

AN APPROACH TO THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM IN THE YOGĀCĀRA SCHOOL OF BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the notion of freedom in the Yogācāra School of Buddhism. The Yogācāra School holds that ignorance prevents one from attaining freedom from the cycle of birth and death. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. In the state of Nirvāṇa, avidyā vanishes and the individual mind returns to its original purity. In the present study, I shall deal with how the Yogācāra has discussed the problem of human suffering and how does this school try to show that through knowledge and practicing yoga man gets freedom here in the earth and can do work for the freedom of other individuals. An attempt is also made to discuss the phenomenal aspect of freedom through the teachings of the Yogācāra.

Key words: *Yogācāra, Buddhism, Suffering, Ignorance, consciousness, Freedom, 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 discusses the processes involved in cognition. This school holds that ignorance prevents one from attaining freedom from the cycle of birth and death. In its metaphysical teaching, the Yogācāra introduces us to a unique view of the mind and the universe. The goal of the school is 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, Diṅnāga, Dharmakīrti, Sāntaraksita and Kamalaśīla. It is accepted that Maitreya-nātha was the real founder of the Yogācāra School.

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). This school believes that reality is an idea and has its centre in consciousness. This consciousness is not only pure but also the main theme of the Yogācāra idealism. They call it Alayavijñāna. 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.

Anand (2012) asserts that the Yogācāra discourse is established on the existential truth of the individual condition and no experiences are there which is not mediated by mind. 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. 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. In the

state of Nirvāṇa, avidyā vanishes and the individual mind returns to its original purity. This state is known as Mahodaya.

According to the Yogācāra, the Saṃsāra is not real but Nirvāṇa is real. In the state of Nirvāṇa, there is pure consciousness free from the subject object duality. The Yogācāra advocates some yogic disciplines to free the beings from the clutch of avidyā and also insists on attaining final freedom from the bondage of the phenomenal world.

Methodology

The data for the study are collected from various sources like – encyclopedia, epics, books, seminar proceedings, thesis, journals, online resources etc. The study is mainly descriptive and analytic. After collecting materials from the above mentioned sources, I have systematized and analyzed them in a descriptive way, to bring out the conclusion.

Concept of Freedom in the Yogācāra School of Buddhism

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. The Sūtra regards them as the transformation of cosmic mind. It means external world has no freedom to exist independently; it is the manifestation of our consciousness. This consciousness, according to Vasubandhu, is the only reality. In this respect our consciousness enjoys much freedom to manifest the world. The thought itself creates the world. Sinha (2006) observes that Ālayavijñāna or the cosmic mind, in one hand, transforms itself into various subjects and in other hand, into various objects. In reality, there are no external objects; they are transformations of the cosmic mind into the form of knowable objects. It means, it is our mind who constructs the external world. Here, the Yogācāra gives our mind complete freedom.

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.

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

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.

Freedom of Mind and Unreality of the World

It is seen that mind is the only reality that has freedom to construct the world. According to Vijñānavāda, our entire surrounding world is the creation of our own mind only. As Tripathi (1972) writes “our own body, property and land where we have our abodes are nothing more than our own mind projected and recognized as

externally extending”(p.303). It means that nothing can exist outside the mind. Whatever is perceived are only mind. 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. 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.

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.

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. 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.

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 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.

It is found that the Yogācāra denies the existence of the external world. We perceive only the essence of thing, which are directly intuited by consciousness. We never perceive the external object. 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.

Tathāgata and Freedom

The Yogācāra School of Buddhism accepts the doctrine of Tathāgata. It is one of the most important doctrines in the Mahāyāna Sect. Like the place of Īśvara in Advaita Vedānta, the Tathāgata occupies the similar place in Buddhism.

According to the Yogācāra School, consciousness is creative and its creativity has two aspects; at first, when consciousness is governed by the idea of objectivity an ‘other’ is projecting by it: this ‘other’ is the form of consciousness. It happens because of the cosmic illusion. The will suffers because of this illusion and return back to its original purity after the removal of cosmic illusion. It is the second aspect of the creativity of consciousness. Between these two aspects, there is an intermediate state where the will is self-conscious. This is the state of Tathāgata. In this state, though the ‘other’ is still present, we are aware of its illusory nature. This state is transitional from ignorance to knowledge. The Tathāgata always perceives the ‘other’ like a creation of consciousness. Though the Tathāgata himself is phenomenal, yet, He knows the real nature of phenomena and therefore, transcends it. The being of Tathāgata has two aspects, which are appropriately put in *Mahāyānasūtralāṅkāra*. In this work, it is said that the two sambhāras of Budhisattava are ‘puṇyasambhāra and

jñānasambhāra.’ (Chatterjee, 2007, p.172). He does everything good to the world because of his aspect punyasambhāra. Again, in this world, his existence is not defiled by the kleśas for his aspect jñānasambhāra. Therefore, the Buddha, though enjoys freedom, he is a person. Though he is essentially one with the absolute reality, he is not completely identical with it.

