

## The Process of Ultimate Transformation in Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamika

FREDERICK STRENG

- 18: 4. When "I" and "mine" have stopped, then also there is not an outside nor an inner self.  
The "acquiring" [of *karma*] (*upādāna*) is stopped; on account of that cessation, "being born" ceases.
5. On account of the destruction of defilements of action, there is release (*mokṣa*); because defilements of action are constructed for him who constructs them.  
These defilements [result] from pseudo phenomenal extension (*prapañca*); but pseudo phenomenal extension comes to a stop by emptiness (*fūnyata*).
7. When the functioning of thought has been dissipated, "that which is thought" is dissipated.  
Certainly the Truth (or reality, *dharmata*), like nirvana, is unoriginated and not eliminated.
- 22: 7. There is nothing whatever that is acquired and there is no thing whatever without acquisition;  
How is there in any way a "fully completed being" (*tathāgata*) without the process of acquiring?
8. [But] how could a "fully completed being" be known by his acquiring process if he does not exist by his actual reality or by some other reality according to the five-fold analysis [of the *skandhas*, i.e. constituents of personality]?
9. So when there is "acquiring," then self-existence does not pertain;  
And if there is no self-existence whatever, how is an other-existence possible?

## ULTIMATE TRANSFORMATION

10. Thus "acquiring" and "someone who acquires" are completely empty (*śūnya*).  
How is that empty "fully completed one" known through that which is empty?
11. One should not say that something is "empty," or "non-empty,"  
Both [empty and non-empty] nor neither [empty nor non-empty]; they are mentioned [only] as conceptualizations.
16. The self-existence of the "fully completed being" (*tathāgata*) is the self-existence of the world.  
The "fully completed being" is without self-existence and the world is without self-existence.
- 24: 8. The explanation of the true nature of things by the Buddhas has recourse to two kinds of truth:  
The delimiting (*samvṛti*) truth and the highest (*paramārtha*) truth.
9. Those who do not know the distribution of the two kinds of truth  
Do not know the profound reality of the Buddha's teaching.
10. The highest truth is not taught apart from conventional practice,  
And without having understood the highest truth one cannot attain nirvana.
14. When emptiness "works," then everything in existence "works,"  
If emptiness does *not* "work," then all existence does *not* "work."
18. The originating co-dependently [of existence] we call "emptiness";  
This is an apprehension of "in dependence on"; it is, indeed, the middle way.
36. You reject all mundane and customary activities  
When you deny emptiness as dependent co-origination.
37. If you deny emptiness, there would be action which is unactivated.

FREDERICK STRENG

There would be nothing whatever acted upon, and a producing action would be something not begun.

40. He who perceives dependent co-origination  
Also understands sorrow, origination, and destruction as  
well as the path [of release].<sup>1</sup>

The above verses from *The Fundamentals of the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakārikās*) focus on the nature of spiritual change as expressed by the second century A.D. Indian Buddhist adept Nāgārjuna. In an attempt to understand the religious dynamic of the transformation which is claimed here we will proceed within the framework of the hermeneutical goals found in the history and phenomenology of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*). Generally expressed these goals might be formulated as an attempt to understand the manifestations of ultimate value (the Sacred) without isolating them from the psychological and cultural forces through which human self-consciousness arises. The century-long effort known as the "science of religion" has seen a variety of hermeneutical methods and techniques which stand in a tension between scientific objectivity and a subjective intuitive apprehension of a trans-perceptual power. Two central characteristics of this approach which pertain to all methods and techniques are (1) the recognition that the data for study is to be found in some cultural form accessible to all investigators, and (2) the concern to interpret the data within a theory of religion that does justice to the universal or general features of religious life as expressed throughout history. The present study will, first, compare the expression of Nāgārjuna's formulation of religious transformation with other types of religious transformation, and then interpret the meaning of his statements in light of hermeneutical insights in contemporary philosophy and psychology.

<sup>1</sup> All the translation of verses from the *Fundamentals of the Middle Way* are based on the Sanskrit text found in Louis de La Vallée Poussin, ed., *Mūlamadhyamakārikās (Mādhyamikasūtras) de Nāgārjuna avec la Prasannapadā, Commentaire de Candrakīrti* (St. Petersburg, 1913). English translations of this work can be found in Kenneth K. Inada, *Nāgārjuna: A Translation of his Mūlamadhyamakārikā* (Tokyo, 1970) and in Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville, 1967), Appendix A. *Mūlamadhyamakārikās* will be abbreviated in this paper as MMK.

