A VIEW FROM VIETNAM OF MOKSHA IN THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF ANCIENT INDIA

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ABSTRACT

One of the many outstanding themes found in ancient religions of India is the theme of Moksha or liberation. With the passage of time, Indian society changed and man’s mental power also improved. The philosophical thought of Liberation, first started between the time of the Rig-Veda (from c 1500 B.C. to c 1000 B.C.) and that of Brahmanas (from c 1000 B.C. to c 800 B.C. to c 500 B.C.), was further developed in the principal message of the Upanishads (from c 800 B.C. to c 500 B.C.) and interpreted differently in the various philosophical and religious schools of the time such as Sankhya, Vaisheshika, Nyaya, Yoga, Mimansa, Vedanta (belonging to orthodox Brahminism) or Jainism. This thought, however, reached its highest development in Buddhism (of the unorthodox system). Each of these philosophical and religious schools, together with its teachings and tendencies, represented the voice of each of the various castes in India and presented a course of physical and mental disciplines for attaining liberation.

Keywords: Ancient India, Moksha, the Religious Philosophy, Vietnam

I. INTRODUCTION

The ancient religions of India are characterized by profound humanism, and one of the many outstanding themes found in that profound humanism is the theme of Moksha or liberation.

Though the ancient religions of India belong to the different schools each of which has its own characteristics and tendencies, all of them aim at explaining this one key issue, the cause of man’s sufferings and the mean by which he can be liberated from the sea of suffering. Liberation is thus the ultimate objective and responsibility of all of the ancient religions of India. Different religions may propose different ways to liberate mankind, but their objective remains the same: to bring about liberation.

The article focuses on clarifying conceptual problems and the origin of the problem of release in ancient Indian religious philosophy; the content of release thought in ancient Indian philosophy, expressed in the Vedas, the Upanishads; in the schools of orthodox religious philosophy (The Orthodox Systems), such as: Nyaya, Vaisesika, Samkya, Yoga, Purva-Māmda, Vedānta; and in the unorthodox schools of philosophy (The Heterodox Systems): Cārīka, Jainism, Buddhism.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to present and analyze the concept of liberation, the origin of liberation in ancient Indian religious philosophy and the content of liberating thought in ancient Indian religious philosophy.

Methodology: The paper’s approach is based on the worldview and the methodology of Marxist philosophy, and at the same time uses specific research methods such as analysis and synthesis, logic and history, inductive and interpretation, abstraction, generalization, comparison, comparison and literary methods for research and presentation.

Main Findings: The research to clarify the content of liberating thought in ancient Indian philosophy under the perspective of Vietnam, help readers to have a systematic, fundamental and deeper understanding of the philosophy of Indian liberation culture in general.
Applications: Research results of liberation ideas in ancient Indian philosophy under the perspective of Vietnam in a systematic and basic way help us clearly see the influence of Indian culture in general and Buddhism in particular on our nation's culture, which also helps us to have a deeper understanding, with national pride and cultural tolerance, the Vietnamese people have selectively absorbed the quintessence of the value of many cultures in the world, including Indian culture, in order to enrich and deepen our national culture in history.

Novelty/Originality: Research contributes to clarifying the content of liberation thought in ancient Indian philosophy for the cultural and spiritual life of the Indian people in general and Vietnam in particular, that is the ideological, religious and moral significance.

III. LITERATURE SURVEY

The study of Indian philosophy as well as the liberating thought of Indian religious philosophy has: Our Oriental Heritage by Will Durant, by Simon and Schuster, New York, 1954, with book 2 titled India and Her Neighbor) has presented, analyzed quite deeply the history of Indian civilization in areas such as geography, population, history, and economics, politics - society, customs, practices, ideas, beliefs, religions, literature, arts, architecture,... including Indian philosophy, religion; or The Discovery of India, 3 volumes by Jawaharlal Nehru, by The Oxford University Press, New Delhi, India, 1954. Although these are not works specializing in philosophy, on the basis of history and common culture, the above authors have also presented and gave quite insightful assessments and comments on the characteristics of Indian philosophy.

The Discovery of India cừ Jawaharlal Nehru, The Oxford University Press, New Delhi, India, 1954; A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy, do Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan và Charles A. Moore biên soạn, Princeton University Press, Princeton New Jersey, 1973; The Upanishas, 4 vol, do Bonanza Books, New York, 1959, analyzed the purpose, content, and path of liberation in ancient Indian philosophy. The above works have gone into the content of each school or type of scriptures, with specific philosophical issues such as ontology, epistemology, human ethics of ancient Indian philosophy, thereby helping us to have a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of ancient Indian philosophy.

