go as they will, without attachment for – or rejection of – them or their objects, so as to be able to focus on the radiance in the thought-flow itself. By such a practice, the adept develops the ability to let his flow of thought-trains gradually and naturally slow down. At a certain point in this development, the flow suddenly stops, as true non-attraction and non-aversion to thought arises in a spontaneous instant, with the mind resting in a state of pure awareness (*rig pa*²⁹), thusness, empty of constructing 'objects', motionless. This is seen as the sudden attainment of enlightenment, the unproduced spontaneous perfection of the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra, personification of the 'Dharma-body' – or at least a foretaste of this. The *self*-emptiness approach to enlightenment, though, is a more gradualist one.

²⁹ Skt *vidyā*, opposite of *avidyā*, spiritual ignorance.

East Asian developments

In China, the *Tathāgata-garbha* was often called *Foxing* (*Fo-hsing*), the ‘Buddha-nature’.³⁰ The influential *Dasheng qixinlun*, the ‘Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna’, saw this as a universal ‘One Mind’, an Absolute that is the basis of the whole universe, thus giving it a cosmological role (Williams, 2009: 115–19). The Tiantai (T’ien-t’ai) monk Zhanran (Chan-jan, 711–82 CE) argued that the Buddha-nature is the immutable mind at the base of all phenomena, even soil and dust. Dōgen (1200–53), founder of Sōtō Zen in Japan, saw the whole phenomenal world not as *manifesting* or *containing* the Buddha-nature, the ultimate, but as *being* it (Williams, 2009: 119–22). While such texts as the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* had denied that walls and stones had the Buddha-nature, he asserted they, like all else, *were* it. The whole changing flux of empty phenomena was nothing but the Buddha-nature, within which it was not possible to designate anything as ‘non-sentient’.

In the twentieth century, a group of Japanese Sōtō Zen scholars³¹ developed a view known as ‘Critical Buddhism’ (see p. 407) that strongly critiques a range of elements of Japanese Buddhism grouped under the heading of what they call ‘*dhātu-vāda*’: a monistic view which sees everything as based on one fundamental substantial foundation. A key aspect of this is the idea of Buddha-nature, and related Japanese ‘original/inherent enlightenment thought’ (Jap. *hongaku shisō*; (BT.191–2)). The Critical Buddhists see such ideas as non-Buddhist, due to being out of tune with the teachings of non-Self and Conditioned Arising, which they see as *the* defining essence of ‘true Buddhism’: they regard all else in Buddhism as questionable (Hubbard and Swanson, 1997; Williams, 2009: 122–5).

THE AVATAṂSAKA SŪTRA AND THE HUAYAN SCHOOL

While *Tathāgata-garbha* thought was perceived by the Chinese as a third school of Indian Mahāyāna philosophy, the Chinese themselves developed the Huayan (Hua-yen) school, based on the *Avataṃśaka*, or ‘Flower Ornament’ *Sūtra* (Ch. *Huayan jing*). This is a huge work, many of whose chapters circulated as separate *Sūtras*. Some were translated into Chinese in the second century CE, but the whole was translated in the fifth and then, in a slightly longer form, in the seventh century. A translation also exists in

³⁰ Though it also seems equivalent to Skt *Buddhatā*, Buddha-ness.

³¹ They are less critical of Dōgen than of other Japanese Buddhists.

Tibetan. The most important books, both surviving in Sanskrit, are the *Dāśa-bhūmika Sūtra*, on the ‘Ten Stages’ of the *Bodhisattva* path, and the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, or ‘Grand Array’ *Sūtra*, which makes up more than a quarter of the whole *Avatamsaka* (Cleary, 1985, 1989, 1991; Williams, 2009: 132–8).

The *Avatamsaka* as a whole deals with: the stages of development and qualities of the *Bodhisattvas*; religious practices; the nature and glories of Buddhahood; visionary descriptions of worlds; and the nature of reality. It contains rhythmic repetitions, a flow of images and shifting perspectives intended to expand horizons and awareness, and a cosmic vision of the deep interrelationship of everything. The *Gaṇḍavyūha*, its culmination, is a literary masterpiece dealing with the spiritual pilgrimage of the youth Sudhana, who is sent by the Buddha on a journey to fifty-two teachers to learn the secrets of the *Bodhisattva* path.³² The journey begins with the Buddha in a pavilion in an Indian grove, which by meditation he causes to merge with him and expand to encompass the whole universe, and countless *Bodhisattvas* from immeasurably distant worlds appear on the scene. These *Bodhisattvas* have such powers as being able to expand their bodies to the ends of the universe, as the Buddha has done. As Sudhana embarks on his pilgrimage, the world in which he moves is not the common-sense everyday world, but the world seen through the eye of wisdom, full of marvellous wonders. Near his journey’s end, he comes to the *Bodhisattva* Maitreya, who shows him the huge tower of the Buddha Vairocana (‘The Resplendent One’). This is described as the abode of all *Bodhisattvas*, meaning that it represents the universe as seen by their wisdom and compassion. Sudhana enters the tower, where he finds a wondrous world, as vast as space, full of countless paths, palaces, banners and trees, all made of jewels, along with countless mirrors, burning lamps and singing birds:

