

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (MMK) by Nāgārjuna¹

Verse of Homage

anirodham annutpādam anucchedam aśāsvatam
anekārtham anānārtham anāgamam anirgamam
yah pratityamutpādaṃ prapañcopaśamaṃ śivam
deśayāmāsa sambuddhas taṃ vande vadatāṃ varam

For most of us who hardly understand Sanskrit, it seems that none of the four translations given below preserves the precise order in which the original ideas are presented, although Wangmo comes close. For in the Sanskrit the ‘eight negations’ come first. Only then is it made clear that they refer to the doctrine of dependent origination, which, it is asserted, eliminates all ‘thought-constructions’, ‘mental fabrications’, ‘fixations’, ‘conceptual constructions’, or ‘hypostatizations’.

It is for this teaching of dependent origination (pratitya-samutpāda)² that the Buddha is considered by Nāgārjuna to be worthy of homage.

This inversion in translation, no doubt in the interest of clarity in English, may seem irrelevant, but it is worth noting that, in the eight negations, Nāgārjuna is presenting his conclusions in advance of his homage. It is as if he is saying: this is how I interpret this doctrine, and it is on this basis that I pay homage to the Buddha. The need to respect his teacher does not take precedence over the need to respect his own insight into what the Dependent Origination teaching means.

I pay homage to the Fully Awakened One,
the supreme teacher who has taught
the doctrine of relational origination,
the blissful cessation of all phenomenal thought-constructions.

(Therein, every event is “marked” by):

non-origination, non-extinction,
non-destruction, non-permanence,
non-identity, non-differentiation
non-coming (into being), non-going (out of being). **(trans. Kenneth K.. Inada)**

That which is dependent arising is
Without ceasing, without being generated,

Without annihilation, without permanence,
 Without coming, without going,
 Without being different, without being one,
 It is peaceful, free from mental fabrication,
 To the complete Buddha who taught all that,
 To the unsurpassed one, I bow. (trans. Geshe Kelsang Wangmo)

I bow down to the most sublime of speakers, the completely awakened one who taught contingency (no cessation, no birth, no annihilation, no permanence, no coming, no going, no difference, no identity) to ease fixations. (trans. Stephen Batchelor)

1. I prostrate to the perfect Buddha

The best of teachers, who taught that
 Whatever is dependently arisen is
 Unceasing, unborn.

2. Unannihilated, not permanent

Not coming, not going,
 Without distinction, without identity,
 And free from conceptual construction. (trans. Jay L. Garfield)

I salute the Fully-Enlightened One, the best of orators, who taught the doctrine of dependent origination, according to which there is neither cessation nor origination, neither annihilation nor the eternal, neither singularity nor plurality, neither the coming nor the going [of any dharma, for the purpose of any *nirvāṇa* characterised by]the auspicious cessation of hypostatization.³ (trans. Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura)

This verse of homage indicates that Nāgājuna will try to substantiate two broad points in his subsequent text: firstly, that the teaching of dependent origination (pratitya-samutpāda) entails his eight negations; secondly, that understanding of dependent origination leads to freedom from all ‘thought-constructions’, ‘mental fabrications’, ‘fixations’, ‘conceptual constructions’, or ‘hypostatizations’ (prapānca).

The first pair of negations – not cessation, not arising - come as a surprise, since these are the very terms used in the basic (iddappaccayata) formula by which the teaching of

dependent origination is expressed. Here is a first indication that Nāgārjuna is going to tax any lax understanding we may have about what that formula actually means. It is not enough to parrot words and phrases without fully investigating their meaning.

The second pair of negations – not-interruption, not perpetuation, is a restatement of the doctrine of the ‘Middle Way’. Not-interruption signifies that there never was an enduring self-nature such that a thing could not be interrupted. Not-perpetuation reaffirms that point: no concept or thing possesses or coalesces around any enduring essence or self-nature.

