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## **THE VIJÑĀNAVĀDIN PHILOSOPHY OF DHARMAKĪRTI: IS HIS PHILOSOPHY PURELY IDEALISTIC?**

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### **Abstract**

*Dharmakīrti is one of the greatest Buddhist logicians of Indian tradition. He belongs to the Yogācāra school of Buddhism. The philosophy of Dharmakīrti is widely acknowledged as Vijñānavāda or Subjective Idealism. In order to enquire into the philosophy of Dharmakīrti it is necessary to pass through his logic and epistemology. Dharmakīrti is basically known for his seven great treatises which are chiefly dedicated to the areas of logic and epistemology. The chief objective of Dharmakīrti is to enquire into right knowledge, which itself is the theory of Prāmānyavāda. Among the two recognised sources of knowledge of Buddhism he accepts perception as the only source of right knowledge (Samyak jñāna). And perceptual knowledge leads towards the efficient particulars. And in the philosophy of Dharmakīrti only efficient particulars are ultimately real. Therefore his philosophy cannot be regarded as pure Subjective Idealism as he himself opined. The objective of this paper is to enquire into the philosophy of Dharmakīrti in order find out if his philosophy purely Idealistic or not.*

**Key Words: *Yogācāra, Prāmānyavāda, Efficient particulars, Realism, Idealism.***

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### **I**

**INTRODUCTION:** Dharmakīrti is one of the finest logicians of India who appears in the hierarchy of Indian Buddhist logicians. He is a follower of Dignāga, the profounder of Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda school. Dignāga is known for his independent philosophy which has its basic ground on Yogācāra system. Dharmakīrti is his efficient disciple who spread the Yogācāra philosophy all over the world. He carries on the logical movement started by Dignāga with a tremendous boost up. So, he is regarded as one of pioneers and representatives of Indian Buddhist logic among Indian and Tibetan philosophers. Philosophical system of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti appeared in the philosophical scenario of India as a culminating factor. Dignāga with his logical approach carried on Buddhism towards a new destiny. This mission of Dignāga was successfully fulfilled by the great Indian logician Dharmakīrti. The seed of Buddhism which was harvested by the Buddha Himself, was nurtured by Dignāga properly. And it turned out to the huge tree of Yogācāra with the effort of Dharmakīrti. Whereas Nāgārjuna's philosophy is a deconstruction of

Buddhist teaching Dharmakīrti introduces a “reconstruction of Buddha’s word” (Klostemaier, Klaus K, *Buddhism- A Short Introduction*, p. 189).

Dharmakīrti flourished in the middle of seventh century A. D. (See Stcherbatsky, Th, *Buddhist Logic*, vol. 1, pp. 31-32). He was born around 635 A. D. (See Dasgupta, Surendranath, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, p. 151). According to available evidences he was born in present South India. He was born “in the South, in Trimalaya (Tirumalla) in a Brahman family and received Brahmanical education (Ibid, vol.1, p.34). According to some records his father was a great scholar and philosopher of Hindu tradition. His family was adherent of South Indian Vaiṣṇavism. Therefore during his childhood he studied the Hindu sāstras. Though his basic education started with the Bramanical teachings, yet later on his interest leaned towards Buddhist tradition. In the first stage he studied Buddhism as a lay member of the Buddhist monastery. But gradually became interested in Buddhism. Therefore he went to Nālandā (the Great Ancient Indian University) to receive knowledge of Vasubandhu’s philosophy. Dharmakīrti was a disciple of Dharmapāla, who was a pupil of Vasubandhu. He learned vows from Dharmapāla. After grasping Buddhist logic properly he wrote a commentary on Dignāga. Dharmakīrti uplifted and enlarged his logical system. Dharmakīrti is attributed with *seven treatises*. They are, *Pramāṇavārtika*, *Pramāṇaviniścaya*, *Nyāya-bindu*, *Hetubindu*, *Sambandha-parīkṣā*, *Santānāntara-siddhi* and *Codanā-prakarāṇa*. Out of these in this paper I am chiefly following *Nyāya-bindu*.

