The Psychological Benefits and Risks of Emptiness: Reflections of a Second Century Buddhist Philosopher in Contemporary Psychology

Citation

Ford, Michael Jonathan. 2024. The Psychological Benefits and Risks of Emptiness: Reflections of a Second Century Buddhist Philosopher in Contemporary Psychology. Master's thesis, Harvard University Division of Continuing Education.

Permanent link

https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37378566

Terms of Use

Share Your Story

The Psychological Benefits and Risks of Emptiness: Reflections of a Second Century Buddhist

Philosopher in Contemporary Psychology

Michael J Ford

A Thesis in the Field of Religion

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies
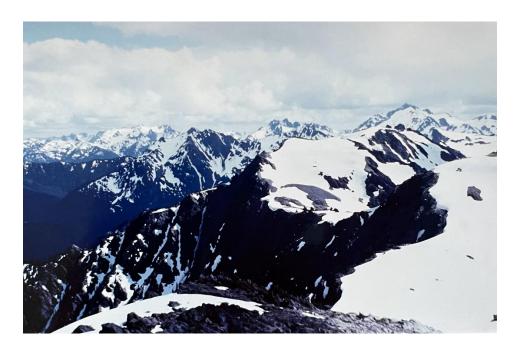
Harvard University

May 2024

Abstract

Several psychotherapies were developed in the United States in the late twentieth

century that incorporate aspects of Buddhist practice. A common element in these

therapies is an emphasis on the benefits of Buddhist approaches to mindfulness, broadly

defined as sustained, non-judgmental, present-moment awareness. The mindfulness

components of some of these therapies are well known, but it remains an open question

whether these therapies also contain implicit elements of Buddhist philosophy. This study

starts to address that question by examining if and how two of these therapies,

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy

(DBT), incorporate the Buddhist concept of emptiness. My focus is on the idea of

emptiness developed by the second century Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna, a prominent

figure in early Mahāyāna Buddhism. Nāgārjuna argued that all things depend on other

things, that therefore all things are empty of inherent existence, or essence, and that a true

understanding of this emptiness is important for achieving enlightenment. After

reviewing the history of Buddhist influence on western psychology, I compare

Nāgārjuna's discussion of emptiness with the founding descriptions of ACT and DBT. I

find that the philosophical foundations of both ACT and DBT contain important elements

that are equivalent to Nāgārjuna's philosophy of emptiness, and conclude that emptiness

is an implicit component of these therapies. Based on a comparison of how the idea of

emptiness is used by Nāgārjuna and these two therapies, I discuss several mechanisms by

which a consideration of emptiness is beneficial for mental health, as well some risks that

could arise from an incorrect understanding of emptiness. I conclude that these widely-

used therapies are an important avenue not only for promoting the practice of

mindfulness, but also the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness.

Frontispiece

Olympic Mountain Range, Washington, 1989. Photo by Michael Ford.

Acknowledgments

      I am grateful to my thesis director, Professor Parimal Patil, for introducing me to Buddhist philosophy, Nāgārjuna, and the Sanskrit language. Professor Patil also provided invaluable input on earlier drafts of the thesis. I would also like to thank my other professors at the Harvard Extension School—Steven Shoemaker, Chris Berlin, Jeffrey McDonough, Charles Stang, Nadine Weidman, and Collier Brown, along with my fellow students in their classes. More broadly, I'm grateful for the Harvard Extension School, an organization I barely knew of a few years ago. Finally, I want to thank my family—Beth, Mariah and Ben—for lots of great dinnertime conversations on philosophy and religion.

Table of Contents

Chapter I.

Introduction

Can believing that nothing exists inherently lead to better mental health? Or does such a belief lead to nihilism, despair, and bad behavior? Or, is there a right way to believe in nothing, so that you achieve the former and avoid the latter? These types of questions were important to the second century Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna, whose description of the middle way (Sanskrit: *madhyamaka*) is foundational to Mahāyāna Buddhism. They may also be important questions in psychology today. The past several decades have seen the development of widely-used western mental health therapies that incorporate aspects of Buddhist practice, especially mindfulness. These secular therapies focus on mental *practices*, and avoid explicit statements of Buddhist belief. Even if they are not explicit, however, some Buddhist philosophical ideas may be implicit in these therapies. The idea of emptiness (*śūnyatā*)—that nothing has inherent existence—is such an element that I will explore in this thesis.

In this paper, I examine the role that the madhyamaka Buddhist idea of emptiness plays in two widely-used therapies, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) (Hayes, 1999), and dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) (Linehan, 1993; Linehan & Wilks, 2015). I explore how the idea of emptiness is implicitly utilized by these therapies, and how the implicit use of emptiness concepts in these therapies compares with the benefits and risks of contemplating emptiness discussed by Nāgārjuna. I will show that elements of emptiness are present in the philosophical foundations of both therapies, and that understanding the role that emptiness plays in these therapies is helpful for gaining a

better understanding of how a 'correct' view of emptiness provides the psychological[1] and spiritual benefits attributed to it by Nāgārjuna.

In order to address these questions, I compare Nāgārjuna's writings on emptiness with texts on the philosophical underpinnings of two Buddhist-influenced therapies. I focus on the madhyamaka view of emptiness as it is described by Nāgārjuna, recognizing that later Indian (and non-Indian) Buddhist philosophers continued to discuss and elaborate on the concept. The focus on Nāgārjuna is for the practical reason of keeping the analysis manageable, and because his writings are considered foundational to the philosophy of emptiness (Carpenter, 2014; Garfield, 1995; Westerhoff, 2009). Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that Nāgārjuna and the madhyamaka represent only one of many Buddhist (not to mention non-Buddhist) philosophical traditions, many of which might also have interesting relationships with contemporary western psychology, but are not explored here.

For Nāgārjuna, emptiness is the idea that no aspect of reality, including the concept of emptiness itself, has *svabhāva* – literally "self-being", and variously translated as "inherent existence", "substance", "intrinsic nature", or "essence" (Carpenter, 2014; Garfield, 1995; Westerhoff, 2010). The philosophical heart of the idea is illustrated in two verses in chapter 24 of his most famous work, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārika* (MMK; the Foundation of the Middle Way): That which is dependently arisen, this we declare as emptiness. Having understood this as a convention, it is the only middle path. / As no

---

[1] Here and elsewhere when referring to the work of Nāgārjuna, I am using 'psychology' in the broad, descriptive sense of anything to do with the mind, including consciousness, thought, emotion, mental well-being or anguish, sense perception, etc.; not the modern scientific discipline.

thing is known that is not dependently arisen, no thing is known that is not empty (MMK

24.18-19).[2]

In other words, Nāgārjuna argues that all things that depend on something else do

not exist inherently—do not have an unchanging essence that makes them what they

are—and are therefore empty. He goes on to argue that everything that exists—matter,

thoughts, time, movement, the self, the Buddha, *nirvāṇa*, and all ideas, including the idea

of emptiness itself—depends on something else, and therefore all of reality is empty.

Nāgārjuna argues (MMK 24.20-40) that this is a good thing, because only through

dependent arising and emptiness is any action or change of any sort possible, including

actions that lead to liberation. His philosophical approach to defending emptiness is to

argue that any claim that things exist inherently leads to absurd conclusions, and

therefore must be incorrect. As a simple example, in MMK 24.23[3], he says that if

suffering existed intrinsically, it could not cease. As a Buddhist, his hypothetical

opponent agrees that suffering does in fact cease, so the opponent's view that suffering

has essence is thereby shown to contradict his other views. The details of many of

Nāgārjuna's arguments are not as obvious, however, especially in the MMK, where they

exist only in an abbreviated form, apparently designed for memorization. Here, I will not

be very concerned with Nāgārjuna's logical arguments defending emptiness, which are

discussed extensively elsewhere (see Carpenter, 2014; Garfield, 1995; Westerhoff, 2009

for reviews). Instead, I focus on what Nāgārjuna says are the psychological and religious

---

[2] *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tāṃ pracakṣmahe / sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā // apratītyasamutpanno dharmaḥ kaścin na vidyate / yasmāt tasmād aśūnyo hi dharmaḥ kaścin na vidyate* (MMK 24.18-19).

[3] *na nirodhaḥ svabhāvena sato duḥkhasya vidyate / svabhāvaparyavasthānān nirodhaṃ pratibādhase* (MMK 24.23). With essence, the cessation of suffering is not known. From the contradiction of essence, you argue against its [suffering's] cessation.

benefits of correctly understanding emptiness, and how these compare to the emptiness

concepts in ACT and DBT.

Methods and Sources

My primary research method is a textual comparison between the philosophical

and religious works of Nāgārjuna, and the founding literature of contemporary

Buddhism-influenced therapies[4]. I utilize the seven surviving works that scholars

generally attribute, with widely varying degrees of confidence, to Nāgārjuna (Streng,

1967; Tola & Dragonetti, 1995b; Walser, 2005; Westerhoff, 2009): The

Mūlamadhyamakakārika (MMK; the Foundation of the Middle Way), the *Ratnāvalī* (RA;

the Precious Garland), the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā* (YS, the Sixty Verses on Reasoning), the

Vigrahavyāvartanī (VV, The Dispeller of Disputes), the *Śūnyatāsaptati* (SS, Seventy

Verses on Emptiness), the *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa* (VP, Treatise on Categories), and the

Catustava (CS, Four Hymns). The MMK, VV, and VP are primarily philosophical texts

that provide arguments for emptiness and refutations against counter arguments; the SS

and YS are religious texts focusing on the soteriological benefits of emptiness; the RA

contains a mixture of philosophy, religion, and moral advice for a royal audience, and the

CS are hymns of praise to the Buddha for teaching the virtues of emptiness. For texts that

---

[4] Sources and translations for Nāgārjuna's writings on emptiness: *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*: Sanskrit: De Jong (1977); English translations: Garfield (1995) and Streng (1967).
Ratnāvalī: Sanskrit, with English translation: Tucci (1936a, 1936b)
Vigrahavyāvartanī: Sanskrit: Yonezawa (2008). English translations: Bhattacharya (1971), Westerhoff (2010)
Yuktiṣaṣṭikā: Sanskrit (reconstruction): Kumar (1993). English translation: Tola and Dragonetti (1983)
*Śūnyatāsaptati***:** English translation: Tola and Dragonetti (1987).
*Vaidalyaprakaraṇa***:** English translation: Tola and Dragonetti (1995a).
*Catustava***:** Sanskrit, with English translation: Tola and Dragonetti (1995b).
Sources for Buddhism-influenced therapies: ACT: Hayes (1984, 1999, 2002), Hayes and Wilson (1993); DBT: Linehan (1993, 2015), Linehan and Wilks (2015).

are readily available in the original Sanskrit (MMK, RA, VV, CS), I utilize a mixture of my own translations and published English translations. For the remaining texts, I rely on published English translations, from Tibetan texts. For YS, there is a published Sanskrit reconstruction from the Tibetan, which I utilize. Translations of quoted verses are my own. For the review of how western Buddhist-influenced therapies treat emptiness, I use the published descriptions of these therapies and how they were employed. These include the original descriptions in the primary clinical psychology literature, as well as instruction manuals and guides for mental health practitioners.

Chapter II.

Buddhist Influence on Western Psychology

Twentieth-century interactions between Buddhism and western psychology were built upon a foundation of 19th-century Buddhist scholarship. In reviewing the history of thought on the relationship between Buddhism and psychotherapy, it is therefore useful to start by considering how 18th and 19th century western scholars thought of Buddhism, not in relation to the yet-to-be-invented practice of psychotherapy, but to western culture, including Christianity, more generally.

The earliest western scholarship on the comparison of Buddhist ideas, including emptiness, to western thought dates to the early 18th century, when the Jesuit missionary Ippolito Desideri (1684 – 1733) spent five years in Tibet, learned Tibetan, and wrote several works on Buddhism. Desideri condemned what he understood as a godless, nihilistic philosophy, but nonetheless praised Buddhist ethics (Desideri, 1932). Despite personal admiration for individual Tibetans, he assumed without question the superiority of the Christian faith, certainly did not advocate for the incorporation of Buddhist ideas into western culture, and was in any case ignored and quickly forgotten by his contemporaries (Batchelor, 1994, pp. 190–194). Nonetheless, his reaction of simultaneous alarm at Buddhist metaphysics and admiration for some aspects of Buddhist practice set a pattern in western Buddhist scholarship that was to last for the next 200 years.

Serious European interest in the philosophical ideas of Buddhism and other eastern religions did not emerge until the late 18th and early 19th centuries, after the British had firmly established themselves in India. The British traders and, later, administrators were typically unimpressed with Indian culture and prejudiced against the local people (Almond, 1988; Bosch, 2002). Some scholars and intellectuals, however, were interested in Indian history and culture. With guidance from Indian pandits and intellectuals, this interest grew over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries into an extensive European scholarship on these topics. In 1786, Sir William Jones (1746 – 1794) helped to spark this scholarly interest with his finding that Sanskrit, the primary instrument for religious and philosophical discourse in India, was genetically related to Greek, Latin, and by extension, to other European languages[5]. This realization of a shared linguistic history helped to initiate a long-lasting western scholarly and popular interest in Indian culture.

By far the most influential early-19th-century European Buddhist scholar was the Frenchman Eugene Burnouf (1801 – 1852), who wrote an 1844 treatise on Indian Buddhism that set the foundation for several generations of Buddhist scholars (Burnouf, 2010). Working in France from a trove of Sanskrit manuscripts sent to him by a British government representative in Nepal, he translated and analyzed an extensive collection of Buddhist *sūtra* (teachings of the Buddha), *vinaya* (rules of monastic discipline), and *abhidharma* (philosophical) texts. The latter included works attributed to Nāgārjuna, whom Burnouf recognized as a major figure in early Mahāyāna Buddhism. He was also a man that Burnouf viewed with some disquiet, noting that

---

[5] Jones was apparently the first European to make this connection, but a Persian scholar, Khan-i Arzu, had noted the connection between Sanskrit and Persian several decades earlier (Azim, 1969).

> this philosopher does not let stand any of the theses posed in the various Buddhist schools, on the world, beings, laws, and the soul; he shatters positive, negative, and indifferent assertions, placing them in doubt; nothing is spared, God and the Buddha, mind and man, nature and the world. (Burnouf, 2010, p. 509)

Burnouf's focus was on understanding Buddhism in the context of its history in India, and he did not make any comparisons between Buddhist philosophy and western culture or psychology. However, his work was influential to those who did make such comparisons, such as Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire, Monier Monier-Williams, and Max Müller. Burnouf's use of chiefly textual sources for studying Buddhism also set a long-term pattern for Buddhist studies in the west.

Building on the increasing knowledge and availability of Sanskrit and Pāli texts and their translations into European languages, the latter part of the 19th century saw a surge in western interest in eastern religions and philosophy among both scholars and the educated public. Popular books about Buddhism, such as Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, published in 1879, and the founding of organizations such as the Buddhism-influenced American Theosophist Society in 1875, promoted positive (if not always well informed) descriptions of Buddhism to the western public. In his study of Victorian-era American Buddhist converts, Tweed (2005), for example, found widespread discussion of Buddhism in late-19th-century American periodicals. Despite, or perhaps because of, this increasing public interest in Buddhism, the generation of Buddhist scholars following Eugene Burnouf often took pains to present Buddhist ideas in what they considered to be a more accurate, often negative, light.

During the same time period, western scholarship on Buddhism also started to take on a character of comparative religion. This was done for a variety of motivations, depending on the scholar in question. Some, such as Sir Monier Monier-Williams (1819

8

– 1899), an endowed professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University, were interested in understanding eastern religions in order to create more effective Christian missionaries. In his 1889 book, *Buddhism, its connection with Brāhmanism and Hindūism and its contrast with Christianity*, Monier-Williams writes "I have depicted Buddhism from the standpoint of a believer in Christianity, who has shown, by his other works on Eastern religions, an earnest desire to give them credit for all the good they contain" (Monier-Williams, 1891, p. ix). Like Desideri nearly 200 years earlier, Monier-Williams found value in Buddhist moral precepts, especially when they aligned with similar Christian ideals:

> I admit this resemblance— I admit that both tell us:— not to love the world; not to love money; not to show enmity towards our enemies; not to do unrighteous or impure acts—to overcome evil by good, and to do to others as we would be done by. (Monier-Williams, 1891, p. 144)

He also admired the universality of Buddhism: "Without doubt the distinguishing feature in the Buddha's gospel was that no living being, not even the lowest, was to be shut out from true enlightenment" (Monier-Williams, 1891, p. 97).

Despite these concessions, Monier-Williams was concerned that Buddhist ideas were proving themselves too attractive to his fellow Europeans, and was writing in part to ward off such influence. He admonished "admirers of Buddhism" (Monier-Williams, 1891, pp. 147, 543) for their overenthusiasm, and cast the Buddha's teachings as "a dead letter" (p. 146) and "a showy edifice built on the sand" (p. 143). He argued that the Buddha was no "Light of Asia" (p. 563), a direct rebuke to Arnold and other contemporary Buddhism enthusiasts who were, in Monier-Williams's analysis, painting Buddhism in a far too positive a light.

The comparative analysis that led to these concerns, shared by his contemporary Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire (Saint-Hilaire, 1914), was both metaphysical and psychological. Metaphysically, Monier-Williams contrasted what he saw as a mortal Buddha's philosophy of soulless agnosticism with the Christian doctrine of a divine Creator and human immortality (Monier-Williams, 1891, pp. 223, 544). In Monier-Williams's analysis, the lack of an anchoring Creator and reliance upon only human effort for soteriological goals were major flaws that could only result in a hollow philosophy and depression in its practitioners. Psychologically, Monier-Williams characterized Buddhism as "pessimistic" (p. 537), with a goal of attaining a mental state like that of a jellyfish (p. 141). He found the idea of karma and acquiring merit through good actions to be selfish, in contrast to the Christian idea of salvation through faith and divine forgiveness (p. 143). In his final analysis, he contrasted an optimistic Christian ideal of eternal life with a pessimistic Buddhist ideal of eternal "extinction of life", and concluded that no "rational or thoughtful" (p. 563) person could possibly choose the latter over the former.

