



OF DECENTERING:A RUMINATION ONNĀGĀRJUNA'STATHĀGATA- PARĪKṢĀ

David Khomdram

Research Scholar (UGC-JRF) Department of Philosophy,

Manipur University, Canchipur, Imphal

ABSTRACT

The paper is a compendious summary focused on Nāgārjuna'sTathāgata-parīkṣā where he examine the notion of Tathāgata and finally reveal the true nature of tathagatha. When he indulge himself with Tathāgata, he was not simply laying down the non-inherency of Tathāgata which is also the continuity of his own arguments or simply a chapter on emptiness, but by saying so he was also trying to infiltrate the structural philosophy. This infiltration has become a fascinating point which opens up further to a more enthusiastic picture which could intensify the movement of cessation to those inglorious logocentrism, binary-opposition, inheritance of dominance and the practice of it. Nāgārjuna's projection of Tathāgata as empty, though significant, has a strong allusion – which we intend to highlight – of deconstructing the entire system through decentering. In Derrida's word, “....the center also closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible.....The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center.”¹ In Tathāgata-parīkṣā, Nagarjuna is not ready to

¹Page no 352, *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978; London, Routledge&Kegan Paul, 1978

entertain any kind of theorizing on Tathāgata because despite the naïve inclusion of the idea of existent entity, he was also not happy with the act of denominating with such compelling notion as Tathāgata. But he unveils Tathāgata to be empty and this emptying tathagatha ultimately leads to the decentering of a system where Tathāgata resides at the center.

Key words: Tathāgata, decentering, aggregates (skandhas), self-nature, other-nature.

Of Decentering: A study on Nāgārjuna's Tathāgata-parīkṣā

It is of much interest to ensure every thesis to be what it is; despite of every possible criticism that it needs to encounter, perhaps in a very conventional sense which the majority would confusingly agree. To make a genuine criticism or make a satisfactory assertion no matter where the arguments go, whatever context each of them may refer to, require a common ground for consensus among them. And this common ground of consensus also acts as a target, a point of maximum interest whose validity can be actively projected but not denominated. When I say it to be undenominated, it means the particular point may be devoid of both the traits of the oppositions or either possessing both the minimum traits. To say this means the realm of undecidables and uncertainty has always been incorporated where there is a discourse either may be formal or informal, rational or non-rational. It is strange to contrive such ground to be intelligible in the least in every possible perspective.

Thinking beyond the conventional laws of thought is not legible to be called 'thinking' from the very beginning. For instance, providing an argument, a view, and an idea has its benefit as far as they are grounded on pre-established framework of the so called thinking. But it is annoying to hear saying that the very ground consist of structural flaw and paradoxical statements or simply questioning the fundamentality of it while one is still using the signs and reasons which was already subscribed by the opposition. Such case was addressed by Derrida as "*the opposition is systematic with the reduction*".² Derrida implies that the working criticism which intends to deny the systematic structure is itself systematic in nature and therefore one is caught in a circle.

² In his book *Writing and Difference*, Derrida illustrate the paradox that the metaphysical reduction of the sign needed the opposition it was reducing. And this can be extended to all the concepts and all the sentences of metaphysics, particular to the discourse on 'structure'. (W&D)

