

# The Buddhist Theory that the World is “Consciousness Only” (*yuishiki*, 唯識): An Easy Introduction for Students of Japanese Buddhism

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## Abstract

The Chinese monk Yijing (義淨, Jp. Gijō, 7th. to 8th.c.) described one important tradition of Indian Buddhism as follows: “The Yog[ācāra] side (/group): Outside [things] do not exist, inside [things] exist. All things are consciousness only (瑜伽則 外無内有 事皆唯識).” At about the same time, the famous translator and scholar Xuanzang (玄奘, 7th.c.) wrote his *Establishing Consciousness-Only* (成唯識論), also building on earlier texts such as the *Sūtra of Ten Stages* (十地經) which states that “[this world consisting of] three realms is mind only” (三界唯是心). All these sources make it explicit that there are countless different subjective minds. *Yuishiki* became a central doctrine in the Hossō (法相) tradition, which played a major role in establishing Buddhism in Japan. In accordance with Xuanzang, the scholars of this tradition held that actions (karma) create “seeds” in the mind which later manifest as the outside world. This process happens entirely inside the mind, from the beginning to the end. In India, critics of this view objected that mind (by means of karma) creates matter only at the beginning of a cosmic eon, when the material world arises from empty space. While the nature of matter was disputed, most Buddhist traditions agreed that after the destruction of all matter at the end of a cosmic eon, there is for a while only empty space, in which all living beings exist without a material body. Modern interpretations of *yuishiki* tend to neglect or reject the theories of karma, cosmic eons, or even the idea that the material world as whole is a mental imagination. For better or worse, this is a departure from the original teachings.

## Keywords

vijñaptimātra, cittamātra, Xuanzang, Yogācāra, Hossō Tradition

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## Introduction: Aim and Scope of This Article

The Chinese monk Yijing (義淨, Jp. Gijō, 653–713) traveled to India by ship, where he studied Buddhist philosophy for more than ten years. Afterwards, he described the various traditions of Indian Buddhist philosophy, one of which was “the Yog[ācāra] side [(group) of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Their main assertion is that] outside [things] do not exist, inside [things] exist. All things are consciousness only (瑜伽則 外無內有事皆唯識).”<sup>1</sup> Thus, when Buddhism came to Japan in the sixth and seventh centuries CE, several important monks promoted the idea that the entire world is created by mind alone. In particular, this was the doctrine of the Hossō Tradition, an influential branch of Buddhism in the Nara Period. In the view of this tradition, material things (such as mountains or trees) may appear as if they were made of matter, but in fact, they are “consciousness only” (唯識, Jp. *yuishiki*), just like the images in a dream. This article provides an easy introduction to the theory of “consciousness only,” written for beginning students of Japanese Buddhism. Since the article may also be of interest for students of Buddhism in other countries and regions, such readers may simply skip the specific remarks on Japanese Buddhism. The concept of “consciousness only” stems from Indian Buddhism and was first transmitted to China and Korea before it reached Japan. In the course of his article, the most basic philosophical concepts are introduced, while historical developments in Japan are mentioned only briefly.

## Consciousness Only (*yuishiki*) in Early Japanese Buddhism and Its Historical Background

In the Asuka period (552–710 CE), Buddhism was officially introduced in Japan.<sup>2</sup> Several Buddhist temples and traditional sects (宗派) came to be established. Among those sects, the Hossō tradition (法相宗) taught the doctrine of “consciousness only.” At present, there are several temples of the Hossō Tradition, such as the well-known Yakushi-ji (藥師寺) and Kōfuku-ji (興福寺) in Nara or Kiyomizu-dera (清水寺) in Kyōto. The specific philosophy of the Hossō tradition is only taught at some of the Hossō temples.

What did the Hossō tradition teach originally? The Hossō scholars taught that the entire world was nothing but an imagination of the mind. How so? For example, in a dream, objects can appear although they are not made of any real, solid material. They are simply created by the mind. In the same way, all objects in the world are merely created by the mind.<sup>3</sup>

An important predecessor of the Japanese Hossō tradition was the Chinese monk Xuanzang (玄奘, Jp. Genjō, c. 602–664). As a young monk in China, Xuanzang was interested in one particular Indian Buddhist tradition which taught that the world is merely a mental creation. He traveled to India, where he studied Buddhism intensively, and his adventures later became the basis for the legend *Record of the Journey to the West* (西遊記, Jp. *Saiyūki*). After several years in India and Central Asia, he returned to the capital of the Tang dynasty, Chang’an (長安, now known as Xi’an, 西安). The emperor praised Xuanzang highly, and he became widely known as an outstanding scholar. He translated numerous Indian Buddhist texts into Chinese and wrote a book (treatise) called *Establishing Consciousness-Only* (成唯識論, pronounced *Jō yuishiki ron*

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1 T2125, 205c14–15.

2 On the earliest transmission of Buddhism to Japan, see Beal and Ruppert 2015, 18.

3 See Masaki 2020:126.

in Japanese). In this book, he explains the doctrine that the world is “consciousness-only” in great detail. In one passage, which will be quoted below, Xuanzang states that, when a person sleeps and sees dream images, these images appear to be real. Yet, they are only mental creations. In the same way, when we imagine a certain thing that existed in the past, it may appear clearly in our mind, even if it no longer exists in reality. For example, if we imagine a cup that was broken and discarded some years ago, the cup nevertheless appears in our memory as if it were still in its unbroken shape. In daily life, we may imagine many things that do not really exist. A rabbit, in reality, does not have horns like a deer, and still, in our minds, we can imagine a rabbit with horns. Our mind has the capacity to create such illusions. According to Xuanzang and his Indian teachers, the entire world is merely such an illusion of the mind. Xuanzang writes:

[Let us consider] objects such as [things that existed in the] past, [things that may exist in the] future, dream objects, images, and so on. They are not real, and still, they may exist as perceived objects. [These] manifestations of consciousness can be obtained [by perception]. [However,] they do not exist. The other [objects, namely those that are perceived in the present] must correspond to that [and are non-material, a mere imagination of consciousness].<sup>4</sup>

In another passage, he addresses the term “consciousness only” and explains the meaning of the word “only” in this context: People generally think that the things in the world, like a mountain or a tree, exist somewhere out there, independent from the mind. Therefore, it is normally not assumed that the things that can be seen (visible matter) only exist inside the mind, or, in the same way, the things that can be heard (audible matter), smelled, tasted, or felt. If a person undergoes training in “consciousness only” or “mind only” study and meditative practice, this trainee will learn to consider a material thing as a mere mental projection. People who do not have this training usually do not see the world in this way. Instead, they assume that material objects are real and develop attachment towards them. Squarely rejecting this worldview, “consciousness only” means that there is “only” (/exclusively) consciousness and nothing else. There are no material things that exist independently of the mind. Xuanzang states: “The word ‘only’ merely rejects (/excludes) truly existing visible matter and so on, which foolish people grasp (/cling to).”<sup>5</sup>

Xuanzang had many students who transmitted his teachings to the next generations. They became known as the Faxian (法相, Jp. Hossō) tradition, and when this tradition reached Japan, the treatise *Establishing Consciousness-Only* (成唯識論) was studied intensively by Japanese monastics.<sup>6</sup> At that time, there were several traditions of early Japanese Buddhism. Not all of them taught that the world is a mental imagination, and in some traditions, this doctrine had different nuances. For example, the Kegon Tradition

4 T1585, 39a11–13: 緣過未夢境像等非實有境。識現可得彼境既無。餘亦應爾。 Cp. Cook 1999:235: “[O]ne takes as objects such things as past, future, dream objects, images, etc., that do not really exist but that are possible as manifestations of consciousness. Since these objects are nonexistent, so must others be.”

5 T1585, 39c24–25: 唯言但遮 愚夫所執 定離諸識 實有色等。 See also Schmithausen 2005:22.

6 Buddhist nuns probably played a more significant role in the Asuka and Nara periods than in later centuries (Matsuo 2007:17–18). However, their role in the Hossō Tradition cannot be analyzed in the framework of this article.

(Jp. Kegon-shū, 華嚴宗) transmitted a text called *Kegon Sūtra* (Jp. *Kegon-kyō*, 華嚴經).<sup>7</sup> This text taught that the world was a mental imagination, similar to Hossō teachings. However, the *Kegon Sūtra* placed great emphasis on the Buddha Vairocana, whose mind pervades the whole universe.<sup>8</sup> The monastery Tōdai-ji (東大寺) in Nara belongs to the Kegon Tradition, and the giant Buddha statue in the main hall depicts Buddha Vairocana.

