

The Middle Way & Emptiness as Taught by the Buddha in the Early Teachings

Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Samyutta Nikaya 56.11: Dhammachakkappavattana Sutta, Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying at Varanasi in the Game Refuge at Isipatana. There he addressed the group of five monks: "There are these two extremes that are not to be indulged in by one who has gone forth. Which two? That which is devoted to sensual pleasure with reference to sensual objects: base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unprofitable; and that which is devoted to self-affliction: painful, ignoble, unprofitable. Avoiding both of these extremes, the middle way realized by the Tathagata – producing vision, producing knowledge – leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding.

"And what is the middle way realized by the Tathagata that – producing vision, producing knowledge – leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding? Precisely this Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is the middle way realized by the Tathagata that – producing vision, producing knowledge – leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding."

Samyutta Nikaya 12.15: Kacchayanagotta Sutta, To Kacchayana Gotta (on Right View)

Venerable Kacchayana Gotta approached the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: "Lord, 'Right view, right view,' it is said. To what extent is there right view?"

"By and large, Kacchayana, this world is supported by (takes as its object) a polarity, that of existence and non-existence. But when one sees the origination of the world as it actually is with right discernment, 'non-existence' with reference to the world does not occur to one. When one sees the cessation of the world as it actually is with right discernment, 'existence' with reference to the world does not occur to one.

"By and large, Kacchayana, this world is in bondage to attachments, clingings (sustenances), and biases. But one such as this does not get involved with or cling to these attachments, clingings, fixations of awareness, biases, or obsessions; nor is he resolved on 'my self.' He has no uncertainty or doubt that just stress, when arising, is arising; stress, when passing away, is passing away. In this, his knowledge is independent of others. It's to this extent, Kacchayana, that there is right view.

"'Everything exists': That is one extreme. 'Everything doesn't exist': That is a second extreme. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma via the middle."

Samyutta Nikaya 12.17: Achela Sutta, To the Clothless Ascetic

Kassapa said: "Now, when asked, 'Is stress (suffering) self-made?' you say, 'Don't say that, Kassapa.' When asked, 'Then is it other-made?' you say, 'Don't say that, Kassapa.' When asked, 'Then is it both self-made and other-made?' you say, 'Don't say that, Kassapa.' When asked, 'Then is it the case that stress, being neither self-made nor other-made, arises spontaneously?' you say, 'Don't say that, Kassapa.' When asked, 'Then does stress not exist?' you say, 'It's not the case, Kassapa, that stress does not exist. Stress does exist.' When asked, 'Well, in that case, does Master Gotama not know or see stress?' you say, 'Kassapa, it's not the case that I don't know or see stress. I know stress. I see stress.' Then explain stress to me, lord Blessed One. Teach me about stress, lord Blessed One!"

"The one who acts is the one who experiences [the result of the act]' amounts to the eternalist statement, 'Existing from the very beginning, stress is self-made.' 'The one who acts is someone other than the one who experiences' amounts to the annihilationist statement, 'For one existing harassed by feeling, stress is other-made.' Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma via the middle."

On one occasion the Blessed One was staying among the Ayojjhans on the banks of the Ganges River. There he addressed the monks: "Monks, suppose that a large glob of foam were floating down this Ganges River, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, observe it, and appropriately examine it. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a glob of foam? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and appropriately examines any form that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in form?"

"Now suppose that in the autumn — when it's raining in fat, heavy drops — a water bubble were to appear and disappear on the water, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, observe it, and appropriately examine it. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a water bubble? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and appropriately examines any feeling that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in feeling?"

"Now suppose that in the last month of the hot season a mirage were shimmering, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, observe it, and appropriately examine it. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a mirage? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and appropriately examines any perception that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in perception?"

"Now suppose that a man desiring heartwood, in quest of heartwood, seeking heartwood, were to go into a forest carrying a sharp ax. There he would see a large banana tree: straight, young, of enormous height. He would cut it at the root and, having cut it at the root, would chop off the top. Having chopped off the top, he would peel away the outer skin. Peeling away the outer skin, he wouldn't even find sapwood, to say nothing of heartwood. Then a man with good eyesight would see it, observe it, and appropriately examine it. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a banana tree? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and appropriately examines any fabrications that are past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him — seeing them, observing them, and appropriately examining them — they would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in fabrications?"

