

BOOK REVIEWS

EMPTINESS—A STUDY IN RELIGIOUS MEANING. By Frederick J. Streng.
Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1967, 252 pp.

This is a worthy and formidable work. It is written in the tradition of Th. Stcherbatsky (*The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa*, 1927) and T.R.V. Murti (*The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 1955) on the philosophy of Nāgārjuna. It not only is expository in nature but stands out uniquely as a consistent treatment of the central doctrine of śūnyatā ("emptiness" by Streng) within an historical and religious orientation. Streng sees Nāgārjuna as a deeply religious man and his doctrine of śūnyatā inhering a soteriological intention, i.e., having the nature of "ultimately transforming." (p. 171) He asserts that religious knowledge is not limited to giving mere information or asserting certain facts but "claims to transform by the power inherent in it." (p. 17) Moreover, "it is related to human vocabularies, structures of thought, and individual sensitivities." (Ibid.) And finally, "its value as transforming truth is dependent on the cognitive patterns by which such truth can be known." (Ibid.) With these premises, Streng will go about relating religious awareness and symbolic expression. But his investigation will focus principally on the conceptual or theoretical mode of expression with respect to the search for the religious awareness and meaning. He is cognizant of his limitations in this line of approach but nevertheless, within it, he carries out a thorough assessment of the Buddhist situation on life, i.e., from the state of suffering (*duḥkha*), through "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*) and to release (*nirodha*) by way of ultimate wisdom (*prajña*).

Nāgārjuna's contention on the rise of suffering, according to Streng, is that despite the interrelatedness of things (*pratītya-samutpāda*), men take those things as self-existent realities and thereby fall victims to the *ātman* doctrine. But, contrarily, Buddhist truths are based on the *anātman* doctrine. If the true nature of things is rightly perceived, i.e., seen as empty (*śūnya*), then the mind is emptied as it were of grasping after any self-existent reality. For Streng then *śūnyatā* is at once relatedness and emptiness. He further asserts: "Emptiness is always the emptiness of something; or emptiness is always the predicate of something, e.g., co-dependent origination of existence or the highest knowledge of no-self-existence." (p. 159)

After discussing the mythical and intuitive structures of religious apprehension within the Indian tradition, including some parallel references to Western models, Streng goes into the heart of Nāgārjuna's unique form of dialectical structure in which there is no reference to "an Absolute Reality that is independent of the language system." (p. 139) Thus, the dialectic-

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tic will not involve any metaphysical propositions nor will it accept any epistemological presuppositions in the nature of self-existent referents. These referents, according to Streng's interpretation of Nāgārjuna, are mere mental fabrications but once they are perceived as such there will be an end to the process of fabrication and result in the true grasp of the symbol "emptiness." Thus, "the insight that all things are 'empty' means that things have phenomenal reality through their interrelation, and not because they 'express' or 'reflect' an absolute essence of a thing which exists somewhere." (p. 143) The dialectic is finally a "negative dialectic" explained thus: "The term, 'negative' in this phrase is not used in a moral, psychological, or aesthetic sense at all. It is an attempt to distinguish between a dialectic which maintains that a thing *both* 'is' *and* 'is not,' and a dialectic which maintains that a thing *neither* 'is' *nor* 'is not.' Nāgārjuna's denial of the four alternatives of the quaternary moves beyond the attempt simply to say that words are inadequate to express the Inexpressible by denying the problem of the relation between the 'Inexpressible' and the 'expressed' conceived as two entities in relation to each other." (fn. 1, p. 139) He further expands: "The dialectic itself provides a positive apprehension, not of a 'thing' but of the insight that there is no independent and absolute thing which exists eternally, nor a 'thing' which can be constructed. The dialectic itself is a means of knowing." (p. 148) Streng is careful to note that his type of dialectic is decidedly different from the one used by Murti in his aforementioned work: "While there is much with which I would agree, my interpretation of the dialectic differs from Dr. Murti's insofar as he holds that the dialectic is primarily a judgment on the limitation of reason which simply clears the mind for an apprehension of 'the real' by intuition (a higher faculty). As I have tried to show throughout this study, Nāgārjuna's 'negative dialectic' is based on epistemological and ontological presuppositions different from a Vedantic dialectic which presupposes an absolute ground of being. Both reason and intuition for Nāgārjuna are empty of self-existent reality, as are any objects known by reason or intuition." (fn. 15, p. 148)

