

CHAPTER 14

Buddhist Philosophical Traditions

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The various philosophical traditions that fall under the rubric of “Buddhism” trace back to the Buddha (“Awakened One”) who was probably born near the start of the fourth century (BCE). Known as Śākyamuni, the “Sage from the Śākya clan,” he is said to have become awakened (Sanskrit, *buddha*) at the age of thirty-five and spent the remaining forty-five years of his life teaching others his path to Awakening. Śākyamuni Buddha apparently spent his life in a relatively confined geographic area within North India and southern Nepal, but eventually his teaching spread throughout all of Asia. In the twenty-first century, Buddhist institutions can be found throughout the world.

As Buddhism developed historically and spread geographically, various traditions and styles of philosophy emerged, and even before Buddhism spread beyond its original Indian milieu, it already included a vast and complicated array of philosophical views and practices. An adequate account of all these traditions in their full complexity would fill many volumes, but all these approaches are based on three foundational styles of Buddhist philosophy: *Abhidharma* (“About the Dharma”), *Madhyamaka* (“Middle Way”), and *Yogācāra* (“Yogic Practice”). By examining these three foundational styles, one can appreciate the most basic issues that Buddhist thinkers have explored, even up to the twenty-first century. This chapter begins by introducing some key themes that are illustrated in the traditional accounts of the Buddha’s life and then examines each of the three styles in turn.

INTRODUCING CENTRAL THEMES: THE BUDDHA’S LIFE

Traditionally, the fundamental aspects of Buddhist philosophy are often introduced through the legendary accounts of the Buddha’s life. The traditional legends of the Buddha’s life may not be historically verifiable, but when used as a teaching tool, historical accuracy of these accounts is less important than the key points that they raise. A typical account would tell us that the figure we know as the Buddha was born to King Śuddhodana (born perhaps in the fifth century BCE), the head of the powerful Śākya family that ruled a small but robust kingdom located in an area that lies in modern-day Nepal. Upon the birth of his son, the king named him Siddhārtha, or “Goal Accomplished.” A sage observed the child, and based on some extraordinary physical marks and other omens, he foretold that the boy might indeed follow in his father’s footsteps and become a great monarch. The omens,

however, also pointed to another outcome: that Siddhārtha would instead focus on a spiritual path and become a great spiritual teacher.

Intent on preventing his son Siddhārtha from going down a spiritual path, King Śuddhodana tried to shelter him from anything that would make him disenchanted with his royal life, and for a while Siddhārtha enjoyed an idyllic existence of seemingly endless pleasure. Eventually, however, it is said that the prince began to explore the world outside the palace gates, and for the first time, he came face to face with profound suffering, especially in the form of illness, advanced old age, and death. And as he encountered the suffering that his father had attempted to hide from him, the prince became dismayed. How could he continue to enjoy his idyllic life, if one day he and his loved ones must also face such suffering? With this question in mind, Siddhārtha then had a pivotal encounter: he saw a “wanderer,” a person who had abandoned his ordinary life and had set out on a spiritual path in an attempt to overcome precisely the fate that so troubled the young prince. Not long after, at the age of twenty-nine, Siddhārtha slipped out of the palace and abandoned his royal life so that he too could seek a solution to the problem of suffering.

In philosophical terms, the legends about young Prince Siddhārtha thus far do not tell us much about the content of Buddhist philosophy, but they do point to some crucial assumptions about the overall motivation for philosophical thinking. In short, philosophical inquiry does not emerge from some neutral interest in understanding the nature of the world, nor is it a matter of acquiring knowledge or wisdom as an end in itself. Instead, Buddhist philosophers are meant to be motivated precisely by Siddhārtha’s own concern, namely, the need to overcome the problem of suffering.

KARMIC CONDITIONING

Returning to the legendary account of the Buddha’s life, the tale continues with the young prince seeking out various spiritual teachers. He learned much that would be counted as philosophy, including various views on the nature of human consciousness, the human body, and styles of philosophical reasoning. He especially learned about a notion that was widespread in his time: *karma*. The teachers that Siddhārtha encountered apparently agreed that *karma* was central to resolving the problem of suffering. The basic contours of the concept are clear: *karma* constitutes a kind of conditioning that traps beings in a life of suffering, and one must somehow become free of this conditioning. The young prince’s spiritual teachers, however, did not agree on the exact nature of *karma*, and they thus proposed different ways of dealing with it.

According to the traditional accounts, Prince Siddhārtha eventually settled on an approach that seemed the most promising. Although few details are available, it seems that the prince had decided that extreme physical practices would somehow eliminate the karmic conditioning that traps one in a life of suffering. Perhaps he thought that karma was something like a casing that surrounds the soul and that this casing could be shattered or burned away by using forceful, physical austerities. According to the legendary accounts, he fell in with a band of five companions and spent a long period engaged in these practices, involving painful physical postures, long periods without food or water, exposure to extreme temperatures, and other such austerities.