Now, before enquiring into the nature of Dharmakīrti’s philosophy I am briefly analyse the chief schools of thought of philosophy,

**IDEALISM:** Idealism is a school of thought which gives a teleological explanation of the world. It is one of the oldest schools of philosophy prescribing Idea or mind or spirit as real, not the matter. For them all the matters of the world are only extension of mind or Idea. There are different branches of Idealism like Objective Idealism, Subjective Idealism, Absolute Idealism and so on. Among them subjective idealism is a school of thought which recognizes minds and mental existence as ultimately real.

**REALISM:** According to realistic school of thought, the objects of the world have independent existence of their own. The existence of the world is real for them. There are various forms of Realism like Materialism, Naturalism etc.

**NOMINALISM:** Nominalism is a school of thought according to which universals or general terms have no independent existence. They are mere names of the particulars.

## II

**PHILOSOPHY OF DHARMAKĪRTI:** The philosophy of Dharmakīrti is actually a fusion of logic and epistemology. He uses logic in order to gain ultimate knowledge. To understand the philosophy of Dharmakīrti his complex method is to be simplified. That is why John Dunne calls Dharmakīrti’s method as *rhetoric*. Within his philosophical method there is logic, epistemology and his unique twists of reasoning. On the basis of these elements he constructs his whole system of thought. Dharmakīrti’s *Prāmāṇyavāda* mainly is concerned

with revelation of knowledge. The chief objective of his Prāmāṇyavāda is to determine the constituents of right knowledge. His philosophy is a systematic investigation into right knowledge. For him human actions are sometimes positive and sometimes negative. In performing these positive and negative acts human actions are sometimes desirable and sometimes undesirable. The purposive actions (*Pravṛtti or artha-kriyā*) of human beings always deal with desirable actions. Right knowledge is based on right cognition (*samyag-jñāna=pramāṇa*). In Buddhist tradition experience is the chief source of the knowledge of the objects of the external world. In his system, reality or real knowledge possesses empirical character. Reality for them is not cognition of Absolute. Rather real cognition of the objects is its true nature. In this journey of reaching knowledge he refers to both the philosophers of his lineage (*paramparā*) and of other traditions. Inheriting the rationalistic attitude of Dignāga, Dharmakīrti also acknowledges perception and inference as two sources of knowledge and denied authority of scriptures (*argumentum ad verecundiam*); but in another way he still admitted Buddha as the source of all knowledge (citing from Nakamura, Hajime, *Indian Buddhism*, p.306, in Yūshō Mujasaka in I B K, Vol.7, no. 2, 1959, pp.131ff). The origin of knowledge resides in their perception or sensation in direct or immediate state. Again, inference is a formal or conceptual representation of perceptual knowledge of objects of the external world. This whole process is operated by human intellect. The conceptual representations of perceptual knowledge of objects of the external world are cognitively expressed by syllogism in verbal expression.

**EPISTEMOLOGY OF DHARMAKĪRTI:** In Buddhist tradition from the time of Dignāga only two sources of knowledge are accepted. They are perception and inference. Dharmakīrti in his works discusses about these sources of knowledge. “Right knowledge is twofold. Direct and indirect (*perceptive and inferential*)” (Citing from Stcherbatsky, Th, *Buddhist Logic*, vol.2, p.12, in *Nyāya-bindu*, 1.3.2-3). The epistemology of Dharmakīrti is wholly based on the difference between perception and inference. Perception implies the knowledge of sensibility and inference refers to knowledge of intuition. A few important characteristics of Dharmakīrti’s account of perception are:

- 1) Perception is *non-constructive*. In other words perception is always direct.
- 2) It is a *distinctive source* of cognizing the objects of the external world.
- 3) Contact of the senses with the objects is *the first stage of cognition process*. In the later stage an attention regarding the object arises. In its pure form perception is non-constructive. Perception is followed by a stage which performs the functions of productive imagination. For Dharmakīrti, perception is not construction.
- 4) Perception in the epistemology of Dharmakīrti is *the necessary condition of real and consistent knowledge*. It is not metaphysical like hares horn. Rather perception for him is transempirical. It is the source of accurate knowledge.

