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ANALYSIS OF WORD AND MEANING
IN MĀDHYAMIKA PHILOSOPHY

Language is considered to be the carrier of thoughts and concepts. When the language performs the job of carrying the thoughts and concepts, it carries a heavy burden with it in the sense that sometimes the words, that are used in a language conceal more than what they intend to reveal. Thus we find that the language is a poor instrument of carrying our thoughts and concepts. Language plays a very important role in any system of philosophy but as far as the usage of language is concerned, the language occupies a very peculiar position in the Mādhyamika system of Buddhist philosophy. Guenther says about the usage of language: «Any discussion of any topic involves the usage of language, whether written or spoken, and a language, in the narrow sense of the word, is made of words. Words themselves have no meaning, but acquire meaning through their use in a specific task field. In this usage both stipulative and reportive definitions fuse imperceptibly. The important point to note is that it is always the task that determines in which sense we are going to use a word, either by selecting one of the several meanings which are already attached to the word we are going to use on the occasion, by stipulating a meaning that it felt to be more precise and clearer than it already has, or by inventing a new word because we do not find one in existence for some meaning we have in mind. Never is the language and its use

something mechanical»¹. The main theme of the paper is to analyse this very peculiarity of language in the wider framework of the Mādhyamika system.

Three different meanings of a word

- i) One is that what a word means is the thoughts, feelings or images that its utterance evokes in one's mind (ideational theory of meaning). The only mental state that seems to be always present in such a case is simply that of understanding what the word means. And this last phrase itself uses the word "meaning" so it cannot be used to tell us what meaning is.
- ii) Another meaning is that what a word means is its tendency to produce in its hearers a certain type or behaviour or at least a tendency onward such behaviour (behavioural theory meaning).
- iii) Third meaning of a word refers to the things in the world (the referential theory of meaning). Instead of saying that all words refer, it would be preferable to say that each word functions as a tool that is used to do something or perform some job in communication. C.S. Vyas observes in connection with a word: «Words spoken in perceptual judgement belong to the common repertoire of words and concepts understood in a linguistic community; they are a far cry from the things as they are in themselves. It is human predicament without names or words, we cannot talk about what we cognise in perception, while words or concepts are not writ large or small on the objects of perception (*svalakṣaṇa*)»². Satkari Mookerjee also makes a similar statement with regard to the usage of a word: «The Buddhist too believes that import of a word is a subjective idea hypostatized as an objective fact, but this objectivity is a purely intellectual construction and is an ungrounded illusion, because it is neither subjective nor objecti-

1. GUENTHER, HERBERT V., *Tibetan Buddhism in Western Perspective*, introduction, (Dharma Publishing, California, 1989), pp. viii, ix.

2. VYAS, C.S., *Buddhist Theory of Perception*, (Navarang, New Delhi, 1991), pp. 42-43.

ve, but a fiction, pure and simple»³. Mervyn Sprung also observes with regard to the cognitive function of language: «This is the crux, and the Mādhyamika answer turns on its denial of the cognitive function of language, whether in its ordinary use or in a putatively higher philosophical and religious use. They are bluntly, no entities to which words refer»⁴. Normally it is believed that we use words to indicate the ordinary mundane, phenomenal objects of the world; but as a matter of fact when we use language, we use the words to give a concrete shape to our mental constructs, which are imaginary and illusive. They do not refer to any real things, which appear to be real in the very first instance. Janice Dean Willis says about the ordinary beings when they use the language: «Ordinary beings, we are told, perceive only the phenomenal aspects of objects, their knowledge is conditional by the foregone conclusion that entities exist just as they are expressed; i.e., that names accurately characterize the nature of things named»⁵. Whenever we are using language for expressing our mental reconstructs (*vikalpa*), we superimpose the false meanings on them. This may be explained by the usage of a simple word “table”. We find that there are hundred types of tables in the world; there might be a table in any part of the world which may be having only three legs; normally all tables are four legged; some tables might be having a very small top whereas others might be having a very large top on them. But see the beauty of the language which has provided only one word for all types of

3. SATKARI MOOKERJEE, *The Buddhist Theory of Universal Flux*, (Motilal Benarsidas, Delhi, 1993), p. 112.

4. MERVYN SPRUNG, *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1979), p. 17.

5. JANICE DEAN WILLIS, *On Knowing Reality, The Tattvārtha Chapters of Asanga's Bodhisattvabhūmi*, (Motilal Benarsidas, Delhi, 1982), p. 7; Cf. (i) also Janice, “As mentioned above, because ordinary beings use language in a careless – though habitual and conditioned – way, such ‘worldly ones’ continually fall into the error of assuming that names accurately characterize the essential nature of the things named”. *Ibid.*, p. 83. Cf. also Janice (ii) “Ordinary beings do all the time whenever they apply names to things and believe – without ever pondering the validity of their belief – that things exist just they are expressed. By so carelessly engaging in language and judgement games, we continually superimpose into things attributes and characteristics which are non-existent in fact”, p. 109. *Ibid.*

the world. When a human being of any part of the world is using the word table, he, according to his mental image of the table, uses the word (whether it may be three legged or four legged). Imagine a situation in which there might have been given as many different words for all types of the tables existing in the world. But the fact of the matter is that there is only one word given in English language for all sorts of tables.

Our mental reconstructs, when superimposed on the phenomenal objects of the world find a temporary base for expressing our concepts or images but a mental image, which is permanently stored in our minds is a reality, which is expressed by a simple word known as "consciousness" (*viññāna*). According to one school of Buddhist philosophy this consciousness is an essential reality.

