

Nāgārjuna's Concept of *Śūnyatā*

by Diane Ames

INTRODUCTION

Nāgārjuna was the first and, arguably, the most brilliant, Buddhist philosopher known to have written systematic expositions of the theory of *śūnyatā*.¹ In fact, he seems to have practically devoted his life to explaining and elaborating this concept. For the naive Buddhist seminarian struggling through abstruse passages which debate whether fire is really different from firewood, this raises the question: Why? Why did one of the great founding thinkers of the Mahayana tradition spend his time trying to prove that the firewood he was discussing could not burn if it really "existed"? What is the point?

THE CONCEPT OF *ŚŪNYATĀ*

One thing is certain: Nāgārjuna and the other Madhyamaka philosophers who came after him were *not* simply playing a game of erudition. It is clear from their writings that they were very serious, practicing Buddhists and that developing their philosophy was part of their practice. Their goal was nothing less than the goal of all their co-religionists: liberation. Why they believed that a real grasp of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) was crucial to attaining that goal is spelled out in Chapter 18, verse 5 of the *Mūlamadhyamaka Kārikās*:

Liberation is due to the cessation of
karma and passions
Karma and passions are due to concepts.
These are due to conceptualization
(*prapañca*)
But conceptualization is stopped by
emptiness.²

Of course the most pernicious "conceptualization" of all is the belief in the self:

"I am not, I will not be.
I have not, I will not have,"
That frightens all children
And kills fear in the wise.

By him who speaks only to help
Beings, it was said that they all
Have arisen from the conception of "I"
And are enveloped with the conception
of "mine."

(*Ratnāvalī* 26-27)

And, above all, it is this concept which ought to be undermined by a correct understanding of *śūnyatā*:

Having thus seen the aggregates as
untrue,
The conception of "I" is abandoned
And due to this abandonment
The aggregates arise no more.
(*Ratnāvalī* 30)³

But how are we to develop such a genuine grasp of the theory of *śūnyatā*? The question brings us to a key Madhyamaka concept: *svabhāva*, usually translated "intrinsic nature" or, more literally, "own-nature." It may be fairly called "key concept" because it is the central task of a Madhyamaka philosopher to demonstrate that no thing possesses *svabhāva*. Or, as one of the great classic commentaries on the *Mūlamadhyamaka Kārikās* puts it:

Question: what is the real state of entities [*dharmā*]?
Answer: Their lack of intrinsic nature [*svabhāva*].⁴

THE COMMONSENSE VIEW OF THE PHENOMENAL WORLD

But, of course, it is hardly possible to disprove the existence of something without defining it first. As far as I can tell, the idea that things have *svabhāva* is simply our commonsense conviction (deeply embedded in our thinking because we never examine it) that the world is made up of real, solid, independent entities which would exist even if the rest of the world did not and which have certain definite, unchanging properties. We believe, in Lindtner's words, that it is possible for "an entity which makes sense independently of a correlate to exist."⁵ Above all, we believe ourselves to exist as independent persons, separated from the rest of the world by our skins and our skulls and retaining the same "personalities" from one day to the next. But Nāgārjuna painstakingly demonstrates that when these assumptions are for once examined closely, they prove to be logically impossible.

For one thing, we think of entities, especially ourselves, as having certain fixed properties. But how does this harmonize with the easily observed fact that everything in the world, certainly including ourselves, changes constantly? Thus the *Mūlamadhyamaka Kārikās*, Chapter 13, verse 3:

Things are without own-nature
Because they are seen to alter.⁶

Likewise, we think that all the entities we perceive in the world, notably ourselves, are independent even though they are always interacting with each other and affecting each other. But how could this be logically possible? If "the fire," say, is an independent entity, why is it that it cannot exist without fuel?

