

Colorful Nothing: Emptiness in the Madyamaka

JIMMY PIANKA

The history of Buddhist philosophy is rich with debate and disagreement, but this paper will focus on the particular school of thought known as the Madhyamaka, or Middle Way view. This perspective, widely regarded as the apex of Buddhist metaphysics, charts a centrist path between the extremes of material realism and nihilism. The work of Nagarjuna, the Madhyamaka's original architect, will be our primary source for understanding the concept of emptiness, though a small amount of Chandrakirti's later commentary will provide additional support. Further research was conducted through interviews at various monasteries in Boudhanath, Nepal.

Our experience of the world is populated with a wide range of phenomena—things like physical objects, forces, emotions, and people—all of which appear to be substantial entities that exist in a very real sense. When you eat your breakfast there is a thing that you consume, there is a thing that consumes it, and then there is a process (another thing) that the food undergoes during which it is transformed into more things still. The relationships between these things seem clear; we maintain rigid distinctions between them, and we conceive of them as separate and independent phenomena, each deserving its own ontological ground. This form of realism is founded on the notion that all phenomena possess at their core some *essence*—some immutable substance in which the phenomena's intrinsic identity is contained and which serves as the bearer of whatever attributes the phenomena displays.

Jimmy Pianka is a senior majoring in Cognitive and Brain Science and Philosophy at Tufts University. Last year he studied abroad in India and Nepal where he studied Buddhism and the politics of Tibetan exile. His interests include philosophy of mind, philosophy of religion, and aesthetics.

This assumption, while seemingly commonsense, is understood in Buddhist thought as the deepest and most tenacious delusion to plague the human mind. It is a natural misconception—after all, the phenomena we experience affect us in tangible ways: fire burns us when we touch it, and a slab of wood taken to the face is going to raise a welt. The fact that these experiences are so compelling, however, is a distraction from the fact that neither the fire nor the wood exist as such. When we search for their essence, we find that all phenomena—everything from galaxies to atoms to people—are ultimately empty of the identities we ascribe to them. Phenomena do not exist as independent entities that can be isolated and understood *sui generis*, but rather as momentary forms whose existence is entirely dependent on their relationships to other phenomena and the conceptual labels we impute upon them.

At first glance the idea of emptiness as the ultimate nature of things seems to invite charges of nihilism. It appears as if Buddhists dismiss the whole of reality as mere illusion, as if it were some phantom masquerading above a great void of nothingness that alone deserves our attention. On face value this is a valid objection: if nothing truly exists, then what is this all around me? There is clearly *something* here, so how can this something arise from nothing? If the ultimate nature of things is emptiness, then how are there things in the first place to possess this nature? These questions, though sensible, arise from a misunderstanding of what is meant by emptiness. Such a view treats emptiness itself as existing in terms of having an essence, as if there were truly some void out there with the phenomenal world floating above it like mist. Admittedly it is easy to be so misled when terms like “ultimate nature” are employed, but as we shall see, emptiness itself is just as empty as anything else. This is the cornerstone of the Madhyamaka that allows it to maintain a balancing act between the two extremes of material realism, the view that all phenomena exist inherently and independently in and of themselves, and nihilism, the paradoxical view that nothing exists. In the end we are left with a worldview in which emptiness and form, truth and delusion, are as interdependent as the phenomena they describe.

The Conventional Level

According to the Madhyamaka, there are two perspectives by which we can understand phenomena: we can speak of them in terms of their ultimate nature, or in terms of the conventional paradigm in which we live our lives. These are known as the Two Truths; neither takes ontological primacy over of the other—we are simply only aware of the conventional

level. In order to get a firm grasp on what is meant by emptiness, we will first examine our conventions and identify the assumptions we make about the nature of the world. Once this is established, we will be prepared to dig deeper into their compositions and discover how said assumptions are unfounded and how all phenomena are ultimately empty of inherent existence. Finally, we will turn to the emptiness of emptiness in order to rescue us from nihilism and unite the Two Truths into the coherent centrist philosophy known as the Middle Way.

