Question: All conditioned dharmas are characterized by impermanence. It should be the case that this is the supreme meaning. Why? All conditioned dharmas are characterized by production, dwelling and extinction. [This is the case] because initially they are produced, then they dwell, and later they become extinct. Why then do you say that impermanence is not actual?

Reply: It should not be the case that conditioned dharmas possess the three characteristics. Why [not]? Because the three characteristics are not real. For instance, all instances of production, dwelling and extinction of dharmas are characteristics of that which is conditioned. Now, production [itself] should also be possessed of the three characteristics because production is [also] a conditioned dharma. In like fashion, at all points [during production] there should exist [all] three characteristics. If this were the case, then this would be endless [and hence absurd]. This would also be the case with regard to dwelling and extinction.

If it were the case that all instances of production, dwelling and extinction did not each possess production, dwelling and extinction, then they should not be referred to as conditioned dharmas. Why [not]? Because they would not possess the characteristics of conditioned dharmas. On account of this, the [teaching that] “all dharmas are impermanent” does not represent the supreme meaning siddhānta.

Furthermore, if all things [on the level of their] actual nature were impermanent, then there would be no carrying forth of karmic retribution. Why [not]? Because impermanence refers to disappearance due to [the process of] production and extinction. This is analogous to a rotten seed which does not have the ability to] produce a fruit. If this were the case, then there could be no carrying forth of karma. If there were no carrying forth of karma, how could there be resultant retribution?

Now, in the Dharma of all of the worthies and sages there is [the teaching of] resultant retribution. This is something which can be believed in and accepted by
those possessed of wholesome wisdom. One should not say that it is nonexistent. For this reason, dharmas are of a non-impermanent nature. On account of innumerable reasons such as these, [I] say that one cannot maintain that all dharmas are of an impermanent nature. [The teachings] that all conditioned dharmas are impermanent, that they are suffering, and that they are not-self are all similar in this regard. [The teachings which set forth] characteristics such as these fall within the scope of the therapeutic siddhānta.

[The Supreme-meaning (pāramārthika) Siddhānta]

As for the “supreme-meaning siddhānta,” the nature of all dharmas, all dialectical discourse, all categorizations of “correct Dharma” and “non-Dharma” — all of them can be refuted and disintegrated through discrimination. The true and actual Dharma practiced by the Buddhas, Pratyekabuddhas, and Arhats cannot be refuted and cannot be disintegrated. Whatever is not reconciled within the three siddhāntas treated above is all reconciled herein.

Question: How then are they reconciled?

Reply: That which serves to reconcile transcends all defects, cannot be changed and cannot be vanquished. How is this so? Because aside from the supreme-meaning siddhānta, all other dialectical positions and all other siddhāntas can be refuted. This is as referred to in verses spoken in the Multitude of Meanings Sutra (ārthavargiya sūtra):

Everyone relies on his own view.
Frivolous discourse generates disputes.
If one has knowledge of another’s errors,
This passes for knowledge of the correct view.
If one cannot bear to accept another’s dharma,
Such a one is a foolish person.
Whosoever engages in these debates
Is truly a foolish person.
If one relies on one’s own view of what is right
And thus begets frivolous discourse,—
If this constitutes pure wisdom,
Then there is no one not possessed of pure wisdom.

In these three verses the Buddha describes the characteristics of the supreme-meaning siddhānta.

To be continued