

The Middle Way in Clear Words

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Offered with gratitude and respect to the memory of the Masters
Nāgārjuna and Chandrakīrti who composed the verses and commentary
of the *Prasannapadā Madhyamakavṛtti*.

Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
 You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
 You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
 You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
 You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.

T. S. ELIOT, EAST COKER

THE method of critical analysis has always been central to Buddhism and its basic doctrines of Anātman and Pratītya Samutpāda are the outcome of this. The Buddha analysed a living being into its component elements. Thus existence was analysed into five groups of the sensuous (*rūpa*), consciousness (*viññāna*), discrimination (*saṃjñā*), feeling (*vedanā*), and volition (*saṃskāra*). It was analysed as a whole, i. e. consciousness with all of that which it is aware. The result was that a permanent entity (*ātman*) could not be found. The component elements went to form only a nominal entity subject to perpetual change, but the finding of only impermanent phenomena is not the same as denying an unconditional ultimate reality which the Buddha actually affirmed. An existence

was thus regarded as a continuously flowing stream of discrete moments made up of elements of the five groups. There was no underlying substance to these moments. This conception has been likened to a cine film. It contained nothing permanent or substantial. The momentary elements were conceived as obeying causal laws. But this conception was adapted to the character of elements which could neither change nor move but only appear and disappear. Causation was called dependently co-ordinated origination (*pratītya samutpāda*) or dependent existence. Causality was thus assumed to exist between moments only, the arising of every moment being coordinated with the momentary existence of a number of other moments. "If there is this, there appears that."

Buddhism denies substance and all that it implies. Existence is momentary, unique, discrete, with no abiding entity. Substance and what is universal and identical are rejected as illusory, due to wrong view (*avidyā*). Admittedly considerable difficulty was encountered in fitting in this theory with the doctrine of Karma and rebirth. This may be regarded as a modal view of reality. This is one of the two main currents of Indian philosophy. The other is the substance view of the Brāhmanical tradition, having its origin in the ātman doctrine of the Upaniṣads. Here reality is conceived on the pattern of an inner core or substrate, identical or immutable though surrounded by impermanence and change. In the Advaita Vedānta, its most radical form, the reality of appearance, change and plurality is held to be false. The Sāṅkhya and the Nyāya also uphold a substantial rather than a modal view. Taking substance as real makes for unity and integration of experience. It also makes perception, memory and personal identity easier but change more difficult to explain. Suffering and bondage are due to the wrong identification of the *ātman* with *anātman*:

Identifying the self with this non-self—this is the bondage of man, which is due to his ignorance, and brings in its train the miseries of birth and death. It is through this that he considers the evanescent body as real, and identifying himself with it, nourishes, bathes and preserves it by means of agreeable sense objects by which he becomes bound as the caterpillar by the threads of its cocoon.

(Śaṅkara, Vivekachudamani 137)

The fully developed abhidharma metaphysic is a consistent and comprehensive system based on the modal or *anātma* standpoint. If the problem for the

systems based on the substantial or *ātma* position is how to account for change, difference and plurality, here it is to account for the appearance of permanence, identity and universality. To account for apparent difference in one case and identity in the other, both make use of the agencies of *avidyā* and *māyā*, the veiling and projecting powers of wrong view.

Thus two consistent and logical systems of metaphysics have been built on the opposing concepts *ātman* and *anātman*. After more or less argument and debate, an acute and objective mind must have come to the conclusion that the fault did not lie with this or that system, but that the inherent contradiction was due to Reason attempting to describe the unconditional in terms of the empirical. Such an antinomial conflict results when speculative metaphysics attempts to extend the forms of thought beyond their proper field.