THE MIDDLE WAY

As his practice of austerities progressed, however, Prince Siddhārtha came to two important realizations. The first is simply that extreme asceticism—just like the extreme life of pleasure

that he enjoyed in the palace—only served to cloud his mind, and if he were to gain the mental clarity to overcome the problem of suffering, he would need to take a more balanced approach. This realization was the seed of what eventually became the notion of the Middle Way, a key concept in Buddhist philosophy that will be explored in the following sections. The second realization was that the problem of suffering could not be resolved simply through some kind of physical technique, because the problem was fundamentally one of knowledge. Siddhārtha recognized that although physical techniques were necessary for developing the right kinds of meditative states for eliminating suffering, only a certain kind of knowledge could completely eliminate suffering, because suffering itself is produced by a kind of ignorance or “mis-knowledge” (*avidyā*). This key insight also will be examined in the following sections.

The legend of the Buddha’s life next recounts that, with this new understanding, Prince Siddhārtha, now thirty-five years old, reinvigorated his body with food and proceeded to what is now called *Bodhi Gaya*. There he sat in contemplation under a tree with the firm determination not to rise again until he had acquired the knowledge that would enable him to eliminate suffering. By dawn of the following day, the prince had “awakened” to the understanding of reality that enabled him to completely uproot suffering. For the tradition, he is henceforth known as the Buddha or “Awakened One,” with the title of Śākyamuni, Sage of the Śākya clan. For traditional Buddhists, it is at this point that Buddhist philosophy begins because what the Buddha realized in that long night is meant to lie at the core of all subsequent philosophical work within Buddhism.

THE BUDDHA’S FIRST TEACHING: THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

Traditional accounts maintain that, after some time, the Buddha decided to seek out the five companions who had practiced physical austerities with him. They had rejected him after he abandoned those practices, and they had traveled north to the outskirts of Varanasi, a city on the Ganges River. Determined to ignore the Buddha when they saw him approaching, his five friends found themselves drawn to the clear transformation that they could see in him. They asked him to explain what he had realized in his contemplations, and he responded, by teaching them the way to achieve the state that he had attained. Although it is difficult to know the exact content of this first sermon, the traditions maintain that the Buddha taught his companions the Four Noble Truths, which are foundational for Buddhist thought. Simply enumerated, the Four Noble Truths are the Truths of Suffering, Origin, Cessation, and the Path.

THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH: SUFFERING

Among the Four Truths, the first Noble Truth—the recognition of suffering—is crucial, for if one does not recognize the ways that one is suffering, then Buddhist philosophy and practice have no purpose. The Sanskrit term for suffering is *duḥkha*, and although it is usually translated as “suffering,” this translation is somewhat misleading. Certainly, the scope of *duḥkha* includes outright physical and mental pain, but it also encompasses subtler forms of discontent. In particular, *duḥkha* includes the discontent that comes from the incessant instability and change that characterize ordinary life. Called “impermanence,” this instability manifests most dramatically in one’s own mortality, but it also includes the inherent instability of relationships and even sensation itself: a moment of pleasure

inevitably dissipates; all experiences are inherently fleeting. Finally, *dubkha* includes an even subtler source of discontent: a lack of freedom that comes from being trapped within one's own conditioning.

THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH: ORIGIN

Elicited with metaphors of being imprisoned or bound in chains, the suffering that arises from entrapment in mental conditioning points to the way that Buddhist thinkers, starting with the earliest period, conceptualized the fundamental cause of suffering. According to the general account, Śākyamuni Buddha understood suffering to have its root cause in mental dysfunction, and this insight constitutes the truth of the origin, the second Noble Truth. In brief, the mental dysfunction that causes suffering can be summarized in two Sanskrit terms: *karma* and *kleśa*. Here, *karma* literally means “action,” but for Buddhist thinkers, it actually refers to the intentions that motivate mental, vocal, and physical actions. Because these intentions occur in mental states that include “afflictive mental features” (*kleśa*), the actions that these intentions produce and the traces that they leave in the mind are dysfunctional. Specifically, although intended to produce happiness or pleasure, these intentions instead lead to suffering or pain.

Buddhist philosophers have created various lists of the afflictive mental features that distort intentions in this way, but for most traditions, the most basic list consists of the “three poisons”: attachment, aversion, and ignorance. When occurring with attachment, an intention to act is focused on obtaining or retaining something that is interpreted as producing happiness or pleasure, and when occurring with aversion, an intention is focused on avoiding or eliminating something that is interpreted as producing suffering or pain. In this way, attachment and aversion involve interpretations of objects and activities as leading to pleasure or pain—or happiness or suffering. And it is these interpretations that are the root problem for Buddhist philosophers because they are all distorted by ignorance. In other words, because all afflictive mental features arise from ignorance, any actions that are motivated by them inevitably fail to bring happiness or relief from suffering precisely because they are rooted in a confused perspective on the world.

To understand the role that ignorance plays, consider the movie *Fight Club*, which draws on Buddhist themes. Near the start of the movie, the main character (played by Edward Norton; 1969–) yearns to purchase just the right coffee table for his apartment because he believes that this purchase will finally bring the satisfaction that he seeks. That belief involves not only an interpretation of the coffee table as a source of satisfaction but also an interpretation of the character himself as the kind of being that could find true satisfaction in the purchase of a coffee table. A large part of the story in *Fight Club* is the main character's gradual realization that he is wrong to believe that he can find happiness by getting a new coffee table—or by acquiring any other possession. And later, a large part of the story is also his final realization that destroying what he dislikes also cannot bring him any lasting satisfaction.

