

**Dogen Sangha Summer Sesshin at 'Earth Spirit'
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**Talk Number 1:
Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika, Introduction**

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Before I start the talks, a couple of things:

The first thing is: As many of you know, my wife and Buddhist companion for thirty years, Yoko, can't be here this year, but she sends her greetings to everybody. I just spent a month in Japan with her. Unfortunately she can't travel; she has a problem with her back, so she is stuck in Japan. But we recorded a short video with a little message from her. As it is on my laptop, I suggest that in the free time I'll set it up and play it to any of you who want to listen to her message. She says hello; she misses everyone.

The second thing: Are there any questions about Zazen? As Zazen is kind of the centre of what we do, so if we have anything we want to talk about regarding Zazen it is important we do so.

Can we hear your version of the Heart Sutra?

Nobody quite knows whether *Heart Sutra* that we just chanted originated in Sanskrit or whether it was written in Chinese. There are some suggestions that Nagarjuna wrote it, but I don't think they hold water. It's a sutra, a chant. If it originated in Sanskrit, it is a bit longer than what we chant. If you look at the Sanskrit original, it has a beginning and an ending.

Very, very, very roughly this is what it is about: Gautama Buddha is having a weekend retreat and everybody is gathered together and one of the senior disciples asks him: "If we get young people coming to practice Zazen, what should we tell them?" And one of the other senior disciples answers and says: "We should tell them that when you sit in Zazen, you drop off all conceptualisations. You don't think about the world, you don't imagine the world in terms of words, concepts, things. There are no ears, no eyes, no noses, no heads, no fingers, no recorders. When we sit in Zazen, the world is whole, undifferentiated. And in that undifferentiated state we can notice the nature of reality. This having been said, Gautama Buddha says: "Right on; that's exactly it. Well done, all the gods in heaven will be happy."

On our Dogen Sangha website there is a Sanskrit version and my translation and also an interpretation I wrote. If you translate it literally, the phrases are quite archaic. And if you don't read the beginning and ending which aren't in the version you chant, then you can't see that it is talking about Zazen. So it is a description of the state in Zazen, the simple state, where in Dogen's terms we cast aside images in our mind and thoughts and just sit – which we find difficult.

Anything else about Zazen?

OK; so I'll go on to Nagarjuna: I didn't know anything about Nagarjuna until about 1990 when Nishijima Roshi, my teacher in Japan, started reading about one of his works. It turns out nobody else knows anything much about Nagarjuna. If you Google Nagarjuna you get enough pages to keep you going for a couple of months, but if you read about who he was, it seems that nobody really knows very much historically, in a scholarly way. It is not completely clear exactly when he lived, exactly where he lived, exactly what he wrote, but he is revered in Buddhism.

There are lots of articles on the Internet, but this is one I printed off and I will read you the first paragraph: "It has been said that after the Buddha, the single most important figure in the entire Buddhist tradition was a monk named Acharya Nagarjuna, sometimes called the second Buddha. As is the case with many religious giants, we know little about the historical Nagarjuna. Scholars usually placed him some time in the late second century B.C. but he may have lived a hundred years before or after that period. According to tradition, Nagarjuna was a scholar monk at Nalanda University, the great Buddhist centre of learning in North-East India. Although we know him through his body of writings, we don't really know how many Nagarjunas there actually were, for it is unlikely that all the works attributed to him were written by the same person. There may well have been three or four monks all writing under the same name. We do know that Nagarjuna's writings are the basis for the *Madhyamaka* or the 'Middle Way' School of Buddhism and that Nagarjuna himself became the most influential figure in the development of *Mahayana* Buddhism, which had begun to emerge during the first century B.C. out of disagreements within the Indian sangha about the path to enlightenment. This is despite the fact that his writings never mention many of the main *Mahayana* ideas such as the *Bodhisattva* ideal or the 'identity of form and emptiness', and so on..."

There are a few articles – there is a long entry in *Wikipedia* and so on – I printed them all off and I'll leave them lying about on this table. So if anybody likes reading, they can read these articles about the historical facts.

