Battle for Middle Way: Bhāviveka's Dialectical Strategy in Context

Karl-Stéphan Bouthillette

Abstract: In a tumultuous socio-historical context, the Buddhist Madhyamaka philosopher Bhāviveka designed a coherent battle strategy that was to set the tone for the development of later philosophical compendia in India and beyond. Bhāviveka's writings, especially his *magnum opus*, the *Madhyamaka-hṛdaya-kārikā* (MHK), his only text preserved in Sanskrit, is not only a rare window into the complex intellectual panorama of sixth century India, but it offers a vivid picture of an engaged Buddhist philosopher ascertaining various dialectical and exegetical strategies suited to the challenges at hand. The first part of this paper is a briefing on the socio-historical context in which Bhāviveka intervened. The second section borrows from 'social-ecological coexistence theory' to examine that context as a dynamic ecosystem. Finally, the mission assigned by the author to his bodhisattvas is presented in his own words, from the MHK's opening section, the *bodhicitta-aparityāgaḥ*.

By the beginning of the sixth century CE, the Indian philosophical landscape had become a complex puzzle of controversies where philosopher chieftains, if they were not busy crafting secret doctrinal alliances, draw sophisticated technical innovations to preserve, redefine or even expend their traditional domain. Even while defending their very walls, the embattled philosophical kingdoms were rife with ideological strife from within. Doctrinal survival in these agitated times of religious rivalry depended on the sharpness of the intellect and rhetoric. The blade wielder needed to precisely identify his opponents' positions and counteract their manoeuvres; to convincingly rally his supporters around a definite worldview. Acting as a chief strategist, the Buddhist Madhyamaka philosopher Bhāviveka designed a coherent battle strategy that was to set the tone for the development of later philosophical compendia in India and beyond. While on the external front, to remain at the vanguard of the 'mêlée' of *vāda*, he displayed a debate method resting on independent arguments, on his own turf he grounded his positions on a Nagarjunian two-fold approach to reality, focusing his attacks on the developments of the Mind-Only theorists and defending the status of the Mahāyāna sūtra-s against the śrāvaka-s. Bhāviveka's writings, especially his *magnum opus*, the *Madhyamaka-hṛdaya-kārikā* (MHK), his only text preserved in Sanskrit, is not only a rare window into the complex intellectual panorama of sixth century India, but it offers a vivid picture of an engaged Buddhist philosopher ascertaining various dialectical and exegetical strategies suited to the challenges at hand. The first part of this paper highlights the agonistic sociohistorical context in which Bhāviveka intervened, suggesting that it contributed to his methodology and to the doxographical nature of the MHK. The second section borrows from 'social-ecological coexistence theory' to examine that context as a dynamic ecosystem wherein Buddhism, as a species,

ingenuously competed before migrating to foreign lands in order to expends its chances for survival. Finally, the dialectical mission assigned by Bhāviveka to the training bodhisattvas, is presented in his own words, from the MHK's opening section, the *bodhicitta-aparityāgaḥ*.

Intelligence Briefing: The Indian Battlefront

Compared with other such Indian philosophical figures, putting a date on the life of Bhāviveka is a relatively easy task. It is facilitated by the fact that his works involved many well-known Buddhist thinkers such as Dharmapāla, Buddhapālita, Dignāga and Sthiramati. His life is believed to have taken place around 490–570 or 500–570 CE. Pin-pointing a precise location for the author's life is a less certain enterprise. As usual, different accounts disagree with one another. Recently, Chien Y. Hsu concluded from a review of the many sources at hand that: 'Bhāviveka was born into a royal family in Dhānakataka, which is presently a western neighbor of Amarāvatī.'[1] By the second century already, the latter city was one of the greatest Buddhist foundations of eastern Deccan.[2] However, we know from the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (602–664 CE) that, at the time of his visit, only a few decades after Bhāviveka's lifetime, the monasteries of Dhanyakaṭaka and its numerous Buddhist sites were mostly deserted and in ruins.[3] What happened?

