Only Knowing: Commentary on Vasubandhu’s Trimsika-karika

(Thirty Verses) of Vasubandhu
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1. Atma-dharma-upacaro hi vividho yah pravartate
Vijnana-parinamo’sau parinamah sa ca tridha

Anything spoken of
are all either “self” or “event”
and this is what has become of knowing.

This becoming has three aspects:

All of your experiences, anything that you might point to, name or conceive of, happens for you in the context of “self” and “event” or “experiencer” and “experience”, “self” and “other”, “this” and “that”. Since everything that you know happens in this way, knowing itself becomes dualistic within your experience. This dualism has three aspects.

2. Vipako mananakhyasca vijnaptir-visayasya ca
Tatra-alayakhya vipakah sarvabijakam

The “ripening,” what we can call “reflexiveness,”
and the “perceiving of objects”.

The “ripening” can also be described as
a storehouse containing all possibilities.

The first aspect is called the “ripening,” the second is “reflexiveness,” and the third aspect involves the “perceiving of objects” as the level of everyday dualistic experience. This third aspect is the one that beings

are most commonly aware of and with. The purpose of describing these three aspects is to direct attention to the underlying structures of delusion so that they may be opened.

The first aspect, the ripening, can also be described as a storehouse containing all possibilities or seeds of experience. (It is important to remember that this is a description of a function, and not an ontological or cosmological statement, since these aspects are not in themselves "things.") This is also called "alaya vijnana" and is the basic and total field of knowing or the fact of experiencing. Alaya vijnana contains all possibilities of experience because it is impossible to experience anything without experiencing it. The alaya is open knowing and contains both the possibilities of confusion and the resulting suffering and dis-satisfaction that arise through confusion, and the possibility of realizing the nature of alaya itself in which there is no objectification or subjectivity either. Due to this, later developments in Yogacharin thought and in Sino-Tibetan forms of practice such as Mahamudra, Dzog-chen and Zen would sometimes qualify these two possibilities as grounds for speaking of alaya not only as the eighth consciousness (underlying the six consciousnesses of sensory experience and mental consciousness and the seventh consciousness which Vasubandhu calls the "reflexive") but to further subdivide it into alaya as the "ground of confusion" and the "alaya of alaya", a ninth consciousness which is the "ground of awakening". The possibility of awakening to the true nature of alaya was also later identified with the tathagatagarbha or "Buddhanature", the inherent capacity for all beings to realize ultimate liberation from conditioned cycles of dualistic experience.

3. Asamviditaka-upadisthana-vijnaptikam ca tat
Sada sparsa-manaskara-vit-sanjna-cetana-anvitam

Here the ideas of grasping and localization
are as yet unknown,
although it has contact, attention,
thinking, perceiving and volition.

The alaya vijnana has no activity of grasping at and identifying with or rejecting any element of experience, but this does not mean that it is some vague state of unconsciousness; it has the same mental activities as confused modes of experience such as the ability to perceive and think and know. However, these do not occur with any kind of localization or contraction into "self" and "event". Instead, whatever is known is simply the activity of knowing itself.

4. Upeksa vedana tatra-anvrta-avyakrtam ca tat
Tatha sparsa-adayas-tac-ca vartate srotasaugha-vat

Here there is a feeling of balance,
nothing is hidden or separate,
and so it is with contact and the others.

It moves like a river's flow

In the ripening or alaya there is no reactivity, no feeling of loss or gain, acceptance or rejection. Nothing is hidden or separate because all experience arises as the play of experience. All mental activity occurs in this way, flowing easily.

5. Tasya vyavrtir-arhattve tad asritya pravartate
Tad-alambanam mano-nama vijnanam mananatmakam

but ceases with the attainment of freedom.

Dependent upon the perfecting consciousness,
and having objectified it,
is the consciousness called "manas"
which is basically reflexive.

