

The Early Buddhist Notion of the Middle Path

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THE RELATIONSHIP between the earliest form of Buddhism and the various traditions that developed later has been a perennial problem in the history of Buddhist thought. As is well known to students of Buddhist philosophy, the different schools of the Abhidharma or scholastic tradition, in spite of rather significant doctrinal variations among themselves, all claimed to preserve the Buddha-word in its pristine purity. The Mahāyāna schools, adopting philosophical standpoints very different from those of scholasticism, upheld the view that theirs represent the true teachings of the Buddha. Many a modern scholar, after aligning himself with one or the other of these later philosophical developments, has endeavoured to draw a close relationship between the school he has accepted and early Buddhism. In the present paper, I propose to show that early Buddhism, as embodied in the Pali Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas, which are recognized by all the different schools as representing the earliest sources for the study of Buddhism, is radically different from all these schools, at least as far as their philosophical content is concerned.

Even though some of the later developed schools did not recognize all the discourses included in the Nikāyas and the Āgamas as being authoritative, fortunately there is at least one discourse that carried the stamp of authority so much so that all schools of Buddhism, both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, studied it with veneration and respect. This is acknowledged by even a prominent Mahāyāna philosopher like Candrakīrti.¹ Moreover, this discourse deals with the most fundamental doctrine in Buddhism and, therefore, any difference that can be noted with regard to the interpreta-

¹ *Mādhyamikavṛtti (Madhyamakakārikās)* (abbr. MKV), ed. L. de la Vallée Poussin (St. Pétersbourg: Imperial Academy of Sciences, 1903-13), p. 269: *Idam ca sūtram sarvanikāyeṣu paṭhyate.*

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tion of the ideas embodied here would indicate the difference subsisting between the early and later forms of Buddhism. The discourse is known as *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta* (Nāgārjuna calls it *Kātyāyanāvavāda-sūtra*) and is included in the *Samyutta-nikāya*² and the *Tsa-a-han Ching* 雜阿含經.³ The text of this discourse, as found in the Pali Nikāyas, is as follows:

While the Exalted One was at Sāvatti the venerable Kaccāyana of that clan came to visit him, and saluting him sat down at one side. So seated he asked the Exalted One, saying: "Lord, we hear the phrase 'right view, right view.' Now how far is there a right view?"

"This world, Kaccāyana, usually bases [its view] on two things: on existence (*atthitā*) and on nonexistence (*n'atthitā*). Now he, who with right insight sees the uprising of the world as it really is, does not hold with the nonexistence of the world. But he, who with right insight sees the passing away of the world as it really is, does not hold with the existence of the world."

"The world, for the most part, Kaccāyana, is bound by approach, attachment, and inclination. And the man who does not go after that approach and attachment, determination of mind, inclination and disposition, does not cling to or take up the stand, [does not think]: 'This is my soul!'—who thinks: 'That which arises is just suffering, that which passes away is suffering,'—this man is not in doubt, is not perplexed. Knowledge herein is his, not merely other-dependent. Thus far, Kaccāyana, he has 'right view.' "

" 'Everything exists' (*sabbam atthi*): this is one extreme. 'Everything does not exist' (*sabbam n'atthi*): this is the other extreme. Not approaching either extreme the Tathāgata teaches you a doctrine by the middle [way]: Conditioned by ignorance dispositions come to pass; conditioned by dispositions is consciousness; conditioned by consciousness is the psychophysical personality; conditioned by the psychophysical personality are the six senses; conditioned

² *Samyutta-nikāya*, ed. Leon Feer (London: Pali Text Society, 1960), 2.16–17.

³ *Taishō Shinshū Daijōkyō*, ed. J. Takakusu and K. Watanabe (Tokyo: Taishō Shuppan Company, 1924–34), 2.85c.

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by the six senses is contact; conditioned by contact is feeling; conditioned by feeling is craving; conditioned by craving is grasping; conditioned by grasping is becoming; conditioned by becoming is birth; conditioned by birth is decay-and-death, grief, suffering . . . even such is the uprising of this entire mass of suffering. But from the utter fading away and ceasing of ignorance (arises) ceasing of dispositions, and thus comes ceasing of this entire mass of suffering.”

This discourse refers to two philosophical theories, existence or Being (*atthitā*, Sk. *astitā*, Ch. *yu* 有) and nonexistence or non-Being (*n’atthitā*, Sk. *nāstitā*, Ch. *wu yu* 無有). There is no difficulty in identifying these two theories.⁴ The former is the traditional Upaniṣadic doctrine according to which everything in this world is filled with (*pūrṇa*) a reality which is the ultimate ground of existence (*astitva*). It is the permanent, eternal, and substantial “self,” variously known as Ātman or Brahman. Hence the Buddha’s criticism that this theory of “existence” leads to the belief in permanence (*sassata*, Sk. *śaśvat*, Ch. *ch’ang chu* 常住). The other is the doctrine of the Materialists who, in spite of their doctrine of natural determinism (*svabhāva-vāda*), were considered to be annihilationists (*ucchedavādin*) because they denied causality of moral behavior, etc. Moreover, the Materialists also denied the existence of a reality of the sort the Upaniṣadic thinkers acknowledge, and hence were popularly known as “nihilists” (*n’atthika-vāda*). The Buddha, too, while refraining from criticizing their conception of natural determinism,⁵ rejected their theory as being nihilistic primarily because of their denial of free-will and moral responsibility. Buddha’s reasons for rejecting both these theories seem to be extremely significant.

