

On Being None With Nature: Nagarjuna and the Ecology of Emptiness

John Clark

Of all philosophical traditions, Buddhism has gone farthest in following the negative way toward truth, pushing to its limits the critique of unity, identity, essence and substantiality. According to the classic *Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines*, the things of nature “have only one nature” and that is “no nature.” It might therefore seem strange to look to Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka prasangika philosophy, the version of Buddhist thought that carries this negative theme to its most extreme limits, as a source for ecological thinking. For how can one find any encouragement for the affirmation of nature in a philosophy that holds that there is “no nature” to affirm? Nevertheless, the Buddhist poet Gary Snyder, commenting on Hakuin Zenji’s reference to “self-nature that is no nature . . . far beyond mere doctrine,” notes that “the greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open, and conditional.” Thus, perhaps we may indeed find inspiration for ecological thinking in the idea that we share with nature a common nature that is “no nature,” or emptiness.

Exploring the degree to which such a source can be found is the goal of this inquiry. In pursuit of this goal, a dialectical approach will be taken toward the relationship between Nagarjuna’s philosophy and contemporary ecological philosophy. This approach includes an investigation of the ecological implications of Nagarjuna’s thought. Quite obviously, this entails no claim that Nagarjuna himself drew out all those implications or developed them in his own works. The purpose of his most strictly philosophical works is to carry out the negative dialectic that is at the heart of his prasanghika position. On the other hand, when he draws out the ethical, social and political implications of his position in various exhortatory texts, he focuses on issues that were of contemporary concern, which did not include most of those that are now central to environmental ethics, ecophilosophy and political ecology. One goal of the present discussion is to make explicit the relevance of Nagarjuna’s thought to these issues of contemporary concern. A further aim is to draw attention to the ways in which a confrontation with Nagarjuna’s philosophy might transform contemporary ecological thought. There has been much discussion in ecological philosophy of the need for “deep questioning.” I would argue that no philosopher has been more radical than Nagarjuna has in pushing to its limits the questioning of all presuppositions. Nagarjuna’s negative dialectic encompasses a radical critique of conventional ideas of selfhood and substantiality and poses a challenge to the metaphysical, epistemological and psychological assumptions underlying much of ecophilosophy today.

Nagarjuna and the Heart of Buddhist Philosophy

Nagarjuna, a second century C.E. Indian thinker, is considered by many to be the most important figure after Shakyamuni Buddha in the history of Buddhist philosophy. His thought can only be understood adequately within the context of a rich Buddhist tradition that by his time had already existed for over seven centuries. That tradition affirms the inseparable relation between theory and practice established in such fundamental teachings as the Three Jewels, the Three Marks of Existence, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path. The Three Jewels are identified as *Buddha*, *dharmā*, and *sangha*. The term *Buddha* signifies the awakened mind, the experience that is at the heart of Buddhist thought and practice, and is used to refer to those beings that have

experienced perfect, exemplary awakening; the *dharmā* consists of the teachings that help point people toward this experience; and the *sangha* is the compassionate community that puts the teachings into engaged practice. The Three Marks of Existence include *anitya*, the impermanence of all things; *anatman*, the absence of an enduring, substantial self or of separate selfhood; and *duḥkha*, the suffering or pervasive sense of dissatisfaction that accompanies our ubiquitous destructive desires and attachments. The Four Noble Truths begin with the recognition of the third of these marks, universal suffering, then present a diagnosis of its cause and cure, and finally explain the path or practice by which the cure can be effected. The cure is seen as liberation from destructive forms of desire and craving through a practice of non-attachment, non-egoism, awakened consciousness, and compassion. The details of this practice are presented in the Noble Eightfold Path. The Path begins with wisdom, which includes right views and right intention, continues with the ethical life, which encompasses right speech, right action, and right livelihood, and concludes with spiritual discipline, which comprises right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation.

The Path, taken as a whole, is an all-embracing practice that addresses every major aspect of life. Philosophy or theory from a Buddhist perspective is an integral part of this Path. Specifically it is the pursuit of wisdom through right thought or outlook, and helps the seeker understand such truths as impermanence and selflessness. Nagarjuna makes an immense contribution to this project by going as far as has any philosopher in any tradition in the critique of the ideas of permanent, substantial beings and of an enduring, self-identical ego. But his philosophy must at the same time be seen to be equally an expression of the practice of non-attachment, non-egoism and compassion that is fundamental to Buddhism and pervades the Mahayana tradition in particular. This includes compassion for all sentient beings, and by implication, I would argue, for all living beings, and for the larger matrix of sentience in the natural world.

Nagarjuna carries on a tradition of Buddhist philosophical psychology that begins with an analysis of ego-experience and suffering. According to this analysis, suffering arises from what the Buddhist tradition calls the Three Poisons. These “poisons” are identified as mental confusion, destructive attractions, and destructive aversions. In each case, the disease is linked to the power of the ego illusion, which encompasses disordered feelings, perceptions, and mental constructs. It is here that we find the phenomenological and psychological basis for domination. According to the Buddhist analysis, we defend the ego through a futile quest to dominate a fugitive, ungraspable reality. Faced with the constant failure of this project, we experience both ourselves and the world around us as unsatisfactory and frustrating. Our own suffering leads us to inflict suffering on other human beings and other beings in nature, and to attempt to dominate and control them in pursuit of our impossible egocentric goals. Egocentrism takes on a multitude of forms, ranging from egoistic self-hatred and self-destruction to egoistic delusions of an expanded, universalized or eternalized selfhood.

