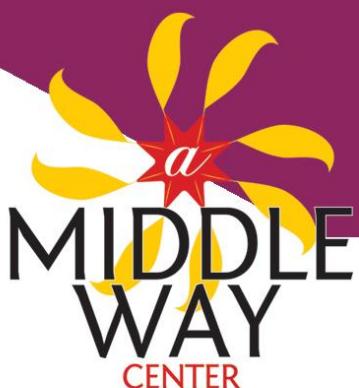


# Explorations in Emptiness

The Emptiness of the Self

Chapters from Nagarjuna's  
*Root Verses on the Middle Way*

“ When thoughts of “me” and  
“mine” are destroyed,  
Regardless of whether the self  
is looked for outside or inside,  
Grasping is destroyed.



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## CLASS ONE

*Chapter Three: An Analysis of the Powers of Sense*

दर्शनं श्रवणं ग्राणं रसनं स्पर्शनं मनः ।

इन्द्रियाणि षडेतेषां द्रष्टव्यादीनि गोचरः ॥ १ ॥

darśanam śravaṇam ghrāṇam rasanam sparśanam manah |  
indriyāni ṣaḍeteṣām draṣṭavyādīni gocaraḥ ||1||

3.1

Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and thinking –  
These are the six senses.

And the range of things they sense  
Are visible objects and the rest.

*In this chapter, Arya Nagarjuna turns to the question of whether the six sense powers (mind was also regarded as a sense power in traditional India) truly perform their functions of seeing, hearing, smelling, and so on. The verse starts with the standard list of the sense powers and the six kinds of objects of sense (visible objects, audible sounds, etc.). Nagarjuna will not try somehow to say argue that we don't see sights, hear sounds, smell odors, and the rest. But we certainly can't be doing so the way we ordinarily think we do.*

*So how do we ordinarily assume things are working? First of all, we think the eye, ear, nose, and other faculties of the sense really and objectively exist. Secondly, we believe that the objects our senses perceive – visible object, audible sounds, things that smell and taste, and tactile objects – are also really, truly, and objectively "out there." Finally, our truly existing senses encounter truly existing sense objects and a connection is somehow made between the two: we see a visible object, hear a sound, smell food cooking, etc.*

*Three different kinds of what are called "self-existent" things – independently existing sense powers that encounter independently existing sensible objects, and a resulting experience (of seeing, hearing, smelling, etc.) that also is really, truly occurring.*

*Nagarjuna will prove in this chapter that our sense powers, the objects of the senses, and the sensations we experience can't exist and be happening the way we, in our ignorance, think.*

स्वमात्मानम् दर्शनं हि तत्त्वेव न पश्यति ।

न पश्यति यदात्मानं कथं द्रक्ष्यति तत्परान्॥ २॥

svamātmānam darśanam hi tattameva na paśyati|  
na paśyati yadātmānam katham drakṣyati tatparān||2||

### 3.2

Seeing can't see itself at all.  
And since seeing can't see itself,  
How will it be able to see  
Something other than itself?

*Using the sense power of seeing to serve as an example of any of the senses, Nagarjuna posits a startling observation: the eye can't see itself. If the visual faculty were truly existent – by which is meant independently or objectively existent, and also essentially existing as a seer – then it wouldn't depend on a visible object for its existence as the visual faculty.*

*And if the eye did not rely on visual objects external to itself in order to be performing the activity of seeing, then the only thing it would need to be "seeing" would be itself – this is what would be entailed by an independently existing visual faculty. Seeing would be an inherent quality of the visual faculty and it wouldn't need anything apart from itself to be seeing. So it would have to be seeing itself!*

*Since there is no independently existing seer that can see itself, how could there possibly be an independently existing seer that is capable of seeing things other than itself? Seeing can't be an inherent quality of seeing at all. Seeing doesn't exist independently. It depends on something seen; the visual faculty relies on a visible object and the act of seeing that object for its very existence.*

न पर्याप्तोऽभिवृष्टान्तो दर्शनस्य प्रसिद्धये ।

सदर्शनः स प्रत्युक्तो गम्यमानगतागतैः ॥ ३ ॥

na paryāpto'gnidṛṣṭānto darśanasya prasiddhaye |  
sadarśanaḥ sa pratyukto gamyamānagatāgatauh||3||

### 3.3

The example of fire is not adequate for

Explaining how seeing works.

That example and the case of seeing

Are both answered

In the analysis of the already gone, the not yet gone, and the going.

*Nagarjuna here refers to the example (that he returns to in Chapter 10) of fire which, according to some, is a thing which burns something else (fuel) but does not burn itself. So too, perhaps, does the eye see other things but does not see itself.*

*The example is refuted with reference to the arguments in the previous chapter of Nagarjuna's book. A fire which is burning – and an eye which is seeing – must be doing so in the past ("already gone"), the future ("not yet gone) or the present ("going"). None of these is possible. A fire that has already burned, or a seer who has already seen, isn't burning or seeing. A fire that has not yet burned, or a seer who has not yet seen, also isn't burning or seeing. And if the burning of the fire or seeing the sight is occurring in the present, then it is already and always going on, without starting (which would mean there was a time when there was no burning or seeing) or finishing (when there had been burning or seeing).*

*In other words, if the fire is burning or the seer is seeing, they wouldn't need to be burning or seeing something – and that would be an independently existing fire or visual faculty, which as we have seen in the last verse, is impossible.*

नापश्यमानं भवति यदा किंचन दर्शनं ।

दर्शनं पश्यतीत्येवं कथमेतत्तु युज्यते ॥ ४ ॥

nāpaśyamānam bhavati yadā kiñcana darśanam|  
darśanam paśyatītyevam kathametattu yujyate||4||

3.4

If there isn't anybody seeing  
There can't be any kind of seeing.  
What sense does it make  
To say: "Seeing sees"?

*Seeing can't be happening through some self-existent eye or seer or visual faculty; it can't be happening all by itself. Seeing does not occur independently of someone who is seeing and something that is seen. A seer is made possible by seeing, and the act of seeing and the something seen occur only when somebody's seeing. All three – seer, seeing, and what is seen – exist only in relation with each other, and none of them exists independently.*

*If seeing existed independently, then we should be able to say that "seeing sees," which is patently nonsensical. It would imply also that, since seeing was what seeing essentially does, it would always be doing that. It would never not see. It would never, for example, not see itself.*

पश्यति दर्शनं नैव नैव पश्यत्यदर्शनं ।

व्याख्यातो दर्शनैव द्रष्टा चाप्युपगम्यतां ॥ ५ ॥

paśyati darśanam naiva naiva paśyatyadarśanam!  
vyākhyāto darśanenaiva draṣṭā dāpyupagamyatām||5||

3.5

Seeing by itself doesn't see  
But not seeing also doesn't see.  
A seer is intelligible  
Only when seeing is itself understood.

