

## EMPTINESS IN THE PĀLI *SUTTAS* AND THE QUESTION OF NĀGĀRJUNA'S ORTHODOXY

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### *Introduction*

A neglected area of research within Buddhist scholarship is the doctrinal relationship between the early *sūtras* and Nāgārjuna's philosophical works. Since most scholars of Buddhism<sup>1</sup> consider Nāgārjuna a Mahāyānist who systematized and spread the philosophy of the *Prajñapāramitā sūtras*, it has seemed to many that there is no need to explore the possible early sources of Nāgārjuna's thought or the evolution of Buddhist philosophy from the Nikāyas to the Mahāyāna schools. Even though the *Kātyāyana Sūtra*,<sup>2</sup> extant in both Pāli<sup>3</sup> and Chinese,<sup>4</sup> is the only *sūtra* cited by name in Nāgārjuna's major work, the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* (hereafter *MMK*), very little research has been done even on the relation between this *sūtra* and Nāgārjuna's thought since David Kalupahana's controversial reading of Nāgārjuna in 1986.

One of the consequences of this lack of research on the early history of Buddhist philosophy is the perpetuation within Buddhist scholarship of the traditional Tibetan division of Indian Buddhism into three sharply and rather artificially delineated stages: early Buddhism, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna.<sup>5</sup> This traditional account of Indian Buddhism, made popular by Edward Conze, is an oversimplification that does not do justice to the richness and complexity of early Buddhism or to the dynamics of the rise of the Mahāyāna movement. Neither early Buddhism nor the Mahāyāna are internally homogeneous from a philosophical standpoint. The philosophy of the Nikāyas or Āgamas is substantially different from that of the Abhidharmas, and the Abhidhamma of the Theravāda school is in many aspects substantially different from the Abhidharma of other schools such as the Sarvāstivāda.

One reason for the notion of an almost unbridgeable gap between early Buddhism and the Mahāyāna is the hagiographies of Nāgārjuna extant in Chinese and Tibetan.<sup>6</sup> Since his life in these works is related to the discovery of Mahāyāna *sūtras* and the second turning of the wheel of Dharma, it is not surprising that Nāgārjuna has been interpreted in contrast with early Buddhism and the first turning of the wheel of Dharma. Some scholars have gone so far as to claim that his thought constitutes a Copernican revolution in Buddhist philosophy,<sup>7</sup> or that it undermines the teachings of early Buddhism as a whole.<sup>8</sup> The assumption is that the first turning of the wheel and early Buddhism are basically the same thing, and that the teachings of the early *sūtras*, Vinayas, and Abhidharmas constitute a homogeneous entity. This misinterpretation of the history of Indian Buddhism is understandable in Tibetan traditions, where a version of the early *sūtras* does not exist and the early Abhidharma

literature is virtually unknown,<sup>9</sup> but within contemporary critical scholarship it is unacceptable.

In order to better understand early Buddhism and the position of Nāgārjuna in the history of Buddhist philosophy, I have made a comparative study of the concept of emptiness in the Pāli *suttas* and Nāgārjuna's *MMK*. My thesis is that three characteristic teachings of the second turning of the wheel of Dharma are not revolutionary innovations of Nāgārjuna but orthodox philosophical moves entailed by the teachings of the Buddha. These teachings are the common identity between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, the emptiness of *svabhāva* of all *dharma*s, and the equating of emptiness with dependent arising. The ultimate aim of this essay is to question sectarian interpretations of Nāgārjuna and simplistic scholastic doxographies of early Buddhist philosophy. Although I will highlight some similarities between Nāgārjuna and the Pāli *suttas*, I do not try to insinuate that they are saying the same thing or that Nāgārjuna is not an original thinker. Even though my approach might resemble that of David Kalupahana, my understanding of the philosophical stance of the Pāli *suttas* and Nāgārjuna substantially differs from his radical empiricist interpretation of them. Furthermore, I am not interested in questioning the traditional religious affiliation of Nāgārjuna, and I do not contend, as Kalupahana does, that he was not a pure Mahāyānist, whatever that might mean.

### *Emptiness in the Pāli Suttas*

According to Nancy McCagney, Nāgārjuna's use of the term 'emptiness' is heterodox and inconsistent with the Pāli *suttas*.<sup>10</sup> In her opinion, emptiness in the Pāli *suttas* refers only to *nibbāna*, and the concepts of both emptiness and *nibbāna* "stand in utter contrast and opposition to that of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, the human condition, or *saṃsāra*."<sup>11</sup> The textual evidence provided by McCagney shows that some usages of emptiness in the Pāli *suttas* refers to a meditative attainment where one experiences *nibbāna*. For instance, she quotes *Majjhima Nikāya* (hereafter *MN*) III.294, where emptiness refers to the meditative attainment called *suññatā-vihāra* or abode of emptiness.<sup>12</sup> According to the Theravāda tradition, in the abode of emptiness the liberated one is aware of the empty aspect of *nibbāna* and enjoys the fruition attainment of arahantship, so emptiness here refers to the experience of *nibbāna*. In addition, she quotes *Therīgatha* 46, where someone is called an obtainer of the signless emptiness (*suññatāssanimittassa lābhini*), another reference to a meditative attainment where one experiences *nibbāna*. She also quotes *Samyutta Nikāya* (hereafter *SN*) IV.360, where emptiness refers to a meditative attainment leading to the unconditioned state called emptiness concentration (*suññato samādhi*), and *MN* I.297–298, where emptiness refers to the deliverance of mind through emptiness (*suññatācetovimutti*), another meditative attainment closely related to the abode of emptiness.

But is this interpretation correct? Is it true that the concept of emptiness in the Pāli *suttas* always refers to a meditative attainment related to *nibbāna*? Does not emptiness refer also to *saṃsāra* or to dependently originated things of *saṃsāra*? Let

us examine the textual evidence that contradicts McCagney’s account of emptiness in the Pāli *suttas*.

In *SN* IV.173, *suñña* is used to describe an ‘empty village’ (*suññaṃ gamam*) and an ‘empty pot’ (*suññaṅkaññaeva*). The terms *suñña* and *suññaṅka*, in what seems to be their original meaning, refer to the physical absence of something. From this original physical meaning, the usage of emptiness was extended to apply metaphorically to the psychophysical components of beings. This second usage can be seen in the same *sutta* (*SN* IV.174–175), where the six internal sense bases are compared with an empty village, and each one of them is said to be void, hollow, and empty.<sup>13</sup> So the word ‘empty’ refers to empty things and places, and metaphorically to the six internal sense bases. The underlying meaning of emptiness in relation to the six internal sense bases is, as we will see later, nonself or absence of an ultimately existing, permanent, and independent self.

Since in *SN* IV.174–175 the six internal sense bases are said to be empty, and in a number of Pāli *suttas* they are said to be impermanent, suffering, nonself—that is, they are part of *saṃsāra*—it follows that McCagney’s interpretation of emptiness in the Pāli *suttas* as only referring to *nibbāna* is incorrect. But let us see more examples of usages of emptiness applying to conditioned and dependently originated things within *saṃsāra*.

