

Why Did the Mādhyamika Decline ?

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A thorough explanation of the decline of the Mādhyamika in its various regional forms is one of the most difficult research problems in the entire study of Mādhyamika Buddhism. Before an answer can be proffered, the historical, textual, and doctrinal nature of Mādhyamika Buddhism must first be studied and determined. In other words, what declined ? What is the study and writing of Mādhyamika texts in the development of Mahāyāna literature, or the scholastic propagation of Mādhyamika doctrines in the development of Mahāyāna thought, or the cultural and religious manifestation of Mādhyamika teachings in the evolution of Mahāyāna schools and sects, or some combination of these three activities ? When, where, and how did the decline of Mādhyamika Buddhism occur ? The following remarks are intended only to suggest possible lines of investigation on this complex research problem.

a. **With respect to Mādhyamika Buddhism in India**, the study and writing of its texts may have ceased with the destruction of such study centers as the Nālandā Vihāra in c. 988 A. D. and Vikramaśilā Vihāra in c. 1203 A. D. in North India and other, lesser known places in South India probably in the late 14th century A. D. Numerous Madhyamaka texts seem to have perished in India and are now available principally in Tibetan and Chinese translation. The destruction of such study facilities would also indicate the lack of effective governmental support, recognition, or tolerance of the scholastic propagation of Madhyamaka doctrines—whether that government be Hindu or Islamic. But this factor must have been shared by the Madhyamaka with other Buddhist schools, both Hīnayāna, and Mahāyāna, which likewise are no longer extant in India. Similarly, whatever cultural expressions of the Madhyamaka may once have existed in religious art and ritual, they suffered the same fate as those of other schools in the general decline of Buddhism in Hindu and Islamic India.

But can these adverse environmental conditions and events by themselves account for the decline and disappearance of the Madhyamaka in India ? Were there also factors within the very nature of Mādhyamika Buddhism which may have incurred its decline ? Did the controversy over the necessity of utilizing independent arguments for the refutation of the contradictory implication of a *prasaṅgānumāna* (negation-dialectic), as waged by the Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika divisions of the Madhyamaka, result in a weakening of the whole school in its critical stand against Hindu and

other Buddhist schools of thought ? Was the Madhyamaka philosophic recognition of the importance of knowing and practicing the six or more *pāramitās* (especially *dāna-pāramitā* and *prajñā-pāramitā*) insufficient to lead to the establishment of religious ethics and ritual ? Did the Madhyamaka fail to establish clearly some metaphysical thesis and religious goal for popular belief and practice ? Or did the Madhyamaka simply complete its now regarded historic role in providing a rational basis for the Bodhisattva ideal in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism ?

b. With respect to Mādhyamika Buddhism in Tibet, the study problem concerns the manner in which the Dbu-ma-pa became so commingled with certain native Pön (Bon) beliefs and practices and with Buddhist Yogācāra tenets and Tāntric interpretations that it now constitutes Lāmaism, especially in its dominant Dge-lugs-pa (Geluk-pa) form.

The general Buddhist persecutions by King Glañ Dar-ma (Lañ Dar-ma, c. 861-900 A. D.) may have effected the real decline of the Mādhyamika in Tibet, and the subsequent activity of Ācārya Atīśa (Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna, 980-1053 A. D.), from Vikramaśīlā Vihāra, during c. 1042-1053 A. D. may have actually constituted an introduction of a modified Mādhyamika school rather than a revival of the officially decreed orthodox school of the 8th century A. D. At any rate, the environmental factors affecting the course of Mādhyamika Buddhism in Tibet appear to have been generally helpful. The study of Mādhyamika texts reportedly still continues in monastic schools in Tibet; the teaching of Mādhyamika doctrines, however modified their interpretation may have become, is still conducted and revered there ; and the possibility of Mādhyamika cultural and ritualistic elements in Lāmaism cannot be denied.

Hence the study of the disappearance of the Dbu-ma-pa as such in Tibet and the rise of so-called Lāmaism, especially that of Ḥbrom-ston (Drom-tön, 1002-1058 or later A. D.) and Tsoñ-kha-pa (1357-1419 A. D.), are interrelated problems for future research which concern the historian of Mādhyamika Buddhism in Asia.

