

A Buddhist Philosophy of Literature: Outlining Yogacara Buddhism with Miyazawa Kenji and Huey P. Newton

Uma Filosofia Budista da Literatura:
Esboçando o Budismo Yogacara com Miyazawa
Kenji e Huey P. Newton

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RESUMO

O que caracterizamos como “budista” possui um duplo objetivo: primeiro, visa levar cada indivíduo a refletir sobre sua condição existencial e a encontrar uma solução para seu problema fundamental, decorrente do fato de ser um ser senciente e transitório. Segundo, qualquer teoria no budismo serve como um guia para que os leitores orientem suas vidas em direção à cessação do sofrimento (nirvana). Para demonstrar essa dupla característica da literatura budista, este artigo explicará inicialmente a estrutura metafísica da filosofia budista com base no Yogacara. Em seguida, para ilustrar como essa filosofia budista da literatura se manifesta na prática, realizaremos um estudo comparativo entre dois pensadores das filosofias japonesa e africana: Miyazawa Kenji e Huey P. Newton. As obras desse par pouco explorado no campo das filosofias mundiais nos ajudarão a compreender o cerne do budismo Yogacara e, ao mesmo tempo, servirão como um exemplo paradigmático de literatura budista.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Filosofia budista, literatura budista, filosofia africana, filosofia afro-asiática da literatura.

ABSTRACT

What we characterise as being “Buddhist” has a two-fold aim: First, it is designed to drive each self to think about its existential condition and to find a solution to its fundamental problem deriving from the fact that it is a sentient, transient being. Second, any theories in Buddhism are to serve as a guiding post for readers to navigate themselves in their lives towards the cessation of suffering (nirvana). To show this two-fold characteristic of Buddhist literature, this paper will first explain the metaphysical framework of Buddhist philosophy in reference to Yogacara Buddhism. To show what this Buddhist philosophy of literature looks like in practice, we will also conduct a comparative study of two thinkers from Japanese and Africana philosophies: namely, Miyazawa Kenji and Huey P. Newton. The works of this underrepresented pair in the field of world philosophies will help us understand the point of (Yogacara) Buddhism and simultaneously prove to be an instance of Buddhist literature *par excellence*.

KEYWORDS

Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist literature, Africana philosophy, Afro-Asian philosophy of literature

The Human Condition: What Makes a Text Buddhist?

Buddhist philosophy does not begin in wonder. What prompts a Buddhist thinker to reflect on the nature of self, and to seek the true face of the world as what it is, lies in its confrontation with the human condition. It faces the fact that life is filled with suffering and saturated with unavoidable contradictions. Naturally, any oral or textual transmission in diverse manifestations of this intellectual tradition, including dialogues (sutras), poetry, prayers, or anything that we would loosely term here as “literature” has a two-fold aim. First, they are designed to facilitate one’s cultivation of self-awareness. They drive each self to think about its existential condition and to find a solution to its fundamental problem deriving from the fact that it is a sentient, transient being. Second, any philosophical theories that are developed out of these literary expressions are to serve as a guiding post for readers (and writers) to navigate themselves in their lives towards the cessation of suffering (nirvana).

If reading a Buddhist text does not lead to this liberation of self from the prison of its self-centeredness, it can no longer be qualified as being Buddhist. What distinguishes it as belonging to the tradition of Buddhism, in other words, cannot only be about its content but also must be about the question of what readers (and speakers) can do with it as a skilful means (upaya). To show this two-fold characteristic of Buddhist literature, this paper will first explain the metaphysical framework of Buddhist philosophy in reference to Yogacara Buddhism. By knowing what this specific school of Buddhist philosophy has identified as the source of suffering and how

it comes to this insight through an intense self-reflection, we should be able to visualise the aim of self-reflection and to recognise the purpose of writing it down, or of reading it, as a text. To show what this Buddhist philosophy of literature looks like in practice, moreover, we will also conduct a comparative study of two thinkers from Japanese and African philosophies: namely, Miyazawa Kenji (1896–1933) and Huey P. Newton (1942–1989). The works of this underrepresented pair in the field of world philosophies will help us understand the point of (Yogacara) Buddhism and simultaneously prove to be an instance of Buddhist literature par excellence.

Chinese Yogacara as an Entrance to the Mahayana Self

The 9th century Esoteric Buddhist philosopher, Kūkai 空海 (774–835) argues in his *Ten Stages of the Development of the Heart-and-Mind* (Jūjūshinron 十住心論) that an existential transformation of self from the realm of the worldly (seken 世) to that of the trans-worldly (shusseken 出世間), that is, to achieve the Mahayana sense of authentic self, calls for a “contemplation of the profound subtleties of ādānavijñāna (arayashiki 阿頼耶識)”¹ (Kūkai, 1993, p. 189). He further argues that “this standpoint, which is set as what a Bodhisattva should aim to achieve, corresponds to the essential teaching of the Chinese Yogacara School (法相宗)”². To know oneself in the context of Mahayana Buddhism, therefore, one must first understand the basic doctrine of (no-)self in reference to Yogacara Buddhism and, to do so, one must further embody the concept of ādānavijñāna (arayashiki or alaya consciousness).

¹ The term ādānavijñāna is often translated into English as “alaya consciousness” or “storehouse consciousness.”

² See Kūkai (1993, p. 190).

What Kūkai implies in this argument is that the fundamental consciousness of alaya consciousness, when it is comprehended and practiced properly, can lead us to our proper self-awareness (jikaku 自覚), that is, to understand the nature of who we really are as much as it reveals the true nature of reality. In turn, an attainment of this (self-)consciousness promises our liberation from suffering. To follow Kūkai's insight, we will first examine how the Yogacara School formulates the notion of this arayashiki (阿頼耶識) in its theory of (heart-and-)mind (kokoro 心 or citta). We will then investigate how this Mahayana Buddhist sense of self diagnoses the source of suffering in the human condition, and then show how it portrays the way out of this existential problem. Lastly, a critical approach to the works of Miyazawa Kenji and Huey Newton will enable us to visualise the liberatory function of fundamental consciousness in Yogacara Buddhism and to evaluate whether or not this very approach to these texts proves to be an instance of Buddhist literature.

