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THE NEGATIVE THEOLOGY OF YOGAVĀSISṬHA AND LAṆKĀVATĀRĀ SŪTRA

The way of negation is not unfamiliar to students and scholars of Indian thought. The practice of *neti neti* in the Advaita Vedānta tradition serves as a means to negate all that is not Brahman. Within the Yoga tradition the definition of yoga is essentially negative, requiring the prevention of the modification of consciousness (*citta vṛtti nirodha*), as is the practice of yoga as given in the ascending stages of *samādhi*. The Mādhyamika dialectic, introduced by Nāgārjuna, presents a fourfold negation of all that is held to exist and even negates its negation. As early as the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, the story of Svetaketu and his father Uddālaka Aruṇi provides examples of a way of negation, particularly in the dissection of a fig down to its invisible and indivisible "essence". In each of these practices, the method is clearly negative: the absolute of each system is spoken in terms of what it is not. Each systematically denies all that is represented by language until the silence of the absolute is found.

Contemporary with many of the explicitly negative methods of spiritual practice described above, one school of thought arose which, at first glance, seems to affirm rather than negate: the mind-only tradition of Yogācāra Buddhism and some schools of Hinduism. In brief, the mind-only doctrine teaches that all things are none other than thought, a teaching which has been labelled by some scholars as "idealism". In the following discussion, the function of mind-only as a spiritual discipline will be examined, drawing from the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* and the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, with the hope of uncovering an essential "negativity" inherent in this important philosophy and discipline.

The *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, a massive verse work written probably in the 12th Century A.D.¹ and undoubtedly influenced by Yogācāra

1. T. G. Mainkar, *The Vāsiṣṭha Rāmāyāna : A Study* (New Delhi : Meharchand Lachchmandas, 1977), p. 186.

Buddhism², advances the doctrine of mind-only as a central feature in the sage Vasiṣṭha's spiritual education of epic figure Rāma. Throughout the six volumes, numerous passages refer to the teaching that the world is none other than mind, a few of which are cited below. Vasiṣṭha repeatedly proclaims that the external world has no intrinsic reality. It is seen to be like an illusion, a phantom of the imagination ; it bears as much reality as clouds which look like a city in the sky :

Whatever appears in the mind is like a city in the clouds. The emergence of this world is no more than thoughts manifesting themselves (YV III, 84 : 30).

The existence of all external objects is deemed unreal, like a mirage or impossible occurrence :

Like the appearance of water in a mirage,
or the sight of two moons in the sky,
so from perception do existent things appear,
although they do not exist in reality (YV VIB 59 : 48).

What would normally be considered real is negated as illusory. Thus, all phenomena are negated, seen as none other than the workings of the mind. It is stated that the world arises from thought :

It is creative thought only (*bhāvanāmātra*)
which produces the form (*svarūpa*) of the world (YV III 84 : 13).

The word *bhāvanā* is a causative derivative of the root *bhū*, which means "to be". It is through "causing to be" or the directed power of thought that the world comes into existence. Thus, the mind is at the root of all things :

All this world is mind-only (*manomātra*) ;
...the mind is the sky, the earth, the wind ;
indeed, the mind is great (YV III 110 : 15).

Other examples are given wherein the mind is likened to the sprout from which the plant springs forth, the root material out of which all images are fashioned, and the essence of water in its various forms :

As leaves, flowers, and fruit are seen to be latent
in the sprout, so everything that is seen in the

2. Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II (Delhi : Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), p. 134.

waking and dreaming states is of the mind.
As a golden image is none other than gold,
so the activities of waking and sleeping
are none other than thought (*cetas*).

As foam, drops, and shower are all seen to be forms of water,
so all the wonderful perceivable things are formations of the mind
(YV III 110 : 46-48).

These statements reflect diverse schools of thought : the *saṃskāra/ karma/vāsanā* theories of Buddhism and Yoga; the all-pervasive Brahman of Advaita Vedānta, often referred to with the analogy of gold and its forms as rings, bracelets, etc. ; the Mādhyamika use of the water metaphor to symbolize non-substantiality. However, all these verses emphasize the doctrine that all “things”, all reality, proceed from the mind, thus negating the inherent reality of the objective world.

