Nāgārjuna and the Philosophy of *Upāya*
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Nāgārjuna is widely recognized as one of the most important thinkers in the Buddhist philosophical and religious tradition. Born in South India during the 2nd Century C.E., Nāgārjuna is famous for developing a critical style of thinking that challenged the major philosophical and religious traditions of India during that time. He debated orthodox Buddhists and Hindus alike, established the "Middle Way" (Mādhyamika) school of philosophy, and refined the traditional Buddhist dialectical method of "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*) that gave birth to Buddhist traditions throughout India, China, Tibet, and Japan. In most Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions, Nāgārjuna is regarded as the 2nd Buddha, a bodhisattva whose writings convey the fundamental wisdom of the Buddha.

Nāgārjuna has recently become important for Western philosophers as well. Because many of his texts rely on *reductio ad absurdum* logic, and because he is seen as criticizing problems surrounding causality, subjectivity, space, and time, he is thought to be a philosopher of stature. Indeed, he is often compared to such important Western thinkers as Kant, Hegel, Hume, Wittgenstein, and Derrida, and perceived as inhabiting the same intellectual milieu and struggling with the same metaphysical problems that have marked the Western philosophical tradition since Plato. While interpretations of Nāgārjuna's philosophy have always varied and range anywhere from mysticism, transcendentalism, and absolute monism to skepticism, pragmatism, nominalism and even nihilism, Western interpretations generally assume that Nāgārjuna is dealing with metaphysical issues and that his doctrine of "emptiness" is easily rendered within a metaphysical discourse. Whether he is depicted as a mystic, nihilist, or philosophical skeptic, and whether or not his dialectic of "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*) undermines *all* positive philosophical positions, as many scholars declare, it is commonly assumed that the driving force behind Nāgārjuna's philosophy is geared toward very general issues relating to logic, language, subjectivity, consciousness, and other traditional Western metaphysical problems.

The purpose of this article is to offer a different account of Nāgārjuna than is found in contemporary Western scholarship. It will not ask what it means for causality, truth, the self, or consciousness to be "empty" in a very general sense, but rather how Nāgārjuna's philosophy relates to the soteriological practices of Buddhism and what it means for those practices to be "empty" of inherent nature. Rather than describing Nāgārjuna as a metaphysician this study will situate him squarely within the early Mahāyāna tradition and the philosophical problem of practice that is expressed through the doctrine of "skill-in-means" (*upāya-kauśalya*). It should become evident in what follows that the doctrine of *upāya* has little in common with Western metaphysics. It is unconcerned with problems regarding causality, personal identity, consciousness, logic, language, or any other issues that are unrelated to specific problems surrounding the nature and efficacy of Buddhist practice. Given that every major tradition in Buddhism stresses the indispensable nature of practice, it is highly unlikely that Nagarjuna's philosophy is concerned with metaphysical issues or that his doctrine of "emptiness" can be separated from the soteriological practices of Buddhism.

The following section will explain the significance of *skillful means* in Mahayana Buddhism and the critical role it plays in an on-going Buddhist debate about the nature of Buddhist practice. The subsequent sections will offer an in-depth reading of important sections from Nagarjuna's *Mādhyamikakārikā* (*Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*) that convey the "skill-in-means" character of Nagarjuna's philosophy.

Skillful Means, Metapraxis, and Truth

While Buddhist scholars agree that *skillful means* is a central doctrine in Mahāyāna Buddhism, there is some confusion over how *skillful means* relates to Buddhist practice and the problem of truth in Buddhism. Interpretations of *skillful means* range from seeing it as an authoritarian doctrine used to convert people to particular viewpoints (Garner, 1993) to seeing it as the "means" for revealing an ineffable truth (Chappell, 2002). Most accounts fall somewhere between these two extremes by describing *skillful means* as a rhetorical means for expressing some version of truth: either the Buddha's own version of truth adapted to the different levels of sentient beings (Williams, 1989; Combrich, 1996) or an entirely new version of Buddhist truth proclaimed by the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition and argued for in texts like the *Lotus Sūtra* (Federman, 2009). However, while interpretations of *skillful means* vary there is a common theme that underlies even the most conflicting explanations: which is that *skillful means* is less a critique of truth than a vehicle (or "means") for expressing truth. On this account, the Buddha already knows the truth but simply gears it to the different levels of human beings. Sometimes he manipulates the truth to suit the various karmic levels of sentient beings and sometimes he withholds it because people are not spiritually prepared to receive it. While there are numerous examples to support this reading of *skillful means* in the Mahāyāna sūtras and commentaries, there is also a critical side to *skillful means* that not only resists being framed as a "means" to truth but is directly opposed to establishing "true" Buddhist doctrine. This common oversight gives the impression that *skillful means* is more like a passive medium than an active philosophical method, thus destroying the critical force that makes *skillful means* a provocative and conceptually challenging Buddhist concept. Before examining this other, more critical side of *skillful means* and the role it plays in the philosophy of Nāgārjuna, we first need to understand why the doctrine of *skillful means* was created in the first place.

In general, *skillful means* refers to the various teaching styles and pedagogical techniques used to communicate the Dharma, and reflects a debate in early Buddhism about the nature and efficacy of Buddhist teachings. Mahāyāna Buddhism arose in part as a reaction against the attempt to restrict Buddhism to pre-established goals and fixed meditation practices, and stressed the open-ended nature of the Buddha's teachings and the variety of practices and doctrines he used to help sentient beings. The *Prajñāpāramitā* (*Perfection of Wisdom)* texts emphasize the Buddha's unique ability to respond to suffering with the appropriate words, gestures, and teachings, and claim he used countless "medicinal aids" to help "cure" the immense suffering in the world. They depict the Buddha as an exemplary "physician" who refuses to believe in a single cure or fixed remedy and who responds to the world's "illnesses" with wisdom (*prajñā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and "skill-in-means" (*upāya-kauśalya*). It is not surprising, then, that the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts unite *skillful means* with wisdom (*prajñā*), as does Nāgārjuna when he says in the *Bodhisaṃbhāra(ka)* that "skill-in-means is the father of perfect wisdom" (Lindner, 1986, p. 127).

