

Chapter One

Buddhism

Existence itself is not hung up

– Allen Ginsberg

The shunyata doctrine

We will begin by focusing on the meaning of, and the benefit to be found in, the doctrine of shunyata, as developed in Nagarjuna's (AD 243–300) Madhyamaka philosophy. Two good commentaries on this subject are T. R. V. Murti (), *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* and Frederick Streng (1933–1993), *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning*. As Murti says, the Madhyamaka (Middle Way), with its concept of shunyata (nothingness, emptiness, voidness, vacuity, hollowness and perhaps openness), is the central philosophy in Buddhism. Most scholars regard Nagarjuna as the most important Buddhist philosopher, second only to Gautama Buddha (563–483 BC) himself. We are therefore dealing with basic Buddhism—indeed, with the 'central philosophy of Buddhism'—if the Buddhist scholar T. R. V. Murti is right.

Some people would say there is something even more basic to Buddhism, namely the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path. However, it can be shown that the idea of shunyata follows from the Four Noble Truths and so is crucial to the Eightfold Noble Path. This can be presented as follows: the First Noble Truth tells us that all ordinary life in the world is full of *duhkha* (dis-ease, turmoil, conflict, suffering). The Second Noble Truth tells us that the cause of *duhkha* is *tanha*, which might best be translated as a 'grasping' that has both an intellectual or cognitive and passionate or affective component. The affective component refers to our emotional states—our states of craving, desire and wanting—and being attached to those wants. We are normally attached to possessing or holding securely to the various objects of our desire in the vain hope of making them stable and permanent and thus a reliable source of happiness. We cling to them with a kind of desperation, mistakenly believing that we need them or that we absolutely must have them if we are to be happy, content or at peace. The cognitive component is an attempt to grasp at Reality intellectually or conceptually and so hold and possess Reality securely in concepts and theories. We hope to possess the 'true view,' the true concept of Reality, the true judgment and hold that fast as something fixed and reliable.

However, neither the objects of desire nor the objects of thought are reliable; they are subject to impermanence, destruction, doubt, defeat and decay and so are not solidly, permanently or reliably grounded and fixed. They are not 'well-grounded,' we might say. They are not secure. Our suffering arises because we try to rely for happiness on the insecure things that cannot be relied on for happiness, and which divert us and distract us from what can be relied on for happiness. Because we try to grasp at everything—passionately and intellectually, cognitively and affectively—we are constantly frustrated and dissatisfied, restless and discontent. Reality does not yield to our grasping ways. This

'incessant frustration' is dukkha and ordinary life is full of it.

The Madhyamaka philosophy attempts to show us that all the views we can take about Reality and what it ultimately is are dubious, insecure and 'vacuous' or 'empty'. This vacuity or emptiness of all theoretical and conceptual constructions of Reality is summed up in the word 'shunyata'. The goal of this teaching of shunyata is not exactly to leave us without any views, concepts or beliefs about Reality; it is intended to empower and enable us via critical understanding to be 'non-attached' in relation to all views, concepts and beliefs about Reality. Thus, just as it is 'enlightened' or 'wise,' according to this kind of philosophical approach, to have desires if the desires do not have us, so we may have views, concepts and beliefs if they do not have us. In other words, we are able to critically 'see through' and 'let go' of these desires or beliefs in an inner act of meditation.

The Madhyamaka philosophy of Nagarjuna is called a negative or 'critical dialectic'. It reflects on the whole range of philosophical views, which people, including many prior Buddhists, have held about Reality. It undermines all those views by raising various arguments and criticisms against them, showing that those views cannot be 'true views' because they are self-contradictory in some way or because they require leaps of logic beyond what can be properly established. I will refrain from going in to the actual content of the Madhyamaka dialectical arguments that are used to undermine and reject all views. Firstly, the arguments, as they actually occur in Nagarjuna's text, are very difficult to summarise and explicate. They are expressed in rather obscure ways for the Westerner and layperson, and many of the views that Nagarjuna criticised were popular in his own time and place but are not so relevant today. Secondly, this undermining of all views can be presented in a much easier way for Westerners and laypeople to follow in the comparable arguments of our own Western tradition. We will therefore be looking to those Western philosophical arguments for reaching the 'detachment from all views' rather than Nagarjuna's own specific arguments. The Western philosophical arguments that undermine and dispose of the validity of all views are the contents of the next four chapters. For now, our discussion will be confined to the general intent behind this critical dialectic within the Buddhist context. I hope to show how and why the dialectic is thought to be relevant to the cessation of dukkha, or how and why such a critical dialectic is thought to have a soteriological effect on our lives.

