

Reality, Relativity, and the Rejection of Speculative Views in the Mādhyamika School of Buddhism

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In this article I intend to clarify the Emptiness (*sūnyatā*) concept according to such thinkers of the Mādhyamika school of Buddhism as Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva, and Candrakīrti, examining some of their contributions available in Sanskrit. My source book for this study is the Mādhyamakasāstra of Nāgārjuna with the commentary: Prasannapadā by Candrakīrti. First, I make an attempt to understand the Emptiness concept through an examination of the conventional (*samvrti*) meaning and the ultimate (*paramārtha*) meaning. Here I try also to explain their equivalent religious terms, that is, samsāra and nirvāna. Second, I focus my attention to explicate the meaning of Emptiness, recognizing the Mādhyamika *niḥsvabhāvatā* or devoid of own-being view as opposed to the *svabhāvatā* or own-being view of the Abhidharmikas. Third, I examine the Mādhyamika-refutation of speculative views on the basis of their understanding of the Emptiness concept. Finally, I present my conclusion with some reference to the Pāli Nikāyas, that what Mādhyamika followers attempt to show by the Emptiness concept is already there in the early Buddhist scriptures.

I. Two Truths and Untruth

As I understand, Emptiness is how things are in reality, and it is explained through a twofold meaning that refers to reality as well as relativity. Reality is the realization of nirvāna, the ultimate goal of Buddhists, and relativity is samsāra, the cycle of birth and death or the phenomenal world. Both nirvāna and samsāra are comprehended in the way we comprehend Emptiness. The samsāra and nirvāna dichotomy disappears in Emptiness—this is ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*). This ultimate truth, however, can only be approached from the conventional truth (*samvrti-satya*). In this regard, Emptiness is understood through two aspects of meaning; one is from the aspect of ultimate sense, and the other is from the aspect of conventional sense. These two meanings are introduced as two truths (*dve satye*) (MK, xxiv, p. 8). Moreover, these two truths are not exclusively opposite to each other, and that is why the Mādhyamikas use the term truth (*satya*) to indicate both meanings: the ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) and the conventional truth (*samvrti-satya*), instead of using untruth (*asatya*) for the latter.

These two truths represent the whole teaching of the enlightened ones (Buddhas). If one understands this twofold meaning, he or she understands the teaching of the enlightened ones. Nāgārjuna says: those who do not understand the distinction between these two truths do not discern the profundity of the message of the Buddha (MK, xxiv, p. 9) He explains further that the ultimate truth is not taught apart from the conventional usage (*vyavahāra*), and without approaching the ultimate truth one cannot attain nirvāna (MK, xxiv, p.10). From the above reference it is also evident that the position of the Mādhyamika followers regarding the two truths is not to assume them as two different realities but to see them as two aspects of meaning that are fundamental to the realization of nirvāna.

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The ultimate truth is not a complete rejection of the conventional truth, but its attainment is the real transformation from the level of samsâra to the level of nirvâna. This transformation not only gives vision to see things the way they are, but also provides the situation of liberation. Here, nirvâna becomes one's realization of the reality of samsâra, and samsâra becomes one's non-realization of nirvâna. What we call samsâra, the cycle of birth and death or the phenomenal world, itself is nirvâna for the enlightened ones (Buddhas), viewed through the ultimate standpoint. The difference is a qualitative distinction of the viewers, and not an ontological difference between samsâra and nirvâna. The very reason of giving two truths parallel to samsâra and nirvâna, indicates this fact. The unenlightened ones view samsâra from a dualistic standpoint or within the limit of causation, but the enlightened ones have no limitation of dualism; therefore, they transcend all the limitations. In this regard, for the unenlightened ones there exists an ontological difference between samsâra and nirvâna, but for the enlightened ones there exists not even a slight distinction between them (MK, xxv, pp. 19-20).

