

## THE BUDDHIST PROBLEM OF EMPTINESS

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In this essay, I would like to present a logical problem with the idea, evident in the writing of Geshe Rabten and Keiji Nishitani, of an innate human tendency towards substantialization and objectification, which they often speak of as being an "instinctual" characteristic of human existence. The problem, specifically, is this: how can Buddhism claim that humans have an innate tendency towards incorrectly imputing permanence and a positive essence to the world, while at the same time maintaining that humans have no innate qualities at all? I am not claiming the problem to be in any way unconquerable; on the contrary, I hope that an attempt at solving it may serve as a means by which to clarify a realm of Buddhist thought which is difficult to talk about even in its most clear moments. First, I would like to define the problem itself as it comes up in the writings of Rabten and Nishitani; then I would like to defend the idea that such an innate tendency might exist as such, by making recourse to the nature of our perception and our language as humans. Finally, I would like to present what is more likely to be the correct analysis of the concepts, emptying the claims made by Nishitani to the level at which he most likely intended them.

We begin, then by stating the question: Why do we substantialize? The initial answer to this question, which seems to me at first terribly unsatisfying to the philosopher, is that it is our "destiny". We are bound to read substance and permanence into our world, according to Buddhism, by the very nature of the universe and the nature of our minds. In the Buddhist literature in general, there seems to be a tacit acceptance of this problem as a general human defect, especially in relation to the question of why people need to be

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enlightened. Of course, the fact of the matter is that enlightened people are in the extreme minority compared to those suffering in samsara, so whether or not it truly is an inborn human fault, it is the prevalent state for the majority of human existence. But why then make these strong claims, especially in light of the empty nature of human existence? Before we can answer, let us actually look at some of these claims.

In his book *Echoes of Voidness*, Geshe Rabten comes to this point as a part of his analysis of the "Heart of Wisdom Sutra". Although all things arise dependently, he says, we must realize that:

All things instinctively appear to us as though they did exist independently, as though they were endowed with their own autonomous self-existence. Take for example a mountain. From its own side, it seems to have an inherent substantiality and massiveness independent of all conditions. It stands there against us: imposing, independent and concrete. But upon reflection we shall slowly become aware that this mountain depends for its existence upon a variety of causes and conditions [ . . . ](Rabten 30)

Again, he comes close to this subject when talking about the selflessness of phenomena. He makes a clever analogy, comparing the unenlightened person to someone with a cataract, who sees things that are not there. In the same way, people who are in samsara naturally see substance which is not there:

Because bewilderment obstructs one from seeing the nature of phenomena, it is said to be deceived. And the Mighty One taught that whatever objects are artificially affected by it and thus appear to be true are deceptive, i.e. conventional truths. For those who have abandoned the apprehension of inherent existence, however, things which are so artificially affected are seen as merely deceptive but not as

true.(Rabten 58)

Rabten does not question why this is the case, but merely makes the comparison. Reality is simply *not* what it seems to be to the unenlightened mind. Although as human beings we are equipped with eyes, ears, and minds capable of accepting and sorting the ambulating mountains of sense data we constantly take in, the *picture* we put together is not a true one, because we see the world as containing objects and substance, of having an essence of positive being. To the Buddhist way of thinking, this positive being is not what we think it is; it is merely empty appearance, and it is our mistake to think (as we all do) that the story ends there. We are constantly betrayed by our perceptions and mental imputations of the world, just as someone with a cataract is betrayed into thinking he sees hairs where there are no hairs. This comparison might lead us to believe that Rabten sees the substantializing impulse in the unenlightened mind as a quasi-physical manifestation, owing its existence to nature or dharma or dependent arising in the way he would speak of any other physical characteristic. On the other hand, however, keep in mind that he makes the above statement in the course of proving that the self and all things are essentially empty and cannot have intrinsic characteristics. Is this a contradiction, or is there something we are not yet seeing? Let us push forward and attempt to glean more from other arguments.