According to the analysis, release from suffering comes through wisdom in action: an everyday practice of non-violent, non-dominating activity (right action and speech); a vocation and way of life based on non-violence and non-domination (right livelihood); an openness to experience of what we falsely objectify as internal egoic selfhood and external nature (right mindfulness); and an openness to mind itself as non-dominated nature (right concentration or meditation). Snyder has written of such consciousness, the awakened state central to Buddhist practice, as “wild mind,” by which he means mind that is permitted to act freely and spontaneously, exhibiting the complexity, diversity, creativity, and anarchic order that wild nature manifests in all of its expressions.

Beyond the Chains of Egocentrism

The Buddhist critique of egocentrism and the egoistic quest to dominate the spontaneous manifestation of nature has great significance for ecophilosophy. Contemporary environmental thought has often focused strongly on the problem of anthropocentrism. Yet as Buddhist ethicist Padmasiri DeSilva has noted, anthropocentrism may be looked upon as an “aspect of egocentrism.” Anthropocentrism functions less as an immediate cause of ecologically destructive action than as an ideology used to legitimate egocentric action. Anthropocentric ideology is significant for its role (in tandem with instrumental rationality and economic values) in creating an exploitative ethos. Nevertheless, ecologically destructive forms of production and the quest for consumer goods produced through such means are not driven most directly by anthropocentric thinking. When a corporate decision-maker assesses market conditions, efficiency, and potential profitability in utilizing a certain production or marketing strategy, or when an individual consumer considers the costs and benefits of buying a certain product, the results of those decisions often play a crucial role in the destruction of species and ecosystems, the disruption of global climate, or the poisoning of the natural environment. However, the individual decision-maker in such cases does not ordinarily in the course of decision-making fantasize about human superiority over nature, or explicitly appeal to an anthropocentric value theory.

In fact, the very concept of “nature” may be very far from the focus of consciousness of the decision-maker in the immediate process of decision-making. Such an agent may have no difficulty engaging in ecologically destructive decision-making even while holding a self-image of “nature-lover,” or “environmentalist.” Moreover, he or she might very well find an image such as Leopold’s “conqueror of the land community” quite alien and unappealing. Despite such pro-nature self-identifications, and perhaps even certain gestures that express concern for the natural world, the decision-maker may nevertheless hold socially conditioned values of self-interest, self-gratification, personal status, individual needs, and personal good that dictate participation in a system that is ecologically destructive. The crucial problem is not that the agent overtly wills the domination of nature and affirms anthropocentric ideology, but rather that he or she abstracts an individual, egocentric conception of good from the larger system of social and ecological goods.

It is true that the systems of production and consumption that depend on such structurally determined decisions are then sometimes *justified* in anthropocentric terms. Consequently, anthropocentrism is a powerful legitimating ideology for the domination of nature, and indeed a conditioning context for individual acts of choice. It is important not to ignore the pervasive influence of an anthropocentric ethos and ideology that conditions and mediates our perceptions and decision-making. Yet, it is also necessary to recognize that the system of social and ecological domination works most immediately through more clearly egocentric rather than anthropocentric mechanisms.

Buddhist theory and practice aim precisely at dissolving the basis for such egocentric mechanisms. The context of all Buddhist thought is a practical commitment to love (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*), and the first of the Five Precepts or Dedications is *panatipata* or “abstaining from the killing of any sentient being,” an injunction that is often interpreted more positively as encouraging the flourishing of all forms of life. Buddhism teaches that fully awakened love and compassion extends far beyond humanity into the natural world—indeed, to every sentient being. Buddhist loving-kindness is seen as a disposition that transforms one’s personality and can be extended to other living beings, to places, and to larger communities of nature.

The ecological implications of the presuppositions of Buddhist thought may not be immediately obvious. Patrick Curry points out that if we take a literalistic approach to classic Buddhist texts and interpret them as teaching compassion for “every sentient being” in the conventional sense of that phrase, then Buddhism in general, and Nagarjuna’s *prasanghika* more specifically, would not imply what he calls a “dark-green,” or strongly ecological position. Rather, it would only extend the focus of care and concern beyond humanity to other individual beings in the natural world. Curry suggests that a key question is the degree to which realities such as places and larger ecological communities can be “construed (better, experienced) as agents or subjectivities (as well as objects) and thus qualify as beings.” This suggests a very useful direction for investigation. Recent ecological philosophy has made advances in this area, for example, in David Abram’s use of Merleau-Ponty’s thought. However, for the present I want to pursue not that precise line of inquiry but another one that can be more immediately related to the implications of Nagarjuna’s thought.

Openness to Natureless Nature

Nagarjuna’s philosophy constitutes an incisive critique of all forms of atomistic individualism and false abstractionism, a critique founded on the central Buddhist doctrine of *pratitya samutpada* or dependent origination. In a certain sense, his analysis is the most thoroughgoing philosophical exploration of the extent to which the fallacy of misplaced concreteness has infected our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of reality, and the dire theoretical and practical consequences of this rampant distortion of reality.

