

Class 3: An Analysis of What is There Before

दर्शनश्रणादीनि वेदनादीनि चाप्यथ ।

darśanaśraṇādīni vedanādīni cāpyatha ।

भवन्ति यस्य प्रागेभ्यः सो ऽस्तीत्येके वदन्त्युत ॥ १

bhavanti yasya prāgebhyaḥ so 'stītyeke vadantyuta ॥ 1

9.1

Some say hearing, sight, and such
And mental modes like feelings
Are triggered by their object
Which must exist before

Arya Nagarjuna anticipates a possible objection to the claim that there is no self-existent person or “me” in the first two verses of this chapter. There must be a truly existent person because if there isn't, who is doing the experiencing when one experiences something? There would have to be a previously existing “hearer” for there to be hearing, a seer for there to be seeing, a feeler for there to be feelings, etc.

In his commentary, Je Tsongkapa says that with this chapter Arya Nagarjuna is beginning a discussion of the emptiness of persons (or of the subject, the “me”), having completed the explanation of the emptiness of phenomena (objects, the “mine”). If there are hearers and seers and feelers who exist before the hearing, seeing, and feeling, then one could say they exist independently and with a self-nature. The “object which must exist before” which triggers hearing, seeing, feeling, and so forth is thus the person who hears, sees, feels, etc. If there is such a person who “exists before,” then we could say there is a self-existent person.

One could also argue, on the same grounds, that the “object which must exist before” mentioned in this verse could refer the objects of sense. How could there be a hearing if there weren't something audible that occurred first? How could there be a seeing if there weren't something there visible first? The imaginary opponent may be picking up on what Arya Nagarjuna said in the last verse of the last chapter about a “grasping.” For this is how perception works according to certain schools of Buddhism: an object of sense is “grasped” by a sense power that reaches out to it. But there also must be someone who “grasps” for there to be such a “grasping.” So the objection is that the grasper who grasps that which is grasped must exist prior to that which is grasped.

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कथं ह्यविद्यमानस्य दर्शनादि भवष्यति ।

katham hyavidyamānasya darśanādi bhavaṣyati ।

भावस्य तस्मात्प्रागेभ्यः सो ऽस्ति भावो व्यवस्थितः ॥ २

bhāvasya tasmātprāgebhyaḥ so 'sti bhāvo vyavasthitaḥ ॥ 2

9.2

If these things did not exist
How could sight and such occur?
Objects must already be there
Existing before we see them

If “these things” (meaning either the experiencer of experiences, or the objects that trigger the experience) did not exist first, who or what would there be to see, hear, etc.?

Both of the two great commentators, Candrakīrti and Je Tsongkapa, give the same example. If there weren't already somebody who existed before he or she obtained money, how could there be anyone who obtained money? You wouldn't say that someone who did not exist (the classic trope here is a “son of a barren woman”) accumulated wealth, would you?

If we take “these things” to mean the objects of senses, the same argument unfolds. How could there be a seeing of something if there wasn't a previously existing visible thing?

Je Tsongkapa also explains “sight and such” to refer to both the five sense powers or faculties (sight, hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling) and also to the various mental “modes” or factors (as also indicated in the previous verse). In the Abhidharma texts, there are fifty-one mental factors listed, beginning with the five “omnipresent” ones of feeling, discrimination, intention, contact, and mental engagement.

The point here is that, just as there must be seer in order to see, there must be a previously existing mind or thinker in order for the mind to “have” feelings, discriminations, intentions, etc.

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दर्शनश्रवणादिभ्यो वेदनादिभ्य एव च ।

darśanaśravaṇādibhyo vedanādibhya eva ca ।

यः प्राग्व्यवस्थितो भावः केन प्रज्ञप्यते ऽथ सः ॥ ३

yaḥ prāgvyaavasthito bhāvaḥ kena prajñapyate 'tha saḥ ॥ 3

9.3

That thing which is already there
Sitting by itself
Before we ever see or hear
Or sense it or the like—
Tell me how it is that you
Establish that it's there?

This verse begins Arya Nagarjuna's reply to the contention that there must be a previously existing self in order for experiences to be possible, or a previously existing sense object in order for it to be sensed.

He first points out that it makes no sense to say that something exists before the experience of that something. For one thing, how can one know something is there before it is seen, heard, felt, etc.? Something or someone who existed prior to being perceived would indeed exist independently. But something that is not perceived is not known. So how would one ever know that that something or someone existed until it was perceived?