The political landscape of India at the end of the fifth and throughout the sixth century was a fragmented and tumultuous one. The Gupta Empire, a staunch supporter of the Brahmanical order, was in steady decline, struggling against the Hunas at its borders and the increasing claims of regional families from within. In the few remaining kingdoms of the sub-continent sympathetic to Buddhism, the dialectician would have been aware of the increasing occurrences of a violent pattern of Brahmanical usurpation and political agitation, if not of outright revolts and massacres, against rulers and institutions supporting an alternative to Brahmanism. In Gandhāra, once a crown jewel of Buddhist culture, in the period ranging from 550 to 580 CE, evidence suggests that tensions rose to the point where local rulers engaged in 'systematic hostility', laying waste unto the revilers of the Vedas.[4] This belligerent atmosphere will increase in the decades following Bhāviveka's death. In the south, closer to his home, Bhāviveka might have witnessed the socio-religious changes that were to bring about the rise of two great Brahmanical empires with little sympathies for the śramaṇa-s who had so far ruled over the region: the Chalukyas and the Pallavas. However, Bhāviveka did not live long enough to see the rule of the poet king Harsha, in Kanauj (606–647 CE), the last and ephemeral hope for Buddhism in India which, in its collapse, brought lasting anarchy to the region. Most Indian kingdoms of Bhāviveka's time derived the legitimacy of their sovereignty from Brahmanical customs and ideology, or sought Brahmanical approval in one way or another, mainly through land grants (*brahmadeya*), a practice already common under the Guptas, perpetuated even by Harsha, which contributed to the rise of a Brahmanical form of feudalism and its

[1] Hsu also offers the alternative spelling of Dhānakataka as Dhānyakaṭaka. See: Hsu 2013, 13.

[2] See Verardi 2011, 74.

[3] Ibid., 176.

[4] Ibid., 172.

corollary, an uncompromisingly conservative and aggressive agrarian social structure strictly enforcing the caste system.

Bloody persecutions of Buddhism had reached new heights in the sixth century, particularly in Kashmir under the Śaiva Hunas and their hawkish ruler Mihirakula. This sectarian phenomenon, which went on till Buddhism became altogether banned from India, around the 13th century, most certainly alarmed Bhāviveka. His disgust for Shaivism and the horrors committed under its tutelary deity is scathingly expressed in the *Mīmāṃsā-tattva-nirṇaya-avatāraḥ* chapter of the MHK: 'Homage to him, Rudra (the Horrible), whose name the meaning is suiting, he who is delighted with joy by meandering beasts frightened of having to feed upon one another; by those in hells, oppressed by grinding, slicing, burning and so on; by humans tormented by birth, old-age, sickness, fear, sorrow, and exhaustion.'[5] These hellish torments, grinding and so on, seem to recall a sight that goes beyond mere fables of the underworld, a testimony of what life under the Śaiva-s might have felt like for those who did not proclaim the *namaḥ śivāya*. Yet, elsewhere, as reported by Xuanzang, the great monastic university of Nālandā, founded at the time of Aśoka, in the kingdom of Magadha, was still standing and producing its stock of educated scholars. The curriculum available at this ancient institution covered every subject worthy of attention by the learned of the day. Mahāyāna Buddhism was predominant, but the eighteen sects were represented at least in scriptures, and even non-Buddhist literature such as the Vedas and other Brahmanical disciplines were discussed. With time, Buddhist education had adapted to the demands of a pluralistic society and diversified its scope, extending to non-Buddhist and non-religious disciplines of learning. Yet, it would be too rosy a picture to simplistically perceive this fact as a reflection of broadmindedness and inclusivism. Indeed, such an interest for non-Buddhist material might have been due to external pressure, if not to a pragmatic logic of war: know your enemy.

From its early inception in India, Buddhism has been surrounded by various groups with which it had constant interactions. The *Brahma-jāla-suttanta*, the first *sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*, lists sixty-two theories regarding the existence of the self (*attan/ātman*) advocated by other ascetics, among which, of course, are brahmins. It is well known that Buddhism's main rivals came from the Vedic milieu. The anti-Vedic sentiment is already felt in Buddhist canonical literature and never actually disappeared from Indian Buddhist treatises altogether, for reasons going beyond mere philosophical disputes. What is more important to remember here is that, although Buddhist authors often mention various competing sects since early times, disparagingly, actual debates directly engaging the views of their non-Buddhist opponents, and not only listing and condemning them, are slow to appear. To that effect, Abrecht Wezler noted that:

[5] MHK, 9. 108–109.
Anyonya-bhakṣaṇād bhītais-tiryagbhir-durlabha-utsavaiḥ |
niṣpeṣac-cheda-dāha-ādi-duḥkha-ārtair-nārakair-api ||
nṛbhir-janma-jarā-roga-bhaya-śoka-klama-ārditaiḥ |
prīyate yo namas-tasmai rudrāya-anvartha saṃjñine ||

> Buddhist literature is characterized by the fact that most, if not all, debates carried on in the texts start from and centre around internal Buddhist or even Hīnayānistic difference of views and Abhidharma points of controversy. In Buddhist literature it is only gradually that heterodox doctrines are taken notice of.[6]

