

Polly Young-Eisendrath Jung Personal Collective Unconscious Abhidharma

## **The Buddhist Unconscious (*Alaya-vijnana*) and Jung's Collective Unconscious: What Does It Mean to be Liberated from the Self?**

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In a 1958 dialogue between Carl G. Jung and Zen master Shinichi Hisamatsu that took place at Jung's home in Switzerland, there was a surprising exchange:

*CGJ: If someone is caught in the ten thousand things, it is because that person is also caught in the collective unconscious. A person is liberated only when freed from both. One person may be driven more by the unconscious and another by things. One has to take the person to the point where he is free from the compulsion to either run after things or be driven by the unconscious. What is needed for both compulsions is basically the same: nirvanda [freedom from the opposites].*

*SH: From what you have said about the collective unconscious, might I infer That one can be liberated from it?*

*CGJ: Yes! (Young-Eisendrath and Muramoto 2002, 116)*

Jung's answer – that we can become liberated from the collective unconscious – might surprise most Jungian readers. It is easy to believe that Jung might have been speaking in confusion because neither he nor Hisamatsu spoke the other's language (they had interpreters) and because Jung said this on only one occasion (as far as we know) and it is not backed up by anything else in his work or correspondence. Moreover, freedom from a ubiquitous collective unconscious seems confusing. How would that look? What could it mean?

As both a 21<sup>st</sup> century citizen and Jungian psychoanalyst and psychologist, I bear witness every day to the pain, suffering, and confusion caused by our implicit collective assumptions about the identity of "self" and "other": assumptions about sex, race, gender, body, political and other social alliances. If it were possible to be liberated from our unconscious hyper-sensitive identities and their hidden assumptions, even to know what all that means, it would be very valuable at both an individual and collective level.

And so, in this chapter I dig into the answer that Jung gave Hisamatsu. Before I begin, however, I want comment on the nature of the answer: I think Jung's reply was an "emergent property" of the dialogue. In other words, I think his answer was a surprising discovery or product of the particular context and moment in which he spoke it and the contact he had with Hisamatsu. I don't know if Jung ever consciously understood the implications of his answer, and since he did not want the conversation published, I assume that he did not. Moreover, Jung's answer sounds different to me now than it did back in 2002, when I edited the book that contains the conversation. Now, I see

Jung's reply in the context of a Buddhist theory of the collective unconscious, one that originated in India from the third to the fifth century. Then, I was trying to understand Jung's answer principally from the perspective of his own theory.

Throughout the dialogue, Hisamatsu advocates liberation from the subject-object split. Implicitly, he challenges the idea that the archetype of self creates a natural division between self and other, self and world. He claims that all suffering could be stopped if we could pull up by the roots our tendencies to form rigid and defensive identities – narratives and histories – about ourselves and what surrounds us, feeling that we are inherently and authentically vindicated primarily by what is “inside” us. When I first studied Hisamatsu's challenges and Jung's responses, I thought their positions were like “ships in the night,” passing each other by without laying down any interpenetrating threads. Now I see a new fabric that weaves together an ancient contemplative theory of mind with a modern psychoanalytic theory of mind.

### Jung's Collective Unconscious and the Freedom from Opposites

Let us begin with Jung's theory of the collective unconscious. It concerns itself primarily with the link between self and world. How are human experiences arising unconsciously in such a way that allows us consciously to encounter a consensual world on an on-going basis? Jung, like Kant, believed there had to be mental structures or forms that compel and constrain our perceptions and allow us to discover a consensual world all together and all at once.

Jung's collective unconscious is structured by “archetypes” – universal templates that shape our perception, cognition, and embodiment in ways that lead to some degree of consensus about all that we take to be mundane reality “out there.” According to Jung, the collective unconscious,

constitutes in its totality a sort of timeless and eternal world-image which

counterbalances our conscious, momentary picture of the world. It

means nothing less than another world, a mirror-world if you will.

