

Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*)

Chapter 24: Examination of the Four Noble Truths

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Nāgārjuna (c. second century C.E.) is the founder of the Madhyamaka or Middle Way School of Buddhist philosophy and, with the exception of the historical Buddha himself, is the most influential philosopher in the Mahāyāna tradition. He probably lived in the lower Krishna River valley in the present state of Andhra Pradesh in India.¹ In his treatises on metaphysics and epistemology *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Fundamental verses on the Middle Way), *Yuktiśaṣṭika* (Sixty verses of reasoning), *Śūnyatāsaptati* (Seventy verses on emptiness), *Vidalyasūtra* (Devastating discourse), and *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (Reply to objections), he develops the argument that all phenomena are empty of essence, but exist conventionally, interdependently, and impermanently.

That all phenomena are dependently originated is the heart of Buddhist ontological theory. In the Mahāyāna tradition, this dependency is spelled out in three ways: all phenomena are dependent for their existence on complex networks of causes and conditions; a dollar bill, for instance, is dependent on the printing press that printed it, the miners who extracted the ore out of which the metal for the press was smelted, the trees that were pulped for the paper, the United States Treasury, and so on. All wholes are dependent on their parts, and parts on the wholes they help to make up. The dollar bill depends for its existence on the particles of paper and ink that constitute it but also, for its existence as a dollar bill, on the entire economic system in

1. See Walser 2005 for biographical speculation.

which it figures. Finally, all phenomena are dependent for their identities on conceptual imputation. The dollar bill is only a dollar bill, as opposed to a bookmark, because the United States Treasury so designates it. To exist, according to Buddhist metaphysics, simply is to exist dependently in these senses, and hence to be merely conventionally existent.

To exist dependently is, importantly, to be empty of essence. For a Mādhyamika, like Nāgārjuna, this emptiness of essence is the final mode of existence of any phenomenon, its ultimate truth. For to have an essence is to exist independently, to have one's identity and to exist not in virtue of extrinsic relations, but simply in virtue of intrinsic properties. Because all phenomena are interdependent, all are empty in this sense. Just as the conventional truth about phenomena is made up by their interdependence, their ultimate truth is their emptiness. These are the two truths that Nāgārjuna adumbrates throughout his corpus.

It follows immediately that the emptiness of all phenomena that Nāgārjuna defends is not *nonexistence*: to be empty of essence is not to be empty of existence. Instead, to exist is to be empty. It also follows that emptiness is not a deeper truth hidden behind a veil of illusion. The emptiness of any phenomenon is dependent on the existence of that phenomenon, and on its dependence, which is that in which its essencelessness consists. Emptiness is itself dependent, and hence empty. This doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness, and of the identity of interdependence, or conventional truth, and emptiness, or ultimate truth, is Nāgārjuna's deepest philosophical achievement. The two truths are different from one another in that the ultimate is the object of enlightened knowledge and is liberating, while the conventional is apprehended by ordinary people through mundane cognitive processes. Nonetheless, they are in a deep sense identical. To be empty of essence is simply to exist only conventionally. The conditions of conventional existence are interdependence and impermanence, which, as we have seen, for Nāgārjuna, entail essencelessness.

This understanding of the two truths is, in turn, deeply connected to Nāgārjuna's doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness. This doctrine allows him to defend his account of the emptiness of all phenomena from the charge of nihilism—of denying that anything at all actually exists—frequently leveled, both in ancient India and in modern Western commentaries, against Madhyamaka.²

It might appear that the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality is tantamount to the distinction between appearance and reality, and that Nāgārjuna holds that the conventional truth is merely illusion, in virtue of being empty, while the ultimate truth—emptiness—is what is real. But Nāgārjuna argues that emptiness is also empty, that it is essenceless, and exists only conventionally as well. The conventional truth is hence no less real than the ultimate, the ultimate no more real than the conventional.

2. See Wood 1994 for a contemporary nihilistic reading.

Nāgārjuna hence strives to develop a middle path between a realism that takes real phenomena to be ultimately existent in virtue of being actual, and a nihilism that takes all phenomena to be nonexistent in virtue of being empty. Instead, he argues that reality and emptiness are coextensive, and that the only coherent mode of existence is conventional existence.

