

# AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE CONCEPT OF EMPTYNESS (SŪNYATĀ) DOCTRINE AND ITS CONNECTION WITH DEPENDENT ORIGINATION



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is an attempt to analyze the concept of emptiness from the early Buddhist teachings to subsequent Buddhist developmental schools, namely, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra Schools. An examination of an insightful bridge between the Buddha's major teaching on dependent origination and the notion of emptiness will also be attempted.

The initial part of this qualitative research will focus on the etymological term of emptiness (*sūnyatā*) and the Buddha's teaching of emptiness from the Early Buddhist standpoint. Next, this research will seek to explain the concept of emptiness in the Madhyamaka School and Yogācāra School. This study will further demonstrates the eradication of suffering is what is meant by the understanding of the concept emptiness from an ultimate standpoint which concerns a connection to the Buddha's central teaching of Dependent Origination.

**Keywords:** Emptiness, Early Buddhism, Madhyama, Yogācara, Dependent Origination

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘Emptiness’ (Skt. *Śūnyatā*) is a popular term in Buddhism especially connected to the Madhyamaka School which was founded by Ācārya Nāgārjuna. According to the Pāli Canon, it is quite evident that the Buddha used the term ‘emptiness’ (*Śūnyatā*) several times in order to make a clear doctrinal exposition towards his followers and disciples. For instance, in the Mahāli Sutta, Poṭṭhapāda Sutta and Mahānidāna Sutta from Dīgha Nikāya; in the Āneñjasappāya sutta, Cūḷa-suññata Sutta, Maha-suññata Sutta and Aggivacchagotta Sutta from Majjhima Nikāya; in the Vacchagotta Sutta from Saṃyutta Nikāya; Avyākata Sutta from Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Blessed One used the word ‘emptiness’ for explaining metaphorical doctrinal teachings such as non-self, an object of mindful meditation, and the universe and the world itself. In addition, the Buddha’s teaching on Dependent Origination (Pali: *paṭiccasamuppāda*; Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*) is the most fundamental doctrine, which he contrived at the eve of Enlightenment. Ācārya Nāgārjuna was the first saint who stated a subtle insightful relationship between the Buddha’s central doctrine of Dependent Origination and the concept of emptiness in his monumental text, the Mūlamadhyamakārikā<sup>1</sup>.

The object of this paper is to analyze the concept of emptiness from the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra Schools and propose a connection between the concept and Dependent Origination.

## ETYMOLOGY OF THE TERM SŪNYATĀ (EMPTINESS)

The word ‘*śūnyatā*’ is the Śanskrit term is generally translated into English as ‘emptiness,’ ‘nothingness,’ ‘devoid’ or ‘voidness’. *Śūnyatā* is renown as *suññata* in Pāli language, which refers to the same meaning as the Śanskrit term. *Śūnyatā* is related to many remarkable Buddhist words, such as ‘*sññagārā*’, ‘*suññatānupassanā*’, ‘*suññatāsamādhi*’, ‘*suññatācetovimutti*’, ‘*suññatā-vimokkha*’, ‘*suññatāvihāra*’, etc.. Etymologically, the word

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<sup>1</sup> Mūlamadhyamakārikā (literally ‘*The Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*’) composed by the eminent Buddhist figure Ācārya Nāgārjuna. This text is considered as the key documents for Madhyamaka School. Nāgārjuna lived at the end of the first century C.E. and his monumental text Mūlamadhyamakārikā (MMK) was composed around that time obviously. The entire MMK is consisted of twenty-seven chapters, which covers principle terms of Buddhism, such as, cause and condition, self-nature (*svabhāva*), action (*karma*), self, liberation (*nirvāṇa*), aggregates, etc.. Scholarly, it says that MMK is the foundation of Madhyamaka School along with the root of the Mahāyāna tradition.

