

# Emptiness and Freedom

Leigh Brasington

About 100 AD, a man later known as Nāgārjuna was born into a Brahmin family in southern India. By the time he was twenty, he was well known for his Brahmanical scholarly learning. However, after an encounter with some serious *dukkha*, he began studying the works of the Buddha. Supposedly in three months he had mastered the early scriptures, but they still left unanswered questions. At that point he encountered an old monk who followed the Mahāyāna tradition.

Nāgārjuna was so impressed by the Mahāyāna vision that he travelled throughout India, seeking more Mahāyāna teachings. He was very skilled in debate, and eventually defeated all comers, whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist. He founded an order and rules for his monks. He composed the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, or *The Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, as a commentary to the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*, the discourses on wisdom. Other such commentaries are also attributed to him.

At least this is what the legends tell us. Actually there is very little we really know about Nāgārjuna. What we do know for sure is that somebody composed *The Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*. And it is a rather remarkable set of teachings. There are twenty-seven short chapters, made up of verses. They attempt to elucidate emptiness—emptiness meaning that nothing has an essence.

Nāgārjuna wanted to take Buddhism back to its roots, back to the suttas. The only sutta he actually mentions by name in *The Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* is the *Kaccānagotta Sutta*, in which the Buddha teaches the Venerable Kaccānagotta that right view is seeing everything as dependently originated. Here

is the relevant part of the discourse:

*This world, Kaccāna, for the most part depends upon a duality—upon the notion of existence and the notion of non-existence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of non-existence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world.*

*This world, Kaccāna, is for the most part shackled by engagement, clinging, and adherence. But one with right view does not become engaged and cling through that engagement and clinging, mental standpoint, adherence, underlying tendency; he does not take a stand about “my self”...*

*“All exists:” Kaccāna, this is one extreme. “All does not exist:” this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the middle way—Dependent Origination.*

*(Samyutta Nikaya 12:15)*



Ven. Kaccānagotta

When you go to the beach and look out, you see the edge of the world, six miles out. You see a ship get too close to the edge of the world, and it falls off. That's terrible; all those people die. It happens far too often. If you go to the beach, you've probably seen it once or twice. You are trapped in an illusion!

***Nāgārjuna is basically trying to take things back toward the teachings found in the suttas, with an emphasis on emptiness.***



*Nāgārjuna*

But once you understand that the earth is a sphere and understand gravity, when you go back to the beach, it looks just as it did before, but you no longer conceive of the edge of the world. You no longer wonder “when you fall off the edge of the world, does it hurt immediately, or does it hurt only when you hit the bottom?” That doesn’t make any sense; you understand the illusion.

This is what the Buddha is saying about the self. Don’t get caught in discussions about the self—does the self exist, does the self not exist. That’s like trying to decide if it hurts when you fall off the edge of the world or not. Look at the world in terms of dependently originated phenomena. That’s all that’s happening; that’s what’s useful.

If you read *The Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, you get a sense that Nāgārjuna had great respect for the Buddha and his teachings. He is basically trying to take things back toward the teachings found in the suttas, with an emphasis on emptiness. One way he does this is by looking closely at some of the words and concepts we

commonly use, trying to understand better just what we mean by them. For example:

Walking

*I do not walk between  
The step already taken  
And the one I’m yet to take,  
Which both are motionless.*

*Is walking not the motion  
Between one step and the next?  
What moves between them?  
Could I not move as I walk?*

*If I move when I walk,  
There would be two motions:  
One moving me and one my feet—  
Two of us stroll by.*

*There is no walking without walkers,  
And no walkers without walking.  
Can I say that walkers walk?  
Couldn’t I say they don’t?*

“Were walking and walker one, I would be unable to tell them apart. Were they different, there would be walkers who do not walk.” So walking and a walker are not the same thing. And yet, you cannot have one without the other. They are dependently related. We need to pay attention to our notions and concepts and see how one thing is dependent on another. You cannot have a walker unless there is some walking going on, but you cannot have some walking unless there is a walker actually doing it. So which came first? How did it get started? There is no fixed entity here, is there? This begins to point us in the right direction.

Let’s look at another analysis of a common expression. What do we mean by the body?

