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# **An Elucidation of VIJÑĀNA in Buddhist Philosophy**

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### **Abstract**

*Generally, consciousness is considered as awareness which is concerned with the different aspects of reality inherent in human being. In other words, it means the states of realizing something or awareness of one's own existence, sensation, thoughts, surroundings etc. It is the aggregates of mental processes that actively participate in one's understanding of reality and one's own self. In Buddhism, consciousness is termed as vijñāna (Sanskrit) or viññāna (Pāli). In Buddhism, vijñāna or consciousness is one of the five classically stated experiential aggregates and it is the third of twelve causes of dependent origination.*

*This paper tried to attempt an elucidation of Buddhist concept of vijñāna or consciousness and tried to interpret why this vijñāna is considered as necessary for forming the meaning of reality and existence.*

**Keywords: vijñāna, consciousness, dependent origination, dharmas, meditation.**

Buddhism is one of the heterodox schools of Indian philosophy. It is considered as the most progressive and practical philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Gautama, the Buddha, flourished in the sixth century B.C. and his followers preached the religion which is known as Buddhism.<sup>2</sup>

In Buddhist philosophy, the fields of consciousness are not limited within the reach of this life alone, but it extends ultimately from life before births to the life after death as well. So, in Buddhism, apart from epistemological approaches we are to enter into the domains of morality and spirituality also. Subjectivity played an important role in Buddhist philosophy. Buddhist subjectivity involves the search for enlightenment as well as the search for human nature who acquires self-consciousness.

Elimination of suffering is the aim of Buddhist philosophy. This is possible only by searching of one's consciousness or awareness as it is presented to one by means of self-observation. In other words, according to Buddhism, elimination of suffering is possible only by changing one's consciousness. One can try to change one's consciousness of the situation in such a way that it is no longer experienced as unpleasant. According to

Buddhism, one can misinterpret one's own experiences and the misinterpretations are driven by one's desires, fears and anxieties.<sup>3</sup> The aim of Buddhist philosophy is the realization of enlightenment or *nirvāṇa* which is possible only by the meditational practices. Therefore, meditation is needed.<sup>4</sup>

The doctrines of 'Dependent Origination', 'Impermanence' and 'No-Soul theory' are all important in Buddhist philosophy. The doctrine of *Pratityasamutpāda* or dependent origination is the foundation of all the teachings of the Buddha. It is applied to the whole causal formula which consists of twelve interdependent causes and effects.<sup>5</sup> According to '*Pratityasamutpāda*', in the empirical world everything is relative, conditional, dependent, subject to birth and death and therefore impermanent. All phenomenal things hang between spatio-temporal reality and nothingness. In this sense Buddha calls this doctrine the Middle Path, '*Madhyama Pratipat*', which avoids both eternalism and nihilism, self-indulgence and self-mortification. The theory of Momentariness or Impermanence (*anityavāda*) and Dependent Origination are co-related theories. All things are relative, dependent, conditional and finite, so, they must be momentary or impermanent. The theory of no-soul (*nairatmyavāda* or *anātmavāda*) is accepted in Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> According to Buddha, 'no-soul' does not indicate the absence of 'self'. It indicates that Buddhism believed in the denial of substance in the form of a '*ātman*' or 'soul'. According to Buddhism, everything is in a flux, existence is momentary. Regarding the concept of non-substantiality of the self, Buddhism considers the aggregates only and denies any permanent soul.<sup>7</sup>

The theory of causation is based on the theory of Momentariness, because each preceding link is causally efficient to produce the succeeding link and thus the capacity to produce an effect becomes the criterion of existence. The chain of causation is known as '*dvādashā-nidāna*' or '*bhāvacakra*', the wheel of re-birth. These twelve links can be divided into three classes, viz. the past, the present, and the future. It may be represented as Ignorance (*avidyā*), Disposition (*sanskāra*), Consciousness (*viññāna*), Name and form (*nāma-rūpa*), Six organs of cognition (*sadāyatana*), Sense object contact (*sparśa*), Sense-experience (*vedanā*), Thirst for objects (*trsnā*), Clinging to objects (*upādāna*), Will to be born (*bhava*), Birth (*jāti*), Sufferings (*jarā-marana*). Out of these the first two are related to past life, means life before birth, the last two to future life, means life after death and the rest to present life. This is the cycle of birth – and – death. This is the twelve-spoked wheel of Dependent Origination.<sup>8</sup> At the stage of the third link or the '*viññāna*' (consciousness), the mind's operation in a person is stronger than that of the body.<sup>9</sup>

