

A MODERN VIEW OF NAGARJUNA'S INTENT AND MEANING

"This [is] a matter hard to perceive, this conditionality, this [dependent origination]...against the stream of common thought, deep, subtle, difficult, delicate...." --Buddha, Digha Nikaya II.36 ("Dialogues of the Buddha") in Macy 1991 45; and compare Dalai Lama 1995 34 on the relationship between emptiness, interdependency, and selflessness.

"Dependent origination is exactly what You [Buddha] think of as emptiness (sunyata). O, Your incomparable lion's roar is that no independent thing exists!" --Nagarjuna, CS I:22 (in Lindtner 1982 137)

"Since the Buddhas have stated that the world is conditioned by ignorance, how is it not reasonable therefore that this world is a [result of] discrimination? When ignorance is stopped why is it not clear that [what also] stops was imagined by it?" --Nagarjuna, YS 37-38 (Lindtner 1982 113)

There are those who admire the brilliance and sophistication of Nagarjuna's writings and the genius of Madhyamika thought, which has been called "the highest Buddhist philosophical school" (Dalai Lama 1995 49). However, others are quite overwhelmed and baffled by him. But his perplexing mystification is due to several reasons: (1) contemporary scholars focusing on his critiques of rivals he had to deal with in the second century which often have little relevance for us today, and thus Nagarjuna is seen as confusing, obscure, and inaccessible; and (2) the inability of translators to agree on basic terminology and meaning which results in various--if not contradictory--interpretations of any one verse from his works. In point of fact, Nagarjuna is not nearly as difficult to grasp as we have been led to believe. And once the **thought patterns** he deals with are understood his system becomes crystal clear.

Central to Nagarjuna's system are the doctrines of the two truths (interdependency and emptiness) and the middle path between extremes which are mutually defining.

"What is interdependent origination, that is called openness [= sunyata: emptiness] by us. It [openness] makes use of convention and is the practice of the middle way." --Nagarjuna, MK 24:18 (in McCagney 1997 202)

Loy (1999 247) points out that Nagarjuna's deconstructive approach "demonstrates our inability to understand the relationship between things and their causal relations." But what does this mean to us in our daily lives? And is it something we should consider? Briefly, whether aware of it or not, we all live by an assumed cause/effect map to guide us in our daily lives. Such causal explanations define cause/effect relationships involving how we see and respond to the self/other interface. Three important causal explanations are:

(1) **Linearity** simplifies causality by limiting it to a one-way relationship between cause and its effect. The svabhava fallacy is rooted in linear thinking which defines the causal-agent self as separate from and acting upon its other to achieve a desired result. So, a linear map is limited--which is useful if we need to narrow our focus--but leads to insidious relationship errors,

especially if we mistake the map for the territory.

(2) **Systems theory** allows for a two-way relationship that involves feedback between cause/effect. Thus, the systemic map is more sensitive and reveals more relational variables. Yet, it is still restricted because systems theory asserts a reified, goal-driven self and ignores the import of nonattachment. (Macy 1991 80, 124)

(3) **Interdependency** (pratityasamutpada), the Buddha's causal law of dependence on conditions, is the most inclusive causal map to guide and inform us in our daily lives. It allows for the linear narrow focus when necessary and it also incorporates the systemic two-way feedback between cause/effect. Thus, interdependency includes the benefits of the linear and systems explanations while correcting their incompleteness with a broader, more comprehensive view. Interdependency also promotes nonattachment whereby we realize the lack (sunyata: emptiness) of inherent characteristics (svabhava) and the impermanence (anitya) of all dharmas, which are equally empty of svabhava. Nonattachment (upadana) deconstructs a linear self clinging to its illusory separateness. Any view of "selflessness that fails to perceive emptiness in terms of dependent origination can never be complete." (Dalai Lama 1995 34)

Although pratityasamutpada is ultimately unverifiable one way or the other from an "objective" viewpoint, it is, at the least, a much more USEFUL and complete causal map to guide us in our daily lives and relationships. Its relevance is personally realized when we see greater affirmation than negation of the doctrine in our daily lives. Such affirmation is seen in the reciprocal influence (by actions and nonactions) between self and other, which do NOT exist separately or independently through any inherent self-nature (svabhava).

