

JAPANESE BUDDHISM  
AND THE  
MEIJI RESTORATION

*Gudo Wafu Nishijima*

*With an Introduction to  
Master Nāgārjuna's  
Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*

The American Academy of Religion

Society of Biblical Literature

– Annual Meeting 1997 –

San Francisco, California

November 22–25

For information about Nishijima Roshi, and books and articles produced by  
Windbell Publications Ltd, please visit our Web site at:  
<http://www.windbell.com>

All translations and quotations from *Master Dogen's Shobogenzo*,  
*Shobogenzo Keiteki*, and the *Introduction to Master Nāgārjuna's*  
*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*,

© Windbell Publications Ltd. 1997



# JAPANESE BUDDHISM AND THE MEIJI RESTORATION

*Gudo Wafu Nishijima*

## **The Meiji Restoration**

The Meiji Restoration that engulfed Japan in 1868, although described as a “restoration,” was in fact a complete revolution, which affected all levels of society. Powerful feudalistic states, including Satsuma (present-day Kagoshima Pref.), Nagato (present-day Yamaguchi Pref.), Tosa (present-day Kochi Pref.), and Hizen (present-day Saga Pref.), banded together and formed an army against the Tokugawa government of the day, with the aim of taking over the capital, Edo (present-day Tokyo). A succession of civil wars ensued, and during the last of the Tokugawa Shogunates, Yoshinobu Tokugawa (1838–1913) took the decision to restore to power the Imperial House which had ruled Japan from the foundation of the state until 1192. The result was a revolution of unprecedented scale, which had an impact on every facet of life—cultural, economic, and political.

Religions too were caught up in the sweeping changes, and Buddhism was no exception. The historical events that unfolded in Buddhism in Japan caused major destruction and irreversible changes to many aspects of the religion and its practices. In this paper, I would like to discuss the concrete nature of some of these changes, in order to set the modern face of Buddhism in Japan within a historical and philosophical context.

## **What is Buddhism?**

In order that we may have a base for further discussion, I would like to start by explaining what Buddhism is. A look at the situation of Buddhism in modern-day Japan provides a very vague and confused

image of what Buddhism is about. There are many different points of view, from the intellectual romanticism of D. T. Suzuki, through the “nothingness” theories of Kitaro Nishida, to entirely academic interpretations of Buddhism based on Master Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, which came through Chinese (Tr: Kumārajīva) and was translated into Japanese as the “Churon.” Studying these different theories in modern-day Japan will not yield any clear description of what Buddhism is really about. Further, after the Second World War, many new Buddhist sects sprang up, promising believers great benefit and happiness in their secular lives. It is not a situation in which the central tenets of Buddhism stand out clearly, and certainly there is no agreed fundamental idea.

When I was 18 years old I met a Buddhist monk from the Soto sect called Kodo Sawaki Roshi. From that time I was drawn to study the works of Master Dogen, and in particular, the *Shobogenzo*. I have now been studying the *Shobogenzo* for more than 60 years, and my understanding of it is now complete. I have been giving regular lectures at the Tokyo University Young Men’s Buddhist Association, the Asahi Culture Center, and other places, for 30 of those years. Through my long studies of the *Shobogenzo* I have come to a clear and exact understanding of Buddhist philosophy. However, I had always thought of Master Dogen as one of many Buddhist thinkers, and that his unique thoughts could not be put forward as a description of the whole of Buddhism. However, about 10 years ago I started to read Master Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* in Sanskrit and subsequently went on to translate it into Japanese directly. As the translation proceeded, I found that the ideas set forth in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* were exactly the same as those in the *Shobogenzo*. I have concluded that among the many philosophical interpretations of Buddhism, there is one authentic theory, which can be called “Shobo” or the “True Dharma.” Although the theory is complex, it has a unique, but rational structure which is mirrored in both Master Dogen’s works and in Master Nāgārjuna’s writings. I am convinced that this theoretical structure describes exactly what Buddhism is. However, because the philosophical structure is so unusual, it is difficult to understand. This is one reason why Buddhism has been misunderstood by so many people for so long.

## The Philosophy of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā

The first two chapters of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā contain a fundamental statement of Master Nāgārjuna's Buddhist thought, and give a clear picture of what he believed.

### (1) Affirmation of this world

At the beginning of the work, before the first chapter, Master Nāgārjuna has written a four-line verse in which he sets down his understanding of Gautama Buddha's teachings. The verse describes Gautama Buddha's preaching of *pratītya samutpāda*, the fact that the totality of all we can see is this world (*prapañca*), which is quiet (*upaśama*) and gracious (*śiva*).<sup>1</sup>

### (2) Denial of subjectivity and objectivity

In the first verse of the first chapter, Master Nāgārjuna denies that subjectivity (*svata*) and objectivity (*parata*) are complete views of reality, or real entities in themselves.<sup>2</sup> By subjectivity he means thoughts and ideas, and by objectivity he means perceptions involving the sense organs. Western civilization has given us two major philosophical systems; idealism and materialism. Master Nāgārjuna's denial of these two positions is a criticism of the tenet that the idealistic viewpoint alone, or the materialistic viewpoint alone, can tell us what reality is. This is quite an assertion, but Buddhist philosophy has from ancient times contained denials of the two extreme viewpoints, *śāśvatadr̥ṣṭi* and *ucchedadr̥ṣṭi*. *Śāśvatadr̥ṣṭi* refers to belief in the eternal spirit and so the eternity of this world, and as such is an ancient Indian form of idealism. *Ucchedadr̥ṣṭi* refers to belief solely in the instantaneous physical manifestation of the world; denying the existence or worth of moral value, and asserting that the world is just matter that we perceive in front of us. It is thus an early form of materialism. This is what has led me to interpret Master Nāgārjuna's denial of *śāśvatadr̥ṣṭi* and *ucchedadr̥ṣṭi* in the first verse as criticisms of the viewpoints of idealism and materialism.

However, idealism and materialism are the fundamental philosophies upon which our civilizations rest, and denying their validity seems to leave us with no viewpoint that we can rely on. But Buddhism does deny both, and in their place establishes a philosophy which is based

on action, or reality itself. It may seem strange for a philosophy to be based on something which is not connected with the intellect; it is usual to think that philosophy is about thinking itself. It is almost impossible to imagine the content of a philosophy which is not based on the intellectual viewpoints of idealism or materialism. However, I am confident enough to assert that the philosophical system that is used in Buddhism is based on a philosophy with a viewpoint which is different from both of these, and I would like to emphasize that this is a key fact in understanding what Buddhism is.

(3) *Four beliefs*

Although in the first verse Master Nāgārjuna denies that what we think (subjectivity) and what we perceive (objectivity) are ultimate descriptions of reality, he goes on to proclaim the existence of four fundamental beliefs (pratyaya), which include both the subjective and objective views. He states these beliefs as: [1] *hetu*, reason, [2] *ālambana*, the five attributes of things (that is, form, sound, smell, taste and touch), [3] *anantara*, having no interior, meaning the present moment, and [4] *tathaiṅādhipateya*, the Lord-like real world.<sup>3</sup> Master Nāgārjuna defines these as beliefs, because with his sharp mind he noticed that, although these four are fundamental to human consciousness, there is no way to prove their existence; thus we can only believe that they exist.

(4) *Action*

In the fourth verse of the first chapter, Master Nāgārjuna points to the separation between action (*kriyā*) and the four beliefs (*pratyayā*). He is pointing to the fact that in our actual lives, to act is much more real than any of the four beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Of the twenty-seven chapters that make up the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, fourteen (chapters 8 to 21) are devoted to explanations of action.

