

Nagarjuna & the Madyamika School of Early Mahayana Buddhism

Dominant Notion: **sunyata** [=empty of “own”-being/i.e., no essence]

Sunyata means:

- (1) Nothing exists in and of itself (i.e., existence is not inherent in any phenomenon)
- (2) Nothing exists independently of causes and conditions, i.e., nothing is eternal, existing causelessly.

This is demonstrated in a variety of ways:

- (1) Denial of Essences: Nothing is eternal. There is no solid, universal and eternal substance to anything. There is no essential “tableness” to a table, nor is there an essential “x-ness” to any phenomenon “x” in the universe.
- (2) Critique of language & concepts:
 - (a) The words that we apply to things are imputed to them by us. They do not inhere in the phenomena themselves. For example, a table is only a “table” only to English-speakers, not to speakers of other languages, nor to beings that do not use language.
 - (b) Even non-verbal concepts do not inhere in things. Animals that do not use language still discriminate food from non-food, for example, by that does not mean that the things they find in the world are “food” in and of themselves, only in relation to beings who can eat them (e.g., bugs are food to lizards but not humans).

This denial of essential substance and this critique of language and concepts applies to concrete objects in the world and also to abstract concepts such as “justice,” “beauty,” or even “emptiness” itself.

This merciless critique of things has two beneficial effects:

- (1) It overcomes ignorance by seeing the true, contingent nature of all things.
- (2) It overcomes *tanha* (grasping/craving/desire) because it changes the way beings look at things, seeing them as essenceless and having a reality apart from our languages and concepts loosens our desire for them.

This is the Middle Way because it steers a middle course between the two extreme views of **nihilism** (=thinking that nothing exists in any sense) and **eternalism** (=asserting that there are things in this world that are not contingent upon causes and conditions).

The Two Truths express this Middle Way by allowing things a valid existence (because they arise and produce real effects in the world) while preventing a too-real or too-substantial view of them:

- (1) **Conventional Truth** affirms that there is a valid place for imputing language and concepts upon things. If we could not make a valid distinction between food and non-food, we wouldn't last very long in the world.
- (2) **Ultimate Truth** prevents one from mistaking the imputations of Conventional Truth as the way things really are. **Even though I can validly say that something is food, Ultimate Truth clues me that it is food for me**, for a being with my biological makeup and cultural upbringing. Nothing can be "food" in and of itself for all beings at all times. It can only be food for those beings that can eat it. **Thus, its "food-ness" is not part of its essence, but is contingent on the causes that produced it and the conditions of other beings that regard it as food.**