‘*śūnyatā*’ derives from the adjective *śūnya* (Śanskrit grammar), *suñña* (Pāli grammar), *śūna* (Vedic grammar)<sup>2</sup>. The Śanskrit word ‘*śūnya*’ emerges from the root (√) ‘*śvi*’ meaning ‘to swell’. Literally, *śūnya* means ‘relating to the swollen’ while the root (√) ‘*śvi*’ seems to have expressed the idea that something looks ‘swollen’ from the outside but is ‘hollow’ inside<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, Sir Monier Williams defines the term ‘*śūnyatā*’ in his dictionary ‘*A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*’ as ‘loneliness’, ‘desolateness’, ‘absence of mind’, ‘non-reality’, ‘emptiness’, ‘illusory nature’ or nothingness<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, Indian subcontinent languages like Hindi, Nepali and Bengali refer the word ‘*śūnyatā*’ as zero (similar meaning to the mathematical term ‘0’). It has to be noted that the Śanskrit term of ‘*śūnya*’ is subsequently impacted many Asian languages enriching their mathematical-language. For example, Thai people pronounce it as ‘*śūny*’ (in terms of Thai Phonetic), Bengali people pronounce it as ‘*śūn*’ya’ (in terms of Bengali Phonetic), which sound similar to the English term ‘zero’. Buddhist scholars, however, commonly translated the term ‘*śūnyatā*’ as emptiness due to its linguistic benefit for clarifying the essence of its subtle, profound, metaphysical and metaphoric meaning as well as its ontological explanation.

## NOTION OF EMTINESS IN EARLY BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

The notion of ‘Emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*) appeared in early Buddhist teachings. Evidence from the Pāli Canonical texts explicitly proved that the Buddha himself used the term ‘emptiness’ many times for expounding his subtle and profound teachings towards his disciples. Referring to the Maha-suññata Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya, the Buddha clearly explained the notion of ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*) when Venerable Ānanda asked his master (the Blessed One) in what respect is the world so-called empty. Having heard Ānanda’s question carefully, the Buddha replied, “*suññam idaṃ atteva vā attaniyena vā*”, which means “insofar as it (the world) is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self, thus it is said, Ānanda, that the world is empty”<sup>5</sup>. The Blessed One admired those practitioners (*yogi*) who

<sup>2</sup> Phramaha Thongyod Bhipalo, **The Study of Suññatā in Theravāda Buddhism**, (Bihar: Wat Thai Buddagaya Bodh-Gaya, India, 2008), p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Conze, **Buddhism: Its Essence and Development**, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1999), p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> Monier Williams, **A Sanskrit-English Dictionary**; web <<http://monierwilliams.com/>> 11 September, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> MI 122.

obtained the stage of emptiness. Hence, on one occasion the Buddha addressed Venerable Ānanda that the wise one is one who contemplates, enters, and remains in an emptiness that is undeniably pure (*parisuddham*) and paramount (*paramānuttaram*)<sup>6</sup>.

In addition to the early Buddhist literatures, the notion of ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*) is focused from three perspectives, namely, treating it (*śūnyatā*) as a meditative dwelling, as an attribute of objects, and as a type of heedfulness-release. These three types of explication are considered the foundations of the ‘emptiness’ concept in terms of Canonical (*Nikāya*) texts.

First, according to the sermon ‘The Lesser Discourse of Emptiness’ (*Cūḷa-suññata Sutta*) a clear statement could be found from the Buddha’s word on emptiness when Venerable Ānanda wanted to confirm of his earlier hearing whether the Blessed One’s joyous meditative dwelling of nothingness (*suññatāvihārena*) was correct or not. Having heard this question, the Buddha precisely illustrated to his attendant Venerable Ānanda that whatsoever he (Ānanda) heard, it was totally correct (*sussutam sugghātam*) and he (the Blessed One) remains fully in a dwelling of emptiness as before (*Pubbepāham ānanda, etarahi pi suññatāvihārena bahulam viharāmi*)<sup>7</sup>. This statement makes a clear notion that the Buddha used the term of ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*) for ascribing a peaceful and joyous meditating dwelling stage.

