

# Notes on the Middle Treatise

Mara Elizabeth Schäfer

2025-04-05

# Introduction

I wanted to write a brief overview of my goals with these notes and publishing them. First, I want to say that I am *not* an expert or teacher on/of anything in any way, nor do I purport to be. In fact, my goal in publishing these is mostly to hopefully establish a dialogue with others by which I could learn more. If you are reading this and find errors or want to discuss anything, please feel free to email me at [mara@nekopath.fun](mailto:mara@nekopath.fun).

This project started as just me wanting to read the Root Verses to learn more about emptiness and early Mahayana / Madhyamaka philosophy. My previous exposure to Buddhist philosophy mostly came from the Pali Canon or from various later Chinese sutras. I wanted to investigate the “links” between these things, as well as to understand emptiness better, and Nagarjuna seemed as good a place to start as any. My friend Kathy had scanned a copy of Brian Bocking’s translation of the Middle Treatise and recommended it to me as a good translation of the Root Verses. I set out with the intention of taking detailed notes (on paper) of every chapter, trying to treat it with diligence and attention. As I reached the middle stages of the work, I started to feel like I would benefit from going through every chapter twice over (at least). I also wanted to digitize my notes for greater portability/safety, in case I lost my notebook somehow. Life is long, and I had come to feel that I would like to spend much of it in dialogue with this work.

I started transcribing my notes and sprucing them up, trying to make them more readable and clear, and to audit my own understanding a little. Thus, for most of the last few months I was doing two simultaneous passes through the Treatise, one taking paper notes, and another one lagging about ten chapters behind doing the digital writeups that are collected here. In general, my process was like this. Each day I would wake up and read a chapter while running before work. Then, at work (I have a lot of downtime) I would take the paper notes on the chapter, and finish them at home if necessary. After getting home from work I would transcribe a chapter of digital notes. Progress wasn’t always linear. Some chapters took two days of work for one reason or another, and other days I didn’t work on the Treatise at all. I wanted to expect nothing of myself and allow my progress to be determined more organically.

This process ended up working quite well for me. When I set out at the very start, my goal was to complete one or two chapters a week. By the end I was doing about four or five a week (eight to ten if you include digital chapters). For nearly three months the Treatise became a primary fixture of my life and I feel very grateful to it. For this reason I want to share this feeling by publishing these notes.

In general, each chapter has a brief overview at the top. There is no defined purpose or guiding sentiment to these other than “these are thoughts I might have on the chapter that are not tied explicitly to any verse”. After that, I outline a structure to the arguments in the chapter. These could be more granular for sure. Many times in refuting a topic Nagarjuna will refute it via one strain of

argumentation, then switch to another mode of negation to refute it another way. I have mostly opted to signpost these in the paragraphs rather than risk being too heavyhanded in imposing structure. All the same, this method helped me identify “what exactly is Nagarjuna trying to prove here, and what utility will the proven proposition serve?”

Most of these I found to take the mode of “refuting X”. Nagarjuna is reluctant to say what things *are*, since his ultimate point is that things are all empty of characteristics, natures, selves, or any other sort of inherent quality of being. Therefore, he predominantly argues by negation to encourage the reader to extinguish thoughts about X rather than to develop a new “higher truth” about X.

At times I found the arguments supplied by Nagarjuna or the commentator to be unconvincing, and at these points I have tried to supply my own proofs of the propositions. I have tried signpost quite clearly when this is the case. This is not necessarily me taking issue with these arguments, since teaching one always requires attention to the student. The people whom Nagarjuna knew and was writing in conversation with possibly had very different ideas about the world, about dharmas, and about the Way than I do, and so arguments that may have been instructive to them might not be to me. I found it quite instructive to try to supply my own arguments in places.

At some points the commentator will supply alternate or additional argumentation following verses. Sometimes these are quite helpful, and cover cases that Nagarjuna does not, or add a deep richness to Nagarjuna’s arguments that stuck with me. I think the commentary in Chapters 13 and 18 specifically were especially wonderful. At other times I found the commentary to be quite unhelpful or redundant. For example, the lengthy example of corn in Chapter 1 and the suite of examples given about the self in Chapter 27 were bits I found to be quite unhelpful, and as a result I did not commentate them. They might be of use to other readers, and I would of course encourage others to read them and see for themselves. As I made my way through the Treatise I began to note mostly novel or exceptional strains of thought from the commentary, and to avoid re-explaining verses that seem clear. In many cases my explanations overlap with those given by the commentator.

I think commentary on the later chapters is perhaps of a slightly higher quality than those of the earlier ones. I attribute this to me becoming much more familiar with Nagarjuna’s philosophy as I made my way through the Treatise. I have made a few editing passes before now, but it’s likely that I will continue to edit these notes for both copy and content reasons at some point in the future. I will note the date of the most recent revision on the title page.

# Chapter 1 - Contemplation of Causality

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting Arising
- Refuting Causality as a Whole
- Refuting Abhidharmist Types of Causes
- Refuting Effects

## Notes

- (1v1) Nagarjuna opens the verses by succinctly expounding the dharma of emptiness - emptiness is not characterized by arising or ceasing, permanence or severance, identity or difference, or arising and departing. Many of the arguments in the Treatise will end up refuting these, or using them in refuting other topics.
  - (1v2) Note here that Nagarjuna immediately equates emptiness and causality. Indeed, this is the most key formula in the work. To be caused *is* to be empty. However, causality itself (and emptiness) are no special dharmas - they are empty like any other. This is what is meant by destroying all sophistries: no dharmas can possess any characteristics, predispositions, selves, or natures, including emptiness and causality. With this, Nagarjuna sets out to refute causality.

## Refuting Arising

- (1v3) If there was arising, then dharmas must be self-produced, other produced, both, or neither. Nagarjuna's method of refuting arising is to disprove all these cases.
  - (1/3) The commentary explains: if dharmas produced themselves they would have two substances, a producer and a produced (the 'finished' dharma), but this producer must also have a producer (otherwise, it would be uncaused, and thus invalid), and there would be an endless chain of arising. This notion of self-arising also contradicts causality, since if things were able to produce themselves, they would not depend on causes and conditions to arise. Endless regression is a slightly shaky argument to me. For this reason I think that self-production being uncaused is a much better and clearer argument, since how could a thing give arising to itself when it has not yet

arisen? This angle of attack is discussed in much more detail in Chapter 7.

- \* Also, there can be no other-production, since other-production is just self-production when viewed from a different perspective. This is interesting, as it anticipates the argument coming later that dharmas cannot produce others (in Ch. 7), or make contact (in Ch. 13)
- \* (2b10) Arising from both is thus not possible, since this would be some combination of arising from self and arising from others, but both have been refuted. The commentator also refutes “from neither” with reference to the soteriological angle of causality - if there were effects without causes (equivalent to arising from nothing), then good actions could bring bad karmic results and vice versa. The implication is that we know this not to be true (because the Buddha told us otherwise).
- (1v4) takes a little aside to also refute the notion that dharmas have natures: since there is no self-production (i.e. since dharmas are in the midst of causes and conditions) there is no self-nature (which also could be used as an alternative starting point to say that there is no self-production, since “producer” would be a nature). This also refutes other-nature, since this is just self-nature from a different perspective.

## Refuting Causality as a Whole

- Q: (1v5) There are causes of four types (causal condition, sequential cause, objective cause, predominant cause). All dharmas are produced by one of these four. Funnily enough, Nagarjuna seems to ignore this at first, and simply refutes causality as a whole.
  - (1v6) He splits the causal process into its two halves: causes and effects. Effects must either arise from causes or non-causes, and likewise causes must produce effects (or not produce effects). His method of refuting causality is to refute each of these possibilities.
    - \* (1v7) Effects: Suppose an effect has arisen. If it comes from a cause, (i.e. there was some cause *before* and *separate* from the effect that was produced), then how would this be a cause? (since it only becomes a cause retroactively upon observing the effect, a cause is indeterminate in forward time). If it does not come from a cause, then it could not be an effect, and would not be subject to causality (and thus this case is impossible).
    - \* (1v8) Causes: Suppose a cause produces an effect. We cannot say this cause already inhered its effect (by itself), since for an effect to be already given in its cause, why would the cause be needed? (i.e. causes cannot produce already-extant effects). If

there is no already-extant effect, then how could the cause be a cause? (since it has not produced an effect). Thus, causes can neither produce already-extant nor not-already-extant effects, so they cannot produce effects, since every effect must be one of these. Causes cannot also produce non-effects, since then how would it be a cause (if it does not produce an effect)? Thus causes can neither produce effects nor non-effects.

## Refuting Abhidharmist Types of Causes

- At this point, Nagarjuna circles back to the question posed in 1v5.
- (1v9) Causal condition: This seems to refer a general notion of causality, or some basic catch-all phenomenon. Nagarjuna recapitulates the argument from 1v7: If effects are produced, then they must be existent, inexistent, or both. But if the effect was already extant, it could not be said to be produced, having already been extant. If it was inexistent, then how would it have been produced, since its cause was present but it did not arise. “Both” is impossible for two reasons: it is half existent and half inexistent but both have been refuted, and also “existent” and “inexistent” are mutually exclusive categories. (1/9) expounds these reasons.
- (1v10) Sequential cause: This one refers to some temporal notion of causality. Nagarjuna’s argument relies on considering the cessation of the cause: “Where an effect has not yet arisen / There cannot have been cessation” hedges against the notion that causes and effect can coexist at the same time. This makes sense, given that effects being already-extant with their causes was refuted above, since an already-extant effect would have no need for a cause (or at the very least, it would be impossible to isolate our chosen “cause” as having produced it).
  - Thus, if a dharma is unable to be a cause without ceasing. But then, the effect must come before or after this cessation. Both are impossible according to Nagarjuna: If before, then we’ve violated the co-existence refutation. If after cessation, how could a ceased dharma be a cause, since having ceased it would be unable to act (to produce an effect).
  - (1/10) The commentary answers some hypothetical follow-up questions: First, a ceased dharma cannot act (in some after effect) since this would imply permanence and thus contradicts causality. Second, the arising of the effect cannot happen at the “moment of cessation” of the cause, since the moment of cessation is of half-ceased and half-not-ceased, but both have been refuted.
- (1v11) Objective cause: The singling out of any one cause or condition as “objective” is the work of a mental distinction being made, and of grasping at characteristics. Since all dharmas are empty of characteristic and nature,

how could they contain an inbuilt notion of “objectivity”? Therefore, this is a notion that depends on the cause of one’s own distinguishing, and is thus empty, like all other things that arise in causation.

- (1/11) The commentator also reminds us that many things have been said as expedient means in order to lead us to greater truths (i.e. enlightenment), and that we should not grasp at these conventional expressions or internalize them as “The Truth”.
- (1v12) Predominant cause: Nagarjuna’s refutation depends on the absence of self-nature - without self-nature (refuted in 1v4), there can be no definite existence. This foreshadows the longer argument about existence in Ch. 15 where (definite) existence is equivalent or related to having self-nature.

## Refuting Effects

- (1v13) Now, after refuting types of causes one-by-one, Nagarjuna turns to refuting effects in detail. Effects cannot be found within causes and conditions, so how can it issue from them? That is, where would an effect exist, since it is neither contained in causes nor produced by them?
- (1v14) If causes have no effects (see 1v8), then to say effects still arise from causes is nonsense - one might as well say that effects issue from non-causes (this is meant as an obviously untrue possibility)
- (1v15) Even so, if effects could somehow arise from causes despite them not issuing effects, then effects would be arising from things without self-nature (see 1v4) since causes have no self-nature. But then how could they arise from causes (since a hypothetical cause would have the nature of “causing” or “production”)?
  - This argument seems weird and circular, but I think it’s basically reminding the questioner that causes have already been proven to not issue effects, and have no self nature, and is thus hammering in the ridiculousness of still searching for effects.
- (1v16) Thus, effects don’t arise from causes or non-causes (refuted in 1v15 and 1v14), so they cannot exist (because they cannot arise). At final, since effects cannot be said to exist, neither can causes or non-causes (since a cause would be something that produces an effect, and non-causes would depend on the existence of causes)
  - The commentary at 1/16 gives a slightly different argument: Suppose effects arise from causes. If causes have no self-nature (from 1v4), then they are not dharmas (weird, considering the rest of the Treatise basically uses dharma = caused = no self-nature = empty, but I think the notion is that dharmas neither have nor don’t have self-nature), and if it’s not a dharma, how can it arise (since it would not have the three marks), so thus the effect could not arise, since the cause never

arose. For non-causes, there are no such dharmas as non-causes (since all are part of the web of causality and to be outside it would be to be self-produced), and speaking of them was merely for argumentative effect.



# Chapter 2 - Contemplation of Going and Coming

This chapter introduces the “three periods” argument that gets re-used and referenced throughout the rest of the work to refute views about action or movement.

The basic gist is that for any action, the dharma of “acting” cannot be found in any of the three periods - before the action, after the action, or during the “moment of acting”. Therefore, actions cannot “really exist” with any self nature, since they can never be found.

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting Going in the Three Periods
- Refuting Goers
- Refuting the Existence of the Three Periods
- Refuting Resting and Resters
- Refuting the Unity or Difference of Goings and Goers

## Notes

### Refuting Going in the Three Periods

- (2v1) There is no going in the already-gone, or in the not-yet-gone. Apart from these, there is also no going in the moment-of-going.
  - This is pretty straightforward for the first two parts. The already-gone cannot contain going, since the going already happened. The not-yet-gone also cannot contain going, since the going has not yet happened. Then, the only remaining option is in the moment-of-going. The commentary at 2/1 refutes this by explaining that the moment-of-going is half already-gone and half not-yet-gone, and since these cannot contain going, the moment-of-going similarly does not contain going.
- Q: (2v2) The questioner doesn’t really take this argument about the moment of going. If there is an action done, which they argue there is since we’re talking about it, then it must take place in this moment of going, since this is the only place separate from already-gone or not-yet-gone.
- A: (2v3) The moment-of-going cannot go, since if “going” is contained in the moment-of-going, how could a moment-of-going arise in the first place without a dharma of going to cause it? In fact the moment would

be uncaused, since what could cause a moment-of-going besides “going”? Thus, the “dharma of going” cannot be contained in the moment-of-going either.

- This is a consequence of the refutation of self-production in Ch. 1, since for a dharma to contain another that produces the whole is impossible. Thus, since a dharma of going is required to produce a moment-of-going, this moment cannot contain the dharma, since then it would be self-caused (or un-caused).
- (2v4) From (2v3), we know that for there to be a dharma of going contained in the moment-of-going, there must be an external “dharma of going” that to cause the moment of going, which would otherwise be uncaused. But this separate dharma of going cannot exist either, since how could the moment-of-going exist separately from a dharma of going?
  - \* (2v5) There is no separate “going” of/in the moment-of-going from the “overall going”, since this would imply two goings: the dharma of going that exists separately from the moment-of-going (that caused the moment) and the “going of the moment-of-going” that is contained within the moment-of-going.
  - \* (2v6) For there to be two goings, there would be two goers, since how could going happen if there is no one to carry it out?
    - ◆ Now, Nagarjuna has constructed a situation like this: Either there is no going in the moment-of-going, or if there is, then there must also be a going that exists outside of the moment-of-going. But then there must be two goers. The conversation now will move to discussing these goers. By refuting “goers”, then this situation that we have constructed will be dissolved, since the establishment of either separate or contained “goings” and “goers” will be extinguished.
    - ◆ (2/6) The commentator however believes this view is obviously nonsense and concludes the refutation here - “One man, two goings and two goers? This is not right.” I think that you *can* conclude the argument here, but along a slightly different line of argument: if there are two goings for one moment-of-going, then they cannot be identical, since how would one particular “going” exist in two places at once, with different relationships to the moment of going? However, the two goings cannot also be different, since then how would they both relate to the same moment-of-going? Suppose X and Y are different. If the dharma-of-going (of X) caused the moment-of-going (of X), then why would this moment-of-going (of X)

contain the dharma-of-going (of Y)? Alternatively, if the moment-of-going (of X) contained the dharma of going (of X), then how could this moment-of-going mutually depend on the dharma-of-going (of Y)? Thus, this situation of two goings and two goers is contradictory.

## Refuting Goers

- (2v7) Now, Nagarjuna argues goers and going cannot be found separately. If the deed doesn't exist, how can there be someone who did it, and vice versa - if there is no one to do the deed, then how can the deed exist?
- (2v8) Nagarjuna separates all agents into two categories: goers and non-goers. His method of refuting a goer is to show that neither of these categories is capable of "going".
  - (2v9) The argument for why goers cannot go that Nagarjuna sets up in this verse mirrors that of 2v3, which argues that the moment-of-going cannot go. Goers cannot contain going, since without an "external" dharma of going there can be no goer in the first place.
  - (2v10) Thus, if the goer contains going, then there must be two goings: one being the going of the goer (i.e. some external "going" that makes the goer a goer, since how could they arise as a goer if no previous "going" existed?), and the other being the going of the dharma of going (i.e. the dharma of going that is contained by them).
    - \* (2/10) The commentary explains that the dharma of going establishes the goer, and in return the goer establishes the dharma of going, so for either one to pre-exist the other would be impossible.
  - (2v11) Therefore to say that a goer goes is incorrect, since goers would have to at once be separate from going and contain going. These goings clearly cannot be identical, since they must exist in two different places and with different relationships to the goer, but if they were different then how would the "goer of X" be caused by the "dharma of going (of Y)"? Therefore we have arrived at a contradiction.
    - \* Non-goers going is never explicitly refuted, since by definition they do not go: if a non-goer goes, then it is not a non-goer.

## Refuting the Existence of the Three Periods

- (2v12) Now Nagarjuna argues that if there *were* goers and goings at some point in the three periods, these three periods themselves would have to begin at some point, but this point can never be found. The structure of

the argument he makes here foreshadows the arguments regarding original limits in Chapter 11 and time in Chapter 19.

- (2v13) This verse explains (2v12): There is no beginning in the not-yet-gone (since there was infinite time before the action started), and thus there can be no beginnings to the moment-of-going, which can only start after the not-yet-gone, (which we have already established has not begun) and the already-gone, which likewise can only begin after the moment-of-going and the not-yet-gone begin.
- (2v14) Thus, we conclude that the three periods themselves cannot be said to exist, since none of these periods can be said to begin, and thus cannot be distinguished.

## Refuting Resting and Resters

- Q: (2/14) The questioner makes the adorable proposition that since no one can be said to be going, or to be a goer, than surely this means that everyone is resting. Nagarjuna disagrees.
- A: (2v15) Nagarjuna splits the possible agents into a familiar binary: everyone is either a goer or a non-goer. The argument is that neither goers nor non-goers are at rest.
  - (2v16) A goer cannot be at rest, since goers are only goers by their going, and since going and resting are opposed, a goer cannot rest (since it is impossible to do both at once).
  - (2/15) In the case of the non-goer: A non-goer cannot be at rest, since to rest means the state that occurs when going ceases, and a non-goer was never going in the first place. This is part of the running theme that opposites are mutually dependent, and to say only one side of a binary exists is meaningless, since what would it be in contrast to?
- (2v17) Here we find another argument: Resting cannot be found in any of the three periods of already-gone, moment-of-going, or not-yet-gone: the not-yet-gone cannot have resting, since there has not yet been any going to rest from, and the moment-of-going cannot have resting since to rest at the moment-of-going would be a contradiction. The argument for no resting in the already-gone is never expounded, but given that Nagarjuna says “All the dharmas of moving and ceasing which exist, / Are included in the idea of going”, I surmise it goes something like this: To transition from “going” to “resting” would be a going in and of itself, and this going can never be isolated, as we have already refuted goers and going. Thus, there is no transformation to a state of resting in the already-gone, so there can be no resting here either.

## Refuting the Unity or Difference of Goings and Goers

- Q: (2/17) Exasperated, the questioner desperately begs for reality to be real: we can see going and resting with our eyes, so how can you say it doesn't exist? The same paragraph of commentary answers this question by reminding us that our senses are faulty, and what we perceive by them cannot be trusted: After all, if there are goings and goers, are they the same, or separate things? This leads in to the final discussion of the chapter.
- (2v18) Nagarjuna now makes an argument about going and goer that does not depend on the three periods - the notion that the dharma of going and the goer are the same and the notion that they are different are both wrong, so these cannot be said to exist. This argument precipitates the argument about Doer and Deed that will come in Chapter 8
  - (2v19) If the dharma of going and the goer are the same, then a doer and their deed would also be the same.
    - \* (2/20) This argument will be expounded upon in a longer discussion at Ch. 8, but the commentary picks up the slack by explaining that this would contradict causality. If going and goer were the same dharma, then by would “a goer” or “going” be established? There is no third thing other than “going” or “goers” that can establish “going” or “goers”, since a “goer” can only exist in reference to the action of “going” and “going” can only exist in reference to something that goes, i.e. a “goer”. The commentator also makes an argument that people abide, while dharmas are fleeting. This one is slightly more dubious to me, but it is a relatively obvious notion that a person's lifespan is longer than that of any individual action (i.e. taking a step). If the person and the step were the same, then when the step ends, the person should die. If one responds that only one's “designation as a goer” dies, then this would mean that this “goer” depended on “going”, which is not true sameness.
  - (2v20) If the dharma of going and the goer are different, then they could exist apart from one another. That is, there could be goings without goers, and goers that never go. However, this was refuted above in 2v11, since these two are interdependent notions and cannot exist separately from the other without violating causality.
- (2v21) Thus, since going and goer can neither be said to be established as the same nor as different, they cannot be established at all. Nagarjuna is not satisfied with only this argument, and he moves on after this to reminding us of the arguments given above.
- (2v22) A goer is recognized as a goer by virtue of their going (i.e. it is because of the going that we identify the agent as a goer), but this goer

cannot employ going since the dharma of going did not pre-exist, waiting around to be used. Thus, a goer does not go.

- (2v23) A goer is only recognized as a goer in reference to a certain going - thus they cannot employ a separate going, as this would be a goer using two goings at once.
- (2v24) and (2v25) employ the first usage of the fixed/not-fixed distinction in the verses: goers and goings cannot exist, and goers cannot employ goings because a fixed or non-fixed goer cannot employ a fixed or non-fixed dharma of going. 2/25 explains all four cases:
  - A goer cannot be fixed and employ going, since definitely fixed means there was a real existence of a goer from the beginning, arising separately from the dharma of going. But if this goer exists separately from the dharma of going, they cannot employ it, since it is something they have no relation to.
  - A goer cannot be not-fixed and employ going, since not-fixed means to be non-existent from the beginning, (i.e. there was no dharma of going to establish them) and if the goer doesn't exist, how could they employ going?
  - A dharma of going cannot be fixed and be employed by a goer, since if there was a definitely fixed dharma of going existing before the goer, the dharma of going would not exist because of the goer, so the goer could not employ it, since it would not be theirs.
  - A dharma of going cannot be non-fixed and be employed by a goer, since if it did not exist, what would the goer employ?
- (2/25) The concluding bit of commentary from this chapter gives a good insight into the strain of thought that characterizes this Chapter's arguments, and much of the rest of the verses: all dharmas (including pairs of going and goer, fire and fuel, deed and doer) are mutually interdependent, so to say one exists heirarchically to another and uses it, produces it, or otherwise takes precedent is impossible. Note that it is also impossible for them to arise simultaneously, since they are caused by one another - if they showed up in the same instant, they both would have been created "from nothing", or from some third thing, and thus would not be mutually interdependent, and would break the axiom of causality.

# Chapter 3 - Contemplation of the Six Sense-Faculties

This chapter introduces a third “mode” of refutation, one that has a slightly more epistemological flavor - how can we trust what we see? In Chapter 1 we refute each of the possibilities around arising and causality with the *causakoti*, and in Chapter 2 we refute actions from a temporal view. However, both the questioner and Nagarjuna make appeals to worldly perception at various points in these two chapters. It's time we understand that this perception too is empty.

## Argumentative Structure

- Refutation of Seeing and Seers
- Refutation of Other Senses, Attachments, and Dharmas of Consciousness

## Notes

### Refutation of Seeing and Seers

- Q: (3v1) The questioner proposes the existence of the six senses: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, as well as the six objects that they can perceive.
- A: (3v2) Nagarjuna begins the refutation by isolating one of these senses: the eye (sight). The argument will eventually be that each other sense is subject to the same refutation. Nagarjuna makes an argument of epistemological uncertainty: If the eye cannot see itself, how can it see anything else? That is, since our vision is only ever able to be conducted from within its own local perspective (of being housed in our body), it cannot be externally verified, so how can we be sure of its validity?
  - (3/2) The commentary at 3/2 forwards the proposition that Nagarjuna seems to be responding to in 3v3: that even though the eye cannot perceive itself, it can still see other things, just as fire can burn other things without burning itself. This seems to propose a framework of “seeing” as the eye’s contact with an external form, just as “burning” is the fire’s contact with an external object.
  - (3v3) Nagarjuna answers the example of fire with a reference to Chapter 2’s three-periods argument, arguing that “seeing” (as an action in which the eye contacts form) cannot be found in the three periods: it is obviously not in the already-seen, since it already happened, or in the not-yet-seen, since the thing has not been seen yet. And as before, there is no seeing in the moment-of-seeing, since

either: this moment is half of the other two refuted periods, or it would have to employ two seeings and two seers, as the “seeing” contained within this moment could not be the same one that caused the “moment-of-seeing”, since this would constitute self-production (if the moment could generate the dharma that in turn produces it).

- (3v4) Subsequently, he expounds on the period of not-yet-seen, stating that seeing is not seeing before the moment of seeing, as in, there can be no seeing without the contact with form. However, for seeing to arise as a result of this contact with form, the contact must have already happened. But this contact itself (between the eye and form) is itself seeing! Thus, seeing is dependent on prior seeing - this is a contradiction, and thus seeing cannot see.
- (3v5) Nagarjuna then gives a total refutation of the dharma of seeing: “seeing” as an action has been refuted, and non-seeing obviously cannot see, and there is no third category beyond these. Thus, there is no seeing, and thus there are no seers as well.
  - (3/5) If there could be seers without seeing, then it would be possible to perceive things visually without the faculty of sight. That is, it would be possible for the blind to see via their other senses, but this is not so. Also, there can be no seers with seeing, since these seers must be able to employ seeing, but this act has already been refuted, so what would they employ? Thus seers cannot see either with or without seeing, so there can be no seers.
- (3v6) Since there are no seers found either separate from or together with seeing, how can there be any seeing (since “seeing” itself is also unable to be found) or things seen?

## Refutation of Other Senses, Attachments, and Dharmas of Consciousness

- (3v7) Without seeing, all other forms of consciousness, attachment, and any other form of grasping at perception cannot be said to exist: thus, the twelve causal links cannot be said to exist.
- (3v8) Just as seeing cannot be found, all other senses are similarly unable to be found, and thus none can be said to exist. The arguments about “seeing” did not depend on any special qualities of the eye or of sight, and so they can be used to refute the other senses.



