

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 46 (1992)

Heft: 1: Études bouddhiques offertes à Jacques May

Artikel: Is prasanga a form of deconstruction?

Autor: Matilal, Bimal Krishna

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-146958>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 10.10.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

IS PRASAṄGA A FORM OF DECONSTRUCTION?

Bimal Krishna Matilal, Oxford

Professor Jacques May is well known to the Buddhologists as well as to those scholars who work in the area of classical Indian philosophy. His contributions to the modern study of Mādhyamika philosophy, that of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, have earned the gratitude of scholars and philosophers alike. In a Felicitation Volume for him, I therefore think, it would be a good way to show my respect by contributing a piece on the central concept of what is sometimes called the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika philosophy: *prasaṅga*. *Prasaṅga* is regarded by most as a philosophical method by which the philosophical/metaphysical theses are critically examined and shown to be internally inconsistent. I shall compare this with a modern concept, deconstruction, and try to see whether or not such efforts make either concepts a little more intelligible.

David Seyfort Ruegg has said in his book on Mādhyamika¹ that *prasaṅga* “serves to relativise and deconstruct our artificially posited entities with their respective conditions, which are then annulled (‘zeroed’) both as substantial entities and ultimately valid philosophical categories”. This was a casual remark in a book where the history of Mādhyamika thought in India and Tibet has been very carefully and meticulously discussed. Ruegg did not explain what he meant by ‘deconstruction’ (but obviously he was thinking of the very recent and well-known concept championed by Jacques Derrida and post-structuralists). Nor did Ruegg analyse the *prasaṅga* form of argument (usually called ‘dialectics’ by modern interpreters) in a way that would support the idea of its kinship with deconstruction. I have raised the question here but I am not sure whether I can give a definite ‘yes or no’ answer to it. But perhaps it is the nature of such philosophical questions that they seldom have any definite and straightforward answers. While we pose and ponder over such questions, certain muddles and confusions are cleared up, and that is all we can hope for. In the present case, I cannot say that we would proceed any further. In the Buddhist canonical texts, the Buddha is supposed to

1 *The Literature of the Mādhyamika School of Philosophy in India*, Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, 1981.

have identified and separated certain philosophically loaded questions, which, according to the Buddha, *need not be answered*. He called them *avyākṛta* “not to be explained or analysed” or “not to be answered”. (I differ from those who prefer the usual rendering of the term as “unanswerable”.) These questions (e.g. “Is the body different from the person or the soul? Or are they identical?”) have been pondered over by philosophers over the millenia, but still we do not have any satisfactory answers.

The task, as I see it, is twofold. First, one should explain what ‘deconstruction’ is or how it is generally understood by modern post-structuralists. Second, one should give an analysis of the Mādhyamika ‘dialectic’ (*prasaṅga*) in such a way as to make it intelligible so that we would be in a position to ascertain its importance as a philosophical method. As I am not fully qualified to perform the first part of the task with any confidence, I shall concentrate on the second part. It is hoped that this would help to resolve to some extent the issues connected with not only the first part of the task but also with the main question in general.

Deconstruction, as I understand it (and I must quickly add that I do not understand it fully), is a form of philosophical criticism directed against the metaphysical or rhetorical structure of a ‘text’ or a discourse, or even a theory. The imagery is apparently reminiscent of the construction industry. The text is supposed to present a ‘structure’ in the structuralist’s sense. A critic’s choice is to ‘dismantle’ the structure. The idea, however, is not to demolish the edifice but to “reinscribe” it in a way that would expose its lack of any transcendental significance or meaning. A text can be anything. A discourse can be on anything, philosophy, metaphysics, literature, linguistics, social anthropology. It is the structuralist’s reading of the text that is relevant in our context. The deconstructionist’s reading of the discourse is, I believe, implicitly ‘Freudian’ in its approach. The major preoccupation of the author, or rather the dominant concern of the text, is shown to betray itself. Deconstruction is in a sense ‘the interpretation of dreams’. Using implicitly the psychoanalytic technique, the critic exposes the “return of the repressed” syndrome in the text. The text, much as the patient, is not destroyed thereby. It is a writing “under erasure” (in Derrida’s language). It is “*sous nature*”. That is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both

the word and deletion. As Gayatri Spivak explains, “since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible”.²

Perhaps, some sampling is in order. Saussurian semiology, Derrida notes in *Positions*, by arguing that the signified was inseparable from the signifier, that they are two faces of the one and same product, turned against the metaphysical tradition which nurtured the concept of the transcendental *signified* and from which nevertheless Saussure borrowed the concept of sign. But the modern (Saussurian) linguist’s preoccupation with the study of speech alone and his rejection of writing would be, in Derrida’s view, symptomatic of a much broader tendency which may easily give in to deconstruction. A deconstructionist would relate the *phonocentrism* to *logocentrism*, would oppose subjectivity with objectivity, thereby hinting at the undoing of the original position itself. It would be thus a writing under erasure. A deconstructionist in this way criticizes ‘metaphysics’, i.e. a science of presence, and yet remains unabashedly within the *clôture* of metaphysics, for it is a process of effacing the presence of a thing and yet keeping it legible. This method is explicitly therapeutic. It is supposed to “free us from and guard us within the metaphysical enclosure” (Spivak, *On Grammatology*, xli). If *prasaṅga* is to be related to deconstruction at all, then this feature seems to be more relevant.

