

Nāgārjuna's

Mūlamādhyamaka-kārikā

Stanzas on the Middle Path

Chapter XXIV
Examination of the Four Noble Truths

1. If all of this is empty,
Neither arising nor ceasing,
Then for you, it follows that
The Four Noble Truths do not exist.
2. If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,
Then Knowledge, abandonment,
Meditation and manifestation
Will be completely impossible.
3. If these things do not exist,
The four fruits will not arise.
Without the four fruits, there will be no attainers of
the fruits.
Nor will there be the faithful.
4. If so, the spiritual community will not exist.
Nor will the eight kinds of person.
If the Four Noble truths do not exist,
There will be no true Dharma.
5. If there is no doctrine and spiritual community,
How can there be a Buddha?
If emptiness is conceived in this way,
The three jewels are contradicted.
6. Hence you assert that there are no real fruits.
And no Dharma. The Dharma itself
And the conventional truth
Will be contradicted.
7. We say that this understanding of yours
Of emptiness and the purpose of emptiness
And of the significance of emptiness is incorrect.
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 drawn between these two truths
Do not understand
The Buddha's profound truth.
10. Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the significance of the
ultimate,
Liberation 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. For that reason—that the Dharma is
Deep and difficult to understand and to learn—
The Buddha's mind despaired of
Being able to teach it.



Nāgārjuna and others, Tibetan Painting

- 13 You have presented fallacious refutations
That are not relevant to emptiness.
Your confusion about emptiness
Does not belong to me.
- 14 For him to whom emptiness is clear,
Everything becomes clear.
For him to whom emptiness is not clear,
Nothing becomes clear.
- 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 perceive the existence of all things
In terms of their essence,
Then this perception of all things
Will be without the perception of causes and
conditions.
- 17 Effects and causes
And agent and action
And conditions and arising and ceasing
And effects will be rendered impossible.
- 18 Whatever is dependently arisen
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.
- 19 Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist.
Therefore a nonempty thing
Does not exist.
- 20 If all this were nonempty, as in your view,
There would be no arising and ceasing.
Then the Four Noble Truths
Would become nonexistent.
- 21 If it is not dependently arisen,
How could suffering come to be?
Suffering has been taught to be impermanent,
And so cannot come from its own essence.
- 22 If something comes from its own essence,
How could it ever be arisen?
It follows that if one denies emptiness
There can be no arising (of suffering).
- 23 If suffering had an essence,
Its cessation would not exist.
So if an essence is posited,
One denies cessation.
- 24 If the path had an essence,
Cultivation would not be appropriate.
If this path is indeed cultivated,
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 non understanding comes to be
Through its essence,
How will understanding arise?
Isn't essence stable?
- 27 In the same way, the activities of
Relinquishing, realizing, and meditating
And the four fruits
Would not be possible.
- 28 For an essentialist,
Since the fruits through their essence
Are already unrealized,
In what way could one attain them?
- 29 Without the fruits,
there are no attainers of the fruits, or enterers.
From this it follows that
The eight kinds of persons do not exist.
If these don't exist, there is no spiritual community.
- 30 From the nonexistence of the Noble Truths
Would follow the nonexistence of the true doctrine.
If there is no doctrine and no spiritual community,
How could a Buddha arise?

31 For you, it would follow that a Buddha
Arises independent of enlightenment.
And for you, enlightenment would arise
Independent of a Buddha.

32 For you, one who through his essence
Was unenlightened,
Even by practicing the path to enlightenment
Could not achieve enlightenment.

33 Moreover, one could never perform
Right or wrong actions.
If this were all nonempty what could one do?
That with an essence cannot be produced.

34 For you, from neither right nor wrong actions
Would the fruit arise.
If the fruit arose from right or wrong actions,
According to you, it wouldn't exist.

35 If, for you, a fruit arose
From right or wrong actions,
Then, having arisen from right or wrong actions,
How could that fruit be nonempty?

