

Language in Buddhist Teachings: the Role of Cataphatic, Apophatic and Aesthetic Tendencies in Indian Buddhism and Ch'an/Zen

In this essay, I will attempt to show and analyse the fruitfully ambivalent tendency in Buddhist philosophy insofar as language and teachings are concerned - namely the role of cataphatic¹, apophatic² and aesthetic³ discourses in different Buddhist traditions. I will limit my discussion to Early Buddhism (especially Theravāda), Indian Buddhism (especially Madhyamaka) and Ch'an/Zen; I will move both diachronically and synchronically, thus highlighting similarities and differences **across** and **within** selected traditions. I will proceed dialectically (albeit not in a strictly Hegelian sense) by first analysing the cataphatic tendency (thesis), followed by the apophatic one (antithesis), then considering the aesthetic strand (synthesis). I will conclude my exposition by attempting to emphasise how all three tendencies

¹ Cataphatic means speaking positively, saying what something is.

² Apophatic is the opposite of cataphatic and it means speaking only negatively, trying to express something by saying what it is not. Both terms are mostly used in theological context.

³ I use here the term 'aesthetic' in its multi-faceted meanings: concerning beauty and judgments of sentiment and taste (see Kant); as intuitive, other-than or beyond rational experience; and etymologically, from the Greek *aesthê*: to feel, thus as linked to the senses, the sensory and perceptual realm.

are fluidly, dynamically intertwined and embraced in the quintessentially Buddhist 'concept' of the Middle Way.

Cataphatic tendency

The role of cataphatic language in Buddhist teaching is most prominent in Early Buddhism, especially in the Theravāda school, as it can be surmised and demonstrated by analysing the Canon, 'the original Pali texts of the *Tipiṭaka*, universally accepted by scholars as the earliest extant records of the teachings of the Buddha.'⁴

In the *Abhaya-rāja-kumāra Sutta*⁵, the Buddha – when asked about what we would call the epistemological conditions for truth – refers to four categories of questions:

- those that can be answered categorically, straightforwardly
- those that can be answered in a qualified way in accordance with a careful analysis of the question
- those that can be answered by a counter-question, to clarify what is being asked, reveal presuppositions, or shift attention to a parallel situation so as to draw conclusions from it

⁴ Rahula, 1990 (revised edition): xiii.

⁵ *Sutta* 58 of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, M.I.392-6, in translation at: <http://www.accesstosight.org/canon/majjhima/mn058.html>

- those not to be answered, but set aside, as question-begging and fraught with misconceptions.⁶

The Buddha says he **would teach**, at the proper time, what he knows to be true and spiritually beneficial, whether agreeable or disagreeable to others, having therefore a spiritually pragmatic criterion for what and when to teach, yet a sophisticated, context-sensitive correspondence truth, seeing phenomena as complex, ever-changing and interacting processes, conditionally co-arising, not as substantial essences. His truth is founded on experiential basis: purified sense experience plus meditative knowledge, with the addition of reasonable inferences from these two. The Buddha teaches how to see ‘things as they are’ –*bhūta* - or better, ‘things as they have become or come to be’ and *yathābhūta*, ‘things as they have come to be thus’⁷ (not static, ontological essences).

Moreover, it is clear in many passages of the Canon that the Buddha sets out to **expound** the truth: the *Dhamma*⁸. I think that Gethin masterly

⁶ Harvey, 2008a: section 4.1.

⁷ See translations by Kalupahana, in contrast with Jayatilleke’s ‘faulty’ translation, in Kalupahana, D., 1992, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1992, pp. 51-52, as cited in Holder, 1995: 449.

⁸ Interestingly enough, the Buddha did choose the word *dhamma* when discussing the truth, rather than the more commonly used word of *sat*, which was widespread in Brahmanical teachings, especially in the *Upaniṣads* when equating truth and being using *sat* for both connotations.

summarises the many interlinked meanings of the semantically rich word *dhamma/dharma* when he writes:

Dharma is the way things ultimately are; it is also the Buddha's teaching, since it is in accordance with the way things ultimately are. Physical and mental events are the ultimate building blocks of the way things ultimately are; thus to understand the Buddha's teaching and see *Dharma* is to see things in terms of *dharma*. Ultimately *dhammas* are all there is.⁹

The word *dhamma/dharma* is best left untranslated as it encompasses a complex web of interwoven facets: ontological, soteriological, gnoseological, phenomenological, ethical, doctrinal and psychological. With regards to illustrating the *Dhamma*, Buddhist teachings use mostly cataphatic language.

Ontologically speaking, from the ultimate perspective (*paramārtha*), *dhammas/dharmas* are the basic patterns, the fundamental configurations, the basic processes that make up reality as it is experienced (through the eyes of trained wisdom, not as we normally see it)¹⁰: dynamic, ephemeral events, not lasting essences or substances in an Aristotelian sense. The *Abhidhammic* Dharma-theory sees reality 'a dancing interplay of evanescent processes of fundamental and real regularities "maintaining" nature: a

⁹ Gethin, 1998: 209.

¹⁰ Harvey, P., 2008, BUDM04, Discussion folder Sn 5: *Abhidhamma* literature and principles, Reply to SN 5 Lead post: group 1, 17 October 2007.

network of ever-changing inter-related basic patterns making up the pulsing fabric of existence.’¹¹ Moreover, *Dhamma/Dharma* is the natural order of things, the way things are (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*), as explained in the *Suttas*.

