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The Zen Teachings of Nagarjuna

by Vladimir K., June 2004

Nagarjuna, characterised as a Buddhist philosopher by many Western philosophers and scholars[1], is perhaps best approached not as a Buddhist philosopher (although he certainly was that) but as a Mahayana teacher. In the Zen tradition, he is the 14th Patriarch. He is also recognized as a patriarch in Tantric Buddhism and the Amitabha Buddhist sects. As Dumoulin (1994:44) points out, it was not his logical dialectics that made him a revered figure, but his "religious vitality that has had the greater influence".

Nagarjuna is considered the founder of the Madhyamika (the Middle Path/Way) school, a branch of the Mahayana Buddhist school. A list of all the works attributed to this near-mythic figure would include a wide variety of texts still extant in Tibetan, Chinese and Sanskrit (Mabbett, 1998), but , as Mabbett notes, many of the texts "are not taken seriously" as coming from the hand of Nagarjuna. Likewise, Nagarjuna's life is obscured by hagiography and mythology (see Tharchin, (n.d.) for a typical example) and even the dates of his life are uncertain, although somewhere between the first and third centuries would be acceptable to most scholars. None of this needs concern us here.

What is generally accepted is that the core text of the Madhyamika school, the Mulamadhyamakakarika (Fundamental Stanzas on the Middle Way) is assigned to Nagarjuna and is one of the most important and influential texts in Mahayana Buddhism. However, Nagarjuna often perplexes, even frustrates upon a first reading. As David Loy (1999) comments, Nagarjuna's writing is a "laconic knife-edged logic that wields distinctions that no one had noticed before and that many since have been unable to see the point of... splitting what some see as conceptual hairs."

One of the difficulties a Western reader has with Nagarjuna is that the Mulamadhyamakakarika is based on classical Indian, rather than Western logic. Western logical traditions see only two possibilities in an argument — truth or falsity. It may try to prove another truth through negation. For example, if a car

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[1]i.e., McFarlane, (1995): "Nagarjuna…is regarded as the greatest Buddhist philosopher ever"; Garfield and Priest (2003): "Nagarjuna is surely one of the most difficult philosophers to interpret in any tradition"; (Loy, 1999): "Certainly Nagarjuna is a philosopher's philosopher"; and even Schroeder (2000), who sees Nagarjuna's work as 'skillful means' (*upaya*) begins his essay *Nagarjuna and the Doctrine of 'Skillful Means'* by calling him "the important Mahayana philosopher"

is not red, it must be some other colour. Indian traditions use four positions: true (not false), false (not true), both true and false, and neither true nor false (*prasanga* or tetralemma). Needless to say, this form of argumentation is difficult for a Western reader used to a completely different line of reasoning. However, Nagarjuna goes even one step further, basically arguing, "None of the above", leaving the reader with nowhere to go and nothing to grasp. Nagarjuna used negation not to prove another viewpoint or truth but to negate all viewpoints. He thereby destroyed all logical arguments or speculation about Ultimate reality, denying the inherent existence of any such 'reality'.

In this essay I will outline some of Nagarjuna's basic teaching based on his Mulamadhyamakakarika and show the relationship between Nagarjuna's writings and subsequent Zen teachings. While Nagarjuna is undoubtedly one of Buddhism's greatest philosophers[2], his writings are best approached as teachings for Buddhists. The Mulamadhyamakakarika should not be seen as a new philosophy but as a clarification of the Tathagata's teachings which ends all speculation of metaphysics. While Zen Buddhism denies the efficacy of philosophising as a pathway to liberation, it took up many of the principles outlined in the Mulamadhyamakakarika and applied them in a practical way to end ignorance and relieve suffering. Nagarjuna and the old Zen masters had the same goal in mind. Only the approaches differed. Both are nothing more than *upaya* (skillful means of teaching)[3].

