

A Comparative Analysis of the Concept of Śūnyatā (Emptiness) in the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra Schools

HPPH7019 “Buddhist Philosophy – Mahayana and Zen Approaches”

Assignment 2

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The concept of *śūnyatā* or emptiness stands as a cornerstone of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, representing the radical insight that all phenomena are devoid of inherent existence. But some viewpoints aren't consistently present across the Mahāyāna philosophical tradition. Opinions might vary between different teachings within philosophical schools. Two of the most influential schools: Madhyamaka and Yogācāra for instance, regard *śūnyatā* (emptiness) as vital for achieving enlightenment, yet they do so through distinct metaphysical frameworks and epistemological standpoints.

Madhyamaka, founded by Nāgārjuna, offers a systematic critique of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), positing *śūnyatā* as the ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) — not only as a rejection of inherent existence, but of any conceptual foundation, including emptiness itself.

At the heart of Yogācāra, lies the doctrine of *viññaptimātra* (consciousness only), which interprets *śūnyatā* as the absence of dualistic perception and external objects, emphasizing on the transformation of consciousness as the key to liberation. Yogācāra, reframes the teachings on *śūnyatā* therefore through a phenomenological lens.

This contrast has given rise to long-standing philosophical debates and the question whether Madhyamaka and Yogācāra "represent irreconcilable visions of the fundamental nature of

reality" or "distinct perspectives that, together, yield a coherent whole" remains central (Garfield & Westerhoff, 2015, p. 1).

While polemical texts—such as Candrakīrti's critique of Yogācāra—highlight clear doctrinal tensions between the two schools, other voices within the tradition point towards integration rather than division. For instance, Śāntarakṣita's *Madhyamakālamkāra* offers a reconciliatory approach, suggesting that “the realization of the Mahāyāna is... obtained by applying the arguments of each [school] in its proper place” (Garfield & Westerhoff, 2015, p. 7). Likewise, Tibetan and Chinese doxographic traditions, although often hierarchical in structure, sometimes recognise models in which “a synthesis of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra... is ranked above both” (Garfield & Westerhoff, 2015, p. 2).

When examined together, these examples suggest that the two schools may not be fundamentally opposed in their core views. Instead they might interpret key concepts like *śūnyatā* through different lenses or frameworks.

In this essay we explore how each tradition interprets and applies *śūnyatā*, not only in metaphysical terms, but also in relation to mind, reality, and the nature of truth. Rather than assuming the schools are oppositional, we'll examine their differences, overlaps, and eventual syntheses, aiming to uncover the depth and dynamism of Mahāyāna philosophical thought.

The development of both the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra schools can be understood as philosophical responses to evolving interpretations within Buddhist thought. Particularly to the realist tendencies found in the Abhidharma traditions and the early Buddhist schools' attempts to systematically categorize phenomena (*dharma*s). Although these early systems aimed to uphold the Buddha's teachings on impermanence and non-self, they often ended up treating *dharma*s as ultimately real - unintentionally drifting toward a kind of metaphysical essentialism.

Madhyamaka, founded by Nāgārjuna in the 2nd – 3rd centuries CE, emerged as a powerful critique of this philosophical direction. In his foundational work, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*), Nāgārjuna employed rigorous logical reasoning to dismantle all views that posit inherent or self-existent nature (*svabhāva*). Not only of persons but of all phenomena, including conceptual categories and doctrinal views.

Central to Nāgārjuna's critique is his argument that *svabhāva*, if truly intrinsic and unconditioned, could not arise from causes and conditions. Since what is dependent is, by definition, not self-existent.¹ His philosophy underscored the radical meaning of dependent origination by demonstrating that no phenomenon exists independently or by its own nature. As the editors Garfield and Westerhoff observe, "Madhyamaka is antifoundationalist in both senses [ontological and epistemological]... It rejects the possibility of any such [ultimate] theory" (Garfield & Westerhoff, 2015, p. 3). For Madhyamaka, *śūnyatā* is not a metaphysical substance but the absence of intrinsic or own nature, applicable to all levels of experience and understanding.

