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Emptiness and Interdependence:
A Meditative Retreat on Strategies for Living the Good Life

Lama Marut's *No Worries* Tour, 2011



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SESSION ONE

THE TWO REALITIES: HOW THINGS DO AND DO NOT EXIST

I. The Importance of Wisdom

इमं परिकरं सर्वं प्रज्ज्ञार्थं हि मुनिर्जगौ ।

तस्मादुत्पादयेत्प्रज्ज्ञां दुःखनिवृत्तिकाङ्क्षया ॥

imaṃ parikaraṃ sarvaṃ prajñārthaṃ hi munirjagau
tasmādupādāyētprajñāṃ duḥkhanivṛttikāṅkṣayā

The Sage has taught this whole set of teachings in order to prepare us for wisdom.
So with a strong desire to end suffering, one should cultivate wisdom.

(Master Shantideva, *GUIDE TO THE BODHISATTVA'S WAY OF LIFE*, 9.1)

I. The Two Truths

द्वे सत्ये समुपाश्रित्य बुद्धानां धर्मदेशना ।

लोकसंवृत्तिसत्यं च सत्यं च परमार्थतः ॥

dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā
lokaśaṃvṛtisatyaṃ ca satyaṃ ca paramārthataḥ

The Buddha's teachings on Dharma are based on the two truths – the mundane and deceptive truth, and the truth that concerns ultimate meaning.

(Arya Nagarjuna, *ROOT VERSES ON THE MIDDLE WAY*, 24.8)

संवृतिः परमार्थश्च सत्यद्वयमिदं मतम् ।

बुद्धेरोगोचरस्तत्त्वं बुद्धिः संवृतिच्यते ॥

saṁvṛtiḥ paramārthaśca satyadvayamidaṁ matam
buddhergocarastattvaṁ buddhiḥ saṁvṛtirucyate

Truth is considered to be of two kinds – deceptive and ultimate. Ultimate reality is inaccessible to the intellect, for the intellect is said to be deceptive.

(Shantideva, *GUIDE*, 9.2)

II. Two Kinds of People

येऽनयोर्न विजानन्ति विभागं सत्ययोर्द्वयोः ।

ते तत्त्वं न विजानन्ति गम्भीरं बुद्धशासने ॥

ye 'nayorna vijānanti vibhāgaṁ satyayordvayoḥ
te tattvaṁ na vijānanti gambhīraṁ buddhaśāsane

Those who don't understand the distinction between these two do not understand the deep reality of the Buddha's teaching.

(Nagarjuna, *ROOT VERSES*, 24.9)

व्यवहारमनाश्रित्य परमार्थो न देश्यते ।

परमार्थमनागम्य निर्वाणं नाधिगम्यते ॥

vyavahāramanāśritya paramārtho na deśyate
paramārthamanāgamyā nirvāṇaṁ nādhigamyate

Without relying on conventional reality, the ultimate meaning cannot be taught. Without arriving at the ultimate meaning of things, nirvana cannot be attained.

(Nagarjuna, *ROOT VERSES*, 24.10)

तत्र लोको द्विधा दृष्टो योगी प्राकृतकस्तथा ।

तत्र प्राकृतको लोको योगिलोकेन बाध्यते ॥

tatra loko dvidhā dr̥ṣṭo yogī prākṛtakastathā
tatra prākṛtako loko yogilokena bādhyate

Because of this, the world is seen to be in two camps: the deep practitioners and the undeveloped. And the perspective of the undeveloped is invalidated by that of the deep practitioner.

(Shantideva, *GUIDE*, 9.3)

लोकेन भावा दृश्यन्ते कल्प्यन्ते चापि तत्त्वतः ।

न तु मायावदित्यत्र विवादो योगिलोकयोः ॥

lokena bhāvā dr̥śyante kalpyante cāpi tattvataḥ
na tu māyāvadityatra vivādo yogilokayoh

The worldly ones see and conceptualize things as if they were real and not illusory, and herein lies the point of disputation between the deep practitioners and the undeveloped.

(Shantideva, *GUIDE*, 9.5)

SESSION TWO

THE EMPTINESS OF THE SELF

THE SEVENFOLD REASONING OF CANDRAKIRTI ON THE EMPTINESS OF THE PERSON

A. The Structure of the Reasoning:

A person is not his or her parts, nor is he or she other than the parts. The person does not depend on the parts, nor do the parts depend on the person. The person does not possess the parts, nor is the person the mere collection of the parts. And the person is not the shape or outline of the parts.

