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# A Study of the Mādhyamika Method of Refutation, Especially of its Affinity to that of *Kathāvatthu*

by Shohei Ichimura

– I –

It was a quarter of a century ago that Prof. T.R.V. Murti published his work on the Mādhyamika philosophy,<sup>1</sup> which has made one essential point of Mādhyamika negation thoroughly known to post-war scholarship, i.e., that Mādhyamika philosophy is a critique of all philosophical theses, and that this critique does not imply any thesis of its own but exclusively reveals an inherent self-contradiction in any and every philosophical thesis. This method has been called *reductio-ad-absurdum* argument after the fashion Stcherbatsky used. My use of the term *Mādhyamika Dialectic* is also in this particular sense.

Although Mādhyamika dialectic is an age-old subject and has also been treated in modern scholarship frequently, I found that little attention has been given to the fact that there is an intrinsic affinity between the Mādhyamika and the pre-classical Abhidharmist methods of refutation. I am especially referring to the method which is recorded in the *Kathāvatthu* or the *Points of Controversy*.<sup>2</sup> To demonstrate this affinity is my primary objective in this paper. In order to accomplish this demonstration, first, I will try to show why the pre-classical Buddhist debaters knew the two basic rules of Syllogistic Inference, namely *anvaya* and *vyatireka*, which I may translate as 'positive and contrapositive instantiations.' They applied these rules in order to defend their own thesis in terms of logicity, while refuting the other's in terms of illogicity. Secondly, I shall make some point of affinity clear as to the Mādhyamika method in parallel to that of the *Kathāvatthu*.

In the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, and especially in his self-commentary, Nāgārjuna frequently equates the term *niḥsvabhava*, or absence of own-being with that of *śūnyatā*, or emptiness.<sup>3</sup> He states, for instance, that 'light' and 'darkness' do not possess their own-being. They have no self-identifying essence, because they are co-relative, mutually interdependent, and hence, unable to come into existence by themselves. Traditionally, this absence of own-being, as equated by Nāgārjuna with the concept of *śūnyatā*, has been regarded as one of the hardest subjects for rational and intellectual understanding, because the method of its exposition was and has been exclusively dialectical. In common sense thinking, we regard both the faculty of cognition (*pramāṇa*) and its object (*prameya*) as two different things, and yet we take their coalescence for granted for the fact of cognition. This is comparable to the fact of illumination in which both a candle light and its object of illumination somehow partake. As the major objective of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Nāgārjuna applies his dialectic to this particular context. I found an intrinsic affinity between his dialectical method as applied in this text and that of the *Kathāvatthu*.

We know that our language works not only as an instrument for expressing inner thoughts, but also as an instrument for their communication. Because of this, we accept that each and every word or sentence has its 'own-being,' or its self-identifying principle. For, such own-being constitutes not only the essence of a conception that each expression signifies, but also of an external existent it refers to. Accordingly, the above two terms, i.e., light and darkness, are regarded as differentiating their respective meanings in our consciousness as well as their respective objects extraneous to us as referents. Nevertheless, Nāgārjuna and his Mādhyamika followers state that our very insistence upon the nature and function of our language convention *ipso facto* commits us to the truth of the reciprocal dependence of any two related terms and sentences, and that we are in fact subscribing ourselves to the truth of absence of own-being.<sup>4</sup> The question is: How and why can the Mādhyamika dialectic be said to be the only method that is capable of revealing the fact of universal reciprocity (*parasparāpekṣatā*) and absence of own-being (*niḥ-svabhāvata*)? I believe that the aspect of universal interdependence can be disclosed by logically analysing the Mādhyamika method of refutation.

In Indian Syllogistic Inference, when two predications are related causally or tautologically, they constitute a necessary relation which Buddhist and Hindu logicians called *vyāpti*. Logically, this relation or *pervasion* of one predication by another consists of the preceding predication of Reason (*hetu*) and of the subsequent one as Thesis or Conclusion (*sādhya*). As briefly referred to, Dignāga (a Buddhist logician of the 5th century) introduced three conditions for the validity of any given *vyāpti* and theorized the dual rules of positive and contrapositive instantiations. In order to explain these rules, let me take one of the stock examples of the classical logicians, namely an inference of the existence of fire from the existence of smoke. In order for a person to let others know a breakout of a fire on a distant mountain, what he must do is to remind the listener of the commonly-known concomitance between smoke and fire by pointing at the rising smoke. On the part of the listener, upon perceiving a particular smoke rising from the slope of the mountain, his mind regulates itself into recalling a causal association of smoke and fire. *It is this logical process of the mind itself that actually consists of the dual instantiations positive and contrapositive.* I shall explain this point briefly.