Referring to decentering of the structurality of structure, which, according to him, is a symptom, particularly, in our era heightened by such critics like Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger, Derrida remarks:

“But all these destructive discourses and all their analogues are trapped in a kind of circle. This circle is unique. It describes the form of the relation between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics. There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shade metaphysics.”³

This shows to have, in the broader perspective of the demolition of metaphysics, a very significant resonance to Nāgārjuna’s two main points of his critique of Nyāya-metaphysics. One is circularity, and the other is his insistence that, short of circularity, we will end up with an irreconcilable difference and have no language or concepts to explain this difference – “*Viśeṣahetuś ca vaktavyah*” “The reason for difference must be stated”. Both these points have been emphasized by Nāgārjuna in the beginning of his *Vigrahavyāvartanī*. Derrida also insists on the irrecon-

2 J. Derrida, *On Grammatology*, Johns Hopkins, Baltimore (tr. G. Spivak), 1978, p. xiv.

3 *Writing and Difference*, tr. A. Ross, Routledge, 1978, p. 280.

cilability of difference that is made in the metaphysics of *presence* and the insurmountable problem of stating the destructive proposition. We quote from Derrida again:

“We have no language — no syntax and no lexicon — which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest.”⁴

Nāgārjuna also has conceded that there cannot be any *stated* proposition (in a logical discourse proposed by the critics; cf. *pratijñā*) to that effect.

Although the historical situations are different, and the places and other contextual factors also vary considerably, I believe the intellectual crisis in one age in India here has a ‘family resemblance’ with the one that Derrida is referring to. Hence the resonances between them are not entirely superficial. Philosophically speaking, I believe it is fruitful to remember some historical antecedents even if they are from different contexts, cultures and geo-political situations. This is the purpose of this exercise.

A deconstructionist resorts to practical clues. In deciphering a text he would single out a word or a group of words which might “harbour an unresolvable contradiction” or would choose the use of a particular word in a number of ways which would also expose the lack of its unified meaning, would select a metaphor that might inadvertently allow the opposite view to take a firm grip — the purpose of all these being the undoing of the text or the discourse, the revealing of its self-transgression, its undecidability. It is not the commentator’s occasional grasp of a moment of ambiguity or irony which may be explained away. It is locating a place in the text, or a moment in the discourse, “that genuinely threatens to collapse that system” (Spivak, lxxv). A deconstructive reading does not bring about the hidden implications or latent weakness, but exposes its undecidability, opens up the horizon of manifold and indefinite meaning. It is a new form of exegesis.

A deconstructionist, according to the rule of the game, cannot claim a sacrosanct status for himself. He should realize that his choice of ‘evidence’ is arbitrary. The name of the game is criticism and self-criticism marked by a self-distrust. Otherwise we would invite a paradox. A deconstruction of deconstruction is required by the logic of decon-

4 *Ibid.* p. 280.

struction itself. Only provisionally a deconstructionist might 'forget' ("will to forget") his own vulnerability, might assume that he at least means what he says. But necessarily the critic's text is self-deconstructed, and this, as Spivak argues, creates the lure of freedom. "The fall into the abyss of deconstruction inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting the bottom". (Spivak, lxxvii). This fits very well with the contemporary mood, or the mood of what may be called post-modernism in thought – the insecurity resulting from the undecidability factor reigning in the arena of ethics, politics and social thinking today. With this rather simple account of deconstruction as a background, I shall proceed to the main part of my task: an account of the Mādhyamika dialectics with its historical underpinnings, and of the dispute among Buddhapālita, Bhāvaviveka and Candrakīrti. I have singled out only certain features of deconstruction, for there are some resonances with *prasaṅga* in these cases.

A philosophical school or system that develops over several centuries or more must also take account of and assimilate the history of its development within itself. The Mādhyamika thought had a long history in India. It was systematized and ramified into two sub-streams, for about half-a-millennium after Nāgārjuna, its founder. A synthesis of the Mādhyamika and the Yogācāra on the philosophical level took place primarily with Śāntarakṣita, and nearly about the same time Mantrayāna and the Tantric school of praxis developed out of the Mādhyamika. Besides, we have to deal with the history of modern scholarship.

