

Prajna in the Madhyamaka School

I. Introduction

1. Madhyamaka was the first systematic school of Mahayana Buddhism
2. Madhyamaka means “pertaining to the middle,” thus the Madhyamaka is the School of the Middle Way.
3. Founder of Madhyamaka was Acharya Nagarjuna (South India, c. 150-250 A.C.)
4. Most important and influential work, the *Mula Madhyamika Karika*, the Root Verses on the Middle Way
5. His influence on Indian, Chinese, and Tibetan Buddhism

II. Madhyamaka as a philosophy of the Middle Way

1. Nagarjuna’s aim: not innovation, but to recapture the Buddha’s original intention
2. The middle way of doctrine = dependent origination.
3. Nagarjuna’s use of dependent origination
4. Roots in the Agamas/Nikayas
5. Nagarjuna’s aim: reconciliation between Sravaka and Prajnaparamita traditions, not polemical conflict

III. Nagarjuna’s special achievement

1. Not development of philosophy of emptiness (Sunyata not an innovation of Nagarjuna)
2. Showed dependent origination is the key to unlock the riddle of Sunyata
3. Nagarjuna showed that dependent origination and emptiness are simply two sides of the same coin; the two together are the “philosophical middle way”
4. Nagarjuna’s verse of homage to the Buddha: the eight negations

IV. Wisdom is the direct realization of sunyata

1. Madhyamika Karika 18:5: “Cognition of emptiness dissolves all *prapanca*, conceptual elaboration”
2. Realization of emptiness needed to achieve all the fruits of the Buddhist path
3. Sravakas and bodhisattvas both attain the same wisdom cognizing emptiness of both persons and phenomena

V. What is meant by emptiness?

1. Emptiness as an extension of the idea of *anatta*, non-self
2. Madhyamaka critique of the Abhidharma system’s approach to non-self
3. The teaching of emptiness asserts that all things are empty of *svabhava*, inherent existence, intrinsic existence, existence independent of conditions
4. To say that phenomena are empty means that they lack inherent existence, that they lack intrinsic reality, that they lack independent existence
5. Reason: because they originate in dependence upon conditions
6. Example: A sheet of paper, arisen from countless conditions, is empty of any “paper essence.”

VI. New meanings in old bottles

1. Dependent origination as meaning that things achieve their being in dependence upon their parts; things are “designated relationally,” designated or named in relation to an assemblage of parts
2. Example: Why a clock is empty of being a clock
3. Dependent origination as meaning that things, as things of a particular sort, depend upon the mind that designates them
4. Examples: (1) “What’s that strange object on the table?” (2) “There’s a great feast in the library!” (said one termite to another)

VII. Conventional truth and Ultimate Truth

1. Things that arise through the law of dependent origination have *conventional reality but not ultimate reality*. Statements that assume their reality express *conventional truths*.
2. The ultimate reality of all dependently arisen phenomena is just their emptiness. Thus emptiness is the ultimate reality and ultimate truth.
3. But emptiness is not something existing apart from dependently arisen phenomena. Although emptiness is the ultimate nature of all dependent phenomena, *emptiness is not itself an inherently existent reality*. Emptiness itself does not ultimately exist; emptiness does not possess an intrinsic nature of its own.
4. Emptiness is also dependently arisen. And what does emptiness depend on? *Emptiness depends upon things that are empty*.
5. The two truths are ultimately identical. Emptiness is not other than dependent origination. Dependent origination is not other than emptiness. (Heart Sutra: “Form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form”)
6. In terms of practical methodology, we have to approach the ultimate truth, the truth of emptiness, through investigation and analysis of the conventional truth.
7. The key to uncovering the emptiness of conventional realities, to removing the illusion of inherent existence, is reasoning. The distinctive Madhyamaka method: arguing from consequences.

VIII. Meditation on Emptiness: First Steps

1. Obtain a sense of the way we spontaneously and naturally cling to the idea of “I”
2. Determine that if the “I” truly exists, it must be either identical with the body and mind (= the five aggregates) or it must be a completely different entity from the body and mind
3. Apply various reasons to establish that the “I” is not identical with the aggregates, and not an entity other than the aggregates.
4. One realizes that the idea of an inherently existing “I” is an error. The “I” exists as a mere concept designated in dependence upon the five bodily and mental aggregates. The “I” is not non-existent. It exists as a conventional truth, but like all conventional truths, it is a truth that is empty of intrinsic nature.