

Chapter III

The Concept of Śūnyatā (Emptiness) in Early Buddhism, Sarvāstivāda and Mādhyamika

3.1 The Concept of Śūnyatā (Emptiness) in Early Buddhism

Over the investigation into the Tipiṭaka of early Buddhism, Śūnyatā or emptiness is said to be the most profound teaching ever to come from Buddhism as being said by the Buddha, “the Discourses proclaimed by the Tathāgata as regard to emptiness (Pali : Suññata-patisaṃyuttā) is deep in meaning, transcending the world and dealing with the emptiness or voidnesss.”¹

The words ‘Śūnya’ and ‘Śūnyatā’ (Sanskrit) ‘Suñña’ and ‘Suññatā’ correspond to the Pali as ‘Suñña’ and ‘Suññatā’. In Buddhist terminology, it means ‘empty’ or ‘emptiness’, ‘devoid’ or ‘devoidness’, or ‘void’ or ‘voidness’. Emptiness is the principal topic of two Pāli texts in Majjhima-Nikāya, titled “Discourse on Small Emptiness” (Cūḷa-Suññatā Sutta)² and “Discourse on Great Emptiness” (Mahā-Suññatā Sutta)³, These two texts, edited under the heading “emptiness”, are relevant to the texts in Saṃyutta-Nikāya⁴ and Majjhima-Nikāya⁵ on the teaching of Suññata-vihāra and appear to have been progressively edited

¹ S. II. p. 267, S. v. p. 407, A. III. pp. 84-86 (P.T.S.).

² M. 121.

³ M. 122.

⁴ S. 236..

⁵ M.151.

by expanding on the practice of emptiness with concrete explanations. These two emptiness-sutras, which have greatly influenced the development of Buddhist thought, differ in content regarding the practice of insight into emptiness.

Over the investigation into the above discourse, emptiness in Early Buddhism could be defined into three contexts as meditative dwelling, the lack of ‘self’ or Anattā, and awareness release. Thus the concept of the three contexts will be further studied here.

3.1.1 Emptiness in the Context of Meditative Dwelling or Suññata-vihāra

Emptiness in its first meaning, as a meditative dwelling, is most fully discussed in Majjhima Nikāya. Essentially, it boils down to the ability to center the mind in a particular mode of perception, to maintain it there, and then to notice the absence and presence of disturbance within that mode as said to Ānanda by the Blessed One, while staying among the Sākyans in a Sākyan town named Nagaraka at Sāvatti in the Eastern Monastery, the palace of Migāra's mother as saying :

Now, as well as before, I remain fully in a dwelling of emptiness. Just as this palace of Migāra's mother is empty of elephants, cattle, and mares, empty of gold & silver, empty of assemblies of women & men, and there is only this non-emptiness — the singleness based on the community of monks; even so, Ānanda, a monk — not attending to the perception of village, not attending to the perception of human being — attends to the singleness based on the perception of wilderness. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, &

indulges in its perception of wilderness. "He discerns that 'Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of village are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of human being are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the perception of wilderness.' He discerns that 'This mode of perception is empty of the perception of village. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of human being. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the perception of wilderness.' Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: 'There is this.' And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, and pure.⁶

Also it is found the process of emptiness development which starts with the perception of one's external surroundings — village, wilderness, the earth property — and then moves internally to the four formless states, the 'themeless concentration of awareness', and finally to the release from all mental fermentation. Each step is compared to the one preceding it to see how its more refined perception engenders less disturbance. For instance, if we move from a perception of the wilderness to a perception of earth, the first step is to settle and indulge in that perception. Then you notice what types of disturbance have been abandoned in the move from the perception of wilderness to the perception of earth — for example, all thoughts regarding the dangers of wilderness are gone — and then to see what disturbances remain based on the latter perception. Then you abandon the perception causing those disturbances and move on to a more refined level of perception. This

⁶ M.121.

process is pursued until it arrives at the ‘themeless concentration of awareness’. When noting that even this refined level of concentration is fabricated, inconstant, and subject to cessation, one gains total release from all mental fermentations and the disturbances that would arise based on them. This is the level of emptiness that is ‘superior and unsurpassed’, and is apparently what the Buddha is referring to in this Sutta when he says that by "not attending to any themes, he enters & remains in internal emptiness." This practice of emptiness is meant for a monk living in the forest, so it starts from the perception of forest (*araññasasāññaṃ*). The monk concentrates, attending to the perception of forest, not attending to the perception of village and human beings, and thus the “distress” (*daratha*) of the perception of village and human beings does not exist. However, since distress still exists in the perception of forest leading to the realization of emptiness, the monk goes further with the practice of emptiness-insight, moving on to a more refined level of perception until it arrives at the ‘themeless concentration of awareness’. The themeless concentration or the abiding in voidness also has a wider meaning, embracing *Jhāna*, *Samādhi*, *Vipassanā* and even *Nibbāna*, the final goal of the religious life.

Upon the analytical study, the internal emptiness he remains is the meditative dwelling or *Suññata-vihāra* which is a term technically used to express the abiding state of him who has succeeded in the religious training and experienced its results. Generally it is rendered as ‘the abiding in voidness’. In the highest sense, it signifies the abiding states of the great man, ie. Buddhas, Pacceka-Buddhas and Arahants, the disciples of Buddhas as being said by the Buddha to *Sāriputta* as sayings,

Sāriputta, your faculties are clear. The color of your skin is pure and bright. What abiding do you often abide in now, Sāriputta? “Now, venerable sir, I often abide in voidness (Suññatāvihāra).” “Good, good, Sāriputta! Now, indeed, you often abide in the abiding of a great man. For this is the abiding of a great man, namely, voidness.” “So, Sāriputta, if a bhikkhu would wish : “May I now often abide in voidness”, he should consider thus : “On the path by which I went to the village for alms, or in the place where I wandered for alms, or on the path by which I returned from the almsround, was there any desire, lust, hate, delusion, or aversion in my mind regarding forms cognizable by the eye?... regarding sounds cognizable by the ear?... regarding odours cognizable by the nose?... regarding flavours cognizable by the tongue?... regarding tangibles cognizable by the body?... regarding mind-objects cognizable by the mind?” If, by reviewing, he knows thus : “On the path by which I went to the village for alms...there was desire, lust, hate, delusion, or aversion in my mind regarding mind-objects cognizable by the mind,” then he should make an effort to abandon those evil unwholesome states. But if, by reviewing, he knows thus: ‘On the path by which I went to the village for alms...there was no desire, lust, hate, delusion, or aversion in my mind regarding mind-objects cognizable by the mind,’ then he can abide happy and glad, training day and night in wholesome states.⁷

In Patisambhidāmagga, the term ‘Suññata-vihāra’ is used with reference to two kinds of knowledge (Ñāṇa), viz., the knowledge of fear (Bhayañāṇa) and the knowledge of passing away (Vyañāṇa), leading to

⁷ M. 151.

the abandoning of clinging to worldly phenomena by which one reaches the state of abiding in voidness. The relevant passage reads : “the aspirant, whose mind is leaning towards the state of voidness, while seeing clinging to ‘self’ as fearful, reflects again and again, and observes the passing away of phenomena. This is called ‘The abiding in Voidness’⁸. In other words it refers to the abiding state of him who is in the states of Jhāna (absorption), Samādhi (concentration), Vipassanā, etc. It is called ‘the abiding in voidness’ because it partakes of nothing other than the voidness itself, that is “what is not remaining, this is voidness, while what is still remaining, there is ‘that being’, this is.”⁹

From these commentarial definitions and its use in the cannon, it can be seen that the term ‘Suññata-vihāra’ or ‘the abiding in voidness’ has a wider meaning, embracing Samādhi, Jhāna, Vipassanā and even Nibbāna the final goal of the religious life. In Buddhist teaching, therefore, the term ‘Suññata-vihāra’ should be understood as the abiding state of him who has trained himself through ‘Suññatā-samādhi’ or void-concentration and succeeded in the religious training of Jhāna, and Vipassanā, thus enjoyed its fruits or Nibbāna.