In the second chapter he describes the absolute difference between a real act at the moment of the present, and the concept “action.” This is not a common subject in philosophy, but I think that recognition of the difference between what we think and what we actually do—our action—is of fundamental importance.

In the first verse of the second chapter, Master Nāgārjuna takes as an example the activity of “going” and asserts that “gone” (recognition

in the present of an action that took place in the past), “going” (recognition in the present of an action that is taking place in the present), and “not gone” (recognition in the present of an action that has yet to take place) are all different from the actual instantaneous act of going performed in the present moment. Our life is not acted out in the area in which we think, and neither is it acted out in the area of our perceptions. Our life is action in the here and now. This is the central theme of Buddhist belief, and from it all other Buddhist theories have emerged.

When we are acting, we experience something, but what we experience is different from what we are thinking and different from what we are perceiving. In our thinking process we make a separation between the subject who is thinking and the object of our thoughts: the person who is thinking can recognize what it is that they are thinking about. And in our perception processes, we make a separation between the subject who is perceiving and the object of our perception: the person who is perceiving can describe what they perceive. But in action, there is no separation between subject and object—they are one undivided whole. In the moment of acting it is difficult or impossible for the person who acts to describe or to observe what they are doing while they are doing it. Because of this fact, although there have been many philosophical systems in the history of human civilization based on idealistic viewpoints and materialistic viewpoints, it has been extremely rare to have a philosophy based on something other than these two viewpoints. It has been an accepted fact for thousands of years that all philosophies have an intellectual basis and thus deal with all matters on an intellectual level. However, Buddhist thinkers have repeatedly attempted to form a philosophy based on action itself, and Master Nāgārjuna’s attempt is an extremely successful one.

*(5) Identity of present action and Dharma*

In the ninth verse of the first chapter, Master Nāgārjuna states that when Dharma does not appear, it is impossible for nirodha, self-regulation in our action, to exist.<sup>5</sup> I have interpreted nirodha to mean “self restriction,” or “self-regulation”; that is, the state in which a person is regulating themselves in present action. Master Nāgārjuna, then, is asserting that self-regulation and Dharma are identical; that when

we act at the moment of the present, then Dharma, this world, appears; and that acting at the present moment *is* the real existence of the world. Although this view is unique to Buddhism, and may appear to be an extraordinary assertion to some, I am convinced that this is the true meaning contained in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā.

## The Philosophy of the Shobogenzo

### (1) Affirmation of this world

Many chapters of the Shobogenzo are concerned with the affirmation of the existing concrete world. Examples are found in *Genjo-koan* (The Realized Universe), *Ikka-no-myōju* (One Bright Pearl), *Keisei-sanshiki* (The Voices of the River Valley and the Form of the Mountains), *Sansui-gyo* (The Sutra of Mountains and Water), and *Hokke-ten-hokke* (The Flower of Dharma Turns the Flower of Dharma).<sup>6</sup> These chapters in particular, and many other parts of the Shobogenzo, assert that this world really exists. The theme is very strong throughout the work.

I have always harbored doubts as to whether the nihilistic interpretations of Buddhism popular in academic circles in Japan today are true. However, after finding that the affirmation of this world in the Shobogenzo is strongly supported by Master Nāgārjuna's realistic assertions in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, I have come to believe that a thorough examination of the basis of true Buddhism is becoming urgent.

### (2) Denial of “Senni-gedo” (Non-Buddhist thinkers like Senika) and “Danken-gedo” (Ucchedadrṣṭi)

In chapter 1, *Bendowa* (A Talk About Pursuing the Truth), Master Dogen quotes the following statement: “In other words, this physical body, having been born, necessarily moves towards death; but this mental essence never dies at all.” He then comments on the statement: “The view expressed now is absolutely not the Buddhist Dharma; it is the view of the non-Buddhist Senika.”<sup>7</sup> In chapter 37, *Shinjin-gakudo* (Learning the Truth with Body and Mind), Master Dogen quotes the words of Master Hyakujo Ekai: “... If a person attaches to the understanding that, being originally pure and originally liberated, we are naturally buddha and naturally one with the way of Zen, [that person] belongs among the non-Buddhists of naturalism.”<sup>8</sup>



These two quotations support my claim that Master Dogen denies both of the two fundamental philosophical viewpoints; the idealistic viewpoint that believes in an eternal spiritual essence, and materialistic naturalism that believes in innate human perfection and intrinsic liberation.

(3) *Four layers of philosophies*

In chapter 3, *Genjo-koan (The Realized Universe)*, Master Dogen describes four philosophical viewpoints. They are: [1] *When all dharmas are [seen as] the Buddha-Dharma*, [2] *When the myriad dharmas are each not of the self*, [3] *The Buddha's truth is originally transcendent over abundance and scarcity*, and [4] *It is only that flowers, while loved, fall; and weeds while hated, flourish*.<sup>9</sup>

I interpret these four viewpoints as follows. “*When all dharmas are [seen as] the Buddha-Dharma*” means when all things and phenomena are interpreted through a belief system called Buddhism, which suggests an idealistic viewpoint. “*When the myriad dharmas are each not of the self*” refers to the case when all things and phenomena are examined from a non-subjective, that is, objective viewpoint. “*The Buddha's truth is originally transcendent over abundance and scarcity*” means the real act which is separate from subjective and objective criteria. “*It is only that flowers, while loved, fall; and weeds while hated, flourish*” is a description of the real state of things—a description of reality.

(4) *Reverence for action and the practice of Zazen*

The *Shobogenzo* contains many chapters related with action. Examples include *Bendowa (A Talk about Pursuing the Truth)*, *Genjo-koan (The Realized Universe)*, *Ju-undo-shiki (Rules for the Hall of Heavy Cloud)*, *Senjo (Washing)*, and *Shoaku-makusa (Not Doing Wrong)*.<sup>10</sup> This reinforces my assertion that Buddhist philosophy is about action itself. We all have two fundamental abilities: the ability to think and the ability to perceive. Using our ability to think, we have established the most excellent idealistic philosophies. Relying on our ability to perceive, we have established exceptional scientific theories. But Gautama Buddha noticed that as excellent as these two abilities are, they do not form the basis of our lives; he noticed that our lives are actually a series of actions at the present moment. His realization of this fact formed the basis of Buddhism,

with a philosophical system based neither on idealism nor materialism. This is the reason that Buddhist philosophy is so hard to understand. A detailed study of the *Shobogenzo* clearly reveals this as the philosophical basis of Buddhism, and Master Dogen, just as Gautama Buddha did before him, urges us to practice Zazen in order to notice reality, which forms the basis of Buddhist belief. He insists that by practicing Zazen we can notice the nature of reality in front of us, and realize what action is.

