

To Establish the Middle Position on One Truth or Two Truths?*: A Survey Based on the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and Its Commentaries

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Abstract

The two truths theory is usually considered as an indispensable framework for Madhyamaka exponents to maintain a middle position. Based on Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (MK) and its Indic commentaries, this paper challenges this view and argues that there is a discernible turning point in the exegetic history of the MK concerning the two truths theory and that the practice of establishing the middle position on two truths was not present in the Madhyamaka tradition until Bhāviveka of the sixth century.

In MK 24.10, Nāgārjuna affirms the pedagogical value of the mechanism of conventional conceptualization by asserting that paramārtha has to be taught through the media of vyavahāra. Nevertheless, he explicitly denies all kinds of customary categories, which are the content of conventional truth. Moreover, Nāgārjuna defines the extreme of nonexistence as a view founded on the false presupposition of existence, i.e., a view committed to the position that things previously exist and then perish. Hence, he establishes his middle position free from both extremes simply through a negation against the presupposition of existence, rather than by any dichotomic arguments. The Akutobhayā and Buddhapālita's commentary align with this stance and further equate the middle position to paramārtha. The practice of combining the middle position with two truths theory had not been introduced into the Madhyamaka tradition until Bhāviveka, who admitted practical existence at the conventional level to secure a middle position. Such a practice was later adopted by Candrakīrti, and eventually became the standard explanation of the middle position in the Madhyamaka tradition.

Key words: Two Truths, Middle Position, Madhyamaka, Nāgārjuna, Bhāviveka

The two truths theory is usually considered as an indispensable framework for Madhyamaka exponents to maintain a middle position (*madhyamaka*)¹ away from the two extreme views, i.e., the views of existence and nonexistence, or the views of eternity and annihilation.² On the basis of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MK) and its Indic commentaries, this paper challenges this view and argues that there is a discernible turning point in the exegetical history of the MK concerning the two truths theory and that the practice of establishing the middle position on the two truths was not present in the Madhyamaka tradition until Bhāviveka. To avoid the scholarly dispute on the authenticity of works attributed to Nāgārjuna, I will use the MK as the main exposition of his standpoint, and will consult several other works which are more widely considered authentic, such as the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā* (YŚ), *Śūnyatāsaptati* (ŚS) and *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV). For the latter two, I will confine myself to the verses and leave aside the so-called auto-commentaries.

Nāgārjuna

The Two Truths

The two truths theory holds a central position in later Madhyamaka philosophy. In contrast, the two truths are mentioned in the MK only once:

dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā |
lokasaṃvṛtisatyam ca satyam ca paramārbhataḥ ||
ye 'nayo na vijānanti vibhāgaṃ satyayoḥ dvayoḥ |
te tattvaṃ na vijānanti gambhīre buddhaśāsane ||
vyavahāram anāśritya paramārtho na deśyate |
paramārtham anāgamyā nirvāṇaṃ nādhigamyate || (MK 24.8–10)

The teaching of the Dharma by the buddhas rests on two truths:

The worldly conventional truth and the ultimate truth.

Those who do not understand the distinction of the two truths

Do not understand the truth in the profound teaching of the buddhas.

Without resorting to conventional conception, the ultimate reality is not taught.

Without apprehending the ultimate reality, *nirvāṇa* is not attained.³

Apart from the verses that mention the names and importance of the two truths, it seems only one line is helpful for us to figure out Nāgārjuna's real thinking, i.e., "without resorting to (*anāsritya*) conventional conception (*vyavahāra*), the ultimate reality (*paramārtha*) is not taught." Nevertheless, here the meaning of "resorting to conventional conception" is not clear enough. I can see at least two options: A straightforward reading would be that the *paramārtha* has to be taught by the buddha—and at the same time, understood by the sentient beings—through the medium of *vyavahāra*. Then the *vyavahāra* here stands for a mechanism of conceptualization or cognition which renders the ineffable reality into an effable form. And the *vyavahāra* is the medium of both the conventional truth and the ultimate teaching. Taking into account the connection between *vyavahāra* and conventional truth (*saṃvṛtisatya/vyavahārasatya*), the other understanding would be that *paramārtha* has to be taught premised that the conventional truth is accepted or unviolated, and in this case *vyavahāra* denotes the content of conventional truth.

In the analysis above, one may find a presupposition of a mechanism-content structure of the worldly convention. It is true that a full-fledged theory of the mechanism of conventional world did not appear earlier than the rise of the Yogācāra school, yet it is reasonable to raise the following question: in which sense does Nāgārjuna use *vyavahāra* here? Unfortunately, he offers no further explication. With this question in mind, we may look into the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. The MK is considered as an explanatory work of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, yet due to its brevity, sometimes we need reverse this sequence and seek the meaning of MK's verses with the help of *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. In order to find a relevant explanation, let us first mark three key points in this line of the MK: (1) the ultimate reality (*paramārthaḥ*) is (2) taught (*deśyate*) (3) resorting to conventional conception (*vyavahāram āsritya*). Then the following passage in the larger *Prajñāpāramitā* is noteworthy:

alākṣaṇā hi devaputrā iyaṃ gambhīrā prajñāpāramitā. evaṃlakṣaṇā hi devaputrā iyaṃ gambhīrā prajñāpāramitā, tathāgatena lokasaṃketena vyavahariyate na punaḥ paramārthena | (PvsP IV 68.5–8)

Therefore, gods, this deep perfection of wisdom is without any defining characteristic. Therefore, the deep perfection of wisdom of such a defining characteristic has been verbally articulated by the Tathāgata through worldly convention, but not through the ultimate reality.

According to this passage, the deep perfection of wisdom (*gambhīrā prajñāpāramitā*), which is without any defining characteristic (*alakṣaṇā*), is articulated (*vyavahriyate*) by the Buddha through worldly convention (*lokasaṃketena*); then it accords all three points in the above-mentioned line of the MK. Similar discussions occur in the larger *Prajñāpāramitā* very frequently, with various wordings corresponding to “through worldly convention,” such as *lokavyavahāram upādāya*, *lokavyavahāreṇa*, *lokavyavahāreṇa vyavakṛtās*, *lokavyavahāram pramāṇīkṛtya*, *lokavyavahārasaṃketam upādāya*, *saṃvṛtisatyam pramāṇīkṛtya*, *lokasaṃvṛtim upādāya*, etc.⁴ In many cases these sentences are followed by the words *na punaḥ paramārthena* or *na punaḥ paramārthasatyena* “but not through the (truth of) ultimate reality.”

There would be no difficulty if we understand “depending on the worldly conventional conception” or “through worldly convention” (PvsP: *lokavyavahāreṇa*, *lokavyavahāram upādāya*, etc.; MK: *vyavahāram āśritya*) as through the mechanism of conventional conceptualization, since everything the Buddha wants to teach has to be conveyed through the media of language, and is impossible to be conveyed by way of ultimate reality itself. The reason given in some passages of the larger *Prajñāpāramitā* is that on the ultimate plane there is no way for speech.⁵ This reason is also concerning the medium but not the content. Conversely, if we take the other option and understand the words “through worldly convention” as a premise that the conventional truth is accepted or unviolated; then, for the sake of symmetry we have to understand *na punaḥ paramārthena* as follows: but not with the ultimate reality accepted or unviolated. Then it would be very strange to say that the ultimate reality has to be taught by the Buddha by “accepting the conventional truth, but not by accepting the ultimate reality.”