Body

*I have no body apart  
From parts which form it;  
I know no parts  
Apart from a ‘body.’*

**How do we get caught in the mistake of “thingifying” the world,  
when it’s just a bunch of interlocking, interdependent process?**

*A body with no parts  
Would be unformed,  
A part of my body apart from my body  
Would be absurd.*

*Were the body here or not,  
It would need no parts.  
Partless bodies are pointless.  
Do not get stuck in the ‘body.’*

Think about your body. It has a bunch of parts, but, it seems to be a bit more than just a bunch of pieces. And if you remove a piece from your body, then it is not part of your body any more. You go get a haircut, and you look down on the floor. “Oh my gosh, part of me is on the floor!” Do you ever have that reaction? No, of course not. You walk in, it was part of you. You walk out, it’s not part of you. How did it become not part of you? What’s going on here? Where are we drawing the lines? How are we creating these individual things out of this whole, ever-flowing process? How do we get caught in the mistake of “thingifying” the world, when it’s just a bunch of interlocking, interdependent processes?

Where this gets really interesting is applying this analysis to the concept of the self.

Self

*Were mind and matter me,  
I would come and go like them.  
If I were something else,  
They would say nothing about me.*

So you start looking for your self. Are you your body? Well, you change out all your cells every seven years. Does that mean you are somebody different every seven years? You certainly don’t look like you looked when you were one year old.

Perhaps you are your mind. You are the consciousness; you are the part that knows it is you. But that keeps changing as well, and it disappears every night when you are in deep sleep. And yet, if we are something other than these, then the body and the mind would not say anything about us.

*What is mine  
When there is no me?*

If you are conceiving a self, then you are conceiving of a self in terms of what it possesses. If you are conceiving of possessions, you are making a self that possesses these possessions, the clinger, the craver.

*Were self-centeredness eased,  
I would not think of me and mine—  
There would be no one there  
To think of them.*

This is the Buddha’s strategy, to make the breakthrough in consciousness so that you are not conceiving of a self. Then there is nobody there to think of me and mine.

**Emptiness stops *papañca***

*When these thoughts end,  
Compulsion stops,  
Repetition ceases,  
Freedom dawns.*

When the thoughts of self and other end, there is no more basis for the compulsions to crave and cling. Repetition is continually doing the same thing over and over even though it does not bring lasting happiness, with the hope that if you do it one more time, it will bring lasting happiness. Stupidity is doing the same thing over and over, expecting a different result. But that’s how we live our lives, it seems.

*Fixations spawn thoughts  
That provoke compulsive acts—  
Emptiness stops fixations.*

“Fixations” is a translation of the Pali word *papañca*, one of the best words in Pali. It refers to mental proliferation, that tendency of the mind to think a thought, and then the next thought, and the next thought. It can be truly amazing what comes up. Maybe you’ve noticed that recently. This tendency to just go on and on and on, and then whole universes appears. It’s just stuff we are thinking up.

***It's already free, all of it. You've just got to quit concocting all these individual entities, including this entity of me.***

So, *papañca* spawns thoughts that provoke compulsive acts. Emptiness stops *papañca*. This is how the realization of emptiness can bring us freedom.

### Dissolving concoctions

*When things dissolve,  
There's nothing left to say.*

Things: When *sankhāras*—concoctions, fabrications, formations—dissolve, there is nothing left to say. When you stop making concoctions out of this effervescent flow of dependently originated processes and phenomena, there is nothing left to say.

*The unborn and unceasing  
Are already free.*

If you are not thingifying the world, there are no things being born and there are no things that are going to cease. It's already free, all of it. You've just got to quit concocting all these individual entities, including this entity of me.

*It is all at ease,  
Unfixatable by fixations,  
Incommunicable,  
Inconceivable,  
Indivisible.*

It's all at ease. The universe is unfolding in a lawful manner, the law of cause and effect. You are attempting to *papañca*-ize it, think about it, decide how it all works, find the beginning of the universe, be able to explain everything, decide whether the soul is the same as the body or something else, or... on and on and on. It just cannot be done. It is already all at ease. None of your thinking is going to get you to the place where it's all at ease.

What actually is happening is incommunicable, in the sense that you cannot really describe in relative terms what is going on at the absolute level. We can use the relative terms to point at what is going on at the absolute level, but don't mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon. Don't get caught up in your concepts and think that your concepts are reality. They are

only useful to help you see what is going on at a deeper level.

"Inconceivable." If you want to really know exactly what's going on, you have to be able to conceive of the whole universe, but your brain is not big enough. It can only take in bits and pieces—we chop our sensory input into pieces so we can manipulate it. To have a brain big enough to take in everything going on in the universe requires a brain as complex as the whole universe.

