

Introduction, Awakening, Nirvana

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

Introduction

I [Stephen Batchelor] have written this book in order to elucidate the vision of the great Buddhist teacher Nagarjuna. Although Nagarjuna is arguably the most important figure in Buddhism after the Buddha himself, very little is known about him. All that can be said with any certainty is that he lived at some time around the second century C.E. in India and is the author of a Sanskrit work of 448 verses, divided into twenty-seven chapters, entitled *Verses from the Center (Mulamadhyamakakarika)*. Yet while Nagarjuna continues to be revered today as a founding figure of many living Buddhist traditions, his seminal work is almost entirely ignored.

I have sought to translate *Verses from the Center* in such a way as to make Nagarjuna's insight come alive for anyone concerned with the question of what it means to live a free and awake life today. Instead of regarding the text as a work of Buddhist doctrine or philosophy – as is generally the case in studies of Nagarjuna – I treat it in the spirit of a Zen koan, which provokes intuitions of the sublime by forcibly challenging entrenched opinions about ourselves and the world.

Awakening & Nirvana

If Nagarjuna is the poet of emptiness, Gautama, the Buddha, was its prophet. For the first five hundred years after his death, the Buddha was remembered as an emptiness. In the fragments of stone friezes that survive from the time, he is represented by an empty seat, a tree with no one beneath it, a pair of footprints, or the wheel of dharma that he set turning. While alive, he referred to himself as the *Tathagata*, the "One Thus Gone." It was not until the Greek settlers in India converted to Buddhism shortly before the time of Nagarjuna that Gautama was first personified, in the form of the god Apollo.

The Buddha describes emptiness as the "abode of a great person." Rather than something to understand, emptiness is a condition in which one aspires to live. Gautama encourages his monks not only to liberate the mind through emptiness in a quiet forest, but also to dwell in emptiness when wandering through villages in search of alms. Living in emptiness is equivalent to following the path to awakening itself. It not only entails letting go of craving and confusion, but cultivating awareness of and insight into the nature of one's self and one's world. Emptiness is a metaphor for authenticity.

To dwell in emptiness means living with the ambiguous and non-dualistic nature of life. This is clear from the Buddha's response to the questions of Katyayana:

"Katyayana, everyday experience relies on the duality of 'it is' and 'it is not.' But for one who.....perceives how the things of the world arise and pass away, for him, there is no 'it is' and no 'it is not.' 'Everything exists' is simply one extreme, Katyayana, and 'nothing exists' is the other extreme. The Tathagata relies on neither of these two extremes; he teaches the dharma as a middle way."

To distinguish between the ineffable depths of the Buddha's dharma and its formulation in words and doctrines, Nagarjuna introduces the notion of two truths. He describes the wordless, silent depth as sublime truth, while recognizing that any expression of it can only ever be a partial truth. For Nagarjuna, this distinction between sublime and partial truths is crucial in making sense of what the Buddha taught. For

*Without knowing how they differ,
You cannot know the deep;
Without relying on conventions,
You cannot disclose the sublime;
Without intuiting the sublime,
You cannot experience freedom.*

From "Awakening"

Although the Buddha used terms such as "deathless," "timeless" and "unborn" to suggest the sublime, such descriptions are inescapably partial and inadequate. No matter how refined and evocative such formulations may sound, they are simply metaphors drawn from one's knowledge of death, time and birth juxtaposed with one's notion of absence. Even the term "emptiness" is a metaphor taken from one's experience of such things as empty bottles, empty rooms and empty spaces. Nagarjuna is nonetheless aware that without resorting to language, the Buddha could not have communicated his discovery of freedom at all.

While Nagarjuna is conscious of the inadequacy of any word or phrase in denoting the sublime, his own term of choice is "emptiness." The use of such a bleak and uninviting word is perhaps a deliberate ploy to preempt the tendency to picture the sublime as anything. Although later Buddhist philosophers provided exact definitions of emptiness, Nagarjuna's own use of the term throughout *Verses from the Center* is imprecise. He prefers allusive imagery to rational precision, logical games to tightly argued syllogisms, provocative suggestions to clear-cut instructions.

As soon as it is suggested that the sublime is incapable of being adequately represented by words and images, the temptation arises to imagine it as something utterly incommensurable with the mundane unfolding of ordinary life. Nagarjuna emphatically resists this urge to reify emptiness, nirvana or freedom into something transcendent or wholly other:

*Life is no different from nirvana,
Nirvana no different than life.
Life's horizons are nirvana's:
The two are exactly the same.
From "Nirvana"*

The sublime may be beyond the grasp of concepts or language, but it is only ever encountered deep within the pulsing heart of what is happening here and now.

