CHAPTER III

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE BUDDHA

The Philosophy of Siddhartha or Gouthama Buddha, who is also known as the light of Asia is fairly well known. The process of Siddhartha’s becoming the Buddha was the process of enlightenment and the status of tathagata which Gouthama attained became the desidartum for his followers. From the cult of Monks Buddhism becomes a religion, develops into two main sects of Mahayana and Theravada, spreads into Srilanka, Burma, and Siam in the South as well as to Tibet, China Japan and Korea in the North.

Like all great Indian Acharyas Buddha also taught by conversation. For a long time, his teachings were also handed down orally through his disciples from generations to generations.

Our knowledge about Buddha’s Teachings chiefly comes from the tripitakas or the three baskets of teachings, which are claimed to contain his thoughts and views as, reported by his most intimate disciples. The names of these three Canonical works are

1. Vinayapitaka

2. Suttapitaka and

3. Abhidhammapitaka

The Vinayapitaka deals with the rules of ‘Sangha.’ Suttapitaka deals with Buddha’s sermons and dialogues and Abhidhammapitaka contains expositions of Philosophical theories. These three books are
the sources of early Buddhist Philosophy and they were written in Pali.

Buddhism travel to far flung lands and the Philosophy developed into many different areas. As on today it is impossible to know and understand all the school of Buddhism and their distinct Philosophies. I am only trying to speak about the basic and essential teachings of Buddha.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS (CHATVARI ARYA SATYANI)

(1) Sarvam Dukhamasti (Life in this world is full of suffering)

(2) Dukha Samudaya (There is a cause of this suffering)

(3) Dukha Nirodha (The Cessation of suffering)

(4) Dukha Nirodha Maga (There is a path which leads to the cessation of suffering) ¹

1. Life in this world is full of suffering. (Sarvam Dukhamasti)

Here Buddha speaks about one universal truth in a most direct manner. All Indian schools shall share this outlook of Buddha except the lokayatas or charvakas. The lokayatas would say that along with pain them and also different types of pleasures in this world. But the Buddhists speak about long term happiness as well as farsightedness. On a final analysis life is suffering pleasures are momentary and shoot living. Birth old age, disease, death, sorrow
grief, wish, desire, in short, all that is bond or attachment, is misery²

2. There is a cause of this suffering (Dukha Samudaya)

Second noble truth is about the cause of suffering. Here Buddha speaks about the chain of twelve links as the cause of suffering. Suffering depends on these conditions. The origin of suffering is explained by Buddha through his special concept of natural causations known as pratityasamutpada. According to this concept the existence of everything depends on some conditions and nothing is unconditional. Since everything is conditional there must be something from which suffering comes. Janana-marana or life suffering is because of birth or ‘jati’. If one could escape birth then there shall not to be suffering at all. One gets born because of the will to become or Bhava the force of the blind tendency or predisposition to be born. The cause of this tendency to be born is because of our mental clinging or Upadana to material objects of the world. This clinging is caused by trsna or our thurst or craving to enjoy objects, sights, sounds etc. Trsna is because of previous sense experience tinged with some pleasant feeling (vedana) of having experienced them. Thus Vedana is because of sparsa or contact of sense organs with objects. Sparsa is because of the fact that we have six organs of cognition, the five Indriyas plus manas or mind (Shadayatana). Shadayatana or the six indriyas exist because of the existence of namarupa or the mind-body-organism. Thus the existence of man as man is the beginning of suffering. This mind body organism could not develop in the mother’s womb and come
into existence, if it were dead or devoid of consciousness or vijnana. Now the Vijnana or consciousness that descends into the embryo in Mothrs womb is only the effect of the impressions or samkara of the past existence. From the last state of past to be samkara in a concentrated manner creates effects in present life. Now these impressions or samsara, which enables re birth are due to avidya or ignorance about truth. The truth, that life is full of suffering, if realized no karma will arise which causes re-birth-ultimately. Ignorance or avidya is the root cause of rebirth-death-rebirth cycle. Thus (1) Suffering is due to (2) Birth which is due to (3) the will which is due to (4) mental clinging which is due to (5) thirst which is due to (6) sense experience which is due to (7) Sense-object contact which is due to (8) the six sense organs which is due to (9) the embryonic organum which is due to (10) some initial consciousness which is due to (11) the impression of the experience of past to be which is finally due to ignorance of truth. Hence we have the twelve links in the chair of causation. Those twelve links are not always same in all the sermons but the majority treats these as the fall and standard account. Many expressions such as dvadasanidan (the twelve sources) as well as the bhavachakra (the wheel of rebirth) signify this. The abhidhammata sangha divides them into past, present and future life also

3. The Cessation of suffering (Dukha Nirodha)

The third noble truth follows from the second noble truth that suffering is conditional. If these conditions ae removed, the suffering would end. The nirodha of suffering and nirvana
(liberation) itself is a state attainable here in this very like. If certain conditions are fulfilled, when the perfect control of passions and constant contemplation of truth is made possible a person can go through the four stages of concentration to reach perfect wisdom. He escapes worldly attachments. He becomes force, liberated and becomes an arhat – venerable person. This is the state of nirvana, the extinction of passion and therefore also of the extinction of misery. 4

We should remember that nirvana is not a state of inactivity. It is true that one has to practice detachment to attain nirvana, but once nirvana is attained, the liberated person should neither always remain in meditation nor wholly withdraw from active life like traveling preaching, founding brotherhood etc.

