Śūnyatā as a Metaphor and Its Problems

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The term *śūnyatā* (空/empty) has been used in different ways due to its homonymic characteristic since early Buddhism. When early Mahayana Buddhism arose, the teaching of *śūnyatā* was intensely promoted by the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* (般若經 /the text of perfect-wisdom) and eventually became the most important teaching in Mahayana Buddhism. Nāgārjuna (龍樹) inherited the tradition of the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* and used the term *śūnyatā* to construct a *Madhyamika* (中道/middle-path) understanding of the world. Due to the homonymic characteristic of *śūnyatā*, however, the term was also used to refer to the development of a different philosophy. The vagueness of the term was used as an excuse by which the *Sarvāstivādin* school criticized Nāgārjuna's philosophy by claiming that his interpretation of *śūnyatā* violated the basic teaching of Buddhism. The purpose of this paper is to show that the Sarvāstivādin's (說一切有者) criticism of Nāgārjuna's teaching on *śūnyatā* is invalid because its argument is based on a literal interpretation of *śūnyatā* as opposed to Nāgārjuna's metaphorical use of the term.

The methodological approach adopted in this paper is metaphorical theories. The debate between Nāgārjuna and *Sarvāstivāda* (說一切有部) in regards to the concept of *śūnyatā* is an interesting topic within Buddhist Studies, which has been intensively discussed. However, some important questions are still unresolved. Among them, one the debate on whether the *Sarvāstivāda* attacked on Nāgārjuna is valid or invalid. The linguistic theory, especially metaphorical theory, helps to clarify the problem at hand because the question involves the homonymy of the term *śūnyatā* between two sides. More specifically, the theory provided by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in regards to metaphor and cognition in their book *Metaphors We Live By*, will be applied as a methodology in this paper.

Nowadays, the study of metaphor is extremely advanced. One of the earliest modern alternatives to the traditional theory (also known as similar theory) is the 'interaction' view. This view was first advocated by the literary theorist I. A. Richards, and was subsequently developed by the philosopher Max Black.[1] The theories have a central characteristic which can be distinguished from the traditional theory. The central characteristic is that metaphors have an irreducible "cognitive content" which cannot be reduced to a literal expression. This cognitive content (or "meaning") is produced by the "interaction" of different cognitive systems. Interactionists generally claim that the "cognitive contents" of metaphors can be true, even though they are not amenable to literal expression.

In short a metaphor is the understanding and experience of one kind of thing in terms of another according to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By*. Lakoff and Johnson use the phrase "Argument is War" as an example to illustrate their understanding of metaphors:

> Argument and war are different kinds of things─ verbal discourse and armed conflict─ and the actions performed are different kinds of actions. But argument is partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of war.[2]

In addition to metaphor, there are many tropes such as simile, model, symbol, analogy, and allegory, which are similar to metaphors and are often confused with metaphors. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish other tropes from metaphors. According to J. M. Soskice, simile is "regarded as the trope of comparison and identifiable within speech by

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[1] *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford University Press: New York and London, 1936). Max Black "Metaphor" *in Models and Metaphors.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962).

[2] G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors we live by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5.

the presence of a 'like', or an 'as', or the occasional 'not unlike'"[3] A model, however, is

an object or state of affairs which is viewed in terms of some other object or state of

affairs.[4] Soskice also indicates, "Symbol can be distinguished from metaphor as a

category which includes the non-linguistic; the cross is a symbol for Christianity"[5], and

an analogy is used to describe a form of argument, or a type of relation.[6] Model, symbol,

and analogy include non-linguistic expression, such as an image, and designate mental

events and visual representations.[7] Among those tropes, an allegory has the closest

relationship to metaphors and is sometime considered as an extended metaphor. The most

distinguishable feature of allegory from metaphors is that allegory is not properly defined

as a figure of speech and is a form of prose.[8]

　　The Sanskrit term *śūnya* (空/empty) is derived from the word $\sqrt{vi}$ (a weak form of

$\sqrt{u}$) which means 'to swell', 'to increase' or 'to grow'.[9] From the basic meaning 'to

swell', the term later incorporated the meaning of 'hollowness' and finally became

known as 'emptiness'. The connections among 'to swell', 'hollowness' and 'emptiness'

are that when something looks swollen outside, it is hollow inside. That is, its inside is

empty (possesses the state of hollowness).[10] Therefore, the various meanings of the

term *śūnyatā* (空性) can be divided into two concepts: the first concept follows the word