Dukkha and its cessation

Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) said, 'existence itself is not hung up,' implying that we create our own hang-ups with our ways of thinking. We are, so to speak, our own worst enemies, generating hang-ups in our minds and then projecting them onto Reality, saying they are inherent in that Reality or in existence-itself. We then say life or Reality is to blame for our problems, as if existence-itself were hung-up or that hang-ups were somehow essential and therefore unavoidable in human life. Existence-itself, though, is void (shunyata) of hang-ups. The hang-ups are in the imaginary and dubious conceptual constructs or fundamental assumptions that we superimpose on Reality. They exist only in and by those constructs or assumptions. The 'gospel,' 'evangel' or 'good news' in the Buddhist teaching is that if we can undermine and let go of the fixity of those constructs and assumptions, and cease clinging on to them or grasping after them, we can undermine and let go of our hang-ups. We will then be restored to existence-itself, as it is 'originally' in-itself, devoid of our constructs and hang-ups. Our hang-ups are our dukkha, so we are talking about the means to the cessation of dukkha, which is the Buddhist goal.

We can restore ourselves to existence-itself and let go our hang-ups and so-called 'problems,' if we realise that our conceptual constructs of Reality 'have no self-existence,' as the Madhyamikas put it. They are not essential to, or inherent within Reality, but

rather, a kind of mental overlay of assumptions that we have projected onto and superimposed over that Reality. To say they are not inherent in Reality, or not 'given as-such' in Reality is to say they are not 'objectively valid,' not 'absolute' and not 'essential' or 'essential to Reality'. We will return to this point in the third chapter. We tend to assume mistakenly that our conceptual constructs or views are absolute, valid and essential to Reality. In other words, we tend to assume they have some 'self-existence,' some absolute existence and validity in their own right, rather than just being something that exists relative to ourselves, as our own mental projections or biases. We do not see that they are a reflection of our own 'partiality'—our partial, fragmented and subjectively skewed views of Reality. In making this mistaken assumption, we fall into delusion and we take our subjectively skewed assumptions to be ultimately real. The Madhyamaka teachings try to save us from such delusion.

Our hang-ups are dukkha; they exist only in and by our imaginary constructions of existence, which we superimpose on Reality and if we could drop our imaginary constructions, we could drop our dukkha. There is one major stumbling block to achieving this, which curtails our freedom. It is as follows: falsely believing, as we do, that our constructions are essential and given, and so have self-existence, we believe we are unable to deconstruct them. In short, we feel we are stuck with and in these constructions, because we take them as belonging to and being true of Reality, to be something essentially real, given, true and objectively valid. From this standpoint, it is impossible to see they are violable and can be 'null and void' or empty.

The main block to our self-liberation from dukkha then, is this belief in the self-existence, essentiality or truth of our imaginary conceptual constructions of Reality, our various views, pictures, interpretations, systems and ways of thinking about Reality, our biases about Reality, our subjectively skewed vision of Reality that we take to be real, ultimate, objective, non-deceptive and non-delusional. We assume, without a second thought, that we are *not* fundamentally mistaken, deceived or radically confused in our perceptions of and thoughts about Reality. The aim of Madhyamaka is to get us to reflect super critically on our various assumptive constructions—to see that they are not essential to Reality, they do not have ultimate validity or self-existence, they are not 'given' as the essential and true view. They show us that our views are highly questionable, either because they are self-contradictory, inconsistent and involve us in unwarranted leaps of logic, or because they have no more grounds or arguments in their favour than their opposite views. In other words, the aim is to show us that our views are not well grounded.

The negative or critical dialectic shows us that all views are inessential or untrue. No view stands out as more probably true of Reality than any other view. No particular view can establish itself as true or essential. Nothing we can say about Reality or existence-itself can be accepted as finally and ultimately valid, or even more probably valid, than anything else we might say about Reality. This is so, even if we happen to 'feel' or 'intuit' that it a particular view is valid. After all, we might be deceived and mistaken in our feelings and intuitions. We are thereby reduced by critical logic to a profound and wise silence about Reality. Realising that all conceptual constructions are useless and imaginary, we see that Reality or existence-itself is void (shunyata) of these superimposed structures, and thereby restored to its original or pristine purity. To borrow a phrase from Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), 'whereof one cannot speak, thereof one should remain silent.' Such critically born silence—a silence born of critical insight or understanding—is the true silence of meditation.

We could say further, that the self, or we ourselves, are restored to the original purity of existence-itself. How so? The self, or we ourselves, are likewise equally devoid of conceptual constructions. In other words, the conceptual constructions we superimpose on ourselves—our self-perceptions, self-reflections and self-images as a separate and at least

semi-permanent ego—are not essential or 'given' as such. We too are empty, just as our views about the world are empty. By seeing through our self-images, a 'person' is restored to existence-itself as devoid of constructs. There are no grounds, in other words, for separating the so-called 'self' from the so-called 'not-self'. These conceptions of self and not-self, of self as essentially different from not-self, from the 'other' or from the rest of the world are themselves voided concepts. They are only words and theories. When all such concepts are voided and annulled, we are restored to existence-itself. In this meditation, there only is existence-itself, at that point. Since existence-itself is not hung-up, you yourself are not hung-up. There is no 'you,' separate from existence-itself, as the supposed source and victim of such hang-ups. The hang-ups are empty.