CHAPTER IV

NAGARJUNA’S CARDINAL PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS

In the history of Buddhism, Nagarjuna’s name has become unsurpassed. He is one of the greatest philosophers of the East. Nagarjuna is believed to have lived during the second century between c. 113-213. He was born in the South India, of Brahmin parents, and was an early convert to Buddhism. The Madhyamika School founded by him is considered to be the philosophical Buddhism par excellence. Nagarjuna was an interpreter rather than an innovator. He accepted the early texts and criticized the interpretations of the Abhidharmika saying that such interpreters do not understand the teachings of the Buddha. He reinterpreted and restated them in a particularly clear and forthright way.

The works generally agreed to be Nagarjuna’s are as follows:

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195 As regards the date of Nāgārjuna, scholars are of different opinions. Robinson placed Nāgārjuna around c. 113-213. See R.Richard, Robinson, Early Mādhyamika in India and China, p. 22., Murti and other scholars favour him to live about the middle of the second century A.D. See T.R.V. Murti, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, p. 88., Ruegg in agreement with E.Frauweller and other scholars suggest that he belongs to c. 150-200. See D. Seyfort Ruegg, “Towards a Chronology of the Mādhyamaka School”, in Indological and Buddhist Studies, ed. by L.A. Hercus, et al, p. 507. All these are reasonable. However, we here agree with Robinson’s opinion.

196 According to Singh, the correct name for Nāgārjuna’s philosophical system is “Mādhyamaka”, and not “Mādhyamika”, for Mādhyamika means the follower of the Mādhyamaka system. See Jaidev Singh, An Introduction to Madhyamaka Philosophy, p. 4. But Ruegg argues that the use of the term “Mādhyamakai” and “Mādhyamika” as designations for the school and its followers was a somewhat later development, because they do not seem to be found in the early works such as the Mūlamadhyamakakārikās of Nāgārjuna and the Catuhsataka of Aryadava. They appear in the commentary on the Mūlamadhyamakakārikās, Candrakīrti’s Prasannapadā Mādhyamakavçā and so on. And Murti holds that – “Mādhyamika” can be used for the system as well as its advocates. See T.R.V. Murti, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, p. 87.
1. *Mulamadhyamaka-karika* (Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way)

2. *Sunyatasaptati* (Seventy Verses on Emptiness)

3. *Vigrahavyavartani* (The End of Disputes)

4. *Vaidalyaparakarana* (Pulverizing the Categories)

5. *Vyavaharasiddhi* (Proof of Convention)

6. *Yuktisastika* (Sixty Verses on Reasoning)

7. *Catuhstava* (Hymn to the Absolute Reality)


9. *Pratityasamutpadahṛdayakarika* (Constituents of Dependent Arising)

10. *Sutrasamuccaya*

11. *Bodhicittavivaraṇa* (Exposition of the Enlightened Mind)

12. *Suhṛdleka* (Letter to a Good Friend)

13. *Bodhisambhara* (Requisites of Enlightenment)
The works of Nagarjuna had their origins in the teachings of the Buddha and in the early Buddhist tradition. The early scriptures speak of the Buddha’s statement about emptiness (sunyata), of the famous fourteen unanswerable questions, and of “theory of no theory”. In addition, we find very clear precursor of the Madhyamika philosophy in the Perfection of Wisdom literature. All these are clear indications of authentic origins of the Madhyamika philosophy. The main philosophical concepts discussed are as follows: (1) emptiness, (2) the middle way, (3) the twofold truth and (4) the refutation of erroneous views as the illumination of right views. Here we are going to discuss the Middle Way, the refutation of the erroneous views as the illumination of right view and the philosophical positions of Nagarjuna. The rest will be taken up after.

**THE MIDDLE WAY**

The “Middle Way” is held to be the essential to all Buddhist schools of thought, especially it was given priority by Nagarjuna and his followers, who applied it in relentless fashion to all problems of epistemology, ontology and soteriology and hence his philosophical school is known as the Madhyamika philosophy. It represents a characteristic attitude, rooted in a certain set of individual and social
concerns, which shapes the motivation for one’s actions in the world, and it is indication of a particular sort of deconstructive philosophy.

In early Buddhist scriptures we found that this concept plays a vital role in shaping Buddhism; at the very first sermon itself the Buddha preached the Middle Way to the five mendicants at the Deer Park outside Varanasi. The detail of this sermon is as follows:

“Mendicants, there are two extremes which should not be practised by any person who has left society to find salvation. What are these extremes? On the one hand, there is the realm of desire and pursuit of pleasure which is in accord with desire - it is a base pursuit, boorish, profane, crude and without profit. On the other hand, there is the pursuit of self – mortification which is sheer misery, as well as crude and without profit. Mendicants, passing through these two extremes and avoiding them both, is the Middle Way, object of the Tathagata’s perfect awakening, opening the eyes and the mind, leading to peace, to omniscience, to complete awakening and to nirvana.”

Here the Middle Way is a practical approach to the religious life, the means to which the practitioner will reach the supreme goal (Nirvana) he aims at the number of this Middle Way is said to be eight, and so the path is also spoken of as the Eightfold Path. They are: right view, right

\textsuperscript{197} V, I., 10–17.
understanding, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. We may recall that the life of the Buddha before his enlightenment as the great experiment of the Middle Way. The time before his renunciation was one in which he enjoyed every possible luxury; for instance, he had three palaces, one for each season, filled with sources of pleasure to an extent scarcely imaginable in his day. After extreme enjoyment, then came six years of extreme asceticism and self-mortification, when Siddhartha Bodhisattva did without the basic amenities of normal life, lived out in the open, wore the poorest garments, and fasted for long periods of time. In addition to such deprivations, he tormented his body through various practices like sleeping on beds of thorns and sitting in the midst of fires under the cruel heat of the midday sun.

Having experienced the extreme luxury and deprivation, and having reached the limits of these two extremes, the Siddhartha Bodhisattva saw their futility and thereby discovered the Middle Way, which avoids both extremes namely indulgence in sense-pleasures and self-mortification. Through avoiding these two extremes and following
the Middle Way as such, the Siddhartha Bodhisattva eventually overcame all sorts of suffering became the Buddha, the enlightened.\textsuperscript{198}

Moreover, the Middle Way to the Buddhist goal of the cessation of suffering is like a medicine for specific ailment. When a doctor treats his patient for a serious ailment, his or her prescription is not only physical but also psychological. If the patient is suffering, for instance, from a heart condition, he or she is not only given medication but is also asked to control his or her diet and avoid stressful situations. Here, too, if we look at the specific instructions for following the Buddhist path to end the suffering, we see that they refer not to one’s body-actions and words, but also to one’s thoughts.

Also the Dependent Origination is the Middle Way, for it endeavors to explain that one should avoid adherence to the philosophical standpoints of extreme realism and nihilism. As the Buddha admonishes to Kaccana:

\begin{quote}
“Kaccana, everyday experience relies on the duality of “it is” and “it is not.” But for one who relies on the Dharma and on wisdom, and thereby directly perceives how the things of the world arise and pass away, for him, there is no “it is” and no “it is not.” “Everything exists” is simply one extreme, Kaccana, and “nothing exists” is the other
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{198} Cf. the Buddha’s admonition to Sona wherein the Middle Way is compared to the musical instrument. Quoted in G. P. Malalasekera, Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names, Vol. II, p. 1294.
extreme. The Tathagata relies on neither of these two extremes, Kaccana; he teaches the dharma as Middle Way.”

Moreover, in the early scriptures itself the Middle Way is considered to be soteriological device. Just as a raft is used to cross over to the other shore of a river, so also the Dharma (here means the Middle Way) is used to cross the ocean of birth and death (samsara) to reach the other shore namely nirvana.