In *MN* I.56 and *Digha Nikāya* II.291, the adjective *suñña* refers to an ‘empty hut’ or ‘empty place’ (*suññaṅgāra*) where one practices the four foundations of mindfulness.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in *SN* I.106, *suñña* is also used to refer to an ‘empty dwelling’ (*suññaṅgeha*) where the Buddha is practicing meditation “sitting out in the open in the thick darkness of the night.”<sup>15</sup>

Emptiness in the Pāli *suttas* also has the philosophical meaning of nonself or absence of self. In my view, this is by far the most important meaning of emptiness in the Pāli *suttas*, and it is the key to assess the possible relationship between Nāgārjuna and early Buddhism. For instance, in *Sutta Nipāta* 1119, in order to overcome death it is advised to be always mindful, to remove views about the self, and to see the world as empty (*suññato loko avekkhassu*). It is important to remark that in this text there seems to be a relationship between seeing the emptiness of the world, the practice of mindfulness, and the destruction of views of self. We will see later that Nāgārjuna also relates emptiness with the destruction of views. Once again, *suññatā* in this particular Pāli text does not refer to *nibbāna* but to the world, which is dependently originated and part of *saṃsāra*. Moreover, the world that one has to see as *suññatā* is nothing other than the psychophysical world of beings. This interpretation of the world as the psychophysical world is confirmed by the definition of the expression ‘empty is the world’ (*suñño loko*) given in *SN* IV.54, where there is another example of usages of emptiness meaning nonself or absence of self:

“Venerable sir, it is said, ‘Empty is the world, empty is the world.’ In what way, venerable sir, is it said, ‘Empty is the world?’” “It is, Ānanda, because it is empty of self and what belongs to self that it is said, ‘Empty is the world.’ And what is empty of self and of what belongs to self? The eye, Ānanda, is empty of self and of what belongs to self. Forms are empty of self and what belongs to self. Eye-consciousness is empty of self and of what

belongs to self. Eye-contact is empty of self and of what belongs to self. Whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition—whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant—that too is empty of self and what belongs to self. . . . [The same is repeated of the other five senses.]”<sup>16</sup>

So the expression ‘empty is the world’ (*suñño loko*) refers to dependently originated things of *saṃsāra*: the six senses, the six objects of the senses, the six kinds of consciousness, the six kinds of contacts, and whatever feelings arise with these contacts.

It is most significant that the expression ‘empty is the world’ is defined as ‘empty of self and of what belongs to self’ (*suññam attena vā attaniyena vā*), pointing out the close connection between the concepts of emptiness and nonself in the Pāli *suttas*. This relationship between emptiness and nonself can also be seen in the *Mahāvedalla Sutta* (*MN* I.297–298), where the expression ‘empty of self and of what belongs to self’ is defined as the deliverance of mind through emptiness (*suññatācetovimutti*).<sup>17</sup> The Theravāda commentary on this text says that deliverance of mind through emptiness refers to the insight into the emptiness of selfhood both in persons and in things.<sup>18</sup> Since persons and things are part of *saṃsāra*, and since the Theravāda commentarial tradition also understands the deliverance of mind through emptiness as the fruition attainment of *arahantship*, which has *nibbāna* as the object of that fruition,<sup>19</sup> it follows that for the Theravāda school, emptiness refers not only to *nibbāna* but also to persons and things of *saṃsāra*. In fact, the Theravāda commentarial tradition says explicitly that emptiness refers to the nonself characteristic of both the aggregates and *nibbāna*.<sup>20</sup>

Other usages of emptiness in the Pāli *suttas* that refer to dependently originated things and that also show the close connection between emptiness and nonself can be found in *SN* III.167; *MN* I.435 and I.500; and in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* II.128, IV.422–423, and IV.124.<sup>21</sup> In all these texts the disciples are advised to contemplate the three characteristics of the five aggregates, that is, impermanence, suffering, and nonself. Among the terms used to contemplate the characteristic of nonself, one can see the word emptiness (*suññato*), suggesting that both terms are synonyms. To quote just one (*SN* III.167), read as follows: “Friend Koṭṭhita, a virtuous bhikkhu should carefully attend to the five aggregates subject to clinging as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumor, as a dart, as misery, as an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as empty, as nonself.”<sup>22</sup> The close connection between nonself and emptiness in these texts is confirmed by the Theravāda commentarial tradition, which says that both terms have the same meaning, being different only in the letter.<sup>23</sup>

Following Choong Mun-Keat, I think that there is a connection between the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness in ‘empty dwellings or huts’ (*suñña-geha*), the insight into nonself or the emptiness of self, and the meditative attainment called ‘abode of emptiness’, that is, the experience of the empty aspect of *nibbāna*.<sup>24</sup>

Besides the physical, meditative, and philosophical usages, emptiness in the Pāli *suttas* also has an epistemological and soteriological usage. In the *Cūḷasuññata Sutta* one can see these two new different usages of emptiness. The epistemological usage

of emptiness refers to the absence of something in one's field of perception, and the soteriological usage refers to the absence in the liberated mind of the taints of desire, hatred, and ignorance. The *Cūḷasuññata Sutta* explains different stages of a meditation on emptiness. In each stage, the meditator has to contemplate the emptiness of something in one's field of perception and, at the same time, has to see what remains present in that perception. What is seen as present in one's field of perception is called 'not empty' (*asuññatā*), but in the next stage that very thing is seen as empty or not present in one's field of perception. That which is seen first as not empty and later as empty is always a dependently originated thing. For instance, in the first stage, one contemplates the emptiness of a village (i.e., it is empty of people) but perceives the forest as 'not empty'. The same procedure is followed in the subsequent stages: in the next stage one contemplates the emptiness of the forest but perceives the earth to be not empty, and in the next one the meditator contemplates the emptiness of the earth but perceives the meditative attainment called 'base of infinite space', which is said to be not empty.

The same procedure is followed with the meditative attainments called 'base of infinite space', 'base of infinite consciousness', and 'base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception'. After contemplating the emptiness of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, the meditator perceives the six sensory fields or bases, which are said to be not empty, dependent on this body (*kāyam paṭicca*), and conditioned by life (*jīvitapaccayā*). Then, the meditator enters into the state called 'signless concentration of mind' (*animitta cetosamādhī*) and later realizes that it is something conditioned (*abhisankhato*), volitionally produced (*ābhisañcetasiko*), impermanent, and subject to cessation.

When the meditator sees that "whatever is conditioned and volitionally produced is impermanent, subject to cessation,"<sup>25</sup> his or her mind attains liberation, and he or she understands that his or her field of perception is empty of the taints of desire, becoming, and ignorance.<sup>26</sup> In the next and last stage one contemplates both the emptiness of the six sensory fields and the supreme and unsurpassed emptiness (*paramānuttarā suññatā*),<sup>27</sup> which is nothing but a way of referring to the realization of *nibbāna* as empty.<sup>28</sup>

In the last stage, in a sense, there is nothing present in one's field of perception but the emptiness of both *saṃsāra* (the six sensory fields) and *nibbāna* (lack of taints). When the emptiness of everything is what remains present, one's field of perception is somehow objectless or without support; that is, it is not dependent on or conditioned by any particular object. If this interpretation of the *Cūḷasuññata Sutta* is plausible, it seems possible to have overlapping experiences of both the emptiness of *saṃsāra* and the emptiness of *nibbāna*. This would be consistent with other accounts of the awakening process where one attains *nibbāna* within *saṃsāra*, or at least with some remains of *saṃsāra*. In this context, the remains of *saṃsāra* are the six sensory fields, a different way of referring to the five aggregates, which are the remains in other contexts. The aggregates of the Tathāgata, although somehow different from the aggregates of the non-awakened beings, are after all aggregates; that is, they are impermanent, suffering, nonself, conditioned, and dependently originated. This is

confirmed by the Theravāda tradition, which considers the aggregates of the Tathāgata to be the residue or remainder of *saṃsāra* experienced together with *nibbāna*. In other words, the aggregates of the liberated one are the *upadi* of *saṃsāra*, to which the technical term *saupādisesanibbanadhātu* (*nibbāna* element with *upadi* left) refers.<sup>29</sup>

Since the aggregates of a liberated one are somehow part of *saṃsāra*, any experience of *nibbāna* during his or her life must be at the same time an experience of what is left of *saṃsāra*. In other words, the experience of the emptiness of *nibbāna* is also an experience of the emptiness of the aggregates, because the aggregates are what remains or are left of *saṃsāra* once *nibbāna* is attained. This interpretation is consistent not only with the Pāli concept of ‘*saupādisesanibbanadhātu*’, or ‘*nibbāna* element with what remains of *upadi*’, but also with the texts suggesting that *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna* take place within the same body.<sup>30</sup> In sum, if this interpretation is correct, even the usages of emptiness that seem to refer only to *nibbāna* would apply also to the aggregates as the *upadisesa* of *saṃsāra*. So even if McCagney is right in saying that emptiness in the Pāli *suttas* only refers to *nibbāna*, it could be argued that since *nibbāna* during this life is always experienced together with *upadi* or the aggregates, it also refers to *saṃsāra*.

