



Report on Madhyamaka Studies at the 17th Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies in Vienna

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This is a summary report of the presentations on Madhyamka presented during the 17th Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies. The congress was organised by the International Association of Buddhist Studies and University of Vienna and held from 18 August to 23 August 2014 in Vienna, Austria. Out of the nearly 400 presentations submitted at the congress, a selection of presentations related to Indian Madhyamka studies will be given here. The presentations were spread across three panels and five sections. The purpose of this report is to provide an outline of their content.

This selection of papers is by no means comprehensive. For instance, I have omitted numerous excellent presentations regarding the reception of Madhyamaka in Tibet and China, as well as presentations about late Indian Madhyamaka and its associations with Tantric Buddhism. I focused instead on papers presenting the Madhyamaka of Nāgārjuna, Bhāviveka, Candrakīrti and Jñānagarbha. Moreover, some papers regarding Madhyamaka were presented in parallel sessions, and thus it was (physically) impossible for me to attend all of them.

The report begins with a summary of papers offered in three panels: Buddhist Theories of Causation; Pramāṇa across Asia: India, China, Korea, Japan; and Riding the Yoked Necks of the Lions of the Middle Way and Epistemology. Then it presents papers from the following sections: Abhidharma Studies; Buddhist Philosophy of Mind; Epistemology and Logic in Buddhism; Mahāyāna Buddhism; and Schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The order of the papers presented here resembles the succession of papers given at the congress. The report ends with a short summary of discussed topics and a modest

observation on the course of Madhyamaka studies nowadays.

In the panel “Buddhist Theories of Causation” Sonam Thakchoe (University of Tasmania, Hobart, Australia) argued that Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka accepts the thesis that empty phenomena are causally effective, and that Candrakīrti endorsed a non-foundational/non-essential type of causality. The following discussion regarded the nature of Thakchoe’s non-foundational causality and a general question regarding the ontological commitment of the Madhyamaka.

In the panel “Pramāṇa across Asia: India, China, Korea, Japan” Shoryu Katsura (Ryukoku University, Kyoto, Japan) presented a structure of the *Fangbianxinlun* (方便心論, T 1632). The text is traditionally attributed to Nāgārjuna and is currently under the process of translation into English by Katsura and Bernard Gillion (McGill University, Montreal, Canada). Prof. Katsura focused on the characteristic of logical proof (*prayoga*) as presented by author of *Fangbianxinlun* and on the role of the text in the development of Indian logic. The next paper in the panel was delivered by Karen Lang (University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA) concerning Candrakīrti’s argument against Mīmāṃsaka’s opponent in Candrakīrti’s commentary on *Catuhśataka* 5.23. As argued, Candrakīrti was aware of the logical standards of the debate elaborated by Naiyāyikas and Dignāga, which in turn shows the wider context of the development of *prāsaṅga* argumentation.

In another panel “Riding the Yoked Necks of the Lions of the Middle Way and Epistemology” Anne MacDonald (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna, Austria) shared the results of her work on Candrakīrti’s *Prasannapadā* and *Catuhśatakaṭīkā*. The conclusion she drew was that the theory of *pratya-kṣa* presented by the “logical school” of Dignāga, and generally Dignāga’s notion of a valid argument is, according to Candrakīrti, deeply flawed. It is also worth mentioning that MacDonald has recently published an extensive and admirable two-volume translation of the first chapter of Candrakīrti’s *Prasannapadā*.¹ The following paper in the panel was given by Ritsu Akahane (Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia, Vienna, Austria) who asked how we can grasp the conventional truth. As demonstrated by Akahane, the answer to this question given by Jñānagarbha’s in his *Satya-*

¹Anne MacDonald, *In Clear Words The Prasannapadā, Chapter One*, Vol. I: *Introduction, Manuscript Description, Sanskrit Text*, Vol. II: *Annotated Translation, Tibetan Text*, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna 2015. Due to the support from the Austrian Sciences Fund the book is available in Open Access and can be downloaded [here](#) (access 13.04.2015).



dvayavibhaṅgavṛtti was modelled on the theory of *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna* presented in Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛtti* and *Pramāṇaviniścaya*. This in consequence shows an influence of Dharmakīrti theories on Jñāna-garbha's Madhyamaka.

