

Scriptural Words and Silence: Interpretation of Nirvāṇic Language in Prajñā Hermeneutics

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Abstract

This paper deals with the hermeneutical relationship between scriptural language and ultimate meaning as it is conveyed in Buddhist texts. Our frame of reference is the Prajñā-Mādhyamika. In Buddhist understanding, speech and words are considered only as a means or path (mārga), to understanding, rather than reality itself. The Buddha exhorted his disciples to be cautious with scripture, not merely clinging to his words as literal, but reflecting on their interpretative meaning. The search for meaning in Buddhist scriptures is a hermeneutical endeavor which seeks to reinterpret the speaker's intent. Buddhist commentarial traditions have tried to clarify the words of the Buddha. But the Buddha's words are only a means or signpost to experiencing the reality of things as they truly are. In most Prajñā texts, the masters abandoned their efforts to grasp ultimate meaning through literal texts, and instead, attempted to understand through a reinterpretation of scripture. Thus, the Mādhyamika system presents a paradox between letters and meaning, in both positive and negative relationship with each other.

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Four stages of interpretation.

I. Introduction

This article deals with the hermeneutical relationship between scriptural language and the ultimate meaning of the Dharma in Buddhist texts. It is based on the Prajñā-Mādhyamika frame of reference.¹ Does the scriptural word of the Buddha actually refer to reality? If so, what is the relationship between letters and meaning? Here, we need to reflect on the nature of scriptural language as a verbal expression of Dharma and its relationship with ultimate meaning and the Buddha's intention.

Since Buddhist scripture is simply a means (*mārga*), one should not take these words as ultimate reality. The scriptural language is only meaningful within the proper context. That is why the Buddha exhorted disciples to base their understanding on interpretative meaning rather than a literal approach to his words.

The search for meaning in letters is a hermeneutical task seeking to reinterpret the intent of the speaker. Buddhist commentarial traditions have tried to clarify the scriptural meaning by showing that the word of the Buddha is only a means or signpost to experiencing the reality of things as they truly are.

As we see in most Buddhist texts, the masters gave up their efforts to grasp ultimate meaning through a literal understanding of the texts once they discovered there is a great gap between scriptural language and reality.

We will begin our investigation by examining the She-lingian view of the four stages of interpretation of scriptural text. This method, far from being

¹ For discussions on the Mādhyamika view of language, see Daye (1975), Streng (1967), Gudmunson (1977), Robinson (1967), Huntington (1983), Williams (1980), Yadav (1989; 1992).

a simple description of dharma categories, attempts to penetrate the meaning of scriptural word from a multi-perspective view, as reality is itself mutually dependent.

Our second task will be to explore Candrakīrti's interpretation of the relationship between scriptural language and reality in relation to the concept of "nirvāṇa pariksa" found in the *Prasannapadā*. Candrakīrti did not conceive nirvāṇa as an ontological entity or a cognitive category, his view accorded with the metaphysicians, as freedom beyond all categorical understanding.

II. The relationship between letters and meaning

The Prajñā scriptures use the words of the Tathāgata as a route to meaning; a finger pointing to the moon. The *Ta-chih-tu-lun (TCTL)*² articulates this point:

One should take as their standpoint the ultimate meaning of words rather than any particular expression; because in regard to ultimate meaning there can be no quarrel that this is good and this is bad, that this is sin and this is merit, this is false and this is true. Words are just a pointer to meaning; meaning cannot be found in the words themselves. For example, when a person points to the moon with his finger one should not confuse the finger with the moon: a person might ask: "As I point to the moon with my finger to indicate the moon, how is it that you see only the finger and miss the moon?" So words are only pointers to indicate meaning, they are not meaning in themselves. One should not therefore, base understanding simply on words (*TCTL*, T.25.125ab).

This is a simple hermeneutical principle to be applied in reading Buddhist scriptures. It is also one of "the four reliances³ in traditional

2 The *Ta-chih-tu-lun* [abbreviated *TCTL*] T. 25, no. 1509, pp. 57-756. It exists only in Chinese translation by Kumārajīva. There are some doubt concerning the authorship of the *TCTL*, but traditionally it is attributed to Nāgārjuna. Venkata Ramanan translated *TCTL* into English partially as the *Nāgārjuna's Philosophy as Presented in the Mahā-Prajñāpāramitā-Śāstra* (1966).