The emptiness of taints in a liberated person and the perception of the supreme emptiness of *nibbāna* do not eliminate his or her six sensory fields. The liberated one still has sensory fields but perceives them as empty of self and taints. When he or she sees the emptiness of *nibbāna*, he or she sees at the same time the emptiness of the six sensory fields or the five aggregates. From this standpoint, *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna* are equally experienced as empty of self, and in this sense it might be said that there is not the slightest difference between them. Similarly, regarding taints, it might be said that there is not the slightest difference between *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna* because both are equally empty of taints. *Nibbāna* is by definition the extinction of all taints, and the aggregates of a liberated being are no longer subject to the taints of sensual desire, ignorance (views of self), and becoming.<sup>31</sup>

Obviously, this relative common identity between *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna* in terms of emptiness of self and taints does not imply that *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna* are absolutely the same thing without any distinction whatsoever. This monistic interpretation of *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna* as being “one and the same” would be inconsistent with the Pāli *suttas*. The aggregates, even the aggregates of a liberated being (*saṃsāra*), are never said to be the same as *nibbāna*. However, the alternative dualistic interpretation that sees *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna* as different would also be inconsistent with the Pāli *suttas*. The aggregates, even those of a liberated one, are never said to be different from *nibbāna*. According to the *Mūlapariyāya Sutta*, liberated beings and even those in higher training (*sekha*) conceive of themselves neither ‘as’ *saṃsāra* nor ‘as’ *nibbāna* (monistic interpretation), neither ‘apart from’ *saṃsāra* nor ‘apart from’ *nibbāna* (dualistic interpretation); they do not conceive themselves even as ‘in’ *saṃsāra* or ‘in’ *nibbāna*. Having these conceptions indicates that there is still attachment to some subtle view of self in relation to *saṃsāra* or *nibbāna*. The *Mūlapariyāya Sutta* expresses this point by saying that people with such conceptions still delight in *saṃ-*

*sāra* or *nibbāna*. It also says that they have not fully understood *saṃsāra* or *nibbāna* and that they are not free from lust, hate, and delusion.<sup>32</sup> So, for the Buddha of the Pāli *suttas*, it is evident that the monistic interpretation of *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna* is proper of someone lacking in wisdom and still subject to the three roots of the unwholesome. Consequently, the common identity between *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna* that is inferable from Pāli texts cannot be monistic and absolute, but rather limited and relative to the emptiness of self and taints experienced by liberated beings.

#### *The Common Identity between Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa in Nāgārjuna*

The question now is whether or not Nāgārjuna's explicit formulation of the common identity between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is monistic and absolute or rather limited and to some extent similar to the implicit common identification in the Pāli *suttas*. When Nāgārjuna says, in *MMK* XXV.19, that there is not the slightest difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* and vice versa,<sup>33</sup> is he speaking from the point of view of liberated beings, or of non-liberated beings? Is he saying that *saṃsāra* in general is one and the same as *nirvāṇa*, or rather that there is not the slightest difference between them in terms of emptiness? According to my interpretation, based on a non-scholastic and direct reading of the Sanskrit version of the *MMK*, Nāgārjuna is speaking from the point of view of liberated beings and their experience of emptiness in both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. In other words, the identification is not absolute but relative to the perspective of liberated beings and limited to emptiness.

In my view, a literal reading of *MMK* XXV.19 is highly problematic. As I will show, it is not only unwarranted by the context but also inconsistent with the rest of the *MMK*. A literal reading interprets *MMK* XXV.19 out of its context without taking into account the absurd consequences that follow.

If it were true that there is literally no difference at all between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, what would be the purpose of Nāgārjuna's *MMK* if those in *saṃsāra* were equally in *nirvāṇa* or if the experience of both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* were identical? Why use emptiness to relinquish views if, with or without views, one is always in literally the same reality? Why is it necessary to distinguish between conventional and ultimate truths, liberated and non-liberated beings, suffering and its cessation? And what, then, would be the point of chapter XXVI, where Nāgārjuna restates the classical formulation of the dependent arising and ceasing of suffering? Why would Nāgārjuna praise the Buddha when in fact there is not the slightest difference between him and a common person? It is precisely because there are differences between a buddha and a common person, between the ultimate and the conventional truth, between a perspective with views and one without views, and between the experience of liberated and non-liberated beings that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* cannot be interpreted as being literally the same thing. It is precisely because the common identity between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is not absolute that the *MMK* has a purpose and that emptiness is a useful method to relinquish views. The absolutistic reading of Nāgārjuna's identification makes the *MMK* unnecessarily inconsistent and utterly pointless. So, if Nāgārjuna's identification of *saṃsāra* with *nirvāṇa* cannot be abso-

lute because of these absurd consequences, how is its scope to be determined? To what extent is Nāgārjuna's identification limited and to what extent is it relative? The answer to these questions can be found in the context of *MMK* XXV.19.

Chapter XXV starts with the objection that if everything is empty, *nirvāṇa* is not possible.<sup>34</sup> Nāgārjuna replies that if everything were non-empty, then *nirvāṇa* would be impossible.<sup>35</sup> Verse 3 defines *nirvāṇa* through six negations.<sup>36</sup> The last four negations (non-annihilated, non-eternalized, non-ceased, non-originated) appear also in the dedicatory verses of the *MMK*. There, Nāgārjuna salutes the Buddha and describes through eight negations three things: dependent arising, the pacification of fabrications (*prapañcopaśamaṃ*), and happiness (*śivam*). The pacification of fabrications and happiness is mentioned again in the last verse of chapter XXV. Since the dependent arising of *saṃsāra* is directly realized by liberated beings together with *nirvāṇa* (at least during the awakening process), it might be inferred that while the term 'dependent arising' refers to *saṃsāra*, the terms 'pacification of fabrications' and 'happiness' refer to *nirvāṇa*. The dedicatory verses—and arguably all of the *MMK*—speak from the point of view of liberated beings and their experience of *nirvāṇa*. Since that experience takes place within *saṃsāra*, that is, within the aggregates, it is plausible to infer that Nāgārjuna's identification has to do with the aggregates of liberated beings and their experience of *nirvāṇa*.

Verses 4–16 seem to confirm this interpretation because they contrast *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, that is, the two aspects experienced simultaneously by liberated beings. They argue that *nirvāṇa* is neither an entity nor a nonentity, nor both, nor neither; whereas *nirvāṇa* is independent, unconditioned, and without old age and death, both entities and nonentities are dependent, conditioned, and with old age and death. The contrast between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* described in verses 4–16 is never denied. This is already enough to rule out a literal and absolute reading of Nāgārjuna's identification in verse 19. The orthodoxy of verses 4–16 is suggested by verse 10, where Nāgārjuna bases his argument on the teaching of the Buddha, here referred to as the master (*śasta*).<sup>37</sup> Verses 17–18 and 20–24 also suggest that the identification has to do with the aggregates of liberated beings and their *nirvāṇa*. Verses 17–18 explicitly mention liberated beings, expressing the inapplicability of "ontological" terms to them. Verse 17 says that it is unacceptable to claim that liberated beings exist after death, do not exist, both, or neither.<sup>38</sup> Verse 18 says that such statements are unacceptable even during their life.<sup>39</sup> It is in relation to liberated beings, then, that verse 19 states that there is not the slightest difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* and vice versa. Verse 20 says that the limits of *nirvāṇa* are the limits of *saṃsāra* and that there is not even something subtle between them.<sup>40</sup> The limits of *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* refer to the limits of the world and the experience of liberated beings, that is, to their aggregates.

