

Book Review

Nagarjuna and the Philosophy of Openness. By Nancy McCagney. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997. xxii + 234 pages.*

As Ninian Smart states in the Forward to Nancy McCagney's book, Nagarjuna is "probably the single most interesting and important thinker in the Buddhist tradition" (xii). "Probably" may be an understatement. McCagney's study of the philosophy of Nagarjuna focuses on his use and development of the concept of *sunyata*. Most Nagarjuna scholars agree that the idea of *sunyata* is central to Nagarjuna's version of Madhyamaka philosophy, and especially in his master work, the *Mulamadhyamakakarika (MK)*. The term *sunyata* is usually translated as "emptiness," sometimes even as "nothingness." McCagney holds that the best translation within the context of Nagarjuna's work is "openness," tracing this aspect of its meaning from the metaphors of etheric space (*akasa*) used in such early Mahayana Buddhist sutras as the *Astasahasrika Prajñaparamita* and the *Lankavatara*. For McCagney, this concept of space, drawn from ancient Indian cosmology, denotes "a luminous ether, filled with light" (xx), a boundless openness not filled with essence.

McCagney does not make it completely clear where this idea of *sunyata* as openness leads us in understanding Nagarjuna's version of *Sunyavada*, but her interpretation is well-grounded in her textual criticism, and her use of the idea of openness is provocative. The standard view is that Nagarjuna uses *sunyata* to mean that all things (or at least all phenomena) are empty of essence, having in themselves no "own-nature" or "self-nature" (*sambhava*), but are all process and event; McCagney attempts to show how *sunyata* as openness relates to, expands, and adds nuance to our understanding of the concept.

McCagney has two further concerns: whether Nagarjuna's version of Buddhism is orthodox in relation to the early schools of "original" Buddhism, especially the Theravada, Pali version of the Dharma, and whether Nagarjuna's views are also consistent with the early Mahayana perspective (as expressed, for example, in the *Astasahasrika Prajñaparamita*, the *Lankavatara*, and other sutras). After a fairly detailed treatment of the development of early (Pali) Buddhism (in Chapter 1) and of the early Mahayana schools (in Chapter 2), McCagney concludes (in Chapter 3) that the various writings that can be attributed confidently to Nagarjuna are consistent with both the Pali and the early Mahayana traditions, but with the following exceptions: First, Nagarjuna sides with the Mahayana perspective in his famous equation of *samsara* and *nirvana* (for example, in *MK* 19-20), which were regarded as opposites in the early Pali tradition. Nagarjuna's argument is that *samsara* and *nirvana* are equivalent, that there is not the slightest difference or distinction between them, in that both are equally empty of essence and thus characterized by their openness. Second (again siding with the Mahayana tradition and especially influenced by the spatial imagery of the *Astasahasrika Prajñaparamita Sutra*), Nagarjuna uses the concept of *sunyata* to designate, not "emptiness," but "openness," as already explained. Third, Nagarjuna departs from both the

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Pali and early Mahayana traditions in his view that *pratitya samutpada* (interdependent origination) and *sunyata* are equivalent. The earlier traditions, both Pali and Mahayana, had seen interdependent origination (which McCagney calls "codependent" origination) and *sunyata* as opposites.

McCagney includes in an appendix a useful Roman transliteration of the Sanskrit text of Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, along with her own verse-by-verse translation. All together, McCagney's work, especially her third chapter on Nagarjuna's overall philosophy, offers a detailed exposition and challenging interpretation of Nagarjuna's ideas.

George Cronk
Bergen Community College, Paramus, New Jersey