

CHAPTER TWO

The *Perfection of Wisdom* (*Prajñāpāramitā*) *Sūtrās*

ON THE MAHĀYĀNA SŪTRAS

In approaching the Mahāyāna *sūtras* we immediately confront presuppositions concerning the nature of the book which these texts put into question. As we have seen, the *sūtra* is not one object among others, but is rather the body of the Buddha, a focus of celebration and worship on the model of relic worship. The book is not a free-standing, self-explanatory item, but an entity embedded in religious practice, a product of and a guide to spiritual experience. Those of the westernized world expect a book, perhaps, to lead through systematic and clearly defined stages from a beginning through a middle to a conclusion. Reading, we think, is a private, solitary affair, requiring peace, leisure, and silence. But the landscape of the Mahāyāna *sūtras* is quite extraordinary, space and time expand and conflate, connections seem to be missed, we move abruptly from ideas so compressed and arcane as to verge on the meaningless, to page after page of repetition. If we approach books as a consumer, regarding texts as goods to be devoured one after the other from cover to cover, then all too often we find the Mahāyāna *sūtras* boring – about as boring as a board game for which we have only the rules, lacking pieces and the board!

In fact the study of a Buddhist *sūtra* was neither private nor peaceful. Certainly in classical times in India the text would be copied and read, but reading was closer to chanting out loud. Widespread mastery of the art of

silent reading is a relatively recent development in world culture. The historian of medieval monasticism Jean Leclerc has observed that

in the Middle Ages, as in antiquity, they read usually not as today, principally with the eyes, but with the lips, pronouncing what they saw, and with the ears, listening to the words pronounced, hearing what is called the 'voices of the pages'. ... Doctors of ancient times used to recommend reading to their patients as a physical exercise on an equal level with walking, running or ball-playing.

(Leclerc 1961: 34)

Each Buddhist monk would probably own no more than one or two *sūtras*, which would rapidly be learnt by heart, not only through frequent repetition but because memory of the texts was demanded by the scholastic environment. Moreover, since the *sūtras* and their exegetical treatises were also guides to meditation, so, as anyone who has practised knows, meditation cannot be performed effectively through repeated reference to a series of written instructions. Buddhist texts were intended as no more than mnemonic devices, scaffolding, the framework for textual exposition by a teacher in terms of his own experience and also the tradition, the lineage transmission from his teachers, traced back to the Buddha himself, or to a Buddha, or to some other form of authorized spiritual revelation. This approach to, and treatment of, the sacred text in Buddhism is not only of historical interest. In traditional Mahāyāna cultures, particularly among the Tibetans, these texts are still used and studied in the age-old way. The scholar who would write a study of Buddhist practice or even doctrine without bearing this in mind is like an art historian who would study architecture by ignoring the building and looking only at the bricks!

The Mahāyāna *sūtras* vary in length from a few words to, say, the 100,000 verse *Perfection of Wisdom*. The larger *sūtras* are often very repetitive and although as yet adequate editions of most of the *sūtras* are almost entirely lacking (where the Sanskrit version has survived at all) it is nevertheless possible through careful text-critical scholarship to detect the growth of the *sūtras* over the centuries, although exact details are very much open to dispute (see Conze 1967a). It would be wrong, therefore, to think of the larger *sūtras* as we now have them as necessarily historically unitary phenomena. Because the *sūtras* grew and developed, often over some time, we should likewise not necessarily expect to find one consistent and systematic doctrine throughout a particular *sūtra*. This is not to say,

however, that the Buddhist tradition has not been able subsequently to interpret a *sūtra* in a unitary manner.

A feature of the earlier *sūtras* is the phenomenon of laudatory self-reference – the lengthy praise of the *sūtra* itself, the immense merits to be obtained from treating even a verse of it with reverence, and the nasty penalties which will accrue in accordance with *karma* to those who denigrate the scripture. We find similar indications of the historical reception of the early Mahāyāna in a famous passage in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (*Lotus*) *Sūtra*, where 5,000 of those in the assembly walk out rather than listen to the preaching of the *sūtra*, because of their 'deep and grave roots of sin and overweening pride, imagining themselves to have attained and to have borne witness to what in fact they had not' (trans. in Hurvitz 1976: 29). Not infrequently, as we have already seen, the *sūtra* itself has one group of monks declaring to another that this *sūtra* is not the word of the Buddha, together with the reply of the *sūtra*'s partisans.

Sometimes stories or sermons which must have originally circulated separately, products, perhaps, of a different intellectual milieu, are inserted into the text. It is occasionally possible to detect short insertions by comparison of the prose and the verse versions of a particular episode, for many of the *sūtras* have both. Generally the verses tend to be the older. The metric form prevents easy tampering, and it is possible sometimes to detect archaic or non-standard linguistic features which indicate, together with other clues, that a number of the early Mahāyāna *sūtras* were not originally in Sanskrit at all, but in a Middle Indic dialect which has been subsequently Sanskritized – not always very well from a classical point of view. Occasionally a number of different *sūtras* have been gathered together and referred to as one conglomerate *sūtra*, as in the case of the *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*, or the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*. There is evidence, moreover, that the Chinese in particular were so impressed with the Mahāyāna *sūtras* that they created a number of spurious *sūtras*, some of which have been of considerable importance in the development of Chinese Buddhism. The great Japanese Zen Master Dōgen (thirteenth century), in his younger days in China, suspected that the so-called *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* (to be distinguished from the genuine *Śūraṅgamasamādhi Sūtra*), an important *sūtra* in Zen Buddhism, was not an authentic Indian *sūtra*, a point now generally accepted by scholars. How one assesses the Central Asian and Chinese spurious *sūtras* in the light of continuing revelation is open to debate, however. After all, from the point of view of the pre-Mahāyāna tradition *all* the Mahāyāna *sūtras* were spurious!

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ LITERATURE

It is not possible at the present stage of our knowledge to make very many certain statements concerning either the origins or the development of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. It is widely held that this literature, and possibly Mahāyāna Buddhism itself, originated in Central or Southern India, and this is supported by a comment in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* that after the death of the Buddha the perfection of wisdom will proceed to the south and thence to the east and north (Conze 1973b: 159).¹ Etienne Lamotte has argued, however, for the North-Western and Central Asian (Khotanese) origins of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, and indeed Lamotte is inclined to see some Mediterranean and Greek influences at work in the changes occurring in Buddhism during the period of Mahāyāna emergence (Lamotte 1954: 377 ff.; 1958). Edward Conze has observed that Lamotte's arguments have shown only that the *Perfection of Wisdom* had a great success in the north-west during the Kuṣāṇa period (c. first century CE), not that it originated there (Conze 1960: 9 ff.).

Issues of the origins of the *Prajñāpāramitā* and those of the Mahāyāna are closely connected, since at the present stage of our knowledge the earliest Mahāyāna *sūtras* are probably *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*. The problem is complicated by the fact that archaeological and epigraphic evidence point one way, and textual evidence the other. A. L. Basham has asserted quite categorically that the inscriptional evidence points to a northern origin for Mahāyāna Buddhism. Observing that some scholars trace the origins of the Mahāyāna to the south, he distinguishes between Mahāyāna mythology and its philosophical ideas. These latter could possibly have a southern origin, but phenomena like the belief in heavenly Bodhisattvas are definitely northern (Basham 1981: 37). It may indeed be necessary to distinguish between the philosophical ideas of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, and the mythology of Bodhisattvas, Buddhas, and their activities, although both are blended in the extant *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. It is possible, although purely hypothetical, to see in the emergence of the Mahāyāna as an identifiable entity the commingling of two originally separate strata, say 'philosophical' and 'religious' (these terms are purely shorthand). The extant *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, at least in its earliest form, shows a predominance of the philosophical, while the other wing is represented by the *Sukhāvati sūtras* and the *Akṣobhyavyūha Sūtra*. It has been suggested that the *Pratyutpanna Sūtra*

represents a deliberate attempt to unite these two originally separate traditions (Harrison 1978: 40). It would be possible thus to trace the origins of these two tendencies to different (although not necessarily intrinsically separate) religio-philosophical trends, and therefore perhaps to different geographical areas. Speculation, of course, but one interesting conclusion we could draw from such speculation is that since the name 'Mahāyāna' is attributed to an entity showing a commingling of both streams, so it may be a mistake to look for the geographical origins of the Mahāyāna. We should rather look as far as possible to a number of centres, and trace in literature, archaeology, and epigraphy their contacts and mutual influences.

Edward Conze has distinguished four phases in the development of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, stretching over more than a thousand years (Conze 1960: 9 ff.; 1968: 11 ff.). From about 100 BCE to 100 CE we have the elaboration of a basic text. During the following 200 years this basic text was very much expanded, while the subsequent 200 years up to about 500 CE was characterized by the restatement of basic ideas in short *sūtras* on the one hand, and versified summaries on the other. During the final period, from 600–1200 CE, Tantric influences make themselves felt, and we find evidence of magical elements in the *sūtras* and their use. So, for examples of each category we have:

- (i) The oldest text, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (8,000 verse) *Perfection of Wisdom*, together with the *Ratnaguṇasamcayagāthā*, which Conze sees as its verse summary.
- (ii) The *Satasāhasrikā* (100,000 verse), the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* (25,000 verse), and the *Aṣṭadaśasāhasrikā* (18,000 verse) *Prajñāpāramitās*.
- (iii) (a) The *Vajracchedikā*: this is the famous *Diamond Sūtra*, the 300 verse *Perfection of Wisdom*.
(b) The *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, an exegetical work attributed to the 'celestial Bodhisattva' Maitreya. This is said to be the *Perfection of Wisdom* systematized for practice. Tibetans always study the *Prajñāpāramitā* through the medium of this text and its commentaries.
- (iv) The *Adhyardhaśatikā* (150 verse) *Prajñāpāramitā*.

Edward Conze's four phases are widely accepted by scholars, and their broad outline, particularly the expansion of a basic text and its subsequent contraction, had been independently suggested by Ryusho Hikata (1958) in Japan. One should be wary of accepting such schema as definitely

established, however. Conze and Hikata disagree on the antiquity of the *Vajracchedikā*, which Japanese scholars generally place much earlier than is usual in the West. Gregory Schopen has now suggested that the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* may actually contain a reworking of ideas found in the *Vajracchedikā* (Schopen 1975: 153n). No notice has been taken, I think, of the quotations from the *Diamond Sūtra* contained in the *Sūtrasamuccaya*, the attribution of which to Nāgārjuna (c. second century CE) has not yet been disproved. The issue must be left open, but at the moment there is reasonable possibility that the *Vajracchedikā* in some form or another dates from a very early phase of *Prajñāpāramitā* literary activity.