Yogācāra was developed in the 4th – 5th centuries CE by Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. This school developed a different response to the metaphysical challenges of the time. Rather than focusing solely on the negation of intrinsic existence, Yogācāra developed a sophisticated model of consciousness to account for the persistence of ignorance and suffering and the cessation of it. Texts such as the *Triṃśikā* (Thirty Verses) by Vasubandhu and the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* (Compendium of the Great Vehicle) attributed to Asaṅga present a Yogācāra view in which experience arises from the storehouse consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*) and appears as a split

¹ Nāgārjuna argues that *essence* (*svabhāva*) cannot arise from *causes and conditions*, because by definition, essence is eternal and independent. If something is caused, it is conditioned—thus fabricated—and cannot be considered essential. This argument is developed in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XV:1–2, where he writes: "Essence arising from / causes and conditions makes no sense. / If essence came from causes and conditions, / then it would be fabricated. How could it be appropriate / for fabricated essence to come to be? / Essence itself is not artificial / and does not depend on another." (*Nāgārjuna*, 1995, p. 219).

between subject and object. But while this seems to emphasize mind-only idealism, Yogācārins do not reject *śūnyatā*. Instead, they reinterpret it: rather than denying inherent existence across the board, as Madhyamaka does, they focus specifically on the emptiness of external objects — understood as mental constructions rather than independently existing things.

The divergence becomes especially evident in the contrast between Madhyamaka's global antirealism and Yogācāra's more targeted critique: "Mādhyamikas... are committed to a global antirealism, while Yogācāras must restrict the scope of their antirealism to the external and the conventional" (Garfield & Westerhoff, 2015, p. 6). This leads to fundamentally different philosophical commitments: while Madhyamaka deconstructs all conceptual elaboration, Yogācāra offers a path of cognitive transformation based on the refinement of mental perception.

Both schools, then, arise from a shared Mahāyāna motivation to deepen the analysis of *śūnyatā* and correct misconceptions arising from overly substantialist readings of Buddhist doctrine. Yet, their divergent philosophical orientations, Madhyamaka's radical deconstruction and Yogācāra's transformation of consciousness, lead to significantly different articulations of *śūnyatā* and its implications for liberation. As Garfield and Westerhoff note, "Philosophically, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra are each attempts to spell out the metaphysics of emptiness characteristic of the Mahāyāna. But they do so in very different vocabularies, and in very different ways" (Garfield & Westerhoff, 2015, p. 1).

Madhyamaka's Conception of Śūnyatā

The Madhyamaka understanding of *śūnyatā* is grounded in the radical critique of *svabhāva*, or intrinsic nature. Nāgārjuna's central notion was that all phenomena — without any exception — lack independent nature. This idea builds on the early Buddhist rejection of a permanent self, but goes further: it applies the same logic to all *dharma*s. Including those regarded by other

Buddhist traditions as ultimately real or foundational. From this perspective, *śūnyatā* is not a hidden essence or deeper intrinsic reality; rather, it refers precisely to this lack of independent nature.

Central to this view is the two truths doctrine, which distinguishes between conventional truth (*samvṛti-satya*) the day-to-day world shaped by perception, expression, and function — and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*), which reveals that these appearances have no independent or intrinsic nature. It's the clear seeing that the conventional is dependently originated and thus empty. But importantly, the ultimate isn't a second, hidden realm. From this perspective, *śūnyatā* is not a third category beyond the two truths.

Nāgārjuna famously equates dependent origination with *śūnyatā* in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.18., declaring that:

“Whatever is dependently co-arisen / That is explained to be emptiness.” (Nāgārjuna, 1995, p. 87)

The emphasis on dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) plays a central role in Madhyamaka view and embodies the Madhyamaka position: because things arise only in dependence on causes, conditions, and conceptual construction, they have no independent, unchanging essence. *Śūnyatā*, therefore, is the recognition of this radical conditionality and interdependence.

