

Resurgence of the Mundane in Nāgārjuna's Philosophy

Shoryu Katsura
(Hiroshima University)

0. Richard Hayes recently caused outrage among Buddhist scholars who have been studying Nāgārjuna by saying “Aside from a few commentators on Nāgārjuna’s works, who identified themselves as Mādhyamikas, Indian Buddhist intellectual life continued almost as if Nāgārjuna had never existed” and “Nāgārjuna’s arguments, when examined closely, turn out to be fallacious and therefore not very convincing to a logically astute reader.”¹

Regarding the first statement, I have a strong reservation. Besides Mādhyamikas some Ābhīdharmikas like Harivarman and Vasubandhu were well aware of Nāgārjuna’s criticism and incorporated some of his arguments into their own works.² As to Yogācāra-vijñānavādins, Gadjin Nagao demonstrated a crucial textual link between Nāgārjuna and a core work of the early Yogācāra.³ And Jñānaśrīmitra refers to Nāgārjuna at crucial points in the *Sākārasiddhi*.⁴ I should say that Hayes greatly underestimated Nāgārjuna’s influences upon the succeeding Buddhist scholars.

Regarding the second statement of Hayes, however, I have no objection. He is right in pointing out that “he (i. e., Nāgārjuna) made frequent use of the fallacy of equivocation.”⁵ To prove his point Hayes gives a detailed and precise analysis of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (= *MMK*) chapter XV. However, I suspect that Nāgārjuna consciously

used the equivocation in order to defeat his opponents. The core of his argumentation technique is later named '*prasaṅga/praśaṅgāpatti*' (reductio ad absurdum). As Yuichi Kajiyama suggested, the logicians of Nāgārjuna's time seem to have regarded his *prasaṅga* arguments as 'futile rejoinders' (*jāti*) which are to be rejected outright in a debate, just as Hayes does.⁶ Since I have analyzed Nāgārjuna's argumentation technique presented in the form of *catuṣkoṭi* elsewhere, I am not going to discuss it here.⁷

Another recent contribution to Nāgārjuna study is Jay L. Garfield's English translation of *MMK*.⁸ Just like Garfield, I am not satisfied with the other existing English versions. Although he claims that he meant his book "to be a presentation of a philosophical text to philosophers, and not an edition of the text for Buddhologists," (p. viii) I am sure that he succeeded in presenting an excellent English rendering with much balanced interpretation of this difficult text, which should be consulted by Buddhologists too. However, we must be careful in using his translation because it has been done from the Tibetan translation. However good the Tibetan version may be, its linguistic connotations can differ considerably from the Sanskrit original. Therefore, we are still in need of a better English translation.

1. The aim of the present paper is to present my own English translation of *MMK* chapter XXIV,⁹ in which Nāgārjuna tries to defend the view that the doctrine of emptiness does not imply a sheer nihilism which denies anything from the Four Noble Truths up to all worldly modes of human conduct. By means of a translation of *MMK* chapter XXIV together with some comments, I would like to demonstrate that Nāgārjuna is not a nihilist as some modern scholars want to assume.¹⁰

It is true that the main vein of Nāgārjuna's arguments in *MMK* looks very negativistic. First, in *MMK* chapter I he denies the doctrine

of the Four Conditions, i. e., Ābhidharmika interpretation of Dependent Origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Then in chapter II he criticizes the Indian grammarians' interpretation of action (*kriyā*) in terms of agent, patient, and action. He goes on to examine the Ābhidharmikas' Dharma Theory (viz. Twelve Spheres, Five Groups, Six Elements, Defilement and Defiled, Three Characteristics of Conditioned dharmas, and action and agent) in chapters III~VIII. And he rejects theories of Person (*puṅgava*) or Self (viz. agent of experience, Self and Five Groups, past and future life, suffering and suffered) in chapters IX~XII. Furthermore, he attacks the position of the Essentialists (i. e., those who insist that a real entity must possess its unique essence (*svabhāva*)) in chapters XIII~XVIII, where he examines the compatibility between essence and change, conjunction of object, sense faculty and person, the concept of essence, binding and liberation, action and result, and Self and his possessions. Finally, Nāgārjuna examines various concepts related to the doctrine of transmigration (*saṃsāra*), namely, time, totality of cause and conditions, origination and cessation, Tathāgata, and Four Reversed Views, in chapters XIX~XXIII.¹¹

