

NĀGĀRJUNA'S ŚŪNYATĀ: BEYOND BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

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Abstract: Śūnyatā has been one of the most misunderstood terms in the history of philosophy. It has been conceived sometimes as an Absolute and sometimes as pure nothingness. Often it has been identified with truth and most often it has been understood as falsity. Traditionalists insist that it is beyond all the categories. On the other hand the same people would say that Śūnyatā is not a transcendent reality. It is just the relativity of all phenomena, the emptiness of all entities. My purpose in the present paper is to ascertain the true import of Śūnyatā. My view is that Śūnyatā is neither Being nor Nothingness. It is beyond all the dichotomies of real and unreal, being and non-being. This does not mean that Nāgārjuna is presenting a new revolutionary ontology quite different from the traditional logic or metaphysics. In fact Logic and Metaphysics are the last concern of the Buddha. Nāgārjuna neither refutes any metaphysics nor presents any new one. He just puts everything as it is and evokes us to be just in tuned with it. By proving all the dharmas (phenomena) empty of their own independent existence and essence he calls us to enter the realm of Dharmatā and Tathatā.

ŚŪNYATĀ sarvadr̥ṣṭīnām proktā niḥsaraṇam jinaiḥ Yesām tu śūnyatā dr̥ṣṭitānasādhyān babhāṣire.

The emptiness was taught by the Buddhas in order to do away with all philosophical views. Therefore those who make a philosophical view out of “emptiness” are indeed lost. Nāgārjuna, *Madhyamakaśāstra*, 13/8. No other philosophical concepts have been so differently interpreted in the history of philosophy as the concept of Śūnyatā. Nāgārjuna is a *Śūnyavādin*. However, what the *Śūnyavāda* means is not still undisputed. For some scholars if Nāgārjuna is an absolutist, others will urge that he is a nihilist. Some others will like to argue that the metaphysics is the last thing which concerns Nāgārjuna. In fact he has nothing to do with metaphysics; rather we should say that he is against any sort of metaphysics. There are a number of scholars who would like to argue that Nāgārjuna is not a dialectician. He is through and through analyst. His *Madhyamakaśāstra* is a treatise of meta-philosophy. The aim of Nāgārjuna is not to posit anything. He just analyzes all the positions and finds that all attempts to have a conceptualized grip over reality is doomed to be failure. Some others will like to say that Nāgārjuna is a spiritualist. His aim is to enlighten the masses and make them aware of their essential Buddhahood. Some others would like to go farther and would say that the very language of Nāgārjuna is of a mystic one. Nāgārjuna is a mystic and from him begins the chapter of esoteric Buddhism. That is why Nāgārjuna enjoys so much respect

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among Tibetan Buddhists. My purpose in this present paper is to asses all these conflicting interpretations of the concept of Śūnyatā. However, I shall mainly confine myself to the nihilistic and absolutistic interpretations. My contention is that Nāgārjuna can not be called an absolutist one. In this regard scholars are tempted to distinguish between *Advaitavāda* and *Advyaavāda*. These scholars maintain that Nāgārjuna is an *Advyaavādin*. My view is that the distinction between these two terms is not justified one. Nāgārjuna is neither an *Advaitin* nor *Advyaavādin*. Buddhism is not a philosophy of Being. This does not mean that it is a philosophy of Nothingness . A philosophy which is based on the enlightenment of the Buddha and a philosophy which teaches the doctrine of *Prajñāpāramitā* and *Mahākaruṇā* can not be called a Nihilistic either. Then what is the true import of Śūnyatā? If Śūnyatā is neither Being nor Nothingness, then what it is ? The answer to the above question lies in the silence of Buddha. What we can best say about the Śūnyatā is that it is unspeakable. The whole of *Madhyamakaśāstra* is an attempt within the purview of speech to show this unspeakability of the unspoken Śūnyatā. This very attempt involves a contradictory goal before itself. That is why one can find *Madhyamakaśāstra* having full of contradictions.