Some late-19th-century western scholars of Buddhism were more open to incorporating Buddhist ideas into western thought, however. Max Müller (1823 – 1900), another contemporary of Monier-Williams's, and his chief competitor for the professorship of Sanskrit at Oxford, was interested in comparing religions as a way to distil the truths they held in common, instead of judging any religion as ultimately true or false. He responded to scholars like Monier-Williams and Saint-Hilaire, by saying they "formed too low an estimate of the benefits to be derived from a thoughtful study of the religions of mankind" (Müller, 1871, p. 183), and he cited Saint Paul's command to keep

what was good in pre-Christian religions (p. 181). In some sense, he shared Monier-William's view that Buddhist ideas of emptiness were nihilistic, noting that "this doctrine of salvation has been called pure Atheism and Nihilism, and it no doubt was liable to both charges in its metaphysical character" (p. 244). But he drew a distinction between a difficult, esoteric metaphysics that he believed was "reserved for a few of his [the Buddha's] disciples" (p. 225), and Buddhism as a religion for the millions (p. 247). In Müller, we therefore see the beginnings of a scholarly attitude that combines analysis of Buddhism as a subject, with a desire to use that analysis to better understand and, perhaps even improve, western religious practices and conceptions. This comparative approach, and its goal for improvement of existing western paradigms, formed a template for later analyses of Buddhism and psychology.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries also saw two other important scholarly developments that influenced the direction of studies of Buddhism and western culture. The first was a growing interest in Buddhism, and other eastern religions, by the new scientific field of psychology. A notable early example was William James (1842 – 1910), Harvard University's first professor of psychology. Like the philologist Max Müller, James believed that a comparative, scientific approach to the study of diverse religions would be valuable for distilling what was good, scientifically true, and psychologically beneficial in each. In his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1917), he summarized an extensive compilation of psychological descriptions of mystical and religious experiences. The majority of his case studies were drawn from western, primarily Christian, sources, but he did include some Buddhist and Hindu examples. He found commonalities between eastern and western religions, finding that "Stoic,

Christian, and Buddhist saints are practically indistinguishable in their lives," (p. 504) even though he found the intellectual foundations of these three religions to be entirely different. Focusing on religious experience and downplaying religious philosophy, James came to the conclusion that religious experience is psychologically beneficial, saying that "we have seen how this emotion overcomes temperamental melancholy and imparts endurance to the Subject, or a zest, or a meaning, or an enchantment and glory to the common objects of life" (p. 505). He concluded that regardless of the underlying causes of religious feeling, it was an empirical, psychological fact that these feelings were "among the most important biological functions of mankind" (p. 505). In this way, he both pioneered the use of psychology to investigate the importance of religion to mental health, and validated eastern religions, including Buddhism, as an important source of psychological knowledge.

A second, concurrent, development was the increasing influence of Asian Buddhist and non-Buddhist intellectuals to the western discussion of religion and science, including psychology. This was particularly true after the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, in Chicago. This event featured several Hindu, Buddhist and Jain scholars whose spoken and published remarks were highly influential in promoting awareness of eastern religions in America (see Masuzawa, 2005; Snodgrass, 2003; Tweed, 2005 for several different perspectives on this event). The Zen Buddhist Soyen Shakyu (1860 – 1919) directly responded to Christian criticisms of atheism and nihilism, and argued for a more inward focused, naturalistic, psychological perspective of God, compared to the typical Christian version: "When we know ourselves, we know heaven and earth, we know God, we know everything and anything. We know his presence even in the most

insignificant flower in the field which is trampled under foot by men" (Shaku, 1906, p. 31). A common theme, emphasized by all of these Asian intellectuals, was that eastern religions were modern and scientific, more so than was Christianity. In his remarks at the Parliament, the Hindu representative Swami Vivekananda (1863 – 1902) stressed that the Hindu conception of an eternal, infinite universe and an all-encompassing pantheistic God anticipated by thousands of years the latest findings of 19th-century science (Vivekananda, 1893, p. 13). This theme of compatibility with science helped to promote interest in Buddhism by western scientists and intellectuals already disillusioned with Christianity (Snodgrass, 2003; Tweed, 2005). In the decades after the Parliament, several of the participants, especially Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki (1870 – 1966), were influential in the transfer of Buddhist ideas and practices into western psychology.

Building on the increasingly wide availability of Buddhist texts and scholarship, along with direct outreach by eastern scholars and religious leaders, the mid-20th century saw an explosion of interest of eastern religions by some western psychologists. Carl Jung (1875 – 1961), psychotherapist and founder of analytical psychology, was an early adopter of Buddhist ideas. He wrote extensively on the relationship between psychology and religion, arguing that humans could not be mentally healthy in the absence of a supportive religious or philosophical worldview (Jung, 1938). Following Müller and James, he compared eastern and western religions, focusing especially on what he saw as psychological differences between Buddhism and Hinduism and Christianity. He concluded that Buddhism and Hinduism, with their shared goal of self-liberation through a meditative, inward focus on the mind, were psychologically introverted. In contrast, the Christian west, where "grace comes from elsewhere" (Jung, 1978, p. 109), was

fundamentally extroverted. In Buddhism's inward focus, however, Jung saw a clear connection with the inward exploration of psychotherapy (p. 172), a connection which to him suggested the possibility that Buddhism might have something to offer western psychology.

Despite Jung's conclusion that Buddhism and psychotherapy were in some ways fundamentally seeking the same thing, he was initially skeptical that eastern ideas or techniques could be effectively imported to the west. In his otherwise positive 1939 forward to D.T. Suzuki's *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, Jung warned that the western public would be unlikely to benefit from Buddhism, saying that "the mental education for Zen is lacking in the West" (Jung, 1978, p. 153). He argued that neurotic westerners would never find solace in eastern religions, but rather should use the inspiration of eastern philosophy to look within their own, distinctly western, minds. In the 1939 article, he cautioned that westerners who looked east for enlightenment were, ironically, just expressing their archetypically extroverted personalities: "if we snatch these things directly from the East, we have merely indulged our Western acquisitiveness, confirming yet again that 'everything good is outside,' whence it has to be fetched and pumped into our barren souls" (p. 111). Near the end of his life, however, he appeared to soften this view, writing in a 1956 review of a translation of the Buddha's discourses that "[t]hey offer Western man ways and means of disciplining his inner psychic life, thus remedying an often regrettable defect in the various brands of Christianity" (p. 210).

In the decades following Jung's death in 1961, humanistic psychologists continued to build upon his view of the similarity between Buddhism and psychotherapy. Increasingly, such scholarship was done either in direct collaboration with Asian-born

Buddhist teachers living in Europe or America, or by westerners who had studied in Asia. An influential example of the former was D.T. Suzuki's and Erich Fromm's (1900 – 1980) book *Zen Buddhism & Psychoanalysis* (Suzuki, 1963), in which the Japanese Buddhist scholar wrote about Zen Buddhism, and the German-Jewish psychologist analyzed the relationship between Zen and psychoanalysis.

Like Jung and James, Fromm believed that religious experience was an important element of the human experience, and that in its absence people transferred their spiritual needs into an unhealthy worship of capitalism, consumerism and over-rationalism. Fromm argued that the west was in a state of "spiritual crisis" (Suzuki, 1963, p. 78), in part because the traditional psychological support of religion, especially Christianity, was no longer effective for much of the population, even if a majority remained nominally Christian. Zen Buddhism, in Fromm's analysis, was an attractive alternative. In an echo of Vivekanada, Fromm concluded that Buddhism, "not burdened by the concept of a transcendent father-savior" (p. 80), was, ironically, better suited for the current, rational state of the western mind than were the western religions that were the antecedents of western rationalism. Like Jung, Fromm found several important parallels between Buddhism and psychoanalysis, including the shared goal of alleviating suffering, the importance of taming a "narcissistic" sense of self that created suffering (p. 90), and even the relationship between Zen master (analyst) and student (analysand). Fromm also found similarities between Buddhism's goal of insight into true reality and psychoanalysis's view that much of consciously perceived reality was an illusion created by the self or society. Fromm also found that the patient population seeking psychoanalysis had changed markedly from Freud's time. Rather than seeking treatment for psychologically-

15

caused physical symptoms, more people were seeking help for a sense of alienation, anxiety or just vague and uncertain dissatisfaction with their lives – issues that traditionally were the domain of religion (p. 85). By incorporating Buddhist religious ideas into psychoanalysis, and training analysts in Zen Buddhism, Fromm hoped to make psychoanalysis and psychoanalysts more effective. He did not believe that many people would become fully enlightened according to the Zen conception of the term, but he argued that it was important to start upon the path.

Jung and Fromm focused on theoretical explanations for why psychotherapy, and its goal of alleviating suffering, would benefit from incorporating Buddhist ideas. In the decades that followed, several scholars and Buddhist practitioners made serious attempts to turn those theories into practical guidance for those seeking better mental health for themselves and others. A common thread among the people making these efforts was prior instruction in Buddhist practice and philosophy by practicing Buddhist teachers.

Americans Jack Kornfield (b. 1945), Joseph Goldstein (b. 1944), and Sharon Salzberg (b. 1952), and British Stephen Batchelor (b. 1953), all wrote influential works related to Buddhism and psychology that were based on experiences working with Buddhist instructors in Asia in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many of these books were aimed at popular audiences, but all were influential in making connections between Buddhist ideas and western psychology. Goldstein (1983) wrote a meditation manual for insight (Pāli: *vipassana*) meditation, focusing on its spiritual and mental benefits. Salzberg (1995) wrote analogous books on lovingkindness (Pāli: *metta*) meditation. Kornfield (1993), a trained psychologist, wrote a treatise on methods for bringing Buddhist meditation and philosophy into everyday life. In 1975, these three also founded

the Insight Meditation Society, an organization to promote mindfulness and meditation in the United States. Batchelor, after studying with Tibetan monks in India and Zen masters in Korea, became disillusioned with the mystical and religious elements of Buddhism, and founded the non-religious alternative of secular dharma (Batchelor, 1997). A common theme connecting the works of all four was the attempt to use Buddhist philosophy and practice to improve mental health. They did this primarily through promotion to the general public of Buddhist ideas and psychological practices, rather than directly continuing the comparative analysis of Buddhism and psychotherapy started by Jung, Fromm and Suzuki.

Mark Epstein (b. 1953), a practicing psychiatrist, Buddhist, and student of Jack Kornfield's, did continue this comparative analysis. In his book *Thoughts without a Thinker* (Epstein, 1995), he provided a systematic comparison of essential Buddhist ideas with the features of Freudian psychoanalysis. Compared to Fromm, who was highly influenced by D.T. Suzuki's mystical interpretations of Zen, Epstein utilized a fuller range of Buddhist teachings and traditions. He started with the Four Noble Truths (suffering, causes of suffering, cessation of suffering, path to cessation), and argued that they were analogous to stages in the psychoanalytic process. He utilized the Buddhist idea of the six realms of existence as metaphors for typical human neuroses found in western psychology. He argued, for example, that the animal (desire) realm, was the target of Freud's exploration of the subconscious as a source of sexual and aggressive desires, while the god realm was the subject of humanist psychologist Victor Maslow's concept of peak experiences (p. 18). He, like Fromm, believed that much of western psychotherapy focused on problems in the human realm, especially related to a fragile

17

and narcissistic sense of self (p. 36). He mentioned Nāgārjuna and the concept of emptiness, which he interpreted as a caution against the human tendency to assign either too much or too little meaning to psychological events: "it means that the emotions that we take to be so real and are so worried about do not exist in the way we imagine them" (p. 101).[6] Like Kornfield, Goldstein and others, he emphasized the importance of meditation as a means for gaining direct, perceptive insight into the mind, the sense of self, and the transitory, largely involuntary nature of cognitive and emotional events. Disagreeing with Jung, he argued that western minds were perfectly capable of benefiting from meditation, but he believed that differences between western and eastern cultures would influence the course of the meditative experience. He argued, for example, that "the Eastern self is enmeshed in a web of family, hierarchy, caste … from which the only escape is often spiritual practice" (p. 176), while the western mind was more likely to be starting from a state of estrangement and alienation (p. 177).

Similar to Fromm, Kornfield, and other proponents of Buddhist ideas, Epstein started from a position that most people would benefit from taking up at least some elements of Buddhist practice. In addition, he discussed how Buddhist practice could help psychoanalysts to be more effective in treating their patients. He also turned this idea on its head, and explored how psychoanalysis might extend, complement and interact with Buddhism, noting that meditation could expose and bring to consciousness difficult emotions or memories that had been previously suppressed. He argued that many Buddhist teachers were not well qualified to help their students deal with these

---

[6] To my knowledge, this is the first explicit reference to Nāgārjuna in the context of comparing Buddhist ideas to psychotherapy. There were earlier comparisons of Nāgārjuna's ideas to those of western psychologists, notably David Kalupahana's (1986) comparison of Nāgārjuna's philosophy of the mind to that of Williams James.

18

experiences, but that this was exactly the purpose of psychoanalysis (p. 184). He

therefore suggested that Buddhist meditation teachers would benefit from psychological

training and collaboration with psychotherapists. In this way, he concluded that although

psychoanalysis and Buddhism had much in common, they also differed sufficiently to be

complementary.

At the same time that Epstein, Kornfield, and other Buddhist psychologists were

thinking about how to incorporate Buddhist ideas into existing psychotherapeutic

paradigms, others were starting to develop new psychotherapies influenced in part on

Buddhist ideas. These included mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn,

2013), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) (Hayes, 1999), mindfulness-based

cognitive therapy (MBCT) (Segal et al., 2002), and dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT)

(Linehan, 1993; Linehan & Wilks, 2015). The developers of these therapies all

acknowledged some degree of influence from Buddhism or other eastern religions,

especially related to the practice of mindfulness, but downplayed this in order to make

the therapies wholly secular.[7]

Over the last two decades, there has been considerable research into some aspects

of the Buddhist influence on these newer therapies. Much of this research has involved

scientifically evaluating the effectiveness of mindfulness in addressing mental health

concerns (reviewed by Gu et al., 2015; Keng et al., 2011; Mace, 2008). Keng et al.

(2011), for example, provided a comprehensive review of multiple correlational studies

---

[7] For example, Linehan & Wilks (2015, p. 99) say: "The idea of meditation was viewed as weird, threatening, and out of reach to individuals whose avoidance of emotions and inner sensations was a strong pattern. Thus, basic Zen practices, along with aspects of other contemplative practices, were translated into a set of behavioral skills that could be taught to both clients and therapists. The spiritual and religious overtones in Zen had to be parceled out as well, at least at first pass."

relating mindfulness to self-reported well-being, as well as controlled studies examining the effects of MBSR (n = 18 studies), MBCT (n = 14 studies), DBT (n = 13 studies), and ACT (n = 11 studies) on several mental health outcomes. These reviews generally concluded that there is strong evidence that mindfulness leads to improved mental health outcomes based on a variety of mood and behavioral metrics, both compared to no treatment controls and in many (but not all) cases compared to non-mindfulness-based treatments. These reviews (and many other individual studies), also noted the Buddhist origins of mindfulness and discussed some of the differences between mindfulness as it is used in western psychology compared to Buddhist settings. They did not discuss emptiness, however. These reviews, with the exception of Mace's (2008) book, also did not discuss any risks associated with mindfulness-based therapies. Several more focused papers have reviewed mindfulness studies for adverse events (e.g., Farias et al., 2020), and others have made theoretical arguments that there is likely an optimal degree of mindfulness which if exceeded might lead to poor outcomes (Britton, 2019; Lindahl & Britton, 2019).

The influx of Buddhist-influenced therapies over the past several decades has also drawn interest by psychologists, philosophers and religious scholars, who have examined some aspects of the philosophical relationships between Buddhism and Buddhist-influenced secular therapies. Hayes (2002) and Fung (2015), for example, both concluded that key elements of ACT mirror the basic elements of Buddhism, including views of the ubiquity of suffering, and the importance of mindfulness and 'right' behaviors as components of a path to alleviating suffering. They remained uncertain about the

congruence of the two philosophies' concepts of the self, however (Hayes, 2002, p. 65), and neither addressed the concept of emptiness.

Merry and Ratnayake (2018) recently published an extended essay on the ethical implications of using Buddhist-influenced therapies for clients whose world-view is incompatible with Buddhist ideas. They concluded that these therapies have an implicit assumption about the nature of the self that is at odds with that held by many people seeking psychotherapy, and suggest that this mismatch should be treated as an "epistemic cost" similar to negative side effects in drug therapies. Their focus was on early Pāli Buddhist texts on mindfulness and the self, and they did not discuss later Mahāyāna texts in which the concept of emptiness is more fully developed.

There are also some recent papers by Buddhist scholars and psychologists arguing for a much greater integration of Buddhist thought into Buddhist-influenced therapies. Their position is that the western use of mindfulness has been stripped of its historical and philosophical context, and therefore may be missing key elements that might improve its effectiveness. Shonin et al. (2014), for example, reviewed the basic elements of Buddhist psychology, and suggested that in addition to mindfulness practice, western psychology would benefit from incorporation of additional Buddhist psychophilosophical principles, including emptiness. Van Gordon et al. (2017) hypothesized that Buddhism is scientifically correct in its denial of an intrinsic self, and therefore any belief in such a self should be viewed as "maladaptive" and treated as an "ontological addiction" (p. 313). These contrasting views suggest that additional scholarship on this topic will be helpful.