B. The Meditation:

1. First, establish a strong feeling of a “me” that exists self-existently or objectively. 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. Get that feeling of “me” as some tangible, palpable, perceptible, solidly existing entity.
2. Think, if this “me” truly exists, it must exist in one of seven possible ways – identical to its parts, separate from them, dependent on its parts, something that its parts depend on, possessing its parts, as the collection of its parts, or as the shape of its parts. *If this “me” doesn’t exist in one of those seven ways, then it can’t truly exist at all.*
3. Let’s begin to check. Am I **identical to or one with my parts**? Am I the same as each of my parts, my body (and each of its parts – my head, torso, arms, legs, etc.) and my mind (and each of its parts – my feelings, ability to discriminate, consciousness, etc.)? When I point to each one of my parts, is it “me” I am pointing to: “I am my elbow,” “I am my feeling at this moment”? No, for if that were so then there would be as many “me’s” as there are parts which are me. Or alternatively and impossibly, somehow just as “I” am one so would the multiple parts of this “me” be one.
4. If I’m not the same as my parts, maybe I am **something other than my parts**. Could there be a “me” that existed apart from the parts of me – the body and mind? If this were possible, if you took away all the parts, there would still be an inherently existing “me” there that you could find and point to. You could locate this “me” here, and then over there you could point to something different that was the mind and body of “me.”

5. Perhaps I am **something that depends on my parts**. Like yogurt in a bowl, perhaps this “me” exists within the parts which hold “me” together. But if that were the case, then there would be a “me” (“yogurt”) distinct from what I depend on (“the bowl”), from my parts. A relationship of dependence implies that the two things (“me” and “my parts”) are separate, and we’ve already established that an inherently existing “me” that was truly different than its parts could not exist.
6. But neither could **my parts be dependent on me**, like a forest (“my parts”) covered in snow (“me”), for the same reason as above – for then “me” and “my parts” would again have to be self-existently different entities, and we’ve seen that they couldn’t be.
7. Perhaps there is a **me who possesses my parts**. A possessor and something possessed could be either of the same entity (I possess ears), or of different entities (I possess a computer). But a “me” who possessed my parts could not truly exist as either the same or different than the parts I supposedly possess, as we have already established. So although there seems to be a truly existing “I” who has parts, that “I” cannot be found (either as one with the parts it supposedly has, or as different from those parts). This room has four walls, but where is the room that has four walls?
8. OK, I got it. **I am the collection or sum of my parts**. But if “I” truly existed like that, when all my parts were dumped together (in pretty much any configuration) an independently or inherently existing “me” (this is the “me” we’re trying to find, right?) would just magically and spontaneously emerge. Furthermore, we’ve already decided that each part of me is *not* “me.” So how then could the sum of those parts, none of which is “me,” turn into a “me”? Could there be a herd of sheep that consisted of things none of which was a sheep?
9. Finally, **I am not the shape of my parts**. First off, only physical things have shape, and I am more than just my body. Further, it is neither feasible for the shapes of the individual parts of me to be “me,” nor for the shape of the collection of the parts of me to be “me.” The shapes of the individual parts before they were assembled and made into “me” are not me, and the shapes do not somehow change during the process of assembly. Since the parts did not become different shapes in the process of their assembly, if there is no “me” there in the shapes of the individual parts before those parts were assembled, how could there be a “me” in the shapes of those parts after they were assembled?

10. So if I don't inherently exist in one of these seven ways, then I could not inherently exist at all. When you convince yourself that there is an *absence* of such a "me," something you thought was there but *isn't there*, try to hold onto that absence one-pointedly. If you lose that sense of an inherently existing "me" being *not there*, repeat the reasoning until you get it again.

SESSION THREE

THE SIX FLAVORS OF EMPTINESS AND MAHAMUDRA MEDITATIONS

The following are six different "flavors" of emptiness that are taught openly by the different schools of classical Indian Buddhism. They are culled from different texts in the lineage of Tsongkapa the Great (1357-1419). Please note that not all of them would be called true "emptiness," but rather "selflessness" in different classical schools.

I. Emptiness, Flavor #1

The lack of a self which is unchanging, whole, and independent.

[According to the Independent group of the Middle-Way School, this is the gross lack of a self to the person.]

Worldview #1—This too will pass.

Things are empty of any self-nature of being unchanging.

II. Emptiness, Flavor #2

The lack of a self which is self-standing and substantial.