Edward Conze has elsewhere distinguished nine stages in the development of *Prajñāpāramitā* thought (Conze 1967b: 123–47): (i) The initial phase represented by the first two chapters of the *Ratnagūṇasamcayagāthā*; (ii) chapters 3–28 of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*; (iii) incorporation of material from the Abhidharma; (iv) concessions to the Buddhism of Faith; (v) the last third of the *Śatasāhasrikā*; (vi) the short *sūtras*; (vii) Yogācārin (Cittamātra) commentaries; and finally (viii) Tantric and (ix) Ch'an (Zen) uses and commentaries. As with his four phases in the development of the literature, with which this list overlaps, Conze's schema here is reasonable but may have to be amended in the light of further research.²

WISDOM (PRAJÑĀ) AND ITS PERFECTION

Wisdom is, alas, all too rare; *prajñā* is not. This apparent paradox should make us sensitive to the usual translation of '*prajñā*' by 'wisdom'. *Prajñā* is a mental event, a state of consciousness, normally in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist context a state of consciousness which results from analysis, investigation. 'Its function', the *Abhidharmasamuccaya* tells us, 'is to exclude doubt.' In this sense some Buddhist texts refer to a worldly or conventional (*samvṛti*) *prajñā*, the understanding through investigation of, say, grammar, medicine, or some other mundane skill.³ These skills may or may not have religious significance, depending on how they are used. Texts also refer to ultimate (*paramārtha*) *prajñā*, the understanding which results from an investigation into the way things really are, what we might call 'metaphysical' understanding, the result of deep and sharp rigorous thought. In this sense there is the *prajñā* not only of Buddhists but also of rival non-Buddhist systems of thought – *prajñā* which

apparently excludes doubt but is from a Buddhist point of view the result of a defective analysis. Thus it is possible to speak, as does the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣita tradition, of false *prajñā* (Jaini 1977). Since the principal concern of Buddhist writing is with the correct understanding of the way things really are, however, by an understandable process of thought '*prajñā*' comes to be used for the correct discernment of the true situation, the ultimate way of things. So, in the non-Mahāyāna *Abhidharmakośa Bhāṣya prajñā* is given simply as the discernment of *dharmas* (*dharma-pravicaya*), those ultimates which mark the terminating point of Abhidharma analysis. It will be recalled, however, that in the early Mahāyāna, as well as in some non-Mahāyāna schools, the teaching of *dharmas* as those final realities out of which we construct the world was rejected in favour of a teaching of the emptiness of *dharmas* (*dharma-sūnyatā*). *Dharmas* too lack any fundamental status and are not ultimate realities, *dharmas* too can be analysed away. For these traditions the analysis associated with the Abhidharma had ended too early, and thus such a *prajñā* was a defective *prajñā*, not the perfection of *prajñā*, or no real *prajñā* at all. Now *prajñā* is said to be a state of consciousness which understands emptiness (*sūnyata*), the absence of self or essence even in *dharmas*. Since this *prajñā* is the principal concern of the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts, and since this *prajñā*, this wisdom, appears to have been advocated in certain non-Mahāyāna schools also, it is not surprising that there is a Tibetan tradition of a non-Mahāyāna *Prajñāpāramitā* in a Prakrit, that is, a non-Sanskrit, dialect belonging to the Pūrvaśaila school (Conze 1960: 9).

Wisdom (*prajñā*) in the Indo-Tibetan tradition is primarily an understanding which results from analysis. There is, however, a distinction familiar to philosophers between knowing *that* something is the case – knowing who Archibald is, for example – and knowing by acquaintance – that is, having the dubious pleasure of actually meeting Archibald. In speaking of wisdom as understanding the way things really are there is correspondingly a distinction between knowing intellectually, through deep, even meditative, analysis, the way things must really be, and the 'paranormal' experience of a meditative absorption directed towards the results of such analysis – *dharmas* or emptiness as the case may be. We thus face another understandable shift in the meaning of *prajñā*. *Prajñā* is sometimes a meditative absorption the content of which is the ultimate truth, the way things really are. Thus the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* can refer to the perfection of wisdom as 'non-conceptual awareness' (*nirvikalpakajñāna*). This is still *prajñā*, wisdom, for it is still a

state of consciousness which results from analysis, although the analysis has been refined, as it were, out of existence, it has transcended itself, and the mind is left in one-pointed absorption on the results of analysis (see Chapter 3, pp. 72–4). Note, however, that this *prajñā* is non-conceptual and non-dual, whereas the preceding examples have been conceptual. That there is a gulf between conceptual and non-conceptual appears to have led certain traditions, notably that of some Ch'an (Zen) practitioners in East Asia, to conclude that *prajñā* can in no way result from analysis, but rather is a natural response to *cutting* all analytic and conceptual thought. There are nevertheless Indian bases and precedents for this (Williams 1980: esp. 25–6), although the particular emphasis on anti-intellectualism and cutting conceptual thought in some Chinese traditions may have been the results of unconscious Taoist influence (cf. the *Tao te ching*'s 'The *Tao* that can be spoken of is not the eternal *Tao*').

Thus far '*prajñā*' and its perfection refer to interconnected forms of conceptual and non-conceptual understanding. There is, however, one further slide in meaning to be noted. By a shift understandable in the Indian context of meditation, '*prajñā/prajñāpāramitā*' come through non-conceptual and therefore non-dual awareness to equal the content or object of such an ultimate awareness, that is, in this context emptiness itself. Thus the *Ta-chih-tu lun* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra*), an enormous commentary on the 25,000 verse *Prajñāpāramitā* attributed probably incorrectly to Nāgārjuna and extant only in Chinese, refers to the perfection of wisdom as the indestructible and imperishable 'real mark of all the *dharma*s'. This is what is really the case, emptiness, the universal absence of any ultimate existence 'whether Buddhas occur or whether they do not occur'.

Ultimate *prajñā* as understood by the Mahāyāna, and *prajñāpāramitā*, the perfection of wisdom, appear to be generally the same. Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna sources refer to a number of perfections (*pāramitā*) mastered by the Bodhisattva as he or she follows the long path to perfect Buddhahood. The most frequent list contains six: giving (*dāna*), morality (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), effort (*vīrya*), meditative concentration (*dhyaṇa*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). The perfection of wisdom is primary; it is said to lead the other perfections as a man with eyes leads the blind (*Madhyamakāvatāra* 6:2), although later writers in particular are sensitive to the suggestion that wisdom is sufficient unto itself and the other perfections are unnecessary. Candrakīrti, in his *Madhyamakāvatāra*, distinguishes between mundane or ordinary perfections, and supra-mundane perfections (1:16). The difference is that the supramundane

perfection of giving, for example, is giving with no conception of the inherent real existence of giver, gift, or receiver, that is, it is giving in the light of perfect *prajñā*. Generally, therefore, the perfection of wisdom is that wisdom which goes beyond the wisdom of the world and that associated by the Mahāyāna particularly with the Abhidharma scholars. It transcends their wisdom both in terms of its more refined analysis, and of the fact that it occurs within the context of the extensive and compassionate Bodhisattva deeds, the aspiration to full Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

ABSENCE OF SELF — THE EXTENSIVE PERSPECTIVE

Edward Conze has argued that the earliest *Prajñāpāramitā* is contained in the first two chapters of the *Ratnagūṇasamcayagāthā* and the corresponding chapters of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*. The *Ratnagūṇasamcayagāthā* (*Ratna*) are verses in a non-standard Sanskrit, and there is reason to believe that these verses were originally incorporated into the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (*Aṣṭa*) on the model of many other Mahāyāna sūtras. Whether Conze is right in maintaining that these sections represent the earliest *Perfection of Wisdom* awaits further research, but they certainly contain the principal features and doctrines of the *Prajñāpāramitā* in a very early and accessible form. The antiquity of the texts is shown, among other reasons, by their immediate need to establish their authority. It is significant that in the *Aṣṭa* the principal speaker, apart from the Buddha, is Subhūti, 'the foremost of those who dwell in Peace', and not Śāriputra, traditionally the disciple most advanced in wisdom, and the patron of the Abhidharma.⁴ The wisdom of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is a wisdom which calms all discursive thought and brings true peace. The sūtra is quick to point out, however, that all Subhūti teaches, and all that other teachers preach which is in conformity with the truth (i.e. *prajñā*), is in fact the work of the Buddha speaking through them. Indeed the sūtra ends with the assertion that 'One should know that those beings are living in the presence of the Tathagata [the Buddha] who will hear this perfection of wisdom, take it up, study, spread, repeat and write it, and who will honour, revere, adore and worship it' (trans. in Conze 1973b: 300; all citations of *Aṣṭa* and *Ratna* are to this translation). As the *Ratna* puts it, 'Their teaching stems but from the might of the Buddhas, and not their own power' (ibid., 9).

The *Perfection of Wisdom* scriptures, as with most Mahāyāna sūtras,

do not indulge in elaborate philosophical argument. For this we must look to the philosophical schools, particularly in this case the Madhyamaka. The scriptures make assertions which indicate the true way of things and behaviour in the light of that truth. All assertions of the *Prajñāpāramitā* are made from the perspective of perfect wisdom, that is, they occur from the position of a Buddha's perception wherein absolutely nothing has any inherent or ultimate existence, but remains only in terms of conventional truth. All entities are like hallucinatory objects (*Ratna* 1:14). By switching between these two levels, ultimate and conventional, it is possible to generate apparent paradoxes for pedagogic effect, but (*pace* Conze) there are no genuine paradoxes, no real 'speaking in contradictions' in the *Perfection of Wisdom*.

The principal ontological message of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is an extension of the Buddhist teaching of no-Self to equal no essence, and therefore no inherent existence, as applied to all things without exception. This is not some form of Monistic Absolutism, negating in order to uncover a True Ultimate Reality. The ultimate truth is that there is no such thing:

Subhuti: Even Nirvana, I say, is like a magical illusion, is like a dream. How much more so anything else!

Gods: Even Nirvana, Holy Subhuti, you say is like an illusion, is like a dream?

Subhuti: Even if perchance there could be anything more distinguished, of that too I would say that it is like an illusion, like a dream.