Indian Philosophy by S. Radhakrisnan, do New York, The MacMillan, 1951; and The Oxford University Press, New Delhi, India, 1956; Max Muller's Six Systems of Indian Philosophy, by Bhavan's book University, 1899; Outline of Eastern philosophy by Minh Chi and Ha Thuc Minh, Publishing Board of University of Ho Chi Minh City, 1993; Introduction to Indian philosophy by Le Xuan Khoa, Learning Resource Center, Ministry of Education, Saigon, 1972; History of Indian philosophy by Thich Man Giac, The Curatorial Committee of Van Hanh University, Saigon, 1967; History of ancient Indian philosophy of Doan Chinh - Luong Minh Cu, University and professional education, Hanoi, 1991, Liberation thought in the Indian philosophy of Doan Chinh, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997 ... The above works have presented and made quite profound comments on the content and characteristics of ancient Indian philosophy; especially in the issue of the purpose, content and way of liberation of the Indian religious philosophy.

IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

1. Conception of release and the origin of release in ancient Indian religious philosophy

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In Sanskrit, liberation is “moksha”, “mukti”; in Chinese, it is expressed in two characters, in which the first character means “to untangle, to take off, to detach oneself from”, and the second means “to free oneself from fetters of some kind”. According to ancient India religious scriptures such as the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Dhammacakkappavanta Sutta, Anattalakkhana
Sutta, and the Dhammapada Sutta, “liberation” is the term that is the rich in meaning and can be interpreted from several angles. In the Upanishads, for instance, “liberation” is conceived of as the state in which the self or Atman is identified with the Supreme Being or Brahman. It is thus written in Chandogya Upanishad, “He is my Self within the heart, He is that Brahman” (The Upanishads, 1959c: 14) and “He is my Self within the heart, smaller than a grain of rice, smaller than a grain of barley, smaller than a grain of millet; He is my Self within the heart, greater than the earth, greater than the mid-region, greater than heaven, greater than all these worlds” (The Upanishads, 1959c: 14).

In Bhagavad Gita, “moksha sannyasayoga” is defined as “self-denial, the renunciation of all that which man desires, the sacrifices of all one’s rights… Some say that there should be renunciation of action, too, since action disturbs contemplation; but some say that works of sacrifice, gift, and self-harmony should not be renounced” (Bhagavad – gita, 1962: 115).

In Dhammapada Sutra, the Buddha interprets liberation as “the state in which has attained Nirvana, freedom and sublime happiness” (Dhamma pada Sutra, Sukhavaggo, 1993: 202-204) and in which one has completely rid himself of greed (lobha), anger (dosa), and ignorance (moha). (The root “ni” in “Nirvana” means “without”, and “varna” means “passion”). Nirvana is, then, the state of purity, of complete absence of sufferings and false actions. Nirvana is also the state in which one has achieved unbounded joy and calmness, and has completely detached oneself from this world and is therefore, birthless, deathless and not dependent on any causes. Also in Dhammapada Sutra, it is thus written, “A man who has freed himself from all forms bondage has reached his destination and is no more subject to suffering” (Dhamma pada Sutra, Sukhavaggo, 1993: 90).

Therefore, liberation, as a philosophical theme in the ancient religions of India, refers to the mental, psychological and moral state of one who has detached himself from the obligations of the vulgar world and from the sufferings of life. Once liberation has been attained, man will also attain enlightenment, recognize his true self and the true from of everything, rid himself of all illusions and lust, and escape the influence of the samsara or the endless series of birth, death and rebirth. He will also be able to identify himself with the Supreme Being or Brahman or Nirvana.

To attain liberation, man must improve his actions (karma yoga), observe the disciplines (sila), sharpen his intellect and intuition, and practise spiritual experimentation and meditation. What, then, is the origin of this philosophical thought of liberation in the ancient religions of India?

Except for the materialistic school of Lokayata, most of the other ancient religions of India explain that starting point of this philosophical thought is the sufferings of manking and the aim of this thought is the suppression and extinction of all desires, the return to man’s true self and union of the self or Atman with the Supreme Being or Brahman or Nirvana.

Such an explanation carries in itself a profound moralistic and humanistic significance, but it does not help much in pointing out the true origin of sufferings. Inquisitive minds would press the point a little further and ask: what, then, is the origin of sufferings? Is the thought of liberation the outcome of man’s subjective will? Or is it a reflection of the demands of the objective reality? Such philosophical school as Upanishad, Brahminism, Buddhism and others offer the following explanation: By nature, man’s true self and the supreme Being or Brahman or Nirvana are identical. The material world, together with its various forms, are just manifestations of that only true Supreme Being. But man’s ignorance and desire have blinded him to that truth and have alienated him from his own self. This explains why stubbornly takes the false self as his true self and consequently finds himself caught in the grips of endless sufferings.

