CHAPTER III

PHILOSOPHY OF MADHYAMAKA SCHOOL OF BUDDHISM

The purpose of this chapter is discussed to give and outline of the philosophy of Madhyamaka School of Buddhism in general, as a background to our survey of Malamadhyamakakarika. The Madhyamaka school of Buddhism, the followers of which are called Madhyamikas, was one of the two principal schools of Mahayana Buddhism in India, the other school being the Yogacara. The name of the school is a reference to the claim made of Buddhism in general that it is a middle path (madhyama pratipad) that avoids the two extremes of eternalism—the doctrine that all things exist because of an eternal essence—and annihilationism—the doctrine that things have essences while they exist but that these essences are annihilated just when the things themselves go out of existence. The conviction of the Madhyamaka school, which can be called the Centrist school in English, is that this middle path is best achieved by a denial that things have any inherent natures at all. All things are, in other words, empty of inherent natures. This doctrine of universal emptinessness of inherent natures (svabhava-sunyata) is the hallmark of the school, which places the school solidly in the tradition

116 http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/madhyamaka/(accessed on the 04th April 2012.)
associated with the literature namely Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom) of Mahayana Buddhism.

The aim of this chapter is to expound the concepts of the school both from the metaphysical as well as the epistemological stand points.

**Dependent Origination (Pratityasamutpada) – Madhyamaka View**

In the doctrine of dependent origination (Pali: paticcasaṃuppada) belonging to the period of Early Buddhism, the metaphysical question of whether or not the individual members of the causal relation possess any enduring and immutable reality (svabhava) hardly arose. For when we consider from the viewpoint of the early doctrine of dependent origination, maintaining as it did that the “world” had not been created by some eternal and imperishable god or similar entity, it was only natural that human ignorance, cognition and action, all pertaining to the world of transmigration, should be impermanent and without any intrinsic reality.¹¹⁷

According to Sarvastivadins, dependent origination means that a certain constituent element (or combination of elements) is in accordance with a constituent relationship obtaining between cause and effect. In other words, dependent origination in Sarvastivada represents the causal relationship obtaining among a limited number of constituent elements of

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the world. In this case, A is considered to act as the cause from which B is born, and this presupposes the fact that A and B must exist each with their separate self–essence. In this manner, a certain thing (A), possessing within itself its own essential base, enters into a relationship with another thing (B), different from itself (A) and also possessing within itself its own existential base. Therefore, the causal relationship posited by Sarvastivada philosophy is a relationship between a certain thing (A) endowed with self–essence and another thing (B) also endowed with self–essence.¹¹⁸

This doctrine of Sarvastivadins is in accordance with their acceptance of primary elements (dharmas) as having their self–essence and exists in three periods of time, past, present and future as having been discussed earlier. This tendency makes Stcherbatsky take the term dharmata which appeared in the statement that “Whether the Tathagatas were to arise or whether the Tathagatas were not to arise, this nature of dharmas remains”.¹¹⁹ Therefore the “essence of dharmas”, that is, their self–essence (svabhava) as opposed to their causal characteristics (svalakṣaṇa).¹²⁰ Hence in his book entitled “Central Conception of Buddhism”, he translated the term dharmata as “ultimate realities.”¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 115 – 116.
¹¹⁹ MKV, p.40 : “utpadad va tathagatanam anutpadad va tathagatanam sthitaitvai sa dharmanam dharmata.” See also S, 2.25.
¹²¹ Ibid., p. 25.
And when he interpreted the statement in the *Madhayamakavṛtti*, he somehow attributes this view to Early Buddhism as well.

To the Madhyamikas, “to be is to be caused, to be conditioned, to be produced, or to be dependent on something”. Because of its interdependent relationship, everything is devoid of its self-essence and hence empty (*sunya*). It is, therefore, wrong to hold, as do the Sarvastivadins, that the primary elements are discrete and have their self-essence (*svabhava*). To illustrate this point, Nagarjuna uses the example of seeing. Seeing is devoid of its essence because it cannot be seen apart from vision. One without the other is not possible. Being mutually dependent upon each other, we cannot identify them separately. Therefore, we are told that vision, being dependent upon seeing, is empty. This paradoxical statement tells us that concepts, at the relative realm or conventional level, cannot express themselves unless they have an opposite. Hence we cannot have an idea of that which is long unless we simultaneously know what it means to be short. We normally say that X is shorter than Y, or that Y is longer than Z, so the concepts of long and short are relative. If we put two fingers side by side, we can assert that one finger is longer than the other, but if we put out a single finger, unrelated to anything else, we cannot say anything about its being long or short. Only with the idea of existence, the idea of non-existence has
meaning and vice versa. The idea of identity only has meaning in relation to idea of difference, and difference has its import only in relation to idea of identity. This is also true of the concepts of three periods of time—past, present and future. Depending upon the concept of past, the ideas of the present and the future are conceived; depending upon the ideas of past and future, we talk about the present; and depending upon the ideas of the present and the past, we talk about the future.\textsuperscript{122}

Similarly light of the sun has meaning only in the context of the darkness of night. And a sprout has meaning only in dependence on a seed, the earth, sunlight, and so on. This mutual dependence proves that entities, like concepts, are empty of any intrinsic nature or their self-essence. It is not only conditioned things which are treated as emptiness, but the unconditioned nirvana too is identified as emptiness, for we cannot think of it unless we know what samsara is. Therefore, both nirvana and samsara are mutually dependent upon each other, and so are empty of any self-essence. Their emptiness means that they are identical.\textsuperscript{123} They are identical only because they are mediated by no self-essence (nihsvabhava). The term “identical” here does not mean that two opposite and contradictory things are directly or immediately (without intermediary) identical. But they are identical in the sense that their

\textsuperscript{122} Peter Della Santina, op.cit., pp. 161-162.
\textsuperscript{123} MK, XXV. 19.
essential nature is the same for both are characterised as having “no self-
essence” (*niḥsvabhava*). In the realisation that *samsara* is empty and that

*nirvana* is also empty, the two become identical. Therefore, the statement

“*samsara* is identical to *nirvana*” is modeled after the statement

“dependent origination is emptiness.”

