*Advance praise for*

# Nāgārjuna's Wisdom

"With these luminous and carefully constructed explanations, Barry Kerzin offers us the vast and profound insights of his teachers on one of the most fundamental Buddhist texts elucidating the nature of reality, Nāgārjuna's famed *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*. With loving patience and enthusiasm, he helps us recognize the way suffering arises and guides us through the process to uproot its deep-seated causes through lucid reasoning and wisdom: a must-read for anyone who wishes to gain a genuine understanding of Buddhist philosophy and practice."

— Matthieu Ricard, translator of *Enlightened Vagabond* and *The Life of Shabkar: The Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogin*

"Venerable Barry's wonderful book on the Middle Way is especially valuable as his unique personal transmission of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's way of opening the door into Nāgārjuna's masterwork. Its twenty-seven critiques, deconstructing everything in the universe, from causation via self and nirvāṇa all the way to worldviews, are the arch pattern of the meditation on emptiness and compassion. Ven. Barry channels His Holiness and leads us right into it. His work is to be cherished."

— Professor Robert Thurman, Columbia University

"With guidance from classical commentaries and oral instructions of great Tibetan teachers, and relating these to decades of meditative reflection, Venerable Barry Kerzin offers a remarkable guide to the key insights and reasoning that are at the heart of Nāgārjuna's famed Middle Way philosophy. Thanks to this book, any serious Buddhist practitioner can now appreciate why the Tibetan tradition makes so much fuss about Nāgārjuna and his wisdom."

— Thupten Jinpa, principal English translator to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and author of *Self, Reality, and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy*

# CONTENTS

# FOREWORD

*by His Holiness the Dalai Lama*

Nāgārjuna was the preeminent scholar of the Nālandā tradition. His writings reveal his great qualities; he was precise and profound. His followers, Āryadeva, Bhāvaviveka, Buddhapālita, and Candrakīrti elaborated on what he wrote. Nāgārjuna praised the Buddha not only for attaining enlightenment but also specifically for teaching dependent arising. In a final tribute at the end of *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* he wrote that the Buddha taught as he did to rid sentient beings of all distorted views.

The *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* is Nāgārjuna's key work, in which he demonstrates that phenomena are empty of inherent existence because they are dependent on other factors. He clearly indicates that the view that phenomena do not inherently exist is not nihilistic, as some critics assert, but that their functionality is in fact due to their being empty of any aspect of inherent existence.

*Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* is a book I have read and studied closely for more than sixty years; it's like an old friend. When I introduce it to others there are certain chapters I recommend they begin with. Readers who make themselves familiar with chapters 26, 18, 24, and 22 will come to understand how we fall into cyclic existence, how there is no independently existent self, and how things have no objective existence but are dependently arisen.

This book, *Nāgārjuna's Wisdom*, had its origins in an explanation of *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* given to Dr. Barry Kerzin by Geshé Namgyal Wangchen, a learned and experienced teacher from the Drepung Loseling Monastery.

Dr. Kerzin, an American monk, has been a student of Buddhism for thirty years. Following the pattern of the Nālandā tradition, he has studied this text, reflected on what it means, and meditated on what he

has understood. Here he has presented some of what he has understood. I have no doubt that readers who would like to know more about Nāgārjuna's point of view will benefit from a reading of this book.

14 May 2019

# PREFACE

When I was fourteen years old my world was shaken. I read D. T. Suzuki, something about how words create our reality, and my head turned 360 degrees. I was stunned. How could this be?

I spent the next few years trying to find out. First there was philosophy club in high school, and then there was study as a philosophy major at the University of California at Berkeley. More questions arose. I was far from satiated. I applied for and was admitted into a PhD philosophy/humanistic psychology program to continue this pursuit, but at the last minute plans changed and I went to medical school instead. Yet the hunger persisted. How could everything I took to be so tangible and true be the result of words, language, and concepts, as I read in the Zen text?

