

NAGARJUNA

(2nd Century AD)

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THE MIDDLE WAY (*Mulamadhyamaka-Karika*)¹

Chapter 1: Causality

1. Nothing whatever arises. Not from itself, not from another, not from both itself and another, and not without a cause.²
2. There are just four conditions of the existence of anything: efficient cause, supporting condition, precipitating condition, and dominant condition. There is no fifth condition.³
3. Among the four conditions of the existence of a thing, there is found no substantial essence [*svabhava* = self-nature] of the thing. If things have no substantial essences, then there can be no real relations between different things.⁴
4. There are no causes with conditions; there are no causes without conditions. There are no conditions without causes; there are no conditions with causes.
5. Things arise from conditions, but if there is no arising, aren't conditions not conditions?
6. There are no conditions of existing things, nor are there conditions of that which does not exist. How can the non-existent have a condition? If something exists, does it need a condition?⁵

¹Rendition and editing by George Cronk. © 1998. Nagarjuna is the founder of the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. The *Mulamadhyamaka-Karika* ("Fundamentals of the Middle Way") is his major work. It was originally composed in Sanskrit, and Sanskrit as well as early Tibetan versions of the work have survived, as have later Chinese translations. There are several complete English translations of the *Karika* available. Two recent ones are *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*, translation (from Tibetan) and commentary by Jay L. Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Nancy McCagney, *Nagarjuna and the Philosophy of Openness* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997), pp. 135-218 (a translation from Sanskrit by McCagney; Roman transliteration of the Sanskrit text included).

²That is, not from neither itself nor another.

³With regard to an existing thing, its efficient cause (*hetu*) is that which produces it; its supporting condition (*alambana*) is that which preserves it in existence; its precipitating condition (*anantaram*) is that which makes it an object of experience (for example, the presence of a table before me is the precipitating condition of my perceiving a table); and its dominant condition (*adhipati*) is the purpose for which it exists.

⁴"*Madhyamaka*" means "middle way (or path)", and "*Madhyamika*" means "he who follows the middle way." Nagarjuna's philosophy is an attempt to avoid the extremes of "essentialism" and "nihilism." Essentialism is the view that true reality is made up of eternal, unchanging, independent, and substantial essences (self-essences as well as thing-essences); and nihilism is the view that there are no such essences and that therefore nothing (Latin, *nihil*) exists at all. Nagarjuna's view is that (contrary to nihilism) there does exist a world of selves and things, namely, the world that appears before us (the phenomenal world), but that (contrary to essentialism) all such phenomenal entities are impermanent, continually changing, interdependent, insubstantial — in other words, "empty" (*shunya*) of essence.

⁵By "existing things," Nagarjuna apparently means things with substantial essences, things that "really" exist, eternally, immutably, and independently. The existence of "really real" things is not conditional.

7. If there are no existents, nor non-existents, nor existent non-existents, how can there be any causes? If there were a cause, what would it cause?
8. If there are events (for example, mental states) without supporting conditions, why should we speak of supporting conditions at all?
9. If things do not begin to exist, then they cannot cease to exist. If things do not begin to exist, how can they have precipitating conditions? If something has ceased to exist, how can it be a condition or cause of anything else?
10. If things have no substantial essences, then they have no real existence; and, in that case, the statement, "This is the cause or condition of that," is meaningless.
11. An effect cannot be found in a single cause or condition, nor can an effect be found in all causes and conditions together. How can something not found in causes and conditions arise from them?
12. If an effect arises from causes or conditions in which it does not pre-exist, then couldn't it arise from no causes or conditions at all?
13. If an effect is created by its conditions, but the conditions are not self-created, how could the effect ever come to be?¹
14. Therefore, effects cannot arise from causes or conditions, nor can they arise from non-causes or non-conditions. If there are no effects whatsoever, how can there be any causes or conditions (or, for that matter, any non-causes or non-conditions)?

Chapter 2: What's Happening?

