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TITLE: Faith Without God

ABSTRACT:

In his *Ratnāvalī*, Nāgārjuna writes that faith is the means of attaining the preliminary, and subsidiary, goal of happiness. But such a claim seems to sit ill with the Buddha's explicit injunction against taking anything on trust – we should not believe things because someone powerful says so, or someone we like or think wise said so; we should believe only what we know from our experience to be true. What room is there, then, for faith?

I suggest that our puzzlement arises when we misunderstand what 'faith' is by reading it from a Christian perspective. Faith, according to that tradition, is most often thought of as 'blind faith' – it is belief *without* reason, or even *in the face of all reason*. Where there are reasons and evidence and argument, one does not need faith. Taken as a virtue, we might even think that faith is nobler, and more ennobling, the less reason one has to believe. This, I suggest, need not and should not be our understanding of the faith at work in the *Ratnāvalī*. Faith need not be blind. The faith Nāgārjuna recommends is not something that fills the gaps left by lack of evidence and reason. On the contrary, faith is that which is necessary in order to search for evidence and reason.

In this paper, I wish to explore two questions: First of all, what is this 'faith' that is the means to happiness? *In what* does one have faith? And second, *why* is faith the means to happiness? I suggest that not heterodoxy but rather psychological acuity leads to this claim. For in a non-providential universe, hope is a virtue all too easily lost. Nāgārjuna's insistence on faith arises from his recognition of the threat to confidence posed by realizing the godlessness of reality.

The *Ratnāvali* (or *Precious Garland*) conjoins the readable style of the moralist with Nāgārjuna’s concise and incisive insight, presenting a clear structure for a distinctively Buddhist ethics, but in the guise of ‘friendly advice to a prince’. The opening verses compactly express the Buddhist goal and the means to it:

“High status is considered to be happiness, definite goodness is liberation.  
The quintessence of their means is briefly: faith and wisdom (*śraddhāprajñe*).<sup>1</sup>”  
III.4||

That happiness is a recognized goal at all sits ill with certain interpretations of Buddhism; to others, it is only stating the obvious – and probably both sides are exaggerated. But the *means* to happiness is surprising all around. For to enjoin *faith* as a necessary means seems to directly contradict the Buddha’s explicit injunction against taking things on trust:

“Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage (of teaching), by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures,... by the seeming competence (of a teacher)<sup>2</sup>, or because you think, ‘The renunciant is our teacher’ ...” [*SN Kālāma Sutta*<sup>3</sup>]

The Buddha insists that we should not believe things because someone powerful says so, or someone we like or think wise said so; we should believe only what we know from our experience to be true. What room is there, then, for faith?

It is possible that Nāgārjuna, the 1<sup>st</sup> C. C.E. exponent of ‘Madhyamaka’, is a discredit to his teacher. A ‘fundamentalist’ approach to Buddhism might try to strip away everything but the barest bones of the oldest sūtras – as far as we can determine that from here – in order to get to the ‘real truth’ of what the Buddha said.<sup>4</sup> Such an approach would not hesitate to say that Nāgārjuna just got it wrong. But there is also a long and very venerable tradition of taking Nāgārjuna to be ‘the second Buddha’ – not literally,

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<sup>1</sup> Monier Williams has as options for *śraddhā*: “To have faith or faithfulness, have belief or confidence, belief, be true or trustful...; to credit, think anything true... to believe or have faith in or be true to...; to consent, assent to approve, welcome; ... faith, trust, confidence, trustfulness, faithfulness, belief in... trust, confidence, loyalty .... [*can be*] calmness, composure of mind”

<sup>2</sup> How to evaluate the competence of a teacher is discussed in *MN 95: Canki-Sutta*.

<sup>3</sup> See below for text omitted in ellipses, which is also relevant to the discussion. The translation is that of Peter Harvey in *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings* (W. Edelglass and J. L. Garfield, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Batchelor’s *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist* is one good example of this.

perhaps, but as an indication of the insight with which he interpreted the Buddha-Dharma. All of Mahāyāna Buddhism, at least – no inconsiderable part of the Buddhist intellectual tradition – cannot be so easily freed from taking Nāgārjuna seriously.

