

Excerpt from: Studies in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism
How Do Madhyamikas Think? and Other Essays on the Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle
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[Chapter] 2. How Far Can a Mādhyamika Reform Customary Truth?
Dismal Relativism, Fictionalism, Easy-Easy Truth, and the Alternatives

[Relativism, roughly put, is the view that truth and falsity, right and wrong, standards of reasoning, and procedures of justification are products of differing conventions and frameworks of assessment and that their authority is confined to the context giving rise to them.

Fictionalism is a view in philosophy that posits that statements appearing to be descriptions of the world should not be construed as such, but should instead be understood as cases of "make believe", thus allowing individuals to treat something as literally true (a "useful fiction").]

[Section] I A famous Scriptural citation cited in Candrakīrti's Prasannapadā Madhyamakavṛtti and Madhyamakāvātāra-bhāṣya goes like this:

loko mayā sārđhaṃ vivadati nāhaṃ lokena sārđhaṃ vivadāmi /
yal loke 'sti saṃmataṃ tan mamāpy asti saṃmataṃ /
yal loke nāsti saṃmataṃ mamāpi tan nāsti saṃmataṃ /

['JIG RTEN NGA DANG LHAN CIG RTZOD KYI, NGA NI 'JIG RTEN DANG MI RTZOD DE,
GANG 'JIG RTEN NA YOD PAR 'DOD PA DE NI NGAS KYANG YOD PAR BZHED DO,
,GANG 'JIG RTEN NA MED PAR 'DOD PA DE NI NGA YANG MED PAR BZHED DO,]

The world (loka) argues with me. I don't argue with the world. What is agreed upon (saṃmata) in the world to exist, I too agree that it exists. What is agreed upon in the world to be nonexistent, I too agree that it does not exist.¹ Clearly the passage is taken as an account of customary truth (saṃvṛtisatya) by the Madhyamaka; that is, it is cited by at least certain Mādhyamika philosophers to show the sūtra source for their view that one should accept "customary truth," or truths for the world, as being only as the world accepts them. But what does that mean and what does it imply? It might well seem to imply an extreme conservatism that nothing the world ever endorsed could be criticized or rejected and that, on the customary level at least, a Mādhyamika's principal epistemic task is just to passively acquiesce and duplicate.

Let me characterize this version of customary truth as a "dismal position," as I think we would agree that the potential flattening of truth and knowledge's normative roles that such duplication brings is indeed quite unattractive: it is a trivialization of the idea of truth to think that we could somehow settle what is true by periodically taking inventories of what people believe to be true at given times and places. Indeed brute reliance on polls and inventories for determining truth has to remain unacceptable whether we are democratic and count each person as one, or assign some greater weight to the opinions of the currently respectable group of clerics and famous cognoscenti.

Who, if anyone, held such a dismal position on customary truth? Something close to this was repeatedly criticized by the Mādhyamika Kamalaśīla as being the view of some anonymous opponents who held that things were established as such and so because people simply accepted them to be established in that way (dam bcas pa tsam gyis grub pa = pratijñāmātreṇa siddha).² Kamalaśīla appears to have been duly horrified by the consequences that ensue when instead of justifying one's views with "sources of knowledge" / "epistemic instruments" (tshad ma = pramāṇa), we are satisfied with simple belief. As he puts it, "it would follow absurdly that everything whatsoever would established by everything" (thams cad kyis thams cad 'grub par thal bar 'gyur ba).³

This worry, for Buddhists, about the negative outcomes when people collapse the distinction between things being so and merely being believed to be so goes back at least to Dharmakīrti, and possibly further. As we see in Pramāṇavārttika 4.9, Dharmakīrti was concerned that any discrimination between good and bad reasoning would be just "wiped out" (lupta) if we established things as so or not so (tattvātattvavyavasthiti) "by the force of people's thoughts" (puṃsām abhiprāyavaśāt).⁴ (Also, Dharmakīrti seems to have been quite familiar with going accounts of different cultures' weird ideas and sexual mores; he often alluded to them sardonically in his Pramāṇavārttika and other works in order to argue that social acceptance didn't give any claim to truth or goodness.)

In fact, the flaws in basing justification purely on what people think is a theme that is often repeated in Buddhist epistemology. I think that this worry about the dismal view, if pushed a little bit further, is also one about relativism.

