UNIT 11: IDEALISTIC SCHOOLS OF BUDDHISM: MADHYAMIKA AND YOGACARA

UNIT STRUCTURE

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- explain the ways Nāgārjuna proved unreality of the world
- describe the nature of ultimate reality in Nāgārjuna's philosophy
- discuss Nāgārjuna's philosophy
- describe the theory of mere ideas
- explain the concept of store-conscioisness
- analyse the three kinds of 'svabhavas'
- explain Yogācāra's philosophy

11.2 INTRODUCTION

About four hundred years of Buddha's passing away a new form of Buddhism appeared which calls itself Mahāyāna, 'Great vehicle' (across the ocean of suffering). It points out new ways to emancipation and thus

makes this supreme goal accessible to a wider range of human beings than the older Buddhism for which a derogatory name Hinyāna or 'Small Vehicle' has come into use. According to the Mahāyānists, Hinyāna is merely the introductory part of the teaching of Buddha. Conversely, the Hinyanists call the Mahāyāna a distortion of what Gautama had taught.

There are basically three concepts which differentiate Mahāyāna from Hinyana and at the same time bind different schools of Mahayana under the same head. They are: Buddhology, the doctrine of three bodies (trikaya) and concept of Bodhisattva.

The Philosophical Mahāyāna schools developed from the religious ones through systematization and elaboration of the teachings of the Sutras. The philosophy of the Mahāyāna concentrates on one main problem: the relationship between the many and the one. The multiplicity of the phenomena which compose the world and the unity of the principle which is sensed in them as the absolute and which has to be realized through individual experience.

Mahayana Buddhism is divided into two schools of philosophical thought: Madhyamaka and Yogacara. Mādhymaka was founded by Nagarjuna. Other thinkers of the Madhyamaka are Aryadeva who was a direct disciple of Nagarjuna; Buddhapalita, Bhavaviveka, Candrakirti, Santideva, Santaraksita and Kamalasila. Another central philosophical school of Mahayana is Yogacara. Three important personalities of Yogacara School are: Maitreyanatha, Asnaga and Vāsubandhu. Other significant philosophers of the Yogacara School are: Dignaga, Sthiramati, Dharmapala, Candragomin, Dharmakirti, Dharmottara and Haribhadra. The writings of these latter Yogacara philosophers mainly deal with epistemology and logic.

11.3 MADHYĀMIKA: NĀGĀRJUNA

The Mādhyamikas were so called because of the emphasis they laid on mādhyama-pratipat (the middle view). In his first sermon in Varanasi, the Buddha preached the Middle Path, which is neither self-mortification nor a life devoted to pleasure of the senses. However, the middle path

advocated by the Mādhyamaka system, is not the exactly the same as preached by the Buddha. The middle path propounded by the Buddha in Varanasi has an ethical meaning, while that of Madhyāmikas is a metaphysical concept.

Nagārjuna was the first to create a philosophical Mahāyāna system. But, Nagārjuna did not develop a system of philosophy. His philosophy was not a systematically presented complete structure. However, he tried to give a proof of unreality of the external world which was merely stated in the Mahāyāna sutra of Prjnaparamita. He also developed and defined the fundamental concepts of Madhyamaka School.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Fill up the blanks:

a. Mahāyana points out new ways to emancipation and thus the supreme goal accessible to a wider range of human beings than the older Buddhism for which a derogatory name _____ or _____ has come into use.

b. There are basically three concepts which differentiate Mahayana from Hinyana and at the same time bind different schools of Mahāyāna under the same head. They are:, _____ , _____and concept of _____

c. The middle path propounded by the Buddha in Varanasi has an_____, while that of Madhyamikas is a_____

11.3.1 The Unreality Of External World

The main goal of Nāgārjuna is to prove the unreality of the external world. He tries to do this by demonstrating with the help of logic that the most ordinary concepts of daily life are impossible. The phenomenal world as it presents itself is so because the phenomenal world rests on these concepts. And as the concepts are impossible, phenomenal world is also impossible.

Phenomenal world has generally been described in Buddhism in terms of five aggregates. Nāgārjuna replaces this with dependent origination. It is a fact that since the time of Buddha himself, the impermanence of phenomenal world had been asserted. The nature of the world was seen in the continuous becoming and ceasing which is governed by law of dependent origination. Nāgārjuna considered this very law of dependent origination as the appropriate formula through which to express the nature of phenomenal world.

