



MEDITATIONS ON EMPTINESS

CLASS SIX: THE EMPTINESS OF THE SELF AND ITS PARTS

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

दर्शनश्रणादीनि वेदनादीनि चाप्यथ ।

darśanaśraṇādīni vedanādīni cāpyatha ।

भवन्ति यस्य प्रागेभ्यः सो ऽस्तीत्येके वदन्त्युत ॥ १

bhavanti yasya prāgebhyaḥ so 'stītyeke vadantyaṭa ॥ 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.

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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दर्शनश्रवणादिभ्यो वेदनादिभ्य एव च ।

darśanaśravaṇādibhyo vedanādibhya eva ca ।

यः प्राग्व्यवस्थितो भावः केन प्रज्ञप्यते ऽथ सः ॥ ३

yaḥ prāgyavasthito 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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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, Candrakirti 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."