

Excerpts from Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* ("Verses on the Middle Way")

Nāgārjuna's (2^d century CE?) Mūlamadhyamakakārikā ("Verses on the Middle Way") is a sustained philosophical treatment of what some have called the "central tenet" of Buddhism, that all things are empty (śūnya) of intrinsic nature (svabhāva). This doctrine (sic) had first been introduced in the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, the first Mahāyāna scriptures (1st c BCE), as an extension of the earlier Buddhist teaching that the self is empty, that what we call the "Self" is no more than a conceptual construction that mistakenly imputes a perdurable self-existence to what is really just a combination of elements of personality (the skandhas). But the sūtras had no more than baldly stated this, without providing any philosophical justification for the claim. It was the duty of Nāgārjuna's treatise to supply this justification, arguing that not just the self but everything, all dharmas, share this lack of self-nature, this emptiness.

The arguments in the Kārikās are too extensive and technically detailed to treat here, but simply as an example of the method of argumentation that Nāgārjuna employs, below are his arguments relating to the Self and the aggregates of personality. Verses one through six rehearse the generally accepted Buddhist teaching of the emptiness of Self; beginning in verse seven, Nāgārjuna extends that notion to all dharmas, arguing that as an "effect" (a phenomenon) is neither identical to nor distinct from its cause, nothing is either destroyed nor eternal. All dharmas are empty, beyond our attempts at hypostatization: "Not dependent on another, peaceful and not fabricated by mental fabrication, not thought, without distinctions, that is the character of reality."

Chapter 18: Examination of Self and Entities

1. If the self were the aggregates (*skandhas*),
It would have arising and ceasing (as properties).
If it were different from the aggregates,
It would not have the characteristics of the aggregates.
2. If there were no self,
Where would the self's (properties) be?
From the pacification of the self and what belongs to it,
One abstains from grasping onto "I" and "mine."
3. One who does not grasp onto "I" and "mine,"
That one does not exist.
One who does not grasp onto "I" and "mine,"
He does not perceive.
4. When views of "I" and "mine" are extinguished,
Whether with respect to the internal or external,
The appropriator ceases.
This having ceased, birth ceases.

5. Action and misery having ceased, there is nirvana.
Action and misery come from conceptual thought.
This comes from mental fabrication.
Fabrication ceases through emptiness.

6. That there is a self has been taught,
And the doctrine of no-self,
By the buddhas, as well as the
Doctrine of neither self nor nonself.

7. What language expresses is nonexistent.
The sphere of thought is nonexistent.
Unarisen and unceased, like nirvana
Is the nature of things.

8. Everything is real and is not real,
Both real and not real,
Neither real nor not real.
This is Lord Buddha's teaching.

9. Not dependent on another, peaceful and
Not fabricated by mental fabrication,
Not thought, without distinctions,
That is the character of reality (that-ness).

10. Whatever comes into being dependent on another
Is not identical to that thing.
Nor is it different from it.
Therefore it is neither nonexistent in time nor permanent.

11. By the *buddhas*, patrons of the world,
This immortal truth is taught:
Without identity, without distinction;
Not nonexistent in time, not permanent.

12. When the fully enlightened ones do not appear,
And when the disciples have disappeared,
The wisdom of the self-enlightened ones
Will arise completely without a teacher.

[Translated by Jay Garfield]