This also is confirmed by verses 21–24. Verse 21 says that views about what happens after death (to the aggregates of liberated beings), that is, about their end and eternity, presuppose (the own existence of) *nirvāṇa* as well as (the own existence of) a last end and a first principle (of *saṃsāra*).<sup>41</sup> Verses 22–23 say that when all *dharma*s or components of beings are empty, it does not make sense to ask about



extreme views about liberated beings and their *dharmas*, that is, about their finitude, infinitude, identity, difference, eternity, and non-eternity.<sup>42</sup> Verse 24 concludes the chapter saying that this (relinquishing of extreme views about liberated beings and their *dharmas*) is the pacification of all objects and fabrications, that is, happiness or *nirvāṇa*. The final verse also states that the Buddha did not teach any *dharma* to any person.<sup>43</sup> That is, it emphasizes that from the point of view of liberated beings all *dharmas* and persons are empty. The last sentence of verse 24 and the first sentence of verse 22 make clear that Nāgārjuna's identification is limited to the emptiness of all: persons and *dharmas*, that is, liberated beings and aggregates, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. From the standpoint of emptiness, it is wrong to ask questions presupposing extreme views about the aggregates of liberated beings, that is, about the temporal and spatial limits of their world, the identity or difference between their body and soul, and their ontological status after cessation.

In the last sentence of the chapter, Nāgārjuna still speaks from the point of view of liberated beings, but now he refers to the emptiness of both liberated and non-liberated beings, that is, to the emptiness of all *dharmas* and all persons. Nāgārjuna reaches the climax of chapter XXV by concluding that the Buddha did not teach any *dharma* to any person. This, in my view, is a way of saying that the Buddha taught even the emptiness of *dharmas* of liberated beings; that is, he taught not only the emptiness of ordinary persons and their *dharmas* but also the emptiness of liberated persons and their *dharmas*. It might be thought that this last verse refutes my interpretation because it seems to entail the common identity, in terms of emptiness, between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* in general, not just of the *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* of liberated beings, as I have contended. My reply is that verse 24, the last one of chapter XXV, does not contradict my reading of Nāgārjuna's identification in verse 19. On the contrary, it complements Nāgārjuna's identification: not only the *saṃsāra* of liberated beings and their *nirvāṇa* (verse 19) but also all *dharmas* and all persons are equally empty. In terms of emptiness, there is not the slightest difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. However, the immediate context of Nāgārjuna's identification in verse 19 does not speak about *dharmas* and persons but about liberated beings and views about them.

The emptiness of *dharmas* and persons might be compared to what the Pāli *suttas* called internal emptiness (*ajjhataṃ suññatāṃ*) and external emptiness (*bahiddhā suññatāṃ*),<sup>44</sup> that is, to what the Theravāda commentarial tradition interprets as the emptiness of one's own aggregates and the aggregates of others.<sup>45</sup> The emptiness of *dharmas* would refer to internal emptiness, and the emptiness of persons would refer to external emptiness. Another possible interpretation of the emptiness implied by verse 24 would understand the emptiness of *dharmas* as the emptiness of aggregates in general, both internal and external, and the emptiness of persons as referring to the emptiness of personal concepts constructed around *dharmas*. The point would be that *dharmas* and persons, that is, components of beings and personal concepts wrongly attributed to them, are all empty.

If it is conceded that the term *dharmas* refers to the aggregates, which were further subdivided into *dharmas* in Abhidharma literature, then stating the emptiness

of all *dharmas* is neither Nāgārjuna's invention nor a Mahāyāna innovation. At least it is something entailed by the Pāli *suttas* and, accordingly, defended by non-Mahāyāna schools such as the Theravāda. Consequently, contrasting the Mahāyāna emptiness of both *dharmas* and persons with the non-Mahāyāna emptiness that supposedly applies to persons but not to all *dharmas* is historically and philosophically inaccurate. At the very least it does not apply to the Theravāda school.

Given the context of Nāgārjuna's explicit identification of *saṃsāra* with *nirvāṇa*, it seems plausible to state that it is perfectly orthodox. As with stating the emptiness of all *dharmas*, stating the common identity between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* in terms of emptiness is neither a revolutionary move nor an exclusive characteristic of the second turning of the wheel of Dharma. It is also entailed by the Pāli *suttas* and similarly defended by the Theravāda. Nāgārjuna's explicit identification is similar<sup>46</sup> to the implicit identification of the Pāli *suttas*: both are relative to liberated beings, both are limited to emptiness, and both presuppose the emptiness of all things (*dharmas* and persons in Nāgārjuna, internal and external emptiness in the Pāli *suttas*). However, the identifications are also dissimilar because they are formulated in very distinct ways and presuppose slightly different conceptions of emptiness. In the *MMK* the identification is explicit and straightforward; in the Pāli *suttas* it has to be inferred and it is at best implicit. Similarly, in the Pāli *suttas*, the emptiness of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* refers to the emptiness of self and taints; in the *MMK* it refers to the emptiness of *dharmas* (verses 22 and 24) and of persons (verse 24).

#### *Emptiness of Svabhāva and Emptiness of Self*

Nāgārjuna's emptiness has been interpreted traditionally as emptiness of *svabhāva*. This interpretation has been defended by classical Indian and Tibetan commentators from Buddhapālita to Tsong Khapa, as well as by a number of contemporary commentators, including Streng, Sprung, Inada, Kalupahana, Garfield, Batchelor, Huntington, Hopkins, Thurman, Newland, Cabezón, and others. Since the concept of *svabhāva* does not appear in the Pāli *suttas*, it might seem at first sight that the concepts of emptiness in the *MMK* and the Pāli *suttas* are referring to different things. This would be true if: (1) emptiness in the *MMK* means emptiness of *svabhāva* and not emptiness of self, and (2) *svabhāva* and self refer to different things. However, a direct reading of Nāgārjuna's *MMK* suggests that both assumptions are questionable.

Emptiness in the *MMK* means not only emptiness of *svabhāva* but also, as in the Pāli *suttas*, emptiness of self. For instance, in chapter IX it is evident that Nāgārjuna refutes the concept of self and establishes the emptiness of self. Verse 9 explicitly uses the concept of self, and the conclusion of the chapter says that when the extreme views of existence and non-existence have ended, the concept of someone, which clearly alludes to the concept of self, does not exist. If something can be inferred from this chapter, it is that Nāgārjuna's target is the concept of self, not the concept of *svabhāva*. Similarly, chapter XVIII explicitly refutes in verses 1–4 the concepts of self and of what belongs to self, saying in verse 5 that these concepts arise due to *prapañca* and cease in emptiness. Again, nothing suggests in these five

verses<sup>47</sup> or in the other verses of chapter XVIII that emptiness means emptiness of *svabhāva*, or that Nāgārjuna is refuting the *svabhāva* of self. On the contrary, the verses prove that Nāgārjuna is establishing the emptiness of self in relation to the aggregates and, therefore, that emptiness in the *MMK* also means emptiness of self.

