



# Philosophy of Vaibhasika and Sautratika on Nature of Reality

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## Introduction:

The Vaibhasika derives its name from its exclusive emphasis on a particular commentary, the *abhidhammamaha* vaibhasa of Abhidhamma. In the true spirit of the doctrine of dependent origination, the Vaibhasika holds that reality is pure flux and change. This school belongs to Theravada. The Vaibhasika speaks about the existence of the mental and the non-mental realities. It teaches that we can really know the external entities and the world outside. This notion is known as *bahya-pratyeksha-vada*. This school holds onto pluralism, realism, and nominalism. According to Vaibhasika, the world is in reality as it appears to us. The ultimate constituents (dharma) of reality are the same as those which make up the world of our empirical experience. Since they hold that the dharma is ultimate and independent of our consciousness, Vaibhasika is realism. Vaibhasika is pluralism as it asserts dharma as distinct and irreducible. For Vaibhasika, the reality is particular and is devoid of any universal unchanging entities. Thus Vaibhasika can be considered as nominalism too.

The name Sautrantika, derived from the fact that it gives greater importance to the authority of the *sutra-pitaka* of the Pali Canon. This school also belongs to Theravada Buddhism. The Sautrantika subscribes both the mental and the non-mental reality. The important difference between both these schools is that while the Vaibhasika maintains direct perception of the external objects, the Sautrantika holds the inference from the perceptions which are representations of external objects. The second important difference between the Sautrantika and Vaibhasika is that unlike the Vaibhasika, the Sautrantika distinguishes between the world as it appears to us (phenomena) and the world as it is in itself (nomena). Here Sautrantika denies the absolute, ultimate, and independent ontological status of dharma. Another point of disagreement between the Sautrantika and the Vaibhasika is concerned with the nature of the relation between successive point-instants of existence. For the Vaibhasika the past, present, and future are equally real. The reason is that the present, which is admittedly real, cannot be the effect of an unreal past and the cause of an unreal future. Contrary to this, the Vaibhasika's point is that the point-instant which has no duration cannot causally bring about its succeeding point-instant. For, the cause and effect cannot be simultaneous.

The Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika are the two ancient schools of Theravada Buddhism and the Madhyamika and Yogachara are the schools belong to Mahayana Buddhism. The Vaibhasikas and Sautrantikas that share the belief that matter and mind exist independently, and that the world is made up of elements that work together: Vaibhasika school belongs to Sarvastivada, around the 3rd century B.C. It expounds the philosophy of 'sarvamasti' or 'everything exists'. This school is named for its belief in the *Abhidhamma* Piṭaka and Vibhāsā, or Commentary. The Vaibhāṣikas hold the theory of direct realism "*Bāhya-pratyakṣavāda*"<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the Sautrāntika School is named for its reliance on the sutras, or the words of the Buddha, and its rejection of the authority of the Abhidharma. The Sautrāntikas believed that events are momentary, and that there is a transmigrating consciousness that contains seeds of goodness in every person. This school is in 2nd century B.C and an offshoot of the Sarvāstivāda. The Sautrāntika theory is called the theory of inferability of external objects, or *Bāhyā- anumeya-vāda*. The Sautrāntikas are commonly identified as a branch of the Sarvāstivādins. The Sarvāstivādins sometimes called the Sautrāntikas the Dārṣṭāntika School, which means "those who utilize the method of examples".

### The Second Buddhist Council

After the demise of the Buddha, there was a schism among Buddhists, but at the end of the first century during the reign of King Kalasoka, a community of Vijjaini monks introduced ten new points (*dasavatthu*) into the discipline of the Sangha, pronouncing them allowable to the Sangha. Ven. Yasa, the head of the Sangha declared these practices illegal and immoral in the extreme. He openly declared these practices to be unlawful. The assembly of the Sangha was led by Ven. Sabbakami and the Ten Points were put one by one and they were declared unlawful. The questions were stated again and the same decision was arrived at in the full assembly of the council. Finally, a group of monks led another council which was called the Great Council (*Mahasangiti*) and formed the *Mahasanghika*-the Great Community. It resulted in a schism in the order of the Sangha.