Suññata-samādhi or void-concentration is a mode of perception adding nothing to or takes nothing away from the raw data of physical and mental events. This mode of perception based on emptiness means to look at events in the mind and the senses with no thought of whether there's anything lying behind them. This mode is called emptiness because it's empty of the presuppositions we usually add to experience to make sense of it, then the thought of ‘I’, ‘It is mine’, and ‘It is myself’,

⁸ Ptsm. pp. 134-8 (Siamese Ed.).

⁹ M. iii., p. 104 (P.T.S.).

which springs from the former hereby of individuality as permanent, happy, and substantial entity, comes to an end because they are empty, vain, void and ownerless.

Over the investigation into Suññata-samādhi Sutta in Saṃyutta-Nikāya, three types of meditative composure are mentioned as the path leading to the not-fabricated as follows:

And what monks, is the path leading to the not-fabricated? The emptiness meditative composure (Suññatā-samādhi), the signless meditative composure (Animitta-samādhi), the undirected meditative composure (Appaṇihita-samādhi). This is called the path leading to the not-fabricated.¹⁰

Also Suññatā-samādhi, the void-concentration, is found in Asaṃkhatasaṃyatta being used with reference to an advanced form of Samādhi, the Samādhi leading to the Uncompounded state (asaṃkhatamagga), i.e., the Path leading to the destruction of the three passions, namely, lust (rāga), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha). It has been said:

What, brethren, is the Uncompounded ? The destruction of lust, brethren, the destruction of hatred, and the destruction of delusion are called the Uncompounded”. And what, brethren, is the path that leads to the Uncompounded ? Concentration that is void. That, brethren, is called ‘the path that leads to the Uncompounded’.¹¹

In Saddhammāpakāsinī, the commentary on Patisambhidāmagga, Mahānāma Thera designates void-concentration as

¹⁰ S. 43.4.

¹¹ S. iv, p. 442 (Siamese Ed.).

‘Ariyamagga-samādhi’ The concentration associated with the noble One.’
It has been guide :

When an aspirant contemplates upon compounded things as impermanent, suffering, and non-substantial in due order, and attains void emancipation (Suññata-vimokkha) through insight into ‘non-self’, his concentration is associated with the Noble Path of that Vimokkha. Thus it is called Suññatā-samādhi.¹²

Suññata-samādhi leading an aspirant to the un compounded is said in the Sutta the Ariyamagga-samādhi leading to Nibbāna or supreme Śūnyatā through insisight into ‘non-self’ or Anattā. Thus Anattā should be regarded as a means to attain Nibbāna or supreme Śūnyatā as the highest aim. Upon the analytical study, an aspirant contemplates upon worldly things as impermanent, since they are limited by rise and fall, disintegrating, perishable and all that, he sees them as painful because they are oppressed, unbearable, the basis of disease and so on, then the thought of ‘I’, ‘It is mine’, and ‘It is myself’, which springs from the former hereby of individuality as permanent, happy, and substantial entity, comes to an end because they are empty, vain, void and ownerless. As a result of this contemplation, there arises in him the knowledge of the contemplation or reflection. And as the result of that knowledge, he does not find anything to be called ‘I’ or ‘Mine’ or ‘Myself’. So he becomes indifferent towards them, and with this knowledge, he is said to have entered the state of of Nibbāna. That’s why Suññata-samādhi is the Ariyamagga-samādhi or the void concentration on non-self which is associated with Vipassanā leading to the Noble Path.

¹² Ptsma. p. 283 (Siamese Ed).

3.1.2 Śūnyatā in the Context of the Lack of ‘Self’ or Anattā

Thervada philosophy, by virtue of the doctrine and the concept contained in the Pali Tipiṭaka, has the world view and philosophical explanation culminated in the doctrine of ‘Anattā’ (selflessness or non-substantiality). Theravada Buddhists are acquainted to the concept of Anattā with philosophical point of view that all states are ‘non-self’ or ‘non-substantial’. In its second meaning, Śūnyatā in the context of the lack of ‘self’ or Anattā as an attribute of objects is most fully discussed in Saṃyutta Nikāya.¹³ That Sutta describes emptiness as meaning the lack of ‘self’ or Anattā or not pertaining to ‘self’ in the internal and external sense media. Whatever sense of ‘self’ that may surround these objects is not inherent in them, and is instead simply the result of one's own penchant for "I-making" and "my-making." Seeing the artificiality of ‘I-making’ and ‘my-making’ in this way helps lead to a sense of disenchantment with these ‘makings’, thus helping to abandon any clinging associated with them. Thus emptiness in this sense relates directly to the third of the three characteristics, ie. ‘non-self’ or Anattā non-self. However, just as the three characteristics are not radically separate from one another — everything stressful is for that reason not-self as said in Kaccāyana Sutta as the Buddha’s sayings :

The world in general, Kaccāyana, inclines to two views, to existence or to non-existence. But for him who, with the highest wisdom, sees the uprising of the world as it really is, ‘non-existence of the world’ does not apply, and for him who, with highest wisdom,

¹³ S.35.85.

sees the passing away of the world as it really is, ‘existence of the world’ does not apply. The world in general, Kaccaayana, grasps after systems and is imprisoned by dogmas. But he does not go along with that system-grasping, that mental obstinacy and dogmatic bias, does not grasp at it, does not affirm : “This is my self.” He knows without doubt or hesitation that whatever arises is merely dukkha, that what passes away is merely dukkha and such knowledge is his own, not depending on anyone else. This, Kaccāyana, is what constitutes right view.¹⁴

The above Kaccāyana Sutta points out, when one no longer latches onto any idea of my ‘self’, one sees phenomena within and without simply as examples of stress arising and passing away.

With regard to its clear meaning, it has explicitly been mentioned in the Fifty Suttas of Salāyatana. The Suttas state that once Venerable Ānanda desiring to know the significance of voidness put this question to the Master, “Why is it that the world is said to be void?, and the Buddha told him thus : Because the world is void of self or of anything belonging to ‘self’, therefore, Ānanda, it is said that the world is void.”¹⁵ The world said to be void in this definition refers to the eighteen dhātus or elements, viz., eye, ear, nose, etc., together with their contacts and their results of contacts. Thus in replying to the question “What, Ānanda, is void of self or of anything belonging to self?” the Buddha tells thus: “The eye is void of self or of anything belonging to self. Objects (of eye) eye-consciousness eye-contact and whatever sensation pleasant or unpleasant or neutral, originates depending on the eye-

¹⁴ S. 12.15.

¹⁵ S. iv. p. 54, Ps. ii. p. 177, Nd.i. p.439 (P.T.S.).

contact, all these are void of self or of anything belonging to self.” The Buddha speaks in the same manner with regard to the remaining senses also, and says, “This is why, Ānanda, the world is said to be void.”¹⁶

The term ‘void’ (Suñña) in the above definition implies two things : one is the voidness of ‘self’, and the other is voidness of whatsoever belonging to ‘self’. The former refers to ‘the voidness of the doer’ or one who feels, and the latter refers to ‘the voidness of its property’. The former, however, seems to be the cause in the sense of which the latter springs from or belongs to, Yet both of them are devoid of any substantial entities, since, as already said, they arise in dependence on proper conditions over which we have no power or control. Thus, in the light of ‘Suñña’ or ‘void’, none of them can be regarded as self, and therefore none of them ‘belongs’ to us.

By analytical reflection (anupassanā) upon these elements, one will realize the fact that there is not anything belonging to him. But for those who are lacking the understanding of this fact, will think that everything is belonging to him. Thus, having known this fact, one is capable of comprehending how everything is ‘Suñña’ (void), and so he remains without clinging in regard to anything which is either ‘Mundane’ (lokiya) or ‘Supermundane’ (lokuttara), since all of them are devoid of self or of anything belonging to ‘self’, as it is said : “The mundane states or worldly things such as eye, ear, nose, etc., are said to be void since there is no ‘self’ or anything belonging to ‘self’ in themselves. Even the

¹⁶ S. iv. p. 54, Ps. ii. p. 177, Nd.i. p.439 (P.T.S.).

