

Concept Of Mind In The Yogācāra School: A Study

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ABSTRACT

The important writers of the Yogācāra School are - Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Dīnāga, Dharmakīrti, Sāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla. The Yogācāra reduces the external object to mere cognitions. They do not recognize the reality of them. The Laṅkāvatārasūtra asserts that external objects have no real existence. They are unreal, false appearance like dreams, misperception, hallucinations etc. It is the manifestation of our consciousness. This consciousness, according to Vasubandhu, is the only reality. For the Yogācāras, cognition is self-luminous. The perception of the world is the self-consistence of cognition. Our all cognitional activities are the modifications of consciousness. So, it is seen that all creations are mental. Our mind alone exists. The empirical world is not real. Because of transcendental illusion, we consider it real. All categories of understanding are the constructions of our thought. In this paper an attempt is made to discuss the concept of mind or consciousness of the Yogācāra School. An attempt is also made to discuss the nature of the world according to the yogacara.

Key Words: Yogācāra, Consciousness, Mind, Freedom, World, Illusion, Bondage, Nirvāṇa etc.

Introduction

The Yogācāra School belongs to the Mahāyāna sect of Buddhism. According to the Yogācāra system, by following yoga, one can attain the perfect knowledge (bodhi) manifested in the Buddha. Sharma (1979) writes “they emphasized the importance of Yoga for the realization of pure knowledge in order to become Buddha by going through all the ten stages of Bodhisattvahood” (p.108). This system is also known as Vijñānavāda, because it only admits the reality of consciousness or Vijñāna. The Yogācāra brings out the practical side of philosophy, where Vijñānavāda brings out its speculative features.

The Yogācāra discusses the processes involved in cognition. In its metaphysical teaching, the Yogācāra introduces us to a unique view of the mind and the universe. The goal of the school is not to advance any new philosophical view, but to develop such a position

which will open the door for highest freedom or enlightenment.

The important writers of the Yogācāra School are - Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Dīnāga, Dharmakīrti, Sāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla. It is usually believed that Asaṅga or Āryāsaṅga was the founder of the Yogācāra School of Buddhism. But it is accepted that Maitreya-nātha was the real founder of the Yogācāra School, who was a historical person and the teacher of Asaṅga. The central figure in the Yogācāra School of Buddhism is Vasubandhu, the younger brother of Asaṅga, who lived in the 4th century A.D. He is also one among the most prominent figures in the entire history of Buddhism.

The meaning of Yogācāra is to practise yoga or meditation. Sharma (1994) states “the term Yogācāra was used for those persons who were interested in using Yogic practices for inauspicious purposes also” (p.16). The famous work Laṅkāvatārasūtra persuades the bodhisattvā

to practise yoga to become a mahāyogin. This school believes that reality is an idea and has its centre in consciousness. For them, the whole world is constituted by consciousness. This consciousness is not only pure but also the main theme of the Yogācāra idealism. They call it Alayavijñāna. The Yogācāra School of Buddhism believes that intuitive knowledge can be acquired by practising yoga. According to this school, external world have no real existence, it appears only for the particularization of individual's confused mind. When one is able to understand the relative existence of the world, immediately the confusion is cleared and as a result such existence disappears. The root cause of all experience is avidyā and its description is not an easy task. In its absolute nature, avidyā is both identical and non-identical with enlightenment. Avidyā is like clothes which are different in forms but made of from the same raw material, i.e. thread.

The Yogācāra discourse is established on the existential truth of the individual condition. No experiences are there which is not mediated by mind. As Anand (2012) writes "Yogācāra discourse is founded on the existential truth of the human condition: there is nothing that humans experience that is not mediated by mind" (p.89). The Yogācāra holds that all individual has a higher principle within themselves. Some qualities are uniformly present among them. Individual's defiled thought is the main cause of saṃsāra. For them, vāsanā and karma are the two main continuance of saṃsāra. The Yogācāras consider Ālaya as the source of the seeds of all pain, pleasure and dharmas etc. Among all the seeds, the defiled seeds are the cause of saṃsāra and the rest, which are free from defilement, leads one to freedom or liberation. It is true that the Absolute is present in all the individuals by itself but it does not mean that they lead them to liberation. Just as, to set fire in a wood, flame is needed; similarly, the germ of the absolute also

needs to be polished through the practice of wisdom and virtue. According to the Yogācāra, by following yogic discipline one can attain intuitive insight because such discipline shows us the way for the truth. Then, by purifying the ignorant mind, Nirvāṇa, the highest freedom can be attained.