The Middle Way as the avoidance of extreme pairs of philosophical views mentioned above and the Middle Way as the soteriological device became a basis of Madhyamika philosophy, especially the Kaccayaganagotta sutta, for it is quoted by Nagarjuna in his Mulamadhyama-kakakarika. According to Nagarjuna, the Middle Way basically signified the avoidance of both concepts of being and non-being. While avoiding the abstract concepts as being unprofitable, he looked at the Eightfold Path as representing the skillful means.

As we have seen the Middle Way was applied in early scriptures as an aid toward the explication of any important doctrine. One of the most forceful and important doctrines for all Buddhist is the concept of selflessness. The Madhyamikas applied the Middle Way to discard all

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199 SN, III, 134. 30-135.19 ; and SN, II, 17.8-30.  
200 Ibid., pp. 588 - 589.  
201 MMK, XV. 7.
views, whether positive or negative, whether right or wrong. We would see that in the Madhyamika perspective even the teachings of the Buddha, viewing from the absolute angle are considered to be as empty as are the empirical truths. As Nagarjuna states:

“*The Buddha has indicated that there is a self, they taught that there is no self, and they also taught that there is neither any self nor any no-self.*”

These four alternatives of the existence and non-existence of self cannot be true. If one is wrong, the other too, must be wrong, for both stand at opposite poles to each other and each of them is considered to be one-sided view. **Whatever be the nature of the conventional view, it is always subject to contradictions, for it is in the nature of thought to contradict itself by itself.** To avoid these contradictions, the Madhyamikas as the holder of the Middle Way adhere neither to a positive view nor to a negative view, neither to right view nor to erroneous view. Discarding all views, they do not offer any view of their own, knowing well that if they had one, they too will suffer from the same contradictions from which other views suffer. Therefore Nagarjuna says:

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202 See the next discussion on “The Refutation of Erroneous views and Illumination of Right views.”
203 MMK, XVIII. 6.
204 Moti Lal Pandit, Śunyaṭā: The Essence of Mahāyāna Spirituality, p. 252.
“If I had any proposition, then this defect would be mine. I have, however, no proposition. Therefore, there is no defect that is mine.”

The Madhyamika’s relentlessly denial to accept any view as absolutely binding is especially characteristic of Prasangika movement attributed to Buddhapalita and followed by Candrakirti and Santideva. It is believed to be a genuine spirit of Madhyamika philosophy, for this non view tendency of the Prasangika finds its precedent in the writings of Nagarjuna as quoted above and in the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* chapter XXII and especially in chapter XXV. 24 which is expressed thus: “The Buddha did not teach anything to anyone at any place.”

Nagarjuna also equated the Middle Way to another important concept in Madhyamika philosophy, i.e., Dependent origination, Dependent designation and Emptiness. As he says:

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205 VV, XXIX. It can be noted that the context and the purpose of this expression of Nagarjuna is similar to the last statement appeared in the book “Tractatus Logico Philosophicus” of Ludwig Wittgenstein as “7. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” It simply refers to the deficiency of language which is used to express or describe the reality. Another example related to this case is written in the book “Outlines of Indian Philosophy” by M. Hiriyanna. He wrote: The Isa Upanisad, for example, does so by predicating contradictory features of Brahman: 'It moves; it moves not. It is far; it is near. It is within all this and also without all this.' But the best instance of it seems to have been found in an Upanisad no longer extant, to which Samkara refers in his commentary on the Vedanta-sutra as Badhva, asked by Bakali to expound the nature of Brahman, did so, it is stated, by keeping silent. He prayed: 'Teach me, Sir. The other was silent, and, when addressed a second and a third time, he replied: 'I am teaching, but you do not follow. The self is silence: Upasantoyam atma.'

206 MMK, XXV.24.
“Whatever is dependent origination (is what) we call “emptiness”. That (again) is (called) dependent designation, (and) that is alone the Middle Way.”$^{207}$

Candrakirti, the later Madhyamaka, explains that Nagarjuna here established the following equation, Dependent origination = Emptiness = Dependent designation = Middle Way, meaning thereby that all these terms in Madhyamika philosophy speak of the same thing, and are therefore interchangeable.$^{208}$ All these terms are considered to be meta-terms in higher order, they do not refer to any essence or entity in the world. They, however, are useful in the context of conventional truth language system and provide a vital impulse to the Madhyamikas in denying all views and make them not commit to any viewpoint.

The dependent origination as the Middle Way was expressed clearly in the dedicatory verses of Mulamadhyamakakarika wherein is called the Middle Way of Eightfold negation. These verses run like this:

“I pay homage to the fully Enlightened One,

The foremost of all teachers,

Who has taught this dependent origination,

The cessation of all conceptual fabrication,

$^{207}$MMK, XXIV. 18.

$^{208}$B. K. Matilal, Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis, pp. 148-151.
Non-ceasing and non-arising,

Non-annihilation and non-eternity,

Neither one nor many,

Neither coming in nor going out.”

Here the term ‘dependent origination’ (pratītyasamutpada) is modified by the preceding eight phrases of ‘non ceasing and non-arising’ and so forth. This means that the dependent origination as the Middle Way avoids eight extreme views of real production, real extinction, annihilation, eternity of phenomenal world, reality as one, as many, as coming in, and as going out, with its own-nature (svabhava). Each of these is one-sided view, and they should be discarded. The Middle Way is to see that things are dependent upon something else, nothing arises independently. Since everything is mutually dependent, everything is devoid of its own-essence (nissvabhava) and hence empty (Sunya). Seeing things like this is considered to be a right view or the Middle Way. But to take emptiness of things as another view is to commit a mistake. Emptiness is not a view but rather meta-term, a provisional concept or a soteriological device to help us out of attachment to the views.

\[209\] MMK, Dedicatory verses.
The Refutation of Erroneous Views – Middle Way and Reality

It is well known that the Madhyamikas apply the method of *reductio ad absurdum* (*prasangapadanam*) which is a kind of negative dialectic to expose the inherent contradictions and absurdities in the opponent’s position. The Madhyamikas disprove the opponent’s view, and they themselves do not prove or present any view of their own instead. T.R.V. Murti:

“*Prasanga is not to be understood as an apagogic proof in which we prove an assertion indirectly by drawing the opposite. Prasanga is disproof simply, without the least intention to prove any thesis.*”\(^{210}\)

All philosophers, enter into the debate, refuse the opponent’s views and present their views; Kant’s proof of the arguments by adducing the thesis and the antithesis in his Antinomies of Reason is the example of the apagogic proof in the West. Nevertheless these proofs may fail to carry conviction. Because the disproof of the adversaries, and even though it is cogent, does not necessarily mean the establishment of one’s position as true. For both the opponent’s view as well as one’s own may be false.\(^{211}\) That is why the Madhyamikas do not present their view.


\(^{211}\) Ibid., p 131.
According to them, the refutation of erroneous views is the same as the illumination of the right views. A right view is not a view in itself, rather the absence of views. If we hold a right view in place of an erroneous one, it (right view) will become one-sided and require refutation. The main logical apparatus by which Nagarjuna criticized all views is the tetralemma (catuskoti). Thus argumentative device assumes that there are four possible views, viz. (1) affirmation, (2) negation, (3) both affirmation and negation, and (4) neither affirmation nor negation. Nagarjuna used the tetralemma to examine the opponent’s views and showed that anything which can be describable in term of existence, non-existence, both existence and non-existence, or as neither existence nor non-existence, is untenable and should be eliminated. This way of refutation is well illustrated in his analysis of the notion of causality.

Thus, we may take the problem of causality as an example in which the Madhyamikas exercise their method. There are four possibilities for the origination of phenomena or the relationship between cause and effect, namely:

1) The cause and effect are identical.

2) The cause and effect are different.

