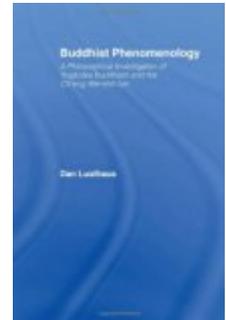


**Dan Lusthaus.** *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogacara Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih Lun.* London: Routledge, 2002. xii + 611 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7007-1186-4.



**Reviewed by** William S. Waldron

**Published on** H-Buddhism (July, 2003)

#### Yogaacaara as a Critique of Consciousness

"The 'given' loses its innocence and is exposed as the 'taken'." (p. 531)

There is still no consensus in the West as to how best to interpret, or even approach, the vast collection of Buddhist teachings and practices falling under the rubric "Yogaacaara." A recently completed annual seminar at the American Academy of Religion, for example, hosted an impressive array of papers on an extensive range of topics for five years running without finally addressing exactly "What is, or isn't, Yogaacaara?"[1]

Dan Lusthaus's recent volume, *Buddhist Phenomenology*, addresses precisely this question (and a great many others) with prodigious energy, acute philosophical insight, and unstinting polemic intent. Dan is a man with a mission and that mission is to set the record straight on Yogaacaara: classical Yogaacaara is not, Lusthaus reiterates, is not, a form of metaphysical or ontological idealism. It is, rather, a phenomenological and epistemological investigation of the classical Buddhist questions of suffering, no-self, impermanence, and liberation, as they came to be ex-

pressed in the sophisticated, post-Abhidharmic and post-Madhyamakan milieu of fourth- to seventh-century India. Seen in this light, Yogaacaara exhibits much more continuity than discontinuity with earlier forms of Indian Buddhism, and the main thrust of this book is to demonstrate this twinned thesis in considerable, if not painstaking, detail. The aims of the book are thus both hermeneutic, to provide an *appropriate* interpretation of the Yogaacaara project, and expository, to present the full range of materials necessary to persuasively make this case. This is by far the most sustained, and in my opinion successful, effort to do so in a Western language.

To accomplish these aims, the first half of the book sets forth the Indian Buddhist antecedents of basic Yogaacaara concepts, before focusing upon Vasubandhu's classic verse summary of Yogaacaara in the "Thirty Verses" (*tri.m.sikaa*). The remainder of the book, a still hefty two hundred pages, examines these ideas as they are systematically espoused in the extensive commentary on the *Tri.m.sikaa*, the *Ch'eng wei-shih lun* (CWSL), composed in 659 C.E. by the great Chinese pilgrim

and translator, Hs=an-tsang, after his return from India. The CWSL seems to substantiate Lusthaus's interpretations of Yogaacaara so well, one suspects, that it must have served as his originating inspiration.

All of this is preceded by two relatively short chapters, on Buddhism and phenomenology, that explain his unique approach to this project, an approach that indeed calls for explanation, for it--both in content and style--may be the most formidable aspect of this discursive, incisive, often brilliant, 600-page work.

Lusthaus's basic interpretive point is that, simply put, "Yogaacaara is Buddhist phenomenology" (p. 11). By citing phenomenology, he is calling upon parallels he finds with the twentieth-century movement in Western philosophy centered around such thinkers as Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and characterized, in his words, by its "critical concern with epistemological issues, a recognition that knowledge comes through cognition, but without implying any metaphysical statement about the nature of reality as dependent upon or created by mind" (p. 11). What Lusthaus aims to do then, as promised by the subtitle, "A Philosophical Investigation of Yogaacaara Buddhism," is to *practice* philosophy in a Yogaacaara/phenomenological mode, "to offer a *philosophical translation* of Yogaacaara into the idiom of phenomenology" (p. 11). Such a "translation," he explains, must "eventually go beyond merely doing philology, in order to explore what a text *means*" (p. ix), and it is this philosophical exploration, this attempt to express what Yogaacaara "means" in a phenomenological idiom, that makes this work so (potentially) impenetrable to the impatient yet, at the same time, so richly rewarding for the resolute. This book, in other words, cannot be used as a handy exposition of Yogaacaara "tenets"; it is not a doxography. It requires, rather, an active engagement at a number of levels in *thinking Yogaacaarically*. That is both its challenge and, in the end, its achievement.

