
A Study on Nāgārjuna's Mahayana Precept Thoughts in Chinese-Translated Mādhyamika-śāstra

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Abstract

This academic article examines Nāgārjuna's Mahāyāna precept thought as reflected in the Chinese translation of the Madhyamaka-śāstra. It focuses on passages concerning dependent arising, karmic causality, non-self, and the emptiness of dharmas in order to clarify how ethical cultivation can remain meaningful within a philosophy of emptiness. Although modern scholarship has extensively examined Nāgārjuna's ontology and epistemology, the ethical and disciplinary implications of Madhyamaka thought have received comparatively less attention.

The article employs qualitative documentary and textual analysis. The primary source is Kumārajīva's Chinese translation of the Madhyamaka-śāstra in the Taishō canon, supplemented by Garfield's English translation of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā and relevant modern scholarship in Buddhist philosophy and ethics. The analysis is organized around the Two Truths and three interrelated contemplative themes: dependent arising, karmic causes and effects, and non-self/non-dharma.

The analysis shows that Nāgārjuna's account of emptiness does not require the rejection of moral discipline. At the level of conventional truth (saṃvṛti-satya), precepts, karmic responsibility, and wholesome conduct retain practical and ethical force. At the level of ultimate truth (paramārtha-satya), neither precepts, agents, actions, nor consequences possess independent intrinsic nature (svabhāva). Their emptiness is precisely what makes them dependently arisen and relational rather than fixed or self-subsistent.

The article therefore argues that Mahāyāna precept cultivation and emptiness are not contradictory. Ethical discipline can be understood as a conventional and skillful expression of insight into dependent arising, while the realization of emptiness prevents moral practice from hardening into reification or dogmatism. This interpretation contributes to Buddhist ethics by highlighting

the practical dimension of Madhyamaka thought and to Chinese Buddhist studies by showing how the Chinese Madhyamaka-śāstra can be read as a source for reconstructing Nāgārjuna's ethical vision.

Keywords: Nāgārjuna; Mahāyāna precepts; Emptiness; Two Truths; Madhyamaka-śāstra; Buddhist ethics.

Introduction

Nāgārjuna is widely recognized as one of the most influential philosophers of Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly for his analysis of emptiness (śūnyatā), dependent arising (pratītyasamutpāda), and the Middle Way. Modern scholarship has often emphasized the ontological and epistemological implications of his critique of intrinsic nature (svabhāva). Yet Madhyamaka philosophy also raises an unavoidable ethical question: if persons, actions, rules, and consequences are empty of inherent existence, on what basis can moral discipline and precept cultivation retain significance? This question is especially important for Mahāyāna Buddhism, in which philosophical insight and bodhisattva conduct are expected to develop together rather than as independent domains.

Recent scholarship has increasingly addressed this ethical dimension. Finnigan (2018) notes that contemporary debates on Madhyamaka ethics center partly on whether a philosophy of emptiness can sustain meaningful ethical distinctions. Tillemans (2010) similarly argues that Madhyamaka does not eliminate ordinary ethical practices; rather, ethical distinctions continue to function at the level of conventional truth. These discussions help challenge the assumption that emptiness necessarily leads to moral nihilism. They also provide a basis for reconsidering Nāgārjuna's use of practical examples, giving, restraint, karmic consequences, and precept observance, within arguments that are usually read primarily as metaphysical or logical.

Against this background, the present article examines precept-related passages in the Chinese Madhyamaka-śāstra, especially those associated with dependent arising, karmic causes and effects, non-self, and the emptiness of dharmas. Its central question is how ethical cultivation can operate coherently within Nāgārjuna's theory of emptiness and the Two Truths. Rather than treating the precepts as a separate ethical system superimposed on Madhyamaka

philosophy, the analysis asks how examples of precept practice function within Nāgārjuna's reasoning itself.

The study is based primarily on Kumārajīva's Chinese translation of the *Madhyamaka-sāstra* (T 30, no. 1564), with reference to Garfield's English translation of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and relevant Chinese- and English-language scholarship. The method is qualitative documentary and textual analysis. Because the article is concerned with the relation between doctrine and cultivation, it also treats contemplation as an interpretive category: dependent arising, causality, and non-self are examined not only as propositions but as ways of seeing that shape ethical conduct.