And it is not just Nāgārjuna who values faith. The 4<sup>th</sup> C. C.E.. Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu lists faith (*śraddhā*) as one of the *kuśala* states in his *Thirty Verses*.<sup>5</sup> This means it is Abhidharma Buddhists, and not just the Mahāyāna innovators who valued faith. One might, of course, observe that Vasubandhu writes considerably after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, and was in other matters known to be unorthodox in his interpretations of Buddhist metaphysics. So perhaps he, too, is not to be trusted. But the Elders' positive evaluation of faith is even endorsed by the ultra-orthodox Theravādin commentator, Buddhaghosa. Written probably in the 5<sup>th</sup> C. C.E., Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga (Path of Purity)* is virtually definitive of the most conservative Buddhist thought and practice, then and now. And he, too, includes faith as one of the thirty-six beneficial mental 'formation' (*saṃskāras*).<sup>6</sup> So it appears that faith is recommended as beneficial throughout Buddhist thought in all of its varieties, from very early on, and in spite of the advice to the Kālāmas. For anyone interested in the coherence of Buddhist thought, and also for anyone interested in faith and autonomy, reason and experience, it is worth exploring other options for trying to make sense of this apparent tension.

For it may rather be we who misunderstand 'faith' when we read it from a Christian perspective, and specifically from a perspective that is a product of the battle between reason and faith that arose in the modern era. With the rise of modern science, our conception of reason and of knowledge became more technical, and our conception of the

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<sup>5</sup> "Faith [*śraddhā*], conscience, shame, greedlessness, with the two others, energy, serenity, vigilance's companion (indifference) and harmlessness are the good [*kuśala*] (elements)." [10d-11d] The translation is that of Robinson, who follows the Sanskrit most closely. It is made available through Nance's extremely useful concordance of the *Thirty Verses (Vasubandhu's Triṃśikā, 2005, available online)*. See also Vasubandhu's *Discussion of the Five Aggregates*, which has the same list, and includes a definition of faith: "What is *faith*? It is a firm conviction, desire, and serenity of *citta* towards action, its results, the beneficial and the Gems" (trans. Stefan Anacker from the extant Tibetan in *Seven Works of Vasubandhu* [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1984, 2008], p. 67).

<sup>6</sup> Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* is translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli as *The Path of Purification* (Onalaska, WA: Pariyatti Publishing 1999); for the list of beneficial factors, including faith, see XIV.133, p. 465 of the translation.

technical itself became more mechanical. ‘Faith’ then became increasingly understood as a counterpoint to reason. It is an alternative epistemological mode, an access to reality (or truth) that by-passes the strict evidential demands of scientific reason. Faith, according to this tradition, tends towards ‘blind faith’ – it is belief *without* reason, or even *in the face of all reason*. For, where there are reasons and evidence and argument, one does not need faith. Taken as a virtue, we might even think that faith is nobler, and more ennobling, the *less* reason one has to believe. We might take Kierkegaard as emblematic of this last move. But even for a more moderate position such as Kant’s – which permits hope and faith only where reason does not disprove its possibility – faith is characterized as an epistemological mode that picks up where reason leaves off. Compare also Aquinas:

“Secondly the intellect assents to something, not through being sufficiently moved to this assent by its proper object, but through an act of choice, whereby it turns voluntarily to one side rather than to the other: and if this be accompanied by doubt or fear of the opposite side, there will be opinion, while, if there be certainty and no fear of the other side, there will be faith.”<sup>7</sup>

This has not been the only conception of faith in the Christian tradition; indeed, it is not the only conception available to ‘us moderns’. It is, however, a widespread and readily available conception, and one that is certainly not the notion of faith we should bring to our reading of Nāgārjuna. But if not thus, then how are we to understand Nāgārjuna’s appeal to faith, and the prominent place he gives it within his ethics?

### I. ‘Faith that...’ and ‘faith in...’

“Faith,” writes St. Thomas (IIa IIae q. 1 a. 2), “is a mean between science and opinion. Now the mean is in the same genus as the extremes. Since, then, science and opinion are about propositions, it seems that faith is likewise about propositions”.<sup>8</sup> So

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<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theologica*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Part, Q1 (IIa IIae q. 1 a. 4, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Second and Revised Edition, 1920)

<sup>8</sup> “so that its object is something complex”, he concludes. Aquinas’ considered view is that this is correct concerning human cognition, though not concerning divine intellect: “I answer that, the thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower. Now the mode proper to the human intellect is to know

what might strike us first is that Nāgārjuna does not recommend faith in a proposition or set of propositions.

