

Madhyamaka

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For the ancient city of Madhyamika, see [Nagari, Rajasthan](#).



Classical Indian Mādhyamika thinkers. Clockwise from upper left: [Nāgārjuna](#) (founder), [Bhāviveka](#) and [Chandrakīrti](#) (commentators), [Śāntarakṣita](#) (synthesized the school with [Yogacara](#)).

Part of a series on
Mahāyāna Buddhism

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Madhyamaka ("Middle way" or "Centrism"; [Sanskrit](#): मध्यमक, [Chinese](#): 中觀見; [pinyin](#): *Zhōngguān Jiàn*, [Tibetan](#): *dbu ma pa*) also known as *Śūnyavāda* (the [emptiness](#) doctrine) and *Niḥsvabhāvavāda* (the no [svabhāva](#) doctrine) refers to a tradition of [Buddhist philosophy](#) and practice founded by the Indian philosopher [Nāgārjuna](#) (c. 150–250 CE).^{[1][2]} The foundational text of the Mādhyamaka tradition is [Nāgārjuna](#)'s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Root Verses on the Middle Way). More broadly, Madhyamaka also refers to the ultimate nature of phenomena and the realization of this in [meditative equipoise](#).^[3]^{[\[clarification needed\]](#)}

Madhyamaka thought had a major influence on the subsequent development of the [Mahayana](#) Buddhist tradition. It is the dominant interpretation of Buddhist philosophy in [Tibetan Buddhism](#) and has also been influential in [East Asian Buddhist](#) thought.^[4]

According to the classical Madhyamaka thinkers, all [phenomena](#) (*dharmas*) are [empty](#) (*śūnya*) of "nature,"^[5] a "substance" or "essence" (*svabhāva*) which gives them "solid and independent existence," because they are [dependently co-arisen](#).^[6] But this "emptiness" itself is also "empty": it does not have an existence on its own, nor does it refer to a transcendental reality beyond or above phenomenal reality.^{[7][8][9]}

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Etymology

Madhya is a Sanskrit word meaning "middle". It is cognate with Latin *med-iu-s* and English *mid*. The *-ma* suffix is a superlative, giving *madhyama* the meaning of "mid-most" or "medium". The *-ka* suffix is used to form adjectives, thus *madhyamaka* means "middleling". The *-ika* suffix is used to form possessives, with a collective sense, thus *mādhyamika* mean "belonging to the mid-most" (the *-ika* suffix regularly causes a lengthening of the first vowel and elision of the final *-a*).

In a Buddhist context these terms refer to the "middle path" (*madhyama pratipada*) between the extremes of annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*) and eternalism (*śassatavāda*), for example:

ity etāv ubhāv antāv anupagamyā madhyamayā pratipadā tathāgato dharmam deśayati
/ – Kātyāyana Sūtra.

Thus, the Tathāgata teaches the Dharma by a middle path avoiding both these extremes.

- *Madhyamaka* refers to the school of thought associated with Nāgārjuna and his commentators.
- *Mādhyamika* refers to adherents of the Madhyamaka school.

Note that in both words the stress is on the first syllable.

Philosophical overview



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Svabhāva, what Madhyamaka denies

Main article: [Svabhava](#)

Central to Madhyamaka philosophy is *śūnyatā*, "emptiness", and this refers to the central idea that [dharmas](#) are empty of *svabhāva*.^[10] This term has been translated variously as essence, intrinsic nature, inherent existence, own being and substance.^{[11][12][10]} Furthermore, according to Richard P. Hayes, svabhava can be interpreted as either "identity" or as "causal independence".^[13] Likewise, Westerhoff notes that *svabhāva* is a complex concept that has ontological and cognitive aspects. The ontological aspects include *svabhāva* as [essence](#), as a

property which makes an object what it is, as well as [svabhāva](#) as [substance](#), meaning, as the Madhyamaka thinker [Candrakīrti](#) defines it, something that does "not depend on anything else".^[10] It is substance-[svabhāva](#), the objective and independent existence of any object or concept, which Madhyamaka arguments mostly focus on refuting.^[14] A common structure which Madhyamaka uses to negate [svabhāva](#) is the [catuṣkoṭi](#) ("four corners" or tetralemma), which roughly consists of four alternatives: some proposition is true, it is false, it is both, or it is neither true or false. Some of the major topics discussed by classical Madhyamaka include [causality](#), change, and [personal identity](#).^[15]

Madhyamaka's denial of [svabhāva](#) does not mean a [nihilistic](#) denial of all things, for in a conventional everyday sense, Madhyamaka does accept that one can speak of "things", and yet *ultimately* these things are empty of inherent existence.^[16] Furthermore, "emptiness" itself is also "empty": it does not have an existence on its own, nor does it refer to a transcendental reality beyond or above phenomenal reality.^{[7][8][9]}

[Svabhāva](#)'s cognitive aspect is merely a superimposition (*samāropa*) that beings make when they perceive and conceive of things. In this sense then, emptiness does not exist as some kind of primordial reality, but it is simply a corrective to a mistaken conception of how things exist.^[12] This idea of [svabhāva](#) that Madhyamaka denies is then not just a conceptual philosophical theory, but it is a [cognitive distortion](#) that beings automatically impose on the world, such as when we regard the [five aggregates](#) as constituting a single [self](#). [Candrakīrti](#) compares it to someone who suffers from [vitreous floaters](#) that cause the illusion of hairs appearing in their visual field.^[17] This cognitive dimension of [svabhāva](#) means that just understanding and assenting to Madhyamaka reasoning is not enough to end the suffering caused by our [reification](#) of the world, just like understanding how an [optical illusion](#) works does not make it stop functioning. What is required is a kind of [cognitive shift](#) (termed *realization*) in the way the world appears and therefore some kind of practice to lead to this shift.^[18] As Candrakīrti says:

For one on the road of [cyclic existence](#) who pursues an inverted view due to [ignorance](#), a mistaken object such as the superimposition (*samāropa*) on the [aggregates](#) appears as real, but it does not appear to one who is close to the view of the real nature of things.^[19]

Much of Madhyamaka philosophy centers on showing how various [essentialist](#) ideas have absurd conclusions through [reductio ad absurdum](#) arguments (known as *prasanga* in Sanskrit). Chapter 15 of [Nāgārjuna](#)'s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* centers on the words [svabhava](#)^[note 1] [parabhava](#)^[note 2] [bhava](#)^[note 3] and [abhava](#).^[note 4] According to Peter Harvey:

Nagarjuna's critique of the notion of own-nature^[note 5] (*Mk.* ch. 15) argues that anything which arises according to conditions, as all phenomena do, can have no inherent nature, for what it depends on what conditions it. Moreover, if there

is nothing with own-nature, there can be nothing with 'other-nature' (*para-bhava*), i.e. something which is dependent for its existence and nature on something *else* which has own-nature. Furthermore, if there is neither own-nature nor other-nature, there cannot be anything with a true, substantial existent nature (*bhava*). If there is no true existent, then there can be no non-existent (*abhava*). ^[25]

An important element of Madhyamaka refutation is that the classical Buddhist doctrine of [dependent arising](#) (the idea that every phenomena is dependent on other phenomena) cannot be reconciled with "a conception of self-nature or substance" and that therefore essence theories are contrary not only to the Buddhist scriptures but to the very ideas of [causality](#) and change. ^[26] Any enduring [essential nature](#) would prevent any causal interaction, or any kind of origination. For things would simply always have been, and will always continue to be, without any change. ^{[27][note 6]} As [Nāgārjuna](#) writes in the MMK:

We state that conditioned origination is emptiness. It is mere designation depending on something, and it is the middle path. (24.18) Since nothing has arisen without depending on something, there is nothing that is not empty. (24.19) ^[28]

The two truths

Main article: [Two truths doctrine](#)

Beginning with [Nāgārjuna](#), Madhyamaka discerns [two levels of truth](#), conventional truth (everyday [commonsense](#) reality) and ultimate truth ([emptiness](#)). ^{[7][29]} Ultimately, Madhyamaka argues that all phenomena are empty of *svabhava* and only exist in dependence on other causes, conditions and concepts. Conventionally, Madhyamaka holds that beings do perceive concrete objects which they are aware of empirically. ^[30] In Madhyamaka this phenomenal world is the limited truth – [samvrti satya](#), which literally means “to completely cover, conceal, or obscure” and arises due to [ignorance](#). ^[31] This seeming reality does not *really* exist as the highest truth realized by [wisdom](#) which is [paramartha satya](#) (*parama* is literally “supreme or ultimate,” and [artha](#) means “object, purpose, or actuality”), and yet it has a kind of conventional reality which has its uses for reaching liberation. ^[32] This limited truth includes everything, including the [Buddha](#) himself, the teachings ([Dharma](#)), liberation and even Nāgārjuna’s own arguments. ^[33] This [two truth schema](#) which did not deny the importance of convention allowed Nāgārjuna to defend himself against charges of [nihilism](#), understanding both correctly meant seeing the [middle way](#):

“Without relying upon convention, the ultimate fruit is not taught. Without understanding the ultimate, nirvana is not attained.” ^[34]

The limited, perceived reality is an experiential reality or a [nominal](#) reality which beings impute on the ultimate reality, it is not an ontological reality with substantial or independent existence.^{[30][29]} Hence, the two truths aren't two metaphysical realities, but according to Karl Brunnholzl, "the two realities refer to just what is experienced by two different types of beings with different types and scopes of perception."^[35] As [Candrakirti](#) says:

It is through the perfect and the false seeing of all entities

That the entities that are thus found bear two natures.

The object of perfect seeing is true reality,

And false seeing is seeming reality.