The mind-only doctrine leads to the statement that the mind actively creates according to its desire. It is stated that as one thinks, so the world becomes :

Whatever thought is held with certainty
that very thing comes into existence,
just as a fire-ball ignites
from its contact with fire (YV IV 20 2)
The mind indeed is the maker of the world ;
the mind indeed is regarded as the primal person (*puruṣa*)
What the mind resolves to do,
that becomes constituted through disciplines (YV III 91 : 4).

A person's thought—not external circumstances—determine the nature and experience of the world. However, it is important to keep in mind that the world is not regarded in a positive way. The world (*saṃsāra*) represents suffering and this suffering is to be overcome ; as with the Buddha, Rāma first sought spiritual enlightenment after perceiving the painful and transitory nature of worldly existence.

A fine distinction is made between common thinking and the creative power of the mind. What is commonly identified as thought— notions in regard to one's self and behaviour—are dismissed as “only thought”. Neither doer, action performed, nor object have any true status other than that ascribed by the mind :

The notions that arise in regard to agent, action,
and result, seer sight, and seen, etc.,
are all only thought (YV III 103: 18).

Even philosophical categories such as existence and non-existence are denied as having some inherent truth or falsity; such speculation is none other than the product of thought. Both extremes are denied in a dialectic manner similar to that used by the Mādhyamika Buddhists :

Existence and non-existence and
the perception of dissolution and creation
are manifestations of thought ;
such things are neither true nor untrue,
but are extensions of the mind (YV IV 20 : 3).

To speculate as to the nature of the existence or non-existence of things is to perpetuate the creative thought process which, as we will see, necessarily results in prolonged bondage.

The first step towards liberation is the perception that all things proceed from the mind. Vasiṣṭha informs Rāma that :

These three worlds and all of creation
are no more than modifications of the mind.
When you understand this, you will achieve
great peace within yourself (YV III 84 : 33).

Once it has been ascertained that the world is based on conception, the mind must be purified. The world-creating process is only set in motion by a deluded and impure mind :

It is the deluded mind which is the agent
that activates the establishing of the world.
The impure mind spins out this manifold world (YV IV 20 : 4).

This parallels a passage found in the *Maitrī Upaniṣad* which states that “*Samsāra* is just one’s thought ; with effort he should cleanse it then.”³ The source of impurity in the mind is the latent desires or “habit energies” which cause the need for experience and subsequent

3. Maitri Upaniṣad, 6 : 34, translated in Robert Ernest Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upaniṣads* (London : Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 447.

creation of and bondage to the world. Spiritual practice consists of the purification of these desires (*vāsanā*) as indicated in the following passage :

Rāma, you currently possess latent desires (*vāsanā*) in your mind; therefore you must successfully accomplish the practice of purity (YV II 9 : 36).

The "practice of purity" hinges on the acceptance of the mind-only dynamic; it is only by recognizing that impurity results from the working of one's own mind that suffering can be overcome. The negation of the "real" status of the world as independent of the mind is a prerequisite to the liberated life, as indicated by Vasiṣṭha's advice to Rāma :

Having heard that all this is no more than thought,
Rāma, your questions will be resolved
and you will renounce the influences
of past actions (*vāsanā*) (YV III 84 : 32).

The doctrine of mind-only is thus accorded a practical function of overcoming the habitual tendencies accrued because of past action. Through the attitude of mind-only, *karma* can be reversed.

A paradox is inherent in the teaching of mind-only. According to the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, the nature of thought is such that when its "play" is revealed, the tendency to perpetuate its creative process is mitigated and, with time, attenuated. It is stated that even the body, the most obvious form "manifested" by the mind, disappears :

If you reside in the view that the form of the world
is only the emergence of thought,
then the physical body, etc., disappears,
like oil in sand (YV III 84 : 35).

However, as stated earlier, the ultimate purpose of the mind-only "method" is to uproot all thinking, all creation which is by nature suffering. Thus, Vasiṣṭha states that the mind itself must be dissolved—negated—before liberation is effected :

Through consideration, the mind thinks,
desiring its own dissolution.
It is only by the dissolution of the mind
that the most excellent (liberation)
will come to be (YV III 97 : 10).

The world implies bondage ; the world proceeds from the mind. Hence, the way to liberation is the self-abnegation of the mind through the mind: through the recognition of mind-only the mind is purified ; the influences of past, impure tendencies (*vāsanā*) are overcome; and desires are subsequently halted. The one who has attained this state is then liberated :

When a person is free from all desire,
then the state of the stainless Brahman
is attained, as when blueness is perceived
to spread throughout the clear sky (YV III 95 : 2).

