

EMPTINESS*

Nāgārjuna's concept of "Emptiness" (*śūnyatā*) has been studied by many scholars. First of all Burnouf described Nāgārjuna's doctrine as a nihilistic scholasticism (*Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien*, Paris, 1844, p. 560). This interpretation was accepted by most scholars in the West in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth century. In *The Conception of Nirvāṇa* (Leningrad, 1927) Stcherbatsky vigorously advocated a positive interpretation of the Mādhyamika absolute: "In Mahāyāna all parts or elements are unreal (*śūnya*), and only the whole, i.e. the Whole of the wholes (*dharmatā = dharma-kāya*), is real" (p. 41). According to him "the reality of the Buddha is the reality of the Universe" (p. 45) and the "real Buddha must be perceived directly by intuition" (p. 44). Stcherbatsky is not the first to have stressed the ontological nature of Nāgārjuna's teachings. Indian and Japanese scholars had already proposed similar interpretations.¹ Their opinion, however, did not have the same effect as Stcherbatsky's forceful statements. Schayer was greatly influenced by Stcherbatsky, although he did not accept all his philosophical conclusions. In the introduction to the *Ausgewählte Kapitel aus der Prasannapadā* (Kraków, 1931), Schayer writes that in the act of mystical intuition the Saint apprehends the absolute reality, the infinity, the totality (p. XXIX). At first de La Vallée Poussin was disinclined to accept this interpretation but in a short note, published after his death, he pronounced himself without ambiguity: "J'ai longtemps cru (divers articles de l'*Encyclopédie de HASTINGS, Nirvāṇa, Dogme et philosophie*) que le Madhyamaka était "nihiliste", niait l'Absolu, la chose en soi. Dans un mémoire "Madhyamaka" (*Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques*, 2), je glisse vers une solution moins catégorique. Enfin, dans la présente note, je me dispose à admettre que le Madhyamaka reconnaît un Absolu" (*HJAS*, III, 1938, p. 148). To complicate matters Stcherbatsky did not maintain his own interpretation. In a sharp attack on Schayer he rejected his own theory and maintained that the Madhyamaka denied the possibility of an Absolute Reality ('Die

dreier Richtungen in der Philosophie der Buddhismus', *RO*, X, 1934, pp. 1-37; cf. also *Madhyāntavibhāga*, Leningrad, 1936, pp. vi-vii). The Mādhyamika are monists, not in the sense of a unique monistic reality but in the sense of a unique principle of explanation, which excludes all real plurality. The absolute is now explained by him as an idea of the dialectic Reason. On the other hand, Schayer arrived at a more explicit explanation of the nature of the Mahāyāna absolute which he considered to be common to both Mādhyamikas and Yogācāras ('Das Mahāyānistische Absolutum nach der Lehre der Mādhyamikas', *OLZ*, 1935, Sp. 401-415). According to him the absolute is infinite, homogenous and undifferentiated; pure, not split into subject and object, inactive and non-fluctuating consciousness; transcending all words and concepts, inexpressible, beyond all predicates and communication. Moreover, infinity is spatial in nature and consciousness is a spiritual substance more subtle than all other substances. In order to substantiate this spiritual monism Schayer does not refer to the Mūlamadhyamakakārikās but to the Samādhirāja and other texts.

Besides the studies of Stcherbatsky, Schayer and de La Vallée Poussin, Poul Tuxen's *Indledende Bemaerkninger til buddhistisk Relativism* (Copenhagen, 1936), containing a penetrating analysis of Nāgārjuna's Kārikās and Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā*, also deserves mention here, although this work has not yet received the attention it merits. It is listed in May's bibliography (Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā madhyamakavṛtti*, Paris, 1959, p. 43), but nowhere mentioned in the book itself. Streng remarks that it contains a general analysis depicting Nāgārjuna's dialectic as the negation of every particular entity in order to express the "whole" or "total" that is the source of all particulars (p. 243). Tuxen had a deep knowledge of Indian philosophies and religions, and his book on *Yoga* (Copenhagen, 1911) is certainly one of the best ever written on the philosophical Yoga system. Also written in Danish and almost completely unknown outside Denmark is his *Buddha* (Copenhagen, 1928), the fruit of a long sojourn in Siam and of a thorough study of Pāli texts. Tuxen keenly understood the value of Stcherbatsky's and Schayer's interpretations but he reproached them for not paying adequate attention to the religious aspect of Nāgārjuna's teachings. Stcherbatsky (in 1927) and Schayer (in 1931) opposed the unreality of particular phenomena to the reality of their totality. Tuxen shares their opinion that the Absolute can

