

MADHYAMAKA'S ŚŪNYATĀ: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENCE

Dr. Malaya Borah

Sepon, Charaideo, Assam.

ABSTRACT:

Buddhism is basically a way of life. It is a practical philosophy. Phenomenology is about looking things transcendently instead of natural attitude. Buddhist phenomenology aimed at elimination of suffering. It is possible only through changing one's attitude.

In searching the two basic truths (relative truth and ultimate truth), the later Buddhism is divided into two main schools- Mahāyāna and Hinayāna. The Mahāyāna includes Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. The Madhyamaka school accepts the concept of non-substantiality of *dharma*s in a broad way. It rejects any separate reality of all elements of existence (*dharma*). *Śūnya* or *śūnyatā* is the most important concept of Madhyamaka school.

This paper wants to show how *śūnyatā* is considered as the essence of life.

KEY-WORDS: *Śūnyatā*, Madhyamaka, Nāgārjuna, *Pratītyasamutpāda*, *Nirvāṇa*

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Śūnyatā (Sanskrit) or emptiness is an important concept of Buddhist philosophy. It is considered as the noun form of adjective *śūnya*, meaning 'empty' or 'void'. *Śūnya* is derived from the root *svi*, meaning 'hollow' or 'void'.¹

Śūnyatā indicates that everything of the world is empty of absolute identity or permanence, or an indwelling 'self' because everything is interconnected and dependent on each other. It is associated with the Buddhist concept of Dependent origination and No-Self theory.² According to Dependent origination or *Pratītyasamutpāda*, in the empirical world everything is relative, conditional, dependent, subject to birth and death and therefore impermanent. All phenomenal things hang between spatio-temporal reality and nothingness. In this sense this doctrine is considered as the Middle Path, 'Madhyama Pratīpat', which avoids both eternalism and nihilism. According to No-Self theory, individual ego and matter are ultimately false. No-Soul does not indicate the absence of self. It indicates that Buddhism believed in the denial of substance in the form of a *ātman* or soul. Regarding the non-substantiality of the self, Buddhism considers the aggregates only and denies any permanent self.³

Later Buddhist schools have tried to analyse the actual philosophical meaning of *Śūnyatā* or emptiness. Among them this emptiness was further developed by Madhyamaka school, an early school of Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁴ Nāgārjuna is considered as the founder of Madhyamaka school.⁵ Buddha's teaching is known as madhyama pratīpad (the middle path) and Nāgārjuna seized this word and considered his philosophy as Madhyamaka. The followers of this system are known as Mādhyamikas.⁶

The whole Madhyamaka school is considered as the re-interpretation of dependent origination.⁷ This re-interpretation of dependent origination is termed as *Śūnyatā* by Madhyamaka school.⁸

Śūnya is described in two ways-

From the standpoint of phenomena, it is described as '*svabhāva-śūnya*', means empty or devoid of independent, substantial reality. From the standpoint of the Absolute, it is described as '*prapañca-śūnya*', means devoid of thought-construction and plurality. According to Madhyamaka, *Śūnyatā* is not considered as nihilism. It negates only all views about reality, but does not negate the reality itself. Reality is neither existent nor non-existent. It does not indicate that the Absolute or the Reality is a non-entity. It indicates that the Absolute is inaccessible to thought. The absolute is realized only through *prajñā* or transcendental wisdom. For Nāgārjuna, *Śūnyatā* is considered as means to lead the mind up to *prajñā*.⁹

So, Nāgārjuna basically used the term *Śūnyatā* to express his views about human life and truth. It does not mean nothingness. The everchanging state of the phenomenal world is expressed through this term. All things are based on endless series of causes and effects. They do not possess any individuality.¹⁰ A 'thing' by itself is 'nothing', it is dependent on the aggregates of its conditions. Things are only appearances. In this case, dependent origination is equated with *śūnyatā* or relativity.¹¹ Heat cannot be said to be the essence of fire, it is the result of the combination of many conditions. When it is said that there is a self which suffers changes is also not true, because there is only *skandhas* and no self. phenomena sometimes appear to be produced and sometimes to be destroyed, but they cannot be determined as existent or non-existent and no truth can be affirmed of either eternalism or nihilism. Existence and non-existence have only a relative truth.¹²

Buddha considered fourteen things as inexpressible and Nāgārjuna termed them as four-cornered negation. They are – whether the world is eternal, or not, or both, or neither; whether the world is finite, infinite, or both, or neither; whether the Tathāgata exists after death, or does not, or both, or neither; whether the soul is identical with the body or different from it. He indicates these four into as a positive thesis, a negative counter thesis, a conjunctive affirmation of the first two and a disjunctive denial of the first two.¹³

