Some Asian philosophical antidotes to Damnation and Awfulizing

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Abstract - Logic-based therapy (LBT) is an approach to philosophical practice that involves finding philosophical ideas that can serve as "antidotes" to clients' emotional problems. I examine philosophical arguments from an ancient Chinese text, namely the Zhuangzi, and from four Buddhist texts, namely the Bodhicaryāvatāra, the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, and the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. The Bodhicaryāvatāra contains several antidotes to the fallacy known within LBT as "Damnation of Others." Arguments from the Zhuangzi, the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, and the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā may be helpful antidotes to the fallacy of Awfulizing about death.

Keywords - Zhuangzi, Buddhism, Bodhicaryāvatāra, Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, anattā, damnation, awfulizing, logic-based therapy, LBT, anger, death

Introduction

Logic-Based Therapy (LBT), one of the major approaches to philosophical practice, consists of six steps. First, the practitioner identifies an emotion that is causing problems for the client. Second, the practitioner reconstructs the client’s emotional reasoning. For example, if I am angry at someone for insulting me, then my emotional reasoning might have the following structure:

1. If someone has insulted me, then she is worthless.
2. Someone has insulted me.
3. Therefore, she is worthless.

Third, the practitioner works with the client to identify “cardinal fallacies” within the client’s emotional reasoning. LBT theory recognizes several cardinal fallacies. In the emotional reasoning above, the first premise commits the cardinal fallacy called “Damnation of Others.” To damn others is to think that their flaws make them worthless. Fourth, the practitioner identifies a “guiding virtue” that can make the client less likely to commit the fallacy. For example, respect for others is a guiding virtue that makes one less likely to damn others. Fifth, the practitioner and client find an “antidote,” a philosophical idea that supports the guiding virtue and counteracts the client’s tendency to commit the fallacy. For example,
Immanuel Kant’s idea that each rational being has immeasurable worth counters Damnation of Others by supporting respect for other rational beings. Sixth, the client exercises willpower to cultivate the guiding virtue and apply the antidote in everyday life.

This paper focuses primarily on the fifth step, the search for antidotes. LBT theory encourages practitioners to draw on diverse philosophical sources when seeking antidotes. However, the repertoire of LBT practitioners tends to be limited to Western philosophy (Chaukar 2021, 42). I believe that LBT practitioners should give Asian philosophy greater attention. Much South and East Asian philosophy has an explicitly psychological and therapeutic orientation that makes it a potential gold mine for philosophical practitioners. In *The New Rational Therapy*, one of LBT’s founding texts, Elliot Cohen cites a famous South Asian philosopher, the Buddha, as a potential inspiration for LBT practitioners (Cohen 2007, 68-69). But the Buddha is hardly the only premodern South or East Asian philosopher with a psychotherapeutic focus. As Edward Slingerland has shown, early Chinese philosophy is deeply concerned with the social and emotional problems that result from artificiality and lack of spontaneity (Slingerland 2014). When laying out its agenda, the *Sāṃkhya Sūtras*, the foundational text of the ancient Sāṃkhyay school of Indian philosophy, begins by stating that humanity’s goal is to escape suffering.1 The *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali, the foundational text of the classical Yoga school of Indian philosophy,2 discusses various psychological afflictions, states, and exercises.

In this paper, I examine arguments from four premodern Asian philosophical texts: the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, a work by the 8th-century Indian Buddhist philosopher Śāntideva; the *Zhuangzi*, a work attributed to the early Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi; the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, an early Buddhist text; and the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, a work by the 2nd- and 3rd-century Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna. I show that the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* contains antidotes to Damnation of Others. Turning to the *Zhuangzi*, the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, and the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, I identify philosophical arguments that can serve as antidotes to another fallacy, namely Awfulizing about death.

**The Bodhicaryāvatāra on anger: antidotes to Damnation of Others**

One of LBT’s cardinal fallacies is Damnation. Damnation is the fallacious assumption that “if there is something about yourself or about another person that you strongly dislike, then you or this other person is totally worthless” (Cohen 2003, 78). If you damn others in this way, then you are engaged in Damnation of Others (Cohen 2003, 78). In Chapter 6 of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Śāntideva presents several arguments against anger. These arguments can serve as antidotes to Damnation of Others. In this section, I examine the arguments found in Chapter 6, verses 39-40, 42, 46-49, 98-100, 109-111.
I should make a terminological note before I continue. When discussing Śāntideva’s arguments, I call the person who is the target of anger “the enemy.” In many and perhaps most cases, an LBT client’s anger will be directed at someone whom the client does not consider an enemy—for example, at a friend or a family member. Even if the client is so angry that he damns the person as worthless, the client would not necessarily describe the person as his enemy. I use the word “enemy” only for convenience and because Śāntideva uses the word in some of these verses.