From a gnoseological viewpoint, *Dhamma/Dharma* is the Buddha’s knowledge and teaching, what he discovered at Awakening, the content of his gnosis/*ñāna*, namely the Four Noble/Ennobling Truths¹², which are subsequently elaborated in the doctrine of Conditioned Arising (‘Whoever sees conditioned arising sees *Dhamma* and whoever sees *Dhamma* sees Conditioned Arising’, M.I.191). As it is ritually chanted in Theravāda monasteries:

well expounded by the Lord is *Dhamma*, visible here and now, timeless/immediate¹³, having the quality of “come and see”, leading onwards (to *nibbāna*), to be directly experienced by the wise for themselves’¹⁴.

However, an apophatic element infiltrates in this dominant cataphatic tendency. Although the *Dhamma* is – cataphatically – to be heard/read and understood (*pariyatti*), practised (*paṭipatti*) and realised (*paṭivedha*), it is

¹¹ Harvey, 2008b: section 4.

¹² Or, alternatively translated, the ‘Four Realities of the Noble One(s)’, as Harvey recently seems to prefer, possibly emphasizing the status of phenomenological and experiential reality of Buddhist truths. See <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.harv.html> .

¹³ Following Meiland’s suggestion in Meiland, 2007: 120.

¹⁴ A.II.156 for instance: svākkhāto bhagavatā dhammo sandiṭṭhiko akāliko ehipassika opanaiko paccatam veditabbo viññūhī ti.

simultaneously – apophatically – ‘profound (*gambhīro*), hard/difficult to see and to fathom, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning/not within the sphere of reasoning (*atakkāvacaro*), subtle, to be experienced by the wise’ (M.I.167). I see this statement as one of the many symptoms of the internal tension within the Canon between the two roles of language, with its epistemological and gnoseological consequences. Although it is possible to see *Paṭiccasamuppāda*, to awaken to its reality and to go beyond it by realising *Nibbāna*, it is linguistically challenging to describe it using positive terminology.

For instance, the *Suttas* seem to prefer a metaphorical (and thus somewhat negative) explanation of the relationship between *nidānas* (conditioning links in the Conditioned Arising sequence)¹⁵, using various types of similes: hydraulic (causing to swell or ‘fill out’ by ‘feeding it’¹⁶); organic (feeding, nurturing), fire (fuelling) and mechanical similes (supporting). The *Suttas* here use analogical language from everyday experience to attempt to convey the meaning of the complex and profound relationships between causes and conditions, drawing from agricultural, environmental and human

¹⁵ See Harvey, 2008c: section 3: ‘It is clear that a *nidāna* is seen as a *necessary* condition [*paccaya*] for that which it conditions, but not as a necessary and *sufficient* condition, otherwise when a Buddha or *Arahat* experienced feeling they would inevitably experience craving, which they are beyond... In the case of more harmful *nidānas*, though – certainly including ignorance, craving and grasping – they would be seen as both necessary and sufficient to cause the arising of the next *nidāna* in the sequence.’

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

images, ostensibly pointing to rather than explicitly and cogently explaining and demonstrating.

On the other hand, the *Abhidhamma* seems to emphasise a more positive, assertoric, philosophically precise explanation of conditions (*paccaya*), which are said to be of 24 kinds. In the *Paṭṭhāna* (the seventh book of the *Abhidhamma*), there is a long and detailed list of conditions¹⁷, using precise categories to classify and discriminate between different types, thus showing a propensity for a more positive, cataphatic elucidation.

This internal ambivalence is also noticeable when considering the phenomenological and psychological characterisation of *dhammas/dharmas* as the basic regular patterns and processes as we know and experience them, i.e. reality as experienced phenomena, how it is presented to us and apprehended by us, in short *yathābhūta*. In the *Suttas*, the methodology is context-rich and sensitive, situational, using spoken language and dialects, conventional terminology, poetic images, narrative devices; whereas in the *Abhidhamma*, there is a shift towards a phenomenological psychology (albeit with a soteriological aim) using technical, specific, philosophically assertoric language, a detailed investigation and exposition, an ‘attempt to give a

¹⁷ See Ñāṇamoli, 1991: XVII 66-104 and 111.

systematic and exhaustive account of the world by breaking it down into its constituent physical and mental events.’¹⁸

Another topic that reveals the fruitful tension between the role of cataphatic and apophatic language in Buddhist teachings is the issue of wrong view, right view and right seeing/no view in the Canon. There are many passages in the *Suttas* in which the Buddha explicitly criticises wrong views and advocates right view (both *lokiya* – ordinary – and *lokottara* – transcendent). In the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (prestigiously positioned as the first discourse in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, itself the first collection of discourses in the *Sutta Piṭaka*), there is a ‘systematic exposition and critique of the varieties of speculative views’¹⁹ with its strong criticism of sixty-two wrong and pernicious views (*micchā diṭṭhis*): 18 wrong views about the past (eternalists, semi-eternalists, finitude or infinity of the world, evasive ‘eel-wrigglers’, self and world arisen by chance) and 44 speculative views on the future (especially annihilationist ones). The Buddha’s main concern, in my opinion, is to acknowledge and criticise all wrong views of his time, so as to

¹⁸ Gethin, 1998: 204. I agree with Gethin, Cousins and Williams that “the aim of *Abhidhamma* is not really theoretical; it is related to insight meditation and a world-view based upon processes in order to facilitate insight into change and not-self so as to undermine mental rigidity’ (Lance Cousins, a great *Ābhidhammika*, quoted in Williams 2000, p.92). There is only a web of *dharmas*, complex, dynamic, evanescent nexus of conditions, not atoms independently existing, not noumena, things in themselves, separate (each carrying own mark/quality, *svabhāva*), yet cooperating: multiple, momentary, impersonal, mutually conditioned **events/processes**.