If the one were different [that is, truly separate] from the other,
It would be so even without the other.⁷
(*Mūlamadhyamaka Kārikās* 14:6,
lines 1-2)

DEPENDENT CO-ORIGINATION

The point is that nothing is really separate from everything else. A rigorous logical analysis bears out the Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-origination. Everything exists interdependently with everything else. And that brings us to the heart of the matter: that in Nāgārjuna's opinion (though not necessarily the opinion of all the other Buddhists in his own day or ours), dependent co-origination and *sūnyatā* were one and the same.

That nature of things which is dependent is called voidness [*sūnyatā*] for that nature which is dependent is devoid of an intrinsic nature . . . Those things which are dependently originated are not, indeed, endowed with an intrinsic nature; for they have no intrinsic nature.⁸

(*Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Section 22)

He states in no uncertain terms that when he says that all entities are "empty" or "void", he does *not* mean that they are non-existent. It is the incurably dense "opponent" who falls into that misunderstanding in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, arguing that Nāgārjuna's statement that all things are void must mean that the statement is void, since the statement is a thing, is it not? And if that means that the statement does not exist, how can the statement assert anything?

. . . your statement that all things are void, must also be void . . . it is devoid of an intrinsic nature [and] since it is devoid of an intrinsic nature, it is void. For this reason, it is incapable of denying the intrinsic nature of all things. A

fire that does not exist cannot burn, a weapon that does not exist cannot cut, water that does not exist cannot moisten; similarly a statement that does not exist cannot deny the intrinsic nature of all things. In these circumstances, your statement that the intrinsic nature of things has been denied, is not valid.' (Section I)

To this Nāgārjuna bluntly replies:

You have not understood the meaning of the voidness of things . . . That nature of the things which is dependent is voidness.¹⁰

(Section 22)

His position is that neither "existence" nor "non-existence" are valid categories.

Those who perceive self-existence and other-existence, and and existent thing and a non-existent thing, Do not perceive the true nature of the Buddha's teaching.¹¹

(*Mūlamadhyamaka Kārikās*, 15:6)

Neither applies to things which are dependently originated (which means that they do not apply to anything, since everything is, in Nāgārjuna's view, dependently originated). In the words of Buddhapaṇita's classic commentary:

How is it logically possible . . . to say that what is dependently originated exists or does not exist?¹²

Here we have come to a problem—Nāgārjuna's use of the term "existence"—that has been and remains the source of endless confusion for readers of his philosophic works. My own opinion¹³ is that in most cases this confusion vanishes if you read "has *svabhāva*" for "exists".

THE TRUE NATURE OF PHENOMENA

If dependently originated things neither "exist" nor "do not exist," what is their nature? In the first place, all phenomena are, upon analysis, not solid entities but composites of many parts. Nāgārjuna may well have been familiar with the *Milindapañha* and its famous example of the chariot which turns out upon examination to be not any one thing but a complicated combination of wheels, axles, reins and so on. It is only when these components are assembled in a certain way that we say that there is a chariot there. Likewise, what we call the "self" or "the mind" is only a certain combination of psychological elements, such as sensations, emotions, thoughts and so forth.¹⁴ Nor can any of these parts exist apart from the whole; it is, for example, scarcely possible for an emotion like anger to exist apart from somebody who has gotten angry. The *Ratnāvalī* makes a similar argument in verse 71:

Due to having many parts "one" does not exist,
There is not anything which is without parts,
Further without "one" "many" does not exist
And without existence there is no non-existence.¹⁵

Just as the "chariot" disappears when the parts are disassembled, the so-called self vanishes when it is analyzed into its psychological components.

Just as there is nothing when
A banana agree with all its parts
Is torn apart, it is the same when a person
Is divided into the [six] constituents.¹⁶
(*Ratnāvalī*, verse 101)

If you search through the component parts of the self, the *skandhas*, looking for the

self, you will no more find it than you will find a chariot by sorting through a pile of spare parts in the chariot-dealer's shop.

If a sentient being is said to trans-
migrate,
He, sought in the five ways, does not
exist
In aggregates, sense-fields, and realms.
Who then will transmigrate?"
(*Mūlamadhyamaka Kārikās*, 16:2)

But no matter how carefully you examine the self (or the chariot), you will find nothing other than its component parts. So, if it is not simply the sum of its parts, it is nothing other than its parts either. There is nothing else there.

