

CHAPTER VII

The Poetics of the Path: Bhāviveka's *Tattvāmṛtāvatāra* ("Introduction to the Ambrosia of Reality")

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To explore the significance of the Buddhist path in the tradition of the Indian Mahāyāna, a natural place to turn would be Śāntideva's well-known *Bodhicaryāvatāra* ("Introduction to the Practice of Awakening"). This text has been well translated and has been the subject of extensive commentary, not only in scholarly circles, but also among contemporary practitioners. To take a step further in the history of the tradition, one could open up the pages of Kamalaśīla's *Bhāvanākrama* ("Stages of Practice") and Atiśa's *Bodhipathapradīpa* ("Lamp for the Path of Awakening"). Both of these texts had wide influence on the path literature of Tibet, most notably Tsongkhapa's great treatise on the *Lam rim chen mo* ("Stages of the Path"). To understand the antecedents of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, one could turn to Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra* ("Introduction to the Middle Way"). This text has been less widely studied, but it too had great influence in Tibet, and it is likely to have more impact on contemporary Buddhist scholarship as its Sanskrit text becomes more widely available.¹

In this essay I would like to focus on another text in this distinguished lineage, one that is not as widely known but that predates all the texts that I have just mentioned. This is Bhāviveka's *Tattvāmṛtāvatāra*, which can be translated as "Introduction to the Ambrosia of Reality." Bhāviveka's *Tattvāmṛtāvatāra* now comprises the first three chapters of his *Madhyamakahrdayakārikāḥ* ('Verses on the Heart of the Middle Way'; hereafter MHK), but there are reasons to believe that these three chapters were originally conceived as a

¹ As in Li 2015.

separate work.² The text is now available for study in both Sanskrit and Tibetan versions, edited by Heitmann in MHK (1998). In effect, it is the first of the great Madhyamaka “introductions,” and it deserves study for that reason alone. But it also is an accomplished work of literature. Its metaphors are richly developed; its language is thick with literary allusions; it has a sharp philosophical edge; and it explores the narrative structure of the path with unusual sensitivity. In this essay I would like to show how the narrative structure of the text (what in Aristotle’s *Poetics* is called its *muthos*)³ is reflected in the metaphorical texture of its language, and how both its narrative structure and the character of its metaphors can give us a rich and varied picture of what it means to follow a distinctively Mahāyāna path.

1. The Narrative Structure of the Bodhisattva Path

When a reader comes to Bhāviveka’s *Tattvāmṛtāvatāra* for the first time, especially with the later “introductions” by Śāntideva and Candrakīrti in mind, Bhāviveka’s text seems utterly conventional. As is common in such texts, Bhāviveka begins with homage to the Buddha, designated in this case as “the Teacher who spoke the truth.” Then he moves on to state the topics of his three chapters: “not relinquishing the awakening mind,” “taking the vow of an ascetic,” and “seeking the knowledge of reality.”⁴

mahābodhau kṛtadhiyām parārthodayadīkṣayā |
tattvāmṛtāvatārāya śaktitaḥ kiṃcid ucyate || (1.4)

For those who aspire to great awakening, vowing to benefit others, I say a few words, as far as possible, to introduce the ambrosia of reality.

² V. V. Gokhale (1972) was the first to suggest that the first three chapters were composed separately. More recent scholarship on the Tibetan transmission of this text (He and Kuijp 2014) has shown that the relationship between these three chapters and the rest of the work is more uncertain and complex.

³ Following the translation in Halliwell 1998: 23–24.

⁴ All quotations from the Sanskrit and Tibetan texts of the *Madhyamakahrdayakārikā* chapters 1–3 are taken from Heitmann 1998. Translations of the first chapter are informed by V. V. Gokhale’s original study of this text in Gokhale 1985. Translations of verses in chapter 3 are either original or adapted from those in Eckel 1994.

bodhicittāparityāgo munivratasamāśrayaḥ |
tattvajñānaiṣaṇā ceti caryā sarvārthasiddhaye || (1.5)

Not relinquishing the awakening mind, taking the vow of an ascetic, and seeking the knowledge of reality—this practice is meant to accomplish all [human] goals.

With the content of the three chapters in view, he takes on the role of a commentator and expands on the meaning of the first term on the list, the “awakening mind” (*bodhicitta*):

bodhicittam mahāmaitrīkaruṇājñānabhūṣaṇam |
buddhabījaṃ yato vidvān tadatyāgāya yujyate || (1.6)

The awakening mind is adorned by great benevolence, compassion, and knowledge; since it is the seed of buddhahood, a wise person should strive not to relinquish it.

How does someone put the awakening mind into practice? Bhāviveka answers in the next two verses:

dhīmatā sattvamahatā paraduḥkhāsahiṣṇunā |
samyagārabdhavīryeṇa yuktaṃ śaktimatā satā || (1.7)
lokam ālokyā sakalaṃ prajñālokatiraskṛtaṃ |
saṃsārāmedhyapātālāt tīrtvā tārayituṃ svayam || (1.8)

A wise person who is capable and intelligent—one who has strength of character, cannot bear the suffering of others, and acts with the true courage—should see that the whole world has lost the light of wisdom, and should save it, along with himself, from the foul netherworld of *saṃsāra*.

These first few verses give us nothing more than an initial orientation to the bodhisattva journey, but they already tell a great deal about Bhāviveka's intellectual style and the expectations he has for his readers. The first thing to notice is how methodical he is in elaborating his categories. The text itself has three chapters (the awakening mind, the vow of an ascetic, and the knowledge of reality); the first chapter has three topics (great benevolence, compassion, and knowledge); and the first of these topics has four aspects (saving all sentient beings, liberating them, waking them up, and taking them to nirvana). Of these four aspects, I have quoted only the first. This tendency to divide categories into subdivisions and to divide subdivisions into sub-subdivisions is certainly not unique to Bhāviveka, but he was a master of this strategy, and it stood him in good stead in later chapters, where his

classification of Indian philosophical views virtually created the genre of the philosophical compendium.

