

The Ultimate Guide to a Better Life



Deep Dharma's Commentary and Practice Guide

For Nagarjuna's *Twelve Gate Treatise*

PREFACE

This is a commentary and with brief practice suggestions for Nagarjuna`s *Twelve Gate Treatise*. The *Twelve Gate Treatise* can be thought of as a commentary on, or least a companion work to Nagarjuna`s foundational *Middle Way Philosophy*. That *opus magnum* was the monumental work of Buddhist philosophy that changed and supported the core of Buddhism to such an extent that it earned Nagarjuna the title “Second Buddha.” Following in Nagarjuna`s footsteps, as he provided the *Twelve Gate Treatise* as a commentary to support the *Middle Way Philosophy*, we offer here a practical commentary to the twelve gates as a companion to our practice guide for *Middle Way Philosophy*.

It seems that either Nagarjuna, or his critics (or both) at the time he wrote *Middle Way Philosophy* (about 200 CE) felt that some critical issues about emptiness had not been clear or had not been discussed explicitly enough. This is surprising since *Middle Way Philosophy* is a dense, seemingly exhaustive study of emptiness. Nonetheless, Nagarjuna wrote this 12-point treatise to clarify things, including, importantly, several discussions from varied perspectives of the impossibility of production of anything permanent. Think of *Twelve Gate Treatise* as *Middle Way Philosophy*’s little brother. It is lighter in tone, sometimes almost chatty, and once or twice even a bit snarky.

Nagarjuna states in his introduction to *Twelve Gate Treatise* that his purpose is to explain emptiness, which he does again and again in discussing each of the 12 gates. Importantly, *Twelve Gate Treatise* is also where he addresses certain arguably underdeveloped beliefs from *Middle Way Philosophy*, beliefs including no-self, creation, God, and the idea of a soul. To Nagarjuna, understanding these twelve gates by getting a solid grip on these critical ideas is the entryway to realizing emptiness, to having one`s feet securely planted on the “middle way” between nihilism (believing that there is no moral or metaphysical core to existence at all) and reification (believing that what we perceive around us is inherently real in the way that it appears) to a happier, healthier, wiser life.

It`s worth taking a moment to ask, what is a gate? Seng-Jui, who aided in the translation of *Twelve Gate Treatise* from Sanskrit into Chinese (about 400 CE), defines “gate” this way: “The word ‘gate` means a way leading to a thorough understanding without a residue of doubt.” So, gates are understandings or practices that lead to realization, in this case to a clear, unmitigated realization of emptiness, an understanding with no lingering or lurking doubt.

It is our hope in writing this practice commentary and guide that it will aid the reader in accessing and using the 12 gates as practice guides, which Nagarjuna would have wanted, to lessen our *dukkha* and to develop “right view.” While it can work as a stand-alone text, we do frequently refer the reader to the more thorough and foundational explanations found in *Middle Way Philosophy* ([ADD LINK](#)).

Finally, a copy of *Twelve Gate Treatise* can be found on our site. It is a translation from the Chinese by Hsueh-li Cheng (the original Sanskrit is no longer extant) and is the only English

translation we have been able to find, so we have attached it for those who might wish to read the original treatise. It is unclear why scholars and Buddhists and translators have taken so little note of this important work since it does seem to make explicit some of Nagarjuna`s most important views and observations. Anyway, before embarking on the adventure of reading and practicing with this treatise, we suggest you read the introductory notes to *Middle Way Philosophy*, where we explain a little about Nagarjuna and his life and role in Buddhism, as well as describe the key concepts of that book, which are also the key concepts of this one.

Andrew Cohen
Carl Jerome
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Seng-Jui added an annotated table of contents to the translation from the original Sanskrit into Chinese. We are presenting it here in Hsueh-li Cheng`s English translation as it will give the reader a short synopsis of the text for each gate with a bit of the flavor of the original treatise. The bracketed phrases were inserted by us for clarification where the modern Western reader might not be familiar with the particular use or meaning of a word or phrase.

Chapter One—Causal Conditions

In the inquiry for the causes of things, it seems that everything possesses a nature [a fundamental essence that exists independently] of itself. A careful analysis shows that such a self-nature does not really exist.

The word “Gate” means a way leading to a thorough understanding without a residue of doubt.

Chapter Two—With or Without Effect

This is a further examination of the principle of voidness of self-nature [emptiness, or lack of inherent characteristics, of things]. It begins with the question whether things have already been in existence or have not been in existence prior to their production. Neither alternative is possible to establish the process of production.

This examination constitutes one of the gates.

Chapter Three—Conditions

One previous chapter [Chapter One] examines causes and this one examines conditions. Effects cannot be found either in conditions in general or in any one of the four conditions [initiating condition, supporting condition, background condition, final condition; see Chapter One, *Middle Way Philosophy* for a comprehensive explanation of conditions].

This examination constitutes one of the gates.

Chapter Four—Characteristics

The previous three gates show that production does not exist in the examination of causes and conditions. This one shows that production does not exist in the examination of the three characteristics [arising, abiding, and ceasing; or origination, duration, and destruction].

This examination constitutes one of the gates.

Chapter Five—With or Without Characteristics

This examines the reality of the three characteristics [arising, abiding, and ceasing; or origination, duration, and destruction]: whether they characterize an object with or without characteristics. It shows that there can be no characterization in either case.

This constitutes one of the gates.

Chapter Six—Identity or Difference

This issue of the reality and unreality of characteristics have been examined, [Nagarjuna here examines] whether an object and characteristics are identical or different from each other. Neither case can be established.

This constitutes one of the gates.

Chapter Seven—Being or Non-Being

The previous chapters show that the three characteristics cannot really characterize; this one shows that the four characteristics [origination, duration, change, and destruction] cannot, either. “Origination” and “duration” belong to “Being,” while “decay” and “destruction” belong to “Non-Being.” “Being” and “Non-being” cannot exist either together or separately.

This constitutes one of the gates.

Chapter Eight—Nature

The examination of Being and Non-Being shows that things are always changing in nature. Since things are originated from conditions, there cannot be any self-nature.

This constitutes one of the gates.

Chapter Nine—Cause and Effect

Things can neither be found from their “self-nature,” nor can be found from the process of causation.

This constitutes one of the gates.

Chapter Ten—The Creator

There cannot be creation without cause and effect. In the examination of the four alternative cases [made from itself, from another, from both, from neither; see Chapter One, *Middle Way Philosophy*], there cannot be any creation.

This constitutes one of the gates.

Chapter Eleven—The Three Times

In the exhaustive study of creation, it is necessary to examine it with respect to time. Then one will find that creation is impossible in all three times [before, simultaneous with, and after; or, past, present and future].

This constitutes one of the gates.

Chapter Twelve—Production

“Creation” means that something new is formed; “production” means that something new is originated [born or begun]. Since they cannot be established in all three times, how can there be such a thing as production?

This constitutes one of the gates.

