



THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS: NAGARAJUNA'S PERSPECTIVE



An Independent Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for Master of Arts (SANSKRIT)

Department of Oriental Languages

Graduate School, Silpakorn University

Academic Year 2022

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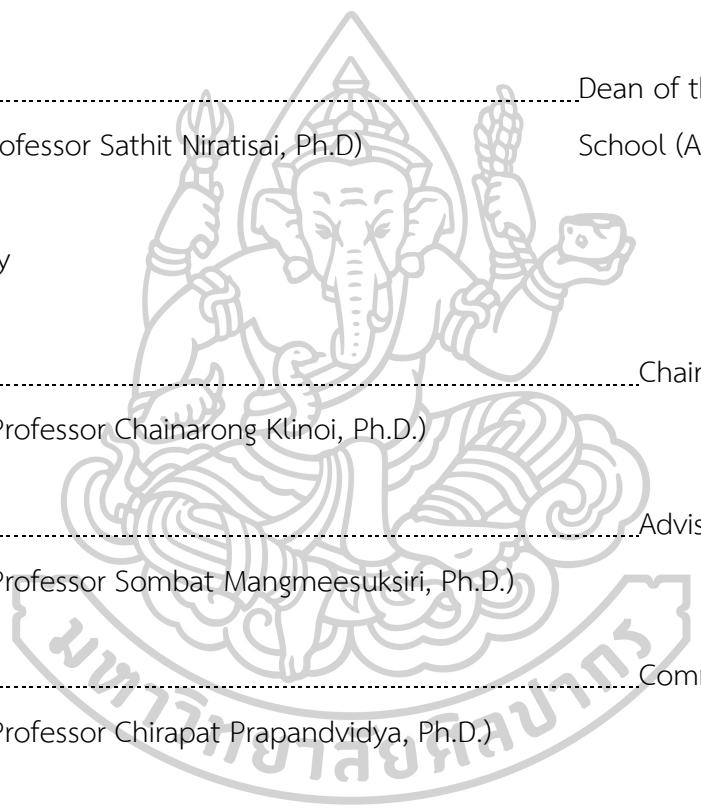
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This Independent Study contains a translation and discussion of the four noble truths in Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. Nāgārjuna's philosophy forms a coherent philosophical system rather than a collection of disparate ideas. The emphasis of the study is on an analysis of the philosophical content of Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā : the refutation of earlier Buddhist ideas of svabhāva and śūnyatā (emptiness), resulting in a new interpretation of pratīyasamutpāda (dependent origination) and the four noble truths.



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MR. Teerakiat JAREONSETTASIN



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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem :

There is a dearth of the understanding of the four noble truths from Nāgārjuna's perspectives, particularly among the countries that have adopted the Hīnayāna Buddhism, such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanma. The middle way as proposed by Nāgārjuna is often misunderstood or cursorily mentioned in this tradition. This is probably due to the scarcity of translation of Nāgārjuna's works from the primary sources, which were written in Sanskrit. Extant literature usually comes from the Tibetan translation and commentaries on his works.

1.2 Background and Rationale :

There is a need to understand Nāgārjuna's interpretation of the four noble truths, which are often understood as linear causation in the Hīnayāna tradition.¹ Nāgārjuna disputes and refutes this. In order to understand Nāgārjuna's view on the four noble truths fully, one must study his thoughts from the primary sources. Therefore this independent study attempts to translate Nāgārjuna's interpretation of the four noble truths in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, which was originally written in Sanskrit. However it has been widely taught and commented upon and preserved in Tibetan language by the Tibetan monks and scholars.

¹ Payutto, P. A. 2018. Buddhadhama. Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation page 15

1.3 Purpose of the Study :

The purpose of the study is to understand the four noble truths in depth from the translation of Nāgārjuna's main work, namely Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. The study looks at the teaching in the context of Nāgārjuna's life, scant as it is, and his philosophical methods. The study also explores various interpretation of the four noble truths by various scholars.

1.4 Research Question:

The main research question is : How are the four noble truths conceived in Nāgārjuna's eyes? The subsidiary questions are: How did Nāgārjuna come to his conclusion? What philosophical methods did he use? What are his premises?

1.5 Methodology :

In order to answer the research questions, we need to understand the most fundamental logical error that Nāgārjuna is challenging: the idea of svabhāva. He relentlessly refutes svabhāva. Only when we understand the absence of svabhāva can we understand the four noble truths as elaborated in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. A translation of Chapters 24 and 26 from the original Sanskrit is produced, followed by the discussion and conclusion.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Nāgārjuna's life

Nāgārjuna, one of the greatest thinkers in the history of Asian philosophy, remains largely unknown. Despite various legendary accounts of his life in Buddhist literature, contemporary scholars agree on hardly any details about him. It is unclear when he lived, although some time during the first three centuries A.D. is most likely,² where he worked, what he wrote. The Tibetan canon attributes 116 different texts of diverse content and quality to him. There were many “Nāgārjunas”, up to four different ones have been distinguished. In his biography preserved in Tibet, Nāgārjuna is depicted as a brāhmaṇa who, in the midst of the political chaos in his homeland, was inspired to give away all his wealth and became a monk. After much study, he attained mastery of the five major branches of learning then current in India and available in monastic education.

The most common view distinguishes only three “Nāgārjunas” : the philosopher, the tantric adept, who possibly flourished around 400 A.D. and the alchemist, who might be placed in the seventh century.³

Recent research by Joseph Walser suggests that Nāgārjuna may have written the Ratnāvalī sometime between 170 and 200 A.D. in the area around present-day Amaravati. This conclusion is based on two facts. First, there is a variety of evidence connecting Nāgārjuna with the Satavāhana dynasty. This is not very helpful on its own, as this dynasty spanned several centuries. However, in verse 232 of the Ratnāvalī, Nāgārjuna mentions a depiction of the Buddha sitting on a lotus. Given that such images were only available during the late part of the dynasty in the

² Westerhoff, Jan. 2009. Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Oxford. Page 15

³ Ray, Reginald. 2000. Indestructible Truth. Boston & London: Shambhala. Page 394-395

Eastern Deccan. Walser comes to the tentative conclusion that Nāgārjuna composed the text during 175 to 204 A.D.⁴ None of this can be regarded as hard evidence. However, given our present inability to find out the time and place of Nāgārjuna in any other way, Walser suggests that it is better not determine them at all.

2.2 Nāgārjuna's works

His works show him learned in the non-Buddhist philosophical schools of his day, in the various Hīnayāna philosophies, and in the prajñāpāramitā. It was during the monastic phase of his life that he composed the great works that form the root texts of the Indian Mādhyamika tradition. Later, Nāgārjuna felt called to intensive meditation, received a vision of the deity Tara and left the protection and comfort of his monastery to wander in search of full realisation. How do we deal with the multitude of works ascribed to him? There are six works that are universally accepted as Nagarjuna's so-called authentic works :⁵

1. the 'Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way' (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, MMK)
2. the 'Sixty Stanzas on Reasoning' (Yuktiśaṣṭikā, YŚ)
3. the 'Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness' (Śūnyatāsaptati, ŚS)
4. the 'Dispeller of Objections' (Vigrahavyāvartanī, VV)
5. the 'Treatise on Pulverization' (Vaidalyaparakarṇa, VP)
6. the 'Precious Garland' (Ratnāvalī, RĀ)

This set, the Yukti-corpus, is well-known in the Tibetan tradition where is it called the “collection of the six texts on reasoning”. We cannot be completely sure that all six texts were indeed composed by Nāgārjuna; apart from the MMK, where Nāgārjuna's authorship is taken to be true by definition, the attribution of every one

⁴ Westerhoff, Jan. 2009. Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Page 16

⁵ Westerhoff, Jan. 2009. Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Page 16-17

else has been questioned. Warder notes that the authorship of Nāgārjuna for texts other than the MMK has not been established beyond doubt and we ought not to assume it.⁶

2.3 Nāgārjuna's philosophy

Western interest in Nāgārjuna as a philosopher is comparatively recent, going back just more than a century. In itself this makes up only a part of Nāgārjunian scholarship, a substantial portion of which concerns itself with problems of philology, textual history. The earliest systematic Western treatment of Nāgārjuna is found in the works of the Jesuit missionary Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733). Desideri published a number of works in Tibetan in which he attempted a refutation of Tibetan Buddhism from the perspective of Roman Catholicism.⁷