# Contemplation of the Five Skandhas

## Argumentative Structure

- Refutation of Form and its Cause
- Refutation of the Five Skandhas
- A Note about Analysis

## Notes

### Refutation of Form and its Cause

- Q: (4/0) The commentary presents us with a question to frame Nagarjuna's opening verse: What do you have to say about the five skandhas (i.e. about their existence)?
- A: (4v1) Nagarjuna answers that form (one of the skandhas, taken as a model for refuting all of them, as in Ch. 3 where sight is refuted as a model for all the other senses) is inseparable from the cause of form, and vice versa.
  - (4/1) The commentary explains the cause of form as being like threads of a cloth, where cloth cannot exist if the threads are taken away, and likewise, where there is no cloth, there can be no threads. Thus, the method of refuting the skandha of form is to show that it has no separate definite existence within causality, and thus cannot be said to exist.
  - (4v2) Form existing separately from its cause would be uncaused form, since there could be the case where form pre-exists the cause of form. This form thus would have arisen without a cause, or it would be permanent - both are contradictions to the notion of causality.
  - (4/2), the commentary poses a lengthy question, in effect asking about the meaning of 4v2's statement (that all dharmas are caused) in light of the Buddhist theory of inactive dharmas, which are said to be uncaused. The commentary replies to this question in 6c3 by explaining that these "uncaused" dharmas are merely figures of speech - either they have no causes and conditions and do not exist, or they do have causes and conditions and are not uncaused.
- Q: (6c3) The commentary poses the notion that the cause of form might exist separately from form.
- A: (4v3) Nagarjuna replies that if this were so, and the cause could exist

without its effect, then this would be cause without an effect - but then this would not be a cause.

- Of course, we also know from Chapter 1 that there could be no cause *with* an effect either, so Nagarjuna is pointing towards the notion (to be proven in the following verses) that form and its cause are meaningless notions without substance.
- From here, Nagarjuna refutes form (and its cause, since we have just proved they cannot be separate) via the *catuskoṭi*: The next sequence of verses refute the four possible logical cases: that form could be caused, form could not be caused, form could be both caused and uncaused, or that form could be neither caused nor uncaused.
  - [C1] (4v4) This verse contains the refutation of the first proposition (that form is caused): If form was already extant, then it would have no need for a separate cause. If form was not extant, then it also would have no need for a cause, since we do not need to “cause” things that don’t exist.
  - [C2] (4v5) This verse answers a question that form might simply be uncaused: this notion is so ridiculous as to not deserve a separate refutation, but for form (or any dharma) to exist without a cause would clearly be a case of an effect arising where there are no causes, which was refuted in 1v15. Note that this would also be a case of “form existing separate from its cause” and would thus be permanence.
    - \* Nagarjuna here also makes a little stab, saying that those with insight should not analyse forms. The commentary (4/5) explains ““Analyser” is a name for the common man who, bound by ignorance, desire and attachment to form, consequently develops from his perverted views distinctions and vain arguments. . . If you search for form in this way, it is never attainable, and therefore a man of insight should not analyse.”
  - [C3] [C4] (4v6) Now, Nagarjuna refutes the notion of both and neither (already easily doable on one’s own, considering both caused and uncaused form have been refuted) by saying that causes and effects neither resemble one another nor do not resemble one another. I interpret this to be the *catuskoṭi*’s last two cases even though it’s not made explicit in the text, since for form to be both caused and uncaused would suggest that some relationship (resemblance) exists between form and cause, and for form to be neither caused nor uncaused would suggest that no relationship (resemblance) exists between form and cause.
    - \* (4/6) The commentary explains these cases via the familiar “thread and cloth” analogy: to say effect and cause resemble one another is wrong, as thread and cloth differ in that thread

is many while cloth is one. However, to say that cause and effect do not resemble one another is also wrong, since coarse thread will not produce fine cloth, and hempen thread will not produce fine silk. Thus, both ideas are wrong.

## Refutation of the Five Skandhas

- (4v7) Form and its cause having been proved to be empty, Nagarjuna then spreads this argument to cover the rest of the skandhas. Each is inseparable from its causes, and neither the cause nor the effect can be said to exist separately or in any definite way, so these skandhas cannot be said to exist. This continues the philosophical program started in the last chapter where one's consciousness, body, senses, and cognition are gradually shown to be empty and unstable.

## A Note About Analysis

- (4v8) and (4v9) return to the thought expressed in 4v5 that one with insight should not analyse form. Nagarjuna states that all arguments exist on the same plane, save for that of emptiness: "If a man makes a criticism... without recourse to emptiness... It will be wholly the same as the other's doubts."
  - (4/9) The commentary explains that even true arguments fall into this trap. It gives the example of one who answers the question of why a jug is impermanent with "because it arises from an impermanent cause". This seems to be sound at first, but according to the commentary "there is still the uncertainty of not knowing whether the cause is permanent or impermanent." That is, we have simply kicked the question down the road a bit. Emptiness for Nagarjuna and the commentator seems to be more of a method than a view: it is a method of expelling sophistries and extinguishing views rather than a "final truth".

# Chapter 5 - Contemplation of the Six Elements

The six elements are earth, wind, fire, and water, along with consciousness and space. These are said to be the elements that ground and make up the matter of reality, through their combination. Philosophically, Nagarjuna starts to elaborate on “existence” as something that depends on characteristics, and by whittling away at any independent establishment of characteristics, extinguishes existence.

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting Characteristics and Characterization
- Refuting Existence, Non-Existence, Knowers, and the Other Five Elements
- A Note About Perception and Cessation

## Notes

- (5/0) opens the chapter by asserting that the six elements have fixed characteristics, and it is due to these characteristics that they are the six elements. Nagarjuna’s method of refuting the six elements relies on two main hinges: first, that the elements are not fixed (since this would mean they have existence separately from their characteristics), and further that characteristics and characterization cannot be said to exist.

## Refuting Characteristics and Characterization

- (5v1) Nagarjuna’s initial response is to say that there could be no dharma of space without the characteristic of space, and that if space had been fixed (pre-existent), it would have been without characteristics. This is to draw out the notion that being “fixed” means to exist separately from all other things. But this would mean that “space” would not have been “space” in any meaningful sense, since it would have at one point have been absent of the characteristics by which we are able to point to “space”. Thus, space (and/or its characteristic) cannot be fixed, and we now must turn to examine these characteristics.
  - The side effect of this argument is that the dharma of (something) cannot exist without the characteristic(s) of (something). This ends up being part of the path to another refutation of dharma-nature, since they cannot exist (= have nature) without characteristics, but these characteristics are able to be found. Thus dharmas must be empty, and without nature or definite existence.

- The commentary at 5/1 explains the characteristic of space as “a place without form”. However, form (as we just learned last chapter!) cannot be said to have any definite, stable existence, and is definitely not permanent. Thus, space (if it were fixed) would pre-exist form, but then how would space be space, as it could not be “a place without form” since form had never existed.
- (5v2) Nagarjuna replies to the questioner proposing that there be space without characteristics: Dharmas without characteristics are nowhere to be found, since characteristics would have nothing to characterize here.
  - (5/2) The commentary explains that we can distinguish dharmas (to say “this exists” or “this does not exist”) by means of characteristics of dharmas, namely “arising”, “abiding”, “ceasing” for active dharmas (otherwise known as the Three Marks, which will be discussed in chapter 7), and “non-arising”, “non-abiding” and “non-ceasing” for inactive dharmas. Without reference to these characteristics, there could be no reference to dharmas. This means that any “existence” is contingent on characteristics. Of course, since these characteristics will be shown to be empty, the dharmas that they characterize must also be empty.
- (5v3) Nagarjuna now turns to refute characterization: or, definite views about what exactly the relationship between dharmas and their characteristics might be. The verse states that whether something has or doesn’t have a characteristic, this characteristic does not reside in any definite place. However, there can be no other “place” for a characteristic besides “being had” or “not being had”.
  - (5/3) The commentary explains this using the example of a cow. A cow has horns, a hump, etc. We know the cow by these sorts of characteristics. If there was no cow, there would be nowhere for these characteristics to reside, since there are not just “floating” characteristics that exist on their own. This bit of explanation seems to point towards the back half of 5v2. However, these “external” characteristics they cannot reside in the cow “having” these characteristics, since the cow is already extant and there, so what need would it have to “contain” these? Also, the cow could not have come about as a result of, or after, these characteristics, since this would be the case of “floating” characteristics with no cow. It is clear that characteristics cannot reside in a thing that has other characteristics (the “not having (these) characteristics case”), since the characteristics of fire cannot reside in the characteristics of water. Thus, characteristics do not reside in things that “have them” or in things that “don’t have them”, and thus cannot reside in dharmas at all.
  - The commentary explains further that characteristics cannot abide in

a thing without characteristics, since this would be uncaused (since “arising” is a characteristic of a dharma, a thing without characteristics would never have arisen), and thus would not be a dharma. Thus, characteristics cannot reside in things that are not dharmas. Since characteristics cannot be external or internal to dharmas, but all dharmas have them, they must be mutually interdependent with the dharmas they characterize and with characterization as a process, so there can be no third state for a characteristic to reside.

- (5v4) Then, since characteristics can neither reside in dharmas that have or don’t have them, nor in a thing without characteristics, there is nowhere to locate these characteristics and so they cannot be said to exist. Also, there is no definite relationship between dharmas and characteristics, so there can be no characterization (which would be the process or relationship between these things). Clearly, characteristics cannot exist without characterization (otherwise they would be floating and uncaused), and characterization cannot exist without characteristics (otherwise what would “characterization” be?), so extinguishing one extinguishes them both.

## Refuting Existence, Non-Existence, Knowers, and the Other Five Elements

- (5v5) Now as a consequence, dharmas must also be extinguished, since we know from 5v2 that dharmas without characteristics cannot be said to exist. But if characteristics cannot be said to exist, then dharmas must be extinguished too.
- (5v6) The extinguishing of all dharmas (and thus all existence, since everything is a dharma) leads the questioner to suppose that everything is then non-existent. Nagarjuna replies that non-existence is meaningless without existence, since (according to the commentary at 5/6) non-existence is what happens when existence ceases.
  - Further, without definite existence or definite non-existence, how could there be a knower who would be able to make definite claims about things existing or non-existing? The commentary poses and answers this question by reasoning that such a knower would either have to exist or not-exist, but both are impossible.
- (5v7) Now Nagarjuna concludes the refutation of the Six Elements via a similar mechanism to the refutations of the six senses and the five skandhas: since space has been refuted (along with all characteristics, characterization, dharmas, existence and non-existence), the other five must also be refuted.
  - (5/7) The commentary explains the grounding for this method, arguing that the other five are more obviously impermanent and caused, consciousness being caused by pain and pleasure and earth, wind, fire, and water by combinations of material. Space is more difficult

to reason about, so it was chosen to be refuted specifically. Also, given that space “supports” the other four elements (in the sense that they are “form” and space being a place without form), refuting space refutes these four elements, and since consciousness is made up of the other four, consciousness is refuted also.

## **A Note About Perception and Cessation**

- (5v8) closes the chapter as stating that seeing things in the light of existence or non-existence will prevent them from the “calm serenity of the cessation of views”.
  - (5/8) The commentary explains that someone who has not yet gained insight will be unable to perceive the true character of dharmas, and will cling to views about existence or non-existence.

# Chapter 6 - Contemplation of Passion and the Impassioned One

In this chapter, Nagarjuna examines the “three poisons” of desire, hatred, and delusion, as well as their victim. He shows their emptiness by refuting the possibility that they could either be the same, or different, dharmas, as well as by refuting the possibility of their combining. Thus, neither passion or the one afflicted by it can be said to have any definite location outside of mutual, causal interdependence - i.e. are empty.

## Argumentative Structure

### - Refuting the Unity or Difference of Passion and the Impassioned One

## Notes

### Refuting the Unity or Difference of Passion and the Impassioned One

- (6/0) The questioner frames the discussion with a somewhat lengthy exposition on the “three poisons”. The three poisons are desire, hatred and delusion and are said to be the foundation of the world, and depend upon living “impassioned” beings to propagate. Desire can take various forms: love, attachment, passion, lust, and desire itself. The “dharma of passion” and the impassioned one are said to mutually exist in a way that cause desire, and thus karmic activity, and thus reality. For this reason the existence of the three poisons is supposed to be a necessary fact underlying our world.
- (6v1) Nagarjuna disagrees, beginning by examining the two primary forces at play here: the dharma of passion and the impassioned being. Nagarjuna asks if they are separate, and if so, which could pre-exist the other. By doing so, he refutes the notion that these two could exist or arise separately, or sequentially cause one another in any capacity.
  - (6v1 - 6v2) (From the side of the impassioned one) Suppose an impassioned one pre-existed separately from the dharma of passion: Surely, there must then be passion in this case, since otherwise how would the impassioned one be impassioned? Thus, no further dharma of passion would arise on account of this impassioned person, since they would already be impassioned. Otherwise, 6v2 asks, suppose there was no impassioned one pre-existing. Then how could passion



arise, given that there is no recipient? Thus, in either case, the impassioned one cannot pre-exist separately from the dharma of passion.

- (6v2) Passion separately pre-existing or not produces the same result (of nonsense) for the impassioned one: If passion did pre-exist separately from the individual, then there would be passion “floating” separate from any individual. But how could this be? Passion could not arise, since there would be no one to “feel” it. On the other hand, suppose no passion pre-existed. Then how could an impassioned one arise, since there is no passion? In either case, the impassioned one cannot arise subsequently from a pre-existent dharma of passion.
- Q: (6/2) From here, the questioner proposes that, since they cannot arise one after the other, they might arise simultaneously.
- A: (6v3) Nagarjuna’s reply to this is that such a simultaneous arising would violate the principle of mutual dependence, since afterwards they must “combine”. The commentary at 6/3 interprets this case as them both being uncaused and separately existing, which means both would be permanent.
  - I prefer a slightly different, and in my opinion clearer, argument (used at the end of the second chapter) to refute simultaneous arising: simultaneous establishment would violate the principle of mutual dependence as either both dharmas would come from “nothing” and be uncaused, or they would come from some third thing, but then they would not depend on one another and would be separate (since each could be independently caused by this third thing): however, the dharma of passion and the impassioned one existing separately has just been refuted in 6v1 and 6v2, so this case is impossible as well.
- (6v4) Nagarjuna expounds on the errors of “combining” from the perspective of unity or difference. This verse angles at the fact that the “things” themselves could not combine, whether the same or different.
  - If passion and the impassioned one are the same, then they could not combine, since how could a thing combine with itself? The commentary at 6/4 explains this as like “a fingertip which cannot touch itself.”
  - If they are different, then how could they combine, since being different, they would remain so afterwards, and so what would the meaning of this “combining”? It’s important to note here that by “different”, we don’t mean simply that we can refer to two things. Being “different” means that the two things would be established separately, without relation to or dependence on one another. Thus, to speak of combining different things is meaningless, since they would still be “different” afterwards, and no new thing would be

formed.

- (6v5) Whether “combined dharmas” are one or separate, either way combination should be separate from “association”, since if two things are “associated” they cannot be “combined”, since they are still regarded as distinct things with a relation.
  - If something is one, then there ought not to be two names: the passion and the impassioned one ought to be without any separation. But passion is a dharma and the impassioned one is a person, so to regard them as a unity would be a great confusion. Thus, to say that two things are a unity as a result of combining would be erroneous, since if they were a unity, they would not have to combine.
  - (6v6) deals with the case that these two are separate and yet combine. Nagarjuna explains that being different, and thus having different characteristics, for them to combine would mean for both to acquire the characteristic of combining.
    - \* (6v7) This verse finishes the argument started in 6v7. Since each dharma previously had their own characteristics, merely adding the characteristic of combining does not wipe away their previous distinct characteristics. Thus, they would still be different after “combining” and so this “combination” would not make them into a unity.
- (6v8) Having established that the two can neither be identical or different, nor combined in any way, Nagarjuna criticizes the views behind the questioner’s line of inquiry. Clearly, passion and the impassioned cannot be totally different, with different characteristics, so the questioner searches for unity. But unity of characteristics is also fallacious, so the questioner re-establishes difference. To search for either option is to find the other, so taking either view is ill-founded.
  - (6v9) Further, to speak of either unity or difference would have to be in the context of some difference or unity, but neither has been established. That is, their characteristics have not been established as different, so what would it mean for them to be the same (since they are not different in the first place)? Alternately, their characteristics are not established to be the same, so what would it mean for them to be different (since they are not the same in the first place)? Thus, both avenues are impossible.
- (6v10) By this point, Nagarjuna has refuted the separate existence and sequential arising of passion and the impassioned, the simultaneous arising of both, whether in unity or difference, or by any possible combination. Thus, since they cannot be said to arise in any such combination or non-combination, they must be empty of any self-nature and are thus neither combined nor separate.

# Chapter 7 - Contemplation of the Three Marks

This is a pretty dense chapter. The three marks refers to the aspects of the causal process mentioned back in Chapter 1: arising, abiding, and ceasing. These three are said to be the “marks” of active dharmas, which is to say *all* dharmas, given that inactive dharmas were dismissed as a figure of speech in Chapter 4.

We have refuted causality by other means in Chapter 1, but the questioner still feels that the three marks must hold truth. Nagarjuna dispenses with this notion by questioning whether the marks themselves are active or inactive. If they are inactive, then they cannot “act”. But if they are active, then they must themselves have the three marks: that is, arising must arise (and cease, and abide), abiding must abide, and so on. Nagarjuna shows that any possibility of this leads to contradiction. Thus, unable to be regarded as active or inactive, the three marks are empty (as are the notions of activity or inactivity, which have been refuted along the way, since “activity” relies on the three marks).

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting the Three Marks’ Activity or Inactivity
- Refuting Arising
- Refuting Abiding
- Refuting Ceasing
- Refuting the Activity or Inactivity of Dharmas

## Notes

### Refuting the Three Marks’ Activity or Inactivity

- (7/0) The questioner opens the chapter by asserting that dharmas have the three marks of arising, abiding, and ceasing, and that it is through these that dharmas exist.
- (7v1) Nagarjuna introduces the binary that will frame his refutation: are these marks active (and themselves having the three marks) or inactive? He quickly dispenses with the notion that it could be inactive: “If arising is not active / How can you call it a mark of the active?”
  - (7/1) previews the argument that will be made by Nagarjuna at 7v2: that the three marks cannot be marked (active) since this would require that a dharma at the point of arising also have the marks of cessation and abiding. But this is nonsenseical, since arising and

cessation cannot occur simultaneously - the commentator makes the analogy that this would be like light and darkness coexisting.

- The commentary here also explains Nagarjuna’s argument that the marks cannot be inactive: Inactive “dharmas” have no nature, and it is because of their cessation of activity (i.e. their non-arising, non-abiding, and non-ceasing) that they are inactive. Thus, they are not dharmas, and thus they cannot act or operate as the marks of dharmas: what would it mean for arising to have the mark of non-arising?
- (7v2) gives Nagarjuna’s initial argument for why they cannot be active: this would require the three marks to coexist all at once in one place. Then arising must be both arising and ceasing and abiding at once, but this is nonsensical, since arising and ceasing and abiding are mutually exclusive.
- (7v3) offers another refutation: that the three marks being active would lead to an endless regression: that if arising has arising (and ceasing and abiding), then this “arising-of-arising” must also have arising (and ceasing and abiding) and so on.
- (7/3) It is this thread that the discussion follows from here on out, and the questioner believes that the three marks could be active without an endless regression. This begins a lengthy Q and A sequence.

### Refuting Arising

- Q: (7v4) Nagarjuna transmits the questioner’s proposition: that when arising (also known as original-arising) is produced via arising-of-arising, it in turn produces arising-of-arising. That is, original arising and arising-of-arising produce each other in mutual dependence. Thus, there is no endless regression.
- A: (7v5) Nagarjuna points out an obvious issue with this. Supposing that arising-of-arising produces original arising, how could this be, given that arising-of-arising is produced by original arising? That is, arising-of-arising could not pre-exist (and thus produce) original arising, since it is not until original arising that it itself would arise. This is a nonsensical situation. Even in the most generous light, if arising-of-arising produced original arising which produced arising-of-arising, then this would be arising-of-arising producing itself, which would be permanence and causelessness.
- A: (7v6) The argument works the opposite way too: if original arising produces arising-of-arising, how could this be, given that original arising would not exist until it arose from arising-of-arising - which doesn’t exist yet, since it has not arisen from original arising. This is also causelessness.

- Q: (7/6) The questioner proposes that this might only be possible at the moment of arising of arising-of-arising, that it could produce original arising.
  - A: (7v7) Nagarjuna again refutes this in two parts. At moment of arising of arising-of-arising, it would not yet exist (since it is still in the exact moment of its arising), so how could it produce original arising?
  - A: (7v8) And from the other side: At the moment of arising of original arising, it would not yet (fully) exist, so it could not act to produce arising-of-arising.
- Q: (7v9) The questioner proposes that the process here could be something like that of lighting a lamp: that since a lamp illuminates itself and others, the dharma of arising produces itself as well as other things. The analogy here is that light : dharma of arising, illuminating : producing, and darkness : things not-yet-arisen
  - A: (7v10) Nagarjuna disagrees with the notion that light illuminates itself: instead, darkness means the “absense of light”, and vice versa. Thus, in places where there is light, it is destroying the darkness that would be there otherwise, rather than illuminating it. Thus, it cannot illuminate itself, since there was no darkness within light in the first place.
  - Q: (7/10) The questioner makes a similar modification to before: that the lamp neither “has” light before or after light is produced, but it is at the moment of production of the light that it illuminates things.
    - \* A: (7v11) Again, since dharmas cannot yet act at the moment of their arising, a lamp at its first instant of arising could not penetrate darkness. Thus, it cannot happen at this moment either.
    - ♦ (7v12) Nagarjuna also makes the point that if light could extinguish darkness even before it is fully arisen, then light must be able to have some capacity to “reach beyond itself” prematurely - so why wouldn’t a light lit in this room destroy darkness everywhere? Yet this would be nonsensical. Thus, light must not have this capacity.
  - A: (7v13) Nagarjuna now makes another argument to refute the notion that light could illuminate itself and other things: since light is nothing special apart from darkness, then darkness, which is nothing special apart from light, would be able to darken itself and other things. But this cannot happen, so the example of light is ill-founded.

- At this point, we have determined that arising cannot be inactive, or be produced by some other arising. Thus, the last case to refute is that arising could produce itself.
- (7v14) starts this refutation by breaking it down into two cases either arising produces itself before or after it has already arisen, and both are nonsensical: if arising has not yet arisen, how could it produce itself, since it would not be around to produce anything. Alternately, if arising has already arisen, why would it need to produce itself, since it has already arisen?
  - (7v15) makes explicit reference to the argument laid out in Chapter 2: That we can look to the “three periods” of not-yet-arisen, moment-of-arising, and already-arisen, and see that arising is not present in any of these, just as going (or any other action) is not present in any of the three periods.
    - \* This refutes the case that arising could be in the “moment of arising”: The moment of arising is caused by a dharma of arising, so for it to contain a dharma of arising this could not be the same arising that caused it, and then we would have two arisings for each arising, but then this would too spiral into infinite regress. Alternately, if there is no causal relationship between the moment of arising and the dharma of arising, they would be separate, and this is nonsensical: how could there be arising that never has a moment of arising (i.e. that doesn’t play out), and how could there be a moment of arising where there is no arising?
  - At this point, there is a lengthy commentary block explaining the logic of the three periods argument, and proposing and answering alternate cases of arising. I think this is a little senseless, since all of these cases have already been covered in Chapter 2. I will probably return here at some point to go through these for the sake of completeness. At the end of this, there is a question proposed that continues the original thread of conversation.
  - Q: (10c3) The questioner deflects towards another (more general) statement of the arising of arising: without saying where arising happens in the three periods, they merely assert that there is arising through the combination of causal conditions.
    - \* A: (7v16) We have proved via the three periods argument that there can be no arising in the moment of arising. Supposing that this moment (when conditions are combining) would be the moment when arising arises would be to say this is the moment of arising - but then there could be no arising here.
    - \* (7v17) Furthermore, to say that arising arises from conditions

would be to say that its nature is calm extinction, which is to say that it has no self-nature, and thus is a dharma, and like all other dharmas is empty.

- Q: (7/17) At this point the questioner proposes that a future dharma will arise if its causes and conditions assemble.
- \* A: (7v18) Nagarjuna answers this with regards to a “future dharma”: If this dharma belongs to the future, then it has not yet arisen. But if it arises now, then it already exists, so what need will it have to arise again (in the future)? Thus, this “future dharma” could not be a “future dharma”.
- (7v19) Here, Nagarjuna recognizes that most of the questions above have hinged around the notion that arising could be arising in the moment of arising, and decides to refute this more explicitly. If there is an arising at the moment of arising, then there must be something else that is produced. But then how could there be any further arising to produce this arising?
  - \* This argument is a little complicated and I think the commentary does a poor job of explaining it, so I’ll give my understanding: The moment of arising and the dharma of arising are inseparable and mutually interdependent (we know this from the three periods argument), so if there *is* arising in the moment of arising, then since this moment of arising already has its *own* arising, it must contain *another* arising that produces something further. Also then there would be two arisings happening, and where would this *other* arising come from, since the moment of arising already is in mutual interdependence with its own?
  - \* (7v20) Then, either it *does* produce this other arising, and there is an infinite regress, since this same case must re-occur with the other arising (that is, it must have its own moment of arising, and thus there would be *another* arising contained in this second moment of arising, and so forth), or this other arising is not produced by the moment of arising, and is thus self produced, but this is not the case (since all dharmas come from causes and conditions).
- (7v21) Thus, existent dharmas should not arise, (since they already exist), and inexistent dharmas should not arise, since they do not exist, and since existent arising has already been disproven, but the notion of non-existence requires previous existence. This argument hinges on the notion from 5v6.
- At this point, arising from oneself has been exhaustively disproven, and now we have established that arising cannot be inactive, arise from another,

or arise from itself. Now, we want to finish the task of proving the marks themselves cannot be marked in any way. This means we must show that arising cannot have ceasing or abiding.

- (7v22) At the point of cessation of dharmas (i.e. when a dharma has the mark of cessation), there can be no arising, since cessation and arising are mutually opposed. Thus, arising cannot have the mark of cessation. Nagarjuna also asserts that dharmas without cessation could not arise. My understanding of this is that if there was no cessation, then there could be no arising, because otherwise this would be permanence.
  - The commentary explains the case for if the dharma was without the mark of cessation a little differently. 11a23 explains that there are no dharmas without cessation, since they cease every instant. Thus, every dharma has cessation and thus cannot have arising. If it had neither, it would be inactive, but these “inactive” dharmas do not actually exist, so this cannot be the case either.
- I assume at this point there is no question of the abiding of arising, since it has already been proven to have no arising. Then could it abide, never having arisen. Thus, all possible cases for arising being marked have been extinguished, so arising cannot be active or inactive, and is thus empty.

