The Unity of Buddhism and Vedānta: Enlightenment as the Realization of Pure Consciousness

Markus E. Schlosser, 2021

Abstract Buddhism and Hinduism appear to be separated by irreconcilable differences. I argue that this apparent gulf can be overcome. The argument has three main parts. First, I argue that the Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising is not a metaphysical principle of real causation, but a principle of fabrication. Second, I argue that this interpretation of dependent arising enables a unification of the main schools of Buddhism. Third, I argue that Buddhism can be unified fully with Advaita Vedānta, the most important philosophical school of Hinduism, and I argue that a substantial unity can be established between Buddhism and the three main schools of Vedānta. In particular, Buddhism and Vedānta can agree that the highest aim and good consists in the direct realization of an unconditioned and pure mind or consciousness.

Keywords Buddhism; Vedānta; enlightenment, pure consciousness, ultimate reality

Introduction

Buddhism and Hinduism may seem to be very different and incompatible spiritual traditions, for both doctrinal and cultural reasons. Indeed Buddhism and Hinduism seem internally diverse and heterogeneous. I will take on the ambitious aim to show that Buddhism and Hinduism can be unified at the fundamental doctrinal level and that the apparent divisions and disagreements can be overcome. To make this manageable, I have to make some substantial assumptions along the way and reduce various complex issues to their essential core. Throughout I restrict my considerations to the three main strands of Buddhism and the three main schools of Vedānta. Further, I set aside differences concerning spiritual practice and culture and I restrict my arguments to

apparent differences that would rightly count as fundamental disagreements. In particular, I consider the following four candidates for fundamental disagreements:

- Disagreement concerning the existence and nature of the empirical world.
- Disagreement concerning the existence and nature of a self (ātman).
- Disagreement concerning the existence and nature of ultimate reality.
- Disagreement concerning the ultimate aim (of theory and practice).

To begin with, let me mention a main motivation behind this project, which also happens to be a good reason to think that this grand unification should be possible. As is the case for most spiritual traditions, the notion of spiritual enlightenment (bodhi or mokṣa) is at the very core of both Buddhism and Hinduism. If we take Buddhism and Hinduism seriously in their aims, we have to take seriously the possibility of enlightenment. According to both traditions, enlightenment is an incredible feast—it entails the unconditional and complete end of suffering and unease (dukkha, duḥkha). Given this, it seems very plausible to assume that, if enlightenment is possible at all, there can be only one kind of enlightenment. Enlightenment seems incredible, but it would seem utterly incredible—and unbelievable—that Buddhism and Hinduism speak of two different kinds of enlightenment through which one may attain liberation from suffering. If there is only one kind of enlightenment, as seems very plausible to assume, then the different spiritual traditions that speak truthfully of enlightenment must be speaking of one and the same possibility, albeit in different and seemingly incompatible vocabularies. Given, then, that both Buddhism and Hinduism speak truthfully of enlightenment, it must be possible to unify them by looking beyond or underneath the apparent disagreements.

Buddhism is often divided into two main vehicles, the Hinayana and Mahāyāna. The former includes most notably the Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda, and Abhidharma and it is

also referred to as "Pāli Buddhism"—the views that adhere most closely to the scriptures of the Pāli canon. The Mahāyāna consists of the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. We can follow the fairly common practice of dividing Buddhism into three main strands: Pāli Buddhism, Madhyamaka, and Yogācāra. The most important and influential philosophical tradition within Hinduism is Vedānta, which is based primarily on the Upaniṣads (the "end of the Vedas"). Vedānta has three main schools: Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Dvaita Vedānta.

In recent debates on Buddhism, Theravāda and Madhyamaka have received the most attention. Breaking with this trend, I turn to Yogācāra and argue that it holds the key for the unification of the Hinayana with the Mahāyāna. Advaita has been by far the most influential and important philosophical school of Vedānta and within Hinduism. We will see that Advaita lends itself most readily to a unification with Buddhism, especially if we interpret the Pāli canon through Yogācāra, as I will suggest. But we will also see that there are two key claims that unify all three Vedānta schools with Buddhism. That is the claim that enlightenment or liberation consist in the realization of an unconditioned and pure mind or consciousness, and the claim that the existence of ultimate reality can be neither affirmed nor denied. We will also see that the most apparent disagreement concerning the self can be dissolved easily if we take Advaita as the authoritative interpretation of the Vedas, as Buddhism and Advaita fully agree that the *individual sense* of self is false and illusory.

The apparent disunity in Buddhism

The three main strands of Buddhism seem to be divided by major disagreements concerning the core doctrines of the Buddha's teaching. This seems most obvious and striking when we compare the schools of the Pāli canon with Yogācāra. In comparison,