In order than an inference be correct, two logically related predications (*hetu* and *sādhya*) must be verified by the substratum intended to be known. In our example the substratum, such as a mountain, must be able to bear smoke as well as fire simultaneously, because, otherwise, it may happen that the mountain may bear smoke but not fire, and *vice versa*. If this is the case with the substratum in question, it is obvious that no valid inference becomes possible. The speaker, therefore, is obliged to demonstrate whether the substratum (a mountain) is a member of the class whose members are invariably able to bear smoke and fire. This is called positive instantiation, or *anvaya*. The same speaker, however, is also obliged to give contrapositive instantiation as to whether the substratum in question is clearly outside the scope of the contrapositive class, because the latter members are neither capable of bearing fire nor smoke. This is contrapositive instantiation, or *vyatireka*, for which the speaker presents an instance, such as a lake or a water-dam, etc., where neither of the two predications can be applied. In short, by means of dual processes of instantiations, the speaker can confirm the demarcation between positive and contrapositive classes (*sapakṣa* and *vipakṣa* resp.) and thereby determine the particular substratum as a member of the positive one.<sup>5</sup>

As to the question of why appeal has to be made not only to positive instantiation but also to the contrapositive one, I believe it will become self-evident in my subsequent demonstration. Here it suffices to say that positive instantiation alone cannot fully differentiate those class members which are either “capable of bearing smoke but not fire,” or “capable of bearing fire but not smoke.” Suppose when, knowing all this, someone encounters an opponent in the arena of debate. How should he conduct his argument? He has to explore every possible error in his opponent’s logic. Sometimes, he may even try to deliberately induce logical errors in his opponent. Nevertheless, he is obliged to abide in accordance with the basic rules of logic, such as dual instantiations. I believe that the debators of the *Kathāvatthu* applied such method and in following their step Nāgārjuna innovated his Mādhyamika method of refutation.

– IV –

There is clear evidence for the fact that the pre-classical Buddhist debators were fully aware of the dual rules of logical instantiation, and applied these as a method of refutation. The procedure of argument in the text is so repetitive in form that I shall have to take up only the initial refutation. The controversy here is concerned with the status of *pudgala*. The orthodox Theravādin who rejects the reality of *pudgala* faces the challenge by the Pudgalavādin in the arena of debate. Formally, the refutation consists of five consecutive sessions. First, the Theravādin presents (1) *Refutation* against the Pudgalavādin, which is followed by the latter’s (2) *Rejoinder*, (3) *Refutation*, (4) *Application*, and (5) *Conclusion*.<sup>6</sup> Their arguments invariably include the dual demonstrations being applied positively and contrapositively.

*No. 1*

Two related predications *cum* substratum

- “P”: (*Pudgala*) “is known in the sense of a genuinely real thing”  
 (*puggalo upalabbhati saccikaṭṭhaparamatthenāti*)  
 “Q”: (*Pudgala*) “is known in the same way a genuinely real thing is known” (*yo saccikaṭṭho paramatṭho tato so puggalo upalabbhati saccikaṭṭhaparamatthenāti*)

The two predications, which I quoted from Mrs. Rhys Davids' translation, can be transcribed as "P" and "Q" respectively. A notation "P" is given to the predication: A *pudgala* "is known in the sense of a genuinely real thing," and another notation "Q" to: A *pudgala* "is known in the same way a genuinely real thing is known."

No. 2

Positive (*anvaya*) and Contrapositive (*vyatireka*) Instantiations:

Theravādin: "P and Q" is assumed to be verified by substratum (*sapakṣa*) such as *dharmas*, while "-Q and -P" is to be falsified by substratum (*vipakṣa*) such as *pudgalas*.

Pudgalavādin: "Q and P" is assumed to be verified by substratum, such as *pudgalas* as well as *dharmas*, while "-P and -Q" is to be verified by all those remaining.

In No. 2, I specify two mutually contrary concomitances as well as their respective contrapositions, which the Theravādin and the Pudgalavādin apply throughout their demonstration. It is also intended to show the workings of positive and contrapositive instantiations which respectively determine the positive and contrapositive classes (*sapakṣa* and *vipakṣa*). For the Theravādin, *dharmas* alone are real, and hence, they constitute the positive class. Accordingly, the position "P and Q" and its contraposition "-Q and -P" should respectively serve as criteria to distinguish *whatever is real like a dharma (sapakṣa)* and *whatever is unreal like an empirical person (vipakṣa)*. For the Pudgalavādin, however, applying the same concomitance as that of the Theravādin is obviously disadvantageous. Therefore, he introduces an exactly contrary concomitance to refute the Theravādin, namely, "Q and P" and its contraposition, "-P and -Q". But the Theravādin logical strategy, and especially the Pudgalavādin's, cannot be understood fully without help from the Western form of logical implication, which I prepare in No. 3.

