

NĀGĀRJUNA'S CRITICISM OF THE CONCEPT OF SUBSTANCE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ŚŪNYATĀ

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*anirōdhamanutpadamanuccchedamaśāśvataṃ/
anekārthamanānārthamanāgamamanirgamam//
yah prāṭhyasamutpādam prapañcopasamam śivam/
deśayāmāsa sambuddhastam vande vadatām varam//*

The concept of substance is one of the dominant themes of philosophical enquiry. Many thinkers of the East and the West have given it a profound significance. The concept looms large in their explanations of the reality, the lifeworld. But the Mādhyamikas are the trenchant critics of substantialism *per se* and as it figures in Asian philosophy, in particular. They have thoroughly deconstructed, through their logic of *śūnya*, the substantialistic model of grasping the reality in terms of the extreme views (*dṛṣṭis*) and firmly established the *śūnyatā* nature of the reality, which is missing in the uncritical or the semi-critical substantialistic ontologies. The Śūnyavādins, indeed, have pioneered a thorough going critical phase and an irreversible non-substantialistic turn in Asian thought. They have laid a solid foundation for *śūnyatā* as a paradigm *par excellence* of the non-substantialistic philosophical understanding.

This paper, in five parts, is an attempt at the exposition of Nāgārjuna's criticism of the concept of substance and its implications for *Śūnyatā*. Part one of the paper presents in brief the concept of substance in the Upaniṣads, the Early Buddhism and Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika. Part two constitutes a short account of the nature and structure of the *śūnya* dialectic. Third one deals in details

with Nāgārjuna's criticism of the concept of substance. Fourth part brings out in detail the implications of the criticism for śūnyatā - the relational and conditional origination, the mutual dependence and the ultimate quiescence - of the existence as a whole. In the last part, it is concluded that the concept of substance is a mere mental construction; no substantial entity, either physical, mental or both at once, exists in actuality; the idea of substance does not correspond with the reality as such. Whereas śūnyatā is the reality as such whatever is in correspondence with śūnyatā is in correspondence with the thusness (*tathatā*) of the reality. Śūnyatā is not a concept or a thesis but the truth (*tattva*) to be realized directly. Clinging to it as an extreme view or as a reified concept is disastrous.

Concept of Substance

Substance, fundamentally, has been defined as a self-caused (*causa sui*), an independent and a permanent being. It is indeterminate, unconditional or absolute. It has a self-nature (*svabhāva*), a self-identity (*mamā*), a self-hood (*ātmya*) and an individuality (*ahaṁkāra*). Substance has been viewed as the substratum or the locus of the ever changing attributes. Remaining numerically one and essentially the same amidst diversity is its distinctive mark. The existence of the substance is necessary and does not involve a self-contradiction as the non-existent square-circle does.

The concept of substance looms large in Asian Philosophy. Primarily the concept figures in the Upaniṣadic doctrine of the *Ātman* or the *Brahman*. According to it, substance is the Soul or the Self which is uncreated, immutable, undivided and eternal; it is self-luminous, omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. It is the pure Subject, the Knower, the ultimate Witness which never becomes an object of knowledge. To put it succinctly, the substance is a homogenous mass of constant consciousness and is devoid of all worldly attributes (Gambhīrānanda:191). Substance as the *Ātman* plays a pivotal role in the Orthodox and idealistic systems of Asian Philosophy, like the *Sāṅkhya*, the *Advaita* etc. The concept is predominant even in the realistic schools like the Early Buddhism and the *Nyāya-vaiśeṣika*. The Early Buddhists like the Abhidharmikas, also known as the Sarvastivādins, deny the

soul-substance but admit the substantiality of the elements (*dharmas*) of existence comprising the five *skandhas*, the twelve *ayatanas* and the eighteen *dhatu*s¹. These elements are claimed to be discrete, specific bits of realities existing in their own right, in the form of seeds. They are neither created nor can they be destroyed. They are in this sense *ātman*, self-being (Ramanan:57). Basing on the self-being of the elements the Sarvastivadins argue that all things including those in the past and in the future exist without ever ceasing to be (Bapat:93-94). The momentariness (*kṣanatva*) or the transiency (*anityatva*) of the elements is their function only it is their efficiency to renew themselves without essential change. The flux of life or the concatenation of the elements does not affect their reality (Murti:73,75). The elements constitute the personality devoid of the soul-substance (*pudgalaśūnyatā*). when the elements are decomposed no substance or soul of any kind remains (Grimm:132). Thus the Early Buddhists are only semi-critical of the concept of substance. They do not rule out the concept in toto as the Mādhyamikas do. They have retained it in the form of the elements.