Supermundane states are devoid of ‘self’ or of anything belonging to ‘self’.”¹⁷

According to the above explanations though voidness with regard to ‘Mundane and Supermundane things’ seems to be identical in the sense that both of them are devoid of self or of anything belonging to ‘self’, yet they differ from each other in the sense that the former refers to the voidness of their essential nature, since they, arise depending on conditions, whereas the latter refers to the truth of things, i.e., the uncompounded things, which are by nature devoid of self or of anything belonging to self, and by seeing the true natures of both one is said to attain Nibbāna.

Over the investigation into the doctrine, Anattā or non-self is experienced through the aspect of impermanence, through the aspect of unsatisfactions, and through the aspect of emptiness. Empty of what? The word ‘emptiness’ is so often misunderstood because when one only thinks of it as a concept, one says "what do you mean by empty?" Everything is there : there are the people, and there are their insides, guts and their bones and blood and everything is full of stuff — and the mind is not empty either. It's got ideas, thoughts and feelings. And even when it doesn't have those, what do you mean by emptiness? The only thing that is empty is the emptiness of an entity. It means that there is no specific entity in anything. That is emptiness. That is the nothingness. That nothingness is also experienced in meditation. It is empty, it is devoid of a specific person, devoid of a specific thing, devoid of anything which makes it permanent, devoid of anything which even makes it important.

¹⁷Saddhammapakāsinī, The Commentary on Ptsma. iii., p.632 (P.T.S.).

The whole thing is in flux. So the emptiness is that. And the emptiness is to be seen everywhere; to be seen in oneself. And that is what is called Anattā, non-self. Empty of an entity. There is nobody there. It is all imagination. Hence approaching Anattā through the three kinds aspects mentioned above, Anattā is thus regarded as a means to enter Suññata-vimokkha (void-emancipation) for the attainment of Nibbāna.

3.1.3 Śūnyatā in the Context of Awareness-release or Full Awareness

Emptiness in its third meaning, as a type of awareness-release or full awareness, is most fully discussed in Majjhima Nikāya which describes this state of awareness-release or full awareness as follows, "there is the case where a monk — having gone into the wilderness, to the root of a tree, or into an empty dwelling — considers this : This is empty of self or of anything pertaining to self. This is called the emptiness awareness-release or full awareness."¹⁸ Thus it will protect (i) one's mind from being invaded and disturbed by the evil, unwholesome states of covetousness and grief, (ii) one's talk not to be associated with lower and vulgar talk but to be associated with ending or releasing from suffering, and (iii) one's thought not to be associated with lower and vulgar thought but to be associated with noble thoughts, leading forwards to salvation.

Majjhima Nikāya further adds, "if one frequently abides in the emptiness awareness-release, one may either attain the dimension of

¹⁸ M.43.

nothingness — one of the formless states — or be committed to the discernment that will lead to awakening.”¹⁹ As Majjhima Nikāya notes :

When one attains full awareness, the themeless awareness-release and the emptiness awareness-release which come to differ only in name, and not in actuality. Still, it is important to remember that in the course of practice, all these three meanings are related and all will inevitably play a role in awakening.²⁰

An overview of Śūnyatā in the context of awareness-release or full awareness in Mahā-sunnatā Sutta of Majjhima Nikāya²¹, the method of contemplation upon the internal-external voidness or the voidness of both sides becomes two aspects: the analytical and synthetical aspect is suggested. Of these, analytical aspect is twofold: internal and external.

(i) In the case of internal aspect, the aspirant analyses and contemplates on the six internal sense-spheres in the light of experience and sees them to be void of ‘self’, etc.

(ii) In the case of external aspect, he analyses and contemplates on the six external sense-spheres in the light of experience and sees them to be void of ‘self’, etc.

(iii) In the case of synthetical aspect, he contemplates upon both the sense-subject of the six internal sense-spheres and the six external sense-spheres of the six different kinds of experience in a combined way of both, and sees them as they really are, i.e., as void of self, etc.

¹⁹ M.106.

²⁰ M. 43.

²¹ M.122.

Here the synthetical aspect of the contemplation upon both sense-subject and sense-object is applied by breaking down wrong differentiations between the sense-subject and the sense-object as self-possessed entities and by showing that the life-process which is void in nature is represented by both the six internal sense-spheres and the six external sense-spheres. Thus, in the course of the practice of internal-external voidness or the voidness of both sides, both aspects, the analytical and the synthetical methods gradually purge one's mind of all delusions in regard to 'self' and the universe of phenomena, thus leading to the attainment of Sotāpanna-hood, the first stage of sainthood. Having attained such internal-external voidness, the aspirant, in order to promote himself to the attainment of all eight meditative states as well as the higher spiritual stages, or as the commentary says : "I will become one who is both ways released,"²² which is advised by the Buddha to attend to the 'Imperturbability' (Ānenja), as it is said, "He attends to imperturbability."²³

Thus the attainment of the stage of imperturbability, being the stages of release, is recommended by the Buddha, after one's attaining the internal-external voidness, in order that he may be able to attain the higher spiritual stage called Sotāpattimagga, the first stage of sainthood. In the course of one's cultivation of the four stages of imperturbability, if one's mind does not delight in them, nor set on their practice, nor attach itself to their cultivation, then one should not give up one's effort but be fully aware of one's failure in regard to fixing one's mind on these four

²² M. iii, p. 112 (P.T.S.).

²³ Op.Cit.

stages of imperturbability on the one hand, and apply one's mind to the same basic Jhānas, internal voidness, external voidness and internal-external voidness again and again as one has done before, that is to say:

(i) to continue to settle, steady, unify and concentrate his mind internally in regard to that same subject of concentration till he attains to the internal voidness.

(ii) to attend to voidness internally,

(iii) to attend to voidness externally,

(iv) to attend to voidness internally and externally, and

(v) to attend to the four stage of imperturbability till the mind gets firmly established on them.²⁴

And if in the course of one's cultivation of the four stages of imperturbability, the mind is firmly established on them, then one should also become fully aware of one's success in regard to fixing one's mind on these four stages of imperturbability. With the mind that is fully aware of what he has attained, the aspirant lives emancipated from dependence on wrong view regarding 'self' and matter, and clings to naught in the world. Thus with this attainment whether one is walking, or standing, or sitting, or even lying down, one will not be invaded and disturbed by the evil unwholesome states of covetousness and grief, as it is said:

If, Ānanda, dwelling in this way, a monk's mind inclines (*nāmati*) to walking, he walks; knowing: "While I am thus walking up and down, no evil state, no unwholesome states of covetousness and grief

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 112-113.

do invade.” Thus he is fully aware in regard to it. (And so of standing, sitting and lying down).²⁵

Whenever such a person speaks and talks with others, since his mind has entered into the internal-external voidness and abides in the four states of imperturbability with awareness-release or full awareness, so he will not talk of things that are not concerned with or related to ending of and deliverance from suffering. He will not talk about kings, robbers, etc.,²⁶ for such talks are considered by him to be lower and vulgar; they are the ordinary and everyday topics of the ordinary folk (*puttujjanika*), they are not noble, for they are unable to lead one who is associated with them, to revulsion (*Nibbidā*), to dispassionateness (*virāga*), to cessation (*nirodha*), to calmness or pacification (*upasama*), to super-knowledge (*abhiññā*) and to *Nibbāna*. On the contrary they are only able to lead one who is associated with them, to prolong one’s continued existence, i.e., to repeat the cycle of birth, decay and death. For these reasons, whatever the aspirant talks, would be related to ten kinds of topics namely, (i) having only a few wants (*appicchatā*), (ii) contentment (*santuṭṭhitā*), (iii) seclusion (*paviveka*), (iv) aloofness from company (*asaṃsagga*), (v) strenuousness (*viriyārambha*), (vi) virtuous conduct (*sīla*), (vii) concentration (*samādhi*), (viii) wisdom (*pañña*). (ix) deliverance

²⁵ Ibid., p.113.

