



PROJECT MUSE®

Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of
Yogacara Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih Lun (review)

Charles Muller

Philosophy East and West, Volume 55, Number 1, January 2005, pp. 135-139
(Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2004.0046>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/176415>

Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogacara Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih Lun. By Dan Lusthaus. Curzon Critical Studies in Buddhism Series. London: Routledge, 2002. Pp. xii + 611. Hardcover \$65.00.

Reviewed by **Charles Muller** Tōyō Gakuen University

Western students of Yogācāra Buddhism have long been in need of a full-length work that analyzes the key Yogācāra problematic concepts in a comprehensive manner. Due to the lack of such a text, many nonspecialists have been forced to rely on the accounts provided in reference and survey works, which have tended to offer vague and confusing interpretations of what the tradition actually represents. In writing *Buddhist Phenomenology*, Dan Lusthaus has provided us with the most comprehensive and coherent response to these needs seen in recent years. After decades spent reading descriptions of the school written by both classical and modern scholars that he considers to have missed the point in one way or another, his aim in writing *Buddhist Phenomenology* is to set the meaning of Yogācāra straight. In so doing, he provides a re-articulation of Yogācāra that amounts to a must-read for anyone with an interest in this seminal Buddhist system.

The core thread in this work lies in treating what Lusthaus takes to be the foremost of the misunderstandings of Yogācāra—the meaning of *vijñapti-mātra*, commonly rendered as “consciousness-only” or “mind-only.” Standard introductions to Yogācāra for several decades now have tended to explain *vijñapti-mātra* as either a Buddhist form of “idealism” or a Jungian psychologism wherein the store consciousness is equated with a collective unconscious. Most introductions to “consciousness-only” continue to explain it as a “kind of happy realization and valorizing affirmation of consciousness as a reality, meaning something like ‘true cognition’ or ‘consciousness is real’” (p. 435). Lusthaus argues that Vasubandhu and his colleagues never intended such a valorizing signification, but in fact used the term *vijñapti-mātra* with “the intent of laying out an indictment of the problems that the activities of consciousness engender” (p. 435). The explanation of exactly how and why this is so necessitates a reexamination of a wide array of arcane Yogācāra concepts. But in a more fundamental sense—at least for Lusthaus (and, we would suppose, for Vasubandhu and Xuanzang)—it implies a reevaluation of one’s understanding of the most basic concepts of Buddhism itself, including karma, dependent origination, and selflessness. Lusthaus’ main vehicle for carrying out this project is Xuanzang’s *Ch’eng Wei-shih Lun (CWSL)*, which Xuanzang composed for the express purpose of clarifying the meaning of Yogācāra in his own time. Lusthaus has been working on the *CWSL* for decades, and so this book also represents a culmination of his studies on that text.

We should not misunderstand, based on the title, that Lusthaus is attempting to write a work of East-West comparative philosophy that directly correlates Husserlian phenomenology and Buddhism. The reason for the reference to phenomenology, as explained in the first two chapters, is that despite the numerous fundamental differences that lie between Buddhism and Western philosophy, when we attempt to translate the discourse of a Buddhist tradition such as Yogācāra, which is epistemo-

logical in character (and not ontological or metaphysical, as it is often construed to be), the branch of Western philosophy that has the language most applicable to the task is that of phenomenology, with such hallmark concepts as *noesis/noema* and *hyle*.

In these first two chapters Lusthaus gives a welcome review of the various permutations and usages of the term “idealism,” as understood by different branches of philosophy, so that we may, later in the book, see exactly why the term is not applicable to what is going on in Yogācāra. In the second part of the book (starting from chapter 3), Lusthaus shows how Yogācāra fleshes out the fundamental components of the Buddha’s teaching by examining the terms and concepts located within the discourse of four basic models from which Buddhism, in all its complexity, can be generated: (1) the five *skandhas*, (2) the twelve links of *pratītya-samutpāda* (dependent origination), (3) the *tri-dhātu* (triple realm), and (4) the trialectic practice of *śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*. Each concept is examined for its historical and etymological bases, as well as its place in the broad scheme of Buddhist doctrine as a whole. One of the most valuable aspects of Lusthaus’ rearticulation of these categories is the plethora of alternative, and invariably more energetic and meaningful, English renderings for Buddhist concepts (that have in many cases become stale in their established renderings) and his explanation of them with interesting and concrete metaphors drawn from everyday experience. For example, after a two-page explanation of the various permutations of the seminal Buddhist concept of *prajñā*, Lusthaus sums up with:

Prajñā thus means “know-how.” Tying shoelaces requires *prajñā* (the requisite know-how) as well as the skillful means (*upāya*). To tie someone else’s laces, or to teach that person how to tie his/her own, or to tie one’s own in order to make oneself available to help others is *karuṇā*. To claim one knows how to tie shoelaces is meaningless unless one can demonstrate this “knowledge” by actually doing it. Likewise, without *upāya* or *karuṇā*, there is no *prajñā*, since knowledge is only valid when it is demonstrable. Whether tying shoelaces or resolving the dukkhic dilemma, *prajñā* signifies the enabling insight. (p. 117)

Chapter 7, which concludes the second section of the book, examines the relationship between the two most advanced forms of contemplation in Indian Buddhism, *asaṃjñī-samāpatti* (thoughtless concentration) and *nirodha-samāpatti* (concentration of complete cessation).