The realization of this insoluble contradiction between the two standpoints led to the emergence of the Mādhyamika dialectic. The systems of the *ātma* tradition represent the thesis and the Abhidharmika system the antithesis of the dialectic. This is a form of the same conflict as an attempt to answer Vacchagotta's questions on ultimate things to the Buddha would have elicited. It was left to Nāgārjuna to develop the Mādhyamika to its full extent. Reason involves itself in deep and insoluble conflict when it tries to go beyond phenomena to seek their ultimate ground. Any fact of experience when analysed reveals the gaping flaws in its seeming homogeneity. It loses every meaning except in relation to other entities, but these in turn depend on others and so on ad infinitum. Everyday commonsense declines to pursue this as irrelevance. Philosophical systems owing to their attachment to a particular view are blind to these flaws. Those who maintain the world has a real existence are wrong, because on deep penetration, the world with all its manifold phenomena is found to be essentially relative and therefore ultimately unreal. And those who advocate non-existence or nonbeing are also wrong because they are denying even the phenomenal reality of the world. Eternalism and Nihilism are both false. Intellect gives us four categories—existence, non-existence, both and neither and involves itself in sixty-two antinomies.¹ It cannot give us Reality. Reality transcends all the categories and at the same time transcends all the antinomies. But it has to be directly realized through spiritual experience. In it the subject-object duality which is the basic cause of suffering is transcended.

¹ See *Brahmajāla sutta*.

Before the mighty strokes of Nāgārjuna's destructive dialectic which was later continued by his able commentator Chandrakīrti, the entire structure of the phenomenal world collapses like a house of cards when the phenomena are held to be real in themselves. However considered as phenomena from the empirical standpoint making up our everyday world they are real enough. Such phenomena are the individual subject and external objects, space and time, matter, motion and causality, also the Four Noble Truths, God, Nirvāna and the Buddha.

Nāgārjuna and Chandrakīrti did not attempt to sustain a point of view—or build a system of philosophy—except it might be said the negation of all views. They concentrated on showing up the inconsistencies and contradictions in the views and philosophical systems of others.

Because of the central position of *pratītya samutpāda* in Buddhist thought it is not surprising that the Mādhyamika or Śūnyavāda school should devote particular attention to causality. *Pratītya samutpāda* is interpreted as *śūnyatā*.

The Buddhist, Brahmanical, Sāṃkhya and Jaina systems all agree that the principle of causality governs all phenomena. Before the advent of the Mādhyamika or Śūnyavāda, it was taken as ultimately real. Thus the problem of the Mādhyamika was to show that causality and other categories were of empirical value only. They are a convenient description for the texture of phenomena. This conclusion Śūnyavāda establishes by showing that all the possible ways in which causality and the categories can be understood under the terms of identity, difference or both or neither, are riddled with contradiction. It is obviously necessary to differentiate between cause and effect, and yet at the same time to identify them. Thus their relation cannot be conceived as identity, difference or both, nor is it no relation.

Four alternative views are usually considered regarding causality. The effect may be considered as the self-expression of the cause, or caused by factors other than itself, or both, or neither. The last alternative amounts to a denial of causation, as it means that things are produced at random. The third alternative is really a compound of the first two. This leaves the first two as the principal alternatives to be considered. Self-production, or the identity of cause and effect (*satkāryavāda*), is the Sāṃkhya view of causation. Buddhism holds the opposite view that they are different (*asatkāryavāda*). Dialectical criticism discloses the inherent flaw in each conception.

Self-production or the identity of cause and effect will first be considered.

A thing cannot arise out of itself. If the effect is already existent in its cause, it is already an existing fact requiring no further production; if the effect does not exist in its cause nothing can produce it. Nobody says the son of a barren woman was a king. But the entity produced must be different from its cause. If cause and effect were identical, how is one to function as cause and the other as effect? If it is supposed that initially the cause was potential and then it becomes actual, a change of states rather than substances taking place, the question then becomes what brings about this change of state? This question is very pertinent with regard to the primeval matter (*prakṛti*) of the Sāṃkhya. What causes it to pass from the state of pure potentiality to manifestation, if not the self (*puruṣa*), which however is held to be radically separate from the primeval matter?