This is facilitated in part by the liberal use of Sanskrit terms throughout, terms which are quickly assimilated into the text, de-italicized and inflected as the occasion demands (*praj~napti* becomes "praj~naptic" or "praj~naptically"). This requires us to think in terms of Sanskrit Buddhist categories, which is consistent with the philosophic aims of the book, but must, I imagine, make considerable demands on the uninitiated. (This is only exacerbated by the meager seven-page index, which is unfortunate for a book as richly diffuse as this, since it virtually precludes its use as a reference work.)

His larger interpretive point, however, is that Buddhism itself was "a type of phenomenology" (p. viii) from the beginning and we can therefore understand Yogaacaara better, that is, more appropriately, if we interpret it in terms of this historical and philosophical context. But, he explains, since this "pre-Yogaacaara phenomenological basis" has "nowhere else ... been spelled out, I devote a major portion of this book to providing this necessary context" (p. ix). This entails re-examining most of the major "models" of Indian Buddhist thought: the *skandhas*, *pratiitya-samutpaada*, *tridhaatu*, and *siila-samaadhi-praj~naa*, from this phenomenological perspective, a re-examination that, depending upon the concept, involves greater or lesser reinterpretation of our own "received tradition." This re-presentation of basic Buddhist models supports Lusthaus's interpretation of Yogaacaara as fundamentally an epistemological rather than ontological project that is fully "in line with basic Buddhist thinking" (p. 535), while at the same time it furnishes the foundation for the eventual reformulation of these models within Yogaacaara in general and the CWSL in particular, as presented in considerable detail in the second half of the book. In this way, *Buddhist Phenomenology* is not unlike Lusthaus's description of the CWSL: "It contains, organizes and evaluates a vast range of Buddhist doctrinal minutia ... rehearsing and re-rehearsing terms

and models in one permutational aggregation after another" (p. 352).

Such an interpretation, that Yogaacaara indicts rather than idealizes consciousness (*vij~naana*, *vij~napti*), has some serious explaining to do and Lusthaus does so with seemingly endless, if somewhat uneven, erudition. Term after term, model after model, chapter after chapter, Lusthaus takes on the core issues--consciousness only (*vij~napti-maatra*), the critique of externality, the constructed nature of experience, the attainment of higher meditative states, and the possibility of nonconceptual awareness--and contextualizes each one by examining its canonical antecedents and their continuing development within Abhidhamma and early Madhyamaka, before turning to its characteristic expression within the Yogaacaara traditions of India and, eventually, China.

Such an encyclopedic project, however, in which one can readily lose sight of the forest for the trees, cannot be easily recapitulated in a few paragraphs, nor can a conventional review--with its usual bromides about which reader will think what about this work when--do justice to the depth, the complexity, the sheer quantity of supporting materials Lusthaus brings to his case. I have been persuaded, therefore, for various reasons and from various quarters, to provide at a different website a synopsis of each chapter, a summary of its contents and its relation to his larger argument--in effect an outline of its organizational logic--while allowing as much as possible for Lusthaus's points to speak for themselves. I will only comment here and there on a few points of controversy or for clarification. Perhaps this precis will encourage others to appreciate, and--dare I say it?--appropriate, the depth of insight and the dogged intellectual effort that has informed this massive work. The interested reader is therefore directed to the following website, for the precis: <http://www.acmuller.net/reviews/wal-dron-review1.html>.

#### Note

[1]. See website for Studies in Yogaacaara Buddhism, A Seminar of the American Academy of Religion, <http://www.acmuller.net/yoga-sem/>, as well as the site with Lusthaus's article addressing this issue, entitled "What is and isn't Yogaacaara": <http://www.hm.tyg.jp/~acmuller/yogacara/intro-asc.htm>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

**Citation:** William S. Waldron. Review of Lusthaus, Dan. *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogacara Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih Lun*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. July, 2003.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7876>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.