



The Four Philosophical Schools

Dominique Side

There were more than a dozen Buddhist philosophical schools in ancient India, and there was a lively culture of debate between them. Each school formed organically over time by honing its views against the views of opponents in debate. It is only with hindsight that one can define anyone as the founder of a school, or a particular text as marking the beginning of a school. Although some Indian scholars such as Bhavaviveka (500-570) began identifying schools as self-conscious traditions of thought, the framework used today was developed by the Tibetans many centuries later.

The Tibetans simplified everything into four main schools of Buddhist thought, two representing the Nikaya Vehicle and two representing the Mahayana. While this is a useful tool for approaching the subject, it is important to point out that Tibetan scholars were not familiar with the Theravada tradition, so Theravada views are not included within the Nikaya Vehicle. Tibetans were following Indian tradition on this matter. For us today, this is an historical oversight, and complete knowledge of Buddhist philosophy needs to include the Theravada system.

Vehicle	School of philosophy as identified with hindsight by Tibetans	Key Indian masters
Nikaya	Vaibhashika	Vasubandhu (4 th century)
	Sautrantika According to scripture According to reasoning	Vasubandhu Dharmakirti (600-660)
Mahayana	Yogachara	Asanga (4 th century) Vasubandhu
	Madhyamaka	Nagarjuna (2 nd century CE) Bhavaviveka (500-570) Chandrakirti (600-650) Shantarakshita (700-785)

The general Buddhist view of the world is encapsulated in the Three Marks of Existence, but when we go into more detail we discover that Buddhist scholars do not all share the same understanding of such basic Buddhist principles. When we look more closely we find there is not just one single Buddhist answer to any



questions about the world, or one straightforward Buddhist view that can be distinguished from non-Buddhist views. The four major schools of Buddhist philosophy each developed a slightly different system. When Buddhist philosophy is studied in contemporary study colleges, within the Tibetan diaspora for instance, all four of these approaches are taken into consideration.

One of the most important frameworks of Mahayana thought is called the Two Truths: relative truth and ultimate truth. Every school makes a distinction between these two but each school defines them differently. In general, we can say that ultimate truth represents a particular school's understanding of the highest truth or reality, while relative truth refers to a lesser truth such as the truths that are conventionally accepted in a given society and that may work well on a transactional level, but not from every point of view. For example, from one perspective I could say that my television is real because it functions as a television should; the proof is that I can watch the news every night. From another perspective, I could say that it is not really real because it can easily be destroyed by a hammer and then there is no television left.

We should be aware that the big difference between the Nikaya philosophies and the Mahayana ones is that the former argue that the external world does ultimately exist, while Mahayana scholars claim that it does not.

Buddhist views on the existence of an external world

- The Vaibhashikas say we perceive an objective external world:
'I am real, and the world is real'
- The Sautrantikas say that perception implies that an external world exists:
'I perceive it, so it must exist'
- The Yogacharins say we can only know what is mental in nature:
'Life is like a dream'
- The Madhyamikas accept an external world conventionally:
'The universe and its inhabitants are interdependent'

