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# Guidelines for Buddhist Social Activism Based on Nāgārjuna's *Jewel Garland of Royal Counsels*

ROBERT A. F. THURMAN

[O King!] Just as you love to consider  
What to do to help yourself,  
So should you love to consider  
What to do to help others!<sup>1</sup>

NĀGĀRJUNA THUS expresses the basic principle of Buddhist social action; the universal altruism of "great love" (*mahāmaitrī*) and "great compassion," or "great empathy" (*mahākaruṇā*). The primary Buddhist position on social action is one of total activism, an unswerving commitment to complete self-transformation and complete world-transformation. This activism becomes fully explicit in the Universal Vehicle (*Mahāyāna*),<sup>2</sup> with its magnificent literature on the Bodhisattva career. But it is also compellingly implicit in the Individual Vehicle (*Hinayāna*) in both the Buddha's actions and his teachings: granted, his attention in the latter was on self-transformation, the prerequisite of social transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> Nāgārjuna, 55. All Nāgārjuna references are to Nāgārjuna, 1975, numbered according to the verse numbers in that text. I have, however, used the Sanskrit original (Vaidya, 1960) in certain places, and on that basis altered the terminology to suit my own preference, thus to maintain coherence between quotes and commentary.

<sup>2</sup> I use "Universal" and "Individual" to translate "*Mahā-*" and "*Hina-*" in these ancient terms, based on the fact that the Mahāyāna is a Vehicle designed for riders who will all other beings to share the ride, and the Hinayāna is a vehicle designed for riders who also hope others will get aboard, but who are primarily concerned with hanging on themselves at least. The former thus emphasizes "Universal" liberation, the latter "Individual" liberation. Finally, since universal liberation certainly cannot take place unless it is "universal individual" liberations in totality, these translations also capture the relationship between the two vehicles. See my forthcoming *Ornament*.

Thus, it is squarely in the center of all Buddhist traditions to bring basic principles to bear on actual contemporary problems to develop ethical, even political, guidelines for action.

This is just what Nāgārjuna did during the second century C.E., when he wrote his *Jewel Garland of Royal Counsels* to his friend and disciple, King Udayi of the powerful Śātavāhana dynasty of south central India. It should thus prove instructive to examine his counsels in some detail. In this essay, I will first sketch the Buddhist view of absolute and relative realities, which has clear implications for the derivation of ethics from metaphysics. Then I will sift through Nāgārjuna's general counsels on social policy in his third chapter to discern the main outlines of the society he prescribed for that time and place. Finally, I will extrapolate from the specific prescriptions in his fourth chapter a set of modern "counsels" for today's "kings," in hopes that it will help the Buddhist intellectual clarify his or her own thinking about the emergencies that beset us.

# I

A perfectly enlightened Buddha is defined in the Universal Vehicle to be a superhuman who has spent aeons in evolutionary development, acting out of both self-interest (*svārtha*) and altruistic interest (*parārtha*) to gather the stores of wisdom and merit (*punya-jñāna-saṃbhāra*). These ultimately come to the fulfillment of self-interest in the Body of Truth (*Dharmakāya*) and to fulfillment of altruistic interest in the Bodies of Beatitude and Emanation (*Samhoga-nirmāṇa-kāya*). Individual Vehicle Buddhism does not formally accept the Buddha's fulfillment of altruistic interest in a Body of Form (*Rūpakāya*), whether beatific or emanational, holding to the idea that a Buddha after Parinirvana is only an absolute Dharmakāya, without further embodiment. However, the scheme of progressive development of a Body of Form virtually arises from the *Jātaka* literature, which actually shows a Buddha's physical as well as moral evolution, as well as from the many instances in which the Buddha's great compassion is praised and illustrated in action. It is useful to summarize these basic concepts in tabular form:

SELF-INTEREST → wisdom store → absolute selflessness → Body  
of Truth

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OTHER-INTEREST → merit store → relative compassion → Body of Form → Body of Emanation

This latter is implicit in Individual Vehicle as

OTHER-INTEREST → Jātaka heroic virtues → extraordinary Body of Śākyamuni → compassionate refrain from immediate Parinirvana → exceptional power and effectiveness as Teacher of Men and Gods.<sup>3</sup>

To return to the Universal Vehicle metaphysical theory, the ground, or even womb (*garbha*), of compassion is emptiness (*śūnyatā*), defined as the absolute selflessness (*nairātmya*) of personal subjects (*pudgala*) and impersonal objects (*dharma*). Since the complete extinction (*nirvṛtti* or *nirvāṇa*) of suffering is attained by the destruction of all misperception of any sort of intrinsically real self, either personal, phenomenal, or even noumenal (i.e., any sort of “self”-experienced objective Nirvana), the Third Holy Truth is a state-less (*apratiṣṭhita*) “state” of selflessness, emptiness. Since this emptiness is necessarily also empty of “itself,” the notion of a Nirvana that is a “place” removed from the places of the world is clearly rejected. One is therefore left with an absolutely selfless relative being whose perfect voidness of self-concern becomes an automatic mirror of the myriad concerns of other beings. These beings are seen to be less fortunate, since they fail to know their own ultimate selflessness, and so are imprisoned in illusory selfish concerns. The selfless person’s mirror-awareness of their frustrations is the “great empathy” (*mahākaruṇā*) which, unobscured by any selfish feelings, feels all their feelings. Such an unimaginably open sensitivity provides the powerful drive to alleviate the sufferings of these unknowing others, which drive becomes the energy described as “skill in liberative technique” (*upāyakauśalya*) which guides a Buddha’s or Bodhisattva’s heroic deeds of benefit to others.

It is said that the perfection of a Buddha is inconceivable to ordinary thought. It is thus fruitless to attempt to conceptualize his inconceivable integrations of wisdom and liberative technique, of absolute emptiness and relative compassion. But we can and should be conceptually precise about where the inconceivability lies; at the unimaginable extreme limit of selflessness, openness, and tolerance of the uncreated, which becomes

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<sup>3</sup> For a fuller description of these schemas, see my essay in P.L. Berger, 1981: 213, 238.

exactly the extreme limit of empathy, commitment to others, and heroic intolerance of others' sufferings. A Buddha is a wisdom that is completely free of all self-centered misknowledge, hence incapable of any sort of self-isolation from the ultimately illusory yet relatively real interconnection with other relative beings. He is simultaneously an empathy so intimately sensitive to the terrible sufferings of so many others, he is literally pulled into the pieces which are the numberless Emanation Bodies that are the medicine others desperately need. To be sure he is no more reborn in the ordinary cycle of compulsive consumption (*upādāna*) which binds mis-knowing beings, but his perfect liberation is itself a boundless life (*Amitāyus*) and a boundless light (*Amitābha*) present to all living beings in an immortally healing immanence.<sup>4</sup>

Another way to approach this inconceivability is through the concept of the "unconditional great compassion." Nāgārjuna refers to this in his famous verse that the supreme teaching is that of "enlightenment in practice (*bodhisāadhanam*), the profound, the terrifying, the emptiness that is pregnant with compassion (*śūnyatākaruṇāgarbham*)."<sup>5</sup> The Buddha-compassion perceives no non-empty living beings or living processes, seeing only pure absolute emptiness as the actual nature of all things, and yet does not neglect the relative illusory sufferings of beings who themselves think they exist and suffer, does not fail to act to liberate them from their suffering and its causes. "Unconditional great compassion" is the fourth and highest type of compassion according to the analysis of Tsong Khapa (1357–1419), elaborated in commentary on Candrakīrti's *Guide to the Central Way*. This analysis of compassion in relation to various levels of wisdom can be conveyed simply in table form.<sup>6</sup>

WISDOM	COMPASSION
deluded wisdom	sentimental compassion
impermanence wisdom	person-perceiving compassion
subjective selflessness wisdom	process-perceiving compassion
objective selflessness wisdom	non-perceiving, unconditional great compassion

<sup>4</sup> I refer to the visions of Beatific Body Buddhahood conveyed in the *Sukhāvativyūha* and related "Pure Land" Scriptures.

<sup>5</sup> Nāgārjuna, 1975: 394.

<sup>6</sup> See Maxwell, 1974; Hopkins, 1980, for full discussions of the varieties of compassion.