The significance of Nagarjuna's arguments today

One of the best efforts by a contemporary scholar to interpret Nagarjuna in terms that emphasize his vital relevance for us today is Loy (1999), from which the excerpts below are taken. Loy points out that Nagarjuna (in MK chapters 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9) deconstructs the common human duality we draw "between things and their attributes," which distorts their relationship AND also our relationship to them. In these chapters we see that, as mentioned above, when contemporary scholars focus on his critiques of rivals he had to deal with in the second century the subject matter often has little relevance for us today, and so Nagarjuna is seen as confusing, obscure, and inaccessible.

Instead of getting bogged down in the specific subject Nagarjuna targeted in his critique, Loy shows us the broader **pattern of thought** Nagarjuna is after in each of these chapters that is common to human beings and transcends time and geography. What makes this dualistic distortion especially significant today is when we apply this illusory pattern of duality to the relationship between self and other. By realizing what Nagarjuna repeatedly demonstrates--"our inability to understand the relationship between things and their causal relations"--the illusory dualism dissolves and we see that things are not separate but mutually interdependent. Aware that causes and conditions of things we perceive are interconnected with other causes and conditions and so on and on, one's life and relationships are enriched. So, we lose nothing but, instead, gain enormously when the illusory duality between substance and attribute, between

things and their causal relations, between self and other are deconstructed. What we gain is the wisdom of our interdependency, which also reflects the emptiness of svabhava.

"Simply put, interdependence means that nothing stands alone apart from the matrix of all else. Nothing is independent, and everything is interdependent with everything else. Logically, the proof of interdependence is that nothing can exist apart from the causes and conditions that give rise to it. But those causes and conditions are also dependent on other causes and conditions. Therefore, linear [= one-way] causality and isolating a single cause for an event gives way to a more web-like understanding of causality in which everything affects everything else in some way because everything is interconnected." (Gross 1997 337-338)

Nagarjuna's Deconstruction and the Mystifications of Language

"Few if any Buddhist scholars would dispute that Nagarjuna (about 150-250) is the most important Buddhist philosopher, and none of them would deny that the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* ["Treatise on the Middle Way" (MK)] is his most important work. It is something of a scandal then, that the basic meaning of this difficult text remains so obscure. This is not for want of interpreters--no Buddhist thinker has received more attention--yet there is little agreement among his Western expositors. It is curious, and more than a little suspicious, that Nagarjuna usually ends up expounding something quite similar to one's own favorite philosopher or philosophy....

The basic problem is not the nature of Nagarjuna's arguments themselves but their target; for, despite (or because of) the various opinions of traditional and contemporary commentators on this matter, it remains unclear from Nagarjuna's text precisely what or whom he is criticizing. Since we have no other reliable access to Nagarjuna's intentions, this is an issue that may never be settled. From a postmodern perspective, the opportunity this ambiguity provides is not entirely negative, but then the onus falls upon each interpreter not only to offer a plausible account of Nagarjuna's motives but also to justify the continued importance of those motives for us.... [Loy 1999 246; and compare Tuck 1990 on Western interpretations of Nagarjuna]

The [significance of Nagarjuna's arguments today] increases for us, though if they are attempts to resolve an inconsistency that plagues our ordinary 'commonsense' way of understanding the world.... [At issue is] the more basic difficulties that plague our usual commonsense distinction between (what philosophers call) substance and attribute.... [Thus, Nagarjuna demonstrates] our inability to understand the relationship between things and their causal relations.... In the process, however, Nagarjuna seems to engage in a kind of logic-chopping that is difficult to follow and whose import is unclear: exactly what is it that is being deconstructed?" [Loy 1999 246-247]

