



# ***The Ultimate Guide to a Better Life***

Art by Kaz Tanahashi

***The Path to Deep Freedom***  
***A Commentary and Practice Guide***  
For Nagarjuna's *Middle Way Philosophy*

# Preface

In 2016 the authors of this commentary, Carl and Andy, were engaged in an exegesis, a close reading of Nagarjuna's *Verses of the Middle Way Philosophy* (in its original Sanskrit, the "*Mulamadhyamakakarika*"; referred to in this commentary as the "*Middle Way Philosophy*"), occasioned by Carl's introduction to Andy of meditation methods and Buddhist concepts and practice generally. Many of the core concepts Carl was describing (all of which we will discuss in this commentary) were immediately familiar from Andy's background as a philosophy undergraduate, especially aspects of what would be described in Western philosophic jargon as metaphysics (descriptions of the nature of objective reality) and epistemology (descriptions of the nature of human knowledge). There was a big difference here, however – the familiar concepts were being analyzed using methods that were at least as systematic and logical as in the best parts of the Western philosophic canon, with the crucial difference that the analysis was intended to improve one's everyday life, and to do this in a big way. This was in sharp contrast to Andy's experience in Western academia where these discussions were characterized by a meandering, speculative quality that may have been intellectually compelling or provided interesting insights into these subjects, but were far from the comprehensive guide to a better life that is the *Middle Way Philosophy*. That said, the *Middle Way Philosophy* is a challenging read, and while there are several academically-oriented commentaries that are very useful to help a Western reader understand it, there remained a need for a plain-language, non-academically-oriented explanation to guide an interested reader through this fascinating and life-changing work. Hence this book.

In light of this goal, we thought it best to present this commentary as a practice guide, not as a scholarly or academic examination of Nagarjuna's treatise as that ground has already been well-tread. In addition, the book does not at all concern itself with the counterarguments of opponents in Nagarjuna's day – there was considerable debate in Nagarjuna's academic circles about the validity of his arguments, and the largest portion of the *Middle Way Philosophy* is devoted to countering those arguments. Instead, our aim is to present enough of the basic arguments in each chapter to show how the arguments of the *Middle Way Philosophy* hang together, and to suggest possible ways to practice with the concepts. Thus, we hope to provide a basic guide for the serious practitioner (beginner-Buddhist or experienced) on how to stand upright in the middle way as explained by Nagarjuna in the *Middle Way Philosophy*.

In keeping with tradition, we thank the Buddha (though we more mean Nagarjuna than Siddhartha), and all those translators and commentators on whom we have relied for understanding, and especially Jay Garfield for his translation and commentary (*Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*), which were the "initiating condition" for our decision to write this practical commentary, and on whose scholarship and thoughtfulness we have leaned heavily.

Though we are not particularly talented nor knowledgeable, (as Jeng-sui reminds us in the *Twelve Gate Treatise*, Nagarjuna's commentary on *The Middle Way Philosophy*—yes, he wrote a commentary on his own book!), nonetheless we dare to attempt, as Jen-sui would say, to teach the middle way, the empty gate.

We hope there will be daily benefits to all those who work with this practice guide, and further benefits to all sentient beings. This book has opened a path for us to live and walk in the middle way, and as it has improved our lives and reduced our suffering, may it do so for you the reader and for all sentient beings.

Andrew Cohen

Carl Jerome

January 2018

# Introduction

Nagarjuna's *Middle Way Philosophy* treatise (the original Sanskrit title is *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, often abbreviated as MMK, and frequently translated as *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*) is organized into 27 chapters, each examining an aspect of reality and expanding, verse by verse, chapter by chapter, along the irrefutable, particular line of Nagarjuna's reasoning to a place of peace. Finally, in the last four chapters, Nagarjuna moves from his intellectual scrutiny to practical ideas and concepts.

Attempting to read the text of the original text by itself, with no background, commentary or teacher, is likely to prove to be a difficult if not futile exercise for most Western readers. The text is frequently concise to the degree of obtuseness, and more significantly, presupposes a familiarity with both Buddhist concepts and with the philosophical disputes and jargon specific to Nagarjuna's milieu of Buddhist monastic culture in Northern India at his time, 1800 years ago. Nevertheless, once the jargon is "unpacked" and the text explained, the elegant and linear logic of Nagarjuna's system becomes clear. Even then, this is a work that takes several readings and lots of thought and contemplation before it settles in.

Providing that unpacking and colloquial explanation for readers with no previous familiarity with Buddhism or Nagarjuna is the aim of this commentary. Further, we provide practice suggestions so that Nagarjuna's ideas can be applied readily to everyday life. Nagarjuna would have seen this as much more than just a philosophic treatise; he would have seen it as the blueprint for a way of life, a way of understanding ourselves and our world that led us to a little less suffering each day.

With that background, let's start our analysis with a two-sentence summary, then explain some key terms and concepts that will help you navigate this dense material. Forgive the arrogance of us trying to summarize such a complex book so briefly, but from a practice point of view, we believe it will be helpful:

*The way the things we observe actually come into being and exist is on the "middle way" between permanence and utter non-existence, with each person, object or event resulting from conditions arising in a dependent, ever changing, interrelated middle way called "dependent co-arising" or "dependent origination." Unpacking that, in excruciating detail, with intellectual scrutiny, Nagarjuna has us arrive at an understanding of emptiness, the foundation for a way of life that leads to us ending our suffering.*

That's what this book is about.

The first chapter of *Middle Way Philosophy*, "Examination of Conditions," introduces Nagarjuna's foundational themes, as well as his favored technique for argumentation, a form of ancient Indian logic called negation. He starts here with the most basic of his negation arguments and then spends virtually the whole book telling us what things—people, places, objects, events, etc.—*are not* in order to lead us to understand what they really are. This makes the text seem obtuse and counterintuitive to the modern Western reader, but we will attempt in this commentary to offer explanations, examples and practices that help overcome this challenge. By the end of the book, however, it becomes clear why Nagarjuna has had to present his philosophy this way, and a big "aha" can be heard by most readers.

Before reading any further, it will be helpful to familiarize yourself with a small handful of key concepts and terms (and helpful again to re-read these summaries whenever you need as we work through the text of the *Middle Way Philosophy*), and then with some biographical notes about Nagarjuna and his role as the Second Buddha, as he is sometimes labeled. Alternatively, we note that all of these concepts are, apropos

of the main message of the *Middle Way Philosophy*, interrelated, so if you find reading through these descriptions tough going, it may be helpful to skip to Chapter 1 and revisit these explanations as they arise in the course of Nagarjuna's arguments.

## Emptiness

According to Nagarjuna all phenomena—all people, places, things, events, processes, states, etc.—lack permanence, lack any inherent qualities, discernible self-sufficient nature, function, definition or meaning. For Nagarjuna, this is obvious because there is no way to produce or create something which is permanent. Phenomena, lacking permanence, are called “empty,” meaning empty of permanence, not having any kind of inherent qualities, definition, meaning or value.

It is especially important to understand that “emptiness” is an adjective, not a noun; it is a designation, not a thing. It is not something permanent that underlies the universe, but rather, and simply, “ultimately” how things really are, which means dependently arisen and ever changing.

Take chocolate, for example. For most of us, a piece of chocolate holds great appeal. We have developed an affinity and if it's bitter chocolate, we may believe it has health benefits as well as being delicious. But if we eat too much chocolate, we feel bloated and sick and our affinity quickly turns into an aversion. For Nagarjuna, this would illustrate that chocolate is neither inherently appealing nor inherently distasteful. It lacks an independent, autonomous desirable or undesirable self-nature and requires other conditions to be present for it to have any qualities at all (e.g., a certain quantity, freshness, a complex flavor profile, appealing color, etc.). It is empty. Were it not empty, it would have an eternal always-the-same meaning and value (and desirability), and we could never change from liking it to disliking it. This will continue to be unpacked and explained as we get further into the text. To use another example, one of the authors loves blueberries and the other does not. Again, this is only possible because blueberries are empty, meaning they lack an inherent likability or undesirability, or for that matter any other permanent, autonomous meaning and definition.

In English, the word “empty” may seem negative and pessimistic as the starting point for a philosophy of life, but in the way Nagarjuna means “empty,” it is the foundation for a life of infinite possibilities. Only because there is emptiness, because things are not permanent, only because things don't have an intrinsic existence, are we able to distinguish between moral and immoral actions, and are able to make distinctions between beneficial and harmful actions. In fact, it is from emptiness, as we said, that morality arises. Again, these complex issues will be further discussed in the body of this commentary.

Note that empty means empty of permanence. Empty (of permanence) is not the antonym of full; nor is permanence the antonym of impermanence. Keeping that in mind will make understanding Nagarjuna easier, though it is no easy feat considering how we normally use the word empty in English. This is a very special word in Buddhist philosophy, used in a special way, and which doesn't, unfortunately, translate readily from the original Sanskrit.

Once we realize what emptiness *is*, or rather what it means, life becomes lighter, happier, and as a consequence, healthier. It gives us a navigational tool for seeing ourselves, our families, and the everyday world in a new, clear, comfortable light. It is an understanding that allows us to be fully present and

engaged—spiritually, cognitively, morally, ethically and emotionally—in a wholehearted way, with who we are and what we are doing.

It is definitely not “empty” in the everyday sense of being meaningless, or futile, or in the sense of there being nothing there. It is, in Nagarjuna’s usage, the exact opposite. Emptiness is a worldview that allows us to be connected and fully engaged with ourselves and others. It is an optimistic view that leads us to infinite possibilities. This will become incrementally clearer as we explore the different concepts in each chapter with Nagarjuna. Just bear in mind, that emptiness is a completely positive and emphatically mindful and engaged, peaceful way of seeing ourselves and our world.

Finally, for Nagarjuna, realizing the Emptiness of all events is a state where all mental constructions dividing reality into discrete entities are absent, and there is a seeing of everything “as it really is”. But this state, by definition, allows for no more statements. ‘Nuf said.

*[Click here](#) to go to Deep Dharma’s dedicated webpage on emptiness, should you want to dig more deeply into the meaning of emptiness.*

## The Two Truths

The doctrine of the two truths, the belief that there are two levels, two concurrent perspectives, on which to understand “reality,” was originated by Nagarjuna in the *Middle Way Philosophy* and has become a core belief in the predominate strains of Buddhism ever since.

The two truths are the conventional truth and the ultimate truth. Reality exists, according to this doctrine, on these two levels simultaneously. The conventional truth is the way we understand our everyday lives. This understanding is the stories we all conventionally agree upon about what things are or what is happening. Conventional truths are helpful, not accurate; they are generally agreed upon understandings, not what is really happening. “This is my car,” is an example of a conventional understanding. But really? Honda thinks it is their car and the bank thinks it is *their* car! “I am driving downtown.” That’s a conventional truth (a story) describing what is and is happening when I get into *my* car and drive it toward downtown Chicago. We need the conventional truth so we don’t end up in Milwaukee when we are “driving to Chicago.” Again, conventional truths are helpful for navigating our lives, but they are certainly not accurate.

Conventional truth—our shared understanding—allows us to respond in a way that either creates a peaceful event or a painful, suffering event out of what is happening. Conventional truth, as Nagarjuna explains late in the text, is a much needed navigational tool for finding ultimate truth and for ending suffering.

Ultimate truth is the understanding that all phenomena are empty—empty of any inherent self-nature, empty of permanence, empty of any concrete meaning or value or definition or function. The ultimate nature of things, **which** we call empty, is how things really are when they are not obscured by a conventional story. Emptiness is described in more detail in the introductory note on emptiness, and in the dedicatory note that precedes Nagarjuna’s text and in the preface and conclusion of this commentary, as well as implicitly and explicitly throughout the *Middle Way Philosophy*.

## Suffering—in Sanskrit: *Dukkha*

“I teach *dukkha* (suffering) and the ending of *dukkha* (suffering).”

– *The Buddha*

These words were clearly imprinted on Nagarjuna. The entire *Middle Way Philosophy* is, ultimately, aimed at teaching us to understand the source of our *dukkha* and how to end our *dukkha*.

### Defining Dukkha

No single English word adequately captures the full depth, range, and subtlety of the Pali term *dukkha*. Over the years, many translations of the word have been used ("stress," "unsatisfactoriness," "dissatisfaction," and most commonly "suffering"). No matter how one translates *dukkha*, it's always deeper, subtler, and more unsatisfactory than that.

To illustrate, *dukkha* is, from a definition by Buddhist scholar Francis Story: *Disturbance, irritation, dejection, worry, despair, fear, dread, anguish, anxiety; vulnerability, injury, inability, inferiority; sickness, aging, decay of body and faculties, senility; pain/pleasure; excitement/boredom; deprivation/excess; desire/frustration, suppression; longing/aimlessness; hope/hopelessness; effort, activity, striving/repression; loss, want, insufficiency/satiety; love/lovelessness, friendlessness; dislike, aversion/attraction; parenthood/childlessness; submission/rebellion; decision/indecisiveness, vacillation, uncertainty.*

## What is The Middle Way?

The middle way is a mode of understanding ourselves and operating in our world in which we realize that things are neither permanent, on the one hand, nor completely non-existent on the other hand. It is a way of seeing the world in which we realize that there is an alternative to thinking that things must be absolutely here in a permanent way or that they don't exist at all.

That alternative is seeing how things arise in a dependent, interrelated “middle way” — not absolutely and inherently here and not not-here either. Things don't have to be one the extremes of permanent or non-existent (reification or nihilism). But because our brains process the information that is received from our senses in a way that appears either to exist, in a separate and outside-of-us way, or as simply non-existent, it is hard to fashion or fathom the existence or character of the middle way.

The middle way is seeing that things arise in a dependent relationship and association with other things. The technical term for this is *dependent origination* (things originate in dependence on other things). It is sometimes translated from the Sanskrit as dependent arising, or dependent co-arising (meaning things arise only in a co-dependent relationship with other things.)

This is a hard concept to wrap our minds around: no self-nature that is permanent, but rather an ultimate interrelated dependency of all things. It is saying that if we look at things in the middle way, we see them as

conventional stories or understandings which may be helpful or useful in navigating our lives but that are not actually or ultimately what's there in objective reality. If we realize, deeply and profoundly what is ultimately there, then our lives become comfortable and peaceful and, regardless of the circumstances.

It is important to remember, and to frame our understanding, of this monumentally important Buddhist text as its author did. Everything in *Middle Way Philosophy* is steering us to a way of understanding ourselves and the world so that each day we are a little wiser, a little happier and healthier. And, it is being done with an irrefutable, airtight logic that not only allows but actually encourages intellectual scrutiny, looking deeply into things to gain a greater understanding, and to support our meditation practice. This union of a solidly-argued metaphysical system, joined with its practical application to everyone's lives is a huge distinguishing feature of the *Middle Way Philosophy* compared to the relative lack of focus of so much Western metaphysical theory on firm conclusions and the practical implications of that theory.

## Life Is Meaningful!

So while things may not have an inherent definition and value, being they aren't permanent, they are meaningful, and emphatically meaningful, as Nagarjuna explains. In fact, the middle way—this understanding that things arise in relation to other things in an interdependent relationship—is what gives life meaning. Were it to be otherwise, if things were permanent, then nothing would be meaningful because nothing we did or said or thought could change anything. And it is our ability to act in ways that influence and change the people, places, things and events of our lives that makes the middle way so important to understand.

Common sense – as well as intellectual scrutiny as we will see in our explanation of the *Middle Way Philosophy*—clearly indicates that none of the stuff in our lives is permanent, meaning nothing has a permanent label, definition, meaning and value. That is precisely why two people can have different views of the same thing; why one of this commentary's authors can love blueberries and the other can hate them. If blueberries, metaphorically speaking, or anything else—any person, place, thing, event, or process—did have a permanent meaning, everyone in the world would necessarily see it the same way and there would be no reason to label and characterize it as the name and meaning would always be the same and obvious to everyone. If blueberries were intrinsically, permanently awful, as one of us thinks, then everyone who saw a blueberry would feel the same about them. But this obviously isn't the case. If things—again, people, places, events, processes, whatever—had intrinsic labels and values, we would also not be able to influence them or change them or affect them with our actions so our actions would be without meaning or consequence. Further, if our actions were without consequence, there would be no morality.

Anyway, what we do does influence the people and world around us. Precisely because they are “empty of permanence,” can we engage with them. In each moment, we make a choice about what to do and the result of that choice is to produce a new condition in our lives, in the world, which will become the basis for our next choice and action. So every choice and action matters, every decision is meaningful and lasting—just not in some permanent or inherent way.

Saying that nothing has an intrinsic, permanent meaning, is really saying that there are fruits to my actions, consequences to my deeds. Everything I do matters. So this is suggesting that it is important to have a metacognitive voice. A metacognitive voice is an internal dialogue that questions how (not so much what)



we are processing the information of the world fed to us by our senses. It asks if our intention is grounded in patience, compassion and generosity which would lead us to peaceful happy, healthy lives, or in greed, anger and delusion, which leads in the opposite direction. Everything we do and say and think is one or the other. The question is, which are we choosing?

## Metacognitive Voices

We know anecdotally from 3000 years of monks watching their minds, as well as from extensive current mind-body scientific research, that mindfulness requires an “internal voice” to monitor and guide us in how we process the people and events of our lives so that we can stay present with what is happening in a peaceful and healthy way.

Virtually everyone has some kind of “internal voice,” some kind of self-talk that they use to navigate the minor to momentous celebrations and dilemmas of life, technically called a “metacognitive voice.” Some people have monologues through which they interpret everything as either positive (the pollyannas: “I am so happy I got cancer; I’ve learned so much from it.”) or negative (the doom and gloom naysayers: “Yesterday was too cold; today it’s too hot—I am never going to be able to go out for a walk....”). Most people have a simple self-centered dialogue. This kind of dialogue weighs the pros and cons of each situation and decides what is “best,” defining best as getting more of what we like and less of what we don’t like (My best shot at getting them to sign the contract is if I lie about the long-term effect; it’s ok if it gets them to sign; they would do it to me if they were in my seat.”). In Buddhist terms, that means all the dialoguing decisions are based on greed—wanting and desiring more, wanting to get our way.

Few people naturally have the other self-talk voice we are describing as a true metacognitive voice, but anyone can develop one. A metacognitive voice is an internal voice that says, how am I processing the information that is coming to me through my mind and senses without determining whether we want or do not want what is before us, simply seeing and acknowledging what is observed. So a metacognitive voice is a voice that leads us to peacefulness in how we process information, regardless of the information itself—it’s about process not content. A couple of metacognitive voices that we the authors frequently use, when feeling a little anxious or upset, are: “Am I processing what’s happening with patience, compassion, and generosity?” or “Am I being curious, open, and accepting?”

The particular question that works best arises from the context of the particular emotional challenge; with a little practice, you will be able to arm yourself with a handful of metacognitive questions that will handily get you through even the most trying of times. In many of the practice notes throughout this book, you will find suggested metacognitive self-talk questions.

Metacognitive questions and voices are an essential practice tools for anyone seeking to live more peacefully and happily, which is why they are so extensively mentioned throughout this book. However, it is important to note that with enough practice, these voices will reset our default to a place where they are no longer necessary, and at that time, they will gently fade away.

## Who and What Was Nagarjuna?

Legendary and mythical accounts of Nagarjuna's life abound, many of which are surreal and phantasmagorical—like him being a sorcerer and alchemist who could turn metal into medicines, or to his studying secrets of Buddhism from mythical sea serpents, called nagas. Nagarjuna literally means “protector of the nagas,” because according to myth, he provided the nagas with medicines they needed while he studied with them. In Tibetan Buddhism, Nagarjuna is symbolized as the Medicine Buddha, a deity who is worshipped because he is seen as able to cure physical and mental illness. Writing a book about emptiness and ending up being worshiped as a god would most likely have left Nagarjuna reeling in hysterics, it just so misses the point!

Myths aside, very little can be accurately said about Nagarjuna's life. About all scholars know with any certainty is that he was born into an upper-class family, and was a Buddhist philosopher monk who lived in southern India sometime between 150 and 250 CE. For our purposes in this commentary, where we are primarily concerned with understanding and applying his teachings, the myths and legends, while amusing, are irrelevant.

A review of his writings shows that Nagarjuna would likely have seen himself personally as a Buddhist, with a deep monastic practice, and professionally as a Buddhist philosopher who was promoting a Buddhist philosophy of life. We can also surmise that he saw himself as a monk devoted to and immersed in a long Buddhist tradition, not as an upstart trying to revolutionize Buddhism, though he did do that. As such, he wouldn't have classified himself in the way we want to classify him today in the West, either as a “metaphysician” or an “idealist.” He likely wouldn't have seen himself as a metaphysician, a philosopher who was concerned with explaining the fundamental nature of being and the world that encompasses it. Rather, we he would have seen himself as a monk dedicated to helping others find the path to end suffering. Nor would he have seen himself as an idealist, someone suggesting that reality existed solely as an idea in our heads. That concept doesn't seriously enter into Buddhist thought until two centuries after Nagarjuna's death, with the writings of Vasubandhu and the development of the Yogacara school.

Nagarjuna saw himself as a Buddhist doing exactly what the Buddha had done—explaining the way we generate our suffering and offering a way of seeing the world that could end that suffering. Whether it was the frustration of raising a family or the difficulty of ruling a kingdom or dealing with existential questions of the meaning and life and death, Nagarjuna saw himself as able to explain to us how to end our suffering.

Buddhism, up until Nagarjuna, had a wobbly philosophic base. That all ends with the *Middle Way Philosophy*. This profoundly enlightened monk saw clearly how to unite all of the basic tenets and teachings of Buddhism into a consistent and irrefutable philosophy of life, which he calls “the middle path.” He presents it with such airtight logic and reason that he shifts the entire future of Buddhism onto the middle path.

Although he is deeply philosophical in this book, in some of his other writings we see that he is more down to earth in offering advice about how to make life easier and more peaceful and how to make the world a better place. Here we have to tease the practical applications out of the text, which we do in the Practice Notes which follow the commentary on each chapter.

If Nagarjuna Is So Important,

## Why Have Most Buddhists Never Heard of Him?

According to the Stanford *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “There is unanimous agreement that Nagarjuna (circa 150–250 AD) is the most important Buddhist philosopher after the historical Buddha himself and one of the most original and influential thinkers in the history of Indian philosophy.” Why then would you be hard pressed to find a Buddhist anywhere in the world who even knew the name of Nagarjuna, much less who had read or studied him?

The simplest explanation we can offer is that most Buddhists learn about their “faith” either casually from their parents or through dharma talks (sermons) when they attend weekly services in their Temples. Buddhist services, like Jewish, Christian, and Islamic services in synagogues, churches and mosques can be seen as serving three purposes: (1) providing community, and a meeting and practice place for the faithful, (2) indoctrinating the young into the faith, and (3) providing followers with a basic moral code. “Church” services are not a place for deep theological teachings or discussions. Most of the teachings at churches are quick lessons with a simple moral underpinning. If we think of Buddhist monks, parish priests, neighborhood rabbis, local imams and ministers as primarily congregationalists with fiscal, membership, and administrative responsibility for their congregations, it is not surprising that great thinkers like Nagarjuna are not a regular part of their preaching and purview.

In the same way that Karl Barth, one of the most influential thinkers in Christian church history, is virtually unknown to the vast majority of Christians today, and Al-Ghazzali, one of the most important Islamic philosophers, is unknown to the vast majority of Muslims, Nagarjuna is unknown to the vast majority of Buddhists. In all religions, it seems that schisms can arise between preaching and pondering—with the pondering either relegated to the back burner or allotted to a select few of the religious intelligentsia.

Another reason why Nagarjuna is so little known is that his teachings were not meant to be used to create new Buddhist institutions. Unlike Luther and Calvin, in Christianity, who were preaching toward new institutions, Nagarjuna was acting in the background of his faith to unify and shore up its “theology” (really more what Western readers might call its “philosophy.”) So Nagarjuna, in the centuries after his death, would bolster and revolutionize the monasteries and temples without ever having his name attached to them. They would, on one level or another, virtually all adopt his middle way philosophy, without much acknowledging him.

# ***Annotated Table of Contents***

## Chapter One – Permanence and Conditions

Here we see that nothing can be permanent—can have self-sufficient, intrinsic qualities that define it—because, among other reasons, there is no way to produce (create) something that is permanent. Since cause and

effect, by definition, is permanent, then there is no natural cause-and-effect relationship possible between people, objects or phenomena. So how do things arise? They happen when four very specific conditions, which depend on each other to happen, appear to arise together. “Empty” is the term for anything that is characterized by this lack of permanence.

