

THE BUDDHA'S MIDDLE PATH

"From morality comes wisdom and from wisdom morality....Like washing one hand with the other...so is morality washed round with wisdom and wisdom with morality." --Buddha, Dialogues of the Buddha I. 124 (in Macy 1991 211)

"This [is] a matter hard to perceive, this conditionality, this [dependent origination]...against the stream of common thought, deep, subtle, difficult, delicate...." --Buddha, Dialogues of the Buddha II.36 (in Macy 1991 45)

"Drom saw him in meditation and said, 'Meditation is good; practice is even better.' The man was amazed and asked, 'How does one practice?' Drom answered, 'Do not be attached to this life; cause your mind to become the practices.' Drom said this because practice depends on thought." (Dalai Lama 1975 33)

Terminology

Interdependency (pratityasamutpada) -- The Buddha's teaching of the "dependence on conditions" of all dharmas (factors of experience: people, objects, events, ideas) means that we can only know phenomena (dharma) through the causes and conditions that give rise to them, as opposed to any inherent or intrinsic self-nature (svabhava) that we might ascribe to them.

Emptiness (sunyata) -- The Buddha's teaching of emptiness means that dharmas lack or are empty (sunya) of any inherent or intrinsic self-nature (svabhava) that we might ascribe to them. So, dharmas are knowable only through the causes and conditions that give rise to them.

Thus, the two truths of interdependency and emptiness are mutually defining. The one is not viable without the other. Any attempt to absolutize the one automatically invokes the other one to neuter it. This mutual definition of the two truths also reveals the noncommittal attitude of the middle path whereby neither side is to be reified as an object for attachment.

Buddha Explains the Middle Path

In his first sermon, Buddha introduces the middle way which rejects the two extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence:

"Those foolish people who torment themselves, as well as those who have become attached to the domains of the senses, both these should be viewed as faulty in their method, because they are not on the way to deathlessness [= liberation, freedom]. These so-called austerities but confuse the mind which is overpowered by the body's exhaustion. In the resulting stupor one can no longer understand the ordinary things of life, how much less the way to the Truth which lies beyond the senses. The minds of those, on the other hand, who are attached to the worthless sense-objects, are overwhelmed by passion and darkening delusion. They lose even the ability to understand the doctrinal treatises, still less can they succeed with the method which by suppressing the passions leads to dispassion [= nonattachment]. So I have given up both these extremes, and have found another path, a middle way." --Buddha (in Conze 1986 55-56)

Later, the Buddha defines the middle way as the "right theory" to follow regarding the two extremes of existence (eternalism) and nonexistence (nihilism) of the self and all principles (dharmas = factors of experience: people, objects, events, ideas): "That all exists is one extreme, Katyayana. That all does not exist is the second extreme. Not going to either of these extremes the thus-gone [= Tathagata: Buddha] teaches the doctrine by the mean [= the middle way]." (in Warder 1980 130)

The Buddha's existence/nonexistence dualism applies to all dharmas (= factors of experience: people, objects, events, ideas) and the characteristics we ascribe to them. To simplify this equation between existence and nonexistence, Nagarjuna reduces it to the dualism of "is" and "is not" of any dharma or its characteristics: "In the instructions to Katyayana, both 'it is' and 'it is not' were demonstrated by the Buddha as causing the appearance of being [= existence] and nonbeing [= nonexistence]." --Nagarjuna, MK 15:7 (in McCagney 1997 172)

"If [no] characteristic is present [= in the mind by mental reification and attachment], the characterized does not occur. If there is no occurrence of the characterized, there is no occurrence of the characteristic. Therefore the characterized does not occur nor does the characteristic occur. Separate from the characteristic and the characterized, no existent occurs." --Nagarjuna, MK 5:4-5 (in McCagney 1997 148-149)

More Views on the Middle Path

"[Nagarjuna] perhaps hoped to reunite the schools, old and new, in a single Buddhist doctrine agreed by all to be the re-establishment of the original teaching of the Buddha himself. The name of the school he effectively founded (even if it existed earlier), the Madhyamika (the 'Intermediate'), suggests the re-establishment of the original 'intermediate way' in all possible senses of 'intermediate', avoiding extremes of speculative opinion, of conduct and perhaps of the divisions of school and 'vehicle'." (Warder 1980 377)

"Just as the neither/nor position in the Nikayas [= early Buddhist scriptures] is the neutral position (the arahant [= saint] who torments neither himself nor others, who feels neither pleasure nor pain, etc.), so for Nagarjuna, pratitya samutpada, sunyata (becoming) is the neutral middle position between asti (existence) and nasti (nonexistence). It is not the case that dharmas exist and it is not the case that dharmas do not exist, they are indeterminate. This is the zero position, neither positive nor negative, but midway between them. Nagarjuna is not negating but abandoning views. He concludes the MK ["Treatise on the Middle Path"] with a salutation to Gautama [Buddha] who, out of compassion, abandoned or rejected (not negated) all views." (McCagney 1997 115)

References

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