But, unlike a mirror-image, the unconscious image possesses an

energy peculiar to itself, independent of consciousness. (Jung 1969, 376)

Jung's theory of the collective unconscious is distinct from the concept of a “personal unconscious” which is structured by “psychological complexes” arising from the emotional imprints and traumas of our early relationships as they are filtered through collective archetypes.

The collective unconscious is impersonal, and cannot be analyzed or interpreted like the personal unconscious can be. According to Jung, it must be approached more contemplatively or intuitively through an attitude Jung (1969, 67-91) called the “transcendent function,” that he described initially in a 1916 essay. This attitude involves waiting and be willing to find a new synthesis, not an interpretation. In fact, Jung says that too much analysis of the collective unconscious (imposing the personal mind on the impersonal mind) may result in “[a] dissociation between conscious and unconscious...usually felt as very unpleasant, for it takes the form of an inner, unconscious fixation which expresses itself only symptomatically” (Jung 1969, 374). Jung's collective unconscious is the membrane between the personal (self or subjectivity) and the collective (world). Liberation from the collective unconscious means gradually waking up and stepping back from automatically and habitually perceiving the self and the world in rigid ways based in one's own defenses. As we become more flexible in our perceptions of what we take to be “self,” we also have more flexibility in our grasping onto the “world” of the ten thousand things. To quote Jung: “Never shall we put any

face on the world other than our own, and we have to do this precisely in order to find ourselves” (379).

Let us now unpack the Sanskrit term *nirvanda* – freedom from opposites or non-dualism – that Jung uses to introduce the idea of liberation. This term is largely unknown to Westerners (even many practitioners of Asian religions) and was mistranslated as *nirvana* in an earlier published version (Meckel and Moore 1992) of the conversation between Jung and Hisamatsu. This technical term is entirely relevant to the question being posed by Hisamatsu. Whether or not Jung knew exactly what Hisamatsu was asking him, I believe that Jung’s reply was accurate within that moment of their conversation. In an intuitive way, Jung makes sense of his claim that one can be liberated from the collective unconscious by using the Sanskrit term. Moreover, Jung often says that the process of individuation or psychological maturity depends on a “freedom from opposites” and so, the Sanskrit term makes sense in a larger way than the immediate conversation.

Non-duality or freedom from opposites means that we become aware of the meaning of our human condition of radical interdependence or co-mingling of what conventionally appears to be opposites: life/death, self/world, good/bad, and self/no-self. To deeply and fully realize this view leads to spiritual liberation, as well as greater ease in living and dying. When these opposites are split apart and held to be entirely separate, especially when only one side of the equation is consciously valued and validated over the other (for example, life over death), we remain symptomatic, defensive, and aggressive in regard to our identities and what we perceive to be unfavorably imposed on us by others and the world.

#### *Abhidharma* and Buddhist Teachings of *Karma*

In this chapter, I aim to expand and clarify the meaning of the collective unconscious by drawing not only on Jung’s ideas about it, but on the much more ancient and comprehensive model of a collective unconscious from *Yogacara* Buddhism that originated and developed in the third to the fifth centuries in India. This model was a response to the earlier Buddhist psychology of the *Abhidharma*, which mapped moment-by-moment awareness. The *Abhidharma* was initially recorded from the earliest oral traditions among the monks who preserved the Buddha’s teachings by memorizing them.[\[1\]](#)

I am not a scholar of Buddhism although I have studied it over decades, but I am a Buddhist practitioner for more than forty years of Zen, *Vipassana*, and of *Phowa* in Tibetan Buddhism, and I feel competent to talk about some psychological aspects of early Buddhist theory and their later developments. I draw generously here on Waldron’s (cite?) contributions to the contemporary study of early Buddhism and *Yogacara*. His expertise on the theory of the *alaya-vijnana*, the collective unconscious from early Buddhism, has proven especially helpful in illuminating Jung’s theory of a collective unconscious in ways that are clinically and culturally relevant. The entirety of my knowledge of *Yogacara* comes through Waldron’s translations and interpretations, both through reading and extensive conversations.