Modern scholars have been dealing with Mādhyamika thought for nearly one hundred years (L. de la Vallée Poussin's edition was published in 1903-13).⁵ The school has been variously described as "nihilism, monism, irrationalism, agnosticism, scepticism, criticism, dialectic, mysticism, acosmism, absolutism, relativism, nominalism, and linguistic analysis with therapeutic value".⁶ We do not have to agree with all these varying descriptions. Some of them however do seem to correspond to some aspects of the Mādhyamika thought. I wish now to add one more motivated description of the Mādhyamika: it is anti-metaphysical. It does not deny, in my view, the reality *out there*. But it definitely rejects any of our attempts to form a metaphysical system, any realistic or idealistic or relativistic account of such reality. For it claims that such systems would

5 L. de La Vallée Poussin, *Mūlamādhyamaka-kārikās*, St. Petersburg, 1903-13.

6 Ruegg, p. 2.

be internally inconsistent and hence that such attempts would have little explanatory value.

We may raise a question: Why should a Buddhist concern himself with such a metaphysical issue? In searching for a tentative answer, let us consider this. It is based upon the assumption of a simple theory of action. Our actions are guided by our inherent beliefs in the values and truths of the concepts that constitute our general conceptual scheme. Metaphysical realism tries to reify such concepts into substantial realities and thereby assign the value to them that we desire and prefer to have them. The Mādhyamika wants to expose the hollowness, in fact emptiness, of the mechanism of this evaluation, desire, and preferences. A thing, we assume, has a nature or essence, it can thereby do us some good or harm us, and therefore we act to obtain it or avoid it. The Mādhyamika wants to show that such an assumption is entirely tentative and dependent upon our desire-orientated existence, our drive for pleasure, our drive for becoming. A *bhāva* or a thing is *only* evaluated to have an existence, an essence and a meaning or a purpose to serve. But actually it is empty of any assigned nature, its assumed value. Our desires and preferences assign this 'own-nature' to things and thereby generate our actions and thus perpetuate our existence. In the terminology of Buddhism it is described as follows. Our thirst (*tanhā*) perpetuates our becoming. Hence, if it can be shown that what drives our life's activity is actually not what it is assumed to be, for it lacks its own nature, is devoid of any value, then such a thing will lose all its allure and our thirst is gone. If thirst is gone, suffering ceases.

The Mādhyamika suggests a further reading of this message. The "own-nature" of a *bhāva* or a *dharma* can be read as the essential value that it is believed to have. Such a value may not simply be desire-generated but contextually conditioned. The evaluation may be simply non-absolute or non-ultimate (though not necessarily only subjective) because of its contextual conditioning (cf. *prafitya-samutpāda*) as well as our conditioned understanding (cf. *upādāya prajñapti*). The Mādhyamika argues that this conditioned origination itself would fully expose or unfold the *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*) of things, it would show that it lacks its nature and therefore its ultimate value. For our *a priori* understanding of "own-nature" or the essential value of a thing runs counter to its being conditioned. Hence dependent origination of *bhāvas* proves their emptiness.

It has been claimed that the Mādhyamika re-established the Buddha's doctrine and fully brought about its philosophical implication. The doctrine of emptiness was a logical extension of the no-soul or *anattā* doctrine. The

notion of an ultimate soul-substance distinct from the psycho-physical aggregate or complex (*skandha*) was found to be an *empty* concept, a hollow notion, for it was argued that in this kind of eternalism there would be no hope to obtain the ultimate freedom from suffering, i.e., the final cessation of suffering, *nirvāṇa*. If there is a soul and if it is as it seems to be, engrossed in materiality and steeped in suffering, then since nothing can change its own 'nature', such a soul can never be *free*, can never attain the unconditioned state. What is conditioned can be made to cease through de-conditioning. What is natural or non-conditioned remains as it is for ever. If the person is devoid of own-nature, that is, if there is no soul, there is *pudgala-nairātmya*. And if there is no soul, can there be any way by which we can make sense of anything else, i.e. of all the *dharma*s? Do the *dharma*s have their own-natures? For the Mādhyamikas, this is only a rhetorical question, as *dharma-nairātmya* is only a logical extension of *pudgala-nairātmya*.

So far I have shown how the sceptical dialectic was used by the Buddha himself as well as by the Mādhyamika to develop a destructive criticism of metaphysical realism. But the Mādhyamika was not a sceptic, although some scholars (R. Hayes)⁷ might be satisfied with just that interpretation. We can call it the 'de-conditioning' of metaphysical beliefs, rather than the 'deconstruction' of metaphysics. The Buddha recognized that the fundamental problems of suffering and the implication of the Buddha's doctrine of four great (noble) truths unfold this aspect. The Mādhyamika therefore realized the potential and real danger in accepting *theories* as truths, means as ends, concepts as real entities. If the dynamic nature of reality is not understood, if the 'own-nature' of things are not understood as empty (*śūnyatām yadi na vetsi*), then there is no hope for changing anything, no chance for a cessation of turmoil and suffering, and then the revolutionaries, the visionaries and the Buddhas alike can give up all their efforts out of frustration. Hence Nāgārjuna's significant proclamation: the Buddha's doctrine is understood only if the emptiness of everything is understood.