I got to know about Nagarjuna through my teacher and with my teacher we started studying the Sanskrit original of one of his main works which most scholars agree is definitely his. There is a lot of controversy about many works that he is supposed to have written, but almost everyone agrees about this one central work. It is called in Sanskrit '*Mulamadhyamakakarika*'.

The original writings of Buddhism that have been preserved, the *Tripitaka*, were all written in Pali. Pali is a kind of dialect of Sanskrit. The grammar is slightly simpler, but it is very, very similar. If you know Sanskrit, you can more or less understand Pali and vice versa. Nagarjuna wrote in Sanskrit, but he wrote about ideas that had been recorded a lot of the time in Pali. So both languages come into it.

'*Mula*' - (I won't put the accents in; the accents in Sanskrit just tell you whether to make the pronunciation long or short) – '*madhyamaka*' – '*karika*': *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, which some people call MMK for short.

'*Mula*' means 'fundamental' or 'basic' or 'root' or any other words that you can find that have that kind of meaning of 'deepest, most fundamental, root'. '*Madhyamaka*' means the 'middle' as an abstract noun, in the sense of the 'middle way' which is a common Buddhist concept, but actually only means 'the middle'. '*Karika*' means a verse or a poetic work or a work in verse or verses. So '*Mulamadhyamakarikā*' means 'fundamental middle verses' or 'fundamental verses of the middle' because 'middle' is a noun. So a good translation would be: 'Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way', or something like that.

There have been at least six translations into English; the first one was back in the 1960s, the latest one before mine is by Stephen Batchelor – I am sure many of you have heard of him. He calls his translation 'Verses from the Centre' and his work is based on Nagarjuna's work, very beautifully written and rather poetic. Stephen Batchelor is an excellent writer, but his version is not actually a translation of Nagarjuna's work; it's based on Nagarjuna's work and conveys the meaning of some of Nagarjuna's work, but some parts are missing. He missed out chapters which are very difficult. So he calls it 'Verses from the Centre'; everybody can make up their own meaning for that but it means something about explaining the middle way in Buddhism.

Nagarjuna's MMK is not very long: It is 27 chapters and each chapter has between 10 and 30 verses and the verses each have four lines. The lines don't rhyme but there is a certain kind of rhythm to the way it is written. Although it is not a huge work, it seems to be very, very difficult to understand. As I said, there are at least six different translations into English. If you read them, you will find a lot of differences between them. Some of the translation make no sense to me at all and others, for instance Stephen Batchelor's, are just very beautiful, but not necessarily very accurate.

I actually did not have any intention to translate it originally or to publish a book, but once I started it, I didn't stop and some people encouraged me to make it into a book and publish it. I'm not a scholar; some of the people who have translated it are Buddhist scholars. That means they have studied a lot of the early Buddhism and early works and the people, the names, the concepts and so on in great detail. I can't claim to have done that, but in translating Nagarjuna's work I did have to start probing into some of those early works to see what they were talking about. It's not a scholarly translation – my purpose was simply to see if Nagarjuna said the same kind of thing that Dogen said. So I had a kind of bias to start with. I was looking for the same things that Dogen said in what Nagarjuna said. What kind of effect that has had on the translation I can't judge, I am too close to it.

I found it very, very difficult to do and I was very unsure about whether I should make a book of it or not. It would stand next to scholars like Stephen Batchelor, people who are well-known, even huge names in the Buddhist field. But something in me thought 'Well, why not? I'll publish what I have done and other people can judge.' And while doing that I thought, 'If I publish all the translations from Sanskrit as well, then people who are Sanskrit scholars or other people who are interested in the actual translation process can look at it, pull it to pieces,

decide where I have made mistakes and work from there'. So the book is a kind of part of a process; it is by no means complete. It doesn't contain a full explanation, even of what I wanted to do. But it contains a kind of record of the work I did over nine years.