Objectives

- 1) To explain the nature of mind or consciousness of the Yogācāra School.
- 2) To acquaint the readers with the nature of the world advanced by the Yogācāra School.

Methods

For this paper mainly analytic and descriptive methods are used. Data are basically collected from the secondary sources. However, primary sources like original texts which are translated into English are also used.

Consciousness and Freedom

The Yogācāra School of Buddhism very systematically develops an idealistic theory. The Yogācāra reduces the external object to mere cognitions. They do not recognize the reality of them. The Laṅkāvatārasūtra asserts that external objects have no real existence. They are unreal, false appearance like dreams, misperception, hallucinations etc. It is the manifestation of our consciousness. This consciousness, according to Vasubandhu, is the only reality.

There is no truth of all our phenomenal knowledge because they are the creations of māyā or a dream. Everything is imaginary construction of the mind. There is no existence of anything like external objects. The mind, by which creations take place, as subject and object have no origination, existence and decay. It is called the Ālayavijñāna. As remarked by Dasgupta (1969) "as the ocean dances on in waves so the ālayavijñāna is also dancing as it

were in its diverse operations” (p.43). Due to illusion only, phenomena appear as subject and object. In reality all being and non-being phenomena are illusory. Consciousness is creative and there exists nothing outside this consciousness or mind. Though consciousness is creative, it doesn't mean that it creates real physical objects. Chatterjee (2007) mentions “its creativity consists in being diversified into so many modes which, though having an apparent externality, are really but modes of consciousness. One idea generates another idea and not an external object” (p.49). External objects are not self-existent and hence not real but are constructions of our mind. We can compare them with the vision of the double moon. The Yogācāra says that an object which is real and remains one without any change can be self-existent. But in our experience, we never perceive such objects in the world. Everything in the world is in a constant series of flux. All things are momentary. Therefore, the physical objects have no self nature. For their existence, everything is dependent on relations which are the production of the mind only.

The Vijñānavāda asserts that momentary consciousness or vijñāna is the only reality. It is subjective idealism which asserts that external world is not real and is mere creations of momentary vijñāna. They deny the existence of a permanent reality. For them, all are transient by nature. They said that behind this momentary consciousness, nothing exists- no soul, no substance. In the Yogācāra literature, a graphic description of the soul is found. By denouncing the soul, Asaṅga says that it is an illusion, which is neither self-existent nor dependent. There exists nothing like the soul or ego substance in the world as the permanent substratum. As cited in Tripathi (1972) “all objects are born of causal relation. It is the result of ignorance that people try to find out whether things are self-existent (being) or non-existent (non-being)” (p.330). But,

what Asaṅga condemns is not the Absolute self but the empirical ego, the feeling of ‘I and me’. The Absolute self is like a vast ocean which cannot be measured and in it all the small souls come and are merged. The idea of soul is nothing but illusion. In reality, there is no existence of Ātman. What exists is only the consciousness. For Sāntarakṣita also, self is nothing but consciousness accompanied with ego. Because of ignorance only we divide the self luminous consciousness into the subject and the object, the self and the world.

Chatterjee (2007) states that when content is merely in our thought, it is considered as subjective, which has no any basis in external reality. Consequently, subjectivity demands a constructive operation of thought. The Vijñānavāda is also called Absolutism. For them, from ultimate point of view, pure subjects become non-conceptual. It forces them to transcend idealism to absolutism. Things do not exist objectively as it is only a mode of consciousness and is illusory. As soon as this illusory idea destroyed, the existence of the subjective consciousness also comes to an end. Pure consciousness or the ultimate reality alone exists in the transcendental state which is the essence of everything.