This means that the distinction between the two truths is primarily [epistemological](#) and depending on the cognition of the observer, not [ontological](#).^[35] As [Shantideva](#) says there are "two kinds of world", "the one of yogins and the one of common people."^[36] The seeming reality is the world of [samsara](#) because conceiving of concrete and unchanging objects leads to clinging and suffering. As [Buddhapalita](#) states: "unskilled persons whose eye of intelligence is obscured by the darkness of delusion conceive of an essence of things and then generate attachment and hostility with regard to them."^[37]

According to Hayes, the two truths may also refer to two different goals in life: the highest goal of nirvana, and the lower goal of "commercial good". The highest goal is the liberation from attachment, both material *and* intellectual.^[38]

The nature of ultimate reality

Main article: [Śūnyatā](#)

According to Paul Williams, Nāgārjuna associates emptiness with the [ultimate truth](#) but his conception of emptiness is not some kind of [Absolute](#), but rather it is the very absence of true existence with regards to the conventional reality of things and events in the world.^[39] Because the ultimate is itself empty, it is also explained as a "transcendence of deception" and hence is a kind of [apophatic](#) truth which experiences the lack of substance.^[2]

Because the nature of ultimate reality is said to be empty, even of "emptiness" itself, along with the very framework of the two truths are also conventional realities, and not part of the ultimate. This is often called "the emptiness of emptiness" and refers to the fact that even though Madhyamikas speak of emptiness as the ultimate unconditioned nature of things, this emptiness is itself empty of any real existence.^[40]

The two truths themselves are therefore just a practical tool used to teach others, but do not exist within the actual meditative equipoise that realizes the ultimate.^[41] As Candrakīrti says: "the noble ones who have accomplished what is to be accomplished do not see anything that is delusive or not delusive."^[42] From within the experience of the enlightened ones there is only one reality which appears non-conceptually, as Nāgārjuna says in the Sixty stanzas on reasoning: "that nirvana is the sole reality, is what the Victors have declared."^[43] [Bhāvaviveka's](#) *Madhyamakahrdayakārikā* describes the ultimate truth through a negation of all four possibilities of the *catuskoti*:^[44]

Its character is neither existent, nor nonexistent, Nor both existent and nonexistent, nor neither. Centrists should know true reality That is free from these four possibilities.

[Atisha](#) describes the ultimate as "here, there is no seeing and no seer, No beginning and no end, just peace...It is nonconceptual and nonreferential...it is inexpressible, unobservable, unchanging, and unconditioned."^[45] Because of the non-conceptual nature of the ultimate, according to Brunnholzl, the two truths are ultimately inexpressible as "one" or "different."^[46]

The middle way

Main article: [Middle Way](#)

As noted by Roger Jackson, non-Buddhist and Buddhist writers ancient and modern, have argued that the Madhyamaka philosophy is [nihilistic](#) and this view has been challenged by others who argue that it is a [middle way](#) (*madhyamāpratipad*) between nihilism and eternalism.^{[47][48][49]} Madhyamaka philosophers themselves explicitly rejected the nihilist interpretation, as Nāgārjuna writes: "through explaining true reality as it is, the seeming [*samvṛti*] does not become disrupted."^[50] [Candrakīrti](#) also responds to the charge of nihilism in his [Lucid Words](#):

Therefore, emptiness is taught in order to completely pacify all discursiveness without exception. So if the purpose of emptiness is the complete peace of all discursiveness and you just increase the web of discursiveness by thinking that the meaning of emptiness is nonexistence, you do not realize the purpose of emptiness [at all].^[51]

Some scholars (Murti) interpret emptiness as described by Nāgārjuna as a Buddhist transcendental [absolute](#), while other scholars such as [David Kalupahana](#) consider this a mistake since this would not make it a middle way.^{[52][53]} Madhyamaka thinkers also argue that since things have the nature of lacking true existence or own being (*niḥsvabhāva*), all things are mere conceptual constructs (*prajñaptimatra*) because they are just impermanent collections of causes and conditions.^[54] This also applies to the principle of causality itself, since

everything is dependently originated.^[55] Therefore, in Madhyamaka, phenomena appear to arise and cease, but in an ultimate sense they do not arise or remain as inherently existent phenomena.^{[56][57][note 7]} This is believed by Madhyamaka philosophers to show that both views of [absolute](#) or eternalist existence (such as the Hindu ideas of [Brahman](#) or *sat-dravya*) and [nihilism](#) are untenable^{[58][59][16]} These two views are considered to be the *two extremes* that Madhyamaka steers clear from:

1. *Essentialism*^[60] or *eternalism* (sastavadava)^[16] – a belief that things inherently or substantially exist and are therefore efficacious objects of [craving](#) and [clinging](#);^[60] Nagarjuna argues that we naively and innately perceive things as substantial, and it is this predisposition which is the root delusion that lies at the basis of all suffering.^[60]
2. *Nihilism*^[60] or *annihilationism* (ucchedavada)^[16] – views that lead one to believe that there is no need to be responsible for one's actions, such as the idea one is annihilated at death or that nothing has causal effects, but also the idea that absolutely nothing exists.

The usefulness of reason

In Madhyamaka, [reason](#) and [debate](#) is understood as a means to an end (liberation), and therefore it must be founded on the wish to help oneself and others end suffering.^[61] Reason and logical arguments (such as those employed by classical [Indian philosophers](#), i.e. [pramana](#)) however, are also seen as being empty of any true validity or reality. They only serve as conventional remedies for our delusions.^[62] Nāgārjuna famously attacked the notion that one could establish a valid cognition or epistemic proof ([pramana](#)) in his *Vigrahavyāvartanī*:

If your objects are well established through valid cognitions, tell us how you establish these valid cognitions. If you think they are established through other valid cognitions, there is an [infinite regress](#). Then, the first one is not established, nor are the middle ones, nor the last. If these [valid cognitions] are established even without valid cognition, what you say is ruined. In that case, there is an inconsistency, And you ought to provide an argument for this distinction.^[63]

[Candrakīrti](#) comments on this statement by stating that Madhyamaka does not completely deny the use of pramanas conventionally, and yet ultimately they do not have a foundation:

Therefore we assert that mundane objects are known through the four kinds of authoritative cognition. They are mutually dependent: When there is authoritative cognition, there are objects of knowledge; when there are objects of knowledge, there is authoritative cognition. But neither authoritative cognition nor objects of knowledge exist inherently.^[64]

To the charge that if Nāgārjuna's arguments and words are also empty they therefore lack the power to refute anything, Nāgārjuna responds that:

My words are without nature. Therefore, my thesis is not ruined. Since there is no inconsistency, I do not have to state an argument for a distinction. ^[65]

Further Nāgārjuna states:

Just as one magical creation may be annihilated by another magical creation, and one illusory person by another person produced by an illusionist, This negation is the same. ^[66]

[Shantideva](#) makes the same point when he states "thus, when one's son dies in a dream, the conception "he does not exist" removes the thought that he does exist, but it is also delusive."^[67] In other words, Madhyamaka does not deny that their arguments are not *ultimately* valid in some [foundational](#) sense, just like all things. However, conventionally one is still able to use the opponent's own reasoning apparatus to refute their theories and help them see their errors. This remedial deconstruction does not replace their theories with another one, but simply dissolves all views, including the very fictional system of epistemic warrants (*pramanas*) used to establish them. ^[68] The point of Madhyamaka reasoning is not to establish any abstract validity or universal truth, it is simply a pragmatic project aimed at ending delusion and suffering. ^[69]

Nāgārjuna also argues that Madhyamaka only negates things conventionally, since ultimately, there is nothing there to negate, "I do not negate anything and there is also nothing to be negated."^[70] Therefore, it is only from the perspective of those who cling to the existence of things that it seems as if something is being negated. But Madhyamaka is not annihilating something, merely elucidating that this true existence never existed in the first place. ^[70]

Thus, Madhyamaka uses language to make clear the limits of our concepts. Ultimately, reality cannot be depicted by concepts. ^[71] ^[71] According to [Jay Garfield](#), this creates a sort of tension in Madhyamaka literature, since it has use some concepts to convey its teachings. ^[71]

Soteriology

For Madhyamaka, the realization of emptiness is not just a satisfactory theory about the world, but a key understanding which allows one to reach liberation or [nirvana](#). Nāgārjuna states in the MMK:

With the cessation of ignorance, formations will not arise. Moreover, the cessation of ignorance occurs through right understanding. Through the cessation of this and that [link of dependent origination] this and that [other link] will not come about. The entire mass of suffering thereby completely ceases. ^[72]

[Dependent origination](#) is the fundamental Buddhist analysis of the arising of suffering and therefore, according to Nāgārjuna, the cognitive shift which sees the nonexistence of [svabhāva](#) leads to the cessation of the first link in this chain of suffering, which then leads to the ending of the entire chain of causes and thus, of all suffering.^[72] Nāgārjuna also states:

Liberation (*mokṣa*) results from the cessation of actions (*karman*) and defilements (*klesā*). Actions and defilements result from representations (*vikalpa*). These from false imagining (*prapañca*). False imagining stops in emptiness (*śūnyata*). (18.5)^[73]

Therefore, the ultimate aim of understanding emptiness is not philosophical insight as such, but to gain a [liberated mind](#) which does not cling to anything. To realize this, meditation on emptiness may proceed in stages, starting with the emptiness of both [self](#), objects and mental states,^[74] culminating in a "natural state of nonreferential freedom."^{[75][note 8]} Moreover, the path to understand the ultimate truth is not one that negates or invalidates relative truths. Instead it is only through properly understanding and using the relative truth that the ultimate can be attained, as [Bhāvaviveka](#) says;

In order to guide beginners a method is taught, comparable to the steps of a staircase that leads to perfect Buddhahood. Ultimate reality is only to be entered once we have understood seeming reality.^[76]

Does Madhyamaka have a position?

Nāgārjuna is famous for arguing that his philosophy was not a view, and that he in fact did not take any position (*pakṣa*) or thesis (*pratijñā*) whatsoever since this would just be another form of clinging to some form of existence.^{[77][64]} In his *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Nāgārjuna states:

If I had any position, I thereby would be at fault. Since I have no position, I am not at fault at all. If there were anything to be observed through direct perception and the other instances [of valid cognition], it would be something to be established or rejected. However, since no such thing exists, I cannot be criticized.^[78]

Likewise in his *Sixty Stanzas on Reasoning*, Nāgārjuna says: "By taking any standpoint whatsoever, you will be snatched by the cunning snakes of the afflictions. Those whose minds have no standpoint, will not be caught."^[79] Randall Collins states that for Nāgārjuna, ultimate reality is simply the idea that "no concepts are intelligible", while Ferrer notes that Nagarjuna criticized those whose mind held any "positions and beliefs", including the [view](#) of emptiness, as Nāgārjuna says: "The Victorious Ones have announced that emptiness is the relinquishing of all [views](#). Those who are possessed of the view

of emptiness are said to be incorrigible.”^{[80][81]} [Aryadeva](#) echoes this idea in his Four Hundred Verses:

“First, one puts an end to what is not meritorious. In the middle, one puts an end to identity. Later, one puts an end to all views. Those who understand this are skilled.”^[82]

However, other texts mention a specific Madhyamaka thesis or view. [Shantideva](#) for example says “one cannot uphold any faultfinding in the thesis of emptiness” and [Bhavaviveka](#)’s *Blaze of Reasoning* says: “as for our thesis, it is the emptiness of nature, because this is the nature of phenomena.”^[83] [Jay Garfield](#) notes that Nagarjuna and Candrakirti both make positive arguments. He cites the MMK which states: “There does not exist anything that is not dependently arisen. Therefore there does not exist anything that is not empty” as well as Candrakirti’s commentary on it which clearly states “We assert the statement ‘emptiness itself is a designation.’”^[64]

These positions however, are not a contradiction, since Madhyamaka can be said to have the “thesis of emptiness” only conventionally, in the context of debating or explaining it. According to Brunnholzl, even though Madhyamaka thinkers may express a thesis pedagogically, what they deny is that “they have any thesis that involves real existence or reference points or any thesis that is to be defended from their own point of view.”^[84]

Karl Brunnholzl states that Madhyamaka analysis applies to all systems of thought, ideas and concepts, including Madhyamaka itself. This is because, the nature of Madhyamaka is “the deconstruction of any system and conceptualization whatsoever, including itself”.^[85] In the Root verses on the Middle Way, Nagarjuna illustrates this point:

By the flaw of having views about emptiness, those of little understanding are ruined, just as when incorrectly seizing a snake or mistakenly practicing an awareness-mantra.^[86]

Origins and sources

The Madhyamaka school is usually considered to have been founded by [Nāgārjuna](#), though it may have existed earlier.^[87] Various scholars have noted that some of themes in the work of [Nāgārjuna](#) can also be found in earlier Buddhist sources.

