

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā: Introduction and the Spread of its system of Teaching and Learning in India and Tibet

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Nāgārjuna, a second centurion Indian Buddhist adept from Nālandā Mahāvihāra, was the pioneer of the Middle Way Philosophy. As the intent-commentary (*āśaya-vṛtti*) of the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*, he composed six treatises on the Middle Way. In this treatise, he elucidates the directed presented order of emptiness (*Śākṣanidarśana-Śūnyatākrama*), i.e., the view point of the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*.

The treatise titled *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, rendered into English as ‘Fundamental Verses on the Middle Path’, is a key text of Madhyamaka School as well as the masterpiece work of Nāgārjuna. He presents the futility of metaphysical speculations in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* utilizing the Buddha’s theory of “dependent origination”. His method of dealing with such metaphysics is referred to as “Middle Path”. It is the middle path that avoids the substantialism of the Sarvāstivādins as well as the nominalism of the Sautrāntikas.

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (MMK)

The name of the text in Sanskrit is ‘*Prajñānāmamūlamadhyamakakārikā*, a combination of five main words: *prajñā*+*nāma*+*mūla*+*madhyamaka*+*kārikā*. Here, ‘*prajñā*’ in Sanskrit means knowledge or wisdom; ‘*madhyamaka*’ means middle; ‘*mūla*’ means fundamental; ‘*kārikā*’ means verse which means that the entire text is a metric composition; and ‘*nāma*’ means so-called. Here ‘*prajñā*’ represents *Prajñāpāramitā* by mentioning a part of it. It is named after its content. Just as ordinarily ‘middle’ means ‘*free from extremes*’, since it avoids both extremes of existence, non-existence etc., he calls it ‘*the middle*.’ The word ‘*madhyamaka*’ itself means ‘*the meaning of ‘madhyama*.’ This is a construction of *taddhita pratyaya* (tad+hita+pratyaya) in which ‘*ka*’ denotes ‘*the meaning of*’. The suffix ‘*ka*’ is attached because it both demonstrates and denotes the middle path. In virtue of the grammatical category of this word, both the treatise on the middle and whatever is associated with it is called ‘*madhyamaka*.’ Or, as Bhāvaviveka, also called Bhavya, says, because it is referred to by the word *madhyama* with the suffix ‘*ka*’ it is Madhyamaka Philosophy. Because of the stem of the word ‘*madhyamaka*,’ both the treatise and the philosophy are called ‘*madhyamaka*.’ By combining the words, it becomes, ‘Versified Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Path’. The treatise is named “Fundamental” since it is, like the body, the complete, not just the partial, basis of all other Madhyamaka treatises.

Essential comments on the text

The treatise now stands at the centre of modern philosophical analysis of the Middle Way Philosophy. The Middle Way is a systemized form of the emptiness doctrine of the *Prajñāpāramitā* treatises which explains that there is not the least difference between the world and absolutely real. The work upon which the Madhyamaka

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Philosophy is based is the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, the authentic work of Nāgārjuna is still available in its original form. According to the sources¹, there are eight commentaries composed by the Indian panditas and twenty-two commentaries attributed to the Tibetan scholars. Among the eight commentaries by the Indian panditas, except *Prasannapada* by Candrakīrti, all other texts are not available these days in its original form. Another commentary, rather a meaningful commentary, of MMK² by Candrakīrti titled *Madhyamakāvatāra* has been restored by two Tibetan scholars and has been published by the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath. Similarly, some of among them are based on the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka view whereas some are based on Svātantrika Madhyamaka view. For example, Buddhapālita, who was one of the disciples of Nāgārjuna, wrote a commentary on MMK titled *Buddhapālita-Mūlamadhyamakavṛtti* (Peking, 5242) according to the Prāsaṅgika view. This commentary is said to be the best commentary among all. In the Sydney 2009 teachings His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama stated that Buddhapālita's commentary on Nāgārjuna's MMK is the best commentary. He adds, “*Buddhapālita* really sums up the Madhyamaka position on how the understanding of emptiness reinforces one's belief in the reality of the empirical world, the conventional everyday life. He also sums up the points expressed in a wonderful passage in the MMK by Nāgārjuna. In it, Nāgārjuna states anything that is dependently originated has been taught to be emptiness and this is dependently designated. This is the path of the middle. Buddhapālita explains here that one's true understanding of emptiness must take place in terms of dependent origination. One could almost say that there is a creation between dependent origination and emptiness. The fact of the dependence of things and events in itself suggests the emptiness of independent existence or inherent existence. The fact that things are devoid of inherent existence suggest that every dependent nature. Therefore, in some sense they are the two different sides of a same thing, two different ways of looking at the same thing. Therefore, Buddhapālita has suggested a way of understanding Nāgārjuna's teachings on emptiness in a very unique way where emptiness and dependent origination are equated with each other.”

