

Nagarjuna, Diganga, And Dharmakirti

The Three Bright Stars In The Firmament Of Indian Thought

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Anirodham anutpadam anucchedam asasvatam
Anekartham ananartham anagamam anirgamam
Yah pratityasamutpadam prapancopasamam Sivam
Desayamasa Sambuddhah tam vande vadatam varam

Unextinct, Unoriginate, Unannihilate, uneternal
Not Monistic, Not pluralistic, Not coming to be, Not going out of
existence

Thus conditionally co-originate, Abater of the illusory manifold,
Auspicious,

Great Teacher of the Nation, Well-Enlightened, Thee I salute, O
noblest of speakers!

(Opening Invocation of *Madhyamakakarika*)

Let me first express my profound gratitude to the Tushita Mahayana Meditation centre and to Sri Kabir Saxena for this gracious privilege you have extended to me in asking me to speak to a few friends about three largely unnoticed or ignored stars on the firmament of Indian thought. My desire is that more Indians will come to hear of them.

We as a people ought to be proud of all three: Nagarjuna (ca 150 - 250), who already in the second century of our era attained a level of astuteness of dialectical analysis, both unprecedented and also unsurpassed, before or after, not only in India, but in any of the cultures of the world as far as I know; Dignaga (480-540) the Master of Indian Logic and Epistemology, who took those disciplines to the highest conceptual formulation, still very relevant to us in the context

of our cultural crisis in India; and Dharmakirti (ca 600-660), called by Prof. Stcherbatsky the “Kant of India” who took Dignaga’s thought to its high culmination.

At the outset I must express my regret that I myself had for many years failed to notice these three bright stars in the firmament of Indian thought. Only of late have I noticed them and come under their Cham. My education in India was not only inadequate, but also sadly misleading, covering up, or at least never drawing my attention to, some of the noblest achievements of Indian thought and experience. More than half of my educated friends to whom I mentioned these three names, had never even heard of them before. Only some had just heard of Nagarjuna, but Dignaga and Dharmakirti were unknown names to many. Their education too was defective, like mine.

The reasons for this obscuring or ignoring of some of our great Masters of the Past, are not far to seek. Most educated Indians have heard about Sri Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhava who are regarded as teachers of the world - lokacharyas. Nagarjuna, Diganga and Dharmakirti, the three that I am now introducing, have had a far greater role in teaching the world, and in teaching Indians as well. If the Indian memory has to be jagged into acknowledging these three who can be regarded as among the best India has ever produced, the reason is that we have been fed a very distorted and one-sided image of our own great Bharatiya heritage. I am, I think, justified in feeling rather proud of that heritage of ours, which, I am convinced, is second to none in the world. But I cannot be proud of that educational system and cultural ambiance which did not give me easy or early access to some of the most admirable aspects of that heritage, namely the great traditions that stem from Gautama Buddha and Jaina Mahavira.

In these days when narrow religious one-sidedness worsens into disturbingly distorted, dishonest, and fanatic if not Fascist, forms of totalitarian identity impositions, it may be useful to highlight some of the Buddhist thought and experience of the first seven centuries of this era.

These lectures may be taken as a modest effort to open up a less

known aspect of our Bharatiya heritage. I am not intending to add to the corpus of our knowledge of Buddhism. I am hardly competent to attempt anything like that.

When Pythagoras the ancient Greek sage, who was a contemporary of Sri Buddha, was honored by his admirers with the title *sophos* or “Wise One” he demurred with characteristic modesty by saying: “Please do not call me a Wise One or *Sophos*. I would much rather be known as a Friend of Wisdom: a *Philosophia*.” Similarly, I must say that I am not a Buddhist, but only a Friend of Buddhism, a Philobuddhadharma, if you will forgive that uneasy mixture of Greek and Samskrit.

I wanted to say that I am a *Bodhisattva*, but I hesitate. Because that word sometimes denotes one who is close to Buddhahood; no, if I were to claim to be a Bodhisattva, it will be only in the sense that I am at the beginning of my pilgrimage to *bodhi* or *samyagsambodhi* which for me means true Enlightenment, so different from the Western Enlightenment which has so lamentably brainwashed our intellectual elite.

