

Article

The Core Idea, Theoretical Doubts, and Re-Understanding of the Theory of Śūnyatā in Madhyamaka Philosophy

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Abstract: With the introduction of the theory of śūnyatā (emptiness 空) in Madhyamaka philosophy from India to China, Indian Buddhism and Chinese culture have achieved a historic new convergence in their understanding of emptiness. After several evolutions of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy, some people agree with it, while some question it, and the discussion around it has been very complicated. Determining how to fully understand and scientifically conceive of the core idea of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy and its contemporary value have become important issues in related research. Most of the existing research focuses on the theoretical interpretation of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy, but understanding and research from the perspective of life practices are still quite scanty, hindering the attainment of a comprehensive understanding and objective cognition of this theory's actual value. The purpose of this paper is to strengthen the practical research on the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy in order to fully understand and scientifically conceptualize its core ideas and contemporary value. From the two basic perspectives of past and present, in regard to both theory and practice, we will re-explore the core ideas of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy and investigate and analyze corresponding theoretical doubts. We further reveal that the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy is not only a metaphysical philosophical theory in which the nature of the world is regarded as empty and its logic as consistent but also a practical piece of wisdom that views the world as empty so as to eliminate all kinds of life troubles and help people attain a better life experience. The dialectical wisdom of both the theory and practice of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy gives it very broad theoretical potential and practical prospects, making it worthy of in-depth study by relevant researchers.



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1. Introduction

Revealing the nature of the world in order to help people attain a better life experience is one of the most important questions of any study. There are two basic positions in the common theoretical answers to this question: One is to regard the nature of the world as “being 有” and then guide people to pursue the “possession” of this “being” constantly. The other is to regard the nature of the world as constituting “nothing 无”, which may lead to nihilism and result in the complete denial of the existence of the world and the value of life. However, there is another theory ignored by many people that perceives the nature of the world as constituting “emptiness” and, as such, attempts to deconstruct everything in the world with “emptiness”. Zhenfu Wang believes that this deconstruction is not only divorced from life and death but also dissolves all processes, states, and results of being 有

and nothing 无, including life and death. Emptiness is a way of asking questions. When the being 有 and nothing 无 of experience and sub-experience are completely eliminated, there is no name for what the world is really like. Therefore, it can only be reluctantly given a “pseudonym,” that is, a “convenient statement”, called emptiness (Zhenfu Wang, Cf. Wang 2016, p. 4).

The idea of emptiness has a long history. Naeim states that the question of emptiness and nothingness has always been a perplexing and curious matter to many thinkers (Naeim 2019, p. 90). However, previous studies seem to ignore the Indian civilization’s understanding of emptiness. After the introduction of Indian Buddhism into China, it had a historic new integration with the Chinese culture’s understanding of emptiness, and gave birth to the unique Oriental wisdom of “emptiness”, which is embodied in a number of different Chinese Buddhist texts related to Madhyamaka that have evolved over time. The Madhyamaka was established by means of a subtle doctrinal exposition of emptiness (śūnyatā) that was marvelously presented by Nāgārjuna (Chowdhury 2018, p. 1), later developed by Devas, Buddhas, and Chivas in the second to fourth centuries. It is referred to as “Madhyamaka” because it interprets the madhyamapratipad as the most core and fundamental position, paradigm, and viewpoint of Buddhism, and thus gave birth to the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy.

Cheng Lv conceives of the research regarding the Madhyamaka as being very in-depth, emphasizing that it does not cling to emptiness while adhering to emptiness, which is closer to the truth than the view of emptiness explained by other schools. This research criticizes and surpasses ministry Buddhism and “innovates more on methodology” than previous classics such as Mahāratnakūtasūtr 宝积经 (Lv 2005, pp. 94–96). Recently, Nelson argued that emptiness in Buddhism explains the concretization of language and experience. However, the discussion of “śūnyatā” in the Madhyamaka is often misunderstood (Nelson 2023, p. 1). This is mainly because “śūnyatā” has a very complex and difficult connotation in the works of the Madhyamaka represented by Nagarjuna (Macor 2024, p. 177). Horiuchi believes that the understanding of “emptiness” and “nothingness” in the Madhyamaka has a very important historical role. Vimalamitra interprets the Heart Sutra in accordance with the basics of the tenet of thought of emptiness in Mahāyāna (Horiuchi 2022, p. 2). However, scholars have many different understandings of “emptiness” and “nothingness”. This raises a new question: how can we better understand and recognize the core idea and contemporary value of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy in a modern context?

Previous studies have provided a relatively rich theoretical explanation of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy and its value from the perspective of theoretical development and historical evolution. In particular, different versions of classic literature have been collated. However, Buddhism is not only a theoretical knowledge system that teaches people to understand the world, it is also a practical knowledge system that teaches people to realize liberation. Throughout history, there have been many different interpretations of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy from different perspectives (Das 2023, p. 109). The word śūnyatā in Sanskrit has been interpreted in various dictionaries, as well as from different perspectives, in different ways by different scholars, proponents and teachers, and text sources. Mishra found that “Śūnyatā is one of the most misunderstood terms in the history of philosophy. It is sometimes conceived of as an absolute and other times as pure nothingness. It is often identified as being associated with truth but most often understood as falsity. Traditionalists insist that it is beyond all categories. On the other hand, the same people would say that Śūnyatā is not a transcendent reality, “it is just the relativity of all phenomena, the emptiness of all entities” (Mishra 2018, p. 47). To better understand and reveal the core ideas and contemporary value of the theory of śūnyatā in

Madhyamaka philosophy, we need to break through the research limitations of emphasizing theoretical interpretations in the existing literature, strengthen the dual perspectives of theory and practice, and then provide new wisdom with which we can scientifically conceptualize and understand the nature of the world and help people attain better lives.