For Nagarjuna, a being can only be understood adequately as part of a system of relations. On the basis of such a philosophical position, there are good reasons to hold that our compassion for sentient beings must extend outward to the communities of life and the greater ecological wholes of which they are a part. From Nagarjuna’s perspective, there is no philosophical basis for simply locating the object of compassion or care within the boundaries of individual beings. Much of his negative dialectic is directed toward the destruction of the kind of fallacious metaphysics that seeks to limit reality in such a manner. I would suggest that the implications of the doctrine of dependent origination lend support to a view of value and moral responsibility that is in some ways similar to Rolston’s theory of systemic value. According to this theory, “things do not have their separate natures merely in and for themselves, but they face outward and co-fit into broader natures. Value-in-itself is smeared out to become value-in-togetherness. Value seeps out into the system, and we lose our capacity to identify the individual as the sole locus of value.” Recognition of the dependently originated nature of phenomena dereifies and desubstantializes the conventionally individual being and thus destabilizes the location of value at the level of that being. This opens the way to a recognition of the ways in which value that is recognized in conventionally individual beings can also be recognized as pervading larger fields of being. Nagarjuna’s philosophical position, combined with what we now know about the nature of value in ecosystems, quite consistently leads to an expansion of Buddhist compassionate practice of care and concern beyond individual centers of valuing (sentient beings) to larger ecological realities.

Despite Nagarjuna’s ruthlessly negative critique, his thought is rooted in his commitment to such a compassionate practice. It is sometimes pointed out that his greatest philosophical work, the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, begins with a statement of the unreality of inherently existing things, and thus with the onslaught of his negative dialectic. However, this is not quite accurate, for it is not the work but only his *argument* that begins this way. If one includes the opening “dedicatory verses,” the

first and last verses of the work commence with the statement “I salute the Perfect Buddha.” The work thus begins and ends not with an argument, but with an action (a performative statement), not with a negation, but with an affirmation. It is significant, moreover, that what Nagarjuna specifically affirms at both the beginning and the end of the work is the “Perfect Buddha.” We know from Chapter XXII, “Examination of the Tathagata,” that those who “develop mental fabrications with regard to the Buddha . . . fail to see the Buddha,” and that “the Tathagata has no essence,” so we are obliged to conclude that it is ultimately no individual, substantial being that he affirms, but rather the awakened mind, which is, as he says in the “Dedicatory Verses,” “the best of teachers.” Furthermore, the final verse asserts that the *dharmā* that is taught results in the “relinquishing of all views,” a goal that defines Nagarjuna’s position precisely as a negatively critical, or *prasāngika*, approach. However, it should also be noted that the final stanza refers both to the compassion of the Buddha and the fact that the *dharmā*, the Buddha’s teaching, leads to non-attachment, in this case to the “relinquishing of all views.” Though Nagarjuna does not use the term, this indicates that the seemingly paradoxical perspective of “non-attached engagement” that is at the heart of Buddhism is also at the heart of Nagarjuna’s project.

Thus, it is true that Nagarjuna’s dialectic is perhaps the most radically negative one in the history of world philosophy, but as Thich Nhat Hanh points out, it has a positive function in relation to our experience and relationship to reality. Negation “has the role of breaking down concepts to the point where the practitioner comes to rid himself of all discrimination and penetrates undiscriminated reality. Dialectic aims at producing a transforming crisis and not at expounding a truth.” Nagarjuna’s goal, like that of all Buddhist philosophers, is to save all human beings, and indeed, all sentient beings, from suffering. His negative dialectic is an attack on the confusion, ignorance and illusion that leads to suffering. It is also an attack on the destructive attachments that accompany this confused thinking and lead to grasping, violence, and domination. Nagarjuna dialectically destroys various forms of knowledge as objectification, reification, domination and appropriation, so that in the absence of such forms, experience can open itself more fully to that which is experienced.

The Ecology of Emptiness

What is experienced in this process includes all that we conventionally call “nature.” This nature is seen as the realm of *samsāra*, the endless cycle of change, while *nirvāna* is seen as the awakened and liberated state. But awakening is awareness of precisely such unending change. It is awakening to the true nature, or non-nature, of nature. Accordingly, Nagarjuna states that

There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence [*samsāra*] and nirvāna.
There is not the slightest difference
Between nirvāna and cyclic existence [*samsāra*].

Nagarjuna thus rejects any transcendent ideal above or beyond nature. Nirvāna is in no way a goal, ideal, or destination apart from that flux or “everlasting fire” that Heraclitus also identified as the universal mark of existence. The world in which one finds liberation and awakening is the world of ordinary experience, the world of change from which so many philosophers East and West have fled in horror since ancient times. But it is that world experienced without the mediation of essentializing conceptual distortions:

Whatever is the essence of the Tathagata,
That is the essence of the world.
The Tathagata has no essence.
The world is without essence.”

The nature that is experienced is therefore a nature that is “no nature,” that is, nature without identity, essence, substantiality, or “self-being.” But it is also nature that is most authentically nature, for it is nature that is experienced in its activity of “naturing,” or being just as it is. As Conze points out, in the *Prajnaparamitas* (or Perfection of Wisdom literature), “emptiness is often interchangeably expressed as ‘suchness’ (*tathata* in Sanskrit). When stripped of conceptuality, the most significant thing that one can positively say about reality is that it is ‘just so’” Similarly, Nagarjuna’s negative dialectic has the positive function of helping one experience nature as directly and openly as possible, free from conceptual distortions. In doing so, it is in accord with the Buddha’s famous Flower Sermon at Vulture Peak, in which he is said to have remained silent and merely held up a flower before the assembled multitude. True, Nagarjuna did not merely remain silent, but his negative dialectic always points to the limits of speech and the contradictions resulting from any assertions about reality. Prasangika philosophy rejects the adequacy of all *propositions* about nature in order to lead us to allow nature to *propose* or manifest *itself*.

