Two Kinds of Interpretations of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XXIV, 18

Musashi TACHIKAWA

1. Grammatical Ambiguities of the *MMK*, XXIV, 18

The eighteenth verse of the twenty-fourth chapter of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*MMK*), which is one of the main works of Nāgārjuna (A.D. 150–250), runs as follows:

> yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ tāṃ śūnyatāṃ pracakṣmahe/ sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā//[1]
>
> (Whatever is dependent co-arising, we call it emptiness. It is provisional designation, and it is the middle way.)

Here in this verse four concepts are mentioned: dependent co-arisisng (pratītyasamutpāda), emptiness (śūnyatā), provisional designation (upādāya-prajñapti) and the middle way (madhyamā pratipat). One may say that the four concepts and interrelations among them determine the entire structure of Nāgārjuna's philosophy elucidated in the *MMK*. The verse has been considered to be one of the most important verses in the *MMK*. It is well-known that the doctrine of Chinese Tian tai School is based upon the thought mentioned in the verse, which is called the Verse of Three Truths (Ch. *san di ji*).

The verse, however, has a grammatical ambiguity: Does the pronoun "sā" in the third pāda refer to "śūnyatā" or to "pratītyasamutpāda?" It may be natural to take the feminine pronoun "sā" as referring to "śūnyatā," which is a feminine noun. Yet there is a possibility such that, since "prajñapti," which is the predicate of the sentence in the third pāda, is a feminine noun, the subject

of the sentence takes a feminine form, i.e., "sā," although the pronoun "sā" eventually refers to dependent co-arising in the first pāda. In a similar way, it is uncertain whether the pronoun "sā" of "saiva" in the fourth pāda refers to dependent co-arising or to emptiness. As in the case of the third pāda, there is a possibility such that, since the predicate "pratipat" is a feminine noun, the feminine pronoun "sā" has been employed in the fourth pāda.

Kenneth Inada has translated the verse:

> We declare that whatever is relational origination is *śūnyatā*. It is a provisional name (i.e., thought construction) for the mutuality (of being) and, indeed, it is the middle path.[2]

From this translation one cannot judge whether "it" refers to relational origination or śūnyatā. Or the translator did not find any need to decide whether the pronoun "sā" (it) refers to relational origination or śūnyatā. That is to say, with some amount of laxity he might have referred to the unity of relational origination with śūnyatā.

David Kalupahana's translation of the verse seems to have the same ambiguity as Inada's translation:

> We state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness. That is dependent upon convention. That itself is the middle Path.[3]

In the commentary on his translation, Kalupahana states that, in the first line of the verse, Nāgārjuna is presenting an equation: Dependent arising is emptiness.[4] Furthermore, he comments:

> The second line refers to the middle path. The

question is: In what way can dependent arising and emptiness, which are synonymous, represent a middle path? The answer to this question is in the statement, sā prajñaptir upādāya.[5]

Here Kalupahana has considered "dependent co-arising" and "emptiness" are synonymous, and that the relation between dependent arising (or emptiness) and the middle way will be represented by what is dependent upon convention. At least one we can say that he is not concerned here with the direction of discourse from dependent co-arising to emptiness.

If the pronoun "sā" refers to emptiness, then in the *MMK*, XXIV, 18 one may find some direction or development of discourse. That is to say, dependent co-arising is stated as emptiness, which is, in turn, understood as provisional designation. If the pronoun refers to dependent co-arising, then it will follow that each of the three concepts: emptiness, provisional designation, and the middle way, will be a qualifier (qualificans, viśeṣaṇa) of dependent co-arising, which is to be qualified (qualificand, viśeṣya).

2. Direction of Discourse

In the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* Nāgārjuna says: [all things are] empty, because they do not have svabhāva (yasmānniḥsvabhāvaṃ tasmāc-chūnyam).[6] In this work as well as the *MMK*, he never says that all things do not have svabhāva because they are empty. Here the absence of svabhāva furnishes the ground for being empty of things, and not the other way around. One can find a direction of the development of the argument given in the above-mentioned passage. Let us call such a direction found in the development of discourse "direction of discourse." Direction of discourse often points out the direction which practitioners should take in their practices. For example, we can see such a case in the *MMK*, XVIII, 5, which we shall discuss below.