The basic difference between conventional and ultimate truths is the basic difference between samsâra and nirvâna. The former is the truth of the unenlightened ones, and the latter is the truth of the enlightened ones. Samsâra is where samsâric thought constructions are, and nirvâna is where such thought constructions are broken down, and where samsâra came to end. To see the samsâric relativity as it is, is to see the reality, that is, nirvâna. The difference is the difference of the character of the one who uses the language: whether one is an attached one or a released one. The samsâric world exists for the one who is attached to it, and that person has something to conceptualize; but the liberated one sees no difference, hence, no conceptualizations. However, this does not mean that the liberated one sees the identity of the two for the simple reason that to see the identity, one needs to see the difference.

The realization of nirvâna is the realization of Emptiness. All the conceptual proliferations (*prapañca*) come to end with it. The samsâric conceptual world rests within the conceptualized boundaries of sensual experience. Such intellect is transformed into the level of reality-experience. In that reality-experience one is able to realize the true characteristic of reality, that is, no characteristic. Where there is no characteristic there is also no conceptualization. Emptiness does not mean nothing or nihility. It is reality which transcends the four ways of intellectualization (*catuskoti-vinirmuktam*): affirmation, negation, both affirmation and negation and neither affirmation nor negation. Emptiness is beyond all sorts of conceptualization, logic and language. The Mâdhyamika Buddhists do not deny reality but they deny the validity of any descriptions about it.

The language of nirvana or Emptiness must involve the experience of it. Those who attempt to explain nirvâna without such experience do so by reducing it to samsâra where the conceptualization of causation works. Accordingly, they conceptualize nirvâna as either existent or non-existent or both or neither. Even for the enlightened ones, nirvâna is not something to talk about. They prefer noble silence in the midst of those who do not have the ability to penetrate language. However, if they do explain, they know the limits and the limited meaning of language; hence, they do not become attached to their explanations. They are in nirvâna where samsâra has been untied or dissolved. Emptiness is an antidote for all metaphysical theories. Candrakîrti quotes from the Kâsyapaparivarta where it says that he who mistakes Emptiness as another view (*drsti*) is incurable: "It is as if a drug, administered to cure a patient, were to remove all his disorders, but were itself to foul the stomach by remaining therein. Would you Kâsyapa consider the patient cured?" (PP, pp. 108-109).

The aim of the Emptiness concept of the Mādhyamika school is to liberate the human mind from the net of views. When one realizes the highest truth, that is the Emptiness of all things, simultaneously one is free from all views. This is the freedom from bondage to the limitations of one's ego. One transcends one's "I" notion when one is unattached to one's cognitive and affective mental proliferations. Nāgārjuna maintains that Emptiness should not be regarded as another viewpoint opposed to non-emptiness (*asūnyam*). Emptiness is proclaimed by the enlightened ones as a refutation of all viewpoints (MK, xiii, p.8). Emptiness is an antidote for the suffering, when applied correctly, but when applied incorrectly it becomes a source of suffering. To see Emptiness is to see the dependent co-arising, the Buddhist theory of causation. The one who sees dependent co-arising understands the four noble truths: suffering, arising of suffering, cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering (MK, xxiv, p.40).

