



Asian Classics Institute

The Wisdom of Arya Nagarjuna
Course One: The Eight Invisibles
Class 1—Getting to Know Arya Nagarjuna
Homework Master

*1) What was the one event in his life that defined Arya Nagarjuna, and what is his position in the Buddhist tradition?

[Nagarjuna’s direct perception of emptiness defined his entire life and teachings. He is considered to represent the “Second Time the Buddha Came to This Earth,” and his teachings on emptiness form the entire basis of this most important Buddhist subject of all time. He is also renowned for reviving the bodhisattva ideal in Buddhism: the Wish to become enlightened in order to help all living beings—which can only be accomplished if we see emptiness directly. This fact is reflected in the use of the word “ultimate bodhichitta” to describe this direct perception.]

2) What are the four principal sources that we will be using for our study of the teachings of Arya Nagarjuna? (Give titles, authors, and their dates.)

[First of all we will be using Arya Nagarjuna’s most famous work of all time, which is called simply *Wisdom*. (It also has a subtitle, which is “Root Verses on the Middle Way”; and was written around 200AD.) Our primary source of explanation will be the extraordinary *Ship for Crossing the Ocean of Emptiness*, composed by Choney Lama Drakpa Shedrup (1675-1748).

This itself is a commentary upon *The Ocean of Emptiness*, which is the deep and masterful explanation of Nagarjuna’s classic by the unparalleled Je Tsongkapa, Lobsang Drakpa (1357-1419). We will also be referring to a shorter commentary by Choney Lama which focuses only upon difficult points in *Wisdom*; its title is simply that!]

3) What is another, very famous explanation of the information covered in Arya Nagarjuna’s *Wisdom*?

[This is *Entering the Middle Way*, written by Master Chandrakirti (c. 650AD); in fact, the “middle way” in the title is a reference to a common nickname of Nagarjuna’s *Wisdom*.

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Chandrakirti's explanation is the foundational work for almost all later explanations of emptiness, especially in Tibet.]

4) What is the first thing that Choney Lama covers, and why, in his exquisite commentary to Arya Nagarjuna's *Wisdom*?

[The very first thing that Choney Lama does in his commentary is to bow down to his teachers. This is in recognition of the fact that we cannot study about emptiness, nor come to see emptiness directly, unless we have someone in our life to act as our personal spiritual guide in doing so. This is a basic truth repeated in all teachings on emptiness, and cannot be ignored.]

5) Six of Arya Nagarjuna's most famous works are often grouped together. Give the name of the group; explain this name; and state the relationship between them in a single sentence. Then name the six works. After each name, give a tiny description of what subject that book covers.

[Arya Nagarjuna's six most famous works are known as the "Six Books of Reasoning," meaning they present reasons and proofs for the idea that all things are empty, and that by understanding this emptiness we can free ourselves and all other living beings from pain. The first of the six—*Wisdom*—is the foundation of the other five, which are considered offshoots of it. Here are the names and subjects of the six:

(1) *Wisdom*

Proves that, as objects of our awareness, all things are empty of any nature of their own.

(2) *Smashing Mistaken Ideas to Dust*

A demonstration that the subject state of mind which perceives emptiness is the key to freedom from our negative emotions, and becoming an enlightened being who can directly help all living beings.

(3) *Seventy Verses on Emptiness*

An explanation of why—even though they are empty—things can still do what they do, with no problem at all.

(4) *Defeating Every Argument*

A clarification of how the very processes of proving and disproving ideas are themselves empty, and yet still function perfectly.

(5) *Sixty Verses on Reasoning*

A demonstration that a viewpoint free of the extremes of thinking that things exist as they seem to—or else cannot exist at all—is the key for freedom from our negative emotions.

(6) *The String of Precious Jewels*

A demonstration that the same viewpoint just mentioned is, furthermore, the key to total enlightenment.]

*6) Give the title of our book in Sanskrit—using simplified English pronunciation—and then give Choney Lama’s explanation of the meaning of each of the words in the title, along with useful English cognates. Please also give the full title in English!

[The title of our book, in Sanskrit, is *Prajna Nama Mula Madhyamaka Karika*. In English, this is *Wisdom: Root Verses on the Middle Way*.

Prajna

The perfection of wisdom: An understanding of how nothing is not coming from our the seeds in our own mind, coupled with a desire to save all living beings, ourselves

Cognates:

For *pra* (“forward,” or “best”)—*proud* (up front), *forward* (frontways), *proud* (consider self best)

For *jna* (“to know”)—*to know* (the *j* in the original explains the *k* in the English); *ignorance* (meaning *not-knowing*); *to recognize*

Nama

Meaning “named”; i.e., “the book named *Wisdom*.” The position of this word in the title confirms that the name that Arya Nagarjuna—the master of Less Is More—meant for the book is simply *Wisdom*.

Cognates: *name*, *nominal*, *to nominate*

Mula

Meaning “root.” This work is the *root* of practically every other correct explanation of emptiness there is in this world.

Cognate: *mural* (coming from a word for “wall, steady foundation”); *ammunition* (coming from words for “steadfast or foundational protection”)

Madhyamaka

Meaning “of the middle way”: staying on the path to liberation, without straying off to either extreme, of thinking that things must exist the way they seem to; or if they do not, then they cannot exist at all.

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Cognates: *middle, medium, moderate*

Karika

Root meaning of “made,” or “set”; that is, *set* in poetry—in lines of verse, for this is how Arya Nagarjuna presents most of his masterpieces.

Cognates: for the Sanskrit root */kir (to do)* here—*karma, create, crescent (growing), cereal (grown grain)*]

*7) What is the goal of our study of Arya Nagarjuna’s *Wisdom*?

[To see emptiness directly, which puts us on an unstoppable track to reach enlightenment within 7 lifetimes, and then be of direct and perfect service to all the countless beings in this universe.]

Meditation assignment:

Twice a day, do round 1 of the Lion’s Dance in a careful, enjoyable way spending as long as you have time to at each level—but still staying comfortable and inspired.

Meditation dates and times:

Please note that homeworks submitted without dates & times will not be accepted.