Let us see another instance in which a direction of discourse is clearly indicated. The *Heart Sūtra*

(Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasūtra) says:

All phenomena are empty, without characteristic, unborn, unceased, stainless, not stainless, undiminished and unfilled. Therefore, Śāriputra, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no discrimination, no conditioning factors, no consciousness, ….[7]

The fact that all phenomena are empty, without characteristic and so on becomes the reason why there is no form, no feeling and so on in emptiness. Here in the *Heart Sūtra* one can clearly find a direction of discourse: from the state of being without characteristic, unborn and so on to the fact that there is no form, no felling and so on.

Does Nāgārjuna give any direction of discourse to the *MMK*, XXIV, 18? The verse itself gives us no solid evidence by which we can decide whether or not Nāgārjuna was thinking of some direction of discourse in the verse. Yet, it is important to note that Nāgārjuna in the *MMK* states dependent co-arising to be emptiness, but he never states emptiness to be dependent co-arising. Although this is not enough evidence to prove that Nāgārjuna has expressed a direction of discourse in the *MMK*, XXIV, 18, it seems to suggest that he was thinking of some direction of discourse in the verse.

In the *MMK* Nāgārjuna states that "through the extinction of action and mental defilements there is liberation" (*MMK*, XVIII, 5a). And, according to Nāgārjuna, action and mental defilements arise from discriminating thought (vikalpa) (XVIII, 5b). Furthermore, this discriminating thought is born of linguistic proliferation (prapañca) (XVIII, 5c).[8] Nāgārjuna concludes the verse by stating that "linguistic proliferation is extinguished in emptiness" (XXVIII, 5d).[9] Here in the *MMK*, XVIII, 5 one can see that a definite direction is given to the negative operation of emptiness.

Furthermore, in the arguments given in the *MMK* the author first try to prove that, on the ultimate level, our conventional language activities or propositions are shown to be impossible, then he concludes that propositions,

that is to say, phenomena, are empty. Nāgārjuna holds that the world consists of words. He admits neither the existence of the external world nor the real existence of inner mental activities. For him what is given to us is nothing but provisional designation. In the former half of the verse also phenomena (dependent co-arising) is considered to be empty, not the other way around. To understand dependent co-arising as empty is part of the above-mentioned process of realization of emptiness, which is carried out in a series of negative operations. Hence, one may safely say that Nāgārjuna was thinking of some direction of discourse from dependent co-arising to emptiness in the *MMK*, XXIV, 18.

Among Buddhist canons or treatises, there are some cases in which a direction of discourse is not clearly indicated although some direction of discourse seems to be implied. For instance, the *Heart Sūtra* states: matter is emptiness, and emptiness is matter (rūpaṃ śūnyatā [or śūnyaṃ] śūnyataiva rūpam). These two sentences cannot be a mere repetition of tautology. Furthermore, no *Prajñāpāramitā* canons state: Emptiness is matter, and matter is emptiness. This seems to imply that the direction from matter to emptiness was considered in the first place and then the direction from emptiness to matter was considered. Furthermore, a number of Indian, Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese commentators on the *Heart Sūtra* tried to find the direction of discourse from matter to emptiness and then that from emptiness to matter. In a similar way, the *MMK*, XXIV, 18 might have some direction of discourse, even though it is not clearly indicated.

At the end of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* Nāgārjuna says:

> I adore the incomparable Buddha who taught emptiness, dependent co-arising and the middle way as having the same meaning (eka-artha).[10]

Here Nāgārjuna states that the three terms "emptiness," "dependent co-arising," and "the middle way" as having the same meaning. How-

ever, it does not mean that the three concepts are logically equivalent. If x, then y, and if y, then x. Such a relation between x and y is called equivalence. In Nāgārjuna's writings we do not have expressions, such as "If some thing (x) is emptiness, then x is the middle way, and if x is the middle way, then x is emptiness."

