

How the Reality of the World Can be Demonstrated A Buddhist Philosophy of Space

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1. Introduction

The world in which sentient beings live has been one of the main focuses and characteristic features of philosophical inquiry. Buddhist scriptures contain various teachings and discussions on critical and significant questions that philosophers have raised about the roots, arising, trends, mechanism, and reality of the world. Aiming at constructing a Buddhist philosophy of space, this paper mainly focuses on the issue of the reality of the world and the way in which the reality of the world is demonstrated.

1. Introduction

The following key concepts need to be defined or clarified in order to better understand and communicate the theoretical underpinnings of this study.

(1) Reality: On the one hand, reality is the state/nature of related factors and activities as they really are, as opposed to conceptual construction or emotional grasp of them; on the other hand, reality is the totality of related factors and activities, including whatever happens, has happened, and will happen, as opposed to spatially and temporally limited phenomena.

1. Introduction

(2) World: A world is an entire existing sphere with temporal process and spatial extension of related factors and activities, rather than merely the material cosmos or physical universe.

(3) Space: Concerning the “spatial world,” this term is not exactly a direct reference to the physical world as some people might think. Just as the temporal world literally means the world pertaining to or concerned with time, so the spatial world means the spatial aspect of the world. However, whether the space is simply material is an issue to be further studied and is not to be taken for granted. Although the world can be studied from the aspects of space, time, or space-time, this paper will be mostly limited to the spatial aspect in weighing the relationship of such an aspect to meditative practices.

2. The Reality of the World in the Context of Buddhist Teachings

This paper draws mainly on the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-Paripṛcchā* of the *Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtras*, which are rich in philosophical insights in a number of important aspects.

The *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* devotes numerous passages and even entire chapter to elucidate that the *prajñāpāramitā* (perfection of wisdom) functions as the genetrix of the Tathāgata (*tathāgatasya janayitrī*) by contributing the indispensable qualities and powers to the achievement of the Tathāgata's enlightenment, and also as the instructress of this world (*asya ca lokasya darśayitrī*) by instructing or demonstrating (*darśayati*) what this world really is.

2. The Reality of the World in the Context of Buddhist Teachings

According to such elucidation, the reality of the world is the focus of what constitutes the *prajñāpāramitā*. However, what does the term the “world” refer to? The “world” is analyzed in terms of the five aggregates (*pañca skandhāḥ*), the twelve perceptual gates (*dvādaśāyatanāni*), the eighteen perceptual elements (*aṣṭādaśa dhātavaḥ*), and so on.

Then, what is it that the Tathāgata has proclaimed as the reality of the world? Above all, the *prajñāpāramitā* reveals (or makes known) that the world is empty (*prajñāpāramitā lokaḥ śūnya iti jñāpayati*), and the Tathāgata proclaims accordingly. Moreover, the *prajñāpāramitā* reveals that the world is ineffable (*acintya*), detached (*vivikta*), ultimately empty (or empty of what has surpassed boundaries; *atyanta-śūnya*), empty of own-being (or empty of inherent existence; *svabhāva-śūnya*), serene (*śānta*), exactly emptiness (*śūnyataiva*), and so on.

3. The Ineffability of the Reality

While demonstrating the reality of the world, the *Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtras* are aware of not only the unfixed and indivisible nature of the reality but also the inadequacy of conventional expressions in corresponding to the reality. Seen in this light, the idea of the ineffability (*acintyatā*) is brought out for rigorous deliberation and is emphasized as one of the essential characteristics of the reality. In other words, such tools as discerning cognition, thinking, inference, and discourses are at most related to some phenomenal aspects of the world, but as far as the reality is concerned, these ordinary tools are simply unqualified.

3. The Ineffability of the Reality

Besides, the *Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtras* frequently include the ineffability among a set of ideas characterizing the fundamental dimensions pertaining to the reality, which is regularly enumerated as thusness (or suchness; *tathatā*), without deviation from suchness (or unmistaken suchness; *a-vi-tathatā*), not different from suchness (or non-extraneous suchness; *an-anyā-tathatā*), the state/nature of dharma (*dharmatā*), the realm of dharma (*dharmadhātu*), the state/nature of the abiding of dharma (*dharmasthititā*), certainty of dharma (*dharmaniyāmatā*), the furthest limit of existence (or limit of reality; *bhūta-koṭi*), and ineffable realm (or inconceivable element; *acintya-dhātu*). Such a set of ideas is not only helpful in understanding why the reality is ineffable but also in providing multiple approaches to the reality.