While the actual term *skillful means* (Pāli: *upāya-kusala*) rarely occurs in the Pāli canon, the sentiment is nevertheless expressed in a number of passages, such as the *Majjhima-Nikāya* where the Buddha describes his teachings as "rafts" to ferry sentient beings across the turbulent river of suffering (*duḥkha)*. The passage suggests that all the Buddha's teachings have provisional status and that it is mistaken to cling to them as anything more than expedient means: "If you cling to it, if you fondle it, if you treasure it, if you are attached to it, then you do not understand that the teaching is similar to a raft, which is for crossing over, and not for getting hold of" (Conze, 1954, p. 223). Early Mahāyāna texts build upon the metaphor of the "raft" by elevating *skillful means* above all other doctrines and teachings, including the firmly established *vinaya* monastic rules, which, as the *Upāyakauśalya Sūtra* graphically outlines, should also be considered provisional precepts that--for soteriological reasons only—may be violated on some occasions (Tatz, 1994).

To avoid the error of reducing *skillful means* to a mere passive vehicle for expressing truth—and thereby eclipsing its critical force—the development of *upāya* needs to be seen in the context of early Buddhist debates about Buddhist practice and the issue of whether it is possible to isolate certain practices as "ultimately true." In the process of analyzing and interpreting the various teachings of the Buddha, for example, the Abhidharma Buddhists developed their own technique for distinguishing between different types of expressions in the Pāli Canon and asserted the absolute sovereignty of a select group of teachings over all others (Jayatilleke, 1963). While the original Pāli commentators distinguished between those passages that needed further explanation (*neyyattha*) from those that already made sense (*nītattha*), and between expressions that used metaphor and conventional speech (*saṃmuti*) from those that used direct speech (*paramattha*), the Abhidharma Buddhists went further by establishing rigid qualitative differences between all such expressions. That is, they asserted that only the direct, systematic and analytic teachings (such as non-self, dependent arising, causality, and so on) are not only "ultimately true" (*paramattha sacca*) but the only practices that lead to enlightenment. Other teachings expressed in parables, similes, and metaphor, on the other hand, are merely "conventional truths" (*saṃmuti sacca*) for the unintelligent and thus soteriologically ineffectual (Nyanatiloka, 1983). Aside from minor disagreements the Abhidharma traditions agreed that "ultimate truth" consists in the elimination of "defilements" (*kleśas*) and the "cessation" of *dharmas* (units of experience) through precise analytic meditation. As Vasubhandu argues, the highest form of wisdom (*prajñā*) requires a "correct" meditative analysis of experience such that without understanding the exact nature of *dharmas*—how they rise and fall, congeal and disintegrate, and form the conditions of all experience--one remains rooted in ignorance and suffering.

> Because there is no means of pacifying the passions without close investigation of existents, and because it is the passions that cause the world to wander in this great ocean of transmigration, therefore they say that the teacher—which means the Buddha—spoke this system aimed at the close examination of existents. For a student is not able to closely investigate existents without teaching in true doctrine (Pruden, 1988, p. 57).

The doctrine of *skillful means* was created by early Mahāyāna Buddhists to attack this restriction of Buddhist practice to set methodological requirements. Because it was developed specifically within a debate over Buddhist practice, it would be misleading to characterize *upāya* as a "means" to express a "higher" truth apart from this debate—be it metaphysical, epistemological, or otherwise. A more correct characterization is similar to what Kasulis calls "metapraxis," that is, to a type of reflection devoted specifically to the nature of religious praxis. Whereas metaphysical reflection refers to problems about the nature of being, language, consciousness, the self, and other traditional Western philosophical concepts, metapraxis refers to the power and efficacy of religious praxis itself:

> Religious praxis generally has either a participatory or transformative function. It participates in, to use Rudolf Otto's term, the "numinous." It is transformative in its improving the person or community in some spiritual way (purifying, healing, reconciling, protecting, informing, and so on). Metapractical reflection inquires into the purpose and efficacy of the practice in terms of these participatory and transformative functions. Something happens, or at least is supposed to happen, in and through religious praxis. Metapraxis analyzes and evaluates that happening. What does the praxis change? Is something remembered? Reenacted? Empowered? If so, exactly how does the praxis work? And why should we prefer our traditional praxis as more effective than another? (Kasulis, 1992, p. 178).

This idea of metapraxis draws our attention away from conceptualizing *upāya* as a "means" for expressing Buddhist truths and directs it toward the philosophical issue of practice that is central to every major debate in the history of Buddhism. It refers specifically to the soteriological practices of Buddhism and expresses a radical critique of any attempt to establish normative guidelines or metapractical "truths" on the grounds that such efforts neglect the concrete suffering of others. As will be argued further below, Nagarjuna uses the dialectical method of "emptiness" to expresses this precise point.

Nāgārjuna and Mahāyāna Buddhism

While we know very little about the historical life of Nāgārjuna, there is no doubt that he saw himself as firmly established within the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition. In the *Twelve Gate Treatise*, for example, Nāgārjuna says that his fundamental goal is to clarify the teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

> I want to reveal and make clear the supremely great teachings of the Tathagata. Therefore, I will explain the teachings of Mahāyāna (Cheng, 1982, p. 53-54).

Likewise, in the *Bodhisambhara(ka)*, or "The Accumulations for Enlightenment," Nāgārjuna aligns himself further with Mahāyāna Buddhism by expressing views already popularized in the *Prajñāparamita* texts:

> Prajñāparamita is the mother of Bodhisattvas, skill in means is their father, and compassion is their daughter.
> Attracting with gifts, teaching the Dharma, listening to the teaching of the Dharma, and also practicing acts of benefit to others--these are the skillful means for attracting (others). While benefiting living beings without tiring and without carelessness, (a bodhisattva) expresses his aspiration for enlightenment: To benefit others is to benefit oneself! Let us not desert living beings! In order to benefit living beings, first generate this attitude and then come to possess the practice of the doors to liberation (Lindtner, 1986, p. 127).