While the failure to distinguish between *p* being so and *p* being believed to be so does not by itself constitute or entail relativism, the additional move comes quite easily. In effect we get relativism when we accord equal truth-status to opposing statements because we hold that truth is not a one-place predicate but a two-place predicate like “*p* is true for ...,” “*p* is true in such and such a mindset/culture,” and so on. Although it’s difficult to be categorical, it seems to me plausible that Dharmakīrti and Kamalaśīla did also reject such a move to a two-place truth predicate that relativizes truth and gives different people with their different mindsets equal claims.

While Kamalaśīla does not explicitly give the name of a particular individual or school in India as the holders of the method of *pratijñāmātreṇa siddha*, some important aspects of his depictions do suggest that he might have been thinking of the sixth-century Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamaka philosopher Candrakīrti, or at least (to be even less committal) someone like him. What Kamalaśīla rails against, in the *Sarvadarmanīḥsvabhāvasiddhi*, is someone who relies exclusively on what is acknowledged (*grags pa* = *prasiddha*, *pratīta*) by the world. Here is what Kamalaśīla says in that text:

One should analyze the production of entities with logic (*rigs pa* = *yukti*) and scripture (*lung* = *āgama*). Suppose it were thought, “Why should we analyze it when [a fact such as] the production of sprouts and the like being conditioned by seeds and so forth is just simply acknowledged (*grags pa* = *prasiddha*, *pratīta*) by everyone from cowherds on up? Judicious people (*rtog pa dang ldan pa* = *prekṣāvat*) should not analyze in order to ascertain the natures of entities (*dnogs po* = *vastu*, *bhāva*), because [if they did,] it would follow that there would be no end [to such analysis] and it would follow that it would not be judicious.”

This is not right, for they would not ascertain [things] through sources of knowledge (*tshad ma* = *pramāṇa*), and moreover it is possible that what is [generally acknowledged is wrong. Otherwise [if analysis using *pramāṇa* were unnecessary], no one who applied himself to what he had himself acknowledged would ever end up being unreliable about anything at all.

To take some examples: it is [generally] acknowledged that perishing is something that has a cause [although this is actually wrong],⁵ and though people [generally] acknowledge that matter and the like are external objects, this can be undermined (*gnod pa* = *bādhā*) by sources of knowledge if it is subjected to analysis. In the same way here, too [with regard to the production of entities], what people acknowledge could also turn out to be false, and hence one really should analyze it. As for scripture without any logic, it would leave judicious people discontent. It is scripture grounded by logic that cannot lead astray, and so first of all we should analyze [things] logically.⁶

Indeed, Candrakīrti does seem to have been someone who held the stance that the customary is what is “just simply acknowledged” (*grags pa* = *prasiddha*, *pratīta*); he is, I think quite rightly, depicted by Tibetan scholastics as a “Mādhyamika who practices in accordance with what is acknowledged by the world” (*’jig rten grags pa ltar spyod pa’i dbu ma pa*).⁷

[See *Hopkins Meditation On Emptiness* p 435

In the same vein, Bu-don (Bu-ston) says that Prasāṅgikas are called 'Madhyamikas using what is renowned in the world' (Loka-prasiddha-varga-chari-madhyamika). (’jig rten grags sde spyod pa’i dbu ma pa)]

There are a number of other telltale indications that strike one immediately in the *Sarvadarmanīḥsvabhāvasiddhi* passage, notably the admonition by Kamalaśīla’s adversary to avoid analysis of causality, and in particular to leave the relationship between seeds and sprouts philosophically untouched and simply as it is, “acknowledged by everyone from cowherds on up.”

This naturally brings to mind the famous argument in the first forty verses of chapter 6 of Candrakīrti’s *Madhyamakāvātāra*, where we find dismissed in detail the claims of Svātantrika-Mādhyamika Buddhists that cause and effect were essentially different things, even if this variant on the pan-Indian debate about causes being nonexistent at the time of the effect (*asatkāryavāda*) was said by them to be only customarily and not ultimately so. Candrakīrti, as is well known, saw as utterly misguided any such philosophically inspired attempt to analyze “causal processes in terms that would go beyond ordinary notions like “This did that,” “I planted such and such a tree,” “I fathered this boy,” “When wood, strings, and manual effort are present, sounds arise from musical instruments,” “Rice comes from rice,” and the other such deliberately simple and philosophically noncommittal characterizations.⁸

So if the ghostly presence of Candrakīrti, or of some such Prāsaṅgika very much like him, is discernible in the Sarvadharmāṅgikā passage that I translated above, as I think it is, we see that for Kamalaśīla the case against the Prāsaṅgika is clear: the Prāsaṅgika fails the basic standards of a rational, intellectual approach — he is not judicious (prekṣāvāt), as he simply copies the world and eschews sources of knowledge (pramāṇa) that confirm or correct the world's beliefs. This yields the unacceptable consequence that sufficiently widespread beliefs would be right ipso facto about the customary.

