

EXPLORATIONS IN EMPTINESS



Verses from Arya Nagarjuna's
"Wisdom: A Song on the Root of the Middle Way"
(*Mulamadhyamakakarika*)

I. INTRODUCTION: THINGS EXIST AND DO NOT EXIST

अनिरोधमनुत्पादमनुच्छेदमशाश्वतं ।

अनेकार्थमनानार्थमनागममनिर्गमं ॥ १ ॥

anirodhamanutpādamanucchedamaśāśvataṁ |
anekārthamanānārthamanāgamamanirgamam || 1

यः प्रतीत्यसमुत्पादं प्रपञ्चोपशमं शिवं ।

देशयामास संबुद्धस्तं वन्दे वदतां वरं ॥ २ ॥

yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaṁ prapañcopaśamaṁ śivaṁ |
deśyāmāsa sambuddhastam vande vadataṁ varam || 2

1.1-2

Of all the fully enlightened Guides,
I bow myself down to the highest
one—

The one who teaches us the peace
That is the final end
Of all elaboration;

The one who teaches us the way
That everything arises
Linked together in dependence:

Nothing starts
Nothing stops
Nothing lives on, and
Nothing ever dies.
Nothing comes, and
Nothing goes
Nothing is different
Nothing is the same.

अस्ति यद्धि स्वभावेन न तन्नास्तीति शाश्वतं।

नास्तीदानीमभूत्पूर्वमित्युच्चेदः प्रसज्यते ॥ ११

asti yaddhi svabhāvena na tannāstīti śāśvataṃ |
nāstīdānīmabhūtpūrvamityuccedaḥ prasajyate || 11

15.11

“That which exists through its own nature
Does not not exist” –
This is eternalism.
“It used to exist but now it
Does not exist” –
This is nihilism.

यः प्रतीत्यसमुत्पादः शून्यतां ताम् प्रचक्ष्महे ।

सा प्रज्ञप्तिर् उपादाय प्रतिपत् सैव मध्यमा ॥१८

yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe |
sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā || 18

24.18

Whatever is dependently originating
Is what we call emptiness.
That which adheres to this guideline
Is the middle path.

II. THE EMPTINESS OF CAUSE AND EFFECT

न स्वस्तो नापि परतो न द्वाभ्यां नाप्यहेतुतः ।
उत्पन्ना जातु विद्यन्ते भावाः क्वचन के चन ॥ ३ ॥

1.3

It is not from itself
And it's not from something else
It is not from both together
And it's not without a cause.

Nothing at all
Could ever start
In any way at all.

क्रिया न प्रत्ययवती नाप्रत्ययवती क्रिया ।
प्रत्यया नाक्रियावन्तः क्रियावन्तश्च सन्त्युत ॥ ६ ॥

1.6

If something were to happen
Then it must have a cause.
There's no such thing as an event
Which doesn't have a cause.
And there aren't any causes
Which don't involve events.

नैवासतो नैव सतः प्रत्ययो ऽर्थस्य युज्यते ।
असतः प्रत्ययः कस्य सतश्च प्रत्ययेन किं ॥ ८ ॥

1.8

A cause is simply impossible
Whether its object exists or not—
For if that didn't exist,
What would it be a cause *of*?
And if that did exist,
Then what would the cause *do*?

फलं च प्रत्ययमयं प्रत्ययाश्चास्वयंमयाः ।
फलमस्वमयेभ्यो यत्तत्प्रत्ययमयं कथं ॥ १५ ॥

1.15

Since the nature of a cause
Is to give a result,
Causes have no nature
Of their own.

What result could come
From something
That isn't itself?
How could a cause
Have a nature?

III. THE EMPTINESS OF PARTS AND THE WHOLE

रूपकारणनिर्मक्तं न रूपमुपलभ्यते ।

रूपेणापि न निर्मक्तं दृश्यते रूपकारणं ॥ १ ॥

rūpakāraṇanirmuktaṁ na rūpamupalabhyate ।
rūpeṇāpi na nirmuktaṁ dṛśyate rūpakāraṇaṁ । । 1

4.1

You could never conceive of a form
Separate from what makes it up.
But these components of a form
Could also never be seen
If they were removed from their “form.”