Most Western accounts focus exclusively on the *Mādhyamikakārikā* and the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, two of his most famous texts. However, Nāgārjuna's writings extend beyond these two books. He wrote to Buddhist monks, lay people, orthodox Hindus, and kings, with varying themes and philosophical motives**.** His writing style ranges from the simple to the complex, spanning personal devotional hymns, such as found in the *Catuḥstava*, to the more philosophically abstract, such as found in the *Kārikās*. The diversity of approaches Nāgārjuna adopts in communicating with different types of audiences is important because it situates him within a *skillful means* tradition that runs from the Buddha and through the Mahāyāna.

Chr. Lindtner is one of the few scholars to recognize the diversity in style that Nāgārjuna adopts, attributing this to the doctrine of *skillful means*:

> In my view, the decisive reasons for the variety of Nāgārjuna's writings is to be sought in the author's desire, as a Buddhist, to address himself to various audiences at various levels and from various perspectives. This motive would of course be consistent with the Mahāyāna ideal of upayakausalya (skillful means). Thus, the Mulamadhyamakakarika, the Sunyatasaptati and Vigrahavyavartani were intended to be studied by philosophically minded monks. The Vaidalyaprakarana was written as a challenge to Naiyayikas. The Yuktisastika, the Nyavaharasiddi, and the Pratityasamutpadahrdayakarika as well are contributions to Buddhist exegesis. The Catuhstava is a document confessing its author's

personal faith in the Buddha's doctrine, while the Sutrasamuccaya, the Bodhicittavivarana, the Bodhisambhara (ka), the Suhrllekha, and the Ratnavali on the whole address themselves to a wider Buddhist audience, monks as well as laymen (Lindtner, 1986, p. 331).

What is important about Lindtner's comment is that he groups all of Nāgārjuna's texts under the heading "skillful means." It is not just the supposed "minor" works that are geared toward a particular audience, but even those that deal with difficult concepts in Buddhist philosophy, such as the *Mādhyamikakārikā* and *Vigrahavyāvartanī*. Even though we are not sure Nāgārjuna wrote all these texts, it is obvious why Lindtner understands Nāgārjuna as a *skill-in-means* thinker, and why he views the highly logical teaching of "emptiness" on the same footing as those given to kings, lay people, and disciples. As a Mahāyāna Buddhist, Nāgārjuna realizes that no single set of expressions is sufficient to cover the various "illness" of sentient beings, and because the world manifests itself in different degrees of karmic growth, different teachings are needed. As he says in the *Bodhicittavivarana (Exposition of Bodhicitta)*:

> The teachings of the protectors of the world accord with the (varying) resolve of living beings. The Buddhas employ a wealth of skillful means, which take many worldly forms (Lindtner, 1986, p. 65).

Nāgārjuna is not saying anything new here. The idea was already stressed in texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras, and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, all of which emphasize that Buddhism contains a variety of soteriological paths (*mārgas*) and "medical" practices. The fact that Nāgārjuna taught to different audiences in different ways shows his devotion to this style of thought. Nāgārjuna's student Āryadeva was influenced by this way of thinking, as we can see from his root text, the *Catuḥsataka*:

> A student emerges for a certain (teacher), a teacher emerges for certain (student). A person who knows the methods (*upāyavid*) instructs ignorant living beings by various methods. Just as it is rare for a skilled physician not to cure patients, it is very rare for a bodhisattva who has acquired the (training) not to have (students) to be trained (Lang, 1986, p. 57).

Āryadeva gives an example in Chapter 6 of the *Catuḥsataka* relating to the practice of *skillful means* is practiced in Buddhism:

> (A student under the influence of) desire should be treated like a servant, since harshness is its antidote. (A student under the influence of) hatred should be treated like a king, since kindness if its antidote (Lang, 1986, p. 65).

Āryadeva's comments express his commitment to Nāgārjuna's style of teaching, and give voice to an entire *skillful means* tradition that runs from Śākyamuni Buddha through the Mahāyāna tradition.

As a Mahāyāna Buddhist engaged in a debate with the Abhidharma Buddhists, Nāgārjuna is clearly concerned with praxis and with how to communicate Buddhism to others. To understand why a metaphysical reading of both Nagarjuna and Abhidharma Buddhism is misleading, it is important to keep in mind that the Abhidharma thinkers are specifically concerned with issues of meditation and praxis, and that the general Mahāyāna critique is leveled at comments such as Vasubhandu's, when he states that without meditating in a particular way (i.e., without "reviewing" the Sarvāstivādin analysis of *dharmas*) then it is impossible to attain liberation.

Nāgārjuna's criticisms take a similar form and are directed against the Abhidharma idea that liberation is attainable *only* upon a "close investigation" of *dharmas*. In his *Mādhyamikakārikā*, the criticism proceeds by analyzing the meditative "matrix" of the Abhidharma tradition--from causality and the five aggregates to impermanence, *nirvāṇa* and the Four Noble Truths-- concluding that each is "empty" of inherent nature. The following sections will analyze key sections from Nagarjuna's *Mādhyamikakārikā*, and while his method may appear excessively dry, logical, and analytic, it is important to remember that Nagarjuna is addressing a scholastic tradition that privileges logical precision and analysis, and he is therefore using their own methodology and rhetorical style to heighten his criticism.

Nāgārjuna's Critique of Causality

In the *Mādhyamikakārikā*, Nāgārjuna attacks the Abhidharma view of praxis by utilizing a system of logic that offers negative responses to four possible alternatives. Called the *catuṣkoṭi*, it can be depicted in the following form:

1. It is not the case that x is ø.
2. It is not the case that x is not-ø.
3. It is not the case that x is both ø and not-ø.
4. It is not the case that x is neither ø nor not-ø.

