

The Phenomena Associated with the Ultimate Truth [Buddhahood and Nirvāṇa]: A Critical Study on the Tibetan Text Mūlamadhyamakakārikā

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Abstract

In *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* traditions, *Śūnyatā* (tib. *stong pa nyid*), also called "emptiness" or "voidness," represents a significant philosophical and metaphysical ideology. This concept was initially presented by *Nāgārjuna* (tib. *dGon po kLu grub*, ca. 150 – 250 AD) as an authentic teaching of the Buddha from the realm of the *Nāgās*. It is crucial to emphasize that this should not be equated with pure nihilism, which has misrepresented the term in Western philosophical discourse. Per *Nāgārjuna's* philosophical testimony, the substantial domain is devoid of both existential and non-existential properties. It is not possible to confirm or deny the existence of this concept. The entirety of phenomena is devoid of ultimate reality (Skt. *svabhāva-śūnya*, tib. *rang bzhin stong pa*), and reality itself is devoid of conceptual proliferation or plurality (Skt. *prapañca-śūnya*, tib. *spros bral stong pa*). Consequently, *Śūnyatā* provides a conceptual framework for understanding both relative and absolute realities, encompassing the cyclical nature of samsara and the attainment of nirvana. It encompasses phenomena and dependent origination. This paper examines the concepts of absolute truth, internal luminosity, Buddha-Nature (Skt. *Tahāgatagarbha*, tib. *Bde Gshegs Snying Po*), and the irreversible progression towards Liberation or *Nirvāṇa* (Tib. *Mya Ngan Las 'Das Pa*), as they relate to the idea of *Śūnyatā*, which signifies both conventional and absolute truth.

Keywords: Nāgārjuna, Śūnyatā, Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, Svabhāva, Nirvāṇa, Tahāgatagarbha

Introduction

Dualistic thinking results in the acceptance of either nonexistence or existence as a consequence of habitual thought patterns. Nevertheless, in actuality, both 'emptiness' and 'non-emptiness' are devoid of any intrinsic nature, despite their conventional appearance. The assertion that only genuine entities exist and that imitations do not is analogous to the evaluation of two figures in a dream, where one is designated as 'real' and the other as 'fake'. Nevertheless, in actuality, neither of these entities can be considered to truly exist. *Nāgārjuna* posits that the subjective experiences of self, possession, and experiential objects are conventionally appropriate to be designated as existent, and that existence is interdependent. The complete negation of the existence of phenomena is the nihilistic approach. However, *Nāgārjuna* acknowledges the existence of conceptual

appearances conventionally while emphasizing their interdependence and devoid of any inherent character. This establishes *Nāgārjuna's* approach to the doctrine of the Middle Way, which is based on the principles of interdependence and devoid of any inherent character.

The enhancement of each subjective perspective is achievable through the concept of emptiness, as is the conduct of individuals who have attained enlightenment. The key to this is interdependence; when all the requisite material causes and conditions are present, anything is possible. Emptiness allows a sentient being experiencing suffering in *Samsāra* to possess the nature of a Buddha.¹ The process of refining one's relative *Samsāra* obscurations that bind has the potential to facilitate the attainment of enlightenment. If everything in existence were to be perceived as substantial and permanent, it would be impossible for any individual to experience the processes of aging or to acquire new knowledge. Such a state of affairs would preclude the possibility of change, whether for the better or the worse. Such an environment would preclude the possibility of improvement, as there would be no scope for it. This is a logical conclusion when one understands the concept of emptiness in its true sense. The concept of emptiness provides answers to a multitude of questions, as it allows for movement and change. It allows for insight and realization. This manuscript presents an analysis of phenomena related to absolute truth, inner luminosity, Buddha-Nature (Skt. *Tahāgatagarbha*, Tib. *bde gshegs snying po*), and the irreversible turning towards liberation or *Nirvāṇa* (Tib. *mya ngan las 'das pa*).

Relation Between Conventional and Absolute Truth

Nāgārjuna employed the theory of two truths, namely the ultimate or absolute truth (Skt. *paramārtha-satya*, Tib. *bden dam bden pa*) and the conventional or relative truth (Skt. *Samvṛti-satya*, Tib. *kun rdzob bden pa*). He elucidated that all entities are devoid of an intrinsic nature, yet they do exist in relative terms. The relative serves as a pivotal means for comprehending the absolute, which in turn facilitates the possibility of the relative. Both *Nāgārjuna* and Buddha affirmed, “For those for whom emptiness is possible, everything is possible”.² The concept of existence appears to be an intrinsic quality, manifesting in both conventional and absolute forms. Nevertheless, this gives rise to erroneous assumptions regarding subjects and objects, which ultimately result in suffering. An understanding that phenomena do not arise in an absolute sense will result in the cessation of suffering. However, all aspects of the concept of existence as a phenomenon, which is often presumed to be permanent, ultimately result in suffering. This is because the twelve limbs of interdependent existence give rise to suffering, given that they neither arise independently from each other nor exist inherently. Phenomena frequently appear deceptive, as they do not reflect their true nature. Chapter XXIV of MMK commences with an investigation into the Four Noble Truths (Skt. *catvāri āryasatyāni*, Tib. *'phags pa'i bden pa bzhi*). It posits that if all phenomena are devoid of inherent existence, they cannot arise or cease, resulting in the absence of cause and effect, dharma, the supreme Buddha, the Four Truths, and ultimately, relative truth. However, *Nāgārjuna* presents a different approach in MMK XXIV:14 to address this argument. “If emptiness is possible, then everything is possible. But if emptiness is impossible, then nothing else is possible either”.³

¹ Pema Tönyö Nyinje (1996), pp. 96.