It should be unique to hold a theory where it can be useful enough to enlarge the scope of understanding and also ripening the world view as it stands today. But the question which will instill some or few on this path with radical or denouncing views is not the validity of the ground on which everything percolates but the subscription on the view of rightness or validness when denominated by some other entity, or the concession on disagreeing the act of denominating or suspicion on the entire process of denominating. The question still continues whether the former or the latter is qualified to be called being rational. Obviously it is not of denouncing rationality by questioning it but the clear and present issue is the proper qualification of being rational. We are familiar with the traditional notion of being rational and it is true to construe that the term ‘traditional’ is reportedly the trending process and we are happy to inscribe truth and validity to it as far as the relevant incumbent society purportedly given their assent. Now the matter should transcend this categorical reaffirmation and speak of evolution on the meaning and intention of reasoning, of being rational. To say that it is a hindrance to be rational is also rational and not irrational. But this latter form of rational does not necessarily possess the same trait as earlier. It is new in the sense that it can denigrate what lies before and it is rational because we are providing sufficient reasons. It is neither similar nor disparate from the former; though it is not both it is also not the third entity. But still it is rational because I haven’t intuited it nor I felt it to be right; it came to me from not me; I might have read it or someone might have explain it to me, then I arrive at a concession that ‘this’ ought to be right, to be live by this and so on. And as far as I can convince and motivate someone to believe to what I have acknowledged by providing valid reasons, it will remain rational albeit how subtle or abstract it is.

Before we arrive at a conclusion or to infer anything legible it is inevitable to put the question ‘*what makes you so?*’ or ‘*what makes it so*’, ‘*who/what support you?*’. This should also precede any processes and events indulging in deconstructing any resultantlogico-metaphysical narratives which is generally believed to be valid in their own sense of the terms. When Nāgārjuna propose the notion of emptiness where the very notion of emptiness is itself empty, he also reclaim the decentering of the entire philosophical enterprise – specifically Buddhist when the *Tathāgata* was shown empty- where he also take refuge in doing so. *Tathāgata* has varied conceptions and interpretations throughout the Buddhist philosophy and the debate is still in progress on its existentiality, essentiality and implications it generate. However, Nāgārjuna explicitly presumes to put forward ‘what *Tathāgata* is’ in one of the chapter of MMK, it is his reflection that confront

us the idea of decentering structural philosophy. So to say, it is a powerful one and it never hesitate to drag the center in the black hole which is neither black nor it is a hole. We are familiar with Nāgārjuna's intention where every explication ought to be directed toward emptiness. This is where I interrupt to reveal that undecidability of Tathāgata and its conformation to emptiness is to take away 'what it is' and 'what it should be' and discarding it from 'where it should be'. This is to strike at the heart of Buddhist philosophy, to uproot its very foundation. But this cannot be so and Nāgārjuna undeniably argue that it is emptiness 'which is what' and 'what it is to be' when one speak of Buddhist philosophy or in any form of metaphysical assertion entailing inherent existence.

In the 22nd Chapter of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, there lies *Tathāgata-parīkṣā* (Examination of the *Tathāgata*) where Nāgārjuna speaks advertantly of the so called agent. It is a short chapter but its significance is abyssal vis-à-vis every notion of foundational thinking; of the origin and the privilege that had been prescribe throughout its historical process. In the Madhyamaka tradition this chapter had receive many commentaries and we owe them every bit. But here in this paper we are going to participate ourselves to accentuate this chapter from another perspective to support our claim and presentation. The chapter on *Tathāgata* has been generally recognized as an attempt to reveal that *Tathāgata* is empty. But this attempt is also an attempt to decenter the systematic structure which is grounded on it for the last few centuries and the centuries to come. The idea of decentering is not what other scholars would happily embrace but this thesis is oblige to accentuate it in order to demystify other things in general which I shall be doing in the next paper. The persisting general perception which held the view that any kind of extraction or deduction need to cover the entirety of it; need to systematically analyze it's denotation and connotation; the category and species to which it belong. But we are happy with a single chapter and not what he said before and after the context. The reason is strange though, but at the least it should be that we are dealing with those whose integrity does not hold the validity of metanarratives and also the inherency of everything. And they themselves deny the structurality, the compositeness and coherence of their work. Hence it would be unfair for us to make any pure deduction out of their whole enterprise.

