

The Middle Way

The Art of Realisation

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Introduction

“Those disciples, Ananda, either now or after I am gone, who dwell with themselves as their own island, with themselves as their own refuge, with no other refuge; with the teaching as their island, with the teaching as their refuge, with no other refuge—it is these disciples, Ananda, who will be for me topmost of those keen on the training.”

The Buddha (SN 47:9)

The purpose of the discussion that follows is plain but difficult. There is a method to be found by which a clear understanding of reality can be established. That understanding is liberating in its finest sense. The person who discovered the method over 2500 years ago became liberated by his own effort and was given the name *The Awakened One*, **The Buddha**. After his realisation and after some hesitation he decided to share his method with others so that they could become free as well.

Things do not, however, stay unaltered in this world. In about hundred generations, numerous cultures and traditions have coated the teaching with layers upon layers of their own reinterpretations, not to mention their tendencies of creating *religions* of things that appear difficult to comprehend.

The present situation is certainly demanding. The general idea of the method itself is not at all too difficult to understand and follow. What is difficult, however, is to

discover it under the layers that have nothing to do with the entirely nonreligious method, or even worse, there are traditions that lead us completely astray.

From the position of present moment, the authenticity of Buddhist texts is next to impossible to credibly verify. “How do we know what the Buddha really taught?” is a question that many Buddhists may ask, or should ask. I for one am not happy with the contents of the countless texts I have studied, nor with the explanations given whenever incoherencies and absurdities emerge.

There is, however, a way of assessing any piece of Buddhist text or teaching, and to see if it corresponds with the original teaching. The method I am referring to is provided by the great logician **Nagarjuna** who lived some 500 years after the Buddha. Nagarjuna’s *Madhyamaka* - The Middle Way provides us the logic by which the Buddha’s teaching can be assessed. This is because the Buddha taught The Middle Way and Nagarjuna’s dialectic is the tool by which this Middle Way becomes accessible through times.

It may initially appear bizarre for many readers to learn that the Buddha’s teaching can have absolutely *nothing at all* to do with religious faith – bearing in mind that most Buddhists themselves consider Buddhism as a religion. The logic of the reasoning that will be discussed in this text will show that the teaching is about the exact *opposite* of religious faith:

Reality, as it appears to human beings, provides limitations to what can and cannot be argued about its nature. The causal system we are able to observe falsifies the human tendency to *reify* phenomena. All religions require the acute presence of reification,

generally directed to unempirical phenomena perceived as gods and such. Since the Buddha's teaching is entirely man-made, Buddhists cannot resort to the common metaphysical gymnastics that religions engage in when explaining that "Yes, we agree with you about how the reality stands, but you see, *we know* who has created all this." Buddhists who mistake the Buddha's teaching for a religion follow their primal instincts by reifying the teaching and coating it with fantasies and stories that soothe their delusional minds. The Buddha, in contrast, taught nonreification.

The Buddha himself was a *critical thinker*; he was an *empiricist*, a *pragmatic*, a *phenomenologist*, a *researcher* proper in time way before modern science. Scientific methods were already there, around him and his contemporaries. He was an *observer* and *experimentalist*. He could discern between what works and what doesn't. And Nagarjuna translated his teaching into the language of logic that endures time.

There is a thematically connected term, *spiritual*, that is easily confusing because it refers to both religious and psychological issues. Buddha's teaching is foremost psychological and unreligious but people have transformed it into brands of religions. I will use the term *method* quite a lot in this text to point out that we are dealing with a nonreligious *tool*, which the Buddha himself referred to as a *raft*. I will deal with the raftness of the teaching throughout the text.

It's all evolutionary, instructs the Buddha

For evolutionary reasons (impermanence, interdependence, and emptiness) I decided to give rise to this text in a gradual manner. Sections and chapters were added and revisions and additions here and there. To keep the development easy to follow, I used version numbering (starting with v. 1.0). I also marked new or revised sections in the table of contents so they were easy to spot when opening a new version.

There is not much more I want to say about these things and I feel that too much has already been said. The text is neither unfinished nor unchanging, however. As life, all things manifest in the excluded middle.

The Buddha's discovery

The Buddha's realisation (awakening) under the Bodhi tree has been described in countless texts and stories. Those stories exemplify our main problem with Buddhism: How can we know what piece of knowledge represents the Buddha's authentic teaching?

In many texts the Buddha's awakening is described as a process taking place in stages during one night. In that process he saw his past lives, first a few, then hundreds, soon hundreds of thousands.

When we say the Buddha saw his past lives, what exactly do we mean by it? Please note that the Buddha did not try to fabricate reality by inventing fantastic imagery to lead people astray. It is the people themselves who have the desire to *inflate* things they see valuable.

If we are to interpret that the Buddha saw *himself* as particular persons in the past with particular names and positions, as many Buddhist interpretations claim, we are misinterpreting the Buddha's teaching. Why is this so? This is so because what the Buddha realised was the proper functioning of the evolution in which all life forms and all nonlife forms are *interdependent* and give rise to each other. He simply realised that everything we see around us is part of the totality that gives rise to everything there is, and that there is an overall process of evolution operating by which change manifests. The nature of reality as inescapably interdependent, where things arise as other things arise, have become known to us as the principle of *dependent origination*. As is explained by Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka – The Middle Way, for us humans, the whole universe operates by this principle.

Buddha's clear vision of evolution differs from that of Charles Darwin's later interpretation in one fundamental aspect. Both the Buddha and Darwin understood that all lifeforms are necessarily developed from other, earlier forms. But where our modern project of evolutionary inquiry inspects specific temporal connections between specified consecutive species, the Buddha understood that all forms are interdependent not only temporally, but also *spatially*, meaning that all forms existing right now are interdependent among each other. Furthermore, he did not distinguish between lifeforms and nonlifeforms, because he understood it that all concepts, such as a lifeform and nonlifeform, are superimposed by us and that ultimately they follow the same interdependencies as all phenomena.

Thus, the Buddha did not see *himself* in any past instance because what the Buddha understood accurately is the fact that he is not the same even after a blink of an eye. That there cannot be any permanent person is the true understanding of *rebirth*; that we are under renewal at every single moment. There is not a single thing to be found in this universe that is permanent, instead all phenomena are under constant change and this gives rise to inescapable principle of *impermanence*. We have now had more than 2500 years to test whether we could find any single phenomenon that violated the impermanence criterion. None has.

The interdependency of all phenomena brings another central principle, which informs us that all phenomena must be *empty* of permanent identity or self-nature. This rather logical consequence of interdependency simply means that all phenomena *share* their existence with other phenomena. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh uses the concept

interbeing to accurately portray the nature of being for all forms in the universe.

Since impermanence (change) cannot be empirically refuted, interdependency is the *only* possible way for things (i.e., phenomena) to exist. This is simply because for a thing to exist independently of other things, it would need to possess self-nature, an identity separate from others. For a self-nature to exist it would need to be independent of the self-natures of other things. Otherwise it could not be called self-nature. It should also be permanent because if a self-nature were constantly changing, it would lack precisely the quality it claimed to be, being the self-nature of a thing.

Above, permanence and independency of things become refuted using the empirical starting point where not a single human being has ever observed any permanent thing in reality. Another way to arrive at the same conclusion is to analyse whether a permanent thing could exist, even in principle. In order for a permanent thing to be permanent, it needs to exist permanently. It cannot arise and it cannot cease because it is permanent. Permanency becomes refuted even before its arising as the arising is exactly what a permanent thing cannot do because that would violate its permanence.

The only way we have empirically observed is things conditioning other things in their arising and ceasing. All things are therefore *empty* of intrinsic nature and thus they are *interdependent* and *impermanent*.

It is one thing to follow logical reasoning from afar and entirely another to realise the unavoidable forces in one's own life. To get in touch with our hardwired conditionings we need to see how these forces influence our *selves*.

If all phenomena are empty of self-nature, also human beings must be such. There cannot be a single permanent

entity in us to be found, not a single. In everyday language we use the term I, self, and mine, and that is quite ok as long as we understand that these terms are only *conventions* to facilitate communication, and that such entities need not exist in any other sense.

It is common for non-Buddhists to be confused about the existence or nonexistence of self and therefore we often suggest a proper study by which a person can learn about the truth in this matter. The study goes something like this: investigate who you are and try to find your proper self which is not something else, such as *your* body, *your* feelings, *your* perceptions, *your* attitudes, *your* desires, *your* consciousness, *your* mind, etc. What is that self who has all these characteristics? Take your time and see if you can find it.

For most Buddhists the absence of self becomes clear as we can meditate on how all phenomena arise, endure, and pass away. It is actually much easier to test than what you may think. Take any thought on your mind, take any feeling you have or have ever had. Do they not arise, endure for as long as they do, and then vanish at some point? By examining the way your mind operates, you quite soon come to realise that there does not, not even in principle, be something like a self in any other sense than what we use in the conventional parlance . Analogically, it is much easier for us to talk about a “house” than to list the countless parts which it consists of. This is why we use names and concepts, but we should not mistake them for more than names and concepts.

So, what did the Buddha realise that was not realised by others? He woke up to see the universal characteristics of all phenomena, living and nonliving alike: impermanence, interdependence, and emptiness. It turns out that by deeply

understanding these interconnected characteristics we become free and can attain unshakeable peace and happiness.

The Four Noble Truths

The Buddha realised the basic working properties of the universe: impermanence, interdependency, and emptiness. He also understood clearly the human condition: due to our *ignorance* we are trying to capture happiness by the use of methods that sooner or later harm us, and therefore no lasting happiness can be obtained.

He saw clearly that the human life contains much suffering. When we lose we suffer, when we gain we suffer, because we fear losing what we have gained. All kinds of external events toss us, first to one direction and then to another. There is no peace when you never know what happens next.

The Buddha understood that what causes all this suffering is our tendency to run after and cling to desirable objects (people, money, fame, you name it). Symmetrically, our suffering is strengthened by our inclination to avoid objects we dislike and hate. Behind both these behavioural patterns is ignorance. Our ignorance prevents us from seeing through our conditioning (we behave like Pavlov's dogs, dripping saliva all over, without realising our miserable state).

Fortunately, the Buddha also discovered the cure for our suffering. By removing ignorance we can abolish suffering and attain freedom. For that purpose we need to know how ignorance is to be removed.

The first question is: Ignorance of what? What is it that most people are ignorant about here? They are ignorant about the working properties of themselves to start with. These working properties contain not only the operation of their own bodyminds, but also their connection to what they consider the reality they are living in.

Most people are indoctrinated in believing that the whole point in life is to achieve some change in the reality of others. If you don't leave any mark you have not existed at all. So, life becomes a struggle against countless things that take place in the reality we live in.

The first lesson to learn is to come to see how the reality can only be approached through the bodymind of ours. There is no other way for us to experience the world. Next lesson involves an understanding that our bodymind *itself* defines how we perceive reality. Reality as such is silent and bears no interest. From these simple initial steps an understanding needs to grow that leads toward further investigation along the path.

Due to ignorance, people carry and cultivate erroneous views which cause them to consider the impermanent to be permanent. What needs to be uprooted is our instinctive tendency to *reify* things, to see phenomena as genuinely separate, independent, and permanent entities. Through learning and practice one comes to realise that only interdependency and impermanence can be established.

The ultimate goal of realisation is reached when you become relaxed and at peace *because* you understand that all phenomena are truly interdependent and impermanent. You cease carrying hidden desires to be saved by something, as you come to understand that there is nothing to be saved.

The Middle Way

The Buddha realised the Middle Way. The path to awakening is not found in practicing severe austerities; punishing the flesh does not deepen our understanding, even though some have assumed otherwise. The Buddha also needed to gain experiential knowledge and see for himself how the mind control based on food deprivation operates. He nearly overdid it, but luckily for all of us, he remained senseful enough to change his course. The experience was not in vain, though. He realised acutely that the body is dependent of the mind and the mind is dependent of the body. There truly is no real separation between the body and mind. This becomes very clear for anyone practicing the full awareness of breathing.

The other extreme to be avoided is indulgence in sensory pleasures. This is because our bodymind responds to stimuli entering through our senses. If there is no hindrance to the inflow of external stimuli, the bodymind creates a habit of running after further impulses. At first it clings and then it becomes an addict.

The Buddha understood the Middle Way also in another sense. His realisation of the interdependency of all things tells us something about the nature of reality. Things do not appear caused by nothing and they cannot return to nothingness. On the other hand, things cannot stay unaltered either, since they are created by other things and they, in turn, create other things. So, the Buddha rejected both *eternalism* (permanence) and *nihilism* (nothingness) and concluded correctly that the nature of reality is not found in either extreme.

When we say that the truth is to be found in neither extreme, this does not necessarily inform us about the exact nature of the truth. We approach our object from the outside explaining what characteristics do not belong to it. This type of negative dialectic is challenging, but it turns out to be the exact way to understand reality correctly. To see why this is so, we need to take refuge in another brilliant mind, the logician Nagarjuna, whose *Madhyamaka* – The Middle Way provides the inescapable logic to the Buddha’s teaching.