2. Own-being Versus Devoid of Own-being

For the Mādhyamaka followers, Emptiness, dependent co-arising, and the middle path are synonyms (MK, xxiv, p. 18). For them, Emptiness is *nihsvabhāvatā*, that is, devoid of own-being, and it is presented in opposition to the Ābhīdharmic notion of own-being (*svabhāva*) of all *dharmas*. *Dharmas* are momentary elements of existence. As it is common to all Buddhists, Ābhīdharmikas also refute the existence of ātman or soul which is eternal and immutable. For them Emptiness refers to "whole," that is, denial of a personal self (*puṅgala-nairātmya*). Anything which appears to be a "whole" is a deceit. What really exists is only a succession of evanescent entities (*dharmas*). In this way, Ābhīdharmikas give some essence (*svabhāva / svalaksana*) to *dharmas*. The Mādhyamikas extended their *nairātmya* or no-self theory not only to the whole but also to the parts (*dharma-nairātmya*) with the introduction of the concept devoid of own-being. They deny the self pertaining to all factors. Moreover, Ābhīdharmikas understand the dependent co-arising as the universal law of causation which allows them to explain their *dharma* theory. For them existence is momentary; each *dharma* occurs and dies within one moment; nothing is going from one moment to the other. However, there really exists a progression of moments. Remarkably those moments of movement occur according to a law which determines the subsequent moments on the basis of preceding ones. For Mādhyamikas, this is nothing more than another extremism which understands the cause and effect relation as totally different to each other (= *asatkārya-vāda*).

The Mādhyamikas see the cause and effect relation as relativity (*sāpekṣatā*). For instance, the concept of night depends on the concept of day, because for one to be meaningful it should expect the other. In the same way, all the conventional conceptual world is based on relativity, for the simple reason that nothing would be meaningful without any relation to another. Good and bad, above and below, right and left, light and dark et cetera are some other examples. Depending co-arising means the essential dependency on each other, for the very reason of anything does not have any own-being which gives the opportunity to occur and be independent. All *dharmas* lack an own or self being, and so cannot be understood as self-sufficient absolutes. Therefore, Emptiness is the dependent co-arising because it denies the own-being of all *dharmas*. At the same time, the denial of self-sufficiency denies extremisms or metaphysical views; for that reason Emptiness is the middle path.

Mādhyamikas undermine the Ābhīdharmic recognition of distinction between compounded (*samskrta*) and un-compounded (*asamskrta*) *dharmas* by refuting Ābhīdharmika claim that each compounded *dharma* has its origination, duration and destruction. Origination is impossible because nothing can originate independently. If there is no origination, how can there be duration and destruction? When the

origination, duration and destruction are unreal, the compounded is also unreal. After refuting the compounded, Nāgārjuna charges if the compounded is not established, how will there be an uncompounded? (MK, vii, p. 33)

3. Views, No Views, and Silence

Nāgārjuna begins his attack on metaphysical speculations while maintaining that "no entities whatsoever are ever found originated from oneself, from another, from both or without a cause" (MK, i, p. 3). He further says, in another place, that in the absence of own-being, there cannot be other-being because other-being means the own-being of other-being. Without having established own-being and other-being, it is nonsense to talk about being, and if there is no establishment of being, one cannot maintain non-being because non-being is the change of being. On this subject Nāgārjuna points out that those who speculate concerning own-being, other-being, being, and non-being, do not see the reality (*tattva*) in the Buddha's message (MK, xv, pp. 3-6). Here is evident the fact that refutation of own-being is the refutation of all kinds of metaphysical speculations; hence, it is central to the meaning of Emptiness.

For the Mādhyamikas, rejection of one speculative view does not mean the veneration of the opposite or the acceptance of any sort of other views. Their dialectic (*prasanga-pādana*) is to go beyond all viewpoints. Emptiness is *prajñā* or wisdom, and it is the awareness of relativity and reality. It is wisdom free from all speculations. Nāgārjuna counsels to see the conflict of the world which tends to dualistic views. For instance, to say, "there exists" is to assume the view of eternalism, and to say "it does not exist" is to assume the view of annihilationism. Therefore, the wise transcends both (MK, xv, p. 10). Nāgārjuna locates a confirmation for his case in a sūtra (*Kātyāyanāvavāde*) where it explains the Buddha's reluctance to take a position of either exist or non-exist. (MK, xv, p. 7).

The Mādhyamikas understand that metaphysical speculation and the liberating wisdom are two different methods with two different goals. The former leads to samsāra, and the latter leads to nirvāna. The rational reasoning has an underlying hidden agenda, which is the desire for existence. Metaphysics is nothing more than a methodological fantasy. Candrakīrti points out that it is nonsensical to answer positively to such metaphysical questions as whether the world is eternal or not, as nonsensical as saying, for example, that the barren woman's son is golden skinned or the hare's horn is white (PP, p. 194).

