

Nagarjuna continued:

**The Liberatory potential of the Emptiness
Teachings**

(12/05/24)

Note:

Please be aware that this discussion will be **audio-recorded** and placed on the OzZEN website **Study Guide** along with the text.

Therefore, it is implied that you give your consent to be recorded if you participate in the discussion.

I will pause throughout the lecture for questions and/or comments, like we do in the reading group on Friday mornings. I prefer a more participatory style of interaction rather than a “lecture” followed by Q&A. If there are no questions and comments I will read the next paragraph and so on.

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Introduction

I decided to do these lectures because I think having some background understanding of Indian Buddhist philosophy is important when it comes to understanding the Zen tradition. For example, the koans and various teaching poems you find in Zen Buddhism often reference this tradition. And the philosophical writings of monks like Nagarjuna help us to interpret the Mahayana sutras such as the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra.

Today I will summarise some of the material we covered last month and finish with Nagarjuna’s

teaching on the emptiness of emptiness and discuss why this is so important and how this understanding of emptiness contributes to the ending of suffering.

From the Buddhist perspective, the understanding and practice of emptiness is the key to liberation from suffering. This is also true of the Ordinary Mind Zen School, especially in the teaching of Barry Magid. You will find references to emptiness in Barry's teachings but it is often expressed using the language of impermanence and interdependence. Barry's emphasis is that the "self-centred dream" is a form of separation from and resistance to impermanence and interdependence, and manifests in the various strategies of control and avoidance that we use to resist life as it is. Understanding Nagarjuna's interpretation of emptiness as being identical to impermanence and interdependence therefore gives us an understanding of this ancient tradition that we belong to. And I stress tradition, and the importance of tradition, and the sense of **belonging** to a tradition which I think we should value and maintain as best we can.

In this lecture, my reading and interpretation of Nagarjuna is primarily informed by Jay Garfield and his translation and commentary on the *Mulamadhymakakarika*.

Everything is Empty of Inherent Existence

Dedicatory Verses
(From the Mulamadhyamakakarika)

*I prostrate to the perfect Buddha,
 The best of teachers, who taught that
 Whatever is dependently arisen is
 Unceasing, unborn,
 Unannihilated, not permanent,
 Not coming, not going,
 Without distinction, without identity,
 And free from conceptual construction.*

This is the teaching of Nagarjuna in a nutshell. It comes at the beginning of his most important work which is translated as “Verses on the Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way”. He negates the possibility of ever being able to speak about ultimate reality because by his understanding language does not mirror ultimate reality – rather language constructs our shared consensus about conventional reality and therefore, we can only speak about ultimate reality conventionally, which leads to the startling conclusion that conventional reality is empty of inherent existence and its emptiness is identical to ultimate reality, and that therefore samsara is nirvana. He will argue that all truth is relative and conventional.

“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” Wittgenstein, 1922.

To say that “Whatever is dependently arisen is unceasing, and unborn”, is to emphasise that dependent arising amounts to emptiness, and emptiness amounts to nonexistence in the ultimate sense. “Things” don’t exist in the ultimate sense. Things only show up in language:

“Language is the house of being” - Heidegger.

This claim caused Nagarjuna to be accused of nihilism, but this clearly is a misunderstanding because he defends the **conventional existence** of phenomena – therefore he is not asserting that nothing exists - just that things do not exist ultimately. “That is, nothing exists independently of convention with identities and natures they possess in themselves” (Garfield 1995, 101) - nothing has its own being.

Therefore, it follows that nothing was ever born and therefore nothing ever dies. We are born and we die conventionally but not ultimately.

Finally, the last line is basically stating that from our human viewpoint, ultimate reality can only be understood conventionally, but from the viewpoint of the absolute, it is free from conceptual construction and hence beyond words.

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The central philosophical concept addressed by Nagarjuna is emptiness. It is defined negatively as the absence of something – indicating something is *not* there. This absent something is referred to as *Svabhava* – translated as inherent existence or own being (Westerhoff, 2009).

According to Nagarjuna then, when we say something is empty – we are saying it is empty of something – **empty of inherent existence** or that it is **essenceless** – this is what we need to understand. **All phenomena** (including ourselves) are empty of inherent existence (**Svabhava**). However, **this does not mean nothingness**. It means things don't exist independently – they only exist conventionally, and that means, interdependently. The basic argument is that all conventional reality – the reality that we construct, is shaped by language. The referent of that language, if you like, is not some ultimate foundational reality with a capital R but is simply conceptual. When we talk about “this cup”, the reference is not to a real thing called a cup, but the referent is the concept of a cup. **The cup does not exist independently of the concept of a cup**. However, because of our conditioning we intuitively, by default, superimpose upon our experience of not just things like cups but also onto ourselves and others this sense of **Svabhava** – we impute things to be independent entities or selves and the liberatory aspects of Nagarjuna's philosophy is free us from this default mindset.

