

Prasangika Madhyamika Analysis of Objects

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BOOKS QUOTED FROM OR REFERENCED:

- His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Jeffery Hopkins (tr., ed.), Elizabeth Napper (ed.), *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*
- *Maharatnakuta Sutra* (Sutra of the Heap of Jewels)

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PRASANGIKA MADHYAMIKA ANALYSIS OF OBJECTS

[Paper as read in WG Class 1983 1125a Begins]

Prasangika presents an epistemology from the perspective that all that can be said to exist in appearances originates in relations. The various elements of the discussion are presented on a phenomenological level and the objective as well as the subjective are (given) with the same evidence. This is to dispense with all judgments, such as existence, non-existence, being and not-being. In this view, there is no casual nexus between the terms of relationships except at the conventional level of appearance. They emphasize clearly one of the central issues of Buddhism: that is, the need to conceive of the path of self-development without prejudging the nature of that self. In the Prasangika view, any attempt to prejudice that self is to obscure the possibility of attaining it. This they contend is to submit to the error of reducing reality to a concept and in so doing strengthen the already powerful force that causes appearances to be presented as inherently existent.

It is at this powerful innate force that the analysis is aimed, for in Prasangika, even in direct cognition is the false element to be found. For them, the presented image of self and other is permeated with a false element of inherent existence. The system attempts to identify the fundamental level of direct cognition and to force the reasoning to act on the error at the level of animal faith or to enter the secret cave of the Dragon. If reason can infer a false element there and by way of an incontrovertible direct cognition correct it there, Prasangika speaks of that which is ultimately not found as some thing or other and is beyond the reach of the intellect, is existentially present as the absolute indivisibility of the two truths.

In the Prasangika epistemology, the familiar Buddhist terms are dependent arising, emptiness, and the two truths, are defined and presented in a way that allows for the above-mentioned goal. Each of the four Buddhist schools define these three terms in connection with their own epistemological formulations and each school has a different formulation. This paper will attempt to show how Prasangika uses these three terms in its own unique way. It is especially significant that for Prasangika these three terms can be used in an interchangeable interpenetrative way. This reflects the relational aspect of their formulation and helps to gain an insight into their method or contrast it to the other schools' use of the same term. The other schools views these three terms in ways that allow them to be placed in a causal nexus and this points clearly at the various ontic premises for their epistemologies.

Although Prasangika rejects the ontic realities that human thought is capable of positing, they do not devalue thought in the way that other systems sometimes do. From a certain point of view, it can be described as existentially spiritual. They pay the thought process a very high compliment. They attempt to describe a method where thought is not only able to correct itself but is actually able to work at the fundamental level of its own instinctive presupposition. It is a curious enigma that they see thought in this exalted way and insist on stripping thought of all ontic premises as well. [Note: The version of this paper read in WG Class 1983 1209a has the following addition here: This view can appear as radical and may even be considered heretical and irreverent if you can believe that thought is only exalted to the extent that it is able to posit ontic realities and mystical truth. Prasangika seems to be addressing a more subtle issue. Perhaps it can be stated as follows. It is not to the question of whether or not there are realities that their analysis is aimed, but rather to the issue of the inborn false element in appearance. It is this false element that deprives thought of the insight needed to make true and certain judgments concerning those realities.]

That the external things of experience do not exist under their own power is a scientific fact. Any thing in the physical sense must depend upon other things or processes. This fact can be easily demonstrated by observing the interrelationships within the natural world. For example, a tree does not exist under its own power for it depends upon the soil in which it is rooted, upon the sunlight that its leaves absorb and upon other factors so numerous that we cannot name them all. Each of these factors upon which a tree directly depends is in its turn dependent on other factors and so on. It is clear to see that if the material aspect of the relationships in Nature are investigated in this way, the result would be a vision of an infinitely complex web of interdependence. Although the truth of this analysis points toward important philosophical possibilities, it is a one-sided investigation for it deals with the manifest, the known, the objective, and no question is asking with regards to the presence of knowledge itself.

If the bare fact of a tree appearing to a subject is itself examined, a different kind of analysis can be undertaken. The tree is after all a known or appearing tree, and despite the fact that the tree is profoundly intertwined with the whole of Nature, that whole of Nature can be known as well. Furthermore, the knowledge of the relationship of the tree with Nature can appear under certain circumstances as an object to a knowing subject. Not only solid objects like trees, people, and stones can be known, but mental objects as well. Thoughts, feelings, and images appear to the knowing subject and can be made objects.