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Thus, wisdom of selflessness liberates a Buddha himself and frees him from all suffering. It becomes compassion when it also frees him from any delusory objectification of any presumed state of isolation from sufferings of others. And that compassion accomplishes its purpose of liberating others as well when, as wisdom, it opens the door of emptiness which engulfs every single other being's vicious cycle of self-misknowledge and self-frustration. Vimalakīrti explains this very appropriately in the context of the bodhisattva, but the point is the same:

"The sick bodhisattva should tell himself: 'Just as my sickness is unreal and nonexistent, so the sicknesses of all living beings are unreal and nonexistent.' Through such considerations he arouses the great compassion towards all living beings without falling into any sentimental compassion. The great compassion that strives to eliminate the accidental passions does not conceive of any life in living beings. Why? Because great compassion that falls into sentimentally purposive views only exhausts the bodhisattva in his reincarnations. But the great compassion which is free of involvement with sentimentally purposive views does not exhaust the bodhisattva in all his reincarnations. He does not reincarnate through involvement with such views but reincarnates with his mind free of involvement. Hence even his reincarnation is like a liberation. Being reincarnated as if being liberated, he has the power and ability to teach the Dharma which liberates living beings from their bondage. As the Lord declares: 'It is not possible for one who is himself bound to deliver others from their bondage. But one who is himself liberated is able to liberate others from their bondage.'"<sup>7</sup>

Going on from the ideal of "emptiness pregnant with compassion" (*śūnyatākaruṇāgarbham*), Śāntideva opens for us its remarkable impact in the actual practice of the bodhisattva, which he embodies in his remarkable precept of the "equal exchange of self and others," the *imitatio Christi*, or "Christ-yoga," of the Buddhists.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Thurman, 1976: 46. The structure of the chapter of the *Vimalakīrti* from which this passage is drawn is interestingly parallel to the typology of compassion developed by Candrakīrti and Tsong Khapa given in the diagram above. When asked by Mañjuśrī how a sick Bodhisattva should "console" himself, Vimalakīrti gives the contemplation of impermanence as the first remedy, then the contemplation of subjective selflessness, and finally the contemplation of objective selflessness leading to non-duality.

<sup>8</sup> The concept of a "Christ-yoga" is strange in the modern west, so removed from its own monastic disciplines of self-transcendence, such as that taught in the *Imitatio*

First of all I should make an effort  
 To meditate upon the equality between self and others;  
 I should protect all beings as I do myself  
 Because we are all equal in (wanting) pleasure and (not wanting)  
 pain. . . .  
 The suffering that I experience  
 Does not cause any harm to others.  
 But that suffering (is mine) because of my conceiving of (myself  
 as) "I";  
 Thereby it becomes unbearable.<sup>9</sup>

Here, he begins this section of the "Meditation" chapter of the *Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life* with the statement of the main theme, equality of self and others. He grounds the equality this time not on the ultimate equality in emptiness of all beings, but on their relative equality in that all beings seek happiness and dislike suffering. He then mobilizes critical wisdom (*prajñā*) to explore the roots even of his own suffering. He shows that suffering is not just an external event, a mere physical process, but that feeling is guided by conception. Its root even in personal, "private" experience is the identification of it as "mine," its appropriation by the ego-process. Thus a warrior in heat of battle or a person under hypnosis can not feel at all a pain that would be excruciating in normal circumstances because of a temporary suspension of ego-appropriation of the pain. But his purpose here is not merely to reject ego-appropriation, but to establish its expandability.

Likewise the misery of others  
 Does not befall me.  
 Nevertheless, by conceiving of (others as) "I"  
 Their suffering becomes mine;  
 Therefore it too should be hard to bear.

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*Christi* of Thomas à Kempis. The deification of Jesus in much western theology also precludes an active "yoga" of altruism, reinforcing the human tendency to excuse the self from self-overcoming and thereby un-selfish action. Therefore, Śāntideva's remarkable teaching of "exchange of self and other" (*parātmāparivartana*) is an extremely useful contribution of Buddhist psychology to the enterprise of ethical self-cultivation, which can be put into practice by followers of any religion or non-religious ideology.

<sup>9</sup> Śāntideva, 1979: 114. This and succeeding quotes are from Chapter VIII, vs 90–136 (pp. 114–121). Again, I have referred to the original and altered some terms using synonyms I prefer, without changing the meaning of this excellent translation.

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This is the classic compassionate application of selflessness as the appropriation of all other selfless beings as one's own selfless self, emptiness' embrace of all beings as organically connected with one's relative self, like limbs of a single body of life. He continues to deal with further objections to this daring altruistic commitment.

“But why should I protect them  
If their suffering does not cause me any harm?”  
Then why protect myself against future suffering  
If it causes me no harm now?

He shows how arbitrary and conceptually delineated is our distinction between that suffering which we are concerned about and that which we ignore. He shows that no one's suffering is intrinsically real, therefore the illusory sufferings of all are equal, and that just as one alleviates one's own suffering for no other reason than that it hurts, so should one alleviate that of others; just because it hurts them. Once this has been established, it is easy to see why a person with such an expanded basis of self-identification on the relative level could easily undergo suffering of the one immediate self to alleviate much greater sufferings on the part of the many selves, no longer excluded by the concept “other.”

Thus, because he loves to pacify the pains of others,  
He whose mind is attuned in this way  
Would enter even the deepest hell  
Just as a wild goose plunges into a lotus pool.

There is no righteous pride arising from altruism cultivated on such a basic insight, just as one does not congratulate oneself for one's kindness when one feeds oneself. One just does it naturally. And Śāntideva echoes Nāgārjuna.

Therefore just as I protect myself  
From unpleasant things however small,  
In the same way I should act towards others  
With a compassionate and caring mind.”

And he labels the precise identity-expansion involved, in these remarkable verses;

Although the basis is quite impersonal,  
Through (constant) familiarity



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I have come to regard the drops  
Of sperm and blood of others as "I".  
So in the same way, why should I be unable  
To regard the bodies of others as "I"?  
Hence it is not difficult to see  
That my body is also that of others.  
Having seen the mistakes in cherishing myself,  
And the ocean of good in cherishing others,  
I shall completely reject all selfishness  
And accustom myself to incorporating others.

There is no automatic identification of the mere matter of the body as "I". It takes long conditioning in infancy to develop such an ego-definition. Psychotics, hypnotics, and even soldiers and athletes can lose it temporarily or even permanently. Cultural conditioning can expand it to include the tribe, the nation, the race, religious groupings; the "we" can become powerful enough to override even instincts of self-preservation. Why then, asks Śāntideva, cannot the "bodhisattva re-conditioning," the Universal Vehicle Dharma, easily make one identify with all living beings, easily develop to the fullest extent a natural, rational, instinctively compelling altruism? Such an altruism, after all, is not artificial, but is based on the cold reality of the essential equality of all beings.

In fact, he goes on, it is evident from experience that human beings are never happier than when they *do* transcend the narrow habitual ego-sense, when they lose the self, to whatever degree. Sense-pleasure reaches its height when the experiencer loses ordinary boundaries. Emotional pleasure is greatest through love when there is union with the beloved. Aesthetic and intellectual joy can safely be defined as proportionate in intensity to the degree that beauty or truth take one beyond oneself into the expansive universality of bliss or transcendence. And in the human plane, in interpersonal relations, Śāntideva assures us:

Whatever joy there is in this world  
All comes from desiring others to be happy,  
And whatever suffering there is in this world  
All comes from desiring oneself to be happy.

A final point that Śāntideva would not have anticipated from his audience might occur to some of us today. It might be thought that the

ethic thus elaborated on the base of emptiness contains a presupposition of a rather simplistic hedonism. Is everyone's "happiness" after all the main goal? Is not "transcendence," Nirvana, emptiness, something more than mere "happiness"? In answer to this, it may first be acknowledged that the Buddhist claim is indeed that selflessness, whether as the Individual Vehicle *anātman* realized fully in Nirvana, or the Universal Vehicle *sūnyatā* realized fully in the non-dual perfection of Buddhahood, is advanced as the supreme bliss, the deathless, the highest joy. It is claimed to be the only ultimately satisfactory good. Therefore, it is true that Buddhism is outright hedonistic. But "hedonism" in the west, an ethic that is usually frowned upon by the majority, is always assumed to be *egocentric* hedonism—"I will have pleasure at whatever or whomever's expense!" A mutual, universal, altruistic hedonism, when all beings wish only for all other beings' happiness, is quite another matter. And, the perfected universe, the Buddhaland, is explicitly envisioned as a perfect realm of selflessness, a mutually empathetically sensitive mind-field of all living beings. Śāntideva speaks of the "ocean of joy that shall exist when all beings are free." And he concludes his teaching of the "exchange of one's own happiness for others' suffering" with these moving verses;

If all the injury, fear, and pain in this world  
Arise from grasping at a self,  
Then what use is this great ghost to me?  
If I do not completely forsake it  
I shall be unable to put an end to suffering,  
Just as I cannot help being burnt  
If I do not throw away the fire I hold.  
Therefore, to allay the harms inflicted upon me,  
And to pacify the sufferings of others,  
I shall give myself up to others  
And cherish them as I do my very self.