Keiji Nishitani makes reference to the concept of an inherent objectifying tendency at several points. In his analysis, he grapples with this problem, and attempts several versions of qualification or explanation. In the course of his discussion on Kant and the "old metaphysics", he says:

The problem of the thing-in-itself developed, in fact, from the presupposition of [an objective, representational point of view] as a constant base. To view things as objects is, after all, to grasp things on the field of consciousness, under the Form they display

insofar as they unveil themselves to us. In that case, as a matter of course, all objects are received as representations. (Nishitani 133)

He here identifies consciousness as the agent of extortion by which we are forced to see everything as representational, objective, and filled with positive essence. He criticizes Kant in that despite his belief in the Copernican revolution, he is still operating from the same base as those Western metaphysicians (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, etc.) who preceded him. Namely, he is still framing the world around him in terms of subjects and objects, and merely removing the "real" objects by a step and calling them noumena, leaving us only with the phenomena we ourselves force onto the world, as a frontispiece for the elusive noumena of which we can have no experience. Nishitani, in this instance, says that as long as we function on the field of consciousness, we will necessarily be caught in the subject object distinction. Although he does not finish the connection in this passage, the next logical step is to realize that insofar as consciousness is a normal, universal facet of human existence, our tendency to objectify is brought once more to the level of instinct. In other places he refers to this tendency as the "essential attachment to things that lurks in the essence of consciousness" and our "orientation to know objects and relate to them as [subjective]" (Nishitani 151, 155). He also ties the idea to the Buddhist word *avidya* ("the darkness of ignorance") in which the self, because it must impute permanence, positive being, and essence to things, remains "opaque and not yet penetrated to its core" (Nishitani 204). This lack of clarity seems to be a stumbling block which is as much a part of being human as seeing or hearing at all. "In fact," he says of *avidya*, "this state of affairs is the constant companion of history, following it around like a shadow" (Nishitani 204). Here and elsewhere, we see Nishitani is in fact making a claim about the breadth and depth of this tendency towards substantialization in human *Existenz*.

In taking a step back from this stream of thought, we see what the obvious objection is, which was mentioned above.

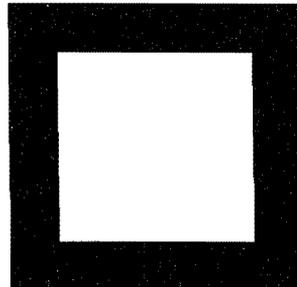
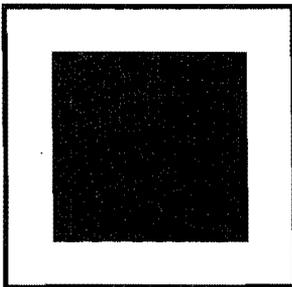
If, according to the Buddhist standpoint, we are essentially empty in the manner of sunyata, how can we then speak of anything as being our destiny? Using the term destiny connotes many things which are directly opposed to the entire concept of sunyata, in that "destiny" is something inevitable and predetermined, or moreover beyond human power or control. Is this truly the claim that is being made of our tendency to objectify the world? Would it not have been better to use another vocabulary in this case, such as speaking in terms of "necessity" or "compulsion" perhaps? If we are going to maintain on the one hand that all appearances are empty of substance and essence, but on the other that our minds (empty though they be) have a characteristic which is enduring, specifically that all humans, by their very nature, tend towards objectification and substantialization, then we have some reconciling to do.

In the next section of this essay, I would like to defend this prospect as well as possible, to see if it has merit despite its obvious tension with the concept of the emptiness and voidness of all things. I would offer two initial solutions, one more satisfying than the other, but both worthy of discussion. To say that it is our destiny or instinct to make the world into a permanent and objectified substance is basically to say that this action has its origin in some aspect of our nature. What are two facets of our material existence in the world that relate to this? Our physical sensation and perception of the world, and our language. Let us deal with each of these sides separately.