*"Seeing" doesn't see by itself, as we have observed in the last verse. If seeing saw, it wouldn't need to see again to be seeing. To say "seeing sees" would be redundant – seeing is seeing, so it wouldn't need to see.*

*So seeing doesn't see, but "not seeing" – something other than seeing – doesn't see either, of course. So if an independently existing seeing doesn't see, and an independently "not-seeing" doesn't see either, than what is seeing?*

*The next part of the verse explains. The act of seeing is what makes the concept of "a seer" intelligible. So here we shift attention from seeing to the seer and observe that the latter cannot exist self-existently any more than the former. Someone who is seeing is a seer; a seer is a seer because they are seeing. "Seeing" and being a "seer" exist co-dependently, relationally. Neither is independent.*

*And neither can exist prior to the other. There is no seeing before, as well as without, someone who is seeing; and a seer doesn't exist until and unless there is the activity of seeing.*

तिरस्कृत्य द्रष्टा नास्त्यतिरस्कृत्य च दर्शनं ।

द्रष्टव्यं दर्शनं चैव द्रष्टर्यसति ते कुतः ॥ ६ ॥

tiraskṛtya draṣṭā nāstyatiraskṛtya ca darśanam|  
draṣṭavyam darśanam caiva draṣṭaryasati te kutah||6||

3.6

A seer neither exists  
Apart from or not apart from the seeing.

And when the seer doesn't exist,  
How can there be something seen  
Or the act of seeing?

*A seer would have to exist either dependently on the act of seeing, or independently of the act of seeing. We've learned before that the seer does not exist as a seer unless and until he or she sees – so the seer cannot exist apart from the seeing.*

*But neither can there be "a seer" who exists dependently on the act of seeing, and here is where Nagarjuna pulls out a carpet we had got comfortable standing on.*

*A relationship of dependence assumes two entities that come into the relationship – in this case, a seer and the act of seeing. But if there is "a seer" before entering into the relationship of dependence on "seeing," then there could be "a seer" who isn't seeing and a "seeing" that isn't occurring in a seer!*

*So there can't be either a seer independent of seeing or dependent on seeing, which means there can't be a seer at all! And without a seer, how can there be visual objects? Visual objects are visual objects when they are seen by someone, and not until. If there are no seers to see visual objects, there are no visual objects. And without seer to see and visual objects to be seen, in what sense is there any kind of seeing going on at all?*

प्रतीत्य मातापितरौ यथोक्तः पुत्रसंभवः ।

चक्षुरूपे प्रतीत्यैवमुक्तो विज्ञानसंभवः ॥ ७ ॥

pratītya mātāpitarau yathoktaḥ putrasambhavaḥ|  
cakṣurūpe pratītyaivamukto vijñānasambhavaḥ||7||

3.7

Just as it said that  
The birth of a child occurs dependently  
On there being a mother and a father,  
So too does consciousness occur  
Dependently on eyesight and visible form.

*In a telling example, Arya Nagarjuna here says that just as the birth of a child can occur only if there is a mother and father, so too the complex of seer (“consciousness”), seeing (“eyesight”) and the object which is seen (“visible form”) exist dependently. It seems to us obvious that there could be no child without parents, so we might say that a child comes into existence in dependence on parents. Similarly, we might say that we see something only when there is the visual capability and a visible object out there to see.*

*But as the example indicates, none of the three can come first or exist independently of the other two. While there is no child before parents, there are no people called “parents” until and unless they have a child. Such is also the case with seer, seeing, and visible object. They each one depend on the others.*

*So nothing exists independently. But neither, as we have seen, can we say that things exist dependently either, for if they did one thing (a.k.a “the cause”) would have to exist before the thing that arise in dependence on the first thing (“the result”). Things can exist only interdependently (as opposed to either independently or dependently) and – here’s the rub – the relationship of interdependence is projected onto these things, and does not exist independently either!*

*This verse, by the way, seems to be missing from a number of Sanskrit commentaries and thus also was dropped from the Tibetan translations. Candrakirti’s commentary does, however, include the verse.*

द्रष्टव्यदर्शनाभावाद्विज्ञानादिचतुष्टयं ।

नास्तीति उपादानादीनि भविष्यन्ति पुनः कथं ॥ ८ ॥

draṣṭavyadarśanābhāvādivijñānādicatuṣṭayaṁ|  
nāstīti upādānādīni bhaviṣyanti punah katham||8||

3.8

Since there's no seeing or something seen,  
There are no four, beginning with consciousness.  
And so how could there be grasping and the rest?

*Having shown that seeing and visible objects cannot exist apart from the projection of them, Arya Nagarjuna draws a radical conclusion: there can be no truly existing perpetuation of suffering and rebirth either. He makes reference to the teaching on the “twelve links of dependent co-origination” in this verse and says, since there are no senses or objects of sense, no consciousness (a “seer,” in this case) could arise. And with no consciousness, no contact can occur; and with no contact, no feeling; and with no feeling, no craving.*

*And with no craving, there can be no grasping to the idea that things exist inherently or self-existently, which would then result in “becoming” (bhava) which in turn leads to “birth” and “old age and death.”*

*It's not that this cycle doesn't exist at all. But Nagarjuna notes here that by proving one of the links in the chain – the senses – have no inherent existence, none of the other links have any inherent existence either. We perpetuate our suffering because we are unaware of the emptiness of things and grasp to illusions. Each of the links of dependent origination exists interdependently with all the others, and that's the only way each exists.*

व्याख्यातं श्रवणं ग्राणं रसनं स्पर्शनं मनः ।

दर्शनैव जानीयाच्छ्रोतुश्रोतव्यकादि च ॥ ९ ॥

vyākhyātam śravaṇam ghrāṇam rasanam sparśanam manah|  
darśanenaiva jānīyācchrotrśrotavyakādi ca||9||

3.9

Hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking,  
As well as the hearer and what is heard, and the others –  
They can all be understood  
Through this explanation of seeing.

*Arya Nagarjuna concludes the chapter by pointing out that everything he's said about the sense of sight also holds true for the other five senses. And what he's said about the seer can be extrapolated to hearers, smellers, tasters, etc.; and everything said about visible objects also applies to sounds, smells, taste, and the rest.*

*So it's not that the senses, the objects of the senses, and the relationship between the senses and their objects don't exist at all. They do, of course – but only interdependently. None of them can exist as they seem, for how each one seems to exist (independently, objectively, self-existently) is only an illusion.*

### **Exercise for Class One**

For fifteen minutes a day, begin by thinking about the assumptions we all have about ourselves in relation to the world around us. On the one hand, we presume that there is a world “out there,” objectively existing and just waiting to be observed. Then, on the other hand, there is the self, a pre-existing “me” that is just waiting to observe something in the objectively existing world.

Take a moment to reflect on how this is, in fact, our usual presumption: there is an independently existing world and there is an independently existing “me,” and then that “me” encounters something in the world – the “I” (which already exists) sees, hears, touches, smells, or tastes something that also already exists “out there.”

Next, review the material in the chapter covered above. Try to get a strong sense that our ordinary assumption about ourselves and the way we experience the world with our senses is impossible. How could there be a “visible object” before it is seen by somebody? And how could there be a “seer” until and unless the seer is seeing something? And the same goes with all the other sense objects and senses.

End by reflecting on the nature of interdependence between the self and the world and the implications of this interdependence for understanding the nature of the self. We are perceivers of the world because there is something to perceive, and there is something to perceive because we are perceivers – and neither can come first.