The early Pāli canonical literature and more so the Vaibhāṣika refers to a term, i.e. *attha-patisambhidā* in the sense of meaning of what is spoken. Thus we read: so *tassa tasseva bhāsitassa attham jānāti, ayam imassa bhāsitassa attho ayam imassa bhāsitassa attho ti: ayam vuccati attha-patisambhidā*⁶, i.e., he comprehends the meaning of whatever is spoken (such as) "this is the meaning of the sentence", "that is the meaning of that sentence", this is called the analysis of meaning. This shows that the examination of meaning probably constituted part of *attha-sambhidā*. This type of analysis of language, meaning and knowledge in the early Pāli canonical literature shows that there was a tradition of analysing the language and its meaning in the early Buddhism.

Believers in the theory of word and its meaning as real

As far as the question of word and meaning is concerned in Indian philosophy, there are various theories as to how the meaning is derived from the word. There is a school of thought of the grammarians led by Bhatṛhari which believes that there is a relation between a

6. Quoted in K.N. JAYATILLIKE, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, (Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1980), p. 311.

concept and a word⁷. According to this position there is a concept in the world and for every concept, the language has provided a word for that. Thus there exists an in-built relationship between the concept and the word. Likewise Patañjali declared in his *Mahābhāṣya* that the relationship between word and its meaning is accomplished (*siddhe śabdārtha sambandhe*). Similarly in the *Mahābhāṣya* another important statement is available with regard to the word, its nice usage, its good knowledge; according to *Mahābhāṣya* all this (knowledge and usage etc.) work as an wish-fulfilling device both in this world and another world (*ekaḥ śabdah suprayuktaḥ suṣṭhu jñātaḥ svarge loke ca kāmadhuk bhavati*). From a statement made by Yāska in connection with the meaning in a word it appears that meaning was very important for him in a word because he declares that one should always try to examine the meaning of the word by any device as such (*kenacit vṛttisāmānyena artha nityaḥ parikṣeta, Yāska's Nirukta*). Coming to the poeticians the meaning was equally important for them in a word because the famous poetician Mammaṭa declares that both the word and the meaning constitute poetry (*Kāvya*) (*śabdārthau sahitaū kāvyam*). Even the famous Sanskrit poet like Kālidāsa was quite familiar with the idea that the word and meaning are closely inter-mingled with each other (*vāgārthau iva sampraktaū, Raghuvamśa, 1.1*). The idea that the word and the meaning are closely associated with each other was deeply rooted in the minds of the Indian poeticians who postulated the four successive stages of the meaning of a word i.e., (i) *adhidā*, (ii) *lakṣaṇā*, (iii) *vyañjanā* and (iv) *tātparya*. These four stages of a meaning of the word presume that there can be a further extension of each whenever it is desired to be so. Apparently not satisfied even with these, they put forth another device i.e., *dhvani* (suggestion) when a very superior and fine poetical idea or concept is sought to be expressed in a poem. It is a well known fact that the best poetry in Sanskrit is available only through this poetic device. All the systems of Indian philosophy accept a very popular term i.e., *padārtha* (*pada* and *artha*). From what has been stated above, it is

7. *na so'asti pratyayo loke yaḥ śabdānugamāt r̥te/ anuviddhamiva jñānaṃ sarvaṇi śabdena bhāsatell Vākyapadīya. 1.123.* (ed. Khetreshchandra Chattopadhyaya, Research Institute Varanaseya Sanskrit Vishavavidyalaya Varanasi, 1963), p. 208.

quite clear that the believers in the theory of word and its meaning as real presume that there is a phenomenal object existing in the world and there is a corresponding word in a language expressing the phenomenal dimensions of a particular object.

Buddhist Point of View: believing neither in the Word nor its Meaning

As compared to grammarians and others, the Buddhist philosophers developed their own understanding of word and its meaning. They devised a very useful technique known as *apoha* (negation). According to the Buddhist philosophical systems there are two images of a word, i.e., *perceptual image* and the *conceptual image*. As a matter of fact, for all practical purposes conceptual image is of utmost importance for the Buddhist philosophers. When we see a phenomenal object of the world, we have immediately the said two images in our minds: one known as the *perceptual image* and the other one known as the *conceptual image*. The Buddhist philosophers use a device known as *apoha* for negating the object expressed by a word. *Apoha* is a negative judgement pure and simple, cow- positive fact-but in relation to a horse- a negative fact/concept. This word has a meaning in the positive concept and the negative import is a resultant cognition. The cow does not actually mean the animal with dew lap, horns etc., it means only the exclusion of all objects that are not the cow. So the import of a word is neither a subjective idea nor an objective fact and ultimately transpires to be an illusory projection⁸. R.R. Dravid says with regard to *apoha*: «Thus a word, in Śāntarakṣita's view, performs two functions- the one denoting directly the concept corresponding to it, and the other

8. Cf. (i) *vastu eva hi paramārthataḥ śabdapratyagrāhyam, ataḥ śabdaiḥ sāksāt vidhiniṣedhābhyaṃ vastusvabhāvapratipādanāt vidhir eva śabdārtha itī vidhiśabdārthavādināṃ darśanam. apohavādināṃ tu na paramārthataḥ śabdānāṃ kiñcit vācyam, vastusvarūpam asti. sarva eva hi śabdapratyayo bhrānto bhinneṣu artheṣu abhedākarādhyavasāyena pravṛtteḥ, yatra tu pāramparyeṇa vastupratibandhaḥ tatārthasaṃvādo bhrāntatve' pīti darśanam. Pañjikā on Tattvasaṃgraha, 867, 868, p. 274, Tattvasaṃgraha, (Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1984); Cf. (ii) cāpohavādinā paramārthataḥ kiñcit vācyam buddhyākāro'nyo vā śabdānāṃ śyate. bāhyam eva arthakriyākāri vastu. ataḥ samāropita eva śabdārthaḥ tat na kiñcīti na kiñcit bhāvato'bhidhīyate śabdaiḥ, Ibid., 891, pp. 285-286.*

