

THE MUTUAL INTERPLAY OF THE TWO TRUTHS

"The instruction of the teachings of the buddhas are based on two truths [= satya]: the truth of common sense conventions about the world [= samvrti-satya] and truth in the higher sense of the word [= paramartha-satya]. Those who do not understand the distinction between the two truths do not understand the profound reality in the teaching of the Buddha. Higher truth [of sunyata] is not taught independently of common practice. Liberation is not accomplished by the unattainable higher truth." --Nagarjuna, MK 24:7-10 (in McCagney 1997 200-201)

[Editor's note: Streng's translation of pratityasamutpada as "dependent co-origination" in the following quote has been replaced with the more current translation as "interdependency," which is the preferred term used throughout this website. Also, to clarify the terminology below, the relative, conventional (samvrti) truth (satya) is the interdependency of daily life, and the supreme (paramartha) truth (satya) is the dharmaic lack or emptiness (sunyata) of any permanent, independent self-nature (svabhava).]

How "an understanding of reality as 'empty' prohibits a rejection of conventional (i.e. conditioned) means for attaining final release." (Streng 1973 28)

"The problem is: how can [interdependency] account for the experience of samsara [= cyclic existence] without necessarily perpetuating samsara in such a way that a qualitatively different reality is required to effect a release from it?" (Streng 1973 29)

"If pratityasamutpada is basic to both samvrti [= conventional truth] and paramartha [= supreme truth] then participation in samvrti (or vyavahara [= common practice, ordinary life]) is part of what it means to know paramartha. That is to say, the use of samvrti is not just a necessary evil, it is a component part of realizing emptiness. The practical, everyday world as such is not to be rejected--only the ignorance, the attachment to svabhava, should cease. Such attachment to svabhava is not a part of the conditioned empty relations that form existence; and one need not--or cannot--reject the [interdependency] of empty forms when one sees the truth of [interdependency]. Thus, Nagarjuna would never suggest that since all things are empty any belief or any view is equally conducive to knowing the way things are or, on the contrary, to hiding the truth. The way a person participates in vyavahara is important for realizing the truth of pratityasamutpada. To state this another way, and more strongly, we would say that truth claims made through conditioned [= samvrti] concepts and experiences have power to expose one to the highest [= paramartha] truth insofar as one avoids imposing a self-existent [= svabhava] quality on any concept or experience (such as using the notion of 'emptiness' as a dogma).

The role of samvrti in paramartha is a function of the recognition in the *Karikas* [= Nagarjuna's 'Treatise on the Middle Way' (MK)] that the distinctions between such things as nirvana and samsara, the tathagata [= Buddha] and the world, or 'being bound' (bandhana) and release (moksa) are only practical distinctions.

If one assumes that each opposite term refers to a different eternal quality or essence, and then

desires one and hates the other, he fails to perceive that this is an empty, relative distinction. The emptiness of absolute opposites is seen in the following stanzas:

Therefore, 'that which is bound' is not released and 'that which is not bound' is likewise not released. If 'that which is bound' were released, 'being bound' and release' would exist simultaneously. [MK 16:8]

Where there is no superimposing of nirvana (on something else), nor a removal of samsara, what samsara is there? What nirvana is imagined? [MK 16:10]

The self-existence [= svabhava] of the tathagata [= Buddha] is the self-existence of the world. The tathagata is without self-existence; the world is without self-existence. [MK 22:16]

There is nothing whatever which differentiates samsara from nirvana; and there is nothing whatever which differentiates nirvana from samsara. The extreme limit (koti) of nirvana is also the extreme limit of samsara; there is not the slightest bit of difference between these two. [MK 25:19-20]

Since all dharmas are empty [= sunya], what is finite? What is infinite? What is both finite and infinite? What is neither finite nor infinite? [MK 25:22]

