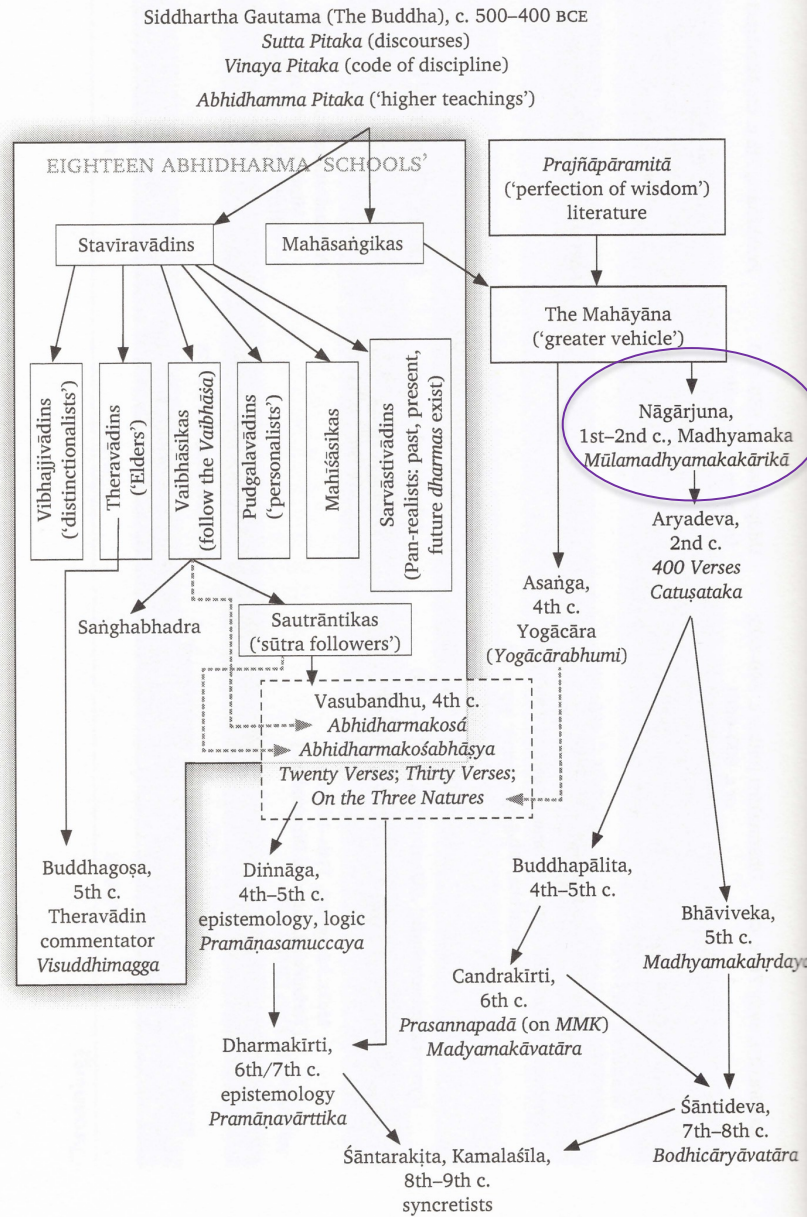


# Comparative Conceptions of the Self

## Evan Thompson

Lecture 7

## Development of Buddhist thought in India

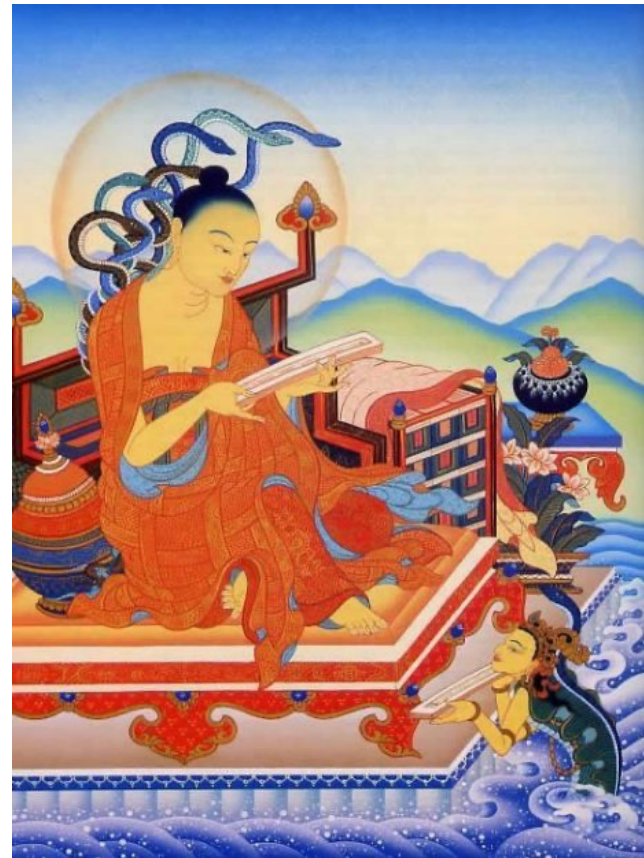


# Nāgārjuna (ca. 150-250 CE)

First named Buddhist philosopher after the Buddha, and one of the most influential of all Indian philosophers.

Philosophy of the “middle way” (*madhyamaka*) and “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) influenced Indian philosophy up to the decline of Buddhism in India (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries).

Had a huge influence on the formation of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy.



# Nāgārjuna's central concept

The **emptiness** (*śūnyatā*) of intrinsic nature.

The concept of emptiness is central to the *Prajñapāramitā* literature.

The concept of intrinsic nature is central to the Abhidharma philosophy (it defines what is ultimately real).

Using *reductio ad absurdum* (*prāsaṅga*) arguments, Nāgārjuna aims to show that there cannot be things with intrinsic nature, hence there cannot be ultimately real things, hence there cannot be dharmas in the Abhidharma sense.

# Abhidharma

To exist with an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) means to be part of the basic furniture of the world, independent of anything else.

