

Fundamental Wisdom

by Nagarjuna



Meaning of the Title

The *Fundamental Wisdom*:

Sanskrit: *Prājñā-nama-mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*

Tibetan: *dbu-ma rtsa-ba'i tshig-le'ur byas-pa shes-rab ces-bya-ba*

(English: *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way called Wisdom*)

prājñā = wisdom

nama = called

mūla = fundamental / root

madhyamaka = middle way / meaning of madhyama

kārikā = verses

“Wisdom”:

Wisdom here refers to the perfection of wisdom. The text is named after its content. It is called wisdom because it enables us to accomplish the perfection of wisdom.

“Fundamental”:

It is the foundation or basis of all other treatises.

“Middle Way”:

Middle here means free from the two extremes: the extreme of reification (or extreme of existence) and of nihilism (or extreme of non-existence). The Sanskrit suffix ‘ka’ connotes “the meaning of”. It is attached to the word ‘madhyama’ (middle) and indicates the middle way.

The term ‘middle way’ is used not only to refer to the philosophy of emptiness but also to Nagarjuna’s *Fundamental Wisdom*.

“Verses”:

Although *kārikā* usually means “chapter” here it means “verses”, for the entire text is a metric composition.

The two extremes

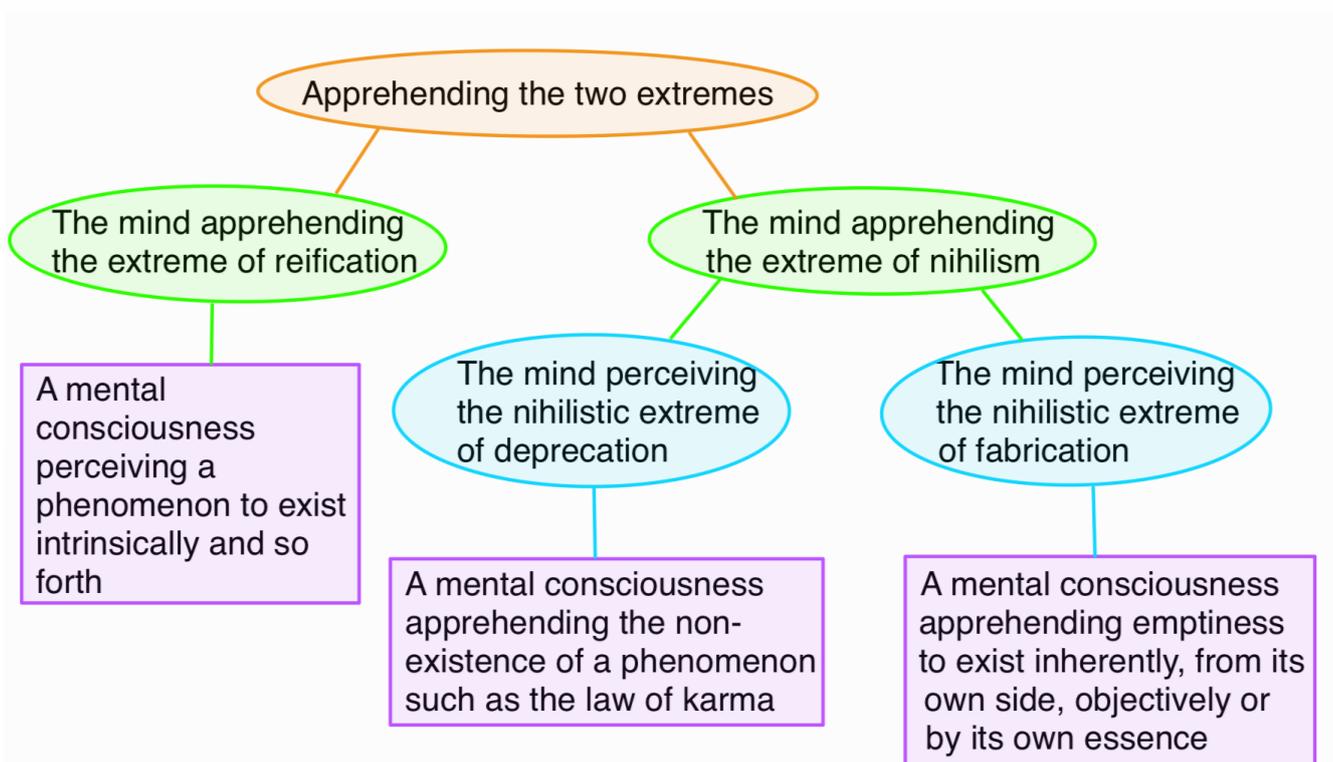
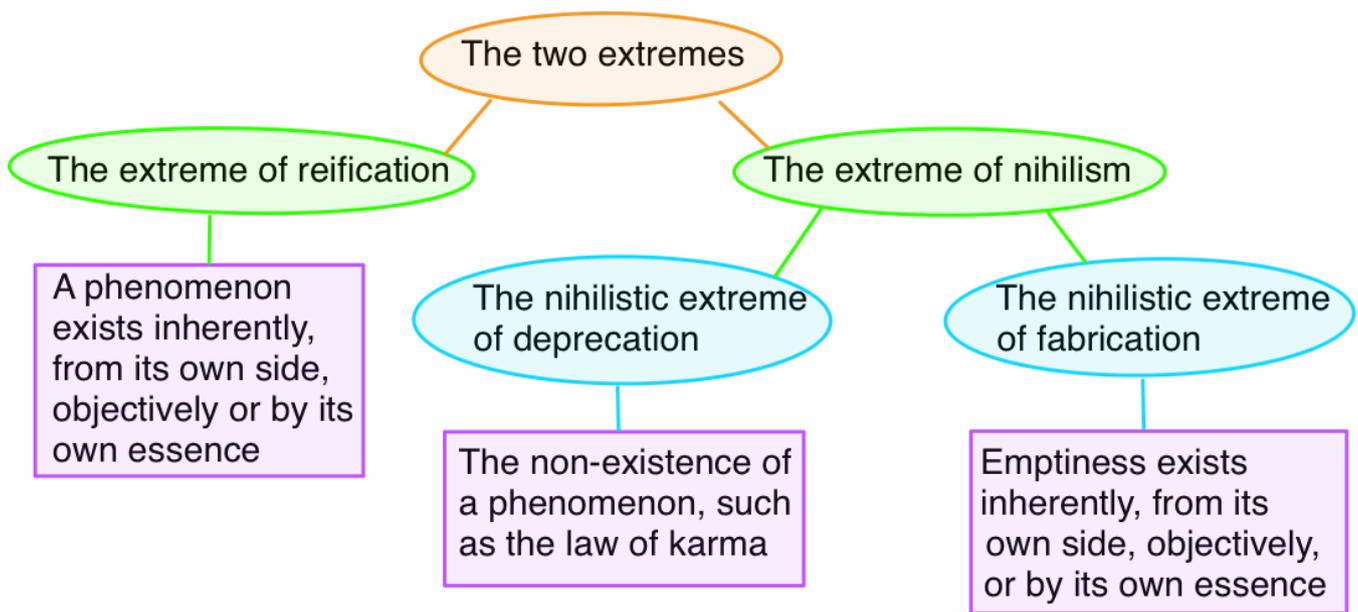
The extreme of reification is: a phenomenon existing inherently, from its own side, objectively or by its own essence.