The “Eight Consciousnesses” (hachishiki 八識) I: The Surface Layers

The ādānavijñāna (arayashiki 阿頼耶識) is the last of the “Eight Consciousnesses” in the Yogacara tradition. This concept signifies the “fundamental consciousness” that generates both division and unity between the internal cognitions of sentient beings (including humans) and the external phenomena of the world. It is the ground on which the standpoint of Yogacara is established. Hence, this branch of Buddhism is often referred to as the “Consciousness-only school” (Cittamātra).

The Consciousness only schools in China and Japan inherited the notion of “eight consciousness” from Dharmapāla’s (護法, 530–61) Jewel-Arising Treatise on the Establishment of Consciousness-Only (Cheng weishi baosheng lun 成唯識寶生論 in Chinese or Jōyuishikiron 成唯識論 in Japanese). It consists of

- (1) genshiki 眼識,
- (2) nishiki 耳識,
- (3) bishiki 鼻識,
- (4) zetsushiki 舌識,
- (5) shinshiki 身識,
- (6) ishiki 意識,
- (7) manashiki 末那識, and
- (8) arayashiki 阿賴耶識.³

³ The first six terms can be roughly translated as (1) consciousness pertaining to eye(s), (2) consciousness pertaining to ear(s), (3) consciousness pertaining to nose(s), (4) consciousness pertaining to tongue(s), (5) consciousness pertaining to bodies, and (6) consciousness pertains to will. It is not possible to come up with an English term to translate manashiki but the closest concept that we can find in reference to the history of European philosophy would be Kant’s notion of “apperception” or the cartesian framework of “cogito.” Arayashiki is also referred as kurashiki 藏識, shujishiki 種子識, and honshiki 本識, which respectively mean “stored consciousness,” “seed consciousness,” and “original consciousness.” For the details of the distinction, see Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism—1076, 1079.

They are generally divided into two interrelated categories of “surface” and “deep” structures of consciousness: (1) – (5) belong to the former category as sense perceptions, as does (6) “will and thinking” as “mental consciousness,” while (7) and (8) belong to the latter category as the constricted and the fundament form of consciousness respectively.

The first five consciousnesses indicate our cognitive faculty based on the five senses and the sixth gives to consciousness the activity of thinking based on will. The Yogacara School argues that these six are on the surface of consciousness because it is fairly easy for a self to become aware of them. The term “consciousness” in English or Bewußtsein in German was historically translated into Japanese by using the Buddhist term, (6) “ishiki” (意識). Hence, when we say “ishiki” in Japanese today, we are generally referring to a sum total of our internal experiences that pertains to our mind. However,

the Buddhist term points us to a specific function of the heart-and-mind that cannot be reduced to any of the previous consciousnesses. It has a double function of “highlighting” a specific sense perception and of “conceptualizing” it with linguistic expressions. This is often described with another term, *myōryōe* 明了依, which means that the consciousness has the “capacity to become the cause for disclosing an object” (YOKOYAMA, 2011) and this “highlighting” can also take the form of conceptualization, which transcends temporal limitations of sense experience.

We can think of many examples that fit with this Buddhist notion of consciousness as an *ishiki*. But let us use the following image as a case study and describe the layers of our consciousnesses. Suppose your commuting consisting of three parts: walking by a forest or a mid-size park, riding a public transport to and in an urban area, and walking towards your office or school campus. Imagine a beautiful day in early Autumn; waking up early in the morning after a restful sleep. The weather is just right for a morning walk. You see a wave of beautiful trees, breathe in the crisp air, and walk through the “realm of absolute colour.”⁴ As you emerge from the edge of the city, everything looks vivid and alive. You somehow have the emotional room and energy to observe the faces of your fellow travellers: there is a young student with a brand-new backpack, a middle-aged man with his morning cigarette waiting for his bus, an old lady thinking about her loved ones in distant cities, and you wouldn’t hate it if you bump into your colleagues on such a great morning.

But now imagine a day in which it suddenly rains during your walk. All the fallen leaves are sticking to the bottom of your

⁴ I owe this phrase to Hisham Mater’s opening section In the Country of Men, 1.

shoes like wet newspaper. Whether or not you have an umbrella, the cold water is beginning to slowly soak inside your shoes. The commuter train or the bus is jam packed and you can hardly see outside because of the condensed moisture generated by the oppressed life of so many proletarians. You will do your best not to bump into anyone in such a cacophonic overture to a miserable working day.

With just a single change to the narrative (namely, the rain), our attention shifts from the beauty of the world to the wet socks. As the magnificent tree lines disappear from our vision, our sense of belonging to others and the city quickly dissipates. This ability to shift our focus in relation to consciousnesses that pertain to our five senses is the work of the sixth consciousness, namely mental consciousness or *ishiki*.

Our *ishiki* can also deeply impact our experience of the present with its capacity to conceptualize experience. In this sense, it can transcend the spatio-temporal limitations of sense perceptions. Imagine you are being persistently bullied at school or happen to hate your colleagues so much that the thought of going to a shared space with fellow students or workers is both depressing and nauseating. In that state of the heart-and-mind, you will think about all the negative experiences from the past and visualize how your day is going to be in relation to your memory of them. You have absolutely no room in your consciousness to pay attention to the scenic view or your natural or social surroundings. The sixth consciousness of *ishiki*, in this manner, can both shift and shape our attention to sense perceptions. It can paint the picture of how our day is going to go. Our ability to imagine and think about this example, too, is dependent on this consciousness.

The “Eight Consciousnesses” II: The Deeper Layers

In the deeper layers of the Yogacara consciousnesses, we have the seventh as the activity of the heart-and-mind, which constitutes speculative thinking. It is described as having a capacity to feed the root cause of our self(-obsession) and subsequently all the sufferings that are derived from it. This consciousness under the surface of the abovementioned six is occasionally called a “polluted will” (zenmai 染汚意) precisely because it introduces the problem of “egoity” or “self-centeredness” in our process of knowing the world and ourselves. The earlier Chinese translation of the term is read in Japanese as *adanashiki* (阿陀那識), but in the context of the East Asian Yogacara tradition, it is often referred as *manashiki* (末那識) and sometimes translated into English as “afflicted mental” or “mana consciousness”. The *manashiki* or *zenmai* basically functions as a synthesis of all the other surface layers of consciousness, which generates an awareness of self as the “I”.