Even a cursory study of Nāgārjuna would suggest that Mādhyamika philosophy is neither absolutism nor nihilism . It is neither a philosophy of Being nor a philosophy of Non - being. But notwithstanding the above we find that a number of scholars have found Nāgārjuna's Śūnyatā as Absolute Being while others have equated it with Absolute nothingness. It would be injustice to these scholars if we say that they were not acquainted with the basic doctrine which Nāgārjuna repeatedly announces that Śūnyatā is neither Being nor Non-being. They were well aware that for Nāgārjuna Śūnyatā is beyond the all categories--categories of Being, of Non-being, of Both, of Neither. In fact the way Nāgārjuna has elaborated his concept of Śūnyatā, there ever remains a possibility of understanding it in so many mutually-conflicting ways. In fact Nāgārjuna himself has used the terms Śūnyatā, Pratityasamutpāda etc.in so many senses that it would be very folly to out rightly reject any of the interpretations of Nāgārjuna's Śūnyatā. I, therefore, would aim in my present paper to find out which of the prevalent interpretations is more consistent to the spirit of Nāgārjuna in particular and Buddhism in general. The most prevalent view regarding *Śūnyavāda* is that it is nihilism rather than absolutism. This view is supported by the ancient classics from within the system and outside the Buddhist system. Almost all the orthodox Hindu philosophers find the Mādhyamikas propagating the doctrine of sheer nothingness. They take it granted that Nāgārjuna is through and through nihilist who does not accept any thing real and who believes that everything is illusory and even illusions have no positive ground. That is why the Mādhyamika theory of illusion is known as *Asatkyātivāda*. This interpretation is accepted to the Yogācāra Idealists, the Jainas, the Advaitins and other orthodox Hindu philosophers. So far as modern scholars are concerned , Western scholars like Burnouf, H.Kern, M.Walleser, Jacobi, A.B.Keith and Wach hold the view that Mādhyamika philosophy is "complete and pure nihilism" and that Mādhyamika philosophy is "absolute nothingness".¹ Among the Indian scholars, besides others ,

¹ For a brief sketch of nihilistic interpretations of *Śūnyavāda*, see--Harsh Narayana, *The Mādhyamika Mind*, Motilal Banarsidas Publishers Private Limited, Delhi, 1997.

S.N.Dasgupta, M.Hyriyanna, Harha Narayana and Yashdeva Shalya are of the view that Mādhyamika philosophy is a rank nihilism. Nāgārjuna is of the view that nothing is absolute, all is relative. Everything is relative, essenceless and hence void. All *dharmas* whether they are *sanskṛta* or *asanskṛta* are unreal. There is nothing real in the world. There is a famous *Buddhavacana* declaring that all comes out of nothing and merges into nothing. Mādhyamika does not "believe in the reality of things, external as well as internal and declare them empty (*śūnya*) of both existence and essence (*svabhāva*)."² (Narayana, 1997: 89) According to *Prajñāpāramitā Texts*, all *dharmas*, as well as the soul, are non-existent. Everything is illusory and dream-like. Even *Buddha*, *Buddhhood* and *Nirvāṇa* are illusory. And Subhūti goes to such extent that he declares "Sons of gods! Even *Nirvāṇa* I declare illusory and dream-like, let alone other *dharma*!----and if anything is more superior to *Nirvāṇa*, this too, I would declare illusory and dream-like." (Vaidya, 1960: 20) Criticizing the nihilistic interpretation of *Śūnyavāda*, Murti says that most of the critics of this system have not gone beyond awe-inspiring term "Śūnya" or "Void". They forget that if affirmative predicates (*sat*, *bhāva*) have been denied of the Absolute, negative predicates (*asat*, *abhāva*) have been equally denied. We are repeatedly warned not to take Śūnyatā as *abhāva-dṛṣṭi*. (Murti, 1998: 312) Chandrakīrti finds him incurable who clings to Śūnyatā itself as an "ism". He clearly says that Śūnyatā should be understood as *Pratīyasamutpāda*. He categorically rejects the view that Śūnyatā is non-being. (Chandrakīrti, 1989)² The major objection against the nihilistic interpretation of *Śūnyavāda* is that it is against the spirit of Mādhyamika "doctrine of no doctrines". *Śūnyavāda* is for destruction of all the doctrines (*dṛṣṭi*). It is not one of the doctrines (*dṛṣṭi*) itself.³ The other thing is that we should make a distinction between "Śūnya" and "Śūnyatā". Really speaking Mādhyamika philosophy is philosophy of "Śūnyatā" and not of "Śūnya". Furthermore, Mādhyamika's approach is anti-metaphysical and hence it should not be interpreted as a metaphysical theory of "void".