Verses 39 and 40 pose a dilemma for one who is angry at an enemy. It seems that malice must be either an essential or an accidental property of the enemy. Either way, Śāntideva argues, it makes no sense to get angry at the enemy:

39. If the nature of fools is that which causes injury to others, a reaction of anger is no more appropriate for them than for fire whose nature it is to burn.

40. And, on the other hand, if this hatred is accidental, and beings are lovely by nature, then this anger is likewise as inappropriate as if it were against the air which is filled with acrid mist.

If malice is an essential property of the enemy, then she cannot help but be malicious, just as fire cannot help but burn. One does not get angry at fire for burning. Therefore, one should not get angry at the enemy for being malicious. If malice is an accidental property of the enemy, then it is not part of her nature, just as the acrid mist that sometimes fills the air is not part of the air’s nature. The problem is the mist rather than the air. Likewise, the problem is the malice rather than the enemy. Therefore, anger at the enemy is irrational.

In the simplistic form found in these verses, this argument is unlikely to work well for LBT purposes. For one thing, the client may be a libertarian regarding free will. If the enemy’s actions are freely chosen in a libertarian sense, then they are neither essential to her nor separable from her in the way mist is separable from air. For another thing, the argument seems to undermine all moral responsibility for actions. Given any action, one could argue that the action is either essential or accidental to the agent and that we therefore should not hold the agent responsible for the action. Depending on the client’s moral psychology, this denial of moral responsibility, if taken seriously, might encourage immoral or dangerous behavior.

However, a suitably nuanced version of the above argument might help a client who feels inclined to damn an enemy. On one hand, the enemy may have developed a malicious character that makes it difficult for her to refrain from acting maliciously. Recognizing this difficulty may lead the client to blame her less for individual malicious acts. Blaming her less, the client is less likely to damn her. This case is roughly analogous to the case in which malice is essential to the enemy. On the other hand, her malicious act may have been out of
character for her. In that case, damning her is disproportionate given her history of non-malicious behavior. This case is roughly analogous to the case in which malice is accidental to the enemy.

Verse 42 takes the retributivism that fuels Damnation and turns it against Damnation. When we damn an enemy, this judgment is often accompanied and sustained by the feeling that she deserves punishment. Śāntideva points out that, from this retributivist standpoint, we ourselves may well deserve the harm that the enemy inflicts on us:

42. Formerly, I too inflicted such pain upon beings: So [pain] is also suitable for me, one who has done injury to beings!

Behind this argument lies the traditional Buddhist belief in rebirth. According to this belief, each time we die, we are reborn in a new body. Our present life is merely one link in a beginningless series of lives. Over these countless lives, we have hurt countless beings. Given the countless pains that we have inflicted on others, we hardly have the standing to damn those who pain us.

The client can accept something like this argument even if he does not believe in rebirth. Many people think that wrongdoers deserve punishment. In addition, everyone has performed some wrong acts. Such acts often go unpunished. Therefore, the client has probably committed some misdeeds for which he has not, by his own standards, been sufficiently punished. If the client clings to the belief that wrongdoers deserve punishment, then he faces a dilemma. On one hand, this belief entails that he himself deserves punishment. Viewed in that light, the enemy's attacks on him are justified (albeit unintentional) punishments for his misdeeds, as verse 42 suggests. If the enemy's attacks are, in this sense, justified, then the enemy is not totally worthless in dishing them out. Even if her motives have nothing to do with justice, she is valuable as an unwitting agent of justice. On the other hand, if the client rejects the view that he himself deserves punishment, then he must weaken or qualify his belief that wrongdoers deserve punishment—the very belief that reinforces his condemnation of the enemy.

Verses 46-49 undermine anger by urging the audience to consider the long run. Suppose that an enemy, despite her best efforts, always ends up harming herself and benefiting me. I am likely to pity rather than hate this enemy. Śāntideva argues that, in the long run, our enemies always harm themselves and benefit us:

46. Since the forest of sword-leaves and the birds of hell are engendered by my own Karma, why, then, be angry?
47. Those who injure me have been prompted by the impulse of my Karma, because of which they go to hell: Surely, they are destroyed by me.
48. By recourse to them, my great evil is destroyed through being patient. By recourse to me, they go to the long anguish of hell.

