

TANTRIC YOGĀCĀRA:
REFLEXIVE AWARENESS AND THE FOUR STAGES
IN RATNĀKARAŚĀNTI'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL WORKS

ALEXANDER YIANNOPOULOS*

Introduction

Although the problem of self-cognition has a long history in Buddhist literature, the concept of reflexive awareness (*svasaṃvedana*, *svasaṃvitti*, Tib. *rang rig*) is often treated primarily in terms of its place in Dharmakīrti's epistemology. However, later Buddhist philosophers understood reflexive awareness to be crucial for both epistemological theory and contemplative practice. This paper aims to explain the relationship between reflexive awareness and the stages of yogic meditative practice as found in the epistemological works of Ratnākaraśānti (ca. 1000 CE). In particular I will focus on the *Pith Instructions for the Ornament of the Middle Way* (*dBu ma rgyan gyi man ngag*, **Madhyamakālaṃkāropadeśa*, henceforth MAU) and the *Pith Instructions for the Perfection of Wisdom* (*Sher phyin man ngag*, **Prajñāpāramitopadeśa*, henceforth PPU). My view is that these texts, together with the *Commentary on the Ornament of the Middle Way* (*dBu ma rgyan gyi 'grel pa*, **Madhyamakālaṃkāravṛtti*, henceforth MAV) represent a more or less continuous and coherent perspective, despite being concerned with slightly different topics. Accordingly, I will frequently refer to one text in order to illuminate another, and vice versa.

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As I will demonstrate, Ratnākaraśānti maintains that Yogācāra meditation both can and should be understood in the context of tantric practice. Furthermore, he implicitly justifies this stance by appealing to the nondual nature of reflexive awareness, which is also known as “luminosity” (*prakāśa*, Tib. *gsal ba*). The nondual luminosity of reflexive awareness thus forms the bridge between practice based in Yogācāra theory, and practices associated with the tantric corpus, particularly the cycle of practices associated with the *Guhyasamājatantra*. However, in order to explain these points, it is necessary to say a few words about the four stages of Yogācāra, as understood by Ratnākaraśānti, and the thorny question of phenomenological nonduality first.

The Four Yogas

The four stages of Yogācāra, also known as the four yogas, are traditionally traced back to the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*. The four stages as found in this *sūtra* may be summarized as follows:

1. The meditator realizes that all phenomena are mind only, and passes beyond the conceptualization of objects as existing externally to the mind.
2. The meditator apprehends suchness (*tathatā*), the nature of reality, and passes beyond “mind only.”
3. Passing beyond mind only, the meditator abides in non-appearance.
4. Abiding in non-appearance, the meditator “sees the Mahāyāna,” whatever this might mean.¹

Although there exists a wide variety of subsequent interpretations, as well as differences in the text of the *Laṅkāvatāra* itself,² this is the most common

¹ *Laṅkāvatāra* X.256–257 *cittamātram sārūhya bāhyam arthaṃ na kalpayet | tathatāmbane sthītvā cittamātram atikramet || cittamātram atikramya nirābhāsam atikramet | nirābhāsaṣṭhito yogī mahāyānaṃ [sa paśyati] ||* (Nanjio 1923: 298–299).

² Perhaps the single most important variant reading is *na paśyate* for *sa paśyati* in the fourth *pāda*. The text as cited by Ratnākaraśānti clearly reads *sa paśyati* (Tib. *de yis theg pa chen po mthong*), as does the Sanskrit text cited by Kamalaśīla in *Bhāvanākrama* I (in both the Namdol 1997 and Tucci 1958 editions). Kamalaśīla also repeats this reading in his subsequent commentary to the verse. Nanjio has *na paśyate*, but includes *sa paśyati* as a variant reading from a Nepali manuscript. Cf. Nanjio 1923: 299, n. 1. Cf. also Namdol 1997: xxxiii and 216, n. 1.

rendering of the four yogas. One crucial point to note here is that “mind only” is but one stage along the path; it, too, must be transcended by the Yogācāra practitioner. This theme will recur in Ratnākaraśānti’s work.

For his part, Ratnākaraśānti presents these four stages in a slightly different manner, closely (though not exactly) following Kamalaśīla’s commentary on these verses in the First *Bhāvanākrama*:³

As for the four stages, the divisions of yoga, these are: [1] the observation of the two extremes of entities, [2] the observation of “mind only,” [3] the observation of suchness, and [4] no observation. The first stage of yoga takes as its support the full range of entities. The second stage of yoga takes as its support the way that phenomena are, which is “mind only.” The third stage of yoga takes as its support the suchness of all phenomena, just as it is. The fourth stage of yoga, in which one sees the Great Vehicle, is non-appearance.⁴

Leaving aside the minor differences between this account and that of the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, there are three key points to understand about Ratnākaraśānti’s explanation of the four yogas. First, the passage to “mind only” necessitates the dissolution of phenomenological subject and object, or “apprehender” (*’dzin rnam*, **grāhakākāra*) and “apprehended” (*gzung rnam*, **grāhyākāra*), which he terms the “two extremes of entities” (*dnegos po’i mtha’ gnyis*). Second, as in the *Laṅkāvatāra*, the recognition of ontological idealism, or “mind only,” is distinct from the realization of suchness. The former is only a step along the way to the latter. Third, the final result of the disappearance of subject and object is the non-appearance of anything at all (except, as we shall see, the undifferentiated luminosity of nondual reflexive awareness).

³ This account is from the MAU. Ratnākaraśānti has the same account of the four stages in the PPU, but explains them slightly differently (see below). Cf. Bentor 2000: 45–47 for an overview of the slight differences between Ratnākaraśānti and Kamalaśīla on the four yogas.

⁴ MAU (sDe dge 460.d–f): *rnal ’byor gyi khyad par gyi sa gzhi ni / dnegos po’i mtha’ gnyis yod pa la dmigs pa dang / sems tsam la dmigs pa dang / de bzhin nyid la dmigs pa dang / dmigs pa med pa’o / de yang ji snyed yod pa la dmigs pa ni rnal ’byor gyi sa dang po’o / ji lta bar gyur pa’i sems tsam la dmigs par gyur pa ni rnal ’byor gyi sa gnyis pa’o / ji lta ba bzhin du gyur pa’i chos thams cad kyi de bzhin nyid la dmigs pa ni rnal ’byor gyi sa gsum pa’o / theg pa chen po thong ba ste / snang ba med pa ni rnal ’byor gyi sa bzhi pa’o /*

There is unfortunately not enough space here to treat these points in great detail. Briefly, however, it is first of all important to understand that ontological idealism in the Buddhist context is in no way reducible to pure solipsistic subjectivity. While this may be fair or unfair as a characterization of e.g. Bishop Berkeley's idealism, it is wholly inadequate as an account of Yogācāra idealism. The classic Buddhist argument is that the realization that external objects cannot exist apart from the perceiving subject, necessitates in turn the realization that the internal subject does not exist as an independent entity. In other words, first you recognize that the idea of objects appearing, in the absence of a subject to whom they appear, does not make sense. In this way, all appearances are "just mind" (*cittamātra*), as anything that appears is by definition appearing to some observer. Crucially, however, you must then reflect on the fact that the idea of a subject for whom appearances appear, in the absence of those appearances, does not make sense either. Understanding that subject and object thus always necessarily arise together, and that neither can exist in the absence of the other, the meditator passes beyond a dualistic, subject-object framework altogether. Ratnākaraśānti himself uses this classic argument in the extended discussion of the second stage of the four yogas in the PPU:

Imputed objects are mind only, and no apprehended object external to the mind exists in any way whatsoever. Because the apprehended object does not exist, the apprehending subject also does not exist. Thus these various [appearances] are ineffable. Having ascertained a "mind only" that is empty of apprehended and apprehender, all mental expressions are abandoned. All phenomena are included in this mind only.⁵

As is well known, this argument is arguably traceable to Vasubandhu.⁶ Less well known is that this reasoning also appears in the *Pramāṇavārttika*

⁵ PPU (sDe dge 313.e–g) *btags pa'i don 'di dag sems tsam yin gyi / sems las phyi rol du gyur pa'i gzung ba'i don ni 'ga' yang yod pa ma yin no / gzung ba de med pas 'dzin pa yang yod pa ma yin no / de bas na sna tshogs 'di dag ni brjod du med cing gzung ba dang 'dzin pas stong pa'i sems tsam du nges par byas la / yid kyi brjod pa thams cad spangs te / chos thams cad sems tsam pa de nyid la sems bsdu te / Cf. Bentor 2000: 42–43 for a further discussion of this passage.*

⁶ Cf. *Triṃśikā* 26–28: "For as long as cognition (*viññāna*) does not abide in mental-representations-only (*viññaptimātra*), the defiled residue (*anuśāya*) of dualistic

of Dharmakīrti (PV 3.212–213), who expands the argument to include a point about cognitive error:

This part of awareness – namely, the one that is established such that it seems external – is different from the internal determination [which is the part of awareness that apprehends that apparently external part]. Awareness is not differentiated, but its appearance is differentiated into two. This being so, that dualistic appearance must be cognitive confusion.