The third pair of negations - not singularity, not plurality – affirms two seemingly contradictory points: that dependent origination is always plural, since it holds good for all manner of things, but that, notwithstanding the plurality of all the many things (dharmas) involved in dependent origination, these things are simple: they are not made up of parts. Note that this theory of simple things (to which complex things such as chariots can be reduced) forms part of the understanding of dharmas advanced by the Buddhist Sarvāstivāda scholars. Nāgārjuna does not challenge this feature of the Sarvāstivāda interpretation of dharmas, although he will go on to challenge that such simple things are ultimately real because they can be identified by an ‘intrinsic nature’ (svabhāva). Note that this rejection of both singularity and plurality (not one, not two) reappears throughout the Māhāyāna tradition, especially in Chan/Zen/Sōn.

The fourth pair of negations - not going forth, not arrival – refers to an argument against the very idea of motion, apparently across either time or space: nothing goes away and nothing arrives in the present from the past. Like the first two negations, the argument against motion is surprising to any ordinary sensibility, since it seems to fly in the face of ordinary experience. Clearly, Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhymakārikā presents a challenge to ideas about reality that are normally accepted without further reflection. It is, therefore, important that his justifying arguments are carefully examined, to make sure that contain no significant flaws.

Chapter 1: On Conditions

It has to be admitted that the discussion group struggled to remain grounded in a line-by-line examination of the text. The problem is that it is so brief, cryptic and detached from real-world examples that the argument is hard to follow. Indeed, there would be no reason to bother, if it were not that the MMK is such an important text in the history of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought. It cannot be known with certainty whether Nāgārjuna got his key ideas and concepts from the early Mahāyāna Sūtras, or whether the ideas in those Sūtras are derived from the MMK, but the latter looks to be possible, at least to anyone with some degree of historical awareness. In other words, on the basis of precedence, some of the most important ideas and concepts in Mahāyāna thought come from Nāgārjuna.

Without his work, there might be no Prajñāparāmitā Sūtras, no East Asian Buddhism and, especially, no Zen.

1. Not from itself, not from another, not from both, nor without cause:
Never in any way is there any existing thing that has arisen.

Amongst the alternatives, the translation chosen for study is that of Siderits and Katsura. The comments here are derived from, and deeply indebted to, Siderits' and Katsura's commentary on the text, which is itself based on the work of traditional early commentators, such as Candrakīrti, Buddhapālita, Bhāviveka, and the anonymous Akutobhāya.

Nāgārjuna's verses represent his argument in the briefest possible form, so they tend to require considerable explanation. That is the reason why this text, although so important, is so rarely read with close attention to detail.

This first verse contains the conclusions that Nāgārjuna defends in the rest of the chapter. Note that these conclusions represent the negation of the views of an opponent, rather than a thesis as such. But these conclusions are alarming, for although Nāgārjuna supports the doctrine of dependent origination, he states that nothing has ever arisen (taken place in the world). Either he is contradicting the commonsense understanding of dependent origination, or he is implying that things (entities, especially in the simple, indivisible form of the dharmas that constitute more complex entities) are not quite what his (Sarvāvāstivādin) opponents think them to be. Since it is normally assumed that the doctrine of dependent origination is the view that things come into being as a result of causes and conditions, this verse seems revolutionary.

- (3) The intrinsic nature of existents does not exist in the conditions, etc.
The intrinsic nature not occurring, neither is extrinsic nature found.
(note that Siderits and Katsura transpose the usual verse order here)

In the first line, this verse provides a brief argument against the idea in verse 1 that anything could arise from itself as cause or condition. The argument is that we know the identity of any 'thing' by its 'intrinsic nature' (svabhāva), which must be different from the intrinsic nature of its cause, or else any identification of that arisen effect, and differentiation of the effect from the cause, would be impossible; therefore nothing can arise from itself.

In the second line, there is a brief argument against the idea that anything could arise from another thing: anything must have a nature that is intrinsic to itself, so

it could not assimilate a nature extrinsically from any cause or condition, whatever they may be.