of implying the negation of the contrary concept. This double function of words- one affirmative and the other negative- is said to be supported by our common usage. Take for example, the assertion fat Devadutta's eating during the day time. But it also affirms, by implication, his eating during the night. Affirmation and negation, according to Śāntarakṣita, are two sides of the same coin; they imply one another. The positive meaning of a word necessarily implies the negation of the contrary meaning. In the absence of such implication, the positive meaning cannot be definitely understood. Kamalaśīla holds that the apprehension of the positive and the negative meaning is not simultaneous, but successive. In the case of general words, the positive meaning is apprehended directly, while the apprehension of negative follows by implication. It must be noted that the direct meaning of words is positive for the Buddhist only in the sense that it is felt as positive. It is not really positive, i.e., an existent since it is not object of sense-apprehension. The positivity, externality attributed to the meanings of words, are, according to Śāntarakṣita is illusory. This illusion springs from the innate constructive tendency of the human intellect⁹. Among the other techniques adopted by the Buddhist philosophers is the called *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination). The law of dependent origination is used to analyse the phenomenal objects of the world. This analysis leads one to a virtual demolition of the word as well as its meaning. Yet another device known as *prajñapti* (derived name) is utilised in the Buddhist philosophy. We can understand this by a famous saying in Buddhist philosophical parlance, i.e., a flower pot could be called a table and a table could be called a flower pot. It simply means that we have given certain nomenclatures to the objects of the world for our day-to-day convenient behaviour so that there might be uniformity in our usage. When we name anybody as "person", the person thus named has no traits of his own and we are only superimposing our individual psycho-dispositional traits on him. Basically the "chariot" and the "person" have no subject-object relationship and the language used in this regard serves only a limited purpose because linguistically named objects "chariot" and "person" are depen-

9. DRAVID, R.R., *The Problems of Universals in Indian Philosophy*, (Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1972), p. 285.

dent on so many conditions. That is why they are designated as *prajñapti*, a derived name or a borrowed name. Mervyn Sprung while talking about *prajñapti* observes: «There is no entity “person” distinct from an individual psycho-physical history, though we mistakenly think that we refer to such, there is no entity corresponding to the word “chariot” distinct from axles, wheels and so on. In all such cases the noun word functions, but not by naming, not by furthering cognition, but as a *prajñapti*. *Prajñapti* becomes in Mādhyamika discussion, a technical term carrying a heavy burden of importance. I understand *prajñapti* to be a non-cognitive, guiding term which serves to suggest appropriate ways of coping with the putative realities on which it rests for its meaning and to which it lends meaning. “Person” rests on the putative reality of psycho-physical traits, “chariot” presupposes wheels, axle and so on. There is, in truth, no entity “person” and so “chariot” named by these words and hence there is entity to be recognized. This is a kind of nominalism and yet is much more»¹⁰. The three major premises of Buddhism, i.e., (i) *sarvaṃ kṣaṇikam*, (ii) *sarvaṃ anityam* and (iii) *sarvaṃ śūnyam* also reduce the words and their meanings to the position of un-reality or to non-entity. Another technique used by the Buddhist philosophers is *vikalpa* (mental reconstruct or thought construction). According to Candrakīrti this *cittapracāra* or thought construction is the innate activity of mind¹¹. Candrakīrti says in this connection that to be free of that (thought construction) is the way (things are beyond thought construction)¹².

A very important term, *kalpanā* (hypostatizing thought) is used in the Buddhist philosophical works. Dignāga has defined *kalpanā* (hypostatizing thought) in very simple words: *nāmajātyādiyojanā kalpanā* meaning a scheme which utilises name and class or genre is called *kalpanā*¹³. Basically when we are using language, we find that

10. MURVYN SPRUNG, *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way*, p. 17.

11. Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā*, on *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 18.9 (ed. Baudhabharati Dwarkadas Shastri, Varanasi, 1983), p. 159.

12. Cf. *tat rahitavāt tat tattvaṃ nirviklapam*, *Prasannapadā* on *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 18.9. p. 159.

13. Cf. For definitions of *kalpanā*: (i) *abhilāpasaṃsargayogyapratibhāsā pratīṭh kalpanā*, Dharmakīrti, *Nyāyabindu*, p. 42. also Cf. (ii) *adhilāpena saṃsargaḥ ekasmin jñāne abhidheyākārasyābhidhānakāreṇa saha grāhākāratayā milanam*, *Nyāyabin-duṭīkā*, (Sahitya Bhandar Meerut ed. Shirinivasa Shastri, 1975), p. 42.

there are so many things which are in themselves inexpressible. It is exactly here that *kalpanā* comes to our rescue and our conceptual constructions framed in our minds are expressed through words. Hattori observes in this connection: «According to Dignāga, a thing, which in itself is essentially inexpressible, comes to be expressed by a word when it is associated with a name (*nāman*) and other factors. Conceptual construction (*kalpanā*) means nothing other than this process of associating a name etc., with a thing. Dignāga classifies the factors to be associated with a thing for the sake of verbal designation into five categories: *nāman*, *jāti*, *guṇa kriyā* and *dravya*, which respectively function in producing *yadṛcchā-śabda*, *jātiśabda*, *guṇaśabda*, *kriyāśabda* and *dravya śabda*. His classification of *śabda* seems to have been adopted from the *Vaiyākaraṇas*, who classify *śabda* into four categories viz., *jātiśabda*, *guṇaśabda*, *kriyāśabda* and *yadṛcchā śabdāḥ*»¹⁴.