To sum up, the Buddhist ethic is an heroic, altruistic ideal that requires superhuman efforts of all beings sooner or later to practice the transcendent virtues that will bring them and all their fellows to evolutionary perfection. These transcendent virtues (*pāramitā*) are usually listed as generosity (*dāna*), morality (*śīla*), tolerance (*kṣānti*), enterprise (*vīrya*), contemplation (*dhyāna*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). They all derive from compassion (1-3) and wisdom (5, 6), and lead to the Buddha Form Body

and the Buddha Truth Body.

Given this general ideal orientation, what sorts of social situation on planet earth, what sorts of practical action in human history, are considered most appropriate for would-be Buddhists? Nāgārjuna's practical counsels to his royal student should provide these answers.

## II

Before reviewing the *Counsels*, I must first recapitulate briefly a thesis advanced in another essay (Thurman, 1979), regarding the social role of monasticism, its implication for a clear view of the Individual Vehicle-Universal Vehicle (Hīnayāna-Mahāyāna) relationship, and the critical light shed on the stereotype of Buddhist "other-worldliness." It is generally conceded that Śākyamuni Buddha was the inventor of monasticism in our recent history. "Monasticism" here must be distinguished on one side from unorganized groups of ascetic anchorites or hermits, and on the other side from an organized social class of priests (i.e., in ancient Indian parlance, from the institutions of the Śramanas and the Brahmanas). Both such groups certainly existed before the Buddha's time, and positive attributes of both are borrowed, re-defined, and applied by the Buddha to his own followers. But the Buddhist Saṃgha was different from the former in that it accepted gifts of lands and buildings from lay patrons, dwelling in them on the outskirts of the cities, not in the wilderness. And it differed from the latter in that its entrance was a complete departure from all social roles and obligations; no priestly services were performed for the laity, its members were drawn from all castes and both sexes, and it was missionaristic and universalistic, transcending regional, tribal, even linguistic ties.

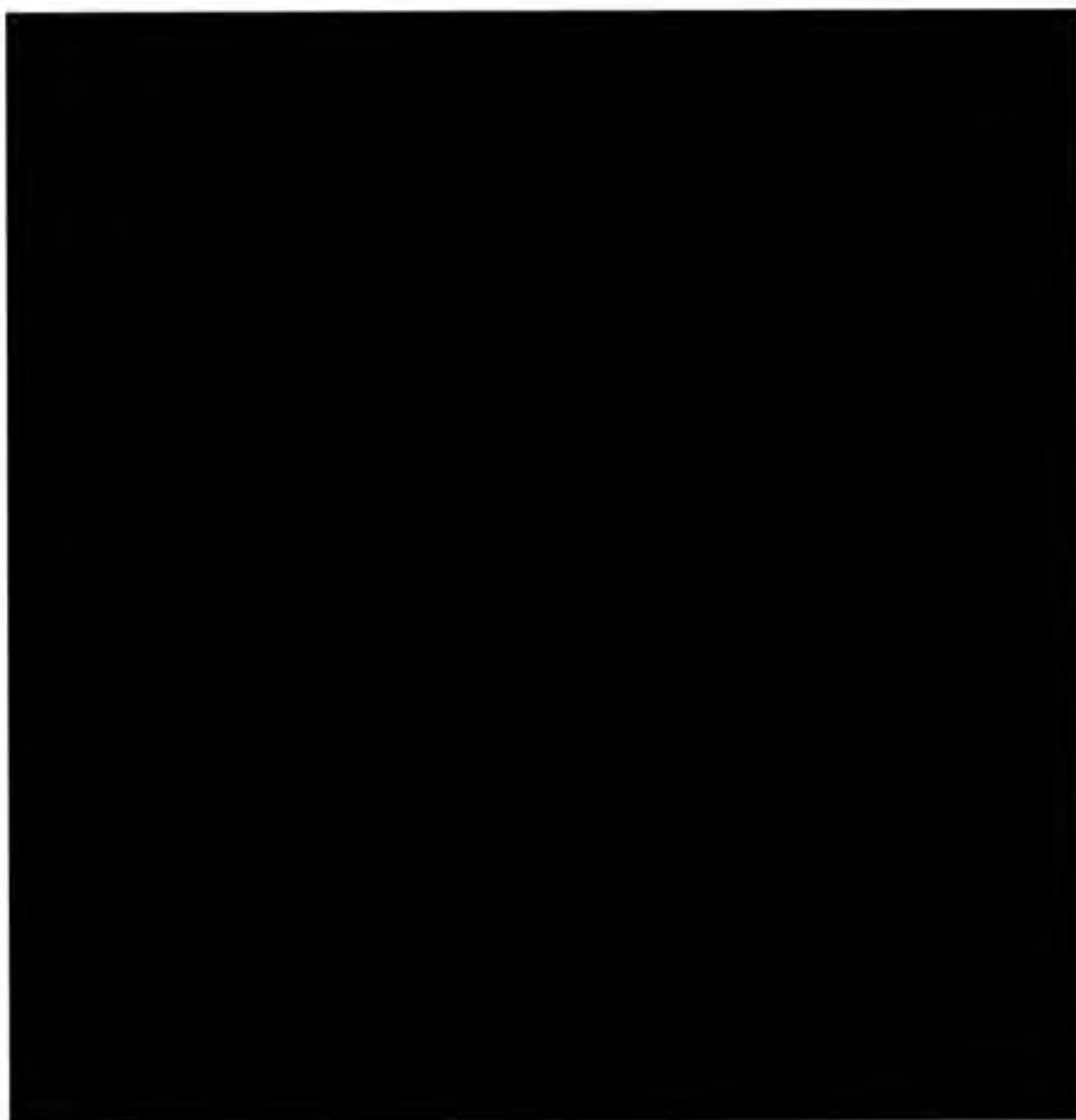
This invention of monasticism, couched in a language of world-transcendence, has earned the Buddhists the reputation of "other-worldliness," both in Asia and in the West. But here again we find the Buddha opening up a middle way in "other-worldliness," steering a course between the mysticism of the Upanishadic rishis, seekers of escape from the world into a higher fullness of Being, an exalted "State" beyond all states, and the asceticism of the Śramanic Jainas, Nirgranthas and Ājīvikas, seekers of complete self-oblivion, annihilation into a "higher" unconsciousness. The Buddha's Nirvana is carefully distinguished from the former by the fact that it is not a "state of being," no more a oneness than a plurality,

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and from the latter in that there is no "self" to begin with, thus there is nothing to annihilate, and the unliberated, worldly person is just as selfless as the liberated transcendentalist.<sup>10</sup> The point of "renouncing the world" and entering the monastic order in Buddhism then is not to reach some transcendent world beyond the world, nor to approach self-obliteration, but rather is just to educate oneself, to diminish the compulsiveness of egotistic drives, and ultimately to eradicate the fundamental delusion of egocentrism. Once free of this delusion and the grip of its attendant drives, it does not matter "where" one is.

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<sup>10</sup> This analysis of Buddhist "other-worldliness" is clearly the kernel of a response to Weber's "ideal typology" developed in his *Social Psychology of the World Religions*, and unpacked for me by my colleague, Professor David W. Wills of Amherst College. Weber's position on Buddhism and my response can be clarified by a diagram of types.



Therefore, it is clear that the "other-worldliness" of the Buddha was neither "world-rejecting" in the mystical sense, nor "world-obliterating" in the ascetical sense, but "world-transforming" in the revolutionary sense. His Samgha was the first free educational institution in history, dedicated to the individual's self-realization, with no immediate social use, no productive purpose, yet somehow able to gain the support of society. It was revolutionary in its transcendentalistic critique of ideology, in its stress on individualism, in its pacifism, in its universalistic missionary zeal to spread enlightenment. It is easy to appreciate the radical nature of this Buddhist revolution if we reflect on the fates of Confucius, Socrates, and other axis-age leaders. The authorities in such traditional societies, elites jealous of their power and status, were never ready to give up land, labor, and food to any group of philosophically-minded educators, always aware of the close connection between spiritual "savior" and "liberator" in actual social reality. But Śākyamuni Buddha somehow succeeded with his movement and established it on such a solid footing that it has lasted for twenty-five centuries in various forms and climes.

