

Mountains are Just Mountains

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Before I studied Zen, mountains were mountains, and water was water.

After studying Zen for some time, mountains were no longer mountains, and water was no longer water.

But now, after studying Zen longer, mountains are just mountains, and water is just water.¹

1 Nāgārjuna and the Catuskoti

The standard view in Western philosophy, dating back to Aristotle, is that every proposition is either true or false—not neither, and not both. There are just *two* possibilities. A traditional view in Buddhism, of equally ancient ancestry, is that there are *four*. A proposition may be true (and true only), false (and false only), both true and false, neither true nor false—**t**, **f**, **b**, **n**. This is the catuskoti.

¹The aphorism occurs in many variants in Ch’an and Zen literature, but is first attributed to Master Qingyuan in the *Compendium of the Five Lamps* (*Wudeng Huiyuan*, 1252):

Thirty years ago, before I practiced Ch’an, I saw that mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers. However, after having achieved intimate knowledge and having gotten a way in, I saw that mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers. But now that I have found rest, as before I see mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers.

App (1994), pp. 111-2, fn. 2.

In *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* (MMK), Nāgārjuna famously deployed the *catuskoti* in two different ways. The first of these is *positive*: he says that, for certain propositions, all four of the possibilities may hold. Thus:²

Everything is real and is not real,
Both real and not real,
Neither unreal nor real.
This is the Lord Buddha’s teaching.

The second is *negative*. In such cases he argues that none of the four hold. Thus, he argues that none of the four possibilities applies to the proposition that the Buddha exists:³

We do not assert “empty”.
We do not assert “non-empty”.
We neither assert both nor neither.
They are asserted only for the purpose of designation.

Both of these applications of the *catuskoti* have an air of paradox about them—if only because, standardly, exactly one of the four possibilities is supposed to apply.

A very common view is to the effect that Nāgārjuna’s use of the positive *catuskoti* showed that he took conventional reality to be contradictory. It seems to us, however,⁴ that as applied to conventional reality the contradictions are mainly *prima facie*. The various possibilities need to be disambiguated with respect to the two notions of truth operative for Nāgārjuna, and quite generally in Buddhism. When this is done, things are perfectly consistent. Thus, something may be true (conventionally), false (ultimately), true and false (conventionally and ultimately, respectively), and neither true nor false (ultimately and conventionally, respectively). All this is said, of course, from the conventional perspective.

Again, a common view is that Nāgārjuna’s use of the negative *catuskoti*, shows that he thinks that ultimate reality is ineffable: there are no ultimate truths. *A fortiori*, what one can say about the ultimate is not contradictory. We have argued⁵ that, for Nāgārjuna, there are, indeed, no ultimate truths. But the ultimate is contradictory: there *are* ultimate truths; indeed, that there are no ultimate truths is one of them. Another is that, from an

²MMK, XVIII, 8. Translations are from Tsong khapa (2006).

³MMK, XXII, 11.

⁴Garfield and Priest (2003).

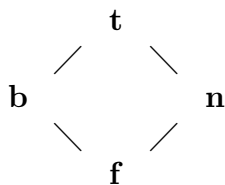
⁵*Ibid.*

ultimate perspective (though not a conventional one) there is no distinction between the two truths. It follows that, from the ultimate perspective, the conventional is contradictory as well.

Moreover, the two catuskoti we argue, paradoxically, express the same insight. Each indicates that there are two truths, that conventional phenomena exist and can be characterized conventionally, and that nothing exists ultimately, or satisfies any description ultimately. Hence, they each indicate the compatibility of the conventional reality of ordinary phenomena with their ultimate emptiness. Moreover, taken together, given the insistence in the negative catuskoti on the conventional character, and hence the emptiness, of emptiness, they also indicate that the ultimate truth is only conventionally real.

2 The Catuskoti and de Morgan Lattices

‘Catuskoti’ means literally ‘four corners’ (in Greek, this is referred to as *tetralemma*). There are, then, four corners to the space of alethic possibilities. The very name suggests representing the truth values thus:



Anyone familiar with the semantics of relevant logics, and in particular the Dunn four-valued semantics for First Degree Entailment, will immediately recognise this as a representation (Hasse diagram) for the four semantic values of that logic.⁶ An interpretation of the language, ν , maps every sentence, A , to one of these values, $\nu(A)$. The usual connectives work in natural ways. The value of a conjunction, $\nu(A \wedge B)$, is the *meet* of $\nu(A)$ and $\nu(B)$ (that is, the greatest value less than or equal to both). The value of a disjunction, $\nu(A \vee B)$, is the *join* of $\nu(A)$ and $\nu(B)$ (that is, the least value greater than or equal to both). The value of a negation, $\nu(\neg A)$, is characterised by the following table:

$\nu(A)$	$\nu(\neg A)$
t	f
f	t
b	b
n	n

⁶See, e.g., Priest (2001), 8.4.

