

Mādhyamika Philosophy of Nāgārjuna

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Abstract

The study is an attempt to understand the concept Mādhyamika philosophy given by Nāgārjuna. He speaks about the emptiness of all phenomena, the emptiness of that emptiness and the identities of emptiness with dependent arising and of the Conventional/ Mundane and Ultimate truths are the central ontological principles of Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. He argues that this doctrine of emptiness is a middle path between two extreme positions: reificationism and nihilism. The fundamental idea of Mādhyamika is that, to put the thing which is ultimately existent as an empty devoid of existence– and this is the very point where Mādhyamikas normally endorses by stressing on the śūnyatā or the emptiness not merely in terms of wholes like as persons, but also of the analytical categories or dharmas, where these are briefly stated in Abhidharma text.

KEYWORDS: Mādhyamika(Middle Path), Pratityasmutpada (dependent origination), Prajnaparamita (perfect wisdom), Two truths Mundane and Ultimate, Śūnyatā,(devoid of merit), Nirvāna.

Introduction

The thoughts and manifestation evolved through the civilizations around the Indian subcontinent, includes conventional (astika) and unconventional (nastika) systems, the conventional systems which includes the Samkhya, Vaisheshika, Yoga, Nyaya, Purva-mimamsa, and Vedanta schools of philosophy, and unconventional (nastika) systems, like Buddhism and Jainism. Nāgārjuna's primary contribution to Indian philosophy is in the development of the concept of Mādhyamika philosophy which brings together other Buddhist doctrines such as anatta (no self) and Pratityasmutpada (dependent origination). Nāgārjuna was also instrumental in the development of the two-truth doctrine mundane and ultimate truths, in other words, there are two levels of truth in Buddhist teaching, one which is directly (ultimately) true, and one which is only conventionally or instrumentally true, commonly called upāya in later Mahāyāna writings. It will not be incorrect to mention here that Nāgārjuna's contribution to the development of the Buddhism was so great and profound that it will last forever and the scholars of the Buddhism will be always be fortunate enough even they have the glimpse of the Nāgārjuna's madhyamika philosophy.

The biographical accounts of Nāgārjuna, agrees that he was born in a Brahmin family of South India.¹ The earliest source testifying to Nāgārjuna's connection with the Sātvāhana dynasty surrounds two works: the *Suhrillekha* and the *Ratnāvalī*.² According to Kumarjīva, Nāgārjuna entered the Buddhist Order and studied all the Buddhist text that were available to him and being unsatisfied with them, he wandered in search of

¹ Ramanan K.V. "Nagarjuna's Philosophy" Motilal Banarsidass Prakashan, Delhi, India, p. 26.

² Joseph walser. P. 63.

other texts.³ All the accounts of his life, speak of his having obtained the Prajñāpāramitā-sutras (Kumarjiva's Vaipulya-Sutras) from a Naga.

The Tibetan sources state that Nāgārjuna was a teacher at Nalanda and they speak of his all-embracing compassion and intense care for the whole community. It is believed that the Nāgārjuna is the author of the thirteen texts. Apart from MūlaMādhyamakakārikā twelve other texts are be considered the genuine works of Nāgārjuna are: Sūnyatāsaptati, Vīrahavyāvartanī, Vaidalyaparakarna, Vyavahārasiddhi, Yuktisastikā, Catuhstava, Ratnāvalī, Pratītyasamutpādahrdayakārikā, Sūtrasamuccaya, Bodhicittavivarana, Suhrlekha, and Bodhisambhāra.

Mūlamādhyamakakārikā is the most important of the Nāgārjuna's texts. It is a subject of major commentaries by the Indian scholars Buddhapālita, Bhāvaviveka, Avalokitavrata, and Candrakīrti and many more commentaries in Tibet. It is cited widely in subsequent Buddhist literature, and debates about how to interpret it define differences between major Buddhist philosophical schools.