Earlier we saw how the tree as a physical thing was dependent on the natural surroundings of which it is a part. Now we must consider the tree as in some sense dependent on the mental atmosphere of which it is most certainly a part also. The known tree must be considered as involved with the mental factors of the knower. The tree presents the knower with the appearance of a tree that does not depend on anything but itself and seems to exist under its own power. We know of course this is not so in the physical sense and the fact that the tree is in relation to a knowing subject is cause for suspicion as well. There can be no doubt that the tree appears to exist in its own right and does not depend upon the thought of the subject. We do not normally experience objects otherwise. We might be willing to assert that the tree in itself is involved with thought in the sense that thought casts an overlay upon the real tree. It is harder to assert that the tree in its most fundamental sense is imputed by thought.

If, on the other hand, the tree has an objective basis apart from thought, apart from appearance, we should be able to find it through analysis. In the same way that one can analyze the rope that appeared as a snake and not find a snake because it was an illusion, we should be able to analyze the appearing tree and find the real tree because it is *not* an illusion. If the appearance of the tree is in agreement with the way it exists, this existence should become clearer when it is carefully analyzed. If something is true, it becomes clearer and its foundations more firm the more one analyzes it. Therefore, when sought it must definitely be findable.

Let's subject the tree to this analysis to see if its objective foundation becomes more clear, more firm. We're not interested in proving that the tree appears to be solid and firm. Just look at the massive trunk. We are here interested in discovering an objective mode of existence that the tree enjoys apart from appearance. No one would argue that the tree appears to be other than real and objective. Since the shape, color, and so forth are qualities of the tree, the qualities are *not* the tree. Also the leaves, branches, trunk, etc, are bases upon which the tree was imputed so they are not the tree. If the tree is sought in this way it seems quite unfindable. If the tree exists is not the question. It most certainly does exist. What is at issue here is the fact that the tree appears to exist inherently or through its own power as if it did not depend

upon imputation of thought of the knower. What is unfindable is this mode of existence. The analysis serves as a means of discrimination between existence and inherent existence.

Once it is accepted that the tree exists but it is not findable as inherently existent, then it can be decided that it doesn't exist by way of its own power but that the tree exists in dependence on other factors. If it is established that the tree is dependent, that it doesn't exist under its own power, and once it is under the influence of other factors it depends on those factors, then it is by the reason of the tree being dependent that it is shown to be empty of existing under its own power. "Thus when it is by the way of the very reason of dependent arising that one is establishing or proving this emptiness of inherent existence, it is impossible for the understanding of emptiness and the understanding of appearance to become separated." [Note: See *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight* (p. 151) by the 14th Dalai Lama, His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, NY, 1984.]

It has been proposed in this discussion, the object under investigation, the tree, is engaged in relationships of dependence in two ways. In the first case, the tree is dependent on the rest of the objective world and in the second the tree is dependent on thought. In the former case, the tree is taken as an objective thing and in this appearance as object it pretends to have a self-standing existence. A closer look however at the tree's dependence on thought reveals that the tree's objective appearance is not the whole of the tree's nature. It has a deeper nature and a more fundamental relation to thought than it does to the objective world. That is to say, its objective status is provisional and restricted to objective appearance rather than in the sense of the tree having objective being or inherent existence.

"The phenomena is not made empty by emptiness. The phenomena themselves are empty." This brief quotation from the *Pile of Jewels* sutra offers an insight into the understanding of emptiness according to their system. [Note: See *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*, p. 164.] The first phrase, "phenomena are not made empty by emptiness" refers to a common misinterpretation of what the Prasangika intends to convey. In the second phrase, "the phenomena themselves are empty," is an expression of the correct view of emptiness. Although the two phrases do not seem on first consideration to present any great juxtaposition of meaning, upon analysis they are very different in regards to presenting a view of emptiness.

