

Introduction to Nagarjuna's Middle View of Buddhism

by Thomas Tam, Ph.D., M.P.H

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Nagarjuna is generally recognized as the founding father of Mahajuna Buddhism. Based on his work "Mulamadhyamika Karika," the discussion will focus on the original contribution of the Buddha, and Nagarjuna's elaboration of the middle way, and the relationship between Pratityasmutpada (inter-relatedness of everything) and Sunyata (emptiness).

To provide a backdrop for my discussion tonight, I will show clips from two very popular movies—indeed, they are blockbusters that captured the hearts and minds of America in the past few years. The first is from Matrix, where Keanu Reeves, a computer programmer, who was introduced to the real world when he became aware of his existence in a totally simulated construction. (Show Matrix)

The second is from MIB, or Men in Black, where aliens roamed around in New York, some from out of space. The scene you'll see involves an extraterrestrial emperor who was murdered. The interesting thing is what lies behind the emperor. It is a graphic illustration of the existence of atman, or the self, that which directs how we behave in this world. (Show MIB)

We can talk more about Tommy Lee Jones or the adventures of Trinity, Neo and Morpheus, but maybe we should get back to why we are here tonight, before we get too distracted.

First of all, I want to emphasize that this is not a lecture on Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika. Rather, it is a discussion, based on the writings of Rev. Yin Shun of Taiwan, and his disciple, Mr. Kar Shu Wong of Toronto.

In Buddhism, a central premise is that the atman, or the self, something that seems so real to us, so profoundly entrenched, so eternally lasting, is really a transient phenomenon. Self is often described as composed of five elements: the material world, our feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and consciousness. It does not mean that the self is equivalent to the five elements, nor does it mean that the self is different from them. The relationship of self to the five elements is famously illustrated by that of a fist which is made up of five fingers. When we put our fingers together, the fist appears. When we spread our fingers, the fist disappears. There is no eternally lasting fist, and there is no eternally lasting self. When the causal conditions converge, the phenomenon appears. When they diverge, the phenomenon disappears.

Philosophical discussions aside, for a long time, neurobiologists have tried in vain to locate that little person in our head. This is the self that makes decisions and that consciously wills us into action. The Harvard professor, Daniel Wegner, in his recent book, "The Illusion of Conscious Will" suggested that the experience of consciously willing an action and the causation of the action by the person's conscious mind are two separate things, that the feeling as though we are causing the things we do is really caused by psychological and neural mechanisms.

Another perhaps even more fundamental premise in Buddhism is that of Pratityasmutpada. Indeed, when the Buddha was asked what his teaching was all about, he replied simply: "I teach Pratityasmutpada."

Pratityasmutpada can be roughly translated as causality. Prof. Garfield translated it as "co-dependently arisen". It is the fundamental principle that the entire world, from the largest to the smallest, from our feelings to our consciousness, from how we think to how we act, come into being as a convergence of necessary primary and secondary causal conditions. The being will also cease when these conditions

change or diverge. While this principle is believed to be applicable to everything including physics of the cosmos, the teaching of the Buddha has concerned itself mostly with the affairs of the human beings. Stated a little more clearly, this principle says that “This arose thus that arises; this ceased thus that ceases.”

The goal of Buddhism is our liberation, or as Morpheus said to Neo in the Matrix: “Free your mind.” The ignorance of Pratityasamutpada can blind us about the transient nature of everything, especially about the nature of self, and what can be identified as the extension of the self. For example, my house, my tooth brush, my organization, or my proposal, etc. The tyranny of our ego can make it difficult for us to let go. It can also lead us to actions that can bring suffering and make us live in hell. If we can be convinced of the empty nature of everything, and if we are able to let go of our ego and its extensions: my family, my contributions or my ideas. Me me, my my, mine mine. We will have avoided actions that can bring suffering. We will be liberated and live in nirvana, or heaven, so to speak. This is the true meaning of Pratityasamutpada.