All these doctrines and common sense being denied, the opponents of Nāgārjuna, who cannot accept his doctrine of universal *emptiness* and who believe in the *essential* reality of phenomenal world, attack him, by reducing his doctrine of emptiness into a nihilism which denies not only Buddhist doctrines and practices but also our mundane activities. To this criticism Nāgārjuna tries to re-establish everything from Buddhist truths up to the mundane activities from the viewpoint of emptiness. Rather he claims that everything is possible only in emptiness (see v. 14 below). Let us see how the arguments run.

2. Translation of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* Chapter XXIV

2.1. Objections by the Essentialists :

v. 1 : If all this were empty (i. e., non-existent), there would be neither origination nor cessation [of anything] ; [then] for you (i. e., Nāgārjuna), it would follow that the Four Noble Truths are non-existent.

v. 2 : Due to the non-existence of the Four Noble Truths, comprehension [of the Truth of suffering], abandonment [of the cause of suffering], cultivation [of the path to the cessation of suffering] and realization [of the cessation of suffering, i. e., Nirvāṇa] will be impossible.

v. 3 : Due to the non-existence [of those], the four noble fruits [of stream-winner, once-returner, never-returner, and arhat] will be non-existent. If the fruits are non-existent, there will be neither the strivers for nor the attainers of those fruits.

v. 4 : If those eight kinds of persons (i. e. the four kinds of strivers and the four kinds of attainers of the fruits) are non-existent, there will be no Community (*saṃgha*) [of Buddhist practitioners]. Furthermore, due to the non-existence of the Noble Truths, neither will the true Doctrine (*saddharma*) exist.

v. 5ab : If there is neither Community nor Doctrine, how will there come to be a Buddha ?

v. 5cd-v. 6 : In this manner, if you speak of emptiness [of all], you are bound to deny all three of the jewels ; you are bound to deny the reality (*sadbhāva*) of the [karmic] result, both good (*dharma*) and bad (*adharma*) [actions], and all worldly (*laukika*) modes of conduct (*saṃvyavahāra*).

Comment : The opponents here try to demonstrate that the doctrine of emptiness will lead to the denial of Buddhism, namely, the Four Noble Truths, practice and realization of the truths, results of practice, practitioners, and the Three Jewels (viz. Buddha, Dharma, and Saṃgha). They further suggest that the upholders of

emptiness are bound to deny common sense, namely, the reality of karmic fruits, good and bad actions, and all worldly activities and conventions.

2. 2. Nāgārjuna's Reply :

v. 7 : To this we reply that you do not understand the aim (*prayojana*) of emptiness, emptiness (*śūnyatā*) itself, and the meaning of emptiness (*śūnyatārtha*) ; hence, you are frustrated in this manner.

Comment : Candrakīrti refers to *MMK* XVIII. 5 as the aim of emptiness, XVIII. 9 as emptiness, and XXIV. 18 as the meaning of emptiness. It is to be noted that emptiness does not mean 'non-existence'.

2. 2. 1. Buddhas have taught their doctrines by depending upon the Two Truths :

v. 8 : Buddhas taught the Doctrine, depending upon the two truths (*satya*) ; namely, worldly conventional truth (*loka-saṃvṛtisatya*) and truth in the ultimate sense (*paramāṛthataḥ*).

v. 9 : Those who do not know the distinction between those two truths do not know the profound reality (*tattva*) in the teachings of Buddhas (*buddha-śāsana*).

v. 10 : Without depending upon verbal practice (*vyavahāra*), the ultimate (*paramārtha*) [truth] is not taught ; without depending upon the ultimate [truth], Nirvāṇa is not attained.

