

Self

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

As a young man, the Buddha was driven to find a response to the existential questions of birth, sickness, aging, and death. This quest culminated in an awakening that revealed to him how human anguish is rooted in confusion and craving. The teachings he gave for the remaining forty years of his life describe in detail a path that avoids the extremes of sensory indulgence and ascetic mortification while engaging every dimension of human life. The central concern of the path is to realize freedom from the confusion and craving that generates anguish. To suggest the way to such sublime freedom, the Buddha spoke of "emptiness."

In reply to the question, "What is liberation of mind through emptiness?," an early Buddhist discourse describes how

A monk gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, reflects: "This is empty of a self or what belongs to a self." This is the liberation of mind through emptiness.

Just as nature or an abandoned dwelling is devoid of human ownership, so experience is intrinsically neither "me" nor "mine." Recognizing mental and physical processes as "empty" of self was, for the Buddha, the way to dispel the confusion that lies at the origin of anguish, for such confusion configures a sense of self as a fixed and opaque thing that feels disconnected from the dynamic, contingent and fluid processes of life. Emptiness does not deny these vital processes. It challenges the insistent fixation about self that obscures them, thus rendering life flat, frustrating and repetitive. Emptiness is a cipher of freedom.

The "great person" who abides in emptiness is one who is able to remain centered in the middle way. Although this middle way was introduced by the Buddha as a path that avoids the extremes of indulgence and mortification, it was refined to include the capacity not to succumb to the lure of any form of dualism. The wanderer Vacchagotta, for example, asked the Buddha:

"How is it, Venerable Gautama; does the self exist?"

The Buddha remained silent.

"Then how is it, Venerable Gautama; does the self not exist?"

The Buddha again remained silent.

The wanderer Vacchagotta got up from his seat and went away.

The Buddha turned to his attendant Ananda and said:

"If I had answered, 'the self exists,' that would have encouraged eternalism.....and if I had answered, 'the self does not exist,' that would have encouraged nihilism."

Although the Buddha taught a doctrine of selflessness, when answering the stranger Vacchagotta he recognized how his own teaching of selflessness placed him on the horns of a dilemma. To be true to his middle way, he had to avoid saying anything that might suggest a person to be endowed with some kind of essential and permanent identity. Yet nor could he suggest the opposite: that a person is a pure illusion, incapable of making moral choices that culminate in acts which bear psychological and social consequences. In steering a middle course between eternalism and nihilism, the Buddha remains suspended between "yes" and "no," "self" and "no self," in silent emptiness.

While the middle way is grounded in insight into the emptiness of self, it expands the experience of emptiness into a sensibility that resists any attempt to pin things down to "this" or "that."

The writings of the thirteenth century Japanese Zen master, Eihei Dogen, return again and again to the creativity, sensuality and immediacy of emptiness. For Dogen, all things “play in emptiness.” The awareness of nature as a field of emptiness is, for Dogen, the culmination of a sustained reflection which begins with an analysis of oneself. Although one’s sense of “I” may instinctively appear as standing in isolated opposition to the natural world, meditative inquiry erodes this fixated assumption of self-centeredness. Just as Hui-ko could not find an irreducible essence of mind, so there is nothing within one’s body, feelings, thoughts, or even consciousness to which one can point and say, “That is the irreducible essence of me.” At the same time, a sense of self is impossible *without* physical sensations, emotions, perceptions, thoughts, and consciousness. Experiencing this paradoxical nature of self results in a loss of alienation that is not self abnegation but a reawakening of a sense of the world in which one is not a stranger but a participant. “To study the Way,” says Dogen,

.....is to study oneself. To study oneself is to forget oneself. To forget oneself is to be awakened by all things. To be awakened by all things is to let body and mind of self and others fall away. Even the traces of awakening come to an end, and this traceless awakening is continued endlessly.

Whether or not Dogen was familiar with Nagarjuna’s *Verses from the Center*, these words are one of the most succinct synthesis of Nagarjuna’s vision. And irrespective of whether Nagarjuna saw himself as a patriarch of the Zen tradition, to listen to him as a Zen master helps one hear the provocative and enigmatic nuances of his voice.

In a completely different context, in 1818 in London the twenty-two-year-old John Keats described Shakespeare as “the least of an egoist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in himself; but he was all that others were, or that they could become.” Later the same year, in a letter to a friend, Keats expanded this idea:

As to the poetical Character itself.....it is not itself --- it has no self --- it is everything and nothing --- It has no character --- it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated --- It has as much delight in conceiving and Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the chameleon Poet.

This ability to be empty of self yet filled with world “which Shakespeare possessed so enormously” was described by Keats in a letter of December 1817 as “*Negative Capability*,”

That is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason.

Self

*Were mind and matter me,
I would come and go like them.
If I were something else,
They would say nothing about me.*

*What is mine
When there is no me?
Were self-centeredness eased,
I would not think of me and mine -
There would be no one there
To think them.*

*What is inside is me,
What is outside is mine –
When these thoughts end,
Compulsion stops,*

*Repetition stops,
Freedom dawns.*

*Fixations spawn thoughts
That provoke compulsive acts –
Emptiness stops fixations.*

*Buddhas speak of “self”
And also teach “no self”
And also say “there’s nothing
Which is either self or not.”*

*When things dissolve,
There’s nothing left to say.
The unborn and unceasing
Are already free.*

*Buddha said: “it is real.”
And “it is unreal,”
And “it is both real and unreal,”
And “it is neither one nor the other.”*

*It is all at ease,
Unfixatable by fixations,
Incommunicable,
Inconceivable,
Indivisible.*

*You are not the same as or different from
Conditions on which you depend;
You are neither severed from
Nor forever fused with them –*

*This is the deathless teaching
Of buddhas who care for the world.*

*When buddhas don’t appear
And their followers are gone,
The wisdom of awakening
Bursts forth by itself.*

Essence

*If my essence came
From causes and conditions,
I would have been constructed –
Essences are neither contingent nor contrived.*

*If I have no essence, how can you?
What is other for me is for you your own –
How can you not be
Yourself or someone else?*

*Without something,
There could be no nothing –
Do not people say:
A thing becomes nothing
When it changes into something else?*

*You who behold
Somethings and nothings,
Yourselves and others,
Are blind to what the Buddha taught.*

*Through understanding
Somethings and nothings,
Gautama told Katyayana
To relinquish being and nothingness.*

*If I had an essence,
I would never cease to be me –
My nature could never be anything else.
If I had no essence,
Whose nature would it be to be anything else?*

*“I am me, I will never not be” –
The longing for eternity.
“I used to be, I am not any more” –
The cut of annihilation.*

The sage avoids being and nothingness.

Already

*Am I already here
Before I see and taste and feel?
If not, how could I see and taste and feel?
How can I know if I’m already here or not?*

*If I were here without them,
They could be here without me.
I reveal them and they reveal me.
How can I be here without them?
How can they be here without me?*

*I am not already here
Before experience as such:
Seeing reveals just the seer,
Tasting just the taster,
Feeling just the feeler.*

*If I’m not already here before them all,
Could I be here before each one?
Can the seer taste?*

Can the taster feel?

*Were they different,
I would be legion.*

*Nor am I tucked inside the elements
Whence seeing and tasting and feeling unfold.*

*If I to whom these things belong
Cannot be found,
How can they be found?
I do not precede them.
Nor am I with them.
Nor do I follow them.*

*Let go of "I am."
Let go of "I am not."*