Seeing That Frees in Context:
A Response to Bhikkhu Anālayo

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I. Introduction

Over the years, we have learned a great deal from Bhikkhu Anālayo's writings. His comparative work on the Chinese Āgama texts and the Pāli suttas has been a significant contribution to scholarship on early Buddhism. Buddhist traditions have long benefited from debate, and we are grateful to Bhikkhu Anālayo for critically engaging Rob Burbea's *Seeing That Frees: Meditations on Emptiness and Dependent Arising* (2014). There are some passages in his critique that we agree with and some that we do not find compelling. Still, we believe that we share a love and care for the Dharma that guides each of us in our lives and in this dialogue. We suspect that Bhikkhu Analayo does not want to spend his time writing critical articles but is motivated by a sense of responsibility to the Dharma. While we appreciate this motivation, in our response to Bhikkhu Anālayo, we are hoping to share some reasons why Rob Burbea's teachings on emptiness may best be seen not so much as a "wrong view," but rather as one more way among many through which practitioners might benefit. Our hope is that this dialogue can serve as a resource for practitioners exploring emptiness, helping them discern their own path of practice.

Bhikkhu Anālayo titles his critique "Emptiness Requires Contextualization" (Anālayo 2025a). As with his

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other works, his criticism is carefully argued and is followed by an impressive bibliography and notes. His primary concern is that Burbea presents a decontextualized account of emptiness that has detrimental consequences for understanding early Buddhism and conflates different Buddhist approaches as if they were a unitary path of practice. In particular, Bhikkhu Anālayo is concerned that Burbea draws on a Nāgārjunian approach to the emptiness of inherent existence and (mis)applies it, without contextualizing it, to earlier Buddhist teachings on impermanence, dependent arising, time, perception, and so on. According to Bhikkhu Anālayo, this is misleading and unnecessary. It is misleading because it leads to a false understanding of earlier Buddhist doctrine and practice. It is unnecessary first, according to Bhikkhu Anālayo, because contemporary practitioners, being already informed by quantum physics, don't believe in inherent existence anyway, so there is no need for Nāgārjunian arguments against it. And second, it is unnecessary because there is already a perfectly adequate teaching of emptiness in the early Buddhist texts. Moreover, as Bhikkhu Anālayo suggests, Burbea's account doesn't explain how arahants and buddhas could have sense perception, make decisions, and engage meaningfully with the world, and so is inconsistent with all the suttas that do describe arahants and the Buddha himself engaging in the world.

With his integration of teachings from multiple traditions, Burbea is seen by Bhikkhu Anālayo as representative of a widespread trend he attributes to Western Insight meditation teachers. He argues that this *bricolage*—bringing together diverse teachings through stories, poems, images, and doctrines from different Buddhist traditions as if they somehow constituted one unified practice—undermines the integrity and effectiveness of any one particular Buddhist path. As he makes clear in his conclusion, Bhikkhu Anālayo is not interested in dismissing "the possibility of a fruitful dialogue" between different traditions (Anālayo 2025a, 63). What is needed, he argues, and what is lacking in *Seeing That Frees*, is contextualization.

We hope it is clear that even as we will try to show why drawing on Nāgārjuna's approach to emptiness can still be relevant for contemporary practitioners, we are not arguing that it is somehow better than the early Buddhist approach to emptiness that Bhikkhu Anālayo so beautifully presents in his recent book *Abiding in Emptiness*.

We are sympathetic to Bhikkhu Anālayo's point that context is important; for this reason, we would like to provide some context for *Seeing That Frees* itself before responding more directly to his critique. We begin with some reflections about Burbea as a dharma teacher, Nāgārjuna's account of emptiness, and the role of emptiness in *Seeing That Frees*.

II. Context Matters I: Rob Burbea as Dharma Teacher

Rob Burbea (1965-2020) was a meditation teacher. He lived at Gaia House—as Bhikkhu Anālayo points out, an Insight meditation center in the UK—and devoted his life to offering teachings, supporting yogis on both individual and residential retreats.

As a teacher, Burbea applied the frameworks of practice offered by classical Buddhist traditions, while simultaneously encouraging personal interpretation and the process of *making the path one's own*. This approach invites a balance between deepening within a single form of practice and also patiently exploring other modes of practice. In this way, Burbea sought to nurture confidence in the integrity of the path and in the practitioner's own capacity to walk it, grounded in experience and in the insights drawn from that experience.

Burbea instructed practitioners in multiple Buddhist lines of practice, including mindful awareness, skills in working with emotions and mind-states, mettā and compassion, samādhi and jhāna, as well as insight and emptiness practices. The choice of which path of practice to

follow depended on the practitioner's interest, capacity, suitability, and inclination.

Mindful awareness, sensitivity to emotions, the cultivation of mettā, and some degree of samādhi formed the foundation. From this base, the path could open into explorations of emptiness practices or inquiries into deep and subtle states of samādhi. Each path of practice supported the others, creating conditions for steady deepening.

Each path of practice came with a kind of "map." It was not usually given explicitly, but revealed itself to the practitioner in the course of exploring the territory. It was not a narrow developmental track; Burbea guided with a chart of a whole landscape. Such a map included elements such as a guiding intention or question, potential difficulties that might arise, ways of relating to emotions and challenges, and expected modes of development. It also indicated how a particular path of practice connected with others—how the different approaches could "work together"—and how, through this territory, one might approach the ultimate orientation and the background philosophy of the path: dependent arising and emptiness.

Burbea's main concern was always the Dharma as it came alive in the hearts and minds of his students. For one of the authors, it was one of the great gifts of his life to practice under Burbea's guidance for many years.