The Two Truths of Reality

Nagarjuna shows by the use of logic how reality contains two distinct and equally important types of truths, and how these distinctive worlds come together as one. It is Nagarjuna that we may thank for providing an intellectual passage to something not easily graspable. Without his contribution Buddhist practice would remain much more based on trial and error. I for one would have been lost in the fantastic tales that Buddhist literature has excessively produced over the centuries. The importance of Nagarjuna's thinking for Buddhism cannot be exaggerated.

Just like the Buddha, Nagarjuna is interested in understanding the reality correctly. It is because only through correct understanding freedom and peace can be attained.

Nagarjuna explains that when we think about phenomena, their impermanence and interdependency, we have to understand that we are dealing with *nominal* issues of the conventional world. When we say that this thing causes that thing to arise, it is so only because we have tacitly agreed upon a convention to distinguish between them and call these types of phenomena with the names we have decided. We *impose* our view onto phenomena and what we then see are our very own imputations. Therefore, Nagarjuna makes use of the distinction between two truths, which are both equally true and which give rise to each other:

The conventional truth covers the conventional reality where phenomena we have named give rise to each other through causal connections we have defined. Things appear distinct yet interdependent as we can distinguish between

them but cannot observe phenomena arising, changing, and ceasing without conditioned by other phenomena.

The ultimate truth refers to the way things are independent of conventions, when they are cleared from our impositions. The ultimate truth of all phenomena is their *emptiness of self-nature*. Not a single phenomenon exists on its own, as they all arise dependent on other phenomena. Thus, the interdependency or *dependent origination* of things in the conventional sense requires that things are ultimately empty of intrinsic nature. They refer to the same characteristic from the two distinct and equally important perspectives.

9. Those who do not understand
The distinction drawn between these two truths
Do not understand
The Buddha's profound truth.

10. Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the significance of the
ultimate, Liberation is not achieved.¹

Above Nagarjuna explains that it is vital for us to properly understand the interdependencies of these two truths. Those who don't perceive it cannot understand the Buddha's teaching. Various Buddhist traditions have developed their distinct methods to help the practitioner see beyond the conventional realm. Being informed about the nature of the ultimate truth as such helps us to see the

¹ In Jay L. Garfield's *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, ch XXIV.

proper nature of the conventional truth, which, as being only nominal, cannot convey more than our shared tacit agreements on reality.

The most fundamental interdependency between the conventional and the ultimate is that if the ultimate truth of emptiness of self-nature were not true, then no phenomena could exist *at all*, not even in the conventional sense. No phenomena could arise, nor change, nor cease as their self-nature would preclude all those. Thus, the distinction and the interdependencies between the conventional and the ultimate are not theoretical speculations; they are *real* in the deepest sense.

36. If dependent arising is denied,
Emptiness itself is rejected.
This would contradict
All of the worldly conventions.²

² Ibid.

The middle in the Middle Way

We can observe reality the way it manifests in front of us, all phenomena arising, changing, and ceasing, because of the unavoidable interdependency among things. In order for things to mutually depend on each other, they must all be empty of intrinsic nature. On one hand, things are not independent entities, they do not exist on their own; yet on the other hand, they are real things with real influences. This is how the Middle Way remains in the middle, avoiding extremes of eternalism and nihilism that cannot be established.

A natural question arises of course as to why then do we need to resort to this uncommon logic before we are able to see reality clearly? Why are we so prone to going too far – for instance, assuming permanence in a world where not a single person has ever witnessed any thing remaining permanent?

An answer to these questions may be connected with how our mind is capable of creating illusions that serve our untamed desires, e.g., for becoming saved. As salvation becomes such an invaluable thing for people, it is quite natural for them to create belief systems to cater for that need. It is the reality that has to bend before the convictions that people carry to make them feel protected.

Buddhist soteriology and the Middle Way

Until this point my task has been to explain how the Buddha's teaching operates in its original, nonreligious form. But since the world cannot remain permanent and everything is under the process of arising, changing, and disintegrating, also the teaching has been transformed into something else. What this something else is, is my next object of inquiry.

I have brought Nagarjuna along for a reason, which is that in order for us to understand what is and what is not in accordance with the Buddha's teaching, we need to consult Nagarjuna. If a concept or an idea passes through the test of Nagarjuna's Middle Way, then we can accept it as conforming to the Buddha's teaching.

Karma

Karma is a central moral concept in Buddhism. There are numerous incidents in sutras where the Buddha is explaining how this and that action bring this and that type of future circumstances. Our problem remains that we do not know what the Buddha actually said and taught and what were his motivations and intentions at particular circumstances with particular people. Our task is to examine whatever is claimed and see for ourselves whether or not it meets the requirements of the Middle Way.

Popular versions of karma link intentions and intentional action of today to the future circumstances that one will be experiencing, and temporally therefore, one's present circumstances as results of past intentional actions.

This idea is shared with many forms of religions and not without a reason. It is a powerful and cost efficient means of controlling social behaviour. If you get people believing in unempirical bookkeeping where balances are constantly being recalculated by some imagined entity, self-constraint becomes a norm.

Like it often happens with nonempirical and imagined ideas, they come with problems their believers are not able to tackle empirically. Here are some.

How is the balance kept? Ideas of karma contain evasive moves that are shared with many religions. When you ask about a particular type of circumstance, such as children dying at very young age not being able to accumulate any karma at all, you receive a reply that evades the issue and gives a story that you simply need to believe. If karma were to operate the way it is claimed (over several lifetimes), a balance of some sort needs to be in operation. Buddhists

generally accept the idea that a reward or punishment can arrive after many lifetimes and one cannot ever know exactly when and how this happens. The reason for this type of evasive move is understandable because what we can empirically observe is, for instance, the following. The richest people in the world have not often gotten where they are by some exceptional level of moral behaviour. You can continue this logic with poor people, and so forth.

Karma in its popular form shares the idea of mystical bookkeeping from countless forms of religions. Since you cannot know the intentions of God, therefore anything that happens is by definition “explained” as God’s purposeful intention.

The idea that a moral result of an intention or action is delayed (for even as long time as several lifetimes) is not viable due to the nature of reality itself. Since we cannot empirically find a single phenomenon that were unchanging in time, the necessary requirement for the impermanence of phenomena is that they all borrow their existence from other phenomena. This is because if phenomena are to change at all they cannot have independent and permanent identity. What gives rise to phenomena are conditions which themselves are equally phenomena produced by their conditions, and so forth. The conditioning complex covers all observable phenomena, each being simultaneously a result of its conditions and a condition for other phenomena. The interdependent rise of conditions cannot be delayed as they occur in their natural order. This makes the idea of a repository in which we could store phenomena for future rewarding or punishing purposes impossible.

Who/what is the bookkeeper? With monotheistic religions the answer is clear, but how about Buddhism

which is supposed not only to be empty of supernatural entities, but also of the soul or self. Buddhists have had hard time inventing different types of subtle entities, such as mental continuum, karmic habits, and subtle forms of consciousness, among other concepts, that refer to some highly ethereal entity that you cannot observe empirically but which allegedly survives the death of your bodymind and takes care of your moral bookkeeping through lifetimes. Here again karma shares the idea of a mystical bookkeeper with any number of religions that need to imagine an agent in order to operate properly.

Whose moral rules the bookkeeper is observing?

Since karma is an entirely moral feedback system, it is important for us to know whose moral rules the bookkeeper is following. Wholesome and unwholesome intentions need to be evaluated against a meter and it matters a lot, of course, what particular variables that meter contains.

Different cultures follow their partly idiosyncratic (subuniversal) moral rules, and as these rules necessarily vary across human populations, measuring them by the use of any universal set of rules becomes problematic for several reasons. First, universal moral rules are nowhere to be found; they simply do not exist at all due to an understandable reason: local human populations are not universal; they are local with local traditions and rules. Second, if some set of allegedly universal moral rules were forced upon any local population, they would partly conflict with the moral rules the population already observes.

As both universal and subuniversal moral rules are nonviable in any moral machine that connects causes and their results properly together, one might want to resort to an individual-based moral feedback system. There would

be no conflict between the meter and the object of measurement if they were one. The only problem is, of course, that a moral system of a single individual is not a proper moral system at all as the legislator, prosecutor, judge, jury and the accused are all one and the same person.

How to distinguish between moral and immoral ants? This question may seem a bit odd at first, but it is entirely relevant when we examine how karma is supposed to operate. Since all life forms are part of the workings of karma and since immoral behaviour is supposed to bring life in a lower form, let's consider how the logic operates here. Let's assume you are born as an ant due to some unwholesome activities in your previous life as a human. Now, the question goes: how can you learn from your mistakes and attain a "higher" form next time around? Karma is a thoroughly moral system *designed for humans*, so how can an ant become more moral and receive a positive reward? Or any other life form than human, for that matter?

The idea of "higher" and "lower" life forms is in dire conflict with the teaching of the Buddha, however. He taught the implications of impermanence, interdependency and emptiness, which render these popular ideas of karma nonsensical.

From Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka perspective karma is just the chain of interconnected conditions, or causal connections if you will, operating under the principles of dependent origination. All actions are caused by conditions that are present, and they in turn operate as conditions for further consequences. The chain reaction is endless and it binds all phenomena together in an interconnected nexus. In order for any phenomenon to exist, all previous phenomena have had to exist prior to that. Karma,

therefore, is not a moral feedback mechanism. It simply is dependent origination in action.

Only amorality of reality can be observed and postulated. My aim here is to provide a simple reasoning that helps us to finalise the case against the common idea that reality somehow rewards or punishes moral or immoral action. The term “amoral” means *absence* of moral dimension and it needs to be distinguished from immorality which indicates action that violates some moral rules.

In order for an alleged *universal moral feedback machine* to function properly, events (i.e., phenomena) should not only operate as conditions and their effects, but they also should carry the indispensable moral dimension in them. I will now show that events cannot be impregnated by such a moral dimension.

If events contained moral feedback, then *all* events should do so without exception. This is because if only some events contained moral feedback, then an absurd setting would result in which moral conditions would produce amoral effects, and amoral conditions would give rise to moral effects. Therefore, events can only be of either kind.

People generally do not impose morality upon animals or inanimate objects. We don't think that a lion kills a gazelle because of immoral motivations. Nor do we assume that Mercury's orbit is somehow immoral if it deviates from our expectations. These simple examples together with the requirement that events need to be of either type, either they all carry moral feedback or none does so, already suggest the only viable alternative.

What can empirically be observed is how people, after the fact, wake to claim that this or that event is the reward or punishment for such and such behaviour. But this type of

ex-post rationalisation runs into logical problems. To see this, we need to understand how the network of causalities operate as a totality. Each event operates as a result of previous ones, and as a condition for those that follow. If an event carried a moral feedback, the question then arises about *whose* feedback it carries. Whose moral behaviour becomes rewarded or punished by an event which itself is a node in the endless network of conditions and effects?

Consider a bus accident where 40 people dies, some of them young children. That event would need to meet the exact measure of punishment for all these dissimilar moral beings. Now, imagine that all events that take place in the world need to meet the same necessary criterion if they are to operate as rewards and punishments. That would require that all affected people deserved exactly the same moral response. Such a setting cannot be found – or even imagined.

Based on what I have written above, not to mention other empirical and logical reasons elsewhere, it should be now clear that events cannot, even in principle, carry moral feedback. This does not prevent general public from happily taking events as moral rewards and punishments, however, and continuing the ex-post rationalisation that *feels* so rewarding to their minds.

It can be hypothesised that the general confusion with karma as moral feedback grows from the human capacity to *retaliate*. Human beings as moral animals are willing and able to incur even high costs in retaliating against immoral behaviour. It is therefore quite natural that they resort to unempirical measures when claiming their righteousness. Human beings are generally not very good with limitations, so they transgress them even when all empirical evidence and reasoning argue otherwise.

Rebirth

Connected with karma, rebirth is another major source of misunderstandings in Buddhism. My intention is not to criticise the nonempirical beliefs of various traditions per se, as such beliefs remain outside the realm of critical thinking, but instead to explain what can and what cannot be established as the teaching of the Buddha. It is therefore entirely ok for people to believe in whatever they believe, and to reify whatever they reify, but it is not ok for anyone to come and claim that the Buddha taught so. The Buddha taught nonreification and nonself of phenomena.

It is safe to say that rebirth is in the centre of Buddhism. Even most non-Buddhists immediately refer to rebirth when asked about the characteristics of Buddhism. But how this concept is interpreted among Buddhists differs greatly.

It is quite common among Buddhists to believe that following the precepts and the Eightfold Path will be rewarded in “the next life”. There is an inherent assumption regarding lives of an individual following each other with the Buddhist practice becoming ever deeper, until the awakening occurs and the cycle of rebirth is destroyed.

There are two alternative ways of rebirth in Buddhism: rebirth which is a compulsory phenomenon for all sentient beings and reincarnation which is for those who have been liberated from the former but who choose to come back in forms they themselves wish. Both these modes would require unempirical things to exist, so my examination covers both these versions.

Reincarnation is based on a belief of a *soul* that transmigrates to a new body after death. Even though soullessness is a central principle of the Buddha’s teaching,

that does not prevent many from reifying the soul regardless of the Buddha's teaching.

