



How Do We Create Our Reality?

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WE'VE NEVER TRULY experienced things as they are. We've only ever experienced things as we imagine them to be. In short, we live in a simulated world, and our perceptions are basically invalid, stuck in a loop created by our consciousness. This is not to say that the world doesn't exist; it's just that we've never lived in it. That is the radical teaching at the heart of Yogacara (pronounced Yogachara), an influential Indian Mahayana school also known as Cittamatra, or Consciousness-Only.

Yogacara is not concerned with whether there are real things "out there." Instead it's concerned with the way we reify and solidify experiences into discrete *things* that we perceive as permanent and separate from us. It points out that our modes of perception are inherently biased. We habitually reduce everything to subject and object, self and dharmas, me and other, leading to false narratives that become ingrained within us.

Therefore, no matter what we experience, everything is a construct of consciousness.

In Yogacara, consciousness is divided into eight layers. The first five are sensory “consciousnesses” (think of them as cognitive moments) that arise on the basis of our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body. The sixth consciousness, *manovijnana*, is that which arises in the faculty of mind or brain. It has the ability to conceive, discriminate, and imagine. The seventh consciousness, called *manas*, acts as the self-referential tendency (me and I) that mediates or filters all sensory experiences. The eighth is *alayavijnana* (also known as *alaya*), or storehouse consciousness—the repository of all mental imprints and karmic seeds based on past actions of body, speech, and mind.

According to Yogacara, karmic seeds or imprints from past actions have real substance. That’s because they shape the way we experience seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching in the present and future. The five sense faculties—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body—have real substance and function as well. They are the results of past karma and are mediated through the *alaya*. Lastly, what Yogacara calls the “container” or “receptacle”—the sensory world in which we live—has real substance. It is the fruition of our karma—literally, actions infused with intent that are stored in the *alaya* and later karmically externalized into mental and physical phenomena.

However, no matter what we reify—whether it is real (from the *alaya*), imagined (from the *mano*), or somewhat real but skewed by self-centered biases (from the *manas*)—it does not exist outside of the mediation of consciousness.

Yogacara dismantles the things we reify by showing how the different layers of our consciousness themselves are in a constant state of externalization, projection, and objectification. The technical term in Yogacara is “transformations” (Skt., *parinama*), of which there are three kinds:

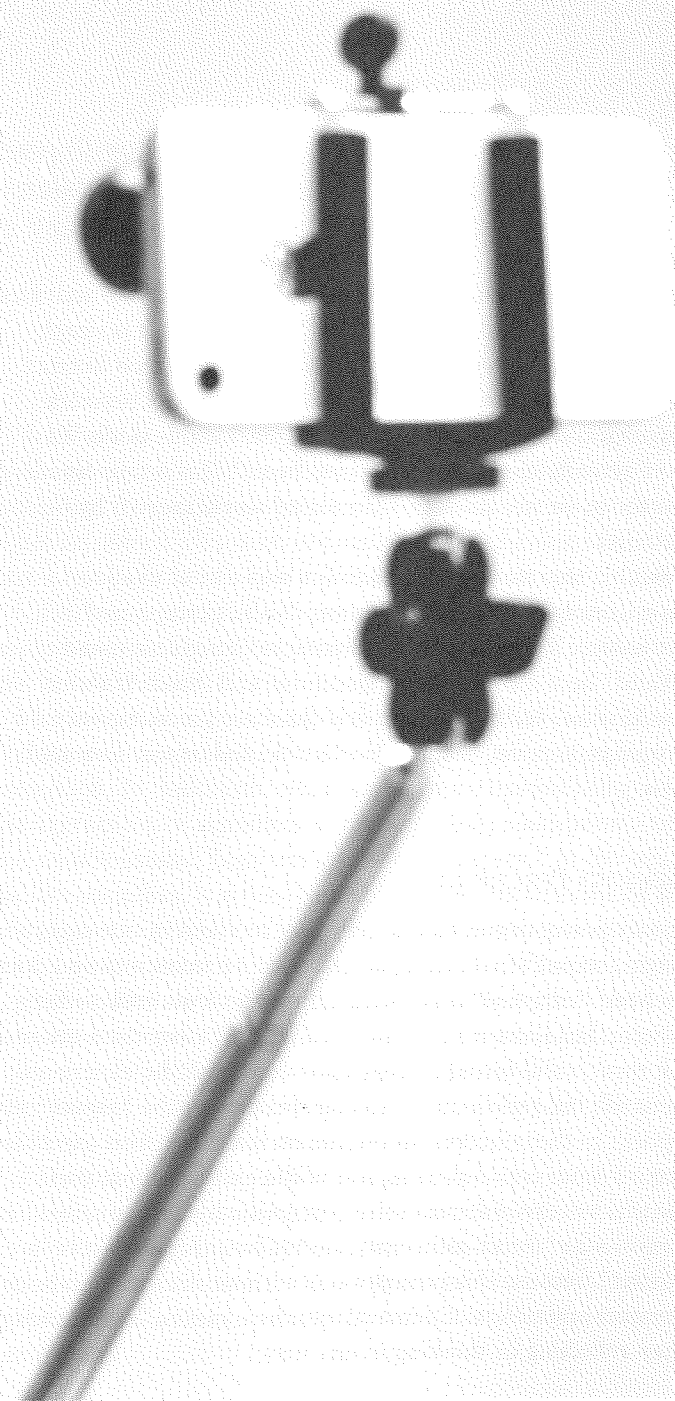
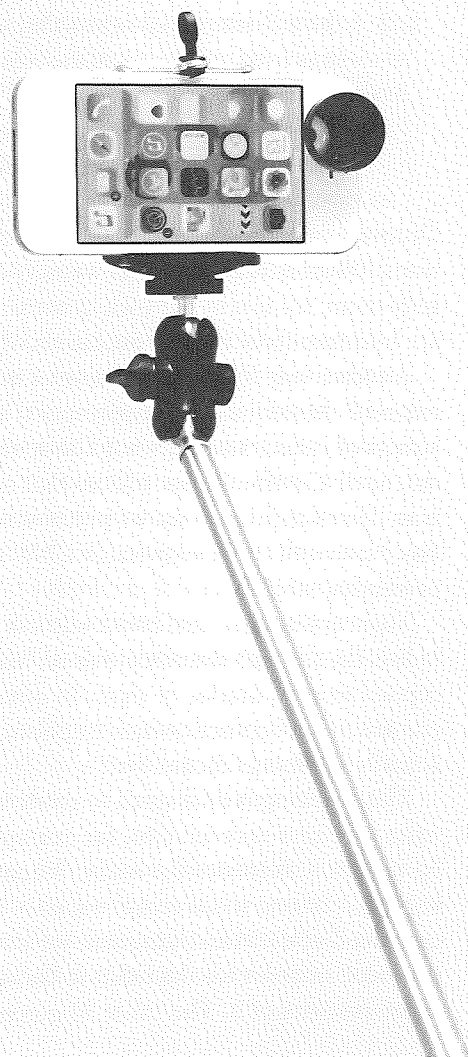
1. the constant ripening of *alaya* that projects karmic imprints into present and future mental and physical realities;
2. the self-referential *manas* that clings to the *alaya* and regards it as itself and projects the sense of me, I, and mine onto all experiences;
3. the cognizing six consciousnesses that mediate our experiences physiologically or neurologically, most often falsely.

Ordinary people are stuck in this ever-evolving loop of transformations. Whether it is the things we reify or the consciousnesses that reify them, we live in our own constructed reality through which we are both products and the producers of our own experience.

Another way Yogacara dismantles our grasping of things is to examine the very nature of perception itself. If all things are constructs of consciousness, what about our perceptual experience? Is that real? Common sense tells us that seeing is believing. Each of us is so convinced that what we perceive is real. Yet those who watch Fox News and those who watch CNN live in completely different perceptual worlds.