The nonexistence of one of the two in awareness eliminates the existence of both. Therefore, the emptiness of duality is the suchness of the awareness.⁷ [Trans. Dunne 2004: 406–408]

We will return to this passage, and in particular to its definition of “the suchness of awareness” as “the emptiness of duality.” But first, let us briefly return to the remaining key points from above. Again, Ratnākaraśānti views the realization of “mind only” to be distinct from the realization of suchness, and he maintains that the final stage of Yogācāra meditation is “non-appearance.” These two points are intimately related. In order to understand why, however, we must first turn our attention to the role of *pramāṇa* theory in Ratnākaraśānti’s exegetical project.

Perception and Nonduality

Ratnākaraśānti rhetorically positions himself as an exponent of Śāntaraksita’s and Kamalaśīla’s synthesis of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka analysis with *pramāṇa* theory. In the MAU, for example, he terms his

apprehension will not cease. (26) Since [the idea that] ‘This [experience] is just mental-representations-only!’ too, is a mental apprehension (*upalambhata*), one who stays at [the] first [stage of analysis] does not [truly] abide in ‘[mental-representations]-only.’ (27) When cognition does not apprehend any support (*ālambana*) at all, it [truly] abides in ‘mental-representations-only,’ where there is no apprehended object (*grāhya*), because none is apprehended. (28)”

yāvad vijñaptimātratve vijñānaṃ nāvatiṣṭhati | grāhadvayasyānuśayas tāvan na vini-vartate || (26) vijñaptimātram evedam ity api hy upalambhataḥ | sthāpayann agrataḥ kiṃcit tanmātre nāvatiṣṭhate || (27) yadālambanaṃ vijñānaṃ naivopalambhate tadā | sthītaṃ vijñānamātratve grāhyābhāve tadagrahāt || (28)

⁷ *paricchedo ’ntar [anyathāso] (Tosaki 1979: anyo ayaṃ) bahir iva sthitaḥ | jñāna-syābhedīno bheda pratibhāso hy upaplavaḥ || tatraikasyāpy [abhāve ca] (Tosaki 1979: abhāvena) dvayam apy avahīyate | tasmāt tad eva tasyāpi tattvaṃ yā dvayaśūnyatā ||*

approach the “Middle Way of the Three Natures” (*rang bzhin gsum gyi dbu ma*), includes homages to both Asaṅga and Nāgārjuna, and he spends much of his time making *pramāṇa*-theoretical arguments. In practice, however, Ratnākaraśānti consistently downplays Madhyamaka in favor of Yogācāra and *pramāṇa*, a fact reflected in the location of the MAU, MAV, and PPU in the Yogācāra (*sems tsam*) section of the Tibetan *bsTan ’gyur*.

Although *pramāṇa* theory is often considered distinct from Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, it is important to understand that both Diñnāga and Dharmakīrti wrote their epistemological texts from a Yogācāra perspective. Dharmakīrti, for example, argues in the end for ontological idealism over and against the existence of extramental matter,⁸ and at points he even uses the decisively Yogācāra concept of the store-consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) to do so.⁹ In important ways, then, Buddhist *pramāṇa* literature was always closely aligned with Yogācāra philosophy. Śāntarakṣita, Kamalaśīla, and Ratnākaraśānti only continued this tradition.

One major difference between Ratnākaraśānti and Dharmakīrti, however, lies in the features of *pramāṇa* theory which each chooses to emphasize. Dharmakīrti spends most of his time arguing from the “External Realist” (*bāhyārthavāda*) perspective, wherein he provisionally accepts the existence of extramental matter in the form of infinitesimal particles (*paramāṇu*). Although Dharmakīrti eventually refutes the existence of extramental matter, he does not expound at any great length from what John Dunne terms the “Epistemic Idealist” (*antarjñeyavāda*, *vijñānavāda*) level of analysis.¹⁰ Ratnākaraśānti, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the Epistemic Idealist perspective, and in his

⁸ Cf. Dunne 2004: 59.

⁹ PV 3.522 (trans. Eltschinger): “Even if heterogeneous [cognitions can] arise simultaneously, [only one cognition] arises from the *ālaya*, not the others, due to the incapacity [to produce them] caused by a particularly intense cognition.” *sakṛd vijāṭiyajātāv apy ekena paṭiyasā | cittenāhitavaiguṇyād ālayān nānyasambhavaḥ ||* Cf. Eltschinger 2016: 45–48 for a discussion of some alternate translations and interpretations of this verse.

¹⁰ Cf. Dunne 2004: 65–79 for a discussion of this terminology. Although I am using the existing terminology for reasons of convenience, it should not be inferred that there is any difference between ontological and epistemological idealism. In fact, the close relationship between ontological idealism and Epistemic Idealism is a key point for both Dharmakīrti and Ratnākaraśānti. Cf. Yiannopoulos 2012: 71–73.

philosophical works never even provisionally accepts the existence of extramental particles.

The difference between the External Realist and Epistemic Idealist positions, in turn, can best be understood as a shift in the nature of the instrument of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) and the known object (*prameya*). At the External Realist level of analysis, the known object is considered to be a conglomeration of real, extramental, infinitesimal particles. The way we come to know such an object, the instrument of knowledge, is considered to be the phenomenal object or “apprehended aspect” (*grāhyākāra*) of a cognition.¹¹ In this account, contact (*sparśa*) with infinitesimal particles produces a cognition (*jñāna*), which is always already bifurcated into subjective and objective aspects. The subjective aspect is first-person phenomenological subjectivity, the “apprehending aspect.” The objective “apprehended aspect” is a mental representation of the causal features of the extramental matter. Reliable cognitions, possessing “instrumentality” (*prāmānya*), accurately track those causal features: what you see is what you get. Conversely, the failure condition for any act of knowing is the presence of some kind of confusion (*upaplava*) or distortion (*bhrānti*) in the relationship between the mental representations and what they are supposed to be representing. Thus, for example, a reliable cognition of water tracks the causal features of water particles which can actually be drunk and slake your thirst. An unreliable cognition of water, such as a mirage, does not represent water particles, or else represents them inaccurately.

In the External Realist context, epistemic reliability is cast in terms of the relationship between the known object (the conglomeration of infinitesimal particles) and the instrument of knowledge (the mental representation or “apprehended aspect”). Since every cognition is necessarily structured into subjective and objective aspects, and the objective aspect is the only means to attain reliable knowledge about the world, the dualistic structure is not considered problematic. At the Epistemic Idealist level of analysis, however, this dualistic structure is itself understood to be a form of distortion; recall the *Pramāṇavārttika* verse from above. The point is that every dualistic cognition is inaccurate, precisely insofar as it distorts

¹¹ This is according to Dharmakīrti; Diñnāga has a slightly different account, the particulars of which do not concern us here.

the *prameya* or “known object.” Again, in an External Realist context, the *prameya* is a conglomeration of infinitesimal particles. At the Epistemic Idealist level, however, both Dharmakīrti and Ratnākaraśānti refute the existence of extramental matter. There exist only mind and mental processes. Therefore the *prameya* must be mind, in some form or another.

The problem is that, for reasons that are too complicated to explain here, Dharmakīrti also rejects the existence of distributed entities, i.e., things with parts, especially things that are extended in space or variegated in terms of their phenomenal characteristics (such as their color).¹² According to Dharmakīrti, the idea of a single cognition possessing two real distributed parts – subjective and objective aspects – is therefore anathema to the Buddhist epistemological project. Furthermore, as Vasubandhu explains in *Triṃśikā* 27, as long as there is any differentiation between subject and object, the meditator has not yet realized “mind only.” Thus, even though it ordinarily seems as though awareness is bifurcated into subjective and objective aspects, in reality, “awareness is not differentiated.” Any dualistic cognition is therefore, by definition, unable to serve as a reliable epistemological instrument (*pramāṇa*), since it constitutes a kind of cognitive confusion or distortion.