According to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika the substance is *dravya*, the first of the seven categories to which the entire Universe is reduced. The substances are nine in number : earth (*pṛthivī*) water (*āp*), fire (*tejas*), air (*vāyu*), ether (*ākāśa*), time (*kāla*), space (*dik*), self (*ātman*) and mind (*manas*). Of them the first four are the physical elements. They are atomic and have their specific qualities - earth has smell, water taste, fire colour, air touch. Ether is not atomic, it is imperceptible and all pervading like time and space. Soul is a spiritual substance it is eternal, allpervading and the locus of consciousness. Mind is also a physical, an atomic substance but partless, imperceptible and eternal. Like the souls, the minds are many. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas regard all these substances as objective realities (Sarma:178) having a being of their own.

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas distinguishes between simple and compound substances. The simple substances are the atoms (*paramāṇus*) which are eternal, indivisible, imperceptible and ultimately real. They are of four kinds - of the earth, water, fire and air. Each atom has a particularity (*viśeṣa*) of its own and differs from others in quality as well as in quantity. As Murti puts it,

The atoms are self-existent and immutable entities, veritable selves as it were (Coward:143). The compound substances are the material objects (*avayavins*) composed of the atoms. They are impermanent, subject to origin, stability and destruction, and breakable into their atoms (Matilala:274-75). Yet they are called substances since each compound substance is by itself a 'whole' (*avayavin*) which is distinct from the atoms, the parts of which it is composed. The wholes have their own, specific and inalienable natures (*svabhāvas*) they have their own identity and significance in and out of their relation with other things (Coward:141).

Mādhyaṃika Dialectic

The *Śūnyavādins* are the uncompromising critics of the concept of substance and the ontologies founded on it. They contend that the true nature of the reality is non-substantial; the entities and events of experience do not have a self-nature (*svabhāva*) and a constant being; nothing is independent and self-abiding, nowhere, internally or externally, is there an entity which is static, fixed and existing in its own right. The phenomena, physical, mental or both at once, are empty (*śūnya*) of self-nature and independent being. They exist in relational origination and mutual dependence; everything arises in the matrix or relational causes and conditions (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The reality is all inclusive, undivided and quiescent in its ultimacy.

Substantialism militates against the *śūnyatā*, the thusness of the reality. It fails to comprehend the reality in the matrix of mutual relatedness and quiescence. It conceives the reality in terms of the extremes of eternalism (*śāśvatavāda*) and annihilationism (*uchedavāda*). The substantialists - the naturalists, the realists, the pluralists, the absolutists, the monists and the radical relativists - try to entify the reality by viewing it in terms of the either/or logic of 'is', 'is-not' both is and is-not' or 'neither is not is-not'. They avoid the middle path of perceiving the reality outside the conceptual framework of the extreme views (*dr̥ṣṭis*).

Nāgārjuna deconstructs substantialism through his trenchant dialectic² or logic of *śūnya* (Inada:23). The logic demonstrates the inconsistencies and