Seeing That Frees: Meditations on Emptiness and Dependent Arising, as the title suggests, is an expression of his Dharma teaching. It is not intended to be read as a contribution to the intellectual history of emptiness and dependent arising in one or another classical Buddhist tradition. It is not intended as a work of scholarship that engages other academic works in the study of Nāgārjuna and his place in the history of Buddhist approaches to emptiness. It is a meditation guide.

Burbea's project in *Seeing That Frees* is thus very different from Bhikkhu Anālayo's recently published monograph that he mentions in his conclusion. As Bhikkhu Anālayo describes it, this monograph is an attempt to "relate early *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* to early Buddhist

thought. But such a dialogue," Bhikkhu Anālayo insists, "needs to be based on approaching each tradition on its own terms. Mere conflation risks misrepresenting each of the relevant traditions" (Anālayo 2025a, 63). What he is describing here, we believe, is his own characteristically careful scholarly work of tracing similarities and differences across multiple Buddhist texts and traditions. It is, in short, a contribution to scholarship in Buddhist Studies. Bhikkhu Anālayo presents and defends one model for how to engage multiple Buddhist traditions *as a scholar*. He has read all the relevant scholarship, engaging with it both in the body of the text and in the footnotes, and many future scholars working on the development of early Mahāyāna Buddhism will likely read this work. But however valuable it may be, it is not a practice guide.

By contrast, *Seeing That Frees* offers practical guidance by drawing on texts and ideas outside their original historical settings, adapting them to serve the liberation of the people actually sitting in front of the teacher. For much of Buddhist history, teachers have recontextualized teachings—selecting, reframing, and combining them—to address contemporary conditions and the specific needs of various communities. In this traditional Buddhist approach to offering guidance to practitioners, as opposed to the careful articulation of distinct philosophical doctrines, historical footnoting and rigorous academic contextualization are not the primary focus; rather, the emphasis is on pragmatic efficacy for particular practitioners living in particular contexts.

In saying this, we are not seeking to dismiss Bhikkhu Anālayo's critiques. We see value in his perspective. And we acknowledge that his work has value not only for scholars, but also for practitioners who want to appreciate the unique contributions of Buddhist traditions from diverse times and places. At the same time, we want to emphasize that his call for strict historical contextualization reflects a distinctively modern, scholarly approach—valuable in its own right, yet not the traditional norm by which Buddhist teachers have typically offered practice instructions. A teacher like Burbea primarily

offers practices and lays out a Buddhist path that is accessible and experientially relevant to contemporary practitioners, much as other Buddhist teachers have done over the past many centuries.

To say that *Seeing That Frees* is a meditation guide rather than a work of historical scholarship is to gesture towards the work as primarily focused on a contemporary Buddhist path of practice which we, and so many others who have worked with it, have found profoundly inspiring, transformative, and liberating. It is a work that has reanimated the path for many long-time Buddhist practitioners.

Before addressing Bhikkhu Anālayo's contention that Burbea's path is one that misleads practitioners away from liberation and entangles them in dukkha because of its interpretations of early Buddhist teachings, we would like to say a little bit about Nāgārjuna, emptiness, and *Seeing That Frees*.

III. Context Matters II: Nāgārjuna and Emptiness

As Bhikkhu Anālayo points out, *Seeing That Frees* is influenced by Nāgārjuna's approach to emptiness and dependent arising. Nāgārjuna (2nd century CE) is widely regarded as one of the most prominent thinkers in any Buddhist tradition. His approach to emptiness and dependent arising influenced virtually all Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions. In his *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*), he argues that if anything is dependently arisen, it lacks the essential nature that, due to language, concepts, and habit, we impute to it.

Consider a wooden chair; maybe you are sitting in one as you read these words. Conventionally, this chair exists. It has a function, shape, color, and hardness, and exists objectively. But, as Carlo Rovelli observes in *Helgoland: Making Sense of the Quantum Revolution*:

> These characteristics exist only in relation to us. The color is due to the very particular biological structures that make human vision possible and the frequencies of light that reflect off the surfaces of the chair. The bird and the bee outside the window would see a different color. (Rovelli 2021, 145)

Still, one might think that because the chair can be moved as an entity, it is an independent object. However, as Rovelli points out, it is actually a set of pieces, composed of distinct parts:

> What is it that makes this assemblage of pieces a single object, a unit? Effectively, it is little more than the role that this combination of elements plays for us. If we look for the chair in itself, independently of external relations, and especially of its relations to us, we struggle to find it. (Rovelli 2021, 146)

Rovelli's point, like Nāgārjuna's, is that even as we can speak meaningfully about chairs, upon analysis, they do not exist as we take them to exist. How we take them to exist depends on a multiplicity of conditions. There would be no wooden chair without the conditions necessary for the tree: the sun for photosynthesis; the soil with nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium; the water to spread these nutrients; the carbon dioxide in the air; the current (and passing) climate that is suitable for maple trees. (Readers may be familiar with Thich Nhat Hanh's example of the interbeing of a piece of paper, an account that can be traced back to Nāgārjuna.)

The conditions for this chair also include a culture in which we gather for convivial meals and other occasions, or in which we sit for work or play or contemplation. (If someone came from a culture without chairs, they might perceive it to be a display stand, or an altar, or some other object unknown to us. For them, it would not be a "chair.") This chair is also conditioned by human physiology, built to suit most adult humans. It is dependent on the craft of wood-working and the

woodworker who made it. According to Nāgārjuna, this dependency means that the chair doesn't exist on its own, doesn't exist *independently*. As Rovelli says, if we try to find the chair itself, "we struggle to find it."

