

**CONDITIONALITY, HUMAN FREEDOM, AND UNIVERSAL PEACE IN  
NĀGĀRJUNA’S MŪLAMADHYAMAKAKĀRIKĀ AND THE LION’S ROAR ON THE  
WHEEL-TURNING MONARCH**

*The articulation of oneness*

“Then I had this thought: ‘This dhamma that I have attained is deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand, peaceful, excellent, beyond reasoning, subtle, and to be experienced by the wise. But this generation delights in worldly attachment, revels in worldly attachment, and rejoices in worldly attachment. For a generation delighting in worldly attachment, that takes delight in worldly attachment, and rejoices in worldly attachment, this doctrine is hard to see, namely, dependent arising which involves specific conditionality. Also, this doctrine is hard to see, namely, the tranquillizing of all dispositions to action, the renunciation of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, and nibbana. So were I to teach this dhamma and others were not to understand me, that would be wearisome and vexing for me.’

*“Moreover, these verses that have never been heard before occurred to me spontaneously:*

*‘I have attained it with difficulty!*

*Enough now of preaching!*

*By those consumed with lust and hate*

*This dhamma is not easily understood*

*It goes against the stream, it is subtle, deep, hard to see, and delicate.*

*Those who are slaves to passion will not see it*

*As they are covered in a mass of darkness.’*

*“Thinking it over in these ways, my mind was inclined toward indifference and not toward teaching the dhamma. Then Brahma Sahampati read my mind with his mind, and he had this thought: ‘Sir, the world is lost. Sir, the world is destroyed, inasmuch as the Tathagata, an arahant, a fully awakened one, is inclined toward indifference and not toward teaching the dhamma.’ Then, just as a strong man might stretch out a bent arm or bend back a stretched arm, in the same way Brahma Sahampati disappeared from the Brahma-world and appeared in front of me.”<sup>xi</sup>*

What is the Buddha’s error in initially declining the opportunity to teach the *dhamma*? Why is the world “lost” and “destroyed” when the Buddha “is inclined toward indifference”? The problem of the individual attainment of nirvana (which is often enough described in terms of the doctrine of expedient means anyway) is that of compassion—can freedom and enlightenment ever be realized independently of one’s social milieu? In this essay, I will to explore these questions with reference to Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and *The Lion’s Roar on the Wheel-Turning Monarch*, two early texts in the Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhist canons. I will discuss the logic of the

former and the rhetoric of the latter with an eye to both the question of ontological suffering and the view of enlightenment as an *essentially* socially aggregate virtue, which, according to our authors, we are capable of realizing at any time.

### Nāgārjuna's View of Dependent Arising and Peacefulness

To begin, I want to look at three moments in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*:

"Neither from itself nor from another,  
Nor from both,  
Nor without a cause,  
Does *anything* whatever, anywhere arise."<sup>ii</sup>

The crucial word here is "anything." To have an ontically distinct "thing" is to already have misapprehended the reality of dependent arising. Nothing arises uncaused, including dependent arising, and nothing arises simply from a strict duality of itself and another—these *were* distinct things, and in coming together, they create something different. Thus, "itself" cannot be postulated as part of the result. The result is yet again something other. For Nāgārjuna, there is no fundamental ground of being that can be isolated; everything comes from everything.

"An existent entity (mental episode)  
Has no object.  
Since a mental episode is without an object,  
How could there be any percept-condition?  
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?"<sup>iii</sup>

Thought has no object and has absolute identity with itself, therefore there is no absolutely distinct perception nor perception of distinctness. No individual things exist, save for nominally, so [no]thing could ever perish. There can be no immediate condition because there can be no essence to particular things; there is a collapse analogous to the conflation of thought *qua* thought in the form of the contradiction between immediate and therefore necessary elements of a being and the concept of conditionality. We already know that there is no ceasing; therefore, properly understood, there are no isolated and divorceable conditions. A thing is in its conditions, and so dependent arising is itself

conditioned in a multitude of ways. Thus any kind of transcendence has its own constituent elements and while not limited by these, it is certainly indebted to them.