Nāgārjuna uses these four statements against a variety of arguments ranging from causality, the self, and the aggregates, to impermanence, space, time, and motion. Against a particular view of causation, for example, Nāgārjuna applies the *catuṣkoṭi* and concludes that *dharmas* (x) are not produced (ø), not non-produced, neither both, nor neither. Or, against a particular view of motion he applies the dialectic and concludes that motion (x) is not moving (ø), not non-moving, neither both, nor neither.

Nagarjuna uses the *catuṣkoṭi* from the very beginning of Chapter 1 in the *Kārikās* and initiates his attack against Abhidharma Buddhism:

Neither from itself nor from another,
Nor from both,
Nor without a cause,
Does anything whatever, anywhere arise (Garfield, 1995, p. 3).

This is the beginning of Nāgārjuna's attack on causality. Things are either caused from themselves, from something else, from both, or from no cause whatsoever. Nāgārjuna denies all four alternatives, trying to show that each view of causation is absurd.

He does this by saying that any understanding of cause and effect presupposes our ability to either affirm or deny causal identity. In other words, a cause is either identical to its effect, different from its effect, both, or neither. Saying they are identical is absurd since this destroys the language of cause and effect that tells us something has changed or has become different from what it was. If cause and effect are identical, then there is no change from the cause to the effect, which means that nothing was ever really "caused" at all. Nāgārjuna denies this alternative, saying that things cannot arise from themselves.

Does this mean that cause and effect is a connection between two different things (arising from another)? Nāgārjuna denies this alternative as well, arguing that it is logically impossible for two separate entities to be causally related. If two things are fundamentally different then there is no

connection between them whatsoever, which destroys their ability to interact causally. Just as causal identity denies the necessary relationship that must exist between a cause and an effect, the idea of absolute difference ruptures any causal connection between two things that are supposed to be related. According to Nāgārjuna, this idea must be rejected because it denies our ability to speak coherently about causation. "Perfect otherness (or difference)," says Candrakīrti, "amounts to no cause at all" (Sprung, 1979, p. 42).

This leaves the last two alternatives, which are also denied by Nāgārjuna, the first for being contradictory, and the second for being illogical. Saying that cause and effect are both identical and non-identical is a basic contradiction: x = ø and not (x = ø). And saying that a cause arises from nowhere is not only logically impossible (how can a non-cause bring something into existence?), but implies that things can arise from any source whatsoever. As Buddhapālita says:

> Things cannot arise without a cause, because that would entail that anything could arise at any time, anywhere (Sprung, 1979, p. 43).

The result of Nāgārjuna's dialectic is to say that causation is "empty," without essence, inherent nature, or substance. But what does Nāgārjuna mean by saying that causation is "empty," and why is he attacking these theories in this way?

As mentioned above, the bulk of Western scholarship argues that Nāgārjuna is dealing with metaphysical problems. According to Murti (1955) and Loy (1987), for example, Nāgārjuna is arguing for a transcendental experience beyond language and conceptualization; for Siderits (1988), he is arguing against the problem of "realism;" for Kalupahana (1986) Nāgārjuna is similar to the Logical Positivists who argue against non-empirical metaphysical views; and for Garfield (1995) he is arguing for the "conventional" nature of reality. All of these scholars also assume that no matter how we live our lives or whatever spiritual practices we engage in, we will never attain complete emancipation until we fully deconstruct our metaphysical attachments. Garfield makes this clear when he writes:

> It cannot be overemphasized that as far as Nāgārjuna--or any other Mahāyāna Buddhist philosopher, for that matter--is concerned, the view that the things we perceive and of which we conceive, to the extent that they exist at all, do so inherently, originates as an innate misapprehension and is not the product of sophisticated philosophical theory. That is, we naively and pretheoretically take things as substantial. This, as Nāgārjuna will argue, and as the Buddha himself argued, is the root delusion that lies at the basis of all human suffering (Garfield, 1995, p. 88).

Garfield's generalization about all Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophers is puzzling, especially since, at least from the Mahāyāna perspective, the problem with the Abhidharma Buddhists is not their supposed metaphysical views but their attempt to justify one set of soteriological practice above all others. That all Mahāyāna philosophers are concerned with metaphysics is certainly not obvious; nor it is obvious that all human suffering is caused by taking things as "substantial." Such a sweeping generalization presents a biased account of Buddhist philosophy, and assumes that human suffering can be explained in a totalizing way. If Nāgārjuna is saying what Garfield thinks he does, then he is guilty of offering the type of "poisonous remedies" that *skillful means* rejects.

If we read Nāgārjuna within the context of *skillful means*, however, then we will not arrive at this conclusion. Similar to the Buddha's criticism of the "sixty two views" in the *Brahmajala-*

suttanta where the Buddha warns against "getting caught in the net" of extremism, Nāgārjuna is trying to resolve a major conflict in the Buddhist community. This conflict has to do with the attempt to establish absolute soteriological guidelines in order to attain liberation. While the Abhidharma traditions agreed that liberation depends on a specific meditation that understands the nature *dharmas*--how they arise and cease, how they are conditioned, and how they cause suffering—the disagreed over the "correct" meditation procedures that allows one to understand the true nature of *dharmas*.

For example, the Sarvāstivādin tradition claimed that underlying the "moments" of meditation are unchanging substances (*svabhāvas*) which continue throughout the entire process. These underlying substances are a *dharma*'s "self nature," and were seen as pivotal in meditative practice. To meditate on a *dharma*'s "self nature" meant that one would no longer be captivated by fleeting appearances or attached to "turbulent" phenomena. One could then see the causes of suffering and mental anxiety, and rest peacefully in the "calm" of *nirvāṇa*. The ability to discern the substance of *dharmas* was therefore tantamount to liberation.

Nāgārjuna's problem with this is that it contradicts the view that one must meditate on causality in order to attain liberation. If *dharmas* stay the same then they are not caused at all because they never change; and if they are "self-caused" then they are identical to themselves, which denies the doctrine of "dependent arising." Thus, for Nāgārjuna, the Sarvāstivādin view of *dharmas* is absurd within the context of a Buddhist meditation, since the idea of *dharmas* contradicts the Buddhist doctrine of "dependent arising."