Similarly, chapter XXVII has nothing to do with views presupposing a *svabhāva*, but rather with the classical undetermined questions. Likewise, verses 17–19 and 21–23 of chapter XXV are related to the undetermined questions of early Buddhism. In the Pāli *suttas*, the undetermined questions are explicitly related to views about self. For instance, in *SN IV.395–397*, it is said that wanderers of other sects answer the undetermined questions because they consider the aggregates as self, or self as possessing the aggregates, or the aggregates as in self, or self as in the aggregates. Since the Buddha of the Pāli *suttas* explicitly relates the undetermined questions to different views about the self, and in chapters XXV and XXVII Nāgārjuna explicitly mentions the Master (XXV.10) and Gautama (XXVII.30), that is, the Buddha, it is reasonable to infer that Nāgārjuna is trying to establish the emptiness of self in relation to the aggregates. Even if someone claimed that at least XXV.24 seems to be referring implicitly to the lack of *svabhāva* in *dharmas*, it would be true that XXV.24 is also referring to the lack of self or persons. The verse says not only that the Buddha did not teach *dharmas* (emptiness of *svabhāva* in *dharmas*) but also that he did not teach any of them to anyone (emptiness of self or persons). That claim would justify my reading, namely that emptiness in the *MMK* means both emptiness of self and emptiness of *svabhāva*.

The second assumption according to which emptiness of *svabhāva* and emptiness of self are not similar is also questionable. That in the *MMK* the emptiness of self and *svabhāva* are similar can be inferred from verses and chapters establishing the emptiness of self in a book mostly devoted to establishing the emptiness of *svabhāva*. That in the *MMK* the concepts of self and *svabhāva* are similar and even synonymous in some contexts can be inferred from at least two verses. For instance, in XXII.3 Nāgārjuna's opponent objects that what is dependent on other-existence (*parabhāva*) can exist without self, and the Tathāgata cannot exist without self.<sup>48</sup> In other words, the opponent claims that the personal identity of the Tathāgata must have self-existence (*svabhāva*), and he makes his point using the concept of self as the antonym of *parabhāva*, suggesting that self and *svabhāva* are synonymous. Nāgārjuna's reply in the following verse seems to confirm this interpretation when he says that without self-existence there cannot be other-existence, and without them, who is the Tathāgata? Nāgārjuna's question in XXII.4 about the personal identity of the Tathāgata seems to concede the relationship established by the opponent in the former verse between the personal concept of self and the impersonal concept of self implied by *svabhāva*. This is only possible if the concepts are similar. Likewise, in XVII.26, the concept of self means identity in a pure philosophical and impersonal sense, that is, it refers to the characteristic, essence, or nature of something, in this case to an action having the nature of afflictions (*karma kleśātmaṅ*).<sup>49</sup> From this verse it is evident that self means the nature or essence of something in an impersonal sense and is therefore similar to *svabhāva*.

If, in the *MMK*, *svabhāva* and self are similar, and emptiness of self and emptiness of *svabhāva* are also similar, there is no equivocation in considering Nāgārjuna's emptiness similar to the usages of emptiness in the Pāli *suttas* meaning emptiness of self. And since the concepts of self and *svabhāva* are similar in the *MMK*, even claiming that emptiness of self in the Pāli *suttas* is similar to the *MMK*'s emptiness of *svabhāva* is not an equivocation.

Once the danger of equivocation has been dispelled, the question now is: in what sense and to what extent is the emptiness of self in the Pāli *suttas* similar to the *MMK*'s emptiness of self and *svabhāva*? In the Pāli *suttas* the concept of self refers to the personal identity of someone, and the concept of *svabhāva* does not appear. In the *MMK* the concept of self can refer either to the personal identity of someone, or, like the concept of *svabhāva*, to the impersonal philosophical identity of something. In both the Pāli *suttas* and the *MMK*, self also refers to a permanent, self-sufficient, independent, and unconditioned identity, that is, to what the *MMK* calls *svabhāva* when it is contrasted with the concept of *parabhāva*. When *svabhāva* refers to the impersonal identity of something, it can be translated as own-nature, nature, or essence. When *svabhāva* means independent existence and appears as the opposite of *parabhāva*, it is better translated as self-existence or inherent existence. Both meanings of *svabhāva* are similar to the concept of self in the Pāli *suttas* because both refer to a permanent and independent identity. In the Pāli *suttas* self means personal identity and independent existence, and both meanings are inseparable. In the *MMK*, *svabhāva* means impersonal identity and independent existence, but both meanings can appear separately. The degree of similarity between emptiness of self in the Pāli *suttas* and emptiness of *svabhāva* in the *MMK* might be slightly different depending on the meaning of self and *svabhāva* that one is comparing, but there will not be equivocation.

It is precisely due to the similarities between emptiness of *svabhāva* and emptiness of self that Indian and Tibetan Buddhist commentators understood emptiness of *svabhāva* as another way of referring to the classical emptiness of self. Even today both emptiness of *svabhāva* and emptiness of self are used synonymously in Tibetan scholasticism.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, strictly speaking, emptiness of self and emptiness of *svabhāva* are dissimilar in several senses: while the emptiness of self is established in relation to aggregates and personal concepts, the emptiness of *svabhāva* is established in relation to *dharmas* and impersonal concepts. While the emptiness of self is inseparable from the concept of mine and has basically psychological connotations, the emptiness of *svabhāva* is inseparable from philosophical categories and has primarily ontological connotations.

The dissimilarities between emptiness of *svabhāva* and emptiness of self, however, do not reflect a new philosophical insight but rather a new philosophical context. The analytical tendency of Buddhist scholasticism to classify and define the ultimate identity and characteristics of things led to the reification of these identities and characteristics. What originally was intended to be an aid to the contemplation of nonself in all things became a set of speculations about the ultimate identity and characteristics of these very things. The scholastic term to denote these character-

istics and ultimate identities was *svabhāva*, and the things that possessed them were called *dharma*s. The *svabhāva* of *dharma*s was mistakenly conceived by some schools as some kind of ultimately existing, permanent, and independent entity, something inherently possessed by each *dharma*. Buddhist scholastics imputed a *svabhāva* not only to phenomena or *dharma*s but also to concepts such as cause, effect, movement, action, and the four noble truths. Buddhist categories and philosophical concepts used to organize and describe the nature of phenomena were also reified and considered ultimate identities possessing permanent and independent characteristics.

For Nāgārjuna, the concept of *svabhāva* was a new expression of the human tendency to perceive ultimate, permanent, and independent identities in conventional, impermanent, and dependently originated phenomena. In this sense, the concept of *svabhāva* was a new manifestation of the concept of self, a more sophisticated view of self. Like the concept of self, the concept of *svabhāva* was a false imputation into things related to the belief in the ultimate identity, permanence, and independence of something. The concept of *svabhāva*, like the concept of self, was a deviation from the classical teaching of nonself and dependent arising as the middle way between the extremes of eternalism and annihilationism, that is, between the extremes of an ultimately existing identity and an absolutely non-existent identity.

The main objective of the *MMK* was precisely to counteract this deviation, this new view of self, this imputation of an ultimate, permanent, and independent *svabhāva* into *dharma*s and concepts. In other words, the *MMK* tries to establish the emptiness of everything and counteracts extreme views about the identity of things and concepts. All chapters except chapter XXVI contain polemical arguments refuting or deconstructing extreme views. Speculation presupposing extreme views leads to more views about the finitude, infinitude, unity, plurality, eternity, and annihilation of these identities. By deconstructing extreme views about identities, the *MMK* establishes the emptiness of everything and leads to the abandonment of extreme views (XXVII.30). This amounts to the cessation of fabrications and the liberation from suffering or awakening.

All chapters in the *MMK* seem to be written from the standpoint of emptiness, a standpoint attained by liberated beings together with the insight of dependent arising and cessation. In other words, all chapters are written from the experience of *nirvāṇa* within *saṃsāra*, of emptiness within dependent arising. This experience and subsequent standpoint is conveyed conceptually and can be rationally understood by non-liberated beings; otherwise Nāgārjuna would not have written the *MMK*.