the former may be characterized as "realist" and the latter as "idealist". Of course, no Buddhist school is realist in the sense that they all deny the independent existence and intrinsic self-nature of ordinary objects and beings. The Sarvāstivāda can nevertheless be called realist as it affirms the existence of entities (dhamma) with self-natures at an ultimate level. The currently popular Theravāda Buddhism can also be characterized as realist in the following sense. According to Sarvāstivāda, dependent arising consists in interactions between entities that constitute causal processes. According to Theravāda, there are only the mere processes. As King (1995: 96) puts it, there is "process without a processed or a processor" on this view. The entities that seem to be involved may be characterized conventionally as causes and effects, but they are not constituents that make up the process—reality *is* process. This view is realist in two respects. First, even though causes and effects do not ontologically constitute the causal processes, they can be said to exist in dependence on those processes. Second, by affirming the reality of processes, the view is realist in contrast to Yogācāra. According to Yogācāra, the processes of dependent arising are not what we would call real processes—processes that constitute reality. Rather, the processes of dependent arising are nothing but a manifestation of mind—a sprouting of the seeds and tendencies that make up the ālaya (or storehouse) consciousness. This ālaya consciousness collects karmic tendencies, but it is not something akin to the unconscious mind of an individual, as it is sometimes assumed. Indeed, the ālaya cannot be ascribed to an individual, because it manifests the minds, bodies, and life circumstances of individuals. As Asaṅga puts it in his great compendium of the Mahāyāna, the ālaya contains all the seeds for "all individual existences of the three realms and all forms of existence in them" (*Mahāyānasaṃgraha* I.21, Brunnhölzl 2018: 164). Given this, it is clear that Yogācāra is not a subjective

idealism or solipsism, but it can nevertheless be characterized as idealist in contrast with the views of the Pāli canon schools.

In the following section I will argue that the apparent disagreements between the Pāli canon schools and Yogācāra are due to a mistaken interpretation of the doctrine of dependent arising, and I will propose a reading of this teaching that enables a unification.

Dependent arising

According to a common understanding, the core teaching of dependent arising (paṭiccasamuppāda) can be presented by the saying that all things arise in dependence on causes and conditions. Further, it is common to interpret it as a metaphysical principle of causal dependence or metaphysically real causation. By this I mean that it is taken as a principle of causal dependence that applies to the causal processes that constitute reality. Note that this metaphysical reading does not presume that causes and effects exist independently, and it does not presume that causes and effects have intrinsic self-natures. So it is compatible with the claim that all things are empty of an intrinsic self-nature, but it is a metaphysical principle nevertheless. Indeed, it is common to claim that dependent arising is *the* metaphysical principle of Buddhism.

This principle, so construed, has two versions that correspond to the two views on processes mentioned above. According to the first, the causal processes of dependent arising have constituents, which are the causes and effects that interact in those processes. Arguably, this is the view of the Sarvāstivāda. According to a second version, the causal processes of dependent arising are mere processes ("without a processed or a processor"). At the conventional level, we can distinguish causes and effects as parts of those processes, but they are not ontological constituents. This is the

Theravāda view. The Mahāyāna takes this one step further. Nāgārjuna, in particular, argued forcefully that we cannot in any way make sense of causes and effects, neither as existing independently nor as existing dependently. Indeed, Nāgārjuna argued that one cannot even make sense of the *arising* of causes and conditions. As King puts it, the "primary insight" of the Madhyamaka critique is that "conditioned arising is no arising" (1995: 117).

I will now argue that dependent arising is not a metaphysical principle of causation at all, and that it was never meant to be one. This is not the view of the Pāli canon schools, as they are commonly understood. But I will argue that this should be their view—given their commitment to the Pāli canon, they should not take dependent arising to be a metaphysical principle of reality. In contrast to the Madhyamaka critique, my argument and interpretation will enable us to dissolve the apparent disagreements within Buddhism.

The metaphysical interpretation assumes that dependent arising holds for the causal processes of the empirical world. We will see that this is a grave misinterpretation. Dependent arising is not a metaphysical principle that ranges over processes in the empirical world. It is, rather, a principle of fabrication. It tells us how the causes and conditions that make up our karmic tendencies give rise to the appearance of the phenomenal world. As this process is rooted in ignorance, it can be called a process of fabrication. It is false and it produces an illusory appearance. On this interpretation, dependent arising is not a principle of metaphysical reality, and its domain of application is not what takes place *within* the phenomenal world. It is a principle of fabrication, and its domain of application is the process that generates the false appearance of the phenomenal world. My argument for this comes in three steps.

First, it is often assumed that one can understand the principle of dependent arising by reflecting on the concepts involved with the help of examples of ordinary causation. This is a very common approach in Western philosophy. However, the Buddha explained the principle in conjunction with the teaching of the twelvefold chain (the twelve nidānas). Indeed, whenever the Buddha gave a detailed explanation of dependent arising, it was presented in terms of the twelvefold chain. This chain spells out how, exactly, dependent arising unfolds. As Gethin (1998: 149) says, the twelvefold chain is the Buddha's "elaboration of the teaching of dependent arising". Another good reason to reject the commonsense approach of reflecting on ordinary cases is provided by the Buddha's well-known saying that "whoever sees dependent co-arising sees the Dhamma" (MN 28). Given this, it cannot be right to understand dependent arising as a principle of causal dependence that applies to ordinary cases. For then everyone who grasps causal dependence, as ordinarily understood, should thereby be able to understand the very essence of the Buddha's teaching. Given this alone, it is clearly wrongheaded to explain dependent arising as ordinary causal dependence, based on reflection on ordinary cases. We should, rather, look to the twelvefold chain.