An Outline of Nagarjuna's Teachings

The Mulamadhyamakakarika is a dialectic, often difficult to follow, and I believe it would be a mistake to pull out one tenet and say that this or that is the main idea or central philosophy of the work. Philosophy is concerned with attempting to explain or describe the essence or the existence of reality. (Cheng, 1991:71) Human beings have a need to philosophise about their existence as otherwise they would feel groundless and undirected, so philosophy does have its place in our lives, based on a conventional reality; but there is no philosophy that can explain ultimate truth. Nagarjuna (and the Tathagata) held that all philosophy and speculation on reality leads not to knowledge but to illusion. The goal is not a new philosophical view of life, but the abandonment of all views. It is only then that true wisdom arises. (Cheng, 1991:72) The Tathagata refused to speculate on metaphysics, saying that such speculation was a waste of energy, irrelevant to knowing the Ultimate Truth as the Ultimate Truth was not this, not that, not both nor not either (the tetralemma). Inquiring into Ultimate causes and purposes through philosophy, the Buddha taught, was fruitless. A man struck by

[2] Not everyone agrees. For example, see Hayes, 2003; Sion, (n.d.)
[3] See Schroeder on this topic

an arrow does not need to know what wood was used for the shaft nor where the arrowhead was forged, but he does need to know how to remove the arrow. Some say the Buddha worked more as a spiritual doctor than simply as a teacher. He diagnosed the disease (suffering), identified its cause (ignorance and craving), determined whether it was curable (there is a cure) and outlined a course of treatment (the Eightfold Path). (Winters, 1994:15; Schroeder, 2000) Following the Buddha's path of eliminating all philosophical speculation, Nagarjuna used the process of *reductio ad absurdum*, a negation of all viewpoints on any topic to reveal that all arguments which attempt to prove or disprove the existence of any conceivable statements about Ultimate reality are untenable, unintelligible and contradictory, thereby dispelling all philosophical viewpoints, all extremes of thought and setting one clearly on the path of the Middle Way taught by the Buddha and towards wisdom and the end of suffering.

Nagarjuna's dialectic can be brought down to four basic propositions:

> All things (*dharma*) exist: affirmation of being, negation of non-being
> All things (*dharma*) do not exist: affirmation of non-being, negation of being
> All things (*dharma*) both exist and do not exist: both affirmation and negation
> All things (*dharma*) neither exist nor do not exist: neither affirmation nor negation (Dumoulin,1998:43)

From this tetralemmatic dialectic, Nagarjuna argued neither production nor destruction; neither annihilation nor permanence; neither unity nor difference; neither coming nor going. (Dumoulin, 1994:44) He thereby refuted all metaphysical speculation about Ultimate Reality or "the highest truth" (*paramartha-satya*).

It is possible to say that there are three important, but, in true Buddhist fashion, interconnected, ideas in the work, none of which can stand on its own but which together make up the central thrust of the teaching. They are the two truths doctrine, emptiness (*sunyata*) and dependent arising or co-dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*). Together, these three make up the Middle Way of Nagarjuna. In just twenty-seven chapters of four hundred verses, Nagarjuna tackles some of the most difficult and esoteric teachings of the Buddha, systematizing the heart of Zen practice, the Prajnaparamita Sutra. While for convenience I will discuss each of the three separately it must be kept in mind that none stand on their own and, even more importantly, none should be taken as some kind of "ultimate truth"; they are but pedagogical devices allowing us a way of knowing the empty nature of truth. Nagarjuna rejects all philosophical views, including his own, and claims that he asserts nothing. All concepts, including *sunyata* and *pratityasamutpada* are but provisional names and have no independent meaning

of their own. (Cheng, 1991:43) Furthermore, nothing Nagarjuna wrote was based on his own creation; all his works were espousing the teachings of the Buddha, not his own original thoughts. Nagarjuna was trying to explain the Buddha's teachings, not present some new teaching of his own.

The two truths doctrine is based on the view that there are two realities: conventional reality and the truth about this reality (a "lower truth"), and ultimate reality and its truth (a "higher truth"). In the final analysis, however, Nagarjuna rejects this duality and teaches that both realities are one and the same. It is our so-called 'common sense' understanding of the world that causes the problem because we tend to see the world as a collection of discrete entities interacting with each other and with the self. In the Buddhist view, this is called ignorance and leads to suffering (*dukha*). The two truths doctrine is based on the practicality of teaching (*upaya*) rather than dogma. From a conventional viewpoint, we can say that things are causally produced and are impermanent but from a higher viewpoint, causal production and impermanence (or permanence) cannot be established and dualistic thinking must be rejected. (Cheng, 1991:45)

