

Barry Kerzin

*Nagarjuna's Wisdom: The Middle Way*

Week Three: "Selfless Origination"

May 20, 2019



Welcome back. This is session three of a four part series on "Nagarjuna's Wisdom." In this session, we're going to be talking about several chapters from Nagarjuna's work, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, or *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. I'd like to remind you about the order of the chapters that we're commenting on. We've extracted five of what we feel are the most important chapters from the book. We're following the approach of His Holiness the Dalai Lama when he teaches this most sacred text and important text, and we'll be starting with Chapter 26.

In this session, we'll be discussing several of those five chapters, and we'll discuss the remaining chapters in the fourth and last session. Both we and His Holiness the Dalai Lama begin the discussion of Nagarjuna's text with Chapter 26, entitled "Analysis of Samsara," because it is an analysis of the 12 links of interdependent origination. This is important because it's how we get into all our trouble. The 12 links are a cycle. Later, we're going to say it's actually more of a spiral. But it's like a cycle, so there's really no beginning. The way it's taught and the way the Buddha taught it, is to start with number one, ignorance. Ignorance was labeled as number one, and it's where we start because that's what gets us into all the trouble. Because of ignorance, we grasp, and we continue to die and be reborn.

These 12 links of interdependent origination are what initially get us into all our trouble, suffering, and pain, and then continue to sustain that suffering and difficulty life after life. If we look at the 12 links from the reverse order, we can find their antidotes. Starting with ignorance, we find the antidote is emptiness, which is the lack of an intrinsic or objective existence. Then we can get ourselves out of samsara and to nirvana, where we no longer die and we live in a state that is complete joy. As we couple that with our bodhicitta practice, we go on to become fully enlightened buddhas. Our purpose is always, without a break, to benefit others.

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Let's look at Chapter 26, "Analysis of the 12 Links of Dependent Origination." If we see that ignorance is number one and the root of the 12 links, we learn how to reverse it and find the antidote for it, which is wisdom. By realizing emptiness, we can get out of samsara. That's what we want to do for ourselves and for others.

To complete one cycle of these 12 links, it takes more than one lifetime. In fact, it takes a minimum of two and a maximum of three lifetimes to complete one of these cycles. These lifetimes are rarely contiguous, and often there are many, many lifetimes in between before we actually finish one cycle. As you can imagine, there are many of these cycles that are going on within us right now, waiting to be completed. That is how this is more like a spiral, rather than a circle.

If we take Nagarjuna's 26th chapter to heart, we may come to the conclusion that there's a solid person who cycles and transmigrates from one life to the next. In order to counter that tendency, His Holiness the Dalai Lama then teaches Chapter 18 which is called Analysis of the Self. This is the only chapter out of the 27 chapters of Nagarjuna's text where he primarily emphasizes the selflessness of the self. All the other chapters mention it here and there, but in this chapter the emphasis is on the selflessness phenomena. Chapter 18 goes into exquisite detail, often using these different logics that we talked about in the previous session in week two. One of those logic types is the lack of identity, the destructive dilemma, where we look at whether something is identical to, or different from its basis.

In terms of looking at the self, Nagarjuna is using an important type of logical reasoning. Is the self the same as the five aggregates? What if we collapse them into two, just body and mind? As we saw before, one cannot be identical with two, and if we look at it from the side of a single self, it cannot be identical with two things, which are body and mind. This is a contradiction.

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Also, karma and its ripening are interrupted if the body dies. If the body or aggregates are identical with the self, it would mean that with the body's death, the self would die. This means you would not get the ripening of karma in the same mental continuum. Similarly, you would experience the results of things that you didn't do, the results of things that had been done by somebody else. You break that continuity of karma between its action and its ripening if you assume that there's identity between the self and its basis: the body and mind.

Chapter 18 tries to undo the tendency that we might have developed from Chapter 26, of thinking that there's a solid, intrinsic, objective person, who cycles or transmutes from life to life. Chapter 18 is presented to counter that tendency to solidify or reify the self.

Please join us for the next session, where we try to counter the tendency that can develop from Chapter 18 towards thinking that there may be no self at all. This is where His Holiness the Dalai Lama usually presents Chapter 24, which is by many accounts the most important chapter of this whole book. Chapter 24 lays out the four noble truths and establishes conventional reality. Please join us for that teaching. Thank you.