Nāgārjuna's contributions to Buddhism were vast, and to understand the profundity of Nāgārjuna's contributions, it is important to have a basic understanding of the religio-philosophical climate during Nāgārjuna's lifetime. It had been a few centuries since Gautama Siddhartha, the historical Buddha, died and left Buddhism to take its own course. The Buddha, himself, it should be clarified, was not particularly addicted to philosophizing. The Buddha expressed the fundamentals of Buddhism and planted the seed for further development, but much of the detailed teachings we know today as Buddhism, as well as most of the statements directly attributed to the Buddha, were actually composed by succeeding generations of Buddhists. Only a few centuries after the Buddha's death, certain groups had established precise philosophical traditions to explain his doctrine. Nāgārjuna considered this kind of intellectual institutionalization of the Buddha's doctrine to be flawed. At the same time, Brahmanic traditions were also actively competing with Buddhist thought, which was still relatively new in comparison to the ancient roots of Hinduism. On one hand, you had Hindus that advocated the existence of an eternal self counterpoint to the Buddhist idea of 'no self', and on the other, you had over-philosophical Buddhists that risked missing the Buddha's point entirely by awarding too much merit to intellectual interpretation. A careful study of the doctrines in the extensive corpus of Buddhist literature indicates very clearly how certain fundamental ideas have survived, in spite of the occasional appearance of the concepts that conflicts with the basic teaching of the Buddha and thus produce controversies among the Buddhist thinkers⁴.

We have seen that nearly all the important tenets of the Madhyamika philosophy were already adumbrated in the Mahasanghika system and Prajnaparamita literature, Nagarjuna only developed them. His original contribution was the dialectic that he evolved. (Dialectic means: - a method of examining and discussing opposing ideas in order to find the truth). The mysterious silence of the Buddha of the most fundamental questions of Metaphysics led him to probe into the reason of silence and through a searching inquiry into this silence was the dialectic born. Nagarjuna clearly systematized the mysterious silence of the Buddha and formulated them into the catuskoti, tetra lemma (four cornered negation).

³ Ramanan K.V. "Nagarjuna's Philosophy" Motilal Banarsidass Prakashan, Delhi, India, pp. 26-27

⁴ Kalupahana David J. "Mulamādhyamakakarika" p.7.

So, the Mādhyamika claim is that everything—including, most importantly, the spiritual life itself—is made possible by emptiness. The contention that entities are not empty contradicts the empirically verifiable reality that things change when the factors upon which these things rely alter, and would, furthermore, completely undermine the possibility of spiritual transformation. As Nāgārjuna says, “for whom emptiness exists, all things are possible. For whom emptiness does not exist, nothing is possible”. The teaching of emptiness is actually an affirmation of the dynamic interconnectedness of all things.

Thus, the Mādhyamika teaching of emptiness appears to be a re-statement of the venerable and central Buddhist teaching of dependent origination (pratiityasamutpaada). Indeed, Nāgārjuna proclaims in the auto-commentary to the Denial of Objections that emptiness and dependent origination are synonyms and he declares that ‘since all entities are empty of inherent existence, the unequalled tathaagata taught the dependent origination of entities.

Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā:

The emptiness of all phenomena, the emptiness of that emptiness and the identities of emptiness with dependent arising and of the Conventional/ Mundane and Ultimate truths are the central ontological principles of Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. He argues that this doctrine of emptiness is a middle path between two extreme positions: reificationism and nihilism. To reify phenomena is to regard them as existing with essence, as existing independently. To be nihilistic is to take the fact that they are empty of essence and exist merely dependently as their complete non-existence, and hence to regard empirical reality as entirely false.