The extreme of nihilism is: a phenomenon not existing at all.

A mental consciousness that perceives a phenomenon to exist inherently apprehends the extreme of reification and has thus fallen to the extreme of existence.

A mental consciousness that perceives a phenomenon to not exist at all apprehends the extreme of nihilism and has fallen to the extreme of non-existence.

The extreme of nihilism can be categorized into (i) the nihilistic extreme of deprecation and (ii) the nihilistic extreme of fabrication. An example of the first type is: the non-existence of a phenomenon such as the law of karma. An example of the second type is: the inherent existence of emptiness.



Translator's Homage

The homage by the lotsawas (translators) who translated the *Fundamental Wisdom* from Sanskrit to Tibetan is:

Homage to the youthful Manjushri.

The object of homage was specified by royal decree. King Tri Ralpachen (9th century, 806–838) was one of the three great dharma kings of Tibet. He invited many buddhist *panditas* (masters) and *lotsawas* and had numerous translations revised. The texts that were established as final were to contain a translator's homage that indicated the section of the *Tripitaka* to which the text belonged, so that there would be no confusion as to its scriptural affiliation.

Tripitaka (Skt. *Tripitaka*, Tib. *sde-gnod gsum*) means "three baskets". The "three baskets" were originally the receptacles of the palm-leaf manuscripts on which the three buddhist collections of texts—(1) the *Vinaya*, (2) the *Sutra*, and (3) the *Abhidharma*—were preserved. These three divisions include the entire buddhist teaching and correspond to the three higher trainings. The *vinaya-pitaka* mainly presents the higher training of ethical discipline, the *sutra-pitaka* the higher training of concentration or meditation, and the *abhidharma-pitaka* the higher training of wisdom.

