

**KNOWLEDGE AND ENDING OF THEORIZING (A STUDY IN
YUKTIŚAŚTIKA)
SHAKUNTALA BORA**

Nāgārjuna says that liberation is attained not with the help of being or non-being but by knowledge of being and non-being. We have Nāgārjuna saying: ‘One is not liberated by being (*bhāva*), one does not [transcend] the being¹ (*bhāva*) by non-being (*abhāva*), [but] by thorough knowledge of being and non-being (*bhāvābhāvaparijñānāt*) the magnanimous (*mahātma*) are liberated.’² For Nāgārjuna this state is the very transcendence of being and non-being by understanding: ‘Those whose intelligence (*buddhi*) has transcended being and non-being and is unsupported have discovered the profound and inobjective meaning of ‘condition’.’³ This is clear thus that, for Nāgārjuna, the transcendence lies in understanding. Transcendence is not to be taken in the sense that there are really beings or its absence which are transcended. Rather, he implies that being and non-being lose significance for the person of knowledge. As Nāgārjuna puts it, the reason for being losing meaning is because knowledge reveals this very fact that being is not there. And of course, as he sees it, without being the issue of non-being does not arise as non-being is nothing but being going out of existence. This is the reason for which he can say that for the person who has seen reality, there is also no *Samsāra* and *Nirvāṇa* – there is neither being and consequently nor its cessation. He says: ‘Those who do not see reality (*tattva*) believe in *Samsāra* and *Nirvāṇa* [but] those who see reality (*tattva*) believe neither in *Samsāra* nor in *Nirvāṇa*. Being (*bhāva*) and *Nirvāṇa* – these two are not [really] to be found [since] *Nirvāṇa* [may be] defined as the thorough knowledge of being.’⁴ If there is knowing of the fact that there is no beings, which make up personal existence, *Nirvāṇa* understood as ending of it also loses meaning.

Nāgārjuna’s whole effort, thus, can be said to be concentrated, in a way, in demonstrating that being is not there. And as he keeps pointing out, this is not to be taken in the sense that being has gone out of existence. Rather he says that there is, in fact, no being as such to talk of its disappearing and thus of non-being. This of course

¹ The term ‘being’ is used for ‘present existence’

² *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 4

³ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 1

⁴ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 5-6. The term ‘being’ is used for ‘existence’

gives rise to the question of what these are then that we have in hand, what their status is. Nāgārjuna is trying to tell that as being in fact is not there, what we consider as being is nothing more than something created, conjectured. And it is precisely because of this fact that he keeps denying destruction of the being. There cannot really be talk of ending of the conjectured, that which is not there. We find Nāgārjuna saying: ‘While [the ignorant] imagine the annihilation (*nirodha*) pertains to a created thing (*bhāva*) which is dissolved (*naṣṭa*), the wise (*sat*), however, are convinced that annihilation (*nirodha*) of [something] created (*kṛtaka*) is an illusion (*māyā*).’⁵ For the one who sees being, there remains the question of its annihilation. But for the one who has understood being in its true nature, as a conjecture, destruction also is only apparent. Nāgārjuna says: ‘though [something apparently] is annihilated by being destructed, it is not [destructed] when one thoroughly understands it as compound (*samskṛta*) [for] whom will it be evident (*pratyakṣa*)? How could one speak of it as dissolved (*naṣṭa*)?’⁶ For the one who understands that a thing is a lie, for him there is no real origination and destruction: ‘When one sees that which arises conditioned by ignorance (*avidyāpratyaya*) with a correct knowledge (*samyajñāna*), no origination (*utpāda*) or destruction (*nirodha*) whatsoever is perceived (*upalabhyate*).’⁷ Nāgārjuna says that it is in this realization – there is no being – that one’s purpose is attained. This understanding definitely does not come in degrees. That is, it can never be that one realizes some things to be not existing and some things to be existing or that things somewhat do not exist and somewhat do exist. All get extinct. We find him saying: ‘This is extinction in this very life (*drṣṭadharmanirvāṇa*) and one’s task is accomplished (*kṛtakṛtya*). If [however] a difference (*viśeṣa*) occurs here, just before (*anantaram*) the knowledge of the principle (*dharmajñāna*), [then] [h]e who imagines that even the most subtle thing (*sūkṣma-bhava*) arises, such an ignorant man does not see what it means to be dependently born (*pratyayotpannārtha*)!’⁸