The purpose of this paper is to strengthen the practical research on the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy in order to fully understand and scientifically conceptualize its core idea and contemporary value. This paper will change current research perspectives and ways of thinking, providing a re-understanding and scientific revelation of the core ideas and contemporary value of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy from the dual perspectives of the past and present in regard to theory and practice. The first part of this paper will focus on exploring the core idea of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy. The second part will analyze and respond to the theoretical doubts regarding the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy. Based on the analysis of the first and second parts, in the third part, we try to explain that we should understand the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy from a hermeneutic perspective.

In this paper, we suggest that researchers should recognize that the disputes among the different sects of Buddhism, such as those in China and India, are only different interpretations of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy rather than refutations of it in any essential sense. The theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy is not only an important philosophical theory about the understanding of the nature of the world today but also a practical piece of wisdom that can help people eliminate their life troubles and attain better lives.

2. The Core Idea of the Theory of Śūnyatā in Madhyamaka Philosophy

The theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy mainly emerged from Nagarjuna's interpretation of "śūnyatā" in the Agama 阿含经. "Śūnyatā" is a broader historical concept that predates Madhyamaka and appears not only in early Buddhist teachings but also the expressions of non-Buddhist Indian traditions (referred to as "external paths"). Its germ can be found in early Buddhist discourses. Buddha advised the venerable Mōgaraja to look at the world as being non-substantial (suññō lōkō avekkassō mōgaraja sadāsātō) in the Mōgaraja sutta of suttanipata. Sunnatālōka in the Sutta of Suttanipa Buddha said to the venerable Ananda that the word is called empty due to the void in the soul and the things belonging to the soul; further, Buddha said the eye is the void of the soul and the thing belonging to the soul, and the form is a void of the soul and the thing belonging to soul; therefore, the world is called empty (Sobitha 2023, p. 1). Chinese scholar Yun Wang discovered that there are three main interpretations of śūnyatā in early Buddhism. The first understands it in terms of substance, in which śūnyatā is understood as being the void and the sky. In the second interpretation, it is understood according to the actual nature of things; śūnyatā is understood as being the real world. The third understands śūnyatā as being the deconstruction of the real world according to an immature understanding (Wang 2016, p. 65).

Prior to the advent of Madhyamaka, the discussion of śūnyatā was not a central theme of primitive Buddhism and ministry Buddhism. After the development of Madhyamaka, the Buddhist discussion of the concept of "śūnyatā" gradually developed into a more comprehensive theoretical system. In a broader historical and cultural context, the term "śūnyatā" took on a richer meaning. Yun Wang discovered that emptiness is not only a category of Indian Buddhism but also an aesthetic category that existed in Chinese native culture before Indian Buddhism was introduced to China (Wang 2016, p. 279). Emptiness, in the Indian context, is a philosophical concept that questions the nature of the world; in contrast, in the Chinese context, more emphasis is placed on an experience of existence. These

two understandings of emptiness are not only different but also interrelated and overlapping, and they have created the unique concept of emptiness in Chinese Buddhist culture. Judging from the existing literature, Madhyamaka not only portrays śūnyatā as being of great significance for understanding the nature of the world but also that it is an important concept that enables people to lead good lives.

First, in the Madhyamaka view, the concept of “śūnyatā” is very important to understanding the nature of the world. In the Madhyamaka view, the concept of “śūnyatā” is indeed not only important but also the core and fundamental concept of Buddhism. This is because, on the one hand, Buddhists believe that everything is empty. On the other hand, there are expressions of various things in the Buddhist scriptures. Thus, Buddhism is faced with an important fundamental problem; that is, Buddhism must clarify the concept of emptiness. In the view of Madhyamaka, the words “emptiness” and “nothingness” appear in our language out of necessity because the truth proved by the Buddha has to be expressed, and if it is not expressed, the fundamental purpose of compassion and salvation cannot be realized. That is, “emptiness cannot be said, the unreal cannot be said, all in the heart, but under a false name.” (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990c, p. 30). This means that “emptiness” and “nothingness” are simply linguistic tools that allow Buddha to realize compassion and salvation. With this linguistic tool, we can tell the truth; that is, the Buddha has proved and realized the fundamental purpose of compassion and salvation in Buddhism. For this reason, Nagarjuna et al. state that we need to comprehensively understand what “emptiness” and “nothingness” are. In Nagarjuna’s view, without a true understanding of “emptiness” and “nothingness”, the Buddha’s compassionate salvation cannot be realized.

