

Dharma Theory: A Critical Analysis in Four Schools of Buddhism

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Abstract--- *Dharma is very important notion in Buddhism. Dharma is that which bears (dhāraṇa), the self-characteristics and common characteristics of a person. All four schools of Buddhism explain the dharma theory according to their philosophy that varies in their understanding of the concept of person. In a general sense dharma refers to the categories that constitute the physical world and the person. Thus, dharma is the means to achieve prajñā (supreme knowledge) and Nirvāna, the supreme dharma. But at the same time, extinguishing of the defilements is possible through the discernment of the dharmas. Different schools of Buddhism have given different interpretations regarding the nature of dharma and its kinds on the basis of their own philosophy. This paper intends to critically analyze the concept of dharma and its kinds in main four schools of Buddhism.*

Keywords--- *Dharma, Mind, Nirvāna, Prajñā, Skandha.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Dharma is a very important notion in Buddhist philosophy. In general *dharma* refers to the categories that constitute the physical world and the person. *Dharma* is that which bears (*dhāraṇa*) self-characteristics. Poussin explains the meaning of *Abhidharma* as follows: “The *Abhidharma* is called *abhidharma* because it envisions (*abhimukha*) the *dharma* which is the object of supreme knowledge, or the supreme *dharma*, *Nirvāna*; or rather it is called because it envisions the characteristics of the *dharmas*, both their self-characteristics and their common (or general) characteristics” (AKB¹ p.57). Thus, *dharma* is the means to achieve *prajñā* (supreme knowledge) and *Nirvāna*, the supreme *dharma*. But at the same time, extinguishing of the defilement is possible through the discernment of the *dharmas*.

However, different schools of Buddhism have given different interpretations regarding the nature of *dharma* and its kinds on the basis of their own philosophy. Sarvāstivāda maintains the real existence of *dharma* and admits that the world (*Loka*) and objects are combination of *dharmas* which combine into matter (*Rūpa*) and mind (*Citta*), and the personality phenomenon (*pudgala*). Except the three unconstituted (*Asaṃskṛta*) *dharmas*, *Ākāśa* (*Anāvṛti*), *Pratisaṃkhyā Nirodha* and *Apratisaṃkhyā Nirodha*, which are pure in nature, the other 72 *dharmas* are under the existence and decay. They are causes of suffering and subject to suffering. Vaibhāṣika is of the opinion that *dharmas* exist in three phases of time. They argue that if *dharmas* do not exist in past and future the *Śravaka* will not consider them. Furthermore, if past and future *dharmas* do not exist, the mental consciousness which is the cause of its object would not arise. Moreover, it is because of the past that the actions which are good and bad give result in the future (AKB V- 25a-b). The actual Sarvāstivāda position on *dharma* is that they are real in the present and meeting point of past and future.

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¹AKB: Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu

Sautrāntika, criticizing the Vaibhāṣika position questions, if future and past things exist as they are present, why they are thus qualified as past and future? Also, if it always exists why not *dharma*s always exercise its activity? It cannot be said that it sometimes produces and sometime does not produce its action. If the unique self-nature of a *dharma* continues to exist, how can this *dharma* be non-arisen or destroyed? If one does not admit that the *dharma* exists after having been non-existent and no longer exist after having existed, the three time periods cannot be established (AKB V-27a-c).

Sautrāntika claims that when the Buddha taught of the existence of past and future, it means “past action exists and future results exist”. “Past is that which is existent and future is that which given its cause, will exist. But they do not exist as substantial entities (*dravyatas*) as does the present.”ⁱ Regarding the claims of Sarvāstivāda, it is said that the objects of consciousness is cannot be produced if past and future *dharma*s do not exist. Sautrāntika argues that because of memory a person remembers the past things and foresees the future as coming into existence.

Yogācāra maintains that only consciousness is real and the rest constituting objective world is appearance, but they accept the *dharma* theory. However, problem arises in finding a relationship between idealism and *dharma* theory. *Dharma*s are not real in essence. “Only consciousness is real, objectivity is an appearance. Objective *dharma*s are therefore in the same predicament as all things objective are; their independence is illusion.”ⁱⁱ By nature consciousness is a ‘pure act’ unchecked by any content. *Dharma*s are not real, their existence pertains to consciousness. Pure consciousness harbors no *dharma*s.

“When consciousness is diversified, its moments are qualified by so many overtones as it were; these do not form an integral part of consciousness, but nor can they be granted an independent status. The external *dharma*s pertain to consciousness only in its infected or bifurcated aspect; they evolved only in its phenomenal state.”ⁱⁱⁱ These *dharma*s for Yogācāra have no ultimate reality; they belong only to the empirical realm. They are real as they pertain only to consciousness. Consciousness is distinguished from one moment to another. For this distinction object is required for the individuality of consciousness. Object is nothing but a mode of existence of consciousness.