Later on, Bhāvaviveka, also a disciple of Nāgārjuna, having refuted the view of Buddhapālita which was commented in his commentary on MMK, wrote another two commentaries. They are the *Prajñāpradīpa* which is its literal commentary and *Madhyamakahrdaya*, is its meaning-commentary and also wrote a commentary on the latter titled *Tarkajvāla*. All these commentaries are based on his own philosophical view, i.e., Svātantrika Madhyamaka. Gradually, many other Indian masters and Tibetan scholars also wrote commentaries basing on the Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika views. Further, the text MMK has also been translated into English by several learned translators with the help of well-versed Indian and Tibetan scholars. Till date six-seven different English translations of the text are available these days. The details of the availability of the English Translations are given at the end of this write up having extracted from different sources.

Content of MMK

¹ Drakpa, Panchen Sonam. *DBU-MA SPYI-DON* [The General Meaning of the Middle Way], Vol. 27, Karnataka: Drepung Loseling Library Society, 2015

² Abbreviation of ‘Mūlamadhyamakakārikā’.

The treatise ‘MMK’ represents in a systematic manner of the philosophy of the Madhyamaka School. The text contains 449 verses, excluding the words of worship, and those are arranged in 27 chapters, and one and half segments. The subject matters of MMK containing the twenty-seven chapters is clearly explained by Nāgārjuna as being the presentation of *Pratītyasamutpāda* characterized by eight attributes. However, the twenty-seven chapters also individually discuss the presentation of the twofold selflessness— selfless of person (*pudgala-nairātmya*) and selflessness of phenomena (*dharmā-nairātmya*). Among the twenty-seven, he expounds the presentation of refuting the self of person in six chapters (2nd, 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th and 18th), the presentation of refuting the self of phenomena in seven chapters (1st, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th) and in the rest fourteen chapters he annotates that all phenomena are empty by nature without distinguishing the self of person and self of phenomena.

Spread of the System of Teaching and Learning MMK in India

As per the historical accounts, number of Buddhist holy persons appeared in the noble country (India) after the demise of Gautama, the Buddha till date without any break. They held, preserved and propagated the precious doctrine that came down from Nāgārjuna and his son-like disciples. In the context of the system of teaching and learning Mādhyamika Philosophy, particularly the system of teaching and learning MMK, history says that there are two periods in which the said system spread in India— early period and later period. Later on, it spread in Tibet when the system declined in India.

(a) Early period in India— Śākyamuni Buddha spoke on the precious *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* containing the subject matter of the twofold selflessness at the Vulture Peak (Gṛdrakūṭa) near Rajgir. At the same time he also taught the *Samādhirājasūtra* and several other things in different indefinite places according to the wish, interest and disposition of his disciples. Since then the system of teaching and learning Mādhyamika Philosophy gradually spread and flourished.

Unfortunately, after the Mahāparinirvāṇa of Śākyamuni Buddha at Kushinagara, the Mahāyāna sūtras were taken away by gods, nāgas and others in their own realms on account of some unavoidable circumstances. As a result the system of teaching and learning of the Mahāyāna sūtras such as *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* and so on almost declined in the human world. Not only this, due to the reason of spreading the system of teaching and learning of the Theravāda Tripiṭaka in a great extent as well as increasing of the number of Śrāvaka monks during that time, the system of learning and teaching of the Mahāyāna sūtras is said to have degenerated in India.

