

Class Two: An Analysis of Doers and Deeds

सद्भूतः कारकः कर्म सद्भूतं न करोत्ययं ।

sadbhūtaḥ kārakaḥ karma sadbhūtaṁ na karotyayaṁ ।

कारको नाप्यसद्भूतः कर्मासद्भूतमीहते ॥ १

kārako nāpyasadbhūtaḥ karmāsadbhūtamīhate ॥ 1

8.1

One who is really a doer
Could never do
That which is really a deed

And one who is really a non-doer
Could never do that
Which is not a deed

In this chapter, Arya Nagarjuna moves from a discussion of the emptiness of things or objects outside of ourselves (“phenomena,” objects, or the “parts of a person” -- “mine”) to the emptiness of the self (“person” or subjects -- “me”). While it may be that the outside world is empty of any true existence and exists only by virtue of being conceptualized and labelled, what about the subject that does the labelling? Surely it must really exist!

The issue of whether there is a truly existing person or subject (a “me”) is here framed in terms of action – karma or causality. If there isn’t an actor or doer (karaka), who is it that does the action (karma) that keeps the individual in this suffering realm?

An opponent might assert that experiences (pleasant and unpleasant) are produced or caused by good or bad actions. Cause and effect must truly exist, and someone who creates the cause and experiences the effect must also truly exist. In other words, karma or action (the “deed”) must have some real, independent existence and someone who creates that karma (a “doer”) must also really exist.

In this opening verse, Arya Nagarjuna states one of the conclusions he will prove in the subsequent verses: If there were someone who truly existed (“by definition,” essentially) as a doer, he or she would not need to do anything – for they are already a “doer.” And someone who exists essentially as a non-doer could never do anything either – for if they did, they’d be a “doer” which would be impossible for a truly existing “non-doer.”

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सद्भूतस्य क्रिया नास्ति कर्म च स्यादकर्तृकं ।

sadbhūtasya kriyā nāsti karma ca syādakartṛkaṁ ।

सद्भूतस्य क्रिया नास्ति कर्ता च स्यादकर्मकाः ॥ २

sadbhūtasya kriyā nāsti kartā ca syādakarmakāḥ ॥ 2

8.2

For that which really is,
The doing can't exist
Or else you'd have a deed
Without a doer

For that which really is,
The doing can't exist
Or else you'd have a doer
Without a deed

If there were someone who existed essentially, truly, independently as a "doer" – let's say someone who was essentially a "surfer" – they would be so because they presumably have surfed and are thereafter somehow permanently conjoined to and defined by that action. Were there such a "surfer," he or she would never need to surf again (being somehow permanently and unchangingly conjoined to the action of surfing which defines him or her as a "surfer").

So, in such a case, it would be unnecessary for a surfer to surf to be a "surfer." "That which is already an agent in virtue of performing an action," writes Je Tsongkapa, "now does not have another action to perform in order to become an agent."

And without a surfer surfing, there could be an act called "surfing" that wasn't done by a "surfer" (for "surfers" wouldn't surf).

A truly existent "surfer" and a truly existent "surfing" would exist independently and separable from one another. There could then be an actor who existed apart from the action that defined him or her as the actor, and an action that existed apart from the actor – a "doer without a deed" and a "deed without a doer."

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करोति यद्यसद्भूतो ऽसद्भूतं कर्म कारकः ।

karoti yadyasadbhūto 'sadbhūtaṁ karma kāraḥ ।

अहेतुकं भवेत्कर्म कर्ता चाहेतुको भवेत् ॥ ३

ahetukaṁ bhavetkarma kartā cāhetuko bhavet ॥ 3

8.3

But if he was not a doer
And he did that which wasn't a deed,
There'd be no cause for the deed
And no cause for the doer either.

So there can't be a truly existing doer (an essentially existing and therefore unchanging "surfer") who, existing separately from the truly existing act, does a truly existing act like surfing. Were this the case, the very doing of the act would change the unchanging doer – going surfing would, in this case, make the "surfer" something other than who they (unchangingly and essentially) are, which is a "surfer."

It seems equally impossible to have a "surfer" without there ever having been a time when they were not a "surfer" and then somehow became a "surfer" by surfing. But in that case there would be "surfing" done by a "non-surfer," an action separable from the actor who does the action.

If they were not already a "surfer," how could they ever become one? Someone who really was a "non-surfer" could never become a "surfer" by surfing. Apples don't become oranges, no matter what you do to them.

Having established that a truly existent "surfer" would never surf, and a truly existing action called "surfing" could not exist apart from a surfer, Arya Nagarjuna now just notes that it also makes no sense to say that were there not a doer (a surfer) who did something (surfing), there would be nothing that brought about the deed (there can be no "surfing" without a surfer) and "no cause for the doer either" (i.e., there would be no one we could call a "surfer" until and unless they surfed).