## ULTIMATE TRANSFORMATION

### *Structural processes of religious transformation*

In order to place "empty non-acquiring" within the context of human religiosity we want to compare different types of religious transformation. This comparison is not a comparison of religious phenomena, e.g. meditation experiences, or descriptions of enlightenment; of religious personalities or the activities of religious specialists, e.g. monks, priests, or spiritual masters; or of doctrines regarding human nature, the world, or "after life." It is rather a comparison of the "dynamics of structural processes" whereby people gain their deepest sense of participating in the fullest, or perfect, reality. The term "structural process" identifies any religious datum—and in this case Nāgārjuna's expression of the "emptiness" of all things—as a dynamic process rather than as a static object of investigation. It focuses our interest on the *function* of the claims for spiritual change. In the history of religions this change has been described as one from death to life, from delusion to insight, from suffering to joy or equanimity, and from bondage to freedom. The use of the plural in "processes" indicates that there are several ways—deep structural differences in the processes—in which people embody their deepest values. These values, when seen as contributing to the images and socio-psychological structures of one's world, are constitutive of the ultimate reality—whatever reality defines the most extensive parameters of one's being or selfhood. Thus, to place Nāgārjuna's expression of "empty non-acquiring" into an understanding of its function of ultimate transformation, we must outline briefly several different ways (or processes) of transformation.

In describing a number of different processes of ultimate transformation, we do not suggest that all religious life can be pigeon-holed into one or another type given here. Rather the processes described are suggestive of the variety found in history, and of the significance of the differences and similarities between them. One process is called "rebirth through personal encounter with a Holy Presence," as exemplified in St. Paul's experience of Christ on the road to Damascus,<sup>1</sup> Nakayama Miki's experience of God the Parent,<sup>2</sup> and Sri Ramakrishna's experience

---

<sup>1</sup> Acts 9: 1-19.

<sup>2</sup> H. Van Straelen, *The Religion of Divine Wisdom* (Kyoto, 1957), pp. 40-43.

## FREDERICK STRENG

of the Divine Mother.<sup>4</sup> This type of structural process focuses on such elements as personal faith, individual intense extraordinary experiences of the Divine, and a sense of personal inferiority in contrast to the Wholly Other, who is also the inscrutable Mystery. It expresses a transformation in the devotee from weakness to confidence in life due to Divine graciousness (love), from a sense of uneasy pretension and a feeling of guilt to an experience of joy and release from guilt, and from a feeling of confusion and unimportance to a recognition of being spiritually reborn as a new being. It is important in this structure to have a dramatic transforming personal experience brought about by God, whose all-sufficiency and unpredictability is a major factor in the way that a person defines his or her basic needs and justification for being transformed. In this dramatic experience we find a modality of ultimate transformation whereby an individual (A major assumption here is that everyone must face the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* alone!) is "returned" to the source of his or her life, and a new being is thereby born—a being who now is obedient to his or her deepest needs, who is confident not in the conventional forces of life but in the Creator of Life. This process is fundamentally the same as the experience of the Holy described by R. Otto,<sup>5</sup> but in our approach it is only one structure of religion—not the core of all religious expression.

A second process of ultimate transformation is "creation of community through myth and ritual." Prime examples of this type are found in the use of myths, sacred symbols, and rituals throughout the world (e.g. the Christian Eucharist, the orthodox Hindu *upanayana* ceremony, and initiation rites among African non-literate societies).<sup>6</sup> Sacred myths and sacraments are used as outward signs of the "power unto salvation" that is available through them. This process has a number of elements that are also found in the first process, but these are rearranged, together with

---

<sup>4</sup> C. Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (New York, 1959), pp. 64–68. For other examples of this structural process see ch. 1, *Ways of Being Religious*, edited by F. J. Streng, C. L. Lloyd, Jr., and J. T. Allen (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1973) pp. 21–67; & ch. 5 of F. J. Streng, *Understanding Religious Life*, second ed. (Encino, California, 1975) discusses this process.

<sup>5</sup> R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. J. W. Harvey (New York, 1958), pp. 12 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Six examples from various cultures are given in ch. 2 of Streng, Lloyd, and Allen, *op. cit.*, pp. 100–140. See also Streng, *Understanding Religious Life*, ch. 6.

## ULTIMATE TRANSFORMATION

some different elements, to form a different structure of religion. As in the first process there is a recognition of human sin and alienation from God (ultimate reality), an apprehension of the fullness of joy as being radically different from a human existence that is continually lapsing into chaos, a solution that demands trust and faith in Divine activity, and a new life based on entering into a new relationship with God.

Several new elements are also found in this type of religious process: a sense that a seemingly arbitrary impermanence is a central problem in one's self-identity; that order is continually established in uniquely vital symbolic re-enactments of Divine creative activity; that special signs, names, stories, and ritual acts (sacraments) are the bearers of Divine ordering and reconciling power; that special sacred persons (e.g. priests), sacred times (holy days), and sacred places (temples, special mountains and rivers) express the power of life in ways that non-sacred persons, places, and times do not; and that tradition and specially trained officials of the tradition are the sources of authority. These new elements are combined with some of the elements found in the first type of religious process to form a quite different process of ultimate transformation. To interpret the religious dynamics of a sacrament as if it were a personal experience of the Holy—or vice versa—is not only to confuse the structures of these processes, but is also to lose the richness of the options found in the dynamics of religious transformation. The modality of a sacramental type ultimate transformation is not *primarily* intense experience, though this might not be entirely absent. The basic power in the mythic-ritual structure is symbolic meaning that is available within a believing community. To understand this modality of religion in relation to the first one described requires a delineation of a different structure that has not only a somewhat new vocabulary but also different valences and meanings of the elements common to both structures.

