



ॐ नमो मञ्जुश्रये

om namo Mañjuśraye

*Arya Nagarjuna's
Root Verses on the Middle Way*

Chapter Fifteen: An Analysis of Self-Nature

न सम्भवः स्वभावस्य युक्तः प्रत्ययहेतुभिः ।

हेतुप्रत्ययसम्भूतः स्वभावः कृतको भवेत् ॥ १

na sambhavaḥ svabhāvasya yuktaḥ pratyayahetubhiḥ ।
hetupratyayasambhūtaḥ svabhāvaḥ kṛtako bhavet ॥ 1

15.1

Something with a self-nature
That was produced through causes and conditions
is impossible.
Something produced through causes and conditions
Would be something
That *both* had a self-nature *and* was constructed.

Things, phenomena, are empty, Arya Nagarjuna has claimed. In this chapter, he addresses the mistaken idea that caused things could arise as things with some kind of self-nature (svabhava) to them.

Arya Nagarjuna begins here by pointing out the impossibility and illogic of thinking this way. If something, like a sprout or an irritating person at work, had a self-nature, they would already and always exist as that thing -- for that is what it means to say something has a self-nature. And therefore something that truly had a self-nature would not need to be produced by causes and conditions because it already and always exists.

It's either one or the other: something either has a self-nature or is produced, but it can't be both. A caused thing and thing with self-nature are mutually exclusive.

Either the irritating person at work always has been, is, and always will be an irritating person, or they are produced as a (temporarily existing) irritating person due to causes and conditions (such as you having been an irritating person to someone in the past and therefore now being forced to have an irritating person in your life).

If we translate the Sanskrit term *svabhava* here as “quality” (for the Tibetan *chi*, as opposed to *jedrak* or “characteristic”), we have Arya Nagarjuna asserting that these qualities are uncaused and therefore unchanging. While other things classified as unchanging are negative absences (empty space and emptiness itself), here we have an example of a positive but unchanging thing – a general category or archetype.

Why are these archetypes said to be unchanging? The general category of “tree” (as opposed to the specific instantiation or “characteristic” of the quality – “a tree,” “the tree,” “this oak tree”) does not grow, does not get more or less, and does not fluctuate or waver. In other words, the snapshot we have of the “tree-ness” of trees does not change. Such qualities may be replaced with different qualities (we develop different ideas about “tree-ness” as a result of encounters over time with specific trees) but each new general category springs up fully developed, not gradually over time. A *chi* is thus an example of an unchanging but impermanent thing (like the emptiness of a changing thing, which goes out of existence when the changing thing does).

Nagarjuna also says that such archetypes are not the product of causes and conditions. An unchanging thing is also an uncaused thing. Change is due to the fluctuating energy of the cause. Something that is not changing must therefore also be classified as something that is uncaused.

And as we learn in this verse, an uncaused thing is further definable as *unconstructed*. Our general categories for things *do not have parts* – they are full-blown, whole images. When we examine our concept of “tree” we can break it down into “trunk of tree,” “branches of tree,” “roots of tree,” etc., but then each of these are simply repositioned as new general categories and not as parts of a general category. “Trunk of tree” becomes the *chi* for the “this tree trunk.”

Jedraks can also reposition themselves as *chis*. “Toyota” can be the *jedrak* of “car” but can also be the *chi* of “this Prius.” But neither “car” in the first example (where “car” is the *chi* and “Toyota” is the *jedrak*) nor “Toyota” in the second (where “this Prius” is the *jedrak* of the *chi* “Toyota”) are constructed from parts and neither are created by causes and conditions.

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स्वभावः कृतको नाम भविष्यति पुनः कथं ।

अकृत्रिमः स्वभावो हि निरपेक्षः परत्र च ॥ २

svabhāvaḥ kṛtako nāma bhaviṣyati punaḥ katham |
akṛtrimaḥ svabhāvo hi nirapekṣaḥ paratra ca || 2

15.2

But how could there be something that we could call
“Something having a self-nature
And something that was constructed?”
Something with a self-nature
cannot also be something that was constructed.
And it cannot be dependent on anything else.

