

Motion and Rest from a Chinese Buddhist Perspective

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on Seng-Chao's conception of motion and rest as two different ways to see the same phenomenon and the effect that this has on his understanding of ideas such as impermanence. I point out the parallels that can be made between motion and rest and samsara and nirvana and I argue that a strong Taoist background helps Seng-Chao clarify Indian ideas and make even deeper claims about the true nature of reality.



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Seng-Chao's writing as a Chinese Buddhist signified the start to a new development in Buddhist philosophy in China.¹ He was one of the first writers to draw on a tradition called the Three-Treatise (or Middle Doctrine) School, which had come over from India in the form of three significant texts, namely Nāgārjuna's² *Treatise on the Middle way*, and *Treatise on the Twelve Gates* and Āryadeva's³ *One-Hundred-Verse Treatise*, which were translated into Chinese.⁴ Seng-Chao was one of the earliest Chinese philosophers interested in making a place for Buddhism within a traditionally Taoist and Confucian society. While his work is grounded in distinctly Buddhist ideas, there are definite Taoist influences to his perspective.

In this paper I will outline Seng-Chao's discussion of motion and rest, drawing on connections this argument has with Nāgārjuna's account of motion and Śāntaraksita's⁵ account of consciousness and memory in relation to the perception of images. Next I will examine Seng-Chao's discussion of time and the relationship between past, present and future. I will make connections to Candrakīrti's⁶ account of memory and its implications on

1. Chinese religious and philosophical thought was almost entirely Confucian and Taoist until the transmission of Buddhism began via the Silk Road from India to China. Seng-Chao was one of the first Chinese scholars to engage seriously with the Buddhist philosophical texts being brought from India.

2. Nāgārjuna was an extremely influential Indian philosopher whose writing marks the start of the Mādhyamika (Middle Way) School of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The most famous of his works, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*Treatise on the Middle Way*), laid the foundation for Mādhyamika thought in India, China and Tibet.

3. Āryadeva was a disciple of Nāgārjuna whose work in Mādhyamika philosophy was influential in both China and Tibet.

4. These three texts were purportedly authored by Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva and were transmitted to China by a monk named Kumārajīva, whose father has been Indian and mother had been Chinese. Kumārajīva and his disciples (including Seng-Chao) translated these texts creating what is referred to as the Three-Treatise School of Chinese Buddhism.

5. Śāntaraksita was an Indian philosopher, labeled in Tibetan doxography as a Yogācāra-Śvātantrika-Mādhyamika. His account of conventional truth follows that of the Yogācāra (Mind-Only) idealist school which holds that only the mind exists and all images which appear to it arise within the mind and are cognized by it in a non-dual reflexive manner. His method of logical argument and reasoning follows that of the Śvātantrika style of autonomous inference. And his account of ultimate truth classifies him a Mādhyamika because he believes that ultimately, everything (including mind) is empty of inherent existence.

6. Candrakīrti was a disciple of Nāgārjuna and wrote commentaries on many of his texts. He follows the Prāsāngika style of logic which means that he does not believe that statements or accounts of the ultimate truth can be maintained because for him, verbally expressing an idea indicates that it is grounded in the conventional world of concepts and is therefore not true about ultimate reality.

what constitutes the past versus the present. I will argue that an analogy can be made between Seng-Chao's observations about motion and rest and the relationship between *samsāra*⁷ and *nirvāna*⁸. Finally I will argue that even though Seng-Chao deviates from his Indian and Tibetan counterparts on a number of points, his philosophical perspective serves to augment and clarify the Buddhist tradition and shed new light on a number of important Buddhist doctrines.

Seng-Chao begins his treatise *The Immutability of Things* by explaining that he disagrees with the commonly accepted idea that time flows like a current along which all things move, changing with it. While Seng-Chao does not outline his specific objections to this analogy, there are many problems with it. The image of a current or river of time suggests properties that cannot be possessed by time or motion. First of all, seeing time as a river would imply that past, present, and future all exist somewhere at all times and to locate any moment (past, present or future) would require nothing more than figuring out where that moment was positioned in a long string of moments. It would imply that, in some way, it might be possible to locate and return to a past moment, which, despite what H.G. Wells might suggest, is impossible. Using the river as an analogy suggests that there is no determined present, but that it is relative to the rest of time. One person may locate a spot on the river that is the present in relation to her, but someone else sitting downstream would have a different conception of what the present moment looked like. Finally, if time is represented by the river, then what is the solid, stable thing past which time is flowing? What is it that is standing still while the rest of existence floats by? If the being experiencing time is standing on this solid structure, then doesn't that give the impression that this being is permanent and immortal? For these reasons, Seng-Chao sees the need for a clearer conception of what time and motion really are and how they behave in relation to each other.

