

Of Ripening Karma and The Three Natures

Vasubandhu Verses 18-20 Dharma talk by Joden Bob Rose

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Good evening dear friends. First a confession, rather an admission. When we first started reading this text as senior students last year I think it was, I really had a hard time penetrating this material and found myself really resistant to embracing a systematic framework to “explain” consciousness and psychology from a Buddhist perspective. These have never been the kinds of text I have been drawn to or felt kinship with. Never really could penetrate Jung and Freud and Phenomenology made my eyes glaze over in a paragraph. And when I spoke briefly with Edie Norton about how she approached her fine talk a couple of weeks ago, she revealed that what she didn’t seek to do was to “explain” what this text “means.” So many rabbit holes to descend down, so many lists and subtle distinctions.

So tonight, I will attempt to offer some thoughts, commentaries and parallel texts that, I trust, will assist each of you in revealing the deep insights contained here but will not try to provide any definitive notion of “how” to understand this profound examination of how our mind positions us on a trajectory toward constant dis-ease and dukkha or can, alternatively, open windows to joy and equanimity. Ben Connelly’s commentary skips over so many vexing and difficult passages to try to get to the heart of what this, it turns out, quite practical text, is trying to convey. And, I have to say, having the same teacher as author of Inside the Grass Hut, the text we studied during my shuso time, provides such a heartfelt and immediately approachable unfolding of two texts, back to back. It all somehow feels comfortable and comforting.

One of the lines I feel intimate with from Song of the Grass Roof Hermitage that Nomon Tim inscribed for me as a gift following my stint as shuso is: “Meet the ancestral teachers, be familiar with their instructions.” By instructions I took to mean both actions (such as enacting our traditional rituals and simply observing, over space and time, how other teachers, senior students and random people encountered in day-to-day life embody, without thought or self-consciousness, the Bodhisattva way) and I also took to mean the written words, so many books, now available to us- with the caution from the same text “thousands of words, myriad interpretation, are only to free you from obstructions.”

So, let’s frame tonight up with stanzas 18-20: of Yogachara as a way to point us toward a life, or at least moments when we can be “free from obstructions”:

18. Consciousness is all the seeds transforming in various ways

Through Mutual influence producing the many conceptualizations.

19. Karmic impressions and the impressions of grasping self and other
Produce further ripening as the former karmic effect is exhausted.

20. Whatever thing is conceptualized by whatever conceptualization
Is of an imaginary nature; It does not exist.

Vasubandhu clearly, from all Ben Connelly tells us, is a key ancestral teacher, in fact we recite his name in the midst of our 80-member ancestral lineage, along with with Buddha, Nagarjuna, Bodhidharma, Hui Neng and Dogen Zenji. I will also confess that my “knowledge” of our body of buddhist teachings contained in Early Buddhism, the Abhidharma and the Mahayan teachings is scanty at best, though I chant the Heart Sutra almost every day, and always find chanting “No suffering, no cause, no cessation, no path, No knowledge and No attainment” to be a great release from feeling my inherent scholar karma tendency to want to actually “know” something or to thereby attain some sense of accomplishment or attainment. But that’s what this text teaches at its heart: to recognize all of these terms and their relationships, and then to let them go. Or, as a good dharma friend said when I told him of my responsibility for tonight said: “It’s a text to help people who need a chart.” Or said another way, it’s a very good map for the highway until you realize there isn’t and has never been a highway. Conceptualization by conceptualization.

Because if we read the text and this commentary carefully and repeatedly, one theme seems to keep popping up: “these are provisional teachings whose purpose is to promote the alleviation of suffering in our day to day, moment by moment lives, through letting go of attachment.” There can be no grasping if there is nothing to grasp and, as this text tells us, “when there is nothing to grasp, there is no grasping (28). It’s so much easier if we keep in mind Bodhidharma’s 3rd principle of practice: “Want nothing,” or recall the final passages we read last winter with Seiu Hannah from the Diamond Sutra:

“This is how to contemplate our conditioned existence in this fleeting world:

“Like a tiny drop of dew, or a bubble floating in a stream;

Like a flash of lightning in a summer cloud,

Or a flickering lamp, an illusion, a phantom, or a dream.”

“So is all conditioned existence to be seen.”