When, due to causes and conditions something is “made” (kirtaka), isn’t it made as something? When, for example, fire arises from fuel and a match, doesn’t something that has a self-nature of being “hot and burning” arise?

In this verse, Arya Nagarjuna further specifies what is meant by something existing by virtue of “its own nature.” Something with a self-nature cannot also be something “made,” for this implies that it depends on something or someone else to make it. The heat of fire, for example, might seem to be the self-nature or essential, defining quality of fire. There is indeed no fire without heat, but there is also no heat before the fire is “made” or produced.

Were there something with a self-nature it wouldn’t depend on anything else for that nature – that’s the “self” (sva-) in the term “self-nature” (svabhava). Since heat depends on fire to be heat, it cannot be the essential nature of fire which, by definition, does not depend on anything else for its existence.

But, as we shall see, it is also of course the case that there is no fire without heat. So in the commentary, Candrakirti makes the apparently enigmatic statement that “the heat of fire neither exists nor does not exist as an inherent nature” – that is, heat is not the innate nature of fire because to be so it would be uncreated and not dependent on fuel, etc. But there is no heatless fire either, so we can’t say that the heat does not exist as the inherent nature of fire either!

A general category or *chi* cannot be both a general category and something “made” or “constructed” (*kirtaka*). As we have seen in the last verse, this means that general categories do not arise gradually but suddenly and are not put together with parts but come fully-blown as wholes. The ideas of “tree” or “car” are uncaused and unconstructed and, therefore, as Nagarjuna points out in this verse, do not “depend on anything else,” i.e., they do not depend on either their parts or on causes and conditions.

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कुतः स्वभावस्याभावे परभावो भविष्यति ।

स्वभावः परभावस्य परभावो हि कथ्यते ॥ ३

kutaḥ svabhāvasyābhāve parabhāvo bhaviṣyati ।
svabhāvaḥ parabhāvasya parabhāvo hi kathyate ॥ 3

15.3

But if something with a self-nature does not exist,
How would its nature be distinguished from a different thing?
For indeed it is the self-nature of a different thing
That allows us to say
That it has the nature of being a different thing.

*If things don't have essences or self-natures, then how can we tell them apart?
Isn't it the essential nature of a thing that distinguishes it from other things that
have different essential natures?*

*We can tell the difference between an irritating person and a nice one because the
former has an irritating nature and the latter a nice one, right? Isn't it the case
that we can differentiate fire from water because fire has the nature of being hot
and burning whereas water has the identifying essence of being wet and flowing?*

*Isn't it the self-nature of the thing (the heat in fire, for example) that gives it its
individuality and allows us to distinguish it from other things, which have an
"other nature" (parabhava, the fluidity and wetness of water in relation to the
heat in fire)? The relative nature of things would seem to indicate that an "an
irritating person" is such in relation to "a nice person." The otherness of "a nice
person" exists as otherness only because it is other than "an irritating person."*

*The self-existence of an irritating person is, under this reasoning, established due
to its relative difference from something that has an "other nature" of being "a
kind person." If things don't have self-natures, there can't be different things
like irritating people and nice people. It's an interesting argument: if there's no
self-existence to things, then there can be no otherness either – and everything
would be just one big, undifferentiated mass.*

Arya Nagarjuna here notes that general categories must exist, for it is precisely these categories that allow us to see things as the things we see. We can and do see trees because of the *chi* “tree.” And we differentiate things because we have different general categories for things. The variety and multiplicity of *chis* is why we see a variegated world where there are “trees” and “cars” as well as “houses,” “people,” “sunsets,” et al.

The distinctiveness of each general category also makes possible our perceptions of different instantiations of those general categories. The *chi* “tree” is different from the *chi* “car” and so we can distinguish the *jedrak* “that tree” from the *jedrak* “this car.”

Furthermore, when *jedraks* reposition themselves into new *chis* it allows us to distinguish between the particulars within a general category. “Tree” is different from “this oak tree,” but “oak tree” (as a general category) allows us to distinguish “this oak tree” from “that pine tree” (the latter being a particular instantiation of the general category “pine tree”). Similarly, “this large oak tree” can be distinguished from “that small oak tree” because of the general categories “large oak tree” and “small oak tree,” and on we go.