## Chapter Two - Motion

Here any view of motion (or change), in which motion is seen as permanent (not empty) is incorrect. Simply put, if a “mover” were permanent, it would never be able to change and so couldn’t move anything. Similarly, “moving” and “moved” would not be able to change if they were permanent. If the three were independent and permanent, they could occur out of sequence, as they wouldn’t depend on each other to arise. So something could spontaneously have moved without a mover or moving having occurred. The way things move, or change, then, is in a dependent, co-arising, conditional relationship. Anything that fits the formula *mover-moving-moved*, (*subject-predicate-object*), is dependently arisen and so is empty. “Moving” can also be translated as “changing.” Nagarjuna wants us to see that we can change things in a way that ends our suffering. Were things to be permanent, something that caused suffering would not be able to be changed and so there would be no possible release from suffering.

## Chapter Three – Senses

Using vision as the example, Nagarjuna explains here that all senses and sense perceptions are empty. This uses the same logic as Chapter 2, but furthers the point that there is no permanent, reified “se-er,” and so no permanent autonomous perceptions of “seeing” and “seen.” To emphasize the emptiness of senses and sense perception, we realize here that far from seeing what is in front of us, we only see that which (1) our eyes can make contact with—a tiny percent of the electromagnetic spectrum, and (2) only those things we already know—we can’t see things we have no previous knowledge of or understanding of how to discover, our eyes and brain simply don’t process the truly novel. And so it is with the other five senses: hearing, smelling, feeling, tasting, and thinking (mind and thought are classified as a sixth sense in Buddhism).

## Chapter Four – Aggregates

The aggregates are an ancient Indian five point model (consisting of form, feeling, cognitions, mental fabrications, and consciousness) explaining how we create our concept of the Self. When we make a sense contact, we cling to our feeling about the contact—our affinity or aversion. We then cognize it, meaning we label it, filter it, and set our brain to writing a story about it. The stories are fabricated from memory fragments assembled because they seem close to what’s happening, and because they make sense in terms of our previous understandings (all of which were fabricated in this same manner). The brain then sends the story to our consciousness and we assert it as an aspect of who we are and then act from that position. Chapter 3 showed that our sense contacts (the first aggregate) are empty; here Nagarjuna shows that the other four aggregates are also empty and so there is no permanent Self (and no soul).

## Chapter Five - Elements

In traditional Indian philosophy current at the time of Nagarjuna (1800 years ago), it was believed that things were composed of six elements: earth, air, water, fire, consciousness, and space. Here Nagarjuna uses

space to show that none of these six elements exist in a permanent way. The elements can't be understood as inherent characteristics of entities because no matter how we take an entity apart, neither the entity nor the characteristics we assign to it, arise other than in dependence on other phenomena and so cannot be part of some permanent inherent nature of the entity. Understanding this goes a long way to understanding no-self, an overriding concept that is strewn throughout *Middle Way Philosophy*, though perhaps not as explicitly as a modern reader might like. Importantly, in the last verse of this chapter, Nagarjuna explains that if we believe that things either don't exist at all or exist in a permanent way, we are dangerously stuck in the extremes and will be unable to become peaceful, a concept that is supported throughout by various arguments.

## Chapter Six – Desire

Here we learn that there can't be desire without a desirer. Like Chapter 5, this is a discussion of the relationship between entities and their properties—but rather than entities as things, entities here are people and characteristics are psychological rather than physical. Desire and the desirous, desirer and desired, are dependently co-arisen, not independent or autonomous, and as such as empty. If we were to think of entities and their properties—in particular, ourselves and our characteristics, or people and their characteristics—as independently characterized things, we can make no sense of how the characteristics and the person being characterized fit together.

## Chapter Seven – Dependent Arising

After demonstrating how various things and phenomena arise in dependence upon each other in the preceding chapters, here Nagarjuna explains that dependent arising itself is empty; it is neither inherently existent nor completely nonexistent. Rather than being one extreme or the other, dependent arising is the “middle way” in which things exist in an ever-changing interdependent, not permanent way. This is a long chapter that addresses complicated antagonist positions of Nagarjuna's opponents, but the core argument establishes that the phenomenon of dependent arising, like the people and things that arise dependently, is empty.

## Chapter Eight – Agent and Action

For Nagarjuna, neither agent nor action (the do-er or the thing done) can be permanent. If, he explains, an actor, an agent, were permanent, it would not be able to involve itself in actions, for that would require it to change, something that would be impossible for a permanent agent. The only explanation left is that of the middle way: that agent and action are dependently arisen and empty. Further, subject and object are mutually dependent, so neither can be autonomous and distinct from the other.

## Chapter Nine – Prior Entity

In this chapter, Nagarjuna addresses the possibility that, after conceding that all phenomena are empty, there is still a prior entity, a person or subject who is perceiving these empty phenomena. Nagarjuna points out that, by definition, if something is a “prior entity,” it has to be permanently and independently separate from whatever follows it. This is impossible: Nagarjuna reminds us of Chapter 8's explanation; subject and object are mutually dependent, so neither can be autonomous and completely separate from the other.

## Chapter Ten – Fire and Fuel

This chapter is a long discussion of a common analogy in Nagarjuna's time, that of the relationship of fire and fuel. It reminds us that when phenomena are seen as empty, as impermanent and relational in character, then identity and difference can only be understood conventionally (i.e., as things appear to us in

the everyday conventional world). Understanding this is critical because it applies not only to fire and fuel, but also to parts and wholes, entities and their attributes, as well as to self and objects of which the self is aware.

## Chapter Eleven – No Beginnings and No Endings

Whether we are discussing the life and death of a person or the beginning and end of a bowl of candy or of the universe, we notice, using Nagarjuna's reasoning, that beginnings and ends, starting points or initiating moments and final points or last moments, only exist as conventional understandings, and even as such are wobbly fictions or perspectives. Beginning and endings are, of course, empty—lacking in permanence. Without a belief in permanent beginnings and endings, all our existential questions drop away, all our confusion about birth, aging and death drop off, leaving us dramatically and emphatically more peaceful.

## Chapter Twelve – Suffering

The Four Noble Truths are the cornerstone of Buddhism (there's a whole climatic chapter on them toward the end of the book), and the first of these "truths" is that everything (all conditioned phenomena) is suffering. Here Nagarjuna explains how there is suffering even though suffering is empty. It is easy enough to see, using the reasoning of Chapter 1, that we can't produce suffering in a permanent way. So suffering arises in dependence on conditions and is therefore empty.

## Chapter Thirteen – Compounded Phenomena

Nagarjuna begins in this chapter to examine compounded phenomena, or emptiness itself. Compounded phenomena are people, places, things, processes or events that are made up of parts. In fact, everything is a compounded phenomenon because everything has parts. Things that are made up of parts can't be permanent and autonomous and have an independent self-nature as they are dependent on other stuff (parts) for them to exist. So all compounded phenomena are empty, and by extension, since every part is made up of empty parts, emptiness itself is empty. And, everything compounded is deceptive and false, and so a source of suffering.

## Chapter Fourteen – Associations

Understanding that the parts, whether physical, like the parts of a table or an eye, or perceptual, like visibles and visual perception of compounded phenomena, are each and every one empty (see Chapter 13), still leaves the possibility that the connection, the assembly, or assemblages, of these parts into ensembles or more simply, into stuff, is not empty. This chapter explains that that associated conditions as a whole or entity does not exist. The assumption that things can be in a permanent discrete association is false: all there is are compounded phenomena.

## Chapter Fifteen – Essence

This is a continuation of the explicit explanation of emptiness in the previous two chapters where the pieces themselves of dependently arisen things were shown to be empty and the assemblies of those pieces or connectors of those pieces were shown to be empty as well. Here Nagarjuna addresses "essence" directly – the concept that things have permanent self-natures. To say that something has an essence means that it

can never change, never not exist, and so it would be eternal, and if something didn't exist in the past, then it would never be able to come into existence (that would entail change). This is absurd because it means that nothing, not anything in the world and not even the world itself, can ever change, not even us.

## Chapter Sixteen – Bondage

Even if there are no independently-existing entities, it would seem we are still bound to our ideas of our separate selves and entities, and to what Buddhists call “cyclic existence”—meaning we are bound to transmigrate or be reborn into life after life until we manage to become enlightened. We have already established that everything is empty, even emptiness, so how can one be bound to something that doesn't exist. In a sentence, bondage to “samsara,” this world of suffering, and liberation, becoming enlightened, are conventionally useful stories, but all the pieces: bondage, us, nirvana (liberation from suffering), samsara, are ultimately empty. On top of this, we observe that in today's world and under Nagarjuna's philosophy, literal reincarnation as either a concept or a reality is insupportable.

## Chapter Seventeen – Actions and Their Consequences

Obviously, there would be no Buddhism if our actions didn't bear fruits, specifically if we weren't able to act in ways that relieve our suffering. Thus, Nagarjuna is not going to say here that there are no consequences to how we act. Instead, Nagarjuna explains that our actions, karmic links, and results or consequences are things we experience conventionally, but are empty of anything other than this conventional existence.

## Chapter Eighteen – Self and Entities

“Self” and “entities,” and whether they exist or don't exist or arise in some other way has largely been the concern, implicitly and explicitly, of the previous seventeen chapters. Nagarjuna has shown repeatedly that there is no such thing as “entityhood” or “Self.” What he has said is that we are conventionally (not permanently) suffering beings able to reduce and perhaps even eliminate our suffering. He has shown that there is no self in relation to perception, action, and suffering. Here he shows that there is no self, period, for if there were a self, it would have to be the same as or different from the aggregates (Chapter 4), and neither of those is reasonable or possible. The final verse is a reminder that we need to meditate on this idea of no self and no entityhood.

## Chapter Nineteen – Time

Granted that everything, including, with particular focus, self and entities, is empty, Nagarjuna's textual opponents still insist that the time in which we do things and entities arise and abide, is permanent. Not so, Nagarjuna says. There cannot be a permanent past, present, and future because if that were so then they could exist without any relationship to each other and, ludicrously, the future could occur before the past. Time has to be seen, for Nagarjuna, as a set of relations between things, all of which depend on each other (there cannot be a future without a present and past, for example) and so time is dependently originated and empty.

## Chapter Twenty – Combination

This chapter reinforces several of the arguments already made, to show that even though Nagarjuna is suggesting that things arise in an infinite flux of interrelationships, the combination of all of these conditions is empty. Complexity does not imply or result in permanence for any entity or phenomenon. As each of the conditions is empty, then the combination of any several or all is empty. This is very similar to the explanation in Chapter 14.



## Chapter Twenty-One – Arising and Ceasing

Nagarjuna explains in this complex philosophical chapter that when we think hard about how things are, the idea that there are permanent, discrete moments in which something can arise and or cease, makes no sense at all.

## Chapter Twenty-Two – Tathagata

The term “tathagata”—it translates as “thus gone,” meaning enlightened one—was originally a title applied to the Buddha, but later developed to mean someone who had or would become enlightened, and then morphed again to meaning “Buddhanature” or “Buddhahood.” As with other supposedly separate, permanent phenomena, the idea that one can develop an inherent or permanent state of enlightenment is as incoherent and downright unimaginable as the idea that a state of enlightenment somehow exists within us. Enlightenment is not a separate, permanent phenomenon (Chapter 25 develops the related concept of Nirvana further). In addition, this chapter deals with the theme of the Two Truths, an understanding that there is a conventional (everyday) understanding and an ultimate understanding (emptiness) to everything, and that they are one and the same. This chapter concludes with the statement that nothing has an inherent self-nature; there is no entityhood! This final statement can not be emphasized enough as belief in a Self is the root source of suffering.

## Chapter Twenty-Three – Errors

This chapter explain how we create errors, and how to reimagine ourselves and the world we live in to eliminate the errors that are causing us to be bound to suffering. The primary errors are the key “defilements”: greed, anger, and delusion; plus (1) a belief in a permanent Self – a belief that our body – meaning (2) following our senses, will lead us to happiness, and (3) that real happiness can be found in our deluded understanding of the world (samsara).

## Chapter Twenty-Four – Four Noble Truths

On the one hand this chapter appears to be about the Buddhist concept of the four noble truths, from the perspective of emptiness, meaning that they are conventional understandings that are ultimately empty. In that sense, they can be thought of as a skillful practice model for understand suffering, how we create it, and how to act. Right view and right intention (the wisdom piece); right action, right effort, right livelihood and right speech (the behavioral piece); and right meditation and right concentration (the meditation or experiential piece.) But, emphatically, Nagarjuna wants us to understand that each element of the Four Noble Truth, as well as the four together, are empty. On a deeper level this chapter is about emptiness itself and about the relationship of emptiness to conventional reality. Understanding the difference between the conventional and the ultimate, and the complex relationship of the conventional to the ultimate and vice versa is a critical pathway to liberation and peace.

## Chapter Twenty-Five – Nirvana

Here, Nagarjuna explains how Nirvana is a dependently arisen concept indicating a state of awareness of things as they are, empty and pacific, as opposed to the way things appear to be conventionally. In Nagarjuna’s explanation, nirvana is not an entity, not a state of being, not a heavenly home; it is not something to be achieved or accomplished or reached. Nirvana is simply a way of engaging with entities that, despite appearances, have no separate existence, but rather are products of our conceptual frameworks.

## Chapter Twenty-Six – The Twelve Links

The twelve links are a Buddhist doctrine further explaining how suffering is created and perpetuated, and provide a classic Buddhist understanding of the interdependence of all things. As such, the links are dependently arisen and therefore empty. Understanding this, and developing a world view based on it provide us with a tool for shifting the way we see things from samsara to nirvana. This is full engagement with the world, not an escape from it to some mythical separate place called “nirvana.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven – Views

Nagarjuna concludes the book by demonstrating that the root of all erroneous views of reality is the view that the self or the external world exist inherently. “No Self!” Nagarjuna is shouting; and by extension, “No Entityhood!” There is a sense that as he concludes the *Middle Way Philosophy*, he feels he has not emphasized enough the need for a no-self practice, a point he expands upon in later commentary.

# ***Chapter-By-Chapter Commentary and Practice Notes***

## **Chapter One – Examination of Conditions**

The first chapter, “Examination of Conditions,” introduces Nagarjuna’s foundational themes, as well as his favored technique for argument, a form of logic commonly used in ancient India called negation. He

starts here with the most basic of his negation arguments and then spends virtually the whole book telling us what things—people, places, objects, events, etc.—*are not* in order to lead us to understand what they really are. This makes the text seem obtuse and counterintuitive to the modern Western reader, but we will attempt in this commentary to offer explanations and practices that help overcome this challenge. By the end of the book it becomes clear why Nagarjuna has had to present his philosophy this way, and a big “aha” can be heard by most readers. This first chapter’s arguments resonate throughout the entire *Middle Way Philosophy*, so we devote a significant portion of this commentary to it.

We are all familiar with negation as a way of reasoning, though very few of us have heard the term. “Negation” is the way we play the game Twenty Questions. “No, it’s not a person,” “No, it’s not an event,” “No, it’s not a thing,” “Then it’s a place?” “Yes.” Eliminating all cases of what something *is not* eventually leads us to realize what it is. That’s negation. And that is the way Nagarjuna is going to explain “emptiness,” the central concept of the book. To illustrate the flavor of Nagarjuna’s argument, negation appears from the first verse of the *Middle Way Philosophy*, which observes:

Neither from itself, nor from another,  
Nor from both,  
Nor without a cause,  
Does anything whatever, anywhere arise

Among other things, this key passage in the *Middle Way Philosophy* sets forth the first and most basic idea of the book. There isn’t anything—not people, not places, not things, not events, not processes—that is permanent. By permanent Nagarjuna means that it has an unchanging, autonomous, essential self-nature. This is often described alternatively as there being no “inherent existence” or “substance” behind any item or phenomenon. He is declaring that if something is not permanent, if it has no real essential characteristics, then it cannot have an inherent value, meaning, function or definition, and understanding this is a major pathway to a better and more peaceful life.

There are many ways to deduce that nothing could be permanent, that nothing has an essential nature, independent of other things, but the one that Nagarjuna highlights, as we noted above, is to explain that nothing can be permanent because there is no way to create or produce something that is permanent, no way for something permanent to have come into being or be originated.

The *Middle Way Philosophy* offers a few arguments to support this idea. One is that the process of making or producing something permanent would require it to change during its production. By definition, something that changes is *not* permanent – if it had an identifiable essence or substance, that individuated essence or substance that gave the thing in question its identity could not morph or change (it would be “permanent”) because if it did, the phenomenon in question would no longer be of the same essence or substance as it was prior to the supposed change and would lose that which gave it its identity.

So Nagarjuna is saying that we must conclude that nothing is permanent because there would not have been any way for it to originate, to “arise” (as it is frequently termed in Buddhist literature), to come into being.

In more detail, his reasoning: to create or produce something is to make something new arise. There are only four possible ways something could be produced – (1) it could come from itself, (2) from something else, (3) from some combination of the two, or (4) from nothing. (1) If it were produced from itself, it would have to already be here before it arose (i.e., it would already exist within that which was producing it), in which case it would make no sense to say it had arisen. (2) Something permanent cannot be produced

from something else, from something completely different, because that means that things would arise with no connection and for no apparent reason (corn fields could suddenly spring up in the tarmac of the local high school parking lot, or monkeys could suddenly change into woolly mammoths, for example). This idea that there can be no connection between supposedly independent entities is elaborated later in the *Middle Way Philosophy*. (3) Something cannot arise from some combination of those two, for the same reasons just stated. And, (4) something cannot arise from nothing, meaning if there is nothing there to produce it from, then nothing can arise. (In some modern Western philosophy, nothing becomes “nothingness” which is an entity; not so for Nagarjuna: nothing is literally nothing, not anything.)

The technical term for this style of reasoning is a *tetralemma*, or a “four-fold negation.” The tetralemma was a common form of argument in Nagarjuna’s India of the third century, and this particular use of the tetralemma is one of his most famous. We realize that to many readers the conclusion reached from the tetralemma, that there is no way to support any notion of a thing being permanent, of inherent existence or substance to anything, any entity or phenomenon, is counter-intuitive, to say the least. Nevertheless, if the examples provided seem silly, it is because, while it may not be intuitive, the reasoning that would lead one to think anything at all, anywhere, in any way, could be permanent, is, when scrutinized, silly and insupportable logically.

A side effect of engaging with Nagarjuna’s argument is that our common intuition, that what we observe is “really there” in the way that it appears to us, is actually underpinned by deeply-held, false, but not often acknowledged metaphysical beliefs, namely our assumption that there are inherently existing entities and phenomena – again, that there is some self-supporting “us” and “them” or “us” and “other” or “this” and “that,” and a belief that they somehow have some indescribable causal powers over each other (meaning there is cause and effect).

Nagarjuna knew he had gotten it right. There is a confidence in his writing, both in style and content. There were also a couple of centuries of prior Buddhist writings, called the wisdom literature, with scriptures like the *Heart Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra*, that support the direction and conclusions Nagarjuna is presenting in the *Middle Way Philosophy*. So Nagarjuna could see himself as part of a continuum of Buddhist thought; and as someone who finally could bring Buddhist thought together, into an irrefutable whole—a middle way that finally made sense of the disparate and often contradictory frameworks that made up the first 700 years of Buddhism and its philosophy. He likely knew in a deep way that his opponents, Buddhists who thought differently than he, who were opposed to and were denying the new wisdom sutras and literature, had gotten it wrong, and indeed, the judgment of history came down on Nagarjuna’s side. Virtually all of Buddhism, from Nagarjuna’s time to ours, uses Nagarjuna’s ideas about emptiness and practice as their foundation.

Having established that nothing can be permanent with the first verse of the book and its supporting argumentation, Nagarjuna proceeds to further arguments showing that nothing being permanent means that there is no cause and effect—at least in the way it seems to happen in our everyday world. Taking a light switch as an example: if flicking it truly “causes” the light to go on, flicking the switch would *always* have to “cause” that to happen, even if there were no bulb at the other end. If it only works sometimes, then it is just one of many factors necessary for that “result” to appear, the flicking of the switch would depend on the presence of other factors (e.g., power plant, unbroken wiring, intact filament, etc.).

Why? Why can’t there be “cause and effect”? By definition, causes and their resultant effects would have to be permanent, i.e., unchanging. In other words, if something were truly the cause of something else, i.e., if the existence of the cause were by itself enough to bring about the effect, it would always have to cause that effect. Put another way, if the cause is seen as an entity or phenomenon that is identified by its

inherent essence or substance, and the cause brings the effect into being, then the cause would not exist without causing its effect – the inherent essence or substance of the cause would consist (at least partially, but necessarily) in causing its effect. Thus, no cause could exist without automatically causing its effect, which points out another problem with viewing anything as permanent. If this were so, the cause would then by definition depend on its effect to exist, which is inherently contradictory to the concept that the cause exists with an essence or substance that is independent of anything else.

So now what? We need to understand that the way the brain presents the world to us, it very much looks like there is cause and effect, and that flicking the switch *causes* the light to go on. But that is just not the case; results or effects are simply interpretations that we impose on what has or is about to happen. Another interpretation could be this: when I flicked the switch, I was able to read my book again. In this interpretation, flicking the switch results in me reading. So we can see, since “cause and effect” do not represent any real relationships, results and effects are simply interpretations that we impose on what has happened or is about to happen. Where we start our interpretation and where we end it makes things appear established in reality but they are just stakes we plant in the sand to explain what is happening, even though things really occur in a fluid ongoing and ever-changing, not static, way, as we will discuss in more detail later in this commentary.

On the everyday conventional level it may seem that there is cause and effect because, as a research scientist friend who struggled with this idea, explained, “there is cause and effect in science because there is an understanding that A will cause B, *all other conditions remaining the same.*” For Nagarjuna, that means A and B are just a couple of the many conditions necessary for something to happen, and not separate from those other conditions in an inherent way where A causes B regardless of the other conditions. When we look at scientific explanations for events that would fit our notions of one event causing another, there has never been a way to show an actual link or causal power between the events that doesn’t depend on something else, some other conditions being present, to complete the description of these events. (“Conditions” has a specific philosophic meaning for Nagarjuna. Understanding conditions is critical to understanding this chapter, and indeed, Buddhism and the middle way as a whole. It will be explained in detail later in this chapter’s commentary.)

Another way of looking at this, using common sense, is to examine something we think of as a cause, and look at the conditions that made that happen, then the conditions that made those conditions happen, and so on. So using the same example again, if the light switch makes the light happen, then what made the light switch happen. This then forms an infinite regress from light switch to manufacturing plant that makes light switches to the inventor of plastic that is used, and so on with everything having to have a cause infinitely in all directions, which is obviously not possible.

That was the first verse and its implications, which negated any possibility that something could be permanent and so eliminated the illusion of cause and effect. Next Nagarjuna says that there are only “conditions” forming all the phenomena we observe. Even defining conditions is difficult, but, we can think of a condition as a person, place, thing, process, event or state to which we appeal to explain (really, how we fully describe) another person, place, thing, process, event or state. So conditions are everyday understandings that we use to explain how things happen. Flicking a light switch, then, is a condition which we use to help explain how a bulb lights up. In Nagarjuna’s model, it is what we are calling an initiating condition, meaning it describes an action that starts our current explanation for something happening, here the appearance of light.

Conditions describe how change occurs in a world without cause and effect. They describe how things happen through an association of a series of related “events” that each fall into one of four descriptive

categories. The events arise in association with each other and appear to “cause” (or explain or predict, depending on how we view the particular set of conditions) something to happen. These conditions depend upon each other and arise in association with each other, so we say they are “dependently arisen,” or, more commonly, “dependently originated.”

Nagarjuna follows a standard philosophic model of his time when he states emphatically that there are only four types of conditions. Using the light switch example there are: [1] an initiating condition (flicking the switch); [2] a supporting condition (the switch working, there being unbroken wiring from the switch to the lighting fixture, the bulb not being burnt out, etc.); [3] a background condition (electricity available to flow into the building and through the wiring); and [4] the final condition (someone seeing the light). Since all conditions arise in a dependent relationship and association with other conditions, Nagarjuna explains, each of the conditions is “empty,” and the resultant “effect” is also empty. Note that one way of understanding this is to realize that the initiating condition, in this example, the flicking of the light switch, is itself the final condition in another series of co-arising conditions. For example, walking up the stairs or opening my front door could be the initiating condition to flicking the light switch. So again, this become an infinite regress; in fact, it is also, if flicking the switch is seen as the initiating condition, the start of an infinite progression—going forward rather than backward.