It is tempting to take Nāgārjuna's conclusion to be that physical objects have a second-class, dependent existence while dependent arising is what exists ultimately. Nāgārjuna forestalls this misunderstanding, arguing that dependent arising is itself dependent on conditions; without the chair and its conditions (or some other phenomenon and its conditions), there would be no dependent arising.

We might think, though, that dependent arising happens in time, so time itself must exist on its own. But Nāgārjuna argues that time is dependent on the relationship between past, present, and future. For Nāgārjuna, there is no Newtonian absolute space or time; space and time are also conditioned and therefore lack the kind of inherent existence Newton attributed to them. Or, one might think that time and dependent arising are dependent on motion, but motion must exist on its own. But motion is always conditioned by at least two phenomena in relation to one another; otherwise, there is no motion. Thus, motion itself must be empty of any inherent existence.

Nāgārjuna applies this radically deconstructive logic not only to material phenomena and general ideas, but also to fundamental Buddhist doctrines such as dependent arising and the five aggregates, as well as the very notions that give meaning to the Buddhist path: dukkha, the Buddha, and nirvāṇa, among others. Nothing exists on its own. As Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel summarizes emptiness and dependent arising: "everything leans."

Nāgārjuna's denial of the substantial nature that we impute, consciously or not, is what Indian logicians characterize as a non-implicative, or non-affirming, negation. Non-implicative negations are contrasted with implicative, or affirming, negations, which implicate something other than what is negated. For example, if I claim that the string instrument I play is not a viola, I imply that I play another

string instrument. However, if I claim that I don't play the viola, I am not implying that I play any other instrument. To say that Nāgārjuna's negation of conventional substances is non-implicative, then, means that it is a negation that covers its tracks, leaving nothing behind.

As Bhikkhu Anālayo points out, for Nāgārjuna, the primary object of critique here is the notion of an essence or unchanging nature, or *svabhāva*, as this was developed by earlier Abhidharma thinkers. We do not dispute this assessment of Nāgārjuna's object of negation. But as we shall address below, we believe that one reason that Nāgārjuna's thought has been so influential up until the present day in traditional Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings, as well as with so many contemporary practitioners in the West, is that irrespective of historical contexts, language, concepts, and deeply rooted habits of perception lead humans to engage with phenomena as if they were enduring and self-existing. While Nāgārjuna's analytic contemplations on emptiness may have been aimed in part at refuting a specific Abhidharma notion, they just as importantly are intended to foster a liberating insight into the selflessness of phenomena and help the mind release its attachments. While early Buddhism may not be concerned with critiquing the notion of *svabhāva*, as Bhikkhu Anālayo notes, Nāgārjuna's project nevertheless still shares the early Buddhist goal of liberating the mind from attachment. As such, his texts can guide us through meditations that demonstrate that, because they are dependently arisen, the various objects that populate our material world, basic patterns and causal relations in the natural world, and even the foundational ideas of Buddhist doctrine are not what we typically think they are. In repeatedly contemplating the emptiness of phenomena, then, Nāgārjuna offers support for us to free ourselves from the entanglements that result in compulsion, aversion, and confusion.

Nāgārjuna declared that his project was to abandon all views; while language and concepts are necessary for realizing ultimate reality, they are, of course, also dependently arisen and therefore empty. Like the raft that is left behind upon

reaching the far shore, any concepts the mind can grasp onto are to be abandoned. Again, we believe there is much that is resonant here in Nāgārjuna's approach with the gradual entry into emptiness as described in the "Shorter Discourse on Emptiness" (Cūḷasuññata-sutta, MN 121) that is presented by Bhikkhu Anālayo in his recent book, *Abiding in Emptiness*.

As Buddhists have long recognized, the danger with contemplating emptiness is a nihilism in which ethics, the suffering of others, and the Buddhist path are no longer meaningful. To address this, Nāgārjuna emphasizes again and again that while ultimately phenomena are empty of the concepts and words with which we describe them, these words and concepts can still be true conventionally. The chair may ultimately be empty of the inherent existence of the concept of "chair," but it still exists conventionally as a chair. Similarly, impermanence, time, and walking, of course, all exist conventionally; Burbea's point, which informs some of his meditations and which we don't feel is adequately reflected in Bhikkhu Analayo's presentation, is that they do not exist *ultimately*.

IV. Context Matters III: Emptiness and *Seeing That Frees*

Readers familiar with *Seeing That Frees* know that Nāgārjuna's approach to emptiness informs Burbea's presentation of the path. However, Burbea's understanding of emptiness and the path of practice he offers leading to the perception of emptiness is distinctive.

Seeing That Frees addresses four primary goals. First, it guides the practitioner through insight practices, presented as liberating ways of looking. Second, it proposes a graduated path: each way of looking builds on the previous one and leads the heart and mind into increasingly subtle terrain—potentially, though not necessarily, to the full fading of suffering and of perception. Third, it directs attention not only to the impact of these ways of looking on suffering, but also to

the degree and density of perceptual construction. In this way, it articulates and cultivates sensitivity to the fading of perception as a central vehicle of insight. And finally, drawing on the experience of fading, the book invites an experiential understanding of a fundamental characteristic of all phenomena: their emptiness of inherent existence.