CHAPTER ONE—CAUSAL CONDITIONS

Nagarjuna begins this chapter with a short preface to the treatise in which he asserts he is an adherent of Mahayana Buddhism and explains why. Nagarjuna asserts, right out of the gate here, that Mahayana is great because, among other things, it can be “ridden” to the realization of emptiness.

Theravada vs. Mahayana

Mahayana is one of the two main branches of Buddhism. The other, which preceded Mahayana, is today generally called Theravada Buddhism, but in Nagarjuna’s day it was derogatorily called the “Lesser Vehicle,” or Hinayana. Mahayana was then (and still is) called, by contrast, the “Great Vehicle,” again with the derogatory implication that earlier teachings were somehow inferior.

The core tenets of Buddhism, such as the Four Noble Truths, the Five Aggregates, and the Six Paramitas are shared by both the Theravada, which is practiced largely in South Asia—in Thailand, Myanmar/Burma, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka, and the Mahayana, which is practiced largely in Central and Eastern Asia—in India, China, Korea, Tibet and Japan. Americans largely practice Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, in a variety of forms, plus some esoteric and hybrid versions too.

In very simple terms, Mahayana emphasizes emptiness as the path to enlightenment, not just for the individual, but for all sentient beings. By contrast, the early Theravada teachings emphasize instead a step-by-step process-driven approach to becoming an enlightened individual, an *arhat*. The distinction isn’t quite as black and white as that, but it is a reasonable understanding of the main difference between the two.

“If one can understand this doctrine [the doctrine of emptiness],” Nagarjuna writes, “they can understand Mahayana and possess the six paramitas (see below) without hindrance.” In other words, they would become, or at least approach, enlightenment where the six paramitas (behavioral perfections of an enlightened being) are the default setting for how we think and act.

This replaces the three poisons—greed, anger and delusion—with the paramitas, and so leads us from unending suffering to the peacefulness of wisdom.

Nagarjuna wants to be emphatically clear in his introduction to this Gate that he is a committed Mahayanist. And, in point of fact, it is his writings that more or less provide the definitive philosophical foundation for the Mahayana, which, prior to Nagarjuna, was a loosely knit collection of evolving understandings about Buddhism in some Common Era scriptures called “wisdom sutras.”

The Six Paramitas

1. *Generosity* is the basic principle of enlightened living, the key to being other-centered and to realizing no self. In and of itself, generosity is almost a complete antidote to the three poisons (greed, anger, and delusion).
2. *Morality* is an understanding derived from emptiness that allows leads us to acting in ways which are virtuous and wholesome and which arise from beneficence toward others. Simply put, morality is not doing what we know is wrong; it is acting without an erroneous view of and for Self.
3. *Patience* is being completely present with the conditions of the moment, with no self-serving agenda. Patience is critically fundamental to the paramitas because it is the antidote for anger, which in its various forms is a virtually omnipresent source of dukkha in our lives as a result of our greed and delusion, which are its antecedents.
4. *Joyful diligence* is maintaining a positive, enthusiastic, conscientious determination toward one`s spiritual practice. It leaves us with a discreet, internal sense of joy for being with the dharma, replacing the discomfort that results from acting from the three poisons or behaving in immoral or unethical ways.
5. *Meditation* is the practice 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 three poisons, as well as from envy, conceit and pride, another three big afflictions that embed us in suffering.
6. *Wisdom*, our cognitive understanding of how things are, meaning how we see and understand the ultimate nature of our world, is the foundation of all our actions. Wisdom is what results when we no longer have erroneous views; Wisdom is realizing emptiness and no-self. Wisdom informs and sustains us in practicing the other five paramitas.

These are the key practices of a bodhisattva, the Mahayana concept of a who seeks enlightenment, not for themselves, but for the benefit of all beings. Perfecting the paramitas, meaning doing them purely and reflexively regardless of the circumstances, is the way bodhisattva would naturally behave. “Emulate them until realization occurs,” Nagarjuna would say. “Fake it till you make it,” we`d say.

So for Nagarjuna, if people can realize the paramitas, it is because they understand the Mahayana and the doctrine of emptiness. To explain emptiness and give us the opportunity to realize or possess it, Nagarjuna declares, we should use the 12 gates explained in this treatise as entryways.

Having established where he falls in Buddhism's great sectarian divide at the beginning of this chapter, Nagarjuna then moves to his explanation and examination of "causal conditions," the first Gate. He starts with the first of the only 26 verses in the treatise:

Things are produced from various conditions,
And hence have no [permanent, inherent] self-nature.
If they have no [permanent inherent] self-nature,
How can there be such things?

Refuting self-nature is where this treatise begins and is the core of the entire book. Nagarjuna begins by explaining that when he uses the phrase "various conditions," he means that there are two general categories for conditions: external and internal. Using a house, for example, the external conditions are a foundation, beams, siding, plumbing, a roof, etc. These are externals that come together to be the causal conditions for the arising of the house. Internal conditions are mental and bodily conditions, such as the twelve links (see below) and the five aggregates (see Chapter Four, *Middle Way Philosophy*), especially craving and the birth of Self. External conditions can be thought of as outside of us; internal conditions are conditions that come from inside us.

So both external and internal things are produced by various (causal) conditions. In the example above, the foundation is the result of causal conditions, externally like concrete and beams, and in turn, each of those is the result of causal conditions, like concrete being produced from sand, gravel, pebbles, broken stone, etc., and so on, forming an infinite regress, meaning every time a set of conditions is used to explain how something arose, the components of that set of causal conditions themselves depend on a set of causal conditions, going back infinitely. Since each thing is the result of previous conditions, infinitely, Nagarjuna would ask: How could anything be other than lacking an inherent, permanent self-nature?

In the same way that external causal conditions were just examined and found lacking in self-nature, so it is with internal conditions. Although Nagarjuna barely addresses the 12 links of dependent origination in *Middle Way Philosophy*, he points out clearly here that the 12 links, which are internal conditions, cannot be established in any permanent way. Nagarjuna assumes that his reader is thoroughly familiar with the 12 links and so he examines them without even listing them. For us today, a detailing of the links is necessary to understand Nagarjuna's arguments about their lack of self-nature. The following explanation is taken from our

commentary on the *Middle Way Philosophy*, and is adapted from an explanation provided by the renowned late 20th century Thai monk, Buddhadasa:

The Twelve Links

(Links in boldface; boldface and italics are additions from the two authors of this commentary.)

The Twelve Links describes conscious experience. Our **ignorance** of how things really are conditions us to the basic act of the mind is 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 characteristic. 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 his other 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.

These 12 links describe conscious experience, and how we (our Self) is created and recreated in a 12 step cycle beginning with ignorance, going through “death,” and looping back to ignorance, all-in-all seemingly binding us to a cyclical life of discomfort and suffering.