After sections ii and iii, at the end of section iv, Tillemans adds:

Let me, however, close on an untraditional — indeed slightly heretical — note. These atypical thinkers are no doubt some of the most subtle thinkers in Buddhism, and not surprisingly their stances are often in a significant and recurring tension with what the Indian texts actually say (on a natural reading of the Sanskrit). Now, I had said earlier that typical Prāsaṅgika is a very natural close reading of Candrakīrti. Indeed I would be prepared to argue that, philologically and historically speaking, it is the way these Indian texts are most naturally read.

I think, for example, that it's incontestable that on a usual understanding of the Buddhist Sanskrit terms loka ("worldling") and ārya, they will be taken as standing in sharp contrast, along the lines of a typical Prāsaṅgika interpretation like that of Gorampa (Go rams pa). Tsongkhapa's contrary exegesis here is not convincing even if the philosophical gain may be considerable.²⁶ One can multiply these sorts of examples.

Does it detract from an atypical thinker that he had to read Candrakīrti in the strained way he did? No, but it certainly does often put him in a very different light from the way the tradition depicted him. The positive point is that someone like Tsongkhapa emerges as a highly creative Mādhyamika with a steel-trap philosophical mind. The irony is that he may well have the merit of making Candrakīrti a better philosopher than he actually was.

Notes to Chapter 2

1. The Tibetan equivalent of loko mayā sārđhaṃ vivadati nāhaṃ lokena sārđhaṃ vivadāmi is found in Trisaṃvara-nirdeśaparivarta (chapter 1) of the Ratnakūṭa D. The Sanskrit of the whole quotation is found in Candrakīrti's Prasannapadā ad Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 18.8 (ed. La Vallée Poussin, 370.6–8), where the source is only identified as a "scripture" (āgama); see also Madhyamakāvātārabhāṣya ad 6.81 (ed. La Vallée Poussin, p. 179) for the Tibetan.

Note that Candrakīrti's source seems to be a Sanskrit version of what we find in Saṃyutta Nikāya III, p. 138 (ed. Léon Feer): nāham bhikkhave lokena vivadāmi loko ca mayā vivadati // na bhikkhave dhammavādī kenaci lokasmiṃ vivadati // yam bhikkhave natthi sammatam loke paṇḍitānam aham pi tam natthīti vadāmi // yam bhikkhave atthi sammatam loke paṇḍitānam aham pi tam atthīti vadāmi //.

"Bhikkhus, I do not dispute with the world; rather, it is the world that disputes with me. A proponent of the Dhamma does not dispute with anyone in the world. Of that which the wise in the world agree upon as not existing, I too say that it does not exist. And of that which the wise in the world agree upon as existing, I too say that it exists" (trans. Bodhi 2000, 949).

The Pāli, however, in contrast to the āgama's Sanskrit quoted in Prasannapadā (as well as the Tibetan translation), has the term paṇḍitānam in this passage and the discussion that follows. Thus the Saṃyutta speaks about that which the wise (paṇḍitānam) in the world (loke) agree upon as existing/not existing, rather than just that which is agreed upon as existing/not existing in the world.

The difference is significant, because it means — as the subsequent discussion explicitly shows in the Khandavagga of the Saṃyutta (see Bodhi 2000, 949–50) — that the Buddha accepts "impermanent, suffering, changing [skandhas] matter," and so on as existent and holds that "permanent, stable, eternal, unchanging matter," and so on is nonexistent.

He thus would accept an ontology proposed by the wise — by qualified experts in the world. The Sanskrit, however, simply says that the Buddha accepts what is accepted in the world; experts are not mentioned. Such is the interpretation that Candrakīrti would adopt and that arguably has the potential for populist "dismal positions" on existence and truth in a way in which the Pāli reading does not. I thank Stephen Batchelor for pointing out the difference between the Sanskrit and Pāli here.

2. “Acceptance” and “belief” are sometimes differentiated in fictionalist philosophies (e.g., that of Bas van Fraassen’s *The Scientific Image*); I’m not using these terms technically here and am treating them as interchangeable.

3. See for example, Sarvadharmaniḥsvabhāvasiddhi P. 327b7–8: dam bcas pa tsam gyis ni ’dod pa’i don ’grub pa ma yin te / thams cad kyi(s) thams cad ’grub par thal bar ’gyur ba’i phyir ro // . “The intended point is not established simply because of being accepted (dam bcas pa tsam gyis = pratijñāmātreṇa siddha), for [if it were] then it would follow absurdly that everything [whatsoever] would be established by everything.”