In his foreword to *Seeing That Frees*, Joseph Goldstein articulates this orientation:

> Beginning by laying the foundation of the basic teachings, [Burbea] explains how these teachings can be put into practice as 'ways of looking' that free and that gradually unfold deeper understandings, and so, in turn, more powerful ways of looking and even greater freedom. This unique conception of insight as being liberating ways of looking is fundamental to the whole approach, and it makes available profound skilful means to explore even further depths of Dharma wisdom.
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> Rob is like a scout who has gone ahead and explored the terrain, coming back to point out the implications of what we have been seeing, and then enticing us onwards. He shows how almost all of the Buddha's teachings can lead us towards understanding the fabrication, mutual interdependence, and, thus, the emptiness of all phenomena. And that it is this understanding of emptiness that frees the mind. (Goldstein 2014, ix)

Seeing That Frees is a detailed, multifaceted guide to realizing emptiness through the lens of dependent arising. Burbea's presentation of practice emphasizes shifts in perception as a primary instrument for insight. Through sensitivity to changes in perception, any Dharma practice—when approached in a particular way—can lead to an insight into the emptiness of phenomena. Every practice, like any systematic mental activity, shapes how the world and the self are experienced.

Unlike arbitrary mental activities, however, Dharma practices can shape both the world and the self in ways that reduce suffering and foster greater flexibility. Sensitivity to how world and self are fabricated—both in their form and in the density, "mass," and "weight" with which they are perceived—is precisely what makes every practice, potentially, a path leading toward the insight of emptiness.

V. Is Nāgārjuna's Approach to Emptiness Still Relevant?

Having presented some context of Burbea as first and foremost a meditation teacher who supported students on residential retreats and as individuals in their practice, introduced Nāgārjuna's approach to emptiness, and gestured toward the centrality of Nāgārjuna's thought in *Seeing That Frees*, we will now turn to explicitly address several of Bhikkhu Anālayo's critiques. We will first address Bhikkhu Anālayo's point that Nāgārjuna's arguments against *svabhāva* are no longer relevant.

As Bhikkhu Anālayo points out, Nāgārjuna's argument that to be dependently arisen means being empty of *svabhāva* arose in a particular historical context: that of abhidharma articulations of the *svabhāva* of fundamental dharmas. Bhikkhu Anālayo hence claims that "thanks to developments in quantum physics," contemporary practitioners would be unlikely to need to be disabused of the mistaken idea of *svabhāva*. Bhikkhu Anālayo then quotes Rovelli to illustrate, as we did earlier, how quantum physics, has already undermined the concept of *svabhāva*. Thus, Bhikkhu Anālayo argues, "there is hardly much room left to consider such problematizing to be indispensable for any contemporary Buddhist approach to cultivating emptiness in order to overcome attachment and clinging." Moreover, "the perspective that emerges in this way successfully demolishes the postulation of an inherent existence. It should be sufficient to prevent this theory gaining a significant following in the

contemporary setting, obviating any need to posit the identification of the absence of an inherent existence as the key element that must be counteracted in order to further insight into emptiness, at the expense of giving more room to alternative ways of relating emptiness to actual practice, such as by simply countering the tendency to cling to things as 'me' or mine'" (Anālayo 2025a, 44). Bhikkhu Anālayo deftly suggests, in this passage, that the Nāgārjunian arguments that have inspired two millennia of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought and practice are today unnecessary antidotes to *svabhāva* because contemporary practitioners don't believe in *svabhāva*, and thus we can set them aside as they have obscured the approaches to emptiness in the Pāli suttas, which "clearly advocate the emptiness of all dharmas" (Anālayo 2025a, 43).

We wish that Bhikkhu Anālayo had shared some of what Rovelli wrote in the pages following the material he quotes about quantum physics. After reviewing many philosophical frameworks that resonate with quantum physics, in a chapter titled "Without Foundation? Nāgārjuna," Rovelli writes:

> In my own attempts to make sense of quant for myself, I have wandered among the texts of philosophers in search of a conceptual basis with which to understand the strange picture of the world provided by this incredible theory. In doing so, I have found many fine suggestions and acute criticisms, but nothing wholly convincing. Until one day I came across a work that left me amazed. (Rovelli 2021, 149)

This work, of course, was Nāgārjuna's *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. Again, quoting Rovelli:

> Nāgārjuna has given us a formidable conceptual tool for thinking about the relationality of quanta: we can think of interdependence without autonomous essence entering the equation. In fact, interdependence—and

> this is the key argument made by Nāgārjuna—*requires* us to forget all about autonomous essences.
>
> The long search for the 'ultimate substance' in physics has passed through matter, molecules, atoms, fields, elementary particles…and has been shipwrecked in the relational complexity of quantum field theory and general relativity. Is it possible that a philosopher from ancient India can provide us with a conceptual tool with which to extricate ourselves? (Rovelli 2021, 154)

Bhikkhu Anālayo argues that because Nāgārjuna's approach to emptiness arose in the context of Abhidharma accounts of *svabhāva*, and because quantum theory should have already disabused us of *svabhāva*, it is not really relevant to contemporary practitioners. But Rovelli, who Bhikkhu Anālayo is quoting, seems to have a very different idea. Rovelli, for one, says plainly that among all the philosophers he has read, Nāgārjuna is the one who actually helps him make sense of quantum theory. Thinking along with Rovelli, then, quantum theory doesn't obviate Nāgārjuna's approach to emptiness; quantum theory is supported by Nāgārjuna's thought, which even introduces an ethical dimension (Rovelli 2021, 157).

At the end of the chapter, Rovelli articulates a sentiment that we could imagine Rob Burbea sharing: "For me as a human being, Nāgārjuna teaches the serenity, the lightness and the shining beauty of the world" (Rovelli 2021, 158).