One of Nāgārjuna's most distinctive philosophical strategies is his use of *prasaṅga* — a form of *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Rather than proposing his own thesis, he dismantles opposing positions by drawing out the contradictions that arise from assuming inherent existence. Crucially, no position is exempt from this method — not even the view of *śūnyatā* itself. This leads to one of Madhyamaka's most subtle (and often misunderstood) insights: the

emptiness of emptiness. *Śūnyatā* is not some hidden essence or ultimate substance; it too is empty — lacking any intrinsic nature.²

Moreover, *śūnyatā* does not mean that nothing exists. Rather, it points to the contingent and shifting nature of all things — a perspective that makes room for transformation, ethical responsiveness, and liberation without relying on fixed beliefs. At the heart of Madhyamaka, this bold dismantling of conceptual certainty walks a middle path: one that steers clear of both essentialism and nihilism.

Yogācāra's Interpretation of Śūnyatā

While the Madhyamaka school approaches *śūnyatā* through radical deconstruction and the denial of intrinsic nature, the Yogācāra tradition offers a different angle — interpreting *śūnyatā* through a Consciousness-Only (*viññaptimātra*) lens. Rather than denying experience itself, Yogācārins question the assumption that external objects exist independently of consciousness. In their view, *śūnyatā* does not point to an absence of experience, but to the absence of externality — and to the understanding that what we take as “outer” reality is, in fact, shaped by cognition.

This critique pushes back against the way Abhidharma metaphysics often treats external objects — as if they truly exist outside the mind — a stance that leans toward a kind of naïve realism. From a Yogācāra perspective, what appears “out there” is actually a projection shaped by consciousness, conditioned by karmic imprints and habitual mental tendencies. Phenomena are

² “Unrelinquished, unattained,
Unannihilated, not permanent,
Unarisen, unceased:
This is how nirvāṇa is described.”¹

¹ Nāgārjuna. (1995). *The fundamental wisdom of the middle way* (J. L. Garfield, Trans., p. 91). Oxford University Press. (Chapter 25, Verse 3)

thus empty of objective externality, yet they retain a vivid, experiential presence within the stream of awareness. In this context, *śūnyatā* is not a void but a pointer to the mind's capacity for transformation.

At the core of Yogācāra's interpretation of *śūnyatā* lies the doctrine of the Three Natures (*trisvabhāva*), which serves both as an epistemological diagnosis and a path toward liberation. The first of these, Imaginary Nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*), refers to the mistaken belief that subject and object exist as separate and inherently real entities — a level shaped by conceptual constructions and entirely devoid of intrinsic nature. The second, Dependent Nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*), describes the causal stream of mental events in which phenomena arise dependently, conditioned by karma and cognitive tendencies. Finally, Perfected Nature (*pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*) represents the direct realization that subject-object duality is itself empty, marking the cessation of deluded perception and the experiential insight into *śūnyatā*. The *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* presents these natures as progressive realisations of *lack of own-being* (*niḥsvabhāvatā*). It states:

“The imputational character... is a character posited as names and symbols, but it does not subsist by way of its own character” (Triṭaka, 1995, p. 99).

“The other-dependent character... arises through the force of other conditions and not by itself” (Triṭaka, 1995, p. 99).

“The thoroughly established character... [It is] the selflessness of phenomena... that is the ultimate” (Triṭaka, 1995, p. 101).

A similar expression of these insights appears in the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, another key text within the Yogācāra tradition. It deepens the doctrine of *viññaptimātra* (“mere representation”) by emphasizing that all appearances are projections of mind and lack any independent, external existence. The sutra goes further to show how karmic tendencies (*vāsanās*) shape perception, and how freedom arises when the mind recognizes its own fabrications for what they are. Although the text doesn't present the Three Natures in formal terms, it traces a comparable arc — from illusion, through causal entanglement, to realization — making clear that when the mind no longer turns outward in search of objective reference, the very structure of duality begins to dissolve.³

Yogācāra also develops the concept of *ālaya-vijñāna*, or storehouse consciousness, to explain how karmic patterns persist across lifetimes and shape ongoing experience and consequently the persistence of deluded perception. This deeper layer of mind holds the latent imprints (*vāsanās*) that condition perception, even though it does not assume the presence of a fixed or essential self. As the underlying basis of *saṃsāric* consciousness, *ālaya-vijñāna* is ethically neutral yet defiled — a subtle current that must be purified through meditative insight and ethical practice.

