

# Madhyamaka Buddhism

## Introduction

Mādhyamaka (the Middle Way) is a Mahayana Buddhist school of philosophy (a *darśana*) founded by Nāgārjuna and his principle disciple, Aryadeva, in India between ca. 150 and 250 C.E.<sup>1</sup> At its core Madhyamaka is an attempt to set forth with logical rigor a view of the nature of phenomena. According to this view, all possible things, both internal (a concept in your mind, for example) and external (the chair you are sitting on, let's say), are empty of an intrinsic nature (essence, own-being, independent reality) of their own because they are dependently co-arisen. That is, they are the result of 'innumerable causes and conditions that are in turn dependent on innumerable causes and conditions' (and thus, importantly, not the result of a first or ultimate cause).

Nagarjuna's method of logical analysis provides conceptual tools to demonstrate the emptiness in this sense of phenomena ranging from the senses, the self, time, the Four Noble Truths, the Twelve Links, and Nirvana itself, which are delusions when considered independent (not dependently co-arisen) realities. These delusions account (according to this tradition) for the suffering of unenlightened beings. The logical method of the school is most directly laid out in Nagarjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārika* (literally *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, known popularly as the *karika*), which is considered by many the most renown and profound philosophical text in Buddhism.

Acharya Nagarjuna, who is sometimes called the Second Buddha, is considered by many to be the most influential and widely studied philosopher in Mahayana Buddhism, a tradition whose roots may extend as far back as the first century B.C.E. As with most persons in early Buddhism, little factual information is known about him.<sup>2</sup> He is thought to have been born in southern India and to have been an important scholar-monk at Nālandā, the great Buddhist monastic university in northeast India.

Madhyamaka as a school of philosophy is important in the history of Buddhism for many reasons, four of which are emphasized here. First, in contrast to the Sutras, which express the Buddha's understanding of emptiness in a usually abbreviated and cryptic manner (think of the *Heart Sutra*: no eyes, no ears, no nose, and so on), Madhyamaka thought provides conceptual tools for demonstrating that all elements of existence are empty of an intrinsic nature. In this sense the school remains faithful to the Buddha's original teachings, which emphasize the emptiness of all dharmas. Second, a goal of the school is to extend (rather than to deny, as often thought) the formulations of the earlier Abhidharma school of Buddhism, whose intent was to systematize the Buddha's various (and often seemingly conflicting) teachings. Third, the Madhyamaka is one expression of the Wisdom (correct understanding) component of the three trainings represented in the Eight-fold Path (wisdom, ethics, meditation), in that its goal is to see through the delusions and reactive responses that our minds are usually mired in (as we will see, Nagarjuna does this by 'deconstructing' these delusions and reactive responses). Finally, many present day schools and traditions in Buddhism like the Tibetan, Zen, Tendai, Sanron, and Mahā-Mādhyamaka have their roots in Madhyamaka Buddhism.

In spite of its seminal importance in the history of Buddhism, Madhyamaka remains difficult to understand. Reasons for this include the complexity and subtlety of Nagarjuna's thought, our unfamiliarity with the Abhidharma and other works that are mentioned or more often only alluded to, disagreement over which texts with the name 'Nagarjuna' attached to it were actually written by the author of the *karika*, the terseness and often cryptic nature of the verses, and confusion over whether Nagarjuna or an opponent is speaking (and thus whether a verse is being defended or negated). These difficulties have led to many interpretive challenges and widespread disagreement over the interpretation of some verses and concepts (like the notion of 'emptiness' itself).<sup>3</sup> Since there is a lack of agreement about important aspects of Madhyamaka philosophy, this primer provides a middle-of-the-road review.<sup>4</sup> Sufficient citations are provided for the fearless who wish to dive into these controversies.