No. 3

Hypothetical Syllogism based upon "P then Q" and "Q then P":

If "P then Q," and "P," therefore "Q." (*modus ponendo ponens*)

If "P then Q," and "-Q," therefore "-P." (*modus ponendo tollens*)

If "Q then P," and "Q," therefore "P."

If "Q then P," and "-P," therefore "-Q."

The one obvious reason for the usefulness of western forms is evident in the chart given in No. 4, i.e., *the antecedent statement always binds to the consequent, and this conditional implication can best be expressed in the hypothetical syllogism of the West.*

No. 4

Five Refutational Sessions between Theravādin and Pudgalavādin:

I	II
<i>Theravādin Refutation</i>	<i>Pudgalavādin Rejoinder</i>
Pudgalavādin thesis "P.-Q" is false, because $P \supset Q$ ;	Theravādin thesis "-P.Q" is false, because $-P \supset -Q$ ;
"P.-Q" is false, because $-Q \supset -P$ ;	"-P.Q" is false, because $Q \supset P$ ;
Therefore, Pudgalavādin thesis "P.-Q" is false.	Therefore, Theravādin thesis "-P.Q" is false.
III	IV
<i>Pudgalavādin Refutation</i>	<i>Pudgalavādin Application</i>
Theravādin thesis "-P.Q" can be refuted, because $-P \supset -Q$ ;	Our thesis "P.-Q" is not falsified, and
"-P.Q" can be refuted, because $Q \supset P$ ;	Your refutation "-(P.-Q)" is not acceptable, because $P \supset Q$ , and $-Q \supset P$
Therefore, Theravādin thesis "-P.Q" can be refuted.	Therefore, your refutation "-(P.-Q)" is not acceptable.
V	
<i>Pudgalavādin Conclusion</i>	
Our thesis "P.-Q" is not refuted, because "P.Q" is not compelled;	
Your refutation "-(P.-Q)" is not convincing, because "-Q.-P" is not compelled;	
Because "P.Q" and "-Q.-P" are not compelled, our thesis "P.-Q" is not refuted.	

No. 4 shows my transcription of the five consecutive sessions of arguments.<sup>6</sup> I consistently replace the form of Indian logical concomitance with that of Western logical implication. As a result, the chart shows not only the dynamism of the sessions but also the logical context in which

indeterminacy ensued. There seem to be two basic reasons for the indeterminacy of the controversy: (1) both parties violated the logical boundary of positive and contrapositive classes, and (2) this in turn allowed the Pudgalavādin to apply the contrary implication.

First, for the Theravādin, both predications “P” and “Q” should be verified by the substratum of *dharmas*, i.e., a *dharma* “is known in the sense of a genuinely real thing” (=“P”), and “is known in the same way a genuinely real thing is known” (=“Q”). Therefore, he uses this implication as a criterion to defend the reality of *dharmas* and to refute the Pudgalavādin heresy that *pudgalas* are also real. But he faces a problem here, because, he cannot reject “Q” about *pudgalas* though no problem to do so with “P.” This means that the Theravādin violated the logical boundary of *sapakṣa* and *vipakṣa* in applying “Q” not only to *dharmas* but also to *pudgalas*.

This logical ambivalence is in fact derived from doctrinal reasons. The repudiation of an empirical person (*pudgala*) constitutes the core of Buddhist doctrine. The Theravādin is obliged to assert “Q” because the unreality of *pudgalas* is knowable only through the way the reality of psycho-physical elements (*dharmas*) is known. To further complicate the matter, the Pudgalavādin also shows a similar logical ambivalence due to similar doctrinal reasons. He asserts “P” about *pudgalas* but fails to assert “Q,” because if he does so, he is *ipso facto* completely identifying *pudgala* with *dharma*, which is heresy for the Pudgalavādin as well. Logically, he also violates the boundary between the classes of *dharmas* and *pudgalas* in applying “P” to them equally.

Second, the strike of ingenuity on the part of the Pudgalavādin is the use of contrary implication as a weapon to demonstrate the logical vulnerability of his opponent. This possibility must have been intuited from the fact that the two contestants stood in an exact contrariety, i.e., “-P.Q” by the Theravādin and “P.-Q” by the Pudgalavādin. Their forces of argument, as shown in the chart, come to an equal balance. The Theravādin argues: If you Pudgalavādin assert the reality of *pudgala* “P,” you are also obliged to assert its knowability in the same way as *dharmas* are known “Q.” But you do not, i.e., “-Q.” If you do not assert “Q,” you are also obliged logically not to assert “P,” i.e., “-Q ⊃ -P.” But you assert “P.” Therefore, your claim “P.-Q” is false. Now, the Pudgalavādin replies: If you Theravādin assert the knowability of *pudgala* in the same way *dharmas* are known “Q,” you should also assert its reality “P.” But you do not, i.e., “-P.” Since you do not assert “P,” you are also obliged logically not to assert “Q,” i.e., “-P ⊃ -Q.” But you assert “Q.” Therefore, your claim “-P.Q” is false.