Having finished the book I felt relieved, but I haven't talked about it since I published it in 2002. One reason for that is that I have almost felt too close to it and I wanted to somehow let it drift away from me; then I could look at it again. It wasn't until this year when Sylvia suggested I talk about it that I thought 'Ok, I'll make a start'.

(Comment inaudible)

In my talks I have picked out bits of Nagarjuna before, but I have never tackled him head on. But because a lot of the things he says are so powerful and so exactly parallel to what Dogen says, it has been nice to quote some of his teachings.

This is a kind of experiment as I have not talked about him or the book before. The work was written in the second century or thereabouts which is a long time ago. Those of you who have studied Dogen with me know how difficult it is to understand something that was written eight hundred years ago by Dogen in a different language and a different culture. And Nagarjuna is further before Dogen than Dogen is before us. So the world was very different then and the way people talked about ideas was very different. The work is also very complex. All this makes it very difficult to attempt to interpret what this man must have been trying to say. In addition, the Sanskrit itself is often not clear. I have read all the translations that there have been so far and it's obvious that in some of the verses it's not clear what he is trying to say. It must have been clear to him, but it's not clear to us. That is reflected in my book as well; when you read some of the verses you might think 'What???' – Well, that is probably because it is not clear. Other verses are very clear.

I think the best thing to do is to start off from the general point of view and then maybe work gradually over the five talks towards the more specific. So I would like to give you a kind of overview, first of all of what is in the '*Mulamadhyamakakarika*', the subjects of the twenty-seven chapters if you like, and then generally work in from that.

One difficulty with the MMK is that parts of it seem to be criticisms of existing Buddhist ideas, that is to say ideas about Buddhism that existed in Nagarjuna's time. He doesn't often quote these specifically, but he criticises them. So he is criticising somebody without saying clearly who that somebody is or what that somebody believes. That makes it a little difficult somehow in certain chapters: 'Is he saying something or is he rebutting something?' 'Is it his own view or somebody else's view that he is stating?' Sometimes it is clear and sometimes it is not.

In Nagarjuna's time a lot of Buddhist teachings were based on the '*Abhidharma*'. Does anybody know anything about the *Abhidharma*? Well, the *Pali Text Society* is slowly translating all these works of Buddhism that were written in Pali and I have a book here that is a translation into English of a summary of the topics of

the *Abhidharma*. The *Abhidharma* is one of the three works of teaching of Buddhism and it was associated with what some people call *Hinayana* Buddhism or 'Small Vehicle' Buddhism. It's an incredibly analytical work; it is full of categories. It is actually almost impenetrable to me because everything is mentioned in terms of the twenty-seven so-and-so's, the thirteen so-and-so's, the four so-and-so's. Some of these have come through in other forms of Buddhism. Dogen often mentions 'the three poisons', 'the four worlds' and such like. In the *Abhidharma* there are hundreds of these categories and each category is explained: 'the sevenfold human beings', 'the four god kings', 'the thirty-three gods', 'four kinds of karma' – you just turn the pages and they are everywhere. It's very, very analytical. Everything is prescribed. It's like an attempt to describe the whole of the world in terms of categories. For instance, you might think of 'consciousness': 'How many different kinds of consciousness are there?' 'Ah, there are seventy-three'...and each one is described. How many different kinds of 'hate' are there? Twenty-one and they are described. It's all in here.

A lot of the early teachings of Buddhism were based on this. But because some people felt that it was like an imprisonment, that something which they wanted to be free and flexible had become rigid and imprisoning, there was a split in the Buddhist Sangha, I think about a couple of hundred years after the Buddha's death. This happened when *Hinayana* Buddhism and *Mahayana* Buddhism split. *Mahayana* Buddhists – they didn't call themselves that although we do – said: 'All these categories are too much. We can't live by categories.' They wanted something more fundamental, more free and uncategorized teachings. The other group, the *Hinayana* group ('*Hinayana*' means 'small vehicle' and '*Mahayana*' means 'large vehicle' – so I think the *Mahayana* Buddhists must have invented the terms) seem to have wanted rules to live by.