Early Buddhist Texts

It is well known that the only sutra that [Nāgārjuna](#) explicitly cites in his [Mūlamadhyamakakārikā](#) (Chapter 15.7) is the “Advice to Kātyāyana”, stating that “according to the Instructions to [Katyayana](#), both existence and nonexistence are

criticized by the Blessed One who opposed being and non-being.”^[88] This appears to have been a Sanskrit version of the [Kaccānagotta Sutta](#) ([Samyutta Nikāya](#) ii.16-17).^[88] The [Kaccānagotta Sutta](#) itself says:

This world, Kaccana, for the most part depends on a duality – upon the notion of existence and the notion of nonexistence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of nonexistence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world.^[88]

Joseph Walser also points out that verse six of chapter 15 contains an allusion to the “*Mahahatthipadopama sutta*”, another sutta of the *Nidanavagga*, the collection which also contains the [Kaccānagotta](#), and which contains various suttas that focus on the avoidance of extreme views, which are all held to be associated with either the extreme of eternality (*sasvata*) or the extreme of disruption (*uccheda*).^[88] Another allusion to an [early buddhist text](#) noted by Walser is in [Nāgārjuna](#)’s Ratnavali chapter 1, where he makes reference to a statement in the *Kevaddha sutta*.^[89]

The [Atthakavagga](#) (Pali, “Octet Chapter”) and the [Pārāyanavagga](#) (Pali, “Way to the Far Shore Chapter”) are two small collections of suttas within the [Pāli Canon](#) of [Theravada Buddhism](#).^[note 9] They are among the earliest existing Buddhist literature, and place considerable emphasis on the rejection of, or non-attachment to, all [views](#). Gomez compared them to later Madhyamaka philosophy, which in its [Prasaṅgika](#) form especially makes a method of rejecting others’ views rather than proposing its own.^[90]

Tillman Vetter, although agreeing overall with Gomez’ observations, suggests some refinements on historical and doctrinal grounds.^[91] First, he notes that neither of these short collections of suttas are homogeneous and hence are not all amenable to Gomez’ proposals. According to Vetter, those suttas which do lend support to Gomez probably originated with a heterodox ascetic group that pre-dated the Buddha, and were integrated into the Buddhist Sangha at an early date, bringing with them some suttas that were already in existence and also composing further suttas in which they tried to combine their own teachings with those of the Buddha.^[91]

Paul Fuller has rejected the arguments of Gomez and Vetter.^[92] He finds that

... the Nikayas and the Atthakavagga present the same cognitive attitude toward [views](#), wrong or right.^[93]

Alexander Wynne also rejects both of Vetter’ claims that the Parayanavagga shows a chronological stratification, and a different attitude toward mindfulness and liberating insight than do other works.^{[94][note 10]}

Abhidharma and early Buddhist schools

The Madhyamaka school has been perhaps simplistically regarded as a reaction against the development of Buddhist [Abhidharma](#), however according to Joseph Walser, this is problematic.^[95] In Abhidharma, [dharmas](#) are characterized by defining traits (*lakṣaṇa*) or own-existence (*svabhāva*). The [Abhidharmakośabhāṣya](#) states for example: “*dharma* means ‘upholding,’ [namely], upholding intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*)”, while the [Mahāvibhāṣā](#) states “intrinsic nature is able to uphold its own identity and not lose it”.^[96] However this does not mean that all Abhidharma systems hold that dharmas exist independently in an ontological sense, since all Buddhist schools hold that (most) dharmas are [dependently originated](#), this doctrine being a central core Buddhist view, rather in Abhidharma, [svabhāva](#) is typically something which arises dependent on other conditions and qualities.^[96] [Svabhāva](#) in the early Abhidharma systems then, is not a kind of ontological essentialism, but it is a way to categorize dharmas according to their distinctive characteristics. According to Noa Ronkin, the idea of *svabhava* evolved towards ontological dimension in the [Sarvāstivādin Vaibhasika](#) school’s interpretation, which began to also use the term *dravya* which means “real existence”.^[96] This then, may have been the shift which Nagarjuna sought to attack when he targets certain Sarvastivada tenets.

However, the relationship between Madhyamaka and Abhidharma is complex, as Joseph Walser notes, “Nagarjuna’s position vis-à-vis abhidharma is neither a blanket denial nor a blanket acceptance. Nagarjuna’s arguments entertain certain abhidharmic standpoints while refuting others.”^[95] One example can be seen in Nagarjuna’s Ratnavali which makes supports the study of a list of 57 moral faults which he takes from an Abhidharma text named the *Ksudravastuka*.^[97] Abhidharmic analysis figures prominently in Madhyamaka treatises, and authoritative commentators like Candrakīrti emphasize that Abhidharmic categories function as a viable (and favored) system of conventional truths – they are more refined than ordinary categories, and they are not dependent on either the extreme of eternalism or on the extreme view of the discontinuity of karma, as the non-Buddhist categories of the time did.

Walser also notes that Nagarjuna’s theories have much in common with the view of a sub-sect of the [Mahasamgikas](#) called the [Prajñaptivadins](#), who held that suffering was *prajñapti* (designation by provisional naming) “based on conditioned entities that are themselves reciprocally designated” (*anyonya prajñapti*).^[98] David Burton argues that for Nagarjuna, “dependently arisen entities have merely conceptually constructed existence (*prajñaptisat*)”.^[98] Commenting on this, Walser writes that “Nagarjuna is arguing for a thesis that the Prajñaptivādins already held, using a concept of *prajñapti* that they were already using.”^[51]

Prajñāpāramitā

Madhyamaka thought is also closely related to a number of Mahāyāna sources; traditionally, the [Prajñāpāramitā](#) sūtras are the literature most closely associated with Madhyamaka – understood, at least in part, as an exegetical complement to those Sūtras. Traditional accounts also depict Nāgārjuna as retrieving some of the larger Prajñāpāramitā sūtras from the world of the Nāgas (explaining in part the etymology of his name). Prajñā or ‘higher cognition’ is a recurrent term in Buddhist texts, explained as a synonym of Abhidharma, ‘insight’ (vipaśyanā) and ‘analysis of the dharmas’ (dharmapravicaya). Within a specifically Mahāyāna context, Prajñā figures as the most prominent in a list of Six Pāramitās (‘perfections’ or ‘perfect masteries’) that a Bodhisattva needs to cultivate in order to eventually achieve Buddhahood. Madhyamaka offers conceptual tools to analyze all possible elements of existence, allowing the practitioner to elicit through reasoning and contemplation the type of view that the Sūtras express more authoritatively (being considered word of the Buddha) but less explicitly (not offering corroborative arguments). The vast Prajñāpāramitā literature emphasizes the development of higher cognition in the context of the [Bodhisattva](#) path; thematically, its focus on the emptiness of all dharmas is closely related to the Madhyamaka approach. Allusions to the prajñāparamita sutras can be found in Nagarjuna’s work. One example is in the opening stanza of the [Root Verses on the Middle Way](#), which seem to allude to the following statement found in two prajñāparamita texts:

And how does he wisely know conditioned co-production? He wisely knows it as neither production, nor stopping, neither cut off nor eternal, neither single nor manifold, neither coming nor going away, as the appeasement of all futile discoursings, and as bliss. ^[99]

The first stanza of Nagarjuna’s root verses meanwhile, state:

I pay homage to the Fully Enlightened One whose true, venerable words teach dependent-origination to be the blissful pacification of all mental proliferation, neither production, nor stopping, neither cut off nor eternal, neither single nor manifold, neither coming, nor going away. ^[99]

Pyrrhonism

Because of the high degree of similarity between Madhyamaka and [Pyrrhonism](#), ^[100] [Thomas McEvilley](#) ^[101] and Matthew Neale ^{[102][103]} suspect that Nāgārjuna was influenced by Greek Pyrrhonist texts imported into India. [Pyrrho](#) of Elis (c. 360–c. 270 BCE), who is credited with founding this school of [skeptical philosophy](#), was himself influenced by Buddhist philosophy ^[104] during his stay in India with [Alexander the Great](#)’s army.

Indian Mādhyamaka



[Nāgārjuna](#) (right) and [Āryadeva](#) (middle).