From a Buddhist perspective, why is this so important? Because if reality existed in any other way than empty conditions, it would be impossible to end our suffering. If there were things that had permanence, inherent values and meanings, and if cause-effect relationships were inherently real (i.e., set in stone) then we couldn’t change them and so things that cause suffering would always cause suffering, regardless of what we did. It would be impossible to end our suffering as its causes would be unchangeable. And a chunk of chocolate, to use that example again, would have to either be delicious, all the time, or nauseating, all the time. Only if it is empty, can it be understood as it actually exists. Contrary to insisting on any notion of permanence, Buddhists and many others have observed, to the contrary, that change is possible (indeed, it is the only natural order) and so is lessening suffering

## Conditions

Because this idea of conditions and conditioned arising is such a fundamental concept, we need to devote more space here to understanding the suggestions and implications Nagarjuna is making in this opening chapter. Let’s simplify it into bullet points (this is largely based on Jay Garfield’s exceptionally clear and accessible explanations):

- For Nagarjuna, for something to be a “cause” it would have to *always* produce its effect. By this definition, the cause-and effect event would always have to happen in exactly the same way regardless of surrounding conditions because, as explained, cause and effect are, by definition, “permanent.” Again, if flicking the switch “caused” a light to go on, then every time the switch was

flicked a light would go on – even if the switch were broken or there was no electricity. This example makes clear that there are many other conditions to the light illuminating than simply flicking the switch.

- Regularity gives the illusion of cause and effect where there is none. Stand in the lobby of a large office building and watch what people do when there is a delay in the elevator arriving. They keep pushing the button, one after another, repeatedly. Why, because normally when you push the button you might expect the elevator to come in a few seconds. So regularity, when things happen in a repeated and predictable pattern, gives us the illusion of causality. But further, when things don't happen in the predictable pattern, we become upset—if the elevator is “slow” in arriving, if traffic light doesn't change fast enough, if the kids aren't home from school by “the predicted” 3:15, and more complexly, if people we care about don't die in a predictable way, on our schedule (usually meaning something like peacefully and at an old age), then we suffer. Our illusions of regularity even show up at a micro-scale where we learn in science class that a particular gene, say NF Kappa-B causes inflammation. But it is not at all that simple. There has to be an initiating condition, like invading bacteria, for it to fire, and that bacteria has to meet certain conditions within the body to initiate an immune response, which could lead to NF Kappa-B firing. Further, the NF Kappa-B gene has to reside in a certain body environment (which is itself reliant on innumerable previous conditions to exist), and so on.
- When Nagarjuna uses the term “condition,” he has in mind a person, place, thing, event, state, or process *that can be appealed to in explaining another person, place, thing, event, state, or process*. Conditions are stories or narratives we create to explain how things happen, how things appear to arise. In other words, we make up stories to explain other stories! (No wonder we are so deluded!) But none of these conditions, these stories, alone or in and of themselves, can make anything happen. The big leap here is that conditions, which are simply narratives created by us as the perceiver to explain something in the conventional world, are “empty” and the event that arises as a result of their association is also empty. Since being empty means lacking permanence, lacking an inherent definition, meaning, function or value, this means that conditions arise only in an association with other conditions, all of which are in a continuous interrelated flux. Nothing in that flux can be autonomously and permanently existent, and where we start and end that “story” determines, amazingly, a false internal world and external world to match it.
- Nagarjuna notes that there are only and exactly four categories of conditions that can be appealed to in the explanation and prediction of phenomena. The four are (1) an initiating condition, (2) a supporting condition, (3) a background condition, and (4) a final condition.
- In the light bulb example, the initiating condition is flicking the light switch, flicking the switch gets things going, (2) the supporting condition is that the hardware is in place and in order: the wires, fixture and bulb are in place and working, (3) the background condition is the availability of electricity flowing into the building and being available to flow through the switch to the bulb, and (4) the final condition, seeing the light. In the elevator example, (1) pushing the button is the initiating condition, (2) the elevator car and cables and other hardware being in place and in order is the supporting condition, (3) the computer algorithm that controls the cabs movement and current to operate the elevator are the background condition, and (4) seeing the door open when the elevator arrives is the final condition. So, (1) the initiating condition starts the process which is concluded in the (4) final condition, when the event that was started is seen to occur. In the examples above, (2) the supporting condition can be compared to the hardware necessary for the event to occur, (3) the background



condition can be compared to the software needed to operate the hardware. Note that one could substitute different conditions in each of these categories to change the story.

- Nagarjuna wants us to realize that no condition has any inherent potentiality. The wires, the supporting condition in both of the examples above, don't have any ability or potential, in and of themselves, to create light or make an elevator move. They are just wires. This also means, for Nagarjuna, that if we were to examine all four conditions together, we would not see any event somehow contained within or necessitated by those conditions, they simply add up to a conventionally plausible description of how something happened. So all of the conditions, and even the association or connection of the four, are all empty.
- Our desire for something to happen does not exert some magical or mystical or occult force that makes it happen. We can "will" a parking place to open up just as we arrive at a downtown restaurant, but it can't make a parking place open up just as we arrive. If that worked, if we could exert an occult force through sheer will power, that would be cause and effect, and again, according to Nagarjuna's reasoning, there is no cause and effect. Nagarjuna emphasizes that when we choose a person, place, thing, event, etc., as a condition, we should remember not to allow ourselves to think it is causal in any way. Our desire for light does not exert some occult force on the lights. Nor is there some synchronistic force at play, nor is there some propelling evolutionary force at work, nor is there anything to be found in the flicking of the switch other than the plastic, metal, movement, and connections visible to the naked eye. Occult or metaphysical causal forces and powers are totally absent, and appealing to them to explain how things happen is dangerous and deluded.
- Explanatory Interest and Language: What we are typically confronted with in nature is a vast network of interdependent and continuous processes, and carving out particular phenomena (person, place, thing, etc.) for explanation or for use in explanations depends more on our explanatory interests and language than on the nature of the conditions themselves. Simply put, what we choose to see and talk about has more to do with who we are, what we are interested in at the time, and the language we choose to express ourselves, than with the nature of what is "happening." If we enter a well-lighted room, we don't mention it; on the other hand, if the room is dimly lit, we might flick the switch or ask that the lamps be turned on so we can see better. So it is not about the light, *per se*, but about our need and interest in having more light. And, the language we use to ask for more light reflects our mood (are we asking gently and politely, indicating we are being open and patient, or are we making a snide remark about this room always being too dark, indicating we are upset) rather than anything about the light or lack of light itself.

Nagarjuna is embarking with us on a journey here that will provide the practical understanding and tools necessary to realize deeply that the ultimate nature of the universe is peacefulness, and that this peacefulness, and the attendant happiness that arises from it, is accessible to everyone. Most of the *Middle Way Philosophy*, then, can be understood as a description of reality that is not intrinsically Buddhist, it simply shows things as they are in objective reality. His specifically Buddhist tools are found in the last four chapters of the book—chapters which define and explain the right view necessary to "walk the middle way" as well as the understanding of how to think and act and speak to ensure each day becomes a little more peaceful, a little happier. We try to bring the practical applications of Nagarjuna's work into play in the Practice Notes included as to each chapter..

Practice Notes: Practicing with this first chapter has three key and several auxiliary aspects. First, we suggest practicing with the idea that nothing is permanent. Second, practicing with the idea that there is no cause and effect, and third, practicing with conditions.

*Practicing with nothing is permanent:* We need to define a term first before we can look at how to this practice. That term is “reify.” To reify something is regard it as if it had its own concrete, material existence, as if it were an independent autonomous thing, or to regard something abstract as a concrete material thing. As hinted at above, to let our minds make something seem permanently real and material is purely an abstract idea. We think we exist in a concrete and material way, we reify ourselves, and believe, for example, that Andy and Carl somehow exist in an independent, material way that has traversed time and space: Andy remembers experiences when Andy was six years old as though it were the same Andy as the one who went fishing with his son yesterday; Carl remembers Carl, and a lot of other things he did when he was twenty, as though it were the same Carl who helped create this commentary. Reifying Andy and/or Carl is nonsense. We can’t be permanent entities, and we certainly aren’t the same selves that we were forty years ago, and the same applies to all other objects interpreted by our minds as separate and independent.

Practicing with nothing being permanent is *not* practicing with the idea that everything is impermanent, for that would reify impermanence. Rather, it is practicing with a voice in our heads that questions any time we reify anything. Especially our selves. Nagarjuna is particularly emphatic about applying a lack of permanence to the self, to who and what I think *I am*. This focus on not reifying the self is one of Nagarjuna’s (and Buddhism’s) biggest concerns, and this idea will be continually explained and reinforced throughout this commentary: no permanent self, no soul.

Practicing with nothing being permanent in a serious situation, say major depression or chronic pain, can reduce, minimize, and sometimes even eliminate the problem. How? We set aside a specific amount of time each day, say 15 or 30 minutes, to examine the statements: I am depressed or I am in pain. We stop reifying our selves and the depression or pain. We start by studying and meditating with the concept that there is no permanent, depressed or pained self. We look at those descriptors carefully and intimately, over a period of week and months, until they lose their weightiness, their validity and intensity. Next, we start thinking, there is no depression. We explore it in meditation, seeing how things that aren’t permanent appear to be permanent. See how what we have reified as depression is simply an ever-changing mix of ideas and sensations, not actually a material entity of its own. We breath into them, observing them intimately, seeing them as ever-changing, not solid and substantive, and then we repeat, out loud if we can, but in our heads if there are people around: “This is not me, this is not mine; there is no self.” Over the weeks and months of practice, we can flood our minds with that quote and, with patience, the depression or pain can slowly weaken. This gradual process happens at different rates for

each of us, we do not want to give the impression that this practice with non-permanence is necessarily easy. After all, if the concept were intuitive and easy, we would not need to practice with it! Nevertheless, the more we practice with nothing being permanent, the less anything can exist (in a false permanent way), and the more peaceful we become.

*Practicing with no cause and effect:* All of our understandings, our stories, about how things are happening involve a cause and effect belief and have a cause and effect story. When we look carefully at the stories, the narratives that we are operating on, they lose their sting and, very often appear silly. Initially, however, this is not self-evident. Maybe when we hear ourselves saying, “the red light is making me late” we can see the silliness of blaming a hunk of yellow and red plastic for my not getting to the office on time. Similarly, when one of the authors’ mother says, “If I don’t hear from you in the morning, it ruins my day,” we can see

the need for empathy without adding elements to the story that needlessly increase our own suffering. When we are caught up in our own narratives, however, even complex stories that could not conceivably be causally connected when viewed at any level of remove can take hold. For example we could hear ourselves saying (as someone did to Carl), “I knew if I went on vacation to the Amalfi coast, my (diabetic) daughter’s sugar would spike and she’d have to be hospitalized.” No, our experience of Italy’s Sorrentine coast line and adjacent sea cannot cause one’s daughter to need hospitalization.

When we realize that all our stories, all of our conceptualizations of what is happening, are written in a cause and effect structure when in fact, there is no cause and effect, we lessen their ability to make us suffer. We do this by lessening their import, and we begin to stop believing them. This moves us significantly in the direction of a life in the middle way, and gently starts to remove us from the delusion that dominates our stories and thus our lives.

In the three examples above: We let ourselves laugh out loud for somehow believing that the algorithm which controls the local traffic pattern knows and is attacking me personally by making the light red (it should, after all adjust itself to me when I pull out of my driveway, right?) Then we take a deep breath, feel our feet on the floor and pedal, our hands on the steering wheel, and quietly follow our breath for the few remaining seconds before the light turns green. We bring ourselves back to a painless mindful condition. With Mom, we see the silliness of her statement, which allows us to be empathetic and compassionate, and explain that we will do our best to give her a buzz each morning, but that conditions at the office sometimes prevent it and so she isn’t to worry if we miss a day. Finally, we talk to the nurse at school so she knows (1) that we have talked to our 11-year old daughter about the importance of monitoring herself diligently while we are away, and (2) for the week we are away, her aunt will be watching her, so call the aunt instead of the parents if there is a problem.

Yes, the stories are false and foolish, nonetheless, they are meaningful. They are useful in arousing our sense of empathy and compassion, and leading us away from our suffering, from our deluded self. Understanding that there is no cause and effect even though it appears that way to us conventionally, means, when we practice with it, that blame and recrimination fall away and are replaced with an understanding that we should be open, curious and accepting in learning to see conditions clearly and learning to “abide in conditions,” to use a Buddhist phrase. We no longer blame people and things, not for our perceptions of them, nor for our stories about them. We simply look at conditions and respond appropriately.

When I am upset with something I have done, and I notice that that is what’s happening, I tell myself to “stop; stop it!” Then I ask myself, “What silly cause-and effect story did I just tell myself that is upsetting me?” I look at the story, chuckle, sometimes even laugh out loud, and remind myself there is no cause and effect, and the story lightens in weight or sometimes falls away completely. This self-talk that I do is using the meta-cognitive voice discussed in this commentary’s introduction. It’s a voice in my head that helps me regulate how I am choosing to interpret things. And realizing, even when I am under duress, that there is no cause and effect keeps me on track to a better life.

One last point is that knowing that there is no cause and effect means, and we must always remember this, we can never predict the outcome of an action. Having stage four cancer does not mean I will *die* of cancer. I could be struck by lightning or hit by a car or have a heart attack or die of complication of the chemo. Having stage four cancer does not mean I will die of cancer any more than speeding on the highway means I will have an accident or get a ticket.

*Practicing with conditions.* Nagarjuna presents us with a model for understanding conditions in which there are four conditions: an initiating condition, a supporting condition, a background condition, and a final condition. We can use this model, say, to decide whether or not to buy a car, or we can simplify it, as we'll explain in the other two examples below.

I am having trouble deciding if I should buy a new car. I start by asking, is there an initiating condition, or what is the initiating condition that is triggering this question. If it is that my neighbor bought a new car and I so I need one to keep up my esteem, then there isn't an initiating condition; competing with my neighbor for who has the newest car or biggest house isn't seeing conditions clearly. If it is that my car is getting old and needs significant repairs, repairs that are so expensive it would be better to just buy a new car, there is both an initiating condition (dilapidated car) and a supporting condition (repairs too expensive to justify keeping the car). If there is money in the bank to buy a new car, then the background condition is present, and then the final condition would be if there are car dealers where I can buy a car, and I do just that, buy a new car.

A neighbor, who is in his 85 years old and still safely driving, even if no longer at night, buys a new car every two years. There is never an initiating condition, there is not a "need" on any level for a new car. Why does he do it? Because he has a belief, from the 1950s, that cars only have a two-year shelf life—after that they start to fall apart and are undependable. That was certainly a commonly held, and reasonable, belief 60 years ago, but it hasn't been a clear read of conditions in a couple of decades. Cars today comfortably last for 10 or more years without significant mechanical problems. There is no need to buy a new one every two years; no initiating condition.

Let's look at another simple example; one that doesn't require using Nagarjuna's model: being cut off in traffic. I am driving on the highway and a car cuts me off, cutting so sharply in front of me that I have to hit the brakes hard. I can feel the anger rising as I brake. "Who does he think he is cutting me off like that?" Well, let's just ask, what is the condition? The condition is that another car switched lanes in front of me. Nothing else. And what is the appropriate response to the condition, it's what any self-driving autonomous car would do: slow to increase the distance between my car and the one that just entered the lane to a safe distance and then resume a safe speed. That's all conditions are suggesting; that's what we do if we abide in conditions. No anger, just a calm, peaceful response. Interestingly, I have no reason to believe I was "cut off." My car may have been in a blind spot for the other driver, and so they might not have even known my car was there. My anger has no effect on the unseen other driver, it only serves to further cloud my own perceptions. Road rage never arises when one abides in conditions!

Also, we need to practice with the knowledge that there is no synchronicity (nothing metaphysical or occult happening, ever), and no coincidence. Things may seem to converge in crazy ways that lead us to that narrative, but they are just conditions arising and we supply a narrative that make it seem to us that the events are connected. Synchronicity and coincidence are just a product of a story we are telling ourselves. Carl gave a talk on mindfulness at a local public library on a Sunday afternoon. One of the attendees said she noticed its synchronicity with an article in the New York Times that day. No, the New York Times did not synchronize the publication of that article with Carl, nor was the Times article the reason Carl was talking as Carl was not aware of the article. Neither condition arose because of the other; neither condition validated the other. Both were just empty conditions.

Practicing with a Cancer Diagnosis: Carl's doctor called him and said (we're abbreviating the story, it was actually a several minute, sensitive conversation), there is an abnormal growth in your white blood cells. Carl was in a hurry, so he said, "Exactly what does that mean?" There was starting to be an edge in his voice. "Carl, you have leukemia." Conditions have changed, Carl heard himself saying to

himself. To his physician he said, “So I have cancer [in that instant he heard himself saying to himself, ‘I guess this is where people write the Cancer Story.’]. Guess you want me to see an oncologist. Email me some names I will be go to one and have them copy you on whatever is decided. I have got to run now or I will be late for my gym class.”

Honestly, that is how it happened. After long practicing with using his meta-cognitive voice and abiding in conditions as they are, he was able to simply proceed to the gym. No cancer story; no “I Am Dying” story. He had lunch after the gym, then made an appointment with the oncologist. Buying a new car or being cut off in traffic, though, aren’t “serious” and so it is easy to abide in conditions with them. But getting a cancer diagnosis is very different. Students often say that, but it is no different, not for those who have practiced with conditions: seeing conditions as conditions, and empty; learning to abide in conditions as they are, without embellishing them.

Understanding conditions, understanding everything as interdependent and in perpetual flux, provides us with a tool for navigating the conventional world that Teflon coats troublesome reactions and responses to people and events, preventing us from being able to stick (crave or cling) to them and so be uncomfortable or suffer. In a sense, knowing the emptiness of conditions changes the bias from creating one of perpetual discomfort and suffering to encouraging one of peacefulness and happiness.

Nagarjuna is trying to give us a jump start to understanding and seeing the world in a reliable way, in the way it really is, which is lacking in permanence, meaning everything is empty. This understanding, when we take refuge in it, makes everything easy and peaceful. When we realize, as Nagarjuna teaches so effectively in this chapter, that there is no cause and effect, at least not in the conventional way we generally understand that phrase, life lightens and softens—an ease slowly settles in. All of our suffering, and it is not stated explicitly here but is certainly lying there just under the surface, comes from us creating erroneous cause-and-effect stories—something is always causing me to be miserable, externally so from red traffic lights to rain to people waiting in line to buy tickets at the movie theatre, to irascible computers and either well behaved or misbehaving kids, and internally so from guilt and recrimination and displeasure at our performance with our coworkers or spouse or the dog or even ourselves. Again, whether the alleged event occurs externally, like it's raining, or internally, like feeling guilty, all suffering comes from blame—either blaming something outside of ourselves or blaming ourselves—all suffering comes from blame, meaning a cause-and-effect story that is simply a fiction and needs to be seen in that context, as not really what is happening.

So, whenever we feel anxious or panicky or stressed, it is a signal that we need to change our narrative. We need to reexamine the conditions with patience, compassion, and generosity; with openness, curiosity, and acceptance. It is a matter of noticing the discomfort early and then remembering to use an internal voice to ask: “If I were being patient, compassion and generous, right now, how would I see the conditions.” Or, “If I were being open, curious, and accepting, right now, how would I see the conditions.” The answer will be a new narrative that leaves one peaceful.

## Chapter Two – Examination of Motion

In this second foundational chapter, Nagarjuna shows that change is possible, and indeed is the natural state of a world where nothing is permanent. To do this, Nagarjuna here examines “motion,” which can be read more generally as a discussion of change. Keeping in mind that the goal of the *Middle Way Philosophy* is to show us how to relieve our discomfort (*dukkha*) with the affairs of everyday life, how to end our suffering, without the possibility of change, this goal would be impossible to meet. It is therefore crucial to Nagarjuna’s argument that he establish, right up front, that change is possible, and thus it is possible for us to change our suffering into peacefulness. In personal terms, here we also see that the person suffering (nor suffering itself) is not stuck forever, permanently, as a person who must live with the yoke of suffering, or with the burden or identity of having suffered. No one needs to suffer, changing from suffering to peacefulness is always possible.

Nagarjuna uses the idea of motion, the idea of things coming and going, to show how change is possible. Again, this can and was meant to be understood as more than just movement, it was also meant to cover “change” in general, a flow of nominal or conventional comings and goings. From a Buddhist

perspective, it is important for us to understand that our suffering and mental afflictions are not permanent, not unchangeable, and not “real” in the way they seem conventionally, but rather that they are underlain by mistaken beliefs that the things that cause suffering do so inherently, or that some essential nature of external things and events necessitates our reactions of suffering. In terms more like those of Chapter 1’s discussion of cause and effect, the things “causing” our suffering do not need to do so as they are not permanent (have no inherently real independent characteristics), and thus they do not characteristically need to cause us suffering at all. Instead, we create the conditions under which these “causes” of suffering do so and we can change these conditions. The things “causing” our suffering are malleable and can be transformed.

In Chapter 1, Nagarjuna seemed to suggest that things arise in a permanent sort of way—meaning they “really” do move into a place, hang out, and then leave (arise, abide and cease). Here Nagarjuna clarifies these descriptions by pointing out that things which are not now in motion, but were in motion in the past or will be in the future, cannot possibly be permanent because to stop or start moving, a thing would have to undergo a significant change, i.e., exchange the essential property of being at rest for the property of being in motion. That is impossible if the thing is permanent. To deal with this problem, all we have to do is recognize Chapter 1’s conclusion that all we observe is dependent on other things (conditions) to establish them in the way we perceive, or described more colloquially, they are all dependent on their particular changeable conditions to “exist” in the way we observe them.

Put another way, we all know that things move and change. Nagarjuna isn’t rejecting a mover or movement, but simply saying that it is not independently existing, in the way it conventionally appears. Rather it is dependently arisen, he explains, meaning that the mover, moving and moved all arise together in an interdependent interrelated ever-changing way. That means they are “empty” –lacking any qualities sufficient to make them exist on their own without these supporting conditions. When we realize this, in a deep and profound way, we are experiencing the ultimate nature of things—things as they really are, and we become open, curious, and accepting in life rather than threatened by the constant change we observe around us.

This is a long chapter, and the thoroughness of the explanation is often quite funny—such as when we realize that if there were a permanent mover, he wouldn’t be able to move anything, and by extension if there were a creator God, God wouldn’t be able to create anyone or anything– the act of creation itself would prove that God was really in flux, not a permanent self-sufficient entity. These are surprising conclusions to many Western readers who grew up with the idea of a supernatural force (God) who acts outside conventional understandings of physics and what is possible. Nevertheless, these conclusions are inevitable once we understand the dependent nature of the reality we observe. Nagarjuna points out that it makes no sense to conceive of a mover (i.e., the “cause” of a change) without the accompanying concept of that which is moving (that which is changed) – the concepts are interdependent. Likewise, there can be no concept of a creator (i.e., the “cause” of a change or creation) without the creator interacting with (changing) the creation itself. A creator without a creation is inconceivable. Chapter 2 systematically establishes this in typically abstruse (to our modern eyes) language. To give a flavor of Nagarjuna’s argument, see, for example, verses 1 and 19-22 of *Middle Way Philosophy*, Chapter 2:

Verse1:

What has been moved is not moving  
What has not been moved is not moving.  
Apart from what has been moved and what has not been moved,  
Movement cannot be conceived

Verses 19-22:

It would follow from  
The identity of mover and motion  
That agent and action  
Are identical.

It would follow from  
A real distinction between motion and mover  
That there could be a mover without motion  
And motion without a mover.

When neither in identity  
Nor in difference  
Can they be established,  
How can these two be established at all?

The motion by means of which a mover is manifest  
Cannot be the motion by means of which he moves.  
He does not exist before that motion,  
So what and where is the thing that moves?

Practice Notes: If we simply understand the basic idea that mover/moving/moved are not independent in the way they appear to us in the everyday world—as three separate and distinct entities not dependent on each other to make sense—then we can make a shift from perceiving mover/moving/moved to the more objective terms as they would appear in logic: subject/predicate/object, each of which makes no sense without the others (i.e., a subject cannot be described as doing anything without using the predicate and the object), leaving us with an important practice technique that we can apply to our lives. How?

First is the knowledge that change is always possible (in fact, it is the natural order of things) because everything is impermanent. If things were permanent, then we couldn't change them; but if everything is impermanent, then anything and everything can be changed. Even a major clinical depression, profound as it can be, can be changed; even a deep sense of loss and grieving at the death of a loved one can be changed. In other words, our suffering can be ended—our depression lightened and lifted, as can grieving and loss. This chapter wants us to practice with the knowledge that everything is impermanent and so we can change anything from suffering to peacefulness.

Nagarjuna here informs us that we can always navigate our way out of suffering; nothing in the external world is responsible for our suffering, it is simply the stories we concoct about externals that lead us to suffer. Realizing this reduces suffering considerably, for blame is impossible and recrimination no longer arises.