“Due to having faith one relies on the practices  
Due to having wisdom, one truly knows.” llv. 5a-bll

We are not asked to have faith in the truth of some claim, nor in the existence of some entities or events otherwise unverifiable. This is in keeping with almost negligent attitude within Buddhism of this time towards an individual’s *beliefs*. For a great deal of Buddhism’s lifetime, monastics of widely different and incompatible views could be found practicing contentedly alongside one another in the same monasteries. The only belief for which one could be expelled from the community was the belief that sensual pleasures pose no obstacle to enlightenment – and even that must be professed persistently in spite of admonishments in order to warrant expulsion. This *laissez-faire* attitude towards the propositions one was wont to espouse was in keeping with the Buddha’s own mistrust of anyone taking their own belief states too seriously. The uncertain Kālāmas are advised against being over-awed by reasoning as much as by the authority of the speaker: ‘Do not go by oral tradition... by a collection of scriptures, *by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by consideration of reasons, by the reflective acceptance of a view*’ is the complete advice of the *Kālāma-Sutta*.<sup>9</sup>

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the truth by synthesis and analysis, as stated in the Ia, q. 85, a. 5. Hence things that are simple in themselves, are known by the intellect with a certain amount of complexity, just as on the other hand, the Divine intellect knows, without any complexity, things that are complex in themselves.

“Accordingly the object of faith may be considered in two ways. First, as regards the thing itself which is believed, and thus the object of faith is something simple, namely the thing itself about which we have faith. Secondly, on the part of the believer, and in this respect the object of faith is something complex by way of a proposition.”

<sup>9</sup> Compare this advice in *MN 74: Dighanaka Sutta* – To LongNails: “A wise person among them considers that ‘If I were to grasp and insist firmly on this view ... I would clash with these two. Where there is a clash, there is dispute. Where there is a dispute, quarreling. Where there is quarreling, annoyance. Where there is annoyance, frustration.’ Envisioning for himself clash, dispute, quarreling, annoyance, frustration, he both abandons that view and does not cling to another view. Thus there is the abandoning of these views; thus there is the relinquishing of these views.” See also *MN 11 Cūlasīhanāda sutta* – Shorter Discourse on the Lion’s Roar: “When ignorance is abandoned and true knowledge has arisen in a bhikkhu, then with the fading away of ignorance and the arising of true knowledge he no longer clings to sensual pleasures, no longer clings to views, no longer clings to rules and observances, no longer clings to a doctrine of self. When he does not cling, he is not agitated. When he is not agitated, he personally attains Nibbana.”

So instead of faith in a fact or proposition, Nāgārjuna enjoins faith in a *practice*, or *the practices*. Of course, one *can* turn this into a proposition of some sort – anything can be made into a proposition. In this case, perhaps, one could say that one must have faith “*that* the practices are efficacious”. But this is not the way Nāgārjuna puts it. And how he formulates his claim may make a difference to how we are to understand it.

When faith is not belief in a proposition, when it instead takes an object directly as its content, then faith is a distinctive attitude towards that object, rather than a belief maintained via a non-standard epistemological mode. Faith in providence, say, or in your children is not specifically tied to any belief that they will do or be something in particular. One might vaguely describe faith in providence as ‘faith that things will go as they ought’; one might say the same about faith in one’s children. But one has not thereby added or explained anything that was not already evident in the initial profession of faith. The attitude itself is the central thing, an attitude of confidence, hope, trust, and openness. This disposition of trusting openness, precisely *without* tying it to some determinate outcome, is what it is to have faith in a thing or person.

Like trust in a person, faith is an affective state – a cognitively rich one, perhaps, and capable of being well or poorly grounded. But trust in a person, for instance, is not *belief* in the proposition “this person will do or be this or that”; nor is it some such belief *plus* some extras. It is rather an affective state, an attitude of confident optimism in the good-will, and related competence, of another towards us.<sup>10</sup> This attitude might, in specific instances of trusting, be directed toward specific expectations or hopes. But a trusting relationship with another is characterized by an ongoing and generally directed attitude, unrestricted by specific hopes for, and optimism about, specific outcomes.