The root cause of worldly suffering is adherence to the views of self, and liberation is the cessation of all such conceptualizations. Nāgārjuna maintains that karmic defilements which causes one to remain in samsāra exist for the one who constructs them, and until the cessation of those defilements there is no liberation. Conceptual proliferation ends with Emptiness, because the realization of Emptiness destroys the notion of "mine" and "I" and related self notions. All conceptual views arise on the level of samsara. With the attainment of nirvāna, all the samsāric based views find no foundation (MK, xviii, pp. 4-5). Accordingly, Emptiness is the negation of all views, and is itself not another view. Criticism of all views is itself not a view; rejection of all theories is itself not a theory. Mādhyamikas have no views; therefore, Nāgārjuna, in his *Vigrahavyāvartinī* (PP, p. 6), and also Āryadeva, in his *Catuhśataka* (PP, p. 5) explain that he who seeks to prove nothing cannot be refuted.

Nāgārjuna in his *Ratnāvalī* (i, p. 57) condemns annihilationism as well as eternalism. He says the former leads to hell, and the latter leads to heaven. Only the pure wisdom which transcends the duality leads to liberation. From the ultimate standpoint, to no person, at no place, no doctrine was ever taught by the Buddha (MK, xxv, p. 24). However, from the conventional sense, this does not necessarily mean that the Buddha did not teach any doctrine; on the contrary, what he preached

was Emptiness, that is, to give up all sorts of speculative doctrines, even his Emptiness teaching after it served its purpose. Nāgārjuna ends his Mādhyamakārikā, paying homage to Gautama the Buddha who, out of compassion for all beings, taught the doctrine in order to eradicate all views (MK, xxvii, p. 30).

For Mādhyamikas logic has only phenomenal validity. They simply refute the arguments of their opponents without having any thesis of their own to prove. They only point out to their opponents that their thesis cannot be supported even by their own logic. Mādhyamikas maintain that they only demonstrate that all logical arguments are ultimately self contradictory (*viruddha*).

From the ultimate point of view, silence is the highest philosophy, simply because reality cannot be expressed by language with its limitations, to the people who have been tied to and married to language. When Buddhas teach reality they do not argue or put arguments; they simply emphasize the practical necessity of realizing reality instead of wasting time and effort on metaphysical arguments. Reality is beyond all categories of rationality, and it is indescribable. Rationality always proceeds with dichotomy, and at the end of the debate, it is compelled to land in the antinomies.

Even though Emptiness is taught by the Buddhas to enable us to rise above all categories of rational views and language, people wrongly take it as a category, or another view. Indeed, they are hopeless. When a seller says to a customer, "I shall sell nothing to you," the customer replies, "Please sell me this 'nothing'". This shows how hard it is to explain and make ignorant people understand Emptiness. Unenlightened people with their attachment to existence expect "something" to grasp and establish their uncertain existence. Mādhyamikas, however, are not nihilists (*navayam nāstikāh*), since they show a path, which transcends both affirmation and negation, to nirvāna. Mādhyamikas also admit the empirical validity of the phenomenal world including language; however, they also recognize it as unreal because of its relativity, and this can be understood only from the ultimate standpoint. Since Emptiness transcends all conceptual proliferations and puts a fullstop to samsāric thinking, it itself is nirvāna.