So, years later, a doctor, I moved to India full of questions, hungry for answers. After many years of meditation retreats the questions had calmed down, but hadn't fully resolved. Answers seemed one day clear, but the next day confused. On my third trip to India, beginning my three-decade stay there, at a converted embassy-cum-rose-garden guesthouse in Delhi, I met a special friend who would later teach me what may be the most famous and profound text explaining Buddhist wisdom in detail: Nāgārjuna's *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*.

Gen Namgyal Wangchen was a master. He studied for his geshé exam,[1] but rather than take the test, he decided to go up to the mountains and meditate instead. This was a real practitioner. After having spent more than a decade teaching in the United Kingdom, he had returned to his home away from home in south India at Drepung Loseling Monastery in his Phara Khangtshen house.

To my great joy Gen Wangchen accepted my request to teach me the *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*. For two-month periods over five consecutive winters he taught me this classic text verse by verse, sometimes in English, sometimes in Tibetan. When Gen Wanghen taught in Tibetan, the extremely kind and learned Tenzin Tsepag was my translator. I am deeply grateful for his help not only in translating but also in reviewing the material after the sessions. My Tibetan is not good enough to understand all the technical nuances.

After the teachings were completed, I spent the next several years

transcribing Gen Wangchen's commentary and some of my own reflections, and then editing everything to create this book. Translations of Nāgārjuna's text were done by myself and Tenzin Tsepag.[2] At first, there were between 800–900 pages. Several publishing houses rejected my manuscript, saying it was much too long. So I tried editing it down, but I couldn't get very far. Dejected, I put the manuscript aside. Several years later Professor Robert Thurman took an interest. If we could pare it down, Columbia University Press might be interested in publishing it. But how could we reduce nearly 900 pages to 250? Then a stroke of genius came from Bob. He suggested that we not publish commentaries for all the twenty-seven chapters of *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*. Rather, we would be selective. But how could we decide which of the many pith and wonderful chapters in Nāgārjuna's seminal work to leave aside?

Then it dawned on us. For years His Holiness the Dalai Lama had been encouraging me to publish this commentary. We should make a commentary following the approach he uses when he teaches this classic text! His Holiness often selects the same five chapters — chapters 26, 18, 24, 22, and 1, in that order — because these five chapters contain the pith and marrow of Buddhist philosophy.

This light-bulb-on moment made the manuscript workable, bringing it down to a manageable page length through commenting only on these five chapters. I am deeply appreciative and grateful to Professor Thurman not only for his brilliant idea of how to reduce the manuscript size but also for believing in me.

Then the real work began. I am not much of a scholar, and I didn't want to make this a pseudoscholarly work. Instead, I have tried wherever possible to make this commentary helpful to practitioners. This, I feel, is my debt owed to the late master Gen Wangchen. And this is the reason I believe students of Nāgārjuna and the Buddha-dharma who genuinely yearn for an end to life's incessant conceptual and emotional pain will read this book.

As the editing progressed, Professor Jay Garfield took a great interest in helping me every step of the way. My gratitude is immense for this remarkable scholar and friend, for his patience and kindness in answering every question with clarity and insight.

I am grateful to Geshe Ngawang Sonam for helping to clarify difficult points in the translation of the root text from Tibetan into English and some difficult points in the commentary.

Most of all, this work would never have been possible without the

deep kindness and care from the master of masters, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He has nurtured me for nearly thirty years now. My love for my late mother and late wife, both of whom died early, has naturally transferred the Dalai Lama. This love has grown exponentially. The only way I know to thank him is to try my very best to follow his example. Thus I write this book dedicating it to unlimited happiness for all living beings — for this is what his life and lives are all about.