A concise overview of the philosophical investigation of Nāgārjuna in the West has been presented by Andrew Tuck. Tuck argues that its history can be divided into three phases,⁸ corresponding to three Western philosophical frameworks against which Nāgārjuna used to be interpreted: first, the Kantian phase, then the analytic phase, which was finally succeeded by a post-Wittgensteinian one. A clear example from the first phase is Theodore Stcherbatsky's *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa* which was first published in 1927. Stcherbatsky's interprets Nāgārjuna as dividing the world into appearance and reality, the former corresponding to saṃsāra, the realm of cyclic existence, the latter to nirvāṇa, liberation. In his attempt to defend Nāgārjuna against the charge of nihilism, especially in the exposition given by La Vallee Poussin, Stcherbatsky ascribes to Nāgārjuna the assumption of an absolute noumenal reality which underlies the constantly changing

⁶ Westerhoff, Jan. 2009. Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Page 18

⁷ Westerhoff, Jan. 2009. Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Page 19

⁸ Westerhoff, Jan. 2009. Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Page 20

and ephemeral world of phenomena. The further development of this Kantianization of Nāgārjuna is presented in a basic texts of Buddhist studies, T.R.V. Murti's *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*.⁹ As Murti's exposition of Nāgārjuna is considerably more detailed than Stcherbatsky's, the fundamental difficulties of interpreting Nāgārjuna according to a Kantian framework become more apparent. He observes that the relation between the two (i.e. the absolute and the world of phenomena) is not clear.

The second, analytic phase of Western studies of Nāgārjuna can be regarded as starting shortly after the publication of Murti's book, with Richard Robinson's 1957 article 'Some Logical Aspects of Nāgārjuna's system'. He sets out to analyse some of Nāgārjuna's arguments, using the resources of modern symbolic logic. His ultimate aim is to transcribe the kārikās entirely, chapter by chapter, into logical notation. The focus is shifted from an investigation of the primarily metaphysical problem of the relation between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa to Nāgārjuna's logical method: refutation called reductio ad absurdum.

If one considers the bigger philosophical picture, however, the limitations of the reading of Nāgārjuna during the analytical phase become apparent. Many of his views, such as the rejection of a foundationalist ontology or the difficulties of assuming a world conforming to the structure of the language, contradict assumptions of analytic philosophy of the first half of the twentieth century. While the employment of certain tools of the analytic philosophers could be seen as presenting Nāgārjuna's arguments more clearly, it was also evident that Nāgārjuna would have not aimed at analytic philosophers. Neither the attempts to develop a logically perfect language for describing the world nor those to ground our knowledge of the world on the supposedly secure foundation of sense-data could

⁹ Murti, T. R. V. 2016. *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*. Delhi: MLBD. Page 9

find much favour with Madhyāṃikas. Analytic philosophy with its specific set of philosophical assumptions was partially helpful in trying to understand Nāgārjuna.

In fact, the third post-Wittgensteinian phase of interpreting Nāgārjuna, the paragons of analytic philosophy were now identified with Nāgārjuna's opponents, such as the Abhidharmikas and Naiyayikas. Works such as Frederick Streng's *Emptiness* or Chris Gudmunsen's *Wittgenstein and Buddhism* set out to stress the close similarities between Nāgārjuna and the later Wittgenstein and his criticism of analytic philosophy. While the relation between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa had been the main concern for the Kantian readers of Nāgārjuna, and that of the logical consistency of svabhāva, the substance for analytic interpreters, the new key term of the Post-Wittgensteinian phase was pratītyasamupāda or dependent origination. This was regarded primarily as reflecting the underlying idea of a Wittgensteinian philosophy of language, according to which the language of philosophical statements could not be regarded as independent of the inter-dependent nature.

There is not nearly as much difference in the roles of Wittgenstein and those of Nāgārjuna as one might imagine of conceptual thought and conventional language. Words were not supposed to gain their meaning by referring to something outside of the system of language; the relation of words to their referents is not seen as being indicative of ontological status but is solely of practical value.

The fact that each interpretation takes place against a specific conceptual framework does not mean that successive interpretations might not lead to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Nagarjuna's thought. In fact the literature published over the last decades suggests that the study of Nāgārjuna is becoming more mature: firstly, most authors now try to treat Nāgārjuna's writings as expressing a single, unified system of thought, rather than as a disparate verses from which individual isolated samples can be extracted to suit one's idiosyncratic interpretation. There finally appears to be an agreement that any interpretation of Nāgārjuna should be coherent with his assertions in all the works which can be plausibly

ascribed to him. Secondly, and more importantly, it has become evident that Nāgārjuna is worthy of philosophical investigation in his own right. Amongst the most philosophical contemporary commentaries on Nāgārjuna's texts, the works by Kalupahana, Garfield (1995) and Siderits (2013) have to be studied.

For Nāgārjuna the discussion of epistemology entails both examining another kind of existence called svabhāva, by investigating whether the means we employ to acquire knowledge of objects are intrinsically such means, and whether the objects are intrinsically such objects as well as establishing an epistemological framework to explain how emptiness can be known.

He examines the different ways in which we could find out that particular means of knowledge are indeed such means. Nāgārjuna rejects both the idea that these means are in some way self-established or that the means and objects of knowledge mutually establish one another. His aim is to show that there are no epistemic procedures which are intrinsically and essentially means of knowledge, and that their objects are not independently existent. Essentialism about epistemic procedures is thus replaced by contextualism: procedures can give us knowledge in some contexts, but not in others without ceasing to be means of knowledge. Therefore it is essential to come up with an account of epistemology like the contextualism which allows for means of knowledge but does not assume that they exist intrinsically.

A philosophical system which is concerned as much with the way in which our conceptual and linguistic conventions shape our worldview as Nāgārjuna's will have something to say on the philosophy of language. Discussion of language does not occupy a great part of Nāgārjuna's writings. The greatest part of the Nāgārjuna's philosophy of language is a later development.

What method does Nāgārjuna use to refute the earlier schools? He uses the logical method, which, in modern parlance, would be called *reductio ad absurdum* or absurd consequences move. *Reductio ad absurdum* is proving that a position is

false, or at least untenable, by showing that if true it would lead to absurd consequences. It is a common and highly effective method of refuting a position. If one can see that obviously absurd consequences follow from a position, it gives one good grounds for rejecting it.¹⁰



¹⁰ Westerhoff, Jan. 2009. Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Page 24-34

Chapter 3

Translation of Mūlamadhymakārikā Chapters 24 and 26

Chapter 24 āryasatyaparīkṣā caturviṃśatitamaṃ prakaraṇam |¹¹

yadi śūnyamidaṃ sarvamudayo nāsti na vyaḥ |
caturṇāmāryasatyānāmabhāvaste prasajyate ||1||

If all this is empty, there is neither origination nor cessation. It follows for you that there is the nonexistence of the four noble truths.

parijñā ca prahāṇaṃ ca bhāvanā sāḥsikarma ca i
caturṇāmāryasatyānāmabhāvānnopapadyate ||2||

If the four noble truths do not exist, then understanding, abandonment, practice, and realisation would not be possible.

tadabhāvānna vidyante catvāryāryaphalāni ca |
phalābhāve phalasthā no na santi pratipannakāḥ ||3||

If these things do not exist, the four fruits cannot exist. Without fruits, there would be no attainers of the fruits and hence no enterers into the paths.¹²

¹¹ Siderits, Mark; Katsura, Shoryū. 2013. *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*. MA: Wisdom Publication. Page 267-288

¹² Jones, Richard. 2022. *Nāgārjuna*. New York: Jackson Square Books. Page 24 : the four achievements (stream-enterer, once-returner, nonreturner, and arhat) and the four enterers into achievement.

saṃgho nāsti na cetsanti te'ṣṭau puruṣapudgalāḥ |
 abhāvāccāryasatyānāṃ saddharmo'pi na vidyate ||4||

*The spiritual community does not exist if the eight kinds of person do not exist.¹³
 And because of the non-existence of the noble truths, the true dharma does not exist either.*

dharme cāsati saṃghe ca kathaṃ buddho bhaviṣyati |
 evaṃ trīṇyapi ratnāni bruvāṇaḥ pratibādhase ||5||
 śūnyatāṃ phalasadbhāvamadharmāṃ dharmameva ca |
 sarvasaṃvyavahārāṃśca laukikān pratibādhase ||6||

Dharma and spiritual community being nonexistence, how will the Buddha come to be? In this way you deny all three jewels when you proclaim emptiness. You deny the real existence of the karmic fruit, both good and bad action, and all worldly modes of conduct.

atra brūmaḥ śūnyatāyāṃ na tvam vetsy prajojanam |
 śūnyatāṃ śūnyatārthaṃ ca tata evaṃ vihanyase ||7||

Here we say that you do not understand the point of teaching emptiness, emptiness itself and the meaning of emptiness. In this way you are thus frustrated.

