

RESEARCH PAPER

Ācārya Nāgārjuna's Philosophy of Śūnyatā: A Critical Study of the Skeptical Method, the Refutation of Substantialism, and the Middle Path

Vineet Kumar Pandey^{1*}, Dr. Arun Kumar²

^{1*}Research Scholar, Department of Jain Bauddha Darshan, SVDV, B.H.U., Varanasi-221005, Uttar Pradesh, India.
(Corresponding Author) Email: vineet2197@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty.), Department Of Sanskrit Vidya, Faculty of Shraman Vidya, Sampurnanand Sanskrit University, Varanasi-221002, Uttar Pradesh, India.
Email: arunkumar0510@bhu.ac.in

Received: 11th Jul, 2026; Revised: 28th Jul, 2026; Accepted: 09th Aug, 2026; Available Online: 21st Aug, 2026

Abstract:

Ācārya Nāgārjuna lived approximately in the second to third century CE (c. 150–250 CE), a period in which he stood among the most revolutionary thinkers (ācāryas) of the Indian philosophical tradition. This research paper presents an analysis of his philosophical outlook with reference to his original works, the *Mūlāmādhymakakārikā* and the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*. The central focus of this study is the concept of *śūnyatā* (“emptiness”), which is neither “non-existence” (*abhāva*) nor “voidness” (*śūnyatva*), but rather denotes *niḥsvabhāvatā*, that is, the absence of autonomous, self-existent being. This paper argues that Nāgārjuna's skepticism is not merely destructive; rather, by exposing the internal inconsistencies of both the substantialist Buddhist schools- *Sarvāstivāda* and *Sautrāntika* and of *Naiyāyika* epistemology (*pramāṇamīmāṃsā*), it establishes a new middle path (*madhyama-pratipad*) in which no ultimate line of distinction remains between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Accordingly, this article presents a systematic analysis of Ācārya Nāgārjuna's life, his distinctive skeptical philosophical method, his arguments against Brahmanical and Buddhist substantialism, his critique of epistemology, and finally the ethical and social implications of his philosophy of *śūnyatā*, seeking through the original Sanskrit *kārikās* to reveal the philosophical subtlety of his arguments.

Keywords: Abhāva, Catuṣkoṭi, Cūnyatā, Madhyamakakārikā, Niḥsvabhāvatā, Pratītyasamutpāda, Substantialism (dravyavāda), Vigrahavyāvartanī.

How to site this article: Vineet Kumar Pandey, Dr. Arun Kumar, “Ācārya Nāgārjuna's Philosophy of Śūnyatā: A Critical Study of the Skeptical Method, the Refutation of Substantialism, and the Middle Path” *Int J Drug Deliv Technol.* 2026;16(77s): 1822-1826; DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.77s.208

Introduction:

In the East Asian and Tibetan Mahāyāna traditions, Ācārya Nāgārjuna is often regarded as the “Second Buddha.” His philosophical contribution is not confined to the Indian tradition of thought; rather, it stands as a watershed moment in the history of world philosophy as a whole. Nāgārjuna called into question the very foundational assumptions that the Indian philosophical tradition generally took as self-evident: the existence of stable substances, the linear movement of cause and effect, the separateness of individuals from atoms, and the notion of a fixed personal identity. Nāgārjuna rejects all these assumptions on the basis of his original insight into *śūnyatā*-a concept that signifies not non-existence, but the absence of autonomous, independent existence, that is, *niḥsvabhāvatā*. What is important is that, according to Nāgārjuna, this denial of

autonomy does not lead to existential emptiness or deprivation; rather, it opens the path to liberation by offering a profound insight into the interconnectedness of all things.

Ācārya Nāgārjuna: Life, Legend, and Literature:

There is indeed a lack of authentic material regarding the historical life of Ācārya Nāgārjuna, and his two most detailed biographies are found in Chinese and Tibetan sources respectively. These were composed centuries after his lifetime and contain, alongside elements of historical fact, a considerable amount of legendary material. There is also a general consensus that Nāgārjuna was born into a Brahmin family in the Andhra region of South India. On the basis of two letters he addressed to the Sātavāhana king “Yajñaśrī Gautamīputra Śātakarṇi” (reigned c. 166–196 CE), his active lifetime is

estimated to fall roughly between 150 and 200 CE. According to Tibetan tradition, Nāgārjuna travelled from Andhra to Nālandā University in Bihar, which later became the foremost center of Buddhist scholastic study.

