



## The Four Schools of Buddhism

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### Abstract

*If we have a look at the history of philosophy then we will be able to find different approaches regarding different phenomena. Sometimes for the same phenomena; different approaches are there. Just as there is only one moon in the sky, yet it has been the theme of many poets, interpreting it in their own different ways. Therefore, there are many views, as many as the number of human beings. Similarly, in Indian philosophy also there are a number of systems which interpret the same phenomenon in different ways. Buddhism is also not exceptional regarding this. Buddhism, which is one of the oldest systems of philosophy in the world is very prominent with its four sub schools which interpret concepts like reality, world and the self in various ways. All of these approaches are unique to each other though they belong to the same system. The death of Buddha paved the way for different aspects to submerge with the already existing beliefs and practices. The original philosophy of Buddha came to be developed and even interpreted differently by his followers as they were required to justify Buddha's teaching, and also convert other thinkers to their faith. This paper intends to examine the different treatment and approaches within Buddhism with its four schools, viz., Mādhyamika, Yogācāra, Sautrāntika and Vaibhāṣika.*

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Indian Philosophy, Nirvana, Reality, Self.

### Introduction:

A look at the history of philosophy shows that the main issues on which philosophers have been debating were questions on reality, the world and conscious phenomena. These questions are the perennial issues which have always been the subject matter of all philosophical discussions. But there is no final view regarding these questions, because they can be speculated upon and analyzed by different persons in different ways. Therefore, there are many views, as many as the number of human beings. Just as there is only one moon in the sky, yet it has been the theme of many poets, interpreting it in their own different ways. Similarly, in Indian philosophy also there are a number of systems which interpret the same phenomenon in different ways. Among these Buddhism, one of the oldest systems of philosophy in

the world, is most prominent with its four sub-schools. Buddhism is being practiced by a large number of people in many parts of the world. As Buddhism made progress and spread to different parts of the world, new ideas started getting involved along with the existing beliefs and practices. This led to the development and evolution of different schools within Buddhism. Thus, Buddhism has started becoming a philosophy embracing a variety of traditions, beliefs and practices.

After the death of Buddha, the different aspects of his philosophy came to be developed and even interpreted differently by his followers as they were required to justify Buddha's teaching, and also convert other thinkers to their faith. Even Buddha's Golden Silence on the ten metaphysical questions concerning phenomena beyond our



ordinary experience came to be interpreted by his followers. Some took the advantage of his silence and started interpreting it as an empiricism which acknowledges the incapability of the mind to apprehend non-empirical phenomena. According to some other, this is a form of skepticism which neither a denial of reality, nor as denial of any means of knowing the non-empirical reality, but only as signifying the indescribability of that transcendental experience and reality. Therefore in this way Buddha's silence has given its way for arising and submerging various schools and sub-schools within Buddhism.

Most of these schools of Buddhism allow their followers to stick to certain general practices and beliefs while some others have invented certain unique techniques or beliefs which adhere to a that particular school only. The division has first started emerging in two broad ways as: (i) Hīnayāna or Theravada and (ii) Mahāyāna. The Hīnayāna system, which is more ancient and orthodox, has their philosophical literature in the language of Pali; while the Mahāyāna, which came into existence later than the previous one, has its literature in Sanskrit.

1) **Hīnayāna or Theravada:** The "Hīnayāna" or "Theravada" literally means "The Way of the Elders". This school believes in self-help, i.e. helping ourselves to achieve the highest goal of our life. Therefore this path is never intended to mean for the common ordinary people because those who follow this path has to be strictly spiritually mature. Unfortunately the number of such people is very few and therefore it started slowly fading away in the eyes of common people.

2) **Mahāyāna:** The new system 'Mahāyāna' came into existence with common practice and beliefs to suit the taste of the common people. While the condition emerges when Buddhism started losing its strength, the teachers had to choose between either upholding the ideal or upholding the numbers. They chose upholding the number at the cost of the ideal. This new system was different from the previous one regarding its ideal which works for not only oneself but for the salvation of all. This Mahāyāna system is much easier to follow than Hīnayāna.

These two broad divisions of Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna again subdivided into four prominent schools, which are as follows

1. Mādhyamika or Sūnyavāda,
2. Yogācāra or Vijñānavāda,
3. Sautrāntika or Bāhyānumeya-vāda, and
4. Vaibhāṣika or Bāhyapratyakṣa-vāda.

Among these four distinguished schools, Mādhyamika and Yogācāra belong to Mahāyāna system and Sautrāntika and Vaibhāṣika belong to Hīnayāna system. All the schools of Buddhism differ among themselves on the nature of the path for the attainment of liberation, the importance and verifiability of various teachings and their respective practices. These systems even differ among themselves regarding the treatment of the concept of reality, self or personality.