Conventional reality is our normal day-to-day reality that we all experience. When you stand in the rain, you get wet; when you haven't eaten for a while, you get hungry and if you fall off a cliff, you get hurt. This is a common-sense reality. The truth of this reality is not so simple. There is the truth that our senses tell us. A broken leg hurts. A doctor treating the leg is aware that her patient is suffering pain and although she herself does not feel the pain, she acknowledges that there is pain. Which leads us to a second type of truth, the truth of common agreement. This truth is a relative truth, often based on socio-cultural factors. A Muslim will bow towards Mecca and all Muslims, by common agreement, see this as the true way of worship. A Christian or Buddhist has other ways of worship which are equally true. Another truth could be linguistic truth. In English we have no difficulty distinguishing a table from a desk. In other languages, this may not be so. To some a table is nothing more than four sticks surmounted by a slab of wood. The table exists only because we call it a table and it is dependent on wood, on its parts, on its uses and upon agreement by us that it is indeed called 'table' and not 'desk'. (Garfield, 1994) The table has no existence outside of the materials it is made of and the person who constructed it and the agreement among those who use it that we are talking about a table. Post-modernists would have no difficulty with these types of conventional truths, truth being in the eye of the beholder and there being no 'ultimate truth'.

The mistaken belief that 'conventional' reality is the ultimate reality is called ignorance, which leads to *samsara*, the world of pain and suffering and ignorance. We tend to believe that once a thing exists (such as a table), it is not only distinct

from all other things, but can continue existing unchanged until such a time as something affects it to cause a change. Our tendency to objectify the world around us, while it may be convenient, causes us to believe that things (and this includes ourselves) have an independent 'self-existence'. Nagarjuna's dialectic was all about destroying this viewpoint.

Huntington (1989:48) defines conventional truth in a way that opens the door to Nagarjuna's other teachings: "The sole criteria for empirical reality is existence within the nexus of cause and effect which defines our shared sociolinguistic experience." Conventional truth allows things to arise, to exist and to fade away. Conventional truth allows causes to arise and to create effects. But this understanding of cause and effect is a 'lower truth'. An understanding of cause and effect is essential in the Mulamadhyamakakarika. More on that later.

Ultimate truth for Nagarjuna is the truth of an enlightened clarity which does not mistake the conventional for something essential (reification). This is where emptiness comes in as Nagarjuna teaches that all things are empty and the understanding of this emptiness leads to a greater truth of the way things really are. Of course, fundamentally, there is no real difference between the two realities as this "truth of the highest meaning" posits that "individual existence cannot be grounded outside the context of everyday experience," (Huntington, 1989:48) thereby linking the two realities into one. In other words, a 'higher' truth is based only on conventional reality, not on a metaphysics.

Emptiness is another central doctrine of the Mulamadhyamakakarika. Without emptiness (*sunyata*) there could be no two truths. Without emptiness, there could be no dependent arising (*pratityasamutpada*). What is important to realise about emptiness is that it does not deny the existence of things (conventional reality) but says that all things (everything) have no intrinsic essence. In other words, nothing exists on its own, divorced or separated from other things. Therefore, everything is interconnected and cannot exist without these 'other things', including the self. It's also important to realise that Nagarjuna really does mean everything, without exception, including the Self, including thoughts, volition, beliefs—quite literally everything. For example, Nagarjuna argues that spatial properties cannot exist on their own. A location cannot exist without an object to be located in that space and, conversely, there cannot be an object without a location for it as all objects must have a location for them to exist in. Both object and location are dependent on each other. (Garfield & Priest, 2003) Nagarjuna goes on to show that everything is dependent on something else to exist. Nothing can exist without something else existing. This is the meaning of emptiness. And this is dependent arising (*pratityasamutpada*).

Nagarjuna explains:

Whatever is dependently co-arisen
That is explained to be emptiness
That, being a dependent designation
Is itself the middle way.

Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist
Therefore a non-empty thing
Does not exit.

Here Nagarjuna links *pratityasamutpada* to *sunyata* and the two together is the Middle Way of Buddhism. The two are intimately linked: if something is dependent on something else to manifest, it is empty and has no self-existence. And if something is empty, it depends on something else to come into being; it cannot manifest on its own. Furthermore, everything that is mutually dependent must have a uniqueness or particularity of its own, at least in terms of 'form'. We can say things are alike, but we cannot say they are identical or the same. For example, the cup that holds my coffee as I write this has a twin in the cupboard. They both look exactly the same, were made at the same factory, possibly by the same people, but they are not one and the same cup. If I break this one, the other will still exist, unbroken. Notice that none of this denies the existence (conventional reality) of things, only that conventional reality does not have an inherent essence or being. This is *sunyata*; this is *pratityasamutpada*.