When we look carefully at each link, though, we notice that no link has an inherent nature, a permanence in and of itself. Every link is dependent on prior conditions to arise, they do

not exist independently. Nagarjuna explains that we know this because there is no way to produce a permanent version of any link. Simply put, if a link caused the next link to arise, without certain conditions making possible and governing the arising of the next link (and the ceasing of the prior link), then cause and effect would have to happen simultaneously, which makes no sense. Likewise, without the presence of conditions, i.e., if the links each had a permanent nature as that and only that link, each link would have to exist permanently and unchangingly, lest they become something other than what they “are.” Thus, the links cannot arise sequentially, as the supposedly permanent links cannot change, by definition. The links cannot arise simultaneously or sequentially, establishing that they do not arise in any permanent way at all, but instead are part of the unceasing flow of ever-changing conditions.

So Nagarjuna has explained that all links empty, and by extension that all conditions lack a permanent self-nature. Since all things are created from conditions, that means all created or produced things are empty of inherent, self-nature. Now Nagarjuna says, as he will repeat in each of the gates, and twice in this first gate: “If created things are empty, how much more so with the self?” He wants to and does emphasize that there is no permanent Self at the conclusion of each of the twelve Gates.

If created things are empty, then obviously non-created things, which are unconditional, meaning they have no causal conditions, are also empty. Non-created things with which we are concerned here, are nirvana and self. If nirvana is non-created, then it is empty of self-nature; and if Self is also non-created as a permanent thing, then it too is empty of self-nature. So to put it flippantly, there is no-one going no-where!

Again, Nagarjuna closes the first gate with this reminder: the self is empty, there is no self, for it can neither be created nor be not-created!

Practicing with Gate One:

Realizing that the way we perceive things is fundamentally false and misleading, this first Gate tells us that a passageway to peacefulness lies in not believing that things are as they appear, but rather, counterintuitively, they are exactly the opposite: they lack self-nature, are empty, not permanent, not real, and we, our Self, is just another one of those things that really isn't here in the way it appears conventionally—we are non-created as a permanent entity and without self-nature. So realizing this Gate, how can I be upset if there is, ultimately, no one, no real, solid, autonomous me here to be upset? How can I suffer if there is, ultimately, no one here to suffer? Further, this Gate is asserting that we can realize that there is nothing here that can cause (from a cause-and-effect perspective) suffering, a concept at the heart of Chapter Two, explained again in Chapter Three, and really throughout this entire treatise and basically everything Nagarjuna wrote.

The First Gate: everything is empty, nothing is real in the way we perceive it, and there is no self. Nagarjuna means us to understand that if we understand just that much profoundly and deeply, all our suffering will cease.

Chapter Two—With or Without Effect

This is a lengthy chapter explaining that there is no cause and effect. Nagarjuna begins with one of his favorite ways of presenting an argument, the tetralemma (a four part, sequential negation structure, as you'll see), to prove that cause and effect is impossible, and then moves to tie the lack of cause and effect back to the lack of production discussed in the first gate.

For Nagarjuna, cause and effect is defined in this way: when A occurs, B results; anytime A occurs, B will result. There are no exceptions; A cannot occur without B resulting. If A could occur and only sometimes would B result, it would indicate that A is not the true, independent cause of B. Either A required some trigger to assist it in causing B (in Buddhist terms, A would need a condition outside itself to be present), or B would occur only sometimes when A was present without such a trigger, i.e., randomly, which in its inexplicability and unpredictability is just that, random occurrence, not direct causation.

In our everyday lives, we often mistake regularity for cause and effect. We think, for example, that pushing the elevator button causes the elevator to come to our floor. (The elevator will only come to our floor if no one is obstructing it on another floor, the computer and motor that operate the elevator are in working order, there is electricity in the building, etc.) Nagarjuna wants us to understand that just because we can observe certain regular patterns in the conventional world, like the elevator coming when we press the button, doesn't mean there is a cause and effect relationship. In this example, pushing the button is only one of many conditions necessary for the elevator to come to our floor; in and of itself it is not causal. Another example might be that we might observe Joan pushing Jim which causes Jim to move, having been pushed aside by Joan. This too, and every observable effect following a cause, is dependent on many other conditions to exist. In this example, some of those conditions might be Joan having an inclination to push, Joan applying sufficient force to move Jim, Jim not moving out of the way before Joan pushed him, etc.).

As observed in the tetralemma (see Chapter One of *Middle Way Philosophy*), there are only four possible ways something can be caused, meaning there are only four possibilities for explaining how something could be produced through cause and effect: (1) if the effect is already truly real and present in the cause, (2) if the effect is not real (e.g., has not yet been produced) and is not present in the cause, (3) if the effect is both in the cause and at the same time not in the cause, (4) and if it is none of the above. Put another way, Nagarjuna is saying that a thing can only be produced (in a permanent way): from itself, from another, from both, or from neither. Here's his reasoning:

If (1) the effect is already present in the cause, then there is no cause as the effect is already there. The supposed cause and effect would at least exist simultaneously at all times, and, on a

deeper level, would actually be identical. Another way to look at it would be that the cause would produce the effect infinitely, which is not the case. [So no cause and effect, no production of a thing from itself.]

If (2) the effect is not real, meaning if there is no effect currently in existence, then obviously there is nothing caused [So no cause and effect]. Nagarjuna has a few separate arguments supporting that an “unreal,” not-yet-produced, potential effect cannot be caused by anything. First, Nagarjuna observes that, as with supposedly real effects that are already present in a supposed cause (see “(1)” in the paragraph above), those real effects would always be caused by the presence of the cause – the cause would contain the effect and would produce the effect infinitely. The same is true of an “unreal” effect in such a cause, i.e., this supposed effect would also have to be produced infinitely as it is also present in the cause, and this is not the case. If you try to say that the “real” effect would be produced, but that the “unreal” effect would not be, this would deny the principle of production entirely, which would itself indicate that there is no such thing as cause-and-effect. Nagarjuna further points out that real and unreal are opposites, so if we were to follow intuition and say that the “real” effect exists, the “unreal” ones could not exist and the unreal effects could never come into existence – there could never be the realization of a potential effect. Even more starkly, if one were to say that the unreal effects exist, it would deny the possibility that the opposite real, already existing effects could exist, leading to absurdity.

Continuing, (3) the effect can't somehow be caused by some combination of (1) and (2), for the reasons just stated. And finally, (4) if it is none of the three above, then to say there is cause and effect is impossible and nonsense – one would be trying to say that nothing caused all of the supposed effects we observe [so again, no cause and effect].

Further, Nagarjuna points out late in this second gate chapter that for there to be a cause and effect relationship, there would have to be an independent and autonomous, permanently separate “maker,” “making” the “made.” After all, a “maker” is defined as an entity which makes (i.e., causes) something else. As we have seen, there can be no such cause-and-effect relationship between a maker and its creation, indicating that they are both empty of inherent characteristics and so are not actually separate independent entities at all. If there were such independent entities, amusingly enough, then these three (maker, making, made) would not be dependent on each other and could arise out of sequence—so dinner could appear on the table before it was cooked! Nagarjuna presents several other arguments and counterexamples in this chapter, all of which illustrate and reinforce the basic logic of the tetralemma which is the foundation of all the arguments we have discussed here, and similarly in *Middle Way Philosophy*, the treatise on which this Twelve Gate Treatise is a commentary.