Therefore, with the help of similar passages from *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, it seems more reasonable to understand the word *vayahāra* in MK 24.10c as denoting a mechanism of worldly convention.⁶ And thus MK 24.10 just means that the ultimate reality has to be taught to sentient beings in the form of conventional conceptualization, and not in the form of the ineffable ultimate reality. Notice that the ultimate reality taught through worldly convention is still *ultimate truth*. Thus, the verse only reveals the indispensability of worldly convention as a medium of the ultimate truth, and does not define Nāgārjuna’s attitude toward the customary views that people hold as true.

Attitude Towards the Conventional Categories

Nāgārjuna is famous for his negative attitude toward all kinds of conventional categories. Yet, did he ever accept any conventional views on any occasion? Let us examine the following verse:

*sarvaṃ tathyaṃ na vā tathyaṃ tathyaṃ cātathyaṃ eva ca |
nāvātathyaṃ naiva tathyaṃ etad buddhānuśāsanam ||* (MK 18.8)

Everything is real; or not real; or both real and not real; or neither not real nor real.
This is the buddhas' teaching.

In this verse the four forms of the buddhas' teaching cannot be conveyed in one and the same context, for they contradict each other. All four Indic commentaries agree that this verse means that the buddhas set forth teachings according to occasions and different faculties of sentient beings, e.g., the *Akutobhayā* says,⁷

*thams cad yang dag ces bya ba ni mig la sogs pa skye mched rnams dang gzugs la
sogs pa'i yul rnams tha snyad kyi bden pa dang mi 'gal bar yod pa'i phyir ro || [...]
(71b5)'dis slob ma'i tshogs rnam pa mang po dag la dbang po dang bsam pa dang bag
la nyal dang dus kyi dbang gis mtho ris dang byad grol gyi lam phyin ci ma log par
rjes su ston pas bstan pa'o ||* (D no. 3829, 71a6–b6)

To say “all is real” (18.8a) is because, according to the *conventional truth*, there exist the sense-fields such as eyes and so on, and the sense objects such as form and so on. [...] For the numerous disciples, according to [their] faculties, dispositions, dormant afflictions and the occasions, [buddhas] teach the path to heaven and salvation accordingly without error. This is the [buddhas'] teaching.

The gradation of faculties is a typical practice for the Mahāyānist to incorporate different teachings of the Buddha into one system. Thus, Nāgārjuna should agree that on certain occasions, e.g., when the audience is at primary stages, the worldly convention, e.g., all is real, is also to be accepted. Nevertheless, no evidence shows that he considers such expedient acceptance, which is only

a matter of technique and gradation of instructions, bears any significance in maintaining the philosophical middle position between existence and nonexistence.

Except for the gradation of instructions, one might get an impression from the MK that Nāgārjuna refutes all kinds of conventional conceptions. And, as a matter of fact, he *never* restricts such refutations to a certain context. Here is an explicit example:

dr̥śyate saṃbhavaś caiva vibhavaś ceti te bhavet |
dr̥śyate saṃbhavaś caiva mohād vibhava eva ca || (MK 21.11)

If you maintain that arising and dissolution [of things] are indeed seen,
 Arising and dissolution are seen only because of [your] delusion.

To those who defend their thesis of existence by perceptual knowledge as direct evidence, Nāgārjuna's only response is, "you are deluded." Notice that Nāgārjuna does not say "on the conventional level, we agree that these phenomena are indeed seen" or "we only deny them at the ultimate level." Nāgārjuna explicitly denies the world perceived as such (*dr̥śyate*) without restricting the context by the two truths theory. Such an attitude can be called an unconditional rejection of the content of the conventional truth.

Passages That Seem to Admit Conventional Phenomena

Some verses of Nāgārjuna are usually taken as affirmations of the conventional phenomena at a certain level, and thus are contradictory to my conclusion above. Here I provide some clarifications.

Dependent Origination

Later Mādhyamika exegetical traditions have given us an impression that Nāgārjuna admits the dependent origination at the conventional level. A thorough examination of this topic will have to wait for another occasion. Here I just give a brief explanation.

Concerning the theory of dependent origination, two concepts should be differentiated: an abstract noun, *pratītyasamutpāda* "dependent origination,"

and an adjective, *pratītyasamutpanna* “dependently originated (things).”⁸ For *pratītyasamutpāda*, Nāgārjuna’s verses read:

anīrodham anutpādam anucchedam aśāśvatam |
anekārtham anānārtham anāgamam anirgamam ||
yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaṃ prapañcopāśamaṃ śivam |
deśayāmāsa saṃbuddhaṃ taṃ vande vadatāṃ varam || (MK, dedicatory verse)

I pay homage to the Buddha, the best of orators, who taught the dependent origination, the elimination of conceptual proliferations and the ultimate welfare, to be the voidness of cessation and origination, the voidness of annihilation and eternity, the voidness of singularity and plurality, and the voidness of coming and going.

yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tāṃ pracakṣmahe | (MK 24.18ab)

We declare the dependent origination to be emptiness.

yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaṃ paśyatīdaṃ sa paśyati |
duḥkhaṃ samudayaṃ caiva nirodhaṃ mārgam eva ca || (MK 24.40)

He who sees the dependent origination sees the [truths of] suffering, arising, cessation and the path.

gang gis skye dang ’jig pa dag || ’di yi tshul gyis rab spangs pa ||
rten cing ’brel ’byung gsung ba yi || thub dbang de la phyag ’tshal lo || (YŚ, dedicatory verse) Only *pādas* ab are preserved in Sanskrit: *namas tasmai munīndrāya pratītyotpādavādīne |*

I pay homage to the lord of sages (the Buddha) who taught the dependent origination, and thereby by this principle eliminates origination and cessation.

From the citations above we can see that dependent origination is upheld by Nāgārjuna as the ultimate truth—he considers the capability to teach it as the quality of the Buddha, and such an insight enables one to see the four noble truths. So, it cannot be some worldly principle that common people realize.

Moreover, Nāgārjuna considers the dependent origination as a principle (Tib. *tsbul*), and is equated to *sūnyatā* “emptiness” and *anutpāda* “voidness of origination,” which deviates from its literal meaning. This is confirmed by the following verses:

shin tu phra ba'i dngos la yang || gang gis skye bar rnam brtags pa ||
rnam par mi mkhas de yis ni || rkyen las byung ba'i don ma mthong || (YŚ 12)

He who imagines the origination of even the most subtle things, is ignorant and does not see the meaning of conditioned origination.

Therefore, *pratītyasamutpāda* in Nāgārjuna’s context refers no more to a principle of origination, as literally suggested by the component of the compound, but to a voidness of origination, which means nothing whatsoever arises. Hence, the concept of dependent origination in Nāgārjuna’s context is to be understood according to the connotation of universal emptiness, but not vice versa.

For the concept of *pratītyasamutpanna*, Nāgārjuna’s standpoint may be observed in the following verses:

apratītyasamutpanno dharmah kaścīn na vidyate |
yasmāt tasmād aśūnyo 'pi dharmah kaścīn na vidyate || (MK 24.19)

Since no *dharmā* whatsoever can be found that is not dependently originated, no *dharmā* whatsoever can be found that is not empty.

tat tat prāpya yad utpannam notpannam tat svabhāvataḥ |
yat svabhāvena notpannam utpannam nāma tat katham || (YŚ 19)

Whatsoever is originated depending on this and that, is not originated as [its] own-being. How can what is not originated as [its] own-being be called originated?

