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THE SYSTEM OF THE TWO TRUTHS IN THE
PRASANNAPADĀ AND THE MADHYAMAKĀVATĀRA:
A STUDY IN MĀDHYAMIKA SOTERIOLOGY

> Although the world may quarrel with me, I have
> no quarrel with the world: that which is considered
> to exist in the context of the world I also assert as
> existent; and that which is considered not to exist
> in the world I also assert as non-existent.
>
> Samyuttanikāya, 22.64.103; as cited
> by Candrakīrti in Prasannapadā, p. 370,
> and Madhyamakāvatāra, p. 179.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the *Madhyamakaśāstra*, *nirvāna* is described in very
uncompromsing terms. *Nirvāna* is the ultimate truth,[1] it is reality (*tattva*).[2]
Nirvāna is not dependent on anything whatsoever, it is entirely at peace and
absolutely unsusceptible to conceptualization.[3] When the mind has become
inactive, when the business of the world with its dichotomy between subject
and object has come to a complete standstill because the chaos of birth,
old age and death is no more, then one is said to have arrived at the final
beatitude of *nirvāna*.[4] Candrakīrti states quite clearly that "it is utterly
impossible for *nirvāna* to be attained by any path that has to do with
samsāra, the beginningless cycle of birth and death".[5] Whereas *samsāra* is
ignorance, *nirvāna* is the ultimate truth.[6] *Samsāra* is bewilderment, passion
and enmity, and *nirvāna* is complete tranquility. Understood in this way,
as final release from all the misery of birth, decay and death, *nirvāna* is
the goal of the Buddhist Path, the *raison d'être* of Buddhist philosophy
and practice, and the ultimate concern of Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamakaśāstra*.[7]
And yet, if *nirvāna* is an absolute denial of *samsāra*, then how are we to
interpret *kārika* XXV. 19? –

> *Samsāra* is not the slightest bit different from *nirvāna*;
> nor is *nirvāna* the slightest bit different from *samsāra*.

Like much of what Nāgārjuna wrote, this stanza appears to stand in absolute

defiance of the tradition which preceded the development of Mādhyamika.
Worse yet, *kārika* XXV. 19 and others like it lend themselves to no facile
interpretation even within the context of the Mādhyamika system itself.

As we shall see in what follows, the words *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* are
representative of two broad divisions of technical terminology within the
Madhyamakaśāstra. On the one hand, the term *saṃsāra* quite naturally
aligns itself with other words like *avidyā, svabhāva* and *duḥkha*, all of
which seem to coalesce around the generic concept of *saṃvṛti*, the relative
or conventional truth. On the other hand, *nirvāṇa, śūnyatā, śānti* and many
other terms from the second division are grouped very conveniently under
the rubric of *paramārthasatya*, the ultimate truth. Such terminology is used
to illuminate various particular nuances of meaning within each of the two
principal divisions. For instance, whereas *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are primarily
of soteriological significance, *svabhāva* and *śūnyatā* refer to ontological
issues, and the terms *duḥkha* and *śānti* denote two specific affective states.
Saṃvṛti and *paramārtha* are not necessarily the most important concepts
within these two classes of terminology, but they are in a sense the most
general or unmarked terms, and therefore they are especially significant
for the purposes of philosophical investigation. Any one of these words
carries with it connotations stemming from its association with the other
words of its class, yet this is perhaps most evident in the case of *saṃvṛti*
and *paramārtha*, for each one clearly reflects the entire range of meaning
associated with its respective division. This should become evident when we
take a closer look at the system of the two truths.

1.1. *The Nature of the Problem*

If we were simply confronted with these two distinct classes of terminology,
then the situation would not be nearly so complex as it actually is. Upon
first glance, both divisions seem to represent very neatly packaged groups
of concepts: *saṃsāra* is bondage, *nirvāṇa* is liberation; *svabhāva* is unreality
and *śūnyatā* is reality; *saṃvṛti* is error or falsehood and *paramārtha* is
truth. One can locate literally hundreds of passages in the literature of the
Mādhyamika to support this type of strictly dualistic understanding of these
words. However, there are many places, as in *kārika* XXV. 19, where the
boundry between the two groups seems to blur or to break down altogether,
and these places serve as focal points for a great deal of the philosophical
controversy which has surrounded the Mādhyamika system since the time

of Nāgārjuna. Over the years, such passages have been a thorn in the side
of many of Nāgārjuna's apologists, and at the same time it is certain that
conundrums like the one presented in *kārika* XXV. 19 are the vital centers
of Mādhyamika thought. They cannot be summarily dismissed, and still
it seems as if no single approach is adequate to explain their significance
within the pattern of the system as a whole. Clearly the issues involved are
not merely of passing interest, since one may easily argue that it is to just
such lines as those quoted above from *kārika* XXV. 19 that we must look
in order to find solutions to several very important problems.

1.2. The "Linguistic" Interpretation of Mādhyamika

Most recently, a sort of linguistic analysis has shown itself to be one espe-
cially fruitful method of unravelling the paradox presented by these passages.
With specific reference to *kārika* XXV. 19, D. Daye summarizes the
conclusions of this linguistic approach:

The above suggest that such distinctions and limits are merely context restricted but
still seductive bits of language. One is also led to the suggestion that the distinctions
of language (witness *nirvāna* and *saṃsāra*) are merely and only internally consistent
and are only pragmatically correlated with our perceptions. This is quite enough and it
is quite reasonable. However, such a view entails no non-circular conclusion about
anything which is said to escape the warm boundries of human care (*duḥkha*) and the
bewitching motherhood of talking (*saṃvṛtisatya*).[8]

According to this analysis, the philosophy of the Mādhyamika embodies
a special meta-language which has the particular capability to "diminish the
magical attachments *to* and obscurations *of* our inner language".[9] Elsewhere
in the same article Daye writes:

The implications of the ontological status of language-descriptions and their correlations
with the publicly known objects in the furniture of the world lead one to the conclusion
that all ontological descriptions are merely pragmatically useful but provisional fictions.
They guarntee only that what is known is simply (and tautologically) consistent with
what *is* known. That is, no conclusions about the transcendental or ultimate nature
(*yathābhūtam*) are *authorized* by statements verified by public or private observation:
rather, what can be known (explicitly) *is* to be known.[10]

1.3. "Reality as Fiction" – A Soteriological Approach

There is little question that Daye's interpretation is justified on the basis
of the Mādhyamika's own concept of "dependent designation" (*prajñaptir*

upādāya), and I have taken this analysis as my point of departure for what
follows. However, as we shall soon discover, the works of early Indian
philosophers are not always so explicit as one might desire with respect
to these issues, and this is especially true in the case of questions regarding
the ontological status of the world. Precisely what are the implications of
this view of language and conceptual thought, attributed to the Mādhyamika,
which asserts that "all ontological descriptions are merely pragmatically
useful but provisional fictions"? In an article entitled "Everyday Reality
as Fiction — A Mādhyamika Interpretation" [11] Charles Crittenden makes
the following very interesting observation with respect to the system of the
two truths:

> I think . . . that this distinction is best explicated in terms of a difference in the
> standpoint one can take in regard to the world and the kinds of attitude which are
> possible given these standpoints. To try and interpret the two-truth idea ontologically
> would not seem promising: for on the Mādhyamika view, at least, there is not some
> transcendental reality over and above everyday reality which could be denoted by
> expressions in the higher truth. Rather this and the lower truth both concern the familiar
> world; hence some non-metaphysical approach seems best and certainly the notion of
> an attitude, already present in the analysis of the motivations of the reality-as-fiction
> proposal, suggests itself. [12]

Elsewhere in the same article Crittenden goes on to say,

> Buddhism is after all not only, or even especially, a set of philosophical doctrines but
> is intimately connected to the practice of meditation and the experiences thereby
> sought for. Someone who adopted typical Buddhist philosophical theories but who
> had no interest in meditational practice or in certain sorts of experience would hardly
> qualify as Buddhist — a point made again and again in Buddhist literature. And
> certainly much of Buddhist theorizing can be regarded as attempting to articulate
> concepts and principles explaining and justifying meditation and the kinds of
> experience which this aims at producing. [13]

What is the nature of the relationship defined by *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*?
What exactly *is* given in the context of mundane experience (*loka-saṃvṛti*)?
Finally, how is this content analyzed by the Mādhyamika, and how is it
transformed, if at all, through the experience of *nirvāṇa*? Over the course
of the next several pages I intend to examine Candrakīrti's two major
philosophical treatises, and by means of this examination I hope to reveal
the degree to which his work demonstrates an awareness of these questions
not simply as linguistic problems, but also — and primarily, I believe —
as soteriological issues.

