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An Analyze of the Core Thoughts of Nagarjuna's Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way

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Abstract: *Mûlamadhyamakakârikâ. (中 論 Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way) written by Nagarjuna is the most fundamental classic work of the Madhyamaka School, and it is also the core essence of the teachings of the Middle Way idea. Nagarjuna used a distinctive dialectical methodology in Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way to break away from other sects thoughts and vigorously promote the meaning of "Emptiness" of Mahayana Buddhism. The method of dialectics in Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way is not negated simply for negation. However, the purpose of this negation is to express affirmation instead. By denying the contradiction in the other different theories, the objective of affirming the correctness of the his own theory is achieved. Furthermore, the meaning of "Emptiness" expressed by Nagarjuna is not the void of nothingness, but the standpoint of the middle way, emphasizing the emptiness of nature while not denying the absence of existence. Hence, he criticized all thoughts that did not conform to the true meaning of the middle way, and expounded that the true nature of reality was emptiness. This paper will deconstruct the main idea of Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way from the three aspects of the emptiness of nature, eight negations of the middle way, and the conventional truth and the ultimate truth to further explore the meaning of Nagarjuna's middle way.*

Keywords: *Nagarjuna, Mulamadhyamakakarika, Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*

Pratītya-samutpāda and The Emptiness of Nature

Pratītya-samutpāda and the emptiness of nature are the foundation of the middle way and the most important basis of all Dharma. Of course, pratītya-samutpāda is the ideological core of Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way. All things and phenomena in the world are born due to their cause and condition, and also disappear thanks to cause. Just like a chair, it needs the help of sunlight, moisture, nutrients and time to produce a good piece of wood. With the design of the designers and the processing of the workers, finally a chair can be produced. Another example is a rose. If it does not get enough sunlight, moisture, and nutrients, it will soon wither and fade away with little doubt. All things and phenomena in the world are not isolated, invariable, and constant, but interdependent, interrelated, and interacting. It is the momentary birth and death of the all the causes. As Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way said that "Never has there been a phenomenon that do not arises dependently, therefore all phenomena are all empty.（未曾有一法，不從因緣生）"(Nagarjuna ,1976) In other words, it can be said that it is a natural phenomenon in the world, but how does it exist in the world? In general, all sentient beings are attached to reality, believing that everything

is real existence, and it has its own entity. However, the thought of the middle way supposes that all things and phenomena arising in the world due to destiny have no existence, and all human beings are deceived by ignorance, so that they are obsessed with the existence of all kinds of things. As a result, they cannot get access to the truth. This is to say that they have a misunderstanding of birth and death.

All conditioned dharmas are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble or a shadow, similar to a dewdrop or a flash of lightning. One should understand and contemplate in such a manner. (Kumarajiva ,1976,p.92)
一切有為法，如夢幻泡影，如露亦如電，應作如是觀。

The middle way thought believes that all the things arising from causes are not real existence, but “Prajñapti”. Their truth is self-emptiness. The reason why they are called prajñapti is to facilitate the guidance of sentient beings to get rid of real existence and to emphasize the importance of prajñapti of all kinds of things on the basis of not denying existence, which really helps sentient beings to further have a better understanding of the meaning of “Emptiness” of the middle way thought. For example, The Diamond Prajna Paramita Sutra says: “What the Buddha calls sentient beings are just not sentient beings. That is why they can be called sentient beings.（眾生者，如來說非眾生，是名眾生。）”(Kumarajiva ,1976,p.92) There are three levels of “sentient beings” in this sentence: the first level is that it refers to the entity existence that the person without wisdom is attached to; the second level is that it denies entity existence from the aspect of emptiness, but it does not mean nothingness; the third level is that it reveals the prajñapti of self-emptiness.

When mentioning the concept of “Emptiness”, it is not difficult to see that this is the basic character of Buddhism, and many Buddhist classics are elaborated by “Emptiness”. Obviously, the meaning of “Emptiness” differs in periods and schools. Nagarjuna reiterated the Buddha's idea of “Middle Way and Non-middle Way” in early Buddhism with denying the nature of all things and emphasizing that the self-nature is empty.

