Verses from the Center: A Buddhist Vision of the Sublime. By Stephen Batchelor. New York: Riverhead Books, 2000. ISBN 0-1573-22162-7. Pp.181.

Stephen Batchelor's *Verses from the Center: A Buddhist Vision of the Sublime* reaches the sublime in its poetic interpretation of a classic Buddhist text. Batchelor's most recent offering contains both a short essay on Nagarjuna's role in Buddhist philosophy, as well as a lyrical translation of Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika* (MMK). Although traditional Nagarjunian scholars may be put off by Batchelor's liberal play with the text, the beautiful and accessible language of his translation provides a refreshing perspective for those struggling to comprehend the complex puzzle that is the MMK.

Verses from the Center begins with an eighty page essay entitled "Intuitions of the Sublime," in which Batchelor provides a brief overview of the role played by Nagarjuna in Buddhist history. The essay is also an overview of Batchelor's interpretation of emptiness in Buddhist philosophy. Unlike scholars David Kalupahana, Charles Lindtner, and Thomas E. Wood, Batchelor does not interpret Nagarjuna's emptiness as nihilism. Batchelor claims that "Rather than denying self, Nagarjuna points to its essential ambiguity" (65) and that "nowhere in Verses from the Center [i.e. the MMK] does Nagarjuna equate emptiness with the absence or negation of self" (64). Rather, emptiness is what makes all things in life possible, including ethics, for "as the fixated grip of self-centeredness is eased, so also does an empathetic awareness of the suffering of other emerge" (78). Batchelor aligns himself with the anti-nihilist camp of Nagarjunian scholars, best characterized by Jay L. Garfield's 1995 translation and commentary on the MMK, to which Batchelor refers those who desire a more strictly academic translation.

Poetry is the priority of the second half of the book, which consists of Batchelor's translation of the MMK. Batchelor's gift for language takes precedence over academic accuracy. In fact, the entire first chapter of the MMK is inexplicably relegated to endnotes, and many of the chapter titles are almost unrecognizable. Chapter 13, which Jay Garfield, for example, renders "Analysis of Samskara," is translated by Batchelor as "Change," and chapter 26, which in Garfield's translation is "Analysis of the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination," is translated by Batchelor simply as "Contingency." Similarly, Batchelor's interpretation of the verses themselves indicate an enormous departure from previous scholarly translations. For example, the first verse of chapter 16 is translated by Garfield as follows:

> If compound phenomena transmigrate,
> They do not transmigrate as permanent.
> If they are impermanent they do not transmigrate.
> The same approach applies to sentient beings.

Batchelor translates the same verse in a vastly different manner:

> Is life what drives me?
> Whether constant or fleeting,
> Drives are not alive like life.
> How am I alive?

Batchelor here is not striving for academic accuracy, but to elicit an emotional response. He is acting primarily as a cultural translator. The accessibility of his translation opens the door of Nagarjunian philosophy to those who would not normally have access. He transforms the words of this ancient text into phrases and ideas that are current, relevant and highly readable. As stated in the introduction, Batchelor "seeks to translate *Verses from the Center* in such a way as to make Nagarjuna's insights come alive for anyone concerned with the question of what it means to live a free and awake life today" (xvi). Indeed this is Batchelor's goal in all his philosophical writing, and with a background combining both Eastern and Western influences he is uniquely qualified to achieve it. As in Batchelor's other books on Buddhism, *Alone With Others* (1983), *The Faith to Doubt* (1990), and *Buddhism Without Beliefs* (1997), Batchelor challenges practitioners to cease clinging to belief for security, to accept the reality of emptiness and uncertainty, and to confront themselves on the most existential of levels. Verses such as "What do you think / Of a freedom that never happens? / What do you make / Of a life that won't go away?" are meant to trigger deep psychological reactions. Ultimately Batchelor's goal is quite similar to that of Nagarjuna's—to help us loosen the tight grip we have on ourselves, and our identity.

The strengths of this book—its poetry and accessibility–are perhaps also its weaknesses. It thus remains for the reader to judge which is more important: lyricism or fidelity to textual accuracy?

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