The historical Buddha lived and taught approximately 2,500 years ago and his teachings were memorized by his followers and then written down, approximately 454 years after he died. The *Abhidharma* is one of the first recorded texts of his original teachings: *Abhi* means higher or meta and *dharma* refers to universal spiritual laws about the nature of reality, as well as the applications of these laws to our experience. The *Abhidharma* avers that truth/reality arises and passes away, moment by moment, in nano-second units of conscious action called *cittas*.

The act of consciousness is immediate awareness that comes into being at the membrane between subjectivity and objectivity. A *citta* is a discrete instance of conscious activity that we can imagine as a kind of disturbance or disruption that signals contact between a perceiving “subject” and an

“object.” Neither subject nor object exists independently from this contact. The subject is not “perceiving” an object nor is the object “resisting” a subject. Contact initiates awareness of both subject and object. Subject (self) and object (world) are only potentials until they make contact.

To perceive or act in the exact present moment, unhabituated, is liberation from *karma*. There are some unprogrammed *cittas* (fractions of a second) that arise with each new perception and if we can become conscious of them, we reach a liberation from past and future. If we can actualize this liberation, we are also free from what we regard as time and space, even though we are still on the plane of mundane existence. *Karma* – meaning here “intentional action” and its consequences – is a central psychological and moral theme in early Buddhism. Becoming “liberated” from its imprisoning effects involves awakening to the simultaneity of the creation of self and world at the membrane of contact. As we will see, this awareness frees one from the ten thousand things and from the collective unconscious.

Much of early and later Buddhism teaches meditative and analytic practices to develop a sensitivity to non-dualism in perception and cognition – sensitizing oneself to the momentary unfolding of experience. As Buddhism develops over time, two kinds of discourses evolve with its practices. One discourse involves *conventional* truths that help us to function as persons in the everyday world. For example, our collective mental health dictates that we perceive the sky as “above” and the ground as “below,” distinguish past and future, and share a sense of self as “in here” while the world is “out there.” A practical Buddhist teaching about mundane reality is not to take yourself too seriously and just “chop wood and carry water,” or “don’t get too mixed up in the drama of the self.” Much of the deeper Buddhist teachings address, on the other hand, *ultimate* truth that disavows the reality of any and all thingness of subject, object, in-here, out-there, sky and ground. This *dharma* shows exactly how self/other, life/death, good/bad and other existential opposites can never be separated because they are co-creating each other. Of course, it is accompanied by practices that teach us how to experience this ultimate reality ourselves.

Conventional and ultimate discourses can seem at odds with each other, especially for those who are not familiar with Buddhism. For example, how can “I” be liberated if I don’t exist? Who suffers if there is no self? Some of this confusion comes from mixing personal discourses about subjective states (such as “self”) with impersonal discourses about objective embodiment (such as “person”). A self and a person are not equivalent or interchangeable. A person seems, for example, singular and solid and unified, but a self is a discontinuous and unclear state of mind that constantly changes. The *Abhidharma* is primarily a methodology for freeing us from subjective states that motivate us to create a consensually validated self with which we habitually and automatically (i.e. unconsciously) identify, and on which we fixate our ideals and narratives. It wants to help us perceive the self and the world as delusions, and to free us from grasping at them for happiness or security.

On the other hand, *Abhidharma* also emphasizes that a *person* is an *autonomous agent* of intentional actions. A person (someone with an identity and a body that can be publicly witnessed) is also the *consequence* of intentional actions from the past that have resulted in a particular being with a particular form. And so, our embodiment, as we collectively experience it, is not an accident, but rather a meaningful expression of *karma* from other life times and other beings. As intentional actors, we shape our future *karma* of self/world, as we engage with the membrane of contact on a moment-to-moment basis.

In the Buddha’s description of his own awakening (e.g., Thanissaro, 2011), he makes clear the way *karma* is created. He penetrates the reality of all of his own *karma* and becomes a witness to its many different forms (animal, human, deity). He also sees how collective existences are shaped through habit and adaptation. In his ultimate awakening, the Buddha witnesses the arising and

passing away of the entire cosmos and how it is connected to *karma* through a principle called “dependent arising.” This principle illustrates how we are always embedded within a dynamic field of self/world and subject/object. We arise within this field, never apart from it.