In the Asuka and Nara periods, scholar-monks often studied the teachings of several traditions rather than limiting their studies to only one.<sup>9</sup> For example, the founder of Tōdai-ji, Rōben (良弁, 698–773) was known as a scholar of both the Kegon and the Hossō Traditions.<sup>10</sup> The Kusha Tradition (俱舍宗) taught that the things in this world were basically real. However, most teachers of the Kusha Tradition were also masters of the Hossō Tradition and for this reason, Kusha was considered a tradition within Hossō (or, subordinate to Hossō). According to Tachikawa (1995:47), the “real” world (as taught in the Kusha Tradition) was assumed to exist within the mental world (as taught in the Hossō Tradition). Historical texts about the Nara Period often mention that a certain scholar belonged to a one particular tradition (宗, Jp. *shū*). However, the idea that the world was only a mental creation may have been widespread, even among monastics who were not classified as belonging to the Hossō tradition.

### What Does the Term *yuishiki* Originally Mean?

When Xuanzang (玄奘) stayed in India, he studied Buddhist texts in their original language, namely the ancient Indian language called Sanskrit. After he had completed his studies, Xuanzang returned to Chang’an (長安), the capital city of the Tang Dynasty (唐朝) in 645, where he began to translate a great number of texts from Sanskrit into Chinese. At that time, he had to find appropriate Chinese words in order to translate the specific terminology of the Indian authors.

One term for “knowledge” in Sanskrit was *jñāna*. *Jñāna* is a noun which derives from the Sanskrit verb *jñā*, “to know.” The Sanskrit language is related to European languages, and the Sanskrit verb *jñā* belongs to the same group of words as the English verb “know.” To the same group of words belong the Greek term “gnosis,” which also means “knowledge,” or the English words “cognition” and “ignorance.”

In order to translate the Sanskrit term *jñāna*, Xuanzang used the Chinese character 智 (Jp. *chi*), meaning “wisdom, knowledge, insight.” In the original texts, the term *jñāna* (智) is used to describe the wisdom of the Buddha, which is also the specific wisdom that a trainee cultivates.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the consciousness of an ordinary person is different from that of the Buddha. Ordinary consciousness is normally called *vijñāna* in Sanskrit. Compared to *jñāna* (“wisdom”), *vijñāna* (“consciousness”) seems to be more diverse or even

7 Masaki 2020:132.

8 Nakamura 1980:199. See also Williams 2009:134–136.

9 See Tachikawa 1995:41.

10 Masaki 2020:68.

11 For example, 智 (Jp. *chi*) is used for *jñāna* in Xuanzang’s translation of Vasubandhu’s *Thirty Verses* (*Triṃśikā*), verse 30: 無得不思議 是出世間智 捨二籠重故 便證得轉依 (T1586, 61b18–19). In Xuanzang’s *The Treatise “Establishing Consciousness-Only”*, this is explained in the following way: 是出世間無分別智 (T1585, 50c24–25).

distracted.<sup>12</sup> As a rule, Xuanzang translated *vijñāna* (“consciousness”) as 識 (Jp. *shiki*). Therefore, if we look at the Chinese term 唯識 (Jp. *yuishiki*), it seems appropriate to translate it into English as “consciousness only.”

The translation of the term *shiki* as “consciousness” seems of be a simple issue, but in fact, it is a bit more complicated. In those passages where Xuanzang used the word 唯識 (Jp. *yuishiki*), *shiki* does not exactly stand for *vijñāna* (“consciousness”), but for a closely related Sanskrit term, *vijñapti*. *Vijñapti*, too, can mean “consciousness,” but it has more specific connotations. *Vijñapti* can stand both for the act of perceiving something as well as for the image of the thing (object) that is perceived.

It is quite remarkable that Xuanzang chose 唯識 (Jp. *yuishiki*) to translate the Sanskrit term *vijñapti-mātra* (“cognition only,” “representation only”). For Xuanzang, it was obviously not important to show his readers any difference between *vijñāna* and *vijñapti*, and he simply used the term 識 (Jp. *shiki*), which basically means “consciousness.” While there are surely many interesting details regarding the precise meaning of *vijñapti*, these details do not change the fact that Xuanzang considered the entire world to be made by mind.

When we look at modern literature about the theory of “consciousness only,” the term *vijñapti* is sometimes treated as if it refers to a phenomenon outside the mind. However, in this tradition (*vijñapti-mātra*), *vijñapti* is unquestionably a purely mental phenomenon with no material cause whatsoever.<sup>13</sup>

Xuanzang traveled to India in the seventh century (of the common era) in search for a doctrine that had come to flourish about three centuries earlier. In about the fourth century, two Buddhist scholars and monks had promoted the doctrine of “consciousness only,” or more precisely, “cognition only” (Skt. *vijñapti-mātra*). According to Yamasaki (1988:9), this tradition “denied the objective reality of external phenomena, explaining them to be no more than transformations of the perceiving consciousness.” The elder of these two monks, Asaṅga (無着/無著, Jp. Mujaku, c. 330–400?), was the teacher of Vasubandhu (世親, Jp. Seshin, c. 340–420?), and in traditional legends and biographies, Vasubandhu is considered Asaṅga’s younger brother. However, an enormous number of treatises has been transmitted under the name of Vasubandhu, and it is not absolutely clear whether all of them were written by Asaṅga’s brother. Among researchers on Buddhist history, there are still several open questions. In particular, it has been questioned whether the central treatise of the Kusha-shū (俱舍宗) was in fact written by Vasubandhu, as his traditional biographies claim. However, several indications support this view, as will be mentioned further below. At present, wooden statues of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu are preserved in the Hossō-shū temple Kōfuku-ji (興福寺) in Nara, designated as national treasures.

When Xuanzang came to India in the seventh century, he visited the monasteries where, according to legend, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu had formerly taught and composed their commentaries. Xuanzang recorded these local legends, and when he returned to the Tang capital, he published a report of his travels

12 Concerning the definition of *vijñāna*, an important commentary that was studied in the Kusha Tradition states: 頌曰 識謂各了別 [...] 論曰。識謂了別者。是唯總取境界相義。各各總取彼彼境相。名各了別 (T1562, 342a14–18). See also Yamasaki (1988:91).

13 For reliable explanations on the term *vijñapti*, see Schmithausen 2005:9,20. The complexity of the term is also reflected in Yokoyama 2015:137: “Representation Only or Consciousness Only (*vijñaptimātra*).”

known as the *Record of the Western Regions of the Great Tang* (大唐西域記, Jp. *Daitō sai'iki ki*). This report is now one of the most important sources about the lives of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu.

### **The Doctrine of “Consciousness Only” and the Modern Scientific View of Mind and Perception**

When Asaṅga and Vasubandhu said that the entire world is “cognition only” (Skt. *viññapti-mātra*), did they genuinely mean that the world is just a creation of mind? Let us first consider the view of modern biology on the functioning of our sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, touch sensors, etc.). Our eyes, for example, receive physical information from the outside world in the form of light. The receptor cells inside the eyes then transform the light energy into electric currents, which flow through the optical nerves towards the brain. Based on this nerve information, the brain perceives light and colors and constructs mental images. In the same way, an external object, such as a bell, produces a sound which moves the molecules in the air, and this airwave eventually reaches the ears. Inside the ears, the airwave is transformed into electric nerve signals, similar to the process in the optical nerve cells of the eyes.

In short, the process of perception can be described in three basic steps: 1.) A material object (independent of the mind) produces a physical signal. 2.) The sense organs transform this signal into an electrical nerve current. 3.) The nerve current reaches the brain, where it is transformed into a sense perception.

Therefore, the brain is never in direct contact with physical objects outside, and it is not even in direct contact with the physical signals (light rays, sound waves) that these objects emit. The brain receives nothing but electrical nerve signals and tries to make sense of them. Any image that is seen or sound that is heard is never the actual thing in the outside world but an image or sound that is artificially (re-)created inside the brain, after a complicated process. Images and sounds are merely reconstructions (or, representations) of the outer world inside our mind.

Could it be possible that Asaṅga and Vasubandhu taught a model of sense-perception that is similar to modern biology? Could “cognition only” (Skt. *viññapti-mātra*) mean that we only perceive the representations inside our minds, while the material objects outside cannot be perceived directly? In that case, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu may not have intended to say that physical matter does not really exist. However, what did they really mean to say?

### **Asaṅga and Vasubandhu: Even Matter is Mind**

Fortunately, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu wrote down their view of the world on many hundreds of pages. They left no doubt about what they meant to say. For example, Asaṅga’s *Compendium of Mahāyāna* (攝大乘論, Jp. *Shūdaijōron*, Skt. *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*) and Vasubandhu’s *Establishing Cognition Only in Thirty Verses* (唯識三十頌, Jp. *Yuishikisanjūju*, Skt. *Triṃśikā-viññapti-mātratā-siddhi*) are preserved to the present day. In traditional Buddhism, both texts were widely studied in East Asia. Xuanzang’s treatise *Establishing Consciousness-Only* (成唯識論, Jp. *Jō yuishiki ron*) is a commentary on Vasubandhu’s *Thirty Verses*.