If Nāgārjuna's literary corpus is classified by subject matter, it may be divided into: (1) works refuting Buddhist substantialism, chief among them the *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā*, the *Śūnyatāsaptati*, and the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*; (2) treatises critiquing Brahmanical epistemology (*pramāṇamīmāṃsā*), such as the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* and the *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa*; and (3) works of ethical-political counsel—the *Suhṛllekha* and the *Ratnāvalī*—addressed to Gautamīputra Śātakarṇi. This very diversity is evidence that Nāgārjuna did not confine his philosophy of śūnyatā to metaphysics alone, but extended it into the domains of social, ethical, and political philosophy as well.

Nāgārjuna's Skeptical Method: The Reconstitution of the *Catuṣkoṭi*:

At the core of Nāgārjuna's philosophical method lies

*anīrodham anutpādam anucchedam aśāśvatam | anekārtham
anānārtham anāgamam anirgamam || yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaṃ
prapañcopaśamaṃ śivam | deśayāmāsa sambuddhas taṃ vande vadatām
varam ||*

(*Mūlamādhyamakakārikā*, *Maṅgalācaraṇa*, 1–2)

That is to say: that which is neither ceasing nor arising, neither annihilated nor eternal, neither one in meaning nor manifold in meaning, neither coming nor going—to the fully awakened one who taught such dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), which is the pacification of conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*) and auspicious (*śiva*), I bow, to him who is the best of speakers. This dedicatory verse is itself the key to Nāgārjuna's entire method: through these eight negations he does not establish any positive doctrine, but rather demonstrates that *pratītyasamutpāda* itself is free from all dialectical extremes (arising–ceasing, eternalism–annihilationism, oneness–multiplicity, coming–going). In this sense, Nāgārjuna's skepticism is not destructive but liberating—not pessimistic, but a profound philosophical optimism, for it is only by being freed from the burden of ultimate doctrines that the human mind becomes capable of diagnosing and treating its own psychological afflictions.

a systematic, methodical skepticism—not irregular doubt, but rather a comprehensive, self-reflexive skepticism akin to that of Socrates, Descartes, or Husserl, one that serves as a means to ultimate wisdom. The Buddha himself, declining to answer speculative metaphysical questions such as “Does the world have a beginning?” or “Is the self-eternal?”, presented the method of the *catuṣkoṭi* (the “four-cornered” negation), whereby all four logical alternatives regarding any question—“existent, non-existent, both existent and non-existent, and neither existent nor non-existent”—are simultaneously negated.

Nāgārjuna transformed this early Buddhist method from a purely practical, illocutionary device into a coherent logic machine, making possible the deconstruction of fundamental categories such as change, causation, and motion. This method is already evident in the opening dedicatory verse (*maṅgalācaraṇa*) of the *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā*, where *pratītyasamutpāda* is defined through eight negations (*aṣṭa-neti*). The Ācārya states:

Against Mundane and Ultimate Substantialism:

By Nāgārjuna's time, the Abhidharma tradition had already produced two major schools—*Sarvāstivāda* (“universal existence”) and *Sautrāntika* (“doctrine of the sūtras”)—representing two formulations of substantialism. *Sarvāstivāda* upheld *satkāryavāda*, the view that the effect already exists latently within the cause, whereas *Sautrāntika* upheld *asatkāryavāda*, according to which the effect is a wholly new occurrence not pre-existing in the cause. Both schools nonetheless held that causal efficacy resides in the fundamental, indivisible essence (*svabhāva*) of things.

Through the method of the *catuṣkoṭi*, Nāgārjuna exposed the internal inconsistency of both doctrines. In the first chapter of the *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā*, the “Examination of Conditions” (*Pratyayaparīkṣā*), he states:

***na svato nāpi parato na dvābhyāṃ nāpy ahetutaḥ | utpannā jātu
vidyante bhāvāḥ kva cana kecana ||***

(Mūlamādhyamakakārikā 1.3)

That is to say: no existent thing is ever found to arise-anywhere, at any time-from itself, from another, from both, or without a cause. This verse is itself the theoretical foundation of the argument discussed above: satkāryavāda (self-origination) renders the very notion of change meaningless, since if the effect already exists in the cause, speaking of its “arising” is pointless; while asatkāryavāda (origination from another) renders the causal relation between wholly heterogeneous substances inconceivable, since things of an entirely different essence cannot be mutually related without compromising their own fixed being. The Jaina doctrine of “both” (ubhayavāda) violates the law of

the excluded middle, and the Cārvāka doctrine of “without cause” (ahetuvāda) itself contradicts the Buddha's own teaching of pratītyasamutpāda. Thus all four possible substantialist positions on causation fail under logical examination.