रूपकारणनिर्मुक्ते रूपे रूपं प्रसज्यते ।

आहेतुकं न चास्त्यर्थः कश्चिदाहेतुकः क्व चित् ॥ २ ॥

rūpakāraṇanirmukte rūpe rūpaṁ prasajyate ।
āhetukaṁ na cāstyarthaḥ kaścīdāhetukaḥ kva cit । । 2

4.2

If we could ever separate
A form from its components,
Then we’d have a form
That didn’t have any causes—

But there isn’t an object
In all the world
Which doesn’t have a cause.

रूपेण तु विनिर्मुक्तं यदि स्याद्रूपकारणं ।

अकार्यकं कारणं स्याद् नास्त्यकार्यं च कारणं ॥३॥

rūpeṇa tu vinirmuktaṁ yadi syādrūpakāraṇaṁ ।
akāryakaṁ kāraṇaṁ syād nāstyakāryaṁ ca kāraṇaṁ ।। 3

4.3

If a component of form
Could ever be held
Apart from its form,

Then we'd have a component
That comprised nothing—
A cause without a result.
That could never exist.

निष्कारणं पुना रूपं नैव नैवोपपद्यते ।

तस्माद् रूपगतान् कांश्चिन्न विकल्पान् विकल्पयेत् ॥५॥

niṣkāraṇaṁ punā rūpaṁ naiva naivopapadyate ।
tasmād rūpagatān kāṁścinna vikalpān vikalpayet ।। 5

4.5

A form not made of anything
Is illogical, in fact
It's totally ridiculous!
So just stop having
All these misconceptions
About form.

IV. THE EMPTINESS OF THINGS BEING THEMSELVES OR OTHER (IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE)

अपेक्ष्येन्धनमग्निर्न नानपेक्ष्याग्निरिन्धनं।

अपेक्ष्येन्धनमग्निं न नानपेक्ष्याग्निमिन्धनं ॥ १२

apekṣyendhanamagnirna nānapekṣyāgnirindhanam |
apekṣyendhanamagnim na nānapekṣyāgnimindhanam | | 12

10.12

There is no fire that exists dependently on fuel
And there is no fire that exists independently of fuel.
There is no fuel that exists dependently on fire
And there is no fuel that exists independently of fire.

इन्धनं पुनरग्निर्न नाग्निरन्यत्र चेन्धनात्।

नाग्निरिन्धनवान्नाग्नाविन्धनानि न तेषु सः ॥ १४

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

10.14

Fuel is not fire
And fire is not something other than fuel
Nor does fire possess fuel.
Fuel is not in fire
Nor is fire in fuel.

अग्नीन्धनाभ्यां व्याख्यात आत्मोपादानयोः क्रमः ।

सर्वो निरवशेषेण सार्धं घटपटादिभिः ॥ १५

agnīndhanābhyāṃ vyākhyāta ātmopādānayoḥ kramah |
sarvo niravaśeṣeṇa sārgham ghaṭapaṭādibhiḥ | | 15

10.15

And so from this investigation
Of fire and fuel,
We can say the same goes for
Self and all its parts
Along with all objects like pots and cloth.

आत्मनश्च सतत्त्वं ये भावानां च पृथक् पृथक् ।

निर्दिशन्ति न तान्मन्ये शासनस्यार्थकोविदान् ॥ १६

ātmanaśca satattvaṃ ye bhāvānāṃ ca pṛthak pṛthak |
nirdiśanti na tānmanye śāsanasyārthakovidān | | 16

10.16

I don't think that those who posit
The identity or difference of self and existing things
Know the true meaning
Of the authoritative teachings.

