

[This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.]

Tutorial 6: “Can we consider Perfection of wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā) thought as a form of nihilism? Discuss the role of emptiness (śūnyatā) in Prajñāpāramitā literature.”

In assessing the role of nihilism within Prajñāpāramitā literature, one must first explore the intention of the perfection of wisdom within the path of the bodhisattva. It seems clear that Prajñāpāramitā is a particular kind of practice for a bodhisattva, one that has the capacity to have a strong outcome that can project one towards Buddhahood if done correctly. It is interesting here to note that the concept of *prajñā* or ‘wisdom’ in a Mahāyāna context is somewhat different than in a Theravāda context, in which the culmination of wisdom is *nirvāṇa*, which is very much not the case for one on the bodhisattva path. It is also notable that, as Roger R. Jackson notes, that “...Theravāda and Śrāvakayāna philosophers sometimes reified dharmas and their categorizations, and many Mahāyāna texts evidently were written to counter this tendency.”<sup>1</sup> Jackson is here noting how one aspect of the culmination of *nirvāṇa* in Theravāda Buddhism is the full understanding (Pāli: *pariññeyya*) of the dharmas, whereas in Mahāyāna Buddhism wisdom implies the understanding that the dharmas are empty (Skt: *śūnyatā*) or without a stable essence - an idea that will be returned to later. In spite of the differences in interpretation of the concept of *prajñā*, it can to some extent be defined as “the discernment of *dharmas*” regardless of the manifestation or function that such dharmas take.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the function of the perfection of

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Buswell, ed., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (New York: Macmillan Reference, USA, 2004), 665.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 2nd ed, The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices (New York: Routledge, 2009), 49.

wisdom for the bodhisattva is something that actualizes and benefits their path to Buddhahood, and therefore holds a positive function instead of a negative one which could be seen as devoid of purpose; such an idea becomes meaningful in evaluating whether the concept itself is nihilistic.

In Buddhism, the idea of nihilism is a fascinating topic in many ways but particularly because it diverges from presupposed Western standards of being/non-being. Such an idea is one that Gajin Nagao explores beautifully in his text as he works with concepts of *śūnyatā* and the premise of what emptiness suggests for theories of nihilism. As aforementioned, emptiness plays a crucial role in Prajñāpāramitā literature, as it describes “...wisdom as the nonconceptual realization that not just the self, but the very dharmas that constitute the person and the world are intrinsically empty.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, from a Western ontological perspective, something being empty or without a tangible existence carries a negative connotation, and indeed one that cannot be rectified as beneficial. This is something Nagao explores when he writes, “[non-existence] is a great problem even in Western philosophy, but there it has been considered in most cases as a deficiency of existence; as a malice, or a flaw. Ontology, to its bitter end, is based upon existence as a positive value.”<sup>4</sup> Nagao is here suggesting that Western ontology is based on the primacy of existence, and to be non-existent is not necessarily included in the paradigm of ontological positivity; i.e. to not exist is inherently negative. However, it is here important to take a closer look at the concept of *śūnyatā* to see whether it is truly devoid of being, or whether it is part of a positive actualizing process, as I previously suggested with regards to Prajñāpāramitā.

---

<sup>3</sup> Buswell, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*., 665.

<sup>4</sup> Gajin Nagao, *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra: A Study of Mahāyāna Philosophies: Collected Papers of G.M. Nagao*, ed. Leslie S. Kawamura, SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 156.

*Śūnyatā* in the sense of Prajñāpāramitā literature denotes not just ‘emptiness’ but also a certain lack of tangible being or existence that could imply stability. Edward Conze in his article, “The Ontology of the Prajñāpāramitā” defines the term *svabhāvasūnya* “...to mean that dharmas are empty of any own-being, i.e., that they are not ultimate facts in their own right, but merely imagined and falsely discriminated, for each and every one of them is dependent on something other than itself.”<sup>5</sup> Conze here is suggesting that dharmas are *śūnyatā* particularly because they do not contain a *svabhāva*, that they are lacking their own nature and thereby require the emergence of other states in order to exist. In this sense *śūnyatā* is not necessarily the complete emptiness or voidness of a state, but rather the recognition that one should not grasp or place importance on things that are intrinsically impermanent. Such an idea is also shared by Tilmann Vetter who notes that “[the] doctrine of voidness (*śūnyatā*) may be understood as a radicalization of the ancient Buddhist assessment of things as transitory, painful, and non-self.”<sup>6</sup> Vetter here is highlighting how *śūnyatā* marks not an exclusive ‘voidness’ but rather a shift in applying concepts of impermanence of transitoriness to even ideas of Dharma.