1. What has already happened is not now happening. What has not yet happened is not now happening. What is now happening has not already happened, nor has it not yet happened. Doesn't this mean that nothing can happen?
2. What is happening is in the process of happening now. What has already happened and what has not yet happened are not in the process of happening now.
3. How is the happening of the now-happening possible? If there is no happening at all, then the now-happening cannot happen.
4. What is happening now might not happen, but it seems that what is happening now is happening now, doesn't it?
5. If what is happening now is happening now, then, in the happening of what is happening now, there are two happenings: (1) that which is happening now and (2) the happening of that which is happening now.
6. If there are two happenings, then there must be two things that happen (two happeners), for there cannot be a happening without a happener.
7. If we can't say that anything is happening unless there is a happener (something that happens), then if nothing is happening, how could there be a happener (something that happens)?

¹Nagarjuna is implying that there is an infinite regress here. If the conditions that create an effect are not self-created, then they are created by something other than themselves, which, if not self-created, would be created by something other than itself, and so on to infinity. The present effect could never be created.

8. Whatever happens must be either something that happens (a happener) or something that does not happen (a non-happener). If neither a happener nor a non-happener happens, what else is there that could happen?
9. If nothing happens, there cannot be a happener.¹ If there is no happener, then we cannot say that a happener happens.
10. Someone who thinks that a happener happens (that is, that something that happens happens) must also think that there can be a happener even when nothing is happening.²
11. If a happener were to happen, then we would have two happenings: (1) the happening of the happener and (2) the happening of the happening.
12. What is happening now doesn't begin with what has already happened, nor does it begin with what has not yet happened, nor does it begin with what is happening now (that is, with itself).³ Where, then, is the beginning of what is happening now?
13. We cannot find the beginning of what is happening now in that which is prior to the beginning of what is happening now (that is, in that which has already come and gone), nor can we find it in that which has not yet happened. Where, then, is it?
14. We can distinguish between (1) what has already happened, (2) what is happening now, and (3) what has not yet happened; but we cannot find the beginning of what is happening now anywhere.
15. [We can distinguish between (1) things that happen (happeners) and (2) things that do not happen (non-happeners).] Happeners are not standing still, but non-happeners are not standing still either.⁴ Other than happeners and non-happeners, what else is there that could be standing still?
16. The idea of a non-moving happener (that is, of something happening that doesn't happen) is nonsensical. Something happening without happening never happens.
17. Something that happens does not stop happening (1) because it is happening, or (2) because it has already happened, or (3) because it has not yet happened. Happening is the same as beginning to happen, and having already happened is the same as ceasing to happen.
18. It doesn't make sense to say that "the happener is the same as the happening" or that "the happener is different from the happening."
19. If the happener were the same as the happening, then actor and action, deed and doer, would be identical.
20. If the happener were different from the happening, then it would follow that there could be happeners without happenings and happenings without happeners.
21. If happener and happening are neither identical nor different, then how should we understand them?

¹Since a happener is something that happens.

²Because the happener and the happening are being thought of as two different things.

³Something that happens cannot cause itself to happen because it would then have to exist before it exists, which is impossible.

⁴Is this because non-happeners do not exist and what does not exist cannot be standing still (or anything else)?

22. When something that happens happens, it isn't caused to happen by its happening since it has no existence before it happens. So is there, in fact, anything that happens?
23. Something that happens doesn't show itself in a happening other than the happening by which it shows itself. Something that happens cannot show itself in two distinct happenings.
24. An existent happenner's happening does not happen in any of "the three ways" (that is, neither in the past, nor in the future, nor [even] in the present). A non-existent happenner's happening also does not happen in any of "the three ways."¹
25. Therefore, neither an existent nor a non-existent happenner's happening happens in any of "the three ways." The happening, the happenner, and the happened are all non-existent.

Chapter 7: Arising, Enduring, and Dissolving

1. If arising arises, then it would have the three characteristics of that which arises (arising, enduring, and dissolving).² If arising does not arise, how could it be a characteristic of that which arises?
2. If the arising, enduring, and dissolving of arising occur separately, then they cannot be the characteristics of arising.³ But how could they occur simultaneously?⁴
3. If arising has characteristics other than arising, enduring, and dissolving, then there will be an infinite regress.⁵ If it has no characteristics at all, then it cannot arise.
4. Perhaps there is a non-arising arising of arising;⁶ and perhaps this non-arising arising of arising gives rise to the arising of ordinary phenomena.
5. If there is a non-arising arising of arising, then it is the primary source of all arising. But if it is non-arising, how can it be the arising of arising?
6. If the arising of ordinary phenomena arises from the foundational arising of all arising, what explains the existence of that foundational arising?
7. If the arising of the arising of ordinary phenomena is non-arising . . . , [then its existence cannot be explained].
8. Can we say that the arising of the arising of ordinary phenomena gives rise to itself as well as to the arising of ordinary phenomena, just as a lamp illuminates itself as well as other things . . . ?

