

Is Nāgārjuna a Philosophical Sadist?

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Abstract: *Śūnyatā* or Emptiness is the ultimate meaning of reality in *Nāgārjuna's* Philosophy. In his philosophy 'śūnyatā' (emptiness), 'pratītyasamutpādayāda' (dependent origination), 'saṃsāra', 'nirvāṇa', 'madhyamāpratipada (middle path) and tathatā (suchness) are different names of the same teachings. According to *Nāgārjuna's* commentator Candrakīrti, what is called *pratītyasamutpāda* can also be called *śūnyatā*. By the dialectic method (*prasāṅga*) Nāgārjuna refutes all opponent theories of metaphysical and transcendental levels being supportive to the *catuṣkotivinirmukta* position and he does not commit himself to any 'though construction'. Naturally, opponents may charge him as a sadist who derives pleasure in torturing others but in our humble opinion this interpretation of Nāgārjuna as a philosophical sadist is not appropriate because he criticizes all dogmatic views about reality and avoids establishing a new theory of reality rather it can be said that his philosophy is the searchlight that illumines the darkest recesses of reason and also makes us *aware* of theories. It is not an instance of philosophical sadism. The purpose of his philosophy is to free the mind from dogmatism and exclusiveness. The proper understanding of *śūnyatā* will give release from all worldly sufferings. It teaches us that we live in an interdependent world, nothing is absolute, nothing is fixed but everything is flexible. In this paper I developed the grounds in support of our contention.

Keywords: *Śūnyatā* (emptiness), *pratītyasamutpādayāda* (dependent origination), 'madhyamāpratipada (middle path), reality, *prasāṅga* (dialectic method).

Critics often accuse that Nāgārjuna is a philosophical sadist. We propose to examine this charge in the following paper through the texts based exposition of the concept of *śūnyatā*. But before discussing the issue it is needed to discuss shortly some relevant concepts of Nāgārjuna's philosophy, because this will enable us to arrive at the conclusion. In Buddhism there are mainly two schools i.e. Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna and they give their different interpretations in various aspects. Hīnayānists are divided into two schools, i.e., *Sautrāntika* and *Vaibhāṣika*. And in Mahāyāna schools *Jōgācāra* or *Vijñānavāda* and *Mādhyamaka* or *śūnyavāda* are another branches. Nāgārjuna is the proponent of the *Mādhyamika* philosophy and the followers of Madhyamika philosophy are called *Mādhyamika*.

Śūnyatā or Emptiness is the conclusion of Mādhyamika philosophy. By the dialectic method ‘*prasāṅga*’¹ Nāgārjuna negates the basic ontological positions of the Sarvāstivādins and other schools and after examining the nature of existence he concludes ‘*sarvaṃ sūnyam*’ and also adopts a middle position in and beyond two extreme views i.e. *ucchedavāda* (nihilism) and *sāsvatavāda* (eternalism).² Nāgārjuna used the word ‘*sūnya*’ or ‘*sūnyatā*’ in order to designate both phenomenal and transcendental reality in a technical sense. According to Nāgārjuna, the world is called *sūnya*, because it is devoid of any intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāva*). Everything in this world is relative and mutually dependent and in this sense it does not have any independent nature. So, in reference to empirical reality (*saṃsāra*), the word ‘*sūnyatā*’ means *essencelessness* (*niḥsvabhāvatā*), devoid of self-being and in this respect it means dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*)³ which is the real foundation on which the entire Buddhist philosophy is built. It is called ‘*dharmā*’ in Pali, ‘*dharma*’ in Sanskrit⁴. The Buddha repeatedly says that a person, who has understood the law of Dependent Origination, understood the teaching of the Buddha⁵. He says, “What is *pratītyasamutpāda* that is ‘*sūnyatā*’⁶. Another sense of the word ‘*sūnyatā*’ is ‘*śūnyatā*’ which has been used to mean ‘*nirvāṇa*’ which is devoid of thought constructions and beyond the reach of categories of causal conditions, motion, rest, instrument of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) etc⁷. Although this word is used in different sense but for him there is no gap between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*⁸. He says in his text *Mūlamadhyakārikā*, “that which is the limit if *Nirvāṇa* is also the limit of *saṃsāra*; there is not the slightest difference between the two⁹. Actually, he denies the ontological difference between phenomenal world and noumenal world. But another school of Buddhism Hīnayānist thinks that *nirvāṇa* is different from *saṃsāra*. They believe that *nirvāṇa* is eternal (*nitya*), blissful (*sukha*) positive entity (*bhāva*) and it is something to be acquired. In *Mūlamadhyakārikā*, by the dialectic method Nāgārjuna shows that if something originates depending on something else, then the former has no essence i.e., that entity is empty (*sūnya*) and also shows the untenability of origination, elements (*dharma*), self (*ātmā*), *dhātu*, *āyatana* etc, because Mādhyamika philosophers explain that rise and subsidence of the elements of existence (*dharma*-s) is not correct interpretation of *pratītyasamutpāda*. Nāgārjuna also shows that if something originates depending on something else, then the former has no essence i.e., that entity is essenceless (*niḥsvabhāv*).