If everything is empty and everything is *pratityasamutpada*, (dependent arising) then everything seems to have a cause so it can arise. The philosophical argument between cause and effect and their relationship is one that has always puzzled philosophers, Eastern and Western, one which Hume saw as "an esoteric and metaphysical" problem. (cited in Huntington, 1989:42) Buddhism recognises two types of causality: sequential and simultaneous. The first, sequential, is our conventional reality. We first have a cause and then an effect. First I make the coffee, then I drink it. It is uni-directional and non-reciprocal. In other words, I can't drink the coffee before I make it. However, Buddhism sees not only a conventional cause and effect based on two aspects (the cause and its effect) but on cause, condition and effect. Based on the fact that there must be a condition (*pratyaya*) as well as a cause before an effect comes into being means that "things or events are understood to originate and cease conditionally" and do not necessarily manifest sequentially and may be reciprocal, i.e., reversible. (Abe, 1997:96) Jay Garfield (2001) defines condition as "an event or phenomenon whose occurrence or existence is correlated with that of another." Nagarjuna said: "These give rise to those, So these are called conditions". (quoted in Garfield, 2001)

This is expressed in the famous four-line stanza:

> When this is present, that comes to be
> From the arising of this, that arises
> When this is absent, that does not come to be
> On the cessation of this, that ceases (quoted in Abe, 1997:97)

Here we can see non-duality at work. If we substitute the pronouns "this" and "that" for something concrete, we can get a sense of *pratityasamutpada*.

> When (conventional) reality is present, nirvana comes to be
> From the arising of (conventional) reality, nirvana arises

We can also say, therefore, quite logically and without contradiction:

> When nirvana does not come to be, (conventional) reality is absent
> When nirvana ceases, (conventional) reality ceases.

Through this argument, one can say that origination is reversible and things arise simultaneously, co-dependently. We can substitute any apparent duality into the stanza: when bigness is present, smallness comes to be and when smallness comes to be, bigness arises; when good is present, evil comes to be and when evil comes to be, goodness arises; when life is present, death comes to be and so on. The argument here is circular rather than linear. Hence, duality is undercut as everything is co-dependent arising. Consequently, nothing has its own self-abiding nature or can exist on its own. It is not that Nagarjuna is denying cause and effect; what he is warning against is "confusing a functional property of the causal conditions with an existing, essential property." (Chinn, 2001) It is only in this sense that we can say that things do not 'exist' or are unreal. This is the "nature that is no nature".

The Hinayana Buddhists used this argument to explain moral as well as physical phenomena (Cheng, 1991:84), and Nagarjuna saw that the early Buddhists took *pratityasamutpada* as an objective law governing all things. To refute any law or truth as universal, he argued that trying to explain a relationship between cause and effect is impossible and just ends up in meaninglessness or absurdity. (*ibid* p.85) The danger Nagarjuna saw was our tendency to search for metaphysical answers to the nature of reality and our life, to create an understanding of life and then to cling to this answer as the truth of existence. Ewing Chinn (2001) quotes Immanuel Kant to highlight how futile this search is:

> Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer. (from Critique of Pure Reason)

Nagarjuna, some two thousand years before Kant, understood this futility of searching for an answer (as did the Buddha) but he did not attribute this failure to reason itself, as Kant did, but to the mind itself being contingent (dependently arisen) and subjectively projecting its reality upon nature. Therefore he wrote:

> Defilements, karmas, doers, rewards, and punishments are all similar to a mirage, a dream, a shadow of light and an echo of voice. (quoted in Cheng, 1991:88)

The cause and effect argument works well in the conventional world but as both cause and effect are empty and have no substance of their own, causality itself must be empty. "If things are empty, then what … is the point of saying that they arise and cease?" (Winters, 1994:129) The difficulty of cause and effect becomes apparent when one tries to separate the two and speak of them in isolation from each other. Nagarjuna only admitted the reality of cause and effect if certain conditions (*pratyayas*) were present, then things could arise. He rejected cause as an active and determining force effecting change. (*ibid*, p.36) As Jonah Winters (p.38) goes on to explain, cause and effect "come into being only in dialectical relation to each other, and neither can be isolated and examined separate from its dialectical component." Therefore, cause and effect is denied any kind of ultimate principle of reality, or 'real' existence, and is used as a teaching tool to prevent people falling into wrong thought or misunderstanding. All of Nagarjuna's writings, indeed all of Buddhist teachings, should be seen as provisional only, a method to lead people from ignorance to wisdom. Nagarjuna himself once said: "It is *pratityasamutpada* that we call emptiness; it is a provisional name; it is also the middle way." (quoted in Cheng, 1991:88)