To come back to Nagarjuna, each chapter is entitled 'Examination of ...' or 'A Study of...'; so all the chapters are an examination of this or an examination of that. The Sanskrit word is '*pariksa*' and it means a 'study' or 'examination' or 'investigation into' and of course, you can translate it as you like.

The first chapter is an 'Examination or an Investigation into Conditions', '*Pratyaya*'. Here Nagarjuna talks about 'conditions'. What does he mean by 'conditions'? The conditions he is talking about are the conditions the *Abhidharma* set down for things to appear in the world. In the *Abhidharma* analysis of reality it is said that every entity comes into existence, stays in existence and then goes out of existence. 'Entity' means not only things, objects, but feelings and ideas, everything; so everything is coming into existence, existing and then dropping out of existence. They had this very complicated theory, even of priorities. So if something comes into existence while something else comes into existence, this one takes priority over that one and then that one drops out before this one. It reminds me of atomic physics in a way because what atomic physics is looking at is little particles appearing and streaking through hydrogen chambers and then disappearing again. So it is a kind of fundamental theory of matter, things coming into existence or arising, continuing in existence, presumably when we see them, like this one and then disappearing. It's much more difficult to accept that the theory is making any sense in today's world where we have a tremendous amount of knowledge about science, atoms and molecules and everything like that, and where we can construct things like a

tape recorder. What the *Abhidharmans* said is that everything has a cause or a condition for it to come into existence and of course they categorised all these different conditions for things to come into existence and then the conditions for them to stay in existence and so on.

In the first chapter of the MMK Nagarjuna refutes this view of the world. He says that he thinks that there are only four conditions and they are not conditions for things to come into existence and pass out of existence. They are more fundamental characteristics of reality. He says that the *Abhidharmans'* theory of conditions is for him a non-starter – it doesn't explain the world. But he doesn't reject four of their categories. He says four of them rather than being conditions for coming into existence they are fundamental characteristics of reality. The first two are: the abstract or ideal – reality always contains an abstract or ideal side and the physical or material: everything has a physical or material side. We know from general Buddhist teachings that a fundamental belief in Buddhism is that matter and spirit are one, body and mind are one – in other words, the Buddhist view is that everything had two sides, an abstract side and a physical side. But those two are only two sides of one thing. Human beings have an abstract side and a physical side; everything has an abstract side and a physical side. So those two conditions that Nagarjuna states are linked to the Buddhist belief in body and mind being one, or spirit and matter being one.

A third condition he says is immediacy; we actually exist in the present. We actually are always here in the present and the present is a kind of knife edge between past and future. But everything that happens always happens in the present. Although things have happened in the past and may happen in the future, everything that we experience is in the present. So his third fundamental characteristic (he uses the term 'condition' but we could call it a characteristic or even a 'belief', though that may be too abstract) is 'immediacy'.

His fourth characteristic of reality is the 'universal'. By the 'universal' he means – I mustn't use the word 'god' – but the universe as a whole is reality. There are a set of universal laws that govern reality and that reality includes the whole universe and is whole and undivided. So that is his fourth characteristic. He calls them 'conditions' – *pratyaya*; he uses the same word that the *Abhidharmans* used. But he has a different slant on them.

(Comment inaudible)

He doesn't say what they are characteristics of. So we can assume that they are characteristics, not of an entity, but of reality itself. We have to be a bit careful because there is a whole lot of teaching in Buddhism about the difference between entity and reality in the sense that in the Heart Sutra that Rob talked about it says that in reality, names and entities don't exist. This doesn't mean that there are no things, but that we don't '*thing*' them, we don't abstract them from the whole. So Nagarjuna's four *pratyayas* or conditions or characteristics are characteristics of reality.

What reality is, is the question. Is it a collection of little particles? That is what they are trying to find out at CERN at the moment – although they stopped for a few months – that is what they are looking for, the nature of reality, the nature of fundamental matter. Is reality composed of lots of little entities, which we'll

give names to? Or, for instance, as the physicist David Bohm has suggested, is it some deep, flowing flux in which little whirlpools appear and the little whirlpool might be me or you or a table or a chair? That is the big question.