["Substantial" can mean a lot of different things; here it refers to the lack of a "driver" or "director" of the five heaps over the five heaps. According to the Mind-Only School, this is the lack of a self to the person. According to the Independent group, this is the subtle lack of a self to the person.]

Worldview #2—I cannot control this in the present moment.

Things are empty of any self-nature of being independent.

III. Emptiness, Flavor #3

The fact that a visible object and the valid perception which grasps the visible object are devoid of any separate substance.

["Devoid of any separate substance" means: "It is not true that they come from a separate karmic seed; rather, they both arise from the same karmic seed." According to the Mind-Only School, this is the lack of a self to things. According to the Independent group, this is the gross lack of a self to things.]

Worldview #3—I have put this and myself here.

What is seen, and what sees it, are empty of coming from separate karmic causes.

IV. Emptiness, Flavor #4

The fact that the fact that any particular thing is called what it is is something which is devoid of existing by definition.

[Put simply: The fact that things are called what they are is not something which is automatic. According to the Mind-Only School, this is also the lack of a self to things.]

Worldview #4—There is somebody who would find this pleasant.

Things are empty of automatically being the thing that is called their name.

V. Emptiness, Flavor #5

The fact that objects are devoid of existing from their own side through any unique identity of their own, rather than existing simply by virtue of having appeared to an unaffected state of mind.

[According to the Independent group, this is the subtle lack of a self to things, or real emptiness.]

Worldview #5—I can use this problem as a path.

Things are empty of having any unique way of being from their own side, rather than simply being established by virtue of their appearing to an unaffected state of mind.

VI. Emptiness, Flavor #6

The fact that objects are void of existing from their own side through their own identity, rather than existing simply through names [words] and terms [thoughts].

[According to the Consequence group of the Middle-Way School, this—and only this—is emptiness, and there are no separate degrees of emptiness (although emptiness can be divided according to the object that has it: the person or "things," meaning the person's parts). This interpretation is the ultimate one accepted by Lord Buddha; the realized being Nagarjuna; Je Tsongkapa; Khen Rinpoche; for all of tantra; and moreover by anyone who has seen emptiness directly.]

Worldview #6—We must be as gardeners.

*Things are empty of any existence from their own side; rather, they exist only as parts of things that I group together and apply a name or mental image of the thing, forced to do so depending on **whether I have, every day, taken care of others or not.***

The Mahamudra Meditation on the Six Flavors

This meditation takes us through six different wrong views of the world around us and, one by one, establishes that these views cannot be true, that what these views profess is, in fact, impossible. By this we arrive at the six flavors of emptiness. However, according to the highest school of Buddhism, only the last one is really emptiness. But each of these wrong views is a view we hold constantly in our daily lives, and each step of eliminating them gets us closer to a pure understanding of emptiness itself.

Six Wrong Views and Their Antidotes

1. Wrong view: Things stay the same for a while
Antidote: Things are constantly changing every second
2. Wrong view: I own this; I control its fate
Antidote: Absolutely nothing in the present moment is in my control
3. Wrong view: I am at the mercy of things randomly happening to me
Antidote: Past deeds caused both the object and myself who perceives it at that moment
4. Wrong view: Things are exactly how I see them and no other way
Antidote: I am imposing judgment on things; they could be different.

5. Wrong view: Things are coming from their own side completely
Antidote: Things come half from their own side, and half from my perceptions
6. Wrong view: There is some part of the object that comes from its own side
Antidote: It's only my perception

Applying the Six Flavors of Emptiness to Your Own Mind

This meditation takes these same previous six wrong views and their antidotes and applies them to a new object: one's own mind. There are many different features of the mind – discrimination, raw awareness, etc. – but it is advised for this meditation to focus on the mental function of feeling. Feelings are easy to access, and they also tend to cause us a lot of trouble when we see them as self-existent, leading us to do bad things in order to avoid what we dislike and attain what we like.