Nāgārjuna’s usage of the word *dharmā* in MK 24.19 shows that he considers the adjective *pratītyasamutpanna* as a denotation of phenomena (in contrast to an abstract principle). Nevertheless, he denies that these phenomena are ever

originated. Being not originated means being nonexistent. This is exactly what Nāgārjuna says:

hetutaḥ sambhavo yasya sthitir na pratyayair vinā |
vigamaḥ pratyayābhāvāt so 'stīty avagataḥ katham || (YŚ 39)

Whatsoever comes forth due to a cause does not endure without conditions, and perishes due to the absence of conditions. Therefore, how can it be apprehended to exist?

'di brten 'di 'byung zhes bya ba'i || 'jig rten sgrub 'di 'gog mi mdzad ||
rten 'byung gang de rang bzhin med || ji ltar de yod yang dag nges || (ŚS 71)

Depending on this, that arises. This mundanely established principle is not rejected. What is dependently originated has no own-being. How could it exist? [This] is definite.

Notice that Nāgārjuna calls the view that “depending on this, that arises” the mundanely established principle (*'jig rten sgrub*). He does not reject it at first and introduces it into his arguments. But when the conclusion of emptiness is reached, this worldly convention is undoubtedly abandoned. He explicitly says that nothing is originated even dependently, e.g.:

na pratyayasamutpannaṃ nāpratyayasamutthitam |
asti yasmād idaṃ karma tasmāt kartāpi nāsty ataḥ || (MK 17.29)

There is no action which either has arisen dependent on conditions, or has sprung up without dependence on conditions. Therefore, the agent does not exist either.

This explains why Nāgārjuna refutes all causal factors, such as conditions, causes and effects (MK, Chap. 1, 20). Incidentally, a verse is sometimes taken as an affirmation of mutual dependence:

pratītya kārakaḥ karma taṃ pratītya ca kārakam |
karma pravartate nānyat paśyāmaḥ siddhikāraṇam || (MK 8.12)

The agent occurs in dependence on the object, and the object occurs in dependence on the agent. Other than this, we see no reason of [their] establishment.

The fact that Nāgārjuna denies reasons “other than this” does not entail the acceptance of this reason. The verse may be viewed as an affirmation of mutual dependence only if it is under the premise that the two entities, agent and object, have to be established somehow. Yet, such a premise is impossible in Nāgārjuna’s context. As a matter of fact, two chapters later in the MK, we do find an explication of the same topic, where mutual dependence is explicitly rejected:

*yo ’pekṣya sidhyate bhāvas tam evāpekṣya sidhyati |
yadi yo ’pekṣitavyaḥ sa sidhyatām kam apekṣya kaḥ ||* (MK 10.10)

This entity is established in dependence [on that entity], yet that entity which is depended upon is established in dependence on this very entity. Then, what is established in dependence on what?

To sum up, Nāgārjuna considers the term *pratītyasamutpāda* “dependent origination” identical to *sūnyatā*, the supreme truth that only the Buddha penetrates, and endows this term with a negative sense which deviates from its literal meaning. It refers not to a law of origination, but to a nature of being without origination, or a principle that nothing can originate. This alteration of meaning is confirmed by Nāgārjuna’s final rejection of *pratītyasamutpanna* (*dharmā*) “dependently originated (things).” Therefore, despite the impression that later Mādhyamika traditions have given us that dependent origination is to be accepted at the conventional level as referring to a continuum of origination and cessation, in Nāgārjuna’s own words, in fact, we find either an empty name of “dependent origination,” whose meaning has been changed to the voidness of origination, or a provisional designation of dependently originated things whose existence is finally rejected.⁹

Emptiness as a Guarantee of Existence

The 24th chapter of the MK as a whole is sometimes interpreted as arguing that emptiness is not a destroyer of phenomena but a guarantor of their

practical existence. It is true that, at the beginning of this chapter, Nāgārjuna is facing the charge that the claim of emptiness would necessarily destroy everything (MK 24.1–6), and then he answers that it is opponents' views of the non-empty or *svabhāva* that destroy these phenomena (MK 24.20–39). Based on this, however, one should not infer that in Nāgārjuna's view the practical existence of these phenomena is saved by the emptiness, just as from his negation of a thesis (called by commentators *prasajya-pratiṣedha*, “non-implicative negation”), one should not infer an affirmation of its contrary. Therefore, the following verse from the MK should be read with caution:

sarvaṃ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate |
sarvaṃ na yujyate tasya śūnyam yasya na yujyate || (MK 24.14)

For whom emptiness makes sense (*yujyate*), all makes sense.

For whom [that all is] empty does not make sense, nothing makes sense.

VV 70 has similar wording; but substitutes *prabhavati* for *yujyate*.¹⁰ These two verbs can be rendered as “possible,” and some scholars further extend it to “be.”¹¹ Thus the verse is sometimes interpreted as arguing that the universal emptiness guarantees all practical existence. Nevertheless, I consider this verse not as an affirmation of the compatibility of emptiness with all phenomena, but a claim that faults could never happen to the position of emptiness. To read it in context, one should take the preceding verse into consideration:

śūnyatāyām adbhilayaṃ yaṃ punaḥ kurute bhavān |
doṣaprasaṅgo nāsmākaṃ sa śūnye nopapadyate || (MK 24.13)

Furthermore, the objection that you make concerning emptiness cannot be a faulty consequence for us; [it] does not apply when [all is] empty.

Verse 24.14 is actually a further explanation of Verse 24.13. The words *yasya* and *tasya* clearly show that this verse is talking about subjective understanding but not about objective situation. The word *yujyate* (or *prabhavati* in the VV) could mean making sense and being free from contradictions. Then, Verse 24.14 is better understood in the following way: for whomever emptiness

makes sense, i.e., whoever accepts universal emptiness and understands that all things are empty, then for him there would be no faults at all, for faults only belong to those who do not understand the emptiness and grasp the existence. Accordingly, no conventional existence is affirmed in this verse.

The Middle Position

Let us now see how Nāgārjuna maintains his middle position. The middle position is to avoid the two extreme views. As stated in MK 15.10, they are views of existence (*astitva/bhāva*) and nonexistence (*nāstitva/abhāva*), or views of eternity (*śāśvata*) and annihilation (*uccheda*). There is no doubt that the position of emptiness has avoided the extreme of existence or eternity. But how does it manage to avoid the extreme of nonexistence or annihilation? Let us take a look at how Nāgārjuna defines this extreme:

bhāvasya ced aprasiddhir abhāvo naiva sidhyati |
bhāvasya hy anyathābhāvam abhāvaṃ bruvate janāḥ || (MK 15.5)

If being is unestablished, definitely nonbeing is not established either.
 For people say nonbeing to be the alteration of the being.

asti yad dhi svabhāvena na tan nāstiti śāśvatam |
nāstidānim abhūt pūrvam ity ucchedaḥ prasajyate || (MK 15.11)

“Whatever exists by its own-being does not become nonexistent,” [from this] eternalism follows. “It existed previously [but] does not exist now,” [from this] annihilationism follows.

