Buddhist Tenet Systems and Their Sages

We begin with a brief outline of the Buddhist tenet systems and the Indian sages that expounded them, and in the next chapter we will explore their views on the nature of reality.

The Fundamental Vehicle tenet systems are:

> 1. Vaibhāṣika, which may be subdivided into three branches according to their location: Kashmiri, Aparāntaka, and Magadha.

> 2. Sautrāntika, which has two branches: (1) Scripture Proponents, who follow Vasubandhu's Treasury of Knowledge, and (2) Reasoning Proponents, who follow Dharmakīrti's Seven Treatises on Reliable Cognition.

The Mahāyāna (Universal Vehicle) tenet systems are:

> 1. Yogācāra (Cittamātra, Mind Only), which has two branches: Scripture Proponents and Reasoning Proponents.

> 2. Madhyamaka (Middle Way), which has two branches: (1) Svātantrika Madhyamaka (Autonomist), which has two subdivisions: Yogācāra-Svātantrika Madhyamaka and Sautrāntika-Svātantrika Madhyamaka, and (2) Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka (Consequentialist).

The Vaibhāṣikas follow the tenets expressed in the Great Detailed Explanation (Mahāvibhāṣāśāstra), a treatise written by Arhat Nyepe and other arhats. It condenses the meaning of the Seven Abhidharma Treatises that only Vaibhāṣikas consider to be the words of the Buddha. Other well-known Vaibhāṣikas are Vasumitra, Dharmapāla, Buddhadeva, and Saṅghabhadra.

Vasubandhu (c. 316–96) wrote the famous Treasury of Knowledge. Although he is reputed to hold Yogācāra views, this text is associated with the Vaibhāṣika school. He later wrote a commentary on it, the Explanation of the Treasury of Knowledge, which is studied by both the Vaibhāṣikas and the Sautrāntika Scripture Proponents.

The great sage Dharmakīrti (c. 600–660) studied with Īśvarasena, a disciple of Dignāga (c. 480–540). Dharmakīrti wrote Seven Treatises on Reliable Cognition, which are said to explain the positions of the Sautrāntikas and Yogācāra, although it seems that Dharmakīrti himself was a Yogācāra Reasoning Proponent. Sometimes great sages gave explanations that differed from their own personal beliefs because those were the views more suitable for their disciples.

Historically, the Mahāyāna tenet systems began with Nāgārjuna, the great Indian sage who discovered and then propagated the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras in India. This magnificent scholar and practitioner wrote six great treatises on emptiness, the most significant of which is Treatise on the Middle Way, in which he set forth what came to be known as the Madhyamaka view of emptiness as explained in the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras. Nāgārjuna's spiritual heir Āryadeva (c. 170–270), who understood Nāgārjuna's thought completely, further explained this view in his work The Four Hundred (Catuḥśataka).

Asaṅga (c. 310–90) was himself a Mādhyamika, but he elaborated on and extensively taught the Yogācāra view and thus was known as the "great charioteer" of this view. This view must have been present in Nāgārjuna's time because Nāgārjuna refuted it in his Commentary on Bodhicitta. When explaining the Yogācāra view, Asaṅga refuted the existence of external objects and asserted that an object and the consciousness apprehending it had the same substantial cause. Asaṅga also wrote an Abhidharma commentary, the Compendium of Knowledge, from the Yogācāra viewpoint.

By the eighth century in India, Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and the logico-epistemological views of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti were among the prominent philosophical views. The great sage Śāntarakṣita (c. 725–88) synthesized these three, creating the Yogācāra-Madhyamaka system (later known as the Yogācāra-Svātantrika Madhyamaka in Tibet), which was the last major development in Indian Buddhist thought before Buddhism in India was destroyed in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. When Buddhism first went to Tibet, Śāntarakṣita's view was seen as the highest explanation of Madhyamaka because he was the first abbot ordaining monks in Tibet as well as the first prominent teacher of Buddhist philosophy there.

Since Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva did not clarify whether external objects existed, Bhāvaviveka (500–570) refuted the Yogācāra view of no external objects and established that external objects exist conventionally. Śāntarakṣita asserted that external objects do not exist conventionally and that the mind ultimately lacks inherent existence. Śāntarakṣita's student, Kamalaśīla (c. 760–815), further explained this view. Other prominent followers of the Yogācāra-Svātantrika system were Vimuktisena, Haribhadra, Jetāri, and Lavapa. Because Bhāvaviveka accepted that external objects exist conventionally, his system became known as the Sautrāntika-Svātantrika Mādhyamika. Jñānagarbha was a proponent of this system, although Tibetans usually identify him as Yogācāra-Svātantrika Madhyamaka.