Bhikkhu Anālayo says that his "intention is not to criticize engagement with these philosophical positions as an Asian Buddhist cultural practice, such as, for example, in the form of debate in Tibetan Buddhist traditions." His point, "is rather to question the relevance of attempts to internalize—through repeated reflection and meditation—the realization that 2,000 years ago Abhidharma philosophers made a 'mistake' in postulating an inherent existence, especially in a contemporary setting, where practitioners are probably more aware of the results of research in quantum physics than of

ancient Indian Abhidharma theories" (Anālayo 2025a, 45-46). We are perplexed by these lines. First, is Bhikkhu Anālayo suggesting that Nāgārjuna's philosophy is "an Asian Buddhist cultural practice" that is legitimate in the context of Tibetan Buddhist traditions but does not have something more general to say to contemporary philosophers and practitioners? Is the study of Nāgārjuna's approach to emptiness an appropriate object of study for intellectual historians or cultural anthropologists working on Tibetan Buddhist debate but not for philosophers or Buddhists who might learn something important from him? Doesn't Rovelli himself make clear that Nāgārjuna's approach to emptiness is still profoundly relevant to contemporary thinkers? Is Bhikkhu Anālayo missing something when he characterizes Nāgārjuna's contribution as "the realization that 2,000 years ago Abhidharma philosophers made a 'mistake' in postulating an inherent existence"?

Quantum physics has been around for a century now, and during this century, Nāgārjuna has been the Buddhist philosopher who has most captivated Western thinkers. Moreover, Nāgārjuna is a profoundly influential figure in Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions to this very day. For many Buddhists, ourselves included, and also non-Buddhist Western thinkers, Nāgārjuna still speaks in ways that are provocative and relevant. Again, Rovelli exemplifies this, as is evident from the passages that follow what Bhikkhu Anālayo quoted in his critique.

Quantum physics, neuroscience, or other fields may offer evocative examples and contemplations, but their very existence does little to alter the ingrained tendency to perceive things as if they exist independently of mind. If it were otherwise, these scientific findings—which point to the impersonal nature of thoughts and much else—would already have dispelled the delusion of identification.

Bhikkhu Anālayo's critique puts Burbea in good company, for it also applies to contemporary Mahāyāna practitioners. Buddhist traditions in the Himalayas and East Asia have long internalized the insights derived from Nāgārjuna's approach to emptiness as central to their

soteriological paths. Are we to conclude that all such traditions are engaging in obsolete philosophical exercises? Zen koans frequently play with the non-finding of beginnings and endings (e.g., "What was your original face before your parents were born?") and the slipperiness of temporal and ontological categories, much like Burbea's reflection on walking. These traditions have remained profoundly relevant to practitioners for centuries and continue to support liberation for contemporary meditators.

Bhikkhu Anālayo's suggestion that modern practitioners no longer believe in inherent existence because of familiarity with quantum physics and therefore meditations drawing on Nāgārjunian critiques of *svabhāva* are unnecessary overlooks the deeply embodied and emotional ways people grasp at things as real, lasting, and essential. As Burbea writes in *Seeing That Frees*, "We feel that a thing has an inherent existence – that its existence, its being, inheres in itself alone. Believing then that this real self can really gain or lose real things or experiences which have real qualities, grasping and aversion, and thus dukkha, arise inevitably" (Burbea 2014, 5). This isn't a philosophical proposition. It's a visceral felt sense, one that shapes how people suffer. In trauma healing, even when someone intellectually knows that their painful perceptions are not fixed or immutable, it is a very different thing to *feel* that fluidity in the body, and gradually, sense and loosen the inner supports that hold it in its consuming frozenness. Burbea's teachings point to this deeper, more embodied level of transformation, one that isn't merely cognitive but reaches into the physiological patterns that sustain dukkha. Seen in this light, Burbea's exploration is not a scholastic exercise but a liberative tool. It helps reveal the unfixed, conditional nature of what we ordinarily take to be solid. And in doing so, it opens the heart to a freedom that doesn't depend on rearranging external conditions, but on seeing through the very scaffolding of suffering itself.

VI. Perception and the Question of Awakened Experience

We now turn to the centrality of perception in *Seeing That Frees* and Bhikkhu Anālayo's interpretation, that the book implicitly rejects the possibility of an awakened being.

Burbea introduces the term "fading of perception" in Chapter 19 of *Seeing That Frees*. In our own teaching and with colleagues, we came to regard sensitivity to fading as a pivotal point in practice—and this chapter as the pivotal point of the book.

One step toward sensitivity to fading is noticing the spectrum of self-sense—at times gross and heavy, at others lighter and more subtle—and recognizing that its movement along this range is not random. With greater clinging and delusion, dukkha increases and the self feels heavier, denser, tighter. As clinging and delusion relax—whether through intimacy with impermanence, easing reactivity, releasing identification, or otherwise—the self feels less solid, less separate.

And it is not only the sense of self that shifts in weight, separateness, or rigidity. Burbea draws on a broad definition of perception as the sensing and experiencing of anything whatsoever. With the relaxing of clinging and *avijjā*, all perception—indeed all experience—fades. One might imagine perception as the weave of the world of experience: at times tightly woven, dense, and binding, with creases and knots where we get entangled; at other times open, smooth, and pliant. And when it loosens in this way, something wondrous may begin to shine through. The tightening of the fabric is the work of clinging and *avijjā*; its loosening, the fruit of letting go and insight. The construction and fading of perception, as it moves along a spectrum from gross to refined, are not unusual. The dynamic is evident everywhere: in irritation or anger, perception tightens and hardens; when balance returns, it softens—becoming more open and pliant.

This way of seeing expands the meaning of "clinging." It is not merely a mode of relationship with experience but part of the very weaving of perception itself—shaping the density, solidity, and separateness of self and world, and even their very appearing.

Burbea's position—relying on Mahāyāna sources, as Bhikkhu Anālayo notes—is that contact, *vedanā*, and perception are all interwoven with clinging. And this, Bhikkhu Anālayo observes, "results in rendering impossible the existence of fully liberated beings in the form recognized in mainstream Indian Buddhism, be they arahants or Buddhas" (Anālayo 2025a, 51). Before responding to Bhikkhu Anālayo's objection, we would like to put Burbea's claims in a broader historical context.

