CHAPTER V

PROBLEM OF CAUSATION AND CHANGE

The attempt to analyze the Mulamadhyamakarika of Nagarjuna in this study has been made in this chapter in accordance with the sequence of the karika itself. The analysis will be divided into four sections according to the contents which had been presented by Nagarjuna as follow;

This first section includes the Dedication verses, Chapters I and II, which deal with the most fundamental doctrines of Buddhism, causation and change, the problem of causation of “dependent arising” is taken up in the first of these. The first chapter, undoubtedly, deals with theories of existence presented by the traditional schools of Indian philosophy. It advocates the reality of a permanent self and the Materialist school that denies such a self thereby denying the continuity of the human person as well as his moral responsibility. The second chapter deals with the problems created - not by an empirical theory of change and impermanence, for that was a fundamental conception of early Buddhism - by a more metaphysical theory of change and impermanence based on a logical or even a psychological theory of moments.

The second section includes thirteen chapters, beginning with an examination of sense faculties (Chapter III) and ending with an
examination of substance (Chapter XV). The entire section is an attempt to establish the doctrine of the non-substantiality of phenomena without having to get rid of any one of the categories such as the aggregates (skandha), spheres of sense (ayatana), and elements (dhatu), all of which were part of the early Buddhist teachings embodied in the discourses as well as in the Abhidharma.

The third section includes eleven chapters (chapters XVI to XXVI.) It is a section that has caused confusion in the minds of many who wrote on Nagarjuna’s thought. First, many of the topics dealt with in the previous section are again analyzed here. This gave the impression that the text is repetitive and therefore it is possible to ignore some of its parts when presenting Nagarjuna’s philosophy. Secondly, this particular chapter (XVII) deals with the doctrine of karma in a more positive way, asserting the existence of a more appropriate view than the one criticized at the beginning of the chapter. Such an assertion seems to go against not only the doctrine of emptiness (sunyata), as it is generally understood by modern scholars, but also the views that neither the Buddha nor Nagarjuna had a view to propound.

Finally, in the fourth section, Nagarjuna could have concluded his treatise with the previous section. However, he was aware that his most favorite discourse- the Kaccayanagottasutta - began with the question
regarding “right view (sammaditthi). Nagarjuna has already explained almost every aspect of the Buddha’s doctrine and shown what constitutes a “right view” as against the “Wrong or confused views” (micchaditthi) that appeared in the Buddhist tradition.

Metaphysical Analysis of the Section I of the Karika†

The karika begins with the following dedication verses:

“I salute him, the fully enlightened, the best of speakers, who preached the non-ceasing and the non-arising, the non-annihilation and the non-permanence, the non-identity and the non-difference, the non-appearance and the non-disappearance, the dependent arising, the appeasement of obsessions and the auspicious.”

Nagarjuna makes both an ontological claim and a methodological claim here in this dedication verse. First, he describes the empty state of things. Some of the negations – the “unceasing, unborn, unannihilated” – may suggest a permanent transcendental reality such as Brahman, but the claim is only about the phenomenal world seen correctly. Second, he

† The translation of the selected verses from the Mulamadhyamakakarika appeared in the analysis of this study is taken from the translation of David J. Kalupahana in “Mulamadhyamakakarika of Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way” 306 MMK, Dedication Verse.
brings up the “peaceful stilling of all conceptual creations (prapancha).”\textsuperscript{307} This indicates the centrality of prapancha.\textsuperscript{308}

He makes clear in the text that only what is real – i.e., self-existent is something that can be born and cease (but then he argues that the real cannot change), and what is void of self-existence cannot be born, cease to be annihilated. Thus, phenomenal reality as it really is (tattva) is free of anything real (self-existent) and thus of anything that could arise and cease. It must be noted hear that it is not an affirmation of emptiness, as if that were itself a reality or the source of a reality.