only be apprehended by the Yogin in a mystical intuition, but he does not consider the Absolute to be the totality of particular phenomena. If I am not mistaken, he uses the word totality (*Helhed*) only once but adds immediately that, as all other words, it is unfit to designate the highest, mystical Reality (p. 95).

After World War II the study of Nāgārjuna was taken up again by a new generation of scholars. One must mention here the names of André Bareau², Jacques May³, T. R. V. Murti⁴, Edward Conze⁵ and Richard Robinson⁶. It is not possible to analyse their contributions to the study of the Mādhyamika system which, in various degrees, have greatly promoted a better understanding of this system and its basic concepts. Streng's book is the most recent study on the Mādhyamika system. Its importance lies in the fact that Streng examines Nāgārjuna's system from the point of view of a historian of religions. However Nāgārjuna's works, in particular his Kārikās, are interpreted, there is no doubt that Nāgārjuna is one of the most important religious thinkers and belongs to the common heritage of mankind. The study of his work ought not to be reserved to philologists and specialists of Indian philosophy. Streng shows himself well equipped for his difficult task. His knowledge of Sanskrit enables him to analyse Nāgārjuna's terminology without having to rely on translations made by other scholars. At the same time his reading in the works of Western scholars is extensive, as is shown by the annotated bibliography which contains an excellent systematic survey of the relevant literature (pp. 229-247). More important is the fact that Streng is a clear thinker who explains carefully the concepts he uses. His book makes no easy reading but this is due to Nāgārjuna himself and to the fact that Streng does not gloss over any difficulties.

It is not our intention to summarize section by section Streng's book because this would fail to do justice to his closely reasoned arguments. However, I would like to discuss a few points which are of particular importance for the understanding of Nāgārjuna. The central section of Streng's book is certainly the third part which is the basis for the fourth, dealing with the soteriological meaning of "emptiness", and which illuminates the arguments used in the preceding sections. Streng distinguishes three structures of religious apprehension in Indian thought: the mythical structure, the intuitive structure and Nāgārjuna's dialectical structure. The mythical structure of apprehension makes use of the

paradigmatic force of words, forming the religious truth through the use of special words or a myth. The intuitive structure presumes an absolute essence or "universal" which can be known only through a unique means of perception unlimited by particular forms (p. 151). Elsewhere, Streng says that in the intuitive structure the "real" is apprehended as the totality of all particular phenomena, which requires a mode of apprehension different from mental apprehension (p. 106). Both the intuitive and mythical structures of apprehension use words in a descriptive way, for they presume that there is a referent having static ultimate ontological status as a correlate to the descriptive term (p. 105). Nāgārjuna's negative dialectic provides a positive apprehension, not of "a thing", but of the insight that there is no independent and absolute thing which exists externally, nor a "thing" which can be constructed (p. 148). In it the power of reason is an efficient force for realising Ultimate Truth (p. 149). In using the term "emptiness" together with his critical dialectic, Nāgārjuna expresses a religious vision which must be distinguished from the "intuition of Ultimate Reality" that denies the phenomenal world as real, and from the notion that there is Ultimate Reality which is activated to take material forms by the creative force of sacred words or sounds (p. 105).