¹⁹ Bikkhu Bodhi, 1997: 51.

clear the way from any intellectual impediment to practising the Path to Liberation (soteriological aim).

There are also many instances²⁰ in which the Buddha extols the benefits of both *lokiya sammā diṭṭhi* (ordinary right view)²¹ and *lokottara sammā diṭṭhi* (transcendental right view)²². Although there may seem to be a tension between critiquing the holding and clinging to views²³, whilst advocating both ordinary and transcendent right view, I believe this can satisfactorily be explained from a temporal, diachronic standpoint²⁴. As there

²⁰ For example in the *Mahā-cattārisaka Sutta*, MN, *Sutta* 117, in the *Sammā Diṭṭhi Sutta*, M. I. 46-55, in the *Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta*, D.II.311-12 (when discussing right view as part of the Ennobling Eightfold Path) and in the *Nidāna saṃyutta*, *Sutta* 15, S.II.17.

²¹ The belief in the goodness and benefits of giving (*dāna*), in karma and rebirth, in other worlds, in morality and in the path, leading in the right direction, yet associated with clinging if not tested by wisdom, dependent on conditions (impermanent and *dukkha*). This is conceptual right view, the intellectual grasp of Buddha's teachings, the potential germ for direct seeing.

²² Direct seeing (not 'view'), wisdom (*paññā*), factor of the path, experiential insight into *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* and Conditioned Arising.

²³ See Harvey, 2008d. The Buddha warns against grasping at views as: one of the four kinds of grasping leading to *dukkha*; one of the *āsava*s (D.II.82); inevitably leading to quarrels (A.I.66) and conceit (Sn. 842-3). Generally speaking, all views, if not tested by wisdom (M.I.133), are still associated with conditioned states and with clinging (M.III.72), thus resulting in *dukkha* if clung to (A.V.187-8).

²⁴ The Path is a road to be walked, which entails time (and effort). If it is true that at Stream-Entry the *Dhamma* is glimpsed all at once (the opening of the *dhamma*-eye), it also true that we move along the path step by step, across time, even across lifetimes. Therefore, from a didactic, soteriological perspective, I can appreciate the decisive importance to 'hold', albeit temporarily and with the minimum possible attachment, a correct rather than an incorrect view of the way things are, so as to be able, whilst progressing on the path, to move from a view to a direct, experiential, intuitive **seeing** of the *Dhamma*.

are ‘different degrees of *paññā*’²⁵ along the Path, there are perhaps different degrees of attachment to views in the first stages on the journey to Liberation²⁶. The Buddha is keen to explain cataphatically and discriminate between different views, with great subtlety and sophistication.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a more apophatic strand in the *Suttas* with regards to the role of *diṭṭhis* and the relinquishing of **all** views. Apart from the emphasis on the endless quarrelling over divergent views²⁷, there is hint that even a direct rejection of all views, though seen as close to non-clinging, is nonetheless a view of some sort: ‘a wise person abandons that view and does not take up some other view’ (M. I. 499). ‘A monk whose mind is thus liberated, Aggivessana, sides with none and disputes with none; he

²⁵ Gethin, 1997: 5 (reprinted with corrections).

²⁶ Although attachment is always unskillful, it can however ‘fuel’ our skilful aspiration to embark on the navigation across the ocean of *samsāra* towards the safe shores of *Nibbāna*. From the *Abhidhamma* perspective, *diṭṭhi* always arises in unskillful states (see Nāṇamoli table III as quoted in Harvey, 2008d: section 6), yet I see this as due to the fact that the *Abhidhamma* is a ‘higher teaching’ for those well-faring along the path, not for beginners (aren’t we all, though, always beginners compared to the unfathomable wisdom of The Lord?). Moreover, I liked Gethin’s suggestion (Gethin, 1997) of understanding *sammā diṭṭhi* (both *lokiya* and *lokottara*) in terms of faith (*saddhā*), trustful, heart/mind-based confidence that spurs us on to following the path and practising, rather than a *diṭṭhi* (with its manifold negative connotations).

²⁷ For example, in reference to *samanas* and *Brahmins* (‘this alone is true, all else is futile’) being blind and eyeless... in the parable of blind men and elephant: a narrow, blinkered, partial, one-dimensional, incomplete experience cannot claim to be truth, as it generates inappropriate generalisations (*Udāna* 65-69, VI.4). Elsewhere, there is also a strong criticism of a welter, thicket, jungle, froth of view in which men are trapped and confused.

employs the speech currently used in the world without adhering to it.’²⁸ An apophatic rejection of all views is even more conspicuous in the *Aṭṭhaka Vagga* of the *Sutta Nipāta* (vv.766-975), sixteen poems²⁹ on the theme of non-clinging (one of which is clinging to views), where a seemingly paradoxical complete letting go of **all** views appears to be advocated. These utterances highlight, yet again, an underlying tension and ambivalence towards language and its ability to express and define the correct Buddhist view, especially from the ultimate standpoint of a Buddha or an *Arahat*. That said, I would nonetheless tend to agree with the introductory comments by Thanissaro Bhikkhu³⁰, where he points out that these paradoxes should not be taken completely at face value, but interpreted by considering: the role of puns on language, the genre of philosophical enigma (where language is used to challenge the reader), the overall emphasis on word-play with didactic purpose and the soteriological aims; hence the interpretative reading should be transformational, rather than merely informative.

