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OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
BUDDHIST STUDIES

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Volume 7

1984

Number 1

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III. PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Ascent and Descent: Two-Directional Activity in Buddhist Thought

Presidential Address for The Sixth Conference of
The IABS

Tokyo, Japan, September, 1983

by *Gadjin M. Nagao*

It is an honor and a privilege to have been selected as President of the 6th Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies and to be invited to address you on this auspicious occasion.

At the first Conference, held at Columbia University in 1978, I discussed several topics relating to Buddhist studies. Of course, many more topics remain to be discussed. Today, however, I would like to consider, with your kind permission, an idea which I cherish in my own study of Buddhist thought.

Buddhists have formulated doctrines around various key-terms such as *pratītyasamutpāda*, *anātman*, *śūnyatā*, and *tathatā*, all of them conveying the fundamental standpoint of Buddhism. It will be found upon examination, however, that most of these doctrines contain within them two opposite tendencies, or directions, or activities. By this I mean that in the structure of Buddhist thought as well as in the way that it is expounded are found two activities or movements, one of "going forth" or "going upward," the other of "coming back" or "coming down." The two activities for the sake of convenience can be named simply "ascent" and "descent."

Ascent can be understood as an activity or movement from this world to the world yonder, or from this human personal existence to the impersonal *dharmadhātu*, the world of *dharmatā*. Descent is the reverse; it is revival and affirmation of humanity, or personality in human existence. These two activities function in opposite directions, so they tend to be paradoxical, at times illogical, even contradictory. But, in fact, it is this “two-directional activity,” frequently encountered in Mahāyānic ideas, that constitutes the characteristic feature of the Mahāyāna. Paradoxes, such as “being and yet non-being,” “purified and yet not purified,” commonly encountered in the *Prajñāpāramitā* and the other Mahāyāna sūtras, are polar opposites. But the “two-directional activity” differs from ordinary paradox. It is through it that the dynamic movement of Mahāyāna thought reveals itself.

While the ideas of ascent and descent are to be found throughout Mahāyāna Buddhism, it was a text of Pure Land School that influenced me most in formulating the idea. T'an-luan (476–542), in his commentary on Vasubandhu's *Upadeśa of Sukhāvativyūha*, designated the two-directional activity with the terms “aspect of going forth” (往相) and “aspect of coming back” (還相). According to him, a follower of the Pure Land teaching transfers the merit he has obtained in two ways: first, he transfers toward his birth in the Pure Land; this is called the “merit-transference in the aspect of going forth.” Secondly he transfers his merits towards his return to this world of suffering for the purpose of benefitting others; this is the “merit-transference in the aspect of coming-back.” Being born in or going forth to the Pure Land refers to ascent, because it is by ascending to the Pure Land that one obtains the great enlightenment, while coming back from the Pure Land refers to descent, because it is by descending once again to this world that one fulfills his act of benefitting others.

The idea of including the coming back into this world within the context of fulfilling one's purpose is a unique one. The search for paradise is a concept common to all religious quests. But the concept of seeking earnestly to return to one's original abode of suffering is rarely seen, and T'an-luan's case is perhaps one of the few exceptions. He established this unique idea of “two-directional activity” as early as the 6th century.



I know of no Sanskrit term that corresponds to the idea of the two-directional activity as it is found in the later Chinese text, but, as we shall see, the basic connotation was already developed rather elaborately in Indian Mahāyāna.

The notion of ascent and descent is found also in Christianity. There, however, it seems that the aspect of descent comes prior to the aspect of ascent. As the incarnation of God, or as Son of God, Jesus Christ descends from Heaven to earth and brings his Father's message. After the crucifixion and resurrection, his earthly life ends and he ascends to Heaven.

The Buddhist notion of ascent and descent is the reverse of this. Gautama Siddhārtha, after living as a human being on this earth, ascends to the throne of *mahābodhi*, and thereafter, as a Buddha, descends to the world to engage in missionary work. He enters *parinirvāṇa* at the end of his life, but according to Mahāyānic belief, his activities on earth as a Buddha continue forever, even after the *parinirvāṇa*. The general pattern of two-directional activity in Buddhism is this: the ascent to enlightenment comes first and from there, the message comes down.

Nirvāṇa is the highest virtue to which a Buddhist aspires; there is no difference in this regard between the earlier and later forms of Buddhism. The attainment of nirvāṇa is the result of the activities directed toward ascent. Thus, knowledge or wisdom (*prajñā*) also belongs to the same line of ascent, because nirvāṇa is realized only through the elimination of *avidyā*, ignorance or non-knowing, the fundamental defilement (*kleśa*). All practices and learnings likewise belong to the category.

Another virtue, however, to which a Buddhist aspires, is "compassion" (*karuṇā*). It is, for a bodhisattva, no less important than wisdom. Compassion is an activity directed toward descent, because benefitting others is the bodhisattva's primal concern. Owing to his deep compassion, a bodhisattva refrains from entering nirvāṇa so long as his fellow beings are not saved. Rejecting even the exquisite pleasure of nirvāṇa, he devotes himself to the works of benefitting others.