On the other hand scholars like D.T.Suzuki, Stcherbatsky, Gopinath Kaviraja, T.R.V.Murti and C.D.Sharma vehemently refute the view that the Mādhyamika is a nihilistic philosophy. They find *Śūnyavāda* as Absolutism. Contrary to the prevalent interpretation, Stcherbatsky goes to such an extent that he says "in Mahayana all parts or elements are unreal (*śūnya*), and only the whole, i.e. the whole of wholes (*Dharmatā = dharmakāya*) is real." (Stcherbatsky, 2004: 48) The universe viewed as a whole is the Absolute, viewed as a process it is the phenomenal.⁴ However, the most profound

² *Yaḥ pratīyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe / Sā prajñaptirupādāya pratipatsaiva madhyamā // Nāgārjuna, Madhyamakaśāstra, 24/18; "Evam pratīyasamutpādaśabdasya yo'rthaḥ, sa eva śūnyatāśabdasyārthaḥ, na punarabhāvaśabdasya yo'rthaḥ sa śūnyatāśabdasyārthaḥ / Abhāvaśabdārthanca śūnyatārthamityadhyāropya bhavānasmānupālabhate // "Chandrakīrti, Prasannapadā on Madhyamakaśāstra, ed. Swami Dvarikadas Shastri, Baudha Bharati, Varanasi, 1989.*

³ *Śūnyatā sarvadr̥ṣṭīnām proktāḥ niḥsaraṇam jinaiḥ / Yesām tu śūnyatā dṛṣṭistānasādhyān babhāṣire // Madhyamakaśāstra, 13/8.*

⁴ *Ya ājavamjavībhāva upādāya pratīya vā / So'pratīyanupādāya irvānamupadiśyate // Madhyamakaśāstra, 25/9.*

support for the absolutistic interpretation of the Mādhyamika Śūnyatā comes from T.R.V.Murti and C.D.Sharma. Here it should be noted that before these scholars Gopinath Kaviraja, in his introduction to *Brahmasūtra-Śāṅkarabhāṣya-Ratnaprabhāṭīkā*, has dealt in details with the different forms of Advaitism. He has shown there that Mādhyamika Śūnyavāda, Yogācara idealism, Kashmir Śivādvaita and Bhartṛhari's Śābdādvaita are some other forms of Advaita.⁵ T.R.V.Murti in his monumental work "The Central Philosophy of Buddhism" comes with the conclusion that the Mādhyamika philosophy is neither nihilistic nor positivistic one. It is a most consistent form of absolutism like its other counterparts Yogācara Idealism and Advaita Vedānta. He is of the view that Advaitism, Yogācara Idealism and the Mādhyamika Śūnyavāda are different forms of Absolutism. All these philosophies speak about one transcendent absolute reality which is devoid of any duality, conceptualization, determination and difference. All these philosophies make difference between "noumenon" and "phenomena" and they come with the supportive doctrine of *Avidyā*. Though all these philosophies (Advaitism, Yogācara Idealism and the Mādhyamika) do proclaim about the non-duality of the Absolute, yet regarding the nature of the absolute and regarding to the approach towards it they differ. Murti says "Brahman is Absolute of pure Being; and the method of approach is from the standpoint of knowledge. Vijñaptimātratā is Pure Act (Transcendental Ideation), and the approach is from the standpoint of the will consciousness. Śūnyatā is *Prajñā*, non-dual intuition, and the approach is from the philosophical reflection of criticism. It is that contentless and positionless awareness itself". (Murti, 1998: 48)

In order to substantiate his arguments in favor of his absolutistic interpretation Murti fancies an interesting distinction between *Advaitavāda* and *Advayavāda*. He is of the view that while Advaitism is a doctrine of *Advaita*, the non-duality of Being, Mādhyamika Śūnyavāda is a doctrine of *Advaya*, the non-differentiated nature of experience. However, if Murti is keen to find out the differences among the various forms of absolutism and to find out the criteria for distinguishing between the Vedāntic Advaitism and the Mādhyamika Advayavāda, C.D.Sharma goes to such extent in his Vedāntization of Buddhism that he hardly finds any difference between Mādhyamika's Śūnya and Śāṅkara's Brahman. He is of the view that Śūnyavāda represents the earlier stage while Vedānta represents the later stage of the development of the same thought. He is of the view that Śūnyavādains maintain that "Reality is immanent in appearances and yet it transcends them all.--Reality is the Non-dual Absolute, Blissful and beyond intellect where all plurality is merged." (Sharma, 2003: 94) From the above description it really becomes hard to see whether the learned scholar is talking about the Advaita-Vedānta or about the Mādhyamika.

