

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT:

How Nargajuna solves the 'ism'

(Music)

(Gong Strikes)

Sophia-Grace: Welcome to Smith Buddhist philosophy class podcast. I am Sophia-Grace, a MHC college student majoring in history. In this podcast, I will be interviewing Sidi WANG, a MHC student currently majoring in religion studies. Today, however, she is joining us with a different identity. She is also a devoted member of the local Green River Zen Center in Greenfield, MA and is willing to share how the Roshi Eve, one of the most famous buddhist teacher in America who established this Zen center, have anything to say on Nargajuna.

Sophia-Grace: Hi Sidi

Sidi : Hi Sophie, thanks for having me here. It is my great pleasure.

Sophia-Grace: Do you mind reminding the audience what is today's topic?

Sidi: No problem, today I will be sharing Roshi Eve, one of the most famous zen buddhist teacher in North America 's opinion on How Nargajuna tackles the 'ism', or to put in simpler terms, how the ancient buddhist philosopher, Nargajuna, is able to use his

wisdom of emptiness to solve modern world's problems on classism, sexism, racism and all other isms!

Sophia-Grace: Sounds like an amazing topic! Just a reminder for our audience to Please stick around until the end of the show, we have a lot of interesting discussions and stories waiting for you, so make sure you listen all the way through! So can you introduce the audience who Roshi Eve is

Sidi: Roshi EVE is the Founding Teacher of the Zen Peacemaker Order, one of the most impactful and largest zen buddhist communities in North America and Roshi EVE is also the founder of the Green River Zen Center in MA, Deerfield.

Sophia-Grace: Could you talk about the Green river zen and peacemaker order a little bit more.

Sidi: Absolutely! Zen Peacemakers is part of the White Plum lineage founded by Maezumi Roshi, who introduced Japanese Zen to America as one of the first pioneers. This school stands out for its practice of meditation (zazen) and the realization and actualization of the oneness of life. Green River Zen is born under this Zen Peacemaker order umbrella.

Sophia-Grace: What is your experience with Green river zen?

Sidi: Since February, I've been attending almost every Saturday service, weekly Dharma talk, and day-long retreat at Green River Zen. It's been absolutely astounding to witness how the authenticity of this Japanese lineage, which dating back thousands of years ago, is embodied in the diligent practice of Green River Zen members in North America. This experience has not only deepened my understanding of Buddhist ideas but also brought about personal transformation.

Sophia-Grace: That sounds amazing! Can you tell me more about why you chose this particular topic to talk with us?

Sidi: Many of their practices are grounded in Nagarjuna's philosophy, the founder of Mahayana Buddhist school. During the most recent One-day retreat, there was a fascinating Dharma talk on how Nagarjuna's philosophy of emptiness and the lack of an independent self could bridge the world together. Especially in difficult times like now, with so much conflict and war happening, I felt it would be best to share this topic with the podcast audience.

Sophia-Grace: Wow That sounds so fun! I would love to go with you next time! Before we jump to the topic, could you introduce to our audience what is Nagarjuna's emptiness?

Sidi: Yes, I would love to. Emptiness may sound like a strongly opinionated word that indicates nothing exists, but in Buddhist philosophy, it is actually just another word for

nothing exists independently., it emphasizes on the fact that everything is dependently arisen. And There is no completely independent nature in anything.

Sophia-Grace: Can you give us some examples on how things are dependent?

Sidi: More than willing to! There are tons to demonstrate the ultimate dependent nature of everything. On the most basic level, a tree depends on soil and water; corn seed depends on corn; A father is called a father depending on having children ; east is called the east depends on the existence of west; etc. So, emptiness, according to Nargajuna, is precisely this interdependent relationship, and emptiness is therefore used for the umbrella term to denote the absence of independent existence.

Sophia-Grace: Thank you! That is such a clear and explicit explanation of emptiness. But I believe the audience and I would share the same curiosity on how would this emptiness be applicable to us?

Sidi: Totally ! That is a great question to ask. Interdependence is considered by Buddhism as the nature of reality. And In zen Buddhism especially, a lot of emphasis has been given to this deep underlying interconnection. It is the nature of human life, of all things and of all situations. We are all linked, and we all serve as conditions affecting each other. Therefore, for the green river zen centre in particular , this very notion of

interdependence has given birth to the notion of no-self, because we are all conditioning one another and are interconnected in one.

Sophia-Grace: Wow! So no-self means there is no person or self that exists independently.

Is that so?

Sidi: precisely

Sophia-Grace: So How could Nargajuna's idea of emptiness be useful in a modern world where we are exposed to extreme divergence and conflicting ideas?

Sidi: Last week, during a one-day Retreat, Roshi Eve was invited to give a dharma talk to the Zen peacemaker organization on the topic of how to make peace in this divided world. Roshi Eve found that grounding oneself in Nargajuna's concept of emptiness would be the most effective approach.