## CLASS TWO:

### *Chapter Four: An Analysis of the Parts of a Person*

रूपकारणनिर्मकं न रूपमुपलभ्यते ।

रूपेणापि न निर्मकं दृश्यते रूपकारणं ॥ १ ॥

rūpakāraṇanirmuktam na rūpamupalabhyate ।  
rūpenāpi na nirmuktaṁ dṛśyate rūpakāraṇam ॥ 1 ॥

#### 4.1

There is no form  
Apart from the cause of that form.  
And the cause of a form  
Is not perceived apart from that form.

*The self we think we have would have to be findable either somewhere within its parts – the mind-body complex – or apart from them. In this chapter, Arya Nagarjuna discusses whether the five main physical and mental components that make up a person truly exist, for if they don't and the self supposedly resides somewhere amidst them, then the self can't truly exist either.*

*The first of these five “heaps” or skandhas is called “form,” referring to the physical body of a person as well as to all physical matter. Form is used throughout this chapter to stand in for all five heaps (the others are feelings, discriminatory thought, consciousnesses and predispositions). The arguments pertaining to form extend also to the other four (see below, 4.7).*

*The opening verse, as usual, states the basic argument of the chapter as a whole: Physical form or matter, one of the main parts of the person, cannot be perceived apart from its “cause” – the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water, which are referred to as the “causal forms” – for the cause is what makes the effect possible.*

*But the cause of a form is not a “cause” until and unless there is an “effect,” i.e., in this case, a form. Cause and effect are mutually dependent; the one cannot exist independent of the other.*

रूपकारणानिर्मुक्ते रूपे रूपं प्रसज्यते ।

आहेतुकं न चास्त्यर्थः कश्चिदाहेतुकः क्वचित् ॥ २ ॥

rūpakāraṇanirmukte rūpe rūpam prasajyate ।  
āhetukam na cāstyarthah kaścidāhetukaḥ kva cit ॥ 2

#### 4.2

Were there a form that emanated  
As a form apart from the cause of that form,  
Then it would be causeless.  
But there are no objects whatsoever that are causeless.

*Nagarjuna begins here by saying that form which isn't caused is impossible, for there is no entity or object of sense perception (artha) which doesn't come into existence due to causes and conditions. The various components of a person's body, for example, arise because of causes, which in the ancient Indian system were identified as the four elements: the earth element is the cause of the skin and bones; the water element brings about blood and other bodily fluids; the fire element produces body heat or temperature; and the air element causes respiration and mobility.*

रूपेण तु विनिमर्पकं यदि स्याद्रूपकारणं ।

अकार्यकं कारणं स्याद् नास्त्यकार्यं च कारणं ॥३॥

rūpeṇa tu vinirmuktam yadi syādrūpakāraṇam |  
akāryakam kāraṇam syād nāstyakāryam ca kāraṇam || 3

#### 4.3

And if there were a cause of a form

Apart from that form

It would be a cause without an effect.

And there is no cause without an effect.

*Having noted that there can be no effect without a cause, Nagarjuna here drops the other shoe: there can also be no cause without an effect. A “cause” is a cause when it brings about an effect – and not until. And that’s why Nagarjuna can state that “there is no cause without an effect.”*

*So which comes first? If we say, as would seem commonsensical, that the cause of any form must come before the form, then we would have a cause for a result before the result occurs. But a cause is only a cause when it brings about a result, that is, after the result, not before. A cause without a result cannot be said to be a “cause.”*

*So actually neither cause nor effect can come first. Neither can exist without the other, that is, independently. Each requires the other to be what it is (a “cause” or an “effect”), and so each exists only interdependently with the other.*

*This is explained more in the next two verses.*

रूपे सत्येव रूपस्य कारणं नोपपद्यते ।

रूपेऽसत्येव रूपस्य कारणं नोपपद्यते ॥ ४ ॥

rūpe satyeva rūpasya kāraṇam nopapadyate ।  
rūpe 'satyeva rūpasya kāraṇam nopapadyate ॥ 4 ॥

#### 4.4

When a form exists

The cause of that form does not occur.

When a form does not exist

The cause of that form does not occur.

*Having shown that neither cause nor effect can exist before or without the other, Nagarjuna now delves deeper and further problematizes the issue of cause and effect.*

*If we say that a form (like the human body, for example) already exists, the cause of that form no longer is there, just as when a sprout comes into being the seed that is supposedly the cause of the sprout disappears. Put otherwise, if the effect already exists, what need does it have of a cause? To say that there exists a cause for an effect that is already there would be unnecessary and redundant, for the whole purpose of a “cause” is to bring about an effect. An “effect” that doesn’t need a “cause” to produce it because it’s already produced is neither an “effect” nor the result of a “cause.”*

*Conversely, if an effect – a form, like the human body – does not yet exist and is not already there, there is no sense in saying that there is a “cause” for it – like the four elements are supposedly the cause for a form like the human body. If the effect isn’t there, there can be no “cause” for it either, because as we’ve seen neither “cause” nor “effect” can exist without the other.*

निष्कारणं पुना रूपं नैव नैवोपपद्यते ।

तस्माद् रूपगतान् कांश्चिन्न विकल्पान् विकल्पयेत् ॥५ ॥

niṣkāraṇam punā rūpam naiva naivopapadyate ।  
tasmād rūpagatān kāṁścinna vikalpān vikalpayet ॥ 5

4.5

A form without a cause  
Could never, ever occur.  
And so when it comes to form  
One should not conceptualize any conceptualizations at all.

*Nagarjuna has left us in the last verse with the impossibility of effects having causes, and vice versa. If an effect already exists, it needs no cause; and if an effect does not already exist, it is impossible to say that it (being a non-existing thing) has a cause.*

*But here he vociferously insists that an effect – a form, like the human body – without a cause could “never, ever occur.” Things don’t happen for no reason. Physical forms like the human body don’t just pop up out of thin air, and to believe so is regarded as the pinnacle of ignorance. Candrakirti, in his commentary, says that Nagarjuna is refuting the “extreme wrongfulness (atyanishtata) of the view that things can be without causes.” Tsongkapa’s comments that to say existing things do not depend on causes is “the stupidest idea ever.”*

*We are left with the impossibility of saying that effects, like form, are caused, and also the impossibility (or the downright harmfulness) of saying that they are uncaused. And so in this verse, Nagarjuna advises us to not even try to say anything definitive about forms like the human body. Any “conceptualization” regarding the “true nature” of form is like thinking about the “true nature” of rabbit’s horns.*

*As a general principle, Nagarjuna elsewhere states that all conceptualizations are erroneous and that the ultimate goal is to “pacify” the mind of such conceptual thinking that distorts reality as it is: “Independent, peaceful, not projected by projections, beyond conceptual thought, undifferentiated – these are the characteristics of reality.” (18.9)*

न कारणस्य सदृशं कार्यमित्युपपद्यते ।

न कारणस्यासदृशं कार्यमित्युपपद्यते ॥६॥

na kāraṇasya sadṛśam kāryamityupapadyate |  
na kāraṇasyāsadṛśam kāryamityupapadyate || 6

#### 4.6

It is not possible that the effect

Is the same as the cause.

It is not possible that the effect

Is not the same as the cause.