4. The fourth noble truth about the path to liberation. (Astanga Marga)

The path to liberation or nirvana consists of eight steps which is called the eight-fold noble path or astanga marga. This could be treated as the essence of Buddha’s ethics. This is meant not only for the monks but also for lay men.

(1) Right views. Sammaditti (Pali) Samyagdrshti (Sanskrit)

Because of ignorance mithya drsti or wrong views about the self and the world causes sufferings. It is natural that the first step to moral reformation should be the acquisition of right views. Right views are the correct knowledge about the four noble truths. Only this knowledge can help moral reformation and lead to nirvana.
(2) **Right Resolve - Sammasankappa (Pali) Samyagsankalpa (Sanskrit)**

Simply knowing the truths or mere knowledge about the truth would be useless until and unless one makes a resolution to reform his life in their lights. A moral aspirant has to renounce worldyness to give up ill feelings to others and stay away from doing any harm to them. Those three points amounts to right determination.

(3) **Right speech- sammavaca (Pali) Samyagvak (Sanskrit)**

Right determination or right resolution must turn into action also. Right determination should be able to guide and control our speech as a first step.

(4) **Right conduct- Sammakammanta (Pali) Samyakarmanta (Sanskrit)**

Right speech should be followed by right action. This is right conduct and not simply stopping with mere talking. Right conduct includes panca silas or the five vows. The panca silas are desistry from 1) killing 2) stealing 3) sensuality 4) lieing and 5) intoxication.

(5) **Right livelihood- Samma ajiva (Pali) Samyagajiva (Sanskrit)**

Now one has to earn his lively hood through honest means. Even to maintain one’s life one should not resort to forbidden means.
(6) Right effort - Samma vayama (Pali) Samyagvyayama (Sanskrit)

It is very difficult to maintain all these. The old roots of evil ideas are still deep-rooted in the mind. Fresh evil ideas can also keep coming anytime one can be knocked off the right path. One has to maintain constant and continues effort to root out old evil thoughts and fight new evil thoughts. The mind keeps bringing many ideas. One must continuously struggle to fill the mind with positive ideas. This means that even when one is high upon the path one cannot afford to relax without running the risk of falling deep dawn.

(7) Right mindfulness - Samma smiti (Pali) Samyag smriti (Sanskrit)

This rule further stresses the necessity of constant vigilance. One must constantly bear in mind the things he had already learned. He must remember and constantly contemplate on them. Then only he can continue on the right path.

(8) Right concentration - Samma Samadhi (Pali) Samyag Samadhi (Sanskrit)

One who successfully crossed the above seven states is now ready to step into the four deeper stages of meditation which can take him to cessation of suffering. His mind had already become unruffled on reasoning (vitarka) and investigation (vichara). Regarding the truths, he enjoys joy through the case born of
detachment. This first stage is called dhyana or Jhana. In the second stage all doubts are dispelled. Since all doubts we dispelled, reasoning and investigation becomes unnecessary. There is joy peace and the internal tranquility resulting from intense and unuttered contemplation. There is consciousness of joy and peace. In the third stage, an attempt is made to initiate an attitude. It indicates that can detach even from the joy or concentration. Now one experienced perfect equanimity coupled with the experience of bodily ease. In the last stage this awareness of ease and equanimity also vanishes. This is a stage of perfect equanimity, indifference and self possession. There is no pain and there is no ease. This is arhatship or nirvana. This is prajna or perfect wisdom.  

OTHER IMPORTANT TEACHINGS OF BUDDHA

The Philosophy of Buddha had remained as an oral tradition for sometime. The texts we find today are written records from these oral traditions. With each of his powerful disciples, Buddhism flourished, developed and entered into all kinds of areas. Strong disciples such as Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, Maithreya, Vasubandhu, Disgnage, Dharmapala, Sankaraswamin, Puramarta, Silabhadra, Dharmakeerti, Devendrabodhi, Sahya bodhi, Vineetha deva, Ravigupta, Jinedrabodhi, Santharakhshita, Kamalsila, Kalyanarakshita, Dharmotharacharya, Muktha kumbha, Arcata, Asoka, Chandragomin, Prajnakaragupta, Jetari, Jina Ratnakeerti, Ratnavajra, Jinamitra, Danasila, Jnanaasrimita, Jnanaasreebhadra, Ratnakarasanti, yamari, Sankarananda, Subhakaragupta, Mokshakaragupta, etc. were instrumental in taking Buddha’s teachings through re-invention and recreation into its
zenith. This is the growth of Buddhim within India, outside India, in countries like China, Japan, Tibet, Korea etc. They also had many strong disciples who re-created and re-invented Buddha in their own contexts. The ‘Lamas’ of Tibet speak about 1,800 Buddhas as cited in the writings of Milarepa.

In this chapter it is impossible for me to even try to look at all these. Therefore let me try to understand some of the principles which are explicitly stated by Buddha himself. Let me further compress these into four views such as (1) the theory of dependent origination (2) the theory of Karma (3) the theory of change and (4) the theory of the non-existence of the soul. 7

(1) The theory of dependent origination or the conditional existence of things.

Whatever is, is conditioned by something else. All events, whether mental or physical, depends on something else. This law of universal causation (Dharma) is an automatic process without the help of any supreme consciousness. Whenever a cause appears, it is followed by a particular effect. Thus everything has a cause. Nothing happens without a cause.

Hence we can see that Buddha is making two important philosophical points. On the one hand Buddha is rejecting eternalism the theory that some reality externally exists independently and unconditionality. On the other hand Buddha is rejecting nihilism; the theory which says that something existing can cease to be. This means that whatever we see or whatever we
perceive possess an existence, but it is conditional on something else. Secondly nothing can perish without leaving some marks impacts or effects.