4. See Tillemans 2000, 18.

5. The allusion here is to the common Buddhist position that perishing is actually without a cause (ahetukavināśa) — the point is that perishing (nāśa) and nonexistence (abhāva) are not real entities and thus cannot be effects.

Although people obviously think that a pot is destroyed by hitting it with a hammer, the Buddhist maintains that what actually results is a mass of potsherds (karparasamḥati) and not, strictly speaking, the perishing of the pot. The history and details of the arguments concerning this vināśītvānumāna (inference of things perishing) are discussed extensively in Mimaki 1976; for an appraisal of this line of argument, see also Tillemans 2011b, section 1.3.

6. Kamalaśīla, Sarvadharmaniḥsvabhāvasiddhi, P. 312a8–312b6: rigs pa dang lung dag gis dngos po rnam s kyie ba dpyad par bya’o // gal te ’di snyam du myu gu la sogs pa’i skyie ba sa bon la sogs pa’i rkyen can gnag rdzi yan chad la grags pa kho na yin na de la dpyad par bya ci dgos / dngos po’i bdag nyid gtan “la phab pa la ni rtog pa dang ldan pa rnam s dpyad par rung ba ma yin te / thug pa med par thal bar ’gyur ba’i phyir dang / rtog pa dang mi ltan pa nyid du thal bar ’gyur ba’i phyir ro snyam du sems na / de ni rigs pa ma yin te / tshad mas gtan la ma phab pa’i phyir dang / grags pa yang log par srid pa’i phyir ro // de lta ma yin na rang la grags pa’i ngor byas te ’jug pa rnam s su yang gang la yang bslu bar mi ’gyur ro // de la dper na ’jig pa yang rgyu dang ldan pa nyid du grags la / gzugs la sogs pa yang phyi rol gyi don nyid du grags zin kyang / dpyad pa byas na tshad mas gnod pa srid pa de bzhin du ’di la yang grags pa brdzun pa’i ngo bo yang srid pas dpyad par bya bar rung ba nyid do // de la lung rigs pa dang bral ba ni rtog pa dang ldan pa rnam s rangs par mi ’gyur la / rigs pas brtan por byas pa’i lung yang don gzhan du drang bar mi nus pas de’i phyir re zhig rigs pas dpyad par bya’o // .

7. = ’jig rten grags sde pa, ’jig rten grags sde dang mthun par spyod pa, ’jig rten grags sde spyod pa’i dbu ma pa. See Mimaki 1982, 27ff. The ’Jig rten grags sde pa, etc., are regularly considered to be the Prāsaṅgika — that is, Candrakīrti and his school — but sometimes certain other thinkers, like Jñānagarbha, are also included. On the terms for Madhyamaka subschools, including the Sanskritizations of Tibetan terms (e.g., thal gyur ba = *Prāsaṅgika, and rang rgyud pa = *Svātantrika) see Mimaki 1982, 53: “Tous les termes utiles pour classer les sous-écoles des Mādhyamika, tels que Sautrāntika-mādhyamika, Yogācāra-mādhyamika, ’Jig rten grags sde spyod pa’i dbu ma pa, Svātantrika et Prāsaṅgika sont une invention des auteurs tibétains.

8. See Madhyamakāvatāra 6.32–33. On Prāsaṅgika-style music-making, see Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya ad 6.35 (ed. La Vallée Poussin, p. 121): dper na shing dang rgyud la brten byas la / lag pa rtsol ba byas pa gsum tshogs na / sgrog byed pi wang gling bu la sogs pas / de dag las skyes sgra yang ’byung bar ’gyur /. The passage is quoted from the Lalitavistara 13, verse 114 (ed. Vaidya): yathā tantri pratītya dāru ca hastavyāyāma trayebhi saṃgati / tuṇavīṇasughoṣakādibhiḥ śabdo niścarate tadudbhavaḥ // . “For example, in reliance upon the strings, wood, and manual effort, three [factors] are conjoined; musical instruments like the tuṇa and vīṇā (‘lutes’) then issue a sound that arises due to these [factors].

26. On Tsongkhapa’s exegesis of “the world” (loka) as including āryas (and not in contrast to them, as typical Prāsaṅgikas would have it), see the article by Sonam Thakchoe, “Prāsaṅgika Epistemology in Context,” in chapter 3 of Cowherds 2011.