Using Streng's own words we have tried to elucidate his conception of Nāgārjuna's negative dialectic as opposed to the mythical and intuitive apprehensions. Streng attributes to the negative dialectic the insight that there is no absolute reality. How is this insight, obtained through negative dialectic, related to the activity of "wisdom" (*prajñā*) and to intuition? Streng devotes a special chapter to the discussion of wisdom but does not deal specifically with intuition. In this chapter wisdom is described as a means to dissipate any absolute notion about something (p. 83). It seems therefore to fulfil the same function as the negative dialectic. However, elsewhere wisdom is said to be, in part, a concentrative exercise which dissolves the mental and emotional attachment of the apparent mind to "things" (including ideas and assertions), for it is the awareness that all "things" are empty (p. 91). Wisdom and negative dialectic are clearly separated in the following passage: "The dialectical activity of the Madhyamakakārikās, informed by the wisdom (*prajñā*) of indifference to logical proof or refutation, is reality-being-realized" (p. 156). One has the impression that Streng has not succeeded in explaining the difference

between the functions of the negative dialectic and of wisdom. The same must be said with regard to his remarks on intuition in Nāgārjuna's system. Streng sharply distinguishes Nāgārjuna's negative dialectic from an intuition which apprehends an absolute essence, a "universal" or a totality. He refers explicitly to the theories of Murti and Schayer who see the Mādhyamika dialectic as only preparatory for the intuition of the reality behind the illusory phenomena (p. 76). As we have mentioned before, this theory was first proclaimed by Stcherbatsky in 1927. One must agree with Streng's rejection of the concept of an intuition which apprehends a totality. However, Streng does not consider intuition to be entirely absent from Nāgārjuna's system. He seems to admit that the Ultimate Truth can be manifested through logical reasoning as well as intuition (cf. pp. 94 and 147). According to him the difference between Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti resides in the fact that the latter holds that mystical intuition is the only way of apprehending Ultimate Reality (p. 97). If I understand Streng correctly, he seems to be of the opinion that both reason (or logic or negative dialectic) and intuition can lead to the manifestation of Ultimate Truth but that wisdom transcends both. This seems to be clearly stated in the following passage, if one admits that the words "mysticism" and "mystical awareness" refer to mystical intuition: "The faculty of religious knowledge which transcends both logic and mysticism is wisdom (*prajñā*); at the same time, wisdom uses discursive mental structures together with a mystical awareness of the inadequacy of logical and empirical knowledge" (p. 159).

To determine exactly the relations between reason, intuition and wisdom in the Mādhyamika system is undoubtedly the crux of the problem. It seems to me that it is not possible to study this problem on the basis of Nāgārjuna's *Kārikās* and *Vigrahavyāvartanī* alone. Streng mentions in his foreword that he has used the Sanskrit texts attributed to Nāgārjuna. However, no reference whatsoever is made to the *Ratnāvalī*, of which the greater part has been preserved in Sanskrit (cf. G. Tucci, "The Ratnāvalī of Nāgārjuna", *JRAS*, 1934, pp. 307-325; 1936, pp. 237-252, 423-435), and to his Hymns. The Sanskrit text of two of Nāgārjuna's hymns (*Nirāupamyastava*, *Paramārthastava*) has been published by Tucci (*JRAS*, 1932, pp. 309-325). It is not possible to study here the problem of the authenticity of the works attributed to Nāgārjuna, but one must point out that Candrakīrti in his *Madhyamakāśāstrastuti* (cf.

