

## Episode 403: Into the Watery Depths

Back in the second century, some 700 years after the Buddha, the evolution of the Middle Way tradition took a powerful turn with the arrival of the young Indian ‘spiritual prodigy,’ Nagarjuna.

One of the most original and influential thinkers of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, Nagarjuna brought to the fore the subtle meanings implicit in the *Prajnaparamita* or *Transcendent Wisdom* sutras, the Buddha’s most essential teachings.

Nagarjuna’s own illustrious treatise on the subject, *Mula-madhyamaka-karika* or *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way* spread throughout Tibet, China, and Japan. We see Nagarjuna’s influence on the Middle Way just about everywhere at this point, evidenced by the fact that we are talking about him just now!

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According to the mystical interpretation of his life, Nagarjuna dove into the watery realm of the *Nagas*—magnificent half human, half ophidian spirits—who fiercely safeguarded a collection of authentic *Prajnaparamita* texts. The Naga King, *Viru-pak-sha*, released them to Nagarjuna, who brought them back to human ground.

Whether this story is true or not, is for *you* to decide. But what cannot be denied is that Nagarjuna made explicit the definitive meaning of the Buddha’s teachings on *Prajnaparamita*. Which, due to their profundity and cryptic presentation, may otherwise have fallen into obscurity.

But the wisdom experience of *Prajnaparamita* was alive in Nagarjuna, and this compelled him to re-introduce that tradition to the world in a fresh way. Nagarjuna’s legacy is an approach, an enduring philosophical framework of reasoning, that provides a “way in” to the authentic meaning of the original sutras.

By virtue of the enormity of his service to the *Prajnaparamita* sutras—the Buddha’s most profound body of teachings—we refer to Nagarjuna as the father of the *Middle Way* or *Madhyamaka* school.

Although innovative, Nagarjuna’s presentation of *Prajnaparamita* remained true to the Buddha’s emphasis on inquiry as the methodology and spirit of approach. Like the Buddha’s, *Nagarjuna’s* approach asserts the certitude that comes from seeing things for oneself.

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Welcome to Open question: A Call to Inner Brilliance. Our theme for this season is *The Self: Walking the Middle Way Path*. I'm Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel and this is OQ 403: *Into the Watery Depths*.

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Once, while paying homage to the Buddha, Nagarjuna said something that will make you curious. He said: "*I prostrate to he who has abandoned all views.*" What did Nagarjuna mean by "*views*" here? Why did the Buddha abandon them? Is it possible to *not* have views? And what about "*the View of emptiness*" or "*the Middle Way View?*" Does Nagarjuna suggest we abandon those too? These questions prime us for an adventure into the world of Middle Way Wisdom.

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"What *is* a view?" you may wonder.

In the broadest sense, a view describes the spacial array of our visual field from any given vantage point at any particular moment in time. A view can be a vista, that portion of space in our rear view mirror, or the marvels we behold through the narrow lens of a telescope.

We, the onlookers of these infinite ever-changing landscapes, play an integral part in defining them. After all, where does a view stand if no one perceives it? Knower and known, subject and object arise in dependence upon each other, making one wonder: *Does the world illuminate mind, or does mind illuminate its world?* There's something poetic and slightly mysterious here.

And amid all this mingling together of seeing and knowing, we are connecting dots, interpreting data and trying to make sense of the life we encounter. "Points of view" congeal into opinions, biases, ideologies and even philosophical, spiritual and political orthodoxies. These are not direct experiences, but *ideas* that shape the way we see things. Sometimes they support us and sometimes they don't.

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So, what do you think: is it possible to *not* have views?

I'd say we always have a point of view... but that doesn't necessarily mean we always see clearly. In fact, the way in which we behold our world creates the cause for either liberation or confusion.

And that's why *how* we see is so important. And *why* Nagarjuna dove into the depths of the Naga realm to retrieve those ancient Prajnaparamita sutras. We need teachings that elucidate what it means to "see clearly."

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In spirituality, the conceptual mind commonly gets a bad rap. So I want to defend it here.

Our ability to have *points of view* by extracting meaning from experiences; by designating words to things in order to communicate; and by dividing and categorizing things into specific groups through identifying common characteristics—these are natural functions of conceptual mind. I doubt we could successfully navigate life without it. Why would we block our discerning intelligence? And can we?