These verses also show how attuned he is to the nuances of language and to the images embedded in his words. The line *lokam ālokyā sakalam prajñālokatiraskṛtam* has the condensed musicality of Aśvaghoṣa's *Life of the Buddha*, and it demands the same attention to nuances of meaning. The Tibetan translator took *prajñālokatiraskṛtam* to mean that the world does not have the "light of wisdom" (*shes rab snang ba med pa*). This is a plausible translation, but we see in a later verse (3.297) that the world is "covered by a net of false conceptuality (*kalpanājālasamvṛtam*).” The bodhisattva sees this unfortunate situation and undertakes to lead ordinary people out of *saṃsāra*. I don't think it would be reading too much into this verse to think that Bhāviveka's first image of the activity of a bodhisattva contains a thinly veiled reference to Avalokiteśvara, who looks down with compassion, and Tārā, who "saves" sentient beings or carries them over *saṃsāra*.

But the most striking imagery in these early verses comes from another tradition altogether. Bhāviveka starts his account of the path with a reference to the bodhisattva's "vow to benefit others," but, instead of using the standard term for a vow (*praṇidhāna*), he calls this vow the bodhisattva's *dīkṣā*. One would normally think of this as a Vedic term for the consecration that prepares a person for a religious ceremony. Monier-Williams explains that it is used in the *Mahābhārata* for "any serious preparation (as for battle)." The ceremonial associations continue a few lines later when Bhāviveka refers to *saṃsāra* as *amedhya*, "impure or unfit for sacrifice." Bhāviveka exploits these associations most fully in the next chapter on "taking the vow of an ascetic." Here he depicts the bodhisattva, in the words of V. V. Gokhale, as "a fully accoutred Muni of the Brahmanical tradition—a Muni with his matted hair, deerskin, water jug, girdle, reed mat, sacrificial fire, Sun-worship, and whatnot, all of which he seems to admire, if not envy."⁵ All these are taken to be symbolic of Buddhist virtues, including the Sāvitrī (or Gāyatrī), which is interpreted as the chant of *pratītyasamutpāda*. Whether these symbolic equivalents express envy or something closer to irony is debatable. These lines were written by the same person who later said that advanced bodhisattvas worship the Supreme Brahman by "the discipline of no-worship" (MHK 3.290).

By referring to the initial aspiration as a "vow" to benefit others, Bhāviveka gives a ritual dimension to something that might otherwise seem

⁵ Gokhale 1972: 45.

to be merely a series of moral and cognitive aspirations. The ritual dimension of this vow is elaborated with particular clarity in the first three chapters of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, where Śāntideva offers "praise to the awakening mind" and embeds this praise in a practice that Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton identify as "an important and widespread Mahāyāna liturgy, the *anuttara-pūjā* or Supreme Worship."⁶ Compassion and other related concepts also function as decisive motivating factors in more traditional accounts of Buddhist lives. One thinks, for example, of the interplay of "sympathy" (*anukampa*), "compassion" (*karuṇā*), "pity" (*kṛpā*), and "grief" (*śoka*) in Siddhārtha's decision to seek release, as recounted in verses 3.43, 3.45, 5.5, and 5.6 of Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita*.⁷ Each of these terms has its own traditional echoes in Hindu as well as Buddhist sources, especially the terms "pity" and "grief." In the *Bhagavadgītā*, Krishna criticizes both of these emotions as signs of weakness. Here they are signs of the bodhisattva's sensitivity to the need for freedom from suffering. By framing this impulse in ritual terms, Śāntideva gives it the karmic weight that eventually begins to accumulate, as the path unfolds, around the practice of the bodhisattva "vows" (*praṇidhāna*).⁸ This vow not only motivates the practice of the bodhisattva, but it makes the power of the bodhisattva's compassion available to others.

As Bhāviveka indicated in his opening verse, his first two chapters on the aspiration and the initiation of the bodhisattva set the stage for his discussion of "the quest for knowledge of reality" in chapter 3. With its analysis of the different categories of Indian thought, this chapter is the one that most appeals to students of Buddhist philosophy, not just for its classification of con-

⁶ Crosby and Skilton 1996: 9.

⁷ See Olivelle 2008.

⁸ The vows begin as an expression of the Supreme Worship in verse 3.6: "With the good acquired by doing all this as described, may I allay all the suffering of every living being" (*evaṃ sarvaṃ idaṃ kṛtvā yaṃ mayāsāditam śubham | tena syāṃ sarvasattvānām sarvaduḥkhaṇapraśāntikṛt ||*) and it is brought to its culmination in the final chapter on the dedication (*pariṇāmanā*) of merit, as, for example, in verse 10.2: "Through my merit may all those in any of the directions suffering distress in body and mind find oceans of happiness and delight" (*sarvāsu dikṣu yāvantaḥ kāyacittavyathātūrāḥ | te prāpnuvantu matpuṇyairiṣṭaḥ sukhaṃ prāmodyasāgarān ||*) (translation quoted from Crosby and Skilton 1996: 20 and 138). For more on the significance of the bodhisattva vow in Madhyamaka tradition, see Eckel 1994: 73–94, and Crosby and Skilton 1996: 133–137.

cepts and categories, but for its distinctive application of Dignāga's three-part inference. But this chapter too is framed as a form of practice:

*abhiyujyeta medhāvī samādhānāya cetasaḥ |
tathā śrutamayajñāne tadanyajñānahetutaḥ || (3.14)*

A wise person should practice mental concentration, and also knowledge that comes from hearing, because it is the cause of other knowledge.

*na paśyati yathā vaktraṃ kauṣapracale jale |
tathāsamāhite citte tattvaṃ nivaraṇāvṛte || (3.15)*

Just as you cannot see your face when water is muddy or turbulent you cannot see reality when the mind is unconcentrated and covered with obstructions.

*nibadhyāmbanastambhe smṛtirajjvā manogajam |
unmārgacāriṇaṃ kuryāt prajñāṃkuśavaśaṃ śanaīḥ || (3.16)*

When the mind strays from the path like an elephant, bind it to the post of the object with the rope of mindfulness and bring it slowly under control with the hook of wisdom.