(trans. in Conze 1973b: 99)

Who will there be who could possibly grasp such a teaching? The answer is that there is no one around who could grasp it – nor has anything really been taught at all! One should be clear, however, what is being said here. There is a widely held view that the philosophical origins of the Mahāyāna lay in a move from the absence of Self in persons (*pudgalanairātmya*) found in the non-Mahāyāna traditions, to the absence of Self in *dharmas* as well, (*dharmānairātmya* = *dharmasūnyatā*) found in the Mahāyāna. This is naïve both historically and in terms of the image of its own teaching found in the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts themselves. Historically, it should be clear that the teaching of absence of Self in persons (in opposition to that of *dharmas*) is a feature of certain interpretations of the Abhidharma. The *Perfection of Wisdom* shows a clear opposition to any conception of inherently existing *dharmas*, but

this is not the same as an opposition to the non-Mahāyāna traditions as such, since at this time the non-Mahāyāna traditions and the Abhidharma schools which taught inherent existence of *dharmas* were not equivalent. As we have seen, there were non-Mahāyāna traditions which held to a doctrine of absence of Self in *dharmas*. The presence of teachings akin to those of emptiness in the *Sutta Nipāta* of the Pāli canon suggests (speculatively) that those who formulated the *Prajñāpāramitā* may have seen the teaching of mere absence of Self in persons alone as a dangerous innovation. It was certainly possible for Candrakīrti to point to passages (extant in the Pāli canon) of the non-Mahāyāna canon which refer to each of the five psycho-physical constituents (*skandhas*) as being like bubbles, mirages, illusions, and so on (*Madhyamakāvatāra Bhāṣya* on 1:8), a clear indication as far as the Mahāyāna is concerned that the Buddha taught even non-Mahāyānists emptiness, the absence of inherent existence in *dharmas* as well as persons (cf. also *Aṣṭa*, Conze 1973b: 167).

Second, the *Perfection of Wisdom* does not claim that complete emptiness is the doctrine for Mahāyānists in opposition to the non-Mahāyāna teachings concerning *dharmas*. Rather, the *Ratna* says:

Those who wish to become the Sugata's [Buddha's] Disciples,
Or Pratyekabuddhas, or likewise Kings of the Dharma –
Without recourse to this Patience they cannot reach their respective
goals.

They move across, but their eyes are not on the other shore.⁵

(Conze 1973b: 13)

The *Aṣṭa* explains that 'No one can attain any of the fruits of the holy life, or keep it ... unless he patiently accepts the elusiveness of the dharma' (Conze 1973b: 98). And again, 'Whether one wants to train on the level of Disciple, or Pratyekabuddha, or Bodhisattva, – one should listen to this perfection of wisdom, ... and in this very perfection of wisdom should one be trained and exert oneself' (Conze 1973b: 84). What the *Aṣṭa* is saying here is that there is no Arhatship or Pratyekabuddhahood without perfect wisdom, an understanding of emptiness, for it is necessary to understand the way things really are in order to cut attachment and attain any degree of sainthood. Attachment to *dharmas* is attachment none the less.⁶ Thus the goal of the Hearers is Arhatship, but this goal cannot be attained without understanding the absence of Self in *dharmas* – in other words those who follow any Abhidharma teaching of the inherent existence of *dharmas* cannot attain even their (from a Mahāyāna point of view) limited goal. What characterizes the Mahāyāna is not the teaching

of absence of Self in *dharma*s but, according to the great Tibetan scholar Tsong kha pa (1357–1419), the extensive deeds and compassion of the Bodhisattva who is treading the path to perfect Buddhahood for the benefit of all.

So the terminology of the *Perfection of Wisdom* is that of the Abhidharma, but the critique is of the claim to have found some things which really, ultimately exist, i.e. *dharma*s. These early *Prajñāpāramitā* texts constantly ask what *dharma* is referred to by the term *x*; the reply is that no such *dharma* can be found, in reality there is no such thing:

No wisdom can we get hold of, no highest perfection,
No Bodhisattva, no thought of enlightenment either.
When told of this, if not bewildered and in no way anxious,
A Bodhisattva courses in the Well-Gone's [Sugata's] wisdom.
(Conze 1973b: 9)

The Bodhisattva should not be bewildered. The *Aṣṭa* says:

And yet, O Lord, if, when this is pointed out, a Bodhisattva's heart does not become cowed, nor stolid, does not despair nor despond, if he does not turn away or become dejected, does not tremble, is not frightened or terrified, it is just this Bodhisattva, this great being who should be instructed in perfect wisdom.

(Conze 1973b: 84)

It is difficult for us to appreciate just how extraordinary these teachings are as religious teachings, and how disturbing they must have seemed to anyone who took them seriously at the time they were first promulgated. For anyone who has tried to practise these teachings in meditation and life the requirement of completely letting go, 'existential relaxation', cutting even subtle attachment, is an extremely difficult one to fulfil, requiring immense training and application, and potentially, if taken seriously, very frightening. This, the *Ratna* tells us, is true renunciation:

In form, in feeling, will, perception and awareness
Nowhere in them they find a place to rest on.
Without a home they wander, dharmas never hold them,
Nor do they grasp at them – the Jina's Bodhi
[Buddha's enlightenment] they are bound to gain.

(Conze 1973b: 9–10; cf. 13)

The language would not have been lost on contemporary readers (or reciters). The image of wandering without a home was a potent one.

Other *sūtras* make the point more strongly, but the *Ratna* gains through its pointed yet poetic subtlety. True renunciation is the abandonment of all grasping attachment, and clearly this is a mental state which may or may not be mirrored in the social institution of monasticism.

A final note. The *Perfection of Wisdom* texts repeatedly assert that the Bodhisattva does not engage in discursive thought. This may suggest a problem in relating the absence of discursive thought to *prajñā* as the result of analysis. It seems to me that the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, in speaking from the point of view of the Buddha's non-dual, non-conceptual awareness, give little attention to how the Bodhisattva is to raise his or her perception to that level. Wisdom, I have argued, involves initially *extending* the analysis, to realize as fully as possible, in the first instance intellectually, the truth of emptiness. To conclude that wisdom for the *Perfection of Wisdom* is the result of simply cutting discursive thought, making the mind a blank perhaps, would, I think, be a historical and religious error, perhaps the error referred to in Buddhist hermeneutics as 'confusing the result with the cause'.⁷ Otherwise, as Tsong kha pa points out, spiritual, salvific value would follow from fainting or deep, dreamless sleep.

THE BODHISATTVA

According to Haribhadra (late eighth century), those following the Hearer and Pratyekabuddha paths may also be called 'Bodhisattvas' in that they are aiming for an enlightenment (*bodhi*). Thus when specifically Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas are meant, those aiming for full Buddhahood for the benefit of all, the word '*mahāsattva*', meaning Great Being, is added. However, it is quite normal in Buddhist literature to use the word 'Bodhisattva' in a Mahāyāna sense to equal '*bodhisattva-mahāsattva*', i.e. that being who has taken the vow to be reborn, no matter how many times this may be necessary, in order to attain the highest possible goal, that of Complete and Perfect Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. It is in this sense too that I shall use 'Bodhisattva'.

The concern of the Bodhisattva is with liberation, full Buddhahood, not for himself alone (or herself, of course – this follows throughout), but for all sentient beings. The *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* contrast this with the narrow scope of the non-Mahāyāna traditions, where their spiritual goal is in the last analysis purely a personal affair:

They make up their minds that 'one single self we shall tame, ... one

single self we shall lead to final Nirvana.' A Bodhisattva should certainly not in such a way train himself. On the contrary, he should train himself thus: 'My own self I will place in Suchness [the true way of things], and, so that all the world might be helped, I will place all beings into Suchness, and I will lead to Nirvana the whole immeasurable world of beings.'

(*Aṣṭa*, Conze 1973b: 163)

Again, from the *Pañcaviṃśati*:

What do you think, Sariputra, does it occur to any of the Disciples and Pratyekabuddhas to think that 'after we have known full enlightenment, we should lead all beings to Nirvana ...?'

Sariputra: No indeed, Lord.

The Lord: One should therefore know that the wisdom of the Disciples and Pratyekabuddhas bears no comparison to the wisdom of the Bodhisattva.

(Trans. in Conze 1968: 33)

The Bodhisattva generates infinite compassion, and all his acts are directed towards helping others:

Great compassion ... takes hold of him. He surveys countless beings with his heavenly eye, and what he sees fills him with great agitation. ... And he attends to them with the thought that: 'I shall become a saviour to all those beings, I shall release them from all their sufferings!' But he does not make either this, or anything else, into a sign to which he becomes partial. This also is the great light of a Bodhisattva's wisdom, which allows him to know full enlightenment.

(*Aṣṭa*, Conze 1973b: 238-9)

This last point is crucial. The Bodhisattva's deeds and attitude are all sealed with the perfection of *prajñā* – the Bodhisattva does not, in carrying out his infinite great and compassionate deeds, consider that there is any ultimately, inherently existing being who is helped. This is final, true, and total selflessness. In a famous passage the *Diamond Sūtra* says:

As many beings as there are in the universe of beings ... all these I must lead to Nirvana. ... And yet, although innumerable beings have thus been led to Nirvana, no being at all has been led to

Nirvana. ... If in a Bodhisattva the notion of a 'being' should take place, he could not be called a 'Bodhi-being'.

(Trans. in Conze 1958: 25)

The *Perfection of Wisdom* also speaks of the Bodhisattva's cultivation of spiritual and other practices in order to develop various psychic and mundane abilities which he can then use in various ways to help sentient beings both materially and spiritually. Through psychic ability the advanced Bodhisattva is said even to be able to manifest Buddhas as psychic creations for the benefit of beings, so that in this and other ways the clear distinction between a Buddha and an advanced Bodhisattva begins to break down. Moreover, being selfless he turns over all his stock of merit, the result of his many virtuous deeds, for the benefit of others. He develops 'skill-in-means' (or 'skilful means' – *upāya*), the ability to adapt himself and his teachings to the level of his hearers, without attachment to any particular doctrine or formula as being necessarily applicable in all cases. The Bodhisattvas may, in their compassion, visit the hells in order to help hell-beings, and as the Mahāyāna developed so the notion of skill-in-means became a strategy whereby Buddhism could open itself out to new and originally non-Buddhist ideas. The *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, for example, has Avalokiteśvara, a Bodhisattva so advanced that he has taken on divine attributes (an example of Conze's 'celestial Bodhisattvas'), apparently sanctioning Hindu doctrines such as Śaivism for those to whom such doctrines would be helpful.