Many others have helped produce this book along the way. Gratitude to Yangten Rinpoché for clarifying difficult points, and to my friend, the great teacher Gen Gyatso at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, for providing much background material. For my friend Ratö Khen Rinpoché, Nicky Vreeland, I have much appreciation and warmth for his encouragement and early suggestions during the long evolution of this manuscript, as well as for his monastic guidance. Finally, in the later and most important part of this process, I have deep gratitude to Wisdom Publications for agreeing to publish this work. Daniel Aitken, the publisher and CEO at Wisdom Publications, has graciously accepted my request. Deep thanks to him. Laura Cunningham, the editor, has been a gem. We work together with warmth and humor, although she gave me much work to do! Nevertheless, I am indebted to her clarity and vision. There have been many others whose names are too numerous to mention.

I am lucky. Even though my mother died quite early, she was indeed a warm, kind, and loving mother. This has allowed me to open my heart to others. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has raised the ante — encouraging me to open my heart not just to others, but to *all* others. This book is dedicated to him and them.

# Introduction

Nāgārjuna's *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, or as it's known in Tibetan, *Root Wisdom*, is the definitive presentation of the doctrine of emptiness and dependent arising and a foundational text of Mahāyāna Buddhism.[3] It is referred to as *Wisdom* because it is based on the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) sūtras of the Buddha, which discuss the wisdom of emptiness in detail. This book will follow the way the present Dalai Lama teaches it — a method that introduces us to Buddhist philosophy step by step, in an order conducive to practice.

His Holiness starts with chapter 26, "Analysis of the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination," which explains how we enter cyclic existence (saṃsāra) and how we exit (to nirvāṇa). We perpetuate saṃsāra through following the links in the forward order, and we put an end to saṃsāra through following the links in the reverse order. We enter and sustain saṃsāra through ignorance; we exit saṃsāra through eliminating ignorance by realizing emptiness.

One might get the misleading impression from chapter 26 that there is a real self that cycles in and (potentially) leaves saṃsāra. In order to correct this potential error, the Dalai Lama then explains chapter 18, "Analysis of the Self," which refutes the idea that there is an intrinsically existent self.

From this, some might then get the false idea that there is no person at all. This is because most people cannot differentiate between the absence of intrinsic existence and complete nonexistence. To avert this potential misunderstanding, the Dalai Lama teaches chapter 24, "Analysis of the Four Noble Truths," which establishes conventional reality, including a conventional person.

In chapter 24, Nāgārjuna argues that he does not undermine, but explains, the four noble truths and the Three Jewels; he argues they make sense only in the context of emptiness. Thus, he argues, conventional reality makes sense not because things exist intrinsically, but because they do not — they exist only as empty.

Some might then make the mistake of thinking that emptiness itself exists intrinsically. To counter this potential tendency to reify emptiness, the Dalai Lama teaches chapter 22, "Analysis of the Tathāgata." Here Nāgārjuna establishes that everything — including

emptiness — is empty. So emptiness itself has no special ontological status, and this empty nature of the world allows everything to unfold.

When time permits, the Dalai Lama then teaches chapter 1, "Analysis of Conditions." This chapter refutes the intrinsic production of anything anywhere at any time. The scope of emptiness is unlimited; nowhere is there anything at any time that is not empty.

This method of teaching the text reflects an idea that Tsongkhapa advances in the first chapter of his *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nāgārjuna's Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (*Dbu ma rtsa ba tshig le'ur byas pa shes rab ces bya ba'i rnam bshad rigs pa'i rgya mtsho*). There he presents several sequences in which to read the text — including one very similar to the order adopted by the Dalai Lama. Tsongkhapa calls this the chapter sequence based on the two selflessnesses: that of the person and that of phenomena. We can see the Dalai Lama's preferred sequence as reflecting this interpretative framework.