Let us begin with a tree. When we look at a tree we are aware of its many components—its branches, leaves, roots, and so forth—but in general we conceptualize their unity as forming the basis for a greater object still: an identity that begins at the furthest tips of its roots, continues to and includes the outermost atoms of its entire surface, and penetrates completely through to its core. We can stand back, look at the structure as a whole, and say, “*that tree exists.*” Now what do we mean when we use the verb “to exist”? Jay Garfield, in his commentary on Nagarjuna’s *Treatise on the Middle Way*, says that for a thing to exist in terms of our general understanding of the word it must “have an essence discoverable upon analysis, for it to be a substance independent of its attributes, [and] for its identity to be self-determined by its essence” (315). To perceive phenomena as existing in this way is to perceive them on the conventional level, which is just one of the Two Truths. This is how the vast majority of us spend our entire lives experiencing the world: we conceptualize it as being composed of distinct, independent phenomena which can be isolated and understood non-relationally as entities which exist *inherently by their own natures*. We are aware of the various causes that bring these phenomena about and the other phenomena with which they interact, but we perceive sharp discriminatory borders between them and understand them as separate and coherent concepts.

The Ultimate Level: A Physical Approach

We will examine a few of the arguments in the Madhyamaka tradition that demonstrate the emptiness of phenomena, but our first line of attack should follow a more familiar course—namely, the science of physics and its quest to unravel the material world. Since as early as the Greeks, philosophy has been asking the basic questions of “What is reality?” in the form of “What kind of stuff is it made out of?” Democritus and Leucippus hypothesized that their atom was the most basic building block of reality, and when our microscopes first caught sight of those little storms we rejoiced in our discovery of the bricks-and-mortar of the universe. As we

probed deeper, however, we found atoms to be composed of even smaller particles. *Those* particles turned out to yield the same curious results, and now, despite the creation of increasingly powerful particle accelerators with which scientists collide subatomic particles to search for smaller ones in the wreckage, no substantial, indivisible object has been located that could feasibly give matter its substance. Despite our effort, we have found only a very colorful nothing.

That being said, our search's failure by no means implies its futility. Perhaps we simply have further to dig. Matthieu Ricard, however, a former physicist who is presently a monk and the French interpreter for the Dalai Lama, presents a compelling argument as to why the existence of an indivisible elementary particle is a logical absurdity. Suppose we have such particles—how then do they combine to construct matter? It seems safe to say that they can do so by either coming into direct contact with one another or by maintaining their distance but relating in some other way. If they touch, say the west side of one particle touches the east side of the other, then we are dealing with objects which are still divisible into constituent regions and are thus not elementary. As long as we conceive of these particles in three dimensions we will always confront this problem.

To avoid this dilemma, these particles would have to exist in only one dimension—thus they would be essentially mathematical points. This, however, generates some problems: if the particles are points, then when they touch the whole of one would be in contact with the whole of the other, and thus both points would fuse into one. In such a model the construction of any macroscopic structure is impossible—the whole universe would be fused into a single point. If the particles did not touch, however, and they were held together by something akin to the strong and weak nuclear forces present in the current model of the atom, then the distance between them becomes nonsensical. The locations of two non-touching, one-dimensional points can only be related by positing at least another dimension, and since points are merely theoretical constructs and occupy no space at all, the distance between these two points would stretch into infinity. Thus the relative scales of size we perceive in the world would lose their foundations, and we could in theory have the entire universe situated between two particles. Consequently, the entire concept of an elementary particle is implausible and it is only through emptiness that forms can exist (Ricard 4/16).

So let us return to our tree. We were last talking about its *treeness*: the underlying essence that provides its identity as a particular tree. Where then can we find this *treeness*? The intuitive answer is that it arises from a synthesis of its parts, and not just from a few of them but from all of them when they are combined and arranged in a particular way. Notice

now that we have already retreated inward to define the tree in terms of its constituent components, which are, of course, just more objects that need explaining. What then makes up *their* essences, and the essences of *their* components? No matter how deeply we penetrate into the tree, everything will stubbornly remain divisible into something smaller. If we look at the wood we find that it breaks down into its cells, the cells break down into mostly cellulose and other polymers, the cellulose is composed entirely of glucose, and we know the story from here.