<sup>1</sup> D.N. Shastri, *Critique of Indian Realism*, p. 39.

After Buddha's death, his followers interpreted his teachings in different ways, leading to doctrinal divisions and the emergence of distinct Buddhist sects. The earliest monastic order divided into: The Sthaviravadins who adhered strictly to the Vinaya code of monastic discipline and The Mahasanghikas advocated more relaxed norms.

. Theravada focuses on Monastic discipline, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the three marks of existence, karma, rebirth and practices like jhana and *vipassana* meditation. Theravada is dominant in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, having spread there from India by the 3rd century BCE. The school upholds Buddha's original doctrines and disciplines, idealising the *arhat* who achieves nirvana through rigorous spiritual striving.

### Historicity of Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika:

Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika schools belong to Theravāda are the two main systems of *Sarvāstivāda* philosophy. Vasubandhu was a great author and wrote commentary of the Vaibhāṣika School. He was the author of *Abhidharmakośakārika* which is the main work of Vibhāsā School. The work was mainly

composed from the point of Kashmir. In Kashmir or Jalandhar where the fourth Buddhist council was conducted. In this council the great commentaries or the vibhāsas were composed and discussed to settle the other schools.

The title “*Abhidharma*” is significant, *kośa* indicates a “holder or a case” which contains something carefully placed in it. The *kośa* apparently contains the valuable writings and essential points of *Abhidharma*.<sup>2</sup> *Abhidharma* is an amplification of the *sūtras*. *Abhidharma* is the psychological and philosophical literature of Buddhist tenets. “There are altogether 594 *slokas* or the *kārikas* arranged in eight chapters, each of which deals with a particular topic.”<sup>3</sup> In broader sense, *Abhidharma* elucidates the *śāstras* from philosophical stand point. In narrow sense, *Abhidharma* comprises of Metaphysics, Ethics, Biology, Physics, Cosmology, Psychology, and Practical Religion. All these subjects are concentrated on the practical goal of a person attaining liberation with the help of practical ethics and introspection.

As per the record of Hsuen Tsang, Vasubandhu was born in Peshawar and belonged to a Brahmin family. They were three brothers, and Vasubandhu was the second. He is the author of famous text “*Abhidharmakośa*” in his early life he studied

<sup>2</sup> A. Haldar, *Abhidharmakośa of Vasubandhu*, pp.14-15.

<sup>3</sup> A. Haldar, *Abhidharmakośa of Vasubandhu*, p.14.

Sarvāstivāda School and wrote this work. Asaṅga was his elder brother who was a pupil of Maitreyanātha. About Vasubandhu it is said that he and Asaṅga were follower of Theravāda School but later on, he converted his believe in Mahāyāna school on the request of his elder brother Asaṅga.

“*Abhidharmakośa*, a masterly work by Vasubandhu, was written as a synthetic compilation of the different *Abhidharma* texts of Kashmir Vibhāsā School of Sarvāstivāda. It seems to have had a wide popularity in India and outside. Even today this *kośa* text remains indispensable for adopt in some parts of China and Japan.”<sup>4</sup>

“The Sautrāntikas, were dissenters from the Vaibhāṣika whom they opposed on the principal doctrine of the Sarvāstivādins viz, everything exists, the implication being that all elements exist. They emphasis, which is put on the reality of elements, refers to the conception that their past and as well as their future transition represents something real. From this fundamental tenet the school derives its names.”<sup>5</sup>

According to Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika School, the world is composed of the elements of mind and the elements of matter. It is existed by the co-operation of different elements. The elements are realities, all compound things are mere names denoting groups of separate elements. Every element is a separate entity. There is no inherence of one element in another.”<sup>6</sup> There is a separate power or force in each element. Thus, all elements have independent existence. The Vaibhāṣika and the Sautrāntika believe that mind and matters exist independently. They are called the natural dualists. “There is a difference in the way things hang together in thought and the way in which they hang together in nature.”<sup>7</sup>

The Vaibhāṣika and the Sautrāntika admit the existence of dual reality of the world. Mind and matter have independent existence. Mind does not rely for its existence on matter and vice versa. The material world is

not creation of our mind and the mental world is not the reflection of material objects. Therefore, all our mental faculties do not rely on the matter for their existence.