And yet, from the perspective of conventional reality, individuals are acting for themselves and move from perception into action, from past into the future. Such movement is also undergirded by fixed mental dispositions – called *samskaras* in Sanskrit – that are remarkably similar to Jung’s archetype: deep mental structures that motivate us to create repetitive templates in our feelings, thoughts, and actions. An individual “self” is such a template.

While both self and body have no actual continuity and are unreal, the Buddha instructs us to be alert to how we sustain a sense of self through implicit assumptions such as “this is the kind of person I am.” Self and world arise together and are co-created at the membrane of their contact. The reason we need to contemplate our unreal self is that we are always creating consequences through our actions and intentions. The ways in which we perceive, speak, and act impact our on-going surroundings through influences we cannot even fathom. These karmic implications have special significance in our primary human relationships (the ones that take place on an on-going basis in our families, communities, and partnerships) in which the consequences of our speech and actions can readily create emotional and psychological patterns that persist over generations, always shaping or molding the future. Karmic implications play out habitually in public and social realms, as well, in which we fixate on certain identity meanings and create consequence from these fixations.

But if each individual’s world (the perceptual domain of an organism that has come about through recurrent interaction with natural and social environments) is largely determined by previous intentional actions in this and other lifetimes, then how do our worlds have anything at all in common? What leads to coherence between individuals’ experiences of self/world? In a sense, the early Buddhist teachings provoke the question: If awareness occurs only through momentary conscious individual perception, how can we experience a consensual world? Eventually a new model of mind develops to respond to this question, one which finally produces a theory of a collective unconscious, remarkably similar to Jung’s.

#### Buddhist Unconscious: *Alaya-vijnana*

The new model from *Yogacara* Buddhism, beginning in roughly third century India, posits a *substrate consciousness* that consists of predispositions that condition our collective conceptual and linguistic images, names, and categories of thought. This substrate evolves through multiple lifetimes, is sensitive to cultural and biological influences, and also arises in a moment-to-moment way, mixed with all of our perceptions. This is also the consciousness that transcends the “death” of the body. It is called *alaya-vijnana* – a term that means roughly “home consciousness” or “storehouse consciousness.” The six traditional modes of awareness (five senses plus mental functions) now do not arise solely within subject-object contact, but now they are shaped or supported by this *alaya* awareness. Sensory cognitive awareness is no longer simply dependent on the present moment, but is influenced by subliminal predispositions, collective images, and linguistic categories that flow from the karmic past for each organism.

This streaming substrate consciousness, of which we are typically unaware, is both an intentional and active consciousness, and can be witnessed consciously. As Waldron (2006) writes:

*Alaya-vijnana* is said to be accompanied by the same five ‘mental factors’ that accompany every other moment of mind (*citta*) in the *Yogacara* tradition: attention, sensation, feeling, perception, and intention. (90)

And so, when we perceive our embodiment and world, we depend on subtle conditioning factors that promote “an outward perception of the receptacle world whose aspects are indistinct” (95).

As long as we remain constrained by the unconscious schemas or archetypes (to use Jung’s language) that underlie ordinary perceptions and cognitions, we will be motivated to experience “I am” inside “this body” while “others” and the “world” are outside. And this disposition carries many emotional marks and psychological meanings that compel us to create more consequential actions that will keep us entrenched in a cyclical habituated set of identities. The view “I am” is the afflictive root of our *karma* and until we “pull it up” we will be captured, as Jung says, by the ten thousand things and the collective unconscious.

