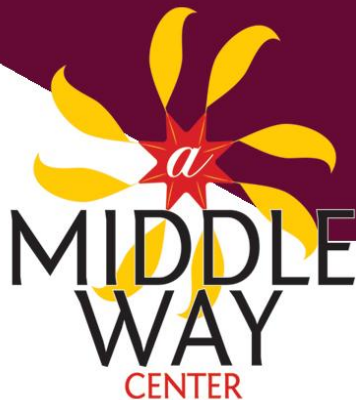


Explorations in Emptiness

The Emptiness of Causation and Karma

Chapters from Nagarjuna's
Root Verses on the Middle Way

“ Nothing stops and nothing starts;
Nothing ends and nothing keeps going;
Nothing is the same and nothing is different;
Nothing comes and nothing goes.”



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Dedication Verses to the “Root Verses of the Middle Way”:

अनिरोधमनुत्पादमनुच्छेदमशाश्वतं ।

अनेकार्थमनानार्थमनागममनिर्गमं ॥

anirodhamanutpādamanucchedamaśāśvataṃ |
anekārthamanānārthamanāgamamanirgamam ||

यः प्रतीत्यसमुत्पादं प्रपञ्चोपशमं शिवं ।

देशयामास संबुद्धस्तं वन्दे वदतां वरं ॥

yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaṃ prapañcopaśamaṃ śivaṃ |
deśayamāsa sambuddhastam vande vadatām varam ||

I salute the Fully Awakened One, the best of all orators,
Who taught the auspicious doctrine of dependent arising
That puts to rest all conceptual elaboration:

Nothing stops and nothing starts;
Nothing ends and nothing keeps going;
Nothing is the same and nothing is different;
Nothing comes and nothing goes.

Nagarjuna previews here the subject matter of the entire book and the position he will be arguing: Things exist only interdependently, and not independently or self-existently.

Because of this, nothing “starts,” “stops,” etc., in and of itself.

Chapter One: An Analysis of Conditions

न स्वस्तो नापि परतो न द्वाभ्यां नाप्यहेतुतः ।

उत्पन्ना जातु विद्यन्ते भावाः क्वचन के चन ॥ १ ॥

na svasto nāpi parato na dvābhyāṃ nāpyahetutaḥ ।
utpannā jātu vidyante bhāvāḥ kvacana ke cana ॥ 1

1.1

No existing things anywhere
Are ever observed to arise:
Not on their own, and not from another,
Not from both, and not without a cause.

Nagarjuna introduces this chapter by inviting us to reflect on how we think something or some event, external or internal, comes about or arises. If things are happening in the way they seem to, they would have to originate in one of four ways, but they cannot: 1) they can't come from themselves, for if they did oak trees would just endlessly reproduce themselves and not arise from acorns; 2) they don't come from something other than themselves, for then we'd have to suppose that one thing could come from something completely separate and different from itself (like apples from oranges); 3) since things don't come from either themselves or something other than themselves, then they can't come from both; and, finally, 4) things don't happen for no reason at all either.

Nagarjuna seems to draw a distinction between a "cause" or "efficient cause" (hetu) and what I've translated here as a "condition," "causal condition," or a "causal factor" (pratyaya). The former seems to be regarded as one type of the latter (see next verse). In this verse, he suggests that things do not arise causelessly (ahetu). But in the verses that follow he argues that the origins of things also cannot be explained by any of the conditions that would seem to make them possible.

Nagarjuna is not saying that things don't appear to arise or come into being. They do. It's just that if things don't arise or "start" in any of the four ways enumerated in this verse, they can't really arise at all . . . apart from the appearance of arising interdependently and the conceptualization of a process of causality. Things arise as in a dream, in an illusory way, and that is the only way they can do so.

चत्वारः प्रत्यया हेतुश्चालम्बनमनन्तरं ।

तथैवाधिपतेयं च प्रत्ययो नास्ति पञ्चमः ॥ २ ॥

catvāraḥ pratyayā hetuścālambanamanantaram ।
tathaivādhīpateyaṁ ca pratyayo nāsti pañcamah ॥2

1.2

There are four kinds of conditions:

Causal, dependent on an object, immediately preceding, and the dominant.

And there is no fifth kind of condition.

Nagarjuna proceeds to analyze the possibility that things arise from other things, the most commonsensical and least absurd possibility of the four possibilities listed in the first verse of this chapter.

There are four types of conditions that might bring about the arising of something other than themselves. 1) The first is called the "cause" or "efficient cause" which means something that directly causes something else to happen (e.g., fire causes smoke, a seed causes a sprout, an acorn is the cause for an oak tree). 2) The second is designated the "object condition" and refers to any existing thing that triggers a perception in the perceiver (e.g., a visible object is the condition for seeing a visible object). 3) Thirdly, there is the "immediately preceding condition" – the present moment of consciousness is brought about by the moment of consciousness that occurred just before it. 4) And then there is what is known as the "dominant condition" which seems to refer to any of the sense powers (e.g., my ability to hear due to the functioning of my eardrums) "dominating" or "ruling over" the consciousness connected to that power (e.g., the consciousness or awareness that I am hearing a sound). Some commentaries simply say that the "dominant condition" is anything that facilitates an effect that is not covered in the previous three conditions.

None of these four conditions, Nagarjuna will prove, can really cause anything at all, and there are no other possibilities: There is no "fifth" to add to these four.

न हि स्वभावो भावानां प्रत्ययादिषु विद्यते ।

अविद्यमाने स्वभावे परभावो न विद्यते ॥ ३ ॥

na hi svabhāvo bhāvānām pratyayādiṣu vidyate ।
avidyamāne svabhāve parabhāvo na vidyate ॥ 3

1.3

The self-nature of existing things
Is not observed in their conditions.
And with a self-nature not being observed,
Another's nature cannot be observed either.

If things had some kind of real existence or a "self-nature" (svabhāva), could that self-nature come from the conditions that bring it about?

Is the self-nature of the sprout found in the seed (it's causal condition)? Is the very visibility of an object located somewhere in the visible object itself (the object condition)? Is my present truly existing moment of consciousness found in the previous moment of consciousness (the immediately preceding condition)? And is my actual awareness or consciousness of hearing something located in the eardrum that hears sounds (the dominant condition)?

The essence or self-nature of something cannot be found in what supposedly brings it into being, because if it did it would already be there within those conditions and therefore would not need to arise: the sprout would exist already in the seed.

But a thing can't arise from something with a self-nature different from the self-nature of the thing that arises – what Nagarjuna here and elsewhere calls an "other-nature" (parabhāva). Something that is essentially an apple cannot come from something that is essentially an orange. Furthermore, "other-nature" assumes a "self-nature" that it is "other" to. If there are no self-existent apples, there can be no self-existent oranges that are essentially different from apples.

And there is no third possibility: If there were an essence to a thing, that nature or essence has to somehow be in the conditions that brought it into being or come from causal factors that have an "other-nature," and in any case, an "other nature" assumes a "self-nature" that no thing has.

क्रया न प्रत्ययवती नाप्रत्ययवती क्रिया ।

प्रत्यया नाक्रियावन्तः क्रियावन्तश्च सन्त्युत ॥ ४ ॥

kriyā na pratyayavatī nāpratyayavatī kriyā |
pratyayā nākriyāvantaḥ kriyāvantaśca santyuta || 4

1.4

The power to bring something about does not have conditions,
But there is no power to bring something about that doesn't have conditions.
Conditions do not have the power to bring something about,
But they also do have the power to bring something about.

Do causal factors or conditions have the power (here the term used is kriya) to bring about their effects? And if they do, where does that power itself come from? Does the power to bring something about have its own conditions that bring it about?

The first line states that the power that brings about a result does not itself arise from conditions, for if it did the question would just be repositioned: What power makes it possible for the conditions to bring about the power that brings something about?

The second line notes, however, that such a power must have conditions, for if it didn't it would be an uncaused thing – something that doesn't depend on its causes and conditions. The origin of the very force that brings about results would itself be inexplicable and mysterious.

And so, as Nagarjuna next notes, ultimately conditions do not have the power to bring about effects, for the power to do so is not in or possessed by those conditions.

But in the last line, he declares that conditions do have such a power; that is, after all, what makes them “conditions” or causal factors – they produce effects. He picks up this point in the next verse, but only to show how this is impossible!

उत्पद्यते प्रतीत्येमानितीमे प्रत्ययाः किल ।

यावन्नोत्पद्यत इमे तावन्नाप्रत्ययाः कथं ॥ ५ ॥

utpadyate pratītyemānitīme pratyayāḥ kila ।
yāvannotpadyata ime tāvannāpratyayāḥ katham ॥ 5

1.5

These conditions are called such
Because in dependence on them something arises.
But as long as something does not arise,
Why are these not non-conditions?

Conditions and the effects they supposedly cause exist only in relation to one another. We call things “causes” only because they seem to bring about “effects,” and therefore a cause comes into being as such only after the effect that defines it as a cause comes into existence.

But if that's the case, then for as long as there is no effect there can be no cause. Before the effect occurs, the so-called “conditions” are really “non-conditions” since they have not caused anything to arise.

And if the cause does not exist until the effect, then how can the effect be caused? How can what is a non-condition also be a condition?

नैवासतो नैव सतः प्रत्ययो ऽर्थस्य युज्यते ।

असतः प्रत्ययः कस्य सतश्च प्रत्ययेन किं ॥ ६ ॥

naivāsato naiva sataḥ pratyayo 'rthasya yujyate ।
asataḥ pratyayaḥ kasya sataśca pratyayena kiṃ ॥ 6

1.6

It makes no sense to say that

There is a condition for either an existing thing or a non-existing thing.

What is the condition for a non-existing thing?

And what use would an existing thing have for a condition?

In this verse, Nagarjuna generally demonstrates the impossibility of efficacious conditions by posing a question: Does the effect the cause supposedly brings about exist or not?

If it doesn't exist, it makes no sense to speak about causes and conditions. How can there be a cause for a non-existing thing?

But if the effect is already an existing thing, it would have no need for a condition that would bring it into existence. It's already there! "What use would an existing thing have for a condition?"

न सन्नासन्न सदसन्धर्मो निर्वर्तते यदा ।

कथं निर्वर्तको हेतुरेवं सति हि युज्यते ॥ ७ ॥

na sannāsaṇṇa sadasandharṃo nirvartate yadā ।
katham nirvartako heturevaṃ sati hi yujyate ॥ 7

1.7

When there are no existing things, no non-existing things,
And no things that are both existing and non-existing,
How would it make sense to say
That there is an efficient cause?

Nagarjuna will now show how none of the four types of conditions listed above in verse two ("causal," "dependent on an object," "immediately preceding," and "dominant") can really produce effects. In this verse, he begins with the type of condition known as "causal" or the "efficient cause" (hetu).

A thing that already truly exists can't be the result of a cause because, as we have seen, if it already exists it doesn't need a cause to bring it into existence. And a thing that doesn't exist, a truly non-existing thing, can't be produced or made into an existing thing no matter how many causes you bring to bear on it, for if that were possible then it wouldn't be a non-existing thing!