When Rev. Yin Shun left the mainland to go to Taiwan in 1949, he stopped by Hong Kong and was requested by some Buddhist monks there to speak on Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhymakakarika. From now on, I shall call it Mula for short. The original Mula by Nagarjuna consists of 446 stanzas. Rev. Yin Shun selected only 70 and arranged them in an order which he believed would be appropriate for an introduction to the Mula. Whereas he took one month to talk about this version of the Mula, his disciple, Mr. Kar Shu Wong, half a century later, spent an entire year to expound on the same version but produced a book at the end.

I hope this background will convey to you the impossibility of what I am trying to do tonight, to introduce adequately Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhymakakarika in only one hour. It will take more than an hour just to read the 70 stanzas out loud. Therefore, this discussion will be very selective. It will be a bird’s eye view, at best. Please forgive me if I have omitted crucial passages and overlooked important points.

In this discussion, I am going to follow the works chiefly provided by Rev. Yin Shun in his three books: “Proceedings of a Lecture on Mulamadhymakakarika”, “Current Discussion of Mulamadhymakakarika”, and “The Study of Emptiness in Essence: An Exploration of its Source”. I am also going to rely on the book by Kar Shu Wong, “Introduction to the Principles of Mulamadhymakakarika”.

There are many translations of Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhymakakarika. I have chosen the most accessible one in English translated by Prof. Jay Garfield, and will supplement it with the Chinese translation by Kumoraja. I should add that Nagarjuna wrote the Mula around the second century, about seven hundred years after Buddha. Kumoraja, who was from present day Xinjiang, translated it from Sanskrit into Chinese around the fifth century. When Buddhism was introduced to Tibet around the eighth century, Nagarjuna’s Mula was also translated into Tibetan from Sanskrit. What you see on the handout, lying side by side are two versions of the Mula: The Chinese version by Kumoraja of the 5th century and the English translation of the Tibetan version of the 8th century. With so many different translations, discrepancy among the versions is probably unavoidable. I shall point out some obvious ones in my discussion later on.

The 70 stanzas chosen and arranged by Rev. Yin Shun can be briefly summarized into the following points: First, there is the opening dedication and the eight no-nos. The eight no-nos are the four pairs of extreme opposites that describe the emptiness of the world. The first pair, “unceasing, unborn”, as you can see in Chinese, can mean “no birth and no death”. This involves existence. The second pair, “no permanence and no annihilation” involves time. If something that exists forever, we call that permanence. If something that ceases to exist, and remains so forever, we call that annihilation. The third pair, “without distinction, without identity” in Chinese can mean “no unity and no separateness” which involves space. Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens and Staten Island are separate boroughs; together they are one municipality: New York. For another example: The eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind are separate sense organs; together they become one person. The fourth pair, “No coming and no going” involves movement. This is when something that exists changes in time and space.

There are thousands of other pairs of extreme opposites, such as beautiful and ugly, good and bad, big and small, etc. These four pairs are selected because of their applicability to everything in the world: existence, time, space and movement. This is meant for the general public, however. As pointed out by Kar Shu Wong, in "Heart Sutra", the most popular Buddhist sutra in China, only three pairs were mentioned. "No birth and no death", "no pollution and no purity", and "no increase and no decrease". The first pair, "no birth and no death" is common to both the heart sutra and the mula, because without existence, there is nothing else to talk about. "No pollution and no purity" refers to the equivalence in quality. "No increase and no decrease" refers to the equivalence in quantity. Heart Sutra, despite its tremendous popularity, is actually aiming at the more advanced students of Buddhism, who aspire to become Buddhas. Before enlightenment, one may perceive one individual as despicable and another as respectable. To the enlightened Buddha, however, there is no difference between the two individuals.

The eight no-nos are the first and most important stanzas of the Mula. Another stanza, just as significant, is the 14th stanza in this version:

Whatever is dependently co-arisen

That is explained to be emptiness

That, being a dependent designation,

Is itself the middle way

What this stanza says is the equivalence of the following:

Pratityasamutpada = Emptiness = Dependent Designation (Temporary Construction) = Middle Way

If we can truly understand these two stanzas, we would have a very good understanding of the Mula. In Rev. Yin Shun's abridged version, Nagarjuna first presents the counter argument that emptiness contradicts common sense, that if things are empty, then even Buddhism would be destroyed.