"Now suppose that a magician or magician's apprentice were to display a magic trick at a major intersection, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, observe it, and appropriately examine it. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a magic trick? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and appropriately examines any consciousness that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in consciousness?"

"Seeing thus, the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness.

Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way

Mulamadhyamakakarika by Nagarjuna

translated by Jay L. Garfield

Dedicatory Verses

I prostrate to the Perfect Buddha, the best of teachers, who taught that whatever is dependently arisen is unceasing, unborn, unannihilated, not permanent, not coming, not going, without distinction, without identity, and free from conceptual construction.

Chapter 1: Examination of Conditions

1. Neither from itself nor from another, nor from both, nor without a cause, does anything whatever, anywhere arise.
2. There are four conditions: efficient condition; percept-object condition; immediate condition; dominant condition, just so. There is no fifth condition.
3. The essence of entities is not present in the conditions, etc... If there is no essence, there can be no otherness-essence.
4. Power to act does not have conditions. There is no power to act without conditions. There are no conditions without power to act. Nor do any have the power to act.
5. These give rise to those, so these are called conditions. As long as those do not come from these, why are these not non-conditions?
6. For neither an existent nor a non-existent thing is a condition appropriate - if a thing is non-existent, how could it have a condition? If a thing is already existent, what would a condition do?
7. When neither existents nor non-existents nor existent non-existents are established, how could one propose a "productive cause?" If there were one, it would be pointless.
8. An existent entity (mental episode) has no object. Since a mental episode is without an object, how could there be any percept-condition?
9. Since things are not arisen, cessation is not acceptable. Therefore, an immediate condition is not reasonable. If something has ceased, how could it be a condition?
10. If things did not exist without essence, the phrase, "When this exists so this will be," would not be acceptable.
11. In the several or united conditions the effect cannot be found. How could something not in the conditions come from the conditions?
12. However, if a nonexistent effect arises from these conditions, why does it not arise from non-conditions?
13. If the effect's essence is the conditions, but the conditions don't have their own essence, how could an effect whose essence is the conditions come from something that is essenceless?
14. Therefore, neither with conditions as their essence, nor with non-conditions as their essence are there any effects. If there are no such effects, how could conditions or non-conditions be evident?

(Chapter 24: Examination of the Four Noble Truths)

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

Nagarjuna's "Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way"

Chapter 1 - Examination of Conditions (Kokyo's interpretation)

(By deeply understanding how all phenomena such as suffering, desire, personality, body, thoughts, activity, liberation, and even this teaching are dependent on conditions and therefore empty of inherent existence, one can no longer grasp them or avert from them, and is thereby liberated from all suffering)

There is no causal power.

1. No thing (flower) can ever be caused by itself (potential flower in the seed), by another (seed, soil, rain), by both itself and another, or by no causes (randomly).

There are only conditions (dependent arising).

2. Every thing (flower) arises dependent on primary conditions (seed, soil, rain), objectively supporting conditions (the flower being an object of perception), sequential conditions (seed, sprout, bud), and dominant condition / purpose or reason (the flower's role in the ecosystem / nothing preventing it).

There is no essence in conditions.

3. There is no essence of a thing (flower) in its conditions (seed). If there are no essences of things (seeds), there can be no essence of dependence (on seeds). An essential dependence on / relationship to some thing (seed), such as causal power, would require an essential thing (seed).

There is no causal power in conditions.

4. Causal power itself (of a seed) could not have conditions, nor could it exist without conditions (magically). Conditions (seed, soil, rain) do conventionally have "causal power" (for a flower), though ultimately they do not, as there is no such real power.

Conditions are simply conventional explanations of regularity.

5. Things (seeds) give rise to other things (flowers) so they (seeds) are called conditions. But if things (rocks) do not come from conditions (seeds), they (seeds) are not conditions.

Conditioned things cannot inherently exist or not exist.

6. Neither inherently existent things (flowers) nor inherently nonexistent things (flowers) could have conditions (seeds, soil, rain).

The four conditions cannot apply to inherently existent things. (verse 6 in terms of the four conditions of verse 2)

7. Neither inherently existent things (flowers) nor inherently nonexistent things (flowers), nor inherently existent and nonexistent things (flowers) are produced, so there could be no "producing cause" (seed), a false definition of primary condition - "production" or "causal power" implies an existent product.

8. An inherently existent thing or mental episode (perception of a flower) could have no objectively supporting condition (flower as object).