The compassion and wisdom of the Bodhisattvas in the Mahāyāna scriptures are both descriptive and exhortatory. There are wonderful beings who have great abilities and perfect compassion. They have progressed well along the path to Supreme Buddhahood and are able and willing to help sentient beings in whatever ways may be of greatest benefit. On the other hand the follower of the Mahāyāna is exhorted to take the Bodhisattva vow himself, to take these teachings and the stories of Bodhisattvas as models. We know that historically the combination of descriptive and prescriptive planes sometimes gave rise to tension. The perfection of giving was often illustrated with popular but gory tales of the Bodhisattva giving his limbs or body, for example, or burning himself out of devotion and selflessness. Chinese pilgrims to India in classical times describe curious cases of what amounts to religious suicide. I-tsing, in the seventh century, observed that 'The Mahāsattva offered his own eyes and body, but a bhikṣu need not do so!' (Joshi 1967: 110)

The activities and aspiration of the Bodhisattva are well illustrated in

the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* by the story of Sadāprarudita ('Ever Weeping'), who willingly offers his own flesh in order to obtain money to give to the Bodhisattva Dharmodgata, who will teach him the *Prajñāpāramitā* (in spite of the cost of books, nowadays the teachings are somewhat cheaper, and for that reason perhaps less valued!). The flesh is offered to a Brahmin who wishes to carry out a particularly perverse sacrifice but, as in all good heroic tales, the Brahmin turns out to be a god testing the novice Bodhisattva's resolve, and he is restored to wholeness. The story forms an important source for our appreciation of the cult of the book, the *Prajñāpāramitā* text, and the Bodhisattva Dharmodgata is the perfect Dharma preacher, so important to the early Mahāyāna. He is Sadāprarudita's Good Friend, the person who is needed, according to a voice from the sky, in order to acquire and master the *Perfection of Wisdom*. The story is allegorical and visionary – indeed Stephan Beyer has pointed out the frequency of such visionary tales in the early Mahāyāna. Beyer speaks of the visionary origins of the Mahāyāna in general, and the *Prajñāpāramitā* in particular:

The metaphysics of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is in fact the metaphysics of the vision and the dream: a universe of glittering and quicksilver change is precisely one that can only be described as empty. The vision and the dream become the tools to dismantle the hard categories we impose upon reality, to reveal the eternal flowing possibility in which the Bodhisattva lives.

(Beyer 1977: 340)

It is frequently said in textbooks that the compassion of the Bodhisattva is so great that he postpones *nirvāṇa*, or turns back from *nirvāṇa*, in order to place all other sentient beings in *nirvāṇa* first. It seems to me, however, that caution and further research is required here. Such a teaching appears *prima facie* to be incoherent, and contains a claim that somehow a Buddha must be deficient in compassion when compared with a Bodhisattva. If all other beings must be placed in *nirvāṇa* before a particular Bodhisattva attains *nirvāṇa* himself there could obviously be only one Bodhisattva. Alternatively, we have the absurd spectacle of a series of Bodhisattvas each trying to hurry the others into *nirvāṇa* in order to preserve his or her vow! Moreover if sentient beings are infinite, a widely held view in the Mahāyāna, then the Bodhisattva is setting himself an impossible task, and no Bodhisattva could ever attain Buddhahood. I asked the late Kensur Pema Gyaltsen, head abbot of Drepung Monastery and one of the most learned Tibetan scholars, about

this while he was on a visit to Britain. I explained that it was widely asserted in books available in the West that the Bodhisattva does not become enlightened until he has helped all other sentient beings to enlightenment. The eminent Lama seemed to find this most amusing since, as he put it, all those who had become Bodhisattvas would not become enlightened, while those who had not become Bodhisattvas would! He stated quite categorically that the final view is that this is not how Bodhisattvas behave. In Tibetan practice the merit from virtuous deeds is always directed towards obtaining full Buddhahood in order to be able to help beings most effectively. There is never any mention of postponing or turning back from Buddhahood. Otherwise any Bodhisattva who did become a Buddha would be presumably either deficient in compassion or have broken his vow.

In fact it should be clear that to speak of *nirvāṇa* in a Mahāyāna context is naïve. There are a number of different types of *nirvāṇa* – the *nirvāṇa* of the Arhat, of the Pratyekabuddha, the supreme and compassionate 'non-abiding' *nirvāṇa* of the Buddha, for example, not to mention the separate issue of whether a Buddha ever finally 'goes beyond' beings and enters some kind of final *nirvāṇa*. Generally, the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva does not postpone or turn back from *nirvāṇa*. Rather he or she rejects the *nirvāṇas* of the Arhat and Pratyekabuddhas, at least as final goals, and aims for the full *nirvāṇa* of the Buddha.

It is the textual situation which requires further research. There certainly are texts which speak of the Bodhisattva postponing or turning back from some enlightenment, although they are rare. The notion may have developed mainly in Sino-Japanese Buddhism. According to Kensur Pema Gyaltsen, if a text states this, it is not to be taken literally, it does not embody the final truth. It may be that it embodies a form of exhortatory writing – the Bodhisattva adopts a position of complete renunciation. In renouncing even Buddhahood the Bodhisattva precisely attains Buddhahood. Nancy Lethcoe (1977) claims to detect a difference between the *Aṣṭa* and the *Pañcaviṃśati* sūtras on this issue. The *Aṣṭa* clearly teaches that the Bodhisattva first attains Buddhahood, and only then can he fully help others. The *Pañcaviṃśati*, on the other hand, teaches that some Bodhisattvas will postpone their enlightenment until all beings have become enlightened (ibid., 264). She gives three references to the *Pañcaviṃśati* (60–73, 81, 170), but although in the first two sections there are many references to types of Bodhisattvas, some of whom it is stated *will* attain full enlightenment and help others, I fail to find any obvious reference to compassionate Bodhisattvas postponing

Buddhahood. *Pañcaviṃśati* 170, however, is different. In Conze's translation (used by Lethcoe) it reads (1979: 124): 'Through this skill in means will I, for the sake of all beings, experience that pain of the hells ... until these beings have won Nirvana. ... Afterwards I will, for the sake of my own self, know full enlightenment. ...' Clearly, the key word here is 'afterwards'. The Sanskrit and Tibetan, however, do not necessarily carry the temporal sense of the English 'afterwards'. They can mean 'thereupon', 'because of that', or 'thereby', all of which convey a very different meaning. I do not want to emphasize the linguistic point, however. My purpose is simply to suggest sensitivity to the initial incoherence and textual uncertainty concerning the Bodhisattva's claimed postponement of *nirvāṇa*, an assertion which appears to have become part of the lore of textbooks on Buddhism. In fact (*pace* Lethcoe), the *Pañcaviṃśati* also says that the Bodhisattva vows that 'after we have known full enlightenment we should lead all beings to Nirvana' (quoted above, p. 50). One should note, however, that the *Pañcaviṃśati*'s 'irreversible' Bodhisattvas seem to be able to do all the things a Buddha can. It is possible that at these rarefied levels, in the eyes of non-systematic piety, advanced Bodhisattvas and Buddhas have simply been conflated.

Madhyamaka

NĀGĀRJUNA AND ARYADEVA

Candrakīrti, at the beginning of his chapter on wisdom in the *Madhyamakāvatāra Bhāṣya*, observes that it is indeed difficult to understand the intention of the sacred scriptures. We are fortunate, Candrakīrti tells us, that there is a person predicted by the Buddha who can be taken as an authority for the exact meaning of the *sūtras*:

How the Bodhisattva who courses in the perfection of wisdom sees the true nature of *dharma*s has been clearly taught by the Noble Nāgārjuna, who understood exactly the scriptures, in his Madhyamaka treatise, employing reasoning and scriptural testimony. This true nature of *dharma*s is characterized by their absence of inherent existence.

(Cone edition, f. 242a)

The 'Noble' (*ārya*) Nāgārjuna, and his principal disciple Aryadeva, are credited with founding the Madhyamaka ('Middling') as a school, an attempt systematically to set forth, demonstrate, and defend an understanding of the way things really are. The name of Nāgārjuna is the first great name in Buddhist thought since the Buddha, and for that reason (among others) he is sometimes referred to as the 'second Buddha'. Unfortunately we know even less about the life of Nāgārjuna than we do about the Buddha himself. He has been the focus of many

legends, however, and these have compensatory value for the scholar in the light they throw on concepts of sainthood and the activities of the spiritual hero. According to Tibetan sources Nāgārjuna was placed in the monastic order as a child in order to escape an astrological prediction of an early death. His subsequent mastery of doctrine, medicine, and alchemy was such that he was invited by the *nāgas*, under-water serpents, to visit their kingdom. While there he discovered the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, which had been lost to the world of men since their exposition by the Buddha. He returned to the world with the *sūtras*, and through his magical ability was able to live for many centuries. Nāgārjuna also became the friend and advisor of a great king, and used his magic in order to keep the king in full vigour and youthfulness. Alas, even with magic and compassion it is impossible to please all of the people all of the time! The crown prince, impatient to succeed to the throne, appealed to Nāgārjuna to commit charitable suicide. He wanted the Master to demonstrate perfect generosity by donating his head. The only weapon which could be used to behead Nāgārjuna was a blade of sacred grass, a result of the time when Nāgārjuna accidentally killed some insects while gathering grass for his meditation cushion. It is said that when the time is ripe Nāgārjuna's head and body will rejoin and again work for the benefit of sentient beings – a rather nice millenarian touch! After death Nāgārjuna was reborn in Sukhāvati, the Pure Land of Amitābha Buddha.

I leave the reader to meditate on the significance of such a story. Modern scholars favour the theory that there were at least two Nāgārjunas, distinguishing between the philosopher Nāgārjuna, who was probably from the southern or Andhra region, and lived perhaps in the second century CE, and a later Nāgārjuna who was a Tantric alchemist and yogin. In addition, it is possible that works have been attributed by the Buddhist tradition to Nāgārjuna simply because of his doctrinal importance, so that the name 'Nāgārjuna' now refers to a composite being of myth rather than a historical figure. There are thus serious historical and methodological problems in trying to suggest what in fact the 'teachings of Nāgārjuna' were.

Our interest at this point is with the second-century philosopher Nāgārjuna and not the later Tantrika. Tibetan scholars divide Nāgārjuna's non-Tantric works into three classes, and it is reasonable to start by taking these treatises as works of our second-century Mahāyāna philosopher:

- (i) The analytic corpus.
 - (a) *Madhyamakakārikā* – Nāgārjuna's principal philosophical work.

- (b) *Yuktisastikā* – 'Sixty Verses on Reasoning [*yukti*]'.
 - (c) *Śūnyatasaptati* – 'Seventy Verses on Emptiness'.
 - (d) *Vigrahavyāvartanī* – a reply to objections against his work.
 - (e) *Validāyaprakaraṇa* – an attack on the categories of the Hindu epistemologists (Nyāya).
 - (f) *Vyavahārasiddhi* – a proof of the conventional realm. This work is lost save for a few verses, and some Tibetans substituted the *Ratnāvalī*.
- (ii) The collection of hymns. A number of hymns have been attributed to Nāgārjuna, one group of four being termed the *Caṭuḥstava*, although there is some dispute as to which four should be included.
- (iii) The collection of shorter treatises and epistles. This includes two works attributed to Nāgārjuna which he apparently wrote as letters to his friend the king, the *Subhṛlekha* and the *Ratnāvalī* (if it is not included in the analytic corpus above).

A number of other treatises are attributed to Nāgārjuna by the Chinese and Tibetan traditions, some of which may be authentic, although I have mentioned already my doubt as regards the traditional Chinese attribution of the enormous *Ta-chih-tu lun* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra*) to the Master.

