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The Soteriological Purpose of Nāgārjuna's Philosophy: A Study of Chapter Twenty-three of the Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikās

by William L. Ames

Nāgārjuna's Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikās (MMK) is the fundamental text of the Madhyamaka school of Buddhist philosophy. It is largely devoted to a critical analysis of various conceptual categories, such as cause and effect, motion and rest, agent and action, etc. Particular attention is paid to the categories into which Buddhist Abhidharma analyzed the world. The Madhyamaka analysis is said to show the emptiness (śūnyatā) of all phenomena (all dharmas).

Some readers, both ancient and modern, have taken Nāgārjuna's position to be one of extreme skepticism, if not nihilism. Some have also charged that his arguments are little more than sophistry. Others have had a more positive evaluation of Madhyamaka, but they have put forward varying interpretations of Nāgārjuna's aim and methods.

An examination of all these views is beyond the scope of this article; and in any case, the matter has been much discussed by a number of scholars. To be brief, let me just say that I agree with those who see the notion of intrinsic nature (svabhāva) as a key to understanding Madhyamaka. Intrinsic nature is defined in MMK 15:2cd as being noncontingent and not dependent on anything other than itself. Thus according to Nāgārjuna, it is necessarily unchanging and permanent. The main target of the Mādhhyamikas' criticism is the belief that our conceptual categories refer to entities (bhāva) which exist by virtue of having an intrinsic nature. Such entities would be inconsistent with the
facts of impermanence (*anityatā*) and dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*), which are basic to the Buddhist world-view.

Hence, according to the Mādhyamikas, all phenomena are empty in the sense of being empty of intrinsic nature. Nāgārjuna compares the way in which things do exist to the mode of existence of mirages and magical illusions. (See MMK 17:31–33, for example.) Like such illusions, things appear in dependence on causes and conditions; but they are not appearances of intrinsically existent entities.

The question I would like to address is the following: How does the philosophical analysis which I have just described relate to the soteriological goals of Buddhism? That Nāgārjuna is concerned with these goals is stated quite explicitly in such works as the *Ratnāvali*, but it is also clearly implied at several places in the MMK. For example, MMK 18:5 says,

> Because of the cessation of action (*karma*) and afflictions (*kleśa*), there is liberation. Action and afflictions are due to conceptual construction (*vikalpa*).

> Those [conceptual constructions come] from linguistic proliferation (*prapañca*); but linguistic proliferation ceases in emptiness.

Madhyamaka is thus conceived of as a means, with liberation as its ultimate end. But the question remains, how does philosophical argumentation lead to spiritual goals? To attempt to answer this question, I will examine chapter twenty-three of the MMK, where the connection between philosophy and soteriology is particularly close to the surface. (In this chapter, Nāgārjuna frequently alludes to arguments made earlier in the MMK without repeating them in detail; but I think that the general thrust of the chapter will be clear even to readers unfamiliar with the MMK.) I have consulted the commentaries, primarily the *Prajināpradīpa* and the *Prasannapadā*; but my discussion will be based insofar as possible on the MMK itself.

Chapter twenty-three of the MMK takes up a theme introduced earlier. In MMK 17:26b, Nāgārjuna stated that "those afflictions [do] not [exist] in reality (*tattvataḥ*)." (The afflictions (*kleśa*) are desire (*rāga*), hatred (*dvesa*), and confusion (*moha*).) In the first two verses of chapter twenty-three, he explains why the afflictions are not real:
It has been said that desire, hatred, and confusion arise from conceptual construction (samkalpa). They indeed occur in dependence on the errors of [apprehending things as] pleasant or unpleasant.

Those which occur in dependence on the errors of [apprehending things as] pleasant or unpleasant Do not exist because of intrinsic nature. Therefore the afflictions [do] not [exist] in reality.

