



## FUNDAMENTALS OF NAGARJUNA'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

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### **Abstract:**

Buddhist tradition of logic and epistemology started with Dinnaga approximately one thousand years after the mahaparinirvana of the Sakyamuni Buddha. Though the topics of this tradition were traced back to the earliest teachings of the Buddha in Nikaya literature and some philosophical works of many famous Buddhist thinkers like Nagarjuna, Asanga, Vasubandhu, it was Dinnaga who officially founded this logico-epistemological system. We must recognize that the contribution of Buddhism to profound system of logic and epistemology of Indian philosophy began with Dinnaga. Dinnaga was the first Buddhist thinker who set up and systematized the Buddhist theory of knowledge which has been definitely the foundation of later Buddhist development of epistemology carried out by Dharmakirti, Dharmottara, Santaraksita, Kamalasila, Jnanasrimitra and Ratnakirti. It is true that Dinnaga keeps an important position in both Buddhist and Indian history of epistemology. He is said to have inaugurated new era in the history of logic and epistemology insofar. By treating the theory of the means of knowledge as a subject by itself, he departed from the usual observation of the previous Hindu schools which used to deal with both the means of knowledge and the objects of knowledge together. It is necessary that there should be many attempts on the study of Dinnaga's philosophy so that his role in Buddhist logico-epistemological system is certified. This study is one of them.

**Key Words:** Buddhism, Nikaya, Madhyamika, Logics, Epistemology, Theory & Philosophers

### **1. Introduction:**

Knowledge is not only what we learn from school or from experience of daily life, but it is also manifested in various versions depending upon other allied issues relating to man, society, and nature. The source of knowledge includes also different forms like customs, traditions, beliefs etc. The variety of knowledge and its sources indicate a fact that from ancient time men were aware of loving of knowledge. It is this love of knowledge that led to the appearance of philosophy which means "love for wisdom". Philosophy consists of many branches. Epistemology is one of them. Epistemology, from the Greek episteme, 'knowledge' and logos, 'theory', is a branch of philosophy dealing with all aspects of knowledge.

In Indian tradition of epistemology, the analysis of knowledge has been the main feature of many famous systems of thought like Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Purva-Mimamsa, Jain, Buddhism and Vedanta. Different kinds of means of knowledge (pramanas) which have been discussed by these traditions are: (i) direct knowledge or perception (pratyaksa), (ii) inference (anumana), (iii) knowledge by similarity (upamana), (iv) verbal testimony (sabda), including scriptural testimony (sastra or agama), (v) presumption (arthapatti), (vi) implication (sambhava), (vii) non-existence (abhava), and (viii) tradition (aitihya). The number of these means of knowledge accepted by each tradition, however, is different. The signs of epistemology are traceable as early as some of the hymns of the Rgveda. Many of philosophical schools then introduced and develop own analysis of epistemology.

Two pioneering works on Theravada's epistemology are Jayatilleke's Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge and Khemananda's Logic and Epistemology in Theravada. Epistemology is then discussed in detail by many authors of Vaibhasika, Sautrantika, Madhyamika and Yogacara. In this chapter epistemology of Vaibhasika and Sautrantika is discussed on the base of main doctrines of these schools. The discussions of Madhyamika's epistemology are based on Nagarjuna's works like Mulamadhyamakakarika, Vighrahavyavartani and Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra while Yogacara's epistemology is discussed through Dasabhumika-sutra, Lankavatata- sutra and other works of Maitreya-natha, Asanga, Vasubandhu, and Dharmapala.

### **2. Nagarjuna and Epistemology of Madhyamika:**

Madhyamika or the Middle Doctrine, which existed in Indian from the first to the eleventh century A.D is one of two Indian Mahayana schools. The name of this school is derived from the word madhyamapratipad (the Middle Path), a doctrine originally expounded by the Sakyamuni Buddha, the Madhyamika doctrine, developed by Nagarjuna (c. AD 150-250?) on the basis of the Prajnaparamitasutras, can be seen in his foundational Mulamadhyamakakarika (MK), the fundamental treatise of this school.