Nāgārjuna

As Jan Westerhoff notes, while [Nāgārjuna](#) is "one of the greatest thinkers in the history of Asian philosophy...contemporary scholars agree on hardly any details concerning him". This includes exactly when he lived (it can be narrowed down some time in the first three centuries CE), where he lived (Joseph Walser suggests [Amarāvati](#) in east [Deccan](#)) and exactly what constitutes his written corpus. ^[105] Numerous texts are attributed to him, but it is at least agreed by some scholars that what is called the Yukti (analytical) corpus is the core of his philosophical work. These texts are the "Root verses on the Middle way" ([Mūlamadhyamakakārikā](#), MMK), the "Sixty Stanzas on Reasoning" ([Yuktiṣāṣṭika](#)), the "Dispeller of Objections" ([Vigrahavyāvartanī](#)), the "Treatise on Pulverization" ([Vaidalyaprakaraṇa](#)) and the "Precious Garland" ([Ratnāvalī](#)). ^[106] However, even the attribution of each one of these has been question by some modern scholars, except for the MMK which is by definition seen as his major work. ^[106]

[Nāgārjuna](#)'s main goal is often seen by scholars as refuting the [essentialism](#) of certain Buddhist [Abhidharma](#) schools (mainly [Vaibhasika](#)) which posited theories of [svabhava](#) (essential nature) and also the Hindu [Nyāya](#) and [Vaiśeṣika](#) schools which posited a theory of ontological substances ([dravyatas](#)). ^[107] In the MMK he used [reductio ad absurdum](#) arguments ([prasanga](#)) to show that any theory of substance or essence was unsustainable and therefore, phenomena ([dharma](#)s) such as change, causality, and sense perception were empty ([sunya](#)) of any essential existence. [Nāgārjuna](#) also famously equated the emptiness of [dharma](#)s with their [dependent origination](#). ^{[108][109][110][note 11]}

Because of his philosophical work, Nāgārjuna is seen by some modern interpreters as restoring the [Middle way](#) of the Buddha, which had become challenged by absolutist metaphysical tendencies in certain philosophical quarters. ^{[111][108]}

Classical Madhyamaka figures

Rāhulabhadra was an early Madhyamika, sometimes said to be either a teacher of Nagarjuna or his contemporary and follower. He is most famous for his verses in praise of the [prajnaparamita](#) (Skt. *Prajñāpāramitāstotra*) and Chinese sources maintain that he also composed a commentary on the MMK which was translated by Paramartha. ^[112]

Nāgārjuna's pupil [Āryadeva](#) (3rd century CE) wrote various works on Madhyamaka, the most well known of which is his "400 verses". His works are regarded as a supplement to Nāgārjuna's, ^[113] on which he commented. ^[114] Āryadeva also wrote refutations of the theories of non-Buddhist Indian philosophical schools. ^[114]

There are also two commentaries on the MMK which may be by [Āryadeva](#), the *Akuto bhaya* (which has also been regarded as an auto-commentary by Nagarjuna) as well as a commentary which survives only in Chinese (as part of the *Chung-Lun*, "Middle treatise", [Taisho](#) 1564) attributed to a certain "Ch'ing-mu" (aka Pin-lo-chieh, which some scholars have also identified as possibly being Aryadeva). ^[115] However, Brian C. Bocking, a translator of the *Chung-Lun*, also states that it is likely the author of this commentary was a certain Vimalākṣa, who was [Kumarajiva's](#) old Vinaya-master from [Kucha](#). ^[116]

An influential commentator on Nāgārjuna was [Buddhapālita](#) (470 – 550) who has been interpreted as developing the [prāsaṅgika](#) approach to Nāgārjuna's works in his *Madhyamakavṛtti* (now only extant in Tibetan) which follows the orthodox Madhyamaka method by critiquing essentialism mainly through [reductio ad absurdum](#) arguments. ^[117] Like Nāgārjuna, [Buddhapālita's](#) main philosophical method is to show how all philosophical positions are ultimately untenable and self-contradictory, a style of argumentation called *prasanga*. ^[117]

[Buddhapālita's](#) method is often contrasted with that of [Bhāvaviveka](#) (c. 500 – c. 578), who argued in his *Prajñāpadīpa* (Lamp of Wisdom) for the use of logical arguments using the [pramana](#) based epistemology of Indian logicians like [Dignāga](#). In what would become a source of much future debate, [Bhāvaviveka](#) criticized [Buddhapālita](#) for not putting Madhyamaka arguments into proper "autonomous syllogisms" (*svatantra*). ^[118] [Bhāvaviveka](#) argued that Mādhyamika's should always put forth syllogistic arguments to prove the truth of the Madhyamaka thesis. Instead of just criticizing other's arguments, a tactic called *viṭandā* (attacking) which was seen in bad form in Indian philosophical circles, [Bhāvaviveka](#) held that Madhyamikas must positively prove their position using sources of knowledge ([pramanas](#)) agreeable to all parties. ^[119] He argued that the position of a Madhyamaka was simply that phenomena are devoid of an inherent

nature.^[117] This approach has been labeled the *svātantrika* style of Madhyamaka by Tibetan philosophers and commentators.

Another influential commentator, [Candrakīrti](#) (c. 600 – 650), sought to defend [Buddhapālita](#) and critique Bhāvaviveka's position (and [Dignāga](#)) that one *must* construct independent (*svatantra*) arguments to positively prove the Madhyamaka thesis, on the grounds this contains a subtle essentialist commitment.^[117] He argued that Madhyamikas do not *have* to argue by *svatantra*, but can merely show the untenable consequences (*prasaṅga*) of all philosophical positions put forth by their adversary.^[120] Furthermore, for [Candrakīrti](#), there is a problem with assuming that the Madhyamika and the essentialist opponent can begin with the same shared premises that are required for this kind of syllogistic reasoning because the essentialist and the Madhyamaka do not share a basic understanding of what it means for things to exist in the first place.^[121]

[Candrakīrti](#) also criticized the Buddhist [Yogācāra](#) school, which he saw as positing a form of subjective *idealism* due to their doctrine of "appearance only" (*viññaptimātra*). [Candrakīrti](#) faults the [Yogācāra](#) school for not realizing that the nature of consciousness is also a conditioned phenomenon, and for privileging consciousness over its objects ontologically, instead of seeing that *everything* is empty.^[120] [Candrakīrti](#) wrote the *Prasannapadā* (Clear Words), a highly influential commentary on the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* as well as the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, an introduction to Madhyamaka. His works are central to the understanding of Madhyamaka in [Tibetan Buddhism](#).

A later svatantrika figure is Avalokitavrata (seventh century), who composed a *tika* (sub-commentary) on [Bhāvaviveka](#)'s *Prajñāpadīpa* and who mentions important figures of the era such as Dharmakīrti and [Candrakīrti](#).^[122]

Another commentator on Nagarjuna is Bhikṣu Vaśitva (*Zizai*) who composed a commentary on Nagarjuna's *Bodhisambhāra* that survives in a translation by Dharmagupta in the Chinese canon.^[123]

[Śāntideva](#) (end 7th century – first half 8th century) is well known for his philosophical poem discussing the *bodhisattva* path and the six *paramitas*, the [Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra](#). He united "a deep religiousness and joy of exposure together with the unquestioned Madhyamaka orthodoxy".^[124] Later in the 10th century, there were commentators on the works of prasangika authors such as Prajñākaramati who wrote a commentary on the [Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra](#) and Jayananda who commented on [Candrakīrti](#)'s *Madhyamakāvatāra*.^[125]

A lesser known treatise on the six paramitas associated with the Madhyamaka school is Ārya Śūra's (second century) *Pāramitāsamāsa*.^[126]

Other lesser known Madhyamikas include Devasarman (fifth to sixth centuries) and Gunamati (the fifth to sixth centuries) both of who wrote commentaries on the MMK that exist only in Tibetan fragments.^[127]

Yogācāra–Madhyamaka



[Kamalashila](#)

According to Ruegg, possibly the earliest figure to work with the two schools was Vimuktisena (early sixth century), a commentator on the [Abhisamayalamkara](#) and also is reported to have been a pupil of [Bhāvaviveka](#) as well as [Vasubandhu](#).^[128]

The seventh and eighth centuries saw a synthesis of the Buddhist [Yogācāra](#) tradition with Madhyamaka, beginning with the work of Śrigupta, [Jñānagarbha](#) (Śrigupta's disciple) and his student [Śāntarakṣita](#) (8th-century) who, like Bhāvaviveka, also adopted some of the terminology of the Buddhist pramāṇa tradition, in their time best represented by [Dharmakīrti](#).^{[117][122]} Like the classical Madhyamaka, Yogācāra–Madhyamaka approaches ultimate truth through the *prasaṅga* method of showing absurd consequences. However, when speaking of conventional reality they also make positive assertions and autonomous arguments like [Bhāvaviveka](#) and [Dharmakīrti](#). [Śāntarakṣita](#) also subsumed the [Yogācāra](#) system into his presentation of the conventional, accepting their idealism on a conventional level as a preparation for the ultimate truth of Madhyamaka.^{[117][129]} In his *Madhyamakālaṃkāra* (verses 92–93), [Śāntarakṣita](#) says:

By relying on the Mind Only (*cittamātra*), know that external entities do not exist. And by relying on this [Madhyamaka] system, know that no self at all exists, even in that [mind]. Therefore, due to holding the reins of logic as one rides the chariots of the two systems, one attains [the path of] the actual Mahayanist.^[130]

[Śāntarakṣita](#) and his student [Kamalaśīla](#) (known for his text on self development and meditation, the [Bhavanakrama](#)) were influential in the initial spread of Madhyamaka Buddhism to Tibet.^[note 12] [Haribhadra](#), another important figure of this school, wrote an influential commentary on the [Abhisamayalamkara](#).

Vajrayana Madhyamaka

The Madhyamaka philosophy continued to be of major importance during the period of Indian Buddhism when [Vajrayana](#) rose to prominence. One of the central Vajrayana Madhyamaka philosophers was Arya Nagarjuna (also known as the tantric Nagarjuna, 7th–8th centuries) who may be the author of the *Bodhicittavivarana* as well as a commentator on the [Guhyasamāja Tantra](#).^[131] Other figures in his lineage include Nagabodhi, Vajrabodhi, Aryadeva-pada and Candrakirti-pada.

Later figures include Bodhibhadra (c. 1000), a Nalanda university master who wrote on philosophy and yoga and who was a teacher of [Atiśa Dīpamkara Śrījñāna](#) (982 – 1054 CE) who was an influential figure in the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet and wrote the influential [Bodhipathapradīpa](#).^[132]

Tibetan Buddhism





Some major Tibetan Mādhyamikas. Clockwise from upper left: [Tsongkhapa](#), [Gorampa](#), [Ju Mipham](#), [Mikyö Dorje](#).