Specifically, it constitutes the “internal distortion” (*antarupaplava*) identified by Dharmakīrti at PV 3.359–362.¹³ The idea is that the sensory cognition of, for example, a blue patch is distorted or mistaken, precisely insofar as the mode of its appearance is dualistic. In other words, such a cognition is misleading to the extent that it *feels like* something outside the mind, some blue patch ‘out there,’ is being apprehended by a first-person or intentional subjectivity. As Ratnākaraśānti writes:

The phenomenal characteristics “blue” and so on do not exist, because they are refuted in the manner that was explained; therefore there is cognitive distortion due to the contaminating force of the psychological imprint for “blue” and so on. That being the case, the experience is distorted, and it is experienced as though one were experiencing something else [i.e. as something external to the mind].¹⁴

¹² Cf. Dunne 2004: 42–44, 58–59, 62–84.

¹³ Dunne 2004: 89, n. 57 and 315–318.

¹⁴ MAU (sDe dge 450.g) *sngon po la sogs pa'i mtshan nyid ni med pa ste / ji skad du 'chad par 'gyur ba'i gnod pa yod pa'i phyir ro / de bas na sngon po la sogs pa'i bag*

For this reason, the objective or “apprehended aspect” cannot be considered an ultimately reliable instrument of knowledge, defined as the type of *pramāṇa* that affords access to reality as it really is, or enables the view of things just as they are (*yathābhūtarśana*): in a word, to suchness, the ultimate, nondual *prameya*.

To step back for a moment, it is not *necessarily* true that the phenomenal object cannot serve as a perceptual instrument at the Epistemic Idealist level. In principle, what distinguishes Epistemic Idealist discourse is its rejection of any extra-mental causes for sensory cognition. In other words, it is at least theoretically conceivable that an Epistemic Idealist could simultaneously maintain both (1) that there are, in fact, no extra-mental entities, and (2) that we are only afforded reliable information about reality by means of an intentional, dualistic form of cognition. Indeed, something like this seems to be the interpretation of Epistemic Idealism made by Dan Arnold¹⁵ and Christian Coseru.¹⁶

In theory, then, it is possible to frame Epistemic Idealist discourse entirely within the “mind only” stage of Yogācāra, without any further reference to the emptiness of duality as the “suchness of awareness.” In

chags kyis bslad pa'i dbang gis 'khrul pa'o / de ltar gyur pas de myong ba yang 'khrul pa dang / gghan myong ba lta bur myong ba'o /

¹⁵ Arnold 2005: 88–89 (emphasis original). “There is, though, a real question here whether Dignāga may thus be seen to uphold something more like a full-blown metaphysical idealism than simply a representationalist epistemology. As in many of the Western philosophical discussions where idealism seems to lurk, though, it is an exegetically complex matter which of two claims is being made: the ontological claim that mental events are all that really *exist*, or the strictly epistemological claim that mental events (such as representational ‘sense data’) are all that we can directly *know*. On either reading of the foregoing arguments from Dignāga, though, we still have to face a question concerning, most basically, the *relationships* that are thought to be involved in cognition...

Thus, if Dignāga’s appeal to *svasaṃvitti* advances the claim that only mental events finally exist, the two mental events whose co-occurrence requires relating are the ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ aspects of any such moment; while if the appeal to *svasaṃvitti* advances simply a representationalist epistemology, the two mental events to be related are (to take the case of one’s entertaining a proposition) the conceptual thought one experiences oneself as having, and one’s non-conceptual awareness of the bare fact of having it. And in either case, the need to establish such a relationship threatens to open up an infinite regress.”

¹⁶ Coseru 2012: 235–273.

practice, however, this does not appear to be Dharmakīrti's view, and it is certainly not Ratnākaraśānti's perspective:

These stated flaws which follow as an unacceptable conclusion from the claim that blue patches and so on are external are the same for a blue patch which has the nature of consciousness, because there is no difference in the unacceptable conclusions that follow. The distinction between [external] objects and consciousness simply does not amount to anything at all.¹⁷

So Ratnākaraśānti, at least, clearly rejects the idea that there could ever be a cognition which is both reliable and dualistic, even if the purported object of the dualistic cognition is held to be nothing other than the mind itself.

In the final analysis, then, the only ultimately reliable instrument of knowledge is reflexive awareness. This is because reflexive awareness is not structured by subject-object duality, and is therefore not contaminated by the "internal distortion." Although this is a contentious point, the nonduality of reflexive awareness is amply attested in the Buddhist epistemological literature, particularly in the commentaries of Devendrabuddhi and Śākyabuddhi, the first generation of commenters on Dharmakīrti.¹⁸ For our purposes here, though, their views on the matter are less important than that of Ratnākaraśānti, who writes:

Moreover, there is nothing that can refute the luminous nature of awareness, because there is no other means of reliable knowledge that surpasses it. It is the perception [*mngon sum*, **pratyakṣa*] that is reflexive awareness, and it is authentic experience. Thus it is established as a means of reliable knowledge.¹⁹

And:

Although their nature is luminosity, blue patches and so on are false since they are harmed [by analysis]. But that luminosity is established as real,

¹⁷ MAU (sDe dge 453.g–454.a) *ji ltar sngon po la sogs pa phyi rol gyi las thal bar 'gyur ba'i skyon brjod pa 'di dag ni / rnam par shes pa'i bdag nyid kyi sngon po la sogs pa la yang mshungs te / thal bar 'gyur ba la bye brag med pa'i phyir ro / don dang rnam par shes pa'i bye brag tsam gyis ni cir yang mi 'gyur ro /*

¹⁸ Dunne 2004: 398–411.

¹⁹ MAU (sDe dge 451.a–b) *yang rig pa gsal ba'i ngo bo la gnod par byed pa ni med de / de las lhag pa'i tshad ma gzhan med pa'i phyir ro / de ni rang rig pa'i mngon sum yin pa dang / yang dag du myong ba'o / de bas na 'di ni tshad mas grub pa ste /*

because it is a perception that is free from distortion, it is a direct means of reliable knowledge.²⁰

And, most simply:

Luminosity is a direct means of reliable knowledge, because there is no distortion in its nature.²¹

It is amply clear, then, that access to suchness, or the ultimate nature of reality, cannot in principle be granted by a dualistic cognition – precisely insofar as such a cognition is, *by definition*, distorted or mistaken, and, additionally, is *prima facie* evidence of the cognizer’s ignorance. The state of “mind only” meditation might in theory be attainable within or by means of a dualistic cognition, but the realization of suchness is in principle impossible. To put it slightly differently: reflexive awareness, or luminosity, is the only candidate for a *pramāṇa* by means of which a meditator may have access to suchness (insofar as this may be spoken of as the ‘object’ of a particular type of meditation), precisely *because* it is nondual. Therefore, interpretations of reflexive awareness that seek to cast it as the subjective aspect’s dualistic apprehension of “itself,”²² or as nothing other than the dualistic intentional structure itself,²³ obscure its single most important feature: nonduality. Additionally, such interpretations render

²⁰ MAU (sDe dge 458.g) *yang sngon po la sogs pa de gsal ba’i rang bzhin yang gnod pa yod pa’i phyir brdzun pa’o / yang gsal ba de rig pa’i ’khrul pa dang bral ba nyid du mngon sum yin pa’i phyir dngos po nyid du grub pa yin no /*

²¹ MAU (sDe dge 454.d–e) *de bas na gsal ba ’di ni rang gi bdag nyid la ma ’khrul ba’i phyir mngon sum gyi tshad ma yin no /*

²² Williams 1997: 8. “The subjective aspect here results in *self-awareness* (i) in the sense that there is not as such an awareness of something outside its own mental continuum... What self-awareness, self-consciousness, is aware of here is its own (object-taking) consciousness.”