² Tsultrim Gyamtso (2003), pp. 154.

³ *ibid.* pp. 156. Also see Tibetan canon volume 96, MMK XXIV:14; *gang la stong pa nyid rung ba ll de la thams cad rung bar 'gyur ll gang la stong nyid mi rung ba ll de la thams cad rung mi 'gyur ll*

The hypothesis of empty phenomena, as put forth by *Nāgārjuna*, is not to be equated with absolute nothingness. Subject-object experiential entities are not inherently existent. Instead, they exist as a result of a combination of causes and conditions. This duality of emptiness and dependent origination invalidates the notion of independent existence. Consequently, if emptiness is plausible, the Four Noble Truths, *Samsāra*, and *Nirvāṇa* can emerge through the amalgamation of causes and conditions. However, in the absence of dependent arising, all entities would subsist autonomously, having an everlasting essence that demands no causal situations.

In verse XXIV of the *Śūnyatāsaptatikārikā*, *Nāgārjuna* sets forth the dual fundamental truths that underpin the Buddha's teachings. When the Buddha refers to 'existence', he is signifying relative existence, whereas when he alludes 'non-existence', he is indicating the absence of any inherent existence.⁴ In their respective philosophies, both Buddha and Nagarjuna employed the terms "existence" and "non-existence" to exemplify an equitable approach free from extreme perspectives. This was done to maintain a logical flow with causal connections. To achieve this, *Nāgārjuna* utilized the concept of "existence" to elucidate the notion of relative existence. In his view, all phenomena are dependent existents and, as such, lack inherent existence. The term 'non-existence' was employed to counteract extreme eternalism at other levels. In ultimate reality, none of the subjects, objects, or even the components of phenomena possess any innate nature.

Consequently, analogies of both existence and non-existence were used to establish a middle path that avoids extreme views. He demonstrated that subject-object dualities are mere objects of examination.⁵ If we accept that the essence of phenomena is beyond the reach of conceptualization, then the Four Noble Truths are rendered either non-existent or irrelevant. This is because the notion of composite phenomena negates the concept of suffering. However, conventionally, the Four Noble Truths are viewed as contingent on the erroneous belief in the inherent existence of a subject-object dichotomy.

Moreover, the Four Noble Truths can be interpreted per *Nāgārjuna's* evaluation of relative and absolute reality. In relative terms, both the subjects and objects are merely mental projections. As previously explained, they are devoid of self and devoid of phenomena. From a relative standpoint, the subject becomes susceptible to ignorance when they experience both pleasant and unpleasant sensations. The Four Noble Truths are defined by holding on to relative reality out of ignorance, presuming it to be eternal. These truths are as follows: 1) that every aspect and every moment of existence in Samsara is suffering in both happiness and sadness (Skt. *Duḥkha*, Tib. *sdug bsngal gyi bden pa*), and 2) that the root of suffering is mental afflictions. The three fundamental tenets of the Noble Eightfold Path are: 1) the cessation of suffering is the transcendence of the miseries of Samsara, called Nirvana; 2) the cessation of suffering is the cessation of mental afflictions and karmic actions; 3) the cessation of suffering is the cessation of the Four Noble Truths. The cessation of suffering is achieved through the practice of the Eightfold Noble Path (Skt. *mārga*, Tib. *lam gyi bden pa*) and the consideration of the three marks of existence (Skt. *trilakṣaṇa*, Tib. *mtshan ma gsum*), namely impermanence, non-self, and suffering. This results in liberation from *Samsāra*. The root cause of suffering is ignorance; therefore, the only way to remove it is to undertake a critical analysis of the relative and absolute nature of existence. Otherwise, the misapprehension of relative reality as real will result in the perpetuation

⁴ Komito (1987), pp. 90. Also see Tibetan canon volume 96, *Śūnyatāsaptatikārikā* verse XXXIV; *yod ces pa dang yod med ces ll yod dang me ces de yang yod ll sangs rgyas rnam kyī dgongs pa yis ll gsungs pa rtong par bla ma yin ll*

⁵ (Komito, 1987) pp. 156-157.

of grief and the cyclical rebirth within the realms of *Samsāra*. However, an understanding of the true nature of non-existence gained through the wisdom of meditation, can liberate one from the cycle of *Samsāra* and lead to the realization that existence is ultimately devoid of substance. In other words, without establishing a connection between conventional and ultimate truth, there can be no *Nirvāṇa*. Most importantly, without the realization of an ultimate truth, there can be no *Nirvāṇa*. *Nāgārjuna* elucidated this correlation in verse XXIV:10, wherein he posited that an understanding of the relative truth is a prerequisite to the imparting of the absolute truth. The recognition of the absolute is indispensable to the attainment of freedom.⁶

In XXIV:10 verse, *Nāgārjuna* sets forth the relation between relativity and absoluteness as a means of achieving final liberation. He highlighted the necessity of adopting a conventional perspective to substantiate the ultimate existence of phenomena. In the absence of the fundamental precept of the deluded appearance of aggregates and other such factors, the ultimate is beyond conceptualization. The absolute can only be established based on a reality that grasps things as truly existent. Once we have absolute recognition of the conventional existence of subject and object as essentially devoid of any inherent nature, suffering can be transcended and liberation is the final stage. Thus, the existence of *Nirvāṇa* as an ultimate is only posited from the perspective of obscuration (the conventional truth).