Here wisdom, or the systematic analysis of the categories of reality, is like a hook to control the elephant of the mind. Without ever having witnessed the training of a wild elephant, one gets a sense of the pain this process might require and also a sense that this process will take time. In this respect, Bhāviveka gives the impression of an old-fashioned pedagogue; this diligent analysis will not be completed in a day.

The third chapter moves on from the analysis of reality to an account of the “stages” (*bhūmi*) of the bodhisattva path and ends with a vision of Buddhahood. In other words, the chapter completes Bhāviveka's step-by-step account of the bodhisattva path, from the initial aspiration that opens the text to the final attainment of Buddhahood. And he gives us a unifying image that we can use to picture the ascent to Buddhahood.

*tattvapṛāsādaśikharārohaṇaṃ na hi yujyate |
tathyaśaṃvṛtisopānam antareṇa yatas tataḥ || (3.12)*

*pūrvaṃ saṃvṛtisatyena praviviktamatir bhavet |
tato dharmasvasāmānyalakṣaṇe suviniścitaḥ || (3.13)*

It is certainly impossible to climb the peak of the palace of reality without the steps of the correct relative [truth]. For this reason,

one should first discriminate with respect to relative truth,
and then analyze the particular and universal characteristics of *dharma*s.

It is not entirely clear what kind of “palace” Bhāviveka has in mind. The word *prāsāda* can apply to a temple as well as to the palace of a king. Since it involves an act of climbing, we might picture this “palace” as having a series of terraces, like the *stūpa* at Borobudur, where a practitioner might travel from one level of reality to another, with each level marked by its own distinctive narrative, until the practitioner reaches the still point at the top. But it would be more accurate to compare this palace to an Indian temple, where the eye makes a visual ascent of the central tower (the *śikhara* mentioned in Bhāviveka’s verse) to reach not just the still point at the top, but the sky beyond. In either case, Bhāviveka’s reference to the “ladder” or “steps” makes it clear that this is not a sudden ascent. One has to attend, metaphorically, to the demands of each stage in the process before reaching the goal.

Here Bhāviveka is giving his own distinctive interpretation of the image contained in Nāgārjuna’s famous account of the relationship between the two truths in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*:

dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā |
lokasaṃvṛtisatyam satyaṃ ca paramārthataḥ || (24.8)

ye ’nayo na vijānanti vibhāgaṃ satyayor dvayoḥ |
te tattvaṃ na vijānanti gambhīre buddhaśāsane || (24.9)

vyavahāram anāśritya paramārtho na deśyate |
paramārtham anāgamyā nirvāṇaṃ nādhigamyate || (24.10)

Buddhas rely on two truths to teach the Dharma: ordinary relative truth and ultimate truth.

Those who do not know the distinction between the two truths do not know the reality in the buddhas’ profound teaching.

Without relying on the conventional, it is impossible to teach the ultimate; without understanding the ultimate, it is impossible to attain *nirvāṇa*.

There is a crucial ambiguity at the heart of this sequence of verses. What does it mean to say that teaching the ultimate “relies on” the conventional? The term *āśritya* could simply mean an act of verbal reference: teachings about the ultimate must inevitably “refer to” the conventional, since all teachings involve the use of words. But the word *āśritya* also can have a spatial implication, as if teachings about the ultimate are somehow “located in” or “based upon” the conventional. Bhāviveka’s reimagining of this verse

takes the spatial implication of the word *āśritya* and elaborates it into the picture of a wise person or practitioner who climbs step by step up a physical structure. Whether this is true to Nāgārjuna's intention might be a point of debate, but it provides a perfect frame for Bhāviveka's methodical analysis of the conventional categories of reality as they were understood by Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools. It also lays the groundwork for his methodical presentation of the stages of the bodhisattva path. Bhāviveka's image of the palace and its steps anticipates the famous defense of the "gradualist" position that is attributed to Kamalaśīla in the so-called "debate at bSam-yas," in which certain influential parties turned away from the dangers of a "sudden" view of awakening toward a more gradual and analytical view of the path. One of the interlocutors in the debate made this point with the same comparison that Bhāviveka used to explain the relationship between conventional and ultimate truths: "Now, when you ascend a mountain, you must do it step by step, but you are not capable of doing it at once. In a similar manner, if it be difficult to attain the first Stage (even by degrees), what is there to say of the attainment of Omniscience?"⁹

On the face of it, the gradualist framework is unsurprising. It is the narrative structure one would expect from an Indian scholar with Bhāviveka's analytical interests. But Bhāviveka's narrative frame is not as simple as it seems. He actually has set a trap for himself in the middle of the text that transforms the solid image of the palace of reality into a figment of the imagination, a palace in a dream. He does this at the beginning of the third chapter by plunging directly into the analysis of emptiness. Before he says anything about the practice of the "perfections" (*pāramitā*) or the elevated attainments of a bodhisattva on the advanced stages of the bodhisattva path, he pushes his analysis of the categories of reality to a classic Madhyamaka conclusion, not just by concluding that all conventional categories are empty of reality, but by concluding that emptiness too is empty of reality. And whatever is true of emptiness is also true of the awareness of emptiness.

*śūnyatādisvabhāvena yataḥ śūnyā hi śūnyatā |
na paśyati tato vidvāṇ chūnyatety api śūnyatām || (3.263)*

Since emptiness is empty of the identity of emptiness and so forth,
a wise person does not see emptiness as "emptiness."

⁹ Quoted from Bu-ston's account of the debate in his *Chos hbyung*, (see Obermiller 1932: 193–196, here 195).

The person who initially set out to ascend the palace and “see” reality, now realizes that there is nothing to climb and nothing to see.

Bhāviveka signals this transition by returning to the image of the palace, but in a different register.

*yathā prasuptaḥ putrastrīvimānabhavanādikam |
paśyen middhavaśāt tatra pratibuddho na paśyati || (3.253)*

Someone who feels drowsy and falls asleep sees such things as young men, young women, palaces and dwelling places, but he does not see them when he wakes up.