For Buddha himself, pradityasamutpada is very serious. He calls it as dharmapad. Samudpada is compared to a staircase by climbings which one can look around the world and see the world with the eye of a Buddha. If one fails to grasp this stand points then that shall be the cause of all troubles. Rhys David says that though later Buddhism does not pay much importance to this, Buddha himself was very serious about this.

(2) The Theory of Karma

Actually the belief in Karma theory is simply a result of Prathityasamudpada, An individual is what he is because of his past karma and his future will depend on his present Karma. This has been very clearly stated when Buddha explains the origin of suffering through the theory of Pradityasamutpada. Buddha’s law of Karma is only on special form of his more general theory of causation, Pradityasamutpada.

(3) The Doctrine of Universal change and Imperamanance Kshnabhagavadam or kshnikavada.

Kshanikavada is also orginatesed from Pradiyasamutpada. If everything began from something else, and if everything is leading something else, then everything is constantly changing. Therefore everything is in constant flex. Therefore everything is Kshnita or
impermanent. Buddha repeatedly teaches that all things are subject to change and decay. Since everything is originating from some condition, everything will disappear when those conditions disappear. Whatever begins must end. Buddha says that “know that whatever exists arises from causes and conditions and is in every respect impermanent”. That which seem everlasting will perish; that which is high will be laid low; when meeting is parting will be; where birth is death will come.

Transitoriness of life and worldly things is spoken of by many other poets and philosophers. Buddha logically perfects this view into the doctrine of impermanence. His later followers develop this further into a theory of momentariness (ksanika-vada), which means not only that everything is conditional and, therefore, non-permanent existence, but also that things last not even for short periods of time, but exist for one partless moment only. This doctrine of momentariness of all things is supported by later writers with elaborate arguments, one of which may be briefly noticed here: The criterion of the existence (satta) of a thing is its capacity to produce some effect (arthakriya-karitva-laksanam sat). A non-existent thing, like a hare’s horn, cannot produce any effect. Now, from this criterion of existence, it may be deduced that a thing having existence must be momentary. If, for example, a thing like a seed be not accepted to be momentary, but thought, to be lasting for more than one moment, then we have to show that it is capable of producing an effect during each moment it exists. Again, if it really remains the same unchanging thing during these moments, then it should be able to
produce the same effect at every one of those moments. But we find that this is not the case. The seed in the house does not produce the seedling which is generated by a seed sown in the field. The seed in the house cannot then be the same as that in the field. But it may be said that though the seed does not actually produce the same effect always, it always has the potentiality to produce, and this potentiality becomes kinetic in the presence of suitable auxiliary conditions like earth, water, etc. Therefore, the seed is always the same. But this defence is weak; because then it is virtually confessed that the seed of the first moment is not the cause of the seedling, but that the seed modified by the other conditions really causes the effect. Hence the seed must be admitted to have changed. In this way it may be shown regarding everything that it does not stay unchanged during any two moments, because it does not produce the identical effect during both moments. Hence everything lasts only for a moment.

4. The Theory of the Non-existence of the Soul

The law of change is universal; neither man, nor any other being, animate or inanimate, is exempt from it. It is commonly believed that in man there is an abiding substance called the soul (atma), which persists through changes that overcome the body, exists before birth and after death, and migrates from one body to another. Consistently with his theories of conditional existence and universal change, Buddha denies the existence of such soul. But how, it may be asked, does him then explain the continuity of a person through different births, or even through the different states
of childhood, youth and old age. Though denying the continuity of an identical substance in man, Buddha does not deny the continuity of the stream of successive states that compose his life. Life is an unbroken series of states: each of these states depends on the condition just preceding and gives rise to the one just succeeding it. The continuity of the life-series is, therefore, based on a causal connection running through the different states. This continuity is often explained with the example of a lamp burning throughout the night. The flame of each moment is dependent on its own conditions and different from that of another moment which is dependent on other conditions. Yet there is an unbroken succession of the different flames. Again, as from one flame another may be lighted, and though the two are different, they are connected causally; similarly, the end-state of this life may cause the beginning of the next. Rebirth is, therefore, not transmigration, i.e. the migration of the same soul into another body; it is the causation of the next life by the present. The conception of a soul is thus replaced here by that of an unbroken stream of consciousness as in the philosophy of William James. As the present state of consciousness inherits its characters from previous ones, 'the past in a way continues in the present, through its effect. Memory thus becomes explicable even without a soul. This theory of the non-existence of soul (Anatta-vada) plays a very important part in understanding the teachings of Buddha. He, therefore, repeatedly exhorts his disciples to give up the false view about the self. Buddha points out that people, who suffer from the illusion of the self, do not know its nature clearly: still they strongly protest that they love the soul; they want to make the soul happy by
obtaining salvation. This, he wittily remarks, is like falling in love with the most beautiful maiden in the land though she has never been seen nor known. Or, it is like building; staircase for mounting a palace which has never been seen. Man is only a conventional names for a collection of different constituents the material body; (kaya) the immaterial mind (manas or citta), the forms of consciousness (vijnana), just as a chariot is a collection of wheels, axles, shafts etc. The existence of man depends on this collection and it dissolves when the collection breaks up. The soul or the ego denotes nothing more than this collection.