3) The cause and effect are both identical and different, and
4) The phenomena arise without cause

These four basic alternatives are indicated in the first verse of the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, which states that “No entity is produced at anytime, anywhere, or in any manner from itself, from other, from both, or without cause”. Each of these four possibilities of causation was upheld by a philosophical school contemporary with the Madhyamika. The Sankhya philosophy advocates that the identity between cause and effect (*satkaryavada*), and thus holds the theory of self-becoming – the theory that things are produced out of themselves. The Buddhist Vaibhasikas and the Naiyayikas propound that the cause and effect are different; effect is a completely new entity (*asatkaryavada*). The Jaina philosophers advocate that the cause and effect are both identical and different by insisting on the continuous as well as the emergent aspect of the effect. The Materialists and the Skeptics reject the views of Sankhya, Buddhist and Jaina, but uphold that phenomena arise without any cause. According to them things are produced by chance.

Let us now consider how the Madhyamikas refute all these views. The first alternative, which affirms the identity of cause and effect, cannot face reasoning. Self-becoming means self-production, i.e., reduplication which is useless. The Madhyamikas say that if cause and

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212 MMK, 1.1.
effect are identical, then having bought cottonseed with the price one would pay for cloth, one ought to be able to clothe with it. Therefore, the view that cause and effect are identical leads to absurdity. Similarly if cause and effect are identical, then there would be no different between father and son, and also no difference between food and excrement.

In the case of the second alternative, that is, cause and effect are different; anything could arise out of anything else, for all phenomena are equally different. A piece of stone, then, may as well sprout into a plant like a seed does, because otherness to the plant is equally present in both.\(^{213}\) Likewise a stalk of rice might arise out of a piece of coal as just easily as from a grain of rice, and a piece of coal and a grain of rice would have the same relationship of difference to a stalk of rice. Hence the notion that cause and effect are absolutely different is an absurd idea.

The third alternative which holds that cause and effect are both identical and different is untenable and suffers from two faults. First, both the arguments that refuted the identity of cause and effect and the argument that refuted the difference of cause and effect are applicable to the third alternative as well. The argument refuting the identity of cause and effect is applicable insofar as cause and effect are identical, and the argument refuting their difference is applicable insofar as cause and effect

are different. We really have no new proposition in the case of the third alternative. Secondly, the third alternative is faulty because of the law of contradiction: no phenomenon can have contradictory characteristics. An entity cannot be both existent and nonexistent at the same time, just as one person cannot be both male and female at the same time.

Finally, the fourth alternative, that is, the phenomena arise without cause, is denied, for it contradicts the common experience. For example, if we set a kettle of water on a lighted stove, the water will boil, but if we set it on a block of ice, it won’t. Therefore, the four alternatives of causation, for the Madhyamikas, are doomed to failure. They are wrong views and must be rejected outright. However, the Madhyamika critique of a view or all views does not aim at upholding another view but simply to discard a view.

Nagarjuna’s dialectic is not merely to limit the validity of intellect and logic; it is also to declare that reasoning and conceptual speculation are absurd. While examining the Madhyamika way of philosophizing we must first see whether they are only interested in victory over their opponents or whether they have some other ulterior motive. If they have some other motive behind all that they do and if they are not simply wrangling with their opponents with a view to achieve an easy victory,

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214 Peter Della Santina, *The Tree of Enlightenment*, pp. 159-161.
then they cannot be regarded as person who is interested only in the refutation of the opponent’s view even if they do not have a metaphysical thesis of their own.

It is not proper to take the Madhyamikas to task, as some critics have done, for rejecting the rival theory or theories without giving any counter theory of their own. Referring to the criticism of the Vaibhasika theory, Fukuhara, for example, says, “though this theory of Vaibhasika contains many defects as pointed out by Vasubandhu, we should acknowledge that it was such a purposeful, religious theory. If the theory can be replaced with another faultless theory which fulfills the above necessities, as done by Vasubandhu, it is better. But simple rejection of the theory without giving any counter theory, as done by Madhyamikas, is not proper”. In fact the Madhyamikas were interested in pointing to nirvana, which is devoid of all prapanca (multiple thought-constructions) caused by the seeing of svabhava where there is absolute nissvabhavata or sunyata, that is, essencelessness. They were not interested in propounding any theory whatsoever about Reality, but by generating a critical insight into nissvabhavata or essencelessness through a criticism of all theories, their intention was to paint to a summum bonum free from thought.

constructions (prapanca). This only is prajna (wisdom) however, to look for prajna (wisdom) is not to look for something, but rather to know that “something” is empty. Wisdom is not the attainment of a theory but an absence of it.

In Madhyamika philosophy the illumination of right views and the refutation of erroneous view are not two separate things. Therefore, when the Buddha denied that a Dharma is existent, he did not hold another view that a Dharma is non-existent. If someone were to hold that a Dharma is non-existent, the view would be another extreme to be refuted. Although the Buddha sometimes used the word “non-existent” in his dialogues, one should know that this idea is brought out primarily to cure the disease of the concept of existence. If that disease disappears, then useless medicine is also discarded.

To insist that the refutation of erroneous views neither necessitates nor implies that one has another view, the Madhyamikas made a distinction between negation for affirmation and pure negation. They questioned the former and argued for the latter. In the Upanisadic and Nyaya systems, negation is used with the aim of affirmation, establishing another thesis; not- A implies something other than A. The judgment, “Banana is not blue” is based upon another judgment, “Banana is yellow”

217 Cf. PSP, pp. 248-249.
But for Nagarjuna, negation is applied solely to affirm negation itself. Not-A means only the absence of A. there is no affirmation implied.\textsuperscript{218} For the Madhyamikas hold that language is like a game, and our debate whether A is B or A is not B is like a magical creation. Suppose there are two men both created by magic. One does a certain thing and another tries to prevent him from doing it. It is obvious that in this case the action and the prevention are equally empty, yet it makes sense to say that one prevents the other. Likewise, to Nagarjuna, his statements are empty, like things created by magic, and yet he can refute the absence of all things.\textsuperscript{219} Nagarjuna’s negation is only an instrument for discarding extreme view. If there were no extreme view to be relinquished, there would be no need for such things as illumination and negation. The term such as right and wrong or erroneous are indeed empty term without reference to entities.\textsuperscript{220} Therefore one should know that the Madhyamika refutation of erroneous view and illumination of right view is a therapeutic device abandoning intellectual and emotional attachment. To obtain enlightenment, one has to go beyond right and wrong, true and false, and see things as they really are, that is, empty in nature.

\textsuperscript{218} Hsueh-li Cheng, \textit{Empty Logic}, op.cit., p. 47.
\textsuperscript{219} VV, XXIII.
\textsuperscript{220} Hsueh-li Cheng, op.cit., p. 48.
NAGARJUNA’S PHILOSOPHICAL POSITIONS

Nagarjuna’s philosophy has been variously interpreted by many scholars, Eastern and Western, from his contemporary rivals down to the present day. A bird’s eye view of all interpretations of his philosophy may compel us to classify them into two main groups viz. 1) nihilism, and 2) absolutism. Now we will discuss in detail what these terms really mean for Nagarjuna’s philosophy and who uphold each of them.

a) Nagarjuna’s Philosophy as Nihilism

First of all, we propose to define the word ‘nihilism’. The word ‘nihil’ is derived from Latin meaning ‘nothing’. Nihilism was first used by Turgeniev in his novel Father and children (1862) to apply to a Russian movement in the second half of the 19th century which pressed for change without a plan and which at its height, assassinated numbers of Russian officials including the Tsar Alexander II himself.221 It is a Revolutionary doctrine, which is inclined to denounce existing moral, religious and social principles. As Oxford Dictionary defines the term thus; “nihilism /'naiiz(s)m, 'naihi, liz(s)m/ n. i. The rejection of all religious and moral principles.”222 In this way the term has no any philosophical meaning at all, but soon it has been applied to metaphysics,

epistemology, ethics, politics and theology. For the sake of brevity, we will consider only its metaphysical and epistemological aspects.