My finding about the Mādhyamika method as parallel to that of the *Kathāvatthu* is rather a simple one, namely that it seeks to create a disconnection between conceptual terms, predications, or propositions in the forms of "P.-Q" and "-P.Q." If one speaks of a motion, for instance, we can match his statement with another about its agent as regards to their relationship.<sup>7</sup> In the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Nāgārjuna creates this particular context by the metaphor of 'light' and 'darkness.' He reminds us that our cognition always involves cognizer and cognized just as the fact of illumination. He assigns predications to the illumining and the illumined respectively as "is capable of illumining" ("P") and "is capable of darkening" ("Q"). By applying both predications to 'light' and 'darkness,' he obtains the formulas of "P.-Q" and "-P.Q." He argues: Wherever there is a light illumining, there should be no darkness ("P.-Q") and *vice versa* ("-P.Q"), which means that the two never can meet.<sup>8</sup> The state of affairs is precisely parallel to that of the *Kathāvatthu* controversy.

How did Nāgārjuna try to solve this logical absurdity? As I understand, he generally takes two approaches. First, in accordance with convention, which assumes both 'light' and 'darkness' for the fact of illumination, he points out that the only way to make this positive concomitance "P.Q" possible is to repudiate the concept of own-being (self-identifying principle) from these entities, so as to accept light and darkness in terms of their reciprocal exchangeability. Second, in accordance to trans-convention, he repudiates both "P.-Q" and "-P.Q," which he must have justified in reference to two contrary implications " $P \supset Q$ " and " $Q \supset P$ " in parallel to the *Kathāvatthu* controversy. Here may I point out the fact that " $P \supset Q$ " and " $Q \supset P$ " together express logical reciprocity.

In concluding my paper, I am obliged to state two points: (1) As evident in my demonstration, the logical concomitance of two predications differentiated four different classes of variables. I believe that the Buddhist fourfold logical category such as *catuṣkoṭi* has its relevant basis in this logic of concomitance. (2) Our conceptual and logical treatment of religious insight in general has its own limitation. To deal with the statements that refer to the dialectical dimension which bridges the empirical and the trans-empirical in terms of logical rules is itself to beg further question. In this sense, I cannot go along with the idea to identify religious truth with the logical formula of reciprocity such as " $P \supset Q, Q \supset P$ ." Nevertheless, I am convinced that this kind of analysis

helps us to understand better as to how the same problem was approached by the ancients.

## NOTES

1. *The Central Conception of Buddhism*, London: 1960.
  2. *Kathāvatthu* ed. by A.C. Taylor, PTS: 1894-7; tr. by S.Z. Aung and Mrs. Rhys Davids, PTS: 1915.
  3. The Romanized text, ed. by Johnston and Kunst, *MCB IX* (1951), Appendix.  
*sarvatra svabhāvo na vidyate iti kṛtvā śūnyāḥ sarvabhāvā iti/ . . .*  
*yasmān niḥsvabhāvas tasmāc chūnyah/* (Comment on *kārikā 1*; *loc. cit.*, p. 10)
- The pattern of argument: "whatever is devoid of *own-being* is empty," recurs throughout the work.

4. *Loc. cit.*, p. 52: *kārikā 70*:  
*prabhavati ca śūnyateyaṃ yasya prabhavanti tasya sarvārthāḥ/*  
*prabhavati na tasya kiṃ cinna prabhavati śūnyatā yasya//*
5. Sankrasvāmin formulated Dignāg's *trairūpya* theory in his *Nyāyapraveśaka-sūtram* very concisely as follows: (GOS Vol. 33, 1930, p. 1):  
*pakṣadharmatvaṃ sapakṣe sattvaṃ vipakṣe cāsattvaṃ iti//*

The process involved in *anvaya* and *vyatireka* is threefold: (1) to determine in a *drṣṭānta* the class of *sapakṣa*, of all of whose members the two related predications are correct separately and jointly; (2) to determine in a contrapositive *drṣṭānta* the class of *vipakṣa*, of all of whose members those two predications are not correct in the same way; and (3) to apply this concomitance of those predications to a particular class member in question.

6. Respectively, *Anuloma*, *Paṭikamma*, *Niggaha*, *Upanayana*, and *Niggamana*.
7. *Madhyamikakārikā*, Chp. 2, *kārikā 10*:  
*pakṣo gantā gacchatīti yasya tasya prasajyate/*  
*gamanena vinā gantā gantur gamanam icchataḥ//*
8. *Vigraha.*, *kārikā 37* (*loc. cit.*, p. 34):  
*nāsti tamaś ca jvalane yatra ca tiṣṭhati parātmani jvalanaḥ/*  
*kurute katham prakāśaṃ sa hi prakāśo 'ndhakāravadhah//*