¹Since a non-existent happenner cannot happen at all.

²That is, like all things that arise, arising would arise, endure for a time, and then cease to exist.

³Because in that event the arising, enduring, and dissolving of arising would each have to arise, endure, and dissolve; and then the arising of the arising of arising, and the enduring of the enduring of arising, and the dissolving of the dissolving of arising would each have to arise, endure, and dissolve; and so on to infinity. Thus, nothing could ever arise in the first place.

⁴That is, how could arising arise, endure, and dissolve all at the same time?

⁵Because these "other characteristics" will have to arise, endure, and dissolve; and their arising, enduring, and dissolving will have to arise, endure, and dissolve; and so on to infinity.

⁶That is, an ontologically foundational arising that does not arise from anything else.

13. If the arising of the arising of ordinary phenomena is non-arising, how could it give rise to itself? If it is given rise to either by itself or by something else, then it is not non-arising.
14. The non-arising, the not-yet-arisen, and the arising: there is no arising in any of them. They are like the non-happening, the not-yet-happening, and the happening.
15. If the now-arising is not given rise to by a prior arising, then how can its arising be dependent?¹
16. If the now-arising's arising is dependent on that which gives rise to it, then the now-arising is peaceful. Both the now-arising and that which gives rise to it are peaceful.²
17. If the non-arising exists, then it must have arisen. If the non-arising does not exist, then how could it arise?
18. If the arising of the now-arising arises, what gives rise to it?
19. If an earlier arising gives rise to the arising of the now-arising, then there is an infinite regress.³ But if that which gives rise to all arising is non-arising, then the now-arising could arise.
20. Therefore, neither being nor non-being can arise, as stated above in Chapter 1, Verse 6.
21. We cannot say that the dissolving of a thing arises because that which is dissolving is no longer arising. Nor can we say that the arisen is not dissolving because all things that have arisen are dissolving.⁴
22. An enduring thing that has arisen does not endure. A non-enduring thing does not endure. That which has arisen is dissolving [and therefore not enduring]. How can that which has not arisen be enduring?
23. That which is dissolving is not enduring. All that has arisen is dissolving.
24. All living beings that have arisen are subject to aging and death. Are there any living beings that do not age and die?
25. Enduring cannot endure through itself, nor can it endure through another enduring, just as arising can neither arise from itself nor from another arising [as shown above].
26. The dissolved does not dissolve. The not-yet-dissolved does not dissolve. The dissolving of that which is dissolving does not dissolve. Can the non-arisen dissolve?
27. Neither the enduring nor the non-enduring dissolves.⁵

¹Contrary to the central Buddhist doctrine of the interdependent arising of all phenomena.

²Why "peaceful"? Is it because the dependence of the now-arising's arising makes the now-arising also dependent, all of which is in keeping with the doctrine of interdependent arising?

³Because there must be an even earlier arising that gives rise to the earlier arising that gives rise to the now-arising, and so on to infinity. The now-arising could never arise.

⁴That is, no phenomenal things are permanent or immutable. They are all impermanent.

⁵The enduring (that is, the permanent) endures and does not dissolve; the non-enduring has dissolved and therefore cannot dissolve.

28. The endurance of a thing cannot explain its ceasing to endure, nor can its ceasing to endure be explained through the endurance of something else [for example, the endurance of dissolving?].
29. No arising, no dissolving.
30. That which *is* [being] cannot dissolve. That which *is* [being] cannot not-be.
31. That which *is not* [non-being] cannot dissolve. Can the beheaded be beheaded a second time?
32. Dissolving does not dissolve itself, nor is it dissolved by another dissolving, just as arising can neither arise from itself nor from another arising [as shown above].
33. Since arising, enduring, and dissolving cannot happen, there are no real things that arise, endure, or dissolve. If there are no such things, how can the ordinary phenomenal world exist?
34. It is all a dream, an illusion, like a city of the gods floating in the heavens. So much for arising, enduring, and dissolving.