ultimate falsehood of the concept of substance and the extreme views thereof by analyzing them to their logical necessity and on their own presuppositions. The *modus operandi* of the analysis is that it frames a thesis, claimed to be exclusively true, against the thesis itself by deducing absurd conclusions which the thesis entails. By the absurdity of the conclusions, the absurdity of the initial thesis, the falsity of the ground is revealed (Ramanan:152). The logic executes the criticism of an extreme view (*dṛṣṭis*) by formulating it in the form of four possible logical positions (*catuṣkoṭika*) in which the view can manifest. The four positions (*Koṭis*) are : is, is-not, both is and is-not and neither is nor is not. These positions, in other words, are expressed as (A) existence (*asti, bhāva, sat*), non-existence (*nāsti, abhāva, asa*), both existence and non-existence *astinasti, bhāvaabhava, satasat* and neither existence nor non existence (*naivāsti, na ca nasti*) (B) self (*sva*), other (*para*), both self and other (*ubhaya*) and neither self nor other (*anubhaya*) identical (*ta*), different (*anya*), both (*ubhaya*) and neither-nor (*anubhaya*) and (C) self (*sva*), other (*para*), both (*ubhaya*) and chance or devoid of reason (*āhetuka*) (Ramanan: 155).

Nāgārjuna examines the four extremes thoroughly and establishes that they are neither true nor independent. The extremes are inherently inconsistent and mutually dependent. Being self-contradictory and relapsing into each other, the first two primary extremes, namely, 'is' and 'is-not' cause confusion and conflict. Being a mechanical combination of the two, the third one cannot explain the reality at all since its mutually exclusive alternatives nullify each other and the fourth one unable to comprehend the truth of reality resorts to irrationalism, scepticism and agnosticism. Being the species of attachment to permanency and impermanency, these extremes deny the truth of the reality which Nāgārjuna reveals by their deconstruction. He dismantles the four-cornered conspectus without establishing a thesis of his own, for the truth is beyond all theses. The śūnya-logic of deduction *ad absurdum* (*prasaṅgavākya*)³ reduces a position to ultimate absurdity without advancing a counter position. Its sole aim is to discover the truth by releasing the mind from the fetters of the extreme views. Truth is precisely freedom from the four cornered perspective of the reality. (*na san nāsan na sadasan na*

cāpyanubhayātmakam / catuṣkoṭi vinirmuktam tattvam mādhyamaka viduh/. The Mādhyamikas thus have laid a firm foundation for a critical phase and a non-substantialistic turn pioneered by the Buddha in Asian Philosophy. This fact will be more evident in the actual criticism of the concept of substance and in the implications of the criticism for *śūnyatā* which are discussed in the following sections of this paper.

Criticism of the Concept of Substance :

Nāgārjuna criticizes the concept of substance as an abiding entity or a bifurcated self (*ātma*) by applying to it the four cornered logic. He formulates the existence or the origination of the substantial-self in the four possible views and reduces them to absurdity. The self-substance, if at all exists, it should exist in virtue of being either (1) self-caused, (2) other-caused, (3) both self and other caused or (4) neither self nor other caused i.e, non-causal.

Nāgārjuna's criticism of the first extreme view (*drṣṭi* or *koṭi*) that the self-substance creates itself is as follows. Let us put forward the arguments (*prasaṅgavākyas*) one by one. the arguments overlap because of the complexity of the problem and the analysis thereof.

The substance cannot be said to create itself, for the idea of self-causation entails, on the one hand the absurdity that the substance exists before its creation. But the creation of an already existent entity? Self-creation is fallacious, for it begs the question (*petitio principii*) by simply assuming the existence of the thing in question. On the other land, the idea of self production also implies that the existent entity in question does not yet exist and has yet to create itself, but how can a non-existent entity which has not arisen create itself (MK. VII.13). The substance therefore cannot create itself either as a created or as an uncreated entity. Both the ideas are wrong.

The idea of self-creation entails the contradiction that the substance is both existent and non-existent at a time. It means that the substance possesses, two mutually exclusive qualities as its nature at the same time. But it is not logically possible for a really existent entity to have two contradictory natures

at a time. a thing is either existent or non-existent but cannot to both. (MK VII.30 Second verse only).

Self-creation means that a thing produces itself redundantly, *ad infinitum* (MK.VII.19. first verse only) and without ever perishing; but redundant production is only a self-duplication; it is not a causation in the strict sense which warrants the production of something new; production *de novo* is possible only when the cause, the existing entity which is supposed to be substantial, ceases to be. But the substantial entity is such that it is permanent; it has a self-nature (*svabhāva*) the non-existence of which is not possible. Indeed, the cessation of a really existent being does not follow. (MK VII.30.First verse only).