The Sautrāntikas also rejected the Sarvāstivādin position but proposed the idea that meditation is composed of continuous "flashings" of "moments" into consciousness: *dharmas* arise and cease each moment, they come from nowhere, "flash" for an instant, and then vanish. To see this process--to "review" it--was the goal of meditative practice that supposedly ends in liberation. For Nāgārjuna, this view of meditation suffers from similar inconsistencies as the Sarvāstivādin view. If we are supposed to meditate on *dharmas* as point-instants that have no continuity between one moment and the next, then what happens to the causal process that is so important for Buddhist praxis? If *dharmas* are nothing more than distinct "moments" in meditative equilibrium, then what is the connection between one *dharma* and the next? Since there seems to be no connection whatsoever, then how can we make sense of "dependent arising"? The point Nāgārjuna is making is that, like the Sarvāstivādin view, the Sautrāntikas are proposing inconsistent views of praxis: they say one must meditate on causality in order to be liberated, but then deny causality by saying that one must meditate on certain moments (*dharmas*) that are non-causal.

What is the significance of this criticism? Is Nāgārjuna saying that we should never meditate on causality, or that any meditation on *dharmas* is always wrong? Is he saying that the Abhidharma views of causation are useless because they are contradictory? It is doubtful Nāgārjuna wants us to come to this conclusion. Not only would this contradict the Buddha's own teachings about causation, it would mean that Nāgārjuna is trying to resolve the conflict between the Abhidharma traditions by renouncing their views altogether. However, Nāgārjuna knows that conflicts are not *caused* by "views," even if they are metaphysically or logically false. The problem lies much deeper than this for Nāgārjuna, and he knows that it has nothing to do with the Abhidharma view of *dharmas* or causation. Like the Buddha who criticized the "sixty two" views because the philosophers who proposed them were "caught in the net" of blind grasping, Nāgārjuna could care less about the metaphysical status of *dharmas*. His concern is why the Abhidharma philosophers think there is only one type of causal meditation, and why they think there is only

one way to attain liberation. By arguing for the "emptiness" of causation, he is reminding the Abhidharma Buddhists that causation, in the form of "dependent arising," is simply one of the many meditative practices taught by the Buddha and that it is therefore nothing more than a skillful "device" used to counter certain forms of attachment. In short, Nāgārjuna is recalling the Buddha's own words about causation: "if you cling to it, if you fondle it, if you treasure it, if you are attached to it, then you do not understand that the teaching is similar to a raft, which is for crossing over, and not for getting hold of."

Nāgārjuna's Critique of the Five Aggregates

In Chapter 4 of the *Kārikās* Nāgārjuna continues his criticism of the Abhidharma tradition by examining the "five aggregates" (*skandhas*), which, like causality, is central to Buddhist meditation. Beginning with the first aggregate, form (*rūpa*), Nāgārjuna applies his *reductios* against the idea that either form or the cause of form must exist in a substantial way:

> Apart from the cause of form,
> Form cannot be conceived.
> Apart from form,
> The cause of form is not seen.
>
> If apart from the cause of form, there were form,
> Form would be without cause.
> But nowhere is there an effect
> Without a cause
>
> If apart from form
> There were a cause of form,
> It would be a cause without an effect.
> But there are no causes without effects (Garfield, 1995, p. 48).

In these passage, Nāgārjuna is arguing against the idea that the *rūpa* aggregate exists essentially or contains *svabhāva* ("self nature"). If we keep in mind the Abhidharma view that a *dharma's* "self nature" is wound up with an explanation of causality, we will understand what Nāgārjuna is up to in these passages. The Abhidharma positions rest on the idea that a *dharma* is either different from or identical to its causal properties, and Nāgārjuna is trying to show is how both views lead to absurd conclusions.

If the Sautrāntikas are right in saying that a thing is essentially different from its cause, then we should be able to speak of cause and effect as two separate things. On the other hand, if the Sarvāstivādin are right in saying that a *dharma* is identical to its causal relations, then we should not be able to distinguish a cause from its effect since they are numerically the same. What Nāgārjuna says about both positions is contained in the above verses. It makes no sense, he says, to separate the aggregate *rūpa* from its cause because we then have the conclusion that *rūpa* can exist without any causal relations whatsoever, i.e., that cause and effect are two separate "things." This means that an effect can exist without a cause, and that a cause can exist without an effect. But according to Nagarjuna this is an absurd conclusion since nowhere do find causes without effects, or effects without causes. The two terms stand in a relation, thus making it logically impossible to assert their independence.

 In the next three verses, Nāgārjuna continues his critique by saying that if *rūpa* has an identifiable essence, something that could be classified as *svabhāva*, then it makes no sense to

speak of something else "causing" it to arise since it already exists as an independent entity. Similarly, a non-existent cause for *rūpa* is logically incoherent, since if it is non-existent then it makes no sense to claim that it could cause other things to arise:

> When form exists,
> A cause of the arising of form is not tenable.
> When form is non-existent,
> A cause of the arising of form is not tenable.
>
> Form itself without a cause
> Is not possible or tenable.
> Therefore, think about form, but
> Do not construct theories about form.
>
> The assertion that the effect and cause are similar
> Is not acceptable.
> The assertion that they are not similar
> Is also not acceptable (Garfield, 1995, p. 49).

The Sarvāstivādin position was already shown to lead to absurdity, and is therefore quickly dismissed in the above sections. If cause and effect are identical then it makes no sense to speak about causation since causation implies that there is some amount of change that occurs between things. The conclusion, as Nāgārjuna asserts in verse six, is that an essential effect is neither different from nor similar to an essential cause, since the whole idea of something having an essence, either a "self nature" or an "other nature," is absurd:

> The assertion that the effect and cause are similar
> Is not acceptable.
> The assertion that they are not similar
> Is also not acceptable.

It is important to note that Nāgārjuna does not propose another correct view of "form" over and above the Abhidharma traditions. He simply argues against their views by showing how their discussion is incoherent, and rather than propose another view he simply says to "think about form" but not to get attached to it:

> Therefore, think about form, but
> Do not construct theories about form.