Turning now to causality in the Abhidharma which is based on the view of *asatkāryavāda* (production from another—non-identity of cause and effect), four kinds of causes or conditions (*pratyayas*) are usually enumerated in Abhidharma treatises. The Abhidharma of the Sarvāstivādins which was in particular criticised by Nāgārjuna will be considered here. The four causes or conditions are *betu*, *ālambana*, *samanantara* and *adbipati*. They do not bear much resemblance to the Aristotelian fourfold division of causes. The *betu* is the direct cause corresponding in some respects to the material cause. It is defined as that which directly brings about the result, for example, the seed producing a sprout. *Ālambana* is the object-condition which is taken as the cause in the production of knowledge and mentals (*citta* and *caitta*). All *saṃskṛta* and *asaṃskṛta* dharmas can act as *ālambana pratyaya*. The *samanantara* is the immediately preceding moment of cessation of the cause before the arising of the effect. The *adbipati pratyaya* is the indirect influence which one dharma has over another. It is not merely the dominant condition but the comprehensive and universal cause. Any entity or dharma exerts an influence over all other entities except itself. The *adbipati pratyaya* is thus wider in scope than all the *pratyayas*, including the *ālambana* which conditions only mental phenomena. It is a co-present cause. No single entity is held to be the cause of an effect. This is criticized by the Mādhyamika in addition to the fact of the cause being different from the effect. God, *prakṛti*, time and chance are not held to be causes.

A cause is so named because an effect depends on it. But as long as the effect is absent it cannot be held to be a cause. On the other hand, the cause cannot

have anything present as effect, as a cause of an already present effect would be purposeless. If entities are interdependent and relative as are cause and effect they have no self-existence and they cannot exist as separate entities. What lacks self-existence cannot be cause and a non-existent thing cannot disappear being already a nonentity. Thus an effect can neither have cause or be without them and conversely causes neither produce an effect or are without an effect. Since the Abhidharma assumes non-identity of cause and effect, regarding *betu* it may be said owing to lack of relation between the two, in principle anything might be produced from anything; a pebble might sprout into a plant, otherness to the plant being present in the pebble as well as the seed. As to *ālambana* as object condition for mental dharmas, the latter are considered entities separate from their objective support or counterpart. If the mental dharma is already present, the object support is superfluous; if the mental dharma is absent there can be no relationship between the two. The *samanantara* as the cessation of cause immediately precedent to the effect, cannot produce an effect because it cannot disappear owing to its inherent lack of self-existence. The *adbipati* as the general influence of all entities may be defined as “that being, this appears,” but if entities are relative they lack real existence and the formula becomes meaningless. An entity existing by itself in its own nature retains the state and form natural to itself. Being already present it does not depend on other entities. It does not come into being. Consequently, something which has a fixed nature of its own cannot dependently originate. But as dependent origination is postulated this can only apply to entities lacking self-nature which are causally impotent. Accordingly *pratitya samutpāda* is meaningless except in a phenomenal sense.

As causality in the Abhidharma view is not self-becoming but requires the co-operation of several factors (*pratyayas*) in producing an effect, the question arises as to what it is that makes the various factors which by themselves are disconnected entities into relevant causes and conditions? And if some other factor were assumed as bringing about this condition, what is it that makes this factor, too, a cause? This clearly leads to an infinite regress. This difficulty is peculiar to all theories of external causation which take the causes to be several. Buddhism does not accept God or other conscious universal co-ordinating agency. In none of these four *pratyayas* can the so-called effect be found. And if it does not exist in them, how can it be produced out of them?

While accepting the traditional Brahmanic view of knowledge, as leading to

enlightenment, in the sense of clear insight, there is also the tendency in Buddhism to limit positive knowledge to the minimum and put on one side all questions irrelevant to gaining liberation from *dukkha*. This check to theoretical speculation is a secret of the vigour and potency of the teaching. The Mādhyamika reinforced this tendency.