9. Since inherently existent things (flowers) could not arise, they also could not cease, and therefore could have no sequential condition (seed, sprout, bud). If an inherently existent thing (bud) could cease, it could not be a condition - it would just disappear.

10. If things (flowers) were inherently existent, the Awakened One's phrase "When that exists, this comes to be" ("When the dominant condition conventionally 'exists,' this (flower) comes to conventionally 'be'") would not be true.

The opponent attempts to defend causal power and essence.

11. If in each condition or in all of them combined the (inherently existent) effect cannot be found, how could it come from conditions?

12. However, if a nonexistent effect arises from these conditions, why does it not arise from nonconditions (randomly)?

13. If the conditions are the essence of the effect, but the conditions don't have their own essence, how could this essential effect come from something that is essenceless?

Nothing has any essence or causal power.

14. Effects (flowers) do not have conditions nor nonconditions as their essence. If there are no such essential effects (flowers), how could there be conditions or nonconditions with causal power (or containing effects)?

Diamond Fragments

(Meditation on the emptiness of all phenomena in the Middle Way system of Nagarjuna: based on ch. 1)

1. Understand how the belief in inherent existence is the root of all suffering and discontent

If phenomena (such as the body) are believed to exist independently, we will not be able to avoid grasping them or averting from them, and we will therefore experience discontent. By deeply and experientially realizing their emptiness, we will no longer be able to grasp them, and will be freed from all discontent.

2. Identify the object to be negated, feel the deep sense of an inherently existent thing

Observe how the appearance of a body covering the limbs and trunk is mixed with the appearance of the limbs and trunk, and yet appears to exist in itself, concretely, inherently, intrinsically, substantially, essentially, naturally, independently, by way of its own character.

3. Ascertain that emptiness follows from the reasoning

Whatever is not produced from itself, from inherently existent others, from both, or causelessly is not inherently produced (does not truly arise, is unborn, and is therefore empty of inherent production and inherent existence) because inherent production is limited to these four possibilities. Production is either caused or uncaused; and if caused, the only possibilities are that the causes are the same entity as the effect, or a different entity from the effect, or both. Firmly decide that these four possibilities are the only way anything could be inherently produced, and therefore inherently exist.

4. Establish the presence of the first reason (diamond fragment) in the case at hand

The body is not produced from itself (from what is the same entity as itself)

- a. because if it were, its production would be pointless and endless,
- b. because the producer and the produced would be one,
- c. because it would contradict what the world manifestly sees.

5. Establish the presence of the second reason in the case at hand

- a. The body is not produced from causes which are inherently existent others because if it were, the body could be produced from anything that was other than it. For, inherently existent others are non-related others since otherness is their nature.
- b. The body is not produced from causes which are inherently existent others because the body and its causes are not inherently other, since the body does not exist simultaneously with its causes. For example, the body at age ten does not exist simultaneously with the body at age five which is a cause of it. However, if cause and effect were inherently other, the body that is the product/effect would have to exist at the time of the activity of its production/cause because this activity (production) must remain other in relation to the effect (product).
- c. For causes, such as parents or the body of an earlier age, to be causes of the present body which is inherently other than them, the causes would still have to exist because it is in relation to the cause that the body is other. Something cannot be inherently other than a thing that does not exist.

6. Establish the presence of the third reason in the case at hand

The body is not produced from both itself and others because all the false notions of production from self and production from other apply to such a theory as well.

7. Establish the presence of the fourth reason in the case at hand

- a. The body is not produced causelessly because then the intercourse of the parents for the sake of conceiving a child would be pointless and senseless. The mother's care of the child in the womb and later after birth would be pointless. Making effort to nourish the body for the sake of future health would be pointless, for the body would arise causelessly.
- b. The body is not produced causelessly because if it were, a body could be produced even from a chair or a table, because everything would arise from everything.

8. Realize the emptiness of the thing

Thus, upon establishment of these four reasons as qualities of the body, realization arises that the body is not inherently produced. If the body is a product and it is not inherently produced, it does not inherently exist, so draw out the implications of this realization of no inherent production to include the insight that the body does not inherently exist, the body is empty of inherent existence.