When we talk about dependent arising, emptiness and the two truths we are really talking about the same thing. All are just devices to rid people of attachment. (Cheng 1991:39) We label them differently for convenience of discussion, but they are one and the same. Therefore, one cannot place one higher than another or assert one to the exclusion of another. (Winters, 1994:131) Furthermore, the relationship between *pratityasamutpada* and emptiness is empty and therefore the relationship does not have any intrinsic, inherent essence. Emptiness itself is dependent — dependent on conventional reality, dependent on *pratityasamutpada*. It is emptiness which allows dependent arising and which allows change and which allows ignorance to be eradicated. Hence,

understanding conventional reality to be something other than what it is, is false understanding: nirvana and 'this very place' are one and the same.

The implications of Nagarjuna's teachings are wide-ranging, startling and, at first reading, contradictory, even incomprehensible. For example, if all things are empty, does this mean that emptiness and dependent arising is the Ultimate Truth, in the sense that emptiness is the 'essence' of all things? Not at all. Nagarjuna said that 'everything' is empty. Therefore, emptiness itself must be empty or else emptiness would be the 'essence' of everything and Nagarjuna asserted that there is no 'essence' to anything, even emptiness itself. Madhyamika Buddhism refutes all 'truths' as being but provisional: "One should be empty of all truths and lean on nothing." (Cheng, 1991:46) Emptiness, *pratityasamutpada*, the Four Noble Truths, all of the Tathagata's teachings are just *upaya*; none should be asserted as 'the truth'. As Nagarjuna said, "Empty, non-empty, both, or neither —these should not be declared [as they] are expressed only for the purpose of communication." (quoted in Winters, 1994:133)

So, what does the emptiness of emptiness mean? Where does it lead us? It leads us back to 'conventional' reality. If ultimate reality is itself empty, ultimate reality can be nothing more than conventional reality. The two are identical. The Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra says: "To say this is conventional and this is ultimate is dualistic. To realise that there is no difference between the conventional and the ultimate is to enter the Dharma-door of nonduality." (quoted in Garfield and Priest, 2003) The Heart Sutra, the heart of Zen Buddhism, says the same thing: "Form is emptiness; emptiness is form; form is no different from emptiness; emptiness is no different from form." This links the 'two truths' together; conventional reality and ultimate reality are not different; rather, they are two views of the same thing. Without the emptiness of emptiness, Nagarjuna would be preaching some kind of self-evident ultimate truth and he clearly is not doing that. As he said, "no truth has been taught by a Buddha for anyone, anywhere." However, it is important to point out that nothing Nagarjuna teaches denies the conditional, ordinary world; it is just our clinging to it as an absolute that causes the problem. (MacFarlane, 1995; Cheng, 1991:42; Abe, 1997:99; Schroeder, 2000) Understanding and living in this realization is what many of the Zen koans are about and what the Dharma gate to Zen practice is.

Nagarjuna's dialectic goes to considerable lengths to prove his points. A brief introduction to his thoughts such as this one does little justice to the wide-ranging implications and logic of Nagarjuna. I do hope, however, that there is enough here to look to Nagarjuna's teachings and relate them to Zen practice, for my contention is that we should view Nagarjuna less as a philosopher (although many would see him that way and certainly Western philosophers have expended considerable energy analysing his writings) and more as a teacher.

Nagarjuna was concerned with revealing the nonsense of philosophers who tried to explain ultimate reality through dualism by separating the common world from some other, ultimate, reality. If we approach Nagarjuna's writings simply as a philosophy, we affirm that Zen and Buddhism are nothing more than philosophies — intellectual exercises. They are not. Zen Buddhism is a path to liberation from wrong understanding and suffering. Nagarjuna did not apply his considerable intellect and deep understanding of the nature of things merely to intellectualise about reality. Nagarjuna wrote the Mulamadhyamakakarika to teach us and release us from suffering. He also made it clear that his teachings, and the teachings of the Tathagata, are nothing more than provisional teachings, not some ultimate truth. The truth is to be found in the practice of Buddhism, not in intellectualising or clinging to the teachings.

