

METAPHYSICS IN BUDDHIST THINKING

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Abstract: *Buddha's main concern was to eliminate suffering, to find a cure for the pain of human existence. In this respect he has been compared to a physician, and his teaching has been compared to a medical or psychological prescription. The prime concern of Buddhism is happiness and sorrow. The Buddha's teachings concentrated on the pragmatic means of relieving human suffering. Human life as a whole is full of suffering. In a perfectly scientific spirit he diagnoses the cause of suffering just as a physician diagnoses illness. What are the symptoms? What are the causes? What is the treatment that can bring relief? And finally, he points out ways and means so that man can effectively get rid of this bond of suffering.*

Nāgārjuna is the most important Buddhist philosopher. He is one of the most original and influential thinkers in the history of Indian philosophy. His philosophy "Mādhyamika" based around the central notion of "śūnyatā." The central concept of Nāgārjuna's philosophy is the notion of "Śūnyatā" The aim of this paper is to expounded and present Buddhist metaphysical concept. This paper is based on the information called out from the relevant works of Nāgārjuna and Mādhyamika school of Buddhism.

This paper attempts to bring out the brief description of Buddhist thinking of Metaphysical questions and experience of nothing and non-Soul or non-Self.

Keywords: Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist metaphysics, Soul, positivism, phenomenolism.

1. Introduction

Lord Buddha was an eminent philosopher. He was invoking the feeling of happiness through the *Astāgṇa mārga* and through four Noble truths called *Ārya Satyas*. The First Truth is that there is suffering, pain, and misery. The Second Truth is that this suffering is caused by selfish craving and personal desire. The Third Truth is that this craving can be overcome. The Fourth Truth is that the way to overcome this misery is through the Eightfold Path. These Four Noble Truths are fundamental concepts taught by the Buddha.

It is also said Buddhism is not about “metaphysics”, a word that can mean a lot of things. In its broadest sense; it refers to a philosophical inquiry into existence itself. In some contexts, it can refer to the supernatural, but it isn’t necessarily about supernatural things. Buddha was very practical and just wanted to help people be free from suffering. Hence he would not have been interested in metaphysics. Yet many schools of Buddhism are built upon metaphysical foundations. Buddhists do not believe that at the core of all human beings and living creatures, which is eternal, essential and absolute something called a soul, self or atman. Buddhism, from its earliest days, has denied the existence of the soul or self in its core philosophical and ontological texts.

In western philosophy, metaphysics has become the study of the fundamental nature of all reality. Many debates between atheists and theists involve disagreements over the nature of reality and the existence of anything supernatural, the debates are often disagreements over metaphysics. Etymologically the term metaphysics is derived from the Greek words ‘*meta*’ and ‘*physika*’ which means ‘after’ and ‘*physics*’ respectively. Metaphysics is generally defined as the systematized knowledge of *noumena* or substances or ultimate realities. It is mainly concerned with the self or mind, matter and God or Absolute.

II. Findings and Discussion

Metaphysics is of accidental origin, it is justified by the significance it subsequently acquired. It has been differentiated from science in form and content, still now this difference is maintained. It has a narrower connotation than philosophy. Metaphysics is primarily concerned with universal truths. Such truths do not exist in space and time, and therefore, they cannot be

perceived. Then where, we may ask, do these truths? It is said that they exist in supersensible reality. Metaphysics tries to obtain knowledge through the process of reasoning. As it is concerned with non-natural existence, so it must undertake the process of reasoning. If an entity is supported by reason then it is said to be real.

Belief in an eternal soul is a misconception of the human consciousness. The Buddha teaches that what we call soul, self, ego, personality, etc; are merely conventional terms that do not refer to any real, independent entity. For Buddhism there is no reason to believe that there is an eternal soul that comes from heaven or that is created by itself and that will transmigrate or proceed straight away either to heaven or hell after death. Buddhism cannot accept that there anything either in this world or any other world that is eternal or unchangeable.

Buddhism regarded soul-speculation as useless and illusory. He once said, only through ignorance and delusion do men indulge in the dream that their souls are separate and self-existing entities. Their heart still clings to self. They are anxious about heaven and they seek pleasure of self in heaven. Thus they cannot see the bliss of righteousness and the immortality of truth. Selfish ideas appear in man's mind due to his conception of self and craving for existence.

Buddhist countered all soul-theory and soul-speculation with his *Anātta* doctrine. *Anāttas* translated under various labels: No-soul, No-self, godlessness and soullessness. For Buddha the body is not the self. Sensation is not the Self. Perception is not the Self. The mental constructions are not the Self. There is no value of them, he becomes free of passions and he is liberated. The disciple sets no value on the body, on sensation, on perception, or on mental constructions, or on consciousness.