Oriens Extremus, IX, 1962, pp. 47–56) attributes the authorship of Hymns (*saṃstuti*) to Nāgārjuna. In his commentary on the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Prajñākaramati mentions a *Catustava*.⁷ The question, which four *stava* are included in the *Catustava*, has been studied by de La Vallée Poussin, Patel, and Tucci (cf. Tucci, *Minor Buddhist Texts*, I, Roma, 1956, pp. 236–237). Recently Lamotte has proposed to identify the *saṃstuti*, mentioned by Candrakīrti, with these four hymns (*Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse*, III, Louvain, 1970, p. XLIII). Lamotte rejects Tucci's theory, according to which the four *stava* are the *Lokātī-tastava*, the *Niraupamyastava*, the *Acintyastava* and the *Paramārthastava*. Following de La Vallée Poussin, he opts for the following four: *Niraupamyastava*, *Lokātī-tastava*, *Cittavajrastava* and *Paramārthastava*. However this may be, both Prajñākaramati and the author of the *Catustavasamāsa*, published by Tucci, are much later than Candrakīrti who does not limit the authorship of Nāgārjuna to a group of four Hymns. In any case, the Sanskrit materials are not limited to the *Kārikās* and the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*. However, even taking into account not only the abovementioned texts but also the texts attributed to Nāgārjuna by Candrakīrti and preserved only in Tibetan translation, it will probably still be extremely difficult to form a coherent picture of Nāgārjuna's doctrines. In order to understand such an author as Nāgārjuna it is absolutely necessary to consult the commentaries on his work and, in the first place, the commentaries on the *Kārikās*. It is only after having studied these commentaries and after having compared their different interpretations that one can try to distinguish the doctrine of Nāgārjuna from that of his commentators.

I would like to illustrate by one example how Streng has been led into error by the fact he did not consult the commentaries on the *Kārikās*, although three of them have been translated into Western languages (cf. Streng, pp. 239–240 for Walleser's two translations and the translations of the 27 chapters of the *Prasannapadā*. In xviii. 12 Nāgārjuna says: *saṃbuddhānām anupāde śrāvakānām punaḥ kṣaye | jñānaṃ pratyekabuddhānām asaṃsargāt pravartate* // which is rendered by Streng as follows: "If fully-completed Buddhas do not arise [in the world] and the disciples [of the Buddha] disappear, then, independently, the knowledge of the self-produced enlightened ones is produced." Streng comments: "The knowledge of 'emptiness' is not conceived as an expression of 'something' ;

it is not a proposition about something. Rather it is a power which spontaneously operated throughout existence (or nonexistence, both or neither)" (p. 83). For the correct interpretation of this verse one must consult the *Akutobhayā* and the *Prasannapadā*; both explain this verse in the same way. According to the *Prasannapadā* the knowledge of the Pratyekabuddhas arises *pūrvajanmāntaradharmatattvaśravaṇahetubalāt* "through the force of the cause consisting in the hearing of the true doctrine in former lives" (p. 378.9–10). This explanation is in complete agreement with the traditional Buddhist idea of the Pratyekabuddha. Consequently, this verse does not bear out Streng's interpretation. There are other cases in which Streng's translation or interpretation could have been more correct if he had taken into account the commentaries and the translations of the verses, embodied in the various translations of the 27 chapters of the *Prasannapadā* and in Walliser's translations.

More important, however, is the fact that the *Kārikās* do not contain any explicit reference to the nature of *prajñā*. The word *prajñā* is not mentioned even once in the *Kārikās* and the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*. These texts are extremely useful for the study of Nāgārjuna's negative dialectic as is obvious from the excellent chapters in which Streng studies Nāgārjuna's analysis of such basic Buddhist concepts as the *dharma*s, the *pratītyasamutpāda* and *Nirvāṇa*. The *Kārikās* and the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* are polemical works in which Nāgārjuna by means of negative dialectic shows the non-existence of all *dharma*s, but they do not deal with the nature of *prajñā* and intuition. Nāgārjuna's teachings can only be seen in the right perspective by taking into account not only all his works but also the commentaries on his works and the works of later Mādhyamikas such as Āryadeva, Buddhapālita, Bhāvaviveka and Śāntideva, who develop the ideas of Nāgārjuna and, in this way, help us to understand the implications of his teachings. This is, of course, not a task for a single scholar, but for several generations of scholars. Only when the main works of the Mādhyamikas have been translated and analysed, will it be possible to understand fully the place of each thinker within the Mādhyamika school.