Second, with reference to the discourse ‘Conducive to the Imperturbable’ (*Āneñjasappāya sutta*) one can observe how the Blessed One used the notion of emptiness for his disciples as a type of attribute of objects and as a type of heedfulness-release. In this discourse, the Buddha advocated to the monks for going to the forest (*araññagato*), going to the root of a tree (*rukka-mūlagato*) going to an empty place (*suññagāra-gato*), sitting cross-legged, holding the body straight, setting mindfulness in front of him, and mindfully breathing out<sup>8</sup>. The aforesaid statement explicitly implies the Buddha’s observation of the term of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) that can be used as an object of mindful meditation in order to keep the mind lucid, imperturbable, peaceful and on edge from mental-proliferation and defilements.

Third, the discourse ‘The Greater Set of Questions-and-Answers’ (*Mahāvedalla Sutta*) delineates the term of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) as a type of heedfulness-release. This sermon describes that when a meditative person has gone to the wilderness, to the root of the tree

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<sup>6</sup>MI 121.

<sup>7</sup>MI 121.

<sup>8</sup>MI 118.

or into an empty dwelling place, he should be aware of the mind and consider thus: ‘This is empty of self or of anything pertaining to self’ (*suññamidaṃ attena vā attaniyena vāti*)<sup>9</sup>. Venerable Sāiputta called this aforesaid noble consideration as emptiness heedfulness-release (*Ayaṃ vuccatāvuso suññatā cetovimutti*)<sup>10</sup>.

Based on above descriptions, one can observe an explicit notion of emptiness in the early Buddhist teachings where the Buddha and his disciples delineated an optimistic approach and skillfully used the term of emptiness for ascribing a meditative stage, as an object of mindfulness, and as a type of heedfulness-release.

## THE CONCEPT OF EMPTINESS IN THE MADHYAMAKA SCHOOL

The Madhyamaka as a systematic philosophical tenet among the four great Buddhist schools<sup>11</sup>, arose in the second century C.E. with the figure of the great saint Ācārya Nāgārjuna<sup>12</sup>. Despite Madhyamaka School<sup>13</sup> having a continuous history of development, it was originally established as a means of subtle doctrinal exposition of emptiness (skt. *śūnyatā*) that was marvelously presented by Ācārya Nāgārjuna.

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<sup>9</sup>MI 143

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> After the Buddha’s demise (*Mahāparinibbāna*), it is scholarly believed that Buddhism was spitted into eighteen sects, which are compiled into four main schools regarding the popular Buddhist doctrinal dispute: how the mind comes into existence. The four developmental Buddhist schools are namely, Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika, Vijñānavāda and Madhyamaka or Śūnyatāvāda. In brief, the four great school’s philosophical viewpoints are as follows:

- (a) *Bāhyartha pratyakṣhavāda* by Sarvāstivādin or Vaibhāsikan, that means, the external object can be perceived through direct perception.
- (b) *Bāhyartha anumeyavāda* by Sautrāntikan, that means, external object is inference.
- (c) *Bāhyartha śūnyavāda* by Vijñānavādins, that means, external object is empty.
- (d) *Ubhayārtha śūnyavāda* by Mādhyamikans, that means, both external and internal are empty.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Della Santina, *Madhyamaka Schools in India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Madhyamaka School was flourished in India from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century to 11<sup>th</sup> Century. It is possible to distinguish four main stages in the development of the Madhyamaka School. The first stage of systematic formulation by Nāgārjuna and his disciple Āryadeva. In the second stage, Madhyamaka is divided into two schools – the Prāsangika represented by Buddhapālita and Svāntarika by Bhāvaviveka. The third stage includes Candrakīrti and Śāntideva who bring Madhyamaka to its rigorous, orthodox form and also follow the Prāsangika. The last stage is a syncretism of the Yogācāra and the Madhyamaka represented by Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla..