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हेतावसति कार्यं च कारणं च न विद्यते ।

hetāvasati kāryam ca kāraṇam ca na vidyate ।

तदभावे क्रिया कर्ता करणं च न विद्यते ॥ ४

tadabhāve kriyā kartā karaṇam ca na vidyate ॥ 4

8.4

If in fact there was no cause
Then the result and cause as well
Would be impossible

And if these things do not exist
The deed, the doer, and the doing
Are all illogical

If there was no cause to things – if doers and deeds, surfers and surfing, existed independently and were not brought into existence by each other – there would be neither results (for a result is something brought about by a cause) nor causes (for without a result brought about, it makes no sense to say that something is a “cause”).

A surfer becomes such by surfing, and surfing comes into being when done by a surfer. Were this not the case, there would be no results – a “surfer” who comes into existence by “surfing”; and an activity called “surfing” brought about when done by a “surfer.”

And there couldn't be “causes” were there no results. If there were no surfers brought about by surfing, how could there be surfing (the purpose of which is bring about “surfers”)? And if there were no surfing brought about by surfers, how could there be surfers?

So, Arya Nagarjuna points out, if the deed, the doer, and the doing – surfing, the surfer, and the going surfing – are extracted from the web of cause and effect, none of them makes any sense at all.

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धर्माधर्मौ न विद्येते क्रियादीनामसंभवे ।

dharmādharmau na vidyete kriyādīnāmasambhave ।

धर्मे चासत्यधर्मे च फलं तज्जं न विद्यते ॥ ५

dharme cāsatyadharme ca phalaṁ tajjaṁ na vidyate ॥ 5

8.5

If we establish deeds and such
To be illogical, then there could be
No right action and no wrong.

If right or wrong acts don't exist
Then there'd be no results
Which come from doing them.

And if we say that deeds and doers truly exist, that is, separable and independent of the process of cause and effect, then the whole edifice of morality crumbles: there is no "right action" (dharma) or "wrong action" (adharna) because there would be no necessary connection between the doer and the deeds he or she does.

Arya Nagarjuna here begins to turn an implicit opponent's objection completely around. For one might argue that there must be real, truly existing actors and actions because of the moral law of karma – an action done, positive or negative, will have a similar effect on the actor who did that action, and therefore actions and actors truly exist. The law of karma seems to prove their true existence!

But as a result of the analyses of the last several verses, Arya Nagarjuna can now turn this argument inside out: If actors and actions truly existed, there would be no possibility for a law of karma, for actors and actions, doers and deeds, would exist independently of one another.

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फले ऽसति न मोक्षाय न स्वर्गायोपपद्यते ।

phale 'sati na mokṣāya na svargāyopapadyate ।

मार्गः सर्वक्रियाणां च नैरर्थक्यं प्रसज्यते ॥ ६

mārgaḥ sarvakriyāṅām ca nairarthakyam prasajyate ॥ 6

8.6

With no results, you couldn't prove
A path that leads to higher births
Or one that makes us free—

Then you'd be saying
There's no point at all
In any deeds at all.

Driving the point home, Arya Nagarjuna notes that if there were no necessary results following from good or bad deeds which acted as causes for those results, then there would be no point to a religious life at all. There would be no way to improve oneself within samsara by following a path that would lead to the "higher" rebirths (as a human or pleasure being in a heaven), nor would there be a path that would lead out of suffering altogether.

This kind of hopelessness and nihilism would be, our author argues, the consequence not of understanding the emptiness of doer and deed, but rather of positing the self-existence of doer and deed.

So in another interesting and unexpected turn, Arya Nagarjuna is saying that it is precisely our ignorance about actors and actions (thinking that they have some kind of self-existence they do not and cannot have) that makes it possible for us to deny a necessary connection between them. Belief in self-existence leads to amoral or immoral behavior!

As one commentator puts it, "It is ironical that it is the urge to guarantee more reality and significance for ourselves than emptiness appears to allow that leads to a view of life as perfectly impossible and pointless. . . . Only in the context of emptiness – what might appear to be the greatest threat to meaningfulness – can a meaningful life be understood."

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कारकः सदसद्भूतः सदसत्कुरुते न तत् ।

kāraḥ sadasadbhūtaḥ sadasatkurute na tat ।

परस्परविरुद्धं हि सच्चासच्चैकतः कुतः ॥ ७

parasparaviruddham hi saccāsaccaikataḥ kutaḥ ॥ 7

8.7

One who both was *and* wasn't a doer
Couldn't do that which was *and* wasn't
"Is" and "is not" are mutually exclusive;
How could a single thing ever be both?

