

## NAGARJUNA ON EMPIRICAL KNOWLEDGE: A STUDY OF THE MŪLAMĀDHYAMIKAKĀRIKĀ

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Nagarjuna was a renowned Mahayana philosopher who lived in the latter half of the first century and the first half of the second century AD. He was influenced by the Mahayana Sutra literature that had been developing for a century or so before his career. Mahayana Sutra literature basically deals with the superhuman qualities of the Buddha with the *Trikaya* concept, the Bodhisattva ideal and the doctrine of emptiness. Nagarjuna wrote several books, each of which was concerned with one of these aspects. Nagarjuna became an exponent through his new interpretation of the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Though the concept of *śūnyatā* is well explained in discourses of the Theravada Pali canon too, Nagarjuna's was a sophisticated critical analysis of the same concept.

The time when Nagarjuna appeared in India, was a period in which several speculative philosophical traditions, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, were dominant. Both schools developed speculative theses especially on the issue of the existence of being. Vedanta philosophies engaged with this in terms of the self-doctrines, whereas Buddhist schools were to explain it without any self-substances of being. To describe the existence of being without any permanent entities was a challenge for Buddhist schools.

The *Mūlamādhymikakārikā* of Nagarjuna is totally dedicated to establishing the non-self thesis of early Buddhism. The method he followed for this is somewhat different. He takes the common sense of existence and non-existence and loosens it up giving examples for erroneous logic pertaining to such views. He criticizes the notions of a persisting self, rejecting all positive, negative, and skeptic views. However, here Nagarjuna exceeds the limits of the early Buddhist view of experience. As far as I understand it, early Buddhism does not reject the existence of external phenomena and of experience. Early Buddhism deals with the concept of *śūnyatā* in relation to experience. Nagarjuna's idea was that if nothing has permanent existence, to claim knowledge is baseless.

In my work paper, I attempt to show how early Buddhism describes emptiness without denying experience and how Nagarjuna differs from early Buddhism in his explanation of experience. I utilize the primary source of the *Suttapitaka* of the Pali canon and other (secondary) works. I used the *Mūlamādhymikakārikā* of Nagarjuna to examine his position on empirical knowledge. Finally, my conclusion is that Nagarjuna does not represent the early Buddhist theory of empirical knowledge.