'to swell', and refers to the meanings, 'swollenness', 'growth' or 'hollowness'; the

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[3] J. M. Soskice. *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 58.
[4] Ibid., 55.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., 55~56.
[9] M. Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University, 1988), 1107.
[10] G. M. Nagao, *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra*. Trans. Leslie S. Kawamura (New York: State University of New York,1991),209. E. Conze, *Buddhism* (New York: Pilosophical Library. n.d.), 130. Monier-Williams,1085.

second concept refers to the meanings, 'emptiness', 'nothingness', or 'non-existence'.[11]

These two concepts were used during the development of Buddhism which caused

confusion.

The two concepts of *śūnyatā* are found in the early Buddhist texts such as the

Āgama (阿含) and *Nikāya* (部). The use of the second concept, non-existence or

nothingness, will be discussed first. For instance, in the *Nikāya*, *śūnya* is used to describe

an empty house (Pāli: *suññageha, suññāgāra*). In the *Saṁyuttanikāya* (相應部), it says:

> The sage who dwells in an empty lodge (*suññagehāni*) and restrains himself is
> great. He cultivates the practice of renouncement. [12]

In the *Dhamma-pada* (法句), it also says:

> Having entered an empty lodge with his calm mind, the monk who meditates on
> dharma enjoys the happiness which common human beings do not possess.[13]

In the two texts above, *suñña (Palī for śūnya)* functions as an adjective to describe *geha*

(茅屋/a lodge),[14] and it literally means 'empty'. This use of *suñña* as nothingness is

found in many other instances in the early Buddhist texts, for example, *suññavimāna* (空

宮/empty palace), *suñña-āgara* (空處/an empty place), and *suññ-gāma* (空村/an empty

village).[15] Therefore, when *suñña* functions as an adjective for the meaning 'empty', it is

considered as the literal usage and to be used to describe a physical object.

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[11] Monier-Williams, 1085.

[12] *Yo suññagehāni sevati seyyo so muni att-saññāto vossajja careyya tattha so pa˜irūpaṃ hi thatāvidhassa taṃ //*(*The Saṃyuttanikāya of the Sutta-pitaka*. Léon Feer, ed. Vol 2. London: H. Frowde for th Pāli Text Society, 1888~1904, I. p106~107.)

[13] *Suññagaraṃ pavi˜hassa santacittassa bhikkhuno amāunsī ratihoti sammā dhammaṃ vipassato///*(*The Dhamma-pada.* Léon Feer, ed. London: H. Frowde for th Pāli Text Society, 1888~1904, No.373.)

[14] A. P. B. Mahāthera, *Concise Pali-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1989), 98. T. W. R. Davids & W. Stede. ed.*Pali-English Dictionary*. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2001),254.

[15] T. W. R. Davids, & W. Stede, ed. *Pali-English Dictionary* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2001), 717.

Regarding the first concept, *suñña* was used as a metaphor to describe the Buddhist perspective of the world in the early Buddhist text. To explain, after the Buddha obtained liberation he discovered that the main problem which caused people to stick to the cycle of life and death stemmed from the misunderstanding of the world. As a result, he taught a new understanding of the world to others to solve the problem. The problem for common people is explained by the *Āgama* as the following:

> The ordinary people depend on two kinds of bases — i.e. they are attached to what is to be contacted as existing or non-existing. Because they are attached to what is to be contacted,[there results the views of] existence (realism) or non-existence (nihilism) . If there is no attachment, then the mind is in contact with the object, there would be no attachment, no dwelling, no conceiving of *ātman* (self). If one has no doubt and is not confused with that "when suffering occurs, it occurs, and when suffering is extinguished, it is extinguished" by one's self and does not need to depend on someone else. This is called "proper seeing" This is called "the middle path explained as being freed from the two extremes." That is, "From the existing of it, this exists. From the arising of it, this arises."[16]

In this passage, the Buddha tries to educate people about the middle way by teaching them two extreme views: nihilism and eternalism. Because common people do not understand *paticasamuppāda* (緣起/the law of causation), they automatically become attached to extreme views.[17] Those who possess the nihilistic view insist that nothing exists even though they see things occurring. On the contrary, those who possess the eternal view insist on eternal substantial existence even though they see nothing present. The Buddha, however, taught that the existence and nonexistence of all phenomena (緣生 /*pratītyasamutpanna*) depends on the law of causation.