The *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* also introduces the concept of *tathāgatagarbha*, or Buddha-nature, describing it as an innate and luminous potential for awakening. While both *ālaya-vijñāna* and *tathāgatagarbha* concern the continuity of consciousness and the possibility of liberation, they differ significantly in character. The *ālaya-vijñāna* functions as a karmic repository — ethically neutral but defiled — and must undergo transformation. *Tathāgatagarbha*, by contrast, is already pure at its core; it does not need to be changed, only uncovered.

In later Yogācāra synthesis — particularly in the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* — the distinction between *ālaya-vijñāna* and *tathāgatagarbha* becomes increasingly blurred. Some passages suggest that

³ See *The Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, Section LXXIII: “What is only mind cannot be seen... when grasper and grasped do not exist, the eternal and momentary are both transcended” (Red Pine, 2012, p. 243).

the purified storehouse consciousness is, in fact, none other than Buddha-nature itself. Schmithausen has argued that *tathāgatagarbha* should be seen not as equivalent to the Madhyamaka notion of *śūnyatā*, but rather as being empty of defilements (as cited in Williams, 1989, p. 318). This interpretation reflects Yogācāra's effort to navigate a middle path between nihilism and essentialism. It resonates with the Perfected Nature — the full awakening to the empty, non-dual character of experience and its transformative potential.

Yogācāra describes something called *āśraya-parāvṛtti* — usually translated as “turning of the basis.” It refers to the fundamental shift of the *ālaya-vijñāna*. This mind-layer, so to speak, stores karmic traces and therefore keeps the wheel turning but with sustained practice — involving both skillful means (*upāya*) and wisdom (*prajñā*) — that base shifts. The *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* describes this transformation as letting go of mental defilements and moving through the bodhisattva stages, finally reaching the *Dharmakāya* — the perfected body of a Buddha.⁴

This vision is echoed in the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, which describes awakening as the transformation of the eight forms of consciousness — including *ālaya-vijñāna* — into four kinds of non-dual wisdom. This transformation is framed not as cessation, but as the realization that projections are “nothing but mind,” and liberation arises when the mind recognizes its own fabrications and ceases to project externality.⁵

In this light, Yogācāra reframes *śūnyatā* as a progressive transformation of consciousness, rather than a philosophical deconstruction. By seeing through conceptual fabrications, practitioners purify cognition and awaken to non-dual awareness. Emptiness, here, is

⁴ The *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* explains *āśraya-parāvṛtti* as the well-established transformation of the basis through renunciation, the complete cultivation of the [ten] stages and the [six] perfections, describing it as the foundation of the *Dharmakāya* and its immeasurable qualities (Triṣṭaka, 1995, pp. 95-145).

⁵ The *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* describes how the transformation of consciousness is nirvana, involving the turning of the storehouse consciousness into four forms of wisdom. Liberation arises when karmic projections cease and consciousness recognizes that “everything is nothing but mind” (*Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, Red Pine trans., 2012, p. 353).

inseparable from meditative insight and ethical transformation. Rather than dismantling all experience, Yogācāra shows how deluded perception can be transmuted into wisdom, culminating in liberation through the realisation of *śūnyatā*.

Key Differences

While both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra place *śūnyatā* at the center of their philosophical frameworks, they differ in important ways — especially in how they approach ontology, epistemology, and the path to liberation. These differences influence not only how *śūnyatā* is interpreted, but also how awakening is imagined within the Mahāyāna tradition.

From an ontological standpoint, Madhyamaka puts forward a radical form of anti-essentialism. Nāgārjuna explicitly denies that anything possesses *svabhāva*, or intrinsic nature, and emphasizes that ultimate truth involves no metaphysical assertion. Even *śūnyatā* is said to be empty — a view captured in the phrase “the emptiness of emptiness.” What we call “reality” here has no underlying essence, but emerges as a network of dependently arisen appearances with no fixed ground.

In contrast, Yogācāra develops what can be described as a positive ontology of consciousness. While it rejects dualistic substance metaphysics, it affirms the mind as the functional ground of all experience. As one passage puts it there exists the imagination of the unreal; there is no duality, but there is emptiness — even in this, there is that.⁶

Here, consciousness — though empty of subject-object division — retains a kind of dynamic coherence, one that can be transformed and purified.