Ignorance thus amounts to a confused perspective that causes inevitable suffering, but Buddhist philosophers are steadfastly disinterested in one obvious question that arises at this point: from where did ignorance come? They insist that ignorance is “beginningless” and that the question of its origin is irrelevant to eliminating it. This pragmatic perspective is often illustrated by the parable of a man wandering through the forest who is suddenly shot with a poisonous arrow, presumably from some unskilled hunter. As his companions rush to remove the arrow, the man insists that they stop because he must first know the name of the

person who shot him, what social class this accidental assailant belongs to, what family this person might be from, and other such irrelevant details. One point of the parable is simply that, while we are all born with ignorance, it can in all cases be removed, when one knows the proper way to do so. Knowledge about the ultimate origin of ignorance, however, is irrelevant to that task.

Buddhist philosophers agree that it is pointless to speculate about the ultimate origin of ignorance, and although we see that various views of ignorance eventually emerge, Buddhist philosophers also agree that ignorance involves a fundamental confusion about the nature of our personal identity. It is this confusion that lies at the root of all suffering. In effect, the fundamental ignorance about the nature of personal identity traps beings in a vicious cycle of fruitless attempts to get what they want and avoid what they don't want. All this getting and avoiding is frustrated because, confused about the nature of their identities, ordinary beings actually do not know what will enable them to put an end to their suffering and dissatisfaction. To use an extreme but nonetheless vivid illustration of the problem posed by ignorance of the self, if I believe that I am a car, I might think that consuming gasoline will make me happy. But because I am not a car, satisfaction will not come from consuming gasoline, no matter how much I manage to get.

THE THIRD NOBLE TRUTH: CESSATION

Buddhist philosophers have a term for the frustrated cycle of compulsive getting and avoiding: they call it *samsāra*. And since all beings are born with ignorance, all beings are caught in *samsāra* until they eliminate ignorance. This rather dire picture of existence has prompted some observers to conclude that Buddhism is fundamentally pessimistic, but this interpretation misses another key claim: namely, that it is always possible to eliminate ignorance. Thus, although all beings are born with the ignorance that traps them in the world of suffering that is *samsāra*, they also all can eliminate ignorance and achieve *nirvāṇa*, just as the Buddha himself did. This fundamental possibility for any being to achieve *nirvāṇa* is the key element in the third Noble Truth, the truth of cessation.

THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH: THE PATH

To achieve *nirvāṇa* through the cessation of *samsāra*, one must employ a systematic method to eliminate ignorance. That method is the path, the fourth Noble Truth. The Buddhist path contains many features, but one common schema summarizes the path as involving training in ethics, meditative concentration, and wisdom. Of these, the key element is wisdom, and it consists in seeing reality as it truly is. Wisdom is the key element because only it can counteract the distorted perspective of ignorance that confuses one about how to obtain happiness and eliminate suffering. Ignorance, however, is deeply ingrained, and to eliminate the habits of ignorance, one must employ contemplative methods that enable wisdom to penetrate deeply into one's mind. These methods, summarized under the rubric of "meditative concentration," require the mind to be stable and clear. The mind, however, that is completely caught up in attachment and aversion is chaotic and clouded. Thus, ethics is a key element in the path because an ethical lifestyle lessens the influence of negative mental features such as attachment and aversion, and hence, one can more readily cultivate the meditative concentration and wisdom necessary to achieve *nirvāṇa*. Although a full account of Buddhist philosophy would include a discussion of ethics and the theory of meditation, in the interest of simplicity, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the way

that Buddhist philosophers conceptualize wisdom as the antidote to ignorance, because the various styles of Buddhist philosophy develop especially from differing views on this issue.

THE FIRST PHILOSOPHICAL STYLE: *ABHIDHARMA*

The earliest style of Buddhist philosophy emerges through a body of literature known as the *Abhidharma*. A straightforward interpretation of this term is that this literature is “about” (*abhi*) the *dharma*. Buddhist philosophers often speak of ten interpretations of the term *dharma*, and one simple meaning is that it refers to the “teaching” of the Buddha. Thus, the *Abhidharma* develops as a systematic attempt to interpret the Buddha’s teachings as they were recorded by the community, initially through oral transmission. The term *dharma*, however, also can mean a fundamental “element” or constituent of mind and body, and this notion of *dharma* is central to the philosophical aspects of *Abhidharma* philosophy.

THE SELF

Recall that the fundamental goal of Buddhist philosophers is to eliminate suffering, and the root cause of suffering is ignorance. For *Abhidharma* philosophers, ignorance consists in a fundamental confusion about personal identity. Their approach requires one to examine carefully all of the elements—the *dharmas*—that constitute mind, body, and world to uncover the true nature of personal identity. This analysis assumes that the basic confusion produced by ignorance is the deeply ingrained belief that there is some truly real *Self* that constitutes one’s true identity.