V. THE EMPTINESS OF SAMBARA AND NIRVANA

संस्काराः संसरन्ति चेन्न नित्याः संसरन्ति ते।

संसरन्ति च नानित्याः सत्त्वे ऽप्येष समः क्रमः ॥ १

saṁskārāḥ saṁsaranti cenna nityāḥ saṁsaranti te |
saṁsaranti ca nānityāḥ sattve 'pyeṣa samaḥ kramaḥ || 1

16.1

If conditioned things were permanent
They would not cycle
And if they were impermanent
They would not cycle.
The same is true for living beings.

बद्धो न मुच्यते तावदबद्धो नैव मुच्यते।

स्यातां बद्धे मुच्यमाने युगपद्वन्धमोक्षणे ॥ ८

baddho na mucyate tāvadabaddho naiva mucyate |
syātām baddhe mucyamāne yugapadbandhamokṣaṇe || 8

16.8

Someone who is bound
Is not liberated
Any more than someone who is not bound
Is not liberated.
Were there to be a liberating
Of someone who was bound
That would be bound and liberated at the same time.

निर्वास्याम्यनुपादानो निर्वाणं मे भविष्यति।

इति येषां ग्रहस्तेषामुपादानमहाग्रहः ॥ ९

nirvāsyāmyanupādāno nirvāṇaṃ me bhaviṣyati ।
iti yeṣāṃ grahasteṣāmupādānamahāgrahaḥ ।। 9

16.9

“Without grasping, I will extinguish suffering
And nirvana will be mine!”

The grasping of those who say this
Is a great grasping and clinging.

न निर्वाणसमारोपो न संसारापकर्षणं।

यत्र कस्तत्र संसारो निर्वाणं किं विकल्प्यते ॥ १०

na nirvāṇasamāropo na saṃsārāpakarṣaṇaṃ ।
yatra kastatra saṃsāro nirvāṇaṃ kiṃ vikalpyate ।। 10

16.10

When nirvana does not arise
And samsara is not destroyed
Then what do you imagine
Nirvana and samsara are?

VI. THE EMPTINESS OF EMPTINESS

शून्यता सर्वदृष्टीनां प्रोक्ता निःसरणं जिनैः ।

येषां तु शून्यतादृष्टिस्तानसाध्यान् बभाषिरे ॥ ८

śūnyatā sarvadr̥ṣṭīnām proktā niḥsaraṇam jinaiḥ ।
yeṣām tu śūnyatādr̥ṣṭīstānasādhyān babhāṣire ।। 8

13.8

Emptiness has been taught by the Conquerors
As the refutation of all viewpoints.
Those for whom emptiness is a viewpoint
Are said to be hopeless.

Meditation:
Am I in Bondage or Free?

Sit down, with your back straight and head up, and begin by concentrating on your breath.

Get in touch with your sense of yourself as a suffering being, a person with problems, worries, fears, shortcomings, etc. Feel yourself identified with that being and his or her suffering and problems: "This is who I am. I am a suffering sentient being."

Try to distant your sense of self from the sufferings and problems that you think you have. You are not your problems. You may think you "have" problems, but you are not somehow identical to those problems.

Next, reflect on whether the "problems" and "sufferings" you think you "have" truly exist as such. Review them and consider whether they could be perceived as anything other than how they seem to you at the moment. Could your "problems" be seen, for example, as opportunities for furthering your spiritual development? If so, are they still problems? Reflect on "problems" as **interpretations**. Since "problems" don't exist as such from their own side, wouldn't it be more advantageous to interpret them differently?

And where, exactly, is the self who is suffering because of these supposed problems? Is there a findable self – who exists essentially as a suffering self – somewhere either inside of or apart from the mind/body complex that is "you"? If there were, how could it ever become a self that wasn't suffering?

Look around for that suffering self. And when you "come up empty," hold your mind on the *absence of a suffering self*.

What are you left with when you stop the projection of "suffering self"? Who are you now? How do you feel when you stop the projection of a self who suffers?