The chapter on Tathāgata, albeit the seeming eccentricity, is highly admirable in the sense that every school of thought could track at least a picture out of it which cannot be subdue by any of the incumbent laws of thought. To simply enact what has been prescribed in the chapter, it

begins with the claim that Tathāgata is inconceivable in relation to the skandhas³(aggregates) or the conditions of existence. Since Tathāgata has its significance in other Buddhist schools as an agent, the enlighten agent, etc.who occupy the center in the Buddhist philosophy; the one who had achieve Buddhahood and thus gone(in English Tathāgata can be rendered as ‘thus-gone’); who saw us the path to nirvana.The first verse is the five-fold analysis of Tathāgata where it says:

Tathāgata is neither the aggregates nor different from them.

The aggregates are not in him,

Nor is he in the aggregates.

He is not possessed of aggregates.

In such a context, who is Tathāgata?⁴

The above verse has been commented by many scholars on their own terms. But what is alluded out of it is that Tathāgata and the aggregates is, some say, the problem of identity and differencebut the exceptional explanation which we intend to do or should do is the decentering of a system. In short, Tathāgata which is Buddha the one who teaches the doctrine of pratīyasamutpāda, the one who exists in some time, atleast a sentient being, paradoxically is undecidable in relation to the aggregates. But what can be doubted is the self-natured or the intrinsically existent Tathāgata which should be established if there is a clear assertion that it is distinct from the aggregates. And unless it is distinct from the aggregates it cannot attain the status of a transcendental entity. Also, he cannot be in possession of them because this would contradict the virtue of Buddhahood. It is at best to resume towards the uncertainty of Tathāgata. Now, if Tathāgata has that idea of an agent then at least we can presume it to be existing depending upon the aggregates which implies that it is devoid of self-nature, it further implies that without self-nature the idea of an existing ‘self’vanishes or it is selfless.⁵ Thus without self the idea of an agent loses its significance. Again the absence of self-nature also hints the absence of ‘self-nature of the other’which is the other-nature on which the selfless depend. Now the

³Skandhas or aggregate are the five necessary designation of a sentient beings they are: material form, feeling, perception, dispositions, and consciousness

⁴Kalupahana, David 1. (1986).*Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*. Albany: State University of New York Press

⁵ In the second verse of the chapter Nāgārjuna says, “If Buddha were to be dependent upon the aggregates, he does not exist in terms of self-nature. He who does not exist in terms of self-nature, how can he exist in terms of other nature?”

Tathāgata is trap in a confusing note; without both self-nature and other-nature the locus has been lost.

In order to heal the above situation one can assume that Tathāgata might be Tathāgata because of the non-dependence or non-grasping of the aggregates. But, to be alive now, to be a matter of our discourse, to be the enlightened one, he should depend upon the aggregates to be present as he is/was.⁶ Since Tathāgata has been grasped at least by his followers which implies that he is dependent upon the aggregates, there is no chance of him to be an independent entity – like atman - because that would not allow us to grasp him. Now Nāgārjuna point out the next liability:

There is no sphere of non-grasping, nor is there something as grasping.
Neither is there someone who is without grasping. How can there be a *tathāgata*?⁷

In the above discussion we claimed that Tathāgata should be grasped but also we had assumed that Tathāgata is Tathāgata because of non-grasping of the aggregates. Again there is no-one who is devoid of grasping. With the inevitability of grasping, it is found that this grasping which is instrumental here is not in terms of self-nature; it is the grasping of something without the aggregates; it is the grasping of something which does not exist in the form of a different identity when observed and analyzed through fivefold manner. Thus grasping itself is not found in terms of self-nature or in terms of other nature (which is already empty) and the inevitability of grasping is lost.⁸ Therefore there is no possible way to establish Tathāgata through grasping; an empty thing cannot be asserted by something empty.⁹ Now Nāgārjuna, with all this rigorous argument, reminds and warns us that:

"Empty," "non-empty," "both" or "neither" -these should not be declared. It is expressed only for the purpose of communication.¹⁰

To this verse David J. Kalupahana gave a convincing explanation. He says, “Nāgārjuna is rejecting any theorizing regarding either the ‘empty’ or the ‘non-empty’ or both or neither.