Second, knowing that subject/predicate/object arise only in an interdependent way, and have no substantial nature of their own, one can realize that nothing which fits that pattern: subject/predicate/object, can cause suffering; there is no suffer/suffering/suffered; bully/bullying/bullied; and so on. And so we don't create bullies or sufferers or perpetrators as solid and autonomous, which allows us to let go of the story that is making us uncomfortable.



In practice, Carl showed a 17-year old how to apply this lesson and eliminate the threat and sting of being bullied in school. The 17-year old no longer sees himself as someone being bullied, as a victim of being bullied; he sees his fellow students who occasionally hurl nasty and derogatory comments at him as people who are really in misery and in need of compassion (he doesn't label them as bullies). Where fear and anxiety once arose in him, understanding, patience and compassion now arise. Again, it can sometimes take considerable practice to do this, but not always.

### Chapter Three – Examination of the Senses

*“Everything you get through your senses is baloney—which is not to deny that a good baloney sandwich isn't occasionally comforting.”*

- One of Carl's students accurately summed up this whole chapter with that sentence.

I see the car in my neighbor's driveway as brown. My neighbor sees his car as red. Some people see his car as green. Not everyone sees color in the same way. An eleven-year-old hears better than sixty-seven-year-old—as we get older we lose our hearing, ask any octogenarian. As we get older, too, our sense of smell and taste declines. And, even knowing this, we think that the way we are perceiving things through our senses *is the way things are*. Not at all.

The information we are getting from our senses is not what is there, but rather what our senses are able to perceive, and not only do we all perceive differently, but none of us sees everything that is available to perceive. We only see tiny percent of the light spectrum, which means most of the world isn't visible to us. As our physics friends remind us, there is the issue of dark matter which comprises eight-five percent of the matter in the universe and we can't see it at all. Clearly, we are not seeing what is there, just what our eye can make contact with and is processed through our limited capacities. A bloodhound can smell us as

much as three weeks after we have been in a room, yet we don't think we leave a three-week stench behind because our sense of smell just isn't very good by comparison. And we should note, we often don't see what is right in front of us: we glance in the side view mirror to see if there is a car there before switching lanes and we miss, we don't see, the cyclist right next to our car. This is because we only see what we are focused on seeing, not what is there, and peripheral vision evolved to see woolly mammoths, not squirrels.

The point in chapter three isn't that there are no senses, or sense organs, or sense objects—things with which we make sense contact. Rather, Nagarjuna points out that none of these, when examined, can be shown to exist autonomously outside of us in the permanent and accurate way they seem to be when we “perceive” things. The way they exist, Nagarjuna is asserting, is in a dependent relationship between the sense organs and the sense objects with which they make contact, and with our processes of perception. This means they arise in an association, an interrelated dependent relationship.

Conversely, our senses themselves (the sense organs plus the associated cognitive capacity to process their input) are impermanent and arise in a dependent relationship, which makes them “dependently arisen” and therefore “empty.” This is the same reasoning used in chapters 1 and 2. Obviously, everything applies to all our senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting touching, and thinking) in the same way it does to seeing, the single sense used as the example for this chapter. Note that Buddhism adds mind and thought as a sixth sense. The traditional five senses are viewed as external senses, meaning they depend on us making contact with something external to our bodies, and the sixth sense is an internal sense, the mind making contact with thoughts.

In addition, Chapter 3 is showing us that consciousness, our “perceiving mind,” which is about us as the perceiver perceiving is also not there in the independent, accurate way it appears to us. This is one of the many counterintuitive points in *Middle Way Philosophy*, because the intuition that we have separate, continuing consciousness is strong and accepted by most Westerners without much thought or analysis. As Nagarjuna points out, as with the assertion that there must be something that is moved for it to be possible for there to be a mover (and moving itself), without a perception, there can be no perceiver doing the perceiving. Rather, the thing that is perceiving—the consciousness—exists only in dependently originated association of perceiver and perceived, and is therefore empty – it cannot exist on its own. Adding to the shambolic foundation of our consciousness, we can observe that the foundation of all thought and consciousness are the flighty, impermanent and fully subjective sense perceptions. As discussed above, these perceptions only exist in conjunction with and dependent upon each other.

In summary, Nagarjuna has explained here that all our sense organs, all our sense contacts, and us as conscious beings (as perceivers and as the appropriators of the information that comes to us through our senses) are dependently arisen and thus empty. In various chapters of the *Middle Way Philosophy*, Nagarjuna provides a more detailed explanation of how our apparent consciousness is constructed, e.g., Chapter 3 and Chapter 26.

Chapter 3 starts us to a clearer understanding of another key concept, “no-self.” No-self is implied in the first two chapters, but in Chapter 3 Nagarjuna is setting us up to get a real grip on no-self. If Nagarjuna can show, as he does here, that seeing, and similarly any sense contact (including thinking in his model), is not permanent, meaning it is empty, then he will be able to assert “no-self” irrefutably, as he does in Chapter 4. (As a preview, it is our sense of self, and our clinging to our stories about who and what we are, that is the source of all our suffering.)

Back to the senses. One way Nagarjuna shows that the eye is “empty,” is by explaining that the eye is made up of parts (again, using sight to represent all senses). Anything which is made up of parts arises in

dependence upon those parts, which in turn arise in dependence on other parts, and on and on in an infinite regression, so there is no possibility that the eye, and similarly seeing, have their own independent essence or self-nature; all things are ultimately assemblages of parts with no necessary connection between them (remembering the arguments of Chapters 1 and 2). To use a cliché, anything that appears existent and whole to us really has no “there” there that we can locate separate from an endlessly divisible set of parts. This applies not only to the traditional Western five senses, but also to the sixth sense in Buddhism, mind and its sense object: thought, meaning consciousness, the perceiver and conscious perceptions or understandings.

Nagarjuna argues specifically that consciousness too arises in dependence on parts. At a minimum, perceiver and the perceived. Nagarjuna asks us to consider the person who is conscious of something and the things which that person perceives. Using this model, perceiver and perceived both arise in dependence upon each other and so are empty, lacking in autonomy, without independent existences. We can use the concrete example of a mother and daughter. Nagarjuna wants us to understand that a person can perceive herself as a mother, meaning be conscious of herself autonomously as a mother, only if (1) the mother is independent of the daughter and arises first, (2) both mother and daughter arise simultaneously, or somehow (3) the daughter arises first.

(1) If the mother could arise first, without the daughter, then she would somehow be a mother even if a daughter is never born to her. Clearly, without a daughter there is no mother – the mother is dependent on the existence of the daughter. (2) If they arise simultaneously, both mother and daughter arising in the same instant, then there would be no time for the mother to participate in the creation of the daughter. That too is disqualifying. The final possibility, (3) the daughter arises before the mother, and is therefore independent of her makes no sense, as there can’t be a daughter without a mother or a daughter who was somehow created before her mother and could exist as a daughter, even if no mother ever arose. The mother can only exist, and, absent some delusional state, can only see herself as a mother if a daughter (child) exists. Understanding that this notion is counterintuitive for most people, Nagarjuna explains it further in various chapters of the *Middle Way Philosophy*, especially in Chapter Nine.

Practice Notes: Understanding that all the information I am taking in through my senses is empty is an important base, not so much for detaching (i.e., rejecting emotional reactions that cause suffering), but for not attaching in the first place. When I keep reminding myself that what I am seeing, etc., isn’t what is really there, I weaken my ability to grasp at it and cling to my story about what I am seeing, and it is our stories about an object or some sort of external factors that cause all our suffering. (The same is true of our stories about and attachment to our ideas of who and what we are.)

Take again the example of being cut-off in traffic. When I am driving on the highway, what I see in front of me isn’t the highway or more accurately, a strip of tarmac. What my mind tells me I am seeing is *my lane*. The definition and meaning I have added firmly indicates that, if someone wants to enter *my lane*, they need *my permission*. And signaling they are switching lanes still doesn’t give them the right to enter *my lane*. I have to do that, and I do it from a very self-important, often capricious, narrative. Why? Because my mind, as perceiver, develops an interpersonal relationship with the things I see and hear, making them mine: my lane. Never mind that I am traveling at 60 miles an hour and that my lane is the 50 feet of highway in front of my moving car. Alternatively, even if we do not think the lane is *mine*, we may get angry because we think the driver cutting us off is intentionally threatening our safety. This is another narrative that exists only as a story that we fabricate – as we have shown, it is highly likely that the driver did not see us (unreliable sense perceptions!), or, if she did see us, clearly her judgment of what is safe in this instance is simply different from ours. On the level of practice of this chapter, none

of my stories or narratives are true. One must always remember, none of our stories, narrative, or perceptions that come through our senses, are true.

Practicing with this, being able to understand that everything I see and hear and feel and taste and touch and think is empty and not there in the way it appears, and not with the false meanings and values my mind is perceiving, as something somehow inherently mine or of me, I begin to understand the importance of remembering and constantly reminding myself, that what I am seeing isn't there in the way I think I am seeing it, not there in the way I am understanding it. If it is causing me to be uncomfortable, unsatisfied, stressed or anxious, etc., then I need to practice by saying to myself: "Stop it! This is not my lane (or whatever)." And remember, we are not actually having interpersonal relationships with inanimate objects – that's just a silly delusion. *My lane*, really?

Other examples: when someone yells at me, whether it is my boss who is upset about something, or someone in a nearby car who wants me to move faster, or the person behind me in a line who thinks I am taking too long to decide which seat I want sit in, they are simply raising the volume of their voice—I make up the story that they are yelling at me. There is really no need or reason to personalize someone else's discomfort or to believe that a loud voice is anything more than a loud voice. Again, getting to the point where one can interrupt long-conditioned emotional reactions to external events (who hasn't spent years associating loud voices with unpleasantness?) likely will not happen overnight. The point here is that these reactions can lessen with time spent practicing with the understanding that events require our own narratives to cause us to suffer, and on their own have no meaning or capacity to cause this suffering.

In short, we need to practice with: "nothing we perceive through our senses is the way it seems!" It is all a delusion, nothing worth bothering ourselves about. Which doesn't mean we don't have to respond when someone is screaming at us, they might be trying to warn us of an oncoming car we are about to step in front of, but we don't need to write a story about it that leaves us frustrated or annoyed with ourselves. A woman we know listened to some hip-hop music with her son and later said to us, "That's not music." Indeed, to her it was just noise. Music is something we have to be trained to discern from "noise;" it is a learned mental concept, not something that exists in any independent way. A friend said: "When I was a child, I got sick from eating some shrimp. Now even the smell of shrimp makes me nauseous." Not really, it is not the "smell" that is the problem, but this friend's story about the meaning of the smell that makes her nauseous.

Again, practice with the understanding that everything we perceive through our senses is an artificial, imagined reality, not what is really there. This, as a fundamental understanding, dramatically lessens our ability to attach and cling, and ultimately to suffer.

## Chapter Four—Examination of the Aggregates

In this chapter, Nagarjuna examines another significant aspect of Buddhist doctrine, the so-called “Five Aggregates,” diagrammed and then defined in italics below. There are many explanations and translations of this concept, but, essentially, the Five Aggregates are the Buddhist model explaining the formation and nature of the human personality, or self. It is composed of five components that cluster together to form our psycho-physiological identities.

### *What Are The Five Aggregates?*

*The aggregates are an ancient (at least 3000 years old, pre-dating the Buddha) five-step model for how we create our understanding of our psychological and physical selves. When we make a (1) sense contact, we spontaneously designate it with a (2) feeling about the contact—our affinity or aversion. If the contact and its attendant feeling are strong enough, we (3) cognize it, meaning we recognize it, distinguish it, label it, and set our brain to writing a story about it. The (4) stories (variously called mental fabrications, mental concoctions, mental formation, volitional fabrications, etc., or sankharas in Sanskrit) are created from memory fragments assembled because they somehow seem close to what’s happening, and because they make sense and are consistent with our previous understandings and beliefs. The brain then (5) sends the story to our consciousness and we assert it as another component of who we are and what we believe, and then act from that position. So, the story is written without our knowledge from fragments of older stories,*

*each similarly written from fragments of older stories. It's a house of cards; it has only the most tenuous, manufactured connection with what is happening in the present moment. But we believe it, we protect and defend it as true and right, which makes anyone who disagrees with us foolish and wrong. Worse, we act on it with certainty, which leads to everything from unnecessary minor disagreements with our family members to open hostility with others, whether in the form of political arguments, or at its worst, war and genocide.*

Having shown in Chapter 3 that senses and so here the sense contacts, the first of the aggregates, are empty, this short chapter simply explains that the other four aggregates also are empty. As we saw in Chapter 1, it is completely illogical to think that something could somehow be composed of both impermanent and permanent components. So, if the first aggregate, sense contact, is impermanent and therefore dependently co-arisen and thus empty, then in the same way must the other aggregates be empty as they are each founded on an empty prior aggregate, and finally the “self” that results is also empty of inherent nature, qualities or existence. We understand that this conclusion is counterintuitive – more than almost anything else, the self appears real to us. This is very understandable, but keep in mind that Nagarjuna’s proof of “no-self” in this chapter (and in many other chapters) does not deny that Andy and Carl are here writing this commentary, only that we are not here in the way we conventionally perceive each other and ourselves and in the way that others conventionally perceive us. We are only here conventionally as mental formations, products of the five aggregates, empty beings without an inherent self.

Practice Notes: Practicing with the five aggregates can have a profound influence on how much one does or doesn’t suffer. Understanding how they operate, and using that to reduce and eliminate suffering is one of the most important aspects of Buddhism.

We have already seen how to practice with the first of the five aggregate, sense contact, in Chapter 3. There we saw how our senses deceive us into believing that what we are seeing or hearing, etc., is what is actually there to see or hear. Not at all, what we are seeing and hearing is only what our sense can see, what little of the light spectrum our eyes can make contact with, what little of the sound spectrum our ears can hear. So, as a reminder, we need to have a meta-cognitive voice (see introduction) that keeps telling us what we are seeing isn’t what is really there, what we are hearing isn’t really what is there, etc. Knowing that all our sense perceptions are limited illusions, not objective reality as we (deludedly) believe, stops us from clinging to them.

In the second aggregate, feeling, our brain pre-cognitively assigns an affinity or an aversion to every sense contact at the instant of the contact. For example, anything that we see and to which our brain (our eye consciousness) assigns an affinity, we desire more of. We see this in children. Take a 4-year-old to the zoo and you are likely to hear, as they look at the lions, “I like the lion, can you get me one, can I take one home?” Zoos know this and so sell stuffed lions to placate the kids, but the kids brain told them they wanted a live lions! As adults, we hear a Beethoven sonata we like and we immediately buy *The Complete Collection of Beethoven Sonatas*. Similarly, if our brain assigns an aversion to the contact, we develop a desire to avoid it, to make sure we don’t get it, and to ensure that, if we do get it, that we get rid of it. Some people feel an aversion to flying. The moment they even think (remember, mind and thought are a sixth sense in Buddhism) about taking a flight, their chest tightens and their stomach starts to churn. Seeing a plane makes it even worse. Some have to take tranquilizers to calm them enough to stop a panic attack so they can board a plane. In some cases, they simply won’t go to places that require a flight to get them there. And in their minds, even though they will usually confess the aversion doesn’t make any sense logically, the need to avoid flying outweighs anything logic could explain to the contrary.

So we practice with this second aggregate by developing a meta-cognitive voice that reminds us, any time we concoct a story in which something appears desirable or aversive that says, “Nothing is inherently desirable or undesirable, there are no inherent affinities or aversion in externals—in people, places, things, process, events, etc.” Constantly reminding ourselves that nothing is inherently desirable or undesirable is a major tool to lessening the impact of the suffering caused by our delusion that some things really are desirable, and that getting them will make us successful and happy, when what it really does is create the basis for greed (an emotion that causes much suffering). Why is this the basis for greed? Because, once we assign an affinity to something, we automatically want more of it; similarly, once we assign an aversion to something, we want to avoid or rid ourselves of it. And greed, this chronic *wanting*, is always a source of suffering, for there is no end to greed, there is always a craving for more of what we feel affinities for, and less of those things for which we feel aversions. “More is never enough,” as Ayya Khema, the renowned German nun, once wrote.

Practicing with the third aggregate is simpler. The third aggregate, cognition, is the decision by the brain the turn the sense contact and the assigned feeling, if the two together are strong enough to warrant it, into a conscious thought. So if we are having a conscious thought, we need to distrust it, to question its validity, because all conscious thoughts come from greed, the desire for more of those things with affinities assigned to them, and so on. All conscious thoughts need to be doubted, questioned, and seen for what they are, sources of greed, of dissatisfaction, of everything from gentle uneasiness and irritation to wrath and fury, of suffering. Significantly, we only cognize people, places, things, processes, etc., to get more of them, to feed our perceived and unsatisfiable “need” for the things to which we have an affinity or an aversion, so they always make us unsettled, never make us peaceful.

We also need to note, we only cognize things, which on some level, we know. So we are not actually cognizant of what is out there, but rather what we know of what might be there. This becomes flagrantly obvious when one travels in a country, like Russia or Egypt or Israel or Thailand, where a different alphabet is used, because, needing to go to the rest room, there is no way to distinguish and cognize the sign for “Women” from the sign for “Men.” Carl remembers this happening to him, in a Russian restaurant in Brooklyn, and remembers standing there sheepishly and awkwardly, until someone came and entered one of the doors! And so it is with everything one doesn’t know—it is uncognizable, unperceivable, essentially non-existent. Think of how a baby comes to cognize the world. After birth, the baby’s ability to process what she sees, hears, etc. is not yet informed by past experience, so (we think) she sees basic shapes instead of “objects” and experiences basic sounds instead of “words.” Only later as the baby matures and slowly collects repeated experiences with these sensory inputs is she able to start identifying (i.e, telling stories about) what she is seeing and hearing (and, for that matter, thinking).

Practicing with the fourth aggregate, stories we create in our minds, stories we concoct to explain why we are having an affinity or aversion for what we are seeing or hearing or feeling or thinking, etc., requires us to remember that all of the aggregates are empty, so this fourth aggregate, where the brain fabricates a story about what is happening is also empty. In other words, while our stories may be useful for navigating the everyday world, and even for understanding how we create and how we can end our suffering, they are, fundamentally false. Take sushi, for example: “I love sushi, the fresh cool taste and texture is so wonderful and refreshing”; or “I hate sushi, why would anyone want to eat raw slimy smelly fish.” At a more abstract level, take business success – “I love doing real estate deals, I get a buzz off the excitement and drama of negotiation”; or “Doing these real estate deals makes me sick, the negotiations are a draining exercise of arguing over money.” These examples (which could be expanded *ad infinitum*) help demonstrate that nothing has an inherent desirability or undesirability. Nothing is, by its nature, desirable or aversive. So anytime I am ill-at-ease or annoyed at something, I need to ask, why am I assuming that it is somehow

inherently aversive or somehow inherent attractive and then writing a story to explain that and attaching to it as mine? That is the practice lesson here, and once it sinks in, it very powerfully reducing the discomfort and psychic and physical suffering of everyday life.

What about behaviors like child abuse and human trafficking and genocide and war? Those are, from a purely *Middle Way Philosophy* perspective, conventionally wrong (see the Two Truths in the Introduction), i.e., in our culture and to the degree that we share assumptions, we agree that these activities and events generally are negative (aversive). Nonetheless, they are still ultimately empty, suggesting, to take war as an example, that the victor (with different background assumptions) might believe a war was a good thing for them and their nation. The vanquished side believes that this same set of experiences (the war) was a catastrophe. The war itself is a conceptual fabrication without permanence (intrinsic characteristics), lending itself, like all such fabrications to different (attractive or aversive) interpretations. Take child abuse as another example, while it is generally abhorrent, there are cultures and countries, in Asia, Africa and parts of the Middle East, and even in Great Britain's immigrant communities, for example, that believe female genital mutilation is a wholesome procedure that insures a girl's purity, humility and modesty. We note that in these examples, both stories, good and bad, about the war or abuse lead to feelings of greed and hence suffering, so from a *Middle Way Philosophy* perspective, it seems that they are bad (leads to more suffering).

Practicing with the final aggregate, consciousness: the story created in the fourth aggregate conditions our response to the world, to the people, places, things, events, processes, etc., by giving us an understanding of the world that is consistent with our previous understandings of it and similar things. The primary problem and practice point here is, realizing that our brain makes everything consistent with what we already know, we understand that it is impossible to really see what is in front of us. Rather, we see what we think, based on previous understandings, it might be. And then we believe it to be there and true and for us to be here and it to be there. So, we practice by telling ourselves, with a meta-cognitive voice (see introduction) that "Nothing my brain tells me is true." Or "Everything my brain tells me is false." Because? Because it appears that what I am perceiving and the way I am explaining it to myself is the way it is. In fact, it is just my perception, my narrative, not what's there. Further the sushi example, what's there—the raw sense data—could be said to be *the sushi* or *fish*; all the rest, my positive or negative feelings and definitions and descriptors are simply my fictions about the food built upon a large set of my previous fictions.

What happens in this final aggregate is that our consciousness mind identifies and appropriates the story, establishing me and mine in the story's context. So what we hear ourselves saying, again using the sushi example, is "I'm the kind of person who loves (or hates) sushi." And we believe it and act from that point of view. So anytime we hear ourselves saying, "I am the kind of person who..." we should come to a screeching halt and remind ourselves, "I am not the story my brain has just concocted! This is not me, this is not mine (no identification and no appropriation). And then ask, "If I were being curious, open, and accepting, what would I be perceiving now—what would the sense data look like without the additional false meaning and layers of embellishment?"

In a sentence, note that our self arises in dependence on the aggregates, but that each aggregate is empty, so self is empty, thus there is no objective, inherent self. So we are not, in an independent permanent way, any one of the aggregates, nor any collection of two or more of the aggregates together. This leads Nagarjuna to ask us to scrutinize everything until we can see clearly and convincingly that there is no self; then there is peace, meaning: no more self, no more reification, no more suffering. As a tantalizing



preview, these concepts relate directly to Chapter 15 in which Nagarjuna explains how things, and Self, exist and don't exist at the same time!

This is so critical a concept that it is worth exploring from another practice perspective as well, a more general perspective rather than a component analysis like that above.

Rehearsing with the key idea that is generated by realizing the Five Aggregates involves asking yourself the question: what would life be like if I really believed this? How would I act? How would I make decisions? In other words, what is the engine that drives enlightenment?

The traditional answer is that you would act from patience and compassion, selflessly. In order to realize that everything is a set of empty conditions, empty of any intrinsic meaning or value, you would have had to let go of your "self." And if you are not self-centered, then you are pure in your altruism, pure in your compassion for others. You would act out of a sense of universal love, *agape* in Christian terms. You would act without discrimination, without prejudice. At the moment of decision (and every moment is a moment of decision), there would be no decision, you would just do "right." This would happen because you wouldn't be doing anything "self-centered."

So rehearse. Ask yourself, in different situations which are troubling, what would you do if you had no self-motive. Ask yourself what would you do if your thoughts and ideas and life didn't matter more than what was happening in front of you. Does it really matter who checks out first in the grocery line? Whose life would I save, if I could only save one, mine or my child's? Some religions believe you save yours first, others the child. Knowing the aggregates, how would you respond? What concocted story about your self-worth would or would not guide you? What conceit or conceits about your beliefs would guide you, right into the pit of suffering?

A very important practice that arises from the Five Aggregates is the realization that no one can make us angry (or make us feel anything else). Only I can make me angry by having a sense contact I define as aversive and then pulling a seed, a volitional formation, that tells me to get angry. On the surface, this may seem wrong (of course people do things that make me angry!), but with scrutiny you'll see that is not the case.

When I notice anger arising, I try and slow my response enough to say: I am not the kind of person who gets angry when he hears the baby crying. Then I say it again and again, emphatically: I am not the kind of person who gets angry when.... With only a handful of repetitions, it shifts to a non-anger volitional formation and the anger dissipates. This works because we can only have one thought at a time, so if we are telling ourselves we are not angry, we can't be angry. When the anger starts to subside, I shift and tell myself: I am the kind of person who feels patient when this happens, patient when this happens. Then patient resets our thinking and way of responding. Patience is, after all, the classic Buddhist antidote for anger.

You can use this practice to change any negative emotion, any defilement, to its antidote.

