THE BUDDHIST DOCTRINE OF TWO TRUTHS AS RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY

3. In ultimate reality (paramārtha-taḥ) there is neither an illumined one nor object of illumination. Ah! you are indeed the one who illumines the reality most difficult to illumine.

7. No sound at all was uttered by you, O Master, And [yet] all disciplined people were satisfied [or 'refreshed'] by the dharma-rain.¹

These stanzas from a hymn attributed to Nāgārjuna reflect a problem recognized in many Buddhist attempts to express the truth. The problem basically is how to use language to release human beings from their attachment to deceptive (false) mental and emotional habits. The Buddha and his followers claimed they could provide a path, a means, of release from life’s anxieties and frustrations. This meant that the Buddhist teachers (therapists) had to entice their hearers into trying the Buddha’s remedy, but without diluting its cathartic power to the point where it became simply a narcotic or worse, a poison. Thus, in expressing the truth (dharma) the spiritual teachers recognized, on the one hand, that the truth which illumines must be appropriate to the spiritual condition of the hearer, and on the other, that there is a criterion of truth which distinguishes salutary teachings from perversions. One way of explaining how there could be a variety of truth statements – some appearing to be mutually contradictory – while also affirming that there was a criterion of truth which applied to all truth claims was to assert that there were two kinds of truth: conventional or world-ensconced truth (saṁvṛtī-satya), and ultimate or highest truth (paramārtha-satya).

While this distinction solved some problems in relating different Buddhist statements, it raised new questions at another level of explanation. For instance, if there are two kinds of truth, what is the relationship between them? Are these kinds of truth simply two kinds of statements having their own linguistic (i.e. logical) structures that apply to different realms of discourse (as in the difference between metaphorical and ana-
lytical statements; or between theological statements, empirically justifiable statements, and descriptions of personal experience)? Or is the conventional truth simply either an illusion or first suggestion in the direction of truth, which should be discarded for a radically different truth realized only when the conventional truth is rejected? Or is the conventional truth also an expression of the ultimate truth at least to the degree that it is a necessary participant in the reality expressed in the ultimate truth?

A study of different expressions of Indian Buddhism indicates that the question of the relation between conventional thought and highest insight was handled in a number of ways. The question is complicated by the fact that Buddhists used a variety of terms referring to different kinds of knowledge (consciousness, or truth), that have overlapping but not identical meaning, e.g. jñāna, prajñā, abhijñāna, viññāna, vidyā, satya, dharma, drṣṭi, vikalpa, saṁkalpa, parikalpita, paratantra, parinirpana-lakṣaṇa. We should also note, as K. N. Jayatilleke has pointed out, that 'the two words, sammuti- and paramattha- are nowhere contrasted in the [Pali] Canon' and that while the Theravāda commentaries distinguish between conventional (sammuti-) and absolute (paramattha-) truth they nowhere imply that the former is false or even that the latter is superior. In contrast, R. Robinson reminds us, the Prajñāpāramitā Sutras differentiate the conventional and absolute truths with the claim that "what is true from one standpoint is false from the other." With this recognition of the complexity inherent in discussing the relation of conventional truth to the highest insight in Buddhism I want to focus on statements about this problem made by the second/third-century Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna.

My interpretation of the way in which Nāgārjuna understood the 'two truths' is informed by two methodological assumptions. The first is that the statements are made in the context of religious philosophy; that is, the highest purpose for formulating any statements is soteriological, not speculative. Thus 'truth' can refer to a development of an attitude as well as a judgment about a proposition. The second is that the meaning or significance of the most profound religious statements includes reference to, though not limited to, commonly recognized experience of reality. To the extent that the latter assumption is correct we can understand the religious significance of the statements without claiming that we have attained the highest spiritual insight. Based on these assumptions I hope