

## The Great Indian Pandits from Nalanda University: Acharya Buddhapalita

*"I call to mind the esteemed Buddhapalita,*

*Who clarified the ultimate meaning of dependent arising, the thought of the Superior,  
The essential point of the profound, (existence as) mere designation and name  
And who has ascended to the utmost state of accomplishment."*

His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama in

'Illuminating the Threefold Faith - An Invocation of the Seventeen Great Scholarly Adepts of Glorious Nalanda

In his prayer "Illuminating the Threefold Faith - An Invocation of the Seventeen Great Scholarly Adepts of Glorious Nalanda", His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama acknowledges the great contributions made by Acharya Buddhapalita in clarifying the essence of the teachings of Arya Nagarjuna. Many eminent Tibetan writers and text composers acknowledge Acharya Buddhapalita as the founder of the Prasangika (Consequentialist) arm of the Madhyamaka (the Middle Way) view. As mentioned in one of the earlier write-ups in the series of articles on the great Nalanda pandits Arya Nagarjuna is considered to have pioneered the Middle Way interpretation of the Buddha's teachings. Arya Nagarjuna's single most important exegetical work is the *Mulamadhyamakakarika (The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way)* that presents the most incisive interpretation of the Buddha's teaching on *Pratitya-Samutpada (The Law of Dependent Origination)*. Through this work the Acharya describes the essence of the Middle-Way, free of the extremes of existence and non-existence, as taught by the Buddha. The Middle Way view was further systematized into two schools viz. the *Prasangika-Madhyamaka (Consequentialist-Middle Way) School* and the *Svatantrika-Madhyamaka (Autonomist-Middle Way) School*. Many scholars believe that Acharya Buddhapalita laid the foundation for the Prasangika school.

Acharya Buddhapalita was born in a place called Hamsakrida<sup>1</sup> in South India. Due to his interest in Buddhism he decided to become a Buddhist monk. He received the Sramanera (novice monk) and Bhikshu (fully-ordained monk) ordinations and became vastly accomplished in the scriptures. He studied under the tutorship of Acharya Sangharakshita who was a disciple of the Arya Nagamitra. He soon came to understand the teachings of Arya Nagarjuna as he studied the original works of Arya Nagarjuna under Acharya Sangharakshita.

Acharya Buddhapalita was a highly realized practitioner. He had a very clear understanding of Arya Nagarjuna's works and he delivered many sermons on the Buddhist doctrine while residing in the Dantapuri monastery in South India. His exegetical work guided later day masters like Arya Chandrakirti who went on to compose many fine commentaries on the Middle Way view of the doctrine. As

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<sup>1</sup> Taranatha, History of Buddhism in India, translated from the Tibetan by Lama Chimpa and Alaka Chattopadhyaya

mentioned earlier Acharya Buddhapalita is considered to have laid the foundation for the Prasangika system with an exegetical commentary on *Nagarjuna's Treatise on the Middle Way* called *Buddhapalita Mula-Madhyamaka Vrtti*<sup>2</sup> Even though Acharya Chandrakirti through his defense of Acharya Buddhapalita opened the way for Prasangika, some writers consider Buddhapalita to be the founder. Acharya Buddhapalita's commentary on *Nagarjuna's Treatise on the Middle Way* uses Consequences (Prasanga) as opposed to Syllogisms favored by many other commentators like Acharya Bhavaviveka. Thus since Acharya Buddhapalita was the first main commentator on the *Treatise on the Middle Way* to use consequences instead of syllogisms he is considered to be the founder of the Pransangika system which in the Tibetan tradition is considered to be superior to all other systems.

Acharya Buddhapalita is said to have composed many works. However, only his commentary on *Nagarjuna's Treatise on the Middle Way* called *Buddhapalita Mula-Madhyamaka Vrtti* survives. This commentary is acknowledged as the most important commentarial work on the *Treatise on Middle Way*. This commentary was used extensively by Acharya Chandrakirti in composing his most important work titled '*Clear Words, Commentary on Nagarjuna's Treatise on the Middle Way (Mula-Madhyamaka Vrtti Prasannapada)*'. The great Tibetan practitioner Je Tsong Khapa is also said to have relied heavily on Acharya Buddhapalita's commentary to realize the meaning of Madhayamaka view.

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2 Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*