⁵ Kant’s “transcendental unity of apperception” most likely belongs to this category, and in line with Nietzsche, the Yogacara school philosophers would have to argue that the unity of apperception is tainted with one’s “will to power” (albeit it is claimed to be pure according to Kant).

The Yogacara tradition argues that all sentient beings are equipped with this deep-seated consciousness that continues to surface in the upper layers of conscious experience. What it does is to attach the “I” to all the other consciousnesses and claims them as “my own”⁵. To understand this point more clearly, we must consider the notion of knowledge from the perspective of the eighth consciousness, *arayashiki*. Consider again the example of walking through the park on your daily commute. This time, however, you have a mini existential crisis, which forces you to stop and stare at a tree. A

(naïve) metaphysical framework in which we understand our knowing of the tree would usually hold this: there is the “I” that stands over here as a subject and there is a tree that stands over there as an object. The object affects the sense perception of the subject (i.e., the subject looks at the object). Each of them is placed in opposition to the other and both have their substantial existence that is not dependent on the other. (The presence of the tree does not make you an observer. Nor does your presence generate the tree.)

The Buddhist self, however, rejects this metaphysical framework—or to be more precise, inverts it. That is because Buddhist philosophy generally holds that self attains its self-awareness when it comes to a realization that all existence is empty of self-subsistence. Given that everything is always already constituted by something other than itself, the Buddhist self becomes aware that each of them (including our “self” or the “I”) cannot be what it is in and of itself. Our existence as the “I” is said to be “provisional” in that sense, and only in that sense can we say that we exist as the subject, or the “I.” If we hold the Buddhist perspective based on the most important line, “emptiness is form, form is emptiness,” it is not that there is a thing called “I” that exists as a subject apart from the object and vice versa but all that exists is “consciousness.” To the extent that there is a “seeing” (via *mokushiki* which is called “*sōbun*” 相分) and the seen (*kenbun* 見分), this is derivative of the experience. In this particular example, there is only consciousness of seeing that sees the tree as the seen. The Buddhist self does not accept the premise that there is a tree independent of the consciousness of seeing. The foundational standpoint of *alaya* consciousness, maintains that all that exists is constituted by consciousness(es),

⁶ It is not accurate to conceive of this “generation” as if the lower layers of consciousnesses are generated from the deeper layers of consciousnesses as if they are two objects but the best way to understand them is to see the former as a manifestation of the latter.

⁷ Phenomenological tradition calls this “thetic judgment” and the Kyoto school philosophers (especially Nishida) argue that there is meta-noesis (or “pure experience”) of the world and self that precedes this subject-object division.

and all the consciousness(es) are generated from this foundational consciousness⁶. In this sense, just as there is no self that stands over here as the subject apart from the object, there is no object that stands over there as completely external to the subject. The cittamatra doctrine holds that the world in which seeing sees the seen comes from the foundational consciousness: hence, what takes place is only the consciousness which sees itself (both as the seeing and the seen). This is the fundamental stage of consciousness that generates the other layers of consciousness, and it is experienced prior to dividing all that is into subject and object⁷.

But what is important here is that the seventh layer of manashiki tries to short-circuit this framework of knowing by positing that the knowledge or the perception of the tree is my activity of knowing or seeing. It posits the division between itself as noesis and the object as noema and privileges itself as their synthetic unity. The Yogacara practice of reaching alaya consciousness indicates that this is the secondary/posited unity of noesis and noema and there is a primordial (metanoetic) sense of their unity that grounds it.



The Yogacara standpoint, in other words, holds that the fundamental consciousness that rises to constitute both the activity of knowing (i.e., the “I”) and that of being known (i.e., the “tree”) is no-one’s. It indicates power that transcends will and cannot be possessed⁸. When I see a tree, then, a proper formulation of this knowledge based on *arayashiki* is that consciousness sees itself both as the “I” seeing the tree, and the tree being seen by the “I”. By waking up to this fundamental consciousness in the depth of our heart-and-mind, each of us can clearly see that when “I see the tree,” both this “I” and “tree” are “like apparitions and mirages” (to use Kūkai’s expressions). The standpoint

⁸ When we talk about the idea of “consciousness only” in English, many students wonder if this “power” is reducible to the Cartesian *cogito* or Berkeley’s *esse est percipi*. In some ways, they are not entirely wrong to think about their similarity. But in a profound sense, *arayashiki* cannot be more different from any form of subjective idealism. We cannot deny the meditative aspect of Cartesian reflection on the foundation of human consciousness as following the same line of thinking, leading us to the Yogacara insight. It breaks away from the naïve acceptance of the simple division between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* and thereby makes a serious effort to ground their togetherness through an intense self-reflection as a thinking being. The divergence between the Cartesian meditation from the Yogacara is the primacy of the declension of “*cognitare*” as “*cogito*,” namely the assumption of the “I” in the “I think.” The Yogacara perspective would see the Cartesian self-reflection or meditation as being already practiced as mine: hence, it is operating at the level of *manashiki*. The consciousness-only perspective, therefore, would have to deny Descartes’ position and instead restate the maxim by saying, “thinking, therefore I am”. This perspective of a yogi then further argues that one must recognize the “I” as a provisional being such that all there is, is just thinking (or consciousness). The foundational consciousness of *arayashiki* allows each self to recognize itself as the “I” but by attaining a proper self-understanding as being essentially empty, the self can come to be aware of itself as an expression of the eighth consciousness beyond the limits of the “I.” For a tree to exist, then it needs to be perceived. The Yogacara thinkers would not deny this. Nothing exists apart from consciousness and only consciousness is. If we close our eyes before the beautiful tree, we have no other way but to rely on other senses to perceive its existence. If we hear no rustling of its leaves or touch its bark as we are blindfolded, it cannot exist to our consciousness. Since there is no noumena/substance of tree to which all the phenomenal attributes are given for constituting its unique sentient existence as a tree, all there is is a summation of phenomenal elements that constitutes it as such before us. Does that mean when we close our senses, the tree ceases to exist? Neither Berkeley nor the Yogacara thinkers would say yes to this question. But the difference between them is that Berkeley resorted to God’s consciousness that constitute a tree independently of human consciousness. Instead of claiming the tree to be mine (or ours), it became His. This would be an apotheosis of *manashiki*, thus a counterfeit *arayashiki*, for Buddhist thinkers.

