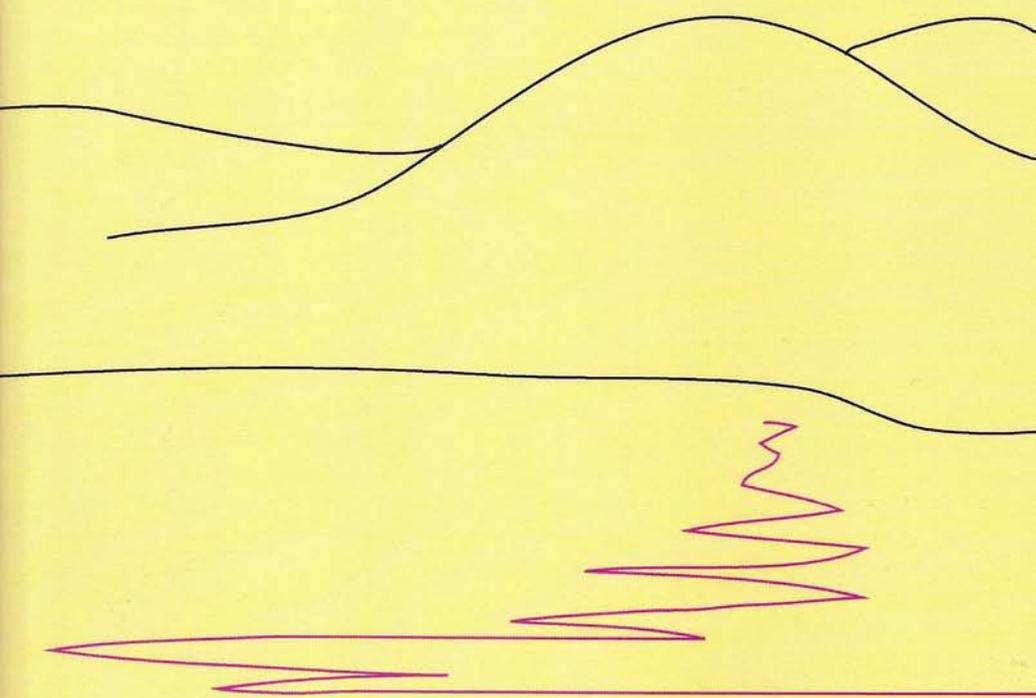


The Influence of Yogacara
on Mahamudra



Traleq Kyabgon



Shared Concepts of Yogacara and Mahamudra

What is the relationship of Yogacara philosophy to Buddhist tantra? People generally ignore the way Yogacara philosophy has influenced Buddhist tantra and its development. This relationship is never discussed explicitly, even though Yogacara thought is quite patent in the writings of Buddhist tantra. You can easily trace notions in tantric literature back to Yogacara philosophy. Yogacara philosophy itself developed as a reaction to overtheorization and came to emphasize individual experience and practice; hence, the name *yogacara*, which means “practitioners of yoga.” Yoga here does not mean twiddling with your toes or practicing asanas; it means meditation. So Yogacara, or practitioners of yoga, refers to meditators. Yogacara, as a system, was developed by two brothers, called Asanga and Vasubandhu. They developed the philosophy in such a way that everything came back to our own practice, our own experience. You could not theorize about Yogacara philosophy without meditating. In fact, you could not be a Yogacarin philosopher unless you meditated. If you look at the writings of the Yogacarins, you will discover that they mention many tantric concepts, either implicitly or explicitly.

There are certain crucial concepts that both Yogacara

philosophy and Buddhist tantra share, such as transforming unhealthy or unwholesome psychological aspects of ourselves into something higher or more elevated. In other words, we do not perceive our negativities, such as the emotions of passion, aggression, ignorance, stupidity, confusion, or whatever, as something to dispense with. We view them as something that should be transformed or mutated. The nature of our psychological makeup is not altered; however, the way these negativities manifest becomes completely different. That is a very important tantric concept, as many of you may know. Transforming our neuroses and emotional instabilities is very much a part of the tantric approach. We do not reject what is bothering us; we learn to accept and transform it. We can, in fact, trace those ideas to the original Yogacarin writings.

