

## INTRODUCTION TO NAGARJUNA AND THE MADHYAMAKA

"To [students] enthusiastic about Mahayana [= universal teaching] the preaching of the Buddhas is in brief: the selflessness and equality (samata) of [all] phenomena [and the doctrine] that mind is originally unborn [= empty of svabhava]. A 'thing' (bhava) is construction (vikalpa). Emptiness is the absence of construction. Where constructions have appeared how can there be emptiness (sunyata)?" --Nagarjuna, BV 29, 44 (in Lindtner 1982 195, 199)

"The Tathagatas [= Buddhas] did not proclaim this teaching [of selflessness] for the sake of argumentation. Nevertheless, it destroys other theses, just as fire destroys fuel. In brief, the Tathagatas explain non-violence as virtuous behavior and nirvana as, in fact, emptiness [= sunyata: openness]. Here [in our system] there are only these two. All people love their own thesis, just as they love their own birthplace. Yet why should a reason that defeats it distress you? An intelligent person who desires good fortune accepts things that are appropriate, even from opponents. Isn't the sun common to everyone on earth who has eyes?" --Aryadeva, CS 12:15, 23-25 (in Lang 1986 115-117)

### **Nagarjuna: the man, the myth, the legacy**

"Nagarjuna is most appropriately understood in the philosophical context of his time, conventionally dated from 150 to 250 C.E. Depending on the dates accepted for the life of Gautama the Buddha [about 566 to 485 B.C.E.], Nagarjuna lived seven to nine hundred years after the parinirvana [= Buddha's physical death] and was associated with the Madhyamaka school.... It was a time favorable to Buddhism when the Greco-Roman influenced Gandhara school of art flourished, inspired Mahayana [= universal vehicle] sutras [= scriptures] were composed in Sanskrit and philosophical debate had become sophisticated.

The Tibetan historian Bu-ston (1290-1364) records that Nagarjuna was a monk at Nalanda near Magadha and a student of Rahulabhadra, one of the founders of Madhyamaka and a student of Avitarka, a teacher of Mahayana.... Whether Nagarjuna's lineage was Mahayana has been raised as a matter of debate in contemporary scholarship. No mention is made of Mahayana themes in texts that can with definitive certainty be ascribed to him. He does, however, refer to Early Buddhist texts....

Nagarjuna is also associated with the Mahayana by region and legend. Like the Prajna Paramita Sutras [= Perfection of Wisdom scriptures], he is said to have come from the south and to have been a frequenter of the naga loka (dragon world under the earth) from whence the Perfection of Wisdom texts are said to have emerged. Place names such as Nagarjuikonda lend credence to his southern origins. Bu-ston says he came from Maharastra in the south.

It is clear from our initial study that Nagarjuna was fully respectful of the early sutras and the Buddhist tradition and early Buddhist scholars erred in seeing him as an iconoclast. His aim was to reaffirm the Middle Way as originally propounded by Gautama [Buddha]. His debate was with the Abhidharma [= early Buddhist scholasticism] and later commentarial traditions of the classical eighteen early schools. Nagarjuna debated and wrote during a creative period that saw the rise of Mahayana Buddhism and a flood of new texts, most importantly, the Prajnaparamita

Sutras, in their numerous abbreviated and elaborated versions, as well as the Lankavatara Sutra, from which he may have drawn but more likely to which he contributed. It was a vibrant period for Indian Buddhism and Nagarjuna's work exerted a lasting influence on later schools well beyond his time and place." (McCagney 1997 1-2, 14)

### **The Name "Madhyamaka"**

The Sanskrit term "madhyamaka" is variously translated as intermediate, middlemost, middle path, the mean, midway, and so on, and is derived from the Buddha's teaching of the middle path (madhyama pratipada). Madhyam(aka) is the school that is associated with Nagarjuna which promotes the middle path; Madhyam(ika) is any follower of the school. Madhyama refers not to the position or view in-between any given dualism, which only creates yet another dualistic opposition, but to a noncommittal attitude (= nonattachment) towards any opposing extremes. For elaboration on this important point, see the Egroup series "Dynamics of the middle path (parts 1-3)," postings #50-52, from 2-3-02 to 4-2-02).