These two arguments make use of the views of Nāgārjuna's opponent: that all things that are simple or ultimate (rather than complex things, such as chariots, which are conventional since they are constructed out of other things), must have an intrinsic nature that allows them to be identified. So what is being called into question here: the commonsense understanding of the doctrine of Dependent Arising, or the very idea that there are identifiable things that can be explained in terms of their intrinsic nature, or both?

(2) [The opponent] There are four conditions: the primary cause, the objective support, the proximate condition, and of course the dominant condition; there is no fifth condition.

The distinction between what constitutes a cause and what a condition is not clear in Siderits and Katsura's translation, or their comments. If Nāgārjuna's argument is correct, such vagueness is unsurprising, since he is going to argue that all conceptual constructions (ideas, particularly when expressed in words and language) are only true by conventional agreement. This point calls to mind Wittgenstein's dictum that 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language'. Like the Sarvāstivādins, in the Tractatus the early Wittgenstein advanced the view that there were simple, indivisible things that could be accurately named by words: a mistake he later repudiated, and so corrected.

According to the Abhidhamma, there are the four kinds of condition (kinds of entity that combine to make something happen). Nāgārjuna will go on, in verses 7-10, to refute each of these four kinds, without going on to consider whether a fifth condition might be possible⁴.

4. An action does not possess conditions; nor is it devoid of conditions.

Conditions are not devoid of an action; neither are they provided with an action.

If there is any difference between a cause and a condition, it lies in the ability of some entities to motivate an action (to initiate an event over time): they somehow possess the power to give rise to actions or events that are productive of new entities or states of affairs. But both causes and conditions come together to make something happen, so it is unclear if there is a clear distinction between them.

5. They are said to be conditions when something arises dependent on them.

When something has not arisen, then are they not non-conditions?

On the face of it, this seems like hair-splitting, but it is further explained in the next verse, and both seek to justify verse 4.

6. Something cannot be called a condition whether the object [that is the supposed effect] is not yet existent or already existent.

If nonexistent, what is it the condition of? And if existent, what is the point of the condition?

The key issue here is time. It is only after something has appeared that it becomes possible to search for the conditions (or the causes). But they were not conditions before the event, and cease to be conditions after the event. But is there a third time (the immediate present) when they could do their active work and so be identified as conditions? According to Nāgārjuna, there is no third time in which action can take place, since the present moment is instantaneous. So the designation of a condition or a cause is just a convention: ultimately, it is an inaccurate description of a real state of affairs.

7. Since a dharma does not operate whether existent, nonexistent, or both existent and nonexistent, how in that case can something be called an operative cause?

According to the target of Nāgārjuna's critique, a dharma is anything that is ultimately real because it has an intrinsic nature. He argues that such a thing does not operate – it cannot instigate change. In the first place, on the grounds given in verse 6, there is no time for an operation to occur. In the second place, an existing thing cannot operate without itself undergoing change. But it is impossible for the intrinsic nature of an ultimately real, indivisibly simple thing to undergo change during its existence, or, of course, its non-existence. It looks like there is something wrong with the Sarvāstivāda concept of a dharma, as well as the idea of an 'operative' or primary cause.

8. A dharma, being existent, is said indeed to be without objective support.

Then why again posit an objective support in the case of a dharma without an objective support?

Most dharmas are actually psychological categories, such as 'anger' or 'visual cognition', with only a minority being material forms. But a psychological dharma might be considered to have an objective support. For instance, an actual tree might be the objective support (or causal condition) for the sight of a tree. But how can a tree be a causal condition for something that does not yet exist? Notice that this is the same argument as in verse 6. Either the commonsense view of causation is wrong, or there is something awry with Nāgārjuna's three-fold

view of time as irrevocably split into past, immediate (timeless) present and future. But this is not necessarily his view: he is borrowing it from the Sarvāstivādins in order to use it against them.