The two extremes of existence and nonexistence—namely, the perceptions of ceasing (*mirodha*) and arising (*uppāda*), respectively—were rejected because they were contrary to the perceptions of one who understands things as they are. Arising and ceasing, no doubt, are empirical facts and, therefore, the argument for the rejection of the two extremes is empirical. Not only did the Buddha resort to empirical arguments for the rejection of the two metaphysical extremes, but also he replaced them with an

⁴ See my *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1975), pp. 5–53.

⁵ See my explanation of this problem in *Causality*, p. 41.

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empiricist view. Thus, the “middle path” (*majjhimā paṭipadā*, Sk. *madhyamā pratipat*, Ch. *chung tao* 中道) between the two extremes of existence and nonexistence is presented as causation or “dependent arising” (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) which explains the pattern according to which things in the world arise and pass away. The conception of “dependence” (*pratitya*) enabled the Buddha to avoid the two metaphysical assumptions regarding causation, namely, (a) the potential existence of the effect in the cause, hence the substantial connection between them or (b) the potential non-existence of the effect and hence the absence of any connection between the cause and the effect.

There cannot be any controversy regarding the message of the discourse. It is a straightforward and unequivocal statement of an empiricist theory of causation which steers clear of two metaphysical ideas of substantial permanence on the one hand, and nihilistic impermanence on the other. The “theory of dependence,” in such a context, explains the causal relationship among impermanent factors of existence.

This was the “middle path” the Buddha claimed he discovered under the Bodhi-tree. It was this philosophical middle position that was the basis of the ethical path of “moderation” between the two extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence that constitute the subject of his first discourse—the *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta*.⁶ In the early discourses, this middle path was never explained as something indefinable (*avivacaniya*) or as indescribable (*avācya*) in any way. The only remark made is that it is “beyond the sphere of logic” (*atakkāvacara*, Sk. *atarkāvacara*), but for very specific reasons. It was a doctrine “deep, difficult to perceive, difficult to comprehend, but tranquil, excellent, beyond dialectic, subtle, intelligible to the learned,” yet a “matter not easily understood by those delighting in attachment, those rejoicing in attachment.”⁷ The argument seems to be that if a person is excessively attached to a certain theory, no amount of logic or dialectic could convince him of the truth of any other theory. Hence, to those recluses and brahmins deeply immersed in metaphysical views (*ditṭhi*, Sk. *drṣṭi*, Ch. *chien* 見), “dependent arising” or causal happening (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) was a difficult doctrine to accept. So much for the “middle path” in early Buddhism.

⁶ *Samyutta-nikāya* 5.420.

⁷ *Majjhima-nikāya*, ed. V. Treckner (London: Pali Text Society, 1948), 1.167; *Taishō* 1.777c-778a.

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The scholastic traditions which developed theories of moments (*kṣana*) and atoms (*paramāṇu*) were faced with the rather difficult task of explaining causal continuity.⁸ One of the ways in which the scholiasts tried to resolve the problem of the continuity of the discrete momentary phenomena (*dharma*) was by accepting the dualistic theory of substance (*svabhāva*) and qualities (*lakṣaṇa*). They upheld that the qualities were in a state of flux, changing every moment, while the substance remained unchanged throughout the three periods of time—past, present, and future. This came to be known as the theory of “everything exists” (*sarvam asti*) which was upheld by the Sarvāstivādins. It may be noted that this very same theory constituted one of the extremes referred to and criticized by the Buddha in the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta*. The Sautrāntikas certainly spared no pains in refuting this doctrine of substance (*svabhāva*) which they equated with the idea of “soul” or “self” (*ātman*).⁹

How did the Sarvāstivādins counter this criticism? Naturally, by reinterpreting the implications of the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta*. In the *Vibhāṣāprabhāṣṭī*, a commentary on the *Abhidharmadīpa* that was written in order to explicate the genuine Sarvāstivāda point of view in opposition to the ideas expressed in the *Abhidharmakośa* with its Sautrāntika leanings, we find this reevaluation of the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta*.¹⁰ Here the author points out that in the discourses the Buddha taught a “middle path” according to which (1) all component things (*samskārah*) are empty (*śūnyāh*) of falsely conceived notions such as “person” (*puruṣa*) or “receptacle consciousness” (*ālaya-vijñāna*) and other such imaginations, and (2) all component things are not empty or nonempty (*aśūnyāh*) of specific and general characteristics (*svasāmānyalakṣaṇa*). This implies that the recognition of a reality such as “person” (*puruṣa*) posited by the Sāṅkhya school or by the “personalists” (*puṅgala-vādin*) of the Buddhist tradition or “receptacle consciousness” (*ālaya-vijñāna*) of the Yogācārin would contribute to a theory of permanent existence (*astitva*) and a denial of specific and general characteristics (*svasāmānyalakṣaṇa*) of dharmas, as admitted by the Sarvāstivādins, would lead to nihilistic nonexistence (*nāstitva*).

⁸ See *Causality*, pp. 67–88.

⁹ *Sphuṭārthābhidharmakośavyākhyā* (abbr. *Sako*) of Yaśomitra, ed. U. Wogihara (Tokyo: Publication Association of *Abhidharmakośavyākhyā*, 1932–36), p. 362: *svabhāvata ity ātmatah*.