¹³ Jones, Richard. 2022. Nagarjuna. New York: Jackson Square Books. Page 24 : those who aspire for the four fruits and those who have attained them.

dve satye samupāśritya buddhānām dharmadeśanā |

lokasaṃvṛtisatyam ca satyam ca paramāṛthataḥ ||8||

The dharma teaching of the Buddha rests on two truths: conventional and ultimate truth.

ye'nayorna vijānanti vibhāgam satyayordvayoḥ |

te tattvam na vijānanti gambhīram buddhaśāsane ||9||

Who do not know the distinction between the two truths, they do not understand reality in accordance with the profound teachings of the Buddha.

vyavahāramanāśritya paramārtho na deśyate |

paramāṛthamanāgamya nirvāṇam nādhigamyate ||10||

The ultimate truth is not taught independently of customary ways of talking and thinking. Not having acquired the ultimate truth, nirvāṇa is not attained.

vināśayati durdṛṣṭā sūnyatā māndamedhasam |

sarpo yathā durgṛhīto vidyā vā duṣprasādhitā ||11||

Emptiness misunderstood destroys the slow-witted, like a serpent wrongly held or a spell wrongly executed.

ataśca pratyudāvṛttaṃ cittaṃ deśayituṃ muneḥ |

dharmam matvāsya dharmasya mandairduravagāhatām ||12||

Hence the sage's intention to teach the dharma was turned back, considering the difficulty, for the slow, of penetrating this dharma.

śūnyatāyāmadhilayaṃ yaṃ punaḥ kurute bhavan |
doṣaprasaṅgo nāsmākaṃ sa śūnye nopapadyate ||13||

Moreover, the objection that you make concerning emptiness cannot be a faulty consequence for us or for emptiness.

sarvaṃ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate |
sarvaṃ na yujyate tasya śūnyaṃ yasya na yujyate ||14||

To whom emptiness makes sense, everything makes sense.

To whom emptiness does not make sense, nothing makes sense.

sa tvaṃ doṣānātmanīnānasmāsu paripātayan |
aśvamevābhirūḍhaḥ sannaśvamevāsi vismṛtaḥ ||15||

You, throwing your own faults on us, are like the person mounted on a horse who forgets the horse.

svabhāvādyaḍi bhāvānāṃ sadbhāvamanupaśyasi |
ahetupratyayān bhāvāṃstvamevaṃ sati paśyasi ||16||

If you look upon existents as real intrinsically, in that case you regard existents as being without cause and conditions.

kāryaṃ ca kāraṇaṃ caiva kartāraṃ karaṇaṃ kriyāṃ |
utpādaṃ ca nirodhaṃ ca phalaṃ ca pratibādhase ||17||

Effect and cause, as well as agent, instrument and act, arising and ceasing, and fruit – all these you thereby deny.

yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe |
 sā prajñaptirupādāya pratipatsaiva madhyamā ||18||

Dependent origination we declare to be emptiness. It (emptiness) is a dependent concept; just that is the middle path.

apratītya samutpanno dharmāḥ kaścinna vidyate |
 yasmāttasmādaśūnyo hi dharmāḥ kaścinna vidyate ||19||

There being no dharma whatsoever that is not dependently originated. It follows that there is also no dharma whatsoever that is non-empty.

yadyaśūnyamidaṃ sarvamudayo nāsti na vyayaḥ |
 caturṇāmāryasatyānāmabhāvaste prasajyate ||20||

If all this is non-empty, there is neither origination nor cessation. It follows for you that there is the nonexistence of the four noble truths.

apratītya samutpannam kuto duḥkham bhaviṣyati |
 anityamuktaṃ duḥkham hi tatsvabhāvye na vidyate ||21||

How will suffering come to be if it is not dependently originated? Indeed the impermanent was declared to be suffering, and it does not exist if there is intrinsic nature.

svabhāvato vidyamānaṃ kiṃ punaḥ samudeśyate |
tasmātsamudayo nāsti sūnyatāṃ pratibādhataḥ ||22||

How will something that exists intrinsically arise again? Therefore the arising of suffering does not exist for one who denies emptiness.

na nirodhaḥ svabhāvena sato duḥkhasya vidyate |
svabhāvaparyavasthānānnirodhaṃ pratibādhase ||23||

There is no cessation of a suffering that exists intrinsically. You deny cessation through your maintain intrinsic nature.

svābhāvye sati mārgasya bhāvanā nopapadyate |
athāsau bhāvvyate mārgaḥ svābhāvyaṃ te na vidyate ||24||

The practice of a path that exists intrinsically is not possible. But if this path is practiced, then you must say it does not have intrinsic nature.

yadā duḥkhaṃ samudayo nirodhaśca na vidyate |
mārgo duḥkhanirodhatvāt katamaḥ prāpayiṣyati ||25||

When there is neither suffering nor the arising and cessation of suffering, then what kind of path will lead you to the cessation of suffering?

svabhāvenāparijñānaṃ yadi tasya punaḥ katham |
parijñānaṃ nanu kila svabhāvaḥ samavasthitaḥ ||26||

If non-comprehension of suffering is intrinsic, how will there later be its comprehension? Isn't an intrinsic nature said to be immutable?

prahāṇasākṣātkaraṇe bhāvanā caivameva te |
parijñāvanna yujyante catvāryapi phalāni ca ||27||

In the same manner, abandonment, realisation, and practice, like comprehension, are impossible for you, and so too the four fruits.

svabhāvenānadhigataṃ yatphalaṃ tatpunaḥ katham |
śakyaṃ samadhigantum syātsvabhāvaṃ pariṣṛhṇataḥ ||28||

For those holding that there is intrinsic nature, if the lack of acquisition of the fruit is intrinsic, how would it be possible to acquire it later?

phalābhāve phalasthā no na santi pratipannakāḥ |
saṃgho nāsti na cetsanti te'sṭau puruṣapudgālāḥ ||29||

If the fruits are nonexistent, then there are neither the strivers after nor the attainers of those fruits. The spiritual community does not exist if the eight kinds of person do not exist.

abhāvāccāryasatyānāṃ saddharmo'pi na vidyate |
 dharme cāsati saṃghe ca kathaṃ buddho bhaviṣyati ||30||

And because of the nonexistence of the noble truths, the true dharma does not exist either. Dharma and saṃgha being nonexistent, how will a Buddha come to be?

apratītyāpi bodhiṃ ca tava buddhaḥ prasajyate |
 apratītyāpi buddhaṃ ca tava bodhiḥ prasajyate ||31||

And if it follows for you that there can even be a Buddha not dependent on enlightenment. It follows for you as well that there can even be enlightenment not dependent on a Buddha.

yaścābuddhaḥ svabhāvena sa bodhāya ghaṭannapi |
 na bodhisattvacaryāyāṃ bodhiṃ te'dhigamiṣyati ||32||

One who is unenlightened by intrinsic nature, though that one strives for enlightenment, will not, according to you, attain enlightenment in the course of the bodhisattva's practice.

na ca dharmamadharmaṃ vā kaścijjātu kariṣyati |
 kimaśūnyasya kartavyaṃ svabhāvaḥ kriyate na hi ||33||

Moreover, no one will ever perform either good or bad actions. What is there that is to be done with regard to the non-empty? For what has intrinsic nature is not done.

vinā dharmamadharmaṃ ca phalaṃ hi tava vidyate |
 dharmādharmanimittaṃ ca phalaṃ tava na vidyate ||34||

For you, indeed, there is fruit even without good or bad action; for you there is no fruit conditioned by good or bad actions.

dharmādharmanimittaṃ vā yadi te vidyate phalam |
 dharmādharmasamutpannamaśūnyaṃ te kathaṃ phalam ||35||

Or if, for you, the fruit is conditioned by good or bad actions, how is it that for you the fruit, being originated from good or bad actions, is non-empty?

sarvasaṃvyavahārāṃśca laukikān pratibādhase |
 yatpratītyasamutpādaśūnyatām pratibādhase ||36||

