

#### 1.4.B. Emptiness from the Viewpoint of Conditioned Genesis as the Middle Way

Conditioned genesis is called "the middle way" (majjhimā paṭipadā) by the Buddha because it avoids extreme views, which are mainly based on self-view (atta-diṭṭhi). Insight into conditioned genesis as the middle way is identified with "right view", and with nirvana. This is made clear at SN 12. 15:

(The venerable Kaccāyana asked the Buddha:) Venerable Sir, it is said: 'right view, right view' (sammādiṭṭhi). From what aspect it is said 'right view', venerable Sir?

(The Buddha replied:) This world, Kaccāyana, usually depends on two [extremes] (dvaya-nissito): existence (atthitā) and non-existence (natthitā).

Now, Kaccāyana, one who with right wisdom (sammappaññāya) sees (passato) the arising of the world (lokasamudayaṃ) as it really is (yathābhūtaṃ) does not hold to the non-existence of the world (loke natthitā). One who with right wisdom sees the ceasing of the world (lokanirodhaṃ) as it really is does not hold to the existence of the world (loke atthitā).

Kaccāyana, this world is usually approaching attachment, tending towards bondage (upāyupādānābhini-vesavinibandho). And one whose mind does not come to approaching attachment, obstinacy, tending towards bias (upāyupādānām cetaso adhiṭṭhānam abhinivesānusayaṃ no upeti) does not cling to, does

not insist on, not [attaching to] "it is my self" (na upādiyati nādhiṭṭhāti attā na me ti).<sup>121</sup> Then, when suffering arises, it arises; when suffering ceases, it ceases (dukkham eva uppajjamānam uppajjati dukkhaṃ nirujjhamānaṃ nirujjhatīti). One is not in doubt, is not perplexed (na kaṅkhati na vicikicchati). Here, one who is not dependent on others comes to have knowledge/insight (aparapaccayā ñāṇam evassa ettha hoti). Thus this, Kaccāyana, is 'right view'.

Kaccāyana, 'Everything exists' (sabbam atthīti), this is one extreme (eko anto). 'Everything does not exist' (sabbam natthīti), this the other extreme (dutiyo anto). Kaccāyana, not approaching the two extremes (ubho ante anupagamma), the Tathāgata (the Buddha) teaches you the Dharma by *the middle [way]* (majjhena):

Conditioned by ignorance are activities; conditioned by activities is consciousness, and so forth. Thus arises this whole mass of suffering. But by the total fading away and ceasing of ignorance activities ceases; from the ceasing of activities, consciousness ceases, and so forth. Thus ceases this whole mass of suffering.<sup>122</sup>

The content of this Pāli text is almost the same as that of SA 301.<sup>123</sup> The notion of "neither existence nor non-existence" has the same meaning as nirvana. That is, as noted in 1.3, nirvana is unconditioned and uncompounded, neither arising nor ceasing. Also, according to SA 249, nirvana is not existence (you-yu 有餘 = remainder), not non-existence (wu-yu 無餘 = no remainder), not both-existence-and-non-existence, and not neither-existence-nor-

non-existence.<sup>124</sup> This insight into conditioned genesis as the middle way does not imply attachment to the middle ground, nor does it mean being unsure about which side is right. It means to be devoid (empty) of the two extremes: the self-based view of existence and the self-based view of non-existence. And it directly implies the meaning of nirvana. In other words, "the middle way of conditioned genesis" has the same meaning as "the emptiness of nirvana".

Clearly, this approach to insight is very different from that which focuses on "impermanence (= suffering)" to eliminate self-view and thus lead to nirvana. The way of right view consisting in seeing conditioned genesis as the middle way, involves directly seeing that there is, in the nature of phenomena, neither existence nor non-existence, so as to see directly the emptiness or not-self-hood of phenomena and thus attain nirvana.