*saṃvṛtyādhigatāṃś tadvad unmīlitamatīkṣaṇaḥ |
ajñānanidroparamāt pratibuddho na paśyati || (3.254)*

So also, when someone has opened the wisdom-eye, stopped the sleep of ignorance, and woken up, he does not see things as they are understood in a relative sense.

Here the physical structure that gave such a clear intellectual form to Bhāviveka's view of the path is transformed into a palace of dreams. With this transformation, the conventional image of the path as a methodical movement from step to step and stage to stage, toward the final stage of bodhahood, has been exploded or, to be more accurate, it has been dissolved into thin air. And the same can be said of the narrative structure of the bodhisattva path. With nothing to climb and nothing to see, what more can the bodhisattva do, and where can the bodhisattva go? To frame the question more precisely, how can Bhāviveka, as a scholar of the path, resituate himself, to get from the “emptiness of emptiness” and from the palace of dreams back to the practice of the bodhisattva path?

As I pointed out in *To See the Buddha*,¹⁰ Bhāviveka marks this crucial transition by engaging once again with a concept of place: he locates his rarefied account of emptiness in the figure of the buddha:

*nirvikalpārthaviṣayā nirvikalpāpi dhīr mṛṣā |
anātmādisvabhāvatvāt tadyathā savikalpadhīḥ || (3.265)*

A non-conceptual cognition with a non-conceptual object also is false, because it has no self, and so forth, like a conceptual cognition.

¹⁰ Eckel 1994, especially pp. 39–42.

*jñeyasya sarvathārthāsiddher nirvikalpāpi yatra dhīḥ |
notpadyate tad atulyaṃ tattvaṃ tattvavido viduḥ || (3.266)*

Since there is nothing at all that can be known, those who know reality know that the highest reality is that of which not even a non-conceptual cognition arises.

*tadbodhād ucyate buddho yo 'śāv anudayo dhiyaḥ |
abodhabodhato mukhyo vikalpasvapnasaṃkṣayāt || (3.267)*

The no-arising of cognition is called “buddha” because it understands this; it is primary, because it is the understanding that is no understanding and because it dispels the sleep of concepts.

This verse serves as an occasion for Bhāviveka to comment on several common epithets of the Buddha, all understood from the ultimate point of view. The buddha is called “*sugata*,” for example, because he has “well understood” (*sugata*) what needs to be understood by the method or approach of no-understanding (*agati-nayena*), and he is called “*sambuddha*” “because he has understood the equality (*śamatā*) of all things without understanding equality.” Bhāviveka gives a similar account of the term “Tathāgata” and various descriptive epithets, such as “immeasurable” (*ameya*), “incalculable” (*asaṃkhyeya*), and “unthinkable” (*acintya*).

At this point in the text, it is important to pause and consider exactly what Bhāviveka means by this string of negations. What does it mean, for example, to say that the buddha is a “no-arising” (*anudaya*) of cognition? There is a temptation built into the language of emptiness to imagine that the term “no-arising” refers to the place where that “no-arising” occurs, just as emptiness occurs in a place that is empty. But to use the word “occur” in this context is, of course, to speak metaphorically. What is meant is simply that a particular place is empty of a particular thing, the way a table might be empty of a book or a mind might be empty of a thought. This is the model suggested by the Tibetan translation of verse 3.267, in which Bhāviveka speaks of the buddha as the “no-arising of cognition”: “that in which a cognition does not arise is the primary buddha, because it understands this” (*de rtogs phyir na gang zhig la || blo skye med pa sangs rgyas dngos*). Following the tradition that the term “buddha” refers primarily to an awareness, one could assume that the intention is to say that the word “buddha” refers to a mode of awareness in which no specific cognitive act occurs. In that sense it is empty of thought. As tempting as this interpretation may be, it does not coincide with Bhāviveka’s interpretation of negation. To negate something ultimately

is to negate it in a way that leaves nothing behind, not even the “awareness” in which this non-occurrence might be said to “occur.” This interpretation also does not coincide with Bhāviveka’s understanding of consciousness. His argument against the Yogācāra approach to the concept of mind-only in the fifth chapter of the MHK is meant to show that consciousness in its subjective aspect is no more real than the external objects that the Yogācāra is intended to negate. Subject and object are equally empty.¹¹

This leaves the reader with a radically negative understanding of Bhāviveka’s concept of “no arising”: what he means literally is that nothing happens, and the “place” where this non-occurrence takes place is also just a figment of the conventional imagination. As stark as this idea may be, it has important resonances with other Mahāyāna literature on the path. It has close kinship, for example, with the idea of “sudden” awakening associated with the Chinese monk Mahāyāna, Kamalaśīla’s alleged rival in the debate at bSam-yas:

If you commit virtuous or non-virtuous deeds, because you go to heavens and hells, (you still) are not liberated from *samsāra*. The path to Buddhahood is obscured.... Whoever does not think anything; the one who does not ponder will become completely liberated from *samsāra* ... he is instantaneously enlightened. He is equal to one who has mastered the tenth bhūmi.¹²

This negative language also has close kinship with accounts of awakening in Tantric tradition and in the language of Zen.¹³ It is as if an element of anti-structure has been thrown into the middle of the rigorously structured narrative of the bodhisattva path. And its significance is not reserved only for the final stages of the path. It expresses the premise, the quality of insight, on which the rest of the story rests. It is only when Bhāviveka has thrown down the challenge of this ultimate negation that he can consider the systematic unfolding of the bodhisattva path.

¹¹ This is the force of Bhāviveka’s critique of “mind-only” in MHK 5.17-54 (Eckel 2008: 232–261).

¹² Williams 2009: 192. Williams quotes this translation from G. W. Houston, *Sources for a History of the bSam-yas Debate* (Sankt Augustin, Germany: V.G.H. Wissenschaftsverlag, 1980): 98. Houston’s translation is taken from the account by Bu-ston.

¹³ On the complex historical and typological connections among these different traditions, see Ruegg 1992.