3. Interpretations of Classical Commentators

Several commentaries on the *MMK* have been preserved. The *Akutobhaya*, which is the oldest commentary among preserved commentaries on the *MMK*, states:

> If something exists, it is dependent arising and provisionally designated. (dngos po 'ga' zhig yod pa nyid yin na/ de ni brten nas 'byung ba dang brten nas gdags yin pas/).[11]

The author of the *Akutobhaya* seems to have almost identified dependent co-arising and provisional designation.

The Chinese translation of the third pāda of the *MMK*, XXIV, 18 in the commentary of Sthiramati (–570), which has been preserved only in a Chinese translation, runs:

> What is dependent is provisionally designated.[12]

Here the translator of Sthiramati's commentary obviously took the pronoun "sā" to refer to dependent co-arising in the first pāda. As far as one judges from the Chinese translation of the verse, one cannot say how Sthiramati took the meaning of the verse.

In Kumārajīva's translation of Piṅgala's commentary on the *MMK*, which is one of the most authoritative works of the Tian tai philosophy, the reference of "sā" remains unspecified. Kumārajīva's translation of the latter half of the verse runs:

> It is called provisional designation, and it is the middle way.[13]

According to the philosophy of the Tian tai School, emptiness (Ch. *kung*), provisional designation (Ch. *chia*) and the middle way (Ch. chung) are the Three Truths with which the system of

Tian tai philosophy has been constructed. The Tian tai philosophy has not forgotten the fourth concept "dependent arising," which becomes the subject or qualificand (viśeṣya) of each of the Three Truths. That is to say, the Tian tai tradition interpreted the verse stating that dependent co-arising is (a) emptiness, (b) provisional designation, and (c) the middle way.

As for the interpretation of the *MMK*, XXIV, 18, H. Ui already pointed out that there was a clear and big difference between Indian way of understanding and Chinese way of reading. According to him, the pronoun "sā" (it) in the third pāda should refer to emptiness.[14]

The *Prajñāpradīpa*, which is the commentary of Bhāviveka (–570) on the *MMK*, has been preserved only in Tibetan and Chinese. Insofar as one can judge from the Tibetan translation of this commentary, one can hardly decide what the pronoun "sā" (it) in the third pāda and that in the fourth pāda refer to. In his commentary Bhāviveka repeats nearly the same content as that of the *MMK*, XXIV, 18.[15]

On the other hand, in the Chinese translation of the *Prajñāpradīpa* a direction of discourse has been clearly indicated:

> Dependnet co-arising is empty, because it is provisionally designated.[16]

Here one can see the direction from provisional designation to emptiness, which is never found in other commentaries on the *MMK*.

Candrakīrti (about the seventh century) in his *Prasannapadā* comments on the verse:

> Whatever is the emptiness of the own-being (svabhāva), it is provisional designation. It is determined that emptiness itself is provisional designation. … It is determined that the emptiness characterized by the non-arising of the own-being is the middle way.[17]

Here Candrakīrti takes the two pronouns (sā) found in the verse refer to emptiness. Hence, one can safely say that Candrakīrti has admitted the existence of a direction of discourse in the arguments of the verse. That is, the first dependent co-arising is considered as emptiness, which is, in turn, described as provisional designation (or the middle way).

Then Candrakīrti adds:

> They, i.e., "emptiness," "provisional designation" and "the middle way," are synonyms (viśeṣasaṃjñā) of "dependent co-arising."[18]

This does not contradict the fact that Candrakīrti admits a kind of direction of discourse as mentioned in the passage quoted above. The word "viśeṣasaṃjñā" here seems to mean a term referring to particular aspects of what is questioned.