Let us first reconsider the term “cognition only” (*viññapti-mātra*, Jp. *yuishiki*, 唯識). In his *Compendium of Mahāyāna*, Asaṅga makes it explicit that this means the same as “mind only” (Skt. *citta-mātra*, Jp. *yuishin*,

唯心).<sup>14</sup> The Sanskrit term *citta* simply means “mind,” and Xuanzang used an equally simple term for it: 心 (Jp. *shin*), “mind,” or originally “heart.”<sup>15</sup> As explained above, the Sanskrit term *vijñapti* (Jp. *shiki*, 識) has interesting nuances, but fundamentally 唯識 (Jp. *yuishiki*) means that the world is only consciousness or mind, including things such as mountains and trees. These things appear to be separated from mind, but in reality, they are not.

### The Subconscious Process of Generating Mental Images

According to the Asaṅga, there is a part of our mind that we cannot see or hear directly, similar to the “subconscious mind” in modern psychology. In the tradition of Asaṅga and his brother Vasubandhu, this invisible layer of mind is called the “store consciousness,” or “the basic-layer consciousness” (Skt. *ālaya-vijñāna*, 阿賴耶識, Jp. *araya-shiki*). All of our actions and decisions leave traces in this basic layer of mind. For modern-day students, this doctrine is easy to remember since the Sanskrit word *laya* is related to the English word “layer.” In Sanskrit, *ālaya* can mean a “basic layer,” but also a “storehouse.” For example, on the Himālaya Mountains, there are glaciers which form a “store,” or a “settled layer” (Skt. *ālaya*) of snow (Skt. *hima*). Water flows from the Himālaya Mountains to the vast plains of the River Ganges in Northern India. Therefore, the mountains (supplying water) are like a precious treasure or “storehouse” for the farmers. During their daily farm work, the farmers in the hot plains may not see the snow on the far-away mountains, but it is still there, as a reserve of water. Similarly, ordinary human beings may not be aware of the subconscious layer of consciousness (the *ālaya-vijñāna*), invisible below the things that we perceive in everyday life. In other words, this hidden kind of consciousness always “lies at” (Skt. *ālīyate*) the bottom of all experience.<sup>16</sup> It brings forth a variety of images, sounds, and other sensory impressions, like in a dream, and it is the basis for seemingly material objects.<sup>17</sup>

In this “store consciousness,” the remnants of previous deeds (業, Jp. *gō*, Skt. *karma*) are stored as “seeds” (種子, Jp. *shūji*, Skt. *bīja*) that will eventually ripen and bring new fruits (果, Jp. *ka*, Skt. *phala*).<sup>18</sup> Among these “fruits” are the sensory impressions of the external world, and they can be either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Again, if we compare this doctrine to the process of dreaming, it is well known that actions of the previous day often re-appear in dreams. For example, if a person works in a restaurant for

14 In Xuanzang’s translation of Asaṅga’s *Summary of Mahāyāna (Mahāyāna-saṃgraha)*, (『攝大乘論本』), 唯心 (Jp. *yuishin*) stands for the Sanskrit term *citta-mātra* (“mind only,” T1594, 138c23, 143c13).

15 In his *The Treatise “Establishing Consciousness-Only”*, Xuanzang explains in detail how the external world is created by mind (心), just like a dream (T1585, 1b5–8: 如患夢者 患夢力故 心似種種外境相現 緣此執爲實有外境。愚夫所計實我實法都無所有). Of course, it can be questioned whether 心 is the best rendering for Skt. *citta*, since the character also stands for *hrdaya*, “heart,” in a more literal sense.

16 This is explained in Asaṅga’s *Summary of Mahāyāna*, chapter I, section 3. Xuanzang’s translation (『攝大乘論本』, T1594, 133b22–24) reads: 即此識於彼攝藏爲因性故 是故說名阿賴耶識。或諸有情攝藏此識爲自我故 是故說名阿賴耶識。In his *Thirty Verses (Triṃśikā)*, Vasubandhu uses the same expression, *ālīyate*, even though he does not mention the *ālaya-vijñāna* by name. See Nagao 1982:83, Schmithausen 2014:136, 146.

17 This is explained in Asaṅga’s *Summary of Mahāyāna (Mahāyāna-saṃgraha)*, chapter I, section 2. Xuanzang’s translation (攝大乘論本, T1594, 135b15–16) reads: 由攝藏諸法 一切種子識 故名阿賴耶。See also Nagao 1982:79.

18 Asaṅga’s *Summary of Mahāyāna*, chapter I, section 26. Xuanzang’s translation (『攝大乘論本』, T1594, 133b18–19) reads: 諸法於識藏 識於法亦爾 更互爲果性 亦常爲因性。See also Nagao 1982, 172.

long hours during the day, there is a very high probability that the same person will dream of being busy in this restaurant. When dreaming, this person will think that the dream scenery is real and that the pans and dishes of the restaurant exist outside the mind. According to Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, our normal, everyday perception deceives us in the same way. The basic layer of consciousness constantly stores new “seeds” and at a certain point in time, these stored impressions will generate everyday experiences. When we look out through our eyes or listen with our ears, the world that we perceive seems to be material, but instead, it is generated by the “seeds” in our minds in every single moment, without exception. The store consciousness contains the seeds that will eventually appear to be external matter. Of course, these traces (residues) of karma are not real, material “seeds” in the literal sense of the word. “Seed” is only a metaphor for subconscious mental tendencies, or traces of former mental activity. At the time of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, most of the people who lived along the Ganges River were farmers, so the image of “seeds” was particularly easy to understand.<sup>19</sup> At that time, monks and nuns who did not live in major monastic centers went of a traditional begging round (托鉢, Jp. *takuhatsu*) with their begging bowls every morning. Since most people in rural settings were farmers, they naturally donated fruits, vegetables, and grains that they had grown themselves, and when these monks and nuns gave a Dharma talk (法話, Jp. *hōwa*), the audiences were often farmers or landowners. In fact, the Sanskrit term *phala* (Xuanzang: 果, Jp. *ka*), which is translated into English as “fruit” here, does not only apply to “fruits” such as oranges and bananas but also to the ripened grains of rice and wheat, in other words, the results of farm labor (in addition, the Sanskrit term *karman* also means “work” in a more general sense).

### More Evidence on the Meaning of “Cognition Only”: Sthiramati

At first sight, Xuanzang’s choice of the term 識 (Jp. *shiki*, “consciousness”) for the Sanskrit expression *viññapti* (“cognition,” “representation”) seems to be misleading because *viññapti* has more specific connotations. However, the above statements from the treatises of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu provide sufficient evidence that Xuanzang’s choice of this word was indeed justified. For the most part “consciousness only” (唯識, Jp. *yuishiki*) and “mind only” (唯心, Jp. *yuishin*) have the same meaning.

Xuanzang was of course not alone in his interpretation of the treatises of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. The doctrine that seeds in the “store consciousness” produce the image of a material world is confirmed by the Indian scholar Sthiramati (安慧, Jp. Anne, c. 6th century), who wrote a commentary on Vasubandhu’s *Proof of Cognition Only in Thirty Verses* and on works by Asaṅga.<sup>20</sup> Sthiramati studied and wrote in Sanskrit and clearly saw the difference between *viññapti* and *viññāna*. Xuanzang’s treatise *Establishing Consciousness-Only* (成唯識論, Jp. *Jō yuishiki ron*), too, is a commentary on Vasubandhu’s *Thirty Verses*. In his *Treatise*, Xuanzang disagrees with some opinions of Sthiramati, but they both agree on the most fundamental point, namely that according to Vasubandhu’s *Thirty Verses*, no physical matter exists except in mental imagination. Besides these two commentaries on the *Thirty Verses*, there is a great wealth of Indian Buddhist literature

19 On the “seed” metaphor, see Yokoyama 2015:29–31, 35, Bayer 2010:345–362.

20 Schmithausen 2005:44, 55.

confirming this doctrine.<sup>21</sup>

### Is There Only Myself and Nobody Else? How Shared Experiences Arise

If everything that is seen, heard, smelled, and so on, is just a mental imagination, does this mean that only one person exists, and all other living beings (有情, Jp. *ujō*; 衆生, Jp. *shujō*, Skt. *sattva*) are merely imaginations? Aśaṅga makes it clear that this is not what he wishes to teach. As stated above, impressions (“seeds”) are stored in the store consciousness. Some of these seeds are similar to the seeds that other living beings have in their “store consciousness.” For this the reason, several living beings can experience the same environment.<sup>22</sup> As an easy example, consider how a swarm of fish can live together under water while human beings cannot live there. Another example: if the farmers in one village plant rice, they will be surrounded by rice fields, while if the farmers in another village plant wheat, they will be surrounded by wheat fields. Importantly, the Buddhist doctrine of karma encourages everyone to engage in wholesome actions, such as helping those who live under unfavorable conditions. This is quite the opposite of simply saying that these unfavorable conditions are their own fault. Of course, the Buddhist karma doctrine can be interpreted in various ways and has its problematic aspects.