3 The *Catuhpratisarnani-sūtra* provides four guidelines for the proper use of Buddhist scriptural texts as follows: (a) The Dharma is the refuge, not the man (*pudgalah*), (b) The meaning (*artha*) is the

Buddhist hermeneutics, in that refuge is in meaning rather than the letter. (*arthah pratisaranam na vyānjanam.*)

The letter (*vyānjanam*) is subordinate to meaning (*arthah*) as reality is not found in syllables (*niraksaratvat tattvasya*). However, a Mādhyamika masters' intention is not to deny the role of the letter and on this point, the Mādhyamika system presents a paradox between letters and meaning, in both positive and negative relationship with each other. Letters and words lack substance, having no ultimate referents; language is manifoldly diffuse (*prapañca*). The nature of language is *Prajñāptisat* entity, having no ontological foundation. Paul M. Williams has summarized its nature:

The word *Prajñāpti* in the Mādhyamika designates the status of entity which has no existence apart from that postulated to fulfill the requirements of verbal reference. The *Prajñāpti* is the referent of a term with no ultimate referent, and created by language due to the requirement that all terms have referents in order to be meaningful. Such terms create their referents by generalization and hypothesis, and it is a doctrine peculiar to the Mādhyamika that all entities whatsoever simply enjoy *Prajñāptisat* (Williams 1980, 14).

The *Prajñāptisat* as referent words has both positive and negative aspects. While it has no ultimate substance, it is an empirical articulation of dharmas. The *Prajñāpti* has the same character as *saṃvṛti-satya*; verbal discourse of Dharma is important for there is nothing which is not *saṃvṛti*. Thus, the Mādhyamika does not reject letters and words, as do some other Buddhist traditions such as Zen which rejects letters and scriptures completely. The She-ling school⁴ in China makes this point clear in their four stages of interpretation.

refuge, not the letter (*vyānjanam*), (c) Those sutras which are direct in meaning (*nīthartham sutram*) are the refuge, not those which are indirect in meaning (*neyatham*), (d) Direct intuition (*jnanam*) is the refuge, not discursive thought (*vijnanam*). For details on this subject, see Thurman (1978, 1984). Also see Lamotte (1949). This article was translated by Webb (1985, 4-24) and Lopez (1988, 11-28).

4 Korean monk Seung-rang (450-559, Seng-lang in Chinese, Sōrō in Japanese) revitalized the Chinese Prajñā-Mādhyamika school in the 5th century. He resided at the Ch'isia temple on Mt. She where he established the new San-lun school called the She-ling tradition. Seung-rang along with his followers, Seng-chuan, Fa-lang, and Chi-tsang, connected dialectical reasoning with scriptural understanding, giving new dimensions to the concept of the two truths and the middle way. See, Kim (2002).

III. Four stages of interpretation in reading scriptural texts

Seung-rang and his followers⁵ proposed four stages of interpretation in search of the scriptural word and its relationship with reality. This method is not just a simple description of the dharma categories, it actually attempts to penetrate to the meaning of the scriptural word from a multi-perspective, as reality has a mutually dependent nature. The four stages are: (a) interpretation in accord with terms and letters, (b) interpretation based on the principle of teaching, (c) interpretation by viewing mutual relationship, and (d) interpretation that is unlimited (*SLHI*, T.45.14a).⁶

A. First stage: Interpretation in accord with terms and letters

This first method of interpretation in accord with terms and letters means to accept a conventional meaning based on designating terms; as Chi-tsang (549-623 CE)⁷ says: phenomenal means popular and conventional (*ETI*, T.45.95a). The scriptural word is interpreted in accordance with linguistic connotations, so that in the popular and conventional sense, the term ‘worldly convention’ (*saṃvṛti*) signifies vain and destructible, while the term ‘ultimate’ signifies true and indestructible (*ETI*, T.45.95a; *TCHL*, T.45.16a).

5 Chi-tsang used to say that this doctrine is a teaching of the ‘master.’ The problem arises when Chi-tsang uses the terms, “master” and “the Great Master She.” It is generally agreed that the term “master” refers to Fa-lang (507-581 CE), Chi-tsang’s direct teacher, while the term “the great master She” refers to Seung-rang. Seung-rang’s thoughts are found in Chi-tsang’s writings. The Most important texts are the *Ta-ch’eng-hsüan-lun* (*TCHL*), the *Erh-ti-i* (*ETI*), the *Chung-kuan-lun-su* (*CKLS*), and the *San-lun-hsuan-i* (*SLHI*).