### **Buddhism before the Meiji Restoration**

It would seem that the system of Buddhist thought expounded by Master Dogen and Master Nāgārjuna has been lost to present-day Buddhists in Japan. This makes it important to confirm whether their system of thought existed in pre-Meiji Japan or not. The problem can be clarified by looking at the recorded works of the monk Master Bokuzan Nishi-ari (Kin-ei). A brief chronology of his life is as follows:<sup>11</sup>

- 1821 Born in Hachinohe City in Aomori Prefecture, the son of Chozaburo Sasamoto.
- 1833 Becomes a Buddhist monk under Master Choryu Kinryu in Choryu-ji Temple when he is 12 years old, and studies Buddhism there for 7 years.
- 1839 Moves to Sendai City and studies Buddhism under Master Ten-ou Etsu-on in Sho-on-ji Temple there.
- 1841 Enters the monastery of Kichijo-ji Temple in Edo (present-day Tokyo).
- 1842 Becomes a certified monk and receives the Transmission of Dharma from Master Anso Taizen in Hon-nen-ji Temple in Edo. Becomes Master of Horin-ji Temple in Edo.
- 1850 Becomes a student of Gettan Zenryu in Kaizou-ji Temple in Kanagawa Prefecture, who is very famous for his study of the *Shobogenzo*.
- 1862 From 1862 onwards Nishi-ari becomes Master of the following temples in succession: Nyorai-ji (Shizuoka Pref.), Eicho-in

(Kanagawa Pref.), Sosan-ji (Tokyo), Hosen-ji (Gunma Pref.)

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Buddhist monks are permitted to use their own family names, and so he registers his own family name as Nishi-ari.

- 1875 After 1875 he becomes Master of the following temples in succession: Hokou-ji Temple (Aomori Pref.), Chu-ou-ji Temple (Hokkaido,) Kasuisai Temple (Shizuoka Pref.,) and Denshin-in Temple (Shizuoka Pref.)
- 1899 A sponsor builds a temple, named Saiyu-ji, for him in Yokohama City.
- 1901 Becomes Abbot of Soji-ji Temple (Ishikawa Pref.), one of the two main temples of the Soto Sect.
- 1910 Dies in Yokohama City on 4th December, aged 90 years.

From this biography we can see that Bokuzan Nishi-ari studied Buddhism in the Soto Sect tradition before the Meiji Restoration, and before Japan's Universities exerted any influence on Buddhist thought. It is fortunate that his many lectures on the *Shobogenzo* have been recorded in his *Shobogenzo Keiteki* and are available today. Reading the records of his lectures we can get a clear picture of his understanding of Buddhism. The *Shobogenzo Keiteki* contains the following 29 chapters:

*Bendowa* (A Talk about Pursuing the Truth), *Maka-Hannya-Haramitsu* (Mahā-Prajñā-Pāramitā), *Genjo-koan* (The Realized Universe), *Ikka-no-myōju* (One Bright Pearl), *Sokushin-zebutsu* (Mind Here and Now Is Buddha), *Uji* (Existence-Time), *Sansui-gyo* (The Sutra of Mountains and Water), *Shin-fukatoku* (Mind Cannot Be Grasped [The Former]), *Kokyo* (The Eternal Mirror), *Kankin* (Reading Sutras), *Bussho* (The Buddha-Nature), *Gyobutsu-yuigi* (The Dignified Behavior of Acting Buddha), *Jinzu* (Mystical Power), *Zazenshin* (A Needle for Zazen), *Butsukojo-no-ji* (The Matter of the Ascendant State of Buddha), *Inmo* (It), *Kai-In-Zanmai* (Samādhi, State Like the Sea), *Juki* (Affirmation), *Kannon* (Avalokiteśvara), *Arakan* (The Arhat), *Hakujushi* (Cedar Trees), *Komyo* (Brightness), *Shinjin-gakudo* (Learning the Truth with Body and Mind), *Muchu-setsumu* (Preaching a Dream in a Dream), *Gabyo* (A Picture of Rice Cake), *Sesshin-Sessho* (Expounding the Mind and

Expounding the Nature), *Shoho-jisso* (All Dharmas Are Real Form), *Mujo-seppo* (The Non-Emotional Preaches the Dharma), and *Shoji* (Life-and-Death).<sup>12</sup>

## The Philosophy of Master Bokuzan Nishi-ari

### (1) Affirmation of this world

In the *Ikka-no-myōju* (One Bright Pearl) chapter of *Shobogenzo Keiteki*, Master Bokuzan gives his interpretation of One Bright Pearl: "...that in the case of Gautama Buddha the whole Universe in ten directions might be interpreted as the Dharma of the One Vehicle or All Things and Phenomena which are real form. Summarily he [Gensa] calls the situations which are seen as the world of the limitless Dharma in one sight, as piercing through from the eternal past to the eternal future, nothing above it, nothing under it, solving the difference between outside and inside, manifesting the oneness of the world of Dharma, and stopping discussions of practice and experience or delusion and enlightenment."<sup>13</sup>

In this commentary Master Bokuzan clearly affirms the real existence of this world as Dharma.

### (2) Denial of *śāśvatadr̥ṣṭi* and *ucchedadr̥ṣṭi*

In the *Bendowa* (A Talk About Pursuing the Truth) chapter of the *Shobogenzo Keiteki*, Bokuzan asserts that both *Dan* and *Jo* are non-Buddhist concepts.

*Dan* is an abbreviation of *Danken-gedo*. *Dan* means to cut, *Ken* means view, *Ge* means outside, and *Do* means Buddhist Way. *Danken-gedo* thus refers to the non-Buddhist view which denies that the continuance of happiness or unhappiness relies upon moral behavior. *Danken-gedo* is the translation into Chinese of the Sanskrit *ucchedadr̥ṣṭi*, which points to the materialistic philosophical systems of ancient India.

*Jo* is an abbreviation of *Joken-gedo*. *Jo* means constant, *Ken* means view, *Ge* means outside, and *Do* means Buddhist Way. *Joken-gedo* thus refers to the non-Buddhist view that believes in the eternity of the spirit and interprets all things and phenomena on the basis of mind. *Joken-gedo* is the translation into Chinese of the Sanskrit *śāśvatadr̥ṣṭi*, the ancient Indian philosophy that believed in the eternity of this world and the eternal Spirit.

Master Bokuzan denied both *Danken-gedo* and *Joken-gedo* in the following passages:

*“The Non-Buddhist views are just the two views of Dan and Jo. The two views of Dan and Jo are what are strongly forbidden in Buddhism. ...Dan and Jo, which Non-Buddhists and ordinary people insist on, are to think the natural big mechanism of this world as their own narrow mind and because they utilize delusions and considerations, sometimes they use Dan and sometimes they use Jo. Those ideas are all opposite to the real form of Dharma, and so they are totally poisonous views that go against nature. Therefore what they recognize as Dan or Jo are not what they experience as Dan and Jo synthesizing material and mental miscellaneous Dharma, but experience Dan and Jo thinking intellectually about material and mental miscellaneous Dharma. So their Dan and Jo can be called relative Dan and Jo.”<sup>14</sup>*

Reading these sentences we can see clearly Master Bokuzan’s insistence that Buddhism is completely different from idealistic philosophy like that of Senika, or materialistic philosophies like those of the “Six Non-Buddhist Thinkers,” who lived at the time of Gautama Buddha.