²³ Arnold 2005: 99. “In terms of the philosophical adequacy of this alternative reading of *svasaṃvitti*, I have already tried to develop (following Strawson on Kant) a sympathetic reading of the cogent transcendental argument to be made in its defense. We have seen, then, an argument to the effect that if *svasaṃvitti* picks out simply whatever it is in virtue of which cognitions are to be distinguished from insentient objects (and I have suggested, following Dharmottara and Mokṣākaragupta, that the criterion thus identified is *intentionality*), then one cannot coherently deny its obtaining since one could only claim to deny this of *cognitions* if these have already been individuated as such – and it will not be *cognitions* of which this is denied if we have not thus individuated constitutively subjective, intentional acts.” Or, somewhat more simply (Arnold 2005: 77) (emphasis original):

Ratnākaraśānti's account of meditative practice, or indeed any theory of nondual meditation, unintelligible.

Finally, this interpretation of reflexive awareness is incompatible with Ratnākaraśānti's understanding of tantric meditation. But in order to understand why, it is necessary to briefly return to the four stages of Yogācāra.

Reflexive Awareness and Tantric Yoga²⁴

The reason we must return to the four stages of Yogācāra is that Ratnākaraśānti explicitly couches his account of tantric meditation in terms of these four stages. In fact, not only does Ratnākaraśānti explain tantric yoga in terms of the four stages, he further claims that the contemplative practice associated with the *Guhyasamājatantra* is identical to the four stages as found in the *Laṅkāvatāra*.

Ratnākaraśānti makes the latter claim in the PPU, after elaborating on the four stages in some detail. As Yael Bentor summarizes,²⁵

In the first stage the yogis apply their minds (*yid la byed pa*) to the diversity of phenomena in the world that are the objects of the six senses. Then they apply their minds to the six senses and the six consciousnesses, in order to comprehend the mental activities that engage with the world. By combining calm abiding (*zhi gnas*) and penetrating insight (*lhag mthong*) they reach an understanding of conceptual reflected images to the extent they exist, and discern the modes of apprehending them through the eighteen spheres of perception.

In the second stage the yogis reflect on the perception of all phenomena as products of mental-processes-only (*sems tsam*), which appear due to habitual tendencies of clinging to objects. Since objects grasped as external to the mind do not exist as they are conceptualised, their grasper cannot exist in that way either. By combining calm abiding and penetrating insight, the yogis understand that the diversity of appearances of the eighteen spheres of perception are mental-processes-only, empty of object and subject, and devoid of inherent existence.

"But *svasaṃvitti* was taken by other thinkers to denote whatever it is – and I will suggest, as a plausible candidate, *intentionality* – that is constitutive of *subjectivity*."

²⁴ This section is heavily indebted to the work of Yael Bentor, especially her article "Fourfold Meditation: Outer, Inner, Secret, and Suchness" (Bentor 2000).

²⁵ Bentor 2000: 42–43.

In the third stage the yogis apply non-appearance to the false marks of manifest appearances, as meditators on the formless realms pass beyond the perception of form, by perceiving infinite space. Thereby they relinquish all false conceptual marks of the object and subject and view them as space, utterly immaculate and limitless, empty of duality, sheer clarity. They realise that all phenomena are formless, undemonstrable, and unobstructed, their one essential characteristic being the absence of characteristics. By combining calm abiding and penetrating insight, they realise that all appearances are reflected images of emptiness and apprehend the suchness of all phenomena as they are.

In the fourth stage, the yogis pass beyond the subtlest conceptualisation of phenomena. Without exertion and without conditioning, they realise experientially, through a direct perception, the suchness of all phenomena. They realise the complete vanishing of the marks of phenomena and the nature of phenomena, the enlightened wisdom, which is non-dual, free of appearances and apprehension, the supramundane non-conceptual calm abiding and penetrating insight.

In keeping with the operating hypothesis laid out above, though, it is worth emphasizing that this extended discussion of the four stages in the PPU is structurally identical to his treatment of the four stages in the MAU, as translated above. Indeed, following his discussion of the four stages, in both the MAU and the PPU, Ratnākaraśānti cites *Laṅkāvatāra* IX.256–257:²⁶

In dependence on “mind only,”
 External objects become unintelligible.
 Having ascertained suchness,
 One should also pass beyond “mind only.”
 Having passed beyond “mere mind,”
 One should pass into non-appearance.
 The yogi who abides in non-appearance
 Sees the Great Vehicle.²⁷

²⁶ Ratnākaraśānti does not seem to be using the same translation of the *Laṅkāvatāra* extant in the *bKa'* 'gyur, but a version closer to the Dunhuang recension. Cf. Bentor 2000: 47, n. 18. See also above, n. 1.

²⁷ MAU (sDe dge 460.f–g) and PPU (sDe dge 321.e–f). *sems tsam la ni brten nas su / phyi rol don la brtag mi bya / de bzhin nyid du dmigs nas ni / sems tsam las kyang 'da' bar bya /*

This is where the MAU ends. In the PPU, however, Ratnākaraśānti goes on to assert that the *Guhyasamājatantra* contains the same fourfold teaching as the *Laṅkāvatāra*:

The *Guhyasamāja* teaches this exact thing in one verse:
 Having investigated one's own mind,
 All phenomena abide [there].
 Phenomena abide in the space-*vajra*;
 There are no phenomena, and there is no nature of phenomena.²⁸

The first stage is implicit in both [the *Guhyasamāja* and the *Laṅkāvatāra*]: because, as long as yogis do not grasp that “All phenomena are this!,” they are unable to apprehend their emptiness.²⁹ ... The second stage, which possesses appearances, is conviction in mind-only, empty of apprehended and apprehender. The third stage is the view in accord with luminosity, which comes about due to the conviction that the characteristics of phenomena do not appear. The fourth stage is that vision [*mthong ba*] which arises due to the utter non-appearance of all of the characteristics of both phenomena and the nature of the phenomena.³⁰

Ratnākaraśānti then glosses the verse from the *Guhyasamāja*, word by word, in terms of the fourfold meditation:

Moreover, “investigate the mind” refers to the second stage of yoga. “Reside” means that all phenomena are the appearance of one's own mind, and “one's own” is the achievement of the certainty: “My own mind, though nonexistent, appears.” “Space-*vajra*” refers to the two non-appearances. “Abiding in that” means abiding in the non-appearance of phenomena and the nature of phenomena, successively. Thus the non-appearance of the self-nature [*rang bzhin*, **svabhāva*] of phenomena is the third stage, and

²⁸ *svacittam cittanidhyaptau sarvadharmāḥ pratiṣṭhitāḥ | khavajrasthā hy amī dharmā na dharmā na ca dharmatā ||* (GuSa 15. 135).

²⁹ Cf. *Triṃśikā* 27 (above, n. 6).

³⁰ PPU (sDe dge 321.g–322.c) *dpal gsang ba 'dus pa las kyang | de nyid tshigs su bcad pa gcig gis gsungs te | rang gi sems ni brtags pas na | chos kun sems la rab tu gnas | chos 'di nam mkha'i rdo rjer gnas | chos dang chos nyid med pa'o | zhes so | gnyi ga la yang rnal 'byor gyis sa dang po ni shugs kyis bstan par 'gyur te | ji srid du chos tham cad ni 'di dag go zhes ma bzung ba de srid du | de dag gis stong pa nyid gzung bar mi nus pa'i phyir ro | ... de dag kyang gzung ba dang | 'dzin pas stong pa'i sems tsam nyid du lhag par mos te | snang ba dang bcas pa ni gnyis pa'o | de nyid la chos rnam kyī mtshan ma mi snang bar lhag par mos pas gsal ba bzhin du lta ba ni gsum pa'o | de nyid la chos rnam dang | chos nyid kyī mtshan ma thams cad shin tu mi snang bas mthong ba ni bzhi pa'o |*

the non-appearance of the self-nature of the nature of phenomena [*chos nyid*, **dharmatā*] is the fourth stage.³¹

This is not the only instance of Ratnākaraśānti glossing key elements of tantric practice in terms of Yogācāra philosophy. As Bentor has noted, Ratnākaraśānti also uses this fourfold schema in his commentaries to the *Guhyasamāja* material, such as the *Kusumāñjali*³² and the *Ratnāvalī* (henceforth RV). For example, in the RV, Ratnākaraśānti uses the fourfold framework in his explanation of a famous verse from the second chapter of the *Guhyasamāja*, which appears at the very beginning of the generation stage (*utpattikrama*) in the *Piṇḍīkramasādhana*:

[a] *abhāve bhāvanābhāvo* [b] *bhāvanā naiva bhāvanā* /
 [c] *iti bhāvo na bhāvaḥ syād* [d] *bhāvanā nopalabhyate* //
 [a] *ḍngos po med pas sgom pa med* / [b] *bsgom par bya ba sgom pa min* /
 [c] *de ltar ḍngos po ḍngos med pas* / [d] *sgom pa dmigs su med pa'o* //³³

Although this verse is perhaps deliberately obscure, one possible translation, following Ārya Candrakīrti's commentary and relying on the Tibetan to disambiguate, is:

“[a] When there are no entities (*abhāve*), there is no meditation (*bhāvanābhāvo*). [b] Even if there is an object of meditation, there is no meditation. [c] Thus, whether [the object is] existent or not, [d] meditation is not observed.”³⁴ Ārya Candrakīrti glosses this verse in four ways,

³¹ PPU (sDe dge 323.d–f) *yang sems brtag pa zhes pa ni rnal 'byor gyi sa gnyis pa'o / rab tu gnas pa ni chos thams cad rang gi sems kyi snang ba ste / rang ste bdag gi sems 'di nyid med bzhin du snang ba yin no zhes nges par byas pa'o / nam mkha' rdo rje zhes bya ba ni snang ba med pa gnyis so / der gnas pa ni go rims bzhin du chos rnam dang / chos nyid du snang ba med pa las gnas pa'o / de la chos rnam rang bzhin mi snang ba ni sa gsum pa yin la / chos nyid rang bzhin mi snang ba ni sa bzhi pa'o /*

³² Bentor 2000: 49–50.

³³ Bentor 2010: 89.

³⁴ Taiken Kyuma (personal communication) suggests this verse may follow the logic of *Madhyāntavibhāga* I.14, insofar as emptiness is characterized in this latter verse as a kind of entity that is in fact an absence (*abhāvasya bhāvaḥ*), specifically the absence of duality (*dvayābhāvo*), and is neither existent nor nonexistent (*na bhāvo nāpi cābhāvo*). Given the high regard in which the Ārya circle of commentators clearly held foundational Yogācāra material such as the *Lañkāvatāra*, the Five Treatises of Maitreya, and the commentaries of Vasubandhu, this is a point that deserves further exploration, which may in turn lead to a greater clarification of the relationship between Yogācāra and tantric Buddhist literature.

adopting the common tantric hermeneutical technique of the “four methods” (*tshul bzhi*): literal, common, secret, and ultimate. However, Ārya Candrakīrti does something else very interesting with this technique: he relates these four levels of interpretation to the four stages of meditation from the *Laṅkāvatāra*.³⁵

Commenting in turn upon Ārya Candrakīrti’s explanation of this verse, and focusing on the second half of the first *pāda* (“Even if there is an object of meditation, there is no meditation”), Ratnākaraśānti remarks that, at the literal level – that is, at the first stage – there are no entities which exist or do not exist (please note that the following are all provisional translations):

[a] As all animate and inanimate entities do not exist, there is no meditation, since there is no object of meditation. [b] “*Even if there is an object of meditation, there is no meditation:*” a meditation on something existent is not meditation, since [the object] exists even in the absence of meditation (*sgom pa med pas kyang yod pa’i phyir ro*). [c] Therefore there are no entities which exist or do not exist, and [d] no object of meditation, meditator, or meditation is observed. This is the literal meaning.³⁶

In this way, the “literal” level of analysis lines up with the first yoga, associated with the refutation of External Realist (*bāhyārthavāda*) epistemology. The fault of attributing existence to an object of meditation is glossed in terms of the purported mind-independence of that object.

Ratnākaraśānti glosses the second, “common” level of interpretation as a form of nondual, mind-only meditation. That is to say, the second level of analysis lines up with the second yoga, associated with the passage to Epistemic Idealism (*vijñānavāda*). Even more interestingly, however, he appears to argue that causality itself is no longer applicable at this level of analysis:³⁷

³⁵ Bentor 2010: 92.

³⁶ RV (sDe dge 50.a–c) *brtan pa dang g.yo ba’i dngos po thams cad med na sgom pa ni med de / bsgom par bya ba med pa’i phyir ro / bsgom par bya ba sgom pa min / zhes bya ba ni / gang yod pa’i sgom pa de yang sgom pa ma yin te / sgom pa med pas kyang yod pa’i phyir ro / de bas na dngos po dang dgnos po med pa dang ldan pa ni dngos po ma yin no / de bas na sgom par bya ba dang / sgom pa po dang sgom pa ni mi dmigs te yi ge’i don to /*

³⁷ Although there is insufficient space to treat this topic adequately, part of the argument for the ultimate status of reflexive awareness is precisely its non-causal status. Cf.

[a] Having cleared away all phenomena that are categorized as above, there is no meditation, “Conditioned and unconditioned phenomena are empty,” because such a view grasps at emptiness, and phenomenal characteristics (*mtshan ma*) are to be cleared away. [b] “*Even if there is an object of meditation, there is no meditation.*” This means that a meditation which apprehends cause and effect is untenable, because there is neither cause nor effect; since intentions (*smon pa*) are to be eliminated, how much more so entities and so on? [c] Thus there does not exist any intended effect which is an external phenomenal form, because there are no focal objects such as intentions. [d] Therefore, meditation on external phenomenal forms is not observed, because they have the nature of mind.³⁸

Here, the fault of attributing existence to an object of meditation is glossed in terms of duality itself, beyond the mere false projection of mind-independence *per se*.

But the shift to “mind only” is, as previously discussed, itself only provisional. At the third level, luminosity clears away the last vestiges of relatively true, differentiated, phenomenal appearances. In the general, exoteric context, this means the appearances of ordinary objects such as tables and chairs. In the specific context of tantric practice, though, these

Dunne 2004: 276, n. 93: “That reflexive awareness is noncausal follows from its simultaneity with its object, namely, the awareness that is reflexively perceived itself. Indeed, what can be most confusing about reflexive awareness is the notion that it is a cognition distinct from its object. This distinction is clearly the case for all forms of perception, including mental perception (*mānasa-pratyakṣa*), for in all cases the object (*grāhya*) of perception is its cause (see, for example, PV 3.224) ... In contrast, what Dignāga first identifies as the three aspects of an awareness – namely, reflexive awareness, the objective aspect (*grāhyākāra*), and the subjective aspect (*grāhakākāra*) – are all ultimately identical and hence simultaneous. The notion that reflexive awareness is cognizing the subjective- and objective-aspects is merely a way of conceptualizing the process of knowing (see the *locus classicus* in PS 1.1.10) ... Dharmakīrti accepts and elaborates upon Dignāga’s opinion.”

³⁸ RV (sDe dge 50.c–f) *steng la sogs pa’i dbye bas chos thams cad sel cing ’dus byas dang ’dus ma byas pa’i chos rnam stong pa zhes bsgom pa gang yin pa de ni med pa ste | stong pa nyid la mngon par zhen pa’i lta ba yin pa’i phyir ro | mtshan ma sel bar bya ba’i phyir | bsgom par bya ba bsgom pa min | zhes smos te | rgyu dang ’bras bu’i rnam pa la mngon par zhen pa’i sgom pa gang yin pa de yang mi rigs te | rgyu dang ’bras bu gnyis su med pa’i phyir ro | smon pa sel bar bya ba’i phyir de bas dngos po zhes bya ba la sogs pa smos te | de ltar phyi’i rnam pa’i smon pa’i ’bras bu gang yin pa de ni yod pa ma yin te | smon pa la sogs pa dmigs pa med pa’i phyir ro | de bas na phyi’i dngos po’i rnam pa’i sgom pa dmigs su med pa ni yod pa ma yin te | sems kyi rang bzhin yin pa’i phyir ro |*

“appearances” are the body of the deity that is visualized during generation stage practice:

[a] In terms of the nonexistence of entities, just as the aggregates and so on do not exist, formless mind-only meditation does not exist, because it is incorrect and impermanent, and because the relative truth is to be cleared away. [b] “*Even if there is an object of meditation, there is no meditation.*” [c] The meditation on the body of the deity – which has the nature of relative truth – is untenable, since it is to be purified by luminosity. Thus entities which are merely relative are not entities, because of the indivisibility of the two truths. [d] Therefore, in terms of meditation, meditation with the form of two truths is not observed, because of the impossibility of the observation. This is the secret meaning.³⁹