Here the phrase which I have translated as "the errors of [apprehending things as] pleasant or unpleasant" is the compound subha (pleasant) plus asubha (unpleasant) plus viparyasa (error) with a masculine plural ending. Candrakirti takes it to be a triple dvandva, "the pleasant, the unpleasant, and error;" but the Tibetan translations of the commentaries of Bhavaviveka, Buddhapalita, and the author of the Akutobhayā understand it to be a tatpurusa, as I have translated it here. I have also added the phrase "apprehending things as" for the sake of clarity.

Thus the afflictions are not ultimately real because they do not exist by virtue of some intrinsic nature of their own. They exist in dependence on the conceptually constructed errors of taking things to be pleasant or unpleasant.

Additional reasons are given in the next three verses. In MMK 23:3–4, it is argued that afflictions must belong to someone; but since neither the existence nor the nonexistence of the self can be established, the afflictions also cannot be established. The fifth verse looks at the relation between the afflictions and the afflicted mind. Alluding to similar analyses earlier in the MMK, it notes that the afflictions and the one who is afflicted cannot be shown to be the same or different. Therefore, by implication, neither of them possesses an intrinsic nature.

If one supposes that the afflictions derive some sort of ultimate reality from their dependence on error, Nāgārjuna replies in verse six,

The errors of [apprehending things as] pleasant or unpleasant do not exist by intrinsic nature. What are the afflictions [which occur] in dependence on the errors of [apprehending things as] pleasant or unpleasant?
The remainder of chapter twenty-three is largely devoted to explaining why error does not exist by intrinsic nature. As we saw in verse one, error (viparyāsa or viparyaya) is closely related to conceptual construction (samkalpa). Verse seven tells us that the objects of the six senses are conceptually constructed (vikalpyate) as the objects of desire, hatred, and confusion. Nāgārjuna has already shown—particularly in chapter three of the MMK—that the six sense objects have no intrinsic nature. Thus 23:8ab says,

<8ab> Forms, sounds, tastes, and tangibles, smells and dharmas, are isolated (kevala).10

The commentaries gloss "isolated" as "without intrinsic nature." The verse continues,

<8cd> They are like a city of the gandharvas; they are similar to a mirage or a dream.

Since the objects of the afflictions are not ultimately real, neither are the afflictions; and the same can be said of errors, which also refer to the sense objects. Therefore in verse nine Nāgārjuna asks,

<9> How will either the pleasant or the unpleasant occur
In those [objects], which are like a person [created by] magical illusion and similar to a reflection?

In other words, objects are perceived by the senses; and this includes the perception of dharmas by the mind. Error or conceptual construction takes these objects to be either pleasant or unpleasant, giving rise to desire, hatred, and so on. But since the objects themselves have no intrinsic nature, neither do the errors and afflictions, which are based on those objects.

Moreover, the pleasant and the unpleasant exist only in relation to each other. Neither is established by its own intrinsic nature, since that would imply that they could exist separately. Thus in verses ten and eleven, Nāgārjuna says,

<10> The pleasant, in dependence on which we could designate the unpleasant as unpleasant,
Does not exist without relation (anapeksya) [to the unpleasant]. Therefore the pleasant is not possible.

The unpleasant, in dependence on which we could designate the pleasant as pleasant,

Does not exist without relation [to the pleasant]. Therefore the unpleasant is not possible.\textsuperscript{11}

That is to say, neither the pleasant nor the unpleasant can be established unless the other is first established. If one argues that they come into being simultaneously in mutual dependence, this, for Nāgārjuna, shows that neither has any intrinsic nature. (See related arguments in chapters six and eleven of the MMK.) Thus in verse twelve, Nāgārjuna asks,

If the pleasant does not exist, how will desire arise?
If the unpleasant does not exist, how will hatred arise?

In these last three verses, as is often the case in the MMK, some qualification such as "by intrinsic nature" or "in ultimate reality" (paramārtha-ataḥ) must be supplied from the context of the work as a whole. One cannot deny that on the conventional level, things are perceived as pleasant or unpleasant and that attachment and aversion do arise.