Dharmas are produced of collected conditions, they are, then, lacking a self-nature. But if it is the case there is no self-nature, how (can we) say there are these dharmas. (Nagarjuna ,1976,p.159)
眾緣所生法，是即無自性，若無自性者，雲何有是法。

If there is an entity that arises from cause in the world, then it is even constant, immutable, and independent. However, there is no such Dharma in the world. There are serval instances: the towering pine and cypress will eventually decay and disappear; the glamorous roses will wither and fade away; the mountain boulders will eventually collapse; the baby in quilts will eventually die. It is because all things in the world are born owing to the pratītya-samutpāda, so they can express their emptiness of their self-nature. Meanwhile, they can also grew up with cause as a result of the emptiness of self-nature. The essence of the pratītya-samutpāda is the emptiness of self-nature, and the illusion of the emptiness of self-nature is the pratītya-samutpāda. For the sake of emptiness of self-nature, there is provisional name, so empty is a prerequisite. That is to say, the origin of everything is empty after all. This is not a real emptiness, but an emptiness without a self-nature. It is the so-called emptiness of everything. This emptiness is transcendental to the emptiness of existence and non-existence. In a word, the self-nature is not constant, and it is constantly in the moment of birth and death, so it is emptiness.

Vol.2 No.1 2022
https://doi.org/10.37420/j.pir.2022.004

Generally, sentient beings always think that everything and phenomena are in a constant entity, that is, all things have their own self-nature. Nagarjuna's middle way thoughts hold that this is a false paranoia due to non-wisdom, and in the Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way, he vigorously disproves the view that all things have their own self-nature. With the help of the causes, Nagarjuna first assumes that all things have their own self-nature, and explained the pratītya-samutpāda from the standpoint of the self-nature. However, it is not feasible. Afterwards, self-arising, another-arising, and both-arising are repulsed one by one. As a result, he finally concludes that all things could not have self-nature.

The Dharma is neither from itself, nor from another, nor from both, nor without a cause, therefore, (we know that) it is non-arising. (Nagarjuna ,1976,p.2)
諸法不自生，亦不從他生，不共不無因，是故知無生。

Nagarjuna believes that if all phenomena in the world are substantial in nature, then there will be no cause or no disappearance, and the world will be fixed, constant, and static. Hence, emptiness of absence of self-nature must be the essence of all things, which are empty after all. It is precisely because the all things are empty that all phenomena have their own meanings.

In this way, Nagarjuna’s emphasis on pratītya-samutpāda and the emptiness of nature in Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way means that the rise and fall of all things and phenomena are determined by the interrelationship of various factors and conditions, and there is no isolated entity that exists. All are emptiness of self-nature, that is, prajñapti. It is precisely because all things and phenomena are emptiness of self-nature, so they can interact with each other, cause and die.

Eight Negations of the Middle Way

Nagarjuna has defined the “Middle Way” in Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way as follows.

All dependently arisen phenomena, I say that they are empty. That, too, is a provisional name, and it is also the middle path. Never has there been a phenomenon that do not arises dependently, therefore all phenomena are all empty. (Nagarjuna ,1976,p.33)
眾因緣生法，我說即是空，亦為是假名，亦是中道義。未曾有一法，不從因緣生，是故一切法，無不是空者。

In this way, all the Dharmas derived from course and condition are emptiness of self-nature, which is also called provisional name or middle way. Nagarjuna’s strong emphasis on the middle way is to deny the theory of perversities, for that he can reveal the truth of the Dharmas. The so-called middle way is to see not only the side where all things are empty, but also the side where there are prajñapti. It is necessary to deny nihilism and realism. Only by grasping such unbiased middle way thoughts can human beings get the true meaning of the Dharma and also can they correctly understand themselves and the world. Nagarjuna expounded his view of the Eight Negations of the Middle Way in the opening chapter of Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way:
Not arising yet not ceasing; not permanence yet not annihilation; not same yet not difference; not coming yet not going. (Nagarjuna ,1976,p.33)