⁶ MMK, Chapter 22, verse-4

⁷ MMK of Nāgārjuna, trans. By David J. Kalupahana, page no. 305

⁸ MMK, Chapter 22, verse-9

⁹ MMK, Chapter 22, verse-10

¹⁰ MMK of Nāgārjuna, trans. By David J. Kalupahana, page no. 307

Neither the empty nor the non-empty should be reified. These terms are used only for the sake of communicating or expressing an experience which, being dependent (*pralīyasamutpanna*), has no static self-nature (*svabhava*), and as such cannot be demarcated and reified.”¹¹When Nāgārjuna uses the word empty, he was not trying to assert something but to project the impossibility of something to exist inherently.

Now the general notion of understanding with regard to eternity or non-eternity and its remaining tetralemma, finite or infinite and its associated tetralemma, which many other schools had privileged themselves in trying to establish of, are inapplicable in tathagata which is empty. And again those who strongly held that Tathāgata ‘exist’ or ‘not exist’ shall still continue to do so even if Tathāgata has been extinguished.¹²Tathāgata having been attained nirvana and thus empty in terms of self-nature, it is not appropriate to hold such view of existence or non-existence. And those who are deceived by hypostatization fail to see Tathāgata.¹³Nāgārjuna’s last verse on this chapter is an attempt to widen the scope of Tathāgata by directly referring to the universe or the world and which he intends to demystify it as empty as the Tathāgata.

As it is provided in the above discourse on Nāgārjuna’s explanation of Tathāgata in his chapter on *Tathāgata-parīkṣā*, what he had optimally focused was the allusion of an agent when one articulates Tathāgata among themselves and others. With the vague interpretation of “thus-gone” or “thus-come”, both albeit its differences is undeniably incorporated with an agent/self/being which is not merely an agent among others but also it stands as the foundation of Buddhism indicating the one who has gone along the path of enlightenment or the one who had arrived to enlighten us with Buddhist doctrine. And it never ends here; it occupies the central position in Buddhist philosophy; the originator, the orator, the one who teaches the doctrine of *pratīyasamutpāda* etc. One of the few reasons is that the Buddhist presupposes Buddha and without Buddha and his doctrines, the permutation and combinations that occur within the system, is unthinkable. This is discretionary to hold this view and it is presume to be as it is until an event is found, an event that hinders the centrality of Tathāgata, which does not have the slightest tendency to replace it. Some of the schools of Buddhist thought are inclined to selfhood

¹¹ MMK of Nāgārjuna, trans. By David J. Kalupahana, page no. 307,308

¹² MMK, chapter 22, verse-14

¹³ *Ibid.* verse-15

of Buddha, the agency that contemplate and teaches, so much that they are happy with the systematic construction of their school and also projected every possible view of substantiality and inherency and then with the absolute conception of Tathāgata. It also presupposes the metaphysical foundation of Buddhism which is and ought not to be if there is reference to the doctrines of Buddhist philosophy.

It is obvious that Nāgārjuna promotes the constitutional invalidity of Tathāgata but our contention here is, while he unsubstantiated the notion of Tathāgata, there is also an implication which provoke the decentering of the assertive nature of entire Buddhist tradition. If we delve deeper it is the process of deconstruction, but Nāgārjuna's unanimity towards deconstruction can be trace and treated some other time. Now and henceforth, I consider this event of decentering or rupture of structurality or foundation of a system could be the first (though it may be different for others) step towards the surcease of any form of binary oppositions. To explicate further, oppositions are generated within and from the system through which they received their 'titles and nominations' or 'purpose and nature'. But if the very system is foundationless, it is devoid of any center, if it is flawed with emptiness, the task would be much easier to dynamite what it precipitated (binary oppositions and its different avatars) and also the entire process of procreation. This is the reason why we are concentration around Nāgārjuna's Tathāgata. And it should be the first step to reveal what lies beneath superficiality and behind the adjunct, a true homecoming to unchain from the fetters of certain preeminence.

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