Thus [the self] is not different from the
appropriation,
Nor is it simply the appropriation.
The self is not non-appropriation
And it is certainly not non-existing."
(*Mūlamadhyamaka Kārikās*, 27:8)

Everything exists only in dependence on everything else, like a reflection in the mirror which can exist only when there is a mirror, something to reflect, enough light to cause the reflection, enough cleaning fluid in the house to keep the mirror clean, and so forth.

Just as without depending on a mirror
The image of one's face is not seen,
So too, the "I" does not exist
Without depending on the aggregates."⁹
(*Ratnāvalī*, Verse 33)

Nāgārjuna would have liked Lewis Carroll's story of the Cheshire Cat because it expresses the same point:

"All right," said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.

"Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," thought Alice, "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!"²⁰

The reason for Alice's bemusement is that outside of Wonderland, a grin can no more exist outside of the context of a face than a person can exist outside of the context of the rest of the world.

Nāgārjuna mentions many metaphors for the real nature of all entities: echoes, which exist only in dependence on a sound wave, something off which to bounce, and a hearer in a certain position; dreams, which exist only in dependence on a dreamer and often on the state of his digestion; and mirages, which exist only in dependence on hot sand, the sun, the position of the observer, and so forth. While on one level the mirage is an illusion and an ephemeral one at that, it is in some sense real. It is, after all, seen. If Nāgārjuna lived today, he would point out that a mirage will even show up on a color photograph.

Having thought a mirage to be
Water and then having gone there,
He would just be stupid to surmise
"That water does not exist."

One who conceives of the mirage-like
World that it does or does not exist
Is consequently ignorant. When there is
Ignorance, one is not liberated."²¹
(*Ratnāvalī*, Verses 55-56)

My own favorite metaphor is that of the rainbow. I and all other phenomena exist in the same way that a rainbow exists. Given a complex set of causes and conditions—light shining at a certain angle, water droplets in the atmosphere, an observer in a certain position—a rainbow will be seen for a few minutes. It is really there; you can even take a picture of it. But the phenomenon is inseparable from the conditions that give rise to it, and it is very fleeting. If I try to take the

rainbow away and put it in a bank vault, I am a fool. Likewise I am a fool if I thing myself at odds with the rest of the world, or try to make myself immortal.²²

Now, if we apply this kind of logic to our bodies, it is not difficult to concede the point. It is obvious that our continued physical existence is dependent on the air around us, on our surroundings being within a certain temperature range, on our being able to get food and water, and so on. But it is harder to admit this about our minds. We cherish the illusion that we have independent thoughts, independent wills, independent consciousness. But do we really think that we do not get our most deeply held ideas, our cultural frame of reference, the very language in which we think, from the outside world? As for our consciousness, most of what we are conscious of is our sensory impressions, which are dependent on our sense organs and on (presumably) the outside world. The *Sūnyatāsaptati-kārikā* makes just this point:

Consciousness (*viññāna*) occurs dependent upon the internal and external sense fields (*āyatana*). Therefore consciousness (*viññāna*) is empty (*sūnya*), like mirages and illusions (*marīcimāyāvat*).²³

(Verse 56)

If it therefore follows that I do not have *svabhāva*, then how can other people have *svabhāva*? The *Mūlamadhyamaka Kārikās* explains that:

The own-nature of another thing
Is called "other-nature."

(15:3, lines 3-4)

It then points out that

If own-nature does not exist
How will there be other-nature?

(15:3, lines 1-2)

It also states that if things—and beings—exist in dependence on each other (as a reflection, for example, exists only in dependence on a mirror), it is illogical to think of them as truly separate from one another:

If this is dependent upon that,
This cannot be different from that.²⁴

(14:5, lines 3-4)

And if there is no rigid dichotomy between "self" and "other", no invisible brick wall separating "me", the independent entity, from "my neighbor" the independent entity, what does that mean? It means that my interests are not really more important than somebody else's, that I should not make a distinction between somebody else's pain and my own. Only when I truly realize this, does it become possible to develop compassion.