### *(3) Four layers of philosophies*

We have seen the four fundamental beliefs in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and the four philosophical viewpoints in the *Shobogenzo*. Can we now find the same four-phased structure in Master Bokuzan’s work? The following passage is taken from the *Bussho (Buddha-nature)* chapter of *Shobogenzo Keiteki*:

*“Mountains are high and the ocean is deep; a man walks upright and a rat runs on a crossbeam. Those all belong to superficial philosophies. Even Mount Fuji can be destroyed if we [want to] destroy it, and even the ocean can be buried if we [want to] bury it. What we see in front of us all belong to secular philosophies and are manifesting superficial form. If there is any time when all the heaven and the earth change, there is nothing which can be called the unchangeable in eternity. There is no fact here which is described ‘The *Tathāgata* is always constant and there is no change or transformation.’ All are superficial philosophies. Therefore concepts are also superficial. And because*

of these situations people usually repeatedly declare [their belief in the concept] 'emptiness.' In these situations, when we think about fact and form, even though it is in theory just empty form, they are just the real existence of all things and phenomena in real form. ...Therefore when we look at them on the basis of theory, they are forms of emptiness, but when we look at them on the basis of the form of facts, they are inevitably real existence. For this reason, we say that existence and non-existence are both superficial in reality. And so we call what is different from non-existence and different from existence the Middle Way. However the Middle Way does not have a real entity other than the name. Leaving existence/non-existence there is nothing which is called the Middle Way. But leaving attachment to the form of existence/non-existence, we look at all as the Middle Way. Therefore in Tiantai theory they say "both are not the Middle Way, both illuminate The Middle Way." In our denials that it is different from existence or it is different from non-existence, [real] existence is directly the Middle Way and [real] non-existence is directly the Middle Way. The Middle Way is directly the Buddha-nature."<sup>15</sup>

**This passage shows that Master Bokuzan accepts existence and non-existence as concepts, but he thinks that they are superficial concepts; just thoughts in our brains and the results of our perceptions. He asserts that the Middle Way is that which is real and different from concepts, and he identifies it with Buddha-nature.**

*(4) Reverence for action and the practice of Zazen*

**In the Gyobutsu-yuigi (The Dignified Behavior of Acting Buddha) of Shobogenzo Keitaki, Master Bokuzan writes:**

"'Buddhas, being in the Buddha's state of truth, do not expect enlightenment.' Enlightenment means the balanced enlightenment or the splendid enlightenment, but we do not need to expect the Buddhist effect of balanced enlightenment or splendid enlightenment. The meaning of the words that it is not necessary to expect enlightenment as the result, is the Master's thoughts that Buddhas in the past, present, and future, are just simply the Acting Buddha. 'Mastery of action in the Buddha's ascendant state of truth...' Buddhas do not stay at the place of Buddhas, and this situation is described as the ascendant state of Buddha. To replace ourselves there, is called the mastery of

*action. To master action in the ascendant state of Buddha, or to enter the circumstances of Buddha directly is just meeting Buddha ourselves right now, and it is impossible for us [to do so] when we rely upon discussing Buddha. What shall we rely upon? We rely only upon acting Buddha. Therefore it is necessary for us to understand acting Buddha. Where we act, acting Buddha appears at once. When we practice Zazen one inch, we can become one inch Buddha. Wanting to become Buddha is just a delusion. Buddha does not have any fault. Wanting to become Buddha is just a delusion. Instead of thinking about it, just practice Zazen: there exists Buddha directly.”<sup>16</sup>*

These sentences show Master Bokuzan’s own mastery of action and Zazen.

## **Japanese Buddhism after the Meiji Restoration**

The Meiji Restoration took place in 1868, and was a political and social revolution. Up to that time, due to the increasing development of capitalistic economic activities, the feudalistic social system under which Japan functioned had become weaker and weaker. Furthermore, western countries were now urging Japan to open its ports to trade. Eventually some of the stronger feudalistic states realized the inevitability of the need to establish a new and powerful government suited to ruling a modern nation. Forming a strong alliance, these states proceeded to organize an army that was able to defeat the existing Tokugawa government.

### **“Haibutsu Kishaku”**

One of the slogans of the Meiji Restoration was “Osei Fukko”—Restore the Monarchy. This was used to encourage the population in their enthusiasm to destroy any cultural habits and institutions that had been central to the Tokugawa era. Buddhism did not escape. For about five years from the start of the Meiji Restoration, a popular movement to destroy Buddhism raged unchecked, many Buddhist temples were destroyed, and thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns were forced back into secular society. This movement was given the name “Haibutsu Kishaku.” “Hai” means to throw away, “butsu” means Buddha, “Ki” means to abolish, and “shaku” refers to Shakamuni (Gautama Buddha).

“Throw away Buddha and abolish Shakamuni!” The movement had an irreversible effect on traditional Buddhism in Japan, despite the efforts of movements who tried to protect the traditions. The relentless flow of history swept away all in its path.<sup>17</sup>

### **Buddhist Studies in the New Universities**

After the Meiji Restoration, the new government was eager to learn the ways of the West, and in 1878 the University of Tokyo was established, soon followed by other universities. In Buddhist studies, new streams appeared, intent on studying Buddhism in a more western and scientific manner. Bun-yu Nan-jo (1849–1927), Junjiro Takakusu (1866–1945), Kaikyoku Watanabe (1872–1895), Unrai Ogiwara (1869–1937), and others, went to England, Germany, and France, in order to study Buddhism on the basis of western thought.

### **“Daijo-Hi-Bussetsu-Ron”**

“Daijo” means Mahāyāna Buddhism, “Hi” means not, “Bussetsu” means Buddhist teachings, and “Ron” means theory. Thus “Daijo-Hi-Bussetsu-Ron” means the theory that Mahāyāna Buddhism is not [true] Buddhism. In these powerful new streams of Buddhist studies were scholars such as Sensho Murakami (1851–1929) and Masaharu Anezaki (1873–1949). They believed that Buddhism could be understood only by scholarly study of what Gautama Buddha taught directly in his lifetime, and that the many complex theories that emerged after his death are not true Buddhism. They claimed that Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings were therefore unreliable, as they were additions to the original teachings, and could only mislead people.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Changes Wrought Upon the Study of Buddhism**

Following the enormous influences on Buddhism from the upheavals of the Meiji Restoration, and especially the “Haibutsu Kishaku” and “Daijo-Hi-Bussetsu-Ron” movements, Buddhist scholars implemented four important changes in what was to become the accepted understanding of Buddhism:

(1) Erasure of the distinction between *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛtti*

Paramārtha (Jap. *shintai*) means “the highest or whole truth, spiritual



knowledge,” often translated as ultimate truth, and *saṃvṛtti* (Jap. *zokutai*) means “common occupation; being, existing, becoming, or happening,” often translated as relative truth. For thousands of years Buddhism had maintained a clear separation between these two terms. It is not easy to clarify the original meaning of the difference between these two terms, but we must attempt it if we are to have a clear understanding of original Buddhism.

Chapter 2 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* is entitled “Examination of Gone and Not Gone.” It is an explanation of the difference between the conceptual world, in which language and social custom exists, and the real world, which exists prior to, and outside of, the conceptual state. Master Nāgārjuna contrasts the process of the conscious recognition of an act (memory), with the instantaneous act itself at the moment of the present. He uses the examples of “gone,” “not gone,” and “going” as conscious recognition, to set against the real act of going. This sharp distinction between the conceived function and the real act itself forms the fundamental basis of Buddhist philosophy.

The human race is endowed with formidable intellectual powers, and our civilizations rest upon these powers of thought and perception. Sometime, as did Plato, we find ourselves believing that the thoughts in our brains are real entities. Or sometimes, as did Karl Marx, that the forms that we perceive through our sense organs are real entities. When he was sitting in Zazen, Gautama Buddha noticed that neither of these is true; both are illusions. He noticed that what was real was his sitting. It became clear to him that his thoughts and perceptions both existed in the area of conceived recognition, and that his act at that present moment was the only thing that was real. This simple recognition of “the way things are” is the fundamental starting point of Buddhism. In Chapter 2, again using “to go” as his example, Master Nāgārjuna explains the difference between the conceived recognition of an act that has been performed: “gone” (*gāta*); an act that is yet to be performed: “not gone” (*agata*); action as a process in the present: “going” (*gamyamānām*); and the real instantaneous act in the present (*gamyate*). His explanations are exceptional in their clarity. Based on these explanations, I interpret *saṃvṛtti* to mean our conceived recognition, in the areas of thinking and feeling,

and paramārtha to mean the Buddhist philosophical viewpoint based on action, reality, Dharma. By reality, I do not mean only physical matter, as is believed by materialists, but real experience, different from both thought and physical substance.

