

Continuity and Harmonization.

Comparative analysis of the concept of *śūnyatā* in the Madhyamaka school and Yogacara school.

● Introduction

During the rainy season of the year Buddha Shakyamuni passed away (c. 483 BCE), a council comprising 500 monks convened to systematically preserve his legacy in oral form. It is not precisely known which texts were discussed and approved, as what has reached us today is based on later records.

Lamotte (1988:129) concludes from a comparative analysis of written materials that while the canonical texts were read collectively at the first or following councils, they are certainly not identical to those we have today. Sri Lanka's oldest known chronicle, *Dīpavaṃsa*, describes the turbulent and insecure developments in Sri Lankan society at the beginning of the millennium (1st century CE), which were completely different from the peaceful and prosperous environment during the time of King Ashoka (d. 232 BCE) marked by the large-scale import of Buddhism – facilitated also by the missionary work of the king's own children. Conversely, the chaotic period at the beginning of the millennium vividly highlighted the impermanence of human life for the bhikkhus, prompting them to write down the previously orally transmitted texts for preservation (Oldenberg 1879:211). However, these early texts, some of which are undated, do not exhibit linguistic or formal uniformity. Nor do they represent finality, as records from the 5th century CE indicate ongoing discussions about the composition of the Pali Tipitaka and its exact makeup (Lamotte *ibid*:130).

In the case of the written canonized Tipitaka, in addition to the records of Buddha Shakyamuni's own words (*buddhavacana*), one must also consider the thoughts of Shakyamuni's disciples, which Gautama himself had approved either previously, subsequently, or concurrently (MacQueen 1981). Moreover, the Tipitaka, which aspires to conservatism, includes material from a much later period than Gautama's immediate disciples, who could not have had Gautama's approval in the conventional sense. Therefore, one can speak of a tradition that values inspiration (*pratibhāna*) from the early days, extending to the canonization of inspired heritage. The Theravada position is expressed, for example, by Sujato & Brahmali, who state that “The point of establishing the authenticity of the EBT (early Buddhist texts – *author's comment*), then, is not to prove that they are all true. It is to show that they are useful (Sujato & Brahmali 2015:152).”

For instance, among the later works is the Kathavatthu, originating from fragments probably dating back to the 3rd century BCE, though there are naturally differences in opinions regarding its precise creation time given the long historical perspective. Based on the content of Kathavatthu, which involves discussions addressing unclear scholarly treatments, it can be concluded that these issues were widely known and expressed by the time of writing. Although the schools represented are not mentioned by name in the work, it is believed that their emergence dates back to the period after King Ashoka's reign, which must be followed by a time frame allowing for the formation of generalizations and assessments. Additionally, the composite nature of today's existing version is highlighted based on linguistic comparisons (McDermott 1975:424, Hinüber 1996:70-73).

In the context of Buddhist thought and the composed texts, a multi-layered internal logic and continuous development are observable, which the tradition of writing down at the beginning of the 1st millennium highlights. Taking into consideration Hinüber's suggestion for the

written version of Kathavatthu, “if the 2nd century is approximately correct” (ibid:73), then Nāgārjuna's (d ~ 250) doctrine of śūnyatā (emptiness) and nihsvabhava (lack of inherent existence) directly addresses the logical deadlock of Kathavatthu. Thus, it fundamentally resolves the Theravadin doctrinal crisis by transcending the limitations of linguistic and conceptual frameworks and elevating the status of dharmas beyond empirical disputes (Ichimura 1991).

Buddha Shakyamuni's teachings, which originated in the northern part of the subcontinent, figuratively returned there through Nāgārjuna when local power began to dominate regionally in the 3rd century CE after half a millennium of spiritual and political subjugation by foreign rulers (Ingalls 1976:16). The subsequent Golden Age of India brought to Nalanda monastery the first and most powerful university of antiquity, associated with most of Nāgārjuna's successors, including both the later Mādhyamaka and Yogacara lines. Naturally, Nāgārjuna's own works were also preserved there, which foreign visitors, such as those from China, came to study in subsequent centuries.

- **Śūnyavāda.**

Historical Perspective and Notes on Further Source Selection.