**Analysis of Conditions in the chapter I of the Karika**

Nagarjuna dedicates his first section, “Analysis of Conditions,” to the subject of causation. An argument of causation had to precede his examination of the elements of reality (dharmas), for it is a thing’s origin that determines its ontological status. Discussion about the theories of causality held a supreme place in Indian philosophy, because it was felt that a system’s theory of causality reveals the method of the entire system.

However, this chapter is not about causation in the scientific sense. Rather, it is about the origin of things—how things happen or are created.


\textsuperscript{308}Prapancha: Prapancha is projecting what it truly real (tatva) the conceptual differentiations we devise, and thereby seeing reality in terms of discrete entities; comparable in phrase Propanchopashamana used by Goupada in Mandukyakarika.
This is Buddha’s main philosophical insight, as has been shown, was expressed by the term “dependent arising”. It starts with an assertion—“no entities whatsoever are found anywhere that have arisen from themselves, from another, from both themselves and another, or from no cause at all”. Nagarjuna, being a true disciple of the Buddha, is therefore seen as initiating his primary philosophical treatise by categorically denying these four causal theories viz.,

(1) Nothing can be self-caused because it would already have to exist to be the cause. In short, nothing can produce itself. Nothing can produce itself through its own power—nothing is “self-existent.” “Self-existence” or “self-causation” would simply render the concept of “causation” meaningless.

(2) Nothing real can be caused by another reality since it would then be dependent on that reality and thus by definition it would not be real. In addition, something could arise from another thing only if that other thing was itself real (i.e., self-existent), but since there is no self-existence that other thing also is not real.

(3) Nothing can be caused by the combination of itself and something else: the two possibilities were ruled out in (1) and (2), and so the combination of them will not work either. That is, the combination of

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a thing and another thing would not be real since neither part is real (self-existent).

(4) Nothing arises without a cause. In emptiness metaphysics, everything arises dependent upon causes and conditions—nothing is causeless. In self-existence metaphysics, to be causeless is to be in effect self-caused, which has already been ruled out.

The first option can be seen as a rejection of the Samkhya position that the effect is in the cause; the second of Jaina’s position on a creator; the third of Vaisheshika’s position on multiple causes (material and instrumental); and the fourth of the position of Indian materialists (Charvaka) that there is only chance and causelessness.\(^{310}\)

“No existents whatsoever are evident anywhere that are arisen from themselves, from another, from both, or from a non-cause.”\(^{311}\)

The point of verse 1 is that since there are no options other than these four, all things lack self-existence (svabhava) and thus are empty (sunya). Furthermore, all empty things are causeless since there are no real (self-existent) entities to be a real cause or a real effect.


\(^{311}\) MMK, I. 1.
“There are only four conditions, namely, primary condition, objectively supporting condition, immediately contiguous condition, and dominant condition. A fifth condition does not exist.”

The causes and conditions of verse 2 are these: an efficient cause with the power to bring about an effect and the three conditions in the Abhidharma analysis. The “objective support” is the object in the world that permits our perception of it. The “continuity” is the connection to a continuing series of events in the world or moments in consciousness. The “influence” is something like the Aristotelian “final” cause: the purpose for which an action is undertaken. The reason for this is very evident. Nagarjuna is a very sophisticated philosopher realized that the Buddha rejected the four causal theories mentioned in verse 1. He also knew that the later Buddhist disciples attempted to elaborate upon the Buddha’s conception of “dependent arising” by formulating a theory of four conditions (pratyaya). Then he saw no reason for an outright rejection of the theory of four conditions.

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312 MMK, I. 2.
313 David J. Kalupahana, Mulamadhyamakakarika of Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way, p 32.
“The self-nature of existents is not evident in the conditions, etc. In the absence of self-nature, other-nature too is not evident.”

“Activity is not constituted of conditions nor is it not non-constituted of conditions. Conditions are neither constituted nor non-constituted of activity.”