One of the implications here is to note that the purpose of one’s spiritual practice is not to somehow reduce everything into an indistinguishable mass of oneness. This is not only undesirable but impossible. One of the “wisdoms” associated with the five Buddha families is that of Amitabha, where desire is transmogrified into the “wisdom of discrimination.” A Buddha discriminates between things, just like suffering living beings do. But they are able to see the good qualities in everything – in both what we would call the “positive” and what we would call the “negative.” Their *chis* are pure and perfect, and therefore every *jedrak* is also perceived as pure and perfect.

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स्वभावपरभावाभ्यामृते भावः कुतः पुनः ।

स्वभावे परभावे वा सति भावो हि सिध्यति ॥ ४

svabhāvaparabhāvābhyāmṛte bhāvaḥ kutaḥ punaḥ ।
svabhāve parabhāve vā sati bhāvo hi sidhyati ॥ 4

15.4

And how can there be anything
Apart from things which have a self-nature
And things which have the nature
Of being a different thing?
It is only when there are things which have a self-nature
And things which have the nature of being a different thing
That we can say that there are any existing things at all.

The argument put forward in the last verse continues and expands here. If you say that things don't have self-natures (the heat of fire, the irritatingness of an irritating person); and you also say they don't have "other-natures" either because an "other-nature" implies a "self-nature" it is other to (heat is the essence of fire because that's what makes it different from water, which has the self-nature of being wet and flowing) – well, then, nothing exists at all.

The very existence of things assumes that they are something and not something else. They are fire and not water, an irritating person and not a nice person. If fire isn't either fire essentially or fire in relation to what is not fire (e.g., water), then what is fire? How can we say fire exists if it's not one thing or the other – or one thing other than another?

The qualities that allow us to see things also allow us to distinguish things from other things. Other things are “other things” because they are instantiations of different and other qualities: they are *not* “this thing.” In some schools of Buddhist logic it is said that this is how perception takes place. When we encounter something, we (in a split second) eliminate all the things that this something *is not* in order to arrive at what it is. When we look at a car, we in a nanosecond review all the general categories of things in our mental repository and check to see if this particular instantiation is an instantiation of one or another of those categories -- is it a ship? A motor home? A duck? A rainbow? Finally we say, “No, it’s *a car*.”

So, Arya Nagarjuna says, there are really two basic perceptual categories: “this thing” and “all the things this thing is not.” And that’s it. It’s either “a car” or it’s “something different than a car.” And that’s all the existing things there are.

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भावस्य चेदप्रसिद्धिरभावो नैव सिध्यति ।

भावस्य ह्यन्यथाभावमभावं ब्रुवते जनाः ॥ ५

bhāvasya cedaprasiddhirabhāvo naiva sidhyati ।
bhāvasya hyanyathābhāvamabhāvaṁ bruvate janāḥ ॥ 5

15.5

If there are no existing things
Then there are no non-existing things either.
When an existing thing becomes something
Other than an existing thing,
People say it becomes a non-existing thing.

If you say that fire doesn't exist since it neither has its own self-nature nor does it have the nature of being something other than itself, then you can't say that there is no non-existing fire either! The "other-nature" of a something that had a "self-nature" of being an existing thing would be a non-existing thing. If there is not a "fire which is essentially hot and burning" then there is no "fire which does not exist as hot and burning" either.

If there were truly existing things, there would be truly non-existing things. And just as the existence of a self-nature entails the existence of an other-nature, the non-existence of a self-nature also entails the non-existence of an other-nature.

Furthermore, if there were truly existing things (which there can't be), and those things subsequently ceased to exist, they would then become non-existing things (which also can't be). So there is neither a fire that exists with the self-nature of being hot and burning, nor a fire that ceases to exist when it is extinguished. There is neither an irritating person, nor a not-irritating-person who appears when the irritating person seems to change, ceases to be an irritating person, and instead appears as a nice person.

