UNIT 10: REALISTIC SCHOOLS OF BUDDHISM: VAIBHASIKA AND SAUTRĀNTIKA

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- explain why Sarvastivāda and Sautrantika are called Realist Schools of Buddhism
- explain the basic doctrines of Sarvastivāda School
- discuss the dharma theory of Sarvastivāda School
- Explain the theory of 'All Exist'
- describe the no-soul doctrine
- discuss the basic doctrines of Sautrantika School
- Explain the theory of Momentariness
- Explain the theory of skandhamatratas

10.2 INTRODUCTION

Sarvasitvada, also often called Vaibhasikas, came to be a prominent school of Theravadins or Staviravadins. It is a Hinyana school with its pitakas in Sanskrit. Sarvastivada came to denote important realistic school of Buddhism. The school is characterized by its sober, realistic spirit. Unlike the Sarvasitvadins, the Sautrantikas reject the authority of Abhidharma. In fact they derive their name from the fact that they accept only the sutras as the word of the Buddha. Sautrantikas are not really an independent school with own cloisters and order-rules. They are rather a group of thinkers who came to disagree on intellectual issues with the Sarvastivada. They opposed the supposed existences of the traditional Sarvastivadins. The Sarvastivadins, for example, held the view, that past and future have real existence, an entity passing from past to future only changes its mode, but does not come into existence or cease to be. Sautrantikas replied that entities should not be multiplied without necessity and kept to the common sense view that past is that which did exist, but does not exist now anymore, and the future that does not yet exist, but shall exist in the future. Sautrantikas deny the existence of Nirvana as a separate state, defended by Sarvastivadns, saying that the end of something existing, namely, suffering at the circle of rebirth, is not itself an existence but simply the end of existence. The Sautrantikas must have been counted among the Hinyana schools, because they accept the reality of the temporal world and share the essentials of dharma-theory with the Theras and the Sarvastivadins.

10.3 SARVASTIVADA OR VAIBHASIKA

The Tripitaka of Sarvastivadins is composed of Vinaya-pitaka, Sutra-pitaka and Abhidharma-pitaka. There are two different Vibhasas commenting on Abhidharma-pitaka. The more important of the two is a commentary on Jnanaprasthanasastra. The doctrinal importance of the Vibhasa was such that it gave Sarvastivada its name Vaibhasikas.

The most unique thought in the system of Sarvastivadins is denial of soul or self. Whereas the Theravadins only say that a self or soul cannot be

found, the Sarvastivadins denied the existence of soul outright. Sarvasitvadins explain the process of rebirth without a soul. They also discuss the dharma theory according to which all existing things are reduced to dharmas in the sense of them being the last principles or basic realities.

10.3.1. The Dharma Theory

Sarvastivada believed in plurality of principles or dharmas in the universe. Number of dharmas listed by Sarvastivadins is seventy-five. Out of these, three are non-conditioned (asamskita) and seventy-two are conditioned (samskrta). From the beginning one has to keep two groups of dharmas, non-conditioned and conditioned separately. Non-conditioned (asamskrta) dharmas are eternal in the sense that they are not conditioned by karmic causes and are not subject to formative power of karma. These do not participate in creation of the sorrowful world. The Sarvastivada counts three non-conditioned dharmas: space (akasa), suppression without knowledge (apratisamkhyanirodha), and suppression through knowledge (pratisamkhyanorodha).

Set against these non-conditioned dharma are the conditioned (samskrta) dharmas. The Sarvastivadins classify the conditioned dharmas into four types:

(1) Citta (mind): Consciousness and thought-activity

(2) Caitta (mental state): The innate abilities and talents of an individual as well as his moods, emotions, impulses and interests

(3) Rupa (matter): The sensual or perceptive faculties, the corresponding sense-spheres, namely, the visible, audible, etc. and the contents of perception

(4) Visamprayukta-samskaras (states independent of the mind): Non-physical relations and processes like obtaining, non-obtaining, vitality, ageing, impermanence etc.

According to dharma theory, all empirical beings and everything that is reflected in them as the external world are phenomena formed by conditioned dharmas. The dharmas are the structural elements of empirical existence that cannot be further reduced. Caused and directed by karma, they combine

in certain ratios and form the phenomena which we experience as ourselves and as the world. The whole of reality is exhausted in the phenomena constituted by conditioned dharmas there is no substratum, or 'essence' behind or beyond them.