Nāgārjuna argues that the substance cannot create itself, for all creation is possible only in relational origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*); there is no production without causes and conditions; that which is created necessarily possesses the character of being made or manipulated. But the nature of the substance is such that it has a self-nature which precludes mutual correspondence with something other than itself; it cannot have the character of being manipulated (MK.XV.1). The substantial reality ceases to be so when it has a mutual correspondence and the character of being made (MK.VX.2)

Fundamentally, the very existence of the substantial entity is in question, let alone its self creation. The substance is defined as an entity which possesses self-identity (*mamā*), self-hood (*ātma*) and individuality (*ahamkāra*) as its basic characteristics. But the substance, indeed, cannot have these characteristics, for they are in their basic nature relational and quiescence (MK.XVIII. 2); they cannot have the character of being independent and permanent. And the absence of separated and constant self-hood, self-identity etc., implies the absence of the substance as a bifurcated and an unchanging entity. Therefore, the substance if at all it exists, it has to exist as a relational and conditional entity, like any other entity. But a relational and conditional entity cannot be equated with the substance under examination. and (self) creation of a non-existent entity does not arise.

Self-production is not justifiable on another ground. The idea entails the existence of two entities-the producing and the produced; and the relation between them would be either identity or difference. But no production is possible when the producing (substance) and the produced (*substance*) are identical to each other (MK.XX.19). So also self-production is untenable when the cause-substance and the effect-substance are totally different from each other. There can never be any relation, let alone the causal relation, between two different entities. The cause and the effect cease to be so in case there is difference between them; the cause would be a non-causal cause (MK.XX.20).

Self-origination is untenable also because there is no entity with the character of an effectuating cause. The very idea of an effectuating cause is not permissible (MK.1.7) for no entity of human experience is said to arise from an independent being; production by an independent being is the only proof for an effectuating cause with a producing nature; but there is no such production; all production is in mutual relationship.

The idea of self-creation does not sustain when the nature of the created-substance is analysed. The nature of the so-called created entity should be either complete or incomplete within itself. And it is not possible to say that what is produced would be a self-complete being, for a self-complete being can not be produced at all either by itself or by anything other than itself (MK. XX. 21). A produced self-complete entity is a contradiction in terms. On the other hand, it cannot also be said that the entity produced would be an incomplete being, for an incomplete being is no being, it is not any thing; it is as good as being not produced, and so non-existent. Moreover, production of an incomplete being is no production at all. An incomplete production, like an incomplete being, ceases to be a production.

Self-production is a fiction in yet another sense. Substance by definition, is a self complete being, a plenum, full of its self-nature (*svabhāva*). But the self-nature is such that it disaffirms the relational and causal conditions (*niḥsvabhāva*) in virtue of which anything may be said to arise. So the substance with self-nature cannot arise again (MK.XXIV. 22). On the other

hand the idea of self-creation also renders the substance an incomplete being; for it is only an incomplete being which needs to be created again in order to make itself complete; but an incomplete being cannot create itself or another. Creation necessitates a cause, an entity which is self-complete; an incomplete cause cannot have a producing nature. The substance therefore cannot be said to create itself either as being a complete being or as an incomplete being. Thus goes Nāgārjuna's protean analysis of the view that the substance creates itself. The examination shows that the idea self creation is not justifiable under any circumstances. The idea is self-contradictory and so illogical. substance therefore cannot be said to exist as a self-created entity.

The second view that the substance is created by something other than itself is untenable too; it involves inconsistencies and fails to establish the existence of the substance. Nāgārjuna's logical demonstration of the non-substantiality of the view is as follows.

The substance cannot be said to be created by the other, for, fundamentally, the substantial entity, is independent and absolute, it so exists that it does not require, for its being, anything other than itself. The substance which is dependent on or caused by the other ceases to be a substance.