If there's really nothing anywhere but a mesh of interconnected conditions, each arising and ceasing in virtual simultaneity, there is no way that things are supposed to be, or not be. *This means that my concocted volitional formation (aggregate four) is never more important or better than someone else's.* That means my opinions are never more important than anyone else's, and should never result in suffering because I am protecting and defending them. This is a deeper sense of humility that usually understood, but once it settles into your way of processing information, very much discomfort, arguing, arrogance, and the like, just falls away leaving us in peace

The aggregates are suggesting we practice with “no preferences” by asking, every time we are irritated or annoyed, or frustrated or angry with something: What would I have preferred to happen here so that I would not be upset? The answer is always quite amusing. “I would prefer the world to be other than what it is.” “I would prefer people to act differently to match my concocted story about how they should act.” “I would prefer red traffic lights be green when I approach them.” And so on. All silly—the planet can slow its revolution so I have more time at the gym; children with learning disabilities can’t be kids without special needs; the traffic algorithm doesn’t change to accommodate me when I leave my driveway. Silly to think those things.

**Meditating with the Five Aggregates:** When you meditate, watch your mind and look for the Five Aggregates. Notice how a thought generates a physical sensation, how you label that sensation, define it by your past experiences, and identify with it. Then notice how, in an instant with a shift of focus, say to an itch on your leg, that whole thought disappears. Give the itch a little space to exist and it vanishes! Realize the aggregates are empty.

Watch for how the Five Aggregates arise in others during conversation and other interactions. The faster you can see this happening, of course, the easier it is to let go of your concocted suffering-causing stories. And it is precisely this seeing, realizing it is just a momentary event without substance, that allows us to let go, significantly reducing our discomfort with everything and allowing us to have peace of mind.

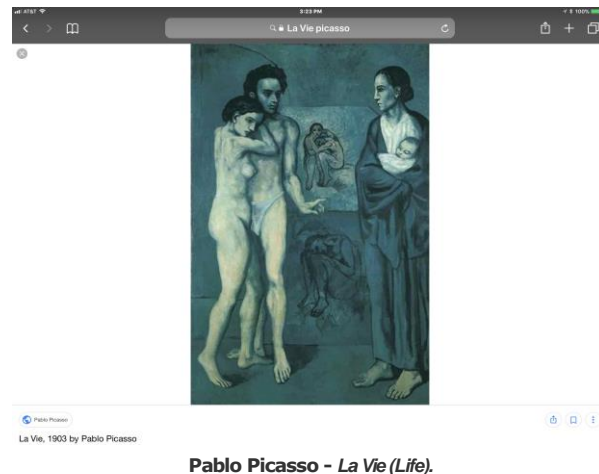
If you look closely at what is happening here, you will notice that you can only know and confirm what you already know. Because we evaluate and confirm what is happening in our lives and world based on our volitional formations, essentially we cannot absorb or synthesize new information. This is one of the scariest understandings that comes from understanding the Five Aggregates, from understanding how our minds work. This is why we unilaterally reject ideas that are outside our box (the box being our volitional formations). Knowing this suggests that, before we reject an idea or concept, we ask ourselves: Am I rejecting this because I have a direct experience that validly tells me to reject it, or am I rejecting this because I don’t have a seed about it and so it seems not to make sense. This kind of self-talk, this kind of a meta-cognitive voice, making of the implicit explicit, allows us to grow spiritually instead of being bound to our old dysfunctional seeds.

Implicitly, what we are learning from the Five Aggregates is that “it’s all about me.” All my values and definitions are ultimately about Me getting My way. To practice with “Getting my way” we need to make the implicit explicit. One way to do that is to ask yourself, in a serious self-analytic way, when you begin to do each new thing in your day: “How could I think about this or do this in a less self-centered way? One answer might be just to be more vigilant about being mindful; another might be not to tell anyone what you are thinking, just to be quiet and let go of the erroneous perception, another might be to examine the intention behind the action.

## Chapter Five – Examination of the Elements

Having shown in Chapter 4 that the aggregates, the components of the psychological self or personality, which are the best candidates to qualify as “the self,” are empty, Nagarjuna has definitively shown that there is no permanent, independently existing self. Nagarjuna moves on in this chapter to examine the elements: fire, earth, air, water, space and consciousness. This is the traditional ancient Indian model for describing our physical being and the material world. This model persists even today in traditional everyday Asian thought and is used as a basis for understanding our physical body, the practice of Ayurvedic medicine, and traditional Chinese herbal and other medicinal practices.

To examine and show that the elements are empty, and thus that our material form is empty, Nagarjuna explores, through the use of the element *space*, the irrationality of perceiving properties and individuals, characteristics and the characterized, as in any way permanent or substantial.



Consider Picasso's painting, *La Vie*—the gloomy masterpiece, in tones of blue, that depicts his friend in a striking pose standing near a woman with an infant in her arms, a Madonna figure. The characteristic is blue and the characterized is a painting. It is easy to understand that the characteristic could not exist separate from the characterized. “Blue” wasn’t hanging around Picasso’s studio as an entity that somehow leapt onto a blank “painting” of his friend that was just resting on an easel at the time. The blue, the paint and then the painting arise in a dependent association with each other. So how do we agree upon a characteristic “blue” if it has no inherent existence? It is, like other observed phenomena, simply a dependently-arisen object, e.g., when light at a certain wavelength contacts a surface with certain absorption/reflection attributes, the conditions are there to reflect a certain conventionally understood color. Note that all of these attributes depend on each other to exist – there must be a surface to support the texture that absorbs/reflects, there must be light present, and so on. Again, blue and painting co-arise dependently, in a relationship of dependent origination, and are empty.

One student said this example begs the question about blue paint – does blue paint characterize “blue” any differently than *La Vie*? The same reasoning shows that there wasn’t blue in Picasso’s studio and paint, independent of each other, that somehow magically joined into a permanent mixture. The blue and the paint arose in dependence upon each other. One cannot be without the other. The same is true for “my car” and “top and bottom,” and everything else that we characterize. Worst of all is characterizing people and phenomena into “bad/good and good/evil,” as much Western psychology and religion does, thus inserting deterministic despair into a place where it doesn’t exist and making it, nonetheless, seem utterly real.

The mother/daughter example, in Chapter 3, would also work in the context of this chapter. There can’t be a physical mother without a physical daughter, nor a daughter without a mother. We can’t characterize a “mother” without a “daughter.” So they arise in dependence on each other, and they are empty, not physically real in the way they appear.

**Practice Notes:** This is a short chapter, but the implications for practice are very significant. We characterize people, places, things, processes and events to separate them from other people, places, things, etc. To recognize something, we distinguish it from everything else by characterizing it and we then assign it a “false” meaning and value. What this chapter is suggesting is that, if we characterize something in a way

that is making us uncomfortable, we can remind ourselves to change the way we are characterizing the situation. We must always have a meta-cognitive voice that reminds us that any characteristic or characterization is false and predicated on greed, as we explained in the chapter above on the aggregates, so (1) we need to stop believing our characterization—which is at best helpful but never accurate—and (2) we need to remember that our narrative needs to be fabricated anew so that we are looking at the raw sense data and are at ease with the situation rather than upset.

More emphatically, this chapter reminds us that all the stories we fabricate are foolish and false, they are not as they appear, and they are sourced in suffering as they arise from a hidden misbelief that things *are* either inherently attractive or aversive. Not so; never so. Constantly reminding ourselves that nothing is desirable or undesirable in the way I am perceiving it lightens the burden of our lives and allows us to see clearly the conditions, the raw sense data of what is happening so we can remain calm and peaceful.

Unfortunately, as explained above, our natural tendency, which is to make things consistent with what we know and believe, which might be that things are characterized by the elements. But this leads to bilateral characterizations—everything is either desirable or undesirable, good or bad, with or without. And this bifurcation leads us to interpret the raw sense data of our lives in a way that is uncomfortable and unsatisfactory, that is suffering, when in fact, the raw sense data are pacific.

## Chapter Six – Examination of Desire and the Desirous

The examination here is an extension of the previous chapter in that it is a discussion of the relation between entities and their properties, but here it focuses specifically on the relationship between people and their psychological characteristics rather than elements. While Nagarjuna may have considered this topic already in his analysis of the senses, the aggregates and the elements, he briefly takes up characteristics and the characterized again in this chapter.

Whether we are examining the idea of a blue painting or ourselves and someone's psychological characteristics, the same reasoning shows that nothing makes sense if either is seen as inherent or permanently existing without the other. In the case of desire and the objects of desire, neither can exist without the other, clarifying that desirability, desire and the objects of desire are not intrinsically so. Realizing that nothing is inherently desirable nor is anyone inherently desirous, but rather that the two arise in dependence upon each other, we gain great freedom from suffering, in large part because our ability

to crave and cling to things becomes weaker, at least in the conventional way. In Buddhist thought (and in many people's everyday experience), desire (which is by nature always to some extent unfulfilled) causes discontent and hence suffering. Because of this, lessening the hold of perceived desire helps to alleviate a major factor that causes us a lifetime of suffering, and showing that nothing is inherently desirable or desirous is a big step in that direction.

It is interesting to observe that the Sanskrit word Nagarjuna uses for desire is *raga*. "Desire" is a mild translation of that word. A stronger translation would be "a passionate interest in something one has," which implies the interdependent relationship between desire and desirous, or it could even be translated as "lust." Try substituting each of those stronger translations and you will gain a deeper sense for the psychological dimensions of this chapter.

Practice Notes: The brevity of this chapter belies its usefulness. When we understand that in the second of the five aggregates (Chapter 4) we assign an affinity or an aversion—a characteristic—to everything with which we make a sense contact, we notice that everything we come into contact with is either desired in the positive sense (we desire more of it) or in the negative sense (we desire not to have it or to rid ourselves of it). Examining this deeply, as Nagarjuna does here, we see that nothing is inherently desirable or aversive. Any time we are uncomfortable, Nagarjuna is again showing us here, it is because we have falsely characterized something as permanently (i.e., inherently and unchangeably) desirable or aversive. These desirable or aversive things are really empty of these characteristics and we should consider that our narratives about them are false and not worthy of attachment, of craving or clinging.

To take an everyday example, one day Carl's 90-year old mother called three times in the morning; the first to say hello, the second to ask if she'd called the first time, and the third just to ask if she was causing annoyance by calling so much. Mom is ninety, somewhat cognitively impaired and so to characterize her actions or words in any way that makes them seem undesirable is unreasonable and a source of suffering and a misread of the conditions. Nagarjuna wants us to understand that every narrative is based on the false belief that something is desirable or undesirable, and that these are simply foolish ways to read the conditions, to categorize the everyday world of people, places, things, events, etc. we encounter and create.

When we realize that nothing is desirable or undesirable, from its side, then we stop attaching to our stories, our selves, and the things we think we want or don't want. That makes life a breeze, or to use Nagarjuna's word, *pacific*.

## Chapter Seven—Examination of the Conditioned

This chapter continues to flesh out Nagarjuna's observations about the observed world. Anything that is conditioned—meaning things which arise, abide and cease (i.e., everything) —fails to be a permanent entity. All phenomena and objects must be understood relationally, like motion or characteristics or elements, as discussed in the earlier chapters. Everything we observe is dependently arisen. Importantly, even dependent arising itself is empty, it only exists in relation to things that are dependently arisen – without them, there is no independent characteristic of "dependent arising" waiting to spring into action. This is a keystone argument to establish that liberation from suffering is possible – since all things are dependent upon each other for existence (and our understanding of that existence), change is possible and suffering can be addressed. A critical verse here, from a practice perspective, is VII.16:

Whatever is dependently arisen,  
That is essentially peaceful.

Therefore that which is arising and [dependent] arising itself  
Are themselves peaceful.

If we look at the core of what is being said in this chapter we learn again that everything is empty—even dependent arising itself. As with the characteristic of “blueness” which was not independently hanging around Picasso’s studio to leap onto *La Vie*, it depends on *La Vie* to exist, the characteristic of dependent arising (to be dependently arisen) requires the arising of objects for its existence.

Practice Notes: How do we practice with this? Verse 16 of this chapter (above) is the understanding from which we see that the ultimate nature of things (dependent arising) is utterly peaceful.

This idea that everything is “peaceful” is not a tenet of the Buddhist faith, to be believed blindly, not a Buddhist dogma, preached as a truism without evidence, rather it is the insight that arises when we understand emptiness. (This is a critical difference between Buddhism and other faiths, and will be explored further in Chapter 27.) When we see everything as empty, we notice that everything is completely collaborative and cooperative—conditions arise and things modulate around that. There is no condition and no “us” trying to “gain anything,” so things are just peaceful. A simple analogy would be the water in a swimming pool. When one dives into the pool the water simply moves in whatever way the conditions suggest so that someone can be in the water. There is no self objecting, no water whining because it was splashed out of the pool. No stories that things should be other than what they are—just peaceful, collaborative, cooperative movement rippling out from the diver as they hit the water.

In other words, everything is by nature peaceful. (Note that this is a spiritual position statement that is unique to Buddhism.) That’s the concept we practice with. That’s the understanding we allow to become our default for processing information. If we perceive a lack of peace (discomfort), then it is us who are mucking it up, and us who need to shift to a better intention and view. The meta-cognitive question here, then, is: How am I organizing and seeing things, how am I overlaying events with a false narrative, that is changing what’s happening from naturally peaceful to uncomfortable? If so, and it is often the case, we need to become more skillful at using meta-cognitive voices to remember that everything is already peaceful, and that we need to be careful not to make it other than that.

## **Chapter Eight—Agent and Action**

Obviously we do things all the time. So how do we understand that we do things, when we can't say there is a really a capital “M” Me that can perform these acts? Nagarjuna explains here that both the action and the agent, the thing being done and me, are dependently arisen—meaning like everything else, they arise in an interdependent relationship on one another and both are therefore empty of permanent, unchangeable characteristics. This is the same argument that has been used in several of the chapters already, but Nagarjuna goes one step further in the final 13<sup>th</sup> verse, saying that we should not “appropriate” any action or attribute as our own. (We discussed this briefly in Chapter 4 on the aggregates.) Instead, we should understand that such action is just one condition to establish the ever-changing narrative stream that we may label as our self. This is an emphatic call for us realize and to practice with “no self.” The supposed self is entirely dependent on other actions and phenomena, change these and the “self” is also changed. This and the last chapter are showing us that we can and *do* do things that meaningfully affect us, our family and friends, and the world in which we live, even if nothing is permanent, including the self. This means that

there can be guidelines for our behavior, moral and ethical guidelines and understandings, that set up a pathway to peacefulness, and these arise from an understanding of emptiness.

Whenever we are inconvenienced, even if we only perceive it as a minor inconvenience, a common error is to appropriate what has happened as directed at us – the power outage is going to ruin my dinner party, the person who changed lanes in front of me “cut me off,” even though I may have been in a blind spot and was never seen. Even if the cutting off was intentional, our reactions to it are controllable. On a sensory raw data level, all that happened was that a car changed lanes.

Practice Notes: First, realize the we are here in a conventional, everyday sense, we are here and doing things, but we don’t—on the deeper, more philosophical, “ultimate” level—need to identify with and appropriate (make “our own”) the things we do and think of them as I and mine. In other words, there is no appropriator (agent) and no appropriation (action) that makes sense - no story that should be believed. This process of identifying with and appropriating as our own the concocted stories of our fourth aggregate, our mental storehouse, is clearly the source of all suffering.

Practicing with stopping this process of identification and appropriation, which might be considered the definition of consciousness, the notion of self weakens, our fictions and false narratives about the people and world around us that cause us to suffer then weaken, diminish and finally end.

Whenever we hear ourselves thinking or saying, and we say it all the time: “I am the kind of person who always drives fast on the highway (or whatever-the-story-is),” we have identified (with the “I” of the sentence) and appropriated “driving fast,” or whatever the-story-is) as mine. The Me and Mine of this structure is the problem, the cause of suffering. We need to remember to think and say, “This is not me, this is not mine” whether it is cancer or a bipolar classification or a stubbed toe. Repeated and intimately looking at something like depression and reciting, over and over, for days and weeks can eliminate a chronic depression! It may not eliminate the bipolar behavior completely, but it can reduce it very significantly. We’ve been there, ourselves and with students/patients (the stubbed toe, not so much!)

## ***Chapter Nine--Examination of Us as a Prior Entity***

Descartes’ famous line “I think therefore I am” assumes that we, as the subject or perceiver, somehow exist as an autonomous being prior to us thinking. Again, Nagarjuna explains that this is not possible. After all, if we existed in a permanent way prior to our thinking, we wouldn’t actually be able to think because that would require us as a permanent thing to change; there would have to be some self-existent bundle of characteristics (the self) that had causal links to things outside itself, which Nagarjuna has shown to be impossible (see Chapters 1 and 2). Further, we would have to be, by definition, permanently before something (prior to) and something would have to be permanently after us (posterior to us). Again, Nagarjuna has shown this to be impossible. There is another perspective which could be used here that Nagarjuna does not address (at least not early in the text): If “I” were permanent, then I wouldn’t be able to think, because thinking would require me to change and permanent entities can’t change.



So how *do* we exist? We exist in a dependently arisen way. Just because someone or something doesn't exist in a permanent way, which is the way our brain generally tells us the world exists, the way our conscious mind "perceives" the world, doesn't mean that we don't exist. It's just that we exist in an interrelated dependent relationship with the conditions of what's happening, not in a reified way. The lack of a prior entity is an important underpinning to many of the examinations in the *Middle Way Philosophy*. I think therefore I am—OK, Nagarjuna may say, but only *conventionally*, and not *really*. Again, if we existed prior to thinking as fully-formed independent entities, then we wouldn't actually be able to think, for thinking would require us to change. And if we existed as a prior entity and were suffering, there would be no way to end suffering. And that obviously isn't the case.

Practice Notes: While our tendency is to believe that we existed, in a solid and substantive way, in the past and somehow traveled through time and space and arrived in the present, Nagarjuna is telling us: "Not a chance. What a silly conception—all it can cause is suffering!" Nagarjuna is positing that the alternative perspective, that we arise dependently, in relationship to the conditions of the moment, allows us to become peaceful with our lives and the lives and events of others. This practice with no-self, simply realizing that the self exists merely dependently, and practicing with the realization that *self has no inherent characteristics*, is a major theme of the *Middle Way Philosophy*. Maybe better stated, it is a rallying cry for the ignorant wanting to become wise. We must always remember that we only exist the way we characterize ourselves at the moment, and that the way we characterize ourselves in any given moment is false and foolish and structured to leave us greedy and wanting, uncomfortable and suffering. If we are characterizing ourselves in a way that is causing suffering, our meta-cognitive voice should be screaming at us: "Stop It! Don't be so dumb about how you think of yourself!"

The understanding Nagarjuna offers in this chapter can even be used for pain management, as pain is another false characterization assigned to a sensation, and to almost anything else that make one physically uncomfortable without being organically threatening. Carl uses this chapter's concept to reduce his back pain. Instead of saying, "I'm in pain, I can't stand" he reminds himself, using a metacognitive voice, that there is no "I" to be in pain, and so he says, "There's a sensation," or sometimes, "There's a strong sensation that is making standing difficult." With enough repetition, this rewires the brain not to interpret the sensations as pain. Without a prior entity, there is no one to be in pain.

More broadly, seeing that every conception of ourselves that we have begins with "I": "I am this," "I am that," "I believe this," "I think that," "I hear this," "I feel that," and so on, allows us to realize the falseness of our perceptions and stories about who we are. This frees us from much of our craving and clinging and thus suffering.

## Chapter Ten—Examination of Fire and Fuel

Chapter 10 contains an agent/action, self/perception analysis using fire and fuel as the analogy. Examining the relationship between fire and fuel was a traditional framework among Buddhist philosophers in Nagarjuna's time. Distinguishing fire and fuel conventionally, which is the only way they can be distinguished (any idea that they are permanent and separate makes no sense, as Nagarjuna has repeatedly shown), permits their mutual dependence while failing to establish the intrinsic identity of either.

Put fire and fuel aside, an analogy that made more sense 2000 years ago (we rarely today view logs as fuel in the way an ancient Indian would have). Let's instead look at some other possible analogies. Take a tire. When it is on a tractor it is a tractor tire, but when it's hanging by a rope from the limb of a tree, it is a swing. Or take a pen. When I am writing with it, it's a pen. But when the dog grabs it, it is a chew toy. And in a self-defense class, it's a weapon. Take a refrigerator. When it's on the display floor at the kitchen center, it's an appliance. In the kitchen, it's a

refrigerator. In the backyard, it's a hiding place for kids playing. At a junk yard, it is trash. All of these examples show that things are only things in dependence of where they are and how they are being used, in a context. Chew toy, weapon or hiding place? "It all depends on the conditions," Nagarjuna would say. So clearly, defining agent and action are dependent upon each other.

What this means is that agent and action, self and perception, fire and fuel, and any and everything else that fits that formula, is empty and so has the nature of peacefulness. Again, Nagarjuna wants us to take from this chapter that things arise in dependence on other things and that they are not independent and permanent. Dependent arising, as we reinforce in this chapter, is peacefulness, and everything is dependently arisen, so until we confuse things with our stories, everything is pacific.

Practice Notes: This chapter reminds us, again but from a slightly different perspective, that nothing exists as solid and substantive in the way it appears—not us and what we do, not me and how I perceive things, and certainly not fuel and fire. Yes, everything arises in a mutually dependent way, but more important for practice, everything is empty of the false labels and meanings and values we assign it, and so if what is happening is leaving us uncomfortable, we need to examine how we are viewing what is happening, and to realize it is a false perception.

The meta-cognitive question, when we are uncomfortable or annoyed or irritated, or even miserable, is: How am I falsely characterizing things and making myself unhappy? How could I characterize things differently so I could see the dependent arising and peacefulness underlying my perception? Remember, tell yourself when you are upset, it is the fallacious characterization, not the event that is the problem. We again note here that while this concept is simple, it is not necessarily easy or quick to implement for most people. The point of this practice, with shifting our mental approach to these issues, is to rewire our whole way of assessing mental and physical sensations that we have learned, internalized and had reinforced since birth. However, practicing with characteristics and characterizations, and learning to recognize them all as fictions, offers a vast amount of peacefulness in face of big and small difficulties—everything from a mosquito bite to a brain tumor.

## Chapter Eleven—Examination of Beginnings and Endings

The main point of this chapter is to explain that there are no beginnings and no endings to anything we observe (people, objects, any phenomena). By “no beginnings and no endings,” we mean no absolute starts (from nothing) and no complete and absolute finishes. While we can demarcate beginnings and endings conventionally for our everyday understanding, ultimately there is no point or moment at which something starts and no point of moment at which something stops or ends.

Nagarjuna would say that he had established this observation already, particularly in Chapter 9 which examined the impossibility of a prior entity and expands on the idea here. Clearly, it is impossible for supposedly permanent objects to produce or create a first time event as this would involve the “permanent” objects existing before they existed to create such event for the first time. Note that this principle also applies to our Self, at least in the way we normally think of our Self. This makes birth and death, in the way we normally think of them—as real beginnings and endings—irrational ideas that are useless. As an erroneous view, seeing birth and death as real beginnings and endings is an unnecessary source of significant angst for many people. Further, Nagarjuna is suggesting that we examine characteristics themselves in

this context, noting that a characteristic cannot have a beginning or ending, an absolute starting point or an exact point of termination. Applying the analysis to characteristics themselves is another way to look at the impossibility of there being a separate, independent self, a major theme throughout *Middle Way Philosophy*.

As a consequence of Nagarjuna's arguments in this chapter, it becomes clearer that, so long as one thinks of phenomena as temporally determinate and bounded, and thinks of the identity of things (including the self) as intrinsic to them, one will have to identify their beginnings, middles, and ends. This leads to paradox, given the indeterminateness and interdependence of things. Nailing down dividing lines is impossible. So instead, Nagarjuna wants us to recognize that dependent arising is the only way to make sense of the things and phenomena we observe, again including the self.

Practice Notes: In establishing this understanding—that nothing has an actual moment of beginning or ending—deeply existential issues around life and death can weaken and, when this idea is fully understood, just fall away. This helps alleviate and eventually can end sleepless nights worrying about where we go next, what happens when one dies. In the authors' experience, this understanding has reorganized our conventional ideas of life and death without a need for suffering or unrealistic and unprovable or unquestioned faith traditions, including the need to imagine a creator God and other supernatural, occult or metaphysical entity from which we sprung. Just understanding that there are no initial and final limits makes all those existential questions drop off without the need for a further explanation. When those drop off, we notice a comfortable, calm appreciation of ourselves as responsible for our lives, and for our peacefulness and happiness or lack thereof. There is a freedom that arises from the realization that no one and nothing supernatural or occult is determining what happens to us, and notions like fate, destiny, superstitions and synchronicity, as they are popularly understood, appear for what they are, impossible notions that lead us astray and to suffer.

So the practice here is: understand deeply that nothing has a permanent initial moment or a permanent final terminal instant. Understanding this deeply has an interesting effect on our suffering. Since all the stories that cause us discomfort and suffering, have initial and final limits, all the stories just fall away as this idea of no initial or final limits sinks in. Just look at the stories that are making you uncomfortable today and note how there are beginnings and endings to each of them, all fallacious and all causes of suffering.