⁹This standpoint is certainly not subjective. If, by the term “idealism,” we assume a self-determining subject (the “I”) or intersubjective substance (“we”) that subsists in its own existence and that sets forth the dual structure of consciousness and being, then consciousness-only cannot be idealism either. This is more like saying that the historical world sees itself through an interaction of all things, and all conscious beings are called to recognize their interrelation with all things as no one’s. The consciousness manifests itself as the world and each of our consciousnesses: hence, our seeing of the world is not ultimately ours alone but self-seeing of selfless consciousness that sees itself as the world in and through conscious beings. Arayashiki, in this sense, is generative of all forms of consciousness, and precisely in this sense, it is called “seed consciousness” (種子識) that gives rise to other seven layers of consciousness that grounds any meta-physical thinking.

of store consciousness affords us to observe the “nothingness/otherness” (apara) of all things (dharma)⁹.

Transcending Self through Consciousness-Only: How Do We attain Alaya Consciousness?

So far, we have used a tree to talk about the concept of arayashiki almost in the tone of epistemology. However, Buddhism is always asking a question about our own existence as much as providing us some frameworks to think about the ways of our knowing. To be truthful to the spirit of Buddhism, we must ask the following questions: How do we attain this power of fundamental consciousness that transcends any forms of self-affirming “will to power” or self-obsessing “egoity”? How do we gain access to consciousness that is not self-centred and serves as the basis of the distinction between the seeing and the seen? What does the direct experience of fundamental consciousness that is prior to, and foundational for, the subject-object distinction? The history of Japanese philosophy, for instance, gives a range of different responses to these existential questions. Rather than consulting the ready-made answers, however, I would like us to tarry with the dominant presence of manashiki in our daily life. Instead of assuming that we can achieve the standpoint of alaya consciousness (as if it were something that we could achieve by reading a couple of philosophy books on epistemology), we have to think about how invasive the awareness of the “I” always is.

When we wake up in the morning, we are already faced with the need of orienting life towards ourselves. I have to wake up at seven in the morning if I want to make it to work on time.

I would have an hour to eat breakfast, shower, put on clean clothes, brush my teeth, and head out. I walk by the park to get to the bus stop and then I can make it to my office well before the first lecture. In addition to teaching, I have to do this or that administrative task and think about the research that I have to do. If I worked in the public or private sector, the content of these works would be different, but all such works are the same insofar as they are saturated with the narrative of “I have to do this”. I finish my work and head home to spend time with “my” family at “my” home and then prepare for the next day because “I” have to wake up at seven to get to my work again. How much of our actions or day-to-day practices are free from egoity or this consciousness of self at all? Is there anything that I do without being fixated on the notion of the self that is posited as having a substantial self-identity and as standing in opposition to the world?

When introducing Yogacara thought, many academics have no choice but to assume the foundational awareness of *arayashiki* and then conceptually discuss how this new type of self-awareness can reorient our understanding of consciousness and shed some light on the nature of subjectivity in philosophy. But, somewhat shamelessly, we seem to do this in the context of *mana* consciousness: I have to write this book otherwise I wouldn’t get tenure or a promotion. Or my research mandate states that I publish an article per academic year. If I don’t compare the structure of knowing based on the eight consciousnesses with the counterpart in European philosophy, that is to make this non-western philosophy accessible to students in Europe, I would not land on any academic job. Kierkegaard’s jab always renders a critical hit: “assistant

professors” is a category that diagnoses our unreflective slavery to our self-obsessed self-consciousness.

What is at stake here is not the validity of the concept but the existential platform in which it is played out. We must keep in mind that the Yogacara school does not say anywhere that we could easily access this deeper layer of consciousness, but each self must practice embodied contemplative introspection (yoga) and go through a series of intense meditations and practices. Only then, we may (or may not) attain the foundational consciousness that breaks us free from our self-consciousness. It is helpful for us to visit the following two examples (one historical and another literary) of this meditative practice in the fields of world philosophies.

The Fundamental Consciousness as the Black Panther: Beyond “Double Consciousness”

The conversion of self from *manashiki* to *arayashiki* is an “event of soul” (in Nishidian sense)¹⁰. Its intensity is comparable to what the black prisoners in the United States once called “Soul Breaker” in the last century.¹¹ Huey Newton, for instance, describes the odd experience of finding true “freedom” in jail and gives us a striking image of his ability to control his thoughts in his solitary confinement. In 1964, the American-made cell of inhumanity was “four and a half feet wide, by six feet long, by ten feet high”.¹² A Buddhist thinker would immediately notice that this is just slightly bigger than a single tatami mat (typically used for a meditation practice in Zen monasteries). This confined space for the prisoner was not a benign image of minimalism or admirable tidiness that

¹⁰ See Nishida Kitarō, *Last Writings*, (1987, p. 47).

¹¹ See Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (2009, p. 104).

¹² NEWTON, 2009, p. 104.

¹³ The commodified version of this clean Zen is termed as *MacMindfulness* by Ronald Purser (2019). For a critical analysis of this concept, see Robert K. Beshara, *Engaged Buddhist Praxis and Critical Psychology* (2024, p. 27-29).

¹⁴ NEWTON, 2009, p. 106. Matthew W. Hughey rightly observes that Newton built a synthetic, pragmatic transcendentalism from Marxism, Black Protestant thought, Latin American liberation theology, and Eastern religious traditions. In reference to Daoism and Buddhism, he also shows how Huey appropriated the Asian saying “those who gather have nothing, those who scatter have much”, into his line in the *Revolutionary Suicide*: “By having no possessions, I have possessed all”. This is clear evidence that Newton demonstrates an acute understanding of Buddhism and my aim with this article is to offer a theoretical vantagepoint in which we can fully appreciate his creative engagement with Buddhism. For this point, see Hughey (2005, p. 641-645).

¹⁵ NEWTON, 2009, p. 105, my emphasis.

¹⁶ NEWTON, 2009, p. 106.

¹⁷ This is also one of the reasons why Buddhist monks leave the worldly (*seken*) and enter temples and monasteries to practice Buddhist teachings.

we may associate with Japanese organization¹³, but the pure deprivation of a torture chamber:

I was kept in the dark, and nude. ... There was no bunk, no washbasin, no toilet, nothing but bare floors, bare walls, a solid steel door, and a round hole four inches in diameter and six inches deep in the middle of the floor. The prisoner was supposed to urinate and defecate in this hole. ... at night no light came in under the door. I could not even find the hole if I had wanted to. If I was desperate, I had to search with my hand, when I found it, the hole was always slimy with the filth that had gone in before. I was just like a mole looking for the sun; I hated finding it when I did. (Newton, 2009, p. 104).

