

The Zero Way

*sarvaṃ tathyaṃ na vā tathyaṃ
tathyaṃ ca-atathyaṃ-eva ca
na-eva-atathyaṃ na-eva tathyaṃ
etaḍ Buddha-anuśāsanam*

(“All is real or without reality
or is real and without reality
or is neither without reality nor real
– this is the teaching of the Buddha”)

Nāgārjuna.

Mūlamadhyamakakārikās, XVIII, 8.

There are some technical terms in modern Buddhist studies that seem to be quite definite and established. One of these is ‘early Buddhism’ (EB) as opposed to ‘late Buddhism’ (LB). So-called canonical Buddhism is considered as, but not normally termed ‘middle Buddhism’ (MB) (in terms of time). In recent years it has become common to consider EB as the purest and most authentic representation of Buddhism (B). However, it is MB or LB that is more or less well known to scholars studying Buddhism. They try to reconstruct EB in one of the following possible ways:

1. EB =: MB
2. EB =: LB
3. EB =: MB \ x
4. EB =: MB \cup x
5. EB =: MB \ x \cup y
6. EB =: LB \ x etc.

Theoretically, there are 17 possible ways of reconstruction which can be summarized in the following formula:

$$EB =: (MB \ x) \cup (LB \ y) \cup z.$$

The sign =: means similarity; x – something that is in MB but not in EB; y – something that is in LB but not in EB; z – something that is in EB but lost in both MB and LB.

In order for the formula to make sense, it should have at least either MB, LB or z, since x and y can also be left out if respectively MB and LB to which they belong are not there.

The equations would be correct if:

1. MB and LB were known quantities;
2. EB, MB and LB were signs of the same level.

Further, we would ask the following question: what content does the term B have and in what way is B abstracted from EB, MB and LB? It does not seem to be possible to give a final answer to these questions at this stage. We can only refer to some ways of approaching this problem.

1. Not to prefer EB to MB and LB in terms of understanding the actual meaning of B. EB is one of the outer manifestations of B. However, the outer manifestations of B have existed and exist as sign systems have existed and exist.

2. B should hardly be considered as a sign system since a sign system is not the only response of the mind to existing phenomena (see table). Otherwise we would find ourselves in a completely hopeless situation on a tiny island of sign systems amidst the ocean of existence (cf. Gödel's theorem).

Another response is the way that can be seen as an open sign system. In our terms the difference between a system and a way is that in the case of the latter, signs are separate from that which they denote and are used primarily to change people's minds.

The third response is the zero way (Sanskrit. *madhyamā pratipad* – 'the middle way'). A certain approximate description of the zero way can be the tetralemma (Sanskrit. *catuṣkoṭikā* – "four limits"), according to which each sign (a) has a denotate or (b) has no denotate, (c) has a denotate and no denotate, (d) has neither a denotate nor the absence of a denotate (see the epigraph to this article). The tetralemma can be represented as the following equation where A is a denotate and A₁ is a sign (*dharma*):

$$A_1 = A + (-A) + [A + (-A)] + \{- [A + (-A)]\}.$$

The right side of the equation equals zero, hence A₁ = 0, where 0 corresponds to the Sanskrit term *śūnyatā*. Our outcome coincides precisely with one of the most important Buddhist phrases:

sarva-dharma-sūnyatā.

(‘emptiness of all signs’).

At the level of mathematical logic, the tetralemma can be represented by the formula

$A \circ B$,

where the logical link \circ means the union of different, even opposite concepts not in the sense of synthesis. There are some equivalents of this link in non-Indo-European languages (in Estonian *olguigi et, ometi*, in Tamil *irundum*, etc.). Alternative conjunctions in new Indo-European languages like Russian *хотя* (khotya) or German *obwohl* are similar in meaning.¹

	Mental response to existential phenomena	Ability to change	Conservativeness	Limitedness	Logicity (i.e. accepted by common sense)	Signs have a certain denotate	The aim is to explain a phenomenon	The aim is to change a person's mind
1	System	-	+	+	+	+	+	-
2	Way	+	-	-	-	-	-	+
3	Zero way	0	0	0	0	0	0	0