But I know that I have a long way to go yet. In my pilgrimage, the Bodhisattva ideal inspires me: filled with love and joy in the spirit, even in the midst of suffering; rejoicing when reviled; unresentful when ridiculed; blessing when cursed; bowing humbly to all, not puffed up with pride; compassionate to all, especially to the weak and the oppressed; desirous of giving freely and generously, even if not always succeeding; pursuing peace, eager for reconciliation, seeking the healing of nations and peoples as well as persons; striving to bring the body and the passions under control, intent on one-pointed meditation, making constant meditation and prayer a habit; wanting to be strong and kind enough to be a refuge to the weary and the lost, to comfort the broken hearted and the sorrowing; caring for all and willing to sacrifice oneself for the good of others; to seek a world with peace and justice where all can live a dignified life, searching and finding meaning and fulfillment. That is my Bodhisattva ideal; the present formulation of it is my own, an adaptation from the *Tathagataguhyasutra (sikshasamuccaya of Santiveda)*. To this

Bodhisattva ideal I am committed, by virtue of seeking to follow my Master, Jesus Christ.

Nagarjuna followed that ideal resolutely and with determination. Centuries before Sankara, Nagarjuna showed us how intellectual vigor can be combined with spiritual depth. For me as a humble student of world philosophy, I think this is the distinctive feature of Indian philosophy and spirituality - the total integration of mind and spirit. I do not find this in a Hegel or a Kant, in a Descartes, or a Bacon, in a Rousseau or a Voltaire; I do find it in Plato and Plotinus, in Tao-Te and Hua-Yen, in Augustine and Jaspers, but definitely to a lesser degree than in Nagarjuna. For me I notice more intellectual - spiritual consistency and astonishing contemporary relevance in Nagarjuna than in Plato or Sankara.

I do not think that the thought of Nagarjuna has been significantly superseded in terms of ontology and epistemology, throughout these 1800 years of history, in any of the cultures of the world. Not only is his vision still fresh as the dawn; most of the philosophical problematics of the world, except perhaps the philosophies of science/technology and political economy, have been already anticipated by him more than a thousand years before - the problems of epistemology and knowledge, of causality and time, just to mention a few of the more prominent problems. Human thought has not significantly advanced beyond where Nagarjuna left it, on these basic issues of ontology and epistemology. And even our modern science/technology and our understanding of the goal and orientation of life will be significantly and perhaps radically altered if our planners and thinkers and scientists will pay careful attention to what this great Indian mind can show us.

But Nagarjuna was more than an academic philosopher. Above all, like Sri Buddha, Nagarjuna was a great Spiritual Master. We cannot do justice to the range and depth of his teaching in this brief paper. I proceed therefore to sample two aspects of his spiritual and intellectual heritage. The first is from his friendly letter or *suhrllekha* addressed to his contemporary, the Satavahana King Gautamiputra, son of queen Balasri, the only Satavahana king known to have embraced Buddhadharma. Since the King was not a monk, we can take

the *Suhrlekha* as an example of spiritual direction for the Buddhist lay people.

The Chinese pilgrim I-Tsing who visited India in the 7th century writes thus about the *Suhrlekha*: “In India students learn this epistle in verse early in the course of instruction, but the most devout make it their special object of study throughout their lives.” Even today the Tibetans use it as a sort of standard manual of instruction. It is brief, but comprehensive. I can here only cite some excerpts, to whet your appetite. Unfortunately I have no access to a Sanskrit text of the *Suhrlekha*. The Tibetan text, with an English translation is available: *Nagarjuna’s Letter to King Gautamiputra*, (Motilal Banarsidass, 1978). The excerpts below are slightly adapted, and edited for style.

Six things remember and recollect always:
The Buddha, His Dharma, the Noble Sangha,
Generous giving, the Practice of Virtue, the Divine Beings. (4)

Practise the Ten Virtues of Body, Speech and Thought
(i.e. abstain from killing, stealing, and sexual immorality,
from lying , slander, malicious talk, and idle chatter,
from greed, bitterness and wrong belief)
Refrain from intoxicating drink,
Delight in a clean and wholesome way of living.” (5)

Look upon these as enemies: Miserliness, Pretension and Deceit
Attachment to Property, Laziness, and Pride
Lust and Amorous Liaisons, Hatred of enemies,
Haughtiness about one’s caste or bodily appearance,
Conceit about one’s learning, youthfulness and strength. (12)

Be alert, ever heedful, mindful; heedfulness brings liberation and life;

Heedlessness brings bondage and death;
If you have been heedless in the past, become heedful
And you shall shine like the moon in a cloud-free sky (13-14).