The extreme of nonexistence is defined by Nāgārjuna as the view that things previously exist and change or perish later. That is to say, the presupposition that there exists something is the basis of extremes of both existence and nonexistence. This is also explicitly asserted by Nāgārjuna:

bhāvam abhyupapannasya śāśvatocchedadarśanam |
prasajyate sa bhāvo hi nityo 'nityo 'pi vā bhavet || (MK 21.14)

For one who acknowledges being (*bhāva*), either eternalism or annihilationism will follow, because the being would be either permanent or impermanent.

ḍṅgos po yod pa nyid na rtag || med na nges par chad pa yin ||
ḍṅgos po yod na de gnyis yin || de'i phyir ḍṅgos po khas blangs min || (ŚS 21)

If there is existence of being, there is eternity; if there is nonexistence, there is necessarily annihilation. If there exists being, the two [extremes] occur. Therefore, being is not admitted.

Thus, there is no need for Nāgārjuna to secure a middle position by any compromise between complete emptiness and substantial existence or by admitting something at the conventional level, for a complete emptiness itself is in perfect accordance with the middle position. As a result, there would be no place for two truths theory in Nāgārjuna's exposition of the middle position.¹² Both extremes can be avoided by a single blow to the presupposition of existence. Just like both the proposition that the son of a barren woman is living or the proposition that he is dead are based on the presupposition that there is a son of a barren woman. By showing their presupposition failure, Nāgārjuna's demolishes all views and thus avoids all extremes, as is confirmed by the following verses:

sūnyeṣu sarvadharmeṣu kim anantaṃ kim antavat |
kim anantaṃ cāntavac ca nānantaṃ nāntavac ca kim || (MK 25.22)
kiṃ tad eva kim anyat kiṃ śāśvataṃ kim aśāśvataṃ |
aśāśvataṃ śāśvataṃ ca kiṃ vā nobhayam apy atha || (MK 25.23)

When all *dharmas* are empty, what is the thing without an end, what is that with an end? What is both with and without an end, and what is neither without nor with an end?

What is this very one, and what is another? What is the eternal thing, and what is the non-eternal? What is both eternal and non-eternal, and what is then neither?

Therefore, the extreme related to *nāstitva*, *abhāva*, *uccheda* or the like—that which Nāgārjuna is trying to distance himself from—should be identified

as annihilationism, but not nihilism. Notice that annihilationism is refuted by Nāgārjuna not because it asserts an extinction of existence, but because it presupposes existence. That is to say, annihilationism is wrong not because of an overly broad range of negation, but because of the lack of enough negation.

Based on the analysis above, Nāgārjuna's viewpoints can be summarized as follows: (1) the mechanism of worldly convention is indispensable to articulate the ultimate reality; (2) the content of the conventional truth is *expediently accepted* for the pedagogical purpose; (3) the content of the conventional truth is *unconditionally rejected* throughout his arguments; and (4) the maintenance of the middle position need not admit anything at the conventional level. In conclusion, the middle position in Nāgārjuna's context is *not* established on two truths theory.

Akutobhayā

Now, let us turn to the *Akutobhayā* (ABh), a commentary on the MK composed probably in the fourth century. In this concise commentary, I find no evidence showing that its author holds a different stance from that of Nāgārjuna concerning the two truths theory. Its definition of the two truths is noteworthy.¹³

'jig rten pa'i kun rdzob kyi bden pa zhes bya ba ni chos rnams ngo bo nyid stong pa dag la 'jig rten gyi phyin ci log ma rtogs pas chos thams cad skye bar mthong ba gang yin pa ste | de ni de dag nyid la kun rdzob tu bden pa nyid yin pas kun rdzob kyi bden pa'o || don dam pa'i bden pa ni 'phags pa rnams kyis phyin ci ma log par thugs su chud pas | chos thams cad skye ba med par gzigs pa gang yin pa ste | de ni de dag nyid la (= P; D las) don dam par bden pa nyid yin pas don dam pa'i bden pa'o || (D no. 3829, 89a1–3)

As for worldly conventional truth, the view that *all dharmas arise*, which is due to people's erroneous ignorance of *dharmas* that are empty of own-being, is conventionally true *only* for these [people], so it is [called] the conventional truth.

As for ultimate truth, the view that *all dharmas do not arise*, which is due to a non-erroneous apprehension by the noble ones, is ultimately true *only* for these [people], so it is [called] the ultimate truth.

This passage can be summarized as follows: (1) The two truths are not two levels of realities, but two views on the same reality. (2) The content of conventional truth is that all *dharmas* arise; namely, they are not empty; yet the ultimate truth is that all *dharmas* do not arise; namely, they are empty. Therefore, as far as their contents are concerned, the two truths contradict each other. (3) The evaluation of the two truths is from a single perspective, i.e., only the ultimate truth is the right view; the conventional truth is in fact erroneous view, which is mistaken for truth by worldly people. (4) The two occurrences of “only” (Tib. *nyid* = Skt. **eva*) suggest the mutual exclusion of the holders of these two views. The conventional truth is taken as truth only by worldly people, yet the ultimate truth is taken as truth only by the noble ones. In other words, the two kinds of views cannot be held true simultaneously by the same person.

If we follow such an explanation of the two truths, unless for certain pedagogical purpose, the acceptance of conventional views at the conventional level would be philosophically meaningless, which is just like accepting $1 + 1 = 3$ at the mistaken level. This explains Nāgārjuna’s unconditional rejection of the content of conventional truth. If both truths can be articulated by *vyavahāra*, surely one should keep maintaining the “right truth” and rejecting the “wrong truth.” Consequently, if the assertion that all is empty is refuted by the opponents based on the direct perception, the Madhyamaka exponents should not reply: “we also accept the existence of these phenomena at the conventional level.” As a result, whenever the assertion of the universal emptiness is accused as a nihilist position, Madhyamaka exponents cannot resort to the theory of the two truths thus defined, since the middle position as their true standpoint cannot be established between the right view and the wrong view. And due to their mutual contradiction and exclusion, the two truths cannot be simultaneously held true and collaborate to secure a middle position. This in turn explains the absence of two truths theory in Nāgārjuna’s exposition of the middle position.

Furthermore, the following passage from the ABh explicitly confirms that the middle way is established solely on the ultimate reality.

*de ltar gang gi phyir dngos po rnams la yod pa nyid dang med pa nyid du lta ba la
skyon du mar 'gyur ba de'i phyir dngos po rnams ngo bo nyid med pa zhes bya ba de
ni de kho na mthong ba ste | dbu ma'i lam yin la de nyid don dam pa 'grub pa yin
no || (D 61b7)*

In this way, since views that take things as existent and nonexistent will result in many faults, to see that things have no own-being is the penetration of reality, and is the middle way; and this is the establishment of the ultimate reality (*paramārtha*).

Buddhapālita's Commentary

Buddhapālita composed a commentary on the MK probably in the late fifth century or the early sixth century. The following passages show that when Buddhapālita's contention of emptiness is attacked by opponents on the basis of directly perceived phenomena, he just goes on insistently denying the things advocated by his opponents, but never compromises or admits anything at the conventional level.