The fundamental doctrine of the Mādhyamika School is *Śūnyatā* that expresses “the ever-changing state of the phenomenal world or absolute unrestrictedness of the noumenal side of the universe.”^{iv} Thus, in the phenomenal world nothing is permanent. Everything produced depends upon cause, so they are changeable. The Mādhyamikas do not admit the real existence of *dharma*s. “There is no *dharma* which is not produced by cause and condition. Therefore no *dharma* exist which can be called not ever-changing or *aśūnya*” (MK XXIV-19). Aryadeva says that it is *śūnyatā* which is produced by cause and condition, as they are produced by the law of causation. There is no particularity, hence they are *śūnyatā*. Criticizing Sarvāstivāda, Nāgārjuna says that the things which has self-essence can neither be produced nor destroyed; they are always independent of cause and condition. But all things are dependent on cause and condition; they cannot possess self-essence (*svabhāva*) (MK XXIV-16). Nāgārjuna claims that both *Samskṛta* and *Asamskṛta dharma*s are relative and existence of the latter are dependent on the former. As they are relative they are also *Śūnya*. “The real state of *dharma* is like *Nirvāna*, indescribable, incomprehensible, without birth and death. It is beyond the reach of thought or language for it is Absolute” (MK XVIII-7).^v

Mādhyamika also criticizes the Vaibhāṣika theory of *āyatana*, *skandha* and *dhātu*. They argue that *āyatanas* are

as discrete and momentary, emerging and subsiding without any activity or agent. From the phenomenal point of view to transcription of what obtains in everyday experience, their existence can be accepted but from the noumenal point of view they have no real existence. “The correct Mādhyamika stand point is that the modes by themselves cannot offer an adequate explanation of phenomena. Substance too must be accepted. Both, however, are of empirical validity only (*saṃvṛta*).”^{vi}

Skandhas have two distinctions: primary and secondary. *Rūpa (bhūta)* is primary and its derivatives are secondary. Likewise, *viññāna* as *citta* is pure consciousness or mind and other *vedanā* etc. are mentals (*caittas*). Nāgārjuna criticize *skandha* from two points: first, the division into primary and secondary is untenable; and secondly the causal principle which is at the basis of this classification is unintelligible (MK IV 2, 3).

The same criticism applies for *dhātus*, “they do not have a *svabhāva*, an immutable absolute nature of their own. Without *svabhāva*, when there is nothing as itself, how can there be an other; for an other is but the *svabhāva* of the different (MKV pp 262-6).”^{vii}

II. KINDS OF DHARMAS

The numbers of *dharma*s differ in various Buddhist schools. Sarvāstivāda or Vaibhāṣika admits 75 kinds of *dharma*s under two headings: 72 *Samskṛta dharma*s and 3 *Asamskṛta dharma*s. The 72 *Samskṛta Dharma*s are classified under four different categories-(a) *Rūpa* (matter) 11 items, (b) *Citta* (mind), (c) *Caitta* or *Cittasamprayukta* (mind derivatives) 46 items and (d) *Citta Viprayukta* (mind dissociated) 14 items.

After critically examining the view of Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika reduced the number of elements (*dharma*s) to forty three from seventy five. First they omit *avijñapti* from *Rūpaskandha*. They objected the existence of ten *Parittakleśas*, *Middha* (absent-mindedness), *Vitarka* (discussion), *Vicāra* (judgment), from the list of 49 mental states which came under the *Citta Samprayukta Dharma* of *Samskāraskandha*. Sautrāntika also eliminated 14 *Cittaviprayuktasamskāra* from the *Samskāraskandha* and rejected three kinds Pure (*asamskṛta*) *dharma*s: space, *pratisamkhyānirodha* and *apratīsamkhyānirodha*.

Sautrāntikas do not accept *avijñapti* as *rūpa* and argue that the term ‘*avijñapti*’ merely connotes/denotes inactivity, an absence, so it does not involve any karmic result. They do not admit past factors, since such a stream cannot exist. Finally, such kinds of karma cannot be called material as they are unmanifested matter and to be matter it has to be destroyed at the next moment.

Sautrāntika said that *avijñapti* is not *rūpa* as it is devoid of resistance. According to Vaibhāṣika, *avijñapti* is produced from *viññapti*, bodily and vocal action, thus *avijñapti* is *rūpa*. Therefore, *avijñapti* is not subject to modification, and it should perish as *viññapti* perishes. Vaibhāṣika said *avijñapti* is *rūpa* as its constituent points of support are the primary elements. For this argument, Sautrāntika remarked, the five kinds of consciousness would be *rūpa*, because their point of support is *rūpa* (AKB 71).