Another branch of Madhyamaka is the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka. Buddhapālita (c. 470–540) wrote a commentary on Nāgārjuna's Treatise on the Middle Way, using many consequences in support of Nāgārjuna's view. Objecting to the way in which Buddhapālita refuted the Sāṃkhya view of arising from self, Bhāvaviveka asserted that phenomena exist by their own character and have inherent existence on the conventional level.

Candrakīrti (600–650) supplemented and expanded Nāgārjuna's explanations, asserting that external objects exist conventionally and that all phenomena lack inherent existence. He also asserted that syllogisms are not necessary, and consequences are sufficient to establish the correct view. Although Candrakīrti asserted some tenets that seem to accord with the Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika schools—such as the existence of external objects conventionally (which is accepted by both Fundamental Vehicle schools) and the nonexistence of apperception (which is accepted by Vaibhāṣikas)—his reasons derive from his views on emptiness, which differ from the reasons used by the lower systems. Candrakīrti did not always agree with Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's system of logic and epistemology and set out other tenets that formed part of the Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka system in Tibet.

Although Candrakīrti's writings were infrequently studied during his lifetime or for two or three centuries afterward, he later became known as the chief upholder of the Prāsaṅgika view; Bhāvaviveka was the chief upholder of the Svātantrika view. Śāntideva (eighth century) also expounded the Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka view. However, this distinction into two branches of Madhyamaka only occurred later in Tibet, at the time of Tsongkhapa, so it is

in retrospect that the Indian masters are designated as being Svātantrika Mādhyamikas or Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas. The names of these systems derive from their preferred manner of establishing the correct view—Bhāvaviveka by using autonomous syllogisms (svatantra-prayoga) and Buddhapālita and Candrakīrti by using consequences (prasaṅga). However, the actual reason for the division into two systems was Bhāvaviveka's acceptance that phenomena exist by their own character conventionally.

Although Mādhyamikas later refuted specific assertions in the two Knowledges, it does not appear that they wrote their own Abhidharma texts. Rather, apart from specific assertions in the two Knowledges that contradicted Madhyamaka tenets, the Prāsaṅgikas accepted these texts. Examples of the portions they refuted are the definition of the ignorance that is the root of cyclic existence and the wisdom needed to eradicate it.

From India, the Yogācāra and Madhyamaka systems spread to North and East Asia. In China the Yogācāra view became very popular, although the Madhyamaka view still exists among some Chinese Buddhists. The Prāsaṅgika view was widespread in Tibet, and all Tibetan traditions follow it, although the vocabulary they use to explain it may differ.

Atiśa (982–1054), a prominent teacher who brought the teachings to Tibet during the second dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet, mainly referred to Bhāvaviveka's texts Heart of the Middle Way and Blaze of Reasoning. Although Atiśa recommended that people follow Candrakīrti's view, it was only during the time of the Kadam geshes that Patsab Nyima Drak began to translate Candrakīrti's Supplement to the Middle Way, Clear Words, and Commentary on the Bodhisattva Yogic Deeds of the Four Hundred from Sanskrit into Tibetan. Patsab gave the first draft of the translation of the Supplement to the Kadam Geshe Sharawa to comment on. Although Sharawa did not understand Sanskrit, he pointed out certain passages that needed to be checked. When Patsab compared these comments to the original Sanskrit, he saw that he indeed needed to revise those sections. For this reason, Patsab praised Sharawa's understanding of the Middle Way.

The admiration went the other way too. Sharawa publicly praised the revised translation and expressed gratitude for Patsab Lotsawa's contribution in bringing Candrakīrti's work to Tibet. The Tibetan translators who worked from the original Sanskrit texts were very learned and courageous people. They remained faithful to the original Sanskrit and developed a consistent vocabulary, resulting in modern scholars praising the accuracy of their translations. Of course, the philosophical language they used was too complex for the average reader, but their efforts enabled serious students to connect to the thought of the past, to great Indian sages, and to the Buddha himself.

Patsab taught the followers of the Kadam school, which originated with Drömtönpa, Atiśa's foremost Tibetan disciple. The Kadampas influenced the teachings of the New Transmission traditions in Tibet—the Sakya, Kagyu, and Gelug traditions. Unless otherwise noted, the explanation of emptiness given in the subsequent chapters is according to the Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka view as presented by the great masters of the Nālandā tradition in India.