Comment : It is to be noted that Nāgārjuna owes the theory of Two Truths to the Ābhīdharmikas. He differs from them only with regard to what should be regarded as the ultimate truth. For him it is not their Dharma Theory but the doctrine of emptiness which is identified with dependent origination (see v. 18 below).

2. 2. 2. Dangerous nature of the doctrine of emptiness and silence of the Buddha :

v. 11 : Emptiness wrongly conceived will destroy the slow-witted, just like a serpent wrongly grasped or a magical spell wrongly cast.

v. 12 : Hence, the Sage (*muni*, i. e. the Buddha) turned his mind away from teaching the Doctrine [of emptiness], thinking that it would be difficult for the slow[-witted] to understand the Doctrine.

2. 2. 3. The Essentialists' objections are useless :

v. 13 : Furthermore, whatever objection (*adhilaya*) you may make with regard to emptiness, it is impossible that any error will result (*doṣa-prasaṅga*) in our [doctrine of] emptiness.

v. 14 : Everything is applicable (*yujyate*) for one for whom emptiness is applicable, while nothing is applicable for one for whom emptiness is not applicable.

v. 15 : You are [unintentionally] throwing your own errors upon us, [as if,] mouned on a horse, you have forgotten that very horse.

Comment : v. 14 corresponds to *Vigrahavyāvarttanī* (= *VV*) v. 70 (*prabhavati ca śūnyateyaṃ yasya prabhavanti tasya sarvārthāḥ / prabhavati na tasya kiṃcin na prabhavati śūnyatā yasya //*). In his auto-commentary to *VV* Nāgārjuna says: “Everything, both supermundane and mundane, is possible to one for whom emptiness is possible.” Regarding ‘everything’, he enumerates ‘dependent origination’, ‘the Four Noble Truths’, ‘the fruits of religious practice’, ‘acquisition of every excellent quality’, ‘the Three Jewels’, ‘good and bad actions’, ‘defilements’, ‘transmigration and coming out of transmigration’, and ‘all worldly modes of conduct’. Cf. *VV* 55 and comm. *MMK* XXIV. 14 (as well as *VV* 70) is the most crucial verse which clearly disproves that Nāgārjuna is a nihilist. In spite of the overwhelming negativism of the doctrine of empti-

ness, or rather because of that, everything, both mundane and supermundane, is made possible to one who has realized that everything is empty, i. e., empty of the alleged essence. It is needless to mention that ‘everything’ does not include those speculative views advocated by the Essentialists.

2. 2. 4. Recapturing the basic critical arguments of *MMK* :

v. 16 : If you regard existents (*bhāva*) as essentially (*svabhāvāt*) real, then you must regard them as being without cause and conditions (*ahetuṣratyaya*).

v. 17 : You are bound to deny effect (*kārya*) and cause (*kāraṇa*), agent (*karṭṛ*), instrument (*karaṇa*) and action (*kriyā*), origination (*utpāda*) and cessation (*nirodha*), and fruit (*phala*).

2. 3. 5. Dependent origination = emptiness = a concept = the middle path :

v. 18 : We call dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*) ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*) ; it (i. e. emptiness) is a concept/designation based on [something] (*upādāya prajñaptiḥ*) ; and it is precisely the middle path (*madhyamā pratīpat*).

v. 19 : Since there is nothing whatsoever which has originated independently (*aṣratītya*), there is nothing whatsoever in this world which is not empty.

Comment : v. 18 (cf. the final benedictory verse of *VV*) is the most celebrated verse of *MMK*. Recently Chizuko Yoshimizu published a detailed study of this verse and proposed a new interpretation of the word ‘*upādāya-prajñaptiḥ*’.¹² Though I agree with her method of investigation and its results, I do not accept her ‘new interpretation’ at the moment and I follow the traditional interpretation that even emptiness is a mere concept which should not be regarded as

something substantial, essential, or absolute. In other words, emptiness is empty, too. The idea seems to correlate very well with vv. 11 & 12 above where the dangerous and difficult nature of emptiness is emphasized. If some one understands emptiness to be real and essential, he will be bound to fall into the Essentialist camp.