From a psychological point of view, man, as perceived from without and within, is analyzable also into a collection of five groups (panca-skandhas) of changing elements, namely, (1) form (rupa) consisting of the different factors which we perceive in this body having form, (2) feelings (vedana) of pleasure, pain and indifference, (3) perception including understanding and naming (sanjna) (4) predispositions or tendencies generated by the impressions of past experience (samskaras), and (5) consciousness itself (vijnana). The last four are together called nama.

THE SCHOOLS OF BUDDHA PHILOSOPHY

It has been found again and again in the history of human thought that every reasoned attempt to avoid philosophy lands a thinker into a new kind of philosophy.

In spite of Buddha’s aversion to theoretical speculation, he never wanted to accept, nor did he encourage his followers to
accept, any course of action without reasoning and criticism. He was extremely rational and contemplative, and wanted to penetrate into the very roots of human existence, and tried to supply the full justification of the ethical principles he followed and taught. It was no-wonder, therefore, that he himself incidentally laid down the foundation of a philosophical system. His philosophy, partly expressed and partly implicit, may be called positivism in so far as he taught that our thoughts should be confined to this world and to the improvement of our existence here. It may be called phenomenalism in so far as he taught that we were sure-only of the phenomena we experienced. It is, therefore, a kind of empiricism in method because experience, according-to him, was the source of knowledge.

These different aspects of his philosophy came to be developed by his followers along different lines as they were required to justify Buddha’s teaching, to defend it from the severe criticism it had to face in India and outside, and to convert other thinkers to their fold. Buddha’s reluctance to discuss the ten metaphysical questions concerning things beyond our experience and his silence about them came to-be interpreted by his followers in different lines. Some took this attitude as only the sign of a thoroughgoing empiricism which must frankly admit the inability of mind to decide non-empirical questions. According to this ex-plation, Buddha’s attitude would be regarded as scepticism. Some other followers, mostly the Mahayanists, interpreted Buddha’s view neither as a denial of reality beyond objects of ordinary experience,
nor as a denial of any means of knowing the non-empirical reality, but only as signifying the indescribability of that transcendental experience and reality. The justification of this last interpretation can be obtained from some facts of Buddha's life and teachings. Ordinary empiricists believe that our sense-experience is the only basis of all our knowledge; they do not admit the possibility of any non-sensuous experience. Buddha, however, taught the possibility of man's attaining nirvana an experience or consciousness which was not generated by the activity of the sense. The supreme value and importance that he attached to this non-empirical consciousness, justify his followers in supposing that he regarded this as the supreme reality, as well. The fact that very often Buddha used to say that he had a profound experience of things ‘far beyond,’ which is ‘comprehended only by the wise’ and ‘not grasped by mere logic,’ may be taken to mean that his non-empirical experience can neither be logically proved with arguments nor be expressed in empirical ideas and language. These grounds lead some followers, as we shall see, to raise a philosophy of mysticism and transcendentalism out of the very silence of Buddha. The nemesis of neglected metaphysics thus overtakes Buddhism soon after the founder’s passing away.

Buddhism, though primarily an ethical-religious movement, thus came to give birth to about thirty schools, not counting the minor one. And some of these get into the deep waters of metaphysical speculation, heedless of the founder’s warning. Of these many schools we shall first notice the four as distinguished in India by Buddhist and non-Buddhist writers. In this account, (1)
some Bauddha philosophers are nihilists (sunya-vadins or Madhyamikas); (2) others are subjective idealists (Vijnana-vadins or Yogacaras); (3) others again are representationists or critical realists (Bahyanumeyavadins or Sautrantikas); and (4) the rest are direct realists (Bahyapratyaksavadins or Vaibhasikas). The first two of the above four schools come under Mahayana and the last two under Hinayana. It should be noted, however, that under both Mahayana and Hinayana there are many other schools.12

The fourfold classification of Bauddha philosophy is based upon two chief questions, one metaphysical or concerning reality and the other epistemological or concerning the knowing of reality. To the metaphysical question “Is there at all any reality, mental or non-mental?” Three different replies are given: (a) the Madhyamikas hold that there is no reality, mental or non-mental; that all is void (sunya). Therefore, they have been known as the nihilists (sunya-vadins). (b) The Yogacaras hold that only the mental is real, the non-mental or the material world is all void of reality. They are, therefore, called subjective idealists (vijnana-vadins). (c) Still another class of Bauddhas holds that both the mental and the non-mental are real. They may, therefore, be called realists. Sometimes they are styled Sarvastivadins (i.e. those who hold the reality of all things), though this term is often used in a narrower sense by some Buddhist writers. But when the further epistemological question is asked: “How is external reality known to exist?” these third groups of thinkers, who believe in external reality, give two different answers. Some of them, called Sautrantikas, hold that external objects are not
perceived but known by inference (anumana). Others, known as Vaibhasikas, hold that the external world is directly perceived. Thus we have the four schools, representing the four important standpoints. This classification has much philosophical importance, even in the light of contemporary Western thought, where we find some of these different views advocated with great force. Let us consider these four schools.  

1. The Madhyamika School or Sunya-vdda

The founder of this school is said to be Nagarjuna, who was a Brahmin born in South India about the second century A.D. Asvaghosa, the author of Buddhacarita, is also regarded as a pioneer. In his famous work, Mddhyamikasasrastra, Nagarjuna states, with great dialectical skill and scholarship, the philosophy of the Madhyamika School.  