Nagarjuna begins the conclusion of this chapter by reminding us that because, in our past experience, things seem to happen in a regular way (press the button, the elevator appears, press sesame seeds and oil appears), we cannot depend on that to always be the case, unless we believe there is cause and effect, which has just been shown to be nonsense and impossible. Additionally, throughout the twelve gates, Nagarjuna argues that nothing can be permanent because there is no way to produce something that is permanent. This is a central argument in every gate. Whether it is a condition, a cause or an effect, a characteristic or

something that is characterized, being or non-being, an inherent nature, a creator or savior God, time, the Four Noble Truths, suffering, the Two Truths doctrine, the central argument for its emptiness is that there is no way to produce anything that is permanent, autonomous, or inherent.

So, since created things are not permanent and independent, they are empty. And it is the same with non-created things. Being all things are either created or non-created, all things are empty. This being the case, Nagarjuna writes, again to be emphatic about there being no self, “is it not more so with the self?”

Practicing with Gate Two:

Realizing that the way we perceive things is to create cause-and-effect stories, cause-and-effect narratives about them, and that this cause-and-effect structure is fundamentally false and misleading, this second gate tells us that a passageway to peacefulness lies in not believing in cause-and-effect—not permanent, not real, cause-and-effect. If we are uncomfortable with how things seem to be, it is because we have created a cause-and-effect story, and we need to remind ourselves that all cause and effect stories are false and foolish. Further, as with Gate One, this gate is asserting that we can realize that there is nothing here that can cause (from a cause-and-effect perspective) suffering—no sufferer, suffering, or suffered— a concept at the heart of Gate Two.

The Second Gate: everything is empty because everything is either a created thing or a non-created thing, and anything created or non-created cannot exist from a permanent cause-and-effect relationship. From this conclusion, Nagarjuna means us to understand that if we believe deeply and profoundly that there is no cause-and-effect, our self and our suffering will cease.

Chapter Three—Conditions

This is a very short chapter explaining that, where there is no cause and effect, things arise from conditions. Nonetheless, there is no effect either in or not in conditions, so Nagarjuna is again explaining that all created and non-created things are empty.

Nagarjuna writes, assuming his reader is thoroughly familiar with the ancient Buddhist concept of conditions, just this:

Four conditions produce things;
There is no fifth condition.
[They are] the initiating condition,
The supporting condition,
The background condition,
And the final condition.

The crux of the explanation is that, even though things arise as a result of the conjunction of four conditions, the effect (the thing that is arising) is nowhere to be found either independently or in

any of the conditions. So, since conditions and effects are empty, created and non-created things are empty. That leads Nagarjuna to conclude, “Since created and non-created things are both empty, can there be a self?” You can almost hear Nagarjuna saying: “...can there be a self? Duh!”

An extensive examination of the four conditions can be found in Chapter One of *Middle Way Philosophy*. Here’s a very short explanation:

Nagarjuna follows a standard philosophic model of his time, 1800 years ago, when he states emphatically that there are only four types of conditions. Using the light switch as an example, it looks like this: [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 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.

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 Buddhism and the middle way as a whole.)

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 and 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” and thus empty.

Practicing with Gate Three:

Realizing that the way we perceive things is fundamentally flawed because we see everything as arising in a cause and effect way, this gate is suggesting that we shift to seeing things as arising from conditions, each of which is empty. This third gate is suggesting that we cultivate a new way of understanding and perceiving our lives: learning to abide in conditions—learning not to believe that our senses are giving us accurate information and that the affinities and aversions we erroneously assign to things are the problem, not the solution.

The gate: abiding in conditions is the superhighway to peacefulness and enlightenment.

Chapter Four—Characteristics

Understanding characteristics and characterization are so important that they are the subject of two gates, of two chapters: Chapters Four and Five.

Here in Chapter Four, Nagarjuna wants us to understand that nothing, not people, places, things, events, nothing, has a permanent characteristic, an inherent definition, meaning or value, an inherent sign or property that indicates a self-nature.

Neither created nor non-creating things
Have [permanent, inherent] characteristics.
Since they have no characteristics
They are both empty.

In the conventional, everyday world, we assign characteristics to things to differentiate them from other things. For example, a table has four legs and a top, a car has four wheels and a chassis. These may be useful conventional understandings, but that's all. The car is also 50 lbs of rubber, 1500 lbs of steel (itself 1450 lbs of iron, 45 lbs of chrome, 5 lbs of vanadium, etc.), 50 lbs of plastic, and so forth. The table, to a hunter-gatherer who does not make daily use of tables, is six pieces of firewood. Characteristics are thus empty, as are the things being characterized.

Nagarjuna points out that things might be thought of as having three general (remember, these are not capital T true or inherent) characteristics: they (1) arise, (2, then) abide, and (3, finally) cease: (origination, duration, and destruction). These are characteristics that seem to make things, things. "What's wrong with this?" Nagarjuna asks. The answer: if origination is a real, created thing, then it would have to have three characteristics, it would have to originate, and that origination would have to originate, forming an infinite regress that indicates emptiness and so it is with duration and destruction.

This means there cannot be a prime cause, a primal origination, because anything that appears to be a prime cause requires us to ask how it originated. So, to Nagarjuna, the Genesis story of God creating us and the world is irrational and illogical – how did God originate? Similarly, physicists telling us the Big Bang is the origin of the universe make no sense. In other words, there can't be origination of origination, as it is an infinite regress, and so no prime cause, no primal origination is possible.

Nagarjuna brings this chapter to a close by saying that since origination cannot be established as a real characteristic (and similarly, duration and destruction), created things are empty and cannot be established as real autonomous things.

To recap, anything with the characteristics of arising, abiding and ceasing is a created thing; anything with the characteristics of not arising, not abiding and not ceasing is a non-created thing. Since created things are empty, Nagarjuna says, obviously non-created things are empty too. And so, nirvana, a non-created thing, is empty. This idea that nirvana is not a real place or

state of being was heretical to fundamentalists of Nagarjuna`s time. (For a more extensive discussion of the nature of nirvana, see Chapter 25 of the *Middle Way Philosophy*.)

The chapter ends with the admonition: “Since created and non-created things are empty, the self is empty. These three things [created, non-created, and self] and hence all things are empty.” And finally, as he did with the previous chapters, Nagarjuna asserts that there is no self.

Practicing with Gate Four:

Realizing that the way we perceive things is fundamentally flawed because we see things in terms of how we characterize them, not how they are (meaning dependently arisen and empty) this gate is suggesting that realize our characterizing is the problem, not the solution, to seeing clearly and living peacefully.