According to ancient Indian religions, then, the origin of human sufferings lies in man’s own psyche. As Kimura Taiken, a Japanese Buddhologist, has put it, “Buddhism holds that life is full of sufferings and it therefore advocates freedom and liberation as its ideals. But those sufferings are not objective realities that exist all by themselves. On the contrary, they are the outcome of man’s attitude of mind. Man suffers because he takes the false self as his true self and stubbornly
tries to satisfy that false self of his. If he can overcome and rid himself of his petty self, he will not only stop suffering but also experience unbounded freedom and joy” (Kimura, T, 1969: 19).

But all things considered, we can say that man’s sufferings and his yearning to get out of that sea of sufferings are a reflection of the gloomy reality of the Indian society of the time. Karl Marx and F. Engels have remarked. “Consciousness is nothing other than consciousness of existence. It is not consciousness that determines existence, but it is existence that determines consciousness” (Karl, M. & Friedrich, E, 1981b: 276-277), and “unlike mushrooms, philosophers do not spring up from soil. Rather, they are the products of their time and their people, and nectar that they can offer mankind is their philosophical thoughts” (Karl, M & Friedrich, E, 1981a: 156). Also in connection with this remark, Jawaharlal Nehru emphasized, “It is impossible to imagine that any culture or any view point based on the assumption of the existence of some other world or of the meaninglessness of this world could have expressed itself so powerfully and in such a varied way” (Jawaharlal, N, 1954: 176-177).

From the above-mentioned viewpoint and also from an analysis of the historial, social, political and economic situations of ancient India, we can say that liberation as a philosophical thought originated not only from the powerful, hostile and mysterious natural forces that weighted down the life of ancient Indians but also (and chiefly) from the characteristics of ancient Indian society, which was a patriarchal, stagnating and backward society, with a system of bondage that was still far behind the standards of the advanced systems of bondage found in other ancient civilizations.

This society was further hampered by the well-consolidated system of self-sufficient rural communes characterized by small scale farming and primitive spinning and weaving (Karl, M & Friedrich, E, 1981b: 558), and also by a conservative administrative system and social institutions.

All these no doubt exerted a very profound influence not only on the country’s economy but also on its thinking, religions, philosophy, habits and customs.

Worse still, the life of ancient India was further stifled by the caste system. This system helped to maintain social order but its other side was conservativeness and mercilessness. This system of bondage was not only advocated by the teachings of theosophical Brahminism but also protected by the laws of the state permitting bondage through the so-called “dharma”. The caste system in India not only encouraged discrimination in matters of social status and property as in other slave-owning states, but also in matters of race, religion, occupation, social relations and marriage. Needless to say that this discrimination was very active in the everyday life of ancient India and it is understandable why the people of the time yearned so much for freedom from the fetters of such a society. But faced with those mysterious, hostile and overwhelmingly powerful forces (both natural and social) that are far beyond their power to comprehend and overcome, and unable to find anywhere or anyone to turn to for help, they could only take their solace in the world of deities (which in fact was the world of deified social and natural forces) or turn to their own inner world spiritual, moral and psychological consolation. For a fuller explanation of the philosophical thought of liberation, we must not forget the philosophical tradition of the time. This tradition had started from the time of the Rig-Veda with its philosophical and religious thoughts and its philosophers. These philosophers, by tradition, would renounce this worldly life and devote themselves entirely to their philosophical and religious beliefs with the hope that they could find the way to help man get out of the sea of sufferings in which he was engulfed. They turned away from the external world and tended towards introspection and meditation, scouring their inner world for answers to questions concerning the nature and meaning of life: “where has man come from? How must he live? And whither will he go?” (The Upanishads, 1959c: 1-8) or to questions about birth, old age, illness, death, suffering and happiness (The Vietnamese TaishōTripiṭaka, 1993). This mental tendency is referred to as “introspection” or the examination of one’s own inner world.