Diñnāga and Dharmakīrti also consider that consciousness is the ultimate reality of the world. For Diñnāga, external objects cannot exist independently from the mind. These external objects are the organisation of consciousness. Such organisation or coordination appears as external object when internally recognized by introspection. He believes that all relations are a priori to be discussed in the form of substantive and attributive. These relations are the principles of understanding, and our imagination constructs them to explain the connection between empirical phenomena. Hence, all relations are dependent and they have no self-existence. Subjects and objects are non-dual and are internal. Non-duality

of subject and object cannot be understood for transcendental illusion. Dharmakīrti reduces the external objects to sense data. Apart from these sense data, which are nothing but sensations or cognitions, no one can perceive or infer the external objects. An individual never perceives a thing as an external object. Dharmakīrti asserts (as cited in Sinha, 2006) that we are able to know only the cognitions behind the external world. Our mind or sense organs also cannot perceive a material object, because all external material objects are cognitions. What we perceive are only the tests, smells, colours, temperature etc. through the sense organs. Sense organs and the mind itself cannot perceive the external objects. When we are able to know their nature correctly then they become disappear to nothingness; what is left is only their cognitions. Sinha (2006) writes “even the so-called external objects are forms of cognitions. The apprehending cognition and the apprehended object, subject and object, are the forms of cognition which is one and self-identical” (p.377). Subject and object can't exist without each other. Both are the aspects of the same cognition. Ultimately, vijñāna or cognition is the only reality. They have freedom from the distinction of subject and object. Sinha (1938) clearly states that the Yogācāra considers cognition as self-luminous. It exhibits itself and is self-aware. Within the cognition, there is no actual difference of subject and object. Cognition cannot be divided because it is one.

Again, Tripathi (1972) asserts that the phenomenal world depends upon two pillars, namely-the subject and the object. However, in reality, these two pillars are the creation of the mind. The mind manifests itself in the form of repository of consciousness. In this position, the Yogācārins clear that the distinction between subject and object is illusory; therefore, there is no reality of the external world. The appearance of the external world is mere self-consistence of our cognition and this cognition is the

modification of consciousness. It is our consciousness which focuses on the world. It is true that the Yogācāra did not give us freedom to perceive an independent external world because it is unreal for them. But we have freedom in this respect that whether we focus on the world or not is completely depending upon us. There is nothing which can bind our consciousness to focus on anything, because consciousness alone is real. For the Yogācāras, cognition is self-luminous. Our all cognitional activities are the modifications of consciousness. So, it is seen that all creations are mental. Our mind alone exists.

The knowledge about the empirical world, which arises through the five sense organs, is not correct knowledge, because our experience never expresses the true nature of things. Therefore, the empirical world is not recognized as real world. As a result, the Yogācāra asserts that the empirical world is the manifestation of our consciousness only. So, it is found in the Yogācāra School of Buddhism that from the epistemological point of view, there is freedom of consciousness to manifest and to focus on the world and from the transcendental point of view; the world has no freedom to exist permanently and independently, because the world is illusory.

Nature of the World

According to Vijñānavāda, our entire surrounding world is the creation of our own mind only. As the world is created by our mind, therefore, it is not real.

The Yogācāras explain the creation of the world through the concept of vāsanā. Tripathi (1972) mentioned that the word ‘vāsanā’ comes from the root ‘vas’ which means ‘to live’ and also means ‘to perfume’. The Yogācāra takes it in its first means. Two types of vāsanā are there -1) **Anubhava-Vāsanā** and 2) **Avidyā-Vāsanā**.

1) Anubhava-Vāsanā: This kind of vāsanā indicates the reality of the external world. Due to

this Anubhava-vāsanā, we feel that there is an existence of external world where inheres pain, pleasure, love, activities of life etc. We have many kinds of habits and impressions assembled in our previous life. For these habits and impressions, we take the external world to be real and centre to activity.

2) Avidyā-Vāsanā: In Avidyā-Vāsanā, when we think over the reality of the world where we live, worship and fight; it becomes disappear. As in the word of Tripathi (1972) “the more we ponder the more it wither away” (p.23). The Yogācāra asserts that nothing can be known beyond ideas; their relation to the external world also cannot be explained. Beyond our ideas, the world has no meaning. The world can be known through our internal ideas. So, it is clear that the illusion of the external world is created by an internal force. This force may be called the transcendental illusion.