This is the abode of all those who make one *kalpa* (eon) enter into all *kalpas* and all *kalpas* into one *kalpa* . . . who make one *dharma* enter into all *dharma*s and all *dharma*s into one *dharma*, and yet without each being annihilated . . . who manifest themselves in all worlds without moving a hair’s breadth from the place where they are . . . This is the abode of those who go about everywhere in the *Dharma*-realm, unattached, depending on nothing, with no habitation, burden-free, like the wind blowing in the air, leaving no track of their wanderings . . . [For such beings] in one particle of dust is seen the entire ocean of worlds, beings and *kalpas*, numbering as many as all the particles of dust that are in existence, and this fusion takes place with no obstruction whatever . . . While abiding here they also perceive that the

³² The stages of Sudhana’s journey are depicted on many of the friezes of the huge Borobudur *Stūpa-maṇḍala* on the island of Java, Indonesia.

principle of sameness prevails in all beings, in all *dharma*s, in all the Buddhas, in all the worlds . . . (Suzuki, 1970c: 120–1, 125, 131, 132; cf. *EB*.4.3.6)

The visionary world described in this *Sūtra* is in some ways reminiscent of, though more wondrous than, the mythological bejewelled city of a *Cakravartin* emperor described in an early *Sutta*, the *Mahāśudassana* (*D*.11.169–98). It is not intended as a mere play of the imagination, but is an attempt to convey, through a series of images for contemplation, an insight into the ‘unthinkable’ (*acintya*) nature of reality. The heart of this insight is the notion of the ‘interpenetration’ of all existences. This grows out of the notion of emptiness, that things are what they are because of their relationship to other things, in a web of interdependence. It is also an expression of the consequent ‘sameness’ (*samātā*) of things. The *Sūtra* depicts a world of light and jewels; for jewels are such that light passes through them and reflects from them; each ray of light, which does not interfere with other rays of light, represents a line of dependence between interdependent existences which lack own-nature (are ‘transparent’). The Huayan master Fazang (Fa-tsang, 643–712) thus illustrated the interpenetration of all things by an image drawn from the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*: the jewel-net of the god Indra, wherein each jewel in the net reflects every other one, including their reflections of each jewel, and so on to infinity (Cook, 1989: 214). The world of Vairocana’s Tower is the transcendental *Dharma*-realm, the realm where insight penetrates into the mutual interfusion of everything, seeing into the thusness of things. The *Dharma*-realm is not different from the *loka-dhātu*, the worldly-realm of ‘separate’ phenomena, but is its true nature, interpenetrating it. The *Dharma*-realm is the totality of the interpenetrating web of existence. In each part of this whole, the whole is present, and in the whole, each part is a necessary ingredient. Just as any part of a three-dimensional holographic image of a thing contains the whole image, each part of the *Dharma*-realm, each item of existence, reflects and includes each and every other part; for all are interdependent. Any bit of the universe shows what the universe as a whole is. And yet each item of existence remains what it is, without obstruction from the other items – indeed it cannot be what it is without its relationship with them. Here is a holistic, organic vision of things, a kind of ‘cosmic ecology’ (Cook, 1989: 214) in which the entire universe of space and time is present in a particle of dust. Thus the *Sūtra* says: ‘Every living being and every minute thing is significant, since even the tiniest thing contains the whole mystery’. As a Chan saying extracted from book 20 of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* says, ‘Mind, Buddha and all sentient beings, these are no different’ (Cleary, 1983: 188).

Ideas of ‘emptiness’ are used in Huayan, and other schools influenced by it, not just as the antidote to all views, but as the ground for a positive appreciation of the concrete realities of nature, as part of a harmonious organic unity. In tune with the Chinese love of harmony and nature, every item of existence is seen as worthy of respect and honour; for all is the ‘body’ of Vairocana Buddha, as also taught by Kūkai (774–835), the Japanese founder of the tantric Shingon school. Logically, this includes all that early Buddhism saw as ‘*duḥkha*’, but while these views are very different, they have in common the values of awareness and non-attachment.