As with Nāgārjuna, it is possible to distinguish between a Tantric and a 'philosophical' Aryadeva. Traditionally it has sometimes been held that Nāgārjuna directed his attack at the Abhidharma scholars, while Aryadeva extended the critique to the non-Buddhist philosophical schools. His output was considerably smaller than that attributed to Nāgārjuna, and the most important work of the non-Tantric Aryadeva was a treatise called the *400 verses* (*Caṭuḥśatakakārikā*).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MADHYAMAKA TRADITION IN INDIA

Tibetan writers, surveying the history of Indian Madhyamaka, have divided Madhyamaka teachers into a number of schools and sub-schools. There was little systematic attempt at such division in India itself and none, as far as we know, in China. Nevertheless, the Tibetan distinction between Svātantrika and Prāsāngika Madhyamaka, and the subsequent division of the former into Sautrāntika-Svātantrika Madhyamaka and Yogācāra-Svātantrika Madhyamaka became standard in Tibet and has been adopted by modern writers on the Madhyamaka.

It appears that the earliest of the 'sectarian' Mādhyamikas ('Mādhyamika' – those who follow or pertain to the Mādhyama, the Middle) was Buddhapālita (c. 470–540), who is sometimes said to have founded the Prāsāṅgika tradition. He apparently wrote just one work, a commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Mādhyamakakārikā*, which survives (as do so many Mādhyamaka texts) in Tibetan translation. It takes two to make a quarrel, however, and since in this work he shows no awareness of the criticisms of his arch-rival Bhāvaviveka (c. 500–70), who is said to have founded the Svātantrika tradition, it is only in retrospect that Buddhapālita can be called a Prāsāṅgika. In fact it was Candrakīrti (c. 600–50), who subjected Bhāvaviveka to trenchant criticism in defence of Buddhapālita, who must be deemed the actual founder of Prāsāṅgika Mādhyamaka as a self-aware tradition standing in conscious opposition to the Svātantrikas. Most of Bhāvaviveka's works survive only in Tibetan and Chinese translation. They include his commentary to the *Mādhyamakakārikā*, known as the *Prajñāpradīpa*, as well as what was probably the first 'encyclopedia of Indian philosophy', the *Mādhyamakabhīṣṭa*, together with an autocommentary called the *Tarkajvālā* – the *Blaze of Reasoning*.

The great Prāsāṅgika is Candrakīrti, whose *Prasamnapadā* commentary to the *Mādhyamakakārikā* is the only commentary on Nāgārjuna's principal philosophical work surviving in Sanskrit. Candrakīrti's *Mādhyamakavatāra*, together with its *Bhāṣya*, an autocommentary, remain in Tibetan and integrate Mādhyamaka philosophy into the Mahāyāna spiritual path. The *Mādhyamakavatāra* and its commentary are the official 'schoolbooks' for the study of Mādhyamaka in Tibetan monastic universities to the present day, and they thus occupy the same role in the Mādhyamaka curriculum as does the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* in the study of the perfection of wisdom.

Among Prāsāṅgikas one should also mention Śāntideva (c. 695–743), whose *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is, like the *Mādhyamakavatāra*, a statement of the Bodhisattva's path to Buddhahood, but distinguished by a poetic sensitivity and fervour which makes it one of the gems of Buddhist and world spiritual literature.

It is often said that the issue which split the Mādhyamaka into Svātantrika and Prāsāṅgika branches was one of methodology, and this certainly does explain the origins of their names although, as so often in the study of Mahāyāna thought, relatively little work has been done on these schools and conclusions are still very provisional.¹ Bhāvaviveka objected to the use by Buddhapālita of *prasaṅga* arguments – that is,

arguments which try to convince the opponent of the error of his ways by simply pointing out that the opponent's position entails undesired consequences for the opponent himself. According to Bhāvaviveka this simply will not do. It is necessary also to employ an independent (*svatantra*) inference put into the proper logical structure or syllogistic form recognized by other schools of Indian philosophy, particularly the Buddhist logicians, headed by the brilliant Dinnaga (fifth–sixth centuries). This dispute may look fairly minor, but perhaps it bulked large in an environment of scholastic precision. It does have its soteriological dimension, however. According to Tsong kha pa, that most acute and sophisticated of Mādhyamaka commentators, the difference between the two schools here is not simply one of method, but rather of the most effective way of bringing the opponent to an inferential understanding of emptiness which is, as we have seen, one type of wisdom (*prajñā*). For Candrakīrti, however, rushing to the defence of Buddhapālita, Bhāvaviveka was simply addicted to logic! Note also that for Tsong kha pa, while there is a distinction between Svātantrika and Prāsāṅgika on this issue of method it is not, in spite of their names, their characteristic distinction. The distinctive difference between the two subschools of Mādhyamaka lies in the acceptance by the Svātantrika of inherent existence conventionally, although all Mādhyamikas deny its ultimate existence. For the Prāsāṅgika, following Candrakīrti, this is a contradiction in terms and inherent existence is simply a fiction on any level.²

The Tibetan tradition terms Bhāvaviveka's school 'Sautrāntika-Svātantrika Mādhyamaka' in order to distinguish it from the subsequent development of Yogācāra-Svātantrika Mādhyamaka under Śāntarakṣita and his pupil Kamalaśīla (eighth century). The basic text for the Yogācāra-Svātantrika tradition is Śāntarakṣita's *Mādhyamakālaṅkāra*, with an autocommentary and subcommentary by Kamalaśīla. Śāntarakṣita was influenced by the development of Buddhist 'idealism', the Yogācāra or Citramātra tradition, which he uses as a stage on the path to establish the Mādhyamaka position. The principal Citramātra element in Śāntarakṣita's thought appears to lie in a view that, although ultimately all entities lack inherent existence, conventional objects are not external to the perceiving mind. Bhāvaviveka accepted that conventional objects are genuinely external to consciousness, as aggregates of atoms, and so he is termed a 'Sautrāntika-Svātantrika Mādhyamaka' because his position in this respect is like that of the non-Mahāyāna Sautrāntika tradition. Kamalaśīla also wrote a number of independent works, particularly the

Madhyamakāloka, and three *Bhāvanākramas* showing the stages of Madhyamaka practice. Both Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla were important early missionaries to Tibet, and according to the traditional stories Kamalaśīla appears to have been murdered there by anti-Buddhist rivals. Among later Yogācāra-Svātantrikas should also be mentioned Haribhadra (late eighth century), whose *Abhisamayālaṃkāralokā* is the principal Indian commentary to the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*.

EMPTINESS AND INHERENT EXISTENCE – THE INCOMPATIBLE RIVALS

The concept of self-existence or essence (*svabhāva*) was a development of Abhidharma scholars, where it seems to indicate the defining characteristic of a *dharma*. It is that which makes a *dharma* what it is, as resistance or hardness is the unique and defining characteristic of an earth *dharma*, for example. In the Abhidharma only *dharmas*, ultimate existents, have essences. Conventional existents – tables, chairs, and persons – do not. This is because they are simply mental constructs out of *dharmas* – they therefore lack their own specific and unique existence.

Since the *Perfection of Wisdom sūtras* taught that all entities, including *dharmas*, are only conceptual existents or constructs, it follows that for the *Perfection of Wisdom* there can be no essences at all. The concept of the essence (*svabhāva*), however, seems to undergo a subtle shift in meaning in the Madhyamaka. It comes to signify generally 'inherent existence' in the sense of independent real existence. For *x* to have inherent existence is for *x* to exist in its own right. In a famous discussion in Chapter 15 of his *Madhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna tells us:

The origination of inherent existence from causes and conditions is illogical, since inherent existence originated from causes and conditions would thereby become contingent.

How could there be contingent inherent existence, for inherent existence is not contingent, nor is it dependent on another being.

(Nāgārjuna 1977: vv. 1–2)

Tibetan writers of the tradition founded by Tsong kha pa (the dGe lugs school, pronounced 'Geluk', the 'Way of Virtue') give a series of equivalents for the expression 'inherent existence' as it is used by the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka, among which is 'Self', 'truly existing', 'truly established', 'ultimately existing', and 'existing from its own side' – that is,

existing completely independently from the mind which apprehends the entity concerned (Hopkins 1983: 36).

When the Madhyamaka speaks of all *dharmas* as empty (*śūnya*) it means specifically that all *dharmas* (and therefore all things) are empty of inherent existence. They have no essence. They are only relative. It is inherent existence which is opposed by the Madhyamaka, not tables and chairs as such, but tables and chairs conceived as inherently existing and therefore, in the Buddhist context, as permanent and fully satisfying. Later writers make a distinction between innate and acquired conceptions of inherent existence. Someone may follow the Abhidharma or some other metaphysical tradition and acquire through learning an 'artificial' conception of the inherent, real, fundamental existence of something or another – atoms, *dharmas*, or the Self, for example. These conceptions can be refuted fairly easily by pointing out that *dharmas*, atoms, or the Self cannot have *inherent* existence since they are causally dependent, they are part of a causal and conceptual flow. It is dependent origination [*pratītyasamutpāda*] that we call emptiness [*śūnyatā*], Nāgārjuna says (*Madhyamakakārikā* (MK) 24:18). We might gloss this by saying that it is because entities originate in dependence on causes and conditions that they lack inherent existence, they are empty. In Tibet it is sometimes said that the particular meaning of the important Buddhist term 'dependent origination' (*pratītyasamutpāda*) for the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka is origination in dependence upon the designating mind; that is, when we say that all entities without exception are empty of inherent existence because they are dependently originated, one meaning of this particularly stressed by the Prāsaṅgika is that all entities are simply mental constructs – the letter A, for example, which we consider to exist as part of the real 'furniture' of the world, is simply imputed by the mind when 1 – 1 are brought together in a particular way (this happy example comes from Hopkins 1984: 17). *All* entities without exception do not exist from their own side but are imputed by the mind in this way (including the mind and emptiness themselves).

It is more difficult, however, to refute the innate conception of inherent existence. The claim here is that unless we are in some sense enlightened beings we all, whatever we may think or say, perceive things as having inherent existence. That is, we perceive and behave as though things were existent in their own right, therefore causally independent, and thus permanent. We thereby grasp after them with implicit expectation of permanent satisfaction. This is a version, of course, of the old and basic Buddhist claim that we suffer because we do not perceive things the way

they really are; the root cause of the human predicament is a very deep form of ignorance. The refutation of the innate conception of inherent existence requires a correspondingly deep and sustained familiarity with meditation on emptiness.