He makes the transition from his negative account of the buddha to the more affirmative vision of the bodhisattva path by posing a simple question: If the buddha ultimately is no-understanding, who is able to approach this buddha in the right way? The answer is a great bodhisattva, like Avalokiteśvara or Maitreya, who can worship the buddha by the discipline of no-worship.

āryāvalokiteśāryamaitreyādyāś ca surayaḥ |
anupāsanayogena munayo yad upāsate || (3.290)

[The Dharma Body] is worshipped by sages and saints such as Ārya Avalokiteśvara and Ārya Maitreya with the discipline of no-worship.

Once this has been said, it is possible for Bhāviveka once again to lay out the stages of the bodhisattva path—to say, in other words, how Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya achieved such extraordinary powers and how others might do so as well.

I will not go into the details of Bhāviveka's outline of the stages of the path, except to say that it follows a pattern that is rather different from the standard list of six or ten perfections in other Madhyamaka *avatāra* texts. He divides the progress of the bodhisattva path into four stages: (1) the first arising of the mind of awakening (*prathamacittotpādika*), (2) the practice of six perfections (*ṣaṭ-pāramitā-caryā-pratipanna*), (3) the irreversible stage (*avinivartanīya*), and (4) the stage that is one birth away from awakening (*ekajātīpratibaddha*). The first of these stages was discussed in the first two chapters of the text; the last three occupy verses 292–345 of the third chapter.

What is most intriguing from our point of view is that he returns once again to the image of a palace. In the symbolic world of Indian temple architecture, the “palace/temple” (*prāsāda*), with its central tower (*śikhara*) is the equivalent of Mount Meru, the mountain at the center of Indian cosmology. Bhāviveka appropriates this image in order to indicate that the bodhisattva in this stage of the path has completed the ascent of the palace and can look back into the world below. Bhāviveka echoes the *Mahābhārata* (and *Dhammapada*) when he says that the bodhisattva in the sixth stage “who, out of compassion, has climbed the mountain peak of wisdom and, with no grief, looks with compassion on the world that suffers and is burned by grief.”¹⁴

sa prajñāmeruśekharam ārūḍhaḥ karuṇāvaśāt |
aśokaḥ śokasamtaptaḥ prekṣate duḥkhitam jagat || (3.296)

¹⁴ The traditional sources of this verse are discussed in Eckel 1994: 28.

But this is not the only reference to a palace or a palace-like object in this section of the text. At the end of his account of the advanced bodhisattva who has acquired the super-knowledges (*abhiññā*) and is only one birth away from Buddhahood, the bodhisattva's final act is to "manifest bodies in as many Buddha-fields as there are grains of dust in innumerable world systems" and with these bodies to offer worship to the buddha. The last objects of worship are ornate "pavilions" (*kūṭāgāra*) that shine with hundreds of lamps, glow with the light of radiant jewels, reach to the clouds, and fill every direction with their light.¹⁵ Are these new palace-like structures "real"? Yes and no. In this section of the text, Bhāviveka dwells at length on the advanced bodhisattva's power to manipulate the perception of reality, with particular emphasis on the word "power." It is as if Bhāviveka were offering his own commentary on Nāgārjuna's classic statement: "Everything is possible for someone for whom emptiness is possible."¹⁶ Finally the bodhisattva path yields to the attainment of buddhahood, and not to the rarefied and paradoxical "ultimate" buddha that we encountered earlier in the text, but to a richly imagined "conventional" buddha who acts in myriads of ways to satisfy the needs of sentient beings.

It is a familiar point in accounts of the bodhisattva to say that the Mahāyāna path has a circular or recursive structure. As Masatoshi Nagatomi used to say to his introductory students at Harvard University, the bodhisattva path involves "two-way traffic," as the bodhisattva approaches nirvana but returns to *samsāra* out of compassion for others. This recursive pattern is given visual form in the version of the ten ox-herding pictures that is particularly popular in Japan, where the seeker catches a glimpse of the ox (or his true nature) as if it were different from himself, then reaches a state of non-duality where ox and self are forgotten, and finally closes the circle by returning the marketplace with empty hands.¹⁷ Here Bhāviveka has charted a similar circular structure. He began with the ultimate Buddha, the

¹⁵ MHK 3.337-342, Eckel 1994: 187–188.

¹⁶ *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.14: *sarvaṃ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate*.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Dan Lusthaus for pointing out that there are two Chinese versions of the ten ox-herding pictures. The one favored in Japan locates the circle of emptiness in frame 8, then returns to the marketplace in frame 10 "with bliss-bestowing hands."

A second version, more popular in Korea, concludes with the circle of emptiness in frame 10 (<http://philosophy.lander.edu/oriental/reader/reader/x5038.html>).

understanding that is no understanding; then he moved to the conventional path that leads to buddhahood; and finally he returned to the concept of buddhahood, but viewed through a conventional lens. This movement from the ultimate buddha to a conventional account of the path and then to a conventional picture of the buddha is reminiscent of Zhiyi's outline of the three truths, where the ultimate and conventional truths are unified in the truth of the middle. Whether this comparison is accurate or not, I think we can agree that Bhāviveka has devised a brilliant solution to the problem of what comes after the abstract account of emptiness. His answer has three parts: the ultimate buddha, the path that leads to buddhahood, and the buddha who serves as a *cintāmaṇi* or "wishing jewel" to fulfill all the aspirations, wishes, and intentions of living beings. In this way, Bhāviveka has given us a strikingly imaginative "introduction" to the bodhisattva path.