Yogacara teaches that consciousness always experiences things indirectly, through the mediation of “aspects” (Skt., *akara*), or perceptual images, marks, or signs. In other words, not only are things constructed by consciousness, but also, what we perceive are never actually the things themselves.

This teaching is analogous to modern neuroscientists’ notion that what we experience as sight, for example, is actually a simulation by the visual cortex of the brain. When light from an external object impinges on our visual receptors, only 10 percent of the information contained in the visual stimulus—of what we think we are seeing—is needed in order for the brain to construct an internal image or representation of it. The other 90 percent of that image ➤



➤ is the result of simulations produced by the brain's own activities. That is, 90 percent of the object we "see" is made up! It is simply the coming together of electrochemical signals which then interact with our internal memories and cognition in a complex network of neuropathways. Everything is happening inside this skull. We have never actually seen the world "out there." This is true for all senses. In short, we are stuck in a simulated world created by our consciousness.

As radical as this may sound, there is a way out of this loop. Yogacara encourages us to cultivate true, "valid perceptions" (Skt., *pratyaksa*). They are sensory, mental, self-cognizant, and yogic. "Valid" here means it is nondeceptive and direct, without conceptualization. Technically, the first three are practices; only the fourth, yogic perception, is considered awakened or true liberated perception.

VALID SENSORY PERCEPTION

Valid sensory perception refers to the initial moment of our experience of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Our consciousness does not apprehend "external" objects directly without an intermediary process. Since Yogacara is not concerned with whether there are real *things* out there, valid visual perception is not about the experience of seeing at all, but rather the direct experiencing of the "aspect" of sight, a priori to the concepts we impute on the thing. This aspect is a property of sense consciousness, not of the external thing itself.

In practice, we can cultivate valid perception by engaging in what Chan identifies as "direct contemplation" (Chn., *zhiguan*). It is called "direct" because this perception is without distortion, fabrication, or conceptualization. Contemplation here means "experiencing" rather than reflecting or thinking in any way.

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Take seeing a tree, for example. What we are contemplating or experiencing is the aspect of the tree before the label "tree" comes into being. Yogacara recognizes a stage *before* the visual cortex simulates an object. This is an instantaneous quickening of perception that is not yet a full-fledged representation or concept (in this sense, it is different from what neuroscience identifies as internal image or representation). Direct contemplation would be the experiencing of tree before the mental representation occurs.

The foundational teaching of the five skandhas can help to explain what is meant by the direct contemplation of valid sensory perception. In Buddhism, what constitutes a human being are the five aggregates, or skandhas: form, sensation, conception, volition, and consciousness. Yogacara's notion of "aspect," in the scheme of the five skandhas, is actually one of the finer dimensions of sensation (the grosser experience of sensation would be the raw awareness of sensation as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral). When this sensation is processed by our higher-order brain structures, then the aspect becomes conception. When it is interpreted by concepts, the aspect becomes a full-fledged visual representation—this is a "tree." The perception is no longer fresh. Then, volition happens when we act based on conception and create all kinds of karma.

For most people, this aspect occurs so fast that there is no way to imagine what I'm talking about. Seasoned meditators, however, should have had some experience with this direct, unmediated, non-conceptual experiencing. In Chan practice, direct contemplation is a way to sustain this experience in order to realize the emptiness of perception.



VALID MENTAL PERCEPTION

Valid mental perception arises almost simultaneously with sensory perception, and both arise immediately prior to conceptualization (the third of the five skandhas) of the thing we are perceiving. According to Buddhism, true and sustained valid mental perception is the awareness of another person's state of mind, as in clairvoyance or mind reading. This perception is only available to those who have attained deeper states of samadhi, or meditative absorption. For most practitioners, the only valid mental perceptions that take place are those that occur for extremely brief moments immediately after true sense perceptions.

