

The Problem of Conceptual Play and Liberation in Buddhist Education

Kim, Yongpyo*

Dongguk University

〈Abstract〉

The present study deals with the problem of substantial metaphysics as conceptual play(*prapañca*) and the way of Liberation from the perspective of Buddhist Education. Our frame of reference is the Prajñā-Mādhyamika.

Human illusion is said to be the product of dualistic discrimination. Buddhist understands the structure of dualistic thinking as a connection between substantial metaphysics and the cycle of birth and death. Discriminative mind is in close connection with conceptual play and the belief in language is considered as an outcome of the belief in self-love.

The ontological use of language is symptomatic of samsaric existence. The Mādhyamika associates substantial ontology with illusive suffering, belief in words as signifier with the self-centering concerns of the ego which is called *prapañca*. The wheel of becoming is produced through the propensity for erroneous conceptualization. The afflictions, and actions arise from hypnotizing thought and this in turn results from conceptual constructions. Ego-centeredness and pride is the main cause of *prapañca*.

The psychological-linguistic analysis of the essence of this substantial metaphysics shows that self-love produces sophisticated fixed ideas. Out of anxiety over the reduction of one's own existence to nothing, man becomes a substantialist and formulates a theory of the non-destructibility of the soul and of an eternal essence. Such a metaphysical disease can be cured by deconstruction of *prapañca*. The doctrine of emptiness(*śūnyatā*) is a prescription for

* Yongpyo Kim is a Professor of the Department of Buddhist Studies, Dongguk University, and President of the Korean Association of Religious Education.

curing the disease of metapsychology.

Key words: conceptual play, Substantial Metaphysics dualistic discrimination, Buddhist Education, liberation, emptiness

I . Problem of Substantial Metaphysics

This article deals with the problem of onto-theological attachment and illusive idea of the eternity of an essence and the way of Liberation from the perspective of Buddhist Education. First the problem of substantial ontology attachment will be examined. Then, by examining the nature of ontological language as conceptual play (*prapañca*), the way of deconstruction of onto-theological disease will be explored.

Buddhism is concerned with the fundamental human problem which originates in discriminative thinking. The primary cause of this problem is misconceiving of the original nature of existence and grasping to the illusive idea of the eternity. Such a false idea which disguises the real nature of things. It is called ignorance. This misconceived discriminative mind creates conceptual play by means of the operation of language and thinking.

In general, Buddhist view of language is necessary means for the attainment of realization. However, there is an opposite view on the nature of language, *i.e.*, language as an ontological bondage, especially the Mādhyamika school holds these two views paradoxically.

For the Mādhyamika the ontological language and categorical thinking are to be deconstructed as a source of valid knowledge. Because epistemic and referential use of language leads to ontological commitment to the belief that there are things independent of language and of which words function as signifier. The ontological use of language is symptomatic of samsaric existence.

The Mādhyamika associates ontology with samsaric existence, belief in words as signifier with the self-centering concerns of the ego which is called *prapañca*. Language pretends to claim an ontological referent, although in point of fact it does not. As Nāgārjuna points out the wheel of becoming is produced through the propensity for erroneous conceptualization, the afflictions, and action arise from

hypnotizing thought and this in turn result from conceptual constructions (*prapañca*).¹⁾ Ego-centeredness and pride(ahamkara) is the cause of prapañca.

Ignorance is a misunderstanding of the original feature of things or lack of understanding.²⁾ This ignorance or lack of understanding conceals the original nature of things. This misperception arises out from the identification of impermanence and eternity, no-suffering and suffering, no-self and self, impurity and purity. The *Anguttara-nikāya* says: “By confusing impermanence and eternity, suffering and happiness is understood confusedly, by confusing no-self and self, misconceptions and delusions arise out from confusing impurity and purity.”³⁾

This misconception starts from the bewilderment of cognition which identifies what is essential with what is non-essential. This substantial metaphysics is a philosophical fantasy. Substantialism is an expression of a feeble man’s anxiety concerning his own true character. Man projects non-existence and existence onto his original nature.