Nāgārjuna's Philosophy of Emptiness

I now turn briefly to a review of western scholarship on Nāgārjuna's philosophy of emptiness. As I discussed above, the first western scholar to discuss Nāgārjuna was Eugene Burnouf, in 1844. Other early scholars included the Belgian La Vallée Poussin (1869 - 1938; Poussin, 1917), who interpreted emptiness as a form of nihilism, and the Russian Theodore Stcherbatsky (1866 - 1942; Stcherbatsky, 1923) who disagreed and interpreted emptiness as an ultimate, transcendental reality that supports the conventional reality of the everyday world. In 1955, the Indian scholar Tirupattur R.V. Murti (1902 – 1986) wrote the first comprehensive analysis of madhyamaka philosophy from a western philosophical perspective (Murti, 1955). He firmly rejected any nihilistic interpretation of emptiness, and instead viewed emptiness as something similar to Kantian transcendental idealism – "the Absolute … devoid of all predicates" (p. 229) that is "incommensurable and inexpressible" and "utterly transcendent to thought" (p. 231). Others, notably Richard Robinson (1957), argued that these interpretations incorrectly treated Nāgārjuna as a mystic rather than a philosopher, and argued that Nāgārjuna used classical logic to simply make the point that things lack essence. Another mid-century scholar, American Frederick Streng (1933 – 1993), interpreted emptiness through the lens of linguistic philosophy, arguing that Nāgārjuna, like the 20th-century western philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, was commenting on the inability of language to make any ultimately true metaphysical statements (Streng, 1967, p. 139). Tuck (1990) found that these (and other) interpretations reflected the western philosophical trends of their times, and that although all might be partially correct, none were necessarily a true picture of what Nāgārjuna himself intended to say.

Responding in part to Tuck's observation, recent scholars of Nāgārjuna have often attempted to interpret, or at least acknowledge, him on his own terms and in the context in which he lived, while also evaluating his ideas with reference to our own times and culture. Garfield (1995), for example, produced an English translation of and commentary on the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* that attempted to capture the skeptical philosophical understanding of Nāgārjuna developed in India and Tibet, with the goal of making this influential interpretation accessible to western philosophers. Garfield (2002) continued to discuss Nāgārjuna's philosophy as a form of skepticism, and applied it to some contemporary problems in the philosophy of science and religion. Walser (2005) took a historical approach, and interpreted Nāgārjuna's works in the context of the social position of Mahāyāna Buddhism in second century India. He argued that "Nāgārjuna's writings are far from the mere collection of abstract arguments that early Western scholars took them to be" (p. 266). Instead, Walser focused on what he saw as Nāgārjuna's rhetorical strategies for obtaining lay political support and maintaining good relationships with non-Mahāyāna monks.

Other scholars have continued to analyze Nāgārjuna's philosophy from a contemporary perspective, while also considering the historical context. Williams (2000) and Burton (1999) critically analyzed the logic of his philosophical arguments in the context of the Abhidharmist ontological beliefs of the second century. They focused especially on the accusations of nihilism that were commonly made against the Madhyamika by other Indian Buddhist traditions, and concluded that these criticisms had merit. They argued that Nāgārjuna's position that there are no fundamental, real entities meant that he believed that everything is merely a conceptual, mental construction,

without any ultimate foundation, a position they equate with ontological nihilism (Burton, 1999, pp 87-121). Because Nāgārjuna insisted that he was not, in fact, a nihilist, Burton (1999, p. 210) proposed that this issue presents a fundamental logical flaw in Nāgārjuna's philosophy.

Other recent philosophical evaluations of Nāgārjuna have been more charitable. Westeroff (2009) provided a systematic overview of Nāgārjuna's philosophy, including historical and modern objections to it, from a perspective that tried to maximize the philosophical cohesion of the surviving texts. He, like Garfield, interpreted Nāgārjuna in a way that was largely consistent with the Tibetan tradition. Along with a similar treatment by Carpenter (2014), Westerhoff concluded that Nāgārjuna's core philosophical position was to eliminate even the most subtle forms of clinging, even to the idea that there is an ultimate reality that differs from conventional reality (Westerhoff, 2009, p. 224). Westerhoff (2016) revisited the question of whether Nāgārjuna's explanation of emptiness entails nihilism. He dismissed Barton and Williams arguments as weak, noting that ontological support could simply be circular rather than hierarchical. He agreed, however, that there might be valid, philosophically sound, interpretations of emptiness as form of nihilism, and sketched out an example of such an interpretation. Westerhoff (2016) and Williams (2000) differed considerably on whether Nāgārjuna's conception of emptiness was metaphysically supportable, but both agreed that Nāgārjuna may have had cognitive, soteriological goals for his description of emptiness that introduce psychological dimensions that are distinct from his metaphysical arguments. Others (Cowherds, 2016) provided an analysis of how a correct understanding of emptiness might be expected to influence moral behavior. Finally, in addition to two centuries of

western scholarship, there is also a twelve-century tradition of Tibetan scholarship on Madhyamaka philosophy that has been influential on western studies of Nāgārjuna (e.g., Tenzin Gyatso & Thubten Chodron, 2022 ; Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa, 2006).

Nāgārjuna's historical influence on Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially in Tibet and east Asia, is well known. As I have summarized above, his philosophy of emptiness has also been of interest to western philosophers for more than 100 years. Over roughly this same time period, there has been a concurrent influence of Buddhism on western psychotherapy. This influence is particularly well known for some therapies developed in the 1980s and 1990s, such as ACT, MBST, DBT, and MBCT, that explicitly incorporate mindfulness as a therapeutic component. Despite some studies of the Buddhist content of these therapies, there has been no scholarship looking directly at the relationship between Nāgārjuna's philosophy of emptiness and the philosophical foundations of these therapies. This research aims to fill that gap, through a comparison of Nāgārjuna's writings on emptiness with the philosophical principles underlying two of these therapies, ACT and DBT. This comparison is of interest both because of Nāgārjuna's importance as a Buddhist philosopher, and because his view of emptiness has been considered by many ancient and modern scholars to be either the key to enlightenment, or to be nihilistic and dangerous. Understanding if implicit exposure to this philosophy through psychotherapy contributes to positive psychological outcomes is therefore of considerable interest. By analyzing if and how the concept of emptiness is implicitly presented in these therapies, and comparing this to an analysis of how Nāgārjuna himself treated the risks and benefits of contemplating emptiness, this thesis will contribute to our understanding of how Buddhist ideas may be most beneficially integrated into western psychotherapies and

mindfulness practices, and might also lead to new insights into the psychological benefits

of understanding emptiness.

Chapter III.

Emptiness in Two Buddhism-Influenced Therapies

In this section, I summarize the main elements of two Buddhism-influenced therapies, ACT and DBT, and analyze how a philosophy of emptiness is an important part of both. These influential therapies were developed in America in the 1980s and 1990s, and continued to be widely used today.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT, typically pronounced as the word "act") was developed by Steven Hayes and colleagues and described in a series of more than a dozen papers starting in 1984 (Hayes, 1984) and ending (for my purposes) in a book-length exposition and guidance for practitioners in 1999 (Hayes, 1999). The therapy remains widely used today, and the 1999 book has been cited by scholars > 11,000 times, including >600 citations in 2022 alone (google scholar profile for SC Hayes, accessed 12.11.2022). In addition to the two works mentioned above, I also consider a 1993 paper in which Hayes and his colleague Kelly Wilson developed their theory of language (Hayes & Wilson, 1993).

Hayes (1999) outlines several key ideas that form the foundations of ACT, and distinguish it from what he says were more typical of late-20th-century psychotherapeutic approaches. First, he argues that psychological suffering is a common, even default, condition of humanity. He contrasts this with the "disease" (p. 4) model of mental health,

in which a happy state is considered to be normal, and psychological suffering an abnormal, disordered condition analogous to a physical disease. He clarifies that the specific variety of suffering he is concerned with is psychological—the anxieties, depressions and neuroses common even among comfortable people whose physical needs are well met. He argues that suffering in the presence of physical comfort is uniquely human, and is caused by the vast increase in the use of language and symbolic reasoning in our recent evolutionary history.

ACT is therefore premised on idea that the development of verbal behavior (broadly defined to include any symbolic activity, including talking, thinking, writing, drawing, etc.) is the primary cause of psychological suffering for human beings (Hayes, 1999, p. 10). Hayes argues that language has the ability to turn thoughts or concepts into 'things' that appear as real, allowing for the creation of suffering in a verbally-created, mental world. The idea is that we live our lives through a conceptual, verbal lens, "constantly describing, categorizing, relating, and evaluating" (p. 50), and that "even the most obviously 'nonverbal' event becomes, at least in part, verbal for humans" (p. 50). Hayes's thesis is that if suffering is created in large part by an overuse of conceptual thinking, then providing alternatives to conceptual thinking, and becoming aware of its effects, will alleviate this suffering. Practical elements of the therapeutic approach are therefore designed to break down and limit the power of language by becoming aware of how it works for us, and by promoting less analytical ways of experiencing and interacting with our environment. As Hayes (1999, p. 12) puts it, "we must learn to use language without being consumed by it."

As the name of the therapy suggests, the methods ACT uses to undermine the power of language involve both 'acceptance" and 'commitment'. Acceptance in this context means the non-avoidance of the direct, non-verbally mediated experience of (especially) unpleasant or unwanted thoughts or feelings. As Hayes puts it, "in the ACT approach, a goal of healthy living is not so much to feel good, but rather to *feel* good" (Hayes, 1999, p. 77, emphasis in original). The idea is to experience things, such as emotions or physical sensations, directly, without too much conceptual analysis. If verbal analysis is adding to or creating suffering, as Hayes argues, reducing that analysis by promoting direct perception of feelings and sensations is expected to reduce that verbally-created suffering. In ACT, this acceptance is facilitated in part through present-moment awareness, mindfulness, and a separation of self from thoughts and feelings that Hayes terms "cognitive diffusion" (Hayes, 1999, p. 74). The goal of mindfulness in this context is to promote the realization that much of our normal experience is verbally or conceptually mediated:

> When we simply accept the fact that a thought is a thought, and a feeling is a feeling, a wide array of response options immediately become available. We begin to notice the process of thinking and feeling, not just the content of that activity. We begin to notice the act of structuring the world, and not just the apparently 'real' world silently structured by language. We being to notice that we are wearing colored glasses, rather than simply looking at the colored environment. (Hayes, 1999, p. 74)

As other have noted (e.g., Hayes, 2002; Ratnayake & Merry, 2018), the mindfulness practices promoted by ACT and other secular therapies such as MBSR are strikingly similar to descriptions of mindfulness in Buddhist texts, such as the *satipaṭṭhāna sutta* (Discourse on Mindfulness). In that text, a monk is advised to mindfully focus on four things: body, feelings, mind and phenomena. With regard to feelings, for example, the monk is to focus

contemplating feelings in feelings, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful … he dwells contemplating in feelings their nature of arising, or … of vanishing, or … of both arising and vanishing. Or else mindfulness that 'there is feeling' is simply established in him ..." (Bodhi, 2005, pp. 281; 295–286)

The similarity between the two approaches in their focus on mindful acceptance of thoughts and feelings seems clear.

Commitment, for Hayes, involves the identification of personal, internal values that do not rely on verbal analysis for their validity, and then working to promote long-term behaviors that are consistent with achieving those values (Hayes, 1999, p. 209). In this context, values are defined as "verbally constructed life consequences" (p. 206) that provide a framework for actions taken over long time periods. Although verbally stated, the content of these values is specifically *not* created through analytical means, but instead is created in a way that "transcends logical analysis and rational decision making" (p. 204). The reason for this is to avoid an infinite regression—if values are created through analytical judgement, then the criteria for that judgement must themselves be justified by other values, which require further criteria, and so on forever. As Hayes puts it, "selecting values is more like postulating, assuming, or operating on the basis of an axiom than it is like figuring out, planning, deciding, or reasoning" (p. 204). This is a topic I will return to later in Chapter IV.

Before examining how emptiness may be implicit in ACT, it is useful to first spend some time evaluating how the therapy views religion more generally. In the autobiography on his website, Hayes says that his initial interest in psychology was sparked by the humanistic ideas of Abraham Maslow, the behavioral science of B.F. Skinner, and a "casual" influence from eastern philosophy developed in part from a stay at an "eastern religious commune in Grass Valley, CA" (Hayes, n.d.). Hayes does not

provide further details, but it seems likely that he is referring to Ananda Village, an organization formed just north of Grass Valley in 1968 (and still there today) by the American Swami Kriyananda (born James Walters, 1926 – 2013). Walters was a disciple of Swami Paramahansa Yogananda (born Mukanda Lal Ghosh, in India, 1893 – 1952), a Hindu monk and spiritual leader who helped introduce yoga and meditation to the United States, along with a Vedantic-influenced philosophy emphasizing pantheism, connection to God, and commonality among all religious (Neumann, 2019).

This trio of humanism, scientific behavioralism, and religion is readily apparent in ACT. The scientific underpinnings of the therapy are mostly adapted from Skinner and the behavioralist school of psychology. Hayes and Wilsons' (1993) development of "relational frame theory", which they call a "contemporary behavior-analytic account of verbal events," builds on Skinner's theory of verbal behavior, and mentions Skinner's work more than thirty times. Consistent with this scientific, behavioralist background, Hayes also developed an entirely naturalistic theory of the "behavior" of spirituality, concluding, for example, that "the qualities of a metaphysical God can be understood as a metaphorical extension of the experienced qualities of seeing-seeing-from-perspective-behavior" (Hayes, 1984, p. 106). This topic will be discussed in greater detail below in the section on the self.

Despite the mostly naturalistic foundations of ACT, Hayes is notably sympathetic toward religion. Hayes (1984) may have developed a scientific explanation for spirituality, for example, but he also concluded (p. 106) that "there are strong cultural traditions that support the search for our spiritual dimensions." Hayes (1999, p. 10) says that religion and psychotherapy have similar goals, noting that the "world's great

31

religions constituted one of the first organized attempts to solve the problem of human suffering." Hayes also argues that religions have important insights into the causes and potential cures of this suffering. For example, he says the story of Genesis is a parable of how the loss of innocence through "evaluative knowledge" (p. 9) leads to suffering, saying that "each new human life retraces this ancient story" and that "we adults drag our children from the Garden with each word" (p. 10). The point he is making is that the type of human-specific suffering he is interested in—such as anxiety about mortality or uncertainty about the meaning of one's existence—is caused by concepts transmitted via language. Prior to developing the linguistic tools to consider such concepts, one lives in an Eden of blissful ignorance. He argues that religions have insights into potential cures for this conceptually-created affliction, noting that "the mystical [i.e., non-analytical] religious traditions probably constituted the first well-developed effort to loosen the effects of verbal products over human behavior" (p. 149). Finally, Hayes views ACT as fully compatible with spirituality and religion, noting that "it is perfectly acceptable to use religion-based stories or terms that the client already uses to support ACT interventions" (p. 199) and that "spirituality as a mode of intervention is highly valued in ACT" (p. 273). He further argues that because both ACT and meditative religions emphasize transcending everyday experience, "therapists who have this type of background [in Eastern religion or meditation] find it easier to adopt the ACT perspective" (p. 273). In summary, Hayes's approach is scientific, but he believes that religions have had genuine insights into the psychology of human suffering and how to alleviate it.

Dialectical Behavioral Therapy

32

DBT was developed by Marsha Linehan in the 1980s while she was a professor of psychology and a practicing clinical psychologist at the University of Washington. The therapy grew out of both her clinical practice and research on the use of 'standard' cognitive therapy to treat borderline personality disorder (BPD). BPD is a severe mental illness with a high incidence of suicide and self-destructive behavior, that Linehan characterizes as "a pervasive disorder of the regulation and the experience of the self" (Linehan, 1993, p. 11). The therapy is extensively described in a 1993 book for mental health practitioners and its accompanying training manual (Linehan, 1993, 2015), and Linehan has also written professional and personal accounts related to its development (Linehan, 2020; Linehan & Wilks, 2015). In addition to being a primary treatment for BPD, DBT is now commonly used to treat other conditions characterized by emotional dysregulation, such as eating disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder (Linehan & Wilks, 2015). The 1993 description of the therapy and its subsequent editions have been cited >19,000 times in the scientific and scholarly literature, including >1000 times in 2022 alone (google scholar profile for M. Linehan, accessed 7.5.23).

Like ACT, DBT has its roots in behavioral science, and utilizes many of the same behavioral and cognitive modification approaches employed by standard cognitive behavioral therapy (Linehan, 1993, pp. 19, 87, 123, 254–265). The development of DBT was motivated, however, by the difficulty of treating BPD patients using either standard cognitive or psychodynamic (Freudian, Jungian) approaches (Linehan, 1993, p. 3). Important differences between DBT and more typical cognitive therapies include an emphasis on 'dialectics' to promote flexible thinking, the use of mindfulness strategies to

increase tolerance for emotional discomfort, and a greater emphasis on a personal

relationship between therapist and patient (Linehan, 1993, pp. 19–22).

Similar to Hayes, Linehan is open about the influence of religion, including both

her native Catholicism and later-acquired Buddhism, on the development of DBT

(Linehan, 2020). A practicing Buddhist, she acknowledges her Zen Buddhism instructor

as an influence on her thinking, and discusses the importance of mindfulness skills drawn

from both eastern and western spiritual traditions (Linehan, 1993, p. vii,144). She

discusses Zen koans as an example of how to teach dialectical thinking (p. 205), and

makes several references to the Buddhist "middle path" as a non-rigid approach to life

that BPD patients (and therapists) should strive to emulate (e.g., pp. 124, 205). She also

notes the importance of metaphor and story-telling in working with psychologically

distressed patients, noting that nearly all religious traditions take this approach (p. 212).

Similar to ACT, DBT therefore clearly has its roots in the scientific, secular field of

behavioral psychology, but acknowledges influences from Buddhism and other religious

traditions.

Philosophical Frameworks

Both Hayes and Linehan emphasize the importance a "philosophy" (Hayes, 1999,

p. 16) or a "fundamental world view" (Linehan, 1993, p. 28) in developing and practicing

their respective psychotherapies. They appear to mean roughly the same thing by these

terms. Hayes uses the term *philosophy* to mean the assumptions and postulates necessary

to develop a theory of how the world works, and uses as an analogy a person's "point of

view" while looking over a landscape (Hayes, 1999, pp. 16–17). Linehan describes a

fundamental world view as something similar—the sometimes unstated basic

assumptions underlying a psychological theory (Linehan, 1993, p. 28). In this section, I

explore how Hayes and Linehan describe the philosophies (in the above sense of the

term) of ACT and DBT, respectively, and compare these to Nāgārjuna's view that all

things are dependently arisen and empty. In subsequent sections, I will compare how

Hayes, Linehan, and Nāgārjuna consider several specific things—language, the self, and

values—in greater detail.