The Nature of Two Truths and Its Misinterpretations

The entirety of existence can be encompassed by these two fundamental truths. A lack of comprehension of these two truths signifies a corresponding lack of understanding of the very essence of the scriptures. The verse of MMK XXIV:8 states; “the Buddha’s doctrinal teaching of the *Dharma* is centered on the Two Truths; the truth of relative and absolute”.⁷

To clarify the distinction between the two truths, *Nāgārjuna* posited that when referring to an individual, the basis of reference is the aggregates, and the world is that which depends on the transitory aggregates. In this context, the term "convention" can be understood to imply a mutual dependence, given that all things are interdependent and lack an intrinsic nature. The literal meaning of "convention" or "relativity" can also be interpreted as a nominal expression, signifying the fundamental existence of things. Consequently, if there are any discrepancies in perception, it does not necessarily imply that the world is inherently real.⁸ It can be argued that the perceptual objects affected by the sense faculties are not real even in conventional reality. The relativity of things as form is taken to be true, which can be considered ignorance. This fabricates the existence of phenomena, but the truth is that they do not intrinsically exist.⁹ The reason for this is that things cannot truly exist, as explained by the concept of *Pratītyasamutpāda*, other than through the perspective of the mind that asserts things as existent. This force of conventional truth is posited due to afflictive ignorance, which is the root cause of cyclic existence. The compounded phenomena will cease to appear as eternal; they will be seen as an illusion only by abandoning ignorance. However, this is not a universal truth, as many people are deceived by this illusion.

⁶ Garfield (1995), pp. 68. Also see Tibetan cannon volume 96, MMK XXIV:10; *tha snyad la ni ma brten par ll dam pa'i don ni bstan me nus ll dam pa'i don ni ma rtogs par ll mya ngan 'das pa thob mi 'gyur ll*

⁷ Tsongkhapa (2006), pp. 479. Also see Tibetan canon volume 96, MMK XXIV:8; *sangs rgyas mams kyis chos bstan pa ll bden pa bnyis la yang dag brten ll 'jig rten kun rdzob bden pa dang ll dam pa'i don gyi bden pa'o ll*

⁸ (rJe Tsong Khapa, 2006) pp. 481.

⁹ Kalupahana (1986), pp. 329-335.

As mentioned in the *Madhyamakāvātāra*¹⁰ (tib. *dbu ma la 'jug pa*), each phenomenon has two natures: relative and absolute. When the relative reality is mistakenly perceived as absolute, the conventional reality is regarded as merely conventional by Bodhisattvas and the Buddha. For them, the nature of the emptiness of the conventional phenomena is the only absolute. The ultimate indicates that both are real and what is supreme, and that it is non-deceptive.¹¹ The ultimate reality is devoid of any deceitfulness towards ordinary beings, as it is *Nirvāṇa*, and does not exist in one way and appear in another. However, phenomena that are compounded and appear in one way but exist in another through mental recognition are not the ultimate truth, as they appear to have an inherent existence. As *Nāgārjuna* said in MMK verse XXIV:9; “One who does not fathom the distinction between two truths, fails to comprehend the Buddha’s insightful truth”.¹²

He posited that the confusion between appearance and the lack of intrinsic nature in phenomena can be understood as two distinct mental perspectives. Those who fail to grasp these two truths will be unable to define phenomena and beliefs in a nuanced manner. They will either believe in non-existence, which is the hallmark of the nihilist perspective, or in existence, which is the defining feature of the eternalist perspective. Consequently, they will be unable to comprehend the interdependent origination and the middle way. Moreover, *Nāgārjuna* posited that misapprehending the two truths would result in an erroneous characterization of emptiness. This, in turn, would lead to the undermining of both conventional and ultimate reasoning. He argued in MMK XXIV:11 that the erroneous understanding of emptiness has the potential to cause significant harm to an individual with limited cognitive abilities. This can be likened to the scenario of a snake being mistakenly grasped or the misguided cultivation of knowledge.¹³

The absolute can only be perceived through a pearl of uncontaminated wisdom that views phenomena as inherently non-existent. Once this perception is achieved, the subject-object duality will cease to exist. However, if the distinction between these two truths is not recognized, the compounded phenomena will be perceived as essentially empty and non-existent by some, while others will view emptiness as essentially existent, based on fabricated concepts. Both interpretations are misperceptions of emptiness, which could be as destructive and fatal as a mistakenly grabbed snake. Therefore, if the existential phenomena are misperceived, the unwise are thereby ruined. This is because those who misperceive are harmed and those with little knowledge will not be able to grasp the proper meaning of the way things are (the dependent existence of *Dharma*).¹⁴

Nevertheless, he posited that in the absence of an erroneous comprehension of the two truths, a subsequent erroneous assumption may arise, namely that the phenomenon of arising and cessation will not occur if all phenomena are ultimately empty. The middle way is a non-erroneous and beneficial doctrine based on *śūnya*, which posits that emptiness is devoid of the inherent existence of whatever arises dependently. This is the reason that phenomena that have arisen dependently suffer since suffering has an origin, cessation, and a path that leads to cessation. Otherwise, if the misperceived phenomena are considered to exist in virtue of an own-

¹⁰ See the Tibetan canon volume 102, *Mādhyamika* division of *Madhyamakāvātāra* verse VI:23.