As the second step of my argument, let us consider whether we can give a metaphysical reading of dependent arising through the twelvefold chain. Here are the twelve links in the most commonly presented version (SN 12.2 and SN 22.5, for instance):

1. Ignorance (avijjā)
2. Tendencies, formations (saṅkhāra)
3. Discriminating consciousness (viññāṇa)
4. Name-and-form (nāmarūpa)
5. Sense bases (saḷāyatana)
6. Contact (phassa)

7. Sensation (vedanā)

8. Craving (taṇhā)

9. Grasping, clinging (upādāna)

10. Becoming (kammabhava)

11. Birth, ego-sense (jāti)

12. Death, aging, suffering (jarāmaraṇa, dukkha)

If we want to construe dependent arising as a metaphysical principle of causal dependence, we have to find the types of things that can be the relata of causal relationships: dependently arising "entities" that act as causes and effects. The relata may be construed as constituents, or they may exist only in dependence on the processes. Either way, we need relata. In particular, if we want to construe dependent arising as a metaphysical principle that applies to processes in the empirical world, we need to find relata that are the causes and effects of physical causation. Looking at the twelvefold chain, it seems easy to identify the best candidate for such physical relata: rūpa (in nāmarūpa). Rūpa seems to be the best candidate, because it is often assumed that rūpa can be translated as "body" or "material form". However, following Pine (2004), I suggest that this itself is a serious mistake. The most literal translation of rūpa is "form", and it is also translated as "bodily form". It may seem that there is no significant difference between the concept of a body and that of bodily form. But the two concepts belong to entirely distinct categories or ontological domains. A body is a material entity, whereas bodily form is the phenomenal appearance of a body. They are not the same at all. As Pine (2004: 59) points out, rūpa "does not actually refer to a concrete object but to the appearance of an object". It is "not an objective category but a subjective one". Moreover, it is inherently deceptive or illusory, because it falsely presents a "presumed outside to a presumed inside". To see why rūpa is inherently false

or deceptive, note that its arising is rooted in ignorance, according to the twelvefold chain. Further, rūpa is often part of the compound nāmarūpa. Nāma and rūpa arise in mutual dependence and they condition each other, and nāmarūpa arises, at the root, on the condition of ignorance. Given all this, it is clear that rūpa cannot be what we commonly call a body or material object, and it is clear that rūpa is not fit to play the role of the relata in processes of ordinary and physical causation. Looking at the twelvefold chain again, it is hard to see what else could play that role. So we are left without relata, and without relata we cannot make sense of dependent arising as a metaphysical principle of causation. Now, one may dispute the presented claims concerning the translation and nature of rūpa. But they receive further support from the following third and main step of the argument.

The twelvefold chain spells out how dependent arising unfolds. The most important point is that the entire chain is rooted in ignorance. This means that, given that the twelvefold chain is an elaboration of dependent arising, dependent arising is a principle that underlies the *unfoldment of ignorance*, as dependent arising is the principle that connects the twelve links. The twelvefold chain alone tell us, clearly, that dependent arising is not a metaphysical principle of causation, because it tells us that dependent arising unfolds or evolves ignorance and delusion. When we look at the second link this becomes even clearer. The second link (saṅkhāra) is translated as "tendencies" or "formations" and sometimes as "volition". The translation as "volition" is misleading, because it falsely suggests that they are volitional tendencies of individuals. Saṅkhāra are the tendencies or formative forces of karma, which are inherited from past actions, including previous lifetimes, and which give rise to one's current life circumstances, including one's body and conditioned mind (Bhikkhu Bodhi 2000: 45, Pine 2004: 63–64). Pine characterizes the process in which the tendencies give rise to the perception of

named forms as a “reproductive imagination” that projects the appearance of an external world and the individual mind that regards it as real. We do not have to decide whether this is the correct understanding of the tendencies, for what is clear from the chain itself is that they are the instrument through which the root condition unfolds the appearance and experience of the phenomenal world. As that root is ignorance itself, the arising of the phenomenal world can only be regarded as false or illusory. We are left with the conclusion that the principle that connects the links must be regarded as a principle of fabrication and illusion, not a metaphysical principle of reality.

The Pāli canon and Yogācāra

In essence, this reading of dependent arising is what we find in Yogācāra. This may not be as widely known as other parts of this teaching, as most of the recent debate on Yogācāra has focused on the ālaya consciousness and the question of whether or not Yogācāra is a kind of idealism. The postulation of the ālaya consciousness is actually best explained in light of the teaching of the twelvefold chain. The chain is puzzling in many respects and raises many questions. The most obvious question is perhaps how the formative forces of karma get transmitted from one lifetime to another. This question is especially obvious and pressing against the background of the assumption that all existence is momentary existence. Generally, if the formations (saṅkhāra) and the discriminating consciousness (viññāṇa) are only momentary, how can they cause the appearance of continuous entities, the named forms (nāmarūpa) that make up the phenomenal world? The postulation of the ālaya serves to answer such questions. We return to questions concerning the nature of the ālaya below. First let me show in more detail how my interpretation of dependent arising fits with the doctrines of Yogācāra.

In the *Tri-svabhāva-nirdeśa* it says that "the other dependent nature exists differently from the way in which it appears" (Wood 1991: 35). The "other dependent nature" is basically the phenomenal world as it appears due to causes and conditions. The text tells us that we cannot see its nature from how it appears to us. This means that we should not assume that we can readily observe the relevant causes and conditions when we look into the world with the ordinary (and unenlightened) mind. This supports my claim that the principle of dependent arising is not be understood as a metaphysical principle of ordinary causation. So what are the relevant causes and conditions? Here is the *Mahāyānasaṃgraha* II.15:

> [Why is the dependent nature] called "dependent"? Since it arises from its own seeds of latent tendencies […]. (Brunnhölzl 2018: 186)

The commentary clarifies that these are the seeds and tendencies of karma, accumulated from past actions and previous lifetimes. It is clear where we can locate this claim in the twelvefold chain. The dependent nature arises at the third link and then unfolds all the way up to the twelfth. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, a major source of Yogācāra, tells us:

> Thus is dependent reality based upon projection (or false imagination); from which name and form follow, giving rise to more projections. (Pine 2012: 161)[1]

This "projection" is the process in which the seeds and tendencies manifest as sense appearances to the sense consciousnesses (and the mental consciousness). As soon as a perception is apprehended, it is cognized as an object (or named form). Importantly, it is not the individual mind that projects (or falsely imagines). Rather, the individual mind

[1] Suzuki (1932) has "false imagination" where Pine has "projection". Pine translates *vikalpa* and *parikalpa* as "projection". Suzuki renders *vikapla* as "discrimination" and *parikalpa* as "imagination" and "false imagination". According to the *Laṅkāvatāra*, discrimination is always false discrimination, because it discriminates duality where there is none, and imagination implies discrimination, because it is the false imagination of duality, which falsely discriminates a subject-object duality.

is itself manifested by this process, which projects the appearance of the false duality of apprehended objects and apprehending subject. This passage also tells us that the apprehension of named forms feeds back into that very process of projection. According to this presentation, the second, the third, and the fourth link of the twelvefold chain are mutually interdependent, forming a self-sustaining or self-enforcing loop. In essence, this is the process by which the dependent nature arises from the karmic tendencies. What then is nature of the "other dependent"? The *Tri-svabhāva-nirdeśa* says that it "exists as an illusion" (Wood 1991: 34). Likewise the commentary to the *Mahāyānasaṃgraha* says that "this dependent nature has the nature of lacking a nature in that it lacks a nature in terms of arising […] it exists in a way similar to an illusion" (Brunnhölzl 2018: 1335).

Once the illusory appearances are grasped as independently existing entities, the "imaginary nature" arises, according to Yogācāra. In the twelvefold chain, this may be associated with the processes starting at the ninth link. The imaginary nature is the dependent nature *grasped* as duality—that this, falsely perceived as being populated with ego-subjects and mind-independent objects. It is crucial to note that the dependent nature is itself "falsely imagined", hence illusory. False imagination and illusion go deeper than the discrimination of duality, because the appearance that gives rise to the perception of duality is itself false and illusory. The twelvefold chain tells us why: the process that generates the appearance is rooted in ignorance. To borrow from the later Mahāyāna tradition of Dzogchen, Longchen Rabjam summarizes all of this concisely:

> The root of the appearance of the five aggregates, the eighteen constituents, and the twelve sense fields is the ordinary mind's mistaken discursive activity expressed from karma and defilement. (Padmakara Translation Group 2018: 79)

Likewise the *Laṅkāvatāra* says that "with habit-energy as cause all things are born in accordance with conditions of causation" (Suzuki 1932: 293). However, it also says that "all things are unborn because they are born of causation" (132). How are we to make sense of this? It seems to involve an obvious contradiction—and what does it mean to say that "things are unborn"? The sūtra says:

> Nothing whatever is born or ceases to exist by reason of causation; when causation is discriminated there is birth and cessation. (Suzuki 1932: 75)

In other words, nothing is ever really born, caused, or originated. Rather, when we discriminate appearances and make causal judgements, there seems to be causation. Causation is *never* metaphysically real causation. It is only ever constructed or fabricated. This is precisely what my interpretation of dependent arising entails.

One may wonder why there is talk of causes and conditions at all, if it is all false and illusory. One possible answer is to say that talk of causation is part of the teaching, and the purpose of teaching is to guide aspirants to enlightenment, not to propound a metaphysical theory of reality. We return to this line of reply below. Here we can give another answer. In one passage, Longchen Rabjam speaks of the "causes and conditions of delusion" (Thondup and Talbott 2014: 260) and he says that all appearances have "just the capacity to act for the deluded mind" (271). This helps to answer the question and it provides further support for my interpretation of dependent arising. Not only does the twelvefold chain spell out how dependent arising unfolds, but dependent arising is limited to interactions specified by the twelvefold chain. The interactions of dependent arising are all with or for the "deluded mind", because they are all rooted in ignorance. Importantly, this means that all the phenomena which appear as external objects do *not interact with each other*. They interact *only* with the deluded mind. The causation of dependent arising is not at all like ordinary causation or physical causation, and so we

can see now that the construal of dependent arising as a universal principle of metaphysical causation is altogether mistaken.

To a large extent, Yogācāra merely makes explicit what is contained in the Pāli canon, in particular the twelvefold chain. The central teaching of Yogācāra is that of the three natures: the imaginary, the dependent, and the perfected nature. It makes clear that the dependent nature is itself false and illusory, which means that the principle of dependent arising is a principle of false and illusory perception—a principle of fabrication, as I have called it. This is just what is contained in the twelvefold chain, and so my interpretation of dependent arising is not really an interpretation. It is the most obvious and literal reading of what the teaching says. It says that the discriminative consciousness (viññāṇa) of named forms (nāmarūpa) is generated by karmic formations (saṅkhāra) which are rooted in ignorance (avijjā). This is the literal reading of the first four links of the twelvefold chain. It implies that the phenomenal world, which is basically the appearance of named forms, is false and illusory. We tend to either overlook or discard this literal reading, because we find it so difficult and perhaps impossible to believe. We cannot help but think that this world must be made up of something. If that are not entities with intrinsic self-natures, then it must at least be made up of the mere processes of dependent arising. This belief in an objective world gives rise to the various interpretations. The literal reading, in contrast, says that not even the processes are truly real or objective. It says that the phenomenal world is false and illusory because it is rooted in ignorance and fabricated by the discriminating mind. Many contemporary Buddhist writings assume or imply that the root ignorance distorts our perception of the world. This implies that there is an objective world behind the distortion. However, the teaching of the twelvefold chains says something much more radical. The tendencies and formations of karma, which are rooted in ignorance, do not

distort the perception of the world. Rather, they *give rise* to the appearance and perception of the phenomenal world, which does not exist in any other way. For many this may be too hard or too absurd to swallow—but this is what the teaching says.