9. Destruction does not hold when dharmas have not yet originated.

Thus nothing can be called a proximate condition; if it is destroyed, how can it be a condition?

Amongst the range of causes, a proximate condition is closest to the production of an effect in time and space – for example, the molecules in a chemical reaction. But it appears to have been thought that a proximate condition is sacrificed in order to produce its effect. Again using the three-times argument, Nāgārjuna is suggesting that such a sacrifice would be in the past, meaning that no effect could appear in the immediate present, because the sacrifice has already taken place.

10. Since things devoid of intrinsic nature are not existent,

“This existing, that comes to be” can never hold.

The thing whose existence makes another thing come into being is the ‘dominant condition’. Nāgārjuna is suggesting that no dharma could be caused to exist, since dharmas are meant to exist in both past, present and future as simple, ultimately real things out of which complex things, such as chariots, are produced. Nāgārjuna is using the Sarvāstivādin’s own arguments to point out that their dharmas cannot be involved in causal co-production.

11. The product does not exist in the conditions whether they are taken separately or together.

What does not exist in the conditions, how can that come from the conditions?

The product (the effect) must be completely distinct from the causes of its production, so how is it produced (from dharmas) that have a different intrinsic nature? As so often with these arguments, it is difficult to be sure if causation is wrong in theory, or whether the supporting arguments are wrong – in particular, the argument that simple things have an intrinsic nature by which they can be identified. It is as if the supporting arguments are Nāgārjuna’s real target, rather than causal conditioning as such. Indeed, how could he aim to defeat the very idea of Conditioned Co-Production, since that is synonymous with the doctrine of Dependent Origination, which he specifically supports in his verse of homage?

12. If that which does not exist [in them] is produced from those conditions, How is it that the product does not also come forth from nonconditions?

Siderits and Katsura cite some examples from the commentaries in support of this verse, which are really not very illuminating. It is argued that cloth has a different nature from the threads that produce it, so why cannot it also be produced from curds, which also has a different intrinsic nature to that of cloth? These are poor examples, since all are complex, therefore conventional, things, rather than simple, ultimate dharmas. As such, threads, cloth and curds do not have intrinsic nature and so need not be expected to remain unchanged through past, present and future.

13. The product consists of the conditions, but the conditions do not consist of themselves. How can that which is the product of things that do not consist of themselves consist of conditions?

Again, the example is cloth as the product and threads as the condition. Nether have intrinsic nature, since both are made up of parts: thread in the case of cloth and at least two minor threads in the case of (two)-ply thread (even un-plyed thread is made up of individual strands of wool, cotton, silk, and so on). Again, the example is unconvincing because it refers to conventional, rather than ultimate things. Surely a conventional theory of causes, conditions and effects is a sufficient explanation for the arising of things that are only things by convention? Since his target is the way in which so-called ultimate things is produced, Nāgārjuna might just accept this criticism.

14. Therefore neither a product consisting of conditions nor one consisting of non-conditions exists;
If the product does not exist, how can there be a condition or a noncondition?

But is it right to restrict the meaning of Nāgārjuna's argument to what we know of the circumstances of the time: the fact that he was largely directing his critique at the Sarvāstivāda view that (75) sorts of ultimate and simple things (dharmas) each possessed an intrinsic nature, each continuing to exist in the past, present and future⁵ yet each were able to act as causal conditions? Ought we to just go by the argument as he briefly expresses it?

