

Notes on Nagarjuna

I. Nagarjuna on his own terms

1. Life

Lived in South India, 1st or 2nd century CE.

Buddhist monk.

First practiced Hinayana, then converted to Mahayana.

That's all we know.

2. Influence

Vast.

Extensive commentaries on the *Prajnaparamita Sutras*; his commentaries are why they are central to Mahayana Buddhism, and why so many Mahayana Buddhists regularly chant the *Heart Sutra*.

Climactic work the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* (*Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*), which is the foundation of Madhyamika (middle path) Buddhism.¹

Essentially every Mahayana school is rooted in some aspect of his work. He is the 14th Zen ancestor. He is regarded as a saint in Vajrayana Buddhism.

Wrote popular works as well: for rulers, for laypeople...

Local hero (like Hui Neng in South China); a 20th century dam in South India is named after him, and the main training school for contemporary Indian Dalit Buddhists is named after him.

3. The *Mulamadhyamakakarika* in four tweets

a. Everything is empty, including emptiness.

b. The phenomenal/relative/conventional world consists solely of relationship/dependent co-origination — but not between *things* (see point a.).

c. The noumenal/absolute/ultimate world = the phenomenal/relative/conventional world

d. Nirvana = samsara (not quite the same as point c.).

4. Method

Two parts: the four propositions; the 100 negations² (recall case 25 of the *Mumokan*: the monk of the third seat).

¹ All of our quotes are from Jay Garfield's translation, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*.

² Only 100?

5. The four propositions

Form A:

1. X exists.
2. X does not exist.
3. X neither exists nor does not exist.
4. X both exists and does not exist.³

Form B:

1. X is Y; Y is X.
2. X is not Y; Y is not X.
3. No X; no Y.
4. X is X; Y is Y.⁴

There are other forms as well.

The main point is: *To assert any of these propositions is to fall into error.*

A relevant quotes from the *Mulamadhyaamakakarika*:

“Empty” should not be asserted.

“Nonempty” should not be asserted.

Neither both nor neither should be asserted.

They are only used nominally.⁵

And an unusual positive quote:

Everything is real and is not real,

Both real and not real,

Neither real nor nor real.

This is Lord Buddha’s teaching.⁶

6. Explicating the four tweets

a. Empty = empty of essence/substance/self-nature. I.e., the philosophical stance called essentialism is false; reification is incorrect.

b. Point a. does not mean that nothing exists. I.e., the philosophical stance called nihilism is false.

c. By point a., the noumenal/absolute/ultimate is impossible outside the phenomenal/relative/conventional.

d. Nirvana = seeing things as they are (i.e., points a. and b.); it is not out there somewhere away from conventional reality.

³ In western logic #3 and #4 are equivalent, but ancient Indian logic was more sophisticated (for those inclined towards technical philosophy: western logic is extensional; Indian logic intentional).

⁴ #1, 3, 4 of form B are often used in formal dharma talks.

⁵ Chapter 22 *Examination of the Tathagata*, verse 11

⁶ Chapter 18 *Examination of Self and Entities*, verse 8

Points a. + b. are why Nagarjuna's approach is called the Madhyamika, or Middle Path/Way. "Middle way" here is something very specific: the middle way between essentialism and nihilism.

*Relevant quotes from the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*.*

For a. + b.:

Those who see essence and essential difference
And entities and nonentities,
They do not see
The truth taught by the Buddha...

To say "it is" is to grasp for permanence.
To say "it is not" is to adopt the view of nihilism.
Therefore a wise person
Does not say "exists" or "does not exist."⁷

For c.:

The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
Is based on two truths:
A truth of worldly convention
And an ultimate truth.

Those who do not understand
The distinction drawn between these two truths
Do not understand
The Buddha's profound truth.

Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,
Liberation is not achieved.⁸

For d.:

There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence and nirvana.
There is not the slightest difference
Between nirvana and cyclic existence.⁹

⁷ Chapter 15 *Examination of Essence*, verses 7 and 10.

⁸ Chapter 24 *Examination of the Four Noble Truths*, verses 8, 9 10.

⁹ Chapter 25 *Examination of Nirvana*, verse 19.

7. Relinquishing views

To assert any proposition as an absolute truth is to fall into error.

Or, as the last stanza of the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* puts it:

I prostrate to Gautama
Who through compassion
Taught the true doctrine,
Which leads to the relinquishing of all views.¹⁰

II. Nagarjuna and Zen

1. Nagarjuna ≠ Zen

In particular, much teaching that is essential to Zen is missing from Nagarjuna:

- a. Mind/substance/true nature/etc.
- b. Focus on practice — in fact, meditation is only mentioned a few times in passing.
- c. Stories (which are a major technique in transmitting Zen teaching).
- d. Function.

However, Nagarjuna did have a strong influence on Zen, and one can even make a credible claim that it is Zen which truly exemplifies certain aspects of Nagarjuna's teaching.

2. Comparison of the start of the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* and So Sahn's *Mirror of Zen*

Mulamadhyamakakarika:

I prostrate to the Perfect Buddha,
The best of teachers, who taught that
Whatever is dependently arisen¹¹ is
Unceasing, unborn,
Unannihilated, not permanent,
Not coming, not going,
Without distinction, without identity,
And free from conceptual construction.

Mirror of Zen:

There is only one thing, from the very beginning, infinitely bright
and mysterious by nature.