First of all, to understand the profundity of Nāgārjuna's contributions, it is important to have a basic understanding of the religio-philosophical climate during Nāgārjuna's lifetime. It had been a few centuries since Gautama Siddhartha, the historical Buddha, died and left Buddhism to take its own course. The Buddha, himself, it should be clarified, was not particularly addicted to philosophizing. The Buddha expressed the fundamentals of Buddhism and planted the seed for further development, but much of the detailed teachings we know today as Buddhism, as well as most of the statements directly attributed to the Buddha, were actually composed by succeeding generations of Buddhists. Some separated by well over a thousand years from the Buddha's lifetime. Only a few centuries after the Buddha's death, certain groups had established precise philosophical traditions to explain his doctrine. Nāgārjuna considered this kind of intellectual institutionalization of the Buddha's doctrine to be flawed. At the same time, Brahmanic traditions were also actively competing with Buddhist thought, which was still relatively new in comparison to the ancient roots of Hinduism. On one hand, you had Hindus that advocated the existence of an eternal self counterpoint to the Buddhist idea of 'no self', and on the other, you had over-philosophical Buddhists that risked missing the Buddha's point entirely by awarding too much merit to intellectual interpretation. A careful study of the doctrines in the extensive corpus of Buddhist literature indicates very clearly how certain fundamental ideas have survived, in spite of the occasional appearance of the concepts that conflicts with the basic teaching of the Buddha and thus produce controversies among the Buddhist thinkers⁵.

⁵ Kalupahana David J. “Mūlamādhyamakakarika” p.7.

Nāgārjuna's contribution to Buddhism:

Nāgārjuna's contributions to Buddhism were vast, but can arguably be boiled down to two essentials that made his perspective unique in his time, and which would change the way that Buddhist thought developed over the coming centuries

To get a better idea of what Nāgārjuna was trying to point out, consider what you would surmise yourself to be if everything classifiable as 'your environment' did not exist. Imagine that you are in a void. Now, you wouldn't be standing, since there is no ground you would not be floating, because there is nothing to float on or over. You wouldn't be in any place, and you would not even be in 'no place'. Since there is only a blank void, 'place' as a quality of experience is gone. If you had a personality, you wouldn't know it, because you would have no way of contrasting yourself to others. There would be no emotion, because there is nothing to feel. There would be no thinking, because there is nothing to think about. You would not be physical or mental or a combination of the two. All of these aforementioned qualities, the qualities we often try to cite when we define our 'self', are inconceivable without all other things upon which they are interdependent. Only with the mutual arising of all phenomena can anything in particular be distinguished and be unique. Everything that we might offer as 'proof of existence' of an inherent, enduring self vanishes the moment that we strip 'non-self' away. Thus, the concept of self, Nāgārjuna declared, is an illusion. What we call 'self' could not exist if not for 'emptiness', which, for the fact that it is without any essential qualities itself, enables the manifestation of individuality and differentiation. We do not find even a single thing in the world which is absolutely real. The whole thing is related to contingent upon which is conditioned by something else or dependently originated (*pratityasamutpada*).⁶ The world is not Reality: it is a realm of relativity.⁷ That is why Nāgārjuna says *yeh pratityasamutpadah sūnyatām tam pracakṣmahe*.

The spirit of the Mādhyamika Philosophy:

The basic philosophy of Mādhyamika is that there are no "things," either sensible objects of the life world or subjective components of the consciousness, which have own-being. All things are, rather, "empty" and without essential nature. They have only relative, dependent being. "Emptiness" thus it is subject to the law of causality or "dependent origination" and lack of a permanent essence and an invariant mark (*niḥsvabhavata*). Nāgārjuna's philosophy termed as the Mādhyamika, because it maintains to stick to the middle path.

The philosophy of Nāgārjuna has no disdain for *vyavahāra* where it is that thought and language hold. The main purpose of the negative argument in the *Kārikā* was to expose the self-contradictions inherent in the position of the *Savāstivādins* who clung to the determination as ultimate, the relative as self-contained. This is the error of misplaced absoluteness. The major function of the negative arguments in the *Kārikā* is to reveal the relativity of the mundane; the question of the ultimate reality constitutes a minor part. It is the error in regard to the mundane nature of things that needs to be cleared up first. With the revelation of the essentially conditioned, non-substantial, relative nature of things, the tendency to cling might again operate, tending to end in negativism. This is an error in regard to the ultimate nature of the things and it is in regard to this error that the *sūnyatā* of *sūnyatā* has been taught. What is sought to be

⁶ Stcherbatsky Th. "The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāna" p.38.

