

Language As an Instrument of Soteriological Transformation from the Madhyamaka Perspective

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I. Introduction

- Expressions of the Madhyamaka perspective such as “neither arisen nor ceased,” “neither existent nor not-existent,” and “neither a dharma nor a not-dharma” are notoriously difficult to understand and are riddled with interpretive ambiguities.
- This paper focuses on the rhetorical construction of non-dualistic terminology and the way linguistic strategies are used in directing non-dualistic terminology for the purpose of soteriological transformation.



II. What is the Madhyamaka Perspective?

- The Sanskrit word “*madhyama*” or “*madhyamaka*” means “middle” or “middlemost.” If “*madhyama*” is joined by “*pratipad*” (way or path), the phrase “*madhyamā pratipad*” figuratively means “middle way.”
- This should not be regarded as a position in the sense of a third position lying at a middle point between the two extremes. Neither does this mean a logocentric middle. It means a way or path which repudiates any set of extremes on both sides so as to allow the turning of related factors (dharmas) to proceed.
- In other words, related factors operate along a way or path leaving various sets of extremes behind. Such a way or path can therefore be called “middle.”

II. What is the Madhyamaka Perspective?

- To have a perspective means to think about things or to look at whatever is perceivable, such as life, sentient beings, events, the world and so on, in a particular way. However, one can hardly become liberated with the same perspective that has gotten one caught up in polarized controversies and trapped in the flow of life.
- Thus construed, *madhyamaka* is more accurately understood as a specific perspective rather than as a certain school or sect such as the Mādhyamika school.



II. What is the Madhyamaka Perspective?

- But what is Madhyamaka perspective? Although “*madhyamaka*” literally means “middle,” Madhyamaka perspective should not be taken at face value to mean that there is something out there called “the middle” ready to be seen or apprehended. At least three steps are required to properly unpack and look into the Buddhist claim of the middle:
 1. non-dualistic cognition (*a-dvaya-jñāna*)
 2. process skills
 3. thoroughly realizing both conditioned co-arising (or dependent co-arising) (*pratītya-samutpāda*) and cessation (*nirodha*) of related factors.

II. What is the Madhyamaka Perspective?

1. non-dualistic cognition

- ▶ The middle apparently derives from two sides or two extremes. It is not automatically wrong or right to divide into two sides or even go to two extremes. However, if one assumes that, not only are extreme views never correct, but also that the correct solution can always be found in the middle as some sort of compromise between two positions, then one probably has fallen victim to the fallacy of “argument to moderation.”
- ▶ The main concern is that it seems quite easy to divide any issue into two sides. When the fabric comprising the two sides of an issue is made by weaving threads of diametrically opposite concepts, if one still holds on to one side of this divide or the other, then one is probably being distracted by conceptual differences and failing to see the big picture.

II. What is the Madhyamaka Perspective?

- ▶ A truth-seeker would restrain impulses toward either of such two sides. As a consequence, a better approach would be not only to withdraw from such two sides, but also to avoid dividing into two sides in the first place. By discarding the division of two sides and refraining from going to two extremes, such a perspective can be called “non-dualistic” cognition.
- ▶ Such a non-dualistic cognition can be called the “middle” on the grounds that the division of two sides is not taken for granted and that the two extremes are not being attached. In other words, the Buddhist claim of the middle is simply a detachment from the construct of two sides or two extremes without assuming any balance, compromise or reconciliation “between” opposing sides or extremes.

II. What is the Madhyamaka Perspective?

2. Second, process skills:

- ▶ Buddhism proposes the middle as a better alternative to opposing sides or extremes. However, by being detached from dualistic constructs, such a non-dualistic middle is only a preliminary step in avoiding a conceptual error, and cannot yet be claimed as correct in a positive sense.
- ▶ What is overlooked in dualistic constructs is their tendency to project dichotomies onto an issue, thus generating one-sided assertions that produce entangled oppositions. By contrast, the non-dualistic middle, as a perspective, is never about making another fixed assertion by way of reified conceptualizations. It is about unpacking reality through observation and continuous re-examination.