Within 400 years after Nāgārjuna the school not only became systematized but also developed two sub-streams associated with Buddhapālita (470-540 A.D.) and Bhāvaviveka (500-580 A.D.). The schism did not have any doctrinal basis but rather depended exclusively on the method of philosophical reasoning used to reach the same doctrinal basis,

7 *Dignāga on the Interpretation of Signs*, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1988, p. 42-71.

the emptiness as truth. Accordingly, in the Tibetan tradition, these two subschools were referred to as Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika. Buddhapālita's metaphilosophical point was this: the philosophical activity of a Mādhyamika is primarily and predominantly refutative and negative. To reach emptiness as truth, i.e. a position where emptiness would dawn upon us as truth, we must refute not only the *asserted* position or proposition but also the *implied* counter-position. And this type of double, triple or quadruple refutation can be done well with the well-known *prasaṅga*, or *reductio*-type of reasoning. For, in this reasoning we refute a position because we are faced with the undesired or absurd consequences implied by the position. These implications may simply be logical implications and hence the refutation could be *a priori*. The famous ending of the arguments by Nāgārjuna was 'it does not fit' '*na yujyate*' or '*nopadadyate*' 'it is not understandable (i.e. incomprehensible = absurd)'. If we can refute both the position and the counter-position in this way, we can maintain the Mādhyamika doctrine of emptiness.

Bhāvaviveka on the other hand thought that this type of *a priori* refutation was an inherently weak form of philosophical argument. He was quite impressed by the logico-epistemological method developed by Diñnāga, where philosophical arguments had to be fortified with a logical reason (*liṅga*) and a supporting empirical example (a refinement of the old Nyāya method of non-Buddhist origin). Hence according to Bhāvaviveka, the Mādhyamika philosophical argument could be completely structured in this new way, where there would be a *pakṣa* – a position to be proved, and a *hetu*, a *drṣṭānta*, i.e. an example supporting the inferential connection. Candrakīrti's words will sometimes be reminiscent of some of the general comments made often by the deconstructionist today when he is faced with a given critique of the metaphysics of being.

I shall now use Candrakīrti's text as the substratum for our discussion *Prasannapadā* on I.3 of Madhyamakāśāstra. The original (*mūla*) text of Nāgārjuna attempts to develop a critique of the notion of *hetu* and *pratyaya*, roughly the 'metaphysics' of causation as it was understood by the Abhidhārmikas. Causation implies that something that was *not* there before has been caused to come into existence. Nāgārjuna argues that nothing can originate in this way for none of the four possible alternatives holds: 1) something x can be self-originating, 2) x can be originating from another, 3) x can be both, or 4) can be neither.

Buddhapālita explains the first alternative as follows. Beings or things do not originate out of themselves, for a) if they did the 'origination' would be without any significance, and b) if they did, there would be an

undesired consequence. These two reasons, a) and b), are further explained. Reason a) means: There is no need for the further origination of entities which already exist by themselves. Reason b) means: If something that already exists may be allowed to originate then such origination cannot be 'temporal' (*kādācitka*), i.e. restricted to a particular time of origination. That is, without originating at a given time it should originate always!

Bhāvaviveka found this exegesis to be faulty. He mounted his attack as follows. The formulation of the argument by Buddhapālita, (i.e. Buddhapālita's "text" itself) is improper. For, first, it does not mention the reason, nor does it cite an example to support the reason. Second, it does not refute the criticisms of the Mādhyamika by others. Third, being in the form of a *prasaṅga* (a type of *reductio* argument), it may establish the opposite hypothesis, that of non-self-origination, which may imply origination from another, but since that is also refuted, we will end up with a contradiction where origination is both denied and then not denied. In other words, Buddhapālita has used a *reductio* type argument. "Had it been X, then we would have an impossible, and unacceptable situation, an absurd consequence: something that originates must be originating all the time or it will never originate." The point of this argument is to deny X, i.e. self-origination. But the thesis of other-origination follows, and if that too is denied, then two denials clash headlong with each other. Such is the thrust of Bhāvaviveka's argument. Should we say therefore that he has successfully 'deconstructed' Buddhapālita? For, being a Mādhyamika himself, he cannot successfully demolish the original motivation of Buddhapālita: both are out to dismantle the Abhidhārmika edifice of *pratyayas* — 'causal theory'. But this is still a premature question. Let us wait to see how Candrakīrti, the champion of the Prāsaṅgika school, 'deconstructs' (if I am permitted to use this term here) the above text of Bhāvaviveka's.