The case of clinging to a self or a soul even when their existence has been refuted by both empirical and logical reasoning provides an example of a more general pattern that creates problems in all human endeavours. It would be unrealistic to assume that when people heard the Buddha teaching, that they would simply listen and learn and take the teaching *as it is* to their hearts. The Buddha's teaching has never been adopted in an authentic manner in any larger scale simply because people lack the capacity to adopt anything as it is. When I write in this text how different traditions, as time passed, covered the teaching by their own idiosyncratic traditions, it is by no means the whole story. None of the traditions ever adopted the teaching as it is to start with and it was the teaching that was absorbed and assimilated into the idiosyncratic, often *shamanic* and *occult* local traditions. The conditioning of human beings is such a great force of nature that even something which is purely empirical and testable will, already before it is properly adopted, be transformed to serve much greater needs.

Those Buddhists who accept selflessness and soullessness can still find their ways to clinging to rebirth. Even though the soul is not there, they can circumvent the problem by inventing other ways, in the form of *karmic habits*, for instance. If there is no self or a soul to serve as a vehicle, one may imagine that our habits somehow transmigrate into a new body.

If karmic habits transmigrated in rebirth, they should be either permanent or impermanent entities. If they were permanent they would not need to be reborn as they already are what they are – permanent entities. If, on the

other hand, they were impermanent entities, they would be incapable of being reborn as the *same* entities because that would violate their impermanence – as sameness would entail permanence. Thus, there are no human or other characteristics whatsoever that can be found with an ability to transmigrate.

Many Buddhists are trapped in their misconception of rebirth because they instinctively reify their selves and they want to preserve themselves for the eternity. Yet the Buddha reiterated time after time that there is no possibility for the consciousness to survive death³.

Do you think people believe (understand) what the Buddha was saying? Think again; if eternal existence is weighed against the Buddha's teaching, quite expectedly the latter will lose, even though it has been established that eternal existence is an unviable option both in the conventional and in the ultimate sense.

There is an odd connection between the Tibetan Buddhist traditions and their roots in Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka - Middle Way. The reason why the connection is odd is because the Tibetan traditions are at the shamanic and mystic end of the spectrum while Nagarjuna's position is at the opposite end. The rituals and secret teachings of the Tibetan traditions have evolved in ways that are in dire contrast to both the open-hand principle of the Buddha and the limitations provided by Nagarjuna's dialectic.

Somebody may ask, why should we concern us with how correctly or incorrectly Buddhists view rebirth? Why not simply allow people to believe in Heavens and Hells and all kinds of creatures living in them, if it makes them happy

³ Majjhima Nikaya 38

and keeps them out of harm's way. The answer lies in the teaching itself. The Buddha understood that we have to not only see, but to *realise*, make real the universal characteristics of impermanence, interdependency, and emptiness, if we are to awaken to the reality as it is. This means that as long as we cling to ideas of this life and next life, we are stuck. This is why it is important for us to understand the teaching of the Buddha correctly.

So, how do we find out what the correct teaching is? Nagarjuna has translated Buddha's core teaching into the language of logic. While the Buddha explained how reality ultimately operates, Nagarjuna showed us by the use of logic that it cannot operate in any other way. A problem still remains, however. The logic itself operates by the conventional rules we share, but it can be mixed together with belief systems creating positions that *appear* logically sound, but which do not stand scrutiny.

The Tibetan traditions explain reincarnation by the use of two unempirical tools: (1) *nonphenomenal matter* and (2) *imperceptible causes*. Nonphenomenal matter is matter which is conventionally nonexistent: on one hand it is matter but on the other hand it does not exist as a phenomenon. This is incoherent, however. In order for matter to exist at all, it needs to exist conventionally. We need to be able to observe it as matter. This is because ultimately phenomena do not exist and the only possible way of existence is to exist conventionally.

An imperceptible cause is one which we cannot perceive. It suffers from the same defect as nonphenomenal matter: in order for a cause to exist as cause, we need to be able to observe it. It needs to exist and be perceived conventionally as otherwise it does not exist at all (no cause can exist ultimately).

The need for nonphenomenal matter and imperceptible causes rises because both karma and rebirth require some means by which cause and effect could operate beyond what can be empirically established. But, causes exist *only* in the conventional sense because we need to be able to perceive them in order to be able to name them. Naming something that cannot be perceived empirically leads to speculation and (self-)deception.

It is the desire to *reify* karma and rebirth that falsifies the positions of the Tibetan traditions and like. When they introduce imaginary means to support unempirical phenomena, they necessarily open the door to a type of metaphysical speculation that knows no limit – nor sense. The Buddha instructed us to steer clear of metaphysical speculation, for good reason.

Too many Buddhist traditions have adopted this reverse strategy by which a phenomenon is first believed to exist, such as karma or rebirth; then, as it cannot be established by empirical evidence, a nonempirical explanation is invented to fill the missing part. Religions operate exactly by this reverse logic. The outcomes are believed to exist but the only problem is how to come up with explanations that people are willing to buy. They should not worry too much, though, because we know from empirical evidence that in their desire to reify things people are willing to buy utterly absurd explanations.

The present leader of the Tibetan Buddhism, Dalai Lama, announced in autumn 2014 that he plans to cease the reincarnation business that has been cultivated within the Tibetan traditions. He was quoted saying that "There is no guarantee that some stupid Dalai Lama won't come next, who will disgrace himself or herself," he said. "That would

be very sad. So, much better that a centuries-old tradition should cease at the time of a quite popular Dalai Lama."⁴

The real reason behind this plan may point to a real danger of China kidnapping the next Dalai Lama, as they did the 11th Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima. Just days after he was recognized by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1995 as the reincarnated 11th Panchen Lama, he and his family were abducted by Chinese authorities⁵. So, to prevent future kidnappings it may be better to terminate the whole tradition instead.

This incident reveals not only the rather bizarre public announcement by the Dalai Lama, but also the political (power) significance of the corrupt reincarnation business that the Tibetan traditions adhere to. It is paradoxical if political rivalry between nations becomes the tool by which this detrimental institution becomes abolished; an institution which goes against the core teachings of the Buddha by increasing reification and creating bondage instead of release. However, it would be a mistake to assume that an occult tradition becomes nonoccult overnight, or by command. New ways of reification will be abundantly available for all.

I present these events to explain that they have nothing whatsoever to do with the teaching of the Buddha, and everything to do with things unrelated with the teaching. Reincarnation is part of the occult Tibetan tradition and should not be confused with the teaching of the Buddha. Therefore it is wrong for any tradition to pass such folly to the general public as part of the teaching. The resulting

⁴ LA Times, Dec 20, 2014

⁵ The Huffinctor Post, May 19, 2015

political clashes are just normal delusional human behaviour.

For people who are obsessing about rebirth we can always point toward processes that *are* observable and can therefore be considered as conventionally real. First, the temporal and spatial dimensions are much wider than what people tend to think. When we die our bodymind transforms into other forms of matter and energy, which keep transforming into other forms (of plants, animals, and so forth). Rebirth can be seen happening every time a change in form occurs, and furthermore, just as I explained in the earlier section, rebirth is under way in you at the moment you read this as some of your cells are dying and new are being born at every moment. If we renew all our cells in approx. seven year cycle, you can calculate how many bodies you already have consumed in your life so far.

There is also another conventional realm where we can see rebirth occurring if we look carefully. The type of rebirth I am considering is directly connected to moral behaviour, which is something most Buddhist would like to have⁶. Let's observe how it operates.

Throughout our lives we affect others and are affected by others. Here the term *others* comprises the whole universe with people, other animals, plants, matter, etc. There are countless ways by which our thoughts, speech, and actions influence other people, animals, plants, matter, and the universe as a whole. When we act we give rise to,

⁶ The idea of rebirth is a means to control moral behaviour of members of a group (e.g., society). All religions share tools that operate for that particular purpose and since religions cannot provide credible reward for moral behaviour in the uncertain reality people live in, they tend to give promises that they do not need to be accountable for: "The reward will definitively come - in your next life. You just need to trust us."

smaller or larger, more or less lasting, more or less wholesome, etc., influences. We may give birth to new members to the human community; we may say or do something that can have beneficial effects; everything we do gives rise to rebirth in countless different manifestations. So, when we die, we have already been reborn countless times.

If seen in this way the connection with morality becomes apparent. What general type of rebirths have we brought into existence? Have we given birth to more good than bad influences in our lives?

We are also constantly receiving influences by others and not all of them come with good intentions. How do we react to these inbound negative effects? We can choose to retaliate and project them back, or we can calmly absorb them with deep understanding. Nonaversion as a principle becomes instantly rewarding if you see every reaction as a birth of something new.

Seeing rebirth in this way makes it unnecessary for us to resort to the fairytale world of children and making us believe in all kinds of fantasies just to feel safe and secured. And most importantly, this path is constantly *empirically testable*. You can observe what happens to your wellbeing when you resort to different ways of response.

What I described above is only so in the conventional sense, meaning that forms change to other forms only when we recognise and nominate such a change. We don't, for instance, conventionally see rebirth in the renewal of our cells, or in the transformation of a cloud into rain, even though if you look deeper into such things, you come to realise their universal characteristics as impermanent and interdependent.

According to the Middle Way, however, when we die we go nowhere; we simply manifest in other interdependent forms, as plants, animals, matter, etc. You literally *name* it. That is rebirth in its empirically true sense of conventional reality.

Neither desirous nor repulsive

This section deals with the empirically challenging component of the Middle Way in the form of steering the mind away from its conditioned and automated tendency to attach itself to emotional biases of liking and disliking, and the resulting behaviours of grasping and avoiding.

The issue is very subtle and chances for misunderstandings are countless. Confusion arises easily when we observe instructions such as that we ought to create repulsion toward something; an act which superficially contradicts the main principle of the Middle Way itself. The Buddha instructed the monks to view the body as a repulsive entity to counterbalance their lustful desires toward attractive female bodies.

The act of counterbalancing a tendency with another, similarly biased alternative, as training, becomes interesting. Is it correct to think that we can best arrive at the correct understanding by training our mind toward the other extreme? This pattern of thinking recurs countless times in the Buddhist texts and thinking, so whatever is said here about attractiveness and repulsion can be applied to any setting where analogous reasoning is applied.

Since the Middle Way rejects both extremes of attachment and aversion, it is clear that creating a persistently repulsive attitude toward the body is not what the Buddha aimed at. The method of counterbalancing an undesirable tendency with another similarly incorrect attitude can be seen as less beneficial.

This is because as long as we train our minds in the realm of desires and repulsions, whatever they may be, we are not helping ourselves to come to see the futility of the

whole effort. Counterbalancing mental tendencies with opposing but similarly biased tendencies is not what we should be doing. Something entirely different should be applied instead, and that the Buddha also instructed.

Desire is not overcome by artificially created repulsion. This is because what we create with such an unskilful method is not freedom and peace, but *suppression*. In both the Buddhist and Western psychology suppression is not what you want to create as a cure. You create growing trouble by suppressing anything, be it at the level of individual or society.

The only truly functional way to freedom and peace is through liberating the bodymind from its biased and erroneous views and conditioning. What this requires is not training any tendency *against* another. Instead, our tendencies need to be first *understood* and then *released*. Or, better still, we do not need to go through the endless lists of our functional tendencies if we can see our meta-level tendency of running after desires and away from the unattractive. The Buddha's teaching is foremost a meta-level method which benefits the wise. People with more limited cognitive capacities may have to train their bodyminds in ways which superficially contradict the teaching. However, if the result is suppression of the bodymental tendencies, the outcome is anything but desirable.

If you think that mentioning our cognitive capacities is somehow incorrect, in the next you will probably be offended in many more ways, so be aware. People who view Buddhism as a religion and salvation think, however erroneously, that Buddhism is for everyone. It is, of course, open for every human being, but not very many can penetrate it. This means that even most Buddhists cannot

understand the Middle Way. They simply follow rituals and instructions of teachers who suffer from the same insufficiency. I am now approaching a theme most sensitive, so I need to make my point clearly and also express these issues as directly as I can. Counterbalancing a tendency with another tendency leads us naturally to considering one of the core institutions of Buddhism, namely monasticism.

Homelessness

Even the non-Buddhists know how the Buddha-to-be left his wealthy and powerful status as prince of a local kingdom to seek liberation from the persistent suffering that everyone, even kings and princes, have to endure in our lives. When we follow his historical path toward realisation, we come to see that it took some time and effort before the Buddha attained what he aimed at. He experimented also with extreme asceticism before a more balanced perspective matured. Only through release was freedom and peace stabilised in him.

An interesting question arises thus concerning the status of the *form of life* as a defining factor of realisation. There is an apparent tension between the teaching and the release. What has become central to the teaching is the abandonment of desire but not that of aversion. Let me explain.

Abandoning desire is seen throughout the Buddha's way of life and teaching. Voluntary poverty containing begging for food and taking any physical circumstances as acceptable and part of the way of practice is central to the method. There are some cases where the Buddha explains how a lay person has attained realisation as well, but in those events it is emphasised that a lay life is *systematically inferior* to that of monastic, when it comes to attainment.