After such a descent, how can we say that there is any *thing* which we can call a tree? We have found nothing of substance to bear this label. Instead we have found an infinitely complex series of relationships and interdependencies: the tree only exists in terms of its parts, those parts only exist in terms of their parts, and so on *ad infinitum*. With no essence, we can say that the tree does not exist inherently and is thus empty. This is not to say that the tree does not exist at all, for clearly there is some form to be perceived, but it is to say that the treeness of this form, its supposed identity, is merely an arbitrary and artificial concept which we have foisted upon it. The tree is empty of inherent existence or exists only in terms of other things, which in Madhyamaka terms is to say that it is *dependently arisen*. On a conventional level there is some form called a tree, but any analytic search for the ultimate essence of that form will come back empty-handed.

Of course, this same line of reasoning is not limited to trees but applies to all phenomena—even immaterial things like emotions are empty since they are never found without relations to other things. Anger requires a subject, an object, the particular causes that brought it about, and the mind that experiences it; there is no such thing as pure anger blazing somewhere on its own. The relationships that define phenomena are likewise empty because they rely on the objects they relate to exist. No concrete thing can ever be isolated and identified—we simply find particular causal relationships and orientations which are by definition inextricably connected to their particular causes and effects.

The Emptiness of Emptiness

So far we have ducked beneath the first extreme of material realism, the belief that phenomena exist on their own by means of their essences, but where does this leave us? To say that all phenomena are empty appears to be asserting an intuitively unacceptable metaphysical nihilism. If nothing exists, then what am I looking at? From what do all these wonderful colors, sounds, and emotions I experience arise? In addition to the protests

of perception, emptiness as ultimate nature seems to generate some contradictions. When we employ concepts like dependencies and relationships we necessitate the existence of at least two characters—for after all, how would nonexistent entities relate? How can a relationship exist if the objects it connects do not exist to begin with? It seems that the concepts on which emptiness depends are rooted in exactly that which it denies.

All of these questions, however sensible they may seem, are rooted in the same faulty reasoning that Buddhism attempts to dissolve. The point is not to treat emptiness as if it were a *real void*—some ultimate property that defines the *true* essence of phenomena. If we do this we treat emptiness as if it existed inherently, despite the fact that we cannot explain what this would even mean, and we have simply substituted one essence for another. When we searched for the essence of the tree and found nothing, it wasn't that we *found a nothing*—as if that nothing were a thing to be found—rather, we simply did not find the tree; it was a wholly negative statement. The tree's emptiness is merely a concept used to characterize the dependent nature of *that tree*, which means that we imputed it artificially in just the same way we imputed the concept of the tree as a whole in the first place. The tree has no inherent existence or essence, but this lack is not itself a thing but simply the fact that the tree is only a convention; 'without essence' is the way in which the tree exists.

That said, we can see how the tree's emptiness is dependent on the tree to exist and is thus empty itself! Furthermore, *that* emptiness is dependent on the previous emptiness and is thus empty, and so on *ad infinitum*. We are not talking about the disappearance of the phenomenal world but rather the illusory manner in which it ultimately exists. As Garfield says in his commentary, "Emptiness is not different from conventional reality—it is the fact that conventional reality is conventional" (316). We cannot talk about its ultimate nature because to use language is to employ concepts and thus reify it, restricting ourselves to the conventional level. A true and lasting understanding of the ultimate nature of phenomena can only be realized experientially through meditation; this is by and large the purpose of Buddhist spiritual practice.

