

**Knowledge and Transcendence:
Modern Idealist Philosophy and
Yogācāra Buddhism (Part I)**

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INTRODUCTION

A desire hidden deep in the hearts of all people is the hope for rebirth in a world of freedom, unhindered by any oppressive bondage or constant preoccupation with passions and delusions. The attempt to shed light on this fundamental drive and to bring it to fulfillment pervades root and stem of all authentic religions. We might even say that this is what the world's religions, each in its own way, are all aiming at.

In Buddhism, that sort of true freedom has been called "supreme enlightenment." To us humans, overwhelmed as we are by a basic ignorance, it means a process of fundamental awakening, as if our eyes had been opened from a dream; and thus a radical conversion from our prior situation.

It is this feature of changed perspective within enlightenment that in the Yogācāra Vijñānavāda school of Buddhism is conceived of as *āśrayaparāvṛtti* (*ten'e* or change of base). This school in particular has reflected deeply upon the conditions for the occurrence of this phenomenon among men.

This "change of base" breaks up the foundation of our delusion and founds existence on a completely different basis. By this switch we throw off the conditions of our

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previous existence and are "reborn" into a purified existence. Yogācāra thought conceives of this occurrence as related to the state of our cognitive consciousness. More concretely, this change of base means the rebirth of our soiled and muddled everyday experiential knowledge into a pure supramundane kind of knowledge. Enlightenment is none other than the pure supramundane knowledge gained through this process. If we provisionally allow ourselves to call the attaining of enlightenment "transcendence," we may say that the distinctive character of Buddhist Yogācāra thought lies in the fact that it treats the problem of transcendence as the problem of the conditions and state of our cognition.

How did this problem develop and come to be understood in this way in Yogācāra thought? And what are its characteristics? As a clue to this elucidation, let us consider the problem of cognition within Western idealist philosophy. This is particularly appropriate because idealist philosophy in the West also recognizes a deep interrelationship between the problems of transcendence and of cognition. We are not saying, of course, that both traditions proceed in identical directions or even in a similar fashion in their respective pursuits of this problem, for it is rather clear that they proceed in fundamentally different directions. I submit that Yogācāra thought takes its departure from a questioning of a background of cognition that still remains unrevealed in modern idealist philosophy, and thus has found a way out of the blind alley Western idealism leads into.

Nor am I saying that Yogācāra thought is the only philosophy that can uncover and solve the problematic points of every idealist philosophy. The abstractions and opacity inherent in idealism have been well pointed out—and ways of overcoming them have been sought—by existential phenomenology, particularly by the latest hermeneutic philosophies (cf. Ricœur 1970, pp.42-47). It is, moreover, clear that the problem of "knowledge and transcendence" has largely dominated the roots of philosophical

thought in the West under the guise of the problem of "religion and philosophy."

So, we need not dwell any longer on the point that there exist ways to go beyond idealism even within traditional Western thought. On the other hand, however, I consider it especially meaningful to cause confrontations between trains of thought found in different traditions and going in different directions. It is rather like trying to understand the internal structure of a particular object by delivering a blow to it from the outside. In this case there must at least be some kind of resonance or response to the blow. Similarly in our case, it must be sufficient to consider only the points of resonance in the confrontation between Western idealism and Buddhist Yogācāra thought, namely the problem of cognition. There is no need to go beyond this and to trace all the intricacies of similarity and difference between the two. We may see how the issue develops in completely different directions in spite of the fact that each treats the same central problem of cognition. By pursuing the root of that difference, we may also be able to illuminate the special features of each of these philosophies. The most important outcome of this research might be, rather than a critique of Western idealism, the opening of our eyes to new possibilities within Yogācāra Buddhist thought.

WESTERN IDEALISM

The **problem of cognition in idealist philosophy**. The problem of cognition has a primary position in modern idealist philosophy. One might be inclined to argue that this central position is rather occupied by questions of a metaphysical nature. It was certainly so for Descartes. But for Kant, the primary mission of philosophy was not so much the establishment of metaphysics, but rather a renewed inquiry into the roots of metaphysics. However, whether modern Western philosophy saw its ultimate mission to be that of establishing metaphysics (as with Descartes) or that of denying metaphysics (as with Kant), we can agree that

these attempts were always made with a deep concern for the issues of the problem of cognition.

