

# *The Truth of Nagarjuna: Something Beyond Nirvana*

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## **1. Introduction**

By considering his (in terms of) Logic-related works, we shall call Arya Nagarjuna as the most important Buddhist thinker in the Indian Antiquity. The most important parts of his works are the criticisms of thoughts which were presented by Buddhist tradition. Nagarjuna, who develops his ideas from the critical point of view by considering both Buddhist and its opposite Nyaya system of thoughts, is accepted as the founder of Madhyamaka which is called either Buddhist and also unique system of thought as its own. This brilliant and famous dialectician in his own period, manifests the most important parts of the fundamental principles of his doctrine by six of his works. Especially four of six, which are thoroughly related with his studies on logic, includes these fundamental principles. These four main logical works of his are known as Vighraha-vyavartani-karika, Pramana-vihetana/Pramana-vidhvamsana, Upaya-kausalya-hrydra-sastra and Mulamadhyamaka-karika (MMK). First three of these works contains his criticisms on Aksapada's logical studies and alternative ideas that he developed in this direction. But of course, undoubtedly the most important work of his own is MMK, which is also a milestone in the Indian history of logic. Buddhist doctrine accepts Nirvana as undetermined one. However, on the contrary to this, Nagarjuna shows in his doctrine that just because of what Buddhist thinkers generally say: "*Nirvana can not be undetermined one*", it also can not be the ultimate truth but it only can be the one face of The Truth. In fact, according to Nagarjuna, the ultimate truth itself is "*there is not a such a thing as ultimate truth*"; if one needs to talk about *The Truth* itself, only this can be said: "*Everything -even emptiness itself- is empty*".<sup>1</sup> According to Nagarjuna, Nirvana is a concept which needs to be solved in the context of The Truth. In his MMK, he proves that it is not such a thing that we can call as ultimate. And beside this, by asking "...so what is Truth?", he asserts that it is something as we can call a dialectical whole which is also beyond Nirvana. In this paper by considering this first we will talk little bit about his criticisms in MMK on Svabhava and Nasti to figure out his understanding of essence as emptiness. Secondly, we will take a look at two fundamental Buddhist Principles called Madhmayamaka and Catuskoti to understand how he epistemologically and logically grounds his both ontological and metaphysical ideas on two faces of the truth as so called Samsara and Nirvana. Then we will have our clear conclusion on The Truth by explaining what we are mentioning with "Something beyond Nirvana": "*The Truth is there is no Truth at all!*"

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<sup>1</sup>Garfield & Priest, Op.Cit, p.6.

## 2. Conclusion

According to Nagarjuna Nirvana which was advised by Buddha as absolute Truth is sunyata (emptiness).<sup>2</sup> Nagarjuna defends that for understanding of the subject sunyata (emptiness) first it must be make clear and comprehend that what sunya (being empty) is. As it was mentioned before one by one every being, even emptiness itself is empty.<sup>3</sup> Here what means by *empty* is something not being in something, being empty concern of being non-exist. As stated in Nagarjuna, this thing which is not being exist in other thing itself is svabhava (substance).<sup>4</sup> Shortly by Nagarjuna being empty be identified as not including substance in itself. In this direction Nagarjuna asserts in his MMK that non-of the beings have substances in themselves.<sup>5</sup> In line with Nyaya doctrine svabhava is something that does not depend on anything or occur, non-changeable, non-conceptual, non-comprehensible, stable, ineffable something which does not contains any varieties.<sup>6</sup> According to Nagarjuna just because of that it is not possible to say anything about its existency. So, no bhavas (beings) includes svabhavas.<sup>7</sup>As Nagarjuna mentions, being empty does not mean non existency at all.<sup>8</sup> Emptiness itself is the cause of interdependent existency.<sup>9</sup> Nagarjuna says that every being does asset win in some determined relations between each other. In other way to put this, everything co-arise contingently and dependently to eachother<sup>10</sup> These conditional situations do appear as qualities, reasons, results, and etc.<sup>11</sup> Every being does come to being with some qualities and combined between each other.