However, the “emptiness” and “nothingness” in Buddhism cannot simply be understood in the usual manner. This is mainly because these kinds of “emptiness” and “nothingness” have neither the source nor the destination of the subject expressed in the ordinary language, nor are they states of existence that come and go. In the same way, we cannot use words in ordinary language, such as “the common and impermanent”, “the same and the different”, “the big and the small”, “the edge and the boundless”, or “the ego and the non-ego”, which are close to “emptiness” and “nothingness”, to understand and explain emptiness and nothingness. Everything we normally express is essentially emptiness. Buddhism aims to reveal this kind of language game and to eliminate this type of lopsided view (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990c, p. 36). Here, lopsided view refers to the viewpoint of insisting on one side and denying the other side in the antagonistic relationship between being and nothingness, eternal and impermanent, and self and non-self. It is only a game of language and thought rather than a real cognition of the world.

Secondly, in the view of Madhyamaka, to understand “emptiness” and “nothingness” in Buddhism, we need various special objective conditions as well as specific subjective conditions. Nagarjuna thinks that “The speaker really knows, but the listener never knows why” (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990c, p. 39). The understanding discussed here refers to the ability of ordinary people to grasp the meaning of a text and the nature of an object and the ability to understand the reality of the various dharmas taught in Buddhism. The former understanding is relatively easy to achieve, while the latter requires a long period of practice and is achieved by very few people. Therefore, wise men often say that an extreme solution is Buddha. To understand “emptiness” and “nothingness” in Buddhism, both kinds of understanding are needed, with the latter being more important. In order to achieve this type of understanding, people first need to clear themselves of the “note 著性” that has been formed. The so-called “note” refers to that which regards a name as reality itself or believes that there is always a reality behind the name and that even if there is not, one must be invented. Sometimes, in the case of a given name, one tends to assume

and construct the reality of the name according to the usual pattern without questioning its essence, falsely assuming what it is. Nagarjuna understands this differently: for him, the person who is not wise will comment on everything everywhere because their heart is not pure enough to realize that everything is emptiness (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990a, pp. 722–23). This reveals the important subjective reasons why it is difficult for people to understand the true meaning of “emptiness” and “nothingness”.

In order to understand “emptiness” and “nothingness” in Buddhism, we not only need to know the differences in the understanding of “emptiness” and “nothingness” for different Buddhists throughout history but also find common ground in different Buddhist discourses in order to discover the Paramartha-satya (true meaning) of Buddhism. From the perspective of cognitive activity, different cognitive subjects have different pre-understanding structures (or contexts); thus, individuals will understand the same form of Buddhism differently. According to Madhyamaka, there are three keys to understanding “emptiness” and “nothingness”. The first is to correctly understand emptiness itself and its causes and meanings. If one does not pay attention to these three aspects of understanding, one will be trapped in endless trouble and confusion. As one gatha says, “you are not able to know emptiness, the causes of emptiness, and the meaning of emptiness, so you make troubles for yourself” (Lv 2005, p. 98). Stepien thinks that for Nāgārjuna, if “one understands śūnyatā, one is freed from entire mass of suffering/completely cease” (Stepien 2024, p. 201).

Therefore, in order to understand “emptiness” without self-annoyance, we must know “what emptiness is”; that is, we must understand emptiness itself. The second key is to know the causes of emptiness, to know “what is the reason to say emptiness”, “what is the basis for saying emptiness”, and “why to say emptiness”. The third key is to know “the meaning of emptiness”. Here, “meaning” has two meanings: one refers to the realm and the object and the other to function and significance. To know the meaning of emptiness, we must know the role of emptiness. If we grasp these three key points when understanding emptiness, we will understand that the essence of emptiness is “eight noes”, that is, “neither birth nor extinction, neither continuous nor interrupted, neither identical nor different, neither coming nor going” (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990c, p. 1). Many great masters, including Vasubandhu, agree that Nagarjuna’s theory of eight unconditioned origins and reality, expressed in the above ode, is fundamental to all theories and encompasses everything.

Finally, in the view of Madhyamaka, emptiness is the nature of the world. As Nagarjuna says, birth, life, death, being, non-being, good, and bad, according to Buddhism, are not real (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 2000, p. 117). The Buddha not only recognizes emptiness but also describes the Lakshya (phenomenon 相) of emptiness. In general, since we are speaking of emptiness, there are no phenomena, or they cannot be described, and emptiness and nothingness, as such, do not exist and do not constitute objects of cognition and explanation. However, the Buddha has to speak of emptiness in order to save the world through compassion. “All is emptiness” need not be said, nor can it be said. However, Buddhism requires these words for expression and communication so that sentient beings can be understood and liberated (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990a, p. 584). In this way, emptiness becomes a linguistic description of “the world is emptiness”. Even the various dharmas recognized by Buddhism and considered by ordinary people constitute emptiness. It is generally believed that there are three phenomena of samskṛta-dharma 有为法: birth 生, living 住, and death 灭. In fact, the essences of these three phenomena do not exist; that is, neither birth nor death exist. In terms of birth, if there is a life, then birth is the dharma. At the same time, birth should also comprise the three phenomena of “birth, living and different”. The same analogy can be applied to the other two phenomena. The three should

be regarded as samskrta dharma; that is, birth, living, and death are emptiness in essence. If birth exists, it should not be living or death; therefore, birth, living, and death are not samskrta dharma (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990c, p. 9).

