

## Nagarjuna – Can Mind Transcend Mind?



1. *All things exist; affirmation of being, negation of nonbeing.*
2. *All things do not exist; affirmation of nonbeing, negation of being.*
3. *All things both exist and do not exist; both affirmation and negation.*
4. *All things neither exist nor do not exist; neither affirmation nor negation.*

*“The fourfold negation of the middle way”*

*Nagarjuna*

Nagarjuna was a prominent Buddhist thinker who lived in South India in the second century C.E. Other than Buddha himself, he is said to have had the deepest influence on shaping the Buddhist path of any scholar before or since. Nagarjuna created the philosophy of the ‘middle way’ (Madhyamaka) which is also called ‘Sunyavada’. He elevated Buddhist philosophy to a higher level and, in doing so, had a direct impact on Hinduism, including the final shape of Advaita Vedanta. There would be no Advaita as we know it without Buddhism, and there would be no Shankara (the greatest and most influential Hindu scholar) without Nagarjuna.

Buddhist philosophy relies deeply on the concept of ‘dependent origination.’ Dependent origination posits that everything in existence is interdependent and nothing has its own individual, separate

essence. The Buddhist theory of no-self can be both inferred and explained through the logic of dependent origination. As an example, it could be said that what people commonly call 'self' is actually just a bundle of interconnected psychological and sensory elements which, in unison, create the illusion of an entity, although none of these elements has a real essence in and of itself. Nagarjuna philosophized that this is not only psychologically, but also existentially, true – nothing has an inherent existence. This absence of essence is what he called 'sunyata' or emptiness. However, his concept of emptiness does not signify that everything is literally empty or things do not exist. It means there is nothing in them which can be identified as an independent core, as having an intrinsic substance of its own.

As noted, Nagarjuna called his philosophy 'Madhyamaka' or 'the middle way.' Buddha himself used the term 'middle way' to point toward a balanced approach to life and the path. However, for Nagarjuna, it was a purely philosophical concept indicating a refutation of the extreme views that things either exist or do not exist. He used the logic of dependent origination to postulate that every such 'view' ultimately leads to self-contradiction and absurdity. His was the middle way between eternalism and nihilism. Eternalism (or essentialism) posits that things have an independent and immutable essence, while nihilism entirely denies this essence. Nagarjuna did not seek to find a middle way between these two perspectives through a compromise between 'yes' and 'no' or 'is' and 'is not.' He aimed at the elimination of all views. It could be said his middle way is not a way at all – it is a non-way.

Nagarjuna contended the nature of existence is emptiness (sunyata). But this is not the emptiness of anything in particular, such as something vacant or hollow in the conventional sense of that term. Rather, he sought to describe an inherently non-existent condition, what he called 'the emptiness of emptiness.' Sometimes the term sunyata is interpreted as an affirmative description of our pure nature, an empty space or a vacuum which contains all things, but in itself, remains unchanged. Thus conceived, it is similar to the Hindu idea of attributeless (nirguna) Brahman. However, according to Nagarjuna, defining sunyata as a substratum of phenomenal existence is false, because it makes the error of absolutizing emptiness - in other words, it falls back into eternalism. This is against the very law of dependent origination:



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*Whatever is dependent arising  
We declared that to be emptiness.  
That is dependent designation,  
And is itself the middle way.*

*Something that is not dependently arisen,  
Such a thing does not exist  
Therefore a non-empty thing  
Does not exist.*

So what exactly did Nagarjuna mean by ‘emptiness?’ His goal was to create a philosophy that went beyond the polarity of ‘is’ and ‘is not.’ As such, he sought to use the logic of dependent origination to target the very mind that hinges upon this kind of logic. He believed the mind could be freed from itself by renouncing all concepts, including that of emptiness. He said:

*The Victorious Ones have announced that emptiness is the relinquishing of all views. Those who are possessed of the view of emptiness are said to be incorrigible*

His purpose was not to give people yet another dogmatic view, but to liberate their minds from all philosophy, including the middle way. In this way his approach to spirituality was ingenious – he used the mind against itself.

Nagarjuna’s term ‘emptiness’ signified the absence of conceptuality, an absence which results from the fourfold negation: negation of this, of that, of both and of neither. The purpose of this fourfold negation is to go beyond all relative views and realize true emptiness, a condition of non-view or non-conceptuality. Nagarjuna proved by means of logic that to say, ‘self does not exist,’ inevitably leads to contradiction, as it rationally implies we cannot say that non-self exists either. As he put it: “It is said that ‘there is a self,’ but ‘non-self,’ too, is taught.” In order to be liberated from this contradiction, he introduced two further statements:

*There is nothing which is “neither self nor non-self...” Everything is real; not real; both real and not real; neither not real nor real: this is the teaching of the Buddha.*



From this passage the four-fold negation, as it relates to the nature of reality, can be inferred:

1. It is not self
2. It is not non-self
3. It is not both self and non-self
4. It is neither self nor non-self

Finally, as Nagarjuna additionally pointed out, it is none of the above:

*In the true nature there is neither permanence nor impermanence,  
Neither self nor non-self, neither clean nor unclean  
And neither happiness nor suffering.  
Therefore, the [four] mistaken views do not exist.*

Nagarjuna was a very great and deep thinker, but he believed too much in the power of logic, even while he was using it against itself. Assuming the mind can be used to go beyond itself through the cancellation of all views, the resulting insight into the nature of reality is very limited. Non-conceptuality is just one dimension of our pure nature, and realizing emptiness through a process of elimination should not be confused with enlightenment. The true purpose of non-conceptuality is to make our enlightenment purer by refining its conceptual dimension - but it is not a substitute for our entry into reality.

Even if one manages to reach a condition of conceptual non-abidance (non-conceptuality), it does not prove one has access to one's pure nature; the absence of mind does not equal the presence of one's true self. This naive view can be identified in Zen Buddhism, too, where adepts believe they will reach awakening by eliminating concepts. But awakening itself has very little to do with the presence or absence of concepts. Awakening is a dimension beyond the mind, in which both the presence and absence of concepts are included. One cannot reach no-mind by clever negations of any kind. At most, one can experience a temporary cessation of the mind, but stopping the mind does not bring us even close to the actual dimension of no-mind.



Another matter to contemplate is whether the concept of dependent origination can really be used to prove that self is inherently non-existent. We would first need to penetrate the assumptions underlying the very complicated Buddhist analysis of the mind and the five aggregates (form, sensation, perception, mental formation and discernment). This analysis is used to prove that all the components of consciousness are interdependent and there is no substantial self to be discovered. But we must see the target of such an analysis is the mind of an ignorant person. Of course, an unconscious human does not have a solid sense of self; they are ‘man-machines’ – people without souls.

What would happen if a self-realized person were to analyze his own consciousness? Using the tool of dependent origination would be quite useless, because he would clearly be experiencing a tangible sense of self which is existentially prior to the act of self-observation. Consciousness is not really arising; it is the background upon which everything else arises. Only the consciousness of an unconscious person seems to ‘arise’ through its various manifestations. True consciousness, when it is actualized, is experienced on two fundamental levels as the base of our inherent, unchanging self: pure consciousness and conscious me.

And if we were to realize our self even further – beyond consciousness, when our whole soul is realized as a divine being of light in the context of perfect samadhi – where is dependent origination then? There is, indeed, a true and higher form of dependent origination, which is inherent in the relationship between the soul and her creator. The soul is both arising and not arising from the heart of the beloved into an illuminated recognition of her me.

On some level, Nagarjuna was very Zen, and the beauty of his approach deserves appreciation. But how could he not see the limitations of his viewpoint? He was clearly an intellectual genius, but to paint a picture of spiritual reality that stops at relinquishing all views is one-dimensional, and in many ways, unintelligent. Perhaps his own spiritual realization was incomplete, and that is why he stopped at the level of non-conceptualization. Or, perhaps, he had an entirely different role: to free Buddhism from clinging overly to its conceptual dimension. In some ways, philosophers are like sick people whose minds have become their disease. They will not let go of that mind, unless they can be persuaded to do so through logic. Nagarjuna used such logical arguments to convince those who are stuck in their conceptual constructs to drop the mind and become free of the burden of illusory understanding. But how free was he really?



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Nagarjuna typifies an era in which many great minds lived - profound thinkers who were deeply passionate about opening a higher understanding of the spiritual dimension. Although they can be accused of being overly intellectual at times, they did, at least, use their minds to understand. Nowadays, nobody is truly using the mind, and yet people still want to go beyond it. We live in the age of mediocrity, where so-called teachers propagate a diluted version of Buddhism or Advaita, repeating what they learned from others in a robotic way, unable to question anything or to identify how incomplete and ridiculous their concept of spiritual evolution is.

Amidst notions of instant enlightenment and very shallow standards for human spirituality, we also hear the idea that we are in the midst of a 'global awakening.' But what kind of awakening is it? Awakening to the utter hopelessness of this superficiality? The golden age of spirituality is lost in the past, like ancient monuments hidden under thick layers of dust. We can try to resurrect them, but there is no going back, because the spirit of revelation lives in the future, not in the past. If we get in touch with the greatness of our spirit, begin to use our higher intelligence and awaken our passion, sincerity and absolute dedication to truth, instead of living through the memories of bygone eras, we can begin to build an even more splendid temple of understanding. If we play our cards right, this will be the diamond age of spirituality, and like a diamond, it will reflect the unity of illumination, conceptual transparency, otherworldly beauty, and love of the supreme reality.

Blessings,

Anadi

*For a full glossary of terminology please visit our website [www.anaditeaching.com/glossary](http://www.anaditeaching.com/glossary)*