²⁶ “If, Ānanda, abiding in this way, a monk’s mind inclines to talking, he resolves: ‘Such talk is low, vulgar of the ordinary fold, unnoble, unconcerned with the well-being not leading to revulsion, to dispassionateness, to cessation, to calmness, to super-knowledge, and to *Nibbāna*; that is to say, talk of kings, robbers, ministers, armies, alarms, battles, food, drink, clothing, beds, garlands, perfumes, relatives, vehicles, villages, towns, cities, countries, women, heroes, street inhabitants, wells, the dead, trivialities, speculation about the world and sea, whether things are or are not-in such talk I shall not indulge.’ Thus he is fully aware in regard to this.”

(vimutti), and (x) knowledge and vision concerning deliverance (vimuttiñāṇadassana).²⁷ These ten kinds of topics are considered to be noble, for they are able to lead one who has thoroughly practised and realized them, to the destruction of continued existence. Moreover, whenever he knows that his mind is detached from the lower and more easily excited matters and well under his control, he will not think of thoughts related to three kinds of things, namely, (i) thought of sense-pleasure (kāma-vitakka), (ii) thought of malevolence (vyāpādavitaṅka), and (iii) thought of harming (vihiṃsāvitakka), but, on the contrary, he will think of thoughts related to three kinds of things namely, (i) thought of renunciation (nekkhammavitaṅka), (ii) thought of non-malevolence (avyāpādavitaṅka), and (iii) thought of harmlessness (avihiṃsāvitakka).

In summary, If a monk wishes to enter the emptiness-abode, he should steady, calm, make one-pointed, and concentrate his mind precisely. According to the Pāli, this refers to practice of the four jhānas (meditations). Then, the monk, based on jhāna, attends (manasikaroti) to four kinds of emptiness: 1. inward emptiness 2. outward emptiness, 3. emptiness both inward and outward, and 4. immovability (with the mind getting firmly established on the four stage of imperturbability) .

The practices described in the two discourses on emptiness differ in orientation. In the ‘Discourse on Small Emptiness’ the practice proceeds vertically, step by step, providing oneness that is not empty,

²⁷ “But, Ānanda, he resolves: ‘Such talk as is concerned with austers penance, as favours the mind’s release, as leads to complete revulsion, to cessation, to calmness, to super-knowledge, to enlightenment, and to Nibbāna. That is to say, he talks having only a few wants, on contentment, on seclusion, on aloofness from company on strenuousness, on virtuous conduct, on concentration, on wisdom, on deliverance, and on knowledge and vision concerning deliverance, in such talk I shall indulge.’ Thus he is fully aware in regard to this.” Ibid., p. 113.

through the fading away of other perception in the process of practicing emptiness, to total emptiness of *kāmāsava* (flow of sense-desire), *bhavāsava* (flow of becoming), and *avijjāsava* (flow of ignorance). This is regarded as ‘small emptiness’. On the other hand, the ‘Discourse on Great Emptiness’ proceeds horizontally from inner to outer, by way of four kinds of emptiness in attending, up to the ‘emptiness-abode’. This is called ‘great emptiness’.

Upon the analytical study of *Śūnyatā* in the context of awareness release or full awareness, it can keep one always awakened or fully aware of what one is doing. With awareness release more and more developed, the mind becomes released from selfcentredness or all attachment. Thus it will lead to the non-existence of ego or the emptiness of self or *Pudgala- Śūnyatā*, so unwholesome states of covetousness and grief do not invade.

3.2 The Concept of *Śūnyatā* (Emptiness) in *Sarvāstivāda*

The *Sarvāstivāda* is that sect of *Hīnayāna* Buddhism which adhered to the belief, initially expressed in the *Saṃyuktanikāya*²⁸, that ‘all things exist’, *sarvaṃ asti*. Highly realistic as their thought-process was, the *Sarvāstivādins* believed, like the *Theravādins*, that it was not only the things in the present but also those in the past and the future they do exist. Their contention was that the past and the future are enlivened through a continuity provided by the present.

The *Sarvāstivāda* School was closely related to the orthodox *Theravāda* School, from which it was first separated probably before the

²⁸ S. iv. 15.

Council of Aśoka. The idea that all things exist may go back even to the time of the Buddha himself, for the word ‘sabban atthi’ (all things exist) is found already in the Samyuttanikāya.²⁹ Nevertheless, the theory of Sarvāstivāda, according to Vasubandhu, is not found in the genuine discourses of the Buddha, but it is an innovation of the Vibhāṣā (Exegetic) Literature of the Abhidhārmikas being against the Sautrāntic School which clings solely to the discourses (Sūtrānta) of the Buddha and maintains that only the present exists.³⁰ Accordingly Vasubandhu in his Abhidharma-kośa adopts the opinion of the Sautrāntic School, although professedly he follows the tenets of the Kashmiri Abhidhārmikas in general.

In the tenet of Sarvāstivāda, all things are real and everything exists permanently with regard to its main teaching, “The all-is Doctrine”. Sarvāstivāda affirms, “The existence of things are in all the three dimensions of time — past, present and future.”³¹ This view is supported by the Abhidharmakośa. But apparently it goes against the view of perpetual flux enunciated by the Buddha. The same charge has been brought about against it by celebrated Vasubandhu, who turned to be a follower of Vijñānavāda in later life. In the opinion of Vasubandhu, ‘the theory of the Sarvāstivādins was an innovation of the exegetical literature’, i.e., it was introduced by the Abhidharmikas and it is not found according to him in the genuine Discourses of the Buddha. the school of the Sautrāntikas, that is to say, that school which proclaimed on

²⁹ English translation by C. A. F. Rhys Davids and F. L. Woodward : The Book of Kindred Sayings, Pāli Text Society Translation Series, Vols. VII, X, XIII, XV, XVI, 1918-30. See Rhys Davids’ Index to the Samyutta, p. 107.

³⁰ Th. Stcherbatsky, **Buddhist Logic**, two volumes. Bibliotheca Buddhica Vol. XXVI, Leningrad, 1932, Vol. I, p. 111.

³¹ Sanghasen Singh, Prof., ed., **Sarvāstivāda and Its Traditions**, (Delhi : Delhi University, 1994), p. 17.

its banner a return to the genuine doctrine of the Discourses, denied therefore the permanent essence of the elements and re-established the doctrine that reality consists of momentary flashes, that the “elements appear into life out of non-existence and return again to non-existence after having been existent for a moment only.”

The Sarvāstivāda School, however, has its origin in the orthodox Theravāda School, raises a rigorous objection and has its assertion,

The past and the future are real, because the present has its root in the past and its consequence in the future. Besides, it holds that the three periods of time ought to exist separately, because the notions of past and future would not occur in us without separate realities. Judging from the discussions recorded in the Mahāvibhāṣā literature, great importance seems to have been laid on the separateness of the three periods of time and the reality of each. The reality of the three periods of time, however, does not mean that the three periods themselves are eternally extant, nor does it mean that time is a real substance. It means that all things or elements are real in the past and in the future as they are in the present—but without enduring from one period to another.³²

In connection with this theory four arguments are quoted by Vasubandhu from the Exegetic Literature:

(1) Dharmatrāta’s argument from the difference of kind or result—as a gold piece may be made into three different articles, yet each retains the real nature of gold.

³² Junjirō Takakusu, **The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy**, (Hoolulu : University of Hawaii, 2002, pp.63 – 64.

(2) Ghoṣa's argument from the difference of mark or factor as the same service can be obtained from three different employees.

(3) Vasumitra's argument from the difference of function or position as in counting where the same numeral may be used to express three different values, for instance, the numeral one may be 1 or the index of 10 or of 100.