The emptiness of *svabhāva* predominant in the *MMK* had to be established in a traditional and orthodox way showing continuity with the early teachings of nonself or emptiness of self; otherwise not a single Buddhist would have taken Nāgārjuna seriously. Nāgārjuna's conception of emptiness had to be faithful to the classical concept of selflessness and at the same time had to address the new conception of self developed by Buddhist scholastics. This, in my view, is the reason why in the *MMK* Nāgārjuna establishes not only the classical emptiness of self in relation to

aggregates and persons but also the new emptiness of *svabhāva* in relation to *dharma*s and concepts. It is true that most chapters of the *MMK* are intended to establish the emptiness of *svabhāva*, but it is equally true that chapters IX, XVIII, XXV, and XXVII establish the classical emptiness of self.

The method used by Nāgārjuna to establish both kinds of emptiness is to point out the absurd consequences that follow when one presupposes the concept of self or *svabhāva*. The emptiness of *svabhāva* builds upon the emptiness of self and expands the field of application of emptiness from aggregates to *dharma*s and from reified personal concepts to reified impersonal concepts. Nāgārjuna's expansion of the field of application of emptiness does not constitute a mere repetition of what Gautama said centuries before. Nevertheless, it is an orthodox move that continues the philosophical insight underlying the emptiness of self. If the emptiness of *svabhāva* were not an orthodox expansion that continues the philosophical insight underlying the emptiness of self, Nāgārjuna would not have put them together in the same text. He would not have used the concept of self in two complementary senses: in a psychological personal sense, as it appears in chapters IX, XVIII, XXV, and XXVII, and in a philosophical impersonal sense equivalent to *svabhāva*, as it appears in XVII.26 and XX.3.

#### *The Equating of Emptiness, Dependent Arising, and the Middle Way*

According to McCagney, when Nāgārjuna says in XXIV.18 that "What is dependently arisen, that is what we understand by emptiness,"<sup>51</sup> he is making a move that identifies *saṃsāra* with *nirvāṇa*. In her view, equating dependent arising with emptiness is an original contribution to the whole of the Buddhist tradition,<sup>52</sup> and a "dramatic departure from earlier usage in the Pāli Canon."<sup>53</sup>

However, in my view, this equation by Nāgārjuna has nothing to do with the identification of *saṃsāra* with *nirvāṇa*; it is a way of claiming the orthodoxy of his understanding of emptiness. Nāgārjuna is not trying to make any original contribution in XXIV.18; quite the contrary: he is defending the orthodoxy of his expanded understanding of emptiness. Once again, we must look at the context of the verse and its consistency with other chapters.

The famous equating of dependent arising and emptiness appears in XXIV.18, within a chapter dealing with the four noble truths. It takes place after Nāgārjuna has been accused of destroying Buddhism by rejecting the four noble truths, the three jewels, the worldly conventions, and other central teachings of Buddhism. Nāgārjuna starts his defense by saying that such an accusation is due to a wrong understanding of emptiness as well as to an ignorance of the distinction between conventional and ultimate truth (verses 7–15). He returns the accusation to the opponent, saying that things are without causes and conditions precisely when one perceives a *svabhāva* in things (verse 16). And it is then, when one presupposes a *svabhāva*, that effects, causes, agent, action, conditions, arising, and ceasing are rejected (verse 17). It is right after this defense and counterattack that Nāgārjuna formulates his famous equating of dependent arising and emptiness.

Afterward, he continues his counterattack by arguing that all *dharma*s are dependently arisen and empty, and that if things were not empty of *svabhāva*, then the four noble truths and all the teachings of Buddhism would be impossible. So the context of verse 24 clearly indicates that Nāgārjuna is defending the orthodoxy of his interpretation of emptiness and clarifying his position to avoid the unjust accusation of nihilism.

Nāgārjuna defends his orthodoxy not only in chapter XXIV but also in the three subsequent chapters. In chapter XXV, he argues that emptiness is compatible with the attainment of *nirvāṇa* (XXV.2) and consistent with the classical middle way between existence and non-existence (XXV.10) taught by the Buddha. Similarly, when Nāgārjuna concludes chapter XXV by saying that the Buddha did not teach any *dharma* to any person (XXV.24), he seems to suggest that the emptiness of *dharma*s and persons taught by him is nothing new but something already taught by the Buddha. In chapter XXVI, Nāgārjuna limits himself to repeating the most traditional twelve-links formula of dependent arising and cessation of suffering. And in chapter XXVII, he concludes the book by establishing the classical emptiness of self in relation to the five aggregates. If something can be inferred from Nāgārjuna's persistent defense of his orthodoxy in the last four chapters, it is that he did not understand emptiness and its equating with dependent arising as an original contribution not entailed by the early teachings of the Buddha.

Given the context of XXIV.18 and Nāgārjuna's insistence on his orthodoxy, I do not see any reason to state, as McCagney does, that Nāgārjuna's equation is a dramatic departure from early Buddhism, and even less a philosophical move similar to an absolute identification of *saṃsāra* with *nirvāṇa*.

While the point in the equating of emptiness and dependent arising is to justify that emptiness of *svabhāva* is perfectly compatible with the four noble truths, et cetera, the point of the identification of *saṃsāra* with *nirvāṇa* is to argue that they are identical in terms of emptiness. The fact that both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are identical in terms of emptiness does not make them identical in terms of dependent arising. At least for Nāgārjuna, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are not equally dependently arisen; otherwise he would not have contrasted them precisely in this regard in XXV.4–16. The position of Nāgārjuna is quite explicit. He says in XXV.9 that *nirvāṇa* is not dependent (*apratītya*) and not conditioned (*anupādāya*), in contrast to what comes and goes, which is dependent and conditioned. So it might be true that for Nāgārjuna all *dharma*s are dependently arisen and empty, as it is explicitly stated in XXIV.19, but they are not so in the same way. Claiming that there is not the slightest difference between *dharma*s in terms of dependent arising is not warranted by the *MMK*, at least in XXV.4–16. If everything were equally dependently arisen, the *MMK* would be inconsistent. The only way to solve this inconsistency in the *MMK* would be by saying that *nirvāṇa* is not a *dharma*, or by attributing XXV.4–16 to Nāgārjuna's opponent. The latter is unlikely because the argumentation in these verses is characteristic of Nāgārjuna. In my view, XXIV.19 is not intended to apply to *nirvāṇa* because *nirvāṇa* is not a *dharma* in the sense of a thing or a component of things. This is precisely what Nāgārjuna is trying to show in XXV.4–16, where he argues

that *nirvāṇa* is not either an entity or a nonentity, or both, or neither of them. Even the Prañgika-Mādhyamaka interpretation, which interprets XXIV.19 as applying to *nirvāṇa*, claims that between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* there is not the slightest difference in terms of emptiness but this is not the case in terms of dependent arising.

If behind Nāgārjuna's equating of dependent arising and emptiness lay the identification of *saṃsāra* with *nirvāṇa*, he would have concluded the chapter in a very different way. Instead of saying that those who see dependent arising see suffering, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation (XXIV.40), he would have said that those who see dependent arising see the identity of the four noble truths, or that there is not the slightest difference between suffering and its cessation, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. However, that would make Nāgārjuna's argumentation irrelevant and contradictory. What would be the point of arguing that emptiness is perfectly consistent with the four noble truths if there is not any difference between them, that is, between suffering and its cessation, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*? Everything would be equally consistent with everything because all would be one and the same. On the contrary, it is precisely because the four noble truths, suffering and its cessation, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, are not one and the same that emptiness can perform its soteriological function consistent with other core teachings of early Buddhism. Since Nāgārjuna does not conclude the chapter on the four noble truths by defending the absolute identity of suffering and its cessation, I do not see any reason to interpret the equating of dependent arising and emptiness in XXIV.18 as equivalent to the identification of *saṃsāra* with *nirvāṇa* that appears in XXV.19. Instead I prefer to interpret XXIV.18 within its context, sticking to the original Sanskrit and without creating unnecessary hermeneutical problems.