'dir smras pa | jig rten mngon sum gyi don 'di gab gab kyis gnon par ji ltar nus | yong ni gang med pas 'gro ba po ma yin no || zhes bya ba dang | gang la ltos nas 'di 'gro ba po yin no zhes bya ba de ni 'gro ba yin la | de yang 'gro ba po zhes bya'o ||
bshad pa | ci khyod bu 'dod la ma ning la spyod dam | khyod 'gro ba po med pa la 'gro ba por rtog go || (D no. 3842, 173b2–b4; Saitō 1984, 46.11–16)

Here is an objection: How can you bustlingly reject the thing that is directly perceived (*pratyakṣārtha*) in the world? In any case, going is that without which one is called a non-goer, and in dependence on which one is called a goer. And this is the goer.

Answer: Do you, wishing for a son, have sexual intercourse with a eunuch? You imagine a goer even if the goer does not exist.

smras pa | mngon sum la gtan tshigs kyis tshig don med pa de ni jig rten la grags pa yin te | ji ltar dngos po ma 'gags par gnas pa rgyu 'ga' zbig kho nas 'jig par 'gyur ba de ni gzhan nu yan chad kyis mngon sum du yin pas | de'i phyir 'gag pa ni yod pa kho na yin no ||
bshad pa | de lta bas na | 'di yang khyod kyis blo'i mngon sum du bya ba'i rigs te | gnas skabs de yis gnas pa ni || de yis 'gag pa nyid mi 'gyur ||
gnas skabs gzhan gyis gnas skabs ni || gzhan gyis 'gag pa nyid mi 'gyur || (MK 7.28)
 [...] *de lta bas na 'gag pa mi 'thad pa yang blo'i mngon sum yin pa'i phyir 'gag*

pa zhes bya ba ci yang med pa de ltar khong du chud par bya'o || (D 195b6–a4; Saitō 1984, 112.13–113.10)

Objection: It is universally accepted (*lokaprasiddha*) that regarding the direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) [your] reason is meaningless. Even a child can directly perceive that an unceasing and enduring thing will certainly cease due to some cause. Therefore, cessation certainly exists.

Answer: In that case, this should be also directly perceived by your mind:

“A state itself does not cease with [the identity of] this very state;

Nor a state ceases with [the identity of] another state.” (MK 7.28)

[...] Therefore, since it is also directly perceived by mind that a cessation is impossible, one should understand that the so-called cessation does not exist at all.

Then, how does Buddhapālita maintain the middle position? Let us observe some examples:

smras pa || *'di la sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das rnams kyis chos bstan pa dag ni phal cher phung po dang khams dang skye mched dag la brten pa yin na de la gal te phung po dang khams dang skye mched dag med pa nyid yin pa de dag don med pa nyid du mi 'gyur ram de dag don med pa nyid du mi rigs na de ci lta bu zbig* ||

bshad pa | *kho bos phung po dang khams dang skye mched dag med pa nyid du mi smra'i* | *de dag yod pa nyid du smra ba sel bar byed do* || *de gnyi ga yang skyon du che ste* | [...] *de'i phyir kho bo ni rten cing 'brel par 'byung bas yod pa nyid dang med pa nyid kyi skyon dang bral ba chad pa ma yin rtag pa ma yin pa rjes su rab tu ston gyi med pa nyid du mi smra'o* || *de lta bas na kho bo cag la phung po dang | khams dang skye mched dag la brten pa'i chos ston pa dag don med pa nyid du mi 'gyur ro* ||

[...]

blo chung ngu gang dag rten cing 'brel par 'byung ba mchog tu zab pa ma rtogs pa na dngos po rnams la yod pa nyid dang | *med pa nyid du rjes su lta ba chad pa dang rtag par lta bas blo gros kyi mig bsgribs pa de dag gis ni mya ngan las 'das pa lta bar bya ba nye bar zhi zhing zhi ba mi mthong ngo* || *de'i phyir yang dag pa ji lta ba bzhin du ma mthong ba spros pa la mngon par dga' ba'i yid dang ldan pa de dag gi phung po dang khams dang skye mched dag la brten pa'i chos ston pa dag ni don med pa nyid du 'gyur ro* || *de lta bas na 'di ni don dam pa yin gyis mi 'jigs shig* | (D 182a6–b5; Saitō 1984, 71–73)

Objection: Here [in Buddhism] the Dharma is taught by the Buddha, the blessed one, mainly on the basis of aggregates, realms and sense-fields. If aggregates, realms and sense-fields are nonexistent, won't these [teachings] become meaningless? Or if it is not proper to say that they are meaningless, then how is that?

Answer: I do not say that aggregates, realms and sense-fields are nonexistent; I just deny the assertion of their existence. Both of them have big faults. [...] Therefore, I assert that because of *dependent origination* (*pratityasamutpāda*), the faults of existence and nonexistence are avoided, and there is no annihilation and eternity, but I do not speak of [their] nonexistence. So, for us, the teachings of Dharma on the basis of the aggregates, realms and sense-fields will not become meaningless.

[...]

Those people of little wisdom, whose intellectual eyes are covered by the views of annihilation and eternity and who see the existence and nonexistence in things without understanding the deepest *dependent origination*, do not see *nirvāṇa*, the elimination of the seen objects and the ultimate welfare. Therefore, for those who do not see reality as it is and whose minds delight in conceptual proliferations, the teachings of Dharma on the basis of the aggregates, realms and sense-fields will be just meaningless. Hence, because this is the *ultimate reality* (*paramārtha*), you should not fear it.

In the above passage, Buddhapālita accepts dependent origination in order to avoid the extreme of nonexistence. Yet, he does not accept dependent origination at the conventional level like later Mādhyamikas have done; on the contrary, he concludes his discussion with the sentence “this is the ultimate reality.” If the denotation of the word “this” is not clear enough, we may refer to another sentence in the first chapter of his commentary, where he clearly affirms that the dependent origination is the ultimate truth:

rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba zhes bya ba don dam pa'i bden pa mchog tu zab pa | [...]
(D 158b5–6; Saitō 1984, 1.23–2.1)

The deepest ultimate truth, called dependent origination, [...]

In addition, in the 15th chapter of Buddhapālita's commentary (D no. 3842, 182a6–b5; Saitō 1984, 206), he cites the whole paragraph from the ABh (D no.

3829, 61b7) we have quoted in last section, where the middle way is equated to the “establishment of the ultimate reality.”

Putting all these materials together, we can see the middle position in Buddhapālita’s context is established solely on the ultimate level. Throughout his commentary on the MK, I cannot find even a single sentence implying that his middle position involves two truths. Wherever he takes up the topic of the middle position, conventional truth is always absent. Now I would like to draw your attention to another passage:

smras pa | gang 'jig rten 'di med do || 'jig rten pha rol med do || sems can rdzus te skye ba med do || zhes bya ba la sogs par lta ba de dang | gang dngos po thams cad ma skyes pa dang ma 'gags pa zhes bya bar lta ba de gnyis la khyad par ci yod |

bshad pa | de gnyis la khyad par shin tu chen | khyod ni stong pa nyid kyi don rnam par mi shes nas de gnyis 'dra'o snyam du sems so || 'di la so sor ma brtags par btang snyoms byed pa gang yin pa dang | so sor brtags nas btang snyoms byed pa gang yin pa de gnyis btang snyoms byed par ni 'dra mod kyi so sor ma brtags par btang snyoms byed pa ni ma rig pa'i kun tu sbyor ba dang ldan par bstan la | btang snyoms byed pa gcig shos ni sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das rnams kyis kun tu bsten pa yin pas | de gnyis la khyad par shin tu che ba de bzbin du | 'di la yang 'jig rten 'di med do zhes bya ba la sogs pa de ltar mthong ba ni ma rig pas kun tu rmongs pa'i sems dang ldan pa yin gyi | dngos po thams cad ngo bo nyid kyis stong pa'i phyir ma skyes pa dang ma 'gags par mthong ba cig shos ni shes pa sngon du btang ba yin pas | de gnyis la khyad par shin tu che'o ||

gzhan yang med pa de nyid ma mthong ba bzbin du 'jig rten 'di med do || zhes tshig 'ba' zbig brjod pa de la ni | dper na dmus long phyogs 'di mi bde'o || zhes brjod kyang mig med pa'i phyir mi mthong bas der 'khrul pa dang | brdeg 'cha' bar 'gyur ba de bzbin du | de yang 'jig rten 'di med do || zhes brjod kyang shes pa'i mig med pa'i phyir mi mthong bas | skyon de dag gis gos par 'gyur ro || (D 243a3–b2; Saitō 1984, 253.1–22)

Objection: what is the difference between the view that “this world does not exist, next world does not exist and the spontaneously born sentient beings do not exist,” and the view that “all things do not arise and cease”?