Nagarjuna and Zen

To see the Mulamadhyamakakarika as a philosophical work would be, in my opinion, to misunderstand Nagarjuna's purpose in writing it. All texts should be approached not only on the basis of what it is that they are conveying, but also, and perhaps more importantly, why they were created in the first place. Nagarjuna created his writings out of great compassion to liberate all beings from ignorance and hence suffering. He certainly was not trying to create a new philosophical view. Quite the contrary, he explicitly denied *sunyata* as a philosophy:

> The emptiness of the conquerors was taught in order to do away with all philosophical views. Therefore it is said that whoever makes a philosophical view out of "emptiness" is indeed lost. (quoted in Huntington, 1989:3)

Zen, like the Madhyamikas, used emptiness, *sunyata*, as a convenient device to lead the ignorant to wisdom rather than as a truth. When Chao-chou (J. Joshu) asked his teacher Nan-ch'uan (J. Nansen) about the Way, he was told "The Way does not belong to knowing or not knowing. To know is to have a concept; to not know is to be ignorant. If you truly realize the Way of no doubt, it is like the sky: wide open and vast emptiness. How can you say 'yes' or 'no' to it?" (Green, 1998:11) When the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng, (J. Daikan Eno) was teaching the Lotus Sutra to Fa-ta, who had been reciting the sutra for seven years yet did not understand it, Hui-neng said, "The mind has nothing to do with thinking, because its fundamental source is empty." (Yampolsky, 1967:166) The Mulamadhyamakakarika (and the old Zen masters) knew that "Right knowledge is not right understanding of some thing, but rather to understand that things are empty." (Cheng, 1991:73) But if one were to think of emptiness as some kind of

substance or essence, then one cannot be cured of the illness of misunderstanding.

Zen also took up the practical application of the Mulamadhyamakakarika principle of 'two truths'. According to both practices, truth is "pragmatic in character" (Cheng, 1991:65) and the truth, therefore, is that which leads to enlightenment and release from suffering. Once suffering and ignorance have been dispensed with, there is no longer any need for 'truth' and it too is abandoned. When Hui-neng beat Shen-hui with a stick and asked him: "Do you feel pain?", Shen-hui replied: "I am both painful and painless." (Cheng, 1991:64) Shen-hui was expressing the two truths of conventional reality (pain) and ultimate reality (pain is empty, as are feelings). It is bringing the two together, the universal and the specific, the 'two truths', that allows one to see the truth of Zen. As Robert Aitken says in the Introduction to the Book of Serenity (J. Shoyo Roku), "To particularize essential nature is to present the harmony of the universal and the specific. … To get at the harmony, it is important not to get lost in the specifics." (Cleary, 1990b:ix) Many Zen koans allow the student to explore the relationship between the universal and the specific, the Ultimate and the conventional, and, thereby, allow one to get lost between the two in the process. For the Zen student, finding a way out of this thicket is the task at hand.

Nagarjuna was following the teachings of the Buddha to relieve suffering. Through the four-fold negation of classical Indian logic, he was attempting to do away with all forms of clinging, including clinging to his views. So the Mulamadhyamakakarika should not be seen as some 'path to liberation' but rather a teaching of the importance of abandoning all views. Liberation from suffering does not depend on some kind of philosophical speculation. As John Schroeder (2000) puts it in his paper "Nagarjuna and the Doctrine of 'Skillful Means'", "*sunyata* is not a panacea at all, but an attack on the very tendency to think in this way." One of the most significant teachings of the Buddha was non-attachment and should one become attached to any philosophy, even non-attachment, dependent arising or emptiness, is to go against the teachings and live in ignorance. All great Zen teachers taught this using whatever was appropriate for the circumstances and the student in front of them. This is called *upaya*, or 'skillful means'.

When Bodhidharma described his teaching as, "A special transmission outside the scriptures; not founded upon words and letters; by pointing directly to man's own mind, it lets him see into his own true nature and thus attain Buddhahood," (Miura & Sasaki, 1965:54) he was pointing at this reality of Zen that sees ignorance in attachment, even to the teachings. This does not deny the value of the teachings, just the attachment to the teachings. So Lin-chi (J. Rinzai) can say, "There is nothing to appear before you, and nothing that is lost. Even if

there were something, it would all be names, words, phrases, medicine to apply to the ills of little children to placate them, words dealing with mere surface matters." (Watson, 1993:72) To truly understand the teachings, to truly transform ignorance into wisdom, one must go below "mere surface matters", and this is done through practice, through zazen, through the face-to-face confrontation between teacher and student. Only then can non-duality and attachment to wrong views be overcome. This is what Nagarjuna is attempting to show.