*This is a difficult verse, turning on the Sanskrit term sadrisha, “resembling, similar to.”*

*Any effect must either be the same as or different from its cause. The first option is not tenable, for although, for example, matter in general is characterized by solidity, liquidity, warmth, and mobility (the four elements which function as “causal forms” of all other forms), particular “resultant forms” have different and unique characteristics. But it is also not possible that the effect is not the same as the cause either, for if that were the case then things vastly disparate – like, for example, material and immaterial things – could somehow be in a cause and effect relationship.*

*But if we take the term sadrisha in its more literal sense, “seen together,” Nagarjuna might here be pointing out that an effect can neither occur at the same time as its cause (for then there would be no way to distinguish the “effect” from the “cause”) nor at a time different from its cause (for then there would be no temporal relationship between the two).*

*So we've seen in this chapter that a cause cannot occur before an effect, it cannot occur after an effect, and with this verse we learn that a cause can also not occur simultaneously to the effect.*

*And so form, as one of the five “heaps” that make up the person, cannot be said to be either caused or uncaused, and therefore cannot be said to truly exist at all.*

वेदनाचित्तसंज्ञानां संस्काराणां च सर्वशः ।

सर्वेषामेव भावानां रूपेणैव समः क्रमः ॥७ ॥

vedanācittasamjnānām saṃskārāṇām ca sarvaśah |  
sarveṣāmeva bhāvānām rūpeṇaiva samaḥ kramah || 7

4.7

The very same logic used with form  
Applies universally to feelings, discriminatory thought,  
Consciousnesses and predispositions,  
And, indeed, to all existing things.

*Nagarjuna here just states that all the previous observations about form hold true for the other four “heaps” or principal parts of the person – feelings, the faculty of discrimination, the miscellaneous factors or predispositions, and consciousnesses – as well as all existing things.*

*What he is suggesting is that if you understand the emptiness of any one part of what makes up the person – form, in this case – you understand the emptiness of all the other parts – or even the emptiness of every other existing thing. One of the commentators quotes here the following verse from the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra:*

*Just as you understand yourself,*

*So too can you understand all living beings.*

*Just as you understand all living beings,*

*So too can you understand all things.*

विग्रहे यः परीहारं कृते शून्यतया वदेत् ।

सर्वं तस्यापरिहृतं समं साध्येन जायते ॥ ८ ॥

vigrahe yaḥ parīhāram kṛte śūnyatayā vadet |  
sarvam tasyāparihṛtam samaṁ sādhyena jāyate || 8

4.8

When someone in a debate  
Argues against emptiness,  
Everything he or she asserts  
Is exactly what needs to be proved.

*Any assertion made that any and all things are not empty of inherent self-existence will presuppose something which the opponent has assumed must have some kind of inherent self-existence. But this is exactly what needs to be proved and so begs the question.*

व्याख्याने य उपालम्भं कृते शून्यतया वदेत् ।

सर्वं तस्यानुपालब्धं समं साध्येन जायते ॥९॥

vyākhyāne ya upālambham kṛte śūnyatayā vadet |  
sarvam tasyānupālabdham samam sādhyena jāyate || 9

4.9

When an explanation of emptiness is put forward  
And someone criticizes it,  
Everything he or she criticizes  
Is exactly what needs to be proved.

*Any criticism of the assertion that things are empty of inherent self-existence is just a sign of some kind of grasping to something which is presumed to have inherent self-existence. And such a presumption is, again, "exactly what needs to be proved."*

*These last two verses are generally applicable observations when it comes to the question of emptiness. Nagarjuna's pointing out that really the onus is on the person who takes a stance against the idea that all things are empty and exist only interdependently to prove, and not just assert, that there is something that in fact has inherent self-existence. Like the boxer Muhammad Ali playing "rope a dope" with his opponent, Nagarjuna is challenging anyone to disprove his thesis.*

## Exercise for Class Two

For the next week, set aside fifteen minutes a day to contemplate where “you” came from. In ancient India it was assumed that our physical and mental parts were caused by the four elements. In our modern societies, science has taught us that our body and mind somehow originally came into being by an egg in our mother’s body being fertilized by our father’s seed.

Review the material covered in Class Two and apply what Nagarjuna is saying about the cause and effect relationship when it comes to our physical and mental parts. Remember that he argues that neither “cause” nor “effect” can come before the other, they cannot appear at one and the same time, but they also cannot have any real connection if they occur at different times.

So is it really possible, according to the argument presented, that the mind and body are the “effect” of a “cause” like a fertilized egg? And if that is not really possible, what are the implications for our understanding of where the mental and physical parts that make up the “me” come from?

## CLASS THREE:

### *Chapter Six: An Analysis of Desire and the One Who Desires*

रागाद्यदि भवेत्पूर्वं रक्तो रगतिरस्कृतः ।

तं प्रतीत्य भवेद्रागो रक्ते रागो भवेत्सति ॥ १

rāgādyadi bhavetpūrvam rakto ragatiraskṛtaḥ ।  
tam pratītya bhavedrāgo rakte rāgo bhavetsati ॥ 1

#### 6.1

If the one who desires were to exist before desire,  
Desire would be separable from the one who desires.  
Desire would thus exist dependently on the one who desires;  
When the one who desires exists, desire would exist.

*In this chapter, Arya Nagarjuna analyzes the emptiness of desire (raga), on the one hand, and the one who has desire (rakta) on the other. An opponent might argue that there is some kind of real, objective, self-existence to things because desire really exists; and that there is a similar objective reality to ourselves because we desire. If we desire, we must be desiring something and there must be somebody who desires.*

*Nagarjuna probably picked desire to analyze at this juncture because of how crucial it is in Buddhist understandings of suffering. Desire joins aversion and ignorance itself as the three main “poisons” or the biggest of our mental afflictions. All our suffering can be ultimately be traced back to these three.*

*Because of our ignorance, things appear to us as being likeable or dislikeable from their own side. Ice cream appears to us as inherently likeable; an irritating person seems as though they are essentially or objectively irritating – both due to our ignorance about where likeable and dislikeable things come from. Because we see these likeable and dislikeable things ignorantly, we want or don't want them ignorantly – and do ignorant things which repeat the causes of our suffering. Rather than share or give away the likeable things we desire, we grasp to them and try to obtain them before others can get them. Rather than being patient and compassionate to the irritating person, we get angry and yell back at them thus recreating the causes that brought us this dislikeable experience in the first place.*

*In this chapter, Arya Nagarjuna will argue that if desire and the desirer truly existed, either one or another of them would have to come first and the other after it (that is, they would come into existence sequentially), or they would have to exist simultaneously.*

*He starts here by asking us to consider whether it is possible for the person who has desire to exist before the desire he or she has, which would mean that desire would exist dependently on the desirer, but also that there could be a desirer who could exist before, and therefore without, the desire that arises only dependently on a desirer.*

रक्ते इसति पुना रागः कुत एव भविष्यति ।  
सति वासति वा रागे रक्ते इप्येष समः क्रमः ॥ २

rakte 'sati punā rāgah kuta eva bhaviṣyati ।  
sati vāsatī vā rāge rakte 'pyeṣa samaḥ kramah ॥ 2

## 6.2

But if there is no one who desires,  
From whom will desire come?  
Whether desire exists or not,  
Or whether the one who desires exists or not,  
It comes to the same thing.