It is the shortness of their activity which qualifies conditioned dharmas to enact the dharma process. Sarvastivada holds that conditioned dharmas are effective only for a short time. But, these dharmas do not have origination and have existed always. The dharmas simply change from a latent state to activity. The Sarvasitvadins explain the functioning of dharma by the example of a stone on a mountain peak: For a long time the stone lies there ineffective. One day it begins to fall and thus becomes effective until it comes to rest and slides back once more to ineffectiveness. The stone on the hill is comparable to dharma of the future, while its falling is like dharma of the present and when it comes to rest, it is dharma of the past. In the stone, as in dharma the three times are not dead: past, present and future co-exist in them.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Fill up the blanks:

a. Sarvastivada is a Hinyana School with its pitakas in _____.

b. The most unique thought in the system of Sarvastivadins is denial of _____.

c. The Sarvastivada counts three non-conditioned dharmas: _____, _____, and _____.

10.3.1.1 All things exist- Sarvam asti

Thus, Sarvastivada believed that it was not only the things in present that existed, but also the things in the past and future which are in continuity with present. 'All exist'- this is the axiom of Sarvastivadins from which the school took its name. The Sarvastivadins maintain the existence of five kinds of dharmas (asamskrta and four classifications of samskrta) in their states at all times- whether in the past, present or future. That is, in some

sense, all principles, all dharmas, exist, including those of the past and the future. The dharmas of the past are transmitted into the present while the dharmas of the future are latent in the present. This may be illustrated with an example: the past mango seed transmits its 'mangoness' into the present; and similarly, the 'future mango' receives its 'mangoness' from the present. It is here that that the Sarvasitivadins are different from other Buddhist schools. Other Buddhist schools maintained that only those of the present exist with, perhaps in a sense, some past actions which have not yet produced their full results.

However, regarding the existence of being and objects in past, present and future, the Sarvastivada exponents differed amongst themselves and interpreted in diverse ways:

(a) Dharmatrata states that the objects remain the same and undergo only modal changes, that is, in form and quality, giving rise to different notions, such as past, present and future. A thing originates when it takes new modes or form or quality and is destroyed when they are abandoned. For example: in case of gold and gold ornaments, gold remains the same though it undergoes change in form and quality; similarly in case of milk and curd, the substance milk remains the same while its form and quality change in curd. There is only change in modality in both the examples. These modal changes are described as past, present and future or as origin and decay etc. A certain object gives up the future mode or form and quality and reaches the present mode. Similarly, it may abandon its present mode or form and quality and attain a past mode. It is because of this fact that an object changes only in its mode, that the future, past and present objects are not entirely different from one another.

(b) According to Ghosaka, every phenomenal object has three characteristics, namely birth, old age and death, which exist with the object all the time. For example, when a baby is born, it carries with it the characteristics of old age and death too. Similarly, when milk is drawn or gold ornaments are made, they carry with them old age and death. Origination, old age and death together exist in an object. The presenteness is actual use while past and the future are distinguished as attainable. The

inception of an object is called birth or present while old age and death, which will be forthcoming, are future. When the baby grows old, or the milk turns into curd, or the gold ornament is worn out, its old age becomes present while its inception becomes past and death becomes future. Dharmatrata deals with the object and quality and form separately while Ghosaka takes the two inseparably. Ghosaka holds that if the three characteristics do not exist together, then present cannot be come past and future cannot become present.

(c) Vasumitra states that objects exist at all the three times- past, present and future. Objects do not undergo any change either in substance or in their form and quality or in their characteristics as held by Dharmaratra and Ghosaka. According to him, it is activity or function that determines the pastness, presentness and futureness of an object. When activity is taking place, it is called present; when activity ceases, it is called past and when activity will take place it is called future. For example: when eyes function and see and object as it is in a substance, it is present; when eyes have completed seeing the object, the object is regarded as past and when the object will be looked at, it is future. In other words, in all objects all the three time-factors are co-existent and it is the activity or the function that determines the time or nature of an object. If the three time-factors did not co-exist, then the past and the future would become non-existent like hare's horn and pastness and futureness are not absolutely non-existent. All phenomenal objects exist in the past, present and future.

(d) There is a fourth view expressed by Buddhadeva. According to him, phenomenal objects exist at all the time. They are referred to as past, present and future only relatively. Like Vasumitra he rejects the view that objects undergo changes in form and quality or in time-characteristics. According to him, an object remains the same at all times. He says that while every object possesses all the three time-factors at the same time, only one time-factor is pointed out in relation to another. To give an example: a certain object is curd in its presentness, milk in its pastness and cream in its futureness. In this manner, Buddhadeva established existence of an object at all times.