⁷ Ibid.

revealed thereby is the non-ultimacy of the relative in their relative nature. The unconditioned is not again anything apart from the conditioned. The ultimate truth about the conditioned is that it is itself the unconditioned reality, the Nirvāna. This is the basic teaching of the Mādhyamika. The very import of this truth is that to realize the ultimate is not to abandon the mundane but to learn to see it “with the eye of wisdom”. To live in the world is itself to realize the Nirvāna.

The extreme to which the Mādhyamika would take us ultimately is one which is the meeting point of all systems. And also the meeting point of the root and the branch, the noumenon and the phenomenon. It is this that the Śāstra means when it says that no violating the derived name the wise teach the ultimate truth. To use the language of Śāstra, the wise are like the dragon that keeps its tail in the ocean and its head in the sky and brings down the showers on earth.⁸ It is to be noted that the philosophy of the Nāgārjuna allows for the conceiving the real as the ground of the universe.

Purpose of the Study:

The aim of this work is to elucidate the meaning of the Middle Way, the way of comprehension. ‘Everything stands in harmony with him who stands in harmony with Śūnyatā, which is not a rejection of existence or of understanding but of the misconstruction of the sense of the real or the error of misplaced absoluteness which is the origin of clinging and the root of conflict and suffering. The arguments advanced by Nagarjuna should be understood as useful tools on the path to enlightenment. The study will be a brief but lucid material for the scholars having interest in Madhyamika Philosophy of Nagarjuna as well as in Buddhism. The relevancy of the present study is immortal and its implication would be beneficial in the philosophical world.

Conclusion:

The fundamental idea of Mādhyamaka is that the put the things which is ultimately existent as an empty devoid of existence— and this is the very point where Mādhyamikas normally endorses by stressing on the Śūnyatā or the emptiness not merely in terms of wholes like as persons, but also of the analytical categories or dharmas where these are briefly stated in Abhidharma text. The Nāgārjuna’s work generally having the arguments that none of the analytic categories or dharmas and conceptions used to explain anything can be reasonably prepared. In short, the argument is that, there is no such categories that can inherently provide any illustrative idea on the phenomenon they purportedly explain.

The Mādhyamikas also rejected those contentions because of their new definition of reality (anapeksah avbhāvaḥ). The Mādhyamika’s conceptions of Relativity (śūnyatā) covered everything, the conditional as well as the eternal elements of the Vaibhāsikas. The new interpretation of the principle of Relativity (praṭītya-samutpāda) made the Hīnayānistic Absolute also relative was false, transient and illusory.

While summing up it is essential to bear in mind that the philosophy of Nāgārjuna has no disdain for vyavahā where it is that thought and language hold. The main purpose of the negative argument in the Kārikā was to unearth the self-contradictions inherent in the position of the Sarvāstivādins who clung to the determinate as ultimate, the relative as self-contained. This is the error of misplaced absoluteness. The major function of the negative argument in the Kārikā is to reveal the relativity of the mundane; the question of the ultimate reality constitutes a minor part. It is the error in regard to the mundane nature of things that needs to be cleared up first. With the

⁸ Śāstra, 263c.

revelation of the essentially conditioned, non-substantial, relative nature of things, the tendency to cling might operate again, tending to end in negativism. This is an error in regard to the ultimate nature of things and it is in regard to this error that the śūnyatā of śūnyatā has been taught. What is sought to be revealed thereby is non-ultimacy of the relative in their relative nature. The unconditioned is again not anything apart from the conditioned. The ultimate truth about the conditioned is that it is itself the unconditioned reality, the Nirvāna. This is the basic teaching of the Mādhyamika.

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