



MEDITATIONS ON EMPTINESS

CLASS TWO: WHAT IF THINGS *WEREN'T* EMPTY?

From Arya Nagarjuna's ROOT VERSES ON THE MIDDLE WAY:

यदि शून्यमिदं सर्वमुदयो नास्ति न व्ययः।

चतुर्णामार्यसत्यानामभावस्ते प्रसज्यते ॥ १

yadi śūnyamidaṃ sarvamudayo nāsti na vyayaḥ |  
caturṇāmāryasatyānāmabhāvaste prasajyate || 1

24.1

If everything were empty, nothing would arise and pass away. It would thus follow, according to you, that the four Arya truths would not exist.

*In this chapter, Arya Nagarjuna again strategically picks a subject definitive of orthodox Buddhism for analysis. The four Arya truths, according to the canonical texts, comprise the first teaching Lord Buddha gave after his enlightenment and form the essential core of the Buddha's Dharma. They are 1) the truth of suffering; 2) the truth that suffering has a cause; 3) the truth that there is an alternative to suffering; and 4) the truth that there is a path or method to attaining the alternative to suffering.*

*In the opening verses we hear the voice of the orthodox critic: If, as you (Arya Nagarjuna) claim, everything is empty of inherent existence, that would mean everything is nonexistent. Nonexistent things, like the body and mind that make up a person, would not arise or cease. There would be no arising of suffering and no cause for that arising, and there would be no cessation of suffering and no path that leads to that cessation. The critic is basically claiming that Arya Nagarjuna has undermined the very core of Buddhist doctrine with his theory of emptiness.*

*This chapter is crucial to the text as a whole not only because Arya Nagarjuna, in his response to the critic, clearly aligns himself with Buddhist orthodoxy, but also because in so doing he gives here one of the most cogent presentations of emptiness, of the relationship between emptiness and conventional reality, and of the "two truths" of deceptive reality and ultimate reality and how they are inextricably connected.*



शून्यतां फलसद्भावमधर्मं धर्ममेव च ॥

सर्वसंव्यवहारांश्च लौकिकान् प्रतिबाधसे ॥ ६

śūnyatām phalasadbhāvamadharmam dharmameva ca ॥  
sarvasaṁvyavahārāṁśca laukikān pratibādhasē ॥ 6

24.6

And also emptiness implies that there are no real results of righteous and unrighteous behavior. In fact, all world conventions are maligned!

*The opponent concludes here by saying that the doctrine of emptiness – understood to mean that things which are held to have no self-existent nature do not exist at all – also undercuts all morality (since everything is “empty” what does it matter what I do?) and, finally, all worldly conventions. There would be no meaning to everyday expressions like “eat” since there would be no one to eat, nothing to eat, and no eating possible with nonexistent beings and things.*



अत्र ब्रूमः शून्यतायां न त्वं वेत्सि प्रयोजनं।

शून्यतां शून्यतार्थं च तत एवं विहन्यसे ॥ ७

atra brūmaḥ śūnyatāyāṁ na tvaṁ vetsi prayojanaṁ |  
śūnyatām śūnyatārthaṁ ca tata evaṁ vihanyase || 7

24.7

We respond like this: You don't understand the purpose of emptiness, emptiness itself, or the meaning of emptiness. As a result, you are brought down by it.

*Arya Nagarjuna responds forcefully: You (the opponent represented in the first six verses) just don't understand emptiness at all! You don't understand the purpose (prayojana) of emptiness, which is, according to Candrakirti, to “bring all projections or imputations (prapanna) to perfect rest (upashama)”; or as Je Tsongkapa puts it, “to pacify fabrication, which is the grasping to things through mental representation.”*

*You (the opponent) don't understand emptiness, thinking that the absence of self-nature to things and beings means they don't exist at all.*

*And you don't understand the meaning of emptiness, which is the fact that things exist only dependently and that they do not exist independently. Emptiness, as Arya Nagarjuna states explicitly later on in this chapter (24.19), is dependent origination. To say things are empty of self-nature or essence is to say that they exist only dependently, and it does not say any more or less than that.*



द्वे सत्ये समुपाश्रित्य बुद्धानां धर्मदेशना ।

लोकसंवृतिसत्यं च सत्यं च परमार्थतः ॥ ८

dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā ।  
lokasaṁvṛṭisatyam ca satyam ca paramārthataḥ ॥ 8

24.8

The Buddha's teachings on Dharma are based on the two truths – the mundane and deceptive truth, and the truth that concerns ultimate meaning.