Dharmas (momentary quality-particulars) are the only things that exist in this way (i.e., are ultimately real).

They are the absolute ontological foundation—the end-point in the chain of ontological dependence relations.

# Madhyamaka

There is no such end-point—no ultimately real foundation.

Everything is “empty” of intrinsic nature (inherent being).

Upon analysis, nothing exists with intrinsic nature, so nothing is ultimately real.

Everything is “conventional” all the way down.

# Madhyamaka

Non-essentialism: phenomena are empty of an essence/intrinsic nature.

Non-foundationalism: phenomena are empty of an inherently existent foundation or ground.

## Soteriological import

*Svabhāva* is not just a theoretical posit; it's how we habitually take things to be; it's our cognitive default mode of experience.

We superimpose onto our self and the outer world the delusion that things have intrinsic nature (inherent being).

This delusion is our fundamental ignorance and deep-seated cause of dissatisfaction/suffering (*dukkha/duḥkha*).

Awakening is the direct experiential realization of emptiness (*śūnyatā*).



## Arguments against svabhāva

Nāgārjuna doesn't give one "master argument" for the absence of intrinsic nature (inherent being).

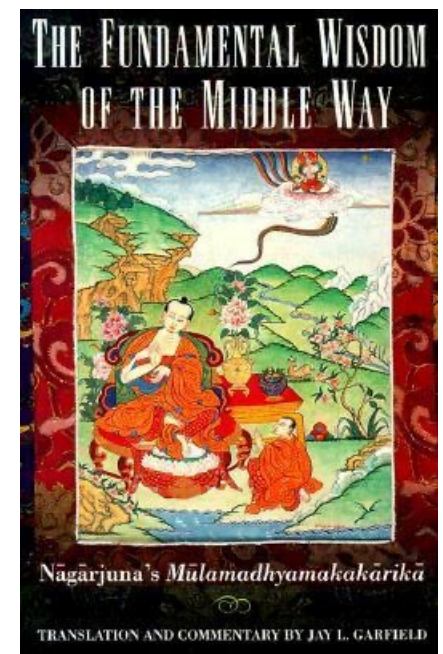
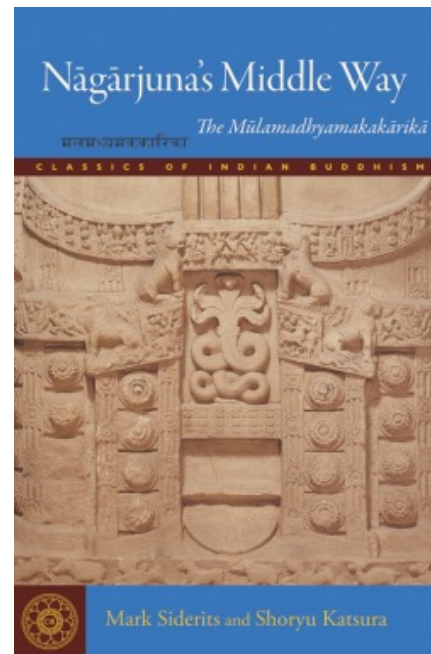
Instead, he examines a variety of claims made by those who take there to be ultimately real entities.