Vincent Eltschinger indicated how the *Savitarkasavicārādibhūmi* part of the late fourth century CE *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra* (YBhŚ), in its *Paravāda* section, provides us with one of the earliest testimony of the use of *parīkṣā*, 'critical examination',[7] in a scholastic context, by presenting and argumentatively refuting sixteen allodoxies. Nevertheless, we must wait yet another century for a proper tradition of debate to emerge out of these first departures. Thus, as observed by Eltschinger:

> Brahmanical orthodoxy and Buddhism had been familiar with each other for many centuries, but in spite of the development of eristic-dialectical (*vāda*) traditions in both of them and the narratives of debates between their representatives, there are very few textual or otherwise documentable hints at there having been a sustained philosophical confrontation before the (end of the) fifth century.[8]

Yet, by the fifth century, this picture is changing and systematic philosophical confrontations with the 'outsiders' slowly emerge. It is within this context that Bhāviveka began his debating career.

This is not to say that debates between the proponents of competing worldviews did not happen before the fifth century. For, we do know that this is the case, as Johannes Bronkhorst observed:

> Debates between proponents of different currents of belief or practice took place long before the beginning of classical Indian philosophy. […] We know that in classical India kings might oblige representatives of different movements to participate in public debates, in which much might be at stake, e.g. the life or freedom of the participants, or the wellbeing of their movement. […] And these same public debates appear to have inspired thinkers to revise and improve their positions, thus creating the schools of classical philosophy.[9]

To come back to the second half of the fifth century CE, where we notice the beginning of a sustained philosophical confrontation between various competing groups, the changes taking place come in the form of a systematic approach to debate (*vāda*) and critical examination (*parīkṣā*), making use of new developments in the field of argumentative reasoning (*hetuvidyā*) which, in time, developed into a fully epistemological framework (*pramāṇa*), used and debated throughout the Indian cultural sphere of influence.

Without excluding the significance of internal philosophical factors, which certainly laid the foundations for the nature and form of the discussions about to take place, the reasons for the occurrence of such new philosophical developments might not entirely lie within the sole realm of philosophy. Why would philosophers suddenly 'feel obliged' to strengthen their position and to engage with the views of others, and not only with those circulating

[6] As quoted in a bottom page note by: Eltschinger 2014, 13.

[7] For Eltschinger 'provisional definition' of *parīkṣā*, see: ibid., 18–19.

[8] Ibid., 71.

[9] Bronkhorst 2016, 182.

within their own religious tradition? Although the trend was already set by the works of Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva, for example, it reaches a new systematic height in Bhāviveka which is worth examining. Eltschinger suggests that these innovations, though introduced by new developments in thought, were also influenced by a given sociohistorical context:

> The factors responsible for this sudden outburst of philosophical confrontation cannot be seriously looked for within the competing tradition themselves, since here the reasons are most likely to be of a non-philosophical and sociohistorical character.[10]

According to Eltschinger, the *sine qua non* factor of this philosophical shift is 'a dramatic increase of hostility towards Buddhism as the Gupta dynasty starts to crumble'.[11] If doctrinal issues could fuel such animosity one can safely assume that, as elsewhere, Indian religions and politics became intimately intertwined in an explosive mix. This is Giovanni Verardi's main argument. According to him:

> Doctrinal debates became hot political issues, and the very development of Buddhist logic and Brahmanical critique can be construed as functions of the political confrontations characterising the Indian scene.[12]

Knowing that this hostility stems almost exclusively out of Brahmanical circles now engaged in a dynamic and successful process of reassertion and self-redefinition, where, on one side, polemical figures such as the famous sixth-seventh century Mīmāṃsāka Kumārila Bhaṭṭa direct a systematic attack on *nāstika* philosophical positions, while on the other side new theistic popular religious developments emerge, like Vaishnavism and Shaivism, insisting among other things on piety (*bhakti*) and symbolic tantric rituals, yet claiming Vedic filiation and the wealthy patronage that ensues, one may suggest that this violent antagonizing mood affected every group perceived as heterodox from a Brahmanical perspective, and not only the Buddhists. Certainly, the Jainas came to feel the wrath of the Brahmins, particularly in the guise of Vīraśaivism, as the *Cennabhasava Purāṇam* bears testimony, though, by times, they too contributed toward anti-Buddhist animosity.