For Nāgārjuna, dependent origination is itself unreal as opposing possibilities of becoming and ceasing, of permanence and impermanence does not apply. Nāgārjuna shows that neither an arising nor a passing away is possible. One of the views with which Nāgārjuna works to show this is the relativity of opposed concepts. Such concepts are mutually dependent on one another since the one is possible only if the other is also given. From this, Nāgārjuna draws the conclusion that corresponding entities cannot exist, because the existence of one always presupposes the existence of the other. A cause for example, is a cause only with respect to an effect. A cause therefore cannot exist as long as the effect does not exist. Without a cause, however, an effect cannot exist. The true doctrine consists in rejection of both opposites; it consists in the middle way. With this Nāgārjuna makes a link to the declaration of Buddha who himself designated his doctrine as the middle way. Nāgārjuna asserts that he is proclaiming the genuine doctrine of Buddha. It is for this reason that his system is called middle doctrine- Madhyamakadarsana.

More important is Nāgārjuna's concept of intrinsic nature (svabhava). For Nāgārjuna intrinsic nature means a being in and for itself and conditioned by only itself, independent of everything else. From this view it follows that such an intrinsic nature has not arisen, and that it is not subject to passing away as its existence is not dependent on anything else. Thus it is permanent and imperishable. Now, Nāgārjuna draws the conclusion that entities of the phenomenal world which are subject to constant becoming and ceasing, cannot possess an intrinsic nature. Hey are therefore without nature, that is, they are unreal.

Though the entities of the phenomenal world are shown to be unreal, the phenomenal world is not to be considered as not existing at all. It just does not exist intrinsically. Nāgārjuna characterizes this nature of phenomenal world with the expression- emptiness (sunyata). The things of the phenomenal world thus are empty, are natureless (sunya). We can therefore neither say the entities exist nor that they do not exist. Both are mistaken, both are opposites. The truth lies in the middle, in the middle way, in emptiness.

It is this characteristic of the phenomenal world, says Nāgārjuna, that makes the phenomenal world as we know it in fact possible. If things possessed an intrinsic nature, they could neither arise nor cease. It is only because of their unreality that the entire course of the world unfolds in accordance with law of dependent origination. The phenomenal world exists in accordance with its own fixed laws and thus a certain truth is allowed to it. The truth allowed to the phenomenal world is not in terms of highest truth but a restricted truth (samvrtisatya). In terms of the restricted truth, the events of the world, the Buddhist path of liberation and declaration of the Buddha, have validity. From the point of view of highest truth (paramarthasatya), which exclusively applies to the highest reality, there is neither a Buddha, nor a doctrine, nor a community, since all these belong to the phenomenal world.

There is a second view regarding the nature of phenomenal world in Nāgārjuna. The nature of the phenomenal world is diversity (prapanca). Nāgārjuna, however, did not analyze the concept. The world of dependence is based on manifoldness, which is provided by diversity. More importantly, our conceptions, which do not apply to highest reality that is free of all diversity, but which invents the phenomenal world for us, rest on diversity.

11.3.2 The Highest Reality

When it comes to the highest reality, Nāgārjuna avoids the positive expressions and designations. He does not speak of an element of principles (dharmadhatu), of a suchness (tathata), but only of extinction (nirvāna). Nirvāna is without arising or passing away, without ending, and also is not

permanent. Most importantly, it is neither existent nor non-existent, since existence and non-existence, as opposing concepts, belong to the world of dependence. Furthermore, Nirvāna is free from all diversity and therefore does not offer any basis for our concepts and thus is unimaginable and inexpressible. In Nirvāna the manifoldness of appearance and law of dependent origination are set aside.

In this way, the same statements proceed about Nirvāna as the statements about phenomenal world. And so Nagārjuna asserts the unity of phenomenal world and Nirvāna. The characterizations that are valid for things (dharmata) are also valid for Nirvana. Nirvāna and phenomenal world are two forms of appearance of same nature. Conditionality and dependency constitutes phenomenal world and free from conditionality and dependency is Nirvāna. Nagārjuna emphatically asserts the sameness of phenomenal world and Nirvāna. There is not the least difference between them. Nirvāna thus is not something separate that one attains by freeing oneself from the phenomenal world. It consists rather only in the fact that the deception of the phenomenal world is not longer perceived, as the diversity on which it is based disappears.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: State whether the following statements are True or False

a. According to Nagārjuna, the external world is real.

b. Nagārjuna describes the phenomenal world in terms of five aggregates.

c. When it comes to the highest reality, Nagārjuna avoids the positive expressions and designations.