(4) Buddhadeva's argument from the difference of view or relation—as a woman can at once be daughter, wife and mother according to the relation she holds to her mother, her husband and her child.³³

Vasubandhu prefers Vasumitra's opinion (3) as the best of the four arguments though he was not entirely satisfied with it. According to this argument it is possible to give different values to each of the three periods of time—the future is the stage which has not come to function, the present is the actually functioning stage, and the past is the stage in which the function has come to an end. Owing to the differences in stage, the three periods are distinctly separate, and all things or elements in them are real entities. Hence the formula : “The three periods (of time) are real and so is the entity of all elements at any instant.” The tenet “Void of abiding self (but) reality of elements (dharma)s” indicates that selflessness is still the basic principle of the Sarvāstivāda School.

As opposed to Aśvaghoṣa's categorical denial of the self, the Mahāvibhāṣā gives a qualified denial. “There are two kinds of self,” it says, “the dharma-self, which exists, and the person-self, which does not.” This statement admits two possible interpretations. One is that

³³ Op. cit.

personal identity can be defined on the ultimate level as an assemblage of impersonal dharmas—the five skandhas—but that there is no entity corresponding to our conventional notion of person. This is the position adopted by the Theravādins in the Sinhalese commentaries composed during this time, the position adopted by later Sarvāstivādin commentators, and apparently the position intended by the authors of the *Mahāvibhāṣā* itself. A second interpretation—that a person does not have a self, but that dharmas do—is what later Mahayāna commentators chose to read into this statement as part of their attack on Mainstream—“Hīnayāna”—philosophy. For them, this statement shows that Hīnayānists do not understand what came to be a cardinal tenet among Mahayāna philosophers: “that even dharmas have no self-nature.”³⁴

Among Vasubandhu’s writings on Hinayana philosophy, the most influential text is undoubtedly the *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra*. In this work, which Vasubandhu wrote while still an adherent of the Sarvastivada sect of the Hinayana, he presents a critical assessment of the doctrine of that sect as they pertain to the *Abhidharma* treatises, correcting what he looks upon as certain errors in their teachings. Already in this early period of his life it is clear that he disapproved of the tendency in the Hinayana sects to discuss logic and doctrine merely for the sake of discussion, and he accordingly endeavored to return to the spirit of the original teachings of Shakyamuni.

By Vasubandhu’s time the Hinayana sects, particularly the Sarvastivada sect, had become firmly established in Indian Buddhism and

³⁴ Richard H. Robinson & Willard L. Johnson, **Buddhist Religions : A Historical Introduction**, Fifth Edition, (California : Thomson Learning,, n.d.), p.93.

were well on their way to institutional and doctrinal stagnation. The Sarvastivadins expounded the view that the dharmas or elements of phenomenal existence are ultimately real, thus taking up a philosophical position very close to that which Shakyamuni had so strongly criticized in the Brahmins of his time.

Vasubandhu, as we have said, took it upon himself to examine these beliefs of the Sarvastivadins and to pass judgment on them. Thus he analyzed the view advanced by the Sarvastivadins that “the dharmas actually exist in the three worlds of past, present, and future, and demonstrated that only the present dharmas, which “keep coming moment by moment,” actually exist. From this point of view, he proceeds to present a total of seventy-five dharmas that may be said to exist.”³⁵

A.N. Lahiri, in his writing regarding the Sarvāstivāda : Its Inherent Vitality and Widespread Popularity, says :

The Sarvāstivādins admitted the permanent reality of all things, even though they believed in *nairātmya*, the absence of any permanent substance in an individual. They believed with the Theravādins in the plurality of elements, in the universe; and there were, according to them, seventy-five elements, about which they built up a highly elaborate philosophical conception. “The Sarvāstivādins denied the existence of soul (*ātman*) and admitted the reality of dharmas (objects) in their noumenal state” They put emphasis on the doctrine of non-ego (i.e., *anātman* of a person).³⁶

Upon an analytical study of the concept of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Sarvāstivāda or Kusha School, Sarvāstivāda, as its name implies

³⁵ Daisaku Ikeda, **Buddhism, the First Millennium**, tr.by Burton Watson, (Tokyo : Kodansha International Ltd.,1978), p.150.

³⁶ Sanghasen Singh, Prof., ed., **Sarvāstivāda and Its Traditions**, p.37.

“sarvam asti” i.e. “All is” or “All exists”, stood for the principle of “All existing” in the three periods of time, ie. past, present and future. Its doctrine did not thereby profess merely the real existence of things, such as psycho-physical elements, but rather insisted quite vigorously the non-existence of the ego. But still greater emphasis was placed on the meaning of the two types of emptiness, namely, emptiness of ātman or self and emptiness of dharmas or things (psycho-physical elements). This twofold emptiness, however, is not that of nature itself, but is the emptiness of the two concepts (i.e., ātman and dharma). The twofold negation of ātman and of dharmas meant that both persons and things are without any ego or permanent individuality. And the Sarvāstivāda school taught only one kind of emptiness, i.e., that of ātman. The emptiness of ātman or the non-existence of ego is regarded as Pudgala- Śūnyatā, denying individuality.

3.3 The Concept of Śūnyatā (Emptiness) in Mādhyamika

The Mādhyamika School was founded in the second century A.D. by Nāgārjuna. The Mādhyamika is the central stage and also the turning point of Buddhism. Mādhyamika philosophy is primarily a philosophy of emptiness (śūnyatā-vāda), teaching that all things are without essence and empty, that the nature of reality is emptiness. Similar ideas about emptiness or nothingness are common in Eastern thought. Within Buddhism, this way of thinking first appeared consistently with the Prajñāpāramitā scriptures and the Mahāyāna philosophy of Nāgārjuna’s Mādhyamika. Its central theme, emptiness, was revolutionary for Buddhism. Its doctrine of the absence of essence and

the emptiness of all beings, signifies non-being. In other words, the being of all beings in emptiness is itself empty. All beings are constituted in virtue of their essence, or selfhood, but that selfhood is now proclaimed to be non-existent. The word *Madhyamika* means ‘the very middle’ or ‘the middlemost’ which proclaims the middle’, that is, either a person, a system of tenets, or treatise that propounds the middle. In the case of Nāgārjuna’s title, it refers to a treatise setting forth the middle, or middle way not in the sense of the middle path but the middle way things are; therefore, the word *Madhyamika* when used in this sense is translated as *Treatise on the Middle Way*.

Nāgārjuna’s *Treatise on the Middle Way* extensively teaches both the profound emptiness and the extensive varieties of spiritual paths, etc. His text delineates reasonings that establish an emptiness of inherent existence as the final mode of existence of all phenomena, not with one or a few but many examples and through many approaches as being studied in the following two major literatures of his many writings.

3.3.1 *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā*

An overview upon Śūnyatā of *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā* or the Middle Way of Nāgārjuna, Nāgārjuna founded the system of philosophical inquiry known as the Middle Way or *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā* which is his most famous work as regards to verses on the fundamental wisdom of the Middle Way (*Mūlamadhyamikakārikā*) consisting of the collection on reasoning.

Mūlamadhyamikakārikā is divided into twenty-seven chapters. The first chapter addresses dependent origination. While many Western

commentators assert that this chapter opens the text simply because it addresses a fundamental doctrine of Buddhism. In *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā*, Nāgārjuna begins with causation for deeper, more systematic reasons. In chapters two through twenty-three, Nāgārjuna addresses a wide of phenomena, including external perceptibles, psychological processes, relations, putative substances, and attributes, arguing that all are empty. In the final four chapters, Nāgārjuna replies to objections and generalizes the particular analyses into a broad theory concerning the nature of emptiness itself and the relation between the Two Truths, emptiness and dependent arising itself.