The article advances three related claims. First, Nāgārjuna's analysis of dependent arising undermines reified views of both moral agents and moral rules without abolishing ethical responsibility. Second, karmic causality remains intelligible at the level of conventional truth precisely because causes and effects are dependently arisen rather than intrinsically existent. Third, reflection on non-self and the emptiness of dharmas weakens attachment to the agent, action, and object of moral conduct while preserving the practical necessity of wholesome behavior. In this sense, the Two Truths provide the conceptual framework through which emptiness and precept cultivation can be understood as mutually compatible.

This approach contributes to Buddhist ethics by foregrounding the practical and disciplinary implications of *Madhyamaka* philosophy. It also contributes to Chinese Buddhist studies by treating Kumārajīva's translation not merely as a vehicle for metaphysical argument but as a textual site in which ethical examples help articulate the relation between conventional practice and ultimate insight.

Buddhist Principles Related to Mahāyāna Precepts in the *Madhyamaka-sāstra*

Emptiness. Discussions of "nothingness" and "non-being" in Indian and comparative philosophy involve several distinct concepts; Yao (2010) cautions against treating them as a single undifferentiated category. Within *Madhyamaka*, emptiness is more precisely understood as the absence of intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāva*), not as absolute non-existence. This distinction is essential for ethical interpretation. To say that persons, actions, or precepts are empty is not to say that they are meaningless or nonexistent; it is to say that they arise

dependently and lack self-subsistent essence. Buddhādāsa (1994), from a modern Theravāda perspective, similarly emphasizes the practical dimension of emptiness as non-clinging. Although his framework differs historically from Nāgārjuna's, it helps illustrate why emptiness need not be interpreted as nihilism. In the Madhyamaka-śāstra, practical examples involving giving, restraint, and karmic consequences show that emptiness is discussed together with, rather than against, ethical cultivation.

Dependent Arising. Pratītyasamutpāda refers to the arising of phenomena in dependence upon conditions. Within Madhyamaka, dependent arising and emptiness are mutually implicative: what arises dependently cannot possess an independent intrinsic nature. Earlier Buddhist schools developed different accounts of dependent arising and the ontological status of dharmas, and recent scholarship continues to reconstruct those debates (Zhao & Liu, 2025). Nāgārjuna's distinctive move is to use dependent arising to challenge the assumption that causes, effects, agents, or events must possess fixed self-nature in order to function.

From this perspective, dependent arising is not a denial of the phenomenal world but an account of its relational and conditioned character. Balsys (2016) emphasizes that dependent phenomena cannot be treated as self-grounding entities, while recent studies likewise connect Buddhist dependent arising with relational accounts of experience and self-understanding (Han & Chang, 2026; Kaewwilai, 2025; Levman, 2024). The ethical implication is that conduct occurs within networks of conditions: actions have consequences, but neither agents nor outcomes exist independently of those conditions.

For the present study, this relational view is crucial because precept cultivation depends upon changeability. If persons and habits possessed fixed intrinsic nature, moral transformation would be difficult to explain. Dependent arising instead provides a conceptual basis for understanding ethical cultivation as conditioned, gradual, and revisable.

Causes and Effects. Buddhist discussions of karma developed within a wider Indian intellectual context, but Buddhism reinterpreted karma in relation to intention, dependent arising, and liberation (Chapple, 1986). Karma should therefore not be reduced to a mechanical doctrine of reward and punishment. In the context of Madhyamaka, karmic causality functions conventionally while remaining empty of intrinsic nature. Wholesome and unwholesome actions can

condition different consequences precisely because causal relations are dependent and dynamic rather than eternally fixed.

Nāgārjuna's analysis rejects the reification of causes and effects. A cause is not an independently existing substance that contains its effect, nor is an effect an intrinsically existent entity produced from nothing. Causal phenomena are intelligible through relational dependence and conceptual designation. Thus, conventional truth allows one to speak meaningfully of moral agency, wholesome action, harmful action, and consequences, whereas ultimate analysis finds no self-existing cause, effect, or agent apart from dependent relations.