In these sense opponents declare Nagarjuna’s philosophy is called *sūnyavāda*. But

Madhyamika philosophy of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) is interpreted by some critics as a kind of nihilism, blank phenomenism¹⁰, irrationalism, philosophical sadism, absolutism etc. Now I propose to examine the interpretation of Nāgārjuna's philosophy as philosophical sadism. After re-reading the various text of Nāgārjuna it can be said that these critics is not appropriate. Because, Nāgārjuna does not deny that there is a reality (*tattva*) behind this changing, conditional world of appearance. By his dialectical method he wants to reveal the relative nature of worldly things and refutes all the possible ways of theory-making without contradicting his own position, that is to say, the position of 'commitmentlessness'. He never feels inclined to assert or form any metaphysical theory; therefore, he is not interested to speak of any thesis to be established because he shows that there is self-contradiction in all metaphysical theories. He denies any absolute beginning or total cessation and accepts *madhyamāpatipada*. He avoids two extremes i.e., i) is or *bhāva* and ii) is not or *abhāva*. In reference to the ultimate reality *śūnyatā* connotes the non-conceptual nature of the 'thing-in-itself' and implies the attitude of *anupalambha*. The *Mahāprajñāpāramitśāstra* brings out another implication of *śūnyatā* as the principle longing for real, beyond the passing show of mundane life. Moreover, Nāgārjuna also refutes the validity of all causal ways of knowing (*pramānas*) because he expresses that *pramāna and prameya* (the matter of knowing) are equally relative terms.

Now the critics argue that if he has no thesis of own and he is not interested in propounding any thesis of his own, and if he always refutes all views of metaphysical and transcendental levels, he could be regarded as philosophical sadists (*piśunavādī*) as his philosophical attitude is destructive in its activity. He always refutes all opponent theories, naturally it will be accused that his only work is to wrangle with the opponents. Moreover, if he has no motive behind all that he tells and if he always refutes all opponent theories, naturally it will be accused that his only work is to wrangle with the opponents and he could be regarded as Vaitandika¹² and a philosophical sadist because he derives pleasure only in refuting others' view. Popularly a sadist is one who gets pleasure torturing others and finds faults with others views. A philosophy which says that others are wrong and does not say what is right, may be called philosophical sadism. Nāgārjuna has shown inner contradiction in opponents' argument and avoids his own philosophical theories. If he has no positive explanation of the world what is the meaning of always getting faults with others? In society we see usually people get pleasure torturing others or seeing others in distress. Only true spiritual person feels pain seeing others in pain. Torturing

animals in the name of game, torturing powerless-marginalized people, the people in power derive pleasure. Depriving other, denying distributive justice to others, exploiting others, people in power enjoy pleasure. Philosophical sadists similarly refute others' arguments or criticize their philosophically opponent positions and enjoy the pleasure of victory. The sadistic philosophy does not have any deeper philosophical significance.

Now the important question comes: Is Nāgārjuna really a sadist in philosophy? Our humble answer is in the negative. Such a charge can only arise from the misunderstanding of the technicality that is involved in Nāgārjuna's way of philosophizing. The proper understanding of *sūnyatā* will give release from all worldly sufferings and the realization of *sūnyatā* constitutes the highest end of life and yields in the cessation of all essential thought-constructions. Nāgārjuna believes that language as a form of expression is appropriate for practical motives, but as dogmatic stand it simply breaks down. He examines different metaphysical theses of causation, *dhatu-s*, *skandha-s*, individual self etc. one after other, and looks each one of them to be untenable and points out that being dependently originated have no self-essence. It is nothing from its own side. So his philosophy contains refutation only for the sake of refutation.

Moreover, Nāgārjuna admits two kinds of truth³-*samvrti satya* (empirical truth) and *pāramārthika satya* (transcendental truth). He says that if one is not aware of these truths, he cannot be able to go through the understanding of what the Buddha said (*Buddhavacana*) and only through the understanding of two truths reveals the true nature of *sūnyatā*. So, Madhyamika philosophy helps us to be *free of* the essentialist *delusion* and *thought construction*. When *sūnyatā* is realized, it is possible to know what the nature of thing of its own is. Language creates a distorted picture in our mind that there is a self-nature (*svabhāva*). The realization of *pratītyasamutpāda* is freedom from suffering which are the products of illusory vision. For the sake of all people, the Buddha, the most Compassionate One preached the doctrine of reality. Nāgārjuna reveals the actual meaning of the preaching of the Buddha. The understanding of *sūnyatā* liberates one from suffering. *sūnyatā* or *pratītyasamutpāda* puts an end to *prapañca* or illusion of creation (*prapañcasama*). It is also positive since by putting an end to suffering which is a part of *prapañca*. Rightly understood, the Madhyamika philosophy is totally free from dogmatism. When one understands that the world is devoid of substantiality, one does not have craving for it and where there is no craving, there is no attachment and consequently no suffering.