Considering expressions such as ‘to have faith in someone’, and so likening faith to something more like trust, is at least a start on how faith might be working in this context. But it might already seem to be no help at all with the question at hand, for three reasons. First, trust is an inter-personal phenomena; my hopes are related directly to the affective

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<sup>10</sup> See Karen Jones “Trust as an Affective Attitude” (*Ethics* 107 (1994): 4-25) for the formulation, and for excellent exposition of this understanding of trust, on which I draw in this paragraph.

states and volitional states of another. Faith in the practices cannot be like that, for whatever ‘the practices’ are, they do not have a will that could be well-disposed towards me or indifferent.

Second, trust as described above operates as a constraint on belief formation. My trust in you filters interpretations of evidence that I consider, and plays a role in determining how I weigh that evidence. There could well be a parallel here, one on conception of faith. We might, for instance, regard faith as a framework concept – as that with respect to which we organize evidence and make sense of information. Such an understanding of faith is a subtler and more attractive one than the ‘faith as alternative epistemic route to knowledge’ view. One of its primary attractions is that it explains how faith can be solid and resistant to easy alteration with every new bit of information, without supposing that this amounts to sheer dogged persistence in a belief regardless of what evidence arises. But it is precisely this attractive feature which makes it useless to Nāgārjuna, and for an understanding of the virtue of faith in a Buddhist context. For nothing *should* be epistemically privileged in the way a ‘framework concept’ is, except our own direct experience. We saw this above, in the advice to the Kālāmas, which is continued below; and we see it in the emphatic rejection of any ‘clinging to views’ (also discussed below). This objection can only be met by insisting that faith, for Nāgārjuna is not any kind of belief at all – and, in fact, not any attitude towards a proposition. Whatever gain there is to be won by likening faith to ‘trust *in...*’, this is lost if we then interpret this as primarily a description of our belief-forming mechanisms. Faith is not better for being invincible, on the Buddhist view; and we should notice that the Kālāmas – baffled about which of the many teachings on offer are to be believed – are *not* chided for any kind of lack of faith, nor is it suggested that if they had faith such questions would not arise.

Finally, and most problematically, practices are rather different from persons and from providence, by being something *we do*, whereas other persons are precisely *not* that. Here any analogy between ‘trust in’ and ‘faith in’ seems to break down irretrievably. For it is precisely this lack of control that makes trust or faith in another person an

appropriate attitude to have. If another's good-will and competence were up to me, then 'optimism' or 'confidence' would be an inappropriate attitude to take towards that good-will and competence. Just as, where we have sufficient reasons, we have no need for propositional faith ('faith *that*'), so too where we determine the state of things ourselves, we have no need for dispositional faith (for 'faith *in*'). I perform or engage in practices – or I don't. This is up to me to do, or not to do. It is hard to see what space there is for faith.

Indeed, trying to force open such space may make things even worse, and to the extent such faith in practices *is* called for, enjoining faith begins to look even more dubious. For we might try to escape the objection above through the following distinction: While *performing* the practices is indeed up to me, the *results* of such performance are not; and so faith is not in the mere act of performing certain practices – 'faith in practices' concerns what I hope to *result from* the practices. But if, as this interpretation suggests, 'the practices' are activities we are enjoined to perform, but *without* supposing that they are the sort whose results are ordinarily under our control, then this begins to look more and more like magic – as if the practices we are to rely on are ritual and devotional practices, to propitiate gods and occult powers in order that they should do our bidding. While this would be a familiar sense of 'faith' – again, as a species of irrationalism – it would be bad news for Nāgārjuna, and for any attempt to reconcile his *Precious Garland* of advice with the Buddha's own advice:

“Bhikkhus, there are these four kinds of clinging. What four? Clinging to sensual pleasures, clinging to views, clinging to rules and observances, and clinging to a doctrine of self.”<sup>11</sup>

'Rules and observances' here refers to the myriad ritual, sacrificial and purificatory activities and injunctions characteristic of non-Buddhist religious practices of the time. These religious activities should, through occult connections, actively maintain the order of the universe, and should make deities well-disposed towards us. Just as much as we should, according to the Buddhist, give up our attachment to sense-pleasures and to

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<sup>11</sup> MN 11: *Cūlasīhanāda sutta* — The Shorter Discourse on the Lion's Roar [Ñānamoli/Bodhi]: §9.

doctrines of the self, we should also give up attachment to such ritual and related rules. It is, I think, impossible to square this advice with a commendation of faith in the practices, *if* this faith is meant to be a kind of superstitious belief that certain ritual or contrived acts have supernatural consequences beyond our control.