Nāgārjuna carries out his project – the project of proving that there are no beings – by insisting that that which is dependent is not to be considered as independent. And the problem with people, as he sees it, is precisely this – that the

⁵ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 7

⁶ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 8

⁷ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 10

⁸ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 11-12

dependent is treated as something independent. He tells that it is wrong to treat one of the co-arisen as arisen as the co-arisen is precisely co-arisen. We find him saying: ‘That which has arisen dependently on this and that that has not arisen by own-being (*svabhāvataḥ*). That which has not arisen by own-being, how can it literally (*nāma*) be called ‘arisen’?’⁹ At times, what he has said has been opposed on the ground that the Buddhas did talk about destruction. As reply to such objections, he argues that the teaching about origination and destruction is a prelude to the actual teaching. It is only in understanding destruction that one can understand impermanence which alone can lead one to the knowledge that there is no own-being by virtue of which something may be determined as being. He says: ‘So to conclude (*evam*): There is no origination (*utpāda*), there is no destruction (*nirodha*). – The path of origination and destruction (*utpādanirodhamārga*) has [however] been expounded [by the Buddhas] with a practical purpose (*kāryārtham*): By understanding origination (*utpāda*) destruction (*vināśa*) is understood; by understanding destruction impermanence (*anityam*) is understood; by understanding impermanence (*anityatā*) the true principle (*saddharma*) is also understood.’¹⁰ The true principle, as Nāgārjuna understands it, is that everything dependently originating has no actual origination – the very principle of dependent co-origination has no origination. And it is only in such an understanding that there can be ending of dogmas which lies at the root of human suffering. He says: ‘Those who have understood dependent co-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) is devoid of origination (*utpāda*) and destruction (*vināśa*) have crossed the ocean of existence consisting of dogmas (*dr̥ṣṭibhūtahavārṇava*).’¹¹

Nāgārjuna’s argument is simple – one is creating a whole lot of problem by treating the dependent as independent. According to Nāgārjuna, those now who treat being, which is dependent on non-being, as not dependent are perverting the fact - the fact that each is dependent. This perversion, by this very fact of being so, degenerates into a view – a mere view of fact, not the fact. And it is due to this perversion or holding view that, according to Nāgārjuna, passions arise. He says: ‘Profane people (*prthagjana*) with their positivistic attitude (*bhāvātmake*) are, due to the fault of being perverted about being and non-being, dominated by passions (*kleśa*); they are

⁹ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 19. The term ‘own-being’ is used for ‘substantially’ for *svabhava*

¹⁰ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 21-22

¹¹ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 23.

deceived by their own mind (*svacitta*)!’¹² That is, once being is accepted as independent, arising also would become true which would allow the entire chain of human existence to come into being. As Nāgārjuna sees it and says, one who continues to think in terms of origination and destruction of things has not understood meaning of dependent origination. ‘Those who imagine that a compound (*samṣkrta*) possesses origination (*utpāda*) and destruction (*vināśa*) do not understand the movement of dependent origination (*pratītyopādacakra*).’¹³