Concerning this middle way of conditioned genesis, there is raised a question linking impermanence, not-self and nirvana. According to SN 22. 90 and SA 262,<sup>125</sup> a bhikkhu ("monk") Chanda (P. Channa), who has not yet achieved the wisdom of nirvana, asks various other bhikkhus to teach him dharma (P. dhamma). They teach him that material form (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), activities (saṅkhārā) and consciousness (viññāṇa) are impermanent (anicca) and, as compounded things, are not self (anatta).<sup>126</sup> Chanda replies: I do know that material form, feeling, perception, activities and consciousness are impermanent, and being compounded things, are not self.<sup>127</sup> Nevertheless, I (Chanda) do not understand and delight when I hear of "the *calming* of all activities, renunciation of all attachment, the destruction of craving, the fading away of desire, cessation: **nirvana.**" (sabbasaṅkhārasamathe sabbhūpadhi-*paṭinissagge taṇhakkhaye virāge nirodhe nibbāne*). For the section in quote marks the Chinese SA 262 has: "the

*emptiness* of all activities, renunciation of attachment, the destruction of craving, the fading away of desire: **nirvana.**" (一切諸行空寂, 不可得, 愛盡, 離欲, 涅槃). Thus where the Pāli has "calming" (*samatha*), the Chinese has "emptiness" (空寂).

Chanda's point is that all activities (compounded things, *saṅkhārā*) are impermanent and not-self; but nirvana is not characterised by impermanence and not-self, and thus there is something, some metaphysical entity, for oneself to attain in the cessation of nirvana (the ending of suffering). If there is complete emptiness in nirvana, who then is the self? or, what is meant by the self seeing (*passati*) the dharma (the nature of phenomena)? That is, the dharma of compounded nature (*saṅkhata*) and un-compounded nature (*asaṅkhata*) are divided into two different things. Chanda admitted impermanence and not-self of compounded nature (*saṅkhata-dhamma*) as essential for the ending of suffering; but he could not admit the un-compounded nature (*asaṅkhata-dhamma*) of nirvana where all activities are empty (or "calm") of self.

Harbouring this doubt, Chanda goes to ask the venerable Ānanda. Ānanda tells him: "I heard the Buddha teach this to the venerable Kaccāyana:

This world, Kaccāyana, usually depends on two [extremes]: existence and non-existence ... (the content is as quoted above).

To resolve Chanda's misunderstanding regarding impermanence, not-self, and nirvana, Ānanda helps him to understand compounded nature (*saṅkhata* = conditioned genesis) as neither existence nor non-existence, and also as the ending of suffering: nirvana. The extreme views of existence and non-existence both come from self-view (*atta-diṭṭhi*). The extinction of self-view, or of desire, hatred, and

delusion, is the un compounded or unconditioned (asaṃkhata), nirvana itself. That is: "when suffering arises, it arises; when suffering ceases, it ceases"; there is neither arising nor ceasing, and there is neither existence nor non-existence.

To see the arising of the world (loka-samudaya) in terms of the middle way of conditioned genesis is to be aloof from the view of non-existence while not giving rise to the view of existence (eternalism); and to see the ceasing of the world (loka-nirodha) in terms of the middle way of conditioned genesis is to be aloof from the view of existence while not giving rise to the view of non-existence (annihilationism). That is, the middle way of conditioned genesis points to both the arising of the world (existence) and the ceasing of the world (non-existence): the world is of a ceasing-nature, i.e. impermanent, and it is empty of self. Hence, the world (loka), as illusion, is an unreal and an unsolid arising-nature (= ceasing-nature) and is neither existence nor non-existence. If one see this, and gets rid of self view, there is a fading way of the two extreme views, which leads to the emptiness of nirvana.

The early Buddhist texts present other characterisations of "the middle way of conditioned genesis". The following are examples.

(1) The middle way of neither sameness nor difference. SA 297 says:

Then the Buddha said to the monks: I will teach you the dharma, ... namely: '*the dharma-discourse of great emptiness*' (大空法經 da-kong-fa-jing, Skt. mahāśūnyatā dharmaparyāya) ... For one who has the view which says that *soul* (or life or self, Skt. P. jīva) is *the same thing as body* (Skt. śarīra, P. sarīra), there is no point in the noble life. And for one who has the other view which says that *soul* is

*one thing and body another*, there is also no point in the noble life. When the mind follows neither of these two extremes, one moves rightly toward the middle way, that is the noble, the supramundane, the true nature of phenomena, free of distortion, having right view, namely: Conditioned by birth are aging-and-death, and similarly conditioned are birth, becoming, attachment, craving, feeling, contact, the six sense-spheres, name-and-form, consciousness, and activities. Conditioned by ignorance, activities arise ... when ignorance ceases, activities cease, and so on ..., and this whole mass of suffering ceases. This is called '*the dharma-discourse of great emptiness*'.<sup>128</sup>

The Pāli counterpart, SN 12. 35-36,<sup>129</sup> has almost the same content, but lacks the words: "the dharma-discourse of great emptiness" (大空法經). However, as noted in 1.2 and 1.3, both traditions have other texts in which the Buddha takes conditioned genesis as the basis for teachings connected with emptiness; and he there describes the meditative state of emptiness (空三昧 kong-sanmei/suññatā-vihāra) as the meditative abode of elders or great men (上座禪住 shangzuo-chanzhu/mahāpurisa-vihāra). Thus the use of the word "great emptiness" in SA 297 to refer to the middle way of conditioned genesis is in keeping with the terminology of early Buddhism.