The notion of emptiness, however, greatly played an important role in the sense of developing the Madhyamaka School. Emptiness doctrine was developed by Nāgārjuna during his lifespan. Initially, Nāgārjuna's main purpose was to prompt the emptiness doctrine for establishing the Madhyamaka School through negating Ābhidharmika interpretation<sup>14</sup>, i.e., *dharma*-theory<sup>15</sup>. Subsequently, Nāgārjuna started to preach emptiness doctrine in removing traditional dogmatic belief with using its skillful method (*upāya kauśalya*) by means of establishing the Buddha's secret teachings. For instance, Nāgārjuna states *śūnyata* as the remover of all types of view (Pāli: *diṭṭhi*, *skt. drṣṭi*)<sup>16</sup>. Hence, Venerable Nāgārjuna says, “*Sarvadṛṣṭi prahāṇā Śūnyatām tām pracatsmahe*”, which means “*śūnyatā* is thought to eliminate all views”<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> During the time of Nāgārjuna, there were several influential Ābhidharmika Schools, such as Sarvāsivādins, Vaibhāsikas, Vibhajyavāda, and Vātsīputriya. Sarvāsivāda was the most influential Ābhidharmika School that was opposed to Vibhajyavādins, and claimed that ‘*sarvaṃ asti*’, which means all *dharma*s exist for the three periods of time. In this manner, the past *dharma* existed, the future *dharma* will come into existence and the present *dharma* has already existed. In addition, all *dharma*s are dependently originated (*pratītyasamutpāda*) from an assemblage of condition. According to Sarvāsivādins, the *dharma* assert itself within the three periods of time – past, present and future, and forwarded the theory of self-nature (*svabhāva*), whereas Sautrāntika School introduced the conception of self (*ātman*) or person (*pudgala*). By contrast, with reference to the Ābhidharmika text *Abhidharma-kośabhāṣya*, Vasubandhu asserts the term *dharma* sustains within its own characteristic, whether *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣaśāstra* refers to the *dharma* having its own self characteristic cannot be predicted apart from the *dharma* itself. On the contrary of all Ābhidharmika Schools, Nāgārjuna precisely gave the doctrine of emptiness or empty of self –nature or empty of existing *dharma*s, by which he recounts the non-self (*anātman*) doctrine of the Buddha. Eminent Nāgārjuna invented the restatement of no-self doctrine and dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) of the Buddha to answer the *dharma*-theory of Ābhidharmikas.

<sup>15</sup> Kapila Abhayawansa, “The Truth of Suffering and the Truth of Cessation of Suffering: Their Identification in the Buddhist Scholasticism” *Ñāṇappabhā : A Felicitation volume in Honour of Venerable Gnanarama Māha Thera* (Singapore: Ti Sarana Buddhist association, 2011), p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> The Buddha classified sixty-two kinds of wrong views (*diṭṭhi*) ‘The All-embracing Net of Views’ (*Brahmajāla Sutta*) as thus: (i) four kinds of beliefs in eternity (*sassata diṭṭhi*), (ii) four kinds of dualistic beliefs in eternity and non-eternity (*ekacca sassata diṭṭhi*), (iii) four views of the world being finite or infinite (*antānanta diṭṭhi*), (iv) four kinds of ambiguous evasion (*amarāvikkhepavāda*), (v) two doctrines of non-causality (*adhičcasamuppannavāda*), (vi) sixteen kinds of belief in the doctrine of percipient immorality (*saññītvāda*), (vii) eight kinds of belief in the doctrine of non-percipient immorality (*asaññītvāda*), (viii) eight kinds of belief in the doctrines of neither percipient nor non-percipient immorality (*n’evasaññī-nāsaññītvāda*), (ix) seven kinds of belief in annihilation (*ucchedavāda*) and (x) five kinds of belief in the doctrines of Nibbāna here and now (*diṭṭhadhammanibbānavāda*).