It becomes quickly apparent, however, that these are *not* the sort of practices Nāgārjuna has in mind. He means merely the banal activities of everyday life, and conducting it decently.

Not killing, not stealing, forsaking the mates of others  
 Refraining completely from false, divisive, harsh, and senseless speech, ||8||  
 Thoroughly forsaking covetousness, harmful intent, and the views of Nihilists –  
 These are the ten gleaming paths of action; their opposites are dark. ||v. 9||  
 Not drinking intoxicants, a good livelihood, non-harming, respectful giving,  
 Honouring the honourable, and love – Practice, in brief, is that. ||v. 10||

So the practices Nāgārjuna has in mind is the practicing of the virtues, keeping to the precepts and the Eightfold Path. This is neither belief in propositions, nor faith in magic, but has rather to do with commitment to widely endorsed, commonly accepted practical activities.

## II. *Faith in Practices as Mode of Engagement*

But now the source of the puzzlement shifts somewhat. For if all Nāgārjuna means to say is that keeping the precepts, and sticking to the Eightfold Path, are the means to happiness, it seems odd that faith has come into it at all. That happiness arises from decent conduct in “body, speech and mind” (v. 7b) is a familiar enough part of the basic Buddhist picture – yet Nāgārjuna insists that “Of these two, wisdom is the chief, faith is its prerequisite” (5c-d). Faith is not just *a* means, then, but a necessary means, not just for happiness but even for wisdom. Why interpose ‘faith’ here as an intermediate term between practice and happiness? Why is Nāgārjuna not satisfied to present us with the simpler picture, where precept-keeping and the Eightfold Path *themselves* give rise to happiness?

The interposition of faith here expresses, I suggest, two related insights into human psychology: one is that the attitude or spirit with which we engage in activity affects the quality of that activity and its results; the other is that the greatest obstacle to keeping the practices is a kind of demoralization, also felt as something called ‘nihilism’ – a kind of apathy or sense of futility arising from the perception of reality as being ‘cut off’,<sup>12</sup> utterly destroyed, in the end.

The Buddha had already declared, hyperbolically perhaps, that action – the sort of action liable to be counted good or bad, and to lead to good or bad consequences – action (*kamma*) is intention. “Intention, I tell you, is *karma*. Intending, one performs deeds of body, speech and mind,” as the Buddha famously (or infamously) puts it in the *Nibbedhika Sutta* (*AN VI.63*; PTS iii.415).<sup>13</sup>

‘Intention’ here is not just a specific mental act of willing, but something nearer to the intentional content on the basis of which one acts. If one acts from a confused or deluded state of mind, with an intention that is mistaken or misguided, this poisons the quality of the act. If the act we are concerned with in our misguided frame of mind is something of obvious and direct benefit to another – say, pulling them out of the way of a speeding train – the results may still be partially good. But insofar as the results are felt by the agent themselves, even such ‘good deeds’, done with misguided intention (say, maliciously savouring the opportunity of putting someone in your debt) have poisonous effects.

Keeping the precepts, the Eightfold Path and so on, largely concern everyday morality. And yet, *as* precept-keeping, or *as* embarking on the spiritual path, these practices centrally concern the *psyche* of the agent, which is inevitably and continuously

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<sup>12</sup> ‘nihilism’ commonly translates *ucchedavāda* – literally, the claim (*vāda*) that things are ‘cut off’, *ud* + *chid*; it is also translated ‘annihilationism’.

<sup>13</sup> “It is generally accepted that an emphasis on the role of *cetanā* [intention] in the action of *kamma* was the Buddha’s contribution to the concept of *kamma*,” writes James Paul McDermott in *Development in the Early Buddhist Concept of Kamma/Karma* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal 1984), 28. While “it is not so clear that the *Upaniṣads* made no connection between intention and *karman*,” he goes on (29), “... Only in Buddhism could the intentional impulse (*cetanā*) be defined as *kamma*.”

directly affected.<sup>14</sup> Refraining from killing, of course, is good for anyone who would be dead if you didn't. But opportunities to *act* on such a vow are, usually, rare. Such negative prescriptions are, therefore, for the greater part ongoing mental determinations in the mind of the person refraining, and so involve the continual formation of intentional states, the source of all beneficial and unbeneficial consequences.