Intriguingly, this draws on the same basic ideas found in the very early (ca. 650 CE) *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhitāntra* (MVAT), chapter 28 (chapter 7 in the numbering of the Tibetan translation⁴⁰):

Lord of the Secret Ones, the form (*gzugs, rūpa*) of the deity is of two types, pure and impure. The pure has the nature (*ngo bo, rūpa*) of realization, free of all phenomenal characteristics (*mtshan ma, nimitta*).⁴¹ The impure is a form that possesses phenomenal characteristics, such as color and shape. Two aims are accomplished by these two types of divine form. Accomplishment (*siddhi*) with characteristics arises from the [form] with characteristics, and accomplishment without characteristics from the [form] without characteristics:

³⁹ RV (sDe dge 50.f–51.a) *dnegos po med pa ni phung po la sogs pa gang yin pa de rnam med pas sgom par gyur ba sems tsam gang yin pa de ni med de / ma dag pa dang rtag du med pa'i phyir ro / kun rdzob kyi bden pa sel bar bya ba'i phyir / bsgom par bya ba sgom pa min / zhes smos te / kun rdzob kyi bden pa'i bdag nyid kyi lha'i sku bsgom pa gang yin pa de ni mi rigs te / 'od gsal bas rnam par dag par bya ba'i phyir ro / de bas na kun rdzob kyi bden pa tsam gyi dnegos po ni dnegos po ma yin te bden pa gnyis dbyer med pa'i phyir ro / des na sgom pa ni bden pa gnyis kyi rnam pa'i sgom pa dmigs pa med ste / dka' bas dmigs pa zhes bya ba ste sbas pa'o /*

⁴⁰ Cf. Hodge 2003: 14–17 for a discussion of the historical development of the text and a comparison of the chapter order in the various translations.

⁴¹ Hodge translates *mtshan ma (nimitta)* as “perceptual forms,” which would be a serviceable translation for (*grāhy*)*ākāra*. The question of the precise meaning of *nimitta* in the MVAT, and its relation to the theory of *ākāras*, is extremely interesting, but beyond the scope of this paper. However, it should suffice to note that the concepts are closely related, as evidenced by Ratnākaraśānti's own usage (see for example above, n. 30). This further solidifies the connection between tantric discourse and Yogācāra epistemology.

The Sublime Conquerors have said that accomplishments
 With characteristics (*nimitta*) result from that which possesses phenomenal
 characteristics,
 But abiding in that which lacks phenomenal characteristics
 Is conducive to accomplishment with characteristics (*nimitta*) as well.
 Therefore, always and everywhere
 Rely on that which lacks phenomenal characteristics.⁴²

The key point here is that in both Ratnākaraśānti's account of the third stage in the *Guhyasamājantra*, and the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhitāntra*, the body of the deity visualized during tantric contemplative practice is considered “impure,” due to that body's extension in space and chromatic variegation,⁴³ i.e., the fact that it possesses “phenomenal characteristics” (*mtshan ma, nimitta*). Even more interestingly, the following chapter of the MVAT then extends the discussion to phenomena in general, in a manner that strongly resembles the main thrust of Yogācāra analysis:

Moreover, Lord of the Secret Ones, you should understand that the mind lacks an inherent nature, that it is free of all phenomenal characteristics, that it is empty of inherent nature. Lord of the Secret Ones, you should understand that the three times do not exist in the mind, and that anything which is devoid of the three times is inherently free of phenomenal characteristics.

Moreover, Lord of the Secret Ones, foolish ordinary beings imagine that the mind possesses phenomenal characteristics, but this is only a designation

⁴² MVAT (sDe dge 381.a–d). *gsang ba'i bdag po lha'i gzugs kyang rnam pa gnyis te / yongs su dag pa dang yongs su ma dag pa'o / de la yongs su dag pa *ni rtogs [D: mi rtog] pa'i ngo bo ste / mtshan ma thams cad dang bral ba'o / yongs su ma dag pa ni mtshan ma dang bcas pa'i gzugs te / kha dog dang dbyibs so / de la lha'i gzugs rnam pa gnyis kyi dgos pa rnam pa gnyis 'grub par 'gyur te / mtshan ma dang bcas pas ni mtshan ma dang bcas pa'o / mtshan ma med pas ni mtshan ma dang *mi bcas [D: dang bcas] pa'i dngos grub kyang 'grub par 'gyur ro / mtshan mar bcas pas mtshan bcas kyi / dngos grub rgyal ba dam pa bzhed / mtshan ma med la gnas pas ni / mtshan ma can yang bsgrub tu rung / de bas rnam pa thams cad du / mthsan ma med pa bsten par bya / Cf. Hodge 2003: 208 and Giebel 2006: 197.*

Hodge (2003: 551, n. 6) notes that a portion of the original Sanskrit of this passage has been preserved, in the *Pradīpoddyotana*, permitting the above emendations of the extant Tibetan translation: *devatārūpam api guhyakādhipate dvividhaṃ pariśuddham aśuddham ceti / tatra pariśuddham adhiḡatarūpaṃ sarvanimittāpagataṃ / aparīśuddhaṃ nimittam rūpaṃ varṇasaṃsthānāṃ ca / tatra dvividhena devatārūpeṇa dvividhakāryaniṣpattir bhavati / sanimittena sanimittasiddhir upajāyate / animittanānimittasiddhiḥ /*

⁴³ See above, n. 12.

[*tshig bla dgas*, **adhivacana*] by the false imagination. They do not know that what is false does not arise.

Lord of the Secret Ones, if a Bodhisattva who practices Bodhisattva conduct by means of secret mantra reflects in this way, he will attain the *samādhi* without phenomenal characteristics.⁴⁴

Buddhaguhya (ca. 700 CE), the principal commentator on the *Mahāvairocanābhishambodhi*, explains this passage in his *Vṛtti* (MVATV) in a manner that prefigures Ratnākaraśānti's perspective:

“Lord of the Secret Ones, you should understand that the mind lacks inherent nature.” This is an instruction to reflect on the thought that [the mind] is inherently free of phenomenal characteristics. It is a teaching on the method of meditation that prevents phenomenal characteristics – which originate in the mind – from arising. Ultimately, the mind does not possess the nature of apprehending subject or apprehended object, because it is empty by nature [and] free from all phenomenal characteristics such as blue and yellow.⁴⁵

And in the *Piṅḍārtha*, Buddhaguhya appears to use *pramāṇa*-theoretical concepts, similarly to Ratnākaraśānti, in order to explain the tantra:

This is also the meaning [of MVAT 1.7], “In this unsurpassable, authentic, perfect awakening there does not exist even the slightest hint of an

⁴⁴ MVAT (sDe dge 382.c–e) *gsang ba'i bdag po gzhan yang sems ni ngo bo nyid med pa / mtshan ma thams cad dang bral ba / ngo bo nyid kyis stong par bsam par bya'o / gsang ba'i bdag po sems la ni dus gsum med do / dus gsum dang bral ba gang yin pa de ni ngo bo nyid kyis mtshan ma dang bral ba'o snyam du bsam par bya'o / gsang ba'i bdag po gzhan yang byis pa so so'i skye bo rnam yid mtshan ma dang bcas par rtog ste / 'di ni yang dag pa ma yin pa'i kun tu rtog pa'i tshig bla dgas so / yang dag pa ma yin pa gang yin pa de ni ma skyes pa'o zhes bya bar rab tu mi shes so / gsang ba pa'i bdag po byang chub sems dpa' gsang sngags kyi sgo nas byang chub sems dpa'i spyad pa spyod pas de ltar bsams na mtshan ma med pa'i ting nge 'dzin thob par 'gyur ro / Cf. Hodge 2003: 21 and Giebel 2006: 199–200.*