*So we've established that there can't be a desirous person without the desire that defines what it means to be a "desirous person." Continuing to explore the possibility that there is a sequential unfolding of a truly existing desire and a truly existing desirer, Arya Nagarjuna in this verse tries it the other way around. Maybe desire exists before the desirous person.*

*But how can desire exist without someone who desires? Desire is not free-floating. It must have a basis. There must be someone who desires for there to be desire.*

*So whichever way you go when it comes to the analysis of which came first, the desire or the one who desires, "it comes to the same thing." If desire and the one who desires truly existed -- out there, independently, on their own, with some kind of objective or essential existence -- they could not come into being sequentially. For if they did, one would have existed before the other. But there can't be a person who has desire unless there is desire that person has; and there can't be desire unless there is a person who has desire. So they can't be in a causal or sequential relationship.*

सहैव पुनरुद्भूतिर्न युक्ता रागरक्तयोः ।

भवेतां रागरक्तौ हि निरपेक्षौ परस्परं ॥ ३

sahaiva punarudbhūtirna yuktā rāgaraktayoh ।  
bhavetām rāgaraktau hi nirapekṣau parasparam ॥ 3

### 6.3

Furthermore, it is not possible for desire and the one who desires  
To arise simultaneously.

For then both desire and the one who desires  
Would exist independently of the other.

*So if a truly existing desirer does not exist before a truly existing desire, and a truly existing desire does not exist before there is someone who has desire, that only leaves one more possible option. Maybe they come into existence simultaneously.*

*And it would seem that this is actually the case, right? The state of mind of desiring occurs at the time when the desire occurs. I desire a desirable thing only when there is a desirable thing to desire. I desire ice cream only when there is ice cream (or the thought of ice cream). It would appear that the desire and the desirer can only appear simultaneously.*

*Arya Nagarjuna first of all points out here that if desire and the one who desires occurred simultaneously, then that would mean that they did not occur sequentially. It has to be one or the other: either one comes before the other, or they happen at the same time. But if they happened at the same time, and not one before the other, then we could not say that one caused the other. We could not say, for example, that desire caused the arising of one who desires. Which would mean that there could be someone who desires without the arising of desire! If they occurred simultaneously, Arya Nagarjuna points out, they would “not share a mutual dependence” (nirapeksha paraspara), i.e. they would exist independently from one another.*

*In the next verses, Arya Nagarjuna thoroughly investigates the possibility of the simultaneous existence of desire and the one who desires. If they existed simultaneously, they would either have to be identical to one another or different from one another. Either way there's going to be big problems.*

नैकत्वे सहभावो इस्ति न तेनैव हि तत्सह ।

पृथक्त्वे सहभावो इथ कुत एव भविष्यति ॥ ४

naikatve sahabhāvo 'sti na tenaiva hi tatsaha ।  
pr̥thaktve sahabhavo 'tha kuta eva bhaviṣyati ॥ 4

#### 6.4

If they were the same,  
They could not occur together;  
Something can't occur with itself.  
But if they were truly different,  
How could they occur together?

*Are desire and being someone who desires the same thing or two different things? If they were the same thing, they could not occur simultaneously, because they would not be two things that occurred at once. It makes no sense to say that one and the same car occurs at the same time as itself. The simultaneity of occurrence of things requires that there be one thing that occurs simultaneous with another thing. In other words, a thing cannot occur simultaneously with itself.*

*Desire and the one who desires are conceptually separable and therefore cannot be the same thing. Were they the same thing, we couldn't tell them apart. So perhaps they are different things that occur at the same time.*

*Arya Nagarjuna dismisses this possibility in the second half of the verse. If desire and the desirer were really different things, how could they occur at once? If they are truly different, like light is different from darkness, they could not be in the same place at the same time.*

*Truly different things are mutually exclusive. It's either one or the other; can't be both at the same time, in the same place. If two things truly existed at the same time and in the same place, they would be one thing – in which case, again, we would not be able to distinguish them. Candrakirti, the great commentator on this text, presents this as a general principle: we never observe the simultaneity of things each of which exists separately. If desire and the one who desires truly, really, independently, self-existently existed as different things, they could never appear simultaneously. We'll return to this below.*

एकत्वे सहभवश्चेत् स्यात्सहायं विनापि सः ।

पृथक्त्वे सहभवश्चेत् स्यात्सहायं विनापि सः ॥ ५

ekatve sahabhavaścet syātsahāyam vināpi saḥ ।  
prthaktve sahabhavaścet syātsahāyam vināpi saḥ ॥ 5

6.5

If what's occurring together are things that are the same,

Then one could exist without its mate.

And if what's occurring together were two completely different things,

Then one could exist without its mate.

*If desire and the one who desires were the same thing, occurring simultaneously, then one could occur without the other. Desire (being the same thing as the one who desires) could occur without anyone who desires!*

*On the other hand, if desire and the desirer are two different things that occur simultaneously, then again if one occurred without the other they could somehow both occur! Desire and the one who desires could occur at the same time with only desire occurring, without one who desires, or with just the one who desires occurring, without the desire!*

*If two things are really identical, they cannot be in any kind of relationship with one another (because they are the same thing). And if two things are truly different, they are completely independent and cannot be in any kind of relationship either.*

*So if desire and the one who desires are either the same or different, they cannot be said to arise simultaneously, for simultaneity requires two things in a relationship of arising at the same time... and this is impossible!*

पृथक्तवे सहभावश्च यदि किं रागरक्तयोः ।

सिद्धः पृथक्पृथग्भावः सहभावे यतस्तयोः ॥ ६

pṛthaktve sahabhāvaśca yadi kim rāgaraktayoh ।  
siddhaḥ pṛthakpṛthagbhāvah sahabhāvo yatastayoh ॥ 6

### 6.6

And if they were completely different things which occurred together,  
Then how could you tell the difference between desire and the one who desires?  
They would occur together!

*How can you conceptualize two different things as “together,” i.e., as one? Nagarjuna here uses the word sahabhava, “sharing the same essence.” If you’re thinking about desire and the one who desires as truly different (prthak) things, you cannot think of them as occurring together or “at once.” And if you are thinking that these two happen “at once,” they cannot be truly separate.*

*If there were two things that truly existed as two things, if they were really different, we would have to be able to find each of them separable from the other. Each would exist independently. In the case at hand, we would have to have a desire and the one who desires existing independently of one another.*

*But if two truly different things could happen at once, then when one happened the other would happen too. They wouldn’t happen separately, and so it wouldn’t make sense to say they are “different.”*

सिद्धः पृथकपृथग्भावो यदि वा रागरक्तयोः ।

सभावं किमर्थं तु परिकल्पयसे तयोः ॥ ७

siddhah pr̥thakpr̥thagbhāvo yadi vā rāgaraktayoh ।  
sabhāvam̄ kimartham̄ tu parikalpayase tayoh ॥ 7

6.7

If desire and the one who desires were completely different,  
How could you imagine that they could occur together?