Nāgārjuna makes the subtle move from saying that the dependent is not independent to say that independent is not there. His argument is that in seeing things being dependently originated, one would see independent not being there. This argument is now taken forward and Nāgārjuna says that as one sees that the independent is not there, the so-called-independent becomes a lie. In other words, for the one seeing things being dependent, things are false. He says: ‘Those who understand being¹⁴ (*bhāva*) see that things are impermanent (*anitya*), fraudulent (*moṣadharmā*), vain, (*tuccha*), empty (*śūnya*), selfless (*anātman*) and isolated (*vivikta*). Stationless (*anāspada*), inobjective (*nirālamba*), rootless (*nirmūla*), unfixed (*asthita*), totally arisen as a result of ignorance (avidyāhetutaḥ), without a beginning, middle or end....Without a core (*asāra*), like a plaintain (*kadalī*), like the city of *Gandharvas* [thus] the dreadful world (*tīvrajagat*) – a city of confusion – appears as an illusion!’¹⁵ The example Nāgārjuna has chosen to bring home this point is that of *Brahmā* and the world. *Brahmā* has meaning only as dependent. As an independent entity, it is not true. He says: ‘*Brahmā* etc., which appear quite true to this world, have been said to be false (*mṛṣā*) to the noble (*ārya*). What about the rest apart from that?’¹⁶ In other words, the so-called-independent no more remains for the one who has seen truly that things are dependent. As there have never been in reality any things, the issue and question of a thing’s being born does not arise: ‘But how is it thoroughly known? – By seeing dependent origination! The [Buddha] best among knowers of reality also said that that which is dependently born is unborn.’¹⁷

¹² *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 24.

¹³ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 18

¹⁴ The term ‘being’ is used for ‘fact’

¹⁵ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 25-27.

¹⁶ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 28.

¹⁷ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 48.

Similarly, there is no extinction of that which is not there. Nagarjuna says ‘A compound thing quieted due to an extinguished cause is understood to be extinguished but that which is not extinguished by nature how could it be spoken of as extinguished?’¹⁸

Nāgārjuna cannot insist enough the need to see that there are no things as such. For, it is these people who see that there are no things who do not get disturbed as they realize that the so-called-things are mere illusions. He says: ‘When one thinks that an illusion (*māyā*) arises or that it is destructed, one who recognizes the illusion is not bewildered by it but one who does not recognize it longs for it (*paritṛṣ-*).’¹⁹ And for Nāgārjuna it is important to realize that these so-called-things are illusions because it is only in seeing this that dogmas do not arise. Nāgārjuna says: ‘One who, with intelligence (*buddhi*), comes to see that existence (*bhāva*) is like a mirage (*marīci*) [and] illusion, is not corrupted by dogmas [based on] previous limit or a final limit.’¹⁹ Now, for Nāgārjuna, not holding or having theory is very important because, as he sees it, it is due to this factor of having a position regarding things that give rise to passions. We find him saying: ‘By taking any standing whatsoever one is attacked by the twisting snakes of passions. But those whose mind has not standpoint are not caught.’²⁰ This very holding of views is ignorance for Nāgārjuna because of which passions arise. ‘For those who suppressed by false knowledge take the untrue for true (*satye satyagrah-*) a series of seizing and contention etc. (*parigrahavivādādikrama*) will arise.’²¹ Nāgārjuna firmly maintains that it is impossible not to have passions as one holds views: ‘How can those whose mind takes a stand avoid the strong poison (*mahāviṣa*) of passions? Even if they are [like] ordinary [people] they are consumed by the snakes of passions.’²² That passions do not arise, it becomes necessary that one does not hold any view. He says: ‘When one affirms ‘being’ there is a seizing of awful and vicious dogmas which arise from desire and hatred, and from that conceptions (*vivāda*) arise. That is the cause of all dogmas, without it the passions

¹⁸ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 20.

¹⁹ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 16.

¹⁹ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 17.

²⁰ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 51.

²¹ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 49.

²² *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 52.

(*kleśa*) do not arise. So when this is thoroughly understood, dogmas and passions disappear.²³