Thus, through its interpretation of the theoretical interpretation of śūnyatā, Madhyamaka philosophy not only interprets the necessity of the existence of the concepts of “emptiness” and “nothingness” from the level of practical application value but also further clarifies the source, meaning, and proof of these concepts from the level of philosophical ontology and epistemology. Nagarjuna believes that people hold the concepts of “being” and “existence” because they lack a true understanding of the nature of the world and because, ultimately, they are limited to a common “being” and “existence” (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990c, p. 8). As stated in “Try-asvabha^{va}-prakaraṇa 三无性论”, “reality is nothingness,” and all dharmas have the same nothingness. This “nothingness” cannot be expressed in terms of the commonsense concepts of “being” and “nothingness”. Therefore, “Do not say being, do not say nothingness” (Paramārtha 1990, p. 867). The “being” understood through common sense is not actual being but the illusion of being, and the “nothingness” grasped by common sense refers to absolute nothingness. True “śūnyatā” obviously cannot be defined in terms of “being” and “nothingness”. We say “nothingness” because the true essence of all dharmas is nothingness. We say “being” because—although all the dharmas are concerned with truth and nothingness—this “being” of nothingness is an objective fact. Thus, “reality is nothingness, and it is named being” (Paramārtha 1990, p. 867). In the Madhyamaka view, “being” and “existence” are illusions of “emptiness” and “nothingness” and are incomplete understandings of “emptiness” and “nothingness”. In this sense, “emptiness” and “nothingness” can better reflect our understanding of the nature of the world than “being” and “existence”. In this way, the Madhyamaka philosophy promotes “emptiness” and “nothingness” so that we can understand the nature of the world.

To sum up, the core of the Madhyamaka understanding of “śūnyatā” lies in this philosophy’s basic stance and logic of the “middle path (madhyamā-mārga)”, which provides us with a theoretical and practical guide to scientifically understanding the nature of the world and obtaining a better life. Nagarjuna believed, “Expression without words is śūnyatā, expression without words is not śūnyatā, expression and consideration without words is śūnyatā, expression and consideration without words is not śūnyatā”. (Paramārtha 1990, p. 30). In Nagarjuna’s view, all of the phenomenal world we see is śūnyatā, and there is no need for people to cling to these fleeting things, and there is no need to be happy or sad about these fleeting things. In this sense, the Madhyamaka view establishes a rationale of viewing the real world from a negative perspective. In the Madhyamaka view, the nature of the world is neither “being” nor “nothing” but “śūnyatā”. This kind of śūnyatā is not only a recognition of the nature of the world but also a transcendence of the real world. Sonam Lamo argues that the Madhyamaka understanding of śūnyatā removes all kinds of colored lenses that people may use to view the world. “Nāgārjuna seems to recommend the very old method of the Buddha in a new way (Śūnyatā) to abolish of all passions (kleśa), desire (rāga), hatred (dvesa) and delusion (moha)”. (Lamo 2017, p. 145) Jan Westerhoff believed that the understanding of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy represented by Nagarjuna actually has very rich philosophical meanings regarding topics such as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and the philosophy of language. It is not only an understanding of the nature of the world but also an epistemology and methodology that guides us in understanding the world (Westerhoff 2009, p. 199). In the Madhyamaka viewpoint, by clinging to neither being nor nothing but holding the “śūnyatā” of the middle path (madhyamā-mārga), we can eliminate the pain and trouble brought by anything we might be attached to and thus live better lives.

3. The Theoretical Doubts of the Theory of Śūnyatā in Madhyamaka Philosophy and a Corresponding Analysis

Due to the complexity of the concept of śūnyatā and the blending of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy with the local history and culture and the introduction of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy through Indian Buddhism to China and other places, researchers with different historical and cultural backgrounds have different opinions on the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy. Many researchers have raised theoretical doubts about the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy. These theoretical questions can be summarized as follows: First, there is the “contradiction problem” between “śūnyatā” in the Madhyamaka view and the existence of Buddha. Second, there is the “contradiction problem” between “śūnyatā” in the Madhyamaka view and Nirvana and liberation in the Madhyamaka view. Third, there exists the “contradiction problem” between “śūnyatā” in the Madhyamaka view and various dharmah. Fourth, there is the “contradiction problem” between “śūnyatā” in the Madhyamaka view and “establishing and breaking the emptiness”. Fifth, there is the problem of understanding the concepts of “śūnyatā” and “nothing” in the Madhyamaka view. In order to understand and recognize the core idea and contemporary value of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy more comprehensively, in this part, we will investigate and analyze these five theoretical doubts and provide a more detailed argumentation basis for the fourth part.