Professor T.R.V. Murti (d.1986), who dedicated his book "The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System" (1955) to his teacher, India's second President Professor Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (d.1975), describes the importance of the śūnyatā concept and the role of Mādhyamaka in the history of Indian philosophy in the book's preface:

The Mādhyamika philosophy claims our attention as the system which created a revolution in Buddhism and through that in the whole range of Indian philosophy. The entire Buddhist thought turned on the śūnyatā doctrine of the Mādhyamika... Considering the role and the importance of the Mādhyamika, I have ventured to appraise it as the Central Philosophy of Buddhism. (Murti 1955:vii).

The spread of views characteristic of Mahāyāna in the early centuries is associated with the diffusive spreading within traditional currents and lacking distinguishable institutional status until at least the 4th-5th centuries CE (Walser 2005:16-18). According to Saito (2007:153), the first known historical figure to call himself a *mādhyamakavadin* was Bhaviveka (d. 570) in the 6th century CE, followed by Candrakīrti (d. 650). The foundational figure of Mādhyamaka philosophy, Nāgārjuna, referred to himself as *śūnyatāvadin* (Saito 2010:331). Candrakīrti's position is considered unique, as it is a testimony of a historical person living almost in the midst of events, making it difficult for later commentators to offer comparable insights. However, it must be understood that his insight, in conflict with one from Bhaviveka, is also a reflection separated by at least centuries from the original textual sources of Mādhyamaka.

The works attributed to Nāgārjuna, about a dozen of which are considered highly likely to be his, particularly the *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā* (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way – henceforth MMK), are regarded as the foundational texts for the development of the Mādhyamaka concept (Warder 2004:357). The second indisputably important author of foundational Mādhyamaka texts is Aryadeva (d. c270), as their texts maintain unquestionable authority and importance even after the emergence of the later Prasāṅgika, represented by Candrakīrti, and Svātantrika, represented by Bhaviveka, factions (Saito 2007:154). In other words, although the critical junction in the development of the doctrine was the 3rd century CE, and the name *śūnyatāvadin* was used by Nāgārjuna himself, data on Mādhyamaka identity come from the 6th-7th centuries CE, when we see representatives of different schools

distinctively using this. Today's generic name usage is based on somewhat different associative parameters.

Murti identifies the *śūnyatā* concept as the root of the Mādhyamaka systematic approach, noting its growing relevance starting from earlier Prajñāpāramitā texts, stating, "The Mādhyamika system is the systematized form of the *śūnyatā* doctrine of the Prajñāpāramita treatises" (Murti *ibid*:83). This is quickly contested by Robinson (1967:63), who points to terminological differences in some editions. A straightforward explanation for this contradiction is formulated by the orientalist and linguist Mäll (2003), who also highlights (Mäll *ibid*:48) Candrakīrti's observation that Nāgārjuna's teachings evolved influenced by Prajñāpāramita sutras. To understand the earlier mentioned contradiction, Mäll adds a description of distinguishable levels of the development of similar ancient texts:

The ideas that conventionally may be termed the ideas of Prajñāpāramita could and most probably did emerge much earlier than the text as such was written down... ... this text (or collection of texts) is equally foreign to any historical period, including the period when it was created... (*ibid*:26).

This clearly demonstrates the characteristic development of an idea over a long period, its understanding, and the discussions that took place, as paralleled in the current *Foreword* with Kathavatthu. This is also illustrated by the form of the older part of Prajñāpāramitā Aṣṭasāhasrikā, which does not directly describe revelation itself but being a text "that seems to foresee all the possible counterarguments by its opponents" (*ibid*:27), showing thus the occurrence of discussion and indicating that we should be grateful for even the fragments that have survived to this day.

Similarly, the Aṣṭasāhasrikā, like Kathavatthu, leaves many questions unanswered, is quite terse and clearly inclined toward esotericism in its treatment of *śūnyatā*. In Part 2, Chapter 3,

"The Saints and Their Goals are Illusions," Subhuti concludes: "No one will grasp this perfect wisdom as here explained" (Conze 1973:98). This brings us to MMK, where Nāgārjuna thoroughly explains the universality of the śūnyatā concept. Nāgārjuna adds an exoteric dimension to the concept of śūnyatā mentioned in Aṣṭasāhasrikā, enabling a broader audience to comprehend.