Nāgārjuna's principal treatise, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, a chapter of which we present here, is the subject of numerous Indian and Tibetan commentaries, which differ among themselves regarding interpretative details. The principal Indian commentaries are composed by Buddhapālita (third century), Bhāvaviveka (fifth century), and Candrakīrti (sixth century). Among Tibetan commentaries, the most extensive is that by Tsongkhapa (fourteenth to fifteenth centuries), *Ocean of Reasoning*. Tsongkhapa follows Candrakīrti closely, but also attends to Buddhapālita, Bhāvaviveka, Avalokitavrata, and other Indian and Tibetan literature relevant to Nāgārjuna's text.

The interpretative disagreement that finds Buddhapālita and Candrakīrti on one side and Bhāvaviveka on the other is thematized in Tibetan doxographic literature as the distinction between *thal gyur pa* (translated into Sanskrit by Western commentators as *prāsaṅgika*), or reductio-wielders, and *rang rgyud pa* (translated into Sanskrit by Western commentators as *svātantrika*), or defenders of one's own position.

The principal disagreement between these two readings of Nāgārjuna's method concerns his dialectical method. Buddhapālita and Candrakīrti read him as relying exclusively on reductio arguments, refuting his opponents' positions on their own terms, but without developing any independent arguments for any ontological position of his own, in virtue of his eschewal of the project of providing an account of the fundamental nature of reality, on the grounds that there is no such nature. Bhāvaviveka and his followers, such as Avalokitavrata and Śāntaraṅgita, argue on the other hand that Nāgārjuna does, at least implicitly, advance independent arguments for a substantive thesis regarding the nature of ultimate reality, namely, its emptiness.³

Nāgārjuna is a master dialectician, who often responds to an opponent who levels a reductio argument against Nāgārjuna that not only is he himself not committed to the absurd conclusion the opponent foists on him, but that the opponent himself is committed to that very conclusion, thus turning a reductio aimed at his own position into one aimed at his opponent. Chapter 24 of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* presents a particularly dramatic instance of this rhetorical strategy. This chapter appears late in the text, and represents the climax of an extended analysis of reality in terms of emptiness. Though its nominal topic is the status of the four noble truths, the doctrinal foundation of all of Buddhism, in fact it is about emptiness itself and the relationship between the two truths.

In this chapter, Nāgārjuna imagines an opponent charging him with nihilism and with contradicting all of Buddhist doctrine in virtue of arguing that

3. For more detail on this debate, see McClintock and Dreyfus 2002.

all things are empty. In reply, Nāgārjuna argues that one can only understand Buddhist doctrine and reality in terms of emptiness, and that it is the opponent who denies emptiness who is in fact a nihilist and a heretic.

The chapter divides roughly into six major sections. Verses 1–6 represent the opponent's attack, and level the charges of heresy and nihilism. The opponent argues that Nāgārjuna, in asserting that all things are empty, denies the reality of suffering, its causes, its cessation, and the path, and hence of all that is important to Buddhism, and all that is real. Verses 7–15 castigate the opponent for misunderstanding Nāgārjuna's view. Nāgārjuna asserts the doctrine of the two truths and indicates that by understanding their relation to one another the nihilist reading of emptiness can be avoided, but that a failure to do so entails nihilism. In a memorable metaphor, he charges the opponent with adopting the very nihilist position with which he charges Nāgārjuna.

Verses 16–19, the heart of the chapter, argue that emptiness and dependent arising (ultimate and conventional truth) are identical, and that all conventional existents are empty. Pay special attention to 18, in which Nāgārjuna equates emptiness and dependent arising and asserts that each is conventionally existent, as is the relation between them. Verses 20–35 demonstrate that Buddhist doctrine can only be understood in the context of emptiness. Nāgārjuna goes through each of the four truths, the three Buddhist refuge objects (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) and the goal of the attainment of Buddhahood, showing that each presupposes emptiness for its cogency. Verses 36–39 demonstrate that emptiness is the only coherent ontology on general consideration, and verse 40 reconnects the entire analysis to the four noble truths.⁴

Translation

1. If all this is empty,
There would be neither arising nor ceasing,
And for you, it follows that
The Four Noble Truths do not exist.
2. If the Four Noble Truths did not exist,
Then understanding, abandonment,

4. There are several English translations of the entire *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*: Streng 1967; Inada 1970, Kalupahana 1986, Garfield 1995, Batchelor 2000. A partial translation of Candrakīrti's commentary, *Prasannapadā*, is available in English (Sprung 1979), and a complete translation of Tsongkhapa's commentary (*Ocean of Reasoning*) is available (Tsongkhapa 2006). The following translation originally appeared in Garfield, 1995. We gratefully acknowledge permission to republish this work.

