

## Chapter Three: An Analysis of the Powers of Sense

दर्शनं श्रवणं घ्राणं रसनं स्पर्शनं मनः ।

इन्द्रियाणि षडेतेषां द्रष्टव्यादीनि गोचरः ॥ १ ॥

### 3.1

Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and thinking –  
These are the six senses.  
And the range of things they sense  
Are visible objects and the rest.

*In this chapter, Arya Nagarjuna turns to the question of whether the six sense powers (mind was also regarded as a sense power in traditional India) truly perform their functions. of seeing, hearing, smelling, and so on. The verse starts with the standard list of the sense powers (seeing, hearing, and so on) and the six kinds of objects of sense (visible objects, audible sounds, etc.). Nagarjuna will not try somehow to say argue that we don't see sights, hear sounds, smell odors, and the rest. But we certainly can't be doing so the way we ordinarily think we do.*

*So how do we ordinarily assume things are working? First of all, we think the eye, ear, nose, and other faculties of the sense really and objectively exist. Secondly, we believe that the objects our senses perceive – visible object, audible sounds, things that smell and taste, and tactile objects – are also really, truly, and objectively “out there.” Finally, our truly existing senses encounter truly existing sense objects and a connection is somehow made between the two: we see a visible object, hear a sound, smell food cooking, etc.*

*Three different kinds of what are called “self-existent” things – independently existing sense powers that encounter independently existing sensible objects, and a resulting experience (of seeing, hearing, smelling, etc.) that also is really, truly occurring.*

*Nagarjuna will prove in this chapter that our sense powers, the objects of the senses, and the sensations we experience can't exist and be happening the way we, in our ignorance, think.*

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स्वमात्मानम् दर्शनं हि तत्तमेव न पश्यति ।  
न पश्यति यदात्मानं कथं द्रक्ष्यति तत्परान् ॥ २ ॥

3.2

Seeing can't see itself at all.  
And since seeing can't see itself,  
How will it be able to see  
Something other than itself?

*Using the sense power of seeing to serve as an example of any of the senses, Arya Nagarjuna posits a startling observation: the eye can't see itself. If the visual faculty were truly existent – by which is meant independently or objectively existent, and also essentially existing as a seer – then it wouldn't depend on a visible object for its existence as the visual faculty.*

*And if the eye did not rely on visual objects external to itself in order to be performing the activity of seeing, then the only thing it would need to be seeing to be "seeing" would be itself – this is what would be entailed by an independently existing visual faculty. Seeing would be an inherent quality of the visual faculty and it wouldn't need anything apart from itself to be seeing. So it would have to be seeing itself!*

*Since there is no independently existing seer that can see itself, how could there possibly be an independently existing seer that is capable of seeing things other than itself? Seeing can't be an inherent quality of seeing at all. Seeing doesn't exist independently. It depends on something seen; the visual faculty relies on a visible object and the act of seeing that object for its very existence.*

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न पर्याप्तोऽग्निदृष्टान्तो दर्शनस्य प्रसिद्धये ।  
सदर्शनः स प्रत्युक्तो गम्यमानगतागतैः ॥ ३ ॥

3.3

The example of fire is not adequate for  
Explaining how seeing works.  
That example and the case of seeing a  
Are both answered

In the analysis of the already gone, the not yet gone, and the going.

*Arya Nagarjuna here refers to the example (that he returns to in Chapter 10) of fire which, according to some, is a thing which burns something else (fuel) but does not burn itself. So too, perhaps, does the eye see other things but does not see itself.*

*The example is refuted with reference to the arguments in the previous chapter of Nagarjuna's book. A fire which is burning – and an eye which is seeing – must be doing so in the past (“already gone”), the future (“not yet gone) or present (“going”). None of these is possible. A fire that has already burned, or a seer who has already seen, isn't burning or seeing. A fire that has not yet burned, or a seer who has not yet seen, also isn't burning or seeing. And if the burning of the fire or seeing the sight is occurring in the present, then it is already and always going on, without starting (which would mean there was a time when there was no burning or seeing) or finishing (when there had been burning or seeing).*

*In other words, if the fire is burning or the seer is seeing, they wouldn't need to be burning or seeing something – and that would be an independently existing fire or visual faculty, which as we have seen in the last verse, is impossible.*

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नापश्यमानं भवति यदा किञ्चन दर्शनं ।  
दर्शनं पश्यतीत्येवं कथमेतत्तु युज्यते ॥ ४ ॥

3.4

If there isn't anybody seeing  
There can't be any kind of seeing.  
What sense does it make  
To say: "Seeing sees"?

*Seeing can't be happening through some self-existent eye or seer or visual faculty; it can't be happening all by itself. Seeing does not occur independently of someone who is seeing and something that is seen. A seer is made possible by seeing and the act of seeing and the something seen occur only when somebody's seeing. All three – seer, seeing, and what is seen – exist only in relation with each other, and none of them exists independently.*

*If seeing existed independently, then we should be able to say that "seeing sees," which is patently nonsensical. It would imply also that, since seeing was what seeing essentially does, it would always be doing that. It would never not see. It would never, for example, not see itself.*

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पश्यति दर्शनं नैव नैव पश्यत्यदर्शनं ।

व्याख्यातो दर्शनैव द्रष्टा चाप्युपगम्यतां ॥ ५ ॥

3.5

Seeing by itself doesn't see  
But not seeing also doesn't see.  
A seer is intelligible  
Only when seeing is itself understood.