There is, however, another way to look at such statements. I argued previously that Nāgārjuna wants to make an ontological point about the way in which phenomena exist or do not exist. We can now begin to see that he is also showing the reader a new way of looking at the world. From this new perspective, errors and afflictions do not arise; or if they do arise, they do not bind one.

Nāgārjuna's interest in leading the reader to a new kind of experience may also account for the fact that chapter twenty-three, like the MMK generally, is not tightly structured. Often, more than one argument is adduced to prove the same point; and that point may be repeated in different words. As philosophical argumentation, this is redundant; but such repetition can be very useful for purposes of reflection and meditation.

Nāgārjuna has so far examined error in terms of the pleasant and the unpleasant. Now he turns to a traditional set of four errors described in Anguttara-nikāya II 52. They are: (1) to hold
that the impermanent \((anîtya)\) is permanent \((nîtya)\); (2) to hold that suffering \((duhkha)\) is happiness \((sukha)\); (3) to hold that the impure \((aśuci)\) is pure \((śuci)\); and (4) to hold that what is not a self \((anâtman)\) is a self \((âtman)\). In MMK 23:13–14, Nāgārjuna discusses the first error, namely, to mistake the impermanent for the permanent.

\<13\> “The impermanent is permanent”: If to hold thus is an error,
[Then] because permanence does not exist in what is empty, why is it not an error to hold [that the empty is permanent]?

\<14\> “The impermanent is impermanent”: If to hold thus is not an error,
[Then] because impermanence does not exist in what is empty, why is it not an error to hold [that the empty is impermanent]?^{12}

In other words, what is empty of intrinsic nature cannot be said to be either permanent or impermanent. Presumably, this is so because there is no independent, self-existent entity of which either permanence or impermanence could be predicated.

Suppose that one admits that no ultimately real entity exists which could be either permanent or impermanent. One might still argue that the act of mistaking or holding things to be either permanent or impermanent does exist. If the act of holding exists, then the one who holds, the cognition by which one holds, and the object which is held to be such-and-such must all exist.

Nāgārjuna replies in verse fifteen:

\<15\> That by which one holds, the holding, the holder, and what is being held,
Are all extinguished \((upasânta)\). Therefore holding does not exist.

Here “holding” is \(grāha\); “that by which one holds” is \(yena grhnāti\); the “holder” is \(grahitṛ\); and “what is being held” is \(yad grhyate\). Gramatically, “holding” is the \(bhāva\) or verbal action; “that by which one holds” is the \(karana\) or instrument; the “holder” is the \(kartṛ\) or agent; and “what is being held” is the
karman or direct object. This sort of argument occurs at a number of places in the MMK, notably in chapter two and chapter eight. The point is that all these elements that go to make up an action are interdependent, and that therefore none of them exists by intrinsic nature.  

Continuing the same line of thought in verse sixteen, Nāgārjuna asks,

<16> If holding either falsely or correctly does not exist,  
   For whom would there be error? For whom would there be nonerror?

Thus there are no grounds for attachment either to the idea that one is in error or to the idea that one is not in error.

Verses seventeen and eighteen also argue that no one who is in error, whether conceived of as a self or a mind, exists by intrinsic nature. They do so by using a pattern of reasoning first used in chapter two of the MMK and referred to repeatedly in subsequent chapters.

<17> For one who is [already] in error, errors are not possible.  
     For one who is not [yet] in error, errors are not possible.  
<18> For one who is [in the process of] coming to be in error,  
     errors are not possible.  
   Consider for yourself: For whom are errors possible?

Here the focus is on the moment at which someone enters the state of being in error. If at that moment, one is already in error (viparīta), then coming to be in error again is redundant. (Here it is assumed that the error in question is the same in both cases.) If one is not yet in error (aviparīta), then by definition one is free from error; and it would be contradictory to say that one is free from error and comes to be in error at the same moment. As for one who is in the process of coming to be in error (viparyayamāna), it is argued that there is no such third category, different both from one who is in error and one who is not in error. If what is meant is that one is partly in error and partly not in error, then the previous arguments apply to each part separately. Thus by this argument also, there is no self-existent entity which could be called “one who is in error.”