不生亦不滅，不斷亦不常，不一亦不異，不來亦不出。

In this “Eight Negations”, Nagarjuna denies the four pairs of categories that contain universal Dharmas in the world from the four levels of substance, time, space and movement. This is not to deny the general phenomena in the world, but to deny the real nature of these phenomena is intended to reveal the essence of their prajñapti, thereby showing the correctness of middle way. The negation theory of “Eight Negations” is a formal method specifically aimed at the prejudice and perversities theories. This does not mean that Nagarjuna should completely break the two extreme prejudices and stick to the middle way, because the essence of the middle way is also emptiness without self-nature. Since the reality in the world cannot be expressed directly in language, Nagarjuna chose to express affirmation in the negative way in Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way, thereby revealing the reality. The eight objects denied by the Nagarjuna are also attached to ordinary beings. They cannot understand the true meaning of the emptiness of all Dharmas, but are attached to their own self-intention. Therefore, ordinary beings are attached to birth and death on the illusion of Dharma, to common and judgment in time, to first sight and dissent in space, and to in and out in the way of movement. This is why the general ordinary beings cannot get access to wisdom basically. Hence, human beings should better stand in the middle way and stay away from the extreme thoughts of emptiness and existence. It is necessary to understand the absence of self-nature of all things and their prajñapti as well.

Nagarjuna admits the phenomenon of birth and death, but denies the analysis of birth and death from a standpoint of its self-nature. Generally speaking, all sentient beings are obsessed with the birth and death of all Dharmas with self-nature. However, Nagarjuna believes that the birth and death of all things can be established only from the standpoint of the absence of self-nature. Because if the origin is self-nature, it means that the Dharma is constant, and since there is no change, there will be no birth and death, which is obviously self-contradictory. Therefore, the establishment of the phenomenon of birth and death must be based on the premise that there is emptiness with absence of self-nature. He believes that the all things arise and fall due to the cause and condition. This is to say that all things are emptiness with absence of nature, so there is no real birth and death.

All industries are not born, because of indefiniteness, and all industries are not destroyed, because they are not born. (Nagarjuna ,1976,p.22)
諸業本不生，以無定性故，諸業亦不滅，以其不生故。

There are two kinds of cognition of the truth of the universe in general. One kind thinks that everything has its own self-nature, so it is resident. The other kind thinks that everything is nothingness, so it is broken. However, whether it is permanent residence or annihilation is an extreme opinion, and it is necessary to stand on both sides to realize the world from the standpoint of the middle way. The origin of all things is emptiness of absence of self-nature, which is not constant. The birth of all things is due to cause and condition.

In this way, birth, death, permanence, and failure are all delusional inversions, and the same method can prove that oneness, difference, coming, and going are also false. Nagarjuna is good at deducing the truth of emptiness of absence of self-nature by negating the hypothetical self-nature. There is absolutely no physical nature available. The “Eight Negations” as a specific means to refute the two extremes. After the refusal, it

Vol.2 No.1 2022
https://doi.org/10.37420/j.pir.2022.004

does not need to exist, so that the middle way can be truly pursued.

The Conventional Truth and the Ultimate Truth

The idea of the Second Noble Truth is the most basic methodology in Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way. One is The Conventional Truth, which is relative truth. The other one is the Ultimate Truth, which is absolute truth. Nagarjuna believes that the Ultimate Truth is the absolute truth of Buddhism, and the Conventional Truth is the step ladder for the common beings to realize the true thoughts of Buddhism. Therefore, the Ultimate Truth and the Conventional Truth are unified. Nagarjuna believes that the Second Noble Truth is to realize the vacuum and the fake at the same time, not to fall on both sides, but to be emptiness. The interpretation of the Ultimate Truth of Buddhism must rely on secular language and expressions, so that it can better guide ordinary beings to obtain the Ultimate Truth. As a result, the difference between the Conventional Truth and the Ultimate Truth is only the level of the difference rather than essential difference.