Functions, modes and ways of expression of kalpanā

Kalpanā is a mental process which tries to associate our mental construction with some probable words of the language; whereas words in themselves are incapable of expressing any thing. It tries to take up a shape in form of letters, adopts a particular type of sound, which contains in itself a deceptive meaning and expressing outwardly, *kalpanā* is born. With the help of this *kalpanā* people become expert in grasping a particular reference (*saṃketagrahaṇa*) afterwards¹⁵. It is therefore clear that the position of words and meanings is illusive on account of *kalpanā*'s application thereon because

14. MASAKA HATTORI, *Dignāga On Perception*, (Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 83-84, Cf. also Hattori, "Dignāga is close to the *Vaiyākaraṇas* in maintaining that conceptual construction is inseparable from verbal expression. The *Vaiyākaraṇa* theory of the inseparable relation between conception and word is clearly set forth in *Vākyapadīya*: *na so'sti pratyayo loke yaḥ śabdānugamāt itel anuvidhamiva jñānaṃ sarvaṃ śabdena bhāsatell Vākyapadīya*, 1.123".

15. Cf. *sa punaḥ sanmūreḥitākṣarākāradhvaniśiṣṭamantar mātrāviparivartīnam arthaṃ bahirivādarsayantī teṣāṃ samupajāyate, yayā paścātsaṃketagrahaṇakūśalā bhavanti*, *Pañjikā on Tattvasaṃgraha*, 1216, p. 367.

the words have no association with any thing which is *sattva*. It is a matter of common knowledge in Buddhism that all names and forms are false. This falsity of names and forms leads one to believe that anything, whatsoever has no nature of its own (*niḥsvabhāva*). Anything that exists in this phenomenal world exists only in some discrete moments of time and this discreteness of things is of great importance in Buddhist philosophy. Anything in the world is unique-in-itself (*svalakṣaṇa*). Language game is such that we use words which have no corresponding objects. It is a matter of convenience that we are using a language which is acceptable to all the members of the society as far as the mundane truth (*saṃvṛti satya*) is concerned. But when we are talking in the realm of the transcendental truth (*pāramārthika satya*), all the considerations of words and their meanings are of little importance for the seeker of the higher truth, which is known to none, because as far as the transcendental truth is concerned, the noble people maintain silence (*paramārtho hy āryāṇāṃ tuṣṇimbhāvaḥ*). From the preceding discussion we maintain that in the contemporary times of Buddha there were clearly two streams of thought as far as the words and their meanings were concerned; one believing in the permanency of the word and its meaning and the other which believed that as a matter of fact in reality neither the word exists nor its meaning. They (the Buddhists) knew fully well that both the words and their meanings were empty and language had a heavy burden of carrying or conveying the vague conceptions or thoughts or hazy images of the minds of the people, who were existing in plurality.

II

Having given above the two streams of schools concerning words and their meanings, we now proceed to examine the status of a word in some of the Buddhist philosophical works.

Status of a Word

Asaṅga in his commentary on the *Uttaratantra* suggests that people have an obsession for the nomenclatures and he treats them as

children and this obsession for the nomenclatures does not enable them to know, to experience and to have a face to face knowledge of Tathāgata. There are again people in the world who just think that the nomenclature is just a nomenclature and nothing more. This type of thinking of people becomes in fact a source of bondage for them. People really do not know that mere words do not have any phenomenal objects in the corresponding to these words. Even the objects of the world are quite misleading for people because any object which appears to be so is not the same in reality. For example, we take the case of a rope, when we go on disbanding the strands of the rope, the rope is no more visible at all. So the appearance of the rope is very much illusive apparently deceptive. As a matter of fact, all the nomenclatures for the different objects of the world are mere referential in nature and they do not serve any real purpose which they are intended to represent. They serve only a limited purpose, i.e., carrying out our day-to-day behaviour (*vyvahāra*). They are just the *prajñaptis* (borrowed word or derived words). They also serve as a mundane truth (*samvṛti-satya*)¹⁶.

Word as only a referential symbol

Words do not serve any purpose in our language usage except being only some referential symbols because to which these words refer, they do not possess those characteristics which are supposed to be present in them. For example take the case of a hand, the word 'hand' does not possess the qualities like grasping the object, which is a function of the hand. It is we who have superimposed all such functions on hand. For carrying out our day-to-day business (*vyvahāra*) these nomenclatures have been devised by the society. They are just *samvṛti* (mundane truth) and nothing else. They are also just *prajñaptis* (borrowed names or derived names). In all cases of *dharmas* (ele-

16. Cf. *yo hi saṃjñāyāṃ saṃjñāṃ parijānāti, saṃjñābandhanam eva asya tad bhavati*. Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* on *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*, 1.3, p. 18. Cf. also *atha ca punaḥ saṃjñāgrāhavinibaddhā bālā na jānanti, na praḥānanti, nānubhavanti, na sāḥ ātkurvanti tathāgatajñānam*, Asanga on *Uttaratantra* 1.12. (Satguru Publications, Delhi, ed. H.S. Prasad, 1991), pp. 23-24.

ments of existence) and all *kleṣas* (worldly suffering) the word is only an artificial nomenclature¹⁷. All the nomenclatures are artificial and all their functions are just imaginary. There is no natural relation between the word and its meaning. It is just our error that we presume that there is an external meaning attached to every word as such and there is a similar usage but in reality there is no meaning at all¹⁸. When we are using language, there is always an on-going mental process by which a hypostatizing activity takes place and this activity is a linguistic one. It creates its own meaning and hypostatizes it¹⁹. Linguistic activity is a very strange thing in the sense that through our own *vikalpa* (discursive thinking), *viparyāsa* (error) and hypostatizing activity we having come to know the (previously) seen and known (meaning or object) become attached with the nomenclatures²⁰. Ordinary beings use language with the impression that the words they are using, actually refer to some phenomenal objects of the world; whereas in all such cases we are only projecting our mental images of those objects with which we have become familiar for a place times immemorial. In all such cases sometimes we use a word with which we are not even familiar or have not seen that place at all, e.g., we frequently make a reference to the city of Moscow which we have never seen in our whole life. In cases like this every body has his/her mental image of that city and one tries to use that mental perception for