11.4 YOGĀCĀRA

The Yogācāra School bears its name because the practice of yoga played a special role in the circles from which it arose. Here yoga is understood in a general sense as the entire striving, the practice, the

activation of all virtues demanded for a future Buddha, a Bodhisattva. The description of a path that a Bodhisattva has to travel was elaborated in an imaginative way. However, various philosophical schools emerged alongside this. These were later fused with and expanded through variety of other ideas from various important teachers. It is in this way that an all-encompassing system of Yogācara finally arose. The school is also known as Vijnānavāda on account of the fact that it holds vijnaptimatra or ideas alone to be real. The "Yogacara brings out the practical side of philosophy while Vijānavāda brings out its speculative side". The title Yogācāra was given by Asanga while the term Vijananavāda was used by Vasubandhu. Yoagacāra considered the transcendental in terms of Absolute Mind and tried to explain why and how the seemingly objective universe came to evolve out of Absolute Mind.

11.4.1 Existence of Mere Idea (vijnaptimatrata)

One of the best ways of demonstrating the sole reality of the Absolute Mind is by disproving the existence of matter. Vasubandhu attempted to show in his Trimsika-Vijnaptimatrata that there is no such thing as a material substance, whether atomic or non-atomic, and that only ideas exist. Vasubandhu, however, does not deny the existence of sensible qualities but an independent material substratum in which they are supposed to inhere. For example, a flower is merely the subtotal of certain visual, olfactory, and tactile sensations. It is not a lump of matter which possesses these sensations as its attributes. We can never perceive or infer an object besides the sensations. Matter is an abstraction, a mere word. Strictly speaking, we should refer, not to having a perception of a thing, but only to having perception. According to Vasubandhu, only vijnaptimatra-only ideas-that is to say perceptions-exist. He holds that when we realize that the so called objective universe exists nowhere except in our mind, all our attachments to it will be destroyed, and with the destruction of that attachment, liberation will be attained. In Vasubandhu's own words, "Where there is nothing to grasp there is no more grasping". Vasubandhu appeals for support in his conclusion not only to logic and analogy of dreams but

also to testimony of the yogis, who in exalted stage of Samādhi perceives vivid sensuous impressions without there being any objective stimulus. Vasubandhu suggests that only by personal experience of meditation one can gain a living conviction of the truth of vijnaptimatrata-before one is awake from the dream, one cannot know that what is seen in the dream does not exist.

11.4.2 The Store Consciousness (alayavijnana)

If it is accepted that matter does not exist, and that universe has no reality except as the aggregate of our sensations, the question that arises is, why do we think that matter exists? What is the cause of illusion of objective existence? The doctrine of alavijnana or store consciousness is a part of Yogacara attempt to answer this question in a systematic manner. Maitreyanatha, besides positing Absolute Mind as the sole reality, had also posited the existence of the abhutaparikalpita, or unreal imagination, by which the radiance of Absolute Mind becomes obscured. These two principles, while in one sense identical, in another sense are different from each other. Regarded as different, Absolute Mind is the static, and the unreal imagination the dynamic, or potentially dynamic principle. Out of this dynamic principle, which comprises of two aspects, eventually emerges the whole so-called universe, which is in reality nothing but a transformation of the mind. The two aspects referred to are: the alayavijnana or store consciousness, and the pravrtti-vijnana or evolving consciousness. Every willed action produces an effect, technically known as vāsana. These 'vāsanas' are stored in the alayavijanana in the form of 'seed'. As these seeds fructify and produce results, they develop touch, mental activity (manaskara), feeling, perception, and will (cetana)- corresponding to five aggregates of older tradition. This is the first transformation of consciousness. The second transformation takes place when manas, or ego-consciousness, evolve from the alayavijanan, and the third when, by means of the six-fold sense activity, perception of colour, sound, temperature, resistance etc., arise and are wrongly interpreted as the objective and subjective world, each independent of the other. This is the

origin of illusion of the reality of things and of the self. The vijnanas associated with the six faculties of sense together with the mano-vijnana or ego-consciousness, comprise the evolving consciousness (pravrtti-vijnana) and these seven and the alayavijnana make up the eight consciousness of Yogācara.

