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 (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
drei 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 Bemærkninger til buddhistik 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 madhyamakavr̥tti, 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 Bareau, Jacques May, T. R. V. Murti, Edward Conze and Richard Robinson. 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 Vigrahavyāvartani alone. Streng mentions in his foreword that he has used the Sanskrit texts attributed to Nāgārjuna. However, no reference whatsoever is made to the Ratnāvali, of which the greater part has been preserved in Sanskrit (cf. G. Tucci, “The Ratnāvali of Nāgārjuna”, JRAS, 1934, pp. 307–325; 1936, pp. 237–252, 423–435), and to hiṣ Hymns. The Sanskrit text of two of Nāgārjuna’s hymns (Nirṇapaṃyasāvastava, 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 Madhyamakaśāstrastuti (cf.
Orients 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 Lokātitastava, the Niraupamyastava, the Acintyastava and the Paramārtha-stava. Following de La Vallée Poussin, he opts for the following four: Niraumpamyastava, Lokātitastava, Cittavājra-stava and Paramārtha-stava. However this may be, both Prajñākaramati and the author of the Catuḥstavasamāsa, 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 Vigrahavyāvartani. 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 anutpāde śrāvakānāṃ punah kṣaye / jñānām pratyekabuddhānām asamsargāt 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 pūrvajamāntarádharmatattvaśravānaḥhetubālaḥ “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 Walleser’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 Vigrahavyāvartani. 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 dharmas, the pratityasamutpāda and Nirvāṇa. The Kārikās and the Vigrahavyāvartani are polemical works in which Nāgārjuna by means of negative dialectic shows the non-existence of all dharmas, 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 Mādhyaṃkika 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 Mādhyaṃkika 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 Mādhyaṃkika system the
Ultimate Truth can only be apprehended by prajñā in the act of con-
centration. 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 samīrti 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 concentra-
tion. Prajñā transcends reason and can only, if imperfectly, be described
as a mystical intuition which sees by way of not seeing (adāśanayogena).
From a philosophical point of view the Mādhyaṃkika 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 Mādhyaṃkika system the reality of all dharmas.
The Mādhyaṃkikas have carried the Buddhist concept of the transitoriness
of everything (sarvam kṣaṇikam) to its ultimate conclusion (sarvam śūnyam).

Our Western philosophy has its roots in Greek philosophy. Greek
θεωρέω 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 ὁστὶ θέα, 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

1 See the references given by Schayer, _OLZ_, 1935, Sp. 401 and by de La Vallée Poussin, _MCB_, II, 1933, p. 36, n. 1.
7 Prājñākaramati always uses the form _catustava_, not _catusṭṭava_; cf. de La Vallée Poussin’s edition of the _Bodhicaryāvatārāpaniṭṭikā_, p. 533, n. 10.

ABBREVIATIONS

 _IIJ_ = Indo-Iranian Journal.
 _JRAS_ = Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society.
 _MCB_ = Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques.
 _OLZ_ = Orientalistische Literaturzeitung.
 _RO_ = Rocznik Orientalistyczny.