*Arya Nagarjuna, for the first time in the text, makes reference to the “two truths” or “two realities” (satya), and by way of responding to his opponent asserts that the Buddha's whole teaching on Dharma is based on the distinction between the two.*

*On the one hand, there is mundane or conventional truth which is also characterized as “deceptive” (samvṛti). To say that is “mundane” or “conventional” means that there is a social agreement about everyday reality as it appears validly. Those whose perceptions are invalid due to mental illness, the influence of drugs or alcohol, etc., are not seeing the “truth” or “reality” as conventionally it is constituted.*

*“Conventional” also means “mutually dependent.” Things are “deceptive” in that they don't appear as dependent but rather seem to have independent reality to them. Deceptive reality appears to ordinary people in a way different than the way that level of reality really exists – as a set of dependently existing projections or imputations, empty of any self-nature which is how ultimately things exist.*

*Deceptive reality is not deceptive from the perspective of those who perceive things the way they really are – empty of self-existence. These would be Aryas in the direct perception of emptiness and Buddhas who at all times see the appearances of things in “deceptive reality” but are not deceived by them, that is, they simultaneously see that everything is a projection and they see that everything is empty of being anything other than a projection.*



ये ऽनयोर्न विजानन्ति विभागं सत्ययोर्द्वयोः।

ते तत्त्वं न विजानन्ति गम्भीरं बुद्धशासने ॥ ९

ye 'nayorna vijānanti vibhāgaṃ satyayordvayoḥ |  
te tattvaṃ na vijānanti gambhīraṃ buddhaśāsane || 9

24.9

Those who don't understand the distinction between these two do not understand the deep reality of the Buddha's teaching.

*Again, a pointed barb directed at the supposedly "orthodox" opponent. The "deep reality" (gambira tattva) of the Buddha's teaching depends on understanding that there are two turths or realities and how they interrelate.*



व्यवहारमनाश्रित्य परमार्थो न देश्यते।

परमार्थमनागम्य निर्वाणं नाधिगम्यते ॥ १०

vyavahāramanāśritya paramārtho na deśyate |  
paramārthamanāgamyā nirvāṇaṁ nādhigamyate || 10

24.10

Without relying on conventional reality, the ultimate meaning cannot be taught. Without arriving at the ultimate meaning of things, nirvana cannot be attained.

*The ultimate meaning or truth of things relies on conventional reality, in at least two ways.*

*First, the ultimate truth of things is that they are empty of having any self-nature. But emptiness itself is not free-floating. The emptiness of conventional reality depends on there being a conventional reality which is empty.*

*Second, the ultimate nature of things can only be taught through words and concepts that are themselves part of conventional reality. If ultimate reality is not taught through words and concepts it cannot be understood, and attaining nirvana would be impossible. As Je Tsongkapa puts it, “Therefore, since it is a means for achieving liberation, just as person who desires water looks for a vessel, one who aspires for liberation must undoubtedly at the beginning accept the conventional just as it is.”*



विनाशयति दुर्दृष्टा शून्यता मन्दमेधसं ॥

सर्पो यथा दुर्गृहीतो विद्या वा दुष्प्रसाधिता ॥ ११

vināśayati durdr̥ṣṭā śūnyatā mandamedhasam | |  
sarpo yathā durgr̥hīto vidyā vā duṣprasādhitā | | 11

24.11

The feeble-minded are destroyed by their wrong view of emptiness, like those who mishandle a snake or cast a spell poorly.