This will be most obviously true in the case of mental states (forsaking covetousness, harmful intent, and nihilistic views, 9a-b), and less obvious perhaps regarding generosity. But notice that it is precisely here, with respect to generosity, that Nāgārjuna is careful to specify that it is not merely giving that is at stake, but doing so in a certain way, *viz.*, 'respectfully'. Insofar as this is a spirit of generosity (*bodhicitta*) which is cultivated, and not the injunction to engage in occasional specific acts (Kant's 'imperfect duty' of benevolence), then this too is an ongoing activity for the one keeping the precept, or cultivating the virtue.<sup>15</sup> And in order to be doing this as one ought, it is a certain quality of mind – respectfulness – that is required, and not just the transfer of goods, nor even just the transfer of the correct goods to the correct persons under the correct circumstances.

The precepts and other practices are not concerned with whether certain acts happen, in the perverse confusion of the world, to have benefitted someone else; they are concerned with the cultivation of beneficial mental states. And if it is quality of mental state that is being measured, the quality of intention is the relevant measure. Acting in the right spirit, with the right attitude, will be all the more relevant regarding the keeping of the precepts and the Eightfold Path, the more we recognize them as ongoing activities for

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<sup>14</sup> See Dale Wright's version of naturalizing the doctrine of *karma*, in "Critical Questions Towards a Naturalized Conception of *Karma*" (*Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 12 (2005): ISSN 1076-9005). 'Naturalised' *karma* is in fact is not so distant from the traditional main concerns of the Buddhist doctrine of *karma*, which was always primarily a mode of orienting oneself and integrating oneself within a complicated universe, rather than an alternative description of crime and punishment. See Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen, "Narrative, Sub-Ethics, and the Moral Life: Some Evidence From Theravāda Buddhism" (*The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 24/2 (1996): 305-27) esp. p. 318-22.

<sup>15</sup> We could concede this is something that comes in degrees: the more the effects are weighted towards the agent herself, the less scope there will be for considering an action good in any way or degree at all, apart from the quality of the intention – or overall mental state and attitude.

the person keeping them, constantly requiring the formation and maintenance of the relevant intentional states.

So one might engage in those acts constitutive of keeping the precepts, but not in the right spirit. One might act out of fear of punishment or hope for reward, or for acclaim from those around one. One might keep the precepts out of *mere* habit, dead to any appreciation of their value or meaning; or one might act formally correctly, but grudgingly, and looking for opportunities for cavilling and prevarication. And this attitude would infect and affect the quality of the action, and especially the quality of the effect that the action has *on the one so acting*. It can change something from an act of devotion, trust, or magnanimity into an act of narrow-mindedness or intolerance or greed. Nāgārjuna, placing faith where he does, is declaring faith to be the correct attitude with which to undertake the keeping of precepts and abiding by the Eightfold Path. Our attitude towards our actions – and towards our commitments fulfilled in such actions – should be faith of the sort we have in a person, open and indeterminate in its content. We keep the precepts and truly follow the Eightfold Path when we engage in the activities constitutive of these with an attitude of optimism with respect to their worth, an ungrudging willingness to try out keeping the practices in order to gain the experience that will confirm or disconfirm us in our faith.

For, if this is not to violate the advice to the Kālāmas, then this cannot be blind faith, faith against all evidence, or even faith that does not ask for evidence – experience *should* confirm us. If it does not, then just as in the case of the person, we withdraw our trust. On the other hand, experience *can* only confirm if our keeping of the precepts is undertaken in the right spirit in the first place.

#### IV. *Why Buddhists Especially Need Faith*

I think there is a second insight connected to Nāgārjuna's placement of faith as the means connecting good practice and happiness, an insight that is especially relevant to the Buddhist case.