The mutual dependence means that entities depend for their relative existence upon the idea that designates them (*prajnaptir upadaya*). Their existence is provisionally known by means of language. We cannot have knowledge of a table unless we conceptualize it. All phenomena have conception as one of the conditions for their establishment. For instance, someone decides to make radio for entertaining. First of all they hold a concept of the radio in their mind; that is, they have a mental picture of the radio they want to create in their mind’s eye. Then they actually go about to manufacture the radio. When it is finished, it is given the name, a radio. This name is applied to it by a conceptual mind to distinguish it from other objects. Take America as another example. Before Westerners arrived there was only a piece of land. But only after they arrived, there was the land named America, and not until the concept of America was formulated and the name America applied could anyone know what the name America was. All phenomena are designated by conception and so conception is one of the conditions
of any phenomena’s establishment. Also knowledge of a designated object arises out of the relationship between the perceived object and its designation. Even the designated concept of an object is dependent upon perception, because the former is not possible without the later. This mutual dependence of perception and concept tells us that knowledge also is identical with emptiness. This in turn means that all forms of conceptual knowledge, on account of its emptiness, are unreal. The conceptual knowledge is unreal when it goes beyond its context–usage, that is, when concepts are inserted with ontological meaning. When concepts remain within their limit, they are real, because they function in accordance with the meaning given to them. This denotes that when, for instance, we say that a table is real, it is real in relation to its function. It is the functional existence of a thing, which may be said to be real, and not the one which is seen in terms of its essence.¹²⁴

We have already seen that Nagarjuna’s interpretation of dependent origination, in its basic terms, tells us that an entity which is dependent cannot possess the self-essence. Whatever which has no independent existence cannot be said to be existing at all. Everything in the phenomenal world as well as the discrete elements (dharmas) falls within the frame of reference. This will be fine. The problem, nevertheless, arises when we begin to insert a nature or essence into these entities by

allowing the concepts to go beyond their context-usage. As already pointed out, a concept derives its meaning from its function, and not from any transcendent source. A philosophic discourse that is not conducted within the functional framework has no understanding as to what constitutes everyday experience. And we should know that ontological entities are only human concepts, and hence are should not be attached to them. However, philosophers continue to manufacture entities and realities, and project them onto the world. According to the Madhyamikas, this metalphysical speculation is a disease, and the cure of it lies not so much in developing a new metaphysical theory as in understanding the nature and function of conceptualization and language. The Madhyamikas, therefore, want to abandon the activity that seeks to find the necessary connection between language and reality. What the Madhyamikas want is that language should confine itself to its functional role.

The concept of dependent origination should be understood as a soteriological device taught by the Buddha to help human beings achieve enlightenment or nirvana. It lets them know that all things are empty because they are dependent upon causes and conditions, and hence devoid of self-essence. Thereby, it helps eliminate the ideas of atman, I,

125 Ibid., pp. 261–262.
126 Hsueh-li Cheng, Nāgārjuna’s Twelve Gate Treatise, p.19.
mine, dharmas and other things. It also serves to keep one from falling into eternalism and nihilism. When we recollect that all things are interdependent, we will not grasp at ourselves and other phenomena as being inherently existent. By focusing on how all things are dependently related we will realize that they can only be related in the first place by virtue of the fact that they exist. The first recognition will prevent us falling to the extreme of eternalism and the second will prevent us from falling to the extreme of nihilism. Understanding dependent origination also will enable us to recognize correctly how phenomena exist only nominally through the conventions of terminology.

The Philosophy of Madhyamaka on Emptiness

The Buddha perceived that all things are transitory and that nothing endures. This was the logical basis for his declaration that nothing has an essence and that all is an atman. The Theravada tradition interpreted this to mean that no persons have a self beyond that constructed by the five fluctuating aggregates, but that the individual elements constituting existence did have an essence; this is which made the elements individual and irreducible.\textsuperscript{127} Mahayana offered a broader definition of soullessness and declared that, not only are persons devoid of a self,
but that all of the elements comprising existence are also without essence.

They are empty, sunya, of self-nature. Furthermore, the utter smallness of the particles and the sheer distances between them shows matter to be little more than empty space and existence ultimately nothing more than interactions of abstract energy fields. That the truest cosmological quality of things is emptiness, sunya, came to be regarded as the central notion of Buddhism.

The base formulation of emptiness comes from Nagarjuna, and it is the concept for which he is most famous, so much so that the Madhyamaka School was often referred to as the Sunyata-vada, the “School of Emptiness.” Notwithstanding, the concept was not original with him. The term “sunyata” appears at a few places in the Pali Canon, but only a few. Here it tends to have the simple meaning of a lack of something. In the “Lesser Discourse on Emptiness,” the Buddha says that, in a hall where there are monks gathered but in which there are no elements or cows, one can say that the hall is “empty” of elephants and cows. Likewise, when a monk is meditating in a solitary forest, the forest is “empty” of villages and villager. “When something does not exist there, the latter [the place] is empty with regard to the former,” the Buddha

defines. This meaning of a lack is also extended to mean a lack of disturbances for the meditating mind. Emptiness is both an object for contemplation and a method of quietism; one can “practice emptiness” both by meditating on the emptiness of the self and by freeing oneself from disturbances.

The philosophical formulation of emptiness in the Theravada tradition is usually taken to be that expressed by the Abhidharma writings. The Realist school of the Abhidharma held that the elements of existence must not be empty, or else they would not be able to interact. It was just compounded objects, like the individual, that are empty, in that they have no enduring soul. The Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom) school disagreed, pointing out that the elements, like the things they compound, must also be seen as empty. By applying emptiness to all things, this school used the concept much more systematically and frequently and expanded its meaning. The Abhidharma quests to define the true nature of things were replaced by a stress on non-dual, intuitive apprehensions of reality through wisdom, Prajna. The highest achievement of wisdom, this school held, was the realization that all things, not just compound ones, are empty of an essence.

