

Mulamadhyamakakarika

By Nagarjuna¹

Translated by Jay L. Garfield²

Based on the Selection and arrangement by Rev. Yin Shun³

1. I prostrate to the Perfect Buddha,
The best of teachers, who taught that
Whatever is dependently arisen⁴ is
Unceasing, unborn,
2. Unannihilated, not permanent,
Not coming, not going,
Without distinction, without identity,
And free from conceptual construction⁵.
...
3. If all of this is empty,
Neither arising nor ceasing,
Then for you, it follows that
The Four Noble Truths⁶ do not exist.
4. If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,
Then knowledge, abandonment,
Meditation and manifestation
Will be completely impossible.
5. If these things do not exist,
The four fruits⁷ will not arise.
Without the four fruits, there will be no attainers of the fruits.
Nor will there be the faithful.
6. If so, the spiritual community will not exist,
Nor will the eight kinds of person.
If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,
There will be no true Dharma⁸.
7. If there is no doctrine and spiritual community,
How can there be a Buddha?

If emptiness is conceived in this way,
The three jewels⁹ are contradicted.

8. Hence you assert that there are no real fruits.
And no Dharma. The Dharma itself
And the conventional truth¹⁰
Will be contradicted.
...

9. The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
Is based on two truths:
A truth of worldly convention
And an ultimate truth.

10. Those who do not understand
The distinction drawn between these two truths
Do not understand
The Buddha's profound truth.

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

12. By a misperception of emptiness
A person of little intelligence is destroyed.
Like a snake incorrectly seized
Or like a spell incorrectly cast.

13. For that reason—that the Dharma is
Deep and difficult to understand and to learn—
The Buddha's mind despaired of
Being able to teach it.
...

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

15. Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist.
Therefore a nonempty thing
Does not exist.
...
16. For him to whom emptiness is clear,
Everything becomes clear.
For him to whom emptiness is not clear,
Nothing becomes clear.
...
17. If there is essence¹¹, the whole world
Will be unarising, unceasing,
And static. The entire phenomenal world
Would be immutable.
18. If it (the world) were not empty,
Then action would be without profit,
The act of ending suffering and
Abandoning misery and defilement¹² would not exist.
19. Whoever sees dependent arising
Also sees suffering
And its arising
And its cessation as well as the path.
...
20. Essence arising from
Causes and conditions makes no sense.
If essence came from causes and conditions,
Then it would be fabricated.
21. How could it be appropriate
For fabricated essence to come to be?
Essence itself is not artificial
And does not depend on another.

22. If there is no essence,
How can there be difference in entities?
The essence of difference in entities
Entities are established
23. Without having essence or otherness essence,

How can there be entities?

If there are essences and entities,

Entities are established.
24. If the entity is not established,
A nonentity is not established.
An entity that has become different
Is a nonentity, people say.
25. Those who see essence and essential difference
And entities and nonentities,
They do not see
The truth taught by the Buddha.
26. The Victorious One, through knowledge
Of reality and unreality,
In the Discourse to Katyayana¹³,
Refuted both “it is” and “it is not”.
...
27. The Victorious Conqueror has said that whatever
Is deceptive is false.
Compounded phenomena¹⁴ are all deceptive.
Therefore they are all false.
28. If whatever is deceptive is false,
What deceives?
The Victorious Conqueror has said about this
That emptiness is completely true.
...

29. If there were even a trifle nonempty,
Emptiness itself would be but a trifle.
But not even a trifle is nonempty,
How could emptiness be an entity?
30. The victorious ones have said
That emptiness is the relinquishing of all views.
For whomever emptiness is a view,
That one will accomplish nothing.
...
31. Desire, hatred and confusion all
Arise from thought, it is said.
They all depend on
The pleasant, the unpleasant, and errors.
32. Since whatever depends on the pleasant and the unpleasant
Does not exist through an essence,
The defilements
Do not really exist.
33. The self's existence or nonexistence
Has in no way been established.
Without that, how could the defilements'
Existence or nonexistence be established?
34. The defilements are somebody's.
But that one has not been established.
Without that possessor,
The defilements are nobody's
35. View the defilements as you view your self:
They are not in the defiled in the fivefold way¹⁵.
View the defiled as you view your self:
It is not in the defilements in the fivefold way.
...
36. Thus, through the cessation of error
Ignorance ceases.

When ignorance ceases
The compounded phenomena, etc., cease.