Also, practice with the idea that we can start and end any perception in a way that makes us either uneasy or comfortable and peaceful. Yes, any story! Even getting cancer, as Carl knows from personal experience. Remember, there is no real beginning, it is just where you start the story; and there is no real ending, there is just where you stop the story. That certainly changes things! In fact, it means that we are responsible for everything we know and understand, and if something is causing us to suffer, we are the reason for the suffering.

This is another unique aspect of Buddhism, the belief that its followers are solely and completely responsible for whether they suffer or not, whether they are peaceful or not. Practice with that notion and notice how hard it is to believe that anything external is the source of either suffering or happiness!

## Chapter Twelve—Examination of Suffering

*A student, after reading a draft of this chapter, said, “If I believed in reality, I’d be a real mess today.”*

The point of Chapter 12 is that there is no suffering in the way we conventionally understand it; there is no one and nothing that inherently is “suffering” or is able to cause us to suffer. It doesn’t exist in the real, permanent (as necessarily or characteristically causing suffering) way it appears. Contrast this with the Abrahamic faiths, for example, where suffering (and the events that give rise to suffering) can result from an outside force, created by God, and adherents of the faiths are expected to bear it because it is intrinsic in the nature of this mysterious world.

To show that suffering doesn’t exist as a real entity, Nagarjuna returns to a production argument, explaining that if it did exist as a real, autonomous entity, that it would have to be produced: either from itself, or from another, or from both, or from neither (neither meaning it somehow arose spontaneously). Self-production is completely illogical, something permanent can’t produce itself; other production is impossible, for the “other” thing would have to change to produce it, and something permanent cannot change into something else that is differently permanent; from both, for the combined reasons just stated; or from neither—things cannot just arise spontaneously, neither suffering nor a mule can suddenly appear on the living room sofa.

So suffering doesn't exist in a permanent way, but suffering does exist conventionally, as an interdependent co-arising set of conditions, like everything else. Since it exists only conventionally, the conditions that give rise to suffering are empty and can be changed (which wouldn't be the case if the suffering or events concerned with it were permanent or had permanent characteristics), so there is a basis for Buddhism, for middle way philosophy, to be able to help end suffering by showing us how to change these conditions.

Practice Notes: As the student in the quote at the head of this chapter said, "If I believed in reality, I'd be a mess." Indeed you would! Understanding that no one and nothing external is inherently able to cause me to suffer is the practice that allows me to lessen my discomfort, even with the most difficult situations one can perceive. They simply aren't true, aren't really believable. For now, as a practice tool, just deeply appreciating and recognizing, on an ongoing basis, that nothing external to us can cause suffering, greatly relieves our perceived suffering in the face of perceived difficulties. Additionally, knowing that nothing external can cause us to suffer weakens our attachment to the "self" and everything else in a way that dramatically lessens suffering. This is a big "wow," from a practice perspective—the realization that all my discomfort with life, all my suffering, all my dukkha (see introduction) is imagined, not real, and can be understood differently, as nothing more than a conventionally perceived fiction.

"Perceived suffering," that's a powerfully useful understanding from this chapter, suffering is all just perceived, not real or permanent. What Nagarjuna wants us to understand is that all our perceptions involve some amount of suffering, whether so mild they are imperceptible or so painful and difficult they leave us with terrifying post traumatic stress. But, once we realize these are just perceptions, and that all perceptions are empty, we can adjust our thinking to reduce and eliminate the suffering.

So, when you are uncomfortable, ask yourself: How else could I perceive what is happening so that I am peaceful rather than uncomfortable? This is always a simple (if not easy) answer because suffering is really nothing more than a bad read of the conditions. So with minor incidents like a stubbed toe or with "big dukkha," as one student labels it, like cancer or death, there is always another way to perceive what is happening that dramatically reduces or even eliminates the suffering. For example, cancer and death can be seen as nothing more or less than a changing condition in our body, which is the norm, our bodies are always changing, not an aberration.

Practicing with this chapter means we need to constantly remind our selves that suffering is just a concocted story about something we feel an aversion toward. It does not exist as inherent in anyone or anything.

There is a revolutionary quality to this chapter. "Suffering and ending suffering" are what the Buddha said was his teaching. The most important and fundamental tenet or dogma of Buddhism is that everything is suffering; it's the first noble truth (see Chapter 24). And what does Nagarjuna do in this chapter? He says there really is no suffering! And so don't be surprised when, later in the book, he says there is no Buddha. Quite the revolutionary, this Nagarjuna guy!

### Chapter Thirteen—Examination of Compounded Phenomena

In this chapter Nagarjuna begins his positive description of emptiness, meaning he begins to describe the precise nature of reality. Up to now, he has implied what emptiness is by suggesting what it is not—it is not an entity, it is not having permanence or inherent nature, and so on. Here he argues that anything made up of parts (compounded), and all phenomena are made up of parts (at a minimum everything has a top and bottom and sides), is empty – lacking in ultimate existence or intrinsic characteristics.

The first verse of this power-packed eight verse chapter also introduces a key concept, that of the Two Truths (see Introduction): the conventional truth, the way we normally understand things on an everyday basis, as separate and independent, and the ultimate truth, that all phenomena, meaning all compounded phenomena, are empty. It is important to note that here Nagarjuna is discussing truth vs. “confusion,” in the style of the early Buddhist scriptures, not truth vs. falsehood. He concludes that all compounded phenomena, everything we understand conventionally, is confused and deceptive, but emptiness is not.

Practice Notes: Practicing with this chapter is similar to practicing with the preceding chapter. It involves realizing that the way things appear to us conventionally may be useful for navigating the people and places and events of our lives, but it is deceptive, and is deceptive in a way that causes suffering. Relief, then, is understanding the other level of conceiving of things, the one that acknowledges their emptiness. When we are



uncomfortable with someone or something, we practice with this Two Truths doctrine by reminding ourselves that we are interpreting conventionally, meaning that we are imputing “real” necessary characteristics to the thing, conceiving of it as really existing in a certain way that is upsetting us. These perceptions are fictitious and deceptive, because we aren’t seeing the “upsetting” thing’s emptiness, its ultimate, non-deceptive nature as arising from changeable conditions and (ultimately) empty of any inherent characteristics. This realization, engaged with as frequently as possible over time will help expand a person’s ability to take the sting out of any uneasy or uncomfortable situation. Admittedly, this is no easy practice, but it is so powerful at ending suffering that it is worth a significant investment of our energy.

#### Chapter Fourteen—Examination of Connection

Here Nagarjuna discusses the lack of inherent connection between aspects or parts of anything we might view as a single process, like seeing something or any other sense perception. There is nothing intrinsic and permanent about any of the individual phenomena involved in sight (the light entering our eye, the stimulation of the optic nerve, the automatic affective and cognitive processes of the brain that filter the light hitting the nerve into a definition of the shape, etc.). These are strings of interpretive steps that are imposed on the raw data of the contact, of the input of light to our eyes. That process is entirely subjective and occurs wholly within our minds. In fact, things with shape and color are often right in front of us and we don’t see them--this is why there are so many accidents with cars and bikers and cars and motorcyclists—we just don’t see them even though they are right there in the driver’s side mirror or in front of us, literally within inches of us and within our sight line.

Nagarjuna wants us to understand that, while everything may be composed of or compounded from (Chapter 13) other things, the connection of these parts, as explained in the example above, is not somehow understandable as a permanent connection or association. Nagarjuna explains that whether we are talking about things meeting in time and space or arising in dependence on one another, the coming together is not something real and inherent, but rather just an understanding, a model, which we use to explain things in the conventional world—and like any concept or dependently constructed phenomenon, it is empty.

There simply is no way things can connect in some permanent way. Why? Because the things being associated or imagined into connection entities or assemblages are impermanent and empty; therefore some conceptual meeting up of them must be impermanent and empty as well. When Nagarjuna examines sense contact, in this context, he shows that upon examination (here we can refer to Chapter 3) we notice that, using eye and sight as the example, if either the object being seen or the perceiver seeing it were permanent, there would be no way for them to form an association because that would require significant change and permanent things by definition can't change.

Think of Legos. No piece in a traditional Legos set has any relationship or inherent association to any other piece. It is only when they come together in a specific way, a way that we conventionally agree is a plane or a figure, for example, that a plane or figure arises. Since the plane or figure arises in dependence on its parts coming together in a particular, but not permanent way, both the pieces and the association of those parts and the final object or figure, are empty.

Another example: Read three biographies of Winston Churchill and you will discover three *completely different* Churchills. At times, you'll even wonder if they are the "same" person: one might show him as the vibrant hero of the Empire; another, with a psychoanalytic bent will explore him as deeply troubled and neurotic with periods of deep depression and fits of megalomania; another might portray him as a humble public servant, a man of the century. And then there's Churchill the painter. Searching for Churchill, as this chapter explains, is like searching for the plane amongst the Lego pieces. There is no connector there, just empty pieces.

Practice Notes: Often our discomfort with life is because we have made connections into entities that really aren't there, associations to which our brain has assigned an aversion, and which appear, together, to have an inherent existence: like "last night's audience at the play was terrible." We should remind ourselves that the entities that appear so real and substantive, in the sense of having a single function, are figments of our imagination and should not be thought of in ways that cause us to feel aversive and uncomfortable. The voice in our head should always be alert to "there are no entities" when something appears to be making us excited and upset.

A contemplative practice, based on this chapter, would be to contemplate "entityhood." By contemplate, we mean sit in a comfortable position, close your eyes, take a few deep breaths to calm your body, then begin to contemplate entityhood for 5 minutes a day for at least a week, preferably about a month. By contemplate we mean ask yourself questions until you thoroughly understand the concept of an entity. Questions like: What is an entity? How does an entity arise? How do we recognize and differentiate between different entities? What is the relationship of Self to an entity. Is Self an entity? Are entities conventional or ultimate, or both? What is the relationship of an entity to suffering. Can one thing or event be two different entities at the same time? Just continue to explore through deeper and deeper questions until you arrive at some conclusion in a month. This practice dramatically lessens one's ability to attach to entities in a way that promotes suffering.

Another practice that we have already suggested, which arises again from this chapter, is to ask yourself, when something appears to make you suffer, if that thing has parts. If so, and everything has parts, from a Lego figure to post traumatic stress, then realize it can be explored intimately, meaning taken apart piece by piece by piece, until it loses its bite or sting. At first this can be hard to understand, but with practice, anything that has parts can be deconstructed and dismantled so that it is no longer seen as a “whole” and then it loses its ability to cause suffering.

## Chapter Fifteen—Examination of Existence and Non-Existence

Chapter 15 further explores the ideas of the previous two chapters through an examination of existence and non-existence of things and extends Nagarjuna’s exploration of the possibility of anything having an inherent nature, an essence, or no nature or essence at all.

Odd as it may sound, something and nothing are dependent on each other. We cannot understand something as an existent person, place, thing, event, etc., unless we understand nothing as when a person, place, thing, or event doesn’t exist. To understand what it is like to own a car, I must also understand the notion of what it is like not to own a car. To understand what it is like not to have a child, one must understand what it might be like to have a child. There can’t be one without the other, which is one way our perceptions can be deceptive—if we don’t know one of those, then neither can exist to us. One of many counterintuitive notions in Nagarjuna’s work.

So, for Nagarjuna, existence and non-existence are dependently arisen (they depend on each other, among other things, to make any sense), and so are empty of any permanence or inherent nature. This eliminates the possibility for something to exist independently and permanently, including, provocatively, a God or gods (in particular, Nagarjuna had a Hindu Creator God in mind as he explains in *Twelve Gate Treatise*, the followup book to *Middle Way Philosophy*), and so precludes our falling into the trap of externalism, where things have autonomous Selves. Importantly, too, on the other hand, it precludes us falling to the gutter of nihilism, where we see

things as without any existence and meaningless. Things are *neither permanent nor meaningless*, they are simply empty, arisen in dependence upon each other in a vast interconnected network that extends throughout time and space. Put another way, neither permanent nor meaningless means: empty and meaningful!

Again, if things were permanent then there would be things which by their nature cause suffering and which we could not change, so there would be no need for Nagarjuna's philosophy, or Buddhism for that matter. And, if the opposite were true, that things were inherently meaningless, then we could not change that either, so again there would be no way out of suffering. But in fact, things exist in a "middle way," in dependence upon each other, in a way that makes all of our actions meaningful as either a source of continued stress or a source of a more peaceful life. We can choose which actions to pursue toward either of these ends.

Further elaborating, Nagarjuna points out that all suffering comes from the thought that there is something or nothing. People who are rich have the suffering that arises from needing to preserve and protect their wealth, a wealth they see as existing and worthwhile; people who have little materially experience the suffering that comes from what they don't have, what doesn't exist. In this context, another, deeper and more complex example is death. Unable to comprehend a world without ourselves in it, we concoct stories about what comes next, stories about nothing.

Traditional forms of Buddhism have some whoppers in the heaven/hell and reincarnation category, described in excruciating detail. "Hell" for example is described as a series of cavernous layers below our human earthly realm in which there are 8 cold hell layers and 8 hot layers. Tortures in these hells include, for example, the mountain of knives where sinners are repeatedly thrown off cliffs and land on mountainous terrain with sharp blades sticking out, or in trees with sharp thorns sticking out. Try that for a few eons before moving on to ice world where you're frozen and then shattered into small pieces, over and over.

Another of the more amusing heaven/hell stories from outside Buddhism comes from the great Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras. According to certain reported traditions, Pythagoras believed that the flatulence which resulted from eating beans interfered with one's ability to reincarnate, or, alternatively, at least represented eating human souls! So no eating beans for Pythagoras and his followers. Amazing as that sounds today, it seems to have been a deeply held belief in Pythagorean circles.

Stories aside, Nagarjuna wants us to understand here that the Self exists and does not exist at the same time. The Self exists only as an empty, ever fleeting thought and at the same time does not exist as any kind of substantive independent entity—which is the way it is usually (mis)understood. When someone dies, they no longer exist. Yet we can continue to talk about them like they do exist, like they are eternal, permanent, just oddly not around right now. We perceive them as existent and non-existent, though not in a well realized way. Adult children often say things like, "Mom is looking down at us right now," even though Mom has been dead for nearly a decade. She seems to exist and not exist at the same time. Existent and non-existent, no difference. At least for now, in this context of being a source of suffering.

Practice Notes: Understanding that things exist and at the same time do not exist in the way we are perceiving them takes a good deal of contemplation, effort and sustained practice. But once we get it, at least on an intellectual level, we can use this to navigate the everyday world with greater ease rather than greater suffering. Knowing that everything exists and doesn't exist (in the way that I am perceiving it) at the same time means it is empty and therefore not something to which I either can or should attach. This allows me to move through life without attaching to the false perception that there are entities in the way "I" understand them.

So my story about what is happening in any situation exists and doesn't exist at the same time. This means *I cannot assume that my story about anything is truer than someone else's story about the same thing—my interpretation of a political event is no more or less valid than someone else's interpretation of that event.* Both people on the political right and on the left have, from their sides and from Nagarjuna's analysis, stories that exist as conventionally real to them and at the same time, for the wise, don't really exist. Right vs left, freedom fighter vs terrorist—no one is a correct interpretation and the other wrong; these both exist and don't exist at the same time, in relation to each other. Getting a handle on this can be difficult, but once we realize that our stories are no more valid than others, arguments become impossible and we develop a way of understanding what others are saying that allows us to respond peacefully.

This doesn't mean there are no moral guidelines, rather it means that our moral compass comes from the understanding of emptiness, both cognitively and experientially in meditation. So Nagarjuna suggests we look at which actions are wholesome (like peacefulness producing, patience, compassion, generosity and an attitude of beneficence), and which are unwholesome, (like killing and taking what is not given, and child abuse and human trafficking), and that we use meditation and intellectual scrutiny to experientially determine a wholesome course of action. Here we also need to remember that there is a fundamental connection between agent and action, between what we do and say and think and how things turn out in terms of how much we suffer.

To reiterate, this is not basic moral relativism, meaning that there are no defensible moral guidelines. Quite the opposite—emptiness and the doctrine of the Two Truths lead us to a moral understanding of our actions that arises from impermanence, from a lack of permanence to anything, and not from bloated self-serving suffering that arises from always wanting more of what our senses tell us is good for us. Actions that lead toward a more peaceful life are wholesome and to be encouraged, actions that lead to suffering are unwholesome and so it would seem experientially we learn that they would be best if reduced. Inherent here is Buddhism's rarely discussed but overriding self-evident truth: we don't want to suffer. So, from one perspective, our moral and ethical behavior comes from a natural desire to reduce and end out suffering. Terrorism, genocide, multi-billion dollar ponzi schemes—even those big horrendous acts—arise from individuals who are suffering and who believe that these misguided actions will somehow end their suffering. (See "Meaning of Life" in the Introduction and "Karma" in Chapter 17 for more commentary on the source of Buddhist morality and ethics.)

From another perspective, this chapter is asserting to us that we can practice with difficult situations like helping to guide a troubled child by realizing that nothing exists in the way that it is imagined, and so our obligation is to look at the conditions as clearly as possible, as free from narratives as possible, and to respond with patience, compassion and generosity, with openness, curiosity and acceptance. That will lead to finding the best strategy for addressing any issue by allowing us to get ever closer to seeing the circumstances as they really are--empty. Even if it doesn't succeed right away or as completely as we might like, we are reminded by Chapter 8 (on agent and action) that mindfulness is about process: look clearly, act appropriately, reevaluate, and repeat. In a world where there are no beginnings and endings (Chapter 11) there is only process. This is liberating! We can continue to improve our responses to difficult and complex emotional situations over time, especially if we can discard expectations of quick and full resolution.

## Chapter Sixteen – Examination of Bondage and Liberation

Continuing themes from Chapter 15 and earlier, in this chapter Nagarjuna is using the ideas of (mental & emotional) bondage and liberation again to illustrate that things don't have an inherent nature, aren't permanent in the way we generally perceive them. It follows from this that we are not bound to suffer from our attachment to our concepts of who and what we are and what other things are. Since these things aren't permanent, but rather are conceptual and empty, then there is no way we can be bound, fettered or attached to them, regardless of how intensely it feels like we are "bound to suffer" over the loss of all our family pictures when the house caught fire. Similarly, liberation, freedom from bondage, from the suffering of attachment cannot be real. If there's no bondage, then there can't be liberation. More colloquially, liberation can be thought of simply as not experiencing self-imposed bondage.

Nagarjuna also again emphasizes that there is no "us" (no self), and thus no one to be bound or liberated. It is understated but critical to Nagarjuna's thinking about wisdom: there's no bondage or liberation because there is no one, no self, to be bound or liberated! This sure shatters any belief in the traditional Buddhist idea of being bound to cyclic existence in samsara!

Practice Notes: This is a "get yourself unstuck" chapter. It reminds us, when we feel stuck in a bad mood or depression, or when we feel stuck in a negative perception, that we are emphatically not stuck, we can use a metacognitive voice to intervene: "Stop it; there is nothing sticky and nothing to get stuck to here." Then we reorganize the information that we have misconstrued into seeing

ourselves as fettered to, rewriting whatever perception is causing us to suffer. Again, “You’re not stuck; there’s nothing to be stuck to.” What we do with that is to question its entityhood. What am I misguidedly making seem like a solid autonomous situation or event that I am bound to? Find the false entity you have created and examine it until it falls apart. For Nagarjuna, examining it meant, at least in part, deconstructing it—piece after piece after piece until nothing was left, as explained in the practice notes of Chapter 14.

## Chapter Seventeen – Examination of Actions and Their Results

As you might expect from the title of this chapter, Nagarjuna first points out that both our actions and their perceived results are empty (sensing a trend here?). They appear to exist on a conventional level but do not on an ultimate level (exist and don’t exist at the same time, following from Chapter 16, above). Importantly, we need to understand that, even though our actions aren’t permanent (they have no independent inherent characteristics), it does not mean there aren’t results from them. If that were the case, we would be saying that what we do doesn’t matter, and in fact, it is exactly the opposite. Everything we do matters because each of our actions, each of our intentional decisions, changes conditions, leaving the world in either a more or less peaceful state. (See *Meaning of Life* in the Introduction.) So all of our actions, in body, speech and mind – through doing, saying and thinking-- are consequential, not in a permanent way, but nonetheless, meaningful and consequential, in that they are partial determinants in what comes next, and in that they help to create conditions leading to either more or less suffering.

Practice Notes: This short chapter is reminding us how important it is that we constantly monitor our behavior – our bodily actions, spoken words, and thoughts – to ensure we are behaving in an appropriate intentional way. This is the gift of being human: wisdom –we are the only species that has the capacity to act with intention, in ways that are morally wholesome or morally unwholesome, and to use this capacity is our most significant purpose and the source of meaning in our lives. We can always be alert to what we are doing, allowing us to create less suffering and more peacefulness. No other species can do this—no other species can therefore see the

preciousness of life nor understand karma, meaning understand how to intentionally create imprints in the mind (or form habits) that point us to wise future actions.

This chapter's direction to always monitor our thoughts and behavior is not an urging to self-flagellation or other unpleasant or rigid self-suppression. Rather, with the understanding that things that cause negative feelings and upsetting thoughts are empty of any self-supporting characteristics that, of themselves, create these feelings and thoughts, we can grow over time to shift our default reactions to be to accept these issues as they are (dependent and contingent) and to let them come and go without causing upset. In other words, it can become easier to be peaceful and to promote peacefulness than to experience automatic reactions that are upsetting. The easiest way to do this is by developing a meta cognitive voice that guides us to always be mindful of what we are thinking, saying and doing. A simple practice here would be to choose a half day, a morning or afternoon, and intentionally force yourself to take a long slow deep breath before speaking. It is amazing how differently one sees conditions when one stops, takes a breath, and then responds rather than reacts.

This chapter explains why we do good things in the hope of getting good results, thus skillfully moving us in a favorable direction, a directly that is likely to reduce or eliminate our discomfort and suffering. Again here in this chapter we see that there is no good and bad, yet it is best that we act in ways that are "skillful." And how do we do this? Again, with a meta cognitive voice that constantly asks, "Is what I am doing or saying or thinking skillful?" In other words, am I acting with body, speech and mind in ways that make me and my family and my friends and colleagues and the planet a better place, or not? And if not, what can I do in this moment to change that?

Alternatively, look at your intention in every situation. Ask yourself, what is the intention behind me doing this, whatever this is. The answer should always be to see the Two Truths and to act from an intention to be of benefit.



## Chapter Eighteen – Examination of Self and Entities

Throughout the *Middle Way Philosophy*, Nagarjuna has provided extensive arguments showing why there cannot be a permanent self. These arguments were supported mainly through various analogies and discussions of the properties a “self” might experience (e.g., actions and their results). Here Nagarjuna condenses and elaborates specifically on how no permanent self is possible, explaining that the self is neither the aggregates nor not the aggregates. In Chapter 4 this apparent paradox was explained, though perhaps not so broadly. Also, recall from Chapter 4 that the aggregates consist of the conventionally-perceived components of the self (form, feeling, cognitions, mental fabrications and consciousness.)

Here Nagarjuna is explaining that “no self” includes not just us—people, actors—but also all entities, all phenomena. Nagarjuna points out that the self we perceive must either be identical with the aggregates or different from them (i.e., it is either the aggregates or not the aggregates). Remember that earlier, Nagarjuna pointed out that the aggregates themselves are empty of permanent existence, and are constantly coming into being and fading away. This is obvious enough: perceptions, thoughts, etc. are constantly changing. Thus the supposedly permanent “self” Nagarjuna is arguing against would, if it were composed of the aggregates, be in a constant state of change and thus would not be permanent at all. On the other hand, since all of our information about the world is received and processed by means of the aggregates (from sense contact to story to consciousness), any supposed self that was outside them could never be known. It would essentially be super-rational and to believe in such a thing is insupportable and would require what we might call today a leap of faith, something Nagarjuna would never ask of us.

As with much in the *Middle Way Philosophy*, this argument and conclusion is counterintuitive and surprising to many readers – we base our lives around an intuitive and culturally reinforced notion of self that sees things and thinks about them in a way that seems absolutely real and true. Nagarjuna here is pointing out that this notion of self is only conventionally real, and cannot stand up to scrutiny when assessed as to whether or not it is permanent, or, put another way, has a self-sufficient set of characteristics that establish its existence outside our mental construction. The self as normally thought of and utilized is instead a fiction that lends a structure to our navigation of the world. The self is itself dependent on the flow of ever-changing perceptions, and for this reason is not ultimately or naturally existent. Again, this is totally counterintuitive as it is not the way anyone automatically encounters the world.