The Post Gupta era, rife with conflicts on all fronts, shattered the relative peace and religious co-existence which was somewhat maintained under the Guptas. Suresh Chandra Ghosh, commenting on the declining state of learning and the rise of endogamy, commensality and craft-exclusiveness, in seventh to ninth century India, observed that:

> Peace and stability so vitally needed for the growth and development of learning took its flight partly under frequent influx of the foreign invaders including the Arabs through the North-West and partly under the impact of an almost incessant warfare among the ambitious northern potentates for the prized possession of Kanauj.[13]

Challenging the causality of this reasoning, which he attributes to a common nationalist myopia, Verardi argues for another explanation. He insists that this biased historical perspective, blaming the outsiders and the warrior clans for the social tensions

[10] Eltschinger 2014, 72.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Verardi, 2011, 205.
[13] Ghosh 2002, 96–97.

and cultural decline of the era, does not fully reflect the testimony of the available sources which, instead, point to serious political oppositions between the proponents of a casteless open society, supported by the śramaṇa-s, centered around cities fueled by the prosperity brought about by trade, and the conservative orthodoxy of a Brahmanical elite, imposing by all means the caste system and its agrarian anti-urban values. Verardi's scenario, though it may not provide the only answer, is better suited to historically reflect on the polemical developments witnessed in philosophy from the fifth century onwards, in which Bhāviveka significantly contributed. As for Ghosh's statement, peace and stability might be ideal for growth, yet many suggest that war, or necessity, is the mother of invention. Eltschinger argues that the social dynamics of the sixth century onwards brought about two major innovations in Indian Buddhism: Buddhist esotericism and epistemology. He notices how both: 'legitimate themselves in a structurally homologous way, and in quite martial terms, as that which, by defeating the outsiders, removes the obstacles to the path toward liberation.'[14] The work of Bhāviveka gains in depth and historical significance when framed within that context, the emergence of a new apologetical strategy of Buddhism, making use of epistemology to defend itself and to attack the positions of others.

A Volatile Ecosystem: Coexistence in Sixth Century India

One can gain further insights into the bearing of necessity on the development of the two major sixth-century Buddhist innovations mentioned by Eltschinger by looking at their overall sociohistorical context as the plight of an ecosystem, and thereby analyzing it in the light of 'social-ecological coexistence theory', a term coined by Philip A. Loring. As a background to his research on salmon fisheries in Alaska, which at first sight appears far removed from our topic, Loring draws general lines of reflection which have a deep resonance when transposed unto our Indic Middle Ages context:

> Why so much diversity exists in the world and how competing species come to coexist in space and time are founding questions of community ecology […]. Biologically diverse systems are generally more productive than less diverse ones […], but diversity does not guarantee stability […]. Over time, dominant species displace and exclude weaker species, and species' niches become differentiated through adaptation and niche construction processes […]. Yet, there are also examples where groups of species with relatively similar niches (i.e., guilds) coexist stably.[15]

To keep on the vocabulary of ecology, one can safely assert that throughout the first to sixth centuries, wherein systematic philosophy slowly bloomed, India was a biologically *cum* ideologically diverse ecosystem. The intense cultural production of the period, regardless of conflict, or probably in response to it, corroborates the assertion that this diversity fostered productivity, and substantial achievements in the field of philosophy, our primary interest here. By the beginning of the sixth century, however, a predatory species, in the form of Brahmanism, established predominance and was well-intent on

[14] Eltschinger 2014, 174.

[15] Loring 2016, 154.

displacing and excluding 'weaker' species, the 'nay-sayers' (*nāstika-s*) rejecting the Vedas, a people that Brahmanical mythology insidiously referred to as *asura*-s and *daitya*-s, the very vermin which their new warmongering gods, with multiple heavily armed arms, were bent on annihilating.[16] This imbalance, in turn, forced competing species to devise adaptation strategies and to look for new niches to exploit.