6 In the *Erh-ti-i* (T.45.95), the terms and order are slightly changed as (a) interpretation in accord with terms and letter, (b) interpretation based on interdependency, (c) interpretation as the elucidation of path, and (d) interpretation that is unlimited. The second method in *SLHI* corresponds to the third method in *ETI*.

7 According to *Hsu-kao-seng-chun*, Chi-tsang became a novice at the age of seven under the San-lun master Fa-lang (507-581) at Mt. She. The biography also states that Chi-tsang studied under Paramārtha in Chi-ling. Since he resided at Chia-hsiang Temple, he was called Great Master Chia-hsing. His main lectures are on Mādhyamika thought contained in the three treatises, the *Saddhmapuṣṍdarika-sūtra*, the *Tai-chi-tu-lun*, and the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra*. Chi-tsang wrote twenty six treatises, over one hundred 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. And for an extensive historical study on Chi-tsang, see Hirai (1976).

But the problem with this view is that it rests on a dualistic notion of terms and letters, thus, worldly and ultimate can only exist as opposite entities. From a She-lingian perspective, terms and names are not special entities for they have no self-nature.

The *Ta-ch'en-hsuan-lun*⁸ argues, in line with Nāgārjuna's *MMK*, that there is no self-nature in terms and meanings, agent and subject, and the activity of appropriation (*TCHL* T.45.17a).⁹ Terms and names are not identical with their reference object, as for example, the term 'fire' is not fire itself. "If the term 'fire' were identical with fire itself, whenever one said 'fire, his mouth would burn up" (*TCTL*, T.25.17a). So a linguistic term is not the same as its reference, they are two different entities. In the conventional world, however, linguistic terms are used without confusion as we borrow the term's function for reference. This is called 'a borrowed name,' which functions as a connector between the 'disconnected name' and its reference object. Thus, 'borrowing' is another name for interdependency (*TCTL*, T.25.18b). Term and reference are disconnected, yet they are not separated.

Fire is not of its nature a fuel and fuel is not in fire, nor fire in fuel. As this argument goes, it can apply to any case of substantial view. Self nature and entities cannot coexist, nor can they be separate. Even dependent things are not seen to be self-existent. In the same way, the subject of appropriation does not exist in its own right, and what is appropriated is not dependent on the appropriator. Take fuel and fire for example, if we think that fire and fuel exist they must either be identical with (*ekatva*) or different from (*anyatva*) one another. However, Nāgārjuna says that neither of these explanations make sense (*PSP*, 202).

In this respect, there is an ontological problem with the first She-lingian stage of interpretation based on terms, as it views words and names as sets of categories and fixed substance, so this interpretation can only be regarded as an initial stage.

8 Chi-tsang, *Ta-ch'eng-hsuan-lun* [abbreviated as *TCHL*], T. 45. no. 1583. For the complete Japanese translation of the *Ta-ch'eng-hsuan-lun* with introduction, see Hakuju (1965).

9 This argument is based on *MMK*, 10: 1-2; "If fire is fuel it would be identified as an agent and act, if fire is wholly other than fuel then it could exist even without fuel."

B. Second stage: Interpretation based on principle and teaching

The second stage of interpretation based on principle and teaching requires us to understand the non-dualistic nature of the scriptural word. In the *Erh-ti-i*, this stage is interpretation as elucidation of the path. Since the scriptural word of the Tathāgata seems to be based on dual discourses, it is easy to erroneously understand it as dualistic teaching. The *Ehr-ti-i* states, “worldly and ultimate come to mean neither worldly nor ultimate as they are interdependent with each other” (*ETI*, T.45.95b). So they are said to be non-dualistic in dualistic discourses. In this method of interpretation, the term ‘principle’ refers to the Dharma realized by the Buddha and the term ‘teachings’ refers to the scriptural word only as a conductive teaching. Dharma teaching is based on names and marks which are verbal expressions of the Dharma, while the internal Dharma is the nameless path. Thus, the second method of interpretation intends to connect the two dimensions of the scriptural word: principle as an internal realization, and teachings as external expression of the Dharma. Hence, worldly means non-worldly and ultimate means non-ultimate. Ultimate and worldly also means neither ultimate nor worldly. This model of interdependency of two truths is further developed in the third method of interpretation.