The striking similarity between the ancient Buddhist view and the contemporary semantics of relevant logic is noted by Priest and Routley.⁷ Taking his cue from Nāgārjuna’s negative catuskoti, Sylvan (*né* Routley) suggested⁸ that Nāgārjuna might be thought of as adding a *fifth* truth value (“none of the above”), meant to apply to statements about ultimate truth. We think that there is something to Sylvan’s insight, and we intend to explore it as a way of understanding the notion of awakening.

On the other hand, Nāgārjuna’s principal commentators⁹ insist that the four kotis (corners) of the catuskoti are exhaustive—that there is no fifth option, and Buddhist commentators standardly follow them in this assessment. Our exegesis, if it is to remain faithful to the tradition, must also therefore show that, even if Sylvan is right, the fifth value really is a value that is no value. We will show this as well.

3 The Great Death, Mountains, and Ox-herding

Though Jōshu, Dōgen, and Hakuin wrote long after Nāgārjuna, and though the influences on this internally heterogenous Ch’an/Zen tradition include both Buddhist and Daoist elements, it is illuminating to read Nāgārjuna through the lens of Zen insight. Themes that lie dormant in the Indian and Tibetan commentarial literature are often highlighted by Chinese and Japanese Buddhist scholars and practitioners. This is particularly true with regard to the account of awakening, a subject to which these East Asian scholars devoted more explicit attention than did Nāgārjuna.

Jōshu introduced the term “the Great Death” to describe the initial stage of awakening. Dōgen adopted this term,¹⁰ and it gained centrality for Hakuin, who links it to Dōgen’s phrase “the casting off of body and mind”.¹¹ Dying in this way is compared by Hakuin to leaping from a high cliff into a void. One abandons the safe ground of substantialism or reification for the abyss of emptiness, something one can do only if one has confidence that there is, in fact, no bottom. Awakening—resurrection from the Great Death—is the recognition that existence makes sense only in endless free-fall. In this free-fall one abandons the need for foundations—for substance as a foundation for attributes; for certain, given, axioms as the foundation

⁷Priest and Routley (1989), 16 f.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā*, 11a-b; Tsong khapa (2006), 50-54.

¹⁰See Nishijima and Cross (1996), ch. 40, ‘*Gabyo*’.

¹¹Peter Gregory (personal communication) has speculated that this may have been a misunderstanding of his Chinese teacher Ju Ching’s phrase ‘casting off the dust of the mind’ indicating the elimination of the kleśas.

for knowledge; for the self as a foundation for experience; for the permanent as the foundation for change; and even for emptiness as the foundation of the conventional. One awakens to the emptiness of emptiness and to the pervasiveness of impermanence and interdependence.

The well-known series of ox-herding pictures provides a nice graphic illustration of this structure. See Fig. 1.

[Insert Fig.1 around here.]

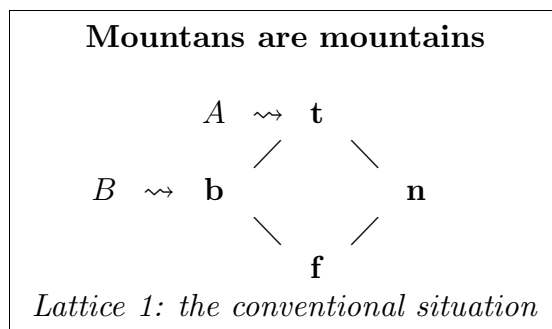
The first seven pictures record the gradual mastery of the ox, representing the taming of the mind and the gradual analytic understanding of reality. The eighth image is blank, denoting the realization of emptiness. But neither the pictures nor the soteriology can end here. The goal of practice is not the extinction of consciousness, or oblivion to the world, but rather the achievement of enlightened consciousness and of a complete understanding of, and appropriate engagement with, the world. And so the final two pictures return to the beginning, but a beginning informed now by the realization of emptiness. Awakening does not free one *from* the world; it frees one *for* the world. (This is why Dōgen can insist that practice is awakening. More of this anon.)