According to Hayes, ACT is based on an underlying philosophy of "functional

contextualism," that involves three primary characteristics: "(1) focus on the whole event,

(2) sensitivity to the role of context in understanding the nature and function of the event,

and (3) a firm grasp on a pragmatic truth criterion" (Hayes, 1999, p. 18). Here, a "focus

on the whole event" means a commitment to non-reductionism for understanding a

client's behavioral or psychological problem. This involves looking at a person or a

behavioral event as the unit of interest, rather than appealing to a lower level, such as the

brain or biochemistry, for an explanation. Whatever "the whole" is determined to be (e.g.,

an event, a person, a behavior, a problem, etc.), it is defined pragmatically in relation to

the client's specific problems. For example, according to Hayes,

> the purpose of the analysis is to find how best to construct a stream of
> behavior into whole units, and these units are organized in terms of the
> way the behavior seems to change the situation from one state of affairs to
> another. (Hayes, 1999, p. 19)

Wholes in ACT are therefore conceptual constructs, created pragmatically in the service

of helping the client to achieve certain psychological goals.

Context, for Hayes, is the background of causes and conditions that influence

whatever is identified as the whole. In the limit, Hayes says that the entire universe ("the

totality", p. 19) is the context for any event, but in practice he is interested in locally

delimiting the context to just those features of the environment that have significant influence on the person or event of interest. If a particular behavior is the whole, context is the relevant part of the world "outside of the behavior" (p. 23) that could in principle be changed in a way to influence that behavior. For example, if the behavior in question is drinking to excess, some relevant context might be the presence or absence of alcohol in the house. Recall that for Hayes, "behavior" is broadly defined to include any human activity, including private behaviors such as thinking or experiencing an emotion, so the relevant context may be similarly broad, and could include other internal mental events in addition to things external to the client. Like the whole, context in ACT is also a conceptual construction, as it is defined and delimited by the therapist and the client.

Finally, the pragmatic truth criterion is the standard Hayes uses to evaluate whether the wholes and their contexts are correctly defined and appropriate to solving the problem at hand. It is based simply on whether the conceptualized wholes and contexts are useful for solving the client's problem, or helping them to achieve their goals, whatever those goals may be. Hayes emphasizes that this "a-ontological" approach stands in contrast to what he says is the more common scientific "mechanist" view of the world as a "machine of unknown design," whose parts exist in their own right just waiting to be discovered (Hayes, 1999, p. 20). Hayes defines a "mechanist" as someone who assumes "that all the world is a machine and that only one model [of reality] ultimately will be shown to be true" (p. 25). In contrast, for ACT, truth is not based on evaluating whether an idea or concept corresponds in a one-to-one way with some ultimate reality, but rather is based on evaluating whether a particular conception of reality leads to a successful outcome based on personal goals and values.

DBT also has a well-articulated underlying philosophy, that of dialectics. Linehan's description of dialectical ontology is in many ways similar to the functional contextualism of ACT, but with a greater emphasis on creative opposition. Linehan emphasizes three aspects of her dialectical approach: (1) interrelatedness and wholeness, (2) polarity, and (3) continuous change. Interrelatedness and wholeness, for Linehan, means something similar to functional contextualism in ACT, namely that both wholes and parts are conceptual constructs defined by individuals or by a society. Linehan calls this "a systems perspective on reality" (Linehan, 1993, p. 31), and notes that "identity itself is relational, and boundaries between parts are temporary and exist only in relation to the whole" (p. 31). She provides the example of how the "the self" is a psychological construct that differs depending upon one's culture, gender or social class, citing as examples studies that claim women tend to view the self in a more relational way than do men. If the self is viewed as a "whole", Linehan is saying that the composition of this whole depends entirely on how it is conceptualized, and may well differ from individual to individual. Like Hayes, Linehan is also an anti-reductionist, and does not think it is useful to analyze parts in isolation from the whole, however the whole is defined (p. 31). In other words, for Linehan any entity of interest consists of the parts (which themselves are simply other groups of entities) and all of the interactions among those parts.

Linehan describes *polarity*, the most obviously 'dialectical' aspect of DBT, as the idea that reality consists of opposing forces, a thesis and anti-thesis, from which emerges a synthesis of newly opposing forces (p. 32). DBT uses this idea in a variety of ways to challenge the overly literal thinking that is a characteristic of borderline personality disorder. A key aspect of polarity, however, is the idea that nothing has a single,

unchanging, intrinsic essence. As Linehan puts it, "that within dysfunction there is also function; that within distortion there is accuracy; and that within destruction one can find construction" (p. 33). Under this view, therefore, reality is never static, but consists only of *continuous change*, driven by the continual synthesis derived from the interaction between thesis and antithesis (p. 33). Truth, from this perspective, is therefore "neither absolute nor relative; rather it evolves, develops, and is constructed over time... nothing is self-evident, and nothing stands apart from anything else as unrelated knowledge" (p. 34). An overarching goal of DBT is to train patients to increase their dialectical thinking by internalizing this philosophy (p. 166). Linehan's use of this idea is a little bit like Hayes's use of the idea of context—that reality can be described in such a way that change is not only possible but is a part of the reality being conceptually created.

These functional-contextual (ACT) and dialectical (DBT) philosophies have some clear analogies to Nāgārjuna's philosophy of emptiness, that all things depend on other things and therefore all things are empty of essence. In particular, Hayes's rejection of the "mechanist" view that the world is preorganized into ultimately real parts seems basically the same as Nāgārjuna's rejection of the realist view that things exist with an intrinsic nature. Hayes uses the term "preorganized" to mean a part in a machine that exists in its own right prior to and independently of any human conceptualization. In other words, a preorganized part of a machine is a part that exists intrinsically—it *is* that part and our role is only to discover and describe its nature and function. Hayes's rejection of that view, at least as it is applied to what he terms whole events and their contexts, therefore implies that he considers those events and context to be empty of intrinsic existence.

Linehan, by arguing that reality consists of conceptually-defined wholes and parts seems to be saying much the same thing, that these things of interest do not exist intrinsically.

Their reason for rejecting the view that things have an intrinsic nature is also quite similar to Nāgārjuna's, namely that if things *did* have an intrinsic nature, then they would be unchangeable. Hayes argues that the whole purpose of psychotherapy is to help a client who is suffering make a change such that they are no longer suffering (Hayes, 1999, p. 24). In ACT, this is done largely through changing the context that influences this suffering. Hayes argues, however, that under a mechanist (i.e., realist) philosophy, there is nothing "that demands that the goal of influence be met, and often it is not" (Hayes, 1999, p. 25). His reasoning is that under a mechanist view, the goal is to describe reality, not necessarily to change it, in contrast to the functional contextual view in which reality itself is *defined* in way that allows for and even encourages change to happen. His reasoning thus seems quite similar to Nāgārjuna's discussion of suffering in MMK 24.23 (see p. 3)—that if suffering is viewed as intrinsic, it follows that it also must be viewed as unceasing.

Linehan is similarly interested in constructive change, and makes arguments that overly-realist thinking creates psychological conditions that inhibit such change. In a clear reference to the frequent Buddhist idea of a 'middle way', she places dialectical thinking as a " 'middle path' between universalistic thinking and relativistic thinking" (Linehan, 1993, p. 120). She notes (p. 121) that while universalists consider truth to be fixed, absolute and unchanging, and relativists consider truth to be entirely personal and subjective, dialectical thinkers construct a truth through a negotiation that avoids the pitfalls of either the universalist or relativist extremes. In addition to being similar

Nāgārjuna's observation that liberation involves avoiding the extremes of either realism or nihilism[8], Linehan's point here is the same as Hayes's and Nāgārjuna's—she is arguing that the belief that things have intrinsic nature is incompatible with the belief that those things can change.

The analysis outlined above suggests that there are some clear similarities between how Nāgārjuna, Hayes, and Linehan view the nature of the existence of some things that are of interest to them. In particular, within the frameworks of their psychotherapies, both Hayes and Linehan emphasize that the things that matter most to them—people, behaviors, thoughts, events—do not exist inherently. Translated into Nāgārjuna's terminology, Hayes and Linehan are saying these things are empty. Nāgārjuna, however, said that *no thing* exists inherently, and that *all things* are empty. Is this idea of universal emptiness also present in ACT or DBT?

To add some context to this question, it is helpful to put Nāgārjuna's ontology of emptiness into the context of other ancient Buddhist ontologies, particularly the Abhidharma ontology that he was, in part, arguing against (see Westerhoff, 2009, for a thorough discussion of this topic). The Abhidharma literature that predated Nāgārjuna postulated a world in which ordinary objects (tables, chairs, humans) could be ultimately decomposed into part-less fundamental particles (*dharma*). Under this ontological view, these *dharma* were characterized as having an intrinsic, self-existence (*svabhāva*), but second-order objects such as everyday things were not. Nāgārjuna and his madhyamaka successors argued that, in fact, nothing has *svabhāva*, that no objects of any type are

---

[8] *jñāne nāstyastitāśānteḥ pāpapuṇyavyatikramaḥ / durgateḥ sugateś cāsmāt sa mokṣaḥ sadbhir ucyate* (RA 1.45). When one has learned to let go of both realism and nihilism, one has conquered both sin and virtue. That is why the wise have said there is liberation from both good fortune and misfortune.

fundamental. Thus, nearly all Buddhist would agree that complex things like people, thoughts, language, ideas, etc., do not exist intrinsically, but various Buddhist traditions differed considerably in their views about what, if anything, does have intrinsic existence. In this context, the ontologies underlying both ACT and DBT appear fully consistent with the general Buddhist view that a person and their complex of associated psychological structures and events are empty of intrinsic existence, but further investigation is required to evaluate whether either follows the madhyamaka view that all of reality lacks such intrinsic existence.

Hayes and Linehan are psychotherapists and psychological researchers. As such, they understandably focus mostly on mental phenomena, and do not spend much time discussing whether the underlying philosophies of functional contextualism or dialectics apply to things broadly outside of the context of psychotherapy. Of the two, Linehan comes closest to explicitly stating that no thing has a true essence. She says, for example, that "reality" itself is constantly changing (Linehan, 1993, p. 32), but according to Nāgārjuna (and I think Linehan would agree), things with essence cannot change. She states (p. 32) that physicists have failed to ever identify a fundamental particle, suggesting that she believes that matter is infinitely reducible to smaller parts, and therefore without a fundamental essence. She notes (p. 28) that dialectal approaches are broadly applied in "almost every social and natural science," indicating that if dialectics can be equated with a lack of essence (as I have argued above) this lack applies to social and natural science broadly, not just within the context of psychotherapy. Notably, she also says that dialectics itself is a "world view" (p. 28) and a "*perspective* on the nature of reality" (p. 31, my emphasis), not that it is necessarily the nature of reality itself. In this

way, she seems to be saying that dialectics is a conceptual construct with which to view the world, not (necessarily) an essential feature of nature. This is important because Nāgārjuna was also careful to explain that emptiness was a dependently-arisen concept (see MMK 24.18, p. 3), and warned against viewing emptiness itself as something that was ultimately real (MMK 13.8; see footnote 25).

Hayes is less explicit about saying that no thing has intrinsic existence, but does seem to imply that the contextual, pragmatic philosophy underlying ACT extends beyond psychotherapy to encompass all of reality. In describing the philosophy of ACT, for example, he states that "truth is always local and pragmatic" (Hayes, 1999, p. 19), and cites philosophers of science, such as Kurt Gödel and Stephen Pepper, who argued against the ability to make any absolutely true statements about reality. As I discuss above, he also argued in general terms against the scientific philosophy of a ready-made world, suggesting that he may view a lack of essence to characterize reality more broadly than just in the context of psychotherapy.

Regardless of the metaphysics, both Hayes and Lineman are saying that an appropriate *view* of reality can create a foundation for psychological well-being. As I reviewed in the previous chapter (and will touch upon again in the next), some scholars have argued that Nāgārjuna's primary purpose for refuting essence was also for the sake achieving psychological well-being, rather than proving some metaphysical point. Indeed, he famously claims that he has no thesis at all, a topic that will be explored further below. His purpose, like that of Hayes and Linehan, therefore may be in some sense therapeutic, and if so, the appropriate comparison between his claims of emptiness and those of Hayes and Linehan might be limited to the realms of their respective

therapeutic goals. Claims of truly universal emptiness, for example, might be important for Buddhist enlightenment, but perhaps a more limited claim of emptiness of psychological phenomena might be sufficient for the specific mental problems that are the target of ACT and DBT. The topic of exactly how an understanding of emptiness is psychologically beneficial is the subject of the next chapter. First, however, I explore how Hayes, Linehan and Nāgārjuna treat the emptiness of two specific phenomena, language and self, in greater detail.

Language

Hayes primarily applies ACT's contextual, a-ontological philosophy to the operation of language. Nāgārjuna does not explicitly discuss a philosophy of language (see Westerhoff, 2009, Chapter 9), but there are many areas in his writings where his approach to language and verbal or cognitive behavior can be readily inferred. A good example is seen in three famous verses from MMK, chapter 24: The dharma instruction of the Buddhas' rested on two truths: the world's conventional truth, and the ultimately real truth. / Those who do not recognize the distinction between these two truths, fail to recognize the profound truth in the teaching of the Buddha. / Without the support of convention, ultimate truth is not taught. When ultimate truth is not understood, nirvana is not attained (MMK 24.8-10)[9]

---

[9] *dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā / lokasaṃvṛtisatyaṃ ca satyaṃ ca paramārthataḥ // ye 'nayor na vijānanti vibhāgaṃ satyayor dvayoḥ / te tattvaṃ na vijānanti gambhīre buddhaśāsane // vyavahāram anāśritya paramārtho na deśyate / paramārtham anāgamya nirvāṇaṃ nādhigamyate* (MMK 24.8-10).

There appear to be at least three important messages related to language in these verses. First, our everyday understanding of the world through normal conventions does not reflect the ultimate, true nature of reality. The word 'conventional' (*saṃvṛti, vyavahāra*) here is used in the sense of what is generally accepted when going about one's normal, everyday life. This would certainly include the use of language, as well as non-verbal or non-linguistic conventions or customs, for example driving on a particular side of the road, and likely even non-human customs, such as a cow eating grass. Second, it is critical to recognize that conventional reality, as it is naively understood, is not ultimate reality— according to Nāgārjuna the recognition of this distinction is the profound truth in the Buddha's teachings. Third, despite its limitations, conventional reality is a tool (for example, through language and teaching) that is needed to point the way toward an understanding of ultimate reality and onward toward liberation. Conventional understanding of the world is therefore a necessary step toward enlightenment, but it is important for those who seek liberation to understand that the reality of convention, as it is naively-understood, is not ultimate reality.

Hayes (1999) makes essentially the same points in describing the philosophy of language that underpins ACT. He notes, for example, that "it is inherently difficult to use analytic language to declaw analytic language" (p. 12), but often that it is nonetheless necessary to do so. He provides the example of his own use of written language to describe the path to liberation from language, saying "we are writing a book, not dancing or meditating" (p. 12). In a chapter providing practical advice to therapists on how to reduce the power of language over their clients, he says "the therapist must, with words, change how words function for the client" and "to teach the client to see thoughts and

feelings for what they are (i.e., a verbally entangled process of minding) rather than what they advertise themselves to be (e.g., the world understood, structured reality)" (p. 150). Put into the language of Nāgārjuna, the client is making a mistake in believing things (in this case thoughts) to have substance (*svabhāva*) when they are in fact dependently arisen (*pratītya samutpāda*) and thus empty (*śūnya*). The therapist must, however, use the tools of conventional reality (i.e., words) to help teach the client see this truth, exactly as Nāgārjuna says in MMK 24.10.

Nāgārjuna and Hayes also are in agreement that the mistaken belief that things have essence when they are in fact empty is both a common condition of humanity and the source of much suffering. This is a major theme in the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā*, seen for example in these two verses: Common people, who think things have an essence of their own, have mistaken non-reality for reality. People who are anguished are thus deceived by their own mind. / When there is belief in essence, there is an embrace of harmful views, followed by a great production of desire and hatred, and from that conflicts arise (YS 24, 46).[10] It is possible, however, to move from a state of ignorance to a state of knowledge: At first, it is said 'all this that is seen is real.' Later, the person who has detached from such things is revealed (YS 30).[11]

Hayes makes similar points regarding ACT, noting that

> you [the client] have been caught up in a trap that has caught most, if not all, other humans, and now you have a chance to confront that head-on and really learn something [i.e., the emptiness of language-created reality] that many people will never learn. (Hayes, 1999, p. 110)

---

[10] *sadasadbhirviparyastā ātmabhāvāḥ pṛthagjanāḥ / kleśavamśagatāḥ sattvā ātmacinttena vañcitāḥ // rāgadveṣodbhavastīvra duṣṭadṛṣṭiparigraḥ / vivādāstatsamutthāśca bhāvābhyupagame sati* (YS 24, 46).
[11] *ādau tattvamidaṃ dṛṣṭam sarvamstīti kathyate / jānannarthānnasakto 'pi paścānnunam vivicyate* (YS 30).

Hayes also views the client and therapist as facing the same fundamental problems and solutions that all people face, not that the therapist is trying to bring the client back to a 'normal' healthy state: "The same language traps that capture the client are also those that capture the therapist" (p. 267). As a behavioral psychologist, Hayes seeks to "understand how language creates the entanglements that make human psychological health and happiness so elusive" and "to try to establish and support cultural practices inside psychotherapy and out that ameliorate these destructive processes in a socially broader way" (p. 287). In other words, ACT, like Nāgārjuna (and Buddhism more broadly, and most other religions) is seeking to create solutions to existential problems facing all humans, not just those who are suffering from some named psychological disorders.