You also deny all worldly modes of conduct when you deny emptiness as dependent origination.

na kartavyaṃ bhavetkiṃcidanārabdhā bhavetkriyā |
 kāraṇasyādakurvāṇaḥ śūnyatām pratibādhataḥ ||37||

There would be nothing whatsoever that was to be done, action would be uncommenced, and the agent would not act, should emptiness be denied.

jātamāniruddham ca kūṭastham ca bhaviṣyati |
vicitrābhiravasthābhiḥ svabhāve rahitam jagat ||38||

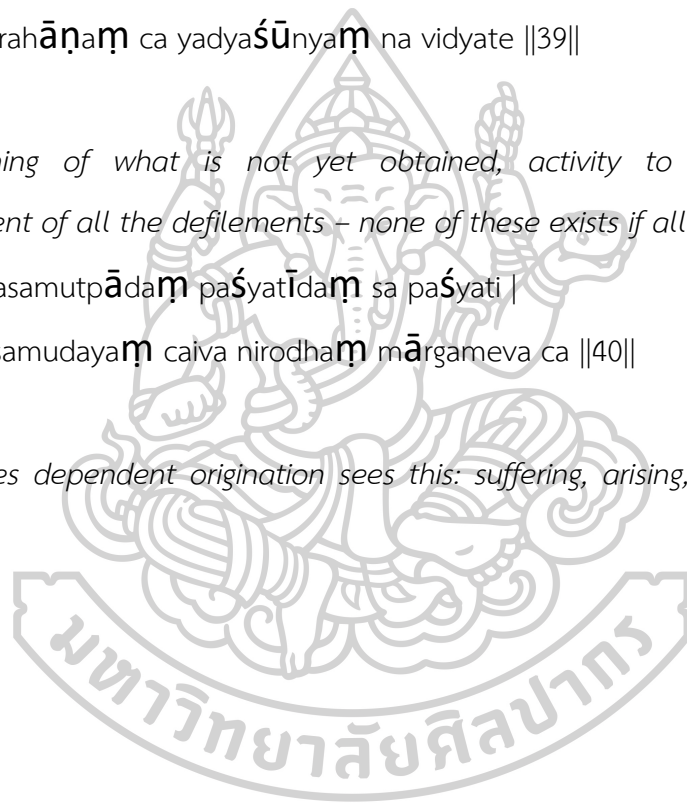
The world would be unproduced, unceased, and unchangeable. It would be devoid of its manifold appearances, if there were intrinsic nature.

asamprāptasya ca prāptirduḥkhaparyantakarma ca |
sarvakleśaprahāṇam ca yadyaśūnyam na vidyate ||39||

The obtaining of what is not yet obtained, activity to end suffering, the abandonment of all the defilements – none of these exists if all this is non-empty.

yaḥ pratītyasamutpādam paśyatīdam sa paśyati |
duḥkham samudayam caiva nirodham mārgameva ca ||40||

He who sees dependent origination sees this: suffering, arising, cessation, and the path.



Chapter 26 dvādaśāṅgaparīkṣā ṣaḍviṃśatitamaṃ prakaraṇam |¹⁴

punarbhavāya saṃskārānavidyānivṛtastridhā |
abhisamskurute yāṃstairgatiṃ gacchati karmabhiḥ ||1||

One who is enveloped in ignorance forms three kinds of volitions that lead to rebirth. And by means of these actions one goes to one's next mode of existence.

vijñānaṃ saṃniviśate saṃskārapratyayaṃ gatau |
saṃniviṣṭe'tha vijñāne nāmarūpaṃ niśicyate ||2||

Having volitions as its conditions, consciousness enters into the new mode of existence. Consciousness having entered into the new mode of existence, nāmarūpa (ie the five skandhas) becomes infused (with life).

niśikte nāmarūpe tu ṣaḍāyatanasaṃbhavaḥ |
ṣaḍāyatanamāgamya saṃsparśaḥ saṃpravartate ||3||

But nāmarūpa having become infused, the six sense organs, contact take place.

caḥṣuḥ pratītya rūpaṃ ca samanvāhārameva ca |
nāmarūpaṃ pratītyaivaṃ vijñānaṃ saṃpravartate ||4||

Dependent on the eye, colour-and-shape, and attention, dependent thus on nāmarūpa, eye)consciousness occurs.

¹⁴ Siderits, Mark; Katsura, Shoryū. 2013. Nāgārjuna's Middle Way. MA: Wisdom Publication. Page 307-316

saṃnipātastrayāṇāṃ yo rūpaviññānacakṣuṣāṃ |
sparśaḥ saḥ tasmātsparśācca vedanā saṃpravartate ||5||

The conjunction of three things – colour and shape, consciousness and the eye – that is contact, and from that contact there occurs feeling.

vedanāpratyayā tṛṣṇā vedanāṛthaṃ hi tṛṣyate |
tṛṣyamāṇa upādānamupādatte caturvidham ||6||

Dependent on feeling is desire, for one desires the object of feeling. Desiring one takes up the four kinds of appropriation.

upādāne sati bhava upādātuḥ pravartate |
syāddhi yadyanupādāno mucyeta na bhavedbhavaḥ ||7||

There being appropriation, there is the coming into existence of the appropriator, for if one were without appropriation, one would be liberated; there would be no further existence.

pañca skandhāḥ sa ca bhavaḥ bhavāj्जातिḥ pravartate |
jarāmaraṇaduḥkhādiśokāḥ saporidevanāḥ ||8||

daurmanasyamupāyāsā jāteretatpravartate |
kevalasyaivametasya duḥkhaskandhasya saṃbhavaḥ ||9||

And this existence is the five aggregates; from existence results birth. The suffering of old age, death, and so on – grief accompanied by lamentations, frustration and despair – these result from birth. Thus arises this entire mass of suffering.

saṃsāramūlānsaṃskārānavidvān saṃskarotyataḥ |
avidvān kārakastasmānna vidvāṃstattvadarśanāt ||10||

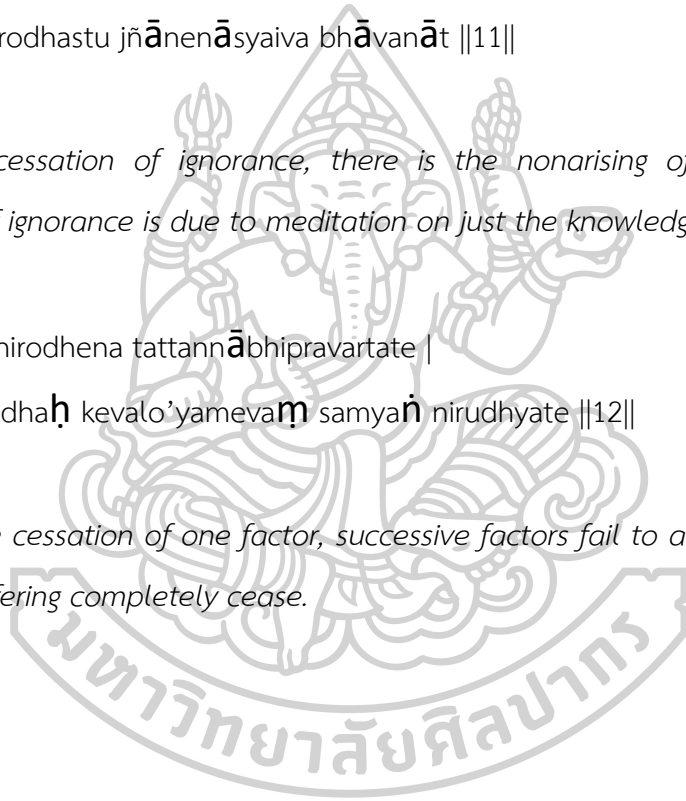
Thus does the ignorant one form the volitions that are the roots of saṃsāra. The ignorant one is therefore the agent. The wise one, having seen reality, is not.

avidyāyāṃ niruddhāyāṃ saṃskārāṇāmasaṃbhavaḥ |
avidyāyā nirodhastu jñānenāsyaiḥ bhāvanāt ||11||

Upon the cessation of ignorance, there is the nonarising of volitions. But the cessation of ignorance is due to meditation on just the knowledge of this.

tasya tasya nirodhena tattannābhipravartate |
duḥkhaskandhaḥ kevalo'yamevaṃ samyañ nirudhyate ||12||

Through the cessation of one factor, successive factors fail to arise. Thus this entire mass of suffering completely cease.