The doctrine of Gorgias, a Greek sophist, is considered to be a metaphysical and epistemological nihilism. Gorgias believed that (1). nothing exists, for if it did, it would have to come from nothing or from some thing; it is irrational to say that something can come from nothing and to have it come from something else is not possible either; (2). If anything did exist it could not be known because of the difference between thought and thing; and (3) if anything could be known it could not be communicated because of the difference between intention and understanding.223

The Pyrrhonian skepticism is the best exemplary of epistemological nihilism. Pyrrho, a Greek Philosopher (born in Elis) upheld the doctrine that knowledge claims are not possible. It is impossible to know the nature of anything; every statement can be countered by its contradictory, with neither more weighty than the other. Since no assertion is more valid than any other, we must submit to an ‘epoche’, or suspension of judgment. Since we must suspend judgment even with respect to our ignorance and doubt, we must also preserve aphasia, or a noncommittal silence, with respect to all things. And in term

223 William L. Reese, op.cit., p. 199.
of value the human situation suggests that man withdraws into himself, and reflects an attitude of a taraxia, or imperturbable serenity and tranquility.\textsuperscript{224}

It seems that Nagarjuna’s view might also be subscribed to the nihilism, for:

1.) The arguments of Sophists and those of Madhyamikas in general and Nagarjuna in particular are similar in principles. As we have seen, Sophists hold that nothing exists on logical ground, similarly Nagarjuna using the dialectical method (prasanga) disproves the views of these adversaries. It is obvious that throughout the Vigrahavyavartani and the Karika as well, Nagarjuna investigates the view of his adversaries and tries to show them that their own thesis is contradictory and hence untenable. Take for instance of causality, the opponents believe that there is a cause which it produces an effect etc. But Nagarjuna argues that there is no cause. The thing is not produced by itself or by another or by both or neither. The doctrine of causation must, therefore, be taken as referring only to the world of ignorance.\textsuperscript{225}

2.) Madhyamikas in general and Nagarjuna in particular apply the concept of “\textit{Sunya}” to draw the conclusion of their reasoning. Because of their repetition of concept of “\textit{Sunya}” as such as well as their failure to

\textsuperscript{224}Ibid., p. 469.
\textsuperscript{225}A.B. Keith, \textit{Buddhist Philosophy in India and Ceylon}, p. 238.
provide any constructive view instead of their opponent’s views, the scholars thus labeled their philosophy as absolute nihilism.

3.) Like the Sophists Nagarjuna also assert that eternal and everlasting being is logically impossible. When the various categories of the opponents were closely examined in the Karikas as well as Vgrahavyavatani. It turns out to be that whatever is upheld by his rivals is totally groundless and impossible. For every conceivable relation yields to such a negative dialectic; subject and object; actor and action; fire and fuel; existence and non-existence; extension or matter; sensation and perception; origination, duration and disappearance; unity and plurality; whole man part; time; the aggregates; the six elements; the dispositions; the senses; as well as all the deepest doctrines of Buddhism. Including misery, the Tathagata, the noble truths, the chain of causation, bondage, and release itself, prove incapable of sustaining the searching examination or reductio ad absurdum (prasanga) which establishes that they neither exist of themselves, nor by other, nor by both, nor by neither.226 Because of such view Nagarjuna’s philosophy is considered to be nihilism.

4.) Similarly Nagarjuna considers on the same line of Pyrrho that knowledge or truth-claims are not possible, for nothing of the objective

226Ibid., p. 239.
world can help knowledge achieve validity.\footnote{Ramachandra Pandeya, \textit{Indian Studies in Philosophy}, p. 41.} We generally believe that we get in touch with reality through knowledge. At any rate, when we investigate deeply into the nature of the so-called reality, we find that there are many sorts of self-discrepancies. Consider a pot, for example, what is the nature of a pot which appears to be given knowledge? Is it an aggregate of parts or a whole? Encountering with such problem we could not provide a satisfactory reply. For if we answer that it be an aggregate of parts, in this case when it is analysed further, it turns out to be an aggregate of atoms and accordingly atoms are invisible, these invisible atoms would compel the pot to be invisible too. If, on the contrary, we in order to avoid this difficulty hold that it is a whole over and above its parts, then the question is how can we describe the relation between them?

In the like manner we are incapable of explaining what passes for a real thing as either existent or non-existent. If a pot always exists, then why does the existing thing need to be made; and the efficiency of its maker would become superfluous. If on the other hand, we hold that it is at one time a non-existent and then comes into existence, we are accepting both existence and non-existence of the same object at the same time; this seems to be contradictory and hence becomes an unintelligible.
According to Nagarjuna, we can avoid such difficulties by accepting that all things do not have their self-essence (nissvabhava). Not only all objects are devoid of their essence, consciousness (vijnana) too falls into network of nissvabhava, and hence it is devoid of its essence. For Nagarjuna, all empirical knowledge is only a working approach to life, in this context that it may be valid or not as the case may be, but it should be conceived as empty of any guarantee for a thing being there. That is to say we must not attach any metaphysical meaning into it. No knowledge whatsoever whether perceptual or inferred is absolutely true, it is rather relative.

Thus Nagarjuna believes neither in external reality nor in the internal\textsuperscript{228}, the knower, knowing and the known are all empty, and hence they do not exist. “Consciousness”, says he, “does not exist, since it arises depending on the knowable (thing); as consciousness does not exist nor the knowable (thing), therefore, the knower does not really exist”\textsuperscript{229}.

5.) Since the Madhyamikas in general and Nagarjuna in particular denied the fixed thing in the world and frequently opine that the object of our normal experience as well as the phenomenal world are nothing but

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\textsuperscript{228} M. Hiriyanna, \textit{Outlines of Indian Philosophy}, pp. 207-208.
\textsuperscript{229}Ś S, verse 57.
\end{flushright}
the objects of illusion and hallucination,\textsuperscript{230} hence they are unreal, they (the Madhyamikas) are condemned to be the nihilists.\textsuperscript{231}

There were many great scholars classical and modern who considered Nagarjuna’s philosophy to be nihilism. The Indian Brahmanical thinkers like Kumarila, Vacaspati Misra and Sankaracharyalabeled Nagarjuna as \textit{sarvavainasika} i.e. nihilist. And the other opponents called him \textit{Sunyavadin} viz. one who upholds the void-doctrine Many contemporary scholars also followed the guideline of his rivals and hold that his philosophy is nihilism or negativism. Burnouf (the first Western scholar of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century described the Madhyamika as“nihilism Scholartique”. M. Walleser described his philosophy as “a negativism which radically empties existence up to the last consequences of negation”, it is the “absolute nothingness”. I. Wach maintained that the Madhyamikas were the most radical nihilists that ever lived.\textsuperscript{232} Louise de La Vallee Poussin, like his predecessor, Burnouf had labeled Madhyamika as “pure nihilists.”\textsuperscript{233} A.B. Keith said that “In the Madhyamika…the absolute truth is negativism or a doctrine of vacuity (Sunyata).”\textsuperscript{234} H. Kern indicated that Madhyamika philosophy is

\textsuperscript{230} Vide MMK, VII.34, XVII.33, XXII.8; Š S, verse 56; Lokatītastavāp verse 3; Acintyastavah verses 4, 18, 25, 30 and 33; RV, I 53-56, 109-113.

\textsuperscript{231} A.M. Padhye, \textit{The Framework of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy}, p. 4.


\textsuperscript{233} Andrew P. Tuck, \textit{Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship}, p. 36.

