

Nāgārjuna: The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way

What is the emptiness of emptiness
and how does it relate to practice?

Kaccayanagotta Sutta (Right View): Neither existence nor non-existence

“When one sees the origination of the world as it actually is with right discernment, ‘non-existence’ with reference to the world does not occur to one.

When one sees the cessation of the world as it actually is with right discernment, ‘existence’ with reference to the world does not occur to one.”

Right view liberates us from “attachments, clingings, fixations of awareness, biases, or obsessions.”

Introduction to Nāgārjuna

Nāgārjuna as the founder of a Buddhist school?
“orthopraxis” not “orthodoxy”

Nāgārjuna’s terse and cryptic verses have led to a great multiplicity of interpretations; it requires a commentary.

Nāgārjuna’s rejection of views as a liberating insight for much Buddhism in India, China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, and the West.

Nāgārjuna's tetralemma

Chapter I, verse 1 (I.1):

- 1: “neither from itself
- 2: nor from another
- 3: nor from both
- 4: nor without cause

does anything whatsoever arise.”

Things obviously arise, but at the conventional level, not ultimately.

The tetralemma is the conclusion to the argument Nāgārjuna will present, that everything is dependent on conditions (dependent origination) and thus lacks essence. Things clearly arise, but only conventionally, not ultimately; without this rejection of ultimate, essential, inherent existence there would be no change, and no dependent origination.

We might think that while physical objects may be dependently originated, change itself, or impermanence, or suffering, or the Buddha, or other basic Buddhist ideas, exist ultimately.

Nāgārjuna's *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* is largely devoted to showing how even the most basic Buddhist ideas are not ultimately real and to cling to them is the lacking of right view.

motion/change depends on a mover and thus cannot be an independent entity (ch. II);

vision/sensation depends on organ, external objects, sensing (ch. III);

the agent of perception, the doctrine of Not-Self (ch. IV);

elements need characteristics (ch. V);

Dependent origination has different phases of arising, stasis, and ceasing (ch. VII);

Suffering—the individual is dependently originated and cannot be absolutely distinguished from her suffering (ch. XII); if suffering were ultimately real we could not be liberated from it.

“If you see the Buddha
on the road, kill him”

“‘Empty’ should not be asserted.
‘nonempty’ should not be asserted.
Neither both nor neither should be asserted.
They are only used nominally.” XXII.11

“Those who develop mental fabrications with
regard to the Buddha,
who has gone beyond all fabrications,
as a consequence of those cognitive fabrications,
fail to see the tathāgata.” XXII.15

Emptiness, Dependent Origination, and the Two Truths

The central ideas here of emptiness, dependent origination, and the distinction between conventional and ultimate truth are inextricable.

Emptiness of mentally imputed essence is itself dependently originated and thus empty of inherent existence. This is the liberating doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness.

Emptiness, dependent origination, and the two truths

“For him to whom emptiness is clear, everything becomes clear. for him to whom emptiness is not clear, nothing becomes clear.”

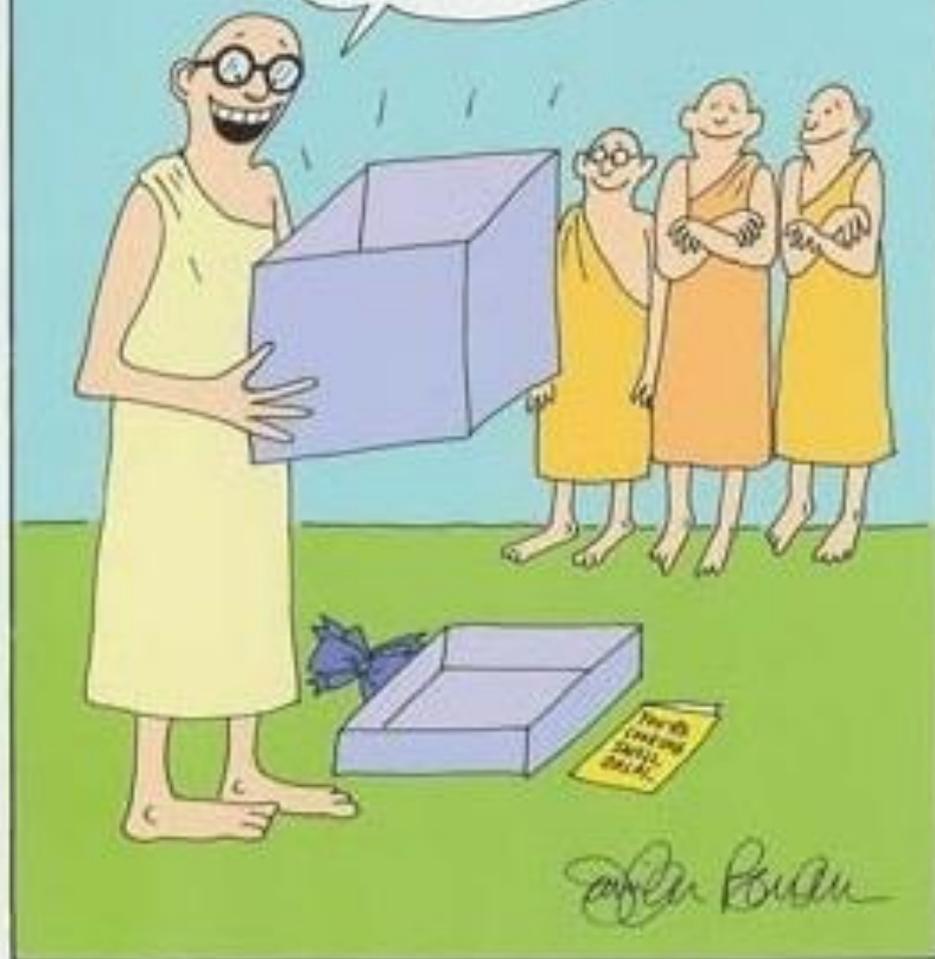
XXIV.14

“Whatever is dependently co-arisen that is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the middle way.”

XXIV.18

DALAI LAMA'S BIRTHDAY PARTY

WOW, NOTHING!
JUST WHAT I
ALWAYS WANTED!



The Emptiness of Morality and the Path?

If, as Nāgārjuna claims, there is ultimately no liberation (ch. XVI) what does that mean for action (*karma*) and its fruit (*karmaphala*), that is, where does this leave morality? Are there any positive consequences for compassionate actions?

For Nāgārjuna, without a proper understanding of the emptiness of action and its fruits, action and its fruits would be regarded as independent and not intertwined with the person and morality would be lost.

Nāgārjuna believes only his view saves the importance of the three trainings of morality, meditation, and right view.

The Relinquishing of all Views

“The victorious ones have said
That emptiness is the relinquishing of all views.
For whomever emptiness is a view,
That one will accomplish nothing.”

A proper understanding of emptiness allows us to understand how we can move toward liberation and frees us from mental attachments.

A Liberating Insight? This very world is also Nirvāṇa

No inherent distinction between
nirvāṇa and saṃsāra:

“When you can’t bring about nirvāṇa,
nor the purification of cyclic existence,
what is cyclic existence,
and what is the nirvāṇa you examine?”

XVI.10