The Mādhyamika's concept of language implies a particular attitude towards the world, or better yet, a particular way of seeing this world *as it is (yathābhūtam)*. As a Buddhist philosopher, Candrakīrti not only assumes that such a yogic vision is indeed possible, but he clearly states that he has taken this assumption as the touchstone for his own philosophical analysis.[14] Therefore, by taking a closer look at these texts I expect to accomplish two primary tasks: first, to clarify the original terminology of this literature; and second, to develop an appreciation of the Mādhyamika's concept of language within the context of his own fundamental belief in the possibility of liberation through the yogic vision of phenomena as empty of intrinsic being.

2. NIHILISM, ETERNALISM AND THE MIDDLE WAY

When we turn to the history of the controversy that has surrounded Nāgārjuna's philosophy, it is immediately evident that debate has focused time and time again upon a few crucial topics, and from among these topics there is certainly none that has inspired more elaborate and heated rhetoric than has the issue of nihilism. The spectre of nihilism obviously haunted Nāgārjuna's work from the beginning, and despite Candrakīrti's spirited efforts to dismiss the problem, one is perhaps never really convinced that Candrakīrti himself, after all, did not do more than his share to maintain a comfortable place for this unwanted guest. To start with, let us investigate the nature of the allegations raised against the Mādhyamika by his opponents, so the issue is acutally not that of nihilism alone; rather it has to do with the problem of nihilism and eternalism versus the Middle Way.

It is not difficult to isolate the source of these charges of nihilism. Throughout the *Madhyamakaśāstra* Nāgārjuna rejects every possible argument designed to substantiate the existence of apparent phenomena. If it is true that the Mādhyamika denies the existence of all that contributes to mundane experience, then his opponents may well be justified in their fear that such a position differs very little from the nihilist's rejection of all meaning whatsoever. Indeed, by far the most serious accusation of all was brought to bear against the Mādhyamika by his own fellow Buddhists:

If everything is empty, then nothing comes into or goes out of existence. Consequently, for you the four noble truths themselves do not exist[15] . . . and by expounding [the emptiness of all things] you reject the three jewels.[16]

It is difficult to avoid reading the denial of being (*bhāva*) as anything other than an acceptance of non-being (*abhāva*) with all the dire implications of such a position; and yet, according to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, this represents a grave misunderstanding of the Mādhyamika's brand of negation. Being is not rejected in favor of non-being, but rather being and non-being are both denied in order to provide access to a seperate vantage point from which the world is seen to be neither absolutely real nor absolutely false. Moreover, it is important to note the particular way in which Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti countered the accusation leveled just above:

In response to this we contend that you do not know the purpose (*prayojana*) of emptiness, nor emptiness itself, nor its meaning. And therefore you are lost.[17]

In his commentary to this stanza Candrakīrti explains the "purpose" of emptiness in the following way:

Through your own misconceptions you, sirs, have mistakenly assumed that emptiness is non-existence, and directing such accusations against us . . . you become the victims of great distress and so you are totally lost. What this means is simply that you are slain by a variety of pure fantasies . . . And therefore, because you do not comprehend the intrinsic nature of things as they are, your characterization [of emptiness] is senseless and bears no relationship whatsoever to our own explanations. Then what is the purpose of emptiness? This is stated in [*Madhyamakaśāstra*, XV. 1], the chapter dealing with examination of the self: "Liberation follows from the destruction of both karmic action and the afflictions. Karmic action and the afflictions arise from reified notions (*kalpanā*) [of real and unreal things], and these are produced from conceptual diffusion. Conceptual diffusion, however, ceases in emptiness." This being the case, emptiness is taught in order to effectively tranquilize the process of conceptual diffusion (*prapañca*), and therefore the purpose of emptiness is the tranquilizing of all conceptual diffusion. On the other hand, in imagining that emptiness means non-existence you, sirs, actually strengthen the net of conceptual diffusion and do not in the least understand the purpose of emptiness.[18]

The purpose of emptiness is clearly soteriological. Further along in this same section of his commentary Candrakīrti reminds us that the term "emptiness" is itself simply a linguistic device, but he seems to feel that we would be less likely to lose touch with this fact if we understood the concept in a broader context which took into account the soteriological purpose of the *Madhyamakaśāstra*.

Candrakīrti holds this distinction to be most critical: whereas he conceives of "eternalism" (*śāsvatavāda*) as the reified concept of "being" (*bhāva*) and nihilism (*ucchedavāda*) as the reified concept of "non-being" (*abhāva*),

the Middle Way is distinguished from both of these as a third alternative which is presented as the single philosophically viable description of the true nature of phenomena.

How are we to approach the notion of the Middle Way? Perhaps the best advice at this juncture comes from Nāgārjuna, when he tells us that "those who do not understand the distinction between the two truths cannot possibly understand the profound truth of the Buddha's teaching".[19] Therefore, we shall proceed with an investigation of the system of the two truths.

3. THE SYSTEM OF THE TWO TRUTHS

All entities bear a dual nature, which corresponds to the entity as apprehended by either correct or incorrect perception. The object revealed by correct percpetion is reality (*tattva*), while that revealed by incorrect perception is referred to as the Truth of the Screen (*saṃvṛti-satya*).[20]

3.1. Saṃvṛti

3.1.1. *General characteristics of the "screened truth"*. A very concise introduction to the nature of this "screen" is provided in the 24th chapter of the *Prasannapadā*, where Candrakīrti mentions four general characteristics of *saṃvṛti*.[21]

(1) *Saṃvṛti* is complete and total covering (*samantādvaraṇam*). This means that the phenomena of the world are not what they seem to be; they are false (*moṣa*) and misleading, because they do not actually exist as discrete entities. Although we take the contents or our perceptions for granted, when closely examined through the medium of the Mādhyamika dialectic our beliefs about the world prove to be riddled with contradiction. So-called solid objects dematerialize under the force of the dialectic.

(2) *Saṃvṛti* is the ignorance (*avidyā*) that arises from the total obscuration of the reality of individual entities. "Precisely because it obstructs [awareness of] the intrinsic nature [of all phenomena], delusion is a screen (*saṃvṛti*); and on its account what is merely fabricated appears as real."[22] Ignorance is the source of suffering in the world,[23] for it is said to be conjoined with all the other afflictions of covetousness, anger, pride, attachment to false theories, and doubt or cynicism. This is *saṃvṛti* as the misery of *saṃsāra*.[24]

(3) *Saṃvṛti* is the circumstance that all things exist in dependence on
each other; that is to say, that they are founded on each other in a
relationship defined by absolute reciprocity. Each of the elements of mundane
experience is dependent for its own existence on a collocation of causes
and conditions. This is *saṃvṛti* as dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

(4) *Saṃvṛti* is characterized as the signs and symbols (*saṃketa*) which
make possible the business of the world (*loka-vyavahāra*). This is also
saṃvṛti as *saṃsāra*, not as suffering, however, but rather in the affectively
neutral sense of language and conceptual thought.