17. Cf. *yāvat eva vyavahāramātram etat nāmadheyamātram saṅketamātram saṃvṛtimātram prajñaptimātram. nālamatra pañctair abhiniviṣa utpādayitavyaḥ. Ātmabhāvaparīśuddhiparicchedaḥ, Śīkṣāsamuccaya*, (The Mithila Institute of Post-graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, Darbhanga, 1961, ed. Vaidya, P.L.), p. 137, also Cf. *sa sarvadharmeṣu sarvakleṣeṣu ca kṛtrimasaṃjñāṃ pratilabha-te. Smṛty upasthānaparicchedaḥ, 13.20 Śīkṣāsamuccaya*, p. 127.

18. Cf. *kṛtrimaṃ nāma vācyas ca dharmas te kalpitā yataḥ/ śabdārthayor na sambhandas tena svabhāviko mataḥ/ bāhyārthābhiniveśas tu bhrāntya bālasya jṃbhate/ tathāiva vyavahāro' yaṃ na tu atra artho' sti kaścan/ Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñā-pāramitā, Dignāga, Prajñāpāramitāpiṇḍārtha, 48-49, (ed., Vaidya, P.L., The Mithila Institute of Post-graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, Darbhanga, 1960), p. 266.*

19. Cf. *prapañco hi vāk prapañcayati arthān iti kṛtvā/ prapañcāir aprapañcītaṃ vākḥhir avyāhṛtam ity arthaḥ/ Cadrakīrti on Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 18.9, p. 159.*

20. Cf. *svavikalpaviparyāsaḥ prapañcaspanditais ca vail dṛṣṭāsrutamatajñāte bālā badhyanti saṃjñāyā/ Lankavatara-sūtra, Sagāthakam 10.372. (ed. Vaidya P.L., The Mithila Institute of Post-graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit learning Darbhanga, 1963), p. 131.*

expressing the nomenclature of that city. Janice Dean Willis observes in this regard: «Ordinary beings, we are told, perceive only the phenomenal aspects of objects. Their knowledge is conditioned by the foregone conclusion that entities exist just as they are expressed; i.e., that names accurately characterize the nature of the things named»²¹.

Language is used to describe certain things of the world and we express these things through words, which are sometimes incapable of describing all the possible dimensions associated with a particular object. Guenther expresses almost a similar opinion in this connection: «A description, however begins and ends with language which has the habit of making us 'conceive' objects where there are none, all this being included in the ceaseless transformation of mental life»²². While we are in the process of using the language, a certain impression is created that a word expresses a particular meaning and a verbal impression in the intellect of the people is generated. This process is further strengthened in the knowledge of the word by creating a meaningful external image and a direct visual perception of word and its meaning seems to be generated²³. It is the normal practice of the words and their meanings that at the time of usage of the word the external form of an object is produced or grasped by the intellect. By that intellect a corresponding reflexive image is directly produced in the form of knowledge and on account of its directness and its identical reflexive association with the object, the meaning of a word is appropriate and not otherwise. In reality by the words through the process of *apoha* (negation) no meaning is conveyed and no external object is even being touched by the words, and nowhere even on account of paucity of material. The term paucity of material signifies a situation of the word which lands itself into, where the word cannot do any justice to all the possible dimensions or functions of the meanings which are associated with the word. The intellectual form

21. JANICE DEAN WILLIS, *On Knowing Reality, The Tattvārtha Chapters of Aśaṅga's Bodhisattvabhūmi*, p. 71.

22. HERBERT V. GUENTHER, *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma*, (Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1974), p. 133.

23. Cf. *bāhyārthādhyavasāyinī kevalaṃ śābdī buddhir upajāyate. tena tad eva arthapratibimbakaṃ śābde jñāne sāṅgāt tad āmatayā pratibhāsanāt śābdārtho yukto nānyo iti bhavaḥ. Pañjikā on Tattvasaṅgraha*, 1011, p. 318.

or activity produced by the words only expressing the external form makes a mere reference to its form etc. In reality this intellectual activity does not touch the nature of an object²⁴. It must also be borne in mind with regard to the usage of words that they also work in some framework of time. As a matter of fact, all the words are floating in the memory of all the people of the world, but when they are put to usage by us presuming that they are conveying our concepts or ideas or our mental images to others; it must be remembered that they were never existing before our usage. When a word has been used, it will long cease to exist. The usage of the words is just like the successive presentation of a film role, these successive pictures of different objects of the world appear before our eyes just for a moment and then suddenly disappear in the next moment. It is the coherence of the successive pictures that gives us an unreal appearance of an object, which is always present in our memory. Kamalaśīla in his comments on *Tattvasaṃgraha* says: «Word that is there at the time of usage will not have been perceived before the usage, – i.e., at the time of making of the Convention relating to it; and the word that was perceived at that time will have long ceased to exist, so that there could be no usage of that word; nor is it right that there should be any usage based upon the word that was not perceived at the time of Convention»²⁵.