First, we will address the “contradiction problem” between “śūnyatā” in Madhyamaka and the existence of Buddha: If everything is emptiness, how should one treat the issues in the Buddhist scriptures, especially the understanding of the various Buddhas? For example, the Buddha Shakyamuni is regarded as “the World-Honored One” in Buddhism. If so, is there a Tathagata Buddha? If there is, it must be included in “all the dharmas”. But then what is the reason for saying that everything is emptiness? If this is the case, where does Buddhism come from, and do Buddhists have no object of belief? Nagarjuna argues that such questions are the inevitable result of a one-sided metaphysical theory of being. If one understands Buddhism’s theory that “emptiness is wonderful, and emptiness is being” correctly, then the above misunderstanding will naturally be overcome. Specifically, although all the Dharmalakshana 法相 constitute emptiness, they are also visible and invisible (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990a, p. 101). The meaning here is that the dharma is only a physical emptiness, which is expressed through being, and therefore has visible and invisible phenomena and properties; thus, it is “being”. From the point of view of the “nature of entity”, the Tathagata “without the five skandha 五阴” is emptiness. However, from the perspective of “phenomenon”, the Tathagata is there and exists because he has five skandhas, and “without the five skandhas, there is no Tathagata” (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990c, p. 29). In the Madhyamaka view, “being” and “nothingness”, “emptiness”, “being”, and “non-being” are not absolutely separate but actually dependent upon each other.

Second, there is the “contradiction problem” between “śūnyatā” and Nirvana and liberation in the Madhyamaka view: Nirvana and liberation are the ideal states pursued by Buddhists, but emptiness and nothingness, as dharma, should also be pursued. If this is the case, does it not mean that when the pursuit of Buddhism is emptiness, Buddhism itself is also emptiness? This question, like the first one, is based on a lack of a correct understanding of the “Twi-satyas” of Buddhism and the paradigms that observe the problem in an undivided way. Fundamentally speaking, all words are false facilities of names, and so are “liberation”, “Nirvana”, etc., which constitute emptiness and illusion. Therefore, it should be said that “there is no liberation.” One can say that one is liberated; this is said in the phenomenon or Samvrti-satya (Deva 1990, p. 182). Nirvana undoubtedly belongs to the asamskrta dharmah 无为法, and there is no difference between asamskrta dharmah and samskrta dharmah. There is neither me nor what I have. These are consid-

ered emptiness by the samskrta dharmah. We should know that Nirvana is also emptiness (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990c, p. 160). “Being” is emptiness, and “non-being” is emptiness (SengZhao 1990, p. 162). Why is this the case? “When these five skandhas are destroyed, there is no more than five skandhas, which is the origin of the five skandhas of Nirvana.” “If I am also emptiness, who will get Nirvana?” (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990c, p. 160). Of course, before entering Nirvana, one must realize that Nirvana not only exists but also is the highest value of Buddhism. It is often said in the Madhyamaka philosophy that dharmas such as Nirvana are profound and difficult to understand. Since dharmas are emptiness and nothingness, how deep are they? Nagarjuna believes that the word “deep” has a specific meaning here. When we say that emptiness is deep, we mean that emptiness is complicated and incomprehensible. Because we do not exist internally and the outward manifestations of things are also changing, what we say is actually unfathomable, but we must express it in words (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990a, p. 581). This recognition can rupture our evil perspectives; thus, it can be said that it is deep. In a particular sense, it cannot be said to be deep. If people insist on defining emptiness, they are mistaken. They do not understand the true meaning of emptiness (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990a, p. 581).

Third, there is the “contradictory problem” between “śūnyatā” in the Madhyamaka view and various dharmah: Since all dharmas inherently constitute emptiness, why do we speak of kusala-dharmah and akusala-dharmah, samskrta-dharmah and asamskrta-dharmah, and so on? All dharmas are indeed emptiness, and this emptiness has no beginning, but sentient beings make false distinctions and think that there are various dharmas in the world. These dharmas, which are based on distinction, are actually illusions. What we see is the appearance of things, and so this is what we think. Everything you see is actually emptiness—a misunderstanding caused by various coincidences (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990a, p. 678). All dharmas are originally without distinction. However, sentient beings, due to their confusion, see skandhas where there are no skandhas, producing various differences. With these distinctions, all kinds of covetousness arise, and thus suffering arises. To fundamentally save sentient beings, we must break their false distinctions. Buddhism has to go along with the world, including the teachings the dharma of samskrta and asamskrta and of kusala and akusala. In essence, the purpose of becoming or not becoming one who is in a certain state is not to establish such a state but to break it so that one can return to the original emptiness of all dharmas. In order to break the attachment of ordinary people—that is, the belief that “I am common and all the dharmas are common”—the Buddha first went along with the ordinary, saying that “there is the dharma and me”, and then dispelled these misconceptions. It is also the case that the six senses 六尘 (vision, sound, smell, taste, feeling, and mind) are the same; “without these two aspects (being and non-being), the six senses are hypothesized” (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990b, p. 866). Superficially, they exist because they have functions and produce the six senses, but the opposite is true. “It is called note but actually cannot be noted; the six senses are hypothesized” (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990b, p. 866).