- Meditation and realization
Would not be tenable.
3. If these things did not exist,
The four fruits would not exist.
Without the four fruits, there would be no attainers of the fruits,
Nor would there be practitioners of the path.
 4. If so, without the eight kinds of person,
There would be no sangha.
If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,
There can be no exalted Dharma.
 5. If there is no Dharma and sangha,
How can there be a buddha?
If emptiness is conceived in this way,
The existence of the three jewels is undermined.
 6. Hence you undermine the existence of the fruits;
As well as the profane;
The Dharma itself;
And all mundane conventions.
 7. Here we say that you do not understand
Emptiness, or the purpose of emptiness,
Or the meaning of emptiness.
As a consequence you are harmed by it.
 8. The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
Is based on two truths:
A truth of worldly convention
And an ultimate truth.
 9. Those who do not understand
The distinction between these two truths
Do not understand
The Buddha's profound teaching.
 10. Without depending on the conventional truth
The meaning of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the meaning of the ultimate,
Nirvana is not achieved.
 11. By a misperception of emptiness
A person of little intelligence is destroyed.
Like a snake incorrectly seized
Or like a spell incorrectly cast.
 12. Knowing that the Dharma is
Deep and difficult for simpletons to understand,
The Buddha's mind despaired of
Being able to teach it.

13. Since the absurd consequences you adduce
Are not relevant to emptiness,
Your rejection of emptiness
Is not relevant to me.
14. For him to whom emptiness makes sense,
Everything makes sense.
For him to whom emptiness does not make sense,
Nothing becomes sense.
15. When you foist on us
All of your errors,
You are like a man who has mounted his horse
And has forgotten that very horse.
16. If you regard all things
As existing in virtue of their essence,
Then you will regard all things
As being without causes and conditions.
17. Effects and causes;
And agent, instrument, and action;
And arising and ceasing;
And the effects will be undermined.
18. That which is dependent origination
Is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.
19. There does not exist anything
That is not dependently arisen.
Therefore there does not exist anything
That is not empty.
20. If all this were nonempty, as in your view,
Then there would be no arising and ceasing.
It would follow that the Four Noble Truths
Would not exist.
21. If it is not dependently arisen,
How could suffering come to be?
Suffering has been taught to be impermanent,
And so cannot exist through its essence.
22. If something exists through its essence,
How could it ever be arisen?
It follows that for one who denies emptiness
There could be no sources of suffering.
23. If suffering existed essentially,
Its cessation would not exist.

- So if one takes it to exist essentially,
One denies cessation.
24. If the path had an essence,
Practice would not be tenable.
If this path is to be practiced,
It cannot have an essence.
25. If suffering, arising and
Ceasing are nonexistent,
By what path could one seek
To obtain the cessation of suffering?
26. If it is not understood
Through its essence,
How could it come to be understood?
Doesn't essence endure?
27. In the same way, the complete understanding of
The activities of relinquishing, realizing,
Meditating and the four fruits
Would not make sense.
28. For an essentialist,
How could it be possible
To attain those fruits
That are already essentially unattained?
29. Without the fruits, there would be no
Attainers of the fruits or practitioners.
If the eight kinds of person did not exist,
There would be no sangha.
30. If the Noble Truths did not exist
The noble Dharma would not exist.
If there were neither Dharma nor sangha,
How could a buddha come to exist?
31. For you, it would follow absurdly that a Buddha
Would be independent of enlightenment.
And for you, it would follow absurdly that
Enlightenment would be independent of a buddha.
32. For you, one who is
Essentially unenlightened,
Even by practicing the path to enlightenment
Could not achieve enlightenment.
33. Nobody could ever perform
Virtuous or non-virtuous actions.
If all this were nonempty, what could one do?
What can one with an essence do?

34. For you, even without virtuous or non-virtuous causes
There would be an effect.
According to you there is no effect
Arising from virtuous or non-virtuous causes.
35. If for you, an effect arose
From virtuous or non-virtuous causes,
Then, having arisen from virtuous or non-virtuous causes,
How could that effect be nonempty?
36. Those who deny emptiness,
Which is dependent origination,
Undermine all of
The mundane conventions.
37. To deny emptiness is to assert that
No action would be possible;
That there can be action without effort;
And that there can be an agent without action.
38. If there were essence, all beings
Would be birthless, deathless,
And eternally enduring.
They would be void of a variety of states.
39. If they were nonempty,
Then there would be neither achievement of that which has not been
achieved;
Nor the act of ending suffering;
Nor the abandonment of all of the afflictions.
40. Whoever sees dependent arising
Also sees suffering
And its arising
And its cessation, as well as the path.

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