⁴⁵ MVATV (sNar thang 274.e–275.a) *gsang ba'i bdag po de gzhan yang sems ni ngo bo nyid med pa zhes pa nas ngo bo nyid kyis mtshan ma dang bral ba'o snyam du bsam par bya'o zhes pa'i bar gyis sems las byung ba'i mtshan mi 'byung bar bya ba'i sgom pa'i thabs bstan pa ste / sems de ni don dam par gzung ba dang 'dzin pa'i rang bzhin med do / sngon po dang ser po la sogs pa'i mtshan ma thams cad dang bral ba rang bzhin gyis stong pa yin pa'i phyir dus gsum las yang dag par 'das pa ste / gang dus gsum med cing rang bzhin gyis stong pa de ni de bzhin nyid kyi mtshan nyid rnam par mi rtog pa yin pas mtshan ma 'byung ba ma yin par rig par byas la mtshan ma med pa'i ting nge 'dzin la gnas par bya'o zhes dgongs pa'o /*

apprehended object, and in the same way, no apprehending subject is observed.” This is because it is luminous by nature, devoid of all cognitive images (*rnam pa*, **ākāra*). Not even the slightest hint of the image of the subject or object exists or is observed.⁴⁶

In particular, Buddhaguhya’s exegesis here neatly tracks Ratnākaraśānti’s “False Imagism” (*alikākāravāda*) as expressed in the MAU and the MAV. Briefly, “False Imagism” is an epistemological position that maintains that any cognitive “image” (*ākāra*) with differentiated phenomenal content such as blue and yellow – as opposed to the undifferentiated luminosity of nondual reflexive awareness – is “false” (*alika*).⁴⁷ Recall that, according to Ratnākaraśānti, the only ultimately trustworthy *pramāṇa* is pure nondual luminosity, for the reasons outlined above. Although it might be premature to assert that this pure luminosity is identical with the pure body “free of all phenomenal characteristics” as described in the MVAT, clearly the underlying point being made is the same: so long as you are perceiving color and shape, you are not yet at the third stage, you have not yet achieved the *samādhi* without phenomenal characteristics. This would in turn necessitate that, at least for Ratnākaraśānti, the stage of luminosity is identical to the view of False Imagism (*alikākāravāda* or *nirākāravāda*),⁴⁸ wherein there are no longer any appearances.

⁴⁶ MVATP (sDe dge 36.c–d) *'di'i don yang bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i byang chub de la / chos rdul tsam phra mo yang gzung ba'i ngo bor med cing de bzhin du 'dzin pa'i ngo bor yang mi dmigs so zhes bya ba 'di yin no / de'i phyir dgongs pa ni de rnam pa thams cad kyis dben pa nyid kyi rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba'i phyir / gzung ba dang 'dzin pa'i rnam pa can gyi chos phra mo yang med cing mi dmigs so snyam pa 'di yin no / Cf. Hodge 2003: 55 for MVAT 1.7.*

⁴⁷ Cf. Moriyama 2014: 344–348; Kajiyama 1965: 429–418; Yiannopoulos 2012: 127–144.

⁴⁸ Although these two terms (*alikākāra* and *nirākāra*) are frequently used interchangeably, it is important to keep them conceptually distinct. *Nirākāravāda* is typically used as a term designating direct-realist theories of perception in general, such as those espoused by the Nyāya or the Vaibhāṣika. The point is that these epistemological theories categorically deny that perception is mediated by any cognitive image (*ākāra*). On the contrary, Ratnākaraśānti and the *alikākāravādins* maintain a representationalist theory of perception, “with images” (*sākāra*). It is only in the context of advanced Yogācāra meditation that these images are understood to be “false” (*alika*) and deceptive, on account of their dualistic structure. In other words, the *alikākāra* position is a strict subset of *sākāra* views.

Finally, at the fourth level, “non-observation” is glossed as the stage of tantric “union” (*zung ’jug*, **yuganaddha*) in which neither ultimate nor relative truth is observed:

[a] There is no meditation of ultimate truth in terms of the non-existence of entities, because they have been pure since the beginning. [b] Nor is relative truth a fit object for meditation, because it is not [actually] true. [c] Thus, there are no entities to be meditated upon which have the nature of either ultimate or relative truth, since liberation is only by means of the vision of the two truths as nonexistent. [d] Therefore, due to perfectly comprehending the stage of union, grasping at meditator, meditation, and object of meditation is not observed. This is the ultimate [meaning].⁴⁹

It is worth noting that in this passage we finally have terminology and ideas which cannot be neatly squared with or interpreted in terms of non-tantric Yogācāra philosophy. The concepts of “primordial purity” (*thog ma nas dag pa*) and “union” are not standard features of non-tantric Buddhist exegesis, and do not appear in Ratnākaraśānti’s epistemological works. This may or may not represent a divergence in Ratnākaraśānti’s presentation of the fourth stage in tantric as opposed to non-tantric contexts; further research is necessary to elucidate this point.

Generation and Completion

Naturally, the preceding discussion raises the tricky problem of the relationship between Ratnākaraśānti’s hierarchy of four levels and the more common division in tantric Buddhist contemplative practice between the generation stage (*utpattikrama*) and completion stage (*utpannakrama*). Given that Ratnākaraśānti explicitly disallows the perception of differentiated phenomenal content at the third level, any Generation Stage deity yoga that involves characteristics must occur at the second level. It is an

⁴⁹ RV (sDe dge 51.a–c) *dnegos po med pa ni don dam pa’i bden pa bsgom pa med de / thog ma nas dag pa’i phyir ro / kun rdzob kyi bden pa’i bdag nyid sgom pa gang yin pa de ni bsgom par bya ba ma yin te / bden pa ma yin pa’i phyir ro / de bas na bden pa gnyis kyi bdag nyid kyi dnegos po ni bsgom par bya ba ma yin no / bden pa ngysis su med par bya ba mthong ba tsam gyis thar pa yin pa’i phyir ro / des na sgom pa po dang / bsgom pa dang bsgom par bya bar mngon par zhen pa ’di zung ’jug gi rim pa khong du chud pas mi dmigs so zhes thar thug pa’o /*

open question, however, whether the third level would then correspond to deity yoga without characteristics, or to the Completion Stage, if indeed it is even the case that Ratnākaraśānti understands these to be different things.

One of the main difficulties presented here is accounting for what is often referred to as the completion stage “with characteristics” (*mtshan bcas*), such as the Sixfold Yoga (*ṣaḍaṅgayoga*) outlined by Ārya Candrakīrti and Ārya Nāgārjuna in the context of the *Guhyasamāja*.⁵⁰ If differentiated phenomenal appearances, such as the various colored disks (*cakras*) and channels (*nāḍīs*) visualized during completion stage practice “with characteristics,” are untenable beyond the second level, it would be logically impossible for at least this type of completion stage practice to constitute the final stage of the tantric practitioner’s path. But Ratnākaraśānti was, like Ārya Nāgārjuna and Ārya Candrakīrti, a member of the Ārya tradition of commentary to the *Guhyasamāja*; this stance would seem to put him at odds with them, insofar as they seem to have defined completion stage practice of the *Guhyasamāja* in terms of the Sixfold Yoga.

On the other hand, this may not necessarily be a problem, as the exact nature of completion stage practice in Ratnākaraśānti’s day is not at all obvious. As Elizabeth English has written, “what scholars /practitioners of the time actually meant by the terms *utpattikrama* and *utpannakrama* is by no means as clear as current secondary literature makes out.”⁵¹ According to Harunaga Isaacson, on whose work English draws heavily, Ratnākaraśānti defines the generation stage as “that stage or type of yoga in which the *yogin* produces, in a series of steps, [himself in] the form of the deity.”⁵² The completion stage, meanwhile, is defined as the yoga of cultivating the *sahaja* or “innate” nature of oneself and other beings, which in turn relies upon cultivating the sensation of great bliss (*mahāsukha*) which “spreads throughout the *sādhaka*’s body, and then is to be imagined pervading the entire universe.”⁵³ As English notes, with respect to the completion stage in particular,

⁵⁰ Cf. Wayman 1977: 163–173.

⁵¹ English 2002: 172.