This is partly due to the fact that modern philosophy takes as its starting point an attempt to ground itself in absolute certainty. Indeed, the fundamental driving force behind modern Western philosophy is the desire to establish the various kinds of knowledge on reliable and definite bases, and the aspiration of beginning philosophy from an apodictic ground.

When Descartes started his philosophical career, the first philosophies he encountered were the Scholastic philosophies of his time. To Descartes, those philosophies appeared to be founded upon the uncertain grounds of mere probability and authority. At that point Descartes decided that it was the duty of philosophy to establish an unshakable basis for metaphysics and to make this the foundation of every area of scholarly inquiry. In seeking this basis of unconditional certainty for all of knowledge, he held in doubt the certainty of all things in the world. But there is no need here to recount the sequel: how by going beyond the "demon who deceives me" he at last arrived at the simple activity of the thinking self.

Thus, for Descartes, the problem of cognition is a problem of self-cognition even before it is a problem of the cognition of things or objects in the world. The truth or falsehood of judgments and cognitions about things in the world does not originate in those things in themselves, but in the truth or error of the self-consciousness which is cognizing these things. Thus the problem is not one of the objectivity of the objects of knowledge, but rather of the "self-decision of the judging subject" (Hosoya 1981, pp.116 f). When we affirm or deny a thing without having clear and distinct ideas about it, "even if our judgment is in accord with truth, that correspondence is no more than happenstance, and is still 'mistaken' in the sense that we have employed our free will unreasonably (beyond the realm of verifiability) in making this decision" (Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques* 4).

Thus, the critical factor here is the self-awareness of the will of the subject in judging—in other words, that it be always conscious of itself as the subject making judgments. In this sense, the consciousness of the self which makes judgments lies at the base of all knowledge and all fields of science. Thus, the ultimate completion of all knowledge and science consists in returning to this self-consciousness, which lies at the basis of all knowledge and science.

Kant had similarly recognized that we must see the working of the self as cognizing subject at the basis of all objective knowledge and of all cognition of objects. The cognition of objects can establish itself only when backed by the working of the cognizing subject. Therein lies, however, a nuance of difference from Descartes' views. Descartes and Kant differ in their understanding of the working of the cognizing and judging self in its founding of all experiential knowledge.

In Descartes' view, the working of the self is not only the basis of all experiential knowledge, but can itself be the object of direct awareness; whereas for Kant that direct knowledge becomes a problem. The difference in their approaches becomes evident in their different conceptions of the relationship of the sciences to metaphysics. Descartes took metaphysics to be the definite ground for all other fields of study, and in that regard he chose as models of certain study the fields of natural science, especially those of algebra and geometry. In this relationship, metaphysics provides the basis for the sciences and indeed envelops them. Research in natural science is inextricably tied up with and pushed ahead by the study of metaphysics; and to pursue the way of metaphysics is also to promote the advance of natural science.

By Kant's time, however, natural science had already established itself as an independent and certain discipline, and the intimate relationship between natural science and metaphysics had broken down. It was no longer the duty of philosophy to stimulate natural research or to ground it in

absolute metaphysical principles, as in Descartes' view; rather, natural science had crowded out philosophy's role to stand high above all natural sciences and to prescribe the directions of their knowledge. By now philosophy acknowledged the knowledge of the natural sciences as already established fact, and tried to shed light on the grounds whereon such objective knowledge could be established. In other words, philosophy was in part attempting to find the foundation of the natural sciences.

We might say that, from Descartes to Kant, the relationship of natural science and metaphysics had been turned upside down. Descartes' point of departure was no longer so for Kant. In Descartes' view, once metaphysical principles had been firmly established, thereafter natural science could be based upon this foundation. For Kant, however, metaphysical principles could no longer be such axiomatic precedents of all other disciplines. Rather, "objective" knowledge of the world, such as that of daily experience and of the natural sciences, was first taken as given, and the problem of metaphysical knowledge later presented itself within the context of the question of finding a way to clarify the foundations of that experiential knowledge. For Kant, metaphysical knowledge was no longer an already given starting point, but had become a goal to reach. As was said before, while Descartes felt that the working of self-consciousness could be directly apprehended, Kant thought rather that the self was something that had to be thought or posited behind the facts of experience. The subject which is the basis of knowledge was for Kant not an "intuited self" but a "transcendental self."