Wisdom and compassion, thus representing opposite directions, stand side by side as the two cardinal Buddhist virtues, the indispensable constituents of enlightenment. They are compared to the two wheels of a cart or the two wings of a bird.

Now, it goes without saying that the sūtras and śāstras are filled with examples which teach, encourage, urge, or admonish people to ascend to their final aims. But which are doctrines that represent the direction of descent?

In addition to the doctrine of compassion just mentioned, there is the doctrine of *apratīṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*, which means "not dwelling in nirvāṇa," i.e., rejecting entry into nirvāṇa. Another term that indicates the direction of descent more positively than this is *saṃcintyābhavopapatti*, which means "willingly to take rebirth in this world." However, as I have discussed these doctrines elsewhere,¹ I shall refrain from going into them in detail here.

In consideration of these two directions, naturally it follows that there exists a summit where the ascent ends and from which the descent begins. What is the characteristic of this summit?

Such a summit can be seen in the career of Gautama Buddha. When he advanced to *vajrāsana* and realized *mahābodhi* at Bodhgaya, he reached nirvāṇa. This great event marks a summit in his life. The 35 years previous to this event belong to the ascent, while the 45 years of his mission come after represent the direction of descent. We are apt to consider the 80 years of his life as a single, continuous ascent to *parinirvāṇa*. But his life is better seen as consisting of two periods, divided by the summit that constitutes the pivotal point where ascent turns to descent and where the life of acquiring self-benefit becomes a life of benefitting others.

The pivotal point or summit has a double character of being simultaneously negative and affirmative. This double character is due to and corresponds to the two directions of ascent and descent.

The ascent implies a negative movement, because to aspire to something higher implies a negation of the present state of existence in anticipation of a higher one in the future. Ascent is always nihilistic in character—through self-negating practice, a practitioner finally reaches the summit of negation, which may be called *śūnyatā*, "negated-ness," or "zero-ness."

Descent, on the other hand, naturally implies an affirmative movement. As stated before, a bodhisattva's primary concern is the practice of benefitting others. He must once deny the saṃsāric world; but if it should then be totally forsaken,

there would be no place for a bodhisattva to fulfill his obligation of helping others. It is in this sense that the world is affirmed in the process of the descent.

The structure of two-directional activity with its summit is clearly seen in the Yogācāra theory of the three knowledges. The three knowledges are: 1) knowledge held in the stage of preparatory practice (*prāyogika-jñāna*), 2) non-discriminative knowledge (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*), and 3) knowledge acquired subsequently (*tat-prṣṭhalabdha-jñāna*). Of these, non-discriminative knowledge, 2), is knowledge in which every form of duality of subject and object has been abolished; hence, it is non-dual and non-discriminative and represents the ultimate enlightenment in this school. It is realized on the path of intuitive sight (*darśana-mārga*) through arduous practice, and it occupies the position of the summit in the sense stated above. Knowledge 1), belonging to the preparatory stage of practice, is itself discriminative but aims for non-discriminative knowledge. It is knowledge practiced in the direction of ascent. Knowledge acquired subsequently, 3), is obtained and arises from the non-discriminative knowledge. It is discriminative and worldly but differs from the first kind of knowledge in that its activity is directed in the direction of descent. It is a pure form of knowledge because it flows out from non-discriminative knowledge.

This kind of knowledge might seem superfluous, and one might question the need for it; because once the ultimate enlightenment—non-discriminative knowledge—is obtained there would be no need for it. But it is this knowledge that an enlightened one must employ as he descends from the *dharma-dhātu* to work in this world. As activity in the direction of descent, i.e., in the direction of compassion, it differs from ordinary human knowledge belonging to the preparatory state; it differs also from the nirvāṇic silence which is essentially non-discriminative knowledge. The formulation of the system of three knowledges by adding the third stage was one of the great achievements accomplished by the Yogācāras.

The two-directional activity is observable also in various other cases. Two words, *āgama* and *adhigama*, with *gam* or “to go” as their common root, are often contrasted. The term *āgama* literally means “coming hither” and is widely used to denote doctrines, precepts, and sacred works, including Buddhist canonical texts; hence, it indicates the movement “coming

down from above," i.e., descent. In opposition to this, *adhigama* means "acquisition," and, especially in Buddhism, "spiritual realization," which implies an upward movement or ascent. Thus the two terms connote salvation from above and self-realization from below.

The two-directional activity can be observed even in a single term. The word *tathāgata*, for instance, has the two meanings of "thus-gone" (*tathā-gata*) and "thus-come" (*tathā-āgata*). Interpreting these two meanings in accordance with the scheme stated above, it is possible to interpret "thus-gone" as representing the Buddha's wisdom which denotes ascent, while "thus-come" can be interpreted as Buddha's compassion which denotes descent. In the same way, the term *bodhisattva* also can be understood in two ways: "a *sattva* who aspires for bodhi" (ascent) and "a *sattva* who has incarnated from bodhi" (descent).