Dharmakīrti admits inference as a source of knowledge. In the first chapter of the *Nyāya-bindu* he discusses about perception. He states “Different from it is the universal character (of the object). It is the province of indirect knowledge (inference)” (Citing from Stcherbatsky, Th, *Buddhist Logic*, vol. 2, pp. 37-38 in *Nyāya-bindu*, 1.6.16-17). As found

in the other schools of Indian tradition for Dharmakīrti also inference is based on the relation of pervasion or *vyāpti*. But, for Dharmakīrti inference operates only the universals. Universals are not ultimately real. So, for Dharmakīrti inference is effective only in the conceptual level. In his *Pramāṇavārtika*, Dharmakīrti discusses about illusion or error. Illusion has different implications. It may either transcendental or empirical. For him perceptual inference falls under the category of spurious perception or *pratyakṣābhāsa*. There are four kinds of spurious perception. Out of them three come under conceptual awareness and one comes under non-conceptual awareness. Three types of conceptual awareness are erroneous awareness (*Bhrāntijñāna*), conventional or linguistic awareness (*Sāmvṛtajñāna*), and inferential awareness (*Anumādi*). Conceptual spurious perception arises when a person judges mirage as water. The person because of ignorance superimposes water upon mirage and commits conceptual spurious perception. Non-conceptual awareness arises out of the disturbances of sense-faculties. For Dharmakīrti non-conceptual spurious perception arises when a person perceives hairs on a clean plate with diseased eyes. By pointing out spurious knowledge Dharmakīrti attempts to highlight the adequate knowledge which is acquired through perception alone. Adequate knowledge or right knowledge for him must be free from error.

**LOGIC OF DHARMAKĪRTI:** Buddhist logic is part and parcel of Indian Buddhism which tries to overcome all contradictions of human knowledge. The domain of Buddhist logic was flourished in the third phase of history of Indian Buddhist. Before that period the field of Indian logic was mainly dominated by the Nyāyayikas. Dharmakīrti is regarded as the most celebrated Buddhist logician throughout the ages. He captures the doctrine of Dignāga and fortifies the system of Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda, which has a Sautrāntika influence. Both Dignāga and Dharmakīrti formulate a mental process of reasoning in their philosophies in their logical way. His *Prāmānyavāda* is an attempt to investigate into right knowledge (*samyak jñāna*). For him, there are two sources of knowledge, perception and inference. Synonymously there are two types of cognitions and two levels of realities. As a logician Dharmakīrti has leaning toward the Sautrāntikas. He presents perceptual judgements as a connecting link between ultimate reality (particulars) and conceptual constructions (universals). There is a logical flow of reasoning in his system. When someone perceives an object (X) then the object is cognized with the help of its concept (A). Again, in case of inferential judgements the object (X) is cognized with the help of its reason (A) and its consequence (B). Therefore the process of perception and inference are distinctly different.

**AN ANALYSIS OF DHARMAKĪRTI'S PHILOSOPHY:** Dharmakīrti appeared more than ten centuries after Buddha. Dharmakīrti's philosophy is chiefly based on his logic and epistemology. He carries on his philosophy with these two wheels of logic and epistemology. The definition of knowledge put forwarded by Dharmakīrti itself expresses the notion of reality or existence throughout his philosophy. Dharmakīrti presents a pragmatic explanation of reality avoiding all metaphysical explanations. The terms like absolute existence, ultimate existence or real existence implies efficiency in his philosophy. He by defining knowledge distinctly shows the difference between two spheres of realities.

A thing which is efficient is real. And a non-efficient thing is not real, e.g. fiction. In the last chapter of his Nyāya-bindu he demonstrates erroneous knowledge. Finally he refutes the wrong and the fallacious on the basis of insufficiency and other. “*Artha-kriyā-sāmarthyā-lakṣaṇam vastu paramārtha-sat*” (Citing from Stcherbatsky, Th, *Buddhist Logic*, vol. 1, p. 69, in *Nyāya-Bindu*, 1.6.15.). Meaning the essence of the ultimate reality is its efficiency. According to Dharmakīrti apart from the ultimate reality there is another reality which is indirect. Thus, in Dharmakīrti’s philosophy the chief tenets of Buddhism are strictly adopted. They are:

- 1) The chief aim of Buddhism is to *remove avidyā or ignorance*.
- 2) *Kṣāṇikavāda* or Theory of momentariness, which demolishes eternal existence of God, soul and physical atoms.
- 3) *Anātmyavāda* or the No-soul theory, either as absolute or as individual.
- 4) *Āryasatyas* or The Four Noble Truths, which the causal process of individual life and also prescribes the Way.