As he laid dying in his own filth, Newton quickly learned how not to lose his sanity. He controlled his diet in the manner of Mahatma Gandhi, and then controlled his consciousness in a “Zen Buddhist posture”.¹⁴ He says that in time of normal distress, he could cope with terrible circumstances by thinking about “pleasant thoughts”, i.e., the “most soothing part of my past”.¹⁵ But in the “soul breaker,” these thoughts did not help him maintain an integrity of his self-identity. Rather, they began to attack him as they turned into “horrible and grotesque caricatures”.¹⁶ What he once thought of as an integral part of his life was no longer present. When that radical discontinuity happens to a self, *manashiki* drives it to hold onto its fixed understanding of itself, and as the gap between reality and the idea widens, an intensity of the drive increases. Self is kept away from the comfortable ordinary day of the worldly (*seken*) in which these experiences of the “I” were once made.¹⁷ Its memory of the past, which constituted its prior sense of fixed self-identity, is totally drained in the darkness of its solitary confinement.

What follows in the cell is a series of intense calisthenics and meditative practices, which helped Newton learn how to maintain a healthy distance —and indeed freedom— from thoughts that constituted an unpleasant idea of the “I”. He calls this “higher freedom” that has afforded him an independence from the things of the world, thus reaching the depth of consciousness that grounds the sense of the “I”.

After fifteen days the guards pulled me out and sent me back to a regular cell for twenty-four hours, where I took a shower and saw a medical doctor and a psychiatrist. They were worried that prisoners would become mentally disorganized in such deprivation. Then, because I had not repented, they sent me back to the hole. By then it held no fears for me. I had won my freedom. (Newton, 2009, p. 107).

An ancient Buddhist teaching commends the practice of seeing the decaying body and of imagining the transience of a human self. This is exactly what Newton saw in the “prison inside prison.” As he wallowed in his waste in darkness, Newton had to “save himself” from the thoughts of his past. The sense of self that he had constituted through his determinate interactions with all others in his society could be broken. His sense of self-identity that is built on his social existence too can be stripped away.

The American prison system in the 1960s, and still today, makes sure to both destroy and feed upon these elements of the “I” as a point of torture and oppression. There is clear evidence of the fact that the guards are wanting prisoners to admit that they did something wrong, that is to say, they should subscribe to the degraded and racialised sense of self that the oppressor imposes on the oppressed as their fixed

¹⁸ See Wynter (2001, p. 31).

¹⁹ Newton's conception of revolutionary self does not extensively use Buddhist language but there are many occasions in his text that suggest his insight into the existential aspect of Zen Buddhism. This unexplored connection between Africana and Buddhist philosophy will be examined in my future projects.

identity. However, once Newton let go of his fixed idea of self and found in himself the source of his subjectivity below the surface of his consciousness, he came to self-awareness that nothing could break his existence. The guards could no longer subjugate the prisoner of genuine mindfulness to the “socio-genetic principle” of racialised other.¹⁸ His sense of self, in other words, reached the stage of the trans-worldly (shusseken): by transcending the confines of the state prison, or more precisely, the social construct by the collective of oppressive “I”s, his being becomes an unbreakable non-“I”.¹⁹ A testimony of the prisoner in the soul breaker shows the path to the true freedom, which he found in the depth of [his] consciousness.

The Poetics of the Fundamental Consciousness

Miyazawa Kenji's *Spring and Ashura* gives a literary example of what it is like to attain alaya consciousness. This poetry collection has an amazing subtitle: “A Sketch of Imagination”. The term, imagination, in Japanese here is not *kōsōryoku* (構想力) —as it is used in Miki Kiyoshi's famous book that points us to Kant's *Bildungskraft*— or *sōzō* (想像) —as that which generates images in one's mind—, but *shinshō* (心象), which literally refers to images that appear (and disappear) in *kokoro* or *citta*. An average reader in Japan would notice Miyazawa's peculiar choice of the term in his effort to describe the nature of imagination (since *sōzō* is the usual choice for describing what we mean by the English term). The images in *shinshō* are based on what we have seen and heard through our senses: hence, the term definitely refers to the surface layers of eight consciousnesses. Once the term is

translated into English, it loses the Buddhist flavour: hence, it seems like merely referring to some sort of mental images as an object. Of course, Miyazawa was not a cultural or linguistic essentialist who would argue that *shinshō* cannot mean the same as the English term, imagination. In fact, it is quite probable that he understood the Anglo-European influence of the concept in their understanding of the Japanese term, *sōzō*, and thought that there was still an ambivalence to what was meant by *shinshō* as imagination. Miyazawa seems to be alluding here to the notion of “mental images” or consciousness as it was understood in the context of Mahayana Buddhism.

The overture to this poetry collection immediately guides us to face two understandings of self and of its relation to imagination.

The phenomenon called “I”
is a blue illumination
of the hypothesized, organic alternating current lamp
(a compound of all transparent ghosts)
a blue illumination
of the karmic alternating current lamp
which flickers busily, busily
with landscapes, with everyone
yet remains lit with such assuredness
(the light persists, the lamp lost)

(MIYAZAWA, 2007, p. 63).

Miyazawa immediately reminds his readers and himself (as the “I”) that there isn’t any self-subsistent sense to the “I”. There is no author that claims his egoity as the creator of this text here. There are not any readers that can claim their self-centeredness as that which waves the text into whatever form they like (thus turning themselves into an author of the

text). The poetry, in other words, begins with the line of self-awareness: there is only a consciousness of the “I” as a transient phenomenon. Certainly, the self tends to attach the sense of permanence to this “I”, but it is as impermanent and transient as the faint flickering of dim light. It is provisional or conventional and not real or ultimate. This transience of self is felt and shared by all that is in (and with) the universe, and the “karmic current” that turns them on and off can only afford us (to be) this finite collection of empty blue. (The term “emptiness” also refers to the sky and the kenotic process of self as it does in the sense of *sunyata*). None of us has a substantial existence that generates the ontological light as our own like the lamps.