The doctrine of Sunya-vada has been understood in India, by non-Buddhist philosophers in general, to mean that the universe is totally devoid of reality, that everything is sunya or void. In setting forth this doctrine in his Sarvadarsana-sangraha, Madhavacarya has mentioned the following as an argument in its support. The self (or the knower), the object (or the known) and knowledge are mutually interdependent. The reality of one depends on each of the other two, and if one be false, the others also must be so (just as the fatherhood of any person will be proved false if the existence of his children be proved to be false). But it must be admitted by all that when we perceive a snake, in a rope, the object perceived, namely, the snake is
absolutely false. Hence the mind or the subject which knows such an object turns out to be false and its knowledge also becomes false. Thus it may be concluded that all that we perceive within or without, along with their perception and the percipient mind, are illusory like dream-objects. There is, therefore, nothing, mental or non-mental, which is real. The universe is sunya or void of reality.

From such arguments it would appear that, according to the Madhyamika view, everything is unreal. Hence it is that such a view came to be known as nihilism in Europe as well as in India (where it has also been termed Sarva-vainasika-vada by some writers). The word sunya, used by the Madhyamikas themselves, is chiefly responsible for this notion—because sunya means ordinarily void or empty. But when we study this philosophy more closely, we come to realize that the Madhyamika view is not really nihilism, as ordinarily supposed, and that it does not deny all reality, but only the apparent phenomenal world perceived by us. Behind this phenomenal world there is a reality which is not describable by any character, mental or non-mental, that we perceive. Being devoid of phenomenal characters, it is called sunya. But this is only the negative aspect of the ultimate reality; it is only a description of what it is not. In the Lankavatara-sutra (sagathaka, 167) it is stated that the real nature of objects cannot be ascertained by the intellect and cannot, therefore, be described. That which is real must be independent and should not depend on anything else for its existence and origination. But everything we know of is dependent on some condition. Hence it cannot be real. Again, it cannot be said
to be unreal because an unreal thing, like a castle in the air, can never come into existence. “To say that it is both real and unreal or that it is neither real nor unreal, would be unintelligible jargon. Sunyata or voidness is the name for this indeterminable, indescribable real nature of things. Things appear to exist, but when we try to understand the real nature of their existence our intellect is baffled. It cannot be called either real or unreal, or both real and unreal, or neither real nor unreal.

It will be seen that in the above arguments, the indescribable nature of things is deduced from the fact of their being dependent on other things or conditions. Nagarjuna says, therefore, “The fact of dependent origination is called by us sunyata.” “There is no dharma (character) of things which is not dependent on some other condition regarding its origin. Therefore, there is no dharma which is not sunya.” It would appear; therefore, that sunya only means the conditional character of things, and their consequent constant changeability and indeterminability or indescribability.

This view is called the middle (madhyama) path, because it avoids extreme views by denying, for example, both absolute reality and absolute unreality of things and asserting their conditional existence. This was the reason why Buddha, as we saw, called the theory of dependent origination—the middle path. And so Nagarjuna says that madya-vdda is called the middle path because it implies the theory of dependent origination.
The conditionality of things which makes their own nature (svabhava) unascertainable, is either real or unreal, etc., may be also regarded as a kind of relativity. Every character of a thing is conditioned by something else and therefore, its existence is relative to that condition. Sunya-vada can, therefore, also be interpreted as a theory of relativity which declares that nothing, no phenomenal experienced, has a fixed, absolute, independent character of its own (svabhava) and, therefore, no description of any phenomenon can be said to be unconditionally true.

To this philosophy of phenomena (or things as they appear to us), the Madhyamikas add a philosophy of noumenon (or reality in itself). Buddha’s teachings regarding dependent origination, impermanence, etc., apply, they hold, only to the phenomenal world, to things commonly observed by us in ordinary experience. But when nirvana is attained and the conditions of sense-experience and the appearance of phenomena are controlled, what would be the nature of the resultant experience? To this we cannot apply the conditional characters true of phenomena. The Madhyamikas, therefore, hold that there is a transcendental reality (noumenon) behind the phenomenal one and it is free from change, conditionality and all other phenomenal characters. As Nagarjuna says: “There are two truths, on which Buddha’s teaching of Dharma depends, one is empirical (sam-vrti-satya) and meant for the ordinary people, another is the transcendental or the absolutely true one (paramartha-satya). Those who do not know the distinction between
these two kinds of truth cannot understand the profound mystery of Buddha’s teachings.”¹⁵

The truth of the lower order is only a stepping-stone to the attainment of the higher. The nature of nirvana-experience which takes one beyond ordinary experience cannot be described; it can only be suggested negatively with the help of words which describe our common experience. Nagarjuna, therefore, describes nirvana with a series of negatives, thus: “That which is not known (ordinarily), not acquired anew, not destroyed, not eternal, not suppressed, not generated is called nirvana.” As with nirvana and also with the Tathagata one who has realized nirvana. His nature also cannot be described. That is why, when Buddha was asked what becomes of the Tathagata after nirvana is attained, he declined to discuss the question.

In the same light the silence of Buddha regarding all metaphysical questions about non-empirical things can be interpreted to mean that he believed in a transcendental experience and reality, the truths about which cannot be described in terms of common experience. Buddha’s frequent statements that he had realized some profound truth which reasoning cannot grasp can be cited also to support this Madhyamika contention about the transcendental.¹⁶

It may be noted here that in its conception of two fold truth, its denial of the phenomenal world, its negative description of the transcendental, and its conception of nirvana as the attainment of
unity with the transcendental self, the Madhyamika approaches very close to Advaita Vedanta as taught in some Upanisads and elaborated later by Gaudapada and Sankaracarya.