The Flower Sermon is often cited as the mythic origin of Zen Buddhism; however, it might also be considered the symbolic founding of Buddhist environmental ethics. Sometimes it is said that Shakyamuni Buddha held out a “golden lotus” to symbolize wisdom. There have been many other symbolic interpretations of this gesture. It might be tempting to add this one: that in holding out a flower, a symbol of the fecundity of nature, he was teaching a lesson concerning our respect for the natural world. But it seems unlikely that on the deepest level he would refrain from the use of words only to resort to the use of a mere symbol. In fact, Shakyamuni Buddha might have held out anything and made the point that no verbal expression could equal the truth that is disclosed when a being manifests its own being merely by being what it is. Thus, even if we allow the flower and its symbolism to disappear, the gesture still conveys Shakyamuni’s message (and later Nagarjuna’s) of the respect for and recognition of nature through the teaching of “no-nature.”

It is ironic that Nagarjuna’s critique of the substantiality of things has sometimes been labeled “nihilistic,” for his central practical and theoretical project entails an explicit attack on nihilism. Nihilism for Nagarjuna means a negation of and loss of faith in reality and in nature. It is an attempt to escape from the real world, that is, the world of the phenomena in all their “suchness” or “thusness.” He attacks ruthlessly (that is, with ruthless compassion) all conceptual escapes from reality, all substitutions of illusions for the realities of experience. Indeed, such nihilism is identified as one of the two extremes that are forsaken by those who travel the “Middle Way” of the Madhyamaka. According to Garfield, the Buddha teaches:

that reification derives from the failure to note impermanence and leads to grasping, craving, and the attendant suffering. Nihilism, he claims, is motivated by the failure to note the empirical reality of arising phenomena. It leads to suffering from failure to take life, others, and morality seriously enough. The middle-path of conventional existence leads to an engagement in the world without attachment.

Nagarjuna holds that when one approaches the world with such a non-attached engagement, the realities that one experiences are found to be “empty.” In using such terminology, Nagarjuna

does not mean to suggest that we should attempt to visualize a vacuum and then to imagine all things mysteriously dissolving into that empty space. Rather, he assumes that when confronted with the concept of emptiness, we will consider the question of what precisely it is of which things are empty, and we will then consider his specific answer to this question, which is that they are empty of inherent existence, essence, identity, substantiality, or “self-nature.” To say that all things are empty is merely another way of saying that they are dependently arising; that is, that they have no ultimate existence separate from the web of conditions of which they are a part. They exist only as conventional abstractions resulting from our processes of conceptualization. There are thus two levels of truth: the conventional (or relative) and the ultimate. Conventional truths are conceptual and verbal but play a quite real ontogenetic and phylogenetic role in view of their pragmatic value in both individual and species development. Our concepts are of instrumental value for a vast spectrum of purposes ranging from personal and collective survival and well-being to the control and domination of other beings. Identity and substantiality are therefore at best eminently useful fictions. Unfortunately, at worst they can be personally, socially, and ecologically destructive delusions.

An awareness of the empty, dependently arising nature of all things in nature reveals the relativity of such fictions and delusions and leads one to the ultimate level of truth. Garfield presents the following concise assessment of the reality of a tree from the standpoint of Nagarjuna’s analysis of dependent origination:

The boundaries of the tree, both spatial and temporal (consider the junctures between root and soil, or leaf and air; between live and dead wood; between seed, shoot, and tree); its identity over time (each year it sheds its leaves and grows new ones; some limbs break; new limbs grow); its existence as a unitary object, as opposed to a collection of cells; etc., are all conventional. Removing its properties leaves no core bearer [of those properties] behind.

In short, there is no substantial “thing” that lies somewhere beyond our experience of natureless nature expressing itself. The individual tree as we conceive of it is an epistemological abstraction from a larger matrix of experience, just as the individual organism is an ecological abstraction from a larger network of ecosystemic processes. We might say that from a Buddhist perspective nature understood more deeply on the ultimate level is always “nature naturing,” while “nature natured,” in the sense of nature that seems to have a completed nature, is always a fiction, albeit an often useful one.

Consideration of such an experiential construct from a larger spatial and temporal standpoint helps show the relativity of what we perceive in the natural world to be substantial and thing-like. The tree, for example, seems substantial and object-like to us, while a subatomic particle or a forest seem much less so, because the tree exists at our own level of spatial scale, and the others do not. Were we either the size of a subatomic particle, or the size of a biome, a tree would hardly seem substantial but would rather either appear as an enormous collection of things or as a small constituent element of some thing. Similarly, we can conceive meaningfully of certain elements of experience as constituting a being, a thing, or an object if they have a noticeable duration of, for example, a day, a year, or even a century. Our practical experience allows us to conceive easily of some objects that may have existed for millions of years (a rock, for example). But it is much more difficult for us to conceive of phenomena that endure for a millionth of a second as constituting substantial objects. Yet none of these “things” are more or less thing-like in any ultimate, substantialist sense. We abstract the “substantial” being from a larger context or web of events from

which they are in reality inseparable and which makes them what they are. In short, substantiality and essence are not qualities of things but more or less meaningful or useful ways of thinking about “things.”