4. Buddhist Strategies to Deal with the Ineffability of the Reality

Here comes a challenging question. On the one hand, the *prajñāpāramitā* consists in instructing or demonstrating the reality of the world, on the other hand, the reality of the world is ineffable. If one is stuck in such a twofold situation, this could serve to make the whole endeavor futile.

According to the *Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtras*, three strategies can be implemented to address the seeming difficulties of the above-stated situation.

4. Buddhist Strategies to Deal with the Ineffability of the Reality

First, introducing the operational framework of the two truths (*satya-dvaya*). The concept of “reality” concerns what really is, and is therefore mainly about the state/nature of the real world or related factors. Except for mathematical truth or logical truth, the concept of “truth” poses a concern regarding the pertinence of assertions or statements to actualities or reality, and is therefore mainly about the correctness of assertions, understanding, and realization. The Buddhist doctrine of the two truths differentiates between two levels of truth: “the truth (manifested) in linguistic convention” (or conventional truth; *saṃvṛti-satya*) and “the truth (manifested) in the utmost meaning” (*paramârtha-satya*).

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This avoids confusion between practical statements about the sensible aspect of the world necessary for verbal instruction and the reality of the world, the meaning of which in its utmost extent is beyond any linguistic reference or differentiation. In other words, there is no contradiction between “what is said” and “what is ineffable” since these two labels indicate different levels of connotations. This is not an issue of logical contradiction but an opportunity to unravel reality from conventional confinement.

4. Buddhist Strategies to Deal with the Ineffability of the Reality

Second, verbal instruction relies mostly on linguistic convention rather than on the utmost meaning. The *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* consistently emphasizes that what has just been remarked and discussed about reality is dependent on conventional usages of specific times and places although explicit intents are usually directed toward the utmost meaning. Such a strategy serves as a bridge between discourses and reality. Although most of the remarks and discussions seem to be about correct assertions in the utmost meaning, such discourses are, nevertheless, engaged in linguistic convention.

4. Buddhist Strategies to Deal with the Ineffability of the Reality

Third, the reality of the world remains ineffable. The *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-Paripṛcchā* frequently and decisively points out that the reality of what has just been remarked and discussed is not the same as thus said (*na punar yathôcyate*). In other words, the reality cannot be contained in speech by verbal expressions (*na śakyā vācā vaktum*). Such a strategy does not mean to set a great wall between discourses and reality. Rather, it honestly faces the insufficiency and inadequacy of discourses in corresponding to the reality. The gap can be fulfilled by realization as an outcome of meditative practices and insightful wisdom.

4. Buddhist Strategies to Deal with the Ineffability of the Reality

Let us take Buddhist discourses on philosophy of space as an example. In the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, space is generally used as a simile not only for Mahāyāna (*ākāśa-samaṃ tad yānam*) but also for all the related factors. There is a long list of characteristics pertaining to the reality of space, which includes the following two utterances: The ten directions of the space are beyond cognizance (*yathākāśasya na pūrvā dik prajñāyate, na dakṣiṇā, na paścimā, nōttarā, na vidiśo, nādho, nōrdhvā dik prajñāyate*); the space is neither the past, nor the future, nor the present (*ākāśam nātītam, nānāgatam, na pratyutpannam*). Throughout this long list, whatever words may be used to describe the space in conventional sense are negated to demonstrate the insubstantiality, indivisibility, infinity, and ineffability of the reality.

5. Conclusion

The usage of languages is never confined within the sphere of everyday life or phenomenal world. Buddhist teachings, especially the *Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtras*, use whatever language to demonstrate and elucidate the ineffable reality of the world. This explains why the space is declared as empty and such technical terms with negative prefixes as not-arising (*an-utpāda*) and not-ceasing (*a-nirodha*) are adopted. Whatever terminology may be used to point to the reality, but the reality cannot be identified as or contained in conventional construction. Concerning the gap revealed by the ineffability of the reality, i.e., what is left by the insufficiency and inadequacy of discourses, meditative practices and insightful wisdom can take over to fill up.

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THE END

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