However this "flowing" of alaya still contains the possibility of confusion. When one realizes the nature of "thatness" or the Actual Nature of all that is and awakens to reality from the dreams of dualism, alaya can no longer become the ground for being confused about and ignorant of this fundamental freedom. As well, at that point, it is no longer reasonable to talk about knowing "flowing" or being "active" because it is realized that there is only Awareness and there is nothing else or other; thus there is nowhere for Awareness to flow to. Within awakened experience it is impossible to talk about flowing or movement because it is beyond reference point and so has been called nirvana or "cessation".

When this open quality of alaya (the "ripening" or "perfecting") flows into the possibility of objectification, knowing is conceived of as a self. This "conception" is not merely intellectual; it is a folding back upon itself, a contraction of reflexiveness. Vasubhandhu calls this the "manas;" later Yogacharins will call it "klisto-manas," which means something like "diseased mind."

6. Klesais-caturbhih sahitam nivrta-avyakrtai sada
Atma-drsti-atma-moha-atma mana-atma-sneha-sanjnitai

Inherent to this are the four afflictions,
obscure and indistinct:
Seeing through the perspective of a self,
self-delusion, self-conceit and self-love.

As soon as experience is tunneled into self and event, into experiencer and experience, it has four afflictions that are inherent to it. These are "obscure and indistinct" because they are inherent to the reflexive consciousness or manas and so are not apparent to it. Nevertheless, they actively delimit the scope of view and condition what is seen, just as assumptions colour any investigation that does not bring those assumptions to light.

Everything is thus seen from the perspective of the self: there is the delusion that the self is real and separate from everything else that arises within experience, there is grasping at this self as more important than anything else, and everything is done or not done only for the sake of this illusory self.

7. Yatrajas-tanmayair-anyaih sparsa-adyais-ca arhato na tat
Na nirodha-samapattan marge lokattare na ca

Wherever the reflexive mind arises
contact and the other events occur with this same quality.

It does not arise for those who are free,
nor with the attainment of cessation,
nor in the path beyond worlds.

All mental events then occur according to this dualistic predisposition. The confusion of dualism is not inherent or necessary to experience at all and for those who question into and realize the Actual Nature of Awareness and of what arises within it, there is no further possibility of its arising.

The "attainment of cessation" or "nirodha" has sometimes been translated as a "suppression of consciousness", that is to say, a state of refined concentration or jhana. However, in Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakosa, he uses this term as a synonym for nirvana. Therefore it should not be taken to mean a conditional state of absorption through the avoidance of the activity of perception and cognition, but rather the cessation of confusion and conditioned experience. The text provides a description of the structures through which knowing becomes confused about itself; obviously, Vasubandhu's purpose is to aid in the direct insight into the structures of delusion so that they can be clarified into sheer knowing, and so he would not equate the conditional experience of yogic jhanas with the realization that arises through such direct insight.

The phrase "path beyond the worlds" is another synonym for freedom and means that no "worlds" or "realms" of experience arise when there is no objectification or subjectivity.

8. Dvitiyah parinamo yam tritiyah sad-vidhasya ya
Visayasya-upalabdhih sa kusala-akusala-advaya

This is the second transformation.
The third is the perception of the six kinds of objects
which are then good, bad or indifferent.

"Manas" is the second aspect of the development from the open quality of alaya to the world of dualistic, everyday experience of confused beings. This is the third development in which there seem to be "objects" which are "known", "seen", "heard", "felt", "tasted", "smelled". Usual consensual thought states it as a certainty that there is a world of objects which provide the "raw data" for sensory contact and experience. However, no such objects can ever be found anywhere; only the experiences of knowing, seeing, hearing and so on can be experienced or found to occur.

In primitive thought about the nature of reality, people would observe that it was raining. Since they did not understand that "rain" is the interaction between numberless elements such as atmospheric pressures and so on, they believed that there was some kind of entity behind the rain that made it happen. Thus, there was a god of rain. Since experience simply presents itself, and people don't understand how or why, they naively assume that there is "something" which is being experienced. This naivety then leads to mistaken behaivour which leads to conflict, suffering, wars, poverty and the other themes that run throughout human history.

