Zen Action, Zen Person And Nagarjuna: The Logic Of Emptiness Essay, Research Paper

The forefather of Madhyamika Buddhism was Nagarjuna. T.P. Kasulis writes in his book, Zen Action, Zen Person that Nagarjuna was a predecessor to the development of Zen Buddhism. Nagarjuna is regarded though as a patriarch of the Zen tradition. He was the affecting principle to demonstrate logically the “emptiness”, or rather sunyata of philosophical distinctions. Kasulis also explores Nagarjuna’s “Logic of Emptiness.”

The Buddhist claimed that “to be concerned with speculative questions is like being concerned with the origin of a poisoned arrow while it is still in one’s flesh, contaminating the bloodstream.” Kasulis writes that a conflicting group supposed that nothing at all continued from the cause into the effect, that the two where completely distinct. The Abhidharma Buddhist scrutinized the principles behind the Buddhist teachings. Zen Action, Zen Person states that these became almost as important as practicing the teachings; that is the scrutnization of the principles. With all this wrangling over the principles and the debate on them, Nagarjuna came up with his “Logic of the Middle.” The origin of this came from the doctrine of sunyata or rather emptiness, which Kasulis states is the “Logic of Emptiness.”

Nagarjuna showed what was wrong the Abhidharma argument. He stated that the multiple philosophical divisions of Buddhism were created on “distinctions that must be seen as tentative rather than absolute.” Kasulis writes that Nagarjuna came up with a resolution to this argument. This solution was pure and simple. Nagarjuna wrote down all the key distinctions that the diverse philosophical “groups” assumed. He then took these distinctions and went through them one by one and showed that they had to be considered absolute. He went on to state that these distinctions lead the way to “ineluctable absurdities.” Ineluctable means, “being incapable of being evaded” or

something that is inescapable (Webster’s 1996). So what Nagarjuna was saying was that these distinctions that the Abhidharma Buddhist believed in eventually lead to absurdities that cannot be escaped from.

Kasulis focuses on two of Nagarjuna’s points or rather critiques against the Abhidharma; time and causality. Nagarjuna’s critique on time can be seen as a good introduction to his “methodology.” Nagarjuna argues four points against time.

The first critique is that “if the existence of the present and future depends upon the past, then present and future should be in the past” (Kasulis). An example from my life to help illustrate this point would be driving. The past is when I was 16 years old and I got my driver’s license. The present is me currently driving and the future is that I will have a wreck. If the present (driving) and the future (my wreck) depends on the past (my obtaining my drivers license), then my being able to drive (present), and my having a wreck (future) should be in the past.

Nagarjuna’s second critique against time is that if present and future was not in the past, how could present and future is dependent upon the past? It can be illustrated this way. If my driving (present) and my having a wreck (future) are not in the past then how could my driving (present) and my having a wreck (future) are dependent upon my obtaining my license?

Nagarjuna goes on to say that if we don’t depend on the past, then the present and future will not occur. If this is the case then present and future times also do not occur. We can also say that if I am not dependent on getting my driver’s license then my driving and my having a wreck will not occur.

Nagarjuna’s last critique against time was that “the remaining two periods of time as well as above, below, and middle, should be characterized.” What Nagarjuna was saying was that the relationship between past, present and future is contradictory. The relationship between my obtaining my driver’s license, me out driving on the road and my having a wreck is contradictory.

Basically what Nagarjuna was saying was that the relationship between past, present and future all depend upon each other. Let’s look at it this way; the past depends on the present, the present depends on the past, the present depends on the future and the future depends on the past. In other words, my getting my driver’s license depends on my driving. My driving depends on my getting my driver’s license. My driving depends on my having a wreck and my wreck depends on my obtaining my driver’s license. One thing cannot happen without the other one occurring also. Kasulis then goes on to focus upon Nagarjuna’s critique of causality.

Nagarjuna challenged causality by making evident that the relationship between cause and effect was not either absolute or unparadoxical. There are four replications to cause and effect. “Cause and effect is completely identical, cause and effect are not at all identical, cause and effect are both identical and not identical at the same time, and the last response is that cause and effect is neither identical nor not identical” (Kasulis).

Let’s use the example of driving again to better illustrate this point or critique. The cause of my having a wreck could be because I was speeding. The effect of my speeding is having a wreck. Nagarjuna says that these responses lead to absurdity. Or in layman’s terms, they are absolutely ridiculous.

Nagarjuna argues on point one that if the cause and effect are exactly the same “then nothing different was caused or brought into existence.” So if my having a wreck (effect) and the speeding (cause) are indeed exactly the same, then nothing happened. Nagarjuna says that for the causality to occur that a change has to happen. For me to speed and then for me to have a wreck, a change has to happen.

Nagarjuna goes on to argue on the second point that since cause and effect is not identical at all, then there cannot be any continuity. So if the wreck and the speeding are at all identical then they cannot continue.

The third argument of Nagarjuna’s regarding cause and effect is that if cause and effect is identical and not identical then that is a precise contradiction to either of the earlier arguments made by Indian logic. If my speeding and my wreck are completely identical then this goes completely against all the other arguments, such as when they say they are not at all identical (point 2).

The last argument of Nagarjuna’s regarding cause and effect is that if cause and effect are neither identical nor not identical then this makes it a misuse of language. It seems to me that Nagarjuna is saying that this is almost a miss-print or a typo. If my wreck and my speeding are not identical nor are they identical then this makes the argument wrong. If this mistake were indeed true then it would make all the other arguments that Indians make about cause and effect null and void.

It seems to me after reading these points on causality that I definitely have to agree with Nagarjuna on points three and four. It is almost as if Indian logic says something about causality and then in the very next sentence they state something about causality that is a direct contradiction to what they previously said.

Kasulis writes “emptiness, which is the logical interdependence of opposing terms, lies at the basis of all philosophical distinction.” Nagarjuna believed that we could work inside the world of duality while we identify its relativity. Kasulis says that we should “consider Nagarjuna’s emphasis on the nondifferentiating, nonobjectifying insight or wisdom.”

Costello, Robert B. ed. Random House. Webster’s College Dictionary. Random

House, Inc. 1996.

Kasulis, T.P. Zen Action. Zen Person. The University Press of Hawaii: 1981.