2. Content of release thought in ancient Indian religious philosophy
With the passage of time, Indian society changed and man’s mental power also improved. The philosophical thought of Liberation, first started between the time of the Rig-Veda (from c 1500 B.C. to c 1000 B.C.) and that of Brahmanas (from c 1000 B.C. to c 800 B.C. to c 500 B.C.), was further developed in the principal message of the Upanishads (from c 800 B.C. to c 500 B.C.) and interpreted differently in the various philosophical and religious schools of the time such as Sankhya, Vaisheshika, Nyaya, Yoga, Mimansa, Vedanta (belonging to orthodox Brahminism) or Jainism. This thought, however, reached its highest development in Buddhism (of the unorthodox system). Each of these philosophical and religious schools, together with its teachings and tendencies, represented the voice of each of the various castes in India and presented a course of physical and mental disciplines for attaining liberation. Some advocate the perfection of virtues through conformity to religious laws, customs and duties for the purpose of attaining spiritual equilibrium and purity while others aim at improving the intellectual and intuitive power for the attainment of enlightenment and wisdom. If there are schools that are more introverted, renouncing the worldly life, and emphasizing the perfection of morality and intellect as means to attain enlightenment and liberation. All these schools of thought symbolize man’s long and arduous journey back to his true self, which has been hidden from him by his own ignorance and desires.

If the Vedas holds that the path to liberation is through worship (with elaborate rituals and sacrifices) and asking for protection from deities (which, in fact, are natural and social forces deified by man himself), and vaguely believes in the reward of a tranquil and immortal life in some other world, then the Upanishads conceives of liberation as the unity of the self and the universal spirit or the universal source of life. In other words it is the unity of Atman and Brahman.

What is Brahman, then? Brahman is “that from which these beings are born; That by which, when born, they live; That into which (at the time of dissolution) they enter and merge. That is Brahman” (The Upanishads, 1959c: 2). Brahman is the primal source of light. “When he shines, everything shines after him. By his light everything is lit… That immortal Brahman alone is before, that Brahman is to the right and left. Brahman alone pervades everything above and below; this universe is that supreme Brahman alone” (The Upanishads, 1959a: 10-11). Brahman is that “which cannot be seen nor feet; which is eternal and omnipresent, all-pervading and extremely subtle; which is imperishable and the source of all beings” (The Upanishads, 1959a: 6).

And what is Atman? In “Atman”, the root “an” means “to breathe.” Atman, therefore, is the principle of life. Atman is still there even after man’s body, intellect, feeling, emotion and senses have all perished. Atman does not limit itself to the ever-changing forms of life. Brahman is the spiritual foundation of the universe and Absolute Truth to which man’s true self (Atman) is unified. It is thus written in the Chandogya Upanishad, “This is the self, this is immortal, fearless. This is Brahman” (The Upanishads, 1959c: 8). The individual self is merely the embodiment of Brahman that takes abode in the human body, man has mistakably thought that it is different from the supreme universal spirit of Brahman. In his life, man is subject to the inevitable result of what he does to satisfy the desires of his body. Therefore man must try best as he can to detach himself from the worldly life, to rid him of all desires, and to devote his whole life to the meditation on the true nature of his spirit and on the unity of his spirit with the supreme source of life or Brahman. Once man has successfully detached himself from this worldly life, his spirit will no longer be fettered to this mortal, ever-changing and transient world. His spirit will then be identified with Brahman liberated. That is the ultimate goal of all Beings. It is thus written in Chandogya Upanishad: “O Indra, this body is mortal, always held by death. It is the abode of the self, which is immortal and incorporeal. The embodied self is the victim off pleasure and pain so long as one is identified with the body, ther is no cessation of pleasure and pain. But neither pleasure nor pain touches one who is not identified with the body” (The Upanishads, 1959c: 12). It is also written in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: “Good deeds make a man good and bad deeds
bad” (The Upanishads, 1959b: 7) and “Those whose conduct here {on earth} has been good will quickly have a good rebirth birth as Brahman, birth as a kshatriya, or birth as a vaisya. But those conduct here has been evil will quickly attain some evil birth birth as a pig, birth as a chandala” (The Upanishads, 1959c: 10). The Upanishads hold that Man’s normal senes and power of reason alone cannot help him to get knowledge of the Supreme Being and that the identity of the Self and the Supreme Being is only possible through divine revelation as asserted in he Vedas, and through intuition or spiritual experimentation.