49. I am injurious to them and they are good to me. When this situation is reversed, why are you angry, you who are foul-minded?

Traditional Buddhist doctrine includes a belief in karma. According to this belief, those who do good acquire good karma, which leads to good fortune in the future, and those who do evil acquire bad karma, which leads to bad fortune in the future. For example, the karma of the wicked causes them to be reborn in hell after death and to suffer from such horrors as “the forest of sword-leaves” (verses 46). By wronging me, my enemy destines herself for hell (verses 47 and 48) and gives me an opportunity to practice patience (verse 48). In the long run, therefore, the enemy harms herself and benefits me (verse 49). In the short run, of course, “this situation is reversed”: I am harmed, and she is benefited. But given how things stand in the long run, it is unreasonable for me to get angry about the short run (verse 49).

Of course, the client will not accept all the details of this argument unless he believes in karma, rebirth, and hell. However, similar reasoning could help him to avoid the fallacy of damning his enemy. By acting maliciously, the enemy alienates the client and others, thereby harming herself socially. Depending on the nature of her actions, they may also create legal problems for her. At the same time, she gives her victims an opportunity to practice patience and other virtues. These considerations may not completely defuse the anger at her, but they show that her action, however inexcusable it may be, is not completely worthless. By realizing that the enemy’s action is not worthless, the client is less likely to condemn her as worthless.

Verses 98-100 show another way in which an enemy has value. These verses are about an enemy who inflicts humiliation. Śāntideva points out that humiliation has benefits:

98. The acceptance of praise destroys my security and my desire for emancipation [i.e., enlightenment], and it creates envy of those with good qualities, and anger at their success.

99. For this reason, those who have arisen to destroy my adulation, and so forth, are only preventing me, for the sake of my protection, from falling into injury.

100. Acceptance of honor is a bond which does not bring me to a longing for release [i.e., enlightenment]. How can I hate those who release me from that bond?

From a Buddhist perspective, worldly praise is harmful because it distracts one from the goal of enlightenment (verses 98 and 100). But there are other reasons to be wary of
praise. For example, those who are praised often become arrogant. Therefore, by humiliating rather than praising the client, the enemy is helping him to avoid arrogance (verse 99). In this way, the enemy's action has at least some value, and the enemy is not completely worthless.

There is an obvious objection to the last two arguments. Yes, the enemy benefits the client by saving him from arrogance and by giving him an opportunity to practice patience. But she does not intend to benefit him. She intends only harm. So why shouldn’t he regard her as worthless?

Verses 109-111 present Śāntideva’s response to this objection:

109. If the enemy is not to be honored because he does not intend the achievement of patience, how then can the true Dharma—a mindless cause of accomplishment—be honored?
110. It is said that he is intent upon harming me, but if the enemy is not honored, as if he were a physician who sought my health, how else is there patience?
111. Thus, contingent upon his evil intent, patience arises; and thus, he is the cause of patience and he is to be honored by me as the true doctrine [Dharma] itself.

In Buddhist terminology, “the Dharma” means Buddhist doctrine. The Dharma is not a conscious being, so it does not intend to benefit anyone. Yet Buddhists still value, even venerate, the Dharma because of the benefits that they get from it. Therefore, even if the enemy does not intend to benefit the client, he can still value her because of the patience and other benefits that he acquires by interacting with her. When exploring this argument with a non-Buddhist client, the practitioner can replace the Dharma with something that serves the same purpose within the argument. For example, stinging insects and other pests play a necessary and valuable role within the earth’s ecosystem although they have no intention to do so. It would be foolish to eliminate them. Likewise, the enemy has value even if she has no intention to benefit anyone.

**Four Asian refutations of Awfulizing about death**

One emotional problem that a client may face is Awfulizing about death. In LBT theory, Awfulizing is the fallacy of thinking that a bad event is “totally devastating, catastrophic, and the worst thing imaginable” (Cohen 2003, 74). *The New Rational Therapy*, one of LBT’s founding texts, proposes several antidotes to Awfulizing in general but also proposes an antidote that is specifically for Awfulizing about death: “Concern yourself not with dying but with living well” (Cohen 2007, 54). This special focus on death is not surprising. Death is
universal and inescapable, so it is one of the things that people most often fear and regard as awful.