Despite these clear similarities, it is important to note that Nāgārjuna and Hayes differ in at least one important way. For Hayes, language itself, and the misconstrued reality he says it creates, is the primary source of the mental suffering that is of interest to him. He says that non-verbal creatures, such pet animals, are content whenever they have their physical and social needs met (Hayes, 1999, p. 3). As I discussed above, he also says that children are "dragged from Eden" as they learn language, implying that well-cared-for, pre-verbal children are in some sense living in the contentment of paradise. I doubt that Nāgārjuna would agree with this. For Nāgārjuna, the conventional (*vyavahāra, lokasaṃvṛti*) certainly includes language, but also includes all other aspects of unenlightened, normal, day-to-day existence. This would include the unthinking and simple desires of animals and children for food and comfort. That in some cases these desires might be temporarily met would not change the fact that animals and children are living a life unthinkingly driven by such desires. In this sense, animals and children may

46

not suffer from the complex, language-driven anxieties that concern Hayes, but Nāgārjuna could well say that they do suffer from an incorrect understanding of conventional existence as they inhabit it.

In DBT, Linehan takes what initially appears to be a quite different approach to language, one that involves *increasing* the use of language to describe and label psychological states and events. She argues that "the ability to apply verbal labels to behavioral and environmental events is essential for both communication and self-control" (Linehan, 1993, p. 145). The goal of this approach, however, is not to suggest to the patient that they are labeling phenomena that exist intrinsically, but rather to use language to become more aware of and emotionally removed from the psychological states that are being labeled. She notes (p. 145) that borderline individuals tend to accept without question thoughts and emotions as inherently real (e.g., "I feel unloved" becomes "I am unlovable"), and that using words to describe these feelings is a tool for breaking down those automatic assumptions. She also notes, similar to Nāgārjuna's statement in YS 30 (above), that over time a patient becomes more aware that their internal mental states are not inherent. In this way, the use of verbal labeling in DBT can be seen as analogous to Nāgārjuna's instruction to use the conventional truth to teach about ultimate truth.

Another, similarity between ACT, DBT and Nāgārjuna's philosophy of language is how they say that language creates a sense of paradox at the heart of human existence, that things (including ourselves) both are and are not. As Hayes and Wilson (1993, p. 295) put it, "this is the core of the 'human dilemma' – the capacity for verbal meaning and meaninglessness are always two sides of the same coin." They provide an example of

a person who constructs meaning by making contributions to the world, but is filled with despair at the ultimate purposelessness of a universe whose only end is certain destruction. Their solution is to deemphasize the use of words and verbal reasoning, and to emphasize the use of free, unjustified choice, at least in some aspects of life. As they put it, "the healthy selection of ultimate purposes can be done only as a choice. If done as a decision [a verbally justified position], the logical network leads inexorably back to the reality of death and the collapse of the universe" (p. 296). Hayes (1999, p. 281) extends this balance of meaning and meaningless, reality and unreality, to ACT itself, exhorting their readers "don't *believe* a word in this book", and noting that "it does no good to provide an analysis of how language naturally leads to cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance, only to turn around and present another 'answer' that is to be held as an 'answer'."

Nāgārjuna makes similar points about the limits of verbal reasoning for constructing ultimate meaning, although, as I will discuss in the next chapter, the lesson he draws from this differs from Hayes' suggestion to use unjustified choice to create meaning in life. In the *Ratnāvalī*, Nāgārjuna says: The Buddha said that which is seen, heard, etc. is neither true nor false. Indeed, from a thesis, an anti-thesis would exist. Both are not truly real (RA 2.4).[12] The second half of this verse is saying that if one makes a verbal argument in favor of a position, the contrary argument naturally follows. If, for example, one was to argue that the world is ultimately good, the counter-argument that it is ultimately bad is naturally formed. Nāgārjuna's point, that ultimately true statements are not possible, is similar to Hayes's argument, that verbal reasoning is not useful for

---

[12] *dṛṣṭaśrutādyaṃ muninā na satyaṃ na mṛṣoditam / pakṣād dhi pratipakṣaḥ syād ubhayaṃ tac ca nārthataḥ* (RA 2.4).

creating an ultimate purpose for one's life. Indeed, for Nāgārjuna, those who achieve full

liberation do not make statements or theories: For the noble ones, there exists no thesis

and no reasoning. For those whose thesis does not exit, where is their anti-thesis? (YS

50).[13]

The meaning of this verse is, presumably, not that the noble ones make no

statements at all (the historical Buddha, after all, was reported to make many statements),

but rather that those who are enlightened recognize that the world is not something about

which *ultimately true* statements can be made. In the same way as Hayes, Nāgārjuna

therefore also makes clear that his own thesis is merely conventional and empty, and

cautions that emptiness itself should not be seen as an ultimate truth: Let it be, that

'empty', 'non-empty', 'both and neither' should not be claimed. It is said but for the sake

of instruction (MMK 22.11).[14] Or, even that there is any ultimate truth: All is truth, not

truth, both truth and not truth, neither truth nor not truth. This is the instruction of the

Buddha (MMK 18.8).[15]

However, based on the first half of RA 2.4, it is clear that Nāgārjuna says the

problem of believing the objects of conventional reality exist essentially extends beyond

language to also include non-verbal perceptions—those things that are seen, heard, etc.

Indeed, that Nāgārjuna mentions these sensory perceptions in the same context as a

"thesis" implies that he views the error they create to be the same as the error of stating a

thesis. The problem, then, is not just in making a statement about ultimate reality, but

---

[13] *mahātmanām na pakṣo vā vitarko vā na vidyate / yeṣām na vidyate pakṣeḥ parapakṣaḥ kutas teṣām* (YS 50).

[14] *śūnyam iti na vaktavyam aśūnyam iti vā bhavet / ubhayaṃ nobhayaṃ ceti prajñaptyarthaṃ tu kathyate* (MMK 22.11).

[15] *sarvaṃ tathyaṃ na vā tathyaṃ tathyaṃ cātathyam eva ca / naivātathyaṃ naiva tathyam etad buddhānuśāsanam* (MMK 18.8).

rather in the internalized belief in such a reality. In this way the error of perceiving

something and believing it to be essential is the same sort of error as stating a thesis about

the essential nature of reality—both are incorrectly assuming essence where Nāgārjuna

says none exists. Indeed, in addition to not making statements about ultimate reality,

Nāgārjuna says that those who are enlightened also *see* that the world exists without

essence: With knowledge of the illusion [of essence], the being who is not stuck in the

mud of normal existence, sees with the eyes of a noble one (YS 54).[16]

DBT, with its dialectical perspective on the nature of reality, makes similar

points, particularly that neither a thesis nor its anti-thesis can ever be regarded as

ultimately true. Similar to Nāgārjuna in RA 2.4, Linehan says that a dialectical

perspective means that "all propositions contain within them their own oppositions"

(Linehan, 1993, p. 32), and that "the synthesis in a dialectic contains elements of both the

thesis and the antithesis, so that neither of the original positions can be regarded as

'absolutely' true" (p. 34). In the context of psychotherapy, by "thesis" Linehan seems to

mean a firmly-held belief about reality, held by the patient about herself or others. She

notes that borderline individuals "hold rigidly to points of view", searching for "concrete

truths and concrete facts that never change" (p. 121), and gives as examples a patient who

believes that even the smallest fault makes it impossible for the patient to be a good

person (p. 35), or a therapist who believes a patient's destructive behavior is entirely and

only maladaptive (p. 33). DBT tries to break down these types of absolutist views by

countering theses with anti-theses, and attempting to create a new synthesis that moves

the patient in the direction of less rigid thinking. Importantly, the synthesis itself is a

---

[16] *cakṣurbhyām viṣayānnāma vimbajñānena paśyati / karmapaṅkeṣvanāsakto bhāvo yathā mahātmanaḥ* (YS 54).

dialectic, so that process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis continues without ever ending in any ultimate truth. The philosophy of DBT is to help the individual see that both a thesis or its antithesis may be simultaneously true and untrue. Similar to Nāgārjuna in MMK 18.8, Linehan says (p. 121) that her purpose is not to make a patient see life as a shade of gray, but rather to realize that the truth might be both black and white (and perhaps neither) at the same time.

Self

   A second area of psychological comparison that I would like to touch on is how ACT, DBT and Nāgārjuna view the self. Hayes (2002) has previously compared ACT's concept of the self with how Buddhism broadly considers the self, and I will start with a brief summary of his analysis. He notes that ACT has three concepts of the self: a conceptual self, a process self, and an observing self. The conceptual self is defined as how we think of ourselves as person. It is a combination of how a person views their own history and life story, reinforced by social interactions that shape how the person thinks of themself. As Hayes puts it, it is all the qualifiers that complete the phrase "I am a person who…" (Hayes, 1999, p. 182). Hayes views the conceptual self as a source of trouble, because for many people their sense of conceptual self is resistant to change and becomes a source of self-deception and conflict. He gives as an example someone whose conception of themself as kind makes them unable to admit to times when they behaved in an unkind way (p. 182). The process self, in contrast, is the moment-to-moment self awareness of changes in emotions, thoughts and sensations. For Hayes, this is also at least partially a conceptual, verbal self, but one that is uncritically describing one's current state, rather than integrating and interpreting it. As such, Hayes views a well-

functioning process self as psychologically beneficial, in that it is providing a reliable source of information about one's current physical and psychological state. That source of information can be used adaptively, for example by knowing when to stop talking when one is feeling angry. Finally, ACT's observing self, also termed "self as context" (p. 185), is claimed to be an unchanging sense of perspective that creates a division between 'I' and 'not-I'. It is, according to Hayes, only a perspective, the "context" that is left after removing the "content" that makes up the conceptual and process selves. Because it is defined as a perspective with no content (a locus, not a thing), Hayes says that this sense of self remains constant and unchanging throughout a person's lifetime. Hayes also views this sense of self as psychologically beneficial, "because it means that there is at least one stable, unchangeable, immutable fact about oneself that has been experienced directly and is not just a belief or a hope or an idea" (Hayes, 2002, p. 65). He hypothesizes that the sense of a constant, unchanging observing self is a naturalistic explanation for spiritual feelings and emotions (Hayes, 1984).

Hayes (2002) argues that ACT and Buddhism are similar in the view that mistaking the conceptual self as a real, permanent entity is a major source of psychological suffering. Similarly, he views the process self as a form of mindfulness that is also at least broadly compatible with Buddhist teachings. Hayes notes that ACT's unchanging observing self, to the degree that it is considered to be a real entity, might be incompatible with Buddhist teachings, which generally say that there is nothing about a person that is immutable. However, I do not think Nāgārjuna would object to ACT's claim that *a sense* of an unchanging observing self exists. In the *Ratnāvalī*, for example, he says: In the same way the image of one's face is seen in a mirror but the image is truly

nothing, / so the self is created by means of the aggregates. It is truly like the reflection of one's face. / Just as without the means of a mirror the reflection of one's face is not seen, so without the means of the aggregates, "I" is not seen (RA 1.31-33).[17]

In these three verses, there are at least three potential aspects of self—the aggregates, the conception of self (Sanskrit: *ahamkara*, literally "I-making") and the one who acquires the conception of self. The aggregates in this case refer to the five Buddhist *skandhas*, consisting of material form (*rūpa*), feelings or sensations (*vedanā*), perception (*saṃjñā*), mental formations (*saṃskāra*), and consciousness (*vijñāna*). These make up the whole human being, and seem to be similar to ACT's process self and perhaps some elements of the conceptual self (e.g., thoughts about oneself). Nāgārjuna's 'conception of self' seems likely to be something very similar to the conceptual self in ACT. This leaves a third self as the one who acquires a conception of self, which certainly seems similar to ACT's observing self, or self as context. Nāgārjuna argues that all of these aspects of self are dependently arisen and thus empty of any essence. This seems fully compatible with the three types of self in ACT, however, including the observing self. In particular, Hayes does not say that ACT's observing self has any essence (Hayes 2002, p. 65), only that it is *perceived* to be unchanging and immutable by the observer, and that focusing on this sense of self has therapeutic value. Nāgārjuna might well disagree with the latter point, as it is arguably a form of clinging to something perceived as substantial that is in fact

---

[17] *yathādarśam upādāya svamukhapratibimbakam / dṛśyate nāma tac caivaṃ na kiṃcid api tattvataḥ // ahaṃkāras tathā skandhān upādāyopalabhyate / na ca kaścit sa tattvena svamukhapratibimbavat // yathādarśam anādāya svamukhapratibimbakam / na dṛśyate tathā skandhān anādāyāham ity api* (RA 1.31-33).

empty, but it seems likely he would not disagree with the (conventional, empty) existence of the phenomenon in the first place.

In addition to possible Buddhist or other eastern religious influence, ACT's philosophy of self also reflects the therapy's behavioralist roots. ACT (and DBT) are drawn in part from the behavioralist branch of western psychology, initially developed by B.F. Skinner and others in the mid-20th century. The behavioralist view of the self and the person has at least some similarities to the general Buddhist view. Both view the person, physically and mentally, as a composite of interacting parts, none of which consist of an unchanging "self" or "soul". In the typical Buddhist view, the person is made up of five aggregates. Similarly, behavioralists categorize behaviors into groups, such as movement, cognitive, verbal, and physiological (Linehan, 1993, p. 37). Both Buddhists and behavioralists also emphasize the importance of cause-and-effect interactions among these systems and the environment for shaping human behavior, including private mental behavior (see e.g. Linehan, 1993, p. 41). These general similarities appear to be based mostly on convergent, shared insights into human behavior and function, rather than any overt, direct influence of Buddhist ideas on Skinner or other founders of behavioralism (e.g., Hanson, 2009; Wright, 2017).

Similar to Hayes and Nāgārjuna, Linehan views misconceptions of the self as an important source of suffering, particularly for the BPD patients that are her focus. One characteristic of BPD is a very weak temporal conception of self, with a strong tendency to look outward rather than inward for a sense of identity. In this way, those suffering from BPD do not necessarily make the mistake of taking the self as unchanging, but do

incorrectly view it as intrinsic and completely real within each moment of time. As Linehan puts it:

> For a borderline patient, another person's anger at her in a particular interaction is not buffered by either other relationships where people are not angry or other points in time when this person is not angry at her. 'You are angry at me' become infinite reality. The part becomes the whole. (Linehan, 1993, p. 36)

This example illustrates that there are perhaps many ways that a conventional sense of self can be corrupted in psychologically damaging ways. Hayes, and Nāgārjuna, seem to mostly focus on the error of mistaking the self as something that is essential and unchanging, whereas Linehan focuses here more on the error of mistaking the self for something that has no temporal stability at all. The focus of DBT is to teach patients the skills and insights needed to construct a more temporally stable sense of self that allows these types of painful moments to be placed in a broader, more coherent context. As I will discuss later, this practical, behavioral approach has much in common with Nāgārjuna's own view of the steps toward liberation from false conceptions of self and reality.

Two important areas of emphasis for Linehan that are either absent or less prominent in Nāgārjuna's writings are the role of gender in forming self-identity, and the related role that widespread *societal* misconceptions of self play in creating suffering not just for whose who hold the misconceptions but also for others in the society. At the time that Linehan developed DBT, women made up approximately 75% of BPD diagnoses and DBT was initially developed and tested on a female population (Linehan, 1993, p. 4). Linehan notes that childhood sexual abuse is common among BPD patients, and discusses the role that sexism more broadly may play in making BPD more prevalent in women than men (Linehan, 1993, pp. 52–56). In considering the interaction between

gender and sense of self, she argues that women may tend to have a more interactive,

relational sense of self than is typical for men. American society, she argues, prioritizes

the more masculine, independent conception of self, resulting in a stronger tendency

toward alienation in women. As she puts it, "there is a 'poorness of fit' between women's

interpersonal style and Western socialization and cultural values for adult behavior"

(Linehan, 1993, p. 55). In other words, behaviors common in a society that views the self

as independent, discrete and atomic may be a source of particular suffering for

individuals who have a more interactive and fluid sense of personal identity.

Nāgārjuna does not directly discuss the interaction of gender and self in any of the

works generally attributed to him. He does, however, emphasize that the self-conceptions

of those in power can influence society more broadly, for good or for ill. This is

particularly evident in *Ratnāvalī* chapter 4, where he advises on the proper way for a king

to think and behave. He notes that those in power are rarely criticized, creating in them an

unhealthy sense of self importance: A king behaving even in an unlawful, unfit manner

knows not what is right and what is wrong because he is praised by his dependents due to

fear (RA 4.1).[18] He then nonetheless proceeds to offer a broad range of, in his words,

unpleasant (*apriyaṃ*; RA 4.3) advice, mostly along the lines of limiting the role of

personal, kingly power, and instead emphasizing the importance of interactions with

ministers, compassion, and the rule of law. Some of this advice appears to be in the

service of obtaining royal acceptance of the nascent Mahāyāna movement (see Walser,

2005 for an extensive discussion). Much of it, though, seems to be cautionary arguments

against just the sort of overly-independent sense of self to which any king or any

---

[18] *adharmam anyāyyam api prāyo rājā 'nujīvibhiḥ / ācaran stūyate tasmāt kṛcchrād vetti kṣamā 'kṣamam* (RA 4.1).

56

powerful person may be prone. His metaphor for a proper king is therefore not an

independent, masculine figure, but rather a tree: This king is a tree, swollen with a wealth

of flowers, bestowing great fruit. He, the one with a virtuous shadow, is served by his

subjects like birds (RA 4.40).[19]

In this way, Nāgārjuna seems to be in agreement with Linehan that an incorrect

conception of self, particularly in the powerful, creates suffering not only for those who

hold it, but also for those with whom they interact. He also takes the opportunity to prove

his point by showing that at least one basic aspect of good behavior follows directly from

an understanding of emptiness. In particular, he provides two reasons for the king to be

selfless, generous and compassionate. First, because such behavior will lead to a good

rebirth (and bad behavior the opposite), and second because the pleasures available to

such a selfish king are empty and not worth pursuing. The second reason is of interest to

us here, because Nāgārjuna's rationale is directly related to his theory of emptiness.