*And if we insist that desire and desirer are truly separate and occur separately, how could they ever really come together and occur at the same time? How could two independently existing things exist simultaneously? If desire and the one who desires occurred separately, then they wouldn't occur together. You would, in such a case, have to say (absurdly) that "separately occurring things occur together."*

*There would be no meaning in saying that desire and the one who desires truly exist as two different, separable, independently existing things if they could happen at the same time. We can't even think it! If we conceptualize them as "together," how can we at the same time think them of them as "different"? And vice versa. "Separate" and "together" are conceptually mutually exclusive.*

पृथग्न सिध्यतीत्येवं सहभावं विकाङ्क्षसि ।

सहभावप्रसिद्धयर्थं पृथक्तवं भूय इच्छसि ॥ ८

pṛthagña sidhyatītyevam sahabhāvam vikāṅkṣasi ।  
sahabhāvaprasiddhayartham pṛthaktvam bhūya icchasi ॥ 8

6.8

If you believe that they are different,  
And you also believe that they occur together,  
Then because they occur together,  
You would also have to believe that they are different.

*Arya Nagarjuna is here accusing his possible opponent of an argument based on convenience rather than on logic. One might wish to say that desire and the one who desires obviously occur simultaneously, and therefore those things are different -- because to occur simultaneously implies two or more different things that happen together. But to say that requires not thinking about what it means to say that things which are truly different and separable could happen simultaneously or "at once."*

*If desire and the one who desires occur simultaneously, they cannot be truly different and separable things; and if they are truly different and separable things, which occur separately and at different times, they cannot occur simultaneously.*

पृथग्भावाप्रसिद्धेश्च सहभावो न सिध्यति ।

कतमस्मिन् पृथग्भावे सहभावं सतीच्छसि ॥ ९

pṛthagbhāvāprasiddheśca sahabhāvo na sidhyati ।  
katamasmin pṛthagbhāve sahabhāvam satīcchasi ॥ 9

6.9

And since we cannot believe that they are different,

We cannot believe that they occur together.

Only if they were different

Could you imagine they occur together.

*Arya Nagarjuna here reiterates that simultaneity depends on two or more different things coming together. But if there are no truly existing independent things, there can be no real simultaneity. If there are no truly existing individual things, then there can be no coming together of those truly existing individual things.*

*Desire and the one who desires do not exist independently and separately from one another. And because they do not exist independently, they cannot happen simultaneously.*

एवं रक्तेन रागस्य सिद्धिर्न सह नासह ।

रागवत्सर्वधर्माणां सिद्धिर्न सह नासह ॥ १०

evam raktena rāgasya siddhirna saha nāsaha ।  
rāgavatsarvadharmaṇāṁ siddhirna saha nāsaha ॥ 10

6.10

So, it's untenable that desire occurs  
Either with or without the one who desires.  
And all existing things are like desire:  
They can't exist either with something else or without something else.

*So here's the cash out: Desire and the one who has desire can't really be happening either at the same time or at different times, neither simultaneously nor sequentially. And there's no third option. So they can't really be happening at all.*

*If they occurred sequentially, they couldn't happen at the same time. One would have to come before the other, which means that they could exist independently of each other.*

*And if they occurred simultaneously, desire and the desirer would have to be either the same thing or different things, and in either case could not occur simultaneously. If desire and the one who desires were the same thing, they could not be separable – and to say that two or more things happen simultaneously requires that there be two or more separable things. And if desire and the one who desires were really different, they could not come together and merge with one another at the same time and place, which is what we mean when we say that things occur simultaneously.*

*Truly existing desire and the one who desires are impossible. They cannot truly exist, independently, objectively, from their own side. They exist only conceptually, and even then only when conceptualized in a relationship of mutual dependence, one with the other. And that relationship itself does not actually, really, objectively exist "out there" in the world, but only the mind of the observer.*

*And Arya Nagarjuna concludes this chapter by saying that everything exists only like this! The proofs given in this chapter for the emptiness of desire and the one who desires extend to "all existing things."*

### Exercise for Class Three

For fifteen minutes a day for the next week, think about something or someone you really like – your new computer, Ben and Jerry’s ice cream, your car, a particular place you went once on a vacation, or someone you are really attracted to.

Get in touch with how you normally perceive this object and your feelings about it. You think that object exists “out there,” independently, as an inherently desirable thing.

And now feel the desire you have for the object -- the feeling of desiring it. And next, think about the desiring “you” that has the desire for the desirable thing.

Next, investigate how these three aspects of desire – desirable object, the feeling of desire, and the desirous person who has the desire – relate to each other. Does this process occur sequentially – desirable object then leading to desire for the object which in turn causes a person to be desirous? Review Nagarjuna’s arguments for why such a sequential unfolding is impossible.

But if these three parts of an event were to happen simultaneously, how could we separate any one from the others?

Conclude these reflections with some thinking about the implications for the “you” that somehow “has” desire for desirable objects. How could such a desirous self really exist?

CLASS FOUR:  
*Chapter Eighteen: An Analysis of the Self*

आत्मा स्कन्धा यदि भवेदुदयव्ययभागभवेत् ।  
स्कन्धेभ्योऽन्यो यदि भवेद्वेदस्कन्धलक्षणः ॥१॥

ātmā skandhā yadi bhavedudayavyayabhāgabhavet ।  
skandhebhyo 'nyo yadi bhavedbhavedaskandhalakṣaṇah ॥ 1 ॥

18.1

If the self were the same as the heaps  
It would arise and pass away as they do.  
If the self were different from the heaps

It would have the characteristics of something other than the heaps.

*If there were a truly existing self it would have to be either the same as its parts (the “heaps” or skandhas) or completely different from them – and there is no third choice. If the self were the same as its parts, then since every one of the physical and mental parts that make up what we call the self is constantly changing (arising, existing momentarily, and then passing away), then the self would also be in perpetual flux. A constantly changing self would not be a truly existing self with some kind of essential or self-nature. A further implication of identifying the self with its parts would be that there could not be one self – the multiplicity of parts would require multiple selves if the self were its parts. Finally, if the self was the same as its parts of the present life, there could be no relationship to selves of previous and future lives (for those selves would be identified with completely different bodies and minds).*

*If, on the other hand, the self were completely different from the parts that made it up, it would not have any of the qualities of those parts, like a horse does not have the qualities of a cow. If that were so, the “you” that supposedly truly existed would have no relationship to the body and mind – “you” would not care if the body were harmed or if the mind were distressed, for they would not be “you.” Furthermore, if “you” were different from “your mind,” “you” would actually be unknowable! What would one be thinking about when one thought of the self if not the body and mind that*

*made up the self? And what mind would be knowing "you" if "you" were not, in some sense, "your mind"?*

*By eliminating both of the only two options there are for a truly existing self vis-à-vis the parts of the self, Arya Nagarjuna here concisely and efficiently proves that there can be no truly existing self at all.*

आत्मन्यसति चात्मीयं कुत एव भविष्यति ।

निर्ममो निरहंकारः शमादात्मात्मनीन्योः ॥२ ॥

ātmanyasati cātmīyam kuta eva bhaviṣyati ।  
nirmamo nirahamkārah śamādātmātmanīnayoh ॥ 2

18.2

If the self did not exist

How could there be that which belongs to the self?