In the traditional treatises that teach “consciousness only,” the outer, material world is called the “container world” (器世間, Jp. *kiseken*, Skt. *bhājana-loka*) because it contains living beings. This outer, seemingly material world is produced by the seeds in the “store consciousness.”<sup>23</sup> In later East-Asian Buddhism, scholars discussed how exactly these shared experiences arise.<sup>24</sup> Xuanzang used the example of many lights (such as candles or oil lamps). If many of these lamps are placed in one room, the room will be bright. The light emitted by separate candles combines and lights up the room.<sup>25</sup> Modern technology provides us with more precise examples, such as several projectors producing the image of the universe in a planetarium, or a network of several computers producing a virtual-reality landscape and the “avatars” therein. As it is probably well known, “avatar” is one of the few Sanskrit words that have become firmly integrated in modern-day English.

### On the Word “Avatar”

The term “avatar” derives from the Sanskrit word *avatāra* (“descending, entering”). In computing, it designates the character (or figure) that represents the human player (operator) in a virtual-reality environment. In Indian Brahmanism and contemporary Hinduism, it describes how a god such as Viṣṇu sends manifestations of himself, in the shape of other gods. In Buddhism, the term *avatāra* is normally not used in this sense, but

21 Schmithausen 2005:24, n. 34.

22 Bayer 2010:183–186; Bayer 2019:39–42.

23 Aśaṅga’s *Summary of Mahāyāna*, chapter I, section 60. Xuanzang’s translation (『攝大乘論本』, T1594, 137b11–14) reads: 共相者 謂器世間種子。不共相者 謂各別內處種子。共相即是無受生種子。不共相即是有受生種子。 See Nagao1982:257–260, Schmithausen 2005:36.

24 During the Ming dynasty (明朝), scholars of the Huayan Tradition (華嚴宗) discussed how “common karman [leads to] the experience of mountains and rivers” (共業感山河). See Brewster 2018:149.

25 T1585, 10c13–16: 謂異熟識由共相種成熟力故變似色等器世間相。即外大種及所造色。雖諸有情所變各別。而相相似處所無異。如衆燈明各遍似一。

we find a similar term in Japanese Buddhism, *suijaku* (垂迹), which is formed from the characters 垂 (*sui*, hanging down) and 迹 (*shaku, jaku*, remain, trace) and refers to different local “manifestations” of a Buddha or a great Bodhisattva.

As stated above, the Kegon Tradition considers the whole world to be a manifestation of mind. The world is pervaded by the mind and light of Buddha Vairocana, also known as the “Great Sun” Buddha (lit. *tathāgata*), Dainichi-nyorai (大日如来). Sadakata (1997:152) quotes the *Kegon sūtra* as saying: “The Tathagata [the Buddha] manifests himself in all the lands of the ten directions, but his actual body is undifferentiated. It is like the full moon appearing in its entirety in dewdrops upon the ground.” Various local deities in Japan are considered to be manifestations (*suijaku*) of Dainichi-nyorai, and also *suijaku* of other Buddhas such as Amitābha are venerated.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, the hand gesture of Buddha Vairocana in Tōdai-ji is identical to the common hand gesture of Buddha Śākyamuni (釈迦牟尼仏, Jp. Shaka-muni).<sup>27</sup> This iconography seems to be based on the belief that Buddha Śākyamuni, too, is a manifestation of Vairocana.<sup>28</sup>

### What is the Point in Denying the Existence of Material Things?

We have seen above that Asaṅga and his followers explained in detail how the illusion of a material world is created, like in a dream. However, is it really necessary to argue against a material world? Asaṅga presents a metaphor and a subtle explanation about why matter is illusory. As said above, at the time of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, in the fourth century CE, most people in Northern India were farmers who grew crops on irrigated fields. Snakes often moved through the irrigation channels, and although snakes are normally afraid of humans, dangerous encounters could happen at any time. Especially at night, there was a constant danger of encountering snakes, whether a farmer returned home late from a far-away field, or whether one had to leave the house for any other reason. In such a situation, if a rope was left on the footpath, or near to it, a person passing on the footpath may think it is a snake and startle. However, the “snake” that is seen on the footpath is just an illusion. It is just a rope and in reality, there is no reason to be scared. Asaṅga then goes one step further and explains that even the rope is an illusion, when analyzed more closely. We can see the rope with our eyes, we can feel it, it may have a specific smell, but aside from its look, feel, or smell, we have no perception of the rope itself, as an independently and inherently existing thing.<sup>29</sup>

In his *Twenty Verses for Establishing Cognition Only* (唯識二十論, Jp. *Yuishiki nijū ron*, Skt. *Vimśikā-vijñapti-mātratā-siddhi*), Vasubandhu presents an even more detailed argument. During his time, important and influential Buddhist scholars claimed that matter was independent of the mind and that it was made of atoms (small, indivisible particles). However, Vasubandhu presents several arguments against this view. Most notably, he claims that an atom must necessarily have parts (and therefore, it cannot be indivisible). In order to form any larger object, several atoms must necessarily stick together in one or another

26 See Matsuo 2007:38–39, 185.

27 Masaki 2020:53,49.

28 See Sadakata 1997:193.

29 Asaṅga’s *Summary of Mahāyāna*, chapter III, section 8. In Xuanzang’s translation (『攝大乘論本』, T1594, 143a2–6): 如闇中繩顯現似蛇。譬如繩上蛇 非真實。以無有故。若已了知彼義無者。蛇覺雖滅繩覺猶在。若以微細品類分析此又虛妄。色香味觸爲其相故。此覺爲依繩覺當滅。 See also Yamasaki 1988:92.

way. In fact, in modern physics, we would say that several atoms have to combine in order to form a molecule. Such an atom is similar to a brick which is used to build a house. It has six sides, and it can be combined with other bricks on any side. According to Vasubandhu, in order to be combined, an atom must necessarily have surfaces on several sides. Its size cannot simply be zero.<sup>30</sup>

Nowadays, of course, we know that Vasubandhu's reasoning was correct and that there is no indivisible smallest part of matter. An "atom," as it is understood in physics, can indeed be split into smaller parts. It has spatial extension, and it normally combines with other atoms in its periphery. An atom has smaller parts such as electrons, positrons, and neutrons. Again, these smaller parts of an atom also have some spatial extension and their size is not zero. They do not have a solid core, and therefore, they cannot be the smallest building blocks of matter either. Yokoyama Kōitsu uses the example of an Egyptian pyramid with its particular shape. Most stones have rectangular shapes and six sides. If we take the pyramid apart and look at every single stone, we will not find a pyramid. The stones themselves consist of atoms and subatomic particles, and no pyramid can be found in them.<sup>31</sup>

### Does Consciousness Exist in an Absolute, Static Way?

If atoms cannot be the indivisible foundation of matter, and if matter is a mental illusion, does this necessarily mean that the mind itself is the ultimate foundation of existence? Is mind absolutely and inherently real, in the same way as other philosophical traditions thought that the indivisible atom is real? The answer to this question is not an easy one. Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, and Xuanzang were not very enthusiastic about promoting the mind as existing in an ultimate, unchangeable, and permanent way. However, the Buddhist critics of Asaṅga's tradition accused them of clinging to the idea of an ultimate, unchangeable mind.<sup>32</sup> If Asaṅga and his followers truly believed that the mind existed unchangeably, like a fundamental substance of all existence, then it would be very similar to the concept of an ultimately unchangeable "self" (Skt. *ātman*), as promoted by the Brahmins and other non-Buddhist traditions.

Buddhist scholars of the Madhyamaka tradition, such as Candrakīrti (c. 600–650 CE) criticized the "cognition only" doctrines along these lines, and this kind of critique had probably begun in earlier centuries. Yet, it seems that their critique is not wholly justified, and while the issue cannot be treated extensively in this article, two important aspects will be treated below.<sup>33</sup>

#### *Xuanzang Rejects the "Self" (Skt. ātman)*

Xuanzang made it explicit that he rejects the idea that a person has an inherently existing "self." At the beginning of his treatise *Establishing Consciousness-Only*, he lists various misunderstandings about the "self." There is no unchangeable "self" in any person, nor do things (metaphorically speaking) have a "self."