Dharmakīrti formulates his philosophical speculation based on these four pillars. The chief aim of Dharmakīrti is to enquire into the real or right knowledge. For him, “All successful human action is preceded by right knowledge. Therefore this (knowledge will be here) investigated” (Citing from Stcherbatsky, Th, *Buddhist Logic*, vol. 2, p. 1, *Nyāya-Bindu*, 1.1) . Right knowledge or samyag-jñāna is one of the most important concepts of Buddhism. The only goal of Dharmakīrti is to free all the beings by revealing reality or the real knowledge. According to him, the cause of suffering is self-clinging (*ātmasneha*). Self-clinging is caused by sakāryadṛṣṭi. In this stage individuals believe aggregates as the locus of the absolute self. This circle of suffering is described by Dharmakīrti in his great work *Pramāṇvartika*. He states,

*“Yaḥ paśyaty ātmānaṃ tatrāham iti śāśvataḥ snehaḥ//  
 Snahāt sukheṣu tṛṣyati tṛṣṇā doṣāṃs tiraskurute/  
 guṇadarśī paritṛṣyam mameti tat sādhyānāny upādatte//  
 tena ātamābhiniveśo yāvat tāvat sa saṃsāre /  
 ātmani satiparasamjñā svaparavibhāgāt parigrahadveṣau//”*

[Meaning, One who believes (literally, “sees”) the self will always cling to it as “I.” Due to this clinging one thirst for pleasures, and that thirst hides the faults (of those things that are imagined to bring pleasure). Seeing those things as having positive qualities, one yearns for them, and doing so, one appropriates as “mine” those means of accomplishing the desired pleasures. Therefore, as long as one is attached to the self (*ātmābhiniveśa*), one will remain in saṃsāra. And when there is a notion of self, there is a notion of other. From the distinction between self and other comes attachment and aversion.] (Citing from Dunne, John D, *Foundation of Dharmakīrti’s Philosophy*, p. 114, in *Pramāṇvartika*, 217 cd-219a).

So, according to him individuals thirst for pleasure because of self-clinging. Thirst for pleasure is the cause of suffering. Suffering comes to an end when one understands the essential nature of this cause. The chief aim of Dharmakīrti’s philosophy is to free human

beings from suffering. He tries to show the nature of reality in order to remove suffering. In his philosophy conceptuality is ignorance and is the source of all faults. Conceptuality contains ignorance because in it there is an imputation (*samārupa*) of an unreal image. For example imposing sameness (*ekatva*) between two things is not acceptable. By recognising and eliminating the tendency (*vāsanā*) to impose sameness one can get rid of ignorance. Thus he carries on his philosophy with certain levels of understanding. In order to elucidate the concepts of ignorance and knowledge he introduces two truths or realities. They are empirical and transcendental. This doctrine of two realities helps the individuals to understand the continuity that resides among the various stages of understanding which progresses towards knowledge.

In characterising his philosophy, Dharmakīrti is grouped as a Vijñānavādin philosopher. Dharmakīrti calls himself as an adherent of Vijñānavāda (Dasgupta, Surendranath, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1, p.151, footnote). 'Svabhāva' is the key term of Dharmakīrti's philosophical school. In ontological context it means 'power of things as principle of their being' and logically it implies conceptual construction which is related to real objects. Dharmakīrti states, '*Sahopalambha-niyamad abhedo nila-tad-dhiyoḥ/ Bheas ca bhranti-Vijñānair dr̥ṣyendau ivadvayell*' (Meaning, Blue and cognition of blue are not different entities, for the one invariably occurs with the other. One should recognize their difference as due to the false cognition, like (double moon seen by an astygnatic) in the moon, which is single (Darling, Gregory J, *An Evaluation of the Vedantic Critique of Buddhism*, p.70). He seems to be **realist** from the interpretation of extra-mental things. Again he is a **nominalist** in denying the universals. Thus, within the philosophy of Dharmakīrti we find two chief tendencies. They are,

- 1) Dharmakīrti supports an anti-realists tradition.
- 2) Throughout his philosophy his faith on perception and inference is reflected from two different points of views.