He begins with an examination of the relationship between motion and rest. Instead of thinking of them as two separate phenomena and polar opposites, he believes that one must look for rest in motion, and conversely, for motion in rest. "As rest must be sought right in motion, therefore there is eternal rest in spite of motion, and as motion is not to be cast aside in order to seek rest, therefore although there is rest, it is never separated from motion."⁹ Motion cannot be other than multiple instances of rest. While he is not arguing that motion does not exist, he is making a claim about the role that rest plays within movement. He would like to say that there is perpetual rest and that motion must grow out of it. At the same time, he is not arguing against the Buddhist idea that everything is constantly changing. Within rest, there is also constant motion. According to Seng-Chao, motion and rest are the same phenomenon seen from different perspectives.

These ideas are grounded in Nāgārjuna's discussion of motion in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Treatise on the Middle Way). "What has been moved is not moving. What has not been moved is not moving. Apart from what has been moved and what has not been moved, movement cannot be conceived."¹⁰ Nāgārjuna identifies three pieces to the conventional

7. *Samsāra* is the Sanskrit word for cyclic existence which is the cycle of death and rebirth in which all sentient beings are trapped because of their ignorance and grasping. This is a term which describes the very world we live in.

8. *Nirvāna* is the Sanskrit word for release from cyclic existence. An individual who has reached *nirvāna* has complete and perfect understanding of reality and therefore no longer grasps at what is empty. It is said that this individual's mind is at peace or at rest. It is important to note that this is also an account of the very world in which we live and does not describe some other realm of existence.

9. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969): 345.

10. Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): 125. (Chapter II, verse 1).

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understanding of motion: (1) the subject (the mover); (2) the action (the movement); and (3) the object (the moved). However, motion itself cannot be located in any of these three things. Moreover, there are three tenses in which motion is understood: (1) the past (what was moved); (2) the present (what is moving); and (3) the future (what has not yet been moved). What was moved is no longer moving so motion cannot be found in it. What has not yet been moved is not moving either, and therefore does not contain motion. Movement implies that something has changed. What has moved has started in one place and ended up in another. Motion therefore can only be understood in relation to time. At any one moment nothing is moving because there is no conception of something having changed location or position. In a sense, it is frozen at that instant in place in whatever location it rests. For this reason, nothing in the present can actually be seen as moving. Seng-Chao would like to suggest, then, that rest is “eternal” and that motion is made up of rest.

Even as Seng-Chao explains motion as multiple instances of rest, he maintains that there is also motion within those very instances of rest. An instant, after all, is just a miniscule duration of time and all things are in a constant state of change. Even if there is no change that can be observed by human senses within that instant, everything in existence during the passing of that instant has aged by a tiny bit which is an indication of change. Since motion is by definition the occurrence of change, motion has taken place in that instant of rest.

In his treatise, Seng-Chao is making metaphysical claims about the way motion and rest function and work in tandem with each other. Nāgārjuna is also using metaphysical arguments in his discussion, though he is concerned with more than the way that motion works. Nāgārjuna is deconstructing the words we use to talk about motion and is trying to show that we cannot locate our concept of that action within the words we use to describe it. In doing this, he is also arguing that all things are empty of inherent existence, and that motion itself is also empty. The biggest difference between Seng-Chao and Nāgārjuna is that Seng-Chao is not concerned with the same argument about the ultimate emptiness of everything. In the end, however, their metaphysical claims remain remarkably similar.

Seng-Chao’s account of multiple instances of rest making up motion can be compared to Śāntaraksita’s explanation of the way that images are perceived in his *Madhyamakālamkāra* (Ornament of the Middle Way). Śāntaraksita believes that images are perceived in multiple, distinct pieces rather than as a fluid continuum. Every instant the object appears to the eye, and the eye perceives the image of that object. The mind then stores that image in memory. It is memory and not the eye, Śāntaraksita thinks, that blurs images together so that the observer gets the sense that she is perceiving a continual occurrence of an object, when in reality, she is only seeing a series of still images. The “joining of the boundaries is done by the memory [of the mental consciousness], not by the seeing [of an eye consciousness], because that [eye consciousness] cannot apprehend past objects.”¹¹

