

Second Turning of the Dharma Wheel:

Everything is Empty.

“We naively and pre-theoretically take things as substantial. This as Nagarjuna will argue is the root delusion that lies at the basis of all human suffering.” (Garfield 1995, 88).

Introduction

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 at the end of each paragraph 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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From the Buddhist perspective, the understanding and realisation of emptiness is the key to liberation from suffering – because the roots of suffering stem from primordial confusion as to the nature of reality – to be free from suffering we need to eliminate ignorance – to eliminate ignorance is to understand emptiness – hence the realisation of emptiness is the ultimate medicine.

In this lecture series we are exploring some of the different ways of understanding emptiness found in Buddhism – today we will go into what is called the Madhyamaka School or The Middle Way School which interprets the prajnaparamita sutras – such as the Heart Sutra and The Diamond Sutra.

Prajnaparamita meaning the perfection of wisdom – where wisdom realises emptiness. Nagarjuna is the founder of the Madhyamaka school and he is the first and most influential Buddhist philosopher - later in the series we will move to exploring the Yogacara view on emptiness and explore the question as to whether or not the Madhyamaka and Yogacara Schools are allies or rivals.

Before we move to Nagarjuna, let's quickly review where we were at. We ended on the topic of the Abhidharma (higher teachings) philosophy. The main viewpoint in this school was that **ultimate reality** is constituted by **moments of experience** which they called **dharmas**. These teachings list 75 of these basic factors (dharmas) which constitute reality. These teachings were also known as Buddhist Psychology. There are Abhidharma teachings associated with Pali or Theravada Buddhism and afterwards, Vasubandhu, in the fifth century wrote an Abhidharma text that was influential in the Indo-Tibetan tradition called *Treasury of Higher Dharma (Abhidharmakosa)*.

In Sanskrit, *Abhi* means “making manifest.” *Dharma*, in this case, means “what can be known or cognised,” “the plurality of factors of reality,” or simply “what there is” (Goodman 2020).

One of the reasons we study Buddhist Philosophy is to challenge our understanding and viewpoint about what is ultimately real. It is claimed that our primary confusion and hence suffering arise because of this ignorance. Buddhist teachings use both rational arguments and direct realisation (prajna) to uncover the true nature of reality in order to be free from suffering. The Abhidharma speaks of factors of reality or “what there is” and it lists 75 dharmas. The majority of these are known as **conditioned** factors and they include the following;

Forms:

1. Eye
2. Ear
3. Nose
4. Tongue
5. Body
6. Visual Form
7. Sound
8. Smell
9. Taste
10. Touch/Texture
11. Imperceptible forms

Mind:

12. Mind (chitta)

Concomitant Mental Factors

13-22 General Factors:

Sensation, Perception, Attraction, Contact, Intention, Discrimination, Recollection, Interest, Concentration.

23-32 Primary Wholesome Factors:

Faith, Diligence, Equanimity, Conscience, Shame,
Nonattachment, Nonaggression, Nonviolence, Pliancy,
Conscientiousness.

Unwholesome Mental Factors:

Delusion, Heedlessness. Laziness, Lack of faith, Lethargy,
Excitement, Lack of conscience, Shamelessness, Fury,
Concealment, Stinginess, Envy, Spite, Hostility, Resentment,
Pretence, Hypocrisy, Self-infatuation.

Variable Mental Factors:

Regret, Sleep, Conception, **Discernment (*prajna*) – makes it possible to know – discern – the nature and functions of the other factors**, Attachment, Anger. Arrogance and Doubt.

Neither substantial or mental:

Acquisition, nonacquisition, perceptionless serenity, state of nonperception, serenity of cessation, life, birth, fleeting stability, decay, impermanence, name, word, letter

Unconditioned Factors:

Space

Cessation (Nirvana) with remainder

Cessation (Nirvana) without remainder

Unconditioned means not-caused. Conditioned means it comes about due to causes and conditions.

All conditioned elements (72) arise, stay for a while, and then decay. We are a movement or a stream of unending “coming together” and “going apart” (Goodman, 2020).

The stream can know itself (prajna).

Nagarjuna: Everything is Empty of Inherent Existence

Nagarjuna is a complex philosopher and I can only give a glimpse of his work in the short time we have available. I would certainly recommend acquainting yourself with his teachings if you have time.

Metaphysics is concerned with the ultimate nature of reality. Is there an ultimate reality and if so, what is it? Some commentators argue that Nagarjuna’s philosophy is anti-metaphysical because his philosophy uses the technique of negation or reduction to absurdity of any attempt to conceptualise ultimate reality – leaving only two options – there is an ultimate reality (the absolute) but it is by definition beyond concepts – inconceivable, ineffable. The other option is that the ultimate reality is that there is no ultimate reality, the only reality we have is conventional reality.

In the history of metaphysics, the nature of ultimate reality often revolves around how we make sense out of the relationship between change or difference and sameness or equality. For example, Plato argued that for something to be real (the truth) it has to be unchanging and eternal.