True penance lies in patience; give anger no chance to arise;
As the Buddha said, Give up Anger; thus you will enter the irreversible path of the Bodhisattva.

Do not complain: they abused me, they beat me up; they robbed me of my property;

If you harbour enmity or resentment, bitterness and quarrels alone result;

Give up harbouring enmity, and you will sleep more peacefully (15-16).

Rightly understand the nature of existents, no existent is Ultimate Truth

All is *sunya*; attach not yourself to the world of object and concepts.

Remain indifferent, O Knower of the World, to the Eight worldly dharmas

Gain and Loss, Happiness and Unhappiness,
Flattering words, Unpleasant words, Praise and Blame
They are all equal - equally unworthy of your mind (29).

The Preceptor of gods and men has said
Contentment is the greatest wealth
So be content, whether you possess wealth or not
Being content without worldly wealth makes you truly rich (34).

Zealously practice the five great virtues:
Attention of faith; Energy and effort;
Mindfulness and Meditation, and above all true Wisdom.
These shall be your true strength, your power,
Your true attainment (45).

Thus it has been said:
The form is not the Self; neither does a Self possess form;
Self dwells not in form; neither does form dwell in a Self;
Also empty are the four other *skandhas*:
(feeling, perception, predisposition and consciousness) (49).

O Noblest of Humans, all things are impermanent,
Without self, without refuge or protection, homeless;
Free your mind from *samsara*; it is like the pitiless plantain tree (58).

The Sage declared:

From avidya or non-wisdom arise samskaras or predispositions
 From *samskaras* Consciousness or vijnana arises
 From vijnana, comes *namarupa* or Name and Form
 From *namarupa* come the six object-senses, the shadayatana
 From the *shadayatanas* arise Contact or *Sparsa*
 From *sparsa* comes feeling or sensation or *Vedana*
 On the ground of *vedana*, trshna or desire or craving arises
 From trshna comes clinging or *upadana*
 From this clinging *bhava* or existence or becoming arises
 From this *bhava*, jati or birth arises.
 Where there is birth, mountains of troubles arise
 Duhkha or Distress, Jara, (disease) nara (old age)
 Frustration, Fear of death and all the rest.
 Put an end to jati or birth and all these will cease (109-11).

This teaching of Pratityasamutpada or Conditioned Co-origination
 Is the profound and precious treasure of the Teaching of the Great
 Victor;

One who sees this sees the most excellent Buddha, the Reality-
 Knower.

In order to attain peace, practice the Noble Eightfold Path:
 Samyagdrshiti or All-fitting Vision, Right Way of Living,
 Right disciplined effort, Right Mindfulness, Right meditation
 Right speech, Right Action, and Right Thinking (113).

O fearless One, thus says the Blessed One:
 The Mind is the root of virtue, So discipline your mind.
 This is good and wise counsel
 No need to say any more (117).

There is a great deal in the present text of Suhrlekha, which I
 regard as later interpolations by lesser minds. A critical study of the
 text, with comparison of the Chinese, Sanskrit and Tibetan texts will
 help us along in this process. The discussion on heavens and hells, the
 passages about giving gifts to Brahmins and other points need no
 further examination.

The Dialectic Or Prasangika Method

We have time here only to illustrate briefly Nagarjuna's dialectic method, which he perfected. The Prasangika method, the main form of Madhyamaka argumentation, is to take your adversary's arguments and refute them by showing their weaknesses and inconsistencies - *reductio ad absurdum*. One's own thesis or *pratijna* which forms the *poorvapaksha* of a three-tier argument; the adversary's counter-argument is a *prasajyapratsedha* or negation of a proposition. When that counter-argument is reduced to absurdity by a syllogism, the original *pratijna* stands established.

But Nagarjuna claimed that he has no *pratijna* or proposition to offer; even his Statement that all is *sunya* is not to be taken as a proposition valid at all levels. His attack is directed against all forms of Realism - Samkhya, Vaibhasika (a Buddhist sect of the Sarvastivada tradition) or Prachina-nyaya.