<sup>17</sup> David J. Kalupahana, **Mūlamadhyamakakārikā of Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way**, ( Delhi: Motilal Benarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1999), pp. 92-93.

Moreover, Nāgārjuna introduced Madhyamaka as the doctrine of the ‘Middle-Way’ (*madhyamā-pratipad*). Literally, Madhyamaka means, ‘one who holds to the middle’<sup>18</sup>. Nāgārjuna in his remarkable text *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* clearly states that the doctrine of *Śūnyatā* itself depends upon and follows the middle way. Therefore, Nāgārjuna says, “*Yah pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe, sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā*”, which means “whatever is dependent arising that is emptiness, that is dependent upon convention, and that itself is the middle way”<sup>19</sup>. This stanza clearly reveals that the four key terms *śūnyatā* (emptiness), *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), *upādāya-prajñapti* (designation or derived name) and *madhyamā-pratipad* (Middle Path) are expressly declared as synonyms. Among the four key terms, the concept of emptiness is the foremost root term which is dealing with the three remaining terms in ascribing the philosophy of the middle way (Madhyamaka School) as a whole.

## EMPTYNESS CONCEPT IN YOGĀCĀRA SCHOOL

The Yogācāra School<sup>20</sup> is one of the most influential Buddhist schools which probably evolved from a group of ancient Buddhist-monks in late second century C.E.<sup>21</sup> Yogācāra School<sup>22</sup> (the Mind Only School) was systematically founded by Asaṅga and his

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Āryasatya Parīkṣā; MMK.: 24.18.

<sup>20</sup> The Yogācāra School, whose name is taken from one of its foundational texts – the Yogācārabhūmi (Stages of Yoga Practice).

<sup>21</sup> Edward Conze, **Buddhist Thought in India**, (Delhi: Motilal Publication, 1962), p. 250.

<sup>22</sup> Yogācāra indicates originally a particular interest in the data of meditation experience (yoga) or perhaps Vijñānavāda (school affirming consciousness), Vijñaptimātra or Cittamātra (school affirming Mind Only). Therefore, this is widely called the school of Mind-only.

half-brother Vasubandhu<sup>23</sup> in the fourth Century C.E.<sup>24</sup>.

In the Yogācāra School, one of the foremost doctrinal-teaching is ‘the three natures’ (skt. *trisvabhāva*). Vasubandhu describes the three natures in the first stanza of his monumental text *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* (TSN) as thus: “the imagined (*parikalpita-svabhāva*), the other-dependent (*paratantra-svabhāva*), and the absolutely accomplished (*pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*)”<sup>25</sup>. Among the abovementioned three natures, the other-dependent nature or the consummated (*parikalpita-svabhāva*) has a close connection with the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*).

In addition to Vasubandhu’s commentary *Madhyāntavibhāgakārikābhāṣya*, it is suggested on “there exists the imagination nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*) of the unreal (*abhūta-parikalpa*), namely the discrimination (*vikalpa*) between the graspable or object (*grāhya*) and the grasper or subject (*grāhaka*). However, there is no pair (*dvaya*), such as the graspable and the grasper. There is instead emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which means that state of imagination of the unreal, which is lacking in the form of being graspable or grasper. Even in such emptiness there exists the imagination of the unreal. Thus, when something is absent in a container, the latter is then perceived as such; also, what is left over there, namely the container, is then recognized as such, namely, as undeniably existing there: this indeed is the