Such seemingly abstract ontological and epistemological questions have profound ecological implications. For example, our ecological predicament stems in large part from our egocentric fixations and our consequent inability to shift from an egocentric spatiotemporal perspective. Ecological consciousness depends on our ability to extend our consciousness—and our compassion and concern—to realms of being larger and smaller than those that are typically the object of egocentric interest. These include, for example, the levels at which we can consider the richness and diversity of species within ecosystems, the genetic qualities of populations, and the overall health of the biosphere.

Such an approach is not equivalent to the “moral extensionism” that one often encounters in contemporary environmental ethics, in which concepts originally formulated to account for moral responsibilities toward other human beings are extended to apply to individual members of other species, or at times to entire species or ecosystems. Serious problems arise in such an attempt to extend individualistic and human-centered concepts and categories to holistic and non-human phenomena. A broadening of compassion based on a rejection of the egocentric, substantializing perspective makes possible a thoroughgoing and critical rethinking of moral categories that will make them more compatible with an authentically ecological ethic. Though Nagarjuna himself went only so far as to consider moral obligations to members of other species, this does not imply that his conceptual apparatus is not capable of dealing with realities beyond the level of individual organisms, or that his position does not have more far-ranging ethical implications that become evident when it is developed in various social and ecological contexts.

The Problem of Moral Development

The egocentric perspective that is the object of Nagarjuna’s critique is at the psychological core of the domination of humanity and nature. Attachment to the illusion of a separate ego creates deep insecurity, because it leads one to be always haunted by the nothingness, or lack, that one can never banish from this constructed selfhood as it is actually experienced. Through attachment to the ego, we fall into a kind of bad faith in which these intimations of emptiness are repressed, projected, and denied. The result of our insecurity, or perhaps more precisely, our flight from this insecurity, is an often-destructive quest for power, control, and possession. This quest is directed toward ourselves, toward other human beings, toward the world of things, and toward the natural world. The symptoms of this malaise range from a lack of care for and attention to others in our daily lives to an absence of care for and attention to the entire biosphere and “all sentient beings” that it contains.

Nagarjuna’s perspective does not presuppose that the ego that is to be analyzed is a given, transhistorical reality with invariant qualities, nor that the cure for egocentrism is the same in each particular case, and in all times and places. In fact, he assumes that each person will have developed a certain specific ego-formation, and that the ethical and the necessary philosophical therapy will differ according to the case. Thus, he states in stanzas 394-396 of the *Precious Garland (Ratnavali)* that

Just as a grammarian [first] has students
Read a model of the alphabet,

So Buddha taught trainees
The doctrines that they could bear.
To some he taught doctrines
To turn them away from ill-deeds;
To some, for the sake of achieving merit;
To some, doctrines based on duality;
To some, doctrines based on non-duality;
To some, what is profound and frightening to the fearful—
Having an essence of emptiness and compassion—
The means of achieving [unsurpassed] enlightenment.

Nagarjuna proposes a process of moral education that takes into account the fact that people are on various levels of ethical practice and philosophical wisdom. This means that the obstacles that stand in the way of such personal transformation must be addressed in a specific manner. Moral education involves a practice of undoing the effects of the three poisons of destructive attachments, destructive aversions, and mental confusion. Furthermore, while there is no enduring, self-identical ego, what we conceive of and identify with as the self consists of *skandhas* or aggregates, which are identified specifically as matter, sensations, perceptions, dispositions, and consciousness. These aggregates are part of the interdependent web of causality and have in themselves no inherent existence. The educational process must take into account the nature of these aggregates, each of which contributes to the ego-illusion in a specific manner and poses specific problems for a practice of liberation from that illusion. Some must concentrate on overcoming bad practices before they can move forward in developing virtuous ones. Their destructive attachments, destructive aversions, and undesirable behavioral dispositions must be addressed. Some must be instructed at the level of conventional truth until they are capable of reaching ultimate truth. Problems of mental confusion and undesirable mental dispositions must be confronted.

This position might be compared to recent theories of stages of moral development, such as the well-known analyses of Kohlberg and Gilligan. Nagarjuna's position is in fact much closer to Gilligan's feminist ethics of care than it is to Kohlberg's position. Both Nagarjuna and the ethics of care see ethical principles as too rigid and abstract to deal adequately with a complex, highly particularized ethical world. Furthermore, Nagarjuna's Buddhist ethics, like the ethics of care, is based on a concern for the real, existing unique being. And for both Nagarjuna and the feminist care ethics, this unique being is seen as part of a complex web of relationships that are of central moral importance. The two views diverge in that Gilligan is careful not to give priority to the ethics of care over the ethics of principles, but rather contends that both are valid and important perspectives, though the former has generally been neglected. Nagarjuna, on the other hand, while recognizing the role of other ethical perspectives, sees an ethics of compassion as philosophically deeper and ultimately more valid. In addition, Nagarjuna's ethics of compassion is broader in that it extends moral consideration not only to human beings but to all sentient beings, and (as is argued here) by implication, to communities of sentient beings and ecological wholes of which they are parts. For these reasons, his position is much closer to forms of care ethics developed by recent ecofeminist theorists such as Salleh and Shiva than it is to Gilligan's classic version.