On the epistemological level, Madhyamaka tends to emphasize the limits of conceptual thinking. Wisdom, from this perspective, doesn’t emerge through the construction of accurate

⁶ “The false imagination exists. In it, the two do not exist. Emptiness exists here, and within it that exists as well.” (*Madhyāntavibhāga*, I.1, as translated in Maitreya, 2022, p. 25)

doctrines, but rather through the relinquishing of all views — including views about *śūnyatā* itself. Knowledge is always provisional and dependent, and liberation comes through insight into the emptiness of all conceptual framework.

Yogācāra, however, focuses on the purification of consciousness and the transformation of cognitive patterns. The root of ignorance lies in the deep illusion of duality, and freedom arises through a reorientation of perception, cultivated through ethical and meditative practice.

From a soteriological perspective, Madhyamaka views liberation as emerging through non-grasping and analytical insight into the emptiness of all phenomena. By dismantling every form of reification, the practitioner moves toward a kind of freedom that is no longer tethered to illusory truths. Yogācāra, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on inner transformation. Here, liberation is tied to the purification of the mind — a gradual clearing of distortions that culminates in the direct realization of *pariṇiṣpanna-svabhāva*, the perfected nature of *śūnyatā* and the end of dualistic perception.

Although both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra affirm *śūnyatā* as a core Mahāyāna principle, they approach it from markedly different philosophical standpoints. Madhyamaka frames emptiness as a universal negation — a dismantling of all notions of intrinsic nature — while Yogācāra tends to emphasize inner transformation, with consciousness as the ground of liberation. These seemingly contrasting views do not reflect a contradiction, but the philosophical richness and diversity of the Mahāyāna tradition in its attempts to clarify the nature of awakening.

Common Ground

While Madhyamaka and Yogācāra diverge significantly in their philosophical outlooks, both remain deeply committed to *śūnyatā* as a defining element of the Mahāyāna path. Both schools

regard *śūnyatā* not as a insignificant or abstract idea, but a central factor in the realisation of liberation and the complete cessation of suffering.

At the heart of both systems is also a shared aspiration to overcome duality—particularly the deeply ingrained dualism between subject and object, self and other, knower and known. Whether through Nāgārjuna’s radical deconstruction of all conceptual categories or through Yogācāra’s analysis of consciousness and projection, each school treats dualistic thinking as the root of ignorance and bondage. *Śūnyatā*, therefore, functions as the critical insight that dismantles the illusion of separateness and reveals the interdependent, non-dual nature of reality.

Furthermore, both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra use the doctrine of *śūnyatā* as a remedy against reification—the tendency of the mind to mistakenly attribute fixed, independent existence to what is in truth contingent and constructed. Neither school treats *śūnyatā* as a metaphysical substance or hidden essence. Rather, *śūnyatā* is understood as a methodological tool. Used to loosen attachment to mistaken views and rigid conceptual frameworks and, in this sense, *śūnyatā* is a means of disrupting habitual patterns of thought that obscure the direct realisation of truth.

This common ground reveals a deep fundamental agreement between the two traditions: *śūnyatā* is not a distant or speculative doctrine. It’s a practical insight, aimed at transforming perception and dissolving the grasping tendencies that perpetuate suffering. Both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, in their own ways, position *śūnyatā* as the key insight through which the practitioner moves beyond illusion, conceptual entrapment, and existential fixation, toward liberation and compassionate mode of being.

Interpretative Debates and Later Syntheses

As David F. Burton notes, later Madhyamaka was far from a monolithic continuation of Nāgārjuna's thought. Instead, it evolved through critical engagement with Yogācāra and other systems, leading to diverse interpretations — from Śāntarakṣita's synthetic projects to Tsongkhapa's refined Prāsaṅgika model. These interpretations ranged from a view of *śūnyatā* as an inexpressible reality to a more epistemically grounded, conceptually knowable absence of *svabhāva*. (Burton, 2001, p. 6)