The changes brought about by “Daijo-Hi-Bussetsu-Ron” have erased this fundamental insistence in Buddhist philosophy of the distinction between the conceptual or intellectual viewpoint (saṃvṛtti), and the viewpoint based on action (paramārtha).

(2) *Misunderstanding of catvāri satyāni*

The Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, the Shobogenzo, and Shobogenzo Keiteki are all constructed around the same layered philosophical structure; one that uses four viewpoints. This is not a coincidence, but reflects the fundamental Buddhist principle called catvāri satyāni, or four viewpoints. They are: duḥkha satya, samudaya satya, nirodha satya, and mārga satya. It can be said that Buddhism consists of efforts to find what reality is. But as reality is beyond concepts, in the end it proves impossible to describe what reality is with words. Because we normally identify what something is by the meaning of the word that we assign to it, we are constantly confusing our conceptualized view of reality with reality itself, which exists outside of the conceptual area. Although we are always living in reality, the main characteristic of reality is that it transcends both thoughts and perceptions; it is different from what we think it is, and it is different from what we perceive it to be. In order to attempt a description of reality, we need to adopt a unique approach—the four-phased method called catvāri satyāni.

[1] Duḥkha satya (philosophy of anguish) suggests idealistic philosophy. When we think about something, our ideas are always more perfect than the real situation, and for this reason we feel anguish at the difference between our perfect plans and imperfect reality. Thus duḥkha satya suggests a philosophy of anguish, or idealism, as it existed in ancient India.

[2] Samudaya satya (philosophy of accumulation) suggests a philosophy based on the accumulation of material elements. When people become disappointed by the imperfect nature of reality measured against their ideals, they often swing to the opposite extreme, and

become trapped in a materialistic view of the world. They start to believe that the only thing that can be relied upon is physical substance. Thus *samudaya satya* suggests a philosophy of materialism, as it existed in ancient India.

[3] *Nirodha satya* (philosophy of self-regulation) suggests a philosophical system based on action. Gautama Buddha was disturbed by the contradiction between idealistic thought and the material world, and it took him many years of searching to realize that action at the present moment is the basis of reality. He then constructed his philosophy around this fact. In the whole history of philosophy there has never been another philosophy based on action at the moment of the present. For this reason, “the philosophy of action” sounds strange to our ears. However Buddhism’s excellence in describing the real world “as it is” comes from having its basis in such a unique philosophy.

[4] *Mārga satya* (philosophy of the Way) suggests a philosophy that is based on the identity between action and the Rule of the Universe. Buddhism asserts that our life is just a succession of actions at the present moment, which suggests that the most important thing in life is to make our action here and now right. This is the foundation of Buddhist morality—a morality that is not abstracted from our present actions, but that is here with us at every moment. We can say that right actions are in harmony with the Universe; they obey its rules. So right action at the moment of the present is following the Rule of the Universe.

*Catvāri satyāni*, the four philosophies, gives us these four layers with which to explain reality, and we find that they form the basic structure behind Buddhist philosophical works.

### *(3) Making light of practice*

Buddhism is not an intellectual pursuit; it is a practical pursuit, which suggests that practice is central to the establishment of Buddhist philosophy. Japanese Buddhist scholars after the Meiji Restoration, however, as a result of the earnestness with which they pursued the western rational method, began to feel that the idea that we need to rely on some kind of practice in order to clarify Buddhist theory was ridiculous. They thought that the idea that we need

to rely on practice to establish theory was neither rational nor scientific. Such scholars had come to believe that all ideas could be understood purely by intellectual effort, and this led them to encourage Buddhism to abandon its traditional practices after the Meiji Restoration. This attitude shut the door to the study of the philosophy of action, and so Buddhists in Japan lost the way to study Buddhism based on practice.

*(4) Loss of Buddhist realism — from practical Buddhism to intellectual Buddhism*

It is impossible to deny the belief in the existence of this world expressed by Master Nāgārjuna in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, and by Master Dogen in the *Shobogenzo*. We find that their philosophical writings express a realistic view which is quite different from the idealism and nihilism expressed by Japanese Buddhist scholars after the Meiji Restoration. These scholars place Buddhism firmly in the area of intellectual studies and, further, they do not like to affirm this world as a real place. They interpret the Sanskrit concept of *śūnya* as a nihilistic concept meaning “empty” or “void,” to suit their insistence that the world in front of us is not real existence. But interpreted from the viewpoint that affirms the real world in front of us, *śūnya* has another meaning; it means “hollow, barren, desolate, deserted,” in the sense of the bare, bald, naked, raw and transparent state of reality “just as it is.” The translation we select for this concept depends on our fundamental Buddhist viewpoint. If we believe that Buddhism does not affirm this world, then the meaning of emptiness or void may make sense to us; but if we believe that Buddhism expresses a profound affirmation of the reality in front of us, then the meaning of “as it is” may be more suited. Both Master Dogen and Master Nāgārjuna insisted that Buddhist philosophy is realistic. Realistic, not in the sense of practical materialism, but in the sense of present action. Many materialistic people think that they are realistic, that the material world is the only basis for realism. But Buddhism asserts that what is real is neither ideas, not physical matter, but action at the present moment in this place. So there is an important distinction between materialistic realism, which believes in the absolute existence of matter through time, and Buddhist realism, which believes that the world exists at the present

moment. However, after the Meiji Restoration, Japanese Buddhist scholars threw away Buddhist realism and changed Buddhist philosophy into a kind of idealistic nihilism.

## **After the Second World War**

Almost a century after the Meiji Restoration, Japan's defeat by the allied armies in 1945 wrought further enormous changes. The nationalistic spiritualism that had dominated Japan was almost completely destroyed, and the people of Japan swung heavily to the opposite direction—becoming an increasingly materialistic society. Buddhism lost almost all of its power and has subsequently turned into a religion of funerals.

### *(1) The appearance of new religions*

In postwar society new religions emerged, almost entirely based on Buddhism, but offering to believers happiness, and financial reward for their devotion. In the confusion and spiritual vacuum of the post-war years, many ran to these religions for security and the promise of salvation.

### *(2) Nihilistic Buddhism*

One well-known philosopher at Kyoto University, Kitaro Nishida (1870–1945), established his own unique philosophy, based around the concept of “absolute nothingness.” Nishida attracted many excellent students to his ranks. Some of these students had studied Buddhism in the Rinzaï sect and they established their own Buddhist theory, based on Nishida's philosophy and formed around the concept of “mu” or nothingness.

### *(3) The common authorized view*

Japanese Buddhist scholarship has based itself around an “authorized” theory which has been taken up by virtually all Buddhist scholars in Japan. The theory has three basic concepts: “engi,” “mujisho,” and “ku.”

“Engi” comes from the Sanskrit word *pratītya samutpāda*, which was rendered into Chinese by Kumārajīva as “causes and conditions.” “En” means conditions and “gi” or “ki” means to occur. Thus “engi” translates as “what has occurred relying on conditions.” This

is interpreted by most Japanese scholars to mean “the mutual relationship which arises relying on conditions and which is not a substantial entity.”