(2) The middle way of neither eternalism nor annihilationism. At SA 300 the Buddha says:

To declare that the one who acts is [the same as] the one who experiences [the result] is to fall into the *eternalist view* (P. sassata-diṭṭhi). To declare that one acts and another experiences [the result] is to fall into the *annihilationist view* (P. uccheda-diṭṭhi).

Teaching the essence, teaching the dharma, I avoid these two extremes. I teach the dharma of the middle way, namely: When this is, that is; this arising, that arises. Conditioned by ignorance, activities arise, ... and thus is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. Ignorance ceasing, activities cease, ... and thus is the ceasing of this whole mass of suffering.<sup>130</sup>

The same discussion of neither eternalism nor annihilationism occurs at SN 12. 17.<sup>131</sup>

(3) The middle way of neither coming nor going. At SA 335 the Buddha says:<sup>132</sup>

I will teach you dharma, ... namely '*the discourse on emptiness in its ultimate meaning*' (第一義空經 *diyiyi-kong-jing*, Skt. *paramārtha-śūnyatā-sūtra*) ... What is the discourse on emptiness in its ultimate meaning? Monks, when the eye arises, *there is no place from which it comes; when it ceases, there is no place to which it goes*. Thus the eye, being not real, arises; having arisen it ceases completely. It is a result of [previous] action (業報 *karma/kamma-vipāka*) but there is *no doer* (無作者 Skt. *akartṛka* = no self); when these aggregates (Skt. *skandhāḥ*) cease, other aggregates continue, except in *conventional dharma* (俗數法 *sushu-fa*, Skt. *Dharma-saṃketa*). The same teachings apply also to the ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, except in conventional dharma. The meaning of conventional dharma is: Because this exists, that exists; because this arises, that arises, thus: Conditioned by ignorance are activities; conditioned by activities is consciousness, and so on ... and thus arises this whole mass of suffering. And again, when this does not exist, that

does not exist; when this ceases, that ceases. When ignorance ceases, activities cease; when activities cease, consciousness ceases, and so on ... and thus ceases this whole mass of suffering. Monks, this is called '*the discourse on emptiness in its ultimate meaning*'.<sup>133</sup>

Similarly, at SA 273 the Buddha says:

... Monk, just as two hands coming together produce sound, so conditioned by eye and [visible] forms, is produced visual consciousness, and these three things together produce contact. [Conditioned by] Contact arise feeling, perception, and activities. All these dharmas (phenomena) are not-self and impermanent. This impermanent self is not eternal, not stable, a changing self. Why is this so? Monk, this is the dharma (nature) of birth, aging, death, and rebirth. Monk, all compounded things (Skt. *saṃskārāḥ*, P. *saṅkhārā*) are as an illusion, a flame, ceasing in an instant, *not really coming* (or *arising*), *not really going* (or *ceasing*). Therefore, monk, you should know, rejoice in and be mindful of this: all activities are empty; empty of permanent, eternal status, unchanging nature; not-self-and-not-belonging-to-self.<sup>134</sup>

These two texts (SA 335 and 273), both of which lack Pāli counterpart, describe the six sense-spheres as of conditioned nature and empty of self, and thus as empty of either coming or going.

In SA 335, the "conventional dharma" (俗數法 *sushu-fa*) refers to conditioned genesis, and the not-self of neither coming nor going together with the dharma of conditioned

genesis is called "emptiness in its ultimate meaning" (第一義空 *diyiyi-kong*, Skt. *parīmartha-sūnyatā*).

In my view, these two texts indicate that the cause and the effect of conditioned nature in each arising and disappearing (ceasing) moment reveal the nature (dharma) of *the passage of time*. These cause and effect in *time* are neither the same nor different, and nothing remains constant for even a single moment in the series of causes and effects.