In addition, Murti highlights the overlap between the ideas expressed in the Salistamba Sutra and Nāgārjuna's MMK:

The Salistamba Sutra says: 'Whosoever sees the Pratityasamutpada sees the Buddha, and whosoever sees the Buddha sees the *dharma* (Truth or Reality).' Nāgārjuna expresses himself similarly in his Madhyamika Kārikā: 'One who perceives truly the Pratityasamutpada realizes the four sacred truths—pain, (its) cause, cessation, and the path'. (Murti ibid:7)

Professor Murti, whose native language was Sanskrit and who specialized in Indian culture and philosophy, taught at the heart of his own birth culture at Hindu University, Banaras. His opponent, Robinson, had studied Sanskrit a few years under the popular translator Edward Conze (d. 1978), known for his enthusiasm and work capacity, which provides a valuable overview of various scenarios for today's Western readers. However, a significant drawback of Conze's texts is the lack of clarity in cultural-philosophical level and conclusions:

I chose this example not because Dr. Conze's translations are worse than anyone else's; in fact, they are better than most. Rather, it illustrates with a concrete example the kind of gibberish that is all too often produced by the Buddhological community in the sacred name of translation. (Griffits 1981:30).

Foreign research can thus be freely used, but through a critical lens allowing for their valuable, especially narrative, overview, but without further analysing the precision of

conceptual criteria. Waldron (2010:1) insists not too long ago that, “there are still no comprehensive treatments of Yogācāra in Western languages. Moreover, a huge gulf still exists between works that are relatively accessible to nonspecialists and those written for and by specialists”.

Contemporary Western researchers often rely on translations that emerged only in the 20th century. Unfortunately, sometimes they are forced to use even secondary translations of original translations into other modern languages. Historical associative nuances, meanings and tendencies that influence the understanding or formation of ancient texts often remain unattainable in such cases, although they are crucial and labour-intensive tasks.

Slightly higher quality available translated materials are those by historians and philologists of Oriental studies, who rightly remind us that we still do not have universally accepted equivalents even for words like *dharma* and *prajñā* (Mäll ibid:26). This also includes the broader notion of *duḥkha*, where simplified translations offering only "suffering" convey an indiscriminate association of misunderstanding and inappropriate psychopathology instead of "discomfort" and "uncertainty" (Gowans 2003:121-8) or “sorrow” (Radhakrishnan...). Many of these original words had what appeared to be almost synonymous terms in use at the time, but which had different historical contexts and consequently different meanings and contexts of use.

Therefore, in this writing, preference is given to scholars who naturally share the heritage of the ancient cultural sphere, even though their works may not be too widely available in Western languages.

● Śūnyatā

The Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna is considered the forefather of several ancient and contemporary schools following the Buddhist tradition. According to Saito's (2007) timeline, Nāgārjuna should naturally be regarded as the patriarch of the Mādhyamaka/Śūnyavāda school. In a broader sense, however, he is also the originator of the Mahayana-Abhidharma movement, from which the identities of both the so-called Yogacara and Mādhyamaka schools later emerged (Saito *ibid*:158). Given his significance in the development of Buddhist thought, he has been deemed worthy of the title "Second Buddha" (Kalupahana 1985:2).

Nāgārjuna's interpretation of śūnyatā differs significantly from the simplistic and one-sided thus misleading translation of "emptiness". Radhakrishnan (.....:663) cites Kumarajiva (d. 413), one of the most important early translators of the earlier Buddhist texts into Chinese, who compared *śūnyatā* to an indispensable precondition for existence.

Reading Nāgārjuna's MMK (Mūlamādhyamakakārikā), it becomes evident that the work is a systematic reminder of forgotten truths to a less competent or distracted listener, rather than a revolutionary revelation for Nāgārjuna himself. Nāgārjuna's treatment of the unreal nature of phenomena had a conceptual character, but his philosophical reach and influence extended beyond just Buddhist scholarship. The eminent Vedic teacher Shankara (d. 8th-9th century CE) summarizes in his commentary on the Mandukya Upanishad that all perceived objects are illusory and adds authoritative weight by emphasizing that this is the "decided opinion of the world" (Nikhilananda 1949:97). While Nikhilananda (*ibid*:xvi, but also Dasgupta 1922:493-494) remind us also about the immense influence of mādhyamaka and Yogacara schools on the concepts of especially Gaudapada (the author of the Gaudapada's Karika

related to Mandukya Upanishad), the Upanishad itself, dating from around the same period as the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, illustrates once again the philosophical questions of the era and in parallel Nāgārjuna's genius in addressing them.