### *Alaya-vijnana* and Jung’s Collective Unconscious

Over many years of being steeped in both psychoanalysis and Buddhism, I have been and remain convinced that the two disciplines have much to learn from each other because they are both dedicated to subjective freedom, but they shine their lights on somewhat different foci. The primary focus of Buddhism is the individual and the world or community (sometimes together and sometimes separately). The focus of psychoanalysis, on the other hand, is the dyad – a two-person field of contact – in which inquiries and developments are sorted out through a mutual discovery process. Both of these practices rely on a reflective and concentrated, but neutral, state of mind.

Confusions arise, however, in translating some concepts back and forth between the two disciplines, perhaps because of the different foci. Some Buddhist theorists assume that psychoanalysts are always convinced of the fundamental reality of an autonomous self because analysts are often describing personal (two-person or one-person) processes in a way that highlights autonomy and individuality; the “world” of psychoanalysis, while it is intersubjective and intrasubjective, is typically described in terms of persons doing and thinking things, not points of awareness arising. For example, Waldron (2006) notes that Jung writes about unconscious process that sounds remarkably similar to the *Yogacara* model of the unconscious:

Seemingly similar, Jung also claims that unconscious processes replicate conscious ones in that they include ‘perception, thinking, feeling, volition, and intention just as though a subject were present’ (90).

But then Waldron assumes that Jung attributes a subtle but distinct “subject” in these experiences whereas Buddhists reject any enduring subject as the locus of action in both the conscious and unconscious minds. I disagree with Waldron. I believe Jung precisely agrees with the Buddhist view of impersonal causal factors in the collective unconscious.

In Waldron’s description of Jung, Jung is referring to the characteristics of *psychological complexes*, sub-personalities that organize the personal unconscious, and not to the *archetypes* that organize the collective unconscious. Jung’s later theory of the collective unconscious does not have even a whiff of the attribution of subjectivity, but is a model of unconscious forces or predispositions. For example, Jung ([1955]1977) writes of *archetype*:

This term is [meant to denote] an inherited mode of psychic functioning, corresponding

to the inborn way in which the chick emerges from the egg, the bird builds its nest, a certain kind of wasp stings the motor ganglion of the caterpillar, and eels find their way to the Bermudas. In other words, it is a ‘pattern of behavior.’ This aspect of the archetype, the purely biological one, is the proper concern of scientific psychology. (518)

Jung sees archetypes as triggered by “situational patterns” where they motivate and compel the activation and development, within the individual, of habitual complexes or fixed configurations of affect, image, idea, and action that cause us to see-hear-feel self and others in highly repetitive and driven ways.

Unconscious archetypes are the motivating forces that *predispose* the organization of personality, defenses, and reactivity. These complexes, like our karma, can carry over unconsciously from generation to generation in family life so that individuals are entirely unaware of how and why they may repeatedly carry out traumatic enactments, through the collective unconscious, from previous generations.

Jung’s theory of archetypes (collective unconscious) and complexes (personal unconscious) is wholly analogous to the classical way the early Buddhists were fond of describing our condition of self/world: “When this is, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this is not, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases” (cited, for example, in Waldron, 2006, 90).

Identity complexes (persona, ego, shadow) – as theorized in Jungian psychology – organize the human personality and carry language and cultural implications. At the core of each personal complex is an archetype. For example, the “ego complex” is organized around the archetype of self – the collective predisposition to become an individual human subject, cohering in a body, having individual agency, forming a narrative that supports an identity existing over time and space, and being dependent on attachment relationships. The archetype of self allows us to move through transitions and transformations from one age or stage to another, over the arc of a lifetime, as though we were the “same” person even though all of our cells and all of our chemistry changes. Understanding Jung’s theory of a collective unconscious in relation to *Yogacara* Buddhism, we discover new insights and meanings through the implications of the *alaya-vijnana* and earlier *Abhidharma* psychology. These models of mind allow us to open a new window onto the unconscious difficulties of human relationships, particularly in the mix and the mess of perceiving self/other.