4. Two Orders of Dependent Co-arising

Since emptiness and provisional designation are not equivalent, some difference in aspect must be found between them. Furthermore, provisional designation may be considered as an aspect of the dependent co-arising which has been characterized by the negating operation of emptiness. In other words, it is through emptiness that dependent co-arising can be manifested as provisional designation. Here we are facing two levels of dependent co-arising. One is the dependent co-arising which is not yet negated through the operation of emptiness; the other is the dependent co-arising which has been reborn, after having been negated by the negating function of emptiness. The first one is indicated in the first pāda of the *MMK*, XXIV, 18; the second, in the third pāda of the verse.

G. Nagao introduces the concept of order in order to explain the difference between the pratītyasamutpāda mentioned in the first pāda and that mentioned in the third pāda, which is equated with upādāya-prajñapti.

Let us see G. Nagao's interpretation of the verse. L. Kawamura has translated Nagao's Japanese translation of the verse into English:

> What is originating co-dependently, we call emptiness. It is a designation based upon (some material). Only that is the Middle Path.[19]

Nagao calls the dependent co-arising in the first pāda "the first order pratītyasamutpāda;" the provisional designation in the third pāda "the second order pratītyasamutpāda." He holds that there is the dynamic movement from the first order to its negation (śūnyatā), and further to its revival as the second order is the middle way.[20] That is to say, "it is dialectical, moving from affirmation to negation and to affirmation."[21]

5. Conclusion

Thus we can see that there have been, at least, two kinds of interpretations of the *MMK*, XXIV, 18: One is rather concerned with the direction of discourse which indicates process of practice; the other, unconcerned with the direction of discourse. In the former interpretation, as seen in Nagao's interpretation, the verse is understood as referring to the procedure such that dependent co-arising is negated and then is reborn. In the latter, as seen in the interpretation of the Tian tai Philosophy, the equation of dependent co-arising with emptiness (or provisional designation) is rather focused.

It is true that some Indian commentators, such as Piṅgala, Sthiramati and Bhāviveka have not clearly given the first interpretation. However, it does not mean that Nāgārjuna was not thinking the direction or movement from dependent co-arising to emptiness and that from emptiness to dependent co-arising. We have to remember that Nāgārjuna never states that "dependent co-arising is emptiness and emptiness is dependent co-arising." This seems to imply that he was thinking of the process of act, which is never reversible.

Notes

1) PP, p. 503, ll. 10–11.
2) [Inada 1970: 148]
3) [Kalupahana 1986: 339]
4) [Kalupahana 1986: 340]
5) [Kalupahana 1986: 340]
6) [Bhattacharya and others 1978: 42]
7) [Lopez 1998: vii]
8) [Tachikawa 1997: 23]
9) [Tachikawa 1997: 25]

10) [Bhattacharya and others 1978: 85]
11) TTP, Vol. 95, p. 43, f. 4, ll. 5–6.
12) Manji Tripitaka, Vol. 26, p. 70 left.
13) Taisho Tripitaka, Vol. 30, p. 33.
14) [Ui 1948: 21]
15) TTP, Vol. 95, p. 43, f. 4, l. 5: kho bo ni rten cing 'brel par 'byung ba gang yin pa de ni / stong pa nyid du 'chad de / de ni brten nas gdags pa yin te / de nyid dbu ma'i lam yin no //
16) Taisho Tripitaka, Vol. 30, p. 126.
17) PP, p. 504, ll. 8–14: yā ceyaṃ svabhāvaśūnyatā sā prajñaptir upādāya/ saiva śūnyatā upādāya prajñaptir iti vyavasthāpyate/ ... saiva svabhāvānutpattilakṣaṇā śūnyatā madhyamā pratipad iti vyavasthāpyate/
18) PP, p. 504, ll. 14–15: pratītyasamutpādasyaivaitā viśeṣa-saṃjñā śūnyatā upādāya prajñaptir madhyamā pratipad iti//
19) [Nagao 1991: 190]
20) [Nagao 1991: 194]
21) [Nagao 1991: 194]

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