For example, when we remember, imagine, or dream about a sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch, the object of our cognition is an idea or mental representation of the corresponding sense object. This mental representation is already a concept, already a full-fledged construct that we are generating with our minds. However, a bare mental perception is a nonconceptual mental aspect created through the apparatus of our mind/brain. This means that when an image appears in our mind, for an instant we have a valid mental perception of that image. Then we quickly conceptualize it and grasp onto it, thereby making our perception invalid.

VALID SELF-COGNIZANT PERCEPTION

The third type of perception is valid self-cognizant perception. This is similar to what Western philosophers call apperception, namely, the knowledge that we have of our own mental states. However, it is different from apperception in that self-cognizant perception is not knowledge but rather an intuitive and reflexive experiencing of our inner mental states. Its function is to know our own mental activities, such as craving or aversion. That is, we know when hunger or greed

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is arising in us and we do not directly identify with these states—we simply know they are there.


The above three types of perception may be valid, bare, or direct, but for most people the instance of valid perception is followed by subsequent cognition and inattentive cognitions. All moments of consciousness go through these three stages. The first moment is always a pristine, bare perception, without conceptualization—it's fresh and direct, such as nonconceptual experiencing of a tree. The second is called subsequent perception, which is a continuing reproduction of the same apprehension of a tree. It is no longer fresh (unless we engage in direct contemplation) because we are conceptually creating the tree in our mind. The last moment is inattentive perception, when our attention drifts away from the tree to something else. Inattentive cognition happens when we engage in direct contemplation of a tree but we also notice birds flying by and other things.

VALID YOGIC PERCEPTION

The final type of valid perception is yogic perception, which is never inattentive. This occurs in the mind-stream of a person who is either in the state of awakening or is thoroughly awakened. A person may have had an experience of awakening but may not always be in that state—self-grasping may return. A thoroughly awakened person is always in the state of yogic perception.

Valid yogic perception arises from prajna, or selfless wisdom, and with it, one perceives the impermanence of the five skandhas, the emptiness of self, and so on. Within this selfless wisdom, one continues to function normally in the world, which Chan calls “wondrous existence,” responding to causes and conditions.

For people who have had genuine awakening, even if they are not presently in the state of awakening, they are most likely able to sustain some degree of attentive yogic perception in daily life. I say “most likely” because some people's experience of selfless wisdom is so shallow and short-lived that it has no real effect on their lives; it's more like a temporary absence of self-grasping. Without diligent practice, such an experience remains a mere memory. It is like not having the experience at all, and it's definitely possible for these people to be inattentive in daily life. They can even break precepts and harm others. Why? Because when self-grasping is present, craving, aversion, and ignorance are also present.

The actual practice of direct contemplation through sight or sound, for example, is pretty straightforward, and I usually lead this practice outdoors in a natural setting. You begin by sitting stably, as you normally would, and then go through the method of progressive relaxation. Once you are grounded and relaxed, you choose an object that is steady and clear—say, a tree, or the steady sound of a flowing stream or an air-conditioning vent. If you choose a sound that is constantly changing, like birds chirping, classical music, and so on, it may be more difficult to go deeply into the method because when the various sounds stop, your method is gone too. It's best to stay with a relatively constant sound. Refrain from using words, labels, or concepts to identify the sound—let it be what it is with an open heart. Let the sound come to you; don't focus on it intensely. The key is *experiencing*. This method is more of an open awareness method, as opposed to single-minded concentration. In time, the sound itself will drop away, leaving you with just experiencing without apparent sense of subject or object. This is a state of oneness. When this oneness drops away, subject and objects, self and dharmas, perceiver and things vanish—this is awakening. Is there just nothing? No. Everything is there; it's just that grasping and self-referentiality is absent. When awakening is let go of, this is thorough awakening. 

For more on the method of direct contemplation, see Guo Gu's forthcoming book, *Silent Illumination: A Chan Buddhist Path to Natural Awakening* (Shambhala Publications, 2021)

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