Because of the subsiding of the belief in self and what belongs to the self

There are no longer thoughts of “me” and “mine”

*But if there is no self, then who possesses the parts of the self? Who “has” a body and mind if there is no self? If there is no “me” (a possessor of parts) there cannot be a “mine” (the parts I possess) either. Nagarjuna totally agrees! When the false idea of a truly existing self is eliminated, so too the idea that there are truly existing physical and mental parts to a self be eliminated. Because there is no truly existing whole (“me”) there can be no truly existing parts of me (“mine”). “Me” and “my parts” exist only interdependently, and neither can exist independently or truly.*

निर्ममो निरहंकारो यश्च सोऽपि न विद्यते ।  
निर्ममं निरहंकारं यः पश्यति न पश्यति ॥३॥

nirmamo nirahāṅkāro yaśca so 'pi na vidyate |  
nirmamam̄ nirahāṅkāram̄ yah paśyati na paśyati ||3||

### 18.3

There is no one who no longer has thoughts of “me” and “mine.”  
He who sees someone who no longer has thoughts of “me” and “mine”  
Does not truly see.

*And now for a typical Nagarjunian twist: If there is no self, there can be no self that realizes that there is no self either! One who thinks that there is “someone” who is free from erroneous ideas of a truly existing self and truly existing parts of that self, that person doesn’t get it at all!*

ममेत्यहमिति क्षीणे बहिर्धार्घ्यात्ममेव च ।

निरुद्ध्यत उपादानं तत्क्षयाज्जन्मनः क्षयः ॥४ ॥

mametyahamiti kṣīṇe bahirdhādhyātmameva ca |  
nirudhyata upādānam tatkṣayājjanmanah kṣayah ॥ 4

#### 18.4

When thoughts of “me” and “mine” are destroyed,  
Regardless of whether the self is looked for outside or inside,  
Grasping is destroyed.  
Because of the destruction of grasping,  
Rebirth comes to an end.

*“Grasping” or attachment is, in the wheel of life teachings on the twelve links of dependent origination, the immediate cause “becoming” (bhava) which leads to “birth” which leads to “old age and death.”*

*When we eliminate the false notions of a truly existing self and truly existing parts of that self, there is no longer anything to grasp on to. There is no self to be found or to be attached to internally or subjectively (“me”), and there is nothing that the self possesses externally or objectively (“mine”).*

*Buddhism enumerates four kinds of grasping that are destroyed in this way: 1) grasping to objects of desire, 2) grasping dogmatically to worldviews, 3) grasping to rules and vows, and 4) grasping to the belief in a permanent, unchanging, self-existing self.*

*When grasping is eliminated due to the elimination of the objects one grasps to, then rebirth ends, for grasping is the main mechanism for rebirth. If we cease to grasp to the illusory idea of a suffering self, the perpetuation of that suffering self ends and we are free.*

कर्मक्लैशक्षयान्मोक्षः कर्मक्लैशा विकल्पतः ।

ते प्रपञ्चात्प्रपञ्चस्तु शून्यतायां निरुद्ध्यते ॥५ ॥

karmakleśakṣayānmokṣah karmakleśā vikalpataḥ ।  
te prapañcātprapañcastu śūnyatāyām nirudhyate ॥ 5

18.5

Freedom comes from the destruction of karma and mental afflictions.

Karma and mental afflictions come from conceptual thought,

From the projection of them.

And projection comes to an end in emptiness.

*Grasping ends “becoming,” but for “birth, old age and death” to end, and freedom from suffering to come about, it is necessary to stop the mental afflictions and karma that is produced by them. In this verse, Arya Nagarjuna says that mental afflictions and karma arise from “conceptual thought” (vikalpa) and the “projections” or “fabrications” (prapanca) that derive from conceptualizations. We conceptualize imaginary things like a self and objectively existing external objects, and then we project them. And then we ignorantly mistake our projections for truly existing things. We then have one or another of our two main mental afflictions -- desire or aversion – about them as if they were desirable or undesirable from their own side. Finally, we then act in relation to them accordingly, thus creating karma.*

*When we realize that all things exist only as projections, that things exist only conceptually and nominally, and that they are empty of existing in any other way than that, “projection comes to an end.” One realizes that the projections are empty of inherent existence. Projections are not truly real, and if one deeply recognizes that one cannot be the victim of the mental afflictions that derived from ignorance and will not continue to produce the karma that keeps us suffering in lifetime after lifetime.*

आत्मेत्यपि प्रज्ञपितमनात्मेत्यपि देशितं ।  
बुद्धैर्नार्मा न चानात्मा कश्चिदित्यपि देशितं ॥६ ॥

ātmetyapi prajñapitamanātmetyapi deśitam ।  
buddhairnātmā na cānātmā kaścidityapi deśitam ॥ 6

18.6

Buddhas have taught that there is a self

And that there is no self.

They've also taught there isn't anything

Which is either a self or a no-self.

*In this verse, Nagarjuna notes that it seems like there are a variety of authoritative teachings in Buddhism on the question of whether a self exists or not. In the scriptures, the Buddha sometimes seems to be saying that there is a self, at other times that there is no self, and at still other times that there is neither a self nor the absence of a self. How can we make sense of these apparent inconsistencies?*

*The Buddha employs skillful means, teaching different levels of truth to different people who need to hear different things. The Buddha taught the existence of a self to materialists who deny the existence of a self which was morally responsible for good or bad actions. But for those who are attached to idea of some truly existing self, the Buddha teaches that there is no such self in order to destroy this attachment. And the Buddha also knows that both the doctrine of self and the doctrine of no-self can become dogmatic attachments. So for those of the highest capacity for wisdom, the Buddha teaches there is neither – a truly existing self does not exist, but neither does a truly existing absence of a self. The latter is just a doctrine too, and is not the final, ultimate truth of things.*

*“Self” and “no-self” are only mutually interdependent ideas or concepts. Neither one exists ultimately; both exist only as projections stemming from concepts. And so, as we have seen in the previous verse, neither one can be truly real.*

निवृत्तमभिधातव्यं निवृत्ते चित्तगोचरे ।  
अनुत्पन्नानिरुद्धा हि निर्वाणमिव धर्मता ॥७ ॥

nivṛttamabhidhātavyam nivṛtte cittagocare ।  
anutpannāniruddhā hi nirvāṇamiva dharmatā ॥ 7

18.7

When the realm of thought has ceased,

The process of labelling ceases.

Existence is like nirvana:

It is doesn't arise nor does it end.

*Here Arya Nagarjuna directly addresses the limitations of language. The process of labelling or naming fools us into thinking that there are truly existing things "out there" in the world, which we are naming. In actuality, things exist only as names; there are signifiers but no truly existing signified things. And that's the case also for the "self" that is labelling. It too is just a label, and not a truly existing entity.*

*When we realize that our inner and outer reality is empty of existing in any other way than just as projections, names, and concepts, "the process of labelling ceases." We understand that there is nothing that truly exists that our language is referring to. Things exist only nominally. Things are empty of existing in any other way.*

*Ultimately, samsaric existence (dharmata) and nirvana are alike in that neither exists in any other way than as a projection, and not as something that exists independently. Neither one arises or ceases to be on their own, out there, objectively. Nirvana "arises" and samsara "ceases" only apparently.*

सर्वं तथ्यम् न वा तथ्यं तथ्यं चातथ्यमेव च ।

नैवातथ्यं नैव तथ्यमेतद्बुद्धानुशासनं ॥८ ॥

sarvam tathyam na vā tathyam tathyam cātathyameva ca |  
naivātathyam naiva tathyametadbuddhānuśāsanam || 8

### 18.8

Everything is real, not real, both real and not real,

And neither real nor unreal.