3.1.2. *Conventional knowledge*. Candrakīrti accepts four valid means of
knowledge (*pramāna*) associated with *saṃvṛti*:[25] (1) inference (*anumāna*);
(2) authority (*āgama*); (3) analogy (*upamāna*); and (4) sense perception
(*pratyakṣa*). These *pramāna*-s are totally dependent on the objects which
they reveal, and the objects are equally dependent on them:

> Insofar as there are means of knowledge, there are objects of knowledge; and insofar
> as there are objects of knowledge, there are means of knowledge. It is certain that
> neither the means nor the object of knowledge can be established as existent in and of
> itself.[26]

The primary significance of this definition of *pramāna* is that for
Candrakīrti neither "the world" (*loka*) nor any other single entity (*bhāva*)
can be absolutely affirmed. There can be no "being-in-and-of-itself"
(*bhāvasvabhāva*), nor any means of knowing such a substance even were it
to somehow exist. This effectively constitutes a refutation of "eternalism"
defined as any sort of substance ontology that entails a reification of the
objective referent posited by a word or concept. It also seems to imply that
neither the world as a whole nor any other individual entity can be absolutely
negated: there can be no valid reification of the concept of "non-being"
(*abhāvasvabhāva*); that is, non-being can only be conceptualized in
opposition to being. This is a very important point for Candrakīrti, and
one which he emphasizes by stating that "it is on this account that the
world must exist just as it is perceived".[27] A third and final ramification
of this notion of *pramāna* is brought out in *Madhyamakāvatāra*, VI.31:

> Mundane experience is not authoritative in every respect, and therefore it does
> not contradict any dealings with reality. However, if an object of mundane experience
> is negated through recourse to [a metaphysical argument used] in the context of

mundane experience, then the testimony of mundane experience may itself
effectively be used to contradict that negation.

Essentially this is a restatement of the first two points already mentioned
above, since it is nothing more than a restriction placed on all four
pramāṇa-s which limits their authority to the realm of *saṃvṛti*. In the
auto-commentary, however, the implications of this *kārika* are made
clear. There we are told that one may not legitimately negate the objects
given in mundane experience by relying on an argument that is drawn
from testimony supposed to lie outside the socio-linguistic context
defined by this common experience. Only the testimony of mundane
experience itself may be effectively used for this purpose, and this is enough
for the Mādhyamika. Candrakīrti writes in the summary to his position on
this issue:

One accepts "production from another" on the consensus of mundane experience,
and thus he avoids being contradicted by the world. On the other hand, according to
mundane experience it is also the case that there is not production from another, and
one may desire from this point of view to refute production from another, which
would then entail no contradiction by the world.[28]

This is the method of the dialectic, which claims to reveal the true nature
of *saṃvṛti* not by resorting to any substance ontology or metaphysical
position, but simply by drawing attention to the fact than certain basic
notions taken for granted by the world, as for instance the idea of causality,
are logically untenable. We will have occassion to explore the implications
of this approach to negation in greater detail,[29] but first we must briefly
review the types of *saṃvṛti* that are found in Candrakīrti's writings.

3.1.3. *The types of saṃvṛti. Madhyamakāvatāra* VI. 25 sets forth the two
principal divisions of *saṃvṛti*:

That which, within the realm of mundane experience, is apprehended by any of the
six unimpaired sense faculties is true according to mundane experience, while any
remaining reified concepts are false according to this same criterion.

On this basis we must discriminate between the *truth* of saṃvṛti (*saṃvṛti-
satya*), and conventional error (*mithyā*), or what Candrakīrti refers to as
"mere *saṃvṛti*" (*saṃvṛtimātra*).[30] Within each of these two divisions we
may further extrapolate two subcategories that can be defined according
to the type of *pramāṇa* associated with the objects contained in each

category. This being the case, I have contructed the following table which
provides an outline of the various types of *saṃvṛti* implicitly recognized
by Candrakīrti:

I. False *saṃvṛti* (*mithyāsamvṛti*, or *saṃvṛtimātra*)

General characteristics of the class	Specific example
(first three *pramāṇa*-s)	
(a) mere words (*śabdamātra*)	"son of a barren woman" (*vandhyāpūtra*)
(b) philosophical concepts	
(i) Buddhist dogma	"mind only", or repository consciousness" (*cittamātratā, ālayavijñāna*)[31]
(ii) Non-Buddhist dogma	"Self" (*ātman*)
(fourth *pramāṇa: pratyakṣa*)	
(c) impaired perception	
(*mṛṣādarśana*)	hallucination, mirage, distortions due to an optical defect
(d) meditative visualizations	skeletons visualized during *aśubhamanasikāra*[32]

II. True *saṃvṛti* (*saṃvṛtisatya*)

General characteristics of the class	Specific example
(first three *pramāṇa*-s)	
(a) objects of veridical mental cognition	"I" or "ego" (*ahaṃkāra*)[33] as agent or patient in mundane affairs (i.e. as founded on the *skandha*-s)
(fourth *pramāṇa: pratyakṣa*)	
(b) objects of veridical sense perception	mundane entities (form, sound, odor, taste and tactile phenomena)

Now let us attempt to establish a few generalizations on the basis of
this chart. The subdivisions according to *pramāṇa* were made in order to
facilitate enquiry into the criteria for distinguishing truth from error at
the level of *saṃvṛti*. In general, Candrakīrti's view of the matter seems clear
enough — for him any conventionally real object is "real" only insofar as
it is acknowledge to exist within the socio-linguistic nexus of cause and
effect which constitutes *saṃvṛtisatya*.[34] What this means is simply that every
real phenomenon is both an effect founded on a particular collocation of

causes and conditions, and a cause or condition with respect to the other phenomena which serve as its own effects. Assuming for the moment that this quality of efficacy is indeed the sole criterion for membership in the class of conventionally real objects, we will proceed to judge the types of *saṃvṛti* mentioned above using it as our standard.

(1) *Saṃvṛtisatya*. It is obvious that any object of veridical sense perception can be accounted for in terms of its efficacy within some cause-effect continuum: e.g. the son is an "effect" as produced from his father and mother, and a "cause" when, as an adult, he becomes the progenitor of his own offspring. The same standard also seems to apply in the case of objects of valid mental cognition. The conventionally valid notion of a self or ego is founded on cognition of the psycho-physical constituents (*skandha*-s); which is to say, the ego is an effect produced from the particular collocation of causes and conditions represented in the Buddhist analysis the body, consciousness, feeling, apperception and the predispositions. If this definition of the ego seems to reduce the individual personality to a mere tautology, then we should note that this is in some sense precisely the point: the self is recognized as an effect because it is produced from the psycho-physical constituents as cause: and the psycho-physical constituents are a cause, in this context, to the extent that they are reponsible for production of the concept of "self" as their effect. The same is of course true for all other phenomena:

When the carriage does not exist then the "possessor of parts" does not exist and neither do the parts themselves.[35]

And furthermore, from the auto-commentary:

Composite phenomena which are characterized by the false [appearance of] intrinsic being are produced in dependence on the error of ignorance. For example, the sprout which is characterized by the false [appearance of] intrinsic being is itself produced in dependence on a seed which is also characterized in the same way. Likewise, one should understand that all things whatsoever, as causes and effects, are characterized by the false [appearance of] intrinsic being.[36]

(2) *Mithyāsaṃvṛti*. Types I.c and I.d contain objects perceived by means of a sense faculty that is somehow "impaired". This impairment can be the result of internal factors like disease (e.g. ophthalmia) or temporarily induced meditative visualizations; or the result of external factors like a mirage or a magical illusion. In any case, these objects are false because they

do not possess any efficacy within the causal nexus defined by objects of
veridical sense perception. As regards the objects included within types I.a
and I.b, each of them is in its own way outside the scope of any conceivable
causal continuum *by definition*. Such objects are defined as *mere* concepts
that have originated in mental defects stemming from faulty logic or wrong
beliefs that may or may not have been cultivated through speculative
philosophy.[37]

3.1.4. *Concluding remarks with respect to saṃvṛti*. Candrakīrti briefly
characterizes the nature of *saṃvṛtisatya*, or conventional truth, in
Madhyamakāvatāra, VI.158—59:

> Even though the [existence of the carriage] must remain unproven ... either in reality
> or in the context of mundane experience, nevertheless here in the world it is designated
> in dependence on its parts, without critical analysis.

> This very [carriage] is a possessor of parts and pieces, it is referred to in the world as
> an "agent", and for common people it is even established as the appropriator (*upādatṛ*).
> Do not lose touch with the screen taken for granted by the world.

It is clear that *saṃvṛti* is not to be dismissed as totally unreal, since
phenomena are real insofar as they interact with each other as cause and
effect. Therefore, when *saṃvṛti* is referred to as illusion (*māyā*) this does
not so much emphasize the unreality of the world as it does the fact that
one may not validly reify the objective referent posited by a word or concept.
According to Candrakīrti, entities cannot legitimately be described through
recourse to reified concepts of "reality" and "unreality", since these notions
and all others are valid only within the context of *saṃvṛti*. "Meaning" is
defined solely in terms of relationship, and for this reason, to reify the
concept of reality or unreality by extracting either one from the context
of its relationship with the other is to deprive it of any possible meaning.

3.2. *Paramārthasatya*

We have now gained some insight into the realm of mundane experience,
where notions of "existence" and "non-existence" or "real" and "unreal"
may legitimately be applied, but when it comes to the sphere of *paramātha*
the situation is quite different. All teachings of the Buddha are said to be
nothing more than various means towards the understanding of ultimate
truth, and for this purpose he necessarily availed himself of language which

is, properly speaking, viable only in the context of *saṃvṛti*. Candrakīrti explains this technique in the following way:

What is the characteristic of this reality which one may gain access to through the teachings of the Blessed Ones? We have already stated [in *Madhyamakaśāstra*, XVIII.7] : "When that which is to be named is no more, then the sphere of [conceptual] thought must also cease." When this is the case, then what more can be asked? Nevertheless, even though this is so, still, in conformity with conventional truth one accepts mundane notions of "real" and "unreal" and so forth, and attributes characteristics to reality (*tattva*) by a process of imputation (*samāropataḥ*).[38]

3.2.1. *General characteristics of the Ultimate Truth.* At first glance, the concept of ultimate truth seems to represent everything that *saṃvṛti* is not:

(1) *Paramārtha* is complete clarity, it is the removal or cessation of obscuration.[39] It is that which "makes sense" in that it does not appear to be other than it really is.[40] It is reality (*tattva*), not as opposed to unreality, but either as (a) the direct vision of things *as they truly are* (*yathābhūta-darśana*); or (b) the total destruction of reified conceptual constructs — particularly those embodied in the notions of "I" and "mine" — which is accomplished through immediate awareness that no ultimately real substance is ever apprehended either in association with living beings or with insentient objects.[41]

(2) *Paramārtha* is tranquility or peace (*śānti*), in the sense that it represents the cessation of ignorance and all the other afflictions. This is *paramārtha* as *nirvāṇa*.[42]

(3) *Paramārtha* is the absence of all reifying thought (*nirvikalpa*);[43] it is the end of the process of assigning labels and the end of the labels themselves; it is the termination of subject and object. It is the cessation of worldly affairs, since the transactional sphere of mundane experience is not possible in any ultimate sense.[44]

(4) *Paramārtha* is not dependent on anything other than itself.[45] It neither arises nor does it perish.[46] *Paramārthasatya* is emptiness (*śūnyatā*). The meaning of emptiness is "the absence of intrinsic being" (*niḥsvabhāva*), and this absence of intrinsic being is, as we shall see, directly perceived by the yogi as a characteristic of *saṃvṛti* as well as of *paramārtha*.[47]

3.2.2. *Paramārtha as the yogic vision.* Presumably, even if *paramārtha* is not an ultimately real substance still this long list of attributes must pertain to

something, and there is ample evidence in the writings of Candrakīrti to attest to the fact that this "something" is actually an *attitude* towards the world – an attitude embodied in the yogi's direct vision of things *as they are*. I will now review the evidence for this claim, and clarify what is meant by the expression "direct vision".

In his *Prasannapadā* Candrakīrti states that the ultimate truth is *pratyātmavedya āryāṇām,*[48] which seems to indicate that although *paramārtha* can be obliquely designatedly through signs and symbols, still it must ultimately be known in and through itself in the individual experience of the saints.[49] In the auto-commentary to his *Madhyamakāvatāra*, Candrakīrti again explains that "the ultimate meaning (*paramārtha*) for the Buddhas is just that intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*; i.e. emptiness) and although it is *paramārthasatya* . . . still each must individually come to know it on his own."[50] Moreover, it is not only the Buddhas and the saints who can know the ultimate truth in this way, for Candrakīrti continues:

Having taught about *saṃvṛtisatya*, the author desires to teach about *paramārthasatya*. However, because it is inexpressible and not within the sphere of [conceptual] knowledge, so it is impossible to teach of it as if it were a "thing" (*bhāvataḥ*). Therefore, he will provide an example for those who want to learn, so that they may illuminate its intrinsic nature through their own personal experience (*raṅ gis myoṅ ba ñid du*).[51]

Candrakīrti's willingness to "provide an example for those who want to learn" is justified by no less a personage than Nāgārjuna himself:

The ultimate truth cannot be taught without relying on convention, and without understanding the ultimate truth *nirvāṇa* will not be attained.[52]

Nevertheless, if the ultimate truth must eventually be known through direct realization, then what exactly is the role of the *śāstra*-s in this process? Candrakīrti authorizes his career as a philosopher with an unusually candid admission of the limitations of his own knowledge:

The yogis have directly perceived entities in this way (i.e. as devoid of intrinsic being), and we others who desire to obtain the wisdom of the yogis have our highest aspiration directed towards those words that explain the intrinsic nature of phenomena. Although we do engage in explanation of the absence of intrinsic being in entities, still this is done through the medium of philosophical treatises like this one which is infused with the wisdom of the yogis. These words are not dependent on my own ideas, since my eyes are still covered over by the cataract of ignorance.[53]

This passage is interesting not only as an all too rare display of humility,

but also because Candrakīrti seems to be defining "the wisdom of the yogis"
not as perception of some particular object, but as a *mode of seeing all
phenomena*: "The yogis have directly perceived all entities *in this way*
(*'di ltar gźigs śin*)." This mode of seeing phenomena is elsewhere referred
to as "non-seeing".[54] In fact, so far as I know, emptiness is nowhere defined
as an object of knowledge (*jñeya*), but only as "the direct seeing of
phenomena as devoid of intrinsic being".[55] Apparently the yogi *does* see
the things of the world, but he does not see them in the same way as the
non-yogi seems them, since the yogi's perception of things is not grounded in
reified concepts concerning the ultimate reality or unreality of conventional
objects.