²⁸ *Dīghanakkha Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya Sutta* 74, M.I.497-501). It is interesting that, on hearing this, Sāriputta, who was fanning the Buddha, attained Arahatship, and Dīghanakkha attained the *Dhamma*-eye that saw ‘all that is subject to arising is subject to cessation’ (*yaṃ kiñci samudaya dhamma taṃ nirodha dhamma*), becoming a stream-enterer.

²⁹ It is interesting that the genre used here is poetry, thus hinting a shift towards aesthetic language. I will examine this further in the next pages.

³⁰ See Harvey, 2008d: section 5.

Overall, I would agree with Gomez³¹ that there is no emphasis on the ineffability of the goal/path in the *Suttas*, yet there are undeniable (and ultimately fruitful, from my point of view) notable exceptions in the Canon, especially in the *Sutta Nipāta*: goal-silence (the goal is utterly indescribable) and path-silence (talking and theorising are obstacles in the path).

Let us now examine more closely some more explicit apophatic passages of Theravāda and Madhyamaka teachings, to corroborate our thesis.

Apophatic tendency

A crucial issue that demonstrates the role of apophatic language in the Canon is the ten *avyākata* (undetermined) questions³². I see four main reasons as to why the Buddha leaves the set of ten questions undetermined and undeclared, which I will analyse in order of priority (from my point of ‘view’, of course).

³¹ Gomez, L.O., 1976, ‘Proto-Mādhyamika in the Pāli canon’, *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 137-75, cited in Harvey, 2008d: section 5.

³² See the *Cūḷa-Mālunkya Sutta*, M.I.426-31: Is the world eternal? Is the world not eternal? Is the world finite? Is the world infinite? Is the life-principle (*jīva*) the same as the mortal body (*sarīra*)? Is the life-principle (*jīva*) different from the mortal body (*sarīra*)? A *tathāgata* is after death? A *tathāgata* is not after death? A *tathāgata* both is and is not after death? A *tathāgata* neither is nor is not after death? *sassato attā ca loko ca; asassato attā ca loko ca; antavā attā ca loko ca anantavā attā ca loko ca; taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ; aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ; hoti tathāgato paraṃ marañā; na hoti tathāgato paraṃ marañā; hoti ca na ca hoti tathāgato paraṃ marañā; neva hoti na na hoti tathāgato paraṃ marañā.*

1. Soteriological reason

As explained to Ven Mālun̄kyaputta in the homonymous *Sutta*,³³ these questions and their answers ‘are not connected with the goal, are not fundamental to the holy life. They do not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, Unbinding. That’s why they are undeclared by me.’ The Buddha uses the simile of the poisoned arrow to emphasise the urgency of Awakening to the reality of *dukkha*, its origin, its cessation and the Path leading thereto. It is interesting that the Buddha is talking to one of his monks, rather than a layperson, when he gave this explanation about the undeclared questions; I see this as possibly the main reason for leaving the questions aside whilst being engaged in the practice, as they are not salvific questions and answers. The Buddha is an unsurpassed **religious** teacher, compassionately concerned about our suffering, ceaselessly pointing to Awakening. Moreover, being overly preoccupied with these questions and their answers would certainly lead to *papañca*, conceptual proliferation, being assailed by ideas which disturb the path from within.³⁴

2. Moral reason

³³ <http://www.accesstoinight.org/canon/sutta/majjhima/mn063.html>

³⁴ See Collins, 1982: 141.

Following Collins's line of thought³⁵, I agree that a chief concern of the Buddha as a **religious teacher** is to lead his disciples into 'laying down the sword' of verbal and intellectual warfare and into 'becoming armyless', relinquishing lust for views and desire for verbal combat against other ascetics. The Buddhist precepts prescribe *ahiṃsā* in body, speech and thought; views inevitably lead to quarrels, to the disruption of peace and amicable relationships.

3. Logical reason

Most importantly for my discussion on apophatic tendency, the ten undetermined questions are linguistically and logically ill-posed, as they are based on a misunderstanding about the nature of reality, projected out of a firm belief in the person (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*), coloured by the distorting glasses of the belief in a Self. For example, when discussing the questions about the world (S.I.62 and S.IV.95)³⁶, the Buddha uses a phenomenological (in modern philosophical jargon) approach to awaken us to the fact that we are always - though rarely consciously- talking about our **lived** world of experience. *Loka* - the world - is always **our experienced world**, a product of mind (*mano*)-based (mis)interpretation (*saññā*) of sense-organs inputs, spun out of beginningless greed, hatred and ignorance. Therefore, ill-formed questions

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139-140.

³⁶ As quoted in Harvey, 2008e: section 4.

cannot be meaningfully answered from the point of view of *dhamma*-eye, they just don't make sense.

4. 'Mystical' reason

As the *bhikkunī* Khemā, answering King Pasenadi on the undeclared questions by the Lord puts it: 'Who can count the grains of sand in the river Ganges...?... Who can count the water in the great ocean...?... The *Tathāgata*, great king, is liberated from reckoning in terms of form; he is deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom like the great ocean'³⁷. It might not please the agonistic philosopher in us wanting to logically argue on everything, but there are realms that logical reason cannot fathom.

In addition to the unanswered questions, there are other passages that emphasise the role of apophatic language, such as: the parable of the poisoned arrow; the parable of the *siṃsāpa* leaves and the parable of the blind men and the elephant (directly applied in the *Suttas* to the *avyākata* questions!).