Vaibhāṣika holds that the each atom of colour that constitutes shade exists dependent upon a tetrad of primary elements. “And even supposing that the shadow is dependent upon the tree, since the shadow is dependent on the primary elements which are proper to it, and these are dependent upon the tree.”^{viii} The comparison of the shadow

with *avijñapti* is inadmissible. “The Vaibhāṣika admits that *avijñapti* does not perish when the primary elements which serve as its point of support perish” (AKB iv 4c-d). Thus Sautrāntika refutation is worthless. Vasubandhu support the second explanation of Vaibhāṣika.

Upekṣā, for Vaibhāṣika is a mental indifference, for it the mind remains equal, and free from all modification. Sautrāntika objected that all mind associated with attention and by nature it ‘inflexion’. Then how the all good mind can associated with equanimity, which is non-inflexion? Same mind cannot have the mental states, modification and non-modification (AKB 192).

Sautrāntika omits torpor or inactive (*styāna*) from the list of *Kleśamahābūmika*. They says, “torpor should be named; but it is not named because it is favorable to *samādhi*. In fact, they claim, person with a torpid disposition (*styānacārita*) or dull person realizes meditation sooner than do dissipated persons.”^{ix}

According to Vaibhāṣika, *vitarka* and *vicāra* are gross and subtle states of mind. Sautrāntika says that *vitarka* and *vicāra* are the ‘factors of voice’. In fact the *Sūtras* say “It is after having examined, after having judged (*vitarkya*, *vicārya*) that one speaks, not with having examined, not without having judged” (*Majjhima* I 301, *Suṃyutta* V 293). The factors of voice are regarded *vitarka*; and those which are subtle are regarded as *vicāras*. Hence it is clear that *vitarka* and *vicāra* are not two different *dharmas*, but rather a combination of mind and mental states which provoke speech, which are sometimes gross and sometimes subtle.^x

Ten *Prittakleśabhūmiks* admitted by Sarvāstivāda are rejected by Sautrāntika, who holds that they are the out flowing of the *kleśas*, and hence are not separate *dharmas*.

Sautrāntika also rejects the existence of the 14 kinds of *Cittaviprayukta saṃskāras* admitted by Sarvāstivāda with proper justification (AKB 206-237).

Sarvāstivāda maintains that only conditioned things have cause and result (AKB II 5c). Unconditioned things have neither cause nor result. “Any unconditioned thing is *kāraṇahetu*, for it does not create an obstacle to the arising of any result, for being outside of time, it can neither project nor produce a result” (AKB II 55d4).

Sautrāntika denied Sarvāstivāda’s view and said that an unconditioned thing is a cause. They remarked that the three kinds of unconditioned things are not real. They are not distinct and real entities (AKB II 55d iii).^{xi}

- (a) Space is solely the absence of any tangible thing and a resistant body. When someone do not encounter any obstacle, says that in their obscurity, there is space.
- (b) *Pratisaṃkhyānirodha* is a state where other defilements are absent and there is no other existence, by reason of the force of the consciousness.
- (c) In *apratisaṃkhyānirodha* state there is no arising of *dharmas*.

Yogācāra accepts all the *dharmas* admitted by Sarvāstivāda and added 25 more *dharmas* to their list. The one hundred *dharmas* of Yogācāra can be classified into five headings: (a) the *citta-dharmas* (8), (b) *the caittas* (51), (c) *rūpa dharmas* (11), (d) *citta-viprayuktasaṃskāradharmas* (24) and (e) *aṣṣkṛa dharmas* (6).

We can point out some important differences between Yogācāra and Hinayāna, basically Sarvāstivāda, regarding the number of *dharmas*.^{xii}