Efforts to synthesize Madhyamaka and Yogācāra were already underway in Indian philosophy before the Tibetan scholastics, most notably in the work of Śāntarakṣita (8th century), a pivotal figure in the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet. Śāntarakṣita established a prominent academic and ecclesiastical career at the famed university of Nālandā and spent his final years in Tibet as the abbot of Samyé Monastery. He is regarded as the originator of the Yogācāra-Madhyamaka philosophical tradition, which sought to integrate the key doctrines of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka thought. In his *Madhyamakālaṃkāra*, Śāntarakṣita invokes Yogācāra reasoning to assert that external objects exist only as projections of mind. He compares external appearances to illusions:

“Within the mental stream without beginning, / Through maturation of habitual tendencies, / Things manifest, yet these appearances / Are miragelike and due to the delusion of the mind.”

(Śāntarakṣita, *Madhyamakālaṃkāra*, v. 44, p. 58)

This synthetic framework became highly influential. It was very likely the prevailing interpretation at prominent Indian Buddhist centers like Nālandā and Vikramaśīla for several centuries.⁷

With his *Madhyamakālaṃkāra*, Śāntarakṣita brings together the Madhyamaka teaching of *śūnyatā* and the Yogācāra perspective of mind-only. His approach supports the usefulness of consciousness-based reasoning at the conventional level, yet ultimately holds to the Madhyamaka view that nothing possesses inherent existence. Rather than choosing between the two systems, he draws from both — combining Yogācāra’s introspective subtlety with Madhyamaka’s philosophical precision — to offer a layered and evolving understanding of the path to awakening.

These interpretative debates and synthesis efforts highlight the dynamism and philosophical plurality within the Mahāyāna tradition. Rather than viewing Madhyamaka and Yogācāra as mutually exclusive, many thinkers have treated them as complementary perspectives, each illuminating different dimensions of the Buddhist path—from conceptual deconstruction to experiential transformation.

The philosophical tensions between Madhyamaka and Yogācāra did not remain confined to their classical Indian formulations but became the subject of vigorous scholastic debate, particularly within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Tibetan scholars engaged deeply with both schools, not only to clarify doctrinal boundaries but also to explore the possibility of reconciliation or hierarchical integration⁸ of their views.

⁷ See Irons (2008, p. 426), who notes that Śāntarakṣita’s synthesis of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka was not only doctrinally significant but also became institutionally dominant at leading Indian Buddhist universities.

⁸ The term *hierarchical integration* refers to the structured inclusion of different philosophical views in a ranked order. In Tibetan scholastic traditions, this often involves interpreting Yogācāra as a preparatory or provisional system that leads toward the more refined insights of Madhyamaka. As such, Yogācāra is treated as a stepping stone toward Madhyamaka, integrating both perspectives but placing Madhyamaka at the top of a philosophical hierarchy (see Williams, 1989, pp. 86).

One of the most influential figures in this context is Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), forfather of the Gelug school, who strongly defended the Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka interpretation as the most refined articulation of the Buddhist view. According to Tsongkhapa, only the Prāsaṅgika approach — with its uncompromising rejection of intrinsic existence and exclusive reliance on *prasaṅga* reasoning — avoids the subtle forms of reification he believed persisted in Yogācāra and certain Madhyamaka sub-schools. For him, the Prāsaṅgika view alone fully captures the implications of *śūnyatā* as the complete absence of inherent nature in all phenomena. Śūnyatā, Tsongkhapa argued, should be understood not as one thing being empty of another, but as the mere absence of true existence.⁹ He thus positioned Prāsaṅgika as the sole correct interpretation of Madhyamaka, sharply distinguishing it from Yogācāra and alternative views such as those of the Jonang school (Emmanuel, 2013). In contrast, other Tibetan traditions — particularly the Jonang — developed the *shentong* (“emptiness of other”) interpretation, which draws heavily on Yogācāra and *tathāgatagarbha* thought.¹⁰

Shentong thinkers argue that ultimate reality, while empty of conventional, dualistic phenomena, is not itself empty of inherent qualities such as luminosity, clarity, and compassion. They view this ultimate as a non-dual, positive ground beyond conceptual elaboration—thereby offering a view that blends Yogācāra’s affirmative vision of consciousness with Madhyamaka’s deconstructive method.