¹⁰ *Abhidharmadīpa with Vibhāṣāprabhāṣṭī*, ed. P. S. Jaini (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1959), p. 270.

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Specific characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*) of a dharma is identified with "substance" (*dravya*, *svabhāva*) which was looked upon by the Sarvāstivādins as "ultimate reality" (*paramārtha sat*).¹¹ When the Mādhyamikas rejected "substance" (*svabhāva*) as an "ultimate reality," they were certainly rejecting the Sarvāstivāda conception of dharma.¹² It is therefore easy to see that in the eyes of the Sarvāstivādins the doctrine of "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*) of the Mādhyamikas was none other than a theory of nonexistence or nihilism (*nāstitva*). Thus, for the Sarvāstivādins, the two extremes mentioned in the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta* are the Yogācāra theory of "receptacle consciousness" (*ālaya-vijñāna*) and the Mādhyamika conception of "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*).

Although the Sarvāstivādins made a determined attempt to distinguish their doctrines from those of the Sāṅkhya, Yogācāra, and Mādhyamika, yet the recognition of an enduring substance (*svabhāva*, *dravya*, *svalakṣaṇa*) as the ultimate reality of things (*dharma*) as opposed to their phenomenal characteristics (*lakṣaṇa* or *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) placed them on the side of the "substantialists" (*sad-vādi*).¹³ For this reason, their doctrine of causation through substance (*svabhāva*) was not at all different from the identity theory of causation (*satkāryavāda*) of Sāṅkhya.¹⁴ True, the Sarvāstivādins recognized the theory of causation with twelve factors, as is done in the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta*, but their theory is so closely associated with the conception of substance that it is no longer the empirical doctrine of causation in early Buddhism but a metaphysical view of the extreme form.

In contrast, the Sautrāntikas, while upholding a theory of moments (*kṣaṇa*), vehemently denied the existence of any substance or substratum (*svabhāva* or *dravya*). The Sautrāntikas, who refused to recognize two separate moments, static (*sthiti*) and decay (*jarā*), but considered them to be

¹¹ *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, ed. P. Pradhan (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1967), p. 341: *Kāyaṃ svasāmānyalakṣaṇābhyāṃ parikṣate, vedanāṃ cittaṃ dharmāḥ ca. Svabhāva evaiṣāṃ svalakṣaṇaṃ. Sāmānyalakṣaṇaṃ tu anityatā saṃskṛtānāṃ dukkhata sāsraṇāṃ śūnyatā 'nātmate sarvadharmānāṃ. Sako, p. 524: paramārthasat svalakṣaṇena sat ity arthah. Also, ibid., dravyataḥ svalakṣaṇataḥ sad dravya sad iti. See ibid., p. 529, svabhāva evaiṣāṃ svalakṣaṇaṃ.*

¹² See *MKV*, pp. 260-261, where the heat of fire (*agner auṣṇyaṃ*) is described as "substance" (*svabhāva*) as well as "specific characteristic" (*svalakṣaṇa*).

¹³ In fact, the Sarvāstivādins claimed themselves to be "substantialists" (*sad-vādi*); see *Vibhāṣāprabhāṣitī*, p. 258.

¹⁴ See *Causality*, pp. 148-152.

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one characteristic (*ekam eva lakṣaṇam*),¹⁵ certainly would not accept the concept of “specific characteristic” (*svalakṣaṇa*) which was identified with the permanent and eternal substance (*svabhāva, dravya*). But as empiricists who recognized the nonconceptual grasp of the external objects at the first moment of perception (*pratyakṣa*), they upheld, or, at least, spoke of “specific characteristics” (*svalakṣaṇa*)¹⁶ without identifying it with substance (*svabhāva*). (This confirms our view, stated earlier, that for the Sarvāstivādins, the nihilists—*nāstika*—were represented by the Mādhyamikas, and not the Sautrāntikas).

The Sautrāntika denial of substance (*svabhāva*) should have made them the faithful representatives of early Buddhism—hence their claim to be the upholders of the tradition of the discourses (*sūtrapramāṇikā*).¹⁷ They were, no doubt, non-substantialists. But, unfortunately, their theory of non-substantiality (*anātmavāda, niḥsvabhāvavāda*) was presented in the background of a metaphysical theory of moments and hence they were unable to account for causality (*pratītyasamutpāda*). This theory of discrete momentary phenomena compelled them to accept a causal principle which involved metaphysical assumptions. They maintained that a nonexistent phenomenon arises during one moment and passes away into nonexistence during the next, without enduring even for one moment, because it has no substantial existence.¹⁸ This view shared all the salient features of the nonidentity theory of causation (*asatkāryavāda*) of the Vaiśeṣika school. Not only did the theory fail to account for the momentary arising of the effect, but also it implied the complete annihilation (*vināśa*) of the effect immediately after its arising. Thus, while the Sarvāstivāda attempt to explain causation in the background of a theory of moments led them to a substantialist position, the Sautrāntika doctrine of nonsubstantiality (*anātma, niḥsvabhāva*) placed them in the position of annihilationists (*ucchedavādī*).

It is now possible to examine the “middle path” as enunciated in the

¹⁵ *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, p. 76, attributes this view to some “other” (*anya*) [school], but Yaśomitra identifies the school as the Sautrāntika; see *Saṅg*, p. 139, *anya punar āhuḥ iti Sautrān[ī]kāh*.