"Indivisible." Any piece of the universe that you pick up is not a separate thing. It is all very much interconnected. There are no separate entities anywhere in the entire universe. We concoct separate entities; we thingify our experience, because that is the only way we can manage to get a grip on it.

### Conditions are/are not you

*You are not the same as or different from  
Conditions on which you depend;  
You are neither severed from  
Nor forever fused with them—  
This is the deathless teaching  
Of buddhas who care for the world.*

This is really the heart of the matter. You are not the same as, or different from, all the dependently originated streams of effects that come into making you what you are. You are neither severed from them, nor are you forever fused with them—you are not stuck. You will continue to change; there is no static anything in the universe. So all these dependently originated phenomena are coming together making the you that you experience, but you are not that dependently originated phenomenon, yet you are not separate from it either. You are just at the point of the unfolding.

*When buddhas don't appear  
And their followers are gone,  
The wisdom of awakening  
Bursts forth by itself.*

## *The opponent misunderstands emptiness, thinking it is nihilism.*

This is pointing to the fact that the truth is out there. If the Buddha is not around to give you the instructions, and his followers are not around to give you instructions, it is possible to figure it out yourself; you just have to pay attention. But I have to admit—I would have never figured this out without the Buddha's help! I'm glad he left some instructions around.

### A challenge

Parts of *The Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* are given over to Nāgārjuna answering the objections of others to what he is saying. One such imaginary opponent lashes into Nāgārjuna for corrupting the Dharma: By saying that everything is empty, you are saying there are no Noble Truths, that no one can ever get enlightened. The opponent is thinking that emptiness means that nothing exists. He is misunderstanding emptiness, thinking it is nihilism. This sometimes happens when people are trying to understand what the Buddha is talking about—for example, “When a fully enlightened one dies, he does not come back; he is annihilated.” This is not what the Buddha said. But you sometimes find ideas like this.

According to Nāgārjuna, the critic is himself undermining the Noble Truths and enlightenment by trying to fixate on ideas rather than open into the broader view of emptiness.

*In projecting your faults onto me,  
You forget the horse you are riding.*

This is a reference to a man who had two dozen horses. He goes out one morning and mounts one of his horses, and goes around counting his horses: one, two, three, four... twenty-two, twenty-three... Twenty-three! Oh, no, someone has stolen one of my horses! He's forgotten to count the horse he is riding.

### Awakening to two truths

Nāgārjuna's response is worth going through in some detail.

*The dharma taught by buddhas  
Hinges on two truths:  
Partial truths of the world  
And truths which are sublime.*

This is an early elucidation of the doctrine of the two truths. You find hints in the suttas of the two truths, but it is not spelled out like it's spelled out in *The Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*. So there are two truths: partial truths of the world, which in the original actually means something like “truths that don't fully reveal,” or “truths that leave something hidden” and then there are sublime truths. We say “relative” and “absolute” or “conventional” and “ultimate.” Nāgārjuna is pointing out that the partial truths do not give you the full explanation; that is what the relative view of the world is. It is true, these are my glasses, not yours, right? But that does not really explain what is going on.

*Without knowing how they differ,  
You cannot know the deep;*

It is necessary to understand there are two perspectives, and to understand how they differ.

*Without relying on conventions,  
You cannot disclose the sublime;*

We need fingers to point at the moon. We are not smart enough to look up there by ourselves and see it. The teachings have to be presented in the relative world. We have to use words and ideas and concepts, but we hope they become fingers that point at sublime truth.

*Without intuiting the sublime,  
You cannot experience freedom.*

Freedom from *dukkha*, the breakthrough to enlightenment, can only occur when you are looking at the world from the perspective of the ultimate. The perspective of the relative just has too much hidden to enable you to make that breakthrough. From the perspective of the ultimate, there are no essences—only emptiness.

**When you hear teachings on emptiness, what you are hearing is teachings on dependent origination.**

**Emptiness at the heart**

*To see things existing by nature,*

(That is, as having an essence.)

*Is to see them without  
Causes and conditions,  
Thus subverting causality,  
Agents, tools and acts,  
Starting, stopping and ripening.*

It has to be like that, otherwise it is not an essence. If something arises from causes and conditions, that means it cannot have an essence. It was caused. And because it does not have an essence, it will cease.