Candrakīrti (600-650, C.E) says that for security and confirmation of his own existence, man gets caught in a mind of self-love and clinging.⁴⁾

The psychological-linguistic analysis of the essence of this substantial metaphysics shows that self-love produces sophistic fixed ideas. Out of anxiety over the reduction of one’s own existence to nothing, man becomes a substantialist and formulates a theory of the non-destructibility of the soul and of an eternal essence. Substantialism means that a system of thoughts presupposing which the origin of man is in existence dwelling in a cave and that the world does really exist forever and that one’s own salvation is possible through a belief in the theory of returning to that evolving existence. Considered from the standpoint of Mādhyamika philosophy, such metaphysics cannot be knowledge leading to liberation. On the contrary, such a belief or philosophy leads to an existence characterized by the transmigration of birth and death bound to self-love.

Thus, Buddhist understands the structure of dualistic thinking as a connection between substantial metaphysics and cycle of birth and death. Discriminative mind is in close connection with conceptual play and the belief in language is considered as

1) Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*, trans. Kenneth K. Inada (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1970) [abbreviated as MMK], Verse 18: 5.

2) Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā* [*The Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way*], trans. Mervyn Sprung (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979) [abbreviated as PSP], Verse 564.7.

3) AN 2:52.

4) Candrakīrti, PSP 438. 5.

an outcome of the belief in self-love. Substantialist thought is only a product of attachment towards one's own self and feeble self-deception trying to make an outward object one's own possession or to rely on such an object. Our task is to deconstruct an ontological entity or a cognitive category and to free beyond all illusive understanding.

II. Conceptual Play as Samsaric Existence

In early Buddhism, the cause of samsaric suffering is explained in terms of craving, passionate greed. The *Majjhima-nikāya* states that *prapañca* originates from craving, pride and obsessive commitment to views.⁵⁾ It is false idea of self (*ātman*) that identifies conceptions with ontological entities. *Prapañca* produces a false referent which is not a real object. The referents have no ontological autonomy or ultimate meaning. They are only conceived and sustained in the self-referential activity of language.

The Buddha distinctly says that suffering (*dukkha*) is five aggregates of attachment itself, *i.e.*, an individual being or I.⁶⁾ It is craving which produces re-existence and re-becoming, and which is bound up with passionate greed, and which finds fresh delight now here and now there, namely, (a) thirst for sense-pleasure (*kama-tanhā*), (b) thirst for existence and becoming (*bhava-tanhā*), and (c) thirst for non-existence (*vibhava-tanhā*).⁷⁾

This *tanhā* produces various forms of the conditioned world. However, *tanhā* is not the first cause of suffering as everything is dependent on each other, *i.e.*, dependent origination. In other words, because of sensation, craving arises, because of craving, grasping arises, because of grasping becoming (*bhava*) arises, because of becoming, birth, old age and death arises, etc.

Although craving is not the original cause of the samsaric world, it is the most immediate cause of it, for the term craving includes not only desire for and attachment to, 'wealth and power', and so on, but also 'ideas and ideals', 'sense-pleasure,' 'views, opinions, theories, conceptions and beliefs(*dhamma-tanhā*)'.⁸⁾

5) MN 1:3.

6) SN, III (PTS), p. 158.

7) SN, V (PTS), p. 421.

It is categorical fixation and falsification. Thus, craving is connected with *prapañca*, as it is pointed out that the pāli term '*papañca*' definitely concerns the grosser conceptual aspect of the process of sense-perception. It is a consequent to '*vitakka*' (reasoning) which presupposes language. *Papañca* tends to obscure the true state of affairs in as much as "it is an unwarranted deviation giving rise to obsession."⁹⁾ Perception and other units of experience such as contact, sensation, and thinking, therefore, are closely connected with *papañca*. It leads metaphysical commitments, formalizing itself in doctrine and dogmas.