His strategy is to show that each of these claims cannot be true.

He does this by purely negative arguments that purport to show that any such claim leads to absurd consequences.

# Arguments against svabhāva

The text of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* comprises 27 chapters, each of which examines a distinct topic and shows via negative argument that it cannot be ultimately real.



## *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. Conditions.                                  | 15. Intrinsic nature/essence.                    |
| 2. Motion.                                      | 16. Bondage and liberation.                      |
| 3. The senses.                                  | 17. Actions and their fruits.                    |
| 4. The aggregates.                              | 18. The self.                                    |
| 5. The elements.                                | 19. Time.  |
| 6. Desire and the one who desires.              | 20. Assemblage/combination.                      |
| 7. The conditioned.                             | 21. Arising and dissolution (of existents).      |
| 8. Agent and action.                            | 22. The Tathāgata.                               |
| 9. What is prior.                               | 23. False conception/errors.                     |
| 10. Fire and fuel.                              | 24. The Four Noble Truths.                       |
| 11. The prior and posterior parts (of saṃsāra). | 25. Nirvāṇa.                                     |
| 12. Suffering.                                  | 26. The twelve links (of dependent origination). |
| 13. The Composite.                              | 27. Views.                                       |
| 14. Conjunction/Connection.                     |  |

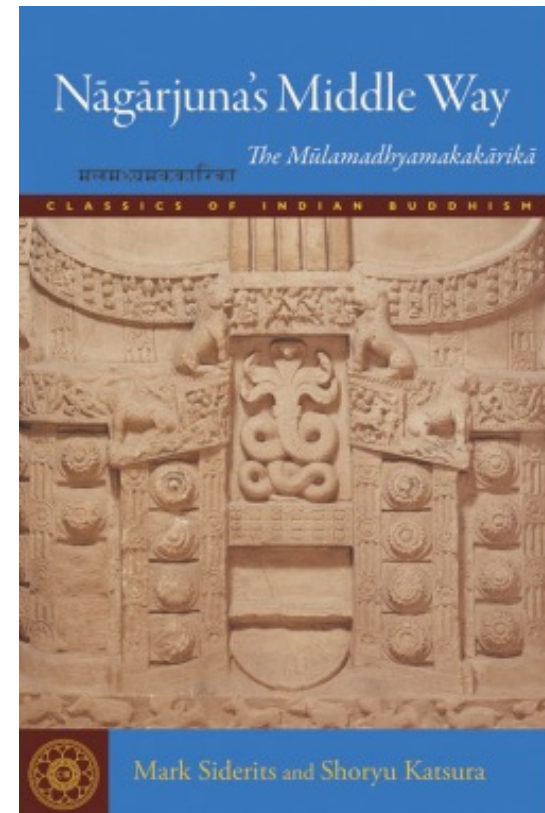
## Arguments against svabhāva

Nevertheless, we can single out one crucial line of reasoning.

It targets the incompatibility between *svabhāva* and dependent origination.