## Refuting Abiding

- (11a23) Even though arising has been dispensed with, the questioner is certain there must still be abiding.
- (7v23) Nagarjuna disagrees. He again frames the argument along a binary. Non-abiding dharmas clearly do not abide. For the abiding side, he again refers to the three periods: abiding dharmas cannot abide, since this is the case of something in the already-abiding period. How could it have any future abiding? Not-yet-abiding is the same as a non-abiding dharma, since it does not (yet) have abiding, so how can it abide? Thus, the question comes down to the moment of abiding. But there can be no abiding here either, and for the same reason as before: there must then be something abiding that is contained in the moment of abiding separately from the abiding that is the “moment’s” abiding, but then where did this thing come from? If it was also produced by the moment, then this is an infinite regress, but if it is not, then it is self produced.
- (7v24) Now we have proved abiding cannot itself have arising or abiding, but anticipating that the questioner might suppose abiding has ceasing, he decides to refute this too: When something is ceasing, it cannot also be abiding (since these are contradictory marks, as ceasing and abiding are opposite notions).
  - (7v25) And if there is no ceasing, then there is no question of abiding, since every dharma has the mark of ceasing (since all dharmas are



active, i.e. marked). So without ceasing, the thing is not a dharma, but then it could not have the mark of abiding either.

- (7v26) At last, having refuted the notion that abiding could be marked (or inactive), Nagarjuna refutes any other possible notion of abiding via a different argument: That it could not be self produced, or other produced. If it is self-produced, then it would be permanent, since it would depend on no cause but itself, which would always exist. If it was produced of another things abiding, then that thing would also have abiding, and there would be an endless regression.
  - This paragraph strikes me as redundant. There can be no other notion of things besides active or inactive, so the notion that abiding itself could not be marked but would exist because of something else’s marks is ridiculous, because how would this other thing produce something without marks (because then it would have produced something inactive, but we have repeatedly seen that “inactive” dharmas do not exist)? I guess this is to continue the thread that arising could not have arise of itself, or arise of another arising-of-arising.

### Refuting Ceasing

- (11b24) At last, having refuted arising and abiding, we finally come to refute ceasing.
- (7v27) Nagarjuna starts with the basic three periods argument here again. If the dharma had already ceased, how could it cease (again, having already done so)? If the dharma has not yet ceased, how could it cease (since by definition, it has not done that yet)? Further, there could not be any dharma of ceasing in the moment of ceasing, since this would create the similar problem of “two ceasings”, where one is uncaused. Also, 7/27 explains the moment of ceasing as half already-ceased, and half not-yet-ceased, but there is no ceasing found in either of these two.
- (7v28) Wanting to be as thorough as possible, Nagarjuna argues that neither abiding or non-abiding dharmas could cease. This strikes me as needless, since this has already been refuted in 7v24.
- (7v30) Nagarjuna now states that it is impossible for a certain dharma to cease as any particular moment, so there is no “moment of ceasing” to be found.
  - The commentary here is incredibly confused. I take Nagarjuna’s verse as a summation of the three periods argument.
- (7v31) refutes ceasing across existence and non-existence. If something exists, it cannot cease, since then it would both exist and not exist.

- (7v32) completes the argument: if something is non-existent, it cannot cease either, just as one cannot cut off a second head (that does not exist)
- (7v33) And finally, just as there is no arising from oneself, or from another arising-of-arising, there is no ceasing-of-ceasing, or ceasing from itself. 7/33 explains: If a thing ceased of itself, this would be a thing affecting itself and would thus be causeless, just as if something gave arising to itself. However if there is a thing ceasing of another, this would be the self-substance, just from the perspective of another. I prefer my explanation to the argument, which is something cannot cease of another's marks, since then ceasing would not have its own marks, and thus be inactive. But this has already explained to be an error.

### **Refuting the Activity or Inactivity of Dharmas**

- (7v34) At last, we have refuted arising, abiding, and ceasing on many grounds. Notably, they cannot be active, since none can be said to possess their own marks of arising, ceasing, or abiding, and further more for each mark, no moment can be found in the three periods where it occurs. Thus, there cannot be said to exist any active dharmas, since the marks themselves cannot be said to exist. As a consequence, there can be no inactive dharmas either, since without active dharmas, the distinction is meaningless.
- Q:(7/34) The questioner wishes to know why, if there are no three marks, we speak their names in the treatise.
- (7v35) Nagarjuna answers that arising, abiding, and ceasing are all empty of self-nature or real existence - they are only things we speak of to bring one closer to insight and emptiness. However, to attach to them as really existing is erroneous.

# Chapter 8 - Contemplation of Deed and Doer

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting Fixed Doers and Fixed Deeds
- Refuting Non-fixed Doers and Non-fixed Deeds
- Refuting Doing
- Refuting Causelessness of Doer and Deed

## Notes

- (8/0) The questioner frames the chapter by asserting that doing, doer, and deed must exist, since this is the combination of elements that drives the karmic process (which they assume *obviously* exists). The commentator inserts a very funny rebuttal before Nagarjuna's first verse, scolding the questioner for continually asserting the existence of things despite the repeated negation of all dharmas, marks, natures, and characteristics.
- (8v1) Nagarjuna lays out the structure of his argument: we cannot say there are doers and deeds (or "doing"), since a fixed doer does not do a fixed deed, and a non-fixed doer does not do a non-fixed deed.

## Refuting Fixed Doers and Fixed Deeds

- (8v2) Nagarjuna starts by examining the cases of a fixed doer or a fixed deed from either side of the relationship. A fixed deed cannot be done, and thus has no doer, since a fixed deed would have always existed, and would necessarily have pre-existed its doer. Thus, it cannot be done at any point, having always existed, and if it cannot be done, then nobody could do it. Thus a fixed deed has no doer. From the other side, a fixed doer has no doing and no deed, since a fixed doer would have no need for a deed, having always been a doer, and never having a deed would mean there is no doing.
  - (8v3) Nagarjuna develops the argument further, noting that as well as fixed doers or deeds negating the possibility of the other side of the relationship, this hypothetical fixed dharma would be causeless, since how could it exist without being caused? That is, what is the meaning of a deedless doer, or a doer-less deed, since they would have arisen from nothing?
- Q: (8/3) The questioner asks what is so wrong with doer and deed arising without causal conditions.

- A: (8v4) Here, Nagarjuna explains the ramifications of causelessness. If we fall into causelessness, then there is no cause or effect, no doing or doer, and no deed (since in this case the doer could be seen as the cause, and the deed the effect, and doing as the causal process).
  - (8v5) If there is no doing, then there is no sin or merit, and thus no karmic reward for sin or merit. This seems quite a similar argument for why the questioner supposed doer and deed *would* exist in the first place, but whereas the questioner is trying to assert the validity of a view about existence, Nagarjuna is adopting this argument as a means to steer the questioner away from annihilationism and extinguish views, rather than to assert the validity of an opposing view.
  - (8v6) If there is no karmic recompense, there can be no nirvana (since how else would it be reached?), and all action is vacuous and meaningless. This is an interesting place to arrive at in light of the future explanation of nirvana as being like realization of non-self and of the lack of self-nature (i.e. emptiness) of all dharmas. It means that viewing actions as vacuous misses emptiness just as much as viewing them as really extant does, and highlights the necessity of emptiness as separate from existence, and separate from non-existence.

## Refuting Non-fixed Doers and Non-fixed Deeds

- (12c14) The commentator addresses this case explicitly before Nagarjuna gets to it, most likely because Nagarjuna lumps this in with a more holistic analysis. The argument is fairly obvious in light of what was just said in 8v3 and 8v4 about fixed doers and deeds. If even one element is missing (i.e. a fixed doer meaning the absence of a deed, and thus being causeless), we fall into a state where deeds are impossible. Then, if both elements are missing, certainly nothing can be done.

## Refuting Doing

- (12c14) The questioner agrees that without doers or deeds, nothing can be done, but if there is both a doer and a deed present, then there should be “doing”.
- (8v7) Nagarjuna refutes doing by analysing all four cases: a fixed or non-fixed doer doing a fixed or non-fixed deed. If none of these cases can be “done”, then logically there can be no doing. He lays out the beginning of his argument, which is that existence and non-existence are mutually opposed, and cannot exist together. This also works to refute the notion that there could be some type of “fixed-and-non-fixed” deed.
  - (8v8) What that means is that a existent doer cannot do a non-existent deed, and a non-existent doer cannot do an existent deed.

Obviously in either case we would have causelessness, since a non-existent deed cannot be done, so how would the (existent) doer be a doer, since nothing would have caused this. Also, how would a non-existent doer *do* anything, so the extant deed would have to be uncaused. Also, even if there was a doer and a deed, there is still no doing: if the deed pre-existed, then why would it need to be done, and if the deed did not pre-exist, how *could* it be done, since the doer (which already exists) would have to do a deed that does not.

- (8v9) Thus, Nagarjuna concludes, a doer cannot do a fixed deed or a non-fixed deed, nor a fixed-and-non-fixed deed. All these cases have been covered above in some form or another. Fixed doer, fixed deed: (8v2), Fixed doer, non-fixed deed: (8v7), Non-fixed doer, fixed deed: (8v7), Non-fixed doer, non-fixed deed (12c14). Thus, no deeds can be said to exist.
- (8v10) Also, a fixed or non-fixed doer cannot do any type of deed. All of these cases have been covered above in some form or another. Fixed doer, fixed deed: (8v2), Fixed doer, non-fixed deed: (8v7), Non-fixed doer, fixed deed: (8v7), Non-fixed doer, non-fixed deed (12c14). Thus, no doers can be said to exist, and since there are no deeds and no doers, there is no doing.

## Refuting Causelessness of Doer and Deed

- Q: (8/10) At this point, the questioner assumes that Nagarjuna, in denying doers and deeds, has taken a position of causelessness and is asserting a world in which “things just happen”.
- A: (8v11) Nagarjuna explains: Doers exist by virtue of the deed, and deeds exist by virtue of the doer. There is no meaning to deed beyond this. This notion is quite similar to that of cause and effect, or dharma of going and moment of going - any of these dharmas taken alone cannot be located or reasoned about, but can only be made sense of as part of a mutually dependent and causal system. Things arising in this way are empty of self-nature, since any “nature” would mean a fixed essence that cannot ever be pinned down. However, even this process of arising, and the exact terms of mutual dependence themselves cannot be isolated or fixed, as we have seen in the first two chapters. So to speak of doers or deeds is merely to speak of doers or deeds - there is nothing beyond this.
- (8v12) Nagarjuna makes a note to extend the notion of doers and deeds towards the five skandhas - where reception and recipient are also refuted. This is pretty interesting, since we usually assume “doer” to mean a person and “deed” to mean an action or thing. However, in this analogy, the skandhas are the “doer” and the person the “deed”. This gives insight into non-self: just as doer and deed cannot be established, neither can the skandhas or the body they create.

# Chapter 9 - Contemplation of a Substrate

Substrate here refers to a soul or anything like it, in the sense of some sort of “self”, “essence”, “identity” that characterizes a person and might transmigrate between rebirths. A substrate would support the sense faculties, and dharmas such as feelings. Nagarjuna’s strategy for refuting this is to argue that such a substrate could never be observed separately from the things it supports, and thus cannot be isolated as a separate thing from feelings, senses, external objects, etc.

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting a Substrate Separate From, or Inhering in, Functions, Dharmas, etc.
- The Implications of Refuting a Substrate

## Notes

### Refuting a Substrate Separate From, or Inhering in, Functions, Dharmas, etc.

- (9v1) Here, Nagarjuna’s verse takes the role of the questioner, introducing the belief in the substrate and its definition: a substrate is the one that possesses the faculties of eye, ear, etc. and the dharmas of pain, pleasure, etc.
  - (9v2) The questioner reasons that if there was no substrate, then who would have the dharmas of eye, etc? Then the senses would transmit to “nothing”, but clearly they go somewhere, as we are able to hear, see, feel etc. Thus, a substrate must exist
- (9v3) Nagarjuna’s refutation begins here. He argues that if there was a separate pre-existent substrate from the functions of eye etc, dharmas of pain etc, we would be unable to know it.
  - The argument here is that if a substrate is a separate thing receiving or supporting our senses, feelings, etc, then our only means of ferreting out this substrate would be by these same means of eye, feeling, etc. Then we have no “external” means of verifying the substrate, and thus it cannot truly be separate. If it is of form, then how could the eye be separate from it (according to our line of reasoning in Chapter 3), and if it is not of form, how could the eye perceive it? It is similar with the other types of objects, senses, etc.

- After this point the commentary gives a lengthy list of reasons against a substrate that seem unhelpful and confused. I suppose these might be helpful in someone. I will not spend time on them.
- (9v4) Nagarjuna examines more implications of the substrates supposed separation from the senses: if these were separate dharmas, then the eye, ear, etc should be able to exist apart from the substrate. But then we would have exactly the case that the definition of the substrate is meant to avoid: there would be eye, ear etc sending “to nothing”, with no substrate to support them. This marks a contradiction for the questioner’s notion of a substrate.
- (9/4) Here, the questioner modifies their inquiry. Maybe the things are separate from one another, but only the substrate itself exists.
- (9v5) Nagarjuna hedges against this by reminding the questioner of causality: We only know of dharmas through our person, and we only know of our person through dharmas: If there was no seeing, no eye, no objects, then what would it mean to be a person? And vice versa, if there was no person, then what would it mean to have seeing, eye, objects, etc?
  - The notions of the person, our senses, and the dharmas they perceive are all mutually interdependent. This is causality, as we learned in Chapter 3. All are empty because all are mutually caused, and so one cannot be said to exist separate from the other.
- (9v6) This analysis applies to the question of substrate as well. There is no substrate required to support these notions of eye, ear, etc, since they are produced by causes and conditions such as the skandhas, other objects (dharmas), etc. Thus there can be no “soul” supporting them, since from where would this substrate have come from if not the skandhas, other objects (dharmas) etc. Else it would be uncaused, or permanent. This is also seen by the eye, the ear, etc acting separately in accordance to different dharmas (i.e. discriminating). If they were all caused in the same way by a common substrate, then why does the eye see differently than the ear hears, etc. Thus, there can be no substrate in the eyes, ears, etc.
- Q: (9v7) The questioner follows up by asking how the eye etc. can function separately and “know” objects without a substrate? As in, what is the recipient of this knowledge, since the knowledge is not “known” by the eye itself (which we have established is empty, only arises in relation to consciousness and external form etc. in Chapter 3).
  - (9/7) At the end of the question, the commentator frames Nagarjuna’s reply. There can be no “knower”, since if each sense had its own “knower”, or if there was one “knower” for all senses, each would be wrong.
- A: (9v8) Nagarjuna frames the questioner’s view like so: There must be a substrate, since the one who sees is the same as the one who hears, is the

same as the one who receives. However, 9/8 points out that, the senses themselves not having a fixed knower, then the substrate should be able to use the eye to hear, the ear to see, etc if they are all identical. Thus, there cannot be one “knower” of all functions.

- A: (9v9) Now Nagarjuna refutes the case where each sense has its own separate knower. If each had its own knower, then the substrate would be multiple, and would exist in copies in each sense. But then when seeing, there should also be hearing: If the “knower” is copied through all senses, then taking input from one would stimulate the knower in every other sense as well. But this is not the case, since one can hear with eyes closed, etc.

### **The Implications of Refuting a Substrate**

- (9v10) Thus, since the substrate cannot be observed separately or externally by any of the functions it supports, nor can there be any substrate in the senses themselves (since they are empty, and any such case of a “knower” has been refuted) there is no substrate in the elements (and skandhas, etc) that produce the functions of eye, ear etc, the dharmas of pain, pleasure etc.
- (9v11) Similarly, if there is no substrate (external, stable base) to support the functions of eye, ear etc, the dharmas of pain, pleasure, etc. Then these things must also be empty (cannot be said to exist) and caused only by conditions.
- (9v12) At last, since the functions of eye, ear, etc are the means by which we apprehend reality, existence and non-existence, if these functions are empty, then so too must be existence and non-existence.



# Chapter 10 - Contemplation of Fire and Fuel

The translator makes a notable point that “fuel” here does not refer to the wood, oil, etc that will be burned, but rather to the “substance” of the fire, where “fire” is the phenomena. Thus, “fire” and “fuel” are like “deed” and “doer”. This also makes more sense given that “fire” and “fuel” are meant as an analogy to the five skandhas and the receiver. This comparison is also made in Chapter 8 on Doer and Deed.

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting Fire and Fuel as Either Separate or Together
- Refuting the Existence of Fire and Fuel
- Refuting Receiver and Reception

## Notes

- Q: (10/0) There is a bit of a Q and A session in the commentary before Nagarjuna’s first verse. The questioner posits that receiving and recipient exist, just like fire and fuel, with the recipient being the fire, and the five skandhas being the fuel.
  - A: The commentary replies (anticipating Nagarjuna’s argument) that fire and fuel cannot be established either together or separately, thus refuting the example.
- Q: (14b18) The questioner responds by asking how the commentator can refute the dharmas by means of unity or difference if they do not exist at all? They presuppose that to speak of something or its characteristics is to admit its existence - moreso, we can see that things exist, so to examine them is natural.
- A: (14a24) The commenatary replies with the explanation that always recurs in these sorts of scenarios: that to speak of things is to merely adopt conventional worldly expressions for the purpose of teaching or argument. Without these expressions, how would one refute anything? Thus, to refute unity and difference one must speak of unity and difference. However, one with insight does not grasp at these terms or accept them as reality. With this prelude out of the way, Nagarjuna begins his argument.

## Refuting Fire and Fuel as Either Separate or Together

- (10v1) Nagarjuna adopts the method of refuting fire and fuel by arguing that they cannot be established either together or separately. If fire and fuel are the same, then this means the deed and the doer are one. If fire and fuel are different, then fire and fuel could exist without one another.
  - (10/1) examines the case that they could be the same: this is very clearly, since this would be like a doer and deed being the same. But clearly a potter is not his pot, nor vice versa. So doer and deed are not the same.
  - (14c10) examines the case that they are different, namely that fires could exist without being caused by fuel: but even worldly perception refutes this, since this case does not happen (where fires pop up without “burning” anything or being caused). I find “worldly perception” to be a rather weak counterargument here, and I find the arguments that Nagarjuna makes in 10v3, 10v4 and 10v5 much more convincing.

Also note that if they were separate, then one could exist without the other, and thus would be uncaused, since fire cannot burn without fuel, and if it did it would be permanence (this is basically the argument Nagarjuna makes in 10v3), and on the other hand, if there is no fire, then how could fuel be called fuel (just as a doer is not a doer without a deed)?

- (10v2) Nagarjuna now gives another reason why they cannot be different: existing separately, one would have fires without fuel. In addition to violating causelessness, this would also violate the characteristics we know of fire, namely that it burns up things. But if there is fire without fuel, then it would be fire that is burning nothing, so it would be a totally unreal sort of fire that does not resemble the “fire” in our world.
  - (10/2) The commentary takes this argument in a slightly different direction, anticipating the causlessness argument that Nagarjuna makes in 10v3: the commentator argues that if fire and fuel were different, then fires would burn permanently, not depending on fuel. But this would be self-substance and violate causality: and if there is no causality, then human effort would be in vain.
- (10v3) Now Nagarjuna picks up on the central error in the difference of fire and fuel: that if fire does not depend on fuel, then it does not arise from causes or conditions. But then fire would be permanent, which would mean it has self-substance (i.e. is able to produce itself). As we saw in Chapter 1, this contradicts our principle of causality, and would mean there is no sin or merit, nor any recompense for one’s actions.
- (10v4) This verse and its commentary are pretty opaque to me, but I think it means to examine the difference case from the side of fuel: If fuel existed

without fire, then how could it be called fuel, just as a cause without an effect cannot be called a cause. If there was fuel without fire, this could not be fuel unless it was burned, but if it burned, what would be burning it except fire?

- (10v5) Now Nagarjuna re-explains the case of 10v3 from a purely logical (not soteriological) sense: if fire and fuel were different, there would be no contact between them. But without contact, how would there be burning (since burning implies the contact of fire and fuel), and if there was no burning, then there would be no extinguishing (just as how there can be no ceasing without arising). But without extinguishing there would be permanence, since a fire that existed without burning (i.e. consuming fuel or making contact with anything) would never go out.
- Q: (10v6) The questioner disagrees that the difference of fuel and fire implies that there could be no contact: It might be that fire and fuel are separate, but come together to produce burning, just as two different people can come together to produce another person.
  - A: (10v7) Fire and fuel being separate would mean a fire could come into contact with some other fuel (separate from the one we were previously discussing). The meaning of this is slightly opaque to me, but I'll try my best - This is more clearly examined by thinking of these as doer and deed: If doer and deed are separate, then a deed "alone" would either not be done (a contradiction), or would require some other doer - but one doer's deed cannot "hop over" to another doer, else we would have causelessness, and one person's actions would be owned by another. Thus, fire cannot come into contact with some other fuel if they are separate.
- Q: (10/7) proposes a much more interesting case: what if fire and fuel exist, but are interdependently established? That is, fire exists on account of fuel and vice versa.
- A: (10v8) begins Nagarjuna's reply. If fire and fuel exist on account of one another, than what fixed dharma pre-existed to cause them both?
  - The point here is that they would have to both be established before contact with one another, or at the moment of contact with one another. But any case of simultaneous arising can be refuted with the three periods argument that is used throughout Chapter 7: Either they would have to be established in the not-yet-established, or the already-established, but these two are clearly wrong, or in the moment-of-establishing. But this moment of establishing would have to be mutually dependent with another "dharma of establishing" that it doesn't contain in order to exist. If it contained the "dharma of establishing of fire and fuel", then this would be a separate establishment, not caused by the "moment of establishing". But then

something else would have to cause this “dharma of establishing of fuel and fire”, or else it would be causeless, which has already been refuted. Thus, some third thing must cause them both, but what would it be? In fact, there can be no third thing, since if it causes them both together they would in fact both be dependent on this third thing. But then they would not be mutually interdependent as the question supposes, and this case is caught in a contradiction.

- (10/8) now examines the cases that either fire or fuel somehow came first. Since the question assumes mutual interdependence this would be a case such as: If a (fixed) fire came first, then fuel is established, and in turn if a (fixed) fuel came first, then fire is established. But any case like this means the one that came first is actually independent rather than interdependent. If fuel came first, then subsequently there is fire, but this fire cannot establish the fuel, since this fuel already existed (to establish the fire). Thus there is no interdependence, and in fact fuel has existed independently and established the fire. If fire came first, and subsequently there is fuel, this fuel cannot in turn establish the fire, since it was already established (to be able to establish the fuel). Thus the fire was independent, not interdependent. Therefore, fire and fuel can only be found together, and cannot be established separately, even interdependently, and thus cannot be established at all.
- (10v9) sees Nagarjuna expound a similar argument to those in 10/8: If fire exists on account of fuel, then fire (already established) would be established again, since for fuel to be called fuel, there must be fire for there to be mutual interdependence (else this would be like a doer not having a deed). Otherwise, if fire was in the “separate” fuel without being seen yet as fire, there would be “fire” here that was not burning, and thus would be non-existent. But the questioner was trying to prove existence. So this is also a contradiction.
- (10v10) Now, having refuted that fire and fuel could come into existence simultaneously or before one another, existing separately yet interdependent, Nagarjuna turns to refute the case that they could be established separately and acquire dependence afterwards. In fact, dharmas established dependently in return establish the other dharmas: this is the meaning of causality: one cannot speak of fuel without fire or fire without fuel. Thus, the notion that they could have ever existed separately is incorrect: “Now, where there is no dependence, / There will be no dharmas established either.”
- (10v11) continues the argument to refute all sophistries about dependence and establishment: If dharmas are dependently established, how can they depend when not-yet established (i.e. how can two dharmas that are not yet established already be said to be dependent on one another), and also already being established, they are dependent (via the proposition

of dependent establishment), so what need would they have to acquire further dependence?

- 10v10 and 10v11 taken together refute all cases of dependent establishment: we know fire and fuel are dependently established - to speak of one without the other is impossible, since to speak of establishment without dependence is to speak of causelessness or permanence. But they cannot be dependent while not-yet-established, since how could they “depend” on anything without being established. They also cannot become dependent after being established, since already being dependently established, what need would they have for further dependence. The case of them acquiring dependence at the “moment of establishment” has been refuted numerous times: In Chapters 2 and 7, and also by me above under 10v8. Nagarjuna also refers to this case in 10v13.

## Refuting the Existence of Fire and Fuel

- (10v12) Now Nagarjuna begins to sum up what we have established, painting the picture of how fire and fuel cannot be said to exist in any way. Fire cannot exist through dependence on fuel, or exist independently (these cases are covered in 10v8-10v9 and 10v5). Also, fuel cannot exist through dependence on fire, or exist independently (these cases are covered in 10v8 and 10v4)
- (10v13) Fire (and fuel) also cannot contain one another, or be established from some third thing (these cases are covered in 10v9, 10v10 and 10v11)
- (10v14) Finally, fuel and fire are not the same, nor are they different (separate), nor do they contain one another. These cases are covered in (10v1, 10v2, and 10v10-10v11). Thus, fire and fuel cannot be established as one, as separate, as existent and mutually dependent, as existent and one containing the other, or as coming from some other thing or from nothing. Thus, fire and fuel cannot be established.

## Refuting Receiver and Reception

- Q: (10/14) At the end of this block of commentary, the questioner asks why Nagarjuna is discussing fuel and fire.
- (10v15) Nagarjuna reminds the questioner of the original question - that fuel and fire are analogies for the recipient and the five skandhas. This example also refers to all dharmas mutually established. By refuting the relationship supposed between fire and fuel in which there was some substance, nature, or existence to a phenomena being caused through action of another substance, we have refuted the notion that there could be a truly existent phenomena of the “self” that is made up by the “stuff” of the five skandhas. In truth all are empty.

- (10v16) Thus, Nagarjuna reminds us that searching for self, characteristics, nature, and existence is misguided, and anti-thetical to the Buddha-dharma (i.e. emptiness)

# Chapter 11 - Contemplation of Original Limits

This chapter is unique in that Nagarjuna and the questioner aren't really at odds here. Rather, the questioner is looking for insight regarding the original limits of saṃsāra (i.e. when did it begin, when will it end). Otherwise, it is an incredibly straightforward application of the catuṣkoṭi.

