

The Development of the View in Buddhist History

Culminating in the Madhyamaka Tradition

Summary: Buddhism is presented in terms of the ground, path and fruition. The ground is the two levels of reality samsara and Nirvana - relative and ultimate. The path is the overcoming of the two obstructions of kleshas and knowledge by the accumulation of the merit and wisdom. Wisdom is the understating of the true nature of the two truths. The fruition is liberation from ignorance and kleshas, and the manifestation of the qualities of the awakened ones.

The Buddha: Initially the Buddha taught a very simple direct sensory version of the situation of our world and minds, affirming the presence of suffering and explaining its cause together being the relative or samsaric level of reality while cessation of suffering or nirvana is the ultimate level of existence. Very dualistic and mechanistic version perfectly geared to foster ones progress on the path which spans the two from samsara to nirvana.

When asked metaphysical questions about the nature of ultimate reality the Buddha declined to answer in any way, instead explaining that he had taught everything important and necessary for those that genuinely wanted to pursue the liberation from samsara. To have answered such questions in any way both would have validated the desire to close up the issue of the ultimate with a conceptual conclusion that would end the searching process and also would assert a status to the elements identified in those questions as being truly existence ultimately. Both of these were specifically avoided by the Buddha.

Nikaya or Initial Period: The first interpretation of the Buddhist view is encapsulated in the Vaibhashika and Sautrantika traditions. These both settle upon the very direct approach of focusing on addressing the cause of suffering identified as the belief in a self. The emphasis in unraveling this belief is to focus on the building blocks of experience that one mistakenly conflates and turns into the mistaken belief in the self.

Madhyamaka: Around the second centuries CE, Nagarjuna clarified the intent in the Buddhas silence in a series of texts describing and demonstrating in detail and without the slightest tinge of compromise the absence of essence or svabhava in all dharmas due to the reality of their being dependently produced. He is complimented by his disciple Aryadeva who furthers his writings by focusing on how to apply them in practice.

Cittamatra & Yogacara: Beginning around the third century CE, Maitreya, Asanga and Vasubhandu presented a system that focuses on the details of the cultivation process and experiences involved in treading the path, explaining how the Buddha qualities manifest when its obstructions are overcome and what is the actual nature of the potential for awakening within each sentient being. The main stream from these three masters is known in the Kagyu/Nyingma tradition as the Yogacara or Tathagatagarbha tradition. However, other students of Vasubandhu focused on the unity of subject and object as its ultimate truth. This

becomes known as the Cittamatra tradition and is focused upon by the Geluk tradition as the only and complete manifestation of the legacy of Maitreya, Asanga and Vasubandhu.

Pramana: The third major development is focused on understanding the dynamics of the mechanism of perception and thereby understanding that one is continually projecting the notion of existence onto those building blocks. This is the epistemological, or Pramana, tradition of Dignaga and Dharmakirti.

Divergent Versions of Madhyamaka: About two centuries later, a gentleman named Buddhapalita reinvigorates the Madhyamaka tradition by writing on the ultimate truth as expressed by Nagarjuna and in the same style of uncompromising dismissal of any acceptance of the reality of anything even for the purposes of discussion. (He is later identified as having paved the way for Chandrakirti's establishment of the Prasangika Madhyamak.)

Shortly thereafter (sixth century) another author, variously known as Bhavavaviveka or Bhaviveka, or Bhavya for short, challenges the authorities and lobbies both for a more inclusive approach to the understanding of the ultimate by using the tools available at that time. By using the tools of the epistemological tradition he presents an accessible path to the ultimate, and in a further radical move clearly refers to a deeper meaning that Nagarjuna was pointing to by way of hinting but that was not revealed in his words. He states that there is an outer and an inner Madhyamaka. This distinction is dismissed by most of his contemporaries, but becomes a major theme in the later evolution of the tradition. Bhavya's tradition later is referred to as the **Svatantrika Madhyamaka** – The Independent Middle Ways.

And shortly thereafter is an even gentler man named Chandrakirti (seventh century), Glorious Moon, who surveys the two interpretations of Nagarjuna's intent and methods of explicating them and unilaterally sides with the profound, direct and immediately ultimate approach of Buddhapalita. His main book, Madhyamakavatara, later becomes the standard for the tradition, an all-time best seller, and is today the root text for the study of the view in all of the universities in the Tibetan tradition. His tradition is later referred to as the **Prasangika Madhyamaka**, the Inconsequential Middle Ways.

Yogacara Svatantrika Madhyamaka Synthesis: In the eighth century, Shantarakshita proposes a synthesis between the radical rejection of Nagarjuna, Buddhapalita and Chandrakirti and the more gradual inclusive approach of Bhavya, distinguishing between an approximate ultimate, which is that ultimate identified by the logical reasonings for lack of essence, and the actual ultimate, thereby giving logic a valid place in the system. His system is furthered by his student Kamalashila.