The Vaibhāṣika School admits seventy-five dharmas (the ultimate momentary elements of existence) while the Sautrāntika admits forty-three and believes that the

<sup>4</sup> A. Haldar, *Abhidharmakośa of Vasubandhu*, p.14.

<sup>5</sup> J.N. Sinha, *Critique of Indian Realism*, p.53.

<sup>6</sup> J.N. Sinha, *Indian Philosophy*, vol.II, p.350.

<sup>7</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol.I, p.614.

remaining are the result of mental construction. Sthaviravāda accepts one hundred and thirty and the other hand Yogācāra accepted hundred such elements. “The world process is a process of combinations of seventy two kinds of subtle momentary elements. Dharmas proceed from their causes (*hetupraphava*) and advance towards extinction (*nirodha*). They produce the phenomenal world under the influence of enlightenment (*prajñā*).”<sup>8</sup> Out of these seventy five dharmas, eleven are material compounds. Mind is one compound. Fourteen are non-mental compounds. Forty-six are mental compounds and three un-compounded dharmas.<sup>9</sup>

Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika believe in the concept of pañcaskandha of Early Buddhism and on the basis of it they developed their philosophy. Therefore, all elements are classified into five numbers.

**They are:** (i) The first is Rūpaskandha, which is the aggregate of form. The *rūpaskandha* comprised of some essential parts that is, the body, the senses, sense-data etc.

(ii) The second is *Vedanāskandha*, which is the aggregate of feeling. The *vedanāskandha* comprised of some emotions and feelings like pleasure, pain and indifferent.

(iii) The third is *Samjñāskandha*, which is the aggregate of perception. This *Samjñāskandha* comprised of verbal knowledge.

(iv) The fourth is *Samskāraskandha*, which is the aggregate of mental disposition. This comprised of synthetic mental states and synthetic functioning of combination of sense- affections, combination of emotions and combination of concepts.

(v) Lastly, *Vijñānaskandha* which is the aggregate of consciousness.

For Vaibhāṣikas, only these five skandhas are real, the mind, or the ego or the soul is unreal. Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika classify all *dharmas* into two kinds of faculties-(i) cognitive faculties and (ii) objective of cognitive faculties. “There are six cognitive *āyatana*s or “bases” of cognition.”<sup>10</sup>

The twelve *āyatana*s are:(a) Six internal bases or respective faculties (*indriya*)

1. Sense of vision (*caḥsur-indriya-āyatana*);
2. Sense of audition (*śrotr-indriya-āyatana*);
3. Sense of smelling (*ghrāṇa-indriya-āyatana*);
4. Sense of taste (*jihva-indriya-āyatana*);
5. Sense of touch (*kāya-indriya-āyatana*);

<sup>8</sup> J.N. Sinha, *Critique of Indian Realism*, op.cit, p.350

<sup>9</sup> J.N. Sinha, *Critique of Indian Realism*, op.cit, p.83

<sup>10</sup> Th. Stcherbatsky, *Central Conception of Buddhism*, p. 6

6. Faculty of the intellect or consciousness (*mano-indriya-āyatana*).

(b) Six external bases or objects

1. Colour and shape (*rūpa-āyatana*);
2. Sound (*śabda-āyatana*);
3. Odour (*gandha-āyatana*);
4. Taste (*rasa-āyatana*);
5. Tangibles (*sparṣṭavya-āyatana*);
6. Non-sensuous objects (*dharma-āyatana*).

In twelve āyatanas, there are subjective dharmas as well as objective dharmas. Subjective dharmas are from first to sixth and objective dharmas are from seventh to twelve. The first six dharmas are the subjects of the rest six objects and the last six dharmas are the objects of first subjective elements.

“The term āyatana means “entrance”. It is an “entrance” for consciousness and mental phenomena.”<sup>11</sup> In technical sense, these twelve āyatana are also known as Dharmas, because these twelve āyatanas are ultimate principles of the world (including material and mental).