The Fourth Gate: characterizing and characteristics are signs that we are not seeing clearly; not seeing that things are really empty.

Chapter Five—With or Without Characteristics

This short chapter furthers Chapter Four`s explanation of how characterizing things leads us to a gross misperception of reality. It explains that the assigning of characteristics, which are how we conceptualize things, forces us to divide things into objects and attributes, the characterized and the characteristic, and this false and erroneous view hinders us from seeing the emptiness of both, and ultimately the emptiness of all things.

The chapter starts by reminding us that there would be no need to characterize things if things had intrinsic, inherent, permanent characteristics (because the characteristics would be obvious and immutable); nor would there be a reason for characterization in the case of a thing without characteristics (nirvana), obviously and by definition. Again, there is no functional reason for characteristics or characterization either when things might have inherent characteristics or when they do not (like nirvana or self).

Nagarjuna concludes that since there cannot be entities with inherent characteristics, there cannot be non-entities either. So entities and non-entities, created and non-created things, are empty.

And as he has in all the previous chapters, Nagarjuna ends this chapter by saying that “Since created and non-created things are empty, the self is also empty.”

Practicing with Gate Five:

Practicing with Gate Five asks us to constantly remind ourselves that nothing has inherent characteristics, nothing is inherently characterized, so anytime we are uncomfortable or

dissatisfied or pained over what is happening, it is because we have mistakenly characterized it in a way that is basically aversive, yet foolish and false, and it is the characterization, the aversion we have heaped onto what is happening that is causing us to suffer, not the thing itself.

The Fifth Gate: characterizing and characteristics are signs that we are not seeing clearly; not seeing things are really empty, not understanding that nothing has inherent characteristics that could cause us to suffer, not even the self.

Chapter Six—Identity and Difference

This chapter furthers Nagarjuna's examination of characteristics and characterization in Chapters Four and Five. Here he addresses the impossibility of there being a substance with attributes. Nagarjuna explains that there cannot be a permanent relationship between characteristics and the characterized, between a substance and attributes, or subject and predicate in the jargon of Western logic. This means they can neither be inherently identical nor inherently different. Take "white car," for example. Neither "white" nor "car" can be seen as inherently the same nor inherently different. They can't be the same nor can they be separate and independent; the characteristic (white—the predicate) and the characterized (car—the subject) are neither absolutely, inherently, autonomously the same nor different. There can't, to use a silly example, be white in the garage and car in the driveway, which could be the case if white and car were separate and independent.

Again in this chapter we see Nagarjuna using the tetralemma (the fourfold negation argument-style) to prove his point. He says there are only four options for characteristics and the characterizable: they are either the same, different, some combination of the two, or neither. If they are permanent, they can neither be the same (same and different aren't identical, that's silly), different because they would then have no relationship to each other (and the characterizable could exist without characteristics, again silly), or some combination of these two (for the reasons just stated), or neither (for then we'd be discussing nothing, even sillier). So while they don't exist in an inherent or autonomous way, what's left is the declaration that they exist in a misleading way, which makes them empty

In one of his clearest examples illustrating the untenability of the characteristic/characterized divide, Nagarjuna addresses an element of Buddhist orthodoxy—the common description of *nirvana* as the cessation of desire. As he does throughout the *12 Gates*, Nagarjuna here responds to arguments made by an unnamed straw-man opponent. The opponent offers an appeal to authority by pointing out that "the Buddha says that the cessation of desire is called the characteristic of *nirvana*. . . . Here characteristics and the characterizable are different from each other." Illustrating the unorthodox (even revolutionary) character of his work, even the core concept of *nirvana* is not immune from Nagarjuna's analysis. Nagarjuna first points out that to say the *nirvana* is the cessation of desire, it would first have to have desire as a characteristic (to lend it something to cease having), and being possessed or composed of desire is clearly not a characteristic of *nirvana* as conceived of in Buddhist orthodoxy. One cannot say that the characteristic (desire) and the characterized (*nirvana*) are at all the same thing. Furthermore, "if it is said that the elimination of desire is the characteristic of *nirvana*, then

it should not be said that the characteristic is different from the characterizable.” This is just a more complex examination of the white-car example above.

Finally, Nagarjuna explains, again, “Since characteristics and the characterizable are empty, all things are empty.” Obviously, this includes the self.

A popular belief about Buddhism is that its aim is for us to become one with everything, but Nagarjuna is saying, “You can `t be one with everything.” That would require you to be identical to and at the same time distinctly different from everything else. Silly thought, is it not?

Practicing with Gate Six: Gate Six asks us to constantly remind ourselves that nothing has inherent characteristics, so anytime we are anxious or agitated or angry over what is happening, it is because we have mistakenly characterized the event in a way that makes us feel aversive. Obviously, Nagarjuna would say, this is foolish for it is the characterization, the aversion we have projected onto what is happening, that is causing us to suffer, not the thing itself. Further, the discomfort tells us that we are not seeing clearly—not seeing things are really empty, not understanding that nothing has inherent characteristics that could cause us to suffer, not even the self.

The Sixth Gate: characteristics and characterizations are relational indicators, conventional understandings applied to entities, not inherent properties.

Chapter Seven—Being or Non-Being

Nagarjuna discusses four characteristics in this chapter—origination and duration (arising and abiding), and change and destruction (aging and death). Again, as in the preceding chapter, he is arguing that none can be established as inherent or independent (self-sufficient), and so all are empty. He structures the argument like this: *being* includes origination and duration, *non-being* includes change and destruction.

Nagarjuna starts by pointing out that life and death cannot be independent of each other. Put the other way, the concepts of (and existence of) life and death are inconceivable without (dependent upon) each other; one could not exist without the other. Indeed, if life and death were truly independent (could exist wholly without each other), it would lead to absurd conclusions like the possibility that you could die before you were born or be born and never die. Put in the context of Nagarjuna`s discussion of the “production” (i.e., existence) of *being* versus *non-being*, without *non-being*, and its characteristic impermanence, *being* cannot be produced, and vice versa. The two are joined at the hip, in the middle way, even though that initially seems counterintuitive.

Nagarjuna also reminds us that one thing cannot contain contradictory characteristics, so when something is produced, it cannot contain both the characteristics of being and non-being. The concept is a little bit complicated as the characteristics themselves (being *qua* being; non-being *qua* non-being) depend on each other and thus must come into existence together, however, a thing (say a human) that comes into existence cannot have these two things as inherent characteristics at the same time. That would be nonsensical as a human that is defined by its existence could not also be defined by its non-existence.

Nagarjuna considers an objection related to this concept, that a created thing could contain contradictory characteristics that are potential – the non-being is somehow there in the person and is activated through some unspecified (and indefensible) process at some point in the duration of the human. Nagarjuna points out that this is impossible as a defining characteristic is by definition inherent and thus that which is defined (e.g., a human is partially defined by being alive) cannot simultaneously be defined as the opposite (i.e., the human cannot have as essential characteristics being simultaneously alive and dead).