A second major theme connected with negative language is the nature of *Nibbāna/Nirvāṇa* and its characterisation in the *Suttas*, which I believe is particularly illuminating with regards to the ambivalence between cataphatic and apophatic language shown so far. From a positive standpoint, the *Suttas*

³⁷ *Abyākatasaṃyutta*, in Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000: 1381-2.

seem to be clear on what *Nibbāna/Nirvāṇa* actually is: the event of the complete destroying of the three fires/poisons (*rāga/lobha, dosa* and *moha*)³⁸, the experience of the complete extinguishing of *dukkha*³⁹, the stopping of the *khandas*⁴⁰, the utter destruction of the *āsavas*⁴¹. Moreover, it is the content glimpsed at Stream-entry and fully known at the moment of Awakening: the Unconditioned realm. Finally, it is the object of signless concentration⁴² (and possibly, according to Harvey's interpretation, a transformed state of discernment)⁴³.

However, when examining the language used to convey the meanings of *Nibbāna/Nirvāṇa*, there appears to be a predilection for apophatic language, for images, metaphors, similes and expression pointing at what *Nibbāna/Nirvāṇa* is not, mostly using the linguistic privative prefixes 'a', 'vi' and 'ni'⁴⁴. There is a wealth of examples in the Canon, which reveals a

³⁸ See the 'fire sermon' (*Vin.* I.34-5), cited in Harvey, 1990: 61.

³⁹ See *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*, SV 420: 'Now *this*, bhikkhus, for the Noble One(s), is the pain-ceasing reality. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it', from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.harv.html> .

⁴⁰ See Harvey, 2008f: section 1.

⁴¹ 'Cankers', 'taints', 'corruptions', 'fermentations', 'influxes', see Harvey, 2007: section 3

⁴² See Harvey, 2008f: section 1.6.

⁴³ Harvey, 1995: 198-226.

⁴⁴ See *Samyutta* 43, in S.IV.360-73, cited in Harvey, 2007: section 2: *asaṅkhatam* (unconditioned), *anataṃ* (uninclined), *anāsavaṃ* (taintless), *ajajjaraṃ* (undecaying), *apalokitaṃ* (undisintegrating), *anidassanaṃ* (non-manifestive), *amataṃ* (deathless), *anītikaṃ*

reluctance to categorically define, to positively circumscribe a reality that is ultimately beyond⁴⁵ linguistic description, as it is quintessentially unconditioned, whereas language is always conditioned. Perhaps the most famous and widely quoted passages are those from the *Udāna* (*Vagga* 8, *Sutta* 3)⁴⁶, in which the Buddha hints at the timeless realm of *Nirvāṇa/Nibbāna* through either negative or poetic⁴⁷ attributes.

Finally, the mysterious⁴⁸ status of a *tathāgata* both in life and beyond death shows the propensity to apply apophatic language to any possible description. A *tathāgata* is in fact:

(unailing), *anttikam dhammam* (unailing state), *avyāpajjho* (unafflicted), *anālayo* (unclinging); *virāgo* (non-attachment); *nippapañca* (unelaborated).

⁴⁵ *Pāram* (beyond) is also a description of *Nirvāṇa/Nibbāna*, S.IV.360-73.

⁴⁶ ‘Monks, there exists the unborn (*ajātam*), the unbecome, the unmade, the unconstructed’, cited in Harvey, 2007: section 5.

⁴⁷S.IV.360-73 cited in Harvey, 2007: section 2: the truth (*saccam*), the beyond (*param*), the subtle (*nipunam*), the very-hard-to-see (*sududassam*), the lasting (*dhuvam*), the peaceful (*santam*), the sublime (*panitam*), the auspicious (*sivam*), the secure (*khemam*), the marvellous (*acchariyam*), the amazing (*abbhutam*), purity (*suddhi*), freedom (*mutti*), the island (amidst the flood, *dīpam*), the shelter (*lenam*), the asylum (*tānam*), the refuge (*saranam*), the destination (*parāyanam*).

⁴⁸ I believe, with Gombrich amongst others, that the Buddha was an unsurpassed language and concept twister: ‘as a creative thinker, he played with some of those [Brahmanical] concepts and gave words new meaning’ (Numata Lectures delivered at SOAS, 14th November 2006, Sixth Lecture, ‘What did the Buddha mean by “no soul?”’). The Buddha ‘played’ with both cataphatic and apophatic language; a supreme example of the latter is the use of the word/concept ‘*tathāgata*’. Its etymology is uncertain, though most scholars (see Harvey, 2008g: section 1) prefer its derivation from: ‘*tathā* (adverb), so, thus, in this way; or *tatha* (adjective), in truth, truthful, true, real; or *tatham* (neuter pronoun), truth; plus *gata*, gone, or *āgata*, come.’ Gombrich, on the other hand, suggests a different interpretation: ‘the word *gata* when it occurs as the second member of a compound of this type often loses its primary meaning and means simply ‘being’. For example, *citrāgatā nārī* is