In the case of revised translations of texts that pertain to the *vinaya-pitaka*, since the numerous different vows, precepts, and rules of ordained and lay practitioners contained therein are the province of the omniscient mind of the Buddha, the homage is paid to the 'Omniscient One'. Since the teachings of the *sutra-pitaka* are usually presented in the form of questions and answers between the Buddha and different bodhisattvas homage is directed at 'all Buddhas and bodhisattvas'. Finally, since the teachings contained in the *abhidharma-pitaka* concerning such concepts as selflessness, emptiness and so on are to be realized by means of wisdom, the homage is paid to the Buddha of wisdom, 'Manjushri'.

The names of the lotsawas and panditas who were involved in the process of translating the *Fundamental Wisdom* are given at the end of the text:

At the behest of his glorious and divine majesty, the great king, the mighty and most holy sovereign [Trisong Detsen], this text was translated by the great Indian abbot Jnanagarbha, a master of the middle way, and the monk

translator Chokro Lui Gyaltsen, who edited and finalized its meaning, in a text of 449 stanzas in twenty-seven chapters, thus equivalent to one and a half volumes. Later, during the reign of King Aryadeva, in the monastery of Ratnagupta, the Hidden Jewel, in the incomparable city of Anuparna in Kashmir, the translation was revised according to Chandrakirti's commentary, the Clear Words, by the Kashmiri abbot Hasumati and the Tibetan translator Patsap Nyima Drak. Finally, at the temple of Rasa Trulnang (in Lhasa), the definitive version of the text was established by the Indian abbot Kanaka and the same translator Patsap Nyima Drak.

Homage of the Text

The *Fundamental Wisdom*:

**I prostrate to the perfect Buddha,
The best of all teachers, who taught that
That which is dependent origination is
Without cessation, without arising;**

**Without annihilation, without permanence;
Without coming, without going;
Without distinction, without identity
And peaceful—free from fabrication.**

An alternative translation of the two verses is:

**I prostrate to the perfect Buddha,
The sublime one, who taught that
That which is dependent arising
does not cease, does not arise,**

**Is not annihilated, is not permanent,
Does not come, does not go;
Is not different, is not the same,
And is peaceful—free from fabrication.**

With these verses, Nagarjuna **prostrates** or pays homage **to the Buddha for teaching dependent arising**. The Buddha is a **sublime** being who has attained complete or **perfect** awakening.

In general, dependent arising refers to all phenomena since “dependent” is applicable to everything that exists. “Arising” or “origination” have two meanings: (1) “being generated by causes and conditions” which includes only impermanent phenomena, and (2) “coming into existence dependently” which refers to all that exists.

Dependent arising as the basis of the eight attributes mentioned in the homage (**does not cease, does not arise**, and so forth) includes only the dependent arising of everything that is impermanent.

Peaceful—free from fabrication means that when one perceives the way dependent arising functions, there is no longer any wandering of conceptual thought. However, this does not mean that there is not insight or that mental activity stops. **Peaceful** also refers to the total absence of sufferings like the suffering of birth and death.

The eight attributes of dependent arising:

Since the opposite of the eight attributes (cessation, arising, annihilation, permanence, and so forth) exist conventionally, they cannot be refuted without supplying a modifying phrase. The modifying phrase is: “in accordance with the exalted wisdom (in terms of which such phenomena as cessation, arising, etc. do not exist)” or “inherently existent”.

Therefore, the words “**does not cease, does not arise**”, and so on mean “does not inherently cease, does not inherently arise”, etc.

Although there are endless attributes of dependent arising, the eight presented are the primary bone of contention. Buddhist and non-buddhist philosophers who assert inherent existence argue that things exist inherently principally on the basis of these attributes.

The eight attributes can be categorized into four pairs: (1) cessation and arising, (2) annihilation and permanence, (3) coming and going, and (4) distinction and identity.

Someone might object to the sequence of the elements of those four pairs, arguing that when there is arising there is cessation, and that without the former the latter does not occur. So it would make more sense to say “does not arise, does not cease.” Also, a person’s birth (or arising) is at the beginning and their death (or cessation) at the end of their life.