Nagarjuna's Deconstructive Approach to the Relationship Between Things

"The *karikas* [= MK] do not offer an analysis of the world itself but analyze our ways of understanding the world. It is these ways of thinking (which, according to Nagarjuna, are inconsistent) that make the world 'empirical' for us. If so, we should look ... in our categories of thought, and there we find it in our ingrained tendency (perhaps due to, and certainly enshrined in, the subject-predicate nature of language) to distinguish our experience into self-existing [=

svabhavic] entities and their activities. We do think of ourselves, for example, as persons distinguishable from our actions, and this implies some sort of reification [= to make real] not only of ourselves but also of the act, as our substantives 'act', 'action', and 'activity' reveal.... [Loy 1999 247]

The import of the arguments above [on "The analysis of going and coming" (MK 2), for example,] is that our usual way of understanding motion--which distinguishes the goer from the going and from the place of going--does not really make sense when examined carefully, for the interdependence of the three shows that each is unreal when considered apart from the others. Nagarjuna's logic here (and in many other chapters) proceeds by demonstrating that once we have thus distinguished them--as ordinary language and 'common sense' do--then it becomes impossible to understand their relationship--a difficulty familiar enough to students of the mind-body problem....

[The] same argument also refutes our usual notions that a speaker speaks something and that an agent performs an action [MK 9]. Very similar arguments are employed [in MK] chapters 4, 5, and 8 to deconstruct our usual understanding of a perceiver perceiving a perceptual object; in chapter 6 to deconstruct the duality between persons and their affections; and in chapter 5 to deconstruct the duality in its most general terms, between things and their attributes." [Loy 1999 248]

The Pattern: A Dualistic Flaw of Ordinary Language

"[Thus,] Nagarjuna is pointing out a flaw in the ordinary language we use in describing (and hence in our ways of thinking about) motion and rest: our ascription of motion predicates to substantive objects is actually unintelligible. In everyday life we constantly fudge this, sometimes assuming that things exist apart from their predicates and at other times identifying things with their predicates (a good example is the relationship between me and 'my' body). Nagarjuna's dialectics demonstrates this inconsistency simply by distinguishing clearly between the possibilities. [Loy 1999 248]

It may be that the tendency to distinguish substance from attribute reflects the inherent dualism of language: a statement predicates something about something, for learning a language is learning what things there are (nouns correspond to things) and what these things do (verbs correspond to actions and processes) or have (adjectives correspond to attributes). But that such a dualism is widespread and even in a certain sense necessary (the 'lower truth') does not make it a correct description of the way things really are ('the higher truth'), according to Nagarjuna." [Loy 1999 248-249]

Nagarjuna's Rampage Through the Nonsense of the Philosophers

"This helps us to understand the point of the general Madhyamika critique, by revealing what is being criticized: our usual, commonsense understanding of the world, which sees it as a collection of discrete entities (one of them myself) interacting causally 'in' space and time.... Yet, Nagarjuna attacks more than the philosophical fancies of Indian metaphysicians, for there is a metaphysics, although an inconsistent one, inherent in our everyday view--most personally and painfully in the contradiction between my sense of myself as something nontemporal and

unchanging (i.e., as distinct from my attributes, such as body) and the awareness that I am growing older and subject to death (indistinguishable from attributes such as 'my' body). It is one or another aspect of this dualistic view that is made absolute in systematic metaphysics. This commonsense understanding is what makes the world samsara for us, and it is this samsara that Nagarjuna is concerned with deconstructing....

The objectivity of the world (including the 'subjectification' of myself as a thing in it but apart from it) depends upon this dualism between things and their attributes/causal relations. This constitutes samsara because it is by hypostatizing such a 'thingness' out of the flux of experience that we become attached to things--again, the primal attachment being (to) the sense of self. Yet what we experience as such self-existing objects (svabhava) are thought-constructed reifications [= to make real], a shorthand way of remembering that our perceptions tend to have a certain stability, which allows us to relate them together and form expectations. This may be a necessary habit for us (which is why it is a lower truth), but such reifications create a delusive bifurcation [= splitting apart] between objects and their attributes (which is why it is a lower truth). [Loy 1999 249]

This point about the way we perceive the world is important because without it one might conclude that Nagarjuna's critique of self-existence svabhava is a refutation of something no one believes in anyway. One does not escape his critique by defining entities in a more commonsense fashion as coming into and passing out of existence. The logic of the Karikas [= MK] demonstrates that there is no tenable middle ground between self-existence independent of all conditions--an empty set--and the complete conditionality of sunya [= empty of svabhava] phenomena. [Loy 1999 249-250]