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[16] 「世間有二種依，若有若無，為取所觸。取所觸故，或依有或依無。若無此取者，心境繫著使不取、不住、不計我；『苦生而生，苦滅而滅』，於彼不疑不惑，不由於他而自知，是名正見，ī。是名離於二邊說於中道；所謂此有故彼有，此起故彼起」。*Tsaahan* (雜阿含 hereafter *Ts*). TSD. vol 2. ed. Takakusu Junjiro et al. (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppansha, 1924) ,85c. (Hereafter: T2,85c).

[17] "From the existing of it, this exists. From the arising of it, this arises" is a formular description for *paticasamuppāda* (the law of causation). See: J. Macy, *Mutual Causality Buddhism and General Systems Theory* (New York: State University of New York Press,1991), 34.

Pratītyasamutpāda (緣起), the law of causality that underlines the arising of all phenomena (*pratītyasamutpanna/*緣生*)*, is usually translated as "interdependent co-arising." It was considered to be the basic teaching of the historical Buddha by all followers of early Buddhism, which refers to the period before the arising of sectarian Buddhism (around 500 BCE ~300 BCE).[18] According to the law of causation, all phenomena are neither substantially existing nor substantially non-existing. They are just the phenomena of causal process. That is, nothing can exist substantially as the following passage describes:

> *Bhikkhus!* Eyes while occurring come from nowhere and while extinguish go to nowhere. Thus, eyes occur unrealistically and extinguish from having occurred. There is karma only and no doer. ….Ears, nose, tone, body and mind are explained in the same way. There is only conventional dharma. Conventional dharmas are defined by the law of causation— i.e. 'because this is existing, that exists; because this has occurred, that occurs.'[19]

Because the Buddha's understanding that all phenomena were neither substantially existing nor substantially non-existing to people was so different from common conceptions of the world at the time, he used similes to convey his views. For example, the Buddha used five aggregates (蘊/*skandha*) to analyze the composition of a human being to show that there is not only no-self, but also that the five aggregates do not substantially exist. The following passage contains a description of the five aggregates:

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[18] Akira Hirakawa in his book, *A History of Indian Buddhism*, divides Indian Buddhist history into different periods — i.e. Early Buddhism, Nikaya (sectarian) Buddhism, Early Mahayana Buddhism, Late Mahayana Buddhism and Esoteric Buddhism. Early Buddhism refers to the period of historical Buddha's life time to the beginning of sectarian Buddhism. A. Hirakawa, *A History of Indian Buddhism*. Trans. Paul Groner (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), 7~9.

[19]諸比丘！眼生時無有來處，滅時無有去處。如是眼不實而生，生已盡滅，有業報而無作者。此陰滅已，異陰相續，除俗數法。耳、鼻、舌、身、意，亦如是說，除俗數法。俗數法者，謂此有故彼有，此起故彼起。*Ts* No.335 (T 2:92c15~21) .

> Form is like a lump of foam, Feeling like a water bubble; Perception is like a mirage, Volitions like a plantain trunk, and consciousness like an illusion, so explained the Kinsman.[20]

In the above text, the Buddha uses similes such as a lump of foam, a water bubble, a mirage, a plantain trunk, and an illusion in his explanation. Such similes were chosen by the Buddha to describe the five aggregates because they possess the characteristics of non-substantial existence, and were thereby suitable for illustrating his concept of the world. The passage below contains the Buddha's teaching on the non-substantial nature of the five congregations:

> Oh! Bhikkhus! Just as sound is made with the coming together of two hand so in the same manner, when three events come together — i.e. with the color-form and eyes as condition, there exists visual consciousness. With these three conditions coming together, there exists contact. On the basis of contact, there appear feelings, conceptualization, thinking and so on. Those phenomena are neither substantive nor permanent. They constitute the impermanent self, non-eternal, unstable, and changeable. . . . Oh! Bhikkhus! All conditioned things are like delusion and mirage, and they disappear instantly. They neither truly come and nor truly go. [21]

In addition to the five similes mentioned above, many terms were used as similes for the concept of the world in the early Buddhist texts. For example, *Suñña* (空/hollowness) was another important term used by the Buddha to illustrate the concept of the world. In *Suttanipāta* (經集/sutta collection), it says:

> *Suññato lokā avekkhassu Mogharāja sadā sato attānudī ūhacca, evā maccutaro siyā: evā lokā avekkhantā maccurājā na passatī/* [22]

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[20] *Bhikkhu Bodhi, The Connected Discourses of the Buddhas: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya.* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 952.