The capitalized term *Self* is a translation of *ātman*, a key term that emerges in the Buddha’s historical context. During the Buddha’s time, many other philosophers shared his concerns, and they too maintained that a crucial task of philosophy and spiritual practice was to eliminate a fundamental error about the nature of our true identity. Many of these philosophers maintained that this error consisted in a failure to realize that one has an unchanging, essential identity consisting precisely in the *ātman* or Self. And like the Buddha, many of these thinkers likewise would hold that we get caught up in the worldly tasks of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain; in doing so, we become trapped by the karmic conditioning that comes from such activity. For these philosophers, often associated with a literature known as the Upaniṣads, we fail to see that our true identity is something that actually transcends worldly pleasure and pain. We need to realize that, in reality, our true identity is the *ātman*, the unchanging, truly real core of our being. And this *ātman*—a Self or even a *soul*—is what one really means when one says that *I* am conscious or *I* exist.

THE NO-SELF

The Buddha shared much with the philosophical style of those who asserted the existence of this ultimately real, unchanging Self. In particular, he too taught that one must seek out the true nature of one’s identity. Other philosophers from the Buddha’s time claimed that, at the end of the search, one would finally discover that one’s true identity consisted in this unchanging Self. In contrast, the Buddha came to a radically different conclusion: in the end, one will find no Self at all. This is the Buddhist philosophical stance known as *no-Self* (*anātman*).

The Buddhist philosophy of no-Self can be confusing because it seems to suggest that people do not exist at all, but this would be a serious error. Instead, no-Self specifically

means that we do not have a fixed, unchanging, essential identity, even though our ignorance prompts us to believe that we do have that kind of Self. From the perspective of ignorance, when a person says, “I exist” or “I am walking,” these statements seem to suggest that there is some single, real thing to which *I* refers. Likewise, ignorance prompts us to feel that the *I* that existed yesterday is precisely the *I* that exists today. The Buddhist position is that, when one performs a careful analysis, one discovers that this sense of a single, unchanging, real *I* is actually a delusion. And when we are caught up in trying to obtain pleasure and avoid pain, we are doing so because we feel that this *I* will receive the pleasure and be spared the pain. Since, however, no such *I* actually exists, all attempts at bringing pleasure to the *I* and sheltering it from suffering inevitably fail. After all, how could a nonexistent thing be made happy or be freed from suffering?

At this point, it becomes clear why the *Abhidharma* philosophers were so concerned with the basic constituents or elements of mind, body, and world. In brief, to eliminate the ignorance that would prompt us to feel that our true identity exists in an unchanging, singular Self, their method was to develop a systematic account of all these constituents, and they then used that account to search for the Self. For example, suppose that I am troubled by the belief that there is a monster that lives permanently in my closet. A friend helps me first to recognize that, if such a monster exists, we should be able to find it. To perform the search properly, however, we need a systematic account of all the locations in the closet where the monster might be. With that detailed map in hand, my friend and I can perform a thorough search and conclude that, in fact, there is no such monster. Likewise, with a thorough map of all the elements of mind, body, and world, one can perform a thorough search and conclude that there is no unchanging, single Self to be found.

On the basis of their systematic analysis of the constituents of mind, body, and world, *Abhidharma* philosophers deployed various arguments to demonstrate that an unchanging, singular Self could not exist. Ignorance suggests to us that the Self is not to be found in the elements of the world, but rather in the elements of our mind–body system. According to one argument, an empirical analysis demonstrates that all of that system’s constituents are produced through causes and conditions, and as causally conditioned things, those elements are necessarily impermanent. The Self thus cannot be identified with one of those elements (e.g., consciousness), because the Self is thought to be unchanging.

One might respond, however, that when one says, “I exist,” the term *I* actually refers to the entire collection of all the mind–body elements; in other words, when we say *I*, we are referring to some single whole that these elements constitute. The Buddhist response to this position involves a key notion of all Buddhist philosophical schools: the distinction between the “ultimately real” and the “conventionally real.” For *Abhidharma* philosophers, for something to be ultimately real, it must be irreducible: it cannot be broken down into more basic components, whether physical or mental. A thing that is composed of more basic elements can still be said to exist, but only in a conventional sense. According to *Abhidharma* philosophers, when a chair, for example, is analyzed, it is shown to actually consist of many irreducible particles of matter. Those particles ultimately exist because they are irreducible. The chair, however, does not ultimately exist because it is reducible to the particles. However, we can still use the term *chair* as a convenient designation that enables us to speak about the causal interaction of those particles, and in this sense, the chair is conventionally real.

The *Abhidharma* literature contains other arguments for no-Self, and much else besides. Its detailed accounts of human psychology, for example, remain foundational for all Buddhist thinkers, even to the present day. Nevertheless, some philosophers sought to move beyond the

Abhidharma's account of ignorance and wisdom. Historically, the next style of thought to gain prominence was known as the *Madhyamaka* or the Middle Way philosophy.

MADHYAMAKA: THE PHILOSOPHY OF EMPTINESS

Some 500 years after the formation of the Buddhist community, toward the beginning of the Common Era, some fundamental aspects of Buddhism change. One way to understand these changes is to note a striking shift in the visual depiction of the Buddha himself. Previously, when Buddhists wished to suggest the presence of the Buddha in a visual representation, he would be represented in an indirect way—for example, by his footprints or by an empty throne under the tree where he meditated to obtain awakening. These representations indicated that after reaching the “final *nirvāṇa*” (*parinirvāṇa*) of his death, the Buddha was now absent. And philosophically, this suggested that *nirvāṇa* itself was best understood as a radical cessation.