II. What is the Madhyamaka Perspective?

- ▶ The road to cultivating the non-dualistic middle begins with developing a process-oriented mindset. Fundamentally, it is the continuous process of phenomena that deserves a full inquiry because, unless in a relation of process, phenomena do not and cannot appear.
- ▶ However, it is the shift from taking sides on opposing views to a mindset oriented toward gaining new skills to look into the flow of events that is characteristic of the non-dualistic middle. Such a shift endeavors to reveal successive events along the temporal dimension, that is to say, the arising, duration and cessation of events -- one of the most important dimensions of reality -- by cultivating the skills crucial to navigating through the survey process. The non-dualistic middle thus cultivated can therefore be termed as the “middle way” (*madhyama-pratipad; madhyamā pratipad*).

II. What is the Madhyamaka Perspective?

3. Third, thoroughly realizing both conditioned co-arising and cessation of related factors:
 - ▶ After a mindset adjusted to confront challenges from the observation of continuous process, it is vital to carry out further investigations along the temporal dimension in order to investigate the process of actual changes from one set of related factors to the next set, and therefore to arrive at the insight that such a process is really the “middle way.”
 - ▶ As the middle, the Madhyamaka perspective requires not only an understanding of the non-duality of what has been dualistically distinguished, but also the refraining from pursuing dualistic extremes.

III. Language Scrutinized from the Madhyamaka Perspective

- However, the Madhyamaka perspective sees language not as about linguistic ability or linguistic intelligence which reinforces linguistically related stereotypes. Rather, it is about gaining a more thorough awareness of reality, the limitations of language in expressing this thorough reality, and how to overcome the limitations of language.
- If we believe we can fully express what we want to express, we will not realize that, on the one hand, sensual immediacy and critical thinking are severely limited by the languages available to us, and, on the other hand, that thorough comprehension of reality may be distorted or hindered by the lens offered by established languages.

III. Language Scrutinized from the Madhyamaka Perspective

- This can be shown to be so in three ways:
 1. Language basically fails when confronted with the sensual immediacy of fresh experience that, to a large extent, is linguistically incomprehensible or defies conceptualization.
 2. At least due to its discrete concepts, segregated cognition, ambiguous meaning, and linear structure, language is a very limited and deficient tool when it comes to critically expressing thought.



III. Language Scrutinized from the Madhyamaka Perspective

3. Thorough reality may be distorted or obfuscated by the manner in which language supplies us with words and sentences at the cost of the overall process and web of reality. When words and sentences are provided, most people can easily be compelled or persuaded to cognize the world through these linguistic statements which themselves reveal the very specific and stereotyped way language operates. As a consequence, a multitude of angles and dimensions are shrouded or jettisoned because one's mentality tends to be determined and impoverished by the linearity of statements.



III. Language Scrutinized from the Madhyamaka Perspective

- From the angle of the Madhyamaka perspective, everyday use of language not only goes in a direction of reinforcing and increasing dualistic views, but also tends to stand in the way of realizing the non-dualistic nature of the world. Within very limited settings, language can function quite well, especially in everyday communication, in denoting references to objects, and in drawing distinctions between various linguistic items. However, language is gravely deficient in revealing the emptiness and indivisibility of reality.
- In this regard, at least the following three points may be offered as a useful guide to avoid the mistakes often made in understanding the nature of language.

III. Language Scrutinized from the Madhyamaka Perspective

1. Developing a critical understanding that thorough reality is altogether beyond the reach of language, designation or differentiating thinking, or dissociated from it.
2. Developing a critical understanding that what language brings about is at most a reduced, simplified, fabricated, and even a distorted representation resulting from the mechanism of cognition. The point is that meaningful expression of language relies heavily on the mechanism of cognition, which in turn relies on available sense organs, the intended objects to be grasped, the way differentiating perception (or consciousness) is produced, and the habitual inclination of cognitive and emotional attributes.

III. Language Scrutinized from the Madhyamaka Perspective

3. Developing a critical understanding that, without proper observation and rigorous examination, language is neither a suitable window on the world, nor a reliable window on the mind. If one naively regards language as an exact perspective on the world, one is inclined to cognize the world merely through what the language is capable of grasping and projecting.
- Thus, in order not to become overwhelmed by linguistic constraints, and in order to proceed with the observation of reality and the realization of insight, it may be advisable to refrain from “getting attached to meaning as being in conformity with words” (*yathā-rutârthâbhiniṣṭa*).