Buddhism considers the phenomenal world as ‘*dharmas*’. ‘*Dharmas*’ are considered as ‘states of consciousness’, ‘factor of existence’ etc. The human person consists of five groups of ‘*dharmas*’, called ‘*skandhas*’ (bundles, aggregates), they are-1/ ‘*rupa*’, means ‘body’ or all perceptible forms, 2/ ‘*vedanā*’, meaning ‘feeling’ like pleasure and pain, 3/ ‘*sanjñā*’- ‘perception’ or ‘imagination’, 4/ ‘*sanskāra*’- ‘motive forces’ which are responsible for the formation of karma due to attachment to (bodily) life, desire, delusion, aversion, volition etc., 5/ ‘*viññāna*’, meaning ‘consciousness’, which is responsible for transmigration or it is considered as the element of continuous series of rebirth cycles. Therefore, life continuously flows through the processes of birth-death, rebirth-redeath.<sup>10</sup>

The Buddhist cognitive process of consciousness is mainly considered as of two types- One is ‘Sensorial cognitive process’ and the other is ‘Ideational cognitive process’. Sensorial cognitive process depends on five-fold senses, namely, eye, ear, nose, tongue and body (or skin); and the cognition of their corresponding objects, namely, form, sound, smell, taste, and touch. In this process there are various stages of consciousness. They are - ‘passive mental stage’ or ‘the sleeping stage’ of mind, ‘adverting’, ‘viewing’, ‘hearing’, ‘smell’, ‘taste’, ‘contact’, ‘apprehension’, ‘investigation’, ‘determining’, ‘apperception’, and ‘recording’. Ideational cognitive process of consciousness includes the last three stages (determining, apperception, recording) of the sensorial cognitive process and after entering into the mind the cognition depends on the ideational object. Through the mental-door there appear two types of ideational objects which are either vivid or feeble. When the mind accomplishes the clear type of ideational objects then the cognitive process of consciousness operates upto the stage of recording. Therefore the cognition is clear and sound. When the mind accomplishes the feeble ideational objects then the cognitive process of consciousness operates upto the stage of apperception. Therefore in this case the cognition is not sound.

Through the two-fold cognitive processes of consciousness Buddhism wants to attain ‘*samatha*’ and ‘*vipassanā*’. ‘*Samatha*’ means the calmness of mind by way of removing all mental barriers or obstacles in the path of meditation. ‘*Vipassanā*’ means insight, intuition, introspection etc. which is merely compared with ‘*Nibbāna*’, the highest pleasure.<sup>11</sup> ‘*Vipassanā*’ or ‘insight meditation’ is the most essential technique of meditation for Buddhism. It is considered as the way of one’s own transformation through one’s self observation. In other words, it is the way of self-purification by self-observation. This is a self-exploratory meditation and the continued practice of this meditation helps one to overcome all the mental impurities and miseries or sufferings. Through this meditation, one can balance one’s mind with full of love, compassion and equanimity.<sup>12</sup>

Above all, according to Buddhist philosophy, the world is an endless process of becoming and consciousness is considered as the fundamental reality which is the beginningless and endless continuum of processes. Buddhism emphasizes that instead of soul, consciousness is considered as the source of continuity in a changing process.

### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Srinivas, K & Sastry, V. Kutumba: *A Concise Dictionary of Philosophy*. P. 86-87.
- <sup>2</sup> Hunt, Arnold D. and Crotty, Robert B.: *Ethics of World Religions*. P. 105.
- <sup>3</sup> Barendrjt, Henk: *Buddhist Phenomenology*- [www.cs.ru.nl/4henk/BP/bp1.html](http://www.cs.ru.nl/4henk/BP/bp1.html)
- <sup>4</sup> Joshi, L.M. & Pande, G.C.: *Buddhism*. P. 62
- <sup>5</sup> Narada: *The Buddha and His Teachings*. P. 419.
- <sup>6</sup> Sharma, Chandradhar: *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. P. 73-74.
- <sup>7</sup> Sharma, T. R.: *An Introduction of Buddhist Philosophy*. P. 25-27.
- <sup>8</sup> Sharma, Chandradhar: *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. P. 73-74.
- <sup>9</sup> Sogen, Yamakami: *Systems of Buddhistic Thought*. P. 81.
- <sup>10</sup> Klostermaier, Klaus K.: *Buddhism: A Short Introduction*. P. 32.
- <sup>11</sup> Varma, Chandra B.: *Buddhist Phenomenology*. P. 43-110.
- <sup>12</sup> *Vipassana Meditation, The Technique*, [www.dhamma.org/en/vipassana.html](http://www.dhamma.org/en/vipassana.html)

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2. *Vipassana Meditation, The Technique*, [www.dhamma.org/en/vipassana.html](http://www.dhamma.org/en/vipassana.html)