*A wrong understanding of emptiness can be as dangerous as a mishandled snake. To think, for example, as our opponent at the beginning of this chapter does, that emptiness means things don't exist casts one into the dangerous extreme of nihilism – nothing matters because nothing exists.*

*Another wrong view of emptiness is mentioned by Candrakīrti: thinking that the emptiness of things is itself some kind of non-empty thing – a self-existent “ground of being” or some such. Emptiness is not something. It is the absence of something. And as such, emptiness itself is empty!*



सर्वं च युज्यते तस्य शून्यता यस्य युज्यते।

सर्वं न युज्यते तस्य शून्यं यस्य न युज्यते ॥ १४

sarvaṃ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate |  
sarvaṃ na yujyate tasya śūnyaṃ yasya na yujyate || 14

24.14

For the one to whom emptiness is clear, everything is clear. And for the one for whom emptiness is not clear, nothing is clear.

*If one understands emptiness properly – as the lack of self-existence to things which exist only dependently – then “everything” (meaning the four Arya truths, the existence of the Three Jewels, etc., discussed above, as well as everything else in conventional and deceptive reality) makes sense.*

*It’s only when one is confused about emptiness, thinking it is the claim that things don’t exist at all, that one is confused about what position Arya Nagarjuna is taking.*

*He is not saying that things don’t exist because they are empty, but only that they do not have self-existence.*



स्वभावाद्यदि भावानां सद्भावमनुपश्यसि।

अहेतुप्रत्ययान् भावांस्त्वमेवं सति पश्यसि ॥ १६

svabhāvādyadi bhāvānām sadbhāvamanupaśyasi |  
ahetupratyayān bhāvāṁstvamevaṁ sati paśyasi || 16

24.16

If you perceive the true existence of things as coming from their own nature, then you will also have to see those things as existing without causes or conditions.

*It is not the correct belief in emptiness that undermines dependent origination. It is, conversely, precisely the view that there is some self-nature (svabhava) or true existence (sadbhava) to things that leads to a belief that things are independent and stand on their own, that is, that they exist without causes (hetu) or conditions (pratyaya).*

*This, by the way, applies to both of the two truths. Conventional or deceptive truth – the world of dependently existing things and beliefs – is empty of self-nature and therefore exists dependently on its causes and conditions. Ultimate truth or reality, that is, emptiness, is also itself devoid of self-nature – it is not an independently existing entity, thing, or ground of being, but rather the ultimate nature of every dependently existing thing.*



कार्यं च कारणं चैव कर्तारं करणं क्रियां ।

उत्पादं च निरोधं च फलं च प्रतिबाधसे ॥ १७

kāryaṃ ca kāraṇaṃ caiva kartāraṃ karaṇaṃ kriyāṃ ।  
utpādaṃ ca nirodhaṃ ca phalaṃ ca pratibādhasē ॥ 17

24.17

You would malign cause and effect, agent and acting and acts, arising and ceasing, and results.

*A view that claims that things and beings had self-nature would entail rejecting cause and effect, for, as we saw in the last verse, a self-existent thing or being would not need causes to bring it into being. A self-existent pot would not be the effect of a cause, and therefore would not be the product of a potter who creates it on a potter's wheel, and the pot would not come into being and eventually go out of being (since it would be permanent). "In short," comments Je Tsongkhapa, "only those who assert that things exist essentially are committed to the untenability of the whole framework of cause and effect, arising and ceasing, etc."*



यः प्रतीत्यसमुत्पादः शून्यतां तां प्रचक्ष्महे।

सा प्रज्ञप्तिरुपादाय प्रतिपत्सैव मध्यमा ॥ १८ ॥

yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tāṃ pracakṣmahe |  
sā prajñaptirupādāya pratipatsaiva madhyamā || 18 ||

24.18

Whatever arises dependently is what is called emptiness. That which is conventionally designated is the middle way.