“When the principle everything exists” is set forth it has the meaning that nothing but the twelve bases of cognition are existent. An object which cannot be viewed as a separate object of cognition or a separate faculty of cognition is unreal. Being a congeries of separate elements it is declared to be a name and not a reality not a dharma.”<sup>12</sup>

Thus, all objects of the world arise and exist by the compound of twelve dharmas. Therefore, the meaning of everything exist is twelve āyatanas exist. When his followers asked Buddha, “what is meant by the words everything exists? Buddha answered, that everything exist means that the twelve *āyatanas* exist.”<sup>13</sup> All things are unchangeably fixed.

According to Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika, the world is analysed with the existence of eighteen kinds of Dhatus. The Eighteen dhatus are composed of six types of faculties, six types of objects of the six faculties and six types of consciousness. Consciousness arises in support of the cognitive faculties and their objects. Thus, there arise six types of different consciousness.

<sup>11</sup> Th. Stcherbatsky, *Central Conception of Buddhism*, p. 7

<sup>12</sup> Th. Stcherbatsky, *Central Conception of Buddhism*, p. 7

<sup>13</sup> Th. Stcherbatsky, *Central Conception of Buddhism*, p. 4

These six consciousnesses are:

1. Visual consciousness;
2. Auditory consciousness;
3. Olfactory consciousness;
4. Gustatory consciousness;
5. Tactile consciousness;
6. Non-sensuous consciousness.

All these kinds of consciousness have existence only in the ordinary plane of existence. “In higher worlds sense-consciousness gradually disappears in the immaterial worlds, only non-sensuous consciousness is left.”<sup>[20]</sup> A division of consciousness into various types (dhatu 15-18) is made essential for the composition of formulas of elements corresponding to the denizens of various worlds. Thus, all objects of the world arise in the composition of the momentary mental and material elements. It can be said that the varieties of the world (i.e. material or immaterial) are the creation of consciousness in order to uphold the mental and material elements. The processes of the world are composition of elements; their consciousness and stream of compounds and their status is impermanent. All separate elements are transitory.

### Philosophy of Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika

Vaibhasika developed Buddha’s notion of ‘*anitya*’ into universal law of impermanence of everything, but they accepted three moments as “a thing arises, remains constant and ceases to exist”. But being logically minded, Sautrantika raised the question, if changing, how can there be three moments, there can be only one moment. As it arises it must vanish. Thus things never remain constant. What is there is an uninterrupted flow of causally connected momentary entities of the same kind. The cessation takes place without cause. They call it *Santana*. If it were not so, then the *dharmas* would remain constant and changeless.

One important logical consequence of this theory is the rejection of past and future. Everything is happening at the present time, past has ceased and future hasn’t arisen. Past is memory and future is imagination. There is only just origination and cessation. This is the real truth (*paramarta sat*). The other two are relative truths (*samvrti sat*). One question that naturally arises is, how we explain ‘the knowing process’ then? They explain it with the theory of *svasamvedana* (self-apperception). This theory says consciousness is able to be conscious of itself and of other phenomena, just like a lamp is able to illumine clearly both itself as well as other external objects.

Sautrantika developed logic and defended itself against both Buddhistic and non- Buddhistic criticisms. This logic was later developed and crystallized by the Yogacara (*vijnanavada*) teachers. Dignaga and Dharmakirti are the two towering personalities. First they were Sautrantika (both mind and external objects exist), later they were lenient to Yogacara (mind only exists). Dignaga in his famous work *Pramana Samuchaya* speak of two valid means of knowledge. They are Perception (*pratyaksa*) and Inference (*anumana*). Perception deals with *svalaksanas*, (that which characterises itself, a unique particular singular and momentary).

This is ultimately real (*paramarta sat*) and inexpressible. To experience them means to experience reality as it is. Inference, the other *pramana* consists of conceptualizations, verbalizations, reflections and other products of mental constructions. (*kalpana, vikalpa*) Dignaga calls it *Samanyalaksana* (a general characteristic applicable to many objects or distributed over many instances). They are enduring and not subject to change, thus they are true only in relational level (*asamvrti sat*).