It can be said that Nāgārjuna's philosophy is the search light that illumines the darkest recesses of reason and also makes us *aware of* philosophical theories. His tendency is to show the rootcause of our inability to know the real in-itself through conceptual construction, *dṛṣṭi*. Every philosophical system picks up a particular way and colours reality from that stand point and possesses a view (*dṛṣṭi*) a stand point or a position. But his philosophy is different. The Mdhymika concept of *śūnyatā* only negates the claims of adequacy of all possible views without exception and it never militates against *vyavahāra*. It is not a case of philosophical sadism, in the text we see again and again Nāgārjuna' says that all pertinent indeed for him who conforms to *śūnyatā*., nothing is pertinent for him who conforms to *śūnyatā*.¹¹ What he criticized is the commonsense scheme of understanding the world in an absolute sense. He refutes other philosophical these and does not advance any further thesis of his own. The burden of proof lies with the proponents of any thesis. And since he has no metaphysical thesis to advance, the burden of proof logically does not lie with him. In other words, his business ends with the refutation and this is not done out of any kind of sadistic pleasure. So, it is wrong to say that Nāgārjuna is a philosophical sadist. When all obstacles, all clouds are driven away, there is no need of pointing out that it is the sun. Nāgārjuna's motive in refuting defective views is not sadistic but spiritual and therapeutic.

Notes and References

1. *Prasaṅga* is "the Critical Reason which by judging the "pros and cons "of a question, brings about a clear consciousness of the antinomies into which reason gets bogged up, and hints at a way out of the impasse by rising to a plane higher than Reason" J.Singh, in *Introduction of the Concept of Buddhist Nirvāṇa* " by Th. Stcherbatsky (ed.), Motilal Banarssidass Publishers Pvt .Ltd. Delhi,1956, p.16
2. *Astīti śāśvatagrāhoḥ nāstītyucchedadarśanam*
Tasmāt astītya-nāstītye nārśīyet vicakṣaṇaḥ-Buddhapālītavṛtti on Mūklamadhyamakakārikā
3. *Pratītya yad yad bhavati na hi tāvattadeva tat*
Na cānyadapi tattasmānocchinnam nāpi śāśvatam // Vīgravyavartanī P.70
If something originates depending on something else, then the former (effect) cannot be identical to the latter (condition). Neither is the former different from the latter. Therefore, neither does eternalism stand the critical scrutiny, nor does nihilism (18:10)
4. *Apratītya samutpanno dharmāḥ kaścīn na vidyate*
Yasmād tasmāt asūknyo hi dharmāḥ kaścīn na vidyate
Mulamadhyamakakarika, 24:19
"Since there is no element of existence (*dharmā*) which comes into manifestation without conditions, therefore

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- there is no *dharma* which is not *øknya* devoid of independent existence “Eng. Trans by J.Singh, in *Introduction of the Concept of Buddhist Nirvāna* by Th. Stcherbatsky, Motilal Banarssidass Publishers Pvt .Ltd. Delhi,p.23.
5. *yaḥpratītyasamutpāda paśyati sa dharmam paśyati yaḥ dharmam paśyati sa buddham paśyati, Mūlamadhyamakakārikā.*
6. *yaśca pratītyabhāvo bhāvānām śknyateti sā proktā*
yaśca yaśca pratītyabhvo bhāvati hi tasyāsvabhāvataṃ
“The nature of the things which dependent /conditionally co-originated is called emptiness, for that nature which is dependent is emptied of any intrinsic nature” Eng. Trans. By Dilipkumar Mohanta in Research Bulletin, Vishveshvaranand Vedic Research Institute, Vol.4 & 5, Dec.2006.
7. *aparspratyayam śntam prapañcair aprapañcitam*
nirvikalpam anānārtham etattvasya lakṣaṇam // Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 18:9
Independently realized, peaceful, unobserved by obsession, not diversified by discriminatory speech (i.e., emptied of thought constructions) and unambiguous in meaning; such is the characteristics of truth” Eng. Trans. By Dilipkumar Mohanta in Research Bulletin, Vishveshvaranand Vedic Research Institute, Vol.4 - 5, Dec.2006.
8. *Na saṃsārasya nirvānat kincid asti viśesaam /*
Na nirvāsya saṃsārāt kincid asti viśesanam // Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, 25:19
The phenomenal world is not at all different from the Absolute. The Absolute is not at all different from the phenomenal world. (25:19)
9. *nirvāṇasya ca yā kotih kotih saṃsaraṇsya ca /*
na teyor antaram kiñcīt susūkṣmamapi vidyate // Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, 25:20
The limit of *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* is same and there is no slightest difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.
10. S.N Dasgupta, *Indian Idealism*, Cambridge;1933
11. *sarvam ca yujgate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate/*
sarvam na yujgate tasya śūnyatā yasya na yujyate // Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, 24:14. See also *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* by T.R.V.Murti.

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