Madhyamaka philosophy obtained a central position in all the main [Tibetan Buddhist](#) schools, all whom consider themselves to be Madhyamikas. Madhyamaka thought has been categorized in various ways in India and Tibet. ^[note 13]

Early transmission

Influential early figures who are important in the transmission of Madhyamaka to Tibet include the Yogacara–Madhyamaka [Śāntarakṣita](#) (725–788), and his students [Haribhadra](#) and [Kamalashila](#) (740–795) as well as the later figures of [Atisha](#) (982–1054) and his pupil [Dromtön](#) (1005–1064) who were mainly influenced by [Candrakīrti](#)'s Madhyamaka. ^[133]

The early transmission of Buddhism to Tibet saw these two main strands of philosophical views in debate with each other. The first was the camp which defended the Yogacara–Madhyamaka interpretation centered on the works of the scholars of the Sangphu monastery founded by [Ngog Loden Sherab](#) (1059–1109) and also includes Chapa Chokyi Senge (1109–1169). ^[134] The second camp was those who championed the work of [Candrakīrti](#) over the Yogacara–Madhyamaka interpretation, and included [Patsab Nyima Drag](#) (b. 1055) and Jayananda (fl 12th century). ^[134] According to John Dunne, it was the Madhyamaka interpretation and the works of Candrakīrti which became dominant over time in Tibet. ^[134]

Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika interpretations

Main article: [Svatantrika - Prasāṅgika distinction](#)

In [Tibetan](#) Buddhist scholarship, a distinction began to be made between the Autonomist (*Svātantrika*, *rang rgyud pa*) and Consequentialist (*Prāsaṅgika*, *Thal 'gyur pa*) approaches to Madhyamaka reasoning. The distinction was one invented by Tibetans, and not one made by classical Indian Madhyamikas.^[135] Tibetans mainly use the terms to refer to the logical procedures used by [Bhavaviveka](#) (who argued for the use of *svatantra-anumana* or autonomous syllogisms) and [Buddhapalita](#) (who held that one should only use *prasanga*, or *reductio ad absurdum*).^[136] Tibetan Buddhism further divides *svātantrika* into [Sautrantika](#) Svātantrika Madhyamaka (applied to [Bhāviveka](#)), and [Yogācāra](#) Svātantrika Madhyamaka ([Śāntaraksita](#) and [Kamalaśīla](#)).^[137]

The svātantrika states that conventional phenomena are understood to have a conventional essential existence, but without an ultimately existing essence. In this way they believe they are able to make positive or "autonomous" assertions using syllogistic logic because they are able to share a subject that is established as appearing in common – the proponent and opponent use the same kind of valid cognition to establish it. The name comes from this quality of being able to use autonomous arguments in debate.^[136] In contrast, the central technique avowed by the *prasaṅgika* is to show by *prasaṅga* (or *reductio ad absurdum*) that any positive assertion (such as "asti" or "nāsti", "it is", or "it is not") or [view](#) regarding phenomena must be regarded as merely conventional (*saṃvṛti* or *lokavyavahāra*). The *prāsaṅgika* holds that it is not necessary for the proponent and opponent to use the same kind of valid cognition (*pramana*) to establish a common subject; indeed it is possible to change the view of an opponent through a *reductio* argument.

Although presented as a divide in doctrine, the major difference between svātantrika and prasāṅgika may be between two style of reasoning and arguing, while the division itself is exclusively Tibetan. Tibetan scholars were aware of alternative Madhyamaka sub-classifications, but later Tibetan doxography emphasizes the nomenclature of prāsaṅgika versus svātantrika. No conclusive evidence can show the existence of an Indian antecedent, and it is not certain to what degree individual writers in Indian and Tibetan discussion held each of these views and if they held a view generally or only in particular instances. Both Prāsaṅgikas and Svātantrikas cited material in the [āgamas](#) in support of their arguments.^[138]

The Tibetan [Longchen Rabjam](#) noted in the 14th century that Candrakīrti favored the *prasaṅga* approach when specifically discussing the analysis for ultimacy, but otherwise he made positive assertions such as when describing the paths of Buddhist practice in his *Madhyamakavatāra*. Therefore even *prāsaṅgikas* make positive assertions when discussing conventional practice, they simply stick to using reductios specifically when analyzing for ultimate truth.^[136]

Jonang and shentong

Further Tibetan philosophical developments began in response to the works of the scholar [Dölpopa Shérab Gyeltsen](#) (1292 – 1361) and led to two distinctly opposed Tibetan Madhyamaka views on the nature of ultimate reality.^{[139][140]} [Dolpopa](#), founder of the [Jonang](#) school, viewed the Buddha and [Buddha Nature](#) as *not* intrinsically empty, but as truly real, unconditioned, and replete with eternal, changeless virtues.^[141] In the Jonang school, ultimate reality, i.e. Buddha Nature (*tathagatagarbha*) is only empty of what is impermanent and conditioned (conventional reality), not of its own self which is ultimate [Buddhahood](#) and the [luminous nature of mind](#).^[142] In [Jonang](#), this ultimate reality is a “ground or substratum” which is “uncreated and indestructible, noncomposite and beyond the chain of dependent origination.”^[143] An important Tibetan treatise on Emptiness and the Buddha Nature is found in [Dolpopa’s](#) voluminous study, *Mountain Doctrine*.^[144] Basing himself on the Indian *Tathāgatagarbha sūtras* as his main sources, [Dolpopa](#) described the Buddha Nature as:

[N]on-material emptiness, emptiness that is far from an annihilatory emptiness, great emptiness that is the ultimate pristine wisdom of superiors ... Buddha earlier than all Buddhas, ... causeless original Buddha.^[145]

This “great emptiness” i.e. the *tathāgatagarbha* is said to be filled with eternal powers and virtues:

[P]ermanent, stable, eternal, everlasting. Not compounded by causes and conditions, the matrix-of-one-gone-thus is intrinsically endowed with ultimate buddha qualities of body, speech, and mind such as the ten powers; it is not something that did not exist before and is newly produced; it is self-arisen.’^[146]

The Jonang position came to be known as “emptiness of other” (*gzhan stong*, *shentong*), because it held that the ultimate truth was positive reality that was not empty of its own nature, only empty of what it was other than itself.^[147] Dolpopa considered his view a form of Madhyamaka, and called his system “Great Madhyamaka”.^[148] Dolpopa opposed what he called [rangtong](#) (self-empty), the view that ultimate reality is that which is empty of self nature in a relative and absolute sense, that is to say that it is empty of everything, including itself. It is thus not a transcendental ground or metaphysical absolute which includes all the eternal Buddha qualities. This rangtong shentong distinction became a central issue of contention among Tibetan Buddhist philosophers.

Alternative interpretations of the shentong view is also taught outside of Jonang. Some [Kagyü](#) figures, like [Jamgon Kongtrul](#) (1813 – 1899) as well as the unorthodox [Sakya](#) philosopher [Sakya Chokden](#) (1428 – 1507), supported their own forms of shentong.

Tsongkhapa and Gelug

See also: [Prasaṅgika according to Tsongkhapa](#)

The [Gelug school](#) was founded in the beginning of the 15th century by [Je Tsongkhapa](#) (1357 – 1419).^[149] Tsongkhapa's conception of emptiness draws mainly from the works of "[prāsaṅgika](#)" Indian thinkers like Buddhapalita, Candrakīrti, and Shantideva and he argued that only their interpretation of Nāgārjuna was ultimately correct. According to José I. Cabezón, Tsongkhapa also argued that the ultimate truth or emptiness was "an absolute negation (*med dgag*)—the negation of inherent existence—and that nothing was exempt from being empty, including emptiness itself."^[147] He also maintained that the ultimate truth could be understood conceptually, an understanding which could later be transformed into a non-conceptual one. However, this could only be done through the use of Madhyamika reasoning, which he also sought to unify with the logical theories of [Dharmakīrti](#).^[147] Because of Tsongkhapa's view of emptiness as an absolute negation, he strongly attacked the other empty views of [Dolpopa](#) in his works. Tsongkhapa's major work on Madhyamaka is his commentary on the MMK called "Ocean of Reasoning".^[150]

According to [Thupten Jinpa](#), Tsongkhapa's "doctrine of the object of negation" is one of his most innovative but also controversial ideas. Tsongkhapa pointed out that if one wants to steer a middle course between the extremes of "over-negation" (straying into [nihilism](#)) and "under-negation" (and thus [reification](#)), it is important to have a clear concept of exactly what is being negated in Madhyamaka analysis.^{[151][152]} Tsongkhapa's understanding of the object of negation (Tib. *dgag bya*) is subtle, and he describes it as an "innate apprehension of self-existence" which Thupten Jinpa glosses as a belief that we have that leads us to "perceive things and events as possessing some kind of intrinsic existence and identity." Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka therefore, does not deny the conventional existence of things *per se*, but merely rejects our way of experiencing things as existing in an [essentialist](#) way, which are false projections or imputations.^[151] This is the root of ignorance, which for Tsongkhapa is an "active defiling agency" (Sk. *kleśāvaraṇa*) which projects a false sense of reality onto objects.^[151] Because conventional existence (or 'mere appearance') as an interdependent phenomenon devoid of inherent existence is not negated (*khegs pa*) or "rationally undermined" in his analysis, Tsongkhapa's approach was criticized by other Tibetan Madhyamikas who preferred an anti-realist interpretation of Madhyamaka.^[153] As Garfield and Thakchoe note, this allows for a "robust sense of the reality of the conventional world in the context of emptiness".^[154]

Following Candrakīrti, Tsongkhapa also rejected the [Yogacara](#) view of mind only, and instead defended the conventional existence of external objects even though ultimately they are mere "thought constructions" (Tib. *rtog pas btags tsam*) of a deluded mind.^[152] Tsongkhapa also followed Candrakīrti in rejecting *svātantra*

(“autonomous”) reasoning, arguing that it was enough to show the unwelcome consequences (*prasaṅga*) of essentialist positions. ^[152]

Gelug scholarship has generally maintained and defended Tsongkhapa’s positions up until the present day, even if there are lively debates considering issues of interpretation. [Gendun Chopel](#) and the [14th Dalai Lama](#) are some of the most influential modern figures in Gelug Madhyamaka.

Sakya

The Sakya school has generally held a classic [prāsaṅgika](#) position following [Candrakīrti](#) closely, though with significant differences from the Gelug. Sakya scholars of Madhyamika, such as Rendawa Shyönnu Lodrö (1349 – 1412) and Rongtön Sheja Kunrig (1367 – 1450) were early critics of the “other empty” view. ^[155]

[Gorampa Sonam Senge](#) (1429–1489) was an important philosopher which defended the orthodox [Sakya](#) Madhyamika position, critiquing both Dolpopa and Tsongkhapa’s interpretations. He is widely studied, not only in Sakya, but also in Nyingma and Kagyu institutions. ^[156] According to Cabezón, Gorampa called his version of Madhyamaka “the Middle Way *qua* freedom from extremes” (*mtha’ bral dbu ma*) or “Middle Way *qua* freedom from proliferations” (*spros bral kyi dbu ma*) and claimed that the ultimate truth was ineffable, beyond predication or concept. ^[157] Cabezón states that Gorampa’s interpretation of Madhyamaka is “committed to a more literal reading of the Indian sources than either Dolpopa’s or Tsongkhapa’s, which is to say that it tends to take the Indian texts at face value.” ^[158] For Gorampa, emptiness is not just the absence of inherent existence, but it is the absence of the four extremes in all phenomena i.e. existence, nonexistence, both and neither (see: [catuṣkoṭi](#)), *without any further qualification*. ^[159] In other words, conventional truths are also an object of negation, because as Gorampa states “they are not found at all when subjected to ultimate rational analysis”. ^[160]

Hence, in contrast to the view of Tsongkhapa for example, Gorampa’s Madhyamaka negates *existence itself*, instead of merely negating “ultimate existence” or “inherent existence”. ^[159] As Garfield and Thakchoe note, for Tsongkhapa, conventional truth is “a kind of truth”, “a way of being real” while for Gorampa, it is “entirely false”, “unreal” and “truth only from the perspective of fools.” ^[161]

Regarding the Ultimate truth, Gorampa saw this as being divided into two parts: ^[159]

- The emptiness that is reached by rational analysis (this is actually only an analogue, and not the real thing).