   We will have more to say about this later on, but at this point I would
like to digress for a moment from our investigation into the system of the
two truths and devote some space to examination of the technical term
svabhāva, which has already been referred to above both as "intrinsic being"
and "intrinsic nature". The concept is particularly important, since a correct
understanding of the term *svabhāva* goes hand in hand with any real
appreciation of Mādhyamika soteriology.

4. THE AMBIVALENT MEANING OF THE TERM SVABHĀVA

In the following passage from the *Prasannapadā* Candrakīrti uses the term
svabhāva in both of its two very distinct meanings:

> What is the quintessential nature (*dharmatā*) of phenomena? Their *svabhāva*. And
> what is *svabhāva*? Original, fundamental nature (*prakṛti*). And what is the original,
> fundamental nature? Emptiness. And what is emptiness? The absence of any *svabhāva*.
> And what is the absence of *svabhāva*? Suchness (*tathatā*). And what is suchness?
> "Being-as-it-is", invariableness, eternal stability.

Already the ambivalence is clear enough, since *svabhāva* has been equated
with the absence of *svabhāva*. Candrakīrti continues with a firm definition
of the term:

> Whatever is possessed by fire or any other phenomenon that is never produced because
> it is not dependent on anything other than itself and because it is not artificially
> fabricated, that is referred to as *svabhāva*.

Svabhāva defined in just such terms could easily be translated as "intrinsic
being", which is of course the concept that serves as the primary target for

all the apparatus of the Mādhyamik dialectic. In this passage, though,
Candrakīrti also intends for his reader to understand the word in its other
sense, as a synonym for emptiness:

> What is taken under the influence of the optical defect of ignorance to be, in whatever
> way, ordinary existence (*bhāvajāta*), becomes, by means of "non-seeing", the object
> of the saints who are rid of the optical defect of ignorance. That alone is the essence
> [of phenomena], and it is established as *svabhāva* for the saints, defined as follows:
> *svabhāva* is unfabricated and not dependent on anything other than itself; so it has
> been established by the various masters, and so it should be understood. This *svabhāva*
> ("intrinsic nature") possessed by all entities is in essence unproduced, and therefore,
> because it is non-existence insofar as it is not really anything whatsoever, it is the absence
> of any *svabhāva* ("intrinsic being"). Thus it must be understood that entities do not
> posses any *svabhāva*.

Although the double entendre of the term *svabhāva* defies accurate
translation here, still we can quite easily grasp the import of the passage.
Svabhāva is defined by Nāgārjuna as "that which is unfabricated and not
dependent on anything other than itself",[57] but this definition can be applied
equally well to either of two very different referents.

(1) *Svabhāva as "intrinsic being"*. The concept of intrinsic being is,
according to Candrakīrti, the primal ontological error which lies at the root
of all forms of suffering in the world, since it is the foundation for grasping
at the notions of "I" and "mine". Intrinsic being is actually the reification
of "relative being", i.e. of "being as opposed to non-being". This is *svabhāva*
either as the speculative concept of non-Buddhist systems, or as the conceptual
ground that structures the experience of common, naive people (i.e. non-yogis)
in a very profound way.

(2) *Svabhāva as "intrinsic nature"*. Although phenomena do not possess
any intrinsic being, they do possess an intrinsic nature. This intrinsic nature
is not a "thing" (*vastu* or *dravya*), but rather a way in which they are related
to each other. It is the circumstance under which all phenomena both
arise and perish, and the Mādhyamika characterizes these circumstances as
"dependent origination" (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Since all entities arise and
perish only in dependence on each other, they do not possess any "intrinsic
being", and this is their intrinsic nature of emptiness. It is the simple fact
of their appearance in the world — "simple" insofar as it is unelaborated by
any concept of an existence that is not the mere reflection of non-existence.
This *svabhāva* as the "object" of the direct vision of Buddhist saints and
yogis: it is as much a "way of being" (for phenomena) as a "way of seeing"

(for the yogi). Let me clarify what I mean here by referring back to Candrakīrti once again.

In the section from the *Prasannapadā* quoted above we find another brief description of the manner in which all phenomena become objects of the saint's vision. Being and non-being, reality and unreality, and all other such conceptual dichotomies, are necessarily assigned to the sphere of ordinary existence, where each member of the pair derives its meaning only in contrast to its opposite. "Meaning" or "existence" only in the context of reciprocal dependence is the primary distinguishing characteristic of *saṃvṛti*,[58] and Candrakīrti draws attention to this fact in the following words:

That which exists in dependence on a reciprocal object (or "meaning": *artha*) does not exist — thus the saints have declared.[59]

And in the auto-commentary to this section:

Just as the existence of "long" is [dependent] on "short", while the existence of "short" is [dependent] on "long"; or the existence of the far bank is [dependent] on the near bank, while the existence of the near bank is [dependent] on the far bank: so it is that whatever is imputed in this way does not have any existence through intrinsic being.[60]

Elsewhere, in the *Prasannapadā*, Candrakīrti explains the way in which "non-existence through any intrinsic being" is not to be equated with absolute non-existence. "Existent" and "non-existent" are equally untenable as characreristics of the ultimate truth about phenomena. I quote here from the *Madhyamakaśāstra, kārika* X. 11, followed by Candrakīrti's commentary:

How can a supposedly dependent entity be dependent if it does not exist? On the other hand it does not make sense that an existing entity should be dependent on a dependent entity. (X. 11)
Something called fire depends on something called fuel: it will be dependent on the fuel either insofar as it — the fire — exists or does not exist. If it is non-existent then because of its non-existence it will not, like the horns of a rabbit, be dependent on the fuel. Again let it be the case that it exists. Then because it already exists, how could it depend on fuel? So not even as existing does it exist in dependence, because that would be meaningless. The case of fuel is to be demonstrated in the same way.[61]

Apparently, the vision of the saint has no object other than this very realm of ordinary existence, which is seen by a sort of "non-seeing". He perceives the things of the world *as they are*: (1) they are unreal because

they lack any *svabhāva* "intrinsic being"); and yet (2) they are real because it is their *svabhāva* ("intrinsic nature") to arise and cease in the world through the force of dependent origination. This is their emptiness.

5. THE NEGATION OF SAMVRTI: QUALIFIED OR ABSOLUTE?

Thus far I have developed a fairly cohesive schematic representation of the system of the two truths. I have examined the problem of "reciprocal meaning" as it relates to the doctrine of dependent origination. Despite the fact that we perceive them as originating and passing away in time, all phenomena which appear in the world are "real" or "unreal" only in the web of cause and effect defined as dependent origination. Each of the twin components in any dichotomy is dependent on the other for its existence, in the case of an entity, or for its meaning, in the case of a concept.[62] We are now in a better position to assess the nature of the dichotomy which obtains between *paramārtha* and *samvrti*.