2.3.6. Nāgārjuna counter-attacks the Essentialists :

2.3.6.1. Against the objection in v. 1 :

v. 20 : If all this were *not* empty (i. e., essentially real), there would be neither origination nor cessation [of anything]; [then] for you (i. e., the Essentialists), it would follow that the Four Noble Truths are non-existent.

v. 21 : How will there be suffering (*duḥkha*), if it (i. e., suffering) is originated independently? Indeed that which is impermanent (*anitya*) is said to be suffering, and it is non-existent, if it is possessed of its essence (*svābhāvyē*).

v. 22 : What will be originated again, if it exists essentially (*svabhāvataḥ*)? Therefore, there will be no origination (*samudaya*) [of suffering], if you deny emptiness.

v. 23 : There will be no cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering, if it exists essentially (*svabhāvena*). You are bound to deny cessation because you stick to [the doctrine of] essence (*svabhāva-paryavasthāna*).

v. 24 : Cultivation of the path (*mārga*) will be impossible, if it (i. e., the path) is possessed of its essence. Or if this path is [indeed] cultivated, [even] for you, it cannot be possessed of its essence.

v. 25 : When suffering, origination [of suffering], and cessation [of suffering] do not exist, since [Nirvāṇa is] the cessation of suffering, what kind of path will lead us [to our final goal] ?

2. 3. 6. 2. Against the objection in v. 2 :

v. 26 : If it (i. e., suffering) is essentially (*svabhāvena*) incomprehensible, how can one further comprehend it? Isn't essence said to be steady?

v. 27 : In the same way, just like comprehension [of suffering], abandonment [of the cause of suffering], cultivation [of the path], and realization [of the cessation of suffering] will be impossible for you ; and so too the four fruits [of Buddhist practice].

2. 3. 6. 3. Against the objections in v. 3-v. 5ab :

v. 28 : How could it, moreover, be possible for one who adheres to [the doctrine of] essence to attain the [four noble] fruits which are essentially (*svabhāvena*) unattainable?

v. 29 : If the fruits are non-existent, there will be neither strivers for nor attainers of those fruits. If those eight kinds of persons (i. e., the four kinds of strivers and the four kinds of attainers of the fruits) are non-existent, there will be no Community [of Buddhist practitioners].

v. 30 : Furthermore, due to the non-existence of the Noble Truths, neither will there be the true Doctrine. If there is neither Community nor Doctrine, how will there come to be a Buddha?

v. 31 : For you, it would follow that one becomes a Buddha even independent of enlightenment (*bodhi*) ; for you, it would follow that there is enlightenment even independent of a Buddha.

v. 32 : For you, one who is essentially (*svabhāvena*) unenlightened will not attain enlightenment, however hard he may strive after enlightenment in the course of conduct of a Bodhisattva (*bodhisattvacaryā*).

2. 3. 6. 4. Against the objection in v. 6 :

v. 33 : Moreover, [for you] no one will ever do either good or bad [actions]. What can be made of the non-empty? For [that non-empty

- thing which possesses] essence cannot be made [into something else].
- v. 34 : For you, there will exist a [karmic] result [even] without good or bad [actions]. And for you, there will not exist any result which is conditioned by good or bad [actions].
- v. 35 : Or if, for you, there exists a result which is conditioned by good or bad [actions], how will it be possible for you that the result originated from good or bad [actions] is non-empty ?
- v. 36 : As long as you deny [the equation of] emptiness with dependent origination, you are bound to deny all worldly (*laukika*) modes of conduct (*saṃvyavahāra*).
- v. 37 : For one who denies emptiness [as dependent origination], there will not be anything that should be done, action would be unbegun, and agent would perform no [action].
- v. 38 : If there were to be essence (*svabhāva*), the world would be neither produced nor destroyed, unchangeable, and devoid of various states. (Cf. XXII. 16)
- v. 39 : If [the world were] non-empty, attainment of what is not yet attained, action to end suffering, and abandonment of all the defilements would not exist.