The problem is that, as expressed, the bare words of his argument do not make entirely make sense. But it does make more sense if we pay attention to his commentators and pay attention to the views of his (Sarvāstivāda) opponents, thereby assuming that he is only arguing against the idea of simple things that

are ultimately real. On that assumption his intention is to show that such simple things are not causes, are not produced and do not exist in the ultimate and real sense that his opponents claim. Thus, he does not contradict himself by attempting to refute the Buddha's doctrine of Dependent Arising (Conditioned Co-Production). Instead he attempts to clarify that doctrine by refuting the idea that the doctrine extends to the co-production of things (effects) that have an intrinsic nature, by means of causes and conditions that also have an intrinsic nature. He has undermined the idea that simple dharmas have an intrinsic nature, but not undermined the conventional 'folk' understanding of events and entities in the world, which by and large depends upon a conventional theory of causes, conditions and effects. The theory is conventional because it is based more on mutual agreement, than on any understanding of the way in which causes and conditions produce their effects. As Hume remarks, all we observe is a 'constant conjunction' between what, by convention, is referred to as a cause, or a condition, or an effect.

,

¹ All translations are reproduced here with gratitude and solely for educational purposes. They will be removed if any author objects to their use.

Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura, 2013, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*, (Wisdom, MA), seems to be the best translation, and includes a perceptive commentary on the text. It is recommended.

Inada, Kenneth, K., 1993, *A translation of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā with introductory notes*, Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica Series No. 127, (Delhi, Sri Satguru).

Garfield, Jay, L., 1995, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagajuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*, (Oxford, O.U.P.) also contains a perceptive commentar.

Bathelor, Stephen, *Verses from the Center: Romanization and Literal English Translation from the Tibetan Text*, <https://www.stephenbatchelor.org/index.php/en/verses-from-the-center>, accessed 10/9/21.

Wangmo, Geshe Kelsang, 2018, *Mulamadhyamakakarika by Nagarjuna*, Chapters 26, 18, 22, 24 and 1. , <http://tushita.info/resources/audio-courses/emptiness-compassion/> accessed 11/9/21

² Dependent Origination is *like* the commonsense or ‘folk’ western theory of causes, which produce effects. But care should be taken to avoid an automatic assumption that it is precisely the same as the western theory in every respect. And it is worth remembering that, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume cogently argues that the relationship between cause and effect cannot be proven, beyond observation of a ‘constant conjunction’ between cause and effect.

The most general (*iddapaccayatta*) form of the Buddhist teaching of Dependent Origination states that:

When this exists, that comes to be;	<i>imasmim sati idam hoti,</i>
With the arising of this, that arises.	<i>imass’ uppādā idam uppajjati;</i>
When this does not exist, that does not come to be;	<i>imasmim asati idam na hoti ,</i>
With the cessation of this, that ceases.	<i>imassa nirodhā idam nirujjhati.</i>

³ According to Siderits and Katsura, ‘hypostatization’ (*prapañca*) means ‘...the process of reification or ‘thing-ifying’: taking what is actually just a useful form of speech to refer to some real entity’.

⁴ Given that western thought includes different kinds of causation, it could reasonably be argued that a fifth condition might be possible and, therefore, needs to be considered.

According to Heidegger, in *The Question Concerning Technology*, Aristotle identified four types of cause: *hyle* or ‘matter’, *eidos* or ‘aspect’, *telos*: purpose or responsibility, and *logos*: word or ‘to consider carefully’. But this is different to the Roman list, which replaces *logos* with *causa efficiens*. For Heidegger, it is the fourth cause which matters, since it governs the way in which the production of an effect takes place. Again for Heidegger, this is *poesis*: bringing forth into ‘presencing’. Thus, the Greek attitude to causation is a natural, poetic and existential matter of responsibility and indebtedness, in contrast to the Roman attitude of *techne*, which stresses the ethics-free efficiency of human crafts-personship, which has given rise to a modern world in opposition to *physis*, the arrival in nature of natural world of things out of themselves.

We cannot know how far Nāgārjuna would have been interested in the ethical difference between natural and human causation, or if he would have found a fifth condition within the Greek and Roman systems, worthy of refutation, or indeed if he would have felt the need to refute the Christian notion of a God as the ‘first cause’ of everything. Perhaps the only conclusion worth drawing is that it is a mistake to regard any list, or any description, as a complete explanation.

⁵ In contemporary philosophy this respectable but minority view is known as the ‘B-theory’ of time.