Thus Streng is able to assert that "the emptiness of all visual or ideal objects is known by the self-abnegating character of logical inference and the ever larger indifference to a 'grasp' of that which is supposed to be an essence of changing existence." (p. 149) Further, he notes that "the negative dialectic both carries on and destroys the activity of discriminating, of defining, and inferring. In this way we can see now Nāgārjuna can say that the highest truth exists in dependence on everyday activities while yet transcending and purifying it." (Ibid.) And so finally the negative dialectic and the articulation of ultimate reality as "empty" are two aspects of the same structure of religious apprehension. (p. 150) Nāgārjuna thus uses the symbol, śūnyatā, to describe that structure which is totally divested of any type of referent and, moreover, religious awareness and verbal expression are reciprocal and co-determinate in nature. (p. 18)

This novel interpretation of śūnyatā, though penetratingly carried out within Streng's religious orientation, opens up many questions. In general, the treatment is novel in the sense of employing Western methodology to an Asian thought and in this sense it is intercultural. But the contacts between the two traditions have been admittedly narrowed to

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the conceptual aspect and, as the analysis develops, there is a feeling that the Western cast too easily accommodates the Asian content.

Without analyzing the function of other concepts in Buddhism, such as, *kleśa*, *skandha*, *vijñāna*, etc., it is difficult to understand the full meaning of *śūnyatā*. Its conceptual analysis must presuppose the understanding of the empirical nature in the rise of *duḥkha*. Thus, for example, the concept of relatedness in the abstract conceptual realm is meaningless unless its empirical nature is analyzed and grasped first and then related to it. For, the question of relating a concrete event for all that it involves to the abstract realm is the crux of the problem. In other words, understanding abstractions do not immediately resolve concreteness; it is ultimately the other way around. Or, in terms of *śūnyatā*, to say that it is a symbol for the structure of apprehension of an ultimate truth and that it inheres a transforming power through a dialectic is to assign a nature to *śūnyatā* which would be hard to defend. In the final analysis, the functions of the three pillars of Buddhism, i.e., *śīla*, *saṃādhi* and *prajñā*, must be integrally tied in within the whole Buddhist venture of alleviating man's state of *duḥkha*.

The question of a dialectic in Nāgārjuna is open. Is it relativity (Stcherbatsky), conflict of reason (Murti), negative dialectic (Streng), absolute nihilism (H. Narain), negativity, another unnamed type, or none at all? In the end, it boils down to the accuracy in translating the original works and their consequent interpretations. To be sure, it is difficult to completely return to the spirit of the times and see Nāgārjuna for what he was. Incidentally, Streng has appended the full translations of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*. His interpretation of Nāgārjuna uses these translations extensively.

It must be emphasized that all Buddhist doctrines are inherently related to man's experience. Any deviation from this context is at once in error or a distortion. Thus the so-called realistic charge against the proponents of Abhidharma philosophy will, on closer examination, reveal much that is exaggerated and should be toned down. Even Nāgārjuna's critique of relational condition (*pratyaḡa*) in the first chapter of the *Kārikā* should not be interpreted in terms of an outright rejection of realism or a case of mere fabrication of thought. In a sense, even Streng's negative dialectic subtly involves the ghost of a referent to effectuate its function. The "all exist" doctrine in reference to the dharmas is an elusive one which no scholar, not even Stcherbatsky, has fully understood and analyzed it to everyone's complete satisfaction. It is a work for the future.

Despite certain limitations, this work is still a singular contribution to comparative religion, thought and methodology. It will certainly occupy an important place in interpreting Mādhyamika thought.

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