Creation of the substance by the other is not possible because the very existence of the other is in question. How can there be the other? Is it self-created or other-created? It cannot be self-created, for the impossibility of self-creation has been demonstrated; nor can it be other-created for the other is non-existent; the non-existent-other cannot create itself; nor can it be created by the existence, just as the existence can neither create itself nor be created itself nor be created by the non-existence (MK.XXI.12).

The existence of the other is not possible for another reason also. The existence of the other would be possible only when the existence of the self were possible. For, what is the self for one the same would be the other for another person. But the existence of the self is not justifiable; nothing exists as a self-substance; everything exists in mutual correspondence with others. This has been mentioned before. And from the non-existence of the self the non-existence of the other follows (MK. I.3)

The Other cannot be anything other than the other-nature or the varying nature (*parābhāva*) of the self-nature (*svabhāva*) (MK, XV.3) (of the self). The primal nature of the self is such that it can never become an extended nature; it can never give rise to a varying nature for the other to arise. The other-nature cannot arise either in the presence or in the absence of a primal nature (MK.XV.9).

The creation by the other is not justifiable, for, the other, if at all it exists, it should be as another substance which is a self-complete being and how can a self-complete being be the cause of another being? A being of completeness cannot have any relation with anything so that it can produce anything. The other cannot produce the self because the other as another self-being cannot have any relation with the self. They exist as being totally different from each other. And there can be no causality whatsoever between two totally unrelated things. Just as total identity, total difference militates against production *per se*. All origination is relational and mutually dependent. This has been demonstrated earlier.

And finally creation by the other is not tenable, for it involves the absurdity that anything can produce anything. It ignores the invariable relation between the cause and the effect. It implies that mere otherness is sufficient for causality, in which case even the stone can be said to sprout for the stone is as much the other to the sprout as the seed is to the sprout. The idea of other cause implies the absurdity that existence arises from non-existence, something out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), for it presupposes production of the self without first establishing the existence of the other. The idea thereby involves the anomaly that everything arises from everything or nothing, (MK. VII.19 Second verse only), in which case the orderly world of experience would be reduced to chaos and confusion.

Nāgārjuna thus deconstructs the view that the substance is created by something other than itself. He dismantles the concept of other - creation by exposing its inconsistencies and the implausibility of the very existence of the other. From the non-existence of the other and other-creation, the non-existence of the self-substance follows.

The third view that the substance is created both by itself and the other is not justifiable when the existence of the substance as the self-being and as the other-being has been established in the refutation of the first and the second theses. The third position is illogical, for how can anything be caused at time by two mutually exclusive things which can never meet? Or, how can there be a thing which possesses as its nature at a time two self-contradictory natures viz., the self-nature and the other nature. If a thing were to possess these two different characteristics at two different times, then the thing in question would cease to be one; there would be two different things. Or, if the two natures were alike held to be absolutely and wholly true of one and the same thing, then each nature would cancel the other and with the cancellation of the two natures the very thing in question would be cancelled; it would cease to be. Moreover, on the one hand, being a mere syncretic form of the first two extremes, the third one is a natural heir to all their inconsistencies. On the other hand, being a disjunctive proposition with mutually exclusive alternatives which nullify each other, this position cannot explain anything 'and there is nothing further that remains as the true description of the thing'. (Ramanan: 157); it suffers from the utter impossibility of the description of existence or creation. So Nāgārjuna declares that the origination of the substantial entity is not justifiable even by the third view of both being and non-being (MK. VII.20), self and other creation.

And the fourth extreme that the substance is caused neither by itself nor by the other is untenable because it implies that the events and entities are not caused but happen to be by mere accident (*āhetuka*). It ascribes randomness to the systematic world. The position thus is representative of the irrationalist who fails to see the cosmic nature of the world of experience. The fourth position may also be taken as the position of the agnostic who denies the possibility of all thought, knowledge and description about the world. But the agnostic position is not consistent with itself, for it, indeed, presupposes a certain amount of the knowledge of the world in the making of the statement that no description, thought and knowledge of the world is possible. In making this statement the agnostic is thinking and describing the world in a certain way. The position of agnostic seems to be no better than

fool's talk (Ramanan: 158). This extreme is also representative of the sceptic position that no definite knowledge and description of the reality is possible. The position is not self-consistent too, for if everything is held to be uncertain this position would also be uncertain. The sceptic position cannot be an exception to itself. The sceptic cannot hold for sure the position that he or she does not hold any definite position. This position may eventually lead to eel wriggling - quibbling, sophistry and evasion (Ramanan : 158).