*"Seeing" doesn't see by itself, as we have observed in the last verse. If seeing saw, it wouldn't need to see again to be seeing. To say "seeing sees" would be redundant – seeing is seeing, so it wouldn't need to see.*

*So seeing doesn't see, but "not seeing" – something other than seeing – doesn't see either, of course. So if an independently existing seeing doesn't see, and an independently "not-seeing" doesn't see either, than what is seeing?*

*The next part of the verse explains. The act of seeing is what makes the concept of "a seer" intelligible. So here we shift attention from seeing to the seer and observe that the latter cannot exist self-existently any more than the former. Someone who is seeing is a seer; a seer is a seer because they are seeing. "Seeing" and being a "seer" exist co-dependently, relationally. Neither is independent.*

*And neither can exist prior to the other. There is no seeing before, as well as without, someone who is seeing; and seer doesn't exist until and unless there is the activity of seeing.*

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तिरस्कृत्य द्रष्टा नास्त्यतिरस्कृत्य च दर्शनं ।

द्रष्टव्यं दर्शनं चैव द्रष्टर्यसति ते कुतः ॥ ६ ॥

3.6

A seer neither exists

Apart from or not apart from the seeing.

And when the seer doesn't exist,

How can there be something seen

Or the act of seeing?

*A seer would have to exist either dependently on the act of seeing, or independently of the act of seeing. We've learned before that the seer does not exist as a seer unless and until he or she sees – so the seer cannot exist apart from the seeing.*

*But neither can there be "a seer" who exists dependently on the act of seeing, and here is where Arya Nagarjuna pulls out a carpet we had got comfortable standing on.*

*A relationship of dependence assumes two independent entities that come into the relationship – in this case, a seer and the act of seeing. But if there is "a seer" before entering into the relationship of dependence on "seeing," then there could be "a seer" who isn't seeing and a "seeing" that isn't occurring in a seer!*

*So there can't be either a seer independent of seeing or dependent on seeing, which means there can't be a seer at all! And without a seer, how can there be visual objects? Visual objects are visual objects when they are seen by someone, and not until. If there are no seers to see visual objects, there are no visual objects. And without seer to see and visual objects to be seen, in what sense is there any kind of seeing going on at all?*

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प्रतीत्य मातापितरौ यथोक्तः पुत्रसंभवः ।  
चक्षुरूपे प्रतीत्यैवमुक्तो विज्ञानसंभवः ॥ ७ ॥

3.7

Just as it said that  
The birth of a child occurs dependently  
On there being a mother and a father,  
So too does consciousness occur  
Dependently on eyesight and visible form.

*In a telling example, Arya Nagarjuna here says that just as the birth of a child can occur only if there is a mother and father, so too the complex of seer (“consciousness”), seeing (“eyesight”) and the object which is seen (“visible form”) exist dependently. It seems to us obvious that there could be no child without parents, so we might say that a child comes into existence in dependence on parents. Similarly, we might say that we see something only when there is the visual capability and a visible object out there to see.*

*But as the example indicates, none of the three can come first or exist independently of the other two. While there is no child before parents, there are no people called “parents” until and unless they have a child. Such is also the case with seer, seeing, and visible object. They each one depend on the others.*

*So nothing exists independently. But neither, as we have seen, can we say that things exist dependently either, for if they did one thing (a.k.a “the cause”) would have to exist before the thing that arise in dependence on the first thing (“the result”). Things can exist only interdependently (as opposed to either independently or dependently) and – here’s the rub – the relationship of interdependence is projected onto these things, and does not exist independently either!*

*This verse, by the way, seems to be missing from a number of Sanskrit commentaries and thus also was dropped from the Tibetan translations. Candrakirti’s commentary does, however, include the verse.*

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द्रष्टव्यदर्शनाभावाद्विज्ञानादिचतुष्टयं ।

नास्तीति उपादानादीनि भविष्यन्ति पुनः कथं ॥ ८ ॥

3.8

Since there's no seeing or something seen,  
There are no four, beginning with consciousness.  
And so how could there be grasping and the rest?

*Having shown that seeing and visible objects cannot exist apart from the projection of them, Arya Nagarjuna draws a radical conclusion: there can be no truly existing perpetuation of suffering and rebirth either. He makes reference to the teaching on the "twelve links of dependent co-origination" in this verse and says, since there are no senses or objects of sense, no conscious (a "seer," in this case) could arise. And with no consciousness, no contact can occur; and with no contact, no feeling; and with no feeling, no craving.*

*And with no craving, there can be no grasping to the idea that things exist inherently or self-existently, which would then result in becoming" (bhava) which in turn leads to "birth" and "old age and death."*

*It's not this cycle doesn't exist at all. But Nagarjuna notes here that by proving one of the links in the chain – the senses – have no inherent existence, none of the other links have any inherent existence either. We are perpetuate our suffering because we are unaware of the emptiness of things, that we are merely projecting the perpetuation of our suffering -- and it's not happening in any other way than that. Dependent origination itself only exists dependently on the mind that projects it, and is as empty of self-existence as everything else.*

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व्याख्यातं श्रवणं घ्राणं रसनं स्पर्शनं मनः ।

दशनिनैव जानीयाच्छ्रोतृश्रोतव्यकादि च ॥ ९ ॥

3.9

Hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking,  
As well as the hearer and what is heard, and the others –  
They can all be understood  
Through this explanation of seeing.

*Arya Nagarjuna concludes the chapter by pointing out that everything he's said about the sense of sight also holds true for the other five senses. And what he's said about the seer can be extrapolated to hearers, smellers, tasters, etc.; and everything said about visible objects also applies to sounds, smells, taste, and the rest.*

*So it's not that the senses, the objects of the senses, and the relationship between the senses and their objects don't exist at all. They do, of course. But only interdependently, only as a projection, only seemingly and apparently. None of them can exist as they seem.*