This verse returns to the dilemma of doer and deeds. To summarize so far:

First, a truly existing doer could not bring about a truly existing deed, for as we have seen, "truly existent" means separable and independent, and therefore not in any kind of cause and effect relationship. One truly existing thing cannot bring about another, because they both would already exist.

Second, Arya Nagarjuna also has noted above that it would make no sense to say that doers and deeds existed outside of the causality either, for that would result in the non-existence of both cause and effect, the doer and deed. Again, if there were no surfers brought about by surfing, how could there be surfing? And if there were no surfing brought about by surfers, how could there be surfers? So here, Arya Nagarjuna is pointing out that if doers and deeds did not bring about one another, how could they exist?

So it's not possible for a truly existent doer (a "surfer" who doesn't surf) to do a truly existent deed ("surfing" that isn't done by a surfer), nor for a non-existent doer (a "non-surfer") to do a non-existent deed (like "surfing" that isn't done by a surfer).

In this verse he rejects another possibility. Someone can't be both a doer (surfer) and non-doer (non-surfer) at the same time, and the deed can't be both existing (surfing) and non-existing (surfing that isn't done by a surfer) at the same time. This is the law of non-contradiction or parasparaviruddha in the Sanskrit.

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सता च क्रियते नासन्नासता क्रियते च सत् ।

satā ca kriyate nāsannāsatā kriyate ca sat ।

कर्त्रा सर्वे प्रसज्यन्ते दोषास्तत्र त एव हि ॥ ८

kartrā sarve prasajyante doṣāstatra ta eva hi ॥ 8

8.8

One who is really a doer
Could never do
That which is not a deed

Neither could one who was not
Ever do that which really is

Here as well you'd run into
The same problem as before

*Arya Nagarjuna here eliminates some more (theoretical) possibilities: a truly existent doer – i.e., somebody who, by definition, does something – could never **not** do something, for it is by the doing of a particular act (surfing) that makes the particular actor who he or she is (a surfer). Reversing the notion explored above that a truly existing “surfer” would never need to surf to be a “surfer,” Arya Nagarjuna here points out that there would also be no meaning in calling a person a “surfer” (in the kind of essentialistic way we’re thinking about it here) if he or she ever stopped surfing and did something else. How could a “surfer” still be a “surfer” if they were to stop surfing and take a shower, have some breakfast, go to work, etc.?*

*Nor does it make any sense to say that someone who was essentially a non-doer of some deed (a non-surfer) could ever do the deed (surf). A non-surfer is by definition someone who doesn't surf. A truly existing “non-surfer” could **never** surf!*

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नासद्भूतं न सद्भूतः सदसद्भूतमेव वा ।

nāsadbhūtaṃ na sadbhūtaḥ sadasadbhūtameva vā ।

करोति कारकः कर्म पूर्वोक्तेरेव हेतुभिः ॥ ९

karoti kāraakaḥ karma pūrvoktaireva hetubhiḥ ॥ 9

8.9

You can't have
One who is a doer
Together with that
Which is not a deed

Because, as I've said before,
An "is" cannot function
Towards something that "is not"

A truly existing doer does not do something which is not a deed – a "surfer" does not also "not surf", for that would mean they could be something and not be that something at the same time. Nor could an actor do something that both is and is not a action – a "surfer" does not both surf and not surf at the same time.

Arya Nagarjuna is here and in the next, calling up the law of non-contradiction he already invoked in the seventh verse: one thing can't be itself and also its opposite.

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नासद्भूतो ऽपि सद्भूतं सद्सद्भूतमेव वा ।

nāsadbhūto 'pi sadbhūtaṁ sadsadbhūtameva vā ।

करोति कारकः कर्म पूर्वोक्तेरेव हेतुभिः ॥ १०

karoti kārakaḥ karma pūrvoktaireva hetubhiḥ ॥ 10

8.10

You can't have
One who's not a doer
Together with that
Which is a deed

Because, as I've said before,
An "is" cannot function
Towards something that "is not"

Nor could one who truly exists as a non-doer (a non-surfer) ever do a deed (surf), nor could a non-doer do something that wasn't a deed for that matter. Same law of non-contradiction involved here.

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करोति सदसद्भूतो न सन्नासच्च कारकः ।

karoti sadasadbhūto na sannāsacca kārakaḥ ।

कर्म तत्तु विजानीयात्पूर्वोक्तेरेव हेतुभिः ॥ ११

karma tatttu vijānīyātpūrvoktaireva hetubhiḥ ॥ 11

8.11

You couldn't have one
Both a doer and not
Together with that
Both a deed and not
For the same reasons I have
Previously explained.

Final application of the law of non-contradiction: One who was (impossibly) both a doer and a non-doer (a surfer and a non-surfer) could not do what was both an action and a non-action (surfing and not surfing).