## History and Development

Although it is generally agreed that the Madhyamaka school was founded by Nagarjuna, it seems likely that many of its key notions existed earlier, particularly in Prajnaparamita sutras (examples are the *Heart Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra*, and the *Astasahasrika Sutra* [the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 verses]) – and, as mentioned above, the formation of the school may have been spurred by the need to make more clear the content of these sutras.<sup>5</sup> The development of the school can also be understood as an extension of earlier Abhidharma types of analysis in which dharmas were defined as having traits or own-existence (*svabhava*) that exist as things in the world independent of human beings and their concepts. The Madhyamaka School extended this type of analysis to concepts themselves. The intent was to show through analysis that dharmas are not independent from concepts but are notionally dependent, which means, if conclusively demonstrated, that they ultimately lack own-being and are, consequently, ‘empty,’ too.

Nagarjuna’s project was continued by his disciple Aryadeva (3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E.) and still later by Buddhapālita (470-550), Bhāvavivaka (ca. 500-570), Candrakīrti (600-650), and Santideva (late 7<sup>th</sup> century into the eighth century). Versions of the school spread to East Asia and Tibet, where they became the most influential schools of Mahayana Buddhism (in China it is known as the Three Treaties or san-lun School). Along the way it was categorized into a number of sub-schools, including Prasāṅgika, Svatantrika, and Yogacara-Svatantrika-Madhyamaka, the latter of which is a synthesis of Yogacara, which emphasizes the reality of consciousness, and Madhyamaka, which emphasizes the ultimate emptiness of reality.<sup>6</sup> The synthesis was due in large part to wide-spread interpretations of Madhyamaka as nihilistic, for Nagarjuna’s relentlessly negative approach undermines the conventional (thought-constructed) world as it is normally understood, which is a frightening prospect for many people.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, the synthesis became understood as complementary, a union that is now widely accepted as the basic, underlying philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism.

### **Key Principles and Approaches**

Madhyamaka is a skeptical but logically rigorous philosophical school, whose core notions are introduced in Nagarjuna’s *Mulamadhyamakakarika*. As with most other Madhyamaka texts, the *karika* is composed of very terse, often cryptic, and often devilish subtle verses, with much of the argument omitted.<sup>8</sup> The central topic of the text is emptiness and its goal is to show that everything, even ‘emptiness’ itself, is empty of inherent existence (*svabhāva*). The text has about 450 short stanzas that were eventually divided into 27 chapters arranged in four sections. The first section (chapters 1-7) focuses on concepts related to what is real like the senses, aggregates, and motion; the second (8-13) on the nature of the self and of subjective experience; the third (14-21) on the external world and the relation of the self to objects; and the fourth (22-27) on phenomena associated with the ultimate truth like nirvana and the twelve links. A key distinction in Nagarjuna’s arguments is between conventional reality (as seen through one’s unenlightened senses) and ultimate reality (as perceived by an enlightened person). This is called the two levels of truth or two realities thesis. This distinction and the use he puts it to is considered his greatest philosophical contribution.

The taken-for-granted world around us that is created through our use of language and its concepts (tree, dog, self, you) is the conventional world. The non-dual, non-conceptual world is ultimate reality (this needs some unpacking, of course). Failure to see this difference (to be stuck in the conventional world) leads to the root delusion of self and things that lies at the root of all human suffering.<sup>9</sup> In Madhyamaka philosophy, when we ask of something, Does it exist?, we must pay attention, then, to whether we mean in conventional or ultimate reality. Understanding this distinction is a key to understanding seeming contradictions in verses in the *karika*.

Madhyamaka texts, including the *karika*, show through methodical analysis that claims that something has inherent existence cannot be the case for these claims are contradictory. They are contradictory because phenomena cannot have inherent (unchanging) existence (considered an extreme view called *essentialism*, which makes objects permanent and thus worth attaching to) and yet change and