Thus the mission of philosophy evolved from directly intending metaphysics towards the more modest one of grounding objective knowledge. In this limitation of its role, the point of departure and basis of philosophy (that is, certainty) seems to have become ambiguous. But the truth is actually the opposite: the attribution to philosophy of this modest role was rather born from the desire of

greater certainty; it takes its origin in the mature desire to avoid falling into the midst of dreams, fancies, and blind illusion.

Kant recognized the possibility of founding a new metaphysics on a Transcendental Self that constitutes the basis of objective knowledge. He thought, however, that we must despair of aiming for the realization of that possibility in the domain of theoretical or speculative reason. He felt that the road to a new metaphysics had to be sought in the domain of practical reason, specifically through the mediation of moral experience, because theory and speculation were thought to work validly only for experiential knowledge that takes as its subject matter the data of sense intuition. But in the Transcendental Self, taken to be the basis for all such experiential knowledge, there can be no such content.

Therefore, even if theoretical considerations lead us to seek to apprehend this kind of a Transcendental Self, such an apprehension can be at best a probabilistic one. But because we must posit the Transcendental Self at the base of all experiential knowledge, we cannot avoid the necessity to apprehend it even in the theoretical dimension. If we would try to fulfill this demand in the theoretical dimension—something Kant despaired of—that attempt would likely express itself in a "Transcendental Reflection" going back to the ground of experiential knowledge. It would result in a "Wissenschaftslehre" which sheds light on the knowledge at the base of experiential knowledge. "Wissenschaftslehre" breaks through the limitations Kant had imposed on theoretical reason in recognizing for it only experiential and "objective" knowledge, and opens up by a recognition, within theoretical reason, of the possibility of a knowledge that transcends experiential knowledge. Thereupon stands the tradition of reflective philosophy that pervades all post-Kantian idealism. "Wissenschaftslehre" appears as a science which clarifies a knowledge at the root of all knowledge, a "knowledge of knowledge." It is the road taken by Fichte for one.

It is thus clear that the problem of cognition occupies a central position in modern Western idealist philosophy, due to the fact that modern philosophy has above all else pursued absolute certainty. That demand for certainty, however, is not merely a scholastic, theoretical concern, but rather is essentially connected with a practical preoccupation, namely the concern with transcendence. To trace back to the roots of experiential knowledge, to close in on the "knowledge of knowledge" that grounds all experiential knowledge, means for the self to escape from the muddled and confused knowledge of the world of emotion and experience, and to emerge in a world of transparent and unified knowledge, a pure and free intelligible world.

Idealist philosophy in Europe after Kant develops a variety of different forms, so naturally we cannot grasp them all in a single stroke. But if we consider them together as "philosophy of reflection," we may identify the common intentionality running through them all: While abiding in experiential knowledge, to rise above it by opening up a dimension of transcendental and intelligible wisdom from out of its depths; and to understand that the original and ultimate ground of the self takes its roots in such a dimension of knowledge. In this way, the problem of cognition delves into and ties together the requirements of science and of transcendence or enlightenment—this is the pathos of modern idealist philosophies.

There is yet another peculiarity connected to the fact that the problem of cognition has taken a position of primary importance in modern idealism. That is, man here is grasped as "consciousness" or "a thing that knows." Man is no longer viewed in terms of "substance" but in terms of "subjectivity" and action. Consciousness is above all, first and foremost, "that which knows," and not "that which is known." If consciousness were primarily a thing known, it would degenerate into a single, passive entity, deprived of the activity and subjectivity peculiar to consciousness. Consciousness is, indeed, always threatened by the possibility of being viewed in such a way—a danger that becomes

inevitable when consciousness becomes object of reflection. However, in that case we are already dealing with "the consciousness of which we are conscious," and no longer with the earliest and original "cognizing consciousness." The thoroughgoing pursuit of consciousness in this subjective direction is the project of transcendental reflection.

A clear form of this sort of transcendental reflection may be observed in France, for example in Jules Lachelier. Let us look briefly at the role of transcendental reflection in the thought processes of Lachelier's *Psychology and metaphysics* (Lachelier 1960, pp.57-96). Lachelier has been called the Kant of France, but he pursued Kant's problem of the transcendental ego in precisely the direction in which Fichte expanded his "Wissenschaftslehre."

