

Philosophy of Religion
Nagarjuna and Buddhist Emptiness Teaching

M. Sudduth

I. Mahayana Buddhism and Nagarjuna

A. In Mahayana Buddhism, “ultimate reality” is explained by way of the teaching of emptiness (sunyata).

B. Nagarjuna (2nd century CE Buddhist philosopher) provided a systematic development of the Mahayana teaching of sunyata. He regarded sunyata as a conceptual vehicle for expressing the denial of substantialist approaches to reality, which maintain that reality consists of independent self-existing substances. Nagarjuna also maintained that this viewpoint was essential to dissolving human attachment and dukkha (lack of satisfaction) that arises from attachment.

II. Abhidharma School of Mahayana

A. Abhidharma subscribes to the general Buddhist principles of anicca (impermanence) and anatta (no eternal, independent, individual self). What we call “the self” is just an ever-changing process arising from the principle of dependent arising, according to which reality is constituted by physical and mental factors (dharma), all of which are mutually conditioned.

B. The Sarvastivada sub-school of Abhidharma maintained that dharmas, especially space and nirvana, are unconditioned, independent realities outside samsara (cycle of death and rebirth – the realm of dependent arising). Nagarjuna rejects this idea. Composite structures are subject to dependent arising, but so are their “parts,” an ever-changing field of interactions. All dharmas are devoid of independent self-existence. There are no independent, unchanging essences. Sunyata is the truth of reality all the way down. All things lack their own being (svabhava); they are empty (sunya).

C. Nagarjuna does not argue that nothing exists or that the world is an illusory nothingness. His central point is that the world as we normally conceive of it is non-existent. Nothing is self-existent. Just as there is no self, the dharmas are empty of self or independent thingness.

III. Nagarjuna on Sunyata and Nirvana

A. Some Buddhists, e.g., Sarvastivadin Abhidharma Buddhists, maintain that Nirvana (the state of cessation of dukkha) is outside conditioned reality or

· Based on Christopher Ives, “Emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism” in *Readings in Philosophy of Religion: East Meets West*, ed. Andrew Eshleman (Blackwell, 2008).

dependent arising. Hence, samsara and nirvana are different realms of existence, conditioned/dependent existence and unconditioned/independent existence.

B. Nagarajuna's teaching explicitly rejects the separation of samsara and nirvana. Nirvana is not differentiated from samsara, nor is samsara differentiated from nirvana. Nirvana is located within samsara. From the perspective of unawakened dualistic thinking, samsara and nirvana appear as two different realities. In awakened consciousness they are non-separate, two aspects of a single reality. When craving or attachment arises in the field of consciousness, the field of consciousness is called samsara (and dukkha). When there is no craving or attachment in this field of consciousness, it is called nirvana. Cf. The same body of water may be tranquil or turbulent.

C. Sunyata is not a transcendent, substantial reality. It too is utterly empty, devoid of independent existence. Sunyata is fundamentally a denial of any ultimate reality. "Ultimate reality" just is the world as one experiences it. Hence, nirvana is not a goal to be achieved, but the reality already present and in which we live.

IV. Attachment and Suffering

A. Buddha taught that suffering or lack of satisfaction (dukkha) is rooted in attachment to identity and permanence. That is, we project into the world of changing processes apparently substantial and independently existing entities we call "objects." We are positively attached to them (through love and desire) or negatively attached to them (through aversion and hatred). We are unhappy because we desire that the world be something it is not. So the world never gives us what we want. We are unsatisfied (dukkha).

B. Nagarjuna takes the position that language creates the illusion of enduring objects (reification) and projects these objects into reality as substantial (i.e., persisting and independently) existing entities. But this conceptual- or mind-framework can never grasp reality as it is, which is emptiness. "Emptiness" is a way of talking about referring words in language: it is a way of indicating that such words construct "reality;" they do not grasp it as it is. Being "non-dual," reality cannot be understood by the mind or articulated. It is beyond being and non-being, beyond thing and nothing, beyond eternal and temporal.

C. Sunyata then signifies: (i) nothing in the world has self-existence and (ii) no concept or theory, nor cognitive processes in general, can grasp the nature of reality.

D. Dukkha, then, arises from reification and projection, which creates the elusive objects of satisfaction. This is avidya (ignorance).

E. Since the intellect cannot grasp reality it can only be "understood" experientially in connection with spiritual practice (e.g., meditation) in which, as Zen teacher Dogen says, there is a "dropping off of mind and body."

F. Salvation is not realizing some unchanging transcendent reality outside the experience of becoming or change but by deconstructing the process of seeking permanence and embracing “becoming.”

G. Prajna: experiencing the world as emptiness. Where there is emptiness, there can be no attachment, for there is nothing to attach oneself to, and indeed no self to attach to anything.

V. Ontology of Sunyata

A. Things exist by virtue of sunyata, not despite sunyata. Things arise only through dependent arising, and the dependent arising by virtue of which things arise is not apart from them. “Emptiness as dependent co-origination is the actual dynamics of reality in its very becoming” (Ives, p. 57). Hence, sunyata is not something prior to the world. It is the world.

B. “Empty-self” experiences the world as dynamic interrelated and dependent processes. We do not have experiences; we are our experience. The experiencer, experiencing, and experienced are not separate. Being and knowing converge; they are not separate (as Advaita Vedanta maintains)