- beyond definition in life and after death as: *gambhīro* (deep, profound), *appameyyo* (immeasurable), *duppariyogāho* (hard-to-fathom)⁴⁹
- untraceable: questions on his/her nature do not apply. Using a simile, it is said that for a fire gone out it is meaningless/inappropriate to ask in which direction (North, South, West and East) it has gone⁵⁰. Moreover, (s)he is freed from being reckoned by any *upādānakkhandā* (personality-factors)⁵¹, as having abandoned *anusayas* (latent tendencies: “I am’ conceit, attachment, aversion, spiritual ignorance). There is no basis/criterion for determining his/her status

not ‘the woman who has gone into the picture’, but simply ‘the woman in the picture.’ So the Buddha is referring to himself as ‘the one who is like that.’ This is tantamount to saying that there are no words to describe his state; he can only point to it” (cited Numata Lecture). Following Gombrich’s line of thought, I agree that the primary reason why a *tathāgata* is seen as so mysterious even in life is because he/she is ultimately ineffable, beyond apprehension, beyond conceptualisation, beyond language and thinking. The soteriological and salvific event of realising *nibbāna* is beyond language support, as it is the very dropping away of the *khandas*, together with all the other fetters, the casting off of views and conceptual proliferation, the cessation of I-conceit, of qualities, of determinations. There is no more criterion (*pamāna*), as Thanissaro Bhikkhu says in the passage quoted in Harvey, 2008g: section 4, to describe and discriminate the nature of a *tathāgata*, words are simply inadequate, can only function as pointers. The event of *nibbāna* is clearly real and fathomable (for the Holy Persons), yet ineffable in terms of language, which is conditioned and construed, unlike *nibbāna*, the unconditioned and unconstructed. So a *tathāgata* is mysterious to our logical mind, yet can be ‘seen’ with the *paññacakkhu*, the eye of wisdom.

⁴⁹ *Abyākatasaṃyutta*, in Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000: 1381.

⁵⁰ *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta*, M.I.483-8, from <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.072.than.html> .

⁵¹ See Harvey, 2008g: section 3 and 4.

- immeasurable: there is no 'I am' conceit, therefore no boundaries (a *tathāgata* dwells within a mind – *ceto* – made to be without boundaries)
- inscrutable (*ananuvejjo*): (s)he cannot be found.

The apophatic role of language is somewhat generalised and radicalised in the Madhyamaka school, especially by Nāgārjuna's criticism of any essentialist doctrine of conditionality in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. His aim is to logically show (*via negativa*, using the *prāsaṅga* methodology of taking up his opponent's views and showing that all the four logical possibilities – *catuṣkoṭi* – lead to nonsense, to absurd consequences or to statements that are not in line with what we observe in our experience: *reduction ad absurdum* method) that we cannot formulate a coherent metaphysics of causality/conditionality when assuming, theoretically or pre-theoretically, the essentialist position of reality as made up of essences, *svabhāvas*. Nāgārjuna is focused on criticising any realist/essentialist view⁵², not on proposing his own position to explain causality/conditionality.

⁵² His interpretation of the *Abhidharma* notion of primary existents as endowed with *svabhāva*, which he shifts to mean 'independently existing nature', rather than simply, in more *Abhidharmic* terms, a characteristic mark or quality of each *dharma*.

His apophatic discourse is clarified with the notion of two (levels of) truths: conventional (*saṃvṛti*)⁵³ and ultimate (*paramārtha*)⁵⁴, which shows a strong nominalism⁵⁵ in his language theory. Language and theories are only valid at the conventional level, where they can make logically coherent assertions⁵⁶. However, at the ultimate level, language is at most ostensive⁵⁷,

⁵³ **Samvṛti**: conventional and concealing. The *Abhidharma* analysis of *dharma*s is true, yet not essentially so. ‘If we examine with reasoning the conventional as it appears, no-thing is found. That nonfindingness is the ultimate’ (Atiśa). ‘Nāgārjuna will deny that it is possible to assert anything from the ultimate standpoint. He will urge that all truth is relative and conventional’ (Garfield, 1995: 101). Talking of causality in chapter 1 of MMK (Examination of conditions) and the logical impossibility to find explanations of how it works, as all 4 options on causes (*hetu*) lead to absurd consequences (self-power, other-power, both and neither): ‘What we are typically confronted with in nature is a vast network of interdependent and continuous processes, and carving out particular phenomena for explanation or for use in explanations depends more on our explanatory interests and language than on joints nature presents to us’ (Garfield, 1995: 113). **Truth is relative to practices and languages, yet truth nonetheless.** ‘The trick is to make correct use of conventional locutions without reifying denotata for all the terms’ (*ibid.*, pp.114-5).

⁵⁴ Emptiness as the articulation (logically implied, when pushed to its logical consequences) of the Middle Way of Conditioned Arising; everything is empty of inherent existence (*ni.hsvabhāva*). Nāgārjuna offers a more radical interpretation than Early Buddhism (which talks only of causal links between specific *dharma*s in temporal sequence), as Conditioned Arising is now viewed more philosophically as a general, abstract principle (that being, this come to be, etc). However, emptiness is not the ultimate reality, emptiness itself is empty, lacks inherent existence, is relational, is emptiness of, is dependent on things being empty. Ultimate truth is wise seeing of conventional **AS** conventional (not disparaging the conventional for something higher and more real), that’s gnosis, abandoning all tendencies to conceptualise, all *prapañca*, that’s *Nirvāṇa*, pacification of verbal/conceptual proliferation, non-construction of conditioned world of *saṃsāra*. *Nirvāṇa* is simply *saṃsāra* **seen** without reification/attachment/delusion, **seen** as it is, empty of inherent existence, **seen** by gnosis rather than by ignorance.

⁵⁵ ‘Empty should not be asserted.

‘Nonempty’ should not be asserted.

Neither both nor neither should not be asserted.

They are only used nominally’,

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, XXII, 11, Examination of the *Tathāgata*, in Garfield, 1995: 61.

⁵⁶ The conventional standpoint is assertoric, see Garfield, 1995: 212-3): ‘For Nāgārjuna, assertion in the literal sense is always the ascription of a property to an entity. As long as

can point to the truth that must be directly experienced and realised. Nāgārjuna suggests a total relinquishing of all views⁵⁸ and all attempts to use cataphatic language, thus radicalising the apophatic tendency found in the Canon.