Inherent existence is the equivalent for the Prāsaṅgika of really, ultimately existing, in the sense of existing from its own side, independent of the imputing, conceptualizing activity of the mind. In reading the Madhyamaka arguments against other schools, on causation, for example, it is crucial to bear in mind that what is being attacked is causation between inherently existent objects. To see entities as empty is to see them as mental constructs, not existing from their own side and therefore *in that respect* like illusions and hallucinatory objects. Nāgārjuna says, concerning the casual flow within which *dharmas*, with their *svabhāvas*, are said to occur according to the Abhidharma scholars:

Whatever comes about conditioned by something else is quiescent from the point of view of inherent existence. Therefore both the process of origination and the act of production itself are quiescent. Like an illusion, a dream, or a castle in the air are production, duration and cessation declared to be.

(MK 7:16/34, cf. also *Sūnyatāsaptati* vv. 64–73, trans. in Lindtner 1982: 63–9)

Emptiness itself is in a sense an abstraction. It is the absence of inherent existence and is seen through *prajñā*, analytic understanding in its various forms. Emptiness is not a vague absence, still less an Absolute Reality. It is the absence of inherent existence itself related to the object which is being critically examined in order to find out if it has inherent existence. Emptiness is the ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*) in this tradition in the sense that it is what is ultimately true about the object being analysed, whatever that object may be. It is not a *thing*, certainly not an inherently existing thing, in its own right. Emptiness, Nāgārjuna asserts, was taught by the Buddha as an antidote to all *dṛṣṭis*, a word which must indicate here a viewpoint or dogma holding to the real existence of something as having inherent existence. Those who take emptiness as a *dṛṣṭi* are declared to be extremely difficult to help (MK 13:8). Mi bskyod rdo rje (pronounced: Mi kyer dor jay), the Tibetan hierarch of the Karma bKa' bgyud (pronounced: Ka gyer) school (the Eighth Karma pa, 1507–54), refers to two false interpretations of emptiness: one takes emptiness as equalling nihilism: nothing exists at all on any level; the other that emptiness is some sort of really existing, Ultimate Reality or Essence –

perhaps like the Brahman of Hinduism or the Godhead of other religions. Emptiness is thus not for the Madhyamaka the Ultimate Truth in the sense that it is an ultimately existing or inherently existing entity. If the object of analysis were to be emptiness itself then emptiness would also be found to lack inherent existence – just as the object is empty of inherent existence because dependently originated, so too must be its emptiness. Thus we come to emptiness of emptiness (*śūnyatāśūnyatā*; see Hopkins 1983: 433). This is a potentially infinite series, depending on what it is that the opponent is grasping at, for the function of understanding emptiness is simply to cut grasping.

A BRIEF NOTE ON MADHYAMAKA METHOD

Madhyamaka texts critically analyse the claims made by other traditions that something inherently exists. They themselves do not put forward the inherent existence of anything. The broad approach, therefore (at least in Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka), is to take the claim made by an opponent that something really exists and show to the opponent, through reasoning using principles acceptable to the opponent, that such cannot be the case. Candrakīrti deals with this at length in his *Prasannapadā* commentary to *Madhyamakakārikā* 1:

There is the setting-forward and proving of his own thesis only insofar as there is the drawing-out of the conclusion of the opponent's thesis. ... This is the best possible refutation, in that the opponent is incapable of establishing his thesis.

(Vaidya 1960: 6, on MK 1:1)

This is the essence of the *prasaṅga* method. The Madhyamika sets out to refute through reasoning his opponent, who advocates inherent existence and is thus bound through egoistic grasping. 'I do not myself have any thesis,' Nāgārjuna says, 'I negate nothing' (*Vigrahavyāvartanī* (Vig). vv. 29/63). Nāgārjuna's claim to have no thesis was extensively debated in Tibet even a millennium or more later.³ There were those who interpreted Nāgārjuna's denial of a thesis as equivalent to an assertion that the Madhyamika has no position at all and makes no assertions in any sense. He simply refutes. Others, most notably Tsong kha pa and his tradition, maintained that Nāgārjuna's denial of a thesis is only a denial of an inherently existing thesis. For Tsong kha pa, Nāgārjuna clearly has a position, and obviously makes assertions. Any alternative involves

paradoxes. In context, Nāgārjuna's text criticizes an opponent who argues that Nāgārjuna must accept the real existence of something, to wit, his own words and arguments – otherwise he could not refute anything. His reply is that his own arguments quite obviously also lack inherent existence, but this does not mean that they lack refutative force. It is like when one illusory or dream entity puts an end to another illusory, dream entity (Vig. v. 23). From which it seems to follow that when Nāgārjuna says he does not negate he means that he does not negate as an act involving inherent existence. It is rather like activities between illusory entities. There is a non-inherently existing negation, and therefore a non-inherently existing thesis too.

It is a presupposition of the Madhyamaka analyses that if something did have inherent existence that thing would be resistant to analysis, or, as the Tibetans put it, the more it is searched for the clearer it would become. This is an Abhidharma principle for tracing an ultimate existent. In fact, when searched for, objects get lost. Madhyamaka critiques often start by delimiting the direction of the search. Thus, for example, if *x* has inherent existence it would be found as either identical with its parts, taken separately or as a collection, or as an inherently existing entity apart from them. To use Hopkins's example, the letter A, if it inherently exists, is identical either with any one of I – I, or with their shapeless collection, or with a separate entity from them. Clearly it is not found in any of these ways, so it does not inherently exist, that is, it does not exist from its own side, independently of the conceptualizing activity of the mind. According to Tsong kha pa's interpretation of Prāsaṅgika, it *does* exist as a conceptually created entity and it is perfectly correct for the Mādhyamika to make this assertion of existence. Tsong kha pa's rivals, on the other hand, tended to see the function of Madhyamaka as purely therapeutic, the curbing of all attachment through refutation alone. The need to assert or show that anything exists at all in any way was attacked as a move away from Nāgārjuna's purely critical approach and a step towards constructing a philosophical system. This was not what the Madhyamaka was about.

Finally, when the Mādhyamika criticizes a thesis of the opponent he is not to be taken as trying to establish as really existing a thesis which is the negation of that of the opponent. The Mādhyamika simply refutes the thesis that something is the case, and might then also continue to refute the thesis that it is not the case (for some poor deluded person may also become attached to this). As Candrakīrti puts it, it should not be inferred from the fact that an advocate of the absence of inherent existence draws

unwelcome conclusions for the one who is attached to inherent existence that the first holds the contradictory position. The Mādhyamika has simply refuted; he is not committed to anything – words are not like policemen with big sticks!

THREE MADHYAMAKA CRITIQUES

Let us look now at some examples of Madhyamaka criticism. These examples are simplified accounts, intended as samplers, indicating Madhyamaka style rather than full and comprehensive expressions of the particular critiques.

On causation

The world of the Abhidharma, as interpreted by Madhyamaka, is one of a series of really existing *dharma*s, most of which are caused by preceding *dharma*s and in their turn can cause those which succeed. Nāgārjuna begins his *Madhyamakakārikā* with a critique of causation. The first verse provides a structure termed by later Mādhyamikas the 'Diamond Slivers' – the argument cuts like a diamond: 'Nowhere are there any entities which have originated from themselves, from another, from both, or from no cause at all.' The most succinct explanation of the argument is supplied by Buddhapaṇita. It is a classic series of *prasaṅga*s; indeed it was in commenting on this verse that Bhāvaviveka elaborated his attack on Buddhapaṇita's use of the *prasaṅga* and so inaugurated the Svātantrika/Prāsaṅgika debate:

'From themselves' means from their essential nature, and entities do not arise from their own essential natures because: (i) such an origination would be quite pointless, and (ii) it would lead to an infinite regress. If entities already essentially (inherently) exist there is no need to produce them, and if an already essentially existing entity is produced then it is not possible that it should ever be the case that it is not being produced. Thus origination does not occur from the entities themselves.

(Trans. by Williams: see Nāgārjuna 1977)

This last point requires a little explanation. In Buddhist thought generally something is a cause because it produces its effect – if the cause is present then it does indeed bring about its result. If *x* causes itself then, having

caused itself, x would be present again. Since x is the cause as well as the effect so, being present again, it produces the effect – itself – again. And so on, *ad infinitum*. Buddhapālita continues: 'Nor could it occur from another entity, because it would follow quite logically that everything could arise from everything else.' Entities are not produced by inherently existent, independently real, others. If x produced y , and they are *inherently* distinct entities, then we have no actual explanation of causation, since x is equally inherently distinct from z . If we call y the effect of x , equally z would be the effect of x , since in both cases the putative cause and effect are inherently quite distinct.

Neither could there be origination from both self and other, since this argument would be prone to the faults of both positions. Nor from no cause at all, for then everything would be being produced continually and everywhere, and also it would become quite pointless to commence anything.

(Trans. by Williams: see Nāgārjuna 1977)

Real production from no cause at all has two faults. First, since entities come into existence with no cause so the world would become random – things would arise anywhere and everywhere. Second, since there would be no cause for the production of y there would be no point in commencing something calculated to bring about y .

From all this we can conclude that when cause and effect are searched for they are not found. That is, there cannot exist a cause–effect relationship between inherently existing entities. Causation does not resist analysis; there can be no metaphysical theory of how causation really works. This is not to deny, however, the everyday, unanalysed world where, as we have seen, change, flux, dependent origination precisely entail that all things are empty of inherent existence.

On the Self

Nāgārjuna treats the subject of the Self in Chapter 18 of the *Madhyamakakārikā*. A more extensive analysis, an elaboration of Nāgārjuna's first verse, is given by Candrakīrti in his *Madhyamakāvatāra* 6:150 ff., and it is Candrakīrti's discussion which forms the *locus classicus* for the extensive Tibetan discussions of the subject. In Tibetan Buddhism analysis of the Self forms the first and crucial part of integrating the emptiness teaching into meditation practice. The following account is a simplified explanation based on Tibetan discussions. Nāgārjuna says:

If the Self were the same as the psycho-physical constituents then it would be subject to birth and destruction. If it were other than the psycho-physical constituents then it would be devoid of the characteristics of these constituents.

(MK 18:1)

The Self must be either the same or different from the mind–body collection. But mind and body are constantly changing. If the Self were the body then it would be unconscious. If the mind, then which of the constantly changing mental states is it? The present state has instantly ceased, and thus, if the Self were the present state it would have already perished. If it were the present state at whatever time one says the word 'I' then there must be a whole series of Selves, and already the notion of one enduring Self has collapsed. If the Self were the whole series of mental states from birth to death then the Self would cease to be unitary and become a collection, most of which has either perished or not yet come into existence. It could not then be an inherently existent Self. Likewise all the same problems would occur if the Self is the body plus the mind. Suppose, therefore, that the Self is posited as a really existing entity apart from the psycho-physical constituents. Then not only could such a Self never be apprehended, so that one would have no reason to think that it exists, but crucially there is no sense in which it would fit the description of what we believe to be our *Self*. It would not be the 'I' which enjoys itself or feels depressed. It would seem to be a complete blank, and as such unnecessary and useless. Any Self which cannot be traced as either the same as, or different from, the changing mental and bodily states cannot exist.