Thus Nāgārjuna examines the four extreme views about the existence of the substance and reduces them to absurdity by bringing to light the dead-ends they meet and the contradictions they entail. He establishes the fact that the substance cannot arise or exist in any of the four ways. No entity can ever arise either from itself, from another, from both or from either (from the lack of causes) (MK. I.1), says Nāgārjuna. With the refutation of the origination of the substance in all the four possible ways, the very existence of the substantial entity is refuted. The substance cannot exist in any way other than the four ways that are examined.

The existence of the substance is unjustifiable even as the substratum of the attributes. If the substance is the substratum then where do the attributes inhere? Do they inhere in a substratum which is qualified, unqualified, both or neither? Firstly they cannot be said to inhere in a qualified one, for then it would mean that the substratum is already possessive of the attributes the inherence of which is in question. Secondly the attributes cannot inhere in an unqualified substratum, for an unqualified substratum is not any thing (Ramanan : 207). An attributeless entity is no entity. Thirdly it is illogical to say that the attributes inhere in the substratum which is both qualified and unqualified at the same time. And the fourth view is untenable for the reasons considered above.

The non-substantiality of the substratum is justifiable by examining the relation between the substratum and the attributes. The relation between them would be either identity, difference, both or neither. In case of identity, the substratum would be one with the attributes which are ever changing; it would be subject to origination, duration and cessation, and no more be self-

abiding; a transitory substance is no substance. and in case of difference, again, the substratum would not be any thing, for being totally separate from the attributes, the substratum would be imperceptible and inconceivable. And the untenability of the third and the fourth views need not be repeated. Thus the substance as the substratum is unfindable in all the four ways. The substratum or the self is neither qualified, unqualified, both, nor neither, it is neither identical, different, both, nor neither .

Substance as an independent being, the exclusive concepts and the extreme views related to it are false. They are non-substantial and do not have an essential truth. On ultimate analysis they are proved to be relational and mutually dependent. Substance and qualities, identity and difference are relational; one cannot exist or be meaningful without the other.

The idea of substance manifests in different ways in the substantialistic philosophies. It appears in the form of the elements of existence, the *skandhas*, the *dhatus*, and the *ayatanas*. It also figures in the form of the categories, like space, time, motion, rest, action, agent, cause, effect, including suffering and liberation. The criticism expounded above is applicable to all these forms of the substance. When the four cornered logic of *śūnya* is applied, they will be reduced to absurdity.

Implications for Śūnyatā

The criticism of the concept of substance has profound implications for *Śūnyatā* - the non-substantial nature of the reality. The criticism reveals that the reality - physical, mental or both at once - is relational and conditional. Entities, events and concepts are devoid of self-nature (*svabhāvaśūnya*), empty of essential or self-being (*anātma*); they are non-permanent (*anitya*) and arise in virtue of mutual dependence (*pratityasamutpāda*).

It is wrong to view the reality in the substantialistic terms of the mutually exclusive views (*dṛṣṭis*) of either being or non-being, self-nature or extended nature, existence or non-existence, (MK.XV.7) constancy or disruption, (MK. XV.11) finite or infinite, (MK. XXV. 22) identity or difference, permanence, impermanence, both or neither. (MK. XXV. 23)