So Roshi opened her dharma talk by sharing an encounter she had with a Trump supporter. When Roshi Eve asked why she supported Trump, the woman explained that it was because Trump was anti-abortion, and she herself strongly opposed abortion. The reason behind her opposition to abortion was from her own experience: when she was pregnant with her first child, she was facing poverty and considered abortion, but ultimately chose not to terminate the pregnancy. Now, her child is 10 years old, and

she feels that having him was the most meaningful and fortunate experience of her life. Therefore, she aligns with Trump's firm stance on anti-abortion.

Roshi Eve, of course, disagreed with her on this. Roshi believes that while it's wonderful that the woman had her child and was fortunate enough to overcome poverty, this does not mean you should deprive the chance of abortion from everyone else. Especially the ones that never got a chance of getting rid of poverty.

Sophia-Grace: I can see there is strong disagreement between Roshi and the Trump supporter.

Sidi: Yes indeed, That is clearly a strong disagreement happening between both. But something more profound occurred. After the disagreement, Roshi Eve found herself pondering: What if she met her on another occasion and had a completely different encounter?

So Roshi thought, What if she met her not as an anti-abortionist and a loyal supporter of Trump, but instead met her as a mother of a 10 years old son in a college reunion dinner? So at that moment, Roshi realised the very danger of categorising a person within the 'ism', Defining a person solely based on a single moment of disagreement is dangerous because it overlooks the complexity of their character. It neglects other equally important and nuanced aspects of who they are. But If you realise Nargajuna's

emptiness and know that None of the ism can independently define that person. The whole world would be different.

Sophia-Grace: That is such a splendid argument! but I guess refraining from categorizing people might be hard to put into practice?

Sidi : Well you see, the trick is to realise the deep underlying interdependence and the oneness that already bridged all of us. There is no, in fact, a single independent separated self that can be singled out to be a 'ism' or 'non-ism'.

There is this one really famous kōan(公案) of Zhaozhou Congshen within zen buddhist canon, and this particular kōan was brought over to North America Sanghas by Maezumi Roshi and later became one of the most famous Zen Koan of all times. The Koan goes like this:

Once upon a time, a monk disciple asked, "What does it mean by 'Our founder came from the west'?"

The master Congshen said, "The oak tree in the front yard." (Green 2001, p.18)

This response may strike you as a meaningless random rant or you may think the master Congshen is actually nuts. But if you understand the philosophy of emptiness, you will realise that what master Congshen is saying is actually a profound realisation of

this interconnected oneness among all beings. There is no west and east, no subject object, no beautiful no ugly, We are all in one. Therefore, any answer, whether it is the oak tree in the front yard or the pencil in your bag, is always the right answer. as everything is one, one is everything.

Sophia-Grace: That is so powerful, I am deeply touched. I can sense from the radical koan you just gave us, there is a complete dismantlement of duality and a reuniting to this interdependent oneness.

Sidi: Yes absolutely, and that is the power you have for Not seeing the people that oppose you as an object, and only through this can you dismantle duality and see the oneness that already existed in all of us.

Sophia-Grace: Is there anything in particular you felt after this dharma talk?

This dharma talk was so important to me on a personal level. when I was listening to the Dharma talk, I just experienced a white-supremecist incident from one of my class discussion, I had a lot of anger towards my professor and my classmates, and I cried for many, many days; but after the Roshi Eve's dharma talk, I wa calmed down. Because I realise by being mad at them, I am defining their actions at that moment as their whole

selves. And by defining them I put them at the opposed position and reinforced this duality.

But what Roshi proposed was that We should refrain from our nature of clinging to the very notion of a substantial independent self and define someone else just as the moment we felt offended. In the abortion exemple Roshi mentioned, the title of anti-abortionist cannot independently define that person, if we do so, we are intentionally objectifying them and putting them in our opposite sides. And it does us no favour in achieving the peace. Then it would only bring more suffering to both parties, it is suffering to me, because I have already defined them as such and therefore, as a defined person, they will never be able to change. At the same time, It will bring more suffering to others as well, because they would not feel right to be called just a racist, as calling them just as such, we are in fact denying many other beautiful parts of that person that are co-existing with the 'ism'

"There is no 'ism' because there is no object to be objectified or antagonized. We don't need to pursue peace; we just need to realise the peace that already resides within all of us and bring it forth."

Sophia-Grace: Just like The oak tree in the front yard.

Sldi: just as The oak tree in the front yard. Already in one, already together, already dependently intertwined with each other. already in peace. We just need to wake up and realise it.

Sophia-Grace: That is a great talk by Sidi WNAG, Thanks. The depth of love and compassion that is enabled by seeing this oneness instead of the 'isms' is truly profound. And to all our listeners, thank you for tuning in! We appreciate your support and hope you found this discussion inspiring. And may all of our listeners advance with us on this path of achieving enlightenment

(Gong Strikes)

References

Green, James, trans. 2001. *The Recorded Sayings of Zen Master Joshu*. N.p.: Shambhala.