The key difference between this order and His Holiness's is that Tsongkhapa skips over chapter 26, "Analysis of the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination," and begins by explaining chapter 18, "Analysis of the Self." After the intrinsic self (person) is thoroughly analyzed and refuted, he then turns to analyzing phenomena. Tsongkhapa next summarizes chapter 24, which he reads as a defense of conventional reality in response to the charge that Nāgārjuna is a nihilist. Tsongkhapa then argues that chapter 22 is Nāgārjuna's argument that even the enlightened one (that is, the Buddha) has no special existential status and that emptiness itself is also empty of intrinsic existence. All compounded phenomena exist in the causal nexus. For this reason, the next chapter in Tsongkhapa's sequence of Nāgārjuna's *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* is chapter 1, the refutation of intrinsic production. Causality is the central relationship between things in an evolving world. The causal relation underlies change, and so grounds impermanence.

In this volume, I've included an appendix: twenty verses on *bodhicitta* from Nāgārjuna's *Precious Advice for a King* (*Ratnāvalī*) that remind us why we are crunching our brains and minds to understand emptiness; it is to benefit all others in the deepest and fullest ways. These twenty verses are inspiring and arouse our universal compassion.

## Nāgārjuna

According to the Indian and Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the Buddha prophesized in the *Descent into Laṅkā Sūtra* (*Lankāvatāra Sūtra*) that Nāgārjuna would uphold his teachings. In this text, Buddha is said to have stated that Nāgārjuna would be born in South India, called the Land of the Vedas. He would be called by the bhikṣu name Śrī, and his common name would be Nāga.

Furthermore, according to the *Descent into Laṅkā Sūtra*, the Buddha stated that Nāgārjuna would explain his teachings by destroying the notions of *existence* and *nonexistence*. In that way he would clearly delineate the distinction between *existence* and *intrinsic existence* on the one hand, and between *nonexistence* and *nonintrinsic existence* on the other hand. Similar statements are attributed to the Buddha in the *Sublime Golden Light Sūtra* (*Suvarṇaprabhāsottama Sūtra*).

In the *Root Tantra of Mañjuśrī* (*Mañjuśrīmūlatantra*), the Buddha is said to have stated that Nāgārjuna would live six hundred years. In the *Great Drum Sūtra* (*Mahābherīhāraka Sūtra*), however, the Buddha is said to have stated that a youthful bhikṣu named Nāgārjuna would be born eighty years after the Buddha's passing and would contribute to the flourishing of the Buddha's teachings by living one hundred years. Afterward, he was to pass into the Pure Land of Sukhāvatī, the Land of Bliss. In both the *Great Cloud Sūtra* (*Mahāmegha Sūtra*) and the *Great Drum Sūtra* the Buddha is said to have stated that Nāgārjuna would later be enlightened. In the tantric discourse called *Illuminating Lamp* (*Pradīpoddyotana*) the Buddha is said to have stated that Nāgārjuna would achieve the enlightenment of a *vajradhāra*[4] in that very lifetime. Furthermore, he is said to have stated that Nāgārjuna would become enlightened through the practice of the highest yoga tantra (Skt. *anuttarayoga tantra*, Tib. *bla na med pa'i rgyud*). The Dalai Lama cautions us not to view these citations as contradictory, for they may not be presented from a historical perspective.

Indeed, little is known about Nāgārjuna's actual life. Although there is no lack of literary sources discussing Nāgārjuna, almost all the elements contained therein are mythical at best and conflicting at worst. Most of the material comes from accounts that were written with hagio-graphical interests ahead of historical documentation. Clearly, for those who like certainty, any kind of "proof" of Nāgārjuna's dates and place of residency is still a long way off. Nonetheless, citing a wealth of archeological, art historical, and textual evidence, Joseph Walser (2005) makes a remarkably persuasive case for Nāgārjuna to have lived in the late second century

in the lower Krishna valley, in the present state of Karnataka.

Nāgārjuna composed many texts. Chief among them are the six texts on emptiness: his opus *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, *Reply to Objections* (*Vigrahavyāvartanī*), *Seventy Verses on Emptiness* (*Śūnyatāsaptati*), *Sixty Verses of Reasoning* (*Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*), *Devastating Discourse* (*Vaidalyaprakaraṇa*), and *Precious Garland of Advice to a King* (*Ratnāvalī*).