In the third section, “Karma, Meditation, and Epistemology,” the seminal Buddhist notion of karma receives deepened nuance based on an explanation of its plethora of Yogācāra permutations. The chapter on Mādhyamika shows us, by comparison, how Nāgārjuna and his descendants understood karma, giving a special focus on the personal aspect of karma known as *saṃskāra*. Chapter 11 shows how *prajñā* came to assume a position in Buddhist discourse greatly privileged over *śīla* and *dhyāna*. The author shows us when and where such a privileging tendency first came to the fore, and what some of the major ramifications of such a privileging have held for the Buddhist tradition as a whole.

Coming to part 4 we arrive at the crux of this work, a detailed analysis of the *Triṃśikā*. The *Triṃśikā* has traditionally been understood to contain in its brief thirty stanzas the gist of the Yogācāra doctrine, especially as concerns the three natures of cognition, the eight types of consciousness, and the status of external objects—which entails the implications of “consciousness-only.” Lusthaus arranges for comparative analysis: (1) Vasubandhu’s original Sanskrit verse; (2) an English translation by Richard Robinson; (3) Paramārtha’s Chinese translation and Lusthaus’ English translation of Paramārtha; and (4) Xuanzang’s Chinese translation and Lusthaus’ English translation of Xuanzang. With extensive notation and commentary, Lusthaus examines where it is that the understandings concur or vary, as well as the implications of these variations.

Central to the matter is the repeated divergence on key issues between Paramārtha and Xuanzang. In general, Lusthaus sees Paramārtha as either missing the point or deliberately twisting the text to make it fit the paradigms of consciousness that he understands, paradigms that are reflected in tendencies seen in the Shelun schools (e.g., the positing of a separate ninth *āmala*, “immaculate,” consciousness) or in the *Awakening of Faith* (which emphasizes the “suchness” aspect of the One Mind). Lusthaus sees these as essentializing tendencies that establish a characteristic East Asian notion of an originally pure nature that are not to be found in Vasubandhu’s text. This section, with the author’s notes, offers one of the most concise summaries of Yogācāra available in the English language.

In the final, extensive discussion (encompassing almost two hundred pages) Lusthaus focuses on what he sees as a key problematic issue in both ancient and modern apprehensions of Yogācāra’s famous notion of “consciousness-only.” Consciousness-only has often been explained as a sort of enlightened view of existence, in the sense that enlightenment is understood as becoming “enlightened to the fact of consciousness-only.” Thus, “consciousness-only” has been regularly cast as a kind of idealism, wherein the individual is empowered by consciousness to create her/his own world according to her/his own will. Although there is some sense in which this can be said to be true, one must understand that such a world is a realm of nothing but delusion, discriminated according to partial and prejudiced views (*dr̥ṣṭi*). Thus,

the key Yogācāric phrase *vijñapti-mātra* does not mean (as is often touted in scholarly literature) that “consciousness alone exists,” but rather that “all our efforts to get beyond ourselves are nothing but projections of our consciousness.” Yogācāras treat the term *vijñapti-mātra* as an epistemic caution, not an ontological pronouncement. (pp. 5–6)

The scriptural and logical support for this position, Lusthaus tells us, is to be found everywhere in the Yogācāra corpus, once we realize what we should be looking for. Our conscious process, wholly infected by the afflictive and cognitive hindrances, can only apprehend the world through the discriminations of language, and through the mediated signals of the sensory circuit, and thus does nothing but continue to close itself off. Lusthaus reminds us here of the etymological connota-

tions of *saṃsāra* as “closure,” and that the term *mātra*, when used in combination with other terms, is invariably invoked to denote a limited type of singularity—again, a closure. Thus, Lusthaus argues, the most accurate way to understand *vijñapti-mātra* in English is as something like “psychosophic closure.” This clarification is vitally important for the proper orientation of present and future students of Yogācāra.

One potential for misunderstanding here is that it seems possible to read this section and get the sense that Lusthaus is the first one to have articulated this point about the negative-connotations meaning of *vijñapti-mātra*. While it is true that many scholars of Buddhism who do not specialize in Yogācāra may not be sensitive to this point, it is something that is well understood by most Yogācāra specialists. One can find this clarified in Yogācāra studies going back as far as a generation,¹ and this point is not mentioned. Nonetheless, general characterizations of Yogācāra in survey and reference works do almost invariably offer the idealistic description, and thus Lusthaus is certainly justified in raising this as a major issue.