(b) Later period in India— Four hundred years after the Mahāparinirvāṇa of Gautama, the Buddha, Ācārya Nāgārjuna was born at Vidarbha in South India. When he grew up, having received many teachings related to the Three Baskets of Teachings from Ācārya Rahula Bhadra, he accomplished several *vidyā-mantras*. Thereafter, he went to the World of Nāga and brought the *Śatasāhashrikā-prajñāpāramitāsūtra* to the human world. Followed by it, he composed six root texts on the middle path etc., containing the essence of the above-mentioned sūtra. In this

way, he established and spread the system of teaching and learning of the middle path again in India.

After this his son-like disciple Āryadeva completely received the excellent and definitive middle path from his compassionate teacher Nāgārjuna. Later he composed several texts such as *Catuhśataka* (Four Hundred Verses) and so on containing the thought of Nāgārjuna as it is. On account of it the system of teaching and learning of middle path as well as the lineage of *sādhana* which were inseparable to that of Nāgārjuna could be spread. Without making description between Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika Mādhyamikas etc., it is simply asserted by the scholars and adepts that the masters who were the holders of this lineage are simply known as the ‘Proponents of the Middle Path of the Original Scriptures’.

Nāgabodhi and Nāgamitra are said to be the disciples of Nāgārjuna. Saṅgharakṣita was the disciple of Ācārya Nāgamitra. Saṅgharakṣita had two direct disciples— Buddhapālita and Bhāvaviveka (Bhavya). Buddhapālita received the entire teachings and studied the texts of Nāgārjuna from his master Ācārya Saṅgharakṣita. Later he composed a text titled *Buddhapālita-madhyamakavṛtti*, a commentary of MMK. By virtue of that, he introduced the good system of the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika.

On the other hand, Bhāvaviveka also studied the Mahāyāna sūtras as well as the texts attributed to Nāgārjuna from Saṅgharakṣita. According to the religious history by Taranatha, followed by the death of Buddhapālita, this Ācārya thoroughly studied the text *Buddhapālita-madhyamakavṛtti* and several others, and negated the assertion of the previous teachers. Then, he composed a literal commentary on MMK called *Prajñāpradīpa* as well as a meaningful commentary titled *Tarkajvālā*. By dint of that, he founded the system of Svātantrika Mādhyamika School. Since then number of learned and accomplished persons who held this tradition appeared in order.

Bhāvaviveka had a disciple named Ācārya Śrīgupta. He also had a disciple whose name was Ācārya Jñānagarbha. From Ācārya Śrīgupta (Śrīguhya), Jñānagarbha studied the entire texts of Nāgārjuna and Bhāvaviveka, and also received instructions that came down from teacher to teacher. Then he wrote a commentarial text on the root text together with its commentary titled ‘*Dvīsatya* (Two Truths)’. It contains the thought of the texts by past gurus according to the system of Sautrāntika Svātantrika Mādhyamika.

Śāntarakṣita (705-762 CE) was a disciple of Jñānagarbha. From Jñānagarbha and Vinayasena, he studied the entire treatises which were commissioned from Nāgārjuna. Thereafter, he composed the texts *Madhyamakālankāra* and its commentary presenting the profound and extensive explanation of Mādhyamika system as well as *Tattvasaṃgraha* and so on. Through such compositions, he established and disseminated the system of Yogācāra Svātantrika Mādhyamika School.

Thereafter, Haribhadra, a pupil of Śāntarakṣita’s early part of life, studied the treatises and received all quintessential instructions that came down from Nāgārjuna to Śāntarakṣita. In order to expound the intent of *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* according to the system of Yogācāra Svātantrika Mādhyamika, he composed a broad and a short commentaries on the sūtra as well as the text *Sphuṭārtha*, the commentary on the *Bhagavati-Ratna-Guṇa-Saṅcayagāthā-prajñāpāramitā* called *Subodhinī*, the

Prajñāpāramitābhāvanā. Similarly Kamalaśīla, who was a main disciple of Śāntarakṣita's later part of life, wrote the text titled *Bhāvanākrama*, a commentary on the text *Dvīsatya* (Two Truths) and so on.