In his verses on the middle way, he expounds that all things are produced by causes and conditions and hence are devoid of substantiality, that is, void (*Śūnya*). As the logical method to prove this, he employed what is known as “tetralemma”, a set of four alternative propositions : 1.something is, 2.is not, 3.both is not, and 4.neither is nor is not. He negates all possible propositions regarding existence and non-existence, and clarifies that the ultimate truth lies in the Middle. Because of their universally accepted status as the unerring sources of the Middle Way system, Nāgārjuna and his heart disciple, Āryadeva (ca. third century), became known as the Middle Way Progenitors.

Since the Middle Way tradition is an expression of the Mahayana, its sole purpose is to liberate all sentient beings from suffering by means of wisdom and compassion working together. This is an essential Buddhist objective. Followers of the Middle Way do not pursue philosophical investigation for the purpose of knowledge itself, but only seek wisdom that will undermine the root of suffering. No matter how alluring a philosophical system may seem, it will merely be a conceptual

elaboration, and thus part of the problem, if it does not cut through this root. Even though freedom from conceptual elaboration is the final objective, we must rely on nothing other than our current projections, perceptions, and confusion in order to open our eyes of supreme knowledge to the true state of things. As Nāgārjuna says in Chapter XXIV Verse No. 9 in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā* as follows:

Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,
Liberation is not achieved.³⁷

The goal of Madhyamika philosophy is liberation from suffering. But that liberation on Nāgārjuna's view can only be achieved by insight into the ultimate nature of things—their emptiness—and indeed into the ultimate nature of emptiness, which we shall see to be emptiness again. But this insight can only be gained through reasoning and hence through language and thought. And the truth that is not to be grasped can only be indicated through language and thought, which are thoroughly conventional and which can only be interpreted literally at the conventional level. It is important to see here that Nāgārjuna is not disparaging the conventional by contrast to the ultimate, but is arguing that understanding the ultimate nature of things is completely dependent upon understanding conventional truth. It is true that the erroneous conventions—the appearance of things that do not exist in reality as though they do—are to be abandoned. But without relying on the mundane ultimate, including such things as expressions and that to which they refer. The knowledge and objects of knowledge, especially the

³⁷Nāgārjuna, **Wisdom of the Middle Way : Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā***, (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1995), p.298.

ultimate truth, cannot be taught; and without its being taught, it cannot be realized. Without understanding the meaning of the ultimate, Nirvāna cannot be achieved. Therefore, since it is a means for achieving liberation, just as a person who desires water looks for a vessel, one who aspires for liberation must undoubtedly at the beginning accept the conventional just as it is.

Over my investigation into Śūnyatā of Mūlamadhyamikakārikā, Śūnyatā is the heart teaching of Mūlamadhyamikakārikā that is the literature written by Nāgārjuna. Śūnyatā of Mūlamadhyamikakārikā is based on the concept of dependent origination of Thereavada as shown in the explanation of emptiness in the sense of dependent origination in Mūlamadhyamikakārikā, Chapter XXIV Verse No. 18 and 19 on the examination of view as follows:

That which is dependent origination
Is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.³⁸

There does not exist anything
That is not dependently arisen.
Therefore there does not exist anything
That is not empty.³⁹

Of the citations from Mūlamadhyamikakārikā, the emptiness of all things is explained to refer to that which is arisen in dependence on causes and conditions. The first citation refutes their being essentially

³⁸ RJE Tsong Khapa, **Ocean of Reasoning : A Great Commentary on Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā**, tr.by Geshe Ngawang Samten and Jay L. Garfield, (New York : Oxford University Press, 2006), p.503.

³⁹ Ibid., p.505.

arisen by arguing that because they have arisen from conditions, they are dependently originated and says that the very meaning of “depending on conditions” is the meaning of “empty of essential existence.” Thus things not arisen are made with the fact in mind that they are not essentially arisen. For the second citation, since there is nothing that is not dependently arisen, and since dependently originated phenomena are all empty of essential existence, there are no phenomena that are not empty of essential existence. Therefore, it means that one should take the meaning of the refutations in the above citations of things being arisen not to be that they are not arisen at all but instead to be that they are not essentially arisen.

Also Nāgārjuna regards emptiness as non-self or selflessness as stated in the examination of self and phenomena in Chapter XVIII Verse No.2, 3 and 4 in Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā* as follows:

If there were no self,
Where would the self’s (properties) be
From the pacification of the self and what belongs to it,
One abstains from grasping onto “I” and “mine”
One who does not grasp onto “I” and “mine,”
That one does not exist.
One who does not grasp onto “I” and “mine,”
He does not perceive.
When view of “I” and “mine” are extinguished,
Whether with respect to the internal or external,
The appropriator ceases.

This having ceased, birth ceases.⁴⁰

Over my investigation into the concept of Śūnyatā as supreme emptiness or Nirvāna in Mūlamadhyamikakārikā, Nāgārjuna explains in Mūlamadhyamikakārikā that Nirvāna is defined as a state one achieves when delusion and grasping cease and the achievement of Nirvāna requires dependence, impermanence and the possibility of change, all of which are grounded in emptiness. Nirvāna can only be spoken of by contrasting it in some sense with Samsāra and because there is no conventionally existent perceptible entity that could serve as a referent for the term, there is the terrible temptation when speaking of Nirvāna to think that, to the extent that one is saying anything true of it in any sense, one is literally asserting an ultimate truth about an inherently existent thing or state. One forgets that once one transcends the bounds of convention, there is no possibility of assertion. Hence Nāgārjuna defines Nirvāna and Samsāra as being of no difference as written in the in the Chapter 25 Verse No.19 on the examination of Nirvāna as follows :

Cyclic existence is not the slightest bit
Different from Nirvāna.
Nirvāna is not the slightest bit
Different from cyclic existence.⁴¹

Of the citation from the above verse regarding Nirvāna, it is obviously seen that is emphasizing that Nirvāna is not someplace else; it is a way of being here. To distinguish between Samsāra and Nirvāna would be to suppose that each had a nature and that they were different natures. But each is empty, and so there can be no inherent difference.

⁴⁰ Nāgārjuna, **Wisdom of the Middle Way : Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā**, pp.247-248.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp.520- 530.

Moreover since Nirvāna is by definition the cessation of delusion and of grasping, hence, it is by definition the recognition of the ultimate nature of things as they really are. This is simply to see conventional things as empty, not to see some separate emptiness behind them, then Nirvāna must be grounded in the conventional. To be in Samsāra is to see things as they appear to deluded consciousness and to interact with them accordingly. To be in Nirvāna, then, is to see those things as they are— as merely empty, dependent, impermanent and non-substantial, but not to be somewhere else or seeing something else. Nāgārjuna surely thinks that in Nirvāna, unlike Samsāra, one perceives emptiness and not entities; one perceives the ultimate truth and not the conventional truth. But emptiness is only emptiness of all entities, and the ultimate truth is merely the essenceless essence of those conventional things. So it is the person who enters Nirvāna, but as a state of being, not as a place to be.

Upon the analytical study of the main concept of Nāgārjuna's philosophy in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, it is generally acknowledged that chapter 24, the examination of the Four Noble Truths, is the central chapter of the text and the climax of the argument. One verse of this chapter, 18th verse, has received so much attention that the interpretation of it alone represents the foundation of major Buddhist schools:

Whatever is dependently co-arisen,
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.⁴²

⁴²Nāgārjuna, **Wisdom of the Middle Way : Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā**, tr. by Jay L. Garfield, p.304.

Here Nāgārjuna asserts the fundamental identity of (1) emptiness, or the ultimate truth; (2) the dependently originated—that is, all phenomena; and (3) verbal convention. Moreover, he asserts that understanding this relation is itself the middle-way philosophical view he articulates in *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā*.

3.3.2 Ratnāvalī or the Precious Garland

Over my investigation into Śūnyatā in Ratnāvalī, Ratnāvalī is the precluded concept of ‘emptiness’ or ‘voidness’ (Śūnyatā) in the school of Śūnyavada or Madhyamika of Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna has composed Ratnāvalī to be the main concept of Śūnyavada or Madhyamika. Śūnyavada is separated from the older school of Buddhism or Theravada as the teaching of Theravada is based on Theravadin doctrine of momentariness but that of Ratnāvalī is based on Śūnyavadin doctrine of emptiness. It seems that the concept of emptiness of Śūnyavada or Madhyamika is different from the concept of momentariness or Khanikavāda of Theravada Buddhism. But actually the concept of the two schools are the same but with different angle of seeing; both concepts are based on the same theory of Dependent Origination.

