



# Mahayana Buddhist Philosophy\*

Anthony Ridenour

Philosophy 450

## How is Mahayana Buddhism philosophically different from Hinduism and Hinayana Buddhism?

The philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism developed as something of a counter to both Hinduism and Hinayana Buddhism. The Mahayana consider the philosophies of both Hinduism and Hinayana as extreme, and while Hinduism and Hinayana Buddhism are similar in many ways, their core philosophies are quite polar. Hindu philosophy asserts the existence of *atman*, the soul, self or ego, and consider this to be the essence of man: one and the same as Brahman, the supreme reality of the universe. This reality is Absolute, unchanging, unformed and unceasing: it is permanent and stands behind all the phenomena of the world.

Hinayana Buddhism, on the other hand, staunchly denies such a reality of substantive permanence and self and instead declares that all things (*dharmas*) in the universe are in constant flux. Nowhere is there found an abiding self that is independent of the five Skandhas, that are permanent and unchanging. In fact, there is no Absolute reality other than the reality of dependent-origination (*pratityasamutpada*), the constant flux of *dharmas*. What is taken to be real in Hinayana Buddhism is not the *atman* or soul, but rather the *dharmas*, each themselves possessing no self-nature, but nonetheless real and subject to the constant flux of impermanence and *karma*.

Quite succinctly, as stated in the general introduction of *Empty Logic*, “the chief philosophical difference between Hinayana and Mahayana is that while Hinayanists assert the reality of *dharmas*, elements or entities, Mahayanists declare that all things are empty” (Cheng 15). Mahayanists claimed that that if the views of orthodox Hinduism were too extreme, the opposite views, those of the Hinayanists, were also too extreme. So rather than shifting focus of the nature of reality as being composed of one thing, *Atman-Brahman*, to another thing, *dharmas*, Mahayana philosophy proclaimed that all aspects of existence are empty of own-being. To the Mahayana, to maintain the *Atman-Brahman* as real, or to argue impermanent *dharmas* are real, are both extreme views, and so the Mahayana philosophy refutes both for emptiness, the doctrine that “emptiness is an unattached insight that truths are not absolutely true. It teaches that discursive knowledge

does not provide true wisdom and that enlightenment is the abandonment of conceptual thinking” (53).

## How did Nagarjuna argue for the emptiness of causality? Do you agree to his arguments? Why or why not?

Nagarjuna said, “Those who adhere to a view of emptiness are incorrigible.” The Madhyamika dialectic is a form of *reductio ad absurdum*, used to reveal the absurd or contradictory nature of an opponent’s arguments. This dialectic is founded on the tetralemma used in Indian logic that assumes four possible views: 1) affirmation, 2) negation, 3) both affirmation and negation, and 4) neither affirmation nor negation. With this four-step formula of analysis, he considered six possibilities concerning the relationship between cause and effect, and argued its impossibility because any view of causation leads to contradiction or absurdity. Thus, Nagarjuna’s argumentative aim was a wholesale negation of “attempts to characterize things,” (36). He made a point to analyze even his own argumentation in this way and advocated a refutation of characterizing or conceptualizing emptiness, which is causality, which is the Middle Way. Nothing escapes the scrutiny of Nagarjuna’s logic as it is applied until there is no position or view left to be proved. The wisdom of the emptiness of causality Nagarjuna advocates holds no view of its own of anything whatsoever, and ultimately what’s left in the wake is the true state of things, the Middle Way or causality, as being indescribable and incomprehensible to conventional thought and language.

I wholeheartedly agree with Nagarjuna’s arguments concerning the emptiness of emptiness or the Middle Way, causality. Cherishing the notion that emptiness is an absolute reality unto itself is no different then ascribing a self-existence or absolute reality to anything else of the world, whether it be a self, a god, or utter non-existence. To realize the emptiness of phenomena is one thing, but to come face-to-face with the emptiness of emptiness is much more subtle. I believe I have had personal experience of this myself, however brief it was, and can attest that the wisdom revealed by direct experience of emptiness is complete eradication of conceptualization. Emptiness then ceases to be a characteristic or attribute of anything at all, and even conceptualizing emptiness, or rather causality itself, is abandoned. Emptiness, being empty itself, is then the full action of causality, and the Middle Way is manifest before one’s very eyes. If these truly are the results of Nagarjuna’s explanation of the Buddha Dharma as emptiness, a restatement of the Middle Way and *pratityasamutpada*, then I am in full agreement with his arguments.

## Who is the Buddha? Is he a divine being or merely a human being in the eyes of the Buddhists?

These questions are not clear-cut, black or white: Historically speaking, the Buddha is simply the founder of the *Dharma* and the *Sangha* if indeed such a singular man existed. What made the Buddha the “Awakened One” and significant among his peers was his enlightenment. What may help to answer the above questions is to investigate how this act of awakening or enlightenment transforms the person from an historical perspective. The question is then: did the Buddha’s enlightenment transform him into the divine, or was he just happy?

Stories abound in the Pali canon and the later Mahayana *sutras* of the Buddha’s superhuman abilities. The Jataka stories recount the previous lives of the Buddha as a *bodhisattva* performing miraculous deeds out of his compassion and love for all living beings. Other later *sutras* describe in great poetic detail the realms of the Celestial Buddhas, incalculable in number and unsurpassed in bliss and beauty. The Buddhist cosmologies of both Hinayana and Mahayana are full of all kinds of beings: gods, devas, humans, animals, ghosts, and demons. The Buddhas, above all, are held in the highest esteem by all beings and possess all the qualities of perfect wisdom and compassion. Many of these descriptions and stories of the Buddha and the universe are fantastical, and it is unclear to what degree they were taken literally by Buddhists. Two things are clear about these stories: they were often written with the purpose of explaining a particular moral or ethical discipline, and they often contained explanations of the benefits one receives by proclaiming to others the message of the particular text.

Alternatively, there are disciplines and schools of Buddhist thought that express no interest whatsoever in deifying the

Buddha. First note that Shakyamuni, when asked about the existence of God, remained silent. Nagarjuna and the Madhyamika, in short, “do not assert that the existence of God is false or doubtful, but that God’s existence as the creator of the world is unintelligible,” and no special attention is given to the Buddha as important (90). Zen Buddhism takes this last statement to its end by answering the question, “who is the Buddha?” with “Three pounds of flax.” The Master Lin Chi is known for saying, “If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha. If you meet the Patriarch, kill the Patriarch.” This is, of course, not to be taken literally but it is to aid the student in eradicating false views of external independence.

In sum, the Buddha is universally accepted as *at least* the historical founder of the movement. After his *parinirvana* nearly every school developed its own interpretation of his importance in their practice. Through the history of Buddhism his deification cannot be deemed insignificant, and the true reality of his being a divine being or merely a gifted human is left to the discretion of each individual Buddhist.

## Work Cited

Cheng, Hsueh-li. *Empty Logic: Madhyamika Buddhism from Chinese Sources*. Delhi, India, 1991.

\*These three essays were submitted as an exam; a list of eight questions were posed, of which the students selected three questions to discuss and submit for grading.