“Whatever is dependently arisen,  
Such a thing is essentially peaceful.  
Therefore that which is arising and arising itself  
Are themselves peaceful.”<sup>iv</sup>

Dependent arising is essentially peaceful because creative energy requires harmony to produce—harmony in the ecological, systematic sense, that is. Human beings are certainly susceptible to extremes of psychological and physical suffering, but that does not make them any less valid as dependently arisen entities. As far as there is a fundamental ground of understanding in the early Buddhist works under investigation here, this interconnectedness of all beings and the equal status of all existent material and immaterial iterations of this unity appear to me foundational to the apprehension of dependent arising and peacefulness. Nature is cooperative, and the question is, in part, to what degree mankind can mindfully participate in that network of organic growth.

Here we may begin to see what we are up against, in terms of Buddhism’s formulation of the problem of suffering. If we suspend for a moment our Victorian construction of the ego, it can be precisely articulated, according to Nāgārjuna’s logic, that each supposedly discrete conscious entity is in fact as much part of another’s existence as it is composed entirely of itself. The creative harmony that bedrocks existence allows for no particular habitual products; there is no exact equivalence between any elements of reality. In fact, all that exists has equal reality only insofar as it relates to its creator (dependent origination), which in the human case remains, as a cause of suffering, something of a *posited* mystery. From the perspective of a sentient being, the non-human existents seem to be without divorce or remove from their organic nature, and thus more fully a part of the consciousness of the whole. However, participating in the natural fecundity and diversity of origins is something that human beings cannot help but be impacted by, and so our actual separation from reality in the form of material nature is much less than what we observe it to be, but this divorce from nature leads to a very powerful moment of social dissipation in the Pāli Canon, and it is worth inquiring into the portrait that *The Lion’s Roar on the Wheel-Turning Monarch* paints of those who elect not to devolve into senseless

killing of their fellow man as a means to understanding how human beings might use this essential peacefulness within Buddhist metaphysics to ground what is all-too-often only articulated as an intuitive orientation towards non-violence (as if that were to diminish the philosophical import of the argument). What I want to flesh out in the rest of this essay is that there is a strong argument to be made for the reclamation of this peacefulness, and to describe what that looks like in the account provided in *The Lion's Roar on the Wheel-Turning Monarch*.

### Spontaneity in Joy and Communality in the Pāli Canon

“Among those who live for ten years, there will be a seven-day ‘weapon period,’ during which they will consider each other as beasts. Sharp weapons will appear in their hands, and with these sharp weapons they will deprive one another of life, saying: ‘That is a beast!’ Then there will be some persons who will think: ‘Let me not do that to anyone! Let no one do that to me! Suppose I were to enter a grass-thicket, a jungle, a dense stand of trees, a place made inaccessible by rivers or a mountain recess and live off the roots and fruits of the forest.’ These people will enter such places for seven days, feeding off the roots and fruits of the forest. After seven days, they will emerge from those remote places unsullied; they will embrace each other and sing together in the assembly hall, saying: ‘Good fellow, it is wonderful! You are alive!’ Then this thought will occur to those people: ‘By undertaking evil mental states, we brought about the prolonged destruction of our kinsmen, so let us now do what is good. And what good things shall we now do? Let us refrain from taking life. That is a good deed to undertake and practice.’ And so they will refrain from taking life; undertaking this good deed, they will practice it. By undertaking this good deed, their life span and beauty will increase. As a result of increasing their life span and beauty, the children of those who lived for ten years will live for twenty years.”<sup>v</sup>

The freedom with which these few people select nonviolent life and enter the forest is one of the most salient manifestations of dependent arising at work in the Pāli Canon. Some combination of forces enabled these individuals to transcend their violent surroundings and come to an orientation towards peacefulness. This is not a once-and-for-all moment, however, since it requires further “practice” in order to ensure the health, beauty, and lifespan of its participants. Dependent arising and radical individualism are mutually opposed—in this cosmology, dependent arising does not allow for an understanding of strict difference nor necessarily the elision of material boundaries. The acknowledgement of oneself in others: “Let me not do that to anyone! Let no one do that to me!” requires that fundamental recognition of another’s humanity and living existence in differentiating ourselves from “beasts,” but is in fact catalyzed by a notion of difference, or suffering.