Based on my earlier discussion above, you may already foresee what my concern here is. Monastic life puts a monk or a nun into a position where the training focuses on the counterbalancing activities that are not necessarily desirable for the development of the bodymind, again from the perspective of attainment. Monks and nuns are assumed to learn to abandon desire when they accept a

way of life of shelter and deprivation, but it can turn out that mainly suppression is what really is attained. Of course we learn also by conditioning based on suppression, but what we learn is not, one can argue, liberation, but further conditioning.

The proper goal of any Buddhist practice is freedom by *letting go*, not freedom by replacing one set of conditioning by another set. We should be careful in adopting behavioural rules that focus on learning by further conditioning because that has nothing to do with the continuous opening of the lotus flower or peeling the onion, that is, abandoning conditioning layer after layer until the final realisation of emptiness and interdependence is arrived at. The Buddha has referred to the less desirable form of learning by conditioning, but it is a grand mistake to think that it is something he, or anyone who understands better, would prefer. Counterbalancing desires by conditioning is a dull method and the road from such conditioning to a release is long and uncertain.

An incorrect understanding of abandoning both desire and aversion has led to traditions of Buddhism that may be anything but healthy. It is common among Buddhist monastics to think that monastic life is like a *superhighway*⁷ to liberation when compared with lay life. Let's look at this superhighway a bit.

When it comes to attainment, practice is what matters. The more your bodymind can encounter moments of practice the more super and highway your path will become. Now, compare the following two settings: 1) A monk lives quietly without sense contacts with the

⁷ This metaphor I have heard more than once by Buddhist teachers and it portrays quite nicely the main rationale for a monastic life.

assumed undesirable worldly phenomena. His bodymind sometimes manifests some desires, but those he soon learns to first suppress and by conditioning he later on assumes having become a victor over.

2) Another type of recluse lives a fairly normal life in society. He trains his bodymind every moment and the flow of practice opportunities is constant and versatile. He runs neither away from nor toward any particular thing. The whole world is his training ground and he remains entirely peaceful in the middle (of everything).

Even though I have described these alternative ways of life a bit unfairly, can you see what can be said about the superhighway aspect of practice? Remember that these Buddhists consider monastic life as superior because of its more effective results. However, the poor monk is not only not on any type of a highway but in fact, he is sheltered as much as possible against practice to the extent that one could rather put him onto a narrow winding road.

This is because most of the decisions in his life are now carried out by somebody else. He is not in charge of himself. If he is a Westerner, he has come to the monastery perhaps because he has become disappointed with “the normal life out there” and all he wants to do is to withdraw from all its uneasiness; hand the keys over to someone else. He is not the light unto himself. He is simply following the rules. What monastics mistake for a practice may well be counterprogramming and further conditioning which can create a false sense of victory over desires.

If the Buddha realised that *both* attachment and aversion is to be rejected, why then did he value voluntary poverty so much? When you look at the teaching itself, there is no *a priori* connection between any form of life and realisation. Any connection is empirical and tentative. It is

understandable that a person who has led a life of luxury quite naturally turns toward a nonmaterial alternative because of its dramatic contrast against his earlier way of life. When choosing voluntary poverty the prince had not yet realised what he later came to realise. Paradoxically however, the realisation itself does not require any particular outer form of life.

It can be argued, though, that voluntary poverty together with monastic rules such as accepting any given food train the bodymind to discard also aversion, but we need to understand that a coerced choice does not train the bodymind as effectively as a choice arrived over again in circumstances where the agent's choice horizon is open-ended, where the agent is free to either accept or reject any given alternative. Can you see this important principle clearly?

It means that when it comes to liberating our bodyminds, a *Ulysses Contract*⁸ which binds our future behaviour is *not* as effective teacher as our bodymind being free to choose at any given circumstance. That is our true and effective teacher.

Another type of argument for the benefit of voluntary poverty or monasticism is that, on average, it helps more *numerous* people to come to realise what needs to be realised. This simply means that, on average, monks have a higher probability of attaining release by following the

⁸ Entering monastic life is a type of Ulysses Contract where the agent voluntarily ties her hands in future choice options. The choice options effectively vanish by the agreement as the agent outsources her decision-making rights for others to utilise. As you may understand this does not come without the risk of abuse, however.

sheltered and deprived path, than their fellow lay people. Let's see how this idea fairs.

In a recent study⁹ interesting and telling results were reported when some central beliefs and attitudes of Tibetan monastics were tested against those of Abrahamics¹⁰ and Hindus. The goal of the study was to see how the deep understanding of the Buddhist tenets, selflessness, impermanence, and interdependence reduces the fear of death and increases generosity toward others. It could be reasonably assumed that Tibetan monastics with years of deep practice of meditation and philosophical study would have developed their understanding close to perfection.

When the fear of death was compared between different groups, the Tibetan monastics ended up fearing death much more than others, even more than Tibetan laypeople who feared death much more than Abrahamics and Hindus. This is of course astonishing, bearing in mind the entire meaning of the Buddha's teaching.

When the level of generosity was compared between these groups, in the form of willingness to sacrifice 6 months of one's lifespan to increase the lifespan of some other person, the result was as astonishing as with the fear of death. The Tibetan monastics were much less generous when compared with other groups. What could explain both these unexpected results?

This study reveals something more profound than what is apparent. On an apparent level Abrahamics and Hindus

⁹ Garfield, Nichols, Rai, Strohminger (2015) Ego, Egoism and the Impact of Religion on Ethical Experience: What a Paradoxical Consequence of Buddhist Culture Tells Us About Moral Psychology. *Journal of Ethics*, 19, 293-304.

¹⁰ Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

who believe in afterlife fair better in the Buddhist terms because they have life-expectancies after death. Due to their beliefs in afterlife they are more fearless than Tibetan monastics who understand that transformation means the end of the present type of conscious life.

But all this is superficial understanding, based on an idea that the teaching of the Buddha just like all religions has been invented for people to feel secure and saved. And people refuse to feel saved unless they are promised eternal afterlife. This is the core of the entire problem: We receive this type of results from Buddhist monastics as long as they view the Buddha's teaching as a salvation to some primordial problem that they want to get rid of. Paradoxically, the teaching that the Buddha meant for releasing people, make them *worse off*, more fearful of death, more grasping of self and life.

What all this shows is that the teaching of the Buddha is definitively not for many. A half-hearted, half-minded person with wishful thinking ends up harming herself, as do many Buddhist monastics. There are very few people, lay or monastic, who understand the teaching correctly and are able to experience release the way the Buddha explained.

It is common to estimate the quality of a monastic community by its level of calmness. It is the outer form of behaviour that we take as an indication of something else which is assumed to cause such calmness. For a certain type of mentality a life without worries, lulling in evenly rotating routines and quasi-permanent atmosphere fits very well. In time the bodymind calms down and existence becomes peaceful and joyful. But what is the cause of such calmness?

The Buddha did not often refuse to accept new followers. Estimating by the growth of their number it is clear that many of them could not really perceive the teaching in any deeper sense. After the Buddha's time things have evolved in much the same way. Temples and monasteries interact with lay communities in ways of exchange: physical nutrition for spiritual nutrition, with corruption rampant.

Those who view Buddhism as a religion see the expansion of the Buddhist community as a merit or goal. The Buddha himself also saw it beneficial that an increasing number of people were able to follow the path. These two things are not entirely unproblematic, however.

The Buddha attained freedom by his own effort. He also instructs us that there is no shortcut for anyone else either. Even though he could define the general outlines of the path, each one of us has to find our own way. Using our reasoning, logic and empirical evidence, it should become quite clear that the teaching can never reach large numbers of people. Not in the form of realisation that the Buddha meant. Here a divide opens, and I am aware of the problems that divides can bring along. Yet, there is a reason why this issue needs open discussion.

As you probably can estimate already I do not consider the teaching in any way attainable by the masses. It was not the Buddha's voluntary choice that the reality is constructed for us the way it is. He did not construct it. He simply saw it as it is, just like you can see it too, in principle.

Since only very few people can follow the path of realisation the teaching cannot be a religion. What then has become a religion if the teaching cannot be one? It is the mindset of the people that has become the religion. Blind leading blind they follow like sheep in flocks. There is probably nothing more absurd than people believing that a

deeply addicted Buddhist teacher is a reincarnation of an earlier lama, and that his two sons just happen to also be reincarnations of other lamas. There is no shortage of historical sources for reincarnation after these people invented a market-opening idea that any earlier lama can have a number of separate and *simultaneous* reincarnations, so new ones can be announced by will, and this is exactly what they have done¹¹.

How can this be? Because these people have kept the business to which they have transformed the teaching in their own hands for generations. How? By observing how the ignorant follow them and believe any fantasy they come up with. There is Buddhism as a religion for you.

This reincarnation game has become so corrupt that traditions following it do not seem to even recognise how damaging it is. They not only make fools of themselves, but more importantly they effectively prevent anyone with any common sense from even considering the Buddha's teaching as anything of value. There are a few people on this planet who can see that the Buddha's teaching is one of the most valuable empirical body of knowledge ever offered to humankind, but these corrupt religions make it extremely hard for anyone else to find it in its proper form.

¹¹ Geoffrey D. Falk's book *Stripping The Gurus: Sex, Violence, Abuse and Enlightenment* deals with numerous cases of world-renowned spiritual leaders with countless followers. The book is freely downloadable in PDF format here: www.strippingthegurus.com

Of teachers and disciples

It is common to think that the Buddha's teaching cannot be made intelligible without the personal guidance of a teacher. You can find countless expositions of the idea that *only* through the personal connection to a master any progress of relevance on the path can be attained.

It should come as no surprise that a natural correlation between the intensity of such claim and abuse of authority exists in Buddhist communities. Traditions that emphasise the unquestionable power and infallibility of their teachers are understandably in high risk of misusing such abnormal and pretentious settings.

Where does such a weird tendency come from to this otherwise so freedom-and-peace oriented method? The main suspect is the misconceived target of the whole operation, namely *enlightenment* itself. Surprisingly, it is the presence of this grand object of attainment that makes people go astray. Let me explain.

In every tradition there are more than a few teachers who genuinely think that they need to explicitly, through their actions and speech, show that something remarkable has happened to them; that they have attained what needs to be attained. So, paradoxically it is the aim of the teaching itself that, incorrectly understood, turns into its perversion.

When a master has been appointed everyone benefits from the pretence of his enlightenment. The followers would be very disappointed and would probably leave if their master was anything less of a person. The organisation itself is dependent on the beliefs and convictions of the followers so it has to enhance such beliefs.

Then there is another great misunderstanding concerning the concept of enlightenment. Unfortunately the Buddhist scripts contain many accounts claiming how by becoming enlightened the Buddha became *omniscient*, possessing universal and complete knowledge. Such a person cannot make any error in his life. The fallible life for him is over from the moment of enlightenment on. This is one of the greatest misunderstandings in Buddhism and has nothing to do with the teaching and the realisation that the Buddha attained. So, what is the correct understanding?

The correct understanding of the enlightenment is the realisation of emptiness of the Middle Way itself. Both the Buddha and Nagarjuna explained very carefully and precisely what this means: there is only one viable way for us to understand the logic correctly and that is the Madhyamika logic delivered by Nagarjuna. It is extremely helpful for any of us as it not only provides the cognitive path but it also refutes all possible other accounts. By following how the path is constructed and how all other logically possible alternatives become refuted not by the Madhyamika logic as such but by the incoherencies of these alternative views themselves, it becomes entirely clear to a capable observant why only one possible way stays standing while others collapse as refuted by their own flaws.

Even though especially Nagarjuna's work is solely focused on explaining this and even though there is not a single person in our history who has ever been or could even in principle be able to refute the Madhyamika logic, it is the misunderstanding of omniscience that spreads like a contagious disease because it serves the human mind so well: if before enlightenment a person was fallible, then surely something so dramatic would cure such an

imperfection. Thus, not only Buddhist teachers but people in general have a desire, a hunger for some uncommon people who are beyond imperfection. They do not know what they are asking for!

What they receive is a setting where both the teacher and the disciple play their roles and now both of them presume the teacher to be enlightened in the sense of being *beyond human error*. And that is the cause of all the trouble. Think of what such a setting can create in the minds of both of them. There is probably nothing as dangerous and harmful in Buddhism than this utter misconception of enlightenment as omniscience. It is paradoxical that the goal of the practice, the very essence of liberation is misinterpreted in such a drastic way and that it is this perversion and not the correct understanding that becomes so contagious in the minds of people.

All this is part of human conditioning, however, and corresponds accurately with the larger framework of our tendency to systematically create and cling to fantasies of godly omniscience and omnipotence¹².

Unfortunately natural correlations do not involve only Buddhist masters. The followers are actually even more importantly involved in creating a system of false faith.

Another paradox is involved here. Followers who cling the most intensively to teachers are in the weakest position to both understand the method correctly and to become the independent path traversers that the method demands. Remember one central point of the teaching: it is the reality

¹² To understand the full account of how human beings systematically, throughout traditions and independent of time and place, create gods and religions, see Pascal Boyer's study reported in his book: *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*.

itself that is structured in such a demanding way that not very many can come to understand the process of liberation correctly.