*A key verse in Arya Nagarjuna's text. What exists only dependently is also what is empty of essential nature. The emptiness of things and beings may be ascertained by how they do exist – dependently and nominally only. Emptiness and the things that exist dependently and nominally are not two different things. They are two ways of talking about the same thing. Emptiness is a feature of dependently existing things – and also vice versa (for empty things do exist... dependently).*

*This position is the “middle way” since it avoids the two extremes of reification (thinking things have self-nature) and nihilism (denying that things exist at all).*



अप्रतीत्य समुत्पन्नो धर्मः कश्चिन्न विद्यते।

यस्मात्तस्मादशून्यो हि धर्मः कश्चिन्न विद्यते ॥ १९

apratītya samutpanno dharmah kaścinna vidyate |  
yasmāttasmādaśūnyo hi dharmah kaścinna vidyate || 19

24.19

There is nothing whatsoever that does not arise dependently, and thus there is nothing whatsoever that is not empty.

*Another key verse on the fact that although there are two “truths” or realities – deceptive and ultimate – they are really just two aspects of the same thing. There is no existing thing that is not dependent on something else for its existence. Things exist dependently on their causes and their conditions, on their parts, and on being conceptualized and designated in the ways they are. All subjects depend on objects, and all objects depend on subjects. Causes depend on results, and vice versa. Parts depend on wholes, and wholes depend on parts. Because of this, every existing thing is empty of self-nature.*



अप्रतीत्यापि बोधिं च तव बुद्धः प्रसज्यते।

अप्रतीत्यापि बुद्धं च तव बोधिः प्रसज्यते ॥ ३१

apratītyāpi bodhiṃ ca tava buddhaḥ prasajyate |  
apratītyāpi buddhaṃ ca tava bodhiḥ prasajyate || 31

24.31

It would then follow that your Buddha would exist independently of enlightenment, and enlightenment would exist independently of your Buddha.

***“Your” Buddha – an essentially existing Buddha of the opponent to emptiness -- would exist self-existently, that is, independent of the enlightenment that makes one a Buddha! Something that exist essentially does not depend on anything else. There would be Buddhas distinct from enlightenment, and enlightenment as a self-existent state, not depending on there being someone who is enlightened.***



यश्चाबुद्धः स्वभावेन स बोधाय घटन्नपि।

न बोधिसत्त्वचर्यायां बोधिं ते ऽधिगमिष्यति ॥ ३२

yaścābuddhaḥ svabhāvena sa bodhāya ghaṭannapi |  
na bodhisattvacaryāyāṁ bodhiṁ te 'dhigamiṣyati || 32

24.32

For you, someone who is not a Buddha through his own self nature could not attain enlightenment by practicing the bodhisattva's way of life.

*Arya Nagarjuna delivers a very low blow! “For you,” the essentialist so-called “orthodox” Buddhist opponent of emptiness, the whole raison d’etre of Buddhism would be undercut. For how could someone who essentially exists as a non-Buddha ever turn into a Buddha? Practicing what is here called the “bodhisattva’s way of life” (bodhisattvacarya) would be useless.*



न च धर्ममधर्म वा कश्चिज्जातु करिष्यति।

किमषून्यस्य कर्तव्यं स्वभावः क्रियते न हि ॥ ३३

na ca dharmamadharmam vā kaścijjātu kariṣyati |  
kimaṣūnyasya kartavyam svabhāvaḥ kriyate na hi || 33

24.33

No one at all would ever do virtuous or non-virtuous actions. What could something that is not empty do? Something with a self nature doesn't do anything!

