

Study of Nāgārjuna's Theory of Emptiness

— Based on Candrakīrti's Prasannapadā, the Commentary on the
Mūlamadhyamakakārikā —

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Abstract

The theory of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is originally found in early Buddhist sūtras, and, therefore, it is clear that the theory did not originate with Nāgārjuna (approx. 150-250 CE). However, realists criticized his theory of emptiness because they thought that human ideas, insofar as they are rational, have substances that correspond to them in the external world. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* ("The Fundamental Verses on the Middle", abbr. MK) is one of Nāgārjuna's major works denying the non-existence of all dharmas. MK has over 400 verses (*kārikas*) divided into 27 chapters. The most disputed chapter

is the chapter XXIV, *Āryasatya parīkṣā nāma caturviṃśatitamam prakaraṇam* (‘‘Examination of the Four Noble Truths’’). This chapter is the longest chapter in MK, and my thesis deals mainly with this chapter. I translated the chapter of the MK and Candrakīrti’s (600–650 CE) *Prasannapadā* (abbr. Pr.), commentary work on MK. The original of both texts are written in Sanskrit. There are many translated texts of MK and Pr. in various languages; however many of them have been translated incorrectly. It is obvious that this kind of mistranslation leads the translator or even readers to misinterpret MK. In this thesis, I clarify some errors of the translated MK and Pr. texts. I try to get close to Nāgārjuna’s theory of emptiness through reading the chapter XXIV.

Nāgārjuna presents first six verses as counter-arguments from realists. At the first verse, the opponent charges, ‘‘If all were empty (śūnya), there can be no appearance nor disappearance. This would lead to a denial of the Four Noble Truths’’. The realists continue, ‘‘If the Four Noble Truths are empty, then likewise, there could not be attainments. There would be none who achieve enlightenment, and there would not even be a Buddha’’. Speaking in this manner about emptiness, the realists conclude, ‘‘You contradict the three jewels [of the Buddha, his teachings, and the community of Buddhists], as well as both good and bad and all such worldly conventions.’’ Candrakīrti further explains the realists’ insistentcies and their theory of being existence in Pr. Nāgārjuna’s theory of emptiness, as understood by realists, means nothing or nonbeing. For example, there is a saying that goes, ‘‘the child of a stone woman does not have birth or death.’’ The meaning of this is obvious; human beings experience birth and death while entities made of stone do not. If all were empty, there is no birth and death. Thus, everything does not exist, including ourselves. This being the case, how you can explain that existence is impermanence and what becomes the basis for the first of the Four Noble Truth, suffering (duḥkha), if all were empty?

Nāgārjuna answers to this cogent objection. He simply says, ‘‘We say that you do not comprehend the purpose of emptiness (śūnyatā prayojanam). As such, you are tormented by emptiness (śūnyatā) and the meaning of emptiness (śūnyatārtham)’’. Nāgārjuna does not explain what are those three characteristics of emptiness in MK. Based

on Candrakīrti's comments, the first two characteristics are already explained in verses of previous chapters in MK, and the meaning of emptiness is explained in a later verse. Candrakīrti cites those verses and included a detailed explanation.

Then Nāgārjuna continues to answer for the realists, "The teaching of the doctrine by the Buddhas is based upon Two Truths: Conventional Truth (*saṃvṛtti satya*) and Absolute Truth (*paramārtha satya*)". Conventional Truth has meanings that grow out of custom or usage between people. Moreover those meanings conform to formal or accepted standards or rules rather than from the original purpose. Thus Conventional Truth, at times, incorporates underlying nuances. Absolute Truth, on the other hand, is not mixed, but pure. It goes beyond mere words because it is perfect, complete, whole, and real. The important key here is that these two truths expressed by Conventional Truth are necessary to point the way to Absolute Truth. What Nāgārjuna clarifies is that the function of language is only to inform, yet language and concepts must be utilized. This is the reason why Śākyamuni hesitated in preaching Dharma because people do not correctly understand the difference between Conventional Truth and Absolute Truth.

A key concept to understanding the theory of emptiness is dependent origination. It is the insight that all existing entities have come into existence only through a process of mutual interaction and causation that provides the understanding of emptiness. Nāgārjuna says, "We state that whatever is dependent origination, that is emptiness". Verse 18 makes clear the theory of dependent origination and of emptiness by saying, "Whatever originates dependently, that is emptiness. This emptiness is contingent existence. This is the middle path." If all were originated dependently, then all lack an independent self. Therefore, all are empty. Emptiness means a lack of self because it is originated dependently, and the emptiness is contingent existence.

Nāgārjuna continues to analyze the realists' insidencies and points out that their theory about the emptiness is misinterpreted. At the end of the verse of the chapter XXIV, he says in closing, "Whoever perceives dependent origination also perceives suffering, its arising, its ceasing, and the path". Nāgārjuna's theory of emptiness is that

emptiness transcends being and nonbeing, and lacks self.

*This thesis was originally written in Japanese.

註

- ① The chapter XXIV contains 40 verses in total. The second longest chapter is XXVII that has 30 verses. Just for reference, the shortest one is chap. III which has only 8 verses.
- ② Prasannapadā is the only surviving original Sanskrit text.