“Mujisho” comes from the Sanskrit *na svatā*. *Na* is a negative particle and *svatā* means essence of self. So the words *na svatā* and “mujisho” are interpreted as a denial of self as a real entity. This is a further instance of the nihilistic attitude that pervades Buddhist studies in Japan.

“Ku” come from the word Sanskrit word *śūnya*, which is interpreted to mean emptiness, nothingness, rather than, as I suggested earlier, as bare, naked— the state of things as they are.

Thus the three pillars of authorized Buddhism in Japan are entirely based upon nihilistic assumptions.

### **The Importance of Open Discussion**

I have described some of the enormous changes in Buddhist belief and philosophy that have taken place in Japan since the Meiji Restoration, and which have affected the very essence of Buddhist thought. It is very important for discussion to continue. The problem is a serious one—to what extent have the changes that took place during the Meiji Restoration effected the core beliefs of Buddhism in Japan? It is my belief that Buddhism before the Meiji Restoration was a practical Buddhism, based on practices such as Zazen and so forth, and that the Buddhism that emerged from the great upheavals of those times is an intellectual Buddhism, a religion based only on ideas, and not grounded in experience. I hope very much that Buddhist scholars will be motivated to take up this theme and study the historical facts in greater detail. I think that research will be able, not only to shed light on the changes that have taken place, but to clarify in greater detail the original body of beliefs, and the original philosophical system that were central to Buddhism prior to those changes.

## References

1. Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. Gudo Wafu Nishijima, Chap. 1.
2. Ibid. Chap. 1, Verse 1.
3. Ibid. Chap. 1, Verse 2.
4. Ibid. Chap. 1, Verse 4.
5. Ibid. Chap. 1, Verse 9.
6. Gudo Nishijima & Chodo Cross, *Master Dogen's Shobogenzo, Book 1* (Windbell Publications 1994).
7. Ibid. Book 1, p. 14
8. Ibid. Book 1, pp. 253–54.
9. Ibid. Book 1, p. 33.
10. Ibid. Book 1.
11. Komazawa University, *Zengaku Daijiten* (Taishukan Shoten 1978). Vol. 2, p. 977.
12. Bokuzan Nishi-ari, *Shobogenzo Keiteki* (Daihorin-kaku 1978), 3 volumes.
13. Ibid. Vol 1, p. 354.
14. Ibid. Vol 1, pp. 156–57.
15. Ibid. Vol 2, p. 177.
16. Ibid. Vol 2, p. 330.
17. Zen-nosuke Tsuji, *Meiji Bukkyo-shi no Mondai* (Ritsubun Sho-in 1949), pp. 4–81.
18. Yusen Kashiwabara, *Nihon Bukkyo-shi: Kindai* (Yoshikawa Kobun-kan 1990), pp. 87–92.





# INTRODUCTION TO MASTER NĀGĀRJUNA'S MŪLAMADHYAMAKAKĀRIKĀ

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā was written by Nāgārjuna, a Buddhist philosopher who lived in India circa 150 to 250 A.D. Around this period, Mahāyāna Buddhism was at its zenith, and Nāgārjuna was the most excellent of all the Buddhist thinkers of his age. Although he wrote many books on Buddhism, it is likely that he wrote Mūlamadhyamakakārikā to record the conclusions of his philosophical journey. What is written in Mūlamadhyamakakārikā is very simple and direct, and to me this suggests that he wrote the work near the end of his life, when his thoughts were mature. Because of these facts, to study the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā is possibly the best way to gain an understanding of the Mahāyāna Buddhism of ancient India.

However, there is another reason why I started to translate the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. I have spent more than 60 years studying the works of Dogen Zenji. During my studies, it became clear to me that the Buddhist thought of Master Dogen is unique among the many Buddhist thinkers of India, China and Japan. I concluded that Master Dogen's thoughts, despite being excellent and compelling, were somehow one isolated example among the many Buddhist theories in existence.

After reading and understanding the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, however, I realized that Dogen Zenji's theories are not at all peculiar. I found in fact that the philosophical structure which Nāgārjuna sets out in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā is in fact identical to the theories of Dogen Zenji. I have now come to believe that Dogen Zenji's thought is far from an isolated view; it is in fact an exact and excellent expounding of the original theories of Buddhism. Both Nāgārjuna and Dogen expound true Buddhist philosophy. The reason that they have both been seen by so many people as unique and isolated in their view comes, I think, from the fact that they were both so excellent

that few Buddhist thinkers, from ancient times right through to the present, have been able to understand what they wrote; their thinking represents the very highest level of Buddhist philosophy.

This is a very important fact, but I fear that many people will not be able to accept it, and will think that my opinion is rather odd. For this reason I think that it is more than just important—it is my duty—to explain what it is that has led me to this conclusion. This is why I embarked on an English translation of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* following my translation into Japanese. When people are able to read this translation, they will be able to follow the path that has led me to my conclusion, and will, I hope, be able to agree with me.

This, then, has been my aim in this translation, but in reality things have not been so simple. Before beginning the translation, I read translations into English by Kenneth K. Inada, David Kalupahana and Ramchandra Pandeya, and into Japanese by Hajime Nakamura and Jushin Saegusa. I found two things; the first was that all of the translations were completely different in meaning. The second was that I could not understand any of them, even after extensive efforts to do so. I concluded from this that there was no reliable translation of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* in existence, and no clear commentaries on the meaning. I reached the point where I realized that if I wanted to understand the meaning of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* I would have to translate it myself.

## **Method of Translation**

I adopted the following four methods in translating the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*:

### *1. Precise meaning of each word*

In reading the existing translations, I found that all of them adopted quite a loose interpretation for the meaning of individual words. While reading existing translations I looked up words which I did not know in the dictionary, but frequently was unable to find the meaning attributed to the word in the translation. In my translation I used three Sanskrit-English dictionaries: by Monier Monier-Williams, by Arthur A. McDonnell, and by Carl Cappeller. I decided to use only the meanings given in these dictionaries in order to maintain consistency and

accuracy, and to further this aim, I have listed the meaning adopted for each word at the start of every verse.

### 2. *Strict interpretation of Sanskrit grammar*

In reading existing translations I came across many examples where the rules of Sanskrit grammar had not been followed in rendering a translation. In these situations, it is natural to conclude that the translated text does not follow the meaning of the original. If there is not strict adherence to the rules of grammar in a translation, then that translation cannot be called reliable. I therefore resolved to follow the rules of Sanskrit grammar as closely as I was able. To support this, I have added grammatical notes at the start of each verse.

### 3. *Not referring to previous translations and commentaries*

In translating original texts, most people proceed by studying all existing translations and references, and then starting their own translation. In the case of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, there are some problems with this method. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* was translated from Sanskrit to Chinese around the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century by Kumārajīva. His translation was so fluent, so elegant and concise that it was accepted widely and received great acclaim in China and subsequently in Japan. However, on checking his translation against the original Sanskrit, I found innumerable problems throughout the whole translation.

Many early commentaries that were written by Indian Buddhists were subsequently translated into Chinese relying on Kumārajīva's interpretation. It is highly doubtful that these Chinese versions of the commentaries retain any of the original meaning of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. At the least, they cannot be relied upon.

These are some of the factors that led me to resolve not to refer to other translations or commentaries, but to endeavor to translate the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* as systematically and objectively as possible. I think that this is the most meaningful and rational approach to take.