He starts his argument by noting that pleasure exists only as either the absence of

suffering or as an internal, imaginary event, neither of which is thing in its own right: All

the world's pleasure consists only of the boundless imagination and the removal of

boundless suffering. Hence, it is truly is not something in itself (RA 4.48).[20] After listing

some of the worldly pleasures that might tempt a king, he then sets out to show that both

the pleasures of the imagination and the pleasures of the senses are dependently arisen

and empty. He notes, for example, that the senses can engage with only one object at a

time, which indicates that the pleasures obtained from other objects only exist dependent

---

[19] *sammānasphītakusumaḥ sampradānamahāphalaḥ / rājavṛkṣaḥ kṣamācchāyaḥ sevyate bhṛtyapakṣibhiḥ*
(RA 4.40).

[20] *duḥkhapratikriyāamātraṃ kalpanāmātram eva ca / lokasya sukhasarvasvaṃ vyartham etad ato'rthataḥ*
(RA 4.48).

upon the senses (RA 4.52). Going further, he says that the objects and the senses are themselves dependent on each other, so neither the object nor the sensory perception of it exist with essence of their own (RA 4.54). He concludes from this that once one truly understands the emptiness of all things, one will no longer experience a desire for pleasure or an aversion to pain: Thus, from insight into its essential non-existence, the thirst for obtaining pleasure is dispelled, as is the thirst for the avoidance of pain. One must see that this indeed is liberation (RA 4.63).[21]

This argument is important in the context of RA chapter 4, the purpose of which is to convince the king to be a good king—one who is noble, competent, compassionate, and generous. Nāgājuna is arguing that an understanding of emptiness leads to moderate behavior, and thus to both personal liberation and (especially in the case of the powerful) to societal well being. I think Linehan and Hayes would clearly agree with this line of argument, at least as applied to misconceptions of the nature of self or language. Linehan, as I discussed above, is concerned that an incorrect understanding of the nature of self creates suffering, both for individuals and for society at large. Hayes also connects the personal to the societal, arguing that the information age has both increased the power of language beyond what it had been in the past, and at the same time undermined traditional practices, such as prayer and meditation, that were historically important for limiting the power of language. Like Nāgārjuna, he believes that individual insight into emptiness (in this case specifically of language) is important not just for the individual but for society as a whole, saying that solving the psychological problems created by language is "the most important psychological task we face as a species" (Hayes, 1999, p.

---

[21] *sukhe saṃyogatṛṣṇaivaṃ naiḥsvābhāvyāt prahīyate / duḥkhe viyogatṛṣṇā ca paśyatāṃ muktir iti ataḥ* (RA 4.63).

287). In the next chapter, I continue to pursue the theme of how exactly insight into emptiness may be beneficial, and also explore whether there might be some risks associated with contemplating emptiness.

Chapter IV.

Benefits and Risks of Therapeutic Emptiness

The special doctrine, the clear meaning, the luminous teaching of the Buddhas' is thus: the emptiness of all things.

Nirvana and existence are not two separate things. It is said, nirvana is only the correct perception of worldly existence (CS-AS 56, YS 6).[22]

For Nāgārjuna and his Mahāyāna successors, correctly understanding the emptiness of all things was not just for the sake of understanding the ontology of the world, but was also the key to attaining enlightenment and achieving nirvana. Later Mahāyāna texts, such as *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (Teachings of Vimalakīrti), emphasize this even more explicitly, and speak of tens of thousands of people becoming instantly enlightened upon hearing and understanding the teachings of emptiness (Gómez & Harrison, 2022). The *Vajracchedikā sutra* (Diamond Cutter sutra) ranks even a partial understanding of emptiness, especially if it is also taught to others, as more important to attaining enlightenment than doing countless millions of meritorious deeds (Price & Wong, 2005). As I have argued in Chapter III, insight into emptiness also seems to be an important component of two widely used, contemporary, western psychotherapies. In both ancient and modern times, therefore, there clearly appears to be something about seeing into the emptiness of reality that is psychologically beneficial. In this chapter, I

---

[22] *dharmayautukam ākhyātaṃ buddhānāṃ śāsanāmṛtam / nītārtham iti nirdiṣṭaṃ dharmāṇām śūnyataiva hi* (AS 56). *nirvānaṃ ca bhavaścaiva dvayameva na vidyate / parijñānaṃ bhavasyaiva nirvāṇamiti kathyate* (YS 6).

summarize and explore several hypotheses for the psychological mechanisms by which an understanding emptiness leads to feelings of enlightenment, or at least to improved mental health and a soothed mind. I also evaluate some of the potential risks and contemporary objections to therapeutic uses of emptiness in light of these mechanisms and Nāgārjuna's writings.

<center>Benefits</center>

Before proceeding, it is important to first briefly discuss what is meant by terms like 'enlightenment' or 'improved mental health'. What, in other words, is the psychological transition that an understanding of emptiness achieves? As I discussed in Chapter II, there is a long history of scholarship demonstrating that Buddhism and psychotherapy share the same basic goal of using psychological methods to alleviate suffering. In this context, at its most basic level, the psychological transition of interest is simply one of going from a state of greater mental distress to a state of lesser mental distress. The starting and ending points of that transition could vary, perhaps greatly, among individuals. The typical therapy client, for example, may simply want to be happier or be relieved of some specific problem, and is likely not seeking nirvana. For my current purposes, however, I am merely interested in exploring how the idea of emptiness reduces distress, whether the final endpoint is merely a mind at greater ease, or something more profound that a Buddhist might consider as enlightenment.

One, straightforward, potential mechanism by which perceiving emptiness might alleviate mental distress is simply through realizing that a specific source of suffering, believed to be fundamentally real or true, is actually less real and less true than one initially thought. As I described in Chapter III, both Hayes and Linehan give examples of

<center>61</center>

this, where patients suffer through a mistaken belief in the essential reality of unpleasant or even debilitating thoughts or feelings, rather than seeing them as transient, contingent, or, in Nāgārjuna's terminology, empty. The problem, they say, is not the thought *per se*, but rather mistaking its content as existing inherently. Indeed, a common component of all cognitive therapies, of which ACT and DBT form a subset, involves challenging the truth of unhelpful thoughts, and (in basic cognitive therapy) replacing them with more helpful ones (e.g., Linehan, 1993, p. 364). For example, a typical cognitive therapy strategy might be to replace the thought "I am worse than everyone" with "many people have the same problems I do." If one replaces a painful thought with the idea that everything, including the thought itself, is empty, this, by itself, could be a form of cognitive restructuring that leads to greater mental ease just by replacing a painful thought with the potentially much more soothing idea that all thoughts are empty. Both ACT and DBT contain strategies for achieving this sort of transition. As I discussed in the last chapter, Nāgārjuna also said the realization that pleasure and pain are empty is liberation.

This hypothesis does invite the question, however, of why it would be necessary or even beneficial to perceive that *everything* is empty and contingent, rather than just a few bothersome thoughts or painful feelings. Standard cognitive therapy, for example, is perfectly happy to challenge the truth of troublesome thoughts and replace them with more functional versions, but does not insist that all of reality is empty. Similarly, Abhidharmist Buddhists both before and after Nāgārjuna would agree that things like the self, or complex things like strings of thoughts and feelings, lack inherent existence, but would not agree that it is necessary, true, or even beneficial to believe that all of reality

62

lacks such inherent existence. Nāgārjuna, and (arguably) Linehan and Hayes, however, disagree, and do in fact say that a philosophy of complete emptiness is psychologically beneficial in a way that emptiness of only self or thoughts is not. Why might this be?

One place to look for a potential answer is in the inherent suffering that seems to be part of what it is to be human. As both Buddhists (e.g., Nhất Hạnh, 1998) and students of Buddhist philosophy (e.g., Carpenter, 2014) have articulated, the suffering that the Buddha sought to address encompasses not only simple, "everyday" suffering like that caused by physical pain or ordinary painful thoughts or hurt feelings, but also more existential concerns, such as awareness of one's mortality, or a sense of the futility of one's existence, or even the futility of existence itself. Does insight into the emptiness of reality help to address these more existential concerns?

On its face, it's not at all obvious that this would be the case. As I discussed in Chapter II, the first western scholars to read Nāgārjuna were appalled by the idea of emptiness, viewing it as an atheistic and nihilistic philosophy. These concerns were expressed even by scholars, such as Eugene Burnouf and Max Müller, who were otherwise sympathetic to Buddhism. Their concerns were that if nothing has inherent existence, there can be no purpose to existence, including no purpose for humans, individually or as a group, and no solid foundation for ethics or moral behavior. Their views reflect similar objections raised by non-madhyamaka Buddhists and by non-Buddhists in ancient India. Nāgārjuna himself was clearly aware of these concerns, and articulated them in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* in the form of an opponent of emptiness who worried that if everything is empty, then nothing he values would be possible:

If all this is empty, there is no rising, no ceasing. From that, the non-existence of the four noble truths follows. / Knowledge, piety, contemplation, and learning would not occur with the non-existence of the four noble truths. / From their non-existence, the four noble fruits would not be known. When the fruits do not exist, there is no enjoyment of the fruits and no noble attainment. / There is no religious community and there are no eight bodies of people, and from the non-existence of the noble truths even the true law is not known. / And if the law and the religious community are empty, where will a Buddha come from? Your position therefore refutes even the three jewels [of Buddha, sangha, dharma]. / Emptiness means the consequences of lawfulness and unlawfulness are all the same. You refute all affairs related to the world (24.1-6).[23]

Nāgārjuna's well-known response to these objections was to reverse them, and argue that in fact no valued things are possible if they exist inherently. His argument was that a world of inherent existence would be a static, unchanging world, and so anything that involves change, including the spiritual growth needed to achieve enlightenment or end suffering, would be impossible: Nothing would be done, there would be no commencement of activity. Doing would be non-doing, if emptiness is refuted. / That which is seen as dependently arisen [i.e., empty], this is seen as the only path to the arising and cessation of suffering (MMK 24.37, 24.40).[24]

---

[23] *yadi śūnyam idaṃ sarvam udayo nāsti na vyayaḥ / caturṇām āryasatyānām abhāvas te prasajyate // parijñā ca prahāṇaṃ ca bhāvanā sākṣikarma ca / caturṇām āryasatyānām abhāvān nopapadyate // tadabhāvān na vidyante catvāry āryaphalāni ca / phalābhāve phalasthā no na santi pratipannakāḥ // saṃgho nāsti na cet santi te 'ṣṭau puruṣapudgalāḥ / abhāvāc cāryasatyānāṃ saddharmo 'pi na vidyate // dharme cāsati saṃghe ca kathaṃ buddho bhaviṣyati / evaṃ trīṇy api ratnāni bruvāṇaḥ pratibādhase // śūnyatāṃ phalasadbhāvam adharmaṃ dharmam eva ca / sarvasaṃvyavahārāṃś ca laukikān pratibādhase* (MMK 24.1.6)

[24] *na kartavyaṃ bhavet kiṃcid anārabdhā bhavet kriya / kārakaḥ syād akurvāṇaḥ śūnyatāṃ pratibādhataḥ // yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaṃ paśyatīdaṃ sa paśyati /duḥkhaṃ samudayaṃ caiva nirodhaṃ mārgam eva ca* (MMK 24.37, 24.40).

Whether or not Nāgārjuna's response seems compelling, these sorts of anguished objections suggest that, at least for some, a philosophy of emptiness does not help address the existential suffering caused by the uncertainties common to the human condition. Indeed, for some, the idea of emptiness seems to exacerbate this suffering.

A plausible explanation for why the concept of emptiness might seem threatening to some but soothing to others may have to do with one's starting point. For example, the 19th-century western scholars who found emptiness so threatening, such as Monier-Williams or Burnouf, were, as a rule, Christians who found psychological comfort in the idea of the absolute, inherent goodness of a self-existent God. From this perspective, it is not unexpected that the idea that all of reality is "empty" or "void" and without any foundation would be considered bizarre and threatening. Indeed, it is not hard to find such anxieties expressed today, such as in debates about whether human attributes such as gender are intrinsic or socially constructed (e.g., Weisman, 2022). Even in the 19th century, however, religious scholars like Monier-Williams and Burnouf were writing from a perspective that had been going out of intellectual fashion long before Nāgārjuna was first read in the west. Discoveries in the physical and natural sciences, from Galileo to Darwin, along with other intellectual currents, such as higher biblical criticism or the minimalist theology of Spinoza, had already led many western intellectuals to question the existence of the Absolute, or at least any Absolute that cared one way or another about humanity, let alone individual humans. As the psychologist and religious scholar Williams James put it in his 1902 Gifford Lectures,

> It is impossible, in the present temper of the scientific imagination, to find in the driftings of the cosmic atoms, whether they work on the universal or on the particular scale, anything but a kind of aimless weather, doing and undoing, achieving no proper history, and leaving no result. … The books

> of natural theology which satisfied the intellects of our grandfathers seem
> to us quite grotesque. (James, 1917, p. 492)

In other words, by James's time, science and philosophy had already convinced many that the universe was empty, that it contained a void where the God of an earlier generation used to reside. Seen from this, already empty, perspective, Nāgārjuna's philosophy could well be psychologically soothing not so much because it argues that emptiness is ontologically correct, but rather for its psychological and religious validation of an ontology that many already believed to be true. Nāgārjuna, in his response to the anguish of those who think that life has no meaning if nothing has essence, is saying that they have it exactly backward, that life as we know it would not be possible if things existed with essence. In this sense, emptiness can be interpreted as a type of freedom—if things existed with essence we would, according to Nāgārjuna, be unable to do anything at all.

If emptiness is interpreted as that which allows anything at all to happen, including cessation of suffering, it is not hard to see how emptiness might take on mystical or even divine connotations. Indeed, the sense of liberation that one might feel upon the realization that things such as self, pain, and pleasure lack any essence might well be felt as a form of spirituality. Nāgārjuna himself said the understanding emptiness leads to liberation, but also warned against deifying emptiness as something ultimate, saying that those who hold emptiness to be an [ultimate] view are unsavable (MMK 13.8).[25] As I reviewed in Chapter II, however, mystical interpretations of Nāgārjuna are

---

[25] *śūnyatā sarvadṛṣṭīnāṃ proktā niḥsaraṇaṃ jinaiḥ / yeṣāṃ tu śūnyatādṛṣṭis tān asādhyān babhāṣire* (MMK 13.8). The Buddhas have said that salvation is emptiness of all views. They declared those who hold emptiness as a view to be unsavable.

in fact common. Earlier promoters of Mahāhāna Buddhism in America, notably D.T. Suzuki, emphasized the mystical, intuitive, nature of emptiness, drew connections between emptiness and Christian mysticism, and even equated emptiness with God (Suzuki, 1968, p. 109). In this respect, the often cryptic verses about emptiness in the *Mūlamadhyamakhakārikā* have been interpreted by some as something like an extended series of Zen koans designed to challenge rationality and logic, and less like a logical, philosophical argument for the ontology of dependent origination (Betty, 1983). On their surface, many of these verses do indeed seem prone to exactly this sort of koan-like interpretation, particularly in the rare cases where they are phrased as questions: What is it? What is another? What is unlimited? What is limited? What is both limited and unlimited? What is neither? (MMK 25.23).[26]

In fact, many of the verses in MMK are structured in this tetralemma format, exploring how or if a particular thing is, is not, both is and is not, or neither is nor is not. In most cases, each of these alternatives is ruled out; in one case (MMK 18.8) each is found to be true. Although this structure can be interpreted using classical logic (Garfield, 2002; Westerhoff, 2009), it seems to require a fair amount of effort or reading between the lines to do so. Westerhoff (2009), for example, spends 23 dense pages explaining how the tetralemma can be interpreted by using two different classical forms of logical negation, neither of which is spelled out explicitly by Nāgārjuna. Garfield (1995, 2002) interprets these verses by following a traditional practice of inserting the missing words "conventionally" and "ultimately" as necessary to force the tetralemmas to make more intuitively logical sense.

---

[26] *kiṃ tad eva kim anyat kiṃ śāśvataṃ kim aśāśvatam / aśāśvataṃ śāśvataṃ ca kiṃ vā nobhayam apy atha* (MMK 25.23).

There have in fact been ongoing and at times heated debates among scholars

about whether Nāgārjuna's goals and methods were primarily based on reasoned, logical

arguments in support of a position, or were more designed to evoke a religious mood

(e.g., Betty, 1983, 1984; Loy, 1984). Recently, Huntington (2007), focuses on a well-

known statement Nāgārjuna makes in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* saying that he cannot be

refuted because he holds no position: If some thesis should exist, this would be a fault of

mine. But, there is no thesis of mine, therefore no fault of mine exists (VV 29).[27] Citing

this and other instances where Nāgārjuna (and some of his later interpreters) seem to

emphasize the limits of language (see Chapter III), Huntington argues that it is a

misreading of Nāgārjuna to interpret him as a logical philosopher at all, and instead that

his writings should be considered a form of "spiritual exercise" designed to facilitate a

release from the desire for any certainty about reality (Huntington, 2007, p. 125). In other

words, Huntington is saying that Nāgārjuna's purpose is to evoke a religious emotion

(*sensu* William James), not to convince through intellectual argument: "It is the nature of

the Mādhyamika trick not to argue, explain, command, or demonstrate—all of which

would be self-defeating—but rather to *conjure*" (Huntington, 2007, p. 128). In a

response, Garfield (2008) strongly disagrees, citing many instances where Nāgārjuna's

writings can be reasonably interpreted as someone trying to persuade by making logical,

analytical arguments, not through some sort of mystical wordplay.

An aspect of this debate that seems important for considering how ACT and DBT

utilize emptiness therapeutically concerns the concept of *upāya*. This is usually translated

as 'skillful', but also includes connotations of expediency and strategy (Monier-Williams,

---

[27] *yadi kācana pratijñā syāt eṣa me bhaved doṣaḥ / nāsti ca mama pratijñā tasmān naivāsti me doṣaḥ* (VV 29).