37. If someone's defilements

Existed through his essence,
How could they be relinquished?
Who could relinquish the existent?

38. If someone's defilements

Did not exist through his essence,
How could they be relinquished?
Who could relinquish the nonexistent?

...

39. While this action has affliction¹⁶ as its nature

This affliction is not real in itself.
If affliction is not real in itself,
How can action be real in itself?

...

40. Action depends upon the agent¹⁷.

The agent itself depends on action.
One cannot see any way
To establish them differently.

...

41. Emptiness and non-annihilation;

Cyclic existence and non-permanence:
That action is non-expiring¹⁸
Is taught by the Buddha.

...

42. When asked about the beginning,

The Great Sage said that nothing is known of it.
Cyclic existence is without end and beginning.
So there is no beginning or end.

43. Where there is no beginning or end,

How could there be a middle?

It follows that thinking about this in terms of
Prior, posterior, and simultaneous is not appropriate.

...

44. Some say suffering is self-produced,
Or produced from another or from both.
Or that it arises without a cause.
It is not the kind of thing to be produced.

45. If suffering came from itself,
Then it would not arise dependently.
For those aggregates¹⁹
Arise in dependence on these aggregates.

46. If those were different from these,
Or if these were different from those,
Suffering could arise from another.
These would arise from those others.

...

47. If suffering were caused by each,
Suffering could be caused by both.
Not caused by self or by other,
How could suffering be uncaused?

...

48. If the self were the aggregates,
It would have arising and ceasing (as properties).
If it were different from the aggregates,
It would not have the characteristics of the aggregates.

49. If there were no self,
Where would the self's (properties) be?
From the pacification of the self and what belongs to it,
One abstains from grasping onto "I" and "mine".

50. One who does not grasp onto "I" and "mine",
That one does not exist.

One who does not grasp onto “I” and “mine”,
He does not perceive.

51. When views of “I” and “mine” are extinguished,
Whether with respect to the internal or external,
The appropriator ceases.
This having ceased, birth ceases.
52. Action and misery having ceased, there is nirvana.
Action and misery come from conceptual thought.
This comes from mental fabrication.
Fabrication ceases through emptiness.
53. That there is a self has been taught,
And the doctrine of no-self,
By the buddhas, as well as the
Doctrine of neither self nor non-self.
54. What language expresses is nonexistent.
The sphere of thought is nonexistent.
Un-arisen and un-ceased, like nirvana
Is the nature of things.
55. Everything is real and is not real,
Both real and not real,
Neither real nor not real.
This is Lord Buddha’s teaching.
56. Not dependent on another, peaceful and
Not fabricated by mental fabrication,
Not thought, without distinctions,
That is the character of reality (that-ness).
57. Whatever comes into being dependent on another
Is not identical to that thing.
Nor is it different from it.
Therefore it is neither nonexistent in time nor permanent.

58. By the buddhas, patrons of the world,
This immortal truth is taught:
Without identity, without distinction;
Not nonexistent in time, not permanent.
...
59. That which comes and goes
Is dependent and changing.
That, when it is not dependent and changing,
Is taught to be nirvana.
60. The teacher has spoken of relinquishing
Becoming and dissolution.
Therefore, it makes sense that
Nirvana is neither existent nor nonexistent.
...
61. Nirvana is said to be
Neither existent nor non-existent.
If the existent and the nonexistent were established,
This would be established.
...
62. Having passed into nirvana, the Victorious Conqueror
Is neither said to be existent
Nor said to be nonexistent.
Neither both nor neither are said.
63. So, when the victorious one abides, he
Is neither said to be existent
Nor said to be nonexistent.
Neither both nor neither are said.
64. There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence and nirvana.
There is not the slightest difference
Between nirvana and cyclic existence.
...

65. Neither the aggregates, nor different from the aggregates,
The aggregates are not in him, nor is he in the aggregates.
The Tathagata²¹ does not possess the aggregates.
What is the Tathagata?
...
66. One who grasps the view that the Tathagata exists,
Having seized the Buddha,
Constructs conceptual fabrications
About one who has achieved nirvana.
67. Since he is by nature empty,
The thought that the Buddha
Exists or does not exist
After nirvana is not appropriate.
68. Those who develop mental fabrications with regard to the Buddha,
Who has gone beyond all fabrications,
As a consequence of those cognitive fabrications,
Fail to see the Tathagata.
69. Whatever is the essence of the Tathagata,
That is the essence of the world.
The Tathagata has no essence.
The world is without essence.
...
70. I prostrate to Gautama
Who through compassion
Taught the true doctrine,
Which leads to the relinquishing of all views.