Many of the opponents of Nagarjuna accused him of nihilism. But in his most important philosophical work, the Mula-Madhyamaka-Karika Nagarjuna argues that it is his opponents who are the nihilists and that the only way to understand impermanence is to reject essentialism.

The Buddha rejected teachings known as nihilism. He also rejected eternalism – the flip

side of nihilism, which is the belief that there is something that is not dependent and does not change. Nagarjuna argues the middle way between these two extremes is **dependent origination** or dependent arising.

Dependent Origination (Arising)

A definition of dependent origination is “When this arises, that arises; when this does not occur that does not occur.”

For Nagarjuna *interdependence* is the core characteristic of *conventional* reality and as we have been discussing, conventional reality is the only “reality” we **can** speak about. The words that we use do not point to a reality outside of language so to speak – words only point to concepts. Therefore we can only speak about ultimate reality by speaking about conventional reality.

“Whatever is dependently co-arisen” Nagarjuna tells us, “is explained to be emptiness”. Anything dependent upon another for its existence does not have any independent identity or nature of its own.

Nagarjuna’s philosophy takes **interdependence** or **dependent origination** to be synonymous with emptiness. For something to be interdependent means it is lacking independent or inherent existence.

In the first chapter of the *Mulamadhymakakarika* Nagarjuna targets **causation**. He distinguishes two views of causation – the first is that causes **cause** their effects – the other view is causal relations simply amount to explain **regularities** – and he defends the latter.

This is based on the observation of regularities that characterize conventional reality – our common sensical reality. The concept of regularity is also conventional, depending on linguistic conventions. We speak **conventionally** of one thing “causing” another thing but all we really experience is regularities. That is why we put inverted comma’s around causing. We don’t experience causation. Causation is a story – it is how we story or explain our experience. Causation is therefore also empty of inherent existence.

He argues that every phenomenon is dependent in **three** important senses: dependent upon conditions for its existence; dependent on its parts and on the wholes in which it figures for its existence and identity; and dependent on conceptual imputation for its identity.

The Two Truths: Conventional Truth and Ultimate Truth

As already discussed, Emptiness is the technical term for lack of independent existence. In his major work Nagarjuna analyses phenomena or processes that appear to exist independently and argues they cannot so exist. Though they lack the inherent existence that is imputed to them,

these phenomena are not nonexistent, they are, he argues, conventionally real.

This dual thesis becomes the famous doctrine of the two truths or two realities – a conventional or nominal truth and an ultimate truth. Two truths – the ultimate truth is that all things are empty and hence do not exist ultimately, and this can only be understood from the perspective of conventional reality. Conventional reality does exist but ultimately the nature of conventional reality is emptiness – these two truths are not contradictory but are complementary, like two sides of the one coin or the two sides of the hand.

On one side of the coin we are tricked into superimposing inherent existence onto conventional reality and on the other side of the coin there is the realisation that conventional reality lacks inherent existence and is identical to impermanence and interdependence.

Take for example this book. Can we experience something that corresponds to the name book? No. We can find paper and ink and colours. The name book is just a designation – a label – that works as a form of practical communication. When we say the book is empty, we are saying it is empty of inherent existence or essence but not nonexistent. It does not exist from its own side – that its existence as the object that it is – as a book – depends not on it, nor on any purely nonrelational characteristics, but depends on us naming it “book” and making it a conventional rule that all language speakers abide by.

Another good example of how conventional reality works is money. We have paper notes, we have metal coins, we have bitcoins, we have digital currency etc. – but it only works because we agree to the convention. Like go at green and stop at red.

Let's also take the example of a football team – it is clearly lacking inherent existence – everything is changing all the time except perhaps the name. Yet football fans identify with their team in the same way we identify as a tribe. How is this possible?

It is because we live and relate within conventional reality – or we could say our lives and emotions are shaped by stories that we identify with.

The Emptiness of Emptiness

Most importantly, this argument applies to all phenomena, including emptiness itself. Emptiness is not a self-existent void standing behind a veil of illusion comprising conventional reality, but merely a characteristic of conventional reality. This understanding and realisation of emptiness is dependent on the recognition of conventional reality.

