

Acintyastava

Hymn to the Inconceivable [Buddha]

Nagarjuna

Translated by Christian Lindtner

1. I bow down to the inconceivable, incomparable [Buddha] whose knowledge is unequalled, who has declared that [all] dependency arising things lack own-being.
2. Just as You personally understood the selflessness of phenomena in the Mahayana, so, swayed by compassion, You have demonstrated it to the wise [Bodhisattvas].
3. You have stated that [whatever] arises from conditions is unoriginated. You have clearly shown that it is not born through own-being and thus is empty.
4. Just as here in this world an echo arises in dependence on a sound, so also [all] existence arises like an illusion or mirage.
5. If illusions, mirages, cities of gandharvas, and reflections are unborn, along with dreams, [then as to] them there can be no [real] vision or any other [forms of sense knowledge].
6. Just as [things] arising from causes and conditions are handed down as composite, O Protector, You have said that the entire conditionally born [world exists only] by convention.
7. It is a meaningless [statement] enticing the simple-minded [that] something created exists as a whole! It is a false statement, [delusive] like an empty fist.
8. If a composite thing is not born, how then can it be present? If a thing [i.e., the cause] has been destroyed, it is done with; how then can it relate to what is about to arise?
9. A thing is not born from itself, [something] else, or both, whether it be existent, non-existent, or existent and nonexistent. How then can anything arise?
10. The unborn has no own-being, [so] how could it arise from itself? Nor can it arise from [something] else, since it is definitely established that there is no own-being.
11. If there were own-being there would be other-being; if other-being, own-being [could be] maintained. Establishment of those two has been stated [by You] to be correlative, like the far shore and the near.
12. When something is not related to anything, how then can that thing exist? For

example, when it is not related to 'long', how can 'short' exist?

13. When there is existence there is non-existence, as there is short when there is long. Since there is existence when there is non-existence, each of the two does not exist.

14. Unity and multiplicity, past and future and the like, defilement and purification, true and false — how [can they exist] by themselves?

15. When an entity does not exist entirely by itself, it certainly cannot exist as an [independent] whole. What is called 'other' does not exist without its own own-being.

16. When there are no 'other' things, there are no things with self-nature. Then what [kind of] seizure of materialism is [the concept of an independent] dependent [nature]!

17. [Since all things] are from the beginning born the same and pass into nirvana by their own nature, You have said that phenomena are in reality unborn.

18. You have, O Sage, shown that form and [the remaining skandhas] lack own-being, like foam, bubbles, illusions, clouds, mirages, and plantains.

19. If that which is perceived with the senses were real, the simple-minded would already have knowledge of reality. What then would knowledge of reality be worth?

20. You have stated that the senses are dull, unreliable, imprecise, and [sources of] wrong understanding.

21. Having deeply understood that no one has access to the truth, You have stated that this is why the world is shrouded in ignorance.

22. 'Exists' is the dogma of eternalism. 'Exists not' is the dogma of annihilation. [But] You have revealed the Dharma [of dependent co-origination], free from the two extremes.

23. Therefore You have said that phenomena are beyond the four categories. They are not knowable to consciousness, much less within the sphere of words.

24. Like a dream, an illusion, [or] seeing two moons: Thus have You seen the world, as a creation not created as real.

25. Like a son who is born, established, and dies in a dream, the world, You have said, is not really born, does not endure, and is not destroyed.

26. In a dream, whatever arises is experienced as resulting from causality. You maintain that all things are like this, both in their origination and their dissolution.

27. You have proclaimed that suffering born from desire and the other [poisons], as well as the klesas, the suffering of samsara, the completing of the [two] accumulations, and even liberation are like a dream.

28. When [someone] understands [something] as born or unborn, present or gone, bound or liberated, he maintains duality [and consequently] does not know the truth.

29. How can what does not arise pass into nirvana? Since it is like an illusory elephant it is in truth originally at peace.

30. Just as [we] assert that an illusory elephant, though [apparently] born, is not born, thus everything [apparently] born is in reality unborn.