This is clear enough for aggregated “things,” meaning things that are made up of parts (and all things are aggregated), so how do we really mean what is first described above, that being and non-being are dependent upon each other to make any sense and must be created together? After all, without an aggregated thing to inhere to, characteristics by themselves don't seem to really be able to exist at all. This unresolvable contradiction is exactly Nagarjuna's point in Chapter 7 – being and non-being require each other to be produced, yet it is impossible for them to actually be produced together! What better demonstration of their emptiness could there be? With this understanding, the tetralemma Nagarjuna quotes at the beginning of the chapter that initially seems inscrutable now makes sense, because of its very inscrutability – it is elegantly saying that here is an unresolvable contradiction, leading to the conclusion that being and non-being are empty concepts:

There cannot be being with non-being;
Nor can there be being without non-being.
If there can be being with non-being,
Then being should always be non-being.

“And there you have it,” Nagarjuna would say with a smile.

Practicing with Gate Seven:

Practicing with Gate Seven, with the idea that both being and non-being are empty, loosens our grip on and craving for the fictions—the conventional stories that seem so real and which we create to explain the existence or non-existence of entities and events. The lighter the grip, the less suffering there is.

The Seventh Gate: being and non-being, entities and events, are all empty, and therefore all created and non-created things are empty, so... “all sentient beings [obviously including the self] are also empty.”

Chapter Eight—Inherent Nature

In this chapter, Nagarjuna explains how his establishment of the principle of emptiness supports a number of key Buddhist concepts, including the Four Noble Truths, the Two Truths and the Five Aggregates. It is a bit of a hodgepodge of a chapter with Nagarjuna delivering short discussions of each of these principles, but he seemed to think that he needed to address each of these specifically in relation to his notion of emptiness.

The chapter begins with the observation that change is the characteristic of all things, hence we know that all things lack an inherent nature (a permanent self nature, an essence, an autonomous entityhood). To understand this position, it is important to understand that by “inherent nature” or “essence,” Nagarjuna is referring to qualities that, by themselves, define a thing’s existence, and are not dependent on other objects or phenomena to exist. If there were truly inherent or essential self-sufficient qualities in nature that defined an object (e.g., abstract qualities of redness, hardness, etc.), these would be permanent characteristics that could not change since they would exist in isolation from, disconnected from, or, in more familiar Buddhist terms, not in dependence upon, any other conditions. So something that had redness as an inherent permanent characteristic and quality would never be able to be any color except red. For a much more detailed exposition of the non-existence of inherent or essential qualities, see Chapter 1 of the MMK (and the rest of the MMK as well!) Since things which lack an inherent nature (which is everything) are non-existent (in a permanent way), all things are described as “empty” of these inherent or essential qualities.

Nagarjuna puts it this way:

By observing that the characteristics [of all things] change

We know all things are devoid of nature.

Things which are devoid of nature are also non-existent [in a permanent sense],

So all things are empty [meaning they exist in a middle way only, as fleeting objects dependent upon prior objects/phenomena to exist].

If things had an inherent self-nature they could not be changing, that would defy the notion of any qualities being independently existing. Further, if things did have an autonomous self-nature, they could not arise as a result of conditions, which Nagarjuna has shown is the case in the first three gates, Chapters 1-3.

Next, Nagarjuna explains that the Four Noble Truths are conventional understandings, and because they are empty of any permanent qualities, they work; were that not so, were they to be empty, meaning were they to be permanent, they wouldn’t work. Were they not empty, things that appear to cause suffering (first noble truth) could never change into things that were not a source of suffering (second noble truth) as the qualities in those things causing the suffering would be permanent and immutable; there would be no reason for things to cause suffering, other than that they just do, inherently, and can’t change (third noble truth); no methodology to

change things would be possible as things that are inherent and autonomous are permanent and can't change (third noble truth); and there would be no use in having the eightfold path, as following it it wouldn't change anything (fourth noble truth).

So, because all things are empty, including the Four Noble Truths, what we do does matter, for what we do in the conventional world, if we follow the Mahayana path, will reduce suffering. This is a far cry from suggesting that emptiness leads to nihilism; in fact, it is exactly the opposite. Here we see Nagarjuna explaining away both eternalism and nihilism, the two extremes, leaving us with only the middle path for understanding the world.

After that, Nagarjuna explains the “Two Truths” and admonishes us not to confuse them with each other.

The Two Truths are the conventional truth and the ultimate truth. Reality exists, according to this doctrine, on these two levels simultaneously. Conventional truth is just the everyday way things appear to our deluded minds. It is meaningful because it is a shared understanding of what is here and happening. This shared understanding (and it is easy to observe that it is, at best, imperfectly shared between us) is more helpful than accurate, but it allows us to respond in a way that either creates a peaceful event or a painful, suffering event out of what is happening. It includes all of what we conceive of as “normal” human understandings, including language and logic, which are all we have to understand the world day-to-day, but lock us into a framework of understanding the world that is imperfect as we only have the tools of our sense perceptions, past thoughts and other “stories” to make sense of the world. Nevertheless, conventional truth is a much needed, and in fact is the only available, 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 definition, meaning, value 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 Nagarjuna's dedicatory note to his MMK, and in the preface and conclusion of our commentary to *Middle Way Philosophy*.

After this, Nagarjuna explains that, like the Four Noble Truths, which have no inherent nature, the Five Aggregates have no inherent nature either, for there is no way for them to begin or end if each is permanent and still be relative to each other. So the aggregates are impermanent, just like the Four Noble Truths. If it were otherwise, there would be no way for us to change and reduce our suffering (the Five Aggregates) and no noble truth about ending suffering (Four Noble Truths). So these doctrines: the noble truths, the aggregates, and the two truths are empty! Without emptiness, there is no possibility for us to improve our lives.

Nagarjuna writes, further to this understanding: “If things have determinate [permanent, inherent] natures, there can be no origination, no destruction [being permanent, there would be no way for them to originate, which would require them to change, and no way to cease or be destroyed, for that too would be a major change and not possible for something permanent], and no good or evil.” For there to be good and evil, for there to be morality, we need to make choices and choices are not possible when things have inherent natures! Religions require

impermanence and emptiness. Morality requires impermanence and emptiness too, and a conventional understanding of good and evil, which in turn requires emptiness.

Nagarjuna concludes by explaining that, being self-nature cannot be established, there is no soul and no self. He finishes by saying: “Now we infer, therefore, that since there is no self-nature, no other-nature, no being and no non-being, all created things are empty. . . . Since created and non-created things are empty, what of the self?”

Practicing with Gate Eight:

Practicing with this gate means that, since nothing has an inherent nature, nothing is a real source of suffering, and anytime we are unsatisfied or uncomfortable, we need to examine our conventional story about it and change that understanding so that the suffering is alleviated. We can do this with the Two Truths, or with the Four Noble Truths, or with the Five Aggregates.