## Argumentative Structure

### - Refuting the Knowability of Original Limits in Saṃsāra

## Notes

### Refuting the Knowability of Original Limits in Saṃsāra

- (11/0) The questioner opens the discussion by referencing a “Sutra on Limitless Origins”, which apparently says that there are beings, that they come and go in birth and death, and that the original limits of this are inconceivable.
- (11v1) Nagarjuna agrees that no original limit is conceivable: birth and death have no beginning, and likewise will have no end. This is taken almost axiomatically, given that it's the words of the Buddha, but don't worry, he'll prove it anyway. For there to be a beginning or an end, then either birth or death must have come first, and also one would have to come last. Nagarjuna will prove the unknowability of the original limits by proving via a pretty straightforward application of the catuṣkoṭi that neither birth nor death could come first, nor occur simultaneously.
- (11v2) Given that there is no beginning or end (taken as axiom, given the words of the Buddha), how can there be a middle? No middle can exist without a beginning or end, since what else would it be in the middle of? Thus, there is no before, after, or simultaneity to saṃsāra. To say we are in it, that it started, or that it ended is inconceivable.
- [C1] (11v3) If we suppose that first there is birth, and afterwards old age and death (i.e. that birth is separate and pre-exists death), then birth would have existed without death, and subsequently there would also be death without birth. But birth and death depend on each other as dharmas - if something is born but never dies then this is permanence. And within the round of saṃsāra, it is said that beings come and go - so how could there be birth without death? Likewise, how can there be death and old age without birth, since something has to be born in order to die. Death without birth is just as meaningless.

- [C2] (11v4) If death comes first, and birth is after, then this would be causelessness: how could the thing die having never been born? Having never been born but yet extant, this would be something uncaused.
- [C3] (11v5) Birth and death cannot occur simultaneously, since in the moment of birth there would be death as well, but these things are mutually opposed. Besides this, there is the error of them both being uncaused, since if birth did not condition death, and death did not condition birth, then how would they arise?
  - Supposing there is some third thing to cause them both is equally erroneous, since then they would not mutually depend and would in fact both depend on this third thing. But then we would have the separation of birth and death that is refuted in 11v3.
- [C4] The neither case is not explicitly dealt with here, since the question assumes that birth and death are extant. But it is safe to say that if there was neither birth and death arising at all, then neither could be a start or end to saṃsāra.
- (11v6) Thus, all cases for birth and death serving as original limits have been extinguished, so to grasp to things such as birth, old age, and death is to pursue sophistries.
- (11v7 - 11v8) In fact, all dharmas are like this. None have conceivable limits. It is possible to see the “birth” and “death” of dharmas as “arising” and “ceasing” (which we already know to be empty, as per Chapter 7). But when did this cycle of arising and ceasing start? And when will it end? These limits are just as inconceivable, since the same arguments used in this chapter can refute that “arising” or “ceasing” would have started or ended this cycle. Therefore there are no original limits.



# Chapter 12 - Contemplation of Suffering

Like Chapter 11, this is another relatively straightforward *catuskoṭi* application. Nagarjuna argues the emptiness of suffering by refuting its production by self, other, both, or neither.

## Argumentative Structure

### - Refuting Suffering via All Possibilities of its Arising

## Notes

### Refuting Suffering via All Possibilities of its Arising

- (12v1) Nagarjuna opens by laying out ways others might think of suffering: as self created, other-created, jointly created, or causeless. All of these, believe it or not, will be incorrect.
- [C1] (12v2) If suffering was self-created, then it would not arise from conditions. But suffering arises from the five skandhas (since suffering describes our experience, or our existence, both of which arise from the five skandhas), and “those” skandhas arise from “these” skandhas. That is, (being empty, as shown in Chapter 4) the skandhas arise and cease, and thus suffering is created from conditions. Thus suffering cannot be self-created (since the self would have to be fixed, but the five skandhas are not).
  - Q: (12/2) Then, to say “these skandhas create those skandhas” is to speak of creation by another.
  - A: (12v3) To say that these five skandhas differ from those five skandhas is to speak of other creation. It is important to remember here that the “parent topic” is still the self-creation of suffering. In trying to pin Nagarjuna’s argument in 12v2 as other-creation, the questioner has made the error of assuming “these skandhas” and “those skandhas” are different. So Nagarjuna here is reminding us that “these skandhas” and “those skandhas” are neither the same nor different, since they have been shown to be empty earlier. So for the questioner to assume they are different is actually to assume “these” and “those” skandhas are other-produced. But this is in conflict to what we have proved in Chapter 4. Thus, the error lies with the questioner.
  - Q: (12/3) To speak of “self creation” of suffering actually means that everyone creates of themselves their own suffering, and of themselves

receives their own suffering.

- A: (12v4) Nagarjuna’s reply angles at the notion that there *is* no person apart from suffering (after all, it’s the first noble truth). Thus, there can be no person-created suffering apart from the suffering of the five skandhas, since there is no person apart from the five skandhas. Similarly, there is no reception of suffering apart from the reception of the five skandhas, so there can be no person-received suffering apart from the reception of the five skandhas.
- [C2] (12v5) Nagarjuna now looks at the reverse of the argument in 12v4 to refute other-creation of suffering: If it *is* so that that person could create suffering and transfer it to this person, then people and suffering must be different. But then how, being separate from suffering, could this person receive it?
  - (12v6) Similarly, if that person creates suffering and bestows it upon this person, then what person could exist apart from suffering in order to create (and give) this suffering?
  - (12v7) Further, since self-creation has been refuted, how could there be creation of suffering by another person, since this person (who creates suffering) would have to create suffering of themselves. But this is nothing but self creation.
    - \* Note: this is the argument Nagarjuna first makes at 1v4.
  - (12v8) Finally, suffering cannot be self-created, since dharmas cannot create dharmas, and this “other” has no self-substance (being a dharma) with which to produce other things.
    - \* The commentary likens this to a knife trying to cut itself. Note that this argument is proved in Chapter 7, where it is shown that arising (or abiding, or ceasing) cannot create arising (or abiding, or ceasing).
- [C3] (12v9) Nagarjuna now addresses the view that there might be joint creation, given there is no self- nor other-creation? Not so, since this must be some combination of self- and other-creation, but both have been refuted.
- [C4] (12v9) Also, given that no person or combination of persons can create suffering, how could it be created by causelessness?
- (12v10) Nagarjuna reminds us that not only is suffering able to be refuted this way, but also all (ostensibly) external dharmas. This is a callback to Chapter 1, where he uses the same method in a comprehensive refuting of causality.

# Chapter 13 - Contemplation of Predispositions

This chapter is ostensibly about predispositions, but the arguments here work in refuting pretty much all dharmas. In particular, the arguments here precede similar ones that come in Chapter 15. Nagarjuna argues against their “existence” because any existence would have to depend on some sort of nature.

However the commentary in this chapter is excellent in explaining the utility of cutting off predispositions to the one searching for insight. In this sense, this chapter begins a strain of thought continued by Chapter 18 and Chapter 25 in expounding the path for one searching for nirvana via emptiness.

## Argumentative Structure

### - Refuting the Variance or Invariance of Dharmas

## Notes

### Refuting the Variance or Invariance of Dharmas

- (13v1) Nagarjuna frames the chapter by noting that sutras speak of the false deceptions and misapprehension of predispositions (aka the skandhas).
  - (13/1) The commentary helps clarify the aim here a little bit: other Buddhists have made the claims that reality and dharmas are characterized by falsity and misapprehension, but nirvana is not.
- (13v2) The aim here is to dispel any distinctions being made, and clarify that *all* dharmas are empty, and that “falseness” or “misapprehension” merely point towards emptiness.
- Q: (17b6) The questioner asks how one can know that predispositions are empty? This begins a lengthy commentary Q and A block preceding Nagarjuna’s next verse.
  - A: (17b6) The commentary replies that all predispositions are empty because they have “the characteristic of falsity”. Given that the commentator explains “predispositions” as meaning the five skandhas (since the five skandhas arise on account of being grasped by our predispositions), the “characteristic of falsity” refers to their lack of self-nature, and their lack of any fixed existence. Thus, predispositions are empty because the five skandhas are empty.
  - (17b10) From this point on, the commentary gives arguments towards the emptiness of each skandha. Most of them take a very similar structure, and the discussion here foreshadows the focus on “varying”

and “variants” that makes up much of Nagarjuna’s verses in this chapter. The first one addressed is form. The form of a person does not abide even momentarily - the form of one in infancy differs from one as a toddler, as a child, all the way up through old age.

- (17b15) Therefore, form cannot have any fixed nature since it can neither be the same nor different throughout life. If form were the same it would be fixed, and so one in old age would have the same form as they did as an infant. But this is not the case. But if the forms were different, then they could not change into one another - the infant could not become a crawler, who could not become a child, and so on, since they would be totally separate. So this cannot be the case either.
- Q: (17b23) The questioner amends their proposition - form may not be fixed, but ceases and arises in a succession of forms.
- A: (17b25) This cannot be the case, since the succession must happen either before or after the previous one’s ceasing, but both are impossible. If before, then the original form will not cease, and there is no successive reproduction, or it would be the case that the two forms would both exist for a time, but this is not possible, since how could a person possess two forms at the same time? Otherwise, the forms arise after the previous one’s ceasing, but then this would be causlessness. The previous form would have ceased, so what could cause the next form?
- Q: (17c1) The questioner amends their position again - it’s not necessarily that successive reproduction occurs in relation to ceasing or not-ceasing, only that non-abiding characteristics arise, so there must be successive reproduction.
- A: (17c1) If this were the case it would still be that of a fixed form arising again (if they do not cease or not-cease), and so one would have many co-existent types of forms. But then this too would not constitute succession. Instead, form ceases moment by moment, abides nowhere, and nowhere is it fixed, so it cannot arise from fixed forms. Thus, form is empty and exists only in conventional expression.
- (17c11) Having refuted form, the commentary moves to cover the rest of the skandhas. Receiving is next, and is like this as well: It does not abide anywhere or arise in any fixed manner, and no reception can be isolated or distinguished from one’s perception of the skandhas. Thus it is also empty.
- (17c13) Conception is also like this, since it arises on account of names and marks. Thus, it is not fixed and pre-existent since it arises from conditions, without fixed nature. The commentator likens conception

to “shadow following substance”, in that shadows would not exist without substance. Similarly, conception only exists from conditions, so it cannot have its (own) nature.

- (17c20) Consciousness is also like this, since it arises on account of form, sound, smell (and the other senses), body, etc. This consciousness cannot have any fixed nature since it is unable to be located. Is consciousness in the eye, or in the form, or somewhere else? Is consciousness that cognizes one person the same as consciousness that cognizes another? These things are unknowable, since to investigate these issues itself relies on consciousness. Unable to be differentiated, they cannot be fixed, and so consciousness is also empty.
- (18a2) Predispositions are also like this. The commentary makes a distinction between “pure” and “impure” predispositions, “pure” meaning those that concern true speech, non-attachment, etc, and “impure” meaning those that are characterized by the grasping attachment that afflicts beings. These vary over the course of one’s life, increasing or diminishing.
  - \* (18a5) The commentary makes an interesting argument about how both “increase” or “diminish”, which is oddly value oriented for the Middle Treatise. It seems like this is meant to explain the constance of “variance” even supposing one is “pure” or “impure. Those with pure predispositions (i.e. those that have attained enlightenment) have “diminished” in the sense that they have cut off attachments, but the resumption of activity (presumably for bodhisattva-doing?) then would mark an “increase”. For those with impure predispositions, receiving the negative recompense of their actions they would be “diminishing” in the sense of lowering oneself, but in resuming their activities (on the path back from hells, etc.) they are “increasing”.
  - \* (18a12) Similarly, looking at the 12 links, one sees that ignorance causes predispositions, which in turn cause consciousness and attachment, which in turn continue down through grasping and existence and birth and death. Thus all suffering has root in predispositions. This is a major point in explaining why Nagarjuna focuses on extinguishing views as a soteriological mechanism. Developing true insight (prajña) ceases ignorance, which allows predispositions and its effects to cease as well.
  - \* (18a19) The commentator characterizes afflictions cut off by meditation: attachment and craving, anger, contamination by form and non-form, lust, ignorance. These are also cut off when predispositions cease (as a result of meditation?) and so each link of causation ceases. Thus each of the five skandhas ceases

as well, and there is only emptiness.

- \* (18a24) Thus, the explanations given in 18a12 and 18a19 provide the motivation for *why* the Buddha tells us that all predispositions are false, and why this points towards emptiness. It is because realizing their emptiness, and attaining the insight that leads to their extinction, is the path that leads one towards the cessation of ignorance.
- (13v3) Nagarjuna picks up on the discussion by introducing the argument previewed in the commentary: that dharmas (including predispositions) cannot have any nature because they vary. Further, these natureless dharmas cannot be said to exist, since they are empty (i.e. not fixed).
  - (13/3) The commentary calls back to the argument about the varying of form in 17b10: since dharmas vary over, they cannot be fixed (or even successively arising) at any point, and thus cannot have own nature or stable existence.
  - Q: (18b4) The questioner asks why dharmas lacking own-nature means they cannot exist.
    - \* A: (18b4) The answer to this is slightly convoluted. If dharmas with no nature really existed, must have the characteristic of existence (or basis). However, this would not be “no nature”, and thus it would not be empty. So, for dharmas to have no nature is for dharmas to not exist. We say “no nature” in order to refute the presumption of nature. But if the case was different we would say otherwise.
- Q: (13v4) Nagarjuna speaks from the view of the questioner: If dharmas have no nature, then how can one speak of the various differences (such as between infancy and old age)? The assumption here is that “being an infant” or “being elderly” is a sort of essence or characterization that defines a particular form, and thus would constitute nature. If there is no nature, then what would vary?
- A: (13v5) Nagarjuna answers by supposing the questioner’s view that a thing must have nature in order to vary. Then, he shows that even a dharma with nature cannot vary (as well as a dharma without nature). This may seem contradictory, given that Nagarjuna in 13v3 just argued that dharmas *do* vary, but it is important to remember that Nagarjuna is merely adopting these terms as conventional in order to refute the opposite views. The goal of his teaching here isn’t about whether dharmas *do* or *don’t* vary, but rather that one must extinguish views about dharmas varying or not varying.
  - (13/5) If dharmas had a nature, this would mean a fixed, settled existence. But then, being fixed, this could not vary. The argument

for nature-less dharmas not varying goes unsaid, but is easily produced: If dharmas had no nature, then how could they vary, since what would be varying (note that this is the situation posed by the questioner, and is used as part of a broader argument to try to wean them off views of varying and nature)?

- (13v6) Particular or different dharmas equally do not vary, just as youth does not become old age, or old age become youth. For a “particular” dharma to vary would mean it would have to change, but then it would not be the same “particular” dharma. Equivalently, a “different” dharma cannot vary, since it would be separate from its variant, so how would it change into it? Thus, youth is either “particular”, and does not change (but it does, since people age), or “different” and it is separate from old age (but it isn’t, since people age). Thus youth does not vary, whether same or different from its variant.
- Q: (13/6) The questioner asks what is wrong in saying that the same thing could vary, since the same person progresses from youth to old age?
  - A: (13v7) Supposing a dharma is the same as its variant would mean (for instance) that milk is the same as cream. But milk and cream are not identical. In fact, there is no dharma apart from milk that can produce cream - thus they cannot be different either.
- Thus, at this point we have shown that dharmas neither vary nor don’t vary, do not have natures nor exist, and are not the same or different as their variants.
- Q (13/7) In speaking of destroying the notions of “itself” and “different”, you are creating a “doctrine of emptiness”. Is this not itself a predisposition?
- A: (13v8) Nagarjuna answers this question in quite an interesting way. Pointing towards the mutual interdependence of categories like “existence/non-existence” or “emptiness/non-emptiness”, he answers that for non-empty dharmas to exist, this must mean that empty dharmas exist as well. However, non-empty dharmas do not exist (this was previously discussed with regards to active and non-active dharmas in Chapter 7, particularly at 7/1 where the commentator explains “inactive” dharmas as only figures of speech. Remember that “active” = “marked” “arising, abiding, ceasing (of conditions)” = “without own-nature” = “empty”), and so empty dharmas cannot exist either (Also, we have shown in 18b4 that empty dharmas cannot exist). Thus, since “empty” (nor non-empty) dharmas do not exist, we are not clinging to their existence, so there is no predisposition of emptiness being expounded.
- Q: (18c11) The questioner again asserts that this reply is clinging to a position, since to speak of interdependence is to cling to characteristics.
- A: (13v9) Nagarjuna responds that this is a mistaken assumption, and that the questioner is asserting views where there are none. To speak

about emptiness is not to expound views, but is instead to wean one from them. However, the questioner has missed this teaching, and is wasting time clinging to the existence or non-existence of terms merely adopted provisionally. This recalls the argument against “analysers” at the end of Chapter 4, and the warning against views of existence and non-existence at the end of Chapter 5.



# Chapter 14 - Contemplation of Combination

This continues the discussion begun in Chapter 3 about seeing, seer and what is seen, refuting the concept that these things can “combine” in any way. This also precedes a more general discussion on dharmas combining that comes in the context of causality in Chapter 20.

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting Combination of Dharmas by their Difference
- Refuting Combination of Dharmas by their Lack of Difference

## Notes

### Refuting Combination of Dharmas by their Difference

- (14v1) Seeing, what is seen and seer all occupy different places - thus they cannot combine. This argument hinges on a relatively common-sense observation: that the object seen is some external material form, the seer refers to the “self”, and “seeing” being the function of the eye. But the self cannot be the same as the functions of the eye (see the discussion in Chapter 9), nor can the self exist outside of the person. Then, located in these different places, how could they combine, given that dharmas cannot be said to “reach” out beyond themselves (this point is discussed at length in Chapter 7, particularly with relevance to the example of light).
  - (19a8) The commentary continues Nagarjuna’s argument further, refuting seeing around the dichotomy of whether or not it does or does not involve combining. If seeing *does* involve combination, then wherever the object is, the sense-function and the self should be there as well (so that they can combine), but this is not the case. If seeing does not involve combination, then the sense function is not in the same place as the object it should be seeing, so how could this be seeing?
    - \* I think this argument doesn’t do that well to answer the proposition that seeing could be that which *does* reach beyond its own dharma, i.e. that combination would exist somewhere “in between”. I think an argument to counter these notions would be that if a dharma of seeing does exist, then it would have to be a dharma, i.e. without nature. But then how could it possess a nature of “acting like a bridge” or “combining” that other dharmas might not have? In fact, we can only say that

it is marked, arising, ceasing, and abiding, but even these are empty, so how much more would “acting”? The three periods argument (used in Chapter 3) also applies here to the dharma of seeing viewed as an action. And if seeing is not an action, then what is it?

- Q: (19a3) The questioner makes an argument for the existence of seeing, seer, and seen with an appeal to “knowing”. Knowing is the combination of four things: self, mind, sense-function, and object. Since we can “know” things like clothes or pots, we must be able to have seeing, seer, seen, etc.
- A: (19a15) As the commentary notes, this has already been addressed in Chapter 3, since the additional supposition of a “knower” or “knowing” does nothing to refute the arguments about the emptiness of seeing, seer, or seen produced there. However, the commentator also refutes knowing here via the same three periods argument used to refute seeing. If knowing is produced before or after “seeing” the object, then it is incorrect: if before, then how could knowing be produced from this combination, and if after, then this knowing would be useless, given that it does not tell us anything that the “seeing” has not already. If they combine simultaneously, then this is also incorrect, since there would be no interdependence between these things (since all would be caused by some other thing besides one another). Thus, knowing is empty as well, so there can be no such combination.
- (14v2) Nagarjuna now states that passion, the object of passion and the impassioned one are the same (occupying different places and thus unable to combine). Of course, all other sensory avenues or afflictions are also the same. In general, the argument of this section is that when occupying different places, dharmas are unable to combine.

## Refuting Combination of Dharmas by their Lack of Difference

- Now, we turn to refuting combination by their *lack* of difference, to refute cases where dharmas might be in the same place, and as well as to show that we are not expounding the one-sided view that “dharmas do not combine because they are different”. Even if dharmas *are not* different, then there is still no combining, as we shall see.
- (14v3) One might suppose that different dharmas could combine, but seeing, seer, and what is seen do not have characteristics established as different, so how might they combine? Possessing no difference in characteristics could mean one of two things. The first being that as dharmas, they are empty of self nature, and thus empty of characteristic, even including the “characteristics” of active dharmas such as arising, ceasing, and abiding.

The second could be that seeing, seer, and what is seen are mutually interdependent, since each of these arises from conditions necessarily including the other two - for example how could a seer see where there is no object to be seen (and so on)?

- (14v4) In fact, this argument doesn't just apply to dharmas of seeing, seer, etc, but also to all dharmas. This leads in to a discussion refuting the different (fixed, separate) nature of dharmas.

- Q: (14/4) Why is it so that no dharmas have different characteristics?

- A: (14v5) To say dharmas are “different” requires them to be truly different, i.e. that they be fixed, separate, entities with no links in causality. However, this cannot be the case, since all dharmas are caused, and arise and cease from causes and conditions. Then, a dharma cannot be “different” from its cause, since it does not have a fixed, separate existence. If it was “different” from its cause, then this would mean that the effect would exist where its cause never did. This is obviously incorrect since it would be an uncaused dharma.

- Q: (14/5) Why are there no fixed, different, separate dharmas?

- A: (14v6) This is largely just the explanation given in 14v5. If difference means a separate thing arising from something (else) different and separate, then it should be different from that other different thing. That is, there should be Dharma A, separate, fixed, not depending on anything else. Remember that to be a dharma means to be caused (as per the discussion in Chapter 1). Then, Dharma B would arise from Dharma A, but Dharma B must also be fixed, separate, not depending on anything else. Then, Dharma A and Dharma B could be said to be “different”. Clearly, this situation is contradictory, since Dharma B arose on account of Dharma A, so it cannot be fixed (which would mean it could exist separately from Dharma A). Thus there are no fixed, different dharmas.

- Q: (19b22) The questioner still persists, saying that different characteristics do not arise from conditions, but rather from the one making distinctions within the universal characteristic. Thus, “different characteristics” follow from these distinctions, and from them follow “different dharmas”.

- A: (14v7) There are no “different” characteristics within either difference or non-difference. Then, different characteristics do not exist, so how can there be difference between this and that?

- \* (14/7) The commentary is quite helpful here in explaining the meaning of this passage. If different dharmas followed from different characteristics, then these different characteristics must arise from conditions, even if that condition is “distinction” or “perception”, as these are also dharmas (the previous chapter

on Predispositions is relevant here in explaining how cognitive processes fit into the causal process). Since these different characteristics cannot be found apart from different dharmas, they cannot be established insolation. But if these different characteristics are “within” these different dharmas, then these different dharmas, already arisen, could not depend on different characteristics, as the questioner proposes. Thus there are no different characteristics within difference. On the other hand, there can be no different characteristics within non-different dharmas, since if they had different characteristics they would not be called “non-different”. Thus there are no different characteristics within non-difference.

- (14v8) Thus, since dharmas do not combine with itself, and we have also refuted combination of different and non-different dharmas, there can be no combination, combiner, or moment of combination.

# Chapter 15 - Contemplation of Existence and Non-existence

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting Conditional Existence of Dharma-nature
- Refuting Existence and Non-existence
- Refuting Dharma-natures by Variance

## Notes

### Refuting Conditional Existence of Dharma-natures

- (15/0) The questioner opens the discussion by referring to the often discussed notion of dharma-natures, supposing that they exist through a combination of conditions, and that they can be observed as a dharma's "function".
- (15v1) Nagarjuna argues in line with what we might expect given the rest of the chapters - that nature (own nature, other nature, etc.) is not something that can exist within conditions. Further, any "nature" that does issue from conditions would be a dharma (like anything else that issues from conditions), and so this "nature" too must be empty of nature.
- Q: (15/1) The questioner asks Nagarjuna why such a supposed nature could not be created from conditions.
- A: (15v2) Suppose there was such a thing as a created nature (arising from conditions). This would be in contradiction to the idea of a nature, which means something uncreated, and established without reliance on other dharmas.
  - Neither Nagarjuna nor the commentator explain the reason behind this very clearly - but it goes like this, according to my understanding. The questioner has proposed that nature is something like a function, or a self, of a dharma. If this was created from conditions, then part of what brought this nature about would be the conditions that it arose from - that is to say, other dharmas. But now we notice that regardless of how the dharma was created, for it to act as a "function", then it must have something else to act on (since a dharma completely isolated and all alone could have no function, since what would it act on or be perceived by?). But then, the dharma's nature is reliant on causes and conditions for its arising,

and also for its supposed “action”, and so it must be a dharma itself, and thus must be empty (since being created within causes and conditions is precisely the meaning of emptiness). Then, this “nature” cannot be said to belong to the dharma of which it is the dharma-nature at all, since it depends on causes and conditions, and so it cannot be the self. Thus we have reached a contradiction. So, any proposed “nature” cannot depend on causes and conditions - to be a self it must be fixed and separate, i.e. not depending on causes. But no such things exist, as argued previously.

- Q: (15/2) Then, if dharmas have no self-nature, they must have other nature?
- A: (15v3) If a dharma has no self-nature, then it cannot have other-nature either, since from the point of view of this “other”, other-nature would be nothing but self-nature. But self-nature has been refuted!
- Thus, dharma-nature cannot be said to exist, since any supposed nature must arise from within causes and conditions. Now, the discussion turns from natures to existence itself.

## Refuting Existence and Non-existence

- Q: (15/3) Then, might dharmas exist without self nature or other nature?
- A: (15v4) For Nagarjuna, to refute natures is to refute existence. This argument relies on the understanding that everything arises or ceases within causes and conditions - if nothing can stand on its own, or last forever, or have any separate self or function attributed to it, or even be perceived stably by the senses, by what right can we say it has existence? Thus, without self- or other-nature, there is no existence of dharmas.
- Q: (15/4) Refuting existence must mean that there is non-existence.
- A: (15v5) If existence is refuted, then non-existence must be as well. Non-existence refers to the state of something existent that has been destroyed. If something never existed in the first place, then it is not non-existent. This argument relies on the mutual interdependence of categories that we see often throughout the verses - for example, what does it mean for something to be dark if there is no such thing as light? In this way, even concepts like “existence” or “non-existence” are dharmas, and are equally caused by other dharmas. Thus, taking either of these things to have stable existence (in this sense, “truth” as concepts) is erroneous.
- (15v6) Further, Nagarjuna reminds us that clinging to views of existence, non-existence, self- and other-nature prevents one from understanding the true meaning of the Buddha-dharma (i.e. emptiness), since emptiness is not a concept to be grasped or an ultimate truth, but rather a word that points towards the extinguishing of all graspings.

- (15v7) Thus, the Buddha is able to extinguish both existence and non-existence. For this reason, the sutras explain “right view” as separate from existence and separate from non-existence”.