C. Third stage: Interpretation based on interdependency

This third method contrasts with the first wherein names and terms have no reciprocal relationship. It is also known as ‘vertical view’ (*TCHL*, T.45.16b and 28), as it is concerned with interdependency of the scriptures. ‘Vertical view’ refers to identification of two truths with the principle of non-duality, whereas ‘horizontal view’ refers to mutual dependency of the two truths. From a multi-perspective view, Chi-tsang tries to show the middle way of dependent origination. The interdependent relationship between worldly (conventional) and ultimate in various scriptures, signifies that each discourse is meaningful only in relation to its reciprocal factors.

This relationship is understood in term of temporality which is a factor in both mutual transformation and interdependency. The two truths originate dependently without a sequence of cause and effect. The *Erh-ti-i* states:

Worldly truth relies on ultimate meaning, because what worldly truth intends to indicate is a non-worldly point pertaining to ultimate meaning.

Ultimate meaning relies on conventional truth, because it cannot be expressed without a worldly convention such as linguistic terms which are essential in conventional discourse. In this way the two truths exist interdependently, yet neither of them obstructs the other (*ETI*, T.45.95b).

In this logic, ‘worldly’ means ultimate and ‘ultimate’ means worldly, they cannot stand if they negate each other. Worldly truth does not reject ultimate meaning for it does not disturb the ultimate, so does the ultimate meaning. Thus, the vertical view interprets the two truths as two interdependent factors born out of reciprocity.

This view is regarded as an authentic understanding of the nature of the scriptural word of the Tathāgata in the *She-ling* school. She-lingians criticized the interpretation of other schools’ such as the *Ch’eng-shih* school, as they believed it to be based on the Hīnayāna understanding that worldly is definitely worldly and ultimate is definitely ultimate. Other traditions do not embrace this theory of interrelation based on interdependent relationship, instead, they think of it as obstruction between ultimate and worldly, which is the Śrāvaka understanding. But the bodhisattva understanding is that ultimate is worldly and worldly is ultimate and there is no obstruction between the two (*ETI*, T.45.95ab).

D. Fourth stage: Interpretation without obstruction

This fourth stage is interpretation without obstruction, in other words, unlimited interpretation. In this interpretation, “worldly means all dharmas, including person, support, saṃsāra, and nirvāṇa. Because there is neither

obstruction nor limitation, all dharmas are worldly” (*ETI*, T.45.95c). The *San-lun-hsuan-i*¹⁰ states, “the middle means form and mental concepts. A single dharma has the meaning of all dharmas and all dharmas have the meaning of a single dharma” (*SLHI*, T.45.14b).

In this respect, the scriptural word structured as two truths is understood only as temporary means or worldly. Since all dharmas are seen as worldly, two truths is also worldly. There is no absolute beyond worldly matter. The ‘worldly only’ approach has profound meaning as it refers to unlimited and unobstructed interpretation. A single term is not restricted by its linguistic connotation as it has inexhaustible meanings. This affirmative approach holds that in worldly truth there is no obstruction indicated in all dharmas, which means that all dharmas are contained in worldly truth, i.e., linguistic terms.

Just as Candrakīrti (600-650 CE) suggests that ontological language can be used to destroy ontology, the She-lingians propose that worldly truth can be freely used to refer to all dharmas and indeed, to the Dharma (truth) itself as the middle way. She-lingians see innumerable meanings in a single worldly term. This interpretation seems to be inspired by the *Avāṃtasaka-sūtra* doctrine of the dependent origination of the Dharmadhātu, as both Seung-rang and Chi-tsang were interested in studying this sutra. The *San-lun-hsuan-i* offers a scriptural basis for this interpretation:

Therefore the sutra says, “in the one, we understand the innumerable, and in the innumerable, we understand the one.” Hence, a single dharma has the meaning of all dharmas and all dharmas have the meaning of a single dharma (*SLHI*, T.45.14b).¹¹

10 Chi-tsang, *San-lun-hsuan-i* [abbreviated as *SLHI*], T. 45, no. 1852, For a partial translation of the *San-lun-hsuan-i* in English, see de Bary (1972, 144-50). Mitsuyoshi Saigusa translated the *SLHI* into Japanese (1971).