Later Candrakīrti studied all texts and received the pith-instructions of Nāgārjuna and Buddhapālita as well as the other past Ācāryas from several disciples of Ācārya Bhāvaviveka and Ācārya Kamalabuddhi, who was the disciple of Buddhapālita. In order to present the literal meaning as well as to mainly present the part of meaning of MMK, he composed two texts. Besides, he also composed the commentaries of *Śūnyatāsaptati*, *Yuktiśaṣṭika* etc., as well as several independent texts, namely *Prajñāmūlāvatāra*, *Pañcaskandhaprakaraṇa*, *Śaraṇasaptati* and so on. By the contribution of such works, he disseminated the system of Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika.

Following the system established by Candrakīrti and other Mādhyamika masters, Śāntideva wrote the text *Bodhicaryāvatāra* in accordance with Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika philosophy. Again two disciples of Candrakīrti— the senior and junior Vidyākoka— and also the followers of these two masters, Atiśa Dīpaṅkara composed the text titled *Dvīsatya* together with its auto-commentary. Thus it is clear from the above description that the lineage of teaching Mādhyamika philosophy flourished in India on the basis of the works attributed to Buddhapālita, Candrakīrti, Āryadeva, Bhāvaviveka, Śāntarakṣita and many other Mādhyamika masters who appeared after Nāgārjuna.

Spread of the system of teaching and learning MMK in Tibet

In fact, innumerable number of Lotsawas (Tibetan translator) was born on the soil of the Snow Land, Tibet just after the entry of the Buddha-dharma. They translated the huge corpus of the sacred scriptures and treatises in their own language with the company as well as guidance and kindness of the Indian adepts. In this way they were able to set the banner of the Buddha's holy dharma in Tibet. Followed by the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet, on account of the enthusiastic efforts of the Lotsawas and royal patronship, the system of teaching and learning Mādhyamika Philosophy spread in the Snow Land. The number of scriptures and treatises which were translated are preserved in *Kagyur* in 108 volumes and *Tengyur* in 225 volumes which number to more than 5,000. Although the number varies according to different editions, but one thing is clear that the aforesaid number of volumes do not contain the entire Buddhavacana and the commentarial texts. There are several texts which have neither been translated, or although translated, but lost in course of time due to some unwanted reasons. However, whatever is available today in the collection of *Kagyur* and *Tengyur* today is mostly Mahāyāna Buddhavacana.

In the eighth century, during the translation period of the Mādhyamika Philosophy scriptures and treatises, Indian Mādhyamika adept Jñānagarbha and Lotsawa Chogro Lui Gyaltsan jointly translated the Mādhyamika texts into Tibetan. Among them, Ācārya Nāgārjuna's MMK, its commentary *Akutoḥbaya*, *Buddhapālita* attributed to Buddhapālita, and *Prajñāpradīpaṭīka* attributed to Bhāvaviveka were the main ones. Simultaneously, the system of teaching and learning of these texts commenced. Again, Pandita Jñānagarbha and Lotsawa Kawa Paltsek translated some other Mādhyamika texts such as *Vigrahyāvartani* together

its commentary and so on into Tibetan. Besides, Yeshe-De, Khu Dode-Bar, Ven. Drakjor Sherab and several other Lotsawas also translated few Mādhyamika texts into Tibetan. Later, in the eleventh century, the Indian master Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna with the help of the Tibetan Lotsawa Tshultrim Gyalwa translated the texts *Madhyamakahrdaya* and its commentary *Tarkajvālā* into Tibetan. Again, the text titled *Madhyamakārthasaṃgraha* attributed to him was also translated into Tibetan. Upto here, the extensive system of teaching and learning Svāntarika Mādhyamika texts seems to have flourished in full flow. Thereafter, the Indian master Kṛṣṇapandita and Tibetan translator Nagtsho Lotsawa Tshultrim Gyalwa translated the text *Madhyamakāvatāra* and its commentary into Tibetan. It seems it was the second phase of the system of teaching and learning the Mādhyamika Philosophy in Tibet.