Verse nineteen presents yet another argument on the same
point. Alluding to the examination of origination in the first chapter of the MMK, it says,

<19> If errors are unoriginated, how will they exist?
If errors are unoriginated, how will one who has fallen into error exist?

Here, of course, "unoriginated" (anutpanna) means "not originated by intrinsic nature."

Following verse nineteen, the Prasannapadā adds a verse which is not found in the earlier Tibetan translations. I will also omit it here. Thus in what follows, verses 20 through 24 correspond to verses 21 through 25 of the Prasannapadā's chapter twenty-three.

In verses ten and eleven, Nāgārjuna argued that since the pleasant and the unpleasant are established only in relation to each other, neither exists by intrinsic nature. Now, in verses twenty and twenty-one, he makes a similar argument concerning the four errors which were mentioned previously.

<20> If self and purity and permanence and happiness exist,
[Then] self, purity, permanence, and happiness are not errors.
<21> If self and purity and permanence and happiness do not exist,
[Then] nonself, impurity, impermanence, and suffering do not exist.

In other words, if conditioned things are permanent, then the notion of permanence is not an error. On the other hand, if there is nothing which is permanent, then the concept of permanence could not arise; and there would be nothing in relation to which impermanence could be conceived. Since the concepts of permanence and impermanence are relational, it is not possible to say that one is purely erroneous while the other is purely correct.

The relative character of permanence and impermanence also undermines the notion that there are entities which are permanent or impermanent by intrinsic nature. Intrinsic nature is, by definition, independent and "self-contained;" but permanence and impermanence imply each other. If we say that some-
thing is permanent, it can be so only in relation to something else which is impermanent; but intrinsic nature cannot be rela-
tional. These same arguments also apply to the other three pairs
of alleged errors and nonerrors.

In the last three verses of chapter twenty-three, Nāgārjuna
discusses the soteriological side of Madhyamaka more explicitly.
Suppose that someone has pondered what has been said so far
and has come to some deep understanding of it, deep enough
that categories like pleasant and unpleasant are experienced as
conceptual imputations rather than as objective facts about the
world. Or, in more traditional terms, suppose that śrutamāyī
dīpajñā has been developed into cintāmāyī dīpajñā and that in turn
into bhāvanamāyī dīpajñā. 14 What is the result for the person who
has done so? In verse twenty-two, Nāgārjuna says,

<22> Thus ignorance (avidyā) ceases because of the cessation
of error.
When ignorance has ceased, karmic conditionings
(samskāraḥ) and so on cease.

While one would usually say that ignorance is a cause of
error rather than vice versa, 15 Nāgārjuna may mean that igno-
rance is a necessary and sufficient cause of error, so that the
cessation of one necessarily entails the cessation of the other.
As we have seen, ignorance and error lead to desire, hatred,
and confusion; and these afflictions, in turn, lead to actions
performed under their influence. In this context, samskāraḥ,
which I have translated as “karmic conditionings,” are equivalent
to karman, “action.” The context, of course, is the twelvelfold
dependent origination, of which avidyā and samskāraḥ are the
first two members. In verse twenty-two, “and so on” evidently
refers to the remaining ten members, ending with birth (jāti)
and old-age-and-death (jarā-maraṇa).

The idea that the cessation of ignorance leads to the cessa-
tion of suffering and rebirth is quite traditional in Buddhism.
For Nāgārjuna, however, this “cessation” is not the ceasing to
exist of some real entity called “ignorance” or “error.” Instead,
it is the realization that all things, including even error and
ignorance, lack intrinsic nature and do not exist as self-sufficient
entities.
Indeed, according to Nāgārjuna, if ignorance and afflictions existed by intrinsic nature, liberation would be impossible. Thus verse twenty-three asks,

<23> If any afflictions of anyone were existent by intrinsic nature,
   How could they be abandoned? Who will abandon the existent?

Conversely, verse twenty-four inquires,

<24> If any afflictions of anyone were nonexistent by intrinsic nature,
   How could they be abandoned? Who will abandon the nonexistent?

