

A Goer Does Not Go

By Sadakata Akira

"A goer does not go," or "a comer does not come" — what exactly do these statements mean? Should they not read "a goer goes" and "a comer comes"?

The statement "a goer does not go" represents the words of Nāgārjuna, an Indian Buddhist philosopher of around the third century A.D., and he used them to explain the philosophical principle of 'emptiness'.^{*1} As many people know, the principle of emptiness is the essence of Buddhist philosophy, teaching us that what we refer to as 'substance' does not exist. (I use the pronoun "we" to denote people conditioned by contemporary Western ways of thinking and unfamiliar with Buddhist philosophy.)

'Emptiness' is the English equivalent of the Sanskrit term *śūnyatā*, a word that is difficult to translate into Western languages, for no similar concept exists in traditional Western thought. But although Western Indologists have provisionally rendered *śūnyatā* as 'emptiness', '*vacuité*', and so on, such translations easily lead to misunderstanding, since they are synonymous with 'nonexistence', the opposite of 'existence'. According to Western thinking, what does not exist is nonexistent; conversely, if something is not nonexistent, it must exist, and there is no intermediate state (law of the excluded middle). The term 'emptiness', on the other hand, refers to a state of being neither existent nor nonexistent.

Even among Buddhists who have been studying Buddhism for a long time there are many who are under the false impression that 'emptiness' and 'nonexistence' are synonyms. Although they may take care consciously not to confuse the two, they still do so unconsciously. This goes to show just how difficult it is to gain a correct understanding of the concept of emptiness. What is more, this has been

an issue ever since the philosophy of emptiness was first propounded, and for those who confuse emptiness with nonexistence there have been provided these words of admonition: "emptiness is also empty."

But it is virtually impossible to rid such people of their misunderstanding by this means, for they will again confuse the emptiness underlying the statement "emptiness is also empty" with nonexistence and postulate a new form of nonexistence. In order to free them from this misconception, one could perhaps say to them, "The fact that emptiness is empty is also empty." But this would probably be of no avail, since they would simply posit another form of nonexistence.

In the end, no amount of words will have any effect on those who have succumbed to a prejudiced view, which in this case is the idea that there exists a substance or entity corresponding to each word. Thus they consider the word 'emptiness' to signify a particular kind of substance. In other words, they equate emptiness with nonexistence.

We normally think of 'nonexistence' not as representing a substance, but rather as representing the absence of substance. This is, however, a delusion. When we say, "there is space," 'space' (that is, nonexistence) represents a substance, as is exemplified by Newtonian space.

At university I explain the difference between emptiness and nonexistence to my students in the following manner. I enter the classroom, walk to the rostrum, and place my briefcase under the rostrum where it cannot be seen by the students. Then, after having talked for about thirty minutes, I bend down slowly, pick up the briefcase from under the rostrum, place it on top of the rostrum, and say nothing for a moment or two. The students, wondering what is about to happen, fix their eyes on the

briefcase. Having ascertained this, I put the briefcase back under the rostrum and begin my explanation.

I tell the students that they are now no doubt looking at the space on top of the rostrum with the awareness that the briefcase is not there. In other words, they are associating this space with a type of 'nonexistence'. However, the space above the rostrum is identical to the space above the rostrum during the first thirty minutes of the class, and during that thirty minutes they would not have had any thoughts of 'nonexistence' regarding this space. It would have been for them in a state anterior to any division between existence and nonexistence, and they could be said to have been looking at it with minds free of any preconceptions. These two attitudes of theirs towards the same space correspond, I say, to the difference between emptiness and nonexistence.

It might be added that Zen (or Chan) thinkers refer to the state of nonawareness as 'no-mind', and they often use this term to refer to what they regard as the ideal state of being.

Out of the conviction that it is pointless trying to explain the meaning of emptiness, no matter how many words one may expend, there emerged in Buddhism the axiom that ultimate truth (or the truth of emptiness) is beyond all verbal expression. This means that one must give up any idea of using language



to explain truth.