Answer: There is big difference between the two [views]. Because you do not understand the meaning of emptiness, you think these two are identical. Here, a person who is equanimous (*upeksaka*) without careful consideration

and a person who is equanimous through careful consideration may be equally equanimous. Yet, the person who is equanimous without careful consideration is said to be fettered by ignorance, whereas the latter one who is equanimous is supported by buddhas. So there is big difference between the two. Similarly, one who views this world as nonexistent has a mind confused by ignorance, whereas the other who perceives that all things do not arise and cease because they are empty in their own-being is led by wisdom. So there is big difference between the two.

Furthermore, without seeing the nonexistence [of the world], he makes a mere verbal statement: “the world does not exist,” just like a born-blind person says: “the place is not good.” But he cannot see since he has no eye, hence he will make mistake and fall down. Similarly, since the person who says that the world does not exist has no eye of wisdom, he cannot see. Therefore, he is defiled by these faults.

The above passage is intended to draw a clear line between the Madhyamaka exponents and the “nihilists” in a derogative sense (*nāstika*). Two points deserving our attention here: First, conventional truth is not mentioned; all discussions seem to focus on ultimate reality, namely, emptiness, and the perception of it. Second, Buddhapālita does not deny that he holds the assertion verbally identical to that of the nihilist. The difference is that a nihilist proclaims that all is empty by deceit or by ignorance, whereas a Madhyamaka exponent, by true perception. On this point another good example is given by Buddhapālita following the passage quoted above, yet it is too long to include here. In this example, two witnesses give the same testimony in court; whereas one actually saw the event in question and the other did not but testifies because he was bribed or on the side of his friend. The latter is just like the nihilist, whose words are correct but not based on actual perception. This is almost to say that the Madhyamaka exponent is a true nihilist, whereas a so-called nihilist just pretends to be one. For now, let us keep these two points in mind and compare other commentators’ viewpoints later.

So far as we can see, concerning the two truths theory, there is no huge gap between Nāgārjuna’s verses, the ABh and Buddhapālita’s commentary. The conventional truth is indispensable only because the mechanism of conventional conceptualization is the only medium for the ultimate teaching. In certain circumstance the Buddha may say something in agreement with the

conventional views, otherwise he may lose the audience of the primary stages. But for the true standpoint of the *madhyamaka*, no acceptance of conventional views has ever been made, and indeed there is no need to accept them, for the middle position is established at the ultimate level.

Prajñāpradīpa

Now let us look into Bhāviveka's commentary, the *Prajñāpradīpa* (PP), composed later than Buddhapālita, probably in the sixth century.

*gzhan dag na re | don dam par phyi dang nang gi skye mched rnams khas ma blangs
pa'i phyir chos can ma grub pas gzhi ma grub pa'i phyir khyod kyi don ma grub pa
nyid kyi skyon du 'gyur ro zhes zer ro ||*

*tha snyad du de'i gzhi bum pa dang mig la sogs pa skye mched rnams dang |
gzhan nyid khas blangs pa'i phyir ji skad smras pa'i skyon mi 'thad pas de ni rigs pa
ma yin no ||* (D no. 3853, 50a4–5)

[Opponents'] objection: Because [you] do not accept *ultimately* (*paramārbatah*) the outer and inner sense-fields, the subject (*dharmin*) [of your thesis] is not established. And because [its] locus is not established, there will be the fault that the meaning of your [reason] is not established.

Answer: We accept *conventionally* (*vyavahāratah*) the locus of that [reason], namely, the sense-fields such as jars, eyes, and so on, and the difference [of things]. Therefore, the above-stated fault is not possible, so this [criticism] is not tenable.

As opposed to Buddhapālita's approach, to accept something at the conventional level becomes Bhāviveka's shield to ward off opponents' criticism. It is the first time in the Madhyamaka tradition that conventional truth is accepted not expediently for pedagogical purposes but consistently on a certain level of reality. Such cases of acceptance appear dozens of times in the PP. Now we may resume the topic of the difference between the Madhyamaka exponents and the so-called nihilist, and see what Bhāviveka's answer is.

rang gi sde pa dang | gzhan gyi sde pa kha cig na re | dbu ma smra ba ni dngos po thams cad la skur ba 'debs pa'i phyir med pa pa dag dang khyad pa ni med do zhes zer ba de dag la kha cig gis | dngos po sel ba nyid du mtshungs su zin kyang | so so'i skye bo dang | dgra bcom pa so sor ma brtags pa dang | so sor brtags pa'i btang snyoms pa dag bzhin nam | dmsu long dang mig can gyi phyogs mi bde'o snyam du nges par sems pa dag mtshungs su zin kyang khyad par yod pa bzhin du med pa dang | dbu ma pa dag la yang khyad par yod do zhes lan 'debs par byed pas ni | pha rol pos dngos po'i de kho na nyid rtogs pa la khyad par med do zhes bstan pa la khyad par yod par ma brjod pas lan ma yin no ||

'di skad brjod na mi rigs te | med pa pa dag dang | dbu ma smra ba dag gang gi tshe mtshungs par rtog | tha snyad kyi dus su 'am | 'o na te de kho na la lta ba'i dus su de la re zbig tha snyad kyi dus su ni de dag rgyu dang 'bras bu la skur pa 'debs pa la mngon par zhen pas dge ba'i phyogs drungs phyung zhing mi dge ba'i las kyi lam thams cad la zhugs pa dang | tha snyad kyi bden pa nyid la gnod pa byed pa de ltar | dbu ma smra ba dag rgyu dang 'bras bu'i 'brel pa sgyu ma dang | smig rgyu lta bu dag la skur pa mi 'debs shing mi dge ba'i las kyi lam la ma zhugs pa dang | [...] tha snyad kyi bden pa nyid la gnod par mi byed pa'i phyir | tha snyad kyi dus su yang med pa pa dang | dbu ma smra ba dag mtshungs pa ma yin la | de kho na la lta ba'i dus su yang mtshungs pa ma yin te | [...] (D 188b1–6)

Some Buddhists and outsiders say that because the Madhyamaka exponents deny all things, they are not different from the nihilists. To them someone (= Buddhapālita) made an answer: although [both of them] equally reject things, the nihilists and the Mādhyamikas are different, just like an ordinary person who is equanimous without careful consideration and an arhat who is equanimous through careful consideration, or like a born-blind man and a man with sight are equally certain that a place is unsafe, yet they are different. Concerning the opponents' statement that there is no difference [between nihilists and Mādhyamikas] in [their] understandings of the reality of things, he (= Buddhapālita) did not say there is any difference. Therefore, [this] is not an answer.