In this vein, we will consider some antidotes to Awfulizing about death. The basic emotional reasoning behind Awfulizing about death is something like the following:

1. If someone has died, then something awful has befallen him.
2. I will die.
3. Therefore, something awful will befall me.

Below, I present four refutations of this reasoning. The first two refutations come from the Zhuangzi. The last two come from the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta and the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. The first refutation from the Zhuangzi targets the first premise of the emotional reasoning, while the second refutation can be interpreted as a refutation either of the first or of the second premise. The refutations from the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta and the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā target the second premise.

In the following passage from the Zhuangzi, Zhuangzi argues that we should not fear death, since we do not know whether death is good or bad:

How do I know that the love of life is not a delusion? and that the dislike of death is not like a young person’s losing his way, and not knowing that he is (really) going home? Li Ji was a daughter of the border Warden of Ai. When (the ruler of) the state of Jin first got possession of her, she wept till the tears wetted all the front of her dress. But when she came to the place of the king, shared with him his luxurious couch, and ate his grain- and grass-fed meat, then she regretted that she had wept. How do I know that the dead do not repent of their former craving for life? (Legge 1891a, 194)

According to Zhuangzi, we are in the same situation as Li Ji. She was carried against her will to a king’s palace and was afraid. We are carried against our will toward death and are afraid. Her life at the palace turned out to be good and her fear unfounded. Likewise, for all we know, death may be a blessing and our fear of death may be unfounded. In short, we do not know what being dead is like, so we have no reason to fear it. Admittedly, this argument probably will not eliminate a client’s fear of death, especially if he tends to fear the unknown. However, if he regards death as awful because he assumes that it is (for example) annihilation, then he might benefit from exploring philosophical uncertainty about what comes after death.

Another refutation of Awfulizing about death appears in the following story from the Zhuangzi. After Zhuangzi’s wife died, his friend Huizi came to comfort him. Huizi found
Zhuangzi drumming and singing instead of mourning. Scandalized, Huizi reproached Zhuangzi for being heartless. Zhuangzi replied:

When she first died, was it possible for me to be singular and not affected by the event? But I reflected on the commencement of her being. ... During the intermingling of the waste and dark chaos, there ensued a change, and there was breath; another change, and there was the bodily form; another change, and there came birth and life. There is now a change again, and she is dead. The relation between these things is like the procession of the four seasons from spring to autumn, from winter to summer. There now she lies with her face up, sleeping in the Great Chamber; and if I were to fall sobbing and going on to wail for her, I should think that I did not understand what was appointed (for all). (Legge 1891b, 4-5)

At the end of this passage, Zhuangzi seems to argue, rather unsympathetically, that grieving the dead is unreasonable because death is inevitable (“appointed for all”). However, the rest of the passage suggests a different reason to accept death. Zhuangzi points out that his wife did not appear ex nihilo. The matter that composed her body preexisted her birth and endures after her death. That matter once changed into a living person and has now changed into a corpse. Zhuangzi compares these changes to “the procession of the four seasons.”

His point, I think, is as follows. In our minds, we divide the year into four separate parts: spring, summer, autumn, and winter. However, these parts are not truly separate. When spring ends and autumn begins, it is not as if one thing, called “spring,” is destroyed and another thing, called “autumn,” is created; instead, the procession of seasons is one continuous process. Likewise, when matter changes into a living person and then into a corpse and then into soil and then into grass, nothing is created or destroyed; instead, there is one continuous process of change. It is only in our minds that we isolate part of that process and call it “the person’s life.” Therefore, it is only in our minds that something called “the person’s life” is destroyed at death.

If a client Awfulizes about death, then this argument may work as an objection either to the first premise or to the second premise of the client’s emotional reasoning. Again, the emotional reasoning is something like the following:

1. If someone has died, then something awful has befallen him.
2. I will die.
3. Therefore, something awful will befall me.
On one hand, we can interpret Zhuangzi’s argument as an objection to the first premise: death is not awful, because death is merely a change, not true destruction. On the other hand, we can interpret the argument as an objection to the second premise: client will not truly die; instead, he will simply take a new form—that of a corpse, which will take other forms after it decomposes. If the client finds this second interpretation persuasive, then he might benefit from reading the poem “Do Not Stand by My Grave and Weep,” which is popular at funerals:

Do not stand
By my grave, and weep.
I am not there,
I do not sleep—
I am the thousand winds that blow
I am the diamond glints in snow
I am the sunlight on ripened grain,
I am the gentle, autumn rain.
As you awake with morning’s hush,
I am the swift, up-flinging rush
Of quiet birds in circling flight,
I am the day transcending night.
Do not stand
By my grave, and cry—
I am not there,
I did not die.