130 D.T. Suzuki, Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism, p 60.
131 Ibid., p 60
132 Ibid., p 62
Taken far enough, the mystical Prajnaparamita insight into emptiness produced a paradox. Not only are things empty, the school declared, but emptiness is a thing.\textsuperscript{133} The meaning of this equation was not made entirely clear until Nagarjuna offered an interpretation of it. The equation is not to be taken too literally, but it seems just to express the notion that emptiness should not be seen merely as a negation. This was hinted at in the \textit{Lesser Discourse on Emptiness}, where the Buddha said that, \textit{``through abiding in emptiness, [I] am now abiding in the fullness thereof.''}\textsuperscript{134} Further, the text continued, it is comprehended that, when a place is empty of something like cows or a village, there is \textit{``something remains there that does exist as a real existence.''}\textsuperscript{135} On the one hand, early Buddhism saw emptiness as a lack of being but, on the other, something remains which cannot be negated. These statements will not make sense in Buddhist terms unless reconciled with the Buddha’s absolute rejection of an ultimate ground of reality. The meaning of the paradox, according to the Prajnaparamita writings, is that emptiness is both and neither being and non-being, both and neither negation and affirmation. Emptiness is not really a thing any more than a thing is really empty, for reality cannot be pinned down in concepts.\textsuperscript{136}
This paradoxical, non-conceptual use of the notion of emptiness is reflected in the fact that certain of the Prajnaparamita writings used the notion without ever mentioning the term. The Diamond Sutra, for example, taught that the notion of emptiness was to be used like a hard diamond to cut away all unnecessary conceptualization, including the idea of emptiness itself. The discourse accomplished this by presenting a series of paradoxes that demonstrated emptiness without using the word. For example, the Buddha is made to say:

“As many being as there are in the universe of beings,...all these I must lead to nirvana, into that realm of nirvana which leaves nothing behind. And yet, although innumerable beings have thus been led to nirvana, no being at all has been led to nirvana.”

A paradox like this will only make sense if the elements of it are not taken either as real or non-real, but as, in terms of Perfect Wisdom, “empty.”

The actual use of the term “emptiness” (sunyata) was likely avoided in the Diamond Sutra because, even though the paradoxes were half affirmative and half negative, the potential for misunderstanding and seeing only the negative side of the equation was great. Equally dangerous was the possibility of clinging to the notion of emptiness as yet another, albeit apophatic, theory. These were dangers the Buddha was...
quite aware of. He said that, following his death, “the monks will no longer wish to hear and learn [my teachings], deep, deep in meaning,...dealing with the void (sunyata), but will only lend their ear to profane teachings, made by poets, poetical, adorned with beautiful words and syllables.” What was crucial, the Buddha taught, was to use the teaching of emptiness as a provisional tool, a way to cut through illusion and achieve insight. His teachings were to be seen as a raft which gets one across a stream but which, upon reaching the other side, should be discarded. The Perfection of Wisdom school used the method of teaching with nonsensical paradoxes to show the final nature of things as empty and then to prevent one from grasping onto the concept of emptiness itself.

Nagarjuna adopted the Perfection of Wisdom teaching that the highest form of intuitive wisdom is insight into the emptiness of all things. His innovations were to clarify this insight and apply it to all philosophical concepts in a more systematic way than had his predecessors. The result of this was that the notion of emptiness, though not new to Buddhist thought, suddenly came to be seen as a revolutionary concept. It is common for mystical expression to speak negatively of the Absolute, noumenal sphere; the mystical side of every religion in history

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139Samyutta-nikaya, quoted in Santina, p 7.
has witnessed this apophaticism in some degree.\textsuperscript{140} Nagarjuna’s innovation was to apply via negative to the phenomenal sphere, as well, and thereby to deny the essential reality of even relative dualities.

Emptiness is not a theory or a view; rather it is an empty of all views. The concept of emptiness is never about a thing or a nothing; rather it is an empty of a thing or a nothing.\textsuperscript{141} That all things are empty implies that concepts or categories through which we constitute our experiences are unintelligible. However, people are inclined to employ conceptual schemes to describe the nature of things. They feel as if concepts can be related to reality and provide a clear picture of the world, through them only one can be sure about what has happened out there. But for the Madhyamikas, language never represents the phenomena as they really are. Words do not refer to what they are believed to be referring. Language is non–referential. Concepts do not have an intrinsic relation with the objects they are supposed to be representing. All linguistic concepts are conventional and relative, and hence do not have absolute validity of meaning.

Emptiness is of the highest value and most profound truth, precisely, because the adept can apply it as a tranquilizing pill for conceptual diffusion. By itself the term has no definite import but

\textsuperscript{140} Matilal, Bimal Krishna, \textit{A Critique of the Mādhyamika Position}, p 23.
\textsuperscript{141} Conze, Edward (Ed. & Tr.), \textit{The Large Sutras on Perfect Wisdom}, p 8.
acquires various meaning on different circumstances. It is usually used to mean the devoidness of something. According to the Madhyamikas, all things are empty for they are devoid of definite nature, characteristic and function. As Nagarjuna says:

“All things are empty why?

Neither created nor non – created things

Have characteristics.

Since they have no characteristics

They are empty.”

For the sake of convenience emptiness may be considered under the following aspects.

1) Emptiness as an antidote for metaphysical disease.

2) Emptiness as soteriological device.

3) Emptiness as a key term to understand the nature of language.

\[142\text{MMK, XVIII. 7.}\]
a) Emptiness as an Antidote for Metaphysical Disease

The implication of the major concepts of Indian philosophers has been exposed by the Madhyamikas. They feel that their opponents, whether the Hindu thinkers or their fellow Buddhists are alike, got the disease out of their ontological longing. Those thinkers treat concepts and words as representing reality. This is one sided view that should be discarded. According to the Madhyamkias, the cure of this disease is not to find a new metaphysics, but to understand the proper nature and function of conceptualization. Emptiness is an antidote against the disease of conceptual thinking.143 One should know that concepts and words are empty of contents. This is the only way that one can be free from slavery to language he himself created and used. Thus, to obtain enlightenment, conceptualization must be relinquished.