Some time around the start of the Common Era, however, new depictions of the Buddha appeared. Now the Buddha was represented in his complete bodily form—the throne was no longer empty. This shift corresponds to a new philosophical attitude about *nirvāṇa*. Some Buddhist philosophers critiqued previous versions of *nirvāṇa* as involving a dualistic relationship, such that *nirvāṇa* was simply the negation of *samsāra*, the world of suffering. Rejecting what they saw as a *nirvāṇa* of mere cessation, they instead spoke of *nirvāṇa* as “unlocated”: when one obtained Buddhahood, one was free from *samsāra*, but one was also not located in the mere cessation of *samsāra*. Instead, this new version of *nirvāṇa* emphasized not cessation but radical transformation. To put it another way, these philosophers saw earlier models of *nirvāṇa* as an escape from *samsāra*. In place of this conception, they instead promoted the notion that *samsāra* itself can be transformed into *nirvāṇa*. This was the view of a new style of Buddhism known as the *Mahāyāna* or “Great Vehicle.”

THE MAHĀYĀNA

The *Mahāyāna*'s new model of *nirvāṇa* required a new philosophical approach to the nature of ignorance and the wisdom that eliminated ignorance. *Abhidharma* philosophy required revision because the notion that *samsāra* itself could be transformed into *nirvāṇa* was simply untenable for *Abhidharma* philosophers. As noted earlier, these thinkers maintained that fundamental elements (*dharmas*) constitute the mind, body, and world. These elements exist ultimately because, upon analysis, they are found to be irreducible.

In addition, all the elements, even the material ones, arise through a causal process that involves karmic conditioning. As the *Treasury of Abhidharma* puts it, “The entire variegated world arises from karma” (Chapter 4, verse 1; cf. translation by de La Vallée-Poussin and Pruden, Vol. 2, 1988, 551). The causal process of karmic conditioning, moreover, is always influenced by ignorance. The upshot is that all the elements that constitute *samsāra*—all the physical and mental stuff—are necessarily “contaminated” by ignorance because ignorance always influences the karmic causal process.

At this point, one might wonder why the elements of *samsāra*, although initially produced through a process involving karmic conditioning and ignorance, still might not be transformed into *nirvāṇa*. The answer is that the elements cannot be transformed because they are fixed in their nature by the causal process that produced them. That is, each element is said to have a *svabhāva* (an “essence” or “intrinsic nature”) that constitutes its

identity. Thus, a particular kind of material particle, for example, has certain properties and causal capacities precisely because it has a particular kind of essence, and it has that kind of essence because of its own causal history. And because that causal history includes the influence of the ignorance that constitutes *samsāra*, these fundamental elements can only continue to produce *samsāra*. It is impossible for the karmic process to produce “non-*samsāric*” elements, so *samsāra* itself cannot be transformed into *nirvāṇa*.

The Mahāyāna vision of transformation holds that the locus of *nirvāṇa* is nothing other than *samsāra*, and this requires a new philosophical approach that rejects the notion that the elements have fixed identities. That approach is provided by Nāgārjuna, the first and (by most accounts) most important Mahāyāna philosopher. Composing philosophical works at some point starting in the second century CE, Nāgārjuna critiqued the notion that the fundamental elements of mind, body, and world are fixed in their essence or intrinsic nature. He argued that the elements lack any ultimate nature, and that if we must speak of their ultimate nature, all that we can say is “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*). This philosophy is what enabled him famously to declare, “There is no difference whatsoever between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.”

Nāgārjuna’s philosophy of emptiness involves a reinterpretation of ignorance. As noted previously, the *Abhidharma* philosophers employed a reductive analysis to determine what ultimately exists. That which cannot be reduced further is ultimately real; things composed of the irreducible, ultimately real elements are only conventionally real. In contrast, Nāgārjuna employs a new kind of analysis to demonstrate that even those supposedly real elements are actually not ultimately real at all. *Abhidharma* philosophers thought that ignorance was the fundamental distortion that causes beings to believe that they have an ultimately real, unchanging Self. But for Nāgārjuna, ignorance is the distortion that causes beings to experience anything whatsoever as ultimately real.

To argue for this view, Nāgārjuna must draw out some implications of the *Abhidharma* theory of essences. Again, according to the *Abhidharma*, a chair is not ultimately real because it can be reduced to the elements that constitute it, but those elements are ultimately real because they are irreducible. For *Abhidharma* thinkers, when we inquire into the true identity of a chair, we discover that a chair is actually just irreducible particles. When, however, we inquire into the true identity of an irreducible particle, *Abhidharma* thinkers do not say that it really is something else. Rather, the particle is simply just that—a particle. In Nāgārjuna’s terms, this means that the particle exists in terms of its own essential nature; in other words, it has its own essential identity that can be specified without depending on or referring to anything else. In short, according to Nāgārjuna, the *Abhidharma* account of what is ultimately real must mean that ultimately real things have an absolute, *nondependent* identity. And by demonstrating that an absolute, nondependent identity is impossible, Nāgārjuna argues that there are no ultimately real entities whatsoever. In short, when we search for the ultimate, nondependent, essential identity of anything at all, the conclusion of that search is that all things are *empty* of any such essential identity.