1899). Doctrinally, various Buddhist traditions have used the concept as a way to reconcile seemingly contradictory statements all represented as originating with the Buddha (Williams, 2000, p. 169). More practically, it refers to the idea that the Buddha taught in ways geared to needs of his audience. In the debate between Huntington and Garfield, the former argues that the Nāgārjuna's use of (apparent) logic and reason is a form of *upāya,* something designed to achieve a certain perspective and then to be abandoned, whereas the latter finds the most importance in the structure and form of the arguments themselves.

The concept and practice of *upāya* clearly plays an important role in ACT and DBT, and both Hayes and Linehan offer practitioners various strategies designed to promote a client's insight into emptiness without using logical arguments. Linehan, for example, argues that "therapists try to both model and reinforce a dialectical style of thinking" and to "challenge nondialectical thinking" (Linehan, 1993, p. 166). Importantly, however, the goal to increase dialectical [i.e., empty] thinking is usually not shared with the client. The reasons for avoiding explicit discussion of dialectics are both because the concepts are considered too abstract to be helpful, and because the very idea of dialectics might be perceived as threatening or unacceptable to many clients. As Linehan puts it, "the individual who believes that there is a universal order to reality, and thus that absolute truth is knowable, is not likely to agree to let go of this approach to knowing and ordering the universe" (Linehan, 1993, p. 166). To avoid directly and clearly explaining what dialectical thinking is, she therefore suggests various indirect strategies to promote dialectical thinking and behavior, including the use of paradox and metaphor that are explicitly drawn from Zen approaches (Linehan, 1993, pp. 205–212).

In considering the spiritual dimensions of emptiness, Nāgārjuna's choice of words also seems telling. One of his great philosophical achievements was to connect the concept of emptiness, already an important if not-always-well-defined element of the *prajñāpāramitā* literature, to the concept of dependent arising—that everything is relational and depends on something else. The Sanskrit adjective *śūnya* (or noun, *śūnyatā*), however, does not mean "interacting" or "dependent"—it is nearly always translated as "empty" or "void" (or, if used as a noun, "emptiness" or "voidness"). Based on its use in a wide variety of Sanskrit literature, Sanskrit-English dictionaries (e.g., Apte, 1957; Monier-Williams, 1899) translate *śūnya* as 'empty', 'void', 'absent', 'solitary', 'bare', 'deserted', 'lonely', 'desolate', 'secluded', etc.—words that have no obvious connotations with 'interacting' or 'dependent'. Synonyms and connotations associated with the word 'empty', but not 'interacting' or 'dependent', may therefore offer a clue for understanding the psychological effects of contemplating emptiness. For example, it is well known that solitary, deserted, "empty" places are associated with reports of religious, spiritual experiences (James, 1917), including Jesus's experiences in the desert (Matthew 4:1-12) and the Buddha's own solitary time in a forest prior to his enlightenment. Monasteries (derived from the Greek *monos*, alone) are often sited in secluded locations. Modern writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, and Edward Abbey all describe the importance of solitude and empty landscapes for experiencing spirituality. The Zen Buddhist and beat poet Gary Snyder puts it this way: "the wilderness pilgrim's step-by-step breath-by-breath walk up a trail, into those snowfields, carrying all on the back, is so ancient a set of gestures as to bring a profound sense of body-mind joy" (Snyder, 2010, p. 94). Based on such associations, it seems

reasonable to conclude that the connotations of the word emptiness/*śūnyatā*—wilderness, solitude, silence—may well give it a sense of spirituality that complements the logical conclusions about what it means to lack essence.

It is worth noting, however, that the various texts considered to be the works of Nāgārjuna utilize the word *śūnya* to greatly varying extents, perhaps reflecting Nāgārjuna's own approach to *upāya*. For example, the MMK uses the word *śūnya* 41 times in its 448 verses, and it is often an integral component of their content (see, e.g., MMK 24.18 and 24.19 in Chapter I). In contrast, *śūnya* appears only three times in the 223 verses of the RA that are available in the original Sanskrit (RA 4.86, 4.87 and 4.96), and then it is used only in the context of defending the Mahāyāna against its detractors, not in any of the verses that set out to demonstrate that things lack essence. The word *śūnya* appears frequently in the VV, where the concept is itself the subject of the debate, but only once in the 60 verses of YS. Assuming that all of these texts were indeed authored by Nāgārjuna, it therefore appears that he believed he could demonstrate the importance of understanding that all things are dependent and without essence, without explicitly saying that they are empty.

<center>Risks</center>

Recently, some scholars and mental health practitioners have expressed concerns that there may be risks associated with the use of mindfulness and Buddhist-influenced therapies, particularly for those who hold strongly theistic beliefs that may be incompatible with a philosophy of a non-intrinsic self or soul. Merry and Ratnayake (2018), for example, argue that therapies such as ACT carry an "epistemic cost" when applied to clients who believe, for religious or other reasons, in an inherently-existing

God or inherently-existing self. Others have found some empirical evidence of rare

adverse events associated with excessive mindfulness practice, including occasional

instances of a debilitating loss of a sense of self (Britton, 2019; Farias et al., 2020;

Lindahl & Britton, 2019; Pickering, 2019).

The analysis I presented in Chapter III suggests that Merry and Ratnayake (2018)

are indeed correct that the underlying philosophies of therapies such as ACT and DBT

may well contradict the deeply-held beliefs of many people. Indeed, the philosophies

underlying these therapies are even more 'empty' than Merry and Ratnayake accuse them

of being, arguably going beyond positing an empty self to positing emptiness of all

reality. How much of this underlying philosophy is due to direct Buddhist influence, and

how much may be due to modern scientific rationalism is debatable, but to the degree that

such an incompatibility is considered a problem, it is fair to say it exists.

Is it really a problem, though? The issue Merry and Ratnayake raise is an old one.

Linehan (1993, p. 166), for example, explicitly acknowledges that a dialectical (empty)

philosophy will not appeal to those who strongly believe in universal truth and order, and

therefore advises DBT therapists to keep this foundational philosophy hidden from most

clients. Similarly, Nāgārjuna was fully aware that an incorrect view of emptiness could

cause anxiety to those with strongly realist views (MMK 24.1 – 24.6, above), in part

because it could be misinterpreted as moral nihilism. As I will discuss below, Nāgārjuna

and Linehan also both have a similar solution, which is to at least initially focus on

promoting *behaviors* that they think will lead one to contentment and, perhaps, eventually

to wisdom and an understanding of emptiness. Similarly, Hayes (1999, p. 199) (echoing

psychologists as far back as Freud (1961, p. 62) and Jung (1938, p. 55)), also focuses on

changing behavior first, and advises ACT therapists not to question a client's religious or philosophical beliefs if these appear to be psychologically useful to that client.

This focus on behavior reflects both a sense of pragmatism, and is also a reflection of the types of problems that these therapies are trying to solve. ACT and DBT were designed to treat client populations suffering, to varying extents, from an overdeveloped sense of realism. Both therapies were premised on the idea that a too-literal belief in the reality created by words, thoughts, social interactions or feelings is a basic cause of suffering. Treating this suffering by indirectly promoting an alternative view of emptiness may therefore be better seen as treating a psychological condition that is causing suffering to a client, rather than implicitly rebuking the client's deeply held beliefs.

Another potential risk of emptiness is that it could lead to a belief in moral nihilism and thus to either despair or bad behavior. As I discussed above, this is a concern of both the early western readers of Nāgārjuna, and is a concern that Nāgārjuna himself gives voice to in the form of an opponent to emptiness in MMK 24:1-6. Perhaps because of these concerns, Nāgārjuna, Hayes and Linehan all emphasize the importance of values and moral behavior as part of a path toward enlightenment or improved mental health. They differ somewhat, however, on what those values are, and how an ontology of emptiness supports proper values and behavior. On the latter point, Nāgārjuna and Linehan generally look to societal norms for rules about proper values and behavior, while Hayes emphasizes the importance of looking within to determine what is most valuable. This section will explore these differences in more detail.

Nāgārjuna, fully consistent with being a Buddhist monk, argues for the importance of traditional Buddhist moral values. He spells these out in detail in the *Ratnāvalī*, which in addition to explaining the philosophy of emptiness, also provides what seems to be straightforward behavioral advice to his royal audience. This advice includes exhortations to refrain from killing, drinking, stealing, adultery, telling falsehoods, slandering, coveting, avarice, and anger (RA 1.9-1.10, 1.14-1.18). The rationale for refraining from these behaviors is initially described in purely consequential terms—if the advice is followed, it is expected to lead to a better life, if it is not followed, one's life is less good. For example: From lying, bad communication; from slander, the breaking of friendship; from cruelty, hearing the unpleasant; from lack of restraint, misfortunate speech (RA 1.15).[28] Those who have not yet achieved the wisdom to correctly perceive the emptiness of reality are exhorted to follow these rules in the faith that this will eventually lead to wisdom and liberation: The idea leading to happiness, to the bliss of liberation, its means is briefly summarized as faith and wisdom. / The one with faith follows the law, the one with wisdom comprehends truly. Wisdom is the higher of the two, but its beginning is in faith (RA 1.4-5).[29]

Nāgārjuna does not draw a detailed philosophical connection between values such as not stealing and an ontology of emptiness. However, as I discussed at the end of the last chapter, he does argue that a true understanding of emptiness should lead one to naturally abandon behaviors that are motivated by seeking pleasures or avoiding pains,

---

[28] *pratyākhyānaṃ mṛṣāvādāt paiśunyāt mitrabhedanam / apriyaśravaṇaṃ raukṣyād abāddhād durbhagaṃ vacaḥ* (RA 1.15).

[29] *sukham abhyudayas tatra mokṣo naiḥśreyaso mataḥ / asya sādhanasaṃkṣepaḥ śraddhāprajñe samāsataḥ // śrāddhatvād bhajate dharmaṃ prājñatvād vetti tattvataḥ / prajñā pradhānaṃ tv anayoḥ śraddhā pūrvaṅgamāsya tu* (RA 1.4-5).

74

since both pleasure and pain are empty. The implication seems to be that one who is

liberated from pleasure and pain will be less selfish and more altruistic and

compassionate. The rationale for why an empty person experiencing only empty pleasure

and empty pain should behave altruistically toward other empty people is not entirely

obvious, and the overall relationship between Madhyamika ontology and moral behavior

has been subject to considerable debate (see e.g., Cowherds, 2016). Even if the logical

relationship between emptiness and ethical behavior is not always totally clear, however,

it is very clear that Nāgārjuna was deeply concerned that a *misunderstanding* of

emptiness could lead people to behave badly. His main concern, which is particularly

apparent in the *Ratnāvalī*, is that emptiness would be mistaken as a form of nihilism, and

lead to either despair or bad behavior by those who misunderstood it in that way. He says,

for example: 'I am not, I will be not, it is not mine, it will not be mine.' This is a great

fear for the child, but the loss of fear for the wise. / If this philosophy is badly

understood, it utterly ruins the ignorant man, because he sinks into the foul doctrine of

nihilism (RA 1.26, 2.19).[30]

     Although Nāgārjuna rejects the inherent reality of all views, between the error of

nihilism and the error of realism, he views nihilism as by far the more serious of the two,

because he says it leads one to bad conduct that takes one further from liberation. He also

clarifies that he views nihilism as the denial that actions have consequences, not the

(correct) understanding that all things lack essence: Concisely, the doctrine of nihilism is

'there is no fruit' from the action. This teaching is an 'incorrect view', and he who

practices it is one who is reborn in the hells. / And, concisely, the doctrine of realism is

---

[30] *nāsmy ahaṃ na bhaviṣyāmi na me 'sti na bhaviṣyati / iti bālasya santrāsaḥ paṇḍitasya bhayakṣayaḥ //*
vināśayati durjñāto dharmo 'yam avipaścitam / nāstitādṛṣṭisamale yasmād asmin nimajjati (RA 1.26, 2.19).

'there is fruit' from actions. This meritorious teaching is a 'proper view' and will

necessarily result in a happy condition [of a good rebirth] (RA 1.43-44).[31]

As I discussed in the last chapter, Nāgārjuna argues that a correct understanding

of emptiness leads to selflessness and altruism. Until such a correct understanding is

achieved, however, there is a risk that emptiness will be misunderstood. Until final

liberation is achieved, he therefore exhorts his reader to faithfully follow the laws

regarding good conduct, rather than relying solely on what might be a faulty

understanding of emptiness: Therefore, as a misunderstanding of the dharma is the cause

of the fault of creating a self, be one who shows respect in the law of generosity, morality

and patience (RA 2.25).[32]

In DBT, Linehan makes a similar distinction between the importance of

ontological insight into the dialectical nature of reality, and the practical steps a BPD

patient will need to follow in order to eventually achieve that insight. A dialectical

ontology grounds the approach, but the practical, functional steps of DBT are behavioral:

creating a healthy, validating environment, extinguishing bad behaviors, and supporting

and reinforcing good behaviors (Linehan, 1993, p. 97). As Linehan puts it, the solution to

a patient's suffering is to "develop psychoeducational therapy modules to teach specific

behavioral, cognitive, and emotional skills" (Linehan, 1993, p. 87). The therapist is aware

of the dialectical ontology and is guiding the patient in ways consistent with that

philosophy, but the patient herself is, at least initially, working on specific, practical

behaviors to improve her quality of life. Indeed, the main goal for a patient early in the

---

[31] *samāsān nāstitādṛṣṭiḥ phalaṃ nāstīti karmaṇaḥ / apuṇyāpāyīkī caiṣā mithyādṛṣṭiriti smṛtā // samāsād astitādṛṣṭiḥ phalaṃ cāstīti karmaṇām / puṇyā sugatiniṣyandā samyagdṛṣṭir iti smṛtā* (RA 1.43-44).
[32] *tasmād yāvad avijñāto dharmo 'haṃkāraśātanaḥ / dānaśīlakṣamādharme tāvad ādaravān bhava* (RA 2.25).

therapy is simply to believe in and commit to continuing therapy (Linehan, 1993, pp.

167–168), an approach reflective of Nāgārjuna's view that faith is the start of wisdom.

Similar to Nāgārjuna's admonitions to the king in the *Ratnāvalī*, DBT also

focuses on encouraging the patient, and therapist, to adhere to a set of 'good' behaviors.

For the patient, these include things like abstaining from alcohol or drug use, avoiding

inappropriate sexual relationships, being frugal with money, avoiding criminal behavior,

and avoiding behaviors that result in unemployment (Linehan, 1993, p. 142). These

behavioral rules are strikingly similar to the Buddhist rules for behavior that Nāgārjuna

promotes, and are of course also similar to analogous rules promoted by other religions,

such as the Ten Commandments of Judaism and Christianity. Like Nāgārjuna, Linehan

does not lay out a complete philosophy of ethics that explicitly derives any of these rules

from first principals or from her dialectical ontology, although she does say that

dialectical thinking skills are helpful in promoting beneficial behavior in part by

increasing distress tolerance (p. 205). This logic seems at least somewhat similar to

Nāgārjuna's point (RA 4.64, Chapter III) that a realization of the emptiness of pain and

pleasure lessens their power. Mostly, however, like Nāgārjuna in the *Ratnāvalī*, her

justification for adhering to these specific behaviors is practical—failing to do so leads to

unacceptable conflict between the patient and others, and a lower quality of life for the

patient. For Nāgārjuna and Linehan, emptiness (or dialectics) and ethical behavior seem

to be synergistic. Gaining some insight into emptiness moderates extreme behavior by

reducing the power of the desire for pleasure or the aversion to pain, while moderating

behavior by faithfully following a set of ethical rules promotes a mindset that leads to

further insights into emptiness. In this way, Nāgārjuna and Linehan both seem to be saying that faith and wisdom interact together to help one toward liberation.

Values and the behaviors that derive from them are also an important part of ACT. Hayes makes a more explicit argument that there is a logical connection between an empty ontology and a theory of values than does either Linehan or Nāgārjuna. Most notably, he stresses that in order to be functional for setting a life direction, values must be freely chosen by the client, and should not be imposed by either the therapist or by society. The logic for this position derives directly from his idea that escaping the false sense of reality created by language is the key to good mental health. He argues that values created through verbal reasoning and evaluation will *always* be unsatisfactory, because the same verbal systems that create meaning can always also be used to destroy it. In contrast, Hayes claims that values that are freely chosen without extensive verbal justification do not suffer from that problem (Hayes & Wilson, 1993, p. 296). He therefore asks the client to look within to identify what is important to them, and to avoid rationally (i.e., linguistically) justifying that choice. Emphasizing the importance of these client-chosen values, he exhorts the therapist to refrain from "using the social influence of therapy to openly or implicitly coerce the client into conforming to broadly held social values" (Hayes, 1999, p. 230). As an example, he argues that

> in working with an alcoholic in the ACT model, there is no assumption that being intoxicated on a daily basis is incompatible with living life in a direction valued by the client. Because the values and direction are the client's to choose, it is actually a legitimate outcome for a client to choose to abuse alcohol. (Hayes, 1999, p. 230)

On its face, this approach seems totally different from Nāgārjuna's view that the path to liberation starts by following a common set of moral laws. At a deeper level there is key similarity, however. As I discussed in Chapter III, Nāgārjuna agrees with Hayes

that an argument (a thesis) always provokes a counterargument. Nāgārjuna uses logical

arguments to demonstrate that any thesis that posits an ultimate essence to things is

illogical, but he himself does not make any direct, positive claims about the ultimate

nature of reality. His advocacy for moral behavior is therefore not based on philosophy,

but rather on conventional, empirical evidence that moral behavior is effective. His goal

is to lead people to liberation, which for him is conventional reality correctly viewed.

Following the law is, therefore, done not because the law has been shown to be ultimately

correct from some set of essential first principles, but rather because it has been shown to

work. For the particular set of circumstances we find ourselves in, following these rules

leads toward liberation. Hayes, in contrast, takes a more individual approach, asking

people to articulate the values that are most important to them. Like Nāgārjuna, though,

he says these values cannot be justified in any ultimate terms, so the criterium for

assessing their worth is the pragmatic one of asking whether the values are helping to

liberate the client from their suffering. Nāgārjuna might well view such a personal

strategy as a risky one, when one considers his admonition to respect the law in order to

safeguard against a misunderstanding of emptiness. He would not disagree with Hayes,

however, that moral values are conventional and empirical, to be evaluated based on their

results.