THE TWO TRUTHS

But if all beings are "void", how can one have compassion on them? Here Nāgārjuna has recourse to the famous doctrine of Absolute and Relative Truth, a concept that he did not invent but for which he is nonetheless famous.²⁵ The Absolute Truth is, in brief, that all things are void. The Relative Truth is that since "void" does *not* mean "non-existent," it is necessary to regard the world as in some sense real and to relate to the world accordingly. Both truths have to be regarded as equally valid.

The teaching of the Dharma by the various Buddhas is based on the two truths; namely, the relative (worldly) truth and the absolute (supreme) truth.

Those who do not know the distinction between the two truths cannot understand the profound nature of the Buddha's teaching.

Without relying on everyday common practices (i.e. relative truths), the ab-

solate truth cannot be expressed. Without approaching the absolute truth, nirvana cannot be attained.²⁶

(*Mūlamadhyamaka Kārikās*, 24:8-10)

This is where we finally come to the answer to the question of how a "void" statement can assert anything. The world does not disappear in a puff of Madhyamaka smoke or dissolve into a mass of amorphous goo when we realize that it is "empty." The world is still there, operating in much the same way that it operated before; we simply perceive its true nature for the first time. The *Heart Sutra* was to restate this in its famous words:

Form is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form; emptiness is no other than form, form is no other than emptiness; whatever is form that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness that is form.²⁷

Again, saying that the world is "empty"—that is, dependently co-originated—does not annihilate the world, it merely describes the same old world in more accurate terms than the ones in which we are accustomed to thinking. The world does not change at all; only our perception of the world changes. The fact that Nāgārjuna said that, in an ultimate sense, a fire is not different from a stack of firewood does not mean that Nāgārjuna lost his mind and tried to cook curry on a stove full of cold firewood. It means that he saw the fire and the firewood as two aspects of the great organic whole that is the world in which we live. They exist; that is Absolute Truth. Relative Truth is the act of preparing the curry on a hot stove as before. Both the Absolute Truth and Relative Truth are, therefore, indispensable for understanding the dealing with the world. Thus:

But things like a cart, a pot, a cloth, etc., though devoid of an intrinsic nature . . . because of being dependently originated, are occupied with their respective functions, e.g. carrying wood,

grass and earth, containing honey, water and milk, and protecting from cold, wind and heat. Similarly this statement of mine, though devoid of an intrinsic nature because of being dependently originated, is engaged in the task of establishing the being-devoid-of-an-intrinsic-nature of the things . . . In these circumstances, your statement: "Your statement, being devoid of an intrinsic nature, is void, and being void, it cannot negate the intrinsic nature of all things," is not valid.²⁸

(*Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Section 22)

UNDERSTANDING REALITY

Again, Madhyamaka philosophy was anything but the rather dry and outdated intellectual game that Western philosophy has now become. The Mādhyamikas assumed, not unreasonably, that the intellect had to play a role in one's religious practice. And the goal of their practice was nothing less than the attainment of an understanding of the true nature of reality—enlightenment, in other words. In the words of Buddhapaṇita's classic commentary to the *Mūlamadhyamaka Kārikās*:

If to see entities and nonentities were to see reality, there would be no one who would not see reality; therefore that is not the vision of reality. Therefore entities' lack of intrinsic nature is reality, and only by seeing that will one be liberated.²⁹

By perceiving the emptiness of the concepts to which they were attached, the Mādhyamikas hoped to fulfill the promise of the Third Noble Truth, or the cessation of attachment. Again Buddhapaṇita:

When the unwise, whose intellectual eye is obscured by the darkness of confusion, conceptually construct intrinsic nature in entities, desire and hatred is

produced in them. When the light of the knowledge of dependent origination has dispelled the darkness of confusion and one sees with the eye of discernment (*prajñā*) entities' lack of intrinsic nature, then that [person's] desire and hatred do not arise in regard to [something] without a basis.³⁰