It is worth mentioning that, according to the principle of 'limited similarity' in coexistence theory, there cannot be any coexistence when competing species aren't able to sufficiently exploit unique niches. Thus, for example, if the decline in international trade brought about by the demise of the Gupta Empire, together with the Justinian plague in the Mediterranean regions, combined with the draining of resources spent over the ensuing perpetual warfare, not to mention the concentration of lands at the hands of Brahmins, affected religious patronage by diminishing the ability of sponsors to support a wide array of sects, leading the competing religious factions to look for support among an ever-smaller pool of patrons, the previous state of relative coexistence among them was directly endangered. Loring's observations could draw us in multiple other fascinating directions illustrating how coexistence theory can rationalize the behaviors of the competing ideological factions of the time, in terms of survival strategies reflecting patterns observable throughout the living realm. However, this will have to be left for more thorough research. For the time being, we will focus our attention on two observations. The first one suggests that: 'While two competing species may coexist effectively when both populations are healthy, one species may displace the second if it is weakened by a chance event.'[17] In our context, this chance event has been identified by Eltschinger as the dismantling of the Gupta Empire. However, this should not prevent us from investigating other meaningful contributing factors, such as the early pioneering role of the Śuṅgas in supporting a new Brahmanical orthodoxy.[18] In brief, taking advantage of a change in equilibrium, the Brahmanical fold, acting as would have any predating species of the living realm, appears to have triggered the 'dramatic increase of hostility towards Buddhism' mentioned by Eltschinger, by engaging in a renewed pattern of predation aimed primarily at establishing its own perpetuation, at the top of the food chain, a position which Brahmins have long claimed as their legitimate birth right.

The last observation to be drawn from Loring concerns two functional mechanisms by which coexistence is achieved: stabilizing and equalizing mechanisms. 'Stabilizing mechanisms are factors that prevent one species from gaining an advantage over the second,[19] [...] Equalizing mechanisms reduce fitness differences among species.'[20] Without entering into a

[16] On the implicit meaning of *asura*-s and *daitya*-s in Purāṇas, see Verardi 2011, 160–161.

[17] Loring 2016, 154.

[18] As suggested in Verardi 2011, 18.

[19] Loring gives the following example: for example, densitydependent predation, where a predator switches from targeting one prey species (A) to another (B) when the population of the first declines (and vice versa) (Loring 2016, 154).

[20] For example, if prey species A is a better competitor than B, but a predator has a stronger preference for A over B, the predator will effectively equalize B's disadvantage. Similarly if species B has alternative food or habitat options, this also equalizes the competitive differential in addition to providing resilience to B in the case of a disturbance to its primary food source, which as noted is also requisite to stable coexistence (ibid.).

detailed discussion as to exactly how this might present itself, one can suggest that the two major sixth-century Buddhist innovations mentioned by Eltschinger, that of Buddhist esotericism and epistemology, might well correspond to these two functional mechanisms of coexistence. The development of esoteric Buddhism had a stabilizing effect in this that the Buddhist fold assimilated the many religious innovations which gave a competitive edge to their opponents, being highly in demand by sponsors ever greedy for political, military, sexual, if not spiritual, powers. As for the development of epistemology, in which Bhāviveka was intimately involved, it has an equalizing effect in this that it intentionally neutralized possible predative tactics on doctrinal grounds. This is what Eltschinger equates with 'negative apologetics',[21] while making nihil the soteriological idiosyncrasies of competitors, the task of 'positive apologetics'.

It is tempting to ponder these coexistence strategies and wonder if they have proven efficient. For, after all, Buddhism eventually disappeared from India. A thorough analysis is impossible here, but some hypothesizes can be drawn. The 'stabilizing' strategy of Buddhist esotericism appears to have been a double-sided blade. It was equally used by brahmins to assimilate the 'strategic edge' of Buddhism, to the point where the Buddha himself became a mere *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. One might also think of the yoga of Patañjali or of the crypto-Buddhist metaphysics of Śaṅkara. On this front, to recall Bronkhorst's latest book, it appears that the Brahmins won. As for the 'equalizing effect' of epistemology, the problem is that these abstruse arguments can only function among a well-educated elite and completely overwhelm the intellectual capacities of the masses, more incline to seek the benefits of piety, if not of ritualized magic. What is more, even the elite might not submit to the power of a valid logical demonstration, or might subdue it through rhetorical schemes, a phenomenon unfortunately noticeable till today, not the less in the field of ecology. There is, however, a strategy not mentioned by Eltschinger, which might have saved Buddhism from complete extinction: internationalization, intimately associated with trade. In order to survive its onslaught, the Buddhist species went on looking for new niches in foreign lands which it had started to colonize early on, through its continuous associations with the merchant guilds. These new niches secured by the Buddhists were out of reach for the Brahmins, whose caste system makes it considerably harder to proselytize and to be adapted by foreign cultures. Ultimately, Buddhism totally migrated out of India, becoming what it had always pretended to be, a refugee.

The explanatory prospects of the social-ecological coexistence theory would certainly need to be assessed further and examined against other historical backgrounds, in Tibet for example, where social rivalry, or its limited presence, could be accounted for philosophical and ritualistic developments. At the moment, however limited in scope, one can at least observe one instance of potential significance.