- The emptiness that yogis fathom by means of their own individual gnosis, the real ultimate truth, which is reached by negating the previous rational understanding of emptiness.

Unlike most orthodox Sakyas, the philosopher [Sakya Chokden](#), a contemporary of Gorampa, also promoted a form of shentong as being complementary to rangtong. He saw shentong as useful for meditative practice, while rangtong as useful for cutting through views. ^[162]

Kagyu

In the [Kagyu](#) tradition, there is a broad field of opinion on the nature of emptiness, with some holding the other empty view while others holding different positions. One influential Kagyu thinker was [Rangjung Dorje, 3rd Karmapa Lama](#). His view synthesized Madhyamaka and Yogacara perspectives. According to Brunnholzl, regarding his position in the rangtong shentong debate he "can be said to regard these two as not being mutually exclusive and to combine them in a creative synthesis."^[163] However, [Rangjung Dorje](#) never uses these terms in any of his works and thus any claims to him being a promoter of shentong or otherwise is a later interpretation. ^[164]

Several Kagyu figures disagree with the view that shentong is a form of Madhyamaka. According to Brunnholzl, [Mikyö Dorje, 8th Karmapa Lama](#) (1507 – 1554) and [Second Pawo Rinpoche Tsugla Trengwa](#) see the term "Shentong Madhyamaka" as a misnomer, for them the Yogacara of Asanga and Vasubandhu and the system of Nagarjuna are "two clearly distinguished systems". They also refute the idea that there is "a permanent, intrinsically existing Buddha nature". ^[165]

[Mikyö Dorje](#) also argues that the language of other emptiness does not appear in any of the sutras or the treatises of the Indian masters. He attacks the view of [Dolpopa](#) as being against the sutras of ultimate meaning which state that all phenomena are emptiness as well as being against the treatises of the Indian masters. ^[166] [Mikyö Dorje](#) rejects both perspectives of rangtong and shentong as true descriptions of ultimate reality, which he sees as being "the utter peace of all discursiveness regarding being empty and not being empty". ^[167]

One of the most influential Kagyu philosophers in recent times was [Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Taye](#) (1813 – 1899) who advocated a system of Shentong Madhyamaka and held that primordial wisdom was "never empty of its own nature and it is there all the time". ^{[168][169]}

The modern Kagyu teacher [Khenpo Tsultrim](#) (1934 –), in his *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness*, presents five stages of meditation, which he relates to five tenet systems. ^{[170][171]} He holds the "Shentong Madhyamaka" as the highest view, above prasangika. He sees this as a meditation on *Paramarthasatya* ("Absolute Reality"), ^{[172][note 14]} *Buddhajñana*, ^[note 15] which is beyond concepts, and described by

terms as "truly existing."^[174] This approach helps "to overcome certain residual subtle concepts,"^[174] and "the habit - fostered on the earlier stages of the path - of negating whatever experience arises in his/her mind."^[175] It destroys false concepts, as does *prasāṅgika*, but it also alerts the practitioner "to the presence of a dynamic, positive Reality that is to be experienced once the conceptual mind is defeated."^[175]

Nyingma

In the [Nyingma](#) school, like in Kagyu, there is a variety of views. Some Nyingma thinkers promoted *shentong*, like [Katok Tsewang Norbu](#), but the most influential Nyingma thinkers like [Longchenpa](#) and [Ju Mipham](#) held a more classical [prāsaṅgika](#) interpretation while at the same time seeking to harmonize it with the view of [Dzogchen](#) tantras which are traditionally seen as the pinnacle of the Nyingma view.

According to [Sonam Thakchoe](#), the ultimate truth in the Nyingma tradition, following [Longchenpa](#), is mainly seen as being that "reality which transcends any mode of thinking and speech, one that unmistakably appears to the nonerroneous cognitive processes of the exalted and awakened beings" and this is said to be "inexpressible beyond words and thoughts" as well as the reality that is the "transcendence of all elaborations."^[176]

The most influential modern Nyingma scholar is [Jamgon Ju Mipham Gyatso](#) (1846 - 1912). He developed a unique theory of *Madhyamaka*, with two models of the two truths. While he adopts the traditional *Madhyamaka* model of two truths, in which the ultimate truth is emptiness, he also developed a second model, in which the ultimate truth is "reality as it is" (*de bzhin nyid*) which is "established as ultimately real" (*bden par grub pa*).^[176] This ultimate truth is associated with the *Dzogchen* concept of [Rigpa](#). While it might seem that this system conflicts with the traditional *Madhyamaka* interpretation, for Mipham this is not so. For while the traditional model which sees emptiness and ultimate truth as a negation is referring to the analysis of experience, the second *Dzogchen* influenced model refers to the experience of unity in meditation.^[177] Douglas Duckworth sees Mipham's work as an attempt to bring together the two main Mahayana philosophical systems of *Yogacara* and *Madhyamaka*, as well as *shentong* and *rangtong* into a coherent system in which both are seen as being of definitive meaning.^[178]

Regarding the *svatantrika prasāṅgika* debate, [Ju Mipham](#) explained that using positive assertions in logical debate may serve a useful purpose, either while debating with non-Buddhist schools or to move a student from a coarser to a more subtle view. Similarly, discussing an approximate ultimate helps students who have difficulty using only *prasaṅga* methods move closer to the understanding of the true ultimate. Ju Mipham felt that the ultimate non-enumerated truth of the *Svatantrika* was no different from the ultimate truth of the *Prāsaṅgika*. He felt

the only difference between them was with respect to how they discussed conventional truth and their approach to presenting a path. ^[136]

East Asian Madhyamaka

Sānlùn school

[Chinese Madhyamaka](#) (known as *Sānlùn*, or the three treatise school) began with the work of [Kumārajīva](#) (344 – 413 CE) who translated the works of Nāgārjuna (including the MMK, also known in China as the *Chung lun*, “*Madhyamakaśāstra*” ; [Taishō](#) 1564) to Chinese. Another influential text in Chinese Madhyamaka which was said to have been translated by Kumārajīva was the *Ta-chih-tu lun*, or **Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa Śāstra* (“Treatise which is a Teaching on the Great Perfection of Wisdom [Sūtra]”). According to Dan Arnold, this text is only extant in Kumārajīva’s translation and has material that differs from the work of Nāgārjuna. In spite of this, the *Ta-chih-tu lun* became a central text for Chinese interpretations of Madhyamaka emptiness. ^[179] *Sānlùn* figures like Kumārajīva’s pupil [Sengzhao](#) (384 – 414), and the later [Jizang](#) (549 – 623) were influential in restoring a more orthodox and non-essentialist interpretation of emptiness to Chinese Buddhism. [Yin Shun](#) (1906 – 2005) is one modern figure aligned with *Sānlùn*.

Sengzhao is often seen as the founder of *Sānlùn*. He was influenced not just by Indian Madhyamaka and [Mahayana sutras](#) like the [Vimalakirti](#), but also by [Taoist](#) works and he widely quotes the [Lao-tzu](#) and the [Chuang-tzu](#) and uses terminology of the Neo-Daoist “Mystery Learning” ([xuanxue](#) 玄学) tradition while maintaining a uniquely Buddhist philosophical view. ^{[180][181]} In his essay “The Emptiness of the Non-Absolute” (*buzhenkong*, 不真空), Sengzhao points out that the nature of phenomena cannot be taken as being either existent or inexistent:

Hence, there are indeed reasons why myriad dharmas are inexistent and cannot be taken as existent; there are reasons why [myriad dharmas] are not inexistent and cannot be taken as inexistent. Why? If we would say that they exist, their existent is not real; if we would say that they don’ t exist, their phenomenal forms have taken shape. Having forms and shapes, they are not inexistent. Being not real, they are not truly existent. Hence the meaning of *bu zhen kong* [not really empty, 不真空] is made manifest. ^[182]

Sengzhao saw the central problem in understanding emptiness as the discriminatory activity of [prapañca](#). According to Sengzhao, delusion arises through a dependent relationship between phenomenal things, naming, thought and reification and correct understanding lies outside of words and concepts. Thus, while emptiness is the lack of intrinsic self in all things, this emptiness is not itself an absolute and cannot be grasped by the conceptual mind, it can be only be realized through non-conceptual wisdom ([prajña](#)). ^[183] [Jizang](#) (549 – 623)

was another central figure in Chinese Madhyamaka who wrote numerous commentaries on Nagarjuna and Aryadeva and is considered to be the leading representative of the school. ^[184] [Jizang](#) called his method "deconstructing what is misleading and revealing what is corrective". He insisted that one must never settle on any particular viewpoint or perspective but constantly reexamine one's formulations to avoid reifications of thought and behavior. ^[184] In his commentary on the MMK, Jizang's method and understanding of emptiness can be seen:

The Abhidharma thinkers regard the four holy truths as true. The Satyasiddhi regards merely the truth of cessation of suffering, i.e., the principle of emptiness and equality, as true. The southern Mahāyāna tradition regards the principle that refutes truths as true, and the northern [Mahāyāna tradition] regards thatness [suchness] and prajñā as true... Examining these all together, if there is a single [true] principle, it is an eternal view, which is false. If there is no principle at all, it is an evil view, which is also false. Being both existent and non-existent consists of the eternal and nihilistic views altogether. Being neither existent nor nonexistent is a foolish view. One replete with these four phrases has all [wrong] views. One without these four phrases has a severe nihilistic view. Now that [one] does not know how to name what a mind has nothing to rely upon and is free from conceptual construction, [he] foists "thatness" [suchness] upon it, one attains sainthood of the three vehicles... Being deluded in regard to thatness [suchness], one falls into the six realms of disturbed life and death. ^[185]