### **3. The Main themes of Madhyamika's Philosophy:**

According to the Madhyamika both mind (internal consciousness) and matter (external existences) are not reality, but just appearances or illusions because all things are the results of causes and conditions. The reality as explained by this school is neither existence nor non-existence, nor the combination nor the negation

of both. 1 The primary concern of the Madhyamika followers is how to understand emptiness (sunyata) as the middle between eternalism and annihilationism. 2 This understanding should be based on the idea of dependent origination (pratiyasamutpada) as the middle between those who cling to the eternal existence of unchanging self and those who cling to annihilation at death. In this sense Nagarjuna shows the similarity between emptiness and dependent origination.<sup>3</sup>

#### **4. Madhyamika's Theory of Two Truths:**

It is true that the above profound themes are not easy to be accepted by those who have not been trained in this tradition. Therefore the Madhyamika introduces two kinds of truth, conventional (samvrti-satya) and ultimate (paramartha-satya), so that the ordinary people can choose their own way of living, useful and meaningful. Samvrti-satya is the relative or conventional truth constituted by our conventions and practices, including our linguistic and cognitive experiences. Paramartha-satya is the ultimate or transcendental truth of the absolute reality. It is also the emptiness of all phenomena. These two kinds of truth epistemologically are two kinds of objects of knowledge. All common activities of the ordinary people as well as other social faces like science, philosophy, literature, culture and so on belong to the conventional truth. The ontology of this truth is determined by human languages and experiences. Ultimate truth, on the other hand, is independent of conventional world. Its domain is therefore the class of entities or phenomena independent of convention, thought and language. It is true that emptiness is its domain. 1 These two truths are characterized by emptiness (sunyata) in different ways: the conventional is svabhava suntra (devoid of intrinsic existence), and the transcendental is prapanca sunya. By prapanca Nagarjuna means display of thought and language.<sup>2</sup>

#### **5. Madhyamika's View of Conventional Knowledge:**

The distinction between two truths and their related aspects has been discussed by Nagarjuna in the twenty-fourth chapter of MK. According to him it was the Buddha who once taught the doctrine of two truths (24. 8).<sup>3</sup> In the chapter IX of the Bodhicaryavatara Santideva explains that the ultimate truth is not within the reach of intellect (thought) because intellect is grounded in the relative. Of the two truths the conventional is known to be illusory because the cognitions pertaining to it are relative and contradictory. The means of knowledge relating to this truth are also regarded as illusory. In his commentary of MK Candrakirti suggests three possible explanations on the term conventional (samvrti) as follow: (a) complete covering or the 'screen' of ignorance which hides truth, (b) existence through dependence or mutual dependence only, and (c) worldly behaviour or speech behaviour involving designation and cognition. These explanations explore the nature and characteristics of what we call conventional world. In certifying that all worldly things are unreal, Nagarjuna also state that the knowledge pertaining to this world is unreal. In the chapter III of MK he explains that the knowledge of seeing is the result of three elements, viz. the seer, visual organ and visual object. He gives a simile that just as the existence of a son can be supposed only on the assumption that there are parents, so the existence of knowledge can only be admitted on the assumption that there are the object seen and the act of seeing. This knowledge actually does not exist because the other three elements are illusory.<sup>1</sup> The nature of the visual consciousness can be applied to the other five sensory consciousnesses too.<sup>2</sup> These above explanations aim at concluding that in the realm of relative truth all sensual organs, their functions. Their objects cannot be perceived directly, but they are inferred from the existence of their product, viz. knowledge.

Reality and causation or dependent originations are other main themes discussed in the MK. The later of course is rather emphasized in both of them. In the fifth chapter after refusing the existence of existence (bhava), non-existence (abhava), characteristics (laksana) and that which is characterized (laksyam), the author came to a conclusion that the ignorant persons, who perceive being and non-being, cannot perceive the appeasement of the object, the auspicious.<sup>3</sup> One of the main purposes of the MK is to present the illusory nature of the phenomenal world and that the absolute reality is beyond comprehension and description. J. Prasad is right when he refuses the opinions that Nagarjuna's philosophy stated in MK is the doctrine of nihilism or relativity and he also regards that this is the doctrine of absolute existence.<sup>4</sup> This statement is true because while attempting to show the unreal nature of the phenomenal existences MK emphasize that the ultimate reality can be comprehended by those who are free from illusory view of the world. This treatise tries to distinguish between the wrong and right way of cognition so that the readers detach from what they are wrongly clinging to.