¹¹ Tsongkhapa (2006), pp. 487.

¹² Mabja Jangchub Tsöndrü (2011), pp. 504. Also see Tibetan cannon volume 96, MMK XXIV:9; *gang dag bden pa de gnyids kyi ll nram dbyed nram par mi shes pa ll de dag sangs rgyas bstan pa ni ll zab mo 'i de nyid rnam mi shes ll*

¹³ Kalupahana (1986), pp. 335. Also see the Tibetan cannon volume 96, MMK XXIV:11 verse for the same, *stong pa nyid la blta nyes na ll shes rab chung rnam phung bar 'gyur ll ji ltar sprul la gzung nyes dang ll rig sngags nyes par bsgrubs pa bzhin ll*

¹⁴ Tsongkhapa (2006), pp. 498-499. Also see Kalupahana (1986), pp. 335.

being, then one must admit that all things are without causes and conditions; they must be either eternal or non-existent, which is unjustified as it denies dependent origination based on two truths.¹⁵ Subsequently, the concepts of cause and effect, agent, instrument, action, arising, and ceasing will be subjected to critical examination. As previously stated, *Nāgārjuna* proposed the Middle Way, which posits that dependent origination can be understood as a form of emptiness. An individual who recognizes the interdependent origination of phenomena can perceive the suffering associated with them, as well as their origin, cessation, and the path leading to their cessation. Consequently, the assertion is that nothing exists in an existential state devoid of dependent origination, and thus, they are devoid of essential existence.

Buddha-Nature

The concept of Buddha-nature (Skt. *Tahāgatagarbha*, Tib. *Bde Gshegs Snying Po*) occupies a pivotal position within Buddhist thought. From an etymological perspective, the term *Tathāgatagarbha* reflects the fluid status and intricate nature of the subject matter. The term illuminates the dual aspect of a transcendent Buddha, 'thus gone', and an innate Buddha, 'to come'. *Garbha*, from which the term is derived, signifies the 'womb, essence and embryo'.¹⁶ The concept of Buddha-nature can be understood as the pure nature of the mind and reality. It conveys the fundamental nature of being and the relationship between the Buddha(s) and sentient beings. In other words, Buddha-nature is the potential for sentient beings to become Buddhas, and it represents the living capacity for awakening.¹⁷

The third cycle of teachings (Third Turning of the Wheel) posits that all individuals possess the Buddha nature and the potential to achieve awakening. As individuals, there is no fundamental distinction, no variance between anyone, and no basis for prejudice or discrimination present in any of us. Furthermore, there is no rationale for conferring differential privileges upon individuals, given that our fundamental nature is identical. The sole distinction between individuals is the extent to which their inherent nature is expressed. The manifestation of the Buddha nature is inversely proportional to the presence of impurities or confusion. As these impurities are reduced, the Buddha nature becomes more apparent. The objective, therefore, is to facilitate the pure and complete manifestation of the Buddha nature in our lives. This may be achieved by reflecting on the initial cycle of teachings, which addresses karma, our actions, and our daily conduct. It also covers the ethical actions of learning restraint, performing virtue, and avoiding non-virtue. These practices facilitate the manifestation of the Buddha-Nature. An examination of the second cycle of teachings reveals a primary focus on the cultivation of love, compassion, and the two aspects that facilitate the awakening of the mind. This entails the awakening of our relationship to the world and the awakening to the nature of the

¹⁵ (rJe Tsong Khapa, 2006) pp. 503-504. Also see that this argument was made by *Nāgārjuna* in verse 16th & 36th of MMK chapter XXIV that; 'one will have to regard all the things without the causes and conditions if things are existing with intrinsic nature. And those who deny emptiness which is dependent origination, then one undermines all conventional mundane'. See Tibetan cannon volume 96, MMK XXIV:16; *gal te dngos rnam rang bzhin las ll yod par rjes su lta byed na ll de lta yin na dngos po rnam ll rgyu rkyen med par khyod lta'o ll*, MMK XXIV:36; *rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba yi ll stong pa nyid la gnod byed gang ll 'jig rten pa yi tha snyad ni ll kun la gnod pa byed pa yin ll* Also see MMK XXIV:19; *gang phyir rten 'byung ma yin pa'i ll chos 'ga' yod pa ma yin ll de phyir stong pa ma yin pa'i ll chos 'ga' yod pa ma yin no ll*

¹⁶ See Brian Edward Brown (1991). pp. 34-41. 'The Sanskrit compound *tathā + gata*, meaning 'the thus gone one, (i.e., Buddha) is the same spelling as the compound *tathā + āgata*, meaning 'the thus come one'.