Fourth, the “contradiction problem” between “śūnyatā” in the Madhyamaka view and “establishing and breaking the emptiness”: Since everything is emptiness, why speak of establishing the emptiness, breaking the emptiness, and so on? In the Madhyamaka philosophy, it is believed that it is definitely wrong to regard various dharmas as the original face of the world and speak broadly about establishing the emptiness and breaking the emptiness because doing so corresponds to an understanding of emptiness as another phase of a dharma. Some people who oppose breaking the emptiness hold the following belief: since there is no emptiness, why should it be broken? To break the emptiness means to break the emptiness as a thing. As long as one states that emptiness can be broken, one admits that, in fact, emptiness itself is a kind of existence. Indeed, if at the time of break-

ing the emptiness there is something empty clinging to it, then the act of breaking itself exists, and if that is the case, then all cannot be emptiness. Deva emphasizes that it is certainly not the position of Buddhism to break the emptiness of the outer world as reality. The first thing that must be broken in Buddhism is the leaning 偏置 emptiness. Because there is leaning emptiness, it is necessary to break the middle path (madhyamā-mārga) of the emptiness. Only the break that maintains the middle path (madhyamā-mārga) is the one that does not lead to leaning on either side. Even this kind of break is only a way of treating “emptiness”. We should also note that when “emptiness” is broken, it is a person’s understanding of emptiness that is broken, not various dharmas. Because the essence of all kinds of dharmas is empty, it is neither necessary to establish nor break it, since it is empty. Here, the breaking and establishing actually only correspond to people’s understanding of emptiness, and the objects that are broken are people’s ideas and fantasies on the issue of “being and non-being”. Deva said, “there is a difference between being and non-being, so it thinks that it needs to be broken. What people with such views do not know is that what is broken, in fact, is people’s understanding of various dharmas. All Dharma is in fact empty. If being is broken, in fact, it has lost the middle way, and it has negated the empty. If nothing is broken, it actually loses the middle path and goes to nothing. If it is nothing, then there is nothing to break.” Therefore, according to the Madhyamaka, it is possible to break emptiness in theory, and it is possible to break emptiness in practice, and the key is that we hold the basic position of the middle path to break emptiness. Without knowing this, we cannot understand emptiness itself, and we cannot achieve emptiness.

Fifth, there is the problem of understanding the concepts of “śūnyatā” and “nothing” in the Madhyamaka philosophy. Firstly, if emptiness is animitta, as described in the Madhyamaka philosophy, then how does one understand “animitta”? “If there is animitta, then there is the Lakshya” (Drdhādhyāśaya 1990, p. 41). Secondly, is there emptiness for something or for nothingness? In other words, what is the relationship between emptiness and being? As Nagarjuna stated, speaking names reflects people’s commonsense cognition, while saying nothing reflects people’s judgment. These acts are actually emptiness (Drdhādhyāśaya 1990, p. 41). If “nothingness” is understood as “incorporeality” and “being” is understood as the false existence of cause and harmony, then it can be said that emptiness is both nothingness and being. Deva said, “All dharmas have no origin, and all causes are known to be emptiness” (Drdhādhyāśaya 1990, p. 41). Another penetrating question is whether the emptiness of the meaning of Buddhism can corrupt the dharma of the world. Will the world fall into nihilism? The answer given by Nagarjuna et al. is categorical: “with emptiness of meaning, all dharmas are achieved; without emptiness of meaning, all dharmas are impossible” (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 2000, p. 36). That is to say, if the emptiness of the meaning of Buddhism is not established, the various dharmas in the world can hardly be explained by themselves and, therefore, cannot be established. On the contrary, people believe that all the dharmas of their existence can be established. According to this theory of cause and effect, we can provide a realistic explanation of their births, lives, differences, and deaths. Therefore, the dharma does not corrupt the dharma of the world, nor does it lead to nihilism. According to the specific content of the Buddhist theory of śūnyatā, one can observe that its essence is the madhyamapratipad; thus, it will neither lead to the negation of reality (nihilism) nor the other extreme, realism. Lamo states that in the present, we can observe many opponents of this theory, such as Vacaspatimiśra, Sankara, and various modern scholars, who equally condemned the theory of Śūnyatā as evoking total nihilism. They took this theory in a literal sense and failed to observe its practical aspects (Lamo 2017, p. 144).

4. A Fresh Review of the Theory of Śūnyatā in Madhyamaka Philosophy

The theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy has a history spanning thousands of years. Today, it is not easy for us to conduct a comprehensive review of the core ideas and contemporary value of theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy. The origin of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy can be traced back roughly to the teachings of the Buddha himself. The Buddha believed that we should avoid extreme views in the face of everything and find a middle path (*madhyamā-mārga*) between two extremes. Nagarjuna, the representative of Madhyamaka, applied the middle path (*madhyamā-mārga*) method to the understanding of “śūnyatā” and formed a theoretical system about śūnyatā. Judging from the later evolution of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy, Indian Buddhism is mainly concerned with the nature of the world, while Chinese Buddhism is mainly concerned with the question of how one can become a Buddha. The former emphasizes the understanding of the nature of the world, while the latter emphasizes the subjectivity of becoming a Buddha. Yun Wang believes that the spread of Buddhism from India to China and other countries has led to a continuous fusion of emptiness in Indian Buddhism and emptiness in Chinese culture. The emptiness in Chinese culture has fully absorbed the emptiness in Indian Buddhism, and the emptiness in Indian Buddhism has also merged with the emptiness in Chinese culture in the interpretation of Buddhist classics in Chinese culture, thus transforming this emptiness into an aesthetic emptiness. This historical evolution of emptiness has also led to various interpretations of the understanding of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy (Zhenfu Wang, Cf. Wang 2016, p. 2). There are also some theorists in different fields who have carried out various discussions on the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy. This complex evolution of this theory further reflects the necessity and complexity of recontextualizing it in today’s world. In order to fully understand and scientifically conceive of the core ideas and contemporary values of the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy, it is necessary for us to explore a new way of understanding in order to gain a richer comprehension of this theory and the concept of emptiness. We should not only note that the theory of śūnyatā in the Madhyamaka view is a philosophical theory about our understanding of the nature of the world but also realize that it is a piece of practical advice with the aim of helping people eliminate their life troubles and live better lives.