The phenomenon of birth and death is what leads to the understanding of impermanence, and impermanence leads to suffering, as countless poets and chanteurs have lamented throughout the world. A French love song comes into mind: *Plaisir d'amour ne dure qu'un moment; chagrin d'amour dure toute la vie*. So, withdrawal from attachment will avoid suffering and lead to salvation. This is what Buddhist belief is supposed to achieve. But if we deny birth and death, then how can we establish Buddhism as we know them?

Nagarjuna then suggested that this argument is misguided, that it confused the ultimate truth with common sense, and that it mistook emptiness to mean nothingness. Phenomenon: everything that we perceive, feel, understand and react to, is nothing but a temporary construction, which changes as different conditions change. Therefore, there is no such thing as an essence that comes into being by itself and remain unchanged forever. If such were the case, then East is East, and West is West, and never shall the two betwixt. An ordinary human being will never become a Buddha. Only when we can see that both of them are nothing but temporary constructions or dependent designations that an ordinary human being can have the opportunity to be transformed into a Buddha. This is possible because the temporary construction is not based on anything that is permanent. The temporary construction is a result of various causal conditions. When the conditions change, so will the result. Thus, the result, or the temporary construction is empty in essence. Nagarjuna then went on to argue that the entire world, from the physical universe to the individual and his troubles, karma, and sufferings are all empty.

That the individual is empty, we have discussed it before, using the illustration of the fist and the five fingers. It is important to point out that while individuals, troubles, karmas, and sufferings can be empty, stanza 41 emphasized that "action is non-expiring", or "every action will have a reaction", or "what has been sown will be reaped".

Our troubles include desire, hatred, and confusion. They all stem from our thoughts and memories and are rooted in our differentiation of various phenomena. (Here it may be helpful to point out that the Chinese translation by Kumoraja [stanza 31] included the term differentiation, whereas Prof. Garfield's English translation did not.) It is our tendency to differentiate that create opposites such as pleasantness and unpleasantness, however. So, there is no essence in both pleasant and unpleasant phenomena. In other words, they are both results from other causal conditions. If these conditions had changed, the results would necessarily change as well. In this sense, both the pleasant and unpleasant phenomena are not fixed. They are dependent on other causes. They are therefore empty.

Our troubles start when we crave the pleasant and hate the unpleasant. Our craving and hatred can lead to actions (karma) that will bring suffering. Since what we crave for or hate are indeed not fixed and empty, our craving and hatred are also not fixed and are empty. In other words, they can be changed. This means that our actions or karma are not fixed and can be changed as well. When our actions are changed, so will the resultant suffering. That is why Nagarjuna said that all our troubles, karma and suffering are empty.

Kar Shu Wong used an everyday example to illustrate the elusive nature of our suffering: Going to work on a rainy day, getting through a crowded subway, becoming late, with clothes all wet and sticking to your body, you may feel very uncomfortable. But when you arrive at the office, your boss publicly praise you for the work you have performed, you may suddenly feel elated, and completely forget your previous discomfort. Thus, our feelings change as conditions change. Discomfort is only a changeable, temporary existence, without essence or permanence.

Sometimes, it may be easy to accept that our thoughts and concepts are empty in nature because they seem to be more abstract or elusive. When confronted with a physical object or person, however, we may reasonably raise questions about calling them "empty". Here, the terms "temporary construction" or "dependent designation" may be helpful. In other words, while these concepts, objects, and persons are ultimately empty in nature, they are, nevertheless, temporary constructions at the moment.

Rev. Yin Shun provided a description of their existence: "Impermanent but continuous". Because their causal conditions change at every moment, so too, the phenomena change at every moment. This is why they are impermanent. At the same time, unless there are drastic changes in the causal conditions, the phenomena will maintain their previous form and function, thus they are also continuous.

It may be instructive to go into more detail to see how Nagarjuna explained the emptiness of suffering. (Stanza 44) This is an illustration of the tetralemma methodology that he often employed to deconstruct concepts. Everything, including suffering, if it is not empty, can be produced in two manners: with cause and without cause. If it is produced with cause, it can be self-produced, or produced by others, or by a combination of self and others. These four possibilities exhaust all the ways that suffering can be produced. Nagarjuna then proceeded to show that suffering could not have been produced by any of the possibilities.