Plato argued that the world of change was illusory and not real. In this way he was following in the footsteps of the Pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides. Plato called the real and

true the world of forms. This belief in the existence of universals is called realism. So for Plato there is a real universal that exists eternally in the realm of forms that is imperfectly reproduced in the world of change. There is a real giraffe that exists eternally. The alternative to this is the viewpoint that argues ultimate reality is always changing. The Pre-Socratic philosopher who argued this was called Heraclitus, and he argued that reality was flux and that you can never step into the same river twice. From this viewpoint universals don't exist; they are merely names, designations of composite entities – the name chariot is simply a label we give to a collection of composite parts that function in a useful way. There actually is no ultimate reality called a chariot. This viewpoint in philosophy is known as nominalism.

Sometimes this debate was known as the One and the Many. Is ultimate reality an undivided, eternal substance that only appears to change or is reality a flow, a process that is constantly changing from moment to moment with permanence being an illusion? Rather than falling on either side of this duality, Zen Buddhism, as a philosophy and practice of nonduality, seeks to understand the One (equality) and the Many (difference) as being the two primary ways in which ultimate reality presents or manifest itself – we could say it is both one and many at the same time or we could say it is neither one nor many.

Nagarjuna's impact on Buddhist thought was so significant that he is sometimes called the second Buddha. We don't know much about the historical person. He was probably from an

educated Brahmin family in the South of India and was working in the second century of the CE. Trained in the Vedic tradition, Nagarjuna established the practice of discussing Buddhism in Sanskrit, the shared language of the educated classes, rather than Pali or some other vernacular. The text was composed in short verses known as Karika's – which was a standard genre for writing philosophy.

Nagarjuna founded the school of Buddhist philosophy known as Madhyamaka or the middle way school. The central text is called the Mula-Madhymaka-Karika (verses on the core of the middle way). Nagarjuna references the growing body of “perfection of wisdom”, *prajna-paramita* literature, among which the Heart Sutra might be taken as emblematic.

“In the abstract, Nagarjuna's basic argument is fairly straightforward: For something to be real (*sat, sadbhūtam*), it must be permanent and unchanging, it cannot arise, change in any way, or cease to be. Thus, for anything that is composed of parts (*abhāva*) or is a basic component of our experienced world (a *dharma*), to be *real*, it must be eternal—it never comes into being from causes and conditions (since whatever is eternal never arose) or ceases (since that would be a change). It must also be unchanging during its existence (since a change would not be eternal). So too, it is not created by anything else or in any way dependent upon anything else (since it would then not have its own independent reality). Nor can it affect anything else (since that would involve a change). Thus, it must exist by its very own power. So too, its very nature cannot change in any way or be the result of any dependence upon something else. In sum, what is real exists totally independently of all other things and any causes or conditions. Thus, it must be self-

contained in both its nature and existence. In short, it must exist by its own existence (*sva-bhāva*).” (Jones 2020).

The Four Extremes

1. Is. Do things inherently exist? No.
2. Is not. Do things not exist? No, if they don't exist in the first place they can't not exist.
3. Both is and is-not. Do things sometimes exist and not exist? No
4. Neither is nor is-not. Do things never sometimes exist and never not exist? No.

From this perspective then – when we say something is empty – we are saying emptiness means the **lack of inherent existence** – this is what we need to understand. **All phenomena** (including ourselves) are empty of inherent existence (*Svabhava*). Everything in samsara and nirvana – the way everything exists is empty of inherent existence. However, **this does not mean nothingness**. This is the one pole of the extreme known as nihilism. The other pole is eternalism. This therefore is the middle way.

Dependent Origination

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

This is based on observation of regularities that characterize reality. Even regularity is nominal, depending on linguistic conventions. We speak **conventionally** of one thing causing another thing but all we actually experience is regularities. Causation is also empty of inherent existence.

All Buddhists agree that interdependence is a fundamental feature of reality. For some Buddhists *interdependence* is a feature only of *conventional* reality.

Nagarjuna is famous for his anti-foundationalist philosophy – its emptiness or relationality all the way down. Everything, including dharmas, are empty of intrinsic existence.

“Whatever is dependently co-arisen” Nagarjuna tells us, “that is explained to be emptiness”.

Nagarjuna agrees with the Abhidhamma that wholes do not exist. However, he disagrees that “dharmas” are indivisible and independent. Like the objection to the Brahman’s position that the Big Self independent and unchanging, Nagarjuna’s objection to his Abhidharma colleagues is that they also have inadvertently done the same by reestablishing the independence of distinctive of selves in the simple elements of reality. The Buddhist teaching, he claims, is not just that there are no personal selves, but that there is no self of any sort anywhere - all things, concepts, dharmas, are empty of intrinsic nature. This he suggests is the unavoidable implication of the core Buddhist claim that all arises dependently.

“Whatever has constituents depends upon those constituents for its existence and depends upon our conceiving this ‘many’ as a ‘one’ for its unity, and so does not exist ultimately, but only (at best) conventionally.”

Whatever depends on its parts for its identity exists only conceptually, because it is our conceptualizing that makes a 'one' out of 'many'. 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.

Every material phenomenon is dependent in **three** important senses: dependent upon causes and 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.