In other words, we cling to things because we believe that they are "real" in the ordinary sense. We believe that they have an independent, substantial, and intrinsic nature of their own, that there is something solid and permanent to which we can cling. Instead, all phenomena are impermanent, unsubstantial, and dependent on causes and conditions. Therefore, as I have already explained, being attached to worldly phenomena is like wanting to hang on to rainbows.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPASSION

And there is another reason to develop a grasp of *sūnyatā*: the development of compassion. Compassion is only truly possible when you understand two things: the voidness of the distinction between self and other, and the fact that both self and other are neither existent nor non-existent. For example, if you see a discharged mental patient eating out of a garbage can, you should not think of him and his hunger as unreal; his hunger is real enough to make him miserable. What you ought to realize is that there is no reason to make such a sharp distinction between his hunger and your own that you will not give him any of the contents of your precious ego's wallet. Nāgārjuna realized all this quite clearly. That is why his manual of advice to a king, the *Ratnāvalī*, first explains the doctrine of *sūnyatā* in great detail and only then gives equally detailed advice about how the king should care for the poor, the disabled, disaster victims, and even prisoners. The king is explicitly urged to treat others as himself, something that is only possible if he stops making the usual distinction between others and himself:

Just as you love to think
What could be done to help yourself,
So should you love to think
What could be done to help others.³¹
(Verse 256)

No, the Mādhyamikas were not only concerned with discussions of whether the firewood was the same as or different from the fire; they recognized the importance of compassion. They recognized it, in fact, as being the only legitimate reason for teaching Buddhism.

The teacher [Nāgārjuna], having a compassionate nature and seeing that beings are afflicted by various sufferings, wished to teach the real state (*yāthātathya*) of entities (*bhāva*) in order to liberate them. Therefore he undertook the teaching of dependent origination, because it has been said, "One who sees the unreal in bound; one who sees the real is liberated."³²

THE FIRST PURE LAND PATRIARCH

In addition to being one of the greatest of all Buddhist philosophers, Nāgārjuna also happens to be considered the first Pure Land master; therefore a Shin footnote seems in order. Long before the Shinshu existed, Nāgārjuna the philosopher understood the basic Shin insight that the ego cannot and will not liberate itself because the ego will not self-destruct. If it tries, it only forges itself more powerful attachments than ever: pride in its own spirituality and desire for spiritual achievement.

"[May] I enter into Nirvana without
clinging,
May Nirvana be mine."
Those who hold thus
Do not well understand "clinging."³³
(*Mūlamadhyamaka Kārikās* 16:9)

Was there ever a more succinct statement of the futility of *jiriki* (self-power)? There is debate over whether or not Nāgārjuna actually wrote any Pure Land treatises, but there is no doubt that he wrote that verse. And it is my humble opinion that he deserves his place on Shinshu altars for that reason alone.

CONCLUSION

So what was Nāgārjuna's conception of *śūnyatā*? It emphatically was not the idea that nothing exists. He believed that *śūnyatā* was dependent co-origination:

That nature of things which is dependent is called voidness, for that nature which is dependent is devoid of an intrinsic nature . . . Those things which are dependently originated are not, indeed, endowed with an intrinsic nature; for they have no intrinsic nature.

(*Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Section 22)

For Nāgārjuna, all else follows.

FOOTNOTES:

1. David Seyfort Ruegg, *the Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India*, Vol. VII of *A History of Indian Literature*, ed. Jan Gonda (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981), pp. 5-6.

2. Christian Lindtner, "Buddhapālita On Emptiness," *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 23 (1981), p. 203.

3. Nāgārjuna and Kaysang Gyatso, The Seventh Dalai Lama, *The Precious Garland and the Song of the Four Mindfulnesses*, trans., Jeffrey Hopkins and Lati Rinpoche with Anne Klein, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 20-21.

4. William L. Ames, "Buddhapālita's Exposition of the Madhyamaka," to appear in the *Journal of Indian Philosophy*. The

brackets are mine.