From the phenomenal point of view, Tathāgata’s free descent into the world is a non-spiritual event. Because of the cosmic illusion He seems to take birth and die, elimination of which is the mission of the Tathāgata. Therefore, it is said that ‘he is neither pure nor impure. A potential Buddha inheres in every individual, which alone provides significance to their spiritual desires. The Tathāgata is attributed with all the powers and perfections associated with the doctrine of God-head. Prajñā and Karuṇā are the two important aspects of Him. For the first aspect, He becomes identical with the Absolute and for the second, He is a phenomenal being.

By the notion of Tathāgata, it is clear that the seed of freedom is present in each and every individual, because the Tathāgata Himself is a person. When one removes avidyā, he can achieve knowledge and become a Buddha, because a potential Buddha is already present among them. In this process, the Tathāgata will help every individual as a guide and a mentor. After achieving freedom, individual can do work for the good of the people. Though the Yogācāra ascribes God-head to the Tathāgata, He is not a governing principle of the world because that principle is the Karma. The Tathāgata is only a spiritual instructor. One can achieve freedom by following the spiritual path taught by the Tathāgata. So, it is clear that freedom can be achieved in this phenomenal world by removing illusion and the knowledge of the real nature of the Tathāgata.

The Absolute Freedom

According to the Yogācāra, Nirvāṇa is real but Samsāra is unreal. Nirvāṇa, for them, is the Absolute freedom where the mind returns to its original purity.

As a spiritual discipline, the value of philosophy consists in freedom from pain. Pain cannot be removed by worldly means. Pain is not one element but whole of our experience is pain because all experiences are illusory. The ordinary person thinks pain as a particular thing and search for its empirical remedy. He has no any knowledge about philosophical consciousness. The person, who can perceive pain as universal, can only realize the efficacy of philosophical discipline. Pain is not an objective factor. As remarked by Chatterjee (2007) “a thing cannot be painful in itself. Pain is rather caused by the attitude mind takes towards the object. Pain is not in the object but in the reaction of mind towards it” (p.158). Because of the impurity of consciousness, pain occurs, therefore, by purifying the consciousness, freedom can be acquired. Mind’s attachment and aversion towards an object causes pain. So, freedom from pain means freedom from these two attitudes of mind.

Thus, it is seen that spiritual discipline is purely a subjective procedure. Though philosophy does not change any fact, it can change us. A philosophical discipline does not need any objective world. In Yogācāra School, there is no reality of such an objective world. They consider Consciousness as the only truth or reality. Therefore, bondage and freedom both belong to consciousness. The Yogācāra holds that due to ignorance, bondage occurs. This ignorance raises attachment and aversion in individual mind, for which he suffers from bondage. Because of it there arises subject object duality in consciousness. Pure-will gradually be developed into the three vijñānas, where the Ālaya is the root. It formulates content where they are actually not. It is, therefore, Samsāra and also is bondage. Because of this Ālaya, we consider the objective external world as real. So, liberation is the retrieving of the supremacy of will by negating the object and ceasing down its self-willed externality. This supreme or universal will is the Absolute reality. As Chatterjee (2007) writes “Nirvāṇa is the realization of this universality. It is the freedom of consciousness from the duality of the subject and the object” (p.160). It is the pull back of Ālaya from its onward movement. In this state, unreal objects become disappeared and one realizes the Tathatā or the true reality. This is called freedom.

Acquisition of something new is not Nirvāṇa but perceiving things as they actually are is Nirvāṇa. Because of the false idea that everything is objective and real, our consciousness is defiled. Therefore, freedom is not transforming consciousness into something new but it is the eradication of false idea and discovering the real nature of consciousness.

Four states of Nirvāṇa are introduced by the *Vijñānamātra Śāstra*. These gradations of Nirvāṇa are-

- 1) The first state of Nirvāṇa is possessed by every conscious being in its original nature. In this state, Nirvāṇa is similar to dharmakāya.
- 2) In the second state of Upādhiśeṣa Nirvāṇa, some residues are left. In this state, though the individual is free from all affections, it is still under existence which causes misery.
- 3) In the third stage of Anupādhiśeṣa Nirvāṇa, no residue is left. In this state there is complete freedom from all kinds of bindings.
- 4) The fourth state of Nirvāṇa is the highest state of freedom. This is the state of absolute enlightenment.