⁵² Isaacson 2001: 470, cited in English 2002: 172.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

There is little call here for iconographical visualization... But as Isaacson points out, Ratnākaraśānti's was by no means the only voice in the debate, and other authors defined the perfection stage quite differently. Advayavajra, for example, focused on its function as an accelerated means of practice but maintained that it is still fully iconographic.⁵⁴

In other words, the apparent irreconcilability of “iconographic” completion stage practices, such as the Sixfold Yoga, with Ratnākaraśānti's account of the third level might best be understood as a consequence of his take on the nature of the completion stage itself. As we have seen, Ratnākaraśānti is firmly committed to the principle that phenomenal appearances must dissipate as the Yogācāra practitioner passes beyond “mind only” into the third level. The conflicting accounts of completion stage practice could therefore reflect a dispute over whether the completion stage was essentially iconographic or essentially non-iconographic. This may even explain the frequent ambiguity in Tibetan sources as to whether the completion stage refers to iconographic practices such as subtle body (*rtsa rlung*) training and dream yoga, or the non-iconographic practice of emptiness meditation following the dissolution of the Generation Stage visualization.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, it has been my concern to elucidate the interconnected relationships between the epistemological concept of reflexive awareness, the praxeological framework of the four yogas, and tantric concepts in the works of Ratnākaraśānti. Again, it is important to note that Ratnākaraśānti is not necessarily promulgating one single perspective, even if we restrict the scope of our analysis to his epistemological works. Nevertheless, there are many clear points of contact in his various texts, perhaps none as critical as the four yogas. Thus, central to this discussion is the question of the place of Yogācāra within Ratnākaraśānti's synthetic project.

Following his discussion of the aforementioned verse from the *Guhyasamāja*, Ratnākaraśānti glosses the verse once more, this time correlating

⁵⁴ English 2002: 172–173.

his exegesis with the three natures of Yogācāra theory: the imagined nature relates to the nonexistence of entities; the dependent nature relates to the nonexistence of meditation; and the perfected nature relates to the non-observation of (or in) meditation:

“When there are no entities,” that is, since no phenomena exist, “there is no meditation” characterized by the apprehension of phenomena. It is empty. “If there is an object of meditation,” the meditation is of the imagined nature (*kun brtags*, **parikalpita*). [But] “there is [still] no meditation,” that is, it is absolutely empty. Therefore, that which is “existent” – i.e., the dependent nature (*gzhan dbang gi mtshan nyid*, **paratantralakṣaṇa*) – is “nonexistent.” It is insubstantial (*rdzas ma yin*), thus it is the great emptiness. “Meditation is not observed,” since the meditation of the perfected nature (*yongs su grub pa*, **pariniṣpanna*) is without ideation (*brtags pa ma yin*, **akalpita*?). It is empty of everything.⁵⁵

We see here that, even in what is nominally a strictly tantric context, Ratnākaraśānti implies that Yogācāra can and should be used as an interpretive framework. This makes intuitive sense: on what basis could a distinction ever be drawn between two different – i.e., Yogācāra-related and tantra-related – nondual cognitions of pure, undifferentiated luminosity? How could such a distinction be intelligible? By definition, contentless and nondual cognitions do not have any identifying marks by which it would be possible to distinguish them from one another. Ordinary dualistic cognitions, by contrast, can be distinguished e.g. in terms of the content of the *grāhyākāra*, for example a cognition of blue vs. a cognition of yellow, or else in terms of the particular *vāsanā* that are active on the *grāhakākāra* side. But there are no similar distinguishing features for *prakāśamātra*, not even causal history, since as noted above *paramārtha-svaśaṅvitti* (i.e., *prakāśamātra*) is both nondual and noncausal. Therefore, nondual “False Imagist” meditation must be the same, whether it is accomplished through the stages of Yogācāra or the stages of tantric practice.

⁵⁵ RV (sDe dge 51.e–g) *dnogs po med pa ni chos thams cad med pas chos la mngon par zhen pa'i mtshan nyid kyi sgom pa med do zhes stong pa'o | bsgom par bya ba ni kun brtags kyi bsgom pa ste | sgom pa ma yin no zhes shin tu stong pa'o | de bas na dnogs po ni gzhan dbang gi mtshan nyid gang yin pa de ni dnogs po ma yin te | rdzas ma yin no zhes stong pa chen po'o | bsgom pa dmigs su med pa ni yongs su grub pa'i bsgom pa brtags pa ma yin no zhes thams cad stong pa ste |*

Likewise, even if, as mentioned above, there is some possibility of divergence in the account of the fourth yoga, important structural similarities pertain between the tantric and non-tantric accounts of the four yogas, including the very fact that Ratnākaraśānti explains both *pramāṇa* theory and the practice of the *Guhyasamāja* in terms of the four yogas to begin with. Furthermore, the concept of nondual reflexive awareness must be understood as the intellectual foundation for Ratnākaraśānti's account of both.

Ultimately, then, the question comes down to precisely how we are to define and understand tantra. The most common accounts of tantra generally refer to a process of ritual initiation (*abhiṣeka* or *dīkṣā*), simultaneously empowering and requiring the initiate to perform certain liturgical duties. However, if it is granted that the true “innate” (*sahaja*) nature of the mind is always and everywhere the same pure luminosity, which remains in principle accessible through training in the non-tantric discipline of the four yogas, might it not then be the case that ritual initiation is unnecessary for access to the ultimate innate nature? Might Ratnākaraśānti, in other words, be laying the intellectual foundations for what came to be known in Tibet as “Sūtra Mahāmudrā”?

At least in theory, the nondual luminosity of reflexive awareness should be the same whether the context is the philosophical investigations of *pramāṇa* discourse, nondual Yogācāra meditation, or the yoga of the *Guhyasamāja* completion stage. And insofar as the result of practice – nondual luminosity – is the same, both tantric and non-tantric (specifically, Yogācāra) approaches to meditation should be regarded as valid. Of course, this suggestion requires further research and corroboration. It might well be the case that innate bliss (*sahajānanda*), for example, somehow serves to differentiate tantric from non-tantric forms of luminosity. But again, it is difficult to imagine how this could be the case, given the manner in which Ratnākaraśānti has explained the nature of luminosity.

Thus, even though Ratnākaraśānti clearly understood Yogācāra theory and tantric practice in terms of one another, it is not at all clear that he considered the two equally indispensable. Tantric meditation according to Ratnākaraśānti seems to require the theoretical infrastructure of Yogācāra, whereas the reverse is not true. This is not to say that tantric practices cannot be given pride of place among the various methods

(*upāya*) for attaining enlightenment, on other grounds – such as their relative ease, their ability to lead to enlightenment within a single lifetime, or their incorporation of innate bliss. It is simply to note that, at least on Ratnākaraśānti's account, tantric meditation should not be seen as uniquely privileged over and above all other means. How this impacts our understanding of Buddhist tantrism, and the relationship between tantric and non-tantric practice and discourse more generally, remains a topic in need of further study.

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- GuSa See *Guhyasamāja*.
- Laṅkāvatāra* *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*. See Nanjio 1923.
- MAU Ratnākaraśānti, **Madhyamakālaṃkāropadeśa* (*dBu ma rgyan gyi man ngag*). sDe dge bsTan 'gyur, mdo 'grel hi: vol. 138: 446–461 (TBRC W23703).
- MAV **Madhyamakālaṃkāravṛtti* (*dBu ma rgyan gyi 'grel pa*).
- MVAT *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhitāntra* (*rNam par snang mdzad chen po mngon par rdzogs par byang chub pa*). sDe dge bKa' 'gyur, rgyud tha: vol. 86: 306–523 (TBRC W23703).
- MVATP Buddhaguhya, *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhitāntrapiṇḍārtha* (*rNam par snang mdzad mngon par rdzogs par byang chub pa'i rgyud kyi bsdus pa'i don*). sDe dge, rgyud 'grel nyu: vol. 66: 1–129 (TBRC W23703).
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ABSTRACT

The late tenth century *siddha* and scholar Ratnākaraśānti, also known as the Mahāsiddha Śāntipa, was renowned as the author of both philosophical *śāstras* and commentaries on tantra. Typically, these are considered separate spheres of activity. However, Ratnākaraśānti's approach, building on the tradition of scholarship associated with the *Mahāvairocanaḥhisambodhitāntra* and the *Guhyasamājanāntra*, as well as on Yogācāra analysis and Buddhist *pramāṇa* theory, is highly syncretic. This paper is a study of Ratnākaraśānti's commentaries that highlights his synthesis of the exoteric and esoteric streams of Buddhist discourse, with particular emphasis on the nondual nature of reflexive awareness (*svasaṃvitti*, *rang rig*), or "luminosity" (*prakāśa*, *gsal ba*), which serves as the conceptual bridge between *sūtra* and tantra.