5. Lindtner, "Buddhapālita," p. 187.

6. Akira Saito, "A Study of the *Buddhapālita-Mūlamadhyamaka-Vṛtti*," Diss. Australian National University 1984, p. 181.

7. Saito, p. 190. The brackets are mine.

8. Nāgārjuna, *The Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna (Vigrahavyāvartanī)*, trans. Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, ed. E.D. Johnston and Arnold Kunst (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978), p. 17. The brackets are mine.

9. *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, pp. 5-6.

10. *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, p. 17.

11. Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (New York: Abington Press, 1967), p. 199.

12. William L. Ames, An unpublished translation of Chapter 23 of the *Buddhapālita-Mūlamadhyamaka-Vṛtti*, p. 31.

13. Which, not surprisingly, is also the opinion of my husband, William L. Ames, two of whose works I have cited.

14. Henry Clarke Warren (trans.), *Buddhism In Translations* (1896; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1973), pp. 129-146.

15. Nāgārjuna and Kaysang Gyatso, p. 27.

16. Nāgārjuna and Kaysang Gyatso, p. 32.

17. Saito, p. 209.

18. Lindtner, "Buddhapālita," p. 204.

19. Nāgārjuna and Kaysang Gyatso, p. 21.

20. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*, (New York: The New American Library, 1960), p. 65.

21. Nāgārjuna and Kaysang Gyatso, p. 25.

22. So far as I know, the Mādhyamikas never actually used rainbows as an example. But I have suggested the idea to my husband, William L. Ames and to Dr. Christian Lindtner, both of whose works I have cited. They agree that it is an appropriate illustration.

23. Christian Lindtner, *Nagarjuniana: Studies In the Writings and Philosophy of Nāgārjuna* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1982), p. 59.

24. Saito, pp. 171, 200.

25. Lindtner, *Nagarjuniana*, pp. 275-276.

26. Kenneth K. Inada, *Nāgārjuna: A Translation of his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā with an Introductory Essay* (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1970), p. 146.

27. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966), p. 81.

28. *Vigrahavyāvartani*, p. 18.

29. Ames, "Buddhapālita."

30. Ames, "Buddhapālita."

31. Nāgārjuna and Kaysang Gyatso, p. 55.

32. Ames, "Buddhapālita."

33. Saito, p. 218. I added both the first set of quotation marks and the brackets at the suggestion of my husband, William L. Ames.

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Shinran, *The Kōsō Wasan: The Hymns on the Patriarchs by Shinran*, Ryukoku Translation Series, Vol. VI, (Kyoto, Ryukoku Translation Center, Ryukoku University, 1974).

Shinran, *Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone': A Translation of Shinran's Yuishinshōmon'i*, Shin Buddhism Translation Series, ed. Yoshifumi Ueda

(Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1979).

Shinran, *Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls: A Translation of Shinran's Songō shinzō meimon*, Shin Buddhism Translation Series, ed. Yoshifumi Ueda (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1981).

Shinran, *Passages on the Pure Land Way: A Translation of Shinran's Jōdo monrui joshō*, Shin Buddhism Translation Series, ed. Yoshifumi Ueda (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1982).

Shinran, *The Shōshin Ge: The Gāthā of True Faith in the Nembutsu*, Ryukoku Translation Series, Vol. I (Kyoto, Ryukoku Translation Center, Ryukoku University, 1966).

Shinran, *The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way: A Translation of Shinran's Kyōgyōshinshō, Volume I*, Shin Buddhism Translation Series, ed. Yoshifumi Ueda, (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1983). Sections 13, 14, 15.

OTHER BOOKS CONSULTED ON NĀGĀRJUNA

Alfred Bloom, *Tannishō: A Resource For Modern Living*, (Honolulu: The Buddhist Study Center, 1981).

Nāgārjuna and Lama Mipham, *Golden Zephyr: Instructions From a Spiritual Friend*, trans. Leslie Kawamura (Emeryville, California: Dharma Publishing, 1975).