The remaining chapters in section 5 all deal with the problem of psychosophic closure from various perspectives. Chapter 16, “Alterity: *Pariṇāma*” shows how “being other” is precisely the definition of who we are in every moment—most importantly *other than ourselves* as the seeds in the *ālaya* alter in each moment. The nature of consciousness as psychosophic closure is also treated in chapter 17, “Why Consciousness Is Not Empty,” and chapter 18, “On *Rūpa*.” In chapter 19, “Externality,” Lusthaus examines the notion of external objects, again from the perspective of the *Triṃsikā* and *CWSL*, showing how the question of external objects itself has been misconstrued in the habitual tendency to understand Yogācāra discourse ontologically, rather than as the epistemological discipline that it is. In chapter 20 he offers a detailed analysis of the four conditions (i.e., types of causation) taught in the *CWSL*. Chapter 21, “Mirror Knowing: Soteric Alterations,” explains the dynamics of *āśraya-paravṛtti* or “overturning of the basis,” which is the Yogācāra explanation for the event of enlightenment/liberation. The last two chapters treat questions of language, and what Yogācāra regards to be ultimately real.

The field of Yogācāra scholarship has for a long time been in need of such a comprehensive, insightful treatment of the tradition, which outlines the major doctrines of the school in a critical manner that helps to clear away some long-promulgated misunderstandings. The author’s continued attempts to render terms in fresh and relevant language will hold much benefit for newer students of Buddhism, as well as for veteran translators of Buddhist classical texts. His generous offering of graphic metaphorical examples makes difficult concepts accessible to specialists and nonspecialists alike. The use of such examples, along with efforts made toward describing the Yogācāra concepts using terminology derived from Western psychology and philosophy will help to open this field to interested persons in those fields. In the process of its in-depth treatment of Yogācāra, the book offers its readers the opportunity to gain a deepened understanding of Buddhist thought as a whole, inasmuch as the implications of karma and the understanding of the meaning of “cognition”—its functions, its hindrances, and the means of removal of same—are taken to be the core component of Buddhist discourse.

There may be some complaint with the author's tendency occasionally to state personal interpretations as if they were fully accepted as fact by members of the field at large, when they sometimes are not. There were also more than a few instances where I wished I could have seen an attribution from a canonical source to support a given assertion. Finally, on the more mundane side, it should probably be made clear to the potential buyer of this book that it suffers from an unduly large number of typographical errors related to the fonts used for diacritics. These criticisms, however, are, in the scope of the work as a whole, relatively trivial. No aspiring student of Yogācāra should pass up the chance to learn from this incredibly rich work.

Note

1 – As early as 1979, when, for example, Janice Dean Willis explained the error of understanding Yogācāra as idealism in her book *On Knowing Reality* (Columbia University Press, 1979), pp. 21–33.

Between Two Worlds: East and West: An Autobiography. By J. N. Mohanty. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Pp. x + 134.

Reviewed by **William Edelglass** Simmons College

The British philosopher Anthony Quinton once described J. N. Mohanty as “The one and only x who is a specialist in Navya-Nyāya, Husserl, and Frege.” *Between Two Worlds: East and West* is the extraordinary story of Mohanty's career as a student, teacher, and scholar of Indian and German philosophy. Told against the backdrop of the struggle for Indian Independence, the trauma of partition, the intellectual and cultural glory of Calcutta, postwar Germany, and the United States of the last generation, Mohanty's story is a page-turner filled with fascinating anecdotes from his own life as well as the lives of the many remarkable thinkers and public figures he has encountered. It is also a story of the concrete historical situations that enabled Mohanty's singular contribution to philosophy: the decades of study with some of India's most learned *paṇḍits*, the opportunities offered during his years as a student in Göttingen, and his close collegial relationships with Aron Gurwitsch, Hans Jonas, and Hannah Arendt. Though he set out to write an autobiography that was explicitly not a philosophical text, Mohanty observes that “since my life has been primarily dedicated to the pursuit of philosophical ideas, the connection of the story of my life to my philosophical interests was almost unavoidable” (p. ix). In addition to brief discussions of some of the philosophical questions he has pursued in his previous writings, Mohanty here reflects on cultural identity, the life of the mind, and religion and spirituality, as well as social and political questions.

Born in 1928, Mohanty enjoyed a pleasant and comfortable childhood supported by the loving attention of an extended family. (In this story families are adaptable, ever incorporating others into the love and care of a network grounded in mutual support, shared food, and conversation.) The family home was in the small village of Nilakanṭhapur (the seat of the blue-necked god, i.e., Śiva), where Mohanty's