11.4.3 Three Kinds of 'Own Being' (svabhāva)

While the doctrine of alayavijnana is part of an attempt to explain the causal relation between Absolute Mind and its hypotheses, the doctrine of svabhāvas, differentiates their ontological status and determines the nature of their interrelations from the ontological point of view. The three svabhāvas are knwon as parnispanna, absolute nature, paratantra or dependent nature, and parikalpita, imputed nature or mere illusion. The first corresponds to Absolute Mind, the second to the unreal imagination, and the third to the wrong notion of objective and subjective existence. While for the Yogācārins the subject-object distinction is wholly unreal, the mind and the mental states on which it is superimposed are real in the relative sense. They are in fact identical with abhutaparikalpita, which is unreal only in comparison with the absolute reality of the One Mind. By admitting the dependent nature of the mind and the mental states, Yogācāra could incorporate the Sarvastivadin classification of dharmas. Vāsubandhu tried to explain the differences between these svabhāvas by means of an illustration. He says that by the power of a mantra a piece of wood may be made to appear in the form an elephant. The non-existence of the elephant in the wood is the absolute nature; the form of the elephant- the dependent nature; and the elephant itself is the imputed nature; the mantra corresponds to alayavijnana. Vāsubandhu makes it clear that the distinction between the three svabhavas is pragmatic only. Ultimately only the One Mind exists. Just as, when the illusory elephant and its form are no longer perceived, the piece of wood is seen- so when the imputed nature and the dependent nature vanish, the absolute nature is realized.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Write short answers to:

a. Why is Yogācāra School called Vijnānavāda?

b. What is the view of Yogācāra regarding matter?

c. What are the three svabhāvas of Yogacārā?



11.5 LET US SUM UP

- About four hundred years of Buddha's passing away a new form of Buddhism appeared which calls itself Mahāyāna, 'Great vehicle' (across the ocean of suffering). It points out new ways to emancipation and thus makes this supreme goal accessible to a wider range of human beings than the older Buddhism.
- There are basically three concepts which differentiate Mahāyāna from Hinayāna and at the same time bind different schools of Mahayana under the same head. They are: Buddhology, the doctrine of three bodies (trikaya) and concept of Bodhisattva.
- The Mādhyamikas were so called because of the emphasis they laid on madhyama-pratipat (the middle view). However, the middle path advocated by the Mādhyamaka system, is not the exactly the same as preached by the Buddha. The middle path propounded by the Buddha in Varanasi has an ethical meaning, while that of Mādhyamikas is a metaphysical concept.
- Nāgārjuna was the first to create a philosophical Mahāyāna system. His philosophy was not a systematically presented complete structure. However, he tried to give a proof of unreality of the external world which was merely stated in the Mahāyāna sutra of Prjnaparamita.
- Phenomenal world has generally been described in Buddhism in terms of five aggregates. Nāgārjuna replaces this with dependent origination. Nāgārjuna considered the very law of dependent

origination as the appropriate formula through which to express the nature of phenomenal world.

- For Nāgārjuna, dependent origination is itself unreal as opposing possibilities of becoming and ceasing, of permanence and impermanence does not apply. One of the views with which Nāgārjuna works to show this is the relativity of opposed concepts.
- Nāgārjuna says that the entities of phenomenal world which are subject to constant becoming and ceasing, cannot possess an intrinsic nature. Hey are therefore without nature, that is, they are unreal.
- Nāgārjuna characterizes the nature of phenomenal world with the expression- emptiness (sunyata). The things of the phenomenal world thus are empty, are natureless (sunya). We can, therefore, neither say the entities exist nor that they do not exist. Both are mistaken, both are opposites. The truth lies in the middle, in the middle way, in emptiness.
- The phenomenal world exists in accordance with its own fixed laws and thus a certain truth is allowed to it. The truth allowed to the phenomenal world is not in terms of highest truth but a restricted truth (samvrtisatya).
- When it comes to the highest reality, Nāgārjuna avoids the positive expressions and designations. He does not speak of an element of factors (dharmadhatu), of a suchness (tathata), but only of extinction (nirvāna).
- Nirvāna consists in the fact that the deception of the phenomenal world is not longer perceived, as the diversity on which it is based disappears.
- The Yogācāra School bears its name because the practice of yoga played a special role in the circles from which it arose.
- The school is also known as Vijnānavāda on account of the fact that it holds vijnaptimatra or ideas alone to be real.
- One of the best ways of demonstrating the sole reality of the Absolute Mind is by disproving the existence of matter. Matter is an abstraction,

a mere word. Strictly speaking, we should refer, not to having a perception of a thing, but only to having perception.

- These 'vāsanas' are stored in the alayavijānana in the form of 'seed'. As these seeds fructify and produce results, the first transformation of consciousness takes place. The second transformation takes place when manas evolve from the alayavijanan, and the third when, by means of the six-fold sense activity, perceptions arise and are wrongly interpreted as the objective and subjective world.
- The three svabhāvas of Yogācāra are known as parnispanna, absolute nature, paratantra or dependent nature, and parikalpita, imputed nature or mere illusion. The first corresponds to Absolute Mind, the second to the unreal imagination, and the third to the wrong notion of objective and subjective existence.



11.6 FURTHER READING

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11.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q. No. 1: a. Hinayāna or 'Small Vehicle'

b. Buddhology, the doctrine of three bodies (trikaya), Bodhisattva.