Chapter 8: The Agent and the Action

1. A *real*¹ agent is not an agent [that is, cannot act]. An unreal (non-existent) agent is not an agent [that is, cannot act].
2. That which *is* [being] does not act. Action in a world of *real* beings would be action without an agent. An agent in a world of *real*/beings would be an agent without action.
3. If a non-existent agent performs a non-existent action, then both action and agent would be uncaused.
4. No cause, no effect. No cause, no agent. No agent, no activity [no power to act]. No activity, no action.
5. If there is no action [as implied by both essentialism and nihilism], then nothing arises. If nothing arises, then there is no phenomenal world.
6. If there is no phenomenal world, then there is no path of liberation, and ordinary existence is without purpose.
7. It cannot be that an agent that is both real and unreal performs actions that are both real and unreal. (It is impossible for the same thing to be both real and unreal at the same time.)
8. It cannot be that a real agent performs an unreal action. It cannot be that an unreal agent performs a real action. (From believing these things, all sorts of errors follow.)
9. It cannot be that a real agent performs an action that is either unreal or both real and unreal
10. It cannot be that an unreal agent performs an action that is either real or both real and unreal
11. It cannot be that an agent that is both real and unreal performs an action that is either unreal or both real and unreal
12. We must say that action depends upon the agent, and the agent depends upon the action. Agent and action cannot exist independently of each other.

¹Nagarjuna's assumption is that the real is permanent and thus cannot change (or act).

13. From this negation of independently existing agents and actions, an understanding of clinging should arise. Through this analysis of action and agent all else should be comprehended.

Chapter 15: Essence and Existence

1. It makes no sense to say that essence arises from causes and conditions. If essence were caused or conditioned, it would not be essence.
2. Essence cannot be created or otherwise come to be. Essence is not artificial, nor does it depend on another.
3. If there are essences, then there are real differences between things
4. Are there entities without essences? Then there are no real differences between them
5. If we cannot find an entity with an essence, that does not prove the non-existence of such entities. Some say that an entity that changes is a nonentity.
6. Those who think in terms of essences and real differences, and who cannot recognize entities without essences, do not grasp the truth taught by the Buddha.¹
7. The Buddha . . . counseled against saying "it is" and "it is not."
8. If only entities with essences [*really*] exist, then there is no non-existence, nor can anything change.
9. Some will say, "If there are no essences, what is there to change?" We reply, "If there *are* essences, what is there to change?"
10. To say "it is" is to be attached to essentialism.² To say "it is not" is to lapse into nihilism.³ Therefore, judgments of "it is" or "it is not" are not made by the wise.
11. "An entity with an essence cannot not-exist." This is essentialism. "It existed before, but now it doesn't." This is nihilism.⁴

Chapter 18: Self and Reality

1. If the self were the empirical personality [ego], then it would arise and dissolve. If it were different from the empirical personality, then it would neither arise nor dissolve.
2. No self: no properties of self. No self: no "I" or "mine."
3. No "I" or "mine," no separate existence. No "I" or "mine," no belief in essential differences.

¹Which is that the phenomenal world and everything in it is devoid or empty of essence.

²Essentialism" is the view that what is "really real" are eternal, immutable, and independently existing essences. This theory is also sometimes referred to as "eternalism" or "permanetism."

³By nihilism in this context, Nagarjuna means the view that only essences or things with essences can exist and, if there are no essences or things with essences, then nothing exists.

⁴Is this a good definition of nihilism?