30 Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses*, commentary on verse 12. In Xuanzang's translation (『唯識二十論』, 1590, 75c29–76a03): 若一極微六方各與一極微合。應成六分。一處無容有餘處故。一極微處若有六微。應諸聚色如極微量。展轉相望不過量故。則應聚色亦不可見。

31 Yokoyama 2015:10.

32 Bayer 2019:31–32.

33 For more details, see Bayer 2019:34–39.

At present, the suggestion that things can have a “self” may seem strange to us. In order to understand this conception, we may reconsider the snake-like rope in Asaṅga’s example. When we speak of a rope in everyday life, it is normally assumed that it is a real, without questioning what this rope might be made of and without questioning the ultimate basis of its existence. The absence of such a basis (or core) is called “the selflessness of things.” Persons are “empty” in so far as they do not have a self, and things are empty as far as they have no truly existent core. These two kinds of selflessness are also called “two kinds of emptiness.”<sup>34</sup>

*Xuanzang Distinguishes Between Perception and the Non-Existence of Objects*

On the other hand, Xuanzang rejects the idea that internal perception is non-existent in the same way as the external objects are non-existent.<sup>35</sup> While the assumption of a “self” (in persons or in things) is certainly false, it is a crucial point for the “consciousness only” tradition to assert that there are no material objects outside the mind. They simply do not exist, and it is even a false idea that such objects could *possibly* exist.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, there is a fundamental difference between the processes inside the mind and the non-existence of external phenomena. To further highlight this distinction, Xuanzang states that the mind is not empty.<sup>37</sup> He makes it clear in the beginning of his treatise that all objects depend on the mind, and therefore, the mind exists in an ultimate way.<sup>38</sup> Xuanzang knew earlier critiques of Asaṅga’s tradition and squarely confronted them with a drastic opening statement.

Compared to this drastic statement, his phrasing is rather mellow in the conclusions to the treatise *Establishing Consciousness-Only*. Here, Xuanzang provides more clarification on what “consciousness” means. “Consciousness” which “exists” is not static or immovable, it is not a monolithic “thing.” “Consciousness” here includes dynamic and changing processes and images within the mind. On the other hand, Xuanzang reaffirms that “consciousness” does not include any objects outside consciousness, which simply do not exist.<sup>39</sup> Asaṅga and his tradition explicitly argued that the thing which is seen in an illusion (for example a mountain) and the illusion itself (the image of the mountain inside the mind) can both be considered to be unreal. However, these two factors are not non-existent in the same way, since the illusion inside the mind occurs, as a matter of fact. If we invoke the example of the rabbit with horns, it should be clear that there is no rabbit with horns outside the mind, while it is an undeniable fact that the mind can imagine a rabbit with horns.<sup>40</sup> Of course, this insight does not compel us to religiously venerate the *imagination of a*

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34 In *The Treatise “Establishing Consciousness-Only”*, Xuanzang explains that the purpose of Vasubandhu’s *Thirty Verses* is dispelling misunderstandings about the two kinds of emptiness (of persons and things): 又爲開示謬執我法迷唯識者。令達二空 (T1585, 1a12–13).

35 T1585, 1a15: 或執內識如境非有。

36 T1585, 39b11–14: 何緣世尊說十二處。依識所變非別實有。爲入我空說六二法。如遮斷見說續有情。爲入法空復說唯識。令知外法亦非有故。

37 T1585, 39b14–17: 此唯識性豈不亦空。不爾。如何。非所執故。謂依識變妄執實法理不可得說爲法空。非無離言正智所證唯識性故說爲法空。

38 T1585, 1b13: 識是假境所依事故亦勝義有。

39 T1585, 59a14–17: 或相分等皆識爲性。由熏習力似多分生。眞如亦是識之實性。故除識性無別有法。此中識言亦說心所。

40 T1585, 6c4–5: 又諸無爲。許無因果故。應如兔角。非異心等有。

rabbit with horns, as the highest, ultimate truth. Rather, this simply means that such an imagination exists. Let me propose another example: For a person sitting on a chair, it makes a fundamental difference whether there is a chair or whether there is none. This difference persists even if we accept that the chair cannot have a material existence if it is not a conglomerate of material atoms (since, ultimately, there can be no atoms). In the Madhyamaka tradition, some authors would not even concede illusory existence to the chair, or they would include vague or contradictory statements in their treatises.<sup>41</sup> Xuanzang has no reservations whatsoever to affirm the existence of mental imaginations.

In this tradition, from Asaṅga to Xuanzang, wisdom (Skt. *jñāna*, 智, Jp. *chi*) transcends distinctions between the object that is perceived and the subject that perceives.<sup>42</sup> However, the true nature of consciousness, and the true nature of the objects it perceives, cannot be expressed in words.<sup>43</sup> In the ancient treatises, the discussions about the ultimate nature of consciousness take up hundreds of pages, but in the framework of this short article, this is all that can be said.

### **Can it be Confusing, or even Dangerous, to Believe that the World is an Illusion?**

In our modern world, it may be difficult to imagine the everyday life of a person who believes that the entire world is just an illusion. If the world were unreal, what would the difference be between good and evil, between things that should be done and things that should not be done?

Firstly, as stated above, Xuanzang emphatically asserts the existence of all dynamic processes inside the mind. “Consciousness only” does not reject the relationship between cause and effect, or the distinction between things that should be done and things that should not be done. As distinct from some other traditions of Buddhism, the “consciousness only” tradition may encourage its followers to engage with the manifold phenomenal world rather than withdrawing from it.<sup>44</sup> The view that *this* world here is the display of mind may be an encouragement to act in an unattached and dynamic way. A simple example is provided by Professor Yokoyama Kōitsu, who regularly went out with his students to clean up litter on the university campus. In Professor Yokoyama’s view, while the students were cleaning up the campus, they were also cleaning up their minds.<sup>45</sup> This can also be applied to cleaning one’s own room:

Typically, when we sweep the dust in a room, we assume that the dust is apart from us. But considering what we have learned about the way in which we normally relate to things, dust in the world is dust in the mind. Knowing this fact, we realize how nice it is to clean the room. As the room becomes clean,

41 Cp. Burton 2013:153: “The Mādhyamikas do not all give the same responses to these questions concerning conventional truth, and in many cases it is debatable what their answers would be.” Burton 2013:154: “Similar doubts occur about the intellectual coherence of the Madhyamaka claim that all entities are entirely conceptually created.”

42 Bayer 2019:32. T1585, 49c18–22: 若時菩薩於所緣境無分別智都無所得。不取種種戲論相故。爾時乃名實住唯識真勝義性。即證真如智與真如平等平等俱離能取所取相故。能所取相俱是分別。有所得心戲論現故。

43 As quoted above, Xuanzang states: 此唯識性豈不亦空。不爾。如何。非所執故。謂依識變妄執實法理不可得說為法空。非無離言正智所證唯識性故說為法空 (T1585, 39b14–17).

44 See Yokoyama 2015:73.

45 Yokoyama 2015:56.

the mind becomes clean, too.<sup>46</sup>

### Teaching “Consciousness Only” to Selected Students, Not to Everyone

Although “consciousness only,” when rightly understood, can be the basis for a responsible and active life, the Indian Buddhist texts acknowledged that without proper instruction, such teachings can lead to confusion. Already an early Buddhist scripture states that the Buddha’s teaching can be like a snake when it is held by the hand (as by a professional snake-catcher). If the snake is held in correctly, it is completely harmless (because it cannot reach the hand of the snake-catcher and bite). However, if it is held in the wrong way, it can bite. As a play on words, the text speaks of “grasping” the snake, using a verb which can also be used for “grasping” the Buddha’s teaching; for understanding and interpreting Buddhist doctrine.<sup>47</sup>

Buddhism has always employed a method of “graded” instruction, in which the teacher first evaluates the student before giving advanced teachings.<sup>48</sup> In the *Level of Bodhisattvas* (菩薩地, Jp. *Bosatsuji*, Skt. *Bodhisattvabhūmi*), a work ascribed to Asaṅga, it is strongly advised to examine a student beforehand and not to teach anything that could be unsettling. In the centuries after Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, scholars in their tradition even wrote treatises in which they claimed that external objects are real and separate from the mind.<sup>49</sup> By making this statement, which they ultimately did not believe themselves, they established common ground for discussions non-Buddhist scholars, without bringing the more advanced doctrines into play.<sup>50</sup> Also Xuanzang states in his treatise *Establishing Consciousness-Only*: “Even if the doctrines of the Great Vehicle (Skt. Mahāyāna, 大乘) were taught [to followers of non-Buddhist traditions] they would not believe in them.”<sup>51</sup> He thereby justified why Buddhist teachers who adhered to the Great Vehicle would teach simpler instructions to audiences who were deemed unfit for Great-Vehicle teachings. In the same way, the Yogācāra text *Level of the Hearers* (声聞地, *Shōmonji*, Skt. *Śrāvakabhūmi*) teaches that there are different kinds of potential (種姓, *shushō*, Skt. *gotra*) for Buddhist followers. Those who can follow the Great Vehicle belong to only one of several groups.