This paradox creates a central problem, which even the Buddha could not handle very easily. What to do to people who mistake the method for a religion but are so eager to follow? If the Buddha had understood this general human tendency of creating dependencies correctly, he would not have accepted such volumes of followers. How do we know this? Let's follow the logic: someone who has realised the nature of human mind would know what will follow when people with incorrect premises (limited capacity) and method (faith) take upon something which is practically unattainable for them; or in other words, something which will in the hand of the masses be transformed into something largely different, as the history has shown.

The Buddha's fallibility aside, who then should take up this method? The apparent answer is: those with premises fit to the challenge and who follow methods less prone to dependencies. These two correlate also internally as cognitive capacity and independency of thinking often coexist. So, people who do not seem to need the Buddha's guidance at all would fit the picture quite well. Let's experiment with this idea a bit.

Many atheists share distaste for explanations that are incoherent. For natural reasons regarding our cognitive capacities, religions contain such incoherencies (such as simultaneous omnipotence and omniscience, which logically preclude each other). Some of those atheists have in a sense been forced to accept the purely materialistic

view¹³ as all other perceived options contain beliefs that they are not willing to adopt.

For many of these types of people it may come as news that also the materialistic position becomes falsified by the use of same logic that they demand from any system. The reason they have never thought about it may be due to the fact that they have so far been ignorant of the correct logical solution and thus have left the inquiry unfinished. They have done the math only halfway, while if finishing it, something quite remarkable appears. This explains why so few have realised what needs to be realised. And this is what this text is all about.

¹³ Materialism here does not refer to consumerism, but rather to the philosophical doctrine of *nihilistic materialism*.

Knowing a better way

Since I have applied critical thinking in examining monasticism, teachers and disciples, and as I apparently have not found the state of affairs altogether beneficial, I better provide an alternative position which, I claim, is less vulnerable to abuse and pretence. Let's see how it fairs.

The Buddha emphasised independent and critical thinking. He advised people to not accept any piece of information without personal scrutiny. For him, growing from childhood to adulthood is a transformation from dependency to *cognitive independency*. Even though we are irreversibly and mutually *interdependent* as members of this reality, the only viable path for us is to make sense of the reality through *our own* bodymental processes.

A monk by the name Thera (Elder) praised his solitary way of life¹⁴. The Buddha instructed him that there is basically nothing wrong in his way of life as such, but that there is a better way to be solitary as well:

"Knowing how to live alone" here does not mean to live in solitude, separated from other people, on a mountain in a cave. "Living alone" here means to have sovereignty of yourself, to have freedom, not to be dragged away by the past, not to be in fear of the future, not being pulled around by the circumstances of the present. We are always masters of ourselves,

¹⁴ Theranama Sutta.

we can grasp the situation as it is, and we are sovereign of the situation and of ourselves.¹⁵

My aim is to apply this very same reasoning of the Buddha to explain that no particular form or way of life is necessary for realising what needs to be realised, or that those forms that are usually assumed beneficial can be actually counterproductive. I have already provided reasons why some central tenets of Buddhism, namely monasticism, and the position of teachers and disciples, are vulnerable to corruption and pretence. Now my aim is to explain how these vulnerabilities can be avoided by correct understanding (of what living alone in the above sense really means).

In earlier times temples and monasteries have operated as centres of knowledge, just like universities later on have. For that purpose one can claim that they have served an important function in disseminating the Buddha's teaching. But because of the human tendency of transforming social institutions to serve our personal interests, monasteries have started serving some other purposes as well.

Today there is no shortage of available information. The information monopolies of the Buddhist monasteries have been long gone. Thus the knowledge aspect does not directly require the presence of monasteries.

How about the interpretation of Buddhist texts and thinking? As I explain above there are apparent dangers in falling into power relations with teachers, especially if either party mistakenly assumes some nonexistent capacities of the teacher. To prevent risks of abuse it is

¹⁵ "The Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone". A Dhamma Talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh on April 5, 1998, Plum Village, France.

better to keep a healthy distance to any teacher. Investing everything you have and entering into shared living conditions in either monastic or other forms is certainly not considered as a healthy distance. It is way too easy for the receiver of your investment to see how vulnerable position you are voluntarily putting yourself into, and act accordingly. Religious belief of surrendering your will has nothing to do with making the reality understandable, even though some traditions may sell exactly that argument.

A better way to deal with this teacher issue is to consider all Buddhist teachers of past and present as our teachers. Some are wiser than others but we can learn from every single one of them. I personally have countless teachers, but I do not cling to any of them, not even the Buddha. I am thankful to all of them but that does not transform into attachment or unnecessary complications. As I have written elsewhere, it is clear that without Nagarjuna's vital contribution in logic, the Buddha's teaching would not have become acceptable to me simply because the people who have produced the scriptures have done a grand disfavour by inserting their wild dreams of omniscience, afterlife, and salvation into them.

So what we need is definitively not a personal master or a teacher to guide us, but instead, a mind that is capable of learning from countless experiences.

The key to knowing a better way to live alone, that is, to sovereignty of ourselves, is in *self-enforcement*. Monastic life does not facilitate self-enforcement as you, on the contrary, put yourself under a regime dictated by others and enforced by others. Following a teacher too closely reduces your self-enforcement as you tend to borrow enforcement from him or her. Let me try to explain how the self-enforcement operates.

The Middle Way needs to be studied and applied with rigour. This means that you study carefully and continuously how different processes operate through your body and mind. Self-enforcement is the most powerful tool in learning because you rely on nobody else but your own experience. You don't follow your sensual desires not because somebody else says so, but because you enforce letting go of your desires entirely on your own, without any guidance or dictation from elsewhere.

Can you see why self-enforcement brings power and speed to your learning the way nothing else can. Compare it to a setting where somebody else dictates behavioural rules to you and what you need to do is to obey them carefully. Your mind starts to question various rules and the overall sense of the setting because enforcement comes from other sources than yourself. If your mind eventually becomes accustomed to the setting, not questioning it any longer, the situation is even worse as you have become a puppet.

For these reasons, neither monastic life nor a life under any teacher fulfils the requirement of becoming the light unto yourself which the Buddha simply instructed. The life of a sovereign based on self-enforcement does not fit nearly as many as you might think, and neither does the teaching of the Buddha.

The Buddha did not teach Buddhism

The title of this section can be interpreted in at least two separate ways. The first interpretation is less speculative as Buddhism did not exist at the time when the Buddha taught his method of realisation. His teaching goes against any “ism”, so even if his fame may have created movement among people of his time, the teaching has nothing to do with such phenomena.

The other connection is more dangerous and I know many Buddhists will be both disappointed and perhaps even hostile to what I am about to say. Buddhists are conditioned to “take refuge” in the Buddha, but this is only a convention because what they really do is they go directly against the teaching of the Buddha. How do I know this?

The Buddha taught Dependent Origination. Dependent Origination is The Middle Way. Nagarjuna taught the necessary and sufficient requirements for Dependent Origination. Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka is The Middle Way. But, because people do not want to limit their behaviour or thinking, they do not respect the logic and limitations of The Middle Way. They want go further; they invent all kinds of fantasies that fit their confused minds. To put it simply, nearly everything that has ever been written about the Teaching contains products of this confusion. To provide an example of this I will give an exemplar: one of the central texts in the Mahayana Buddhism, The Heart Sutra. There are some correct ideas in the sutra about the nature of emptiness, but then these people claim that:

Being the resultant person means being what we are physically, our bodies. Some are strong and in good health, so others respect them for it. Some are

unsightly and unwholesome, so others dislike them. The strong, the weak, the long-lived and the short-lived, the beautiful and the ugly, the wise as well as the foolish, all have varied causes in their previous lives and, accordingly, receive diverse effects in their present existence. Those who have produced good causes in their previous existences enjoy good health, longevity, beauty and wisdom in this life. In contrast, those who generated evil causes in their past lives have various deficiencies and shortcomings in the present. This, then, is what being a resultant person means. ... Obviously, those who have all their needs satisfied live happily; favorable events occur, yet they do not now have to exert themselves because of good causes in their previous lives. A resultant person relies on the dependent conditions for survival, and the conditions, in turn, have their causes in his or her past existences. However, good karma – practice and deeds that benefit others in the present – will produce favorable effects in one’s future existences.¹⁶

This type of ideas that people have are of course quite expected (in their confused mindsets). The only problem here is that these ideas go against the very core of the Buddha’s teaching, The Middle Way. They do something else as well and that is more problematic. They motivate and maintain discrimination, racism, separatism, segregation, caste systems, and of course war; all kinds of nasty things that confused people inflict upon each other. It must be slightly demotivating for a handicapped person to learn that their past bad karma has put them in the position

¹⁶ *The Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra*, Second ed. 2000

they find themselves. “But, hey! Try to improve this time around, will you.”

The Buddhist texts are simply full of cases like this. What is very worrying is that the Buddha taught critical thinking as the methodology for coming to understand reality. All these fantasies live and prosper in Buddhism and people from high to low all bow to these without scrutiny, without a hint of critical thinking.

I have already exposed the line of teaching that needs first to be understood and then advocated. Only very few people after the Buddha and Nagarjuna have ever first realised and then *limited* their thinking correctly. The line of teaching is:

The Buddha’s Dependent Origination = The Middle Way
= Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka

Whatever people want to say beyond this must in all cases meet the requirements of The Middle Way, and to know whether or not our thinking goes astray we need to understand Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka thoroughly. All the massive volume of nonsense in Buddhism is created due to lack of understanding of this clear but demanding principle. Any deviation from The Middle Way becomes falsified, not by the Madhyamaka logic as such, but by its own effort. That is the beauty of reality. Every erroneous view collapses by its own effort and Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka simply explains how it all happens. The only view that remains standing is The Middle Way. And reality does not care whether or not you understand this. It just is.

The Teaching is the Middle Way

The Buddha warned of the futility of metaphysical considerations and refused to answer questions concerning the nature of universe (beyond impermanence, interdependency, and emptiness) or what happens to us after we die. This has not prevented Buddhist traditions to set up whole systems of beliefs of heavens and hells with countless creatures abiding in them.

We should steer clear of fantasies describing fairies, gods, deities, and other supernatural phenomena. Why? Because the Buddha's teaching is entirely empirical and pragmatic. It has nothing to do with salvation or other soteriological issues that transcend empirical world.

How do we know this? Because, once again, both the Buddha's teaching and Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka provide the limitations to what can and what cannot be said about reality. No fairy or god or even semi-god can survive the logico-empirical method by which liberation is attained.

Why is it then that we can hear prominent Buddhist leaders explaining that it is quite alright for people to believe in God or Allah? They should know that reifying gods is not what should be taught to people. It is common among Buddhists to refer to skilful means, meaning that it is wise to adjust the teaching according to the cognitive level of the listener.

Skilful means, when properly administered, never lead the listener astray, however. There is nothing skilful in encouraging people's beliefs in imperceptible phenomena. It would be skilful to explain to a listener that most people on this planet cling to various beliefs in order to feel safe and protected, but that the whole point of the Buddha's

teaching is to show why we do not need to grasp those beliefs and that it is precisely when we do not reify our unwarranted beliefs that peace and happiness can be stabilised - entirely without spiritual outsourcing.

It appears that many Buddhists cling to the salvation due to the reification of karma and rebirth. This is very unfortunate because by doing so they obstruct their understanding of the teaching of the Buddha. I cannot blame them, though, because if you look at the mass of expressions in sutras in which the Buddha defines how this person is a *stream enterer* and that one is a *once returner*, and the next one is to be reborn in the *Tusita heaven*, etc., it is understandable that this has an effect on people, especially if their minds are already *framed* in believing that what they are seeing are not only the words of the Buddha, but more importantly, that these words convey what the Buddha himself believed of those issues.

We have by now observed in several ways that the Buddha did not *believe* in anything. His method is about abolishing *all* convictions about reality and uprooting ignorance by understanding the ultimate nature of reality as empty. Therefore we need to develop skilful means in interpreting Buddhist texts.

A prominent reason for clinging to all kinds of salvation stories is our fear of *nihilism*. Those who fear nihilism may go to the other extreme and end up at *eternalism*. Most people simply do not seem to trust the Buddha and Nagarjuna when both of them explain and also prove that you can relax, you can be at peace in the middle. The paradox lies in the fact that neither nihilism nor eternalism can be established at all. They both are genuinely untrue notions of reality. Only the Middle Way can be established.

Both nihilism and eternalism become falsely established by people because they follow an intrinsic desire to reify things they are able to imagine. This means that we have a tendency to take abstract beliefs *as if* they were concrete and real. A prominent example is of course God and the way people tend to reify it by seeing it in forms which are conventional to people: God is an elderly male, preferably bearded, with certain omnipotent characteristics that people tend to cling to.

Many modern educated people do not feel the need to believe in God, however. But are they free from reification which occurs in subtle and unconscious ways? The answer is in the negative. We may become conscious of the most bizarre forms which create *cognitive dissonance* in us and because of accumulated tension we may feel the need to abandon such beliefs, but we certainly do not abandon reification as a mental habit that easily. We may choose to reify God's opposite, nothingness, as a state into which we enter at the moment of death.

Both the Buddha and Nagarjuna discovered the truth about reality: all aspirations for reification are doomed to fail. All phenomena are completely empty of intrinsic nature; they are not separate having their individual essences. Instead, all phenomena become what they are because of other phenomena, and they all are interrelated.