Of the orthodox system of religious and philosophical beliefs, Mimansa advocates the attainment of liberation through the performance of religious rituals and the strict observance of social and religious rules (dharma) that are demanded of man by the caste to which he belongs. Yoga, on the other hand, prescribes a course of mental and physical disciplines by which the spirit can be detached from the external world and become pure. In that state of spiritual purity, man can perceive (while in deep meditation) the difference between his self and the external environment and consequently attain enlightenment. These mental and physical disciplines are referred to as the Eight Precious Stages: The first and second stages are the practice and unfailing observance of moral virtues (including non-violence, chastity, truthfulness, etc); the third and fourth stages, often worked in conjunction, include the practice of certain difficult and arduous bodily postures and control of the breath; the fifth stage is restraint, in which sense organs are trained to take no notice of their perceptions; the sixth stage is steadying the mind and excluding worldly thoughts through concentration on a single object; the seventh stage is meditation, which, when fully achieved, leads to the eighth and final stage, samadhi, or release.

Other orthodox schools include: Nyaya (which emphasizes logical analysis of knowledge, considered as deriving from perception, inference, analogy, and reliable testimony); Vaisheshika (which asserts the existence of a universe formed by a god out of atoms of earth, air, fire, and water, as well as out of space, time, ether, mind and soul, all conceived as substances co-existing eternally with the god). Both of these schools hold that liberation can be attained through intellectual training and intuitive knowledge. But more outstanding than those schools is perhaps Vedanta which develops a method to attain enlightenment and liberation through intuitive knowledge and spiritual experimentation together with selfless devotion (bhakti).

Of the unorthodox system, Jainism asserts that, to free his immortal soul from sufferings brought about by his own desires, man must observe the principles of asceticism that rule out killing, theft, telling lies, lust, greed and worldly pleasures. He must also practise meditation as a means to bring about spiritual calmness and purity. Lokaya, on the other hand, rejects such Brahminist concepts as the immortal spirit, karma, samsara and moksha, and advocates acceptance of this life and its sufferings and joys. Perhaps Lokaya’s opposition to orthodox Brahminism of the time when interpreted in some way also implies a method of liberation?

But liberation as a philosophical thought in the ancient religions of India reached its highest development in Buddhism. Buddhism holds that the ever-changing world, together with everything in it, is the outcome of the relation of a primal cause to other secondary causes or conditions. It is thus written in Dhammapada: “All actions are ever-changing. If our intellect can see it that way we will be free from sufferings” (The Dhammapada, 1995: 277). Since everything is ever-changing, there is no self, nor is there that universal spirit. It is out of his own ignorance and desires that man has come to accept his false self and descend to the world of material comforts and possessions and has thus inflicted on himself countless sufferings. Only intellectual training, meditation and observance of religious rules can bring about the extinction of desires and ignorance and make possible the attainment of Nirvana. The Buddhist philosophical thought of liberation finds its expressions in the Four Noble Truths (Catvery Arya Satya), The Twelve Nidanas (Dvadansanidanas), The Eightfold Path (Aryastangikamarga). The Four Noble Truths are: All life is suffering (Dukkha); the cause of suffering is ignorant desire (Samudaya Satya); This desire can be destroyed (Nirodha Satya); The means to this is the Eightfold Path (Marga Satya), The Five
Disciplines and The Six Bodhisattvic Perfect Means, which together make up three basic Buddhist subjects: Discipline (Sila), Contemplation (Samadhi) and Knowledge (Prajna). Commenting on the special features of his religious doctrine, the Buddha wrote, “I only preach one sermon on sufferings and how to put an end to sufferings” and “I say, Paharada, much as the great sea has only one salty taste, so all of my teachings and disciplines have only one taste, and that is the taste of salvation” (The Vietnamese TaishōTripiṭaka, 1993: 16).

V. CONCLUSION

We can say that the philosophical thought of liberation in the ancient religions of India was essentially a reflection of the characteristics and the urgent demands of Indians to get out of this life of injustice and sufferings and to enjoy a better life and therefore it carries in itself a profoundly humanistic significance. But due to its failure to perceive the true origin of man’s sufferings, this thought only brought about spiritual, psychological and moralistic liberation rather than any real social reforms that are only made possible through real revolutionary actions.

It must be admitted, however, that the thought of liberation, with its profound historical significance, has had a far-reaching influence not only on the Indians but also on the peoples of other oriental countries including Vietnam. This thought has found its way into the skillful strategies worked out by the outstanding leaders of the Indian people for cultural development and national liberation (the policies of ‘non-violence’ and ‘hunger strike’ for instance). It has also attracted the attention and admiration of thinkers the world over because it has provided them with a new way to look at mankind and the world. William Durant once wrote, “India has taught us a lesson of noble tolerance, which is a sign of a mature mental power. It has also taught us how to preserve spiritual calmness and mental equilibrium, which will enable us to learn new things, to comprehend all and to forgive all. Last but not least, it has taught us a lesson of kindness and love, which alone will unite mankind” (Will, D, 1954: 524).

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