It was Nagarjuna's aim to provide a set of arguments in support of the claims of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras.

The Sutra on the Heart of Realizing Wisdom Beyond Wisdom

*Avalokiteshvara, who helps all to awaken,
moves in the deep course of
realizing wisdom beyond wisdom,
sees that all five streams of
body, heart, and mind are without boundary,
and frees all from anguish.*

*O Shariputra [who listens to the teachings of the Buddha], form
is not separate from boundlessness;*

boundlessness is not separate from form.

Form is boundlessness; boundlessness is form.

*Feelings, perceptions, inclinations, and discernment are also
like this.*

*O Shariputra,
boundlessness is the nature of all things.
It neither arises nor perishes,
neither stains nor purifies,
neither increases nor decreases.*

*Boundlessness is not limited by form,
nor by feelings, perceptions, inclinations, or discernment.
It is free of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind;
free of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and any object of
mind;
free of sensory realms, including the realm of the mind.
It is free of ignorance and the end of ignorance. Boundlessness
is free of old age and death,
and free of the end of old age and death.
It is free of suffering, arising, cessation, and path, and free of
wisdom and attainment.*

*Being free of attainment, those who help all to awaken
abide in the realization of wisdom beyond wisdom
and live with an unhindered mind.*

*Without hindrance, the mind has no fear.
Free from confusion, those who lead all to liberation
embody profound serenity.
All those in the past, present, and future,
who realize wisdom beyond wisdom,
manifest unsurpassable and thorough awakening.*

*Know that realizing wisdom beyond wisdom
is no other than this wondrous mantra,
luminous, unequalled, and supreme.*

It relieves all suffering.

It is genuine, not illusory.

So set forth this mantra of realizing wisdom beyond wisdom.

Set forth this mantra that says:

GATÉ, GATÉ, PARAGATÉ, PARASAMGATÉ, BODHI! SVAHA!"

The Two Truths: Conventional Truth and Ultimate Truth

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 (Garfield 1995, 88).

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 – ultimate truth is emptiness and the conventional truth is everything else – conventional truths do exist but ultimately they are empty – these two truths are not contradictory but are complementary, like two sides of the one coin or the two sides of the hand.

His primary methodology is *reductio ad absurdum* – reducing any claim to independent existence to be absurd. Rather, what counts as real depends precisely on our conventions.

Take for example this book. Can we find anything 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.

And of course it is the same for people.

But even though we can demonstrate this by rational argument, our mind projects inherent existence onto phenomena and we need to recognise this – we still live and relate within conventional reality but when we begin to realise emptiness, we are no longer asleep or hypnotised by conventional reality - we wake up to emptiness – we wake up to impermanence and interdependence and at the same time we honour conventional reality and we abide by the rules of conventional reality but when we have deep realisation of emptiness we experience less attachment to the sense of self as being independently existing hopefully our reactivity falls away, while, and this is so important, we continue to speak in ways that recognise the existence of conventional reality.

What would happen to us if we stopped recognising the existence of conventional reality?

The Emptiness of Emptiness

Most importantly, this argument applies to all phenomena, including emptiness itself. Emptiness or boundlessness is not a self-existent void standing behind a veil of illusion compromising 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 belonging and recognition. This is what identity gives us but because we **identify** with our identity we learn to defend our identity from slander, for example.

The identity of nirvana and samsara

Finally, Nagarjuna famously claims that there is not the slightest difference between Samsara and Nirvana. The Buddhist path is not about escaping the world in order to dissolve into nothingness, but rather about finding a new perspective on it, free from craving and clinging to fixations of views and identities. Nirvana doesn't refer to escaping or overcoming samsara in order to reach a state of everlasting

bliss, but to the realization of a liberating perspective: that there is no difference between samsara and Nirvana. 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.” 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).

Dedicatory Verses

(From the Mulamadhymakakarika)

*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.*

Whatever is dependently arisen amounts to emptiness, and emptiness amounts to nonexistence in the ultimate sense.

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.

Buddhism proposes emptiness is the gateway - allowing us to understand the meaning of ultimate reality. The first, second and third turning of the dharma wheel present us with differing perspectives on emptiness. The first turning focuses on the emptiness of self; the second turning focuses on the emptiness of all phenomena and the third turning focuses on the emptiness of mind. Impermanence and interdependence are the ultimate reality of the phenomenal world and they are sometimes identified as the ultimate reality. The third pointing however, focuses on the emptiness of Mind, mind in this sense being prajna, awareness, or that which knows. Is Mind also interdependent and impermanent or is it timeless and spaceless so to speak. Just this immediacy – always just this now. In that sense, transcending both impermanence and impermanence being not a thing.

The Prajnaparamita teachings are at the core of Zen Buddhism and hence Nagarjuna's philosophy is a key to understanding Emptiness. From a Zen perspective, we need to be able to freely move from the perspective of emptiness of self and other, and the emptiness of phenomena and the relative world of conceptual relative and relational reality. However, we now have to explore what is called the third turning of the dharma

wheel – the Yogacara teachings and the Buddha Nature teachings.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

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.

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