\textsuperscript{234} A. Berriedale Keith, \textit{Buddhist Philosophy in India and Ceylon}, p. 235.
“complete and pure nihilism.” Recently scholars like Harsh Narain and Thomas E. Wood reaffirm this nihilist interpretation of the Madhyamikas. Harsh Narain believed that “the Madhyamika philosophy is absolute nihilism rather than a form of Absolutism or Absolute Monism.” He has attempted with great pain to prove his argument and took the evidence from the Madhyamika texts as well as the verdict of tradition. To quote him, “In the face of such an almost unanimous verdict of tradition, it is difficult to see how the Nihilistic interpretation of Sunyavada can be rejected as totally false.” Thomas E Wood too clarified his stand on Madhyamikas as nihilists by two reasons, exegetical and textual. To him, the passages in MK, XXV. 7-8 which seem to assert that things are not entirely non-existent and the passages in MK, XII. 7 which seem to assert that things are not entirely empty, when were scrutinized deeply, appear to fit nihilists interpretation rather than the rest. Moreover he argued that the textual evidence indicates that “Madhyamikas did not really believe in the existence of the phenomenal world. Nor do they appear to have believed in a non-phenomenal, absolute reality…emptiness (sunyata) was not a thing, process or property – not even a transcendent thing, process or property. “It was exactly what the Sanskrit words Sunya” and “sunyata” suggest that it

237 Ibid, p. 313.
was”. 238 He went on comparing emptiness of things with illusion etc, and concluded, “it was simply sheer, unqualified, absolute nothingness.” 239

b) Nagarjuna’s Refutation of the Nihilistic Charges

One of the reasons as to why Nagarjuna and his followers were condemned to be nihilists is because their opponents misunderstood the meaning of sunyata and its purpose. They understood it in the literal sense as ‘voidness’, ‘emptiness’, ‘vacuity’, ‘devoidity’ or ‘nothingness’ etc. There is no doubt that the concept of sunyataplays an important role in the Madhyamika philosophy. Nevertheless it is very difficult concept liable to be easily misunderstood. That is why Nagarjuna warned us not to take it in its literal sense as such. 240 He obviously made a point that nothing could be asserted to be Sunya, aSunya, both Sunya and aSunya, and neither Sunya nor aSunya. They are asserted only for the purpose of provisional understanding. 241 For him, sunyata should be treated in three perspectives viz.

1) Sunyata is identical with pratityasamutpada,

2) Sunyata should be considered together with the twofold truth, and

238 Thomas E. Wood, op. cit., p. 279.
239 Ibid, p. 280.
240 MMK, XXIV. 77.
241 Ibid, XXIV. 11.
3) Sunyata is a therapeutic device or a corrective instrument.

These standpoints only can guarantee the right way of looking at sunyata.

Firstly, we consider sunyata as identical with the pratityasamutpada. In Karika and in different verses of Vigrahavyavartani Nagarjuna has said about the identification between these two concepts. Pratityasamutpada is nissvabhavata or being devoid of the intrinsic nature and nissvabhavata in turn is Madhyamapratipad which can never be equated with the extremes of eternalism or nihilism. No where in his works has Nagarjuna deviated from this standpoint. Only his opponents called him Sunyavadin or saçvavinasavadin, he never approves these charges. Hence it is absurd if anyone draws the conclusion that the whole of Nagarjuna’s thought, especially in Vigrahavjavartani seems to agree with the tacit approval to the critics ascription of nihilism to him.

Secondly, whosoever considered sunyata to be nothingness or non-existence does not grasp the profound significance of the distinction between worldly and transcendental truths. Hence sunyata should be considered together with the twofold truth, worldly and transcendental.

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242 Ibid., XXIV. 18.
Nagarjuna points out that looking at worldly level, everything seems to have an existence apart from its perceiver. In this standpoint of truth we classify objects as jar, car, table, chair, house, tree, milk, I, mind or the other intelligible things and likewise we carry on our everyday life. This is quite alright, but what Nagarjuna wanted to object is that worldly experiences causally interdependent, are absolutely real. When everything is viewed from the transcendental standpoint, it is devoid of determinate, fixed and self-existing essence. Notwithstanding, to say that nothing is absolutely real does not mean that nothing exists. It does not nullify anything in the world. It does not deny the universe either. Nagarjuna does not throw a child along with the bath. The dialectical criticism is logical and grammatical but not ontological. His negation is aimed at destroying the house of cards but not the real one. He merely avoids making an essential differentiation and metaphysical speculation about it.\textsuperscript{244}

The purpose of \textit{sunyata} is to bring language back to the worldly level. Moreover, Nagarjuna’s negation is absolute, for it does not have any counter position, whereas a nihilist’s negation is relative to the thesis which is being negated. The latter is a mere play of words and concepts (\textit{prapanca}). Nagarjuna’s negation is based on the truth of looking at everything in its proper way, whereas the nihilist’s negation is blind and

\textsuperscript{244} Hsueh-Li Cheng, \textit{Empty logic}, op. cit. p. 42.
untrue. Just as a man has committed theft. Another man, who does not, in fact, know whether the first man has committed theft or not, comes along and declares that this is the theft simply because he happens to take a dislike to him. Then, a third man, who has actually seen the first man-committing thief, comes along to declare that this is the theft. Now, both the second and the third man make the same assertion about what happened in actuality, but yet the difference between them is very significant and important. It is the distinction between a liar and a truthful person, between falsehood and truth. If we have understood this distinction between the third and the second person, then we have understood something important about a Madhyamika who declares that everything is empty. This is exactly the way Candrakirti wanted to explicate the distinction between the ‘emptiness’ and scepticism, the essential difference between a Madhyamika and a skeptic.

Furthermore *sunyata* of the Madhyamika does not prohibit functionality. The opponents criticized that if all things are empty, they could not arise nor cease and accordingly there would be no four noble truths. Nagarjuna replies to this nihilistic charge by reversing the opponent’s argument that if all things are not empty and were fixed and determinate, nothing could arise or cease and accordingly there would be

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245 PSP, 368.
246 MMK, XXIV. 1.
no four noble truths.\textsuperscript{247} It is indeed in the worldly experiences that everything functions, and emptiness is the interdependent arising. Where the emptiness is possible, there everything is possible, and wherever the interdependent arising is possible, there it must logically follows that the four noble truths must exist, for the interdependent arising bring about suffering, without it suffering could not arise. Since suffering is dependent on interdependent arising, it is essenceless and empty. If suffering causally exists, then the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering are possible. Therefore, the understanding of suffering, the abandonment of the cause, the realization of cessation and meditation on the path too are possible. If the fruits exist, then those who abide in the fruits are possible, and if those who abide in the fruits exist, then those who enter them become possible. Where there exist those who enter and abide in the fruits, there the Sangha is possible. If the noble truth exists, then the true Dharma is also possible.

When the true Dharma and the true Sangha exist, then the Buddha is also possible. All of the distinct understandings of all things, both worldly and transcendental, is also possible. Dharma, nondharma, and their results, as well as worldly terminology become possible.\textsuperscript{248} On the contrary, if all things are not empty and have their fixed and determinate

\textsuperscript{247}Ibid., XXIV. 14.
\textsuperscript{248}PSP, 500-501.
nature, “anyone who is not a Buddha cannot attain the enlightenment even by otherwise rigorous effort or by the practice of the Bodhisattva’s way.”249 Freedom also would be impossible. It is only when all things are empty that everything including the teachings of the Buddha is possible. And then those who committed sin can become good ones, and the unenlightened can attain nirvana. Therefore, the Madhyamika is not nihilist, for his concept of sunyata is given to save or to account for empirical phenomena and practical values.250

Thirdly, sunyata should be regarded as a therapeutic device or a corrective instrument like the teachings of the Buddha such as the four noble truths, the five aggregates, the six internal sense-fields, the six external sense-fields, the eightfold path etc. are all in the aspect treated as practical device given by a doctor, i.e. the Buddha to a sick person, i.e. human being in order to eradicate his sickness, rather than as embodying the highest philosophical truth. Just as a man is struck by an arrow and bleeding to death it is only practical and proper, at that instant, to pull the arrow out and administer medical care rather than look for the culprit to punish him or even teach him a lesson. In this way of treatment, Nagarjuna’s philosophy can never be a nihilism.251

249 MMK, XXIV. 32.
250 Hsueh-li Cheng, op. cit. p. 43.
c) Nagarjuna’s Philosophy as an Absolutism

Before we go further into the detail discussion of this interpretation, we would like to define the term absolutism and its significance in the philosophical arena first. The word “absolute” comes from the Latin “absolutus” which means the “perfect” or “completed”. It is often used in oppose to the relative, that is, as that which is independent of relation. Nicholas of Cusa was the first who introduced the Absolute as a noun standing for the name of God. To him, God is both Absolute Maximum and Absolute Minimum.