Furthermore, how can we say there is a seer, hearer, or feeler who exists before they see, hear, or feel? The one who sees cannot exist before the act of seeing that makes it possible for us to call them "one who sees." If we imagined things differently, then there could be a seer before he or she saw anything, a hearer who wasn't hearing, etc.

From another angle we can also say that if there were a self-existent, independent, previously existing seer, hearer, smeller, taster or feeler, they would always be seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling – and therefore would not need to see, hear, smell, taste, and feel again or anew.

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विनापि दर्शनादीनि यदि चासौ व्यवस्थतः ।

vināpi darśanādīni yadi cāsau vyavasthataḥ ।

अमून्यपि भविष्यन्ति विना तेन न संशयः ॥ ४

amūnyapi bhaviṣyanti vinā tena na saṁśayaḥ ॥ 4

9.4

If you claim it sits there
Before ever being seen or such
No doubt their senses also
Could exist without its presence

Next, Arya Nagarjuna points out that if you assume a previously existing visible thing which existed as such before being seen, then you would also have to say that there were sense powers that could also exist without sensing anything. If there previously existed a visible thing it would be separable from the sense power of seeing. . . and vice versa.

So if there were an independently and previously existing visible object, there would also have to be an independently and previously existing sense power of seeing just waiting to see the visible object when it appeared. There could be a “seeing” that wasn’t a seeing of something!

The same logic holds if we take the “it” that “sits there before ever being seen or such” as the person who sees. If there were an independently and previously existing seer, then there would also have to be an independently and previously existing ability to see that was just waiting to be deployed by a seer who was already and always seeing!

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अज्यते केन चित् कश्चित् किं चित्केन चिदज्यते ।

ajyate kena cit kaścit kiṃ citkena cidajyate ।

कुतः किं चिद्विना कश्चित्किम् चित्कं चिद्विना कुतः ॥ ५

kutaḥ kiṃ cidvinā kaścitkim citkaṃ cidvinā kutaḥ ॥ 5

9.5

Which one is identified
And which identifies?
In which one's absence is it
That the other could not be?

Whichever one is absent,
How could the other be?

How could there be a visible object until someone sees it? And how could there be someone seeing something until there is a visible object to see? If one is absent, so is the other. There is no visible object without someone seeing it, and no seer without a visible object that is seen.

Arya Nagarjuna is here pointing to a profound general point. Subjects ("me") and objects ("mine") in general exist only in a mutually dependent way. There is no subject without an object, and vice versa. There is no previously existing me that then perceives the world around me, nor is there a previously existing world waiting around for me to come and perceive it.

An "existing thing" and a "knowable thing" are synonyms in Buddhist logic. A thing literally comes into existence only when known. And if it is not known by someone, it literally does not exist. An object comes into existence only when perceived by a subject. But by the same token, there is no subject who exists until it perceives an object. The mind or subject too only comes into existences when it functions as a perceiver or knower of an object.

Everything exists interdependently. And at the highest level this means in a mutually dependent way that can only be coming from a mind that projects itself as a subject, the objects the subject perceives, and the mutually dependent relationship between them.

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सर्वेभ्यो दर्शनादिभ्यः कश्चित्पूर्वो न विद्यते ।

sarvebhyo darśanādibhyaḥ kaścitpūrvo na vidyate ।

अज्यते दर्शनादिनामन्येन पुनरन्यदा ॥ ६

ajyate darśanādināmanyena punaranyadā ॥ 6

9.6

It can't be that a thing exists
Before the group of sight and such

Or else, establish it exists
In some other time
Than that in which you saw it
And through some other means
Besides seeing and the rest

This verse seems to be Arya Nagarjuna giving voice to another possible objection. So maybe there isn't a person or self-existent subject that exists before all things such as seeing and the rest (sarvebhyo darshanadibhyah). But there is such a person or self-existent subject who exists prior to each of these things individually. There is a person who sees and who exists while the seeing is going on, and then at another time (anyada) there is someone who hears and exists when there is something audible, etc.

There is still, the opponent might claim, a real, truly existing person, self, or subject. But that person is at one time a seer, and at another time a hearer, etc. The self would under this understanding actually be a series of truly existing selves.

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सर्वेभ्यो दर्शनादिभ्यो यदि पूर्वं न विद्यते ।

sarvebhyo darśanādibhyo yadi pūrvo na vidyate ।

एकैकस्मात्कथं पूर्वं दर्शनादेः स विद्यते ॥ ७

ekaikasmātkatham pūrvo darśanādeḥ sa vidyate ॥ 7

9.7

You say a thing does not exist
Before the group of sight and such—
How then could it come before
Each individual power of sense?

