



MEDITATIONS ON EMPTINESS

CLASS EIGHT: THE EMPTINESS OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THINGS

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

यदिन्धनं स चेदग्निरेकत्वं कर्तृकर्मणोः।

अन्यश्चेदिन्धनादग्निरिन्धनादप्यृते भवेत् ॥ १

yadindhanam sa cedagnirekatvam kartṛkarmaṇoḥ |
anyaścedindhanādagnirindhanādapyṛte bhavet || 1

10.1

If the firewood *was* the fire
Doer and deed would be the same;
If fire was separate from its fuel,
It could happen without the fuel.

In this chapter, Arya Nagarjuna takes up the example of fire and fuel which others used as a metaphor to argue that were things that were both truly or inherently existing and also dependently originating. Even dependent things have self-existence, it was claimed. Fire depends on fuel, but fire and fuel are distinct but also have their own separate existences. Fire is neither identical to nor absolutely different from fuel. Similarly, it might be argued, there could be a self that truly exists even while also depending on its parts – a self who is neither identical to nor different from the self's parts, but nevertheless truly exists.

Arya Nagarjuna will argue that things like fire and fuel can neither be really the same as each other nor inherently different from one another – and these are the only two alternatives.

In this opening verse, Arya Nagarjuna sets up the dilemma: If fire (equated in this verse to the actor or agent) and fuel (compared to the action) truly exist, they must be essentially the same (ekatva) or essentially different (anyatva). If they were the essentially the same, fire and fuel as well as actor and action would be identical and, therefore, indistinguishable. If they were essentially different, then one could exist without the other: fire could burn without fuel.



नित्यप्रदीप्त एव स्यादप्रदीपनहेतुकः।

पुनरारम्भवैयर्थ्यमेवं चाकर्मकः सति ॥ २

nityapradīpta eva syādapradīpanahetukaḥ |
punarārambhavaiyarthyaamevaṁ cākarmakaḥ sati || 2

10.2

It would be pointless to light this fire
Since it doesn't come from a cause;
It would just stay there, always burning,
And then it couldn't ever burn.

So let's suppose that fire and fuel were essentially or inherently different. If they were, fire would not come from fuel; it would not be "something that is inflamed due to causes," and therefore would already and always be burning. There would be no point or need to ignite it since it would already and always be burning, and "it would do nothing" in the sense that it would not consume fuel since it was not burning because of or dependent on the fuel. Fire would be an "actor" or "agent" which didn't act or do anything – and that would be absurd. There is no agent without an action, and vice versa; they exist only interdependently.



परत्र निरपेक्षत्वादप्रदीपनहेतुकः ।

पुनरारम्भवैयर्थ्यं नित्यदीप्तः प्रसज्यते ॥ ३

paratra nirapekṣatvādapradīpanahetukaḥ ।
punarārambhavaiyarthyaṁ nityadīptaḥ prasajyate ॥ 3

10.3

Since it didn't depend on anything else,
It would happen without a cause;
And if it's already always burning,
How absurd to try and light it!

Being independent of its causes, fire would not need fuel to burn and would burn eternally. And if fire was burning eternally it would be pointless to rekindle it; it would need no rekindling, ever. Fire, of course, does not exist this way. We never perceive fire to exist apart from fuel. It exists only dependently on fuel. And it is because it is not independent that it can "do something" (i.e., consume the fuel it depends on) and also makes it necessary for it to be reignited when it goes out having consumed the fuel. Fire is not independent of its causes because it is seen to be brought into existence the fuel, burn for as long as the fuel lasts, and go out when the fuel is consumed. So fire and fuel cannot be inherently different.



तत्रैतस्मादिध्यमानमिन्धनं भवतीति चेत्।

केनेध्य तामिन्धनं तत्तावन्मात्रमिदं यदा ॥ ४

tatraitasmādidhyamānamindhanam bhavatīti cet |
kenedhyatāmindhanam tattāvanmātramidaṁ yadā || 4

10.4

Suppose you were to think to yourself:

“What’s burning is the firewood.”

If indeed this is simply the case,

What makes the firewood burn?

But if fire is not different from fuel, how can we say that one thing brings about another – that “fire burns fuel”? Maybe fire and fuel are not separate but the same. One might argue that it is not the fire but the fuel that burns. The fire, under this viewpoint, does indeed depend on the fuel but is not different from it since the fuel is what’s doing the burning. But Arya Nagarjuna here points out that if we say this we are saying that the fire and fuel are identical and indistinguishable. And if we say that, then we cannot say that the fuel is the cause of the burning or the fire. Cause and effect, to be “cause” and “effect,” must be separable and therefore different.



यदीन्धनमपेक्ष्याग्निरपेक्ष्याग्निं यदीन्धनं।

कतरत्पूर्वनिष्पन्नं यदपेक्ष्याग्निरिन्धनं ॥ ८

yadīndhanamapekṣyāgnirapekṣyāgnim yadīndhanam |
kataratpūrvaniṣpannam yadapekṣyāgnirindhanam || 8

10. 8

So fire is something dependent on fuel,
And fuel is that which depends on fire;
If fire and fuel depend on each other,
Which one of them came first?

Here we begin an analysis of how the interdependence between fire and fuel – if that interdependence is conceived of as existing in any other way than as a mere appearance – is also impossible. For if fire depends on fuel for its existence, then the fuel must exist before the fire. Fuel also depends on fire for its existence -- wood, for example, is not “fuel” until it is burning as a fire. It’s just “wood” until then. So fuel can’t exist before fire and more than fire can exist before fuel.