Six Wrong Views and Their Antidotes Applied to Mental Feelings

1. Wrong view: I will feel this same way for a while
Antidote: My feelings are constantly shifting, moment to moment
2. Wrong view: I control how I feel
Antidote: I have no control of my feelings in the present moment
3. Wrong view: I am at the mercy of my random feelings
Antidote: My past actions caused both this feeling and myself perceiving it
4. Wrong view: This feeling is definitely good or bad
Antidote: I am imposing a judgment on the feeling that is not inherently part of that feeling and could be different
5. Wrong view: Outside forces are completely responsible for how I feel
Antidote: Outside forces combined with my perceptions compose how I feel
6. Wrong view: There is some outside factor affecting how I feel
Antidote: How I feel is entirely a projection

Example of a Mahamudra Meditation

1. I think this feeling of unhappiness will last for a while. But really, the rise and fall of a moment of emotion is just like the rising and fading sounds of a plane passing overhead – it comes and goes quickly, and even in the space of its short existence it is constantly changing by degrees, from softer to louder to softer, etc.
2. I think I can control my feelings. Actually the thoughts and feelings come into my mind completely unbidden – I never invite this unhappiness to come and disturb my mind.
3. I feel like I'm being bombarded by this random feeling of unhappiness. But to be sure, nothing is random. I have been brought to this moment, and the feeling of unhappiness has been brought to this moment, by the same karma—the fact that in the past I caused someone else to be unhappy. I am fully responsible.
4. I think this feeling of unhappiness is really lousy! But does it really have an inherent badness about it? I could look at this feeling of unhappiness as a great motivation for me to practice even harder, so I can get out of this stupid cycle of pain and then bring others out of it. Then I'd have to say that the unhappiness is a good thing.
5. I am sure my feeling of unhappiness relies entirely on things outside of me: the bad weather, lack of sleep, the start of a cold. I think if those things were different, I'd be happy. But really, come on, then we could all just work on manipulating our outside situations so we'd always be perfectly happy. We could all move to Florida or something. That doesn't work. Even if everything outside goes perfectly, there are still unhappy feelings left. That part must be coming from inside of me. So outside circumstances can only play a part in how I feel, and my own mind provides the rest.
6. These outside circumstances must play some part in how I am feeling, right? It really seems like when I get a nice surprise gift from someone I feel happier than if the gift never came. But there are times when I'm so sad nothing can make me feel better. And times when I'm so happy nothing can faze me. These feelings actually have nothing to do with any outside circumstances I thought were affecting them. It is *all* a projection forced on me by my past actions. And that means that if I plant the right seeds now, I can create a future of total joy every moment of the day.

SESSION FOUR

A DEEP DIVE: THE CHICKEN OR EGG QUESTION

*Chapter 9 of Arya Nagarjuna's Root Verses on the Middle Way
"An Analysis of What There is Before"*

दर्शनश्रणादीनि वेदनादीनि चाप्यथ ।

darśanaśraṇādīni vedanādīni cāpyatha ।

भवन्ति यस्य प्रागेभ्यः सो ऽस्तीत्येके वदन्त्युत ॥ १

bhavanti yasya prāgebhyaḥ so 'stītyeke vadantyaṭa ॥ 1

9.1

Now, some say that there is someone who exists prior
To seeing, hearing, etc.,
And to the mental of functions of the feelings and the rest.

Arya Nagarjuna anticipates a possible objection to the claim that there is no self-existent person or "me" in the first two verses of this chapter. There must be a truly existent person because if there isn't, who is doing the experiencing when one experiences something? There would have to be a previously existing "hearer" for there to be hearing, a seer for there to be seeing, a feeler for there to be feelings, etc.

In his commentary, Je Tsongkapa says that with this chapter Arya Nagarjuna is beginning a discussion of the emptiness of persons (or of the subject, the "me"), having completed the explanation of the emptiness of phenomena (objects, the "mine"). If there are hearers and seers and feelers who exist before the hearing, seeing, and feeling, then one could say they exist independently and with a self-nature. "That which is prior" and which triggers hearing, seeing, feeling, and so forth is thus the person who hears, sees, feels, etc. If there is such a person who exists "prior," then we could say there is a self-existent person.

One could also argue, on the same grounds, that what exists prior to sensations like seeing, etc., would be the objects of sense. How could there be a seeing if there weren't something there visible first? How could there be a hearing if there weren't something audible that occurred first? The imaginary opponent may be picking up on what Arya Nagarjuna said in the last verse of the last

chapter about a “grasping.” For this is how perception works according to certain schools of Buddhism: an object of sense is “grasped” by a sense power that reaches out to it.

But there also must be someone who “grasps” for there to be such a “grasping.” So the objection is that the grasper who grasps that which is grasped must exist prior to that which is grasped.

कथं ह्यविद्यमानस्य दर्शनादि भवष्यति ।

katham hyavidyamānasya darśanādi bhavaṣyati ।

भावस्य तस्मात्प्रागेभ्यः सो ऽस्ति भावो व्यवस्थितः ॥ २

bhāvasya tasmātprāgebhyaḥ so 'sti bhāvo vyavasthitaḥ ॥ 2

9.2

How would there be seeing, etc.