In *Reply to Objections*, Nāgārjuna establishes that, even though everything is devoid of intrinsic existence, it is still possible to use logic to refute others' mistaken views.

In *Seventy Verses on Emptiness*, Nāgārjuna further explores the two truths. He explains how phenomena exist based on worldly conventions, despite the fact that they do not exist intrinsically. In his *Sixty Verses*, Nāgārjuna applies this to the path to awakening, arguing that it is necessary for the attainment of liberation to realize the distinction between existence and intrinsic existence on the one hand, and between nonexistence and nonintrinsic existence on the other hand.

The *Devastating Discourse* is a polemical text that argues for the incoherence of the conceptual categories of the Nyāya school.

In his *Precious Garland of Advice to a King*, Nāgārjuna explains to the king that devotion and faith to a wholesome way of life is required for rebirth in the human or higher realms. Devotion inspires one to listen, understand, and apply the teachings on wisdom to one's own emotional and cognitive life, leading to liberation and enlightenment. This text also explores the moral and political dimensions of his Madhyamaka thought.

Attributions of *One Hundred Preparations* (*Sbyor ba brgya pa*), various other texts on medical science, and other texts about tantra to Nāgārjuna are doubtful. Nāgārjuna is also said to have composed a set of hymns of praise (*stotras*), which pay homage to and explain emptiness and dependent origination, and explain how to avoid falling into the two extreme views of intrinsic existence and nonexistence. Although there is controversy regarding their authorship, the Dalai Lama seems to accept the hymns as authentic.[5]

## The Logic of the *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*

We see certain patterns of logical analysis repeated again and again in

*Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way.* Each time, the opponent takes something to be intrinsically real, and then Nāgārjuna employs one of several methods of refutation to prove that it is not.

One method Nāgārjuna often employs is a *destructive dilemma*, showing that pairs of things the opponent takes to exist intrinsically can be neither identical to nor different from one another. Nāgārjuna also uses a second, similar strategy — the negative *tetralemma* — for this purpose.[6]

A third argument template is a *trilemma*: the three temporal periods. The future is yet to come. The past has already been. And the present cannot be found. As finely as you can divide, the present cannot be found. It is still either past or future and *only* exists in dependence on the past and the future. This logic is used extensively in chapter 2, "Analysis of Motion," examining when and where the walker walks.

A fourth argument form is the *infinite.* For example, if all existent things have the three characteristics of originating, enduring, and disintegrating, then what about origination itself? Does it too have all three characteristics? Since it is an existent thing, it must. But then we fall into a vicious infinite regress. This is the argument pursued in chapter 7, "Analysis of Arising, Abiding, and Disintegration."

Fifth, Nāgārjuna uses the argument *refuting reflexivity*. This is used to refute a claim that something bears a relationship to itself. For example, a knife cannot cut itself. Nor can darkness cover itself. Nor can a finger point at itself. This argument likewise is pursued in chapter 7.

Sixth is the argument from *mutual dependence.* This refutes the assumption that things exist intrinsically by showing that they exist in mutual dependence. This argument is presented mainly in chapter 10, "Analysis of Fire and Fuel," verse 10.

All these logical arguments Nāgārjuna presents are for understanding the distinctions between existence and intrinsic existence, and nonexistence and nonintrinsic existence. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for understanding the lack of intrinsic existence, and hence emptiness.

## The Question of Existence

In addition to gaining familiarity with the logical techniques Nāgārjuna employs in *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, it is also crucial to clearly understand two distinctions: the one between

*negation* (*dgag bya*); to understand the subtle nature of reality we must first know what it is not. We want to eliminate, or negate, false superimposition, in order to correctly understand reality. In the case of Madhyamaka analysis, the object of negation is neither *mere existence*, nor *the appearing object itself*, but rather *intrinsic existence*.