Abandoning the use of language is equivalent to abandoning the act of differentiation. This is because the essence of language lies in differentiating one thing from another. For example, the word 'large' differentiates what is large from what is not large and points to the former. Likewise, the word 'white' distinguishes between what is white and what is not white, 'book' distinguishes between what is a book and what is not a book, and 'existent' distinguishes between what is existent and what is not existent. Therefore, the Buddhist term for dispensing with language (including concepts, which are unspoken words) is 'nondifferentiation' (or 'nondiscrimination'), and the appearance of the world prior to differentiation is described as 'nondual'. (In passing, it might be mentioned that, etymologically speaking, the prefix *dif-/dis-* means 'twice', while the Japanese word *kotowake*, signifying 'explication' or 'apology', literally means 'dividing' [*wake*] a 'matter' [*koto*].)

The observant reader will have realized that if language cannot impart truth, then words such as 'nondifferentiation' and 'nonduality' can also not apprise us of the truth. This is indeed so, and Buddhist philosophers have been fully aware of this fact. In a certain Buddhist scripture we find the following episode.

Once the Buddha's disciples were discussing what it meant to understand 'nonduality'. One of the disciples said, "Birth and death are a duality, but in reality nothing is born and nothing dies; realization of this is called 'understanding nonduality'." Another disciple said, "'I'(subject) and 'mine'(object) are a duality, for where

there is 'I' there is also 'mine', but if there is no 'I', then there is no 'mine'; realization of this is called 'understanding nonduality'." Yet another disciple said, "Existents and emptiness are a duality, but existents and emptiness are in fact identical; realization of this is called 'understanding nonduality'."

After the disciples had each given his own view, they asked Mañjuśrī, who was known for his wisdom, what he thought, whereupon he replied, "All things transcend the realms of word and speech, and the abandonment of all argument is called 'understanding nonduality'."

Mañjuśrī's reply went beyond the replies of the other disciples. Whereas they had remained unaware of the limitations of language throughout their discussion, Mañjuśrī realized its limitations and pointed this out.

Lastly, Mañjuśrī said to Vimalakīrti, the only one not to have offered his opinion, "It's your turn. What is meant by 'understanding nonduality'?"

Vimalakīrti remained silent without saying a word. He looked full of confidence, and seeing this, Mañjuśrī exclaimed, "Excellent, excellent! You have uttered not a word, and yet it is you who have explained the most skillfully what it means to understand nonduality."

But even after hearing of episodes such as the above our faith in language may still remain unshaken. We have always believed that there is birth and death, and even now cannot help believing that this is so. This is hardly surprising, for ever since we were born into this world we have been brought up in an environment where this use of language is the norm, and we never had the opportunity to question it.

For those of us who place unwavering trust in language, emptiness seems like mere dogma, and rather than being an object of understanding, it would appear to be an object of faith. If at all possible, we would like to be brought to an understanding of emptiness by means of language, that is, by logic, yet the philosophers of emptiness are seemingly unacquainted with any such methods of

instruction. But actually Nāgārjuna does in fact respond to these wishes of ours, and one of the expressions that he used towards this end was the statement "a goer does not go" quoted at the beginning.

Most people maintain that "a goer goes," but Nāgārjuna rejects this.

*How could it possible for a goer to go
When, without the act of going,
there can be no goer?*

The import of this statement may appear difficult to fathom, but it means something like this. The idea that "a goer goes" is predicated on the assumption that a 'goer' and the act of 'going' constitute two separate phenomena. Hence a 'goer' already contains within himself the act of 'going' and has no need to be linked anew to any act of 'going', since a 'goer' who does not 'go' is a logical impossibility.

Therefore, the proposition "a goer goes" gives rise to the contradiction of there being two acts of 'going'. This is made clear in Nāgārjuna's following words:

*If a goer were to go, it would follow
that there would be two acts of going.*

The first act of 'going' is inherent in the word 'goer', while the second is the act of 'going' that represents the movement performed by the 'goer'. Furthermore, if there were two acts of 'going', this would lead to the absurd conclusion that there are two 'goers', since it is impossible for there to be only an act of 'going' without a 'goer'.