Some traditional biographies of Vasubandhu also suggest that he did not always state his opinions openly. His *Treasury of Abhidharma* (Skt. *Abhidharmakośa*, 阿毘達磨俱舍論, Jp. *Abidatsuma kusha ron*) asserts the existence of phenomena outside of mind (however, the ninth and final chapter contains a critique of several aspects under which reality is perceived). When Vasubandhu wrote the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, he had probably already accepted the “cognition only” doctrine but did not state this clearly in this text. The

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46 Yokoyama 2015:54–55. Cp. Yokoyama 2001:91: 部屋にたまった塵を掃く。その塵はふつうは心の外にあると思っています。しかし、そうではありません。掃くゴミはまずは心の中にある影像です。ですから、塵を取り除くということは心の中にある塵を除くことです。

47 Jones 2020:3.

48 Bayer 2021:41.

49 See, for example, Nakamura 1980:305: “Dharmakīrti, in his *Pramāṇavārttika*, adopted the theory of realism (Sautrāntika) that conglomerations of atoms are objects of cognition from the viewpoint of daily life.”

50 Surprisingly, Candrakīrti states that the Buddhist logicians “fail to see through [...] confused verbiage [...] propounding real entities [...] that is set forth in the Outsiders’ treatises” (Tillemans 2013:282), as if he is unaware of the purpose of these texts.

51 T1585, 14c29–15a2: 大乘所説廣大甚深非外道等思量境界。彼經論中曾所未説。設爲彼説亦不信受。

*Treasury of Abhidharma* was probably written for readers who accepted the reality of external phenomena.<sup>52</sup>

In the same way, the Japanese Kusha (倶舎) Tradition was based on the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, but it was transmitted within the Hossō Tradition, which rejected the proposition that external phenomena exist. In other words, the Hossō scholars transmitted the *Treasury of Abhidharma* even though this treatise did not conform to their own ultimate convictions. It is highly probable that Vasubandhu's originally wrote the *Treasury* for this purpose. It was rather a method for engaging in discussions with other traditions. At the time of writing, Vasubandhu himself probably rejected the reality of external phenomena and held the worldview taught in his *Thirty Verses* on which, to say it again, Xuanzang's treatise *Establishing Consciousness-Only* is a commentary.

However, contemporary scholars of Buddhism do not agree on this point. Some even assume that Vasubandhu accepted the reality of external phenomena in his *Thirty Verses*, and that his model of sense-perception is the same as the model of modern biology (indirect perception of external phenomena). However, this assumption is certainly a misunderstanding. There is a fundamental methodological difference between modern academic writing and Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. When a scholar at a modern university writes an academic article, this article should ideally be in accordance with the author's own convictions. Vasubandhu's tradition, on the other hand, considered it to be virtue to compose treatises for specific audiences and to withhold one's personal views. In fact, even modern textbooks for middle-school physics teach a simplified view of electrons, positrons, and neutrons, and leave the more intricate details to the high-school years. With this in mind, we may consider that some modern descriptions of the Hossō Tradition do not mention that the Kusha Tradition was transmitted in this organizational framework. However, this is an important historical detail, and neglecting this fact can lead to fundamental misunderstandings.

### **“Consciousness Only” and Karma, the Law of Action and Result**

In general, all traditions of Indian Buddhism accepted that, as a general principle, bad actions will lead to bad results, and good actions will lead to good results. This principle is sometimes referred to as “karma, its causes and results,”<sup>53</sup> the basis for the common Japanese expression “the theory of karma, cause and result” (業因果説, Jp. *gō in'ga setsu*). In the worldview of “consciousness only,” actions are the karmic causes that later produce the environment as their result. For example, a farmer who is jealous of others may harvest only small fruits, and another farmer who fosters ill-will against other people will harvest bitter fruits. In this worldview, the process of retribution also works if these persons engaged in jealousy and ill-will in a previous lifetime and not in the present one.<sup>54</sup> In fact, it was not only the “consciousness only” tradition which held this to be true but also several other schools of thought. The particular doctrine of the tradition from Asaṅga to Xuanzang presupposed that the karmic “seeds” were preserved in the “store consciousness,” and that some of the “fruits” eventually appear as the external world, which is wholly illusional. Karmic “seeds” are produced by mental acts, stored in the mind, and their ripening equally takes place inside the mind. In other words, the

<sup>52</sup> Bayer 2021:42.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Xuanzang's translation of the *Yogācārabhūmi* (『瑜伽師地論』 T1579, 76a20): 三趣種種業因果故.

<sup>54</sup> Bayer 2010:162, T1606, 728b9: 貪欲故果實少。瞋恚故果味辛苦.

process is completely mind-internal.

Other Buddhist traditions, too, accepted that a person who practices profound states of meditative concentration will be reborn in a world where there is no physical body. Such meditators remain in this type of absorption for a long time, and there are no material things of any kind in that sphere.<sup>55</sup> However “consciousness only” means that even in our human plane of existence, the experience of *all* material things is caused by karma in every single moment.<sup>56</sup> It is therefore said that mind perceives mind, as in a dream, or that the mind perceives itself. This is also called “self-perception” (自証[分], Jp. *jishō[bun]*, Skt. *svasaṃvedana*).

### “Consciousness Only” and Modern Philosophy

Several contemporary scholars have tried to participate in modern philosophical discussions by rephrasing the philosophy of Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, and their followers. This is a laudable undertaking because many philosophers still assume that in the pre-modern world, only the Greek philosophers were *real* philosophers. Such presumptions are of course inappropriate, since also Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Xuanzang, and others were important thinkers and provided detailed reasons for their worldview. However, in modern philosophical discourse, the theory of karmic cause and effect has generally not been accepted. Although this is an important ingredient of “consciousness only” theory, contemporary literature about “consciousness only” has often ignored the aspect of karma. It is however hardly possible to explain the theory that mind perceives itself (*jishō*) without taking karma into account. Contemporary literature on this kind of “self perception” or “reflexivity” can be highly complicated. However, once it is understood that the images in the mind are the results of karma, the theory is in fact simple, and Vasubandhu explains this in detail in his *Twenty Verses*. Contemporary philosophy can of course benefit from many aspects of “consciousness only” philosophy. However, this should not lead to a distortion of the original teachings, and a clear distinction should be made between the history of this theory and its modern interpretations.

### The Repeated Creation of the Material Universe from Mind

Although the question of how our universe came about (cosmogony) may be considered a fundamental aspect of most religions, there are indications that the earliest Buddhist tradition did not engage in speculations about this issue. However, as Buddhist scholasticism gradually developed, a cosmological theory was formed according to which the universe was not created at one specific point in time. Rather, our universe will collapse after many millions of years, leaving only empty space. However, the living beings in the universe will not vanish at that point. They remain, without a body, among the gods in the “realm of immateriality” (無色界, Jp. *mushikikai*, Skt. *ārūpyadhātu*). For a very long time, there will be no material things at all. However, in one way or another, living beings still have the “seeds” of their past actions (karma) in their store consciousness. Due to the force of this karma, the universe will gradually re-emerge, until it reaches a stage in which the earth and all spheres of existence are formed again.<sup>57</sup> All the while, the karma that is

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<sup>55</sup> Bayer 2010:172–174.

<sup>56</sup> See also Yamasaki 1988:92.

<sup>57</sup> Hirakawa 1990:174–175.

stored with every living being is not a material thing: it is in the mind. For this reason, it can be said that the universe is generated by mind in this specific phase, the phase when matter appears in the universe due to the force of karma. This is accepted even in traditions which hold that in the lower two realms, matter exists independently of mind.

### Mind Without a Body in Other Traditions of Buddhism

The “consciousness only” doctrine of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu implied that *all* spheres of this universe are created by mind. Various opinions on this question can be found in other traditions of Indian Buddhism. Although some traditions claimed that physical matter can exist by itself, independent of mind, it was generally assumed that there were three different spheres of existence in the universe:

- 1.) The highest sphere, the sphere of immateriality, can be reached by those who practice meditative concentration intensively. As mentioned in the previous section, there is no matter at all, and the sphere is inhabited by gods who do not have a physical body. Nevertheless, unconsciously, these gods still have previous karma, and they will have to leave this sphere at some point in time. As an example, let us consider an advanced practitioner of silent meditation at its highest stage. When this practitioner reaches the end of life and dies, rebirth will happen in a heaven called “the peak of existence” (有頂[天], Jp. *uchō[ten]*). The gods at the “peak of existence” have a mind but no body. Still, according to Asaṅga, they still have a “store consciousness” in which seeds continue to ripen.<sup>58</sup> The gods at “the peak of existence” remain in this realm for a long time, but lack Buddhist wisdom (Skt. *jñāna*). They will die again when the results of other karmic actions become manifest. At this time, they be reborn in a lower world, with a “material” body. It should therefore be clear that in the Buddhist traditions that accept the “realm of immateriality” (Skt. *ārūpya-dhātu*, 無色界, Jp. *mushikikai*), it is not presupposed that the mind needs a material body or brain in order to exist.
- 2.) The second highest sphere is inhabited by gods who have a physical body but no sensual desire. Like all living beings in the three spheres, these gods are mortal.
- 3.) The lowest of the three spheres is the sphere of ordinary beings such as humans and animals who have a physical body and various kinds of desire.<sup>59</sup>

In sum, while the Indian “cognition only” tradition asserted that all three spheres are a mental projection, other traditions held that there was matter (separate from mind) in the lower two spheres. Most traditions however agreed that there is no matter in the third and highest realm.