⁹ As cited in Emmanuel (2013), Tsongkhapa criticized Yogācāra and non-Prāsaṅgika views as misrepresenting emptiness, asserting that only Prāsaṅgika accurately presents it as the mere absence of true existence (p. 102).

¹⁰ Dölpopa (1292–1361), recognized as the founding figure of the Jonang tradition, developed the influential *shentong* (“emptiness of other”) view. He held that ultimate truth is not empty of its own nature, but only of what is false or conditioned. As such, it truly exists as the ground of reality and is considered “empty” only in the sense that it is free from all relative phenomena. By contrast, relative phenomena are deemed *rangtong* or “self-empty,” lacking any intrinsic essence and ultimately absent from true reality (Emmanuel, 2013, p. 102).

Implications for the Concept of Self and Phenomena

Both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra share a central aim: breaking down the belief in a substantial self. In each case, the concept of *śūnyatā* plays a key role in that process, offering a path of transformation. Yet the way each tradition goes about deconstructing selfhood reflects deeper metaphysical assumptions — and leads to different understandings of what it actually means to let go of the illusion of a fixed self.

In Madhyamaka thought, the idea of self is taken apart through radical negation. Nāgārjuna's critique of *svabhāva* shows that the self—whether imagined as a fixed soul, an independent agent, or a core identity—is nothing more than a conventional label, arising in dependence on the five aggregates (*skandhas*). It doesn't exist apart from the web of causal and conceptual factors that give rise to the illusion of continuity and control. Viewed through the lens of *śūnyatā*, Madhyamaka insists that the self is completely empty of inherent being, and that freedom lies in seeing this clearly—letting go of grasping, and gradually dissolving ego-based attachment.

The phrase “emptiness of emptiness” however, while central to Madhyamaka discourse, appears conceptually incoherent when considered from the standpoint of *śūnyatā* as ultimate truth. Ultimate reality, or *śūnyatā*, is not a relative absence defined by contrast, but a non-phenomenal, non-conceptual lack of nature—intrinsic or empty. There is simply no nature to be found in the first place. As such, to speak of the “emptiness of emptiness” may inadvertently reify what is, by definition, unreifiable—a truth that is neither phenomenal nor conceptually graspable, but empty of all defining characteristics, including self-negation. It rather is the no-nature truth.

Therefore it is insufficient to speak of ultimate truth as merely “empty of intrinsic nature,” for this still suggests the presence of a categorizable nature that is subsequently negated. From the Madhyamaka standpoint, the ultimate resists all classification — it is not merely devoid of

svabhāva, but devoid of any conceptual handle whatsoever. To say that ultimate truth has no nature is not to describe it, but to silence the very impulse to describe. Thus, *śūnyatā* is not a property that things possess or lack; it is the undoing of all ontological presuppositions, including the notion of “nature” itself.¹¹

Yogācāra, while also rejecting the existence of an independently existing self, approaches the problem through a psychological and cognitive framework. In this tradition, the self is understood as a construct of consciousness, shaped by karmic imprints, habitual patterns, and the dualistic projections of subject and object. Central to this, is the concept of *ālaya-vijñāna*. It serves as the repository of karmic seeds and gives rise to the mistaken sense of a stable self. Rather than negating the self through dialectical analysis alone, Yogācāra aims at transforming consciousness so that the constructed nature of self-experience can be seen through and ultimately transcended.

In both schools, realisation of *śūnyatā* functions as the means by which the delusion of selfhood is overcome, yet they differ in their treatment of the phenomenal world. Madhyamaka tends to deconstruct all phenomena, revealing them as conceptually designated, empty constructs with no foundational reality. Yogācāra, on the other hand, offers a more phenomenological account of experience: while external objects are denied independent existence, mental phenomena retain a kind of pragmatic validity within the evolving stream of consciousness.

Thus, Madhyamaka provides a purely negative critique that eliminates all traces of essentialism, while Yogācāra offers a constructive analysis of cognition, situating the illusion of self within a broader theory of mind and mental transformation. Both perspectives aim at liberation, but

¹¹ It is reductive to describe ultimate truth as merely “empty of intrinsic nature,” since this still presumes a nature to be negated. From the Madhyamaka perspective, ultimate truth is not a subtler kind of essence, but the dismantling of all ontological projections. *Śūnyatā* signifies the relinquishing of all views — not their replacement by another. As Nāgārjuna writes:

“The victorious ones have said

That emptiness is the relinquishing of all views.