The [opponents'] words are not tenable. [One should ask], in which circumstance are nihilists and Madhyamaka advocates considered identical, in the circumstance of conventional conception, or in the circumstance of seeing reality? If it is in the circumstance of conventional conception, because these [nihilists] cling to the denial of cause and effect, they root out the wholesome

part and enter the path of all unwholesome actions. Hence they harm the conventional truth (*vyavahārasatya*). Madhyamaka exponents do not deny the connection between causes and effects which is similar to illusion and mirage, and do not enter the path of unwholesome actions [...] hence they do not harm the conventional truth. Therefore, in the circumstance of conventional conception the nihilists and Madhyamaka exponents are not identical, and in the circumstance of seeing reality they are not identical either. [...]

We can see that after criticizing Buddhapālita's explanation, Bhāviveka gives his own answer from two perspectives, i.e., the conventional level and the ultimate level. Here I would not like to go further into the details of Bhāviveka's theory. It is quite clear that his commitment on the conventional level is no longer an expedient acceptance as former Madhyamaka exponents has made, which can be abandoned according to occasions, but a structural designation without which he cannot response the opponents' accusations and cannot maintain his middle position. Consequently, the two truths theory, which is only mentioned once in Nāgārjuna's MK and is intended to solve practical problems, evolves into an underpinning for the whole philosophical system.

Prasannapadā

It is well-known that in many cases Candrakīrti defends Buddhapālita and criticizes Bhāviveka's view. However, as far as the comparison of the middle position to the nihilist extreme is concerned, he adopts an argument similar to that of Bhāviveka and accepts existent things at the conventional level:

*tathāpi vastusvarūpeṇāvidyamānasyaiṅva te nāstitvaṃ pratipannā ity amunā
tāvad darśanena sāmyam astīti cet || na hi | kutaḥ | saṃvṛtyā mādhyaṃkair
astītenābhyupagamān na tulyatā ||* (PSP 368.13–15)

If opponents say: but, since these [Mādhyamikas] agree that a [thing] which is not found as real in itself does not exist, such a view is identical to that [nihilistic] view. The answer is no. Why? Because the Mādhyamikas accept [things] as existent at the conventional level, hence [the two views] are not identical.

Chinese Sources

In later times it became a common practice for the proponents of the Mahāyāna in India and China to establish the middle way on the two truths. The question is: Is Bhāviveka the first person to start this trend?

In Chinese sources, we find that this idea had already been present a century before Bhāviveka's time.

**Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*:

以世俗諦故有，第一義故破。以俗諦有故，不墮斷滅中，第一義破故，不墮常中。
(《大智度論》卷31《序品》，T 25, no. 1509, 288b5–6)

According to conventional truth, [things] exist; according to ultimate truth, [their existence] is to be denied. Because according to conventional truth [we accept things] exist, [we do not] fall into [the extreme] of annihilation. And because, according to the ultimate truth [we] deny [them], [we do not] fall into [the extreme] of eternity.

**Tattvasiddhi* by Harivarman:

若第一義諦故說無，世諦故說有，名捨二邊行於中道。(《成實論》卷10《身見品》，T 32, no. 1646, 316c10–11)

To assert nonexistence according to ultimate truth, and to assert existence according to conventional truth, is the abandonment of the two extremes and the adoption of the middle way.

Both of these two treatises were translated by Kumārajīva at the beginning of the fifth century, and both works are believed to have had some connections with schools of sectarian Buddhism.¹⁴ The idea of a middle way established on the two truths gained predominance later in Chinese Buddhism.

Conclusion

We may reasonably conjecture that in India, as early as the fourth century, the idea of justifying existence at the conventional level in the name of the middle

position might have served as a supplementary theory to the contention of emptiness in *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. I suspect that this trend started by those who had the background of sectarian scholasticism, and yet who embraced Mahāyāna doctrine. No trace of such a theory is found in the MK. Nāgārjuna defined the extreme of nonexistence as a view founded on the false presupposition of existence, i.e., a view committing that things previously exist and then perish. Hence he established his middle position free from both extremes simply through the negation against the presupposition of existence, rather than by any dichotomic arguments. The ABh aligned with this stance and explicated further that the middle way is established on *paramārtha*. Buddhapālita insisted on this stance even at the cost of giving up maintaining that there is any verbal difference between a *madhyamaka* and a nihilist position.

The practice of combining the middle position with the two truths theory had not been introduced into the Madhyamaka tradition until Bhāviveka of the sixth century, who admitted practical existence at the conventional level to secure a middle position. Such a practice was later adopted by Candrakīrti, although his theory of two truths differs from Bhāviveka. Eventually, the practice of establishing the middle position on two truths became the standard explanation of the middle position in the Madhyamaka tradition.

Notes

- * This paper is based on a presentation given at the International Workshop on Bhāviveka and Satyadvaya, May 28 and 29, 2016, Ryukoku University. An earlier draft of this paper was also presented at the East Asia Four Universities International Seminar on Buddhist Studies, April 21–23, 2016, at Peking University. I am grateful to Professor Shōryū Katsura who kindly gave me suggestions. Thanks are also due to Dr. Zhu Chengming and Mr. Diego Loukota for the help and advice in many aspects.
- 1 The Sanskrit term *madhyamaka* is usually translated either as “the middle way” or as “the middle position.” The former is more commonly represented by the Pāli term *majjhimā paṭipadā* and the Sanskrit term *madhyamā pratipad*, and refers to an idea that already appears in the *Kaccānagottasutta* (SN 12.15, for Sanskrit parallel in the *Nidānasamyukta* see Tripāthī 1962, 167–170; cf. also MK 15.7) and the *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta* (SN 56.11); the latter denotes more specifically the philosophical standpoint of the Buddhist school affiliated with Nāgārjuna (notice that *madhyamaka* does not appear in the verses of the MK). The common point between the two understandings is the avoidance of two extremes, through which the advocaters of the universal emptiness (*sūnyatā*) emphasize that their standpoint accords with the Buddha’s teaching. Furthermore, Akira Saitō (2012, 8–10) noticed that Bhāviveka uses the word **madhyamā pratipad* in the *Prajñāpradīpa* to provide an etymological explanation of *madhyamka*, and Avalokitavratā even names themselves **mahāyāna-madhyamā-pratipad-vādin* in his *Prajñāpradīpikā*.
 - 2 For typical examples, see Hirakawa (1979, 46): “この世俗諦と第一義諦の調和が中道 (*madhyamā pratipad*) である。” Seyfort Rugg (1981, 46): “The twin principles of *pratīyasamutpāda* and *sūnyatā* thus found a philosophical Middle Way that eschews both the extremes of annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*) and eternalism (*śāśvatavāda*). The Madhyamaka takes account of ‘phenomena’—the manifoldness of *dharmas* on the *samvṛti* level—and reality—the *paramārtha*—while refraining from presenting them as opposed factors.” Cf. also, Murti (1960, 250f.); Williams (2009, 77).
 - 3 The translations from Sanskrit and Tibetan are mine throughout, and I shall freely avail myself of the previous translations, such as Siderits and Katsura (2013); Kalupahana (1986); Saitō (1984), etc.
 - 4 Cf. e.g., PvsP II–III 98.3; V 54.14, 120.12, 126.29, 138.24, 158.10; VI–VII 72.8.
 - 5 Cf. e.g. PvsP V 126.29–31: *na khalu Subhūte asaṃskṛtaṃ bhāvayati api tu lokavyavahāraṃ pramāṇīkṛtyocyate na punaḥ paramārthena śakyā prabhāvanā. tat kasya hetoh? na hi tatrāsti vākpathaprajñāptir.*
 - 6 The second line of Verse 28 in the VV deals with the similar topic: *saṃvyavahāraṃ ca vayaṃ nānabhyupagamyā kathayāmaḥ |* “We do not speak, however, without assenting to the conventional conception.” The auto(?)-commentary reads *api ca na vayaṃ vyavahārasatyam anabhyupagamyā vyavahārasatyam pratyākhyāya kathayāmaḥ sūnyāḥ sarvabhāvā iti | na hi vyavahārasatyam anāgamyā śakyā dharmadeśanā kartum |*