All of this is summed up most helpfully in the aphorism that inspires this essay. Prior to Buddhist reflection, mountains and water—phenomena and change—are perceived as substantially existent, independent, things and properties that qualify those things. Some are permanent; some impermanent. Particulars and universals are ontologically independent, and are real independently of convention. Buddhist analysis, however, shows these phenomena to be empty of inherent existence; to be insubstantial and to fail to exist ultimately. Were one to stop here, while the error of taking things to be inherently existent—primal ignorance, as it is called in the trade—would have been expurgated, awakening would not have been achieved. For to stop at this point would be to be stuck with an incomplete understanding both of emptiness and of the kind of reality that mountains and waters—phenomena and change—in fact have. This would be to take conventional reality and emptiness to stand to one another as appearance and reality, and so would simultaneously be to deprecate conventional reality and to reify emptiness. Hence, the final moment of the dialectic—the realization that mountains are *just* mountains and that waters are *just* waters—is essential if practice is to be completed. At this moment, one realizes that for mountains and waters to be empty just is for them to exist interdependently and conventionally; for them to exist at all just is for them to be empty of inherent existence. The realization of their emptiness

is therefore the realization of their existence, and this is the realization that emptiness and existence are the same thing: the identity of the two truths. The third moment differs from the first just in that the realization of emptiness that mediates them strips away the imputation of inherent existence from the apprehension of the conventional, leaving the conventional just as conventional, and transforming the world as seen through primal ignorance into the world as seen through awakened awareness.

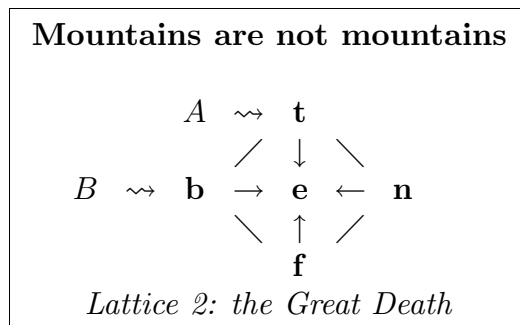
4 The Lattices

We can now connect this dialectic directly to the catuskotis and to the semantic lattices that represent them. The first lattice represents the positive catuskoti, and the first moment of the Zen dialectic.



In this lattice, we see that the evaluation function for our language, ν (represented by the squiggly arrows), maps sentence (such as A, B, \dots) into the set of truth values represented by the corners of the lattice. From the standpoint of conventional truth, some sentences are true; some are false; some are true and false (perhaps in different senses); some are neither true nor false (perhaps in different senses). But truth values can be assigned. Mountains are, from this perspective, mountains.

The second lattice takes us to the second moment of Zen awakening.



Here, a second mapping is also represented. A fifth value, \mathbf{e} (emptiness) is added to the lattice. Though we write it at the heart of the picture it is an isolated point. That is, according to the ordering, it is incomparable with the other four values. (Strictly, then, this is not a lattice in the mathematical sense; it is just a partial ordering. However, we will continue to describe the structures we are talking about as lattices, since this is an apt description of their appearance.) \mathbf{e} is also a *sink*. That is, if $\nu(A) = \mathbf{e}$ then $\nu(A \wedge B) = \nu(A \vee B) = \nu(\neg A) = \mathbf{e}$. We now introduce an operator, μ (indicated by the straight arrows) on the semantic values. For any lattice value, \mathbf{v} , $\mu(\mathbf{v}) = \mathbf{e}$. The symbol ‘ μ ’ is happily appropriate; for in Japanese Buddhist thought, ‘mu’ [INSERT KANJI CHARACTER MU, HERE] is the ultimate negation. (More of this anon, too.) Given the new structure, the truth values of all sentences are obtained by composing ν and μ . Thus, the truth value of A , e.g., ‘Mountains are mountains’ is $\mu(\nu(A)) = \mathbf{e}$. It is *not* true that mountains are mountains.

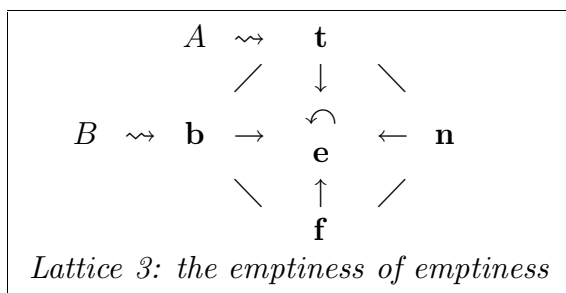
Hakuin and Dōgen, as we observed, refer to the realization of the emptiness of all things as the “Great Death”, the casting off of body-mind. They urge that a precondition for awakening is the courage to endure the Great Death; to give up one’s commitment to the substantiality, permanence, and ultimate importance of the external and internal worlds; a recognition of their emptiness. At that point, mountains are no longer mountains; waters are no longer waters. All there is is emptiness.