Important terms for Nagarjuna

Svabhava: inherent existence synonyms: self (atman)
 essence independence
 self-nature objective existence (vishaya-siddhi)
 substance existing by way of its own character (svalakshana-siddhi)
 own-being existing by way of its own power (svairi-siddhi)
 intrinsic nature existing in the basis of designation

(essence: the permanent, individual, real nature of a thing; true substance)

(inherent: existing in something as a natural and inseparable quality, innate, inborn, intrinsic)

Shunyata: emptiness (of inherent existence) synonyms: suchness (tathata)
 absence (of inherent existence) selflessness (nairatmya)
 nonsubstantiality lack of own-being (nihsvabhavata)

Pratitya-samutpada: dependent co-arising Buddha's definition: "When that is, so this will be."
 interdependent origination
 contingency

Samvrt(t)i-satya: conventional truth
 partial truths of the world
 samvrti: obscured, obscuring, covered, covering / samvrtti: manifested, revealed

Paramartha-satya: ultimate truth
 absolute truth
 sublime truth

Hetu: cause (an agent that produces an effect or result, something with efficacy or the power to produce an effect)

Pratyaya: condition (a requirement for the completion of something, a provision)

Hetu-pratyaya: efficient condition
 primary condition
 "causal" condition

Alambana-pratyaya: percept-object condition
 appropriating or objectively extending condition
 "objective" or "supporting" condition

Samanantara-pratyaya: sequential condition
 immediately preceding condition
 "immediate" condition

Adhipati-pratyaya: dominant condition synonym: reason for being (karana-hetu)
 universal condition
 "sovereign" condition

Middle Way (Madhyamaka) Reading List

"'Everything exists': that is one extreme. 'Everything does not exist': that is the second extreme. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma via the middle (*majjhena / madhyama*)." Samyutta Nikāya 12.15: Kaccānagotta Sutta (Connected Discourses by Bhikkhu Bodhi, page 544)

Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras

*The Diamond Sutra: The Perfection of Wisdom – Red Pine, 2001 (Vajracchedika Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra)
The Heart Sutra: The Womb of Buddhas – Red Pine, 2004 (Hrdaya Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra)
The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary – Edward Conze (Ashtasāhashrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra)

Mahāratnakūta Sūtra

*A Treasury of Mahayana Sutras: Selections from the Maharatnakuta Sutra, Chapter 20 – The Sutra of the Assembled Treasures – Garma C. C. Chang, 1983 (Kāshyapaparivarta)

Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (translations with commentary):

Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning – Frederick J. Streng, 1967

*The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika – Jay L. Garfield, 1995 (Tibetan perspective)

Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way: The Essential Chapters from the Prasannapada of Candrakirti – Mervyn Sprung, 1979 (partial translation, Candrakirti's commentary on Mulamadhyamakakarika)

*Nagarjuna's Middle Way: Mulamadhyamakakarika – Mark Siderits and Shoryu Katsura, 2013 (Indian perspective, based on Chandrakirti)

Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way – David J. Kalupahana, 1986 (Theravada perspective)

Nagarjuna: Translation of his Mulamadhyamakakarika with Introductory Essay – Kenneth K. Inada, 1970

*Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika – rJe Tsongkhapa, translated by Geshe Ngawang Samten and Jay L. Garfield, 2006

*Ornament of Reason: The Great Commentary to Nagarjuna's Root of the Middle Way – Mabja Jangchub Tsondu, translated by the Dharmachakra Translation Committee, 2011

*The Sun of Wisdom: Teachings on the Noble Nagarjuna's Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way – Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, translated by Ari Goldfield, 2003 (partial translation)

Verses from the Center: A Buddhist Vision of the Sublime – Stephen Batchelor, 2000 (poetic version)

Verses from the Centre: Mulamadhyamakakarika – Stephen Batchelor, 2000 (literal translation):

www.stephenbatchelor.org/verses2htm

Other Mādhyamika Texts by Nāgārjuna (150-250 CE):

*Nagarjuna's "Seventy Stanzas": A Buddhist Psychology of Emptiness – David Ross Komito, 1987 (translation and commentary on Shūnyatāsaptatikārikā)

The Dispeller of Disputes: Nagarjuna's Vighrahavyāvartanī – Jan Westerhoff, 2010

Master of Wisdom: Writings of the Buddhist Master Nagarjuna – Christian Lindtner, 1997

Āryadeva's Chatushataka (170-270 CE):

Yogic Deeds of Bodhisattvas: Gyel-tsap on Aryadeva's Four Hundred – Geshe Sonam Rinchen and Ruth Sonam, 1994 (Aryadeva was direct disciple of Nagarjuna)