The three-part structure of Bhāviveka's thought can be read as a response to the tension that Buswell and Gimello identified between "Mārga and the 'Anti-Mārga' Tradition in Buddhist Thought":

In the Buddhist world of cognitive indeterminacy, all things or events are so thoroughly transient as to be actually instantaneous, so radically interdependent that none may be assigned its own fixed and discrete identity; thus is the lie given to all apparent differentiation and imagined substantiality. Yet in this unstructured and unstructurable world, some order, sequence, and stringency of disciplined practice are still deemed necessary.¹⁸

Bhāviveka draws this "unstructured and unstructurable world" into the center of his account of the path, and he tames it, not simply with the discursive device of a philosophical argument, although that is always one of his most important rhetorical resources, but with a form of poetic imagery. And the imagery that gives his path its structure is also the image of a structure: the structure of a temple tower, the structure of a palace seen in a dream, and the palace-like structure imagined by a bodhisattva to pay homage to the Buddha. With this image in view, we can understand the structure of Bhāviveka's vision of the path without ever descending into its innumerable, practical details.

¹⁸ Buswell and Gimello 1992: 24

2. The Metaphorical Texture of Bhāviveka's Language

I mentioned above that I would like to comment not only on the narrative structure of Bhāviveka's text, but also on the metaphorical texture of its language. Bhāviveka's composite image of a palace/temple/mountain clearly gives structural form to his account of the path, but this image is only part of a much broader pattern of metaphor that gives formal integrity to his text. It is easy to see what this means by looking back at the first few verses of the third chapter, the chapter that Bhāviveka calls *tattvajñānaiṣaṇā* ("seeking the knowledge of reality"). He begins this chapter with two verses about knowledge as vision:

*yasya jñānamayaṃ cakṣuś cakṣus tasyāsti netarat |
yatas tasmād bhaved dhīmāṃs tattvajñānaiṣaṇāparaḥ || (3.1)*

Someone who has the eye of knowledge and not the other eye is the one who sees; so a wise person should focus on seeking the knowledge of reality.

*paśyaty andho 'pi matimān didṛkṣur viprakṛṣṭakān |
sūkṣmavyavahitān arthāṃs trailokyāhatadarśanaḥ || (3.2)*

Even if a wise person is blind, he sees the three worlds without any obstruction; he sees whatever he wants to see, whether it is far away, subtle, or concealed.

This quest for vision then occasions this verse about the bodhisattva quest as the ascent of a palace:

*tattvaprāsādaśikharārohaṇaṃ na hi yujyate |
tathyaśaṃvṛtisopānaṃ antareṇa yatas tataḥ || (3.12)*
*pūrvam saṃvṛtisatyena praviviktamatir bhavet |
tato dharmaśvasāmānyalakṣaṇe suviniścitaḥ || (3.13)*

It is certainly impossible to climb the peak of the palace of reality without the steps of the correct relative [truth]. For this reason, one should first discriminate with respect to relative truth, and then analyze the particular and universal characteristics of *dharmaś*.

The initial verses about the philosopher's eyes add another dimension to the image of the palace or temple tower: the purpose of the wise person's ascent is not merely to pass through a number of requisite stages to

reach a goal, but to reach a vantage point where it is possible to see reality clearly. This image of the bodhisattva's sight returns in verse 3.296, where the bodhisattva who has attained the perfection of wisdom and entered the sixth bodhisattva stage stands on the mountain peak of wisdom (*prajñāmeruśekhara*, like the *tattvaprāsādaśikhara* of verse 3.12) and gazes compassionately on those who suffer below. At this elevated level, vision actually points in two directions: not just toward the valley, but also upward toward what Bhāviveka calls the "ambrosia of reality" (*tattvāmṛta*) which is as clear as the autumn sky. Bimal Krishna Matilal once suggested that the term *avatāra* in the title of this text does not mean "introduction," as it is commonly understood, but "descent" in the Hindu sense, like the descent of Viṣṇu into the realm of *samsāra*.¹⁹ In that case, the "ambrosia of reality" would be the nectar that flows down from the bodhisattva on the mountain peak of wisdom. This is a strong proposal, but it does not exactly match Bhāviveka's language. When the bodhisattva is on the mountain (in verse 3.296) he looks into the sky to see the ambrosia of reality:

śive prapañcopaśame śaradgagananirmale |
tattvāmṛte nirāloka dhīpracāram alocanam || (3.300)

The ambrosia of reality, the welfare that consists of calming manifoldness, is as clear as the autumn sky. But [ordinary people], whose minds function so that they do not see it, lack the eye [of wisdom].²⁰

To help these ordinary people, the bodhisattva sends forth rivers whose water consists of merit, born from the six perfections (verse 3.303). The bodhisattva showers them with water, not with ambrosia, but the water still finds a way to satisfy their thirst. This water is simply a more palpable expression of the bodhisattva's tears of compassion in verse 3.297. More could be said

¹⁹ Matilal made this comment in a private communication. This understanding of "ambrosia" (*amṛta*) as descending from above is consistent with Étienne Lamotte's point in Appendix Note VIII of his translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, where he points out that *amṛta* does not come from the depths of the ocean, as in Hindu tradition, but from above (Lamotte 1976: 307–313).

²⁰ This verse is filled out by carrying terms down from the preceding verses and by explanation in the commentary. See Eckel 1994: 174–176. The translation of *prapañcopaśama* follows the suggestion of Anne MacDonald in her translation of Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* (MacDonald 2015, vol. 2: 42–43).

about the sensory dimensions of this complex image: it includes not only the kinesthetic and visual dimensions of the bodhisattva's ascent of the mountain, but also the sense that the bodhisattva can satisfy sentient beings with the water of his merit. But let me set the sensory images connected with the bodhisattva's vision and comment briefly on a pair of verses that show what Bhāviveka thinks it means to move along a path to Buddhahood.

In chapter 5 of the MHK, the text in which the *Tattvāmṛtāvatāra* is now embedded, Bhāviveka responds to a Yogācāra critic by saying:

*atrocyate pramāṇaṃ naḥ sarvaṃ tathāgataṃ vacaḥ |
āptopadeśaprāmāṇyād bhadro hi pratipadyate ||* (5.8)

In response we say, All the Tathāgatas' teachings are authoritative for us, because the teachings of a reliable person are authoritative; clearly a good person understands.

*nāgamāntarasamdigdhaviparyastamatiḥ paraḥ |
tasmāt tatpratipattiyarthaṃ tanmṛgyo yuktimannayaḥ ||* (5.9)

But the opponent, whose mind is confused and misled by other traditional doctrines, does not.