Nagarjuna explains this situation in the frame of Madhmayamaka (absolute middle/middle way) as everything (every bhavas) being asset win independently from svabhava (substance) but inter-related with other beings. This also means that the whole only assets win with particles (pieces) by principle of interdependent existency (that is contingently and dependently co-arisen (svabhava /essence)) and vice versa.<sup>12</sup> This interdependent existence means that no being that does not have substance (svabhava) could exist independently from each other. On account of being empty, every being are equal to each other in terms of ontology.<sup>13</sup> These every equal beings

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<sup>2</sup>Priest, "Nāgārjuna's Mulamadhyakamakarikā", p. 132.; Satischandra, Op.Cit, p. 252.

<sup>3</sup>Garfield & Priest, "Nagarjuna and The Limits of Thought", p. 6.

<sup>4</sup>Westerhoff, Op.Cit, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup>Priest, "Nāgārjuna's Mulamadhyakamakarikā", p. 130; Garfield & Graham, "Nagarjuna and The Limits of Thought", p. 6; Satischandra, Op.Cit, p. 254.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Hubert Jones, "The Nature and Function of Nāgārjuna's Arguments", Philosophy East and West, Vol. 28, No. 4, University of Hawaii Press, Oct., 1978, p.488; Robinson, Op.Cit, p. 326.

<sup>7</sup>Robinson, Op.Cit, p. 325-331, 326; Westerhoff, Op.Cit, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup>Garfield, Op.Cit, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid

<sup>10</sup>Robinson, Op.Cit, p. 326; Garfield & Priest, "Nagarjuna and The Limits of Thought", p.6.

<sup>11</sup>Priest, "Nāgārjuna's Mulamadhyakamakarikā", p. 130.

<sup>12</sup>Satischandra, Op.Cit, p.254; Garfield, "Nagarjuna and The Limits of Thought", p. 6.

<sup>13</sup>Priest, "Nāgārjuna's Mulamadhyakamakarikā", p. 131.

does exist because of this principle itself. Nagarjuna gives examples on his ideas of interdependent existency in MMK.<sup>14</sup> According to him substantiality of spacial qualities of something can not be asserted. And the very reason of this is un-possibility of referring spacial qualities of something without its existence (while it is non-exist). And in the same way it is not possible to talk about something which does not have spacial qualities.<sup>15</sup> As it is understood, according to Nagarjuna the principle of interdependent existency becomes the shape of absolute existency.<sup>16</sup> In this direction, the absolute existence is existing as being empty that is emptiness (sunyata) itself. By saying *everything -even emptiness itself -is empty* Nagarjuna mentions that the emptiness which he approves as absolute Truth (sunyata) does asset win with this essence which he calls as absolute True. And by saying *the only thing which does not exist is something which is not empty*, he asserts that the only and very Truth is there is no ultimate Truth as absolute truth at all. Yet when we talk about Truth by considering its existency this Truth itself must be empty. And accordance with this essence (sunyata), its (Truth) existency necessitate another being which it can interdependently exist by completing that dualist structure of theirs.<sup>17</sup>

Nagarjuna's explanation of absolute existency as being the principle of interdependent existency and by that mentioning two kinds of existency as being *interdependent* and *absolute* can cause us to think that he comprehends Buddha's doctrine of absolute middle (middle way) as *something does exist or vice versa, but both of them are true anyway*. Thusly Satischandra in his History of Indian Logic<sup>18</sup> says that Nagarjuna asserts and accepts that both of these premises are True and the knowledge is some kind of reality that leads us to some kind of Truth.<sup>19</sup> Absolute middle/middle ways is to see the whole picture as both being and non-being. In this regard, absolute middle/middle way should not understand as something right between extreme ends. As a matter of fact, what is mentioning here is not something like acceptance of the third choice (possibility) between being and non-being. At the same time, by considering absolute middle/middle way it does not mean to avoid these extreme ends and rejecting them. Because absolute middle/middle way which brings all every determination under itself, under one unique whole does not stands beyond these determinations. It is a *unifying principle*. Every particular determination takes their characteristics from this universal *unity*.<sup>20</sup> Therefore in Nagarjuna's doctrine absolute middle/middle way means avoiding two extreme ends and arrive at an agreement between them. To say it in other way, it is the cognizance of division of two kinds of satyas (Truths) which stays on the base of its ontological, epistemological and metaphysical sights and the cognizance of unity at this division. Once this division get comprehend as whole (One), Nirvana which is the fundamental element of Buddhism will show itself up to us as absolute Truth.