Unfortunately, people are clinging to concepts and words, they fell that the way in which we think and talk about reality presupposes that things have essences. For them, things have their own being, because of which, we think, it is possible for us to identify them, to know them, to think about them and to talk about them. They do not see the emptiness of these things. Thus, they held the view that concepts and words can refer to the extra-linguistic entities, and the import of a term is the object for

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143Singh, Jaideva, An Introduction to Madhyamaka Philosophy, p 54.
which it stands. To see the import of a conceptual fabrication is to seek an extra–linguistic entity, and to know the truth is to look for reality. Knowledge is the knowing of things, and epistemology is supposed to be dependent upon ontological assumptions. If we utter a sentence “a cat is on the mat.” This sentence, to the realist philosophers, represents the truth or falsehood about things. If a cat is on the mat at the moment, it is true, if it is not, it is false. This suggests that words represent the world in one–to–one correspondence. This view, to the Madhyamikas, is untenable because all words are empty of contents and without essence, so they lack referential connotations. In the case the statement do not refer to an empirical world, the realists still believe that they must point to transcendent reality. These are merely mental projections. They are illusory. They cannot represent reality correctly. The emptiness–outlook is only the way out of the prison of conceptual fabrication. The Madhyamikas way of emptiness is an observation that concepts and words deceived the metaphysicians and these philosophers do not know that they go astray into the jungle of their conceptual construct and got struck in the net of ontological concepts as such. That is why they wasted their time in establishing a metaphysical theory. This is also true to the Abhidharmikas because they too, construct a dynamic view about phenomena. They represent the concept of elements (dharmas) as having
self–essence instead of *atman* of the Upanisads. But, according to the Madhyamikas, this view too, suffers a setback, for it cannot solve the metaphysical dispute. The correct solution is not to present a new theory, but to empty one’s mind from mental fantasies. This indeed is what the Madhyamikas mean when they say that they have no view of their own. The Madhyamikas follow the teachings of the Buddha that all things are not-self by advocating that the meaning of a term cannot be found in object, entity or essence for which it stands, because meaning is merely human projection, it depends upon the context in which it is used. Right knowledge is not right understanding of something as a substratum, but rather to discern that things including words and concepts are empty. In the like manner the perusal of any theory of knowledge does not indispensably presuppose or entail an ontological entity. If we fail to understand this and treat emptiness as denoting whether an ontological entity or any philosophical theory, we are said to be incorrigible. According to the Madhyamikas, *Brahman*, *Atman Prakṛti*, dharmas and other ontological items are only reified concepts. One should apply emptiness as a medicine to cure the disease of projection of these concepts onto phenomenal world. Seeing metaphysical concepts as empty

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144 Sprung, Mervyn (Ed.), *The Problem of Two Truths in Buddhism and Vedānta*, p 63.  
145 MMK, XIII. 9.  
146 Sprung, Mervyn (Ed.), *The Problem of Two Truths in Buddhism and Vedānta*, p 36.
of contents and hence non-referential is right knowledge and after that the eye of wisdom will shine on.

b) Emptiness as a Soteriological Device

Emptiness is nothing but a soteriological device to help sentient beings crossing the ocean of *samsara* and reaching the other shore of *nirvana*. In daily life we are attached to the defilements and conceptual diffusions. The negation of mental diffusion would uproot the defilements which enshroud our thinking and vision. When the cloud of defilements was dispersed, the eye of wisdom would penetrate into the suchness of things, which is seeing things as empty of their essential nature.

Emptiness as a means to enlightenment may be compared to a shock–therapy. Just as a shock–therapy rightly applied would cure a patient who got mental disorders, he would become normal and remember well as before, so also emptiness rightly used would strip off one of false views which he believes to be true.

By awakening to emptiness, through emptiness, one realize that conventional truth, comparing to ultimate one, is both real and unreal. It is real within the scope of the everyday life, but is unreal from an ultimate angle. That is, things may destitute of real existence. It is their efficiency which bestows upon them the relative reality, and so become functional.
When one realized the true meaning of emptiness, he accordingly adjusts to circumstances. This does not mean that emptiness undermines the conventional truth, rather it supports the realization of ultimate truth, for Nagarjuna says, “without relying on conventional truth, the ultimate truth is not taught. Without understanding the ultimate truth, nirvana is not attained.” Because the Madhyamikas understand that all teachings of the Buddha are only a skillful means (upaya), and they should be treated as being provisional only. Likewise emptiness is considered to be a skillful means or instrument of Buddhist soteriology. Emptiness as a soteriological device is intimately connected with the Buddhist idea of dependent origination. Dependent origination, according to the Madhyamikas, indicates that things originate in dependence upon each other, nothing is independent. This means that all things have no inherent essence. Without inherent essence, therefore, things are considered to be identical with emptiness. Since things are, as they were, unified in emptiness, nothing exists as inherent essence, including discrete elements. Thus samsara and nirvana are said to be identical in the sense that they lack their own essence and hence are empty.

147Ibid., XXIV. 10.
148Ibid., XXV. 20.
While discussing the sixth stage of Bodhisattva Candrakirti describes emptiness which is coalescing around dependent origination thus:

It is no secret that empty entities like reflections and so forth depend on a collocations (of causes and conditions), and that a cognition may be produced in the form of an image of such empty reflection, for example.\textsuperscript{149} All entities are, in similar fashion, not only empty (as effects). They are also produced out of empty (causes). According to the two truths, (entities possess) no inherent essence, and therefore they are not permanent, nor are they subject to annihilation.\textsuperscript{150}

What these passages indicate is that the objective entities in our normal experiences are not different from reflected images in a mirror. Just as we treat reflections in a mirror as insubstantial or empty, so also are the objective entities to be seen. To impute falsity to the objects of cognition does not mean that they are non-existent, or that the original objects are transcendentally existent. The reflection is illusory only in order to correct the mistaken notion held by those who believe it is real in a way that it is not. Moreover, the objective entities, which are experience as unreal, are not only because of they having arisen dependently, but also because of their dependence upon various circumstances. Take an

\textsuperscript{149}\textsuperscript{MKV, 5.37.} \textsuperscript{150}\textsuperscript{Ibid., 6.38.}
image in a mirror as an instance once again. The attention, the intensity of light, the distance between the mirror and the perceiver etc. determine the quality of reflection. Therefore, the existence of an object is contingent upon a collocation of causes and conditions. Taking into account the circumstances, we can say that the reflection is illusory in the sense that it is not what it appears to be.