Turning to the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, we find another antidote to Awfulizing about death. The Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta presents two arguments to support the Buddhist doctrine that there is “no Self” (anattā in Pali, anātman in Sanskrit).5 The text is lengthy and repetitive, so I will summarize the arguments.

The first argument can be summarized as follows:

1. If there were such a thing as your Self, then you could completely control it.
2. You cannot completely control any part of yourself.
3. Therefore, there is no such thing as your Self.\textsuperscript{6}

The second premise is plausible enough. You cannot completely control your body. For example, you cannot stop it from aging. Nor can you completely control your mind. For example, your mind often wanders when you are trying to focus. At first glance, the first premise may seem odd: people often lack self-control, so why does the premise say that you could completely control your Self if you had one? Perhaps the answer is something like the following. Whenever you cannot control something, you cannot control it because you are separated from it in some way. For example, you cannot manipulate an object that is a mile away from you, because the object is spatially separated from you. But you cannot be separated from yourself: you \textit{are} yourself. So, if there were such a thing as your Self, then you would not be separated from it and could completely control it.

The \textit{Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta}’s second argument can be summarized as follows:

1. If there were such a thing as your Self, then it would last as long as you last.
2. No part of you lasts as long as you last.
3. Therefore, there is no such thing as your Self.

The first premise follows from the definition of a Self. Your Self, whatever it may be, is supposed to be you. Therefore, it must last as long as you last. The second premise is plausible given the constant flux of both body and mind. The matter in your body is constantly being replaced by new matter.\textsuperscript{7} The thoughts in your mind are constantly being replaced by new thoughts. No part of you, either physical or mental, seems to last as long as you last.

The second argument clarifies what the no-Self doctrine means. It means that you are like a waterfall that has lasted for many years. The waterfall consists of water, but no water has been part of the waterfall for all those years. The water in the waterfall is constantly flowing away and being replaced by new water. There is no water that we can point to and say, “That’s the waterfall.” Likewise, bits of you are constantly being replaced. Nothing has been part of you for your whole life. There is nothing that we can point to and say, “That’s you.” If we define your Self as the part of you that is most truly you, then nothing is part of you for long enough to qualify as your Self.

Within Buddhism, the no-Self doctrine’s purpose is to eliminate suffering. It makes no sense to crave things for yourself if there is no such thing as your Self. Therefore, if you clearly see—not just intellectually but on a deep, experiential level that comes only with full enlightenment—that there is no Self, then you will stop craving. Buddhism teaches that suffering results from craving. Therefore, if you stop craving, then you will stop suffering. In
this way, Buddhism claims, fully realizing and accepting the truth of no-Self liberates you from all suffering.

What about those who understand no-Self only intellectually and who have humbler ambitions than full enlightenment? For them, the no-Self idea might work as an antidote to Awfulizing about death. Consider how Derek Parfit describes the effects of coming to believe that his own existence is not some further fact—some enduring Self—over and above the existence of his changing mental and physical parts:

Is the truth depressing? Some may find it so. But I find it liberating, and consoling. When I believed that my existence was a further fact, I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. I am less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others. (Parfit 1984, 281).

Among the benefits of the no-Self idea, Parfit includes liberation from the fear of death (the fear of the “darkness” at the end of the tunnel of life). The no-Self idea weakened the sense of separate selfhood that lies behind that fear. Consider again the emotional reasoning behind Awfulizing about death:

1. If someone has died, then something awful has befallen him.
2. I will die.
3. Therefore, something terrible will befall me.

The no-Self idea undermines the second premise of the emotional reasoning: there is ultimately no such thing as death, for there no “I,” no Self, to suffer destruction.