## Refuting Dharma-natures by Variance

- (15v8) Now, Nagarjuna again returns to refuting Natures, pre-empting arguments that might be levied against his definition of a nature as something fixed. Therefore, he proves that natures could not vary. A (fixed) nature is incapable of varying, he argues.
  - (15v9) Nagarjuna argues that whatever the fate of natures, they are incompatible with variance. If dharmas really had a nature, then how could it vary? If dharmas really had no nature, then it could not vary either.
    - \* Case if dharmas had a nature: Then this nature would either have to be fixed, or created by causes and conditions. If it is fixed, then being fixed and separate, it could not vary. If created by causes and conditions, it could not be a nature, as refuted in 15v2. But even if natures somehow were created by causes, then they still could not vary, since to act on oneself (to change) would be self-production, refuted in Chapter 1, or it would be brought about by another dharma. But the combining of dharmas has already been refuted in Chapters 13 and 7, as has the ability of dharmas to produce or cause one another’s arising, abiding, ceasing, etc (also in Chapter 7). Thus, a nature still could not vary, even if produced by causes and conditions. Further, if a nature is a function as originally posited by the questioner, then if the function of a dharma were to change, then would this not be a different dharma? It would be like if a jug changed function from holding water to spraying it. Then it would be a hose and not a jug. But then the nature would not be a nature at all.
  - (15v10) Again, Nagarjuna reminds us that to speak of fixed existence or non-existence is to be attached to permanence or severance. Therefore, those with insight do not attach to either.
    - \* (15/10) To attach to fixed existence is to say that something must always exist, and that it would never acquire non-existence. But this is to speak of permanence.
    - \* (20b22) To attach to fixed non-existence then this non-existent thing must have existed already, and does not now. Then to say things *really* exist and are cut off to *really* not exist is severance.

- (15v11) Nagarjuna’s argument here is just that which is explained by the commentary in 15/10 and 20b22.



# Chapter 16 - Contemplation of Bondage and Liberation

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting Transmigration
- Refuting Bondage and Liberation

## Notes

### Refuting Transmigration

- (16/0) The questioner opens the chapter asking to saṃsāra, and the transmigration of beings or predispositions within it. The questioner supposes these processes must exist (in some fashion), and asks Nagarjuna why he thinks they must be empty.
- (16v1) Nagarjuna replies by grouping predispositions and living beings into one case (after all, both are dharmas, arising within causes and conditions). Then, he asks if they are permanent or impermanent. Either way, no transmigration should occur.
  - (16/1) If they're permanent, then they have fixed characteristics and existence, and their self-nature will persist, and there should be no continuity through births and deaths. In fact, they should not be bound to this cycle at all, being permanent. If they're impermanent, then they must be not fixed, which is to say empty of self-nature or characteristics. Then, having no self-nature, what would there be to transmigrate, and what characteristics would there be to continue?
- (16v2) Suppose living beings transmigrate. We know that a "living being" is nothing more than the skandhas, realms of form and desire, and sensory avenues. But these each have been shown to be empty, in various chapters (the skandhas in Chapter 4, the elements in Chapter 5, and the senses in Chapter 3). Considering any of these to be a "self" is thus erroneous. Then, what would there be to transmigrate? This contradicts the notion of living beings transmigrate.
- (16v3) Further, Nagarjuna argues that if something transmigrates from body to body, then there must be a time when it is bodiless - that is, the "thing" that transmigrates cannot be the body itself (since this does not continue between births and deaths), and so the question comes up of whether it has a body or not, of its own. Nagarjuna argues that it must be bodiless, since if it does have a body, then what need would it have for transmigration? But if it does not have a body, then how could

it transmigrate, since having no host, how could it remain in existence? Thus, there can be no transmigration.

## Refuting Bondage and Liberation

- Q: (16/3) The sutras refer to nirvana, and the extinction of suffering. Surely this must refer to either the extinction of living beings or the extinction of predispositions?
- A: (16v4) Nagarjuna reminds the questioners that to speak of existence and non-existence is to miss the meaning of emptiness: Neither predispositions nor living beings can go extinct since both are empty. Never existing, how can they be extinguished?
  - This is a good reminder that to speak of there being “no transmigration” or “no saṃsāra” is not to speak of their non-existence, but rather to speak of their emptiness. Nagarjuna is saying there is “no X” in order to counter the assertion that there *is* “X”. But if the questioner had posited that there was “no X”, then Nagarjuna might respond with arguments *for* “X”. This notion will be made more and more explicit in later chapters (for an example, see 18v6).
- Q: (16/4) Then, the questioner supposes that there can be no bondage or liberation, since without predispositions or living beings, there is no ground for them. But of course, there must be bondage and liberation.
- A: (16v5) Nagarjuna answers in much the same manner - predispositions and living beings both are dharmas, and thus arise and cease without self-nature. Then, how could they be bound or liberated? A more detailed examination follows.
  - (16v6) If by bondage one means “having a body (receiving the five skandhas)”, then this cannot be said to be bondage of a living being, since the living being is not the body. Only the body is *bound* by the five skandhas, but this body is not the self, nor is any other skandha. Thus, to be bound by the skandhas, or to have a body, is not bondage of a living being or a predisposition. Further, if a thing has no body, then without receiving the five skandhas how would it be bound by them?
  - (16v7) Nagarjuna argues that for one to be bound, the bondage must be pre-existent, and one would enter into it somehow. But there is no pre-existent bondage, since for there to be bondage, there must be one who is bound (since what would bondage be if nothing is bound?). But for bondage to be pre-existent, it must exist separately from the one that is bound - this is a contradiction, and so there can be no bound one. Nagarjuna also makes a three periods argument, viewing bondage as an action that would be applied to something. I’ll analyze this below.

- \* (16/7) This argument, that the bound one and the thing binding are inseparable, continues as far up the “chain” as we want to go. Just as the living being is not a thing bound by the body (since there is no difference or sameness between these two things), the body is not bound by the skandhas (since there is no difference or sameness between these two things), and even further, the skandhas are not bound by the afflictions (since there is no difference or sameness between these two things).
- \* Explaining the three periods argument. The “binding” obviously cannot happen in the time “before one is bound” or “after one is bound”, so we look to the moment of bondage. But if there was a moment of bondage, there must be a “dharma of binding” in mutual interdependence with this moment. Otherwise, how would this moment of binding arise? But if the “binding” (equivalent to a dharma of binding) is *within* the moment of binding, then this could not be the same one that caused the moment, since it could only arise once the moment has come to be. But then, this second dharma of binding would be uncaused. If not uncaused, then it must have its own moment of binding, and so on in an infinite regress. But if there are infinite binders, and infinite moments of binding, and infinite bindings, they must each bind their own thing. This is a contradiction, since there is only one thing (the living being) being bound.
- (16v8) At this point, having addressed bondage, Nagarjuna turns to discuss liberation. With or without bondage, there can be no liberation in either case. If one is bound, they do not have liberation, since these are opposite. If one is not bound, they they also don’t have liberation, since this one is not bound, so what is there to be liberated from? Liberation also cannot come in the same moment as binding, since bondage and release would then be simultaneous, which is a contradiction since they are opposites.
- Q: (16/8) The questioner is starting to question the point of Buddhism. If there is no bondage or liberation, then what of those that have cultivated the way and achieved nirvana (and thus liberation)?
- A: (16v9) Nagarjuna answers by explaining that thoughts such as “Nirvana is liberation from reception” is in itself an attachment and a bondage - having definite ideas about what liberation is and how to achieve it is to hold predispositions, and is to create distinctions where there should be none (in emptiness)
  - (16v10) Nagarjuna continues explaining: nirvana is not something separate from birth and death. It is not some special state or quality of mind or heaven. Nirvana is only calm extinction, and thusness (i.e. emptiness), and ideas and views about receiving, bondage, and

liberation only serve to lead one away from the calm cessation of views.

# Chapter 17 - Contemplation of Karma

This chapter is somewhat different from the others, since the questioner takes up a large amount of the space here expounding theories about how karma does or might work. Central to all these is the basic points put forward in the initial commentary question (17/0): that karma *does* have a fixed existence, and that living beings receive sin or merit depending on their karma (actions).

Nagarjuna refutes the non-emptiness of karma based on two main arguments - the first being that any theory of actions and effects would constitute either severance or permanence, and the second being that any action or reward would have to be done or received by a person, or by afflictions, both of which are themselves empty.

## Argumentative Structure

- Theories About Karma
- Refuting Natures of Actions
- Refuting Karma by Emptiness of its Causes and Effects

## Notes

### Theories About Karma

- Q: (17/0) Karma must exist, since it is the cause of the fruits and rewards that living beings receive according to their actions. Evil persons are reborn in the hells, ones that cultivate merit in the heavens, and one is able to attain nirvana by cutting off karma. Therefore, karma cannot be empty.
  - (17v1) A person can subdue one's mind to benefit living beings - this compassion is the seed and the fruit of this world and the next.
    - \* By this, the questioner is setting up two things - first, the notion that self-discipline (especially through meditation) is the means by which one cultivates the way and does "good", and also the distinction between "mental" and "speech/body" karma.
  - (17v2) There are two kinds of karma - thought, and the actions that result from thought.
  - (17v3) Mental karma is that which arises from thoughts, and itself is the cause of speech and body karma - as in, thought precedes action.

- \* (17/3) The commentary explains mental karma as that which arises from conception (one of the skandhas). Conception is the mental configuration (as opposed to consciousness, or reception) that is able to initiate action.
- \* Thus, in the view of the questioner, mental conception is a precursor to all mental karma, and thus a cause of all speech/body karma. This is consequential because it means that disciplining one's mind is the key to ceasing karma, whether good or bad. This also means that for one cultivating the way, eliminating sinful actions is not enough, since one might think a sinful thing and not act upon it - however, this is still far from attainment, since this one is still generating mental karma by conception. This is not entirely dissimilar at its core from the notion expounded by the commentator in Chapter 13 that ceasing predispositions is the root of extinguishing the 12 causal links. The difference is that the questioner is taking these configurations and actions to be real and extant, whereas the commentator and Nagarjuna see them as predispositions spun up by the grasping of the ignorant mind.
- (17v4) All types of karma (speech, body, performed (referring to the two together), and nonperformed, i.e mental) have both good and non-good variants.
- \* (17v5) Both virtue and evil arise in the same way, via what are referred to here as the seven dharmas (good and bad speech karma, good and bad body karma, good and bad mental karma, and conception, which supports all the other types, as explained in 17/3).
  - ◆ (17/5) The commentator explains the seven dharmas in a way that doesn't quite match what Nagarjuna's questioner seems to be positing. For the commentator, all seven dharmas can be divided into both active and non-active types, whereas the action (whether mental or physical) is "active", and the fruits that the action brings is "non-active". Regardless, the definitions of "good" and "not good" provided seem appropriate - "good" means to stop evil. "Not good" means to not stop evil.
  - (21c20) The commentator asserts also that the line "From their effect arises. . ." in 17v5 means that one receives "double" karma (in comparison to what??) for doing good or evil action unto another, since one receives merit for the giving, and more merit arising from the other's enjoyment.
  - (21c22) The same applies to evil karma - shooting

at a man with an arrow is a sin regardless, but doubly so if the arrow strikes and kills the man.

- A: (17v6) Nagarjuna steps in for a moment to address these theories about karma. Regardless of the types and classification, he cuts through to look at the assertion of “real” actions (causes) or rewards (effects) - do these causes persist up to the arising of their effect, or do they cease beforehand? This mirrors the argument made to refute causes in Chapter 1 - that if a cause continues up to its effect, then the cause must be permanent, since it cannot be made to cease by either itself or another thing (see the discussion on cessation at the end of Chapter 7), and if it doesn’t (and ceases before the effect arises), then how can it produce the effect, having ceased?
- Q: (17v7) The questioner makes the analogy that karma is like the stages of growth of a plant, where a sprout arising from the seed and the fruit arising subsequently.
  - (17v8) Thus, there is a succession of characteristics from the seed. There is no severance, because the cycle is never cut off, and there is no permanence because neither the fruit nor the seed persists.
    - \* As far as I can tell, this is a misunderstanding of “severance”. Nagarjuna would say the error of “severance” is to claim things “really exist” and then “really don’t exist”, i.e. to make claims about existence followed by non-existence. Permanence is to claim things “really exist” and are *not* followed by “really not existing”, and so permanence and severance are the two types of errors that follow from any view about the real, fixed existence of dharmas. Thus, despite claiming to avoid it, the questioner is making the error of severance by claiming that the fruit and the seed have real existence as actions and results, but that they dissipate to give rise to the next part of the cycle.
  - (17v9) Just like the seed and the fruit, the dharmas of mind have arisen in succession from the initial mind. This verse gives the sense again that karma is produced mostly by mental graspings, and that one’s continuation in saṃsāra is mostly sustained by mental configurations.
    - \* (17v10) Then, from one’s mind there is succession (action, or subsequent existence), and from this succession there is an effect (the reward or fruit of the action). Thus, results follow actions without severance or permanence, since the cycle does not end (as long as one remains in saṃsāra) and is not permanent, since one state never persists indefinitely.
  - (17v11) Unable to resist classifying more types of actions, the questioner then asserts that there are ten paths of “white” actions that establish virtue, and the five types of desires and pleasures that are

the rewards of the white actions.

- \* (17/11) The commentator lists the white actions as: no-killing, no-stealing, no-lewdness, no lying, no deception, no evil speech, no useless gossip, no jealousy, no anger, no perverted views.
- A: (17v12) Nagarjuna doesn't quite know where to start in refuting all the errors made here, and merely begins by stating that the questioner is extremely lost.
  - I'll try to outline the main ones. The biggest one is the misunderstanding of "severance" that I speak about above - by asserting that the distinct parts of the cycle of cause and effect "really do" exist, and are followed by parts where they "really don't" exist, this is making the error of severance. However, in addition to expounding arguments that rely on false notions of severance, the questioner still failed to determine whether or not this cycle of fruit and seed consists of fruit and seed persisting up to one another, or not. Since either option results in an error, it must be that cause and effect are empty, and that making distinctions in this way about fruit and seed is merely the result of clinging to views. Of course, action and reward are no different (being dharmas) from any other sort of cause and effect relationship, so they have already been refuted many times in general (Chapters 1, 7) and in specific (Chapter 8 on Doer and Deed, which will be addressed again later in this chapter).
  - Further, by making distinctions about "good", "non-good" and "white" actions, and so on, the questioner is making distinctions between actions which are themselves empty, and is thus adding another layer of grasping and false conception on top of the more basic misunderstandings about the existence of actions and rewards. As part of making distinctions about good and bad actions, the questioner also makes distinctions about good and bad rebirths and worlds such as heavens or hells, all of which are also unknowable, as is discussed in Chapter 11 on original limits.
- Q: (17v13) Not to be deterred, the questioner persists with another series of views.
  - (17v14) The non-disappearing dharma is like a bond, and actions are like the goods owing. Its nature is neutral (as in neither good or bad) and it can be classified as bound to one of realms of desire, form, etc.
  - (17v15) Picking up on the theory laid out in 17v1, the questioner asserts that karma can only be severed by meditation, since perceiving truths still requires the use of the mental configuration of conception. Then, subduing ones mind is a precursor to subduing action, and since all conception generates some form of "mental" karma, to actually extinguish karma must come as a result of meditation (and



ceasing one's attachment to the skandhas) - simply "knowing better" isn't enough. This is what is meant by the nature of karma being neutral, since whether it is good or bad, any bondage to conception at all is what produces one's continued existence in saṃsāra.

- \* (17v16) The questioner also asserts that karma could not be severed by perception of truths, since actions still reaching similar rewards (even after one has perceived truths about karma, existence, the Way, etc) would simply be the karmic process working as normal, despite being nominally severed. Thus, only that which ceases actions themselves (the subduing of the body and mind via meditation) can lead to a severance of karma.
- \* (17v17) The cycle of karma begins when one first receives their body in a realm (one's existence in this world, or in one of the heavens or hells), this constitutes the condensing of all one's previous karmic effects into one body.
- \* (17v18) Then, good and bad actions alike receive one reward in the present world, and these actions remain latent in the present body.
  - ◆ (17v19) Then, the difference between those with outflows (karmic existence in saṃsāra) and those without (beings that have achieved enlightenment in this body) is whether these actions cease at fruition or at death. In average people they cease with death, but in enlightened ones they cease upon fruition, i.e. their actions do not flow out to create more karmic effects.

## Refuting Natures of Actions

- A: (17v20) Nagarjuna at last steps in to refute the theories of the questioner, which he says are characterized by permanence and severance. Of course, given that both of these follow from a view of existence, it must be that karma is neither, nor is it non-existence. Emptiness is thusness, separate from existence and non-existence. Thus, karma and reward are neither severed nor permanent. They are not non-existent (since this is misunderstanding emptiness to be annihilationism), so they must exist in the same manner as any other dharma, as arising from causes and conditions.
- (17v21) Without any fixed nature, all dharmas are non-arising. Then, not arising, they are also not ceasing, since something cannot cease without first having arisen.
  - Up until this point in the verses, there has been a loose opposition between two sets of relations: on one hand there are dharmas, which

are active, and so arise from causes and conditions, and thus have no self-nature, and thus are empty of any nature or characteristic. On the other, there are non-dharmas, which are non-active, and thus do not arise from causes and conditions, and thus have some real, fixed existence and self nature. Then, never arising from causes they cannot cease either, and persist, permanent.

- \* However, there are some other implications of this. If all that “exists” (i.e. can be observed through sense avenues, cognized or conceptualized, be seen to take reception of the skandhas, etc.) is a dharma, then there is no existence but that of dharmas. Then, we have inverted our two opposing relations - non-dharmas, which supposedly have a fixed, real, permanent existence, actually can not exist at all. This makes sense, because they never arise. On the contrary - if there *was* something that did *really* exist, it must have arisen! So dharmas, which supposedly have no real fixed existence due to their arising and ceasing from causes and conditions, are actually all that *can* be said to exist, because they are the things that we know to arise and cease. Of course, this is merely our mental distinguishing and grasping resulting from predispositions. In emptiness, there is no distinction between these two sets of relations - they are merely an expedient means by which to teach a student. So, we apply what we learned from Chapter 7, which is that even these marks of arising, ceasing, etc. that characterize all (nominally) existant, active dharmas are *themselves* empty. Then all dharmas that we say arise or cease can be equally said to be non-arising (and non-ceasing), since if “arising” has no own-nature, and no place in the three periods of time, what could we possibly point to and say “this is arising”? Then, existence and non-existence, arising and non-arising, are all “false” in a sense.
- \* Whether we say a dharma is arising or non-arising is dependent on the views of the person we are trying to teach about emptiness. Someone clinging to non-existence will need to be pointed towards the middle by extinguishing views of non-arising, and someone clinging to views of existence will need to be pointed towards the middle by extinguishing views of arising. In this chapter, Nagarjuna acknowledges the basic notion of the karmic and causal process outlined by the questioner, but denies that karma has any fixed or real existence. Thus, to refute the views about the cycles of fruit and seed, bond and goods owed, etc., he emphasizes that these dharmas must be fundamentally *non-arising*. And why? It is because all dharmas have no fixed nature to observe or characterize. If something does not have any nature, then by what means can we recognize or observe it,

and thus say that it has arisen? The argument proceeds from this point.

- (17v22) If actions *did* have a nature (i.e. were able to arise and take on some real existence), they would be permanent (see below for proof). But then if something is permanent, it cannot act - this is because a permanent doer would exist separately from their deed, or vice versa (for a longer discussion of this, see Chapter 8), and we would have the contradiction of inactive actions.

\* The permanence of natures can be proved like this: Suppose there was a nature that was *not* permanent. Then it must change (in the case of ceasing, it would change from “existent” to “non-existent”) But if it changed, then how could we distinguish a “nature” from any minor characteristic? Think of water which is dyed red by food coloring. Before, we might say the water has the nature of “clear”, and after, it has the nature of “red”. Then, we would still have water (of course, it would taste the same, have the same chemical properties, etc.), but it would have a different nature! Then we have something that is still fundamentally the same in some ways, but different in others - in this case, what use is the concept of a nature? One might argue that this color is not the *true* nature of water. For example, the “true nature” might be something like being made up of two hydrogen atoms and an oxygen atom. But if a chemical process was applied to the water, even this could change. For any “true nature”, something can happen to change it. Then, it seems clear that the notion of a “nature” is something that relies on the distinguishing of an observer, or at least on some other causes and conditions to be made sense of within a particular context. But if a nature relies on causes and conditions, even if only the sense avenues and conception of an observer, then it is not different from any other dharma! Then, whatever marks, characteristics, or nature it has must be empty, and our nature was not a nature at all, but merely another empty dharma. We have then arrived at a contradiction. This means if any nature *did* exist, it must be something unchangeable and permanent.

After I wrote this, I remembered that this notion is proved in the first part of Chapter 15... Oh well, I thought it was quite instructive to do it on my own.

- (17v23) If there were inactive actions, then this would imply a decoupling of action and karmic recompense - someone acting virtuously or not performing an action could receive the result of having performed a sin, or vice versa.

- (17v24) Then, there would be no distinction between doing good and doing evil, and all dharmas of worldly expression would be meaningless. Thus, Nagarjuna has shown that the fixed, existent actions that the questioner posits are *actually* what leads to the downfall of the karmic system, not emptiness. In fact, emptiness is actually the only way it *does* make any sense.
- (17v25) Nagarjuna offers another conclusion, this one logical in nature instead of soteriological. If actions are fixed, with self-natures, and permanent, then if an action begets a certain reward, after having received the reward the action would still be active, so why should one not receive the reward again?

### Refuting Karma by the Emptiness of its Causes and Effects

- (17v26) Here, Nagarjuna's arguments take on a different tone. Having refuted action and reward on the grounds of their lack of natures (which means they must be dependent on causes and conditions) he now turns to refuting even their existence within causes and conditions based on their dependence on other empty dharmas. If all actions, he asks, arise from afflictions (suffering, etc.), and we know that these afflictions themselves are empty and unreal (see Chapters 6, 12), then how can actions be real?
- Q: (23a27) After a commentary block explaining 17v21 to 17v26, the questioner asks how karma can be empty, given that our bodies, given to us from our past karma, exist?
- (17v27) Since afflictions and karma are the causes of bodies (in the sense that our existence in saṃsāra is perpetuated by suffering, grasping, karma, etc), and we know that actions and afflictions are empty, the bodies too must be empty - that is to say, there *is* no real, extant body. In fact, this has already been addressed in Chapters 3, 4, and 9 (on the sense avenues, five skandhas, and substrate/soul). In fact, if the body exists as a result of karmic causes and conditions, how could it *not* be empty?
- Q: (23b5) The questioner says that there must *still* be karma, since there is one who originates karma mentioned in the sutras.
  - (17v28) In fact, this one (obscured in ignorance, persisting in saṃsāra) is not the same or different from the original doer (the one who previously acted).
    - \* (17/28) If they were the same, then there would be no transmigration (since a man would be the same as the ox he became after doing evil). But if they were different, then no one would receive the rewards of their actions, and karma is meaningless.
- A: (17v29) In fact, karma does not arise from conditions (as per 17v21, since for something to arise, it must have some nature, and thus be permanent),

nor does it arise from non-conditions (since how could a non-condition produce an effect). Then, there can be no originator of karma, since this originator must either be a condition or a non-condition of the karma they produce.

- (17v30) Then, if there is no karma, and no doer, then how can there be any such relation of an action producing a reward? And if there is no reward, then how can there be a recipient? Thus, there is no originator of karma or one to receive it.
- Q: (23b24) At last, the questioner falls back on the last resort - that karma *must* exist, since we can see it working around us.
- A: (17v31) Nagarjuna explains that this is illusory, just like other things such as transmigration, which was refuted in the last chapter.
  - (17v32) Although the body and self are empty, we can still speak of a “doer” (conventionally, for expedient means). In the same manner, we can speak of actions, even though we know that “deeds” are just as empty.
  - (17v33) All dharmas, afflictions, actions, doers, rewards are like this - able to be spoken of, but without any real existence.

# Chapter 18 - Contemplation of Dharmas

This chapter is slightly different from the rest in structure, with Nagarjuna's verses running uninterrupted by commentary, which follows after.

Nagarjuna speaks on the non-self of dharmas, and explains that the various teachings of the Buddha, and of the rest of the treatise, are signposts to help one reach an understanding of emptiness, which of course cannot be definitively represented in words. Instead, the teacher must use whatever means the situation requires in order to help unravel whatever mental attachments, graspings, or misunderstandings the student might have. For this reason, a teacher might teach self or non-self in order to refute the graspings of a student, but these teachings should not be themselves clung to as "truth". It is hoped that through repeated negation of, and subsequent extinguishing of, views that the student will begin to acquire the flavor of what emptiness is, and begin to develop the ability to penetrate it for themselves.

## Argumentative Structure

### - Explaining the True Character of Dharmas

#### Notes

#### Explaining the True Character of Dharmas

- (18/0) The questioner makes their only appearance for a little while, asking what is meant by the "true character of dharmas" in the case that all dharmas are wholly and utterly empty. The commentator answers that penetrating this meaning requires insight into non-self. Nagarjuna begins his verses answering the question of how one can know that dharmas are without self.
- (18v1) Nagarjuna proves "non-self" by refuting both the ideas of "self" and "no self". If self is the five skandhas (which our false illusion of self depends upon, and which reception of all dharmas stems from), then like the five skandhas (which are empty), it must arise and cease. But if the self arises and ceases, it is not self, which can only mean a permanent, fixed and stable essence or nature. On the other hand, if the self exists apart from the five skandhas, then it cannot have form, consciousness, conception, reception, or predispositions. But then how could this self be recognized, recognize others, act or take form, or indeed, have any characteristic at all? But the self *is* nature, or stable characteristic, so how can something without characteristic be the self? Thus there can be neither self nor no self, and so the only case can be that of "non-self".