31. Countless world-protectors have [apparently] led innumerable beings one by one into nirvana, but [in reality] not one [being] has been liberated by them!

32. Have you not clearly stated, O great Sage, that when those beings who attain nirvana are [in fact] not born [at all, then] no one is liberated by anyone?

33. Just as the work of a magician is empty of substance, all the rest of the world — including a creator — has been said by You to be empty of substance.

34. A creator created by another [creator] cannot avoid being created [and so is impermanent]. But [to say he creates himself] implies that the creator is the agent of the activity that affects him!

35. You have proclaimed everything merely a name. Nothing expressible is found apart from the expression.

36. Therefore You have declared that all phenomena are merely abstractions. Even the abstraction through which sunyata is conceived You have declared non-existent.

37-39. [That which] has transcended the duality of being and non-being, without however having transcended anything at all; that which is not knowledge or knowable, not existent or non-existent, not one or many, not both or neither; [that which is] without foundation, unmanifest, inconceivable, incomparable; that which arises not, disappears not, is not to be annihilated, and is not permanent — that is [reality], like space, not within the range of words [or] knowledge.

40. Just that is dependent co-origination; just that is what You maintain to be sunyata. The true principle (saddharma) is of that kind, and the Tathagata is like that also.

41. It is also accepted as the truth, the ultimate meaning, suchness, and the real. It is the indisputable. Whoever awakens to this is called Buddha.

42. Therefore there is really no difference between the world of living beings and Buddhas. Hence You maintain the identity of yourself and others.

43. Sunyata is not different from things and there is no thing without it. Therefore You have declared that dependently arising things are empty.

44. The conventional arises from causes and conditions and is relative. Thus have [You] spoken of the relative. The ultimate meaning, however, is not fabricated.

45. It is also termed own-being (svabhava), nature (prakriti), truth (tattva), substance (dravya), the real (vastu), [and the] true (sat). [Conventionally] an imagined thing does not exist but a relative is found [to exist].

46. You have stated that [affirmative] attribution is to say about an imaginary entity that it exists. [You] have also declared that cutting off [i.e., negation] is to say that a compound [entity] does not exist, because it is annihilated.

47. According to cognition of truth, [however], You maintain that there is no annihilation or permanence. [You] assert that the entire world is empty of substance, like a mirage.

48. Just as a mirage is neither annihilated nor permanent, thus all existence is said to be neither annihilated nor permanent.

49. One to whom things present themselves has [the dogmas of] annihilation and [permanence] imposed upon him and accepts implicitly that the world is finite or infinite.

50. Just as there is the knowable when there is knowing, there is knowing when there is the knowable. When both are unborn, what is [there to be] understood?

51. By thus teaching clearly through analogies — such as illusion and so forth — the Supreme Physician has taught the Holy Dharma, which cures all dogmas.

52. The ultimate truth is the teaching that things are without own-being. This is the unsurpassed medicine for those consumed by the fever of positivism.

53. Precisely therefore, O Offering-Priest of the Dharma, You have repeatedly made Dharma Offerings in the three worlds that are unsurpassed, unhindered, and unimpeded.

54. You have uttered this wonderful lion's roar of not-self, which cuts off the fear [caused by] belief in things [and] terrifies the [timid] deer — the tirthikas!

55. [You] have beaten the Dharma Drum [that resounds with the] deep truth of sunyata. [You] have blown the Dharma Conch, with its clear note of no own-being.

56. [You] have proclaimed the gift of Dharma: the nectar of the Buddha's teaching. The final meaning has been indicated — that is, of course, that phenomena are empty.

57. But the teaching regarding origination, cessation, and so forth; regarding the lives of sentient beings and the like, has meaning requiring interpretation
O Protector, you have also called it convention.

58. One who has finally reached the far shore of the ocean of perfect wisdom dwells

amidst the jewels of the virtues of merit, fully conversant with the ocean of your virtues.

59. By virtue of the merit I have obtained by thus praising [You], the inconceivable [and] incomparable Leader of beings, may beings become like You!