For this reason, he²¹ should follow a rational approach so that [the opponent] will understand.

The second of these two verses bears a strong resemblance to a parallel verse by Dharmakīrti in *Pramāṇavārttika* 2.30:

*jñānavān mṛgyate kaścit taduktapratipattaye |
ajñopadeśakaraṇe vipralambhanaśaṅkhibhiḥ ||*

Those who suspect deceit in the teaching of an ignorant person seek some knowledgeable person in order to put into practice what is taught by him.²²

The similarity between these two verses can hardly be accidental, but who borrowed from whom? Is it Bhāviveka who rewrites Dharmakīrti or the other way around? All we can say is that the verses contain at least one key difference. For Dharmakīrti the thing to be sought is a knowledgeable person; for Bhāviveka, it is what I call a "rational approach." Franco argues that we

²¹ Bhāviveka identifies the "he" in this sentence simply as a "debater" (*smra ba po / vādin*). Presumably this is a reference to the "good person" (*bhadra*) of the previous verse who is entering into debate with an opponent who does not understand.

²² Franco 2018.

should treat the two concepts as equivalent. But that would blind us to one of the most characteristic features of Bhāviveka's thought: his use of the term *nīti* or *naya* functions as part of a consistent metaphorical system to build a verbal picture of a bodhisattva's movement along the path to awakening.

In a thoughtful appendix to her translation of the first chapter of the *Prasannapadā*, Anne MacDonald reviews the possible translations of the terms *naya* and *nīti* and recommends the use of the word "method," especially in the term *prajñāpāramitā-nīti* or the "method of the perfection of insight."²³ She is generous enough to acknowledge that my word "approach" appears to work in the context of Bhāviveka's MHK, but she prefers not to apply it elsewhere. It is true that "approach" is an awkward choice, but it is meant to draw attention to an aspect of the text that is almost impossible to capture in translation. The words *nīti* and *naya* are both verbal nouns based on the root to "lead." In a sense, then, they are "leadings." This is why MacDonald likes Iida's term "guiding principle." But the terms also have a doctrinal function: they name a system, doctrine, position, or viewpoint (to pick just a few of the many possible dictionary meanings), hence Iida's compound designation "guiding principle."²⁴ You could say that the term *prajñāpāramitā-nīti* refers to the Perfection of Wisdom as a way of thinking, with the understanding that it is a distinctive doctrinal approach among others. One of the most important doctrinal resonances of the terms *nīti* and *naya* is the Jain classification system of seven *nayas*, a system that is distinct from but related to the Jain system of 363 doctrines.²⁵ These numerical schemes acquired great importance in the tradition of Jain doxography that was just beginning to emerge in the time of Bhāviveka, and they lie behind one of the most intractable philological problems in the *Tarkajvālā* ("Flame of Reason"), the list of 363 *darśanas* ("views") in the commentary on verse 9.20. The identity of most of these views remains obscure, but the list itself seems to be an archaic snapshot of the diversity of Indian philosophical views.

Just a glance at the language in MHK 5.8-9 shows that the terms *naya* and *nīti* are not simply devices for classification; they reflect Bhāviveka's metaphorical understanding of philosophy as a form of movement. A "rational approach" is the focus of a particular action: it is something "to be

²³ MacDonald 2015, vol. 2: 357–358.

²⁴ Iida 1980: 80.

²⁵ Folkert 1993.

sought” (*mṛgya*). This word comes from the same root *mṛg* that is found in our word *mārga* or “path.” When the commentary glosses the word *naya* (“approach”) in verse 5.9 as *lam* (presumably the Tibetan for *mārga*), it is treating *naya* as an “approach to be followed.” And if it is followed, where does it lead? The terms *pratipadyate* and *pratipatti* in 5.8 and 5.9 could be translated by variations of the word “understand,” as I do, or as “put into practice,” as favored by Franco. But it is possible to get closer to the root meaning by translating these words as “move forward” or “make progress,” with the understanding that this movement involves progress in a cognitive sense. This meaning is enshrined in the analysis of the path in Haribhadra’s *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (“Ornament of Realization”)—a tradition that was almost certainly known to Bhāviveka—and, of course, it is the meaning that lies concealed in the term “Middle Path” (*madhyamā pratipad*), which could just as easily be translated as the middle way of making progress.²⁶

Bhāviveka’s word-play with the terms *nīti* and *naya* is not limited to the Yogācāra chapter; he also uses it to frame his response to the Śrāvakas in chapter 4.

durvigāhām imāṃ nītiṃ boddhum durbalaśaktayaḥ |
asthānatrāsasamrabdhaḥ prāhur hīnādhimuktayaḥ || (4.1)

Those who have low aspirations cannot understand this difficult approach; shaken by baseless fear, they make the following claims.

tatra prāguktanītyā tu svanītivipadam paraḥ |
yad amṛśyann upādikṣat tan na yuktam itīṣyate || (4.15)

“According to the approach explained earlier, the opponent’s approach has gone wrong; what he said in his impatience is unreasonable.” This is our position.

Here we could note Bhāviveka’s use of the term *vipad* (“gone wrong”), which carries the implication that the opponent’s approach has been a “disaster.” It also is related to the root *pad*, like the term *pratipatti*, but here the opponent is not making progress; he has made a misstep. The most intriguing expression of motion in these verses, however, is *asthāna*. This could mean that the opponent’s fears are “baseless,” as I indicate in

²⁶ As in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.18: *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tāṃ pracakṣmahe | sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā ||* – “Dependent co-arising we call emptiness; it is a dependent designation and it is the middle path.”

my translation, or it could mean that the opponent is afraid of “not standing,” or perhaps of having no place to stand, as in the Mahāyāna concept of *apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*, a *nirvāṇa* that is not located in either *nirvāṇa* or *saṃsāra*. Bhāviveka defines *apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa* in verse 3.294 by saying: “[A bodhisattva] does not leave *saṃsāra* but is free from the harm of *saṃsāra*; [a bodhisattva] does not attain *nirvāṇa* but it is as if [the bodhisattva] were located in *nirvāṇa*.”²⁷