Nāgārjuna states in chapter fifteen of the MMK that intrinsic nature is necessarily unchanging. Presumably, this is so because the independence and self-sufficiency of intrinsic nature would make it impervious to other influences. Thus if one had afflictions by intrinsic nature, this condition would continue indefinitely.

On the other hand, if the afflictions were nonexistent by intrinsic nature (abhūtāh svabhāvena), the question of abandoning them would not arise. Here abhūtāh svabhāvena apparently refers to a kind of absolute nonexistence in which things would be intrinsically unable even to appear. Nāgārjuna has said that the mode of existence of phenomena is similar to that of mirages or dreams. It is not the case that they exist by intrinsic nature, but they are perceived and experienced.

To sum up, according to Nāgārjuna, liberation does not come about through escaping or suppressing ignorance and error, but through a profound comprehension of their true nature, which is their lack of intrinsic nature. As Nāgārjuna put it in another work, the *Yuktiśaṭṭhikā*:

The thorough comprehension of samsāric existence (bhava) itself is called nirvāṇa.

Thus a Mādhyamika can say that ignorance and error cease, in the sense that one comes to understand something which one
did not understand before. But if one means that a real entity called "ignorance" is destroyed and another real entity called "enlightenment" or "liberation" is produced, this very idea becomes an obstacle to liberation. Before one is liberated, things lack intrinsic nature; and they are equally lacking in intrinsic nature after one is liberated.

Chapter twenty-three of the MMK shows how Nāgārjuna carries on philosophical analysis with a soteriological end in view. The soteriological goal is paramount, but philosophy can function as an important part of the soteriological process. Philosophy opens the door to an understanding of things as they really are. Other factors of the path come into play, as Nāgārjuna discusses in the Ratnāvalī and elsewhere; but it is the thorough realization of this understanding which constitutes liberation.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was read at the Eighth Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Berkeley, Calif., Aug. 8–10, 1987.
4. \(\text{akṛtīmāḥ svabhāvāḥ hi nirapekṣāḥ paratra ca.}\)
5. See MMK 15:8cd, \(\text{prakṛter anyathābhāvo na hi jatūpapadyate,}\) where \(\text{prakṛti}\) is used as a synonym of \(\text{svabhāva}\).
7. \(\text{karmakleśaksayān mokṣaḥ karmakleśā vikalpataḥ| te prapañcāt prapañcas\}}\)
\(\text{tu śūnyatāyām nirudhyate||}\)
8. \(\text{te ca kleśā na tattvataḥ.}\)
10. In 23:8ab, Nāgārjuna almost quotes a passage from the early Buddhist canon: \(\text{evam rūpā rasā saddā gandhā phassā ca kevalā iṣṭā dhammā anīṣṭhā}\)
ca na ppavedhenti tādino (Anguttaranikāya III 379; see also Vinaya I 185, Theragāthā 643, and Kathāvatthu 90).

11. My translation of verses ten and eleven follows the wording of the early Tibetan translations. The Akutobhaya, the Buddhāpālita-Mulamadhyamakārītī, the Prajñāpradīpa, and the Prajñāpradīpa-ṭīkā were all translated by Jñānagarbha and Cog ro Klu'i rgyal mtshan in the early ninth century. In some places, as here, their text of the verses of MMK is a little different from that found in the Tibetan translation and the Sanskrit manuscripts of the Prasannapadā, all of which are considerably later. See the appendix for the reconstructed Sanskrit text.

12. In MMK 23:13–14, as in 23:10–11, the wording of the earlier Tibetan translations is different from the text of the MMK in the Prasannapadā. Again, I have translated the earlier version.


14. See, e.g., Lindtner, Nāgārjuniana, pp. 269, 274 (Master of Wisdom, pp. 334–5, 339). The three types of praṇā or “discernment” are derived from śrutī, “hearing,” i.e., hearing and learning the content of texts or oral teachings; cintā, “reflection” on what has been learned, including logical argument and analysis; and bhāvanā, “meditation” on what has thus been learned and examined.