A third process of transformation, and the one in which Nagarjuna's "empty non-acquiring" occurs, is called "insight through spiritual discipline." Some of the key elements in this religious process are: (1) a meditative discipline and spiritual exercises, though difficult for most people, are done to eliminate the anxieties and compulsions that people feel; (2) ultimate reality is perceived to be internal and subjective, and awaits disclosure; (3) direct awareness of one's true "self" transcends both conventional perception and supernormal psychic vision; (4) the simplest and most profound problems are self-made and can be solved

## FREDERICK STRENG

by letting go of false security and conventional human responses to problematic situations; and (5) non-compulsive states of awareness have the power to change a person's perceptions and life-style. While this type of religious transformation process focuses on individual, inner experience as does the first type which we discussed, the fact that it includes the assumption that ultimate reality is already internal to all existing beings, and that the basic problem is non-awareness of this power rather than separation from it are significant differences. Prime examples of this type are Hindu yogic exercises that lead to *samādhi* (perfect concentration), the Theravada Buddhist "discipline of mindfulness" (*satipaṭṭhāna*) and Zen.

We will analyze particular aspects of Nāgārjuna's position as they pertain to some of these elements later in the paper; the concern here is to portray the character of the modality of religious transformation that is found in this type. The central organizing element in this structural process is the power of an attitude or awareness that pervades all perceptions, sense of identity, feelings, concepts, or behavior. The ultimate reality involved is not fundamentally an experience—even an overpowering and irresistible one—nor of a principle, or archetypal symbol that creates order in time and space, though people participating in this religious structural process are aware of moving experiences and symbolic images and concepts. These are not the modalities of fullest "becoming"; they are not the dynamics by which ultimate value is embodied in the life of a person living in this religious process. In this structural process the concern is to purify the mind or consciousness. One does not purify the consciousness by obeying a divine law or performing a particular ritual to perfection—though morality and ceremony function in important ways to keep one attentive to spiritual goals that transcend immediate conventional satisfactions.

Likewise, purification of the mind does not simply mean believing the right ideas. Here the activities of the mind and emotions which are seen to be useful for everyday affairs are recognized to have compulsive tendencies; one tends to acquire exaggerated images of one's experiences, to swing from good feelings to bad, to divide one's world into likes and dislikes. Identifications of perceptions and feelings which help to give order to one's experiences are also limiting and restricting patterns of knowledge; they give direction and serve as selective principles for further experiences. In this type of structural process the spiritual goal

## ULTIMATE TRANSFORMATION

is given as insight, wisdom, enlightenment, or concentration; and these terms have as much an ontological significance as an epistemological one. A person "becomes" in a certain way by "knowing" in a certain way. When a person lives according to insight, he or she does not become attached to partial images or to half truths—though, again, such a one has perspectival perceptions and uses concepts and linguistic structures which only partially indicate the totality of an experience.

Here we see that one way to give value to human life—and thereby determine the manner in which a person actualizes the fullest context of experience—is to cultivate an awareness that is free from attachment to the psychological, social and linguistic patterns that, indeed, give order and meaning to conventional experiences. To perceive this as an ontological act is to take it out of the interpretation sometimes given to "mystical traditions" which presents them as escapes from the real world. Such an interpretation uses a different norm for identifying reality than the one found in this structural process. Here every perception, every thought, every conscious moment is already within some mental-emotional process of consciousness; and every act of consciousness is participating in tendencies that make a person less or more dependent on conventional psychological, social, and linguistic ordering forces. To become aware of the spectrum of consciousness is the first step to be free from the reinforcement patterns, or "karmic residue," that keep one bound to one's own fabrications. Then, according to this perspective, one needs to "exercise" the capacities of "mind" (or consciousness or "heart") so that one can experience the variety of consciousness-states and gain the insight to recognize one's freedom. Ultimately, one should manifest the freedom gained through insight in daily life—a life of serenity, compassion, and awareness.

The notion of a "structural process of religious transformation" should be recognized as an "ideal type." This means that it is a mental construct itself; as such it is perhaps a useful tool as a hermeneutical device. To perceive it as a "natural law" or a "universal principle" would be to hypostatize a pattern of consciousness. As a hermeneutical device, however, it focuses on the interaction of the concern for ultimate value as found in all religious life while recognizing profound differences in the actualization of ultimate value. If we can define the intention of all religious life as activity related to ultimate transformation, then through this approach we can become aware that the way this intention is per-



## FREDERICK STRENG

ceived conditions the manner in which it is formulated. While one structural process may express the intention through an assumption about the radical separation of sacred and profane, another may not. To carry over the role of certain assumptions from one structural process to another may lead to misunderstanding. Similarly, the focus on a future fulfilment of a spiritual goal in one process may be inappropriate in another, for the release from evil and suffering in a context where there is a clear separation of time and eternity will be different from one where release is available only in a moment of existence by means of a shift in consciousness.