And things that are both existing and non-existing are mutually exclusive, so one thing can't truly be both.

अनालम्बन एवायं सन् धर्म उपदिश्यते ।

अथानालम्बने धर्मे कुत आलम्बनं पुनः ॥ ८ ॥

anālabhana evāyaṁ san dharma upadiśyate ।
athānālabhane dharme kuta ālabhanam punaḥ ॥ 8

1.8

It is apparent that an existing thing

Does not depend on an object.

And when something does not depend on an object

How can there be the kind of condition that depends on an object?

Next, we turn to the second type of condition: the “object condition” or ālabhana, a word that literally means “depending on” and is used technically to refer to a perceptible object on which perception depends. The “existing thing” Nagarjuna speaks of in this verse is the perception or mental event – the mental image of a tree, and not the tree itself. If such a perception already exists, it doesn’t need the “object condition” to bring it about; and if it doesn’t already exist, then how could anything bring into existence a non-existent thing?

It would seem commonsensical, however, that a tree is the “object condition” that does bring forth the mental image of the tree. But the perception of a tree actually does not depend on the physical tree; rather, it depends on the concept of “tree” for the object to be recognized as such. Without such a pre-existing concept, the object would be unrecognizable.

And so, we can say, the mental image of a tree – the “existing thing” in Nagarjuna’s verse – does not depend on the object but rather on the already existing idea of “a tree” or “this tree,” which is in turn simply an instantiation of the general category of “tree.” The physical tree is not what is perceived; it is only a mental image of the tree that is perceived.

At the same time, there obviously could not be a valid perception of a tree without the physical object we call “a tree” stimulating the perception. But neither the perception of the tree nor the physical object called “a tree” can be said to cause the other, and so there can be no “object condition.” Perception and perceptible object exist in a mutually interdependent way such that neither can exist without the other and neither one can come first.

अनुत्पन्नेषु धर्मेषु निरोधो नोपपद्यते ।

नानन्तरमतो युक्तं निरुद्धे प्रत्ययश्च कः ॥ ९ ॥

anutpanneṣu dharmeṣu nirodho nopapadyate ।
nānantaramato yuktaṁ niruddhe pratyayaśca kaḥ ॥ 9

1.9

Since things don't arise, cessation does not occur.
And so the immediately preceding condition is not possible.
And if something were to stop,
How could it be a condition?

The third kind of condition, the "immediately preceding" (anantara) assumes that something that has happened immediately before brings about an effect that follows: A previous moment of consciousness produces the next moment of consciousness, or a seed germinates into a sprout.

Again, Nagarjuna notes that non-existing things cannot turn into existing things – "things don't arise." If they are "things" (the word here is dharma-s), they already exist and would not depend on something else that came before to come into existence.

And so too, a condition that immediately precedes the effect, if it truly exists, could never stop existing and become a non-existing thing. A previous moment of consciousness that truly existed would not vanish in the wake of the next moment of consciousness; a seed would not disappear upon the arising of the sprout.

Nagarjuna then drops the other shoe: If there were immediately preceding conditions that ceased a moment before their effects began, how could they be said to bring about the effects? They stopped, ceased, came to end, and were no more! How could something non-existent bring about something into existence? In what sense would there be an "immediately preceding condition" if it weren't there?

भावानां निःस्वभावानां न सत्ता विद्यते यतः ।

सतीदमस्मिन् भवतीत्येतन्नैवोपपद्यते ॥ १० ॥

bhāvānām niḥsvabhāvānām na sattā vidyate yataḥ ।
satīdamasmin bhavatītyetannaivopapadyate ॥ 10

1.10

If we observe no existing things
That exist devoid of any self-nature,
Then the phrase, “When this exists, that comes into being”
Would have no meaning.

The last of the four conditions is the “dominant condition,” the idea that when a decisive or dominant factor is present then something arises: I must be able to hear with my ears in order to register a sound in my consciousness. Or, put more generally, “When this exists, that comes into being,” which is the very summation of the doctrine of dependent arising.

But Nagarjuna points out that things are empty of having any essential nature to them, including the so-called “dominant conditions.” And it is precisely because things do not have essential natures that they can bring about something else. Dependent origination is made possible by emptiness, and is impossible if we assume any true nature either to supposed causes or supposed effects.

न च व्यस्तसमस्तेषु प्रत्ययेष्वस्ति तत्फलं ।

प्रत्ययेभ्यः कथं तच्च भवेन्न प्रत्ययेषु यत् ॥ ११ ॥

na ca vyastasamasteṣu pratyayeṣvasti tatphalaṁ ।
pratyayebhyaḥ katham tacca bhavenna pratyayeṣu yat ॥ 11

1.11

The result is not in conditions
Which exist either separately or together.
How then could that which is not in the conditions
Come from the conditions?

Beginning here, Nagarjuna in these last verses of the chapter returns to the general problem of causation. If one imagines it as having some kind of independent power to bring about results, problems will ensue. With this verse he begins a summary as to why causation is in reality empty of inherent existence.

Nagarjuna here notes that the effect – the oak tree, let's say – cannot be found in any one of its conditions (the acorn, the earth it is planted in, the sunlight, the water, etc.), nor is it found in all of them put together.

Since the effect is not locatable in any or all of the causal conditions, in what sense can we say that the oak tree “comes from” or “arises” from them?

अथासदपि तत्तेभ्यः प्रत्ययेभ्यः प्रवर्तते ।

अप्रत्ययेभ्यो ऽपि कस्मान्नाभिप्रवर्तते फलं ॥ १२ ॥

athāsadapi tattebhyaḥ pratyayebhyaḥ pravartate ।
apratyayebhyo 'pi kasmānnābhipravartate phalaṁ ॥ 12

1.12

But if that non-existent result
Could come from those conditions,
Then why couldn't the result
Come forth from that which are non-conditions?

Next, Nagarjuna addresses the notion that an effect could arise from causal factors in which the effect is not present. Could a "non-existent result" at the time of the cause nevertheless somehow later actualize as a result brought about by its causes and conditions?

If we assume that a result can come from causes and conditions in which the result is not present (see last verse), then why couldn't that result equally come from "non-conditions" in which the result also is not present?

If the oak tree is not found in its causes (acorn, soil, sunlight, et al.) but nevertheless arises from these conditions, then what is particularly special about those conditions? Why are they "conditions" at all? Why couldn't the tree come from just anything? Why couldn't an oak tree arise from a kitchen sink, or a breeze, or by a spoken word – all of which are "non-conditions" for the result, the oak tree?

फलं च प्रत्ययमयं प्रत्ययाश्चास्वयंमयाः ।

फलमस्वमयेभ्यो यत्तत्प्रत्ययमयं कथं ॥ १३ ॥

phalaṁ ca pratyayamayam pratyayāścāsvayammayāḥ ।
phalamasvamayebyo yattatpratyayamayam katham ॥ 13

1.13

The result is inherent in its conditions,
But the conditions are without their own inherent nature.
Since the result comes from things that have no inherent nature,
How can it be inherent in the conditions?

On the one hand, Nagarjuna is pointing out that if a result is brought about by its conditions, that result can be said to be inherent in those conditions (pratyaya-maya; the suffix also can signify “made or produced by” those conditions). The oak tree is the result of the acorn, earth, sunlight, etc. And so, in order to be an oak tree, it depends on these particular “oak tree making” conditions that create it as such.

But on the other hand, Nagarjuna notes that conditions “are without their own inherent natures” (asvayam-maya). No one or all together are inherently “oak tree making” things in and of themselves. Furthermore, the acorn, earth, sunlight, etc., each in turn depend on their own individual conditions, which also depend on their conditions, and so on, ad infinitum.

And so since an oak tree comes from conditions that do not have inherently “oak tree making” properties, the nature of the result (the oak tree) cannot be inherent in its conditions.

Put more generally, since causes and conditions exist dependently on the effect they bring about in order to be “causes and conditions” for that effect, they do not have an independent or inherent nature (since they depend on the effect to be “causes and conditions”). And if effects are “effects” due those causes and conditions, and causes and conditions have no inherent natures of their own, then there can be no inherent natures to effects either.

तस्मान्न प्रत्ययमयं नाप्रत्ययमयं फलं ।

संविद्यते फलाभावात्प्रत्ययाप्रत्ययाः कुतः ॥ १४ ॥

tasmānna pratyayamayam nāpratyayamayam phalam |
samvidyate phalābhāvātpratyayāpratyayāḥ kutah || 14

1.14

Therefore, conditions have no inherent nature
And the result is not inherent in its conditions.
If we don't observe a result that occurs like that,
How can there be either conditions or non-conditions?

And so the conclusion: Conditions are not "conditions" in and of themselves, for they depend on results to be the conditions of those results. And although results are not "results" without their conditions, they are not inherent in those conditions either. There is no oak tree somewhere lurking within the acorn, or the earth, or the sunlight, etc.

So if causation does not work like we ordinarily think it does – with causes and conditions somehow having the efficacious power to bring the effect into existence – does causation work at all?

Nagarjuna does not claim that there is no causation or dependent origination, as later chapters make clear. Rather, he takes a middle way: Causation is empty of working self-existently or automatically. But he also says that things don't happen for no reason (see the first verse of this chapter).

Because both causes and conditions, on the one hand, and the effects they bring about on the other hand, are equally empty of having inherent natures of being "causes and conditions" or "effects," they exist only interdependently. "Causes and conditions" depend on the existence of the effects they bring about, and "effects" depend on the causes and conditions that brought them about. Neither can exist without the other, and neither can come first.

Exercise for Class One

For fifteen minutes each day, review the verses in Chapter One and contemplate and meditate on how causation can only work if we understand emptiness and the interdependent nature of cause and effect.

Begin by analyzing your own assumptions. Take the classic example of the seed and the sprout. Try to identify how you ordinarily assume causality is working in this case. Do you suppose that the sprout is somehow already present in the seed, a miniature version of the sprout just waiting to get out? Review the problems such a view would entail: Can the sprout come from itself?

Conversely, does if the seed and the sprout are completely different, independently existing things, how do you think a seed can produce a sprout? Does the seed have some kind of power in it to bring about the sprout, and if so, where did that power come from? Does this power exist independently, or does it depend on its causes and conditions?

When the sprout comes into existence, what happens to the seed? If the seed no longer exists, how can it really be the cause of the sprout? It's not there! And if the sprout already exists, why would it need to depend on a cause? It's already there!

Meditate on the fact that causation can only work because things are empty of having any independent self-nature of their own. There is obviously no effect until and unless there is a cause for which it is the effect. But it is also true that a cause is not a cause until and unless there is an effect for which it can be said to be a cause. Cause and effect depend on each other to be what they are, and both depend on an observer who draws the connection between them. And that's the only way cause and effect could possibly exist.