Fichte and Schelling utilised this term in their philosophy. Hegel also used the term as the name for the capstone entity of his philosophy, the Absolute Spirit, which has dimensions of absolute truth and beauty. Later on this usage became popular among the 19th century idealists and continued to be so in early 20th century. Mostly the idealist philosophers employed the term in its original Latin sense, i.e. the Absolute is the perfect, unchanging, completed reality, which lies beyond the phenomenal world. Sri Aurobindo also used the term as the alternative term for Brahman in his book entitled “The Life Divine.”252 Here we can say that the Absolutism is merely the modified and expanded form of Absolute Idealism. However we can easily remark that every absolutism

is monism but not vice-versa. Because every form of absolutism opposes to pluralism, but monism does not. Monism can allow pluralism to play a role depending on what kind of reality to be considered. If, for example, it is the material, then there would be a materialism leading to atomism. If, on the contrary, it is spiritual, then there would be a spiritual monism leading to Leibnizian monadonism etc. But in the case of absolutism, that which is considered to be absolutely real is considered to be spiritual only. Hence we by and large called that absolutism which is a kind of idealism a form of monism, for it elevates the one over the many.\textsuperscript{253}

There are many eminent scholars associated with the absolutistic interpretation of Nagarjuna’s philosophy as well as some masterful studies, especially those of Indian scholar T.R.V. Murti whose work, \textit{the Central Philosophy of Buddhism} is widely recommended. The recent Indian scholars unlike their ancient Hindu predecessors who ascribed the Madhyamika as nihilists considered \textit{sunyata} in opposite direction, i.e. in an absolutistic sense. This tendency, generally speaking, may be influenced by Stcherbatsky’s monistic interpretation of \textit{sunyata} as well as by Upanisadic and Vedantic outlooks. For them, \textit{sunyata} is an absolute which is transcendent to thought and it does really exist.

\textsuperscript{253} A.M. Padhye, op. cit., pp. 18-19.
Radhakrishnan indicates “Nagarjuna’s absolute seems to be immobile in its absoluteness.” In this sense it seems like Nirguna Brahman of Advaita Vedanta. Sinha also sees the same, to him, “all dharmas are relative (Sunya). But they are grounded in the Absolute (Sunya).” And elsewhere he says, “Sunya is nirvana. Nirvana is the state of Dharma (dharmata).” Therefore, for him, Nagarjuna’s Sunya is like the Nirguna Brahman of the Upanisads, which is beyond thought and language, and cannot be related to the relative and phenomenal. It is the ground of the many which are not its expression.

C.D. Sharma divided sunyata into two aspects, phenomenal (svabhavasunyata) and transcendental, the latter is the Absolute or Reality itself. He says, “sunyata, in its second aspect, is therefore the Reality itself wherein all plurality is emerged, all categories of intellect are transcended.” Jaidev Singh also echoes the same. He states that sunyata viewed from the Absolute standpoint means prapancairaprapancitam and ananartham, i.e. devoid of, completely free from thought-construct and devoid of plurality. It is used as the indicative of avacya, avyakṣta (inexpressible). Kalupahana also

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256 Ibid., p. 408.
257 Ibid., pp. 408 - 409.
258 Chandradhar Sharma, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, p. 98.
260 Ibid., p. 41.
accords with the Absolutistic interpretation of *sunyata*. He says, “By adopting this dialectic approach, the Madhyamika were able to uphold the sole reality of the Absolute which they term variously, Tathata, Dharmakaya, Tattva or Satya.” Even Sri Aurobindo sees similarity between Sunya of Madhyamika and Brahman of Advaita Vedanta.

T.R.V. Murti was one of the great scholar of Madhyamika philosophy, who took the Western philosophy especially that of Kant and Hegel and Vedantic philosophy as the framework for his study of Madhyamika philosophy. As the result he eventually concludes that Madhyamika philosophy is Absolutism in character not Nihilism. There were a few points which made by Murti as follow.

1) The first point is that he views Madhyamika philosophy as parts of revolution in Buddhist history. Following the Buston’s classification of Buddhism into three phases, namely, i) Pluralism, ii) absolutism iii) idealism he states:

“In metaphysics, it was a revolution from a radical pluralism (Theory of Elements, dharma-vada) to an as radical absolutism (advaya-vada). The change was from a plurality of


discrete ultimate entities (dharmah) to the essential unity underlying them (dharmata).”

2) Comparing Madhyamika philosophy with that of Kant, Murti claims that Nagarjuna made a turning point, i.e. a “Copernican revolution” in Indian philosophy. He elaborates that Kant’s criticism emerges from the conflict between rationalism and empiricism, whereas Nagarjuna’s criticism emerges from the conflict between Upanisadic atma and Buddhistic nairatmya views. The Madhyamika did not stop at the Reason, for after eliminating all views, the philosophical consciousness reaches intuition. This intuition itself is Prajna (non-dual knowledge), whereas Kant expresses the hesitation about the elimination of illusion. Prajna as the dissolution of conceptualization is nothing but Freedom, and Prajna as the Absolute in identical with the Tathagata, the Tathagata is a free phenomenal manifestation of sunyata(Prajna). Strickly speaking Prajna (non-dual knowledge), Freedom (nirvana) and Tathata are the Absolute.

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264 Ibid., p. 123.
265 Ibid., p. 298.
266 Ibid., p. 301.
3) Murti considers the Madhyamika negation to be not and end in itself. It is a means which opens to absolutism. He states: Negation itself is significant because there is an underlying reality the subjacent ground. If there were no transcendent ground, how could any view be condemned as false. A view is false, because it falsifies the real, makes the thing appear other than what it is in itself.267

4) According to Murti, Prajnaparamita of Madhyamika is Absolute itself, and he designates the Absolute as Sunya, for it is devoid of all predicates such as existence, unity, selfhood, goodness etc.268 The Absolute is incommensurable and inexpressible. It is extremely transcendent to thought. It is universal, impersonal reality of the world.269

5) For Murti, Madhyamika upholds that Tattva as Dharmata or bhutakoni is the underlying ground of phenomena.270 It is the reality of all things (dharmanam dharmata) their essential nature. The Absolute is that intrinsic form in which things would appear to the clear vision of anArya (realised saint) free from ignorance."271 But Nagarjuna denies the idea of a

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267Ibid., pp. 234 - 235.
268Ibid., pp. 228 - 229.
269Ibid., p. 280.
270Ibid., p. 237.
271Ibid., p. 235.
causal substratum, then how can Dharmata activates and illumines empirical things. To make this point clear, Murti, later on tries to establish the distinction between “epistemological” and “metaphysical” absolutism. The Vedantin advocates the latter, whereas Madhyamika upholds the former. In epistemological aspects, paramartha satya is the knowledge of the real “as it is without any distortion (akrtimam vasturupam).” In the Madhyamika philosophy one can attain the knowledge of paramartha only through the elimination of samvrti, and the true insight into the real is possible only through the relinquishing discursive, the logical ratiocination. Hence in Madhyamika philosophy samvrti is the means and paramartha is the end.