4. No "I" or "mine," neither internally nor externally — clinging ceases. No clinging, no rebirth.
5. When clinging and misery cease, there is Nirvana. Clinging and misery arise from false consciousness, from delusion. Delusion ceases when emptiness (*shunyata*) is realized.
6. Some teach self (*atman*). Some teach no-self (*anatman*). The buddhas teach neither self nor no-self.
7. What language describes is non-existent. What thought describes is non-existent. Things neither arise nor dissolve, just as in Nirvana.
8. The world is real. The world is not real. The world is both real and not real. The world is neither real nor not real. None of these is true, according to the teaching of the Buddha.
9. Not dependent. Quiescent. Not a product of false consciousness. Not a mental construct at all. Without distinctions. No purpose. This is the nature of ultimate reality.
10. Something whose arising depends on another is neither identical to nor different from the other. Therefore, it is neither non-existent nor eternal

Chapter 24: Emptiness and the Four Noble Truths

1. "If all were empty of essence, then nothing could arise or dissolve. It would follow that even the Four Noble Truths could not exist.¹
2. "If the Four Noble Truths did not exist, then true knowledge, renunciation of the world, spiritual progress, and enlightenment would be impossible.
3. "If knowledge, renunciation, spiritual progress, and enlightenment did not exist, then the four fruits [stages of advancement along the Noble Eightfold Path]² would not exist; and if the fruits did not exist, then there would be no attaining of the fruits and thus no advancement toward Nirvana.
4. "If those eight things [mentioned in verses 2 and 3] did not exist, then there could be no Buddhist community (Sangha); and without the Four Noble Truths [verse 1], there could be no true teaching (Dharma).
5. "If the Sangha and the Dharma did not exist, then how could the Buddha exist? The [Madhyamaka] doctrine of emptiness destroys the Three Jewels [of Buddhism – the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha].
6. "Thus, the doctrine of emptiness negates the existence of actions, of the four fruits, of the Dharma, and also of the things taken for granted in the ordinary and everyday thought of the unenlightened."
7. Your understanding of our teaching on emptiness is defective and, by failing to understand it, you are in danger of losing the truth, which will cause you suffering.
8. In the Dharma taught by the buddhas, there is a distinction between two levels of truth: (1) the conventional and confused "truth" of ordinary consciousness and (2) the "true truth" revealed to superconsciousness.

¹The first six verses of this chapter (enclosed in quotation marks) represent the views of a critic of the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness. According to the critic, Madhyamaka philosophy is a form of nihilism, a charge that Nagarjuna seeks to refute in verses 7-40.

²The four fruits or stages of advancement are those of (1) the stream-entrant, one who has renounced the world in order to follow the Noble Eightfold Path; (2) the once-returned, a path follower who will be reborn only once more; (3) the non-returned, a devotee who is in his or her final life and who will no longer be reincarnated; and (4) the arhat, one who has attained Nirvana.

9. If you don't understand the two-truth distinction, then you cannot understand the profound teaching of the Buddha.
10. Understanding conventional "truth" is a prerequisite to grasping ultimate truth; and without an understanding of ultimate truth, you cannot attain Nirvana.
11. By failing to understand emptiness, those of little intelligence can be destroyed, like someone grabbing a snake by the head or casting a spell improperly.
12. Thus, realizing how few are capable of learning the deep truths of the Dharma, the Buddha was reluctant to teach it [to the many].
13. Your attempted refutation of our teaching on emptiness is off-target. Your criticisms do not apply. Our understanding of emptiness is quite different from yours.
14. A correct understanding of emptiness makes everything clear. For those with a defective understanding of emptiness, nothing works out.
15. You are attributing your own misunderstandings to us. That's like someone who mounts a horse and then forgets that he is mounted.
16. If you view all existing things as having essences, then you must view all things as having no causes and no conditions.
17. [If essentialism is true,] then there can be no causes, no effects, no agents, no actions, no conditions, no arising, no cessation, and no consequences of action.
18. Whatever emerges out of the process of interdependent arising, we call emptiness. Speaking of interdependent arising as emptiness is a standard practice of those who follow the middle way (Madhyamaka).
19. Since there are no things that are not interdependently originated, it follows that there are no things that are not empty [of essence].
20. If all things were not empty [of essence], then (contrary to your view) nothing could arise or dissolve. It is actually your view that rules out the existence of the Four Noble Truths!
21. If all things were not interdependently originated, then there could be no suffering. Suffering is impermanent and cannot exist in something that has a self-nature [substantial essence].
22. Something with a self-nature cannot originate. Therefore, if you deny emptiness, there can be no arising.
23. If suffering had a self-nature, then there could be no cessation of suffering. An essence cannot cease to exist.
24. If the Noble Eightfold Path had a self-nature, then it could not be followed. Since the Path is followed, it cannot have a self-nature.
25. If suffering, arising, and cessation did not exist, then there could be no path leading to the cessation of suffering.
26. If ignorance had an essence, then knowledge would be impossible. An essence is permanent.
27. For the same reason, renunciation, realization, following the Path, and the four fruits [stages of attainment] would also be impossible.
28. Moreover, if the four fruits are essences that are unattained, then how could they ever be attained?