10.3.2 No-soul Theory

Sarvastivada believed in no-soul, the absence of any permanent substance in an individual, though they admitted the permanent reality of all things. The dharma process provides the Sarvastivadin the theoretical basis to rebirth without a soul. Dharmas come into being due to karmic pre-conditions which on account of one's karma unite to compose an individual. Karma is the causing and formative power for the dharmas. When the dharmas that constitute a being today disintegrates at his death, the action-intentions which the being had endorsed while alive determine which new dharmas will unite in 'his' new form of existence. This new existence is not identical with the old one, but owes it to the old one for the nature of one's being for without the earlier existence the new existence would not have come into existence.

Sarvastivadins hold that personality is a dynamic stream of conditioned dharmas. Such an interpretation has enabled the Sarvastivadins to talk of personality while denying existence of a soul or self. Being, like objects in general is nothing beyond what is so given. Beings are actually designations of the series of successive existences. They are nothing but a collection of dharmas and have no stable nature of their own. Expressions like 'suffering', 'karma', and 'liberation' do relate to the subject but this is only an empirical one: a dharma combination. The identity of a living being can be compared to that of a fire consuming a forest. The fire can be denoted as one fire, but in fact the flames renew themselves constantly, and no one of them subsist for the shortest time.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: State True or False

a. Sarvastivāda believed that it was only the things in present that existed.

b. According to Dharmatrata, every phenomenal object has three characteristics, namely birth, old age and death, which exist with the object all the time.

c. Vasumitra states that objects exist at all the three times- past, present and future.

10.4 SAUTRĀNTIKA

The Sautrantikas are often called nominalist in contrast to the realism of Sarvastivadins. Sautrantikas state that many of the dharmas of Sarvastivadins exist only as designations (prajnaptita). For example, space is mere emptiness and nirvana is mere extinction. The terms 'space' and 'nirvana' are used not to refer to real entities but as designations. The Sautrantikas are characterized by their doctrine of momentariness, the doctrine that skandhamatratas are transferred from existence to existence and that everything ceases in Nirvana.

10.4.1 Theory of Momentariness

The Sautrantikas subscribed to a doctrine of extreme momentariness that held that only the present moment exists. The Sarvastivadins argued that dharma lasts through all three times: past, present and future. This means that past and future are somehow contained in the present, since they are present in the dharma now given. Past, present and future, all exist. The Sautrantikas regarded the Sarvastivadin position as a violation of basic Buddhist principle of Impermanence (anicca). For the Sautrantikas only the present is real. They hold that the present only is what exists, the past what did exist, and the future what shall exist in the future when its conditions are given. The Sautrantikas also denied the existence of a past which is still to yield its fruit. They do not admit that the fruit springs directly from the past act, for that does not exist anymore. The fruit springs from a certain moment in the series following the act. On the moment the act is completed, it transforms the series, and this transformation determines as evolution (parinama). The last moment of evolution has a special efficacy, the capacity to produce the fruit immediately. This moment is called the distinguishing moment (visesa). In the same way, in nature the seed does not yield the fruit immediately, but only after a

process of long development. First, there is the sprout, stalk, leaves, flower and only finally the fruit.

10.4.2 Skandhamatratas

The Sautrantikas maintained that though dharmas are only momentary, existing only as long as they are effective, but behind the chain of dharmas there is a substratum (asraya), namely, a consciousness acting as a continuum that transmigrates from birth to birth. They held that there is transference of skandhamatras from one existence to another. This view is wholly opposed to the cardinal doctrine of Buddhism- momentary existence of skandhas. According to early Buddhism, the skandhas disintegrate every moment to give rise to another. The Sautrantikas, however, in defence of this doctrine of early Buddhist philosophy said that skandhas in their gross form do not pass from one existence to another. It is the mulantika skandhas, i.e., the original or the subtlest form of skandhas that pass from one existence to another. The mulantika of all the five skandhas are of one nature. In other words, there are not five mulantika corresponding to five skandhas. They are in reality one substance and not five different substances passing from one existence to another. It is of the form of consciousness that is like a seed out of which develops the whole temporal world. It is impersonal and universal and is to be distinguished from balance of merit.

For the doctrine of transference of sakndhamatras through several existences, the Sautrantikas are also called Samkrantivadins or Samkrantikas.