Theravada, the older school of Buddhism is grounded from the early Buddhism. the teaching of Theravada is based on Theravadin doctrine of momentariness. that means what Nāgārjuna stated about emptiness (Śūnyatā) is thus in the phenomena of momentariness. The Theravadin doctrine of momentariness testifies to a transition from an empirically oriented postulate of impermanence to momentariness or from anicca to Khanikavāda. In the canonical texts, Khanikavāda entails

that all conditioned phenomena are intrinsically momentary and subject to constant origination and destruction, corresponding to the characteristics of the conditioned; the transition from impermanence to momentariness consists of the threefold subdivision of a moment which is prefixed by the words *uppāda*, *thitl* and *bhanga*. Here the three moments of origination, endurance and dissolution do not correspond to three different entities. Rather, they represent three phases of a single momentary phenomenon and are defined as one single consciousness-moment (*ekaciltakkhana*): a dharma occurs in the first sub-moment, endures in the second sub-moment and perishes in the third one; thus a dharma is impermanent or empty (*Śūnya*). That comes the important view of the two schools in Buddhism seeing the truth as *Anattā* or *Śūnyatā*.

In *Ratnāvalī* or the Precious Garland, Nāgārjuna also taught the idea of relativity; in the *Ratnāvalī*, he gives the example that shortness exists only in relation to the idea of length. The determination of a thing or object is only possible in relation to other things or objects, especially by way of contrast. He held that the relationship between the ideas of "short" and "long" is not due to intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). This idea of relativity is expressed similarly: "That which is the element of light ... is seen to exist on account of (in relation to) darkness; that which is the element of good is seen to exist on account of bad; that which is the element of space is seen to exist on account of form."⁴³ This idea of relativity is expressed in *Ratnāvalī* on the Verse no.48 as follows:

When this is, that arises,
Like short when there is long.
Due to the production of this, that is produced,

⁴³ David Kalupahana, **Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism**. (Hawaii : The University Press of Hawaii, 1975), pp. 96-97.

Like light from the production of a flame.⁴⁴

Since the mental and physical aggregates are the basis of designation of the person, the misconception of them as existing from their own side serves as a basis for considering the person designated in dependence upon them to exist from his/her own side. Nāgārjuna has his view in Ratnāvalī or the Precious Garland regarding ‘self’ as saying, “As long as one has conception of the aggregates (as inherently existent), so long does one have conception of the ‘I’ (as inherently existent).⁴⁵ Also Nāgārjuna explains how the abandon of ‘self’ could be achieved with clear knowing of reality as expressed in Ratnāvalī from the Verse no.30 - 33 as follows:

Having seen thus the aggregates as untrue,
The conception of I is abandoned,
And due to abandoning the conception of I
The aggregates arise no more. (Verse No.30)⁴⁶
Just as it is said
That an image of one's face is seen
Depending on a mirror
But does not really exist (as a face),(Verse No. 31)⁴⁷
So the conception of I exists
Dependent on the aggregates,
But like the image of one's face

⁴⁴ Nāgārjuna, **Nāgārjuna's Precious Garland**, tr. and ed. By Jeffrey Hopkins, (Ithaca, New York, Boulder, Colorado : Snow Lion Publications, 2007), p.100.

⁴⁵ Dalai Lama, **The Dalai Lama at Harvard: Lectures on the Buddhist Path to Peace**, edited by Jeffrey Hopkins, (New York : Snow Lion Publications, 1988), p.175.

⁴⁶ Nāgārjuna, **Nāgārjuna's Precious Garland**, tr. and ed. By Jeffrey Hopkins, p.97.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.97-98.

The I does not at all really exist.(Verse No. 32)⁴⁸

Just as without depending on a mirror

The image of one's face is not seen,

So too the conception of I does not exist

Without depending on the aggregates. (Verse No.33)⁴⁹

Based on Theravadin doctrine of momentaries in Theravada Buddhism, the concept of 'emptiness' or 'voidness' (Śūnyatā) in the view of Nāgārjuna is principally not different from Theravada Buddhism. That means it is empty because it is just a phenomenon of momentariness due to the reality of Dependent Origination. On the concept of momentariness, Nāgārjuna has expressed the concept in Ratnāvalī from the Verse no.66 - 68 as follows:

If always changing,

How are things non-momentary?

If not changing,

How can they be altered in fact?(Verse No.66)⁵⁰

Do they become momentary?

Through partial or complete disintegration?

Because an inequality is not apprehended,

This momentariness cannot be admitted either way.(Verse No.67)⁵¹

If momentary, then it becomes entirely non-existent;

Hence how could it be old?

Also if non-momentary, it is constant;

Hence how could it be old? (Verse No.68)⁵²

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.98.

⁴⁹ Op. cit.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.103.

⁵¹ Op. cit.

Regarding the world and Nirvāna, Nāgārjuna explains the concept of Śūnyatā based on the philosophy that Nirvāna (supreme emptiness) and the world have no difference. The concept regarding the world and Nirvāna of Nāgārjuna is shown in Ratnāvalī from the verse no.64 - 65 as follows:

Because the coming, going, and staying
Of the world and Nirvāna do not exist
As (their own) reality, what difference
Is there in fact between the two? (Verse No. 64)⁵³
If, due to the non-existence of staying,
Production and cessation do not exist as (their own) reality,
How could production, staying,
And ceasing exist in fact? (Verse No. 65)⁵⁴

This means that Nirvāna can be found in the world or samsāra that is all the Four Noble Truths can be found within the five aggregates, i.e., form or matter, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. Or, in short, the samsāra and Niravāna (Nirvāna) can be found within the five aggregates, i.e., within one's own personality. Thus, the mind-body-complex (nāmā-rūpa), or the five aggregates are the ground from which one can find out both Niravāna (Nirvāna) and samsāra, even now and here. That is to say, when the wisdom is developed, one sees the secret of life; one sees mind-body-complex as it

⁵² Op. cit.

⁵³ Ibid., p.102.

⁵⁴ Op. cit.

is, i.e., the arising and the cessation of suffering, as it is said: “Whatever is of the nature of arising, all that is of the nature of cessation?”⁵⁵

According to Theravada Buddhism, it is stated in some Suttas of Majjhima-nikāya, about the realization of Niravāna (Nirvāna) as sayings:

Buddha declares rūpa, vedanā, etc., to be illusory. In the Majjhima Nikāya, it is stated: “Depending on the oil and the wick does the light of the lamp burn; it is neither in the one nor in the other, nor anything in itself; phenomena are, likewise, nothing in themselves. All things are unreal; they are deceptions; Niravāna (Nirvāna) is the only truth.” Basing himself on this text Nagārajuna says: “In declaring that it is deceptive and illusory, the Lord means Śūnyatā-dependence of things.”⁵⁶

But in Madhyamika system, it is found to refer to the non-difference or non distinction between Nirvāna and Saṃsāra, i.e., Nirvāna and Saṃsāra are the same element or the same thing. The difference between them is only our way of looking at them, as it is said:

“There is no difference whatever between Niravāna and Saṃsāra. Noumenon and Phenomena are not two separate sets of entitles, nor are they two states of the same things.”⁵⁷

This view also seems to have developed out of the idea found in the original Pāli text and as stated earlier the Buddha said, “he who sees the ceasing of dukkha also sees the dukkha”.⁵⁸

Upon an analytical study above, we can clearly see that the philosophy of Ratnāvalī regarding ‘emptiness’ or ‘voidness’ (Śūnyatā) is

⁵⁵ T.R.V. Mutri, **The Central Philosophy of Buddhism**, (London : George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1960), p. 34.