III. Language Scrutinized from the Madhyamaka Perspective

- A critical understanding of language can be developed through reflection on how language works and how language relates to the time, place, society, culture, source material, observation, thinking, and environment in which it was produced. Such an understanding can greatly change the way one sees language and enhance, in a positive way, an understanding of what is left to do. Among various tasks, soteriological application can be viewed as a worthwhile challenge.



IV. Language As a Soteriological Instrument

- In the academic field of Buddhist studies, soteriology, the study of the doctrine of salvation, can be understood as a key theme in helping sentient beings rightly understand how the sentient world works and how to maintain or improve wellbeing in the ongoing life-process.
- In order for soteriology to be functional and effective, Buddhism has recourse to multiple paths of cultivation and various tools of soteriology, which are appropriate to the heterogeneous faculties and sentiments of sentient beings, and are therefore conducive to the autonomous practices of prospective sentient beings.

IV. Language As a Soteriological Instrument

- Some of these numerous soteriological tools include such practices as offering rescue, refuge, shelter, relief supplies and services, providing relevant antidotes to day-to-day predicaments, instruction on how to practice morality, meditation and wisdom, and finding a way out of suffering and ignorance. In addition to these, language can be an equally valid tool in Buddhist soteriological application.
- The use of language lies at the core of Buddhist teachings. Buddhism has issued a vast number of scriptures that incorporate multiple paths and schools, and have been transmitted in various languages and dialects such as Sanskrit, Pāli, Gāndhārī, Chinese, and Tibetan.



IV. Language As a Soteriological Instrument

- The point is that, in Buddhism, the scriptures are regarded as teachings of liberated or enlightened masters, and as directions and guidelines for practices. To put it differently, the words of the scriptures can be soteriological because they convey some layers of the truths that, on the one hand, are discourses derived from realization of liberation or perfect enlightenment, and, on the other hand, are crucial tools necessary for a clear and fruitful orientation of practices toward liberation or perfect enlightenment.



V. Soteriological Transformation and Linguistic Transformation

- Buddhism shows at least two levels of linguistic adjustment in presenting its soteriological transformation to sentient beings:
 1. **A non-authoritarian position on words and views**
 - ▶ Buddhism has little interest in having language succumb to authoritarian or dogmatic tendencies in its soteriological application.
 - ▶ “The words of a tradition, whether it be the Brahmanical Vedic tradition with its revealed texts or their own Buddhist teachings, should not be taken as authoritative because of their source, but should be regarded as true only when proved to be so by the individual practitioner using her own reason and experience.”

V. Soteriological Transformation and Linguistic Transformation

- ▶ Such a non-authoritarian position on words and views is crucial because, from the Buddhist perspective, liberation or perfect enlightenment is to be gained not only from pertinent understanding of the limitations of language but also by appropriate use of language and other soteriological tools.
- ▶ On the contrary, an authoritarian approach to words and views will only worsen the already suffering situation of sentient beings by aggravating the problems of false views, attachment, contention, and fear. Therefore, Buddhism proposes a non-authoritarian attitude toward language in order for words and views to be suitable tools for optimizing the soteriological pursuit of liberation or perfect enlightenment.

V. Soteriological Transformation and Linguistic Transformation

2. Linguistic transformation

- ▶ A linguistic transformation is necessary together with an overall soteriological transformation, which implies that in a soteriological context, a process of profound and radical change orients prospective sentient beings in a new direction and takes them to an entirely different level of effectiveness.
- ▶ Furthermore, what should be practiced is not only the transformation of the presently manifesting mental continuum, but also the transformation of the latent tendencies lying dormant far beneath this surface – a process technically called *āśraya-parāvṛtti*, i.e., transformation by overturning (*parāvṛtti*) the dependent basis (*āśraya*) for the occurrence of the mentally derived world. But since the main focus of this paper is on language, these more complex issues will not be investigated in more detail here.