If there weren't qualities like "tree" or "car" there could not be the opposite of those qualities ("this thing which is not a tree," "those things that are different from cars"). Things seem to exist the way they do because they do not exist as different things.

But here Arya Nagarjuna takes things a step further. He notes that if you say, for example, "Trees don't exist" – perhaps because you've studied the last four verses and come to the realization that particular trees are just the empty placeholders for a general category called "tree" – then you fall into a logical trap. If trees don't exist, what is it that doesn't exist? The non-existence of something called "trees" presupposes something called "trees" that exist!

Furthermore, if you think something like a tree exists at one point in time but then later ceases to exist – say it was cut down and turned into firewood – then you would have to say that a truly existing thing called tree has become something other than itself: a truly non-existing tree. If the tree is truly an existing thing, how can it become something other than itself? How can it become a "non-existing tree"?

And what is something if it doesn't exist anyway? What is a "non-existing thing" if not just the interdependent mate of "an existing thing?"

Nagarjuna is setting us up for the next verse. Things are different from other things because they are examples of different general categories. But they are not *in and of themselves* "trees" or "cars" or "existing things" or "non-existing things." Everything exists interdependently and in relation to other things. There are no independently existing things or independently non-existing things.

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स्वभावं परभावं च भावं चाभावमेव च ।

ये पश्यन्ति न पश्यन्ति ते तत्त्वम् बुद्धशासने ॥ ६

svabhāvaṃ parabhāvaṃ ca bhāvaṃ cābhāvameva ca ।
ye paśyanti na paśyanti te tattvaṃ buddhaśāsane ॥ 6

15.6

Those who think that there are
Things with a self-nature and things with a nature of being a different thing,
Or who say there are existing things and non-existing things,
Do not understand the truth
Of what the Buddha taught.

As Candrakīrti comments, “Self-nature, other-nature, existing things and non-existing things are all unintelligible, total misapprehensions of those whose understanding is inverted by the defect of ignorance.” There are no irritating people who exist with a self-nature, but it’s not that irritating people don’t exist either. There’s no fire with the self-nature of being hot and burning, but where’s there any fire that’s not hot and burning?

To put it formulaically, as it occurs elsewhere in Buddhist philosophy:

- *nothing exists with a self-nature*
- *but it’s not that nothing exists at all (i.e., with an “other-nature” of non-existence)*
- *everything exists merely by virtue of us conceptualizing and naming things the way we do*
- *but everything exists without existing with some self-nature*

And, as Ārya Nāgārjuna notes in this verse, the Buddha didn’t teach that things had either self-natures or other-natures, that things either exist or don’t exist. Nāgārjuna calls upon one of the three methods for establishing valid knowledge: āgama, the authority of an unimpeachable source. (The other two are pratyakṣa or direct perception, and anumāna or inferential reasoning.)

Here's where Nagarjuna pulls out the rug. Different qualities or general categories ("tree" and "car") and qualities and their opposites ("tree" and "this thing which is not a tree") do not exist out there, independently, on their own as such. Qualities are projections, and these projected general categories make possible projections of particular things: "tree" is a mental image which then makes possible the mental image of "this oak tree." But it's all just projection; it's all just images of things and not the things in themselves. There is no knowable or "findable" objective reality that is unmediated by our projections of reality.

The Buddha didn't teach that there were qualities and characteristics, existing things and non-existing things. He taught that there were *projections* of qualities and characteristics, existing things and non-existing things. Things are empty of being themselves instantiations of the quality we see in them, and the qualities that allow us to see particular things are themselves empty of being anything other than mental projections of qualities.

As it is said in the Mind Only school, changing things (*shen-wangs*) are empty of truly and in and of themselves being the examples of the mental constructs (*kuntak*) we think they are. "That car" does not have "car-ness" in it; the changing thing ("that car") is empty of being the construct ("car-ness") that allows us to see it as "that car." "That car" is just a changing thing before and until we "kuntak" it as an example of "car." But the "car-ness" of "that car" isn't in "that car."