Everything is interdependent, impermanent, and empty of intrinsic identity. Every identity claim is simply a designation fraught with the capacity to generate endless suffering because we grow so attached to our identity claims, which is a legacy of evolution and our nature as social beings who bring conventional reality into existence by using

language. Being social beings, we need a sense of stable reality and a sense of belonging and recognition. This is what identity gives us but because we **identify** with something which is ultimately empty, we perpetuate suffering by denying our impermanence and interdependence.

The Identity of Nirvana and Samsara: The Liberatory Potential of the Emptiness teachings

Nagarjuna famously claims that there is not the slightest difference between Samsara and Nirvana. The Buddhist path is not about escaping the world into a transcendent ultimate reality called Consciousness or Pure Awareness or True Self but rather it is a path of freedom from craving and clinging to fixations of views and identities. Nirvana doesn't refer to escaping or overcoming samsara to reach a state of everlasting bliss, but to the realization of a liberating perspective: that there is no difference between samsara and Nirvana. This just as it is, is it.

Creating a more compassionate world

As Jay Garfield puts it, this is “a nirvana not found in an escape from the world but in an enlightened and awakened **engagement** with it.”

This word engagement is key – Zazen itself as the practice of nonseparation *is* engaging with the world. And because the world as we know it is the world of conventional reality, nothing is really fixed in concrete – hence we have unlimited possibilities to recreate a world that displays all the characteristics of compassion and loving kindness.

If everything is a story then we don't necessarily need to identify with the stories we have inherited. We can create new stories and the possibilities are infinite – this is where emptiness as lack of inherent existence becomes positively reframed as the domain possibility. When we begin to realise emptiness and live our lives from the perspective of emptiness we can recreate conventional reality in alignment with our values of wisdom and compassion – we can transform ourselves and the world.

Nirvana implies a different way of being in this world. The early Buddhist notion of Nirvana as a liberation from samsara is not considered wrong or untrue but is seen as a preliminary perspective for those starting out on the Buddhist path. Once one has progressed on the path, one is ready for the more advanced nondual perspective that Nirvana and samsara are the same.' (Braak 2011, 38).

In Chapter 18 Nagarjuna focuses on an examination of self. When we stop imputing a substantial self then we see there is no independent “me” or “you” that exists as an

owner of the skandhas. Our self is just our conventional self which is inseparable from everything we are in a relationship with, including the history of all our relationships. We are embodied, **relational selves**. We also are impermanent and interdependent.

“When one stops grasping the aggregates and the self as independent entities or as the possessions of independent entities, one recognizes one's own lack of inherent existence” (Garfield 1995). How liberating – we don't exist as fixed essential entities – we are in a constant state of flux and we are perpetually reinventing who we are from moment to moment! Other people might want to control us by trying to pin us down into a particular identity or we might pin ourselves down and this is another way of understanding suffering.

“Understanding emptiness leads one to grasp less, to become more detached. Relaxing one's tendency to grasp leads to a realization of emptiness. Philosophy, meditation and the practice of the moral virtues that issue in the relaxation of grasping are conceived from this vantage point as necessarily mutually supportive” (Garfield 1995, 248).

*When views of “I” and “mine” are extinguished,
Whether with respect to the internal or external,
The appropriator ceases.
This having ceased, birth ceases.*

“When one completely relinquishes the view of entities and the self as inherently existent and when all habits of reification have been eliminated, Nagarjuna urges, liberation from cyclic existence and suffering have been achieved” (Garfield 1995, 248).

Conclusion

If it is primal confusion about the nature of ultimate reality that is the root of suffering, then we need to be diligent about discovering for ourselves the nature of ultimate reality.

Nagarjuna proposes emptiness is ultimate reality - allowing us to understand the meaning of ultimate reality as being identical to conventional reality. Nagarjuna identifies emptiness with Impermanence and Interdependence. The prajnaparamita teachings are at the core of Zen Buddhism and hence Nagarjuna’s philosophy is a key to understanding Zen.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF THE EMPTINESS TEACHINGS

1. Non-Abiding

Practice Non-fixation, non-reification – we can get stuck in emptiness in the same way we get stuck in any kind of identity – we get stuck in negative identifications of self and others and we can get stuck in an idea of what emptiness is – that is why Nagarjuna’s teaching on the emptiness of emptiness is so important – we can only go beyond emptiness by returning to the relational and we can only go beyond the

identification with the relational by seeing its emptiness. In zen we call this non-abiding.