29. If the four fruits did not exist, then they could not be attained or experienced. Without the fruits, and without attainers and experiencers thereof, there could be no Sangha (Buddhist community).
30. Without the Four Noble Truths, there would be no Dharma. If the Sangha and the Dharma did not exist, then how could the Buddha exist?
31. The view that you [the critic of Madhyamaka] have expounded implies that the Buddha arises independently of enlightenment and also that enlightenment arises independently of the Buddha.
32. For you, someone who by nature [i.e., by essence] is not enlightened can never attain enlightenment, no matter how diligently he might strive to follow the [Noble Eightfold] Path.
33. [If your view were correct,] then no one could ever do either right or wrong as defined in the Dharma. What can that which is not empty of essence do? Essence is unchanging and thus inactive.
34. Since, for you, the four fruits are essences, they cannot arise from right or wrong actions; and if they did arise from right or wrong actions, then they would not exist [because, in essentialism, arising is unreal].
35. If, however, you claim that the four fruits *can* arise from right or wrong actions and still exist, then (on your assumptions) the fruits cannot be empty of essence [because, in essentialism, only essences can exist].
36. In denying that interdependent arising is emptiness and that emptiness is interdependent arising, you also negate all of the conventions of everyday thought and action.
37. The denial of emptiness implies (1) that there are no actions [which is contrary to the facts of experience], (2) that there are actions without beginning or end [which is incredible], and (3) that there are agents without actions [which is contradictory since an agent is, by definition, a performer of actions].
38. In a world of essences, everything would be unchanging, there would be no changes of circumstances from time to time, and nothing would either begin or end.
39. If all is empty of essence [as we claim], then renunciation of all actions and worldly defilements, the ending of suffering, and the attainment of enlightenment are all possible.
40. He who sees interdependent arising sees suffering, the arising and cessation thereof, and the Noble Eightfold Path.

Chapter 25: Nirvana

1. If all is empty [of essence], then there is no [real] arising and no [real] dissolving. Through what dissolving can Nirvana arise?
2. If all is non-empty [of essence], then there is no [real] arising and no [real] dissolving. Through what dissolving can Nirvana arise?
3. Not abandoned. Not attained. Not annihilated. Not permanent. Not arisen. Not dissolved. This is Nirvana.
4. If Nirvana were [phenomenally] existent, it would then be subject to aging and death. Whatever is [phenomenally] existent ages and dies.
5. If Nirvana were [phenomenally] existent, it would be compounded. Whatever is [phenomenally] existent is compounded.
6. If Nirvana were [phenomenally] existent, it would be dependent. Whatever is [phenomenally] existent is dependent.

