

Chapter XXV

Examination of Nirvāṇa

This chapter continues the study of the nature of what are often thought of as ultimate realities and that of their relation to the conventional world. It follows quite naturally on the preceding chapter, which considered the relation between emptiness and the conventional world. For insight into emptiness is, from the standpoint of Mādhyamika philosophy, an important precondition for entry into nirvāṇa. And just as the ultimate truth is related to the conventional as an understanding of the way things really are as opposed to the way they appear to be, nirvāṇa is related to saṃsāra as a state of awareness of things as they are as opposed to a state of awareness of things as they appear to be. But given the results of Chapter XXIV, and the surprising identification in entity of the conventional with the ultimate and the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness, one might well wonder about the status of nirvāṇa. Is it no different from saṃsāra? If it is, how, and how is it related to saṃsāra? If not, why pursue it, or better, why aren't we already there? Is nirvāṇa empty? If not, how does it escape the Mādhyamika dialectic? If it is, can it really be different from saṃsāra?

Nāgārjuna begins the examination with a challenge from the reificationist, raised by the previous chapter:

1. If all this is empty,
Then there is no arising or passing away.

By the relinquishing or ceasing of what
Does one wish nirvāṇa to arise?

Nirvāṇa is defined as a state one achieves when delusion and grasping cease, and when one relinquishes saṃsāra and its entities. But if there is neither self, nor object, nor delusion, nor grasping, who relinquishes what, and in what manner? Moreover, if there is no arising or passing away from the ultimate point of view, how can nirvāṇa arise or saṃsāra pass away? Nāgārjuna replies, using the same dialectical strategy deployed in the previous chapter:

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?

Nirvāṇa would be precluded not by the emptiness of saṃsāra, but rather by its inherent existence. For then it could not pass away. Nor could an inherently grasping grasper relinquish grasping, or an inherently existent delusion be alleviated. The achievement of nirvāṇa requires dependence, impermanence, and the possibility of change, all of which are grounded in emptiness.

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

It is important that these predicates are all negative in character, and that they are all expressed, both in Sanskrit and in the Tibetan translation, with explicitly negative particles (Skt: *a*, Tib: *med-pa*). The point is that no ascription of any predicate to nirvāṇa, for Nāgārjuna, can be literally true. For such a predication would purport to be an assertion that nirvāṇa is an ultimately existent phenomenon with a determinate property, and there are no ultimately existent phenomena, not even nirvāṇa. Because nirvāṇa can only be spoken of by contrasting it in some sense with saṃsāra and because there is no conventionally existent perceptible entity

that could serve as a referent for the term, there is the terrible temptation when speaking of *nirvāṇa* to think that, to the extent that one is saying anything true of it in any sense, one is literally asserting an ultimate truth about an inherently existent thing or state. One forgets that once one transcends the bounds of convention, there is no possibility of assertion.¹²⁵

The discussion in XXV: 4–18 is framed by the tetralemma that would follow from considering *nirvāṇa* to be something independent about which something could be said; or as a proper subject for a theory; or as a genuine alternative to *saṃsāra*, from which it is inherently different. If it were so, it would have to either be existent, nonexistent, both, or neither. (Note that here Nāgārjuna uses the terms “existent”/“non-existent” in both their adjectival and nominal forms [Tib: *dngos/dngos-min//dngos-po/dngos-med*, Skt: *bhāva/bhāvo//abhāva/abhāvo*] deliberately calling attention to their correlation. I have generally translated the Tibetan “*dngos-po*” as “entity” throughout this text. But for the purposes of this discussion in order to highlight the structure of the text, I switch in the next few verses to “existent.”) Nāgārjuna will now argue that none of these alternatives is possible.