Candrakīrti begins, "We consider all these criticisms to be inappropriate. How? let me explain". He takes the first point about the lack of mention of reason and example, and declares it to be an unimportant charge. For the opponent of the Mādhyamika is the one who accepts self-origination, and he is asked, "Is your 'cause' the same as that which originates?" And he asserts it to be so. To him then the Mādhyamika says (as Buddhapālita has done), "We cannot find any need or purpose for re-origination of something that already exists. On the other hand we see an infinite regress being opened up if re-origination is conceded. You do not wish to assign the re-origination to something already in existence, nor

can you embrace an infinite regress. Hence your discourse does not have a resolution that you intend it to have. Besides you would run into contradiction with what you have already accepted.”

The opponent (of the Mādhyamika) is here confronted with a threat that his preferred structure may collapse. Hence he may decide not to assert any further thesis. In that case, there would arise no need for citing a reason along with a supporting example. However, if he is “shameless” and undaunted even by such a threat of contradiction in his own assumptions, he would not step back even by a counter-argument endowed with a reason and a (supporting) example. In that case, he appears to have taken leave of his sanity. Hence we would not like to quarrel with a mad man who would not listen to reason. In this way, Candrakīrti concludes, Bhāvaviveka’s critique of Buddhapālita only exposes his own predilection for an inferential (syllogistic) form of argument. Bhāvaviveka wishes to fortify his argument with an inference (based upon reason and an example). However, for a Mādhyamika it is improper to construct an independent ‘syllogistic’ form of inference. Why? The Mādhyamika does not have a ‘provable’ position or hypotheses which can be reached as a conclusion of such an inference. As Āryadeva has said (Candrakīrti quotes from *Catuhśataka* 16/25), if a position is not characterized by existence, nor by non-existence, nor by both, no one can refute or attack it, no one can blame it. In addition, Candrakīrti quotes two celebrated verses from Nāgārjuna himself, from *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (1951 ed. by E.H. Johnston and A. Kunst)

“If I had any statable (defensible) thesis, thence could I be faulted. I do not have such a statable thesis, hence I cannot be faulted.”

“If I apprehended (asserted) anything through the evidence of perception etc., then I would have affirmed something or denied something. But since I did not, I cannot be blamed.” verses. 29, 30.

Bhāvaviveka might argue that it would be improper to say that the Mādhyamika would not have any thesis to defend nor any statable (syllogistic) inference based upon reason, etc. For the Mādhyamika does refute the Sāṃkhya opponent by formulating an independent thesis, viz. “the ‘internal’ bases (faculty of vision, etc.) do not originate out of themselves”. Bhāvaviveka’s critique can even go further at this point. Using the Sāṃkhya reply to Buddhapālita’s refutative statement, Bhāvaviveka would repeat his second objection, viz. the Sāṃkhya criticisms of the Mādhyamika has *not* been answered and resolved properly. The

Sāṃkhya asks: what exactly is meant by “out of themselves”? If the phrase refers to the products, i.e. the originating entities, then it is futile. For the Sāṃkhya already admits that the “internal bases” evolve out of the ‘unmanifest’ matter. Hence the refutative statement on this interpretation would be establishing something (a negative thesis) that is already established for the Sāṃkhya. ‘Establishing the established’ is regarded a ‘fault’ of an argument, for it is redundant. If, however, the said phrase refers to the causes from which those entities originate, there the position would be threatened by a contradiction. For everything that originates, originates from being necessarily existent as a cause – this is the accepted doctrine of the Sāṃkhyas and hence the above refutative statement would run counter to this established doctrine. In short, the Sāṃkhya faults the Mādhyamika on two counts. On one interpretation, the Mādhyamika’s effort would be redundant, on another he would be threatened by contradiction. Bhāvaviveka now points out that Buddhapālita has not been able to answer these two points.

Having set up the position of Bhāvaviveka in this manner, Candrakīrti points out that Bhāvaviveka in his eagerness had forgotten that Buddhapālita did neither assign a ‘reason’ to his refutative thesis nor mention a supportive evidence for it. In other words, he was not formulating a proper (syllogistic) argument of the form: A is B, because of C, just as the case of X (“There is fire on the hill, because there is smoke, just as it is with the case of kitchen”). It was Bhāvaviveka who formulated the syllogistic form of argument, e.g. “Things do not self-originate, for they are already existent, just as a pot”. When and only when arguments are presented in this form with a proper evidential reason (*hetu*) being assigned and an example being cited in support, then and only then can one find ‘faults’ such as redundancy or contradiction. But Buddhapālita did not take that way out. He presented only a *prasaṅga*, or Indian version of a *reductio* argument, where the position, or thesis, could be refuted on pain of absurd consequence, contradiction or incoherence. Besides, even the third criticism of Bhāvaviveka has no foundation. For a *prasaṅga* argument is such that it is employed only to refute or *reject* a position, it does not involve the acceptance of the counter position or negation of a negative thesis. Those who employ only *prasaṅga* would not be prepared to concede any assertible thesis, positive or negative. In fact they would fault the negative or the counter thesis almost in the same way and almost as much as they fault the positive thesis.