Sometimes Bhāviveka’s distinctive use of these words for movement is known less by what he includes than by what he leaves out. One of the peculiarities of Bhāviveka’s account of the Yogācāra, for example, is that he makes almost no mention of the exegetical distinction between *nītārtha* and *neyārtha* (“definitive and provisional meanings”). This distinction is an important feature of Yogācāra literature, but it also figures prominently in Madhyamaka, as in the first chapter of the *Prasannapadā* and in Tibetan texts like Tsongkhapa’s *Drang-nges-legs-bshad-snying-po* (“The Heart of the Correct Explanation of Provisional and Definitive Meanings”). Why would Bhāviveka ignore this key distinction, especially when it so clearly relates to his use of the term *naya*? Curiously, I think it has to do with his vision of the unity of Buddhist thought. We have already seen that he begins his response to the Yogācāra by saying: “All the Tathāgatas teachings are authoritative for us, because they are the authoritative teaching of a reliable person.” As an exegetical principle this hardly seems exceptional, but he applies it in a striking way. For example, he does not claim that the statements of “mind-only” in texts like the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* reflect a lesser level of authority. He says that they are true, but simply need to be properly interpreted. How? By following a “rational approach” and subjecting them to the proper Madhyamaka critique. In chapter 4, the Śrāvaka objector claims that the Mahāyāna constitutes a different path and, for that reason, cannot be the teaching of the Buddha. Bhāviveka responds that the Mahāyāna teaches exactly the same path, but insists that the path is to be followed with a different approach. Here the key text is MHK 4.20cd-22ab:

samyagdr̥ṣṭyādimārgaṃ ca bhavaty abhyasyato yadā ||
adarśanam asaṃkalpo vāgavyāhṛtir akriyā |
anājīvo 'saṃārambho 'saṃpramoṣo 'sthitis tathā ||

²⁷ MHK 3.294: *na nirgataś ca saṃsārāt saṃsārāc ca gatavyathaḥ | asaṃprāptaś ca nirvāṇaṃ nirvāṇa iva ca sthitaḥ ||*.

tadānenaiva mārgeṇa buddhabodhir matā hi naḥ |

When someone practices the path that begins with right views as no views, no thought, no speech, no action, no livelihood, no effort, no mindfulness, and no concentration, we think that person achieves a Buddha's awakening by this very same path.

These verses could be read as an example of the same irony that Bhāviveka brought to the way bodhisattvas “worship” Brahman by no-worship, but they are perhaps better read in a more positive light, as a statement of Bhāviveka's own understanding of what makes a proper “path.” It is not, as it were, a track marked across the landscape or even a series of carefully demarcated states. It is a certain cognitive attitude, an approach, or a way of thinking that can be brought to bear on any practice. This was his approach to the word *pratipad*, and also to the words *naya* and *nīti*. As far as I know, he does not apply the same logic to his elucidation of the word *mārga* itself, although he does use *mārga* in its verbal form in verse 5.9 when he says that a rational approach should be “followed” (*mṛgya*). What is a *mārga* but another example of the modes of cognitive and affective progress that constitute the journey to awakening?

Much more could be said about Bhāviveka's use of the metaphorical complex that surrounds the terms for “seeing” and “going.” The different modalities of “seeing” and “going” can each, in its own way, represent the cognitive process that leads a person from the state of ignorance to the knowledge of Buddhahood. These terms can also be brought together in striking ways, as in the Mīmāṃsā critique of the Mādhyamika reliance on inference in chapter 9:

dūṣayitvā trayīmārgaṃ hetubhir hetuvādinah |
anumānapradhānatvāt svanayaṃ dyotayanti ye || (9.14)

When logicians (*hetuvādin*) use reasons to criticize the Veda (*trayīmārga*), they reveal their own approach, because they give priority to inference.

pādasparśād ivāndhānāṃ viṣame pathi dhāvatām |
anumānapradhānānām pātas tesām na durlabhaḥ || (9.15)

They are like blind men who run on a dangerous road by touching it with their feet. When they give priority to inference, it is easy for

them to fall.²⁸

Bhāviveka responds to this criticism (in verses 157–158) that it is just as counter-productive to rely on someone else’s directions without analyzing them and testing them for oneself. Words that are simply taken on faith can easily mislead. Behind this simple image lies a complex discourse about the means of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*) and the relative relationship of inference, perception, and scriptural authority.

Bhāviveka’s masterful “introduction,” the *Tattvāmṛtāvatāra*, communicates in many ways. For some readers, the process of inference that Bhāviveka uses to establish his view of emptiness will be the primary concern. For others, it might be his distinctive use of ethical concepts, such as compassion (*karuṇā*) or the perfections (*pāramitā*), to chart the path to awakening. But for any of these readers, an attention to Bhāviveka’s poetic strategies makes possible a more nuanced and inclusive view of Bhāviveka’s view of a meaningful Buddhist life. We can see its structure; we can see how he accommodates and domesticates the anti-structural elements that are crucial part of Buddhist tradition; and we can see how his understanding of the cognitive quest reflects and is mapped onto the ordinary actions of seeing and knowing. In short, we can see the hand of the poet at work and sense how his vision of the world might come to life.

²⁸ Kawasaki Shinjō (1976: 13, n. 7) notes that this verse quotes, with modest changes, *Vākyapadīya* 1.42: *hastasparsād ivāndhena viṣame pathi dhāvatā | anumānapradhānena vinipāto na durlabhaḥ* || “Fall is not unlikely in the case of one who relies on reasoning, as in the case of a blind man who walks along a difficult path by groping with his hands.” In his own version of this verse Bhāviveka changes “hand” (*hasta*) to “feet” (*pāda*). Assuming that this change is not just a textual variant, it seems to be an indication of Bhāviveka’s attention to detail. It would make no sense to “run” (*dhāv*) and also touch the ground with your hands. The comparison only works if you touch the ground with your feet.

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