From an analysis of Aśoka's rock edicts,<sup>11</sup> a set of principles of a "Buddhist politics" emerges, which I have labelled as 1) individualistic transcendentalism, 2) renunciative pacifism, 3) transformative, educational universalism, and 4) compassionate socialism. The first describes Aśoka's conviction that the nation exists for the Dharma, understood as individual self-development toward enlightenment, not vice versa. This is the root of true individualism in social terms, the idea that reality is such that an individual's most important enterprise is the achievement of enlightenment, a higher priority than social duty (incidentally the pre-Buddhist meaning of *dharma*). The second follows from the first, in that the purpose of life being individual self-perfection in enlightenment, the taking of a life cannot be justified in terms of a presumed social good, which rules out war, capital punishment, even slaughter of animals, though Aśoka himself proclaimed his own inability fully to live up to this principle. The third follows logically in that individual development is more important than credal ideology, and educational systems are paramount for personal growth, the Buddhist monastic schools being held up by Aśoka as central for this purpose. The final principle results from the awareness that basic economic well-being and security are the foundation

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<sup>11</sup> See Thurman, 1979, for the examination of the Aśokan edicts.

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upon which people can base lives dedicated to transcendental matters. Though not of prime importance, economics can distract from the transcendent pursuits if neglected or unequally divided.

With these four principles in mind, let us turn to Nāgārjuna's *Royal Counsels* themselves.

### III

Nāgārjuna begins the book on the transcendentalist plane, instructing the King in what he needs to know for his own liberation and self-cultivation. This is the first principle of Buddhist social ethics, individualist transcendentalism. It is most clearly expressed in the shocking advice Nāgārjuna gives the King that it might be best for him to resign.<sup>12</sup>

But enlightened rule is difficult  
Due to the un-enlightenment of the world;  
So it is better you renounce the world,  
For the sake of true glory. 400

Such advice flies in the face of all worldly political wisdom, ancient or modern, but it is at the heart of Buddhist politics and ethics. The "sacred duty" of the king, the "supreme responsibility" of the President, (i.e., the sacred pompousness of rulers) all derive from the idea that the will and the necessity of the collective are supreme over those of the individual. The prime self-sacrificer is thus supposed to be the ruler himself or herself. "Heavy lies the head that wears the crown . . ." and so forth, the idea is well-known. The king must put the collective ahead of himself, submerge his individual interest in the collective interest, and his so doing confirms that all individuals in the society matter less than the collective "people." This is the essence of collectivism and secularism, and is the same in any totalitarian state, whether fascist, communist, monarchical/imperialist, whatever. Against this Nāgārjuna proclaims the supremacy of the individual, starting with the king himself, more importantly a human being than a social role, even the most important social role. The best thing the king can do for his nation is, finally, to perfect himself. The best use of his own "precious jewel of a human life endowed with leisure and opportunity" is to attain his own enlightenment, for which purpose

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<sup>12</sup> From here on, all verse numbers refer again to Nāgārjuna, 1978.

he may renounce the world and enter the monastic discipline of spiritual virtuosity.

The practical impact of this advice is that the necessities and will of the collective, the "business of society" is *just not that important*. It is, after all made up of individuals, their collective interest is the specific sum of their individual interests, one by one. Therefore, as the enlightenment of each one individually is the most important thing for each one, one by one, the enlightenment of any one individual is of supreme importance at any one time.

The fundamental importance of individualist transcendentalism is witnessed by the fact that more than two thirds of the *Counsels* contain personal instructions on the core insight of individualism, namely subjective and objective selflessnesses.<sup>13</sup> This type of instruction is called the teaching of "transcendence," (*niḥśreyasa*) the *summum bonum*. Based on these, though leading beginners up to them, are the teachings of "ascendancy" (*abhyudaya*), methods to improve one's status and ability in the world. Ascendancy teachings call for faith, mainly; transcendence teachings call for wisdom. Ascendancy teachings are summarized early in the *Counsels*.

Here are given the Buddhist "Commandments," "not to kill, not to take the not given, not to rape; not to lie, abuse, slander, or gossip, not to bear envy, malice, or false convictions"; matched by injunctions to "prolong life, give gifts, maintain proper sexuality, tell the truth, reconcile conflicts, speak gently, speak meaningfully; be loving, rejoice in others' fortune, hold authentic views." Following this tenfold path of virtuous evolution,<sup>14</sup> one "ascends" in the stations of worldly life, being reborn in human and divine realms.

<sup>13</sup> Skt. *pudgala-* and *dharma-nairātmya* are usually translated "personal selflessness" and "phenomenal selflessness." However, *dharma* includes *noumena*, i.e., non-apparent, even non-visualizable, mental objects, such as "emptiness," "absolute," "infinite," "eternity," and so forth, which are still selfless. Therefore, I am inclining toward the translations "subjective" and "objective" selflessnesses.

<sup>14</sup> The close correspondence between the tenfold path of evolutionary action and the Mosaic Decalogue is striking, and should be more thoroughly studied.

BUDDHIST (—/+)

not to kill/save life  
not to steal/give gifts

MOSAIC

thou shall not kill  
. . . not steal

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Next, and in much more detail, Nāgārjuna turns to the transcendence teachings.

The teachings of transcendence  
The Victors call profound,  
Subtle and terrifying to the unlearned immature.      25

He begins transcendence teaching by demonstrating the unreality of the "I"-notion. The king should first be aware that his "I" and his "mine" are illusory, not established in reality as they habitually appear to be.

"I am," and "It is mine,"  
These are false as absolutes.  
For neither stands existent  
Under exact knowledge of reality.

The "I"-habit creates the heaps,  
Which "I"-habit is false in fact.  
How can what grows from a false seed  
Itself be truly existent?

Having seen the heaps as unreal,  
The "I"-habit is abandoned.

"I"-habit abandoned, the heaps do not arise again.      28-30

With characteristic boldness, Nāgārjuna's first transcendent teaching to the King is that "'you' and 'yours' do not really exist the way 'you' think they do"! The previous ascendance teaching leaves the King's self-image intact, admonishing him to be good, by not killing, not taking what is not given, and so forth. But transcendence begins with the discarding of the self-image, and it aims for liberation, beyond good and

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no sexual misconduct/proper . . .  
not to lie/tell truth  
not to slander/make peace  
not to abuse/speak gently  
not chatter/speak religiously  
not greed/detachment  
no malice/love  
no perverse view/true view

. . . not commit adultery  
(remember Sabbath)  
. . . not bear false witness  
(honor father and mother)  
. . . not take Lord's Name in vain  
. . . not covet  
(no graven images)  
no idolatry ("other gods before . . .")

Thus, seven out of ten are very closely connected, almost identical, though the blasphemy and idolatry prohibitions reflect the theistic/non-theistic difference.



evil. This evinces the same emphasis on attitude and wisdom that also puts authentic view (*samyakdr̥ṣṭi*) as the first of the eight components of the path. The world arises from the delusions "I am" and "I have," but since they are delusions, notwithstanding scientific investigation, the world itself is delusory in nature. Thus by terminating the delusions, the world of suffering is terminated, the world of the compulsive heaps (*skandha*). Thus, the world-creator, the root of all evil, is this "I"-habit, this fundamental misknowledge. And the root of good, of positive social action is the individual's realization of this subjective selflessness.

However, this absolute non-existence of the self does not itself exist as an absolute self of non-existence, such as the Ājīvikas, Cārvākas, and other Indian negativistic thinkers supposed. Just as the world only exists relatively, in an illusory way, so the "transcendent," the "beyond" also is only illusory. "Nirvana" only has meaning as opposite of "samsara." Terminate the one and the other is also obsolete. Therefore, liberation is not just an easy non-existence, it is the profound central way, between existence and non-existence. "If nirvana is not a nothing, just how could it be some thing? The termination of the misconceptions of things and non-things is called Nirvana" (42).

Furthermore, "Because in reality there is no coming, going, or staying, what ultimate difference is there between the world and Nirvana? . . . (64). . . . Ultimately the world cannot through Nirvana disappear" (73). Such is the accurate intuition of the uncreated nature of reality, the non-duality of absolute and relative, the objective selflessness and the subjective selflessness. This intuition can be expanded limitlessly by the scientific procedures of critical wisdom until virtual omniscience is attained. Sparing no technical detail, Nāgārjuna sets forth the full picture of transcendence for King Udayi in a sustained exposition (vv. 25-147). And he affirms the non-duality of the bodhisattva way by demanding that such wisdom be attained by the King himself; "From wisdom comes a mind unshakeable, relying not on others, firm and not deceived. Therefore, O King, be intent on wisdom" (138). Social reality is not a lesser sphere, to be taken care of by those incapable of enlightenment. Each one, even political managers, must themselves achieve their own independent individual enlightenment.