Similarities of Mādhyamika with Advaitism tempt scholars to interpret the Mādhyamika as an absolutistic philosophy. As we know, both these philosophies talk about the levels of truth, distinction between appearance and reality, illusoriness of the world and the incommensurability and indescribability of the real. The real is beyond

⁵ See Gopinath Kaviraj, Introduction to *Brahmasūtra-Śāṅkarabhāṣya-Ratnaprabhāṭīkā*, Achyuta Granthmala, Kashi, samvat, 1993.

linguistic determination and categories of thought. It is such an awareness which is devoid of differentiation, duality, linguistic determination. And this is the final destiny which for the Vedāntins is the *Mokṣa* and for the Buddhists the *Nirvāṇa*. In spite of the above similarities between them, one should not overlook the basic difference between them. Though the world is illusory, unreal and *Māyika* to both, the Śūnyavādins and the Advaitins but whereas for the Advaitins and even for the Yogācāra Idealists, appearance is grounded in reality, the Mādhyamika does not accept any ultimate reality which grounds this phenomenal world and underlies it, and of which this world is an appearance. In fact Mādhyamika does not accept a reality behind the unreal appearances. That is why scholars like S. N. Dasgupta finds Mādhyamika as a sheer form of blank phenomenism. (Dasgupta, 1962: 79) In fact, the Mādhyamika illusion is groundless and supportless.

The major drawback which I find with the absolutistic interpretation of Mādhyamika Śūnyatā is that the advocate of this view forgets to note the point that a doctrine like Absolutism is a metaphysical doctrine of being. Absolutism is always an absolutism of being. There are no alternative forms of absolutes or of absolutism as proposed by scholars like K.C.Bhattacharya and others. As we know that there are a number of scholars led by K.C.Bhattacharya who believe that Absolute of Being is not the only Absolute. There are other alternative forms of Absolute, viz. Absolute of Knowledge, Absolute of Will etc. Besides K.C. Bhattacharya, the other scholars who have shared and further developed this notion of alternative forms of Absolutes are T.R.V.Murti, K.D.Bhattacharya and A. K. Chatterjee. Now in the legacy of the tradition of K.C.Bhattacharya, Murti comes with his doctrine that *Advaitic* type of Absolutism need not be the only form of Absolutism. As noted above he is of the view that Yogācāra idealism and Mādhyamika philosophy also are different forms of Absolutism. Where *Advaitic* form of absolutism is absolutism of being, Mādhyamika form of absolutism is absolutism of awareness or knowledge, while *Vijñānavāda* is an absolutism of Will. Interestingly taking cue from Vidhushekhara Bhattacharya and Gopinath Kaviraja, Murti makes a distinction between *Advaitavāda* and *Advyavāda*. Where *Advaitavāda* is a doctrine of non-duality of being, *Advyavāda*, according to him, is a doctrine of non-differentiated nature of intuition or awareness. Where *Advaitavāda* is a doctrine of being, *Advyavāda* is of knowledge, Former is ontological while later is epistemological. Here I would like to say that Murti's insistence is not legitimate one. Absolutism is a theory of metaphysics--metaphysics which is science of being qua being.

The non-differentiative nature of *Prajñāpāramitā* and its being beyond the duality of subject-object or knower-known distinction does not make it an Absolute. Mādhyamika philosophy can never be called an Absolutistic philosophy, nor the Mādhyamika Śūnyatā has any affinity with philosopher's Absolute. It is true that Mādhyamika distinguishes between *Paramārtha Satya* and *Samvṛti Satya* but this does not mean that Mādhyamika position should be termed as Absolutism. The ultimate reality is of Śūnyatā, but this Śūnyatā should not be taken as a non-dual Absolute which appears in the form of phenomenal world. The distinction between "*paramārtha satya*" and "*Samvṛti satya*" should not be read as the distinction between "a transcendental reality" and "a phenomenal world". G.C.Nayak rightly remarks "Paramārtha here in