Nāgārjuna critiques the notion of nondependent, essential identity in several works, but the best known is his text *Wisdom* (translated by Siderits and Katsura, 2013) which begins with a critique of causality. The point of his critique is that, if we attempt to specify the essential identity of causes and effects in and of themselves, we inevitably will fail. To argue for this position, Nāgārjuna employs a new style of analysis that focuses on the problem of relations or dependence. For example, we might say that a seed is, by its very nature, the cause of a sprout—this causal capacity is an aspect of the seed’s nondependent, essential identity. Nāgārjuna notes, however, that there is a problem here: the sprout does not yet

exist at the time of the seed, and how can the seed be—by its very essence—the cause of something nonexistent? A cause for a nonexistent entity is not a cause at all. On the other hand, if the sprout somehow already exists when the seed exists, then why would we need the seed to produce the sprout? After all, the sprout already exists, so the seed is unnecessary. Likewise, if we claim that the essential identity of a sprout is to be the effect of a seed, we run into the same problem. If the seed does not exist at the time of the sprout, then we must be saying that the sprout is the effect of a nonexistent cause; but that makes no sense. And if the seed exists at the time of the sprout, then the seed is nothing other than the sprout, which means that that the sprout is both cause and effect; this too makes no sense. For Nāgārjuna, the upshot is that it is impossible to specify the ultimate identity of causes and effects in and of themselves.

In *Wisdom*, Nāgārjuna goes on to critique many other key categories of the *Abhidharma*. In his analysis of time, for example, he notes that the present cannot be defined in and of itself; instead, the present only makes sense in relation to the past and the future. Yet, in the present, neither the past nor the future exists; how can the present be defined in terms of something nonexistent? On the other hand, we might say that we can define the present in relation to the past because the past somehow exists in the present. But how then do we define the past as what comes before the present? If the past exists in the present, then the past is no longer past.

The gist of the critique of time—and all the other critiques in *Wisdom*—is that the attempt to specify the identity of a thing in and of itself always ends up in a circular conundrum of relations. We try to specify the ultimate identity of an effect, and we find ourselves speaking about its cause. And when we try to determine the ultimate identity of a cause, we find ourselves thinking about its effect. For Nāgārjuna, our failure to specify the ultimate identity of things in and of themselves means that they are “empty” of any such identity. Thus, a cause is empty of ultimately being a cause; the present is empty of ultimately being the present. In short, if we wish to answer the question of how things exist in ultimate terms, the only answer is “emptiness.”

The term *emptiness* is a negation, and Nāgārjuna is sometimes accused of being a nihilist. That is, when he says that emptiness is the answer to our search for the ultimate nature of things, we might think that this means the ultimate nature of things is nothingness. This, however, is a serious mistake. Nothingness also does not ultimately exist, because its identity also cannot be specified in and of itself. Instead, “nothing” only makes sense in relation to “something.” And even emptiness itself does not ultimately exist because it too cannot be specified in and of itself. As Nāgārjuna puts it, “There is nothing whatsoever that is non-empty, so how can one establish what is empty?” (*Wisdom*, chapter 13, verse 7; cf. translation by Siderits and Katsura, 2013, 144). A sprout is ultimately empty of being a sprout because its identity cannot be specified in and of itself; any attempt to specify its identity falls into a circular conundrum of relations. Likewise, emptiness is ultimately empty of being emptiness because its identity also cannot be specified without that same circular conundrum of relations. Thus, Nāgārjuna cannot be a nihilist because he denies that things are ultimately nothing.

Adopting the *Abhidharma* notion of the two realities—ultimate and conventional—Nāgārjuna argues that, in ultimate terms, things are empty, and this is another way of saying that ultimate existence itself is incoherent. In conventional terms, however, things do exist *interdependently*. In a famous verse, Nāgārjuna declares, “We say that emptiness is interdependence” (*Wisdom*, chapter 24, verse 18; cf. translation by Siderits and Katsura, 2013, 277). In other words, “emptiness” means that, ultimately, things cannot have an

independent, essential identity. This is so precisely because all identities are necessarily interdependent and that relational, interdependent identity constitutes their conventional existence. Thus, to the extent that we can make sense of identity, it can only be interdependent and relational. And because relational identities are not fixed in their nature, it is possible for them to be transformed. It is possible, in other words, for *samsāra* itself to be transformed into *nirvāṇa*.

Through his critique of the *Abhidharma* approach, Nāgārjuna provided the philosophical tools that enabled his fellow Mahāyāna Buddhists to reimagine *nirvāṇa*. The style of his philosophy became known as the Middle Way approach, and many subsequent Buddhist thinkers identified themselves as followers of this school. To understand this notion of the Middle Way, recall that the Buddha, when he was a young prince, realized that he could achieve his aims only by striking a balance between the hedonistic life of pleasure that he lived in the palace and the ascetic life of extreme physical austerities that he tried for a while in his search for awakening. This notion of balance is key to Nāgārjuna's philosophy, for he too seeks to tread a middle way between the absolutist notion of essential, independent identities and the nihilistic denial of existence altogether. This attempt to find a path between absolutism and nihilism remained a constant in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, but the next major philosophical development—the *Yogācāra*—offers a somewhat different approach to finding that balance.