Philosophically Sautrantika goes a step further from Vaibhasika to answer the question, what we really know. They say it is not objects that come into our consciousness (naive realism) but an after-image of an

object. Thus our knowledge is not through perception, but through inference. Therefore there will be always some mental construction. Thus we call them representative realists or critical realists.

The Vaibhāṣika believes that one have an immediate and direct understanding of the nature of objects as they are in themselves. One is directly aware of the external objects and therefore, the senses lead to reliable knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Sensory awareness is closely connected to perceptual and conceptual knowledge. Being cognitive activities perception and conception function when one tries to connect with those things, which are already gone through in sensory awareness. Perception and conception are not two different entities but they are two forms of activity involved in one cognition. In perception there is direct contact with other actualities and conception involves interpretative activity. Vaibhāṣika accepts immediate apprehension and inference as the means of valid knowledge. The cases of inference include judgement of neither perception which are neither pure inferences nor pure perception.

In the field of perception, the Vaibhāṣika maintains three kinds of direct knowledge. They are: (i) The first type is immediate sensory apprehension which is devoid of intellectual

<sup>14</sup> S. Chatterjee & D. Datta, op.cit, p.142

characterization. It perceives the here-and newness and individual existence of the objects. In it one is able to perceive colour-forms and hear sounds. “According to Vaibhāṣika this “seeing” or “hearing” is occasional by the specific function characteristic of a particular sense-organ. The eye is specifically charged with the function of seeing- forms, and in discharging its function it does not look at askance to any higher faculty of mind. Perceiving at this stage is “sensing”.<sup>15</sup>

(ii) The second kind of knowledge is intellectual apprehension that unfolds an immediate awareness of meaning.

(iii) The third kind of knowledge is mystical apprehension which transcends the realm of concept and is not limited to sensory apprehension.

The Vaibhāṣikas hold the theory of direct realism “*Bāhya pratyakṣavāda*”.<sup>16</sup> According to them, the existence of external object is cannot be known, if we do not admit that they are directly perceived by us. For example, inference of fire from the perception is possible because we have seen both smoke and fire together in the past. A person who has never seen fire before cannot infer its existence from the perception of smoke. So, it is proved that external object is directly known or perceived by us.

The Vaibhāṣika scholar holds experience is to be of two types *Grahan* and *Adhyavasaya*. The experience which is formless through sense-organs in the first stage of knowledge is called *Grahan*. This is knowledge without any attribute and is comparable to the sensation in the language of psychology. When this knowledge which is formless, assumes form and appears and is with attributes, it is known as *Adhyavasaya* and is comparable to the perception in language of psychology. Hence, they admit the existence of things or objects which are eternal and they consider them as the subject of perception.

The Sautrāntika on the other hand believes that in perception one is in cognitive contact with something which is neither oneself nor one’s mental states. At the other end of cognitive contact may be a thing which is either actual or illusive. When the object is actual, there is an ontological object equivalent to the

epistemological object and when the object is illusive one have an epistemological object without corresponding to the ontological object. The perceptual condition is direct whereas the conceptual condition is discursive. The Sautrāntika focused on the direct, non-discursive and intuitive mode of knowledge which leads to the reality. It may be said that things like “sky-flower” etc have

<sup>15</sup> C.S. Vyas, *Buddhist theory of Perception*, p.45.

<sup>16</sup> D.N. Shastri, *Critique of Indian Realism*, p. 39.

epistemological status but the Sautrāntika knew that these kinds of objects are not similar to these things denoted by them in the external world.<sup>17</sup>