According to Lachelier, consciousness shows two aspects simultaneously: one whereby it may be observed as an object, and another wherein it works as a subject. The objective aspect of consciousness is that which is studied in the field of psychology. But that which is doing the observing and studying in psychology is itself also consciousness, this time as the subject that does the observing and studying. To reflect on consciousness itself as on "that which knows," i.e. in the subjective direction, is the task of metaphysics, according to Lachelier.

Lachelier suggests that we call the immediate state of consciousness as subject "sensible consciousness" (*conscience sensible*). In effect, we live this sensible consciousness as sensations and emotions; therein we are one with our bodies, and through our bodies we put down roots into nature and the physical world. But this sensible consciousness is not the real subject. For there is a "consciousness of consciousness" which sheds light on the contents of sensible consciousness, affirms or denies them, and must be considered to be independent from and superior to sensible consciousness. This is the true subject as knowing agent and can be called "intellectual consciousness" (*conscience intellectuelle*). This intellectual consciousness does not exist utterly apart from sensible consciousness; it is con-

nected with it, but since it is deeper than and sheds light on sensible consciousness, it must be a different sort of entity. In this intellectual consciousness, we can escape from the subjective world of sensible consciousness and enter the truly objective realm. As an example, the emotion of sorrow I feel is a subjective impression peculiar to myself, but my knowledge of my sorrow is no longer a feeling of sorrow, it is no longer subjective. In my knowledge of it, I go beyond the bounds of the subjective emotion.

Thus, at the bottom of our emotional consciousness there is concealed a dimension of objective knowledge which transcends the subjective sphere from within. In this intellectual consciousness, we strip off the opacity and density of sensible consciousness and enter the realm of clear and pure knowledge. Because this is the ultimate ground of the self, it is the place where we become true subjects and can achieve true "self-affirmation." Lachelier refers to the reflection which opens up this dimension of knowledge like a wellspring of light in the depths of consciousness by the term, "direct reflection."

Lachelier further interprets this dimension of consciousness, revealed by direct reflection, as "freedom." This is because all other things are given against this ultimate background and illuminated by it, but the background or base itself is neither given nor illuminated by any other thing. If we were to demand that there be yet something else on which to ground intellectual consciousness, we might again ask for the illuminating ground of that something else, and so fall into an infinite regress of reflection. Accordingly, we must treat intellectual consciousness as neither given nor illuminated by any further entity, but accept it as the "X" or basis. We must then conclude that its basis is "nothing" (Lachelier 1960, pp. 55 and 87). This means that intellectual consciousness is the idea that produces itself out of nothing, the pure activity of self-position and self-affirmation. The self as subject is one with the idea thus born from nothingness.

Consciousness and its hidden background. At this point, however, we must ask: Can we really build an understanding of the true self upon this kind of transcendental reflection that traces back to the basis of knowledge, or upon Lachelier's direct reflection, which aims at the understanding of "the knowledge of knowledge"? To phrase our question differently, can a real transcendence be realized within a merely ideational grasp of the self? The attempt of the transcendental reflection to shed light on the roots of knowledge is accomplished as a "science," but, as we said before, within the intentionality of science there is included at the same time a demand for transcendence. Here the question arises anew whether modern idealist philosophy, as a scholastic endeavor that tries to shed light on the roots of knowledge, adequately includes such concerns as "care for the heart" or the "demand for wholeness" which we find in philosophy in its original sense of "love of wisdom."

This grave doubt surrounds the basic intentionality running through all modern idealist philosophy. Historically this became apparent after Hegel's attempts to push idealism to its ultimate limits. As has been strongly emphasized by realist and existential philosophy after Hegel, the self grasped in idealist philosophy was at best no more than an abstract shadow of the self, and not the really existent self. However, to maintain that the idealist conception of the self as an *Idee* is still an abstraction is not to say that this self is isolated from, or hypostasized outside of, reality. The self as idea is strictly grasped at one with actual consciousness, as the highest level of existence deep within it. Hence the reflection which delves down to that idea is itself accomplished as a "science."