The Practice of Boundless Compassion

For Buddhism, the negative path of the destruction of illusion is inseparably linked to the positive path of an open, awakened, and compassionate response to a living, non-objectifiable

reality, the “nature that is no nature.” While this implication is implicit throughout the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* and similar works such as the *Sunyatasaptatikarika* (or *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness*), in which the ontology of emptiness is the main theme, it comes to the foreground in a work such as the *Precious Garland*, in which ethics and the conduct of life is the central topic for analysis. The literary form of this work is that of a discourse directed to the ruler: it is called the “precious garland of advice to the ruler.” In this it is reminiscent of the *Daodejing* of Laozi; however, unlike the latter work, it appears to be written for the instruction and edification of a particular ruler. Nevertheless, most of Nagarjuna’s advice concerns neither the needs of any one particular ruler, nor even the general practice of “rulership” in the literal sense of that term. Rather, it is a manual of instruction in the art of curing the disease of suffering and becoming an awakened, compassionate person. Near the end of the work, he states that the teachings found in the work were designed not

Only for monarchs
But were taught with a wish to help
Other sentient beings as befits them.

Thus, the teachings are meant to be useful for anyone who wishes to pursue a life of non-attachment to illusion and compassion for all sentient beings.

As in the case of the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, particular attention should be given to the opening and closing lines of *The Precious Garland*. It opens with an expression of “Homage to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,” to whom Nagarjuna “bows down” as “[t]he sole friend of all beings.” In the final stanzas, he exhorts the reader to “[b]ecome a sustenance for all sentient beings,” and concludes that “aspirants should always apply themselves to ethics,” which includes among its qualities “the wealth of altruism.” Thus at both of these crucial points in the work Nagarjuna focuses on the importance of concern, care and compassion for all beings. In addition, shortly after he begins the work, Nagarjuna states that of faith and wisdom, the latter is “the chief,” but that faith is nevertheless “the prerequisite” for the development of wisdom. It must be understood that “faith” in the Buddhist sense does not mean belief in and dependence on some transcendent being, as in the Western tradition, but is defined rather as the quality of diligence in practice that is not deterred by “desire, hatred, fear, or bewilderment.” The practice undertaken is the one outlined in the Noble Eightfold Path, the fundamental Precepts, and other basic formulations. Thus, the pursuit of philosophical insight is inseparable from a practice of non-attachment and compassion. Moreover, later in the work Nagarjuna states even more clearly that universal compassion is his motivation in propounding the teachings of emptiness and dependent arising, teachings that he describes as “unpleasant” in view of the fact that they cause difficulties for us by challenging our deepest illusions and strongest attachments:

. . . from compassion for all beings,
I tell you without hesitation
That which is useful but unpleasant.

Having compassion for all beings means for Nagarjuna contributing to their welfare and refraining from injuring them. The highest ethical ideal is to contribute as much as possible to the happiness and enjoyment of all sentient beings and to cause no injury to them. Accordingly, Nagarjuna asks:

May I always be an object of enjoyment
For all sentient beings according to their wish

And without interference, as are the earth,
Water, fire, wind, herbs, and wild forests.

The conception of “enjoyment” implied here is a very broad one, since the things in nature that are said to contribute to such enjoyment are those that fulfill the diverse needs of living beings. If this hyperbolic statement were taken literally, it would seem to imply that we should make superhuman efforts to increase the pleasure and happiness and to fulfill the needs of all beings on which we might have an effect. I would suggest that this passage be construed in much the same way that one often interprets the well-known Shiguseigan, or Bodhisattva Vow that is recited at the end of zazen practice. The latter begins, “beings are countless, I vow to save them all.” The practitioner realizes that though this might perhaps be an appropriate goal for a Bodhisattva, ordinary human beings can hardly be expected to save every sentient being in the universe. Neither can they can reasonably be expected to contribute in any strong sense to the enjoyment of all sentient beings, at least in the sense of intentional acts directed specifically toward the well-being of each single one of these beings. Nevertheless, a reasonably diligent practice based on this infinite goal could include a strict adherence to one’s negative duties of refraining from injury to all sentient beings in addition to a conscious effort to carry out one’s positive duties of promoting the good of these beings.

This parallels the manner in which the basic ethical precepts (the Pancasila) are usually interpreted: one should never kill, but rather perform acts contributing to the well-being of other beings; one should never steal, but rather perform acts of generosity; one should never lie, but rather perform acts exhibiting honesty and truthfulness; etc. With the exception of the precept to refrain from killing, the precepts have traditionally been interpreted primarily in regard to our relationships with other human beings. However, Buddhist ethics has increasingly extended their implications to other sentient beings and to larger ecological realities, recognizing implicitly that the premises of Buddhist thought have wider implications than those that have traditionally been emphasized. Such a larger view of the precepts implies, on the one hand, that negative duties of non-injury should be practiced in relation to both humanity and the natural world, and, on the other, that positive duties of generosity, good will, and care are to be practiced in relation to both. Nagarjuna’s ideal of contributing to the enjoyment of all sentient beings lends itself well to a similar interpretation. His ideas seem to imply an ethical practice that encompasses both compassionate forbearance and also compassionate beneficent action in regard to sentient beings in the natural world, and by implication, to larger ecological realities.

However, the passage cited above seems to have further implications from an ecological perspective. The ideal proposed includes being an “object of enjoyment” for sentient beings in a particular manner, the way that the “water, wind, herbs, and wild forests” fulfill this role. It is noteworthy that these natural beings perform such a function unintentionally, through active “inaction” rather than through intentional action. Interestingly, there is one way in which we can contribute to the larger good in the way that these constituents of the natural world do, so that the carrying out of our negative duties are turned “effortlessly” into the fulfilling of our positive ones. When we act as ecologically responsible beings and refrain from ecologically injurious actions, the necessary result is that we make a positive contribution to the good of all living beings through our place in the interconnected web of ecological relationships. Through our “inaction” we play a role ranging from that of habitat for mitochondria, to that of participant in food chains, to that of contributor to the oxygen-carbon dioxide cycle.