### *Words and spiritual truth*

The attempt to understand religious life in its continuity among cultures has not been an isolated activity during the past century. Both philosophical reflection and social scientific analyses have raised hermeneutical issues and provided an awesome breadth of data. In this section we will consider Nāgārjuna's use of words to express spiritual truth, and attempt to show that the "negative dialectic" which he uses and his refusal to identify terms with some self-established reality (or essence) has, among other functions, the function to release a person from unconscious attachments to verbal imagery. Without presenting explicit correlations between Nāgārjuna and certain twentieth century philosophers, this section will deal with questions of verbal meaning recognizing that the meaning of words and human intentions are not isolated from a wider cultural context. The concerns expressed by Edmund Husserl and continuing through Martin Heidegger, on the one hand, and those of the later Wittgenstein, on the other, have helped to form the hermeneutical lenses through which I have attempted to understand Nāgārjuna.

To understand Nāgārjuna's use of words in expressing the truth that releases a person from his or her self-constructed bondage, we will first remind ourselves that the Buddhist tradition recognizes that human beings are driven by unconscious motives as well as conscious decisions. Unlike many contemporary psychiatrists, however, Buddhist thinkers regarded all human experiences, desires, and felt needs as conditioned, and therefore controllable. If human beings want to be free from suffering, they have to see how they are constructing the bondage that they feel they are in. Thus, the Buddha's Path requires insight into conditioning

## ULTIMATE TRANSFORMATION

causes of human experience. From the verses quoted above from *The Fundamentals of the Middle Way* we see two kinds of statements regarding religious transformation. The first (MMK 18: 4, 5) claims that the act of "acquiring"—this includes all unconscious "drives" for hanging on to life in terms of general or class designations, e.g. "me," "the teaching," "a person," or "life"—has to be eliminated in order to have release from suffering. One must become aware that conventional human experience is "produced" in part through "acquisition," which, in turn, binds one to faulty expectations. The second kind of statement (MMK 22: 7–11) expresses the jarring insight that the notion of "acquisition" itself might be apprehended in an "acquiring mode of apprehension," and therefore, there is a denial that the Buddha, i.e. the "fully completed being" (*tathāgata*), has acquired anything or that he could have existed without acquisition. "Both 'acquiring' and 'someone who acquires' are completely empty" (MMK 22: 10).

By bringing the nature of the problem of "acquiring" before the mind in this way, the Buddhist adept first gets a conceptual image of the problem and then is forced to examine the image-ing process to see if he or she is constructing an illusory awareness of a pseudo-object, i.e. a "thing" called "acquisition." A person who experiences the mechanism of image-ing, which generally overlaps with such feelings as attachment, desire, fear, and anxiety, is at least aware of his or her own participation in "acquiring" one's sense of reality. For Nāgārjuna, the recognition that all conditioned phenomena are empty of self-nature results in "emptying" or dissipating the binding energies through which people restrict their vision and energy. When insight dissipates false images or expectations and desires, the heat of greed and hate is cooled.

The ignorance which is eliminated by insight is something more than just the lack of information or an inaccurate description of something. This sort of ignorance is systemic; that is, it is inherent in the very system or procedure that one uses to know life. The ignorance that contributes to clinging (or acquiring) is not being aware of the power that images, linguistic structures, and feelings have to bind one's expectations. The insight that frees one from this process is also a releasing energy whereby one is no longer caught—or, one no longer catches oneself—in the conceptual net and the expectations of one-to-one correlations between a word and some nonverbal referent.

We can begin to see the problem that Nāgārjuna was considering when

## FREDERICK STENG

we recognize a fairly simple thing: our words and language can generate the expectation of entities that are totally nonexistent in the world available to common knowledge. Human beings can use language in such a way that the words can be meaningful while at the same time be mere fabrications of the mind. We can, for example, refer to a square circle, to the son of a barren woman, or to the horn of a rabbit. We can extend a notion of a particular thing to a generalized notion. For example, we can extend the awareness of a single, concrete human being to a notion of a class of human beings, and call it "humanity." We can extend the notion of a "good" act to "perfect goodness." Or we can create new notions that do not refer to direct experience by negating a general cognition such as "limitation" or "finitude"; thereby we derive the notions of "unlimited reality" or "infinity." These words indicate immaterial verbal entities; and they are meaningful expressions since they share with other expressions certain grammatical properties and leave us with an impression of some possibility. This turns out to be a very curious thing when we recognize that many other terms or words function by pointing out objects or calling objects to our attention. Words seem to carve out remembered experiences by defining and manifesting general forms or characteristics of the world. A name is said to indicate something, or a term specifies something. Thus, if a person says the word "egg," most of us immediately have some image of an egg in mind. Yet different people might have quite different specific images of an egg.