We must differentiate the basis for the object of negation and the object of negation itself. For instance, if we look at the chariot in Candrakīrti's famous analogy from *Entering the Middle Way* — in which we are asked to determine where, among all the parts of a chariot, or even separate from the parts, its essential chariot nature is — the chariot is the basis on which we impute the object of negation. But even though we impute the object of negation upon its basis, we do not negate the basis of the object of negation, only the object of negation. We do not negate the chariot, but only its intrinsic existence. Thus there is only one object of negation — intrinsic existence. When we thoroughly eliminate the object of negation, the aggregates that form the basis for the imputation of self will not be apprehended as existing intrinsically. We will continue seeing the conventionally existent person, but the intrinsic nature that we falsely impute will be negated.8

It is necessary to distinguish two things — the appearing object (*snang yul*) and the conceptually grasped object (*zhen yul*). First there is the appearance of the object. Then there is clinging to the conceptually grasped object of our conception. The referent object is not the basis of designation. The conceptually grasped object or the intrinsic self is not consistent with reality. Rather it is what we falsely conceive in the mind.

The basis of designation for the designated object, cup, is all of its parts including the handle, lip, and container. The designated object is the cup. These two are mutually dependent. Because they are mutually dependent, neither of these can exist independently. Although at the sensorial level there is the appearance of intrinsic existence, the sensorial consciousness does not have the ability to *ascertain* intrinsic existence. This is because sensorial consciousness does not have the capacity to discern, label, or assert. This intellectual capacity is reserved only for the mental consciousness. Therefore, the appearance of intrinsic existence to the sensory consciousness comes about due to our habitual grasping at intrinsic existence that occurs at the mental consciousness level. This grasping mental consciousness infects all of our minds including the sensorial minds.

When objects appear to our ordinary mind, they appear as

intrinsically existent. This mistaken aspect of the mind, where there is the appearance of intrinsically existent object, is cognitive obscuration. Its complete elimination occurs only when we become completely enlightened. However, when objects appear as intrinsically existent to us, one part of our mind grasps at this intrinsic object. This grasping becomes the basis of all negative emotions. The complete elimination of this grasping at intrinsic object occurs even before enlightenment, sometime after nonconceptually realizing (direct) emptiness.

It is crucial to understand the distinction between a mistaken (*'khrul shes*) and a wrong (*log shes*) mind. A mistaken mind's object of appearance does not exist. A wrong mind's object of engagement also does not exist. In order to understand the mistaken aspect of the mind, it is important to recognize what the appearing object of the mind actually is. Generally, there are two kinds of minds, sensorial and mental. Objects appearing directly to sensorial minds are their appearing objects (*snang yul*). Take, for example, a cup that appears to a visual consciousness. This is the *snang yul*, or appearing object of that visual consciousness. The object of engagement, *'jug yul*, is the apprehended object. With respect to a visual consciousness perceiving a cup, the cup is both its object of appearance and object of engagement. However, when something appears to the visual consciousness but fails to be apprehended, there is only the object of appearance and not the object of engagement. An example is when you are mentally absorbed and something appears to your visual consciousness but is not apprehended. The same understanding is true for all the other four sensorial consciousnesses. Our gross mental consciousness, which is a conceptual mind, has as an appearing object and a conceptually grasped object (*zheng yul*). In classical epistemological Buddhist texts, appearing objects are attributable to all types of minds, whereas conceptually grasped objects are reserved for only conceptual minds. Objects of engagement, or apprehended objects, apply to all minds. The referent (focal) object, that is, *dmigs yul*, is the object to which the mind is directed. When a mind focuses on the referent object, what appears to it becomes its appearing object (*snang yul*), while what it apprehends becomes its object of engagement (*'jug yul*). Both the appearing object (*snang yul*) and the object of engagement (*'jug yul*) are universal for all minds. Regarding self-grasping of a person, the person is the referent (focal) object (*dmig yul*), whereas the intrinsic self is both the appearing object (*snang yul*) as well as the conceptually grasped object (*zhen yul*). Self-grasping is a mistaken and wrong perception that binds us to samsara

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