Śūnyatā, understood as ontological emptiness, arises from the concept of *pratītyasamutpāda* or "dependent origination," which sees phenomena indistinguishable from cause and effect as interdependent and inseparable from the sequence of other preceding, succeeding, or simultaneous phenomena—essentially indefinable, thus characterized through *śūnyatā*.

Despite the linguistic convenience as the very core of the concept, this empty or indeterminate phenomenon does not cease to exist due to its emptiness. After all, illusions and hallucinations exist too.

The realization of emptiness helps to eliminate unnecessary attachment, clinging. However, clinging to *śūnyatā* itself must also be viewed as an error (MMK XXIV:13, transl.

Kalpahana), particularly attachment to its simplified interpretations, which are generally biased towards nihilism. Nihilism was already an unreasonable extreme for Nāgārjuna as reflected in the MMK. Discussing the apparent transformation, arising, and birth of the existing through the state characterized by *śūnyatā*, Nāgārjuna repeatedly emphasizes that this cannot be nihilism (Venkata Ramanan 2016:318, Saito 2007:156). On the contrary, "As the true nature of things, *śūnyatā* is *tathatā*, which is comprehended at different levels, mundane and ultimate" (Venkata Ramanan *ibid*:317).

Kalpahana notes in his introduction to the MMK translation the nature of Nāgārjuna's language, clearly aimed at describing the imagined essences of various phenomena through *śūnyatā*, as evidenced by Nāgārjuna's phrase "*sarvam idam śūnyam*" ("all this is empty"), which is meaningfully different from "*sarvam śūnyam*" ("all is empty"). He also acknowledges that "‘emptiness’ as a derivative of the concept of ‘dependent arising’

(*pratītyasamutpāda*) is again ‘dependent convention’ (*upādāya prajñapti*), for it is dependent upon and, therefore, identifiable in terms of, ‘the empty’ (*śūnya*)” (Kalupahana 1986:86).

Contrary to the frequent tendentious or fragmented understandings, Nāgārjuna describes the various aspects of *śūnyatā* as shades of a single reality i.e. as - the only reality.

In MMK XIII:3-6 (acc to comments both in Garfield's and Kalupahana's translations), Nāgārjuna explains that perceived changes are only possible through the absence of "self-being," i.e., through *śūnyatā*. Essential emptiness is a parameter that arises from our conceptual ability and enables the existence of the perceived world per se. Therefore, Murti describes *śūnyatā* through potential:

“*Śūnyatā* and *Karuṇā* are the two principal features of the Bodhicitta. *Śūnyatā* is *prajñā*, intellectual intuition, and is identical with the Absolute. *Karuṇā* is the active principle of compassion that gives concrete expression to *śūnyatā* in phenomena. ... *Śūnyatā* is potential, *Karuṇā* is the actualized state.” (Murti ibid:264).

Similarly, discussions based on the lack of self-being in phenomena should not be regarded merely as linguistic convenience or pointless chatter for the sake of vanity. Nāgārjuna clearly acknowledges the existence of two levels of understanding (MMK XXIV:8-9, transl. Kalupahana). Conventional speech and concepts should be viewed as handy tools for improvement and refinement, as the ultimate truth can only be taught using these conventions (*prajñapti*). Bhāviveka later added to the written tradition of Mādhyamaka the concept of multilevel *paramārtha* through one of his significant works, the *Prajñāpradīpa* (Hayashima 2014:28). The depth of possible knowledge can only be grasped through individual capability and readiness, necessitating compassionate teaching, explanation, and

guidance. Nāgārjuna, in his MMK, systematically revisits and emphasizes one by one all the essential yet gradually forgotten levels, forming a cohesive rule.