Miyazawa says that his poetry, or more precisely the “mineral ink”, is just there to link the chiaroscuro of these lights in [his] consciousness and that it is always already shared by everyone at the same time, precisely because the consciousness is neither his nor anyone else’s.

About these, the man, the Galaxy, Asura, or the sea urchin,
eating cosmic dust, breathing air or saltwater,
may each think up a fresh ontology,
but any one of them too will be no more than a fleeing scene
(風物) in the heart-and-mind.

(MIYAZAWA, 2007, p. 64).

His poetry clearly follows the same line of thinking based on the doctrine of consciousness-only. It is not that there is a fixed subjectivity in which different imaginations are conjured and that the author is imposing these concepts on his readers as the other to herself. When we try to hold onto this idea, there is a limit to what we can convey as a product of our

imagination and as European postmodern thinkers have echoed with Miyazawa, once we demarcate an authorial intent as *mine* or *ours*, it dissipates into the web of words that fail to capture the transience of the world. Instead, the Buddhist poet suggests here that the text embodies the layers of consciousnesses and that it does not make sense to say it is his as an author or ours as his readers.

Because, just as we perceive our senses, landscapes, and personalities,
just as we all merely perceive them,
so the records and histories, or the history of the earth,
together with their various data,
(under the temporal, spatial restrictions of karma)
are no more than what we perceive (かんじてゐる).

(MIYAZAWA, 2007, p. 64).

The function of Miyazawa's poetry then is to perceive or to feel (*kanjiru* かんじる) what appears in consciousness without imposing the division of self and other. The poem is conducive to arriving at the standpoint of foundational consciousness from which these determinate layers of the senses are generated. To do this, each self must break the limits of self-consciousness and abstain from becoming an observer of the phenomenal universe as if we each are noumenal selves. Since *arayashiki* generates *manashiki*, each self is allowed to come up with its unique (or "fresh") ontology to define the fixed boundary of what is real and intelligible. The distinction of self and other, real and unreal, rational and natural, in this sense, melts away as the self empties itself of its self-obsessive self-consciousness.²⁰ To feel this (through the eight layers of consciousnesses) or to share this feeling, a poet must silence her egoity, turn herself and her words into a flicker of

²⁰ Kino Kazuyoshi argues that this "rigorous imaging" of consciousness in Miyazawa's writing makes it impossible for him (or the text) to develop it(self) to a novel or a philosophical treatise (let alone a literary theory). These are superfluous addendum that shifts our attention away from what the poetry is trying to achieve, this self-awareness. See Kino, *The Mystery of Kenji: The World of Fables in Miyazawa Kenji* (1985, p. 8-9).

light. Only then can she invite her readers to do the same through tracing the material ink on the paper.

The consequence of breaking down *mana* consciousness and of breaking it through to *alaya* consciousness in reciting Miyazawa's poetry then is two-fold: on the one hand, it unpacks unlimited possibility of imagination, and on the other, it calls for an act of boundless kindness.

Perhaps, two thousand years from now,
an appropriately different geology may win the time,
apposite evidence may turn up successively from the past,
everyone may think that two thousand years ago
colourless peacocks filled the blue sky,
fresh bachelors of arts may excavate
wonderful fossils somewhere from the glittering frozen nitrogen
at the top stratum of the atmosphere,
or discover in a stratification plane
of Cretaceous sandstone
the enormous footprints of an invisible mankind.

(MIYAZAWA, 2007, p. 64-65).

Keep in mind(-and-heart), however, that imagination here doesn't simply mean the products of mental activities that have nothing to do with reality. That distinction of fact and fiction is superseded in the perspective of Buddhist philosophy. If perception and imagination are both works of selfless consciousness, then everything is possible. The unthinkable is thinkable; the thinkable is unthinkable. The opening poem in the *Spring and Ashura* closes with the extraordinary "propositions" that symbolize the infinite possibility of relational knowing, an expansive communal knowing that leads to a boundless attentiveness of ever making difference. Miyazawa also maintains that this unlimited possibility of imagination,

²¹. This idea of Boddhisattva is famously sung in his “Unbeaten by Rain”. The most accurate version can be found on the Wikipedia page *Ame ni mo makezu*.

generated from the viewpoint of the fundamental consciousness, sets forth an unbreakable sentient being that carries out its actions out of pure compassion.²¹ The self-awareness of this (human) being as emptiness reserves nothing for its egoity, and its presence in the world only comforts those who are in suffering.

Self-Emptying Literature

Huey Newton’s life and thought as “revolutionary suicide” clearly resonates with the Buddhist idea of self-awareness that Miyazawa expresses through his poem on the demigods (*Asura*). It was absolutely irrational, utterly impossible, and perhaps still considered to be unrealistic for him and his fellow African Americans to both think about and act for the sake of their liberation in the United States. The notorious record of the COINTELPRO clearly shows that the state authority conceived it as a threat to *their* national security and justified the violence of the majority under the banner of liberal democracy. Newton imagined the unimaginable and many lines in his writings clearly suggest that his actions were pursued out of [his] boundless compassion towards the fellow blacks in unspeakable suffering. What grounds his ability to think beyond the impossible was the freedom of non-self that overcomes the bounds of *his* fixed notion of self. The compassionate person that Miyazawa paints and aspires to be may come across as being far too insignificant and meagre compared to the iconic legacy of Newton. But both individuals clearly embraced the same logic of overcoming self-centeredness of *manashiki*; to break down the fixed barriers of what is socially and individually conceived as the rational

²² Notice how many times he refers to “brothers and sisters” in his speech. Contrary to a common imagination that BBP along any other forms of black nationalism was misogynistic (which is definitely what the FBI really wanted people to believe), his language is saturated with his care for both women and men of colour under oppression rather than advocating a militaristic imposition of his “masculinity” on his people.

For the reductionistic demonisation or trivialisation of Newton’s philosophic life, see especially Judson L. Jeffries, “Introduction” to Huey P. Newton: *The Radical Theorist* (2002) and Hughey (2005, p. 640).

²³ Most children would know his short stories and most Japanese should be able to recite the first two lines of his most famous poetry, “Unbeaten by Rain” which paints the ideal of how a Buddhist individual should be.

²⁴ See Kenji Miyazawa’s *The Restaurant with Many Orders*, n.d.

and the irrational, good and evil. They both aimed at reaching the standpoint of fundamental consciousness, which enabled them to imagine the unimaginable and to live up to the impossible ideal of their freedom from suffering.