An area in which Nagarjuna applies the principle of compassionate forbearance very strictly in regard to beings in nature concerns the precept of not killing. In his view, this precept implies that one should strictly avoid destroying sentient beings. He is particularly severe in his judgment of the practice of hunting:

To hunt game is a horrible
Cause of short life,
Fear, suffering, and hell,
Therefore always steadfastly keep from killing.
Those who frighten embodied beings
When they encounter them are malevolent
Like a snake spitting poison,
Its body completely stained with impurity.

Thus, for Nagarjuna a truly compassionate life excludes the killing of animals, whether for sport or for a source of food, and implies ethical vegetarianism. It is certainly questionable on empirical grounds whether hunters must inevitably be malevolent, just as it is quite implausible to attribute malevolence to a snake defending itself. These statements are obviously not defensible on a literal level. On the other hand, it is quite reasonable to assume that snakes fail to practice compassion toward the organisms that they attack, so perhaps the exaggerated simile can be seen as a poetic device to point out the hunter's failure to achieve the highest levels of compassion, in which it is extended to all sentient beings. In any case, Nagarjuna accepts the traditional Buddhist view that if one dedicates oneself to following the *dharma* strictly, one must refrain from killing sentient beings for any purpose.

The Anti-Naturalistic Moment in Nagarjuna's Thought

Although it is argued here that Nagarjuna's philosophy has important ecological implications, it must be recognized that not only does he himself fail to draw out many of these implications, he even fails at times to present a positive view of the human relationship to the natural world. In some ways, the most challenging fact for an ecological interpretation of Nagarjuna's position is not his silence concerning ecological issues of concern today, but rather certain views that he expressed that seem directly contradictory to any sort of ecological perspective. It would, however, be surprising if Nagarjuna's thought, despite its anti-dualistic and implicitly nature-affirming qualities, were to escape entirely the influence of the pervasive hierarchical dualism of the social order of which he was a part. And it did not. Thus, the view of the body expressed in certain passages of the *Precious Garland* seems highly problematical for any attempt to interpret Nagarjuna's philosophy as an unconditional affirmation of the natural world. His depiction of the body at times expresses a strongly ascetic ideal that includes a highly negative view of the person's natural, physical being. Beginning in stanza 148, he develops the theme that "there is nothing clean in a woman's body" while in stanza 165 he asserts to the (male) reader that "your own body is as unclean as a woman's." He concludes that "desire for self and other" should be rejected, and later he dismisses both physical and mental pleasures as "meaningless."

As troubling as these passages are from an ecological, nature-affirming perspective, it should be noted that they are qualified by other more positive statements concerning the body and the desirability of pleasure. Nagarjuna's view cannot be equated with mere rejection of nature and self-abnegation, and those who attempt to interpret him in accord with a preconceived idea of all early

Buddhism as a form of generalized “renunciation” overlook the complexity of his position. For example, despite his depiction of the body as “unclean,” Nagarjuna also praises physical beauty extensively, poetically claiming that numerous desirable physical attributes result from virtue and love. He also states that

Those who feel a dearness for the practices
Have in fact a dearness for the body.
If dearness [for the body] helps it,
The practices will do just that.

He also explains that it is through “relinquishing small pleasures” that “there is extensive happiness later,” and that:

Through faith in the Great Vehicle
And through practicing what is explained in it
The highest enlightenment is attained
And, along the way, even all [worldly] pleasures.”

It must be admitted that a certain strain of nature-denial that appears in some passages cannot be ignored or explained away. However, Nagarjuna’s goal is on the whole in accord with his “Middle Way” (Madhyamaka) philosophy. That philosophy teaches not only the doctrine of *sunyata* or emptiness as the middle way between substantialism and nihilism, but also the practice of moderation as the middle way between destructive self-indulgence and destructive self-denial. In addition, as has been noted, it rejects the duality between *samsara*, the relative world of change and the multiplicity of beings in nature, and nirvana, the absolute realm of emptiness and dependent (non-)origination, affirming instead the identity of the two.

The Material Basis of Compassion

It might be asked why one should expect this “highest enlightenment,” the Buddhist practice of awakening and non-attachment, to lead to the outcome that Nagarjuna predicts, given the vast diversity of human personal and cultural differences. Why should the destruction of illusion lead to compassion, rather than to cynicism, as it often seems to in everyday life, or to social conservatism, as it has in the case of Humean and other forms of philosophical skepticism. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch contend, based on their experimental evidence, that “the experience of the groundlessness of *sunyata* or the (positively defined) sudden glimpse of the natural, awake state itself” results in a “fundamental warmth toward the phenomenal world that practitioners report arises from absolute experience and that manifests itself as concern for the welfare of others beyond mere naive compassion.” Part of the explanation for such possible results lies in the fact that just as the roots of the domination of humanity and nature are largely historical, so also are the roots of care and compassion, but they are part of an even longer history. De Silva quotes on behalf of a Buddhist environmental ethic the contention of Singer, Cannold, and Kuhse that our feelings of care and sympathy “have their roots deep in our human nature. We have evolved as mammals living in small and relatively stable groups. This means that we are concerned to protect our kin, and liable to form long-lasting reciprocal relationships” and that “any successful rules for everyday life should build on these aspects of our nature.” In other words, the potential for compassion has a phylogenetic basis; it lies in part in the history of the human species that is *embodied* in the specific being of each human being.