### 4. *The role of Buddhist philosophy*

It is normal when reading a classical work to attempt as far as possible to throw away all personal prejudice and bias, and read the work as objectively as possible. But in reality, we all have our own biases

and beliefs, and it is impossible for us to throw them away completely. It is actually impossible to read a work without imposing our own beliefs on it.

In my case, I have been studying the works of Dogen Zenji, a Buddhist monk who lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, for more than 60 years, and my Buddhist beliefs now rely entirely on his thoughts. I have translated his works into modern Japanese and some of them into English, and I have been giving lectures on his works regularly for the last 30 years. My understanding of Buddhist thought is so deeply influenced by Dogen Zenji that I feel my beliefs are identical to his. In this situation it is impossible for me to read the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* without bringing with me Dogen Zenji's philosophy.

Fully aware of this fact, it was therefore a revelation to me to find that in fact *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* contains exactly the same philosophical structure as Dogen Zenji's work. As it turned out, my deep knowledge of Dogen Zenji's philosophy was the one thing above all that enabled me to understand and translate the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* relatively quickly.

## **The Structure of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā***

As the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* is a highly structured work, I think it helpful for the reader to have an idea of the overall structure of the work to better understand the translation.

### *1. Four main groups*

The 27 chapters that make up the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* can be divided into four groups according to the main focus of each chapter.

#### **Group 1: Chapters devoted to philosophical explanations of the fundamental basis of Buddhist thought.**

- Chapter 1 — Examination of Fundamental Beliefs
- Chapter 2 — Examination of 'Gone' and 'Not Gone'

#### **Group 2: Chapters devoted to philosophical explanations of the external world**

- Chapter 3 — Examination of the Eyes and Other Sense Organs
- Chapter 4 — Examination of Aggregates
- Chapter 5 — Examination of Physical Substances

- Chapter 6 — Examination of Passion and the Impassioned  
 Chapter 7 — Examination of the External World

**Group 3: Chapters devoted to explanations of the philosophy of action**

- Chapter 8 — Examination of Action/Conduct  
 Chapter 9 — Examination of Prior to the Moment  
 Chapter 10 — Examination of Flame/Combustion  
 Chapter 11 — Examination of Ends Before and After  
 Chapter 12 — Examination of Anguish  
 Chapter 13 — Examination of Doing  
 Chapter 14 — Examination of The Undivided Whole  
 Chapter 15 — Examination of Subjective Identity  
 Chapter 16 — Examination of Restriction/ Emancipation  
 Chapter 17 — Examination of Action/Result  
 Chapter 18 — Examination of Soul  
 Chapter 19 — Examination of Time  
 Chapter 20 — Examination of Grasping the Whole  
 Chapter 21 — Examination of Coexistence and Universal Existence

**Group 4: Chapters devoted to philosophical explanations of Reality**

- Chapter 22 — Examination of the Appearing of Reality  
 Chapter 23 — Examination of Change  
 Chapter 24 — Examination of Holy Realities  
 Chapter 25 — Examination of Nirvāṇa  
 Chapter 26 — Examination of the Twelve Causes and Effects  
 Chapter 27 — Examination of Doctrine

Although when I had read the whole of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā it was obvious to me that the chapters fall into four groups, there may be some who question the four groups I have used. These groups or categories are in fact taken from Verse 2 in Chapter 1. In that verse, Nāgārjuna states the existence of catvāra pratyaḃyā, or four fundamental beliefs. These are: hetu or reason, ālambana or what is hanging down, anantara or the present moment, and tathā or reality. It is these four categories that I have used in classifying the chapters into groups.

## Overall Intent of the Work

### *1. Simple acceptance of this world*

Nāgārjuna wrote an introductory verse to the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā which he placed before Verse 1 in Chapter 1. In that verse he proclaims Gautama Buddha's message as simple acceptance of *pratītyasamtupāda*, the totality of visible, recognizable phenomena. This proclamation is of fundamental importance in understanding the central principles of Buddhism.

Later, some of the sects that sprang up in China and Japan asserted that Buddhism does not affirm the real existence of the world. However, at the culmination of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India, Nāgārjuna clearly and positively affirms this world.

### *2. Denial of subjectivity and objectivity*

In the first verse of the first chapter, Nāgārjuna denies that either *svata* (subjectivity) or *parata* (objectivity) are true pictures of reality. If we define subjectivity as a view of the world based on thought, and objectivity as a view of the world based on perception, then what Nāgārjuna is saying here is that ideas are not real existing entities, and also that things we perceive with our sense perceptions are also not real entities. We normally call things that we perceive matter, and in this verse, Nāgārjuna is saying that matter as we perceive it is not real.

These assertions are extremely important in understanding Buddhist philosophy, for when Nāgārjuna denies that ideas are real, he is also denying idealistic philosophies. And when he denies that matter is real, he is also denying materialistic philosophies. These two denials are startling when we examine them, because if we deny both idealistic and materialistic philosophies, then we leave nothing in the intellectual area that we can affirm as real. These two philosophical systems, which have been with us for thousands of years, both lose their validity.

But Nāgārjuna's denial is unequivocal; he clearly states that neither idealism nor materialism is able to explain the real nature of this world. Although human beings have been making efforts for thousands of years to explain reality with the twin tools of idealistic and materialistic philosophies, they will never achieve their goal.

Nāgārjuna says that the reality in which we exist is completely different from intellectual explanations from idealistic or materialistic viewpoints. In saying this, he is reaffirming true Buddhist theory; the teachings passed down by a small number of Buddhist Masters for two thousand five hundred years from Gautama Buddha himself.

We can find exactly the same insistence in the writings of Dogen Zenji. In *Shobogenzo Bendowa* he asserts that Buddhism is completely different from the beliefs of the non-Buddhist Senika, who was a believer in the idealistic Brahmanism of ancient India.

And he also asserts in *Shobogenzo Sansui-gyo* that Buddhism is completely different from naturalistic beliefs, by which he means the kind of materialistic beliefs that assert that this world is composed of only matter. These kind of materialistic beliefs were very strong in India at the time when Gautama Buddha was living.

So Dogen Zenji also denied both the idealistic beliefs of the Brahman Senika and the materialistic beliefs of naturalist thinkers.

From these two great Buddhist thinkers, we can conclude that Buddhism is originally based on a denial of both idealistic and materialistic thought. It was from this position that Buddhism developed a philosophy based on action. A “philosophy of action” sounds strange; how can such a philosophy exist? What is it based on? Both Nāgārjuna and Dogen Zenji expounded a philosophical structure for Buddhism based around a denial of the traditional subjective/objective dialectic. In fact they both expound a philosophy based on action. They assert that reality is not what we think it is, and not what we perceive it to be; but is in fact action at the moment of the present. And a series of moments comprises our experience of reality. They both explain the nature of reality from the perspective of present action, and affirm the identity between action and Dharma, the rule of the Universe.

### 3. *The four beliefs*

In the second verse of the first chapter of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna proclaims his belief in four fundamental beliefs (*catvāraḥpratyayā*). The four beliefs are *hetu*, or reason, *ālambana*, or objective things and phenomena, *anantara*, or the present moment, and *tathavādhipateya*, or “This—reality like a Lord.” Although he

denies subjectivity and objectivity as inclusive views of reality, he affirms the existence of four fundamental beliefs: reason, the external world, the present moment, and this world as reality. He found that it is impossible to deny the existence of one's own consciousness, of the world outside oneself, of the moment here and now, and of reality itself. But at the same time, his sharp intellect noticed that although we cannot deny the existence of the four, we cannot prove their existence either. For this reason he calls them beliefs. What is more surprising is that he strongly asserts that there exists no fifth belief. This is the mark of his confidence in his Buddhist convictions.