As John Dunne has written, the "tension between a buddha's transcendence and immanence—his location within both nirvāṇa and saṃsāra—prompted much debate among Buddhist philosophers" (Dunne 1996, 525). In "Thoughtless Buddha, Passionate Buddha," Dunne traces this debate in the work of two Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophers writing in the sixth-seventh century, Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti, and some of their commentators. For Dharmakīrti, because concepts apply to universals but we only perceive particulars, concepts are necessarily erroneous. Ignorance is thus a necessary characteristic of conceptuality. This leads to the question of whether a buddha actually uses concepts. In Dunne's words, Dharmakīrti "throws up his hands by equivocally remarking that a buddha's knowledge is 'inconceivable'" (Dunne 1996, 533).

Candrakīrti takes a position that may be even more radical. For Candrakīrti, the further we advance along the path, the less we take what we perceive to be real. Thus, as Dunne characterizes Candrakīrti's position, those "who are at an advanced level of understanding, do not experience anything in the world as 'real'; everything seems fabricated to them because they have realized that nothing has a real essence" (Dunne 1996, 544). Thus, these advanced practitioners do experience the world, but they recognize that

even "raw sense data" are fabrications. For a buddha, though, there is not even any raw sense data: "at the highest state of understanding where one's knowledge is completely non-conceptual, nothing appears at all" (Dunne 1996, 544).

Because language and conceptuality are understood to be mistaken, to speak would be to participate in ignorance. As Mario D'Amato shows in "Why the Buddha Never Uttered a Word," some Mahāyāna sūtras claim that the Buddha did not use language. While most Buddhist thinkers would not accept a buddha being ignorant, some others maintained that in order to teach and engage in the world, a buddha would consciously take on some ignorance. Ratnākaraśānti, the great 11th century Indian Buddhist philosopher, who was known as the "Omniscient One of the Degenerate Age," argues that "a buddha retains cognitive error (*bhrānti*)" in order to speak and lead others to liberation (Seton 2023, 587).

We are not introducing Dharmakīrti, Candrakīrti, and Ratnākaraśānti into this article in order to argue that, in fact, awakened buddhas do not have perception or use concepts. Rather, we are bringing them in and considering other classical Buddhist figures, as well as contemporary scholars, because their work might prompt us to ponder the question of how a fully awakened being perceives, thinks, feels, and acts. Bhikkhu Anālayo doesn't find this to be particularly perplexing; awakened beings simply perceive, think, feel, and act without attachment and clinging. Maybe it is that simple. And, if our perception, thinking, feeling, and acting are conditioned by language, culture, history, biology, and psychology, we wonder what that means for the conditioned perception of awakened beings.

Bringing these classical figures into the conversation is also helpful because they are some of the most prominent Buddhist thinkers in the history of the tradition, committed to the idea that there are fully awakened beings whose experience is vastly different from ours. Perhaps it is a mistake for us to discuss these figures, as it may confuse or distract readers from Burbea's understanding. Perhaps a simpler response would have been to say that when Burbea talks about clinging being

part of contact, perception, and *vedanā*, he is referring solely to ordinary experience. His intention is to help meditators see how clinging fabricates experience and how insight into this dynamic can bring freedom.

Bhikkhu Anālayo's understanding that a fully awakened being can perceive, act, feel, and think just without clinging has the virtue of simplicity. It is also a widely held view justified by some classical Buddhist texts, though not by others. There is room for different views within the tradition and no one, authentic orthodoxy. Burbea regarded awakening as a field of deep interest and open-ended inquiry. The image of awakening is therefore encouraged to evolve in dialogue with one's sense of what practice makes possible, rooted in tradition, and in relationship with one's own aspiration. He presented *Seeing That Frees* as itself a path of awakening, beginning with the realization of the emptiness of all phenomena. That realization becomes increasingly nuanced, pointing also to the emptiness of the aggregates—including awareness in all its forms. The inquiry extends to time and the passing of time, and gradually to the emptiness of fading and fabrication, and even of the unfabricated itself. Through intimacy with both fabrication and the unfabricated, a non-duality between them opens. In this light, the main aspect of awakening is equivalent to knowing and seeing precisely this.

Burbea drew on certain Mahāyāna texts that depict the Buddha's awareness as simultaneously knowing appearances and their emptiness perfectly. When it becomes possible to reflect on the emptiness of appearances, of knowing, and of delusion—and inseparably, of fabrication and fading—one may then hold a vision of all things as empty manifestations. Such practice offers a glimpse into how an awakened being might intuitively experience and perceive. Practices that transform perception of the experiential world—where things still appear, yet are consciously composed in forms different from their ordinary appearance—support such a dwelling: a dwelling with manifest appearances, yet known as empty.

One way to think of Burbea's understanding of clinging and perception is as an invitation to go deeper: as long

as one perceives, one can let go more, leading to further unbinding. At the same time, when what is needed is to point to the possibility of seeing emptiness itself—and the emptiness of that very seeing—in a way that inspires practice, there is a possibility of seeing and sensing that is ultimately free, in which both of these insights are held together without compromising either. Here, Burbea is deeply resonant with much Tibetan Buddhist thought on perception and emptiness.