However, confusion arises when we mistake conceptual mind for the *open-dimensional* nature of life itself. Let me explain. Maps orient us as we traverse the terrain, let's say, of a hiking trail. The trail itself looks nothing like the map; it is vibrant and teeming with life. We feel the coolness of the breeze on our skin, we discover short cuts, and resting places. We sit on a rock under the shade of an ancient piñon tree. We don't confuse a map for its territory. We know that, although it serves a function, life is too lively for the likes of a map.

Ironically though, when it comes to how we view our world, we tend to assume that things are limited to what we think of them. In other words, we confuse the designations we use to identify things with their lively and rambunctious nature.

This is not just a theory. We could call this *reification*. Reification sounds like a technical term, but it's quite experiential, I assure you.

Sometimes, we will read a news headline that evokes in us a strong reaction. We may know little to nothing about the backstory of the event or consider the bias of its presentation. We cling to the headline as a singular idea—like a map—as if removing the occurrence from the ever-changing confluence of interrelated elements that define it. Reactive mind sticks to the headline. It doesn't give a damn about details.

And so we don't stop to consider, for instance, that the individuals involved are, in fact, a mother's son, maybe a sister, a father, a friend. Consider them in the context of their interdependent nature. This leads to a heart-opening and humanizing experience. But that would require us to bear the open-dimensionality of *being*.

Unfortunately, we tend to default to the familiar. And so without taking in nuance, or asking a question, we proceed to reification, which distorts our view of the object or situation in question *and* disturbs our mind.

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Even reifying someone in a favorable way can have a dehumanizing effect. Years ago, my friend shared with me her dismay, when, at her father's funeral, everyone portrayed him like a saint. She confided in me that he was often, as she described him, "*A prickly pear cactus!*"

We often think of deification as a sign of respect, but here, my friend was expressing love for the fullness of her father's humanity.

To demonize or deify another human being reduces them to a singular idea...it doesn't allow for the complexity of who they are. Therefore, I always try to remind myself that the greatest expression of respect I can afford anyone (and this includes myself!) is *not* to assume I know who they are in a determinate way.

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Emerging from reification, through recognizing the nature of infinite contingencies—*pratityasamutpada*—is the experience of liberation from distorted views and disturbing emotions. In essence, this is what Nagarjuna meant by *abandoning views*, in his homage to the Buddha.

The Middle Way teachings center around the cultivation of *Prajna*: a Sanskrit word that is often translated as "accurate discernment". The use of the term *accurate* here doesn't allude to adopting a particular idea or philosophy. It refers to accurately discerning dependent arising as the *nature* of all things.

Dependent arising—or *Pratityasamutpada*—sets things right through disrupting our distorted views of reality. This is why the topic of dependent arising lies as the very epicenter of the Middle Way path. You might say that *Pratityasamutpada* is the "hero"—the *wisdom protagonist*—of our Middle Way story.

As we look at the mechanics of both delusion and liberation, we realize that dependent arising is not a mere idea, but the process of emerging out of deep misunderstandings we have about reality, into *clear unobstructed seeing*.

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*Prajna*, or accurate seeing, becomes our formal practice on the Middle Way path. In accordance with the nature of *Pratityasamutpada*, we use analysis to "loosen" or "set free" reified views through what I like to call "The liberating practice of looking and not finding."

Here we encounter a playful challenge: *Can we find "a thing"—either conscious or material—that exists outside the nature of Pratityasamutpada? That is not comprised of parts, or "in" relationship with other things?*

Because we have chosen to explore the Self this season, let's make the Self the focus of our contemplation in this episode. We'll engage a classic investigation into looking for a Self that is singular or whole, something that is *not* made of parts.

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In hearing this challenge, you may assume that you can find a singular self. Or you may assume that you can't! And that's fine. But the point is to search, because the process will yield unexpected information about the nature of things.

The point of analysis is *not* aimed at negating the function or appearance of the Self. So let's establish that the self is a useful designation—a map.

As we walk the terrain of the Self, we come across aggregations of conscious and material experience, known in the Buddhist tradition as *skandhas* or heaps, that constitute all aspects of human experience. We could zoom in on any aspect of experience, but let's focus on our physical form as the object of investigation as we continue to walk the territory of the Self.

Notice that our maps keep shifting. We began with the Self and now we will walk the terrain of the physical body. It becomes our new map.

While walking the terrain of the body, we encounter a vast array of parts: a knee, an elbow, a joint, limbs, blood, bone, heart and so on. If the body were a singular whole (not made of parts), it would be inert. The movement and function of our body is made possible through the dynamic of its parts, working together, searching for balance in the field of gravity.