The fact that words refer to general classes of things *and* to specific phenomena leaves us with the fascinating question of whether the term, e.g. "egg" as a general classification, has a meaning because it refers to some essence that pertains to each of the images that we have or whether the term is meaningful simply because we have learned to use the term in a certain way. As in Western schools of philosophy, there were in India some schools, e.g., the Nyāya school, that held that universals, like "eggness," which referred to a common element in all eggs, had as their universal reality some kind of objective basic characteristic. The Buddhists, on the other hand, held that "universals" or general-class terms are fictions; but they can be objects of propositions and can serve as subjects in order to function in popular, conventional communication. For the Buddhists, the fact that the general term "egg" could be used knowledgeably by a variety of people whose specific experiences could be quite different indicated that they fabricated certain notions in order to

## ULTIMATE TRANSFORMATION

communicate key, easily-defined aspects of specific experiences. They did not agree that the general property that can be specified as "eggness" is some timeless objective reality which is present in all individual eggs.

For Nāgārjuna a general term simply distinguished a particular class of items from another class of items. It did not indicate that there is some kind of universal reality that is found in multiple forms. By focusing on exactly these problems of the formation of ideas and human expectations, that words identify and give form to certain perceptions and aspects of our experience, Nāgārjuna, along with other Buddhists, pointed out how many people, though unaware, were being pushed by the very language and assumptions of language that they thought were helping them understand their existence.

The affirmation that there are two kinds of truth (MMK 24: 8–10) that are useful in spiritual life is a recognition, I think, that there are at least two important functions of religious expression. The first of these functions is to present a correct understanding of human existence. This means that some formulations, some verbal images, and some uses of language, are better than others in guiding people's thinking and experiencing in the most free and unattached manner. The second function of religious speech is to transform a person's attitudes about himself or herself and the world whereby that person will become free from an illusory self-image. The first function—that of analyzing the way that the world comes into existence and the way people apprehend this continually changing existence—is what Nāgārjuna calls the realm of conventional or delimiting truth. That there are certain things or ideas that one should know to help clarify the understanding of one's role in existence is made clear when Nāgārjuna writes in chapter 24, verse 40:

He who perceives dependent co-origination (*pratityasamutpāda*)  
Also understands sorrow, origination, and destruction as well  
as the path.

In this way Nāgārjuna does not hold that all conceptual formulations about the arising and elimination of suffering are equally good or bad. One must understand the notion of dependent co-origination—which is equal to the emptiness of all things.

The recognition that all things are empty, then, does not mean that the advocate of the middle way wants to avoid dealing with everyday

FREDERICK STRENG

conditioned existence. In fact, Nāgārjuna says that unless a person perceives existence as empty, he or she will not be able to account for conditioned and mundane life. He argues that if a person holds the notion of a self-existent or an inherent character of any particular form, that person will not be able to account for the arising and dissipation of existence. Therefore, in chapter 24, verse 36, he claims:

You reject all mundane and customary activities  
When you deny emptiness [in the sense of] dependent co-  
origination.

He confronts his opponents with misunderstanding the notion of emptiness when he says (chapter 24, verses 13 and 14):

Time and again you have made a condemnation of emptiness,  
But that refutation does not apply to our emptiness.  
When emptiness "works," then everything in existence "works."  
If emptiness does *not* "work," then all existence does *not* "work."

Here we see that the term "emptiness," when it is a term for dependent co-origination, applies as much to conditioned existence as to the freedom from grasping-after-existence. Everyday experience is not a reality different from emptiness.

"Emptiness" is the basic term used by Nāgārjuna to interpret the arising and cessation of suffering in the world; it is a situation that is in itself neutral, allowing for both the production of illusion and its cessation. To perceive the emptiness of everything is the highest insight into the nature of life. Thus this perception is not a rejection of conditioned existence *per se*—as if it were a kind of reality qualitatively different from unconditioned reality. Rather a different kind of distinction must be made to account for the difference between pain and the release from pain; this is the difference between grasping after assumed ultimate entities and the use of particular existing forms for attaining insight and serenity. When applying this distinction to the use of language, we see that conceptual formulations which are assumed to describe self-substantiated reality end in delusion; these formulations are different from those which in a practical and relative sense express the nature of the world or an understanding of the nature of the world but are themselves recognized to be empty of any inherent quality.

By rejecting concept after concept as absolute, and by denying a

## ULTIMATE TRANSFORMATION

counter-thesis as well as the thesis, Nāgārjuna attempts to develop an indifference to grasping after a supposed essence. In this way the negative dialectic is an effective force breaking a person's mental and emotional attachment to phenomenal and ideal entities without positing an unconditional eternal source of all phenomena behind those phenomena. According to Nāgārjuna, there is nothing more beyond emptiness or dependent co-origination. The notion of emptiness and the use of the dialectic, then, are useful tools for fulfilling the first function of dharma teaching: to distinguish between views and to describe most accurately the nature of existence.

