



The Logic of Omniscience: A Madhyamaka Buddhist Argument for Realising the Emptiness of All Things

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Within the religious and philosophical milieu of Classical India, the claim for the personal authority of the Buddha was, unsurprisingly, central to how Buddhist thinkers defined themselves against their ‘Hindu’ opponents. Fundamental for this claim was the assumption of the Buddha’s omniscience. While this would seem to be a matter of faith which falls outside the domain of rational enquiry, this paper examines how Buddhist thinkers of the Madhyamaka school did indeed attempt to mount a logical defence of one aspect of omniscience. Specifically, I examine the Madhyamaka claim that seeing the emptiness of one thing is tantamount to seeing the emptiness of all things. For Mādhyamikas, all things are said to be, in the final analysis, empty of inherent nature, hence, the Buddha’s omniscient insight into the nature of all things is said to be precisely the realization of universal emptiness. This insight into the nature of all things is held to occur, for a Buddha, in precisely the direct insight of the nature of just one thing, hence the nature of all things is said to be seen in a single instant. My paper will examine the contours of how this claim is defended in a philosophical setting, and how this defence draws upon highly sophisticated theories of negation, particulars and universals. What is especially of interest is the way that Buddhist thinkers refuse to abandon rational enquiry altogether even within this context of what appears to be an unverifiable faith-claim. It will thus be argued that this specific argument for omniscience, particularly in the light of the analysis it inspired, provides an insight into how the Buddhist tradition envisaged the relation between mystical insight and philosophical reasoning.