2. Guided Meditation on Emptiness

- a. Being here now
- b. See if you can catch a glimpse of your sense of self – I am sitting here in the CWA listening to this guided meditation. Sense of I am sitting here. What is that I? Does it seem to exist somewhere inside of you rather than something created by your mind.
- c. We might intellectually see this but when we are criticised and we feel hurt and angry we are responding from this sense of I. Our sense of I feels like it exists and I need to defend it. But if that is true we should be able to find it.
- d. Start by exploring your body, the different parts of the body – can you point to any part of the body and say that is me?
- e. Similarly with the mind and then even with your memory.
- f. What do you discover?

3. Freedom from Negative Identity

Conclusions

The metaphor of damaged goods is dominant in the mental health field. It is true that our developing brains can be damaged by neglect, however, the self is a complex combination of emotions and thoughts held together in a complex web of meanings - but in this sense, brokenness or damage is simply a figure of speech. There is no “identity” as

such that can have the property of being damaged.

Appendix 1: Key Sanskrit Terms for Understanding Nagarjuna Adapted from Richard Jones

1. Svabhava – self-existence

Something existing by its own intrinsic nature. Is not dependent on causes and conditions. It is real (sat/being). We can say it is. It exists from its own side. Self-existence is necessary for anything bhava to be real (sat). What exists by Svabhava has being (sat) and cannot be created or come to be or cease to exist or be eliminated. What is self-existent cannot change. It would be eternal isness. It would be without cause and whatever is without cause is permanent. Because of years (or lifetimes of conditioning) we think things exist independently – and we fight and kill on this basis.

2. Asti/Nasti – “it is” / “it is not”

“It is” and “It is not” become technical terms for Nagarjuna since only what exists through Svabhava is real and only something real can be destroyed and not exist. “It is not” is a change in is –

This means that reality as it truly is (tattva) neither “is” nor is any change resulting in “is not”. “It is a denial of the eternalism of “it is” and the annihilationism of “it is not” - what is dependently

arisen constitutes a third ontological group. Thus, dependent-arising is a “middle way” between “is” and “is not.” So too, those whose awareness has gone beyond “it is” and “it is not” do not grasp any entities (bhavas).”

3. Bhava – an entity

A bhava is any “thing” in the phenomenal world. Compound entities like chariots are the classic example. Without self-existence it is not real and only exists conventionally.

4. Dharmas – basic phenomena of the experienced world

These are the “factors of the experienced world” according to the general Buddhist analysis of reality. They are not eternal in nature but last only momentarily and arise dependently. They are not the same as bhavas: bhavas are conventional entities; dharmas are the ultimate components of what we experience. Thus, both are impermanent and dependently arisen, but bhavas are a matter of conventional truths and the analysis of dharmas is a matter of ultimate truths.

5. Prapancha – conceptual projection

Prapancha is projecting onto what is truly real (tattva) the conceptual differentiations we ourselves devise, and thereby seeing reality in terms of discrete entities. Translators have rendered the term “projection of plurality,” “conceptual construction”, “objectification”, “reification” and “superimposition”. It makes our

subjective mental discriminations into features of “objective” reality. In this way, we create a false world of differentiated, isolated objects corresponding to our conceptual creations. The nature of the conventional world is born from Prapancha.

“In short, we superimpose “self-existence” onto what is void of it. We thereby distort reality by seeing it as a collection of unconnected entities corresponding to the discrete concepts our mind has devised. Such discriminations cause karmic acts and the resulting afflictions.

It is often said that Mind has no beginning but it has been contaminated with ignorance. That’s why it’s so hard – we are so habituated or addicted to seeing the world as if conventional reality was ultimate reality.

Our ignorance about the true nature of things is compounded because we think we know the true nature of things – we don’t acknowledge our ignorance – we actually cling to our ignorance.

6. Shunya – empty, void

Something that is Shunya is empty of Svabhava.

Emptiness is not an essence by which things exist.

From the point of view of reality there is no being or nonbeing, thus the true state of things is that everything is essenceless, contingent, changing and dependent upon other things.

7. Tattva – reality as it truly is

Tattva is literally the “that-ness (tat-tva) of things”

Those who see reality do not form the dispositions underlying the actions that propel the cycling of rebirth i.e., they are liberated.

References

Braak, A. v. d. (2011). Nietzsche and Zen: Self-Overcoming without a Self. Plymouth, UK, Lexington Books.

Garfield, J. L. (1995). The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika. Oxford, Oxford University Press.