## *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24: 18-19

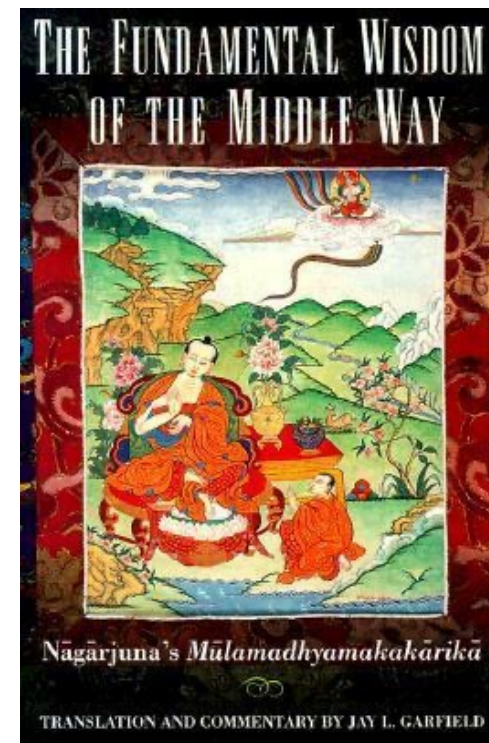
18. Dependent origination we declare to be emptiness. It [emptiness] is a dependent concept; just that is the middle path.
19. There being no dharma whatsoever that is not dependently originated, it follows that there is also no dharma whatsoever that is non-empty.
- Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*, pp. 277-288.



## *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24: 18-19

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

Something that is not dependently arisen,  
Such a thing does not exist.  
Therefore, a nonempty thing  
Does not exist.



# Comparison with Abhidharma

## **Abhidharma**

Whatever has parts depends upon them for its existence, and depends upon our conceiving this “many” as a “one” for its unity, and therefore does not exist ultimately, but only (at best) conventionally.

## **Nāgārjuna**

Anything dependent on another for its existence does not have any independent being or nature or identity of its own.

# Nāgārjuna's principle is stronger than the Abhidharma one

## Abhidharma

For Abhidharma, although a dharma (e.g., “seeing-blue-consciousness”) depends on other dharmas (the contact dharma, the dharmas making upon the organ of sight, etc.) for its *occurrence*, it doesn't require anything else for its *being* that dharma. It has its nature or being intrinsically.

## Nāgārjuna

The causal dependence of the dharma is taken to imply that it cannot have any intrinsic being or nature.

It follows that no conditioned dharma can have an intrinsic nature, hence there can be no conditioned dharmas in the Abhidharma sense (no momentary quality-particulars with their own intrinsic nature).



# Questions

What justifies Nāgārjuna's stronger principle?

Why should an Abhidharma philosopher (or any philosopher) accept it?

## The task

Nāgārjuna needs to show that any kind of causal dependency impugns the intrinsic nature of a dharma in just the way that the conceptual dependency of complex wholes (e.g., a chariot) impugns their ultimate reality.

Nāgārjuna does this by showing that causal dependency is itself a conceptual construction, and hence that causal dependence implies conceptual dependence.

## The task

This is exactly what Nāgārjuna announces in the first verse of the MMK:

# Arguments against svabhāva: causation

MMK 1:1:

Not from itself, not from another, not from both, nor without cause:

Never in any way is there any existing thing that has arisen.

[Siderits & Katsura]

Neither from itself nor from another,

Nor from both,

Nor without a cause,

Does anything whatever, anywhere arise.

[Garfield]

## Arguments against svabhāva

Assumption: (the entity that is the) cause and (the entity that is the) effect have an intrinsic nature (each is intrinsically real).

Given this assumption, there are four possibilities: things can be produced:

1. from themselves, or
2. from other things, or
3. from both themselves and other things, or
4. from neither.

# Arguments against svabhāva

## 1. From themselves (self-causation):

Suppose that cause and effect are the same object. E.g., the pot one second ago is the cause of the present pot.

- But causes precede their effects and no entity can be temporally prior to itself.
- If we say that the past time slice of the rock causes the present time slice, then we are treating the time slices as different temporal parts, which means that cause and effect are no longer the same.

# Arguments against svabhāva

## 1. From themselves (self-causation):

Suppose the effect is contained in the cause (or in the causal field of the cause and all the necessary background conditions).

- But this entails that when the cause is present, the effect is too, contrary to our usual assumption that the cause brings about the effect at a later time.
- Also, what would be the point of production if the effect is already contained in the cause?
- Also, if we investigate the constituents of the causal field (e.g., gas, oxygen, spark) we do not find the effect (the explosion).

# Arguments against svabhāva

## 2. From other things:

But the effect **depends existentially** on the cause (if the cause did not exist, the effect would not exist), and the cause **depends notionally** on the effect (if there was no effect, the cause would not qualify as a “cause”).

If there were two entities that were ultimately real, they could not be connected by a dependence relation, so they could not be related as cause and effect.