If one of the functions of the negative dialectic and the use of such terms as dependent co-origination and emptiness are to bring about a clearer mental understanding of the arising and dissipation of changing existence, the other function is just as important. This is that the articulation of truth must go beyond the formulation of a proposition. It must transform the very character, the very mechanism, or process, of awareness in an individual. The highest truth, a correct formulation of the arising and dissipation of existence, would not be of spiritual benefit unless it helped to avoid the personal attachment to an illusory self-existing reality in the phenomenal world or in a mental world. The highest truth, however, is not a total rejection of conventional truth. The realization of nirvana is not attaining a self-existent opposite to some sorrow—as was the highest reality conceived in some other forms of Indian spiritual life. Rather the highest truth is the realization that all distinctions are "empty." This realization requires a transformation of self-awareness much more drastic than eliminating all constructed entities in favor of an undifferentiated transcendent reality.

To realize emptiness as the basis for both *samsāra* (or conditioned existence) and nirvana is to recognize also that the terms "delimiting truth" and "ultimate truth" are themselves empty of self-existence. The highest wisdom is not the elimination of all mental formulation in the expectation that there is a self-existent absolute reality as such. Rather the highest wisdom includes the attitude or mental-psychic condition which permits the spiritual advocate to function within existence without pain and with great joy. This condition can be compared to health as a condition of the body which permits it to function properly. The "delimiting truth" has the capacity to point beyond the limitations inherent in the distinctions which it must use; thus, it is useful for point-

## FREDERICK STRENG

ing to a condition of freedom from the tendencies of concepts to break up the flux of existence into apparently self-established entities and to crystallize them into false expectations. Likewise, the "ultimate truth" is the situation of being illumined about the dependent co-origination of all things which devoids a person of anger, greed and fear in regard to any conditioned entity. The deepest illusions are thereby dissipated through the highest insight; these illusions are not simply faulty identification of existing entities, but attachment to the notion that identification of entities can insure absolute truth. The highest truth is not only an indication of the way things are; it is an experienced situation of freedom, health, and serenity.

### *Transformation lived as empty goal*

In the verses quoted above regarding the fully completed being's non-acquiring of empty acquisitions (MMK 22: 7-11, 16), we can note that he is involved in existence in at least two ways. The first is that he participated in image-making, the use of symbols, and mental reflection as do all people. In this way the formation of language is itself an expression of the "dependent co-origination" of all existence. There is no eternal "center" of the mental-emotional-physical events that make up a personality, nor even an unchanging characteristic of any mental object labeled "event." The fully completed being, as the world, is empty.

The second way that the fully completed being participates fully in existence, however, is that he is known as a person when (empty) mental-emotional-physical factors are experienced as serial changes in the moment-by-moment rough-and-ready presence in existence called "human life." That experience can be described as changing, and in this context the fully completed being has stopped the process of "acquiring." Here the transformation—which from the standpoint of highest truth is also empty—is an experience of "letting go," of cessation of error, and non-attachment. Since the manner in which a person is present in the world determines how free or how bound one is to one's own construction, the immediate engagement that a person has with (relatively real) existence is very important. Every person, according to the dominant understanding of human life in the Buddhist tradition, participates in the very "arising" (i.e. the appearing, the becoming) of the world. All action and every sensitivity to the experienced physical, social, or mental aspects of life

## ULTIMATE TRANSFORMATION

necessarily include some form of consciousness. Thus it is not surprising to find Nāgārjuna stating at the end of chapter 23 of *The Fundamentals of the Middle Way*, in an analysis of misconception, the following:

23. From the cessation of error ignorance ceases;  
When ignorance has ceased, conditioning forces and everything else cease.
24. If any kind of self-existent impurities belong to somebody,  
How in all the world would they be eliminated? Who can eliminate that which is self-existent?
25. If any kind of self-existent impurities do not belong to somebody, then  
How in all the world would they be eliminated? Who can eliminate that which is non-self-existent?

The reality of spiritual transformation, then, is an experience that cannot be labeled as either essentially "existing" or "not existing." It is important to see, however, that if a person wishes for some kind of otherness or some kind of absolutely different situation in which to live an unattached and uncompulsive existence, it is a fantasy that is debilitating to true spiritual progress. This means that all beings, because they live in dependent co-origination, have an effective power and a spiritual resiliency in themselves which can be cultivated. Thus, the ideal of the spiritual goal cannot be actualized of a self-deprecating person who wants to depend solely on something or someone else to provide the solutions to his or her pain. Such a person lives in a fantasy of insecurity that itself diminishes the capacity to develop insight through spiritual powers which are available to everyone. Paradoxically, the spiritual resources that must emerge to relieve pain are cultivated in and through the same general factors of personality that are experienced very often also as painful, anxious, limited and ignorant. The ideal reality, then, is not something other than what is right now; it is inherent in the individual field of experiences (i.e. the personality) that is indeed in constant change, and which can be cultivated and skillfully sensitized to other possibilities.