If there weren't someone present to see?

Therefore, prior to the seeing and the rest,

Someone definitely must exist.

If there weren't someone there, who or what would there be to see, hear, etc.? Both of the two great commentators, Candrakīrti and Je Tsongkapa, give the same example. If there weren't already somebody who existed before he or she obtained money, how could there be anyone who obtained money? You wouldn't say that someone who did not exist (the classic trope here is a "son of a barren woman") accumulated wealth, would you?

Je Tsongkapa also explains "seeing, etc." to refer to both the five sense powers or faculties (sight, hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling) and also to the various mental "modes" or factors (as also indicated in the previous verse). In the Abhidharma texts, there are fifty-one mental factors listed, beginning with the five "omnipresent" ones of feeling, discrimination, intention, contact, and mental engagement.

The point here is that, just as there must be seer in order to see, there must be a previously existing thinker who would then "have" feelings, discriminations, intentions, etc.

दर्शनश्रवणादिभ्यो वेदनादिभ्य एव च ।

darśanaśravaṇādibhyo vedanādibhya eva ca ।

यः प्राग्व्यवस्थितो भावः केन प्रज्ञप्यते ऽथ सः ॥ ३

yaḥ prāgvyaavasthito bhāvaḥ kena prajñapyate 'tha saḥ ॥ 3

9.3

The one who exists
Prior to the seeing, hearing, etc.,
Prior to the feelings, etc.,
How could it ever be known?

This verse begins Arya Nagarjuna's reply to the contention that there must be a previously existing person in order for experiences to be possible, or a previously existing sense object in order for it to be sensed.

He first points out that it makes no sense to say that something exists before the experience of that something. For one thing, how can one know something is there before it is seen, heard, felt, etc.? Something or someone who existed prior to being perceived would indeed exist independently. But something that is not perceived is not known. So how would one ever know that that something or someone existed until it was perceived?

Furthermore, how can we say there is a seer, hearer, or feeler who exists before they see, hear, or feel? The one who sees cannot exist before the act of seeing that makes it possible for us to call them "one who sees." If we imagined things differently, then there could be a seer before he or she saw anything, a hearer who wasn't hearing, etc.

From another angle we can also say that if there were a self-existent, independent, previously existing seer, hearer, smeller, taster or feeler, they would always be seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling – and therefore would not need to see, hear, smell, taste, and feel again or anew.

विनापि दर्शनादीनि यदि चासौ व्यवस्थतः ।

vināpi darśanādīni yadi cāsau vyavasthataḥ ।

अमून्यपि भविष्यन्ति विना तेन न संशयः ॥ ४

amūnyapi bhaviṣyanti vinā tena na saṁśayaḥ ॥ 4

9.4

If such a one definitely existed

Without seeing, etc.

Then the seeing, etc., would no doubt also exist

Without that one.

Next, Arya Nagarjuna points out that if you assume a previously existing seer who existed as such before seeing, then you would also have to say that there were sense powers that could also exist without sensing anything. If there previously existed a seer, he or she would be separable from the sense power of seeing. . . and vice versa.

So if there were an independently and previously existing seer, there would also have to be an independently and previously existing sense power of seeing just waiting to utilized by the seer when the seer decided to see something. There could be a “seeing” that wasn’t a seeing of something!

Put in another way, if there were an independently and previously existing seer, then there would also have to be an independently and previously existing ability to see that was just waiting to be deployed by a seer who was already and always seeing!

अज्यते केन चित् कश्चित् किं चित्केन चिदज्यते ।

ajyate kena cit kaścīt kiṃ citkena cidajyate ।

कुतः किं चिद्विना कश्चित्किम् चित्कं चिद्विना कुतः ॥ ५

kutaḥ kiṃ cidvinā kaścītkim citkaṃ cidvinā kutaḥ ॥ 5

9.5

One is brought about by the other,

And vice versa.

How would one exist without the other,

And vice versa?

How could there be a seeing of something unless there were someone who sees? And how could there be someone seeing unless there was a seeing of something? If one is absent, so is the other. There is no seeing of a visible object without someone who is seeing it, and no seer without a visible object that is seen.

Arya Nagarjuna is here pointing to a profound general point. Subjects (“me”) and objects (“mine”) in general exist only in a mutually dependent way. There is no subject without an object, and vice versa. There is no previously existing me that then perceives the world around me, nor is there a previously existing world waiting around for me to come and perceive it.