15. See, e.g., Abhidharmakosa 5:32cd,33 and 5:36cd, with the bhāya.

16. See note 5.


APPENDIX

Sanskrit Text of MMK, Chapter Twenty-Three


sāmkalpaprabhavo rāgo dveṣo mohaś ca kathyate|
śubhāsbhaviparyāsān sambhavanti pratītya hi||
śubhāśubhāviparyāyaṁ sambhavanti pratītya ye
te svabhāvān na vidyante tasmāt klesā na tattvataḥ

ātmano 'stitvanāstītve na katham cica sidhyataḥ
tam vināstītvasāstītve klesānām sidhyataḥ katham

kasyacid dhi bhavantime klesāḥ sa ca na sidhyati
kaścid āho vinā kaṃcit santi klesā na kasyacit

svakāyaadrśtivat klesāḥ kliṣṭe santi na paṇcadhā
tvarkāyaadrśtivat kliṣṭam klesāṣv api na paṇcadhāḥ

svabhāvato na vidyante śubhāśubhāviparyāyaḥ

pratītya katamān klesāḥ śubhāśubhāviparyāyaṁ

rūpaśabdārasstrasāḥ gandhā dharmāḥ ca śādvīdham

vastu rāgasya doṣasya mohasya ca vikalpyate

rūpaśabdārasstrasāḥ gandhā dharmāḥ ca kevalāḥ
gandharvanagarākārā maricisvapnasaṃnībhāḥ

aśubham vā śubham vāpi kutas teṣu bhaviṣyati

māyāpuruṣaḥkalpeṣu pratibimbāsamesu ca

anapekṣya śubham nāsty aśubham praṇāpayemahī

yat pratītyāśubham tasmāc chubham naivopapadyate

anapekṣyaśubham nāsti śubham praṇāpayemahī

yat pratītya śubham tasmād aśubham naiva vidyate

avidyāmān ca subhe kuto rāgo bhaviṣyati

aśubhe 'vidyāmān ca kuto dveṣo bhaviṣyati

anītye nītyam ity evaṁ yadi grāho viparyayah

na nītyam vidyate śunye kuto grāho 'viparyayah

anītye 'nītyam ity evaṁ yadi grāho 'viparyayah

nānītyam vidyate śunye kuto grāho 'viparyayah

yena grhnāti yo grāho grahitā yac ca grahyate

upaśāntāni sarvānī tasmād grāho na vidyate

avidyāmānī grāho ca mithyā vā samyag eva vā

bhaved viparyayah kasya bhavet kasyāviparyayah

na cāpi viparītasya sambhavanti viparyayah

na cāpy aviparītasya sambhavanti viparyayah
na viparyasyamānasya saṃbhavanti viparyayāḥ||
vimṛṣasva svayam kasya saṃbhavanti viparyayāḥ|| 18

anutpannāḥ kathāṁ nāma bhaviṣyanti viparyayāḥ||
viparyayeśv ajāteṣu viparyayagataḥ kutāḥ|| 19

ātmā ca śuci nityāṁ ca sukhāṁ ca yadi vidyate||
ātmā ca śuci nityāṁ ca sukhāṁ ca na viparyayāḥ|| 20

nātmā ca śuci nityāṁ ca sukhāṁ ca yadi vidyate||
anātmā 'śucy anityāṁ ca naiva duḥkham ca vidyate|| 21

evaṁ nirudhyate 'vidyā viparyayanirodhanat||
avidyāyāṁ niruddhāyāṁ saṃskārādyāṁ nirudhyate|| 22

yadi bhūtāḥ svabhāvena kleśāḥ kecid dhi kasyacit||
kathāṁ nāma prahiṣyeraṁ kah svabhāvaṁ prahāsyati|| 23

yady abhūtāḥ svabhāvena kleśāḥ kecid dhi kasyacit||
kathāṁ nāma prahiṣyeraṁ ko 'sadbhāvaṁ prahāsyati|| 24