The Buddha has said that despite the emptiness of individuals, every action will generate its own aftermath. Suffering is the reception of an action's aftermath. There is a dependency and a causative relationship that exist between action and suffering, also between the one who acts and the one who suffers.

First of all, if suffering is produced without a cause, it will directly contradicts causality, shatters the relationship between action and suffering, and brings havoc to any view of morality, destroying all foundation of common sense. It is therefore not possible. Thus, we reject the proposition that suffering can be produced without a cause.

Can suffering be produced with a cause, by the self, or others, or by them both? When there is suffering, there is a sufferer. Suffering and the sufferer are intimately related. They cannot be isolated one from the other. Without the sufferer, we cannot talk about suffering. As we have seen before, the sufferer is made up of the five elements, (or aggregates) of which feeling is one. Suffering is the aftermath of an action. Action is also intimately associated with the one who acts. The actor, like the sufferer, is also

made up of five elements, of which behavior is one. So, we can say that the suffering is produced by the actor, but the actor, even though it shares many of the five elements with the sufferer, is not the same as the sufferer. For one thing, one is with the past, and the other is at present. We therefore cannot say that suffering is self produced. Can we then say that suffering is produced by others? Even though the actor is of the past, and the sufferer is of the present, they are intimately related to one another. Without the five elements that made up the actor previously, there could not have been the five elements that made up the sufferer at present. One is derived from the other. We cannot say that one is entirely different or separated from the other. We therefore cannot say that suffering is caused by others. This is the meaning of "impermanent but continuous".

Since neither self nor others produced suffering, we cannot say that suffering is produced by self and others. Thus, Nagarjuna exhausted all possibilities.

The question of whether or not the universe has a beginning or an end has been posed to the Buddha during his lifetime. Every time it was raised, the Buddha would refuse to answer it. It is one of the famous 14 no comments by the Buddha. This question, of course, has also been rigorously explored by cosmologists these days.

A point of contention between some Hinayana and Mahayana is the apparent difference in their perception of samsara and nirvana. For the Hinayana, samsara is the phenomenon of endless birth and death cycle. Through Pratityasamutpada, they see the impermanence in everything. The avoidance of suffering and the ending of desires and craving will also lead to the experience of emptiness and nirvana. The Mahayana starts from the other direction, nirvana, the ultimate truth where total emptiness would preclude all activities including the birth and death of ideas and things. Thus in the ultimate truth of nirvana, for the Mahayana, no birth and death is equivalent to birth and death. Whereas the Hinayana believes that samsara is different from nirvana, the Mahayana believes that in the ultimate truth, they are the same.

The Buddha himself has commented on this in the Diverse Agama Sutra #293 when he was comparing Pratityasamutpada with nirvana, "The meaning of Pratityasamutpada runs very deep. The silence and emptiness of nirvana, without desire and letting go of everything, is even deeper and more difficult to understand. One is of this world. The other is beyond this world. To be born, to stay, to change and to die: these are phenomena of this world. Beyond this world, the ultimate truth is no birth, no stay, no change and no death."

Another difference between the Hinayana and the Mahayana that has been cited, mostly by the Mahayana, perhaps lies in the lesson each draws from the Buddha. Whereas the Hinayana takes Buddha's teaching to heart and practice to liberate himself to reach and stay in nirvana, the Mahayana emulates the Buddha, delays his own enjoyment of nirvana, and engages in the liberation of other human beings.

In his book "Current Discussion of Mulamadhyamakakarika", Rev. Yin Shun emphasized that "Nirvana definitely does not mean death, nor does it mean an experience possible only after death... In Sanskrit, nirvana has the connotation of negation and disintegration, as well as the implication of comfort and freedom." The nirvana that Buddha talked about is the state of complete peace, calmness, and liberation that we can experience in our daily lives, that we can reach if we see through the mirage of seemingly endless cycle of birth, death, and utter confusion.