Chapter Eight: An Analysis of the Actor and Action

सद्भूतः कारकः कर्म सद्भूतं न करोत्ययं ।

कारको नाप्यसद्भूतः कर्मासद्भूतमीहते ॥ १

sadbhūtaḥ kārakaḥ karma sadbhūtaṁ na karotyayaṁ
kārako nāpyasadbhūtaḥ karmāsadbhūtamīhate ॥ 1

8.1

A truly existing actor

Does not perform a truly existing action.

Nor does an actor who does not truly exist

Perform an action that does not truly exist.

In this chapter, Nagarjuna moves from a discussion of the emptiness of things or objects outside of ourselves (“phenomena,” objects, or the “parts of a person” -- “mine”) to the emptiness of the self (“person” or subjects – “me”). The issue is here framed in terms of an actor (kāraka) and the action (karma) performed or produced by the actor. The concern in this chapter is mostly one of definition –what makes an actor an actor and an action an action? The question of moral responsibility if there are no truly existing actors or producers of karma, is addressed more specifically later in Chapter Seventeen.

An opponent, perhaps an “orthodox” Buddhist, might assert that karma (the “action”) must have some real, independent existence and someone who creates that karma (an “actor”) must also really exist, for if they don’t, neither exists at all.

In this opening verse, Nagarjuna states one of the conclusions he will prove in the subsequent stanzas: If there were an actor who truly existed as an actor, he or she would not need to do anything else, for they are already an “actor” without the need for further acting. Such an actor would not depend on doing a truly existing action to be a truly existing actor, for “truly existing” in either case (actor or action) means not dependent on anything else to be what it is.

Conversely, an actor who does not truly exist would also not be dependent on doing an action that does not truly exist to be who he or she is.

सद्भूतस्य क्रिया नास्ति कर्म च स्यादकर्तृकं ।

सद्भूतस्य क्रिया नास्ति कर्ता च स्यादकर्मकाः ॥ २

sadbhūtasya kriyā nāsti karma ca syādakartṛkaṁ ।
sadbhūtasya kriyā nāsti kartā ca syādakarmakāḥ ॥ 2

8.2

Someone who truly exists does no activity,
And there would then be action without an actor.
Someone who truly exists does no activity,
And there would then be an actor without action.

Here we explore the first of the two options given in the last verse: Could a truly existing actor perform a truly existing action? Keep in mind that “truly existing” means existing independently, with an essential nature of its own and without depending on anything other than itself for its definitive existence.

If there were someone who existed essentially, truly, and independently as an “actor” – let’s say someone who was essentially a “surfer” – he or she would be so because he or she is permanently and unchangingly conjoined to and wholly defined by that action. But were there such a “surfer,” he or she would never need to surf, for they are already and forever a “surfer” and performing another action would be unnecessary, redundant, or impossible.

“That which is already an agent by virtue of performing an action,” writes Tsongkapa, “now does not have another action to perform in order to become an agent.” So it would be unnecessary for a truly existing surfer to surf in order to be a surfer.

And without a surfer surfing, then there could (impossibly) be an act of surfing that wasn’t done by a “surfer,” an “action without an actor.” An act that could exist independently of an actor is as impossible as “a vase made by the son of a barren woman,” says Mabja Jangchub Tsondu.

A truly existent “surfer” and a truly existent “surfing” could both somehow exist separable from one another. There could thus be an actor who existed apart from the action that defined him or her as the actor, and an action that existed apart from the agent of that action – an “actor without an action” and an “action without an actor.”

करोति यद्यसद्भूतो ऽसद्भूतं कर्म कारकः ।

अहेतुकं भवेत्कर्म कर्ता चाहेतुको भवेत् ॥ ३

karoti yadyasadbhūto 'sadbhūtaṁ karma kāraḥ |
ahetukaṁ bhavetkarma kartā cāhetuko bhavet || 3

8.3

If an actor who did not truly exist
Performed an action that did not truly exist,
Then there would be an action without a cause
And a causeless actor.

As we've seen in the last verse, there can't be a truly existing actor (an essentially existing and therefore unchanging "surfer") who, existing separately from the truly existing act, nevertheless does a truly existing act like surfing. Were this the case, among other absurdities, the very doing of the act would change the unchanging actor – going surfing would, paradoxically, make the "surfer" something other than who they (unchangingly and essentially) are, which is a "surfer."

And as Nagarjuna notes in this verse, it is equally impossible to have a "surfer" if there ever was a time when they were not a surfer and not engaged in surfing ("an actor who did not truly exist" performing "an action that did not truly exist"). And if they were not already essentially a "surfer," how could they ever become one? Someone who really was a "non-surfer" could never become a "surfer" by surfing. Apples don't become oranges, no matter what you do to them.

Having established in the last verse that a truly existent "surfer" could never surf, and a truly existing act of "surfing" could not exist apart from an surfer, Nagarjuna now just notes that it also makes no sense to say that were there not an actor (a surfer) who did something (surfing), there would be nothing that brought about the action (there can be no "surfing" without a surfer, no "action without a cause") and no cause for the actor either (i.e., there is no one we can call a "surfer" until and unless they surfed, for it is the activity of surfing that is the cause for there being a surfer).

हेतावसति कार्यं च कारणं च न विद्यते ।

तदभावे क्रिया कर्ता कारणं च न विद्यते ॥ ४

hetāvasati kāryaṃ ca kāraṇaṃ ca na vidyate ।
tadabhāve kriyā kartā karaṇaṃ ca na vidyate ॥ 4

8.4

And if a cause does not exist,
Neither an effect nor a sufficient condition can be observed.
And when these are not observed
There is no action, no actor, and no doing of the activity.

If there were no efficient causes (hetu-s) to things, there would be no effects (for an effect is something brought about by a cause). Nor would there be “sufficient conditions” (kāraṇa, the conditions that make it possible for the efficient cause to function as such), for without a result brought about it makes no sense to say that something is a “sufficient condition” that brought the result about.

If, for example, there is no surfing (the efficient cause), then there are no surfers (who result from surfing) and no “going surfing” (getting a surfboard, going to a surf site, paddling out, waiting for a wave, etc. – the “sufficient conditions” for surfing).

And all three – efficient cause, sufficient conditions, and result – are necessary for there to be an actor and an action. A surfer becomes a surfer by surfing, and surfing can only happen when there is a surfer who surfs. But the action of surfing only comes into being when done by a surfer who has gone surfing, and so going surfing is the condition of possibility for a surfer to surf.

Truly existing actors and actions would not require causes and conditions to be what they are. So, Nagarjuna points out, if any one or all of these three – the action, the actor, and the sufficient conditions for the action (surfing, the surfer, and the going surfing) – are extracted from the web of cause and effect, none of them makes any sense at all. None of them can come about without all of them coming together in a relationship of mutual dependence.

धर्माधर्मौ न विद्येते क्रियादीनामसंभवे ।

धर्मे चासत्यधर्मे च फलं तज्जं न विद्यते ॥ ५

dharmādharmau na vidyete kriyādināmasambhave ।
dharma cāsatyadharme ca phalaṁ tajjaṁ na vidyate ॥ 5

8.5

When action and the rest are not ascertained,
Then there is no ascertaining of what is right and what is wrong.
And when right and wrong don't exist,
Then no consequence can be ascertained that follows from either one.

Nagarjuna here begins to turn an implicit opponent's objection completely around. For one might argue that there must be real, truly existing actors and actions because of the moral law of karma – an action done, positive or negative, will have a similar effect on the actor who did that action, and therefore actions and actors truly exist. The law of karma seems to prove their true existence!

But as a result of the analyses of the last several verses, Arya Nagarjuna can now turn this argument inside out: If actors and actions truly existed, there would be no possibility for a law of karma, for actors and actions, doers and deeds, would exist independently of one another and neither would be caused by the other.

If we say that actions and actors truly exist, that is, separable and independent of the process of cause and effect, then the whole edifice of morality crumbles: There would be no “right” (dharmā) or “wrong” (adharma) actions because there would be no necessary connection between the actor and what he or she does, and therefore no consequences for the actor adhering to the actions of the actor.

फले ऽसति न मोक्षाय न स्वर्गायोपपद्यते ।

मार्गः सर्वक्रियाणां च नैरर्थक्यं प्रसज्यते ॥ ६

phale 'sati na mokṣāya na svargāyopapadyate ।
mārgaḥ sarvakriyāṇāṃ ca nairarthakyaṃ prasajyate ॥ 6

8.6

If there were no consequences,
There would be no path
That would lead to freedom and heaven,
And there would be no purpose to any activity.

Driving the point home, Nagarjuna notes that if there were no consequences following from good or bad deeds which acted as causes for those results, then there would be no point to an ethical life at all. There would be no way to improve oneself within samsara by following a path that would lead to “heaven” (here probably meaning a higher rebirth in general), nor would there be a path that would lead to freedom and out of suffering altogether.

This kind of hopelessness, amorality, and nihilism would be, our author argues, what's entailed in positing the self-existence of actor and action and of not of understanding the emptiness of both. So in another interesting and unexpected turn, Nagarjuna is saying that it is precisely our ignorance about actors and actions (thinking that they have some kind of self-existence they do not and cannot have) that makes it possible for us to deny a necessary connection between them. It is the belief, implicit or explicit, in self-existence, and not the fact of emptiness, that leads to amoral or immoral behavior!

Actors are actors because of the actions they do, and the actions are actions because they are done by actors. We are defined by our actions, and our actions are defined by the actors we are.

As Jay Garfield, commenting on this verse, puts it, “It is ironical that it is the urge to guarantee more reality and significance for ourselves than emptiness appears to allow that leads to a view of life as perfectly impossible and pointless. . . . Only in the context of emptiness – what might appear to be the greatest threat to meaningfulness – can a meaningful life be understood.”

कारकः सदसद्भूतः सदसत्कुरुते न तत् ।

परस्परविरुद्धं हि सच्चासच्चैकतः कुतः ॥ ७

kāraḥ sadasadbhūtaḥ sadasatkurute na tat |
parasparaviruddhaṁ hi saccāsaccaikataḥ kutaḥ || 7

8.7

An actor who both exists and does not exist
Does not do that which both exists or does not exist.
How could what exists and does not exist
Occur simultaneously when they are mutually exclusive?

To summarize so far:

First, a truly existing actor could not bring about a truly existing action, for as we have seen, "truly existent" means separable and independent, and therefore not in any kind of cause and effect or interdependent relationship. One truly existing thing cannot bring about or depend on another, because they both would already truly exist. So it's not possible for a truly existent actor (a "surfer" who doesn't need to surf to be a surfer) to do a truly existent action ("surfing" which need not be done by a surfer).

But neither is it possible for a non-existent actor (a "non-surfer") to do a non-existent action (like "non-surfing"), for again, being a truly non-existent actor and a truly non-existing action would be independent of each other and not defined in relation to one another.

Second, Nagarjuna also has noted above that it would make no sense to say that actors and actions exist outside of causality either, for if actors and actions did not bring about one another, how could they possibly exist?

