



Emptiness and Voidness

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The Lankāvatāra Sūtra presents a sevenfold typology of emptiness, but makes a specific point of contrasting the emptiness of characteristics (lakṣanaśūnyatā) with relative emptiness (īteretaraśūnyatā), the latter being classified as the "most inferior of all emptinesses". Following the pioneering work of Gadjin Nagao, most attention has been paid to relative emptiness in isolation. It has been traced back to the Pāli Cūḷasuññatasutta, and has also been considered in terms the Yogācāra three nature theory, the tathāgatagarbha doctrine, the controversy over sudden and gradual enlightenment and the later rang stong vs gzhan stong ('self- vs other- emptiness') controversy in Tibet. This has been most notably due to the recurrence of the controversy over what is 'left over' in the wake of the emptiness-critique and the potential reification of a basis, or locus, which is empty. Relative emptiness has not, however, been considered in terms of the emptiness of characteristics. This paper will examine how Candrakīrti and Kamalaśīla follow the Lankāvatāra Sūtra in playing relative emptiness off against the emptiness of characteristics, the latter being found to be amenable to the Buddha's omniscient perception of the emptiness all things, while the former is incompatible with it. This paper will consider how the 'lower' conception of emptiness in terms of relativity is envisaged in terms of the reification of characteristics (lakṣana) such that it is placed in direct opposition with the emptiness of characteristics, as well tracing the terminological delineation of relative emptiness in terms of 'voidness' rather than 'emptiness' or that which is 'devoid' (vivikta) or 'isolated' (rahita) rather than 'empty' ('śūnya'). It will be shown that emptiness cannot simply be reduced to a state of relativity and that Buddhist thinkers have been acutely aware of some of the potential shortcomings of doing so.