- (18v2) Then, without “I” (as in, without a stable self), there can be no “mine” (i.e. things such as “my” body, “my” thoughts, “my” possessions, etc.). Realizing this to the fullest extent is to cut off one’s attachment and mental grasping to all dharmas, since in truth there *is* nothing to grasp.
- (18v3) This is what is meant by viewing reality, and this is what is meant by “separate from existence and separate from non-existence” - in truth, there is no distinction between emptiness, reality, and nirvana - all these are the same, merely thusness.
- (18v4) Thus, when one sees the uniform character of all dharmas and ceases to make distinctions between “I”, “Mine”, “that”, “this”, and so on, without grasping to annihilation or non-existence, then there is nothing to receive, nothing to call “mine” and nothing to call “my body”. This is not Nagarjuna trying to state a “uniform quality of fakeness” but rather to instruct the student that there is no dharma that is “distinct” from emptiness, non-self, or causality (all of which can be seen as equivalent terms).
- (18v5) Here, Nagarjuna equates liberation (which carries the connotation of achieving nirvana) with the extinction of karma and affliction. On face value, this seems to not be too different from the usual formulation of “achieving nirvana”, but the second part of the verse clarifies Nagarjuna’s meaning - since we have already proved karma and afflictions to be empty, there is no “real” karma or afflictions to cut off. Thus, Nagarjuna is instructing the student to cut off all sophistries, predispositions, or views, *about* karma and afflictions, and is also suggesting that these sorts of attachments are the only things that *do* constitute karma or affliction. Then, cutting off these sophistries comes with one’s insight into emptiness, and pointing oneself in this direction is the only real liberation - but of course this is not any separate state, place, or quality than merely the immediate present, since it is already the way things truly are.
- (18v6) Here, Nagarjuna’s verses turn towards commenting on the process of teaching a student about emptiness - that is, the Buddha’s dharma. There *is* no truth that can be clung to or grasped in words but a teacher, Buddha, or Bodhisattva must nevertheless use words to lead one towards emptiness and the extinction of sophistries. Since people can come with many diverse sorts of graspings, misunderstandings, or predispositions, there are many teachings that might expediently constitute the Buddha-dharma - for example one might teach that there is a self, or that there is not a self, but neither of these should be clung to as the “true character” of dharmas.
- (18v7) Instead, this true character is nothing but the extinction of all such thoughts, actions, or speech, including about subjects like dharmas, nirvana, truth, and nature.
- (18v8) Thus, Nagarjuna gives a succinct formulation of the Buddha-dharma

as all things (dharmas) being real, unreal, both real and unreal, and neither unreal nor not unreal. The attentive reader will notice that a dharma being all these four cases at once is logically impossible - that is because none of these is cases is “actually” the case at all (referring back to our discussion on insight inot non-self being the means of penetrating the true nature of dharmas). What Nagarjuna means is that all four of these are “equivalently true” as expedient means by which to point the student towards emptiness - none of them being ultimately true, each can be used as required in order to extinguish views about dharmas.

- (18v9) “To know for oneself” emphasizes the experiential quality of thusness - it is not a truth to be grasped, or a thing to be learned from another, or a concept to have understood. Instead, it is a state of having insight and of not making the distinctions, graspings, and conceptualizations that characterize the mental activities of most people.
- (18v10) Here, Nagarjuna re-emphasizes the link between causality and emptiness - emptiness is separate from existence and non-existence due to the causal establishment of all dharmas. Neither differing nor uniting with their conditions, all dharmas are neither cut off (as in, existing and then not existing) nor permanent (fixed, existing forever).
- (18v11) Indeed, it is this fourfold extinction - not one, not different, not permanent, not severed, that characterizes the Buddha-dharma.
- (18v12) This truth is so self-evident that even in a world without the Buddha, someone else (a pratyekabuddha, i.e. someone who attains Bodhi on one’s own, without external assistance or teaching)



# Chapter 19 - Contemplation of Time

Simple and straightforward chapter. The three periods of time (past, present, future) are refuted based on the argument they cannot be established either together or separately.

## Argumentative Structure

### - Refuting Time

## Notes

### Refuting Time

- (19/0) After learning about the true character of dharmas (their emptiness, and the necessity of penetrating “non-self” in order to experience them), the questioner asks about the existence of time, which seems obvious enough to have to have some “real” manifestation. The question supposes that present, past, and future all mutually establish each other.
- (19v1) Nagarjuna supposes it is as the questioner says - that because of past time, present and future exist. But that would mean that the cause of the present is in the past. The past must still be active as a dharma in order to cause the present (since if it was ceased, how could it act as a cause?). Since the past cannot exist in the present, that must mean the present (and the future) is established in the past. But then we would have the contradiction of the present and the past coexisting - clearly this is not possible.
  - (19/1) The commentator makes a pretty good example of the case being like light established on account of a lamp - the light is established according to the location of the lamp, otherwise it would be the case that we could light a lamp in this room and have light appear in another room. This continues the negation, running throughout the treatise, of dharmas being able to “reach out” beyond themselves, or combine in any ways.
- (19v2) Now, seeing as how present and future cannot exist in the past, Nagarjuna supposes it was otherwise, and that future and present did not exist in the past. If this was the case, how could it be that future and present depend on the past as the questioner supposes? If none of them occupy the same place, then each would cease before the other arises. But then how could past be a cause of present or future, not being active to cause them? Thus, the present and future can neither depend nor not depend on the past.

- Q: (19/2) The questioner, seeing as how the mutual establishing of any concrete existence has been refuted, proposes another option: that present and future do exist, but are not dependent on past time.
- A: (19v3) Nagarjuna refutes this possibility as well, since what meanings would “past”, “present”, or “future” have without referring to a relationship between themselves and some other period of time? If there was no past, then how could there be a future? In what place would future time be established except in opposition to a present?
  - (19v4) In truth, this is the case for all groups of relations: above, middle and below, same and different, etc. Any term in a set like this depends on the others for meaning, but for any of them to contain or establish another in a one way cause and effect relationship is impossible. Another way to look at it is like this: suppose the dharma of “different” established the dharma of “same”. Then, “different” would have to exist prior to “same”, in order to give rise to “same”. But, since no notion of “same” exists yet, how could any notion of “different” exist?
- (19v5) In conclusion, periods of time cannot be definitively captured in a continuous sense (see Chapter 2 on Going and Coming) or in a discrete sense (as past, present, and future). Unable to isolate distinct characteristics for any period of time separate from any others, how can one speak of any “greater whole” of time that could exist, being made up by these slices?
- (19v6) At last, Nagarjuna offers another argument - time is only perceivable because we see objects subjected to it. If there was no objects or things to perceive, how would one recognize time? Then, time clearly depends on the existence of objects as a condition. But objects themselves are nothing but dharmas, which we know to be empty. Then, depending on dharmas to arise, how could time not be empty itself, since it is established causally like everything else.

# Chapter 20 - Contemplation of Cause and Effect

This chapter covers similar ground to Chapter 1, deeping Nagarjuna's argument and covering some questions and cases that one might have after the first chapter.

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting the Combination of Causes
- Refuting Cause and Effect in the Three Periods of Ceasing
- Refuting the Transformation of Causes
- Refuting the Coexistence of Causes and Effects
- Refuting Effects
- Refuting the Unity or Difference of Causes and Effects
- Refuting the Production of Effects

## Notes

### Refuting the Combination of Causes

- (20/0) The questioner opens the chapter by supposing that since effects manifestly exist by through causality, it must be so that they exist by the combination of conditions. One might think that this is a slightly more complex case to consider than the earlier "one cause, one effect" framework, but in reality it's not really very different.
- (20v1) Nagarjuna will refute this by stating that whether effects pre-exist or do not in the combination, production is impossible in either case. He starts by refuting the notion that "combination" could produce anything new that did not already exist within the combination. This is a pretty straightforward argument. If combination is just another word for production, then we have already refuted it when we refuted arising and causality in Chapters 1 and 7. If combination is not production, then no new effect is produced, so it must have already existed within the combination somewhere, and thus is not "produced" anew by the combination.
  - (20v2) If there is no effect already extant in the combination, how could an effect arise from the combination? This would require the combination to produce the effect, but then this would just be

production or arising caused by another, both of which have been refuted.

- (20v3) However, it is not the case that effects pre-exist in the combination. If they did, then how could the causes be called causes, and the effects be called effects, given that they would co-exist together? Then there would be no need for the arising of effects or the combination of causes, since the effect would already exist.
- (20v4) Since there is no effect inherent within the combination of conditions, these causes are no different from non-causes, since they cannot produce an effect. Note also that 20v3 can also imply that even *if* the effect inhered in the combination, these causes would still be no different from non-causes, since what would they cause if the effect already exists?

### Refuting Cause and Effect in the Three Periods of Ceasing

- Q: (20/4) The questioner now asks about the case that a cause operates as a cause and then ceases. This hypothetically avoids the error of effects inhering or not inhering in the causes because the cessation of the cause would mean that the effect could not pre-exist in the cause, but also the acting of the cause “as a cause”, would mean that the effect is produced anyhow. This new proposition by the questioner still has a lot of issues, notably that the imprecise notion of “acting as a cause” still is not free of the earlier question of whether or not the effect pre-exists in the cause(s).
- A: (20v5) If the cause gives rise to an effect and then ceases, then this would constitute having a dual substance of giving cause and ceasing at once. This argument seems somewhat imprecise to me, and seems to work to refute the case where the questioner would believe that a dharma can only have one substance. I don’t think this is necessarily a universal belief though, so I’ll offer an additional argument, which is basically that the questioner: this seems to address the notion that an already extant cause acts as a cause, and then ceases some time afterwards. If this “acting as a cause” happens in isolation without any external influence. Then the cause must contain the other-nature of its effect within it in order to produce it, since it cannot come from anything else, and the cause cannot produce it out of nothing (since then it would be uncaused). But then, the effect would already exist in the cause, so what need would it have to be produced?

Otherwise, this is the case of combination, where the conditions combine to produce an effect. Then the effect cannot arise solely from any one of the elements in the combination, since then combination would not be required. Therefore, the combination must act as some “combined cause” that is capable of issuing the effect. Then this falls into the same error as with a single cause, where the effect either must pre-exist in the

combined cause, or be uncaused. Moreso, this other-nature could not truly be “other-nature” (i.e. fixed, self), since it would have to depend on the cause in order to exist. In fact, this other-nature would have to change, since in the moment of its arising, it would need the extant cause in order to exist itself. However, in the moments after the cause has ceased, this other-nature would *not* need the extant cause in order to exist by itself. But then the nature has changed from “reliant on a cause” to “not reliant on a cause”. The notion of natures changing has been refuted (see my notes on 17v22).

- (20v6) Otherwise, if the effect arises after the cause has ceased, then the effect is uncaused. This is because a cause cannot continue to act as a cause after ceasing, and since the not-yet-arisen effect would depend on something that has ceased in order to arise.
- Q: (20/6) Now, given that it is clear the effect cannot be produced before or after the ceasing of its causes, the questioner inquires about the only remaining possibility, which is that the effect is produced in the exact moment of combining.
- (20v7) Nagarjuna’s answer here is the same as in refuting other simultaneous happenings - if the effect is dependent on the combination yet happens at the same time, then the combination could not have existed in order to cause the effect. If the combination already existed before the effect, even if for the smallest moment, then this would be the case where the effect comes after the cause, not simultaneous production. Thus, simultaneous production is not possible.
- Q: (20/7) Finally, the questioner submits a slightly absurd proposal, which is that the effect comes before the combination of conditions.
- (20v8) Nagarjuna points out the obvious error here, which is that if the effect arose before its causes, then it would have arisen separate from them and would be uncaused.

## Refuting the Transformation of Causes

- Q: (20/8) Here, the questioner proposes an interesting case, that the cause ceases and transforms into an effect. Note the ceasing here, which is the key to Nagarjuna’s answer. If there was no ceasing, then this would be the changing of the cause’s nature, but since it ceases and re-arises (caused by itself?), it is supposed to be considered as the same dharma, with different roles.
- A: (20v9) Nagarjuna answers by saying that if the cause transforms into the effect, then it has caused the effect once (by transforming), but would cause the effect again upon re-arising (as the effect, since it is identifiable as the same cause). If the effect is *not* identifiable as the same cause, then

this is merely the earlier case of a cause ceasing and then the effect arising, which has already been refuted.

- (20/9) The commentary continues with another Q and A that I think is quite clarifying. First, the commentary reasons that if a particular cause transforms into an effect (and remains that particular cause), then it cannot be regarded as changed (into an effect). Otherwise, if the cause *is* changed, then it cannot be regarded as that particular cause, since its nature is now different.
  - \* (27a2) The questioner now clarifies that the cause does not cease, but the designation as a “cause” ceases, and changes into the designation of “effect”, like a lump of clay turning into a jug.
  - \* A: (27a6) The commentators response is that a lump of clay does not only produce jugs, since there are many other things that can be made of clay. Therefore, the matter of clay turning into a jug is not only one of designation, since there must be other conditions applied to cause this. Then, this does not constitute transformation if the lump of clay ceases, but also in the case that the lump combines with other conditions to produce the jug - this is just the case of effects arising from combination, which has already been refuted.
- Q: (20/9) At this point, the questioner makes a rather shaky proposal that a ceased and disappeared cause is still able to produce an effect.
- A: (20v10) How could a ceased cause, entirely disappeared possibly produce an effect? If it is ceased, it cannot act to produce anything, since it does not exist. Or, if the questioner asserts that the cause exists (still) in the effect (in order to cause it), then how could this cause produce the effect, since it would be contained in an already arisen effect?

## Refuting the Coexistence of Causes and Effects

- Q: (20/10) Now, the questioner makes another appeal to common notions of cause and effect, by specifying nothing except to say that causes have effects everywhere, and thus effects exist.
- A: (20v11) Nagarjuna returns to the main argument of the chapter, which is that if causes have effects, then do they see or not see the effect? Neither one can be production, as we see in the first four verses. If the cause sees the effect, then the effect already exists, so what need would it have to produce it? If the cause does not see the effect, then it ceases before the effect arises, and so the effect would arise uncaused.
  - (20v12-20v14) Now, Nagarjuna makes a series temporal arguments for the non-combination of causes and effects, which is that past,

present and future causes cannot combine with past, present or future effects. The arguments go like this: If they are both in the same period of time, then the effect is there as well, so what need would it have to be produced? If they are in different periods of time, then how could they combine, not existing at the same time?

- (20v15) Then, if they do not combine, how could a cause produce an effect, since there is no relation between the two. If they do combine, then how could a cause produce the effect, since the effect already exists (as part of the combination).
- (20v16) If the cause is empty and there is no effect, then there cannot be an effect produced, since the cause would lack any characteristic or nature (being empty), including any characteristic of producing or arising. If the cause is empty and there *is* an effect, then the effect already exists, so how would the cause produce it?

## Refuting Effects

- (20v17) Now, Nagarjuna turns to discuss effects around the idea of emptiness. If an effect is not empty, then it is fixed, permanent, with its own nature. Then, being fixed it neither arises nor ceases. Then, never arising, how could it be produced?
- (20v18) Similarly, if an effect *is* empty, then it has no characteristic or nature, including those of arising or ceasing (since these marks are dharmas, and thus empty, like any other thing). But then, it does not arise or cease, and never arising, how could it be produced?

## Refuting the Unity or Difference of Causes and Effects

- (20v19) Here, Nagarjuna introduces the argument he seeks to prove: that cause and effect are neither the same nor different (and thus neither can exist).
  - (20v20) If cause and effect are the same thing, then producer and produced are one, so what would it mean for a thing to be a “cause” or an “effect”, since this would merely be the same thing enduring. If cause and effect are different, then they are separate, with no relation between them, so how could a cause be any different from a non-cause, since it has no relation to the effect? Note this argument mirrors the one against combination in Chapter 14 at 14v6.

## Refuting the Production of Effects

- (20v21) Finally, Nagarjuna turns to the central error of production - that for something to be “produced” and subsequently “exist”, it must have some sort of fixed nature (since this is what existence is). But any notion

of an effect with a fixed nature would contradict the notion of causal production. Nagarjuna begins here, by saying that if the effect is fixed and extant, then it has always existed, so how would the cause cause it? Also, if the effect is fixed and non-existent, then how could the cause cause it, since it does not exist?

- (20v22) If the cause does not produce an effect, as is the case in either one of the above cases, then it is nonsensical to refer to such a thing as a “cause”. But then causes do not exist, so what would there be to produce effects, since they cannot come from causes (or non-causes)?
- (20v23) Here, Nagarjuna makes a distinction between combination and production. If combination is different from production (which it must be, otherwise it would be called production), then how could it produce effects, since production is what produces?
- (20v24) Therefore, combination cannot produce effects. Also, non-combination cannot produce effects, since if causes and conditions never combined, how could they act as causes? Then, combination itself also cannot exist, since there are no effects by which we can recognize it.



# Chapter 21 - Contemplation of Becoming and Dissolution

This chapter is roughly in two halves. The first covers becoming and dissolution, which seem to be alternate names for arising and ceasing, although without the connotation of being “marks”. Thus, they are discussed as a more general concept, and are refuted in two ways by Nagarjuna.

The second half refutes the continuity of existence. This comes about as a consequence of a proposition by the questioner that challenges Nagarjuna’s argument that dharmas cannot “exist” due to their emptiness. As a result, Nagarjuna argues that dharmas cannot have any continuity of existence, and thus cannot “exist”

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting Becoming and Dissolution
- Refuting Continuity of Existence

## Notes

### Refuting Becoming and Dissolution

- (21/0) The questioner opens the chapter by proposing that since everything is impermanent (“manifestly has the characteristic of dissolution”), then dissolution itself must exist.
- (21v1) Nagarjuna’s first argument is outlined here. He argues that dissolution cannot be established either separate from or together with becoming, which also cannot exist by the same argument in relation to dissolution.
  - (21v2) If dissolution is separate from becoming, then how can dissolution exist? Nagarjuna makes the analogy of this being like death without birth. It is useful to remember that for Nagarjuna, “separate” doesn’t just mean “distinct concepts” in a colloquial sense, but it means “separate existence” without relying, depending on, or relating to one another in any way, such that one could be established in isolation when the other has never existed. Something must first “be” in order to dissolve, and thus must first “become”.
  - (21v3) If becoming and dissolution exist together, this is a contradiction since it would be like birth and death existing simultaneously. This argument relies on the notion that existing together means to exist in the same place, at the same time. It seems to me that this argument leaves a lot of room for various notions of “becoming and

dissolution exist in relation without simultaneous coexistence”, but Nagarjuna leaves refuting these possibilities to later in the chapter.

- (21v4) Becoming cannot exist apart from dissolution, since if something becomes but never dissolves, then it would be never ceasing. However, we know all dharmas to be impermanent since they are without self-nature, and so they must cease. Therefore becoming cannot exist apart from dissolution.
- (21/4) The commentator adds coverage for an interesting case at (28a7), which is for the proposition that there is constant dissolution within becoming. This is refuted by arguing that then there would be no abiding. I think it’s an interesting case to consider, because the mutual interdependence of opposites could be “unskillfully” grasped as implying that they contain each other. However, this is not possible, because if X contains Y and Y contains X, then how would either arise, since each would depend on the other. But the other would not exist before its opposite arises, so neither could ever come into being.
- (21v5) Nagarjuna summarizes the arguments again here, but with a conclusion refuting becoming. Since becoming and dissolution cannot be established either together or separately, becoming cannot be said to exist. Then, since nothing can become, nothing can dissolve either.
- (21/5) Now, the questioner responds to Nagarjuna’s argument by saying that dharmas that have the characteristic of being exhausted and ceased exist, and are said to be both exhausted and not exhausted. They conclude that becoming and dissolution must exist in the same way. This is an unclear situation to me, since it appears to make the assertion that things can cease and still exist. I also don’t exactly know what becoming and dissolution existing “in the same way” means, except for the general notion that opposites (such as existence and exhaustion) could coexist. However, this does not seem to outline how they would be established. Further, Nagarjuna’s reply here is to argue that becoming and dissolution cannot be established together with either exhaustion or non-exhaustion. It’s unclear to me how this answers the question, which appears to making an analogy to the case of exhaustion and non-exhaustion rather than saying becoming and dissolution depend on them. In this case, I think it’s useful to remember that the commentary (and the questions) were added many years after Nagarjuna’s verses, and they may not be in perfect correspondence. In times like these I just “suspend” the Q/A format and just read Nagarjuna’s verses for myself to try to glean the argument.
- (21v6) Nagarjuna argues that exhausted or not exhausted, there is no becoming, and exhausted or not exhausted, there is no dissolution.
  - (21/6) According to the commentary, “exhaustion” means a state in which dharmas are constantly ceasing and passing away, like flowing

water. “Non exhaustion” means a constant succession of arisings and ceasings without severance, and so dharmas are permanent and abiding without being cut off. Then, becoming cannot be identified in exhaustion, since how would something exhausted and “constantly ceasing” become? Also, how would anything exhausted dissolve, since this would put an end to the constant ceasing. In non exhaustion, becoming and dissolution are also not possible, since this is the case of permanence, so how would they become or dissolve?

- Q: (21/6) The questioner proposes that there are “simply dharmas”, without becoming or dissolution.
- A: (21v7) Apart from becoming and dissolution, there can be no dharmas. This is because of the most basic thing we know about dharmas - that they are caused, and so they arise and cease. Then, if there was no becoming or dissolution, then dharmas would be fixed, permanent, with self-nature. But there is nothing at all that exists this way, since all dharmas are caused. Further, if becoming and dissolution were separated from dharmas, what would there be to become or dissolve, since everything is a dharma.
  - (21v8) Now Nagarjuna negates the opposite case. If dharmas are empty, then there can also be no becoming or dissolution, since if a dharma is empty, it can have no marks, characteristics, or nature, including those of becoming, dissolving, arising, ceasing, etc. This was proved in Chapter 7 with the emptiness of the three marks.
- (21v9) Then becoming and dissolution cannot be one, since they have opposing characteristics. Even if one recognizes that there are no characteristics in emptiness, then they still cannot be one, since by what mark or characteristic could we say that they exist? Becoming and dissolution also cannot be different, since then they would have totally separate existences. This case has been refuted in 21v2 and 21v4.
- (21v10) Now Nagarjuna reminds the reader that grasping at ideas such as arising or ceasing, becoming or dissolution as really existing is to grasp at delusion. Within emptiness there are no characteristics, natures, concepts, or other mental distinctions. Thus, to conceptualize these things and see them as reality is to misunderstand the nature of dharmas. For more on this, see Chapter 18. One might also see Chapter 7 for the negation of arising and ceasing.
- (21v11) For this reason, Dharmas do not produce dharmas, nor do they produce non-dharmas. Dharmas cannot produce dharmas for the reasons outlined in Chapters 1, 7 and 20 - to produce something means to give it definite existence. But nothing has “existence”, since this would mean self-nature, and stable existence separate from other dharmas. But if a dharma arises from another dharma, it is dependent on that other dharma to have arisen, and is said to have come from causes and conditions. But then this is not “existence”, since the dharma can only be spoken of or

observed in the context of other dharmas, above all the five skandhas. But then being caused, it must arise and cease, and so it must be empty, since any nature or characteristic, including that of “existing”, is changable. Therefore it cannot “exist”, since it is empty of the characteristic of existence. Dharmas cannot produce non-dharmas, since non-dharmas do not exist (everything that exists is a dharma). Then, how could something that does not exist be produced? Similarly, non-dharmas cannot produce dharmas or non-dharmas, since they do not exist, and thus cannot act to produce anything.

- (21v12) Now Nagarjuna zeroes in on the case of dharmas producing dharmas, since this is clearly the most consequential of the four possibilities. Dharmas cannot be produced at all, since they cannot produce themselves, nor be produced from another, nor from a combination of both. The “other” case was already addressed above in 21v11. The self case is obvious, since before a dharma arises, there is no part of it that exists. Then how could it act to produce anything (including itself)? From a combination of both is also impossible, since both self- and other-production have been refuted.
- (21v13) To accept the existence of dharmas is to accept either severance or permanence. This is because if something “really exists”, then either it will stick around forever (permanence) or it will be cut off and “really not exist” at some point (severance). In either case, this denies the causal process, since something permanent exists outside causality, and something cut off is removed from participating in causality.

## Refuting the Continuity of Existence

- Q: (21v14) Nagarjuna himself proposes the question that shifts the discussion onto the subject of the continuity of existence. He proposes the case of one who accepts (the existence of) dharmas without falling into severance or permanence by reckoning about a continuous cycle of cause and effect.
  - This is a very similar case to in Chapter 17, where at verse 7 the questioner asserts that there is no severance or permanence of karmic action. Just as there, the question is ill-formed because it misunderstands severance and permanence. If something “really exists” and then ceases (even as part of a cyclical process), then this is severance, since something that has ceased cannot re-arise. Even if something identical arises next, it will not be “the same”. Further, cause and effect occurring cyclically does not constitute continuity (or “real existence” of dharmas), which is what Nagarjuna will argue in the next few verses.
- A: (21v15) If cause and effect arise and cease in succession without cessation, the causes will be considered extinct, since they have ceased. Then this is

not true continuity.

- (21v16) A dharma abiding in its own-self nature (i.e. something that hypothetically *does* “really exist”) should not be both existent and non-existent, since this would be a contradiction. Thus, it cannot be (at various points in the cycle) considered both existent and non-existent. Another way to put this is that something, having ceased, cannot be considered to be continuous. If this was the case, nirvana would be severance (since it is separate from the arising and ceasing of existence), but this is an error, since nirvana is not non-existence.
- (21v17) In fact, if this first existence (in a cycle) ceases, then no future existence (the future cycles) will arise, since what would there be to cause it, as the cause has ceased. Also if the first existence does not cease, then there will be no subsequent existence, because the first one will still be continuing. In either case, there is no subsequent existence.
  - (21v18) Another reason why there cannot be the cyclical production of existences is because if the first existence ceases and simultaneously co-arises (so as to have continuity, as the question supposes), then the moment of cessation (and thus the dharma of cessation) and the moment of production (and thus the dharma of production) will belong to two different existences, and so this is not continuity at all.
  - (21v19) Another way to say observe this is to see that all dharmas depend on the five skandhas for their form, etc. Then, if there is simultaneous arising and ceasing, then the skandhas would die and be born at the same time, but this is impossible, since these two acts are contradictory and cannot coexist in the same moment.
- (21v20) Thus, there is no continuity of existence in arising and ceasing.

# Chapter 22 - Contemplation of the Thus-Come

This chapter discusses the existence (or non-existence) of the Tathagata (or Thus-Come). Nagarjuna's argument hinges around the notion that the Thus-Come cannot be said to exist separate from, or together with, the five skandhas. Towards the end of the chapter Nagarjuna pivots to discussing the nature of the Thus-Come in relation to the nature of the world.

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting the Tathagata's Relationship to the Five Skandhas
- The Nature of the Tathagata and the World

## Notes

### Refuting the Tathagata's Relationship to the Five Skandhas

- (22/0) Surely, even if nothing else exists, the Thus-Come must exist. Right? Right??
- (22v1) Nagarjuna's verdict is: Unlikely. The argument here is that the Thus-Come is neither the skandhas themselves, nor separate from them, nor do they contain one another, nor does the Thus-Come have them (is bound to them). This response relies on the notion that all "existence" comes in relation to the skandhas, or as a separate fixed existence. Since the Thus-Come is neither bound by the skandhas nor separate from them, there is no place where he could exist.
  - (22/1) The Thus-Come is not the same as the skandhas, since they have the characteristics of arising and ceasing, and so the Thus-Come would then have to have the same characteristics. Then, "really existing" would mean he must be ceased or cut off, and thus impermanent. But we know this not to be true, since he has the characteristic of one who attained enlightenment, and cannot be cut off. This would also make the error of the receiver (the Thus-Come) and receiving (of the Skandhas) being one, but we know this is not correct from our analysis of Doer and Deed in Chapter 8 or Fuel and Fire in Chapter 10.
  - \* (29c19) If the Thus-Come was separate from the skandhas, then he would be fixed, permanent. But there was a time before the Buddha came into the world, achieved enlightenment, etc, so permanence is not correct. Also, the commentary makes the

point that if the Thus-Come was separate from the skandhas, then he would not be able to use cognitive or sensory processes such as the eye, ear, be able to see or know, etc, which is obviously incorrect.