यदीन्धनमपेक्ष्याग्निरग्नेः सिद्धस्य साधनं।

एवं सतीन्धनं चापि भविष्यति निरग्निकं ॥ ९

yadīndhanamapekṣyāgniragneḥ siddhasya sādhanam |
evam satīndhanam cāpi bhaviṣyati niragnikaṁ || 9

10.9

If fire were something dependent on fuel,
It would have to be there alongside the fire
And, you'd have fuel that's being burned
Before there was ever a fire.

If we say that “fire depends on fuel,” we are presupposing the existence of something (“fire”) that supposedly does not exist until the thing it depends on (“fuel”) is present. But if there were no pre-existing fire, what, exactly, would “depend on fuel?” And if the fire existed before the fuel, in what sense would it need fuel to bring it into existence? It would already exist. And if fire existed before fuel, they would be separable and distinct and we could, impossibly, have “fuel” that existed apart from the fire for which it is “fuel.”



यो ऽपेक्ष्य सिध्यते भावस्तमेवापेक्ष्य सिध्यति।

यदि यो ऽपेक्षितव्यः स सिध्यतां कमपेक्ष्य कः ॥ १०

yo 'pekṣya sidhyate bhāvastamevāpekṣya sidhyati |
yadi yo 'pekṣitavyaḥ sa sidhyatāṁ kamapekṣya kaḥ || 10

10.10

If any dependent thing
Needed the depender to be there
In order for it to depend on it,
But the depender also needed it,
What could ever depend on what?

Maybe fire and fuel, while being dependent on one another, come into existence simultaneously. But in that case, we could not say that one depends on the other or that they were interdependent. For to say that “fire exists dependently on fuel,” the very existence of fire is presupposed (as we have seen above). And if fire already exists before the fuel it supposedly depends on, on what does it depend? And to say that “fuel depends on fire” similarly assumes the existence of something called “fuel” before the fire it supposedly depends on for its existence.



यो ऽपेक्ष्य सिध्यते भावः सो ऽसिद्धो ऽपेक्षते कथं।

अथाप्यपेक्षते सिद्धस्त्वपेक्षास्य न युज्यते ॥ ११

yo 'pekṣya sidhyate bhāvaḥ so 'siddho 'pekṣate katham |
athāpyapekṣate siddhastvapekṣāsyā na yujyate || 11

10.11

Say a thing occurs in dependence—
If that thing is absent, how does it depend?
But if you say it already exists,
It wouldn't need anything to depend on.

If a thing that exists dependently is already an existing thing, then how can it exist dependently? And if a thing doesn't yet exist, how can it also be said to "exist dependently." Fire and fuel cannot exist interdependently under our usual understanding of what it means to say that things exist interdependently. The inherent existence of dependent origination is impossible. Dependent origination itself only exists dependently, as a mere appearance and not happening "out there," "independently," or "self-existently."



अपेक्ष्येन्धनमग्निर्न नानपेक्ष्याग्निरिन्धनं।

अपेक्ष्येन्धनमग्निं न नानपेक्ष्याग्निमिन्धनं ॥ १२

apekṣyendhanamagnirna nānapekṣyāgnirindhanam |
apekṣyendhanamagniṁ na nānapekṣyāgnimindhanam | | 12

10.12

It can't be that fire depends upon fuel;
But equally impossible
Is that fire does not depend on fuel.
It can't be that fuel depends upon fire;
But equally impossible
Is that fuel does not depend on fire.

There's no existing fire that exists dependently on fuel. And there is no existing fire that could possibly exist independent of fuel. There is no existing fuel that needs to depend on fire (it already exists), and there's no sense calling something "fuel" if it doesn't burn!



आगच्चत्यन्यतो नाग्निरिन्धने ऽग्निर्न विद्यते।

अत्रेन्धने शेषमुक्तम् गम्यमानगतागतैः ॥ १३

āgacatyanyato nāgnirindhane 'gnirna vidyate |
atrendhane śeṣamuktam gamyamānagatāgatāiḥ | | 13

10.13

Fire can't come from any other,
And fuel does not have any fire.
The rest about fuel is just the same
As what we talked about before
With going or not going by walking.

Fire is not somehow in its fuel, for if it were it would be identical to it and indistinguishable from it. But fire doesn't come from anything else besides fuel either – fire doesn't arise from water, or kitchen sinks, or just thinking. Arya Nagarjuna refers here also to his analysis in the second chapter of this work on the emptiness of the “going,” “gone,” and “not yet gone” -- what has burned (= “the gone”) is not burning, for it's already “burned”; and what has not yet burned (= “not yet gone”) can't be burning either, for it doesn't exist yet. And burning can't associated with what is burning (= “going”), for if it already exists as “something which is burning,” it would be redundant to say, “Something which is burning is burning.”



इन्धनं पुनरग्निर्न नाग्निरन्यत्र चेन्धनात्।

नाग्निरिन्धनवान्नाग्नाविन्धनानि न तेषु सः ॥ १४

indhanam punaragnirna nāgniranyatra cendhanāt |
nāgnirindhanavānnāgnāvindhanāni na teṣu saḥ || 14

10.14

The fuel itself is not the fire
But fire can't come from anything else
The fire does not have any fuel
But if it doesn't have fuel, it can't exist.

Arya Nagarjuna here sums up what's gone before by reviewing five possibilities on how fire and fuel could relate to one another. . . and negating them all. Fuel is not fire, for if it were they would be the same and not different. Similarly, a actor is not the same as the action the actor performs. But fire and fuel are not inherently different either, for if they were one could exist without the other. And the last three possibilities all assume that fire and fuel are inherently separate things such that one could possess the other or that one could be in the other.