One might wonder why, in such a letter of counsels, Nāgārjuna spends such a long time on first principles, on analysis of earth, air, fire, water, and consciousness, on refutation of being and nothingness, on transcend-

ence of unity and plurality. He could simply have referred the King to his classic *Wisdom*, the exhaustive unpacking of the subject, with its accompanying *Emptiness Seventy*, *Counter-Rebuttal*, and *Philosophical Sixty*.<sup>15</sup> But it is clearly in keeping with the principle of individualist transcendentalism that the bodhisattva man of action can and must be responsible for intuitive wisdom, and so he presents the king with a quintessence of the methods for developing the wisdom-basis of effective social action.

Furthermore, this is Nāgārjuna's own way of practicing what he preaches. He does not consider any ends of society, achieved by getting the king to follow his policies, to be as important as the King's own self-development and self-liberation. A liberated and compassionate king will himself choose the right path of action and be more effective than a merely obedient, unliberated king who must depend slavishly on Nāgārjuna's or someone else's ideas.

In sum, the fact that the majority of the *Garland* is devoted to the transcendent selflessness, the door of the liberation and enlightenment of the individual, is clear evidence that the heart of Buddhist social activism is individualistic transcendentalism. The attainment of Nirvana is everyone's Ultimate Good, and the good of each single person is always more important than any good of any putative whole or collective. Thus, the Individual Vehicle, the Buddha's "original" teaching, remains indispensable, the essence of the Universal Vehicle as well.<sup>16</sup>

The second major strand in Nāgārjuna's *Counsels* is that of self-restraint, unpacked as detachment and pacifism. The King will not be able to act selflessly without the basis of intuitive wisdom which understands the critique of the "I" and the "objective self," realizing their ultimate non-existence and conventional relativity. Likewise, he will not be able to

<sup>15</sup> Four famous works of Nāgārjuna's, in Sanskrit: *Prajñā nama mūla-madhyamakakārikā*, *Śūnyatāsaptati*, *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*.

<sup>16</sup> See note 2 above. It is worth emphasis that the Individual Vehicle monastic institution is itself the most "socially activist" institution in history, designed and normally functioning as a direct antidote to militarism in numerous civilizations. Contrary to the view that considers the Universal Vehicle as opposed to the Individual Vehicle, the former requires the latter as essential in achieving its goal of world-transformation. Thus, Vimalakīrti, while providing individual monks with critiques of their various one-sided views, respects each of them as *monks*, members of the Community, never losing sight of the sanctity of the monastic institution.

resist the temptations of consumption, food, possessions, sex, if he does not understand the reality of the objects of his passions. Therefore Nāgārjuna dwells extensively on the timeworn and effective meditation on ugliness (*aśubhatva*) to help the king free himself from passion.

He realizes that it is not easy to change long-standing preferences and habits of attachment, nor is it pleasant to scrutinize long-loved objects under the harsh light of critical analysis. So he carefully prefaces his excursion into the horrific. "Rare indeed are helpful speakers. Listeners are rarer. But rarer still are words which though unpleasant help at once! Therefore, having realized the unpleasant to be helpful, act on it quickly; just as when ill, one takes even nauseating medicine from a person of concern" (141-2). He immediately affirms the impermanence of life, health, and dominion. "Seeing that death is certain, and that when dead one suffers from one's sins, you should not sin, foregoing passing pleasure" (144). He forbids the ruler drinking and gambling, and then comes to the most important, sex. "Lust of women mostly comes from thinking that her body is clean; but there is nothing clean in a woman's body" (148). "The body is a vessel filled with excrement, urine, lungs, and liver . . . an ornamented pot of filth . . . He who lies on the filthy mass covered by skin moistened with those fluids, merely lies on top of a woman's bladder . . . (157). How could the nature of this putrid corpse, a rotten mass covered by skin, not be seen when it looks so very horrible? . . . (160). Since your own body is as filthy as any woman's, should you not abandon lust for self and other both? (165). . . . If you yourself wash this body dripping from its nine wounds and still do not think it filthy—what use have you for profound instruction?" (166). Nāgārjuna courageously invades the royal harem, bathrooms, and even toilets, to force the king to confront the inherent unclean nature of the body in its daily functions, in its putrefaction and death, and in its biological urges. If the king will courageously confront these coarse facts . . . "If you thus analyse, even though you do not become free from desire, because your desire has lessened, you will no longer lust for women" (170). This section concludes with a warning not to hunt and kill animals, because of the unpleasantness of this for the animals and the hellish effects eventually for the hunter/killer.

The themes collected under this principle of "pacifism," namely revulsion from lusts, restraint of aggressions, vanity of possessions and power, are drawn by Nāgārjuna from the basic Individual Vehicle teachings of

renunciation (*pravrajyā*). To modern persons, they may seem to lead to a drab puritanism, a killjoy asceticism. Certainly, they are not the kind of cosmetic encouragement people of wealth and power expect to hear. And here is where Buddhist social action shows its realism, its "hard-nosed" acceptance of the facts of life, grounding the heroism of transcendent virtue in the effective calmness of a deglamorized awareness.

Next, Nāgārjuna turns to the third principle of Buddhist social activism, that of transformative universalism. This is expressed specifically in the complete commitment to a pluralistic, enlightenment-oriented educational effort, considered the major business of the whole nation. His general counsel begins with the Teacher. "With respect and without stint you should construct Images of Buddha, reliquaries and temples, and provide abundant endowment . . . (231) . . . construct images of the Buddha from all precious substances. . . ." The Buddha image is not, as westerners have assumed, merely an object of devotion. Though it has a devotional function at the most popular level, its main function is inspirational. It is meant to represent the fullest potential of all the people, to inspire them all to transform themselves and reach their own perfection of evolution. Thus the Buddha is the image of each individual's own perfection. Next, "you should sustain with all your effort the Excellent Teaching, and the Monastic Community . . ." (233). Once the image of perfection is everywhere to act as inspiration, there are the actual teachings themselves (Dharma), the teachings individuals may use to develop and liberate themselves. Finally, to put these teachings into practice, teachers are required, who must also be exemplary practitioners, both of which functions were fulfilled by the monastic communities (Saṃgha). "You should make donations of Śākyamuni's Scriptures and the scientific texts based upon them, as well as of the paper, pens, and inks needed to copy them. As the strategy to increase wisdom, take regions where there are schools of letters, and assure their grants of estates to provide the livelihood of the teachers" (239).

The fourth principle of Buddhist activism, compassionate socialism, concerns the economic and legal administration of society. Here Nāgārjuna describes the welfare state, astoundingly, millennia ahead of its time, a rule of compassionate socialism based on a psychology of abundance, achieved by generosity. "To dispel the sufferings of children, the elderly, and the sick, please fix farm revenues for doctors and barbers throughout the land" (240). This is a concise description of a socially-supported

universal health care delivery system. "Please have a kind intelligence and set up hostels, parks, canals, irrigation ponds, rest houses, wells, beds, food, grass, and firewood" (241). A policy of total care of all citizens is plainly recommended, including care for travellers, even strangers passing through, and special shelters for beggars and cripples, and wandering ascetics. "It is not right to eat yourself until you have given seasonal food, drink, vegetables, grains, and fruits to mendicants and beggars" (244). Nāgārjuna spares no details of how these outsiders should be cared for: "Please establish rest houses in all temples, towns, and cities, and provide water fountains on all arid roadways. . . . At the fountains place shoes, umbrellas, water filters, tweezers for removing thorns, needles, thread, and fans. Within the vessels place the three medicinal fruits, the three fever medicines, butter, honey, eye-salve, antidotes to poison, written charms, and prescriptions . . . Place body-salves, foot-salves, head-salves, cloth, stools, gruel, jars, pots, axes, and so forth. Please have small containers kept in shade filled with sesame, rice, grains, foods, molasses, and cool water" (242-248). He even recommends a special custodian be appointed to provide food, water, sugar, and piles of grain to all anthills, caring also for dogs and birds, showing his ecological concern is wider than just for the human society.

Nāgārjuna combines his social counsel with some practical economic advice. He advocates a regulated economy, with the government protecting the small farmer that was always the basis of wealth and stability in Indian kingdoms. The royal granary should husband seed-grains against times of scarcity, taxes and tolls should be kept to a minimum. Government should control prices and release from its grain storage during bad seasons to prevent hoarding. A good police force to protect against thieves and bandits is also recommended, so one cannot accuse the *Counsels* of being altogether unrealistic.