The above argument provides a penetrating insight into the essence of language. Every phenomenon constitutes a complete whole that cannot in itself be divided into parts. But when we set about representing it by means of language, we have to go through the process of first dividing it into a subject and an action and then recombining the two. This results in the statement that a 'goer' (subject) 'goes' (verb = predicate).

It would seem that all communication



is of this nature. When an image is transmitted electronically, it is first dissected into small elemental areas, the shade or tone of which is converted into corresponding electrical signals that are then sent to the receiving station, where they are reconverted to reproduce the original image. Most people today know this, but they never think of applying this knowledge to language. It is this fact, unnoticed by us all, to which Nāgārjuna is alluding.

However, Nāgārjuna's explanation is not particularly helpful. This is because the unnatural statement "a goer goes" is not used in everyday speech, and consequently people may question whether his criticism is in fact applicable to natural speech as well. In order to dispel this doubt, I shall try to elaborate further on his exposition.

Our everyday speech is made up of statements such as the following:

John goes.
John falls.
John laughs.
John cries.

.....

From countless expressions like these, we abstract an unchanging entity called 'John'. Although this John is, properly speaking, a going John, a falling John, a laughing John, a crying John, or a John performing some other action, we educe a 'John' who is unrelated to any of these actions. Under no circumstances does there exist any such abstract 'John', and yet we persuade ourselves that this abstract 'John' does exist.

Next, let us consider the following series of sentences:

John goes.
Mary goes.
The dog goes.
The train goes.

.....

On the basis of expressions such as these, we abstract the universal action of 'going'. There is no such action as 'going' *per se*: it is always someone or something that goes. But in spite of this we tacitly take it for granted that there

exists an act of 'going' *per se*.

We then go on to interpret everyday phenomena in the following manner. We assume, namely, that there exist various substances of entities, each of which chooses to perform certain actions as it sees fit. In other words, substances and actions each exist independently of each other, and a particular substance is combined with a particular action as the occasion demands. In this fashion the idea of a 'substance' becomes deeply entrenched in our minds through everyday statements of the type "A does B." This is especially so in the case of contemporary European languages, which are characterized by the linguistic structure "subject plus verb" (S+V). (In many other languages such as Japanese the subject is frequently omitted.)

The reader may initially have thought that Nāgārjuna had simply substituted the statement "a goer goes" for the statement "John goes" to suit the convenience of his own arguments. But it should now be clear that in the proposition "John goes" there is no John other than a 'going John', and yet people first posit a 'John' unrelated to the act of 'going' and then say, "John goes." This, if anything, represents a specious substitution of words.

In the above we have considered the case of "subject plus verb" (S+V), but the same also applies in the case of "subject plus verb plus object" (S+V+O). Suppose, for example, that I beat a dog. Before this situation is expressed in language (that is, before I consciously think of it), 'I', 'beat' and 'dog' constitute a single, indivisible phenomenon in which there exists no 'I' divorced from 'beat' and 'dog'. This state is described by some Japanese philosophers as the nonseparation of subject and object.

It is only when this phenomenon impinges upon our consciousness and is verbalized that it is divided into subject and object and manifests as the three independent elements of 'I', 'dog' and the act of 'beating', the last of which links the former two. I wrote earlier that this occurs when transmitting information, and the act of becoming

conscious of something can be regarded as equivalent to the transmission of information, for it represents the transmission of information to oneself by oneself.

The two stages before and after verbalization can be considered to correspond to the difference between sensation and judgment. This calls to mind the following words of Goethe: "The ears and eyes do not lie; it is judgment that lies" (*Maxims and Reflections*, "Thought and Action"). When we see a rope and mistake it for a snake, we are prone to think that it was our senses that erred and our judgment that corrected this error. Perhaps because animals of a lower order are also endowed with different senses, we regard the senses as gross and judgment as refined. But it is our judgment that both mistakes the rope for a snake and realizes the mistake. The senses never err, for they transcend right and wrong; it is judgment that makes mistakes and then corrects them.*2

A further characteristic of language is that the same words are used over and over again without changing their form. This too is probably another factor that contributes to our belief that there exist immutable entities corresponding to individual words.