2. The Yogachra School of Subjective Idealism

While agreeing with the Madhyamikas, as to the unreality of external objects, the Yogacara School differs from them in holding that the mind (citta) cannot be regarded as unreal. For then all reasoning and thinking would be false and the Madhyamikas could not even establish that their own arguments were correct. To say that everything, mental or non-mental, is unreal is suicidal. The reality of the mind should at least be admitted in order to make correct thinking possible.

The mind, consisting of a stream of different kinds of ideas, is the only reality. Things that appear to be outside the mind, our body as well as other objects, are merely ideas of the mind. Just as in cases of dreams and hallucinations a man fancies to perceive things outside, though they do not really exist there, similarly the objects which appear to be out there, are really ideas in the the existence of any external object cannot be proved, because it cannot be shown that the object is different from the consciousness of the object. As Dharma-kirti states, the blue colour and the consciousness of the blue colour are identical, because they are never perceived to exist separately. Though really one, they appear as two owing to illusion, just as the moon appears as two owing to defective vision. As an object is never known without the consciousness of it, the object
cannot be proved to have an existence independent of consciousness.

The Yogacharas also point out the following absurdities which arise from the admission of an object external to the mind. An external object, if admitted, must be either partless (i.e., atomic) or composite (i.e., composed of many parts). But atoms are too small to be perceived. A composite thing (like a pot) also cannot be perceived, because it is not possible to perceive simultaneously all the sides and parts of the object. Nor can it be said to be perceived part by part, because, if those parts are atomic they are too small to be perceived, and if they are composite, the original objection again arises. So if one admits extra-mental objects, the perception of these objects cannot be explained. These objections do not arise if the object be nothing other than consciousness, because the question of parts and whole does not arise with regard to consciousness. Another difficulty is that the consciousness of the object cannot arise before the object has come into existence. Neither can it arise afterwards, because the object, being momentary, vanishes as soon as it arises. The external object, according to those who admit it, being the cause of consciousness cannot be simultaneous with consciousness. Nor can it be said that the object may be known by consciousness after it has ceased to exist. For in that case the object being in the past there cannot be any immediate knowledge of perception of it. Perception of present objects, as we must admit always to have, remains, therefore, unexplained if objects are
supposed to be external to the mind. This difficulty does not arise, if the object be supposed to be nothing other than consciousness.\textsuperscript{17}

The Yogachara view is called Vijnana-vada or idealism because it admits that there is only one kind of reality which is of the nature of consciousness (vijana) and objects which appear to be material or external to consciousness are really ideas or states of consciousness. This theory may be described further as subjective idealism, because according to it the existence of an object perceived is not different from the subject or the perceiving mind.

One of the chief difficulties of subjective idealism is: If an object depends for its existence solely on the subject, then, how is it that the mind cannot create at will any object at any time? How is it explained that objects do not change, appear or disappear at the will of the perceiver? To explain this difficulty, the Vijana-vadin says that the mind is a stream of momentary conscious states and within the stream there lie buried the impressions of all past experience. At a particular moment impression comes to the surface of consciousness the circumstances of the moment are the most at that moment that impression attains maturity (paripaka), so to say, and develops into immediate consciousness or perception. It is thus that at that particular moment only that object, whose latent impression can, under the circumstances, reveal itself becomes perceived; just as in the case of the revival of past impressions in memory,, though all the impressions are in the mind, only some are remembered at a particular time. This is why only some object can be perceived at a time and not any at will.\textsuperscript{18}
The mind considered in its aspect of being a store-house or home of all impressions is called by the Vijnana-vadins Alaya-vijnana. It may be regarded as the potential mind and answers to the soul or atman of other systems, with the difference that it is not one unchanging substance like the soul, but is a stream of continuously changing states. Through, culture and self-control this Alaya-vijnana or the potential mind can gradually stop the arising of undesirable mental states and develop into the ideal state of nirvana. Otherwise, it only gives rise to thoughts, desires, attachment which bind one more and more to the fictitious external world. The mind, the-only reality ‘according to this school, is truly its own place, it can make heaven of hell and hell of heaven. 19

The Yogacharas are so called either because they used to practise yoga by which they came to realize the sole reality of mind (as Alaya-vijnana) dispelling all belief in the external world, or because they combined in them both critical inquisitiveness (yoga) and good conduct (acara). Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dignaga are the famous leaders of the Yogacara school. Lankavatara-sutra is one of its most important works.

3. The Sautrantika School of Representationism-

The Sautrantikas believe in the reality not only of the mind, but also of external objects. They point out that without the supposition of some external objects; it is not possible to explain even the illusory appearance of external objects. If one never perceived anywhere any external object, he could not say, as a Vijnana-vadin does, that,
through illusion, consciousness appears like an external object. The phrase ‘like an external object’ is as meaningless as ‘like the son of a barren mother,’ because an external object is said by the Vijnana-vadin to be wholly unreal and never perceived. Again, the argument from the simultaneity of consciousness and object to their identity is also defective. Whenever we have the perception of an object like a pot, the pot is felt as external and consciousness of it as internal (i.e. to be in the mind). So the object, from the very beginning, is known to be different from and not identical with consciousness. If the pot perceived were identical with the subject, the perceiver would have said, “I am the pot.” Besides, if there were no external objects, the distinction between the ‘consciousness of a pot’ and the consciousness of a cloth could not be explained, because as consciousness both are identical; it is only regarding the objects that they differ.

Hence, we must admit the existence of different external objects outside consciousness. These objects give particular forms to the different states of consciousness. From these forms or representations of the objects in the mind we can infer the existence of their causes, i.e., objects outside the mind.