Aesthetic tendency

To conclude my essay, I would like to discuss another role of language in Buddhist teachings, which may synthesise the ambivalence between cataphatic and apophatic tendencies: aesthetic language. Although little used in Early Buddhism, there are significant passages in the *Theragāthā* where early *Arahats* express their open, free-from-attachment, spontaneous and

we are talking from the conventional standpoint, there is no problem here. There are plenty of conventional entities and conventional properties to go around and, so, lots of available conventionally true assertions. That is the basis of conventional truth. It is also important to note here that corresponding to these conventional assertions are real propositions that make them true or false – entities with or without the ascribed properties... But when we start doing metaphysics, it is easy to slip into nonsense: For now, when we want to characterize the essence of a thing, we take ourselves to be positioning a non-conventional thing and ascribing to it an essential property. And there not only are no such things, but there are not even *possibly* such things. There is no ultimate *way the world is* that we are characterizing, truly or falsely.’

⁵⁷ ‘The language must hence be understood, from the ultimate perspective, not as making assertions, but rather as ostending – indicating that which cannot be literally asserted without falling into nonsense – as Wittgenstein puts in the *Tractatus*, showing that which cannot be said’ (Garfield, 1995: 213). Ultimately there is no entity of which emptiness can be predicated upon, assertions are only nominally true at the conventional level. ‘The ultimate truth, then, is that there are no ultimate realities; existence is inconceivable and inexpressible as it has no ultimate ground’, (Harvey, 2008h: section 10).

⁵⁸ See MMK XXVII, Examinations of Views, 30: ‘I prostrate to Gautama, Who through compassion, Taught the true doctrine, Which leads to the relinquishing of all views’ (In Garfield, 1995: 83).

poetic appreciation for natural beauty. They use aesthetic language of purified sensory (yet not sensual) delight for the natural environment, rejoicing at simple manifestations of everyday landscape beauty, showing an attitude of wonder and gratitude towards plants, animals, rocks, mountains, sky, clouds, and generally all natural elements⁵⁹. It seems to me an attempt to overcome a possible dichotomy between positive and negative language, creating a timeless - yet rhythmical - ludic space for embracing the contradiction of yearning to express the inexpressible, to say the unsayable, to reveal the hidden and concealing mystery of Awakening⁶⁰.

The role of aesthetic language becomes more prominent in the Ch'an/Zen tradition and is particularly evident and effective in Japanese *haiku*. I think that the *haiku* art form is perfectly suited to embody the Zen 'spirit' of what I would call an aesthetic theology (borrowing from Earhart's 'intuitive and aesthetic approach')⁶¹. It is quintessentially poetry of awakening, as 'the flash of poetic insight is an artistic counterpart to the Zen moment of enlightenment'⁶² in its subtle ability to evoke and suggest, rather

⁵⁹ 'Those rocks delight me, the colour of blue clouds, beautiful, cool with water, having pure streams, covered with Indagopaka insects', *Theragāthā*, v. 1063, attributed to Mahā-Kassapa and cited in Harvey, 2008i: Section 1.

⁶⁰ 'The earth is sprinkled, the wind blows, the lightning flashes in the sky. My thoughts are quietened, my mind is well concentrated', *Theragāthā*, v. 50, attributed to Vimala, see cited Session 29.

⁶¹ Earhart, 1974: 128.

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 140.

than explain or even show. I would argue that *haiku* is a purely suggestive art form, an intuitive, immediate, spontaneous expression of a sudden realization, whether that be a small or big *satori*, a gentle irruption of reality into our subjective world, able to shatter -perhaps only for an instant - the illusory membrane between in and out, mind and body, subject and object.

Haiku poems are not symbolic or representational, neither referring to/standing for something absent, nor portraying/copying something already present. It seems to me that *haiku's* power is in allowing the space/time for phenomena to 'presence' (as a verb) themselves⁶³ in their coming to be and passing away, in their beautiful and delicate impermanence. *Haiku* poetry evokes the ever-new arising and ceasing of reality, opens the gates of the mind to abide in quiet observation, without judgement or reflective process. It is the art of *hishiryō*, 'thinking without thinking'⁶⁴, mindful pre-reflective attention to the mysterious unfolding and concealing of phenomena, presencing of things as they are/come to be (*yathābhūta*). *Haiku* poems evoke the aimless, purposeless (*mushotoku*), immediate, ever- alert state of mind that Zen practice cultivates, 'expressing the artist's own inner state of

⁶³ 'Yes- cf [sic] I sometimes translate *sati-paṭṭhāna* as 'presencing of mindfulness'- Haiku seem to 'present' an experience in a very immediate way, inviting the presence of mindfulness, so they meet 'in the middle', Harvey, P., BUDM04 Discussion Folder Session 29: Zen and the arts, Reply to Lead Post, 5th February 2008.