When experience is thus objectified into "things" and are seen from the point of view of the "self", they are interpreted as being "good", that is to say worth grasping at; "bad" or threatening or unpleasant; and "indifferent" or not worth bothering about.

9. Sarvatra-gair-viniyataih kusalais-cetasair-asau
Samprayukta tatha klesair-upaklesais-trivedana

It has mental factors which are universal
and those that arise specific to it,
which are healthy, afflicted or deeply afflicted.

All these states are experienced as
pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

This third transformation has the same mental activities as the other two aspects, but it also has factors which are specific to it because it tends to proliferate into more and more patterns of complexity. These are predispositions or ramifications of self-image, grasping at an image of the self. As one begins to complexify experience into a centre and fringe, or self and other, it becomes more and more complex to do anything at all because one has to have motives and impulses to guide activity. Some of these when followed through are healthy; this means that they do not cause harm to "oneself" or "others" and may in fact be part of cultivating a willingness to understand the nature of experience. Some cause confusion and suffering to greater or lesser degrees.

10. Adyah sparasadayas-chanda-adhimoksa-smrtayah saha
Samadhi dhibhyam niyatah sraddha-atha hrir-apatrapa

The universal factors are contact and so on.
The specific are: determination, resolve,
mindfulness, harmony, faith,
care and conscientiousness;

Vasubandhu, who was a great scholar of the Abhidharma's classification and lists of the components of experience now reels off the names of these factors.

11. Alobha-adi trayam viryam prasabdhih sa apramadika
Ahimsa kusalah klesa raga-pratigha-mudhayah

the three of lack of greed, lack of hatred and lack of stupidity;
energy, confidence, alertness and non-violence.
The afflicted factors are: passion, aggression and stupidity,

The text uses a short form: "the three beginning with lack of greed".

12. Mana-drk-vicikitsas-ca krodha-upanahane punah
Mrksah pradasa irsya-atha matsaryam saha mayaya

pride, views, doubt, anger, hatred,
hypocrisy, envy, jealousy, malice, duplicity

13. Asatyam mado'vihimsa-hrir-atrapa styanam-uddharah
Asraddham-atha kausidyam pramado musita smrtih

dishonesty, arrogance, violence, shamelessness, recklessness,
apathy, intoxication, faithlessness, laziness, insanity,

14. Vikseposamprajanyam ca kaukrtyam middhameva ca
Vitarkas-ca vicaras-ca-iti-upaklesa dvaye dvidha

distraction, confusion, regret, fatigue,
initial and continued thought.
The last two pairs can be either afflicted or healthy.

15. Pancanam mula-vijnane yatha-pratyayam-udbhavah
Vijnanam saha na va taranganam yatha jale

In the "root consciousness", depending on the situation,
the five sensory experiences can all occur or not,
as waves might form on water.

To reach or realize the "root consciousness" or the basic field of alaya, it is not necessary to eliminate sensory experience. In the "meditation" practice of attending to and questioning into experience as it presents itself, which was the method transmitted to Vasubandhu by his master Jayata, sometimes attention is quite subtle and is directed to the arising of each moment of experience and so coarser events such as seeing and so on are not apparent, sometimes they are.

16. Mano-vijnana-sambhutih sarvada-asanjnikad-rte
Samapatti-dvayan-murchanad-api acittakat

Mental experiences always arise except in states of non-cognition
such as the two attainments, deep sleep, fainting
and other unconscious states.

Nor does one need to eliminate mental activity such as thoughts and feelings. The root consciousness is, after all, knowing or Awareness. Awareness presents itself as all states in that all states arise within it but none of them are what it is in itself. The mind of realization is the cessation of confusion but that does not mean that unconscious states such as those that can arise through concentration practices, deep sleep and so on are the same as that cessation. The "two attainments", the jhana states of the cessation of cognitions and of feelings through abiding in mature concentration, and states such as deep sleep and so on are merely states that arise within Awareness.