5.1. *The Concpet of "dependent Origination"*

The word "*svabhāva*" is defined as "that which is unfabricated and not dependent on anything other than itself",[63] and just above we have seen how this definition can be made to apply either to the false concept of reified existence or to the truth of emptiness. In both cases we refer to the distinguishing characteristic of all phenomena, their innermost essence which is "unfabricated and not dependent on anything other than itself". From among the many expressions that are synonymous with *svabhāva* as the ultimate truth, one of the most important is *pratītyasamutpāda*, a term which itself embodies a great deal of ambiguity. In the *Prasannapadā*, Candrakīrti has this to say about dependent origination:

The Blessed One clearly demonstrated that things arise in dependence on causes and conditions and he rejected the possibility that origination could be without cause, from one cause or from a multiplicity of causes, or that things could be produced from themselves, from what is other than themselves or from both. By this rejection the conventional nature (*samvrta-svarūpa*) of conventional things is revealed for what it really is (*yathā-avasthitam*): Dependent origination is thus itself conventional (*samvrta*) because it is not produced through any intrinsic being [even though it appears otherwise to the non-yogi]. From the perspective of the wisdom of the saints, there is in [*pratītyasamutpāda*] no cessation and no movement . . . Nāgārjuna will expound

throughout this entire treatise that the characteristics of cessation and so forth do not apply to dependent origination.[64]

Here is a very significant clue to the nature of the relationship between ultimate and conventional truth: *paramārtha*, as *pratītyasamutpāda*, is itself *saṃvṛti*, because it appears as other than it really is.

Thus what should be obvious is here confirmed: the dictotomy of *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti* is, like all dichotomies, simply another aspect of conventional truth, and therefore the unqualified negation of *saṃvṛti* on any grounds whatsoever must necessarily constitute an equally unqualified negation of *paramārtha*. This fact must carry with it rather profound implications with respect to the system of the two truths, and yet I have been unable to find any passage either in the *Prassanapadā* or in the *Madhyamakāvatāra* where these implications are clearly spelled out and discussed in satisfying detail. Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, on reading Candrakīrti one is after all still left with the lingering suspicion that the world is somehow absolutely rejected from the perspective of the ultimate truth. Before closing, we must turn for one last look at a few especially problematic themes.

5.2. *The Use of Metaphor and Simple to Describe the Yogic Vision*

One very common motif in both the *Prasannapadā* and the *Madhyamakāvatāra* is the use of metaphors and similes in which the world is equated in one way or another with an illusion. We may take the simile of the mirage as an example of the type: Under certain conditions the slanting rays of late afternoon sunlight can produce the impression of clear, blue water; but for those who are nearby, the situation is quite different. Here *saṃvṛti* is compared with the mirage. Is this an unqualified rejection of apparent phenomena? I quote from the *Prasannapadā*:

Similarly, those who are far removed from seeing the reality of these things called "I" and "mine" as they are, who tread the path which leads through the cycle of birth and death, they are under the sway of the error of ignorance and so for them [the self], which is imputed onto the psychophysical constituents, appears as if it were real (*satyataḥ*) even though it is definitely a false object (*mṛṣārtha eva*); but for those but for those nearby who see the reality of these things, [the self] does not appear as if it were real.[65]

In another very frequently used simile the appearance of conventional phenomena is compared to the visual distortions caused by certain forms

of optical disease. This time I refer to the auto-commentary of the
Madhyamakāvatāra:

Suppose that a man with diseased eyes is holding a bone white vase in his hand, and
under the influence of an optical defect he sees what appear to be clusters of hair on
the surface of the vase. He wants to remove the hairs and so begins to shake the vase
when a second man with normal vision happens to pass by. Puzzled as to this odd
behavior, the second man approaches and begins to stare at the place where the hairs
should appear. Naturally, he apprehends no such hairs and consequently he forms
no conception of existence or non-existence, of hair or non-hair, nor even of
darkness or any other attribute with respect to these hairs. When the man with
an optical defect tells the second man about his idea that he sees hairs, then the
second man may desire to clarify this misconception by stating that the hairs do not
exist. This is indeed a statement of negation, however the speaker has not in this
case maligned [any conventionally real entity]. The man without any optical defect
sees the reality of the hairs, while the other man does not. In just the same way, there
are those who are striken with the optical defect of ignorance so that they are incapable
of perceiving what is real; the intrinsic nature of the *skandha*-s, *dhātu*-s and *āyatāna*-s
which is apprehended by them is simply a [false] conventional form. The Blessed
Buddhas, however, are without any trace of ignorance so that they perceive the hairs
in the manner of one who is not afflicted with an optical defect; that is, the intrinsic
nature of the *skandha*-s and so forth seen by them is the ultimate truth of these things.
One may ask how it is that they are capable of seeing an intrinsic nature like this,
which is invisible. – True, it is invisible, but the fact is that they "see" it by means
of "non-seeing".[66]

In the first of these two passages the concept of a "self" is compared to
a mirage, and in the second, the intrinsic nature of the *skandha*-s and so
forth which is perceived by ignorant people is compared to the illusory
appearance of hairs created by an optical defect. If we do not pay very
close attention to the inner structure of these similes, then we may be led
to conclude that the appearance of *samvrti* is absolutely false, yet such
a conclusion would leave several apparent discrepancies unresolved.

The first example is relatively easy to explain: The mirage appears to be
real only for those standing at a distance, but for those who understand
the mechanism involved, "it does not appear as if it were real". The concepts
of "I" and "mine" are like a mirage insofar as they possess no ultimate
reality; however – and this is of critical importance – within the context
of *samvrti*, as we have seen, these concepts are causally efficacious, and to
this extent they are quite different from the mirage which is unreal even at
the conventional level. It is evident upon closer inspection that the simile
here is valid and useful only to a certain point.

The second example is slightly more subtle. In commenting on this particular simile, Candrakīrti makes the following observation:

Those with an optical defect see hairs, flys, and gnats and other such things which are not real; and although they are instructed by those with unimpaired vision, still, unlike these other people, they themselves are not able to realize the true nature of the hair as it really is, by simply not seeing it. On the contrary, on the basis of the instruction they have received from those with unimpaired vision, they develop a merely theoretical grasp of the fact that the hair is false. When, however, their eye of awakening is annointed with the salve of the direct vision of emptiness, which cures any optical defect, and they develop an understanding of reality, then these people realize for themselves the reality of the hair — by not realizing it.[67]

In interpreting this second example we must be especially careful to note that the hairs are compared with the *intrinsic nature* of conventionally real things like the *skandha*-s and so forth, and not with the *skandha*-s themselves. Thus the simile must be explained in this way: Just as the hairs are falsely imputed to the surface of a conventionally real vase, so a quality of intrinsic being is falsely imputed to apparent phenomena which are themselves only conventionally real. And just as the truth of the hairs is "seen by non-seeing", so the intrinsic nature of all conventionally real phenomena is "realized by non-realization".[68] There is neither something, nor nothing, to realize.

