

# Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way

## Mulamadhyamakakarika by Nagarjuna

Translated by Jay L. Garfield

### Chapter 24: Examination of the Noble Truths (Arya-Satya-Pariksha)

1. (Opponent:) If all of this is empty,  
Neither arising, nor ceasing,  
Then for you, it follows that  
The Four Noble Truths do not exist.
2. If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,  
Then knowledge (understanding), abandonment,  
Meditation (practice), and manifestation (realization)  
Will be completely impossible.
3. If these things do not exist,  
The four fruits (stream-enterer up to arhat) will not arise.  
Without the fruits, there will be no attainers of the fruits.  
Nor will there be the faithful, (those intending to realize).
4. If so the spiritual community (sangha) will not exist.  
Nor will the eight kinds of person (stream-enterer... arhat).  
If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,  
There will be no true Dharma.
5. If there is no doctrine (Dharma) & spiritual community,  
How can there be a Buddha?  
If emptiness is conceived in this way,  
The Three Jewels are contradicted.
6. Hence you assert that there are no real fruits.  
And no Dharma. The Dharma itself  
And the conventional truth (of the world)  
Will be contradicted.
7. (Reply:) We say that this understanding of yours  
Of emptiness and the purpose of emptiness  
And of the significance of emptiness is incorrect.  
As a consequence you are harmed (frustrated) by it.
8. The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma  
Is based on two truths:  
A truth of worldly convention  
And an ultimate truth.
9. Those who do not understand  
The distinction drawn between these two truths  
Do not understand  
The Buddha's profound truth.
10. Without a foundation (reliance) in conventional truth  
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.  
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,  
Liberation (nirvana) is not achieved.
11. By a misperception of emptiness  
A person of little intelligence is destroyed.  
Like a snake incorrectly seized  
Or like a spell incorrectly cast.
12. 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.
13. You have presented fallacious refutations  
That are not relevant to emptiness.  
Your confusion about emptiness  
Does not belong (apply) to me.
14. For him to whom emptiness is clear,  
Everything becomes clear (possible, pertinent).  
For him to whom emptiness is not clear,  
Nothing becomes clear (possible, pertinent).
15. When you foist (project) on us  
All of your errors  
You are like a man who has mounted his horse  
And has forgotten that very horse.
16. If you perceive the existence of all things  
In terms of their essence (inherent existence),  
Then this perception of all things  
Will be without the perception of causes and conditions.
17. Effects and causes  
And agent and action  
And conditions and arising and ceasing  
And effects will be rendered impossible.
18. Whatever is dependently co-arisen  
That is explained to be emptiness.  
That, being a dependent designation,  
Is itself the middle way.
19. Something that is not dependently arisen,  
Such a thing does not exist.  
Therefore a nonempty thing  
Does not exist.
20. If all this were nonempty, as in your view,  
There would be no arising and ceasing.  
Then the Four Noble Truths  
Would become nonexistent.
21. If it is not dependently arisen,  
How could suffering come to be?  
Suffering has been taught to be impermanent,  
And so cannot come from its own essence.
22. If something comes from its own essence,  
How could it ever be arisen?  
It follows that if one denies emptiness  
There can be no arising [of suffering].

23. If suffering had an essence,  
Its cessation would not exist.  
So if an essence is posited,  
One denies cessation.

24. If the path had an essence,  
Cultivation would not be appropriate.  
If this path is indeed cultivated,  
It cannot have an essence.

25. If suffering, arising, and  
Ceasing are nonexistent,  
By what path could one seek  
To obtain the cessation of suffering?

26. If nonunderstanding comes to be  
Through its essence (inherent existence),  
How will understanding arise?  
Isn't essence stable (fixed, immutable)?

27. In the same way, the activities of  
Relinquishing, realizing, and meditating (practicing)  
And the four fruits.  
Would not be possible.

28. For an essentialist (one who upholds a view of essence),  
Since the fruits through their essence  
Are already unrealized,  
In what way could one attain them?

29. Without the fruits, there are no attainers of the fruits,  
Or enterers (intending to attain). From this it follows that  
The eight kinds of persons do not exist.  
If these do not exist, there is no spiritual community.

30. From the nonexistence of the Noble Truths  
Would follow the nonexistence of the true doctrine.  
If there is no doctrine (Dharma) & no community (Sangha),  
How could a Buddha arise (come to be)?

31. For you, it would follow that a Buddha  
Arises independent of enlightenment.  
And for you, enlightenment would arise  
Independent of a Buddha.

32. For you, one who through his essence  
Was unenlightened,  
Even by practicing the path to enlightenment  
Could not achieve enlightenment.

33. Moreover, one could never perform  
Right or wrong actions.  
If this were all nonempty what could one do?  
That with an essence cannot be produced.

34. For you, from neither right nor wrong actions  
Would the fruit arise.  
If the fruit arose from right or wrong actions,  
According to you, it wouldn't exist.

35. If, for you, a fruit arose  
From right or wrong actions,  
Then, having arisen from right or wrong actions,  
How could that fruit be nonempty?

36. If dependent arising is denied,  
Emptiness itself is rejected.  
This would contradict  
All of the worldly conventions.

37. If emptiness itself is rejected,  
No action will be appropriate.  
There would be action which did not begin,  
And there would be agent without action.

38. If there is essence, the whole world  
Will be unarising, unceasing,  
And static. And so, the entire phenomenal world  
Would be immutable (devoid of manifold appearances).

39. If it [the world] were not empty,  
Then action would be without profit.  
The act of ending suffering and  
Abandoning misery and defilement would not exist.

40. Whoever sees dependent arising  
Also sees suffering  
And its arising  
And its cessation as well as the path.