“Our conditioned existence- like a bubble floating in a stream... a dream.” Reading these lines again, I understand how the earworm: “Row row, row your boat gently down the stream; Merrily, merrily merrily merrily, life is but a dream,” took hold in my mind. 3 pulls of the oar (row, row, row), 4 repetitions of practicing with joy (merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily), and down the stream we go, with the current but also steering, gently, to avoid rocks and obstructions. We are riding the wave but we have agency and choice about our direction. Each moment is a destination.

Such a fundamental understanding and so hard, it seems to come to. One of my favorite quotations from the poet Charles Olson (and I used in the epigram to my first little book of poems) is: “I have had to learn the simplest things last, which made for difficulties.” So, here we are, this evening, a fine day in August, contemplating three pivotal verses from a text nearly 2000 years old but immediately present and energizing of this moment. When our senses are awake, we see things, in each moment that reflect our present state of mind, our conditioned, one could say, pre-conditioned awareness and incorporates that recognized offering into our alaya, our seed consciousness.

Let me give you a couple of examples of Verse 18: “Consciousness is all the seeds transforming in various ways Through Mutual influence,” what Connelly labels “The Process of Consciousness.” Having breakfast at a little coffee shop last week (only a week ago!), in Waikiki (or as my partner calls it “Way iki iki”) after studying some of this text the night before, there was a sign: “You can’t stop the wave, but you can learn to surf.” Here was a contemporary restating and commentary of verse 15:

The five sense consciousnesses arise on the root consciousness (alaya) together or separately. /
Depending on conditions, like waves arise on water.”

There is no stopping the river, the waterfall or the ocean’s waves, our experiencing of the phenomenal world. It is a constant state of flux, emerging, an ongoing fluid dynamic. Nothing solid to stand on. Shi Tou’s Merging of Difference and Unity reminds us that “Phenomena Exist/ Box and Lid fit.” It seems like this text is, in that sense, a guide to learning to surf, to ride the real waves of phenomena, of this moment, of our lives whatever condition present. And recognize that this moment will not re-occur, that our response, right now, is a matter of life, keep swimming/ keep rowing.

Or, the past few days, on Cypress Island, 4 of us, dear friends, hanging together as we have many times before, far away, as the saying goes, from the madding crowd, without tension or purpose except to be on this bluff-top

pioneer homestead on the edge of a 6,000-acre wilderness island, the reality of seeds, karmic or, otherwise, in this case, thistle, continuously emerging. Our friend Nick was reflecting how, each year, he assiduously cuts any thistle plant that shows its head, ready to blossom. And yet, and yet, each year, more thistles show. This has been going on for over 30 years. Then I pointed out that the weed scientists estimate the lifespan, in the soil, of a single thistle seed, can be up to 100 years. How does a seed with a live germ capable of life thrusting forth from the soil survive, without rotting or running out of life "juice" remain intact for so long?

Yogacara teaches us these our karmic seeds are far longer lived and even more mysterious, despite all of our efforts to "control" or direct them. At each emergence, we have a choice, to persist in the illusion of "control" or allow them to grow and then to propagate further. Is it not the same dilemma we saw in the Grass Roof Hut: "When it was built, fresh weeds appeared; Now I it's been lived in covered with weeds." The store consciousness "contains all karmic seeds/what it holds and its perception of location are unknown." (verse 3). It comes forth in response to conditions and is "like a river." But each moment of emergence is also a moment of choice; water or not, nourish or not.

One of my daily rituals for many years (and occasionally even now) was reciting a text introduced by Nomon Tim to us many years ago, "The 37 steps of the Bodhi Pakshika Dharma with these lines called *the four proper exertions*: "Guarding against unwholesome states/ abandoning unwholesome states/ Cultivating wholesome states/ maintaining wholesome states." It's always a continuous two-step process- recognizing the unwholesome state that emerges from this moment and not watering that seed and the harder step of abandoning the conditions we have made part of our life habit and our manas "personality". Holding on to the unwholesome because we know it so well and not recognizing how our automated control watering only perpetuates our separation, our "need", our wanting for just a little bit more. And the other side, as Connelly notes is cultivating peace and harmony "found in devoting oneself to seeing things as they are while engaging in kind action." After all, since our goal as bodhisattvas is alleviation of suffering, the first sufferer to heal is ourselves. Or, as Alan Ginsburg says in "Who Be Kind To": "Be kind to yourself, it is one and perishable." Each moment, each breath, our chance to be kind, to ourselves, perishable and empty, and all those others with whom and with which we are inter-penetrated, continuous and intimate. We know we will never get it all "right" but our task, as humans with intentional consciousness, is to give it our best shot. Or as Ginsburg says in another poem "America," America, I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel. " Total engagement, devotion to compassionate action.