These general counsels to the king just give him the broad outlines of an individualist, transcendentalist, pacifist, universalist, socialist society. The emphasis throughout is on the king's own self cultivation, especially of critical wisdom understanding selflessness and propertylessness, of detachment understanding the questionable desirability of normal passions, universalistic love extending the opportunity for happiness to all through education toward liberation and enlightenment, and generous compassion dedicated to providing everyone with everything they need to satisfy their basic needs so that they may have leisure to consider their own higher

needs and aims. We have very little physical evidence as to how successful King Udayi was in enacting these counsels, although the picture of the Southern kingdoms that emerges from sources like the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, the non-Sanskrit literatures of South India, the art of Ajanta and Amaravati, the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims, and the Tibetan histories is certainly idyllic. A civilization of wealthy cities, luxurious courts of great sensuous refinement, widespread scholarship and intense asceticism, prosperous farmers and peasants, relatively long-lasting peace and political stability. This picture represents a considerable advance over the India of the Mauryas, reflected in Megasthenes, the *Arthashastra*, and Aśoka's Edicts.<sup>17</sup>

#### IV

In this final section, I will turn to Nāgārjuna's more detailed counsel (after vs 300) and I will use it as a framework on which to outline guidelines for Buddhist social action in our modern times. The fact that it is counsel to a "king" does not invalidate this approach in the least, for, as R. B. Fuller says, the average citizen of any modern, industrial or post-industrial society lives better in many ways than most kings of bygone eras; indeed is more king of his own fate than they were in many ways.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, everyone can apply these counsels in their own sphere of activity, parties could be formed with such principles in their platforms (indeed many parties do have such planks), and Buddhist communities and individuals in particular could work to spread such principles and attitudes. So, let us now read Nāgārjuna as if he were addressing us today. There are forty-five verses (301–345) which contain the whole quintessence of the matter.

Again, this section begins with some acknowledgement that good advice is often unpleasant at first hearing, especially to a rich and powerful king

<sup>17</sup> It is hard to find a single source that communicates the ambience of the Śātavāhana civilization. One has to study the sculpture of Amaravati and the Ajanta paintings, then use the imagination. The southern world of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* can be evoked from the text, then one can take a literary cross-fix from the *Kathā* narratives, Tamil poetry, and the Chinese pilgrim's travel accounts. The overall *rasa*, or aesthetic taste, that emerges from these imaginative exercises is one of a lush gentleness, in stark contrast with the more militaristic north Indian lands.

<sup>18</sup> R. B. Fuller is fond of making this point, in his essays in *Utopia or Oblivion*.

who is used to being flattered and having his own way. The king is urged to be tolerant of the "useful but unpleasant" words, and to consider them as true words spoken without anger and from compassion, hence fit to be heard, like water fit for bathing. "Realize that I am telling you what is useful here and later. Act on it so as to help yourself and others" (306).

People in power are still the same. In fact, the entire populations of the "developed" countries are in a way full of people of royal powers, used to consuming what they want, being flattered and waited upon by people from "underdeveloped" lands, used to having unpleasantly realistic things such as corpses, sicknesses, madnesses, the deformities of poverty, kept out of their sight. They do not want to hear that all is impermanent, that life is essentially painful and fundamentally impure. They do not want to acknowledge that all beings are equal to them and their dear ones, equally lovable and deserving. They do not want to hear that there is no real self and no absolute property and no absolute right. But that they do hear it, and hear it well, is quite the most crucial necessity of our times. The hundreds of millions of "kings" and "queens" living in the developed world must face their obligations to other peoples, to other species, and to nature itself. This is the crisis of our times, the real one, not the supposedly important competitions among the developed "big powers."

Nāgārjuna's first real statement is straight to this most crucial point. "If you do not make contributions of the wealth obtained from former giving, through such ingratitude and attachment you will not gain wealth in the future" (307). There are two beliefs behind this simple yet far-reaching injunction to generosity, an injunction essential today. First, wealth accrues to an individual as the evolutionary effect of generosity in former lives or previously in this life. Second, wealth in this life accrues to one by the generosity of others who give to one, for whatever reason, and therefore one must be grateful to them. Bracketing the question of former lives, which is difficult for modern people, it is a fact that people who are wealthy today usually are so because previous generations worked hard and gave of themselves to the future. Capitalism itself is, in its essence, not a matter of hoarding and attachment, but a matter of ascetic self-restraint, the "investment" of wealth or the giving it up to a larger causality. The more given up from present consumption to productive investment, the more is produced for future consumption. Those who lose sight of the essence of this process and simply consume and hoard, soon lose their wealth, just as Nāgārjuna states. It is a fact of economics

that the basis of wealth is generosity.

Today the wealth of the modern nations comes from three main sources: 1) the generosity of hard work, self-sacrifice, and inventiveness of their own former generations; 2) the generosity of older, gentler nations, from whose Asian, African, and American lands enormous wealth was exploited by western and recently westernized entrepreneurs; 3) the generosity of the earth herself, with the sun, the oceans, and the winds. Now we the people of modern nations must "make contributions" with that wealth, to create still more wealth for the future. We can repay former generations by generosity towards future generations, by investing in their future, restraining our consumption. We can repay the heirs of the exploited by giving back some of the fruits of the wealth they let our ancestors take, especially in the form of equipment they need to produce more wealth themselves. And we can repay the earth by ceasing to pollute her, cleansing previous messes, and investing in her long-term health. We still have the chance to make these gifts voluntarily. If we fail to take it, all will inevitably be lost. Nāgārjuna sums this up: "Always be of magnanimous mind, delighting in magnificent deeds. Magnanimous actions bring forth magnificent fruits" (309).

Petty mindedness, scarcity psychology, short-term profit seeking, destructive rapacity—these are the real enemies. Their opposite is magnanimity, which makes all people friends. In sum, transcendence is the root of generosity. Generosity is the root of evolutionary survival. Evolutionary survival eventually brings forth freedom for the bliss of transcendence. This is a golden three-strand cord more powerful than the usual heap-habit, ego-habit, addiction cycle. The former is living Nirvana. The latter is the samsara of continual dying.

The foremost type of giving is, interestingly, not just giving of material needs, although that is a natural part of generosity. That of greatest value to beings is freedom and transcendence and enlightenment. These are obtained only through the door of Dharma, Transcendent Truth of Selflessness, Voidness, Openness, and so forth. Therefore, the educational system of a society is not there to "service" the society, to produce its drone-"professionals," its workers, its servants. The educational system is the individual's doorway to liberation, to enlightenment. It is therefore the brain of the body politic. Society has no other purpose than to foster it. It is society's door of liberation. By giving others the gift of education, they gain freedom, self-reliance, understanding, choice, all that is still



summed up in the word "enlightenment." Life is for the purpose of enlightenment, not enlightenment for life. The wondrous paradox is of course that enlightenment makes life worthwhile: because it makes it less important, it makes it easier to give it away, whereby at last it becomes enjoyable. Therefore, human evolution is *consummated* in transformative education. Society becomes meaningful when it fosters education. Life is worth living when it values education supremely. And so our "royal" giving should first of all go to support universal, total, unlimited education of all individuals. Nāgārjuna is very specific:

"Create centers of Teaching, institutions of the Three Jewels, whose name and glory are inconceivable to lesser kings. O King, it is better not to establish any center of Higher Teaching that does not raise the hackles of neighboring kings, for fear of their ill-repute after death (if they rule unwisely and selfishly)" (310–311).