Śāntaraksita uses the example of a swinging firebrand to demonstrate his idea. When a person observes a firebrand being swung in a circle, the impression that the viewer gets is that of a continuous circle of fire. The observer knows that the firebrand is not actually becoming a circle, but instead that a spot of fire is being moved from location to location in a circular motion fast enough that it is being seen as such. Śāntaraksita would like to suggest that a person’s eyes take in individual images of the spot of fire at distinct locations in its

11. James Blumenthal, *The Ornament of the Middle Way: A Study of the Madhyamaka Thought of Śāntaraksita* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2004): 238. (Verse 29).

circular path, and that the mind uses memory to blur the boundaries between those images, giving the viewer the impression of a continuous circle.

There are obviously many similarities between Śāntaraksita's account of memory and perception and Seng-Chao's ideas about motion. They are both suggesting that it is necessary to break down what seems like something continuous into instants of time in order to fully understand the nature of motion and memory. Śāntaraksita is providing an epistemological explanation for the way perceptions are acquired, which explains the relationship between mind and external objects and the differences between the two. Seng-Chao, however, is making a metaphysical claim about the nature of all of existence and the very way in which that existence exists. This claim is much deeper than that of Śāntaraksita's because it is relevant to every part of life and is not confined to an account of how our mind interacts with the external world. It leads to conclusions about the way time functions, and helps clarify the relationship between past, present and future.

Following his discussion of motion and rest, for instance, Seng-Chao engages in an examination of time and common (mis)conceptions about the relationship between past, present and future. According to him, because there is constant rest, everything occurs and ceases, and there can be no notion of the past coming into the present or the present moving into the past.

If the present passes on to the past, then there should be the present in the past. If the past reaches to the present, then there should be the past in the present. Since there is no past in the present, we know it does not come, and since there is no present in the past, we know it does not go... every thing, according to its nature, remains for only one period of time.¹²

The past comprises everything that already occurred in the present and is no longer found there, and the future is made up of everything that has yet to occur in the present and so cannot yet be found there. Those who say the present moves into the past are wrong because there is no instance of the present in the past. The present has not gone anywhere. The present does not move into the past, just as the past cannot move into the present. Therefore, memories of past experiences are not the experiences themselves, but present impressions of things that remain in the past.

Candrakīrti makes similar conclusions in his discussion of memory in the *Madhyamakāvātāra* (Introduction to the Middle Way). It would be "illogical to assert that a memory constitutes remembrance [of an actual experience]. In fact, it would be entirely different from [that previous experience], just as much as if it had been produced in a continuum that did not include any cognition [of that earlier experience]."¹³ He is refuting the Yogācārin understanding of memory, which claims that memory is based on an awareness of oneself performing an action or going through an experience. On the Yogācārin account, it seems that memory is a kind of reliving of the past. A person recalls what it was like to be aware of going through an experience, and therefore is able to experience it all over again using memory. Candrakīrti wants to emphasize the fact that the experience remains in the past and cannot be relived. Instead, a memory is a present impression of a past experience. He

12. Wing-Tsit Chan, 349.

13. C.W. Huntington, Jr., *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamika* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989): 166. (Verse 74).

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argues that it is possible to have experienced something in the past of which there was no cognition or awareness at the time. A memory of this experience can then be triggered by something later on. In this case, one cannot claim that this memory is a remembrance of the actual experience since the person was not aware of the experience at the time.

Candrakīrti's idea of awareness being produced in a continuum is very much like Seng-Chao's argument about time. Candrakīrti sees cognition as arising sequentially instead of looping back to the past or jumping ahead to the future. Memory must be independent of actual experience because the two do not ever exist in the same moment. Similarly, the past and present, for Seng-Chao, must be distinct and separate things because they do not ever co-exist in the same instant of time. Here again, it is Seng-Chao's focus on a metaphysical account of the nature of existence that sets him apart from Candrakīrti's epistemological approach to explaining memory. While Candrakīrti is concerned with the way the mind processes experiences and the way people think about the past, Seng-Chao is involved in a debate about how time functions, which is a phenomenon affecting all of existence. The impermanence of all phenomena is deeply implied in his understanding of time and his account of the subsequent occurring and ceasing of each present moment.