Words as tools of communication

Words are used in a language as tools to express or to communicate with the members of the society. In every speaker there is a desire to convey one's ideas or concepts or feelings to other members of the

24. Cf. *na hi paramārthena kaścit apohena viśiṣṭo' rthaḥ śabdair abhidhīyate. yataḥ pratipāditam etat, yathā na kiñcit api śabdair vastu saṃsprīyate, kvacit api sāmāgrī abhāvāt iti. tathā hi śābdī buddhir abāhyārthaviśayā api satī svollekhaṃ svākāraṃ bāhyārthatayādhyavasyantī jāyate, na paramārthato vastusvabhāvaṃ sprīṣati yathātattvam anadhyavasāyāt. Pañjikā on Tattvasaṃgraha, 1066-67, p. 332.*

25. Cf. Kamalaśīla on *Tattvasaṃgraha* 961-63, p. 306, *yo hi vyavahāarakālāvasthāyī śabdaḥ sa vyavahāarakālātpṛāk saṃketakāle na dṛṣṭaḥ; yo dṛṣṭas tasya ciraniruddhatvāt na tena vyavahāraḥ, na ca saṃketakāle yo na dṛṣṭas tena vyavahāro yukto' tīprasāṅgāt, p. 306.*

society. It is basically this desire which gives birth to the language which uses words as its tools. Language presumes two agents for its operation i.e., the speaker and the listener. Thus there is a chain between the speaker and the listener. The speaker tries to convey almost a similar cognition of an object, (which is there in his mind) to the listener. The listener also grasps the cognition of that object in the same manner. This process takes place by means of *adhyavasāya* (impression). Kamalaśīla says this in his comments on *Tattvasaṃgraha*: «The “Desire to speak” is present in the “Chain” of the Speaker and the “Inference” based upon that Desire is present in the “Chain” of the Hearer; the form that is connected with the two, -i.e., which figure in these – when the two persons – the Speaker and the Hearer-think of the object as so figuring – then the word comes to be applied to that external object. That is to say, though in reality what the speaker is cognisant of is what is figuring in his own consciousness, yet the he thinks that he is speaking to the other man of an external object; and the Hearer also has the impression that “this man is speaking to me of an external object” hence just as two men suffering from defective vision see two moons, so also is all this use of words»²⁶. The words are never expressive of anything and hence nothing forms the part of our intellect. Apparently what seems to be expressive through the words, it does not come into the purview of the so called referential symbols as expressed by the words. Therefore the whole behaviour of our day-to-day experience is an illusory one as experienced by two men of defective vision who see two moons. Any form of cognition is not to be expressed by the words at all. As cited above, Kamalaśīla in addition to the case of two persons suffering from a defective vision, he points out to another important reason for the words not expressing any thing at all and that it illusion. This illusion is present in the mind of both the persons i.e., the speaker and the hearer and both of them are under an

26. Cf. *vivakṣā ca vaktṛsantānavartanī tasyā eva vivakṣāyā anumitiḥ ca śrotṛsantānagateti vivakṣānumitī tābhyāṃ śliṣṭa; – tamākāraṃ bāhyatayā vyavasyator vaktṛśrōr atra bāhye pravṛttir bhaviṣyati. etad uktaṃ bhavati paramārthataḥ svapratibhāsānubhave’ pi vaktur evam adhyavasāyo bhavati, mayā asmai bāhya eva arthaḥ partipādyate. śrotur api evaṃ bhavati, mayā ayaṃ bāhyam eva pratipādayatīti. ataḥ taimirikadvayadvicandradarśanavat ayaṃ sarvaḥ śabda vyavāhāraḥ. Pañjikā on Tattvasaṃgraha, 909, p. 290.*

illusion that they are understanding the same thing as falsely expressed by the words spoken by the speaker. Kamalaśīla observes in this connection: «As a matter of fact, the form of the cognition also is not accepted by us to be denoted by words, – in view of which the impossibility of Conventions relating to that could be reasonably used against us. Because, for us, all verbal usage is purely illusory, being assumed in accordance with the notions of individual persons, – it is as illusory and false as the idea of two moons that appears in the man of disordered vision; all that is produced by words is a Conceptual Content relating to the Thing, through the arising of the Impressions of objectless conceptions; and it is the Reflection of this that is called the “Denotation” of words, because it is produced by words, – not because they are denoted (expressed) by them. – So that though, in reality, the Speaker and the Listener are cognisant of what appears in their own consciousness, – yet inasmuch as the root of illusion is equally present in both men, – just as in the case of the man with the disordered vision, – the apprehension that the two men have of the external object is similar; and yet the idea in the mind of the Speaker is that “the thing that I cognise is also cognised by this man”; the Listener also has the same idea. – It might be asked – How is the fact of both of them apprehending the same thing known to each of them? – The answer to that is that in reality it is known to them; and yet the source of the Illusion being there, equally in both, there is-as already explained by us – a mistaken usage in accordance with each man’s own apprehension, – just as in the case of the persons of two moons by the man of disordered vision. – Thus then both men having the apprehension of same thing, the making of Convention is quite possible»²⁷.

27. Cf. *na hi paramārthato jñānākāro’pi śabdānāṃ vācyatayābhīṣṭo yena tatra samketāsambhavaścodiyate, yataḥ sarva eva ayaṃ śābdo vyavahāraḥ svapratibhāsā-nurodhena taimīrikadvayadvicandradarśanavat bhrānta iṣyate, kevalam artha śūnyābhījalpavāsanāprabodhāt śabadebhyo’ rthāvasāyivikalpamātrotpādat. tat pratibimbakam śabdānāṃ vācyam ity adhidhīyate janant, natv abhidheyatayā. tatra yadyapi svasya svasya eva avabhāsasya vaktrśrotarbhyāṃ paramārthataḥ samvedanaṃ, tathāpi taimīrikadvayasya eva bhrāntibījasya tulyatvāt dvayor’pi vaktrśror bāhyārthādhyavasāyas tulya eva. tathāpi vaktur ayam abhimāno vartate – yama eva aham artham pratipadye tam eva ayaṃ pratipadyata iti. evaṃ śrotur’pi yojyam. ekārthādhyavasāyitvaṃ katham anayor vaktr śrotuḥ parasparam viditam iti cet, yadi nāma paramārthato na viditaṃ, tathāpi bhrāntibījasya tulyatvāt asty eva*