die out (another extreme in this view called *annihilationalism*, a view that leads to the belief that there is no need to be responsible for our actions).<sup>10</sup> The truth, Nagarjuna proposes, lies somewhere in between, which is the true nature of phenomena. The method used is the tetralemma (or *catuskoti*) in which every proposition has four possibilities: the proposition may be true (and true only), false (and false only), both true and false, or neither true nor false. In the West we say that every proposition is either true or false – not neither, and not both. So a seemingly different kind of logic is being used here (but, believe it or not, when placed within the framework of conventional and ultimate realities, it all makes sense). The *karika* uses the tetralemma in both a positive and a negative way. In the first for certain propositions, all four of the possibilities hold; for the second none of the four hold. Here is a positive use: “Everything is real and is not real. Both are real and not real. Neither unreal nor real. This is the Lord Buddha’s teaching.” Here is a negative use: “We do not assert ‘empty.’ We do not assert ‘non-empty.’ We neither assert both nor neither. They are asserted only for the purpose of designation.” As mentioned above, when examining a tetralemma, it is important to determine, then, which parts are set in conventional reality and in ultimate reality.<sup>11</sup> For example, in the sentence “Everything is real and is not real,” the first part refers to conventional reality, the second to ultimate reality. In “Both real and not real,” it is true that everything is both real in conventional reality and not real in ultimate reality. And so on. The truth of the nature of things is arrived at through this dialectic process, a process whose aim is to show that opposing views (‘things exist’ or ‘things do not exist,’ for example) are self-negating. The middle way is emptiness (*shunyata*). It’s not as difficult as it first seems after you have worked your way through several examples.

For instance, in very simple form, at times I think of myself as an unchanging individual, as when I say, “I grew up in Wisconsin” or “I worked as an adult in Minnesota.” At other times I am aware that my thoughts, emotions, and bodily feelings change throughout the day and from year to year. Nagarjuna considers these two ways of understanding oneself – as a thing that both changes and remains the same – as contradictory.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, if nirvana, as another example, is a reality that does not arise or pass away (because it has inherent existence), then there is no way for us to get there, for we cannot attain it if we do not already have it. On the other hand, if it is conditioned, then it too will pass away. Because the alternatives are contradictory, nirvana, if considered this way, cannot be a source of spiritual salvation.<sup>13</sup>

### **Emptiness in More Detail**

The Buddha perceived that all things are transitory, that nothing endures, and, therefore, that nothing has an unchanging essence or self-nature. The Theravada tradition interpreted this to mean that no persons have a self beyond the aggregates, but that individual elements (atoms) did have an essence that made them individual and irreducible. Compounded things are created by combinations of these atoms. A goal of the tradition was to define the true nature of all things by categorizing the atoms. This view is expressed in the *Abhidharma*. *Madhyamaka* went further by declaring that not only the self but all elements comprising existence (including the ‘atoms’) also lack an essence (and because they lack self-nature they are empty); there is thus no ultimate ground of reality. This view is first stressed in the *Perfection of Wisdom* literature. With this shift, the method of inquiry shifts, too, (at least in the Mahayana tradition) from logical analysis to non-dual, intuitive apprehensions of reality. Thus wisdom becomes, in this tradition, non-conceptual, non-dual meditative absorption; the claim is that wisdom cannot result from conceptual analysis, but rather is a natural response to cutting off all analytic and conceptual thought.

A seeming paradox exists in the *Perfection of Wisdom* understanding of emptiness, for not only are things considered empty but emptiness is not seen as a negation of some kind. The point here is only that since ‘things’ do not exist in an objective, separate sense, how can there be a negation of something that does not exist. We can think of emptiness as a provisional tool, then, that helps us cut through delusion, but when its job is done, it’s time to let it go, for there is nothing to grasp onto.<sup>14</sup> Nagarjuna’s innovation was to apply the *via negativa* (the tetralemma) to deny the existential reality of even relative dualities, such as “empty” and “nonempty,” and “existent” and “nonexistent” (to phrase it in a very simple way, these refer to nothing – and how can you say that nothing exists or does not exist?).

In conclusion, emptiness is neither the denial of an existing thing or quality nor merely the negation of a concept. It is a call to shift one's perception, to reconceive the nature of reality. Things do exist, of course, but only as dependently arisen phenomena. That they have self-nature is not so much an illusion as it is the result of a misguided or improperly-trained conceptualization. So emptiness is not so much the means to dispel an illusion as it is the correction of an error. It is important to emphasize that emptiness is a middle view which, by denying essences and identities, stands between the extremes of being and non-being, between negation and affirmation (and thus is called the Middle Way). Since negation is no more real than affirmation, even the concept of emptiness (since it is only a conventional tool) must in the end be denied reality.<sup>15</sup> When its job is done, negation itself must be negated (as a raft is left behind once it has carried us across the river). Consequently, Nagarjuna, like the Buddha, does not offer thoughts of his own to replace false ones. As he says in the *Vigrahavyavartani*, "I have no thesis" (this is his famous no-thesis view). He concludes as well that "further speculation is not fruitful." For the Buddha, too, there is no position, thus nothing to dispute. Zen would make the point and stop as well, for the mind cannot possess anything – if pressed, a Zen master might say, "in Japan in the spring we eat cucumbers."