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<sup>23</sup> saṅga and Vasubandhu were born in Northwest India in what is now Pakistan. Both of them had played a central role in its formulation and popularization. Asaṅga and Vasubandhu contributed to a large number of works defining, categorizing and setting forth the Mind-only philosophy. Asaṅga is famous for his *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (Stages of the Bodhisattva Path), *Abhidharmasamuccaya* (Compendium of the Abhidharma) – a work specifically establishing Yogācāra Abhidharma, and the *Yogācārabhūmi* sometimes is also attributed to Asaṅga. He himself wrote commentaries on a number of important texts of Yogācāra Mahāyāna attributed to the Buddha Maitreya. Those which are attributed to him include *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (Ornament for the Realisations), *Madhyāntavibhāga* (the Discrimination of the Middle from the Extremes), *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* (the Discrimination of dharmas and their True Nature), *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* (Ornament for the Mahāyāna Sūtras) and *Ratnagotravibhāga*. Vasubandhu is renowned for his *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* (A Treatise on the Three Natures), *Triṃśatikā* (A Treatise in Thirty Satnzas) and *Viṃśatikā* (A Treatise in Twenty Satnzas) and other texts containing commentaries on some of the above works of Maitreya such as *Madhyāntavibhāgakārikābhāṣya*. (Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, pp. 155-6)

<sup>24</sup> John P. Keenan, **Yogācāra in Takeuchi Yoshinori, Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, and Early Chinese**, (New Delhi: Shri Jainendra Press, 1995), p. 203.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas A. Kochumuttom (trans.), *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* (TSN) in *A Buddhist Doctrine of Experience: A New Translation and Interpretation of the Works of Vasubandhu the Yogācārin*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1999), p. 92.

defining characteristic of emptiness”<sup>26</sup>. Herein, Vasubandhu argues a thing in its absolute state of existence is devoid (*śūnya*) of subject-object duality, at the same time interprets emptiness (*śūnyatā*) with reference to the unreal (*abhūta-parikalpa*) ‘which is lacking in the form of being graspable or grasper’<sup>27</sup>. The concept of emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) thereby ultimately means the state of existence that is empty of the imagination of unreal and of the consequent subject-object distinction<sup>28</sup>.

Moreover, with reference to the unreal nature (*abhūta-parikalpa* or *paratantra-svabhāva*) the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is expressed as ‘neither (total) assertion (because of existing the negation of the pair of subject and object) nor (total) negation’ (because of having the assertion of the negation of that pair); ‘neither different (from the *abhūta-parikalpa*) nor identical (with *abhūta-parikalpa*)’, which are noted in the text *Madhyānta-vibhāga-kārika-bhāṣya*<sup>29</sup>. Emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) then stands to unreal nature (*abhūta-parikalpa*), just as nature (*dharmatā*) stands to its substances (*anityatā* or *anityadharma*). They are not quite different (*na-prthak*) nor identical (*na-eka*), but just two different modes of existence of the same individual. Emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) refers to one’s mode of existence in the state of freedom (*nirvāṇa*), while unreal nature (*abhūta-parikalpa*) refers to one’s mode of existence in the state of *Śamsāra* (the cycle of suffering)<sup>30</sup>. This is the true sense of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in the Yogācāra system.

To sum up the abovementioned description of the early Yogācāra system, the three natures (*trisvabhāva*) are shown in the below chart:

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas A. Kochumuttom (trans.), **A Buddhist Doctrine of Experience: A New Translation and Interpretation of the Works of Vasubandhu the Yogācārin**, p.31.

<sup>27</sup> MVK I.2 and MVKB I.2

<sup>28</sup> Thomas A. Kochumuttom (tr.), **Madhyānta-vibhāga-kārika-bhāṣya in A Buddhist Doctrine of Experience: A New Translation and Interpretation of the Works of Vasubandhu the Yogācārin**, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1999), pp.30-56.