As with causation, the Madhyamaka is not saying that we do not exist, or that we should not use the word 'I'. Rather, we do not exist in the way we think we do, as inherently existent, independent monads. The correct way of understanding our existence is as conceptually created entities superimposed upon our changing mental and bodily states.⁴

On nirvāṇa

In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Perfection of Wisdom*, *nirvāṇa* is declared to be 'like an illusion, like a dream'. It is in the Madhyamaka that we find arguments to demonstrate such dramatic assertions.

Nirvāṇa, for Nāgārjuna, is 'the calming of all representations, the calming of all verbal differentiations, peace' (MK 25:24). It is said to be

like the true nature of things (*dharmatā*, i.e. emptiness), not produced and not destroyed – that is, things are always like this; it is the cessation of the realm of verbal utterance and the (dualistic) mind (MK 18:7). It is the result of seeing things the way they really are, a seeing which occurs through going beyond the conceptualizing activity of our everyday minds and language, which conditions us to think in terms of inherent existence. 'The characteristic of reality [*tattva*]', Nāgārjuna says, 'is to be not dependent on another, calm, not differentiated by verbal differentiations, beyond discursive thought, without diversity' (MK 18:9). The expression 'not dependent on another' is glossed by commentators as meaning known by oneself, directly, not through the indirect medium of another person. This reality is interpreted by Prāsaṅgika teachers as equalling emptiness, i.e. the real way of things, but not an Ultimate, inherently existing Reality.

It is only fair to indicate at this point, however, that there have been both ancient and modern interpreters of Nāgārjuna's thought who have seen him as indicating here as elsewhere a true, positive Ultimate Reality. I shall return to this issue when I discuss the Buddha-essence (Chapter 5). There certainly are texts attributed to Nāgārjuna which do without a doubt give such a 'positive' interpretation of the Madhyamaka reality. Most important here is one of the hymns, the *Dharmadhātustava*. It is to this work, rather than to the strictly philosophical or logical texts, that Tibetan writers who wish to give a 'positive' interpretation of Nāgārjuna's thought refer. I suspect very strongly that the *Dharmadhātustava* is not by the philosopher Nāgārjuna, and it does not seem to cohere with the knowledge to show this conclusively, however. Nevertheless, so long as we restrict ourselves to Nāgārjuna's works on philosophy and follow the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* it seems to me that a positive interpretation of Nāgārjuna's views on the way things really are is rather unlikely.

Since for Nāgārjuna *nirvāṇa* is the result of calming the categorizing, conceptualizing mind, so any tendency to conceptualize *nirvāṇa* is refuted. *Nirvāṇa*, he says, is neither an existent nor a nonexistent, neither both together nor neither alternative. It could not be an existent, since all existents are part of the realm of causal conditioning (MK 25:5–6). It would then be subject to decay and perishing (literally: birth and death: MK 25:4). It could not be a nonexistent, however, since if there are really no existents so there can be no nonexistents. Nonexistence occurs when something goes out of existence, and also the very notion of nonexistence depends upon the notion of existence. Nonexistents are anyway not

independent entities (MK 25:7–8). If there is really, from an ultimate point of view, nothing (that is, nothing has inherent existence), then *nirvāṇa* could not come about either. Moreover *nirvāṇa* could not be both an existent and a nonexistent, since these are contradictory (MK 25:14). And *nirvāṇa* as a really existing thing which is neither existent nor nonexistent is simply incomprehensible (MK 25:16). In fact, Nāgārjuna says:

There is nothing whatsoever differentiating *samsāra* (the round of rebirth) from *nirvāṇa*. There is nothing whatsoever differentiating *nirvāṇa* from *samsāra*.

The limit of *nirvāṇa* is the limit of *samsāra*. Between the two there is not the slightest bit of difference.

(MK 25:19–20)

According to Tsong kha pa in his commentary to the *Madhyamakakārikā* (f.263b) this is not to be taken as the expression of some mystical identity. Rather, *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* are identical in the sense that they have in all respects the same nature – absence of inherent existence. We should not think that this world is empty but *nirvāṇa* is some really existing alternative realm or world. *Nirvāṇa* is attainable here and now through the correct understanding of the here and now.

THE TWO TRUTHS

In Chapter 24 of the *Madhyamakakārikā* an opponent accuses Nāgārjuna of having destroyed the Buddhist religion with his teaching of emptiness. Nāgārjuna's reply is that:

The doctrine of the Buddhas is taught with reference to two truths – conventional truth [*lokasaṃvṛtisatya*] and ultimate truth [*para-mārthasatya*].

Those who do not understand the difference between these two truths do not understand the profound essence [*tattva*] of the doctrine of the Buddha.

Without dependence on everyday practice [*vyavahāra*] the ultimate is not taught. Without resorting to the ultimate, *nirvāṇa* is not attained. If emptiness is coherent then all is coherent. If emptiness is not coherent then likewise all is not coherent.

(MK 24:8–10/14)

Nāgārjuna seems to be making two points here. First, his opponent fails to understand an old Buddhist distinction between the two truths (perhaps 'levels of reality' would be better). Thus he takes what is ultimately the case, i.e. things are not found, as being the way the everyday world is. This is patently absurd and would indeed destroy the Buddhist religion. As Candrakīrti points out, 'everyday practice does not exist from the point of view of ultimate truth'. In fact it is crucial for the Madhyamaka to accept the everyday conventional world, as it forms the basis for religious practice and without it enlightenment cannot be attained. Nevertheless, the everyday conventional world must be accepted not as an ultimate world but precisely as what it really is – the everyday conventional world. That is, it must be seen correctly as lacking inherent existence. The other point Nāgārjuna is making is that when the everyday conventional world is thus seen correctly it is apparent that emptiness (the ultimate truth) and the world are not opposed to each other but rather mutually imply each other. While emptiness in itself, directly cognized in a non-dual meditative absorption, is beyond language, as Candrakīrti says, 'not conditioned by others, quiescent, accessible to saints only by direct intuition, beyond all verbal differentiations', still, it is nothing more than the absence of inherent existence. As one of the most important of the transmitters of Buddhism to Tibet, Atiśa (982–1054), a Prāsaṅgika, puts it in his *Satyadvayavātara*: 'If one examines with reasoning the conventional as it appears, nothing is found. That nonfindingness is the ultimate. It is the primeval way of things' (*dharmatā*; 21, Lindtner's edn: Atiśa 1981: 192). The problem for Nāgārjuna's opponent lies in his interpretation of 'emptiness' as equalling 'nonexistence'. As Candrakīrti points out, emptiness is taught in order to calm all verbal differentiations, the net of concepts, and therefore it cannot equal another concept, that of nonexistence. Nonexistence is dependent upon existence, and is refuted by the Madhyamaka as much as the latter. In fact: 'The meaning of the expression "dependent origination" is the same as "emptiness", and not "non-existence". Falsely thinking that "emptiness" and "non-existence" are synonyms you criticize us' (Candrakīrti (1960) on MK 24:7). Since emptiness and dependent origination mutually imply each other it is *because* things are empty of inherent existence that change occurs. It is the opponent, with his doctrine of inherent existence, who has destroyed Buddhism, since clearly with inherent existence there can be no change and no enlightenment. And Nāgārjuna makes a gentle joke: 'You, levelling at us your own faults, are like a person mounted on a horse who has forgotten the horse' (MK 24:15)!

The most important Prāsaṅgika source for the doctrine of two truths is Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra* 6:23 ff., together with its commentaries. All entities, Candrakīrti says, have two natures, because there is correct perception and delusory perception. The object of correct perception is reality (*tattva*). That of delusory perception is said to be conventional truth (v.23). Both Candrakīrti and Tsong kha pa are quick to point out that this 'reality' seen by correct perception is not something existing in its own right, with inherent existence, of course. Delusory perception is also of two sorts: that which occurs when the sense organs are working effectively, and that based on defective sense organs (v.24). Perception of the latter-type is said by the world, the man in the street, to be delusory in comparison with perception of the former type, which is accepted by the world. However, even the objects of correct worldly perception are only accepted as true, really true, by the world, and not by enlightened beings (the *āryas*; on MK 6:25). Moreover, the imaginary objects of those who philosophize incorrectly, such as the Self, are incorrect even from the point of view of worldly truth.

Let me clarify here what Candrakīrti and other Prāsaṅgikas, like Atiśa and Tsong kha pa, who follow him, are saying. If one searches through reasoning for what is really the case one finds that nothing resists analysis, and thus nothing is really the case. This is the ultimate truth. This perception of reality, the real situation, has as its object emptiness, absence of inherent existence, that is, absence of ultimate existence. Emptiness is not itself an ultimate existent, however. Some of the objects which are empty are maintained in the unenlightened world, on its own bases, as true, since unenlightened beings, through primeval ignorance, perceive things as having inherent existence. Others are held to be false by the world. Those beings who have reached a fair degree of enlightenment, however, do not see conventional entities as really true. They are 'merely conventional' (*samvṛtimātra*). This is the proper understanding of the conventional. Atiśa says: 'A *dharmā* which has the ability to bring about its goal (i.e. has efficiency), which arises and ceases and satisfies so long as it is not critically examined – this is maintained to be the correct conventional' (v.3). Conventional and ultimate are not two distinct realities, two realms opposed to each other. It should be clear that the ultimate, emptiness, is what is ultimately the case concerning the object under investigation. It is what makes the object a conventional entity and not an ultimate one, as we think it is. Emptiness makes the conventional conventional. Conventional and ultimate are thus not separate. Nevertheless, they are also not the same. A chair and its

emptiness of inherent existence are not literally the same thing. Nor is it a question of two different ways of seeing the same thing, as is sometimes stated in modern books on Madhyamaka. The fact that something lacks inherent existence is not just a way of looking at that thing. It is also something which happens to be true of it as well!

MEDITATION AND EMPTINESS – AN IMPRESSIONISTIC OUTLINE

The principal systematic Indian sources for the integration of emptiness teachings into Madhyamaka meditation practice are the three *Bhāvanā-kramas* of Kamalāśīla, which may indeed have been written originally for a Tibetan audience. In Tibet numerous such works were produced. The dGe lugs contributions have been studied in particular by Jeffrey Hopkins (1974; 1983: esp. 43–123; 1984: 134–44), and I shall follow Hopkins's account.