In his philosophy Dharmakīrti presents objects with consciousness or self-awareness and subject. But these three are not different part of a single process. Perception of an object includes all these simultaneously. In doing so the nature of true knowledge is self-revealed. Knowledge of the colour blue is not assisted by any other knowledge. Right knowledge is *avisamvādi* (non-contradictory) and particular (*Viśeṣa*). So, in the philosophy of Dharmakīrti, particulars alone are absolutely real. The universals are not capable of producing any *direct awareness* or *an image*. The universals cannot be directly perceived and cannot produce any *telic function*. Therefore they are not ultimately real and have no nature of its own (*arūpa*). *Can consciousness be the foundation of real existence? If yes then can it independently be aware of a thing which is not external to it.* In the philosophy of Dharmakīrti consciousness is essentially the subject. Though consciousness itself is never objectified yet it projects the form of objectivity. This formation of objectivity is the basis of illusion. When the objectivity falls away from it, its subject function also lapses automatically (Citing from Chetterjee, Ashok Kumer, *The Yogacara Idealism*, p.129, in *Pramānavārtika*, II, 213). Subject gains all the significance in the knowing process only

after involving in relation with the object of consciousness. So, in the Vijñānavāda of Dharmakīrti neither consciousness nor objects of conscious have independent existence of their own. They also cannot operate singularly. To cognize the ultimate reality nature of illusion is to be revealed. Again, Dharmakīrti discusses objectivity from various points of view. *Firstly*, though objectivity is not ultimately real yet the idea or the consciousness of objectivity is present. *Secondly*, particulars are essential and ultimately real. But objectivity appears in the whole process of consciousness as a *mode of consciousness*. For example consciousness of a blue object does not project an object. In other words from the consciousness of an object, the object does not arise. Rather to perceive an object, connection between object and its consciousness is mandatory. Yet it is noteworthy that in the process of perceiving the object, consciousness owing to that object arises as an inner prerequisite. Therefore Dharmakīrti states, “there is the awareness of blue” (citing from Chetterjee, Ashok Kumer, *The Yogacara Idealism*, p.129, in *Pramānavārtika*, II, 337).

### III

**CONCLUSION:** In the philosophy of Dharmakīrti search for true knowledge is carried on by considering efficiency as a measuring scale. On the basis of the above analysis following conclusions can be drawn out,

**1) Pragmatic explanation of reality:** Dharmakīrti in his philosophy gives a pragmatic explanation of reality. According to him, each being or existent is transitory. There is no continuous existence of these beings. We assume the continuous existence of an individual who is nothing but a continuation of moments and who is constructed by our imaginative and discriminative thinking (*vikalpita*) (Nakamura, Hajime, *Indian Buddhism*, p.306).

**2) Efficiency as the measuring condition for ultimate reality:** Dharmakīrti seizes efficiency as the measuring condition of ultimate reality in his philosophy. Efficiency and ultimate reality are non-different for him. In order to be real fire must be efficient. In other words fire must cook and burn in order to be the ultimately real. This is the ‘*telic function*’ of the ultimately real objects.

**3) There are realist, nominalist and idealist elements in Dharmakīrti’s philosophy:** Dharmakīrti appears as a realist when he recognizes perception as the only source of right knowledge. At the same time he can be established as an Nominalist, as he denies the reality of universals. At the same he himself calls as a Vijñānavādin (subjective idealist) thinker as mentioned. He is a subjective idealist philosopher because he relates perception with consciousness. In this way there are realist, nominalist and idealist elements in his philosophy.

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