And then comes the heart of the whole  
*Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā:*

*Dependent origination is emptiness  
Which, dependently configured,  
Is the middle way.*

This cryptic verse is equating dependent origination and emptiness, and furthermore saying emptiness is also empty. It is just a concept we are using to try and understand what is going on. Do not make an ultimate out of emptiness. In one of the commentaries that I like, the author says Nāgārjuna is basically climbing up higher and higher, and as he gets to each level, he kicks away the ladder. And he gets up to the highest level, and he kicks away that ladder as well. It is all empty.

*Everything is dependently originated;  
Everything is empty.*

So when you hear teachings on emptiness, what you are hearing is teachings on dependent origination. The universe is just these streams of causes and conditions, coming to fruition, and we are part of the continuing of the streams as the acts that we do come to fruition as well.

*Were everything not empty,  
There would be no rising and passing.  
Ennobling truths would not exist.  
Without dependent origination  
How could I suffer dukkha?*

*This shifting dukkha  
Has no nature of its own;*

If *dukkha* had an essence, you would be in trouble, because you would be stuck with that *dukkha*.

*If it did, how could it have a cause?  
Deny emptiness and you deny  
The origins of dukkha.  
If dukkha existed by nature,*

(That is, if it had an essence.)

*How would it ever cease?*

The essence has to stick around, so it's going to exist forever; you're stuck with the *dukkha*.

*Absolute dukkha could never stop.  
How could you cultivate a path  
That exists by nature?  
How could it lead to the end of pain?  
A path on which you tread  
Can have no essence of its own.*

You can notice that when you walk on a path through a forest, the essence of the path is that there is no forest there—paths do not have an essence. It is precisely the lack of forest that makes it a path. And it is not unchanging, because left alone, the forest comes back.

Nāgārjuna goes on to bring this reasoning to bear on awakening.

**Emptiness allows freedom**

*If confusion existed by nature,  
I would always be confused.  
How could I know anything?  
Letting go and realizing,  
Cultivation and fruition  
Could never happen.*

If you are not enlightened now, and you have an essence, your essence is that of an unenlightened being, and you are stuck. So you had better hope there is not an essence.

***The fact that it is all empty, that it is just dependently originated phenomena,  
means there is a chance that it can be different.***

*Who can attain absolute goals  
That by nature are unattainable?  
Since no one could reach them,  
There would be no sangha;  
With no truths, no dharma either.  
With no sangha or dharma  
How could I awaken?  
I would not depend on awakening  
Nor awakening on me.*

*A naturally unawakened person  
Would never awaken  
No matter how hard  
He practiced for its sake.*

You cannot have an essence if you are going to progress on the spiritual path. You have to change, you have got to have an open mind, you cannot cling to fixed views. And you certainly cannot have an essence.

*He would never do good or evil;  
An unempty person would do nothing.  
He'd experience fruits of good and evil  
Without having done good or evil deeds.  
How can fruits of good and evil not be  
empty  
If they are experienced?*

Emptiness is how karma works; there is an action and a result. If the action had an essence, it would always be acting; it would never cease and generate its result.

*To subvert emptiness and dependent  
origination  
Is to subvert conventions of the world.  
It engenders passivity;  
Acts without an author,  
Authors who do not act.  
Beings would not be born or die;  
They would be frozen in time,  
Alien to variety.  
If things were unempty,  
You could attain nothing.  
Dukkha would never end.  
You would never let go of compulsive  
acts.*

The fact that it is all empty, that it is just dependently originated phenomena, means there is a chance that it can become different.

Which brings us at last to Nāgārjuna's full restoration of the core teachings of the Buddha:

*To see dependent origination is to see  
Dukkha, its origins, cessation and the  
path.*

The book I have been reading from is *Verses from the Center*, by Stephen Batchelor. It is a poetic translation of the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. It is not literally accurate, but it does capture the "essence" of what Nāgārjuna is trying to teach us. If you really want to study Nāgārjuna I would suggest you get a copy of this book, read it multiple times, and then you can try books such as Jay Garfield's *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* if you want to look in depth at exactly what Nāgārjuna was saying.

Of course, this is just my intellectual understanding. You are going to have to take this and make it your own. This is hopefully only whetting your appetite to look at the world in terms of these streams of dependently originated phenomena. Can you see that that is what is going on? When you get caught in an unpleasant mind state, for example, can you look back and see, "Oh, this is what the sensory input was that triggered it, and that sensory input was triggered by ..., that was triggered by ...," and can you start seeing the streams of dependently originated phenomena coming at you? This can take you in the direction of freedom. Hopefully this will help you realize that dependent origination is a very rich vein to mine, a great place to investigate.



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