17. Vijnana-parinamo'yam vikalpo yad-vikalpyate
Tena tan-nasti tena-idam sarvam vijnapti-matrakam

This transformation of knowing is a discriminative construct.
As it is a construct, it does not really exist.

It is all only representations.

The realm of experiencing objects and so on arises only through a confused structure of knowing. As it is only a construct, a fabrication, it does not truly exist. It is confusing "representations", that is to say, images and conjectures, for reality.

18. Sarva-bijam hi vijnanam parinamas-tatha tatha
Yati-anyonya-vasad vikalpah sa sa jayate

Knowing transforms itself into all possibilities.
Whichever way it goes
mutually conditions whatever structures will arise.

When one takes up a particular point of view then things are seen according to that view. When a particular realm or structure arises within experience, whatever is experienced according to that structure reaffirms that structure.

19. Karmano vasana graha-dvaya-vasanaya saha
Ksine purva-vipake 'nyad vipakam janayanti tat

At the exhaustion of the previous ripening consciousness,
activity and tendency, along with the abiding
of the duality of grasper and grasped,
gives rise to another.

Each moment of confusion gives rise to and is continued by the following moment of confusion.

20. Yena yena vikalpena yad yad vastu vikalpyate
Parikalpita-eva asau svabhavo na sa vidyate

The "thingness" which
appears through discrimination
is only the "fabricated nature".
No substance can be seen.

Vasubandhu now begins to try to clarify the matter by relating this to the Yogacharin teaching of the Three Natures of parikalpita or the "fabricated" which is the same as the third transformation of "objectification of perception" just discussed, the para-tantra or "dependent" which is the same as the manas or "reflexive" consciousness, and the parinispanna or the "perfected" which is the same as the purified alaya.

He first points out that the "thingness" of usual confused experience has no substance at all and is the fabricated nature.

21. Para-tantra-svabhavas-tu vikalpah pratyaya-udbhavah
Nispannas-tasya purvena sada rahitata tu ya

The "dependent nature" is the discrimination
of the arising of conditions.

The fact of always being free from conditions
is the "perfected".

The dependent nature is the very act of discriminating between a "self" and "events" that gives rise to conditions. The "perfected nature" is the fact that such conditions do not truly exist, they arise within knowing and knowing is itself unconditioned by nature and so the conditions that arise are only apparent. The Actual Nature of experience is always open.

22. Ata eva sa na-eva-anyo na-ananyah paratantratah
Anityata-adivad vacyo na-adrsto 'smin sa drsyate.

Thus the perfected nature should not
be said to be other than or the same as the dependent,
just as impermanence
and what is impermanent
are not different or the same.

When it is not seen,
it is seen.

One should not think that the perfected nature is some other kind of realm hidden behind dualistic experience. It is not the same as the dependent nature because it is not confused, however it is not separate from conditions; instead it is clearly knowing the emptiness of conditions. In this, it is like the quality of impermanence: if we do not understand that everything comes and goes and changes, we grasp at the changeable as if it were permanent and then are saddened by our "loss"; if we understand impermanance, then this means that we understand how something is and this impermanance is not separate from how this thing is.

When the dependent nature is no longer seen or how one sees, then the perfected nature is seen.

23. Tri-vidhasya svabhavasya tri-vidham nihsvabhavatam
Sandhaya sarvadharmanam desita nihsvabhavata

The naturelessness of all events
is pointed to with
the insubstantiality of these Three Natures.

Everything is insubstantial or empty. There are no "things" or "objects". This can be further understood by applying the teaching of the insubstantiality of these Three Natures just discussed.