⁵⁶ M.i. p.479, M.iii. p.1 ff. (P.T.S.).

⁵⁷ T.R.V. Mutri, **The Central Philosophy of Buddhism**, p. 274.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

not different from that of Theravada Buddhism. As both philosophies use the same theory of Dependent Origination or the ‘Middle Way’ to explain the world and all phenomena. Anyhow both philosophies interpreting Nirvāna from different angles, as mentioned above the concept of Nirvāna in the view of Nāgārjuna has no difference from Saṃsāra.

Upon investigation into the concept of Śūnyatā in Mādhyamika, while the Sarvāstivāda logic of dharma attempts to explain logically the transiency of all things, the Mādhyamika theories of emptiness (śūnyatā) and absence of self-nature (niḥsvabhāva) are clearly intended to refute or go beyond the Sarvāstivādin concept of dharma by applying the eight negations of non-birth, non-extinction, non-cessation, non-permanence, non-uniformity, non-diversity, non-coming, and non-going which sweeps us at once to the heart of Nāgārjuna’s thought, is that the word “eight” is not intended to be limiting. The meaning is not “eight negations, no more and no less,” but rather “numerous negations” or even “infinite negations.” It is through this process of negation of every possible concept that one arrives at an understanding of the śūnyatā or “emptiness” that is the core of Mādhyamika philosophy of the Middle Doctrine. And all the negations will lead to both the egolessness of the individual (Pudgala- Śūnyatā) and also the unsubstantiality and emptiness of all phenomena (sarvadharmasūnyatā).

3.4 Conclusion

Over the investigation into the concept of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in early Buddhism, emptiness is the principal topic of two Pāli texts, titled “Discourse on Small Emptiness” (Cūḷa-Suññatā Sutta) and “Discourse on

Great Emptiness” (Mahā-Suññatā Sutta) in Majjhima-Nikāya which could be defined into three contexts as meditative dwelling, the lack of ‘self’ or Anattā, and awareness release.

Emptiness in the context of ‘Suññata-vihāra’ or ‘the abiding in Voidness’ means the ability to center the mind in a particular mode of perception, to maintain it there, and then to notice the absence and presence of disturbance within that mode. It also has a wider meaning, embracing Jhāna, Samādhi, Vipassanā and even Nibbāna, the final goal of the religious life. In Buddhist teaching, therefore, the term ‘Suññata-vihāra’ should be understood as the abiding state of him who has succeeded in the religious training and enjoyed its fruits. The abiding in Voidness’ is ‘superior and unsurpassed’, and is apparently what the Buddha is referring to in this Sutta when he says that by "not attending to any themes, he enters & remains in internal emptiness." The abiding in voidness in the highest sense signifies the abiding states of the great man, ie. Buddhas, Pacceka-Buddhas and Arahants,

Emptiness in the context of the lack of ‘self’ or Anattā refers to the emptiness of ‘self’ or things pertaining to ‘self’ both in the internal and external sense media. Whatever sense of ‘self’ that may surround these objects is not inherent in them, and is instead simply the result of one’s own penchant for ‘I-making’ and ‘my-making’. Seeing the artificiality of ‘I-making’ and ‘my-making’ in this way helps lead to a sense of disenchantment with these ‘makings’, thus helping to abandon any clinging associated with them. Thus emptiness in this sense relates directly to the third of the three characteristics, ie. Anattā or non-self.

Emptiness in the context of awareness-release or full awareness is the awareness-release by method of contemplation upon the internal-

external voidness with full awareness which can keep one always awakened or fully aware of what one is doing, thus no unwholesome states of covetousness and grief do invade. As discussed in Majjhima Nikāya which describes this state of awareness-release or full awareness as follows, "there is the case where a monk — having gone into the wilderness, to the root of a tree, or into an empty dwelling — considers this : This is empty of self or of anything pertaining to self." Also the method for the development of full awareness is the contemplation upon the internal-external voidness with synthetical aspect upon both sense-subject and sense-object which is applied by breaking down wrong differentiations between them as self-possessed entities. Thus it will lead to the non-existence of ego or the emptiness of self or Pudgala- Śūnyatā, so unwholesome states of covetousness and grief do not invade.

Over the investigation into the concept of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Sarvāstivāda, Sarvāstivāda, as its name implies "sarvam asti" i.e. "All is" or "All exists", stood for the principle of "All existing" in the three periods of time, ie. past, present and future. Its doctrine did not thereby profess merely the real existence of things, such as psycho-physical elements, but rather insisted quite vigorously the non-existence of the ego. But still greater emphasis was placed on the meaning of the two types of emptiness, namely, emptiness of ātman or self and emptiness of dharmas or things (psycho-physical elements). This twofold emptiness, however, is not that of nature itself, but is the emptiness of the two concepts (i.e., ātman and dharma). The twofold negation of ātman and of dharmas meant that both persons and things are without any ego or permanent individuality. And the Sarvāstivāda school taught only one kind of emptiness, i.e., that of ātman. The emptiness of ātman or the non-

existence of ego is regarded as Pudgala- Śūnyatā, denying individuality. According to Sarvāstivāda school, the past and the future are real because the present has its root in the past and its consequence in the future. Besides, it holds that the three periods of time ought to exist separately, because the notions of past and future would not occur in us without separate realities. The reality of the three periods of time, however, does not mean that the three periods themselves are eternally extant, nor does it mean that time is a real substance. It means that all things or elements are real in the past and in the future as they are in the present—but without enduring from one period to another.

Over the investigation into the concept of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Mādhyamika, Mādhyamika is a philosophy of the middle way between two impossible extremes. The middle way is not in the sense of the middle path but the middle way things are. Therefore, the word Mādhyamika when used in this sense is translated as Treatise on the Middle Way. Of his many writings, the two major literatures of Nāgārjuna, Mūlamadhyamakakārikā and Ratnāvalī are studied in this thematic papers of which the concept of emptiness based on the theory of dependent-arising and the two truths are concerned.

For Śūnyatā (emptiness) being related to dependent-arising (pratītyasamutpāda), all phenomena, both impermanent and permanent, are depending on dependent-arising (pratītyasamutpāda). Through the reason of their being dependent-arising, their emptiness is established.

For Śūnyatā (emptiness) being related to the two truth, conventional and ultimate truth, Nāgārjuna clearly explains that understanding the ultimate nature of things is completely dependent upon understanding conventional truth. Thus insight can only be gained

through reasoning and hence through language and thought. And the truth that is not to be grasped can only be indicated through language and thought, which are thoroughly conventional and which can only be interpreted literally at the conventional level.

Upon the concept of *Sūnyatā* (emptiness) in *Mādhyamika* Philosophy, various meanings of emptiness are exemplified in the successive stages of *Mādhyamika* negation. On the first level, emptiness means that commonsense things, which appear to be real, are not really real. On the second level, emptiness is employed to revoke dualistic thinking. The term ‘empty’ means that both naive realism and nihilism are unintelligible and their descriptions of the world should be discarded. Here the doctrine of emptiness is expressed as the denial of both being and non-being. On the third level emptiness implies that monistic as well as dualistic and pluralistic views of the world are untenable. It is the negation of conceptualization, stated as a denial of both duality and non-duality, thus leading to both the egolessness of the individual (*Pudgala-Śūnyatā*) and also the unsubstantiality and emptiness of all phenomena (*sarvadharmasūnyatā*). At this stage, one is supposed to be free from all attachments. In summary, the term *Sūnyatā* (emptiness) in *Mādhyamika* is mainly a soteriological device, a tool of *nirvāṇa*. Psychologically, emptiness is detachment. The teaching of emptiness is to empty the mind from cravings. Morally, this negation has a positive effect, namely, preventing one from doing evils and making one love oneself and others. Epistemologically, emptiness is an unattached insight that truths are not absolutely true. It teaches that discursive knowledge does not provide true wisdom and that enlightenment is the abandonment of conceptual thinking.