Chapter 4

Discussion

4.1 Interpretations of svabhāva and Śūnyatā

Svabhāva means intrinsic existence. In early Buddhist school called sarvāstivāda, abhidharma is the predominant doctrine. It teaches that the smallest permanent component of any phenomenon is called dharma. Therefore, fundamentally there is svabhāva. Then came along the sautrāntika, which claims that phenomena or dharmas exist only momentarily, so fast that phenomena appear that there is continuity or permanency. It is, in modern times, like the light bulb appears shining continuously but in fact it only lights up 60 cycles per second, thanks to the fact that electric current alternates its direction 60 cycles per second. Despite momentary existence, it is still svabhāva.

How did ancient Buddhist scholars resolve the problem of nirvāṇa, which is supposed to be permanent; otherwise, nirvana cannot be the summum bonum or the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice? The lokottaravāda proposes the idea of duality that there is the transcendental realm, in which nirvāṇa belongs and there is the worldly realm in which our senses and body-mind complex belong. This idea sounds strikingly similar to that of the Sāṅkhya system of Indian philosophy. It is also very similar to Kant's idea of duality: the phenomenon and noumenon.

Nāgārjuna disputes all the above doctrines of earlier Buddhist schools, saying that earlier schools, despite some refinement of the idea of impermanence, still propose inherent existence at the most fundamental level. Nāgārjuna, therefore, refutes svabhāva.

In science, nothing exists inherently on its own. Take for example: we cannot identify any object as an independently existent object as such. Any object can be reduced to constituents all the way down. Wood can be reduced to carbons, which can be reduced to the composition of protons, neutrons and electrons, which in

turn can be reduced to subatomic particles. In modern physics, subatomic particles consist of a multitude of apparently ghost-like particles called quarks. All the so-called smallest particles do not exist as matters, nor do they exist as energy. Sometimes they behave as matters; other times, they behave as energy. We cannot predict how they behave but we can calculate their probability. However, we cannot find their location at any given time. Modern physics would be amazingly consistent with Nāgārjuna's idea of svabhāva.

Svabhāva is the central conceptual point which Nāgārjuna tries to refute. Svabhāva is often translated as 'inherent existence' or 'own-being'. Śūnyatā (emptiness) means precisely the absence of svabhāva.

There are various interpretation of what svabhāva as a philosophical concept entails. The concept of svabhāva does not have any straightforward equivalent amongst the those discussed in the history of Western philosophy. This is not to say that it is a fundamentally alien concept, but merely that it combines a number of features which we do not see thus combined in the Western context. In order to get a clear conception of svabhāva, ontologically svabhāva has two aspects:

1. Essence-svabhāva

In the early Buddhism, we encounter an understanding of svabhāva as a specific characterizing property of an object. This understanding of svabhāva is made more precise by the sarvāstivādin's identification of svabhāva. The specific quality which is unique to the object is characterized and therefore allows us to distinguish it from other objects. Objects have specific qualities as their own because they are distinguished from the qualities of other objects. In this context svabhāva is understood as opposite to the common characteristics of all phenomena.

The specific quality of an object is the unique combination of properties which distinguishes the object from all others. An essential property is something an object cannot lose without ceasing to be that very object. Nāgārjuna observes that

svabhāva, in the sense of essence, cannot be removed, like the heat of fire, the fluidity of water, the openness of space.

For, in common usage, heat is called the svabhāva of fire because it is invariable in it. The same heat, when it is apprehended in hot or warm water, is not svabhāva, because it is contingent, since it has arisen by fire and water, even though heat does not constitute the svabhāva of water.

Heat is a property which is always created by fire. Water, on the other hand, can be either hot or cold and requires some special conditions to heat it up. Although not stated explicitly, the notion of essence-svabhāva also appears to include a modal element: if fire lost the property of heat, it would no longer be fire. Water, however, can cool down and still remain water. This conception of svabhāva agrees well with a common understanding of an essence or essential property in contemporary metaphysics which conceives of them as the properties an object cannot lose without ceasing to be that very object.

2. Substance-svabhāva

There is, however, a second understanding of svabhāva, which is of much greater importance in the Madhyārika debate which considers svabhāva to be a primarily ontological notion, independent of anything else: svabhāva in the sense of identity and svabhāva in the sense of independence.

The fifteenth chapter of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, investigating the notion of svabhāva, begins by saying: svabhāva cannot result from causes and conditions, because if it was produced from conditions and causes it would be something artificially created. But how could svabhāva be artificially created, as it is not artificially created and not dependent on anything else? Substance-svabhāva is therefore taken to be something which does not depend on anything else. This is the definition of svabhāva, which is not artificially created and not dependent on anything else.

Nāgārjuna considers the existence of substance-svabhāva to be incompatible with change. If svabhāva existed, the world would be without origination or cessation. It would be static and devoid of its manifold states. But given that we do perceive change in the world, this provides us with an argument against substance-svabhāva. By the observation of change, we can infer the lack of svabhāva of things. If svabhāva was found, what would change? Neither the change of a thing itself nor of something different is possible: as a young man does not become old, so an old man does not become older either.

Nothing which we perceive to be changing can exist by substance-svabhāva. This is because an object existing by substance-svabhāva constitutes an independent, irreducible and unconstructed fundamental constituent of reality. If the young man had its age as an essential and intrinsic property, if he was young by svabhāva, he could never grow old.

It is evident that most of Nāgārjuna's arguments are concerned with the rejection of substance-svabhāva. These two meanings can also be employed when speaking about svabhāva. We could say that if something exists by svabhāva, it does not depend on anything whatsoever. This is the meaning of svabhāva usually identified with substance-svabhāva and corresponds to the sarvāstivādin's primary existent. But we could also say some property exists by svabhāva if as long as any objects are around they have that property.

4.2 The Four Noble truths

Chapter 24 of the Mūlamadhyamakārikā is regarded as the Buddha's main teaching known as the four noble truths. In the first six verses, the opponent objects that if, as Nāgārjuna claims, all is indeed empty, then this teaching, as well as all that follows from it, is put in danger. In replying, Nāgārjuna first claims that the opponent has misunderstood the meaning of the doctrine of emptiness. He then seeks to turn the tables on the opponent and show that what would actually

jeopardize the Buddha's teachings is denying emptiness, or affirming that there are things with intrinsic nature. In outline, the argument goes like this :¹⁵

Verses 1-6 Objection: Emptiness is incompatible with the core teachings of the Buddha : the four truths and the three jewels as well as with ordinary modes of conduct.

Verse 7 Reply: The opponent misunderstands emptiness.

Verses 8-10 The opponent does not understand the distinction between the two truths.

Verses 11-12 The Buddha hesitated to teach emptiness for fear of its being misunderstood.

Verses 13-15 Assertion: The faults pointed out by the opponent are in fact found in his arguments.

Verses 16-17 Reason: If things existed with intrinsic nature, they would not originate in dependence on cause and conditions.

Verses 18-19 To affirm that all things arise in dependence on causes and conditions is to affirm that all things are devoid of intrinsic nature.

¹⁵ Siderits, Mark; Katsura, Shoryū. 2013. *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*. MA: Wisdom Publication. Page 267-268

Verses 20-25 If things were not empty, the four noble truths could hold.

Verses 26-27 If things were not empty, there could not be the four activities that constitute the path to nirvāṇa.

Verses 28-30 If things were not empty, the three jewels-Sangha, Dharma, and Buddha-could not exist.,

Verses 31-32 If things were not empty, then these things would all be essentially unrelated: being a Buddha, enlightenment, following the Buddha's teaching, and the path of the bodhisattva.