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

Nirvāṇa is negatively characterized as release from *saṃsāra* and the constant flux, aging, death, and rebirth it comprises. But that means that since all entities have these characteristics, *nirvāṇa* cannot be thought of as an existent entity. And here we must be very careful: The point isn't that *nirvāṇa* can't be thought of as inherently existent. For inherently existent entities, if there were such things, would not have these characteristics. In this discussion, Nāgārjuna is rejecting the notion that *nirvāṇa* can be thought of as existent in any sense at all—even as a conventional entity. That is why we must be so careful in our discourse—very careful indeed—for, as we shall

125. See Streng (1973), chap. 5.

see in a moment, neither do we want to say that *nirvāṇa* is nonexistent. But moreover, Nāgārjuna will want in another sense to identify *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* (see XXV: 19, 20 below), and there is clearly a sense in which we can say that *saṃsāra* phenomena exist and a sense in which we can say that they do not. (Again, see the discussion of the positive tetralemma in XVIII: 8 above.) The point here is that though things seen from the standpoint of *saṃsāra* and from the standpoint of *nirvāṇa* are not different in entity, from the standpoint of *saṃsāra* they can be characterized and appear *as entities*. But from the standpoint of *nirvāṇa*, no characterization is possible since that involves the dualities and dichotomies introduced by language, including the positing of entities and characteristics, as well as their contraries and complements. These have only conventional and nominal existence, and no existence at all from the standpoint of *nirvāṇa*. (See also the discussion of XXVII: 30 below.) In a sense this discussion can be seen as a useful commentary on chapter IX of the *Vimīlakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* and, in particular, on the dramatic concluding remarks by Mañjuśrī and nonremarks by Vimalakīrti on the subject of nonduality and insight into emptiness: Mañjuśrī indicates that the distinction between the conventional and ultimate is itself dualistic and hence merely conventional. To realize it is hence to enter into nondual awareness of emptiness. He then asks Vimalakīrti to comment on nonduality. Vimalakīrti remains silent.¹²⁶

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

126. His Holiness the Dalai Lama in oral remarks (Columbia University 1994) notes that “The ultimate nature of things—emptiness—is also unknowable, in that one cannot comprehend it as it is known in direct apprehension in meditation.” Nayak (1979) writes:

Being firmly entrenched in *śūnyatā* and realizing that language has only a conventional use, an *ārya* or a philosopher regards silence or noncommitment as the highest good or *paramārtha*. And the attainment of *paramārtha* in this sense, not in the sense of a transcendent reality, constitutes an essential feature of *nirvāṇa* or liberation. (p. 478)

All empirical phenomena are compounded. But being compounded involves phenomena in the round of *saṃsāra*. For since the recognition of compounds as unitary phenomena demands conventions of aggregation, to be compounded is, ipso facto, to have a merely conventional existence. And it is the treatment of merely conventional, nominally existent phenomena as inherently existent entities that generates *saṃsāra*. That is because from the standpoint of Buddhist soteriological theory, the foundation of suffering—the basic condition of *saṃsāra*—is craving and the foundation of craving is the root delusion of taking to be inherently existent—and so worthy of being craved—that which is merely conventionally, or nominally existent. We are hence trapped in *saṃsāra* exactly to the extent that we mistake the conventionally existent as inherently existent. So given the contrast between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* and the fact that everything in *saṃsāra* is compounded, *nirvāṇa* cannot be compounded. So it is not existent, even conventionally.

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

Saṃsāra and dependent arising go hand in hand. For a phenomenon to be dependent is for it to be impermanent and for it to be subject to destruction. (See the discussion in Chapter XV.) *Nirvāṇa* is supposed to be beyond all this. It is, by definition, liberation from all that characterizes *saṃsāra*. So again, *nirvāṇa* cannot be a conventionally existent entity. (It is important to see that there is a sense in which *nirvāṇa* is dependent and a sense in which it is independent, and these are not contradictory: *Nirvāṇa* is achieved in dependence upon the practice of the path and the accumulation of wisdom and merit. But once attained, inasmuch as from the standpoint of *nirvāṇa* there are no entities at all, there is nothing on which *nirvāṇa* can be said to depend. In this sense it is nondependent.) But all of this raises the obvious possibility that *nirvāṇa* is simply not real at all—that it is completely nonexistent. This possibility is considered and rejected in the next two verses:

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

To say that *nirvāṇa* possesses the positive property of nonexistence is not coherent either. For then there would be nothing to which the predicate “nonexistent” could in fact apply. Note the difference between saying, in the sense relevant here, “*nirvāṇa* is nonexistent” and “Santa Claus does not exist.” The latter, Nāgārjuna would certainly agree, is not only coherent but true. But in explaining the semantics of the latter, we can posit a concept of Santa Claus and interpret the sentence as asserting that that concept is not instantiated. But when, in trying to characterize *nirvāṇa*, one is tempted to say that it is a nonexistent, this is in response to the difficulty we have just noted in asserting that *nirvāṇa* in fact exists. The temptation is to assert then that it is real, but has some kind of ghostly reality as a substratum of the property “nonexistent.” But that is simply incoherent—an attempt to have it both ways. So the predicate “does not exist” cannot, in this case, even be applied. If there is no *nirvāṇa* at all, there is no such basis of predication. Even this apparently negative discourse about *nirvāṇa* is then blocked, to the degree that it is taken literally as positive attribution of a negative predicate.

8. If *nirvāṇa* were not existent,
How could *nirvāṇa* be nondependent?
Whatever is nondependent
Is not nonexistent.

Moreover, Nāgārjuna reminds us, one of the reasons that we rejected the view that *nirvāṇa* is an entity in the first place is that it is nondependent. The latter assertion is, of course, intended in a merely negative sense—a denial of the possibility of characterizing *nirvāṇa* as dependent, or of recognizing dependent phenomena or dependency from the standpoint of *nirvāṇa*. But to the extent that we can make sense of nonexistence as a positive attribute, it would have to be the attribute of something. And as we have seen—

especially in Chapters VII, XXII, and XXIV—entities can only be conceived as dependent. So if something is nondependent, it can't also be a real nonexistent! In the next two verses, Nāgārjuna reframes the problem about the ontological status of nirvāṇa in preparation for consideration of the final two tetralemma possibilities for nirvāṇa—that it is both existent and nonexistent and that it is neither existent nor 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.

Nirvāṇa is here again explicitly characterized only by contrast with saṃsāra. While it therefore cannot be an entity of the kind with which saṃsāra is populated, it is, as the release from saṃsāra, not completely nonexistent. So it can neither be conceived of conventionally or ultimately as a thing, nor coherently asserted not to exist. In fact, as XXV: 9 emphasizes with eloquence, the very same world is saṃsāra or nirvāṇa, dependent upon one's perspective. When one perceives the constant arising and ceasing of phenomena, one perceives saṃsāra. When all reification is abandoned, that world and one's mode of living in it, becomes nirvāṇa.¹²⁷ Nāgārjuna now considers the possibility that nirvāṇa is both existent and nonexistent:

11. If nirvāṇa were both
Existent and nonexistent,
Passing beyond would, impossibly,
Be both existent and nonexistent.

This would entail that it is contradictory. And it is absurd to assign anything contradictory properties. Moreover, having seen

127. See *Yuktiśaṣṭika* 11 for another presentation of this view.

that each of the conjuncts is individually impossible, their conjunction, even were it not a conjunction of contradictories, could certainly not be coherent. In particular, we don't want to say that one does and does not pass into nirvāṇa upon release from saṃsāra.

12. If nirvāṇa were both
Existent and nonexistent,
Nirvāṇa would not be nondependent.
Since it would depend on both of these.

But since both existent and nonexistent entities are dependent, as Nāgārjuna has argued in XXV: 6, 8, if nirvāṇa were both existent and nonexistent it would be doubly dependent. It would depend both on existent and nonexistent phenomena.

13. How could nirvāṇa
Be both existent and nonexistent?
Nirvāṇa is uncompounded.
Both existents and nonexistents are compounded.

Moreover, not only are existents compounded—that is made up of parts or given rise to by causes—but genuine nonexistents are compounded as well—their nonexistence is determined by the nature of other things; if real, they would be composed of parts. A nonexistent elephant is composed of a nonexistent trunk, tusks, and so forth.

14. How could nirvāṇa
Be both existent and nonexistent?
These two cannot be in the same place.
Like light and darkness.

This verse simply sums up the results of the previous three: There is simply no way to avoid manifest contradiction if one takes this horn of the tetralemma. Nāgārjuna now considers the final possibility—that nirvāṇa is neither existent nor nonexistent:¹²⁸

128. See also Padhye (1988), pp. 109–14, for a concise discussion of Nāgārjuna's treatment of the tetralemma of existence/nonexistence with respect to nirvāṇa.

