ABSTRACT

Nagarjuna is the most important Buddhist philosopher after the historical Buddha himself and one of the most original and influential thinkers in the history of Indian philosophy. His philosophy of the “middle way” (madhyamaka) based around the central notion of “emptiness” (sunyata) influenced the Indian philosophical debate for a thousand years after his death; with the spread of Buddhism to Tibet, China, Japan and other Asian countries the writings of Nagarjuna became an indispensable point of reference for their own philosophical inquiries. Nagarjuna’s philosophy signifies not only the history of Indian philosophy but in the history of philosophy as a whole, as it calls into questions certain philosophical assumptions so easily resorted to in our attempt to understand the world.

The central concept around which all of Nagarjuna’s philosophy is built is the notion of emptiness (Sunyata). Emptiness is of course always the emptiness of something, and the something Nagarjuna has in mind here is svabhava.

We can distinguish two main conceptual dimensions of the concept of svabhava, an ontological one, which refers to a particular way in which objects exist, and a cognitive one, which refers to a way in which objects
are conceptualized by human beings. Within the ontological dimension we can distinguish three different understandings of svabhava: in terms of essence, in terms of substance, and in terms of absolute reality.

If we understand svabhava in terms of essence it has to be considered a property an object could not lose without ceasing to be that very object: the svabhava of fire is to be hot, the svabhava of water to be wet: whatever ceases to be hot is no longer fire, whatever ceases to be wet is no longer water. According to this understanding svabhava is also identified with the kind of specific qualities (svalaksana) that allow an observer to distinguish an object from other things: by knowing that something is hot, together with a variety of other svalaksana we know that what we have in front of us is fire rather than something else.

Mulamadhyamakakarika is the most important of Nagarjuna’s texts. It is the subject of major commentaries by the Indian scholars. It is cited widely in subsequent Buddhist literature, and debates about how to interpret it define differences between major Buddhist philosophical schools. It has been translated not only into all non-Indian Mahayana canons, but also a number of times into Western languages, with five English translations appearing in the last few decades. It is, however, a very difficult text to read and to interpret, and modern interpreters differ
among themselves about the correct way to read it at least as much as canonical interpreters.

The aims of this thesis are to expound and present Buddhist metaphysical concept and its possibilities with special reference to Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhyamakakarika in as clear and concise a manner as possible. This thesis is based on the information culled out from the relevant works of Nagarjuna and Madhyamika school of Buddhism which are cited in the footnote as well as in the bibliography. Mainly three methods are employed in preparing this thesis viz., analytical, comparative and critical method.

This thesis consists of eight chapters. The inceptional and the second chapters are purely introductory. It describes the Buddha and His Teaching in the early Buddhism context. It also deals with early Buddhist metaphysical thoughts. The third chapter aims to expound the philosophy of Madhyamika School of Buddhism as the philosophical background to the study of Mulamadhyamakakarika. The fourth chapter focuses on Nagarjuna’s cardinal philosophical concepts and his philosophical positions. Here the study aims to expound the Buddhistic metaphysical standpoint presented by Nagarjuna. The fifth, sixth and seventh chapters are the metaphysical analysis of the Mulamadhyamakakarika. Their aim
is to systematically expound the Buddhist Metaphysics presented in the
text. The concluding chapter aims to state the finding of this study.