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Now the map shifts again. When we walk the territory of these parts, we again find a confluence of smaller interrelated parts...that break into more parts, and then particles or atoms.

It may interest you that in ancient Greece the term for *atom* referred to something that couldn't be broken or cut, something that resisted analysis. There has been a lot of scientific exploration since then. Atoms are no longer seen as unbreakable. In fact, entire universes of phenomenal surprises have burst from the confines of their so-called unbreakable nature.

During the 1950s and 60s physicists discovered a variety of particles—quarks, strings, leptons, gluons—that they referred to as the *particle zoo*.

The point here is that as long as you can locate a singular object, a thing, whether it be a theory or an animate or inanimate object, it is susceptible to analysis.

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Doing this investigation yields important information that we don't want to miss. Notice that this process of *looking and not-finding* neither affirms nor denies the existence of a Self. Whether something exists or not has no consequence for our experience of the Self.

We looked for a singular Self and although we didn't find one, it didn't negate our experience in the least. In fact, it just seemed to yield more life.

Looking and not finding challenges us to consider what it would be like to behold our world without clinging to the designations of existence or nonexistence. Existence and nonexistence are dualistic concepts impossible to reconcile. This is why looking directly into the nature of things, as we have been doing, is so powerful.

Can we bear not defaulting to the habit of reification? Can we bear that life will always be free or empty of the “thingness” we assign it? That the map can never fully represent the territory?

These are essential Middle Way questions.

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When we see clearly that life will always be free or empty of the *thingness* we assign it, that is Prajnaparamita. Prajnaparamita is unconfused about the nature of her object; she is poised for insight into the empty nature of all things. She is the subject, and Pratityasamutapada—the nature of infinite contingencies—is her object.

But, we might ask: *Isn't that just another view?*

When we check into a hotel, we make sure we ask for a room with a view. We want to open the shutters and take in an unimpeded view of the seaside or mountain range.

The view of emptiness or the Middle Way view refers to seeing clearly without the extraneous misunderstandings that come from reification. Of course, we *could* reify emptiness or Prajnaparamita and make them a thing...there's nothing like a little reification to turn any living experience into a dogma. So take care!

Prajnaparamita refers to our ability to bear witness to the nature of infinite contingencies. We might call *that* a *Viewless View*.

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The essential Indian text *The Uttara Tantra Shastra* describes the View-less View as follows:

*There is nothing to add,  
not a single thing to be removed,  
in seeing things as they are,  
that is liberation*

As this verse suggests, we don't have to remove or *abandon* anything. It is merely in seeing things accurately that mind is liberated.

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In the *Dhammapada sutra*, the Buddha made a declaration of sorts at the time of his awakening by saying:

*"House-builder, you're seen! You will not build a house again. All your rafters broken, the ridge pole destroyed, gone to the Unformed, the mind has come to the end of craving."*

*[Dhammapada, verse 154]*

The Buddha is calling out the impediments to clear seeing. He compares awakening to the collapse of a house, once its supporting beams have been removed.

The house is our delusion, and the supporting beams, our mistaken views. *Reification, the nails and mortar, hold it all in place.*

This verse makes it plain that the Buddha did not emerge from confusion to create a new ideology, and that his awakening was not a mere construct or philosophy. His was a Viewless View—one that reveals itself when everything extraneous to its nature falls away.

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In Tibetan, the word for Buddha is *Sang-gye*. This word gives us a window into the Buddha's process of awakening. The first syllable, *Sang*, means "to purify"—referring to the collapse of confusion, through seeing clearly.

The second syllable, *gye*, means to blossom. But as there is nothing to add or remove, the awakening being, the buddha, naturally emerges from the veils of confusion like the sun emerging from the clouds.

And this is why Nagarjuna paid homage to the Buddha by saying "I prostrate to he who has abandoned all views."

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Please join us **live on August 19th at 2 pm Mountain Time** for our next OQ Live conversation with Andy Karr: The Liberating Practice of Looking and Not Finding.

Andy has studied with many great masters, including Shun-ryu Suzuki Roshi, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso. He has authored several excellent books: *Contemplating Reality; The Practice of Contemplative Photography*; and his latest book, *Into the Mirror*. Andy is the perfect guest for OQ Live because he has a special gift for diving into challenging topics without watering down their meaning. I look forward to talking with him about the topic of views, his upcoming book, and the historical evolution of the Middle Way Path.

For more info visit [middlewayinitiative.org](http://middlewayinitiative.org)

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