According to the Yogācāra, the differences between the subject and object, cognition and of being cognized are made only from the empirical viewpoint. From the transcendental view point no such differences are there in consciousness. For instance, a person who is suffering from jaundice perceives the white conch shell as yellow, similarly, we are suffering from transcendental illusion and we perceive the absolute reality as an external world. So, it is clear that external world is unreal. Our mind has only reality.

The Buddhist holds that the categories of substance, universals, quality, action etc. have no existence. They have no objective reality because they are the constructions of our thought or mind. As they are mere creations of our thought so, they cannot be associated with a real object. Dinnāga holds that our perception of snake in a rope is not perception at all. It is the creation of our thought. Similarly, our perception, which is connected with name and genus etc., is not a perception. For

example, when a cow is perceived and said that ‘it is white’ or ‘it is red’, it is not perception. It is just an explanation of its general characters which are also found in other cows. In perception, we perceive an individual peculiar cow which is not comparable with other cows. It cannot be connected with a class character and also not possible to designate by a name. As Tripathi (1972) mentions “it is a self-conscious process which determines the object and confirms to the unique individual nature of the object even without attributing it a name or a colour” (p.89). The feeling of pain, pleasure etc. are all self-consciousness. Dinnāga analysed it into three moments. The three moments are- sensation, mental sensation and self-cognition. In the process of our perception, in the first moment, there is a simple reflex, which is in response to a particular indefinite object. Then a mental feeling arises in the next moment which is referred by the simple reflex to the effect that there is something in our area of perception. When the moment of sensation and mental sensation stop to work, in the third moment, we feel a desire to achieve or avoid the object, which feeling is called self-cognition. This feeling is not depending upon any external object. Therefore, it cannot be illustrated in terms of subject-object relations. The Yogācāra holds that self-cognition can only be realized through the yogic perception.

Yogic perception may be defined as the cognition which arises out of the concentration of things. Such perception is free from conceptual content and error.

So, it is found that according to the Yogācāra, our mind creates the world. Because of transcendental illusion, the unreal world appears as real. In reality, the external world is unreal, what we perceive, is only the extreme particulars, the essence of thing. They cannot be directly presented to the senses but only intuited by our mind. All things of the world are the results of cosmic evolutions of the mind. Chatterjee (1968)

clearly states that considering all mental and non-mental things as unreal, is fatal or suicidal. At least, the reality of the mind should be acknowledged in order to make the thinking procedure correct.

According to the Yogācāra, the cause of our sensation is efficient cause. They consider it an image. Judgment refers to this image which is ideal. No any objective reality of things is referring to by judgement. Therefore, “all objects of judgement are ideally real and empirically unreal” (Tripathi, 1972, p.167). They are technically called phenomenal and are differ from fictitious and absolutely real objects. In this respect, the Yogācāras are differing from the Vaibhāṣikas and the Mādhyamikas. Because, according to the Vaibhāṣikas, the objects of judgements are real, and according to the Mādhyamikas, they are unreal. Avoiding these two extremes, the Yogācāras accept the middle position.

The Yogācāras deny the reality of categories; they are mere names. Diñnāga also states that categories are the constructions of our thought only. For him, the category of universal is not real as it is the imagination of our intellect. They are the formations of the mind.

Thus, it is found in the Yogācāra that all our mental categories have no separate reality. They are the creations of our thought. There exists nothing which can rest outside the mind. Ultimately, the entire world is the construction of our mind. Our mind has freedom in this respect. The mind or consciousness is only visible and the external objects are their appearances. They can be identified with the floating hair in the atmosphere. Because of ignorance, we consider the external world as real and become attached with them. And this attachment is the principal cause of all our sorrows. Hence, our mind has freedom to exist as an absolute reality.

Absolute Reality and Illusion

According to Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, the Absolute reality is pure consciousness or Vijñāptimātratā. Coward (1952) mentions “it is unchangeable, immutable and eternal. It is supreme reality, the essence of all beings. It is uncaused, unconditional, necessary and absolute. It is the essence of the whole universe” (p. 190). The objects of the external world are the self formations of this pure consciousness, in its manifestations in the form of Ālayavijñāna under the impact of the dispositions of previous experiences. They are imaginary and false like dreams. The nature of Ālaya is not static. It can be identified with a mighty stream. Asaṅga considers Citta to be the absolute source of all things. The Citta has two aspects. They are Phenomenal and Noumenal. The phenomenal aspect of the Citta is changeable but the noumenal aspect is unchangeable.

