

**"Buddhism and the Mādhyamika Thought: A Study with reference to select Buddhist treatises"**

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**ABSTRACT**

Buddhism, right from the beginning, has a magnitudinous expanse of its philosophical thought which can be said to have culminated in Mādhyamika School. The Mādhyamika has developed its entire philosophical corpus on Śūnyatā doctrine which has become a moving force of entire scholarship in the field of Buddhist philosophy since then. My Present paper deals with the formation of Mahāyāna School, its Historical background and the Philosophical implications thereof primarily the Śūnyata doctrine of Mādhyamika School.

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If we put Buddhism in a broad Parenthetical division as 'Early Buddhism' i.e. the phase before the Great Schism when Buddhism got divided into two Schools – Theravada and Mahāyāna , and 'Later Buddhism' which can be said to have originated with the Prajñāparamitā treatises in the form of Śūnyata doctrine of Mādhyamika. T.V.R Murthi writes -

Earlier Buddhism was semi-critical: it denied the reality of the substance – soul – (Pudgala-nairatmya), but dogmatically affirmed the reality of the dharmas, separate elements. The new phase denies the reality of the elements too (dharma-nairatmya). (5)

The evolution of Mādhyamika School is generally said to have taken place in Prajñāparamitā treatises where the teachings of this school were found to have existed in the scattered form. Mahāyāna is called the new revolutionary school because with Mahāyāna started an altogether new interpretation of Buddha's teachings as it is very well known that during the Great Schism, which believed to have happened after a decade of Buddha's death the major points of difference were that what should be Buddhism's response to the new customs that it is coming across with? and should it change according to the changing times or not? The Hinayanis, as they are popularly known, held fast to the belief that Buddhism should be kept rooted and limited to what Buddha said during his lifetime however, another group of Monks objected to it as they wanted to interpret Buddha's silence and build on what he didn't mention in his teachings and this group came to known as what is now called Mahāyāna School. The Mādhyamika School evolved from Mahāyāna sect of Buddhism and the entire chorus of Mādhyamika thought is believed to have been taken Prajñāparamitā treatises. The famous Mahayanist Monk and the founder of Mādhyamika School Nāgārjuna is generally assumed to teachings found in these treatises.

About Prajñāparamitā, says T.V.R Murthy:

In the Prajñāparamitā and the other subsidiary canonical (Sutra) literature of the Mādhyamika, the one basic idea that is reiterated ad nauseum is that there is no change, no origination, no cessation, no coming in or going out; the real is neither one, nor many; neither atman, nor anatman; it is as it is always. Origination, decay etc. are imagined by the uninformed. ; they are speculations indulged in by the ignorant. The real is utterly devoid (Śūnya) of these and other conceptual constructions; it is transcendent to thought and can be realized only in non-dual knowledge – Prajñā or Intuition, which is the absolute itself. We are also expressly warned not to consider Śūnyata as another theory, the Dharmata as other than the phenomenal world. The Absolute in one sense transcends phenomena as it devoid of empiricity, and in a vital sense or identical with it as their reality. (39)

From Prajñāparamitā we now come to the Mādhyamika School of Buddhist Philosophy. The Mādhyamika School, having originated with the teachings of Nāgārjuna and Aryadeva at around 150 A.D is believed to have its teachings Projected systematically in Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, which is considered as the representative work of the Mādhyamika School. The Mādhyamika School is believed to have four decisive stages of its development – The first began with the Teachings of Nāgārjuna and his disciple Aryadeva (the latter compiled the Mādhyamika teachings in a systematized form and gave it a concrete structure by which it is known till the present day and the former, who happens to be the favourite disciple of Nāgārjuna, to follow his teachings in the correct spirit and write his famous work Catuh Shataka, which, in importance, is second only to MulaMādhyamikarika of Nāgārjuna ); The second could be traced in the development of the Prasangika School represented by Buddhapalita (author of Madhyamakavrtti) and, the Svatantrika School developed by Bhavaviveka ( whose

famous work is Prajñāpradīpa);

About the third stage, T.V.R Murthy opines:

It is Candrakīrti and Santi Deva that give to the Mādhyamika systems its rigorous, orthodox form. Candrakīrti is a commentator and author of unequalled merit; his dialectical skill is of the highest order. Stcherbatsky rightly describes him as “a mighty champion of the purely negative method of establishing monism.” “He succeeds in driving Bhāvaviveka’s school into the shade and finally settles that form of the Mādhyamika system which is now studied in all monastic schools of Tibet and Mongolia, where it is considered to represent the true philosophic basis of Mahāyāna Buddhism. (63)

The fourth and the final stage evolved with Santarakshita (author of Tattvasaṅgraha and Mādhyamikālaṅkāra Karikā) and his disciple, Kamalsīla which saw the syncretism of Yogacāra and Mādhyamika Schools. It was in this phase that Buddhism got its major foothold in Tibet and it happens to be the major philosophy in Tibet and Mongolia to this day. Till this very moment, four philosophical treatises are known on Mūlamādhyamakakārikā: the Akutobhayā (author unknown), the Mādhyamakavṛtti by Buddhapālita, the Prajñāpradīpa by Bhāvaviveka, and the Prasannapadā by Candrakīrti.