It is important to note how these thinkers face the same astounding fate in the field of philosophy in Anglo-European academia. Newton was greatly inspirational to a large number of people when he was alive. He was capable of initiating a massive social movement for the liberation of “American blacks” as his “brothers and sisters”.²² However, he was cut short of realizing his dream, and as far as the general context of Anglo-European philosophy is concerned: his approach to the history of European philosophy and his philosophical concepts have been hardly discussed outside the marginalised context of Africana philosophy. Unlike Newton, Miyazawa was a nobody when he was alive and yet thanks to his brother and a Kyoto School philosopher, Tanikawa Tetsuzō, his self-published works and memoirs were rigorously re-examined, and their monumental significance was posthumously recognized. Miyazawa is now considered to be one of the greatest poets and Buddhist thinkers in Japan.²³ However, his approach to European and Asian intellectual traditions has hardly been discussed outside the marginalised context of Japanese philosophy in our “western-style” (*seiyōfū* 西洋風) academia.²⁴

What makes it so challenging for contemporary academics from around the world to study their philosophical works is not only their shared intensity for holding a strong existential unity of their life and ideas, but also for their uncompromising drive towards selflessness. They aim at nothing but the liberation of self, an aim flowing their suffering. With that mind-

set, the purpose of their textual transmissions (including reading and writing) naturally moves away from what Japanese women thinkers, for instance, once condemned in the works of professional philosophers as an “intellectual game”, a series of conceptual clarifications of philosophical ideas for its own sake (as many of us are expected to exclusively carry out in academia).²⁵ This is exactly what Newton and Bobby Searle meant by the term “Paper Tigers”.²⁶ Instead, these thinkers constantly fight for their freedom from a contracted sense of self-consciousness, (i.e., *manashiki*). From the Yogacara perspective of consciousness-only, both Newton and Miyazawa can be seen as presenting the same exemplary case of “street philosophers” where, through intense practice of meditation and physical exercise (that is to say, Yogacara), a single sentient being can break down the fixed world of self-affirming self-consciousness, thus breaking themselves (and others) free from the self-inflicted prison of what is collectively believed as the real, the rational, and the sensible.²⁷

²⁵ See Yusa & Kitagawa, *Japanese Women Thinkers* (2011, p. 1129).

²⁶ See Brian P. Sowers, *The Socratic Black Panther* (2017, p. 31) — which cites Newton (p. 138-144) and Seale (p. 113-125).

²⁷ For the notion of “street philosopher” see Sowers (2017, p. 28, 31-35).

What It Means to Read Any Text as Buddhist Literature Today

The most overstudied author in philosophy programs at leading universities in Europe is Plato. Every introduction to the history of philosophy, typically delivered to a fairly large group of first year undergraduate students, has a section on Plato and they are typically fed with a set menu of *Republic* and *Apology*. Most programs will not read them as a philosophical literature but go through a few parts of them like a textbook that concisely represents a metaphysical theory of

²⁸ See the article by Malik (2017) *Are Soas students right to 'decolonise' their minds from western philosophers?*

²⁹ A large number of students questioned the ethnographical ground of Hume's famous racist footnote and expressed their concerns that they were commemorating a racist thinker by studying at a building named after him, namely "David Hume Tower." The decision was made by the university to remove the name from the famous building (BBC, 2020). For a helpful reference to the ethnographical foundation of Scottish Enlightenment, see Tommy J. Curry's lecture *The Ethnographical Foundation of Scottish Enlightenment* (2024).

³⁰ The University of Warwick just opened a position for "non-western philosophy" and a number of universities in continental Europe are beginning to think about the issue of "decolonising the curriculum." My intuition is that many universities in the UK will follow the University of Edinburgh model while the continental European universities will follow the same suit with the demand to deal with increasingly diversifying student body due to their immigration policies.

³¹ Perhaps, Daya Krishna is right in saying that Plato's dialogue is written in such a constrained fashion that it cannot always represent open dialogue (let alone encouraging a series of them). See Daya Krishna, *Contrary Thinking* (2011, p. 30).

Platonic realism (or idealism or dualism depending on their course organisers).

Under the current strong narrative towards "Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion" (EDI) and the ongoing discussions concerning the importance of "decolonising the curriculum" on many UK and European campuses, we begin to observe an increasing voice of concern from students with relatively diverse cultural backgrounds, chanting their discontent at the "elitist" philosophers of "western" thought: "I do not want to read the works of dead white men". The 2017 student protest²⁸ against Plato and Descartes at the SOAS in London was sensational. University of Edinburgh in the north, too, was led to get rid of David Hume from the name of their famous building in 40 George Square in 2020.²⁹ It is just a matter of time before the same type of student concerns will be raised —although progressively in a much more sustainable fashion— against many philosophy programs across the UK and Europe.³⁰

This is a problem not because Plato was a white man but because his texts are currently read, not as philosophical literature but as theoretical works, by most course organisers. His dialogues are read like treatises that showcase a part of the history of European philosophy, which prescribes a blind faith in the self-referential validity of Cartesian *cogito* as Watsuji argues in his overture to *Rinrigaku*. Plato's poetic texts are presented as if they are literally presenting an epistemological or metaphysical theory that fits with the fixed narrative of European philosophy of mind.³¹ Once again, this falls victim to the problem of playing the "intellectual game" and thereby the Platonic corpus only serves the "sociogenic principle". The perspective of Buddhist philosophy would have no

³² We have to refrain from a binary misconception of literacy regarding Newton. It is a complete misunderstanding to think that he was incapable of thinking and engaging with philosophy before cultivating his ability to follow the letters. In fact, he was highly intelligent in terms of what some Indigenous philosophers (as Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gill, Anne Waters, and David Kopenawa) would call “mnemonic tradition”. He memorised poems and constantly engaged in “dialectics” (strictly in the manner of Socrates) prior to his achievement of textual literacy. For the complex significance of this transition from the oral/mnemonic engagement with philosophical thinking to the textual transmission of radical concepts in Newton’s life and work, see *The Huey P. Newton Reader* (Newton, 2011) and Hughey (2005, p. 641).

choice but to diagnose this reading as dwelling in the domain of *manashiki*, thus failing to dig deeper into the foundation of consciousness or the soul of our existence as humans.