In case of cognition of the object expressed by a word, our intellect plays a very important part. Whatever forms a part of our intellect is not really expressed by the words. Our intellect superimposes our impression of an object on it and thereby giving a feeling to us that we are truly grasping that object about which there is a vague perceptual image in our minds. When our intellect is associated with the *apoha* (negation) then we suddenly come to realise that we are superimposing our perception of an object on it. In all such cases our intellectual judgement about the reality of the object is misconstrued. Our intellectual grasp of an object is very limited because in this process our judgement about the object hardly touches only some aspects associated with the object. The object as posited in our mind is much different from the external object as such. The external object has a number of dimensions associated with it whereas when it is visualised by the mind, only a weak *perceptual image* is existent there. The realm of the object as existing in our mind is much different from the realm of the object of the phenomenal world. In between these two realms there is the existence of the word. We try to take it back through our sense organs to our minds and we have our own mundane experience of the objects. But whatever is carried to our minds through our sense organs is not the true reality of the object. It is only a misguided notion about the object which is grasped by our intellect. Kamalaśīla while talking about *apoha* (negation) in association with our intellect says: «As for the Apohist, on the other hand, he does not hold anything denoted by words, or the form of the Idea, to be real. Because what he holds is that alone forms the Import of the word which appears to be apprehended by the verbal cognition; and (under the Theory under review) what is apprehended by the verbal cognition is not the form of the Idea, but the external object which is capable of effective action. – And yet the external object is not really apprehended by it, – because the apprehension is not in strict accordance with the real state of things; on the contrary the thing is accepted in accordance with the apprehension; so that the Import of words is something

paramārthataḥ svapratibhāsānurodhena taimirikadvayavat bhrānta eva ayaṃ vyavahāra iti nivīditam etat. tena ekārthādhyavasāvaśāt saṃketakaraṇam utapadyata eva. Pañjikā on Tattvasaṃgraha, 1210, p. 365.

superimposed; and what is superimposed is nothing; so in reality, nothing is denoted by words. – As for what has been said by the Apohist regarding “that being the denotation of words”, – that has been said with a view to the superimposed object. The upholder of the Theory however, regards the form of the Idea to be really denoted by word»²⁸. The words do not denote any external things. They try to give shape to our mental images or the *perceptual images* by means of the words. These words are produced out our discursive thinking. These words try to project a corresponding reflexive image of our mental framework. Except projecting our mental images of certain things the words do not perform any function as such. Kamalaśīla again commenting on *Tattvasaṃgraha* observes: «Of the words, there is no function of denoting external thing, other than the producing of the Reflection of the Conception apprehending those things; because all entities are devoid of activity. Hence when the word produces the Reflection of the conception tending to the apprehension of the external thing, it is said that, ‘it denotes its meaning»²⁹. Words do not denote anything but they are subservient to our wishes as far as their meanings are concerned³⁰.

III

The Purpose of Language in the Mādhyamika System of Philosophy

A Mādhyamika philosopher is basically using a language to explain his system of philosophy to the people who are quite ignorant

28. Cf. *na ca apohavādinā paramārthataḥ kiñcit vācyaṃ buddhyākāro'nyo vā śabdānāmiṣyate. tathā hi ya eva śābde pratyaye vyavasīyamānatayā pratibhāsate sa śabdārthaḥ. na ca buddhyākāraḥ śābdapratyayena vyavasīyate, kiṃ tarhi? bāhyam eva arthakriyākāri vastu. na cāpi tena bāhyaṃ paramārthato vyasīyate, yathātattvam anadhyavasāyāt, yathāvyavasāyam atattvāt. ataḥ samāropita eva śabdārthaḥ. yat ca samaropitaṃ tat na kiñcit bhāvato' abhidhīyate śabdaiḥ. Pañjikā on Tattvasaṃgraha, 891, pp. 285-86.*

29. Cf. *na śabdasya bāhyārthādhyavasāyivikalpapratibimbotpādavyatirekeṇānyo bāhyārthābhidhānavyāpāraḥ saṃbhavati. ato bāhiyārthādhyavasāyena pravṛttavikalpapratibimbaṃ janayantī śrutīḥ svārtham abhidhātta iti ucyate iti. Pañjikā on Tattvasaṃgraha, 1018, p. 320.*

30. Cf. *icchāmātrapatibaddho hi śabdānām artheṣu niyogaḥ. Pañjikā on Tattvasaṃgraha, 1035, p. 325.*

about the usage of the language. This thing cannot be done without the use of language. So the Buddhist philosopher uses a language to dispell the misconstrued notion of the ordinary people with regard to the objects of the world. The language used by the people is quite sufficient to explain the mundane truth (*saṃvṛti satya*) of the world. Thus there is a misconception among the people that they are truly expressing what they think to be true. In the minds of the people there are certain objects for which the world or the society has provided corresponding words for expressing these objects in an ordinary way. All this happens at the empirical level. People become habituated to this type of subjective activity of the mind. In an ordinary way it can be said that the language is a very weak vehicle for expressing our ideas. The purpose of language in the Mādhyamika system of philosophy is to provide the people an instrument by which they can successfully grasp the transcendental truth (*pāramārthika satya*). In this process first of all the false method of discursive thinking (*vikalpa*) is to be done away with. A different type of thinking has got to be developed with regard to the language usage by the people.