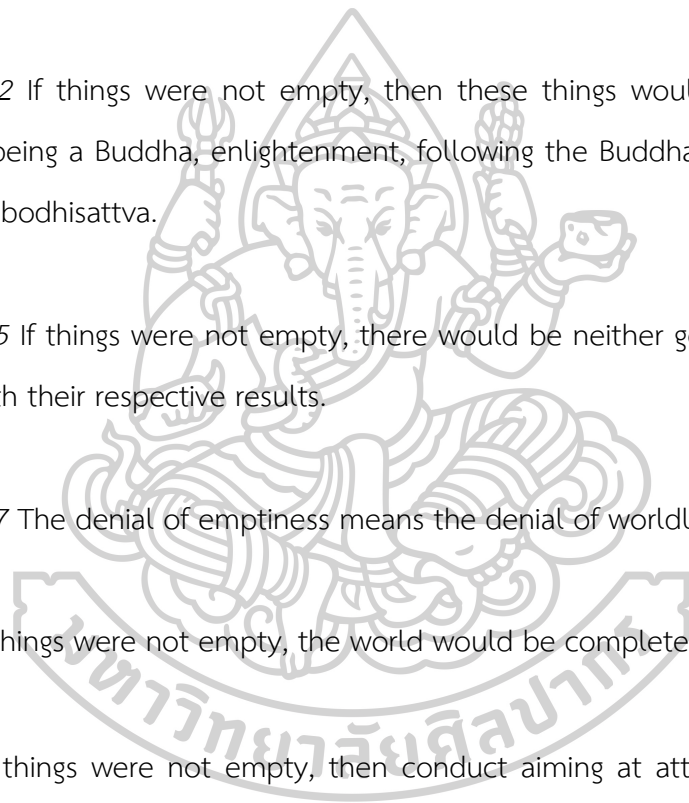
Verses 33-35 If things were not empty, there would be neither good nor bad actions together with their respective results.

Verses 36-37 The denial of emptiness means the denial of worldly conduct.

Verse 38 If things were not empty, the world would be completely static.

Verse 39 If things were not empty, then conduct aiming at attainment of nirvāṇa would also make no sense.

Verse 40 Conclusion: One who sees dependent origination sees the four truths.



Chapter 24 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* opens by laying out, in the first six verses, the primary objections to the view that everything is empty, from those who take existence to be inherent existence.¹⁶ In *verse 1*, those who reify reality put forward their strong counter-proposal, which is based on a misunderstanding of the meaning of intrinsic existence. Nāgārjuna rejects all intrinsic existence based primarily on the view of dependent origination. And the proponents of intrinsic existence claim that if things were indeed empty of intrinsic existence, then nothing could be produced and nothing could cease. Therefore, cause-and-effect relationships would not be tenable. Hence nothing would exist.

In *verse 2*, this would include the four noble truths, which consist of a pair of cause-and-effect relationships: suffering and its cause, and liberation and its cause. Since cause-and-effect do not exist, it would follow that the four noble truths do not exist. Those who reify reality continue their defence of intrinsic existence, arguing that if there were no intrinsic existence, then none of the ways of approaching the four noble truths would be possible. The four ways of approaching the four noble truths are complete understanding (the truth of suffering), abandonment (the truth of the cause of suffering), cultivation (the truth of the path), and actualization (the truth of cessation). If the four noble truths did not exist, then there could be no complete understanding, abandonment, cultivation, and actualization. Therefore, there would be no one trying to eliminate the first two truths and accomplish the last two truths. If the four noble truths did not exist, the four achievements would not be possible.

Verses 3 discuss the four achievements (stream-enterer, once-returner, nonreturner, and arhat) and the four enterers into achievement. Those nearly achieving these attainments are like those who have entered the stream of liberation by realizing reality. Further purification leads one to coming back for one more life,

¹⁶ Jones, Richard. 2022. *Nagarjuna*. New York: Jackson Square Books. Page 89

or several lifetimes, to complete the work. This discussion hinges on whether these eight achievements and enterers exist intrinsically or not. The argument from those who reify reality is this: if things did not exist intrinsically, then the four achievements and the four entries into these achievements would not exist. Therefore, they conclude that things must exist intrinsically. Their rebuttal: if things did exist intrinsically, then these four achievements and the four entries into these four achievements would not be possible. Then it would be those who reify reality, who would face such consequences.

In *verse 4*, those who reify reality continue drawing out consequences based on their lack of understanding of intrinsic existence, concluding at this point that there would be no Dharma. If there were no sangha and no Dharma, then how could there be a Buddha? Therefore, Nāgārjuna holds everything to be empty would consequently reject the most precious Three Jewels.

In *verse 5*, those who reify reality conclude that there would be no precious Triple Gems in the absence of intrinsic existence. Not only would rejection of intrinsic existence damage the four fruits, it would also undermine all non-virtues and all virtues. Thus, all conventional phenomena would cease to exist. In this way there would be no world and no beings inhabiting this non-existent world. (*verse 6*)

In *verse 7*, Nāgārjuna responds. From the first to the sixth verse, those who reify reality faces the full consequences of no intrinsic existence. Those who think that to exist is to be non-empty and to be empty is to be non-existent have no understanding of the purpose of emptiness. Nor do they appreciate the cultivation and achievement of the understanding of emptiness. Furthermore, those who reify reality have no understanding of the meaning of emptiness.

Due to this misunderstanding, those who reify reality misinterpret Nāgārjuna's position to be a view that rejects the existence of everything. The irony is about to come : Nagārjuna is about to turn the tables, charging the reificationist

himself with nihilism. The teachings of the Buddha comprise the two truths: the conventional truth and the ultimate truth.

This understanding of reality represents a deeper level of the Buddha's teachings. The things which we see in everyday life do exist in the framework of one and do not in the framework of the other. But we need one to explain and to reach the other. This is very important because here Nāgārjuna distinguishes them and tells us that we need to understand that distinction in order to avoid the extremes of nihilism and reification. Yet in *verse 18*, Nāgārjuna tells us that they are inseparable and that we need to understand that inseparability to avoid those very extremes.

From our understanding of the two truths, we're able to comprehend the four noble truths, the bedrock of the Buddha's teachings. Recognizing there are causes to our suffering allows for the possibility of eliminating suffering. The four noble truths are a guide leading us out of suffering. This path leads to the total cessation of suffering. Thus, the conventional leads us to the ultimate. And without the ultimate there could be no conventional.

The conventional relies on relationships like cause and effect, which are only made possible by ultimate emptiness. Extending the cessation of suffering to all living beings then summarizes the essence of the Buddha's teachings. This is presented in *verse 8*. Those who do not understand these two truths have no understanding of the essence of the Buddha's teachings.

This reiteration of the importance of the two truths is reconfirmed in *verse 9*. Without depending on the conventional truth, one cannot understand the ultimate truth. Moreover, without understanding ultimate truth, one cannot attain nirvāṇa. *Verse 10* is important because it emphasizes the importance of conventional truth and the need for the ultimate truth. It must be realized by careful understanding that can only be achieved through language. We cannot just go straight to the ultimate without a thorough engagement with conventional reality, which is the basis

of emptiness. And in order to understand conventional reality, we need to understand emptiness. Each supports the other. They are, in fact, non-dually related. *Verse 10* has an important relationship with the *verse 18*. *Verse 10* presents the important distinction between the two truths. In *verse 18*, we find the explanation of the identity of the two truths. Thus, both are important verses to fully comprehend emptiness. Emptiness is not the annihilation of convention, but the ability to return to convention, seeing it merely as convention. Discursive thought returns; language is again used, but now understood merely as a tool, not as a mirror of reality itself.

This intimate and quintessential connection between the conventional truth and the ultimate truth, and attaining nirvāṇa is presented here in *verse 10*. They are necessary for avoiding the extremes. If one does not know how to understand emptiness correctly, then those with less intelligence will be lost.

Verse 11 presents two analogies illustrating the potential disastrous consequences of misunderstanding emptiness: In the first analogy, the danger that exists in misunderstanding emptiness is described to be like the danger of a beginner without proper training trying to catch a poisonous snake.

In the second analogy, this danger is the same as an untrained beginner, without knowing the proper technique, attempting to cast a spell using black magic.

Hence, if you grasp emptiness properly and you become free. Grasp it improperly and your suffering will never end. This is particularly relevant when the two truths are not understood and one thereby concludes that emptiness itself exists in some absolute way. This grave misunderstanding is very difficult to correct.

For these reasons the Buddha fully understood how difficult it would be for those with immature wisdom to understand the profound reality correctly. Therefore, he remained silent and did not teach for some time after attaining enlightenment. This is explained in the *verse 12*. The very same arguments are used those who think that exist is to be non-empty and to be empty is to be non-existent to refute Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna claims he is immune to the consequences

presented by those who reify reality. Moreover, those who reify reality must now face these same consequences they tried to force on Nāgārjuna

In *verse 13*, due to a fundamental misunderstanding of emptiness, the faults thrust on Nāgārjuna are now turned back onto the reificationists in a bit of philosophical counter-attacks. Nāgārjuna is charging the opponent who thinks Nāgārjuna is a nihilist with being that very thing himself.