One of the differences between the Mind Only school and the Middle Way school is that the latter also denies that changing things truly exist as receptors for the general categories or constructs. The changing things themselves are empty of being changing things apart from the perceiver of the changing things. And changing things, by the way, can only be perceived as "changing things" because of the general category (*chi*) or mental construct (*kuntak*) "changing thing."

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कात्यायनाववादे चास्तीति नास्तीति चोभयं ।

प्रतिषिद्धं भगवता भावभावविभाविना ॥ ७

kātyāyanāvavāde cāstīti nāstīti cobhayaṁ ।
pratiṣiddhaṁ bhagavatā bhāvābhāvavibhāvinā ॥ 7

15.7

The Lord, in his “Instructions to Katyayana”
Refuted both “it is” and “it is not”
Through his analysis of
Existence and non-existence.

Arya Nagarjuna here backs up his assertion that the Buddha never taught that things have self-nature or other-nature, truly exist or don't exist, with reference to a particular sutra, i.e., a text accepted as authoritative by all Buddhist schools. In that text, the Buddha states that it is because people hold to the belief in one or another of the two extremes – things either are supposed to truly exist or not exist at all -- that they are unable to escape samsara.

The Buddha, Arya Nagarjuna states, did not assert that that things either exist or don't exist *independently, on their own, objectively*. They exist as projections, but are empty of existing in any other way.

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यद्यस्तित्वं प्रकृत्या स्यान्न भवेदस्य नास्तिता ।

प्रकृतेरन्यथाभावो न हि जातूपपद्यते ॥ ८

yadyastitvaṁ prakṛtyā syānna bhavedasya nāstitā |
prakṛteranyathābhāvo na hi jātūpapadyate || 8

15.8

If there were something that existed by nature
Then it could never not exist.
Something that exists by nature
Could never become something other than
Something that exists by nature.

If there were something that existed “by nature” (prakirtya) – that is, if it were the nature of the thing to exist as an existing thing – how could that thing ever become a non-existing thing? Nagarjuna here is noting (as he already intimated above in verse 15.2) that if things had essences they could never change. If fire truly existed, it could never be kindled and never be extinguished. If an irritating person existed essentially or by nature as an irritating person, they would have always been an irritating person and could never be anything other than that.

Je Tsongkapa sums it up: “Anything that exists essentially cannot change into something else. So, since things are observed transforming into something else, things do not exist essentially.”

If things existed in any other way than as projections of things – if there were trees that had the quality of “tree-ness” *in them* – then trees could never cease to be trees or change into something else and become, for example, firewood. If particular things truly had the qualities we attribute to them in them they could never be anything other than what they were. The fact that things appear to be changing and can transform from one thing (“a tree”) into something else (“firewood”) proves that they cannot have inherently in them the qualities we see them exemplifying.

This is very good news! If we were instantiations of “suffering living being” we could never be examples of “enlightened Buddhas.” *Because* we are *not* a suffering living being (but only *a projection* of a suffering living being) we could be a Buddha (i.e., *a projection* of a Buddha).

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प्रकृतौ कस्य चासत्यामन्यथात्वं भविष्यति ।

प्रकृतौ कस्य च सत्यामन्यथात्वं भविष्यति ॥ ९

prakṛtau kasya cāsatyāmanyathātvam bhaviṣyati ।
prakṛtau kasya ca satyāmanyathātvam bhaviṣyati ॥ 9

15.9

If there was nothing that existed by nature
How could it become something else?
But if there was something that existed by nature
How could it become something else?

Most commentaries take the first two lines as a potential objection to what Arya Nagarjuna has said in the previous verse. If you say that the fact that things change proves they don't have a self-nature, then what is it that's changing? Doesn't there have to be something – a “changer” that exists by nature as “a changer” or as a changing thing – for change to occur at all?

The reply comes in the last two lines: If there was something that had any kind of self-nature – even something that had the self-nature of being “a changing thing” – then how could it change? There can be no essential nature in something – even a “changer” or a changing thing – if the thing changes, for to say something has an essence is by definition something that doesn't change.

Another implication of this verse concerns the process of change itself. The opponent assumes that Nagarjuna accepts that change is really happening -- out there, in the world, truly and really. But Nagarjuna has never said this and does not believe it. Change itself is a projection. As Candrakirti puts it, “We have at no time agreed that there is change in anything at all.”