Verse 19, "The Ripening of Karma," continues this theme:

Karmic impressions and the impressions of grasping self and other

Produce further ripening as the former karmic effect is exhausted.

The “grasping self,” the “I” wanting some thing , some one, some situation, some other, separate from what is, what we are embedded in and a continuous part of. As Thich Nhat Hanh points out, the nature of manas is to think and calculate, “This is me,” considering store consciousness as a separate entity.

The fundamental separation that our conditioned consciousness of self creates is, unless recognized, a self-perpetuating flywheel, continuing to produce karma. Connelly uses a lovely phrase for these impressions, calling them “momentary perfumes,” smell being the most provocative way to stir memory and remind us of some past event or person, pleasant or unpleasant, bringing forth a seed from our alaya. What I found, initially puzzling was this notion of an “exhaustion” of karmic effect. Then the image (concept) that came to my mind was dropping a pebble in water, seeing the waves generated ripple outward until sometime later the water is smooth again. The effect is “over” but we cannot see the consequence of those waves, small or profound because we can only see the point the stone dropped, not the shore where the waves arrived or what happened on the bottom where the stone struck. Master Hanh further tells us that “the only way to help manas stop grasping at the notions of self and not-self is for us to practice deep looking into the impermanence and interdependent nature of reality.” In those moments on the cushion, moment after moment of calmly breathing and observing, patiently, looking at our own karmic processes, we can respond with beneficial, healthy thoughts and thus liberate ourselves from our grasping conditioning.

So now we come to the final verse for tonight’s contemplation:

20. Whatever thing is conceptualized by whatever conceptualization
Is of an imaginary nature; It does not exist.

Here’s where this text turns to understanding phenomena as having 3 simultaneous natures, a slightly different approach than we are used to in the standard Mahayana “two natures” of absolute and relative. Natures.

Frankly, my writing time today was interrupted numerous times as we deal with the real estate closing for our new dharma hall, so I will lift some highlights from Connelly and ask for your understanding.

So, taking a tree an example, we have our conditioned, conceptualized nature, socially and culturally embedded in our minds. A tree is a tree is a tree. It’s individual, separate and unique. But a very different cedar tree would be present in a pre-contact Haida’s imagination. It is “ours” as a function if our particular causes and conditions.

The cedar also has an “other dependent” nature, an infinite matrix of interdependent processes and substances, from the first water on earth that continues to circulate, to our body with miraculous eyes that ‘sees’ the tree, our minds that integrate the branches moving and the wind blowing not as separate phenomena but as “mind moving” and, for me, the most recent recognition that what I previously conceived as “old growth eternal forest is, in fact only an 8,000 year old ecosystem post glaciation. Investigate one thing, open the world. William Blake’s “all the universe in a grain of sand.”

And then there is the third nature, “complete realized nature”, neither imaginary projection or other-dependent. The “source” that our grass hut master can’t face or turn away from, right her and now. Thusness, suchness, tathata. When these three mutually supporting “reeds” are realized, we can, as Connelly points out, “relax the pace of trying to figure things out. “ Or, again, as the hut song reminds us, “let go of hundreds of years and relax completely.” “Understanding nothing,” “not knowing is most intimate,” so many simple statements about what turning consciousness upside down means.

Our capacity to “dwell nowhere”, relaxed and comfortable in not knowing, in emptiness, to respond to what Connelly calls the “dream of life in each moment with compassion” is a reflection of what we do each moment, overcoming the afflictive barriers spoken of earlier in this poem. And, in the end, words will fail us because words can only point us in the right direction.

So let me finish up with a story about Huang Po (known as the proponent of “One Mind” and his teacher Lin Chi, founding teacher of the Rinzai “koan” branch of Zen focused on the fut:

Opening paragraph, Chapter 5, Hisamatsu’s Critical Sermons of the Zen Tradition:

So, let’s go into groups of three with the following question:

“What keeps your boat of compassion afloat when you see rapids ahead?”

“Who or where do you turn to keep on course??”