It is tempting to think that the Great Death and the apprehension of nothing but emptiness is awakening. But, again as we observed, it is not. To awaken is not to lose the conventional truth; it is to awaken to its conventional nature. The apprehension of emptiness and the dissolution of the conventional is only a precondition. The second lattice collapses all four corners into emptiness, and so cannot be a stopping point.

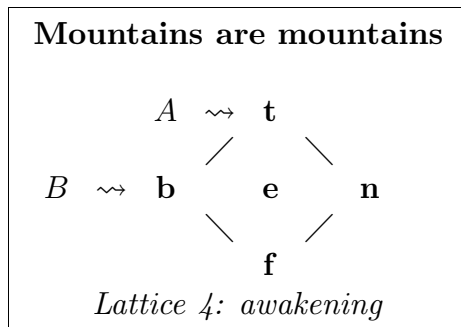
To leap from the high cliff of ignorance requires courage precisely because one is convinced that one will inevitably hit bottom—that there is a ground. Awakening occurs with resurrection from the Great Death and the realization that there are no foundations, whether ontological, epistemological, or logical. Conventional truth is not undermined by this discovery, for conventional truth never presupposed such foundations anyway. Its reality is the reality of changing, interdependent, essenceless, phenomena, the ontological status of which is determined by the conventions and concerns with which we approach them; and access to which is mediated by conventional epistemic practices whose warrant is determined in turn by their efficacy in mediating our relations to these variable, essenceless, phenomena. Awakening is awakening to the fact that the only reality possible for conventional phenomena is their emptiness, and that that emptiness just

is their conventional reality. Mountains are just mountains; waters are just waters—neither anything more, nor anything less.

Diagrammatically, this last stage is difficult to draw. It is helpful, for a start, to split it into two.



Recall that μ maps every value to e . Hence, $\mu(e) = e$. e is itself “muified”; and since it is empty, there is ultimately nothing for the arrows inside the diamond to map to. This is really a transition state, and the diagram might better be represented dynamically, with the interior of the diamond gradually fading out, giving rise to lattice 4.



The arrows from the sentences now stop at the original truth values. All sentences therefore receive their conventional truth values. e is still there, but has cancelled itself, and so the arrows that target it, allowing the original truth values to manifest—to emerge from emptiness.¹² (The four conventional truth values, though they map to e in Lattice 3, may still be the targets of the squiggly arrows, since these represent conventional practice, and so remain undisturbed by the ultimate analysis represented by the straight arrows.)

As the final diagram makes clear, we have effectively returned to where we started. True, from the standpoint of conventional reality the first and last representations may look different. The first does not encode emptiness;

¹²Lattice 4 might therefore also be represented as lattice 3 with its whole interior written *under erasure*.

the fourth does. But from the standpoint of ultimate reality, there is no real difference; they are the same. The first lattice had an empty centre from the beginning. The final picture only makes that fact explicit. In each, conventional practice proceeds in the context of this empty centre and is undisturbed by it.

5 Internal and External Negation

It is interesting to turn here, for a moment, to traditional Indian logic (Hindu and Buddhist). In Indian logic, it is common to distinguish between two kinds of negation, which we may call *internal* (*paryudāsa*, Tib: *ma yin dgag*) and *external* (*prasajya*, Tib: *med dgag*). The difference between them is that the internal negation of a proposition, or state of affairs that it describes, implicates the existence of a different state of affairs. Thus, when we say that a certain pot is not (internal) blue, we implicate that it is some other colour (e.g., red). An external negation—such as that there is no blue pot—has no such implicatures.