24. Prathamo laksanena-eva nihsvabhavo'parah punah
Na-svayam-bhava etasya iti-apara nihsvabhavata

The First Nature is insubstantial
by definition.
The Second Nature is insubstantial
in that it has no substance of its own.
The Third Nature is naturelessness.

The fabricated nature is just that, a fabrication, an illusion, and is insubstantial as such. The dependent nature is insubstantial because each condition is dependent upon other conditions to be what it is; for example "long" is "long" because it can be compared to something "short" and each cause is the effect of another cause. The perfected nature is inherent openness and is the same as the Actual Nature of everything.

25. Dharmanam paramarthas-ca sa yatas-tathata-api sah
Sarva-kalam tatha-bhavat sa eva vijnapti-matrata

The final meaning of all events
is Thatness
and is so throughout all time
and is only representation.

This true nature, the final meaning or truth, is called "Suchness", "Thatness" or "Buddha". Each thing or event only appears to be an object because it is represented as such through the fabrications of self-image. Suchness or thatness has always been the case, Awareness has never been confined within what arises within it, all things and beings and events always have been, are and will be Buddha. It should be pointed out here that "time" is also a fabrication and applies only to objects of Awareness but not to Awareness itself.

26. Yavad vijnapti-matrate vijnanam na-avatisthati
Graha-dvayasya-anusayas-tavan-na vinivartate

If knowing does not abide
in "only appearance"
the assumptions of the duality of
grasper and grasped
will not end.

If one does not always experience the display of apparent objects as "only appearance", then the basic duality of grasper and grasped and all of its resultant destinies will just go on and on.

27. Vijnapti-matram-eva-idam-iti-api hi-upalambhatah
Sthapayan-agratah kim-cit tanmatre na-avatisthate

Even the idea that "this is really only appearance",

because it is a conception, stays at the surface,
and does not at all penetrate
“just this”.

This understanding must be applied directly, moment after moment in both formal practice sessions and the informal practices of daily conduct. Just thinking about it will not penetrate the density of the habituation of these structures.

28. Yada alambanam jnanam na-eva-upalabhate tada
Sthito vijnana-matratve grahya-abhave tad-agrahat

When knowing does not objectify perceptions
it rests in only knowing.
As there is nothing to grasp,
there is no grasping.

When there is no more tendency to contract or localize experience into the delusion of self-image through pretending that perceptions refer to some hidden realm of “objects”, then there is a cessation of all conflict. Knowing is only knowing and there is no “knower” and no “object of knowledge”, no grasping and nothing to grasp. There is only Awareness.

29. Acitto’nupalambho’sau jnanam lokattaram ca tat
Asrayasya paravrttir-dvidha daustulya-hanitah

Not mind, not apprehending,
it is Awareness beyond worlds.

The ground is overturned
and the two afflictions cease.

This cannot be called a “mind” any longer because that term is too loaded with dualistic and substantialist notions, nor does it need to “reach out” to something to know it because all that is arises within knowing. Awareness is the context of the appearing of all worlds, states and experiences and stands always free of them but never separate, just as a mirror cannot be contained within its reflections but is not something isolated from them.

30. Sa eva-anasravo dhatur-acintyah kusalo dhruvah
Sukho vimukti-kayo’sau dharma-akhyo-‘yam maha-muneh

Without afflictions, an inconceivable sphere,
it is good, unmoving, joyful,
the body of the free.

This is what is called
the Teaching of the great sage.

This is the realm of unconditional freedom that is no realm at all. Everything is contained within this dimensionless sphere that circumscribes all possibilities and is often called “the limit of reality”. There is nothing to be confused about and all of the destinies of conditioned experience have ended. There is no more birth and death, no anger, fear, grasping, hypocrisy. It is beyond all conceptions and reference points. It is the very body of freedom and can be uncovered in and as this very body by those who realize this freedom.

This is the Teaching of the Great Sage, Mahamuni, the whole meaning and purpose of the Dharma transmitted by all Awakened Ones for the liberation of all beings.

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