In the Mādhyamika system, *prapañca* is defined as language (*vak*) which produces the verbal differentiation (*prapañcayati*) of referents.¹⁰⁾ The *prapañca* is thereby closely related with the role of language. Candrakīrti states:

The afflictions arise in the unenlightened from groundlessly hypothesizing external objects and the other factors of personal existence. Nāgārjuna will say, 'Desire, aversion and delusion are said to spring from hypostatic thought. They arise dependent on misbelief and on taking things to be good or bad.'¹¹⁾

The *prapañca* according to Candrakīrti, is guilty exhaustively. It consists of knowledge and objects of knowledge, words and their meanings, agents and action, means and act, pot and cloth, diadem and chariot, objects and feelings, female and male, gain and loss, happiness and misery, beauty and ugliness, blame and praise.¹²⁾ All erroneous conceptualizations originate from *prapañca*. The dualistic thinking produces the linguistic referents which have a discriminating function. Samsaric illusion is said to be the product of dualistic discrimination (*vikalpa*).

8) MN. I, p. 51; SN II, p. 72.

9) Nananda, *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971), p. 3.

10) PSP on MMK 18: 9. Mervyn Sprung translates it as 'named thing' which means that language gives rise to things with meaning. 183.

11) PSP, p. 171.

12) PSP, p. 172.

III. Language and Dualistic Discrimination

This nature of dualistic discrimination is further clarified in the *Madhyantavibhaga-karika-bhasya* of Vasubhandu.¹³⁾ The imagination of unreal (*abhūta-parikalpa*) is defined as the thought construction between the graspable and the grasper. Human imagination (*parikalpa*) is the result of discrimination (*vikalpa*) of subject-object duality. The *vikalpa* is cause of perception corresponding to the object of views. It is also knowing an object by its term. According to Vasubandhu's commentary, "the imagination of the unreal means the discrimination between the graspable and the grasper. The pair is the graspable and the grasper. Emptiness means that state of the imagination of the unreal which is lacking in form of being graspable or grasper. Even in this emptiness there is that, namely, the imagination of the unreal."¹⁴⁾

Thus, when something is absent in a receptacle, then one, seeing that receptacle as devoid of that receptacle, which is left over, as it is, namely as something truly existing here.¹⁵⁾ The dualistic distinctions are considered as all mere imagination and therefore they are unreal. However, such mental construction is not exist in the state of emptiness which refers to the things as they are. Thus, Samsara is accordance with a state of illusion, *i.e.*, *abhūta-parikalpa*.

In this context, *prapañca* is thought construction of the consequent forms of such discrimination. Candrakīrti attributes *vikalpa* to the self-exteriorizing activity of consciousness(*cittapracarah*).¹⁶⁾ There is a close relation between the *vikalpa* and *prapañca*, the exteriorizing activity of consciousness and belief in referents. The divisive 'vi' in 'vikalpa' is faithful to its name. It puts emphasis on the creation of a referent through language. It also manufactures polarities, and diving the world into mutually exclusive and contradictory categories.¹⁷⁾

13) Vasubhandu, *Madhyantavibhaga-karika-bhasya*, tr. Stefan Anacker, *Seven Works of Vasubandhu: The Buddhist Psychological Doctor* (Delhi: Motilal banarsidass, 1980), chapter VIII, pp.191-286.

14) *ibid*, Vasubandhu's commentary on the *Madhyantavibhaga*, verse 1: 2.

15) This definition appears in the Vasubandhu's self commentary on the verse 1:1 of the *Madhyantavibhaga*. The verse is: "There exists the imagination of unreal, there is no pair, but there is emptiness, even in this there is that. Thomas A. Kochumutton, *Buddhist Doctrine of Experience: A New Translation and Interpretation of the Work of Vasubandhu the Yogacarin* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982), pp. 29-30.

16) PSP, p. 183.

17) Paul M. Williams, "Some Aspects of Language and Construction in the Madhyamaka." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 8 (1980), p. 27.

The *Vimalakīrtinidesa-sūtra* lists following dualistic concepts; “distraction and attention, grasping and non-grasping, uniqueness and characterlessness, sinfulness and sinlessness, happiness and misery, the mundane and the transcendental, samsaric life and liberation, the destructible and indestructible, self and selflessness, form and emptiness, sense organs and object of sense organs, aggregates and cessation of aggregates, darkness and light, detesting the world and rejoicing in liberation, good paths and bad paths, and the true and false.”¹⁸⁾

The ego creates polarities to center the world in itself, and it uses language to confer ontological independence to entities which it itself has manufactured. One such entity is being which is believed to be an undivided, which is eternal.