An “existing thing” and a “knowable thing” are synonyms in Buddhist logic. A thing literally comes into existence only when known. And if it is not known by someone, it literally does not exist. An object comes into existence only when perceived by a subject. But by the same token, there is no subject who exists until it perceives an object. The mind or subject too only comes into existences when it functions as a perceiver or knower of an object.

Everything exists interdependently. And at the highest level this means in a mutually dependent way that can only be coming from a mind that projects itself as a subject, the objects the subject perceives, and the mutually dependent relationship between them.

सर्वेभ्यो दर्शनादिभ्यः कश्चित्पूर्वो न विद्यते ।

sarvebhyo darśanādibhyaḥ kaścitpūrvo na vidyate ।

अज्यते दर्शनादिनामन्येन पुनरन्यदा ॥ ६

ajyate darśanādināmanyena punaranyadā ॥ 6

9.6

There is no one who exists before
All of the senses beginning with sight,
But one is, at different times,
Brought about by one or another of the senses, seeing and the rest.

This verse seems to be Arya Nagarjuna giving voice to another possible objection.

So maybe there isn't a person or self-existent subject that exists before all things such as seeing and the rest (sarvebhyo darshanadibhyaḥ). But there is such a person or self-existent subject who exists prior to each of these things individually. There is a person who sees and who exists while the seeing is going on, and then at a different time (anyada) there is someone who hears and exists when there is something audible, etc.

There is still, the opponent might claim, a real, truly existing person, self, or subject. But that person is at one time a seer, and at another time a hearer, etc. The self would under this understanding actually be a series of truly existing selves.

सर्वेभ्यो दर्शनादिभ्यो यदि पूर्वो न विद्यते ।

sarvebhyo darśanādibhyo yadi pūrvo na vidyate ।

एकैकस्मात्कथं पूर्वो दर्शनादेः स विद्यते ॥ ७

ekaikasmātkathaṁ pūrvo darśanādeḥ sa vidyate ॥ 7

9.7

If there is no one who exists

Prior to all of the senses beginning with sight,

How can there be someone who exists

Prior to individual instances of seeing, etc.?

Arya Nagarjuna replies that this makes no sense. If you concede there is no self-existing person before all the sense powers, how could there be one who existed before each one separately?

Je Tsongkapa says that to deny a self who exists before all the sense powers and such, while affirming a self who exists before each of these powers, is like saying that although a forest does not exist before all the trees, it does exist before each one of them.

If there were a person or self who existed before each of the powers of sense individually and sequentially, would the person who is seeing at one time be the same or different than the person who is at another time hearing?

द्रष्टा स एव स श्रोता स एव यदि वेदकः ।

draṣṭā sa eva sa śrotā sa eva yadi vedakaḥ ।

एकैकस्माद्भवेत्पूर्वं एवं चैतन्न युज्यते ॥ ८

ekaikasmādbhavetpūrva evaṁ caitanna yujyate ॥ 8

9.8

If the seer were the hearer, and then the feeler,
He would exist prior to each new one.
This would make no sense!

It would make no sense to say that there was a self who at different times was a seer, a hearer, and a feeler while somehow remaining itself – a seer who remains a seer while later becoming a hearer and hearing. For if there were a series of selves, and the self at each point in that series was the same self, then again there would be a self who had the capability to see, hear, and feel who existed before the seeing, hearing, feeling, etc. that it would be doing later.

A seer who remained a seer while hearing a sound could not be seeing a sight at the same time as hearing a sound – these things happen only one at a time. A seer who remained a seer while hearing would be a seer who was not seeing while being a hearer who was hearing!

The supposed person who pre-exists before one of the sense powers arising could not, therefore, be identical to the supposed person who pre-exists before another of those sense powers.

द्रष्टान्य एव श्रोतान्यो वेदको ऽन्यः पुनर्यादि ।

draṣṭānya eva śrotānyo vedako 'nyaḥ punaryadi ।

सति स्याद्द्रष्टारि श्रोता बहुत्वं चात्मनं भवेत् ॥ ९

sati syāddraṣṭari śrotā bahutvaṁ cātmanāṁ bhavet ॥ 9

9.9

If there were a different seer, a different hearer, a different feeler,
When there was a seer there would also be a hearer.
There would be a multitude of selves!

But if the person who is seeing is completely different from the person who later hears, how could these two truly different selves have any relationship to one another? In what sense would such a continuously changing self be a “self” at all?