From this, Nāgārjuna concludes that things do not change because they possess fixed essences, but rather change precisely because they lack any fixed essence-because they are niḥsvabhāva. In the fifteenth chapter, the “Examination of Essence” (Svabhāvaparīkṣā), he clarifies:

***svabhāvaṃ parabhāvaṃ ca bhāvaṃ cābhāvaṃ eva ca | ye paśyanti na
paśyanti te tattvaṃ buddhaśāsane ||***

(Mūlamādhyamakakārikā 15.6)

That is to say: those who perceive self-essence (svabhāva), other-essence (parabhāva), existence (bhāva), or non-existence (abhāva) as truly existing do not perceive the truth of the Buddha's teaching. The culmination of this chain of reasoning is found in Nāgārjuna's bold proposal, in which he

denies any ultimate distinction between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. These two verses from the twenty-fifth chapter, the “Examination of Nirvāṇa” (Nirvāṇaparīkṣā), are counted among the most frequently cited lines in the history of Buddhist thought:

***na saṃsārasya nirvāṇāt kiṃcid asti viśeṣaṇam | na nirvāṇasya
saṃsārāt kiṃcid asti viśeṣaṇam ||***

***nirvāṇasya ca yā koṭiḥ koṭiḥ saṃsāraṇasya ca | na tayoḥ antaraṃ
kiṃcīt susūkṣmam api vidyate ||***

(Mūlamādhyamakakārikā 25.19–20)

That is to say: there is no distinction whatsoever between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, nor between nirvāṇa and saṃsāra. Whatever the limit of nirvāṇa is, that is also the limit of saṃsāra; between the two there exists not even the subtlest difference. It is here that Nāgārjuna, establishing the identity of

śūnyatā and pratītyasamutpāda, offers his celebrated definition of the middle path (madhyamā pratipad). This verse, from the twenty-fourth chapter, Prakṛtiparīkṣā, is regarded as the very foundation of Madhyamaka philosophy:

***yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tāṃ pracakṣmahe | sā prajñaptir
upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā ||***

(Mūlamādhyamakakārikā 24.18)

That is to say: whatever arises dependently (pratītyasamutpāda), that we call śūnyatā; this designation, being dependent upon what it designates, is itself the middle path. In this verse, by establishing the identity of these three-śūnyatā,

pratītyasamutpāda, and the middle path-Nāgārjuna demonstrates that śūnyatā is not a negative metaphysical claim but the logical precondition of all change: not “voidness” but “openness,” which itself encompasses both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa within a

single field of experience.

Against Pramāṇa: The Logical Strategy of the Vīgrahavyāvartanī

Naiyāyika logicians levelled a sharp charge of self-refutation against Nāgārjuna's doctrine of śūnyatā, arguing that if the statement “all things are empty of essence” is itself a “thing,” that is, a claim,

then it too must be empty of essence, thereby undermining its own universal assertion. The opening objecting verse of the Vīgrahavyāvartanī makes this charge explicit:

*sarveṣāṃ bhāvānāṃ sarvatra na vidyate svabhāvaś cet | tava vacanam asvabhāvaṃ
na nivartayituṃ svabhāvaṃ alam ||*

(Vīgrahavyāvartanī, Kārikā 1)

Objection (pūrvapakṣa): If no essence whatsoever exists anywhere for any entities, then your own statement, being likewise devoid of essence, cannot be capable of negating essence. Nāgārjuna's response comes in two stages. First, he critiques the logicians' own theory of the means of valid knowledge (pramāṇa)-perception, inference, analogy, and testimony-showing that the validity of

the pramāṇas is itself afflicted by the faults of infinite regress, circularity, or groundless self-validation. Second, and more decisively, he reveals that “emptiness” is not a formal metaphysical thesis at all, and therefore the Naiyāyika rule regarding the fault of an assertion (pratijñā-doṣa) does not apply to it in the first place. The text's celebrated reply verse states:

*yadi kācana pratijñā syān me tato 'haṃ bhaved doṣaḥ | nāsti ca mama
pratijñā tasmān naivāsti me doṣaḥ ||*

(Vīgrahavyāvartanī, Kārikā 29)

That is to say: if I had any thesis (pratijñā), then indeed that fault would apply to me; but I have no thesis at all, and therefore I have no such fault. This response reveals Nāgārjuna's “vaitaṇḍika” stance: he does not establish any positive ontological position,

but rather turns the opponent's own epistemological system against itself, exposing its internal inconsistency. The text concludes with a dedicatory verse to the Buddha, which encapsulates the essence of Nāgārjuna's entire method:

*yaḥ śūnyatāṃ pratītyasamutpādaṃ madhyamāṃ pratipadaṃ ca | ekārthaṃ nijagāda
praṇamāmi tam apratimabuddham ||*

(Vīgrahavyāvartanī, Kārikā 70)

That is to say: I bow to that peerless Buddha who declared śūnyatā, pratītyasamutpāda, and the middle path to be one and the same in meaning.

assures that material adversity can be transmuted into spiritual flourishing-and it is this same assurance that gives Buddhist wisdom the character not of passive renunciation, but of an active, transformative ethical mission.