Notes:

1. Nagarjuna lived in India during the 2nd century A.D. He is generally regarded as the founding father of Mahajana Buddhism. Mulamadhyamakakarika, the Middle View Stanzas, his representative work on the idea of emptiness, was translated by Kumaraja into Chinese in the 5th century A.D..

2. Jay L. Garfield translated the Mulamadhyamakakarika from Tibetan into English. The seventy translated stanzas are from his book: "The Fundamental Wisdom of The Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika", published by Oxford University Press, 1995. The Sanskrit version of Mulamadhyamakakarika was probably introduced to Tibet during the 8th century A.D.
3. Rev. Yin Shun gave a month long seminar when he was in Hong Kong in 1949, to introduce the Mulamadhyamakakarika. He selected seventy stanzas out of the original 446 stanzas in the Chinese translation. Fifty years later, following his footsteps, his disciple, Mr. Kar Shu Wong gave a yearlong seminar based on the same selection. Later, notes from his seminar became a book: "Introduction to the Fundamental Principles of Mulamadhyamakakarika", published in Chinese in 2000.
4. Dependently arisen is translated from the Sanskrit "Pratityasamutpada" to denote the inter-relation of everything in the world. "This arises because that arose; this ceases because that ceased."
5. Conceptual construction refers to the different views about the nature of the universe. For example, God created our world.
6. Four Noble Truths refer to the awareness of suffering, how suffering comes about, how it can be eliminated, and the practice of such elimination.
7. Four fruits refer to the different stages of enlightenment achieved by Buddhist practitioners.
8. Dharma refers to the teachings of the Buddha, including the four noble truths preached by the Buddha when he first achieved total enlightenment. Even more so, it refers to 'Pratityasamutpada' or 'dependently arisen' and the equivalent concept of 'Sunnyata', or 'emptiness'.
9. Three jewels refer to Buddha, Dharma, and Buddhist monks.
10. Conventional truth is the worldly truths that everyone agrees on.
11. Essence refers to the inherent properties of a thing, which are permanent, unchangeable, and pre-existing.
12. Defilement can be translated to mean troubles.
13. The *Discourse to Katyayana* is found in the Diverse Agama Sutra:

Katyayana was Buddha's disciple noted for his debating skills. He asked Buddha: "What is the side of existence? What is the side of non-existence?" Buddha said to him: "Generally speaking, when people see the appearance of a thing, they assume that it is an objective existence, so they fall onto the side of existence; when they see the disappearance of a thing, they assume that it is objectively non-existent, then they fall onto the side of non-existence. A learned Buddhist will not react this way. When he observes the coming about of something in the world, he understands that everything can make its appearance under the appropriate conditions, so he does not harbor a view of non-existence. When he observes the destruction of something in the world, he understands that there is no objective existence for anything, because if something exists objectively, it will be impossible to relinquish or to destroy. Thus a Buddhist will leave the side of existence, as well as the side of non-existence, leading to sunyata, or emptiness. The middle path is built on this "Pratityasamutpada" or "dependently arisen", "Because this existed, therefore that exists; because this arose, therefore that arises."--- Rev. Yin Shun [Mulamadhyamakakarika Lecture Notes, p. 257]

14. Compounded phenomena refers to all things that result from transitory actions including all activities of the internal mind.
15. Fivefold way refer to the five erroneous ways that people identity the "self" with the five aggregates¹⁹: 1) There is a self aside from the aggregates, like the existence of a soul. 2) The self is situated within the aggregates. 3) The aggregates are within the self. 4) The aggregates belong to me. The self is the master. The aggregates are its subordinates. 5) The aggregates are identical with the self. – Kar Shu Wong, [Introduction to the Fundamental Principles of Mulamadhyamakakarika, pp. 207-210]
16. Affliction can be translated to mean troubles.
17. The agent refers to the one who carries out the action.
18. Non-expiring refers to the karmic relationship of every action which will generate a reaction, in spite of the long lapses of time between action and reaction.
19. Aggregates refer to matter, feelings, thoughts, actions, and consciousness. They are what constitute the external and internal world of every sentient being.
20. Fourfold ways refer to the four different ways that anything can come into existence: by itself, by something else, by itself and something else, or without any cause at all.
21. Tathagata can be translated as Buddha.