Ananda Coomaraswamy (d. 1947) also discusses the development and true meaning of the concept of *śūnyatā* in a metaphysical context as excluding nihilism. His historical perspective allows a better understanding of MMK and the idea of *śūnyavāda* through their evolution. By actualizing the meaningful perspective that had fallen into oblivion by that time, Nāgārjuna does nothing more than guide the reader towards the correct path, explaining the historically accurate understanding—justifying what was already written in older Pali texts. Otherwise, why would Nāgārjuna warn that misunderstood *śūnyatā* is dangerous like a snake (MMK XXIV:11, transl. Kalupahana)? Everything falls into place when *śūnyatā* is properly understood (ibid:14). It was not a new theory but an elucidation of an old truth for a new audience.

“Nāgārjuna has devoted most of his energy to clarifying what ‘wrong views’ are... The two extreme views of existence and non-existence were rejected by the Buddha, not because he had no views to propound, but because he had a better or more appropriate one to offer.” (Kalupahana ibid:78). MMK “is here looked upon as a grand commentary on the Kaccayanagotta-sutta” (ibid:81).

Coomaraswamy opens the door to the concept, often forgotten and seemingly incomprehensible to the layperson, through a historical perspective:

... metaphysically, in the symbolism of the Wheel, the surface—blank (*śūnya*) in the initial non-being (*asat*) of any formulation (*saṃkalpa*)—represents the truly infinite (*aditi*) and maternal possibility of being. (Coomaraswamy 1934:492)

Since the associative roots of the linguistic expression of this perception are very old, they are evidently not accessible to the common consciousness. Known to have originated from the

Eurasian steppes before the Vedas and carried to the Indian subcontinent, the sacred symbolism of the wheel, used in all dharmic religions/cultures, had retained its external iconic form over millennia. Still, its ancient linguistic-associative level was either forgotten or losing its relevance from the common consciousness's perspective. The once technologically revolutionary invention of the wheel, which induced a revolution in human consciousness, has today mostly lost its mystique, except for the traces preserved in traditional-philosophical-religious contexts. It is taken mostly as an existing part of the mundane, by-default superficial setting without symbolism and deeper context. Coomaraswamy's conclusion—"maternal possibility of being"—aligns with Murti's emphasis on "potential".

In addition to the concept of "emptiness," which Streng describes as "*Śūnyatā* is both relatedness and emptiness; it stands 'between' the absolute and the conditioned phenomena" (Streng 1967:167), he sees *śūnyatā* as an attempt to describe the indescribable—as "the perspective of *śūnyatā*, as 'apprehending in an empty manner'" (ibid):

We, however, have interpreted this expression as religious on the ground that it has a soteriological intention... which is seen in terms of "purifying," "becoming real," "being free," and "knowing the truth" in various religious traditions all over the world. (Streng ibid:171).

Nāgārjuna definitely viewed his own work as important, considering his line of reasoning to be understanding-facilitating for the reader. He undertook the significant task of showing the reader line by line that *śūnyatā* is not occasional or temporary but an absolute principle.

Radhakrishnan summarizes the essence of *śūnyatā*:

From our point of view, the absolute is nothing. We call it *śūnya*, since no category used in relation to the conditions of the world is adequate to it. To call it being is

wrong because only concrete things are. To call it non-being is equally wrong.

(Radhakrishnan 1923 vol.1-663)

● **Vijñānavāda**

King (1994) suggests that names such as 'Yogacara,' 'Vijnaptimatratā,' or 'Vijnanavada,' used to describe the philosophies of Asanga (d. IV-V CE) and Vasubandhu (d. IV-V CE), should be used cautiously (ibid:660).

Salvini (2015) examines these names by translating verse 35 from Nāgārjuna's "Hymn to the Inconceivable," which states, "The world is only names... Apart from the expression, nothing to be expressed can be found" (ibid:29). This partly applies to commonly accepted definitions of *vijñāna* ("consciousness") and the term *vijñānavāda* ("consciousness-only") used to characterize the school.

On one hand, we use "consciousness" in everyday language as a simplified and conventional marker for a historical phenomenon that we cannot precisely define temporally or substantively, especially in its early stages. However, this verbal definition is inherently as empty and invalid as it is confusing. Given the explosive frequency of usage and massive defining/associating in today's information society, it is worth remembering that as recently as the early 20th century, Bertrand Russell characterized the concept of "consciousness" as "a trivial and unimportant outcome of linguistic habits" (Russell 1921:40) and as recent only, meaningless, and contradictory. Viewing recent "consciousness" as, in W. James' words (ibid:22), "a faint rumour left behind by the disappearing 'soul' upon the air of philosophy," indicates perhaps a need to return from contemporary worldviews to the ancient worldview itself.