Nagarjuna doesn't say these are characteristics of entities. So we can assume he means that these are characteristics of this thing which we don't know, that we live in. That's Chapter 1.

Maybe if you have questions about each chapter you should ask them now before I move on, rather than forgetting them - as long as they are easy questions. (Chuckles).

I have a question but I am not sure if it is about this chapter, but it is a question about the nature of reality.

Oh – I can answer that. (Laughter).

Do we need to know all this?

That's a very good question and I can't answer it. (Laughter) I can't answer it.

When we sit in Zazen, is this going to come into our consciousness and are we going to go 'Oh! I understand it all!' and sort of disappear and become god or something or can we just get by without actually knowing?

I think the answer has to be first of all an individual one. Do I need to know this or am I happier going for a walk over nearby Dundon Beacon?

Is knowing this going to make a big difference to us? I get the impression from reading different things that somehow if you find the truth, it will make a huge difference to you and so we are trying to understand something that is almost un-understandable.

Yes, in that I think we're pursuing the same thing from a different angle as the physicists in the large hadron collider project. So hearing about that last week, ordinary people might ask 'Do we need to have this, twenty-seven kilometres of tunnel, billions and billions of dollars to smash little particles into each other? What are we going to find out from it? How will it make our lives better?' But with that project it's easier to see that, for instance, the technology developed to cool down the tubes might have spin-offs for medical science, for freezing embryos or something; the technology needed to make very efficient electrical generators that pass currents round very large areas without loss, will have spin-offs for making electrical wiring in houses more effective. So we can say, 'Ah, yes, we can see all the benefits coming out of that project, even though what they are actually trying to do is to smash atoms together, which is a ridiculously crude way to look at reality. But in Buddhism we are tackling it from a different aspect and it is very difficult to see if there might be any spin-offs, what they might be and why we are doing it.

If we sort of suppose things are as we imagine them to be, we don't have to think about them, about what is underneath our own way of thinking about them.

A lot of Buddhist teaching, a lot of Nagarjuna's teaching, is peering at our normal experience and saying something about it which is different from what we normally conclude.

Ah, right – so it is worth it because it is going to make us question ...

For me it's worth it; it has been worth it but at times I wonder whether it's worth it, what I am doing. But actually our life, anybody's life, is really choosing a way to live and then just carrying on with it. Some people choose to take a piece of metal in one hand and a hammer in the other hand and hit against a block of stone and carve little shapes and other people get little pieces of wire and string them on a big box and then scrape a piece of wood over it and make noises. We are all doing strange things and we find out individually whether we get some benefit or not. So you have to decide whether it is beneficial or not for you to study Buddhist teachings. What I am saying is that it's an individual decision.

I think the question is essentially about what you were saying earlier about the split in Buddhism; it's the same question with the higher and lower vehicle. It is about 'Do we need all this to live our lives well in relation to ourselves and others and the natural world?'. It's in that spirit of enquiry.

Yes, I understand and what I am saying is saying is 'You have to answer it yourself'. So you can go off with the *Mahayanists* or the *Hinayanists* or you can hover in the middle and decide later.

Mike, does it help you understand Master Dogen any better?

Ah, yes, very much. Whether it has helped me to live my life better, I can't answer.

Because you haven't got a 'you' that you can compare it to. Is that right?

Yes, it's a valid question. Yes.

A striking comparison immediately, isn't it? As there are four conditions and Nishijima's four views used to decode Dogen. It must have been quite a shock when you came up against that? Or was it the other way round? Did it inform his thinking?

It did inform his thinking, yes. It captured his attention, yes.

Can I ask a question about the actual translation? You said the spiritual and material are separate but in the four causes 'hetus' it doesn't say anywhere in your translation 'spiritual'. You have got 'the four conditions are causal, objective, immediate and universal'; so 'causal' and 'spiritual'; can you say something about this?