#### 1. **Mādhyamika or Sūnyavāda**

This school is nihilists in nature. Mādhyamika means "the middle way" between the realism of the Sarvastivada School and the idealism of the Yogācāra School. Nagarjuna, is regarded as the pioneer of this school as most of the works of this school can be found as the



form of commentaries mainly on the works of Nagarjuna. One of the famous doctrines of this school is Sūnyavāda which means all is void. Like all the older schools of Buddhism Mādhyamika also accept Buddha's *anatmavāda*. According to this doctrine, there is no "Self" in the sense of a permanent, fundamental, and transcendental being within individual existence. What people think of as the Self, personality and ego, are temporary creations of the *skandhas*, viz., *rūpa* (form), *vedanā* (feelings), *sañjñā* (perception), *samskāra* (predispositions) and *vijñāna* (consciousness).

Generally the doctrine of Sūnyavāda has been misunderstood as a doctrine where everything is void (*sūnya*) and the universe is totally devoid of any reality. But, actually this is a philosophy which does not deny all reality, but only the perceptible phenomenal world which can be perceived by us. According to them, behind this phenomenal world there is a reality which is indescribable. Thus, by saying all categories and all existents as "empty," the Mādhyamikas are trying to mean that they are empty of "essence" (*svabhava*). Because they do not exist essentially but relatively to other existents and categories. Therefore Sūnyavāda is also called as a kind of relativity because it declares that no thing or phenomenon has a fixed, absolute, independent character and is unconditionally true.

Regarding the state of nirvana also Nagarjuna has said it is a state which cannot be described but it can only be suggested negatively like that which is not ordinarily known, not acquired anew or destroyed and which is not eternal.

## 2. Yogācāra or Vijñānavāda

Yogācāra is another school of Buddhism which also belonged to the Mahāyāna tradition and who advocates subjective idealism. Yogācāra is also has been called as the "Mind only" school because it teaches that things exist only as an idea of our mind. According to them, even what we think of as reality is also a creation of the mind.

Yogācāra school basically influences Buddhist philosophy and psychology through yogic practices. According to this school there is nothing which is not mediated by mind, which gives the other name for this school is "Vijñānavāda". *Vijñāna* means "consciousness" and *Vada* means "doctrine". Hence, "Vijñānavāda" may be called as "doctrine of consciousnesses". Yogācāra emphasizes the practice of Yoga mainly as a means for attaining final emancipation from the bondage and suffering of this world.

For the Yogācāra School, the mind is all in all, i.e. *Alaya-vijnana*. This 'Alaya vijnana' is not something having a steady and permanent nature; instead it appears to be so owing to the continuity of the basic consciousness at each moment, just like the water of a river which is always keep on running and changing. Therefore, according to it, everything occurs like a stream of consciousness which changes every moment. In other words, we can say that this Alaya-vijnana of Buddhism is a counterpart of the orthodox Hindu concept of 'Atman'. But the difference here is that while 'Atman' is immutable, Alaya vijnana is continuously changing.

Yogācāra presents three basic modes of perception. They are: (1) the



fully conceptualized (*Parikalpita*): It is imaginary in nature, wherein things are incorrectly apprehended based on conceptual construction, through attachment and erroneous inequity; (2) the other dependent (*Paratantra*): It is dependent in nature, by which the correct understanding of the vulnerably originated nature of things is understood; (3) the fully accomplished (*Parinispanna*): It is absolute in nature, through which one apprehends things as they are in themselves, uninfluenced by any conceptualization.

All Yogācāra discourses take place within the religious and doctrinal aspect of Buddhism. It is also determined by the fundamental Buddhist problem, as liberation of the living being from the bondage of *Samsara*. According to this school, our present life is the consequence of our past deeds. Therefore the present existence of a human being is also determined by the actions of his or her past. In this way this school tried to show the effect of karma in our life, according to them, karma accounts for the continuity of human personality through death, or unconsciousness. It holds that new seeds come to execution in each moment and once a seed produces its fruit, it is used up. Therefore in this way we continue to believe in the reality of our perceptual framework and the process which creates seeds that will ripen into further delusion until the time of our enlightenment.

### 3) Sautrāntika or Bahyanumeya-Vada

Sautrāntika is one of the four important pillars of Buddhist Philosophical system and it came into emergence as a consequence of the Sarvastivada's doctrine of All-Is-Real. The school has got its name as

"Sautrāntika" because of its dependence on the sutras which are believed to be the words of the Buddha. The Sautrāntikas believe in the reality of both mental as well as external objects. And they said that the reality can be apprehended by inference only. Therefore they are called the 'Bāhyānumeya-vāda'.