It is important to pay attention to how Newton read his Plato. By growing up in the poor black neighbourhood of “double consciousness”, the social conditions did not afford him with a proper education. Even if he successfully attended public school programs, it was precisely because they were not designed for him or his peers to cultivate their sense of human dignity or to facilitate the rise of their self-consciousness, he would not have become a philosopher of self-awareness that we are observing here today. At the age of 17, Newton was basically illiterate.³² To overcome this problem, he locked himself in his room with his older brother’s copy of *Republic*. Then he taught himself how to read by checking the meaning of each word and projecting his sense of self and *cogito* to the symbolisms that he newly discovered therein.

He did not read the imagery of the cave as an imagination of the dead white male intellectual but as the social and existential condition of his self. He did not think about the constitutions of the soul as a strange political theory but the internal problem for him as a black intellectual, a prolegomena to his future project of establishing the sense of an inclusive nation and of cultivating communal self-awareness among fellow African Americans. Brian Sowers is absolutely right: “Plato’s *Republic* directs the trajectory of the narrative and influences how Newton describes the plight of Black America and how he cites literature, especially poetry” (Sowers, 2007, p. 36–37). He could not afford existentially skipping over Socrates’s line in Book seven:

³³ See also Sowers (2017, p. 31-35).

“these prisoners are like us” (PLATO, 2007, 515a5). This is why, as Sowers³³ shows,

Over the course of part 2 of *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton gradually transforms into a modern-day Socrates, who, like his ancient counterpart, confounds his (white) opponents and reveals the truth about (racial) oppression and injustice. At the same time, studying prose texts, philosophical ones in particular, becomes symbolically charged as a metaphor for racial enlightenment and the means by which Newton, as newly liberated prisoner, can free those still chained in the cave’s recesses. (SOWERS, 2017, p. 27).

Through a self-taught “paideia”, the soul of the young black devoured the works of other philosophers like Marx, Dubois, Fanon, Jackson and Malcom X, and with the same intensity, he familiarised himself with State Law and the US criminal justice. The goal of his reading was to use any idea that he could get as a weapon of freedom. He aimed at crushing the prefixed notion of racialised self and liberating himself and others from their suffering by any means necessary. If he could not fight against the injustice and inequality that he witnessed in his society, he had no reason to read them. His readings of philosophical texts had to be both transformative and revolutionary, very much in line with Plato’s and Buddhist sense of “conversion” as an event of the soul.

This point becomes undeniable when we look at the outline of Newton’s essays on “Freedom” and “Trial”. They are modelled after the allegory of the cave and *Apology*. Instead of analysing the concepts and studying them within the context of European philosophy, Newton applied the social condition of living as the oppressed in the United States in the 1960s

and 70s to the stories and rewrote them in reference to his self and others like him. If this is not the best reading of Plato's philosophical texts, I do not know what is. But we can at least say that this method follows the Buddhist process of "deconstruction and reconstruction": it destroys the (supposed) fixed narrative of Plato and restructures it in such a way that it recuperates the original meaning with a renewed reference to the sense of self in contemporary American and European society.

Miyazawa Kenji breaks away from the formalised style of traditional Japanese poetics, and with his distinct use of onomatopoeia, he appeals to the elementary, lyrical aspect of the language. Instead of writing a treatise on epistemology and metaphysics or sophisticated novels of socio-political criticism, he wrote children's stories and poetry that was written for himself. While living in poverty and sickness, with a fear of death, his life embodied the Buddhist principle of self-negation. He lived his words, encouraging himself to be as compassionate as possible to others, thus inspiring many to do the same posthumously.³⁴ Many of his stories are grownup's everyday reality of serious contradiction: our inherent ability to, and continuous failure in, changing our heart-and-mind.

³⁴ See his most famous poetry as singing the Buddhist ideal, *Unbeaten by Rain* (MIYAZAWA, n.d.).

In the end, whether or not these thinkers believed in the Buddhist doctrine of no-self and encouraged their readers to live the life of Buddhism is irrelevant. What is relevant here is that revolutionary minds always come across as being irrational and insignificant to the world of educated self-consciousness precisely because they are always after the foundational consciousness beyond the contracted sense of the subjective "I" and always, out of compassion, aiming at the alleviation of existential and social problems

in their given historical conditions. The task of world philosophies in approaching their works, then, is to show how they are breaking down these barriers (very much in consonance with the spirit of Yogacara Buddhism) and realising the impossible dream of absolute compassion.

Concluding Words of No-Mind

To see the emptiness of self, to become self-aware in Buddhism, is not to deny the self but let go of its self-centeredness such that each self can come to see what genuinely constitutes its identity, namely its inter-relationality with all the others. In its proper openness and fellowship with its others, the self can overcome its attachment to its fixed and false notion of the self. This is precisely what Newton means by “I am We” in reference to George Jackson’s philosophy and Zen. The task of Buddhist texts is to endorse this existential movement of self-affirmation through self-negation in its communicative openness to diverse others (in suffering), and it is clear that both Newton’s and Miyazawa’s approach to philosophy and poetry encourages the same movement through their textual transmissions. As they showcase the Buddhist concept of foundational consciousness, their writings themselves encourage their readers to perform the same self-reflective action.

The remaining question that we have to face —“I” as the author and “you” as a reader of this article on the Buddhist philosophy of literature— is the question of whether or not we are engaging with this article as a means for cultivating our self-awareness in the same fashion. What makes a book Buddhist is not its fixed self-identity but what we do with it

³⁵ About this, see
Thich Nhat Hahn
(1998).

for our self-understanding: its “inter-being” or “relational knowing” with us.³⁵ If this article is read as a means to know a bit about the Yogacara theory of mind or as merely adding a few encyclopaedic entries on the facts about non-western philosophers (for superficially decolonising our philosophy program in European academia), this is a complete waste of our time as sentient beings. If we are not going to improve our life by reading any Buddhist texts, it is the same thing as burning it in the manner of *Rashōmon* or even as defecating on it in the manner of Ikkyū’s *Crazy Cloud*. What saves us from the flames of oppressive concepts or from the sewage of blind (self-)prejudices is our serious existential engagement with what we read. This is what the Yogacara Buddhist doctrine of eight consciousnesses guides us to achieve through their teaching and what is exemplified in the works of these Japanese and African philosophers.

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