Verse 3 says that activity, like physical entities, is also not separate from its conditions. Verse 4 sounds like a contradiction in terms: “Activity does not have conditions, nor does it not have conditions.”

Moreover, conditions do not exist with the power to act, nor without the power to act.” But this can be seen as consistent if we utilize the doctrine of “two truths”: from a conventional point of view, activity has no conditions and has the power to act; but from an ultimate point of view, it is not self-existent but has conditions, and so it has no independent power to act but is conditioned by other activity and entities. This pattern of mixing both points of view occurs throughout the karikas, but Nagarjuna has one consistent position throughout: there are no self-existent entities, properties, or activities, and there are worldly phenomena that arise and fall dependent upon conditions.

314 MMK, I, 3.
315 MMK, I, 4.
317 Ibid., p33.
In this context, Nagarjuna seems to be likely more an empiricist than a dialectician who purely employs reason. Hence, the text begins with a simple rejection of self-nature as something that is not obvious.

Therefore, in the verse 4, Nagarjuna repeats again about the action (kriya) and condition (pratyaya). In this case, neither the action nor the condition is negated. What is negated is the sort of relationship that is assumed between them, which is emphasizing on the identity. The negation of identity is prompted by the fact that it is equated with “self-nature” (svabhava) which, in its turn, was looked upon as a permanent entity.

“These are conditions, because depending upon them these [others] arise. So long as these [others] do not arise, why are they not non-conditions?” 318

“A condition of an effect that is either non-existent or existent is not proper. Of what non-existent [effect] is a condition? Of what use is a condition of the existent [effect]?” 319

“A thing that exists is indicated as being without objective support. When a thing is without objective support, for what purpose is an objective support?” 320

318 MMK, I. 5.  
319 MMK, I. 6.
In verse 5, Nagarjuna is arguing that if the conditions exist before the thing dependent upon them arise, then how can they then be called “conditions”? They only become conditions as things arise dependently on them. What does not exist at all (asat) obviously cannot have conditions (since it does not exist), and what is real (sat) does not need conditions since to be real is to be self-existent and thus to exist independently and without reliance on anything else (verse 6, 8). So how can there be conditions? Therefore the fundamental factors of the experienced world are without svabhava and thus they too are not realities that could really arise or cease or be a real cause.321

“When things are not arisen (from conditions), cessation is not appropriate. When [a thing has] ceased, what is [it that serves as] a condition? Therefore, an immediate condition is not proper.”322

“Since the existence of existents devoid of self-nature is not evident, the statement: "When that exists, this comes to be," will not be appropriate.”323

320 MMK, I. 8.
321 Ibid., p 34.
322 MMK, I. 9.
323 MMK, I. 10.
“An effect made either of conditions or of non-conditions is, therefore, not evident. Because of the absence of the effect, where could conditions or non-conditions be evident?” 324

According to verse 9, Nagarjuna states that nothing real truly arises, there is nothing real that could cease, and thus no true conditionality is involved. And if something real possibly had arisen and then ceased, conditions are no longer possible. In verse 10, he states further that with no self-existent entities, there is nothing real to be the cause or condition for something else. An effect is not already in the conditions or we would see it there; but if it is not in the conditions and yet still arises, it is not related to the conditions at all. If the conditions are not real, how can any effect arising from them be real? 325 In verse 14 Nagarjuna makes a logical conclusion that if there is no real effect, then there is nothing to label a “condition;” and if there is nothing to label a “condition,” then there is nothing to contrast as a “non-condition”.