Nagarjuna’s use of emptiness as soteriological device has a specific function and purpose. One of the chief causes of bondage is, not so much the faculty of conceptualization, but rather the propensity to grasp onto the products of that faculty.\textsuperscript{151} The rational nature, like the dispositions Nagarjuna discussed in chapter seven of the \textit{Karika} has a value. Concepts are important and necessary instruments to be used in ordering one’s world and acting within it. The problem is that rational beings tend to impute excessive validity to these concepts. This is done for two reasons. One is ignorance, the rational beings do not know or ignore the fact that their mental nature is only a tool and has limited applicability. Second reason is that sentient being cling to the mental process is desire. Desiring pleasure, the mind reifies the apparently pleasurable things in the hope of thereby possessing them and preventing them from ceasing. Fearing death, the individual reifies the apparent existence of life itself and

\textsuperscript{151}Tachikawa, Musashi, \textit{An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nāgārjuna}, p 98.
thereby acts with excessive and unjustified selfishness. The Buddha taught that these two tendencies, desire and the faith in the result of mentation, are indirectly, the cause of bondage. “Desire, know I thy root,” he said. “From conception thou springest; No more shall I indulge in conception, I will have no desire anymore.”

There are two significances of the notion of emptiness. One is simply that when one is enlightened, one discerns things as empty. Emptiness in this sense is considered to be an observation. The other significance is the pragmatic one. As a soteriological device emptiness is an antidote to an excessive emphasis on mentation. Having demonstrated that all things are empty, Nagarjuna explicates that it is pointless to hypostatize anything. “When all things are empty, why (speculate on) the finite, the infinite, both finite and infinite, and neither finite nor infinite? Why (speculate on) the identical, the different, the eternal, the non-eternal, both, or neither?” Emptiness as a concept, acts as an antidote to this misuse of the rational faculty in two ways. One, if all things are empty, then no speculation is worthwhile. Excessive belief in concepts is misguided and, ultimately, debilitating, for it distracts one from the proper path, which is tranquility and appeasement of desires. The other

\[152\] The Buddha did uphold the importance of self – preservation, not because the self is real, but only of compassion – compassion for oneself as well as for others. Self – preservation must be tempered by other – preservation.
\[153\] MMK, XXV. 22 - 23.
use of the concept of emptiness is a positive one. The neophyte who has not developed the perfect wisdom which allows him to see all things as empty may need to use concepts as a temporary guide.\textsuperscript{155} The mind, by its very nature, needs to think. The trained mind can dwell in peaceful wisdom but the untrained one needs a system to direct its thought properly. Emptiness can act as an object of contemplation, an abstraction on which meditation can be focused. It is said that there are three stages in contemplation on emptiness. One is the emptiness of the self and the potential clinging which is spelled out in terms of Buddhist philosophy and psychology. In the second stage the emptiness of the doctrine is asserted, while the third stage points out the emptiness of emptiness itself. The first stage swallows the ordinary mind and sets up a Buddhist mind in which the erasing of the self has been given; the second stage swallows the Buddhist mind and sets up the mind of emptiness. Once the emptiness of the doctrine and practice are asserted, then the craving mind does not have anything to cling to and thus its latest stronghold is exposed. This is where one is confronted with the desire to give up desires. In the last stage emptiness swallows itself and the mind can discern the phenomena as they really are through the eye of wisdom (prajñājaksu). This last stage makes sure that there is nothing on to or dwelling in an emptiness that is separate from things that leave one outside the reality of concrete

\textsuperscript{155} Tachikawa, Musashi, \textit{An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nāgārjuna}, p 102.
existence. One who reaches the third stage is considered to be a real – Buddhist.

c) Emptiness as a Key Term to Understand the Nature of Language

The Madhyamika notion to emptiness is directed against the referentialist view that the meaning of a word is the object for which it stands; and that the words and objects relate to each other in one–to–one correspondence. Nagarjuna holds that words do not have meaning of themselves, the meaning of a word is not the object to which it corresponds, but depends upon context or conditions in which it is used. If the context or conditions vary, the meaning of the word also would vary. In this sense, the meaning of a term or concept is flexible, indeterminate and changeable in the course of time and place. The Buddha, for example, might make a statement “there is a self” in certain circumstance, in other “there is no self”, and in another “there is neither the self nor not self.” These statements seemed to be true in their certain context, but lost their significance in another context.

For the Madhyamika, even the words like “Buddha”, “Bodhisattva” and “Perfect Wisdom” have no meaning by themselves; they are as empty as any other term we use in daily life. We should not give any specific metaphysical significance to them. All words and
concepts should be considered to be solely conventional conveniences for the purpose of communication in our daily life. There are no extra linguistic relatives to be given to them.

In *Vigrahavyavartani* Nagarjuna asserts that all things are empty of substantial reality, and words which refer to such things are equally empty of reality, since there is no real substance for which they refer. This assertion has been made directly against the Nyaya realist who believed that all meaningful terms must refer to realities, the empty terms which have no references are meaningless. Thus for the Nyaya realist, to say that all things are empty of their self–essence is tantamount to saying that all terms are meaningless, including those in Nagarjuna’s assertion itself. Hence, the assertion is useless as a means of argument.

Nagarjuna formulated this problem for himself in the first part of the *Vigrahavyavartani*. Here Nyaya realist argues:

“If nothing at all possesses the self–essence, then your statement (that nothing possesses self–essence) itself possesses no self-essence and it cannot refute self–essence.”\(^{156}\)

\(^{156}\)VV, 1.
And again:

“If there is no self-essence, then even the word “no self-essence” (nihsvabhava) is impossible, because there can be no word without an object (to which it refers) (nama hi nirvastukam nasti).”\(^{157}\)

In the second part of the work, Nagarjuna formulates his reply to the above charge. He says:

“You have not understood the emptiness of things.... If things existed by virtue of their own essence, they would exist even without causes and conditions. But they do not. Therefore they have no self-essence, and they are called empty. Similarly, because it is dependently produced, my statement has no self-essence, and because it has no self-essence, it is reasonable to call it empty. Now, things like a cart, a pot, or a cloth, though they are empty of their self-essence because they are dependently produced, serve their various functions. For example, they carry wood, grass, or earth, they contain honey, water, or milk, or they protect from cold, wind, or heat. Similarly, my statement serves to establish the fact that things have no self-essence, even though, because it is dependently produced, it has no self-essence.”\(^{158}\)

\(^{157}\) VV, 9.