[21] Eltschinger 2014, 24.

The Mission of the Bodhisattva: Debate and Dialectic

Bhāviveka's important contributions to Madhyamaka Buddhism has already attracted much attention. However, relatively few attempts have been made to reflect on his work in the light of the historical context of the sixth century CE. Adopting a strict philosophical perspective, most researchers focused on interpreting his positions within the doctrinal framework of Buddhism alone, as if Bhāviveka had worked in *vase clos*. For example, there has been ample discussions on the reasons that led Tibetan doxographers to classify him as a proponent of Svāntantrika-Madhyamaka, and more precisely of Sautrāntika-Svāntantrika-Madhyamaka, for his criticism of Buddhapālita's position on the first chapter of Nāgārjuna's *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, raised in his *Prajñāpradīpa*, where Bhāviveka argues that it is insufficient to simply state the absurd consequences (*prasaṅga*) that follow from the position of an opponent, but that one should equally state his own position through an autonomous inference (*svatantrānumāna*). Candrakīrti eventually came to the defense of Buddhapālita, whence the Tibetans saw in this split the birth of two separate lines of interpretation. While much attention has been given to the philosophical implications of both positions, little attention has been given to the social context which Bhāviveka was facing and which might have contributed to his stance on inference. As Verardi rightly stressed: 'Indian Buddhism should not be studied *per se*, but in counterpoint with Brahmanical theorisations.'[22] Taking into consideration the Pan-Indian context of *vāda*, where one is required to assert his own position prior to engaging in the fray of debate, a prerequisite already stated in the *Nyāya-Sūtras* of Gautama,[23] and knowing how crucial debates had become for the security of the debater and of his following, one might better appreciate the desire of Bhāviveka to elaborate and defend a solid dialectical position of his own, in the name of the *Middle Way* (Madhyamaka).

Keeping in mind that Bhāviveka was a southerner, one might want to refresh one's memory on the account given by Reverend William Taylor of the south Indian manuscripts collected by Colonel Mackenzie. Verardi gives us a bleak summary: 'In these manuscripts, Jains and Buddhists appear as the earliest rulers of south India, subsequently suppressed by the brāhmaṇas who put pressure on local kings with the purpose of getting rid of them. During the doctrinal disputations attended by the conflicting parties, Taylor observed, the Buddhists were always the losers and were killed, martyred, or forced to leave the country.'[24] As if the picture was not grim enough, Taylor specifies the type of death sentence a lost debate might entail: '[t]he punishment by grinding to death in oil-mills, is one well known to Indian History; and in the progress of development of these papers it will be seen that *Bauddhas* and *Jainas* were subjected to it, at a later period, by Hindu kings, under Brahmanical influence.'[25] Here, one is tempted to recall Bhāviveka's hellish description of Shaivism mentioned earlier on. In this context, where one's life and those of one's brethren are on the mill, the outcome of debate is crucial,

[22] Verardi 2011, 106.

[23] The exact date of composition is variously estimated between the 6th century BCE and the 2nd century CE. It is likely that the text has been composed by more than one author, over a period of time.

[24] Verardi 2011, 25.

[25] Ibid., 26.

and one's dialectical and rhetorical skills better be effective. For, it is not purely a matter of doctrinal orthodoxy anymore.

There was yet another major issue facing Bhāviveka, and this time it is not related to outsiders. By the sixth century CE, the Saṅga had been through numerous schisms. The Third Jewel was in pieces. Dissension on doctrinal and ethical grounds made unity impossible. Long gone were the days when a Buddha could please his monks with a flower and smile. Questions were raised that required answers. The wide array of topics debated in the MHK of Bhāviveka bears witness to the many lines of fracture which divided the community. To recall two major ones, one may summon the debate on the status of the Mahāyāna sūtras and the controversies regarding the nature of the mind. The MHK opens on a brief discussion of *bodhicitta* (*bodhicitta-aparityāgaḥ*), followed by a reflection on monastic vows (*muni-vrata-samāśrayaḥ*) and a revision of foundational *abhidharma* doctrinal positions (*tattva-jñāna-eṣaṇā*). Bhāviveka then undertakes his doxographical conquest, beginning his campaign on his own turf, by directing his attacks at the śrāvakas (*śrāvaka-tattva-viniścaya-avatāraḥ*) and the yogācārins (*yogācāra-tattva-viniścaya-avatāraḥ*). Proceeding like Alexander the Great, who first subdued Macedonia and Greece before proceeding with his dream of repaying the Persians in kind for their earlier invasions, Bhāviveka's MHK strategically unifies the realm of Buddhism under his banner before marching into Brahmanical lands. He begins by expanding his criticism to sāṃkhya (*sāṃkhya-tattva-avatāraḥ*) and vaiśeṣika (*vaiśeṣika-tattva-avatāraḥ*). Then he becomes the first ever critic of vedānta (*vedānta-tattva-viniścayaḥ*) as such, keeping his utmost wrath for the mīmāṃsākas (*mīmāṃsā-tattva-nirṇaya-avatāraḥ*), which he seems to have despised the most amongst all. This last category appears as a hodgepodge of Brahmanical views going beyond what came to be traditionally designated as Mīmāṃsā, ridiculing the belief in such deities as Śiva and Kṛṣṇa. Having trampled the Brahmins, Bhāviveka finally turns his gaze towards the notion of omniscience (*sarva-jña-siddhi-nirdeśaḥ*), a central issue in Jainism, on which he will set the final boundary of his doctrinal conquest. This overall dialectical strategy covers the entire realm of philosophy known at this period. It sets the tone for later Indian philosophical compendia. This strategy also informs the broad philosophical training that Bhāviveka engaged bodhisattvas in.