4. Self, No-self, and Emptiness

What the Mādhyamika followers of Buddhism attempt to establish with the Emptiness concept is that it is inappropriate to speak of nirvāna, since it is not "something" to be speculated about but a state which shows the nakedness of language. People come to misunderstand the samsāric world as it really exists because language always covers the nakedness of samsāric world with its nouns and verbs, blinding the humans. Furthermore, their religious purpose of emphasizing Emptiness is to make the adept aware of dangers of mental speculations for the realization of nirvāna (PP, p. 228). To talk about nirvāna within the boundaries of language is nonsense, because language can reign within samsāra only. Those who speak of nirvāna are not speaking of nirvāna but speaking of samsāra, thinking it is nirvāna. They are mistaking samsāra for nirvāna just as one may misconceive a rope in the dark to be a snake and to talk about it believing that it really is a snake.

To claim cognitively that nirvāna exists, does not exist, both and neither, nirvāna must be "something," because in order to have a cognition there must exist a cognized object. For Buddhists, Mādhyamikas in particular, nirvāna is not a cognitive object to be grasped. It is a realized state which is beyond the speculations of language. Buddha's silence indicates the futility of metaphysics, and signifies his refusal to commit speculative nonsense. This does not mean that there is no nirvāna; it means only that it is non-sensical to speculate about nirvāna since there is no ontological nirvāna.

Mādhyamikas refuse extremist views, following the historical Buddha who taught his middle path avoiding both eternalism and annihilationism. They are the followers of the middle path doctrines, and they understand the dependent co-arising as the middle path, and it should be noted that this equalization also appears in many Pāli scriptural passages. For instance, Buddha says to a monk:

If one holds the dogma that the soul is identical with the body, in that case there can be no religious life. Again if one holds the view that the self is one thing and the body another, then also there can be no religious life. Avoiding both of these extremes the Tathāgata teaches the doctrine that lies in the middle. (S, II, p. 61)

The Buddha explains further that this middle doctrine to be the dependent co-arising.

Elsewhere, by using his middle doctrine (*majjhena dhammam deseti*), Buddha refutes two other extremisms which are also related to the two extremist religio-philosophies. One is everything exists and the other is nothing exists (S, II, p. 17). Here, again his middle doctrine is dependent co-arising. The most significant fact is that the Pāli scriptures use no-self (*anatta*) concept in the same way that the Mādhyamikas use the devoid of own-being concept. The famous Dhammapada saying of "all the dharmas are devoid of a self" (*sabbe dhammā anattā*) (S, III, p. 133; Dhp, p. 279), is an example for it. The word *anatta* (no-self) for early Buddhists is not only the refutation of the self but also the refutation of non-self. That is to say, the refutation of self does not mean taking the side of annihilationists who even refuse the validity of a religious life. The theory that the Mādhyamikas use to avoid extremes is the dependent co-arising, which is the middle path, as is for the Buddha.

According to the Pāli scriptures, the early Buddhists also avoid speculative views, ideas, theories, concepts and dogmas. In his discourse to Kaccāyana, Buddha explains the world's general inclination to two extremities of is-ness and not-is-ness. However, for the one who has the right understanding of dependent co-arising, there is no such inclination. He says subsequently that the world, in general, grasps after ideologies and -isms, and is imprisoned by them (S, III, pp. 134-135). As we saw earlier, this discourse is highly valued by the Mādhyamikas and also by the followers of other schools of Buddhism. That is to say, avoidance of extreme views and rising above all views are central to all forms of Buddhism.

Rising above all views, Mādhyamikas attempt to find the solution to the human predicament which is ceasing to be in face of will to be. Will to be enables people to reproduce speculative views about self on which people re-build their conceptual worlds, and, in turn, totally undermines the Emptiness. Mādhyamikas, with their Emptiness doctrine, teach people to get away from cognitive speculations, while realizing the self which is only an imagination, and a mental construction of the individual but powerful enough to deceive him or her, though it does not even have its own-being. Emptiness enables one to realize the hollowness of the world of nouns, pronouns, verbs, and verbal nouns, and to realize the reality which is the relativity of them. The one who realizes the reality of relativity, goes beyond all forms of metaphysical thoughts and views, and hence he is a Tathāgata, one who has no conflicts with the world, even though the world may have conflicts with him.

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