VII. A Wholesome, Nourishing Meal

Bhikkhu Anālayo presents several other critiques of *Seeing That Frees*. We do not have the space or time to respond to all of them. We hope it is clear from our discussion of Rovelli, quantum theory, and Nāgārjuna's approach to emptiness that despite the historical context of Nāgārjuna's arguments against *svabhāva*, there are other stories to tell, other ways of engaging Nāgārjuna that can help us understand why his work continues to be fruitful and relevant for Buddhist traditions and beyond. Similarly, even as we welcome Bhikkhu Anālayo's observation that Burbea's account problematizes the perception, feeling, and action of awakened beings, we hope that our very brief discussion of classical Buddhist figures whose writings influenced 1,500 years of Buddhist tradition and Burbea's own dynamic approach to awakening may at least raise some questions for readers that might lead to new inquiry and exploration, and perhaps they will pause and consider before dismissing Burbea's account.

We hope that careful readers of Bhikkhu Anālayo's critique and our response will be motivated to discern for themselves what will invite deeper exploration and what may not be so helpful for them. The critiques we found least helpful were those that addressed relatively minor issues or seemed to be based on a misunderstanding of the context in the book. For example, in his discussion of Burbea's analytic contemplation of walking, Bhikkhu Anālayo suggests that a process

metaphysics can provide a better philosophical account of walking than a Nāgārjunian analysis. This may very well be true. However, it is not particularly helpful for us because, as we read that passage, Burbea is not attempting to provide the best philosophical interpretation of walking. Rather, he is offering a meditation practice in the hope of inviting the practitioner into a deeper, embodied insight into emptiness.

We do feel it is important to address Bhikkhu Anālayo's objection to syncretic Dharma teachings. We can draw a distinction between two kinds of syncretic teaching. On the one hand, there is what one might call an undiscerning syncretism or perhaps a perennialism. "Underlying this syncretistic way of teaching Dharma," Bhikkhu Anālayo writes, "appears to be the belief that anything said on a particular topic like emptiness, independent of where, when, and by whom, must in the final count be reflecting the same basic perspective, just expressed in different ways. That is, in principle differences can only be in letter and never in spirit" (Anālayo 2025a, 41). This is indeed a mistake. Such an approach would be misleading. But is this what Burbea is doing? Consider, for example, this comment from his chapter on "Notions of the Ultimate":

> Working with such teachings and texts, it is helpful to know that words such as 'ultimate' and even 'emptiness' may be used in different ways at different times. Sometimes the ultimate truth of things is declared to be their emptiness of inherent existence. But at other times the ultimate is declared to be beyond all assertions and conceptual designations, *including* emptiness. Moreover, since, as we have just seen, a full understanding of the implications of emptiness eventually leads to a transcending of all concepts and ascriptions, at still other times that very word 'emptiness' is used too, as Nāgārjuna used it above, to mean a 'relinquishment of all views'.

> Of course all this inconsistency of terminology can be confusing. It is crucial therefore to consider in context any such passage which declares the need for a transcending of, or surrendering of, the view of emptiness. (Burbea 2014, 406-07)

Here Burbea is explicitly distinguishing different views on emptiness (as opposed to Bhikkhu Anālayo's contention that diverse views are being read as "saying the same thing"). Moreover, Burbea is arguing that in interpreting these different views we need to consider their context.

While he doesn't make this distinction explicitly, and may not believe there actually is a distinction, there seems to be another form of syncretism to which Bhikkhu Anālayo objects. This is a hybrid approach, one that draws on multiple traditions to create something new. Burbea does draw on a variety of sources—early Buddhist texts, Indian Mahāyāna, as well as some Tibetan and East Asian figures—to construct a contemporary Buddhist path of practice. Bhikkhu Anālayo compares this to:

> Walking through a supermarket and picking up one item from this shelf and another item from another shelf in order to make a meal. It does not matter under what conditions and in what country the individual item was produced as long as the combination of the different items results in a tasty meal. (Anālayo 2025a, 41)

But this is an analogy, not a critique.

We are not sure we fully understand this analogy. Today, many of us consider ethical issues when shopping, such as the environmental consequences of contemporary avocado farming in Mexico, labor conditions, and economic and trade implications. However, we doubt that Bhikkhu Anālayo was thinking about the labor or environmental conditions under which classical Buddhist figures worked. Rather, he seems to

be objecting to mixing and matching ingredients from different places to create "a tasty meal."

What might such a meal look like? Perhaps it would include appetizers such as Indian-spiced hummus or edamame and corn salsa, followed by sweet potato and chickpea tagine tacos with cinnamon-sugar fried plantains, or kimchi corn fritters, or paella spring rolls. We are not sure what the problem would be with such a tasty meal and Bhikkhu Anālayo doesn't say. But the more important point is that even though much of what we eat may not appear as obviously fusion, it is already a cultural hybrid. Consider Indian dishes like Aloo Gobi, which is made with potatoes and cauliflower, or the various Indian foods that use tomatoes or chili peppers. Potato, cauliflower, tomato, and chili pepper all came to India from South America. Italian pasta with tomato sauce? A hybrid of the East Asian noodle and the Andean tomato. Our point is that the closer we look, the more hybridity we see in our food. The teaching of dependent arising tells us that there are a multiplicity of causes and conditions and every cultural artifact is itself a hybrid. And thus, it is also true of Buddhism, itself always a hybrid, which can help us understand the great diversity and heterogeneity of Buddhist traditions.

There are some Buddhist texts that lay out a path, for example, Śāntideva's *Training Anthology* (*Śikṣā-sammucaya*) or Tsong-kha-pa's *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (*Lam Rim Chen Mo*), which explicitly quote and draw from multiple Buddhist schools. But more generally, it is this hybridity that has given us the great unfolding of Buddhist traditions over the last two and a half millennia. Bhikkhu Anālayo seems to acknowledge this when he recognizes the ahistorical framing of S. N. Goenka's teachings as the contemporary embodiment of the Buddha's teachings, passed from teacher to student and maintained in their "pristine purity" (Anālayo 2025a, 40). Scholars believe that some teachings and some texts in the Pāli Canon had a source other than the Buddha. Even the Buddha drew on available resources; not all the practices and doctrines that he taught were original to him.