Chang Chung-Yuan (1969) in his excellent book "Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism" claims, "The Madhyamika maintains that when all particular existence is reduced to sunyata, or Emptiness, by the dialectic process of negation of negation, Supreme Enlightenment takes place and *prajnaparamita*, or "non-dual knowledge," is fulfilled." (p.4) Given that Nagarjuna "taught in order to do away with all philosophical views" this seems like an unlikely purpose to Nagarjuna's works although this was taken up by the Sun-lun school in China, a school which soon faded away. It was Kumarajiva who, at the end of the fourth century, brought the Madhyamika to China and it was Niu-t'ou Fa-yung who was one its greatest teachers. But Lin-chi's teacher, Hung-po, (J. Obaku) said of Fa-yung, "he still did not know the secret of making the further leap to the Ultimate," (Chung-Yuan, 1969:9) denying that Fa-yung had penetrated the depths of Ch'an or even that one could do so through logical argumentation. Yet Tao-Sheng, another of Kumarajiva's disciples, is called by some the "actual founder of Ch'an". (Dumoulin, 1994:74) He was steeped not only in Madhyamika teachings but also advocated 'sudden enlightenment', claiming gradual enlightenment as a "metaphysical absurdity." (*ibid*, p.75) Chung-Yuan (1969:9) points out the fallacy of depending on logical speculation when he states, "Man's mind can be opened up no more by mere reasoning or philosophical speculation than by the conscious search for sunyata." Given that Nagarjuna fought against all forms of grasping, including grasping his own works as an ultimate truth, the idea that the Madhyamika itself could lead to liberation or was anything other than *upaya* would be an anathema to him.

Nagarjuna was careful to deny that he was creating any kind of philosophy or metaphysical theory, stating "I have no proposition".[4] Schroeder (2000) reminds us that the Mulamadhyamakakarika "is an attack on traditional Buddhism" which was sinking into philosophical argumentation and becoming attached to these arguments, each saying that they represented the highest wisdom of the Buddha. Huntington (1989:29) suggests that the Mulamadhyamakakarika "be read as a radical attempt at abandoning the obsession with a metaphysical

[4] Hayes sees this term, "pratijina", as meaning "one is not going to argue with someone else in a competitive way" thereby not marring "the potential beauty of life through unnecessary disputation" rather than "no proposition", i.e., "I'm not proposing anything at all."

absolute that dominated the religious and philosophical thought of post-Upanisadic India." Differing viewpoints may well be relatively innocuous but it is the blind grasping of the views that leads to ignorance. Nagarjuna was trying to release people from this grasping of viewpoints by pointing out that all things are, without exception, empty and this includes causality, the Four Noble Truths, the Dharma, and Buddhism itself. This is Nagarjuna's good medicine to overcome the sickness of attachments and erroneous views.

Likewise, Zen teachers try to undercut a student's attachment to discursive logic and attachment to the 'words and letters' of the teachings. As Yun-yen T'an-sheng (J. Ungan Donjo) (and many others) said, "The basic point of Zen study is to clarify the mind and awaken to reality." (Cleary,1990:161) One cannot "clarify the mind" if one is attached to a particular teaching or a rigid view. Only by jettisoning the deeply ingrained tendency to search for some 'essential' nature to things and to our life, can we find liberation and "awaken to reality". This obsessive delusion we have in thinking that we are dealing with 'an existing substance' is ignorance as all we really have is "a construction of our minds." (Chinn, 2001) How to teach this is a problem for all Zen teachers and has led to a mountain of words and letters, metaphors and seemingly illogical constructs coming from the mouths of teachers over the millennia.

All Zen teachings can be seen as nothing more than *upaya*, expedient or skillful means. Buddhist teaching is nothing more than that — a method to overcome deeply ingrained ignorance. The Buddha himself used the metaphor of a raft for his teachings, something to get one to the other shore (wisdom and release from suffering) but which should then be abandoned. *Upaya* is building a raft that is suitable for a particular person, a particular 'sickness'. Ma-tsu (J. Baso doitsu) expressed this when asked by Yuen-shan Wei-Yen to explain how Zen can point directly to the human mind to see its essence and realise buddhahood. Ma-tsu replied: "Sometimes I make 'him' raise his eyebrows and blink his eyes; sometimes I don't make 'him' raise his eyebrows and blink his eyes. Sometimes raising the eyebrows and blinking the eyes is right; sometimes raising the eyebrows and blinking the eyes is not right. What about you?" (Cleary, 1990:155) Lin-chi could "see through them [students] all", never worrying "whether on the outside they are common mortals or sages, or get[ting] bogged down in the kind of basic nature they have inside." (Watson, 1993:30) This insight gave him the freedom to treat each sickness as he saw it and one of the greatest sicknesses he battled was the sickness of attachment to the teachings. Hence he said, "I don't have a particle of Dharma to give to anyone. All I have is cure for sickness, freedom from bondage." (*ibid*, p.53) He rails against students who "seize on words and form their understanding on that basis." (*ibid*, p.61) Nagarjuna would approve.