\(^{158}\) VV, Commentary on verse 22.
In these passages Nagarjuna refused to be pushed by the Nyaya realist into admitting that either his words or things to which they refer exist by virtue of their own essence. However, he allows the way the words actually function by making an appeal to conventional usage. His words admittedly have no self-essence, but they work conventionally as well as does a cart. The cart, when we examine, it has no nature that can be designated as its “cartness”, but it still manages to carry out its function effectively.\textsuperscript{159}

Therefore, for Nagarjuna, in conventional, day-to-day situations, whether a word or concept is valid or invalid, is a matter to be determined entirely on the basis of its function or application. A word or concept in this sense necessarily derives its meaning from its application within a particular context. This means that the meaning of a word derives not from its reference to some independently real object, but rather through circumstance that it recommends to us a particular way of looking at the world and suggests a certain appropriate form of behaviour on this basis. It is in this sense that concepts serve to mold our experience, which is quite apparent when words are used for obviously practical purposes. For instance, the above concept “cart” is immediately intelligible in either of two conventional contexts, where “cart” means either:

1) If we *conceive* of this assemblage of wood and metal in such and such a way, then we can use it to carry grass; or

2) If we *assemble* this wood and metal in such and such a way (as dictated by the concept “cart”), then we can use it to carry grass.\(^{160}\)

When we accept the emptiness of things in the sense that things are dependent upon causes and conditions, all the worldly conventions are possible. On the contrary Nagarjuna says:

“*You deny all the worldly conventions when you deny emptiness associated with dependent origination.*”\(^{161}\)

The function alone gives language life. We must not overstep the conventional usage in which it is original home of language. In this environment only can words do their duty. However, when we say that everything is indeed empty, this does not mean that it is a mistake to speak in terms of things such as cause, effect, time and I. For the conventional usage is not the conventional falsehood. Therefore, there would be no error in speaking in terms of dharmas, cause, effects, time, I, or whatever, once we have realized that there are no entities corresponding to these terms.

\(^{160}\) C.W. Huntington, Jr., *Emptiness of Emptiness*, p.53.

\(^{161}\) MMK, XXIV.36.
The Madhyamika Refutation of Self-Essence (Svabhava)

The term self–essence is defined by Nagarjuna as “that which cannot be contingent”, or “that which is not dependent on other.”\textsuperscript{162} Self–essence, therefore, refers to the inherent essence of a thing, to what exists in and of itself, or to a substantive being, unchanging and unmovable. In other words, it is an absolute existence. Moreover things which have their self–essence cannot be changed and perish; they would remain as they are forever. They also cannot be created\textsuperscript{163}, eliminated\textsuperscript{164}, or attained.\textsuperscript{165} Someone possessing demerit, for example, would never be able to remove this demerit and thus would be permanently in that state. And a person is by self–essence unenlightened can never attain the fruit of enlightenment.\textsuperscript{166} Similarly, to assert the view that a person is by self-essence enlightened, is a potential Buddha, or possesses a bodhi–citta makes the attachment of enlightenment meaningless\textsuperscript{167} or impossible.

Images in the mind or perceptions would be forever before the mind. There could be no real actions.\textsuperscript{168} If an action lacks self–essence it is not real and if it has self–essence, it does not occur, that is, it is eternal and thus never is completed. Besides being uneffectable, real entities

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[162] MMK, XV.2.
\item[163] Ibid., XXIV.39.
\item[164] Ibid., XXIII. 24 and VV, 67.
\item[165] Ibid., XXIV.39.
\item[166] Ibid., XXIV.32.
\item[167] Ibid., XXIV.28.
\item[168] Ibid., XVII. 21 – 22.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
cannot affect other things. Therefore an actually existent actor can neither do an actually existent action, because it too is real, nor do a not actually existent action, since it is unreal. There is no activity of a real entity; the actor and action would exist independently.\textsuperscript{169} If a father, as another example, is an entity existing through self-essence, then either he is identical or unrelated to the man before the birth of a child. If he is identical, no change could possibly have occurred (since the real does not change), that is, no birth. If the father is different, then a change occurred, that is, the child created the father by producing his fatherhood. The first alternative is rejected since a birth did occur; the second involves a change and production – neither of which can occur to what exists through self-essence. Therefore, the man is neither identical nor distinct from the father and thus neither exists. And if the father does not exist, then the child also does not exist (a child by definition is dependent upon a father). So there are no real fathers or children.

To accept such a self-essence is to go against the ideas of selflessness (anatman), emptiness and dependent origination. According to the Madhyamikas, that a thing has originated in dependence on causes and conditions implies that it has no self-essence. Because its existence depends on things other than itself, it is nothing in itself; that is, when it is

\textsuperscript{169}Ibid., VII. 1-2.
considered in isolation from everything else.\textsuperscript{170} If we focus on a particular thing in an effort to distinguish its self-essence from that of other things, we find that it disappears. Therefore, we do not find any inherence essence in it which makes it what it is and which is independent of anything else. Nagarjuna thus, says, “\textit{The arising of a self-essence by means of causes and conditions is not logically possible (yukta). A self-essence that has occurred as a result of causes and conditions would be something that is made.}”\textsuperscript{171} More precisely Candrakirti elaborates the concept of self-essence (\textit{svabhava}) in this way. According to him, the term self-essence (\textit{svabhava}) has been used in Buddhist philosophy in two senses.

1) It is used as an essence of a thing. Heat, for instance, is not the essence of water, but the essence of fire because fire is always hot.

Candrakirti explains this point that “in this world an attribute, which accompanies an object, never deviates from it, that not being indissolubly connected with anything else, is known as \textit{svabhava}, i.e., essence of that object.”\textsuperscript{172}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[171] Ibid., XV.1.
\item[172] PSP, p. 115.
\end{footnotes}
2) A self-essence (*svabhava*) as the contrary to dependent being (*parabhava*), is one’s being, the very nature of a thing.

These two imports of *svabhava* have been rejected because in Madhyamika system there are no phenomena which have their own existence. As Candrakirti reiterates Nagarjuna’s views, “We do not accept that *svabhava*, which is brought or which is contingent on, or which is relative to something else.”173 However, a self–essence is accepted in conventional level, for even the so-called *svabhava* or essence of a thing is contingent and dependent. For instance, heat, which is considered to be an essence of fire, depends upon so many conditions such as a match or a lens, fuel or the friction of two pieces of wood. The heat is, therefore, not *svabhava* of fire in the ultimate sense. Thus if the *svabhava* is held in the conventional level, it is acceptable.