In this verse he rejects another possibility. Someone can't be both an actor (surfer) and non-actor (non-surfer) at the same time, and do an action that both exists (surfing) and does not exist (non-surfing) simultaneously.

This is the law of non-contradiction or parasparaviruddha ("mutually exclusive") in the Sanskrit. Something (e.g., a truly existing thing) cannot be the completely opposite (e.g., a truly non-existing thing) at the same time.

सता च क्रियते नासन्नासता क्रियते च सत् ।

कर्त्रा सर्वे प्रसज्यन्ते दोषास्तत्र त एव हि ॥ ८

satā ca kriyate nāsannāsatā kriyate ca sat ।
kartrā sarve prasajyante doṣāstatra ta eva hi ॥ 8

8.8

Something that does not exist is not produced by an actor who does exist.
And something that does exist is not produced by an actor who does not truly exist.
All these same errors would follow from that.

Nagarjuna here eliminates some more possibilities when it comes to the relationship between an actor and the action the actor performs, saying that all the errors he's pointed out above would apply here too.

First, a truly existent actor could not produce a truly non-existent action: the essentially existing surfer could not not surf, for it is the doing of an action (surfing) that makes the particular actor who he or she is (a surfer), the gist of which was already covered in the first two lines of verse two of this chapter.

Here Nagarjuna reverses the notion explored above that a truly existing surfer would never need to surf to be a "surfer." He points out that there would also be no meaning in calling a person a truly existing "surfer" if he or she ever stopped surfing and did nothing (a truly non-existing action, "something that does not exist") or, by implication, did something else besides surf. How could a "surfer" still be a "surfer" if they were to stop surfing and take a shower, have some breakfast, go to work, etc.?

Nor does it make any sense to say that someone who was essentially a non-actor of some action (a non-surfer) could ever do the action (surf). A non-surfer is by definition someone who doesn't surf. A truly existing "non-surfer" could never surf!

The third verse in this chapter covers the problems inherent in positing either a truly non-existing actor or a truly non-existent action.

नासद्भूतं न सद्भूतः सदसद्भूतमेव वा ।

करोति कारकः कर्म पूर्वोक्तैरेव हेतुभिः ॥ ९

nāsadbhūtaṁ na sadbhūtaḥ sadasadbhūtameva vā ।
karoti kāraakaḥ karma pūrvoktaireva hetubhiḥ ॥ 9

8.9

An actor who truly exists does not produce

An action that doesn't truly exist

Or an action which both truly exists and doesn't truly exist.

The reasons for this have been mentioned previously.

A truly existing actor does not do something which is not an action – a “surfer” does not also “not surf,” for that would mean they could be something and not be that something at the same time. Nor could an actor do something that both truly is and truly is not a action – a “surfer” does not both surf and not surf at the same time.

Nagarjuna is here and in the next verse calling up the law of non-contradiction he already invoked in the seventh verse: one thing can't be itself and also its opposite at the same time.

नासद्भूतो ऽपि सद्भूतं सद्सद्भूतमेव वा ।
करोति कारकः कर्म पूर्वोक्तैरेव हेतुभिः ॥ १०

nāsadbhūto 'pi sadbhūtaṁ sadsadbhūtameva vā ।
karoti kārakaḥ karma pūrvoktaireva hetubhiḥ ॥ 10

8.10

Also, an actor who does not truly exist does not produce
An action which truly exists
Or an action which both truly exists and truly doesn't exist.
The reasons for this have been mentioned previously.

Nor could one who truly exists as a non-actor (a non-surfer) ever do an action (surf) that exists independently from the actor, nor could a truly existing non-actor (a non-surfer) do an action that truly doesn't exist (non-surfing).

Same law of non-contradiction involved here. Neither an actor nor an action can truly exist and truly not exist at the same time.

करोति सदसद्भूतो न सन्नासच्च कारकः ।

कर्म तत्तु विजानीयात्पूर्वोक्तैरेव हेतुभिः ॥ ११

karoti sadasadbhūto na sannāsacca kāraḥ ।
karma tatttu vijānīyātpūrvoktaireva hetubhiḥ ॥ 11

8.11

It should be known also for reasons that have been mentioned previously
That an actor who both truly exists and doesn't truly exist
Cannot perform an action that both truly exists and does not truly exist.

Final application of the law of non-contradiction: One who was (impossibly) both truly an actor and truly a non-actor (a surfer and a non-surfer) could not do what was both truly an action and truly a non-action (surfing and not surfing).

प्रतीत्य कारकः कर्म तं प्रतीत्य च कारकं ।

कर्म प्रवर्तते नान्यत्पश्यामः सिद्धिकारणं ॥ १२

pratitya kāraḥ karma taṁ pratitya ca kāraḥ ।
karma pravartate nānyatpaśyāmaḥ siddhikāraṇaṁ ॥ 12

8.12

An actor occurs in dependence on the action
And the action occurs in dependence on the actor.
We cannot see any other means to define them.

So here's the bottom line. An actor depends on the action that defines the actor as an actor – a surfer is a surfer dependent on the act of surfing. But the action ("surfing") also depends on the actor who performs the action – surfing is surfing dependent on a surfer who surfs. Neither actor nor action can exist without the other, and neither can come first. Actor and action exist interdependently. And they are empty of existing in any way other than that. For as Nagarjuna says, there is no way to define either of them without reference to the other.

But it's also the case that neither actor nor action can cause the other, for that would assume the prior and independent existence of one or another – a cause that exists before its effect is impossible. If a surfer brought about the activity of surfing, he or she would have to exist as a surfer before the surfing that he or she did. And if there was an activity of surfing that made people who did that activity surfers, then there would have to be surfing before there were surfers. Since neither the actor nor the action can exist before the other, neither one can really be causing the other.

And there also can't be a simultaneously real actor and a real action either, for that also would require either that the two things were identical or that they were different and separable truly existing things that just happened to occur at the same time. Surfers and surfing are not identical, and there is no sense in saying that there could be a surfer without the activity of surfing and vice versa. As Nagarjuna says in 10.10, "If an existing thing depends on that by which it exists, then the latter also exists dependent on the existing thing."

The mutually interdependent relationship between actor and action is why there could be such things as a surfer and surfing. Were they not empty of having any independent existence, they would be impossible.

एवं विद्यादुपादानं व्युत्सर्गादिति कर्मणः ।

कर्तुश्च कर्मकर्तृभ्यां शेषान् भावान् विभावयेत् ॥ १३

evaṃ vidyādupādānaṃ vyutsargāditi karmaṇaḥ ।
kartuśca karmakartṛbhyāṃ śeṣān bhāvān vibhāvayet ॥ 13

8.13

And so from this refutation of action and the actor
Grasping should also be understood.
And one should extrapolate from the action and the actor
To all the rest of existing things.

Nagarjuna says here that the “refutation of action and the actor,” that is, the proof laid out in this chapter of the impossibility of any self-nature or independent existence of either, also applies to “grasping” (upadāna) in general.

Grasping means holding on to the belief in some kind of real, true, self-existence to things or beings. Grasping according to the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination is the immediate cause of “becoming” (bhāva) which in turn leads to “birth” and “old age and death,” and so the cycle of suffering continues. This vicious circle can be broken only through a deep understanding of the emptiness of all things, including actors and actions.

Applying the argument in this chapter to grasping, we can say there is no grasper (the actor) without the grasping (the action), and vice versa. Furthermore, there is nothing “grasped” (the object of actor’s action) until and unless there are grasper and grasping. No one of these three can exist before or without the other two. They exist only interdependently.

And so Nagarjuna is not saying that there are no actors who do actions, nor is he saying that actions don’t have consequences (see above, verse 6). He is only demonstrating that actors and their actions are mutually definitive, and this insight may be extrapolated to all existing things. Just as there can be no action without an actor, and no actor without an action, so too does everything exist only interdependently and is empty of existing independently.

Exercise for Class Two

Chapter Eight discusses the relationship between an actor and the action he or she performs. Each day this week, rotate through one or another of the roles you play in life and contemplate its emptiness.

For example, one day you might select your professional role: “I am a yoga teacher, consultant, lawyer, electrician,” or whatever. Then, having reviewed the material in this chapter, think about what makes you this kind of actor. You could not essentially or independently be a teacher, consultant, etc., for if you were, you would not be dependent on the activity (teaching, consulting, etc.) to be what you are. And the activity (teaching, consulting, etc.) would somehow be separable from you, the actor, who need not do it to be who you are.

On other days, try the same analysis on other of the roles you play in life: your role in a family (“I am a mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, husband, wife,” etc.), or in social life (“I am a friend, acquaintance, enemy,” etc.). How could you be any of these identities without engaging in the action that defines you as one or another of them? And how could you be anyone at all without others with whom you interact and by whom you are defined?

Use this exercise to reflect on the interdependent nature of personal identity, and the emptiness of any definitive and independently existing essence to any one of the many actors we are at various points in our lives.

Analysis of Action and Its Result

आत्मसंयमकं चेतः परानुग्राहकं च यत् ।

मैत्रं स धरमस्तद्वीजं फलस्य प्रेत्य चेह च ॥ १

ātmasaṁyamakaṁ cetah parānugrahakaṁ ca yat |
maitraṁ sa dharamastadbījaṁ phalasya pretya ceha ca || 1

17.1

Self-restraint, a loving mind, and benefitting of others,
This is the Dharma.
It is the seed that brings
Fruit in this life and in the afterlife.

In this chapter Nagarjuna turns to the question of moral responsibility – the connections between acts and their consequences or “fruits.” If, as was claimed in Chapter Sixteen, there is no truly existing samsara, where does the linkage between acts and their consequences occur? It would seem that actions and effects must be related to each other within some kind of real, truly existing continuum, i.e., that which is called “samsara.” Were there not this continuum, actions and their results would seem to be unrelated, especially through the process of transmigration and rebirth. What insures the “reaping of what one sows” over multiple lifetimes, or even over time in this lifetime, if there is no truly existing continuum within which connections are made between acts and their consequences? Also entailed here is the problem of the morally responsible agent. If there is not some on-going, continuous person, the one who creates the cause would not be there later to receive the results (see 17.10 and Nagarjuna’s response at 17.28).

In this opening verse, Nagarjuna gives three examples of karmic causes which plant the seeds for positive future effects, either in this very life or in a subsequent lifetime. 1) Self-restraint prevents us from thinking, saying, or doing what is harmful to others and, therefore, ultimately to ourselves; a mind saturated with 2) loving-kindness (maitri) and 3) compassion that seeks the benefit of others ultimately benefits the loving and compassionate actor. These three motivations are said to sum up the entirety of the Dharma, and following the Dharma is said to be the “seed” for positive “fruit” either in this life or in future ones. Acts motivated by the opposite of these, by implication, will yield negative results. It is not insignificant that Nagarjuna leads with this verse; he must believe it.