5.3. *The Defense of Saṃvṛti*

This mysterious ambivalence with respect to the ontological status of *saṃvṛti* permeates Candrakīrti's work. There are places where he seems to be rejecting *saṃvṛti* outright, and in still other passages he rushes in to protect *saṃvṛti* from unqualified negation. In the auto-commentary to the *Madhyamakāvatāra* he plainly states that *paramārthasatya* is not used to negate that which is taken for granted within the context of mundane experience.[69] If someone is concerned because his property has been stolen then we are told that the Mādhyamika philosopher does not try to console him with the assurance that "all property is of the substance of a dream", since such statement would not be in accord with what is given in mundane experience.[70] In one of his lighter moments Candrakīrti chides his opponent, the Vijñānavādin, with the following invitation:

If mundane experience does not contradict you, then go ahead and reject the things of this very world. Quarrel with the world if you want to, and afterwards I will side with winner.[71]

According to Candrakīrti the Mādhyamika would not presume to interfere with the business of the world:

Because we maintain that [cause and effect] are like magical illusions, therefore no faults accrue to us and the entities of the world are left intact.[72]

Time and time again throughout chapter six of the *Madhyamakāvatāra* Candrakīrti rises up in defense of *saṃvṛti* as though it were his own wife: he himself can abuse and malign her, but woe be unto anyone else who might dare to suggest that she is not without fault. In fact, he actually goes so far as to accuse his opponents of being the true nihilists:

On account of his passion for a real substance, inherent in our opponent's view, all the ordered conditons taken for granted in mundane experience have been laid to waste.[73]

5.4. *The Yogi's Attitude Towards Saṃvṛti*

We have already seen that *saṃvṛti* can serve either as the object of mundane perception or as the sphere of the saints and yogis (*āryāṇāṃ viṣayam*). Candrakīrti does not attempt to describe the experience of the yogi who directly realizes the ultimate truth, but he does tell us something about the response of the yogi to this "direct seeing" of things as they are:

When the yogi realizes that *saṃvṛtisatya* is set up through mere ignorance and is devoid of intrinsic being, understanding that emptiness is the characteristic of *paramārtha* immanent within *saṃvṛti*, he does not fall into the extremes of dualism. He does not say to himself, "What once was, now is no more", and then go on to accept nihilism after not apprehending any intrinsic being within entities. He does not reject worldly convention which is like a reflected image, nor does he reject [the elements of mundane experience like] *karma* and its fruits, or the distinction between that which is right and that which is wrong (*dharma* and *adharma*). And finally, he does not reify *paramārtha* by imputing a quality of intrinsic being to [any or all] entities, because he sees that things like *karma* and its fruits abide within objects that are devoid of intrinsic being, and not within objects that possess intrinsic bieng.[74]

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Our investigation has come full circuit here, and we return now to the question posed by *Madhyamakaśāstra* XXV. 19: What does it mean to say that *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* are not at all different? Candrakīrti himself supplies a rather succinct response to the puzzle when he writes, "*saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are of the same essence because both are by nature at peace".[75] The calm that

lies at the center of the storm of birth and death is revealed only to a select few, however, and these are the yogis who take *saṃsāra* as the object of their "non-seeing".

Candrakīrti insists that the yogic experience is "the end of the process of assigning labels and the end of the labels themselves". At this point I feel confident that this statement ought to be interpreted in two ways: First, it should be regarded as a hyperbolic device used by the Mādhyamika to drive home his claim that emptiness is a "non-referring" term, or, in the language of Professor Daye, a "third-order capstone *reflexive* concept".[76] Therefore, it would be improper to reify the concept of emptiness, forcing it to serve as the ultimate truth about any privileged representation within the mind or any object "out there" in the world. Second, and perhaps more important, such an assertion stresses the significance of a certain *attitude* towards mundane experience. All phenomena appear "empty" to the yogi who has completely internalized the dialectic of the Mādhyamika, and in this sense "emptiness" is both a "way of being" and a "way of seeing":

That which, taken as dependent or conditioned, is of the nature of birth and death, is, taken as non-dependent and unconditioned, declared to be *nirvāṇa*.[77]

Nirvāṇa is emptiness,[78] and emptiness is understood as the direct realization of the absence of intrinsic being within all phenomena.[79] The absence of intrinsic being is not to be equated with non-existence but rather with dependent origination,[80] and dependent origination is *all that there is* to mundane experience.[81] Therefore the key to the relationship between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, or *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* is to be found in the formula of dependent origination; and because dependent origination is the mark of both conventional and ultimate truth, it is the Middle Way:

A chariot is designated in dependence on its parts, the wheels and so forth. Whatever is designated in dependence on its own parts is not produced through any intrinsic being, and the non-production through any intrinsic being is emptiness. Emptiness, defined as non-production through any intrinsic being, is itself the Middle Way. That which is not produced through any intrinsic being cannot possibly be existent; and yet because it lacks non-being neither can it be non-existent. Therefore, on account of its avoiding the two extremes of being and non-being, emptiness, defined as non-production through any intrinsic being, is called the Middle Way, or the Middle Path. So it is that the following expressions are various synonyms for dependent origination: emptiness, dependent designation, and the Middle Way.[82]

Paramārtha, as emptiness or dependent origination, is the intrinsic

nature of all particular phenomena; yet if this intrinsic nature is taken to be
an object set apart from the context of its relationship to those phenomena,
then it loses any possible meaning, because no characteristic can be understood
apart from the object(s) which it characterizes.[83]

What is called *saṃvṛti* is not pure *saṃvṛti*, insofar as its intrinsic nature is
paramārtha; and at the same time, what is called *paramārtha* is not pure
paramārtha since it is of the nature of *pratītyasamutpāda* to appear as
saṃvṛti.[84] Neither of these two concepts can be isolated from the other and
reified into "absolute truth without reference to error", or "unmitigated error
without reference to truth". Like the components of any other dichotomy,
paramārtha and *saṃvṛti* require each other in order to yield any meaning.
This seems to indicated that for the Mādhyamika the world is now and must
always remain a mixture of truth and error, and this might easily prove to be
the most profound insight expressed through the dichotomy of the two truths:
Paramārtha is a reference to *apparent* phenomena — it refers to the particular
way in which phenomena appear to the yogi — and the term can have meaning
only so long as there are apparent objects and a perceiving subject.

At the close of the last chapter of his *Prasannapadā* Candrakīrti quotes
the following two lines from an unidentified source:

It was taught by the Lord of the world that *nirvāṇa* is no *nirvāṇa*;
A knot tied by space is undone by space.[85]

The knot is tied when the categories of "real" and "unreal" are reified;
and it is untied, that is, *saṃsāra* becomes *nirvāṇa*, when each one of these
concepts is seen to be meaningless in and of itself. I do not see how we could
interpret Candrakīrti as saying that the world either does or does not ultimately
exist; nor could it be justifiedly claimed that its ontological status is in any way
actually altered when the world becomes the object of the yogi's direct vision.
Presumably, this is why Candrakīrti is able to claim that "in *nirvāṇa* there is
no extinction of anything whatsoever, nor any cessation of anything whatsoever.
Nirvāṇa is in essence the complete disolution of reifying thought."[86]

According to Candrakīrti the world is something more than our misconceptions
about it, since dependent origination is not itself merely a misconception.
This being so, the question still remains: Just what is the ontological status
of the world; and when the distortion created by reifying thought is eliminated,
what is left of mundane experience? This question brings us around again to
the issue of "dependent designation" (*prajñaptir upādāya*), which was taken

as the point of departure for this essay. In his *Madhyamakāvatāra*, Candrakīrti cites this expression as one of the synonyms for *pratītyasamutpāda*:[87]

A reflection that is mere designation is founded on a collocation of [causes and conditions] including the face and other things which themselves exist as mere designations; a house is designated as dependent on its beams and other structural components which are also mere designations; and a forest is similarly designated as dependent on trees. Just as in a dream one apprehends a sprout that is unproduced through any intrinsic being, so it is equally reasonable that no entity exists apart from its own designation; and this designation is founded on [a collocation of] other entities which are themselves mere designations.[88]

There is no question about the fact that our experience is shaped to a very great extent by our conceptual frames, yet it is difficult to determine just how deeply our perceptions of a given situation (and the actions based on them) are grounded in these patterns of thought. This is an issue of the utmost importance primarily because these conceptual frames supply most, if not all, of the meaning and structure that determines our motives and so guides our behavior in the course of daily life. Moreover, it is clear that many of the concepts which govern our acts are in themselves quite abstract and almost wholly dependent on other concepts from which they derive their meaning. The mechanism is illustrated quite graphically in a recently published study of metaphorical thought:[89] If we did not at some level structrue our concept of "argument" through the metaphor of "war", then would we still "attack our opponent's position", or "retrench and defend" our own? Our behavior under such circumstances is obviously shaped by the metaphorical application of a second concept, and yet, must we necessarily think in terms of "winning" or "losing" an argument, or could the experience defined by the concept of "argument" be conceived of in an altogether different way, perhaps as "dance" rather than as "war"? If both participants were to conceive of argument through the metaphor of "dance", then we might assume that their behavior would be governed by a desire to establish understanding through balance and harmony, rather than through victory and defeat.