Tibetan Developments: Initially, during the first introduction of Buddhism into Tibet, since Shantarakshita is the harbinger of that phase, his synthetic version is the only version, and is elegantly presented and woven together with the vajrayana by **Rongzom** (11th century).

Then during the second diffusion of the dharma into Tibet, in the 10th and eleventh centuries, Chandrakirti's texts are finally translated by **Chapa** and gradually gained pre-eminence, especially through the efforts of the Sakyapa **Rendawa** (13th century) and his student **Tsongkhapa** (14th century). Both however continue the trend begun by Shantarakshita of combining the use of logic with the Prasangika presentation. Tsongkhapa, forefather of the Gelukpa, in particular establishes a very unique version of Madhyamaka which he asserts as the true Prasanghika Madhyamaka, but, in perspective, since so many others criticize it as diverging significantly from the Prasangika of Chandrakirti, most effectively the Sakyapa **Gorampa** (15th century) perhaps it is best to call it **Tsongkhapa Madhyamaka**.

Simultaneously, two other major figures continue the trajectory begun by Shantarakshita in blending the Yogacara perspective with the Madhyamaka and including both Svatantra and Prasangika. The Kagyupa **Rangjung Dorje** (also 14th century) presents this unique blend with its fearless identification of buddha nature, later known as Great Madhyamaka, while Jonangpa **Dolpopa** (also 14th century) presents a significantly more radical emphasis upon the manifestation of the ultimate nature in his emptiness-of-other (Shentong) philosophy. Perhaps the last major During the Tibetan Renaissance of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Rime and Nyingma master **Jamgon Mipham Namgyal** (19th century) presents a unique synthesis of the Prasangika and Shentong systems.

In terms of the path of how to overcome the knowledge obscuration:

1. Do we instantaneously short circuit to believe in projections? This is the Prasangika Madhyamaka system.
2. Or do we gradually build up an ever more refined understanding of the projection process and thereby deflate the energy of the process? This is the Svatantrika Madhyamaka system.
3. Or do we alternate to these two? This is the Yogacara madhyamaka or Yogacara Svatantrika Madhyamaka system.
4. In terms of the result is it the complete absence of mental elaboration? This is the Madhyamaka system.
5. Or is it the releasing and manifestation of inherent buddha qualities? This is the Yogacara system.

Some of the major terms used in this aspect of the teachings:

1. Phenomena - dharmas
2. Things - bhavya
3. The self - atman
4. The person - pudgala
5. Inherent existence - svabhava
6. Implicative and non-implicative negation
7. Presenting valid arguments - svatantra
8. Revealing absurd consequences – prasangha

The Stages of Meditation on Emptiness of Phenomena

The Lankavatara Sutra

Translated by Karl Brunnholzl in "The Center of the Sunlit Sky"

(1) By relying on mere mind, one does not imagine outer objects. (2) By resting in the observed object of suchness, one should go beyond mere mind too. (3) Going beyond mere mind, one must even go beyond the nonappearance [of apprehender and apprehended]. (4) The yogic practitioner who rests in nonappearance sees the great vehicle. This spontaneously present, peaceful resting is completely purified through aspiration prayers. Genuine identityless wisdom sees by way of nonappearance.

Madhyamaka Pith Instructions, by Atisha

Translated by Karl Brunnholzl in Straight from the Heart: Buddhist Pith Instructions

1) What possesses form is a collection of infinitesimal particles. When these are analyzed and broken up in terms of their directional parts, not even their minutest [part] remains and they are utterly without appearance. (2) What is without form is the mind. As for that, the past mind has [already] ceased and perished. The future mind has not [yet] arisen or originated. As for the present mind, it is very difficult to examine: it has no color and is without any shape. Since it is just like space, it is not established. In other words, it is free from unity and multiplicity, unarisen, natural luminosity. When analyzed and scrutinized with the weapons of reasoning, such as [those just mentioned], you realize that it is not established. (3) At the point when those two [what possesses form and what is without form] definitely do not exist and are not established as [having] any nature whatsoever, the very knowledge that discriminates them is not established either. Thus, all flaws, such as dullness and agitation, are eliminated. (4) In this interval [of meditative concentration], consciousness is without any thought, does not apprehend anything, and has left behind all mindfulness and mental engagement.

The Absolute Bodhicitta Slogans of Atisha

Translated by the Nalanda Translation Committee

1. Regard all dharmas as dreams.
2. Examine the nature of unborn awareness.
3. Self-liberate even the antidote.
4. Rest in the nature of alaya, the essence.
5. In post-meditation, be a child of illusion.

Mipham's Four Stages of the Dawning of the Middle Way

Translated by Douglass Duckworth in Mipham on Buddha Nature

1. Empty (*stong*)
2. Unity (*zung 'jug*)
3. Freedom from constructs (*spros bral*)
4. Equality (*mnyam pa nyid*).

The Four Stages of Pointing out in the Mahamudra Tradition

1. Appearances are mind
2. Mind is empty
3. Emptiness is spontaneously present
4. Spontaneous Presence is self liberating