Śūnyatā refers not only to the determinate truth (*saṃvṛti satya*) - the relational, the co-arising and the all-inclusive nature - of the reality. It also refers to the indeterminate, the undivided (*advaya*) and the absolute truth (*pāramārthika satya*) of the reality which is quiescence (*śāntam*). Quiescence is the supreme excellence, the wonderful peace, perfection and bliss which the reality is in its ultimacy. Quiescence is the thusness or the thatness (*tattva*) of the reality. Nāgārjuna expresses it in terms of the eight 'noes' or negations as non-extinction (*anirodham*), non-origination (*anutpādam*), non-destruction (*anucchedam*), non-permanence (*aśāśvatam*), non-identity (*anekartham*), non-differentiation (*anānārtam*) non-coming into being (*anāgamam*) and non-going out of being (*anirgamam*)⁴, Nāgārjuna further describes the quiescence as non-conditionally related (*aparapṛathyayaṃ*), non-conceptualized by conceptual play (*prapañcāirapapañcitam*) and non-discriminative (*nirvikalpam*) (MK. XVIII. 9)

Thus non-substantiality or *śūnyatā* refers to the two truths - the empirical and the transcendental. the relative and the absolute or the relational and the non-relational. The two truths are not totally different from each other. The determinate truth is not separate from the indeterminate truth, but only the determinate form of the indeterminate itself, the divided truth, is only the division with undivided. But there can never be absolute determination or division of the indeterminate and the undivided. The determinate truth is only the appearance of the indeterminate truth (Ramanan : 252) *Śūnyatā* as the indeterminate truth is the ground of *śūnyatā* as the determinate truth. The former is *nirvāṇa* and the latter is *saṃsāra*. They are not essentially different from each other (MK. XXV. 19). There is not the slightest difference between the two. The realm (the limits) of *nirvāṇa* is the realm of *saṃsāra* (MK. XXV.20) . *Nirvāṇa* cannot be realized by avoiding the realm of *saṃsāra*. Nor can it be expressed without relying on the relative truth of *saṃsāra* (MK. XXIV.10) Those who fail to understand the subtle distinction between the two truths fail to understand the profound significance of the Buddha's teachings (MK. XXIV.9).

As a skilful means of avoiding the extreme views, *śūnyatā* is itself the middle way (*madhyamapratipad*). Firmly established in *śūnyatā* the farer on

the middle path comprehends the reality as it obtains, the relative as relative, the absolute as absolute. The farer grasps the determinate truth in terms of mutually dependent concepts and views; the farer uses the concepts and views as contingent and convenient designations in respect of the relative truth, but avoids all conceptualization or ideation in respect of the absolute truth (*prapañcasūnya*).

Substantialistic outlook is due to the elements of attachments or defilements which condition the mind to view the reality in terms of the extremes of permanence (*śāśvatavāda*) and impermanence (*ucchedavāda*) which are the source of division, discrimination, intolerance, conflict and suffering. The elements of attachment are of two kinds: the physical taintings (*kleśāvaraṇas*) and the mental tainting (*jñeyāvaraṇas*). *Sūnyatā* destroys the elements of attachment by destroying the self-nature (*svabhāva*) of the reality as a whole including the elements of defilements.

The mind which is *sūnyatā* is in *mokṣa* and is never touched by sorrow, for the whole structure of conceptual play (*prapañca*) is banished in it (MK. XVIII.5). Ignorance and suffering are not due to *saṃsāra*, the *sūnyatā* as relational origination (*pratityasamutpāda*). Nor, of course, is it due to *nirvāṇa*, the *sūnyatā* which is non-relational and quiescence. Suffering, indeed is due to the creation of the fictitious, the dream world of substantialistic mental conformation or essentialistic thought construction. Nāgārjuna likens the substantialistic conceptual world to an imaginary city in the sky (MK. VII.34) which is totally unrelated to *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* which belong to the realm of the uncreated. The wise never indulge in conceptual diffusion or substantialistic entification of the reality. They are always choicelessly aware of the immortal teachings (*śāsanāṃṛtaṃ*) of comprehending the undivided truth (*advayadharma*) in accordance with the middle way of non-identity (*anekāthaṃ*), non-differentiation (*anānārthaṃ*), non-interruption (*aanucchedam*) and non-continuity (*aśāśvatam*) (MK. XVIII. 11).