If all things are recognized to be dependently co-originated, Nāgārjuna's spiritual discipline cannot be seen as an escape from the immediate present. To think of self-becoming as an escape is simply to encrust or substantialize a mental image of "otherness" or of possible absolutes outside a dependently co-originating change. This is one of the



## FREDERICK STRENG

most powerful ways to avoid significant change. One temptation in recognizing the difficulty of trying to communicate verbally the "reality" of emptiness is to attach oneself to the spaces between the forms, or to some kind of non-form, as if that were itself some absolute. Nāgārjuna, in contrast, attempts to articulate the need to be free from both the forms of language and non-forms.

How is it that a person who lives "emptily" is not identified either as being-in-existence or not-being-in-existence? In considering an answer to this question, we need to recognize that, for Nāgārjuna, there are various qualities or levels of awareness that make up a personality. Nāgārjuna does not say that in order to recognize the emptiness of all things people need some kind of transcendent awareness. Rather, he speaks of a way of perceiving life as it is constructed through a personality. This recognition that all things are empty is not so much a description of a presumed final or ultimate experience, but rather functions to present a procedure for discernment about oneself and life as dependently co-originated. Nor is this a lowest-common-denominator perception of life; it is a value-cognition that makes possible the cessation of acquisition or compulsive grasping. To interpret how this claim that "all things are empty" functions to transform consciousness, we need to see that Nāgārjuna recognizes that the *quality* of awareness is a major factor in determining what one experiences. We can say that it is the quality of perceiving without interfering. Thus, it is a form of understanding which is not a thoughtless or senseless absorption into an imaginary absolute, on the one hand, nor is it simply a reformulation of past images and interesting ideas or experiences. Rather, it is always an empty active sense whereby there is a letting go of preconceptions or emotional attachments to expectations.

The middle way, for Nāgārjuna, is a quality of mindfulness that pertains to every moment of experience. It is the letting go of expectations to the point that one perceives the formative subjective and objective determinants of every moment. If people could become aware of their own emerging moments of consciousness, say many spiritual masters in the Buddhist tradition, they could recognize that there is a direction and a selection in the process of formulating certain ideas and concepts. The state of consciousness, however, has to have the quality of letting go from the expectation that there are essential characteristics in such notions as "personality" or "desire" if a person is to use such notions as a means

## ULTIMATE TRANSFORMATION

of spiritual insight. This concern focuses on the question of *how* one perceives anything; and in this examination of perception the mind is seen to play a crucial role. Recognizing that we are using conventional patterns of mentalizing in the present analysis, we can say that the mental-emotional center of our personalities is both conscious and unconscious; and the effort to attain an "unattached" or "non-acquiring" mode of becoming conscious is of critical importance.

The terms for indicating the character of a healthy, or non-acquiring, mind are found early in the Buddhist tradition. We find terms such as "mindfulness," (*smṛti*, and *sati*) and "total awareness" (*samprajanya*) as indicators of mental attitudes that are said to pacify a troubled mind. In *Samyutta Nikāya* III. 189, we see that *nibbāna* (i.e. nirvana), is said to be described as release. Likewise, in the *Theragāthā*, Section I, the monk sings, "My mind is well-composed and free." Here we see that nirvana is described as a state of the mind and emotions (*citta*) that is freed from obsessions and the turmoil of emotions, desires, and moral defilements. At the same time, the Mādhyamika followers emphasize that nirvana does not exist in itself or that happiness does not exist in itself because these cannot be adequately specified as a cognitive object and therefore represent an unchanging reality. Nāgārjuna indicates, at a relative level of knowledge, what the nature of that reality is. For example, in chapter 18, verse 9, he says:

"Not caused by something else," "peaceful," "not elaborated  
by discursive thought,"

"Indeterminant," "undifferentiated": such are the character-  
istics of true reality.

Nāgārjuna inherited these terms as part of a fund of Buddhist concepts and modes of thinking about the nature of reality. The discipline of the Buddhist path from the earliest times dealt with the problem of greed at the level of unconscious (or "natural") drives, including the subtle drive to make distinctions. He attempted to deepen this insight by pointing out that all metaphysical-psychological viewpoints were subject to the same limiting forces as any more mundane distinctions that make an ultimate claim on human awareness.

The Mādhyamika follower, therefore, comprehends that there are experiential bases for various feelings that can be identified as salutary or non-salutary, as desire or non-desire, as pleasurable or painful, when he

FREDERICK STRENG

experiences a feeling. However, it is important to comprehend these terms *in such a way* that one is released from the conceptual, emotional, and perceptual limitations or bonds which one is making in the very process of cognition. The bondage is the act of establishing a place for the cognition and feelings to be, to reside, in one's own self-awareness. It is as if people are always building a world that is dependent on the isolation of particular ideas of very common experiences such as windows, tables, chairs—as if these experiences of tables, chairs, people, heat, love, hate, fear, were themselves uncontrollable forces in existence. The person who accepts the emptiness-teaching will regard life's sorrows and anxieties as resulting in part from his or her own construction. That person knows that he or she must desist from constructing these experiences in an “attached” or “acquiring” way in order to be released from the feelings of anxiety, sorrow, or pain that usually accompany them.

