

“Skepticism” in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism: Nāgārjuna

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History & Context

- People, schools, & traditions:
 - Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka (“Middle Way”).
 - Buddhist Abhidharma.
 - Hindu schools: Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, (Advaita) Vedānta.
- Nāgārjuna’s works:
 - “The Root Verses on the Middle Way” (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, MMK).
 - “The Dispeller of Disputes” (*Vigrahavyāvartanī*, VV).
 - “The Precious Garland” (or, “Letter to a King,” *Ratnāvalī*).
 - And many, many more.
- Nāgārjuna’s reception (in India, Tibet, and the modern West).

Emptiness & Svabhāva

- Vocabulary:
 - *Bhāva* – being.
 - *Svabhāva* – literally, “own-being.” Also: essence, intrinsic nature, etc.
 - Emptiness.
 - Conventional & ultimate.
- Emptiness and the self (*ātman*).
- The dependence of (all) other phenomena:
 1. Mereological (wholes depend on parts).
 2. Causal.
 3. Conceptual/Essential.
- Emptiness is not the same as non-existence.
- Fixation on svabhāva, as (a) source of suffering/anxiety.

Nāgārjuna's Strategies & Methods

- An argumentative toolkit.
 - No grand unifying theory (despite what we've said earlier today).
 - No single “master argument” for universal emptiness.
- The tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭi*).
 - Four options:
 - A.
 - Not-A.
 - Both A and not-A.
 - Neither A nor not-A.
 - Technique: Find a way to reject (or negate) all four options.
 - Two kinds of negation:
 - Implicative: negating a term, and implying some other term.
 - Non-implicative: negating a proposition, without implying anything else.
- An example: Is an effect produced ... ?
 - ... from itself?
 - ... from something else?
 - ... from both itself and something else?
 - ... from neither itself nor something else (i.e., without any cause at all)?
- Another example: What is the temporal relation of cause and effect? Are they ... ?
 - ... successive (one after the other)?
 - ... simultaneous?
 - ... both successive and simultaneous (overlapping in some way)?
 - ... neither successive nor simultaneous (two aspects of a single event, not distinct at all)?

Reflection & Evaluation

- How to classify Nāgārjuna's position(s)?
 - Nihilism?
 - Monism? (compare/contrast with Advaita Vedānta).
 - Skepticism?
 - Something else?
- Is Nāgārjuna's standard too high? Is a lower standard defensible?
- Distinguish the experience of emptiness, from the philosophical techniques for achieving it.



Readings & Resources

The best place to start reading is with Nāgārjuna’s masterwork, the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. Since the text itself is written in somewhat cryptic verse, it’s essential to have a translation which also includes a clear and careful commentary. There are a variety of options, but my personal favorite is:

- *Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. Translated by Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura. Wisdom Publications, 2013.

The translators begin each chapter by providing a helpful outline, which will help you find your way through the twists and turns of the argument. They also draw upon traditional Indian commentaries, to help clarify the more challenging passages.

Another very well-known scholarly translation of the same text is:

- *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. Translated by Jay Garfield. Oxford University Press, 1995.

This groundbreaking work has been highly influential, and was a major factor in advancing the study of the Madhyamaka in the English-speaking world. It’s also (and Nāgārjuna himself would be delighted by this!) very much a product of its time: Garfield is a bit self-conscious, often trying to justify the philosophical merit of Nāgārjuna’s work to western scholars, by way of comparisons to Ludwig Wittgenstein and other western philosophers.

In terms of their approach, Siderits and Katsura are focused on Nāgārjuna’s work in its Indian context, and they translate directly from the original Sanskrit text. Garfield, on the other hand, is situated squarely within the Tibetan tradition: he translates not from the original Sanskrit, but from the classical Tibetan translation of Nāgārjuna’s text, and his commentary clearly shows the influence of that Tibetan lineage. Neither approach is “bad” or “wrong,” but they can be quite different.

The *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* is focused particularly on metaphysical issues, including causality, motion, parts and wholes, and the nature of emptiness itself. For another side of Nāgārjuna’s thought, focused on epistemological questions (concerning knowledge, and the processes by which knowledge is produced), the place to go is:

- *The Dispeller of Disputes: Nāgārjuna’s Vigrahavyāvartanī*. Translated by Jan Westerhoff. Oxford University Press, 2010.

All three of these books are available in relatively inexpensive physical and e-book versions. They are also held by quite a lot of libraries, so your local public library can probably get them for you via interlibrary loan.

Finally, for an audio overview of Nāgārjuna’s life and work, the three episodes on Peter Adamson’s *History of Philosophy in India* podcast are pretty good. In my view, they repeat some common misunderstandings about his opponents’ theory of knowledge—though part of that may come from Nāgārjuna himself being inaccurate or unfair to those opponents. Regardless, they’re quite satisfactory when it comes to understanding Nāgārjuna’s own general approach to philosophy.

- [Episode 44: It All Depends: Nāgārjuna on Emptiness](#)
- [Episode 45: Motion Denied: Nāgārjuna on Change](#)
- [Episode 46: No Four Ways About It: Nāgārjuna’s Tetralemma](#)

Supplement: Other Resources Mentioned During the Workshop

A few other books and resources were mentioned during the course of the workshop.

In responding to a question about the various senses of “being” and “existence,” I mentioned:

- Wilhelm Halbfass, *On Being and What There Is: Classical Vaiśeṣika and the History of Indian Ontology*. SUNY Press, 1992.

This is a sweeping scholarly study of the question of being in classical India, focused particularly on one of the Hindu schools, the Vaiśeṣika, who were among Nāgārjuna’s opponents. It’s a demanding read, for those really motivated to explore the issue, and not really intended as a first introduction for a general audience.

A better way into the basic question of the different words for “being” and “to exist” in Sanskrit is actually the entry in the online [Oxford English Dictionary](#) for the English verb *be*. Click to expand the etymology section, and you’ll be treated to an incredibly detailed essay, which makes careful reference to the different Sanskrit verbs. Access is available through many libraries; contact your local library for specific instructions.

And keep an eye out for future classes and workshops on Indian philosophy, where we may have the chance to explore the different ways Indian philosophers classify reality and non-existent objects.

In response to a question about the diffusion of philosophical ideas between India and the Mediterranean, we mentioned:

- Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies*. Allworth, 2001.

As I said during the workshop, this is a thoughtful and provocative work, which makes some bold claims for both philosophical parallels and historical channels of diffusion between Greek and Indian philosophies. In my estimation, McEvilley’s training as an art historian often leads him to look for historical diffusion where it’s not necessary, and where the evidence is simply lacking; quite often, the parallels he offers could be explained just as well by internal developments within a single tradition (responding to obvious objections, working out the implications of established assumptions, etc.). But that does not diminish the value of McEvilley’s philosophical comparisons: regardless of how much these historical figures knew about each other’s work, we can benefit from approaching different systematic traditions side by side, allowing each to illuminate the others.