- *Upaya*

We find a nearly identical discussion in both Nāgārjuna's "Hymn to the Inconceivable" and the *Madhyāntavibhāgakārika*, another fundamental text attributed to Maitreya-nātha, who may have been one of the founding fathers of Yogacara and/or Asanga's teacher, which explains why Joshi (1967:8) classifies Asanga and Vasubandhu's period as classical rather than early. Fortunately, the *Madhyāntavibhāgakārika* text (transl Stcherbatsky 1992) has reached us along with so-called founding father Vasubandhu's own commentaries:

Stanza 1 speaks of the Universal Constructor of phenomena, who/which is said to exist, containing the Absolute and being contained within the Absolute itself. Vasubandhu affirms this (transl Stcherbatsky 1992:24). Stanza 3 tells the reader that our consciousness is essentially a projection of things, beings, and their properties, but since the objects of cognition are imaginary, the entire ideation associated with them is surreal. Vasubandhu agrees, adding that "Extinct illusion means Salvation" (ibid:34). The theme is summarized in Stanza 13, which frees us from the dualism that initially confused us, stating that the unreality of both object and subject, as well as the reality underlying this unreality, constitutes the Absolute. And the Constructor of phenomena: "Is neither different from it nor is it quite the same" (ibid:76).

Consciousness is only one of the phenomena on which emphasis is useful for progress and assistance in the context of compassionate help (*upaya*). Similarly, the object or agent of cognition, as well as the language that summarizes and conveys content, can only encompass conventional abstraction, whose basis is shaped by the speaker's linguistic background's approximation (*upachara*). Here, it is reasonable/possible to distinguish different aspects of the processes marked by a single conventional name. Reasonable because each piece of knowledge helps on the path to understanding:

Yogācāra philosophers use *vijnāna* in a unique sense within the system, which may cause some confusion and even perplexity. *Vijnāna* is also used to refer to something that truly arises, that is, the momentary projection of what is unreal (*abhūtaparikalpa*) rather than the *grāhya* and *grāhaka*, which are projected (*parikalpita*). *Vijnāna* as the perception of an object must obviously be a falsity; however, *vijnāna* as the projection of the two (perceived/perceiver) does occur (Salvini ibid:40).

While Mahayana offers an esoteric-philosophical (*Guhya*) perspective in addition to the more exoteric-soteriological declaration of Theravada (*Vyakta*), the name Yogacara clearly speaks of categories and uses categories, which again Salvini says are “within the “conventions of the *yogin*,” considered superior when compared to the “conventions of worldly people” (*yogisaṃ vṛti* versus *lokasaṃ vṛti*)” (Salvini ibid:55). The issue is one of viewpoint and perspective. If fundamental understanding and reminder help common consciousness, the *yogin* is primarily interested in output through compassion, leading to effective emphases and measurable comprehension.

Asanga immediately brings the concept of ālayavijñāna or store consciousness to the reader in his Mahāyānasamgraha (Brunnhölzl 2019) Ch 1:1-2, referring to Abhidharmasūtra, which contains the previous karma's accumulation and forms the foundation for subsequent scenarios for all other levels of consciousness. Contemporary science confirms this ancient observation's rational core and partially describes this phenomenality through epigenetics and the unconscious (originally: ‘the subconscious’—Laplanche&Pontalis 1973:430-431). While it is a lot to expect concepts across disciplines to overlap, this dharmic component is fundamentally described as unconscious outside of Buddhism. In the psychoanalytic tradition, for example, the manifestation is formed against the background of what is not conscious, i.e. is beyond consciousness forming such a topography as an 'extended substrate'.

The above illustrates the validity of *śūnyatā* in the Yogacara and in later Chan context. A phenomenon aspect that cannot be precisely conceptualized and is therefore inherently empty—significantly impacts our lives and quality. For instance, contemporary psychology increasingly discusses spiritual crisis (Suzuki, Fromm 1960:78-80), intergenerational trauma, cumulative stress, and the proportion of psychogenic diseases.