### **Practicing Buddhism within a Madhyamaka Context**

Buddhist practitioners find that meditations on key aspects of Madhyamaka thought deepens their understanding of "things as they are," a least from a Madhyamaka perspective.<sup>16</sup> The idea is that by seeing the true nature of things (including ourselves), we will let go of our delusions and reactive patterns, and enter a 'serenity (*shiva*) that cannot be grasped but can be lived.' Three meditations are briefly mentioned here. A first is to think of all the ways something like a piece of paper, a chair, or yourself 'inter-are' (to use an expression frequently used by Thich Nhat Hahn). For example, which tree did the paper come from, which clouds watered the tree, who cut and processed the tree, and so on. This meditation demonstrates the dependent arising of all phenomena.

A second meditation uses the tetralemma to demonstrate that all phenomena are empty. One approach is to use Garfield's *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, which has commentary on each chapter, to work your way through the chapters (as mind-bending as it will be). In the process, ask yourself three questions of each chapter: Why was this particular theme chosen? What (very briefly) is the argument that runs through the chapter? And What is the significance of the conclusion of the chapter for right understanding in Buddhism (the first stop along the eightfold path)? Be forewarned: the answers are not always crystal clear!

A third meditation, a variation of shikantaza, is based on the following story: "According to a Hindu myth, the world is upheld by the great elephant Maha Pudma, who is in turn supported by the great tortoise Chukwa. An Englishman asked a Hindu sage what the great tortoise rests upon, 'Another turtle,' was the reply. And what supports that turtle? 'Ah, Sahib, after that its turtles all the way down.'" As Buddhist teacher David Loy reminds us, it's stories all the way down, too.<sup>17</sup> When sitting watching thoughts and feelings drift through your mind, open to the realization that behind those thoughts and feelings, it's 'turtles all the way down.' That is, those thoughts and feelings rest firmly on grounds that are ultimately groundless (or so the teachings of Nagarjuna assert).

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The following verse from the karika (Chapter 24, 18) ties together Nagarjuna's entire philosophy, shows where it comes to an end, and defines the point of it all. If you understand the verse, 'you've got it.' If not, 'sit with it.'

"Whatever is dependently co-arisen/  
That is explained to be emptiness./  
That, being a dependent designation,  
Is itself the middle path."

Once you understand that verse, try this one, the most famous verse in the karika (25:24):

“The pacification of all objectification/ And the pacification of illusion:/ No Dharma was taught by the Buddha/ At any time, in any place, to any person.”