Many other metaphysical questions were put to the Buddha during his life: Is there Soul? Is there no Soul? Is there God? Etc. But Buddha is silent. He did not answer them all. Buddhism express in words the divine paradoxically as what is not verbalized and experienced as what is not identifiable in experience, and, therefore, as nothing more than Nothing. Buddha's celebrated silence to certain 'metaphysical' questions put to him is an eloquent paraphrase of the meaning of nothing,¹ Buddha eschewed and avoid the more abstract and speculative metaphysical pondering and discouraged such questions as hindrances on the path. Such questions as, what is

¹Murti, T.R.V., *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1961, p. 47

Nirvāṇa like, what preceded existence etc: were often met by silence or what may have seemed like mysterious obscurity.

One of the meanings of the term 'Orthodox' (*āstika*) given is acceptance of God, which means acknowledging that God-language is intelligible. The language preferred by the generality of Buddhist thinking, however, is 'emptiness', 'voidity'. Buddhism as distinct from the general Hindu approach considers the divine, not in reference to the cosmic manifestations, not as ontological cause and anthropomorphic personification, not as the ground of knowing and speaking but as supra – existential state, a state which appears as a Nothing when seen from the point of view of the false plenitude of existence (*saṃsāra*). The ontological language of 'nothing' can really mean as shedding some light on the negativistic concepts like *śūnya* and *nirvāṇa* of Buddhism which assumes the intelligibility of 'nothing' and builds on it. It may also throw some light on the Hindu application of the sense of 'nothing' in talking about the world as *māyā* or *ajñāna* and in its negative theology with its approach to Reality as 'not this,' 'not this'.²

The 'nothing' takes on various forms and admits to diverse interpretations in Buddhism. *Śūnyatā*, validity, does not connote one single meaning. *Hināyāna* Buddhism understands it to mean voidity of the substantial and the whole. The perception of a whole, identical and permanent amid change and difference is the work of construction which imposes configured wholeness (*pudgala*) on the real elements of existence. It is against the perception of them as unreal fictions that the 'events' or real, temporally discrete elements (*dharma*) stand out as real (*aśūnya*).³

Nāgārjuna explains the meaning of *Sūnyata* which has a double aspect. In the realm of the phenomenal it means *Svabhava-śūnyatā* or *Nissvabhavata*. *Śūnyatā* or *Svabhava* means devoid of ultimate reality. It is the Middle path between affirmation and negation a Path which ultimately transcends both. It is known as *Pratītyasamutpāda* or Relativity which means everything that can be grasped by the intellect is necessarily relative. For *Nāgārjuna* *śūnyatā* we do not mean mere negation, it means Dependent Origination or Relativity. For *Nāgārjuna* nihilism means negation which leads to hell; and affirmation leads to heaven, and non-dual truth which transcends affirmation and negation which leads to liberation.

²*Brahadaranyaka Upanisad* 3,8,84,4,15.

³Chatterjee, A.K., *Yogacara Idealism*, Varanasi, 1967.

Mahāyāna deepened the sense of *śūnyatā* in terms of ‘essencelessness’ which should not be confined to any particular aspect of experience as the *Hināyānaists* do but apply to the whole of experience. Experience itself in its entirety is void; (*śūnya*) which has no real existence. Strangely enough *śūnya* here connotes not only unreality but reality also. Against the experience of the abysmal character of experience as such, reality stands out precisely as what cannot be expressed through conceptualization, affirmative or negative (*dr̥sti śūnya*).⁴

Sometimes it is claimed that the historical Buddha was unconcerned about the nature of reality. Buddhism is not about either believing or not believing in God or Gods. Instead of the historical Buddha taught that believing in gods was not useful for those seeking to realize enlightenment. In other words, God is unnecessary in Buddhism, as this is a practical religion and philosophy that emphasizes practical results over faith in beliefs or deities. Hence for this reason, Buddhism is more accurately called monotheistic rather than atheistic. For the other school of Mahayana, namely the *viññānavada*, unreality pertains not to experience as such but only to what is confronted as object in experience. The perception of the objective side of experience as ‘nothing’ serves as a foil for understanding the experience of consciousness itself is ontologically real.⁵

In the Buddha’s analytical treatment of personality, he makes use of the definition of the traditional metaphysical concept of a changeless soul (*atman*) to show that none of the observable constituent of personality conforms to that definition. The real self as traditionally understood was believed to be eternally blissful, not subject to change, disease, or destruction. The Buddha, unlike other philosophers, did not commit himself to an affirmation of the existence of an entity or entities conforming to that definition but applied that definition to show that the observable elements of existent reality do not conform to it. Buddha in his five disciples he said:

Monks, material form is not atman. If material form were atman it would not be subject to disease, and it would be possible to say with regard to material form ‘Let my material form be thus and let my material form not be thus!...Is it proper to look upon that which is impermanent,

⁴Murti, T.R.V., *The Metaphysical Schools of Buddhism in History of Philosophy, Eastern and Western*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1967, 297.