¹⁶ See T. I. Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic* II (New York: Dover, 1962), p. 312.

¹⁷ *Saṅg*, p. 11.

¹⁸ *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, ed. C. Bendall (St. Petersburg: Imperial Academy of Sciences, 1897–1902), p. 248: *iti hy abhūta bhavati bhūta pratigacchati svabhāvarahitatoḥ*; see also *Causality*, pp. 151–154.

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Mādhyamika school of Buddhism. The doctrines of the two Abhidharma schools, Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika, undoubtedly served as the immediate philosophical background of Mādhyamika thought. Although these two schools with their theories of causation provided the setting necessary for the Mādhyamika *dialectic*, Mādhyamika philosophy should not be considered a mere reaction to these two schools. On the contrary, this school at least in its undeveloped form, had independent existence before Nāgārjuna organized it into a coherent system. This undeveloped stage is represented by the Prajñāpāramitā literature, and especially by the *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā*.

Here we need to digress a little from the discussion of the middle path. The concept of Buddha is the most important topic of discussion in the Prajñāpāramitā literature. Buddha Gotama was a historical person. The discourses of the Pali Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas afford us ample evidence of that.¹⁹ He influenced the life and thought of the people of India during his time to such an extent that superhuman qualities came to be attributed to him, not only after his death but even while he was alive. These qualities—intellectual, moral, and even physical—soon raised him to the position of a divine being (*deva*) in the eyes of his followers. The result was that the followers themselves became puzzled as to the real nature of the Buddha's personality. When the question regarding the Buddha's personality was raised, the Buddha himself answered that he was neither a man (*manussa*), nor a water spirit (*gandhabba*), nor a powerful demoniac spirit (*yakkha*), nor even a god (*deva*) or a Brahma, but that he was only a Buddha.²⁰ Similar questions were being raised even two centuries after his death, during the reign of Aśoka, the Maurya, in the third century BC,²¹ thus, it became one of the most important and relevant topics of discussion in the history of Buddhist thought.

The passing away of the Buddha created a big vacuum in the lives of his followers and admirers. The *Mahāparinibbānasuttanta* which relates the incidents in the last days of the Buddha's life seems to indicate this. To perpetuate the memory of the Buddha, the Buddha himself recommended

¹⁹ See article on "Buddha," in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol. 3.

²⁰ *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, ed. R. Morris and E. Hardy (London: Pali Text Society, 1955), 2.98-39; *Taishō* 2.28a-b.

²¹ *Kathāvatthu*, ed. A. C. Taylor (London: Pali Text Society, 1894-1897), 18.1-4.

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to his followers four places of pilgrimage.²² The desire of the faithful followers to have the Buddha as an object of worship contributed to the development of the conception of an eternal spiritual body (*dharmakāya*) of the Buddha.

In the Pali Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas, the question whether the Buddha exists after death was regarded as a metaphysical question and was left unanswered. It was left unanswered not because, as some Buddhist scholars seem to think, the Buddha continued after death in a transcendental form, hence indefinable and indescribable, but because there was no way of knowing (*na pamāṇam atthi*) on the basis of personal experience whether he continues or not.²³ But in the Mahāyāna tradition, especially as embodied in texts like *Mahāvastu*, *Lalitavistara*, and *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka-sūtra*, Buddha came to be looked upon as one who remained forever (*sadā sthita*),²⁴ and his *parinirvāṇa* came to be considered a mere illusion.²⁵ The Buddha became a supramundane and immortal person. His body (*rūpakāya*) could not represent his real nature. Therefore, the *Vajracchedikā* maintains: "The Tathāgata is not to be recognized by means of the marks on his body."²⁶ The real body of the Buddha is the spiritual body (*dharmakāya*). The Buddha's real body is not only spiritual but cosmic as well. While the spiritual body is identified with all the constituents of the universe (*sarva-dharma*), it is also considered to be the same as ultimate reality (*tathatā*). Running through the entire Prajñāpāramitā literature is the conflict between the nondual (*advaya*) absolute reality, the *dharmakāya*, and the pluralistic phenomenality. To resolve this conflict we find the *Vajracchedikā* adopting the all important standpoint that ultimate reality is *beyond description*.

This digression from the discussion of the middle path is necessary to understand the Mādhyamika position. The Mādhyamikas, as their name implies, claim to follow the middle path. But the first Mahāyāna text

²² *Dīgha-nikāya*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter (London: Pali Text Society, 1903), 2.140.

²³ See my *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1975), chapter 7; also *Causality*, pp. 178-180.

²⁴ *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka-sūtra*, ed. U. Wogihara and C. Tsuchida (Tokyo: Seigo Kenkyukai, 1934-1936), p. 271.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

²⁶ *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā*, ed. and tr. E. Conze, *Series Orientalis Roma XIII* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1957), p. 56.