Four Hundred Verse Treatise on the Actions of a Bodhisattva's Yoga – Alexander Berzin, 1978:

http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/x/nav/group.html_710512761.html

Chandrakīrti's Madhyamakāvātāra (translations with commentary) (650 CE):

The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamika – C. W. Huntington, 1989

*Introduction to the Middle Way: Chandrakirti's Madhyamakavatara with Commentary by Jamgon Mipham – Padmakara Translation Group, 2002

Introduction to the Middle Way: Chandrakirti's Madhyamakavatara with Commentary by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, 2003:

<http://www.bodetam.org/English/BodhicittaSastras/Madhyamakavatara.pdf>

- *The Karmapa's Middle Way: Feast for the Fortunate, by the Ninth Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje – Tyler Dewar, 2008 (translation and commentary on Chandrakirti's Madhyamakavatara)
- Moon of Wisdom: Chapter Six of Chandrakirti's Entering the Middle Way, with commentary by the Eighth Karmapa, Mikyo Dorje – Ari Goldfield, Jules Levinson, Jim Scott, Birgit Scott, 2005
- Tsong-kha-pa's Final Exposition of Wisdom – Jeffrey Hopkins, 2008 (partial translation of Tsongkhapa's commentary on Chandrakirti's Madhyamakavatara)

General:

- *Appearance and Reality: the Two Truths in the Four Buddhist Tenet Systems - Guy Newland, 1999 (pp. 59-94) (good summary, Tibetan version)
- *Center of the Sunlit Sky: Madhyamaka in the Kagyu Tradition – Karl Brunnholzl, 2004
- Cutting Through Appearances – Geshe Lhundrup Sopa and Jeffrey Hopkins, 1989 (pp. 279-324)
- Dependent Arising and the Emptiness of Emptiness: Why Did Nagarjuna Start with Causation? – Jay L. Garfield, Philosophy East and West, 1994: www.thezensite.com/zenessays.html
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- Emptiness: the Foundation of Buddhist Thought – Geshe Tashi Tsering, 2009
- *Emptiness Yoga: The Tibetan Middle Way – Jeffrey Hopkins, 1987 (application of the teachings in everyday life)
- The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment by Tsong-kha-pa, Volume Three – Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee, 2002.
- *How to See Yourself as You Really Are – His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Jeffrey Hopkins, 2007
- *Introduction to Emptiness (as taught in Tsong-kha-pa's Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path) – Guy Newland, 2008
- *Meditation on Emptiness – Jeffrey Hopkins, 1983 (large thorough sourcebook on Madhyamika, how to meditate on the teachings, etc.)
- Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction – Jan Westerhoff, 2009
- Nagarjuna's Middle Way – Jonah Winters, 1994 (analysis of Mulamadhyamakakarika): <http://bahai-library.org/personal/jw/other.pubs/nagarjuna/>
- Nagarjuna and the Limits of Thought – Jay L. Garfield and Graham Priest, Philosophy East and West, 2003: www.thezensite.com/zenessays.html (also in 'Empty Words')
- The Open Door to Emptiness – Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, 1997
- Realizing Emptiness: Madhyamaka Insight Meditation – Gen Lamrimpa, 2002
- *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness – Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, 2001 (pp. 45-79)
- *Stars of Wisdom – Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, 2010 (pp. 47-67) (from "meditation" perspective)

Zen:

- Deconstruction in Nagarjuna and Dogen – David R. Loy, Philosophy East and West, 1999: www.thezensite.com/zenessays.html
- The Zen Teachings of Nagarjuna – Vladimir K., 2004: www.thezensite.com/zenessays.html
- *Eihei Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye) – trans. by Kazuaki Tanahashi, 2010
 - 2 – Manifestation of Great Prajna (Makahannya haramitsu) – vol. 1 in Nishijima & Cross
 - 23 – Buddha Nature (Busshō) – vol. 2 in Nishijima & Cross
 - 42 – Undivided Activity (Zenki) – vol. 2 in Nishijima & Cross
 - 44 – Flowers in the Sky (Kūge) – vol. 3 in Nishijima & Cross
 - 55 – Dharma Nature (Hōsshō) – vol. 3 in Nishijima & Cross
 - 77 – Space (Kokū) – vol. 4 in Nishijima & Cross

(* = Kōkyō's recommendations)