First, in order to understand the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy scientifically and objectively and better determine its contemporary value, we need to recognize the conceptual origin of the Madhyamaka and clarify its essence to ascertain its interpretation of the nature of the world according to the Buddhist scriptures. According to Nagarjuna et al.’s understanding of the dharma, there is only one Paramartha-satya that the Buddha wants to expound upon. This Paramartha-satya is originally separate from words and unspeakable, but Buddha has great compassion for sentient beings and has, therefore, made it convenient to speak this Paramartha-satya in words. In this way, there are many ways to express it. The Mahayana, for example, has many kinds of doctrines; these can be divided into hundreds of different kinds from different perspectives. According to Nagarjuna et al., what is reflected in various sayings is “one heart and one body”, which is simply the emptiness of the dharma. As the gatha states, “all things are equal, there is no difference; each takes the dharma but are never chaotic” (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990d, p. 600). According to Yinshun, Nagarjuna’s elaboration of śūnyatā is mainly rooted in the Aagama Sutra, and they further interpreted and developed the thoughts of this type of contract sutra; as a result, it can be said that “Madhyamakakarika is the general theory of the Aagama Sutra, which generalizes its fundamental thoughts and determines its original meaning” (Yinshun 2009, p. 174). Because the Madhyamakakarika is mainly about the emptiness of the causal origin of the Madhyamapratipad and because identifying the

causal origin and naming it Madhyamapratipad corresponds to the Aagama instead of Prajna, it can be said that the Madhyamakakarika “finds out the deep meaning of the causal origin of the Aagama” (Yinshun 2009, pp. 174–75). In addition, Nagarjuna inherited the thoughts of a northern Indian sect of Buddhism named Sabha Polybhakta. The unification of reality and emptiness in Nagarjuna’s *sūnyatā* is related to this. As Yinshun said, “the combination of Prajna and Sarvāstivāda’s thought, the unification of reality and emptiness, is the adaptation of Prajna’s development in the North. The latter Madhyamaka scholars Nagarjuna and Cadrakirti, on the secular side, followed Sarvāstivāda and inherited this style of study” (Yinshun 2009, p. 631).

Secondly, to understand the theory of *sūnyatā* in Madhyamaka philosophy scientifically and objectively and better determine its contemporary value, we also need to realize that its exposition of the nature of the world delivers all living creatures from difficulty. In the Madhyamaka view, understanding the nature of the world is not the fundamental purpose of our cognitive activities. We engage in various cognitive activities because people living in this world always have various troubles, and the fundamental reason for these troubles is that we do not clearly understand the nature of the world. Therefore, according to Buddhism, all living beings need to realize the truth of the nature of the world by learning about it, thus helping relieve our various troubles. Nagarjuna believes that Buddha is emptiness and nothingness. “All Buddhas have no beginning and no destination, so why, if the dharma does not move the Lakshya, is the dharma a Buddha? There is no so-called ‘birth’ or ‘death’ in all things; in fact, all things are emptiness, and the emptiness is Buddha” (Nāgārjunabodhisattva 1990c, p. 744). If emptiness as the result of this realization is the Buddha, then emptiness as the process, the cause, and the operation can be regarded as the way of reaching an untroubled state. Nagarjuna et al. state that the fundamental purpose of the theory of *sūnyatā* in Madhyamaka philosophy is not “theory” but “action” that aims to eliminate the worldly troubles of sentient beings and realize universal sentience.

In essence, the theory of *sūnyatā* in Madhyamaka philosophy is a practical piece of wisdom about eliminating the troubles of life and helping people live better lives. How can this be possible “in practice”? How is it possible to eliminate the troubles of the world through understanding *sūnyatā*? Nagarjuna states that Mahayana’s attitude toward this issue is to treat *sūnyatā* like any other dharma. If people should not be obsessed with other dharmas, they should not be obsessed with *sūnyatā* either. If you cling to the *sūnyatā*, then you only break false existence, but you do not break the *sūnyatā* itself. To reach the step where one realizes that the essence of Lakshya is emptiness and not attached to emptiness, one will truly realize that Lakshya and emptiness are actually one: Lakshya is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from Lakshya. In Nagarjuna’s view, practice is the only way to approach, grasp, and experience the *sūnyatā* of Buddhism. When one practices, absolutely quieting the mind and entering a state of absolute silence, then the reality of the emptiness of the universe will be seen in the present moment. Strictly speaking, the insight here is the return to nature. Silence is the nature of the heart, but people keep moving away from it due to the perplexity of ignorance. Through practice, they continue to remove these obstacles and return to the truth. In short, the emptiness, nothingness, or Paramartha-satya of the world; Nirvana; and the reality of the world are obscured from the perception of ordinary people. When people bring their own true wisdom of Prajna to light through demonstration, they can see the true face of the emptiness of the universe. This true face is not outside, inside, nor in the middle; it is the nature of all dharmas, including our own minds. The body fills the dharma realm, and nature is one with the emptiness; it is the dharmakaya shared by the mind, Buddha, and all living beings.