In Hegel, reflection moves from transcendental to dialectical reflection. This too is but a suggestive attempt to incline reflection more realistically, to deepen its participation in reality. Hegel's famous phrase, "substance is subject" (Hegel 1967, p.80), does not mean that the subject is grasped as a contentless abstraction apart from

substance but, on the contrary, that an attempt is being made to grasp the subject from within the very substance, as the self-awareness of the most inner interior of the substance. This inclination toward concretization is perhaps best expressed by the words, "What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational" (Hegel 1953, p.10). The ideal does not exist outside of the real, but rather is a self-denying objectification of itself within the real. This sort of ideal which objectifies itself within the real becomes conscious of itself and grasps itself within the real. And the process whereby the ideal gradually grasps itself and becomes aware of itself within the real, is precisely dialectical reflection or the activity of "speculation."

According to Hegel, the level at which the ideal has arrived at self-realization is the level of Absolute Spirit, of which one expression is religion. In religion, however, the Absolute Spirit is as yet buried in the content of religion and does not yet attain to its own true self-realization. It is the duty of philosophy to bring to clear light and to foster that self-realization which is still imperfect in religion. Thus it is in philosophy that the ideal clearly cognizes itself and reaches down to its own basis; it is there that substance becomes subject. From this viewpoint, the difference between transcendental and dialectical reflection is that transcendental reflection is primarily concerned with the dimension of intellectual consciousness found at the bottom of individual consciousness, while dialectical reflection has the broader domain of seeking intellectual consciousness underlying society, culture, and history. But they both attempt to break through the shell of the real and the sensible to grasp the ideal hidden at their base; their common aim is to comprehend the true standpoint of the self in this realm of the ideal.

In what sense, then, can the self as a reflectively apprehended idea still be called abstract? It is an abstraction in that in our being heightened to an intelligible self, opening up at the base of the experiential and sensible

self, we have at best a heightening in thought, and not in reality and act. In other words, the transcendence of the sensible self by reflection is no more than a possibility and not an actual accomplishment. If, in spite of this, we count as real our participation in this intelligible domain now revealed as a mere possibility, we may mistake the self or lose sight of it. Fundamentally speaking, it is this sort of self-deception that Kierkegaard criticizes Hegel for. According to Kierkegaard, to stand speculatively at a very high plane is not the same as for the speculating self to actually exist at an exalted plane; and we must never lose sight of this distinction. Because Hegel fails to adequately grasp this difference, Kierkegaard says, he forgets the real self in the midst of all his talk and conceptualizations. Kierkegaard sarcastically attacks Hegel's loss of the self as follows: "His philosophical enthusiasm will make him so absent-minded that he needs a good-natured, level-headed wife whom he can ask, as Soldin asked Rebecca when in enthusiastic absentmindedness he also lost himself in the objectivity of the chatter: 'Rebecca, is it I who is speaking?'" (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 51).

Between standing on a high plane conceptually and reaching a high plane in actuality, there is a difference which Kant clearly indicated and took as a point of departure for his critical philosophy. Closing the road to metaphysics by pure theory and accepting only the road through practical reason, or again "to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith" (Kant 1978, p. 380), and other famous words tell the story. This eminently clear differentiation in Kant derives from his deep ethical discernment and conviction. However, is it not true that the knowledge removed to make room for belief, or the theoretical reason placed beneath the dominance of practical reason, is not really reason (*Vernunft*) but only activity of the intellect (*Verstand*)? And whereas it is the duty of reason to shed light on the unknown, is not faith, which stops short of that, rather intellectual sloth?

This kind of criticism could not but arise. There ought

to be a logical way of thinking lying beyond the reasoning of the intellect and able to enter into the unknown. And it is precisely that sort of logical understanding that is the reflection leading toward the base of all knowledge; and when that reflection is exercised with involvement also of world and things it becomes speculation. The road followed by post-Kantian German idealism was precisely that of deepening this reflective knowledge and of creating again a theoretical knowledge going beyond the bounds established by Kant—a theoretical knowledge beyond the intellect and also involving practical reason. But it remains true that the post-Kantian idealists ignored the problem area which Kant had made the basis of his philosophizing and which it remained for Kierkegaard to take up again: the fact that we can reach transcendence not by theory but only by practice.

