

Comments on Vyavaharasiddhi

Nagarjuna — DIALECTICAL · Nagarjuna

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Establishment of Convention
(Six verses from a Lost Text)
(Vyavaharasiddhi)
by Nagarjuna

\ #1.

\ One syllable is not a mantra; many syllables are not a mantra either. Dependent upon syllables that are [thus] insubstantial, this [mantra is neither existent] nor non-existent.

¢(i.e. Emptiness of whole and parts because of conceptual interdependence: The whole and its parts, like the effect and its aggregate of causes and conditions, are empty of inherent existence because they are conceptually interdependent. One cannot exist without the other. But this doesn't mean that they are completely non-existent either. They are still dependently arisen and functional. They are not existent, not non-existent, not both, not neither. The mantras may not be absolute, but they are still efficient in some occasions.)

\ #2.

\ Likewise, no medicine appears apart from its specific ingredients. It appears [like] an illusory elephant: It is not [identical with them] nor is it [absolutely] different from them.

¢(i.e. Everything is like an illusion: Since everything is empty of inherent existence because dependently arisen, then everything should be seen as like an illusion.

¢-- The non-duality of whole and parts: The whole and its parts, like cause and effect, are not different, not the same. They are inseparable, non-dual: not two, not one.

¢-- Medicine here refers to all the adapted skillful means (like mantra, renunciation, morality, meditation, love, compassion, Bodhicitta, ...), all the virtuous methods, used along the path. They may not be inherently existing, or absolute methods, but they are still dependently arisen and functional. It is not because everything is empty of inherent existence that they are completely non-existent, useless, meaningless, and that we should drop them all immediately. So there is no absolute [path], only adapted skillful means.)

\ #3.

\ It arises in dependent co-origination! Who would maintain that it is existent or non-existent? [Similarly,] visual consciousness arises based on [eye and form].

¢(i.e. Everything is empty because of co-dependently arisen, but still functional: Anything dependently arisen is necessarily empty of inherent existence, but still not completely

non-existent either. There is no exception; all dharma are like that.

¢-- The non-duality of the consciousness and the world: Even consciousness is co-dependently arisen with the sense organs and the objects of perception. One cannot exist with or without the others. Thus there is no real consciousness, no real world, no real impartial perception of an independent world by true sense organs.)

\ #4.

\ Projected by the power of karma and passions, the appropriator arises out of existence. Form arises likewise. Who would maintain its existence or non-existence?

¢(i.e. The non-duality of the self and the five aggregates: The self (owner) and its five aggregates are also co-dependently arisen. One cannot exist without the other. They are not different, not the same; not two, not one. They are not existent, not non-existent, not both, not neither.)

\ #5.

\ Similarly, all the [twelve] members of existence are [simply] conventional designations. All the dharmas, such as extinction, have [only] been advocated [by the Buddhas] for a specific purpose.

¢(i.e. There is no real dependent origination, no real extinction / Liberation: The twelve steps of the Wheel of Dependent Origination are also like that: empty of inherent existence because co-dependently arisen; not existent, not completely non-existent, not both, not neither. All dharmas are like that; there is no exception at all. Even the extinction called Liberation is empty of inherent existence, only another adapted skillful means, but not an absolute. How could there be a real extinction when there is no real origination and inherent existence. Samsara and Nirvana are not different, not the same. Beings in samsara and Buddhas are not different, not the same. So there is nothing to do or cease, nothing to get or drop, no absolute path to follow, but that doesn't mean that we should drop all paths and fall into the other extreme of nihilism. Even if there is no absolute good and bad, there is still relative good and bad, still conventional truths and laws.)

\ #6.

\ Just as a mantra is not a mantra and medicine is not medicine, so [all phenomena] are stated to be dependent. Neither of the two [i.e., cause or effect] can be established [as existing independently].

¢(i.e. Emptiness and non-duality of cause and effect because of interdependence: The concept of Dependent Origination, or causality, itself is empty of inherent existence because there is no real cause and effect. Cause and effect are empty of inherent existence because interdependent. One cannot exist without the other. They are co-dependently arisen. They are not different or separate, not the same or simultaneous. Dependent Origination, or causality, is not existent, not non-existent, not both, not neither.

¢-- In short there is no absolute determinism, but still no absolute chaos; no absolute control, but still some control. We are conditioned by our accumulated karma, but we can still break free. There is no absolute path, but there is still the possibility of Liberation.)

[End]

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