Being the 'great architect' of that design, Bhāviveka casts himself, and the bodhisattvas who were to follow in his footsteps, as the Cakravārtin of world philosophy. The logic of the MHK is one of thorough uncompromising dialectical dialogue, a war on 'views', systematically conducted without bloodshed, and its means are reasoning (*yukti*) and inference (*anumāna*), blessed by the words (*śabda*) of the Lord, Buddha. Victory, in this context, is ultimate peace. Even if it is to be expected of such a work, it is particularly meaningful that the text begins by recalling the thought of enlightenment (*bodhicitta*), the aspiration of the bodhisattvas. Herein, with a lyricism that has nothing to envy the *Song of Roland*, Bhāviveka summons his troops. He reminds them of their vows: 'Not to relinquish the aspiration for enlightenment, to take refuge in the monastic vows, and to seek to know the truth, this is the conduct to achieve the benefit of all.'[26] Compassion, ethical

[26] MHK, 1. 5.
Bodhicitta-aparityāgo muni-vrata-samāśrayaḥ |

conduct and knowledge are the calling of the bodhisattva: 'Bodhicitta, ornamented with great compassion, benevolence and knowledge, is the germ of enlightenment. Therefore, the learned one strives not to abandon it.'[27] Like the knight of romance, it is out of love for the world that the bodhisattva remains in the battle fray of *saṃsāra*, to courageously wipe out ignorance and save deluded beings from themselves: 'With intelligence, profound goodness, with forbearance in the suffering of others; with a heroism verging towards perfection, joined with powerful goodness; seeing that the entire world conceals the eye of wisdom, after having rescued it from the polluted subterranean hell of the continuous flow of existence (*saṃsāra*), [one] saves himself.'[28] The entire world has gone blind, explains Bhāviveka, and the bodhisattva's task is to restore its vision (*darśana*), through the pure philosophy of emptiness (*śūnyatā-vāda*), establishing the true nature of things: 'By training in the view of the void, afflicted dispositions are destroyed, along with wicked deeds, the bondage of which is the doorway to all miseries.'[29] The view of emptiness is the pacification of all conflicting 'views', the philosophical victory aimed at by the Madhyamaka. Yet, the bodhisattva should know that his quest is no easy one, as it aims higher than any conceivable worldly lordship: 'What could be more difficult to obtain even for a Brahmin, for Indra or for a universal emperor (*cakravārtin*) than the universal means to quench endless thirst, through which one is not overcome by suffering and so on, but subdues dissent in all direction, the immortality-nectar of the knowledge of the true nature of things?'[30] In other words, the conquest of suffering is like the quelling of conflict. It completely stifles rebellious passions. Upon total surrender, the thirsty are quenched. Thirst (*tṛṣṇā*), the engine of *saṃsāra*, fuelled by ignorance (*avidyā*), has been extinguished forever when, after a long dialectical struggle against disturbing views, recalling the mythological churning of the ocean by *devas* and *asuras*, the ambrosia (*amṛta*) of immortal life emerges, the knowledge of the true nature of things. Thus, equipped with the ultimate antidote to all poison, the view of emptiness, the paladin bodhisattva, like a warrior priest, shall wonder about in the world and, like a doctor, heal the drinkers of ignorance, the deluded drunkards who grasp at the poisonous liquors brought to them by dubious reasoning: 'Those falling heavy with the slumber of ignorance after having drunk maddening liquors, those whose collection of merit is ruined to naught by the thief of dubious reasoning.'[31] For their own