⁵ Ibid, 210.

and unsatisfactory and having the nature of transience as ‘This is mine, this am I, this is my self’ (*Samyuttanikaya*: Pali Text Society, London III.66)

Buddhism distinct from Hindu Vedanta does not have recourse to the language of being but uses the same expression ‘voidity’ to point to or imply the ‘is-hood’ in virtue of which anything that is. It does it for the simple reason that ‘Being’ cannot possibly itself be regarded as an entity as *something* which is. However one may seek to conceptualize it, it has to be contemplated as void of it. It is equitable with the denial alike of ‘is,’ ‘is not,’ ‘is both’ and ‘is neither’ (*catuskoti vinirmuktam*).⁶ Vedanta, however, speaks of it as Being (*sat*) but is careful to interpret it to mean ‘a denial of what is not,’ to indicate that it is not equating it with ‘is’.

For Buddhism represented in the Pali canonical tradition speaks of no creator God, of no creation, of no teleological plan, and above all of no substantial entity called an individual self or soul, awaiting to be redeemed by the grace of God. Buddhism made no ontological claims of a metaphysical nature. It did not attempt to explain the ultimate origin of existence by positing an absolute substance, but spoke of the related existence of things in cyclic processes of evolution and dissolution. The Buddhist quest for right knowledge is not an attempt to grasp an ontological absolute in terms of which everything else is to be looked upon as illusory or non-existent, but to understand the nature of the very things that we encounter in ordinary experience in a certain perspective that conduces to the elimination of *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness).

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⁶ .Mervyn Sprung, op.cit; 181

‘Let my material form be thus and let my material form not be thus! Is it proper to look upon that which is impermanent, and unsatisfactory and having the nature of transience as ‘ this is mine, this am I, this is my self ‘⁷.

III. Conclusion

It may be noted that the school of Buddhism, the *Mādhyamika* or *Shūnyavāda* School(which associated with the famous scholar *Nāgārjuna*) the notion of void (*sunya*) plays an important role.*Nāgārjuna*, in his fourfold dialectical reasoning, tries to establish the unreality of everything we come across. So with the establishment of the unreality of everything, including the soul left only with the void.

In the mind of many people the belief in soul or self and the creator of God is so strongly rooted. They cannot imagine why the Buddha did not accept these two issues *soul* and *God* which are essential to many religions. In fact some people got a shock or became nervous and tried to show their emotion when they heard that the Buddha rejected these two concepts. This is the main why to many unbiased scholars and psychologists Buddhism stands unique when compared to all the other religions. At the same time, some others who appreciate the various other aspects of Buddhism thought that Buddhism would be enriched by deliberately re-interpreting the Buddha word *Atta* in order to introduce the concept of *Soul* and *Self* into Buddhism. Buddha was aware of this unsatisfactoriness of man and the conceptual upheaval regarding this belief.

All conditioned things are impermanent, all conditioned things are *Dukka* Suffering, and all conditioned or unconditioned things are soulless or selfless.⁸

Though the Metaphysical entities do not exist in nature, it cannot be said that they do not exist at all. It exists in the super- sensible world. For example ‘The supreme God’ is a metaphysical entity, and although it is not exist in nature. It exists in the super-sensible world. Good may be not natural, but it is real somehow. We may simply infer about such an entity. It cannot be perceived by our sense experience. It does not observed and tabulate the facts of consciousness, but’ ‘ it is concerned with what the existence of facts implies regarding the

⁷ .Ibid.III.33

⁸ .Dhammapada, 277,278,279.

nature of reality.”⁹Metaphysicians say that nothing is real, but that which is eternal. This eternal reality has super-sensible property. So only through a metaphysical enquiry the questions about such a reality can be answered .Again the fundamental propositions of ethics are inferred from metaphysical propositions, which ethical truths follow from metaphysical truths.

In Hinduism, the major theistic schools as well as some philosophical systems accepted creation as real. Generally they maintained that the relationship between the one and the many is one in which the same Supreme Reality exists as one in many, and the many exist in one. There is no mystery in such a relationship.”The error is to make an unbridgeable gulf between God and man, Brahman and the world.... We have arrived at an affirmation and some conception of the divine and creative Super mind in which all is one in being, consciousness, will and delight, yet with an infinite capacity of differentiation that deploys but does not destroy the unity.”¹⁰

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⁹ .S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol.II, P.475.

¹⁰ .Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1960,155.

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