As mentioned earlier, some contemporary authors claim that the original “consciousness only” philosophy basically conforms to modern biology. Since all perception is transmitted to the brain through

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58 See, for example, Xuanzang’s translation of the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* (『攝大乘論本』, T1594, 136a24–25), chapter I, section 39: 復次生無色界 若離一切種子異熟識 染污善心應無種子 染污善心應無依持. See Nagao 1982:205–206. See also Xuanzang’s commentary on Vasubandhu’s *Thirty Verses* (『成唯識論』, T1585, 23c29–24a3: 然此染意相應煩惱 [...] 極微細故所有種子. 與有頂地下煩惱. 一時頓斷勢力等故), and Bayer 2010:172.

59 Hirakawa 1990:170–174.

nerve signals, there is no direct perception of the outside world.<sup>60</sup> However, the conception that gods exist without a body is not easy to align with the biological approach. The idea of the “realm of immateriality” may not be essential for the basic teaching of “consciousness only,” but it played a major role in this tradition’s history.

### The Creation of the World from Mind: Critique by the “Middle Way” Tradition

A Buddhist *sūtra* that was accepted by various traditions (the *Sūtra of Ten Stages*) states that “[the world] consisting of three worlds is mind only.” Asaṅga, one of the most important predecessors of the Hossō Tradition, wrote that this *sūtra* passage supports the “cognition only” doctrine.<sup>61</sup> As stated above, already in ancient India, Asaṅga and his followers were criticized by the “Middle Way” (Madhyamaka) Tradition, the predecessors of the Sanron Tradition (三論宗) in Nara Buddhism. However, a detailed critique of Asaṅga’s tradition was written by the Indian Buddhist scholar-monk Bhāviveka (清弁, Jp. Shōhen, 500–c. 570) and later adapted by Candrakīrti (月稱, Jp. Gesshō, c. 600–c. 650), who lived around the time of Xuanzang. Candrakīrti’s treatises were not translated into Chinese and did not reach Japan. Let us however consider his point of view as an elaborate formulation of critiques that were much older and partly known to Xuanzang.

Like Asaṅga, Candrakīrti, too, accepted the in the *Sūtra of Ten Stages* as an authoritative text that was taught by the Buddha. He also accepted that the *sūtra* statement “[the world] consisting of three realms is mind only,” literally referred to the whole world, and that it was not a metaphor for the perception of the world. However, he claimed that the three realms are only *created by* mind only. They arise from karma when the universe is re-created after a phase without matter. Since karma is a mental factor, the material world is created by mind alone, but only in this phase or re-emergence. Candrakīrti seems to imply that, once this process of re-emergence is completed, matter can exist independently of mind.<sup>62</sup> In other words, the external world “is” not mind only in the present moment when we look at it. It *was* once created by mind only and will be recreated again at the beginning of the next cosmic eon. However, a look at the *sūtra* itself reveals that Candrakīrti’s interpretation is inaccurate. The statement that “[the world] consisting of three realms is mind only” is preceded by a statement that *all things in the world* are like a hallucination, a dream, etc.<sup>63</sup> This insight even challenges the very concept of “existence” since the things in this world are said to be in a state beyond existence and non-existence.<sup>64</sup> Unquestionably, “mind only” does not only refer to the phase of re-emergence at the beginning of a cosmic eon but to every moment thereafter.

For the sake of completeness, it needs to be added that in the time between the collapse and re-emergence of the universe, there is only one realm, not three. However, most traditions agree that there is no

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60 Cp. Burton 2013:161: “Some scholars have criticized this alternative interpretation of Yogācāra as unsupported by the textual sources, no matter what its philosophical merits might be.”

61 T1594, 138b2–4: 其有未得眞智覺者。於唯識中云何比知。由教及理應可比知。此中教者。如十地經薄伽梵說。如是三界皆唯有心。Xuanzang’s translation 唯有心 literally means “[In the three worlds] only mind exists.” The original Sanskrit phrase in the *Sūtra of Ten Stages* can be understood as “this [world] consisting of three realms, this is what is mind only” (*cittamātram idaṃ yad idaṃ traidhātukam*). See Bayer 2019:32.

62 Bayer 2019:36.

63 Bayer 2019:42; T286, 514b20–21: 以幻夢影響水中月鏡像焰化故 一切法平等。

64 Bayer 2019:43. T286, 514b21–22: 十以有無不二故 一切法平等

matter in this phase, so it would be trivial to find fault with the *sūtra* statement about this point.

In his *Twenty Verses*, Vasubandhu observes with some wonder that the critics of “cognition only” consider karma to be a mental phenomenon while they expect the fruit of karma to appear outside the mind (verse 7).<sup>65</sup> Although Candrakīrti wrote his own critique some centuries later, I have been unable to find a passage in his works in which he responds to Vasubandhu’s argument, and it almost seems as if he did not know the *Twenty Verses*.

In contemporary Buddhist Studies, the aspect of karma in Candrakīrti’s critique of Aśaṅga’s tradition is often neglected.<sup>66</sup> Candrakīrti wrote on a broad range of topics and brought forth various arguments. However, his view that karma leads to the re-emergence of the universe is probably not particularly interesting for contemporary philosophers. Nevertheless, as a matter of fact, it was one of Candrakīrti’s main arguments against Aśaṅga’s interpretation of the *Sūtra of Ten Stages*.

The *Sūtra of Ten Stages*, stating that “the three worlds are mind only,” is also contained in the *Kegon sūtra* (Skt. *Avatamsaka-sūtra*), the central text of the Kegon Tradition (華嚴宗). Therefore, the Kegon Tradition accepted this view and did not presuppose that mind and matter are simply two separate things.

### “Consciousness Only,” the Exploration of Nature, and the Science of Logic

Vasubandhu’s *Treasury of Abhidharma* is not only an outline of abstract Buddhist doctrines but also a collection of knowledge about the natural world. This includes the structure of atoms and molecules, basic geographical and astronomical facts, classifications of living beings, etc. Of course, modern science has shown that many of these pre-modern assumptions are not accurate. In fact, even Vasubandhu himself probably knew that the theory of atoms described in his book is only preliminary and not ultimately tenable. In any case, it is remarkable that the *Treasury of Abhidharma* recorded the views of Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) scholars who tried to explain the natural world by rational analysis rather than relying on religious authorities or divine revelation. This was a significant difference from, for example, shamanic cultures where gods and demons were considered to be the cause of most natural phenomena. In the centuries after Vasubandhu, the study of mathematics, medicine, metallurgy, and architecture flourished in Buddhism, in India, Central- and East Asia. In fact, this process had begun some centuries before Vasubandhu. In the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, Vasubandhu mostly summarized knowledge that was available at his time and added his own interpretations. However, it seems that not all Buddhists were impressed that monks spent their time with researching “worldly” things. After all, a monk was supposed to turn away from the world and strive for the liberation from mental defilements (Skt. *kleśa*, 煩惱, Jp. *bonnō*).

In his *Treasury of Abhidharma*, Vasubandhu also summarized and advanced the science of logic, at a rather rudimentary stage. Logic was a particularly important subject in India, since kings sometimes invited representatives of various religious groups to debate at court. The winner of the debate would be supported by the king financially and in other respects. According to legend, Vasubandhu was both a monk

65 T1590, 75b2–3: 業熏習餘處 執餘處有果 所熏識有果 不許有何因。

66 A laudable example to the contrary is Burton 2013:154: “Mādhyanikas would highlight the influence of karma on the way the world is constructed.”

as well as a fabulously wealthy man, having received enormous rewards for his victories in debate.

Vasubandhu’s students upheld the tradition of logic and wrote extensive treatises on this issue. In these treatises, it was normally presupposed that the external world exists independently of the mind, because it was easier to defend the Buddhist doctrine on that basis.