Śūnyatā as the mundane truth is relativity. It is the term that is brought to light by rejecting the absoluteness of everything. *Śūnyatā* as the ultimate truth is the unconditioned, undivided being which is the ultimate nature of the conditioned and the contingent. The first kind is conceived as *śūnyatā* and the second kind is conceived as *śūnyatā* of *śūnyatā*.¹⁴

Śūnyatā may be described as inexpressible. It is defined as non-substantiality. Non-substantiality does not mean non-existence of things. It actually means that they exist only in the manner of dependent origination. This school believes that subjectivity is another name of relativity. All of our experiences are purely subjective, things have only an apparent existence and in reality they are imaginary or subjective.¹⁵

Madhyamaka school accepts the non-substantiality of *dharmas* or elements of existence. This school denies the real existence of the present time. The present is just a dot between non-existing past and non-existing future. This school reduced every phenomenal object to '*śūnyatā*' by applying the law of dependent origination.¹⁶

Therefore, in other words, according to this school, all things are of inherent nature. It believes that the things are relative to each other and depend upon something else for their very existence. By the process of dependent origination, one reaches a stage and that is the stage of *śūnyatā*.¹⁷

The main objective of this school is to know the Reality. Reality is transcendent to thought, so Nāgārjuna considered his philosophy as Madhyamaka which means 'pertaining to the transcendent'.¹⁸ The Madhyamaka philosophy is called *śūnyavāda* because it indicates *śūnya* as the characterization of Reality.¹⁹

According to Madhyamaka school, *nirvāṇa* is considered as the absence of the essence of all phenomena. It cannot be conceived either as anything which has destroyed or as anything which is produced. It is conceived merely as the destruction of seeming phenomenal flow.²⁰

According to Nāgārjuna, *nirvāṇa* is nothing but *saṃsāra* because it is experienced in light of a proper understanding of the emptiness of all things.²¹ From the standpoint of Nāgārjuna, “Nothing of phenomenal existence (*saṃsāra*) is different from *nirvāṇa*, nothing of *nirvāṇa* is different from phenomenal existence.”²²

One’s desire to know the things brings one ultimately to the level of *śūnyatā*, beyond which one’s intellect cannot reach. It is believed that the law of dependent origination operates at the mundane level giving rise to *śūnyatā* at the transcendental level.²³

According to Nāgārjuna, the realization of ‘*śūnyatā*’ allows one to reach liberation because it is nothing but the elimination of ignorance.²⁴

Therefore, from the above analysis, we may say that ‘*śūnyatā*’ is present in everyone as the ground and essence. For clarifying the meaning of ‘*śūnyatā*’, the only way is that we have to change our attitudes or ourselves.

Notes:

¹<https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org>>...

²<https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org>>...

³Sharma, T.R.: *An Introduction of Buddhist philosophy*. P. 25-27.

⁴<https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org>>...

⁵Sogen, Yamakami: *Systems of Buddhistic thought*. P. 193.

⁶Singh, Jaideva: *An Introduction to Madhyamika Philosophy*. P. 4.

⁷Murty, T.R.V.: *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*. P. 7.

⁸Ibid. P. 166.

⁹Singh, Jaideva: *An Introduction to Madhyamika Philosophy*. P. 38-43.

¹⁰Sogen, Yamakami: *Systems of Buddhistic thought*. P. 201-204.

¹¹Singh, Jaideva: *An Introduction to Madhyamika Philosophy*. P. 39.

¹²Dasgupta, Surendranath: *A history of Indian Philosophy, Vol. I*. P. 141-144.

¹³Singh, Jaideva: *An Introduction to Madhyamika Philosophy*. P. 16.

¹⁴Venkataramanan, K.: *Nāgārjuna’s Philosophy*. P. 42-43.

¹⁵Sharma, T.R.: *An Introduction of Buddhist philosophy*. P. 5.

¹⁶Ibid. P. 25-27.

¹⁷Ibid. P. 18-19.

¹⁸Singh, Jaideva: *An Introduction to Madhyamika Philosophy*. P. 50.

¹⁹Ibid. P. 36.

²⁰Dasgupta, Surendranath: *A history of Indian Philosophy*. P. 142.

²¹<https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org>>...

²² Singh, Jaideva: *An Introduction to Madhyamika Philosophy*. P. 29.

²³ Sharma, T.R.: *An Introduction of Buddhist philosophy*. P. 105.

²⁴ <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>>wiki

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