For Nagarjuna, this is an overwhelmingly important point. The idea of no self, or “not self,” another translation that seems broader in meaning, is the core teaching of the *Middle Way Philosophy*. If we understand not-self, all our delusional thinking weakens and with time and practice through study and meditation falls away and the Two Truths become evident (see Chapter 24).

Practice Notes: We should always keep in mind that the false notion of an independently existing self is at the source of all problems and suffering. All “my” suffering arises from a perception, a delusional conceptualization, that “I” am here in a real and permanent way. It is the way our brain processes information: every perception we have, every narrative about our lives, starts with the word “I.” For our brains, we can and must always be the center of the universe. (It’s a survival thing.) Also, and obviously, the way our brain works, it cannot conceive of our non-existence. So all suffering arises from a belief in self, a clinging to me and my and what I want. When we glance at the Twelve Links in Chapter 26 we will see a detailed model of how this clinging to self works and at the same time is the source of all suffering.

Whenever we are uncomfortable, whenever we are depressed, whenever we are in physical pain, we need to remember that there is no me to suffer in the way “I” am perceiving suffering. The traditional phrase to chant at these times is, “this is not me; this is not mine –there is no self.” If we don’t identify and appropriate our brain’s story, then (again after much study and meditation to overcome our intuited self) we can transform what was previously a stressful reaction to one with little to no impact. Another option is a no I-Me-My-Mine practice.

### No “I, Me, My, Mine” Practice

An amazing but very difficult practice here is to set two hours one day to practice with no-self in this way: For the preset two hours (you can start with one hour, if two seems too hard), do not say any of these four words: I, me, my, or mine. Try not to even think them. So “I need to wash the dishes” becomes “There are dishes in the sink that need washing.” Practice with this once or twice a week and notice what happens when the “I-function” is weakened, notice what happens in your mind and in your body. See how a natural calmness sets in when self is enfeebled by this practice. This may be the most difficult practice we have suggested in this commentary, and the one that provides the most profound insight into how to reduce suffering.

## Chapter Nineteen – Examination of Time

A sample of Nagarjuna's thoughts on time (*Middle Way Philosophy*, Chapter 19, verses 1-3):

If the present and the future  
Depend on the past,  
Then the present and the future  
Would have existed in the past.

If the present and the future  
Did not exist there,  
How could the present and the future  
Be dependent upon it?

If they are not dependent upon the past,  
Neither of the two would be established.  
Therefore neither the present  
Nor the future would exist.

It might seem that time exists as a permanent entity because things exist in time, meaning that there is some separate property of "time" in which events occur. Something that has ceased to be might be said to have existed in the past, for example. Not so, as Nagarjuna explains in this short chapter. Instead, Nagarjuna points out that time is just a conventional name for whatever series of dependent relationships we are discussing at the moment. Time has no separate independent existence, no permanence of any sort, outside these dependent relationships.

One of Nagarjuna's arguments goes like this: If the present and the future depend on the past, then the present and the future would have had to have existed in the past—predestination at its worst! This surprising conclusion results from Nagarjuna's earlier explanations that if there is a "cause" supposed for a later event (result, or effect), the cause must have the result inherently contained within the cause, otherwise there can be no connection shown between the two events.

If there were a connection, it would lead to the nonsensical conclusion that the past must somehow contain the future – that the past and the future would exist simultaneously. Additionally, the future could, by this reasoning, exist on its own and just happen (or would have happened already, whatever that may mean). My car might appear at my office next week without anyone ever having driven it there.

This mind-bending issue becomes explainable if we instead see time for what it is. Our perception of time—a series of events, each arising from earlier ones—is a mental construct, a conceptual relationship we find useful to explain the everyday world. Time, like everything else is just a mental fabrication, albeit a very useful one as long as we keep it in perspective and don't think it exists in some permanent way.

Nagarjuna is using time as yet another example to show that things can exist in relationships without being permanent. Chapter 2 explained this emphatically, in another context, and Chapter 20 will explain it again in yet another context. All this repetition is meant to cause readers of *Middle Way Philosophy* to scrutinize their assumptions about reality, which in Nagarjuna's view is an important step in the process of ending one's suffering.

Practice Notes: From a practice point of view, realizing that time is empty, that it doesn't exist in the way we conventionally perceive it, can be used to liberate us from a considerable amount of our suffering. In fact, from any and all the stories that cause us discomfort—from mild annoyance to rage and wrathfulness.

For starters, without a belief in a linear flow of time, there can be no cause and effect (as explained in Chapter 1). Hard as it may be to realize because of the way our brains are wired, which is to make things linear in a consistent way with our past understandings, realizing there is no cause and effect makes all our stories about what is happening to us lose their impact. When we look closely, we see that every perception, every narrative that is a source of suffering (and all are) is fabricated in a cause and effect structure. Without time: no cause and effect, without cause and effect, we cannot really believe what our minds are telling us and so the fear and anxiety and angst and the delusion of it all, fades away. Admittedly, it fades away very slowly because this is such a giant shift in the way we are asking ourselves to process the information of the everyday world. But as Nagarjuna explains, and as the authors here attest, it does, with meditation and practice, fade away, and a lot of it just falls off without us even noticing, which is even better. We are profoundly adept at making sequences out of things that aren't sequential; and all our sequencing, while it may seem true and real, is conceptual nonsense that causes us to suffer.

If we deeply realize, if we contemplate and practice with the understanding that time is empty, then there is no past and nothing in the past to cause us discomfort, nor is there

anything in the future about which to worry. All the “what ifs,” which are the source of so much of our suffering, lessen and fall away. Being that there is nothing in the past nor in the future for us to fixate on, instead of fixing our thoughts and emotions on past events and their presumed future results, we can instead be mindful and coast smoothly and peacefully in the conditions of the moment.

## Chapter Twenty – Examination of Combinations

This chapter is not very provocatively named, but has a lot of chewy philosophy to it nonetheless. Here Nagarjuna again explains that events and entities have no inherent existence, but instead arise in dependence upon certain conditions, though they are not caused by those conditions (Chapter 1’s commentary covers this extensively; Chapter 4 looks at it again, Chapter 14 examines it from a slightly different perspective, and it is threaded as a theme through the whole *Middle Way Philosophy*).

Chapter 20 focuses on the idea that effects, meaning relationships between objects and phenomena and direct influences or connections between them, no matter how regularly they may follow each other, are not connected by any intrinsic force (per Chapter 1). There is no “necessary connection,” to use a phrase from David Hume, no fixed combination between any phenomena we observe, only regularity that is the product of dependent arising.

If things arise in dependence on conditions, one may ask, is this not just another name for a causal relationship of the type Nagarjuna disproved right up front in Chapter 1? If certain conditions are present, do they together (as a combination or as an assemblage) necessitate the arising of the thing that arises in dependence on the conditions? In other words, is the combination causal in a cause-and-effect relationship. Clearly not.

To give a flavor of Nagarjuna’s response to this question, using typically cryptic language Nagarjuna opens Chapter 20 with Verses 1-4, like this:

If, arising from the combination of  
Causes and conditions,  
The effect is in the combination,  
How could it arise from the combination?

If, arising from the combination of

Causes and conditions,  
The effect is not in the combination,  
How could it arise from the combination?

If the effect is in the combination  
Of causes and conditions,  
Then it should be grasped in the combination,  
But it is not grasped in the combination.

If the effect is not in the combination  
Of causes and conditions,  
Then actual causes and conditions  
Would be like noncauses and conditions.

Put more succinctly, Nagarjuna is observing that neither a condition nor a group of conditions, neither a piece or part, nor some collection or connected group of those, can (1) be independent and permanent or (2) causal in a cause-and-effect context. And then the clincher, in the last line of verse four above, tells us, *none* of this exists, not the trees nor the forests exist. So ultimately conditions and cause-and-effect stories constructed from them, are non-events that snare us into the delusion that causes us to suffer. If you want to, you could also consider this in terms of time, from Chapter 19 above—time wouldn't exist because it would be a collection of pasts, presents, and futures.

In addition to the arguments from previous chapters referred to above, there is another somewhat technical argument that Nagarjuna appends here. After the opening four verses, Nagarjuna goes on to point out that the combination of conditions claimed to necessitate (cause) a certain result, if the combination were asserted to have an inherent causal effect (i.e., be a true cause), would have to be identical to the result as it (the combination) would not be able to interact with the effect in any way if it did not contain the effect inherently. The effect would have to be part of the cause already and so the effect would also have to exist simultaneously with the cause at all times, not in the required cause-precedes-effect sequence. These elegant side arguments always bring a smile to this commentary's authors, and Nagarjuna certainly meant us to smile here!

From a more practical perspective, Nagarjuna is pointing out the impossibility that combinations of things, or collections of things, can exist in a harmony or unity that is permanent. He is saying that it makes no sense to believe that while trees might not be permanent, a collection of trees, a forest, would be permanent and exist as a self-existent thing with an inherent nature. Why? Because a self-existent thing arising from a collection of things, be it a forest or a car or even a person (harking back to Chapter 4), in which none of the individual things themselves have any inherent existence would require some unprovable link between them, the trees, and the permanent thing, the forest. Further, they could not undergo change, meaning change in a way that that was necessarily (see Chapter 1 for a detailed explanation of this) caused by the conditions.

Since *Middle Way Philosophy* is, after all, a Buddhist text aiming to provide a foundation to help us to relieve our suffering, Nagarjuna is less interested in us understanding that things which are made up of parts, such as trees and forests, are empty as he is in getting us to understand that the

aggregates in combination (Chapter 4) are empty and, as we shall see in Chapter 26, that the 12 links (a foundation of Buddhist psychology explaining how we all become subject to the confusion about the true nature of reality) are empty individually and as a collection.

Practice Notes: We can think of this chapter as saying that there is no “bigger picture.” Often our tendency in analyzing our lives is to look for “the bigger picture” to gain a perspective that will relieve our suffering. The “you can’t see the forest for the trees” piece of folk wisdom is, to Nagarjuna, just more silliness, since there are neither forests nor trees. When we let this settle in deeply, we lose the cloudiness of our minds, the murkiness of our perceptual stories, and we see conditions clearly. When we cannot blame the trees or the forest, when we can see little things as causing us to suffer and no longer blame the bigger picture as the source of our suffering (there is no cascade of events leading to inevitable suffering), we can realize that we are causing our own suffering and have the ability to end it.

This understanding is helpful for people who suffer from beliefs that occult and metaphysical forces are the source of their suffering, and for people stuck in the paradoxical loops of fatalism and predestination. For none of these can exist—being they all supposedly act as (impossible) connectors between events.

Going still further, when we practice with there being no one and nothing to blame for perceived stressful outcomes, the blame-game ends and so does our discomfort. Understanding and realizing this lack of inherent connection eliminates the blame game. When we no longer view life in a way that would allow us to blame others for our discomfort or suffering, a whole boatload of suffering just falls away. What arises, when the connection and blame are gone, is just a clear understanding of conditions. When we see this clearly, right conduct, meaning a moral code, arises from the clarity. As there is no longer a Self-Other construct, when we aren’t trying to blame someone for something, and when we aren’t trying to get something for ourselves out of what is happening, we can know unhesitatingly that the path to liberation is found in doing no harm and being of benefit. This tells us how to make ethical and moral choices, without the need for an external authority to command us in how to act and to threaten us if we don’t do so. This is explained further in Chapter 27.

## Chapter Twenty-One – Examination of Arising and Ceasing

This chapter can be understood as a final extension of the previous chapters that are analyzing the conventional world we live in. We have just seen Nagarjuna tying up one philosophical loose end in Chapter 20 with his explanation that combinations of conditions cannot be seen as “causing” an outcome. Nagarjuna here ties up another hanging issue, showing that, in addition to lacking enduring (permanent) characteristics, phenomena do not even really exist for any duration at all, reinforcing his explanation in Chapter 19 that time does not exist.

Nagarjuna’s target here is the idea of momentariness, that for each arising thing, there is a discrete moment in which it arises followed by a moment in which that thing ceases. This idea of momentariness is a philosophic leftover from early Buddhist philosophic thinking, and so isn’t particularly important to us today. That noted, it is relatively easily dealt with by Nagarjuna, who points out that this idea is internally contradictory—all arising things are simultaneously coming into being and ceasing as (as we have seen with other phenomena) the notions of arising and ceasing make no sense without each other—meaning they are interdependent at all times, so there can be no moment of pure arising followed by a moment of pure ceasing. Additionally, if there were arising and ceasing, coming and going, there would have to be a permanent dividing point at which arising ended and ceasing began, and as we have already discussed, the idea of there being one permanent thing in an impermanent, or, more accurately, ultimately empty universe is incoherent and nonsensical. There are several verses in Chapter 21 exploring different facets of Nagarjuna’s argument, illustrated by Verses 1-2 (again exemplary of Nagarjuna’s inimitable style):

1.  
Destruction does not occur without becoming  
It does not occur together with it  
Becoming does not occur without destruction  
It does not occur together with it

- 2.



How could there be destruction  
Without becoming?  
How could there be death without birth?  
There is no destruction without becoming

Practice Notes: The lesson we take from this chapter is somewhat peripheral in that it doesn't come from the idea of momentariness as much as from the more fundamental ideas of arising and ceasing. Everything that makes us suffer comes from a story, a perception of what is happening, and every one of those stories has a beginning, where it arises, and an end, where it ceases. (We might add that there is also a middle to everything, and the middle becomes the end of the beginning and the beginning of the end, and so forms an infinite regress and progression simultaneously, which is laughable!)

Remembering that arising and ceasing are empty, are just arbitrary starting and ending points to our perceptions, not actually what is happening, allows us to weaken our attachment to our stories in a more active and emphatic way. It points up that all our stories are false since we create where and how they begin and when and how they end without any hint of "reality" to those stories. As any college writing student knows, where one chooses to start and end a story determines whether it has a sad or happy ending! But the starting point and the ending point are completely arbitrary, they are not a reflection of anything other than the writer's imagination. And everyday life's stories are imagined just as much as a piece of fiction. Similarly, movie makers will often write two endings, a sad ending and a happy ending, and test which works best with audiences.

Note that arising and ceasing also means birth and death, for there cannot be discrete, clearly defined permanent moments in which we are born, meaning arise; nor discrete moments in which we die, meaning cease. So when we practice with Chapter 21 we learn to see "alive" and "dead" not as permanent moments of birth and death but rather as conventional stories about change. And practicing with seeing everything as change, seeing change as the natural order of things, is one of the most profound practices in the way Buddhism eliminates suffering (see Chapter 26 for more about this). Angst around death, which so many Western therapists today see as normal, Nagarjuna teaches is nonsensical. Carl has often had listeners in lectures say, "You can't understand how much suffering there is when someone close to you dies until it has happened to you." Despite the strength of this narrative in our culture, Carl has had a different experience—after having someone close to him die in a brutal way he has seen first-hand how applying Nagarjuna's middle way philosophy to his reaction has minimized the pain and suffering. After working with Carl to explore the *Middle Way Philosophy*, Andy has had a similar experience.

To explore this from one more perspective, we need to know that birth and death are just conventional stories, sticks in the sand, if you will, that don't really exist in the way they appear. In fact, there is very little agreement on when birth occurs. Some believe it is at conception, others when the baby comes out of the womb, and everything in between, before and after. Another view of birth is that it occurs when we learn about it. Carl remembers when his sister was born (he was six years old), and she was born when his father sat him down and told him: "You have a baby sister!" That was about half an hour she came out of the womb, half an hour after the time on the birth certificate. Understanding that someone isn't born (or dead) until we learn about it is complicated and counterintuitive, but it allows us to understand the emptiness at the heart of

arising and ceasing. Death, of course, is very similar: are we dead when our heart stops? Can we be dead, then, and be reborn (with resuscitation or CPR); or is death final? Are we dead when we are brain dead? Brain dead but not heart dead? The more we analyze this, the more Nagarjuna's conclusion that life and death are just useful conventional understandings, but ultimately are foolish to believe are real and true. To paraphrase, there is neither life nor death, except nominally (conventionally). Chew on that long enough and existential angst around these events falls off effortlessly—no more existential angst.

How do we do this? How to do get from thinking of life and death as beginning and endings to realizing they are nominally useful designations that are empty. By developing a strong meta cognitive voice that asserts over and over that change is the norm, not an aberration. And “birth” and “death” are just changes, they are not specific, permanent, autonomous moments or moments that begin and end anything.

## Chapter Twenty-Two – Examination of the Tathagata

Up to this point in the *Middle Way Philosophy*, we have been looking at an ancient Indian philosophy about the nature of reality (what we might call metaphysics in Western thought, though Carl prefers to label it soteriological ontology), with some conclusions about our world that can help us to understand things in a way that reduces our discomfort and suffering. Starting here in Chapter 22 and for the remainder of the book, Nagarjuna moves from this general philosophy to very specific Buddhist ideas about ethics (the right way to live), the nature of enlightenment (full realization of the nature of reality) and Buddhist psychology, all of which are seen through the lens of Nagarjuna's arguments that all things are empty of inherent existence.

“*Tathagata*” is an honorific title in Sanskrit, the original language of Nagarjuna's text, and doesn't have a good translation in English, though Buddha is sometimes used. Tathagata is used for the historical Buddha as an individual man, as well as other “Buddhas” (at least 28 major named ones with imaginary histories assigned to their behaviors and enlightenment.) These are just people, not deities, who have ended their suffering and become enlightened, meaning people who have been liberated from what Buddhists call “the cycle of *samsara* (suffering),” a concept that Nagarjuna looks at more specifically in a Chapter 25. That understanding led early Buddhists to argue that, because there were enlightened beings (who were perceived as having attained a permanent state of enlightenment), then a place where people suffer, *samsara*, must also exist in a permanent way. Fallacious as it is (as we will see below), having enlightened beings and a place for them to go is a useful story. It is not unlike the Abrahamic faiths' concept of being at God's side in heaven.

From Nagarjuna's perspective, and as a natural consequence of engaging with emptiness, the idea of a separate place from “here” that is free of suffering is illogical and nonsense. When Nagarjuna established this, this thought was revolutionary as it contradicted a fundamental dogma in Buddhism that had been around for about 700 years prior to Nagarjuna, and even continues today, although in Western Buddhism with much less philosophic or dogmatic weightiness than in the more institutionalized Buddhism prevalent in parts of Asia. Imagine that when Nagarjuna examined this, it was as shocking to Buddhists as it would be for Christians to get up one morning and be told, “Oops, we were wrong, there is no heaven.” It was that revolutionary, which is

why we think that the idea of a Buddhist heaven and hell still lingers in Buddhist institutions today.

Nagarjuna explains in this chapter that there is no way to produce a permanent, eternal Buddha, using arguments that by now are familiar to anyone who has made it this far in understanding *Middle Way Philosophy*. Nagarjuna first points out that, like all other entities, the Buddha is empty of any inherent existence. Critically, however, *Nagarjuna now makes explicit an idea that he has been hinting at up to this point: when describing any entity as empty of inherent existence and/or permanent characteristics, it is critical to understand that this is the same as saying the (conceived of) entity does not ultimately exist—it only exists on the conventional level of our perceptions*. The importance of this statement can be chewed on for years so that realization of the middle way settles in and resets our default mode of thinking of the perceived world as “real.” Expanding on this idea, this chapter, among others, highlights that emptiness itself is not a “characteristic” that any supposed entity has, it is instead a description of the nature of ultimate reality that is free of all our perceptions and interpretations.

This idea is elegantly argued by Nagarjuna here. Interestingly, at this point in the text and going forward for the rest of *Middle Way Philosophy*, Nagarjuna’s style becomes less inscrutable than that of earlier chapters, as exemplified in the following important Verses:

11.

“Empty” should not be asserted.

“Nonempty” should not be asserted.

Neither both nor neither should be asserted.

They are only used nominally (conventionally).

13.

One who grasps the view that the Tathagata exists,

Having seized the Buddha,

Constructs conceptual fabrications

About one who has achieved Nirvana.

14.

Since he is by nature empty,

The thought that the Buddha

Exists or does not exist

After nirvana is not appropriate.

16.

Whatever is the essence of the Tathagata,

That is the essence of the world.

The Tathagata has no essence.

The world is without essence.

Practice Notes: Because there is no permanent person (with or without suffering), or a permanent place (with or without suffering), then what we have is the ability to choose a path that comes from wisdom and logic, and therefore is based in compassion as well—for when I remove “me” from the equation, I am left with an other-centered default setting that arises from

compassion. Since our aim (like that of Buddhism) is to lessen and ultimately eliminate our suffering, we can choose to conduct our affairs of family and work, of community and of the planet in ways that lessen suffering moment by moment. As you might imagine, there are lists of these that have come around in the various Buddhist traditions, called the *paramitas*. *Paramitas* is a Sanskrit word that translates as the “perfections,” which are ethical guidelines we are meant to perfect in our lives. Note that over the ages the lists have varied in content and size; sometimes there are six perfections, other times there are ten. The most basic list is generosity, moral discipline, patience, enthusiastic effort, meditation, and wisdom (wisdom is what allows us to realize the other five).

### The Six Paramitas

1. *Generosity*, the basic principle of enlightened living, the key to being other-centered and to realizing no self: giving, selflessly.
2. *Morality*, acting in ways that are virtuous and wholesome, that arise understanding emptiness and so from beneficence; not doing what we know is wrong
3. *Patience*, being completely present with the conditions of the moment, with no self-serving agenda; patience is so fundamental because it is the antidote for anger in its various forms, ranging from mild annoyance to malevolence, and anger is one of the three poisons (greed and delusion are the other two)
4. *Joyful diligence*, maintaining a positive, enthusiastic, conscientious determination toward one’s practice, toward realizing no self and emptiness
5. *Meditation*, from which awareness is cultivated and clarity arises, from which the mind is trained to rest in the present moment, free from afflictions and obscurations, like the poisons: greed, anger, and delusion; sometimes states as envy, conceit and pride
6. *Wisdom*, knowing emptiness, the foundation of all our actions, which informs and sustains us in practicing the other five paramitas.

You can practice with the *paramitas* by choosing one, say generosity, for a week, and then keeping it in the forefront of your mind all week. Every day that week, go out of your way to do

one generous act. In the same way, work your way down the list through moral discipline—stop yourself from doing something you know is wrong, even something as small as not cutting in front of someone in line at the grocery, etc.

Remember as we practice, that everything Nagarjuna says is reminding us about no-self and not-self! As suggested in Chapter 18, we can practice with this chapter by doing the no I-me-my- mine practice, as explained in the practice notes of Chapter 18.

Specific to the text here, if there is no Tathagata and no suffering, then there is no Me to do or not do the suffering. Right? Right. But don't believe it just because we say it. Why not have a seat and contemplate it? Sit there long enough and you and all your worries might just fall away. More about all this in the next chapter.

## Chapter Twenty-Three – Examination of Errors

This chapter addresses the mistakes of our mental constructs, the errors that lead us to lives of suffering, and shows that they are not permanent, not inherent in us, rather that they are empty. This chapter features Nagarjuna's most specific description (along with Chapter 26) of the psychological process behind our self-created interpretations of what we experience as suffering.

In making his argument, Nagarjuna deploys some typical Buddhist jargon. For example, he discusses the fundamental "defilements," also called "the three poisons," of greed, anger, and delusion: greed being the desire for more, more of those things we believe attractive and for less of those we find aversive; anger being the mind state that arises when we don't get something we believe is desirable or when we get something we believe is inherently aversive; and delusion, which is our inability to see the ultimate nature of reality, which, if we were not subject to delusion, would allow us to see that there are no permanent entities which we could label as attractive or aversive. Again, in his inimitable style, Nagarjuna points out that the defilements are not a necessary feature of the world:

4.  
The defilements are somebody's.  
But that one has not been established.  
Without that possessor,  
The defilements are nobody's.

Following standard Buddhist thought, Nagarjuna points out that the fundamental erroneous views leading us to be victim to the defilements are (1) belief in a permanent Self, (2) happiness can be found in our everyday world (samsara) if we just get more of those things we believe are attractive, and (3) our body is pure, meaning our senses can lead us down a path to peacefulness.

If these defilements and errors were somehow to be permanent, Nagarjuna explains, then there would only be a world of suffering without end, a permanent samsara, which is impossible and

which has been shown not to exist in the previous chapter. And too, for the errors to be permanent, the Self would have to be permanent, and that has been repeatedly shown to be impossible. *What this means is that suffering can be ended with an alert and constant effort to minimize our attachment to the Self and the erroneous views falsely attributed to and characterizing the Self.*

Practice Notes: This is a key practice: (1) remembering I do not exist in the way I am perceiving myself—there is no unhappy me or angry me or depressed me, and further remembering that there is nothing that is of itself attractive or aversive. When we want, desire, crave something, we can remind ourselves that there is really no “us” and that nothing is inherently desirable or attractive, and that loosens our craving and clinging to it. Similarly, when anger arises, we can remind ourselves that what we are angry at isn’t really aversive in and of itself. This allows the anger to lessen and eventually dissipate. Simply put, if we are uncomfortable, it is because we have characterized someone or something as either attractive or aversive and then believed it is really that way. Using a meta cognitive voice to remind us that, while all our perceptions are affinity and aversion based, there is nothing which is really desirable or undesirable of itself, significantly lessens our suffering.