The unity of the Pāli canon and Yogācāra

Let us now consider whether there is fundamental disagreement between Yogācāra and the Pāli canon, according to the four potential disagreements identified above. First, there should be no disagreement concerning the existence and nature of the empirical world. According to the interpretation of dependent arising that I argued for, the Pāli canon is in full agreement with Yogācāra in the view that the empirical world is a false and illusory appearance rooted in ignorance and projected by karmic tendencies. Second, there is no disagreement concerning the existence and nature of an individual self. This follows from the first point, as the individual or empirical self is included in the false and illusory appearance of the empirical world. Third, there is no disagreement concerning the existence and nature of ultimate reality. Both traditions hold that the ultimate nature of things is emptiness or suchness. This amounts to the claim that individual things can be individuated only conventionally, not ontologically, which amounts to the claim that there is no real multiplicity of things. Ultimately, indivisible suchness is all there is.

Some Yogācāra scriptures and later Mahāyāna traditions such as Dzogchen seem to go beyond the Pāli canon when they refer to suchness as the Buddha nature, the Buddha mind, or the true nature of the mind. However, “Buddha nature” is a synonym for suchness, and there are passages in the Pāli canon that characterize the ultimate and enlightenment as a kind of mind. Consider the following:

> Freed, dissociated, & released from form, the Tathāgata dwells with unrestricted awareness. Freed, dissociated, & released from feeling… perception… fabrications… consciousness… birth… aging… death… suffering & stress… defilement, the Tathāgata dwells with unrestricted awareness. (AN 10.81, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu 2017: 1854)
>
> Consciousness without surface, without end, luminous all around: here water, earth, fire, & wind have no footing. With the cessation of [conditioned] consciousness, each is here brought to an end. (DN 11, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu 2017: 86)

The realization of the Buddha is here clearly characterized as a kind of consciousness or mind. Of course this cannot be the conditioned mind that arises from the karmic seeds and tendencies. It is, rather, that which remains when the conditioned mind is uprooted. Given this, it is also clear that there is no disagreement concerning the ultimate aim. The ultimate aim is the end of suffering or liberation from saṃsāra. This is characterized negatively as the cessation of all conditioned phenomena and dualistic experience—the cessation of the twelve links that ensues when ignorance and the karmic seeds are uprooted. Positively, it is characterized in some Mahāyāna schools as the realization of the true nature of the mind, or Buddha mind, and according to the quoted passages of the Pāli canon, it can be described as the realization of an unrestricted awareness or unconditioned and pure consciousness.

We can conclude here that there is no fundamental disagreement. But Yogācāra clearly goes beyond the Pāli canon with the claim that the accumulation of karma requires the assumption of an entity that transmits seeds and tendencies. That is the role of the ālaya consciousness. Let me now explain why this does not constitute a fundamental disagreement.

First, the assumption of the ālaya does not result in any other conflict or disagreement, because the ālaya is assumed as an explanatory background condition that helps us to see how the second link of the karmic formations can connect the root ignorance with the appearance of the world. So the assumption of the ālaya does not affect the twelvefold chain or any other core teaching of the Pāli canon. More importantly, the ālaya is postulated as an explanatory entity but not as an additional ontological entity. The *Mahāyānasaṃgraha* tells us that the ālaya is "neither substantially different nor not different" from the seeds that it accumulates and that it arises in dependence on those "beginningless latent tendencies" (Brunnhölzl 2018: 162–163). In other words, it is nothing over and above the seeds and tendencies. So while the ālaya is introduced for explanatory purposes it does not expand the ontology. Further, when the question of its nature is further pressed, the *Mahāyānasaṃgraha* says that the ālaya is itself "like an illusion, a mirage, a dream" (176). As it arises itself in dependence on the seeds and tendencies, it arises in dependence on ignorance. It is itself false and illusory.

Why add the ālaya when it is false and illusory and how can it be explanatory when it is not real? Here it is appropriate to point to the purpose of teaching. The ālaya is not explanatory in a metaphysical sense, because it does not really exist. But it is explanatory in the context of teaching, which is the teaching of the unenlightened. As ordinary beings are under the spell of the root ignorance, it does make sense to help them in their understanding of the teaching by adding the ālaya as an explanatory postulate.

Here is another way to look at this. We may say that Yogācāra does not add anything substantial by adding the ālaya, because in doing so it merely introduces a distinction between a potentiality and its actuality. In essence, the ālaya is nothing but the sum total of ignorance and karma in its potential or latent form. The twelvefold chain spells out

how this potential is manifested or actualized in phenomenal appearance. So, to add the ālaya does not add anything substantial. It merely adds an explanatory layer for the sake of teaching.