In the course of his discussion on the knowing of not-knowing, Nishitani says that "not even the so-called subject, but even the body is an apparition of selfness" (Nishitani 156). Our consciousness is very much linked to our body, and our body has limitations. Our survival in the world, at the most basic level, is dependent upon our ability to perceive the physical nature of the world around us. If we are lacking in the areas of sensation or perception, it is simply a fact that we will not live long enough to consider the questions of our essential nature in the first place. (Whether or not it is

essentially empty on the field of sunyata, the delivery truck coming down the street at 60 miles per hour will kill us if we choose to interfere with it.) Psychological research tells us that in our system of perception, we have many little "tricks" which tend to aid us in the process of taking a large, complex field of input (our vision, for example) and delineating it into discrete meaningful areas, such as foreground and background, near and far, up and down, etc. It is by means of these perceptive tricks that we are quickly able to determine how distant the truck is and how fast it is moving, even though we are only actually seeing blotches of color moving past each other. This ability is so engrained in our perceptive abilities that we rarely see these perceptive tricks occurring, and if we do, it is only in the case of an optical illusion or other unusual circumstance.

My point is this, that if such mechanisms are known to be in place in as simple a realm as our visual perception, so much more can we assume they exist in the realm of our mental framing of the world. This is the realm of phenomenology, of course. So perhaps we can say that Nishitani uses the word "destiny" in his writing to connote the idea that we are originally oriented in such a way as to impute substantiality in the things around us, in that it helps us to survive physically. Going back to the Rabten analogy of the cataract, perhaps it would be better to compare our predestined substantializing tendency to something like a person who sees an optical illusion. Take the following picture, for example:



The two squares in the center are exactly the same size. However, the white center square on the right seems bigger than the black center square on the left because our eyes tend to expand white on black, and decrease black on white. This is a defect, in that it prevents us from seeing what is actually the case. But unlike the cataract, we do not simply dismiss this error as a type of disease. More like the "destiny" Nishitani speaks of, this example shows a tendency to substantialize that is a part of being human, at least insofar as we understand being human. This example is preferable to the example of someone with a cataract (at least, it is if we want to maintain that this substantializing tendency is instinctual) because the cataract is a disease which developed over time, whereas the perceptual illusion seems to be common to all people regardless of their background.

The other possibility by which we can explain this "destiny" is that perhaps Buddhism labels this problem as instinctual or destiny-bound because it has to do with representationality, which is central to the nature of *language*, which is in turn all-important to our humanity. Language is our mode of understanding everything, as well as the only bridge connecting us and others. Language functions, to be criminally simple, by establishing metaphorical relationships between symbols (words) and corresponding objects or concepts. Implicit in this relationship is the fact that words mean something; they mean some thing, and "thing" in this case easily slips to mean some objective, essential, substantial thing which is heavy and solid with its own being. To say "apple" already has the effect of pinning down apple as a solid object, capable of holding its ground against the onslaughts of nihility. To say "love" marks love as something which we can talk about, and in turn, some thing to which characteristics can belong, which can exist or not exist and be authentically objective in either case. Perhaps to find a problem with Nishitani's use of the word "destiny" is to miss the fundamental point that language has the effect of pinning us to substantiality (and pinning substantiality to us) in a nearly inescapable way.

To this second idea, the Buddhist might object, citing that in enlightenment, what has happened is not that we stop using words; we continue to speak and write, but we somehow manage to avoid doing it in a substantializing way. Apple becomes apple<sub>2</sub>, and love becomes love<sub>2</sub>, in the manner of conventional truth, meaning that we speak now relating to things in their appearance (knowing that they are only appearances, but also that in the appearance lies the very fullness of essence). Language is therefore not the culprit, or at least, not a reason to be using the word "destiny".