Well, '*hetus*' actually means 'reason' as well as 'cause'; so 'reason' is abstract. Reasons for things are explanations we need. You can't find a 'reason' anywhere in this room, can you? It's abstract. So the Sanskrit word '*hetus*' means both 'reason' and 'cause', because in ancient India, in the ancient world, they hadn't yet started the investigation into reality which we call science. So even their 'causes' were in a way conjectured and it hasn't been until hundreds of years later that we started investigating what we call 'cause'. We think of 'cause' as physical, don't we, usually, because of the influence of science? So '*hetus*' is abstract.

No relation to 'spiritual'? You said 'spiritual' material earlier on, but...

Yes,...

*I don't really get the relationship between 'hetus' and 'spiritual'?
You said there is no divide between the two; earlier on did you say 'spiritual'?*

Spirit and matter, yes. In Buddhism there is no division between 'spirit' and 'mind' and 'abstraction' and 'conceptual'; they are all in the same area. Buddhism doesn't divide 'spirit' from 'mind'. For something abstract or mental or spiritual I use the same word.

So that is 'hetus' as well?

Not exactly; I am giving a kind of explanation of the chapter. If you would like to go through it on the Sanskrit basis, I will have to explain it in a different way, because I can't cope with explaining the actual meaning of the Sanskrit words at the same time as giving an overall overview.

I won't go on to Chapter 2 because I can't go through it in five minutes

The point that Peter (*last comment*) raised is actually important but I can't talk about everything at the same time. So what I'm going to try and do is to give a very rough overview of the chapters and then we can come back. I hope I won't take a whole talk for each chapter because that means we will have to have twenty-seven talks. I will speed up.

But this point is very valid: How do we take these words that are used in Sanskrit and understand them in modern terms? In the second century there was no investigation of physical matter, or only a very small amount. There were the 'materialists' who believed that what was hard and in front of you was the only reality and there were 'spiritualists' who believed that reality was somewhere else, in another world and we were just mirroring it. But there weren't the same kind of people who we have as scientists now, who actually investigate the nature of physical reality in a very detailed way. That reflects back on the use of the Sanskrit words and how we translate them. Actually it is very complicated and very difficult.

How can a word like '*hetus*' mean 'cause' and 'reason'? Certainly most people think that a 'cause' of something is something solid and definite. But the 'reason' for something has a slightly different meaning. Yet in Sanskrit the same word is used, i.e. which meaning is it? All those kinds of questions...

It's not that simple in 'Aristotle', like 'formal cause' and 'effective cause'...

Ah – I don't know very much about Aristotle apart from a general outline of his teachings. It must be the same translating from Greek, yes.

Would Dogen have read Nagarjuna?

Dogen read Nagarjuna a lot but he read him in a Chinese translation which was done in the third or fourth century by a man called *Kumarajiva*. *Kumarajiva's* mother was Indian and his father was Chinese; so he was bilingual I suppose and he translated lots of Sanskrit works into Chinese. However, scholars have suggested that he didn't do it all himself because there are a tremendous amount of translations attributed to *Kumarajiva*. He couldn't have done them all himself and it's thought that he must have had a group of people and gave the work out to them and so they all did a bit. It becomes quite clear when comparing some of his translations from Sanskrit into Chinese that there are mistranslations, some of them quite serious. He translated the Lotus Sutra into Chinese and there are omissions in that and errors and he also translated Nagarjuna's MMK into Chinese and there are differences and omissions in it without any doubt.

So Dogen studied Nagarjuna's work in Chinese and writes about it in the Shobogenzo.

(Comment inaudible)

He quotes Nagarjuna to support his own views, in several chapters, for instance in the chapter '*Bussho*' – which I have given talks on – he quotes Nagarjuna, a story about Nagarjuna, yes.

We'll stop there and continue this afternoon and I'll move through the chapters more quickly as I get used to it.

If anybody wants to browse these articles, I'll leave them on the table.

Thank you very much.