V. Soteriological Transformation and Linguistic Transformation

- Taking soteriological transformation as the backdrop for this argument, it is clear that linguistic transformation plays an important role in Buddhist philosophy, especially when it comes to Madhyamaka perspective. In the philosophical discourses of Buddhist teachings, the major function of language is to serve as a guiding tool oriented toward soteriological goals.
- Consequently, there is a need for a transformative approach to understanding soteriological language. In other words, without such a shift to a transformative approach, non-dualistic terms may not make much sense to those who manage life-and-world in a linguistically pre-determined and fixed fashion.

VI. A Transformative Approach to the Madhyamaka Expression of “Neither A Dharma Nor A Not-dharma”

- This paper mainly focuses on the expression of “neither a dharma nor a not-dharma” (*na sa dharmo nâdharmah*) with particular emphasis on obtaining the following four insights for facilitating an overall soteriological transformation.
 1. **Remarks on “Neither A Dharma Nor A Not-dharma”**
 - ▶ The Tathāgata teaches not only at the linguistic level of a string of signs that mediates between syntactic structures and differentiating representation, but at the pragmatic and metaphysical levels where the soteriological realization of ungraspability and ineffability goes hand in hand with the expression of “neither a dharma nor a not-dharma.”

VI. A Transformative Approach to the Madhyamaka Expression of “Neither A Dharma Nor A Not-dharma”

2. Reasoning of “Neither A Dharma Nor A Not-dharma”

- Which related factor (*katamasya dharmasya*) is precisely the identifier (*adhivacana*) of the so-called sentient being (*sattvaḥ sattva iti*)?
- The straightforward answer is that the so-called sentient being cannot be precisely identified as either a related factor (*na dharmasyâdhivacana*) or a not-related factor (*nâ-dharmâdhivacana*).
- As an add-on name (*nāmadheyaṃ prakṣiptam*), a sentient being is, in reality, adventitious (*āgantuka*), without a corresponding entity (*a-vastuka*), without anything belonging to a self (*an-ātmīya*), and without objective support (*an-ārambaṇa*).

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- Furthermore, no substantial sentient being has been revealed (*na kā-cid sattva-paridīpanā kṛtā*), no matter how many times the name “sentient being” has been uttered. Since a sentient being is only an add-on name to an adventitious presence, it cannot be precisely identified as either a related factor or a not-related factor.
- The quote comes from *the Mahā-parinirvāṇa-sūtra*, in which the following explanation is given in relation to the Tathāgata, though not to the sentient being:



The Tathāgata is not a dharma (or related factor). Why is that? It is because all dharmas (or related factors) have varied characteristics from one another. The case with the Tathāgata is not so. The Tathāgata is endowed with one characteristic only, and is therefore neither a dharma nor a not-dharma. Why is that? The Tathāgata is the realm of related factors (*dharma-dhātu*), therefore, the *Tathāgata* a not-dharma.

- On the one hand, the Tathāgata is not just any related factor, in the sense that the Tathāgata is consistently one characteristic throughout. To put it differently, it is not a particular entity endowed with several distinct characteristics distinguished from other entities. On the other hand, the Tathāgata is also not a not-related factor, in the sense that the Tathāgata passes through the realm of all the related factors.

VI. A Transformative Approach to the Madhyamaka Expression of “Neither A Dharma Nor A Not-dharma”

3. Creating A Soteriological Link with the Raft Simile

- ▶ In its soteriological application, the expression of “neither a dharma nor a not-dharma” can go hand in hand with the raft simile (Skt. *kolopama*/ Pāli, *kullūpama*), although both do not always appear together.
- The teaching (or the related factor/ dhamma) is rendered for the sake of crossing over (*nittharaṇatthāya*), not for the sake of holding onto (*no gahaṇatthāya*).

Understanding the teaching (or the related factor/ dhamma) as rendered comparable to a raft, you should let go even of (pertinently) related factors (*dhammāpi vo pahātabbā*), to say nothing of not-(pertinently-)related factors (*pageva adhammā*).

