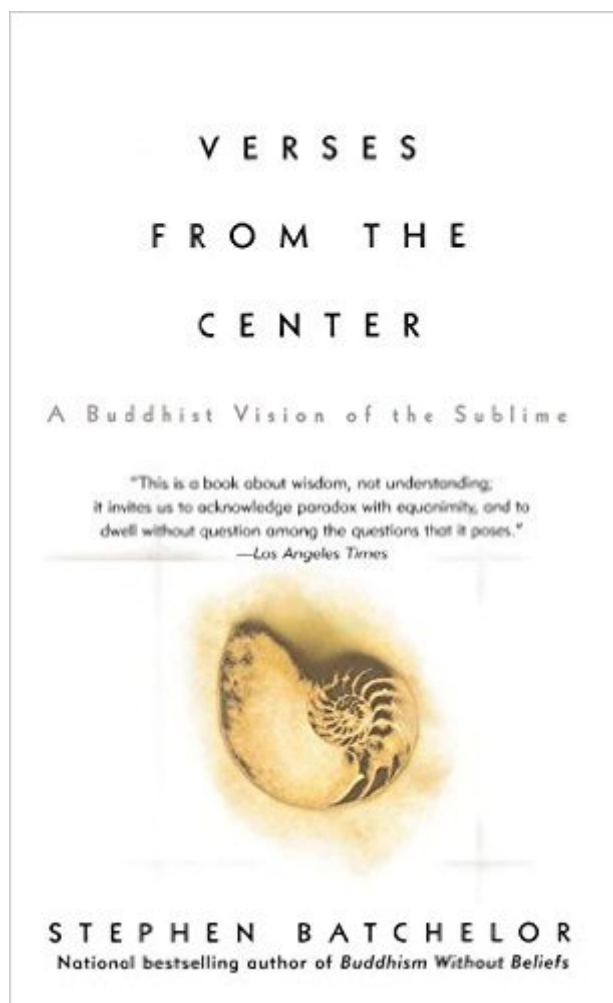


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Verses From The Center: A Buddhist Vision Of The Sublime



Synopsis

The understanding of the nature of reality is the insight upon which the Buddha was able to achieve his own enlightenment. This vision of the sublime is the source of all that is enigmatic and paradoxical about Buddhism. In *Verses from the Center*, Stephen Batchelor explores the history of this concept and provides readers with translations of the most important poems ever written on the subject, the poems of 2nd century philosopher Nagarjuna.

Book Information

Series: Buddhist Vision of the Sublime

Paperback: 208 pages

Publisher: Riverhead Books; Reissue edition (July 1, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1573228761

ISBN-13: 978-1573228763

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.6 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 4.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (18 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #710,157 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #53 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Eastern > Buddhism > Mahayana](#) #768 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Poetry > Themes & Styles > Inspirational & Religious](#) #145261 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality](#)

Customer Reviews

There is much about Stephen Batchelor's new translation of Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika* which is extremely useful, although the work is also highly problematic. Batchelor has chosen to render Nagarjuna's verses in a very free fashion, communicating what he discerns to be the real message at the heart of the Karikas. He has felt free to omit material, paraphrase, summarize, and reword entire sections with enormous liberty. On the one hand this has freed the text from much of its cryptic quality which has resulted from the metrical constraints of the Sanskrit root text. On the other hand we must rely heavily on Batchelor's interpretation of what Nagarjuna actually meant. What did Nagarjuna actually mean? Batchelor sets forth his interpretive model in the lengthy and challenging introduction. Nagarjuna, Batchelor argues, should be interpreted as belonging to a common philosophical heritage. In comparing Nagarjuna's text with the writings of Taoism and Zen and even the English Romantic poets, Batchelor suggests that the Verses espouse a common insight which is far broader than many modern interpreters have suggested. It seems probable that

the unspoken opponent of his exegesis is the Gelukpa and Gelukpa-inspired scholarship which has had much to say about Madhyamaka in recent years, and of which Batchelor himself was once a part when he translated Chandrakirti's Madhyamakavatara with Geshe Rabten in *Echoes of Voidness*. Here, he briefly presents Dzong-ka-ba's view on Nagarjuna, which Batchelor clearly thinks is overly scholastic and removes the heart of the message by viewing emptiness as primarily a kind of anti-metaphysics. The real message, we learn, is that we are to approach the world with a particular stance of openness and sense of interconnectedness.

There is little doubt that Nagarjuna gave humanity a masterpiece with the MMK which is evident in the attention that this text has received over the centuries. Moreover as a vertebra in the backbone of the student-centric disclosure of emptiness, MMK is indeed an essential read for those of us who tread the fascinating and beautiful road to insight. The MMK is not about Philosophy or Sanskrit but of sharing a direct, living experience of emptiness through the medium of writing; using language and concept to reveal a non-conceptual experience of emptiness. In my mind this would be the only way of 'translating' a text such as the MMK. A good re-presentation of the MMK must be memorable and life-changing. Self-grasping must be left with nothing to hold onto and be clearly revealed as the unskillful, foolish enemy that it is. I feel that with this book, Batchelor is attempting to offer an alternative experience of MMK to those that are currently presented by the linguists and philosophers who have chosen MMK as belonging to their respective domains. His arguments are at their strongest when he resists ownership of the text by intellectualising academics. For this alone he gets a star. For his provocative alternative rewriting of the MMK, (helping us remember that there are alternative approaches to translation) he gets one more star. Batchelor wishes to share with us the spontaneity of the verse form without getting lost in a rarified explication of his own understandings of the intellectual import of the verses, which is indeed a lofty and noble goal, but the question arises over whether or not Batchelor is up to the challenge; I believe that he is not.

A relaxed distillation of Nagarjuna's teaching, fleshed out with various reflections from the author's experience and intuitions gleaned from personal reading habits, this book has proven satisfying to people who might otherwise balk at taking Nagarjuna 'straight.' Whether it constitutes a 'translation' of Nagarjuna's karikas - is open to question. For the Buddhist background, I recommend Murti's 'The Central Philosophy of Buddhism.' True, not everyone wants to read Nagarjuna with a close eye on all the interpretive questions that might be raised about the place this text occupies in Buddhism. Nevertheless, the wish to present the Madhyamaka - shorn of its traditional trappings,

Buddhist-scholastic exegeses etc. - means that we are left wholly dependant upon the 'Batcheloresque' exegesis. Other reviewers have pointed out some of the textual issues involved here - viz. Stephen's reading of the karikas. We might add that - contrary to what some of Stephen's observations suggest, Nagarjuna saw the Madhyamika as 'marga' centered - i.e. that it presupposed the Buddhist path. Even though it forsakes all dualism (advayavada) and allied thought constructs (drsti), Nagarjuna made it clear that this was in the interest of a religious ideal - viz. realization of the unconditioned (absolute), as against nihilism, scepticism or agnosticism etc. The Buddha said: 'two things only do I teach, suffering and its cessation.' The first - suffering (duhkha) is a corollary of impermanence (antiya) and 'dependent origination (pratitya-samutpada). Hence, Stephen's reference to the fact that we are (relatively) 'contingent beings.' But this is only half the picture. Buddhism is not just a philosophy of 'shifting sand' and the Madhyamika does not stop there.

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