Analysis of the Movement in the chapter II of the Karika

In chapter II of the Karikas, an attempt is made to review the conception of impermanence, i.e., change or movement. Such reconsideration, like the examination of causality, was required not by a

324 MMK, I. 14.
desire to transcend it but by a desire to return to the original teachings of the Buddha.

It may seem peculiar for us that Nagarjuna puts this chapter of movement at the very beginning of his work, but he has good reasons for it because motion, after all, is a principal example of change and action. The argument is also a template for other arguments in the karikas; and it is directly related to the Buddhist soteriological concern of sentient beings moving through the cycling of rebirths (samsara).³²⁶

“How appropriate would be the movement of the present moving? For, the non-movement in the present moving is certainly not appropriate.”³²⁷

“A two-fold movement is implied in the movement of the present moving: that by which there comes to be present moving and, again, the movement itself.”³²⁸

“If two movements are allowed, it would follow that there would be two movers. For, separated from a mover, a movement is not appropriate.”³²⁹

³²⁶Ibid., p 104.
³²⁷MMK, II. 3.
³²⁸MMK, II. 5.
³²⁹MMK, II. 6.
“If it is thought that a movement separated from a mover is not appropriate, then, when no movement exists, how could there be a mover?” 330

These arguments in this chapter are: if the mover moves, then we have to separate the agent and the action into distinct, independent, self-existent entities. 331 If someone is mover without there being motion, then motion is separate and cannot occur because it is not connected to a mover. There would also be a mover without motion – but by definition, a mover moves, and so there can be no mover without movement.

There cannot be a mover that is not moving, so we cannot find a mover independent of the motion who has the motion. A mover must be moving and thus does not begin to move. A mover is labeled a “mover only once he or she is moving – there is no pre-existing, non-moving entity gaining a new attribute with a new action by a distinct entity.

Again, Nagarjuna is highlighting not only conceptual connections, but how our concepts of “moving” and “mover” seem to make independent entities – our conceptualizing-mind artificially parses up the situation into distinct realities and cannot put them back together again. 332

330 MMK, II. 7.
331 Richard H. Jones, Nagarjuna: Buddhism’s Most Important Philosopher, p 105.
332 Edward Conze, Selected Sayings from the Perfection of Wisdom, p 120.
“Movement is not begun in the moved, nor is it begun in the not moved. Neither is it initiated in the present moving. Wherein is then movement initiated?”

“Prior to the commencement of movement, there is neither the present moving nor the moved from which movement is initiated. How could there be a movement in the not moved?”

It is possible to note that in the concept presented in verse 12 and 13 in this chapter is familiar with the Greek Zeno’s arguments about the non-reality of motion. Consider Zeno’s example of an arrow in flight: the arrow either occupies the space it is in or another space. But it cannot occupy a space it is not in, and if it occupies the space it is in, then it is not moving – it cannot occupy more or less than the space it is in, so the arrow is not really moving at all. All movement and by extension all other types of changes are illusions.

However, verses 12 and 13 are apparently parallel to Zeno even if we do not spatialize the argument: motion cannot begin in something that is already moving or in what is not moving at all – so where can it being?

In fact, Nagarjuna is actually arguing the opposite of Zeno: Zeno and his mentor Parmenides thought change was an illusion, not part of

333 MMK, II. 12.
334 MMK, II. 13.
true reality; for Nagarjuna, entities and activities seen as self-existent realities are the illusion, and the constant flux of what is actually real is affirmed. That is, Nagarjuna affirms there is the (empty) motion and denies any self-existent realities are involved; the Greek denied the motion and affirmed permanent realities.

For Nagarjuna, a non-mover cannot be described in any terms of motion. This includes “non-motion” – if there is no motion, then there is nothing in reality to contrast with it, and so the concept of “non-motion” is meaningless. A “non-mover” is a change in a mover not someone who has not moved.

“As much as a mover is not stationary, so is a non-mover not stationary. Other than a mover and a non-mover, what third party is stationary?”

It can be noticed that there is a logical form in verse 15 which is x and not-x and not third possibility: this is an implicit recognition of the law of the excluded middle – everything is either one thing or its opposite, with no third possibility in between.