In sum, there is something confused and deluded about our ordinary understanding of the world, because it dualizes substance from attribute, subject from predicate, permanence from change. Instead of attempting to supply the 'correct view,' however, the Madhyamika simply deconstructs this commonsense understanding, a removal which allows something else--obvious but hitherto over looked--to manifest." [Loy 1999 250]

A Walk Through Svabhavic Constructions

As further elaboration on what precisely it is that Nagarjuna is concerned about, the follow quote on the svabhava (inherent, independent self-nature) illusion is provided.

"To [students] enthusiastic about Mahayana [= the universal teaching] the preaching of the Buddhas is in brief: the selfless-ness and equality (samata) of [all] phenomena (dharma) [and the doctrine] that mind is originally unborn [= empty of svabhava]." --Nagarjuna, BV 29 (in Lindtner 1982 195, 199)

"Since all things altogether lack substance (svabhava) either in causes or conditions [or their] totality or separately, therefore they are empty (sunya).... Inasmuch as all things are empty of own-being (svabhava) the incomparable Tathagata [= Buddha] has taught this [interdependency] about things." --Nagarjuna, SS 3, 68 (in Lindtner 1982 35, 65)

The Madhyamika deconstruction "demonstrates our inability to understand the relationship between things and their causal relations." (Loy 1999 247; and see 248-249 on fudging) How it does this is exemplified below in the noun/verb paradigm of "John walks." By separating "John/walks," both dharmas (ideas) are reified as separate, independent concepts or entities with inherent existence. So, John, as OTHER, is also reified. And, from this common assumption of svabhavic separation, we habitually ascribe "other" with our privileged conceptual constructions as its INHERENT characteristics. Thus, we act upon our own relative conceptual constructions as the inherent self-nature (svabhava) of others (dharmas) when, actually, our constructions are empty of svabhava and RELATIVE to us.

"For Nagarjuna language is self-referential, tautological [= needless repetition of an idea, statement, or word]. The danger of tautologies--and Nagarjuna consistently exploits this danger--is that though two different terms are being used to describe an event that is an event precisely because its causal conditions are *NOT* radically separated, nonetheless because the *TERMS* are different *THEY* can be separated and treated as independent entities. This seeming independence is merely a linguistic illusion. For example, one can say 'John walks'. For Nagarjuna this is a tautological statement, since without 'John' this particular 'walking' could not occur, and conversely, with-out 'walks' we would have a different 'John' (a cooking John, or a sitting John, or a talking John, and so forth). 'John' and 'walks' are inseparable, but by separating the two words, one begins to imagine that something called 'John' exists independently of walking and that walking exists independently of John. [emphasis in the original]

In fact, grammatically we are compelled to separate nouns from verbs, adjectives from nouns, adverbs from verbs, and so forth. But these linguistic distinctions CONCEAL the actual inseparability of the factors being carved up by distinct words. The danger of this separation is that these separate 'entities' are then given invariant identities, and ultimately assigned to universal classes (class of humans, class of walkers, and so forth). So John (noun), even when not walking, is taken to still be John, and thus his essential identity remains unchanged and unaffected by the various activities (verbs) he engages in. But that is untrue. Our activities (karma) are perpetually changing us. Once John has been given the status of 'unchanging John' (that is, his identity remains constant through time and different actions) by this simple trick of language, it is a short step to positing an unchanging, invariant IDENTITY that is John, that is his 'essence' or self (atman), an ESSENCE that remains invariant and constant from life to life and even beyond. Noun-verb phrases are tautologies, not relations between separate classes. Metaphysics thus grows out of linguistic fictions. [emphasis added]

Because John and walking are not different, it does not follow that they are the same. John is not the only thing that can walk (though 'John walks' can only signify the John who walks). To argue they are either the same or different is to fall into one or the other extreme, that is, to lose the 'Middle Way'." (Lusthaus 1995 186)

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