10.4.3 Nirvāna

The Sautrantika view of nature of Nirvana is a logical extension of their general point of view that the asamskrtas do not have real existence. Non-conditioned things are not real and distinct entities, but pure absences. Space is absence of tangible. Apratisamkhyanirodha is the absence of the arising of future things obtained through the absence of causes and independently of power of wisdom. They consider pratisamkhyanirodha or nirvāna as the absence of latent tendencies and existence acquired with

the aid of wisdom. Nirvāna means the end of the process of life without any dharma as residue in which life has been extinguished. It is absolute end of manifestations, the end of passion and life, without any positive counterpart. The subtle skandhas, which may continue through several existences totally cease in Nirvāna. They oppose the realistic view of Sarvastivāda who consider Nirvāna as a distinct entity. At the attainment of Nirvāna, defilements and defiled factors no longer arise in the future. According to Sautrantikas, non-arising means mere non-existence. Thus they conclude that Nirvāna is a non-existence, a mere nothing.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Write short answers to:

a. Why the Sautrāntikas are called nominalist?

b. Why the Sautrāntikas are called Samkrantikas?

c. Do the asamskrtas have real existence according to Sautrāntikas?



10.5 LET US SUM UP

- Sarvasitvāda, also often called Vaibhasikas, came to be a prominent school of Theravadins or Staviravadins. It is a Hinyana school with its pitakas in Sanskrit. Sautrantikas are not really an independent school with own cloisters and order-rules. They are rather a group of thinkers who came to disagree on intellectual issues with the Sarvastivada.
- The most unique thought in the system of Sarvastivādins is denial of soul or self. They also discuss the dharma theory according to which all existing things are reduced to dharmas in the sense of them being the last principles or basic realities.
- Sarvastivāda believed in plurality of principles or dharmas in the universe. Number of dharmas listed by Sarvastivadins is seventy-

five. Out of these, three are non-conditioned (asamskita) and seventy-two are conditioned (samskrta).

- The Sarvastivāda counts three non-conditioned dharmas: space (akasa), suppression without knowledge (apratisamkhyanirodha), and suppression through knowledge (pratisamkhyanorodha).
- Set against these non-conditioned dharma are the conditioned (samskrta) dharmas. The Sarvastivadins classify the conditioned dharmas into four types: Citta (mind), Caitta (mental state) Rupa (matter), and Visamprayukta-samskaras (states independent of the mind)
- According to dharma theory, all empirical beings and everything that is reflected in them as the external world are phenomena formed by conditioned dharmas.
- Sarvastivāda holds that conditioned dharmas are effective only for a short time. But, these dharmas do not have origination and have existed always. The dharmas simply change from a latent state to activity.
- Sarvastivāda believed that it was not only the things in present that existed, but also the things in the past and future which are in continuity with present. 'All exist'- this is the axiom of Sarvastivadins from which the school took its name.
- However, regarding the existence of being and objects in past, present and future, the Sarvastivada exponents differed amongst themselves and interpreted in diverse ways.
- Dharmatrata states that the objects remain the same and undergo only modal changes, that is, in form and quality, giving rise to different notions, such as past, present and future.
- According to Ghosaka, every phenomenal object has three characteristics, namely birth, old age and death, which exist with the object all the time.
- Vasumitra states that objects exist at all the three times- past, present and future. According to him, it is activity or function that determines the pastness, presentness and futureness of an object.

- According to Buddhadeva, phenomenal objects exist at all the time. They are referred to as past, present and future only relatively.
- Sarvastivada believed in no-soul, the absence of any permanent substance in an individual, though they admitted the permanent reality of all things.
- Beings are actually designations of the series of successive existences. They are nothing but a collection of dharmas and have no stable nature of their own.
- The Sautrantikas are characterized by their doctrine of momentariness, the doctrine that skandhamatratas are transferred from existence to existence and that everything ceases in Nirvana.
- The Sautrantikas subscribed to a doctrine of extreme momentariness that held that only the present moment exists.
- The Sautrantikas maintained that though dharmas are only momentary, existing only as long as they are effective, but behind the chain of dharmas there is a substratum (asraya), namely, a consciousness acting as a continuum that transmigrates from birth to birth.
- They consider pratisamkhyanirodha or nirvana as the absence of latent tendencies and existence acquired with the aid of wisdom. Nirvana means the end of the process of life without any dharma as residue in which life has been extinguished.



10.6 FURTHER READING

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