That is the authoritative teaching of the Buddha.

*The Buddha taught that “everything is real (tathya)” in the sense that everything exists conventionally, interdependently, apparently... and works as such. An apparently existing car can break your apparently existing legs if you are hit by it, and you will end up in an apparently existing hospital. So for those who need to get a better grasp on the importance of karma or causation, the Buddha taught that “everything is real.”*

*But for those who say who then grasp to the idea that things have some kind of intrinsic reality – including those who cling to karma or causality itself as somehow existing independently – the Buddha taught that “things are not real.” Because nothing has any self- or independent existence, nothing is in this sense real.*

*Things are “both real and not real” is the teaching in which it is emphasized that things are real only deceptively but unreal ultimately.*

*The teaching that things are “neither real nor unreal” is for those advanced practitioners and thinkers who may still be clinging to the idea that emptiness is a “viewpoint” or “position.” To say things are “unreal” or empty implies that there is something which is empty. The “unreal” assumes the “real.” Ultimately, truth lies beyond this kind of dualistic thinking.*

अपरप्रत्ययं शान्तं प्रपञ्चैरप्रपञ्चितं ।  
निर्विकल्पमनानाथमेतत्त्वस्य लक्षणं ॥९ ॥

aparapratyayam śāntam prapañcairaprapañcitam |  
nirvikalpamanānārthametattattvasya lakṣaṇam || 9

18.9

Independent, peaceful, not projected by projections,  
Beyond conceptual thought, undifferentiated –  
These are the characteristics of reality.

*While ultimately the truth lies beyond language, Arya Nagarjuna recognizes that we cannot avoid using language to point to what lies beyond it. So here he supplies a list of “characteristics” (lakshanas) that describe ultimate reality. It is “independent” in that the direct perception of ultimate reality is not something that another can bring about in you. Those who have seen ultimate reality try to point others toward it, but ultimately one must see it for oneself in a direct, nonconceptual mystical experience. It cannot be conveyed through language or conceptual mediation, and so is independent of them. It is “peaceful” in that one obtains the cessation of doubt in the truth of the path when one has such a direct experience of ultimate reality, and that experience leads one inexorably to the state of perfect peace or nirvana. “Not projected by projections” and “beyond conceptual thought” both refer to the fact that ultimate reality is not accurately conveyed in language and concepts. “Undifferentiated” means that all things and beings are equally empty of self-existence; all things and beings are equally without self-nature at the level of ultimate reality.*

प्रतीत्य यद्यद्भवति न हि तावत्तदेव तत् ।

न चान्यदपि तत्स्मान्नोच्छिन्नं नापि शाश्वतं ॥१० ॥

pratītya yadyadbhavati na hi tāvattadēva tat |  
na cānyadapi tattasmānnocchinnam nāpi śāśvatam || 10

18.10

That which comes into being dependently on something else  
Is not identical to it nor is it other than it.  
Therefore it is neither disconnected nor on-going.

*Nagarjuna here reminds us that things that exist dependently – that arise as the result of a cause – are neither identical to that cause (for then the result would be indistinguishable from the cause; a seed would be the sprout that grows from it) nor are they different from that cause (for then the result would not need the cause; a sprout could come into existence without the seed). The result is not “disconnected” from the cause in that sprouts come from seeds. But the result is also not “on-going” in relation to the cause in that sprouts are different from seeds; the result is not simply a continuation of the cause.*

*Absolute identity and absolute difference are equally impossible. Things can neither be really or essentially the same nor can they be really or essentially different. But if they existed essentially – “out there,” independently, and objectively – they would have to be one or the other. The fact that things both appear to be connected and different is a kind of proof that the relationships between things have to be imposed on them by the perceiver.*

अनेकार्थमनानार्थमनुच्छेदमशाश्वतं ।  
एतत्तलोकनाथानां बुद्धानां शाशनामृतं ॥१ ॥

anekārthamanānārthamanucchedamaśāsvataṁ ।  
etattalokanāthānāṁ buddhānāṁ śāśanāmṛtaṁ ॥ 1 ॥

18.11

Non-identity and non-differentiation,  
Neither disconnected nor on-going –  
This is the immortal teaching of the Buddhas,  
The Lords of the World.

*Arya Nagarjuna here sums up the “immortal teaching”: things are neither essentially the same as one another (for if they were, how could we distinguish between them?), nor are they essentially different (for if they were, they could never interact – a seed that was essentially different from a sprout could never turn into that sprout). Things are not inherently disconnected nor on-going, as we have seen in the last verse.*

संबुद्धानामनुत्पादे श्रावकाणां पुनः क्षये ।

ज्ञानं प्रत्येकबुद्धानामसंसर्गात्प्रवर्तते ॥१२ ॥

sambuddhānāmanutpāde śrāvakāṇām punah kṣaye ।  
jñānam pratyekabuddhānāmasaṁsargātpravartate ॥ 12

18.12

When the perfect Buddhas no longer appear,  
And when there also are no more Listeners,  
Spontaneously the wisdom of the self-made Buddhas comes forth.

*Even when there are no Buddhas present in the world, and also no “Listeners” (here perhaps referring to the immediate disciples of a Buddha), the wisdom taught by the Buddhas can still arise “spontaneously” in the minds of those who achieve enlightenment on their own. Candrakirti, in his commentary on this verse, says that this verse points to the power of the eternal truth of the Buddhas’ teaching and the effectiveness of the cure to suffering that is this truth. But he also notes that ultimately one must realize this truth on one’s own. While our teachers can lead us toward the truth, in the end we must discover it for ourselves. The spiritual life is ultimately a solitary pursuit.*

## Exercise for Class Four

For the next week, set aside some time every day to do the following meditation.

Bring to mind how you ordinarily think of yourself: as a tangible, perceptible, self-existent “me.” Say your name to yourself and hold the image and feeling that are conjured up; or remember how you felt when someone falsely accused you of some wrong deed.

Think: if such a “me” exists, it must either be **the same as (one with, identical to) my parts**, or **different from (other than) my parts**. *And these are the only possibilities.*

If such a “me” were **one with or identical to my parts**, then there would have to be as many “me’s” as there were parts of me – my body and each of my body’s parts would be “me,” and my mind (and each function and moment of my mind) would be “me.” This is absurd, and certainly not the “me” I ordinarily think exists and that I grasp on to. So this “me” is not the same as my parts.

So maybe the “me” is **different from or other than the parts of me**. But if such a “me” were different from its parts, then I should be able to locate it separately, apart from my body and mind. Is there any findable “me” that can be perceived separate from the “me” who thinks, feels, meditates, has a body, etc.? And even if there were, is that the “me” I ordinarily think exists and am so attached to?

So if there isn’t a truly existing “me” that is the same as my parts, nor is there a truly existing “me” that is different from these parts, then there isn’t a truly existing “me” at all. When you’ve convinced yourself of the *absence* of such a self, hold onto that realization for as long as possible. When you lose it or it begins to waver, repeat the reasoning.