

On Realizing There is Only The Virtual Nature of Consciousness

Vijñapti Matratā Siddhi

成唯識論

Source text by Vasubandhu (天親)

Commentaries on it by Dharmapāla (護法) and others

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Dedicated to An Lạc

Preface

The Discourse on Realizing There is Only the Virtual Nature of Consciousness, composed in the year 659 CE, was a landmark in the history of Chinese Buddhism. Based on Vasubandhu's Thirty Stanzas of Verse on There Only Being the Virtual Nature of Consciousness and the debates on it by the great masters of the School on the Practice of Engaged Meditation (Yogācāra) at the renowned Nālandā Monastery during the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, it represents the very pinnacle of Buddhist thought in India on the nature and characteristics of consciousness and the path to restoring its spiritual foundation.

Compiled by Xuánzàng, one of the greatest students of Nālandā and the foremost translator of Buddhist teachings into Chinese, it describes the subconscious mind as a wondrous computer, an inner processor that stores memory and creates the virtual reality it imagines based on the dynamic between its input and output, the world it experiences and the world it creates. The workings of this inner mind are programmed by the seeds of memory that become embedded and take root in the very nature of sentient existence – the fundamental ignorance defined by a self-centered point of view, the afflicted nature of self-interest and the habitual prejudices and predispositions arising from retained experiences. Any external reality one imagines to exist is only a simulation created by this virtual nature of the mind, and clinging to it as having a reality apart from this mind is a delusion that inevitably results in the emotional disturbances and existential suffering found along the stream of consciousness, the river of life and death. Through introspective meditation on the nature of this inner mind, there is the noble path of self-discovery that leads to freedom from this suffering and a realization that true contentment only comes from within, regardless of seeming external circumstances. Yet, by itself, freedom from affliction only allows for an escape from facing life in this world that is ultimately selfish. Being endowed with the marvelous instrument of the human mind is a precious gift. In being more than just a computer, there remains the great moral question about the use for which it is to be put for the short time one is given in this world. In awakening to a greater sense of life's purpose, there is a spiritual rebirth on the bodhisattva path, an engagement with fellow sentient beings with love, compassion and dedication to the higher calling of delivering them from this existential nature of suffering. However, the reality of any greater purpose apart from one's own mind, one's character and the choices one makes here and now is only hypothetical. In clinging to such a purpose having a real existence on its own, there are the obstacles of cognitive dissonance that prevent a proper understanding of the transcendental reality that there is only the virtual nature of consciousness, with identity and purpose only being useful illusions.

Having described the characteristics of this inner mind, the conditions of cause and effect by which it evolves, the habitual forces that lead to the continuity of its affliction and its very existential nature, the discourse explains the noble path leading to a restoration of the spiritual foundation of consciousness and its transformation into knowledge of the transcendental nature of life's purpose. It describes ten levels of grounding in this transcendental nature based on:

1. Cultivating ten kinds of spiritual deliverance
2. Eliminating ten kinds of cognitive dissonance, and
3. Penetrating this transcendental nature on ten progressively deeper levels.

With this restoration there is a realization that there is only the virtual nature of consciousness, a state of grace in which the transcendental vows that constitute the spiritual life of the buddha work through one's own life to produce a pure land, an environment pure of affliction where meaningful benefits and the bliss of inner peace are delivered to sentient beings.

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