VI. A Transformative Approach to the Madhyamaka Expression of “Neither A Dharma Nor A Not-dharma”

4. Facilitating An Overall Soteriological Transformation

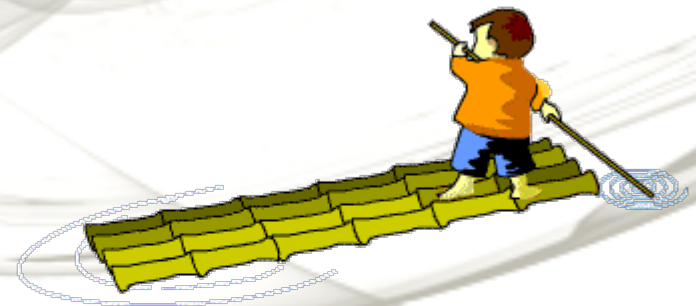
- ▶ Among the best-known and often-quoted texts concerning the raft simile is the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā*, which has been cited in support of “a charter for paradox and irrationality.”
- ▶ Although the quotation has been interpreted in various ways, at least it is effective in making a soteriological link between the raft simile and the expression of “neither a dharma nor a not-dharma.” Such a link can be analyzed in the following sequence.
 1. The idea of rafts is employed as a metaphor, transferring the meaning of rafts as an instrument for support or transportation over water to the related factors for moving forward along life’s path.

VI. A Transformative Approach to the Madhyamaka Expression of “Neither A Dharma Nor A Not-dharma”

2. Just as a raft is made out of whatever materials are readily available and appropriate to its intended use, so a related factor could be similarly conceived as a compounded appearance of multilayered structure in the context of the dynamics of various actions.
3. In terms of an analogical understanding of how a raft is made and used, a related factor is accordingly not supposed to be conceptualized as a related factor in its discrete manner, or even to be conceptualized in any way. Rather, the right approach is to clearly perceive and understand that the so-called related factors are not related factors in themselves.

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4. The fact that a related factor is not a related factor in itself does not mean that a related factor is a not-related factor. Both the assertion of being a related factor and that of being a not-related factor are likewise based on conceptualization and confined within a dualistic framework. Such dualistic conceptualization and assertion are basically mental constructs, which are so abundant as to enchant ordinary sentient beings to incessantly pursue a conventional world of linguistic differentiation.



VI. A Transformative Approach to the Madhyamaka Expression of “Neither A Dharma Nor A Not-dharma”

5. One cannot become disenchanted by means of the very same enchantment. With a view to becoming disenchanted with linguistic proliferation and to facilitating an overall soteriological transformation, it is necessary to really understand that the so-called related factors are neither related factors nor not-related factors, to avoid getting attached to any related factor, and, most importantly, to dynamically and skillfully handle whatever related factors – be they related to how the sentient world works or to how Buddhist soteriology works – in a manner conducive to developing wisdom and making progress on the soteriological path.