A New Buddhist Space: The Ethical Implications of the Philosophy of Śūnyatā:

In the Sūhṛllekha and the Ratnāvalī, addressed to Gautamīputra Śātakarṇi, Nāgārjuna links his metaphysical doctrine of śūnyatā to the ethics of action. Since there is no ultimate distinction between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, the proper domain of Buddhist practice cannot remain confined to the solitary monastery; it must extend into every sphere of the state's economy and social life. Dharma, which Nāgārjuna also calls “the highest policy” (sarvottama nīti), becomes, through virtuous conduct, the very means of establishing justice within the state. This bidirectionality of transformation, arising from śūnyatā and pratītyasamutpāda, is precisely what

Conclusion:

Nāgārjuna's philosophy of śūnyatā presents a unique synthesis in the history of Indian philosophy—a systematic skeptical strategy that, by exposing the internal inconsistencies of both Brahmanical epistemology and Buddhist substantialism on their own terms, creates a new philosophical space. The verses cited above from the Mūlamādhyamakakārikā and the Vīgrahavyāvartanī are evidence that the concept of niḥsvabhāvatā does not propound a negative nihilism, but is established as the logical precondition for change, ethical practice, and liberation. This is why Nāgārjuna's thought, even after two millennia, remains foundational to the Buddhist philosophical traditions of India, Tibet,

China, and Japan, and continues to be a subject of ongoing reinterpretation in contemporary comparative philosophy.

References:

1. Ācārya Nāgārjuna. Mūlamādhyamakāśāstram, ed. Dr. P. L. Vaidya. (Sanskrit original).
2. Ācārya Nāgārjuna. Mūlamādhyamakakārikā, ed. Dvārikādāsa Śāstrī (Bauddha Bhārati Prakāśan).
3. Ācārya Nāgārjuna. Niḥsvabhāvatā-darśana, by Rāmacandra Pāṇḍeya and Manju (Eastern Book Linkers, Delhi, India).
4. Mādhyamika Darśana, by Dr. Hṛdaya Nārāyaṇa Miśra (Ārādhana Brothers, Govind Nagar, Kanpur).
5. Nāgārjuna-kṛta Madhyamakāśāstra aur Vighrahyāvartanī, by Yaśadeva Śālya (ICPR).
6. Ācārya Nāgārjuna. Vighrahyāvartanī, trans. and ed. Dvārikādāsa Śāstrī (Bauddha Bhārati Prakāśan).
7. Ācārya Nāgārjuna. Śūnyatāsaptati, trans. and ed. Ācārya Sempa Dorje (Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath, Varanasi).
8. Ācārya Nāgārjuna. Ratnāvalī (Hindi translation), Dr. Candranārāyaṇa Miśra and Dr. Mahāprabhulāl Gosvāmī, Tara Printing Works, Varanasi.
9. Ācārya Nāgārjuna. Suhrillekha, ed. Dr. Pema Tenzin (Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath, Varanasi).
10. Ācārya Nāgārjuna. Catuḥstava, trans. and ed. Jñānchen Namdol (Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath, Varanasi).
11. Bauddha-Darśana-Mīmāṃsā (Ācārya Baladeva Upādhyāya), 2011, Chaukhambā Vidyābhavan, Varanasi.
12. Āryapañcaviṃśatisāhastrikā Prajñāpāramitā, Part I, ed. Dr. Vijayarāj Vajracārya (Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath, Varanasi).
13. Bauddha-Darśana-Prasthāna, by Prof. Ramāśaṅkar Tripāṭhī (Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath, Varanasi).
14. Garfield, J. L. The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamādhyamakakārikā. Oxford University Press.
https://archive.org/details/nagarjunafundamentalwisdomofthemiddlemulamadhyamikakarikatranslationjargarfieldl.oup_192_f/page/n1/mod/e/2up
15. Westerhoff, J. Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction. Oxford University Press.
<https://archive.org/details/nagarjunamulamadhya>

- [mikakarikaofnagarjunaaphilosophicalintroductionjanwesterhoffoup_759_t/page/n133/mod/e/2up](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nagarjuna/)
16. Related entry, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy- "Nāgārjuna"
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nagarjuna/>