In the first part of the verse we have an imaginary objector saying, “If there were no qualities in things that made them what they were, how could they become something else?” If there were no suffering living being, what, exactly, would turn into a Buddha? If “changing things” weren’t *inherently* changing, how could they change?

The second half of the verse is Arya Nagarjuna’s response, in typical form. He changes one word (in Sanskrit, one letter) and comes back at his opponent: If things *did* have the qualities we see in them in them, how could they change? They would be forever and unchangingly what they are: a tree that had “tree-ness” in it would always be a tree, and a suffering living being who was essentially that would always be that.

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अस्तीति शाश्वतग्राहो नास्तीत्युच्चेददर्शनं ।

तस्मादस्तित्वनास्तित्वे नाश्रीयेत विचक्षणः ॥ १०

astīti śāśvatagrāho nāstītyuccedadarśanaṃ ।
tasmādaśtitvanāstitve nāśrīyeta vicakṣaṇaḥ ॥ 10

15.10

“It is” – this is grasping to eternalism.

“It is not” – this is the worldview of nihilism.

Therefore the wise person

Adheres to neither.

Nagarjuna, and Buddhism as a whole, adopts a “middle way” between two extremes: a) the position that holds that things exist with some kind of self-nature, and as such could never change or cease to exist and therefore would be eternal (shashvata); and b) the extreme that says, well then, since things don’t exist with a self-nature that means they don’t exist – nihilism (uccheda, literally meaning that things are “cut off” from or “cut out” of existence).

This and next verse enunciate the two extremes, between which Nagarjuna (and subsequently Madhyamika philosophy) occupy a “middle way.” To say that a particular or “characteristic” truly exists as the general category or quality that it seems to exemplify is one extreme, what Nagarjuna labels “eternalism.” And to say that there cannot be particular things if they do not have inherently the general quality they seem have is another extreme – “nihilism.” The middle way is defined here as the acceptance of neither extreme.

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अस्ति यद्धि स्वभावेन न तन्नास्तीति शाश्वतं ।

नास्तीदानीमभूत्यूर्वमित्युच्चेदः प्रसज्यते ॥ ११

asti yaddhi svabhāvena na tannāstīti śāśvataṁ ।
nāstidānīmabhūtyūrvamityuccedaḥ prasajyate ॥ 11

15.11

“That which exists through its own nature

Does not not exist” –

This is eternalism.

“It used to exist but now it

Does not exist” –

This is nihilism.

Arya Nagarjuna ends this chapter with another go at defining the two extremes, this time from a different angle. “Eternalism” is here defined as the belief that things have a self-nature and therefore “do not not exist” The double negative seems important: the extreme is here presented not as one of “existence” but of the denial of non-existence. The position is that if you say “things don’t not exist” you imply that they have a self-nature of being truly existent since they do not have the “other-nature” of being a “thing which does not exist.”

And “nihilism” is similarly defined unusually here. Arya Nagarjuna says it refers to someone who believes that things which once existed go out of existence, and thus become “nothing.” Things do not arise, last for a bit, and then disintegrate and die – and to believe so would get you labeled a nihilist by Nagarjuna. It is only an appearance and not the reality that things begin, endure, and end.

As the author has written in the very first verses of this book: “Nothing starts. Nothing stops. Nothing lives on, and nothing ever dies. Nothing comes, and nothing goes. Nothing is different, nothing is the same.” It’s all just projection; nothing is happening out there, independent of the perceiver.

Nagarjuna restates the two extremes. The first, “eternalism,” is defined negatively: the *absence of non-existence* of something that truly and inherently embodies the general category of which it is a particular example. And the second extreme position, “nihilism,” is characterized as the belief that something that once existed could cease to exist – a suffering being who ceases to be a suffering being and becomes instead a Buddha. There was *never* a (truly existing) suffering being, so there cannot *no longer* be a suffering being either.

Or put more positively, because there has *never* been a (truly existing) Buddha that you were not, you could be a (projected) Buddha.