7. If Nirvana is not [phenomenally] existent, does that mean that it is a non-being? If Nirvana is not [phenomenally]existent, it is not necessarily a non-being.
8. If Nirvana were a non-being, how could it be non-dependent? Whatever is non-dependent is not a non-being.
9. That which comes and goes is dependent and changing. But Nirvana is not dependent and changing.
10. The Buddha has negated both becoming and dissolving. Therefore, it seems that Nirvana is neither [phenomenally] existent nor a non-being.
11. If Nirvana were both a [phenomenal] existent and a non-being, liberation would both happen and not happen. But that is impossible [because it is contradictory].
12. If Nirvana were both a [phenomenal] existent and a non-being, Nirvana would not be non-dependent since both existing phenomena and non-beings are dependent [on whatever causes them].
13. How could Nirvana be both a [phenomenal] existent and a non-being? Nirvana is uncaused. Both existing phenomena and non-beings are caused.
14. How could Nirvana be both a [phenomenal] existent and a non-being? These two cannot occupy the same location. They are like light and darkness.
15. Nirvana is neither a [phenomenal] existent nor a non-being. If only we could understand this!¹
16. If Nirvana is neither a [phenomenal] existent nor a non-being, who is in a position to say so?²
17. Having entered Nirvana, the Buddha does not exist, nor does he not-exist, nor does he both exist and non-exist, nor does he neither exist nor not-exist.
18. During his lifetime, the Buddha did not exist, nor did he not-exist, nor did he both exist and not-exist, nor did he neither exist nor not-exist.
19. There is no difference at all between Samsara and Nirvana! There is no difference at all between Nirvana and Samsara! [They are both empty (*shunya*) of essence.]
20. The limits of Nirvana are the same as the limits of Samsara. There is not the slightest shade of difference between the two. [They are both limited by their emptiness (*shunyata*) of essence.]³
21. Speculating about what lies beyond Nirvana is pointless

¹Some (but not Nagarjuna with his doctrine of emptiness [*shunyata*]) might say that Nirvana is neither an existing phenomenon (empty of essence) nor a non-being, but rather a state of *being* [not empty of essence].

²No one in Nirvana would say so, and we can't trust the word of someone in Samsara.

³Behind verses 19 and 20 is Nagarjuna's assumption that both Nirvana and Samsara are equivalent to emptiness. On that assumption, it follows logically that Nirvana and Samsara are equivalent to one another. If N is equivalent to E, and if S is also equivalent to E, then it follows necessarily that N and S are equivalent. However, is Nagarjuna's assumption here correct? Perhaps it makes sense to say that Samsara is equivalent to emptiness since everything in Samsara, and Samsara itself, is empty of essence. But is Nirvana equivalent to emptiness? Suppose that Nirvana is the *realization* that Samsara is empty. Does that supposition undermine Nagarjuna's argument at all?

22. Since all existing phenomena are empty [of essence], what is finite? What is infinite? What is both finite and infinite? What is neither finite nor infinite?
23. What is identity, and what is different? What is permanent, and what is impermanent? What is both permanent and impermanent? What is neither permanent nor impermanent?
24. Liberation is the cessation of all thought, the dissolution of all plurality. The Buddha taught nothing at any time, in any place, to any person.

Chapter 26: The Twelve-Link Chain of Interdependent Arising

1. Out of the mystery of [I] ignorance, there arise the three kinds of action (physical, verbal, and mental), which give rise to [II] the impulsion to continue existing [through rebirth].
2. The disposition to continue existing [to be reborn again and again] gives rise to [III] consciousness, from which there emerge [IV] mind and body.
3. With mind and body, come [V] the six senses . . . , which result in [VI] contact [with objects of sensation]
4. From contact, [VII] feelings [of pleasure and pain] come forth.
5. From feelings, comes [VIII] craving [for more pleasure and less pain]. From craving, come [IX] grasping and clinging
6. From grasping and clinging, [X] he who grasps and clings emerges
7. He who grasps and clings . . . grasps and clings [i.e., strives for pleasure, for continued existence, etc.] and so arrives once more at [XI] rebirth, from which there inevitably follow aging and dying, sorrow and weeping, misery and grief.
8. Together with confusion and despair, all these woes arise as a consequence of birth and rebirth. Thus, [XII] the entire mass of suffering comes to pass.
9. The force that fuels the continuation of *samsara* is the impulsion to continue existing, which arises from ignorance. Therefore, the wise do not strive for continued existence. The ignorant so strive, but the wise are not ignorant.
10. With the cessation of ignorance, the impulsion to continue existing will not arise. The cessation of ignorance results from meditation and wisdom.¹
11. With the cessation of ignorance, the chain is broken. The entire mass of suffering ceases.

¹The ignorance to be overcome is that which consists in the belief that the phenomenal world (including the empirical self or ego) is independent, permanent, and therefore real; the wisdom to be acquired shows that the world of phenomena is empty of essence (i.e., it is dependent, ever-changing, and thus unreal).