"The Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism goes back to Nagarjuna, the great Indian Buddhist philosopher.... The school derives its name of Madhyamaka, i.e. 'middlemost' (Chinese chung, Tibetan dbu ma), from the fact that Nagarjuna and his followers developed a particular theory which avoids the twin dogmatic extremes of eternalism and annihilationism rejected by the Buddhist tradition and keeps to a philosophical via media [= a middle way] in a specific and very interesting manner. While all Buddhists would of course observe the Middle Way [= madhyama pratipat] in their theory and practice, the philosophers of this school especially have therefore come to be known as Madhyamikas or 'followers of the middle' (Tibetan dbu ma pa)."

"Nagarjuna's writings are the first philosophic treatises (sastra) known to us in which an attempt has been made to give a systematic scholastic exposition of the theory of emptiness (sunyata) and non-substantiality [= lack of svabhava: a permanent, independent self-nature] not only of the self (atman) or individual but also of all factors of existence (dharma), one of the most fundamental ideas of the Mahayanasutras. In Buddhist tradition Nagarjuna is linked especially closely with the Prajnaparamitasutras [= perfection of wisdom scriptures], the Mahayanist scriptures that devote much space to this theory; and he is indeed credited with having rescued parts of them from oblivion." (Ruegg 1981 1, 5-6)

### **Two Madhyamika Subschools**

The Prasangika and Svatantrika Madhyamika subschools developed after Nagarjuna's death. Though the Prasangika reduced to absurdity any opponent's position (as was Nagarjuna's method), they have been accused of lapsing into Hindu absolutisms. At the least, he does lapse into Hinduistic flights of verbal fantasy. (Kalupahana 1986 xv) The Svatantrika was accused of erring through a "subtle absolutizing process" at "a serious cost to the integrity of Nagarjuna's method." (Eckel 1978 327-329) Though the Svatantrika Bhavaviveka criticized certain aspects of the Yogacara mind-only idealist school, his advocacy of using his own positive theses to counter an opponent's argument validates the Yogacara tendency to use positive concepts. It is this reification of and attachment to positive concepts that has influenced popular Buddhism today and results in their abusive conversion techniques. And there are other problems with Bhavaviveka's understanding of the Madhyamaka system. (See Huntington 2003; and the

Egroup's two-part critique on "The Svatantrika-Prasangika Distinction" for elaboration on this problematic classification.)

### **Some Points of Difference Between the Madhyamika and its Rivals**

"The analysis of experience into indivisible moments was a dominant feature of the philosophical atmosphere in which Nagarjuna lived. Hence the situation was extremely complicated for Nagarjuna, so whatever new interpretation he gave to the causal theory [= interdependency] propounded by the Buddha was prompted by circumstances. Though presented with a choice of metaphysical theories of causation presented by Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools, Nagarjuna was drawn to the doctrines embodied in the Prajnaparamita [= perfection of wisdom] literature. He therefore sought a way to justify the teachings embodied there, and his dialectic seems to be an attempt to provide a philosophical foundation for these doctrines." (Kalupahana 1975 155)

"Having seen how vehemently Nagarjuna attacks any kind of acceptance of svabhava [= a permanent, independent self-nature] one would also expect him to have criticized those who might have thought themselves justified in maintaining the absolute existence of vijnana (citta) [= consciousness, thought]." (Lindtner 1982 180)

"We still have no clear idea of Bhavaviveka's Svatantrika system, which can be studied only in Tibetan translations, and which seems to have upheld the well-nigh incredible thesis that in Madhyamika logic valid positive statements can be made. Likewise we continue to be puzzled by the teachings and affiliations of the Yogacara-Madhyamikas who were responsible for the final synthesis of the Mahayana in India." (Conze 1967 238-239)

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