11 Here, the sūtra refers to the *Hua-yen-ching* (*Avāṃtasaka-sūtra*) (T.9.422c-23a). At the time of Seung-rang and Chi-tsang (549-623 CE), *Avāṃtasaka* studies were not popular. Buddhahadra between 418-420 CE, translated the old version of the *Avāṃtasaka-sutra*, 60 fascicles, was translated. Beginning Tu-shun (557-640) and Chi-yen (602-668), Fa-tsang (643-712) systematized the Hua-yen philosophy. Since Fa-tsang’s philosophy is strongly influenced by the Yogācāra concept of Ālaya vijñāna and Aśvaghōṣa’s *Awakening of Faith in Mahayana* (*Ta-ch’eng-ch’i-hsin-lun*), his understanding of the doctrine of śūnyatā is different from the She-lingians. Fa-tsang’s idea of independent origination of the Dharmadhātu is already presented in the She-ling teaching of the unlimited interpretation.

However, the She-lingian position is not the same as the Hua-yen school which didn't develop fully until a century later. The Hua-yen doctrine of non-obstruction between phenomenon and phenomenon is already evidenced in this final interpretation in unmixed form. Concerning this interpretation, the *Chung-kuan-lun-shu* comments on the history of Buddhist thought as follows:

Before the three treatises appeared, there were Abhidharma followers, Ch'eng-shih followers, and the Mahayana of acquisition, as well as meditation masters, vinaya-masters, practitioners of the path, and devotionalists. All these individuals stuck to arising and ceasing, impermanence and permanence. These obstruct the true insight of the middle way. As a result they are not able to obtain the great function of unobstructed interdependency of phenomena. Therefore, if dualistic views of acquisition are dispelled until finally nothing remains, then one realizes the true mark of dharma. (CKLS, T.42.31b).

The method of unlimited interpretation shows that, from the highest perspective, only worldly truth (*saṃvṛti satya*) is important. This signifies that affirmation of *saṃvṛti* is the ultimate locus for salvation. After comprehension of the unobstructed path, unlimited interpretation becomes unlimited function. This is the key point of the fourth interpretation.

IV. Interpretation of nirvāṇic language and silence

A. Nirvāṇa as complete rejection of thought construction

Candrakīrti's interpretation of the relationship between scriptural language and reality is somewhat unique; it can be found in the 'nirvāṇa pariksa' of the *Prasannapadā*. Candrakīrti states that nirvāṇa cannot be reality of description with language, and he suggests that language about nirvāṇa ought to be rejected.

The Buddha teaches nirvāṇa, the way of realization, generally characterized as freedom from suffering of life and death; this is the ultimate

goal of Buddhist practice. However, the nature of nirvāṇa has been interpreted differently among Buddhist traditions. In the earliest Buddhist thought it is said to be the state of complete extinction in which there is no more greed, anger or ignorance, nor desire or passion.

According to Theravāda master, Buddhaghosa, the characteristic of nirvāṇa is peace, its function is not die, or to comfort, and it is manifested as signless, non-diversification (Buddhaghosa 1956, 578). Buddhaghosa's interpretation represents the classical Theravāda view of nirvāṇa. The Abhidharma traditions, particularly the Sarvāsivādins, interpret nirvāṇa as a real entity, asaṃskṛta dharma. And the Sautrāntika's understand it as something negative, the complete end of all manifestation of passion and life. Thus, they understand nirvāṇa as something ontological, epistemological and dualistic.

In the Mādhyamika texts, nirvāṇa is identified with *nisprapañca*, i.e., beyond thought construction (*nirvikalpa*) and not manifested as a named thing (*nisprapañca*). It is also said that nirvāṇa cannot be expressed with language, is free from thought construction, and is a peace that calms all verbal differentiation (*MMK*, 25: 24).

Nāgārjuna's issue here is how not to seek nirvāṇa as it cannot be attained unless one rejects it as an object of epistemology. Nirvāṇa, according to Candrakīrti, is not an object to be claimed as 'is' or 'not-is' logic, it is "a case of logical non-sense (*viprakṛsta*)" (Yadav 1977, 452-53). Yadav argues that metaphysical thought involves the logic of 'is' (*asti*) and 'not-is' (*nasti*), and eventually this way of thinking produces existence that suffers from the logic of existence and non-existence. He proposes a therapeutic way of thinking in contrast to metaphysical thinking, a way of thinking that is characterized by methodical deconstruction of language and thought on reality. No attempts to construct a logic for nirvāṇa are valid, as nirvāṇa is a result of destruction of all categorizing conceptions. It is total silence beyond speech and reasoning.