This approach is consistent with the broader Madhyamaka strategy of avoiding the extremes of identity and absolute difference, permanence and annihilation. Cause and effect are neither wholly identical nor wholly unrelated. The continuity of causal processes can therefore be maintained without positing an unchanging substance beneath them. Ethical responsibility is preserved at the conventional level without requiring metaphysical essentialism.

The Two Truths clarify this point. At the level of conventional truth, karmic distinctions function: intentional actions can be wholesome or unwholesome, and conduct has consequences. At the level of ultimate truth, those relations are empty of independent self-nature. Emptiness therefore does not invalidate causality; rather, it prevents causal relations from being understood as intrinsically fixed. This is central to the article's interpretation of precepts as effective practices that remain non-reified.

The Two Truths and Precept Cultivation. From a Mahāyāna ethical perspective, conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) should not be treated as mutually exclusive. Conventional truth is the domain in which persons, vows, precepts, actions, and social relations are meaningfully distinguished. Ultimate truth concerns the emptiness of those distinctions when analyzed for intrinsic nature. Nāgārjuna's well-known account of the Two Truths therefore provides a framework in which ethical practice can function without being absolutized (Garfield, 1995).

Precepts belong to conventional practice, but this does not make them philosophically insignificant. Without conventional distinctions, there would be no intelligible language of harming and non-harming, wholesome and unwholesome action, or cultivation and transgression. At the same time, ultimate

analysis prevents practitioners from treating precepts, moral identities, or the status of “being virtuous” as independently existing realities.

Emptiness can therefore support rather than undermine ethics. Because persons and situations arise interdependently, actions affect others within networks of conditions. Mahāyāna precepts may accordingly be understood as skillful means (upāya) that orient conduct toward non-harming, generosity, patience, and compassion. The ethical force of these practices does not depend upon intrinsic existence; it depends upon their conditional efficacy within lived relationships.

This reading also guards against two extremes. Reifying moral rules can lead to legalism and self-righteous attachment, whereas invoking emptiness to dismiss ethical distinctions can lead to nihilism. Madhyamaka’s Middle Way allows moral discipline to operate conventionally while remaining informed by insight into emptiness. The ultimate is therefore not realized by abandoning the conventional but by seeing the conventional without reification.

Non-self and the Emptiness of Dharmas. The Buddhist doctrine of non-self (anattā; Sanskrit: anātman) denies an independent, permanent, controlling self. Narraway (2008) emphasizes the ethical importance of this challenge to substantial selfhood in Mahāyāna thought. Buddhādāsa (1994) likewise describes non-clinging to “I” and “mine” as a practical dimension of emptiness. Although these sources arise from different doctrinal settings, both illustrate the ethical significance of weakening attachment to a fixed self.

The emptiness of dharmas extends this analysis beyond the person. It denies that phenomena themselves possess independent intrinsic nature. In Madhyamaka terms, the distinction between personal non-self and the emptiness of dharmas should not be treated as two unrelated doctrines; both concern the absence of self-subsistent essence and the conditioned status of experience.

For ethical cultivation, this distinction has practical implications. Reflection on personal non-self weakens attachment to the moral agent as a fixed identity, while reflection on the emptiness of dharmas weakens attachment to actions, rules, and objects as inherently existent. Yet neither form of analysis entails the disappearance of conventional responsibility. Rather, they shift the basis of moral practice from substantial identity to relational and conditioned activity.

The five aggregates provide an important example. What is conventionally called a person can be analyzed into form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness without discovering an independent self apart from these conditioned processes. This does not mean that the conventional person is useless or nonexistent; it means that the person is dependently designated.

Likewise, phenomena conventionally designated as “precept,” “transgression,” “merit,” or “harm” have practical functions without possessing fixed self-nature. Their ethical significance is contextual and causal rather than substantial. Such an interpretation is consistent with the Two Truths: conventional distinctions remain indispensable for practice, while ultimate analysis prevents their reification.

For this reason, the article avoids presenting non-self as a simple progression in which one doctrinal level mechanically replaces another. Instead, personal non-self and the emptiness of dharmas are treated as related analytical perspectives that deepen the critique of attachment and support non-reified ethical cultivation.