Tattva-jñāna-eṣaṇā ca-iti caryā sarva-artha-siddhaye ‖

[27] MHK, 1. 6.
bodhicittaṃ mahā-maitrī-karuṇa-jñāna-bhūṣaṇam |
Buddha-bījaṃ yato vidvāṃs-tad-atyāgāya yujyate ‖

[28] MHK, 1. 7–8.
Dhīmatā sattva-mahatā paradukhe'sahiṣṇunā |
Samyag-ārabdha-vīryeṇa yuktaṃ śaktimatā satā‖
Lokam-ālokya sakalaṃ prajñā-āloka-tiraskṛtam|
Saṃsāra-amedhya-pātālāt tīrtvā tārayituṃ svayam ‖

[29] MHK, 1. 18.
Dauḥśīlyā-kriyayā sarva-durgati-dvāra-bandhanāt |
Śūnyatā-darśana-abhyāsāt kleśa-vṛtty-upaghātataḥ ‖

[30] MHK, 1. 13–14.
kiṃ punas-cakravartī-indra-brahmaṇām-api durlabham |
atyanta-tṛṣṇā-avicchedi sādhāraṇam-upāyataḥ ‖
Vigraha-kṣaya-paryanta-duḥkha-ādy-anabhibhāvitam |
Niḥśeṣa-duḥkha-śamanaṃ tattva-artha-adhigama-amṛtam ‖

[31] MHK, 1. 10.
Pramādam-adirāṃ pītvā prasuptān moha-nidrayā |
Vitarka-taskara-aśeṣa-vilupta-śubha-saṃcayān ‖

mercy, the holy-debater is to slash through the vicious reasonings of these deluded arguers with his assertive intellect: 'He who completely cuts bondage with the sharp sword of wisdom is compassionate when he releases those who are not free.'[32] This is the ultimate quest of the bodhisattva framed by Bhāviveka: to go about like a machete in a dense jungle, cutting down the bonds of fallacious reasoning. In this act lies the greatest display of compassion. Bhāviveka's conception of the bodhisattva's path is thus two-fold: to acquire knowledge for oneself, and to dispense that knowledge unto others. Both dimensions of the path are supported by *āgama* and *yukti*, culminating in the knowledge born of their contemplation (*bhāvanā-mayī-prajṇā*), in a three-fold division of knowledge borrowed from the *Yogācārabhūmi*.

Conclusion

Thus, in two words, Bhāviveka's bodhisattva is a skilled *dialectician*, a *debater*. It is his main duty to refute the mistaken views of others. This conception was not original to Bhāviveka. In the first century CE, Aśvaghosa, in his *Buddhacarita*, already portrayed the bodhisattva in similar terms. Eltschinger describes how:

> By refuting the other systems and by argument he [the bodhisattva] caused men to understand the meaning which is hard to grasp. […] Proclaiming the final truth of impermanence, selflessness and painfulness does not go without critically examining and overcoming (*niGRAH?) competing religio-philosophical claims.[33]

Hence, one can conclude that Bhāviveka is loyal to his analytical tradition and merely seeks to equip the embattled bodhisattvas with the additional dialectical weaponry of the Madhyamaka, not shying away from wielding the sword of independent reasoning whenever required. For, when victory means both the end of *saṃsāra* and the defeat of the opponents of *dharma*, no skillful means (*upāya*) is to be relinquished.

Although many of the above quoted passages might appear as familiar tropes to scholars of the Madhyamaka, it would be a loss not to appreciate the sense of urgency with which they infuse the MHK's all-encompassing systematic overview of the realm of philosophy, the first of its kind in India, the very beginning of Indian doxography. The text gains both in philosophical depth, by stressing the necessity of pacifying views, and historical significance, as a testimony of intense ideological agitation, when framed within the tumultuous socio-historical context of sixth century India. In this context, the social-ecological coexistence theory provides an insightful framework to relate various coexistence strategies which, at first sight, do not exhibit explicit connections. In this case, it provides an additional tool to comprehend how the strategy of internationalization, through which Buddhism could exploit new niches, accounts for its survival as a major world religion up to the present day.

[32] MHK, 1. 11.
Prajñā-niśita-nistriṃśa-cchinna-niḥśeṣa-bandhanaḥ |
Mukto na mocayed-enān yad-ayaṃ karunātmakaḥ ||

[33] Eltschinger 2014, 11–12. Insertions in brackets are mine.

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