¹⁷ Hookham (1991), pp. 14-17.

world.¹⁸ The practice of these instructions allows for the clarification of confusion, thus enabling the manifestation of one's true nature in its purest and most complete form. As previously stated, the Four Noble Truths can be understood as follows: the first and second truths are relative, the third is ultimate, and the fourth represents the path to achieving the third, which is the cessation of dukkha.

Nāgārjuna posited that the Buddha Nature is an emptiness, insofar as beings are capable of transforming Buddhahood. The concept of emptiness serves to guarantee the relativity of all things. Consequently, it is possible to evolve to become a Buddha despite ignorance. The concept of the *Tathāgatagarbha* is that it is the Buddha within our mind. This is because the inconceivable 'truth body' (Skt. *dharmakāya*, Tib. *chos sku*) of the Buddha is reality itself, including beings. Buddha is one with us, and therefore we have the potential to be equal to him. However, *Nāgārjuna* argued that positing the Buddha-Nature as substantially existent is not tenable. In the first verse of MMK XXII, he stated "The *tathāgata* is neither, nor different from aggregates. Neither the aggregates are in him nor he in the aggregates. He does not possess aggregates. Who is *tathāgata*?"¹⁹

If the *tathāgata* is posited as an entity in its own right, it must be either identical with or distinct from the aggregates. However, it cannot be identified with the aggregates, as this would entail the agent and object being identical, as elucidated in Chapter X of MMK. Consequently, the *tathāgata* must be regarded as distinct from the aggregates.²⁰ Moreover, the term '*tathāgata*' is not nominally existent, as there is no basis for the designation of *tathāgata* and it cannot be established as either a self-entity or as an entity of another nature. This is discussed by *Nāgārjuna* in MMK XXII:8, where he states, having been sought in a fivefold manner, how can that which is neither identical nor different be designated as the *Tathāgata* through grasping?²¹ In this sense, the *tathāgata* is neither identical nor different from the aggregates. It follows that the existence of the *tathāgata* cannot be supported by or have the aggregates. Therefore, the *tathāgata* is neither a self-entity nor is it of the nature of other entities. This is because *Nāgārjuna* presented and explained in MMK XXII:2 & 3 that if the Buddha depended upon aggregates, it would not exist through its self-nature. It is therefore impossible for him to exist through otherness-nature, given that he does not exist through self-nature.²²

If something is contingent upon the aggregates, it is not an intrinsic entity. Similarly, if Buddha were to be regarded as dependent on aggregates, it would follow that he would not exist in an intrinsic sense. This is because all dependent arising is said to lack an intrinsic nature, which is analogous to the reflection of the moon in a lake. It is therefore impossible for non-existence to be constituted by otherness. Moreover, *Nāgārjuna* posited that, given that nothing exists intrinsically, it is not possible to refer to the *tathāgata* as inherently existent if it is dependent on aggregates. Otherwise, if the *tathāgata* existed inherently, it would be essentially existent, and its relation in dependence on the aggregates could not be established. It is therefore

¹⁸ Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche (1992), pp. 234.

¹⁹ Kalupahana (1986), pp. 302. Also see Tibetan canon volume 96, MMK XXII:1 for the same; *phung ni phung po las gzhan min ll de la phung med de der med ll de bzhin gshegs pa phung ldan min ll de bzhin gshegs pa gang zhig yin ll*

²⁰ Tsongkhapa (2006), pp. 443.

²¹ Garfield (1995), pp. 61. Also see Tibetan canon volume 96, MMK XXII:8; *rnam pa lngas ni btsel byas na ll gang zhig de nyid gzhan nyid du ll med pa'i de bzhin gshegs pa de ll nye bar len pas ji ltar gdags ll*

²² (Jay L. Garfield, 1995) pp. 60. Also see the Tibetan canon volume 96, MMK XXII:2; *gal te sangs rgyas phung po la ll brten nas rang bzhin las yod min ll rang bzhin las ni gang med pa ll de gzhan dngos las ga la yod ll gang zhig gzhan gyi dngos brten nas ll de bdag nyid du me 'thad do ll gang zhig bdag nyid med pa de ll ji ltar de bzhin gshegs par 'gyur ll*

not prudent to assert that the *tathāgata* does not exist inherently but rather exists inherently as dependent on another.²³ In the concluding remarks of section XXII, *Nāgārjuna* poses the question of what sort of Thus-Gone could exist apart from that which is of the nature of other phenomena.²⁴

It can be concluded that the concept of a *tathāgata* cannot be defined in terms of its existence or about other entities. It is not possible to relate something else to him, nor is it possible to relate anything other than himself. Nevertheless, the notion of Buddha-Nature must be preceded by an understanding of self-emptiness and the emptiness of other phenomena (tib. *rang stong gzhan stong*), as Buddha-Nature is characterized by selflessness. This observation arises through logical analysis, given that every phenomenon is interrelated with other phenomena. Consequently, there is no possibility of any entity existing independently. This is because dharmas are self-empty (*rang stong*), and we tend to perceive things as real in our daily experience. This can fail to recognize Buddha nature.²⁵ Conversely, they are devoid of existence; they are non-existent, both and neither (*gzhan stong*), since they are merely an extension of Buddha's Wisdom Mind, which is beyond the scope of ordinary conceptual consciousness. The emptiness of Buddha-nature is therefore devoid of limiting factors, in other words, it is devoid of conceptually created phenomena.²⁶ *Nāgārjuna* mentioned in MMK XXII:16;

Whatever is the essence of the *tathāgata*, is also the essence of the cosmos.