To understand all this Nagarjuna brings one phenomenon after another which people tend to regard as independent (such as I or self). He then shows all possible ways to reify them, and falsifies every single one of them. The technique he uses in the falsification is unique: he does not invalidate them by a positive argumentation; instead he lets every attempt of reification to collapse by their own incoherencies. No matter how hard an opponent tries, there

is simply no way for them to escape the inevitable defeat: not a single separate and independent thing can be found in the universe. In the next section, I will present some central ideas of the Madhyamaka.

Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka

Since throughout this text I refer to Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka - The Middle Way, I decided to introduce some of its central points here. This text operates as an introductory tool only as it is vital for the reader to study Jay L. Garfield's interpretation of Nagarjuna's Middle Way listed at the "recommended reading" section. He is the present-day champion of Madhyamaka and is able to provide coherently both the logic and reasoning of this unconventional dialectic in its entirety. Garfield's significance to the correct understanding of Madhyamaka lies in his thorough analysis of the distinction between semantic and metaphysical views on Madhyamaka¹⁷. Mistaking Madhyamaka for a metaphysical view demonstrates our hardwired propensities for reification. It is truly paradoxical that some modern Madhyamika mistake what is central to Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka, namely nonmetaphysics, for its opposite, that is, a metaphysical view no different from any other alternative. Thus, our level of understanding Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka correctly as semantics measures our own degree of freedom from reification.

You may find that even though some of the reasoning may appear unexpected, it is consistent with the direction toward which our modern scientific understanding is moving. The increasing speed of relativisation in physics is changing the way we understand the nature of universe from the scientific viewpoint. Absolutes are disappearing as

¹⁷ These discussions can be found in Jay L. Garfield's published articles in scientific journals through, e.g., Google Scholar: <http://scholar.google.com>

one phenomenon after another turns out to be relative after a more developed examination. Quantum physics offers radical change to our understanding of the physical world, bringing it closer to the Madhyamaka (which is interesting, bearing in mind that the Madhyamaka was developed some 2000 years ago). The new type of physics perceives indeterminacy and subject-object interdependencies in ways that are as astonishing as are the principles of the Madhyamaka for the general public.

New discoveries in plant life are similarly astonishing. We now know that many plants engage in activities that correspond with both individual and collective intelligence not differing from that of human or other life forms in any profound sense. These activities include cooperation, altruism, nurture and care, advertising, exchange, protection, competition, war, etc.

Our biological understanding in general is moving toward deeper recognition of *entanglement* within and between species. Different species have evolved to living interdependently without us perceiving how the reality operates around us. Our blindness has long roots in hubris and arrogance by which we self-conceitedly have created fantasies of our intelligence and status being somehow profoundly unlike those of other species. The self-serving stories we have created to emphasise our special status on earth has done greatest damage to both our own understanding and to our fellow travellers. It is high time for us to wake to the reality where all the others have been waiting for our intelligence to mature enough so that we may become grown-up members of the community. Madhyamaka is the tool that forces our eyes open to see how everything coexists.

The central message of the Madhyamaka is that all entities and phenomena, and their properties and relations are necessarily empty of intrinsic nature by which they could be conceived as existing independently of each other. This requirement is necessary for the reality to appear the way it does.

How does the reality appear then? It appears in a mode that makes it impossible for things to exist in two extreme ways that both attract the human mind like flypaper. The first extreme view mistakes empirical phenomena as independently existing, possessing essences of their own. This view reifies the existence of phenomena as separate, solid, and quasi-permanent. The second extreme view opposes the first one but mistakes emptiness of phenomena to mean their total nonexistence in the conventional reality we live in. Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka falsifies both these extreme views and provides the logic by which the centrist position is the only one that can be established at all. Here are some examples of its reasoning.

Causality: Nothing arises (1) by itself, or (2) from another, or (3) from both, or (4) without a cause. Even though this statement may appear astonishing at first sight, after a closer examination it makes perfect sense. Causality requires a chain reaction of some sort. If there were no connection between a cause and its effect, causality would lose its meaning. So, there must be *something* that necessitates causality manifesting regularity instead of randomness. Our question is about the nature of that something.

When we observe such omnipresent regularities as causality operating constantly everywhere, we tend to reify it. Since all phenomena arise under its laws, causality somehow appears permanent and nonempty. Now, the

question arises about what exactly would be nonempty in causation.

The basic option is to argue that things themselves are nonempty, that they have essences of their own. Causality is then simply the power of one thing to bring another thing about. But, that would contradict the independence of things possessing their own essences. After all, essence is the intrinsic nature of a thing and if it could be caused by another it could not simultaneously exist as an independent and permanent property. Therefore, Nagarjuna's second clause stands: there is no way by which independent things can cause other independent things to arise without contradicting their very existence as independent things.

One might then argue that the effect exists *potentially* in the cause. Thus, things might arise by themselves when the potential actualises. But, in that case the cause and effect turn out to be the same as the cause must already contain the outcome in its own potentiality. An effect cannot arise independently and yet already be contained in its cause, whether or not via a medium of potentiality. Therefore, Nagarjuna's first clause stands.

A third option, that a thing might arise both from itself and other, is a compromising combination opposing the first two clauses. If separately they failed, then perhaps together the inherent potential and the causal power of another might do the trick. This option is based on the *tetralemma* structure of Indian logic, but here it does not bring any new insight. Two falsified do not make one verified simply by cooperation. Nagarjuna's third clause stands.

As none of the former doctrines worked, there is only one logical option left for a mistaken reificationist, that things must arise spontaneously without cause. That is

empirically problematic since we do observe causality in operation: causality manifests as regularity instead of randomness. With spontaneous emergence as the explanatory regulation we would observe entirely different type of reality than the one we know of.

With all these four possible doctrines a reificationist fails to establish causality among things that are assumed to exist as independent entities. Nagarjuna maintains, however, that things do not arise without causes. What are these causes if they must remain empty of essences, one might ask.

Things do not possess the power to cause other things. No such power exists. Causes in this sense do not exist. Instead, only conditions do exist. All things are empty of essence. They borrow their existence from conditions that need to take place in order for an effect to become manifest. Conditions themselves are likewise effects of prior conditions. This process of conditions giving rise to effects which in turn operate as conditions for further effects is the endless causal chain of dependent origination, which explains how all phenomena become manifest in the universe as impermanent and dependent, without independent essence or self.

Motion (change): Motion is a spatial relation between positions of matter at distinct moments in time. Thus, motion and change depend on both the matter and its positions in time.

Time: Time, in turn, cannot be perceived without reference to motion and change. If there were no change in any position of matter at all, no time would pass. Thus, the passing of time is perceived insofar as there is both matter and its spatial change.

Primal elements: It is not uncommon to think that even though perceivable phenomena are all impermanent, they may still be composed of more elementary elements which themselves are permanent and have essences. Physics is an example of science where new, more elementary, entities have historically been discovered that construct other, composite entities. Such an evolution has encouraged scientists and the general public to entertain unfounded ideas of the possibility of finding the origin of universe, the unmoved mover that constructs all there is. Such a view is mistaken as it treats the entire universe as something objective and outside the subject that is examining it. This fallacy of objectification has deep roots in science. However, new scientific discoveries point toward increasing indeterminacy and subject-object interdependencies.

As has been reiterated in the present text, while human beings are very good at believing in imperceptible things, we are quite unwilling to accept logical constraints. We carry the primal tendency to reify and substantiate things we have never empirically observed, and at the same time we reject the necessary constraints that the observable reality imposes on us. Nagarjuna provides the logic by which no entity whatsoever can exist that could violate emptiness of essence. No primal elements can exist with essences of their own, because if any did, we would not observe the reality as it is. In this deepest sense Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka is not a matter of preference.

Dependent arising: All things arise dependent on other things. All things not only arise, they also pass away. Nothing can exist permanently. Dependent arising (a.k.a. dependent co-arising or dependent origination) is a property of all things and as such also empty of essence. It

is real only in the conventional phenomenal sense. Its existence depends on our conventions regarding how we perceive and name causal connections, which in turn are equally based on conventions, and so on. When we understand that everything we can perceive about reality is exactly this way, we are approaching a deeper understanding of the nature of reality where dependent arising is the principle that makes the whole universe intelligible and coherent to us.

The agent and action: Some may be drawn to think that even if it may be the case that the external phenomenal reality is only nominal and lacks inherent existence, the subject who perceives all this and who is capable of nominal imputation should herself exist as inherently real.

Nagarjuna shows how the agent is dependent on the action which is dependent on the agent, and both are dependent on the object which is dependent on both the agent and the action. None of these can exist independently of each other. Thus, we cannot make sense of the self as independent of actions, perceptions, objects, etc. And therefore, while the external phenomenal world depends on our intersubjective conventions, our selves reciprocally depend on the conventional existence of the external world.

This gives rise to equality among phenomena with such profundity that many of those who consider themselves egalitarians may find it difficult to digest (if they recognise that our selves are just a type of phenomenon, entirely equal to any other).

The subject-object relation: It might be tempting to think that the self must exist independently and prior to activities like perception, seeing, hearing, tasting, etc. Otherwise, one might ask, who would experience all those activities?

But, if the self existed independently of these activities, they too ought to exist independently of the self. There would be perceptions without a self and also a self without perceptions. If the self were separated from the experience and the object of experience, absurd things should be observed.

The subject existing without the object makes no sense as subjectivity only arises when there is an object of awareness. Likewise, an object without a subject is contradictory because being an object is to be an object *of* a subject. As interdependency between subject and object is what can be established while their independence cannot, there is no ground for an enduring self as a basis.

If accepting this *feels* uncomfortable, it is only because of deeply rooted reification that is in operation. In this case, it is the conventional use of the term “self” that becomes reified. Since we have used the term for our entire lives, it has become real in a completely different sense than what it is as merely a conventional concept for communicative purposes.

The universal tendency to reify things is what the Buddha discovered and this is what he taught us: Conventions shape our perceptions of reality, but if we realise that conventions are *merely* conventions, we begin to see the true nature of reality as it is for us humans. To learn how the conventional and the nonconventional (ultimate) operate we need Nagarjuna, so let us continue further.

Conventional limits: It is common to think that things have their lifespans containing beginning, middle, and end. As we have never observed any permanent phenomena, everything we have seen follows this familiar cycle. If we take these three phases that all phenomena undergo to be

real in some nonconventional sense, we impose essence on them by reifying their existence. Then the beginning would be independent of the middle, and they both would be independent of the ending. Since their existence would not depend on the existence of other phases, we would observe each of them existing simultaneously, which would prove absurd.

So we perceive that all these phases are only conventional designations that help communication. Their boundaries are imposed by us as there is no nonconventional way for us to define when exactly the beginning arises and when the ending of the beginning turns into the beginning of the middle, and so on.

What is said here about the boundaries of different phases of phenomena is to be applied to the limits between different phenomena as well. There is no nonconventional boundary to be found between a seed and a tree, nor between a tree and a table made of that tree. All these limits are imposed by us through the reference to conventions that we follow.

Thus, there is birth because we name it so. There is life because we so define; and there is death because we see it that way. There is nothing else than our conventions that define these things. Hindus and most Buddhists see birth and death differently than Christians because they follow different conventions. There is nothing more real than that in any of those terms. This is what the Buddha meant when he taught us that through realisation we transcend birth and death¹⁸.

¹⁸ Misunderstanding this point has produced various reifications among Buddhists about imperceptible phenomena, such as an eternal soul that transcends birth and death.

The Four Noble Truths: These four truths are the cornerstones of the Buddha's teaching: Human life is (1) *suffering* due to (2) *misunderstanding* the true nature of reality and the human mind. But, since suffering is based on cognitive error, there is also a (3) *remedy* for it, a path that leads to (4) *nonsuffering*. These truths being central tenets in Buddhism it is understandable that many may view their status as something beyond conventional designation: Even if everything else may depend on our imposition, these truths must exist independently of our conventions, how else could they serve as truths.

Nagarjuna shows how it is only by consistently following the logic of emptiness that also these truths can exist *at all*. Any attempt to reify any of these truths, or their properties, or their relations, would expire their existence in the only way they can exist, as conventional designations.

The path from suffering to nonsuffering requires learning by falsifying our basic misconceptions about reality. This involves abandoning all reifications that we have accumulated during our lives. Nonsuffering becomes manifest when we finally have relinquished erroneous views of nihilism and eternalism, and no longer mistake conventional existence for inherent existence.

The Ultimate Truth points to the Conventional Truth: Everything is conventionally real, and yet everything is ultimately unreal (from the ultimate point of view). Nothing is ultimately existent, nor completely nonexistent (from the conventional point of view). Everything is neither real in the ultimate sense nor unreal in the conventional sense.

The ultimate refers to a reality that is independent of conceptual conventions, of identities, and therefore, of distinctions between identities. We cannot conceive such a reality because no words can describe it. And yet the

ultimate truth about things is precisely their ultimate nonexistence.

Paradoxically, the Buddha explains and Nagarjuna proves that the ultimate reality does not differ, and cannot differ, the slightest from the conventional reality. To understand why this must be so, we need to follow Nagarjuna's logic until the very end. Remember that nothing can exist independent of others and therefore everything in the entire universe is related to others. When we say everything, it means every single thing you can conceptually think of. There are no ultimately existing things or relations or properties to be found, only conventional nominations.