The reason why we cannot perceive at will any object at any time and place, lies in the fact that perception depends on four different conditions and not simply on the mind. There must be the object to impart its form to consciousness, there must be the conscious mind (or the state of the mind at the just previous moment) to cause the consciousness of the form, there must be the
sense to determine the kind of the consciousness, that is, whether the consciousness of that object would be visual, actual or of any other kind. Lastly, there must be some favourable auxiliary condition, such as light, convenient position, perceptible magnitude, etc. All these combined together bring about the perception of the object. The form of the object thus generated in the mind, is the effect of the object, among other things. The existence of the objects is not of course perceived, because what mind immediately knows is the copy or representation of the object in its own consciousness. But from this it can infer the object without which the copy would not arise.

The Sautrantika theory is, therefore, called also the theory of the inferability of external objects (Bahyanumeya-vada). The name ‘Sautrantika’ is given to this school because it attaches exclusive importance to the authority of the Sutranitaka. The arguments used by this school for the refutation of subjective idealism anticipated long ago some of the most important arguments which modern Western realists like Moore use to refute the subjective idealism of Berkeley. The Sautrantika position in epistemology resembles ‘representationism’ or the ‘copy theory of ideas’ which was common among Western philosophers like Locke. This exists even now in a modified form, among some critical realists.

4. The Vaibhasika School

While agreeing with the Sautrantikas regarding the reality of both the mental and the non-mental, the Vaibhasikas, like many
modern neo-realists, point out that unless we admit that external objects are perceived by us, their existence cannot be known in any other way. Inference of fire from the perception of smoke is possible because in the past we have perceived both smoke and fire together. One who does not have the knowledge of the invariable concomitance or vyapti cannot infer its existence from the perception of smoke. If external objects were never perceived, as the Sautrantikas hold, then they could not even be inferred simply from their mental forms. To one unacquainted with an external object, the mental form would not appear to be the copy or the sign of the existence of an extra-mental object, but as an original thing which does not owe its existence to anything outside the mind. Either, therefore, we have to accept subjective idealism (vijnana-vada) or, if that has been found unsatisfactory, we must admit that the external object is directly known. The Vaibhasikas thus come to hold a theory of direct realism (bahya-pratyaksa-vada).

The Abhidhamma treatises formed the general foundation of the philosophy of the realists. The Yaibhasikas followed exclusively a particular commentary, Vibhasa (or Abhidhamma-mahavibhasa) on an Abhidhamma treatise (Ahhidharma-jnana-prasthana) hence their name.

THE RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS OF BUDDHISM

Hinayana and Mahayana

In respect of religion Buddhism is divided, as we know, into the two great schools, the Hinayana and the Mahayana. Representing faithfully the earlier form of Buddhism the Hinayana,
like Jainism, stands as the example of a religion without God. The place of God is taken in it by the universal moral law of karma or dharma which governs the universe in such a way that no fruit of action is lost and every individual gets the mind, the body and the place in life that he deserves by his past deeds. The life and teachings of Buddha furnish the ideal as well as the promise or the possibility of every fettered individual’s attaining liberation. The organized school (sangha) of his faithful followers adds strength to spiritual aspirations. So an aspirant is advised to take the threefold solemn vow (tisarana): “I take refuge in Buddha, I take refuge in Dhamma, and I take refuge in the Sangha.” (Saranatrayas)

But with an unshaken confidence in his own power of achievement and a faith in the moral law that guarantees the preservation of every bit of progress made, the Hinayanist hopes to obtain liberation in this or any other future life by following Buddha’s noble path. His goal is Arhatship or Nibbana, the state that extinguishes all his misery. Hinayana is, therefore, a religion of self-help. It sticks fast to Buddha’s saying: ‘Be a light unto you. ‘Everyone can and should achieve the highest goal for and by him. It is inspired by the last words that Buddha said before he passed away: “Decay is inherent in all things composed of parts. Work out your salvation with diligence.” This path is meant only for the strong, who neither understood the path nor had the necessary moral strength to follow it. With the support of royal patrons like Asoka Buddhism gained in number but lost its original quality. The bulk of people, who accepted Buddhism, on grounds other than moral,
brought it down to their own level. They camp with their own: habits, beliefs and traditions which soon became a part of the new faith they accepted. The teachers had to choose between upholding the ideal at the cost of number and upholding the number at the cost of the ideal. A few sturdy ones preferred the first. But the majority could not resist the temptation of the second. They came thus to build what they were pleased to call the Great Vehicle, Mahayana, contrasting it with the orthodox faith of the former, which they nicknamed the Lesser Vehicle, Hina-yana. By the criterion of number Mahayana surely deserved the name, for it was designed to be a religious omnibus, with room enough to hold and suit persons of all tastes and cultures.  

Its accommodating spirit and missionary zeal made it possible for Mahayana to penetrate into the Himalayas and move across to China, Korea and Japan and absorb peoples of diverse cultures. As it progressed, it assumed newer and newer forms, assimilating the beliefs of the people it admitted. Modern Mahayanist writers are reasonably proud of their faith and love to call it a living, progressive religion whose adaptability is the sign of its vitality.

The accommodating spirit of Mahayanism can be traced back to the catholic concern which Buddha himself had for the salvation. Mahayanism emphasizes this aspect of the founder’s life and teachings. Mahayanists point out that the long life of Buddha, after enlightenment, dedicated to the service of the suffering beings, sets an example and ideal, namely, that enlightenment should be sought not for one’s own salvation, but for being able to minister to the
moral needs of others. In fact, in course of time, Mahayanism came to look upon the Hinayanist saint’s anxiety to liberate him, as a lower ideal which had yet an element of selfishness in it, however subtle or sublime this selfishness might be. The ideal of the salvation of all sentient beings thus came to be regarded as the higher aspect of Buddha’s teachings. The greatness of their faiths Mahayanists contend, consists in this ideal and the inferiority of the Hinayanists in the lack of it.