Finally, I want to examine Chapter 15 of Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakārikā. Although lengthy, this passage is worth quoting in full. It is an especially vivid example of unmistakably philosophical argumentation leading to an antidote to Awfulizing about death. Below, I translate the eleven verses of this chapter and add a running commentary:

1. Intrinsic existence is not the result of conditions and causes. Intrinsic existence constructed by causes and conditions would be produced.
2. Again, how will intrinsic existence be produced? Intrinsic existence is surely not produced and is independent of other things.
Commentary: In Buddhist philosophy, a thing has “intrinsic existence” (svabhāva in Sanskrit) if its existence does not depend on other things. Verses 1–2 argue that intrinsic existence cannot have a cause. If a thing has a cause, then the thing depends on that cause. For example, a knife depends on the knife’s manufacturer; the knife would not exist without the manufacturer. Since intrinsic existence does not depend on anything, it cannot have a cause.

The purpose of verses 1–2 is to show that nothing has intrinsic existence. According to verses 1–2, intrinsic existence cannot have a cause. But one tenet of Buddhist philosophy is that each thing’s existence has a cause. It follows that each thing’s existence is not intrinsic.

3. If there is no intrinsic existence, then where will extrinsic existence come from, since the intrinsic existence of extrinsic existence is called “extrinsic existence”?

Commentary: In Buddhist philosophy, a thing has “extrinsic existence” (parabhāva) if its existence depends on other things. This verse argues that things lack not only intrinsic existence but also extrinsic existence. For one possible interpretation of the reasoning in this verse, see Dowd 2022, 91.

4. Again, if there is no intrinsic existence or extrinsic existence, then where does existence come from, since existence is established where there is intrinsic existence or extrinsic existence?

Commentary: Verses 1–2 argue that there is no intrinsic existence. Verse 3 adds there is no extrinsic existence. Therefore, verse 4 concludes that there is no existence at all, because existence must be either extrinsic or intrinsic.

So, things ultimately do not exist. Some scholars interpret this conclusion as the nihilistic claim that there is no existing reality (see Westerhoff 2016). There are, however, other possible interpretations. Here, I want to consider an interpretation that denies the existence, not of reality, but of things, regarded as separate parts of reality. Jay L. Garfield presents this interpretation as follows: “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 2001, 29). In other words, reality does not come to us already divided into such things as tables, trees, dogs, cats, and people. Instead, we divide reality into those things in our minds. How we divide reality is determined by our conventions. Thus, things exist only conventionally. For example, suppose that I hold a pencil with an eraser. How many things am I holding? If we use the word “pencil,” then I am holding one thing: a pencil. If we use the words “wood,” “graphite,” “metal,” and “rubber,” then I am holding four things: wood, graphite, metal, and rubber. If we use the word “molecule,” then I am holding billions of things, namely billions of molecules. Our linguistic conventions, rather than things in themselves, determine how many things exist.
5. If existence is not established, then nonexistence is also not established, because people say that nonexistence is a change of existence,

Commentary: In verse 5, “nonexistence” means destruction. A thing is destroyed when it changes from existing to not existing (“nonexistence is a change of existence”). Therefore, if there is ultimately no existence (“if existence is not established”), then there is ultimately no destruction (“nonexistence is also not established”). Verse 4 says that there is ultimately no existence. Therefore, verse 5 concludes that there is ultimately no destruction.

6. and seeing both intrinsic existence and extrinsic existence and existence and nonexistence is indeed not seeing the truth in the Buddha's teaching

7. and, in the discussion with Kātyāyana, both “exists” and “does not exist” are rejected by the blessed one, who explains existence and nonexistence.

Commentary: The point of verses 6 and 7 is that the Buddha (“the blessed one”) rejects both eternalism and annihilationism. Eternalism is the idea that you exist eternally, and annihilationism is the idea that you are destroyed at death (see verse 11 below). In an early Buddhist text, the Buddha talks to a follower named Kātyāyana and rejects both eternalism and annihilationism. Verses 4 and 5 explain why verses 6 and 7 reject eternalism and annihilationism. According to verse 4, there are no separate things. Therefore, there is no separate you that can exist eternally, so eternalism is false. According to verse 5, there is no destruction, since there are no separate things to be destroyed. Therefore, death is not destruction, so annihilationism is false.

8. If existence were through intrinsic existence, then nonexistence would not be possible, because intrinsic existence does not change.

Commentary: According to verse 8, destruction (“nonexistence”) proves that things lack intrinsic existence. Intrinsic existence does not depend on other things, so intrinsic existence can never change (“intrinsic existence does not change”). Therefore, if things had intrinsic existence, then they would never change from existing to not existing—in other words, they would never be destroyed (“nonexistence would not be possible”). But things can be destroyed. Therefore, things lack intrinsic existence.