## Notes

1. There is an extensive and often conflicted literature on Madhyamaka Buddhism. For overviews at multiple levels of difficulty, see Daye (1971), Williams (2009), Garfield (1995), and Westerhoff (2009). The ‘madhya’ part of Madhyamaka is generally translated as “the middle.” Mahayana, the Buddhist tradition of which Zen is a part, is the third phase in the history of early Buddhist thought, which are the basic teachings of Gautama the Buddha, the Abhidharma, and Mahayana, of which Madhyamaka is an early phase.
2. For Nagarjuna, see Loy (2006), “the zensite: Nagarjuna and the Madhyamaka” (on line), and the Nagarjuna entries in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. In general good historical records are lacking for classical India. See Walser (2005) for an important overview of the social context of the karika. In brief Nagarjuna is attacking opponents’ (mistaken) views throughout the text, rather than advancing claims of his own.
3. Ruegg (1981, p. 2) summarizes the broad extent of the disagreement by concluding, “Over the past half-century the doctrine of the Madhyamaka school, and in particular that of Nāgārjuna has been variously described as nihilism, monism, irrationalism, misology, agnosticism, skepticism, criticism, dialectic, mysticism, acosmia, absolutism, relativism, nominalism, and linguistic analysis with therapeutic values.”
4. Today, most Western scholarship follow (more or less) the Tibetan Gelugpa Collegiate interpretation of Madhyamaka. See Magee 1999.
5. Warder 2000, p. 358. It is also possible that a motivation for these clarifications was a fear of an impending decline of the dharma (the Buddha’s teachings), for the Buddha said his teachings would fade after 500 years. Nagarjuna is generally considered a devout Buddhist whose intent in writing the karika was to defend Buddha’s teachings against misinterpretations (thus he refutes others views throughout the karika), to clarify the teachings, and to spread them. In short, the work is intended to enrich our practice, not mere philosophy.
6. Jones 2011-12, Rizzi 1988.
7. Nihilism is an extreme form of skepticism that denies all existence, including ourselves, real knowledge about the world, and values. Since nothing can be believed, life (in this view) becomes meaningless. In reading Nagarjuna, ask, then, how he avoids this extreme, for that is his intention (but does he?).
8. It is this terseness that has led to many interpretive challenges and widespread disagreements over the interpretations of some verses, for it is not always apparent what is intended in a set of verses. This is where the commentary literature becomes of essential importance. It is important to understand that these verses were to be memorized, chanted, and meditated upon over a lengthy period of training. They were not intended to be a coherent narrative, such as that found in a modern novel. The three main themes that run through Madhyamaka thought in the karika are the refutation of self-nature, the replacement of causation by dependent arising, and the teaching of emptiness.
9. For example, by thinking of ourselves as separate from everything around us, we anticipate with some anxiety the illness, old age, and death (the Buddha’s classic examples of suffering) that await us as an individual self. It is useful to see here that Nagarjuna is using language to show how language deceives us (that is, our conventional world is a linguistic construct that does not accurately reflect how the world really is).
10. That is, if by definition inherently existing entities are not dependent on anything else, then they cannot change into something else, cannot cause change in something else with inherent existence, and so on. Furthermore, you cannot refer to some aspect of ultimate reality as non-existent in conventional reality, since it sets up a duality with existent. So, while something can be existent or non-existent in conventional reality, it makes no sense to refer to something in ultimate reality as non-existent.

11. The presence of these two kinds of reality leads to paradoxical statements like “nirvana and samsara are not different” (for how could they be different in a world where no concepts exist!). The thought that they are different is rooted firmly in the conventional world.
12. See Chapter 18 in the karika for Nagarjuna’s deconstruction of the notion of ‘self.’ According to the Buddha, a great deal of suffering in our life results from the delusion that we are inherently real entities, that is, that we are separate persons. Thus, Nagarjuna sets out in this chapter to show that the notion of the self is empty of inherent existence, too. Note that none of this means that there is not a conventional self based on the aggregates. He is not arguing that there are no persons or aggregates, and so on, but only that above all of that there is not a single substantial entity that is ‘I.’
13. See Chapter 25 in the karika for Nagarjuna’s deconstruction of the notion of ‘nirvana.’ The argument runs along this line: If there is neither self, nor object, nor delusion, nor grasping, who relinquishes what, and in what manner? Moreover, if there is no arising or passing away from the ultimate point of view, how can nirvana arise or samsara pass away? Furthermore, if samsara has an inherent existence, then it can’t pass away. And so on.
14. At the close of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein, an Austrian philosopher, famously makes the point this way: “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out from them, on them, over them. He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.” Another paraphrase from Wittgenstein helps here, too: ‘We cannot make any valid statements about Reality as a whole because there is no place outside where we can take up a stance so as to describe it.’ Said another way, complete emptiness means no foundations, no ground to stand on.
15. As Atisha, another Madhyamaka, later expressed it, “If you use reason to examine the conventional world as it appears to us, you can find nothing that is real (that has self-existence). That not-finding is itself the ultimate.”
16. It should be stressed that Nagarjuna’s goal is always toward practice and salvation. The verses in the karika are intended to be memorized and used as a focus of meditation; it is not intended to be a book that is to be read through like a novel.
17. See Loy’s *The World is Made of Stories*, p. 4.

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GG, last updated 9/24/14