In summary, the mind-only doctrine is twofold : First, all “ things ” are denied inherent reality separate from the mind ; everything is said to proceed from the mind. Second, the mind itself is negated, allowing for the dissolution of all conceptualization and, hence world creation. Objectivity in any form—even in the form of the mind-only doctrine—is negated. From this release from objectivity, liberation follows:

As long as knowledge is associated with objectivity,
there is bondage. Only when objectivity is pacified,
then there is liberation (YV VIb 190 : 1).

If it is seen that all experience depends upon the mind and if one desires liberation, then the pacification of the mind follows, through which the world and its requisite bondage are eliminated. The mind is essential for phenomenal existence ; when the *via negativa* of mind-only is pursued, the dissolution of the mind (*vilaya*) follows, resulting in liberation.

The tradition of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, similar to Śankara’s Advaita Vedānta, allows for liberation in the embodied state. Dasgupta, drawing largely from the seventy-seventh chapter of the fifth book of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, describes the “ Stage of the Saint ” (*jīvan mukta*) as follows :

The *jīvan mukta* state is that in which the saint has ceased to have any desire...He is self-contained and thinks as if nothing existed... He internally renounces all actions and does not desire anything for himself. He is full of bliss and happiness, and therefore appears to ordinary eyes to be an ordinary man ; but, in reality, though he may be doing all kinds of things, he has not the delusion of being himself an active agent...⁴

4. Dasgupta, pp. 245–246.

In other places in the text, it is said that one achieves a god-like status.⁵ In fact, B. L. Atreya refers to the state of *jīvan mukta* as 'deification,'⁶ a term used by Western mystics to describe their "final attainment of the Absolute" after undergoing the *via negativa* of Western spiritual practice.⁷

For the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, spiritual life consists in the systematic reduction of the world and objects to projections or imputations of the mind, thus negating their inherent, independent reality. Then a more radical step is taken : the mind itself is eradicated, leading to the state of liberation. Spiritual life for one who has achieved this state of *jīvan mukta* is no longer a quest or striving, but an embodied reality.

The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, one of the seminal texts of Yogācāra Buddhism, contains several references to a philosophy of mind-only (*citta-mātra*), regarded as an integral phase in the "uncovering" of the *tathāgata garbha*, an epithet for enlightenment. A few of these references are translated and analyzed below in an attempt to ascertain the function of mind-only in the text.

As in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, the mind is seen to play an active role in the appearance of the world. It is the churning of thoughts which create the world ; when this is realized, there arises a pacification of the mind. It is only through the non-recognition of the mind's power that one is held in its grip, as the following passages indicate :

When the primacy of mind is not discerned,
dualistic thinking arises.

When the primacy of mind is discerned,
the churning of thoughts ceases (LS III : 75).

When the mind is released from convictions,
free of the thought of self,
and abiding no longer in the body,
to me there is no objective world (LS X : 53).

The external world is seen to arise when stimulated by latent desires (*vāsanā*) in the mind. However, when these are overcome, and it is

5. See *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, Book II, Chapter 4.

6. B. L. Atreya, *Deification of Man : Its Methods and Stages According to the Yogavāsiṣṭha* (Moradabad : Darshana, 1963).

7. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (London : Methuen and Co., 1930), p. 415.

seen that the “real” world does not have an inherent existence, then the notions of subject and object break down :

All this in mind-only (*citta-mātra*).

It is through the apparent existence of perceiver and perceived that the two-fold mind arises.

But self and that which belongs to it do not exist (LS III : 121).

In another passage, it is stated that when “real” or compounded things (*saṃskṛta*) are no longer relied upon, then the meaning of mind-only is discerned :

When “things” are regarded as free from the notions of depended and depending, this decidedly is mind-only...(LS III : 25).

When the idea of inherently real things is abandoned, then they are seen to be merely thought, or mind-only.

The teaching of mind-only is not the culmination of the Buddhist experience for the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, despite its centrality to the text. As in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, the ultimate state of the practitioner is beyond predication, beyond even the idea of the path itself, as shown in the following passage:

Having succeeded in the view of mind-only, he attains the state which is free of appearance. Established in this, the yogin does not even see the Mahāyāna (LS X : 257).