चेतना चेतयित्वा च कर्मोक्तं परमर्षिणा ।

तस्यानेकविधो भेदः कर्मणः परिकीर्तितः ॥ २

cetanā cetayitvā ca karmoktaṁ paramarṣiṇā ।
tasyānekavidho bhedaḥ karmaṇaḥ parikīrtitaḥ ॥ 2

17.2

It has been said by the Highest Sage
That action is either intention or what has been intended.
It is stated that there are
Many divisions and types of actions.

The fundamental division of all action (“karma” in the Sanskrit) is between that which is intentional and “motivating” (cetanā) on the one hand, and that which is “motivated” or induced by the intention (cetayitvā) on the other.

Of these two, the first one is primary and determinative, for the moral and karmic value of motivated acts is governed by the intention that motivates them.

Within this general binary framework there are many subdivisions, some of which Nagarjuna mentions in the following verses. The categorization of karma is found in the Abhidharma literature, but different Buddhist schools are divided on the details of what the categories are.

Nagarjuna seems to be reviewing several of these schools’ positions on karma in the course of this chapter, and one of the biggest challenges the reader faces is to determine when Nagarjuna is portraying the theories of others and when he is giving his own position.

The commentaries are not of much help here, for they are not in agreement on the question. It seems possible that Nagarjuna begins his own presentation at 17.13 where the voice is in the first person (“I will now explain. . .) and the position outlined in the verses that follow is said to be that of “the Buddhas, Self-Made Buddhas, and Listeners.” But most commentators believe that Nagarjuna’s own viewpoint does not explicitly appear until 17.20 or 17.21, although it would seem that some of the points made in verses up until then would also be held by Nagarjuna himself. In any case, it is not until the final ten verses or so of the chapter that we get a typically Nagarjunian deconstruction of all attempts to find something truly real in the karmic process.

तत्र यच्चेतनेत्युक्तं कर्म तन्मानसं स्मृतं ।

चेतयित्वा च यत्तूक्तं तत्तु कायिकवाचिकं ॥ ३

tatra yaccetanetyuktaṁ karma tanmānasaṁ smṛtaṁ ।
cetayitvā ca yattūktaṁ tatttu kāyikavācikaṁ ॥ 3

17.3

In this regard traditionally the action known as “intention”
Has been defined as belonging to the mind,
And what has been called “intended”
Relates to the body and speech.

The type of karmic action called “intention” (or “motivating”) is mental, that is, it consists of a volitional thought. When that intention or motivating thought impels one to do or say something, the physical or verbal action is called “intended” or “motivated.”

Nagarjuna labels this a “traditional” (smṛta) division, but there was debate among the schools on the fine points. There was, for example, a position that regarded all karmic acts – mental, physical, and vocal – as “intention,” while others followed the distinction Nagarjuna gives here between “intention” and “intended.”

“Intention” is classified in Buddhism as being a constituent, even the main one, of the mental “heap” or “aggregation” (skandha) labeled “predispositions” or saṃskāra-s. Intentions can be therefore be either conscious and willful, or they can be sub- or unconscious and operating subliminally.

वाग्विष्पन्दो ऽविरतयो याश्चाविज्ञप्तिसंज्ञिताः ।

अविज्ञप्तय एवान्याः स्मृता विरतयस्तथा ॥ ४

vāgviṣpando 'viratayo yāścāvijñaptisañjñitāḥ |
avijñaptaya evānyāḥ smṛtā viratayastathā || 4

17.4

Actions relating to body and speech which are non-continuing
And either non-communicating or communicating,
And others are traditionally known to be
Continuing and non-communicating. . .

Nagarjuna continues with a “traditional” accounting of seven kinds of action, the listing of which begins in this verse. The exact contents of this seven-fold division of acts are not clear from what’s given in the text and commentators provide varying lists. It seems clear, however, that there are six kinds of “intended” or “motivated” actions of body and speech, and mental intention is added as the seventh.

Of the six “intended” actions, virtuous and non-virtuous actions of body and speech can be either “communicating” or “non-communicating,” meaning that the intention that has motivated the verbal or physical action is either observable to others or not. “Communicating” acts can also be “non-continuing” in that between the times when the intention has been communicated through physical or verbal action there is a break in the stream of that intention. And “continuing” acts, Nagarjuna says, can either be “communicating” or “non-communicating.” “Non-communicating” acts are said to be “continuing” in that the intention that motivates them continues on in an unbroken stream even during periods of distraction or deep meditation. “Communicating” acts can be continuing if the intention behind them is continuously apparent to others.

Within the category of “communicating” actions of body and speech, there are 1) virtuous or non-virtuous physical actions (e.g., the gestures of the body when one is prostrating to a holy image, or the gestures of the body when one is killing a sentient being); and 2) virtuous or non-virtuous speech-acts (where the intention is communicated through the sound of one’s speech). There are also 3) non-communicating, continuing virtuous physical or verbal acts (e.g., when a person takes a lifetime vow and a non-observable quality forms in their minds), and 4) non-communicating, continuing non-virtuous physical or verbal acts (e.g., when one resolves to make their living by killing by becoming, for example, a soldier or butcher).

परिभोगान्वयं पुण्यमपुण्यम् च तथाविधं ।

चेतना चेति सप्तैते धर्माः कर्माङ्गनाः स्मृताः ॥ ५

paribhogānvayaṁ puṇyamapuṇyam ca tathāvidhaṁ ।
cetanā ceti saptaite dharmāḥ karmāṅjanāḥ smṛtāḥ ॥ 5

17.5

Such types as those done for pleasure,
Which are either meritorious or non-meritorious actions,
And also intention –
These are the seven phenomena
Which are traditionally regarded as productive of karma.

The “traditional” list of the seven types of actions continues in this verse with 5) virtuous acts done out of choice (or “pleasure,” paribhoga) which are, according to Candrakīrti, like the act of choosing to renounce the world and becoming a monk or nun; and 6) non-virtuous acts done out of choice are like killing done by those who have not resolved to make their living by killing but nevertheless choose to kill.

With these two we come to the end of the six types of “intended” action of body and speech. Finally, there is 7) intention, the “motivating” or mental karma that inspires physical or verbal action of all sorts.

तिष्ठत्यापाककालाच्चेत्कर्म तन्नित्यतामियात् ।

निरुद्धं चेन्निरुद्धं सत्किं फलं जनयिष्यति ॥ ६

tiṣṭhatyāpākakālāccetkarma tannityatāmiyāt ।
niruddham cenniruddham satkiṃ phalaṃ janayiṣyati ॥ 6

17.6

If a karma continued on until it ripened
It would then be permanent.
And if it ceased,
How, having stopped, could it bring a result?

The analysis of whether or not karmic effects are essentially related to their causes begins with this verse, which states two untenable options. The rest of the chapter explores various attempts to find a middle way that avoids these two extremes.

On the one hand, if a karmic cause endured until it ripened as an effect, it would be “permanent” or ongoing (nitya). The cause would thus still be present when the result came about. But it is apparent that this is not the case: the seed disappears when the sprout emerges; the karmic result of a good or bad deed does not immediately occur with its cause. There is no such thing as “instant karma.”

On the other hand, if the karmic cause did not continue – if it “ceased” before the ripening of its result occurred – it wouldn’t be there to bring about its result . Something that has truly ceased no longer exists. So how could we say that something that doesn’t exist has the ability to act as a “cause” for a “result?”

In the first case, there would be an unbroken link between cause and effect, which Nagarjuna would regard as an “eternalist” position. The idea that there are “permanent,” ongoing, and unchanging (nitya) things and events goes against the fundamental teachings of the Buddha on “impermanence” (anitya).

Nagarjuna would see the second assertion – that there is no link at all between cause and effect – as a “nihilist” position, for it would entail the randomness (and absurdity) of results that were not related to causes.

यो ऽङ्कुरप्रभृतिर्बीजात्संतानो ऽभिप्रवर्तते ।

ततः फलमृते बीजात्स च नाभिप्रवर्तते ॥ ७

yo 'ṅkuraprabhṛtīrbijāto 'bhipravartate ।
tataḥ phalamṛte bījātsa ca nābhipravartate ॥ 7

17.7

There is a continuity between the seed
And the sprout that comes forth from the seed,
Which then proceeds to fruition.
In the absence of the seed, nothing can proceed.

To solve the question of how cause and effect are related, one might posit a “continuity” (santāna) or series of related events that begins with a seed which germinates and proceeds to its final “fruit” or result, the full-grown plant.

Without the seed, the series of events that leads to the sprout would be impossible, and so the result is not without its cause. With this, the second of the two options given in the previous verse is refuted (the “nihilist” position that denies linkage between cause and effect), and Nagarjuna himself elsewhere in this text dismisses the idea that events can occur haphazardly and without a cause.

To assume a “continuity” between the time of the cause and that of the effect attempts also to avoid the problem of the first option (positing a “permanent” linkage between the two). The cause (the seed) is indeed not present by the time the effect (the sprout that grows into a plant) eventuates, for change has occurred. It is rather, this series of continuous and related but nevertheless changing events that links cause and effect.

बीजाच्च यस्मात्संतानः संतानाच्च फलोद्भवः ।

बीजपूर्वं फलं तस्मान्नोच्चिन्नं नापि शाश्वतं ॥ ८

bījācca yasmātsantānaḥ santānācca phalodbhavaḥ ।
bījapūrvam phalaṁ tasmānnocchinnaṁ nāpi śāśvataṁ ॥ 8

17.8

And because this continuity starts with the seed,
And the result comes from the continuity,
Therefore the fruit comes from a previous seed.
There is neither disruption nor an unbroken connection.

The claim here is that although it is a “previous” (i.e., no longer existing) seed, the result comes from the “continuity” that began with the seed. Because of this series or chain of events, starting with a seed and ending with a sprout, there is no “disruption” or discontinuity (uccinna) as the seed ends and the sprout begins, even when all the elements in the chain are impermanent.

And so there is also not an “unbroken connection” (śāśvata), meaning something “eternal” or permanent). The seed does not endure when the sprout emerges and grows to maturation within this series of continuous, yet ever-changing, events.

यस्तस्माच्चित्तसंतानश्चेतसो ऽभिप्रवर्तते ।

ततः फलमृते चित्तात्स च नाभिप्रवर्तते ॥ ९

yastasmāccittasantānaścetaso 'bhipravartate ।
tataḥ phalamṛte cittātsa ca nābhipravartate ॥ 9

17.9

Therefore the continuity of the mind proceeds from the intention
And from that come the results of actions.
And without coming from the mind,
It couldn't proceed.

The example of the seed, sprout, and full-grown plant elucidated in the last two verses is now explicitly applied to how karma works, with the “continuity” involved now specified to be a “continuity of the mind” (citta santāna).

Just as the seed sets off a continuous series of events that brings about the sprout and plant, a state of mind colored by a certain intention sets into motion this “continuity of the mind” – a set of linked but nevertheless discrete mental events – that ultimately lead to the karmic result. The intention determines the direction of the process: a virtuous or non-virtuous intention colors the stream of the mental continuum until the result – a pleasant or unpleasant state of mind – ripens.