A question can be asked here: when in the Buddhist system of philosophy we finally presume that the words have no real meanings attached to them; how this proposition is going to help the people in obtaining the transcendental truth (*pāramārthika satya*). An answer to this very fundamental question may be proposed in the following manner. If all the people of the world continue to have their own way of false notions about the language used by them, then in that case they are only adding to their previously existing heavy load of mundane truth (*saṃvṛti satya*) and thus in this process they all develop another type of sense of false mundane truth (*mithyā saṃvṛti satya*) about the objects of the world. This again creates among them an I-sense (ego: *ahaṃkāra*). Words are just nomenclatures (*saṃjñāmātra*) and they have to do nothing with the reality as such. In their habitual process of usage in the day-to-day life people unnecessarily become attached to them (nomenclature) and this creates a bondage for them. They behave like children when they are obsessed with the usage of these nomenclatures and this way their path to the knowledge of the Tathāgata is obscured very much. This artificial usage of language on their part creates only *kleṣa* (worldly suffering) for them. To know a

nomenclature only as a mere nomenclature is a big source of bondage (*saṃjñābandhana*) to them. Asaṅga in his commentary on the *Uttaratantra* (1.25) uses three different words for the bondage caused by the obsession towards the nomenclatures: (i) *sarvasaṃjñākṛtabandhana*, (ii) *mahatī saṃjñāgranthī* and (iii) *saṃjñāgrāha*. Among all the three the second one is very significant in the sense that it is a sort of knot (*granthī*) which is tied with the personality of a man who has an obsession for the nomenclatures. Asaṅga says that in those who have become delivered from the bonds, the limitless spirit of the Buddha (manifesting itself), becomes of help to all living beings³¹. From this it appears that it is very essential for us to get away with these bondages in order to have a manifestation of the transcendental truth. Otherwise the people are never in a position to realise the emptiness of words and their meanings. When they are in a position to realise the emptiness of words and their meanings, their total behaviour towards the world becomes changed. They develop a different cultural outlook towards the world. In this gradual process of learning they come to realise that what is carried to them by means of their sense organs is not the true reality about the things. It is a very much misconstrued notion of reality which they are having in their minds. H.S. Prasad opines in this regard: «They project forms and symbols of subjective nature, and assign them wrongly the cognitive value. The uncritical and unreflective mind then tries to see cognitive meanings in them. Such meanings, according to Mādhyamika, can be shown on the above analysis as non-cognitive and thus empty in description»³². Nāgārjuna has said that quiescent is indescribable by hypostatizing thought and language (*prapañcair aprapañcitam*). The hollowness of words and their meanings as described above leads one to a particular type of silence (*śūnyatā*) by which one can devote himself to a phase of meditation. This meditational device may help one to ponder upon the transcendental truth (*pāramārthika satya*) for a while, because it is matter of realisation only and it has been pointed out in the Buddhist

31. Cf. *apaniteṣu ca sarvasaṃjñākṛtabandhaneṣu tat tathāgatjñānam apramāṇaṃ bhavati sarvajagat upaḥīvyam iti*. Asaṅga on *Uttaratantra*, 1.25, p. 24.

32. H.S. PRASAD, *Emptiness of Language and Meaning: A Mādhyamika Formulation*, (*International Journal of Communication*, V, New Delhi, 1995), p. 95.

scriptures that no exercise of linguistic activity can describe the transcendental truth (*pāramāthika satya*). The Mādhyamika suggests that as far as the transcendental truth (*pāramārthika satya*) is concerned; it is better to maintain silence.

Three stages of Language Usage

Language usage is done at three different levels by the members of the society. In the first case the ordinary people (*pudgala*) use language because they are quite ignorant about the mundane truth (*saṃvṛti satya*) and the transcendental truth (*pāramārthika satya*). In the case of second category the people use the language as they are fully aware that they are using words to express their familiar objects of the world. Here they have no choice as they are obsessed with the usage of the words in a particular manner. All people of this category carry the *perceptual image* of the object through their sense organs believing that they are grasping the object rightly and they are also aware that they know the reality of the object; whereas this knowledge of the object is a mere information about the object and nothing else. While they are knowing one object at a time, they are not at all aware of its multiple dimensions which the object is really capable of performing. This type of knowledge about the object is in reality a cause of bondage for them. The Mādhyamika understands that truly it is a case of mundane truth (*saṃvṛti satya*) but he also knows fully well that it is also a case of *mithyāsaṃvṛti satya*. There is another category of people in the society who are noble people (*āryajana*). They also use language for their day-to-day experience but they are always in search of transcendental truth (*pāramārthika satya*). They know fully well that neither the perceptual image nor the conceptual image of the object is real or true. They understand well that the words cannot express the reality about the object in any case so it is better to maintain silence when they are unable to grasp the reality about the object. This silence maintained by them is known as arresting their minds from discursive thinking (*vikalpa*). This arresting of mind from indulging in discursive thinking (*vikalpa*) is *prapañcōpaśama* which is equated with *nirvāṇa* where language has no part to play at all.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages we have tried to present a picture of the word and its meaning as it is found in the Mādhyamika philosophy. The word is just a tool for expressing our familiar ideas or concepts which occur from time to time according to the need of the hour. A number of devices adopted by the Buddhist philosophers try to exhibit the hollowness of the word as well as its meaning. In this process two situations emerge here: one in which the people feel the bondages of the nomenclatures with which they are obsessed very much, another situation in which people realising the inability of the words expressing anything simply maintain their studied silence. This latter situation helps them in arresting the discursive mental faculty by which they are able to reach a position which is *prapañcopaśama* a situation which is *nirvāṇa*. This situation further helps them to obtain an altogether different cultural attitude towards the life itself. The proposition of the Buddhists that the words and their meanings are hollow in their contents has a deeper significance in the sense that the people realising well that they cannot know the reality by means of words remain silent. Their minds become pure and free from all obscurities of the world. Thus they can devote themselves to meditational practices which can give them a solace and they in their reflexive attitudes of life while remaining silent become truly *Bodhisattva*.