In systematizing the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*’s message, Huayan thought combines many ideas from earlier Mahāyāna thought, and is influenced by the ideas of indigenous Chinese Daoism (Taoism), especially that everything is a form of a fluid ultimate reality, the ‘*Dao*’ (*Tao*). Using a well-established pair of Chinese ideas, the *Dharma*-realm is said to be the underlying ‘principle’ or ‘noumenon’ (Ch. *li*) which interpenetrates ‘phenomena’ (*shi* (*shih*)) as they do each other. As Sengzhao (Sêng-chao, 384–414) had put it, ‘Heaven and earth and I are of the same root, the ten-thousand things and I are of one substance’ (Suzuki, 1959: 353). Phenomena are empty, but are not unreal; for they are no different from *li*. Phenomena are seen as radically interrelated, and thus empty of inherent nature, much as in Mādhyamika thought, but as well as this ‘horizontal’ relationship between phenomena, there is also their ‘vertical’ relationship with *li*, the *Tathāgata-garbha* conceived as like the ever-malleable *Dao*. All phenomena are actual forms of this, as illustrated by Fazang’s ‘Treatise on the Golden Lion’ (*BT.168–72*). In this, the phenomena of the world are like the parts of a golden lion, all of which are made of the same malleable gold, being forms of it (Williams, 2009: 141–4). The choice of a golden object in the treatise is probably not accidental: the intrinsic brightness of gold is no doubt an allusion to the intrinsic brightness of the Buddha-nature, and to the meditative mind, to which it is related. This idea of an underlying substance to things is very different, though, from how Indian Mādhyamika saw things, for it is rather like the *Brahman* of the *Upaniṣads*, which was also seen as the basis and substance composing everything. Yet *li* is not static and unchanging, but fluid and without any fixed form, like the *Dao*. It is a kind of ‘emptiness’, but now in the sense of something which is empty of fixed form, and so full of countless possibilities. It is empty of defilements, but not of an intrinsic radiance; it has a bright openness, a natural purity to which no defilements can stick, so to speak – though defilements are of course included in the phenomena that are the forms of *li*. Phenomena interpenetrate each other, through deep interdependence, and are also in a sense identical with each

other, as they are all forms of *li*. They are also each the unique cause of the totality of existence, the *Dharma*-realm, as without a particular phenomenon, the totality would not only lack one item, but also lack the multiple effects that this brings to the whole. As each phenomenon is also the cause of the whole, they are also identical in this respect.

Such ideas are explored by Francis Cook (1977), though he tends to see only a Mādhyamika sense of ‘emptiness’ in Huayan thought. In their writings, Huayan authors sought to argue for their perspective, though their arguments are often obscure and mix valid and very debatable points. Perhaps what they were trying to say is very difficult to adequately verbalize. Perhaps they sometimes wrongly conflated different kinds of ideas, such as different kinds of ‘emptiness’. Perhaps something of both of these. Perhaps what look like arguments are intended more as guidance in meditation.

Huayan ideas had implications for how the Buddhist path was seen, for the very start of the path, the arising of faith, was seen as in a sense identical with its goal (Williams, 2009: 144–5). This may reflect, in part, the fact that the first time meditation really starts to work for someone, this opens up for them a whole vista of possibilities. There is then a sense in which practice after this time is a question of unpacking and exploring what has already been obscurely felt/seen. There is, here, a parallel to the tantric idea of using the goal (visualized as a holy being) as a key aspect of the path (see p. 189).

In Huayan, practice involves being aware of one’s Buddha-nature and acting as far as possible like a Buddha, until this becomes a natural and spontaneous way of being (*BT*.192–3). Its kind of speculative mysticism provided the philosophical perspective that imbues much of Chan/Zen Buddhism, and today its ideas are much emphasized by the ‘Order of Interbeing’³³ of the monk Thich Nhat Hanh, of the Vietnamese Chan tradition (known as Thien). An illustration he often uses (e.g. 1991) is that in a sheet of paper are the tree its fibres came from, the sun and rain that sustained this, the logger that cut it down and all he depended on, and ourselves as part of a deeply interdependent world in which all items ‘inter-are’ with all others.

A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW OF MAHĀYĀNA PHILOSOPHIES AND THEIR IDEAS OF ‘EMPTINESS’

Looking back over the philosophies discussed in this chapter, one can see a range of meanings given to the word ‘emptiness’, reflecting the different

³³ www.orderofinterbeing.org

concerns and perspectives of the relevant texts, authors and schools. Broadly speaking:

- For the Mādhyamikas, ‘emptiness’ is a quality shared by *all* phenomena: their lack of inherent nature and inherent existence, with no underlying shared substance to them, either.
- For the Yogācāras, the mental phenomena of the other-dependent nature, which is all one directly knows to exist, are individually empty in a Mādhyamika sense, but there is an additional sense of ‘emptiness’ as meaning the lack of a real subject/object duality in this mental flow, and this ‘emptiness’ is also a name for the positive reality, not empty of itself, which lacks this.
- In Tathāgata-garbha texts, the Mādhyamika sense of emptiness may apply to conditioned phenomena, but the most important sense of ‘emptiness’ is the pure and changeless *Tathāgata-garbha*, the supreme empty thing which is empty of real defilements, but full of Buddha-qualities and the basis of all actions of beings.
- For the Huayan school, while the Mādhyamika sense of emptiness applies to individual phenomena, they are forms of an underlying substance, the *Dharma*-realm, *Tathāgata-garbha*, One Mind, *li*, which is ‘emptiness’ in the sense of that which lacks any *fixed* nature, being fluid and infinitely malleable, like the *Dao*. This underlying principle is not multiple in nature, one per each being, but is a single universal principle at the root of the entire universe.