YOGĀCĀRA: WHAT REMAINS IN EMPTINESS?

Not long after Nāgārjuna, a new trend began to emerge in Buddhist philosophy. Also identified with Mahāyāna Buddhism, this new approach is known as *Yogācāra*, or yogic practice. The main articulators of this new philosophical style were Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, both active some time in the fourth century CE. As the name of this style suggests, these philosophers were concerned with the experiential aspects of philosophy, especially in terms of what it means to say that the wisdom that counteracts ignorance consists in “seeing reality as it ultimately is” (*yathābhūṭadarśana*). As Mahāyāna philosophers, they also critiqued the notion that the elements of mind, body, and world were fixed in their essential natures, and they too spoke of “emptiness” as the best way to articulate the conclusion to the search for the way things ultimately exist (or fail to exist). From an experiential standpoint, however, this leads to a difficult question: when one sees reality as it ultimately is, one must see emptiness, but what does it mean to “see emptiness”?

Nāgārjuna's works provide limited resources for understanding the experience of emptiness, but for Buddhist philosophers, such an experience is of utmost importance. Ignorance is not simply an intellectual error, but rather a deeply ingrained flaw that distorts all ordinary experiences and perpetuates the suffering of *samsāra*. To uproot ignorance, the wisdom that knows reality's ultimate nature—emptiness—must reach to the same experiential level. Yet Nāgārjuna seems to describe emptiness as a mere negation of essential, nondependent existence, and it is not at all clear what it means to experience a mere negation.

With this problem in mind, the philosophers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu take a different approach to emptiness, and it involves yet another way to define ignorance. For Nāgārjuna, ignorance causes ordinary beings to experience themselves and the things of the world as having nondependent, essential identities. His critique's target is therefore precisely the notion of essential identity. *Yogācāra* philosophers, in contrast, maintain that ignorance is even subtler.

For them, ignorance consists in the dualistic structure that permits one to experience objects “out there” from the standpoint of a subjectivity “in here.” With that structure in place, one naturally experiences objects as existing with their own essential identities, separate from one’s own subjectivity. In other words, there seems to be an *I* or subjectivity that is experiencing a separate, objectively existent “world.” And the kind of essentialism that Nāgārjuna critiques occurs as an aspect of such an experience. That essentialism, however, has no chance to occur if the structure of subject–object duality is not present. Thus, the essentialism is not the root cause of our confusion; instead, the fundamental problem—the distortion that is ignorance—is precisely the subject–object duality that makes essentialism possible.

Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, and their followers use various arguments to critique subject–object duality, and although their arguments are too complex to present in detail here, one style of argument can be sketched. This argument seeks to negate subject–object duality by critiquing the very notion of matter itself, specifically by pointing out that irreducible particles of matter cannot exist. Previously it was noted that, on the *Abhidharma* view, the criterion for ultimate existence is irreducibility: if a thing cannot be broken down further, then it is ultimately real. This means that, in the case of matter, the material world must consist of irreducible, infinitesimally small particles. Such particles, however, cannot be perceived on their own, and to account for our experience of, for example, the smallest visible object, we must assume that these particles aggregate to form something visible to the naked eye. To aggregate, however, the particles must have spatial areas—top, bottom, left, right, and so on—where other particles will join to it. But if an allegedly partless particle has sides (top, bottom, left, right, and so on), then it has parts, namely, those sides. If one somehow insists that the particle is still a single, partless thing even though it has multiple sides, then one can simply ask: are the sides the same as the partless particle, or different? If they are the same as the particle, then suppose that the particle is still one thing; in that case, because the sides are the same as that one thing, they too would all be the same. Thus, another particle joining to the left side would also be joining to the right side, because the left side and the right side are one thing. On the other hand, if we suppose that, the particle is different from its sides, we must explain how the sides themselves are connected to the particle, and we are now back at the beginning of the problem: how can a partless particle connect to anything else? For *Yogācāra* thinkers, the conclusion of this argument is that the very notion of matter—which according to their view required the existence of partless particles—is incoherent.

From this critique of matter existing outside the mind, *Yogācāra* thinkers conclude that even though we seem to be experiencing objects “out there,” this aspect of experience is actually false. Moreover, because there are in fact no objects “out there,” the feeling of a subjectivity “in here” that is looking out at them is likewise false. This is so because one’s subjectivity is defined as “in here”—that is, within consciousness itself—against objects “out there.” And if objects do not exist “out there,” then subjectivity cannot be “in here,” as subjectivity is “in here” only in contrast to what is “out there.” Thus, by critiquing the existence of matter outside the mind, *Yogācāra* thinkers mean to show that the inside–outside or subject–object distinction necessarily collapses.

The critique of infinitesimal particles is only one approach used by *Yogācāra* philosophers to argue that the subject–object distinction is actually a delusion, and some of their other arguments are subtler and more phenomenological in flavor, in that their arguments often draw on a finely grained account of what we mean by “experience” and the structures that are necessary for experience to occur. Whatever argument is used, however, the main point is that the delusion of subject–object duality is precisely what these

philosophers mean by ignorance. In that case, wisdom, which counteracts ignorance by seeing reality as it truly is, must somehow involve an experience devoid of any such duality. To unpack how this is the case, we must turn to their theory of the Three Natures.