This means that the founding principles of the universe, impermanence, interdependency, and emptiness of essence are just like everything else, ultimately nonexistent. They operate as has been established, but only in the conventional sense as the ultimate reality is empty of anything to be operated.

And finally, to be able to establish a fully coherent logic without any violations or absurdities, the last concept left to be emptied is the tool that has been used for examining the truth of all things, the *ultimate truth* of things itself which, just like everything conceivable, must be taken only as a conventional nomination.

What all this implies is that there cannot exist ultimate truths beyond conventional designation. The ultimate truth points at its own property of being nonexistent. The ultimate truth is that the conventional reality is only nominal.

Those who are able to practice by embodying this unconventional logic, reifying nothing, face exactly the same reality as those who don't, with the remarkable

difference that the latter are bound in the fundamental error of regarding the conventional as inherently real, while the former are able to pacify grasping and transcend suffering.

- (1) By observing reality we can see that all phenomena arise, endure and pass away. We cannot find a single phenomenon that would not follow this pattern.
- (2) This means we do not observe permanence in the reality we experience, only impermanence.
- (3) Since all phenomena are under constant change, they cannot possess fixed identity.
- (4) We can only observe phenomena that arise when other phenomena are present, and they pass away when other phenomena are not present; and since we cannot observe them arising without connection to any other, we come to realise that phenomena are somehow mutually connected among themselves.
- (5) Since all phenomena borrow their existence from other phenomena, they cannot be treated as genuinely separate from others.
- (6) When we look a bit closer at what these phenomena are, we come to understand that they exist in reality the way *we* experience them, and that they are named by *us*.
- (7) Also, causal relations between different phenomena are those we have discovered and named, and we know by experience that any list of causal factors is under constant change as we find new ways of seeing and naming things.
- (8) Thus, the reality we see operating is designated by our own volition to serve our purposes of surviving and adapting.

- (9) The universal lack of intrinsic nature forces us to accept the ultimate truth acting upon itself, thus leading to the inescapable conclusion that there are no ultimate truths beyond our conventional designation of things.
- (10) This should pacify our deceptive desire to reify the conventional truth and help us accepting things as impermanent, dependent, and nonsubstantial.

The Buddha and Nagarjuna were interested in liberating the human being from suffering and since, through analysis, we can show that suffering is created by our deeply rooted misperceptions of reality, it is the connection between us and the reality that needs to be analysed.

Contrary to religious beliefs they did not try to invent *alternative* realities that would soothe the mind and lull us into a fairy-tale land. They simply showed with astonishing accuracy how the reality we live in operates and how we become misguided as we tend to regard real what is unreal and unreal what is real.

The Buddha did not invent the Two Truths and neither did Nagarjuna. The Two Truths are as much part of our reality as anything you can experience. The whole agenda of the Madhyamaka is to show in a very precise manner how anyone wishing to take either of these Truths away will fail by their own effort. Anyone wishing to oppose the existence of Two Truths opposes one's very own opposition.

The rest is about effort and patience by which the path becomes understandable to us. Through practice our perception expands and we have fewer desires of clinging to things that cannot be established in the sense we have earlier believed. The Buddha's and Nagarjuna's teaching is

about learning to see the countless layers of conditionings and habits we have accumulated. Freedom is attained by our ability to see clearly how conditioning operates in us and how we can abandon its grip.

With practice we are able to grow from a paradoxical creature, who on one hand falsely believes to be a substantially distinct entity but who on the other hand passes its life without knowing the very nature of its existence on this planet, to a truthful combination who sees the nonsubstantiality of oneself but who knows not only its own existence but that of every other form as well.

Meditation

The path contains three *interdependent* components: insight, morality, and meditation. Conventionally thinking, insight becomes sharpened by intellectual training, through critical thinking, morality becomes developed by moral assessment, and meditation becomes deepened by meditation techniques. These three conceptually distinct fields of training contribute to our understanding of the nature of reality itself, but they also construct each other.

An initial level of wisdom and insight needs to be present in a person before she can come to perceive even the starting point of the path. Insight also gives rise to morality as the correct understanding of impermanence and dependent co-arising has unavoidable moral consequences. A simple-minded person cannot understand these and misinterprets morality as a matter of preference or obedience.

I will focus here on the most important and perhaps the most complex issue concerning the significance of meditation: The arising of freedom. Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka provides the logic for dependent origination showing how each phenomenon operates as both a result of and a condition for other phenomena, leaving the concept of *freedom* without any operational purpose. Freedom within the logic of endless causal network would signify noncausality, which becomes falsified as we have never empirically observed noncausalities. Thus, *freedom cannot exist* in this strict logical sense. Yet, the *present moment*, to which most meditation techniques bring us back to, again and again, is the *only moment* that is considered *completely free*, even though the present moment itself as a separate

temporal dimension between the past and the future cannot exist either. What is this freedom that does not logically exist, but which is somehow present at all times, even though the untrained mind cannot understand it correctly?

Freedom is the aim of the Buddha's teaching as the end of suffering. Suffering in turn is self-created by our misunderstanding of the nature of reality and our own minds. Since suffering is in this way self-afflicted, it can also be cured if we learn how the mechanisms of our minds operate. So, by understanding how our minds run after desirable things and how this compulsive running *itself* is the source of our misery, we can begin to untangle the knot that binds us.

Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka provides all the necessary tools to arrive at the correct insight concerning the nature of reality for us humans. Buddhist psychology provides a detailed map of how conditioning operates in us and how we become victims in our own lives. However, it is one thing to become cognitively conscious of our mental regularities and dependencies, yet it is entirely different process by which these regularities become dropped off.

Freedom in meditation does not refer to popular misperception of "freedom from the reality that binds us". Quite the contrary, meditation brings ever deepening understanding of the reality. Our minds contain a special feature which the Western psychology is largely unknowledgeable about. Just watching what is going on is a thing that does not fit well with the Western mode which is constantly looking for something to *do* and to mess around with. Meditation is, however, about just observing and dropping off everything you can imagine; yes, your *self* included. It is through meditation by which we are able to

attain freedom from preconceptions, opinions, feelings, discursive thinking, all kinds of automated processes we mistake as the most valuable things that construct our identities.

Due to human imagination there are countless meditation techniques in this world. Due to the same source the goals of meditation also vary greatly. My aim here is not to present a cavalcade of various alternatives, but instead, to connect meditation directly to the main goal, namely the end of suffering by liberation.

Liberation is attained by understanding the reality correctly. Reality is correctly understood when the Four Noble Truths become realised. The “how to” part of the four noble truths deals with ways of transforming our understanding and coming to realise what needs to be realised. The Buddha lists two sets of things that lead to liberation. The first set, The Noble Eightfold Path, presents the type of views and activities that need to be present if we are to progress toward our final goal. The second set is The Seven Factors of Enlightenment: mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity. Without these elements one cannot attain the final goal.

The seven factors of enlightenment operate as progressive steps in meditation. They are often referred to as the stages of *Jhana*. Here is where things may become tricky for many people – unnecessarily, though, as I will maintain. Those with less patience are often unable to experience these stages. Also, since people differ, each has to find out responses that fit to their bodyminds. This is achieved by experimentation which requires trial and error correction. This again requires patience and some degree of

cognitive capacity (to be able to discern nuanced causalities).

Because the Jhana stages do not appear without effort and constant practice, some meditators turn away from them, but because of the human condition, many of them like to argue that the Jhanas are not at all that important. This is where they go wrong. Not only are they important, they are essential factors for liberation. The Buddha makes this very clear as he repeatedly emphasises the function of the seven factors of enlightenment (the name he uses for them should leave no doubt in anyone's mind).

The doubtful and fearful feelings that some meditators have against the Jhanas are unnecessary though. They are not anything mystical or extraordinarily difficult to attain, but instead very practical steps that we all can follow irrespective of time or culture. You can experience the exactly same type of process that the Buddha himself went through countless times.

The seven factors of enlightenment are as central as the noble eightfold path is for arriving at our final destination. This is why there is no question about whether we should go through what the Buddha taught us to go through.

The bodymind

Mind is the forerunner of all things, instructs the Buddha. This is empirically established in the sense that we can understand reality only through our own minds. Even if a person carries a view of separate objective reality existing outside human perception, she still is confined within the limits of her own mind. She has to make use of her own mind when thinking of concepts such as objective reality. There is no escape for anyone.

Acknowledgement of this human limitation is a central point of departure in the Buddha's reasoning. He was not interested in metaphysical speculation on types of realities that human beings are able to imagine. The type of liberation that he was seeking was both empirical and pragmatic.

Since the mind is the one that interprets, it can be seen as the forerunner of everything. In this sense, reality depends on the existence of the mind, as without the mind no such a thing as reality could exist to begin with.

However, because of the inevitable interdependency of the body and mind, it is not useful to consider them as separate entities here. By keeping them artificially separate people create room for evasive moves, where, for instance, addictions are seen as mental problems of particular individuals, and not as universal processes that affect everyone's bodymind.

Another reason for treating the bodymind as a single unit of analysis connects to the reality where causal explanations are under constant change and where the distinction between the body and mind is mainly a remnant of earlier traditions of medicine and psychology.

The third reason for using the term bodymind is linked with the empirical findings that the mind as a separate entity is nowhere to be found. We use concepts like memory, consciousness, feelings, thoughts, etc. But when we try to find the mind itself where all these components are supposed to be located, it is nowhere to be found. Not a single person has ever shown what the mind is and where it is to be found. This does not mean that the concept is useless, however. We have of course benefited greatly by the term that refers to the immaterial container of its immaterial components. But the clear distinction between the body and mind can also lead us astray, especially if we emphasise their distinction when in reality they are intertwined in ways that render them inseparable.

My aim here is to explain that treating the body and mind as separate even in the conventional sense, can mislead us to believe in a type of disconnection between them that modern science does not corroborate. Understanding how the chemistry of the body affects the mind and how the mind gives rise to changes in the body helps us to take care of this vehicle of ours – the bodymind.

Fields of science that contribute to the bodymind interaction, neuroscience, chemistry, biology, medicine, psychiatry, just to mention a few, evolve following the self-correcting rules of science. A general direction of the present time is toward increasing number of discoveries that connect mental and cognitive processes with chemicophysical sources of the body. Abnormal chemistry is seen to give rise to countless types of mental challenges, e.g., insomnia, depression, bipolar disorder, Alzheimer's disease, different schizophrenic alternatives, varieties of anxiety types, etc. The list seems endless and it expands as we speak.

A new *Deep Brain Stimulation* treatment for e.g., Alzheimer's disease, depression, Parkinson's disease, among some others, offers an exemplary connection between brain chemistry and memory of past experiences. The patient is awake while the target area of her brain is treated with electric impulses. This gives rise to visions of past experiences and the patient is able to describe them while being treated.

Similar type of dynamic can be found when we face an acute and momentary danger. Resulting from a physicochemical shock in the body we are able to visualise our past experiences like a film within a very short period of time. The interaction between the body and mind cannot be separated as the mind as the immaterial component does not "do" anything; it simply operates as the container for other immaterial components.

Our bodyminds drive us in many different ways and unfortunately scientific discovery is not always used for our benefit. Food industry utilises empirical findings on types of nutrients that are highly addictive to humans, namely fat and sugar (not to mention tobacco industry's abuse of nicotine for similar purposes). It is startling to observe how the entire human kind becomes harmfully affected by greed and profit seeking. In nearly absolute silence entire populations suffer from health problems that they no longer can prevent from deepening. The silence I talk about is of the most harmful kind as instead of the real wrongdoer it is the addicted population that is loudly blamed for its self-harming addiction to fat and sugar.

The modern person is constantly targeted by profit-seekers who are not genuinely interested in the welfare of their customers. After being driven to health problems through conditioning and attachment to sensory pleasures,

the person, who is now mainly viewed as a customer, is offered relief in the form of pharmaceutical products – which also come with harmful side effects, which in turn require some other counter measures. Our dear customer becomes a puppet in her own life.

It is very difficult for a person who follows conventions and forms opinions by imitating others not to be driven by her sense experiences. Everything she observes in and around her clearly indicates that by following her senses, by drawing toward things that are pleasurable and by avoiding those that cause dislike, life is made better. Unfortunately, both the body and mind of an untrained person work against her welfare.

The reason for this opposition is clear. We know it by empirical findings and through our own experiences that by simply following sensory pleasures we harm the bodymind in the long-term and create and maintain clinging resulting addictive tendencies. If following sensory pleasures does not bring welfare, what does then?

My intention is not to provide health instructions or any particular programme to be followed. I will present a simple way of viewing the entire bodymind and life complex in order to maintain healthy balance in this vehicle of ours.

Interdependency between experiential and scientific knowledge. The bodymind adapts to changes in its environment. Also, the mind adapts to changes in the body, and vice versa. Health instructions seem to change with increasing speed in the present time. Something that was yesterday considered unhealthy has become healthy today, and vice versa.