Mādhymika context does not refer to any transcendent reality but to the ultimate truth, the highest good, the summum bonum". (Nayak, 2001: 38) It is true that there are some passages where Nāgārjuna does try to define the terms like "Tattva" and "Svabhāva"⁶ Now this attempt of Nāgārjuna has been used by supporters of absolutistic thesis that Nāgārjuna does accept *Tattva* or *Svabhāva* . But as Harsh Narayana writes "so, when he defines *Tattva*, or *Svabhāva*, he does not mean to suggest that there is a reality confirming to his definition". (Narayana, 1997: 125) Then what Śūnyatā is? Śūnyatā is the ultimate relativity of things, their essencelessness, and hence utter emptiness. From the above discussion it is clear that Śūnyatā is not a transcendent entity. It does not refer to any transcendent reality. It is the real nature of things, their ultimate truth. Śūnyatā and the awareness of Śūnyatā cannot be distinguished. That is why ultimately Śūnyatā is *Prajñā* par excellence, the *Prajñāpāramitā*. It is *Tathatā*, *Dharmatā*, *Bhūtaakoṭi*, the reality of whatever so-called is or not is. It is *Buddhakāya*, *Dharmakāya* or *Nirvāṇa*. Śūnyatā is neither Being nor Nothingness. It is beyond all dichotomies, beyond Being and Nothingness.

Śūnyatā i.e. emptiness of all phenomena is the ultimate truth (*paramārtha satya*) for Nāgārjuna. It is the highest and final meaning (*nūārtha*) of all Buddhist texts. Nāgārjuna's project was to unravel the true import of Buddha's teaching. He found in Śūnyatā that teaching of Buddha. It was just another name of the previous doctrine of no-soul (*anātmavāda*). One can say that Nāgārjuna extended this no-soul theory to all entities. Similarly the doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and of dependent designation (*upādāya prajñapti*) only suggested him that finally all phenomena are empty of independent existence and essence. In fact the real meaning of all the major Buddhist doctrines - doctrines of dependent origination, of dependent designation and of middle way (*madhyamā pratipat*) was ascertained as Śūnyatā. Nāgārjuna says in his *Madhyamakāśāstra*, 24.18 that what we call Śūnyatā is dependent origination,, it is the dependent designation and it itself is the middle way. Though Nāgārjuna was firm/ unhesitant of his understanding of Buddha's teaching, the major task before him was how to interpret the preceding dominant *Abhidhārmic* trend/tradition of Buddhism. That task was felt really challenging when it was found that the realistic and pluralistic philosophy of *Abhidharma* was well supported by our day-today worldly life. Consequently the doctrine of two truths and two-fold meaning of the texts was conceived. Through these two devices he could now well explain our day-today worldly life and the significant role of the preceding *Abhidhārmic* philosophy. Thus the real value of the doctrine of Śūnyatā is that it does not reject anything. It is true that Nāgārjuna does not accept any Absolute whether in the world of facts or in the world of ideas. But that does not mean that he rejects everything. In fact he does not reject anything. All entities and ideas have their own value in their world of relations. It is true that they lack ultimate and absolute value. Much has been said regarding Nāgārjunian hermeneutics and rhetorics. Śūnyatā is often conceived as an

⁶ *Aparapratyayam śāntam prapancairaprapancitam/ Nirvikalpamanānrthametattattvasya lakṣaṇam // Madhyamakāśāstra*, 18/9; *Svabhāvaḥ kṛtako nāma bhaviṣyati punaḥ katham / Akṛtrmah svabhāvo hi nirapekṣaḥ paratra ca // Madhyamakāśāstra*, 15/2.

outcome of these. However, the true meaning of Śūnyatā can never be grasped by mere textual exegesis, rhetorics, dialectics or analytical and discursive reasoning. It is something to be realized and felt within. Each one has to realize it by own. It is not something to be studied, taught or communicated. Similarly ontology or epistemology was not the real concern of the Mādhyamikas. Nāgārjuna's philosophy was basically a soteriological one. Buddhism is and has been through and through a *soteria*. Thus the true meaning of Śūnyatā can only be grasped by *Sādhanā*. Practice of *pāramitās* and especially of *Śamatha* and *Vipaśyanā* lead us to that realization par excellence which is called Śūnyatā. Ultimately everything is perceived as empty, nothing is exception to this. But the question is which type of experience is this highest realization. Mādhyamikas would unanimously deny that it is a self-conscious experience. They would repeatedly insist that ultimately this experience of Śūnyatā too is *śūnya*. However, the later Buddhists like Yogācāra and the Vedāntin Hindus would say that self-conscious experience of Śūnyatā is the highest truth.

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