One reason the educational priority in Buddhist activism has been misperceived, causing Buddhists in the west, for instance, to denigrate education as "mere book-learning" or "mere intellectual time-wasting," is the mistranslation of the word "Dharma." In the verse above, where I have translated it "Teaching" it would have usually been translated either "Religion" or "Doctrine." The former term would have given the counsel a religious missionary flavor, the latter a dogmatic scholastic flavor. "Dharma" has eleven main meanings, according to Vasubandhu, ranging from "thing" to "Nirvana."<sup>19</sup> After "thing," it means "law," "duty," "religion," "virtue," still on the ground level, the level of preservation of order, the level of pattern-maintenance. Next, it can mean "doctrine" and "teaching," as the ideas and communications leading to fulfillment of the "laws," etc. Then it can mean "Truth" as that which liberates, which makes either doctrine or teaching work. Finally, it means "path," "practice," and "Nirvana" itself, absolute reality as the goal of all the "Dharmas" in the preceding meanings, as well as their source. Thus, "Nirvana" is the subjective union with the absolute, the Dharmakāya or Dharmadhātu. Practice of the Laws, Duties, Religions, Doctrines, Teachings, Truths, or the following of the Paths they indicate, leads to that union. "Truth" is the absolute itself reflected in speech, the Word which

<sup>19</sup> Vasubandhu gives this illuminating analysis of Skt. *dharma* in his little-known work, the *Vyākhyāyukti*, a treatise on the hermeneutics of sutra interpretation, preserved in the Tibetan *bsTan 'Gyur*.

liberates. Teachings teach the Truth, path, and practice leading to Nirvana. Doctrines predispose one to accept the Teachings by putting them into practice. Religions cause one to look in the right place for doctrines, etc., as well as preliminarily not to do anything one naturally would not do after enlightenment, and laws and duties fit with this function. Finally, "qualities," "phenomena," or "things," are the patterns of ultimate reality conventionally created by our perceptual/conceptual habits.

Thus, from this clarification, we can see that Nāgārjuna is not talking about merely creating "religious centers." He is not even talking about creating "Buddhist centers," "Buddhism" understood in its usual sense as one of a number of world religions. It does not matter what symbols or ideologies provide the umbrella, as long as the function is liberation and enlightenment. Clearly Nāgārjuna, who proclaims repeatedly that "belief-systems," "dogmatic views," "closed convictions," "fanatic ideologies," etc., are *sicknesses* to be *cured* by the *medicine* of *emptiness*, is not a missionary for any particular "belief-system," even if it is labeled "Buddhism." Rather, he wants the social space filled with doorways to Nirvana, shrines of liberating Truth, facilities for Teaching and Practice, where "things," "duties," "laws," "religions," and "doctrines" can be examined, criticized, refined, used, transcended, and so forth. As already mentioned, these centers are not primarily even for the service of society, although in fact they are essential facilities for the evolutionary betterment of the people. They are the highest product of the society. As society itself has the main function of service to the individual, its highest gift to its individuals is to expose them to the transcendent potential developed by education.

Now these are institutions of the Three Jewels, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṃgha. And, under the above, critically "de-religionized," interpretation, fully in keeping with Nāgārjuna's own Centrist (*Mādhyamika*) critical style, these Three Jewels can demonstrate their value without any sectarian context. In universal social terms, the Buddha is the ideal of the educated person, the full flowering of human potential, the perfectly self-fulfilled and other-fulfilling being. He/she<sup>20</sup> is not a god, not an

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<sup>20</sup> When speaking of Buddha in the context of ideal archetypes, it is important to use the double pronoun, as a modern Buddhist, for males not to monopolize access to religious virtuosity and spiritual perfection. In fact, the 112 super-human signs of a Buddha contain definite symbols of androgyny, subliminally resonating with the

object of worship, but an object of emulation, a source of enlightenment teaching. He/she is the standard of achievement. The Dharma is his/her Teaching, the Truth and Nirvana he/she realized, which all people can educate themselves to realize, as already explained. The Saṃgha is the Community of those dedicated to teaching and practicing this Dharma with a view of becoming and helping all become such Buddhas. Very often they are so concentrated on these tasks, they have no time for ordinary social activities, business, professions, family, and so forth, but are specialists in practice and teaching. These become mendicants, identityless, propertyless, selfless monastics, and often in Buddhist history they served as the core staff of Teaching centers. Sometimes, however, part of their Teaching and practice involved, as in the case of Vimalakīrti and later the Great Adepts (*Mahāsiddhas*), participation in ordinary living patterns, so it is not necessary in all times and places and at all stages of development that they observe the monastic life-style.

These institutions will gain fame, as the people come to know that they are verily the gateways to a higher order of living, a higher awareness, a fuller sensibility, a more valid knowledge. They radiate glory as the persons who have developed themselves and have transcended their previous addictive habits naturally and compassionately give invaluable assistance toward the betterment of others according to their capacities and inclinations.

In the second verse, Nāgārjuna puts in an important criterion of a genuine institution of Enlightenment Teaching; it must not become a servile establishment in service of the elites of existing societies, there to provide professional training and ideological indoctrination. Its teachers and students must live transcendentally, that is, valuing Truth above all personal considerations. They must thus be intensely critical of all falsehood, pretense, delusion, sham. Therefore, their sayings and writings must be so ruthlessly clear and straightforward, that inferior persons, elite members as well as kings, must be terrified of being exposed in their pretenses and faults, hence inspired themselves to live and act transcendently. If the institutions are not truly liberal, i.e., liberating in this manner, they had better not be established at all.

To take Nāgārjuna's counsel to heart in modern times, this means a

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famous pronouncement that "ultimate reality is beyond male and female," found in many Universal Vehicle Scriptures.

drastic revision of our practice nowadays. Liberal education should no longer be seen as an institution necessary for the preservation and enrichment of a free society. Rather liberal education as an institution should represent the fulfillment of the very founding purpose of a free society. Kant's call for enlightenment as the "emergence from the tutelage of others" and Jefferson's call for "universal enlightenment throughout the land" should be seen as expressing the prime priority of the whole nation. Thus it is quite proper that the major expenditure in the national budget should be for education; and it should be offered free to all, regardless of class affiliation, regardless of utilitarian calculations. "If it takes all your wealth, you should disabuse the magnificent elite of their arrogance, inspire the middle classes, and refine the coarse tastes of the lowly" (312).

Nāgārjuna seems to have been aware of the economic costliness of his insistence on the priority of education, for he devotes the next five verses to persuade the King that wealth should not be hoarded for lesser necessities, and that he should go the whole way in support of higher education. He harps on the king's death, how such contributions are an investment in his future evolution, how his successor will probably waste it, how happiness comes from the generous use of wealth, not from hoarding and eventual wasting, and how, finally, if he does not do it now while he is young and in control of his ministers, they will not respect his wishes when he sees clearly on his deathbed. In his own words:

Having let go of all possessions (at death)  
Powerless you must go elsewhere;  
But all that has been used for Dharma  
Precedes you (as positive evolutionary force).  
All the possessions of a previous King come under the control of  
his successor.  
Of what use are they then to the previous King,  
Either for his practice, happiness, or fame?  
Through using wealth there is happiness here and now.  
Through giving there is happiness in the future.  
From wasting it without using it or giving it away there is only  
misery.  
How could there be happiness?  
Because of impotence while dying,  
You will be unable to make gifts through your ministers.

## THURMAN

Shamelessly they will lose affection for you,  
And will only seek to please the new King.  
Therefore, now while in good health,  
Create Centers of Learning with all your wealth,  
For you are living amid the causes of death  
Like a lamp standing in the breeze.  
Also other Teaching Centers established by the previous kings,  
All temples and so forth should be sustained as before."

[313-318]

Nāgārjuna further specifies how the faculties should be chosen: "Let them be staffed by non-violent, virtuous persons, who are truthful, firm in self-discipline, kind to visitors, tolerant, non-combative, and steadily industrious. Appoint guardians of the Teaching at all Teaching centers who are energetic, free of greed, learned, exemplary in conduct and without malice" (319, 322). If all our academics met this description, our institutions would be resplendent beyond imagination! Noteworthy in particular is the "exemplary" quality, insisting on a high level of embodiment in the teachers of principles taught, and not accepting our western dissociation of teaching from the personal qualities or understanding of the teacher.

From the universalism underlying the educational emphasis of Buddhist activism, Nāgārjuna moves to the principle of pacifism, in specific application to the appointment of ministers, generals, officials, administration of justice, and vigilance over the actual conditions in the nation.

The choice of ministers, generals, and officials is mainly determined by whether or not they practice the Teachings, and manifest this personally by honesty, generosity, kindness, and intelligent discrimination. Even with such people, the ruler should be in constant contact with them, and constantly admonish them to remember the overall aim and purpose of the nation; namely the Teaching, realization, and practice of the liberating Truth. "If your kingdom exists for the Truth, and not for fame, wealth, or consumption, then it will be extremely fruitful; otherwise all will finally be in vain" (327). In modern terms, this counsel accords well with the experience of successful corporations and government administrations and agencies. They always choose their leaders from among liberally-educated persons, rather than from narrow professional circles, as it takes the special "enlightened" ability of clear critical insight to manage large

complex affairs successfully.

