

Contingency

Excerpts From *Verses From The Center: A Buddhist Vision of the Sublime* by Stephen Batchelor A Commentary and Translation of Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika*

The key to Nagarjuna's *Verses from the Center* lies in his understanding of emptiness as inseparable from the utter contingency of life itself. To recognize that things are contingent is the key to understanding what it means for them to be empty. Moreover, the emptiness experienced by easing one's obsessive hold on a fixed self or on things is declared by Nagarjuna to be the Buddha's middle way:

*Contingency is emptiness
Which, contingently configured,
Is the middle way.
From "Awakening"*

Emptiness is not a *state* but a *way*. Not only is it inseparable from the world of contingencies, it too is "contingently configured." To experience emptiness is not a descent into an abyss of nothingness nor an ascent into a separate realm. It is a recovery of the freedom to configure oneself as an intentional, unimpeded trajectory through the shifting, ambiguous sands of life. To recognize this emptiness is not a negation of life: it gives us a glimpse of what enables anything to happen at all.

*When emptiness is possible,
Everything is possible;
Were emptiness impossible,
Nothing would be possible.
From "Awakening"*

Emptiness is a way of talking about the sublime depth, mystery and contingency that are revealed as one probes beneath the surface of anything that seems to exist in self-sufficient isolation. Emptiness is the untraceability of any such isolated thing. Yet for something to be empty does not imply that there is nothing there at all. "Were there a trace of something," says Nagarjuna,

*There would be a trace of emptiness.
Were there no trace of anything,
There would be no trace of emptiness.
From "Change"*

To understand emptiness does not mean that "emptiness" becomes a discrete "object" of a "consciousness." Emptiness is experienced as the letting go of fixed ideas about oneself and the world:

*Buddhas say emptiness
Is relinquishing opinions.
Believers in emptiness
Are incurable.
From "Change"*

One can become fixated on emptiness as easily as on anything else. In doing so, what is intended to stop fixations becomes an insidious form of entrapment. To symbolize this, Nagarjuna compares emptiness to a poisonous snake: a dangerous but fascinating creature that elegantly negotiates the trickiest terrain. While a handler knows exactly how to pick it up, one who does not will be bitten and killed.

Running through the verses is an urgency that reveals Nagarjuna's determination to ease the existential and linguistic fixations that keep one locked in repetitive cycles of anguish. He pulls the comfortable rug of common sense from beneath one's feet, short-circuiting the habits of the mind, leaving nothing to hold on to. Instead of offering the consolation of belief, he holds out the tantalizing possibility of freedom.

Nagarjuna is not interested in simply reiterating the Buddha's discourses of offering formulaic reinterpretations of orthodox doctrines. He acknowledges his debt to tradition while speaking in a voice that departs from its stylistic conventions. A playful and provocative tone runs through his text. The verses embody the movement of a supple but disquieting intelligence, which constantly has to sidestep the logical traps of the language Nagarjuna cannot help but use. His awareness of the contingency of "self" and "other," "something" and "nothing," is expressed in a voice that is quixotic and inquisitive, dramatic and tentative, always poised to surprise:

*Believers believe in buddhas
Who vanish in nirvana.
Don't imagine empty buddhas
Vanishing or not.
From "Buddhanature"*

Nagarjuna has relatively little to say *about* emptiness. Each poem is an attempt to *disclose* emptiness through the play of language; poetry works not by describing its subject with detached objectivity from without, but by imaginatively entering its subject so as to disclose it from within. As a poet, Nagarjuna gives voice to the freedom of emptiness *from within*. He is not interested in confirming what is safe and familiar, but in exploring what is unsettling and strange; the letting go of fixed opinions about oneself and the world can be both frightening and compelling. Although such emptiness may seem an intolerable affront to one's sense of identity and security, it may simultaneously be felt as an irresistible lure into a life that is awesome and mysterious.