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which refers to the middle path and which is often quoted by the Mādhyamikas themselves is the *Kāśyapaparivarta* of the *Ratnakūṭa-sūtra*. It is a formative text of the Mahāyāna school that came to be looked upon with great respect by most Mahāyāna teachers and represents, according to our understanding, a statement of the transition from early Buddhism to Mādhyamika. Here we come across what appears to be two versions of the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta*, but with a different interlocutor—Kāśyapa. One of these versions is more faithful to the original *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta*. It reads:

“[Everything] exists,” Kāśyapa, is one extreme. “[Everything] does not exist,” Kāśyapa, is the second extreme. In between these two extremes, Kāśyapa, is the middle path, because it is the correct perception of things.²⁷

The middle path is further defined in terms of the twelfold chain of causation in its progressive and regressive orders. By preserving this version, the *Kāśyapaparivarta*, though an extremely important Mahāyāna text, seems to vouch for the authenticity of the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta* as found in the Pali Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas. Here, as in the Nikāya and Āgama statement, the two metaphysical theories are rejected and a middle position embodying a causal description of the phenomenal world is presented.

The second version found in the *Kāśyapaparivarta*, though dealing with a middle path between two extremes, is very different from the above. This statement reads:

“Self” (*ātma*), Kāśyapa, is one extreme. “No-self” (*nairātmya*) is the second extreme. In between these two extremes is the middle position that is formless, nonindicative, supportless, noumenal, signless, and nonconceptual. This, Kāśyapa, is called the middle path, the correct perception of things.²⁸

Although the two extremes, “self” and “no-self” may relate to the two extremes, existence and nonexistence mentioned in the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta*, yet the statement as such is conspicuous by its absence in the Nikāyas

²⁷ *Kāśyapaparivarta of the Ratnakūṭa-sūtra*, ed. A. Staël-Holstein (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1926), p. 90.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

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and the Āgamas. There is no doubt that this second version is an innovation attempting to explain the development of the doctrine. While the Hindu schools as well as Sarvāstivāda accepted a theory of "self" (*ātma*) or something bordering on a theory of "self," the Sautrāntika school of Buddhism adamantly held on to a theory of "no-self" (*nairātmya* or *niḥsvabhāva*). Naturally, the Mahāyāna doctrine of ultimate reality, equated in the early Mahāyāna with the Buddha's spiritual body, had to represent the "middle" position. But this middle position is not phenomenal. It is transcendental; hence the use of the negative characteristics to describe it.

In the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna refers to the *Kātyāyanāvavāda-sūtra* (i.e., *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta*) and maintains that in this context the Buddha rejected the two extremes of existence (*asti*) and nonexistence (*nāsti*).²⁹ A faithful disciple like Candrakīrti was, therefore, compelled to look at this *Kātyāyanāvavāda-sūtra*. After observing that this discourse is studied in all the schools of Buddhism, he quotes a section of the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta* in some original version (not in the *Kāśyapaparivarta* version mentioned above).³⁰ But when he had to comment on the middle path he ignores all the versions which refer to the twelvefold formula of causation and switches on to the second version from the *Kāśyapaparivarta* that has very little in common with the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta* and which describes the middle path in negative terms.³¹

The *Kāśyapaparivarta*, therefore, is an invaluable text that explains one of the most controversial subjects in the history of Buddhist thought, namely, the transition from early Buddhism to Mahāyāna. While preserving a statement of an empirical theory of causation presented in the background of two metaphysical ideas, it also puts forward a conception of a linguistically transcendent middle path, thereby relating itself to the Prajñāpāramitā doctrine of the indefinable and indescribable ultimate reality.

Let us examine this "transcendentalism" in more detail. Transcendentalism, as pointed out earlier, developed gradually in the Mahāyāna tradition in connection with the conception of Buddha and reached its culmination in the Prajñāpāramitā literature. On the other hand, the Abhidharma scholiasts, engrossed with the doctrines of moments and

²⁹ *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 15.7.

³⁰ *MKV*, pp. 269-270.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

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atoms, presented metaphysical theories of causation in their attempt to explain the phenomenal world. Both these trends convinced Nāgārjuna of the futility of depending on linguistic conventions (*samvṛti*) as a means of explaining reality (*paramārtha*), except as a means to an end.

The *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* represents one determined attempt to deny the reality of arising (*utpāda*) and ceasing (*nirodha*). This seems to have been necessary if one were to hold on to the Mahāyāna conception of *dharmakāya* as the eternal and permanent reality, also known as *tathatā*, *paramārtha sat*, etc. Fortunately for Nāgārjuna, the Sarvāstivādins and the Sautrāntikas had created a "conflict in reason" by explaining causality in such a metaphysical way that he either had to accept arising (*utpāda*) of things on the basis of an underlying substance or substratum (*svabhāva*) (i.e., the *satkāryavāda* of the Sarvāstivādins) or was compelled to deny a substance and therefore arising too (i.e., the logical conclusion of the Sautrāntika *asatkāryavāda*). The theory of moments did not permit Nāgārjuna to accept arising and passing away without positing a substance.

Not only was he unable to explain arising and passing away, he was not in a position even to accept relativity as embodied in the statement: "When this exists, that exists" (*asmin sattdam bhavati*).³² This means causation of any sort could not be explained without falling into one of the two extremes, existence and nonexistence. It is this selfsame idea that Candrakīrti was attempting to substantiate by repeatedly quoting a quatrain from what was known to him as *Anavataptahradāpasamkramaṇa-sūtra*:

Whatever is born of causes is unborn for it has no arising through substance. That which is dependent on causes is empty. He who understands emptiness is diligent.³³

This is supplemented by two quotations, (a) from the *Majñūsūtrīparipṛcchā* and (b) from *Āryadhyāyitamūṣṭi-sūtra*. These quotations are found at the end of his commentary to the very important chapter of the *Kārikā* on the "Examination of the Noble Truths" (*Āryasatyaparikṣā*).³⁴ Both quotations

³² *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 1.10.