“However, it is not without assenting to the conventional truth, it is not by rejecting the conventional truth, that we say ‘all things are empty.’ For it is not possible to teach the Dharma without having recourse the conventional conception.” The word *abhyupagamyā* in the verse and the word *na pratyākhyāya* in the commentary seem, at first glance, to suggest a reading “assenting or unvoiling ([the content of] the conventional truth).” Yet, this is not necessarily the case. Since *abhyupagamyā* can mean “agreeing ([the designation of] the conventional truth),” and *na pratyākhyāya* can simply mean “not rejecting ([the expression of] the conventional truth).” The following sentence “for it is not possible to teach the Dharma without having recourse to the conventional conception” clearly shows that it is the mechanism of worldly convention that is to be relied on, for the teaching of Dharma need not always rely on the acceptance of the content of the conventional truth, but always need the medium of language.

7 The explanation of the other three Indic commentaries of the MK:

Buddhapālita: *de'i phyir gang gi tshé jig rten gyi tha snyad bya ba de'i tshé na gang jig rten la yang dag pa nyid du grags pa | de bcom ldan 'das kyis kyang yang dag pa nyid do || zhes gsungs so || gang jig rten la yang dag pa nyid ma yin par grags pa de bcom ldan 'das kyis kyang yang dag pa ma yin no || zhes gsungs so || [...]* (D no. 3842, 245a5; Saitō 1984, 258.10) *de lta bas na sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das rnam kyis jig rten gyi tha snyad kyi dbang gis kyang de dang de dag gsungs pas | de'i phyir de kho na mthong bar 'dod pa rnam kyis jig rten gyi tha snyad kyi dbang gis gsungs pa dag la mngon par ma zhen par bya ste | de kho na gang yin pa de nyid gzung bar bya'o ||* (D 244b1–245a6; Saitō 1984, 256.14–258.14)

Therefore, when it is an action of worldly convention, what is acknowledged to be real in the world is also affirmed by the blessed ones as real. What is acknowledged to be unreal in the world is also affirmed by the blessed ones as unreal. [...] Therefore, even though buddhas, the blessed ones, have said this or that by virtue of worldly convention, those who want to see the reality should not cling to the statements by virtue of worldly convention, and should grasp that which is reality.

Prajñāpradīpa: bstan pa zhes bya ba ni lha dang | mi'i mtho ris dang | byang grol gyi bde ba 'dod pa rnam la | dbang po dang | bsam pa dang | bag la nyal dang | dus kyi dbang gis mtho ris dang | byang grol gyi lam phyin ci ma log par rjes su bstan pa'o || (D no. 3853, 189b5–6)

The “teaching” means, to those who desire the pleasure of heaven and salvation belonging to the celestial beings and human beings [respectively], according to [their] faculties, dispositions, dormant afflictions and the occasions, [buddhas] teach the path to heaven and salvation accordingly without error.

Prasannapadā: etac ca buddhānām bhagavatām anuśānaṃ | [...] evam anupūrvyā sāsanam anuśānaṃ | vineyajanānurūpyeṇa vā sāsanam anuśānaṃ | (PSP 371, 1.13–14).

This is the accordant teaching of buddhas, the blessed ones. [...] Thus the teaching according to the grade is the accordant teaching, or the teaching corresponding with the people to be instructed is the accordant teaching.

- 8 These two terms are explained respectively in early Buddhism, see the *Pratītyasūtra* in the *Samyuktāgama* of the Sarvāstivādin tradition (Tripāṭhī 1962, 147–149) and the *Paccayasutta* in the Pāli tradition (SN 12.20). For an overview of this topic in Abhidharma and Yogācāra traditions see Huimin (2000).
- 9 Chapter 26 of the MK elaborates the successive origination and cessation of the twelve causal factors without elucidating how they are connected with the doctrine of emptiness. For modern scholars, the authenticity of this chapter is not beyond doubt. It also puzzled ancient commentators, e.g., the *Akūtoḥbhayā* views this chapter as dealing with entering of the supreme truth according to Śrāvaka's doctrine (*nyan thos kyi gzibung lugs kyis don dam pa la 'jug pa*, D no. 3829, 94b3). Due to its vagueness I prefer to lay aside this chapter and do not consider it as evidence in support of Nāgārjuna's affirmation of dependently originated things. For Nāgārjuna's rejection of the twelve causal factors see MK 3.7, 16.3; YŚ 10.
- 10 *prabhavati ca śūnyateyaṃ yasya prabhavanti tasya sarvārthāḥ | prabhavati na tasya kiṃcin na prabhavati śūnyatā yasya ||* (VV 70)
- 11 E.g., J. Westerhoff's (2010, 41) translation of VV 70: "For whom there is emptiness, there are all things. For whom there is no emptiness, there is nothing whatsoever."
- 12 For a similar view prior to Nāgārjuna see KP §52–62, esp. §56–60, where two truths are not mentioned either.
- 13 A Chinese parallel is found in *Zhonglun* 中論 translated by Kumārajīva (T 30, no. 1564, 32b).
- 14 For the **Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* (*Dazhidu lun* 大智度論), I follow Étienne Lamotte's (1970, xl–xli) suggestion that it is most likely written by an Abhidharma master from north-western India who had a Sarvāstivāda background yet embraced Mahāyāna doctrine, but not by Nāgārjuna as ascribed.

Abbreviations

- ABh *Akutobhayā*
D Derge (sDe dge) blockprint edition of the Tibetan Tripiṭaka
KP *Kāśyapa-parivarta*, ed. von Staël-Holstein (1926); Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya (2002)
MK *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, ed. Ye (2011)
P Peking blockprint edition of the Tibetan Tripiṭaka
PP *Prajñā-pradīpa*
PSP *Prasanna-padā*, ed. La Vallée Poussin (1903–1913)
PvsP *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, ed. Kimura (1986–2009)
SN *Samyutta-Nikāya*, ed. L. Feer, 5 Vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1884–1898.
ŚS *Śūnyatā-saptati*, ed. Lindtner (1982, 31–66)
T *Taishō shinsbū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經
VV *Vīgraha-vyāvartanī*, ed. Johnston and Kunst (1948–1951)
YŞ *Yukti-ṣaṣṭikā-kārikā*, ed. Li and Ye (2014)

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