Now we have reached the most essential concept of the Middle Way and can understand what is meant by the phrase "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." All phenomena are empty in that they do not exist inherently but only in relation to other phenomena, but likewise emptiness can only be understood in relation to the particular phenomena it describes. Thus we have avoided both extremes of essentialism and nihilism and have arrived at a unity of the Two Truths. They are like the two sides of a coin or a mobius strip, inseparable and inexplicable without the other. The ultimate reality of things and our misperceptions are themselves

interdependent, and thus the nature of the world is both form and emptiness, being and nonbeing, inextricably intertwined.

Arguments for Emptiness in the Madhyamaka

Now that we've explored the heart of emptiness as a concept, we will examine two ancillary arguments that the traditional authors of the Madhyamaka employed to flesh out the worldview that emptiness implies. It is prudent to cover the emptiness of emptiness quickly in order to answer the questions that the notion initially prompts, but the following arguments provide some of the finer details that may not have been immediately obvious.

(1) *The Refutation of Causation*

The first argument we will examine is a *reductio* in which Nagarjuna, the Madhyamaka's central proponent, examines the process that underlies causes and effects to demonstrate that here too no essence can be found. The argument goes as follows: if a phenomenon comes into being, we can say that its causes can have one of four possible relationships with their effect:

1. The causes are the same as the phenomenon (meaning they share the same essence).
2. The causes are different from the phenomenon.
3. The causes are both the same and different as the phenomenon, or
4. The causes are neither the same nor different than the phenomenon. (Donden 4/15)

We can immediately throw out the third possibility since it is a contradiction. Likewise, we can discard the fourth, since it is either a contradiction or is to be interpreted that the phenomenon is uncaused and springs into being spontaneously. Additionally, we can eliminate the first possibility since it is circular: if the causes of the phenomenon are identical to the phenomenon itself, then the phenomenon would have had to have existed prior to its own origination in order to bring itself about. This leaves us with the model that most people take to be true: effects are brought about through causes that are something other than themselves.

Nagarjuna, however, finds this option equally untenable. In the first chapter of his *Treatise on the Middle Way*, he states the following:

[The] Essence of entities
 Is not present in the conditions, etc....
 If there is no essence,
 There can be no otherness-essence. (I:3)

The first two lines point out that no essence can be satisfactorily located in causes of phenomena. A burn is not present in fire and a welt is not present in the slab of wood used to draw it out. The final two lines state that if phenomena depend on their essences from other objects, and if no such essence is present in those objects, then with no other place from which that essence could come it follows that phenomena arise without an essence. Having lost this basic ground of being, phenomena thereby lose the basis by which they can be differentiated, and thus interdependent phenomena are really just the same thing. Given this lack of difference, the notion of obtaining an essence from another becomes absurd since there are no true others from which this essence can be obtained. Therefore, it is impossible for phenomena to come about by virtue of causes different than themselves since this would result in an internal contradiction (Garfield 112).

Having refuted our model of causation, Nagarjuna is then forced to explain, at least in some sense, the pattern of cause and effect we perceive in the conventional world. In the end he does not do this in a way that we would find fully satisfactory, but since he believes phenomena are ultimately nonexistent to begin with, his obligations here are considerably lessened. Rather than point to explicit causes that bring about their effects through some enigmatic power, Nagarjuna instead appeals to the various conditions that precede an effect to explain its appearance without ascribing them any active involvement in the process. Thus, fertile soil, steady sunlight, and a strong water supply are the conditions necessary for the growth of our tree, but none of these are causes in the sense that they exert some power to provoke the tree's growth. Regularities and logical consistency are what count (Garfield 103).

When pressed about why regularities exist at all, Madhyamaka philosophers point out that regularities are only intelligible in reference to larger regularities, and ultimately, the question is unanswerable: "The fact of explanatorily useful regularities in nature is what makes explanation and investigation possible in the first place and is not something itself that can be explained. After all, there is only one universe, and truly singular phenomena, on such a view, are inexplicable in principle" (Garfield 116). Thus our final outlook is a typical Madhyamaka stance: on the conventional level we may acceptably suppose active causal powers in the conditions necessary for an effect, but ultimately no such powers exist—in the end our

explanations are grounded on a mythical system built from a consistency we perceive in nature. Any attempt to decode this consistency will, if carried out long enough, climb higher and higher into further consistencies until it reaches the outer limits of the universe, at which point reason hits a wall and becomes arbitrary.