The differentiation which presupposes unchangeable essences [= svabhava] is not useful for knowing the emptiness of ideas, 'things', or emotional responses. But when words are not regarded as representing some independent reality, they can function as practical forces in man's cessation of ignorance (attachment) to illusory objects. Even more, (empty) words used to express the dharma [= teaching] and the [Madhyamika] dialectic are not merely a destructive form which clears the ground for a constructive formulation of the truth, or simply a dissolution of all verbal formation that then allows a mystic intuition of an absolute unchanging reality to 'take over'. The dialectic itself can be a means of knowing. It provides the insight that there is no absolute or independent samskrta [= conditioned existence] or dharma. This is no mean feat; for the conventional use of words and logic tends to posit some kind of intrinsic value [= svabhava] in the mental constructs that are used. This tendency to superimpose illusory significance to parts of human experience can be overcome, in part, by verbal guides (such as teachings, moral precepts, dialectic) which are informed by the highest insight into the emptiness of things. Thus Nagarjuna did not contend that paramartha appears when samvrti ceases. Rather the truth of existence is known when emptiness is realized as the source of both samvrti and paramartha. Ideally, samvrti is paramartha applied to daily living: when nirvana is realized in the cessation of desire, or in the reduction of all dogma to absurdity. Then the practical distinctions of 'cessation', 'desire', 'dogma', 'absurdity', or 'nirvana' are from the highest perspective, recognized as empty of all svabhava.

Because Nagarjuna's ultimate affirmation is pratityasamutpada [= interdependency], any conventional affirmation that might suggest an absolute, in the form of a dogma or doctrine, is avoided. Even 'sunyata' [= emptiness], 'asvabhava' [= no self-nature], 'tathagata' [= Buddha], or 'pratayaya' [= relational condition] cannot be transformed into absolutes; they are designations

which can help in a practical way to dispel the effective (though empty) power of misconceptions. To the degree that one uses samvrti [= the conventional] without the misconception of svabhava [= self-nature] it can be an aid to the cessation of suffering. The soteriological [= theology of salvation: Buddhist liberation] function of Nagarjuna's dialectic is commonly accepted. Our concern here is to indicate that the affirmation of pratityasamutpada as the way things are precludes an interpretation that would make the goal of knowing sunyata a denial of phenomenal existence, as if this existence were characterized by an unchangeable essence (svabhava) of impurity.

To realize that nirvana, samskrta [= conditioned], asamskrta [= unconditioned], and samsara are empty of svabhava [= self-nature] requires a shift more drastic than to say that all conceptual forms prevent a person from intuiting the One undifferentiated whole. Both samvrti and paramartha participate in [interdependency]--which reality is without beginning or end, and without eternal qualities. There is no way to eliminate [interdependency]. The problem it is affirming is that in conventional expression the processes of articulation (definitions of words, inferences drawn from asserting 'is' or 'is not') are conducive to superimposing a svabhava on the selection of conscious impressions we experience. The highest awareness, which is needed for release from svabhava, is not the result of moving from the finite to the infinite, but the release from ignorance about the [interdependency] of anything at all. Paramarthatatya is, then, living in full awareness of [interdependency] rather than in a limited, 'tunneled' awareness about the conditions of existence. It is living without fear of the interdependent nature of things, and without the desire for an unconditioned self-existent reality--which is just a fantasy, a mirage. Indeed, the reality of [interdependency] is a 'relative existence'; but according to the paramarthatatya the 'relative character' is not a self-existent evil. It is not to be negated for its opposite; for the realm of opposites is a function of the crystallization of svabhavas. From the perspective of paramarthatatya, both paramartha and samvrti are empty [= interdependent]." (Streng 1973 34-37)

For more discussion on the doctrine of the two truths, see the .pdf files at our Current Features webpage:

The Two Truths
Interdependency

References

McCagney, Nancy. 1997. *Nagarjuna and the Philosophy of Openness*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., pp. 200-201)

Streng, Frederick J. 1973. "The Significance of Pratityasamutpada for Understanding the Relationship Between Samvrti and Paramarthatatya in Nagarjuna" in Sprung, Mervyn, ed. *The Problem of Two Truths in Buddhism and Vedanta*, pp. 27-39. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company.