Meditation is a practice that has been used throughout the Buddhist tradition to de-automate habitual patterns of experience. While Nāgārjuna did not advocate meditation directly in his *Fundamentals of the Middle Way*, there are texts that are credited to him, such as his “Letter to a Friend” which suggest that he accepted meditation as a critical part of the Buddhist path. He states there:

Know that there are three things that block the gate to the city of freedom, and that you must cast aside: sole reliance on rites and penance, perverted views and doubt.

Freedom depends upon you alone, for no one else can help you: strive in the four noble truths, with study and virtue and meditation.

Ever train yourself in higher virtue, higher wisdom, higher meditation, for within these three are gathered more than a hundred and fifty trainings.<sup>1</sup>

Human beings can cultivate a non-acquiring quality of consciousness despite the fact that most of life is experienced in a limited way. Nāgārjuna recognizes this in the 25th chapter of *The Fundamentals of the Middle Way* when he says:

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephan Beyer, trans. and editor, *The Buddhist Experience: Sources and Experience* (Encino, California, 1974), p. 14.

## ULTIMATE TRANSFORMATION

9. That state which is the rushing in and out of existence when dependent and acquired—

This state, when not dependent or not acquired, is seen to be nirvana. . .

24. The quieting of acquisition is a salutary quieting of image-development (*prapañca*);

No *dharma* [law, reality, truth] of anything anywhere has been taught by the Buddha.

The changes in the personality are a result of being free from acquisition (*upādāna*). Existence as people normally experience it is "acquired," or accumulated, as a part of one's sensitivity of being present-in-existence. This common experience is found whenever a person thinks that he or she must do something in order to "be" or "become." Letting go of the acquisitions which compel one to define one's selfhood in certain cultural, historical, and physical terms is merely avoidance of debilitating restrictions that people make on themselves in order to function in certain social roles. This effort "to acquire" life interferes with fully participating at a deeper level of our awareness in a free and spontaneous way with one's environment. In Nāgārjuna's terminology, the mode of experiencing oneself as a series of acquisitions prevents one from experiencing the "dependent co-origination" of all things. A felt need, as well as unconscious drives, to "acquire" life cuts people off from the possibility of seeing themselves both as whole human beings, on the one hand, and as unique selves, on the other.

The "acquired mind" obscures what might be called "intrinsic awareness." This mind is a mode of experiencing which crystallizes perceptions or concepts—perhaps even such terms as "intrinsic awareness," "unique self," or "whole human beings"—into substantive entities. When this happens, the mechanism of "acquired mind," which at a more basic and purified level is also free, is a malfunctioning process at the beginning of the dependent co-arising of human experience. The acquisition that structures one's world is both a mechanism for developing personality and an inhibition of new possibilities or other experiences. When the habits of personality structures take over the fundamental movement of a person's growth patterns, one tends to identify all new possibilities of life in terms of those habits.

To let go of the acquiring mind, does not mean that the spiritual

## FREDERICK STRENG

adept will lose *all* expectations, or goals, or hopes. To do so would mean that a person would lose normal consciousness as in a trance, or, alternatively, as in an experience of being knocked out. Rather, it means (1) that the expectations, hopes, and images of the goals are recognized as having been conditioned, and (2) that individuals can experience personally the release from their compulsive, "acquiring" minds by letting go, step by step, of each image, hope or expectation as it takes a particular form.

In sum, according to *The Fundamentals of the Middle Way* human beings have the capacity to be free from the "acquiring forces" that bind them to a restrictive and painful existence. They can become free because they contribute to the formation of every physical, mental, or emotional activity of their lives. The nature of the transformation is a shift in the quality of consciousness or awareness, rather than a change from living in chaos to participation in a supposed eternal principle or archetype of existence, or a change from inherent weakness to a strength found in response to a totally other (Divine) power. The shift in awareness is one from a bondage derived from assuming that some unchanging, essential ultimate reality dominates one's (conditioned) existence to a freedom whereby one has the power and insight to avoid self-imposed debilitating behavior. This freedom is expressed philosophically in the Buddhist tradition as the middle path between the extremes of essentialism and nihilism; it is articulated by Nāgārjuna in a negative dialectic and the assertion that all mental, physical and emotional objects of awareness are "empty," that is, "dependently co-originated." Even the path of stopping "acquisitions" is empty of self-existent reality; and the articulation of "empty non-acquisition" as a process of ultimate transformation must itself avoid the "acquiring" tendency of mental construction. The spiritual transformation indicated by, but not identical to, this articulation is one of a shift in the quality of awareness that is not bound by the formulation in a one-to-one correlation with a projected non-linguistic referent to the terms or the subject-object linguistic structure. This transformed awareness is expressed in conventional, "delimiting" language as unattached, non-acquiring, peaceful, and empty. However, such terms themselves must be used in a non-acquiring manner if they are to function as a releasing power.