It is necessary to agree that the Yogacara teaching has indeed and most commendably provided thought and aid over long centuries. Since any theory is only as valuable as it supports the following ones, it must be noted that Yogacara has definitely served as an inspiring source for subsequent schools.

- Common Foundation

The Samdhinirmocana-sutra (Disclosure of Intention) is considered one of the earliest core Yogacara texts, introducing the familiar wheel symbolism and introducing the reader to Mahayana and *śūnyatā* with the second turning of the wheel described as “marvelous and wonderful” (Keenan 2000:49). The third turning, described as “marvelous and wonderful indeed” (ibid), added more sentient beings who could benefit from understanding the truth through meditation and learning. No conflict with previous teachings is seen. Likewise, in Samdhinirmocana-sutra, Buddha responds to Bodhisattva Manjusri's question:

Good son, these three are characterized by nonduality. That is to say, there is no perfect awakening nor any absence of perfect awakening. There is no turning of the wheel of doctrine nor absence of turning the wheel of doctrine. ... This is so because of the ultimate purity of the Dharma body of Tathagatas and because of the constant manifestation of the Transformation bodies of Tathagatas. (ibid:110)

Similarly, Asanga shows that the ‘warehouse consciousness’, the ground of manifestations, is simply an ancient but important aspect, the treatment of which moves the teaching forward in

time. At the same time, he does not place consciousness above other phenomena but warns against the affliction that may arise if viewed outside the context of *pratityasamutpada* (Asanga transl Engle 2016:274-275).

- Criticism (against misinterpretations)

King (1994: 662) highlights Asanga's episodic criticism of *śūnyavāda* interpreters, which resulted in two main misinterpretations leading to nihilism:

a) Clinging to the idea that some individual characteristics (*svabhāva*) of things exist inherently. Asanga emphasizes that these characteristics do not reflect essence but are only verbal concepts (ibid). For example, the examples given in MMK do not prove the existence or quality of individual characteristics based on those specific examples. These specific examples were presented only as a list to demonstrate the pattern of non-duality.

b) The simplification that "absolutely everything is non-existent", which Asanga claims is a fallacy (ibid). Emptiness in the context of *śūnyata* describes essence of the phenomena, not their existence. Conventional truth and criteria are the only categories that can bring us closer to ultimate truth.

Essentially, Asanga's criticism of incorrect interpretations reinforces *śūnyata* and *śūnyavada* principles (Lusthaus 2015:142). Anacker (1986) describes the misleading impression that Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu disagreed with each other, which has come down to us through an ancient commentary. As one explanation, he suggests centuries later struggle for position or human vanity in a situation where Buddhism had already become an academic discipline in the universities of Nalanda and others (Anacker ibid:3). Garfield & Westerhoff (2015) convey a summary opinion in their book's introduction, "The difference between the two thinkers might therefore be read as one of temperament and style, not one of substance" (ibid:5). Such

opinions of the founding fathers do confirm that also the worldview position of the two respective schools coincides more than journalistic or "common truth" may initially indicate (eg *ibid*:4).

Garfield and Westerhoff's comprehensive anthology from 2015 offers an impressive range of relevant academic opinions, but does not claim to provide definitive answers regarding the relationship between Yogacara and Mādhyamaka. It is clearly impossible within the scope of this writing to address the intersecting, overlapping, and divergent views of these two significant and extensive philosophical schools in any considerable detail. Therefore, I will limit myself to a brief summary:

The beginning of Mādhyamaka is considered to be the works of Nāgārjuna and Aryadeva. "mādhyamaka is both straightforward and unique. It is straightforward, since nothing whatsoever is posited to exist as anything more than a convention (*saṃvṛtisat*)" (Salvini *ibid*:50). But, as Eckel(2015:130) aptly mentioned: "Madhyamikas have no monopoly on the middle way, and Yogācāras have no monopoly on the practice of yoga"

Similar to Mādhyamika, the Yogacara school considers the works of Nāgārjuna and Aryadeva as its foundation, with Nāgārjuna's contributions concisely summarized by Westerhoff (2015). Based on the earlier teaching, a qualitatively new development took place, which is understandable given that several generations if not centuries separate the works of Nāgārjuna from those of Asanga and Vasubandhu. These centuries include the flourishing of Indian philosophy against the backdrop of the Gupta Age or the so-called Golden Age. As a result of this later development, the founders of Yogacara do not question earlier fundamental works and truths, but instead question frivolous interpretations by third persons, their commentaries and impractical applications that seem either inappropriate or tendentious

(Lusthaus 2015:142, Gold 2015:217). Nāgārjuna's MMK received extensive written supportive commentaries both from Asanga and also significantly later from Sthiramati (ibid.).