It is clear that Seng-Chao is using his discussion of motion and time to demonstrate the impermanence and constantly changing nature of all things. He is also connecting the idea of perpetual rest to this conception of the way things exist. Neither motion nor rest can be fully understood without the other, and both exist within each other in a way that makes them co-dependent. I would like to suggest that this is an analogy for the relationship between samsāra and nirvāna. Like motion, samsāra is that which can be seen all around us all the time. Its effects are tangible and it affects all beings throughout the duration of their existence. Samsāra, a cycle of rebirth and karmic retribution, is often described as flowing or circling, which again aligns it with motion. Similar to rest, nirvāna is the less visible force underlying all of existence. It is always present whether or not it is recognized as being so and it is described as being a state of rest and cessation of all afflictions.

In a sense, nirvāna is just samsāra seen from a different perspective. Every being is already enlightened, but most tend to distort this and bring suffering upon themselves because they do not understand the true nature of their existence. In the same way, Seng-Chao believes that there is perpetual rest and that our minds distort reality and see everything as motion.

Ultimately, samsāra and nirvāna are contained within each other and are the same thing. They are two different ways of viewing reality and each has a certain degree of truth on its own. However, each needs to be understood in relation to the other in order to fully understand the nature of the relationship and the way they function together in reality. Returning to Śāntaraksita's account of the swinging firebrand, it appears that the only thing actually being perceived is the rest (or nirvāna), and that it is the mind that creates the image of a circle and the impression that there is continuous motion (or samsāra). Upon examination, however, it is clear that there is nothing outside the multiple instances of rest. Therefore motion, while appearing to capture the nature of the perceived phenomena, is revealed as an imposition of the mind onto the perception of rest.

In the same way, samsāra is a distortion of what is actually being experienced, which is nirvāna. Because the two are closely linked, it is necessary to discover the nature of samsāra before one can fully understand nirvāna, and likewise it is impossible to fully grasp the nature of nirvāna without having knowledge about samsāra. Seng-Chao's conclusion that

motion and rest exist simultaneously together, and must be understood in conjunction, is therefore very similar to the relationship between the concepts of samsāra and nirvāna.

Seng-Chao's discussion of motion, rest and the role that time plays in the conception of both of these, takes Buddhist ideas (as seen in the overlaps with Nāgārjuna, Śāntaraksita and Candrakīrti) and brings a new slant to them. Seng-Chao, being located in a Chinese tradition, is very much influenced by the Taoist culture in which he is immersed, and these influences can be seen in his work. Taoism is a tradition that stresses the interrelatedness, co-dependence and ultimate sameness of what appear to be opposites. "Partial means whole, crooked means straight, hollow means full, worn-out means new... thus the sage holds onto the one."¹⁴ Seng-Chao has adopted a very similar argument in relating rest and motion with each other, and finding each within the other. Taoism is not concerned with refuting inherent existence, unlike Indian and Tibetan Buddhists. While Nāgārjuna's account of motion and rest accomplishes many of the same goals as Seng-Chao's treatise (the only major difference being Nāgārjuna's additional claims about emptiness), many Indian and Tibetan philosophers fail to make claims this deep. In sticking to a purely epistemological account, many of them are only able to explain the mind and its relationship to perceived external objects which it recognizes as moving.

By using a metaphysical approach, Seng-Chao is able to make deeper claims about impermanence and the nature of time because he has actual objects and phenomena with which to work. It is hard to assert the permanence or impermanence of something that never had inherent existence in the first place. In addition, Seng-Chao is able to explore themes as complex as the relationship between samsāra and nirvāna simply by explaining the way existence actually exists, and comparing this to the way we perceive it to exist around us all the time.

It is Seng-Chao's ability to clarify important Buddhist ideas while coming from a different perspective that makes his philosophy augmentative to the Buddhist tradition. His more Taoist lens allows him to make connections that scholars immersed within the Indian and Tibetan traditions failed to see. By abandoning something as central to Mādhyamika Buddhism¹⁵ as the lack of inherent existence and the ultimate emptiness of everything, some might claim that Seng-Chao's philosophy is a gross distortion of Buddhism. Instead, I would like to suggest that he is reframing Buddhist ideas in a way that makes other very central themes (such as impermanence) crystal clear to a degree that Mādhyamika was not able to accomplish. ■

14. Lao-Tzu, *Taoteching*, Trans. Red Pine (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1996): 44 (Verse 22).

15. The Mādhyamika school of Buddhism was founded by Nāgārjuna and is based on the idea that all phenomena are dependently arisen and empty of inherent existence. Even the concept of emptiness itself is empty of true essence.