The *tathāgata* is empty of essence, the universe too devoid of essence.²⁷

The reality of the *tathāgata* is beyond the limitations of conceptual construction. This is why the Buddha-nature, depicted as the *dharmakāya*, is neither existent nor non-existent, nor both nor not the both. Rather, it is pure, equal, unconditioned, and indestructible, and its meaning cannot be expressed in words.²⁸ The description of phenomena is accompanied by a description of the *tathāgata*, as well as of samsara and *nirvāṇa*. It is asserted that these three concepts are identical in their true nature, as are the Buddhas and sentient beings.

Nirvāṇa

The initial concept of Nirvana as elucidated by the Buddha is subject to variation, contingent upon the capabilities of his disciples. Those who were experiencing distress due to their afflictions were instructed that *Nirvāṇa* was a genuine phenomenon and that it signified an irrevocable emancipation from *Samsāra*. However, disciples who had a fixed idea of Nirvana as a tangible reality were taught that Nirvana is not an inherent entity; rather, it is a transient phenomenon akin to a dream. To those disciples who were receptive to this teaching, the Buddha elucidated the true nature of Nirvana as the fundamental nature of all phenomena, which transcends the limitations of conceptual constructs.²⁹ Thus, the explanations are structured in four stages. 1) *Samsāra* is the nature of suffering, 2) Liberation from suffering exists, 3) *Nirvāṇa* does not truly

²³ Rje Tsongkhapa (2006), pp. 443-444.

²⁴ Tsöndrū (2011), pp. 461. Also see Tibetan canon volume 96, MMK XXII:4c-d; *gang bzhin dang ni gzhan dngos dag ll ma gtogs de bzhin gshegs de gang ll*

²⁵ Hookham (1991), pp. 14-15.

²⁶ (Hookham, 1991) pp. 16.

²⁷ Kalupahana (1986), pp. 310. Also see Tibetan canon volume 96, MMK XXII:16; *de bzhin gshegs pa'i rang bzhin gang ll de ni 'gro 'di'i rang bzhin yin ll de bzhin gshegs pa rang bzhin med ll 'gro ba 'di yi rang bzhin med ll*

²⁸ Guang Xing (2005), pp. 94.

²⁹ Tsultrim Gyamtso (2003), pp. 162.

exist and 4) The nature of *Nirvāṇa* transcends both existence and non-existence. The four stages are essential for introducing the concept of *Nirvāṇa*, as they encourage the practice of the Dharma. Otherwise, one is distracted from the pursuit of enduring happiness, failing to recognize that existence is inherently a state of suffering. The second stage offers the prospect of the cessation of suffering through the pursuit of Nirvana as an ultimate objective. Nevertheless, one might regard Nirvana as a genuine entity at the second stage and yet fail to achieve it. This would entail the assumption that Nirvana does not possess an intrinsic existence, a premise that could potentially give rise to an erroneous attachment to the notion of its nonexistence. Consequently, Nirvana can be described neither as an existent nor a non-existent entity.

Nāgārjuna undertook an analysis of the concept of *Nirvāṇa* in the context of phenomenal existence, in response to criticism levelled at the notion of *Nirvāṇa* by opponents. Some opponents advanced the argument that if everything is empty, it is impossible to transcend suffering and there cannot be a *Nirvāṇa*. However, an examination of the nature of worldly phenomena reveals that *Nirvāṇa* can also be demonstrated to lack an inherent nature. In MMK XXV:1-2, *Nāgārjuna* posits that if everything is empty, the aspiration to attain *Nirvāṇa* is illogical. Similarly, if all is nonempty, the desire to attain Nirvana is also illogical. If Nirvana is assumed to exist, the question arises as to which preceded the other, *Samsāra* or *Nirvāṇa*—neither existed before the other. The actual concept of Nirvana is elucidated in Chapter XXV:3 of MMK.

Un-relinquished, unattained, unannihilated, impermanent, un-ceased and

Un-arisen, this is called *Nirvāṇa* (transcendence of suffering).³⁰

Nirvāṇa logically is devoid of all the extremes. ‘*Nirvāṇa* does not exist essentially as any of these four things: desire, which has been relinquished; the fruit of the spiritual practitioner, which has been attained; the appropriation of aggregates, which has been annihilated; or the non-empty, which would be permanent’.³¹ In other words, *Nirvāṇa* is the complete pacification of all fabrications since it neither ceases nor arises. However, one cannot attain *Nirvāṇa* without the elimination of two conceptions; that of existence and that of non-existence. Therefore, one should reject any view that limits *Nirvāṇa*, as limitation belongs to cyclic existence. There are no existent phenomena in *Nirvāṇa*.

Refutation of the Four Extremes

Nāgārjuna posited that the existence of *Nirvāṇa* is inherently beyond the scope of all conceptualization. This is because, like phenomena, it cannot be defined as either existent or non-existent, nor can it be understood as both.