In his commentary, in chapter twenty – two of the *Prasannapada*, Chandrakirti states that the Buddha has taught emptiness, non–emptiness, etc. on different occasions in accordance with the needs and capacities of various disciples. Similarly, we may suppose that the statement that *svabhava* exists is designed, here, as in the *Madhyamakavatara*, to dispel any tendency to nihilistic negation of things. The statement that there is no *svabhava* is designed to counter the

173 Ibid.
opposite tendency to make the fact that things lack *svabhava* itself a thing.

Normally ordinary people believe that the whole class of entities (*bhavajatam*), which is totally without essence, have essence. This belief fails fundamentally. And if one has thoroughly understood this, there would be no question of the existence or non–existence of such entities, or their essence at all. Candrakirti makes this clear in a passage in the *Madhyamakavatara*, using his recurrent example of the illusory hairs seen by a person with ophthalmic.

According to the example, a person with normal vision saw someone with ophthalmic trying to scrape illusory hairs out of a jar. The first person sees no hairs; and so he has no idea relating to hairs, whether of entity or non–entity, hairs or non–hair, etc. Only when the one who suffers from ophthalmia tells him that he sees hairs in the jar, does the first person, in order to remove his misunderstanding, tell him that the hairs do not exist. Thus the notion of the non–existence of self–essence can arise only in relation to the illusion that self–essence exists. The enlightened are without the illusion and have no need of its negation, but they negate it in order to teach the unenlightened. This negation,
however, cannot be the ultimate truth because it is left behind an unnecessary after the illusion has been left behind.174

According to Chandrakirti, the fact that things are without their own essence is, itself, invariably true and thus non–contingent. This therefore, amounts to say that the essence of things is that they have no self–essence.

SELF-NATURE THEORY

The concept of self-nature, svabhava, has been repeatedly discussed in passing in the above three chapters. It has not yet been examined in isolation because Nagarjuna did not present a single, comprehensive presentation of it in the karika. He did devote section fifteen to an “Examination of Self-nature,” but this presentation of it was not exhaustive. In it he only discussed three aspects of self-nature theories: the character of svabhava as necessarily non-made and independent, the fact that svabhava cannot be related to thought of existence or non-existence, and the incompatibility of svabhava with the Buddha’s teaching.

174 Ibid., pp. 171-172
Non-Buddhist Notions of Self-Nature and the Soul

The three aspects of self-nature theories discussed seemingly were chosen because they were of the most direct relevance in the theories Nagarjuna was refuting and the teachings he was upholding in the treatise. What he did not discuss, then, and for obvious reasons, were a more sympathetic account of self-nature, i.e. the reasons it was formulated as a concept in the first place, what the theory meant, and what problems it solved. The concept had a long history of usage and a variety of meaning throughout that history. There were definite reasons for some schools of thought, Buddhist and otherwise, to posit self-nature. Further, there are more significances of the concept which Nagarjuna did not as explicitly touch upon; these significances were only implicit in his refutation of the concept. A brief discussion of the history of the concept, reasons for its assertion, and it is significance needs to be taken up now. This is not an irrelevant aside, but is important for two reasons. First, a fuller understanding of self-nature theories will shed greater light on Nagarjuna’s enterprise. Second, it will demonstrate the ground for his philosophy, dependent arising and emptiness, will only make sense against the backdrop of the theories he was criticizing.

Waldo Ives, Nāgārjuna and Analytic Philosophy, p 95
One cannot point to a conclusive beginning of self-nature theories. Surely, they were first posited whenever individuals reflected on the fact that there is a causal regularity between events and an apparent continuity of identity in individuals and things.\textsuperscript{176}

By the time of the early classical period in India, two district camps of self-nature theories had become clear: those of orthodox Hinduism, and those of the three heterodoxical systems of Materialism, Jainism, and Buddhism.\textsuperscript{177}

The central fact agreed upon by almost all of Hinduism is the reality of an eternal, immutable, immanent soul, the atman. This led Hinduism to assert the reality of self-nature in one form or another. For example, the early Hindu philosophers, considered “warmth” to be the first creative principle.\textsuperscript{178} From this primal warmth originated, respectively, law, truth, darkness, water, time, and finally the physical universe. The Sankhya-Yoga system later postulated a general material principle (prakrti) which was the primal cause of the universe and from which all else evolved. Either way, though, it was clear that the omnipresence and the eternality of the soul declared that nothing really

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{176}Ibid., p 67.
\item \textsuperscript{177}Richard, H., Robinson, \textit{Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge}, p 44.
\item \textsuperscript{178}Ibid., p 46.
\end{itemize}
new could come into existence; all change was, in some form or another, based on self-nature.\textsuperscript{179}

The “Materialist” philosophies of the early classical period were even clearer about the reality and function of self-nature, for they denied the existence both of controlling, inner soul and of a transcendent \textit{primum mobilum}.\textsuperscript{180} Kalupahana says that, “it was the Materialists who first put forward a systematic theory of inherent nature svabhava.”\textsuperscript{181} Since the regularity of causation could be attributed neither to a God nor to an inner soul, only inherent self-nature could be invoked to account for it. This self-nature became elevated to the status of fixed, universal law: self-nature is the only determinant of and force behind causation. Since self-nature took the place of both the soul and God for the Materialists, they were often grouped under the broad heading of Svabhavavada, the “School of Self-nature.”\textsuperscript{182}

Generally speaking, they held that only matter is real. Any forms of life or consciousness are byproducts of material forces, the theory of hylozoism. These material elements have an inherent nature which manifests itself in a fixed pattern of causation. Since sentience is

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., p 46.
\textsuperscript{180} Primum Mobilum may translated as the “First Moved”. It derived from two Latin words viz., primum or primus (first) and the mobile or mobilis (mobile).
\textsuperscript{181} David J. Kalupahana, \textit{The Philosophy of the Middle Way}, p.35
epiphenomenal and self-nature invariable, free will is necessarily an illusion.