The Conventional Truth is explained based on secular knowledge. From the Dharma of entering the world, it emphasizes all matters related to the birth of all things, so all the things are not empty; the Ultimate Truth is the out-of-the-world Dharma seen by the holy wisdom of Buddhism, so all things are empty.(Liu Dongshan,2002,p.45-49)
世俗諦是基於世俗識而闡述的，從入世間法開始強調一切因緣而生萬物事項，故一切法有；第一義諦即是勝義諦，是佛學聖智所見的虛妄之出世間法，故一切法空。

The Ultimate Truth is the true mystery of the cosmic world that the Buddha comprehends through continuous practice, and it is the truth of the various things in the world obtained by breaking away from the obstinacy. This is something that ordinary beings with non-wisdom can recognize. The secular notion of common beings is that everything has its own self-nature and is real. The meaning of the Conventional Truth is to lay a foundation for the realization of the Ultimate Truth of ordinary beings. Taking the secular view of ordinary beings as the starting point, regardless of its fallacy compared with the true meaning of the Dharma, the purpose is to proclaim the Dharma, then deny the existence of the all things, and then realize the impermanence and non-self, and finally get the silence of Nirvana.

The Conventional Truth and the Ultimate Truth never refer to two truths, because there is only one truth, and they refer to two levels of truth actually. As mentioned above, the Conventional Truth and the Ultimate Truth only have the difference in levels. This difference is caused by different cognitive methods. Nagarjuna believes that the Conventional Truth is a relative truth, a truth expressed in words and languages, a truth that ordinary beings can easily understand, and it is also a step ladder to reach the Ultimate Truth. The Ultimate Truth is the absolute truth, the transcendent truth, the truth that cannot be proclaimed by the secular language and expression, the highest level truth that must be realized through the Conventional Truth, and it is also the true appearance of the all various things. This also shows that the “Eight Negations” mentioned by Nagarjuna in the opening chapter of Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way is an indirect way of proclaiming the true meaning of Buddhism and is also a convenient method. Nagarjuna believes that the theory of the Second Noble Truth is another way of proclaiming the origin of the empty nature.

Due to various reasons, in the cycle of life and death, not subject to various causes, it is called Nirvana. (Nagarjuna ,1976,p.35)
受諸因緣故，輪轉生死中，不受諸因緣，是名為涅槃。

The theory of the Conventional Truth and the Ultimate Truth cleverly combines the secular world and Nirvana, as Nagarjuna said, “Nirvana exists in the world.” All Dharma arises from the combination of cause and condition. Nirvana is just like other things in the world, it has no entity, it is empty, and it is also a provisional name. From the level of Ultimate Truth, this is an existence that cannot be declared, and this is empty. From the perspective of the Conventional Truth, the cause and condition are also empty. All sentient beings cannot be attached to the emptiness, nor to the existence. But if someone follows the middle path on both sides, he or she can realize the Ultimate Truth from the Conventional Truth, and realize that the universe is empty after all, so as to get Nirvana.

Conclusion

Nagarjuna used distinctive dialectical methodology in Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way to indirectly explain the true meaning of Dharma by denying the concept of the world. Nagarjuna’s emphasis on the cause and condition explains the emptiness of self-nature. The Conventional Truth and the Ultimate Truth explains this issue from another dimension, which shows the importance of the secular world in understanding the reality of all various things, and emphasizes that Nirvana exists in the real world. As far as I am concerned, the Middle Way thoughts are not a metaphysical study of belief, but a study of wisdom with speculative abilities in a logical way. The expressions in Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way are on both sides to avoid extreme teachings, and the essence of the ideology of pursuing the middle way is of great help to the cognition of the self and even the world, and also has great research value at the level of philosophy.

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Vol.2 No.1 2022
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