For me personally it is Nagarjuna's refutation of Realism that makes him extremely relevant to our time. Realism can mean many things in western usage. To some it means the reality of universals, apart from the particulars. To the Machiavellians it means simply not being bound by ethical considerations in the exercise of power. In western philosophy it means the belief that matter, things, objects have "real" existence independent of our perception of them.

This view, that things are actually as they appear to us, objectively, independent of our subjective perception of them, was once the viewpoint of modern science. But quantum Physics clearly shows that the observing subject is inescapably a part of the observed object, and that "things in themselves" cannot be known by any mind. But most of us continue to be "Naive Realists" not finding any need to question the "reality" of the world of the objects of our perception. Immanuel Kant had sought to demonstrate already in the 18th century that the concept is a joint creation of certain effects created on us by the object and the structure of the knowing subject's mind.

"Realism" is a superstition; science does not claim any more that things are real. But ordinary people keep clinging to this superstition, without stopping to examine it. This is true also for Government thinking and planning as well. Our educational system also perpetuates the

superstition and instils into children's minds. The end result is a consumerist civilisation and the commodity fetishism of our culture and our political economy. It is in the re-examination of this "naive realism" that Nagarjuna can help us, above all.

Let me now proceed to give a sample of Nagarjuna's basic affirmation about the nature of reality. It is not a positive proposition or *pratjna*; it is more of a negation or *pratishedha* of other peoples' propositions.

Nagarjuna: Na svato napi parato na dvabhyam napi ahetutah
utpanna jatu vidyante bhavah kvacana kecana

Neither of itself, nor of some other, neither from both nor uncaused
Nowhere is known any existent coming into being MadhKar 1.1

Adversary: Sarvesam bhavanam Sarvatra na vidyate
svabhavascet

Tvadvacanam asvabhavam na nivartayitum svabhavamalam

If the intrinsic nature of existents everywhere does not exist
Then your statement has no intrinsic nature and cannot negate
intrinsic nature . VigrVyav 1.1

Nagarjuna: Hetupratyayasamagryam ca prthak capi madvaco na
yati

Nanu sunyatvam siddham bhavanam asvabhavatvat

If my statement exist in the cause and conditions of it, or independently of them

Then the sunyata of existents is established by their not having intrinsic nature.

In other words, Nagarjuna negates all svabhava for the bhavas or existents. His adversary argues that if all is sunya, then the statement that all is sunya is also nisvabhava and therefore sunya. Nagarjuna rejoins that if his own statement were not nihsvabhava and therefore not sunya, then his statement that all is sunya would not be universally true, for the statement, if it were true would be a contradiction of itself. Therefore Nagarjuna says that his statement that all is sunya should not be taken as a truth with its own intrinsic nature.

He goes on to say: All existents are sunya, because they arise only under certain conditions, ie. *pratityasamutpanna*; they are all hetupratyapeksha, or dependent on causes; but existents have a function which they fulfil in the *samvrtisatya* or level of everyday reality. My statement also has the function of affirming the *nihsvabhavata* of all existents. Not in itself, my statement is also *sunya*, *nihsvabhava*.

In the Vigrahavyavartani, (31) Nagarjuna raises the first time in human history the problem of all epistemology, or in our language, pramanavicara. It does not matter how many basic pramanas you hold to: just pratyaksha like the carvaka, or Pratyaksha and Anumana as in Digagna, or adding agama as a third in many systems, or adding a fourth called Upamana in the Naiyayika system which Nagarjuna takes as his target; the question of Nagarjuna is the same: By what pramanas did you get your list of pramanas?

Yadi ca pramanatas te tesam prasiddhir arthanam
Tesam punah prasiddhim bruhi katham te pramananam

If by such and such pramanas such and such objects are established for you

Please tell me by what pramanas these are established for you.

As Nagarjuna goes on to argue, if the pramanas are established through other pramanas, then the series can go on in infinite regression, which is absurd. If on the contrary you are trying to establish those pramanas without basing them on any other pramanas, then your *vada* is finished; it has no basis. If the pramanas are self-established, then your means of true cognition as you call them are independent of the objects of true cognition, then what relation can they have to those objects? (41)

I want to conclude this lecture here. My purpose was only to whet your appetite by sampling some of Nagarjuna's powerful prasangika logic.

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