This interpretation of nirvāṇa is different from early Buddhist thought, and the Abhidharma traditions which propose the metaphysical explanation that nirvāṇa is a locus in which there is an absence of all sufferings of life and

death, or alternately, it is negation of all existence. They did not oppose this metaphysical understanding on nirvāṇa, nor did they follow the Buddha's main teaching which rejects any speculation concerning the absolute. Nāgārjuna does not agree with their understanding, and says:

Nirvāṇa can neither be made extinct, nor can it be realized through action; it does not terminate, nor is it everlasting; and it neither ceases to be nor does it come into being (*MMK*, 25: 3).

Candrakīrti points to how Nāgārjuna is saying that nirvāṇa is nothing but the end of all reifying thought, and as long as these conceptions (*kalpana*) prevail, such as 'this exists' or 'this does not exist,' afflicted existence will not come to rest (*PSP on MMK*, 25: 3, 249-51). Nirvāṇa is certainly not conceived as an ontological entity or a cognitive category, as the metaphysicians would have us believe; it is freedom from all categories.

Candrakīrti further observes that nirvāṇa is not abandoned, as with desires and passions (*rāga*), nor can it be realized, like the fruits earned by a sramana, it is not destroyed, as with the factors of personal existence (*skandhas*), and it is not eternal, in that it is not devoid of being or non-relative principles. Thus, nirvāṇa is said to be that which, in its own nature neither comes to be nor ceases to be; its nature is the coming to repose, the stilling of all differences and views (*PSP on MMK*, 25: 3, 248-49).

This interpretation of nirvāṇa allows no questions about the concept of suffering and elimination of suffering which is supposed to constitute nirvāṇa. Nor is there a means to entertain the concept of skandhas and their cessation, for as long as these ideas (*kalpana*) persist there is no attainment of nirvāṇa (*PSP*, 249). Nirvāṇa is complete rejection of all thought construction.

B. Silence and endless negation of a concept of nirvāṇa

One might object that in nirvāṇa there is no suffering and no skandhas, when they are present prior to nirvāṇa and the result of their dissipation is nirvāṇa. Candrakīrti also refutes this opinion. We should abandon this way of

looking at the problem because things which are real in themselves prior to nirvāṇa cannot later, be non-existent. Those seeking nirvāṇa must abandon this way of thinking.

Although there is not even the subtlest difference between the two, it should be realized that in nirvāṇa there is no extinction of anything whatsoever, nor is there any cessation of anything whatsoever. Nirvāṇa is of the nature of utter dissipation of reifying thought (*kalpana*). As said by the Tathāgata, “There is no annihilation of the elements of existence; elements of existence which do not exist can never exist; if one reifies thinking in the way of ‘this exists’ or ‘this does not exist,’ then afflicted existence will not come to rest” (*PSP*, 249).¹²

Freedom from suffering will not be attained by those who believe in its existence or cessation. All saṃsāric states, such as Karma, kleśa, birth, do not exist. They are like a snake appearing in darkness which vanishes in the light. Then, how can there be an everyday world of birth and death (*saṃsāra*)? Candrakīrti observes that things which do not really exist appear to exist to immature people who are in the grip of an illusory ‘I’ and ‘mine,’ just as those who suffer from eye disease can see things which do not exist (*PSP* on *MMK*, 25: 3, 250). People afflicted by avidya can never see the imagined snake as the rope that it is, a factual reality (*sadhuta*).

With this view of nirvāṇa in mind, we’ll examine the nature and function of nirvanic language. According to Mādhyamika thought, *nirvāṇa* is beyond speech and words, there is nothing that can be said. It is:

The very coming to rest,
the non-functioning of perceptions
as signs of all named things (*PSP* on *MMK*, 25: 24, 262).