Nāgārjuna gives the reason why with view passions arise. Fact is not that passions arise due to views. Rather having view and passions, as he does not forget to mention, are co-arising. To have a view is indicative of the fact that one believes in objects. And it is due to this belief in objects that passions arise: ‘Just as a fool (*bāla*) is attached to its reflection (*pratibimba*) because he conceives it to be true (*satya*), thus the world (*loka*) gets stuck in the cage of objects (*viśayapañjara*) because of [its] stupidity (*moha*).²⁴ And actually it is because of the reason of seeing that there are no objects that for the wise suffering does not emerge. This is so because suffering arises only from the passions. Nāgārjuna says: ‘When the great souls (*mahātman*) see the things (*bhāva*) are like a reflection (*pratibimba*) with their eye of knowledge (*jñānacakṣuḥ*) they do not get stuck in the mire of so-called objects (*viśaya iti pañka*).²⁵ Thus liberation is when there is the knowing that there are no things at all. Liberation does not happen, according to Nāgārjuna, even in detachment. He says: ‘Fools are attached to material form (*rūpa*), the moderate attain absence of passions, but those of supreme intellect are liberated by knowing the nature of material form.²⁶ Nāgārjuna does not say explicitly why there cannot be ending of suffering in dispassion. But one can infer that in dispassion there always lies the possibility of emergence of passion while in case one sees that there are no things, the very possibility of having passion dies. He says: ‘The faults of passion that torment due to false knowledge do not arise for those who understand the meaning of judgments concerning being and non-being (*bhāvābhāvavikalpārtha*).²⁷ However, Nāgārjuna does place dispassion at a higher level than passion though it is not liberation. It may be because suffering would be less in dispassion than in passion. We find Nāgārjuna saying: ‘One desires by thinking of [something] pleasant; by turning away from it one becomes free from desires, but by seeing it to be void (*vivikta*) like a phantom (*māyāpuruṣa*) one obtains Nirvāṇa.²⁸ But in case of those who have understood that

²³ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 46-47

²⁴ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 53.

²⁵ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 54.

²⁶ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 55.

²⁷ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 57.

²⁸ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 56.

there are no things at all, there is no more views and no more possibility of passion arising. Thus there is liberation from suffering. Nāgārjuna says: ‘If there were a standpoint there would be passion or dispassion [or distaste], but the great souls without standpoint have neither passion nor dispassion. Those whose fickle mind (*calacitta*) is not moved – not even at the thought of the void – have crossed the awful ocean of existence (*tīvrabhavārṇava*) which is agitated by the monsters of passion.’²⁹

We get to understand why there are no views in seeing no independent things in Nāgārjuna’s criticism of the some Buddhists. Nāgārjuna criticizes the Buddhist who agree that things arise due to conditions and yet believe that things exist. For as he sees it, to understand as being dependent is to understand that there is no thing independent. We find him saying: ‘That which originates due to cause and does not abide without [certain] conditions but disappears when the conditions are absent, how can it be understood to ‘exist’?’³⁰ Nāgārjuna says that he may understand a substantialist believing in things, but he finds it strange for a Buddhist to believe in existence. He says: ‘If the adherents of being who keep on clinging to being, go on in the same way, there is nothing strange about that; [b]ut it is strange indeed that the exponents of impermanence of everything [who] rely on the Buddha’s method keep on adhering to things with strife.’³¹ Nāgārjuna has been saying that in truth realization, there are no dogmas. Dogmas can arise only in relation to things: ‘Those who adhere to a Self or the world as unconditioned alas they are captivated by dogmas about permanent, impermanent etc (*nityānityadr̥ṣṭi*)!’³² Nāgārjuna asserts that even if the belief is of conditioned things, still it does not escape from the fact of being a dogma - it being about some thing. He says: ‘Those who postulate that conditioned things are established in reality (*tattvataḥ*), how are they not also overtaken by mistakes about permanence etc. (*nityādidoṣa*)?’³³ But who has seen that there are no things, question of making assertions also does not arise for him: ‘But those who are convinced that conditioned things are like the moon in the water (*(u)ḍakachandra*), neither true nor false, they are not carried away by dogmas

²⁹ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 58- 59

³⁰ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 39.

³¹ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 40-41.

³² *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 43.

³³ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 44.

(*dr̥ṣṭi*).³⁴ Fact is, one never asserts anything about that which one knows as never being there. He says: ‘When ‘this’ and ‘that’ said about something is not perceived by being analysed (*vicāra*), which wise man (*visakṣana*) will claim with strife (*vivāda*) that ‘this’ and ‘that’ is true (*satya*)?’³⁵