The essential point is that insight into emptiness does not remove ethical practice; it changes how ethical practice is understood. Precepts can be observed seriously without construing the observer, the rule, or the act as independently existing entities.

Nāgārjuna’s Mahāyāna Precept Thought in the Madhyamaka-śāstra

The practical dimension of the Madhyamaka-śāstra becomes especially visible when philosophical analysis is read together with examples of moral conduct. Nāgārjuna’s arguments repeatedly invite a contemplative shift away from reified assumptions about causes, agents, actions, and objects. In this article, three themes, dependent arising, karmic causes and effects, and non-self/the emptiness of dharmas, are used to reconstruct the ethical implications of that shift.

The purpose of this reconstruction is not to claim that the Madhyamaka-śāstra is primarily a Vinaya text or a systematic treatise on bodhisattva precepts. Rather, precept-related examples are examined as evidence that Madhyamaka reasoning presupposes a functioning conventional domain of ethical practice.

Such examples are philosophically important because they show that the critique of intrinsic nature does not erase moral distinctions.

The following sections therefore examine how precept-related examples operate within Nāgārjuna's treatment of dependent arising, karmic causality, and non-self/non-dharma.

1. Precept Thought Through Contemplation on Dependent Arising

Nāgārjuna's analysis of dependent arising challenges the assumption that phenomena must possess intrinsic nature in order to function. Balsys (2016) similarly emphasizes the incompatibility between dependent existence and self-subsistent essence. In the Madhyamaka framework, the absence of intrinsic nature does not destroy causal relations; it explains why phenomena can arise, change, and cease in dependence upon conditions.

Garfield's translation of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā summarizes this relation in the well-known formulation that whatever is dependently arisen is explained to be emptiness and is dependently designated; this itself is the Middle Way (Garfield, 1995). Read ethically, the point is significant: if conduct is dependently arisen, moral transformation remains possible, while no action or identity needs to be reified as permanent.

The Chinese Madhyamaka-śāstra uses precept-related examples within arguments concerning causality and non-arising (T 30, no. 1564). The text reasons that if phenomena arose without causes, the distinction between wholesome and unwholesome action would lose coherence: giving, precept observance, and other meritorious actions could no longer be connected meaningfully with their consequences. The example therefore indicates that emptiness cannot be interpreted as causelessness. Rather, the absence of intrinsic nature is compatible with, indeed inseparable from, dependent causal functioning.

From the perspective of precept cultivation, this means that ethical practice remains meaningful at the conventional level because actions arise within causal networks. At the same time, practitioners are cautioned against reifying precepts or karmic relations as absolute substances. Nāgārjuna's precept thought can therefore be reconstructed as a disciplined middle position: moral conduct is neither denied nor absolutized.

Dependent arising thus provides the first bridge between emptiness and ethical discipline. Because conduct is conditioned, it can be cultivated; because it

is empty, it should not become an object of attachment. This interpretation aligns Madhyamaka ethics with the broader concern identified by Finnigan (2018) and Tillemans (2010): preserving ethical distinctions without treating conventional categories as ultimately self-existent.

2. Precept Thought Through Contemplation on Causes and Effects

A second set of passages concerns karmic causality. The Madhyamaka-śāstra argues that denying causal relations would make ordinary ethical distinctions unintelligible: giving and precept observance could not be connected with merit, while killing and stealing could not be connected with harmful consequences (T 30, no. 1564). The argument does not posit karma as an eternal substance. Rather, it protects the intelligibility of causal responsibility within conventional truth while denying intrinsic nature at the ultimate level.

Karmic causality is therefore neither fixed fate nor metaphysical permanence. Its conditioned character makes ethical transformation possible. By changing intentions, habits, and actions, practitioners alter the conditions that shape future experience. This is consistent with Chapple's (1986) emphasis on karma as action and transformative possibility rather than simple determinism.

Keown's study of Buddhist ethical cultivation likewise emphasizes that moral discipline is integral to Buddhist soteriology rather than an optional supplement (Keown, 1986). In the Madhyamaka-śāstra, giving, precept cultivation, patience, and conduct that benefits sentient beings are presented as meaningful conventional practices (T 30, no. 1564). Their value lies not in possessing intrinsic moral substance but in their capacity to condition less harmful and more compassionate patterns of action.