Developed by the foundational *Yogācāra* thinkers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, the theory of the Three Natures gives an account of how consciousness occurs in two modes: the deluded experience of subject–object duality, and experience from the standpoint of wisdom, where subject–object duality has collapsed. These two different modes are actually different ways that the flow of consciousness manifests itself. To describe that flow of consciousness, *Yogācāra* thinkers call it the “dependent nature.” It is, in short, the causal stream of experience: colors, sounds, thoughts, and so on. When these various contents are experienced as objects standing against the subjectivity that is apprehending them, that causal stream is now experienced as the “constructed nature.” Importantly, *Yogācāra* thinkers maintain that, as mere representations in consciousness, these colors, sounds, thoughts, and so on actually do exist. They do not exist, however, in the way that they are apprehended; that is, they do not exist as apprehended objects separate from an apprehending subject. With proper philosophical and contemplative training, one can come to experience the causal flow of consciousness without that subject–object duality. This type of experience is called the “perfect nature.”

To illustrate the Three Natures, we can turn to another film inspired in part by Buddhism: *The Matrix*. Toward the end of the film, the central character, Neo (Keanu Reeves; 1964–), finds himself confronting three Agents in a hallway. As the Agents are about to attack, Neo looks intently at them, and he has a crucial moment of realization: instead of seeing three Agents, he just sees a stream of data. And freed now from the delusional belief that he was seeing Agents, he is able to manipulate that data stream and overcome the attack.

This scene from *The Matrix* is a clear analogy for the Three Natures. The stream of data itself is the dependent nature. When Neo experiences that data stream as three Agents, he is having the deluded experience that is the constructed nature. And when he sees through that delusion and realizes that the data stream is not three agents, it is just a data stream, he experiences the perfect nature. That is, he is seeing things as they truly are. This scene from *The Matrix* thus maps clearly onto the Three Natures, but because Neo also can return to the “real world,” the film is an imperfect expression of *Yogācāra* philosophy. For *Yogācāra* thinkers, there is no “real world” separate from the causal flow of consciousness itself.

As we have noted, the experience of the perfect nature is equivalent to the wisdom that sees reality as it truly is. And using the schema of the Three Natures, *Yogācāra* thinkers also speak of that experience in terms of “emptiness,” although their way of using this term is notably different from Nāgārjuna’s usage. On the *Yogācāra* view, ordinary, deluded beings experience the causal flow of experience from the standpoint of subject–object duality. However, that same causal flow can be experienced as *empty* of subject–object duality. Thus, for *Yogācāra* thinkers, “emptiness” refers to the experience of the causal flow of consciousness without subject–object duality. And this now makes it clear that, unlike Nāgārjuna’s approach, something remains in emptiness for the *Yogācāra* thinker. Nāgārjuna appears to equate emptiness with the utter negation of essential existence, and *Yogācāra* thinkers likewise hold that emptiness involves a negation; for them, it is the negation of subject–object duality within consciousness. However, what is not negated is consciousness itself.

Defining emptiness in this fashion, *Yogācāra* thinkers agree with Nāgārjuna—that is, they agree that the experience of emptiness is wisdom. In other words, it is the experience of reality as it truly is. They also maintain, however, that in experiencing emptiness, one is

having a nondual awareness of consciousness itself. This approach counteracts the potentially nihilistic notion of emptiness that one might derive from Nāgārjuna's thought when it is poorly understood. And perhaps for that reason, many subsequent Buddhist thinkers chose to synthesize *Yogācāra* philosophy with Nāgārjuna's approach. At the same time, however, the *Yogācāra* account of wisdom as nondual awareness raises many questions: How is awareness possible without either a subject or an object? And what would be the content of such an awareness, if indeed it has any content at all? And can philosophical analysis on its own lead to such an experience, or are other contemplative techniques necessary? These and many other questions have animated Buddhist philosophy as it continued to develop in India and beyond.

Summary

As presented in this chapter, three foundational styles of Buddhist philosophy—*Abhidharma*, *Madhyamaka*, and *Yogācāra*—form the core of all subsequent developments in Buddhist philosophy in India, and they likewise are the basis for the many philosophical developments in other parts of Asia where Buddhism spread. Although not discussed in this chapter, many themes and theories emerged through these developments, and Buddhist philosophy remains vibrant in the present day. The *Abhidharma* continues to be studied in nearly every Buddhist tradition, but it is especially important to the Theravāda traditions of Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and parts of Vietnam. Tibetan Buddhists—who are found not only in Tibet but also in Mongolia, Bhutan, and various Himalayan regions—study all three philosophical styles, but *Madhyamaka* is particularly emphasized. In East Asia—including China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam—all three styles are also found, but *Yogācāra* proved especially influential in the formation of traditions such as Chinese *Chan*, Japanese *Zen*, and Korean *Seon*. In all of these regions with their many Buddhist traditions, numerous philosophers have written thousands of pages that delve deeply into fundamental questions for Buddhists, such as the nature of suffering, ignorance, wisdom, and *nirvāṇa*. This chapter provides a foundation for exploring the numerous insights and philosophical intuitions of these many Buddhist thinkers throughout the centuries, and the interested reader is encouraged to embark on that journey of philosophical exploration.

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