### The Buddhist Study of “Consciousness Only” and Logic: From Hossō to Zen

The science of logic, too, was transmitted to Japan by the Hossō Tradition. However, while public debates were held before the king in India, it seems that there was no such custom in Japan, and the Hossō Tradition did not succeed in making the study of logic a strong tradition.<sup>67</sup> By contrast, the *Kegon sūtra* put more emphasis on social harmony, which was well received in Japan at the time.<sup>68</sup> During the Heian period (794–c.1185), the Shingon and Tendai Traditions gained prominence. Especially Kōbō Daishi (弘法大師, 774–835), the founder of the Shingon Tradition, became known as an outstanding scholar who also advanced practical knowledge in the “worldly” fields of study and the alphabetization of the general public. His teachings emphasized a union of “consciousness only” and Madhyamaka doctrines,<sup>69</sup> and he advocated a “Great Self” (大我, Jp. *daiga*, corresponding to Skt. *mahā-ātman*) in which the universe and the self are one.<sup>70</sup>

Shingon and Tendai monastics conducted systematic studies of Buddhist doctrine and questioned the reality of seemingly material phenomena. Still, their doctrines differed from the Hossō Tradition in some points.<sup>71</sup> According to Matsuo (2007:162): “The leading doctrines of the Heian period were those of the Hossō school, the Tendai school and the Shingon school.” Tendai and Shingon propounded the theory of Buddha nature (如来藏, Jp. *nyoraizō*), according to which every single person, without exception, has the potential to become a Buddha like Amitābha or Mahāvairocana, even if this takes a very long time. This also applies to animals and sentient beings in other realms. In contrast, Asaṅga and his tradition held that not every living being has this potential.<sup>72</sup> In practice, Asaṅga’s followers also transmitted doctrines which did not belong to the “Great Vehicle” (Skt. *Mahāyāna*), since not all audiences were ready for such teachings. However, to some extent, also other Indian *Mahāyāna* traditions transmitted non-*Mahāyāna* doctrines. In any case, Matsuo (2007:163–164) relates that Tendai monks first criticized the Hossō Tradition for their view that not everybody could become a complete Buddha. For this reason, they even claimed that Hossō belonged to the “Small Vehicle.” Later on, there was some amount of reconciliation, and Tendai, Shingon, and Hossō scholars

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67 Nakamura 1964:544–547, Bayer 2022:109.

68 Nakamura 1964:412.

69 Yamasaki 1988:92. Here, the primary example for the union of “consciousness only” and Madhyamaka is, however, the example of the rope and the snake, in the way it is already presented in Asaṅga’s *Summary of Mahāyāna*.

70 Yamasaki 1988:75.

71 On Tendai thought, see Tachikawa 1995:57, on Shingon thought, Tachikawa 1995:61,71,79–82.

72 Matsuo 2007:162: “The Hossō school criticized the standpoint that everyone can attain enlightenment [...] and explained that the capacity of sentient beings differs [...]” The issue is complex and probably not treated with absolute consistency in all Yogācāra treatises. In final consequence, Yogācāra scholars conceded that even Arhats on the Vehicles of the Hearers and Solitary Buddhas can enter the Great Vehicle at any point before their death. However, once such an Arhat has passed away, the Great Vehicle is no longer an option. I am not aware of exhaustive research on this particular question and have to apologize for the brevity of this note.

recognized each other as belonging to the “Great Vehicle.”

The Kamakura period (c.1192–1333) saw a trend towards simplified Buddhist practices and doctrines,<sup>73</sup> accessible for both ordained monastics and lay followers alike. During that time, Dōgen Zenji (道元 禪師, 1200–1253) of the Sōtō Tradition (曹洞宗) argued against complex studies of systematic Buddhist doctrines. He radically reinterpreted the statement “the three worlds are mind only” to mean “the three worlds are as they are regarded.”<sup>74</sup> In this tradition, “the three worlds are mind only” was no longer considered a statement about the “stuff” or “substratum” of material things, but rather a psychological statement about the way in which human beings perceive the world.

These developments also made an impact on the way in which the statement “the three worlds are mind only” is presented in contemporary literature on Buddhism. Since the Sōtō Tradition is popular internationally, some contemporary authors seem to consider Dōgen’s reinterpretation to be a historically accurate interpretation of the statement “the three worlds are mind only” in the *Sūtra of Ten Stages* and other texts. Since I am not a specialist in the Sōtō Tradition, I cannot comment on whether Dōgen intended to present a historically valid interpretation of the original *sūtra* phrase, or whether he instead wanted to present a new, alternative, and more practical interpretation of the phrase. In either case, despite the many strengths and virtues of the Sōtō Tradition, rational analysis and the classification of natural phenomena was not seen as a central occupation of Sōtō monastics. However, Sōtō Zen was always more than “just sitting” (只坐, Jp. *taza*), which Dōgen advocated. Although the Sōtō Tradition officially disposed of “graded” instructions, in practice, admission to a monastery was strictly controlled, and a novice’s faith and determination were tested, similar to the prescriptions in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*. Beyond the monasteries, in society as a whole, seemingly “worldly” crafts were labelled a “path” (道, *dō*) and pursued with vigor, possibly even surpassing the crafts of earlier periods when Hossō, Tendai, and Shingon prevailed.

## Conclusions and Further Readings

It has been shown in this article that Xuanzang’s terminology 唯識 (Jp. *yuishiki*), “consciousness only” is an accurate rendering of the original Sanskrit term *viññapti-mātra*, even though *viññapti* originally does not simply mean “consciousness.” Skt. *viññapti* also has the connotations of “[an act of] cognition” or even “the object of cognition.” However, Asaṅga, the seminal Indian preceptor of Xuanzang’s tradition, made it clear that “cognition only” (Skt. *viññapti-mātra*) basically means the same as “mind only” (Skt. *citta-mātra*), as in the phrase “the three worlds are mind only.” Like in a dream, the karmic impressions (“seeds”) in our minds constantly produce the illusion of a material world, while in reality, matter does not exist outside the mind. When this doctrine is misunderstood, it can lead to confusion, but when it is rightly comprehended, it can bring about a dynamic, compassionate, and unattached engagement with the variety of phenomena in this world.

In the modern era, some assumptions of the “cognition only” or “consciousness only” traditions may be met with disbelief, for example the idea that the universe consists of three distinct spheres, or that

73 Matsuo 2007:165–166.

74 Nakamura 1964:353, Bayer 2022:109.

good actions are rewarded with good karmic results and bad actions with bad results. On the other hand, some arguments may still be acceptable even for non-Buddhist audiences. For example, Vasubandhu argued in this *Twenty Verses* that indivisible parts of matter cannot possibly exist. At least on the level of “atoms,” Vasubandhu’s assumption has been confirmed in modern physics.

Some attempts have been made to adapt “consciousness only” to the modern world and to contemporary philosophical discourse. Unfortunately, this has occasionally led to false statements about the history of this tradition. Beginning students should be aware that the statement “the three worlds are mind only” originally means exactly what it says: The entire world is created by mind, in a literal sense. Candrakīrti, a critic of Aśaṅga’s tradition, claimed that mind is the cause of the material world only at the beginning of a cosmic eon. However, the *Sūtra of Ten Stages*, where this phrase is found, designates all phenomena to be “like a hallucination, like a dream.”

Readers with an interest in the Hossō Tradition and its Indian background should be careful in choosing their reading. There are very few experts in these issues, and inaccurate interpretations are widespread, especially when it comes to the phrase “consciousness only,” which for Xuanzang meant that material things do not exist outside the mind. Professor Yokoyama Kōitsu (1940–2023) spent many years researching the original Indian texts, and his *An Intelligent Life*, which has been quoted above, can be recommended as a readable introduction for a general audience. The English version is a partial translation of “*Yuishiki*” to *iu ikikata* (『「唯識」という生き方』, “*Consciousness Only*” as a *Way of Life*), where Yokoyama pursues many ideas in greater detail. A variety of reliable sources on the Hossō Tradition is available in Japanese, such as Tachikawa 1995 and Masaki 2020, both listed in the bibliography below.

In English, Nakamura 1964 contains valuable remarks related to Hossō thought. Even though sixty years have passed since its publication, this study still meets high standards. Concerning Aśaṅga and Vasubandhu, it may be advisable to read the respective passages in Williams 2009 followed by Frauwallner 2010. Frauwallner’s presentation is a bit demanding on the reader, but he presents a good selection of passages from the original texts. Unfortunately, Frauwallner does not mention the role of karma in Candrakīrti’s critique of Aśaṅga’s tradition, nor does he consider that Vasubandhu may have been a follower of Aśaṅga’s tradition when he wrote the *Treasury of Abhidharma*. For these two issues, I humbly refer to my articles of 2019 and 2021. In sum, the Hossō Tradition was probably the most influential Buddhist school in the Nara period,<sup>75</sup> and discussions about its doctrines imply many issues that are highly relevant in today’s world, such as the relationship between mind and matter or the relationship between rational analysis and the intuitive aspects of our mind.

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75 Masaki 2020:129.

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