Lachelier too has pointed out that this sort of mistake lurks within idealist philosophy. In his *Psychology and metaphysics* he begins from the standpoint of transcendental idealism, but later proceeds to uncover the problem issues that lie hidden therein. At first he considered the intellectual consciousness, discovered by direct reflection at the bottom of sensible consciousness, to be "absolute subject," identical with "freedom" itself. As pure freedom, the subject would be in direct contact with, and even be one with God. Thereafter Lachelier discovered that that "freedom" is really the "idea of freedom" and not "freedom itself." We humans possess the idea of freedom, not the actual existence of freedom itself. Similarly, God conceived by man is "God as idea and as reflected." We may call him "God as light," but we cannot accurately call what we conceive of "God as power" (Lachelier 1960, p.118). Between the two there is a distance similar to that found between possibility and actuality.

The abstraction of transcendental reflection lies in that it classes both categories together and loses sight of this distance. As long as we try to reach to freedom or Godhead through the reflective method, we can meet with

no more than their shadows. God and freedom directly challenge the limits of the reflective method. It is only through that which is bestowed on us as "grace" that we can encounter their actual existence. Only within a deeply religious consciousness does the gap between the "idea of freedom" and the "reality of freedom" come to light. That distance emerges both within Pascal's criticisms of Descartes and within the Hegel critique of post-Hegelian existentialists and realists. Once we are alerted to this gap (between the ideal and the real), the self-sufficiency of transcendental idealism collapses. It is in fact the same unbridgeable gap between the "idea of freedom" and the "reality of freedom" which was encountered also by Kant in his shift from Pure Reason to Practical Reason. And what becomes problematic anew when we are faced with this distance is both the hidden background of our consciousness and the root of illusion lurking in the depths of human existence. We begin to wonder whether in back of our consciousness, which we grasp by reflection as pure and transparent light, there may not lie an impenetrable darkness, and whether our consciousness is not after all still in the clutches of deception and illusion.

When we come to this problem of the "darkness" concealed in the background of consciousness, the standpoint which sees consciousness based on knowledge as pure and clear light begins to falter. It is not that idealism has totally ignored the principle of darkness or confusion hidden within consciousness. But, since it becomes a serious problem only in a practical dimension and cannot be adequately considered from a theoretical perspective, reflective philosophy rather ended up by bypassing that issue. Thus it was left to existentialism and to the hermeneutic philosophies of Nietzsche and Freud to openly re-examine this problem.

When we focus on the dark side underlying cognition, and try to reconsider cognition in that context, the structure itself of cognition undergoes a change. In philosophical idealism, cognition is understood by the metaphor

that its center is light and its surroundings darkness. But in Gabriel Marcel's view, for example, the center of cognition is seen as darkness and its surroundings as light (Marcel 1949, p.14). The center of cognition is considered dark in that the subject can never be rid of its body, and places the body in the center of its existence. Where previously light was taken as the center of cognition, the body and the world became objectified as things outside of the cognizing subject. But the body, as "my body," is not something which can be externalized or objectified; it is always present as subject behind the cognition. And thus the center of cognition is impenetrable darkness. This is not to say that the body supporting cognition is necessarily the principle of all deception and blindness. According to Marcel, our body is rather the mystery in which our cognition must participate. Yet at the root of the confusion and deception in which this cognition is wrapped there is inevitably the body, and confusion, deception, and opacity appear through the indisponibility of the body. Consequently, to descend to the bottom of this embodiment and to cut through the roots of confusion is something that cannot be accomplished by pure reflection unempowered by asceticism, but only through the mediation of bodily activity.

When we consider the problem of cognition in modern idealist philosophy from this angle, we can see that the questions raised thereby have a number of points in common with those raised by Buddhist Yogācāra thought. Yogācāra thought also inquires as to the basis of our cognition, moves on to consider the cause of cognition's being befuddled by delusion, and aims to cut off the roots of that delusion. If we call the way to trace back to the origins of cognition "reflection," then in the Yogācāra context that reflection is not to reach from knowledge towards the basis of knowledge that makes knowledge be knowledge, but rather to reach towards the roots of our delusions. In the Yogācāra context, reflection cannot take the scientific form which reflection has assumed within modern idealist

philosophy. Rather, reflection here is accomplished in a purely practical way: by the aid of ascetical concentration it attempts to convert consciousness from its false condition. Thus, within Yogācāra Buddhism, reflection is inseparably linked to the practice of yoga.

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