<sup>29</sup> MVK I.14

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

| The three natures<br>( <i>trisvabhāva</i> )                                                 | Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya<br>(Mvb 1.1) | Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya<br>(Mvb 1.5) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| The imagined nature<br>( <i>parikalpita-svabhāva</i> )                                      | Subject-objects interaction         | Duality                             |
| The dependent nature<br>( <i>paratantra-svabhāva</i> )                                      | Imagination                         | Imagination                         |
| The other dependent<br>nature or consummated<br>nature ( <i>parikalpita-<br/>svabhāva</i> ) | Absence of duality                  | Emptiness ( <i>śūnyatā</i> )        |

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEPENDENT ORIGATION AND EMPTINESS

The doctrine Dependent Origination (Pali: *paṭiccasamuppāda*; Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*)<sup>31</sup> is the most profound yet subtle teaching of the Buddha. It explicitly ascribes the law of nature and the root of suffering and uplifts Buddhism as a very unique and dynamic teaching compared to other religions and philosophies. Venerable Nāgārjuna was the first saint who precisely clarified a relationship between the concept of Dependent Origination and emptiness (*śūnyatā*).

Regarding the great text Mūlamadhyamakārikā, Nāgārjuna says, the middle way philosophy or Madhyamaka is not nihilism, but a clarification of Dependent Origination, and precisely claims that this doctrine is emptiness. He says, “*Pratītya yad yad bhavati*,

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<sup>31</sup> Dependent origination describes the reliance of all phenomena upon cause (*hetu*) and condition (*pratyaya*). Therefore, with reference to the early *Nikāya* text *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, Assaji Thera told Upatissa (subsequently he became well known as Sariputta Thera) thus: “*Imasmim sati idaṃ hoti, imassa upādā idaṃ uppajjati, Imasmim asati idaṃ na hoti, imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati*”, which means “when this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases”. [Bahudhātuka Sutta, M.115] In the same way, Nāgārjuna wrote in the causality verses of the Mūlamadhyamakārikā as follows, “*na svato nāpi parato na dvābhyāṃ nāpy ahetutaḥ, utpannā jātu vidyante bhāvāḥ kvacaba kecana*”, which means “nothing whatever arises; not from itself, not from another, not from both itself and another, and not without a cause”. [Pratyaya Parīkṣā; MMK.: 1.1.]

*tat tac Śūnyatā svabhāvataḥ*”, which means “whatever is subject to conditionality (dependent origination), is by its very nature tranquil and empty”<sup>32</sup>.

Nāgārjuna’s analogy of the twelve constituents of Dependent Origination into three categories- affliction (*kleśa*), action (*karma*) and suffering (*duḥkha*), in demonstrating with cause (*hetu*) and effect (*paccaya*) is explained as follows:<sup>33</sup>

|                       |                               |                             |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Ignorance          | → Affliction ( <i>kleśa</i> ) | → Cause ( <i>hetu</i> )     |
| 1. Volition           | → Action ( <i>Karma</i> )     | → Cause                     |
| 2. Consciousness      | → Suffering ( <i>Duḥkha</i> ) | → Effect ( <i>Paccaya</i> ) |
| 3. Name and Form      | → Suffering                   | → Effect                    |
| 4. Six Sense Doors    | → Suffering                   | → Effect                    |
| 5. Contact            | → Suffering                   | → Effect                    |
| 6. Sensation          | → Suffering                   | → Effect                    |
| 7. Craving            | → Affliction                  | → Cause                     |
| 8. Clinging           | → Affliction                  | → Cause                     |
| 9. Becoming           | → Action                      | → Cause                     |
| 10. Birth             | → Suffering                   | → Effect                    |
| 11. Old Age and Death | → Suffering                   | → Effect                    |

According to the abovementioned chart,

- (i) The first category of affliction (*kleśa*) includes three constituents: (1) ignorance (*avidyā*), (8) craving (*trsnā*) and (9) clinging (*upādāna*).
- (ii) The second category of action (*karma*) includes two constituents: (2) volition or mental formation (*saṃskāra*) and (10) becoming (*bhāva*).
- (iii) The third category of suffering (*duḥkha*) includes the remaining seven constituents.

<sup>32</sup> Svabhāva Parīkṣā, MMK 15.9

<sup>33</sup> Dvādasāṅga Parīkṣā, MMK 26.1-26.12.