15. Nirvāṇa is said to be
Neither existent nor nonexistent.
If the existent and the nonexistent were established,
This would be established

But this can't be so either. For really to assert this as the nature of nirvāṇa would be to suppose that both of these possibilities made sense with respect to it, but that neither happened to be realized. But it makes no sense for nirvāṇa to exist. And it makes no sense for it not to exist. So of each, the negation can't be assigned any coherent meaning. And conjoining two pieces of nonsense only yields further nonsense.

16. If nirvāṇa is
Neither existent nor nonexistent,
Then by whom is it expounded
"Neither existent nor nonexistent"?

If this could be coherently asserted, it would have to be asserted either by one in nirvāṇa or one not. But, as is emphasized in the next verse, this has never been asserted by anyone certifiably in nirvāṇa. And if it is asserted by someone in saṃsāra, we have no particular reason to believe it.

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.

None of the four tetralemma possibilities can be asserted. Just as in Chapter XXII, we see that when things are plausibly posited by an interlocutor as ultimates, Nāgārjuna resorts to a negative tetralemma. This emphasizes that all discourse is only possible from the conventional point of view. When we try to say something coherent

about the nature of things from an ultimate standpoint, we end up talking nonsense.¹²⁹ But recall the discussion of emptiness and convention in chapter XXIV: We can develop an understanding of emptiness in relation to conventional reality, of emptiness as empty: Emptiness seen that way simply is the lack of essence of the conventional. Its own emptiness is the fact that it itself is no more than that. Seeing the conventional as conventional, we argued, is to see it as it is ultimately. At this point, Nāgārjuna makes a similar move with regard to nirvāṇa and draws one of the most startling conclusions of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*: Just as there is no difference in entity between the conventional and the ultimate, there is no difference in entity between nirvāṇa and saṃsāra; nirvāṇa is simply saṃsāra seen without reification, without attachment, without delusion. The reason that we cannot say anything about nirvāṇa as an independent, nonsamsaric entity, then, is not that it *is* such an entity, but that it is ineffable and unknowable.¹³⁰ Rather it is because it is only saṃsāra seen as it is, just as emptiness is just the conventional seen as it is:

19. There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence 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.

To distinguish between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa would be to suppose that each had a nature and that they were different natures. But each is empty, and so there can be no inherent difference. Moreover, since nirvāṇa is by definition the cessation of delusion and of grasping and, hence, of the reification of self and other and of confusing imputed phenomena for inherently real phenomena,

129. See Nagao (1991), pp. 42–43, for a similar account.

130. This reading contrasts with that of Inada (1970), who asserts that nirvāṇa, in fact, is transcendent, belonging to a wholly different ontological realm. I find his reading very difficult to reconcile with XXV: 19, 20 or indeed, with any of Chapters XXII, XXIV, or XXV.

it is by definition the recognition of the ultimate nature of things. But if, as Nāgārjuna argued in Chapter XXIV, this is simply to see conventional things as empty, not to see some separate emptiness behind them, then nirvāṇa must be ontologically grounded in the conventional. To be in saṃsāra is to see things as they appear to deluded consciousness and to interact with them accordingly. To be in nirvāṇa, then, is to see those things as they are—as merely empty, dependent, impermanent, and nonsubstantial, but not to be somewhere else, seeing something else.¹³¹

Another way of distinguishing between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is to think of them somehow as different places, as Earth and Heaven are often conceived in Western religious traditions and then to think that upon attaining nirvāṇa one leaves this place—disappears—and goes there. Of course, if one thinks at all about the career of the historical Buddha Sakyamuni, that would entail that upon attaining enlightenment, he would have disappeared. This would make something of a hash of the Buddhist canon. But Nāgārjuna is emphasizing that nirvāṇa is not someplace else. It is a way of being here.