Arya Nagarjuna replies that this makes no sense. If you concede there is no self-existing person before all the sense powers, how could there be one who existed before each one separately?

Je Tsongkapa says that to deny a self who exists before all the sense powers and such, while affirming a self who exists before each of these powers, is like saying that although a forest does not exist before all the trees, it does exist before each one of them.

If there were a person or self who existed before each of the powers of sense individually and sequentially, would the person who is seeing at one time be the same or different than the person who is at another time hearing?

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द्रष्टा स एव स श्रोता स एव यदि वेदकः ।

draṣṭā sa eva sa śrotā sa eva yadi vedakaḥ ।

एकैकस्माद्भवेत्पूर्वं एवं चैतन्न युज्यते ॥ ८

ekaikasmādbhavetpūrva evaṁ caitanna yujyate ॥ 8

9.8

But neither would it be correct
If eye or ear or feeler
Were themselves to come before
Each of their respective objects

It would make no sense to say that there was a self who at different times was a seer, a hearer, and a feeler while somehow remaining itself – a seer who remains a seer while later becoming a hearer and hearing. For if there were a series of selves, and the self at each point in that series was the same self, then again there would be a self who had the capability to see, hear, and feel who existed before the seeing, hearing, feeling, etc. that it would be doing later.

A seer who remained a seer while hearing a sound could not be seeing a sight at the same time as hearing a sound – these things happen only one at a time. A seer who remained a seer while hearing would be a seer who was not seeing while being a hearer who was hearing!

The supposed person who pre-exists before one of the sense powers arising could not, therefore, be identical to the supposed person who pre-exists before another of those sense powers.

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द्रष्टान्य एव श्रोतान्यो वेदको ऽन्यः पुनर्यदि ।

draṣṭānya eva śrotānyo vedako 'nyaḥ punaryadi ।

सति स्याद्दृष्टरि श्रोता बहुत्वं चात्मनं भवेत् ॥ ९

sati syāddraṣṭari śrotā bahutvaṁ cātmanam bhavet ॥ 9

9.9

If seer, hearer, and feeler
Were really separate from each other,
Then if I saw when I was hearing
I'd need to multiply myself

But if the person who is seeing is completely different from the person who later hears, how could these two truly different selves have any relationship to one another? In what sense would such a continuously changing self be a "self" at all?

Furthermore, if these different selves really or inherently existed as completely different – if there were a truly existing seer who was different and separable from a truly existing hearer – then these truly existing but different selves could exist at the same time. There would, in this case, be (as one commentator says) "multiple simultaneous selves."

There would in this case have to be "a multitude of selves" (bahutvam atmanam). There would be different seers, hearers, and feelers, but they would all exist at the same time! It would be pretty crowded inside!

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दर्शनश्रवणादीनि वेदनादीनि चाप्यथ ।

darśanaśravaṇādīni vedanādīni cāpyatha ।

भवन्ति येभ्यस्तेष्वेष भूतेष्वपि न विद्यते ॥ १०

bhavanti yebhyasteṣveṣa bhūteṣvapi na vidyate ॥ 10

9.10

This seeing, hearing, and the rest,
And feelings and the like,
And all the things that come from them
They simply don't exist

Arya Nagarjuna is here saying that not only is there no self or person that can inherently exist as the seer of seeing, the hearer of hearing and the feeler of feelings. Neither is that self somehow grounded in the "things that come from them," the elements (bhutas) of earth, wind, fire, and water.

The self cannot be found in the physical elements of solidity, mobility, heat, and fluidity, which are the bases for the objects that the sense powers sense, any more than it can be found in that which is the seer, hearer, feeler, etc. of those sense powers. The same reasoning as given above would apply. Could an experiencer of solidity exist before there were solid things to experience? Could solidity exist before there was an experience of solidity?

Everything exists in the same way: relationally and interdependently. Nothing exists independently. Nothing exists on its own. Subjects and objects mutually create each other.