6) Murti argues that the Madhyamika philosophy is religion in the sense that it has the consciousness of the super mundane Presence immanent in things; whereas early Buddhism lacks this character. The Buddha is considered to be not a historical person but the essence of all Beings (dharmata). Religion in this sense, therefore, is the revolution from a

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273 Ibid., pp. 19, 22.
positivism to an absolutistic pantheism. On this basis Murti believes that Madhyamika philosophy can serve as a basis of world culture.

d) Refutation of Absolutistic Interpretation

Buddhist philosophy as a system stood against the Brahmanical essentialism (Brahman-Atman Vada) has a uniqueness and peculiarity of its own thought. The terms “monism” or “absolutism” have no real significance in its system. Looking throughout all its philosophical concepts, we could not find a single concept which can be described in monistic or absolutistic senses in the strictest sense. For example, the Buddha himself, as the historically enlightened one, is never referred to as metaphysically absolute or God. The other words such as Tathata, Dharmakaya, Nirmanakaya, Sambhogakaya, Dharmata, Prajna, Prajnaparamita and even Nirvana should be understood likewise. That the Buddha had refused to answer categorically the metaphysical questions should be considered to be a constant warning to those who easily resort to labeling any doctrine or facet of Buddhism into

275 Ibid., pp. 337 - 341.
276 The parable of a man who wounded by a poison arrow, did not want to be treated for his injury, instead wanted to know the origin, composition, maker, ardor, and so on of the weapon, was indicative of Buddhism’s preference for soteriology over ontology. Cf. Majjhima Nikāya; Discourse 63, Cūla-Mālunkayasutta.
convenient forms of monism or absolutism. From the first verses of his treatise, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Nagarjuna also explicitly denies any ontological or metaphysical substrata. Since those scholars were very much under the influence of the Upanisadic and Vedantic *Atmavada*, they understood the aforesaid Buddhistic terminologies in an absolutistic and monistic senses. For them, those terms really refer to something beyond the phenomenal world. But in fact Nagarjuna does not believe so, for him, these words do not refer to any underlying reality or to any other indescribable, non-dual reality beyond our empirical experiences as such. They are incomplete symbols or conventional names having no meaning outside the practical purpose. They should not be understood apart from the dialectical semantics of corrective language game.

Now we would examine the words such as *Tattva, Sunyata, Prajna* or *Prajnaparamita* and *Nirvana* respectively and see whether any of them indicating the ‘grand fact’ or the underlying reality as such or not.

Mostly the scholars who took side of an absolutistic interpretation of Nagarjuna’s philosophy quoted MK, XVII. 9. which seems to indicate the *Tattva* in ontological sense. However, after scrutinising it carefully, no such thing could be found there. According to Nagarjuna, *Tattva*, the real nature of things is *Pratityasamutpada* (interdependent origination)

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taught by the Buddha. And Pratityasamutpada is explained in eight negative senses in the dedicatory verses of the Karika that it is “non-ceasing and non-arising, non-annihilation and non-eternity, neither one nor many, neither coming in nor going out”.\textsuperscript{278} And Pratityasamutpada is sunyata; it is nissvabhavata, being devoid of its own essence, and nissvabhavatais madhyamapratipad, middle way.\textsuperscript{279} Realising this only one can becomes free from essentialist thought-constructions. And thus Tattva is said to be “realised within oneself, peaceful, free from thought-constructions, without discrimination and having a variety of meaning”.\textsuperscript{280}

This verse does not indicate Tattva as an Absolute transcending thought as those scholars believed. It is, in fact, solely the explication of state of affairs when one realised the essencelessness of all things including ideas and concepts. Since the world is considered to be nih\textsuperscript{s}abhava (devoid of its own essence), prapancaSunya should not be seen otherwise, that is, as quality of an entity over and above this empirical world. Rather it simply means devoid of ontological speculations. This is Tattva, and itself is pratityasamutpada. For the enlightened person (aryans), this process itself is nirvana. Candrakirti, therefore, says, “It (pratityasamutpada) is also called Nirvana, the

\textsuperscript{278} MMK, Dedicatory Verses.
\textsuperscript{279} MMK, XXIV. 18.
\textsuperscript{280} MMK, XVIII. 9.
Quiescence or equalisation of all plurality, because when it is critically realised there is for the philosopher absolutely no differentiation of existence to which our words and concept could be applied.” 281 This Tattva only is called Tathata (suchness), for it is a true state of affairs, or bhutatathata, the real nature of the case as it obtains. And it is also known as Yathabhuta, the fact as it is, or Bhutapratyavekśa, perception of the real nature of the fact, or Dharmanam dharmata, suchness (devoid of essence) of all things.

The term sunyata also does not refer to any existent entity, nor does it stood outside of the conventional system. It should not be given any meaning than the meaning it has in connection with the view for which it is offered as corrective. If we understand it metaphysically as those scholars did, we miss the real sense of it and equate to treat it outside the context it offers, that is, the original home of natural language. Thus it should not be treated as a metaphysical concept involving a theory of its own. As Nagarjuna notices, “If there is a thing that is not empty, then there must be something which is empty. Since nothing is non-empty, how can there be an empty thing? 282” In fact, sunyata is for eradicating, all concepts and theories either nihilistic or absolutistic.

282 MMK, XIII. 7.
sunyata being understood in its metaphysical sense serves negative purpose. Nagarjuna warns us, “Just as a snake caught in a wrong manner by a dull-witted folk only causes death to him or as a magic wrongly employed destroys the magician, so also sunyata wrongly seen and understood only ruins the person concerned.”283 Sunyata is meant to provide an insight into Tattva of all things as discussed above and helps to eliminate our mental and emotional attachment to phenomenal realities. It is complementary to the practice of meditation to bring home the realisation of the ultimate truth. When the ultimate truth is realized, sunyata must not be viewed as a separate viewpoint. Murti comes close to this point when he asserted that Nagarjuna had not attempted to offer any speculative theory or an ontological position. He says:

Philosophy, for the Madhyamika, is not an explanation of things through conceptual patterns. That is the way of dogmatic speculation; but this does not give us the truth. The Dialectic is intended as an effective antidote for this dogmatic procedure of reason; it is the criticism of theories.284

But just as Murti was confident that the Madhyamika dialectic really searched for uncovering the fact that “the Absolute (Sunyata) is the

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283 MMK, XXIV. 11.
universal impersonal reality of the world”. He seems to have deviated from the right track. For Nagarjuna says “The Victorious one proclaimed the emptiness of all views. But those who take ‘emptiness’ to be a view, are called ‘incurable (person)’.

Candrakirti too explicitly says if sunyata is taken by anyone as anything positive or Bhavarupa, he is completely destroyed.

Negation, to Nagarjuna, is absolute in itself, it does not imply any transcendent reality as the absolutists asserted, he does not point to a position beyond linguistic expression; he simply shows that there is nothing about which one can hold absolute position, for whatever there is devoid of its own essence (svabhavaSunya). His negation is aimed at destroying all views and highlighting the essencelessness of all things. If anyone believed that his negation is similar to that of Upaniṣadic via negativa method, he is misleading. As Streng remarks:

A major difference between Nagarjuna’s negative dialectic and the Upanishadic analogic use of words, however, is that unlike the “Neti, Neti” (“not (this), not (that)”), expression in the Upaniṣhads there is no inexpressible essential substratum which the negations attempt to describe. For Nagarjuna, in place of the Brahman-Atman is the anatman (non-individual entity). The purpose of Nagarjuna’s negation is not to

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286 MMK, XIII. 8.
287 MMK, XXIV.11.
describe via negativa an absolute which cannot be expressed, but to deny
the illusion that such a self-existent reality exists.\footnote{Frederic Streng, \textit{Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning}, op. cit., p. 146.}

Similarly Candrakirti comments on this misunderstanding as follows, “if a man goes to the shop to buy something, but the shop-keeper
tells him, “Look, there is nothing to sell, so I can give you \textit{nothing}”, and
if that man says, “All right, then, please give me that nothing”.\footnote{PSP, pp. 247-248.} This
man committed a category mistake, it becomes difficult to remove his
delusion about buying. So also the \textit{sunyata} viewed as a position destroys
him who clings to it.