An important theme in Madhyamaka commentarial literature¹³ is that emptiness is an external negation. When we say that the pot’s being blue is empty, we do not implicate that is some other colour, or even that there is a pot there at all. The state of affairs of a blue pot just does not arise. Most importantly, to say that something is empty is not to implicate the positive state of affairs that it has a certain essence, namely emptiness.¹⁴

The transformation from the perspective of the positive *catuskoti* (first lattice) to the negative (second lattice) is the transition from the conventional to the ultimate perspective, and hence to the perspective of the apprehension of emptiness. That transition should therefore be marked by some kind of external negation. This is exactly the function of μ . In the context of the second lattice, it is not the case that A is true— A is not ultimately true, in virtue of the emptiness of its subject and predicate. Thus, it takes the value **e**, which is distinct from **t** and **b**. This is not to say that $\neg A$, is true, though. Indeed it has the same status: all of the four standard possibilities are rejected. Nor is it true to say that the state of affairs that A describes is empty. No positive statement, in fact, no statement at all, is true at this stage of the game. All take the value **e**.

This is the sense in which emptiness is an external negation. And the

¹³Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā*, 11-12, Tsong khapa (2006), 50-54.

¹⁴See Candrakīrti’s commentary on MMK XV, 8 (*Prasannapadā*, 92b) in which he compares one who takes emptiness to be an essence with a customer who, when the shopkeeper tells him that he has nothing to sell, asks to purchase some of that nothing.

fact that it is an external negation is what makes it possible for the recovery of the conventional, represented in the final moment of the dialectic. For if any alternative, even emptiness, were implicated by the negation of the conventional kotis it would be hard to see how they could each be recovered, and how the conventional world could be preserved. It is precisely the fact that emptiness is such a complete negation that prevents it ultimately from erasing the conventional truth values which it negates. The fact that this falls out so nicely from our account indicates that our use of modern logical apparatus does not take us so far from the canonical Indo-Tibetan tradition after all.

6 Cogent Inconsistency

The series of lattices also give us insight into Dōgen’s puzzling assertion that practice is awakening. It might seem much more natural to think that practice is a *means to* awakening, and so is precisely what one does when one is *not yet* awakened. If that does seem more natural, then one is indeed not yet awakened, and practice may be necessary. But suppose that one is already awakened. One has realized emptiness and reaffirmed the conventional truth. That conventional truth is not altered by one’s realization. It must hence be recognized to be empty once again, and that is practice. That practice is awakened. But that practice is no different from the practice one initially undertook. And so that was awakened practice as well. One just didn’t realize this.

This, of course, leads us to one of the most puzzling doctrines of East Asian Buddhist philosophy, one disparaged by some Tibetan Madhyamaka philosophers: the doctrine of primordial awakening and of an innate Buddha-nature in every sentient being. From the standpoint of one focused on the graduated path to enlightenment, with countless eons of practice before one attains even the second bodhisattva stage, and many more countless eons of practice before awakening, the very idea that one is already awakened seems preposterous. Why put in all that effort to achieve what is already achieved? The claim that despite being already awakened one simply doesn’t realize it appears, as well, to be an incoherent reply. How could Buddhas not know that they are Buddhas?

Here the Ch’an/Zen tradition is merely following Nāgārjuna closely, though—and this is why, in this tradition, sudden awakening is rated as possible. If the two truths really are non-different, and if to apprehend the ultimate really just is to apprehend the conventional, what a Buddha apprehends is precisely what anyone else apprehends. This does not mean

that it is *easy* to see things as a Buddha does. Ignorance remains the superimposition of inherent existence on that which is empty. But it does mean that ignorance is not the *absence* of awakened perception, but the *addition* to it. Awakening is simply the fact that nothing needs to be *added* to experience. Sudden awakening is possible because of the presence of that primordial awareness.

So all things have a single nature, and that is emptiness, and that is no nature at all. And that is why each thing can manifest exactly the conventional nature that it has. All of this might seem at first glance hopelessly incoherent. We grant its inconsistency: Nāgārjuna and Dōgen are indeed committed to the identity of distinct truths, and to the assertion that the essence of all things is their essencelessness. They are also committed to the claim that the objects of awakening and ignorance are both distinct and identical. The fifth value, *e*, with its paradoxical status, is a way of representing this. Nāgārjuna and Dōgen agree that ultimate reality escapes the standard four possibilities, and so acknowledge a fifth; the fifth is self-dismantling. It is both crucial and idle.

So, inconsistent, yes; incoherent, no. We hope to have made sense of this inconsistent picture of reality. To the extent that we have, we have vindicated Nāgārjuna's use of the positive and negative *catuskotis*, his identification of the two truths and the claim of his most important exegetes that emptiness in Nāgārjuna's system is an external, not an internal, negation. We have also, to this extent, vindicated Hakuin's and Dōgen's account of the Great Death, of the identity of practice and attainment, and explained the Ox-herd sequence. And we have shown that mountains are just mountains and waters are just waters. What more could they be?

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