In one of his early treatises called "The Meaning of the two Truths" (*Erdiyi*), Jizang, expounds the steps to realize the nature of the ultimate truth of emptiness as follows:

In the first step, one recognises reality of the phenomena on the conventional level, but assumes their non-reality on the ultimate level. In the second step, one becomes aware of Being or Non-Being on the conventional level and negates both at the ultimate level. In the third step, one either asserts or negates Being and Non-Being on the conventional level, neither confirming nor rejecting them on the ultimate level. Hence, there is ultimately no assertion or negation anymore; therefore, on the conventional level, one becomes free to accept or reject anything. ^[186]

In the modern era, there has been a revival of [Mādhyamaka](#) in Chinese Buddhism. A major figure in this revival is the scholar monk [Yin Shun](#) (1906 - 2005). ^[187] Yin Shun emphasized the study of Indian Buddhist sources as primary and his books on [Mādhyamaka](#) had a profound influence on modern Chinese Madhyamika scholarship. ^[188] He argued that the works of [Nagarjuna](#) were "the inheritance of the conceptualisation of dependent arising as proposed in the [Agamas](#)" and he thus based his Mādhyamaka interpretations on the Agamas rather than on Chinese scriptures and commentaries. ^[189] He saw the writings of Nagarjuna as the correct Buddhadharma while considering the writings of the Sānlùn school as being

corrupted due to their synthesizing of the Tathagata-garbha doctrine into Madhyamaka. ^[190]

Many modern Chinese [Mādhyamaka](#) scholars such as Li Zhifu, Yang Huinan and Lan Jifu have been students of Yin Shun. ^[191]

Chán

The [Chán/Zen-tradition](#) emulated Madhyamaka-thought via the San-lun Buddhists, influencing its supposedly "illogical" way of communicating "absolute truth." ^[7] The Madhyamika of Sengzhao for example, influenced the views of the Chan patriarch [Shen Hui](#) (670–762), a critical figure in the development of Chan, as can be seen by his "Illuminating the Essential Doctrine" (*Hsie Tsung Chi*). This text emphasizes that true emptiness or [Suchness](#) cannot be known through thought since it is free from thought (*wu-nien*): ^[192]

Thus we come to realize that both selves and things are, in their essence, empty, and existence and non-existence both disappear.

Mind is fundamentally non-action; the way is truly no-thought (*wu-nien*).

There is no thought, no reflection, no seeking, no attainment, no this, no that, no coming, no going.

Shen Hui also states that true emptiness is not nothing, but it is a "Subtle Existence" (*miao-yu*), which is just "Great Prajña." ^[192]

Western Buddhism

Thich Nhat Hanh

[Thich Nhat Hanh](#) explains the Madhyamaka concept of emptiness through the related concept of interdependence. In this analogy, there is no first or ultimate cause for anything that occurs. Instead, all things are dependent on innumerable causes and conditions that are themselves dependent on innumerable causes and conditions. The interdependence of all phenomena, including the self, is a helpful way to undermine mistaken views about inherence, or that one's self is inherently existent. It is also a helpful way to discuss Mahayana teachings on motivation, compassion, and ethics. The comparison to interdependence has produced recent discussion comparing Mahayana ethics to environmental ethics. ^[193]

Modern Madhyamaka

Madhyamaka forms an alternative to the perennialist and essentialist (neo-)Advaita understanding of [nondualism](#) or modern spirituality.^{[web 1][web 2][web 3]} The classical Madhyamaka-teachings are complemented with [postmodern philosophy](#),^[web 4] [critical sociology](#),^[web 5] and [social constructionism](#).^[web 6] These approaches stress that there is no transcendental reality beyond this phenomenal world,^[web 7] and in some cases even explicitly distinguish themselves from (neo-)Advaita approaches.^[web 8]

Influences and critiques

Yogacara

The [Yogacara](#) school was the other major Mahayana philosophical school (darsana) in India and its complex relationship with Madhyamaka changed over time. The [Saṃdhinirmocana sūtra](#), perhaps the earliest Yogacara text, proclaims itself as being above the doctrine of emptiness taught in other sutras. According to Paul Williams, the Saṃdhinirmocana claims that other sutras that teach emptiness as well as Madhyamika teachings on emptiness are merely skillful means and thus are not definitive, like the teachings in the Saṃdhinirmocana.^[194] As Mark Siderits points out, Yogacara authors like [Asanga](#) were careful to point out that the doctrine of emptiness required interpretation in lieu of their three natures theory which posits an inexpressible ultimate that is the object of a Buddha's cognition.^[195] Asanga also argued that one cannot say that all things are empty unless there *are* things to be seen as either empty or non-empty in the first place.^[196] Asanga attacks the view which states "The truth is that all is just conceptual fictions" by stating:

As for their view, due to the absence of the thing itself which serves as basis of the concept, conceptual fictions must all likewise absolutely not exist. How then will it be true that all is just conceptual fictions? Through this conception on their part, reality, conceptual fiction, and the two together are all denied. Because they deny both conceptual fiction and reality, they should be considered the nihilist-in-chief.^[197]

[Asanga](#) also critiqued Madhyamaka because he held that it could lead to a laxity in the following of ethical precepts as well as for being "imaginatively constructed views that are arrived at only through reasoning."^[198] He further states:

How, again, is emptiness wrongly conceptualized? Some ascetics and Brahmins do not acknowledge that [viz. intrinsic nature] of which something is empty. Nor do they acknowledge that which is empty [viz. things and dharmas]. It is in this way that emptiness is said to be wrongly conceived. For what reason? Because that of which it is empty is non-existent, but that which is empty is existent—it is thus that emptiness is possible. What will be empty of what, where, when

everything is unreal? This thing's being devoid of that is not [then] possible. Thus emptiness is wrongly conceptualized in this case.

Asanga also wrote that "if nothing is real, there cannot be any ideas (*prajñaptī*). Someone who holds this view is a nihilist, with whom one should not speak or share living quarters. This person falls into a bad rebirth and takes others with him."^[199] [Vasubandhu](#) also states that emptiness does not mean that things have no intrinsic nature, but that this nature is "inexpressible and only to be apprehended by a kind of cognition that transcends the subject-object duality."^[195] Thus early Yogacarins were engaged in a project to reinterpret the radical Madhyamaka view of emptiness. Later Yogacarins like [Sthiramati](#) and [Dharmapala](#) debated with their Madhyamika contemporaries.^[200] However, Yogacara authors also commented on Madhyamika texts. As noted by Garfield, "Asaṅga, Sthiramati, and Guṇamati composed commentaries on the foundational text of Madhyamaka, Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*."^[201]

According to [Xuanzang](#), [Bhavaviveka](#), who critiques Yogacara views in his *Madhyamakahrdayakārikāḥ*, was disturbed by the views of Yogacarins and their critiques of Madhyamaka as nihilism, and himself traveled to [Nalanda](#) to debate Dharmapala face to face, but Dharmapala refused.^[202] Bhavaviveka quotes the attacks from the Yogacarins in his texts as claiming that while the Yogacara approach to prajñāparamita is the "means to attain omniscience", the Madhyamaka approach which "concentrates on the negation of arising and cessation" is not.^[203] Bhavaviveka responds to various Yogacara attacks and views in his *Tarkajvālā* (Blaze of reason) including the view that there are no external objects ([idealism](#)), the view that there is no use for logical argumentation (*tarka*), and the view that the dependent nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*) exists in an absolute sense.^[204]

Advaita Vedanta

Several modern scholars have argued that the early [Advaita Vedanta](#) thinker [Gaudapada](#) (c.6th century CE), was influenced by Madhyamaka thought. They note that he borrowed the concept of "ajāta" (un-born) from Madhyamaka philosophy,^{[205][206]} which also uses the term "anutpāda" (non-arising, un-originated, non-production).^{[207][web 9]} The Buddhist tradition usually uses the term "anutpāda" for the absence of an origin^{[205][207]} or [sunyata](#).^{[208][note 16]} "Ajātivāda" is the fundamental philosophical doctrine of [Gaudapada](#).^[212] According to Gaudapada, the Absolute ([Brahman](#)) is not subject to birth, change and death. Echoing Nagarjuna's use of the [catuskoti](#), Gaudapada writes that "nothing whatsoever is originated either from itself or from something else; nothing whatsoever existent, non-existent, or both existent and non-existent is originated."^[213]

However, it has been noted that Gaudapada's ultimate philosophical perspective is quite different from Nagarjuna's in that Gaudapada posits a metaphysical absolute based on the [Mandukya Upanishad](#) and thus he remains primarily a

[Vedantin](#).^[214] The Absolute is *ajā*, the unborn eternal.^[212] The empirical [world](#) of [appearances](#) is considered unreal, and not [absolutely existent](#).^[212] In this sense, Gaudapada also shares a doctrine of [two truths](#) or two levels of reality with Madhyamaka. According to Gaudapada, this absolute, [Brahman](#), cannot undergo alteration, so the phenomenal world cannot arise from Brahman. If the world cannot arise, yet is an empirical fact, then the world has to be an unreal^[note 17] appearance of Brahman. From the level of ultimate truth (*paramārthatā*) the phenomenal world is [Maya](#) (illusion).^[214]

Richard King notes that the fourth prakarana of the *Gaudapadiyakarika* promotes several Mahayana Buddhist ideas, such as a [middle way](#) free from extremes, not being attached to dharmas and it even references beings called "Buddhas". King notes that this could be an attempt to either reach a [rapprochement](#) with Buddhists or to woo Buddhists over to Vedanta.^[215] However, King adds that "from a Madhyamaka perspective, the *Gaudapadiyakarika*'s acceptance of an unchanging Absolute supporting the world of appearances is a mistaken form of eternalism, despite Gaudapadian protestations to the contrary."^[215]

[Shankara](#) (early 8th century), a later Advaitin, directly dismissed Madhyamaka as irrational and nihilistic, stating that it was a kind of nihilism that held that "absolutely nothing exists" and that this view:^{[213][216][217]}

is contradicted by all means of right knowledge and requires no special refutation. For this apparent world, whose existence is guaranteed by all means of knowledge, cannot be denied, unless some one should find out some new truth (based on which he could impugn its existence) – for a general principle is proved by the absence of contrary instances.