The main differences between svabhava of Hindu and Materialist boils down to morality.\[^{183}\] First, the Hindu was more transcendental. The eternal all-pervasiveness of atman required that nothing really new come into existence-causal change was always ultimately superficial. The Hindu tradition emphasized the spiritual quality of ultimate reality, a corollary of which was that morality is real. One’s action determined one’s fate, and so it was paramount to make causality and self-nature two halves of the same coin. The Bhagavad-Gita summarizes well the connections between self-nature and morality in Hinduism. Its final chapter states clearly that each person has a self-nature which determines his or her duties in life. Each of the four castes is said to have its own intrinsic nature, svabhava, which prescribes specific duties incumbent upon each person. One can only obtain freedom by properly living out and manifesting one’s svabhava.\[^{184}\] The Materialist recognizes no such transcendent self-nature, for self-nature is a blind physical force found in the material elements only. Religion then boils down only to morality, and morality in turn reduces to simple hedonism. One text defines heaven as nothing more than “eating delicious food, keeping company of young

\[^{183}\text{Ibid., p 28.}\]
\[^{184}\text{Ibid., p 29.}\]
women, using fine clothes,” etc. Some certain Materialists did at least elevate morality to include cultural cultivation, discipline, and education, but this was for no other reason but to develop a greater capacity to enjoy the world’s delights.

Jainism, whose founder was a contemporary of the Buddha, adopted a middle ground between the above two opposing theories. The Hindus held a modalistic philosophy; they saw the universe as nothing but modes of the living atman. The Materialists saw the universe as nothing but manifestations of non-living matter. The Jains attempted to reconcile the two by postulating a living being with soul acting in a universe comprised of non-living matter, space and fate (karma). Both permanence (spirit) and change (matter) are equally real. This led to what seems to be the rather confusing doctrine that “things are partly determined and partly undetermined,” that both determinism and free will are real and operative. As might be expected from this, they attempted to both accept and deny self-nature. This was accomplished by asserting that, on one hand, individual human exertion was capable of effecting change. On the other hand, past extrinsic karma caused the individual to become associated with a deterministic type of self-nature.

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185Ibid., p 29.  
186Shah, S.M., The Dialectic of Knowledge and Reality in Indian Philosophy, p 113.  
187Ibid., p 115.
The Buddha’s Theory of Soul-lessness

The Buddhist theory of self-nature, both in its original formulation and its later developments, is unlike any of the above three. There are few references to self-nature to be found in the early Buddhist writings. This is not because the Buddha was unaware of or was ignoring the issue, but because he saw self-nature as included in the larger issue of selfhood (atman) as a whole. About this, he had very clear teachings. Any ideas of self are false and imaginary beliefs which have no objective ground. Further, the illusory beliefs in self-hood are the direct cause of selfishness, craving, and greed. “In short,” says Buddhist scholar Walpola Rahula, “to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world.”

However, and this is crucial, the Buddha also taught that one must not conceive of the self as non-existent. He clearly stated that there is no self, but he did not intend for this to be interpreted as a negation of something that once existed.

The Buddha was thus careful not to be too adamant about either answer. Saying that there is a self would lead people to interpret him as being eternalist, i.e. assertion the eternal atman of Hinduism. The moral result of eternalism is selfishness and, ultimately, excessive desires. Saying that there is no self would lead people to interpret him as being.

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188Rahula, Walpola, What the Buddha Thought, p 92.
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ationist, i.e. denying any sort of self-hood in the same way that the Materialists denied it. The moral result of annihilationism is a state of distress over losing that which one believes one now has and, further, annihilationism would undermine moral accountability.190

A few hundred years after the Buddha’s death some schools undertook the task of systematizing his ontology in the face of his teaching of atman, soullessness. The result was the Abhidharma, a classificatory analysis of human experience into physical elements, sense-faculties, and the aggregated comprising the individual. In this process of analysis, two old pre-Buddhist theories crept back in: self-nature (svabhava) and other-nature (parabhava). It was in response to these insidious heresies that Nagarjuna formulated his refutation of the two.

Theories of self-nature found their host in the Realist (Sarvastivada) school. Theories of other-nature found a host in the “Sutra School” (Sautrantika), so called because they saw themselves as being the most faithful to the original writings, the sutras. The Realists reduced all phenomena to ultimate atomistic entities. The systematization of these atoms and the relations between them was complete enough to account for all phenomenal things, events, and individuals without any recourse to theories of a transcendent self, such as atman. However, since these

190Gadjin M. Nagao, Madhyamika and Yogacara, p 48.

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atoms were irreducible and discrete, both temporally and spatially, there remained a difficulty of accounting for the influencing effect of one momentary atom on another. Further, the perceived continuity of existence was not fully explained. To resolve these difficulties, the Realists asserted that each atom has its own self-nature. However, since these atoms are the ultimate building blocks of reality, and since each has self-nature, they cannot be associated with arising and ceasing. As such, they must exist in all three phases of times, past, present, and future. It is not clear how exactly the atoms can be momentary but their self-nature eternal. It seems that the phenomenal manifestation of an atom is but momentary, while the potential existence of an atom and its eternal character, its self-nature, are trans-temporal. Such a self-nature may not have been explicitly contrary to the Buddha’s teachings, but it seemed to other schools of Buddhism to come dangerously close to the Hindu atman-theories which the Buddha was assuredly and clearly negating.

In response to these theories which seemed to border on heresy, a group of monks split off to the Realists around 150 C.E. This, the “Sutra School,” intended to reject the heresies of the Realists and return to the original Buddhism as found in the earliest scriptures. They denied the eternal self-nature of the otherwise momentary atoms by going to the

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191 Ibid., 50.
other extreme of denying the atoms any temporal duration. They did not merely confine the atom to existence in the present alone, but literally reduced its duration to zero. A result of this nontemporal instantaneity was that the atoms could have no spatial extension, either. The atoms were seen as arising and perishing in the same instant. Since the atoms partook of their time nor space, their causal efficiency was negated. Causation was not denied, for regular continuity of phenomena was observed to exist. However, the all-but-nonexistence atoms had no such power to influence or cause. There was thus seen to be a difference between cause and effect, and the Sutra School was forced to recognize other-nature, parabhava. The “other” in their other-nature was the series of atoms of which any one atom was a part. The atoms succeed one another in a contiguous, uninterrupted sequence. While no atom on its own lasts long enough to have causal efficacy, the series of atoms does last long enough to influence other atomic series. It is the self-nature of one series, which series is “other” than each atom within it, that interacts with and conditions (pratyayas) other series.194

193 Frederick Streng, Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning, p 214.
194 Ibid., p 216.