

## The Madhyamaka (Middle Way) School – An Overview

### **Texts and Teachers**

Note: Middle way – is free from extremes of *nihilism* and *eternalism*.

- *Perfection of Wisdom (prajnaparamita)* sutras (most famous is *Heart of Wisdom Sutra*, or *Heart Sutra*)
- Nagarjuna – *Compendium of Sutras* (a key source of his views on emptiness)
- Nagarjuna – *Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way*
- Aryadeva – *Four Hundred Stanzas* (a close disciple of Nagarjuna)
- Buddhapalita – *Commentary on "Fundamental Wisdom"* (asserts the existence of external objects in general)
- Bhavaviveka – *Blaze of Reasoning*
- Bhavaviveka – *Lamp of Wisdom*
- Chandrakirti – *Clear Words*
- Chandrakirti – *Commentary on the "Four Hundred Stanzas"*
- Chandrakirti – *Supplement to the Middle Way* (asserts the existence of external objects in general)
- Jnanagarbha – *Differentiation of the Two Truths* (main master of *Sautrantika Svatantrika*)
- Shantarakshita – *Ornament of the Middle Way* (11<sup>th</sup> century; denied that external objects exist; helped develop Buddhism in Tibet; main master of *Yogachara Svatantrika*)
- Kamalashila – *Stages of Meditation* (11<sup>th</sup> century; denied that external objects exist; helped develop Buddhism in Tibet)
- Atisha – helped develop Buddhism in Tibet

### **Two Subschools**

- Nagarjuna and Aryadeva – fathers of Madhyamaka school
- Later, Buddhapalita and Bhavaviveka differed in their interpretations of their predecessors' views.
- Buddhapalita – believed that Nagarjuna asserted the existence of the external world, but things do not have intrinsic nature. Consequential argument used (debates wherein ideas are challenged until they collapse into absurdity) in addition to syllogisms (sheer logic)
- Bhavaviveka – disagreed with Buddhapalita
- (1) Svatantrika Madhyamaka (Middle Way Autonomy)
- Bhavaviveka – founder
- (2) Prasangika Madhyamaka (Middle Way Consequence)
- Chandrakirti – founder; refuted Bhavaviveka and supported Buddhapalita
- Tibetan Buddhism – the four traditions (Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, and Gelug) hold the Prasangika Madhyamaka view.

### **The Base – Importance of Two Truths**

- Other schools: Existent phenomena – (i) conditioned/unconditioned; (ii) generally/specifically characterized; (iii) contaminated/uncontaminated.
- Madhyamaka school: Existent phenomena (things) – conventional (concealer or relative) truths/ultimate truths
- Base: Two truths. The base as the two truths is traced back to the Buddha's teachings (*Meeting of the Father and Son Sutra*). Nagarjuna expresses a similar thought.
- Understanding the two truths is important to understand the base, and essential in order to follow the path, and achieve the result of enlightenment.

### **The Path and Result – Importance of the Two Truths**

- Understanding the two truths is essential for the path.
- Conventional truth enables one to develop the *method* side – compassion, concentration, and ethics; ultimate truth leads one to realize the *wisdom* side – emptiness.
- These realizations will result in the two buddha bodies – *truth* (from wisdom) body and *form* (from method) body.
- Ignorance of the two truths means one is in an unenlightened state. Path to enlightenment involves developing both method and wisdom.
- The 16 aspects of the four noble truths and the 6 perfections are presented from the view of the two truths.
- To be free from suffering, one needs to cultivate an understanding of reality – the wisdom of ultimate truth, as well as develop the method side of the practice, which entails a thorough understanding of conventional truth.
- Statements by masters from Nagarjuna to HHDL emphasize the importance of the two truths.

### **Conventional Truth**

- Sanskrit word for conventional truth: *samvriti satya* – "that which entirely conceals reality" (Tibetan: *kundzob* – "all covered").
- Ignorance conceals reality. Therefore, the word *conventional* is used.
- All "manufactured" things come into being existence due to causes and conditions – seen by the ignorant mind as having a true (i.e. causeless and independent) nature that they don't have. Therefore, that mind conceals their actual mode of existence.
- By *superimposing* a sense of true existence onto the object, the reality of the object is obscured. Therefore, it is a *concealer* truth – true for the ignorant mind, but concealing the ultimate truth of the object.
- Things and events lack true existence, but the ignorant mind superimposes this true existence on top of their actual experience.
- Three meanings of *conventional*:
  - (1) An ignorant (lacking understanding) consciousness that conceals reality. It refers to the ignorant mind that grasps on to things and events as if they exist truly – but which obscures or conceals the way things really are. [For the Madhyamaka subschools – it is the ignorance that covers everything, that deceives us about our entire existence]
  - (2) That which is *interdependent* or *mutually dependent*. [For the Vaibhashika school – things are interdependently true or "real".]
  - (3) Worldly conventions – *signifiers*, that is, mundane nominal conventions. [Whatever is agreed upon as a truth by worldly conventions, and includes all our worldly knowledge.]
- Relative or conventional *truth*: Is a truth because it works conventionally. One sees a book, and the mind registers "book". We are deceived, however, in that the object appears to us to be inherently existent, whereas it is not.
- Logically, we can accept that a book has no intrinsic existence – but that is not how the object appears to us.