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प्रतीत्य कारकः कर्म तं प्रतीत्य च कारकं ।

pratītya kāraḥ karma taṁ pratītya ca kāraḥ ।

कर्म प्रवर्तते नान्यत्पश्यामः सिद्धिकारणं ॥ १२

karma pravartate nānyatpaśyāmaḥ siddhikāraṇaṁ ॥ 12

8.12

The doer must depend on the deed
And the deed on this same doer
And apart from occurring in dependence
You won't see a cause for anything

So here's the bottom line. A doer ("surfer") must depend on the deed ("surfing") that defines the doer as the doer. But the deed ("surfing") also depends on the doer who does the deed (a "surfer"). Neither can exist before the other, and neither can exist independently of the other.

They do exist, however. Doer and deed both exist in mutual interdependence. And they are empty of existing in any way other than that.

Let's review. One cannot really cause the other, for that would assume the independent existence of one or another. If a surfer brought about the activity of surfing, he or she would have to exist as a surfer before the surfing that he or she did. And if there was a self-existent activity of surfing that made people who did that activity surfers, then there would have to be surfing before there were surfers. Doer and deed, agent and action, surfer and surfing cannot exist one before the other and so one can't really be causing the other.

And there also can't be a simultaneously self-existent doer and deed either, for that also would require either that the two things were identical or that they were different and separable and therefore that both already existed already. Surfers and surfing are not identical, and there is no sense in saying that there could be a surfer without the activity of surfing and vice versa.

The mutually interdependent relationship between doer and deed, surfer and surfing, is projected onto them by our mind. There is a connection between the two, but that connection does not exist "out there" somewhere. And that's why there could be doer and deed, surfer and surfing. Were these things not empty, they would be impossible.

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एवं विद्यादुपादानं व्युत्सर्गादिति कर्मणः ।

evam vidyādupādānaṁ vyutsargāditi karmaṇaḥ ।

कर्तुश्च कर्मकर्तृभ्यां शेषान् भावान् विभावयेत् ॥ १३

kartuśca karmakartṛbhyāṁ śeṣān bhāvān vibhāvayet ॥ 13

8.13

Since we've eliminated deeds and their doers
Now apply that to substantial causes as well
Through understanding doers and their deeds
You can figure out all other working things.

Arya Nagarjuna says here that the "elimination of deeds and their doers," that is, the proof in this chapter of the impossibility of any self-nature or independent existence of either, also applies to all the "substantial causes as well." The word translated here as "substantial causes" is upadana, often rendered as "grasping," "attachment," or "appropriation."

The ignorant "grasping" to the idea of self-existence to things, according to the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, is the immediate or substantial cause to "becoming" (bhava) which in turn leads to "birth" and "old age and death." This cycle can be broken only through a deep understanding of the emptiness of all things that are like doers and deeds.

All other "working things" (things that do something, that function) are pairs that are involved in the same kind of mutually dependent relationship as "doers and deeds." Creators and that which they create, movers and the act of moving, seers and that which they see – they all exist in exactly the same way. They exist only through the mind imposing or imputing a relationship of mutual dependence on the two elements. They come into existence when the mind draws that relationship of mutual dependence, a relationship which is not there until the mind imputes it.

All forms of subjectivity ("doers," "surfers," "seers") do not exist independently but only dependently. Subjects are as empty of self-existence as objects.

*Meditation for Class Two:
An Analysis of Doers and Deeds*

Let's investigate first who we think we are. Who is the person we call "me"?

Who is this person now, in this present moment?

Isn't what we call "me" just the sum of everything we think we were, of all our past experiences? If so, we are, one could say, our karma – the deeds we did and the seeds those deeds planted, both consciously and unconsciously. The actor is defined by the actions the actor does, right?

But where is that karma that defines us stored? Where is it located? Who has it? If we are defined by our actions, where exactly is the actor? Where is the person that is defined by his or her karma?

Is there a "me" apart or separable from the deeds that define me? Could we be ourselves before doing what we did? Could there be a you before the deeds that define you were done by you?

Where is the person that could exist before the activity that makes that person possible?

And what about the actions that define you? Could there be an activity, a deed, a karmic action that wasn't done by somebody? Were those actions just there waiting to be done by you? Did the actions that define you exist before they were done by you? Wouldn't that also be impossible?

So now we have to rethink how we look at things. The whole entire thing -- the doer, the doing, and the deed; the planter of the karma, the planting of the karma and the karma itself – it's all just one big mental image.

There is a doer and a deed; there is cause and effect. But it exists only as a projection. There is an appearance cause and effect. And this is how it is possible for "you" to create karma and to be the karma you created. Actor and action exist only in mutual interdependence. And they could not exist in any other way.

Cause and effect can only work because they do not exist the way they seem. There can't be a doer with the deed, and there can't be a deed without a doer.