(2) *No Self*

Finally, let us examine the famous Sevenfold Reasoning, an argument Chandrakirti introduced to demonstrate the absence of a true self or ego. This argument is often seen with a chariot as its focus, but due to the profundity of the point and its importance to Buddhism, we will use the self instead. Additionally, although it logically follows that the self would be included in our discussion of the emptiness of all phenomena, I think it deserves some special treatment since there are few things which to us seem more real. That said, the argument follows the basic format of trying to isolate and identify the inherently existing person in relation to the body and mind. When all the possibilities have been exhausted and no such thing can be found, it follows that our self-perception as separate and autonomous individuals is an illusion—we are just as interdependent as anything else.

Assuming the self exists, Chandrakirti gives seven possibilities for its relationship to its parts. These parts, hereafter unexplained, are typically thought of as things like the body, the conscious will, memories, sets of character traits, and so on, but they can include anything you would qualify as an essential characteristic of your identity. These seven possibilities are as follows:

1. The self is the same as or equal to its parts.
2. The self different than its parts.
3. The self is dependent on or exists by virtue of its parts.
4. The self is based on or contained in its parts.
5. The parts are based on or contained in the self.
6. The self is the collection of its parts.
7. The self is the proper shape or arrangement of its parts.

Many of these will be surprisingly easy to dismiss. First, if the self were the same as its parts, then it would have to be either equal to them on

an individual basis or equal to them as a whole. If it were equal to them each individually, then we would have to say that the self is many, which is clearly not the case. Furthermore, if the self were equal to the sum of its parts, then we would be forced to admit that we were someone new every time we clipped our finger nails, ate a meal, or had a new thought. This isn't what we have in mind when we think of a self—our notion of identity is something that persists through change.

Next, the self cannot be something different from its parts because then we would somehow be able to apprehend it as existing separately from them. Theoretically we should be able to strip all the parts away and still have the self, which is something we can't do. Furthermore, the self can't depend on or exist by virtue of its parts because to do so would entail difference, *mutatis mutandis* for the self being based on or contained in its parts and the parts being based on or contained in the self. Additionally, the self cannot be the collection of its parts because this would allow us to dismantle it, rearrange the parts in any gruesome order, and still call it the self. This makes no more sense than dismantling a chariot, tossing its wheels and handlebars into a shiny brass heap, and then readying the horses for a ride.

Finally, we are left with the possibility that the self is the proper shape or arrangement of its parts. If the self can be reduced to a shape, then it is a kind of physical thing—a precise arrangement of particles. This, however, leaves out all the mental, non-physical components such as thoughts and values. How are things with no shape to be included in this geometry? If you're a materialist and you believe that all of mind can be reduced to neurons and electricity, then so far so good. But as we noted in the first possibility, this option would freeze a wholly-physical self into some fixed statue incapable of change: the loss or addition of even one particle would constitute a change in identity. As we know, people gain and lose weight, dye their hair, and get tattoos—not to mention the fact that our bodies are constantly refreshing their cells. Even if you consider the shape to be a pattern through which the parts are recycled—like the way a whirlpool exists in a stream despite never containing the same water for longer than an instant—this pattern, being fixed by definition, would not be able to account for the changes humans are known to undergo (Chandrakirti 83–84).

Furthermore, the notion of the self existing as something independent is still untenable. Conventionally that whirlpool may persist, but ultimately it's just a concept available from our perspective, something totally dependent on its components and circumstances for its existence—and beyond that there isn't even a stream. You as a persona exist in a conventional sense like the tree, or the chair, or the candle, but if you start digging through

the layers in search of some gem that you could isolate and call yourself, you'll find only bridges arching out in all directions, interdependencies that criss-cross to various forces and histories until your ego gets lost in the webbing.

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