Firstly, if *Nirvāṇa* is assumed to exist, it would be a compound entity, given that empirical phenomena are also compounds. The contradiction between *Samsāra* and *Nirvāṇa* is based on the compounding nature of phenomena; therefore, *Nirvāṇa* is not compounded. Conversely, uncompounded phenomena do not exist in any location. Similarly, *Nirvāṇa* must be non-dependent since essentially existing entities do not depend on causes and conditions; thus, no independent entity can be identified. Additionally, *Nirvāṇa* is negatively described with the characteristics of *Samsāra* as arising, aging, death, cessation, and so forth, like any other

³⁰ Kalupahana (1986), pp. 357. Also see the Tibetan canon volume 96, MMK XXV:3; *spangs pa med pa thob med pa ll chad pa med pa rtag med pa ll 'gag pa med pa skye med pa ll de ni mya ngan 'das par brjod ll*

³¹ Rje Tsongkhapa (2006), pp. 518.

conventional phenomena. Therefore, it cannot be classified as intrinsic existence.³²

Secondly, the concept of *Nirvāṇa* cannot be posited as non-existent, given that it has already been demonstrated that such a notion of nonexistence is untenable. Consequently, it is incongruous to ascribe nonexistence to *Nirvāṇa*. If something is non-dependent, it cannot also be non-existent. Concerning the relationship between Nirvana and *Saṃsāra*, they are analogous insofar as *Nirvāṇa* exists conventionally as a dependent and consequent phenomenon of *Saṃsāra*. The existence of the one (*Saṃsāra*) is contingent upon the other (*Nirvāṇa*). *Nāgārjuna* also mentioned in MMK XV:5b: ‘Since entity does not exist, nonentity does not exist’.³³ Whatever is dependent, is conventional. Hence, no non-entity is neither essentially dependent on causes and conditions nor dependent on other designations.

Thirdly, the concept of *Nirvāṇa* cannot simultaneously be both of these things. *Nāgārjuna* posited that all phenomena that arise and cease are dependent and produced by the combination of causes and conditions from previous lives; they can't be both. The simultaneous existence of existence and non-existence in a single location is not a possibility, analogous to the coexistence of light and darkness. Furthermore, an examination of *Nirvāṇa* revealed that it is unconditioned, whereas existence and non-existence are considered to be conditioned. Additionally, *Nirvāṇa* is not an independent entity, as existence and non-existence are mutually dependent. Furthermore, if both existence and non-existence were to be considered *Nirvāṇa*, it would be illogical, given that *Nirvāṇa* is uncompounded. Conversely, both existence and non-existence are compounded.

Fourthly, the concept of *Nirvāṇa* cannot be imposed upon either of the three. *Nāgārjuna* posited that the proposition of Nirvana as neither existent nor non-existent can be established only when existence and non-existence are established. However, these two were refuted earlier, and the negation of these two is not established either. He further argued that if *Nirvāṇa* has a nature that is neither entity nor non-entity, it is unclear who could perceive the same. Nevertheless, there is no one to conduct such an examination at the stage of peace.³⁴ Moreover, *Nirvāṇa* is not a subjective consciousness nor is it an object of the relativity of *Saṃsāra*.

Regarding his argument on extremes, *Nāgārjuna* concluded that none of the four alternatives can be asserted and that all discourse is only possible from the conventional point of view. From the perspective of ultimate reality, this approach is untenable when discussing the coherence of inherent nature in things.³⁵ Therefore, the individual who has achieved *Nirvāṇa* cannot be perceived to exist, nor to be non-existent or manifest, or both, or neither. Similarly, when the topic of the *Tathāgata* was explained, it was established that even when

³² See Tibetan canon volume 96, MMK XXV:4, 5 and 6; *re zhig mya ngan 'das dngos min ll rga shi'i mtshan nyid thal bar 'gyur ll rga dang 'chi ba med pa yi ll dngos po yod pa ma yin no ll gal te mya ngan 'das dngos na ll mya ngan 'das pa 'dus byas 'gyur ll dngos po med ji ltar rung bar 'gyur ll 'ga' yang gang na yod ma yin ll gal te mya ngan 'das dngos na ll ji ltar myang 'das de brten min ll dngos po brten nas ma yin pa ll 'ga' yang yod pa ma yin no ll*

³³ Rje Tsongkhapa (2006), pp. 524. Also see Tibetan cannon volume 96, MMK XXV:7-8; *gal te mya ngan 'das dnogs min ll dngos med ji ltar rung bar 'gyur ll gang la mya ngan 'das dngos min ll de la dngogs med yod ma yin ll gal te mya ngan 'das de brten min ll ji ltar mya ngan 'das de brten min ll gang zhig brten nas ma yin pa'i ll dngos med yod ma yin ll*

³⁴ Stanley Frye (1981), pp. 342. Also see Tibetan cannon volume, 96 MMK XXV: 15-16; *dngos min dngos po med min pa ll mya ngan 'das par gang ston pa ll dngos po med dang dngos po dag ll grub na de ni grub par 'gyur ll gal te mya ngan 'das pa ni ll dngos min dngos po med min na ll dngos min dngos po med min zhes ll gang zhig gis ni de mngon byed ll*