Our embrace of the mystery of our creator, dependent arising, gives us an insight into the freedom we have in the endless possibilities set down by nature and enables us to abide in incomplete knowledge of the divine, which is already a concept that, for the Buddha, “does not apply.” Reality takes form only in relationship, and as such has no teleology, since those relationships structure their own growth and development. Therefore, these nonviolent impulses are created out of the same mechanism that grounds nature, and are in fact more properly natural themselves. Nāgārjuna and the Pāli Canon both describe the peace of the inherent nature of process-being, and this allows for a unity of theory and practice in Buddhism, where metaphysics and empiricism do not have to be reconciled because there is in fact no divide. If peace is the nature of things, then to be peaceful is necessary in order to be a full member of the whole. But if discriminative thinking is how we come to deviate from the nature of things, how can we achieve reconciliation, according to this worldview?

The notion of absolute freedom of conditions by means of everything’s being conditioned and therefore malleable is crucial to understanding the human predicament for these authors. Freedom from suffering is always possible, and though suffering is a condition of human life—at least as we have always known it—some other state must be possible if we can but *think* it. And this is not pure speculation—recall that in *The Lion’s Roar* the motivations of the non-violent abstainers are never questioned, their deed is simply called “good.” So it is not so much important how change and enlightenment come to be, because they simply *do* arise, along with everything else, but rather important that change and enlightenment can arise at any time, provided conditions oblige. The infinite and the eternal correspond in every moment because of the cross-section of this constant possibility and the progression of time. The openness of an infinite system coincides with the eternal empty space that is time and gives social man both a determined and undetermined evolution.

Thus, so as far as we can talk about the nonviolent people in *The Lion’s Roar* being completely free and conditioned, we must realize that the conditions in which they lived—the “nasty, brutish, and short” articulation of the Eastern Classics—were part of the cause for their enlightenment and abstinence from harm. However, does this mean that in this

formulation, we must simply wait for the proper conditions to arise in order for progress towards peace? Partially, yes. But not entirely, since Nāgārjuna tells us that one new thing is made of two old things, and so the constituent elements of something do not limit its potential being—everything is more than the sum of its parts, including human beings, so the notion of agency and freedom are surely just as existent as the determined portions of being. Further, Nāgārjuna describes the relationship between agency and conditionality in the following way: “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.”<sup>vi</sup> Here, the only freedom is the return to the source, peace, since it is the only movement away from suffering. To be peaceful is to embrace dependence and assert relationship as the highest determiner in the being and life of all ‘distinct’ things.

This recondite philosophy is described as “hard to grasp” because it is somatic in nature. Because of dependent arising, the creatureliness of the human being means that he possesses a body equal with his mind, and in part, the nonviolent enlightened ones in *The Lion’s Roar* might be said to be responding to a basic animal instinct for self-preservation. On the other hand, we are more than just mind and body, and so it is the transcendent part of entity that ultimately responds to the suffering of other human beings. If another is suffering, it is unpeaceful, and thus disrupts the entire structure of the world.

I hope to have shown here that human freedom and the determined “dependent arising” are co-extensive, and that human agency and creative thinking, which provides the schism between us and nature, are also the way to a better state of things. Additionally, it is those beings who are in fact conditioned by their social reality, and see the problems with it, that flee to the forest, taking immediate action against any possible perversion of their realization of non-violence. This dialectic of individuality and social totality is one of polarity, but as such seemingly disparate entities, the two affect and interpenetrate each other in oblique ways, sometimes difficult to see and confusing. Awakening from the dream of everyday reality and gaining the title of “Buddha” is not a mechanism for the masses because there must be something to rebel against, and unless that thing exists, there cannot be enlightenment. So we see a contradiction in positing the necessity of peace and also positing that suffering is the catalyst for enlightenment. The only possible way for

enlightenment to be other than primarily individual is if all people are simultaneously enlightened, removing suffering universally and thus ridding us of its necessity in providing a ballast for the individual spirit's pursuit of *nirvana*. If the root of life is suffering, only with the absolute abolition of this ground of being can there be a release from the cycles of birth and death.

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<sup>i</sup> *Early Buddhist Discourses*. Edited and Translated by John J. Holder. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006. 9-10.

<sup>ii</sup> *Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Translation and Commentary by Jay L. Garfield. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Chapter I, Verse 1.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter I, Verses 8 and 9.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter VII, Verse 16.

<sup>v</sup> "The Lion's Roar on the Wheel-Turning Monarch," *Early Buddhist Discourses*. 186.

<sup>vi</sup> *Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Chapter I, Verse 4.

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