It was never born, and it never dies. It cannot be described or
given a name.

¹⁰ Chapter 27 *Examination of Views*, verse 30.

¹¹ I.e., everything.

2. Intense skepticism about teaching, language, theories

from the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*:

No Dharma was taught by the Buddha
At any time, in any place, to any person.¹²

from the *Lin Chi Record*:

If you meet the Buddha, kill him.

from the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*:

Therefore, think about form, but
Do not construct theories about form.¹³

from the *Mulamadyamakakarika*:

What language expresses is nonexistent.
The sphere of thought is nonexistent.¹⁴

from the *Mumonkan*:

Words cannot speak truth...
He who attaches to sentences is lost.

4. Kong-ans

In some sense, the negation of the four propositions is the fundamental stance of kong-ans.

Example: the introduction to the third case (Master Ma is Unwell) of the *Blue Cliff Record*:

This way will do, not this way will do, too. This is too diffuse. This
way won't do, not this way won't do either. This is too cut off.

Example: from the *Transmission of the Lamp*:

[Shi-t'ou responding to Yao-shan's request about realizing true nature]
This way won't do; not this way won't do. Both this way and not this
way won't do either. How about you?

Example: Joju's dog

¹² Chapter 25 *Examination of Nirvana*, verse 24.

¹³ Chapter 4 *Examination of the Aggregates*, verse 5.

¹⁴ Chapter 18 *Examination of Self and Entities*, verse 7

5. Slippage

Given dependent co-origination, nothing is fixed, things slide into each other.

Example: from the *Blue Cliff Record*:

“Bring me the rhinoceros fan!”

“The fan is broken.”

“Then bring me the rhinoceros!”

6. Absolute = relative

Shi-tou’s *Sandokai*, whose English titles are all along the lines of *The Identity of the Relative and the Absolute*

“What is Buddha? Dry shit on a stick.” and many more such kong-ans

7. Emphasis on emptiness

This is common to all Mahayana schools, but Zen emphasizes it more than most; sometimes it even seems to be a fundamental essence,¹⁵ sometimes the discussion seems straight out of Nagarjuna:

from Ta-hui’s *Swampland Flowers*:

Existence cannot be grasped; nonexistence cannot be grasped either. Winter’s cold and summer’s heat cannot be grasped; inside, outside, and in between cannot be grasped. The one who speaks like this cannot be grasped; the one who hears such talk cannot be grasped either. Not even a fine hair can be grasped. Neither you nor I can be grasped. Ungraspability itself also cannot be grasped... Basically things have no inherent nature...

8. Middle way

A quotation from the great Korean teacher Chinul:

When the deluded mind is present in existence, it is attached to existence; when it is present in nonexistence, it is attached to nonexistence. It is constantly caught in one of these two extremes and is never aware of the middle path.¹⁶

A quotation from So Sahn’s *Mirror of Zen*:

It is therefore extremely important that you abandon the view that things do or do not exist...¹⁷

¹⁵ Thus asserting Zen’s independence from Nagarjuna...

¹⁶ from *Tracing Back the Radiance: Chinul’s Korean Way of Zen*, Robert Buswell, p. 139

¹⁷ p. 21

9. Non-piety

In particular, both Nagarjuna and Zen stand outside standard “sutra” teaching¹⁸ based on karma, e.g. if you do this you get that.

from So Sahn’s *Mirror of Zen*:

If you know that the arising thought is itself unreal delusion, you are already free. What need is there for employing skillful means?¹⁹

by Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman)

¹⁸ A misnomer, since in fact many Mahayana sutras do not support this kind of piety, but a misnomer with a very long history.

¹⁹ p. 51

III. Sample: Chapter 13 *Example of Compounded Phenomena*

[This is essentially Garfield's translation, but I have substituted *Blessed One(s)*, from the Sanskrit, for Garfield's *Victorious One(s)*, from the Tibetan, and have italicized the words spoken by the interlocutor/challenger/opponent.]

The Blessed One has said that whatever
Is deceptive is false.
Compounded phenomena are all deceptive.
Therefore they are all false.

*If whatever is deceptive is false,
What deceives?*

The Blessed One has said about this
That emptiness is completely true.

All things lack entitihood,
Since change is perceived.
There is nothing without entity
Because all things have emptiness.

*If there is no entitihood,
What changes?*

If there were entity,
How could it be correct that something
changes?

A thing itself does not change.
Something different does not change.
Because a young man doesn't grow old,
And because an old man doesn't grow old
either.

If a thing itself changed,
Milk itself would be curd.
Or curd would have come to be
An entity different from milk.

If there were even a trifle nonempty,
Emptiness itself would be but a trifle.
But not even a trifle is nonempty.
How could emptiness be an entity?

The blessed ones have said
That emptiness is the relinquishing of all
views.
For whomever emptiness is a view,
That one will accomplish nothing.

Brief discussion: This gives a good idea of Nagarjuna's method of undercutting our standard half-conscious way of looking at the world. The key is what happens in verse 4. The interlocutor, knowing that change is the only constant of existence, challenges Nagarjuna by asking how, if he does not believe entities exist, he accounts for change. And Nagarjuna turns this on its head: if the standard view that entities existed were true, then change could never happen. He then goes on to give examples to make his point, and finishes by pointing beyond the point he is making.