One of the reasons for this hybridity is precisely that Dharma teachers, like everyone else, are always trying to speak to the contemporary context. They draw on available cultural resources. Not to do so would lead to the desiccation and irrelevance, and ultimately, the end of any tradition.

VIII. Conclusion: Contextualizing Bhikkhu Anālayo and Rob Burbea

In "Emptiness Requires Contextualization," Bhikkhu Anālayo argues that teachings such as *Seeing That Frees* must be rigorously contextualized within their historical and doctrinal settings. In doing so, he is participating in a distinctively modern development in Buddhism: the academic and historically critical approach to Buddhist thought. This is not to say that classical Buddhist traditions didn't provide historical contexts. They did. And, often, they were hagiographies and stories that legitimized one particular teaching or another. Consider the context given for some Mahāyāna sūtras, that they were delivered by the Buddha at Vulture Peak. Such stories appear in Buddhist traditions across cultures consistently engaged in reinterpreting, synthesizing, and adapting doctrinal frameworks in creative and often—from the perspective of contemporary disciplinary standards and methods—nonhistorical ways. Asian Buddhist traditions creatively recontextualized teachings to meet the needs of their time.

In Bhikkhu Anālayo's 2021 book, *Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions*, he argues against superiority claims made by various Buddhists (for example, that Theravāda is the original teaching or Mahāyāna is the higher teaching). We wonder, though, if Bhikkhu Anālayo is saying that a Buddhism that is informed by a historical-critical method might indeed be superior to one that is not. We cannot help wondering if the context of Bhikkhu Anālayo's academic training, with its cultivation of a modern scholarly sensibility, might involve setting aside elements that have been significant for Asian

Buddhist traditions. For example, does the elevation of a historical-critical method that prioritizes doctrinal coherence and chronological fidelity come at the expense of the interpretive flexibility, mythopoetic imagination, and devotional pragmatism that have historically characterized Buddhist transmission? In criticizing Burbea for insufficient contextualization, does Bhikkhu Anālayo participate in a form of modernism that filters Buddhist legitimacy through academic historicism, a lens foreign to much of Buddhism's own adaptive evolution?

We ask these questions with caution. First, we have such great respect for Bhikkhu Anālayo as a remarkable meditator and teacher, as well as a Ph.D. trained in contemporary scholarly methods, who has produced so much important research. We also have enjoyed our time with him at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. And perhaps most importantly, we do not want to suggest that anyone can come along and claim that anything they want is a legitimate Buddhist teaching. We believe there is an important place for the kinds of critical questions that Bhikkhu Anālayo is raising in response to Burbea and in some of his other publications.

At the same time, we wonder about Bhikkhu Anālayo's emphasis on contextualization. One might ask a similar question about how the suttas approach saṃsāra. Most contemporary, convert Insight/Theravāda teachers do not emphasize karma and rebirth, which are significant contexts for early Buddhist practice. One might ask whether Theravāda Buddhism even makes sense without the context of liberation from rebirth, becoming a stream-enterer, a once-returner, a non-returner, and then attaining full liberation. But many contemporary practitioners are not motivated by a desire to be free from rebirth even as Buddhism is still deeply meaningful in their lives.

Burbea understood "contextualizing the teaching" as not only referring to the historical circumstances in which words were first spoken. He takes it to be also about the living context in which teachings are offered, received, and practiced in the present. Burbea–like anyone informed by Buddhist

teachings of the principle of conditionality, twentieth-century critical theory, or hermeneutics–knows that turning to tradition always and inevitably involves participation, and this participation can itself be a profound expression of respect.

Seeing That Frees was never intended as a historical or doctrinal treatise. Burbea is not interested in giving an account of "Buddhist thought in general," or the best philosophical account of walking, or time, or the tetralemma. Instead, *Seeing That Frees* offers a meditative pragmatics, a flexible, experiential framework for deconstructing reified perceptions that sustain dukkha. For many practitioners, this work has proven liberating. That it does so without always providing scholarly contextualization does not mean that it leads practitioners astray.

It is unlikely that any single lens–historical, textual, philosophical, or practice lineage–can universally define what liberates. This would indeed be a "superiority conceit." The implication that a "correct" understanding due to historical contextualization offers a more authentic or effective path risks narrowing the richness and diversity of the Dharma. Different approaches resonate with different practitioners. What matters most is whether a teaching, grounded in tradition, opens the heart and decreases or eradicates suffering.

Bhikkhu Anālayo has often modeled a beautiful practice of interreligious and intrareligious, mutually appreciative dialogue. His scholarship is, without doubt, a treasure—careful, illuminating, and deeply rooted in a sincere love for the Dharma. Bhikkhu Anālayo clearly believes that it is his responsibility to employ the treasure of all his learning to function as a gatekeeper of legitimate Buddhist teaching and practice, as he does in "Emptiness Requires Contextualization." We respect his sense of responsibility. We also believe there is room for multiple approaches to Buddhist Studies and to Buddhist practice, and there are many Buddhist lineages and ways of touching emptiness, including the teachings of Bhikkhu Anālayo. Rather than see these as competing–or even as mutually exclusive–perhaps we can understand them as complementary, each offering

nourishment to different hearts, each helping to turn the wheel of the Dharma a little further in this suffering world. "In the end," as Bhikkhu Anālayo himself has written: "any meditation technique or practice is best viewed as a raft, which has only an instrumental purpose in leading onward on the path to freedom" (Anālayo 2021b, 132).

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