Furthermore, if these different selves really or inherently existed as completely different – if there were a truly existing seer who was different and separable from a truly existing hearer – then these truly existing but different selves could exist at the same time. There would, in this case, be (as one commentator says) “multiple simultaneous selves.”

There would in this case have to be “a multitude of selves” (bahutvam atmanam). There would be different seers, hearers, and feelers, but they would all exist at the same time! It would be pretty crowded inside!

दर्शनश्रवणादीनि वेदनादीनि चाप्यथ ।

darśanaśravaṇādīni vedanādīni cāpyatha ।

भवन्ति येभ्यस्तेष्वेष भूतेष्वपि न विद्यते ॥ १०

bhavanti yebhyaṣteṣveṣa bhūteṣvapi na vidyate ॥ 10

9.10

This one also does not exist in those elements
From which come seeing, hearing, and the rest.

Arya Nagarjuna is here saying that not only is there no self or person that can inherently exist as the seer of seeing, the hearer of hearing and the feeler of feelings. Neither is that self somehow grounded in the basic building blocks of the sensory world -- the elements (bhutas) of earth, wind, fire, and water.

The self cannot be found in the physical elements of solidity, mobility, heat, and fluidity, which are the bases for the objects that the sense powers sense, any more than it can be found in that which is the seer, hearer, feeler, etc. of those sense powers. The same reasoning as given above would apply. Could an experiencer of solidity exist before there were solid things to experience? Could solidity exist before there was an experience of solidity?

Everything exists in the same way: relationally and interdependently. Nothing exists independently. Nothing exists on its own. Subjects and objects mutually create each other.

दर्शनस्त्रवणादीनि वेदनादीनि चाप्यथ ।

darśanasravaṇādīni vedanādīni cāpyatha ।

न विद्यते चेद्यस्य स न विद्यन्त इमान्यपि ॥ ११

na vidyate cedyasya sa na vidyanta imānyapi ॥ 11

9.11

And if one who sees, hears, etc, and feels etc.

Does not exist,

Then those things also do not exist.

Here Arya Nagarjuna notes that if there is no inherent or true existence to a seer who sees, a hearer who hears, a feeler who feels, etc., there cannot be any true existence to sense faculties of seeing, hearing, feeling, and the rest either. If the seer exists only dependently on the seeing, then the seeing also exists only dependently on the seer. As Candrakirti says, "If the one of whom seeing and the other kinds of perception does not exist, then it has been made evident that seeing and the others kinds of perception do not exist."

But this certainly does not mean that subjects and objects don't exist at all. "No one who is not insane would reject the existence of the person who is the agent of such things as seeing and hearing," writes Je Tsongkapa. "Therefore its total nonexistence makes no sense."

There is a middle way here. To say that the seer of sights, the hearer of sounds, etc., doesn't exist at all is fall off one extreme – the extreme of nihilism or non-existence. But such a seer or hearer certainly doesn't exist independently or self-existently, which would be the other extreme. Candrakirti summarizes: "Both the obsession with things as realities and the obsession with things as unrealities are to be repudiated."

The subject arises only when in a mutually dependent relation with an object, and vice versa. Things exist, but only interdependently. Both subjects and objects are empty of existing on their own.

प्राक् च यो दर्शनादिभ्यः सांप्रतं चोर्ध्वमेव च ।

prāk ca yo darśanādibhyaḥ sāmpratam cordhvameva ca ।

न विद्यते ऽस्ति नास्तीति निवृत्तास्तत्र कल्पनाः ॥ १२

na vidyate 'sti nāstīti nivṛttāstatra kalpanāḥ ॥ 12

9.12

There is no one who exists before, during, or after, the seeing, etc.

So give up such conceptions as

“He is” or “He is not.”

Arya Nagarjuna summarizes the chapter in this verse. First, a seer of sights (or the sight that's seen) cannot come before the seeing. A seer who does not see, and a sight which is not visible, are impossible. Furthermore, if there were a “seer” who existed independently of the seeing, they would be always and already seeing before the seeing that makes them a “seer.” If there were a pre-existent person, they would have to be the same person who saw, then heard, then felt, etc., or they would have to be different people. If they were the same, the person who was a seer and then became a hearer would still be a seer but would not be seeing because they were now a hearer hearing. And if they were truly existing but different selves who first saw and then heard, there would be multiple selves who, being separable and different, could also exist at the same time.

Second, a seer of a sight could not exist after the sight seen, for that would imply a sight and seeing that existed before a seer who sees a sight. It would also mean that there could be a seer who continued to exist as a seer after the sight was seen.