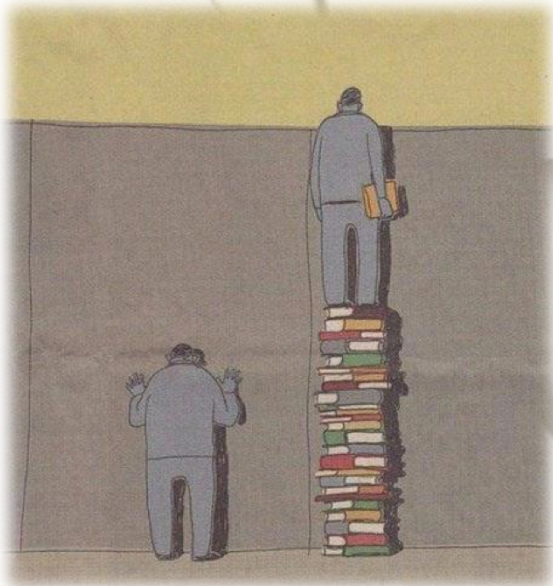
VII. Conclusion

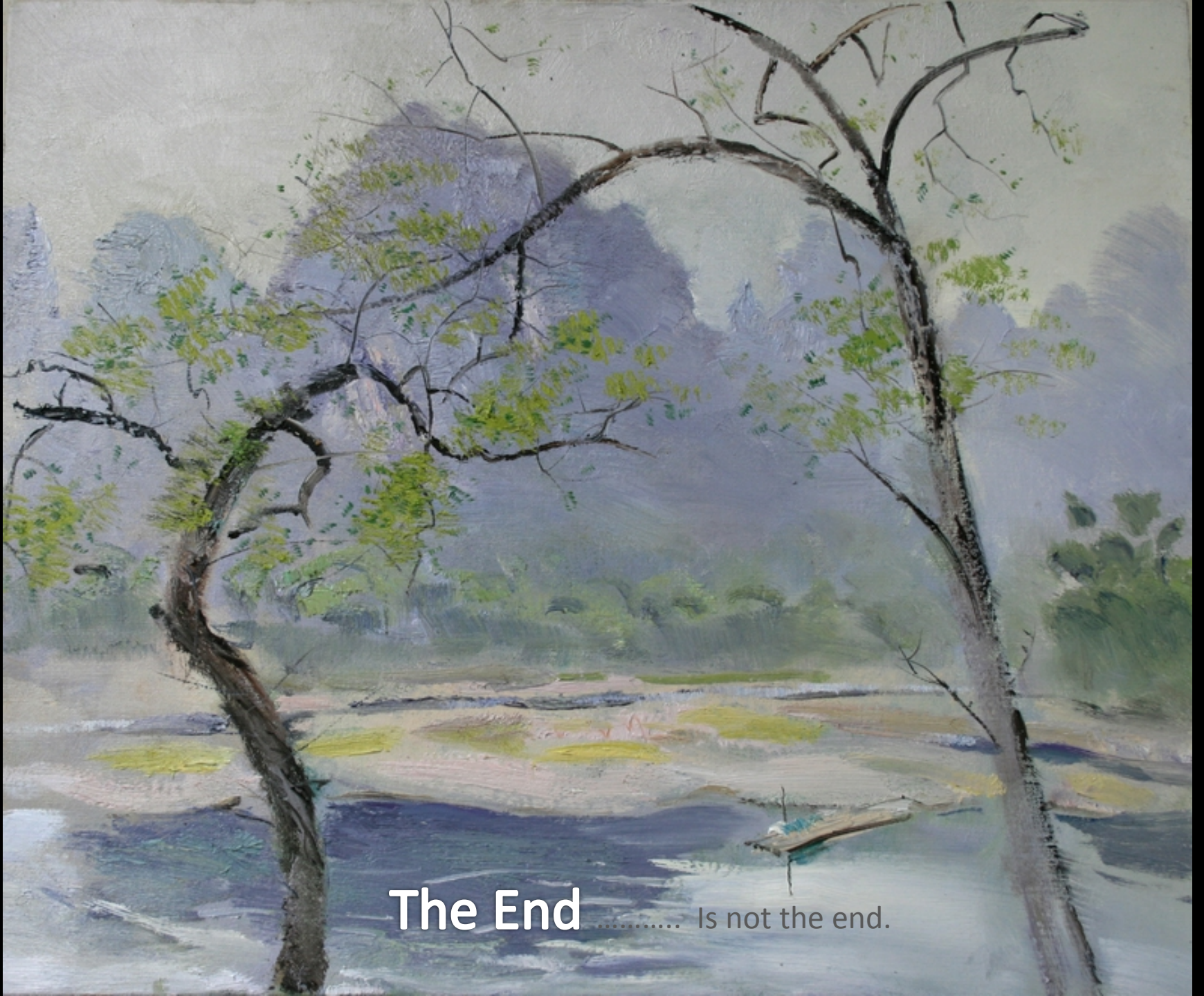
- Instead of considering the works of Nāgārjuna or other Mādhyamika thinkers, as most contemporary scholars tend to do, this paper looks to language as an instrument of soteriological transformation from the Madhyamaka perspective mainly by drawing on such Buddhist scriptures as the *Āgama/Nikāya* collections, *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*, *Lañkāvatāra-sūtra*, and *Mahā-parinirvāṇa-sūtra*. In the philosophical discourses of Buddhist teachings, the major function of language is to serve as a guiding tool oriented toward soteriological goals.



VII. Conclusion

- As soteriology entails transformation, so too soteriological tools embody transformation. In the same manner, language undergoes transformation when used in a soteriological context. In brief, this paper has demonstrated that, through a shift to a transformative approach, one can at least, to some extent, properly understand the innovative wisdom and soteriological strategies characteristic of such Madhyamaka expressions as “neither a dharma nor a not-dharma” without casually labeling it as “a charter for paradox and irrationality.”





The End Is not the end.