⁶⁴ As Master Deshimaru said, commenting on Dōgen's *Fukanzazengi*, in Deshimaru, 1979: 19.

going nowhere in a timeless moment'⁶⁵, being an echo, a reverberation, a sonorous resonance of such moments. *Haiku* poetry is full of emptiness, words are sounds delicately vibrating in silence, unobtrusively, 'a pebble thrown in the pool of the listener's mind, evoking associations out of the richness of his own memory'⁶⁶, inviting participation, not admiration. They renew the child-like awe-full sentiment of wonder, what the Japanese call *sono-mama*, 'Just as it is', or 'Just so'.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to unearth an underlying, fruitful tension with regards to the attitude towards the role of language in Buddhist teachings, limiting my exposition to Theravāda sources, Madhyamaka school and Ch'an/Zen. I hope I have highlighted how cataphatic, apophatic and aesthetic languages are subtly interwoven in the Buddhist tradition to create a complex and sophisticated Middle Way approach to teachings, truth, practice and Awakening. I believe that these three tendencies towards language masterly embody the Buddhist Middle Way: a path that unifies in diversity, embraces yet maintains differences and peculiarities, holds and respects (from the Latin *respicere*, looking back with care) the other as other, without reducing it to any S/self (in its metaphysical connotation and

⁶⁵ Watts, 1962: 200.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

psychological implication of ‘I am’ conceit). The Middle Way as *praxis*, not all-encompassing, panoramic *theorein*, not *vāda* (school) with its inevitable pull to reduce possibilities to a single ‘view.’ Although language is ultimately inadequate to exemplify practice, we are nonetheless inevitably compelled to utilise it to mediate between path and goal, without falling into a delusory and partial understanding of them as extreme, binary pairs⁶⁷. The silence of *paramārtha* as *paññā/prajñā* and the language of *saṃvṛti* as *mahā-karuṇā*.⁶⁸

Fragrant fynbos
Battered by wind and waves:
Is it gone?

Bibliography

⁶⁷ Ruegg, 1989: 244.

⁶⁸ ‘Paraphrasing Nagao: ‘As the “silence” of paramārtha is true “Wisdom” (*prajñā*), logic, which was recovered and molded into the form of language, represents “Great Compassion” (*mahā-karuṇā*) of the Buddha towards the illusory world. The Madhyamic logic... is a logic of Love – a skilful device of the Great Compassion – supported by the Wisdom of *sūnyatā*’, in Nagao, 1991: 46.

Bikkhu Bodhi, 1997, 'The Buddha's survey of views', in Dhammajoti, K.L. Tilakaratne, A. and Abhayawansa, K., eds, *Recent Researches in Buddhist Studies: Essays in Honour of Professor Y. Karunadasa*, Colombo, Y. Karunadasa Felicitation Committee in collaboration with Chi Ying Foundation, Hong Kong, pp. 51-69.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, Volume II, Boston, Wisdom Publications.

Collins, S., 1982, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Deshimaru, T., 1979, *The Voice of the Valley. Zen teachings*, Indianapolis, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.

Earhart, H.B., 1974, *Religion in the Japanese Experience: Sources and Interpretations*, California, Dickenson Publishing Company, INC.

Garfield, J.L., 1995, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way. Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Gethin, R., 1997, 'Wrong View (*micchā-diṭṭhī*) and Right View (*sammā-diṭṭhī*) in the Theravāda *Abhidhamma*, in Dhammajoti, K.L. Tilakaratne, A. and Abhayawansa, K., eds, *Recent Researches in Buddhist Studies: Essays in Honour of Professor Y. Karunadasa*, Colombo, Y. Karunadasa Felicitation

Committee in collaboration with Chi Ying Foundation, Hong Kong, pp. 211-19.

Gethin, R., 1998, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Harvey, P., 1990, *An Introduction to Buddhism. Teachings, history and practices*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Harvey, P., 1995, *The Selfless Mind. Personality, Consciousness and Nirvāṇa in Early Buddhism*, Oxon, RoutledgeCurzon.

Harvey, P., 2007, Session 10: The Third Ennobling Truth: *Nirvāṇa*, section 2, BUDM01, University of Sunderland.

Harvey, P., 2008a, Session 1: Introduction and the Early Buddhist Theory of Truth, BUDM04, University of Sunderland.

Harvey, P., 2008b, Session 5: *Abhidhamma* literature and principles, BUDM04, University of Sunderland.

Harvey, P., 2008c, Session 7: Conditioned Arising: its nature, and how it is known, BUDM04, University of Sunderland.

Harvey, P., 2008d, Session 13: Wrong view, right view and right seeing/no view, BUDM04, University of Sunderland.

Harvey, P., 2008e, Session 14: The undetermined questions on the world materials, BUDM04, University of Sunderland.

Harvey, P., 2008f, Session 17: The nature of *Nirvāṇa*, BUDM04, University of Sunderland.

Harvey, P., 2008g, Session 18: The enlightened one as untraceable in life and beyond death, BUDM04, University of Sunderland.

Harvey, P., 2008h, Session 20: The Madhyamaka on emptiness and the transcending of views, section 10, BUDM04, University of Sunderland.

Harvey, P., 2008i, Session 29: Zen, nature and the arts, Section 1, BUDM04, University of Sunderland.

Holder, J.T., 1995, 'The Early Buddhist Theory of Truth: a contextualist, pragmatic interpretation', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XXXVI, no. 4, pp. 433-59.

Meiland, J., 2007, Pali Language Course, part of BUDM06, Pali Language Module, p. 120 of PDF. file revised on 11 April 2007.

Nagao, G.M., 1991, *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra. A Study of Mahāyāna Philosophies*, New York, State University of New York Press.

Ñāṇamoli, 1991, *The Path of Purification - Visuddhimagga*, Kandy, Sri Lanka, Buddhist Publication Society.

Rahula, W., 1990 (revised edition), *What the Buddha Taught*, London, Wisdom Books.

Ruegg, S.D., 1989, 'The Buddhist Notion of an "Immanent Absolute" (tathāgatagarbha) as a Problem in Hermeneutics', in Skorupski, T., *The Buddhist Heritage*, Tring, U.K., The Institute of Buddhist Studies, pp. 229-46.

Watts, A., 1962, *The Way of Zen*, Penguin Books.