This chapter also (again) reminds us to practice with no-self—not to believe that getting more of what my senses, my body, implies is desirable, will make me happy – it won’t. In fact, exactly the opposite is true, getting more of what I want always leads me to wanting more and more. And there is no end to more, it is an ugly infinite progression at the source of so much suffering.

Finally, this chapter asks for a meta-cognitive voice focused on non-self that, bottom line, reminds me that ultimately there is no one here to feel angry, no one here to be greedy, no one here to be feeling attracted or repulsed by an imagined something outside of us.

## Chapter Twenty-Four – Examination of the Four Noble Truths

The “Four Noble Truths” are the most basic and core teaching of Buddhism. The first noble truth is that all compounded phenomena, which can be described for purposes of this commentary as all our made-up perceptions and narratives and stories that define the people and stuff of the world, are a source of suffering. The second noble truth is that suffering results from defilements and erroneous views (see Chapter 23). The third noble truth is that it is possible to end this practice. The fourth noble truth is that the path to ending our suffering can be seen to have eight steps (it is “eightfold”).

If compounded things don’t exist in a permanent way, then neither does suffering. So reexamining things in terms of emptiness, rather than allowing our defilements and erroneous views to dominate, minimizes and resolves our perceived idea that things are making us suffer. Being that suffering is not permanent, ending it is a practice, and a practice that is possible and attainable. With practice, indeed, we can get more and more skilled at ending it.

Finally, there are eight practices, the eightfold path, that meditation, intellectual scrutiny and just plain everyday experience and common sense show us lead to happier, healthier lives: having a right view (of emptiness); a right intention (being resolved to act in beneficial ways and having the intention to realize emptiness); right speech, conduct, livelihood, and effort (all based in doing or saying or thinking in ways that are right, meaning beneficial); and, finally, right mindfulness and concentration (being mindful and meditating). These eight agenda items for Buddhism are guidelines, skillful ways of acting that lead us to less suffering. Note that there is nothing permanent or inherent in any of them – they are all in the realm of altering our attitudes and actions. They are guidelines to keep us on the path, not commandments that, unless followed, will lead to punishment by an outside Power or Force.

From a philosophical perspective, there is an even bigger notion in this chapter, Nagarjuna’s arguments for the “Two Truths,” a concept we have explained previously in the Introduction and alluded to in other chapters, but is most directly discussed by Nagarjuna here.

The Two Truths: There is conventional truth, the seeming truth of our everyday understandings of how things are, and there is ultimate truth, emptiness. Because things are empty, we can have conventional understandings of them. Remember it is exactly the fact that things have no permanent, inherent characteristics that allows us to ascribe our perceived characteristics to them. Following this, the fact that we have a conventional understanding of something means it is empty, in other words, the fact that we are able to ascribe characteristics to something shows that it is empty. If it were permanent (i.e., was possessed of its own inherent qualities and characteristics), the thing itself would dictate our perceptions of it. *So, things are conventionally true and empty at the same time; in fact, there is no difference between the two.*

This is another inflection point for many readers of the *Middle Way Philosophy*. What is the point of the two truths, is not the conventional understanding just plain erroneous? Nagarjuna would say that this is the wrong question. Remember that the point of all this argumentation, and the point of Buddhism in general, is to relieve suffering. The *Middle Way Philosophy* can be seen as Nagarjuna's attempt to further this goal by helping us to understand the nature of reality – the emptiness of all things in order that we may be free of the delusion that stands in the way of relief from our suffering. Importantly, and as explicitly acknowledged by Nagarjuna here, we only have our perceptions and intelligence to work with to make progress toward this goal – all of our ability to understand ultimate reality comes through conventional means like language, dealing with concepts, reading and understanding his treatise on the middle way and its follow-up commentary (Nagarjuna's *Twelve Gate Treatise*), and certain other texts and scriptures. Without a conventional understanding, we can make no progress toward understanding ultimate emptiness. As verse 10 says:

Without a foundation in the conventional truth,  
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.  
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,  
Liberation is not achieved.

This chapter also provides Nagarjuna's most explicit explanation of his philosophy as the “middle way” between nihilism (believing that nothing exists or has any meaning) and reification (believing that things in the world have real, permanent, eternal, inherent natures and characteristics in and of themselves).

The concepts are somewhat complex, but one argument goes essentially like this: first, remember that for things to be empty of inherent characteristics is exactly what allows us to ascribe characteristics to them, as well as the conditions giving rise to them. These sets of conditions, and, more importantly, the thing that arises, do not exist inherently, they are essentially “created” by our conception and labeling of them. Looked at in reverse, the fact that we observe (label and thereby create) some dependently arisen thing is, for the same reason, evidence that it is ultimately empty. If it were not, we could not ascribe the perceived qualities to it, we would be bound by its inherently existing qualities, not free to create our own observations. Thus, we observe a dependently arisen thing (i.e., there is something there) contradicting nihilism, but what we observe is not something that is inherently real because of any self-possession abiding characteristics contradicting reification. So neither extreme is possible. Nagarjuna observes this in Verses 18-19:



18.

Whatever is dependently co-arisen  
That is explained to be emptiness.  
That, being a dependent designation,  
Is itself the middle way.

19.

Something that is not dependently arisen,  
Such a thing does not exist.  
Therefore a nonempty thing  
Does not exist.

Note also that Nagarjuna states in verse 18 that emptiness itself is a dependent designation, “emptiness” is dependent on a notion of dependent arising to have any meaning. Without its contrast of dependent arising, emptiness would not be able to be conceived, and vice versa for the concept of dependent arising. This is a point at which the limits of conventional understanding of ultimate reality are displayed – the emptiness that is ultimate reality just *is* and cannot really be subject to any description because such description will necessarily create mental boundaries to the understanding of emptiness. Achieving an apprehension of this ultimate reality is often described as the full “realization” of reality, which is a step beyond an intellectual understanding of emptiness, dependent arising and the middle way. This concept is described in more detail in the final chapter of the *Middle Way Philosophy*. It is further described in the eight negations of the *Middle Way Philosophy*’s dedicatory note, and is elucidated in the conclusion of this commentary.

**Practice Notes:** The Two Truths, everything is conventionally real and empty at the same time—this sounds like the ultimate in mumbo-jumbo. However, we hope that by this point, you can see how Nagarjuna has built a strong case for this understanding, piece by piece, and with contemplation and questioning analysis you will be able to see that compounded things don’t exist in a permanent way (they exist only conventionally), and neither does suffering. On the other hand, there is a reality out there (we just can’t get to full realization of it through study and logic alone), and thus nihilism and its attendant lack of moral guidance and impulse toward despair is incorrect. Contrary to nihilism, which could be seen to deny that anything is liable to change and therefore our actions are meaningless, in fact, everything is meaningful just because it is conventionally not permanent – we are free to change our perceptions and actions toward those which will lessen suffering.

“If compounded things don’t exist in a permanent way, then neither does suffering.” If we create our own understandings of events, that is the bottom of the ninth inning, grand slam, out of the park hit that wins the world series. That concept, supported by Nagarjuna’s systematic logic, is so powerful that, when you practice with it, it can change everything. It is really this simple: realize that my ideas about things are just made up stories, compounded phenomena, and if any of them seem to be making me suffer, I can change them. So there are no difficulties, no problems, no mishaps, those are just deluded understandings that can be released so we can be peaceful. Over and over, remind yourself, in practicing with this chapter: “There are no difficulties, no problems, no mishaps! Those just appear when I forget the Two Truths.”

## Chapter Twenty-Five – Examination of Nirvana

Nirvana is correctly understood as a state of full realization of the nature of reality. It is not a separate physical or supernatural place (certainly not a heaven-like location somewhere) as it is sometimes misunderstood. If, as Nagarjuna proves throughout the *Middle Way Philosophy*, there is no suffering outside our notions of conventional reality, then there can't be a separate "nirvana," as there is no self-existing state of suffering to end or transcend. If nirvana had this characteristic (a separate place without suffering), it would also be permanent, and for us to enter it would entail (impossible) change. What a waste it would be, to have a place where there is no suffering, but which by its very nature is impossible to get into. A heaven without a pearly gate?

Practice Notes: This chapter reminds us to practice with the understanding that both suffering and total relief from suffering (nirvana) exist simultaneously right here, right now – it is just a matter of viewing things correctly that puts one in nirvana, or erroneously that leaves one uncomfortably in a state of suffering in samsara. Whether I suffer or not is a matter of perspective, and I am reminded again in this chapter that I alone am responsible for creating my perspectives. Eliminate the erroneous views from the way we process the information from our senses and there is peacefulness, right here, right now—nirvana right here. Remember there is no self (that's the biggie), and peacefulness arises right here, right now. Remembering that we don't have to go anywhere or do anything, just be present, right here, right now, and there is peacefulness, is a big practice, a practice in constant need of remembering, in large part because it is so counterintuitive, so contrary to Western faith traditions.

## Chapter Twenty-Six – Examination of the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising

When something is dependently arisen, or dependently originated, it is not truly, permanently, inherently arisen in the way it appears. Our perception is a product of the particular conditions giving rise to that event, including, critically, the perceiver (us!). Thus, things that are dependently arisen are just appearances. Nagarjuna approaches this key teaching here by reference to the Buddhist concept of the “12 links” that explains the process by which we as perceivers take the conditions surrounding an event and mentally, emotionally and, to some extent, even physically process them until they seem “real,” or, alternatively, their true nature as phenomena empty of inherent or independent existence is obscured from our understanding and the result is suffering. In short, the 12 Links is a model for how we create a Self that suffers. This chapter is something of a departure from the intensive metaphysical disputations addressed in most of the *Middle Way Philosophy*, offering a quick and relatively clear exposition of the 12 links that describe how humans process their perceptions of everyday events.

Nagarjuna assumes that the reader is very familiar with the 12 links and so skims through them here quickly and casually, but we offer a more detailed description to assist those reading this from outside the Buddhist tradition. The following very useful explanation of the 12 links comes from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Thai monk, Buddhadasa. It is taken from a talk by Buddhadasa translated by Santikaro, with our annotations in parentheses or *italics*:

### *The Twelve Links*

*(Links in boldface.)*

The Twelve Links describes conscious experience. Our **ignorance** of how things really are conditions us to the basic act of the mind which is to cognize things with which we have sense contact by concocting **stories** (*sankharas*) about them. These stories allow us to develop **consciousness**.

Consciousness makes it possible for there to be mind-body (us, a sentient being). Once mind-body arises as an ignorant active structure, **sense organs** arise in the person and become active. *This can be understood as the physical organ such as the ear drums and associated physical structures that enable hearing, along with the neural pathways that allow the inputs, here vibrations in air particles, to be processed into the sounds that we hear.*

Active sense organs make it possible for there to be **contact** with external objects (sights, smells, sounds, etc.), leaving a meaningful impression on the mind, an experience that is both physical and of which we are conscious. Without contact, nothing would exist for sentient beings, not even the world.

Because there has been contact, a **feeling** arises about the experience of the contact. Because feelings are dependent upon contact, which arises from senses that exist because there is mind-body—all of which is just a fabrication, a concoction, a story, a *sankhara* that arose from ignorance, the feeling is false and foolish. *To explain this conclusion a bit more, remember our prior discussions that all our sensations are limited and otherwise determined by a person's physical quirks and characteristics. The 65-year old generally does not hear as well as his 10-year old 'self,' and the same is true of the perceptions generated by their senses. Some people are color blind, some have perfect pitch, others have different experiences of taste (cilantro tastes like soap to Andy's wife but not to him, etc.) and touch. Buddhadasa is pointing out that such unreliable and changeable bases can't reasonably be seen as firm ground to claim that what is "causing" these variable sensations is real in some absolute sense.*

These ignorant feelings lead to foolish desires for more of what we like and less of what we dislike, *all grounded in shifting, unreal sands of perception.* This **craving**—deeply desiring and wanting—leads to clinging and attaching. The stronger the feeling and craving, the greater the clinging and attachment.

**Clinging** is the attachment to self. *Remember that the self can't exist without the perceptions (they are interdependent), so the perceptions built on shifting sands continually reinforce the notion of the self unless that co-dependence is interrupted (perhaps through meditation), a classic feedback loop!* Which is why there is suffering.

If there were no clinging, there would be no suffering – *there would be no self-referential self to do the suffering.* But with clinging, everything and anything is grasped as me and mine, self and of-self. This thing we are grasping has arisen because the ignorant mind clings to something that arose through conditions a moment ago and is now gone.

*Attachment is the self grasping onto its perceptions of "external" things.* Once attachment occurs, **becoming** (existence) arises. Meaning once there is clinging there is a basis for something, whatever is clung to now exists as I, somehow, somewhere. So clinging causes something to arise in the realm of our existence. Thus there is both a being and an environment for that being created, solidifying *perceptions of* both a false inner world and outer world.

With existence (becoming) there is **(re)birth**. Even though it was previously just clinging to a concept, the self has grown and developed and a new even more self-centered I has been born *with each act of attachment.* Rebirth happens every time there is craving or desire, every

time there is a thought. For every time there is a thought, the sense of I-me-my-mine grows and develops.

So dukkha is the result of birth (*ever-renewed perception of things that are not as they seem*), ego is born from ignorant craving (*for more of those unreal things we like and less of those we do not*). So, in Buddhist terms, we are created in dukkha (born out of craving), from dukkha and by dukkha.

With birth as a condition, **aging and death** arise. Because we don't realize this, we stay ignorant and keep being born. Further, through the natural process of arising, running its course, and ceasing, the self appropriates and identifies with: my birth, my aging, my death. *So we have transformed a natural process into a static personal problem.*

Summarily: all forms of suffering come from our clinging to I and mine; and every rebirth of self is a birth of suffering.

Practice Notes: For anyone who self-identifies as a Buddhist, it is important at some time that you become familiar with the 12 link model, with both its personal and global meanings, as it is a complex understanding that can be contemplated for years of spiritual growth. For those not definitely committed to being Buddhists, the italicized sentence near the end is a great line to practice with: paraphrasing—Don't make change, a natural process, into a static personal problem. That line alone can "change" your life forever!

For centuries, this was the model that showed and "proved" that everything was dependently arisen, which explained how there were fruits to our actions in a universe that was impermanent. (Emptiness, *per se*, didn't appear in Buddhism until three to five hundred years after the 12 links had become a fundamental tenet in Buddhism, with the development of what is called the wisdom literature which included such sutras as the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra.) Nonetheless, and history aside, dependent origination has become so overwhelmingly evident by reading the *Middle Way Philosophy*, and in much simpler models and terms than the 12 links, that the authors of this commentary don't practice with the twelve links themselves except in two ways - with the notion of clinging as it is explained here and with the italicized sentence about change just mentioned.

Practice with clinging means reminding ourselves that we don't cling to externals (as there are none in the way we perceive them) but to our stories about what they mean. We cling to our story about liking sushi, not to sushi itself. Understanding this, practicing with it, gives us a new way of seeing what we formerly thought of as the source of our suffering: clinging to outside stuff. This is antithetical to the traditional Western model of clinging and attachment, in which there is an inherent value in the sushi and it should be sought after and clung to.

Practicing with not making change into a static personal problem, this means we need to remember to activate our meta-cognitive voice that tells us never ever to make change into a difficulty, a personal issue, a problem. Since everything is always changing, nothing is truly or inherently a problem. It can take considerable contemplation for that idea to settle in and become the norm for how we process information, but it is very well worth all the effort. Let's look at an example:

Traffic lights turning red are a change, not a problem, so we don't write a story that this is somehow unreasonably and deliberately making *me* late; our hair getting longer or falling out,

this is change not a condition that requires us to feel dismay—even if the latter is cancer and chemo-related; our spouse’s OCD flaring up is change, not a reason for me to create a dilemma and disastrous what-if story about the marriage; being diagnosed with heart disease or a failing kidney (yes, even the “very big” stuff) is just a change in the body, it doesn’t require us to make it into a disruptive, agonizing, threatening event, and on and on.

What we learn from practicing with not making change into a personal problem is that everything needs to be conceived of in the same way we think about a haircut: there’s a condition needing us to respond to it appropriately, without annoyance and aversion. When our hair gets “too long,” we make an appointment and get it cut; when the IRS sends us a bill with penalties for filing late, we just pay it (or negotiate a payment plan with them to pay it). Events in relationships with others, with institutions, with our health, everything is just a condition changing and needs no more unsatisfactoriness assigned to it than getting a haircut.

When Carl talks about this in lectures and at cancer facilities, there is always pushback, and quite frequently he gets angry personal attacks during the talk or nasty evaluations right afterwards. Yes, it is counterintuitive. Nonetheless, when this is deeply understood and practiced, even the questions about life threatening illnesses, about life and death, the existential questions that plague so many of us, fall away and become, not unimportant, but non-existent. Indeed, even “life” and “death” are just change!

*Nagarjuna himself provides an extensive analysis of the 12 links in his book, Seventy Stanzas, should you be interested in delving deeply into this doctrine in Nagarjuna’s own words.*

## Chapter Twenty-Seven – Examination of Views [Doctrines]

The point of this chapter is asserted definitively in verse 29:

Since all things are empty  
Why would anyone, anywhere, at any time,  
View things as being permanent or  
Anything else?

So when all is said and done, Right View is no view. To view things as empty (i.e., not permanent, having no inherent nature or essence) is the same as holding no view at all, or, put another way, no view is “abiding in conditions.”

When Nagarjuna writes about views, he is generally speaking about views like permanent or not permanent, existence or not existent, finite or infinite, dependent or independent, now or then, self or other, inherent or not inherent, eternal or nihilistic, and so on, all of which are categories that are typical of Buddhist discourse and argumentation. From a practice perspective rather than a purely Buddhist philosophic perspective, it is useful to think of “views” as beliefs, convictions, notions, ideas, opinions, thoughts, estimations, dogmas, mores, values, certainties, contrivances, facts, impressions, and the like (and that covers everything we conceptualize). We are all born with capacities and processes described in the 12 links that have us jump to the conclusion that what we are perceiving every day is “reality,” but as we have seen in our journey with Nagarjuna, when we scrutinize this conclusion, it falls apart. As stated above, since all things are empty of inherent existence, we really can have no universal doctrine that describes reality – right view is no view. Buddhism, in a sense, is a religion without a doctrine. Anyway . . .

Seeing views in a broader way, we come to realize that all views (from simple beliefs and attitudes to dogma and doctrine) are conventional fabrications, useful for navigating through situations so long as we don’t believe them to be independent and true. That way, we don’t get to attach to our erroneous view of the ultimate nature of ourselves and the world, we don’t get to lie to ourselves by

giving things false meanings that leave us bound to our defilements. More colloquially, we are free of unnecessary and counterproductive attachment to any belief or concern.

So, when all is said and done, we come to view this world as a mere appearance, an illusion, a dream. The idea that the perceived world is akin to a dream state is a very positive, optimistic state, for the emptiness that makes it dreamlike allows for us to make choices in how we understand and act, and this suggests that there is a moral choice in how we respond to each and every moment, each and every changing condition, and an obligation—if we want to end our suffering—to respond appropriately, meaning responding in a skillful way that does not create suffering. Acting morally is a choice that arises from the understanding of emptiness.

Practice Notes: On a conventional, everyday level, of course there are (conventionally) right views and wrong views. Right views reflect what is real (the two truths, emptiness, interdependence); wrong views reflect a false sense of the world (things are separate and independent, reified and distinct). Right views lead us to behave in skillful ways, ways that produce peace and long-term happiness, wrong views have the opposite effect.

Because the views that underlie our actions determine our course through life, nothing is more beneficial to us than right views and more detrimental to us than wrong views.

There are two types of right views: those which deal with the moral efficacy of our actions (karma), and those which reflect a right understanding of the Four Noble Truths. The former right views lead us to make ethical distinctions between that which is positive and good and wholesome and that which is negative and harmful and unwholesome. Wholesome karmic action is doing and saying and thinking in ways that are morally responsible, that are helpful to our spiritual growth, and that make us “better” people, meaning people whose lives are of benefit, to themselves and others, and to the planet. This wholesome action comes from wisdom. Unwholesome karmic actions slow our spiritual growth and lead to more suffering and destruction. These unwholesome actions come from ignorance.

There is no question that we need conventional understandings to lead us to appropriate, wise, skillful behaviors (non-violence, right speech, not taking what is not given, etc.). But what Nagarjuna is saying so emphatically here is that, neither our Buddhist doctrinal views nor our opinions and beliefs about ourselves or the world are true, permanent, in the way they appear. And while we may need them to communicate and to evaluate, and to get to wisdom, to get past being governed by old habitual views, we should never see them as somehow truer than anyone else’s views or doctrines or dogmas or ideas. Right view tells us that a news show with a liberal bias is not more or less accurate to what is happening than a show with a conservative bias. Rather, it tells us that both are just illusory interpretations of events, perhaps conventionally useful to living a better life, perhaps not, but certainly not “capital T” true.

Practicing with right view, at its core, tells us to always doubt the validity of our ideas as doctrinal absolutes, and to never, ever, go on the battlefield to defend a belief.



## CONCLUSION

As was traditional in Buddhist texts in Nagarjuna's time, the book began with a dedicatory verse. Beyond the dedication showing respect and esteem to the Buddha, the dedication is virtually incomprehensible to a reader not deeply and thoroughly familiar with Madhyamika theory and thought, which Nagarjuna's early readers would have been. But now, having waded through this pivotal treatise, we lay readers today can perhaps understand the dedicatory verse (that precedes the original text), which is called the Eight Negations.

The Eight Negations is (together) intended to explain that the true nature of phenomena (emptiness) is non-substantiality – that no particular object or happening has an inherent or permanent independent existence. So, the only way to “describe” emptiness is in purely negative terms without asserting anything substantial. Nagarjuna writes:

I salute the Buddha,  
The foremost of all teachers, who taught that  
Whatever is dependently arisen is  
[The cessation of all conceptual games [techniques],  
meaning the true nature of an event is marked by]  
**No origination (no beginning), no extinction (no ending);**  
**No permanence, no impermanence;**  
**No identity, no difference;**  
**No coming, no going.**

The eight negations, bolded above, is Nagarjuna's characterization of emptiness. Emptiness is without beginnings or endings, without permanence or impermanence, without sameness or difference, without comings and goings. As such, we cannot really describe emptiness positively, which explains Nagarjuna's relentless use of negation throughout the *Middle Way Philosophy*—emptiness is not a “thing” that can be discerned (and the things we do discern exist only in interdependence, not independently), rather it is the true nature of reality, which is beyond understanding with conventional categories or even conscious thought.

Practice Notes: Understanding and realizing the meaning of the eight negations is a lifelong practice. But what became obvious to us in continued study of the *Middle Way Philosophy* (and in writing this commentary) is that all of our suffering comes from a perception, a fiction, a story, a narrative, a fabrication, etc., that has either a beginning point and an ending point, or an aspect of permanence or impermanence, or an element that appears either the same or distinctly different from something else, or is portraying something that is in the process of coming or going, arriving or departing. Knowing that none of these is possible, once identified in the story that is making us uncomfortable, the story loses its weightiness and apparent reality and so our suffering is lessened, our ability to attach to it as real and meaningful diminishes. In a sense, that reduces this whole book to eight phrases!

*Finally, our gratitude to Nagarjuna for this treatise. May we have honored him and it with our commentary and our practice of the middle way.*

### About The Authors

#### Andrew Cohen

Andy Cohen is an attorney and Buddhist initiate living and practicing in the Chicago area.

#### Carl Jerome

Twenty-five years ago, Carl became a dedicated student of Buddhism. His first teacher was Zen Master, Philip Whalen. Fifteen years ago he became a student of Master Jiru at the Mid-American Buddhist Association (MABA). He became a fulltime resident and teacher at the monastery in 1994, and later at Enlightenment Temple in Chicago's Chinatown. He is the founding teacher of the North Shore Meditation and Dharma Center on Chicago's suburban north shore, where he currently resides.

This is Carl's first foray into a philosophical exegesis, which was only possible because of the collaboration with his student and friend, Andy Cohen. While Carl focused on the practice aspects of this commentary, it was Andy who did the philosophic heavy lifting to make it all come together.