The Sautrāntika accepts the reality of mind and also of external objects. According to them, one cannot elaborate the illusory appearance of external object, if one does not accept the existence of external object. If one never seen anywhere any external objects, he could not say, that through illusion, consciousness looks like an object that is external. The expression “like an external object” is does not have any sense as “like the square circle” because an external object is said to be totally not real and never perceived.<sup>18</sup> Further, whenever we perceived an object like a tree, the tree is felt as external and consciousness of it as internal. So a thing or the object, from the very beginning, is said to be totally different from consciousness. If the tree will be similar with the subject, who perceives it, then the perceiver would have said, “I am the tree”. In addition to this, if there were no external objects or we do not accept the external objects then the distinction between the “consciousness of a tree” and the “consciousness of a cloth” could not be explained, because as consciousness both are identical; it is not only regarding the objects that they differ. So, we must accept that the existence of different external objects outside consciousness. These objects provide particular forms to the different states of consciousness. Through these forms or representations of the objects in the mind, one can infer the existence of their causes, i.e. the objects that exist outside the mind. The main reason why we cannot perceive at will any object or a thing at any time and place, depends on the fact that a perception depend on four different conditions and not simply on the mind. They are:

1. *Ālambanapratyaya-Ālambana* is the cause of external things like tree, jug etc, because the form of the knowledge is born out of it. In other words, we can say there must be object to give its form to consciousness.
2. *Samanantarapratyaya-Samanantara* means parallel and is so called because it is only after the previous mental stage that the next stage achieves consciousness. In other words, we can say there ought to be the conscious mind to cause the consciousness of the form. It is different from the content of the cognition, which is its *ālambana*, in this that the character of the *samanantarapratyaya* is uniform, whereas the content is variable. According to Dharmottara, “It is similar or coordinate in respect of its cognitive quality

<sup>17</sup> D.N. Shastri, *Critique of Indian Realism*, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> S. Chatterjee & D. Datta, op.cit, p.140.

(*jñānatva*) and is the immediate precedent (*anantara*), as there is nothing intervening and is termed the

*pratyaya*, as it is the cause thereof.”<sup>19</sup>

3. *Adhipatipratyaya*-The senses have been known as the *Adhipati pratyaya* of the knowledge. It is also known as dominating or determinative<sup>20</sup> cause. For this school, without the senses, there can be no external knowledge of objects even when the first two causes are available. The knowledge of the forms, touch, etc of objects that are external depends on the existence of the senses. In other words, we can say there must be the sense to figure out the kind of the consciousness, that is, whether the consciousness of an object would be visual, tactual, and olfactory and so on.

4. *Sahakāripratyaya*-*Sahakāripratyaya* is the subsidiary condition which is natural for knowledge. For instance-light, form etc without which knowledge does not become possible. In other words, we can say that there must be some favourable auxiliary condition, like-light, right position and so on.

Sautrāntika accepts these four causal factors, which are necessary to generate perceptual knowledge. By combining all these things together one can have the perception of the object. The form of the object hence produced in the mind, is the effect of the object among other things. We cannot perceive the existence of an object because mind immediately knows is the copy of the object in its own consciousness. But from this it infers the object without which the copy would not arise.

The Sautrāntika theory is called the theory of inferability of external objects which is known as *Bāhyā-anumeya-vāda*. The school Sautrāntika is called so because they believe in the authority of *Suttapiṭaka*<sup>21</sup> while Vaibhāṣikas believe in *Abhidhamma piṭaka* and *Vibhāṣā*. It is because of believed in *vibhāṣā* or commentary this school has been called Vaibhāṣika.

## Conclusion

The Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika are Buddhist schools that agree on the existence of a dual reality of mind and matter, but differ on how cognition works and the nature of categories, Vaibhāṣikas believes that cognition directly contacts and cognizes its object, while Sautrāntikas believe that cognition occurs through a mental hologram of the object. Vaibhāṣikas do not believes that superficial true phenomena exist because they

<sup>19</sup> S. Mookerjee, *Buddhist Philosophy of Universal Flux*, p. 317

<sup>20</sup> S. Mookerjee, *Buddhist Philosophy of Universal Flux*, p. 318

<sup>21</sup> Y. Sōgen, *Systems of Buddhistic Thought*, p.5.

are mentally labelled by conceptual cognition. Sautrāntikas believes that categories exist because they are mentally labelled by conceptual cognition. Sautrāntikas believes that the self is a deepest true phenomenon that is objectively real. Vaibhashikas believes that relative truth is that which can be broken down into parts, whereas ultimate truth is indivisible. But Sautrantikas was accepting the selflessness of persons but not the selflessness of phenomena.

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