This critique was upheld by most post Shankara Advaitins. However this did not prevent later [Vedanta](#) thinkers like [Bhaskara](#) of accusing Shankara of being a crypto-buddhist for his view that everyday reality is Maya and that [Brahman](#) has no qualities and is undifferentiated. Another Vedantin philosopher, [Ramanuja](#) (1017–1137), directly compared Shankara's "mayavada" views to Madhyamaka, arguing that if [Maya/Avidya](#) is unreal, "that would involve the acceptance of the Madhyamika doctrine, viz. of a general void".^[217] This critique by comparison is also echoed by the later philosophers like [Madhva](#) as well as [Vijñanabhikṣu](#) (15th or 16th century), who goes as far as to call Shankara a [nastika](#) (unorthodox). Later Advaitins also acknowledged the similarity of their doctrine with Madhyamaka. Vimuktatma states that if by *asat* (nonbeing), the Madhyamaka means Maya and not mere negation, then he is close to Vedanta. Sadananda also states that if by [Sunya](#), what is meant is the reality beyond the intellect, then the Madhyamaka accepts Vedanta. [Sri Harsha](#) notes that the two schools are similar, but they differ in that Advaita holds consciousness to be pure, real and eternal, while Madhyamaka denies this.^[217]

Jain philosophy

Modern scholars such as Jeffery Long have also noted that the influential [Jain](#) philosopher [Kundakunda](#) also adopted a theory of [two truths](#), possibly under the influence of Nagarjuna.^[218] According to W. J. Johnson he also adopts other Buddhist terms like [prajña](#) under the influence of Nagarjuna, though he applies the term to knowledge of the Self (jiva), which is also the ultimate perspective (*nīścayanaya*), which is distinguished from the worldly perspective (*vyavahāranaya*).^[219]

The Jain philosopher [Haribhadra](#) also mentions Madhyamaka. In both the *Yogabindu* and the *Yogadrstīsamuccaya*, Haribhadra singles out Nagarjuna's claim that [samsara](#) and [nirvana](#) are not different for criticism, labeling the view a "fantasy".^[220]

Taoism

It is well known that medieval Chinese [Taoism](#) was influenced by Mahayana Buddhism. One particular school, the Chongxuan (重玄, "Twofold Mystery") founded by Cheng Xuanying (fl. 632–650), was particularly involved in borrowing and adapting Madhyamaka concepts like emptiness, the two truths and the [catuskoti](#) into their [Taoist philosophical](#) system.^[221]

Modern scholarship

As noted by Ruegg, Western scholarship has given a broad variety of interpretations of Madhyamaka, including: "[nihilism](#), [monism](#), [irrationalism](#), [misology](#), [agnosticism](#), [scepticism](#), criticism, dialectic, [mysticism](#), [acosmism](#), [absolutism](#), [relativism](#), [nominalism](#), and linguistic analysis with therapeutic value".^[222] [Jay L. Garfield](#) likewise notes:

"Modern interpreters differ among themselves about the correct way to read it as least as much as canonical interpreters. Nagarjuna has been read as an idealist (Murti 1960), a nihilist (Wood 1994), a skeptic (Garfield 1995), a pragmatist (Kalupahana 1986), and as a mystic (Streng 1967). He has been regarded as a critic of logic (Inada 1970), as a defender of classical logic (Hayes 1994), and as a pioneer of paraconsistent logic (Garfield and Priest 2003)".^[223]

These interpretations "reflect almost as much about the viewpoints of the scholars involved as do they reflect the content of Nāgārjuna's concepts".^[224]

According to Andrew Tuck, the Western study of Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka can be divided into three phases:^[225]

1. The [Kantian](#) phase, exemplified by [Theodore Stcherbatsky](#)'s "The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāna" (1927) who argued that Nagarjuna divides the world into appearance (samsara) and an absolute noumenal reality (nirvana). This

is also seen in T. R. V. Murti's 1955 "The Central Philosophy of Buddhism".

2. The analytic phase, exemplified by [Richard Robinson](#)'s 1957 article "Some Logical Aspects of Nāgārjuna's System", sought to explain Madhyamaka using [analytic philosophy](#)'s [logical](#) apparatus.
3. The post-Wittgensteinian phase, exemplified by Frederick Streng's "Emptiness" and Chris Gudmunsen's "Wittgenstein and Buddhism", "set out to stress similarities between Nāgārjuna and in particular the later [Wittgenstein](#) and his criticism of analytic philosophy.

The Sri Lankan philosopher [David Kalupahana](#) meanwhile saw Madhyamaka as a response to certain essentialist philosophical tendencies which had arisen after the time of the Buddha and sees it as a restoration of the early Buddhist middle way [pragmatist](#) position. ^[226]^[111]

Among the critical voices, [Richard P. Hayes](#) (influenced by [Richard Robinson](#)'s view that Nagarjuna's logic fails modern tests for validity) interprets the works of Nagarjuna as "primitive" and guilty "errors in reasoning" such as that of [equivocation](#). Hayes states that Nagarjuna was relying on the different meanings of the word *svabhava* to make statements which were not logical and that his work relies on various "fallacies and tricks". ^[227]^[228] William Magee strongly disagrees with Hayes, referring to Tsongkhapa's interpretation of Nagarjuna to argue that Hayes misidentifies Nagarjuna's understanding of the different meanings of the term *svabhava*. ^[229] Many recent western scholars (such as Garfield, ^[230] Napper, ^[231] Hopkins, ^[232]) have tended to adopt a [Gelug](#) Prāsaṅgika influenced interpretation of Madhyamaka. However, American philosopher Mark Siderits is one exception, who has attempted to defend the Svātantrika position as a coherent and rational interpretation of Madhyamaka. ^[233] C.W. Huntington meanwhile has been particularly critical of the modern Western attempt to read Nagarjuna "through the lens of modern [symbolic logic](#)" and to see him as compatible with [analytical philosophy](#)'s logical system. ^[228] He argues that in reading Nagarjuna, a thinker who he sees as "profoundly distrustful of logic", in an overly logical manner, we "prejudice our understanding of Nagarjuna's insistence that he has no proposition (*pratijñā*)."^[228] He puts forth a more literary interpretation that focuses on the *effect* Nagarjuna was attempting to "conjure" on his readers (i.e. an experience of having no [views](#)) instead of asking how it works (or doesn't) in a logical manner. ^[228] In response to this, [Jay Garfield](#) defends the logical reading of Nagarjuna through the use of Anglo-American analytical philosophy as well as arguing that "Nagarjuna and Candrakīrti deploy arguments, take themselves to do so, and even if they did not, we would be wise to do so in commenting on their texts". ^[64] Another recent interpreter, [Jan Westerhoff](#), argues that Madhyamaka is a kind of [anti-foundationalism](#), "which does not just deny the objective, intrinsic, and mind-independent existence of some class of objects, but rejects such existence for any kinds of objects that we could regard as the most fundamental building-blocks of the world."^[234]

See also

- [Buddha-nature](#)
- [Candrakīrti](#)
- [Materialism](#)
- [Mentalism](#)
- [Nagarjuna](#)
 - [Mūlamadhyamakakārikā](#)
- [Schools of Buddhism](#)
 - [Prasangika](#)
 - [Svatantrika](#)
 - [Yogachara](#)
 - [East Asian Madhyamaka](#)
- [Śūnyatā](#)
- [Tathagata](#)
- [Two Truths Doctrine](#)

Notes

1.

- 'Own-beings', ^[20] unique nature or substance, ^[21] an identifying characteristic; an identity; an essence, ^[22]
- • A differentiating characteristic, ^[22] the fact of being dependent, ^[22]
- • 'Being', ^[16] 'self-nature or substance' ^[23]
- • Not being present; absence: ^[24]
- • svabhava
- • Nāgārjuna equates svabhāva (essence) with bhāva (existence) in Chapter 15 of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā
- • Chapter 21 of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā goes into the reasoning behind this. ^[56]
- • See also [Atthakavagga and Parayanavagga](#), for early, Madhyamaka-like texts from the Buddhist canon on freedom from views.
- • In the Pali canon, these chapters are the fourth and fifth chapters of the [Khuddaka Nikaya](#)'s [Sutta Nipata](#), respectively.
- • Wynne devotes a chapter to the Parayanavagga.
- • [Mūlamadhyamakakārikā](#) 24:18
- • Alex Trisoglio: "In the 8th century, Shantarakshita went to Tibet and founded the monastery at Samyé. He was not a direct disciple of Bhavaviveka, but the disciple of one of his disciples. He combined the Madhyamika-Svatantrika and Cittamatra schools, and created a new school of Madhyamika called Svatantrika-Yogachara-Madhyamika. His disciple Kamalashila, who wrote The Stages of Meditation upon Madhyamika (uma' i sgom rim), developed his ideas further, and together they were very influential in Tibet." *Khyentse Rinpoche, Dzongsar Jamyang (2003). "Introduction". In Alex Trisoglio (ed.). [Introduction to the](#)*

[Middle Way: Chandrakīrti's Madhyamakavatara with Commentary](#) (PDF) (1st ed.). Dordogne, France: Khyentse Foundation. p. 8. Retrieved 7 January 2013.

- • In his Tattvaratnāvalī, the Indian scholar Advayaśastrya classified Madhyamaka into "those who uphold non-duality from the simile of illusion" (*māyopamādvayavādin*) and "those who uphold non-placement into any dharma" (*sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavādin*); furthermore, in the Madhyamakāśāṭka he envisaged a specifically Vajrayāna type of Madhyamaka. ^{[[citation needed](#)]}
- • According to Hookham, non-dual experience is Ultimate Reality. ^{[[173](#)]}
- • According to Hookham, "The Chinese Tathagarba schools describe Buddhajñāna as the totality of all that is, which pervades every part of all that is in its totality." ^{[[173](#)]} According to Hookham, for Shentong Buddhajñāna is "the non-dual nature of Mind completely unobscured and endowed with its countless Buddha Qualities (*Buddhagūṇas*). ^{[[173](#)]}
- • The term is also used in the [Lankavatara Sutra](#). ^{[[209](#)]} According to D.T Suzuki, "anūtpada" is not the opposite of "utpada", but transcends opposites. It is the [seeing into the true nature of existence](#), ^{[[210](#)]} the seeing that "all objects are without self-substance". ^{[[211](#)]}

17. • C. q. "transitory"

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- • Susan Kahn further explains: "The emptiness of emptiness refutes ultimate truth as yet another argument for essentialism under the guise of being beyond the conventional or as the foundation of it. To realize emptiness is not to find a transcendent place or truth to land in but to see the conventional as merely conventional. Here lies the key to liberation. For to see the deception is to be free of deception, like a magician who knows the magic trick. When one is no longer fooled by false appearances, phenomena are neither reified nor denied. They are understood interdependently, as ultimately empty and thus, as only conventionally real. This is the Middle Way."<ref group="web" name="Susan Kahn">[Susan Kahn, *The Two Truths of Buddhism and The Emptiness of Emptiness*](#).
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