The Sautrāntika differs from its parent school, i.e. the Sarvastivadins. While the Sarvastivadins upholds a complex system in which past, present, and future phenomena are all believed to have their own existence, the Sautrāntika upholds the doctrine of "extreme momentariness" which declares that only the present moment exists. Even according to them, the Sarvastivadin's position regarding this is a violation of the basic Buddhist principle of impermanence. The important point about Sautrāntika is that where non-Buddhist Indian philosophers typically referred to an *Atma*, there they used the concept of an *āsraya* (substrate) and explained the continuity of consciousness through rebirth. Therefore, according to them, there is an *āsraya* where consciousness resides and it continues through rebirths and hence personality also continues in this way from birth to birth.

Among the *Tripitakas*, the Sautrāntikas admit only *Sutrapitaka* and *Vinayapitaka* but rejected *Abhidharmapitaka* by saying that it is not a valid source of the teachings of Lord Buddha.

Sautrāntika's always defend their theory about the external objects and the mental as well; they refute other's theory regarding these matters. The Vijñānavadins believe that the mind is the ultimate truth and the external objects are only images or ideas of the mind. Sautrāntikas strongly reject this



theory by saying that if external objects do not exist, their imaginary nature cannot be proven. Because if there is nothing outside, the mind will never be able to apprehend things. Therefore, according to the Sautrāntika, the external existent is as valid as the mental.

Sautrāntika always strongly upholds the Buddhist theory of Impermanence. According to them, the first moment of this world does not exist at the second moment. Yet each moment seems to be similar, we are deluded and see them as the same, but they are different in each and every moment. For example, the flowing water of a river. Though we see the same river every time but still it is a new river each and every moment because of the continuous flow of its water. In this way, all objects of the world - our bodies, ideas, emotions and all the external objects around us are destroyed every moment and are replaced by similar things generated at the succeeding moment, which are again replaced by other similar things at the next moment, and so on. According to Sautrāntika, human personality is also such and such similar thing like the example of the river.

#### 4) Vaibhāsika or Bahyapratyakṣa-Vada

The Vaibhāsika belongs to the Hīnayāna system within Buddhism. The Vaibhāsikas, like the Sautrāntikas, admit the reality of both the mental and external objects. According to them, reality can only be known through perception and not by any other sources of knowledge. Therefore they are known as Bāhyapratyakṣa-vādins. They refute the Sautrāntika view regarding inference by saying that inference is not a valid source of knowledge as it is dependent on things perceived previously. For example,

the inference of fire from the perception of smoke is possible if someone has perceived both fire and smoke together at the same time. Without that one will not be able to make the inference of that fire from the smoke. Similarly it is applicable in case of external objects also. If nobody has ever perceived external objects, their existence cannot be proved simply by their mental projection only.

If it be said that as in the actually observed candle flame-stream, due to the arising of grouping of atoms having similarity with causes in the cognition-stream, the illusory recognition happens, therefore the permanence of the object is imagined, then we can reply, that as in the case of the flame which is differentiated by the absolute necessary difference in the instruments etc., here there is no way of refuting the recognition. If all things are momentary, since there is no person to discover the identity etc. also between the prior and later, even the illusory recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) or remembrance cannot arise. Vaibhāsika school believes in every moments of consciousness. Therefore they hold that no person or thing has a truly existent and independent self. According to them, through the development of different meditative states, a person can recreates himself/herself as a pure being who has overcome the causes of suffering, and who is no longer bound to the cycle of rebirth and death in conditioned existence. The practitioner is eventually liberated to become an Arhat, i.e., the one who has destroyed his obscure emotions which can bind him to this samsara.

**Conclusion:** As we have seen that Buddhism, as a vast system of philosophy has presented different views in various ways through its different sub-schools. Even though they put forward different



views regarding different matters but yet their similarity also cannot be denied. But the most common ground on which all the schools of Buddhism are analogous is that the greatness as well as the quality of the life of a human being depends on the wisdom and morality that is perfected in him/her. The conquest of oneself is better than conquering thousands of men in the battleground. There is no such power in this world which can be compared with the victory of the person who has conquered himself/herself through self-development. And this self-development involves the elimination of the unwholesome traits of mind, the roots of evil behavior, greed, hatred and confusion of mind and thereby to achieve the highest goal of human life, i.e., the perfect enlightenment or *nirvana*.

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