चिताच्च यस्मात्संतानः संतानाच्च फलोद्भवः ।

कर्मपूर्वं फलं तस्मान्नोच्छिन्नं नापि शाश्वतं ॥ १०

citācca yasmātsantānaḥ santānācca phalodbhavaḥ ।
karmapūrvam phalam tasmānnocchinnam nāpi śāśvataḥ ॥ 10

17.10

Because from the mind comes the continuity,
And from the continuity a result arises,
Therefore the result is neither annihilated nor eternally connected
In relation to the previous action.

Like a billiard ball which strikes another ball which strikes another, etc., a mental continuum made up of related yet discrete moments of mind links karmic cause (intention) to karmic result (a pleasant or unpleasant state of mind).

As with the seed and the sprout, karma, according to this view, works in such a way as to avoid having the result either “cut off” or annihilated from its cause (there is a continuity of linked mental events that join the two) or having the two “eternally connected” and existing simultaneously, for the cause does not endure but only sets into motion a series of events leading to the result.

So, one might argue, with the introduction of the idea of “continuity” there is a “middle way” between the extremes of eternalism and nihilism as they are stated in verse 17.6. This position was apparently held by the school of Buddhist philosophy known as the “Sautranikas.”

धर्मस्य साधनोपायाः शुक्लाः कर्मपथा दश ।

फलकामगुणाण् पञ्च धर्मस्य प्रेत्य चेह च ॥ ११

dharmasya sādhanopāyāḥ śuklāḥ karmapathā daśa |
phalaṅkāmaguṇāṇ pañca dharmasya pretya ceha ca || 11

17.11

Ten white paths of action
Are the means to practice the Dharma.
And the result of Dharma, here and hereafter,
Are the five objects of desire.

Having offered an explanation as to how karmic causes and results can be connected without resorting to either “eternalism” or “nihilism,” the karmic linkages between ethical causes and pleasant effects are now spelled out.

The ten “white” or pure karmic causes is the standard list in Buddhism. Three pertain to physical actions of the body (protecting life, protecting others’ property, and respecting others’ relationships); four relate to speech (telling the truth, harmonious speech, kind speech, and meaningful speech); and the last three are mental acts (rejoicing about the happiness of others, feeling compassion for their suffering, and holding right views about the nature of reality). The first seven of these pure karmic actions are “intended” or motivated, and the last three are “intentions” or motivating states of mind.

These ten are said to be the “means” (upāya) to practice dharma, meaning the way to create good karmic causes. The result of putting these karmic causes into play will be the attainment of the five “objects of desire”: seeing pleasant forms (rūpa), hearing pleasing sounds (śabda), smelling nice smells (gandha), enjoying good tastes (rasa) and agreeable tactile sensations (sprasthavya).

Since there is a cause and effect relationship between the practice of Dharma and pleasant sensory experiences in the future, karma functions due to the “continuity” that exists between the time of the cause and the time of the effect.

Exercise for Class Three

“What goes around, comes around.” Some version of this idea of personal responsibility for one’s actions is found in every ethical system and is the foundation for all morality.

This week, spend fifteen minutes each day reviewing the “ten white paths” of karma and the way they are connected to the “five objects of desire” (verse 17.11), reflecting on the general principle: If I do good to others, I will receive pleasant results. Try to get some firm belief that this is true, for if it is not there is no point in trying to act in morally responsible way.

With some firm belief in ethical cause and effect in place, begin an analysis of how karma works based on the verses from Chapter Seventeen we’ve reviewed so far. Think about the dilemma laid out in 17.6: What are the problems entailed in thinking that a karmic cause could continue in an unbroken stream, finally linking to its karmic result? And what logical difficulties would arise if we assumed that a karmic cause simply “stopped” upon its completion? How could there then be any connection at all between karmic cause and the result it supposedly brings about?

Analysis of Action and Its Results

बहवश्च महान्तश्च दोषाः स्युरपि कल्पना ।

यद्येषा तेन नैवैषा कल्पनात्रोपपद्यते ॥ १२

bahavaśca mahāntaśca doṣāḥ syurapi kalpanā ।
yadyeṣā tena naivaiṣā kalpanātropapadyate ॥ 12

17.12

If one posits this,
Many great errors would occur.
Therefore such a conception is not tenable.

The position described in verses 17.7-12, dependent as it is on positing a “continuity of mind” that joins cause and result even over time, is here said to be untenable and would entail “many great errors.”

Tsongkapa in his commentary specifies one such error that would follow: mental states, which form karmic causes, in a human would give rise to later effects only in the “continuous” mind-stream of a human, and not, in say, the mind-stream of hell-being. “In such a case, a human who performs non-virtuous acts would not experience unfavorable transmigrations. But one cannot maintain this!”

It is also not clear how a “continuity of mind” that began with a virtuous cause could ever be replaced by another “continuity of mind” provoked by a non-virtuous cause. As Mabja Jangchub Tsondru notes in his commentary, “These minds would then all produce exclusively the mental continuum of whatever is characteristic of themselves, whether that be virtue, non-virtue, and so on. If this were the case, a virtuous continuum could not, for example, be replaced by a non-virtuous mind-set. Hence this account seriously contradicts what we see to be the case.”

इमां पुनः प्रवक्ष्यामि कल्पनां यात्र योज्यते ।

बुद्धैः प्रत्येकबुद्धैश्च श्रावकैश्चानुवर्णितां ॥ १३

imāṃ punaḥ pravakṣyāmi kalpanāṃ yātra yojyate ।
buddhaiḥ pratyekabuddhaiḥca śrāvakaiḥcānuvarṇitāṃ ॥ 13

17.13

I will, however, now explain the appropriate conception,
Which has been propounded
By the Buddhas, Self-Made Buddhas, and Listeners.

Who is the “I” who will explain the “appropriate conception,” i.e. one followed by realized Buddhist practitioners of all sorts? As we’ve said above, the commentators tend to agree that Nagarjuna’s own unambiguous voice on the question is not heard until 17.20 or 17.21.

The position that follows is identified in the commentaries as that of the Vaibhashikas. But it is unusual for Nagarjuna to use the first person here (“I will . . . now explain”) to speak for a position that is not his own. In any case, by invoking three different kinds of realized beings we are meant to understand that what follows should be (according to someone!) the position of Buddhists of all schools.

पत्रं यथा ऽविप्रनशस्तथर्णमिव कर्म च ।

चतुर्विधो धातुतः स प्रकृत्या ऽव्याकृतश्च सः ॥ १४

pattraṁ yathā 'vipraṇāśastatharṇamiva karma ca ।
caturvidho dhātutaḥ sa prakṛtyā 'vyākṛtaśca saḥ ॥ 14

17.14

Karma is like a debt for which there is an irrevocable promissory note.
It is four-fold in relation to the four realms,
But by nature it is neutral.

Karma is here described in terms of the example of a promissory note for a debt one has incurred. While karmic causes do not themselves endure over time, a binding debt created by them carries on until it is paid in the form of the karmic result. This debt is said to be “irrevocable” (avipranaśa, “not destroyed, unperishing”). Je Tsongkapa writes, “In virtue of executing the promissory note, even though the money has been spent, the creditor will receive the money with interest at a later time. In the same way, even though the action is disintegrated immediately after it is performed, as it endures without destruction, the agent experiences the effect of the action.”

Such “irrevocable” karma can ripen in any of the “four realms” – the three realms of suffering or samsara (desire realm, form realm, and formless realm) or in the realm of nirvana (meaning “nirvana with remainder,” the nirvana of someone who is still physically embodied and thus still experiencing, though not suffering from, the results of past karma). Karma itself is thus contaminated (when it ripens in one or another of the three realms of samsara) or uncontaminated (ripening, but not experienced as suffering, for one who is liberated), but the “irrevocability” of karma itself is neutral.

The process of karmic cause and effect is thus neither inherently “good” nor “bad, “pleasant” nor “unpleasant.” “Good” or “bad” causes are due to the intention of the actor, and “pleasant” or “unpleasant” results depend on the actor’s understanding of the experience.

This presentation of karma also attempts to avoid both the extremes of “eternalism” (for there is no permanence or endurance of the cause) and “nihilism” (for there is nevertheless a connection between cause and result due to the “irrevocable debt”).

प्रहाणतो न प्रहेयो भावनाहेय एव वा ।

तस्मादविप्रणाशेन जायते कर्मणां फलं ॥ १५

prahāṇato na praheyo bhāvanāheya eva vā ।
tasmādavipraṇāśena jāyate karmaṇāṃ phalaṃ ॥ 15

17.15

It is not left behind by just relinquishing it.
Abandonment can only occur through practice.
Therefore the result of actions
Arises through that which is irrevocable.

The karmic debt created by action doesn't just go away by simply "relinquishing" or deciding that you don't want it, as this and the next verse make clear. The "abandonment" of the karmic debt is said to occur due to practice (bhāvana), and the practice would be to break the chain of dependent origination that keeps one in the cycle of suffering.

As Nagarjuna himself teaches us in Chapter Twenty-six, freedom from the bonds of karma is attained through ending ignorance and realizing the emptiness and interdependence that characterize all reality: "One who is ignorant creates karmic predispositions. Therefore the one who is ignorant is a doer of action" – a creator and recipient of karma (26.10). And, he says, when there is a "cessation of ignorance karmic predispositions do not arise," and this cessation comes about through practice (bhāvana) infused with wisdom (26.11).

The traditional Buddhist commentators tend to read this verse in a more technical way. The karmic debt is not cancelled when the practitioner reaches the "path of seeing," i.e., has a direct experience of ultimate reality, but rather only gradually on the "path of habituation" (bhāvana) as mental afflictions are one by one eliminated on the way to Awakening and Buddhahood.

प्रहाणतः प्रहेयः स्यात्कर्मणः संक्रमेण वा ।

यदि दोषाः प्रसज्येरंस्तत्र कर्मवधादयः ॥ १६

prahāṇataḥ praheyaḥ syātkarmaṇaḥ saṅkrameṇa vā ।
yadi doṣāḥ prasajyeraṁstatra karmavadhādayaḥ ॥ 16

17.16

If karma could be left behind by just relinquishing it.
Or by means of transformation,
Then errors such as the destruction of karma would follow.

“Relinquishing” in the sense of resolving not to do a bad action again, for example, does not nullify the karmic debt of having done the action previously.

“Transformation” seems to mean shifting from one kind of action to another, and so the idea here is that a karmic debt owed for a bad action cannot be cancelled by switching to a good action (see above, 17.12).

Believing in these false methods for avoiding “irrevocable” karma involves errors such as the “destruction of karma” – the idea that by avoiding a karmic result for a past action the karmic cause could somehow be destroyed.

Karma is improved and one is ultimately freed from it altogether only through practice, as was stated in the last verse.

सर्वेषां विसभागानां सभागानां च कर्मणां ।

प्रतिसंधौ सधातूनामेक उत्पद्यते तु सः ॥ १७

sarveṣāṃ visabhāgānāṃ sabhāgānāṃ ca karmaṇāṃ ।
pratisandhau sadhātūnāmeka utpadyate tu saḥ ॥ 17

17.17

Among all karmas,
Those which are similar or dissimilar,
Only one arises at the time of rebirth
Into that same realm.