The Two Truths again provide the interpretive key. Conventionally, agents act, karmic patterns develop, and consequences matter. Ultimately, no agent, action, or result can be established as independently self-existent. Nāgārjuna's ethical position therefore avoids both moral absolutism and nihilism: causal responsibility functions without requiring intrinsic essence.

3. Precept Thought Through Contemplation on Non-self and Non-dharma

Narraway (2008) argues that Mahāyāna ethics need not collapse when the substantial self is denied; rather, the critique of self can transform the basis on which ethical relations are understood. This point is relevant to the Madhyamaka-

śāstra, where examples involving the continuity of the aggregates show how conventional identity can function without an eternal self (T 30, no. 1564).

A conventional person may be designated on the basis of the continuity and coordination of the five aggregates, just as a house is designated in dependence upon its constituent parts. Yang and Shi (1996) similarly describe emptiness as requiring insight into the conditioned character of both material and mental phenomena. The practical consequence is not that persons disappear, but that attachment to a permanent “I” or “mine” is weakened.

The Madhyamaka-śāstra illustrates this point through practical examples associated with precept observance (T 30, no. 1564). The continuity of a person is sufficient for conventional responsibility, even though no independent self can be found apart from the aggregates. The example allows precept practice to remain meaningful without presupposing a metaphysically permanent moral agent.

This distinction is important for Mahāyāna ethics. If the self is conventionally designated rather than intrinsically existent, moral cultivation can still address habits, intentions, and relationships while avoiding attachment to a fixed moral identity. The practitioner may undertake wholesome conduct without reifying “the one who keeps the precepts.”

The same logic extends to the emptiness of dharmas. The Madhyamaka-śāstra presents teachings on self and non-self according to the capacities and conditions of sentient beings, while maintaining that all dharmas arise dependently and are empty of intrinsic nature (T 30, no. 1564). Such flexibility is compatible with the Mahāyāna notion of skillful means: conventional teachings remain useful when they conduce to ethical restraint and insight.

From this perspective, the emptiness of dharmas does not abolish precepts. Rather, it shows that precepts themselves are dependently established practices whose meaning is inseparable from context, intention, and consequence. Their conventional efficacy can therefore coexist with their ultimate emptiness.

Contemplation of non-self and non-dharma thus deepens the article’s central argument. Ethical cultivation remains possible because conventional persons and practices function; non-attachment becomes possible because neither persons nor practices possess intrinsic nature.

Nāgārjuna's Mahāyāna precept thought, as reconstructed from these passages, is therefore best understood through the Two Truths: ethical discipline is indispensable conventionally, while ultimate analysis prevents that discipline from becoming reified. Emptiness and precept cultivation are not competing doctrines but complementary dimensions of the Middle Way.

Conclusion

The Chinese Madhyamaka-śāstra provides important evidence that Nāgārjuna's philosophy of emptiness is compatible with, and can illuminate, Mahāyāna ethical cultivation. Passages concerning dependent arising, karmic causes and effects, non-self, and the emptiness of dharmas repeatedly presuppose a conventional world in which actions have consequences and wholesome conduct matters.

The Two Truths make this compatibility intelligible. At the level of conventional truth, precepts, moral agents, karmic distinctions, and compassionate action function as indispensable categories of practice. At the level of ultimate truth, these categories are empty of intrinsic nature. Their emptiness does not render them ineffective; rather, it explains their dependence upon causes, conditions, relations, and designation. Ethical cultivation is therefore possible precisely because persons and habits are not fixed.

The article consequently rejects two opposing interpretations: that precepts must be treated as absolute realities in order to be meaningful, and that emptiness eliminates the basis of moral responsibility. Nāgārjuna's Middle Way allows practitioners to cultivate precepts seriously while relinquishing attachment to the precept, the transgression, and the moral self as inherently existent. This reading contributes to contemporary discussions of Madhyamaka ethics by showing how philosophical analysis and ethical practice can mutually reinforce one another. It also suggests that further study of Chinese Madhyamaka sources can deepen understanding of the transmission of Nāgārjuna's ethical thought in East Asian Buddhism.

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