The Eight Gate: Nothing has an inherent, permanent, autonomous self-nature, so everything is changeable and suffering, regardless of the situation, can always be alleviated.

Chapter Nine—Cause and Effect

Nagarjuna has already established that no cause and effect is possible in Chapters 1-3, which examine conditions. Here, just after Chapter 8’s reinforcement that nothing can have inherent, permanent, unchangeable qualities, he wants to emphasize again that, likewise, there is no essential quality creating any relationship of cause and effect. It is not possible for there to be a causal relationship if the cause and the effect are autonomous. Why? Because autonomous things can’t change into other things while at the same time remaining unchanged. And further, things can’t arise in some magical metaphysical or occult way, without connection to each other, for then there would be no “cause” for the “effect,” there would just be unconnected events. So if the effect is not in the cause (is not one of the essential qualities of the cause), which makes no sense at all, and cannot come from somewhere outside (as it would be a completely discreet, unconnected phenomenon), then the effect is empty.

This leads Nagarjuna to the conclusion that, being the effect is empty, all created things are empty. Again, as explained previously, if created things are empty, then non-created things must also be empty. Emphatically, there is nothing to cause things that are created; nor to cause things that are non-created; not in any of the conditions that appears to have created them, nor in the combination of those conditions.

That being examined, Nagarjuna says, like he has in every chapter so far, “consider then the self as also empty.”

Practicing with Gate Nine:

Practicing with this gate means realizing that all our suffering results from the false and foolish understanding that there is a real cause-and-effect relationship to things. This blinds us to seeing the middle way, to seeing that we can have an influence on events, and that this allows us to end our suffering.

The Ninth Gate: there is no cause-and-effect, ever, anywhere, anyhow; no cause-and-effect period!

Chapter Ten—The Creator

In Chapter 10, Nagarjuna explicitly addresses an “elephant in the room” of all (or at least most) religions: is there an omnipotent, self-sufficient God who created the world? As might be expected, Nagarjuna’s response, after applying his usual methods of analysis, is that there cannot be such a being. The chapter is long and covers a lot of ground, most of which has been explained in one or more of the previous gates, beyond just showing that it is impossible for there to be a Creator or Savior God.

Nagarjuna’s introductory arguments are familiar by this point, explaining that a creator God, if permanent and autonomous (as a Creator would be by definition), would not be able to change to create things, and similarly, a permanent and autonomous savior God would not be able to change to save a person, and so would not be able to actually save anyone. In addition, there would be no way for a permanent creator or savior God to be created, since a permanent God could not arise from itself, or something else, or both, or neither [the tetralemma, again used here in this context, and explained fully in Chapter One of *Middle Way Philosophy*]. All of those possibilities, and they are all the possibilities for something to be created, require God to be impermanent.

Production being central to Nagarjuna’s arguments, he points out here that there is no way for a Creator or Savior God to be produced, to be made or created, for a number of reasons, the strongest is explained in the now-familiar tetralemma argument about production in general (i.e., regarding production of anything in the world), which is used throughout the twelve gates. There are only 4 possible ways for something to be produced—it can be produced from itself, from something else, from some combination of those, or from neither. And none of those, as Nagarjuna has repeatedly explained, is possible—not even in the case of God. Why? Because the process of production requires change, and change is not possible if something is permanent.

Further, if there were a permanent God, it begs questions like: where did that God come from and where is the place that God occupies, where did God’s occupied place come from, and how did the God get there? Did it not have to have existed before God arrived there? So how was it created? Was there something preceding God that participated in God’s creation? If so, how was that Creator created? This line of reasoning is obviously untenable and nonsense. Every answer begs another question in an infinite regress.

In the course of addressing the existence of God, Nagarjuna discusses the emptiness of suffering as well, both in itself and as a way to illustrate that God is not the cause nor the solution that ends suffering. He says (again) that, being all things are empty (we know this because it is impossible for a thing to be made by itself, by another, by both, or from no cause at all), suffering is empty. Suffering arises when certain conditions arise in dependence on each other, but each of the conditions is itself empty and so the arisen suffering is empty too. So God cannot be the source of suffering nor the solution that ends suffering.

Nagarjuna also explains that neither the Self nor Soul, which are believed to be autonomous and permanent in traditional religions, now and in Nagarjuna`s day, could be the source of suffering. Why? Because if the Self or Soul were permanent, it would not be able to change and creating suffering would require considerable change; that makes it a contradiction in terms. And, if the Self really could produce suffering, then Nagarjuna laughs and says, what would the Self be bestowing the suffering on—another permanent self? Ha!

Amuse yourself with this, as Nagarjuna does: “If God is self-existent, He should need nothing. If He needs something, He should not be called self-existent. If he does not need anything, why did he cause [change], like a small boy who plays a game, to make all creatures?” Still smiling, Nagarjuna adds, “...if God created all living beings, who created him? That God created himself cannot be true, for nothing can create itself. [There is no prime cause, no first cause.] If he were created by another creator, He would not be self-existent.”

Clearly sensing a need to drive home his points about the impossibility of God`s existence, Nagarjuna runs through a series of production-oriented “what-if`s” that indicate the impossibility of there being a God. Interestingly, he moves away from his airtight tetralemma-oriented metaphysical arguments for several of these to address the question more colloquially:

- If things were permanent at the moment of creation they could not be changing, so there would be no karma (see definition and brief notes on karma below), no way for us to affect karma. That`s sheer nonsense.
- If things were created by a traditional God, there should be no sinfulness or virtue, no good and evil, just the Created world created by God, but there is sinfulness and virtue, so all things could not be created by God.
- If all living being were created by God, they would all respect and admire and worship God (as a child does a parent), but this is not the case, so how could these beings be made by God?
- If God is the maker of all beings, why are some happy and some unhappy? God would have to sometimes act out of love and sometimes act out of hate to create different affects in living beings, and that means God is not self-existent, permanent and autonomous, and that all things are not made by God.

All of this argument shows that God cannot be all good and cannot be self-sufficient; this means God cannot exist. Along with no God, this shows that man`s fate and salvation cannot be determined by God. If that were the case, man would not be able to effect what happens and so moral and religious practice would be meaningless.

Karma

- Karma are the motivational dispositions stored in our brain which, when conditions warrant it, assemble into narratives that suggest how we should act.
- Karma are the intentional acts that arise from our motivational dispositions (lightning striking a house, for example, is not a karmic event)
- Karma is the destiny that we create through our actions and thoughts.
- Karma is an echo of the past that determines the future.
- Karma means and explains that our past actions actually link us to our present states of mind and actions.

The basic observation that underlays karma is that it is possible to develop a skill. This simple fact carries a number of important implications for any teaching on action—action is the literal translation of karma: (1) Actions give results, and their results follow a discernible pattern. Otherwise, it would not be possible to develop a skill. (2) Some results are more desirable than others. Otherwise, there would be no point in developing a skill. (3) By observing one's mistakes one may learn from them and use that knowledge to act more skillfully in the future. This means that the mind is a crucial agent in determining actions and their results, and there is an opening for feedback to influence the process of action (karma). It is thus a non-linear process, and there is room for free will. (4) Results can be observed while one is acting, as well as after the action is done. This means that actions have both immediate results and long-term results, a fact that makes this non-linear process very complex.