Verse 14 presents the well-known classic position: to whom emptiness makes sense, everything makes sense. To whom emptiness does not make sense, nothing makes sense. This verse has sometimes been used to summarize Nāgārjuna's view of reality, particularly emphasising the two truths: the conventional and the ultimate truth. This verse demonstrates how reality functions despite all phenomena lacking intrinsic existence. Those who reify reality are accused of mistakenly transferring their own faults onto Nāgārjuna.

Verse 15 compares this to a person riding a horse who forgets he is on a horse. The horse-rider is riding around his property counting his horses one, two and three. He knows he had a fourth horse yesterday. So he accuses another person of having stolen one of his horses, as the other person is riding a horse that looks a lot like the one he can't find. The other person points out that in fact the rider forgot to count the horse he is riding. Thus, the rider accuses the other person of riding the horse that in fact he is riding. The opponent accuses Nāgārjuna of riding the dark horse of nihilism, when in fact he is riding it himself.

Verse 16 informs us that actually the opposite is true. When those who reify reality view everything existing intrinsically, in fact they are rejecting everything. Reification precludes relations. Relations mean dependence. Reification views everything as intrinsic or independent. Whatever exists independently, by definition, is not dependent. Therefore, nothing could be in relationship. Since everything exists in dependence, reification thereby rejects everything. By rejecting everything, those who reify reality have rejected all causes.

Verse 17 continues the argument. By rejecting all causes, those who think that to exist is to be non-empty and to be empty is to be non-existent must also reject results dependent on these causes. If they reject all results that depend on their causes, this means that language and our thinking must also be rejected. The agent, his actions, and the objects of those actions would all be categorically rejected by the opponent. Furthermore, since causes and effects are rejected, this means the opponent must reject the very production and disintegration of things. Thus, those who reify reality actually reject everything. They reject all things.

The heart of the chapter- and of the book- is presented in *verse 18*. Understanding this verse properly becomes the cornerstone of correctly understanding the Middle Way. Whatever dependently arises is empty of existing intrinsically. There are only two possibilities: either things exist objectively from their own side, or they exist subjectively from the side of the mind. Existing from the side of the mind means they are dependently designated by the mind. Rejecting things existing intrinsically from the side of the object means they must exist subjectively through dependent designation. This is the identity of emptiness and dependent origination. Emptiness means absence of intrinsic or independent existence. Absence of intrinsic or independent arising means dependent origination. This is the Middle Way. This is explained as emptiness. This identity is the powerful meaning of *verse 18*.

As everything is dependently arisen, everything is empty. This includes all phenomena, as stated in *verse 19*. Thus, these two verses in chapter 24, *verse 18* and *verse 19*, are the essence of Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. *Verse 20* goes on: if all phenomena were not empty of intrinsic existence, then there would be no production and no disintegration. If there were no production and no disintegration, then the four noble truths would be impossible.

Verse 21 argues, if things did not depend on others, then how could suffering be produced? The Buddha taught that phenomena are impermanent and that all

contaminated things are in the nature of suffering. This precludes the possibility that things could exist from their own side intrinsically. Moreover, if things did in fact exist intrinsically, how could they ever be produced? Those who reify reality would be rejecting everything in the world since all are produced. As those who reify reality would reject all phenomena, including production, they would therefore also reject the cause of suffering.

This is the conclusion drawn in the *verse 22*. Furthermore, if suffering existed intrinsically, then the cessation of suffering would be impossible. As the cessation of suffering would be impossible, suffering would last forever. In this way, those who reify reality are forced into a position whereby they must reject the cessation of suffering based on their own logic.

This is the presentation in *verse 23*. If the path existed intrinsically, then how could there be a path? When those who reify reality propose a path to enlightenment that complements meditation, that path cannot exist intrinsically. For if it did exist intrinsically, the absurd consequence would follow that we could never relate to that path. Without relating to the path, we could never meditate on the path.

This is the further absurd consequence of intrinsic existence drawn out in *verse 24*. Following from the logic of those who reify reality, there would be no suffering, no cause of suffering, and no cessation of suffering. If that were the case, *verse 25* questions, then precisely who is it that attains the cessation of suffering? And if there is no one who attains the cessation of suffering, then no truth could be realized at the ultimate level. Hence, there would be no ultimate truth of reality to be realized.

Therefore, the *verse 26* concludes the truth concerning reality, which is the object of the meditation, cannot possibly exist intrinsically. Furthermore, if all these things existed intrinsically, then it would be impossible for those who reify reality to

continue maintaining their position of knowing, abandoning, cultivating, and actualizing all the achievements that result from meditation on the truth of reality.

Verse 27 again demonstrates the absurdity of objective, intrinsic existence by showing how it contradicts complete understanding, abandonment, cultivation, and actualization. These important products of meditation on emptiness could never come about since intrinsically existent achievement could never be. How could there be achievement at all in the face of an unchanging world that is devoid of relations? This is the conclusion drawn in *verse 28*. Without attainment, there could be no arhats reaching and abiding in these attainments. Without those stream-entering arhats putting effort into attainments, the eight kinds of arhats could not exist.

Verse 29 concludes that without these eight kinds of arhats there would be no Sangha. If there were no four noble truths, which are the truths from the perspective of these arhats, then there would be no Dharma. And if there were no Dharma and no Sangha, then how could there be a Buddha?

Nāgārjuna skilfully turns all the arguments back onto the opponents, those who reify reality. He states that these faults do not attach to him; rather, they attach to any position that reifies reality. This is grand finale; this is the presentation of the *verse 30*. According to those who reify reality, a Buddha would not be dependent on enlightenment, nor would enlightenment be dependent on a Buddha, This further absurd consequence of grasping intrinsic existence, which prevents any type of relationship at all, is presented in *verse 31*.

Furthermore, according to those who reify reality, those who have not yet attained enlightenment could never practise the path to enlightenment. Intrinsic existence does not allow anything to change. Thus, there could be no transformation; hence, no one could ever practise the path. This is a further absurd consequence of intrinsic existence presented by Nāgārjuna in *verse 32*.

If the view of intrinsic existence of those who reify reality is to be accepted, this means that no one could ever know the difference between Dharma and non-Dharma. In this context, Dhama and non-Dharma refer to virtue and non-virtue; thus, no one could ever distinguish between right and wrong. If things were not empty of intrinsic existence, nothing at all would ever be possible. The impossibility of anything, anywhere at any time, is a further absurd consequence of the view of intrinsic existence of those who reify reality, laid out in *verse 33*.

Furthermore, as made clear in *verse 34*, if there is no practice of morality and immorality, then according to those who think that to exist is to be non-empty and to be empty is to be non-existent, nobody could ever attain any results. Intrinsic existence prevents all relationships, including causality. Without causes there can be no results. Yet those who reify reality continue insisting that results are produced from moral and immoral actions. In that case, then why are morality and immorality not empty of intrinsic existence? If results are produced from moral and immoral actions, then these actions must be empty of intrinsic existence. Intrinsic existence precludes any change, any causality. This is a further contradiction of intrinsic existence.

Verse 35 exposes the absurdity that no results could ever be produced. *Verse 36* concludes that in actuality those who reify reality are rejecting all conventional phenomena whatsoever at any time and at any place. Thus, they are completely rejecting dependent origination. Therefore, for those who reify reality there would be no striving to attain anything. They are forced into the ridiculous position that performance of action would be devoid of any activity and any object, Action without activity and action without an object are the further absurd consequences explained in *verse 37*.

If that were the case, then nobody would do anything. Without activity and without an object, it would be impossible to do anything. If beings existed intrinsically then they could not be born. And if beings are not born, neither could

they die, leading to the absurd result of unborn beings who can never die. All change and formation is precluded. Thus, they would be completely bereft of any attributes or any relationships at all. Complete inert inactivity is the absurd consequence of intrinsic existence drawn out in *verse 38*

Verse 39 shows the absurd consequence that the third and fourth noble truths would be utterly impossible given the view of reification. Thus, whoever correctly sees the true meaning of dependent origination will understand suffering. They will then recognize the cause of suffering and hence will attain cessation from that suffering.