Karma carries over from lifetime to lifetime and this verse talks about a mechanism by which that could happen. Karmas performed in any lifetime are innumerable but are either “similar” (i.e., alike in being relatively good or bad) or “dissimilar.” But the verse also states that among all these karmas performed in a particular realm (e.g., as a human in the desire realm) only one will come due at the time of rebirth into that same realm (e.g., as someone in the process of being reborn in the desire realm).

And the text says that of all karmas created, only one arises at the time of rebirth which is a kind of summation of all the karmas that have been produced before. This view of the mechanism by which karma carries over from lifetime to lifetime is quite different than supposing that every individual karma is somehow stored in a continuous individual who is reborn carrying all that dormant karma within him or her until it comes to fruition. Rather, the first moment of the new life is the concentrated encapsulation of all the karmic debt of the previous life, or indeed, of all previous lives (at least those in the same realm). It is the “irrevocability” of karma in a general way that persists, not any one or collection of all particular karmas somehow enduring over time.

No particular action lies dormant from one lifetime to the next (for that would involve some kind of permanence of continuity of the creator of karma, the recipient, and the action itself). Nor does any particular action that has not come to fruition simply evaporate (for that would involve the “destruction” spoken of in the last verse). Rather, all particular karmas from past actions are subsumed within a single karma that arises upon rebirth. The idea expressed here is congruent with the theory often found in Buddhist texts that the last moment of consciousness in one life determines the first moment of consciousness in the next life.

कर्मणः कर्मणो दृष्टे धर्म उत्पद्यते तु सः ।

द्विप्रकारस्य सर्वस्य विपक्वे ऽपि च तिष्ठति ॥ १८

karmanah karmano dr̥ṣṭe dharma utpadyate tu saḥ ।
dviprakārasya sarvasya vipakve 'pi ca tiṣṭhati ॥ 18

17.18

But in the visible world

It arises from each and every action of the two kinds,
And remains until the time of its ripening.

The topic in the last verse was the irrevocability of karma moving from one lifetime to another (within the same realm). Here the subject is karma persisting within a single lifetime (the “visible world”).

Whereas the irrevocability of past karma is said to be concentrated into a single karma as a person passes into a new life, this verse states that in this lifetime every action maintains its irrevocability until the result comes to fruition (or, as we will see in the next verse, upon death).

But it would seem that in this lifetime too every particular karma’s ongoing irrevocability is encapsulated in each moment of life. As Jay Garfield writes, “At each moment we are the total consequence of what we have done and of what we have experienced.” We don’t have karma according to this understanding; we are our karma.

The two kinds of action mentioned here could be intention (mental activity) and intended (physical and verbal acts); or pure and impure karma (see next verse); or similar and dissimilar (as in the previous verse).

फलव्यतिक्रमाद्वा स मरणाद्वा निरुध्यते ।

अनास्रवं सास्रवं च विभागं तत्र लक्षयेत् ॥ १९

phalavyatikramādvā sa maraṇādvā nirudhyate ।
anāsravaṁ sāsravaṁ ca vibhāgaṁ tatra lakṣayet ॥ 19

17.19

It ceases because the consequence has been exhausted
Or because of death.
One should note that there is
A distinction between pure and impure actions.

In this lifetime, the irrevocability of any particular karma comes to end when the consequence has fully flowered or has been "exhausted" due to practice, as was mentioned above at 17.15.

Or, as we have already seen, it comes to an end at death when all karmas are subsumed within a single karma that brings about the first moment of the next life.

And this is the case for both "pure" and "impure" actions whose karmic debt is irrevocable until one of the two events mentioned in this verse occurs.

शून्यता च न चोच्छेदः संसारश्च न शाश्वतं ।

कर्मणो ऽविप्रणाशश्च धर्मो बुद्धेन देशितः ॥ २०

śūnyatā ca na cocchedaḥ saṃsāraśca na śāśvataṃ ।
karmaṇo 'vipraṇāśaśca dharmo buddhena deśitaḥ ॥ 20

17.20

Emptiness does not mean annihilation
And samsara is not characterized by eternalism.
The irrevocability of action
Is the Dharma taught by the Buddha.

In relation to the topic of this chapter – the problem of how to connect karmic cause with its result – this verse states a middle way between the two extremes of the dilemma posed in verse 17.6.

Karma, like everything else, is empty of having any self-existence, but that doesn't mean there is an "annihilation" of the debt incurred by creating the karmic cause. But in samsara – which is characterized and perpetuated by karma and the mental afflictions that inspire it (see below, verse 17.26) – there is nothing that is eternal, enduring unchangingly – and that includes action, the results of action, and the connection between them.

It is in the "irrevocability of action" that we may find the middle ground between eternalism and nihilism when it comes to connection between karmic cause and effect. As stated in 17.14, "Action is like a debt for which there is an irrevocable promissory note," and this irrevocability of action is said here to be "the Dharma taught by the Buddha." Although there is no unbroken continuity between a karmic cause and its result, the debt created by the cause is said to persist until it is repaid or otherwise exhausted (i.e., through fully flowering into its consequence, upon death, or as the result of practice and wisdom).

Some commentators believe that with this verse Nagarjuna's own position begins, while others think it only starts with the next verse.

कर्म नोत्पद्यते कस्मात् निःस्वभावं यतस्ततः ।

यस्माच्च तदनुत्पन्नं न तस्माद्विप्रणश्यति ॥ २१

karma notpadyate kasmāt niḥsvabhāvaṃ yatastataḥ ।
yasmācca tadanutpannaṃ na tasmādvipraṇāśyati ॥ 21

17.21

Why does karma not arise?
Because it has no self-nature.
And since it is unarisen,
Therefore it will not be revoked.

So with this verse at least everyone agrees that Nagarjuna is laying out his own views, for here the emphasis is on the fact that karma, like everything else, is empty of having any self-nature.

Discussions about how karma arises, persists, and ends in fruition are all misguided if they assume a truly real karmic cause and result and some kind of truly real continuity that links them. As Mabja Jangchub Tsondru remarks, “All these attempts at explaining action as beyond permanence and annihilation are like working to restore a dream city. They are pointless endeavors.”

But the “irrevocability” (avipraṇāśa) of the karmic debt seems to be maintained, as indicated by the use of the verbal form of the word in this verse (“therefore it will not be revoked,” na tasmād vipraṇāśyati). Because karma is empty of self-nature, and because it cannot really arise it also cannot be “revoked,” meaning that because karma does not arise on its own it does not cease on its own either. As we have seen, the irrevocability of a particular karma comes to an end only when the causes and conditions for it to end are in place: when its results have fully manifested, upon death, or due to practice and especially the wisdom that undercuts grasping to self-existence.

कर्म स्वभावतश्चेत्स्याच्छाश्वतं स्यादसंशयं ।

अकृतं च भवेत्कर्म क्रियते न हि शाश्वतं ॥ २२

karma svbhāvataścetsyācchāśvataṁ syādasamśayaṁ ।
akṛtaṁ ca bhavetkarma kriyate na hi śāśvataṁ ॥ 22

17.22

If action had a self-nature
It would undoubtedly be eternal.
As such, action would be uncaused,
For what is eternal is uncaused.

If karma, or anything else for that matter, had a self-nature it would be permanent and unchanging ("eternal") – one of the two extremes everyone has wanted to avoid in discussions of karma surveyed in this chapter. As we've seen, one implication of that would be that a cause would endure and would exist even at the time of the result, which is patently not the case. Another implication is that an unchanging thing could not function or do or produce anything (other than itself).

What is permanent and unchanging is by definition also "uncaused" (or "not performed," akṛta), for just as all caused things are changing things, all uncaused things (like, for example, empty space) are also unchanging.

अकृताभ्यागमभयं स्यात्कर्माकृतकं यदि ।

अब्रह्मचर्यवासश्च दोषस्तत्र प्रसज्यते ॥२३

akṛtābhyāgamabhayaṁ syātkarmākṛtakam yadi ।
abrahmacaryavāsaśca doṣastatra prasajyate ॥23

17.23

If karma was uncaused,
One would have fear of encountering something that was uncaused.
From this error would follow,
And also irreligious living.

And if karma did have some kind of nature of its own, and therefore were uncaused, then an individual would have to worry about results that weren't caused by that individual at all. There would be utter randomness to life without some kind of causality.

And so, "error would follow" from this, including "irreligious living," for there would be no responsibility or regularity in the moral world.

If one said karma had a self-nature, he or she would commit the error of the extreme of eternalism, as we've seen in the last verse. And since the concept of something with a self-nature also entails the concept of that thing being uncaused, we would also end up with the other extreme, that of nihilism.

व्यवहारा विरुध्यन्ते सर्व एव न संशयः ।

पुण्यपापकृतोर्नैव प्रविभागश्च युज्यते ॥ २४

vyavahārā virudhyante sarva eva na saṁśayaḥ ।
puṇyapāpakṛtornaiva pravibhāgaśca yujyate ॥ 24

17.24

Undoubtedly all conventions would be contradicted.
And the distinction between meritorious and unmeritorious acts
Would no longer apply.

With the breakdown of causality and the possibility of effects without causes, there would be no reason to do anything at all. Why go to work if there can be no expectation of getting paid or rewarded for one's labor? Why send your kids to school if there is no assurance at all that they will learn something and become better prepared for life?

"Since effects would be present without having been created, telling someone, 'make a vase,' would be pointless," as one commentator notes.

More importantly, there would be no reason to behave morally, for there would be no guarantee of a positive consequence for meritorious action or a negative consequence for an unmeritorious act.

तद्विपक्वविपाकं च पुनरेव विपक्ष्यते ।

कर्म व्यवस्थितं यस्मात्तस्मात्स्वाभाविकं यदि ॥ २५

tadvipakvavipākaṁ ca punareva vipakṣyate ।

karma vyavasthitaṁ yasmāttasmātsvābhāvikaṁ yadi ॥ 25

17.25

If karma were unchanging due to having some self-nature,
An action whose result had ripened would have that result
Ripen over and over again.

Another consequence of supposing that karma truly existed with a nature of its own, and therefore was unchanging, would be that the result would not ripen just once but endlessly. Were karma permanent, the karmic cause would always be present and endlessly be bringing about its result, over and over again, for that's what a cause is. . . something that brings about a result.

कर्म क्लेशात्मकं चेदं ते च क्लेशा न तत्त्वतः ।

न चेत्ते तत्त्वतः क्लेशाः कर्म स्यात्तत्त्वतः कथं ॥२६

karma kleśātmakaṁ cedam te ca kleśā na tattvataḥ ।
na cete tattvataḥ kleśāḥ karma syāttattvataḥ katham ॥26

17.26

And although karma is characterized by mental afflictions,
If these mental afflictions don't truly exist,
How would action exist truly?

Karma is, by definition, "afflicted action" – action motivated by one or another of the myriad mental afflictions.