Madhyamaka and the unity of Buddhism

The proposed interpretation of dependent arising through the twelvefold chain enabled us to see that there is no fundamental disagreement between Yogācāra and the Pāli canon. Now we will see that the Madhyamaka can be aligned with this reading as well, giving us a full unification of the three main strands of Buddhism. Most of the work has been done, because we have already seen that the Pāli canon can be unified with the "primary insight" of the Madhyamaka analysis "that conditioned arising is no arising" (King 1995: 117). Conditioned arising is not real arising because it fabricates false appearance based on karma and ignorance and for the deluded mind. Nāgārjuna expressed this beautifully (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 7.34, Padmakara Translation Group 2008: 26):

> Like a dream and like a mirage,
> Like a city of gandharvas,
> So arising, abiding, and cessation have been taught.

Of course, Nāgārjuna does not mean to reject the teaching of dependent arising. Rather, he makes the point that dependent arising is not real origination or causation and that not even the phenomena of the empirical world truly arise, as they appear only to the conditioned mind and only in dependence on ignorance and delusion.

The main issue to be addressed here concerns ultimate reality. Yogācāra and Madhyamaka agree that suchness is the nature of ultimate reality. As mentioned, in Yogācāra suchness is sometimes referred to as the true nature of the mind.

Madhyamaka may seem to be at odds with this claim that the ultimate is a kind of mind or consciousness.

According to Longchen Rabjam, Nāgārjuna does not "refute appearance" but "just the thought that things are truly real" (Padmakara Translation Group 2017: 185). The passage quoted above supports this. If arising, abiding, and cessation occur in the manner of dreams, magic, and illusion, then the *appearance* of arising, abiding, and cessation is affirmed. The phenomenal world is affirmed as phenomenal. But when one affirms the appearance, one must also admit some kind of mind or consciousness. For as Nāgārjuna implies, it can be known that the appearance is false and illusory. Spiritual awakening is sometimes compared to lucid dreaming—it is said to be like becoming aware of being in a dream while the dream continues. If it can be known that a dream is just a dream, there must a mind or consciousness that knows that. In the case of enlightenment, this knowing mind cannot be the conditioned mind. It must be an unconditioned mind or pure consciousness. This is precisely what the Pāli canon says, as we have seen. So given that logic demands it, and given that the Pāli canon holds it, why can Madhyamaka not admit that suchness is a kind of mind or consciousness? I cannot see any good doctrinal reason why Madhyamaka should have to resist the claim. Given all this, we can also see why it is not incoherent or problematic for Dzogchen to be committed to the Madhyamaka and to refer to suchness as a timelessly self-knowing and pure awareness.

It is sometimes said that Buddhism should not admit a pure mind or consciousness, because this may become the object of attachment to a self. However, this is a poor argument. First, the argument concerns the pragmatics of teaching. It is a purely didactic reason that does not stem from, or give rise to, a fundamental doctrinal disagreement. Second, even as a mere path instruction, there is no obvious reason to

think that all practitioners should be bound by it. At certain stages of the path, there may be a tendency or risk to get attached to a certain notion of a self. More advanced practitioners may leave that behind. Most importantly, attachment to a self is a danger only when the object of attachment is either the individual and embodied self or a concept of a self. For if the self in question is *pure* mind or consciousness itself, what would one get attached to? More to the point, only the *notion* of a pure mind or consciousness can become the *object* of attachment. Pure mind or consciousness *itself* can never be the object of any attitude, because pure mind or consciousness cannot be objectified in any way.

The bottom line is that we have not found good reason to maintain a fundamental doctrinal disagreement between Madhyamaka and the unified view of Yogācāra and the Pāli canon. We can conclude that the main strands of Buddhism can be unified by their shared views concerning the nature of the world, the self, ultimate reality, and their highest aim and good.

The Unity of Buddhism and Vedānta

Now we will see that this unified view of Buddhism can be fully unified with Advaita Vedānta and that a significant unification can be established with Vedānta in general. Let us begin with the apparent disagreement concerning the existence and nature of ultimate reality. King (1995: 138) distilled the disagreement between Madhyamaka and Advaita Vedānta to the following two claims: “There is no birth” for Madhyamaka and “There is an Unborn” for Advaita. This analysis can be generalized. Concerning ultimate reality, Buddhism holds that there is no birth, in the sense that there is no real origination, and all three Vedānta schools seem to hold that there is an unborn (Brahman or absolute self). But when we look more closely, we find in both traditions

qualifications and clarifications that enable a unification. First, does Vedānta really assert that "There is an Unborn"? This may seem obvious, as Vedānta holds that Brahman alone is real and that it is unborn. However, Vedānta clarifies that Brahman cannot be said to exist in the sense in which objects or entities are said to exist. "Existence" is a relative notion that belongs to the empirical world, and Brahman transcends all relative and finite notions. Speaking strictly, we cannot say that there exists an unborn. We find this point in many Vedānta scriptures. For instance, quoting from the *Bhagavad Gītā* (XIII.12), Śaṅkarā says that the absolute ātman, identical with Brahman, is called "neither existent nor non-existent" (*Upadeśasāhasri*, Prose Part 1.8, Mayeda 1992: 214). Later on, speaking from his own realization, Śaṅkarā proclaims "I am neither existent nor non-existent nor both, being alone and auspicious" (Metrical Part 13.20, Mayeda 1992: 133). Strictly speaking, all we can say about the absolute is "not this, not this" (neti neti). Brahman is that "wherefrom words turn back along with the mind" (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II.IX.1). Even to say that it exists is problematic, because we say of finite objects that they exist. However, according to Vedānta, we cannot deny the existence of Brahman either. In the commentary on the *Brahma Sūtras* III.iii.17, Śaṅkarā resolves this by saying that the absolute self is existence itself, indicating that it is not something, some object, of which we say that it exists. Brahman is pure consciousness and pure being—it is existence or presence itself. It is the substratum of all appearance but does not exist as some object or entity.