³⁵ Rje Tsongkhapa (2006), 529. Also see Tibetan cannon volume 96 MMK XXV:17-18; *bcom ldan mya ngan 'das gyur nas ll yod par mi mngon de bzhin du ll med do zhe 'am gnyis ka dang ll gnyis min zhes kyang mi mngon no ll bcom ldan bzhugs par gyur na yang ll yod par mi mngon de bzhin du ll med do zhe 'am gnyis ka dang ll gnyis min zhes kyang mi mngon no ll*

the Blessed One was alive, it was neither assumed that he did not exist, nor that he existed in a dualistic manner. Rather, both Buddha and *Nāgārjuna* rejected the metaphysical concept of *Tathāgata*. Consequently, *Nirvāṇa* cannot be subjected to the four alternatives other than as a conceptual argument regarding its existence.

Relation between *Saṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa*

Nāgārjuna's investigation of *Nirvāṇa* led to the conclusion that there is no distinction between existence and *Nirvāṇa*. This is because there is no *Nirvāṇa* that is not *Saṃsāra*, and vice versa. The mentally projected *saṃsāric* fold of pain and pleasure are both either negative or positive aspects of suffering; we strive for something beyond to cease suffering. This position is irreversible blissfulness; it is *Nirvāṇa*. It is evident that devoid of *Saṃsāra*, there is no *Nirvāṇa*, and it is futile to differentiate between the two.³⁶ *Saṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa* are identical, yet they cannot exist simultaneously. If one recognizes the true essence of one's subject-object mentality as an illusion, then *Saṃsāra* is *Nirvana*. *Nāgārjuna* defined the relation between *Saṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa* in MMK XXV:19;

Saṃsāra is not the slightest difference from *Nirvāṇa*.

Nirvāṇa is not the slightest different from *Saṃsāra*.³⁷

This signifies that *Nirvāṇa* and *Saṃsāra* are inherently equal in their fundamental nature. Both are beyond the limitations of conceptualization, given that their intrinsic nature is one of original purity. While *Saṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa* are not distinct entities, they do exhibit differences in characterization. In the context of *Saṃsāra*, phenomena can be characterized and appear as entities. However, in the context of *Nirvāṇa*, no characterization is possible. From the perspective of *Nirvāṇa*, the *saṃsāric* phenomena have only conventional, nominal existence and no inherent existence. Neither appearance nor absence of appearance is established in the manner of the four extremes. Furthermore, *Nāgārjuna* states in MMK XXV:20 that:

Whatever is the extremity of *Nirvāṇa*, that is the extremist of *Saṃsāra*.

There is not even the slimmest variance between them or even the subtle thing.³⁸

Once the concept of inherent existence is negated, the true nature of phenomena and actions is revealed. This realization, known as suchness, eradicates ignorance and paves the way for the cessation of arising. Ultimately, this leads to the attainment of liberation, a state free from the constraints of aging and death.

Conclusion

In the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*, all experienced phenomena are described as *sūnya*, both in terms of conventional understanding and in an absolute sense. This does not imply that they are not experienced and therefore non-existent; rather, it suggests that they are devoid of a permanent and eternal *svabhāva*, akin to how a dream is a mere projection of human consciousness. As these imaginary fictions are experienced, they are not mere *prajñapti*.³⁹ Moreover, all compounded phenomena are conventionally regarded as existing

³⁶ K. Venkata Ramanan (1966), pp. 176.

³⁷ Tsultrim Gyamtso (2003), pp. 165. Also see Tibetan canon volume 96, MMK XXV:19; 'khor ba mya ngan 'das pa las ll khya par cung zad yod ma yin ll mya ngan 'das pa 'khor ba las ll khya par cung zad yod ma yin ll

³⁸ Garfield (1995), pp. 331. Also see the Tibetan canon volume 96, MMK XXV:20; mya ngan 'das mtha' gang yin pa ll de ni 'khor ba 'i mtha' yin te ll de gnyis khyad par cung zad ni ll shin tu phra ba 'ang yod ma yin ll

³⁹ Kalupahana (1986), pp. 120.

based on interdependent origination and subject to impermanence. All emotions are, in essence, painful, given the nature of *Samsāra*. Given that all phenomena lack intrinsic existence, the concept of enlightenment or nirvana is beyond the scope of conventional understanding. When observed with omniscience, *Samsāra* is perceived as an unpleasurable state of being. It is therefore crucial to become increasingly convinced that the only worthwhile objective is to achieve supreme enlightenment. The contemplation of the sufferings of *Samsāra* will naturally result in the development of a strong wish to be liberated from it. However, neither phenomena nor Buddha nature nor Nirvana can be subsumed under the four extremes.

Nevertheless, they can be projected conventionally; however, they are beyond all mental constructions in the ultimate sense. To project a convincing analysis of *śūnyata* that includes *Nirvāṇa* and *Tathāgata*, both Buddha and *Nāgārjuna* established that all phenomena are beyond the four extremes and that the Middle Way is the only acceptable proposition. Consequently, it can be argued that Buddha nature, Buddhahood, emptiness, and *Nirvāṇa* are all intrinsically empty of inherent existence.

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