Nāgārjuna shows here in *verse 40*, the last verse, that understanding emptiness is equivalent to understanding the four noble truths, precisely what the opponent claimed could not be understood within the framework of emptiness. The four noble truths are everything one needs to understand. And they are exactly what the opponent claimed that Nāgārjuna himself undermined. Nāgārjuna thus demonstrates that the opponent's view of reification leads him to fall into nihilism. This chapter therefore shows that is only the Madhyāmika position that allows one to affirm the Buddhadharma. Thus, chapter 24 establishes conventional reality or important ground, path, and result.¹⁷ The thorough establishment of conventional reality within the context of emptiness is the grand achievement of Nāgārjuna, clearly elucidating the teachings of the Buddha.

Chapter 24 of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā is the most important chapter: Nāgārjuna relentlessly challenges the notion of intrinsic existence. He does this so exhaustively that some might misinterpret his arguments to mean that nothing exists. Then they might think that since nothing exists, everyone can do whatever they want, for nothing really matters. This would be a grave error not only for the individual but also for society in general. It is much harder to understand emptiness.

¹⁷ Kerzin, Barry. 2019. Nāgārjuna's Wisdom. MA: Wisdom Publication. Page 150

Understanding emptiness set us free from the two extremes of reification and nihilism.

4.3 Dependent origination (Pratītyasamutpāda) :

This chapter is out of character with the rest of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā : it is a straight exposition of the twelve-step dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda) that is standard to all of Buddhism.¹⁸ With no analysis of it in terms of emptiness, this leads some scholars to doubt that this chapter were originally part of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā and is written by someone else. Some scholars also doubt that the Buddha ever taught the full twelve-step cycle. If this hypothesis is true, then the original ending of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā is the dramatic declaration.

Dependent origination may only be a conventional truth; the situation from the ultimate point of view would not involve the the process in terms of any categories or entities. The discussion of dependent origination starts with root-ignorance (avidyā). Dependent origination is about the necessary conditions for a process and how to remove a condition so that the cycle does not continue. The difference is not merely semantic: causes can be seen as all the necessary conditions coming together, but dependent origination only delineates one necessary condition in each step. Thus, if the root-ignorance (avidyā) were the cause of desires rather than a condition, then once it arose, desires would have to arise. Thus once we are unenlightened, we would remain unenlightened forever. But under dependent origination, once ignorance arises, desires are not automatically caused. That is, our root-ignorance does not cause desires, but condition for desires; thus, by removing this ignorance, desires cannot arise.

¹⁸ Jones, Richard. 2010. Nagarjuna. New York: Jackson Square Books. Page 160

All Buddhist schools accept the doctrine of dependent origination. Dependent origination means that every existent depends on other things to exist or to originate. There is nothing that can exist on its own or has its own intrinsic existence or essence or nature. However, Nāgārjuna's view is the identification of emptiness with the twelve nidānas (links) and the principle of dependent originations. According to Nāgārjuna, if we understand dependent origination fully, we will be face to face with emptiness. It may be recalled that the sarvāstivāda's abhidharma interprets the twelve nidānas in terms of sequential, linear causality, which supports its realistic interpretation of dharmas as being free-standing entities, each with its own essential nature.

Nāgārjuna critiqued the abhidharma of the twelve nidānas as linear and as underplaying their important and critical relational dimension. In fact each nidāna only has existence and meaning in relation to and in mutual dependence upon the others. Feeling makes no sense apart from a body-mind apparatus. Rebirth consciousness has no meaning apart from ignorance. For Nāgārjuna, the abhidharmic idea that each nidāna, as a dharma, is an entity with a definite and independent essence is incorrect. The deeper truth is relational: no single nidāna has any nature that stands independent from the web of relationships in which it is appearing. Rather, that nidāna is the effect of the entire realm of being with which it is causally connected. And this totality, which alone is what the nidāna is, can never be put into thought or words. It is profoundly empty of individual intrinsic nature.

The Buddha's version is the twelve links of dependent origination, which explains the causal chain of how we are born, suffer and die repeatedly. He emphasizes the dependent nature of our lives. This explanation of the cycle of birth and death underpins the second noble truth, the truth of the cause of suffering. It shows how we cycle from one birth to another through ignorance of the reality. It also gives us insight into how we can escape from this suffering. The reverse process shows the path to enlightenment.

The twelve links of dependent origination actually work more like a spiral involving several elements, rather than a linear progression. Nevertheless, the Buddha starts his teaching with ignorance. Because of ignorance, we grasp reality as if it had objective, intrinsic existence. In this way we reify reality. Because of clinging to such a reality, emotional responses of attraction or aversion follow. We become attached.

Gaining insight into the sequence of events help us disrupt it. Through analysing ignorance and cultivating the wisdom of realizing emptiness, we can escape the misery and become free from suffering. Thus, through understanding chapter 26, "Analysis of the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, we develop the insight that realizes emptiness, which is the only way to be free.¹⁹

We can then stop the ignorance and become free. Existence and birth manifest in the body and mind, which are the five aggregates. These five aggregates are, by their nature, suffering. When ignorance is brought to an end, action (karma) no longer arises. Ignorance is brought to an end through understanding and meditating on emptiness. Thus, cessation of ignorance, and with it the complete chain of suffering, is accomplished through the understanding of emptiness. When the cause of cyclic existence ceases, all the subsequent links no longer arise. This is somewhat analogous to the domino effect: when one falls, all the others fall in sequence. Here the twelve links may fall all at once when their original cause (ignorance) has been eliminated. No further effort or action is required. Once ignorance is finished, the succeeding links will naturally no longer arise. In this way the continuity of suffering is severed.

¹⁹ Jones, Richard. 2022. Nagarjuna. ew York: Jackson Square Books. Page 89-121

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The study sets out to answer the following questions: How are the four noble truths conceived in Nāgārjuna's eyes? The subsidiary questions are: How did Nāgārjuna come to his conclusion? What philosophical methods did he use? What are his premises?

From the original texts of chapter 24 and 26 of the Mūlamadhyamakakārika, it is clear that Nāgārjuna sees the four noble truths through the lens of emptiness and dependent origination, the perspectives of which are discussed at length in the previous chapter. In short, without emptiness and dependent origination, there cannot be the four noble truths.

Nāgārjuna comes to this conclusion by taking on his opponents' argument to the contrary : only without emptiness can the four noble truths exist. Nāgārjuna uses a very powerful logical means of negation, in modern logical terms called reductio ad absurdum or absurd consequences move. Reductio ad absurdum is proving that a position is false, or at least untenable, by showing that if true it would lead to absurd consequences.

His main premise is that there is no such thing as svabhāva and the absence of svabhāva is śūnyatā (emptiness). He effectively uses this tool to disprove his opponents' position of svabhāva, and to prove his position of emptiness. He also emphasises that emptiness is not nihilism and svabhāva is eternalism. Emptiness is neither nihilism nor eternalism.

The opponent starts it off by imputing an ontological nihilism to Nāgārjuna that would destroy the Buddhist way of life: if everything is empty, then the four noble truths do not exist. Nāgārjuna corrects his opponent by claiming that the Buddha's teaching is based on two categories of truths: truths from a conventional point of view and truths from the highest point of view or the ultimate truth. Truths

from the highest point of view give the ultimate ontological status of something. Conventional truths are about what the unenlightened count as real, depending on our conceptual conventions. Thus, ultimate truth is stated from the ontologically correct point of view, while conventional truths still involve the idea of self-existent entities for practical purposes.

Here we have a very profound understanding of what the Buddha has discovered: the four noble truths. And Buddhist scholars believe to be the most important teaching of Lord Buddha. The four noble truths in Buddhism are that there is suffering, that suffering has a cause, desires based on the root-ignorance, that there is cure removing the root-ignorance, and a prescription (the eight-fold path). Teaching the ultimate truth depends on our conventions. And without understanding those truths, nirvāṇa cannot be attained. This distinction is very important. Nāgārjuna accepts truths in the conventional sense, while denying that they exist in the worldly sense from the highest point. The phenomena are empty of self-existence and there are no self entities in the world, but the phenomena still exist in some ultimate sense. This is reality as it truly is (tattva). In fact, he goes on to say that only if phenomena are empty do things work, then there can be suffering. If the world were nothing but a collection of discrete self, there cannot be suffering and suffering could not end.

Implications of the study: The Mūlamadhyamakakārika revolves around Nāgārjuna's attempts to refute a commonly misunderstood concepts of and show, in his views, the correct understanding of not only the four noble truths, but also the whole Buddhadharma. We can understand Nāgārjuna better by studying the primary sources, his own works in Sanskrit. It is also advisable to carry out comparative studies between his works and those of original Pāli canons and of the extensive Tibetan translation.

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