This conclusion is then extended to all the other aggregates as well:

> Feelings, discrimination and dispositions
> And consciousness and all such things
> Should be thought of
> In the same way as material form.

The majority of arguments in the *Kārikās* proceed along these lines. The idea of *svabhāva*, essence, substance, or inherent nature is attacked for being inconsistent, which calls into question the Abhidharma insistence that a "correct" meditation on them is necessary liberation. From an analysis of causality and the aggregates, Nāgārjuna moves on to the other major factors in

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Abhidharma analysis of experience, performing the same task in each case: deconstructing the view of *svabhāva* without putting another definitive view of praxis in its place.

Nāgārjuna's Critique of Suffering, Attachment, and Bondage

In chapter 12, "Examination of Suffering," Nāgārjuna argues against the view that suffering can be explained in an essentialistic way. This is an important chapter of the *Kārikās* if only because it goes against the prevailing view in Indian philosophy that suffering needs to be an object of meditative praxis, i.e., that we need to meditate on the nature of suffering, how it arises, and what makes it cease in order to achieve liberation. Nāgārjuna begins by laying out four popular theories on how suffering arises:

> Some say suffering is self-produced,
> Or produced from another or from both.
> Or that it arises without a cause.
> It is not the kind of thing to be produced (Garfield, 1995, p. 33).

Nāgārjuna ends the verse by stating the conclusion: suffering is not the kind of thing that can be explained by appealing to some form of inherent production. He goes on to explain that suffering is not self-produced because that would entail speaking of production in isolation from causal conditions, i.e., production without any real cause and effect. It cannot come from something wholly other because the idea of essential difference precludes the necessary relationship that must adhere between conditioned things. The final two alternatives are rejected for leading to similar absurd conclusions: to say that suffering is both self-produced and other-produced is a basic contradiction, and saying that it arises without any cause whatsoever implies that things can arise from nowhere, which make little sense. Nāgārjuna ends the chapter with the following verse:

> Not only does suffering not exist
> In any of the fourfold ways:
> No external entity exists
> In any of the fourfold ways (Garfield, 1995, p. 34).

Nowhere in this chapter does Nāgārjuna say what suffering is in-itself. He offers no new theory on how it comes about, what its nature is, or what knowledge we need to have for liberation. His goal is simply to refute those theories that rely on an essentialistic understanding of suffering. Not only does suffering lack an essence (at least in the way the Abhidharma thinkers think of it), but it is absurd to speak of "external entities" as existing in this way as well. By attacking the idea that suffering has an essence, he is trying to undermine the view that suffering must be an object of meditative praxis.

Nāgārjuna's critique of essentialism in regards to suffering is also applied to the causes of suffering. According to a number of Indian philosophies, one needs to meditate on the causes of suffering in order to overcome it, and most traditions agreed that suffering, *samsāra*, bondage, and dis-ease is caused by attachment, either to the fruits of action, the *guṇas*, *Prakṛti*, an empirical "self," friends, relatives, or material things. Nāgārjuna also shares this view, but ascribes no significance to the idea that attachment needs to be an object of meditative praxis. Just as causality, *rūpa*, and suffering are "empty," then so too is attachment: without essence, substance, or inherent nature.

This criticism is developed further in the chapter 16, "Examination of Bondage," where Nāgārjuna argues against the idea that the essence of *samsāra* can be located in the act of "grasping." The gist of the argument is that if grasping (attachment) has an inherent nature then we should be able to identify the subject of attachment, the "grasper." In other words, if there is "grasping" then there must be some essential subject that actually does the grasping. But since no essential subject can be found, according to Nāgārjuna, it follows that the idea of an essential "grasping" is impossible.

> If grasping were bondage,
> Then the one who is grasping would not be bound.
> But one who is not grasping is not bound.
> In what circumstances will one be bound?

> If prior to binding
> There is a bound one,
> There would be bondage, but there isn't.
> The rest has been explained by the gone, the not-gone, and the goer (Garfield, 1995, p.41).

Nāgārjuna's goal here is to drive a wedge between bondage and the person bound. If bondage does have an essence, then, like all essences, it must exist as an independent phenomenon, separate from and prior to the person becoming bound. Similarly, if a person has an essence, a *svabhāva*, then it too must be separate from the act of grasping that is identified as bondage. What Nāgārjuna says above, however, is that this creates an untenable dualism. If the person "grasping" has an inherent nature independent from that act, then it is obviously not bound, and if it is not bound, then the whole idea of needing to get out of bondage makes no sense. The separation between the subject which grasps, the act of grasping, and the experience of being bound--all three of which are needed to identify an essential "grasping"--is a separation that excludes the necessary relationship that must adhere between these activities. It is like severing the relation between motion and moving, which, as Nāgārjuna explains in chapter 2 of the *Kārikās*, leads to the absurd conclusion that there is no movement.

The reification of suffering, attachment, and bondage that Nāgārjuna criticizes here goes hand in hand with a reification of non-attachment, or *nirvāṇa* as well. When *samsāra* is essentialized into a fixed principle with its own "inherent nature"--then *nirvāṇa* is separated off, distinguished from all other things, and reified into a realm of independence. Such a radical separation severs any possible relationship between being bound and achieving liberation, and leads to the conclusion that whatever is bound must necessarily remain bound, and whatever is released must stay released. As Nāgārjuna puts it:

> Whoever is bound is not released.
> Whoever is not bound does not get released (Garfield, 1995, p. 42).

This is an unacceptable conclusion for a Buddhist, or any other Indian tradition that seeks to liberate sentient beings, and is why Nāgārjuna ends the chapter with the following question:

> When you can't bring about nirvāṇa,
> Nor the purification of cyclic existence,
> What is cyclic existence,
> And what is the nirvāṇa you examine? (Garfield, 1995, p. 42).