This, then, is Candrakīrti’s way of ‘deconstructing’ Bhāvaviveka’s preferred form of argument. An illustration from **Karatalaratna*

(*Chang-chen-lun*) can be furnished. It summarizes the Mādhyamika doctrine in the form of a discussion on both levels, reasoning and meditation. This shows that the schism was not simply based on metaphilosophical ground, i.e. difference in their ways of arguing for the same doctrine, but also on difference in mental culture, or meditational praxis for meditating upon the Mādhyamika truth, emptiness:

‘Conditioned things are *in reality* (*paramārthataḥ*) empty of *svabhāva* for they are conditioned, just as a magical creation. ‘Unconditioned things are *in reality* not real for they are not produced, just as a sky-flower’.⁸

What is important here is the qualification “in reality”. The inferential subject and the inferable property belonging to it (*pakṣa* and *sādhya*), belong to different levels or realms of reality: the conventional level and the ultimate level. The proposition spans these two realms, selecting the subject from the phenomenal and the property to be inferred, i.e., the predicate, from the ultimate. Candrakīrti finds this to be an irreconcilable double-talk which destroys the thesis itself. Things are “conditioned” and so recognized as far as their phenomenal existence is concerned, whereas the property to be empty of *svabhāva* is how they are to be understood at the ultimate level. The abyss between realms, the ultimate and the convention, that is opened up by the insertion of the qualification “in reality” can never be bridged, and hence the thesis would be unintelligible. We cannot honestly form a proposition, or a *pratijñā* by juxtaposing the two. If, on the other hand, the said qualification does not have such significance, it is redundant and pointless.

A logical reason (*liṅga*) is a technical term here. It is defined in Dinnāga’s system as one having *three* characteristics: a) it should characterize the subject (*pakṣa*) the locus; b) it should characterize a similar locus, a locus similar to the subject-locus; c) and it should not characterise anything that is a ‘counter-example’ where the property to be inferred is not present, a locus dissimilar to the subject-locus. A logical reason is usually supported by an example and a ‘counter-example’ or a counter-case. This is, in brief, the structure to which this type of inference must conform. Bhāvaviveka, in his formulation, shows that his logical reason characterizes the subject-locus, for conditioned-ness is a character of every conditioned thing. But the proposition to be proven is a negative proposition. Hence a supporting example is possible, “the magical

8 D. Ruegg, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

creation” is a part of the group of conditioned things. But a counter- or negative example is not available. For it would have to be something unconditioned. But such things are not to be found on this theory. Hence the only way we have to ascertain the logical relation that conditionedness implies emptiness is to have a positive case where both characteristics are present, i.e., the magical creation, for only such a type of positive case can warrant the generalization that all conditioned things are empty. A negative citation would have added to the degree of certitude belonging to this generalization. This would have increased its force for proving the proposition in question. In any case Bhāvaviveka thinks that this lack of negative example does not matter, for he has at least given a well-formulated argument distinct from *reductio* or *prasaṅga*, an independent inference, not simply an *a priori* implication. It is a *svatantrānumāna*, which proves the Mādhyamika truth beyond doubt. The Prāsaṅgika, i.e. the Buddhapālita School, neglects the virtue of the empirical constraint, and hence there is a built-in weakness in the *prasaṅga* dialectic. This new type of reasoning to confirm the emptiness doctrine should also be internalized for meditational purpose.

Bhāvaviveka added another logical point to strengthen the Mādhyamika dialectic, to free it from the charge of contradiction or inconsistency or irrationalism. This is the point about negation. In order to maintain the middle course by avoiding extremes, the Mādhyamikas are bound to reject or refute sometimes both a proposition and its contradiction. “Things do not have own-nature nor they have other-nature” “*Bhāvas* are neither self-produced nor other-produced, nor even both nor neither” (cf. *catuṣkoti*) This raises the question of comprehensibility. For one may say that it violates what are sometimes called the fundamental principles of thought. Who can comprehend a statement if it says that something is neither A nor non-A, nor both, nor neither? The Mādhyamika dialectician can answer that that is precisely the point. The binary opposition is a principle of *vikalpa* or a product of our dichotomising thought. We have been trained that way to understand and organize our experiences. This is, perhaps, the acceptable and convenient way to interpret our experience, but the Mādhyamika wants to move beyond this conventional truth, i.e. the conventional way of interpreting reality. This given way of interpreting experience has only a pragmatic, practical value for the Mādhyamika, but is not ultimate: it has only a provisional status. The rule of binary opposition, of contradicting pairs (of which we can accept only one, not both), is a fundamental principle, when and only when we accept the “own-nature” theory. The emptiness doctrine, however, destroys the

own-nature theory, and hence a violation of the principle of binary opposition is not a fault here but a necessary ingredient of the Mādhyamika thinking. This, then, is how we transcend the dichotomising thought.