Finally, if the self-existent seer and the self-existent seeing of a sight occurred simultaneously (and not only mutually dependently), then that seer (being self-existent) could also exist even when not seeing, and the seeing (being self-existent) could exist even when there were no seer. Furthermore, Candrakīrti points out that there is no meaning to a seer who isn't seeing and of a seeing which isn't being done by a seer, so two impossible things can't occur simultaneously: “One never experiences simultaneous existence of two things each of which by itself does not exist, like the two horns of a rabbit: subject and perceiving do not exist by themselves, independent of each other.”

Meditation

Picture yourself walking into a room. You open the door and you see the things that are in the room. So the things were in the room before you came in and saw them, right? They were there, pre-existing, as visible things before you, the seer, came into the room and saw them.

But is it possible for those things to exist as “visible things” before they were seen? Are you really walking through the door into a pre-existing room with pre-existing things in it?

What’s really going on when you walk into a room? There is no room and no visible things in the room before you came into the room and saw them. When you see the room and the things in the room you are creating them as visible things. They weren’t visible things before you saw them.

Nor is there a you who sees things before you see things. Seeing things creates the seer of things. When you see the room and the things in the room, you are also aware of yourself as a seer of a room and the things in the room. You do not exist as seer before you see something.

So when you walk into a room, you are creating the room and creating yourself as an experiencer of the room at the same time. The room and you as the experience of the room exist only in relation to one another, only mutually dependently.

Rehearse the process of walking into a room again and again and try to see yourself creating both the room and yourself.

Then think: what forces me to create this room, and my experience of this room, the way I do? How would I be able to create the causes that would force be to create this room as more enjoyable, more beautiful, warmer, nicer? And how could I create the causes that would force me to experience myself experiencing this room as happier and more content?

SESSION FIVE

SUMMING UP: USING KARMA AND EMPTINESS TO LIVE THE GOOD LIFE

यथा दृष्टं श्रुतं ज्ञातं नैवेह प्रतिषिध्यते ।

सत्यतः कल्पना त्वत्र दुःखहेतुर्निवार्यते ॥

yathā dr̥ṣṭaṁ śrutaṁ jñātaṁ naiveha pratiṣidhyate ।
satyataḥ kalpanā tvatra duḥkhaheturnivāryate ॥

It is not things that are seen, heard, and known that is being refuted here. It is the conceptualization of those things as truly existing – which is the cause of our suffering – that is here repudiated.

(Shantideva, *GUIDE TO THE BODHISATTVA'S WAY OF LIFE*, 9.26)

सर्वं च युज्यते तस्य शून्यता यस्य युज्यते ।

सर्वं न युज्यते तस्य शून्यं यस्य न युज्यते ॥

sarvaṁ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate
sarvaṁ na yujyate tasya śūnyaṁ yasya na yujyate

For the one to whom emptiness is clear, everything is clear. And for the one for whom emptiness is not clear, nothing is clear.

(Nagarjuna, *ROOT VERSES ON THE MIDDLE WAY*, 24.14)

यः प्रतीत्यसमुत्पादः शून्यतां तां प्रचक्ष्महे ।

सा प्रज्ञप्तिरुपादाय प्रतिपत्सैव मध्यमा ॥

yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tāṁ pracakṣmahe
sā prajñāptirupādāya pratipatsaiva madhyamā

Whatever arises dependently is what is called emptiness. That which is conventionally designated is the middle way.

(Nagarjuna, *ROOT VERSES*, 24.18)

अप्रतीत्य समुत्पन्नो धर्मः कश्चिन्न विद्यते ।

यस्मात्तस्मादशून्यो हि धर्मः कश्चिन्न विद्यते ॥

apratītya samutpanno dharmah kaścinna vidyate
yasmāttasmādaśūnyo hi dharmah kaścinna vidyate

There is nothing whatsoever that does not arise dependently, and thus there is nothing whatsoever that is not empty.

(Nagarjuna, *ROOT VERSES*, 24.19)

तदेवं शून्यतापक्षे दूषणं नोपपद्यते ।

तस्मान्निर्विचिकित्सेन भावनीयैव शून्यता ॥

tadevaṁ śūnyatāpakṣe dūṣaṇaṁ nopapadyate
tasmānnirvicikitsena bhāvanīyaiva śūnyatā

So there is no possible refutation when it comes to emptiness. Therefore one should meditate on it exclusively and without any hesitation at all.

(Shantideva, *GUIDE*, 9.54)