The *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*, XXIV.18, presents a zigzagging logic, in which dependent co-origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*) is identified with the three notions of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), designation based upon some material (*upādāya-prajñapti*), and the middle path (*madhyamā-pratīpad*). It is zigzagging because what exists is identified with what does not exist, which is then identified with what exists. This zigzagging logic defies straightforward reasoning and understanding, but if we apply the idea of the two-directional activity, the logic will be understood easily. The identification of dependent co-origination with *śūnyatā* is the activity in the direction of ascent, and the identification of *śūnyatā* with designation based upon some material (which designation, I think, is another name for dependent co-origination) is the activity in the direction of descent; *śūnyatā* occupies the position of summit as stated above. The final situation, called the middle path, synthesizes the two directions and is itself the summit between them; it is equated not only with *śūnyatā*, the summit, but also with dependent co-origination and designation, thereby fully synthesizing the two directions.²

These two directions, however, are further claimed to be one and the same activity, even as they are opposite and contradictory. That is to say, ascent is descent and descent is ascent. But, how is this identity of contrary directions possible?

If we properly understand the double character of the

summit mentioned above—that is, the two meanings of *śūnyatā*, “non-existence” (*abhāva*) on the one hand, and “existence of that non-existence” (*abhāvasya bhāvaḥ*) on the other, as defined by the *Madhyāntavibhāga* (I.13)—such an identity will become comprehensible.

Further, such an identification can be illustrated by the English word “realization.” The verb “to realize,” meaning “to make real,” has two different senses: 1) “to understand clearly,” “to conceive vividly as real,” and 2) “to bring into concrete existence,” “to actualize.” When we say “realization of truth,” we mean that we are aware of the truth and, at the same time, we mean that the truth realizes itself, or actualizes itself, in our awareness. “To be aware” is *our* understanding—it belongs to ourselves; but if it is a *real* understanding, it is consummated only through the actualization of the truth itself. The former, the understanding constituting our “self-realization,” denotes the direction of ascent, while the latter, the “self-realization” of the truth, denotes descent. Thus, in the single word “realization” both directions of ascent and descent have been combined and unified.

The two aspects of this “realization,” or enlightenment, are comparable to the two words *adhigama* and *āgama* referred to earlier. Within a religious context, *adhigama*, our understanding or realization, cannot be realized without *āgama*, the teaching, which always illuminates the path of *adhigama* from above. At the end of this path, there is a sphere or a field where *adhigama* and *āgama* become identical, become one and the same activity. That is to say, *adhigama* is deepened to the depth of *āgama* and *āgama* becomes our own *adhigama*.

Realization of such a sphere in which ascent is descent and descent is ascent is called *satori* or enlightenment in Zen Buddhism and salvation or faith in Pure Land Buddhism. As Nishitani Keiji puts it: “. . . the actualization of the Buddha’s Great Compassion and the witness of faith by sentient beings are seen to be really one, a single realization.”³ Here, “the actualization of the Buddha’s great compassion” is in the direction of descent, and “the witness of faith” in the direction of ascent. They are “really one, a single realization.” Through the witness of faith, one meets the Buddha and his great compassion; it is a realization even of the identity between the Buddha and ordinary beings.

So much for the identity of ascent and descent. However, it is equally true that ascent is not descent; descent is different from ascent. Śūnyatā is the meeting place where *adhigama* meets *āgama* and becomes identified with it. But śūnyatā is not a mere nihilism which engulfs all entities in its universal darkness, abolishing all differences and particularities. On the contrary, śūnyatā is the fountainhead from which the Buddha's compassionate activity flows out. Śūnyatā, the summit, is reached, but in the next moment, differentiation and discrimination occurs again, notwithstanding the identity accomplished by śūnyatā. Therefore, we can say that the two directions, ascent and descent, are simultaneously identical and not identical.

The emphasis is often placed on the upward direction alone, the "aspect of going forth" and "being born in the Pure Land." But, unless a religion contains the "aspect of return," it is still incomplete and imperfect. Unless concern is directed to the world once more, the ultimate goal of religion cannot be fulfilled. T'an-luan made a great contribution to Buddhist thought when he clarified the concept of return. It is my belief that the concept of two-directional activity is indispensable for judging the authenticity of a religious teaching. It should be used as a touchstone to aid us as we study and re-examine the various aspects of Buddhist doctrine.

Notes

1. "The Bodhisattva Returns to This World," in *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhism*, ed. Leslie S. Kawamura, SR supplements; 10 (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 61-79.

2. For these discussions, please refer to my article: "From Mādhyamika to Yogācāra; An Analysis of MMK, XXIV.18 and MV, I.1-2," *Journal IABS*, 2, No. 1 (1979), pp. 29-43.

3. Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, tr. by Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley, etc.: Univ. of California Press, 1982), p. 27.