Bhāvaviveka would, I think, accept such points of the dialectician. But he wishes to enrich the method of reasoning and meditation by adding another dimension to it. That is the concept of a special type of negation where a negation does not imply (nor does it *presuppose*) the opposite of what is negated (we may call it *presuppositionless* negation, following Hans Herzberger).⁹ In Indian tradition, the grammarians (Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*), the Mīmāṃsakas and the Naiyāyikas, from the very beginning, talked about two senses of negation: *paryudāsa*, and *prasajya-pratiṣedha*. Contextually, one was nominally bound and the other was verbally bound (as explained in Matilal 1968).¹⁰ Sanskrit grammarians noted that the former is *samāsa*-sensitive (that is, allows the negative particle to be compounded with other words) while the latter is *samāsa*-resistant or compound-resistant (the negative particle is generally left to itself). On the basis of this, I have remarked elsewhere (1971, Section 5.9) that in the former type the denial aspect is overridden by the commitment aspect while it is just the other way around in the latter type. In each act of negation, there is some implicit commitment to affirm something, the opposite (the contrary or contradictory) of what is negated. The 'denial' aspect overrides this implicit commitment in some negation more than others. Using a suggestion noted in Y. Kajiyama's paper in 1957,¹¹ I had noted in 1971 that Bhāvaviveka seemed to have explicitly argued in favour of "the strongest kind of negation" (cf. a special use of *prasajya-pratiṣedha*) where the negating act amounts to a *simple* denial which will completely contravene the implicit 'commitment' aspect, i.e., the commitment to implicitly affirm anything, even the opposite of what is negated.¹²

Hans Herzberger wrote a brilliant article in 1975, "Double Negation in Buddhist Logic", where he developed a unique concept of the Apohist Negation suitable for the logical analysis of the Buddhist doctrine of Apoha. In this connection, Herzberger suggested that the content of every

9 Hans Herzberger, "Double Negation in Buddhist Logic", *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 1975, Nos 1/2.

10 B.K. Matilal, *The Navya-nyāya Doctrine of Negation*, Harvard, Cambridge (Mass.), 1968, pp. 156-7.

11 Y. Kajiyama, "Bhāvaviveka and the Prāsaṅgika School", Nalanda, Mahavihar, 1957.

12 B.K. Matilal, *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis*, The Hague/Paris, 1971, p. 164-5.

sentence (which will include negative ones) can be factored into two components, roughly on the following model:¹³ presupposition and manifest content (p. 13). From this it may be suggested that Bhāvaviveka, in view of what has already been said above, will favour a special kind of negative sentence where the manifest content would simply include a denial and the presuppositional element would be completely removed. In other words, the negative sentences in Mādhyamika dialectics are expressive of such “non-presuppositional” negation. This is not a very far cry from what I have called the “no-commitment” denial that is most suitable for Bhāvaviveka. David Ruegg in his recent book has used the term “non-presuppositional” negation and ascribed the concept to Bhāvaviveka.¹⁴

In this connection I would add a brief comment on the relevance of the concept of ‘zero’ to interpret or translate the Mādhyamika concept of *śūnya* in *śūnyatā*. In 1971 I suggested (p. 152) with trepidation that while trying to translate the term “*śūnyatā*” of the Mādhyamika we might also consider the popular mathematical term “zero”.¹⁵ The idea was that since the symbol for zero is regarded in arithmetic as something that has a value when and only when it is attached to some other number (i.e. it has a value only for its position in a given natural number, a place-value), we may use this model to elicit an interpretation of the term ‘*śūnyatā*’ in the Mādhyamika. (Incidentally this idea has nothing to do with the rather technical sense attached to zero in the philosophy of arithmetic, dealing with foundations of Arithmetic, for example, in the Peano postulates, where 0 is an undefined term and heads the list of non-negative integers 0,1,2,.....). The Mādhyamika declared every *bhāva* to be *śūnya* (devoid of its own-nature) because it cannot have any absolute claim to existence or reality, but is only intelligible in relation to its causes and conditions (*hetus* and *pratyayas: prafītya-samutpanna*). Hence the suggestion was the *bhāvas* are like zeroes, having a value (a claim to reality) only in relation to something else or to the position it occupies in a complex, and consequently no absolute value (claims to existence/reality independently).