The concept of a middle path is applicable to religion in general. Here the one extreme is that man can work out his salvation on his own without any help from outside, the other that he can achieve nothing by himself. The position taken varies with the religion and its particular stage of development. In early Buddhism and the Theravāda man is expected to work out his own salvation. It may not be possible to find a complete explanation for the swing of the pendulum in Buddhism, but the destructive dialectic of Nāgārjuna and his school must have been influential. The effect of the Śūnyavāda was to produce an indeterminacy into phenomena and their relationship. For "all things have come into being, not of themselves and not by another and not without a cause." Confidence in the light of human reason to discover ultimate truth was no doubt shaken by this. The pendulum swung almost to the opposite extreme from its original position: "Just as a man who is blind from birth cannot see the sun, just so are men in the throes of conventional conceptions, they do not perceive the Buddha directly, but wish to detail (*prapañcayanti*) him conceptually. Only by them he cannot be seen directly (*aparokṣavartin*). Buddha must be regarded as the Cosmic order (*dharmatā*), his body is the Cosmos (*dharmatā*). The essence of the Cosmos is incognisable, it is impossible to know what it is conceptually. The reality of the Buddha is the reality of the Universe and as far as the Buddha has no separate reality (*niḥsvabbāva*), neither has the Universe any apart from him. All the elements of existence, when sifted through the principle of Relativity (Śūnyatā), become resplendent. All the millions of existences (*bbūtaakoṭi*) must be regarded as the Body of the Buddha manifested in them. This is Relativity or Śūnyatā, the Climax of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*)."²

According to this new point of view liberation cannot be gained by any rational system of knowledge, but only by the saving grace of the Tathāgata with his Triple Body, first to become a Bodhisattva and then a Buddha. The necessity is

² *Buddhist Conception of Nirvana*, p. 45.

to serve the Buddha in all beings and all places, and to become devoid of self to make room for the Self of selves. This teaching might be summed up as “If I give the Buddha all I am, he will give me all he is.”

Ignorance as the motive power behind the process of dependent origination acquires a new and concrete sense. It becomes essentially that kind of ignorance which hides the highest, completest truth (Śūnyatā) by its belief that it is accessible to ordinary knowledge and thought, and by its failure to realise that logical deduction (*kalpanā*) represents a falling-away from Śūnyatā into duality and suffering.

It must not be thought that the consistent application of Nāgārjuna’s dialectic to all concepts, relations and things produces a nihilistic attitude. Rather it produces a basic serenity and stability manifesting as a disinterested benevolence accompanied by tolerance and forbearance from opinions and judgements. It might well be termed “apatheia,”³ a condition free from suffering as being no longer subject to self-centred passions.

It is not a state of apathy or insensitivity but on the contrary the indescribable radiance of Śūnyā or Prajñāpāramitā when the clouds of Avidyā and Māyā are swept away.

The Mādhyamika is surely deserving of more consideration than it receives at the present time, representing as it does the maturity of critical analysis. And more than any other system it truly represents a Middle Path.

This one Reality eternal
 Has been revealed by the victorious Buddha
 The lion of mankind:
 It is not born, it does not live,
 It does not die, does not decay,
 And merged in it are all the beings!

If something has no essence in itself;
 How can it then receive an essence from without?
 There are therefore no things internal,
 . There are also no things external
 But everywhere present is our Lord.

³ Not the insensibility of the Stoics, but disinterested love—“passionless passion.”

THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

This absolute condition of Quiescence,
Where every individual disappears,
Has been revealed by the real Buddha,
There is in it no individual life whatever,
There you will stroll from birth delivered!
You will then be yourself the Saviour,
And you will save the hosts of living beings!
There is no path discernible whatever,
There you will live from birth delivered,
And free yourself, deliver many beings!

Ārya-Ratnakara Sūtra

(*Buddhist Conception of Nirvana*, p. 180)

The writer is particularly indebted to the following:

H.V. Guenther: *Philosophy and Psychology of the Abhidharma*.

J. May: *Prasannapadā Madhyamakavṛtti*.

T. R. V. Murti: *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*.

S. Schayer: *Mahāyāna Doctrines of Salvation*.

C. Sharma: *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*.

Th. Stcherbatsky: *The Buddhist Conception of Nirvana*.