In this fashion we image that if there is a word, then there is also a corresponding substance. In most cases there is no harm in this view, and in fact human beings have adhered to this way of thinking for the very reason that it has brought benefits as a result of which they have even come to create great civilizations. But sometimes we forget the essence of language and are instead harmed by words and suffer from their



ill effects. Let us now consider a number of these harmful words.

'I'. — This is the word with which we have the greatest affinity, and it is also the word that we repeat most often. Consequently our belief in the existence of an immutable entity called 'I' (one could just as well say 'soul') becomes all the more ineradicable. This gives rise to self-consciousness, to which it then lends a further edge, and this self-consciousness becomes a psychological burden and causes friction with others.

At the same time, this sense of self leads us to entertain false ideas about our own death. We imagine a universe from which only our own person is missing. In this manner we conceive of our death, and it frightens us. But we fail to realize that it is because we are alive that we can imagine such things. It is impossible for any living person to visualize his or her own death. The reason that we nonetheless indulge in such imaginings is that, because of the existence of the word 'I', we assume that there also exists an entity 'I' that is independent of the universe.

The word 'individual' exacerbates these delusions. An 'individual' is nothing but an abstract notion. In reality one will be someone's parent or someone's child, and one may be a Japanese or an American. But a person independent of all relationships — that is, an individual — simply does not exist.

'Atom'. — This signifies the ultimate irreducible form of matter. Any physicist who believes that it will one day be possible to track this down has fallen into the trap of words. An 'atom' is nothing more than a word, and no such thing actually exists.

'Infinity'. — Physicists have debated whether the universe is finite or infinite, and apparently the arguments for the thesis that it is finite are the more compelling. But this debate is also nonsensical, for 'finiteness' and 'infinity' are no more than words and do not actually exist.

But I do not want to leave a false



Nāgārjuna, an Indian Buddhist philosopher, who taught the principle of 'emptiness'

impression. Despite what I have written in the above, the philosophers of emptiness are not telling us to desist from using language. So long as we do not lose sight of the essence of language, it is warrantable to make full use of it. Provided that words such as 'soul' and 'individual' make people happy and terms such as 'atom' and 'infinity' contribute to the development of science and technology, then it has to be said that language should be utilized to its full capacity. In this sense, words are tools, and like a knife, they can be both dangerous and beneficial. Not only does the philosophy of emptiness teach us about the true nature of the world, but it also imparts the wisdom for preventing language from becoming a lethal implement.

*1 This statement is found in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna's most important work. In the original Sanskrit (the classical language of ancient India) it reads: *gantā na gacchati*. Like Greek and Latin, Sanskrit belongs to the Indo-European family of languages, and it is therefore a simple matter to convert this sentence into European languages. The *gan-* of *gantā* represents the root *gam*, corresponding to English 'go' or 'come', while *-tā* is the nominative

singular of the agentive suffix *-tr* (*-tar*), equivalent to English '-er'; *na* is a negative particle ('not'); and *gacchati* is the third person singular of the present indicative of *gam*. The English translation "a goer does not go" is that of Richard H. Robinson, a scholar of Mādhyamika thought.

*2 Nietzsche says much the same thing, but in a more philosophical manner and in a way that almost suggests that he himself had studied Nāgārjuna's philosophy of the negation of substance.

[The senses] do not lie at all. It is what we *make* of their evidence that first introduces a lie into it, for example the lie of unity, the lie of materiality, of substance, of duration.... 'Reason' is the cause of our falsification of the evidence of the senses.

Twilight of the Idols, "Reason' in Philosophy" 2 (R.J. Hollingdale, tr., *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* [Penguin Books, 1968], p. 36)

... in the present case our *language* as a perpetual advocate. Language belongs in its origin to the age of the most rudimentary form of psychology: we find ourselves in the midst of a rude fetishism when we call to mind the basic presuppositions of the metaphysics of language — which is to say, of *reason*. It is *this* which sees everywhere deed and doer; this which believes in will as cause in general; this which believes in the 'ego', in the ego as being, in the ego as substance, and which *projects* its beliefs in the ego-substance on to all things —

Twilight of the Idols, "Reason' in Philosophy" 5 (*ibid.*, pp. 37-38) **UJI**

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