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The Middle Way

1. By definition, something is independent, intrinsic, or absolute only if it does not depend on anything else; it must have an identity that transcends its relations.

2. Nothing in our experience can be found that satisfies this criterion of independence or ultimacy. The earlier Abhidharma tradition had expressed this insight as codependent arising: nothing can be found apart from its conditions of arising, formation and decay.... Nagarjuna took the understanding of codependence considerably further. Causes and their effects, things and their attributes, and the very mind of the inquiring subject and the objects of mind are each equally codependent on the other. Nagarjuna's logic addresses itself penetratingly to the mind of the inquiring subject...to the ways in which what are actually codependent factors are taken by that subject to be the ultimate founding blocks of a supposedly objective and a supposed subjective reality.

3. Therefore, nothing can be found that has an ultimate or independent existence. Or to use Buddhist language, everything is "empty" of an independent existence for it is codependently originated.

Why should it make any difference at all to experience? One might say, So what if the world and the self change moment to moment -- whoever thought that they were permanent? And so what if they are mutually dependent on each other -- whoever thought they were isolated? The answer...is that as one becomes mindful of one's own experience, one realizes the power of the urge to grasp after foundations -- to grasp the sense of foundations of the real, separate self, the sense of the foundation of a real, separate world, and the sense of foundation of an actual relation between self and world.

It is said that emptiness is a natural discovery that one would make by oneself with sufficient

mindful/awareness -- natural but shocking. Previously we have been talking about examining the mind with meditation. There may not have been a self, but there was still a mind to examine itself, even if a momentary one. But now we discovered that we have no mind; after all, a mind must be something that is separate from and knows the world. We also don't have a worlds. There is neither an objective nor subjective pole. Nor is there any knowing because there is nothing hidden. Knowing sonyata [emptiness]... is surely not an intentional act. Rather (to use traditional imagery), it is like a reflection in a mirror -- pure brilliant, but with no additional reality apart from itself. As mind/world keeps happening in its interdependent continuity, there is nothing extra on the side of mind or on the side of the world to know or be known further. Whatever experience happens is open (Buddhist teachers use the word exposed), perfectly revealed just as it is.

We can now see why Madhyamika is called the middle way. It avoids the extremes of either objectivism or subjectivism, of absolutism or nihilism. As is said by the Tibetan commentators, "through ascertaining the reason -- that all phenomena are dependent arisings--the extreme of annihilation (nihilism) is avoided, and the realization of dependent-arising of causes and effects is gained. Through ascertaining the thesis -- that all phenomena do not inherently exist -- the extreme of permanence (absolutism) is avoided, and realization of the emptiness of all phenomena is gained."

Sources

Excerpt from "The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience" from the book "The Middle Way" by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson & Eleanor Rosch (pp. 224-226)