There is no doubt that it sometimes seems that we live in a world in which ‘the wicked flourish like the green the bay tree’ [*Ps.* 37:35], and the fruits of virtue are seldom the ones the world celebrates or rewards. Keeping to the modest and relentless business of right conduct, speech, view, of generosity and so on is liable to feel at times not quite worth it. Add in the usual human tendencies towards short-sightedness, and we are vulnerable to occasional demoralization. However, if our attitude towards our outlook and practice has all along been one of faith, this steady disposition can see us through periods of discouragement until we are able to adopt again a better perspective. Faith is something we need because we are not yet fully realized and stable in virtue and, the Buddhist would add, in ‘correct view’. It is thus the means to *happiness*, the prerequisite to *wisdom*, but not the goal itself.

But there is more acute need for such faith, in such a role, on the Buddhist path. For that path leads to a profound absence of teleology. The insight into reality that is demanded to reach liberation includes the recognition that there are no final goals in the organization of the universe. Everything arises due to a variety of causes and conditions, but not necessarily for any *reason*. There is no benevolent or rational principle in overall control. There is no promise that life will ever be essentially different from what it is now – in fact, life (in any sense that we could have of understanding that word) will surely not be *essentially* different than it is now, even if it can be more rather than less pleasant, more rather than less joyful. The First Noble Truth is ‘suffering exists’, and this truth must be accepted. The human condition is one of each of us lacking control over our own lives sufficient to protect ourselves against suffering; there is no higher court of appeal, no outside help, and no prospect of a different life, somewhat like this, but made perfect and free from this basic vulnerability.

Spelled out in this way, the necessary insight into the nature of reality is a bleak one. It is not hard to imagine it might give rise to despondency and listlessness, especially when first encountered and only partially grasped.<sup>16</sup> With good reason, then, nihilism is

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<sup>16</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> C. complaint, still sometimes heard today, that Buddhism is nihilistic stems from this partial grasp of the absence of teleology.

specifically mentioned as a view to be ‘forsaken’ in right practice (*Ratnāvalī* 9b). The Buddha was so aware of the potential for his teaching to induce nihilism, and of the ill that comes from that state of mind, that he refused to teach when he judged someone likely to construe his teaching of dependent-origination so bleakly.

In what follows in the *Ratnāvalī*, addressing wisdom and liberation, Nāgārjuna will ask us to stare unflinchingly at a non-teleological universe. The necessary insufficiency and inadequacy of all things – what Nāgārjuna calls ‘emptiness’, and what the Buddha called sometimes ‘suffering’ and sometimes ‘dependent arising’ – figures centrally, and wisdom consists in appreciating the pervasiveness and implications of this fact. Readers – in particular, the addressee of the *Ratnāvalī*, a prince – will be approaching this from an everyday perspective. This perspective assumes the reality of substances, of agents, of independently existing individuals with claims to authority over their own identity at least. Particularly when still in the grip of these illusions, the teachings of no-self, of dependent origination and emptiness can make it look at first as if the universe, and oneself, is being deprived of all value, drained of any meaning.

And so it is especially at the beginning that one will need some faith that this initial appearance is misleading. The requisite faith, however, is not exercised by adopting an attitude of unquestioning belief in these teachings, nor in the Buddha himself, prior to and independently of one’s own experience. The faith required is directed towards familiar practices of good conduct, and consists more in a commitment to living decently. Cultivating faith means undertaking ethical practices *in the correct spirit* – doing them for their own sakes, optimistically confident of the simple good of doing them, keeping to good conduct cheerfully, rather than grudgingly. Faith in the practices, confirmed by experience, makes good conduct an unconditional part of our outlook or orientation: Giving is something I do willingly, refraining from appropriating is ungrudging, and abstaining from harm and malicious speech is something I do as a matter of course, confident that this is indeed the best course. So grounded, one is never tempted by, for instance, the specious argument that simply because there is no ‘self’

there, it is a matter of indifference how we treat others; or, because there is no providential ordering, we are not to be moved by the suffering of others.

The faith Nāgārjuna recommends is not something that fills the gaps left by lack of evidence and reason. On the contrary, faith is an attitude of optimism and confidence that sustains the search for evidence and reason, and our experience of them. Faith in the practices enables us to live a life within which searching for wisdom is possible, and enables us to experience the true good of decent practice – for *these* goods are only to be attained when practices are guided by the right intention. While our wisdom is incomplete, we are still liable to confusion and despondency in pursuing insight into the nature of reality. While still thus vulnerable to disorientation, faithful everyday good practice develops and sustains a wholesome outlook that will not be easily shaken by provisional understandings and disturbing metaphysical truths.

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