Strictly speaking, XXIV.18 does not equate emptiness and dependent arising but clarifies what Nāgārjuna means or understands by emptiness. The term *pracaṣṣaḥ* is derived from the verbal root *caṣ*, which means seeing and, less literally, perceiving, knowing, and understanding. Seeing or understanding emptiness as that which is dependently arisen is nothing other than the middle way taught by the Buddha. One should not forget that in chapter XXIV Nāgārjuna is defending the compatibility between emptiness and the four noble truths. Since dependent arising is the principle underlying the four noble truths (when there is thirst, there is suffering; when the path is practiced, cessation of suffering is attained),<sup>54</sup> it is understandable that Nāgārjuna relates emptiness to dependent arising in a chapter devoted to the four noble truths. It is also understandable that Nāgārjuna concludes chapter XXIV by saying that whoever sees dependent arising sees the four noble truths (XXIV.40). This conclusion can be interpreted as a reference to the early teachings of the Buddha and as another way of reinforcing his claim to orthodoxy. The reference is to *MN* I.191, where it is said that those who see dependent origination see the Dharma, which in a number of texts is summarized as the four noble truths or the arising and cessation of suffering.

Nāgārjuna had already defended the orthodoxy of his extended version of emptiness in relation to the middle way and dependent arising, at least implicitly—specifically, when he mentioned the *Kātyāyana Sūtra* in XV.7, extant both in Pāli and



Chinese.<sup>55</sup> The *Kātyāyana Sūtra* not only deals with the two extremes of existence and non-existence and the doctrine of dependent arising as a middle way between them; it also speaks about right view. Right view in the *Kātyāyana Sūtra* is nothing other than the teaching of dependent arising and cessation of suffering, which is contrasted with views about self.<sup>56</sup> The only early *sūtra* that Nāgārjuna cites explicitly to legitimate his expanded understanding of emptiness contrasts the view of self with right view, and sees right view as the middle way of dependent arising. This contrast suggests that already in the Pāli *suttas* the teaching of dependent arising is related to the teaching of nonself, and consequently to the teaching of the emptiness of the self and of what belongs to the self. Since the *Kātyāyana Sūtra* contains a connection between the teaching of dependent arising as the middle way and the teaching of nonself, and since the concept of nonself is a synonym for emptiness, I do not see enough grounds for considering Nāgārjuna's equating of dependent arising and emptiness as a revolutionary innovation not entailed by the Pāli *suttas*.

In conclusion, Nāgārjuna's famous identification of *saṃsāra* with *nirvāṇa*, his defending the emptiness of *svabhāva* of all *dharmas*, and his equating emptiness and dependent arising are not revolutionary innovations but orthodox philosophical moves entailed by the early teachings of Buddhism.

#### Notes

I would like to thank Professor Francisca Cho (Georgetown University), Professor Charles B. Jones (Catholic University of America), Professor Jay Garfield (Smith College), Louis Gabaude (Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient), and the anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful comments.

All references to the Pāli texts are to the edition of the Pāli Text Society, Oxford. References to the *Dīgha*, *Majjhima*, and *Samyutta Nikāyas* cite the volume and page number. The reference to the *Sutta Nipāta* cites the verse number. The following abbreviations are used in the text and Notes:

MN *Majjhima Nikāya*  
 MMK *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*  
 SN *Samyutta Nikāya*

- 1 – The only well-known exceptions are David J. Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), and A. K. Warder, "Is Nāgārjuna a Mahayanist?" in *The Problem of Two Truths in Buddhism and Vedānta*, ed. M. Sprung (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1973), pp. 78–88. Both claim that Nāgārjuna was not a pure Mahāyānist but a devoted disciple trying to reestablish the original philosophy of the Buddha as extant in the Pāli *suttas* and the Chinese Āgamas, especially in the *Kaccāyanagota Sutta*.
- 2 – MMK XV.7.
- 3 – SN II.17.

- 4 – *Samyuktāgama*, 262.
- 5 – Bu-ston Rin-chen-grub, *The History of Buddhism in India and Tibet*, trans. from Tibetan by E. Obermiller, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Sri Satguru, 1999), pp. 122–130 (originally published in Heidelberg, 1932).
- 6 – See, for instance, J. Hopkins, *Buddhist Advice for Living and Liberation* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1998), pp. 9–21; Richard H. Robinson, *Early Mādhyamika in India and China* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978), pp. 21–22 (originally published by the University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1967); and Shohei Ichimura, *Buddhist Critical Spirituality* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001), pp. 62–63.
- 7 – T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1955).
- 8 – T. Stcherbatsky, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvana* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), p. 54 (originally published in Leningrad, 1927).
- 9 – The seven books of the Theravāda Abhidhamma tradition as well as six of the seven books of the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma are not extant in Tibetan.
- 10 – “The important exception to ‘orthodoxy’ is Nāgārjuna’s use of the term ‘*śūnyatā*’” (Nancy McCagney, *Nāgārjuna and the Philosophy of Openness* [Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997], p. xix).
- 11 – McCagney, *Nāgārjuna and the Philosophy of Openness*, p. 57.
- 12 – “Sāriputta, your faculties are clear. The colour of your skin is pure and bright. What abiding do you often abide in now, Sāriputta?” “Now, venerable sir, I often abide in the abiding of a great man. For this is the abiding of a great man, namely, emptiness” (MN III.294) (Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* [Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995], p. 1143; I have modified the translation, using ‘emptiness’ instead of ‘voidness’).
- 13 – “‘The empty village’: this is a designation for the six internal sense bases. If, bhikkhus, a wise, competent, intelligent person examines them by way of the eye, they appear to be void, hollow, empty. If he examines them by way of the ear . . . [the same is repeated of the other senses,] . . . by way of the mind, they appear to be void, hollow, empty” (SN IV.174–175) (Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* [Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000], p. 1238).
- 14 – “And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating the body as a body? Here a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out” (MN I.56) (Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 145).

- 15 – SN I.106, in Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 199.
- 16 – SN IV.54, in *ibid.*, pp. 1163–1164.
- 17 – “Here a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, reflects thus: ‘This is empty of a self or of what belongs to a self.’ This is called the deliverance of mind through emptiness” (*ibid.*, p. 394; translation modified: ‘emptiness’ instead of ‘voidness’).
- 18 – *Ibid.*, p. 1238 n. 450.
- 19 – See *ibid.*, p. 1239 n. 458.
- 20 – *Kathavathu Aṭṭhakatha*, p. 179 (reference taken from S. Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], p. 141).
- 21 – For the equivalent texts in the Chinese Āgamas, which use the word ‘emptiness’ as a synonym for nonself even more, see Choong Mun-Keat.
- 22 – SN III.167, in Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 970.
- 23 – *Paṭisambhidāmagga* II.63 with *Paṭisambhidāmagga Aṭṭhakatha*, p. 567 (reference taken from Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, p. 141).
- 24 – See Choong Mun-Keat, *The Notion of Emptiness in Early Buddhism*, 2nd rev. ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), pp. 9–10 (originally published in Singapore, 1995).
- 25 – MN III.108, in Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 969.
- 26 – “He understands: This field of perception is empty of the taint of sensual desire; this field of perception is empty of the taint of becoming; this field of perception is empty of the taint of ignorance. There is present only this not-emptiness, namely, that connected with the six bases that are dependent on this body and conditioned by life” (MN III.108, in Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, pp. 969–970; translation slightly modified: ‘empty’ instead of ‘void’, and ‘becoming’ instead of ‘being’).
- 27 – “Thus he regards it as empty of what is not there, but as to what remains there he understand that which is present thus: ‘This is present.’ Thus Ānanda, this is his genuine, undistorted, pure descent into emptiness, supreme and unsurpassed” (Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 970; translation slightly modified: ‘empty’ and ‘emptiness’ instead of ‘void’ and ‘voidness’).
- 28 – According to the Theravāda commentarial tradition, supreme emptiness refers to the *arahant’s* fruition attainment of emptiness, which has *nibbāna* as its

object of fruition (Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 1328 n. 1144).