Nāgārjuna's point here is to say that liberation is impossible if *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are substantially existent things. To think of grasping, bondage, suffering, and liberation as distinct objects of meditative praxis is to treat them as fixed and static entities, which then severs any possible relationship between them. If this happens, then something bound can never become unbound, and someone who suffers can never hope for release. Since this is an unacceptable conclusion for any Buddhist, then the problem lies in the way liberation is being conceived. In moving from causality, the aggregates, and the elements of existence to suffering, attachment, *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, Nāgārjuna has covered the major areas of Buddhist practice. In each case, he undermines the idea of *svabhāva*--thus undermining the assumption that these terms, categories, and experiences are necessary for liberation. If there is no essence to causality, to suffering, to attachment or to *nirvāṇa*, then they are, as Nāgārjuna says, "empty" of inherent nature; and if they are "empty," then the Abhidharma view that one *must* meditate on them is unwarranted.

Nāgārjuna's Critique of the Four Noble Truths

Chapter 24 of the *Kārikās* contains some of the most important sections of the entire text, and begins with an obvious rejoinder to everything Nāgārjuna has argued against. If it is true, as Nāgārjuna says, that causality, impermanence, suffering, bondage and so on are all "empty," then is there anything left to Buddhism at all? In other words, if it is true that the Abhidharma views of practice are "empty," and if it is true that their views of praxis are central to Buddhist meditation and doctrine, then Nāgārjuna seems to be undermining everything that is vital to Buddhism. He begins Chapter 24 by expressing this complaint in the following way:

> If all of this is empty,
> Neither arising nor ceasing,
> Then for you, it follows that
> The Four Noble Truths do not exist.
>
> If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,
> Then knowledge, abandonment,
> Meditation and manifestation
> Will be completely impossible.
>
> If these things do not exist,
> The four fruits will not arise.
> Without the four fruits, there will be no attainers of the fruits.
> Nor will there be the faithful.
>
> If so, the spiritual community will not exist.
> Nor will the eight kinds of person.
> If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,
> There will be no true Dharma.
>
> If there is no doctrine and spiritual community,
> How can there be a Buddha?
> If emptiness is conceived in this way,
> The three jewels
> are contradicted (Garfield, 1995, p. 67).

In the above passages, the Abhidharma opponent is saying that if Nāgārjuna is right about "emptiness," then the very practices that make Buddhist soteriologically efficacious will be destroyed. That is, if it is true that the Four Noble Truths are "empty," then there is no such thing as the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, no such thing as impermanence, "non-self," and *nirvāṇa*, and the practices that supposedly lead to liberation will be destroyed. Nāgārjuna responds to the opponent by saying that he has misunderstood the doctrine of *śūnyatā*:

> We say that this understanding of yours
> Of emptiness and purpose of emptiness
> And of the significance of emptiness is incorrect.
> As a consequence you are harmed by it (Garfield, 1995, p. 68).

Because the Abhidharma opponent takes "emptiness" to mean the non-existence of the Four Noble Truths, he is "harmed by it," in other words, he sees "emptiness" as destructive. But his reason for interpreting "emptiness" in this way stems from his own essentialistic view of practice. Nāgārjuna responds to this assumption by reversing the tables, saying that it is not "emptiness" that destroys practice, but the very idea that praxis has an inherent structure or *svabhāva*:

> If you perceive the existence of all things
> In terms of *svabhāva*,
> Then this perception of all things
> Will be without the perception of causes and conditions.
>
> Effects and causes
> And agent and action
> And conditions and arising and ceasing
> And effects will be rendered impossible (Garfield, 1995, p. 69).

Nāgārjuna goes on to say that the reason essences militate against causal conditions, arising, ceasing, agency, and so forth, is because the idea of *svabhāva* entails independence, and if things are independent then it is impossible for them to interact causally. If this is true, then there is no "dependent arising," and without "dependent arising" it is impossible to make sense of the ability to cultivate a virtuous life. In other words, without the process of change the whole idea of cultivating the "fruits" of a Buddhist life is rendered nonsensical. Nāgārjuna responds by saying that Buddhist praxis must be "empty" if we are to make any sense of the Four Noble Truths:

> If dependent arising is denied,
> Emptiness itself is rejected.
> This would contradict
> All of the worldly conventions.
>
> If emptiness is rejected,
> No action will be appropriate.
> There would be action which did not begin,
> And there would be agent without action.
>
> If there is *svabhāva*, the whole world
> Will be unarising, unceasing,
> And static. The entire phenomenal world
> Would be immutable.

> If it (the world) were not empty,
> Then action would be without profit.
> The act of ending suffering and
> Abandoning misery and defilement would not exist (Garfield, 1995, p. 72).

Nāgārjuna has thus shifted the debate. Whereas the Abhidharma thinker begins with the assumption that a "correct" meditation on the Dharma is a necessary prerequisite for liberation, Nāgārjuna undercuts this by saying that if one takes the Dharma as necessary then the very teachings of Buddhism are undermined. Like the first chapter on causation, Nāgārjuna is reminding the Abhidharma philosophers here about non-attachment. The Four Noble Truths are supposed to be medicinal "rafts" that help specific sentient beings overcome their attachments, but if one becomes attached to the practices of non-attachment then one has missed the entire point of Buddhism. Thus, Nāgārjuna says that the Dharma--which includes causation, impermanence, suffering, bondage, and liberation--is "empty."

Conclusion

During Nāgārjuna's life time there were prolific debates over issues such as the nature of personal identity, the mind, consciousness, the status of knowledge, causality, and the structure of experience. While it is possible to discuss these debates in purely metaphysical terms and apart from their context in Indian and Buddhist philosophy, we need to remember that the underlying issue in these debates is about the soteriological efficacy of Buddhist practice. The debates over causality early Buddhism, for example, are not about knowing how the world is structured or getting clear on the nature of causation in itself, but about how a meditation on *dharmas* allows us to overcome the causes of suffering, attachment, and bondage. Likewise, the debates over the "means of knowledge" (*pramāṇa*) between the Nyāya and Buddhist philosophers is not about gaining a disinterested perspective on how we know, or how we know that we know, but is about the role of knowledge and cognition in meditative praxis. Thus, while it might be interesting to examine these issues apart from how they operate in a metapractical discourse, and while we could discuss them in relation to general metaphysical, ontological, or epistemological problems, we would end up distorting the issue if we frame these debates apart from their metapractical context and apart from how they relate to issues of mediation, practice, and soteriology.