- (i) Regarding consciousness Yogācāra and Hinayāna put forward different views. For Vijñānavāda consciousness is the only reality and also one of the ultimate factors of existence. Hinayāna admits consciousness as *dharma*, not the only reality, and enumerates six kinds of consciousness produced from the six sense organs, including *manas*. Yogācāra accepted these six kinds of consciousness and added other two consciousnesses: *kliṣṭa manas* (subconscious *vijñāna*) and *Ālaya*.
- (ii) *Caittas* are, for Sarvāstivāda, really distinct realities from *citta*. They are ultimate existence, independent and absolute. But for Yogācāra they are merely the phases in which the complexity of consciousness is exhibited. In the Sarvāstivāda 46 numbers of *Caittas* approved, Yogācāra added another five to make it 51.
- (iii) The ten Mahābhūmikas of Sarvāstivāda are analyzed by Vijñānavāda in to two groups: *Sarvatraga* and *Viniyata caittas*, and each group contains five members. According to Vijñānavāda, the later groups are not as universal in scope as the former; they are peculiar to some kinds of consciousness.
- (iv) In the list of the ten kinds of *Kuśala Mahābhūikas* of Vaibhāṣika Yogācāra added *amoha* to make it eleven.
- (v) Sarvāstivāda admits 18 kinds of *Akuśala caittas* which were increased by Yogācāra to 26 and divided into two classes: *kleśa* (6) and *upakleśa* (20). From the Sarvāstivādin list of *kleśa* only *Moha* is classed as a *kleśa* by Yogācāra and in their list they added another five: *rāga*, *pratigha*, *māna*, *drk* (*drṣṭi*), and *vicikitsā*. In the Yogācāra's list of *upakleśa* includes Sarvāstivāda 10 *upkleśa*, 2 *akuśla mahābhūmikas* and 5 *kleśas*. There are another three (*muṣitā*, *vikṣepa*, *asamprajanya*) which are not figured in the Sarvāstivāda classification of *akuśala caittas*.
- (vi) The Yogācāra in their list of *aniyata dharma* reduces four *dharmas* from the Sarvāstivāda list. The excluded *dharmas* of *aniyata* of Sarvāstivāda are elevated to the rank of *kleśa* by Yogācāra.
- (vii) Yogācāra, like Sarvāstivāda, accepts eleven kinds of *rūpa* with similar explanation. Only *avijñaptirūpa* is replaced by *rūpa* included in *dharmadhātu*.
- (viii) Sarvāstivāda admits 14 kinds of *citta Viprayukta-saṃskāra-dharma* where Yogācāra adds another 10 to make it 24.
- (ix) Sarvāstivāda accepts three *Asaṃskṛta dharmas*, Yogācāra increases their number to six. They add *Acala-nirodh*, *Samjñā-vedayṭṭ-nirodha* and *Tathatā* in their list. Among them the *Tathatā* is very important; it is the ultimate essence of everything, the unconditioned absolute.

III. CONCLUSION

Buddhist *dharma* theory has a good account of the concept of person. All four schools of Buddhism explain the *dharma* theory according to their philosophy that varies in their understanding of the concept of person. In a general sense *dharma* refers to the categories that constitute the physical world and the person. Vaibhāṣika admits 75 *dharmas* which are divided in two groups: *saṃskṛta* (3 kinds) and *asaṃskṛta* (72 kinds). The 72 *asaṃskṛta dharmas* are conditional *dharma*, so subject to birth and decay and constitute the person.

Sautrāntika critically examined the *dharma* theory of Vaibhāṣika and reduced the number of *dharmas* to 43 and treats the rest as a result of mental construction. They have given proper justification regarding this reduction. For Sautrāntika person is a combination of 43 *dharmas* that includes 10 *rūpa*, or physical elements and 33 mental states (*caittas*). No single metaphysical element is admitted by Sautrāntika.

Sautrāntika does not admit the Vaibhāṣika point that *dharmas* exist in three phases of time. *Dharmas* exist but we do not know them directly. Sautrāntika restores the *dharma* theory to the notion of a series (*samtāna* or *pravāha*). Being a critical realist, Sautrāntika, rejecting the Sarvāstivāda view holds that the so-called characteristics of a condition elements have no real existence. “Continuous existence of entity (*dravya*) is fragment of imagination. They are series rather than to the moment.”^{xiii}

Yogācāra advocates the idealistic view and maintains consciousness as the only reality and that the objective world is only appearance. For them *dharmas* have no real essence, like the objects have no independent existence. *Dharmas* are not real they have existence as pertaining to consciousness. Diversification of consciousness moment to moment cannot be explained without object. For individuality of consciousness *dharmas* are required. Thus the external *dharmas* pertain to consciousness only in its infected or bifurcated aspect; they are evolved only in its phenomenal state. But these *dharmas* for Yogācāra have no ultimate reality; they belong only to the empirical realm. They admit 100 kinds of *dharmas*. Thus for Yogācāra person exists as a content of consciousness that make possible the individualization of consciousness. Apart from this it has no real existence.

Mādhyamika on the basis of their *Sūnyatā* theory rejects the *dharma* theory. Mādhyamikas do not admit the real existence of five aggregates (*skandhas*) and *dharmas* as they are relative and are produced by cause. For them the relation of the cause and effect, substance and attribute, whole and part, subject and object etc. are mutually dependent and relative. Thus they are not things-in-themselves. Person only has existence in the sphere of *Samvṛtisat*; in *Parmārthika* stage it has no existence.

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