

Nagarjuna and the Two Truths

(23/06/24)

Note:

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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

Today we will conclude our discussion of Nagarjuna, the founder of the Madhyamaka (Middle Way) School of Buddhist Philosophy, beginning with his two truths thesis and the important claim that emptiness itself is also empty.

The Two Truths: Conventional Truth and Ultimate Truth

As previously discussed, Emptiness is the technical term for lack of independent existence (the selflessness of persons and things). 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 we superimpose onto them, these phenomena are not nonexistent, they are, he argues, **conventionally** real, not **ultimately** real. What, therefore, is ultimate reality?

There are different interpretations of what constitutes ultimate truth or reality. One interpretation of Nagarjuna (Garfield, 2015) is that the ultimate truth is simply that all things are empty and hence do not exist ultimately. The ultimate truth *is* that there is no ultimate truth. However, the alternative interpretation, (which is later taken up by Yogacara) is that there *is* an ultimate reality but it is inexpressible, beyond concepts or words, which can only be perceived experientially, known as “thusness” or “suchness”.

The two truths thesis is an understanding that is arrived at by the logical deconstruction of conventional reality. However, emptiness does not mean nothingness – it means non-being, defined as the absence of own-being or “fixed essence”. There are no “things” that exist independently apart from other things. Conventional reality does therefore exist – if we ignored conventional reality we would not survive. How we use language is all convention but language is essential to our ability to cooperate as human beings who are social beings.

These two truths are not contradictory but are complementary, like two sides of the one coin or two different ways in which reality is seen. On one side of the coin, we invariably superimpose inherent existence (conventions) onto “reality” – for example we take nouns to be fixed – we

make distinctions with our universal categories – we distinguish a cow from all non-cows. On the other side of the coin there is the realisation that the fundamental nature (or no-nature) of reality is emptiness; and that conventional reality is identical to emptiness - conventional reality *is* impermanence and interdependence.

When we recite emptiness is identical to form - “form” is the distinctions we make between shapes, colours, things, and good and bad, and they are all ultimately interdependent and impermanent – the “all” is therefore “one” and the “one” is “all”. Conventional reality is the manifestation of diversity and separation and ultimate reality is exactly the realisation that emptiness is conventional reality.

Examples:

Take for example this book. You say, can you pass me the book and I will pick up the book and pass you the book. No problem. However, do we experience something that corresponds to the name book?

What do we find when we go directly into our experience?

Can you find a book?

Go to your senses –

Firstly, we experience the colours of the cover of the book. We experience the letters on the cover.

We can pick up the book and feel the texture of the cover. We can turn the pages and

experience the whiteness of the page and the black ink on the page.

We can smell the book.

But do we experience a book?

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.

Karma as cause and effect without essences

Nagarjuna's basic argument is to show how the belief in essentialism leads to absurd conclusions.

If we believe in the existence of an unchanging atman that is eternal, then it can obviously never change. How does this fit with the belief in karma – the belief that negative consequences flow from harmful actions and positive consequences flow from beneficial actions. How can we learn from our mistakes if our true self is unchanging?

“Hence, an atman that is truly unchanging and independent has nothing to do with karma defined in terms of cause and effect. It stands outside of time and causality” (Waldron 2023).

Conventional reality conforms to cause and effect. We can therefore change – our practice is transformative.

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 despite the claim that emptiness is the way things ultimately are, it is not a substantial absolute, a substratum underlying all phenomena quoting them and giving them reality in the way that God or brahman are often thought to do. Rather, emptiness is itself a concept dependent on our understanding of conventional reality, merely a characteristic of conventional reality. This understanding and realisation of emptiness is dependent on the recognition of conventional reality being impermanent and interdependent and lacking inherent existence.

“Despite the claim that emptiness is the way things ultimately are, it is not a substantial absolute, a substratum underlying all phenomena, supporting them and giving them reality in the way that God or Brahman are often thought to do. Emptiness refers to the specific *lack* of essence found in any phenomenon because it is dependently arisen. It is not an *independent* reality, since it depends on reference to particular phenomena; emptiness is empty, too” (Waldron 2023, 139).

Everything is interdependent, impermanent, and empty of intrinsic identity.

Why is this important? In two ways. Firstly, it helps to bring an end to suffering by freeing us from the habit of superimposing a fixed identity into ourselves and others. Secondly, it reduces suffering by freeing us from the confusion that seeks to grasp things and people as if they were fixed. Finally, it frees us from the mistake of attributing a fixed essence to emptiness itself. Emptiness also is empty – emptiness cannot be grasped – it can only be lived!

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 our 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. Just this, is it.

Mahayana recognizes the limits of expressibility. "Therefore, the best way – the least misleading way - to characterize reality is to say it is just as it is, nothing more, nothing less: it is *thus*. Everything can be equally characterized by its thusness or suchness (tathata)" (Waldron 2023, 141). We must also be careful here as well – this term also does not refer to any discrete thing, substance or reality called "thusness". It is not referring to some reality beyond concepts. It is simply pointing to the ineffability of everyday life.

Creating a more compassionate world

Ultimately, this realisation of the emptiness of all things liberates us from suffering and opens our heart into realising compassion for all beings because we are not separate from all beings. How we treat others will have a direct impact on how others treat ourselves.

As Jay Garfield puts it nirvana is not found by escaping from this world but by “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 in conventional reality 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. Being dependent intelligently

Given interdependence is reality, that we need to recognise and accept our human needs, including our needs for psychological validation and acknowledgment. We don't deny or dissociate from these needs (spiritual by-passing). Being dependent "intelligently" means also recognising that other people are never going to be perfectly able to satisfy our needs for validation and acknowledgement all the time. That at times, they will frustrate and disappoint us. That includes our intimate partners, family, sangha friends and yes, therapists and Zen teachers.

Are you aware of practicing being dependent intelligently? Not denying your needs but being honest with yourself and others about these needs? Being able to see others we depend on as people who will at times frustrate and disappoint us?

2. 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.

3. 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?

4. 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

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