Awakening

*The dharma taught by buddhas
Hinges on two truths:
Partial truths of the world
And truths which are sublime.
Without knowing how they differ,
You cannot know the deep;
Without relying on conventions,
You cannot disclose the sublime;
Without intuiting the sublime,
You cannot experience freedom.*

*Misperceiving emptiness
Injures the unintelligent
Like mishandling a snake
Or miscasting a spell.*

*The Buddha despaired
Of teaching the dharma,
Knowing it hard
To intuit its depths.*

*Your muddled conclusions
Do not affect emptiness;
Your denial of emptiness
Does not affect me.*

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

*In projecting your faults onto me,
You forget the horse you are riding.*

*To see things existing by nature,
Is to see them without
Causes or conditions,
Thus subverting causality,
Agents, tools and acts,
Starting, stopping and ripening.*

*Contingency is emptiness
Which, contingently configured,
Is the middle way.
Everything is contingent;
Everything is empty.*

*Were everything not empty,
There would be no rising and passing.
Ennobling truths would not exist.
Without contingency
How could I suffer pain?*

*This shifting anguish
Has no nature of its own;
If it did, how could it have a cause?
Deny emptiness and you deny
The origins of suffering.*

*If anguish existed by nature,
How would it ever cease?
Absolute misery could never stop.
How could you cultivate a path
That exists by nature?
How could it lead to the end of pain?
A path on which you tread
Can have no essence of its own.*

*If confusion existed by nature,
I would always be confused.
How could I know anything?
Letting go and realizing,
Cultivation and fruition*

Could never happen.

*Who can attain absolute goals
That by nature are unattainable?
Since no one could reach them,
There would be no community;
With no truths, no dharma either.
With no community or dharma
How could I awaken?
I would not depend on awakening
Nor awakening on me.*

*A naturally unawakened person
Would never awaken
No matter how hard
He practiced for its sake.
He would never do good or evil;
An unempty person would do nothing.
He'd experience fruits of good and evil
Without having done good or evil deeds.
How can fruits of good and evil not be empty
If they are experienced?*

*To subvert emptiness and contingency
Is to subvert conventions of the world.
It engenders passivity:
Acts without an author,
Authors who do not act.
Beings would not be born or die;
They would be frozen in time,
Alien to variety.*

*If things were unempty,
You could attain nothing.
Anguish would never end.
You would never let go of compulsive acts.*

*To see contingency is to see
Anguish, its origins, cessation and the path.*

Nirvana

*Were everything not empty,
Nothing would happen.
Nirvana would be a letting go
And stopping of what?*

*Nothing let go of, nothing attained,
Nothing annihilated, nothing eternal,
Unceasing and unborn –
That is nirvana.*

*If it were something,
Nirvana would be contingent
And would wither and die
Like all other things.*

*Can nirvana be nothing?
Not to be something
Does not mean to be nothing.
Were nirvana nothing,
It would be contingent
Like all other nothings.*

*Things are created and contingent;
Nirvana is neither:
The letting go of what rises and passes
Is neither something nor nothing.*

*Were nirvana both something and nothing,
Things and nothings would be free
Or nirvana would be as contingent as they:
Darkness and light cannot be one.*

*Can I experience nirvana
As neither something nor nothing?
This would be possible
Only if something or nothing were.*

*After the Buddha died,
He was not seen as existing or not.
Even when he lived
He was not seen as such.*

*Life is no different from nirvana,
Nirvana no different than life.
Life's horizons are nirvana's:
The two are exactly the same.*

*Visions of the beyond,
Of eternity, annihilation
Depend on how you see
Nirvana, the past and the future.*

*What finitude in empty things?
What infinity?
What this? What else?
What stays? What changes?*

*The dissolving of objects
And easing of fixations is peace.
The Buddha never taught
Anyone anything.*

Buddhanature

*It's not physical, emotional,
Conceptual, impulsive, conscious –
Or anything else.
It does not dwell in us
Nor we in it.
It does not own us.*

*If it depended on us
Or on anything else,
It would not be in itself.
How could it be anything but itself?
Could what is not itself
Be buddhanature?*

*What is it apart from itself
Or something else?
Is it independent of body, feeling, thought,
Impulse or consciousness?
It depends on them now
And is set to continue.*

*Can you say that
Buddhanature is "contingent"
When what is depended on
And what depends are empty?*

*Can you say that
Buddhanature is "empty"
When "empty" and "not empty"
Are mere ciphers?*

*Fixed ideas of permanence
And transience,
Finitude and infinity,
Have no place when all is well.*

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

*When transfixed
On what's unwavering
Beyond fixation's range,
You see no buddhanature.*

*Buddhanature
Is the nature of this world.
Buddhanature has no nature,
Nor does this world.*