As it is known, that of the three Pitakas namely Sutta Pitaka, Vinaya Pitaka, Abhidhamma Pitaka; the Abhidhamma Pitaka discusses the philosophical interpretations of the teachings of Buddha. The Māhāyāna School (mentioned in the category of Later Buddhism earlier) refutes (and modifies) some of the concepts of Abhidhamma Pitaka in its formulations but doesn’t defend their assertion and it was in the Mūlamādhyamakakārikā that we find a systematic defense of those doctrines and the formulation of the Śūnyatā. The concept of Emptiness is not new in Buddhism; it started right from the Buddha. In the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Buddha explained about the notion of emptiness when Ananda asked to the Buddha in thus:

“Venerable Sir, it is said the world is empty. In what respect the world is empty? The Buddha replied, “Insofar as it is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self (suññaṃ idam attena vā attaniyena vā); thus it is said, Ananda, that the world is empty”. (Keown 23)

However, Nagarjuna’s reinterpretation of the concept of emptiness is the revolutionary concept in the Mahāyāna thought and during the course of time, has come to be established as the central point of the Mādhyamika School. Just like the other doctrines of Buddhism, it also reaches the same end as taught by the Lord but with its own interpretations and ways. Śūnyatā is term derived from Sanskrit language which is translated into English as ‘Emptiness’ or ‘Nothingness’ or ‘Voidness’. In Pāli it is called Suññata which stands on the same meaning in English as ‘emptiness’ or ‘voidness’ and sometimes it has translated as un-substantiality, phenomenality, freedom from lust, ill-will and dullness. The word Śūnyatā comes from adjective śūnya (in Sanskrit), suñña (in pāli), śūna (in vedic). These three

words are translated as the same meaning of 'empty' or 'void'. The notion of Śūnyata can be defined as the lack of any intrinsic nature (svabhāva) in all the things of the world. Empty of something else or empty of permanent substance (svabhāva śūnya). The adherents of Mādhyamika School declare everything as devoid of any real being and hence Empty (or Śūnya). Now, as the real nature of things is primarily Void (or Empty) then there could be no thirst/desire for them and detachment from them becomes possible. The ultimate aim of Śūnyata doctrine of Mādhyamika School is to prove that we cannot make any perception about the things i.e. we can neither accept them nor reject them, they cannot be put under the ambit of what is called as duality of reason as is or is not because they are basically empty and hence, any kind of perception about them would be wrong as even the Śākyamuni himself was against any kind of perception about the things (as it happens to be one of the major characteristic of the Buddhistic thought commonly known as Dittivāda). Furthermore, Śūnyavadins believe that failing to see the real nature of things is ultimately the cause of the human suffering. We generally have a misconception about the true nature of a thing, we consider 'relative' as 'absolute' and 'conditioned' as 'unconditioned' and that is reason we cling to the things and our desires arise. However, once we know the true nature of a thing means to abstain oneself from having any kind of desire for them. Śūnyata refers to the very notion of realizing the truth, the truth that nothing is absolute, everything that Humans come across in this existence is relative, and the very existence of Humans is relative. Mādhyamika School, as a whole, reveals idea of the ultimacy and separateness of the basic elements is not devoid of any ground however it is definitely counterstated by the very nature of things. It focuses on the very idea of Śūnyata (Emptiness). Śūnyata, as emptiness, means that the phenomenal world, we live in and are a part of, believing that it composes of substances that are inherently existing however, the truth is that these entities fundamentally lack any inherent existence- they are, basically, empty or devoid of any inherent existence. No sequence, neither any consequence, nor any subsequence would be attached to it and exactly in Dhammapada, Gautama would maintain and keep up the same: *Sāraṃ ca Sārato nātvā asāraṃ ca asārato / Te sāraṃ adhigaccanti sammāsaṃkarappagocarā* (But they who knew the truth as truth and untruth as untruth arrive at truth and follow right desires (Radhakrishnan 62). When Gautama says the truth as truth, he should like to mean that ideal is expressed through its most specific nature that is once again the convergence of attendant constructs. Thus, the truth of an object is the convergence upon the single explicit point of reference because of which we can come to know the object.

Hence, Mādhyamika School in Buddhism has been revolutionary in redefining the very nature of the elements. It had outdrawn many the then existing schools of Buddhism and proved conclusively that the very nature of the things and beings was/is/always will be empty and without any fundamentally fixed nature and hence, our clinging to them is fruitless and futile. Nagarjuna in the very same regard, came with a rather pontifical observation: *Kriyā na pratyayavatī nāpratyayavatī kriyā / Pratyayā nākriyāvantaḥ kriyāvantaś ca santy uta.* (Activity is not constituted of conditions not it is not non-constituted of conditions. Conditions are neither constituted nor non-constituted of activity). (Nagarjuna 108). It would mean that neither the subject nor the object derive their significance from certain predisposed

associations or conditions, each, therefore, have a logical necessity to exist on its own nor each is both cause and effect unto itself. From this standpoint, it would be rather easy for us to conclude that once the cause comes to begin in the form of effect, it ceases to be - thus every other moment is unto itself and on its own and no association whatsoever could be thought about. It is imperative to point out the very fact which is believed in Buddhist Philosophy that, what is denied by such criticism is not the phenomenal world but rather our holding on to it as absolute – which is, according to the Madhyamikas, our ignorance. Thus, it is not the perceptions or determinate entities as such which are denied by Śūnyata but rather our attachment to them, our misapprehensions with regard to them. Śūnyata does not deny the existence of the phenomenal world; it only denies our mistaking it as absolute.

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