Conclusions

The concept of substance is a mere mental construction; there is no such thing as a substantial or a self-abiding entity anywhere. Everything exists

in relational and conditional origination. Nothing exists devoid of mutual *Śūnyatā* refers not only to the determinate truth (*saṃvṛti satya*) - the dependence. The so-called substance belongs to the realm of the 'created' and it is unfindable in actual reality which is non-substantial or '*śūnyatā*'. *Śūnyatā* is neither created nor uncreated but a beginningless and an endless interdependence and quiescence of the undivided reality. The concept of substance does not correspond with *śūnyatā* in any way. Where the one is there the other is not.

Śūnyatā is not a concept but an actuality to be directly realized by relinquishing all the views and the concepts. Conceptualizing the *śūnyatā*, which is in truth non-conceptualizable and beyond all views is highly disastrous. It is as dangerous and ruinous as a badly seized snake or a wrongly executed incantation (MK. XXIV.11). It destroys the unwise, the people of low insight who reduce it to a concept. As *Nāgārjuna* puts it, those who cling to *śūnyatā* as an idea are incorrigible (MK. XIII.8). They are the victims of irremediable sorrow.

Nāgārjuna therefore controverts all attempts at grasping *śūnyatā* as an ontological category. He says that the term '*śūnyata*', like any other term, is used as a provisional name or as a thought construction (*prajñāptirūpādāya*) (MK. XXIV.18) for the provisional understanding (*prajñāptiyārtham*) of the thusness of all existence without entifying. It is the middle way of understanding the truth.

Śūnyatā is as much *śūnya* as *svabhāva* is. In other words, non-substantiality is as much empty of substantiality as substantiality is. Just as clinging to substantiality is denied through the emptiness of substantiality, (*niḥsvabhāva* or *svabhāvaśūnya*), *Nāgārjuna* denies clinging to non-substantiality through his teaching of the emptiness of non-substantiality (*niḥsvabhāvaśūnya*). *Nāgārjuna* has taught not only emptiness but also the emptiness of emptiness (*śūnyatāśūnyatā*). Thus *śūnyatā* may be called a paradigm *par excellence* for understanding and expressing the relational origination and quiescence of the whole of existence which is both immanent and transcendent at the same time. *Śūnyatā* is the basis of all existence. Anything true is possible only in

virtue of being in correspondence with *śūnyatā* (MK. XXIV. 14). Non-substantiality at its determinate and indeterminate levels cannot adequately be expressed in words and more so in terms of positivity which have a natural tendency to substantialize the true nature of the reality. Nāgārjuna has therefore sought to express it in negative terms. and 'śūnyatā' is the best possible term to express the truth in the best possible way, that is, without substantializing.

NOTES

1. The *skandhas* are the five groups, viz., form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedana*), perception (*saṃjñā*), mental conformations (*saṃskāras*) and consciousness (*viññān*). the *ayatana*s are the six internal organs of sense and their corresponding objects, viz., the eye and forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and odours, the tongue and flavours, the touch and tangibles and the mind and ideas. The *dhatu*s include the twelve *ayatana*s and the six types of consciousness, viz., the eye-consciousness, the ear-consciousness etc.
2. Nāgārjuna's dialectic is not the same as the Western dialectic. It is different, for instance, from the Greek *eristic*, a sophisticated disputation which is an end in itself. It is also different from the Hegelian and the Marxian dialectics which are idealistic and materialistic, respectively. The Mādhyamika dialectic is soteriological in nature and its aim is the Insight which transcends reason and reveals the truth.
3. Besides Nāgārjuna, the *Prāsaṅgika* Mādhyamika is represented by Buddhapaṇita, Candrakīrti, Aryadeva and Rahulabhadra. There is a rival group, namely, the Svātantrika Mādhyamika which advances a counter position in refuting a position. this school is represented by Bhāvaviveka.
4. These eight 'lines' constitute the first two lines of the very first verse of Nāgārjuna's MK in which he offers salutations to the Buddha who taught the doctrine of relational origination (*pratityasamutpāda*) and blissful (*śivas*) cessation of all phenomenal thought constructions (*prapañcōpaśamaṃ*).

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ABBREVIATION

MK. Mūlamādhymakakārikā