36 If dependent arising is denied,
Emptiness itself is rejected.
This would contradict
All of the worldly conventions.

37 If emptiness itself is rejected,
No action will be appropriate.
There would be action which did not begin,
And there would be agent without action.

38 If there is essence, the whole world
Will be unarising, unceasing,
And static. The entire phenomenal world
Would be immutable.

39 If it (the world) were not empty,
Then action would be without profit.
The act of ending suffering and
Abandoning misery and defilement would not
exist.

40 Whoever sees dependent arising
Also sees suffering
And its arising
And its cessation as well as the path.

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Chapter XXV
Examination of Nirvāṇa

1 If all this is empty,
Then there is no arising or passing away.
By the relinquishing of ceasing of what
Does one wish nirvāṇa to arise?

2 If all this is nonempty,
Then there is no arising or passing away.
By the relinquishing or ceasing of what
Does one wish nirvāṇa to arise?

3 Unrelinquished, unattained,
Unannihilated, not permanent,
Unarisen, unceased:
This is how nirvāṇa is described.

4 Nirvāṇa is not existent.
It would then have the characteristics of age and
death.
There is no existent entity
Without age and death.

5 If nirvāṇa were existent,
Nirvāṇa would be compounded.
A noncompounded existent
Does not exist anywhere.

6 If nirvāṇa were existent,
How could nirvāṇa be nondependent?
A nondependent existent
Does not exist anywhere.

7 If nirvāṇa were not existent,
How could it be appropriate for it to be non-
existent?
Where nirvāṇa is not existent,
It cannot be a nonexistent.

- 8 If nirvāṇa were not existent,
How could nirvāṇa be nondependent?
Whatever is nondependent
Is not nonexistent.
- 9 That which comes and goes
Is dependent and changing.
That, when it is not dependent and changing,
Is taught to be nirvāṇa.
- 10 The teacher has spoken of relinquishing
Becoming and dissolution.
Therefore, it makes sense that
Nirvāṇa is neither existent nor nonexistent.
- 11 If nirvāṇa were both
Existent and nonexistent,
passing beyond would, impossibly,
Be both existent and nonexistent.
- 12 If nirvāṇa were both
Existent and nonexistent,
Nirvāṇa would not be nondependent.
Since it would depend on both of these.
- 13 How could nirvāṇa
Be both existent and nonexistent?
Nirvāṇa is uncompounded.
Both existents and nonexistents are compounded.
- 14 How could nirvāṇa
Be both existent and nonexistent?
These two cannot be in the same place.
Like light and darkness.
- 15 Nirvāṇa is said to be
Neither existent nor nonexistent.
If the existent and the nonexistent were
established,
This would be established.
- 16 If nirvāṇa is
Neither existent nor nonexistent,
Then by whom is it expounded'
"Neither existent nor nonexistent"?
- 17 Having passed into nirvāṇa, the Victorious
Conqueror
Is neither said to be existent
Nor said to be nonexistent.
Neither both nor neither are said.
- 18 So, when the victorious one abides, he
Is neither said to be existent
Nor said to be nonexistent.
Neither both nor neither are said.
- 19 There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence (samsāra) and nirvāṇa.
There is not the slightest difference
Between nirvāṇa and cyclic existence.
- 20 Whatever is the limit of nirvāṇa,
That is the limit of cyclic existence.
There is not even the slightest difference between
them,
Or even the subtlest thing.
- 21 Views that after cessation there is a limit, etc.,
And that it is permanent, etc.,
Depend upon nirvāṇa, the final limit,
And the prior limit.
- 22 Since all existents are empty,
What is finite or infinite?
What is finite and infinite?
What is neither finite nor infinite?
- 23 What is identical and what is different?
What is permanent and what is permanent?
What is both permanent and impermanent?
What is neither?
- 24 The pacification of all objectification
And the pacification of illusion:
No Dharma was taught by the Buddha
At any time, in any place, to any person.
- Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamādhyaṃakakārikā* (Oxford University Press, 1995.)