In regard to justice, Nāgārjuna tells the king to appoint elder judges, responsible, well-educated, virtuous, and pleasant persons, and even so he should intervene as much as possible to exercise compassion for criminals. "Even if they (the judges) have rightfully fined, bound or punished people, You, being softened with compassion, should still take care (of the offenders). O King, through compassion you should always generate an attitude of help, even for all beings who have committed the most appalling sins. Especially generate compassion for those murderers, whose sins are horrible; those of fallen nature are receptacles of compassion from those whose nature is great" (330-2). Nāgārjuna goes to the central issue concerning violence and non-violence of a society, the issue of murder and its retribution. Taking of life is the worst violence, especially in enlightenment-valuing nations, where the precious human life, hard won by struggle up from the tormented lower forms of evolution, is the inestimably valuable stage from which most effectively to attain freedom and enlightenment. But to take a second life to avenge the first is to add violence to violence, and hence capital punishment is abolished by Nāgārjuna. Punishment must be rehabilitative, and Nāgārjuna's formulation of this principle may be the earliest on historical record. "As long as the prisoners are not freed (which, he says, they should be as soon as possible) they should be made comfortable with barbers, baths, food, drink, medicine, and clothing. Just as unworthy sons are punished out of a wish to make them worthy, so punishment should be enforced with compassion, and not from hatred or concern for wealth. Once you have examined the fierce murderers and judged them correctly, you should banish them without killing or torturing them" (335-7). The non-violent treatment of criminals, even capital offenders, accords with every principle of Buddhist teaching: 1) compassion, of course, in that love must be extended most of all to the undeserving, the difficult to love; further, for society to kill sanctions killing indirectly, setting a bad example; 2) impermanence, in that the minds of beings are changeable, and commission of evil once does not necessarily imply a permanent habit of doing evil; 3) selflessness implies the conditionality of each act, and the reformability of any personality; 4) the preciousness and value of life, especially human life.

In modern times, it is to the great credit of those modern societies founded on enlightenment principles that they finally have abolished capital punishment. By the same token it is sad that there are strong

political pressures to reinstate it. In such a context, it is even more astounding that Nāgārjuna should have set forth this clearcut principle almost two thousand years ago, in such specific, practical terms.

Nāgārjuna has already given specific advice regarding socialistic universal welfare policy: "Cause the blind, the sick, the humble, the unprotected, the destitute, and the crippled, all equally to attain food and drink without omission" (320). He does not elaborate upon this in specific policy terms. It is perfectly clear that he considers it obvious that the king is obligated to care for everyone in the whole nation as if they were his children. In modern terms, the welfare system created by Roosevelt in the United States, and the welfare socialism the socialist states have implemented fit extremely well with this policy. But recently, we can observe a trend of assumption that, while any reasonable person would like to give everything to everyone, it is bad for people to get goods for nothing, and it is impossible to support everyone, there is not enough wealth for that purpose. The assumptions underlying this anti-welfare reaction we see around the world are that 1) people are inherently lazy, and 2) wealth is inherently insufficient. Indeed, there were certainly such attitudes abroad in Nāgārjuna's day and earlier. The central Buddhist story of the Prince Vessantara turns on the paradox of generosity and wealth. Everyone loves him because he gives everyone everything they ask for. Yet the nation comes to fear him when it seems he will give away even the very sources of their wealth. So they shrink back in fright, clutch what they have to themselves, and banish their real source of joy, the generous Prince.

Since the welfare system was installed in the United States, that nation has produced the greatest wealth ever produced by any nation in history, including inventions in principle capable of infinite productivity; and this in the midst of a series of disastrous wars, with their aftermaths wherein the nation gave enormous treasure to rebuild the nations it had defeated. Now, the rulers of America confusedly think that their gifts to the people, the real source of their optimism, the energy of real productivity, are exhausting them, and so they want to take it all away. In this confused effort to clutch on to what they see as scarce and shrinking wealth, they will destroy the source of that wealth, the love and optimistic confidence and creativity of the people. Fortunately, this will result in a rapid disaster for all, so the error will soon come to light, and Prince Vessantara will return in triumph from his banishment. Hoarding creates poverty. Giving away

creates wealth. Imagination of scarcity is thus the cause of loss. Imagination of abundance creates endless wealth. It is terrible or wonderful, depending on one's tolerance, that life must always be so subtle, so paradoxical, and complex.

Nāgārjuna seems to be aware of the charge of "impractical idealism" that tends to be levelled against his *Counsels*, and so his verses closing this passage address the practicality question. "In order to maintain control, oversee your country through the eyes of agents; attentive and mindful, always act in accordance with the principles" (338). An effective intelligence system seems to be necessary! The king must know what is happening throughout his realm to prevent abuses and forestall disasters. In modern terms, Nāgārjuna allows for the vital role of "intelligence," the gathering of insightful information about the state of the people. The very mention of an "Intelligence Agency" is so sensitive nowadays, it is hard to remember that it is not the "intelligence," but the stupidity and violence in the paramilitary activities of the CIA, KGB, and their colleagues in other nations that have caused their aura of horror. Theoretically, if the responsible leaders of all nations really had all the information about all consequences of their actions, they surely would desist from the foolish and self-destructive policies they currently espouse.

Furthermore, another role of intelligence is to find out what people are doing in a positive direction, to reinforce their heroisms and virtuous accomplishments. "Always handsomely reward those firm in virtues with rich gifts, honors, and advancement, while treating all others in just proportion" (339). A reward system providing positive reinforcement for virtue is an indispensable part of any system of law, as any parent knows. Modern systems of justice have become so obsessed with their catch and punish functions, they do not even consider this within their province. Presidents and generals award medals, the news media commend acts of heroism and even more humdrum virtue as "human interest," and there are economic rewards for some achievements and social rewards of peer esteem for virtue. But there is no merit system responding to peoples' good actions comparable to the criminal system that responds to their mistakes. The last such systems are probably the knighthood system remaining in those few lands such as Britain where the traditional idea of hierarchical social solidarity has not totally disappeared. In democratic lands the only positive incentive is probably money. So perhaps Nāgārjuna is merely suggesting that the Department of Justice include a branch that



seek out instances of virtue to be rewarded, and not spend all its energy on cases of crimes for punishment!

Nāgārjuna sums up his practical counsels with a pleasant metaphor: "The birds of the populace will alight upon the royal tree that gives the cool shade of tolerance, that flourishes with the flowers of honors, and that provides the bounteous fruit of great rewards" (340). That is, an idealistic social policy is realistic. Tolerance, justice, and generosity are not merely lofty ideals, "ultra-obligations" for a few saints and heroes to aspire to embody, but are the essential components of any viable social policy. The ruler or government must manifest them first, and each citizen must strive to cultivate them. Since animals' habits do not automatically tend away from anger, delusion, and greed toward tolerance, justice, and giving, these virtues must be gradually be cultivated. As each must do this for himself or herself, individualistic transcendentalism is the foundation of any viable activism. From this basis, pacifism is the social expression of tolerance; educational universalism is the social expression of wise justice; and socialistic sharing of wealth is the social expression of generosity.

These four principles seem to encompass mainstream Buddhist social practice, as counselled by Nāgārjuna. These four guidelines should be reliable in choosing a line of action in particular situations. It is always essential to remember, however, the fundamental inconceivability of all things, for which great love seems finally the only adequate response. Nāgārjuna insists that "the profound, enlightenment in practice, is emptiness creative as compassion." Jesus Christ's "Love God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thyself," and Augustine's "Love God and do what you will"—these two great "pivotal phrases" are very much in the same vein, using of course the theistic term for emptiness. In a culture more used to those great statements, we might express Nāgārjuna as follows: "Open thy heart to absolute emptiness, and love all thy neighbors and thyself!" It is such love that is the whole "Law," and is the very body of all Buddhas. Vimalakīrti describes it to Mañjuśrī:<sup>21</sup>

"The love that is firm, its high resolve unbreakable like a diamond; . . . the love that is never exhausted because it acknowledges voidness and selflessness; the love that is generosity because it bestows the gift of Truth without the tight fist of bad teachers; the love that is justice because

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<sup>21</sup> Thurman, 1976: 57.

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it benefits immoral beings; the love that is tolerance because it protects both self and others; the love that is enterprise because it takes responsibility for all living beings; the love that is meditation because it refrains from indulgence in tastes; the love that is wisdom because it causes attainment at the proper time; the love that is liberative technique because it shows the way everywhere; the love that is without formality because it is pure in motivation; the love that is without deviation because it acts decisively; the love that is high resolve because it is free of passions; the love that is without deceit because it is not artificial; the love that is happiness because it introduces living beings to the happiness of a Buddha. Such, Mañjuśrī, is the great love of a bodhisattva."

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