It is the cessation of truth-claims and metaphysical thought, nor is nirvāṇa absolute truth as the Buddha never teaches truth (Dharma); Nāgārjuna concludes:

¹² Nagarjuna’s verse refers to *MMK*, 25: 20. The Tathagata’s verse quoted by Candrakirti refers to the perfected state (nirvṛti) of nirvana without residual base which is agreed by proponents of all schools.

Ultimate beatitude is coming to rest
of all ways of taking things,
the repose of named things;
no truth has been taught by a Buddha
for anyone, anywhere (*MMK*, 25: 24).¹³

Candrakīrti comments that when there is cessation of verbal assertions (*vacas*) prapancas are in repose. Cessation of discursive thought is ultimate beatitude (*siva*) (*PSP* on *MMK*, 25: 24, 262). It is silence of silence. Candrakīrti poetically describes this experience of the enlightened one:

Ultimate beatitude, which is coming to rest of prapanca as such, is like kingly swans in the sky, soaring in space or in nothingness of space on the twin wings of accumulated merit and insight. And it should be known that because they do not perceive objects as signs, no rigid ‘truth’ whatsoever concerning either bondage or purification, has been taught either to or among gods and men (*PSP* on *MMK*, 25: 24, 262).

Finally we encounter negation of Buddha-vacanam which is the essential point of the Buddha’s discourse. All scriptural words are silent, nameless, and empty. No doctrine concerning nirvāṇa is true, for the Tathāgata does not indulge in naming or ontological thought.

V. Concluding remarks

Having established that the Buddha was not concerned with teaching ‘truth,’ surely this begs the question, “If the Buddha has taught no truth at all

13 David J. Kalupahana translated the verse as; “The Buddha did not teach the appeasement of all objects, the appeasement of obsession, and the auspicious as some thing to some one at some place,” (1986, 24). Kenneth K. Innada’s translation is; “All acquisitions (i.e., grasping) as well as play of concepts (i.e., symbolic representation) are basically in the nature of cessation and quiescence. Any factor of experience with regards to anyone at any place was never taught by the Buddha,” (1970, 159). Innada’s translation is criticized by Kalupahana because Innada has broken up the verse into two distinct statements. Kalupahana’s claim that Innada’s translation thereby lost its significance seems to get a point. Because when the Buddha spoke of nirvana, he did not refer to them even as the repose of prapanca or auspicious.

to anyone whatsoever at any time, how is it that various scriptures are cherished as meaningful? Candrakīrti tells us that this question only arises in the imagination of people who are dreaming or who are deep in the slumber of ignorance. They think the Tathāgata taught the Dharma for them. But Tathāgata being himself is a reflection of pure, passionless truth; ultimately he is not real nor is he perfected; he is beholden as a reflection in all worlds (*PSP on MMK*, 25: 24, 263).

Thus, we might conclude that there is no true doctrine concerning ultimate reality as nirvāṇa. Candrakīrti is not saying that the Buddha did not teach nirvāṇa, rather, he points out that nirvāṇa is a cognitive-nonsense (Yadav 1977, 445-71). Since no doctrine is true concerning nirvāṇa it would be a non-sense to say that nirvāṇa existence depends on such a doctrine. Nirvāṇa is not in the doctrine, it is cessation of all perceptions as signs and a coming to rest of all activity, overt and covert” (*PSP on MMK*, 25: 24, 263).

At this point, only silence is meaningful. In fact, the Tathāgata preaches Dharma in silence when he is not able to express it with language. Vimalakīrti remained silent and Manjusiri listened by not hearing the meaning of non-dual Dharma.¹⁴

Rediscovery of the meaning of the enlightened one’s silence may shed a new light on the relationship between scriptural language and reality. The Buddha’s silence signifies a refusal of prapanca or metaphysical commitment. The Buddha keeps silence whenever he encounters metaphysical questions. His silence is also encouragement to destroy this ontological disease by deconstructing all perception as sign. No language of prapanca is necessary in nirvāṇa. If one tries to label it, he is far off from nirvāṇa. The conceptions and doctrines of nirvāṇa exist only in an imaginary realm, which is why the Prajñāparamita scripture declares nirvāṇa is like a dream or illusion. Chi-tsang says:

14 “The crown prince Mañjuśri said to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti. ‘We have all given our own teachings, noble sir. Now, may you elucidate the teaching of the entrance into the principle of nonduality!’ Thereupon, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti kept his silence, saying nothing at all. The crown prince Mañjuśri applauded the Licchavi Vimalakīrti: ‘Excellent! Excellent, noble sir!’ This is indeed the entrance into the nonduality of the bodhisattvas. Here there is no use for syllables, sounds, and ideas.” See Thurman (1975, chap.9, 73-77).