2.4. Conclusion :

- v. 40 : He who sees dependent origination [as emptiness] sees this (i. e., the Four Noble Truths): suffering, origination [of suffering], cessation [of suffering], and the path [to the cessation of suffering].
- [The End of Translation of *MMK*]

3. In order to contribute to the general theme of the conference, namely ‘Relevance of Buddhism in Our Everyday Life’, I would like to summarize what I think the messages of Nāgārjuna are which seem to be relevant to us because of their universal appeal :

- (1) Doubt any prevalent view and reject any prejudice (Keep sound Scepticism).
- (2) Reject Essentialism and do not reify that which is merely imaginary.
- (3) Avoid both nihilism and cynicism, for everything will resurge after rejection by emptiness.

(This paper was originally presented in Japanese at the annual conference at Tōyō University on Oct. 5, 1997. 本論文は、平成9年10月5日の東洋大学における学術大会で「龍樹における日常性の甦り」と題して日本語で発表したものである)

Notes

- 1 “Nāgārjuna’s Appeal”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 22 : 299, 1994.
- 2 See C. D. C. Priestley, “Emptiness in the Satyasiddhi,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 1-1 : 30-39, 1970 ; S. Katsura, “Harivarman on *Satyadvaya*,” *Indogaku Bukkyogaku Kenkyu*, 27-2 : (1)-(5), 1979. As to Vasubandhu, one may be reminded of his discussion of *upādāya-prajñapti* in *Abhidharmakośa* chapter IX, which is similar to the one found in the *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā* chapter X.
- 3 G. M. Nagao, “From Mādhyamika to Yogācāra : An Analysis of MMK, XXIV. 18 and MV, I. 1-2”, now available in *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra*, tr. by L. Kawamura, pp. 189-199, Albany, 1991.
- 4 Jñānaśrīmitra refers to Ārya-Nāgārjuna-pāda at least six times in his works. See e. g. *Jñānaśrīmitranibandhāvalī* (2nd ed. by A. Thakur, Patna, 1987), p. 506 : *āryanāgārjunapādānāṃ tu bhinnavaṃśatve’pi sādharmaṇaiva sādhyatattvasthanitir iti darśitam, abādhyasvasaṃvedanasvikārāt.*
- 5 Hayes, *ibid.*, p. 363.
- 6 Y. Kajiyama, “On the Authorship of the *Upāyahṛdaya*,” *Studies in the Buddhist Epistemological Tradition*, ed. by E. Steinkellner, Wien, 1991, p. 113. Futile rejoinders are enumerated in the *Nyāyasūtra* V-2 and other manuals of Indian logic.
- 7 See my forthcoming article, “Nāgārjuna and the Tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭī*),” *Festschrift for Gadājin M. Nagao* being edited by Jonathan Silk.

- 8 *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way, Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Oxford University Press, N. Y. - Oxford, 1995.
- 9 I would like to thank my old friend Mark Siderits who kindly made available his unpublished translation of some important chapters of *MMK*. My English translation of *MMK* Chapter XXVI appears in *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku Kenkyū*, 46-1, 1997.
- 10 For example, Thomas E. Wood, *Nāgājunian Disputations, A Philosophical Journey through an Indian Looking-Glass*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1994.
- 11 In *MMK* chapter XXVII, Nāgārjuna denies sixteen kinds of wrong views (*dṛṣṭi*) and in the *Vaidalyapṛakaraṇa* he criticizes the sixteen categories (*padārtha*) of Nyāya school.
- 12 “Upādāyaprajñapti ni tsuite — Mūlamadhyamakakārikā XXIV 18 wo kangaeru —”, *Naritasan Bukkyō Kenkyūsho Kiyō*, Vol. 20, 1997.

*I would like to thank Dr. Jonathan Silk for kindly correcting my English and giving me many valuable suggestions.