### Liberation from the Archetype of Self: What Does It Mean?

Early Buddhists saw and taught how subject and object arise together. *Yogacara* Buddhists also saw how *alaya-vijnana* (substrate consciousness) is habitually shaping certain kinds of perception, feeling, thinking, volition and intentions to create and sustain experiences of separation and defense of the self.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, we can also see that individuals in a dyad – especially a significant dyad like a couple – create their own inherent tendencies to see/feel/hear each other in a static repetition of emotional and identity themes. These are not “cognitive distortions” or simply mental habits, but entire and complete perceptions of apparently “objective reality.” When one person is “triggered” to see and feel the other person as the “enemy” or the “problem,” at that moment a dynamic field of relating comes into being in which each person sees/hears/smells/tastes/feels/cognizes the other as threatening.

As soon as this dynamic field is fully activated, the two people arise together at the membrane of contact, co-creating self and other in habituated and emotionally threatening ways. If, from a Buddhist view, we can see that self/other and self/world depend on contact at a moment-to-moment membrane, then we can begin to appreciate how entangled we are at this point of contact. When we recognize what is at stake – creating consequences that tend to fixate into endless anguished

repetitions – we may bring to our relationships a more dedicated desire to correct a rigid misperception of “I am.” Similarly, we can also recognize spontaneous creativity and liberation that can emerge from non-fixated contact as, for instance, in the Jung-Hisamatsu conversation.

Ordinary human beings are unlikely to be able to perceive a freedom in the nano-second *cittas* of awareness, even through meditation. Instead, for most of us, we have only the freedom to correct our misperceptions or destructive actions or speech *after* we have expressed them. We can step back and examine our blind spots and implicit unconscious associations. We can act to repair what we may have done to increase suffering or threat at the membrane of contact. If we cultivate a compassionate awareness of our habituated blind spots, acknowledging the force of a collective unconsciousness in predisposing us to create enemies and narratives of self-protection, then we can recognize that we always need a deeper inquiry and a mutual discovery process. We need others in order to know anything about ourselves in the non-duality of self/other.

This awareness opens new opportunities and possibilities in applying both psychological and Buddhist teachings in intervening with couples, families, race and gender relations, and other identity conflicts. The Buddhist notion of a substrate consciousness that passes from death to life and life to death, always propelling us to make the mistakes of “I am in here” and “you are out there,” returning us to repetitive ignorance of non-duality, awakens a deep yearning for liberation. It also shows us that we are all flawed, all caught in identity protections and unconscious projections.

Complexities of the “past,” from a Buddhist perspective, also include contingencies that we do not know about. For example, our current identity, gender, or skin color, has evolved through conditions that fall far outside our current life and become meaningful as a path to liberation from self/other splits, and oppositions. Jung’s theory of a collective unconscious, on the other hand, also points out the projection of our own face onto the world through a kind of mirror image. In other words, we are always looking through our own eyes to see “the world,” and we need to keep that fact in mind because it teaches us greater modesty about what we supposedly “know” on an “objective basis.”

If we can imagine how the self is a fiction played out symptomatically by a person who is fundamentally unconscious of the forces of karma and the collective unconsciousness as they are working through time and circumstances, we may begin to loosen our grip on personal identity. When our complexes are taken more lightly, then we may become more acutely aware of how instantaneously we create both an ego-driven “self” and a dubiously motivated “other,” how they are bound together at the membrane of consciousness.

Moreover, if we can also see that liberation is not simply insight into non-duality or a moment of deconstruction of subject/object, but instead is an invitation to see again and again that there is no enemy, there is no “other,” but only the contact in which subject and object come into being, perhaps we will understand how to live more ethically, respectfully, and lovingly. As human beings, we can become reflective about our actions and our speech: we have an intelligence that other animals do not have. We can correct ourselves after the fact of doing or saying something damaging or destructive. Being liberated from the constraints of the collective unconscious and the archetype of self means that we commit ourselves to our natural self/other being, both prospectively in our theories and ideas, and retrospectively in our actions. I believe this is the only hope for happiness and co-existence for such unconsciously limited and profoundly interdependent beings as we are.

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All first names of authors need to be spelled out in Chicago style.

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[\[i\]](#) For a brief and practical summary of Abhidharma, see Jacobs 2017.