- 29 – *Itivuttaka*, 38–39.
- 30 – “It is, friend, in just this fathom-high carcass endowed with perception and mind that I make known the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world” (SN I.62).
- 31 – “My deliverance is unshakeable; this is my last birth; now there is no renewal of becoming” (MN I.167, etc.).
- 32 – MN I.5–6.
- 33 – *na saṃsārasya nirvāṇāt kiṃ cid asti viśeṣaṇam / na nirvāṇasya saṃsārat kiṃ cid asti viśeṣaṇam //*
- 34 – *yadi śūnyam idaṃ sarvam udayo nāsti na vyayaḥ / prahāṇād vā nirodhād vā kasya nirvāṇam iṣyate //*  
If all this is empty, there is neither arising nor ceasing / From the renouncement or cessation of what is *nirvāṇa* attained [lit., desired]? //
- 35 – *yadi aśūnyam idaṃ sarvam udayo nāsti na vyayaḥ / prahāṇād vā nirodhād vā kasya nirvāṇam iṣyate //*  
If all this is not empty, there is neither arising nor ceasing / From the renouncement or cessation of what is *nirvāṇa* attained [lit., desired]? //
- 36 – *aprahīṇam asaṃprāptam anucchinnaṃ aśāśvataṃ / aniruddham anutpannam etan nirvāṇam ucyate //*  
Non-renounced, non-attained, non-annihilated, non-eternalized / Non-ceased, non-originated, this is called *nirvāṇa* //
- 37 – *prahāṇaṃ cābravīc chāstā bhavasya vibhavasya ca / tasmān na bhāvo nābhāvo nirvāṇam iti yujyate //*  
The Master proclaimed the renunciation of existence and non-existence / Therefore, ‘*nirvāṇa* is an entity or a nonentity’, it is not logical //
- 38 – *paraṃ nirodhād bhagavān bhavatīty eva nājyate / na bhavaty ubhayaṃ ceti nobhayaṃ ceti nājyate //*  
‘The Blessed one exists after cessation’, it is not acceptable / ‘[He] does not exist’, ‘both’, ‘not both’, it is not acceptable //
- 39 – *tiṣṭhamāno ‘pi bhagavān bhavatīty eva nājyate / na bhavaty ubhayaṃ ceti nobhayaṃ ceti nājyate //*  
Even while being alive, ‘The Blessed one exists’, it is not acceptable / ‘[He] does not exist’, ‘both’, ‘not both’, it is not acceptable //
- 40 – *nirvāṇasya ca yā koṭiḥ koṭiḥ saṃsāraṇasya ca / na tayoṃ antaraṃ kiṃ cit susūksmam apī vidyate //*  
The limit of *nirvāṇa* is the limit of *saṃsāra* / There is nothing between them, not even something subtle //

- 41 – *param nirodhād antādyāḥ śāśvatādyāś ca dṛṣṭayaḥ / nirvāṇaam aparāntaṃ ca pūrvāntaṃ ca samāśritāḥ //*  
Views about after cessation, the end, et cetera, eternity, et cetera / Are based on *nirvāṇa*, a last end and a previous end //
- 42 – *śūnyeṣu sarvadharmeṣu kim anantaṃ kim antavat / kim anantaṃ antavac ca nānantaṃ nāntavac ca kim // kiṃ tad eva kim anyat kiṃ śāśvataṃ kim aśāśvataṃ / aśāśvataṃ śāśvataṃ ca kiṃ vā nobhayaṃ apy ataḥ //*  
When all *dharma*s are empty, what is infinite? What is finite? / What is infinite and finite? What is neither infinite nor finite? // What is identical? What is different? What is eternal? What is non-eternal? / What is eternal and non-eternal? And what is not both [eternal and non-eternal]? //
- 43 – *sarvopalambhopaśamaḥ prapañcopaśamaḥ śivaḥ / na kva cit kasya cit kaś cid dharmo buddhena deśitaḥ //*  
The pacification of all objects, the pacification of fabrications, happiness / The Buddha did not teach any *dharma* to anyone //
- 44 – MN III.112.
- 45 – See Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 1329 n. 1152. In the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, internal and external emptiness are interpreted differently, as referring to the internal sense organs and their respective external objects.
- 46 – I am using the term ‘similar’ as a middle way between ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’, conveying analogous meaning and function, but not complete identity. In other words, I am using the term ‘similar’ presupposing the existence of dissimilarities. I consider the dissimilarities as important as the similarities, but here I am basically concerned with those aspects that are similar.
- 47 – *ātmā skandhā yadi bhaved udayavyayabhāg bhavet / skandhedhyo ‘nyo yadi bhaved bhaved askandhalakṣaṇaḥ // ātmany asati cātmiyaṃ kuta eva bhaviṣyati / nirmano nirahaṃkāraḥ śamād ātmātmanīnayoḥ // nirmano nirahaṃkāro yaś ca so ‘pi na vidyate / nirmamaṃ nirahaṃkāraṃ yaḥ paśyati na paśyati // mamety aham iti kṣīṇe bahirdhādhyātman eva ca / nirudhyata upādānaṃ tatksayāj janmanaḥ kṣayaḥ // karmakleśākṣayān mokṣaḥ karmakleśā vikalpataḥ / te prapañcāt prapañcas tu śūnyatāyāṃ nirudhyate //*
- 48 – *pratītya parabhāvaṃ yaḥ so ‘nātmety upapadyate / yaścānātmā sa ca kathaṃ bhaviṣyati tathāgataḥ //*
- 49 – *karma kleśātmakaṃ cedaṃ te ca kleśā na tattvataḥ / na cet te tattvataḥ kleśāḥ karma syāt tattvataḥ kathaṃ //*
- 50 – See, for instance, Joe Wilson, *Candrakīrti’s Sevenfold Reasoning: Meditation on the Selflessness of Persons* (Dharamshala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1980).
- 51 – *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tām pracakṣmahe /*

- 52 – McCagney, *Nāgārjuna and the Philosophy of Openness*, p. 53: “But on the equivalence of *pratītya samutpāda* and *śūnyatā*, Nāgārjuna was original and his argument made a respected and influential contribution to the Buddhist tradition.”
- 53 – *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 54 – When this is, that is, with the arising of this, that arises. Besides being the abstract principle underlying the four noble truths, the twelve-link formula of dependent arising and cessation corresponds to the second and third noble truths in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* I.176–177. Not surprisingly, Nāgārjuna restates in chapter XXVI the twelve-link chain of dependent arising and cessation, somehow implying that his analysis and deconstruction based on emptiness is perfectly orthodox and consistent with this classical teaching.
- 55 – In the Discourse to *Kātyāyana*, both ‘existence’ and ‘non-existence’ “Have been refuted by the Victorious One, the analyzer of entity and non-entity” (*kātyāyanāvavāde cāstīti nāstīti cobhayam / pratiṣiddhaṃ bhagavatā bhāvābhāvavibhāvinā //*).
- 56 – “This world, Kaccāna, is for the most part shackled by engagement, clinging, and adherence. But this one [with right view] does not become engaged and cling through that engagement and clinging, mental standpoint, adherence, underlying tendency; he does not take a stand about ‘my self.’ He has not perplexity or doubt that what arises is only suffering arising, what ceases is only suffering ceasing. His knowledge about this is independent of others. It is in this way Kaccāna, that there is right view. ‘All exist’: Kaccāna, this is one extreme. ‘All does not exist’: this is the second extreme. Without veering toward either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the middle: ‘With ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be]. . . . [Then the other factors of dependent origination and cessation of suffering are explained]” (*SN* II.17) (Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 544).