Streng's book has great merits. Even though its textual basis is too narrow and the philological interpretation of Nāgārjuna's verses not always correct, his work is a very important contribution to the study of the religious meaning of Nāgārjuna's ideas. This is due to the fact

that Streng has gone beyond the two short texts, taken as his basis, and has carefully and critically examined the most important scholarly works dealing with Buddhism and, in particular, with the Mādhyamika system. In many respects and above all with regard to the soteriological aspect of Nāgārjuna's teachings, he has been more perceptive than many specialists in the field of Buddhist studies. However, he has not been entirely successful in analysing the relations between reason, intuition and wisdom with regard to the attainment of Ultimate Truth. Let me conclude this review by briefly stating my own opinion which does not pretend to be more than an impression based upon the reading of only a few Mādhyamika texts. One of the fundamental ideas of Buddhism throughout its doctrinal history is that true insight is obtained through concentration of mind. First comes *śīla*, then *samādhi* and finally *prajñā*. The *prajñāpāramitā*, the last and highest of the *pāramitās*, is to be obtained after the *dhyānapāramitā*. In the Mādhyamika system the Ultimate Truth can only be apprehended by *prajñā* in the act of concentration. The Ultimate Truth cannot be described with words or concepts but the insight gained in concentration, enables the Yogin to use his dialectical reason on the plane of *saṃvṛti* in order to demonstrate the unsubstantiality of all dharmas, Nirvāṇa included. The negative dialectic does not lead to the understanding of the Ultimate Truth but prepares the ground for the true insight to be gained through concentration. *Prajñā* transcends reason and can only, if imperfectly, be described as a mystical intuition which sees by way of not seeing (*adarśanayogena*). From a philosophical point of view the Mādhyamika system is the culmination of a basic tendency in Buddhism which consists in the emptying of ontological categories. Early Buddhism denies the reality of the Self (*ātman*), the Mādhyamika system the reality of all dharmas. The Mādhyamikas have carried the Buddhist concept of the transitoriness of everything (*sarvaṃ kṣaṇikam*) to its ultimate conclusion (*sarvaṃ śūnyam*).

Our Western philosophy has its roots in Greek philosophy. Greek *θεωρεῖν* means not only "to see", but also "to think, to speculate, to theorize". The philosophy of Plato reaches its climax in the vision of that which is best in existence (ἡ τοῦ ἀρίστου ἐν τοῖς οὐσι θεά, *Res publica* VII, 532c). The Greek looks at the visible things and tries to penetrate into their essence. The mystic vision of the Indian yogin is turned away

from the visible world towards the invisible world. I believe that this fundamental difference between the Greek and Indian spirit explains the difficulties one encounters in understanding Indian thought in its supreme manifestation.

NOTES

* Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness. A Study in Religious Meaning*. A Depth Study of the Philosopher Nagarjuna and His Interpretation of Ultimate Reality. Including translations of Nagarjuna's "Fundamentals of the Middle Way" and "Averting the Arguments", Nashville, New York, Abingdon Press, 1967.

¹ See the references given by Schayer, *OLZ*, 1935, Sp. 401 and by de La Vallée Poussin, *MCB*, II, 1933, p. 36, n. 1.

² *L'absolu en philosophie bouddhique* (Paris, 1951), pp. 172-198, 294.

³ 'Recherches sur un système de philosophie bouddhique', *Bulletin annuel de la Fondation Suisse*, III, 1954, pp. 21-33; 'La philosophie bouddhique de la vacuité', *Studia Philosophica*, XVIII, 1958, pp. 123-137; 'Kant et le Mādhyamika', *III*, III, 1959, pp. 102-111; *Candrakīrti Prasannapadā madhyamakavṛtti* (Paris, 1959), pp. 5-22.

⁴ *The Central Conception of Buddhism* (London, 1955).

⁵ *Buddhist Thought in India* (London, 1962), pp. 238-249.

⁶ *Early Mādhyamika in India and China* (Madison, Milwaukee and London, 1967), pp. 39-70.

⁷ Prājñākaramati always uses the form *catustava*, not *catuḥstava*; cf. de La Vallée Poussin's edition of the *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā*, p. 533, n. 10.

ABBREVIATIONS

HJAS = Harvard Journal of Asian Studies.

IJ = Indo-Iranian Journal.

JRAS = Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society.

MCB = Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques.

OLZ = Orientalistische Literaturzeitung.

RO = Rocznik Orientalistyczny.