Overall, different Buddhists in history have their own different understandings of emptiness, and even the twenty schools of ministry Buddhism have different understand-

ings of emptiness, and these have given rise to important debates. It is in this way that Mahayana Buddhism later developed Buddhist emptiness and promoted it to the center of Buddhist discussion. In India, Mahayana Buddhism, including Madhyamaka and Vijnaptimatratasiddhi-sastra, has different understandings and expressions of emptiness. However, because Vasubandhu and BodhisattvaAsanga had studied and annotated Deva's "Sata-sastra 百论", which belonged to the Buddhist canon, they were greatly influenced by it, and both were among the more than ten annotators of the "Sata-sastra". BodhisattvaAsanga also studied and annotated Nagarjuna's "BodhisattvaAsanga 中论" and wrote the book Madhyāntānugamaśāstra 顺中论. Although both of them have theories of *śūnyatā* that are different from those of Nagarjuna, Deva, etc., there is no direct conflict between the two groups; on the contrary, there is harmony. One thousand years after the death of the Buddha—that is, after the 5th century AD—the annotators of the Sata-sastra were said to have seventy masters. There are as many as ten studies on Yogācāra-bhūmiśāstra 瑜伽师地论, and there are ten studies on Vijnaptimatratasiddhi-sastra. After the School of Emptiness 空宗 and the School of Having 有宗 were introduced into China, they not only continued to flourish but also developed greatly in the process of adapting to Chinese culture. For example, the Three-Treatise School 三论宗, which highlighted the status of emptiness, developed greatly in the Sui Dynasty after Kumarajiva and Jizang and gradually declined after the Tang Dynasty. In the Tang Dynasty, the interpretations of masters such as Xuanzang, who inherited and carried forward the Dharmalaksana School, were greatly developed. Although there are some differences in the interpretations of emptiness among Chinese Buddhist sects, there is no fundamental conflict. Different schools of Mahayana Buddhism hold positive attitudes towards the basic value of emptiness.

Thus, we can state that after the historical evolution from India to China, the theoretical system of the theory of *śūnyatā* in Madhyamaka philosophy itself is not contradictory; on the contrary, it has gradually formed a more logical and self-consistent philosophical theory about *śūnyatā*. Moreover, it also provides practical wisdom to help people eliminate their life troubles and thus live better lives. The former emphasizes the metaphysical 形而上 meaning of the theory of *śūnyatā* in Madhyamaka philosophy, while the latter emphasizes the physical 形而下 meaning, proving that this theory has both theoretical and practical value. From a metaphysical point of view, the theory of *śūnyatā* in Madhyamaka philosophy contends that the nature of the world is *śūnyatā*. From a physical point of view, the theory of *śūnyatā* in Madhyamaka philosophy helps people discard their obsession with and attachment to the phenomenal world and use emptiness to understand how the complicated real world controls us so as to eliminate all kinds of troubles caused by obsession and attachment to the phenomenal world in life and thus live better lives. Looking at the two together, we can find that the metaphysical and physical meanings of the theory of *śūnyatā* in Madhyamaka philosophy are dialectically unified. On the one hand, as a metaphysical philosophy theory, the theory of *śūnyatā* in the Madhyamaka view provides a philosophical foundation for the theory as a piece of practical wisdom. On the other hand, as a kind of practical advice, the theory of *śūnyatā* in Madhyamaka philosophy provides a practical environment and new conditions for the development of this theory as a metaphysical philosophy theory. It is precisely in this interaction between theory and practice that we can find that the theory of *śūnyatā* in Madhyamaka philosophy has extremely broad theoretical potential and practical prospects and is worthy of further study by all researchers.

5. Conclusions

After several years of historical evolution, the theory of *śūnyatā* in Madhyamaka philosophy has become very complex. Determining how to fully understand and scientifically

conceptualize the core ideas and contemporary value of this theory is an important issue to investigate in related research. From the dual perspectives of past and present and theory and practice, this paper reveals the core thoughts of the śūnyatā of the Madhyamaka, analyzes the theoretical doubts related to it, and shows that the middle path (madhyamā-mārga) has been applied to the understanding of “śūnyatā” to form a theoretical system about śūnyatā. It is not only a philosophical theory that regards the nature of the world as śūnyatā but also a piece of practical wisdom. The theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy holds the middle path (madhyamā-mārga) and regards the nature of the world as śūnyatā, thus transcending the dichotomy of the world as being 有 and nothing 无, providing valuable practical wisdom that can help people eliminate the troubles caused by their obsession with and clinging to being 有 and nothing 无 and live better lives. It is precisely because of this dialectical thinking and its theoretical potential and practical prospects that the theory of śūnyatā in Madhyamaka philosophy is worthy of in-depth study by all researchers.

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