c. In Central Asia, the decline and eventual disappearance of Mādhyamika Buddhism constitutes a relatively unapproached study problem. The answer is doubtless contingent upon the determination of the time and manner in which the Buddhist governments, or governments tolerant of Buddhist activities, declined or succumbed to Islamic forces. Is there any evidence to indicate the continuance of Mādhyamika textual study in western and southern Central Asia (Yarkand, Kāshgar, Khotan) after Sūryasoma (c. mid-4th century A. D.) ? in northern Central Asia (Kucha, Wēn-su [modern Uch-Turfan], Turfan) after the enforced departure of Kumārajīva (344-413 A. D.) for north-west China (Liang-chou) in 383 or 385 A. D. ? in eastern Central Asia (Tunhuang) after the 10th century A. D. ?

d. In China, the whole problem of studying the decline and subsequent disappearance of Mādhyamika Buddhism is conditioned by a prior unsolved problem: did Chinese Mādhyamika Buddhism include only the San-lun-tsung (Three [Mādhyamika] Treatises School), with its variously interpreted "Old" and "New" lines of transmission, or also the Pan-jo-tsung (Prajñā School) and Ssū-lun-tsung (Four [Mādhyamika] Treatises School) ?

Occasional adverse environmental conditions cannot alone account for the decline of Mādhyamika Buddhism in China. In addition to the San-lun-tsung, Ssū-lun-tsung, and Pan-jo-tsung, other Buddhist schools which were particularly characterized by their emphasis upon textual study such as the Ch'êng-shih-tsung (Satya-siddhi or Tattva-siddhi School), Shê-lun-tsung (Mahāyāna-saṃparigraha-śāstra School), Chū-shê-tsung (Abhidharmakośa School), P'i-t'an-tsung (Abhidharmika School), and Ti-lun-tsung (Daśabhūmika School) — suffered general political restrictions, economic hardships, deterioration or destruction of temples, and loss of following or popular support and died out. On the other hand, some Buddhist schools such as the Hua-yen-tsung (Avataṃsaka School), Ch'an-tsung (Dhyāna School), T'ien-t'ai-tsung (T'ien-t'ai School), and Ching-t'u-tsung (Sukhāvātī or Amitābha School), which varied widely in their emphasis upon the necessity of ritual and textual study, encountered the same occasional adverse environmental conditions but nevertheless established themselves as long-lasting Chinese Buddhist institutions.

Hence, were there certain characteristic weaknesses within the Chinese Mādhyamika movement which helped to bring about its decline by the late 7th or early 8th century A. D. ? Were such internal factors inherent in the Chinese Mādhyamika texts, or in the Chinese Mādhyamika doctrine as expounded in lectures and commentaries, or in the very scholastic organization of the Chinese school(s) ? A composite answer may be suggested here for further study.

Chinese Mādhyamika literature, in translations and commentaries, may be classified into two general groups: first, those texts primarily expressing the Mādhyamika philosophic doctrine according to *paramārtha-satya* (*chên-ti*, transcendental, absolute truth-reality); and second, those texts primarily expounding the Prajñāpāramitā Bodhisattva doctrine according to *saṃvṛti-satya* (*su-ti*, empirical, relative truth-reality). Accordingly, the first group consists mainly of the *Chung-lun*, *Pai-lun*, and *Shih-erh-mên-lun* which Sūng-lang (Sêng-lang, in China c. 494-512 or later A. D.) selected and Chi-tsang (549-623 A. D.) emphasized as constituting the canonical literature of orthodox Chinese Mādhyamika Buddhism, thus causing the school to be known as the San-lun-tsung (Three [Mādhyamika] Treatises School). The alternative names for this school were K'ung-tsung (Śūnyatā School), Chung-kuan-tsung (Middle View or Madhyama School),

Wu-tê chêng-kuan-tsung (Insurperable Right View School), Wu-hsiang [Ta-ch'êng]-tsung (No-real-attribute [Mahāyāna] School), and Lung-shu-tsung (School of Nāgārjuna) which expounded the equation *i-ch'ieh-fa-k'ung* (*sarva-dharma=śūnyatā*) and thus expressed the philosophic or theoretical side of Chinese Mādhyamika Buddhism.

The second group of texts consists mainly of the *Ta-chih-tu-lun*, *Shih-chu-p'i-p'o-sha-lun*, and other works together with the *Chung-lun*, *Pai-lun*, and *Shih-erh-mên-lun* which comprised the canonical literature of the Pan-jo-tsung (Prajñā School), Ssü-lun-tsung (Four [Mādhyamika] Treatises School), and Hsing-tsung (which included the San-lun-tsung and Hua-yen-tsung [Avataṃsaka School]). These schools expounded the doctrine *yu-su-ti* (*bhāva=sainvṛti-satya*, "coming into existence is the relative, conditioned, and commonplace aspect of reality") and thus expressed the religious or practical side of Chinese Mādhyamika Buddhism.