For whomever emptiness is a view,

That one will accomplish nothing” (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 13.8; Garfield, 1995, p. 38).

they do so by emphasizing different aspects of experience—Madhyamaka through the analysis of emptiness as negation, and Yogācāra through the recognition of emptiness within the flow of consciousness.

Conclusion

In this essay, we looked at how the concept of *śūnyatā* is interpreted within the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra traditions. We focused on both the ideas they share and the significant philosophical differences that set them apart. While each school places *śūnyatā* at the core of the Mahāyāna path—using it to question the belief in a fixed self and challenge dualistic thinking—they approach it in distinctly different ways.

Madhyamaka is known for its sharp, logical method. It breaks down every idea of intrinsic nature, leaving nothing to cling to—not even *śūnyatā* itself. Yogācāra, by contrast, works more from the inside. It sees the self as something the mind creates, and focuses on transforming the way we perceive.

These differences aren't just theoretical—they shape how *śūnyatā* is understood, practiced, and realised. Madhyamaka's strong stance against fixed essence pushes back against any attempt to turn things—even *śūnyatā*—into something solid. This makes it a sharp tool for breaking down deeply held assumptions. Yogācāra, on the other hand, focuses on how the mind builds and maintains illusions. Its path works through awareness and inner change, offering a more psychological approach. In this way, the two traditions offer different but complementary ways of moving toward awakening—one through analysis, the other through direct experience.

While the Madhyamaka dialectical deconstruction can lead the mind to a conceptual understanding of the absence of intrinsic nature of all phenomena, such analytical insight remains within the domain of thought and phenomena. One could argue that *śūnyatā*, as the

realisation of non-phenomenal truth, cannot be grasped through phenomenal means. The brain cannot apprehend what is not; nor can the eye, the heart, or the body as a whole perceive that which is beyond sensory or conceptual form. Even the mind, insofar as it functions as a stream of perceptual and cognitive fluctuations, remains bound to conditioned phenomena and is thus incapable of a direct recognition of *śūnyatā* as ultimate truth.

The mind — when freed from the distortions caused by mental fixation and conceptual complexity (*prapañca*) becomes aware of the lack of intrinsic nature in all things. ‘It’ also recognises no-nature *śūnyatā*. This is not a subject grasping an object, but rather the cessation of deluded perception (and cognition) and the emergence of wisdom. Moreover, the realisation of *śūnyatā* does not result in a new metaphysical foundation. It is a non-affirming negation (*prasajyapraṭiṣedha*) of any nature nor is it realised as not non-existent.

Is it not through this direct realisation that the ultimate truth is known; a boundless, spaceless, timeless, and formless no-nature, no-thingness (*iśness / suchness*) that eludes all conceptual grasp, including notions imposed upon phenomena such as permanent and impermanent, empty and not empty, and “it is” and “it is not”?

What does this reveal to us about the mind, once freed from its deluded perceptions and illuminated by the emergence of wisdom?

Can this be any ‘thing’ other than a non-dual, non-conceptual, awareness without being an object of cognition¹², one that is no longer bound to the subject–object structure, and that does not assert anything, but realises itself through absence, through non-grasping?

Lastly, future research could take a closer look at how doctrinal differences shape ethical thinking, meditation styles, and spiritual development in the Mahāyāna tradition. It may also be

¹² “Self-awareness thus does not entail / An object and an agent as real entities.” (*Madhyamakālaṃkāra*, v. 17, as translated in Śāntarakṣita, 2005, p. 53).

worthwhile to bring these perspectives into conversation with Western ideas about the self especially in the fields of philosophy and psychology and “the hard problem of consciousness” (coined by David Chalmers). In the end, the ways Madhyamaka and Yogācāra interpret *śūnyatā* highlight just how layered and subtle Buddhist philosophy can be—offering distinct, yet interwoven, paths toward insight and liberation.

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