But the mental afflictions that "characterize" karma are themselves empty (they do not have tattva or any kind of true or real existence), as Nagarjuna has demonstrated in earlier chapters (e.g., Chapter Six, "Analysis of Desire and the One Who Has Desire," and Chapter Twelve, "Analysis of Suffering"). Mental afflictions, like everything else, exist only in a nexus of interdependence: there is no affliction without someone who is afflicted by something that afflicts, and no one of the three can exist without the others and none can come first.

Since the mental afflictions don't truly exist, and since karma is action motivated by the mental afflictions, karma cannot have any true existence either.

कर्म क्लेशाश्च देहानां प्रत्ययाः समुदाहृताः ।

कर्म क्लेशाश्च ते शून्या यदि देहेषु का कथा ॥ २७

karma kleśāśca dehānām pratyayāḥ samudāhṛtāḥ ।
karma kleśāśca te śūnyā yadi deheṣu kā kathā ॥ 27

17.27

Karma and mental afflictions are said to be

The factors that produce bodies.

If these are empty,

What's there to say in relation to the bodies?

And since karma and the mental afflictions that characterize it are both empty of having any true nature – i.e., any independent self-existence – then the body one takes on at conception and birth, which is supposedly produced by karma and the mental afflictions, must also be empty.

Nagarjuna here again touches on the question of karma and rebirth addressed throughout this chapter. In relation to karma, what is it that persists not only throughout one lifetime but as one passes from one lifetime to the next? Is it some kind of “continuity of mind” (17.9-10); or a single karma which recapitulates and condenses the entirety of the karma collected in one's lifetime (17.17)?

As none of the options for what persists over lifetimes has any kind of real existence, we cannot grasp on to any of them as some sort of objective understanding of how karma continues over time.

अविद्यानिवृतो जन्तुस्तृष्णासंयोजनश्च सः ।

स भोक्ता स च न कर्तुरन्यो न च स एव सः ॥ २८

avidyānivr̥to jantustr̥ṣṇāsamyojanaśca saḥ ।
sa bhoktā sa ca na karturanyo na ca sa eva saḥ ॥ 28

17.28

The experiencer of action –
A person clouded by ignorance and fettered by craving –
Is neither different from nor the same as the actor.

Having declared the linkage between the production of karma and the experience of its result to be empty, Nagarjuna here problematizes the recipient of karma (one who is ignorant and enslaved to craving). The recipient is neither completely different from nor the same as the producer of karma, the “actor” or “agent” (who was already proved to be empty in relation to the action produced in Chapter Eight).

The dilemma that has driven much of the discussion in this chapter – is the karma created by an agent linked in an unbroken and ongoing way to the recipient of its consequence, or is it “cut off” or “annihilated” due to the perpetually changing nature of things? – is here reposed and the middle way restated: The agent and the recipient are neither the same as nor different from each other. If they were the same as each other, we’d have the problem of “eternalism,” and if they were really different from one another we’d face the extreme of “nihilism.”

The appeal to the impossibility of either identity or absolute difference is one Nagarjuna makes at many points in his treatise. If things or beings were truly identical, there would be no point in talking about different things like an “actor” and a “recipient,” for they would be exactly the same entity. And if they were truly different, there could be no relationship whatsoever between them.

न प्रत्ययसमुत्पन्नं नाप्रत्ययस्मुत्थितं ।

अस्ति यस्मादिदं कर्म तस्मात्कर्तापि नास्त्यतः ॥ २९

na pratyayasamutpannam nāpratyayasmutthitam ।
asti yasmādidam karma tasmātkartāpi nāstyataḥ ॥ 29

17.29

Since this action does not truly exist
Either as arising from conditions or as not arising from conditions,
No actor can truly exist.

Having established the emptiness of the recipient of karma, Nagarjuna now turns to the actor or producer of karma.

An action that had some kind of independent existence – which seems to be what Nagarjuna means by “this action” (idam karma) – does not arise from causal conditions nor does it happen causelessly, as was proven extensively in Chapter One. No action arises from causal conditions, for there is no findable power inherent in them (or outside of them either, for that matter) that produces them. But actions are not causeless either, for if they were they would not be effects of previous causes nor reposition themselves as causes for future effects.

“And if a cause does not exist,” as Nagarjuna has already observed, “neither an effect nor a sufficient condition can be observed. And when these are not observed, there is no action, no actor, and no doing of the activity.” (8.4)

कर्म चेन्नास्ति कर्ता च कुतः स्यात्कर्मजं फलं ।

असत्यथ फले भोक्ता कुत एव भविष्यति ॥ ३०

karma cennāsti kartā ca kutaḥ syātkarmajaṁ phalaṁ ।
asatyatha phale bhoktā kuta eva bhaviṣyati ॥ 30

17.30

If there is neither action nor actor,
How could there be a result produced by action?
When there isn't a result,
How could there be an experiencer of the result?

The actor or producer of karma, the karma the actor produces, the karmic result or consequence of the action, and the recipient of that consequence are all equally empty of any kind of independent or inherent existence. Rather, they all depend on one another to be what they are: There is no actor apart from the action (and vice versa); there is no karmic cause without its karmic result (and vice versa); there is no experiencer of karma until and unless there is a karmic experience to experience (and vice versa); and there is no karmic producer who produced the experience the karmic experiencer experiences apart from the experiencer (and vice versa).

The emptiness of all the components of a karmic event does not repudiate karma as a system, but rather makes it possible. If any of these components were not empty, the system could not function. For as Nagarjuna and his followers repeatedly point out, a thing or being with a true nature or essence – independent, self-existent, and unchanging – could not do anything or would do the same thing over and over, ad infinitum. As we have seen above in Chapter Eight, for example, if a surfer had a true nature as a surfer, he or she would never have to surf (being already a surfer) or could do nothing other than surf (being essentially a surfer). And as we have seen in this chapter, to take another example, if karma had some self-nature and was therefore an unchanging thing, the result of a karmic cause would “ripen over and over again” ceaselessly (17.25).

Because karma is empty, it can function the way it does, a point made more generally in Chapter Twenty-four (see below).

यथानिर्मितकं शास्ता निर्मिमीत द्विसंपदा ।

निर्मितो निर्मितीतान्यं स च निर्मितकः पुनः ॥ ३१

yathānirmitakaṁ śāstā nirmimīta rddhisampadā ।
nirmito nirmimītānyaṁ sa ca nirmitakaḥ punaḥ ॥ 31

17.31

It's like the Teacher who through supernormal powers emanates a form.
And then that emanated form
Emanates another emanated form.

As we near the end of the chapter Nagarjuna unequivocally states, by means of a simile, his own position on the question of the karmic continuity that links the agent/producer, the action/cause, the experience/result, and the experiencer/recipient of the karmic consequence.

In this verse, he evokes the example of how a Buddha appears in various “emanation bodies” (nirmāṇa kāya-s). All the “form bodies” (rūpa kāya-s) of an Enlightened Being are, by definition, illusory in the sense that they are not what they seem. They are not any more “real” than anything else that appears in “deceptive reality” is what it appears to be. So it is that in many texts we read that the Buddha spontaneously and without effort can appear in many forms without ever moving from the unmanifested “truth body” (dharmā kāya).

Everything, very much including the appearance of a Buddha, has only illusory or conceptualized existence and cannot exist in the way ignorant minds think it does (as having a separable, distinct, independent existence in a dualistic relationship with other things and beings with separable, distinct, independent existences).

Empty Buddhas emanate empty forms of Buddhas which emanate empty forms of Buddhas, etc. And the way karma works is like that, as we learn in the next verse.

तथा निर्मितकाकारः कर्ता यत्कर्म तत्कृतं ।

तद्यथा निर्मितेनान्यो निर्मितो निर्मितस्तथा ॥ ३२

tathā nirmitakākārah kartā yatkarma tatkr̥taṁ ।
tadyathā nirmitenānyo nirmito nirmitastathā ॥ 32

17.32

So too the actor is an emanated form
Whose action is done by somebody who is emanated.
It's like an emanation
That emanated from another emanation.

Nagarjuna says that karmic continuity is like a series of emanations or “fabrications” (nirmita). The process of “fabrication” continues moment to moment throughout this lifetime and also passes over from one lifetime to the next (“lifetimes” themselves being empty of independent existence) in a way that defies logical analysis or description.

It's all just the play of illusion, but illusions (and, in fact, only illusions) can function and work the way they do.

क्लेशाः कर्माणि देहाश्च कर्तारश्च फलानि च ।

गन्धर्वनगराकारा मरीचिस्वप्नसंनिभाः ॥ ३३

kleśāḥ karmāṇi dehāśca kartāraśca phalāni ca ।
gandharvanagarākārā marīcisvapnasannibhāḥ ॥ 33

17.33

Mental afflictions, actions, bodies, actors, and results
Are just like a city of ghosts,
Like a mirage, like a dream.

Nagarjuna concludes this chapter by saying that the components of a karmic event are all illusory – like phantoms, like a mirage, like a dream. They are all without essence, without true existence, without a self-nature. They all exist only interdependently, not independently. None can exist without the others; none is either the same as or different from the others; none can be dependent on or arise from another (for that would suppose the prior and independent existence on that which another depends); and none can follow from another (for the same reason).

Ignorance comes to an end and the karmic prison definitive of samsara is shattered, when one truly and deeply realizes the illusory nature of what we think keeps us in bondage.

Exercise for Class Four

In the verses for this class we read about an “irrevocable” karmic debt that lasts until it is repaid or otherwise neutralized. One verse even declares that “The irrevocability of action is the Dharma taught by the Buddha.” (17.20)

This week’s assignment is to think about what karmic debts you may owe. Review your conscience and identify one recent action of body, speech, or mind that you know was wrong – selfish, hurtful, and disrespectful of others. Although the negative karmic cause cannot simply be “revoked” either by just wishing it away or by subsequently practicing good karma, it is said that the effect can be neutralized by practicing what are known as the “Four Forces.”

Begin by 1) thinking about how karma really does work (if not in the way we often conceptualize it working). Karma works in an illusory and dream-like fashion, and that does not at all diminish its functionality. In fact, as we’ve seen in this chapter, if karma weren’t empty of being some kind of objective “law of nature,” how could it possibly work at all? 2) The second step is to generate some good, healthy regret for the negative karmic act you would like neutralize, keeping in mind that regret is different from guilt. 3) Next, make a resolution to not repeat the negative act in the future. 4) Recalling the “ten white paths” mentioned at 17.11, pick the one that is most nearly the opposite of the negative action you are neutralizing (e.g., if it is some form of harming another, the positive act would be protecting life), and then spend the rest of the week concentrating on practicing it in all the ways you can.

At the end of the week, try to feel strongly that this particular karmic debt has been neutralized. It doesn’t mean you didn’t do it. But because of your sincere efforts in the practice of the four forces with the wisdom about how karma works gained from the study of Nagarjuna, have confidence that this particular negative karmic deed has now been addressed.