Another very important concept that is also common to Yogacara philosophy and to Buddhist tantra is the emphasis on the enlightened nature of every human being. Both the Yogacara and tantric schools emphasize the fact that every single human being is fundamentally enlightened. Ignorance and confusion are totally incidental to that fundamental awakened state; they are not at all intrinsic to human nature. Human nature is held to be totally enlightened and sane, and no amount of negativity or emotional instability, whatever it may be, can corrupt that basic intrinsic intelligence or basic wisdom—that basic enlightened nature.

In Yogacara writings, that is known as *tathagatagarbha*. *Tathagatagarbha* actually means “womb of enlightenment.” Our enlightened nature exists as a potentiality, just as a womb has the potential to accommodate a being. Every human being possesses *tathagatagarbha*, this womb of enlightenment. Normally, *tathagatagarbha* is translated as “buddha nature.” Buddha nature is actually a Yogacarin concept. Buddhists tend to associate buddha

nature with the Mahayana in general, but that is not true. Not all Mahayana schools go along with that idea. The Madhyamaka school, for instance, rejects the notion of tathagatagarbha altogether, because for them it is just another concept. Madhyamikas reject any kind of metaphysical concept. For them, the tathagatagarbha notion was taught by the Buddha only for beginners so that they will gradually wake up to the fact that Madhyamaka is the answer. It is just a warm up exercise, an *entrée*, whereas the main course has not yet been presented.

The tantric tradition also employs the notion of tathagatagarbha, but it is expressed in a different way. It is called “clear light” (*’od gsal*), which is not a particularly good translation. It is also translated as “luminosity.” That is the same concept as tathagatagarbha, because it expresses the fundamental sense of the incorruptibility of human nature. That is an aspect that we will explore further as we go along.

The next important concept is the notion of *shunyata* or “emptiness.” Shunyata normally has a negative connotation, where it is taken to mean that things have no any inherent existence or that things have no real substantiality. The lack of that substantiality is known as emptiness. However, in Yogacara philosophy, emptiness begins to assume a positive connotation. That is also true in tantra. Emptiness is no longer regarded as the total negation of the substantiality of things. It begins to assume the role of the absolute, the ground upon which the phenomenal world actually functions and exists. It becomes an affirmative negation.

This is very interesting. Normally, when we negate something that is the end of it. However, in the Yogacarin and tantric conception of things, negation itself becomes the affirmation of something we normally cannot access. Shunyata is a reality we can perceive and tune into—not through the ordinary means of knowledge—but through a higher form of knowledge. As we begin to transform our

negativities into something positive and higher, we also begin to apprehend reality or shunyata in a much more precise way. In tantra shunyata is even called “the unshakable vajra.” It is so real and so solid we cannot deny its existence. To say that in strict Madhyamaka terms would be shocking. When the chair you sit on is insubstantial, and the glass you drink from is insubstantial, how could emptiness—something that we cannot even see—be more real and more solid than them? Yogacarins and tantrikas almost, in some ways, substantiate the notion of emptiness. It becomes the ground or the reality upon which the phenomenal or relative world actually exists.

The last concept we could discuss is the emphasis both schools place on the workings of the mind. Yogacarins and tantrikas do not speculate about the world. They reduce both subject and object to the workings of mind. Our understanding of the phenomenal world is due to the mind. Whatever we experience, in terms of subject and object duality, is due to the mind, so mind is the cause from which everything stems. Both schools share that view and say that the mind not only creates subject and object; it also creates samsara and nirvana. The attainment of liberation is due to mind and our bondage to samsara is due to mind. No matter whether we are freed or bound, it is all due to the workings of mind. Liberation can be achieved only by working with and transforming our negative states of mind into something much more positive.

We will go into some detail about all these points in the following chapters so that we can take each point as we go along and gradually try to absorb it. The connection between tantra and Yogacara has not really been discussed enough. As far as the tantric side is concerned, we will not discuss the lower tantras too much, because they are ritually rather than philosophically oriented. We will concern ourselves more with the philosophical concepts of tantra

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