One must transcend expression and comprehend meaning. This very mind of enlightenment is the true cause. Nothing can express the contemplative mind, hence, Kāśyapa always sighed, saying “inconceivable” (TCHL, T.45.39a).

At this point, we encounter the endless negation of the concept of nirvāṇa which is nameless. Concerning the question of the meaningfulness of the Buddha’s discourse, Candrakīrti answers with a quotation from the *Treatise on the Secrets of the Sayings of the Perfected One*:

This arises only from the imagination of people who are dreaming or deep in the slumber of ignorance. Such people think ‘This revered one, lord of gods, demons and men in all the three worlds, has taught this doctrine for our sake.’ The illustrious one said, ‘The perfected one has his being as a reflection of pure, passionless truth; he is not ultimately real in himself nor is he perfected; he is beheld as a reflection in all worlds.’¹⁵

It is a dream if one thinks there is a real Dharma which was taught by the Tathāgata, or that the Tathāgata is a real and perfect one. The Tathāgata and his words are only beheld as a mirror in the world, a means by which hearers can look upon their own face. The scriptures are also viewed only as a reflection of human existence. There are no scriptures in themselves, no Buddha who speaks from a transcendent space. The scriptures are only echoes of what people have heard. The transcendent Buddha is only a human image. His words are the screen on which audiences reflectively display their own projections. We interpret Buddha’s silence as the poetics of silence which is beyond conceivability of logic and reasoning. The experience of nirvāṇa as a mere illusion or dream is non-cognitive in nature. In the silence of nirvāṇa there is nothing that can be named or spoken.

15 This statement from the *Tathāgataḡuhyasūtra* is cited by Candrakīrti (PSP, 262-63).

Abbreviations

- CKLS *Chung-kuan-lun-shu* (中觀論疏). T. 42.
 ETI *Erh-ti-i* (二諦義). T. 45.
 MMK *Mula-Mādhyaṃaka-Karika* (中論頌).
 PSP *Prasannapada* (明句論), Trans. Meruyn Sprung. 1979.
 SLHI *San-lun-hsuan-i* (三論玄義). T. 45.
 T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (大正新修大藏經) [followed by volume, (text number), page, and horizontal column].
 TCHL *Ta-ch'eng-hsuan-lun* (大乘玄論). T. 45.
 TCTL *Ta-chih-tu-lun* (*Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, 大智度論). T. 25.

Glossary of Chinese Terms

(K=Korean, C=Chinese, J=Japanese)

- Ch'eng-shih-lun* (C), *Satyasidhi-śāstra* (S), *sungsil-ron* (K) 成實論
 Chia-hsing Ta-shih (C) 嘉祥大師
 Chi-tsang (C), Kil-jang (K), Kichizo (J) 吉藏
 Chi-yen (C) 智儼
Chung-kuan-lun-su (C) 中觀論疏
Chung-lun (C) 中論
Erh-ti-i (C) 二諦義
 Fa-lang (C) 法朗
 Fa-tsang (C) 法藏
 Fa-tu (C) 法度
 Hsing-haung (C) 興皇
 Hsuan-tsang (C) 玄奘
Hsu-kao-seng-chuan (C) 續高僧傳
 Interpretation based upon principle of teaching (C) 理教釋義
 Interpretation by viewing the mutual relationship (C) 互相釋義
 Interpretation in accord with terms and letters (C) 依名解釋
 Interpretation that is unlimited (C) 無方釋義.
 Kim yong-pyo (K) 金容彪

- San-lun-hsuan-i* (C) 三論玄義
 Seng-chuan (C) 僧詮
She-lun-hsuan-i (C), *Shiron-gengi* (J) 四論玄義
 Seub-ryung (K) 攝嶺
 Seung-rang (K), Seng-lang (C), Soro (J) 僧朗
 She-shan (C), Seubsan (K) 攝山
Shih-erh-men-lun (C) 十二門論
Ta-ch'eng-hsuan-lun (C) 大乘玄論
Ta-chih-tu-lun (C) 大智度論
 Tu-shun (C) 杜順

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