As a matter of fact, this same objection can be applied to the first solution I offered to our problem, that of physical perception leading us into a broader form of substantializing. If it is the case that we have the ability to escape these problems, why are they born into us? Could it not be the case that a baby is born who might learn to perceive and use language in a non-essential way? After all, enlightened monks can do it, and they are only human. What is on the line here is the question of nurture versus nature, albeit in a more in-depth way than the usual debate: are we naturally born to substantialize the world, or is it something we learn as we grow up? If Buddhism is going to maintain that it is inborn and unalterable at that level, how can they still claim that human existence is essentially empty? If on the other hand, they hold that yes, human existence is empty and has no inherent qualities, they must admit that the objectifying impulse is learned and not an innate characteristic we possess.<sup>1</sup> It is a sticky situation we have put ourselves in now, but perhaps we can be aided by a discussion of Nishitani's earlier in his chapter.

One clue we have which may help defend Nishitani against the contradictions raised above comes in his discussion of the historicity of self-centeredness. Citing Arnold Toynbee, he explains that what we may actually be looking at is, in part, a mode of self-centeredness. Western history, starting with Israel as God's "chosen people", is a goal-oriented, directional history, and as such naturally emphasizes the "master" side of the master-*sive*-slave relationship of circuminsessional interpenetration. It tends to put us as

the players on the stage of life, as Shakespeare has quoth, and thus the center of it all. We become *subject*, all else becomes *object*: "Given this standpoint, the self-centeredness of man casts its shadow over everything. Trying to elude this shadow is in vain" (Nishitani 203).

This is the problem; what is the solution? The talk of this tendency being "innate" can only go so far, and Nishitani's point in bringing it up is to make it clear to us that Buddhism's radical emptiness is in fact the only cure for the disease: "The Buddhaic mode of thought has one distinct advantage over the Western mode: the former contains the possibility of going beyond the self-centeredness that is innate not only in man but in all living things" (Nishitani 202). Aha! Here we see two things. First, his most candid admission of the basic problem discussed in this paper: ". . . the self-centeredness that is innate not only in man but in all living things." If not for the context of this statement, we would have to say that Nishitani has allowed just enough rope to hang his self of no-self. However, the escape is evident in this statement. Buddhism, and the standpoint of sunyata, gives us the only "out" from what is otherwise an innate tendency, by making us understand that it is "innate" only insofar as any conditional truth can be innate. On the level of ultimate truth, however, it is just as empty as our need to breathe or eat. On the field of rationality, it is a logical problem. The field of sunyata, on the other hand, transcends the field of logic, and therefore does not need to worry about this contradiction as a problem.

Going more in-depth into this idea, we come to see that our "problem" is no problem at all, but rather it is at most a careless choice of language. The tendency to objectify is part and parcel of the substantial mode of thinking which traps us all until we become enlightened, but that is not at all to say that it is our home-ground. Nihilism opens up in our lives not as something external, but as coextant with life itself, and in embracing this nihilism, we become truly ourselves for the first time, and "take leave of the essential attachment to things that lurks in the essence of consciousness and by virtue of which we get caught in the grasp of things in trying to grasp them in an objective, representational manner"

(Nishitani 151). In enlightenment, our vain attachment to things is exchanged for a new relation to things as primal facts, and it is this relationship which is our most fundamental mode of being, not our attachment to things in the realm of samsara. In the war between the "destiny" of this erroneous tendency and the clearing "force" of sunyata, we see the struggle of where to locate our primal, basic ontology: either in permanence and absolute being on the one hand, or in impermanence, negativity, and emptiness on the other. Buddhism holds the latter to be the most basic, and I would argue that as long as writers persist in calling the substantializing tendency by the misnomer of "destiny", Buddhism is only hurting its own project.

#### WORKS CITED

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In this case, I would think that it should be one of the *goals* of Buddhism to change the world in this respect, so that right from birth we attempt to keep children from substantializing the world in perception and language, rather than accepting the fact that each human being must endure a youth of learning to substantialize everything, only then to turn around and unlearn what was learned.