THE MIDDLE WAY

The teaching of the Middle Way states that the material world lacks an ultimate reality, and that living beings do not have a truly existent personality. The goal of the Middle Way is to experience the unity of appearance and emptiness in meditation.

Nagarjuna (~ 2nd century), one of the most important Buddhist philosophers, founded the Middle Way school. His teaching is directly based on Buddha Shakyamuni's explanation of the directly experienceable, intuitive wisdom that the historical Buddha passed on to his disciples in northern India. This wisdom is not learned knowledge, but a direct experience of the power and possibilities of one's own mind. It is a spontaneously arising realization that any living being can attain through meditation techniques.

Nagarjuna's life's work consisted in the exact explanation and systematization of Buddha's words. He wrote many commentaries in which he explained that the material world lacks an ultimately existing reality and that the living beings do not possess a truly existing personality (doctrine of emptiness).

The methodical approach of his doctrine is that everything experiences a reality only through the existence of its opposite. Following this principle, all opposites are rejected as independently existent and refutable points of view are avoided. This gave the philosophical school its name "The Middle Way", free from the extreme views of the existence of things (existentialism) and the consequent negation of all perceptible phenomena (nihilism).

Nagarjuna divides his considerations of the world into two levels. The conditional level or relative truth describes the relative existence of things, to which three qualities are attributed:

1. The actual nature of the things is not examined exactly.
2. Things are bound in an incessant process of change. This can happen so subtly that the appearance and decay of things happen almost simultaneously.
3. Things fulfill a concrete function.

From these three key points come the understanding of the nature of things at the second, ultimate level of absolute truth. Since things are subject to constant change in their appearance, an independent reality existing by itself is not possible. On the ultimate level, the nature of appearances is empty, that is, devoid of substance and unreal. Thus one becomes both the appearance of things as well as their change. However, an extreme and thus refutable worldview is avoided.

These two aspects of reality are inseparable from each other, they describe the same phenomenon. The goal of the Middle Way is to experience the unity of appearance and emptiness in meditation.

The mere arising of things already shows their conditional character and contradicts an own, ultimate existence. Things do not exist out of themselves, but receive their relative reality according to the principle of cause and effect. Ultimately considered, these phenomena have no intrinsic nature, according to their essence they are empty or free of a truly existing reality.
Similar to ancient Greece, ancient India experienced a flowering of the art of debate. The winner of a debate took on the disciples of the losing opponent. Through this system, Nagarjuna contributed greatly to the spread of Buddha's wisdom teachings as the prevailing philosophical doctrine. With Nagarjuna's main disciples, the Middle Way school later divided into two schools of interpretation. The Prasangika school and the Svatantrika school of Madhyamaka emerged.