There is sometimes a tendency in the West to think of meditation and analysis as in some sense opposed. This is a tendency which should be firmly resisted when studying the Madhyamaka. Analysis, investigation of the way things really are, is an activity forming the principal ingredient of insight meditation (*vipaśyanā*), which leads to the different degrees of *prajñā*. The context of the earlier stages of meditation on emptiness may be either formal debate with an opponent or silent, private meditation, having calmed the mind and body. The content in either case will be systematic analysis – 'If an inherently existing entity arises then it can only come from itself, other, both or neither. If from itself, then...'. Meditation on emptiness proceeds through a number of stages. Initially the meditator gains a clear idea of what is, and what is not, being refuted. The object of refutation is inherent existence. The meditator (presupposing, from now on, that he or she is engaged in solitary meditation) clarifies what inherent existence is, and how it differs from mere existence. He may review the faults in attempting to refute existence *as such*, the conventional realm as well, particularly if his problem is to over-negate. He subsequently checks that the reasons given for absence of inherent existence do indeed entail such an absence. For example, in meditating on the emptiness of inherent existence of the Self, he considers that the Self lacks inherent existence because of being neither the same as nor different from the psycho-physical constituents. In order for the meditation to have any power, however, he must first be

convinced that if the Self had inherent existence then it would be either the same as or different from the psycho-physical constituents. The meditator then surveys the arguments very carefully and systematically. And he concludes that therefore the subject of analysis lacks inherent existence. With experience the meditator is able to place his mind on this absence alone, the vacuity which is a specific vacuity of absent inherent existence in the object being analysed. His mind in this state has no actual conception of subject and object, although subject and object do still appear. He is said to have attained a conceptual realization of emptiness – conceptual because it is through the medium of an image, it is still not a direct cognition of emptiness. Through repeated familiarization with such meditation the conviction that entities are empty of inherent existence becomes more and more firm and penetrates his awareness. It forms the necessary background to all his religious activity.

The next stage of meditation on emptiness is to attain perfect meditative absorption. Practices for generating stabilization, or calm abiding (*śamatha*), are found throughout the religious world. The meditator gains an ability to place his mind without effort and without wavering on the meditation object. Since meditation on emptiness requires analysis, and analysis is not conducive initially to a one-pointed mind, specific meditation on emptiness is normally postponed at this stage until an ability to generate calm abiding has been acquired. It can take some time. With the calm, still, powerful mind thus developed, our meditator now returns to emptiness, alternating calming meditation with analytic meditation. Eventually a deep state of absorption, one-pointedness (but not yet pure calm abiding), is attained through analytic meditation itself. When analytic meditation actually generates calm abiding one is said to have attained insight (*vipaśyanā*). If this insight is generated with emptiness as the object, one enters what is called the 'Path of Preparation' (*prayogamārga*), which is one of the five successive paths of Buddhist practice (see Chapter 9). Subsequently, in stages, one removes the conceptual elements of this insight into emptiness. When a direct, non-conceptual insight is attained in meditative absorption then one is said to enter the 'Path of Insight' (*darśanamārga*). This is a direct, non-dual cognition of the ultimate. If it is combined with the altruistic concern of the Bodhisattva then our meditator attains the first of the ten Bodhisattva stages (*bhūmī*). All artificial conceptions of inherent existence are completely eradicated. When he arises from his meditation he still sees inherent existence, but he knows that this is not how things are, and he is like a magician viewing his own creations. There is still a

very long way to go, however, for he has now so to refine his perception that he eradicates completely even the innate moral and cognitive taints (including the innate conception of inherent existence). He must attain omniscience, Buddhahood, such that no longer even sees inherent existence but sees emptiness in the very same perceptual act as he sees objects.

A FINAL NOTE – MADHYAMAKA IN CHINA AND EAST ASIA

In East Asia the Madhyamaka was generally known as the 'Three Treatise School', after the three Indic texts which served as the root texts for this tradition in Sino-Japanese Buddhism. These treatises were translated into Chinese by the great translator Kumārajīva (344–413), who may be said to have established the Madhyamaka tradition in China, although the principal orientation of the tradition was known for some time prior to Kumārajīva to the early translations of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*. There was nevertheless a strong tendency in these early translations prior to Kumārajīva to the early translations of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*. There environment. The early translator Chih-chien (third century), for example, chose to translate 'śūnya', 'śūnyatā', and 'tatvatā' (suchness/ thusness; the ultimate way of things) by 'pen-wu' – original nonexistence – a term used by the Taoist commentator Wang-pi (226–49) to equal the primeval non-being from which things evolve, thus conveying to the Chinese mind at this time a sense of emptiness as the cosmological origin of manifold forms.⁵

The Three Treatises are all, unfortunately, of obscure origin. The *Chung lun* (*Madhyamaka Śāstra*) consists of Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamakārikā* embedded in a commentary said to be by an Indic teacher whose name in Chinese is given as Ch'ing-mu. It is not possible to be certain of his Indian name or who this teacher was. The *Shih-erb-men lun* (*Dvadaśamukha Śāstra*?) appears in the main to be a collection of verses drawn from Nāgārjuna with a commentary attributed by some to Nāgārjuna and by others to the elusive Ch'ing-mu. The *Pai-lun* (*Sata Śāstra*) is a work by Aryadeva, with a commentary by another obscure figure, Vasu. The verses may bear some relationship to the second part of Aryadeva's *Catuhṣṭaka*. Sometimes the *Ta-chih-tu lun* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra*) is added to the Three Treatises, producing a Four Treatise School. This text is attributed to Nāgārjuna, in the form in which it now stands

incorrectly, and it was also translated (or compiled) by Kumārajīva. Although some works by Bhāvaviveka were translated into Chinese, and commentaries or partial commentaries on the *Madhyamakārikā* by the Yogācāra (Cittamātra) masters Asaṅga and Sthiramati, neither Buddhapaṇita's commentary nor the works of Candrakīrti were translated into Chinese – not to mention the later Yogācāra-Svātantrika works. This means that the Chinese Three Treatise School, and therefore the school in Japan and Korea, developed quite independently of the major scholastic disputes and developments in Indian Madhyamaka.

The most important Mādhyamika among Kumārajīva's Chinese disciples was Seng-chao (384–414), but the greatest of the San lun (Three Treatise) masters in China was Ch'i-tsang (549–623). Ch'i-tsang's Madhyamaka teachings seem to be rather different from those of his chronological successor Candrakīrti. One of Ch'i-tsang's pupils, a Korean named Ekwan (a number of important early 'Chinese' Mādhyamikas were in fact Korean) first introduced the Madhyamaka into Japan in 625, but although it contributed to the ideas of other schools it never really flourished as an independent school. In China, too, the Three Treatise School seems to have entered a decline after Ch'i-tsang, and although it contributed a certain amount to Ch'an (Zen), for example, it eventually perished as a separate school in the ninth century. Three Treatise teachings, on the other hand, have continued to be studied to the present day in East Asian Buddhism.

Two teachings in particular characterize Ch'i-tsang's interpretation of Madhyamaka. First, there is his principle that 'the refutation of wrong views is the illumination of right views'. That is, the Mādhyamika holds no views at all, he simply refutes false views, and the refutation of false views is not in order to establish another view but rather to let go of all attachment to any view and thence to all words and conceptuality. Emptiness is not itself a true doctrine or view, but is a therapeutic device, as Nāgārjuna says, the antidote to all views (*dr̥ṣṭi*). The Ch'ing-mu commentary likens emptiness to a medicine – if the medicine increases the illness then one is incurable.⁶

Second, there is Ch'i-tsang's doctrine of the two levels of truth. For Ch'i-tsang the two levels of truth are not, as they are for Candrakīrti, two natures possessed by all things. Rather, they are levels of teaching which are, as such, not fixed but provisional, taking the student through a step-by-step dialectical ascent to a state of non-conceptuality. This ascent is composed of three phases. At the first level people have conceptions of existence, and these are opposed with emptiness (= nonexistence here?).

At this level existence is conventional truth, emptiness ultimate truth. It is now important to negate emptiness as well, in order that the mind does not become fixed, attached to emptiness and thereby duality. At the second level, therefore, existence and emptiness are conventional truth, non-duality is the ultimate truth. By 'non-duality' here, Chi-tsang explains, neither existence nor emptiness is meant. Third, both duality and non-duality are conventional truth, while neither-duality-nor-non-duality is the ultimate truth (*Erb-ti-chang*, trans. in Chan 1963: 360). This is the denial of all views, all extremes, and with the denial of all views and concepts the mind is able to shine forth in a non-conceptual state of *prajñā*.

In formulating his theory of the two levels of truth Chi-tsang was undoubtedly influenced by the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*, an important *sūtra* in Chinese Buddhism. In this *sūtra* a similar but extended series of teachings is given in order to explain the meaning of non-duality. Eventually Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva particularly associated with wisdom, explains that true non-duality is to say nothing. Vimalakīrti accordingly, when asked for his explanation of non-duality, remains in silence. On the ultimate level there is nothing to speak about. In spite of this, Chi-tsang's teachings are, I suspect, in part due to certain Chinese Taoist concerns, although (*pace* Candrakīrti) they nevertheless do have a basis in Indian Madhyamaka. Fung Yu-lan points out that Chi-tsang's state where all concepts cease is exactly paralleled in the work of the Taoist Chuang-tzu. Wing-tsit Chan comments that Chi-tsang's dialectic is strikingly similar to approaches found in Chuang-tzu.⁷ An emphasis on an original, non-conceptual, spontaneous purity beyond all words (which mislead in a very radical way) has always been central to the concerns of Philosophic or Contemplative Taoism.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cittamātra
(Mind Only)

BACKGROUND

Nāgārjuna probably lived during the second century CE, and he is associated with a king of the Śātavāhana dynasty, a dynasty which held sway for some time over large areas of Central India, the Deccan. As we have seen, North India during the last century or so BCE and the first three centuries CE was subject to foreign invasions and fragmentation. Impermanence (lack of inherent existence) was present in the very fabric of the socio-political environment! With the rise of the Gupta empire in the fourth century, however, all changed. For two centuries the Gupta empire dominated India, and this domination marks the high point of classical Indian civilization. India's greatest poet and dramatist, Kālidāsa, probably lived at the court of Candra Gupta II (c. 376–415). It is from this time also that Chinese pilgrims, in search of *sūtras* to take home to China and translate, started to visit India and, with fine historical sense, they have left us accounts of their travels and observations. The greatest of these pilgrims were Fa-hsien and Hsüan-tsang (the model for Tripitaka in the famous *Monkey* stories). Hsüan-tsang visited India not during the Gupta period, however, but during the reign of Harṣa (seventh century), one of the major post-Gupta kings of North India, and it is possible to detect already, in comparison with the Gupta visit of Fa-hsien, a certain decline in social and political stability. Hsüan-tsang has left a detailed description of the enormous Buddhist monastic university of