These constituents, moreover, could be classified into two groups: causal (*hetu*) and resultant (*Paccaya*). In the commentarial text *Pratītyasamutpāda-hṛdaya-kārikā*, Nāgārjuna describes these twelvefold constituent as empty (*śūnya*); his analogy of emptiness for twelvefold formula of Dependent Origination with regards to the aforesaid chart (of twelve links) is as follows:

- (i) From the three, two originates; from the two, seven originate; and from these seven, in turn, the three originate. Thus the wheel of existence revolves again and again.
- (ii) The whole world is cause and effect; excluding this, there is no sentient being. From the factors (which are) only empty, empty factors originate<sup>34</sup>.

The aforesaid examination on the relationship between the law of Dependent Origination and the doctrine of emptiness clearly reveals a note that those (the wise) who understands the law of Dependent Origination has seen the meaning of conditioned origination that is empty (*śūnya*).

Hence, Nāgārjuna advocates in the dedicatory verse of the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*:

*“Anirodham anutpādam anucchedam aśāśvatam ,  
anekārtham anānārtham anāgamam anirgamam;  
yaḥ pratītyasamutpādam prapañcopaśamaṁ śivaṁ ,  
deśayāmāsa sambuddhas taṁ vande vadatāṁ varam ”*<sup>35</sup>

The verse means, ‘there is non-extinction (*anirodham*), non-origination (*anutpādam*), non-destruction (*anucchedam*), non-permanence (*aśāśvatam*), non-identity (*anekārtham*), non-differentiation (*anānārtham*), non-coming into being (*anāgamam*) and non-going out of being (*anirgamam*); withdrawal of all mental-fabrication (*prapañcopaśamaṁ*) of dependent origination. I (Nāgārjuna) offer my humble obeisance to the Buddha as the teacher of Dependent Origination (*Pratītyasamutpāda*)’.

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Della Santina, *Causality and Emptiness: The Wisdom of Nāgārjuna* (Singapore: Buddhist Research Society, Singapore, 2002) pp.60-61.

<sup>35</sup> Dedicatory Verse, MMK.

Based on the above discussion, it implies that the connection between the doctrine of Dependent Origination and emptiness could be revealed by those who see the ultimate truth<sup>36</sup> and obtains the stage of freedom (*nirvāṇa*).

## CONCLUSION

This study is an investigation into an analytical concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) doctrine from the Early Buddhist to the Buddhist developmental schools, mainly focused on Madhyamaka and Yogācāra Schools and examines that the teaching of Dependent Origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) has links to the concept of emptiness. Eminent Nāgārjuna did not accept any kind of dogmatic concepts, but clearly explained the Dhamma in logical ways and demonstrated to the people not to grasp in attachment as the Buddha advices. The *śūnyatā* (emptiness) doctrine of Nāgārjuna is the teaching of the Buddha as a par excellence.

As examined above, the early Buddhist teaching describes the notion of ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*) from three perspectives, namely, treating it (*śūnyatā*) as a meditative dwelling, as an attribute of objects, and as a type of heedfulness-release, whereas Madhyamaka and Yogācāra Schools used the concept of emptiness as a skillful means for understanding doctrinal expositions, such as the dependent nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*) among the three natures’ (*trisvabhāva*), the middle way (*madhyamā-pratipad*), using it as a remover of all wrong views (*dṛṣṭi*).

Based on above considerations, one can conclude that the doctrine of emptiness is like a lamp which could be used as an object to understand the central Buddhist teaching of Dependent Origination along with describing the Buddha’s doctrinal diversity.

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<sup>36</sup>Nāgārjuna logically concludes his *śūnyatā* (emptiness) doctrine that things are based on two truths similar to the Buddha’s interpretation. The Blessed One’s teaching rests on two truths, namely, conventional truth (*samvṛti satya*), and truth in the highest sense (*paramārtha satya*). One who does not comprehend the distinction between these two truths does not comprehend the profound meaning of the Buddha’s teaching.

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