● Summary

Sūnyatā is an integral and central part of the Buddhist community thought, although its interpretations, for example, in the Pali Tripitaka, differ both in emphasis and frequency from those typical of Mahayana (Pasadika 2007:202).

The original Śūnyavāda still used today as a synonym for Mādhyamaka and advocated by Nāgārjuna himself, was mainly focused on the very fundamental truths, especially the nature of *śūnyatā* as the fundamental concept. *Chapter 2* of this writing discussed the absoluteness of *śūnyatā*, its inherent potential, and its soteriological aspects, as well as the conceptual emptiness of observable phenomena.

Mādhyamaka focused on the ultimate nature of reality, which transcends all conceptual ambiguity, contradictions, fabrications, and dualities. Mādhyamaka used logical analysis and dialectical reasoning to demonstrate 1) the conceptual emptiness, while also acknowledging 2) the potential that would allow for the consensual existence, formation, and transformation of phenomena - leading to the realization of *śūnyavāda* as the middle path.

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Next generations sought further applications *for* these truths. The nature of the Bodhisattva described for example by Asanga in his 'Bodhisattvabhūmi' and presented to us in the 'Samdhinirmocana-sūtra' through the third turning of the wheel is characterized as the next

step in further contextualization of the previous teaching of *śūnyatā*. This was discussed in Chapter 3 of this writing.

Bodhisattvahood results from the constant pursuit of the perfection of skillful means (*upaya*). In striving for practical advancement, Yogacara selectively developed many valuable concepts, offering new possibilities to fellow thinkers in the context of compassionate aid—such as store-consciousness (*Ālayavijñāna*), Consciousness-Only (*vijñaptimātra*), and the Three Natures (*trisvabhāva*). Similarly, the distinction between 'completely imagined' and 'misconstrued' (*parikalpita* and *vikalpita*) allowed Yogacara to offer a “specific and articulate system of Abhidharma” while contending that the various defining traits (*lakṣaṇas*) are not arbitrary elaborations of a mere illusion” (Salvini *ibid*:57).

The Yogacara masters embraced the mystical perspective found in the Prajnaparamita texts, which was logically advanced by the works of Nāgārjuna and Aryadeva. This was a path long forgotten and brought to attention among others by Aryadeva in his ‘The Treatise of the Four Hundred Stanzas on the Yogic Deeds of Bodhisattvas’.

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If *śūnyatāvada* is taken to be synonymous with mainstream Mādhyamaka, then the material in Chapter 1 of this treatise can be summarized as characterizing it as a specific line of reasoning that explains the meaning of the Prajñaparamitas by providing insight into the ultimate nature of reality.

Yogacarins’ primary concern was bodhisattvahood, which Nāgārjuna did not yet pedestal in his works. Yogacara teaching was associated with meditative practices (*yoga*), rather than merely conceptual understanding (Asanga’s ‘Yogacarabhūmi’). Yogacarins focused on introspection to understand how consciousness shapes all meaning, whether mystical or theoretical, i.e., how it creates the illusion of duality, and how perception evolves from

delusion to enlightenment. Although, as stated by Vasubandhu or the Samdhinirmocana-sutra, even the concept of consciousness is inherently empty like any other, its application was found to have significant practical value.

The perspective of the Yogacara direction is supported by modern neuroscience, psychoanalysis, and others. For example, leading scholar A. Seth, professor of Cognitive and Computational Neuroscience at the University of Sussex, describes our everyday life a millennium and a half after Asanga and Vasubandhu as a 'controlled hallucination' (Seth 2021). It seems that no better model has been created so far.

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The concept of *śūnyatā* itself must, in turn, be regarded esoterically as *śūnya*. Both *śūnyavada* (Mādhyamaka) and Yogacara agreed on this.

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