“One does not come to be stationary because one is either moving, or has moved, or has not moved. Movement,  

336 MMK, II. 15.
commencement and cessation (of movement) are all comparable to motion.”

A mover does not stop moving since one would no longer be a mover in the case. Verse 17 parallels the impossibility of anyone starting to move: no one can stop. We are either moving or not, and there is third state of transition between them; so whether we are moving or not, no one ever stops moving.

“The view that movement is identical with the mover is not proper. The view that the mover is different from motion is also not proper.”

“If movement were to be identical with the mover, it would follow that there is identity of agent and action.”

“If the discrimination is made that the mover is different from motion, then there would be movement without mover, and mover without movement.”

Verses 18-20 again reveal the problems caused if we treat motion and a mover as self-existent entities. Motion and a mover are not identical, if motion is the same as the one who moves, then when the act

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337 MMK, II. 17.
338 MMK, II.18.
339 MMK, II. 19.
340 MMK, II. 20.
of motion stops, the mover ceases too. But if they are distinct then there would be motion without a mover, and someone labeled “a mover” who does not move, which by definition is not possible. The next two verses reiterate the conceptual interdependence of the concepts of “motion” and “a mover.”

“Whose establishment is not evident either through identity or through difference, how is their establishment evident at all?”

In verse 21, Nagarjuna mentions establishing something for the first time. By “establishing,” he means establishing that something exists – i.e., proving something supposedly that supposedly exists by self-existence actually exists by self-existence, or proving the emptiness of something. Notice that is establishing that reality of something and not establishing a claim, as modern philosophers would do.

Since someone is not called “a mover” until he or she moves, there is no “mover” prior to the motion. But, on the other hand, this mover does not make a move other than the move by which he or she becomes called “a mover,” since only one move occurs; so someone who is called a “mover” does not make a new move.

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341 David J. Kalupahana, Buddhist Philosophy: A Philosophical Analysis, p 44.
342 MMK, II. 21.
343 David J. Kalupahana, Buddhist Philosophy: A Philosophical Analysis, p 45.
344 David J. Kalupahana, Buddhist Philosophy: A Philosophical Analysis, p 48.
“An existent mover does not carry out the movement in any of the three ways. Neither does a non-existent mover carry out the movement in any of the three ways. Nor does a person carry out a movement, both existent and non-existent, in any of the three ways. Therefore, neither motion, nor the mover, nor the space to be moved is evident.” 345

Verses 24-25 suggest that motion does not exist: a truly existing mover does not move, nor does a nonexistent mover, nor does an existing-and-non existing mover exist. Thus, a motion, a mover, and the place of the motion are not found. But again, he is not arguing that motion is an illusion as with Zeno.346 Rather, he is arguing that if self-existent entities were involved, there could be no real motion and no real mover. Since we obviously see motion, Nagarjuna’s opponent’s premise of self-existence must be rejected. The result is an ontology of empty but nonetheless efficacious (and thus “real” in this sense) entities.347 Only motion as a substantive, self-generated reality is rejected.

The conclusion is very specifically stated in these two verses. It is not any kind of mover or movement that is rejected as being impossible. It is the really or substantially or independently existent mover or

345 MMK, II. 24-25.
346 David J. Kalupahana, Mulamadhyamakarika of Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way, p 41.
347 Ibid., p 42.
movement that is rejected. This is a criticism of eternalism. The opposite view, namely, a non-real, non-substantial and non-independent existence was the kind of impermanence advocated in annihilationism which, in the Buddhist context, is commensurate with momentary destruction, rather than the impermanence advocated by the Buddha on the basis of "dependent arising".\textsuperscript{348}

The combination of the two metaphysical views of existence and non-existence does not lead to a happy synthesis.\textsuperscript{349} Change and impermanence understood in this metaphysical way do not contribute toward a reasonable and empirical explanation of the motion, the mover, or even the space moved.

\textsuperscript{348}Ibid., p 42.
\textsuperscript{349}David J. Kalupahana, \textit{Buddhist Philosophy: A Philosophical Analysis}, p 50.