Three vijñānas are accepted by the Yogācāras. They are- 1) Ālayavijñāna, 2) Monovijñāna and 3) Pravṛtti-Vijñāna. These vijñānas must be accepted to account for the empirical distinctions. In reality, the evolutes of vijñāna are infinite. These are the three stages of the evolution of vijñāna. In the process of evolution, Ālayavijñāna is the first manifestation. It is the constructive consciousness. Through transcendental illusion, it manifests the phenomenal world. The second stage is the Monovijñāna. It is the process of imagination by which the equivalent and undifferentiated Citta is differentiated into subject and objects, the knower and the known. “It is not an independent agent which acts on the Ālaya from outside, but has its base in the Ālaya” (Tripathi, 1972, p. 344). The Pravṛtti-Vijñāna is the third stage of evolution. This is a distinct consciousness of the eternal objects.

Among the above three vijñānas, the first one is the most fundamental. Coward (1952) mentions “the Ālaya is the repository the carrier

of all *vāsanās*, the potential state of things. The other *Vijñānas* are connected with it as its consequence. The other two strata not only drew upon the *Ālaya*, but also replenish it” (p. 290). *Ālaya* is the essence of everything. It exists in our mind independently. It is common to all minds and is the ground of all feelings and ideas. The empirical world is the self formation of thought. With the medium of the external world, the individual consciousness through their experiences, can communicate one another. Both subjective and objective are the self-evolutions of thought. Vasubandhu considers that subjects and objects are real transformations of self evolving thought. All principles are the transformations of pure consciousness. The *Yogācāras* concept of pure consciousness has similarity with the *Vedānta*’s concept of *Brahman*. Sinha (2006) asserts: “there is a real transformations of the self evolving thought into the individual subjects, on the one hand, and the objective world of perceived objects, on the other” (p.385). In reality, there is no existence of external objects, but only the transformation of consciousness. The nature of pure consciousness is eternal, unchangeable, beyond all experiences and even unthinkable. It is also the ground and essence of *Ālayavijñāna*.

The *Yogācāra* idealists maintain that “illusion is an eccentric projection of a subjective idea into the external world; it is purely subjective hallucination” (Tripathi, 1972, p.57). Regarding the nature of illusion *Diñnāga* holds that, illusions are the wrong assumptions about reality; therefore, they are purely mental. In understanding, they have their locus. Like the fallacies of inference, there are fallacies of perception also. The fallacies of perceptions are not real perceptions but only appear like perceptions. They put before the senses and are produced by the misconception of the intellect. The *Vijñānavāda* asserts that the whole world is an illusion. Illusions are the images of our

thought. Just like a man, who has defective sense organs, perceives the vision of double moon, similarly an ignorant man, lacking of absolute knowledge, sees the vision of various colours and forms and acts on the presumption that they are real. But they are all illusory and are the projections of our mind. The whole universe and its inhabitants of everything are the creation of the mind. Thus, it is seen that the whole phenomenal world has no independent reality.

Freedom from Suffering

The main purpose of *Yogācāra* School of Buddhism is to focus on freedom from suffering and to acquire peace of mind. For the freedom of suffering, at first, we have to search the root or origin of it. For this enquiry, the *Yogācāra* tries to provide a detailed explanation of the mind. Appearances are the defiled aspect of the absolute; they are the modification on the basis of consciousness. All phenomena emerge from the wrong projection of the mind. This wrong projection can be removed only by realizing the pure consciousness; free from subject-object distinction. The pure consciousness or the *Vijñāptimātra* is eternal. Due to ignorance, there arises the cosmic consciousness or the *Ālayavijñāna*. The seeds full of defilements, and the seeds, free from defilements, are stored in *Ālayavijñāna*. In the word of Sinha (2006) “the former comprise the seeds of suffering and the cause of suffering. The latter comprise the seeds of the path to the extinction of suffering” (p.387). So, the *Ālayavijñāna* holds all the seeds of defilement and freedom. Defiled seeds are the causes of suffering and the undefiled are the causes of freedom.