For instance, it is common to think that food should be taken in short intervals (4-5 times) during a day. This is

generally believed to keep the sugar level even, and that in turn keeps our mental and physical performance up. Many health professionals have learnt to think this way. But we also know that a healthy body balances the sugar level in ways that are not connected to food intake intervals. We also know that low calorie intake and fasting help the body to maintain balance and reduce adverse processes such as growth of cancer cells, inflammation, etc. We also know that low calorie intake extends the life-span of cells and increases longevity. It seems that less frequent intake and lower calorie diet have overall beneficial effects on the body. Why?

Many of the processes of our bodies have been adapted to environment where humans lived earlier, before the relatively rapid change in technologies and social patterns that changed our diet. The evolution of our organs and bodily processes cannot keep up with the dramatic increase in calories. It is expected that we will discover an increasing number of causal connections between epidemically expanding diseases such as Alzheimer's and high calorie diet.

Keeping our vehicle relatively light not only helps us to maintain mental and physical balance, but the process by which lightness is maintained *itself* helps us to realise how freedom increases as the sensory-pleasure automat is switched off.

It may sound bizarre for a modern person who is attached to her sensory pleasures when it is suggested that her bodymind operates better with food taken in moderation once or twice a day. The bodymind of course needs some time to adjust, but after a few days, it stops protesting and equanimity prevails.

An unexpected consequence comes in the form of sensory desires quieting down and the person can feel some freedom from the demands that earlier were seemingly beyond her control. The bodymind starts to adjust to the perception and understanding of the person who resides in that vehicle.

A person understanding this does not need weight reduction programmes or any other programme because everything she adopts is experiential aimed at lifelong use. We simply observe what works.

The importance of physical training needs also to be noticed. The separation between the body and mind has misled many to assume that physical training is in some natural sense disconnected from mental training. Many people are conditioned to avoid physical effort and are able to invent excuses against it. However, physical training is training the bodymind complex and it is an important element in maintaining the health of our vehicle.

Learning to balance the bodymind is a long and evolving process. On one hand, sensory pleasures should not drive the bodymind, but on the other hand, we should also steer clear from self-mortification. It may first seem quite difficult to maintain balance when the sensory bombardment is a continuous state of affairs. The solution comes in the form of nonattachment. We need to unlearn the conditionings which we have learned earlier. When we gradually unwind our clinging to sensory inputs, we simultaneously create space in our bodymind for remaining calm and relaxed even when sensory traffic is present. As time passes, the traffic subsides and clarity intensifies. That is the clarity of the interdependent bodymind complex.

Equality of phenomena

Realisation of the conventional and the ultimate truths brings a deep understanding of equality or evenness among all phenomena. Since no phenomenon can possess separate essence, no priority among interdependent phenomena can be justified.

There is a particular reason why I want to emphasise this necessary consequence of these two truths. First, most non-Buddhist people consider their own existence as human beings as a privileged position. Secondly, most Buddhists consider their own existence as human being as a privileged position as well. By seeing their own position as human beings as something very special and blessed, they reveal a lack of understanding of both the conventional and the ultimate truths.

Practically all Buddhist traditions that aim to control social behaviour by rebirth as a karmic feedback system emphasise the blessed state of having been born in a human form. This is in dire contradiction with both the conventional and the ultimate truths about reality.

The Buddhist texts are covered with references of the Buddha explaining the various states that a human being can be reborn into based on how they behave during their lifetimes. This may seem quite confusing. First the Buddha explains the two truths of reality and then goes on contradicting himself by describing all kinds of fantastic things that he or anybody else has never witnessed. And the Buddha was supposed to be a critical thinker *par excellence*. How can this be?

The answer is quite practical. Because he was selling something, the Buddha needed to meet the conventions of

local people. If even educated people today base their moral values on fantasies of afterlife and whatnot, how much more deeply were people some 2.600 years ago inclined toward superstition and mysticism. And the Buddha's agenda was to persuade such people to discover freedom from fabrications.

This reveals how difficult it is for anyone to come to know what the true teaching is and what is just storytelling to meet the expectations of local superstitious people.

The main motivation for this text is to explain that there is a way to sweep the storytelling aside and dig into the very nature of reality that the Buddha tried to offer. And that is the Middle Way as expounded by Nagarjuna. By understanding Nagarjuna's Middle Way you come to see the naked Buddha without layers of cultural storytelling and incoherencies.

Not only Buddhists are interested in the privileged status of human beings. For some reason, even a modern and educated mind is drawn to think that it must be such a tiny probability for one's own personality to exist on earth. That idea leads way too automatically common people concluding that: "thus, this state of mine must be a blessing".

There are increasing attempts, even by scientists, to calculate the odds of a particular person having been born. In order to be able to calculate such a phenomenon we would need to know all the causes and conditions that give rise to a particular personality. That would require knowledge of all possible events that have affected the causalities, and their probability distributions. Also, it is not correct to arbitrarily stop the causal connections to one's parents, as many calculations do. This is because the causal connections continue through the history of humanity to

earlier life forms and all the way back to the beginning of universe itself. The reader needs to discover by their own effort why this is so.

What I am trying to approach here is the revolutionary state of reality that the Buddha discovered. It is revolutionary in that it goes against the most intimate ideas that most human beings carry about themselves. Namely, that they are NOT in any profound way different from any other life form – or any form, to be more precise. To be born as a human being is just our present manifestation, and there certainly is nothing blessed or unblessed about an eventuality that follows natural causalities in ways whose nature is explained in detail in Nagarjuna's Middle Way.

This evenness or equality among all forms is one of the most difficult medicines for people to swallow because they mistakenly think that if you take their privileged status away from them, they are left with *nothing at all*. That is why they cling to anything that serves their false senses of security and comfort.

Paradoxically, this unpleasant wake-up call points to the most central task in being a human: how to become a sovereign being who does not need a false identity based on fantasies and fairytales; in other words, how to be a human free from reifying the nonexistent extremes of either eternalism or nihilism.

If you look more carefully into this, you will see that being a human is just another manifestation and our present form was transformed from another and will be transforming into something else again. This is to say that we have never been born and will never die; instead we are and have always been part of the entirety which is known to us by the name of the universe. All this is established

both empirically and logically; the question is, are you willing to let go of reification and wake up to the reality?

Everything arises together

Dependent origination is often also named as *dependent co-arising*, especially when the togetherness of the arising of phenomena is emphasised. It is not always entirely clear what this togetherness or co-arising means and how it can be seen. I have observed only few correct interpretations and for that reason it is best that I explain something about it. By “correct” I mean an interpretation that points toward liberation.

It may appear counterintuitive to think that all phenomena arise collectively; not only that no phenomenon can arise separately, but also that we need *every* phenomenon for the apparent arising of any single one. But this is exactly how we need to come to understand in order to realise what needs to be realised.

It is common sense to think that for us to appear, our parents must have appeared before us. And their parents before them, and so on. Common logic is able to follow this type of simple line of causality. More generally, nothing that we can find in the universe has emerged without a cause – or to put it in another way, everything you consider real must have a cause.

Now concerning your ancestors, would you agree that *any* missing link in the chain of ancestry would make your present existence impossible? Would you also agree that the length of the chain that you are able to perceive depends on your knowledge (of biology, physics, and at least of logic). The point I am trying to make is that we cannot arbitrarily decide where we want to end the chain. It really is not in our command. The chain necessarily remains intact whether or not we understand its scope.

And the chain continues – yes, it continues right through the Big Bang itself¹⁹.

Therefore, when you sit there, or stand; and you breathe, the entire universe is breathing *in* you.

I know some of you are not satisfied with this linearity alone. That is because there always exist other members of the same or other species as well. So you suspect that particularly you may not be needed for everything to arise together. You want to see some breadth of the system before you are satisfied.

Why do we need *all* other phenomena to exist just the way they do in order for any single phenomenon to arise the way it arises? It is because just like the chain of ancestry that facilitates your present appearance, all other phenomena become manifest by exactly the same chain of ancestry that continues indefinitely back in time. There is simply nothing at all in the universe that lacks ancestry because that is the only way that anything can be seen to appear, namely through causality. Thus, in order for anything to arise, every single other line of ancestry must have taken place exactly the way they have.

Where do we tie the knot among all these (you may think separate) lines of ancestries? All ancestries are co-dependent. This is because for any phenomenon to arise there are a multitude of conditions that must co-arise with it. The idea of a linear chain of causalities helps us to understand temporal dimensions of causality as each condition operates as a cause for the next phenomenon to appear. But when we acknowledge that for any

¹⁹ This text takes no position to the type of phenomena that may or may not have existed prior to the concept of Big Bang, or whether the concept itself will be replaced with something entirely different. and so on.

phenomenon to appear an uncertain number of conditions arise together with it, things become also spatially complex. By uncertainty I refer to the fact that what are *named* as conditions depend on our conventions at any given moment. We pay attention to conditions that we think are effective, and necessarily ignore those that we are unaware of.

If we then connect the temporal and spatial dimensions of causalities we get an interdependent network of causes and conditions operating in time and space, each being equally a source for and an outcome of others. As the network of causes and conditions operates in time and space any single phenomenon that become manifest depends on the entirety, and vice versa.

Neither one nor different

My final task here is to explain how this particular manifestation we are all sharing, this being human at the present moment, can become both intellectually fulfilling and experientially satisfying entirely without childlike yearn for comfort and nursing by imaginary entities. At this point we all know that such an understanding does not come automatically and without effort. Automatically come only blindness and herding.

If we understand correctly what this text has tried to portray, there should be a natural sense of tension regarding our presence as human beings at this very moment. Since everything truly is dependent origination at work and manifestations appear and disappear according to conditions, how should we take all this from our side?

Asking this question and feeling the subtle tension reveal that there is something fundamental that needs to be realised: the whole journey is about coming to understand that there is no *our* side against the *other* side. It is quite understandable for fear to arise if one views herself as a tiny entity *against* the magnitude of the universe. "What is the point of being here if we are just specs of dust in the endless flow of causalities", one may mutter.

Yet, release comes from an apparently unexpected direction. It comes from the nonduality itself. This fundamental aspect becomes clear only by our complete surrender and letting go of all reifications. One may spend an entire life examining how causalities operate from an observer's perspective and yet there is no release to be found. How does this letting go then happen?

It happens through meditation, because there really is no other way for human beings to be able to let go of the body, and of the mind, and finally of all reifications in any proper sense. What arises there is that which never separates us from the reality. The manifestation that mistook herself as a separate personality finds it to be non-existent in such a mode, and that heap of processes becomes quite naturally free from sorrow and suffering. The old saying “nothing can separate us” comes to mean something slightly more profound than what is in the common melodramatic setting.

The seemingly complex process of liberation can be expressed in a fairly simple and straight forward way: First, we need to understand the conventional reality correctly. By understanding this entirely nominal and superimposed nature of the conventional reality, the practitioner experiences an initial sense of release. But, if the nature of the ultimate reality is not understood as well, the early sense of relief is soon replaced by anxiety and fear due to mistaken views about the conventional reality as empty, lacking meaning, etc.

Release awaits those who by using the conventional as a tool are able to approach the ultimate. The ultimate can only be approached through the conventional since the nature of the goal needs to be communicated somehow, and the only means by which we can transfer conceptual knowledge is through language. What can be transferred about the ultimate, though, is only its *approximation*, not the ultimate itself. When the practitioner, using the conventional reality, perceives the approximate ultimate reality correctly i.e., she understands conceptually the nature of the ultimate, the rest of the journey takes place beyond expression. That journey can only be taken in

meditation because no phenomena, no language, nothing of the conventional is present when the ultimate is approached. Yet, the ultimate cannot be attained without the conventional. Both the Buddha and Nagarjuna understand that without the conventional, the ultimate cannot be grasped; and without the ultimate, liberation is not possible.

Finally, it is not a mystery why contentment is what is left in this collection of processes we call the human being when everything is stripped away and cast aside. When both the conventional and the ultimate are correctly realised what is left is the nature of reality as it is and that is entirely peaceful. Satisfaction is inherent in the deep understanding of dependent origination and us as processes in it because the only way that can be established is the nature of all things being *neither one nor different*. When this is realised everything becomes peaceful.

*There is no release
For those who harbour views,
As all views fail by their own effort.*

*By understanding the Two Truths correctly
Reality becomes known as it is.*

*The Middle Way can only be
Established as viewless.*

*For those who realise this
Is freedom attainable.*

Recommended reading

Jay L. Garfield: *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*.
For those who want and are able to deepen their understanding of the Madhyamaka Middle Way I recommend reading everything that Garfield has published in this field, including articles and discourses together with other philosophers.

Pascal Boyer: *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*.

Thich Nhat Hanh: *Awakening of the Heart. Essential Buddhist Sutras and Commentaries*.

Internet sources of books and texts:

jaygarfield.org

accesstoinsight.org

buddhanet.net

holybooks.com/category/buddhism

A student asks Zen master Mushin:

Student: "Master, do you expect people to understand the Middle Way correctly?"

Mushin: "No."

Student: "What causes this?"

Mushin: "They are mad."

Student: "How are they mad?"

Mushin: "Barking mad."

Student: "What causes this?"

Mushin: "Arf! Arf! Arf!"

Jukka Kaisla



For further information, visit:

<http://jukkakaisla.fi>