Here is another way to put the somewhat paradoxical point: Nāgārjuna surely thinks that in nirvāṇa, unlike saṃsāra, one perceives emptiness and not entities; one perceives the ultimate truth and not the conventional truth.¹³² But emptiness is only the empti-

131. Compare Streng (1973):

...[A] problem occurs when we act inappropriately to the empty (non-svabhāva) set of conditions that allow saṃskṛta to arise. This inappropriateness is our acting as if we could discern a self-existent thing either in the conditioned 'thing' or in some identifiable 'element' of our experience. . . . Contrariwise, the insight that leads to the cessation of these inappropriate acts is an awareness that the conditions and relations by which we define our experience are empty. (p. 30)

Nayak (1979) puts it this way: "Nirvāṇa is thus nondifferent from critical insight par excellence which is free from all essentialist picture-thinking" (p. 489).

132. Though it is standard doctrine that a buddha, in virtue of being omniscient (setting aside the vexed and controversial question of the nature of this omniscience—a matter of considerable debate within Buddhist philosophy), perceives all conventional phenomena and knows all conventional truths, as well as all ultimate truths. But a buddha does not know conventional truths and perceive conventional phenomena in the same way that a nonenlightened being does. A buddha knows them and perceives them as conventional and sees them at the same time as empty, through an immediate knowledge of the unity of the two truths. A non-buddha, by contrast, even if s/he knows that conventional phenom-

ness of all entities, and the ultimate truth is merely the essenceless essence of those conventional things. So nirvāṇa is only saṃsāra experienced as a buddha experiences it. It is the person who enters nirvāṇa, but as a state of being, not as a place to be.¹³³

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.

The kind of metaphysical speculations that the Buddha discouraged in the famous discussion of the unanswerable questions regarding the origins and limits of the world and what lies beyond the universe in space and time, are grounded, Nāgārjuna asserts, in the view that cyclic existence—the entire phenomenal world—can be conceived as an entity against which stand other entities or other regions. This is the same kind of picture that motivates the view that nirvāṇa is someplace or something beyond cyclic existence or that nirvāṇa is bounded or eternal. But there is no vantage point from which the universe is one place among many. That is why talking about what lies beyond it is nonsense and why reifying or characterizing nirvāṇa temporally is one example of that nonsense.

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 impermanent?
What is both permanent and impermanent?
What is neither?

ena are empty, through studying Mādhyamika philosophy, perceives them as inherently existent and only reasons her/himself into the knowledge that these phenomena are really empty and that these truths are merely conventional.

133. Kalupahana (1986) reads this verse differently. He translates it as follows: "Whatever is the extremity of freedom and the extremity of the life-process, between them not even a subtle something is evident." He then takes the purport to be the denial of any entity such as a "seed of release" mediating between the states of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa (p. 367)

Again Nāgārjuna uses negative tetrallemmas to emphasize that while of conventional entities a good deal can be said, so long as we take the predications to be asserted in a conventional, relative sense, the moment we try to conceive of things as they are ultimately, as empty, such assertion has to stop. That is not, again, to say that things are nonempty. Far from it. But it is to say that literal description applies only within the bounds of conception and that attempts to develop a metaphysics of the ultimate are doomed.¹³⁴

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.

In many Buddhist teachings many conventional phenomena are described and are subjected to analysis, including the mind, mental phenomena, and a wide range of external phenomena. But this is always a conventional analysis intended to demonstrate the emptiness of these phenomena, their impermanent character, and so forth, for soteriological purposes. The goal is to dispel illusion and to end deluded ontological fabrication and the various epistemological, psychological, and moral ills Nāgārjuna has argued are grounded therein. But it is important, Nāgārjuna concludes, not to reify that doctrine, or any of the entities that appear as *prima facie* referents of the words used to expound it (the Buddha, the spiritual community, etc.). In fact, it is important to see that *nirvāṇa* does not, on this account, amount to an entity; it is not achieved or described by entities. Rather it is a way of engagement with nonentities by nonentities.

134. Padhye (1988) points out (pp. 68–70) that Nāgārjuna should also be read here and in this chapter as a whole as emphasizing that, in virtue of the emptiness of all phenomena in *samsāra* and of the self that experiences them, *nirvāṇa*, which is defined simply as that self's liberation from positing those phenomena, must be equally empty. For it, too, can only be understood as a characteristic of that empty self and of its relation to empty phenomena.