³³ *MKV*, pp. 239, 500, 504: *yah pratyayaḥ jāyati sa hy ajāto/no tasya utpādu svabhāvato'sti/ yah pratyayādhanu sa śūnya ukto/yah śūnyatām jānati so 'pramattaḥ.*

³⁴ *MKV*, pp. 516–517.

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explain the manner in which one should try to comprehend the Four Noble Truths. The latter maintains:

By him, Mañjuśrī, who has seen all dharmas as unborn, unsatisfactoriness is understood. For him who has seen all dharmas as unproduced, arising is eliminated. By him who has seen all dharmas as completely extinguished, nirvana is realized. By him who has seen all dharmas as absolutely empty, the path has been cultivated.

This is the very opposite of the argument in the early discourses where things were considered to be unsatisfactory primarily because they are impermanent (*anicca*), which is a synonym for arising and passing away (*uppādavaya*).³⁵ As the eight negations indicate, not only arising (*utpāda*) and ceasing (*nirodha*), but also permanence (*śāśvata*) and annihilation (*uccheda*), identity (*ekārtha*) and difference (*nānārtha*), coming (*āgama*) and going (*nirgama*) are concepts not applicable to reality.³⁶ Thus not only the metaphysical concepts like permanence and annihilation, but even nonmetaphysical concepts like arising and ceasing cannot be applied to reality. The Prajñāpāramitā doctrine of the indescribability of ultimate reality finds perfect philosophical justification here. The nature and function of language appear in a different light. Conventional terms (*sammuti*), which in early Buddhism were symbols agreed upon by popular consent to denote the various experiences or combinations of experiences, are now looked upon as deceptive veils (*varaṇa*) concealing in every way (*samantād*) the true nature of things: hence *samvṛti*.³⁷ Even the dichotomy between knowledge and the object of knowledge (*jñānajñeya*) (not subject and object) is valid only at this level. Ultimate reality is free from such dichotomy.³⁸ This ultimate reality (*paramārtha*) is independent, peaceful, nonconceptual, and is to be experienced (*vedya*—not “known,” *jñeya*) for or within oneself (*pratyātma*) by the wise one. It cannot be indicated [as this or that] nor can it be known (*na jñāyate*).³⁹

Thus, the Mādhyamikas deny the ability to know ultimate reality as an

³⁵ *Samyutta* 1.191, 3.146; *Taishō* 2.153c.

³⁶ *MKV*, p. 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 492.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 493; see also p. 135.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

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objective phenomenon. The dichotomy between knowledge and the known is emphatically denied. But the possibility of *realizing* the nature of ultimate reality within oneself is recognized. This seems also the conclusion of the very important chapter on the "Examination of Elements" (*Dhātuparīkṣā*) of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* which emphasizes the pacification of the object (*draṣṭavya-upaśama*),⁴⁰ rather than the pacification of views (*drṣṭi-upaśama*), implying thereby that the latter could not be achieved without achieving the former. This also explains the basic difference between early Buddhism and Mādhyamika thought as far as another of the important concepts is concerned, namely, the concept of *prapañca*.

The term *prapañca* in early Buddhism is understood as "obsession." Hence, *prapañcōpaśama* as a definition of *nibbāna* implies pacification of all obsessions. A person who has eliminated these obsessions can continue not only to know things in the external world as they are (*yathābhūta*) but also to use the linguistic conventions (*sammuti*) without overstepping their limits, i.e., without using them to designate things not given in experience. For example, he will be able to use the term "self" (*atta*, Sk. *ātman*) as a reflexive pronoun without implying by this the existence of a transempirical entity, permanent and eternal. This is because he has eliminated the root of all obsessions, namely, craving (*taṇhā*). Hence *prapañcōpaśama* becomes a synonym for *ditṭhi-vūpaśama*, "pacification of all views," where *ditṭhi* refers to the manner of seeing. For this purpose it is not necessary to attain *draṣṭavyōpaśama* or pacification of the object, i.e., the complete elimination of the object from one's understanding. But in the Mādhyamika system, since there is a recognition of an ultimate reality (*paramārtha*) which is nonconceptual (*nirvikalpa*) as opposed to the conventional (*samvṛti*), *prapañca* comes to mean conceptual proliferation. For this reason, the Mādhyamikas will not be able to entertain the very idea of "object," hence *draṣṭavyōpaśama*. It is extremely significant to note that this pacification of the object is presented by Nāgārjuna as a middle position between the two extremes of existence (*astitva*) and nonexistence (*nāstitva*). How far this position is related to the Yogācāra standpoint that the object (*ālambana*) is not real seems to be an interesting question.

In the light of what has been stated above, I propose to analyse the meaning and significance of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* statement of the middle path. It runs thus:

⁴⁰ *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 5.7.

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Whatever dependent arising is, that we call emptiness. That (i.e., emptiness) is a dependent concept and that itself is the middle path.