Chapter V.

Summary and Conclusions

The primary purpose of this study was to evaluate if and how two widely-used western psychotherapies, ACT and DBT, incorporate the Buddhist concept of emptiness, specifically as it was described by the second-century Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna. Both of these therapies are widely known to have had some Buddhist influence, largely because they use the Buddhist practice of mindfulness as an integral component of their treatment process. Prior to this study, however, little was known about whether these therapies also incorporated important components of Buddhist philosophy, such as emptiness.

I have found that Nāgārjuna's concept of emptiness—that no thing exists with an intrinsic essence—is in fact an important component implicit in both of these therapies. The foundational documents of neither therapy use the term emptiness, but both describe philosophies or world views in which developing an understanding that things lack essence is a critical therapeutic component. In the case of ACT, the focus is primarily on language, and how the use of language and conceptual thinking, if done naively, leads one to believe that thoughts and ideas, including conceptions of the self, exist intrinsically, even though they do not. A major component of ACT's therapeutic model is to train people to see the emptiness of this language-created reality. DBT is more focused on painful emotions and dis-functional behaviors, but here too a major element of the therapy is to help train clients to see these as empty and changing, rather than fixed and inherent. I have shown that all of these points—the emptiness of language, of self, of pain, of suffering—have clear parallels in the works of Nāgārjuna.

These parallels extend beyond philosophical foundations to their implications. DBT and Nāgārjuna, for example, are remarkably similar in recommending a set of moral behaviors as a first step leading toward wisdom and liberation. ACT, in contrast, takes a different approach, by asking clients to identify their own values as a guide to their long-term behavior. Nāgārjuna, who had a real concern that emptiness would be misinterpreted as a rationale for moral nihilism, would almost certainly view this as a risky strategy. Even so, ACT, DBT and Nāgārjuna all agree that values and behaviors are justified pragmatically based on whether they lead to or away from liberation from suffering, not on any ultimately-existing foundation.

The purpose of my analysis was to determine if the concept of emptiness was present in these therapies, not necessarily to ask how the concept got there. Answering the latter question would require a much more detailed historical analysis than I could attempt here. Nonetheless, there are some useful clues that are worth a brief discussion. In the case of DBT, Linehan is a practicing Zen Buddhist, and she has recently published a memoir in which she is open about the influence of Zen Buddhism in shaping DBT (Linehan, 2020). Zen, a form of Mahāyāna Buddhism that developed in eighth-century China, incorporates multiple concepts of emptiness, including among them the philosophy developed by Nāgārjuna (Davis, 2013). It seems highly plausible, therefore, that some of the ideas about emptiness that are implicit in DBT are there at least in part due to this Zen Buddhist influence.

In the case of ACT, Hayes (2002) says that he had little knowledge of Buddhism while developing the therapy, and that any parallels are thus convergent. I see no evidence to doubt this, and if this is true for some of the general Buddhist concepts that

Hayes discusses, it seems likely even more so for Nāgārjuna's specific philosophy of emptiness. In addition, both ACT and DBT utilize emptiness, but in some other ways DBT seems more obviously Buddhist-influenced than does ACT, consistent with Linehan's greater exposure to Buddhism and a stated lack of such exposure by Hayes. Examples include their differing approaches to values, and DBT's explicit use of some Zen approaches as a therapeutic tool. These observations further suggest that it is at least plausible that the emptiness ideas in ACT were developed independently from any direct influence from Buddhism.

After showing that both ACT and DBT contain the idea of emptiness, I discussed three different ways that this idea might be psychologically soothing. First, Nāgārjuna, Hayes and Linehan all agree that the realization that things previously believed to be intrinsically real are actually essence-less and empty is form of liberation. Second, Linehan and Hayes agree that ACT and DBT are open to a sense of spirituality, and that spiritual feelings can be beneficial to both client and therapist. Whether Nāgārjuna himself was a mystic is hotly debated, but some twentieth century scholars have interpreted him in this way. In addition to the potential spiritual, liberating feelings one might experience upon realization that things lack essence, I have argued that term emptiness itself has connotations, such as seclusion and wildness, that may promote a sense of well-being and spirituality complementary to the madhyamaka concept of dependence and essencelessness. Finally, I have also argued that the intellectual idea of emptiness and its implications for freedom of action could be particularly appealing in the modern era, after 400 years of science and rationalism has already shown that much that was once thought to be intrinsic—God, the soul, humanity's special place in

82

creation—already seems to be non-existent or empty. From that perspective, Nāgārjuna's idea that only with emptiness is anything possible seems like a way of turning what may have been a source of anxiety into a source of comfort.

Finally, the finding that a Buddhist philosophy of emptiness is an important element of two prominent, widely-used psychotherapies has some implications for how we think about Buddhism in American society. Only 0.7% of American adults (~1.8 million people) say they are Buddhists (Pew Research Center, 2015). In contrast, in 2018 alone, approximately 10% of American adults (~26 million people) received professional mental health therapy (Terlizzi & Zablotsky, 2020). Although there are many types of therapies, it seems likely that there are a great many more Americans who have been exposed to the ideas in ACT, DBT, or other Buddhist-influenced therapies than there are self-identified Buddhists. This seems even more likely considering that there are hundreds of published self-help books based on the ACT and DBT models, so their reach extends well beyond the population that has directly experienced these therapies in professional settings. Nāgārjuna's therapy of emptiness, even if it does not go by that name, therefore seems to be well-established in twenty-first century America.

References

Almond, P. C. (1988). *The British discovery of Buddhism*. Cambridge University Press.

Apte, V. S. (1957). *Revised and enlarged edition of Prin. V. S. Apte's The practical Sanskrit-English dictionary*. Ponna. https://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/apte/

Azim, A. (1969). Khan-i Arzu's Observations on the Relationship of Sanskrit and Persian. *Zeitschrift Der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, *119*(2), 261–269.

Batchelor, S. (1994). *The awakening of the west: The encounter of Buddhism and Western culture*. Parallax Press.

Batchelor, S. (1997). *Buddhism without beliefs*. Riverhead Books.

Betty, L. S. (1983). Nāgārjuna's masterpiece: Logical, mystical, both, or neither? *Philosophy East and West*, *33*(2), 123–138. https://doi.org/10.2307/1399097

Betty, L. S. (1984). Is Nāgārjuna a philosopher? Response to Professor Loy. *Philosophy East and West*, *34*(4), 447–450. https://doi.org/10.2307/1399178

Bhattacharya, K. (1971). The dialectical method of Nāgārjuna: Translation of the "Vigrahavyāvartanī" from the original Sanskrit with introduction and notes. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, *1*(3), 217–261.

Bodhi, B. (2005). *In the Buddha's words: An anthology of discourses from the Pāli canon* (1st ed.). Wisdom Publications.

Bosch, L. van den. (2002). *Friedrich Max Müller: A life devoted to humanities*. Brill.

Britton, W. B. (2019). Can mindfulness be too much of a good thing? The value of a middle way. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *28*, 159–165. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.12.011

Burnouf, E. (2010). *Introduction to the history of Indian Buddhism (English translation of the 1844 French book)* (K. Buffetrille & D. S. Lopez, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.

Burton, D. (1999). *Emptiness appraised: A critical study of Nāgārjuna's philosophy*. Curzon.

Carpenter, A. (2014). *Indian Buddhist philosophy*. Routledge.

Cowherds. (2016). *Moonpaths: Ethics and Emptiness*. Oxford University Press.

Davis, B. W. (2013). Forms of emptiness in Zen. In *A companion to Buddhist philosphy* (pp. 190–213). Wiley-Blackwell.

De Jong, J. W. (1977). *Mūlamadhyamakakārikāḥ*. Adyar Library and Research Centre ; Agents, Theosophical Pub. House, Adyar Library and Research Centre.

Desideri, I. (1932). *An account of Tibet: The travels of Ippolito Desideri of Pistoia, S.J., 1712-1727*. G. Routledge & sons, ltd.

Epstein, M. (1995). *Thoughts without a thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist perspective*. BasicBooks.

Farias, M., Maraldi, E., Wallenkampf, K. C., & Lucchetti, G. (2020). Adverse events in meditation practices and meditation-based therapies: A systematic review. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, *142*(5), 374–393. https://doi.org/10.1111/acps.13225

Freud, S. (1961). *The future of an illusion* (J. Strachey, Ed.; J. Strachey, Trans.). W.W. Norton & Company.

Fung, K. (2015). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Western adoption of Buddhist tenets? *Transcultural Psychiatry*, *52*(4), 561–576. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461514537544

Garfield, J. L. (1995). *The fundamental wisdom of the middle way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (J. L. Garfield, Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Garfield, J. L. (2002). *Empty words: Buddhist philosophy and cross-cultural interpretation*. Oxford University Press.

Garfield, J. L. (2008). Turning a madhyamaka trick: Reply to Huntington. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, *36*, 507–527. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-008-9045-9

Goldstein, J. (1983). *The experience of insight: A simple and direct guide to Buddhist meditation*. Shambhala.

Gómez, L., & Harrison, P. M. (2022). *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa: The teaching of Vimalakīrti*. Mangalam Press.

Gu, J., Strauss, C., Bond, R., & Cavanagh, K. (2015). How do mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction improve mental health and wellbeing? A systematic review and meta-analysis of mediation studies. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *37*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2015.01.006

Hanson, R. (2009). *Buddha's brain: The practical neuroscience of happiness, love & wisdom*. New Harbinger Publications.

Hayes, S. C. (n.d.). *About Steven Hayes*. Steven C. Hayes, PhD. Retrieved November 6, 2023, from https://stevenchayes.com/about/

Hayes, S. C. (1984). Making sense of spirituality. *Behaviorism*, *12*(2), 99–110.

Hayes, S. C. (1999). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: An experiential approach to behavior change*. Guilford Press.

Hayes, S. C. (2002). Buddhism and acceptance and commitment therapy. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, *9*(1), 58–66. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1077-7229(02)80041-4

Hayes, S. C., & Wilson, K. G. (1993). Some applied implications of a contemporary behavior-analytic account of verbal events. *The Behavior Analyst*, *16*(2), 283–301.

Huntington, C. W. (2007). The nature of the Mādhyamika trick. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, *35*(2), 103–131.

James, W. (1917). *The varieties of religious experience. A study in human nature. Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902*. Longmans, Green, And Co. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/621

Jung, C. G. (1938). *Psychology & Religion*. Yale University Press.

Jung, C. G. (1978). *Psychology and the east*. (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). Princeton University Press.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness* (Rev. and updated edition, Bantam Books trade paperback edition.). Bantam Books.

Kalupahana, D. J. (1986). *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā of Nāgārjuna. The Philosophy of the Middle Way*. State University of New York Press.

Keng, S.-L., Smoski, M. J., & Robins, C. J. (2011). Effects of mindfulness on psychological health: A review of empirical studies. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *31*(6), 1041–1056. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2011.04.006

Kornfield, J. (1993). *A path with heart: A guide through the perils and promises of spiritual life*. Bantam Books.

Kumar, B. (1993). The critical edition of Yuktiṣaṣṭika-Kārikā of Nāgārjuna. *The Tibet Journal*, *18*(3), 3–16.

Lindahl, J. R., & Britton, W. B. (2019). "I have this feeling of not really being here": Buddhist meditation and changes in sense of self. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, *26*(7–8), 157–183.

Linehan, M. (1993). *Cognitive-behavioral treatment of borderline personality disorder*. Guilford Press.

Linehan, M. (2015). *DBT skills training manual* (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.

Linehan, M. (2020). *Building a life worth living: A memoir* (First edition.). Random House.

Linehan, M., & Wilks, C. R. (2015). The course and evolution of dialectical behavior therapy. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, *69*(2), 97–110. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2015.69.2.97

Loy, D. (1984). How not to criticize Nāgārjuna: A response to L. Stafford Betty. *Philosophy East and West*, *34*(4), 437–445. https://doi.org/10.2307/1399177

Mace, C. (2008). *Mindfulness and mental health: Therapy, theory, and science*. Routledge.

Masuzawa, T. (2005). *The invention of world religions, or, How European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism*. University of Chicago Press.

Monier-Williams, M. (1891). *Brāhmanism and Hindūism, or, Religious thought and life in India: As based on the Veda and other sacred books of the Hindūs* (4th ed., enl.improved.). Macmillan.

Monier-Williams, M. (1899). *A English-Sanskrit dictionary.* www.gandhari.org.

Müller, F. M. (1871). *Chips from a German workshop*. C. Scribner.

Murti, T. R. V. (1955). *The central philosophy of Buddhism*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd.

Neumann, D. J. (2019). "Development of body, mind, and soul:" Paramahansa Yogananda's marketing of yoga-based religion. *Religion and American Culture*, *29*(1), 65–101. https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2018.4

Nhất Hạnh, T. (1998). *The heart of Buddha's teaching*. Parallax Press.

Pew Research Center. (2015). *America's changing religious landscape*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/

Pickering, J. (2019). 'I do not exist': Pathologies of self among Western Buddhists. *Journal of Religion and Health*, *58*(3), 748–769. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-019-00794-x

Poussin, L. V. (1917). *The way to nirvāṇa. Six lectures on ancient Buddhism as a discipline of salvation*. Cambridge University Press.

Price, A. F., & Wong, M. (2005). *The diamond sutra & the sutra of Hui-Neng*. Shambhala.

Ratnayake, S., & Merry, D. (2018). Forgetting ourselves: Epistemic costs and ethical concerns in mindfulness exercises. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, *44*(8), 567–574. https://doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2017-104201

Robinson, R. H. (1957). Some logical aspects of Nāgārjuna's system. *Philosophy East and West*, 291–308.

Saint-Hilaire, J. (1914). *The Buddha and his religion*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315816609

Salzberg, S. (1995). *Lovingkindness: The revolutionary art of happiness* (1st ed.). Shambhala.

Segal, Z., Williams, J. M., & Teasdale, J. (2002). *Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy for depression*. The Guilford Press.

Shaku, S. (1906). *Sermons of a Buddhist abbot; addresses on religious subjects,*. The Open Court Publishing Company. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.FIG:002251345

Shonin, E., Van Gordon, W., & Griffiths, M. D. (2014). The emerging role of Buddhism in clinical psychology: Toward effective integration. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, *6*(2), 123–137. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035859

Snodgrass, J. (2003). *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian exposition*. University of North Carolina Press.

Snyder, G. (2010). *The practice of the wild: Essays*. Counterpoint.

Stcherbatsky, T. (1923). *The central conception of Buddhism and the meaning of the word "dharma."* Royal Asiatic Society.

Streng, F. J. (1967). *Emptiness: A study in religious meaning*. Abingdon Press.

Suzuki, D. T. (1963). *Zen Buddhism & psychoanalysis* (1st Evergreen ed.). Grove Press.

Suzuki, D. T. (1968). *On Indian Mahayana Buddhism.* ([1st ed.].). Harper & Row.

Tenzin Gyatso & Thubten Chodron. (2022). *Searching for the self*. Wisdom Publications.

Terlizzi, E. P., & Zablotsky, B. (2020). *Mental health treatment among adults: United States, 2019* (NCHS Data Brief 380). National Center for Health Statistics.

Tola, F., & Dragonetti, C. (1983). The Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā of Nāgārjuna. *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, *6*(2), 94–123.

Tola, F., & Dragonetti, C. (1987). "Sunyatasaptati", the 70 karikas on voidness (according to the svavrtti) of Nāgārjuna + Introduction, original Tibetan

translation ('Ston Pa Nid Bdun Cu Pahi Hgrel Pa') with an English-translation. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, *15*(1), 1–55.

Tola, F., & Dragonetti, C. (1995a). *Nāgārjuna's refutation of logic (Nyāya), Vaidalyaprakaraṇa, Źib mo rnam par ḥthag pa źes bya baḥi rab tu byed pa: Edition of the Tibetan text, English translation and commentary, with introduction and notes* (1st ed.). Motilal Banarasidass Publishers.

Tola, F., & Dragonetti, C. (1995b). *On voidness: Study on Buddhist Nihilism* (1st ed.). Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa. (2006). *Ocean of reasoning: A great commentary on Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Oxford University Press.

Tucci, G. (1936a). The Ratnavali of Nagarjuna. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, *68*(3), 423–435. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0035869X00077236

Tucci, G. (1936b). The Ratnavali of Nagarjuna. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, *68*(2), 237–252. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0035869X00084069

Tuck, A. P. (1990). *Comparative philosophy and the philosophy of scholarship: On the Western interpretation of Nāgārjuna*. Oxford University Press.

Tweed, T. A. (2005). *The American encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912: Victorian culture and the limits of dissent*. UNC Press Books.

Van Gordon, W., Shonin, E., & Griffiths, M. D. (2017). Buddhist emptiness theory: Implications for psychology. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, *9*(4), 309–318. https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000079

Vivekananda. (1893). *Addresses at the Parliament of Religions*. http://archive.org/details/AddressesAtTheParliamentOfReligions

Walser, J. (2005). *Nāgārjuna in context: Mahāyāna Buddhism and early Indian culture*. Columbia University Press.

Weisman, J. (2022, March 23). A demand to define 'woman' injects gender politics into Jackson's confirmation hearings. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/23/us/politics/ketanji-brown-jackson-woman-definition.html

Westerhoff, J. (2009). *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A philosophical introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Westerhoff, J. (2010). *The dispeller of disputes:Nagarjuna's Vigrahavyavartani*. Oxford University Press.

Westerhoff, J. (2016). On the nihilist interpretation of Madhyamaka. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, *44*(2), 337–376. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-014-9266-z

Williams, P. (2000). *Buddhist thought: A complete introduction to the Indian tradition*. Routledge.

Wright, R. (2017). *Why Buddhism is true: The science and philosophy of meditation and enlightenment* (First Simon&Schuster hardcover edition.). Simon & Schuster.

Yonezawa, Y. (2008). Vigrahavyāvartanī: Sanskrit transliteration and Tibetan translation. *Journal of Naritasan Institute of Buddhist Studies*, *31*, 209–333.