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BUDDHAPĀLITA ON EMTINESS

[Buddhapatita-mūla-madhyaamakavyārtti XVIII]

1. Compared to its author’s other works Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (MK) may be called his magnum opus in the sense that he nowhere else treats the Leitmotiv of all his thinking, viz. his faith in the emptiness (śūnyatā) of all phenomena or concepts (dharma), with such consistency and thoroughness as here. Two other texts, Śūnyatāsaptati (ŚS) in 73 stanzas and Vigrahavyāvartanī (VV) in 70 are, as the commentator Candrakīrti observes, to be regarded as ‘appendices’ (Tib. 'phros pa) to the 448 stanzas of MK’s twenty-seven chapters. Finally Yuktiśāstikā, Ratnāvalī and Catuḥstava (especially Lokāśita- and Acintyastava) provide much additional material for the understanding of Nāgārjuna’s conception of emptiness.

While it would certainly be ill-advised to neglect the fact that Nāgārjuna also composed works expounding traditional Buddhist ethical and religious topics usually in a clear and agreeable style (Suhrllekha, Ratnāvali, etc.) it is, I believe, still his celebrated theory, or rather ‘therapy’ of emptiness which retains the greatest historical and philosophical significance.

Two things must be held in mind to estimate the import of MK (ŚS and VV) properly: Nāgārjuna’s own background or premises, and that of his intended readers or audience. First of all he is deeply inspired by the teaching of ‘non-origination’ (anutpāda), i.e. the māyāvāda preached in the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras. It is, then, his intention to impart this conviction to those Buddhists who adhere to the dogmas (dṛṣṭi) as codified in the more or less ‘realistic’ systems of Abhidharma. It is not that Nāgārjuna proposes to discard the traditional Buddhist concepts (dharma) such as the aggregates (skandha) etc., but what he attempts is to abolish the dogmatic or clinging attitude towards these as if they were really existing entities (bhava). Such an attitude is the source of all misery.

His method is that of arguments (yukti), the gist of which is this: Empirically, all phenomena are dependently originated (pratītyasamutpāda), hence they are nothing in themselves. They lack “own-being” (svabhāva) and are, as such, like illusions (māyāvāda). Logically, nothing can be conceived as ‘one’ (eka), i.e. as an entity which makes sense independently of a correlate, no matter whether this entity be termed a ‘cause’, ‘desire’, ‘Buddha’ or ‘Nirvana’ etc.

So while Nāgārjuna is apparently interested in “ontology” he is not interested in it for its own sake but only for its ethical, or soteriological implication viz. the non-clinging attitude. On this point he is convinced of his own orthodoxy and
careful to stress it.  Thus Nāgārjuna’s own achievement in the history of Buddhist thought mainly consists in the fact that he is the first individual who on a large and systematic scale attempts to reform the spirit of Abhidharma to that of the Prajñāpāramitā.

The reformatory tenets of MK etc. must soon have been realized among some of the monks to whom it was addressed, and in due course it not only gave rise to opposition but also to a large number of commentaries written by some of the greatest names in the history of Mahāyāna in India. Some of these are lost, others only known from fragments. Apart from Akutobhayā (and Chung lun) only Prasannapada, Candrakīrti’s commentary, is translated in full into European languages. The commentaries of Buddhāpālīta and Bhavya (with the sub-commentary of Avalokitavrata) have not yet received the general recognition to which their merits entitle them.

2. If we are to trust our only source, Tāranātha, Buddhāpālīta was born in *Hāṃsakrīḍā in Tambaḷa in the south. *Sāṃgharakṣita, a disciple of a certain *Nāgamitra became his teacher and his residence was the vihāra of Dantapūrī. However we lack the means of verifying the truth of this testimony.

Buddhāpālīta’s commentary was composed later than Akutobhayā (the Mūlamadhyamakavṛtti ascribed to Nāgārjuna) on which it often depends but earlier than Bhavya’s (c. 500–570) Prajñāpradīpa (c. 550) in which it is sometimes quoted. If we lend credit to the report that Buddhāpālīta and Bhavya were pupils of the same Sāṃgharakṣita the former may have flourished c. 500. Compared to Bhavya his influence seems to have been rather modest though his work was appreciated at least by Candrakīrti and Avalokitavrata.

The internal evidence to be culled from Buddhāpālīta’s vṛtti is scanty. Apart from a few brief and often recurring sūtra-quotations his main authorities are Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva. From Nāgārjuna he only quotes MK though he must, of course, also have known some of his other works. From Āryadeva he quotes Sataka, or Catuḥsataka, and also three verses not to be identified in that text. Finally we meet with one verse from Rāhulabhadra’s Prajñāpāramitāstotra and a verse by a certain ācārya called Abhayā.

Characteristic of Buddhāpālīta is the predominantly philosophical interest. Ethical, religious and psychological issues are hardly mentioned though as a Buddhist the author must obviously also have been concerned with them.

The text of MK as used by Buddhāpālīta is almost identical with the recension transmitted in Candrakīrti’s Prasannapada. As far as the titles of the twenty-seven chapters are concerned, there are some variants but Buddhāpālīta always agrees with Akutobhayā (Chung lun), Bhavya and Avalokitavrata on this point.

On the whole Buddhāpālīta’s style is sober, vivid and to the point without