- \* (29c22-25-28) The commentary addresses the cases of the skandhas and the Thus-Come containing one another, or that he has them, by saying that this would be like a fish in water or a fruit in a bowl, and that they would be different, and thus separate. Then we fall into the same error of permanence as above. I think this argument is slightly too general, and that it doesn't address the dependence/hierarchical notion that I think the case proposes. My arguments are: If the Thus-Come contains the skandhas, then how would he have arisen in receiving from them, given that they would not have arisen until he did? If the Skandhas contain the Thus-Come, or if he has them, then this is the same error as if he was the skandhas, namely that he would (being dependent on the skandhas) have their characteristics of arising and ceasing, and we would fall into the error of severance (where he "really existed" but then ceased).
- (22v2) Nagarjuna also makes an argument here leveraging another implication of existence - that one who "exists" must have self-nature. If the Thus-Come exists by the combining of the skandhas, then he cannot have self-nature, since one established through causes and conditions is empty. But without self-nature, how can he "exist"?
  - (22v3) Another implication of this is that without self-nature, how would this dharma be the Thus-Come? To be able to say "This is the Thus-Come" or "This isn't the Thus-Come" relies on having a nature or characteristic to perceive, but without any we cannot say whether a dharma is or isn't the Thus-Come.
  - (22v4) If there is no own-nature, then how can there be other-nature? A way of seeing this is that, if there was other-nature was extant, but own-nature was not, then we would have natures being produced from something that is without nature, (since there is no self-nature, this "other" cannot produce itself). But then something empty, without characteristic or nature, cannot act as a cause, since then it would have the nature of "causing". Further, if there is no self-nature, then how would one recognize other-nature in contrast, since there would be nothing to compare to?
- (22v5) Nagarjuna now addresses the notion that the Thus-Come pre-existed the skandhas. In this case, then receiving them now (attaining physical existence as the Buddha?), he would be known as the Thus-Come.
  - (22v6) However, since receiving is empty (as the five skandhas were negated in Chapter 4), then what would there have been for the

Thus-Come to receive? Thus, the dharma of the Thus-Come cannot be receiving them now. Also, if he did not exist before (not receiving them), then how could he come to receive them, since what would there be to start receiving?

- (22v7) When there has not yet been receiving, we do not call what “will be received” as “received”. Thus, the Thus-Come cannot exist without the skandhas - in every place where the Thus-Come is said to be, the skandhas must be as well. Otherwise, where would the Thus-Come be?
- (22v8) Then, if the Thus-Come cannot be found (as in verse 22v1) either separately from, or united with the five skandhas, then how could he exist in receiving them?
- (22v9) Also, the five skandhas themselves are empty (again, as per Chapter 4), so they have no own-nature. If they have no own-nature, how could they support the other-nature of the Thus-Come?
- (22v10) Thus we know that in considering the Thus-Come and the skandhas as receiver and receiving that both are empty. But by means of emptiness, how can we speak of an empty Thus-Come, since we have no characteristic of any nature to identify him by.

## The Nature of the Tathagata and the World

- Q: (22/10) Now, the questioner asks how considering the receiver and the recipient as empty is not taking a view of emptiness as a fixed, existent quality. As with similar questions throughout the treatise (see 13/7), the questioner here misunderstands emptiness, and the role of Nagarjuna as a teacher. Emptiness is not an idea to be grasped or a characteristic to be applied. Nagarjuna’s words can merely point one to develop insight, but to cling to them as describing “really extant” or “really true” things is misled.
- A: (22v11) Nagarjuna answers as such: neither emptiness nor non-emptiness can be expressed, nor can both, nor can neither. This is because phenomena themselves have no nature, including cognition about what they are, or any inherent labels or qualities. Thus, to discuss emptiness, non-emptiness, both, or neither is to merely discuss them as conventional names. One should not cling to these labels and manners of speaking as being the “things themselves”. Thus, Nagarjuna is not claiming that emptiness (or non-emptiness) “really exists” as an entity, but is rather imploring one to recognize that in relation to all dharmas, all views should be extinguished, including those about emptiness itself.
  - (22v12) Within the characteristic of calm quiescence (also known as the “true nature of dharmas”, or “emptiness”, or “nirvana”), views of permanence, impermanence etc. do not exist. Nor do the



views about limit, no limit, etc. exist. This is because these views have characteristics, names, labels, concepts that we can know and perceive them by. But within emptiness there are no characteristics (including the characteristic of “no characteristic!”). Thus, none of these views can themselves “be” emptiness.

- (22v13) One who clings will make claims about there being, or not being, a Thus-Come. To say the Thus-Come does not (or has never) existed is to have deeply entrenched false views. It is to be in error to try to make distinctions about whether the Thus-Come exists, or doesn’t exist.

- \* (22/13) The commentator makes an interesting explanation here: they describe false views of two kinds. One denies “worldly bliss”, by which they mean sin and merit, virtue, and the existence of saints and sages (those who have done good). To deny worldly bliss is to forsake doing good and cultivating merit. Another type denies the path to nirvana. This type of view is held by those who believe in discriminations between existent and non-existent, good and evil, etc. This person might cultivate worldly bliss, and develop merit, but will never attain nirvana because of their distinction between being and non being. This relates to Nagarjuna’s argument that those who speculate about the existence or non-existence of the Thus-Come are missing the point - even if one cultivates the good, to cling to distinctions like this is to prevent one from seeing reality. This also foreshadows the topic of the next chapter on perverted views.

- (22v14) Within emptiness, there can be no discovering if the passing of the Thus-Come has been followed by existence or non-existence. In reality, there is no “truth” to be obtained on the matter.

- \* (22v15) The Thus-Come transcends sophistries (as one who has achieved nirvana), yet people still produce them. In producing sophistries, including views of existence or non-existence, one fails to utilize the eye of insight, and fails to understand the Buddha-dharma.

- (22v16) Thus, the nature of the Thus-Come (emptiness) is the same as all other dharmas, and the same of that of the world. This nature is that of emptiness, or no nature.

- \* This is an incredibly significant equation. Many conceive of the Buddha and the enlightenment he attained as something separate or special. In fact, the Buddha was one who saw the world as it is with insight, cutting off ignorance. But that means that penetrating the true nature of the world, the true nature of nirvana, and the true nature of the Buddha

are all the same task, which is as described in Chapter 18: to penetrate the nature of non-self. Nirvana and the Buddha are not other-worldly things existing in some separate place, or with characteristics different from those found here and now. In fact, there is only thusness, equivalent to emptiness.

# Chapter 23 - Contemplation of Perverted Views

This chapter negates the existence of perverted views on the grounds of the total emptiness of all their conditions and relations - that is, what does it mean to have a perverted view when the skandhas, the viewer, and all the afflictions or poisons the views might inflict are empty?

Since perverted views are empty, what would it mean to cut them off? In this chapter Nagarjuna also argues that there can be no cutting-off of perverted views, nor non-perverted views. All views stray from the characteristic of calm extinction, and are themselves empty.

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting the Conditional Existence of Perverted Views
- Refuting the Cutting-off of Perverted Views

## Notes

### Refuting the Conditional Existence of Perverted Views

- Q: (23v1) Nagarjuna himself poses the initial question that frames the chapter. The questioner here posits that lust, anger, and delusion (the three poisons) arise from perverted conceptual discriminations, as do concepts like purity and impurity. Purity and impurity then produce the three poisons, and as such they must exist, being established conditionally.
- A: (23v2) Nagarjuna reminds the questioner that to be established conditionally means to be empty of self-nature. Consequently, if perverted views of impurity and purity are the cause of the three poisons, then these poisons must be empty of self-nature, and cannot be said to exist.
  - (23v3) Further, the dharma of “self” cannot be said to exist, since it was negated in Chapters 3 (by the emptiness of the six sense faculties), 9 (by the emptiness of a substrate), and 14 (by the emptiness of combination). Then, without a self, the defilements of anger, lust, and delusion cannot be established either (this is a similar argument to that made in Chapter 6).
  - (23v4) Without a self, then who would there be to have these defilements? Since the self of a sentient being can never be located, how would one be said to have these defilements. Certainly, the defilements cannot exist apart from the self, since this would be the case of lust, anger, and delusion existing, but no one existing that has them.

- \* (23v5) These defilements are not present in the body, and they are also not present in the mind. To “seek five ways” means to examine them as the same, different, containing one another, or being possessed (or employed) by the body/mind. This structure was used to refute the relation between the Thus-Come and the Skandhas in Chapter 22. Similarly, the body and mind cannot have any of these relations to the defilements, since they have been shown to be empty in previous Chapters. Then, empty of characteristic, how could they “be” anything, “contain” anything, or “employ” anything?
- (23v6) Therefore, the perverted views of purity and impurity have no self nature, since there is none to hold them. Predispositions were also negated back in Chapter 13, so we know all “views” themselves to be empty on account of their dependence on the skandhas (which are themselves empty). Then, since views of purity and impurity are empty, how could they support the arising of the three poisons?
- Q: (23v7) Nagarjuna again plays the questioner, now proposing that the six sensory avenues are the root of the three poisons, effectively proposing that delusion arises on account of the perception.
- A: (23v8) However, this view is mistaken. Rather than the sense avenues being the cause of delusion, the six avenues themselves are the result of delusional grasping. Nagarjuna explains these dharmas (and all dharmas) as being like “flames or dreams / Or like a magic Gandharva-city”.
  - (23v9) Being empty, how could the sense avenues produce things like the defilements or views of purity and impurity? To produce something would be to produce other-nature, but how could this arise from emptiness?
- (23v10) Now, Nagarjuna utilizes the device of mutual interdependence of opposites in relation to purity and impurity. His argument for the next sequence of verses is to show that purity and impurity are interdependent, and that the poisons must depend on them. But views of impurity and purity are themselves empty, as has been shown above, and so the whole house of cards collapses. Without the characteristic of purity, how can there be impurity? If impurity existed separately from purity, then it could be that impurity would exist when purity has never arisen. Then on what basis would something be impure?
  - (23v11) Similarly, there is no purity except in relation to impurity. To say something is pure when there is no impurity is meaningless as well.
- (23v12) Now, without purity, how can there be lust? Except in contrast to purity, how can we see lust as a defilement? Similarly, if there is no impurity, then what would it mean for there to be anger? The defilements

cannot be recognized as bad, or poisonous, or evil if there is no conception of distinguishing things between pure and impure.

- Q: (23/12) The commentator here acts as the questioner, proposing that there *are* perverted views (and thus purity and impurity) on the grounds that there are the perverted views of permanence, etc.
- A: (23v13) Nagarjuna's argument here is really nice. To cling to permanence (in the nominal truth of impermanence) is called perverted perception. This much seems apparent to most people familiar with some strain of Buddhist philosophy. But since there is no permanence in emptiness, where can this "view" exist to cling to? That is, how can one cling to permanence when no permanence exists?
  - (23v14) Similarly, many would say that clinging to impermanence within (the nominal truth of) impermanence is not a perverted view, and is the truth. But there is equally no impermanence in emptiness, since emptiness has no characteristics or nature, including that of impermanence. Then, this view of impermanence should be equally perverted as a view of permanence. This couple of verses mirrors the argument made in Chapter 22 at verse 12. Even "more truthful" views are equally distant from the true nature of dharmas, since they are marked by concepts of characteristics, natures, predispositions and mental distinctions.
- (23v15) Now, since we know that clinging (to views such as permanence or impermanence), the clinger (the self, or sentient being), that which is clung to (dharmas, predispositions, skandhas, views, etc.), and the dharma that clinging employs (the means by which clinging acts, perhaps mental processes or the six sense avenues?) are all empty, how can clinging possibly exist? Who would there be to cling, what would they cling to, and by what means would they cling?
  - (23v16) Then, since there is no dharma of clinging, there are no perverted views. Who is there to have these views, since they are unable to cling to them? Then, since views cannot exist without a self (see 23v2-23v5) there are no extant views, perverted or non-perverted.
- (23v17) Now, Nagarjuna negates views by showing that they can be neither produced nor not produced. Existing perverted views cannot produce perverted views, since something "existing" must be fixed, permanent, and separate, with own-nature. But then perverted views would exist separately from the poisons, from the viewer, and from the object of their perversions. Then, they must pre-exist the views that they produce, but then their nature would be at times "producing" and at other times "not producing" This is a contradiction, since we supposed that perverted views are fixed. Also, as explained just above, perverted views are empty. Thus perverted views do not produce perverted views. Non-existent perverted views do not produce perverted views, since how could they act, being

non-existent? The perverted viewer does not produce perverted views, since the perverted views would have to pre-exist the viewer in order for the viewer to be perverted? If there are no perverted views before the viewer, then how would he be perverted? Finally, the non-perverted viewer does not produce perverted views, since he is not perverted. Also, this is the case of doer and deed, and we know both to be empty from Chapter 8.

- (23v18) Also, perverted views cannot be produced in the moment of perversion (as in, simultaneously with the establishment of the perverted viewer), since they would be uncaused. If there is no pre-existent perverted viewer, what would there be to cause the perverted views? Either they would be uncaused or they would come from some third thing, but then they would not be *this* viewer’s views.
- (23v19) Finally, it is not the case that perverted views could exist being not-produced. This is a meaningless sentence, since how could something not-produced be existent? Thus, since perverted views cannot exist as produced or as not-produced, how can there be a perverted viewer (defined as one who holds perverted views)?
- (23v20) Now, Nagarjuna explains that if permanence, self, bliss, and purity “really existed”, then they would not be perverted views. For something to be a perverted view, it must lead one away from insight. If reality was such that these were the case, then they would not be perverted views (as we know them to ostensibly be).
- (23v21) If it is as other Buddhists say, and permanence, self, bliss, and purity do not exist, then impermanence, suffering and impurity would also not exist, due to the mutual interdependence of opposites. Therefore, it is not possible for “one thing” to be the truth, and its opposite to be false - establishing one side of a relation like this establishes the opposing side as well.

## Refuting the Cutting-off of Perverted Views

- (23v22) Now, Nagarjuna explains that when perverted views cease in this way (by recognition of their groundlessness in emptiness), ignorance also ceases. Ignorance is not ceased by “cutting-off” the hypothetically extant perverted views, but instead by gaining insight into emptiness and realizing the groundlessness of all concepts of views, purity, impurity, etc.
- (23v23) In the last two verses, Nagarjuna explains the futility of any sort of “cutting-off” - If the defilements *did* have a real nature, and *really did* belong to someone, then they would be permanent, with own-nature - so how could they be cut-off, and how could someone cut them off?
- (23v24) However, if the afflictions and deceptions are indeed false deceptions, empty, without nature, and belonging to no-one, then

how could they be cut off, since how could one cut off a non-nature?

# Chapter 24 - Contemplation of The Four Noble Truths

This chapter (along with the following chapter on Nirvana) represents perhaps the most complete expression of Nagarjuna's philosophy.

The questioner begins by expounding their belief that Nagarjuna's philosophy of emptiness cuts off everything, most consequentially the Four Noble Truths, all types of aspirants and attainers, the triple jewel of the Dharma, Sangha, and Buddha, and the path to liberation. Therefore, the questioner charges Nagarjuna with annihilating the Buddhist path.

Of course, this charge has to do with a misunderstanding of emptiness as "non-existent". Throughout the treatise the questioner has posited that things *do* really exist, and Nagarjuna has refuted them with arguments about non-existence. These arguments were merely to negate the questioner's propositions, but if clung to as concerning the "ultimate truth", one can lead themselves to misunderstanding. Nagarjuna explains this strategy here.

The questioner does present fragments of an argument that these dharmas cannot "exist" in emptiness. However, their error is in concluding that emptiness is non-existence and annihilation. Therefore, Nagarjuna responds by showing that assuming dharmas to be fixed, or "really extant" actually leads to the annihilation of the Buddhist path just the same as non-existence does. Therefore, the questioner and Nagarjuna combine to show that only emptiness, that insight separate from existence and separate from non-existence, preserves the Buddhist path and the Four Noble Truths - not as really existent or really non-existent, but as conventional means by which one can be guided to insight.

## Argumentative Structure

- The Questioner's Argument
- The Two Truths and The Emptiness of Emptiness
- Refuting the Fixed Nature of the Noble Truths

## Notes

### The Questioner's Argument

- Q: (24v1) The questioner begins this chapter by laying out their explanation of why emptiness destroys the Buddhist path: If everything is entirely empty, then with no arising or ceasing, then there will be no dharmas of the four whole truths. The fundamental error of the questioner's argument begins (and persists) like so: they understand "no arising and



no ceasing” to mean “non-existent” instead of “cannot be said to have the characteristics/natures/marks of arising and ceasing”. Therefore, instead of correctly reasoning about emptiness, they are speaking of non-existence.

- (24v2) Without the four truths, the things they speak of, such as perceiving suffering, cutting off the accumulation of suffering, realizing cessation of suffering, and practicing the way that leads to the cessation of suffering - these things will not exist.
- (24v3) Then, if these actions are non-existent, then there are no four fruits (assuming that this means “the fruits of putting into practice each of the four truths” or something similar). That is, if these actions are non-existent, then what attainment can be gained from them?
- (24v4) Then, since attainment is non-existent, there are no aspirants or attainers (the eight types of holy person), and thus no Sangha. Then, without the four noble truths, there is no Dharma either.
- (24v5) Then, without the Dharma or the Sangha, how could there be a Buddha? Thus, according to the questioner, the proponent of emptiness destroys the Four Noble Truths and the Three Jewels.
  - \* (24/5) The commentator makes one distinction here that I found insightful, which is to group the Four Noble Truths as pairs of causes and effects. The second truth, the accumulation of karma (by grasping) is the cause of the first truth of suffering, and the fourth truth of the way is the cause of the third truth of the cessation of suffering.
- (24v6) Thus, the doctrine of emptiness proposed by Nagarjuna destroys cause and effect, sin and merit. These negations tear down the most fundamental elements of karma, causality, and the Buddhist path, and what’s more, they negate the ordinary objects and events of daily life, leaving a worldview of annihilation. Therefore, emptiness cannot be the true nature of dharmas.

## The Two Truths and the Emptiness of Emptiness

- A: (24v7) Nagarjuna’s response in the next section of verses is two-fold in pointing out the source of the error in the questioner’s misgrasping of emptiness, but also to explain how to avoid such grasping by explaining the two truths doctrine that guides his arguments. Here, he makes clear that the argument of annihilation set out by the questioner woefully misunderstands emptiness.
  - (24v8) Now, Nagarjuna explains the two truths. In order to teach the Buddha-dharma, teachers must use conventional worldly truths - names, labels, explanations and so forth. These may involve ar-

guments about characteristics, natures, arising, ceasing, existence, non-existence and so forth, but none of these should be taken to be the ultimate meaning. Instead, these terms and arguments are adopted as necessary and as depends on the student, in order to refute their graspings and misconceptions about dharmas. However, there is also a “truth of the ultimate meaning” which is not to be confused with these conventional truths. This “truth of the ultimate meaning” is the “true nature of dharmas” explained in Chapter 18, and is nothing other than the calm extinction that comes from obtaining insight into non-self and emptiness.

- (24v9) Thus, being unable to distinguish between these two truths is a fatal error - as long as one mistakes the “ultimate meaning” for consisting of names, labels, arising, ceasing, existence and non-existence, etc., one will stray further and further from the true nature of dharmas, labelled here as “the real meaning / Of the profound Buddha-Dharma.”
- (24v10) The conventional truth cannot be abandoned in pursuit of the ultimate truth. Unless one uses the conventional truth to speak, to explain and to understand, they will neither be able to teach nor learn the Dharma of the ultimate meaning, and unless one are able to penetrate the ultimate meaning, one will not reach nirvana. Thus, these conventional means are actually *essential* to one in pursuit of nirvana. Without progressing through these conventional truths, it is not possible to travel the path (all the more so since even the path itself is a conventional truth).
- (24v11) Emptiness points towards the ultimate truth. However, ones that do not perceive emptiness correctly can wound themselves on this concept, just as the questioner has done in the opening part of this chapter, and elsewhere throughout this treatise.
- (24v12) In fact, the Buddha himself was reluctant to teach emptiness for exactly this reason (its profound and subtle character). Therefore, mostly spoke in conventional truths and other means, such as those concerning the Triple Jewel, the Four Noble Truths, etc.
- (24v13) Thus, when you say that our “doctrine of emptiness” has produced the errors of annihilation, non-existence, destroying the Noble Truths and the Dharma, Sangha, and Buddha, etc., it is actually not the error of the truth of emptiness but is instead an error on your part of unskillfully grasping at conventional names. None of these errors exist in emptiness- it *itself* is empty, free of characteristics and of existence and non-existence. It is characterized neither by annihilation nor existence.
- (24v14) In fact, it is by emptiness (here used as equating to causality) that all dharmas are established. If there was no emptiness,

nothing would be established. Here, Nagarjuna begins to negate the questioner's charge of annihilation. Emptiness means to be without characteristic, without own-nature. We know that by causality all things are established. Then, anything "existent" comes about in dependence on something else. But then, it does not have own-nature, depending on its cause to arise. Thus, everything that is established is without own-nature, and thus empty.

- (24v15) The questioner themselves is in error, misapprehending emptiness as leading to annihilation, and yet themselves pushes a doctrine (of fixed existence) that denies all that is established.
- (24v16) If one clings to the view that all things have natures, and are fixed, then these self-natures cannot be established through causes and conditions, and so one with the view of fixed reality denies causality, and thus makes errors as does the questioner.
- (24v17) Then, the questioner negates cause and effect, doing, doer, and deed, as well as the arising and ceasing of all dharmas - the very things they claim to uphold. Thus, their misunderstanding has lead them to destroy what they wish to protect. This is the meaning of "injure oneself" that Nagarjuna spoke about in 24v11.
- (24v18) Now, Nagarjuna explains the opposite end of the argument in 24v14 that all things are established in emptiness. Dharmas produced by causes and conditions (i.e. all dharmas) are also said to be *non-existent* as well as existent. This is because, being established through causality, they are dependent on causes, conditions, context, and perception in order to be established. Thus, they can only be seen as conventional and local - not ultimate, pre-existent, permanent, fixed, or having a self. This is the meaning of the middle path - separate from non-existence and separate from existence.
- (24v19) Both 24v18 and 24v14 are true because all dharmas arise from causes and conditions. Thus, all dharmas are established causally, and all dharmas are empty since they lack own-nature (from being established causally). Thus, emptiness is neither "establishment" nor "non-establishment", neither "arising" nor "not-arising", neither "existent" nor "non-existent", neither "true" nor "false", while also being any or all of these things conventionally. This is because emptiness is itself empty of characteristic, being established in the same way as any other dharma.

## Refuting the Fixed Nature of the Noble Truths

- (24v20) Now, Nagarjuna turns the structure of the questioner's argument back on them, showing that if things were fixed, existent (i.e. not empty), then this would lead to the destruction of the Buddhist path that they

had hoped to avoid. If everything was not empty, as in not established through causality, with really existing natures, then there would be no arising and ceasing. For the proof of why a nature could not arise or cease, it is because then the nature would depend on something else, and thus the nature would be changable, which we know cannot happen (I prove this below 17v22). Then, without arising and ceasing, there could be no Four Noble Truths. Nagarjuna explains each noble truth in terms of causality.

- (24v21) Nagarjuna explains the first noble truth in terms of causality here. If suffering had a fixed nature, then how could it arise from accumulation? Suffering, having a fixed nature, would be permanent, but we know suffering to be impermanence (this is the first noble truth). Thus, the doctrine of fixed existence denies the first noble truth.
- (24v22) Now, Nagarjuna explains the second noble truth in terms of causality. If suffering had a fixed nature, how could it arise from accumulation? Then, grasping and clinging would not accumulate karmic suffering, and one would not become bound to saṃsāra via unskillful action. But we know that clinging brings the accumulation of suffering, since this is the second noble truth. Therefore, the doctrine of fixed existence denies the second noble truth.
- (24v23) Similarly, if suffering had a fixed nature, how would there be any cessation of suffering. Being permanent, suffering could not be cut off or ceased in any way, and the binding of one in saṃsāra would be permanent. Thus the doctrine of fixed existence denies the third noble truth.
- (24v24) Finally, if suffering had a fixed nature, there would be no Way to cultivate. Everything being fixed and with stable own-nature, how could the self be changed, or how would one realize or understand things they had before been ignorant to? Therefore the doctrine of fixed existence denies the fourth noble truth.
- (24v25) Further, if none of the four noble truths existed, then how would one attain the four fruits of putting into practice each of the truths? Therefore, nothing could be attained by an aspirant to the Way. Therefore, the doctrine of fixed existence denies the four fruits of the Way.
- (24v26) If suffering was fixed, then how could one perceive the nature of suffering having not perceived it before? When one is born, they have not yet achieved enlightenment, so being born with a fixed nature of “not enlightened”, this would be unable to change and no one could ever achieve anything. Thus, the doctrine of fixed existence denies the advancement of one’s own insight.
- (24v27) Similarly (to v26), if one could not come to perceive suffering,

one would be unable to act in understanding of the Four Noble Truths - one could also not cut off accumulation, realize cessation or cultivate the way. Again, the doctrine of fixed existence denies the achievement of the four fruits.

- (24v28) Similarly (to v27), if the four fruits of the way were unattained when one is born, then having fixed natures, how could they possibly be attained?
- (24v29) Then, if there were no four fruits to be attained, and there was no way to cultivate or advance one’s insight, then there would be none of the eight kinds of holy people, and thus no Sangha. Being born with the fixed nature of “unenlightened”, one could never join the Sangha, and so the doctrine of fixed existence denies the Sangha-jewel.
- (24v30) Since the doctrine of fixed existence denies the four holy truths, it also denies the Dharma-jewel, and without the Dharma-jewel and the Sangha-jewel, how can there be a Buddha-jewel? Thus, the questioner’s doctrine of fixed existence has denied the Four Noble Truths and the Triple Jewel.
- Q: (24/30) The questioner claims that even if all this was true, then surely the Buddha must still exist by virtue of the state of nirvana existing and being achieved by him.
- A: (24v31) Any conception of the Buddha that assumes a doctrine of fixed natures (i.e. of existence) is to speak of the Buddha and bodhi both as permanent, fixed, separate and with own-nature. Then, this is to speak of the Buddha without bodhi, or of bodhi without the Buddha. But you have said that it is exactly because of the state of bodhi that one is a Buddha - thus you contradict yourself when you speak of fixed existence.
- (24v32) Then, if this is the case, even if one diligently and single-mindedly sets forth to achieve bodhi, one could not do so, having been born with the nature of a non-Buddha, since this nature would be fixed and permanent. Then, a doctrine of fixed existence denies one achieving Buddhahood.
- (24v33) Also, if all dharmas were not empty, then without a doer or a deed (since these would be fixed and separate - see Chapter 8), how could one do good or bad deeds? In fact, one could do nothing at all, since their nature would be fixed.