The first phrase, "phenomena are not made empty by emptiness" refers to the misinterpretation that's common. The inclination to misinterpretation is for the most fundamental reasons. The error is actually indigenous to experience and descriptive of the unreflective or passive way that an individual entity functions in order to maintain its status. By drawing out the implications of this phrase, "phenomena are not made empty by emptiness," it is possible to see clearly the basic paradox implied in non-reflective experience. This paradox can provide a wedge for the reasoned analysis of experience and also to make possible a correct understanding of the Prasangika view expressed in the second phrase, "phenomena are themselves empty."

What would happen if the [tape flipped here, some words lost] and thereby alter it to make it empty. How the phenomena would be altered in this hypothetical case is perhaps a far-fetched possibility to discuss but it might take the following hypothetical form. Object plus emptiness added to it would equal nothing. In this incorrect view, the phenomena is accepted by the mind to exist as an independent thing. It is accepted in experience as objective (and/an) independent existence. The phenomena has been unreflectively validated as having an absolute givenness as a separate and independent thing. When this givenness is clung to, the understanding of emptiness then would take the following incorrect form. The objects of experience, which as we just said under this view would be given, are not now empty. But it is

possible that the objects could be *made* empty. Namely, dissolving the objective phenomena with the mental solvent of emptiness. This is the way we might conceive that phenomena are not empty but are made empty by emptiness.

It is clear that the above discussion is a consequence of an analysis of experience while clinging to the natural and innate belief in objects and the attendant opinion that the mind has some magical power of making phenomena dissolve by directing a concept of emptiness or nothingness at them. The insistence of the belief in phenomena as self-standing necessitates a view of emptiness as nothingness or the opposite of phenomena. If it's examined more closely it is obvious the doctrine of emptiness is being equated here in this misconception with a concept of nothingness and this imagined nothingness must then be juxtaposed with phenomena. This is a fruitless approach because the object and the emptiness annul each other. This error cannot lead to a valid philosophic perspective, only to the fear that the world is going to disappear.

If the thinking persists and the second phrase of the quote is considered, then it may become obvious that the manner of posing the problem in the first way of trying to do it has rendered the problem impossible to solve. Emptiness according to the Prasangika refers to the absence of independent existence. But if the attempt is made to apply the term emptiness to objects that are first and foremost revered by the mind as independent existing things, then the Prasangika view is not grasped. Now upon looking at the issues discussed above from the point of view of the second phrase, namely "phenomena themselves are empty," then the paradox can be resolved. Things *are* empty. There are no separate things to be *made* empty. In this view, the basis of the object is no longer its objective independent status. The basis of the object is emptiness or non-independence or mind. The sutra's expressing the view that the real basis of the thing is its lack of or emptiness of independence of the mind. The thing is never independent of the mind. The thing has the nature of dependence on the mind, is therefore empty of any independence from the mind. The thing and the empty nature of a thing are the same and these arise together in experience. And that's why he says, "The phenomena are themselves made empty or of the nature of emptiness." The dependently arisen thing is no thing apart from its own empty nature and the empty nature is not other than the dependently arisen thing.

This analysis seems to present its own paradox. But, it is important to see that the apparent paradox is in regards to the fact that we do not normally experience objects as varieties of dependent arisings. Rather, we do not know the world as mental. If, on the other hand, the Prasangika view is approached from the perspective of mentalism or to use the expression of that system, from the perspective of imputations by thought, then the quotation becomes more meaningful. It is important to see that this view, when taken to heart, promotes a drastic and innovative transformation of the way that we habitually experience the world. The logic of this view forces the intellect into a cul-de-sac by making clear the fundamental paradox which is inherent in the distinction between mind and matter, as well as the logical contradictions involved with experience of phenomena as independent of thought or mind.

Insofar as this analysis of experience is offered as a method to be applied to the conventional, innate, non-reflective state of mind, rather than an expression of ontology or metaphysics, it seems an extraordinarily precise expression of mentalism. But also, in that we normally define ourselves, at least in terms of our ego, in regards to the way things appear to be rather than the way things must actually be, this analysis can gnaw at the foundations of our non-reflective beliefs. It's important to recognize that the beliefs that are being questioned are the very ones that obscure the actual experience of mentalism as immediate and intimate reality. The Prasangika view does not in any way deny the existence of objects.

Objects most certainly do exist. But according to this view they do not exist the way they appear, if they appear(ed) to enjoy an independent existence.

[Paper as read in WG Class 1983 1125a Ends]