The new elements which Mahayanism came to acquire or develop in its different branches were many and sometimes conflicting. We shall mention here only a few of the more important ones.

(a) The Ideal of Bodhisattva: As noted previously Mahayana regards even the desire for one’s own salvation as selfish at bottom. In the place of personal liberation, if establishes the ‘liberation of all sentient beings’ as the ultimate goal of every Mahayanist’s spiritual aspirations. The vow that a devout Mahayanist is expected to take is that he would try to achieve the State of Enlightenment, Bodhisattva (the Wisdom-State-of-Existence), not to live aloof from the world but to work with perfect wisdom and love among the multitudes of suffering beings for removing their misery and achieving their salvation. This spiritual ideal of Mahayana has, therefore, come to be called Bodhisattva.

One who has attained this ideal of Enlightenment and works for the salvation of other beings is also called a Bodhisattva. Love and
karuna and prajna) constitute the essence of his existence. Speaking about such perfect persons Nagarjuna says in the Bodhi-citta: “Thus the essential nature of all Bodhisattvas is a great loving heart (mahakaruna citta) and all sentient beings constitute the object of its love.” “Therefore, all Bodhisattvas, in order to emancipate sentient beings from misery, are inspired with great spiritual energy and mingle themselves in the filth of birth and death. Though thus they make themselves subject to the laws of birth and death, their hearts are free from sins and attachments.22

They are like unto those immaculate, undefiled lotus-flowers which grow out of mire, yet are not contaminated by it.” By an exchange (parivarta) of the fruits of action, a Bodhisattva relieves the miseries due to others with his own good deeds and suffers the consequences of their actions himself.

This ideal of Bodhisattva is nurtured by the Mahayana philosophy, which comes to think that all individuals are unreal as separate particular phenomena, and that they are all really grounded in one transcendental Reality (Alaya-vijnana, according to some Yogacaras, or Sunya or Tathagata, according to some Madhyamikas), of which they are the partial or illusory manifestations. This philosophy favoured the rejection of the idea of the individual ego and acceptance of a universal absolute self (Mahatman or Paramatman) as the real self of man. Striving for the liberation of all and not simply for the little self (hinatman) was, therefore, the logical outcome of this philosophy of the unity of all beings. Moreover, the idea that the transcendental Reality is not
away from but within the phenomena paved the way for the, belief that perfection or nirvana is not to be sought away from the world but within it. Nirvana, says Nagarjuna, is to be found within the world by those who can see what the world really is at bottom. Asceticism of the Hinayana is, therefore, replaced by a loving, enlightened interest in the world’s affairs.

(b) Buddha as God: The philosophy which gives the advanced followers of Mahayana, on the one hand, the ideal of Bodhisattva, supplies the backward ones, on the other hand, with a religion of promise and hope. When an ordinary man finds himself crushed in life’s struggle and fails, in spite of all his natural egoism, to avert misery, his weary spirit craves for some unfailing source of mercy and help. He turns to God. A religion of self-help, such as we have in early Buddhism, is a cold comfort to him. To such forlorn multitudes, Mahayana holds out the hope that Buddha’s watchful eyes are on all miserable beings.

Buddha is identified with the transcendental Reality that Mahayana philosophy accepted. The historical Buddha or Gautama is believed, in the common Indian way, to be the incarnation of that ultimate Reality or Buddha. Many other previous incarnations of Buddha are also believed in and described in the famous Jatakas (or stories of the different births of Buddha). As in Advaita Vedanta, so also here, the ultimate Reality in itself is conceived as beyond all description (like the Nirguna Brahma). But this reality is also thought of as manifesting itself in this world, as the Dharmakaya or the regulator of the universe. In this aspect of Dharmakaya the
ultimate Reality or Buddha is anxious for the salvation of all beings, leads him to incarnation in the different spiritual teachers and helps all beings out of misery. So, Buddha as the Dharmakaya, for all practical purposes, takes the place of God to whom the weary heart can pray for help, love and mercy. In this aspect Buddha is also called Amitabha Buddha. Thus the religious hankerings of those who accepted Buddhism are also satisfied by the Mahayana by identifying Buddha with God.23

(c) The Restoration of the Self: One of the sources of the ordinary man’s dread of earlier Buddhism must have been the negation of self. If there is no self, for who is one to work? Mahayana philosophy points out that it is the little individual ego which is false. But this apparent self has behind it the reality of one transcendental self (Mahatman), which is the Self of all beings. The devout Mahayanist thus finds his self restored in a more elevating and magnified form.

At the present day the followers of Hinayana and Mahayana often try to belittle one another. But to the discerning outsider they stand as the living examples of a fight between two equally noble motives, namely, greater purity and greater utility. To impartial observers the mighty current of Buddhism, like every current, naturally divides itself into two parts—the narrow but pure and impetuous stream that runs through the solitary uplands near the source, and the gradually widening river that floods and fertilises the vast plains below, though not unmingled with the indifferent streams that increase its volume on the way and not unsoiled with
the vast amount of dirt that it carries down. The first without the second would remain sublime but relatively useless; the second without the first would cease to be. It is good, therefore, to find that attempts are being made to unify the Buddhists of all countries and schools by emphasizing the basic common principles of the faith.
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