IV. Illusive Idea of Eternity and the Tathāgata

Yadav defines Substantial ontology as “a discipline which conceives the genesis of man in a cave where Being dwell (*guha*), treats the world as a derives entity, centers the world in Being with the category of causation, and finds emancipatory satisfaction in genealogical return to Being.”¹⁹⁾ This definition signifies to affirm Being itself which is unmade and not dependent on another, and which has its own-being, and to seek a confused identity with Being itself for egological fantasy. For the *Mādhyamika*, such a Being is conceived in dream and fantasy.

Nāgārjuna defines own-being (*svabhāva*) as something which cannot be made and has no relation of dependence with something else.²⁰⁾ Buddhism begins with the dependent origination which among other thing deconstructs belief in things in themselves, including Being. He warns that those who try to understand the concepts of own-being, extended nature, being and non-being do not perceive the true Dharma in the Buddha's teaching.²¹⁾ That is why the deconstruction of the metaphysics of substance becomes a major issue in the *Mādhyamika* Buddhism.

18) See the *Vimalakīrtinidesa-sūtra*, chapter 9, T. 14, pp. 550b-551c. On the problem of duality in Buddhism, see, Lang E. Ra, *The T'ien-tai Philosophy of Non-duality: A Study in Chan-jan and Chih-li* (Ph. D. Dissertation, Temple University: 1988).

19) Bibhuti S. Yadav, “Methodic deconstruction”, *Interpretation of Religion*, ed. Shelomo Biderman (Leiden: Brill, 1992). p. 2.

20) MMK 15: 2.

21) MMK 15: 6.

Substantial ontology by definition uses referential language. It builds a world of being and non-being, and it shelters its world through a network of categories. In this way, ontology formalizes egocentric projections. Prapañca is the linguistic tool, through the ego displaces the psychological in the ontological or the metaphysical. Thus, *prapañca* is evaluated with an substantialistic discourse. Candrakīrti offers the characteristics of *prapañca* as follows:

Prapañca means that language gives rise to things with meanings. Not manifested as named thing means inexpressible by verbal utterance. Thought construction is the inner activity of mind. To be free of that is the way things are beyond thought construction. As the sutra says: What is the higher truth? Where nothing is happening, not even knowledge, how could there be any utterance of words? This is what beyond thought construction' means.²²⁾

Since the *prapañcas* are bound to objects and referents, to be beyond *prapañca* means that there is no meta-linguistic object to which language refers. Nāgārjuna points out this issue:

Those who subject the Buddha to *prapañca* the Buddha who is beyond object knowledge are all victims of language and do not see the Tathagata.²³⁾

Candrakīrti clarifies it in this way: Because language is beyond *prapañca* to objects, and because the Tathagata is not an object, how could language be feasible? Therefore, the Tathagata transcends *prapañca*.²⁴⁾

Consequently, he argues that using object-language to describe the Buddha entails illusory attribution, like the illusory attribution of colors to the sky. As the Tathagata is beyond all named things, and because he is not a thing in itself and is at peace, it is the uncritical mind that thinks of him as an eternal or a contingent entity.²⁵⁾ Even the Tathagata is not understood in ontological category. Buddhists can make no ontological assertion whatsoever.

Chi-tsang(吉藏, 549-623 CE)²⁶⁾ also insists that all ontological assertions are *prapañca*.

22) PSP on MMK 18: 5, pp. 172-173.

23) MMK 22: 15.

24) PSP on MMK 22: 15, p. 204.

25) PSP on MMK 22: 14, p. 204

26) Chi-tsang is the San-lun master(the three treatises) in China. Since he resided at Chia-hsiang Temple, he was called Great Master Chia-hsing. He wrote twenty six treatises, over one hundred

The *San-lun-hsuan-i* (三論玄義) says that any thinking in terms of being and non-being is a disease, and all teachings of the Buddha are delivered to cure such a disease.²⁷⁾ Ontological language will play a trick on people and destroy their reflective eyes.²⁸⁾ Language is seen as only a practical activity which has no essence and no ultimate referents. Thus, the She-lin tradition argues that conceptual play as a disease misguides people to have an ontological commitment to objects. There is no essential own nature (*svabhāva*) in any dharmas. The substantial reality of *svabhāva* exists only in imagined concepts. That is why Nāgārjuna asserts that those who try to see the concept of self-nature in being and non-being do not perceive the truth embodied in the Buddha's message. This kind of metaphysical disease can be cured by deconstruction of *prapañca*. The doctrine of emptiness is a prescription for curing the disease of metapsychology (*vyadhi*).