*Yaḥ pratīyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe. Sā prajñāptir upādāya pratīpat saiva madhyamā.*⁴¹

Candrakīrti's assistance in unravelling the rather abstruse meaning of this quatrain is extremely valuable. We have already referred to the Mādhyamika argument that whatever is caused or is dependently arisen is really uncaused or unborn because it does not arise as a result of "substance" (*svabhāvenānutpatti*). Causation cannot be explained without admitting a substance. But a substance does not exist in reality. Therefore, causation or dependent arising is empty. But what about this emptiness (*śūnyatā*) itself? Is emptiness (*śūnyatā*) an empty and misleading concept (*samvṛti*), like "substance" (*svabhāva*)? This is the last thing the Mādhyamikas would want to admit. In fact, a major portion of the chapter on the "Examination of the Noble Truths" (*Āryasatyaparīkṣā*) is devoted to a refutation of the view that "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*) is "nothingness" or "nihilism" (*nāstivā*). Thus, the Mādhyamikas are forced to accept at least one concept that is "dependent" or "denotative" (*upādāya prajñāpti*), and that is *śūnyatā*. *Śūnyatā* is not a mere empty concept (*samvṛti*) but the ultimate truth (*paramārtha satya*), and therefore, the use of the term *upādāya prajñāpti* instead of *samvṛti* to refer to it (although of course, the terms *sammuti*, in its original meaning, and *paññatti* were used synonymously in early Buddhism). It is identical with *tathatā*, *dharmakāya*, Buddha, and even *pratīyasamutpāda* (in spite of the earlier criticism), all of which were transcendental and hence described in negative characteristics only. It is also what has to be experienced or felt (*vedya*) for oneself (*pratyātman*) with the attainment of perfect enlightenment (*samyaksambodhi*).

Does this mean that "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*) is substantial? The Mādhyamika reply will certainly be in the negative. Emptiness is not substantial in the same way as substance is substantial. Similarly, emptiness is not empty in the same way as substance is empty. Emptiness is empty of conceptual proliferation (*prapañcasūnya*) and, therefore, non-conceptual (*nirvikalpa*). This is the significance of another oft-quoted statement defining ultimate reality:

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 24-18.

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Independent, peaceful, conceptually nonproliferated, nonconceptual, nondiversified—this is the characteristic of reality (*tatva*).

*Aparapratyayaṃ śāntaṃ prapañcair aprapañcitaṃ nirvikalpaṃ
anānārtham etat tattvasya lakṣaṇam.*⁴²

Now we are in a position to analyse the nature of the middle path (*madhyamā pratipat*) referred to in the quatrain quoted earlier. Of the two extremes, there seems to be no difficulty in identifying the first, i.e., existence (*astitva*). For Nāgārjuna and for all the Mādhyamikas, “existence” meant the existence of a substantial entity (an *ātma* or *svabhāva*) in phenomena (*dharma*). “Nonexistence” (*nāstitva*), therefore, would mean the absence of any such substantial entity, in other words, absolute nonexistence or nihilism. The middle path that steers clear of these two extremes is, therefore, the reality (*tathatā, paramārtha sat*) that transcends all linguistic expression (*saṃvṛti*). This explains the Mādhyamika, or even the Mahāyāna, characterization of the middle path with negative epithets such as formless, nonindicative, supportless, noumenal, signless, nonconceptual. This is not at all different from the philosophy of the Prajñāpāramitā which emphasizes the linguistic transcendence of ultimate reality (*paraāmṛthasatya*).

T. R. V. Murti is credited with having written the most authoritative account of Mādhyamika philosophy. His interpretation, therefore, has in some way or other influenced the understanding of the doctrines of this school. Unfortunately, in spite of the excellent analysis of Mādhyamika ideas by Murti, one mistaken interpretation on his part has prevailed in the Western understanding of Mādhyamika philosophy. The mistaken interpretation is of the following quatrain:

Existence and nonexistence are two extremes;
Purity and impurity—these too are extremes;
Therefore, having given up the two extremes,
The wise one takes no position in the middle.

*Astīti nāstīti ubhe 'pi antā
śuddhī asuddhīti ime 'pi antā
tasmād ubhe anta vivarjayitvā
madhye 'pi sthānam na karoti paṇḍitaḥ.*⁴³

⁴² *Ibid.*, 18.9; see also MKV, pp. 491, 493.

⁴³ MKV, pp. 195, 270.

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The conclusion which Murti arrives at on the basis of this statement is expressed in the following quotation: "It may be thought that in avoiding the two extremes, the Mādhyamika takes a middle position between the two. No; he does not hold any middle position. Or, the middle position is no position."⁴⁴ This analysis seems to be the basis of the very popular view: "*Mādhyamika position is no position.*"

Unfortunately, Murti's seems to be a rather strange conclusion. To say that one should *give up* two extremes and also the middle position is not tantamount to saying there is *no* middle position. If it does, it certainly seems to be a confusion (*viparyāsa*) not only of linguistic usage but also of logic. It is one thing to say that one should not grasp on to a middle position; yet another to say that there is no middle position. In fact, strange as it may seem, Murti himself then goes on to say, on the basis of the passages from the *Kāśyapaparivarta* and the *Mādhyamikavṛtti* quoted earlier, that the middle position is *transcendental* in that it is beyond concept and speech.⁴⁵ This interpretation of Mādhyamika philosophy by Murti has caught the fascination of many a Western scholar who got involved in the study of the Chinese Buddhist tradition, especially Ch'an or its Japanese counterpart, Zen. Ch'an is generally understood as denying any form of transcendentalism even though it seems to contribute to a theory of linguistic transcendence of ultimate reality. The influence of Mādhyamika thought on the development of Ch'an goes uncontroverted. Therefore, Murti's interpretation of Mādhyamika philosophy as a doctrine of "no position" has received wide acceptance, especially because it harmonizes with the current interpretation of Ch'an.