It is notable that in traditions such as Theravāda or other early Indic forms of Buddhism, more stability is placed on the teachings of the Buddha themselves, whereas Mahāyāna asserts that one should not even attach oneself to the teachings and practices of the Buddha(s). This idea is also one that is shared by Florin Deleanu who states, “[on] the one hand, we have basically traditional Śrāvakayāna meditative practices which are reinterpreted in the light of the Prajñāpāramitā relativism, with special emphasis on the idea of practising without a support and

---

<sup>5</sup> Edward Conze, “The Ontology of the Prajnaparamita,” *Philosophy East and West* 3, no. 2 (July 1953), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1397258>, 120.

<sup>6</sup> Tilmann Vetter, “A Comparison between the Mysticism of the Older Prajñāpāramitā Literature and the Mysticism of the Mūla-Madhyamaka-Kārikās of Nāgārjuna,” *Acta Indologica* 6 (1984), 501.

the complete negation of attachment to rapture.”<sup>7</sup> Deleanu is suggesting that in Prajñāpāramitā literature there is a movement away from early Śrāvakayāna meditative practices towards a view that emphasizes a negation of the intrinsic value (or perhaps the intrinsic permanence) of such practices. What this hypothesis suggests is that in Mahāyāna practice and literature there emerged a need to emphasize the emptiness and intransitory-ness of all things in order to heighten one’s progression towards Buddhahood. As highlighted by Vetter’s aforementioned statement, such a practice is indeed a ‘radicalization’ in that it expedites one’s ability to see the nature of all things, and thereby attain more expediently the awareness and knowledge of wisdom required to teach others. If one views *śūnyatā* in this capacity, as a tool necessary for the perfection of wisdom and the attainment of Buddhahood, it then becomes unlikely and unbeneficial to view such a concept within an inherently negative and purposeless framework.

From an ontological perspective, one can now grasp how Prajñāpāramitā is not a form of nihilism in that it does not adhere to the definition of being completely devoid of all meaning - i.e. the practice of Prajñāpāramitā is certainly not purposeless. The function of being able to fully grasp *prajñā* through *śūnyatā* actualizes its function and gives it a meaning that lies beyond the scope of nihilism. This idea is captured wonderfully by Nagao who argues, “[the] phrase ‘all things are empty’ means that everything is nonexistent, that all experienced phenomena are empty (*śūnya*) and vain, and this that all objects and qualities are negated in both an ontological and ethical sense. But this negation is not mere nothingness. It rather indicates an affirmative absolute being, freed from objectifications and qualifications.”<sup>8</sup> In this passage Nagao makes what I think is a crucial distinction in the argument of whether Prajñāpāramitā literature is

---

<sup>7</sup> Florin Deleanu, “A Preliminary Study on Meditation and the Beginning of Mahāyāna Buddhism,” *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University* 3 (2000), 69.

<sup>8</sup> Nagao, *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra*, 209.

nihilistic, that being, the differentiation between negation and complete rejection. As Nagao depicts, to negate something is to shift its orientation but maintain a firm sense of purpose, whereas to reject and label something as completely empty removes even a foundation of meaning.

In conclusion, it would be incorrect to presume that Prajñāpāramitā thought is nihilistic in Mahāyāna Buddhism, as such a view does not take into account the actualizing of the practice for those who wish to attain the goal of the bodhisattva path. It is perhaps more beneficial to question the motivations behind such a practice, and what such a divergence from other early-Indic forms of Buddhism achieves for the needs of its practitioners. From an ontological perspective (though I may perhaps be jumping too abruptly to conclusions) it seems that the teachings of the Buddha(s) are almost always purposeful and motivated towards a specific goal, regardless of whether the actualization of that goal is cessation or Buddhahood. Due to such a productive intention it would be unbeneficial to suggest that Buddhism is nihilistic, but particularly Mahāyāna Buddhism which guides its students not towards absolute emptiness, but towards the compassion to liberate others from suffering.

## Works Cited

Buswell, Robert E., ed. *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*. New York: Macmillan Reference, USA, 2004.

Conze, Edward. “The Ontology of the Prajnaparamita.” *Philosophy East and West* 3, no. 2 (July 1953): 117–129. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1397258>.

Deleanu, Florin. “A Preliminary Study on Meditation and the Beginning of Mahāyāna Buddhism.” *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University* 3 (2000): 65–113.

Nagao, Gajin. *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra: A Study of Mahāyāna Philosophies: Collected Papers of G.M. Nagao*. Edited by Leslie S. Kawamura. SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.

Vetter, Tilmann. “A Comparison between the Mysticism of the Older Prajñāpāramitā Literature and the Mysticism of the Mūla-Madhyamaka-Kārikās of Nāgārjuna.” *Acta Indologica* 6 (1984): 495–512.

Williams, Paul. *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. 2nd ed. The Library of

Religious Beliefs and Practices. New York: Routledge, 2009.