V. Educational Prescription for Curing the Disease of Meta-psychology

As we have examined, human samsaric existence is the product of dualistic discrimination which is connected with substantial metaphysics. This illusive disease can be cured by deconstruction of *prapañca*. The doctrine of emptiness is an educational prescription for curing such disease of metapsychology (*vyadhi*).

Prajñā of emptiness (*sūnyatā*) means seeing the real nature of things as they really are. It is ultimate wisdom apart from dualistic thinking. The *Prajñā* departing from conceptual play is the wisdom of non-attachment, of emptiness. It is possible only in the dimension where mankind overcomes substantial ontology and attachment. That is, the true nature of things becomes clear in an awakened and 'open-endless mind'.²⁹⁾

In the *Prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra*, the doctrine of emptiness signifies on the unobtainability of wisdom which is considered as the perfection of wisdom. Because obtaining, the

chuan. Chi-tsang's writing style is systematic and analytic. For a detail on the biography of Chi-tsang, see the *Hsu-kao-seng-chuan*, T. 50, no. 2060, p.513c 15a.

27) SLHL, p. 10c.

28) CKLS, p. 111b.

29) See, Yongpyo Kim, "The Idea of Buddhist Character Education: A Mahayana Perspective," *Korean Journal of Religious Education* vol 2(1996), pp. 35-37.

act of obtaining, and the person obtaining are all empty.³⁰⁾ Human defilements arise from discrimination and discrimination arises from conceptual play. But conceptual play disappears in emptiness.

Because deeds and defilements are annihilated, There is liberation,
 Because they have no real existence,
 Conceptual play is annihilated
 When entering emptiness.
 The real aspect of all dharmas is the cutting off
 Of mental functions or language.
 It has no production and no annihilation,
 It is extinguished and like nirvana.³¹⁾

The real nature of Dharma transcends conceptual play. It is not sophisticated through all kinds of conceptual play, as non-discrimination it is true without discriminative meaning. Nāgārjuna states: “Where conceptual play and All obtained things are extinguished, There begins the realm of tranquility and bliss.”³²⁾ It is the unutterable, incognizable, unobtainable.

The practice of emptiness is to means the process leading to ultimate liberation. From a pedagogical point of view, emptiness is the process of deconstruction of conceptual play and dualistic discrimination. The dialectic of emptiness leads to the right contemplation of the true nature of all existence. It is an antidote to the fundamental causes of man’s samsaric existence. It is a method to destruct delusion and attachment. The ultimate liberation is only possible in the stage where the mind of human is opened and awakened to emptiness. Thus, the doctrine of emptiness is a teaching seeking liberation freed from all metaphysical theology conceptual play.

The perfection of wisdom possesses the pure brightness of the mind. The attainment of perfect freedom and liberation is the essential point of Buddhist theory of liberation and salvation.

30) MMK 22:10.

31) MMK 18:5,7.

32) MMK 18:9.

Abbreviations

- T. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (大正新修大藏經) [followed by volume, text number, page, and horizontal column].
- CKLS *Chung-kuan-lun-shu* (中觀論疏). T.42
- MMK *Mula-Mādhymaka-Karika* (中論頌). T. 30.
- PSP *Prasannapada* (明句論) Trans. Meruyn Sprung. 1979.
- SLHI *San-lun-hsuan-i* (三論玄義). T.45.
- MN *Majjhima-Nikāya* (PTS)
- SN *Saṃyutta-Nikāya* (PTS)
- AN *Aṅguttara-Nikāya* (PTS)

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- ① 전공: 종교학, 불교학 / 소속: 동국대학교
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 - ④ E-mail: sunyata@dongguk.edu
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