Anekānta and Madhyamā-Pratipad

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VARDHAMĀNA Mahāvīra started with implicit faith in ahīṃsā and austerities, while Gautama Buddha was impressed by the practice of meditation. The supreme problem of Mahāvīra was the conflict of ontological doctrines of his time, which led him and his followers to formulate the doctrine of anekānta. The Buddha was troubled about the psychoethical discipline, specially the final end of meditation and the rational adjustment of various codes of life, hedonistic and ascetic, which he characterized as madhyamā-pratipad (middle course).

The ontological pursuits of Mahāvīra and his followers led to the discovery of the conflict in the nature of things, and the resolution of such conflict in their theory of anekānta. A real must change and this change is impossible without a mode that has originated, a mode that has passed and also an aspect that continues to exist in order to make origination and passing possible. In other words, a real must have a persistent feature in order to appropriate change, that is, a real must be a substance capable of assuming modes. This is anekānta, that is, the doctrine which accepts many-sidedness of a real which is necessarily continuity and change rolled into one.

The Buddha singled out the moral aspect of life and discovered the causal doctrine of pratītyasamutpāda which traced the final source of life and death in avidyā. This causal law determined the ontological
speculations of the Buddha and his followers. Substance, according to this law, was a myth raised up by imagination. The modes alone were real without any underlying unity. One mode replaces another in unbroken succession determined by causal nexus. The unity is replaced by an infinite chain of self-charged moments in this doctrine of pratityasamutpāda which literally means 'origination depending on relevant causes and conditions'. Nothing is independent and self-sufficient in this view. The real is also śūnya, that is, devoid of a character which is self-explanatory without any reference beyond itself. The concept of unity is a composite act of imagination, called upādāya-prajñāpti, that is, a concept (prajñāpti) depending upon (upādāya) other constituent concepts. Nāgārjuna, a Mādhyamika Buddhist, equates madhyamā-pratipad with these three aspects of the real when he says:—

\[ यः प्रतिवेच्यसून्येतः सः प्रवचनेत् सः मध्यमा ॥ \]

Another aspect of pratityasamutpāda and madhyamā-pratipad is the non-acceptance of any of a set of two extreme concepts or views. Nāgārjuna pays homage to the Buddha as the promulgator of the negation of all sets of conflicting concepts in the following verses:—

\[ अनिष्क्यमुन्यादस्तुच्छेदनश्चक्ष्मान्नतम् । ।
अनेनकार्यमानान्तर्भनानागमनिर्मित्तम् ॥
वः प्रतिवेच्यसून्यातः प्रवचनेत् शिवं ।
देशयासातं संभुजतं बुद्धं वर्गं ॥ \]

The Yogācāra Buddhist also eulogizes the Buddha's doctrine as the negation of the cognized (grāhya) and the cognizer (grāhaka).

Thus, the madhyamā-pratipad, originally a doctrine of life, came to be interpreted by later Buddhist thinkers as a doctrine of reality, from the ontological as well as the epistemological point of view.

Anekānta, on the other hand, was an ontological doctrine from the beginning. It was an attempt to explain causation and also a doctrine of relation. A substance can have different modes and yet preserve its unity and identity with those modes. The criterion of unity is inseparability. There can be distinction without difference. Modes are different among themselves and distinct from the substance, but they are not different from the latter. The relation between substance and modes is identity-cum-distinction. The Buddhist does not agree with the Jaina and consequently fails to find any unity in the knowing, feeling and willing of
the same person, which leads him to the denial of the entitative character of personality. Knowing, feeling and willing also are finally rejected by the Mādhyamika Buddhist as unreal. Thus, while the theory of anekānta was an attempt at the synthesis of the conflict apparent in experience and reason, the madhyamā-pratipad, as interpreted by later Buddhist thinkers, accentuated the conflict and denounced both the extremes as untenable and unacceptable. If anekānta gives an impression of eclecticism, the madhyamā-pratipad was made to play a role which it was perhaps not intended to do.