It is nevertheless common to confuse Nāgārjuna's metapractical critique--dealing with attachment to Buddhist praxis--with metaphysics because it appears that the Abhidharma philosophers are giving a metaphysical justification for their views. As argued in the preceding sections, however, it is doubtful that the conflict between the Abhidharma traditions can be framed in this way since their views are inseparably linked to praxis: they are not offering theories of causality in the abstract--but theories of meditative practice. Their problems surround questions over how to attain liberation and how to meditate rather than metaphysical truth.

The divisions between the two Mādhyamika schools that followed Nāgārjuna, the Prasaṅgika and Svātantrika, are separated by similar issues of praxis, and therefore immersed in a *skillful means* debate. The issue that separates them is about the best way to communicate "emptiness" to other Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools in India. The Svātantrika philosopher Bhavaviveka, for example, thought the best way to express "emptiness" is to use arguments that conform to accepted modes of argumentation. By relying on an independent syllogism (*svātantra-anumana*), he felt that the Mādhyamikan philosopher would be more effective in inducing an understanding of "emptiness" to others because he would then use inferential norms accepted by both parties. According to Chandrakīrti, however, the Mādhyamika system begins only with views and assertions of other people and does not rely on an independent inference. It admits only

provisionally the argument of the opponent and then shows, through *reductio ad absurdum* (*prasaṅga-vakya*) arguments, the untenability of the position being advanced. As Peter Della Santina notes, the issue for the Prasaṅgika is not whether an argument is true inferentially but whether it will work soteriologically:

> They have as their paradigm the conduct of the Enlightened Ones who by means of appropriate arguments edify the ignorant. In such a context, the validity of an argument is measured by its efficacy, not by its conformity to the principles of formal logic and epistemology (Della Santina, 1986, p. 69).

From a metapractical perspective, the debate between the two Mādhyamika schools is a debate about the nature and efficacy of the Buddhist system, and has little to do with strictly metaphysical or logical issues. Nāgārjuna's debate with the Abhidharma philosophers should be seen in a similar light: he is not asking how causation is possible at all, or which philosophical theory is most feasible, but why the Abhidharma thinkers are putting forth this particular view of praxis, and why they think it represents the highest soteriological wisdom of the Buddha.

By situating Nāgārjuna's thought within the all-important Mahāyāna doctrine of *skillful means*, we can see how his philosophy is embedded in a critical debate about the nature of Buddhist practice. As a critical doctrine, *skillful means* expresses the non-foundational nature of Buddhist practice and repeats the Buddha's warning about becoming attached to his teachings: "if you cling to, if you fondle it, if you treasure it, if you are attached to it, then you do not understand that the Dharma is similar to a raft." The Buddha's critical stance toward his teachings is repeated by a number of important Buddhist thinkers and texts throughout Buddhist history, including the *Lotus Sūtra*'s claim that all the Buddha's teachings are none other than "skill-in-means," the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*'s condemnation of those who preach Buddhist doctrine "without knowing the thoughts and inclinations of others," and the Ch'an/Zen master Lin-chi's bold assertions that there is no Buddha, no Dharma, no practice, and no such thing as enlightenment.

Skillful means exposes a particular form of Buddhist attachment that relies on elevating one set of practices above all the others and claiming that it is necessary for enlightenment. Aware that his disciples harbored such desires, the Buddha stressed the importance of not being attached to his own teachings, but the problem persisted long after his death. The Abhidharma tradition was cited above as an obvious example of not heeding the Buddha's warning by creating a rigid orthodoxy to regulate Buddhist practice. But similar forms of attachment can be found in every tradition throughout the history of Buddhism, including questionable alliances between Buddhism and the state in China, Japan, and Tibet, the formalized and hierarchical Sangha that maintains its influence throughout Thailand, and even the claim by some Nichiren traditions that the *Lotus Sūtra* is the *only* path to salvation. One can see similar forms of attachment in contemporary critical Buddhist scholarship as well. It is not uncommon to find Mādhyamika scholars arguing, for example, that "emptiness" is not only *the* central doctrine in Buddhism (Murti, 1955) but that anything that deviates from it is either non-Buddhist (Shiro, 1997) logically fallacious (Siderits, 1989), or a source of suffering in itself (Garfield, 1995). Some even remake Nāgārjuna into a metaphysical version of the Abhidharma by arguing that the realization of "emptiness" is the *only* path to liberation:

> Only with the simultaneous realization of the emptiness, but conventional reality, of phenomena and of the emptiness of emptiness, argues Nāgārjuna, can suffering be wholly uprooted (Garfield, 1995, p. 314).

Skillful means warns against reducing the Buddha's teachings to any single religious practice,

view, or philosophical position, as does Nāgārjuna who claims that "emptiness"—which he sees as the heart of Buddhist wisdom—is itself "empty." Such non-attachment to Buddhist doctrine is expressed positively in the figures of the bodhisattvas who reject all fixed doctrines and views and who refuse to "review" or "settle down" in any single perspective. The bodhisattva's ability to transcend all forms of attachments—including the doctrines of "emptiness," dependent arising, *nirvāṇa*, and all other paths leading to liberation—is the expression of Buddhist wisdom (*prajñā*) that is rooted in love and intimacy (*karuṇā*), a type of wisdom that, as expressed in the *Heart Sūtra*, has "gone, gone beyond, gone way beyond" all the forms, sense-data and elements of ordinary experience to a deeper sensitivity and compassion for others. That such wisdom can be reduced to a fixed methodology or set soteriological path (*mārga*) is precisely the type of reasoning Nāgārjuna and the doctrine of *skillful means* calls into question.

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