In addition to the above unwarranted analysis of the Mādhyamika statement, the interpretation of Mādhyamika philosophy as one of "no position" seems to stem from the undue emphasis on, or, more specifically, the wrong understanding of the purpose of, the *reductio ad absurdum* (*prāsaṅgika*) method adopted by Nāgārjuna. It is true that in the refutation of the two extremes of existence and nonexistence Nāgārjuna utilized the *reductio ad absurdum* method of not accepting any one of the views, but merely using one to refute the other. His use of this method was confined to a refutation of the phenomenal reality *only*. But he does not appear to have used it in order to reject the two truths, phenomenal or conventional

⁴⁴ *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), p. 129.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*; see note 4.

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(*samvṛti*) and ultimate (*paramārtha*), though these in some way may be taken to constitute two extremes like “purity” and “impurity” referred to in the above quatrain quoted from Candrakīrti. On the contrary, he emphatically asserted the existence of ultimate reality or truth (*paramārtha sat*) though he held it to be beyond conceptual thinking. Everything else, existent or nonexistent, falls under the category of conventional (*samvṛti*).

In conclusion, it may be said that the last major school of Indian Buddhism—Yogācāra as represented in the *Madhyāntavibhāga* (*Examination of the Middle Path and the Extremes*) of Maitreya—openly admitted the existence (*sat*) of the middle position between the two extremes of existence (*sat*) and nonexistence (*asat*).⁴⁶ Existence, for them, was of “constructive ideation” (*abhūtaparikalpa*, i.e., ideation with regard to nonexistent phenomena). Nonexistence was of substance (*dravya* as *svabhāva*). In between these two extremes, says Vasubandhu in his *Madhyāntavibhāga-bhāṣya*, is existence (*sattva*) of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which is the middle path between absolute emptiness (*ekāntena śūnya*) and absolute nonemptiness (*ekāntenāśūnya*). This, according to Vasubandhu, is in conformity with the Prajñāpāramitā statements such as: “All is neither empty nor non-empty.”⁴⁷

This analysis of the middle path creates another problem. If absolute emptiness is one extreme and absolute nonemptiness is another, what could be the middle position? The Mādhyamikas maintained that the middle position is nonconceptual and therefore, indefinable and indescribable. But for the Yogācārin, this is existence, i.e., transcendental existence (*paramārtha sat*). If so, what remains is the phenomenal which the Mādhyamikas had treated under the conventional (*samvṛti*). For the Yogācārin, this is not a sensible position, for the phenomenal is not *always* identical with the conventional considered to be absolutely empty (*śūnya*). On the one hand, there are conventions that are absolutely empty, hence *abhūtaparikalpa*, i.e., mere conceptual construction. There are, on the other hand, conventions that embody phenomenal reality. This third level of truth or reality is substantial (*dravyataḥ sat*), although it is not identical with the Sarvāstivāda “substance” (*svabhāva*). It is compara-

⁴⁶ *Madhyāntavibhāga* 1.2. See *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya*, ed. G. M. Nagao (Tokyo: Suzuki Research Foundation, 1964), p. 18: *na śūnyam nāpi cāśūnyam tasmāi sarvaṃ vidhīyate satvād asatvāt satvāc ca madhyamā pratipac ca sā.*

⁴⁷ *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya*, p. 18.

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ble to the Sautrāntika conception of "specific characteristic" (*svalakṣaṇa*) (discussed above).⁴⁸ The recognition of this third level of truth or reality seems to have been prompted by the need to accommodate the phenomenal reality which the Mādhyamikas denied when they considered all concepts (except those such as *śūnyatā* indicating the ultimate reality) to be empty and unreal. Hence the *Madhyāntavibhāga* statement refers to the three degrees of truth—(1) *sat* or existence, i.e., ultimate reality (*paramārtha sat*), (2) *asat* or nonexistence, i.e., emptiness with regard to substance (*svabhāva*) or self (*ātman*), i.e., conceptual construction, and (3) *sat* or existence, i.e., existence of specific characteristics (*svalakṣaṇataḥ sat*). These were the very same degrees of truth embodied in the more popular triad—(1) the ultimate (*pariniṣpanna*), (2) the conceptual (*parikalpita*), and (3) the relative (*paratantra*), respectively. This middle position is rather unique in that it is not a middle position between two rejected extremes, but a third position.

These different interpretations of the middle path in the later Buddhist schools would certainly enable the unprejudiced scholar to trace the manner in which the Buddhist doctrine underwent development throughout the centuries since its first enunciation by Siddhārtha Gautama at Buddhagayā.

⁴⁸ Sako, p. 524: *Trividham hi Yogācārānāṃ sat, paramārtha saṃvṛti-sat dravya-sat ca. Dravyataḥ svalakṣaṇataḥ sad dravya-sad iti.* Note the nonuse of the term *svabhāva* to define *dravya*, although, defining the Sarvāstivāda conception, Yaśomitra (p. 529) said: *svabhāva evaiṣāṃ svalakṣaṇam* (see note 11).