#### **6. Madhyamika's View of Wisdom of Liberation:**

Besides the explanations regarding to the knowledge of the conventional world MK also deals with the knowledge leading to freedom. Nagarjuna said that the ignorant people are born in the cycle of birth and death because they create unwholesome actions while the wise men (vidvan) are free from suffering because they follow the perception of the nature of truth (MK. 26.10). The common people are often dominated by likes and dislikes and on the basis of which they fall into the extreme views, whether eternalism or annihilationism. In order to follow the middle path they have to avoid these extremes and appease their dispositions. Those who have achieved the state of the appeasement of dispositions and have abandoned all forms of dogmatism with regard to views are said to have attained enlightenment and freedom.<sup>1</sup> Nagarjuna insists that when one perceives through wisdom the arising and ceasing of phenomena, one abandons the two metaphysical explanations of that experience. Here the emphasized matter is not the perception of a non-arising and non-ceasing ultimate truth,

but rather the non-perception of a metaphysical entity that is non-arising and non-ceasing.<sup>2</sup> Thus sense perception, according to Nagarjuna, serves as the foundation of human knowledge and emptiness or wisdom of detachment is the foundation of liberating knowledge. The relationship between common knowledge and liberating wisdom is stated in the MK that the one cannot comprehend ultimate truth without relying upon conventional truth and freedom cannot be attained without comprehending the ultimate truth (MK. 24.10).

#### **7. Theory of Knowledge in the Mahaprajnaparamita-Sastra:**

The Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra, a commentary on the Pancavimsatisahasrika Prajnaparamita-sutra attributed to Nagarjuna, refers to different kinds of classification of knowledge. The volume 43 distinguishes three kinds of knowledge, namely, the skilful knowledge of mundane things, the knowledge leading one to freedom of birth and the trans-mundane knowledge. Of these the last one is the knowledge of Sravakas and the Pratyeka-Buddhas whose defilements have been eliminated. However the highest knowledge which is superior to all of these is the prajnaparamita. This knowledge is completely pure and free from clinging. <sup>3</sup> It is the knowledge of the ultimate nature of all things that completely destroys ignorance put an end to passion and turns the attention of people to the highest source of peace and joy. On the other hand, knowledge is classified as the eternal and the functional. The former is the ultimate reality contrasted with the world of relativity and change, and the latter is the function of the mind or the self-conscious intellect contrasted with ignorance. <sup>1</sup> The functional knowledge is really the act of knowing which is considered to consist of three characteristics of (1) analysis, (2) criticism and (3) comprehension. <sup>2</sup>

#### **8. The Concept of Pramana in the Vigrahavyavartani:**

Pramana or the means of knowledge is the prominent point that Nagarjuna raises in his another work, the Vigrahavyavartani. In this work he devoted twenty verses to refute Nyaya concept of pramana and gave different dialectical arguments against the claim for valid knowledge of the cognitivists. <sup>3</sup> Most of us believe that in order to have a cognition we need to have means of knowing. A means is not a means unless it does something and hence we have to know that it is there so that we can use it effectively. Regarding to this matter Nagarjuna raises the question: how, or through what means, do we know that they are there? <sup>4</sup> To this argument the pramana theorist seems to concede that the means of knowing can be turned into the object of knowing. If a means needs another means to be known, then we may regress into infinity and our search for the final means may never come to an end. This is why Nagarjuna continues to state: 'If the proof of the pramanas were by means of other pramanas, then there would be no proof of the first, nor of the middle, nor of the last.'<sup>5</sup> Here his argument aims to pointing out that what we call the means of knowing or pramana is unreal. In the verse no. 51 of the same work Nagarjuna says that there is no ultimately reliable criteria for our daily cognition though that cognition is based on sensation (pratyaksa) reasoning (anumana), analogy (upamana), scriptural tradition (agama), or the combination of these four factors. <sup>6</sup> Because of this reason, all opinions are to be abandoned by the process of subjecting them to close scrutiny and discerning their ultimate emptiness.

#### **9. Conclusion:**

By discussing various aspects of Dinnaga's system of epistemology we can realize the position as well as the contribution of Dinnaga to the history of Buddhist philosophy in India. Both of his theory of pramanas (the means of knowledge) and language are highly influential for subsequent Buddhist thinkers. It should be noted that Dinnaga's logico-epistemological system is not a way for mere discussion, but it serves for the purpose of eliminating of human anxieties relating to the nature of life as well as wrong cognitions that the common people involve in their daily lives.

#### **10. References:**

1. D. Chatterji, op. cit., p.212.
2. P. William; op. cit., p. 140.
3. D. J. Kalupahana, Mulamadhyamakakarika of Nagarjuna, pp. 339-340.
4. J. Prasad, op.cit., p. 62.
5. Ibid., p.50.
6. R.P. Hayes, Dignaga on the Interpretation of Signs, p. 61.