#### 4. Action

In the fourth verse of the first chapter, Nāgārjuna states that *kriyā*, action, is different from the four beliefs, and different from not having any belief. He recognized that existence is something much more direct and real than belief. He believed that the most fundamental, basic state of existence is action at the present moment. And from this basic belief, he developed his philosophy to embrace a description of the whole of reality.

Nāgārjuna's thoughts thus originate from, and developed relying upon, action at the present moment. I also assert that action at the present moment is the fundamental basis of the Buddhism which Gautama Buddha established.

#### 5. Dharma

In the ninth verse of the first chapter, Nāgārjuna states that action and Dharma are identical. Dharma has always been the ultimate object of worship in Buddhism, but here Nāgārjuna identifies it as the same as action at the present moment. Buddhist philosophy includes the concept of the instantaneousness of the world—that this world, Dharma, appears and disappears at every moment. If we accept that action at the present moment and Dharma are the same, then we can realize that this world, which is our action, appears and disappears at every present moment. I think that this theory is the most important in Buddhism.

#### 6. Distinction between thought and act

In chapter two, Nāgārjuna describes the difference in dimension



between thought and action. For better or for worse, human beings are endowed with unrivaled intellectual powers. Because of our excellent intellect, we sometimes mistake our thoughts for reality; that is, we take the world inside our heads to be the real world. This is the reason that some people believe that ideas are absolute truth, and believe in the absolute truth of idealistic philosophies. Other people think that what we perceive through our senses is completely reliable, and that the things we perceive are real entities; they believe in the absolute truth of materialistic philosophies. But Guatama Buddha doubted the absolute nature of both of these views, and urged us to realize what this world is really like.

This same fundamental philosophy can be found in Nāgārjuna's work, and he expounds on it in chapter two under the title "Examination of 'Gone' and 'Not Gone.'" "Gone" is recognition of an action completed in the past, and "not gone" is recognition of an action yet to be performed. In the second line of the first verse, he also introduces the concept "going," which is action in the present as a continuous process. He then goes on to assert that all of these three descriptive concepts are completely different from the actual act itself, which can only take place in the moment of the present. It is only with the greatest difficulty that modern people, with our ingrained intellectual view of the world, can see the truth of this subtle distinction. But it is just this subtle and fine distinction between what we think and what things are actually like—real action at the present moment—that lies at the heart of Buddhism.

### *7. The external world*

The five chapters from chapter 3 to chapter 7 are devoted to explanations of the external world. There are many Buddhist scholars, especially in Japan, who insist that Buddhism does not affirm the existence of this world. They do not think that Buddhist philosophy is talking about reality. However, Nāgārjuna clearly affirmed the existence of this world, although his sharp intellect noticed that it is not something that can be proven; it remains a fundamental belief. It is against this backdrop that he explains what the external world is in these five chapters.

In chapter 3, he describes the sense organs as windows on the

external world, and in chapter 4 he discusses the five skandha or aggregates. In chapter 5 he discusses the dhātu, or physical elements which Buddhism uses to explain the external world. Chapter 6 is devoted to a discussion of passion and the impassioned, rāga and rakta, as our perception of the external world is heavily influenced by our emotional state. His description, in Chapter 7, of the external world is so precise, that it is next to impossible to believe that he had any doubts about the existence of the external world.

### 8. *Philosophy of action*

Buddhist philosophy is based on action, and it is important to notice clearly that action is in a fundamentally different dimension from thinking or feeling. Of course, we can discuss action intellectually from both idealistic and materialistic viewpoints, but the real act upon which Buddhism centers its philosophy is not the same as the concept “action”; it is real action at the moment of the present. It is precisely because Buddhist philosophy is based upon real action in the moment of the present that it is so difficult to understand.

Master Nāgārjuna devotes the 14 chapters from Chapter 8 to Chapter 23 to an explanation of the philosophy of action. On reading these 14 chapters the unique philosophical standpoint of Buddhist thought that pervades the whole work is clarified. It becomes clear that the whole of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, rather than being a theoretical explanation from idealistic or materialistic bases, is a direct and exact description of the real facts in front of us, which relies on the intuitive consciousness that comes with the state of balanced body/mind, and which is called prajñā.

In Chapter 8, Nāgārjuna explains that real action at the present moment is not divided into act and behavior, into content of action and way of acting. Chapter 9 is devoted to describing the moment just before the present. Although real action exists only in the present, it is impossible for us not to think about the moment that went before the present moment. He goes on to explain, in Chapter 10, the oneness of action in the present moment by using the simile of real fire and its two component concepts; flame (form) and burning (content). Chapter 11 continues with a description of the boundaries of life; birth and death. Acknowledging their importance, Nāgārjuna goes on to

explain that they are simple facts at the moment of the present. Looking at the two events in this way as action in the present, both birth and death are seen as present states, and in that sense, not fundamentally different. The subject of Chapter 12 is anguish, which Nāgārjuna also explains as a simple fact in the present, and Chapter 13 deals with performance. In Chapter 14 he goes on to describe the oneness/totality of acting at the present moment, and in Chapter 15 he denies again that there can be any subjective awareness during action. He goes on in Chapter 16 to describe restriction and freedom, insisting that both restriction and freedom are combined into the oneness of action in the present; they do not exist as separate entities. Chapter 17 explains that in real action, there is only action, and nothing exists that can be called “result.” He denies the existence of anything called “soul” in present action in Chapter 18, and asserts that action can only take place in the present, and at this place, in Chapter 19. Chapter 20 is devoted to an explanation of the totality/undivided wholeness that is manifested in present action, and Chapter 21 describes the philosophical relationship between co-existence and universal existence in present action.

### 9. *Realization*

Nāgārjuna uses the final six chapters, from Chapter 22 to Chapter 27 to describe the ultimate state in Buddhism—the state of realization. He first explains the meaning of the word *tathāgata*, which is usually interpreted as meaning a person who has arrived at reality, or a person to whom reality has come. However, in Chapter 22 he describes the arrival of reality itself. He discusses the state of arrived reality, denying the existence of any sudden, tremendous change in this world. In Chapter 23 he goes on to explain that, as the world is existence at every moment, it is impossible to experience a sudden change of the order that is commonly connected with the words “satori” or “enlightenment.” In Chapter 24 he describes “sacred reality.” Because life is just at the moment of the present, it is important that our conduct in the present is in tune with, identified with, the law which governs the Universe. In Chapter 26, Nāgārjuna identifies our day-to-day life with *nirvāṇa*. He says that daily life is just *nirvāṇa* and that *nirvāṇa* is just our daily life. Chapter 26 is devoted to an explanation of the mutual relationship between the twelve causes and

effects, and in the final chapter, Chapter 27, he denies that doctrine has value. We usually adopt some particular doctrine and attempt to lead our lives according to that doctrine, believing it to be the truth. Nāgārjuna doubts the value of doctrine, and suggests that the most valuable thing is not doctrine, but the balanced state, which reveals the origin of everything and all phenomena that are spread in front of us.



*[Note: this Introduction is from a “work-in-progress” English translation of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. Windbell Publications Ltd. hopes to publish Nishijima Roshi’s complete translation within the next two years.]*