It is because the roots of compassion lie so deep in the history of the species that it can seem so “natural” when obstacles of individual and social conditioning are removed. Thus, Nagarjuna can paradoxically describe the action of the wise in terms reminiscent of the Daoist concept of *wuwei*, or “acting without acting.” In the *Daodejing*, Laozi asks:

Can you understand all and penetrate all without taking any action?
To produce things and to rear them,
To produce, but not to take possession of them,
To act, but not to rely on one’s own ability,
To lead them, but not to master them. . . .

In a strikingly similar depiction, Nagarjuna contends that “the root of cyclic existence,” the continual reappearance of the ego, lies in “action” (*karma*), by which he means grasping, greed, and the quest to dominate reality. The basis for action is in turn found in ignorance, that is, the failure to realize the emptiness of the ego and all objects, and the futility of pursuing desires that cannot be satisfied. The solution for Nagarjuna as for Laozi is to remove the causes of “action.” He concludes that:

The root of cyclical existence is action.
Therefore the wise one does not act.
Therefore the unwise is the agent.
The wise one is not because of his insight.
With the cessation of ignorance
Action will not arise.”

The reason why many forms of skeptical critique lead to cynicism, egoism, or social conformism is that the critique remains on the intellectual level, while the socially and historically constructed self, which consists not only of a collection of abstract ideas, but quite notably, mental and behavioral dispositions, is not subjected to the ultimate critique through the transformative power of fully engaged practice. Rather ironically, according to both the Daoist and Madhyamaka Buddhist accounts, liberating forms of “inaction” often require the most concerted effort. Within such a practice, negative dialectic in the spirit of Nagarjuna can be very valuable but must be combined with other elements, such as the spectrum of ethical practices and spiritual disciplines outlined in the Eightfold Path. The history of our species has created the necessary preconditions for compassion, but the sufficient conditions include the ethical, psychological, and spiritual techniques of breaking down the barriers to the liberation of the potential for compassion that have evolved over the history of civilization. Mindfulness and (above all) meditation, the final steps in the Eightfold Path, are the ones that are closest to Nagarjuna’s critical philosophical approach, since they reveal experientially the emptiness of phenomena. As Varela, Thompson, and Rosch note of such experience, “[o]ne’s very habitual patterns of grasping, anxiety, and frustration are the contents of mindfulness and awareness. The recognition that those are empty of any actual existence manifests itself experientially as an ever-growing openness and lack of fixation.”

The Historical Roots of Spiritual Revolution

Thus, the Buddhist spiritual revolution is not merely theoretical, but also eminently practical. Thich Nhat Hanh notes that both Nagarjuna and Zen masters have a method “of combating

concepts, of producing crises, and of creating conditions that arrive at releasing the vision of reality,” and that in Zen, “the response to the *kung-an* [*koan*] lies in the life of the practitioner.” The challenge presented by Nagarjuna’s negative dialectic is a similar one: he presents us with a choice between living in a world of false and destructive abstractions or opening ourselves up to non-attached but engaged experience, the source of a life of joy and of compassion for all sentient beings and, by implication, for the communities of life and larger ecological wholes of which they are a part.

Nagarjuna helps us understand the fundamental human predicament: that we are faced with a dream world of illusory, deceptively permanent objects and egos, and a futile quest to defend the ego and dominate reality. Where most analyses (including most Buddhist analyses) of egocentric consciousness and the egoic flight from the trauma of lack stop short is in failing to investigate the social and historical roots of these phenomena. We must understand that the ego is not only a psychological and epistemological construct, but also a historical one. Its roots are to be found in the development of large-scale agrarian society and regimented labor, the rise of the state and ancient despotism, the emergence of economic class and acquisitive values, the triumph of patriarchy and warrior mentality—in short, in the evolution of the ancient system of social domination and the domination of nature. To put it in Buddhist terms, our true karmic burden, both personally and collectively, is our profound historicity and our deep materiality.

A full account of the history of the ego would explore its long evolution from that point onward in dialectical relationship with such institutions as patriarchy, the state, and the system of economic exploitation of humanity and nature, culminating in the present globalized society of transnational corporate capital, the nation-state system, the technological megamachine, and the mass-consumer culture. Indeed, it can be argued that although the ideology and practice of domination go back to the origins of civilization, their tragic implications can only be understood through their developed expression in today’s violent, ecocidal project of global domination by economic, political, military, and technological means. Undoing the ego means undoing not only the psychical legacy but also the social legacy of that history of domination.

In considering the relation of the Buddhist critique of the ego to this history, it is important to remember that original Buddhism was in many ways a revolt against the emerging system of domination: the rebellion of the awakened, embodied, open and responsive mind against a deadened, dualistic, divided, and alienated consciousness that was the product of that system; the revolt of an ecological consciousness against the egological consciousness. Nagarjuna’s Middle Way of non-attached engagement in the world continues this tradition of revolt and offers guidance in seeking a way out of the continuing history of domination. Particularly today, as global society is torn in conflict between the two extremes of economic nihilism and fundamentalist dogmatism, largely ignoring a biosphere in peril, Nagarjuna’s Middle Way is of crucial importance.

According to this way, it is by the most radical affirmation of “no nature”—the emptiness of nature and of our own nature—that we can finally save ourselves and nature from the effects of our own destructive passions and delusions.