

How I Use Yogācāra Without Accepting Its Metaphysics

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Yogācāra offers some of the most psychologically insightful models in the Buddhist tradition, especially when stripped of their metaphysical interpretations. The storehouse consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*) is particularly valuable as a way of understanding conditioning. It functions as a metaphor for the accumulated tendencies, habits, and emotional imprints that shape how experience arises moment to moment. Likewise, the Three Natures provide a clear framework for seeing how we project imagined stories, how experiences depend on causes and conditions, and how recognizing this loosens cognitive rigidity. These conceptual tools help illuminate the constructed, conditioned nature of perception and behavior without requiring any supernatural commitments.

What I do not accept, however, is Yogācāra's metaphysical move toward "mind-only," "pure awareness," or a deeper ontological mind beneath experience. From a biological and phenomenological perspective, mind and self are not two separate layers—one true, one false. They are the same ongoing process of active inference. Experience and selfing arise together as the brain predicts, interprets, and stabilizes its engagement with the world. There is no hidden, purified mind waiting behind experience, and no ultimate consciousness separate from sensory contact. Everything we call mind is constructed, dependently arisen, and embedded in the body's sensing and modeling.

For this reason, awakening is not the elimination of the self but the clear recognition of its constructed, conditioned nature. The self continues to arise whenever there is experience, because experience itself requires an organizing perspective. The task is simply to see it as a process rather than a thing. Yogācāra's psychological insights can help illuminate this, as long as we treat them as models rather than metaphysics. Used this way, they become powerful tools for understanding conditioning, loosening habitual narratives, and deepening awareness—compatible with a biological, phenomenological, and non-metaphysical understanding of the Buddha's path.

Alignment With the Buddha's Early Teachings

This approach is consistent with how the Buddha explained mind and experience in the Pali Canon. Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) never appears on its own; it always arises dependent on conditions, particularly **contact** (*phassa*) between sense faculty, sense object, and sense consciousness. There is no lasting or ultimate awareness apart from this conditioned interaction. Likewise, what we call "self" is simply a cluster of **formations** (*saṅkhārā*)—patterns of perception, memory, emotion, and intention that recur due to past conditioning, including biology. These formations shape how each moment of consciousness is constructed, but they have no inherent essence.

From this standpoint, Yogācāra's storehouse consciousness can be seen as a metaphor for *saṅkhārā*—the accumulated, conditioned tendencies that influence how experience unfolds—rather than a literal, underlying mind. The Buddha's teaching makes it clear that everything arising in experience, including awareness itself, depends on causes and conditions and cannot exist independently. By grounding Yogācāra's psychological insights in this early framework, we can appreciate their explanatory power without accepting metaphysical claims the Buddha himself did not make.