This process of structuring one concept in terms of another, layer after layer, most certainly exerts a profound effect on the overall pattern as well as the details of our experience. In the study cited above, the authors have done an excellent job of laying bare this innate tendency of conceptual thought. However, if the Mādhyamika analysis is correct, they overlook what may be the most deeply rooted and pernicious of all metaphors: "reality as substance".

What does it mean to conceive of the ultimate truth as "dependent origination" rather than as a substance — whether it be a privileged representation within the mind, or a real external object? The non-referential theory of language and conceptual thought, embodied in all the apparatus of the Mādhyamika dialectic, entails two primary consequences:

(1) It serves to enforce the strictly pragmatic use of words and concepts in a given socio-linguistic matrix; and

(2) It acts as a safeguard against any tendency towards the application of words or concepts to private objects supposed to lie outside this socio-linguistic matrix; or, in the jargon of the Mādhyamika, it brings an end to "conceptual diffusion" (prapañca).

In the context of Western philosophy, a very similar non-referential theory of language is associated with the name of Ludwig Wittgenstein:

We may say that the general criteria by which the later Wittgenstein judges philosophical utterances to be nonsensical is the pragmatic criterion of meaning. This is shown by his submitting philosophical statements to questions such as: "What use can we make of that statement?" "What practical consequences is it supposed to have?" "Under what circumstances, to achieve what, would you say that?"[90]

This approach to language and conceptual thought not only represents the theoretical statement of a particular philosophy, but moreover, it necessarily implies a subtle, yet highly significant paradigmatic shift in the *purpose* of philosophizing. If the meaning of words and concepts is to be judged by strictly pragmatic criteria, then the value of philosophy itself can no longer be measured solely — or even especially — in terms of its success as a finely tuned system of abstract, logical propositions. This is certinaly not to suggest that scholastic or academic viability is not essential to any philosophy; it is simply to point out that, given this particular view of language, academic success alone would not only constitute a rather hollow philosophical victory, but a meaningless one as well. Like the Mādhyamika, Wittgenstein also seems to have been essentially motivated in his work by a very pragmatic sensę of purpose, a purpose which lay not in explaining the nature of reality so much as in changing our attitude towards the world of mundane experience:

I am in a sense making propoganda for one style of thinking as opposed to another. I am honestly disgusted with the other . . . Much of what I am doing is persuading the people to change their style of thinking.[91]

We might rephrase the question posed just above and ask: What would it

mean to live in a world where one's concepts were no longer structured in a very crucial way by reified notions of "reality" and "unreality"? I submit that the overriding concern here is neither ontological nor epistomological after all, for, reflecting on these questions, I am once again reminded of Candrakīrti's assertion that one is lost if he does not understand the *purpose* of emptiness, which is "the tranquilizing of all conceptual diffusion".

Liberation follows from the destruction of both karmic action and the afflictions. Karmic action and the afflictions arise from reified notions [of real and unreal things], and these are produced from conceptual diffusion. Conceptual diffusion, however, ceases in emptiness.[92]

Unlike either a strictly rational philosophy or a metaphysical system, the Mādhyamika does not seem to be preoccupied with sophisticated epistomological or ontological explanations of reality. On the contrary, the dialectic is apparently designed to expose the meaninglessness of any such attempts at explanation, and in doing so, to "make propaganda" for a style of thinking that should lead to a conception of ultimate truth as *duḥkha-nirodha*, or the cessation of all suffering, by altering one's attitude towards everyday experience in this world.

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NOTES

[1] PP, p. 135.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 373.
[3] MS, XVIII. 9.
[4] PP, p. 11.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 135.
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
[8] Daye, p. 96.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 95.
[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 92–93.
[11] Crittenden (see bibliography).
[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 328–29.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 327.
[14] MA, pp. 218–19.
[15] MS, XXIV. 1.
[16] *Ibid.*, XXIV. 5cd.

[17] *Ibid.*, XXIV. 7.
[18] PP, pp. 990–91.
[19] MS, XXIV. 9.
[20] MA, VI. 23.
[21] PP, pp. 492–93.
[22] MA, VI. 28ab.
[23] PP, p. 58.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 54.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 75.
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] *Ibid.*
[28] MA, p. 113.
[29] See section five of this essay.
[30] MA, VI. 28.
[31] *Ibid.*, VI. 84 and VI. 92.
[32] *Ibid.*, VI. 69.
[33] *Ibid.*, VI. 162.
[34] See for example the following verses along with Candrakīrti's commentary on them: MA VI. 33; VI. 35; VI. 100; VI. 159; VI. 196; VI. 197.
[35] MA, VI. 161ab.
[36] *Ibid.*, VI. 156.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 104.
[38] PP, p. 372.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 538.
[40] *Ibid.*, p. 41.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 340.
[42] *Ibid.*, p. 41.
[43] MS, XVIII. 9.
[44] PP, p. 493.
[45] *Ibid.*
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 524.
[47] MA, p. 218.
[48] PP, p. 493.
[49] See Edgerton, p. 376.
[50] MA, p. 108.
[51] *Ibid.*, p. 109.
[52] MS, XIV. 10.
[53] MA, pp. 218–19.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 111.
[55] See for example, PP, p. 351.
[56] PP, pp. 264–351.
[57] PP, p. 511.
[58] PP, p. 68.
[59] MA, VI. 58cd.
[60] MA, p. 150; also see MS, X. 10–11.
[61] Sprung, p. 138.
[62] *Artha* carries both an epistomological and an ontological significance.
[63] See note 57.

[64] PP, pp. 10–11.
[65] *Ibid.*, p. 347.
[66] MA, pp. 109–10; cp. BA, p. 364.
[67] PP, p. 373.
[68] *Ibid.*
[69] MA, p. 113.
[70] *Ibid.*
[71] *Ibid.*, VI. 83.
[72] *Ibid.*, VI. 170cd.
[73] *Ibid.*, VI. 78cd; also cp. MS, XXIV. 36.
[74] PP, p. 495.
[75] *Ibid.*, p. 536.
[76] MS, XXV. 9.
[77] Daye, p. 84.
[78] PP, p. 351.
[79] *Ibid.*, p. 350.
[80] *Ibid.*, p. 499.
[81] PP, pp. 10–11, and p. 54.
[82] *Ibid.*, p. 504.
[83] *Ibid.*, p. 67.
[84] *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.
[85] *Ibid.*, p. 540.
[86] *Ibid.*, p. 522.
[87] MA, p. 272.
[88] *Ibid.*, p. 225.
[89] Lakoff and Johnson (see bibliography); the following illustration occurs on pp. 4ff.
[90] Fann, p. 85.
[91] Wittgenstein, p. 28.
[92] MS, XVI. 1.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC ABBREVIATIONS

BA *Bodhicaryāvatāra*
MA *Madhyamakāvatāra*
MS *Madhyamakaśāstra*
PP *Prasannapadā*

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