Nagarjuna understands life as the sublime unfolding of a complex array of conditions, all of which emerge contingently:

*Seeds turn into plants that bear fruit.
Motives turn into minds that bear fruit.
Seeds are neither severed from
Nor forever fused with fruits of plants,
Motives are neither severed from
Nor forever fused with fruits of mind.
From "Acts"*

Causes, whether seeds or motives, appear to be distinct from their effects. Not only can they be separated by long stretches of time, they seem to be different *things*: the acorn that gave birth to the oak is in no way comparable to the great tree that stands where the acorn was planted two hundred years ago. By paying attention to the sprouting of an acorn and its transformation into a full-grown tree, we realize there is no point at which the acorn stopped and the oak tree began. Nagarjuna is suspicious of clear-cut "things" such as "seeds" and "plants" as well as language that talks of them as "forever fused with" or "severed from" each other. Mindful awareness of living processes explodes the myth of things (and nothings) to reveal a world that is irreducible to the conceptual and linguistic images we use to describe it.

Seen in this light, each moment of experience emerges from and within a seamless continuum of conditions. This is not only true of seeds and plants but of the awareness of them as well:

*Just as a child is born
From father and mother,
So consciousness springs
From eyes and colorful shapes.
From "Seeing"*

One might intuitively believe “consciousness,” the most private and enduring feature of one’s self, to be more “real” than the passing phenomena of which it is aware. Consciousness feels like a solitary witness, already there within us, lying in wait for things to appear. For Nagarjuna, this is but a convenient illusion. Consciousness is meaningless unless it is conscious of something; it is inextricable from the sense organs and objects that enable it to take place; it is as contingent and ephemeral as the flickering displays of colors and shapes it beholds.

Such reflections lead Nagarjuna to the contingency of human suffering. No matter how real anxiety or depression feel when we are gripped by them, they too can be seen to emerge from a complex set of conditions:

*Blocked by confusion,
I forge a destiny through impulsive acts.
Consciously I enter situations
Where personality unfolds
And world impacts on a sensitive soul.
From “Contingency”*

The confusion that “blocks” is that instinctive denial of contingency which simultaneously insists on the presence of a non-contingent self. This creates opposition to an unstable world outside that entices, frightens or bores us. Such responses in turn lead to obsessions with things we crave to have or avoid. The craving crystallizes into clinging to sensual experiences, opinions, rules and selves. Each step further reinforces the pattern of self-obsessively trying to freeze and control reality. “Clinging,” says Nagarjuna, “is to insist on being someone.”

Contingency

*Blocked by confusion,
I forge a destiny through impulsive acts.
Consciously I enter situations
Where personality unfolds
And world impacts on a sensitive soul.*

*Personality creates consciousness
Just as attention,
The eye and a colorful shape
Trigger vision.*

*Impact is the meeting
Of consciousness, senses and world.
It leads to experience
I crave to have and avoid,
Craving makes me cling
At senses, opinions, rules and selves.*

*Clinging is to insist on being someone –
Not to cling is to be free to be no one.*

*To be someone is to be a conscious,
Impulsive, thinking, feeling body,
Which is born, ages, dies,
Suffers torment, grief, pain,
Depression and anxiety.
Anguish emerges when someone is born.*

*Impulsive acts are the root of life.
Fools are impulsive;
The wise see things as they are.
When confusion stops through insight,
Impulsive acts cease.
Stop this and that will not happen:
Anguish will end.*

Change

*If something has an essence –
How can it ever change
Into anything else?*

*A thing doesn't change into something else –
Youth does not age,
Age does not age.*

*If something changed into something else –
Milk would be butter
Or butter would not be milk.*

*Were there a trace of something,
There would be a trace of emptiness.
Were there no trace of anything,
There would be no trace of emptiness.*

*Buddhas say emptiness
Is relinquishing opinions.
Believers in emptiness
Are incurable.*

Conditions

*Nothing comes from itself
Or something else
Or both together
Or without a cause.*

*The essence of a thing
Is never to be found
In causes and precursors,
Consciousness or objects –
For if a thing is not itself,
How can it be something else?*

*I too did not appear
Either with conditions
Or without them:
They became my conditions*

*Only when I sprang from them,
Not before.*

*Whether I am there or not,
Conditions are impossible –
For in my absence,
Whose conditions would they be?
And in my presence,
What purpose would they serve?*

*You cannot say:
“When this is present, that happens” –
For the presence of an inessential thing
Is never to be found.*

*How can conditions cause
Something unconnected to them?
Why could I not have been born
From causes that were not my conditions?*

*How could my nature be conditioned
When conditions have no nature of their own?
How could it ever be my nature
To be without conditions?*