Nāgārjuna cites scripture in support of the view that everything that we have in hand, everything worldly is illusory. The world is illusion. As the world has been declared by the Buddhas to be product of ignorance, whatever is seen in ignorance must be considered as mere discrimination and not reals. He says: ‘Since the Buddhas have declared that world is conditioned by ignorance, how is it not reasonable that this world therefore is a [result of] discrimination (*vikalpa*)? When ignorance is stopped why is it not clear that that which stops was imagined by ignorance?’³⁶ In other words, whatever we see is false. In fact, Nāgārjuna says that as the Buddhas have declared only *Nirvāṇa* to be true, the rest must be regarded as false: ‘Inasmuch as the Buddhas (*jina*) have stated that *Nirvāṇa* is true, which clever person (*paṇḍita*) will then imagine that the rest is not false?’³⁷

It may be true that what we are considering as things are not things at all. But, as Nāgārjuna has pointed out, this is something that cannot be spoken of to someone uninitiated. It is for this reason, Nāgārjuna says, that the Buddhas did talk about things. And then gradually has taken the person concerned towards its actual status – that it is not a thing at all. We find Nāgārjuna saying: ‘To begin with [a teacher] should say that everything exists to his truth-seeking. Later when he has understood the meaning he gains isolation (*vivikātā*) without being attached.’³⁸ The teachers refer to things to lead people to truth. When understanding happens, things will definitely lose their significance. Nāgārjuna says: ‘Just as the Buddhas have spoken of ‘my’ and ‘I’ for pragmatic reasons, thus they have also spoken of the aggregates, the sense-fields and the elements for pragmatic reasons. Such things spoken of as the great elements are absorbed in consciousness. They are dissolved by understanding them. Certainly they are falsely imagined!’³⁹ Similarly, it is only for

³⁴ *Yuktiṣaṣṭika*, 45.

³⁵ *Yuktiṣaṣṭika*, 42.

³⁶ *Yuktiṣaṣṭika*, 37-38.

³⁷ *Yuktiṣaṣṭika*, 35.

³⁸ *Yuktiṣaṣṭika*, 30.

³⁹ *Yuktiṣaṣṭika*, 33- 34.

the people who have seen that there are no things at all, that the so-called things are mere illusions, for them only nature or quality of conduct loses significance. For the one who has not seen truth, for whom the things are real, for him the quality of conduct certainly has meaning. We find Nāgārjuna saying: ‘The [various kinds of] *karma* with its results (*phala*) and the places of rebirth have also been fully explained [by the Buddhas]. The full knowledge of its nature and its unorigination have also been taught [by them].’⁴⁰ In other words, in Nāgārjuna’s philosophy, ethics does not lose its importance so long as wisdom is not gained. Though the Buddhas as well as people of the world may seem like advising the same kind of conduct, one should be able to discern the Buddhas’ project which is so very different from those who are in the world. It is the purpose behind the teaching that determines the nature of teaching. We find Nāgārjuna saying: ‘The world (*loka*) which is blinded by ignorance and follow the current of desire (*trṣṇāusārin*) and [on the other hand] the wise, who are free from desire, how can their view of the good (*kuśala*) be similar?’⁴² Till the realization of truth, activities do not lose their importance. One may have an intellectual understanding of truth, but that cannot be considered as sufficient. Activities lose meaning only in experiencing truth and not in mere learning about it. Thus we find Nāgārjuna saying: ‘Those who do not understand the meaning of isolation (*viviktārtha*) but keep on merely learning without enacting merit (*puṇya*), such base people (*khala*) are lost!’⁴³

In the light of what has been said to far, it becomes understandable when Nāgārjuna says that the Buddhas’ teaching is not a theory at all. To be a theory it has to be about something while the Buddhas’ teaching is not about any thing at all. Rather, it is the very road that leads to realization that there are no things at all. Keeping in mind that a path’s significance lies in being walked, the Buddhas’ teaching is the very way walking which one ends theorizing. The teaching being about no thing, being the very ending of theorizing, it cannot even serve as the ground for a counter theory. He says: ‘The magnanimous (*mahātman*) have neither thesis

⁴⁰ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 32.

⁴² *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 29.

⁴³ *Yuktiśaṣṭika*, 31.

(*pakṣa*) nor contention (*vivāda*). How can there be an opposing thesis (*parapakṣa*) to those who have no thesis (*pakṣa*)?⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ *Yuktiṣaṣṭika*, 50