Because of the transcendental illusion, the reality of external world occurs. As a result, suffering occurs because of ignorance about the real nature of the world. This suffering can be removed only by realizing the pure consciousness; free from the duality of subject and object. Such consciousness can be acquired

by the insight meditation. This consciousness can be compared with an example of clean water and muddy water. Just like, a hand, which is become dirty by muddy water can be cleaned by clean water, similarly a pure mind can purify an impure mind caused by unwholesome. In reality, the world is the creation of our mind and when the wise one by practising meditation, will be able to realize the truth, he will acquire freedom from all kinds of suffering.

According to the Yogācāra, Nirvāṇa, the highest freedom can be attained by purifying the ignorant mind. In the state of Nirvāṇa, avidyā vanishes and the individual mind returns to its original purity. This state is known as Mahodaya. They consider Nirvāṇa to be real. . The Yogācāra introduces us to some spiritual disciplines by practising which one can achieve freedom. These disciplines consist of-

- i. **Sambhāramārga**
- ii. **Prayogamārga**
- iii. **Darśanamārga**
- iv. **Bhāvanāmārga**

Sometimes the stages of spiritual disciplines are condensed into five. They are –‘ādhāra’, ‘āhāna’, ‘ādarśa’, ‘āloka’ and ‘āśraya’. Receiving of verbal knowledge, which is taught by the Buddha, is called ‘ādhāra’. Deep meditation regarding the teaching, which the Buddha taught is called ‘āhāna’. In the stage of ‘ādarśa’, consciousness rests in its original essence by removal of the object. In ‘āloka’ stage, by negation of externality and acceptance of reality, the yogin has a true vision of things as they actually are. ‘Āśraya’ is a stage which is the retracting of the Ālaya. This is called Nirvāṇa.

Conclusion

From the discussion of the Yogācāra School, it can be concluded that consciousness is the only reality. There is nothing which can bind our consciousness to focus on anything, because consciousness alone is real. For the Yogācāras,

cognition is self- luminous. The perception of the world is the self-consistence of cognition. Our all cognitional activities are the modifications of consciousness. So, it is seen that all creations are mental. Our mind alone exists.

The empirical world is not real. Because of transcendental illusion, we consider it real. All categories of understanding are the constructions of our thought. Therefore, objective reality of things cannot be denoted by them. Ultimately, the world is the manifestation of our consciousness. There exists nothing which can rest outside the mind. The force of evolution which creates the world is our internal biotic force. The mind or consciousness is only visible and the external objects are their appearances. They can be identified with the floating hair in the atmosphere. Because of ignorance, we consider the external world as real and become attached with them. And this attachment is the principal cause of our sorrows. Causality for them is also not derived from experience. It is apriori and is also mental.

The Vijñānavādi asserts that the whole world is an illusion. These illusions are the images of our thought. They assert that Consciousness is the only truth or reality. Just like a man, who has defective sense organs, perceives the vision of double moon, similarly, an ignorant man lack of absolute knowledge sees the vision of various colours and forms and acts on the presumption that they are real. But they are all illusory and are the projections of our mind. These ideas appear before us as something external. The whole universe and its inhabitants of everything are the creation of the mind. All phenomena emerge from the wrong projection of the mind. This wrong projection can be removed only by realizing the pure consciousness. The main purpose of the Yogācāra School of Buddhism is to focus on freedom from suffering and to acquire peace of mind. Because of the transcendental illusion, the reality of external

world occurs. As a result, suffering occurs because of ignorance about the real nature of the world. This suffering can be removed only by realizing the pure consciousness; freeing from the duality of subject and object. Such consciousness can be acquired by the insight meditation.

The Yogācāra considers Nirvāṇa as the absolute freedom where the mind returns to its original purity. They formulate some spiritual disciplines by practising which one can achieve freedom in this phenomenal life. According to the Yogācāra, Nirvāṇa, the highest freedom can be attained by purifying the ignorant mind. In the state of Nirvāṇa, avidyā is vanished and the individual mind returns to its original purity. This state is known as Mahodaya. Achieving this state of Nirvāṇa or the absolute freedom, one can do work for the good of mankind.

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