Buddhism phenomenally spread in Tibet from the eighth to ninth centuries. In the ninth century, Lang Darma, the unspiritual minded king of Tibet, brutally destroyed Buddhism in Tibet. It caused Buddhism declined in central Tibet for about one hundred and fifty years. Historians proclaim this period as being the dark period of Tibet. In the middle of the eleventh century, just after the arrival of Ācārya Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna in Tibet, Buddhism began to spread again. This period is called the 'Later Spread of Buddhism in Tibet.' Accordingly, Indian panditas started visiting Tibet again. In the twelfth century, Ācārya Mahāsumati and the Tibetan translator Lotsawa Patshab Nyima Drak edited the MMK which was translated by Jnanagarbha and Lotsawa Chogro Lui Gyaltsan. They also translated its commentary *Prasannapada* into Tibetan on the basis of eastern Kashmiri edition. Similarly, Lotsawa Nyima Drak under the supervision of the Indian master Tilaka Kalasha translated *Madhyamakāvatāra* and its auto-commentary on the basis of the Kashmiri edition. Later, this Lotsawa with the assistance of the Indian master Kanakavarma edited those translated texts by comparing with the Aparāntaka (Western Kashmir) edition. Again, with the assistance of Ācārya Suksmajña, an Indian adept who was well-versed in all treatises and scriptures, Lotsawa Nyima Drak translated the text *Catuhṣataka* into Tibetan gave pace to the system of teaching and learning the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika Philosophy.

Lotsawa Chogro Lui Gyaltsan and others who appeared during the Early Translation Period and Lotsawa Nagtsho Tshultrim Gyalwa, Lotsawa Loden Sherab and others who appeared during early part of the Later Translation Period not only translated most of the texts of Svāntarika Mādhyamika, but also widely spread through teaching and learning. The system is still alive in the Tibetan tradition in an unbroken way.

During the ending part of the twelfth century, on account of the enthusiastic effort of Lotsawa Patshab Nyima Drak, along with the translation of the Mādhyamika texts ascribed to Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva, Candrakīrti and other Mādhyamika, the systematic way of teaching and learning the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika texts was commenced. Lotsawa Patshab Nyima Drak and his four heart-sons, namely Tsang Parbo, Ma-Jangchub Tsondrü, Dar Yonten Drak and Zhang Thang-Sagpa Yeshe Jungne jointly translated several Mādhyamika texts such as the commentary of MMK, the condensed meaning of *Madhyamakāvatāra*, *Catuhṣataka* and its commentary of Candrakīrti and so on. According to the book titled *Blue Annals* of Gö-Lotsawa Zhonnu Pal, Lotsawa Patshab Nyima Drak and his

disciples commenced the system of studying and teaching all the Mādhyamika texts by Candrakīrti as well as spread its system of philosophical debate and composition in Tibet. As a result, the system of Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika could widely spread in Tibet. Particularly, the system of teaching and learning the Mādhyamika system that came down from the scholars of Zhang Thang-Sagpa's Monastery, Sakya Scholars, Chapa Chökyi Seng-ge, Bu-ston Rinchen Drub, Rendawa Zhon-nu Lodrö and his disciple Ācārya Tsongkhapa, his disciples, Karmapa Mikyo Dorje, Künkhyen Padma Karpo and so on, reached its climax. Its credit goes to Ācārya Zhang Thang-Sagpa who himself also wrote a commentary on *Madhyamakāvatāra*. Gö-Lotsawa mentions in his book *Blue Annals* that the said system comes down from Śākyamuni Buddha to Ācārya Rāhula Bhadra, Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, Mañjukīrti, Devachandra, Ratnavajra, Parahita, Mahāsumati and Patshab Lotsawa.³

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³ *Blue Annals*, 1984 (published in Tibet), p. 418