

Buddhism: The theory of subjective idealism: Yogachara School

While agreeing with the Mādhyamikas, as to the unreality of external objects, the Yogācāra school differs from them in holding that the mind (citta) cannot be regarded as unreal. For then all reasoning and thinking would be false and the Mādhyamikas could not even establish that their own arguments were correct. To say that everything, mental or non-mental, is unreal is suicidal. The reality of the mind should at least be admitted in order to make correct thinking possible. The mind, consisting of a stream of different kinds of ideas, is the only reality. Things that appear to be outside the mind, our body as well as other objects, are merely ideas of the mind. Just as in cases of dreams and hallucinations a man fancies to perceive things outside, though they do not really exist there, similarly the objects which appear to be out there, are really ideas in the mind. The existence of any external object cannot be proved, because it cannot be shown that the object is different from the consciousness of the object.

As Dharmakīrti states, the blue colour and the consciousness of the blue colour are identical, because they are never perceived to exist separately. Though really one, they appear as two owing to illusion, just as the moon appears as two owing to defective vision. As an object is never known without the consciousness of it, the object cannot be proved to have an existence independent of consciousness. The Yogācāras also point out the following absurdities which arise from the admission of an object external to the mind. An external object, if admitted, must be either partless (i.e., atomic) or composite (i.e., composed of many parts). But atoms cannot be perceived.

A composite thing (like a pot) also cannot be perceived, because it is not possible to perceive simultaneously all the sides and parts of the object. Nor can it be said to be perceived part by part, because, if those parts are atomic they are too small to be perceived, and if they are composite, the original objection again arises, so if one admits extramental objects, the perception of these objects cannot be explained. These objections do not arise if the object be nothing other than consciousness, because the question of parts and whole does not arise with regard to consciousness. Another difficulty is that the consciousness of the object cannot arise before the object has come into existence.

Neither can it arise afterwards, because the object, being momentary, vanishes as soon as it arises. The external object, according to those who admit it, being the cause of consciousness cannot be simultaneous with consciousness. Nor can it be said that the object may be known by consciousness after it has ceased to exist. For in that case, the object being in the past, there cannot be any immediate knowledge or perception of it. Perception of present objects, as we must admit always to have, remains, therefore, unexplained if objects are supposed to be external to the mind. This difficulty does not arise, if the object be supposed to be nothing other than consciousness. The Yogācāra view is called Vijñāna-vāda or idealism because it admits that

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

One of the chief difficulties of subjective idealism is: if an object depends for its existence solely on the subject, then, how is it that the mind cannot create at will any object at any time? How is it explained that objects do not change, appear or disappear at the will of the perceiver? To explain this difficulty, the Vijñānavādin says that the mind is a stream of momentary conscious state and within the stream there lie buried the impressions (saṃskāra) of all past experience. At a particular moment that latent impression comes to the surface of consciousness for which the circumstances of the moment are the most favourable.

At that moment that impression attains maturity (paripāka), so to say, and develops into immediate consciousness or perception. It is thus that at that particular moment only that object, whose latent impression can, under the circumstances, reveal itself becomes perceived; just as in the case of the revival of past impressions in memory, though all the impressions are in the mind, only some are remembered at a particular time. This is why only some object can be perceived at a time and not any at will.

The mind considered in its aspect of being a store-house or home of all impressions is called by the Vijñānavādins Ālaya-vijñāna. It may be regarded as the potential mind and answers, to the soul or ātman of other systems, with the difference that it is not one unchanging substance like the soul, but is a stream of continuously changing states. Through culture and self-control this Ālaya-vijñāna or the potential mind can gradually stop the arising of undesirable mental state and develop into the ideal state of nirvāṇa.