In the section "Abhidharma Studies" Goran Kardas (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia) commented on papers by Richard H. Robinson and Richard Hayes.² According to Kardas, fragments of **Abhidharmamahāvibhāśāsāstra* (阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論卷第, T 1545) support thesis that the Abhidharmika's meaning of the term *svabhāva* was, contrary to Robinson and Hayes, the same as its meaning in Nāgārjuna's writings.

In the session "Buddhist Philosophy of Mind", which drew attention not only because its relevance to the Madhyamaka studies but also due to its importance for the Indian philosophy of mind in general,³ Christian Coseru (College of Charleston, Charleston, USA) argued that Candrakīrti's critique of *svasaṃvedana* ignored the phenomenological aspect of consciousness and, more problematically, cannot solve the so-called binding problem, i.e. how different mental contents are combined into a single experience. Mark Siderits (Seoul National University, Seoul, South Korea) argued against Coseru and in favour of Nāgārjuna-Candrakīrti's view that consciousness is not self-aware basing his arguments on findings in cognitive science.

In another session "Epistemology and Logic in Buddhism" I gave a paper about the possible extension of Graham Priest's FDES calculus over *svātantra* arguments. As I reasoned, paraconsistent representation of these arguments is problematic in the face of the fact that according to Bhāviveka there can be no proof for an incoherent thesis. Moreover, FDES renders formal problems regarding the representation of *prasāṅga* reasoning because it cannot make sense out of typical *ad absurdum* inference. In the same session, Laura Guerrero (Utah Valley University, Utah, USA) argued that Madhyamikas and Yogācārins share the metaphysical global antirealist assumptions. This in turn forces them to present an account of conventional truth that is a normative concept. In the end, Yogācāra's antirealism serves this purpose better.

In the session "Mahāyāna Buddhism" Shaoyong Ye (Department of South

²Richard H. Robinson, *Did Nagarjuna Really Refuted All Philosophical Views?*, "Philosophy East and West" 1972, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 325–331, Richard P. Hayes, *Nāgārjuna's Appeal*, "Journal of Indian Philosophy" 1994, Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 299–378.

³A more detailed report on this session was given by Elisa Freschi on [her blog](#) (access 13.04.2015).



Asian Studies, Peking University, Beijing, People's Republic of China) presented an interpretation of Nāgārjuna's philosophy in which *svabhāva* is understood as a referent of a concept. Because there is no direct way to prove the existence of the referents, Nāgārjuna's refutation of *svabhāva* is a refutation of the mental images of things and not the things themselves.⁴

In the session "Schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism", last but not least, Jan Westerhoff (Oxford University, Oxford, United Kingdom) presented a consistent and appealing nihilistic interpretation of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. According to Westerhoff, Madhyamaka nihilism is a combination of eliminativism, i.e. a thesis that some sort of entities do not exist, and non-foundationalism, i.e. a thesis that the (alleged) hierarchy of existence does not possess the lowest level.⁵

To sum up, the numerous papers regarding Madhyamaka presented at the 17th Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies aimed at setting Madhyamikas among their fellow philosophers. Topics such as conventional/ultimate truth and the structure of the Madhyamikas' arguments were most widely discussed. This is also true, although with some differences, for papers on Tibetan and Chinese Madhyamaka. The participants of two panels, "Pramāṇa across Asia: India, China, Korea, Japan" and "Riding the Yoked Necks of the Lions of the Middle Way and Epistemology", presented insightful observations about the historical and philosophical relations between Madhyamaka philosophy and Dignāga/Dharmakīrti epistemology and logic. Taking a longer view, the Madhyamaka studies tend to be more about the nature and the form of Madhyamaka arguments than about their content.

Note about the author

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⁴I would like to take this opportunity to thank Shaoyong Ye for sharing a draft version of his paper with me.

⁵More about Westerhoff's interpretation can be read in his article *On the Nihilist Interpretation of Madhyamaka* forthcoming in "Journal of Indian Philosophy".