This suggestion was criticised by some scholars at the time, and perhaps rightly, because my cryptic comment did not make it clear that I was aiming at the popular, non-technical conception of the zero. In any case, the underlying point of the suggestion remains. Now it is rather a

13 See Herzberger.

14 Ruegg, p. 65.

15 Matilal 1971, p. 152.

pleasant surprise to see that Prof. David Ruegg in his new book (1981), as well as in an earlier article (1978), referred to an earlier paper by L. Mäll (1968) who used the term 'zerology' for *śūnyatā*.^{*} I was unaware of this paper. Ruegg is, of course, right in emphasizing that the mathematical (that is, the technical and sophisticated) notion of 'zero' should not be taken into account when we are trying to interpret the Mādhyamika *śūnyatā*. It is a different notion. The similarity which struck me in 1971 was only with the popular notion of zero, or a cipher obtaining some meaning and value only by being positioned in the proper manner, otherwise remaining a cipher. The word *śūnya*, unlike the arithmetical symbol for zero, is always a relative term in the Mādhyamika writing, it is said that a *bhāva* is *śūnya*, i.e. 'devoid' of something, i.e. its *svabhāva*. Nothing is said to be *śūnya* or 'zero' *per se*. This only shows that the idea of the mathematical analogy does not work all the way.

To come back to Candrakīrti. He says that Bhāvaviveka's attempt to formulate a refutative inference 'syllogistically' to deny the metaphysics of causation is doomed from the beginning. It has been already noted that the insertion of the adjective "in reality", "from the ultimate point of view" (*paramārthataḥ*) in the thesis of the inference formula was disastrous. In the context of the refutation of the 'self-origination' view, Candrakīrti points out the 'bases' would not be accepted as self-originating even at the conventional level by a Mādhyamika Buddhist. The Buddha himself in the *Śālistamba-sūtra* made this point clear (and Candrakīrti quotes him). Rejection of both eternalism and annihilationism would be automatically dismissive of the self-origination theory. If the Bhāvaviveka thesis (which he wishes to prove by inference) is "the 'bases' (the eye etc.), which are only *conventionally* or provisionally real, lack self-origination on the ultimate level", we have already created the gap between the two levels which dissolves the proposition itself, and the philosophical argument cannot start. Besides, the provisional reality of the 'bases' (which constitute the subject term here) would never be acceptable to the opponent against whom the argument is directed. Hence from his point of view the inference suffers from the fatal defect of the 'empty subject term'.¹⁶

* *Editor's note added in proofs.* Prof. Matilal was speaking of the following two articles: D.S. Ruegg, "Mathematical and linguistic models in Indian thought: the case of śūnyatā," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 22, 1978. L. Mäll, "Une approche possible du Śūnyavāda," *Tel Quel* 32, hiver 1968.

16 See Matilal, 1971, *op. cit.*, Chapter 4 for this problem.

What exactly was Candrakīrti after? The tradition answers that the *prasaṅga* form of argument is best suited for the Mādhyamika – this is the goal. Any other form would generate absurdities, inconsistencies. No affirmation and no denial may mean writing a proposition and crossing it out, and letting both, the sign and the deletion, stand. The repeated reference to the rejection of the binary opposition between eternalism and annihilationism may have a similar effect. But that is as far as we can go. Probably there is only a family resemblance between ‘deconstruction’ and *prasaṅga* dialectics. The deconstructivist’s goal is to dissolve the metaphysical enclosure and also to remain within it. The Mādhyamika would have agreed. For Nāgārjuna clearly says that between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* there is not even an iota of difference: *nirvāṇa* dissolving *samsāra* and at the same time remaining within it. Spivak (lxxvii) says that deconstruction shows us “the lure of abyss as freedom” because we never “hit the bottom”. The Mādhyamika shows also the lure of emptiness or ‘substance-less-ness’ or “bottomlessness”. This is not very different from what has actually lured some, at least, of the modern Mādhyamika philosophers.

I have hinted at the purpose of my exercise in my initial remarks. I believe this has not simply been a juxtaposition of a few points from one cultural context and other similar points from another culture. Buddhism is still part of our global culture. Modern researchers give ample evidence of the vitality and attractiveness of modern Buddhism. Hence, I believe in this relevant context I have shown, or at least offered a glimpse of, the common problem that all critics of metaphysics face and are bound to face: a useful device, be it *prasaṅga* or deconstruction, has to be only *provisionally* accepted so that we avoid the problem of the inevitable circularity on the one hand, and the unbridgeable abyss of *viśeṣa* ‘distinction’ (cf. Nāgārjuna’s pronouncement: ‘*Viśeṣahetuś ca vaktavyaḥ*’) on the other.