All conceptions of the Absolute are negated ; even the notion of the Buddha himself is rejected :

And there are no Buddhas, no truths, no fruition ; no causal agents, no pervasion, no *nirvāṇa*, no passing away, no birth (LS X : 277).

Although not explicitly stated, this critical analysis allows no possibility for the mind-only doctrine to survive as an absolute truth.

The *Yogācāra* system is characterized by its emphasis on meditation. Technically, meditation is designed to attenuate the seeds of

past tendencies (*vāsanā*) in the storehouse consciousness (*alayavijñāna*) which is also referred to as mind (*manas*). Through purification of the mind, the influence of past deeds is weakened and the *tathāgata-garbha* or “embryonic Buddha” is revealed.⁸ This “buddha nature” is contained within every living being, as noted by Diana Mary Paul:

...the nature of the Tathāgata is stored within the living being's mind, intrinsically pure in nature, but obscured by “dust” (*kleśas*) as if buried in the earth.⁹

Meditation is the means of uncovering the undefiled state of the *tathāgatagarbha*:

...meditation...serves the function of introspection upon the mind itself in its true, intrinsically pure nature. Having meditated upon itself, the mind then awakens to the thought of enlightenment, transforming the ordinary mind (*sattva-citta*) which is extrinsically defiled into the commitment to rediscover the pure, luminous mind (*prabhāsvara-citta*).¹⁰

Thus, Yogācāra culminates in the transformation of the phenomenal mind into a reflection of Buddha-mind, or the *tathāgata-garbha*.

In both the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* and the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, “things” in the conventional sense do not have an inherent or lasting reality, but rather proceed from the workings of the mind. The functioning of the mind at a mundane level creates and reinforces attachment to objects and to notions of self. Through the mind-only formula, both self and object are negated as “mind-only”. Through the recognition that reality can be ascribed only to the grasping mind and not to things in themselves, the power of that grasping is attenuated. Once the world is seen as mind-only, the bank of past impressions or latent desires (*vāsanā*) is purified. The negation of the world through its dismissal as mind-only leads to the discernment of the true nature of the mind, which, in the language of the Buddhists, is identical with Buddha nature. Within the Hindu context, the *jīvan mukta*, seeing

8. Richard H. Robinson, *The Buddhist Religion* (Belmont, Ca. : Dickenson Publishing Co., 1970), p. 71.

9. Diana Mary Paul, *The Buddhist Feminine Ideal* (Missoula, Mt. : Scholars Press, 1980), p. 79.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

the “self” in all beings, has transcended duality. The negation of the world and, ultimately, the negation of the path, lead to the spiritual life *par excellence*, the stage of the saint or that of the *bodhisattva*.

The Mind-only Debate in Recent Scholarship

The meaning of mind-only has been a point of dispute among scholars of Indian thought. Due to its insistence on the primacy of mental processes, Yogācāra has been deemed often to be a form of idealism in the Western sense of the word. Dasgupta, in his *Indian Idealism*, gives a vague definition of idealism, stating that any system which maintains that “reality is spiritual” is an idealism.¹¹ Chatterjee takes this a step further in *The Yogācāra Idealism*, stating that “...idealism as an epistemological doctrine means that knowledge is constructive. It does “not reveal ; it creates.”¹² He ascribes reality in Yogācāra exclusively to the subjective : “The Yogācāra declines the notion of objectivity, but the subjective becomes ontological : it really exists, while the objective does not.”¹³ Chatterjee even goes on to say that “The Yogācāra holds that consciousness is the sole reality. The empirical world reduces itself... to ideas...”¹⁴ Wayman, in his critique of Chatterjee’s work, states that he has mistaken the function of mind-only. What Chatterjee considers to be the ontological truth of things as residing in the mind is in actuality only the constituents which cover the Absolute, the reality of voidness. Wayman emphasizes the two truths, the *saṃvṛtti* or relative or worldly level, and the *paramārtha*, the absolute truth of emptiness or *śūnyatā*. When the relative is seen to exist in the mind-only, then the Absolute, identified with the *tathāgatagarbha*, is revealed.¹⁵ Similarly, carefully countering the argument that mind-only is merely solipsism, Guenther states that “the mentalists (Yogācārins) did not subscribe to ‘existential’ subjectivity by which it is implied that anything that owes its being to a percipient event occurring in me, exists only for me.”¹⁶