Nagarjuna, the frame of his madhmayamaka (absolute middle/middle way) Doctrine draw attentions to two Realities which corresponds to comprehension of two

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<sup>14</sup>Garfield, Op.Cit, p. 149-152.

<sup>15</sup>Garfield & Priest, Op.Cit, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, p.7.

<sup>18</sup>Satischandra, Op.Cit, p. 254.

<sup>19</sup>Priest, "Nāgārjuna's Mulamadhyakamakarikā", p. 131; Garfield & Priest, Op.Cit, p. 6,10.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, p. 251.

Truths and two Truth Values which gives us these Realities.<sup>21</sup> The truths which stays in field of conditional Truths and gives us Conditional Realities are called as Conditional truths (trues). Conditional truths (trues) are all about empirical world (the world in appearance).<sup>22</sup> By more open statement we shall say, the premises which includes knowledges about being or non-beings in combined relations carries these kinds of Truth Values. Conditional Truths (trues) are the Truths (trues) that are adopted in daily life, relative and deceptive time to time. Because of that they never give us absolute Realities and so absolute Truths.<sup>23</sup> Particular beings which are exist because of absolute being namely conditional beings and related things to their complex relationships are the conditional Truths (trues). These conditional Truths (trues) only gives us conditional realities. In other way to put it conditional beings and conditional true values about them only about conditional realities.<sup>24</sup> Because of that Conditional truth values (trues) only helps us to comprehend conditional Truth itself. Conditional Realities conceptually points at the field of conditional Truth. This understanding of Conditional Truth has a very important place in Nagarjuna's system because of the comprehension of absolute Truth that is called Nirvana. Conditional Truth is a step which carries us to hold absolute Truth. In MMK 24:8-10 Nagarjuna makes it very clear from Buddha's mouth (as we have mentioned before).<sup>25</sup> According to us, the field of conditional Truth for Nagarjuna is a cyclical field which includes every component of absolute being and presents us some truths (trues) which can help us to comprehend the conditional Truth. This so called the Conditional Truth is the field which we can call as Samsara (which is a very fundamental element of Buddhism again).<sup>26</sup>

According to Nagarjuna knowing Nirvana (the Absolute Truth) is only possible by comprehension of absolute True. The Absolute True is the judgement of *-everything is empty*.<sup>27</sup> On account of this, it is possible to cognize sunyata (emptiness) as absolute True.<sup>28</sup> In this context sunyata points at the absolute direction of The Truth. As we have mentioned before, emptiness is the absence of svabhava in every particular being.<sup>29</sup> And this emptiness is the principle of interdependent existency itself as absolute being (existency). Absolute being is the *essence* that expresses imperative (necessary) relations between imperative (necessary) beings which Nagarjuna asserts as implicit knowledge adversely to Nyaya's substance in particular beings. Because this essence is something exist in and for itself and for other beings that exist because of it, it has its characteristics as being absolute. Absolute True gives us absolute Reality and thus absolute being (existency). In this respect, absolute reality is essence which is absolute. Nagarjuna, moving from his acceptance of absolute Reality which is put forward by absolute True corresponds to conceptionally the field of absolute Truth, asserts that absolute Truth itself is the emptiness which is absolute as it is.

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<sup>21</sup>Westerhoff, Op.Cit, p. 9; Jones, Op.Cit, p. 495; Garfield & Graham, Op.Cit, p. 4; Jones, Op.Cit, p.495.

<sup>22</sup>Garfield & Priest, Op.Cit, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup>Priest, Graham, "Nāgārjuna's Mulamadhyakamakarika", p. 2.

<sup>24</sup>Garfield & Priest, Op.Cit, p.7.

<sup>25</sup>Priest, "Nāgārjuna's Mulamadhyakamakarika", p. 131.

<sup>26</sup>Westerhoff, Op.Cit, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup>Garfield & Priest, a.g.e., p. 6.; Priest, "Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyakamakarika", p. 4.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Robinson, Op.Cit, p. 326. Ruegg, The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of philosophy in India, p.3; Westerhoff, Op.Cit, p. 53.

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