(4) The middle way of the fourteen "non-declarations" (P. *avyākata*, Skt. *avyākṛta*). These are fourteen kinds of extreme view based on self-view:<sup>135</sup>

- (a) the world is permanent, 1
- (b) the world is impermanent, 2
- (c) the world is both-permanent-and-impermanent,
- (d) the world is neither-permanent-nor-impermanent;
- (e) the world is finite, 3
- (f) the world is infinite, 4
- (g) the world is both-finite-and-infinite,
- (h) the world is neither-finite-nor-infinite;
- (i) life (or soul) is the body, 5
- (j) life is different from the body; 6
- (k) after death the Tathāgata (the Buddha) exists, 7
- (l) after death the Tathāgata does not exist, 8
- (m) after death the Tathāgata both exists and does not exist, 9
- (n) after death the Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist. 10.

These are all considered meaningless argumentation (P. *papañca*, Skt. *prapañca*),<sup>136</sup> and not to be declared (*avyākata*, *avyākṛta*).<sup>137</sup> The fading away of all such extreme view is the emptiness of the middle way.

(5) The middle way of neither the happiness of sense-pleasures nor the suffering of self-mortification. This refers

to the practice of the middle way – the noble eightfold way (*ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*).<sup>138</sup> According to MN 139 and MA 169, the noble eightfold way, leading to the realisation of nirvana, consists in practice that approaches neither of these two extremes: the happiness of sense-pleasures and the suffering of self-mortification.<sup>139</sup>

Accordingly, the emptiness that is based on the middle way of conditioned genesis eliminates all extreme views, and the practical way is the "noble eightfold way". This is not just an idea; it is a practical philosophy of life, based on the reality of the body and mind, to develop, to see the middle way, leading to the extinction of self-view and the realisation of nirvana. In early Buddhism, nirvana is expressed only in terms of the cessation of suffering, complete emptiness of self view, or of desire, hatred, and delusion. The unconditioned or unconditioned, nirvana, is beyond all arguments about existence and non-existence (= self-view); it is pointed to by the middle way of conditioned genesis. Consequently, compounded nature (conditioned genesis) and unconditioned nature (nirvana) are not opposed to each other as contrasting entities. No wonder, then, that conditioned genesis and nirvana are said to be profound, difficult to see, and connected with emptiness.

To summarise, the middle way of conditioned genesis centres on fading way from extreme self-view and is directly connected with the meaning of nirvana. Therefore, in early Buddhism there is a deep relationship between emptiness and the right view of the middle way.

In my view, conditioned genesis connects with both the arising and the ceasing of the world (suffering), so it indicates the emptiness of both time and space by emphasising the realisation of "time" (impermanence) as not of self. The arising (implying existence) and the ceasing (implying non-existence) show *time* as arising and the ceasing and *space* as existing and not existing. From non-

existence to existence is arising, and from existence to non-existence is ceasing; or from future coming to present is arising, and from present going to past is ceasing. This arising and ceasing is *the passage of time* (impermanence) implying *the existence and non-existence of space* (the world). Thus, conditioned genesis mainly focuses on “time” as conditioned (P. saṅkhata, Skt. saṃskṛta); arising and ceasing indicate the emptiness of both time and space – neither arising nor ceasing as well as neither existence nor non-existence.

## Chapter Two: The Practice of “Emptiness” in Early Buddhism

### 2.1. Emptiness and Samatha-vipassanā (calm and insight)

#### 2.1.A. Development in both Samatha and Vipassanā

“Emptiness” (P. suññatā, Skt. śūnyatā) and “empty” (P. suñña, Skt. śūnya) have the meaning “not-self”, and it is through insight into not-self that the emptiness of nirvana is attained. Not-self is emptiness in the sense of seeing the objective world as empty of self, and nirvana is emptiness as the attainment of a mind empty of craving. The connection between these two – seeing the objective world and the attainment – is “development” or “practice” (P. Skt. bhāvanā). Bhāvanā is the way (P. magga, Skt. mārga) to liberation (P. vimutti, Skt. vimukti), and emptiness is essential to that way.

The early Buddhist texts indicate that the Buddha, recognising the different situations, needs and abilities of people, established various ways and practices, such as “the four settings-up of mindfulness”,<sup>140</sup> “the four right efforts”,<sup>141</sup> “the four factors of psychic power”,<sup>142</sup> “the five faculties”,<sup>143</sup> “the five powers”,<sup>144</sup> and “the seven factors of enlightenment”,<sup>145</sup> but in the early stages of Buddhism, the foundation of the way of liberation or bhāvanā is the “noble eightfold way” (ariya-aṭṭhaṅgika-magga).<sup>146</sup>