We find very similar dialectics within Buddhism, where it is often stressed that suchness cannot be said to exist. The commonly given reason is also that we cannot simply assert the existence of suchness, because we assert the existence of ordinary objects and beings. But as with Brahman, its existence cannot be denied either. Suchness is, after all, the true nature of all there is. In the *Tri-svabhāva-nirdeśa* it says

that the perfected nature, which is in essence suchness or the Buddha nature, is "said to exist and to not exist" (Wood 1991: 37).[2] Similar claims of "neither existent nor not-existent" can be found in many texts of all Buddhist traditions. In the *Tulku Tsulo*, a Tibetan scripture, we find the claim that suchness is the "original face of one's own mind" and that this "primal mind", or Buddha mind, is unborn and non-existent (Thondrup and Dowman 2018: 111). Then this is qualified by the claim that it can be said to exist "in the sense that it sees its own nature by itself" (112). It is real insofar as it is by nature self-aware. Similar claims are common in Vedānta. Śaṅkarā says in the *Upadeśasāhasri* that "I am always of the nature of seeing" (Metrical Part 12.9, Mayeda 1992: 130) to express the point that the absolute self is not an entity that sees. It is seeing or pure consciousness itself, and it is said to be self-knowing or self-effulgent.

We can conclude that the two traditions agree that, strictly speaking, ultimate reality cannot be said to exist even though its reality cannot be denied. Nevertheless, it can be said in both traditions that the ultimate is absolutely real insofar as its reality is non-relative and non-finite, hence absolute. Further, both traditions agree that the ultimate is real insofar as it is immutable, and they agree that it is an unconditioned and pure mind or consciousness. Finally, we may note here that the realization of ultimate reality is described as supreme peace or pure bliss in both traditions—even Nāgārjuna says of suchness that "it is peace" (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 18.9).

Let us turn then to the ultimate aim and good. Here a disagreement may be seen to arise from the predominantly negative characterizations of enlightenment as cessation in Buddhism, whereas in Vedānta we find predominantly positive characterizations in terms of the realization of pure consciousness. However, closer inspection shows that

[2] According to Wood (1991: 10), the perfected nature is the absolute suchness. According to Suzuki (1932: xxxv), the perfected nature is the perfect wisdom of directly seeing suchness.

we find very similar negative and positive characterizations in both traditions. As we have seen, even some passages in the Pāli canon characterize enlightenment in terms of the attainment or realization of an unrestricted awareness or pure consciousness, and later Buddhist traditions such as Yogācāra and Dzogchen are very explicit about this. In Vedānta we find many negative characterizations that are very similar to Buddhist formulations in terms of cessation. The Buddha characterized his enlightenment by saying that form, feeling, perception, tendencies, and consciousness have all been "cut off at the root" (MN 72, Wood 1991: 3). Śaṅkarā would seem to provide a concise summary of this characterization, surely unintentionally, when he describes liberation as the "cessation of the phenomenal universe of duality" (Commentary on the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* 1, Swāmī Gambhīrānanda 1958: 171).

There is full agreement concerning the ultimate aim. The aim is to end suffering and saṃsāra through enlightenment. According to both traditions, this entails the cessation of the dualistic subject-object experience of the world and the realization of an unconditioned awareness or pure consciousness. Both traditions face the question of how this can possibly be attained while alive. Does the cessation of the phenomenal world not entail death? Both traditions can respond by pointing out that the body is always a mere appearance. As Śaṅkarā says, "embodiment is the result of false perception" rooted in ignorance (*Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* I.i.4, Swāmī Gambhīrānanda 1965: 42). This is exactly what the twelvefold chain tells us about the nature of the body, which is a named form (nāmarūpa). What happens at enlightenment is that the true nature of the body is realized, which does not affect the appearance as such. Likewise, the phenomenal world does not altogether disappear. Rather, it ceases to appear as a dualistic reality. It is realized to be *mere* appearance. This helps to explain why both traditions frequently use the same analogies, comparing the world appearance

to a dream, a mirage, or an illusion. Like with a mirage, when we see through the illusion, the mere appearance of water remains, but it ceases to appear as real water.

Given this, we can see that there is no fundamental disagreement between Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta concerning the existence and nature of the empirical world. According to both, the appearance of the world as a dualistic reality is rooted in ignorance and fabrication that is fuelled by karmic tendencies. As it says in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, "there is nothing (here) that is not the result of karma" (I.ii.12, Swāmī Gambhīrānanda 1958: 102). Or as Śaṅkarā says in somewhat more detail, "the perception of external objects is owing to their seed in the form of ignorance, desire, and action" (Commentary on the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VIII.6.3, Swāmī Gambhīrānanda 2003: 612). As we have seen, this is basically what the twelvefold chain says about how the phenomenal world emerges from the karmic tendencies. Interestingly, according to Śaṅkarā, māyā plays essentially the same role in Vedānta as the ālaya consciousness in Yogācāra. The ālaya is the sum total of the seeds and tendencies, and it is postulated to explain the manifestation of the phenomenal world. Śaṅkarā says that māyā is "inferred" as that which "appears to be the seed of name and form" (Commentary on the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad II.I.3, Swāmī Gambhīrānanda 1958: 111). Brahman is immutable and cannot be an acting cause. For this reason, an agent must be assumed to explain the world appearance. Hence the postulation of māyā. Like the ālaya, māyā is not a real entity, according to Advaita. It is itself rooted in ignorance, and its nature cannot be determined—it is itself like a dream, a mirage, an illusion.