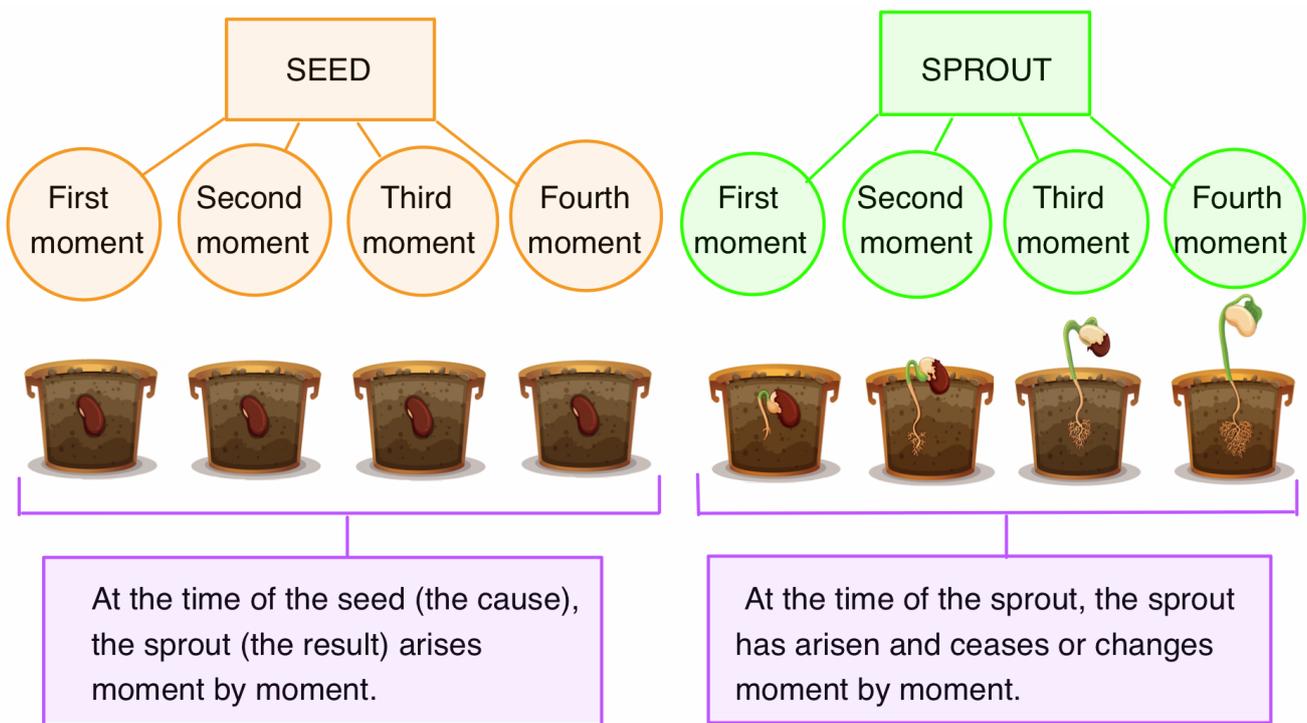
In the homage, however, the order is reversed in order to indicate that the order would be irrelevant if phenomena existed by their own character, objectively and from their own side. For if they existed in that way, they would have to be either distinct or identical; they could not be different from some phenomena and the same as others.

This is because a phenomenon will be different from something and identical with something else in dependence on other phenomena. Such dependence, of course, would be impossible if phenomena really existed in the way they appear to us.

If arising and cessation were inherently different, a person would not die (or cease) after they were born, or they would not be born (or arise) before they were dead. If they were inherently identical, the very person who was born would die, and if that were the case, then that very person who dies would be born.

Cessation and Arising

With respect to the nature of an impermanent phenomenon such as a sprout, during the time of its cause (the seed), it arises moment by moment to become the sprout, and once it has arisen, it ceases moment by moment until it *has* ceased and thus gone out of existence. However, its arising and cessation do not exist inherently but conventionally.



Annihilation and permanence

With respect to the continuum of an impermanent phenomenon such as a table, as long as the table exists, its continuum remains, while its previous continuum, the continuum of a tree trunk from which the table was crafted, for instance, has been annihilated. Similarly, when the table has been chopped up and turned into firewood, its continuum has been annihilated, while the continuum of the firewood remains for some time.

However, the annihilation of a phenomenon’s previous continuum and the permanence or persistence of its present continuum do not exist inherently but conventionally.



During the existence of the felled tree trunk, its continuum—which consists of numerous moments of that trunk—is “permanent”, i.e. it remains, while its previous continuum, the continuum of the tree, has been annihilated.

During the existence of the table, its continuum—which consists of numerous moments of the table—is “permanent”, i.e. it remains, while its previous continuum, the continuum of the felled tree trunk, has been annihilated.

During the existence of the firewood, its continuum—which consists of numerous moments of the firewood—is “permanent”, i.e. it remains, while its previous continuum, the continuum of the table, has been annihilated.

Coming and going

With respect to the location of an impermanent phenomenon such as a person, they come closer from a distant place and go far away from nearby. But coming and going exist only conventionally and not objectively and from their own side.



Distinction and identity

With respect to how phenomena relate to each other, phenomena are either different from or the same as other phenomena.

A sunflower, for instance, is different from anything that in terms of its meaning and its name is not identical or one with it, for being the same or one with a sunflower means to have the same meaning and the same name as it has.

But like the other attributes, distinction and identity exist only conventionally.