Now then, the decline of Mādhyamika Buddhism in China may be hypothesized as follows. Chi-tsung, by emphasizing the philosophic or theoretical side, thereby precluded the development of Mādhyamika textual study into a practical, religious institution capable of expressing itself in cultural forms attractive to popular interest and support — in spite of the fact that he wrote numerous commentaries on various Buddhist texts belonging to other schools which were developing the religious application of their doctrine. Thus, in time, this philosophic rationalization of Mahāyāna doctrines, as provided by the San-lun-tsung, served its purpose and was duly recognized and in part appropriated by the stronger and more eclectic Chinese Yogācāra schools of the Mahāyāna.

Similarly, the doctrinal exposition and presumed limited cultural expression of the religious or practical side of Chinese Mādhyamika Buddhism by the Pan-jo-tsung and Ssü-lun-tsung were in time absorbed by the Yogācāra schools, and thus the decline and disappearance of the Chinese Mādhyamika movement as whole was effected.

Although the plausibility of the foregoing hypothesis may be affected by future historical investigation, it will be well to remember that any explanation of the decline of Chinese Mādhyamika Buddhism must take into account the interrelatedness of its historical environment, textual study, and doctrinal exposition.

e. With respect to the decline of Mādhyamika Buddhism in Korea, much more data concerning the whole position of the Sam-non-jong in Korean Buddhist history is needed before an answer can be attempted. A special study should be made on the merger of the Chung-do-jong (Middle Way School) with the (Sin-in-jong (Spiritual Symbolism School, cf. Mil-gyo) in c. 1406 A. D.

f. In Japan, an explanation of the decline of the Sanron-shū (Three [Mādhyamika] Treatises School) may be guided by that proffered above for the San-lun-tsung in

China with the following notable exceptions.

- (i) Prior to and during the Nara period (710-784 or 794 A.D.) the Sanron School developed (as did the other Nara schools) from a *shu* (Group) into a *shū* (School or Sect) and prospered through the support of an interested and tolerant government.
- (ii) The temple activity and doctrinal study of the Sanron-shū was conducted in close affiliation with other Buddhist schools, especially the Hossō-shū (Fa-hsiang-tsung), Jōjitsu-shū (Ch'êng-shih-tsung), Kairitsu-shū (Chieh-lü-tsung) or Ritsu-shū (Lü-tsung), and Kegon-shū (Hua-yen-tsung).
- (iii) The Sanron-shū openly participated in, and sometimes led, state religious ceremonies and thus lacked neither facilities nor opportunity to effect its teachings in cultural forms.
- (iv) The Sanron-shū doctrinal study was not confined to the *Chū-ron* (*Chung-lun*), *Hyaku-ron* (*Pai-lun*), and *Jū-ni-mon-ron* (*Shih-erh-mên-lun*) but, according to Shōsōin records, included more than fifty Chinese texts (and also Sanskrit?) which presented both "theoretical" and "practical" sides of the Mādhyamika and other Buddhist schools.

Why, then, did the Sanron-shū gradually decline as an active Buddhist school by the mid-12th century A.D.? The answer may well lie in a more comprehensive study of the transition of "Buddhism in Japan" (Nihon ni okeru Bukkyō) to "Japanese Buddhism" (Nihon no Bukkyō) or, in other words, the modification of Chinese (and Korean?) Buddhism of the Nara period (710-784 or 794 A.D.) especially by the Tendai-shū (T'ien-t'ai-tsung) and Shingon-shū (Chên-yen-tsung) in the Heian period (794-1185 A.D.) and subsequent formulation of that modified Chinese Buddhism as Japanese Buddhism especially by the Jōdo-shū (Ching-t'u-tsung), Jōdo-Shin-shū, and Nichiren-shū in the Kamakura period (1185-1333/6 A.D.). These latter sects, together with the Zen-shū (Ch'an-tsung) developments (Rinzai-shū [Lin-chi-tsung], Sōtō-shū or Sōdō-shū [Ts'ao-tung-tsung], and Ōbaku-shū [Huang-po-tsung]; other now defunct), which have since then dominated Japanese Buddhism, tend to stress the so-called practical or religious aspect of the Mahāyāna. Consequently, the more theoretical or philosophical aspect of the Mahāyāna in Japan, as was once especially expounded by the Sanron-shū, has been relatively neglected.

Thus the study of the decline of Mādhyamika Buddhism in Japan involves a comprehensive understanding of the development of Buddhism in that country from its scholastic beginnings (*shu*=[Study] Group) to its present-day religious practices (*shū*=School or Sect).