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Classical Indian Philosophy Madhyamika School of Mahayana Buddhism for Competitive Exams

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Madhyamika School - Introduction

- Madhyamika school of Mahayana Buddhism is also known as Shun Avada.
- It is one of the most important school of Mahayana Buddhism.
- Although it is believed by many that Nagarjuna is the founder of the school but it is not so because it was present way before his time in the Mahayana-sutras and Buddha Carita by Ashbaugh's.
- Hence, Nagarjuna is only the first systematic expounder of Samaveda.
- Meaning, Nagarjuna, a brahmin born in the South of India around the second century A. D. wove the scattered ideas of Madhyamika into a unity or into a systematic, consistent manner.

- On the other hand, Ashbaugh's is regarded as the pioneer of the Madhyamika school of Mahayana.

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Importance Given to the Doctrine of Middle Path

- Madhyamika's or the shunyavadins call themselves the followers of the middle path realised by Buddha.
- According to the theory of middle path expounded by Buddha, the path leading to extremes must be avoided.
- For instance, one must avoid the extremes of existence and non-existence, affirmation and negation, cowardice and brutality, eternal-ism and nihilism, etc.
- According to Buddha, the middle path between these two extremes is the ideal path one should tread upon.
- Hence, shunyavadins accept Buddha's theory of middle path
- Note: Buddha theory of middle path shares a lot of similarities with Aristotle's Golden Mean theory.

The Wrong Conceptions

- Unfortunately, the school Shun Avada has been misunderstood by many schools, thinkers of Indian and Western philosophy.
- The literal meaning of the word shunya is negation or void.
- This has led to a lot of confusion and wrong assessment regarding the nature and the philosophy of the school.
- It is commonly believed that the school accepts universe to be devoid of reality and that they accept everything to be void, unreal, empty or shunya.
- Hence, the school is commonly termed as a nihilist school. Or, it is widely and wrongly believed that Madhyamika believes in nihilism.
- Note: Nihilism is a belief that nothing can be known, all values, all principle and theories are baseless. In short, according to the nihilists, everything is purpose-less and they believe in nothing. It is often associated with extreme pessimism.

The True Meaning and Their Philosophy

- Shunya according to the school does not mean that the universe is devoid of reality or that everything is full of void, and is unreal or empty.
- Rather, shunya does not deny all reality but it denies only the apparent phenomenal world or the everyday world perceived by us.

- In other words, according to the Madhyamika school, shunya means indescribable. It is indescribable because it lies beyond the comprehension of our intellect.
- It is a reality which transcends existence and non-existence both and neither. It is neither affirmation nor negation nor both nor neither.
- Madhyamika philosophy says that reality is that which is independent and does not depend on anything for its existence and origination. But, everything that we know of is not of such nature. So, it cannot be real.
- On the other hand, it cannot be said to be unreal in nature because an unreal thing is, for instance, a caste in the air, or child of a barren woman, a unicorn, etc. These can never come into existence for they are unreal.
- Hence, sunyata is nothing but the name for the indeterminate, indescribable real nature of things. It lies beyond our intellect.
- As a result, it cannot be said to be either real or unreal, or both real and unreal, or neither real nor unreal.
- Simply put, reality being devoid of phenomenal characters is called shunya. Or, Shun Avada only denies the phenomenal world which is mental in nature and not all reality.
- Empirically speaking, sunyata is relativity or pratityasamutpada and it is phenomenal (dependent, conditional, unreal, etc.) in nature.
- On the other hand, absolutely speaking, it is reality or noumena which is free from plurality.
- In other words, the reality or the noumena is indescribable because our limited intellect cannot adequately comprehend and describe it.
- Hence, phenomena is svabhava-shunya or devoid of reality and noumena is prapancha-shunya or devoid of plurality.
- So, it is relative in the empirical sense and reality in the absolute sense.
- In short, the philosophy of Madhyamika school believes that there is a reality behind phenomena which is unconditional, independent and free from all change or noumena (or transcendent reality) .
- According to Nagarjuna, there are two kinds of truths on which Buddha's teachings of Dharma depend, namely;
- Samvrti-satya
- Paramartha-satya
- Samvrti- satya or the empirical truth or the phenomenal truth is meant for ordinary people.

- On the other hand, Paramartha-satya is the transcendental truth or the noumena or the absolute reality.
- The latter is the higher truth, it can only be described as negation of what is known in the former or samvrti-satya.
- Therefore, Nirvana can only be described with a series of negatives such as, “that which is not known ordinarily, not acquired anew, not destroyed, not eternal, not suppressed, not generated is called Nirvana.”
- In other words, no positive description of nirvana or the noumena or the absolute reality is possible.
- Hence, he says those who do not understand the distinction between these two fails to understand the teachings of Buddha
- Note: It is important to note that the philosophy of Madhyamika school or Shun Avada school accepts the two-fold truths, denial of phenomenal world or the empirical world, gives a negative description of the reality or noumena and nirvana, and accepts nirvana to be nothing but the attainment of unity with the transcendental reality or noumena. In this way, the madhyamika philosophy shares a number of similarities with the philosophy of Advanta Vedanta by Shankar.

Mcq

1. Madhyamika believe in _____ Buddhist theory

- A. Madhyampratipada
- B. Anatmavada
- C. Theory of karma
- D. Both B and C

• Answer: A

2. The word *shunya* according to Madhyamika school is

- A. Negation
- B. Void
- C. Indescribable
- D. All of these

• Answer: C

3. Which of the following according to Nagarjuna is the higher truth;

- A. Samvritti satya

B. Paramartha satya

C. Both A and B

D. Sunya

• Answer: B

4. Sunyavada or Madhyamika school is _____ associated with Nihilism

A. Wrongly

B. Rightly

C. can't say

D Wrong question

• Answer: A

5. Some strong similarities can be drawn between the philosophies of Madhyamika school and

A. Yogacara school

B. Advaita Vedanta school

C. Both A and B

D. Visistadvaita school

• Answer: B

✍ Manishika

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