*Arya Nagarjuna picks up the critique leveled earlier (24.6) where the opponent claimed that if things were empty there would be no justification for morality – no essentially virtuous or non-virtuous actions. Again, Arya Nagarjuna turns the argument back on the opponent. If things did have self-natures, there would be no point in doing virtuous actions. The reason is again given as a general principle. “Something with a self-nature doesn't do anything.” Action of any sort, virtuous or no, would be impossible for self-existent – that is static and changeless – being. As Candrakirti puts it, “It is not logically possible to bring about anything which, by nature, is not devoid of self-existence, because the non-devoid is factually in existence.”*



सर्वसंव्यवहारांश्च लौकिकान् प्रतिबाधसे ।

यत्प्रतीत्यसमुत्पादशून्यतां प्रतिबाधसे ॥ ३६

sarvasaṁvyvahārāṁśca laukikān pratibādhase ।  
yatpratītyasamutpādaśūnyatām pratibādhase ।। 36

24.36

When you malign emptiness which is dependent arising, you malign all conventionality.

*The opponent has argued in 24.6 that the doctrine of emptiness also contravenes the conventional understanding of reality. Once again, Arya Nagarjuna turns the tables around and makes the same accusations of the opponent. Emptiness is here once again equated with dependent origination – because things are empty, they do exist dependently, and vice versa. And all conventional understanding of the way things and beings are and operate in the world requires that they be empty. If things and beings were not empty, nothing would work, as Arya Nagarjuna points out in the next several verses.*

*The lack of self-nature to things turns out to be the prerequisite for the common-sensical understanding of things!*



न कर्तव्यं भवेत्किं चिदनारब्धा भवेत्क्रिया।

कारकः स्यादकुर्वाणः शून्यतां प्रतिबाधतः ॥ ३७

na kartavyam bhavetkim cidanārabdhā bhavetkriyā |  
kārakaḥ syādakurvāṇaḥ śūnyatām pratibādhataḥ || 37

24.37

If emptiness is maligned, there would nothing to be done; there would be no actions that were ever undertaken; and there would be actors who didn't act.

*If thing and beings were not empty, there would be nothing that could be done by anyone at all. If everything existed self-existently, action would be impossible (as Arya Nagarjuna proves in detail in several chapters of this work): there “would be nothing to be done” in the sense of nothing which needed to be effected since everything would already exist essentially; “no actions that were ever undertaken,” since any essentially existing action would already exist and would not have to be undertaken again; and there would be actors who “didn't act” in that self-existent actions would exist independently, and would not depend on actions to be actors!*



अजातमनिरुद्धं च कूटस्थं च भविष्यति।

विचित्राभिरवस्थाभिः स्वभावे रहितं जगत् ॥ ३८

ajātamaniruddhaṁ ca kūṭasthaṁ ca bhaviṣyati |  
vicitrābhiravasthābhiḥ svabhāve rahitaṁ jagat || 38

24.38

If things had natures of their own, the whole world would be unborn, without ceasing, immoveable, and not going from one state to another.

*If things were not empty – if they had natures of their own – the world would be fixed and static. No change would be possible, no dependent origination, no causality, no impermanence. The commentators quote Lord Buddha here (from the Pītaputrasamagama Sutra): “If there were ever the slightest thing nonempty, the Victor would not make predictions. And without any change, everybody would exist eternally just as they are, and there would be neither improvement nor degradation.”*



असंप्राप्तस्य च प्राप्तिर्दुःखपर्यन्तकर्म च।

सर्वक्लेशप्रहाणं च यद्यषून्यं न विद्यते ॥ ३९

asamprāptasya ca prāptirduḥkhaparyantakarma ca |  
sarvakleśaprahāṇaṁ ca yadyaṣūnyaṁ na vidyate || 39

24.39

If things were not empty, there would be no attainment by someone who had not attained;  
no actions that would end suffering; and no relinquishing of all mental afflictions.

*If things were not empty, not only would common sense and conventional reality break down, but moral and spiritual cultivation would be meaningless, as we have seen above. Someone who existed essentially as one who had not attained higher spiritual states could never change and attain them. There would be no possibility of ever ending suffering if suffering existed self-existently, and no one could ever be rid of mental afflictions if they existed essentially as people who had mental afflictions, and if the mental afflictions themselves existed inherently. Life would be hopeless and pointless. We would be doomed to our self-existent fate.*