Yet words and language[5] are often what we are dependent upon to convey meaning. Certainly Nagarjuna's dialectic is dependent upon words. He constructs a sword of words in his attempt to cut us free from the limits of our thoughts and beliefs. Likewise, Dogen's "Shobogenzo" often relies on word-play and metaphorical language to teach the truth of non-attachment to the very words being used. The old masters, when they found that words were leading to attachment, when the words were becoming more important than the experience they were trying to convey, resorted to striking, shouting, or direct action, such as Chao-chou putting a sandal on his head or Kuei-shan (J. Isan Reiyu) kicking over the water jug (both from the Wu-men Kuan; J. Mumonkan). Just as 'conventional' reality cannot be separated from 'ultimate' reality, so language cannot be separated from the experience of our world. As Chinn (2001) points out, "the existence of the world is just as dependent on language as the language that we use is dependent on the world." Furthermore, he continues, "The implication of *pratityasamutpada* is that our language, like anything in the world, is shaped by the environment we live in, and that our language cannot be 'out of touch with reality' any more than we can." Nagarjuna, like all Zen teachers, draws us back to this real, mundane, human world which is none other than nirvana, through his use of language. We live in this world of *samsara*, of suffering, deception, ignorance and Zen does not deny it nor attempt to escape it. When Chao Chu was asked, "In the day there is sunlight, at night there is firelight. What is 'divine light'?" Chao Chu replied, "Sunlight, firelight." (Green, 1998:99) The divine and the mundane are one and the same. Nor does Zen attempt to transcend language per se, but to "reorient within it," (Loy, 1999) to become fluent in expression without dualisms or attachment to the words. *Gonsen* koans are designed to study and investigate the meaning of words, to penetrate "into the innermost meaning of words and phrases". (Miura & Sasaki, 1965:52) Hence, Dogen cries out in the Sansuikyo ("Mountains and Waters Sutra) fascicle, "How sad that they do not know about the phrases of logical thought, or penetrating logical thought in the phrases and stories." (Tanahashi, 1988:100-101) Words can liberate or they can bind. When Chao-chou was asked "What is the one word?", he replied, "If you hold on to one word it will make an old man of you." (Green, 1998:20) Nagarjuna's words were designed to liberate but not all who read them can penetrate their subtle meaning or their mystery. All too often Nagarjuna's words, like the Zen masters' words, are taken as an Ultimate Truth instead of as *upaya*.

Nagarjuna expounded the Buddha's teaching through the logic of the India of his time. Through the process of *reductio ad absurdum* he negated all truths without affirming any truth. By affirming that all things are empty, he was able to negate both existence and non-existence without contradiction. The great Sun-lun

[5] See Wright on this topic

master, Chi-tsang wrote, "Originally there was nothing to affirm and there is not now anything to negate." (quoted in Cheng, 1991:47) The influence of Madhyamika thought on Zen becomes obvious when one remembers the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng wrote:

> There is no Bodhi-tree
> Nor stand of mirror bright
> Since all is void,
> Where can the dust alight?
> (Suzuki, 1956:157)

Zen eschews all philosophical speculation and is often but a practical application of *pratityasamutpada, sunyata* and the two truths. (Cheng, 1991:56) It is this practical application that may make Zen appear illogical or irrational to the uninitiated. Dogen railed against this categorization of Zen as illogical, lashing out "The illogical stories mentioned by you bald-headed fellows are only illogical for you, not for buddha ancestors." (Tanahashi, 1988:100) Zen's adoption of *sunyata* as a soteriological device negates all intellectual speculation and places the emphasis on the practical aspects of achieving enlightenment and liberation. At first, this seems quite different from Nagarjuna's dialectical approach and it is indeed different. But the difference is only in the methodology, the *upaya*, not in the purpose. Both Nagarjuna and the old Zen masters were after the same goal: a method of awakening the ignorant and the suffering to the truth of Buddhism. The methods may have been different, but the purposes were identical. Zen Buddhism took up Nagarjuna's dialectic and turned it into a dynamic and forceful teaching that brought many to truth and the ending of suffering.

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