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दर्शनस्त्रवणादीनि वेदनादीनि चाप्यथ ।

darśanasravaṇādīni vedanādīni cāpyatha ।

न विद्यते चेद्यस्य स न विद्यन्त इमान्यपि ॥ ११

na vidyate cedyasya sa na vidyanta imānyapi ॥ 11

9.11

Who is it that sees and hears
And feels and all the rest?
Without this one, the rest of them
Would never come to be

Here Arya Nagarjuna does two things. First, he notes that if there is no inherent or true existence to a seer who sees, a hearer who hears, a feeler who feels, etc., there cannot be any true existence to sense faculties of seeing, hearing, feeling, and the rest either. If the seer exists only dependently on the seeing, then the seeing also exists only dependently on the seer. As Candrakirti says, "If the one of whom seeing and the other kinds of perception does not exist, then it has been made evident that seeing and the others kinds of perception do not exist."

But our author is also here reminding us that just because things don't exist the way they seem doesn't mean they don't exist at all. "No one who is not insane would reject the existence of the person who is the agent of such things as seeing and hearing," writes Je Tsongkapa. "Therefore its total nonexistence makes no sense."

There is a middle way here. To say that the seer of sights, the hearer of sounds, etc., doesn't exist at all is fall off one extreme – the extreme of nihilism or non-existence. But such a seer or hearer certainly doesn't exist independently or self-existently, which would be the other extreme.

Candrakirti summarizes: "Both the obsession with things as realities and the obsession with things as unrealities are to be repudiated."

The subject arises only when in a mutually dependent relation with an object, and vice versa. Things exist, but only interdependently. Both subjects and objects are empty of existing on their own.

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प्राक् च यो दर्शनादिभ्यः सांप्रतं चोर्ध्वमेव च ।

prāk ca yo darśanādibhyaḥ sāmpratam cordhvameva ca ।

न विद्यते ऽस्ति नास्तीति निवृत्तास्तत्र कल्पनाः ॥ १२

na vidyate 'sti nāstīti nivṛttāstatra kalpanāḥ ॥ 12

9.12

Whether it comes before
Or after, or at the same time
As the seeing and such,
It simply cannot be
So give up all these fantasies
That claim they do or don't exist

Arya Nagarjuna summarizes the chapter in this verse. First, a seer of sights (or the sight that's seen) cannot come before the seeing. A seer who does not see, and a sight which is not visible, are impossible. Furthermore, if there were a "seer" who existed independently of the seeing, they would be always and already seeing before the seeing that makes them a "seer." If there were a pre-existent person, they would have to be the same person who saw, then heard, then felt, etc., or they would have to be different people. If they were the same, the person who was a seer and then became a hearer would still be a seer but would not be seeing because they were now a hearer hearing. And if they were truly existing but different selves who first saw and then heard, there would be multiple selves who, being separable and different, could also exist at the same time.

Second, a seer of a sight could not exist after the sight seen, for that would imply a sight and seeing that existed before a seer who sees a sight. It would also mean that there could be a seer who continued to exist as a seer after the sight was seen.

Finally, if the self-existent seer and the self-existent seeing of a sight occurred simultaneously (and not only mutually dependently), then that seer (being self-existent) could also exist even when not seeing, and the seeing (being self-existent) could exist even when there were no seer. Furthermore, Candrakīrti points out that there is no meaning to a seer who isn't seeing and of a seeing which isn't being done by a seer, so two impossible things can't occur simultaneously: "One never experiences simultaneous existence of two things each of which by itself does not exist, like the two horns of a rabbit: subject and perceiving do not exist by themselves, independent of each other."

*Meditation for Class Three:
An Analysis of What is There Before*

Picture yourself walking into a room. You open the door and you see the things that are in the room. So the things were in the room before you came in and saw them, right? They were there, pre-existing, as visible things before you, the seer, came into the room and saw them.

But is it possible for those things to exist as “visible things” before they were seen? Are you really walking through the door into a pre-existing room with pre-existing things in it?

What’s really going on when you walk into a room? There is no room and no visible things in the room before you came into the room and saw them. When you see the room and the things in the room you are creating them as visible things. They weren’t visible things before you saw them.

Nor is there a you who sees things before you see things. Seeing things creates the seer of things. When you see the room and the things in the room, you are also aware of yourself as a seer of a room and the things in the room. You do not exist as seer before you see something.

So when you walk into a room, you are creating the room and creating yourself as an experiencer of the room at the same time. The room and you as the experience of the room exist only in relation to one another, only mutually dependently.

Rehearse the process of walking into a room again and again and try to see yourself creating both the room and yourself.

Then think: what forces me to create this room, and my experience of this room, the way I do? How would I be able to create the causes that would force be to create this room as more enjoyable, more beautiful, warmer, nicer? And how could I create the causes that would force me to experience myself experiencing this room as happier and more content?