## “Argument of the three times”

MKK 1: 5-6:

5. They are said to be conditions when something arises dependent on them. When something has not originated, why then are they not non-conditions?
6. Something cannot be called a condition whether the object [that is the supposed effect] is not yet existent or already existent.

## “Argument of the three times”

Hypothesis to be refuted: the effect arises distinct from the causes and conditions (*asatkāryavāda*).

## “Argument of the three times”

Question: when does the production of the effect take place?

Not after the effect has come into existence, since then production would be superfluous.

Not before, because a productive cause must produce something, and when the effect does not exist, it is nothing.

There is no third time between the time before the effect exists and the time when it does exist.

## “Argument of the three times”

Question: when does the production of the effect take place?

But why can't we say the cause produces the effect during the time the effect is coming into existence?

Because this requires there to be a time when the effect is neither existent nor non-existent, and this is impossible for something that is supposed to be ultimately real (to have an intrinsic nature), and we are supposing that the cause and effect are intrinsically real.

## Arguments against svabhāva

### 3. From both themselves and other things:

As the conjunction of (1) and (2), it suffers from the same problems as they do.

## Arguments against svabhāva

### 4. From neither:

This possibility undermines the very idea of causality, because it implies that anything comes from anything else.

# Upshot

It follows that the relation of causation or production must be conceptually constructed:

- Thinking in causal terms requires drawing together distinct things—the “cause” and the “effect”—and thinking them as “one” while at the same time keeping them distinct.
- But thinking of something multiple as “one” in this way is, by the Abhidharma’s own criterion, conceptually constructed.

Causation is something we impute upon observing a regular succession of events; it is conventionally but not ultimately real.

## Upshot

So causal dependence implies conceptual dependence, which implies the absence of an intrinsic nature (a nature independent of conceptual construction).

Hence dependent origination implies emptiness:



## *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 24: 18-19*

18. Dependent origination we declare to be emptiness. It [emptiness] is a dependent concept; just that is the middle path.

19. There being no dharma whatsoever that is not dependently originated, it follows that there is also no dharma whatsoever that is non-empty.

-- Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*, pp. 277-288.

# Implications

To say that all dharmas are empty implies that there is no ultimately reality—that upon analysis, nothing meets the criterion of having an intrinsic nature, and therefore of being ultimately real.

Put another way, the only reality is conventional reality.

This includes emptiness too—it is not ultimately real; it is the absence of ultimately reality, which is to say it is only conventionally existent.

# Implications

In other words, emptiness and the phenomenal world are not two different things (as the phenomenal world and dharmas were assumed to be in Abhidharma).

They are two characterizations of the same thing.

# Implications

Ultimately, there is no such (ultimately real) state as saṃsāra.

For in order for saṃsāra to be something about which ultimately true claims could be made, there would have to be ultimately real mental forces that produce it.

But if all things are empty, there are no ultimately real mental forces.

So one can't say that ultimately saṃsāra exists, which means that nirvāṇa can't be ultimately real either.

## *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 25: 19-20

19. There is no distinction whatsoever between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. There is no distinction whatsoever between nirvāṇa and saṃsāra.

20. What is the limit of nirvāṇa, that is the limit of saṃsāra. There is not even the finest gap to be found between the two.

-- Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*, p. 302.

## Nirvāṇa and saṃsāra

Conventionally, there is a difference between nirvāṇa and saṃsāra, and it is conventionally true that we should seek the former and bring about the cessation of the latter.

But ultimately there is not the slightest difference between them.

“To distinguish between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa 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. Moreover, since nirvāṇa is by definition the cessation of delusion and of grasping and, hence, of the reification of self and other and of confusing imputed phenomena for inherently real phenomena, it is by definition the recognition of the ultimate nature of things. But if, as Nāgārjuna argued... this is simply to see conventional things as empty, not to see some separate emptiness behind them, then nirvāṇa must be ontologically grounded in the conventional. To be in saṃsāra is to see things as they appear to deluded consciousness and to interact with them accordingly. To be in nirvāṇa, then, is to see those things as they are—as merely empty, dependent, impermanent, and nonsubstantial, but not to be somewhere else, seeing something else... So nirvāṇa is only saṃsāra as a buddha experiences it. It is the person who enters nirvāṇa, but as a state of being, not as a place to be.” – Jay Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, pp. 331-333.