\* The proof of this is that for a deed to be done, it must be established in mutual dependence with a doer, and a dharma of doing. Otherwise, who would do the deed, and how would one do it? But if a deed were to be established in this way, it

would depend on these dharmas causally, and thus be empty.  
Thus, to speak of a existence is to deny doer and deed.

- (24v34) Then, if there is no sin and merit, there is no karmic recompense or reward, and if such rewards or retribution exist, they are separate from sin and merit. Then, one could do good and receive negative recompense, or do evil and receive karmic reward.
  - \* (24v35) The basic doctrine that reward and retribution arise from sin and merit itself presumes causality - if these things arise with those things as a cause, then how can they not be empty, since they must be without own nature?
- (24v36) Thus, the denial of emptiness, and the doctrine of fixed existence that the questioner proposes is the denial of all dharmas, of all causality, and of the production of any other dharmas. It is in fact this doctrine, rather than insight into emptiness, that produces a view of annihilation.
- (24v37) If one rejects emptiness then this entails rejecting causality and all causal processes - thus there is no doer, no deed, and no doing, and doers and non-doers are equivalent.
- (24v38) If all dharmas had fixed existent natures, then all characteristics (since there is no real separation between a *nature* and a *characteristic*, see the proof below 17v22) would be non-arising, non-ceasing, and permanent.
  - \* (24v39) Then, since all things are permanent, without emptiness there is no attainment for those who have not yet attained, no cutting off of defilements, and no termination of suffering.
- (24v40) Thus, it is said that to perceive the dharma of causality (and equivalently, the dharma of emptiness) is to perceive the Buddha and (the Four Noble Truths of) suffering, accumulation, cessation, and the Way.

# Chapter 25 - Contemplation of Nirvana

Nagarjuna at first here begins by refuting

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting Nirvana
- Nirvana, the Buddha, the World, and Emptiness

## Notes

- (25v1) The commentator has tagged this verse as a question, and certainly it can be read as one, but it's also possible to see 25v1 and 25v2 as a couplet refuting the any sort of “labelled assignment” of nirvana, which is where Nagarjuna’s argument goes through the core of the chapter. Regardless, the argument here holds regardless of whether this is a question or not, the only change is whether you believe the questioner has again taken emptiness to mean “non-existence” or not. If all dharmas are empty, then they are empty of the marks of arising and ceasing, amongst all others. Then, what characteristic or nature would be cut off such that (cutting off) it could be called nirvana? This is because if nirvana “exists” in any way, even conventionally, then it must have some “characteristic of nirvana” by which we can identify it. But there are no characteristics in emptiness, so how is this possible?
- (25v2) Here, Nagarjuna continues the strain of argument that he made in the previous chapter - if things were fixed, existent and not empty, then they also would neither arise nor cease. This is since being fixed, with own-nature, their existence would not depend on other things. Then, how could it arise or cease (depending on time, perception, or other causes and conditions)? Thus, without arising and ceasing, what could be cut off (since this would be ceasing) or even be in the first place (since this would require arising) that could be called nirvana?
- (25v3) In truth, Nirvana is neither attained nor arrived at, neither cut off nor permanent, neither arisen nor ceased. This definition is key, since Nagarjuna is unwilling to label nirvana as anything in particular. Rather, he defines it through negative space, negating all the things one said it might be, since any label, name, or concept is a characteristic and arises through the skandhas. But such a thing is not empty, and thus cannot be nirvana. In the subsequent verses, Nagarjuna explains why nirvana cannot be anything but this “negative space” by extinguishing all other possibilities via the *catuskoṭi*.

- The commentary explains like this: not attained means that it does not come as action or karmic reward, not arrived at means it is not a place, or any realm separate from here. Not cut off means that since all is empty, when one enters nirvana there is no characteristic that is cut off. Not permanent means that, if there were separately distinguishable dharmas that they would be permanent, but there are no separately distinguishable dharmas in nirvana, since all are empty of characteristic. The commentary also explains (as Nagarjuna will explain himself just below) that nirvana means non-reception of all dharmas. This is perhaps the closest “label”.
- [C1] (25v4) Nirvana cannot be an existent, since all existence has the characteristics of old age and death. No existent dharma ever is without these (being marked with the three marks of arising, abiding and ceasing). Here, instead of the other usage of “existent” to mean something with self-nature, and thus permanent and fixed, Nagarjuna uses the notion of “existing as a dharma”, i.e. being established through causes and conditions. For more about this notion, see 24v14.
  - (25v5) If nirvana was existent, it would be active (marked), since there are no inactive dharmas. There are no inactive dharmas since inactive means to be without the three marks. Thus, if a dharma was inactive, it would not arise or cease, and would be permanent? But then how would it be a dharma, as dharmas by nature are impermanent (as per the first noble truth)?
  - (25v6) Also, if nirvana were existent, why would it be spoken of as “non-receiving” (note, this has not been explicitly mentioned in the treatise as of yet, so it can be inferred that this must be a common way of characterizing nirvana). Any existent dharma is established in arising from reception (and the other skandhas), so if nirvana is non-receiving, it cannot be existent.
- [C2] (25v7) Now Nagarjuna turns to refuting the non-existence of nirvana. The argument here hinges on the meaning of “non-existence” as an opposite state to existence, as in when something existent ceases and becomes non-existent. Then, existence not being established, how could non-existence be established?
  - (25v8) Similarly, if nirvana is non-existence, how could it be called non-receiving, since nothing can be non-receiving and non-existent. This is because to be non-existent means to have ceased, but to be non-receiving means to never have arisen in receiving in the first place. Therefore, being called non-receiving, nirvana cannot be non-existent.
- Q: (25/8) Now, the questioner asks what sort of thing nirvana is, being neither existent nor non-existent.
  - A: (25v9) Nagarjuna answers by stating that nirvana is the state of



not receiving causes and conditions. It is because of the reception of causes and conditions that we revolve in saṃsāra. Therefore, not receiving causes and conditions is nirvana. This is the “end state” of the path as described by the commentator at (13/2, 18a12), and is characterized by attaining the insight into the “true nature of dharmas” (i.e. not receiving them) as described in Chapter 18.

- (25v10) Here, Nagarjuna cites a sutra to back up his argument: since nirvana is “Cut off from existence, cut off from nonexistence”, it can be neither existent nor nonexistent.
- [C3] (25v11) Nagarjuna returns to the third corner of the catuṣkoṭi, proving that nirvana cannot be a combination of existence and nonexistence together. The first error that Nagarjuna points out is that then liberation (as in, the state that one who has attained bodhi would achieve) would have to be both existence and nonexistence. But being opposites, existence and nonexistence cannot coexist, so such a state is impossible. Thus nirvana cannot be both existence and nonexistence.
  - (25v12) Also, since nirvana is non-reception, it cannot be a combination of existence and non-existence since both arise from reception. This is because existence arises in reception of the skandhas, and non-existence arises following existence. Therefore both depend on receiving.
  - (25v13) Also, nirvana cannot be active, since then it would have the three marks and be impermanent. However, existence and non-existence are active, since they arise in receiving from causes and conditions. Therefore, nirvana cannot be a combination of existence and non-existence.
  - (25v14) Finally, Nagarjuna rejects the possibility that existence and non-existence could even combine in the same place at all, since they are opposites. He makes the analogy that this would be like light and darkness existing together in the same place.
- [C4] (25v15) At last Nagarjuna comes to negate the final logical possibility, that nirvana is “neither existence nor nonexistence”. This case too is not possible, since how could it be distinguished? If something does not exist, nor not-exists (having existed before), then what characteristic (something that never exists obviously cannot acquire characteristics) could we distinguish nirvana by?
  - (25v16) Also, the principle of dharmas mutually establishing their opposites negates this possibility also. Since all dharmas cease, they go from  $A \rightarrow \sim A$ . Thus, if nirvana as a dharma was “neither existence nor non-existence”, it would establish its logical opposite, “existence or non-existence”. But then either existence or non-existence (or both) would be established, but all of these cases have already been refuted!

Thus, “neither existence nor non-existence” cannot be established either.

## Nirvana, the Buddha, the World, and Emptiness

- (25v17) Here, Nagarjuna turns to discussing the implications of the refutation of nirvana. Nagarjuna has related nirvana the buddha (see 24v31, where he denies that one can think of bodhi and the Buddha as separate), and the world (see the end of Chapter 22, starting at 22v11) throughout the verses, and here he reaffirms their shared emptiness. The Thus-Come after the time of his passing is neither existent, non-existent, both existent and non-existent, nor nonexistent and not-nonexistent.
- (25v18) Similarly, in the present, the Thus-Come is neither existent, non-existent, both existent and non-existent, nor nonexistent and not non-existent.
  - The proof for these is simple. The Thus-Come cannot be existent, since existence depends on the skandhas, and in Chapter 22 we argued that the Thus-Come can not be found in relation to the skandhas in any way (not one, not different, not containing the other, not possessing them). Then, not existing, the Thus-Come cannot be said to be non-existent as well, since he does not receive the skandhas. Similarly, both is impossible, since both existence and non-existence have been refuted, and equivalently both would depend on receiving. Neither is also eliminated as a logical possibility, since establishing things in this way would establish one of the previous options as well, but all have been refuted.
- (25v19) Between nirvana and the world, there is not the slightest distinction. Between the world and nirvana, there is not the slightest distinction. This is quite an impactful formulation, but this is not so new a thought - both nirvana and the world are empty of characteristic, inconceivable in limit, and not separate, arising, non-arising, existent, or non-existent. This verse underscores what Nagarjuna said in 25v3 about nirvana being not arrived at: some characterize nirvana as being like heaven, or a separate state of being, realm, or quality of existence to the present world. In fact, nirvana cannot be any of those things, since all are defined by conventional names and are grasped at through conception. Thus, there can be no other nirvana than the here and now.
  - (25v20) Similarly, the real limit of nirvana and the real limit of the world have no distinction between them. Both are inconceivable in the sense that they cannot be “truly grasped” through the skandhas of conception or perception and their limits cannot be found. We know by Chapter 11 that the limits of the world (in birth and death) cannot be found, and similar is nirvana.

- (25v21) Nagarjuna further explains his limits argument here. Whether there is existence or non-existence after death, whether there are boundaries to things like existence and permanence. All such views depend on nirvana (since nirvana is what would be “past” the boundary, as it is what one is said to enter when everything else is cut off), and they also depend on “future” and “past” (by analyzing existence cyclically). But nirvana is empty, as is time (see Chapter 19), so these views must be as well.
- (25v22) Thus, since all dharmas are empty, what could have the characteristic of boundedness, of unboundedness, of both bounded and unboundedness, or of neither bounded nor not boundedness? All dharmas being empty of natures and characteristics, how could they have natures such as these, and who is there to regard them as any of these things?
- (25v23) Since all things are empty, all distinctions and views such as the ones above are empty and unknowable as well. Then, why regard things as one or different, as permanent or impermanent, or as both permanent and impermanent or neither permanent nor impermanent? All of these views are empty and unknowable as well, and clinging to them only causes one to continue in receiving.
- (25v24) Thus, all dharmas are inconceivable. What is there to do besides extinguish all futile thoughts? There are two possibilities as for what Nagarjuna could mean by “all futile thoughts”. First, he could mean that all thoughts are futile. This is true in the sense that all thoughts arise from the reception skandhas, and that any conception grasps at characteristics that cannot be said to exist in emptiness, the true nature of dharmas. Then, extinguishing all thoughts could be seen as a way to attain nirvana (not receiving). Second, he could mean to extinguish *futile* thoughts, as in ones that are characterized by grasping and inverting insight, and instead cultivate thoughts that lead one towards insight into emptiness and bodhi. It is possible to loosely characterize adhesion to these two possibilities as matching the two truths - one begins to extinguish all *futile* thoughts when learning the dharma and thus gets closer to emptiness, but one extinguishes *all futile* thoughts when attaining nirvana and entering into non-receiving. Regardless, the meaning of Nagarjuna’s words are clear - that grasping at conception, labels, words, characters, natures, existences, etc. is what is to be extinguished, and that this is the goal of one following the Middle Path. Accordingly, there is no self (to be spoken of in emptiness), there is no world (to be spoken of as existing or not-existing in emptiness), and there is no dharma (truly existing in emptiness) as taught by the Buddha.

# Chapter 26 - Contemplation of the Twelve Causes and Conditions

Straightforward rundown of the Twelve Links of Causality. You might note that this was discussed in particular focus in Chapter 13 on cutting off predispositions. Since predispositions (and ignorance) are at the top of the chain, cutting them off is the way to cease all receiving.

## Argumentative Structure

### - Outlining the Twelve Links of Causation

## Notes

### Outlining the Twelve Links of Causation

- (26/0) The questioner asks Nagarjuna to expound “the way of the ultimate meaning” in relation to the Śrāvaka-dharma as opposed to the Mahayana. I’m not entirely sure what is meant by this, since I think it’s pretty clear that Nagarjuna’s philosophy is in clear conversation with the Pali Canon and other earlier Buddhist philosophy, as evidenced by the repeated reliance on core concepts such as causality, karmic sin and merit, and the chapter on the Four Noble Truths. I believe that Nagarjuna saw his philosophy not as “overturning” earlier Buddhism, but as clarifying, or perhaps “distilling”. Regardless, what Nagarjuna does here is to expound causality (i.e. the basis for emptiness) in its classic formulation.
- (26v1) Living beings, obscured in delusion give rise to the three actions, and by producing these three actions fall into the six destinies, according to their predispositions. There are a few things to note here. The first is that delusion, or ignorance, or lack of insight is what characterizes a “living being” and is also what drives them to do the three types of actions. This suggests that “cutting off” ignorance could have to do with ceasing actions as well as extinguishing thoughts. I.e meditation. If action and delusion are the engine and fuel of the karmic cycle, then the predispositions are the steering wheel, since predispositions are what determines one’s rebirth according to the verse. Thus, extinguishing predispositions or views is also a central component to extinguishing one’s persistence in saṃsāra.
- (26v2) Conditioned by the predispositions, consciousness receives a body of the six ways (senses?). It is the consciousness attaching to this body that gives rise to name and form, by which is meant that conception of objects

and mental schema depends on the attachment to reception rather than being an inbuilt facet to reality.

- (26v3) The development of name and form is what allows the six ways of the body to truly act as the six sensory avenues - once one makes distinguishing between “internal” and “external” or “this” and “that”, one begins to sense dharmas and make contact with them.
- (26v4) Reception then arises on account of this contact. The translator explains “threefold reception” as being of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain. Receiving contact of these qualities, one develops craving. This could be craving for an end to pain, or craving for pleasure, or anything of any type.
- (26v5) This craving then leads one to grasp to try to satisfy the craving in some way. Of course this is futile, since grasping produces action, which we have seen is at the top of this chain. Thus, grasping actually generates further craving instead of satisfying or extinguishing it, as one obscured in delusion might believe. This is why the verse says “If the grasper would not grasp / There would be liberation, and no existence.” Ceasing grasping means to cease action and to disrupt the cycle. Instead, existence is generated by the actions of grasping. It is for this reason that “existence” is thought of as something that can only exist within causality (in the sense that all dharmas are established through causes and conditions). Grasping is an essential cause of all “existent” dharmas, whether by receiving them or generating them.
- (26v6) Existence (here referring to all dharmas), as we know, is marked by arising and ceasing. Thus, there is birth (arising) and subsequently old age and death (ceasing). Old age and death generate all sorrows and ill, such as greed, hatred, fear, etc. Another way to say this is to see that old age and death means “impermanence” and sorrows and ill mean “suffering”. Then, this is the first noble truth.
- (26v7) All things arise from birth (arising) - it is only through the causes and conditions (listed above) that suffering (which comes through the skandhas) accumulates.
- (26v8) Then, as is spoken of in Chapter 13, the basis of one’s continued existence in the rounds of birth and death is predispositions, fueled by delusion and ignorance. One with insight is able to cut off delusion and extinguish predispositions, and thus does not create the basis for their own birth.
- (26v9) When these things cease, they do not arise, and this whole assemblage of suffering simply ceases. By this verse, it is meant that cutting off any part of this chain can cease the whole round since it is a cyclical assemblage. However, doing any of this cutting off requires one to develop insight, which means to cut off ignorance and predispositions. As long as

these remain, the rest will continue.

# Chapter 27 - Contemplation of Wrong Views

This is the final chapter. Nagarjuna analyses some of the core problems of Buddhism (the “Śrāvaka-dharma”): does the self abide, is the world bounded or boundless, etc. Of course, these issues have already been dealt with in previous chapters (especially Chapters 16 and 11). Perhaps for some, the arguments of those chapters would not be persuasive, so we’ll do it again.

## Argumentative Structure

- Refuting the Continuity of the Self
- Refuting Views of Permanence and Impermanence
- Refuting the Boundedness or Boundlessness of the World

## Notes

- (27/0) The questioner wishes to hear Nagarjuna refute wrong views “in the Śrāvaka-dharma”. Your guess is as good as mine as to what that means.
- (27v1) Views of the self existing or not existing in the past, as well as views of the permanence of the world, all depend on the past. This is fairly obvious, since for something to be permanent it would have had to exist in the past, and for one to have knowledge of the self’s existence or non-existence, one would have to have knowledge of the way the things were in the past. However, as we will see Nagarjuna explain, one cannot have knowledge of the past, since one exists in the present, and no continuity can be established.
- (27v2) Similarly, views about the persistence or non-persistence of the self into the future and views about the world having a boundary depend on the future. For a world to be bounded, it must end at some point in the future, and for one to have knowledge about the self’s persistence is to be able to know a future event.

# Refuting the Continuity of the Self

- (27v3) To say one existed in the past is untenable, since the self in the past is not the same as the present self. This argument is negated depending on the self's relationship with the body. If the self is the body, then the body has undergone changes from infant to adult, or between incarnations. Then, the current self cannot have existed in the past. Otherwise, if the self is not the body, then what would it mean that the self "existed", since it would not receive a body? By what means would one recognize a bodiless self, and by what means would a bodiless self act? Then, if the self is not a body, it also cannot have existed in the past.
- (27v4) Similarly, to say that the self in the past existed, and is the same as the current self is also untenable. Clearly, the body has different characteristics (this is the changes in form that are discussed in Chapter 13, starting at 13/2, 17b10), and where else could the self live but in the body (this argument is made at 16v3 in the context of transmigration, and also is the ground for the entire argument of Chapter 9)? Also, to have knowledge about the future self is impossible, since the future has not yet happened. How could one know the future, existing in the present, unless the future was also in the present? This is a contradiction since the future is not in the present (see Chapter 19).
- (27v5) Now, Nagarjuna turns to discussing the self's identity (or lack thereof) with the body. No self can exist apart from the body (as has been established in Chapter 9), so if the body is the self, then there is no self, since the body is impermanent, arising through causes and conditions.
  - (27v6) The body alone cannot be the self since the body's characteristics arise and cease (things that famously don't happen to a self). The notion of a self arising and ceasing is as meaningless as a nature that varies - in fact, it is the same concept. See Chapter 15 for the refutation of this. Also, how could receiving and receiver be one? This would be like doer and doing being one, but we know this is not the case.
- (27v7) The self cannot exist apart from the body for reasons of receiving. If the self and the body were separate, then the self would exist without receiving (remember from Chapter 26 that receiving a body is what allows existence and birth to be perpetuated - if there was no reception, how would there be existence?). But there can be no self without receiving for the reason above, and also because it would be unfindable. Not receiving, how would such a self take form, act, perceive things, or be perceived? Thus such a bodiless self can never be found.
- (27v8) Since the previous arguments depend on receiving, Nagarjuna wishes



to make it clear that receiving and the self are also not separate or identified in any way. The self is not separate from receiving since there is no other way a self could be found - this was proved above in 27v7. But the self also cannot be the same as receiving, since things arise and cease in receiving but the self does not arise or cease since it is fixed, with self nature. Also, this would be like receiver and receiving being one - but as with doer and doing being one, this is not the case. Further, the self cannot be non-receiving since this would mean it did not depend on the skandhas, and must exist separately from them. But then how could such a self be found, since the six sensory avenues, consciousness, etc. are established through the skandhas? Nor could the self be non-existent, since not existing, how could it act or be, or be perceived?

- There is a lengthy commentary block after this point. To the extent it follows Nagarjuna’s verses, it explains the arguments mostly similarly, or supplies additional arguments that I feel are either unhelpful or are simple enough to not require additional commentary. There are two other possibilities for the self that are refuted, which are the self as a doer, and the self as a knower. I will not comment on these, since there is no nuance added here that is not present in the refutations of these in Chapter 8 on Doer and Deed and in Chapters 9 and 14 on Substrate and Combination. I will say that this block is worth reading for the analogies and examples the commentator employs, which I found to be quite creative.
- (27v9) However, just as to say that there is continuity or identity to the self is wrong, to say the current self did not operate in the past, or that the past self was different from the present is also incorrect.
  - (27v10) The reason for this is that they should then exist separately from one another, being separate. Then, this self in the present would not depend on that self in the past. But this would mean self-production for the current self, which is an error, since how would it produce itself, not having existed before?
  - (27v11) To say the past and present selves are different is also an error of severance - if that self ceased, this would be to say the self “really existed” and then “really did not exist”. But if that self ceased and did not re-arise, so too would its karma. Then either its karma is cut off without entering into nirvana, or its karmic reward would be visited upon a future, different self. Then we would have the error of one self acting and another self receiving the recompense. This is not correct.
  - (27v12) To say the self did not exist in the past but does exist now is also incorrect, since the current self would be uncaused. If it arose from the skandhas, then how could it be self, since it would arise and cease? If it did not exist before, then how could it be self, since it

would not have a fixed nature?

- (27v13) We have refuted the views of self existing or not existing in the past (27v3-27v8 and 27v9-27v12). Then, the case of self both existing and not existing in the past is extinguished as well, since both have been refuted, and the case of neither existing nor not-existing in the past is also extinguished, since if it were not, it would establish the case of “both” by mutual dependence.
- (27v14) Views of whether the self will operate or not operate in the future are the same as those of the past, since one can look at this case from the standpoint of the future self as “present” and the current self as “past”. Also, the question of self in the future would have to depend on the same identity or separation of the self and the body or of the self and receiving, but all these cases have been refuted.
- (27v15) Now, Nagarjuna turns to arguing against the continuity or separation of the self across rebirths by examining the case of a man who is reborn as a god (following meritorious action) or the case of a god who is reborn as a man (following sinful action). The god cannot be the same as the man, since this would fall into the extreme of permanence, since the self of a god would persist through death and rebirth. Then if the god was permanent he would be non-arising and this would contradict the arising of the god as a man, as well as the arising of the god as a god in the first place.
- (27v16) Also, the god cannot be different from the man since this would be the case of impermanence. If there is no continuity between them, then how can say that the god became a man?
- (27v17) The case of them being both (i.e. being half-god and half-man) is not the case either, since this would be to make both errors of permanence and impermanence at one. Not only have both been refuted, but this would be the case of one body containing contradictory natures. This cannot be the case, because since opposites mutually depend on one another how could they arise together, since they would be uncaused.
- (27v18) Also, “neither permanence nor impermanence” would have to be established in conjunction with “both permanence and impermanence”, since they are opposites and mutually depend, but since “both” have been refuted, “neither” is refuted also.

## Refuting Views of Permanence and Impermanence

- (27v19) Since the arguments about god and man discuss the errors of permanence and impermanence, Nagarjuna sees fit to explain them further. If dharmas had a fixed “coming” or “going” (arising or ceasing), then birth and death would have no beginning, since there would always be a cycle of “really existing” arising and ceasing in saṃsāra. Then, one could say

saṃsāra or the world is permanent, since it would always be populated by fixed comings and goings. However, we know that there is no going or coming (Chapter 2) or arising and ceasing (Chapter 7), so there can be no permanence.

- I think this argument for “no permanence” is a little convoluted, and that it suffices to say permanence requires permanent natures, which means they cannot depend on anything, which is a denial of causality.
- (27v20) Now, if permanence has been refuted, then this also refutes impermanence (since they mutually establish one another as opposites), “both” (since permanence and impermanence are refuted, how can both not be?), and “neither”, (since this would have to be established with “both” since they are opposites).

## Refuting the Boundedness or Boundlessness of the World

- (27v21) Now, Nagarjuna applies the refutation of permanence and impermanence to the question of the world and its boundary (or lack thereof). If the world is bounded, then there can be no subsequent world, since this one would cease and be unable to cause the next world. Then there would be no round of death and rebirth. If the world is unbounded, then there also will be no subsequent world, since this one would never cease, and so no subsequent world would need arise.
- (27v22) The world exists in receiving to the five skandhas, like all dharmas. Then, the skandhas constantly succeed one another like the flame of a lamp, neither permanent nor impermanent, and thus neither bounded nor unbounded.
  - (27v23) If the previous skandhas had perished, and these subsequent skandhas were to arise independently, then the world could be said to be bounded. This would be boundedness because there would be a point at which that world ended (when the previous skandhas perished) and this world began (when the subsequent, independent skandhas arose). Note that the skandhas could not be the same, since then “that” world and “this” world would not be different. However, the skandhas do not perish and arise separately, since the skandhas are inseparable from their causes (the previous skandhas, since all dharmas exist in receiving). Therefore the world cannot be bounded.
  - (27v24) If the previous skandhas had not perished and independently the subsequent skandhas arised, then the world would be boundless, since it would never cease for even a moment. However, this case is impossible since the previous skandhas never having ceased, they would be permanent. But if the skandhas were permanent they would have fixed natures, and could not act as part of the causal process.

- (27v25) The world could not be half unbounded and half bounded, since this would be the presence of two opposing characteristics in one place, but this is not possible.
  - (27v26) This case of half unbounded and half bounded is impossible since bounded and unbounded depend on whether or not the skandhas have perished or not. But how could the skandhas be half perished and half un-perished? It is not correct to say a dharma half-ceases. If there is any part that exists and acts in causality, then how can it be ceased, and if there is any part of it that is ceased, then how can it be the same particular dharma that continues to act in causality?
  - (27v27) Likewise, the world (as receiver of the five skandhas) can not be half receiving and half not receiving - how would one only receive half of the skandhas? This would be the same error as one being both permanent and impermanent.
- (27v28) Then, the establishment of “neither” depends on the case of “both” being established. However, “both” has been refuted, so “neither” is as well. Therefore, there is no view about the world and boundedness that holds.
- (27v29) Since all dharmas are empty, all views about the permanence of the world, the past and future, and the self - Who would there be to hold these views, since there is no self (and no no-self), where would they hold them, since there is no existing (or nonexisting) world, and when would they hold them, since there is no past, present or future. Then, all of these views are empty, and none can be said to be “really true”.
- (27v30) Thank you Buddha, for teaching us to extinguish all views. This means that “right views” and “wrong views” are really the same - right view is “extinguishing views”.