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1. Surendranath Dasgupta, *Indian Idealism* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1933), p. 25.
 2. Ashok Kumar Chatterjee, *The Yogācāra Idealism* (Delhi : Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), p. xii.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
 5. Alex Wayman, “The Yogācāra Idealism,” *Philosophy—East and West*, Vol. XV, No. 1 (1965), pp. 68 f.
 6. Herbert Guenther, “Saṃvṛti and Paramārtha in Yogācāra According to Tibetan Sources,” *The Problem of Two Truths in Buddhism and Vedānta*, ed. Mervyn Sprung (Dordrecht, Holland : D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1973), p. 93.

The point of mind-only is not that the person is the sole determining factor in reality. Rather, the point is precisely the opposite : neither the person nor the world bear any inherent, lasting truth.

Conze proclaims that the mind-only doctrine serves only a meditative function. In denying the absolute existence of objects and affirming the importance of the subject, the Yogācārin are employing a "soteriological device...its main functions consist in acting as the first step of a meditation on the perverted views."¹⁷ This form of meditation is central in the realization of the *bodhisattva's* career, serving to weaken attachment to the "external" world. According to Conze, the pursuit of this interioristic meditation leads to the realization that "...with the final collapse of the object also the separate subject has ceased to be and that also thought and its concomitants, insofar as they take an object, do not "constitute an ultimate fact."¹⁸ The focus of Yogācāra is the lessening of attachment, towards the goal of purification.

In a recent study of the *Yogācāra* writings of Vasubandhu, Thomas A. Kochumuttam posits that the "idealism" of Yogācāra has been misinterpreted, stating that :

The theory of *vijñāpti-mātratā* [mind-only] in Vasubandhu's writings is not an ontological theory worth the name idealism it does not say that reality in its ultimate form is in the nature of consciousness. On the contrary for the most part it is an epistemological theory, which says that one's (empirical) experience of objects is determined by one's psychic dispositions, especially the idiosyncrasy for subject-object distinction, and that, therefore, one in the state of *samsāra* does not at all come to know the things in their suchness (*tathatā*). Things in their suchness are ineffable, and as such are known only to the enlightened ones...To be sure, *vijñāpti* is definitely an empirical/phenomenal/*samsāric* factor which should be given up for one to attain to the state of *nirvāṇa*.¹⁹

17. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (Ann Arbor, Mi. : The University of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 252.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 253.

19. Thomas A. Kochumuttam, *Vasubandhu the Yogācārin : A New Translation and Interpretation of Some of his Basic Works* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Lancaster, U.K., 1978), p. 263.

Kochumuttam thus agrees with Conze's assessment that the mind-only doctrine is a "soteriological device" which serves to emphasize the need for mental clarity in the path to Buddhahood. In the same vein, Janice Willis even challenges the translation of the term *cittamātra* :

Cittamātra, throughout the early Yogācāra, should be more properly rendered as "just thought" or "merely thought" and seen more appropriately as functioning within the realm of discourse concerned with the meditative experience — that is, within discourse about spiritual *practice* as opposed to strictly philosophical theory.²⁰

The implication of both Kochumuttam's and Willis' work is that the interpretation of Yogācāra, at least in its Indian form, as a system of idealism, is unfounded.

Having examined briefly various passages from the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* and the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, as well as some recent scholarship, the mind-only doctrine may be viewed as a means of describing specific meditative practices on the path to enlightenment. The ultimate purpose of the mind-only teaching is not to state that the world is created by the mind ; an explanation of the world and its creation is not the central concern of either Yogācāra or the tradition represented by the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*. Rather, it is the cessation of the world-generating process and the return to the consciousness with no object which prompts the discussion mind-only. It is a positive statement of a *via negativa* : all things are first ascribed to the mind ; then, the mind itself is negated in the state of liberation or *nirvāṇa*. Hence, the mind-only doctrine may be seen as a means of spiritual practice which, rather than making positive statements in regard to the ultimate reality, serves to attenuate attachment to notions of subjectivity and objectivity, thus facilitating the enlightenment experience.

20. Janice Dean Willis, *On Knowing Reality : The Tattvartha Chapter of Asaṅga's Bodhisattvabhūmi* (New York ; Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 25.