\textit{Prajna} (wisdom) or \textit{Prajnaparamita} (perfect wisdom) is nothing
but a conventional name for state of affairs of which one realises the truth
that everything is without its own essence (\textit{nissvabhava}). It is incorrect to
treat this concept as something beyond our understanding, an Absolute
which is incommensurable, non-dual, inexpressible. Nagarjuna never
implies that \textit{Prajna} (wisdom) consists in the knowledge of an Absolute
Reality as such. Nayak comments, “It is not that Reality of an altogether
different order hidden behind the appearance is grasped in wisdom
(\textit{prajna}), but it is like something getting revealed in our understanding
which was all the while there unnoticed in front of us. It is our
understanding which makes all the difference”.

Prajnaparamita, to the Madhyamika, is Tathagata in the sense that the Tathagata is the liberated or enlightened being. But never Nagarjuna equates it with God or Absolute. For he indicates that there is no difference between Nirvana and Samsara. Tathagata and Samsara are also the same status. Tathagata is Prapancatita or Nissvabhava. To say Tathagata is ‘asti’ or ‘nasti’, ‘SaSvata’ or ‘aSaSvata’, ‘nitya’ or ‘anitya’, ‘Sunya’ or ‘aSunya’, ‘Sarvajna’ or ‘asarvajna’ is nothing but prapanca. Those who attribute any of these viewpoints to Tathagata are themselves in prapanca and they do not have right understanding of Tathagata.

Nagarjuna, therefore, who is Madhyamika in the strict sense of the term, can never be under any category whatever. To ascribe his prajna(wisdom) or Tathagata to the Absolute is totally fault and has no evidence.

It is true that Nagarjuna does talk about two truths, the ultimate truth (paramartha satya) and the conventional truth (lokasamvrti satya) and highlights the distinction between them. He says, “Those who do not know the distinction between the two truths cannot understand the

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291 MMK, XXV, 19,20.
293 MMK, XXIV.8.
profound meaning of the Buddha’s teaching”. However, this bifurcation is not a distinction between a transcendental reality and the empirical world. Rather it is a distinction between two ways of talking: two language games, there is no attempt to posit any transcendent reality over and above the empirical experiences, nor is there a theory of ineffable, supernal realm of absolute existence which stands outside the grasp of conceptual thoughts and conventional realities. In this manner, to Nagarjuna, there are only two truths, but not two realities. Paramartha satya may mean the highest or ultimate truth, the highest good or final goal to be realised, but not an Absolute transcending the phenomenal world. The paramartha satya is that all things are Sunya, devoid of their own essence, and when one is firmly entrenched in this truth he is said to have realised the highest truth as distinguished from the conventional truth. To understand sunyataas paramartha in the sense of an Absolute Reality beyond the grasp of human thought would be a mistake and contrary to Nagarjuna’s intentions. Streng indicates:

By clearly understanding that there is no absolute essence to which “emptiness” (or “nirvana” and “perfect wisdom”) refers, we recognize that when emptiness is described as inexpressible, inconceivable and

294 MMK, XXIV.9.
295 G.C. Nayak, op.cit., p. 486, and also Andrew P. Tuck, op.cit., p. 83.
devoid of designation, it does not imply that there is such a thing having these as characteristics.296

Since Nagarjuna views his own language as merely conventional, and as empty itself, any interpretation of him as either absolutist or nihilist is symmetrically misleading interpretations.

*Nirvana* (freedom) is strictly a term for designating a state unencumbered by philosophical concepts and unmediated by the language of existence and nonexistence.297*Nirvana* is not an achievement of exploring into the Absolute Reality behind the illusory phenomena. In fact, Nagarjuna’s task is neither to escape to another realm of higher reality, nor to deny the reality of everyday existence. His goal is to eradicate delusive, conceptual habits of mind and to avoid holding any “ism” either nihilism or absolutism, or even *sunyata* as a philosophical viewpoint. Since *sunyata* is a self-referential term (emptiness of emptiness). Nagarjuna’s *nirvana* could not have been meant to be a separate realm of existence, nor *sunyata* as a true view of reality. Rather *sunyata* is the provisional name for the nature of the phenomenal world as seen without such absolute mental constructions. It is reality without an “illusory veil” of conceptual idea of reality. *Paramartha satya* is,

297 MMK, XXV.10.
therefore, a psychological state. There is no change in things, the world does not change into nirvana, the change is in our understanding and outlook. Nagarjuna asserts that nirvana is “what is not abandoned nor acquired; what is neither annihilation nor eternity; what is not destroyed nor created.”

Thus Nagarjuna makes it clear that there is not even the slightest difference between the worldly state (samsara) and the state of liberation (nirvana). If there were no man who practices meditation to get rid of kleSas, there is no thing called nirvana. Suppose in this world there were no men, no any being capable of practicing meditation to relinquish all defilements, there would be no nirvana as such. Just as recovering from illness is possible only in the case of which there is a man who got ill, if there were no man, there would be no illness; when there were no illness, there would be no recovering from it, as well as the nirvana.

To think that “the Absolute” is that intrinsic form in which things would appear to the clear vision of an Arya (released saint) free from ignorance is misguiding. That the Arya (release saint) realises the svabhavasunyata, essencelessness of all things is indeed the intrinsic form of his clear vision, not anything else. Candrakirti comments that if

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298 Andrew P. Tuck, *op.cit.* p. 91.  
299 MMK, XXV.3.  
301 Somparn Promta, *Mahayana Buddhism: Main Schools*, pp. 80-82.  
someone thinks that nirvana is an entity or a positive state which can be obtained as one would obtain oil out of oil seeds or butter out of milk, he is absolutely mistaken.\textsuperscript{303} When the Madhyamikas assert that an entity is Sunya, empty of its own essence, they direct this assertion towards those people who hold it to be real in the manner and the way it is not.

Whatever arguments are provided in favour of emptiness of the world, they have to be seen as corrective instruments, and not as a means of reaching grand fact or any reality. This is so, for words in no manner are connected to reality. Sine language is non-referential; the Madhyamikas have neither to uphold nor to defend a particular or any philosophical viewpoint. The contents of proposition mean nothing when sunyata(emptiness)of the world is explicitly recognised. On a par with this approach to reality, Nagarjuna says, “When all things are empty...where is there any proposition”.\textsuperscript{304} Sunyata(emptiness), therefore, should be seen as a medicine against the disease of clinging to any views. This medicine of emptiness is bound to produce only a negative effect insofar as it is taken as a nihilistic view (abhava darSana). The Buddha admonishes to Kasyapa:

“It is not (the idea of) emptiness that makes things empty: rather they are simply empty. It is not (the idea of) the absence of any ultimate

\textsuperscript{303} PSP, 25.24., quoted in G.C.Nayak, op.cit., p. 4 89.
\textsuperscript{304} VV, Verse 29.
cause that makes things lack such a cause; rather they simply lack an ultimate cause. It is not (the idea of) the absence of an ultimate purpose that makes things lack an ultimate purpose; rather they simply lack an ultimate purpose. KaSyapa, I call this careful reflection the Middle Way, truly careful reflection. KaSyapa, I say that those who refer to emptiness as ‘the mental image (upalambha) of emptiness’ are the most lost of the lost...Indeed, KaSyapa, it would be better to hold a philosophical view of the ultimate reality of the individual person the size of Mount Sumeru, than to be attached to this view of emptiness as ‘non being’. Why is that? – Because, KaSyapa, emptiness is the exhaustion of all philosophical views. I call incurable whoever holds emptiness as a philosophical view. KaSyapa, it is as if a physician were to give medicine to a sick man, and when the medicine had cured all the original problems it – remained in the stomach and was not itself expelled. What do you think, KaSyapa, would this man be cured of his disease? – No, indeed, Blessed One, if the medicine cured all the original problems and yet remained in the stomach, unexpelled, the man’s disease would be much worse. The Blessed One said: Thus it is, KaSyapa, that emptiness is the exhaustion of all philosophical views. I call incurable whoever holds emptiness as a philosophical view.” 305

305 PSP, pp. 248-249.