Further, the general understanding of the doctrine of karma is that actions from the past largely determine the direction of present happiness or unhappiness, while present actions determine future happiness or unhappiness, peacefulness or suffering. So karma is the moral principle that governs human conduct. It declares that our present experience is conditioned by our past conduct and that our present conduct will condition our future experience. But if past action were the sole determining factor, then present action should have no effect on our present experience of pleasure or pain, and there would be no reason for the doctrine of karma, no morality possible, and certainly no need for Buddhism or any other religion.

One of the most distinctive features of Buddhist karma, as opposed to the everyday secular understanding of it, is that the present experience of satisfaction or displeasure we feel in any moment is a combined result of both past and present actions. This plays an enormous role in allowing for the exercise of free will and the possibility of putting an end to suffering before the effects of all past actions have ripened. In other words, it is what makes Buddhist practice possible; it is what makes us able to develop the skill to live happier, healthier, more peaceful lives for us, for our families and communities, and for the earth.

Near the end of the chapter, Nagarjuna addresses the reader directly with this powerfully uncomfortable line for Westerners today: “You should know that all things are not made by God and also that God does not exist.” Why? Again, because there would be no way for determinate things or for an autonomous God to be produced, and therefore one cannot exist. On a more

positive note, Nagarjuna concludes with a reminder that suffering (as well as God) is empty: “If suffering is empty, you should know that created, non-created and all sentient beings are empty.”

Practicing with Gate Ten:

Practicing with this gate means grasping the reality that there is no savior or creator God; there are no Higher Powers. This is a profoundly positive message – the sufferer is not experiencing an unmovable, omnipotent external power, but instead can influence and even diminish their own suffering! There is just us and karma; our actions that make us and the world a better or less good place, a more peaceful, happy and healthy place, or a place of more suffering. We realize we can change anything to make ourselves, our families, our communities, the world and the universe a happier, healthier place.

The Tenth Gate: there is no God, and that is why we can lessen suffering.

Chapter Eleven—The Three Times

So far in this treatise, Nagarjuna has shown that it is impossible for anything or anyone to be produced in a permanent, autonomous way. In the previous chapter he explains that this is true of suffering and of God. In this chapter, he shifts to examining the impossibility of production itself. He does this by examining production in the three times, a standard Buddhist framework to consider the sequence of events. The three times, in Buddhism, are “earlier than,” “simultaneous with,” and “later than,” or, more colloquially: past, present, and future.

As Nagarjuna explains, a cause cannot be prior to (earlier than) an effect, because, were it to be permanent and independent, there would be no way for an effect to arise from it unless the effect already existed in the cause (recall our earlier discussion about permanent objects having no way of interacting with each other). This is obviously nonsensical for there would be no need for a cause as the effect already existed. So, “earlier than” is not possible. Next, if the cause and the effect existed at the same time, the cause and effect would be effectively identical and there would also be no need for or possibility of production. Finally, in this triad, if the effect were to arise independently in the future, then it could have no relationship to the cause, so no need for or possibility of production.

Summing this up, we discover that there is no way for there to be production because production is not possible if the three times are separate and independent, if there really is a past, present and future. And a past, present, and future are required for production. So the “three times”, as independent entities, is an impossibility and as a result, production, as an entity, is impossible.

We are left with another confirmation of the idea that all things must exist in a state of flux and dependence upon each other to come into being and to fall away. Production can only occur when people and things arise in a fluid, relative relationship.

Practicing with Gate Eleven:

Practicing with this gate means realizing that things only appear to happen in a linear way—a cause in the past leads to the circumstances now, which is transformed into future events. Actually, that is nonsense; outside our mental constructs making life appear to us as a linear flow of connected events, there is no cause and effect traversing time in a linear, autonomous way. So wherever we notice we are suffering from a cause and effect, past to present to future time-lined story, we need to remind ourselves that this perception is nonsense. If we get that it is nonsensical, then we aren't able to crave or attach to it and so our discomfort diminishes and we live with a new-found sense of comfort and peace.

The Eleventh Gate: Neither time (meaning past, present, and future) nor anything dependent on a linear concept of time for its production, really exists.

Chapter Twelve—Production

This final chapter is a further examination of the impossibility of production. In Cheng's note in the translation of this treatise, he says that this chapter shows that "[t]he function of production, originating, making, doing, acting, changing, and creating, cannot be established." Nagarjuna does this by explaining that production of something or someone permanent (an effect), requires a linear path from that which is produced (the effect that has already happened), to that which is not yet produced (no effect). Without those two, nothing would be able to be being produced, nothing would be able to be in the process of being produced. The problem is, as Nagarjuna has explained repeatedly, that neither that which has been produced nor that which has not been produced exists independently, so both are empty. And that means that nothing and no one can be being produced, so production itself is empty.

This is very much like the examination of motion in Chapter Two of *Middle Way Philosophy* where Nagarjuna explains that none of these: mover, moving, moved nor subject, predicate, object, can exist independent of the others, for these are all dependently arisen, relational and empty. We also observe that, in light of Nagarjuna's discussion of time and momentariness (here in Gate 11 as well as throughout *Middle Way Philosophy*), it is hard to see how there can really be an expression of something "being produced" – since all things and events are momentary and aggregated (composed of parts and arising and ceasing simultaneously), can we even sensibly talk about a "now" for the "thing" to be produced in? Nagarjuna summarizes these points in Gate Twelve: Since production cannot be established, "origination, duration, and destruction cannot be established. Created things cannot be established. Since created things cannot be established, non-created thing cannot be established, all sentient beings cannot be established."

Nagarjuna has spelled this out for us repeatedly in the twelve gates, so this final summation of his understanding seems more repetitive than climatic. But, there is a twist in the last sentence of this

final chapter: “Therefore you should know all things have no production; they are ultimately empty and tranquil.” TRANQUIL, that`s the zinger.

In the last word of the entire treatise, Nagarjuna is driving home the idea that as everything is empty, everything is tranquil, meaning at peace—at least until we mess it up with our misperceiving narratives that make things seem independent and autonomous.

Practicing with Gate Twelve:

Practicing with this gate means realizing that things only appear to happen in a linear way. Actually, that is nonsense; there is no cause and effect traversing time in a linear, autonomous way. So whenever we notice we are suffering from a cause and effect, past-to-present-to-future timed-lined story, we need to remind ourselves that that perception is fabricated, and not based on any inherent “reality.” If we get that it is nonsensical, then we won`t be able to crave or attach to it. Our discomfort diminishes and we live with a new-found sense of comfort and peace.

The Eleventh Gate: neither time (meaning past, present, and future) nor anything dependent on a linear concept of time for its production, really exists.