So far we have full agreement between Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta. But it cannot be denied that disagreements remain with respect to the two minor schools of Vedānta. In essence, the disagreements stem from a very different interpretation of māyā. According to Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita Vedānta, māyā is a real entity and it is given a

much more positive role. Māyā is not primarily the illusion that deludes us, but the creative power of Brahman. On this view, the world is a real creation after all. In particular, there is real multiplicity according both Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita Vedānta.

The situation is similar when we turn to the question of the individual self. Again this follows insofar as the individual self is part of the phenomenal world. Buddhism and Advaita agree that the individual self is a false and illusory appearance. Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita Vedānta hold that there is an individual self, which is ultimately identical with the absolute self but does nevertheless possess real individuality. Buddhism, of course, is very reluctant to admit any kind of self, let alone an absolute self. However, given that suchness is the Buddha nature and given that the Buddha nature is the true nature of all sentient beings, this dispute is merely verbal. Both traditions hold that our true nature is the same as the nature of ultimate reality. Vedānta calls it our true self, Buddhism calls it our Buddha nature.

Concluding remarks on the remaining differences

What should we make, then, of the remaining disagreements with Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita Vedānta? There are several perspectives that one may take here in order to show that these disagreements are not as divisive or fundamental as they may seem.

First of all, it is worth reiterating that Advaita is by far the most important and influential of the Vedānta schools. Given this, we have established a very substantial and significant unification of Buddhism with Advaita Vedānta.

Second, we should remember that we are discussing spiritual teachings, not the doctrines of philosophical theories. Buddhism and Vedānta make it very clear that their goal is spiritual enlightenment. Reasoning and metaphysical theorizing have a role to play, but in the end all theories are vacuous, as no theory or conceptual framework can

capture the nature of the ultimate and as no amount of reasoning and theorizing can lead to its realization. Given that, remaining disagreements concerning the nature of the phenomenal world seem relatively minor after all. They may seem important and fundamental from the perspective of Western philosophy, but they are ultimately insignificant for those who see Buddhism and Vedānta for what they are: spiritual teachings. In connection with that we can note that both traditions differentiate levels of teaching. Arguably, the mentioned disagreements dissolve once we acknowledge that Buddhism and Advaita teach primarily at the highest level or from the highest truth, whereas Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita Vedānta are more accommodating of commonsense beliefs and the conceptual attachments of spiritual aspirants.

Finally, recall the assumptions that I introduced at the beginning. If enlightenment is possible at all, it seems that there can only be one kind of enlightenment, and if there is only one kind of enlightenment, then Buddhism and Vedānta must be talking about one and the same realization in different vocabularies. These, I suggested, are very plausible assumptions and they provide us with good reason to favour Advaita over Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita Vedānta. For if there is only one kind of enlightenment, we have reason to favour the school of Vedānta that can be aligned with Buddhism. Likewise, if there is only one kind of enlightenment, we have reason to favour a reading of the Buddha's teachings that can be aligned with other spiritual traditions that speak of enlightenment as the unconditional end of suffering and unease.

References

Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.) (2000). *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Brunnhölzl, K. (ed. and trans.) (2018). *A Compendium of the Mahāyāna: Asaṅga's Mahāyānasaṃgraha and its Indian and Tibetan Commentaries*. Boulder: Snow Lion.

Gethin, R. (1998). *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

King, R. (1995). *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Mayeda, S. (ed. and trans.) (1992). *A Thousand Teachings: The Upadeśasāhasri of Śaṅkara*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Padmakara Translation Group (trans.) (2008). *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way: The Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Boulder: Shambhala.

Padmakara Translation Group (trans.) (2017). *Finding Rest in the Nature of Mind*. Boulder: Shambhala.

Padmakara Translation Group (trans.) (2018). *Finding Rest in Illusion*. Boulder: Shambhala.

Pine, R. (trans.) (2004). *The Heart Sutra*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint.

Pine. R. (trans.) (2012). *The Lankavatara Sutra: Translation and Commentary*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint.

Suzuki, D. T. (trans.) (1932). *The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra: A Mahāyāna Text*. London: Routledge Kegan Paul.

Swāmī Gambhīrānanda (trans.) (1958). *Eight Upaniṣads With the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama.

Swāmī Gambhīrānanda (trans.) (1965). *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya.* Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama.

Swāmī Gambhīrānanda (trans.) (2003). *Chāndogya Upaniṣad With the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (trans.) (2017). Handful of Leaves: An Anthology from the Sutta Piṭaka. Metta Forest Monastery Valley Center.

Thondrup, T. (trans.) and Dowman, K. (ed.) (2018). *Boundless Vision: Tulku Tsulo*. Dzogchen Now! Books.

Thondup, T. (trans.) and Talbott, H. (ed.) (2014). *The Practice of Dzogchen: Longchen Rabjam's Writings on the Great Perfection*. Boston, MA: Snow Lion.

Wood, T. E. (1991). *Mind Only: A Philosophical and Doctrinal Analysis of the Vijñānavāda*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.