So, it is clear that Nirvāṇa can be attained in this world and after achieving Nirvāṇa, the Absolute freedom, one can do act for the welfare of humanity.

The Yogācāra introduces us to some spiritual disciplines by practising which one can achieve freedom. These disciplines consist of-

Sambhāramārga (the path of accumulating merit): This is the initial stage in the disciplinary path. Our consciousness is defiled by the two obstructions- kleśāvaraṇa and jñeyāvaraṇa. These obstructions cover the real nature of consciousness. By accumulating merit and wisdom, these āvaraṇas can be destroyed. It is called jñānasambhāra.

Prayogamārga (the path of training): The Bodhisattva, both theoretically and practically undertakes strong training of the philosophical wisdom. When he is able to realize that all objects are mental creations; he immediately stops to perceive all objective dharma. When the unreality of object realized, the awareness of the reality of consciousness also ceases.

Darśanamārga (the path of vision):Freeing from the subject object duality, the sage has an intuition of the absolute reality. With a pure intuition of the ultimate substance of the world, the sage enters into the first bhūmi. Here, the sage withdraws the Ālaya. Though he himself has no pain, he feels sorrow at the pain of suffering mankind.

Bhāvanāmārga (the path of concentration): Here, the Bodhisattva gets a total mystic intuition of the absolute. Such intuition is two-fold-nirvikalpa jñāna and the pṛṣṭhalabdha jñāna. The former is a mystic knowledge and a direct supernatural intuition of the Bodhisattva. This intuition is immediate and completely personal. The latter is the empirical knowledge, which is conceptual. Unlike the former, the latter can be communicated with the individuals who are in the cycle of avidyā. Freeing from the two obstructions, here, the intuition is completely pure.

Without the Bhūmis, the Yogācāra discipline will not be completed. In the Mahāyāna Buddhist scripture '*Daśabhūmika Sūtra*' written by Vasubandhu, there found ten stages of Bhūmis, which are described by the Buddha. These Bhūmis are accepted by the Yogācāras. The stages of ten Bhūmis are ten lands practiced by the Bodhisattva's for the spiritual development of their career. The Bodhisattva ideal, in Mahayana Buddhism, is one who searches for enlightenment for the welfare of all beings. A Bodhisattva must progress through the ten stages of development formulated by the Buddha in order to reach the stage of enlightenment and Buddhahood.

Conclusion

From the discussion of the Yogācāra School, it can be concluded that the Yogācāra gives us freedom by considering consciousness as the only reality. When Vasubandhu considers that consciousness is the only reality, it means our consciousness enjoys freedom to exist as a permanent reality. 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 the 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.

It is found in the Yogācāra that from the epistemological point of view, our consciousness has freedom 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 it is illusory.

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. 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.

It is also found that the Yogācāra School accepts the doctrine of Tathāgata. Like the place of Īśvara in Advaita Vedānta, the Tathāgata occupies the similar place in Buddhism. Though the Yogācāra ascribes God-head to the Tathāgata, He is not a governing principle of the world. The Tathāgata is only a spiritual instructor. One can achieve freedom by following the spiritual path taught by the Tathāgata.

It can be concluded from the foregoing discussions that the freedom of the Yogācāra School of Buddhism can be grouped under four levels. They are-

1. Social Freedom
2. Philosophical Freedom
3. Moral Freedom and

4. Absolute Freedom

There is social freedom in the Yogācāra School. Here, there are instructions to common people like how they can live a social life without suffering. For social awakening and awareness, freedom of thought, freedom of speech etc. are important. The Yogācāra gives individual the freedom of thought by considering consciousness or mind as the only reality. For them, everything is the construction of our thought or mind.

'Free will' can be considered as philosophical freedom. Free will stands for freedom of choice. There is also freedom of will in this school, as this school denies the existence of any creator, God. They consider our mind as the only reality.

Moral freedom stands for freedom of selection of some moral values in order to lead a life like a moral agent. In this school also, there is moral freedom. The Yogācāra accepts ten stages of Bhūmi. A Buddhisattva must progress through all the ten stages of developments formulated by the Buddha in order to reach the stage of enlightenment and Buddhahood. By attaining Buddhahood, a buddhisattva works for the welfare of all beings and live like a moral agent.

The Absolute or the Spiritual freedom is known as Nirvāṇa in Buddhism. The Yogācāra considers Nirvāṇa as the absolute freedom where the mind returns to its original purity. 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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