9. And if intrinsic existence does not exist, then what will change? And if intrinsic existence exists, then what will change?

Commentary: Verse 9's first sentence is an objection to Nāgārjuna’s argument. Nāgārjuna has argued that there is no intrinsic existence. If there is no intrinsic existence (“if intrinsic existence does not exist”), then there ultimately are no things (see verses 3-4).
If there ultimately are no things, then change is impossible ("what will change?"). But change is possible. Therefore, Nāgārjuna must be wrong when he says that there is no intrinsic existence. Verse 9's second sentence says that the objection has it the wrong way around. Intrinsici existence does not depend on anything, so it should last forever and not change ("if intrinsic existence exists, then what will change?"). The fact that things change shows that things lack intrinsic existence.

10. “Exists” is grasping at the eternal. “Does not exist” is annihilationism. Therefore, a clear-sighted one does not rely on existence and nonexistence.

11. “Whatever exists by having intrinsic existence does not fail to exist” is the eternal. "It does not exist now but existed previously” leads to annihilation.

**Commentary:** Verse 11 defines eternalism and annihilationism. Eternalism is the idea that you exist forever ("does not fail to exist") because you have intrinsic existence. Annihilationism is the idea that you exist for a while and then are destroyed. Verse 10 says that an enlightened person ("a clear-sighted one") rejects both eternalism and annihilationism.

The argumentation in these verses is complicated and abstract. I do not suggest that an LBT practitioner deploy these arguments in the form in which they are found here. However, as far as death (or “annihilation,” as our text puts it) goes, Nāgārjuna’s overall point is straightforward enough. Reality does not come to us already divided into separate things. We divide reality into separate things in our minds. You are one of the things into which we conventionally divide reality, so you exist only conventionally. Therefore, it is only conventionally true that you will die. Ultimately, there is no separate you to be destroyed. For a client who can grasp it, this reasoning may help to alleviate the fear of death.

**Conclusion**

Far from being philosophy for philosophy’s sake, the Bodhicaryāvatāra, Zhuangzi, Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, and Mūlamadhyamakakārikā are concerned with real emotional problems that people face. The Bodhicaryāvatāra presents a battery of arguments against anger. The Zhuangzi offers two arguments against the fear of death. One argument encourages agnosticism regarding the horribleness of death. The other argument presents death not as destruction but as one physical transformation among others. The Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta and the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā argue that there is no separate “you” or “Self” that is destroyed at death. The Bodhicaryāvatāra’s arguments can serve as antidotes to Damnation of Others. The rest of the arguments can serve as antidotes to Awfulizing about death. Given the psychological and therapeutic orientation of these and other Asian
philosophical works, LBT practitioners would do well to search Asian philosophy for potential philosophical antidotes.

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1 “Well, the complete cessation of pain [which is] of three kinds is the complete end of man” (Sāṃkhyaśūtras 1.1, Ballantyne 1885, 1).
2 Many different schools of physical and mental training have been called “yoga.” Here, I refer to the school that is one of the six “classic” or “orthodox” schools of Hindu philosophy.
3 In quoting these verses below, I follow the translation in Matics 2007, 176-7, 181-2.
4 In this and other quotations from translated Chinese works, I have updated the spelling of Chinese names to accord with the Hanyu Pinyin romanization system.
5 For the full text of the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta and the exegesis that yields these two arguments, see Dowd 2022, 76-80.
6 For a different interpretation of this argument, see Siderits 2007, 46-47.
7 In fact, according to traditional Buddhist metaphysics, every particle of your body is replaced at each moment. Traditional Buddhist metaphysics analyzes composite objects into particles called dharmas and claims that each dharma exists only for a moment.
8 I translate the Sanskrit text in Vaidya 1960.
9 In verses 8 and 9, the word that I translate as “intrinsic existence” is not the usual svabhāva but, rather, prakṛti. In South Asian philosophy, prakṛti usually means formless matter. In this context, however, it appears to mean intrinsic existence and is translated accordingly in the canonical Tibetan translation of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā.
10 Ultimately, there are no things (verse 4). Therefore, it is not ultimately true that things are destroyed (see verse 5). However, from the conventional standpoint, which assumes that the world is divided into things, things are created and destroyed all the time.

Bibliography