[21]比丘！譬如兩手和合相對作聲；如是緣眼色生眼識，三事和合觸，觸俱生受、想、思。此等諸法，非我非常，是無常之我，非恆、非安隱、變易之我。比丘！諸行如幻、如炎，剎那時頃盡朽，不實來實去。*Ts* No.273 (T,2,72c).

[22] *Sutanipāta 1119. Sutanipāta* is the fifth text of Khuddaka- nikaya.

In the above citation, "*suññato lokā avekkhassu Mogharāja*" may be translated as the follow: "Mogharāja! You should view the world as hollowness (*suññato*)."[23] According to this sentence, the Buddha uses the word "*suññato*" in his construction of a metaphorical view of the world. The use of "*suññato*" as a metaphor to view the world is also found in many other places in the early texts.[24]

According to Max Black's interaction theory of metaphor, in a metaphor of the form "*A is B,*" the "system of associated commonplaces" for *B* "interacts with" or "filters" our thoughts about the 'system' associated with *A*, and thereby generate a metaphorical meaning for the whole sentence.[25] When Black's theory is applied into the use of *suñña* in Buddhist world view, it will be as follows: when the Buddha used *suñña* as a metaphor to filter the understanding of the world, a metaphorical meaning was created in the description, "the world is *suññato.*" As mentioned earlier, *suñña (Sanskrit: śūnya)* means "to swell," "hollowness," and "emptiness." However, such meanings originally were used to describe a material or physical object such as a house or lodge. In the sentence, "the world is *suññato,*" the concept of the world is abstract because the world is not composed of material things but instead it is only a view. According to Buddhist understanding, in this case, *suññato* is used metaphorically instead of literally.

In their *Metaphors We Live By,* Lakoff and Johnson further considered any description of an abstract object to be a metaphor and they called such a description an ontological metaphor. An ontological metaphor refers to a way of viewing nonphysical

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[23] My own translation.
[24] See: *Ts* (T2, 56), No. 232 (T2,56b), also *Saṃyuttanikāya*. Pali Text Society Trans. Vol 4. (London: Pali Text Society), 35 and 85.
[25] M. Black, *Models and metaphors: Studies in language and philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,1962), 25~47.

things such as events, activities, emotions, or ideas as entities or substances.[26] That is to say, an ontological metaphor treats an abstract concept as a physical object. As a result, literal terms that are used to describe physical things are used in the metaphor when they are used to describe unphysical things. In the sentence, "the world is *suññato*," the abstract concept of the 'world' is treated as an entity, and thereby it can be described as *suñña* (swollen, hollow, vain) which is commonly used to describe an physical thing.

When *suñña* is used as a metaphor to convey a Buddhist understanding of the world, *suñña* means hollowness rather than nothingness. Lakoff and Johnson propose the idea that metaphorical language does not highlight all parts of the 'tenor', the original subject, which they refer to as the target domain. To elaborate, some parts of the target domain are not used in the 'vehicle', the words and concepts that are invoked by the word, to which they refers as the source domain.[27] In the case of "the world is *suññato*," 'the world' is the target domain, and *suññato* is the source domain used to construct the concept of the world. The part which needs to be highlighted from *suññato* is the meaning of hollowness, and the parts which are not to be included in the metaphor are the meanings of 'swelling' and 'emptiness'.

Suñña became a main metaphorical term to construct the concept of the world because it contained common features that the five similes share. According to Lakoff and Johnson's theory, the different source domain that people choose to use depends on the parts of the target domain that needs to be highlighted.[28] According to Yin-Shun's research, among the five similes mentioned earlier, the similes of a lump of foam and a

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[26] G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors we live by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 25~28.

[27] Black call principle subject and subsidiary subject, 52~53.

[28] Lakoff and Johnson, 10~13.

water bubble convey the concept of impermanence. A plantain trunk is a simile something that looks firm on the outside but it is hollow inside. That is, the simile of the plantain trunk conveys the idea of no-self. On the other hand, a mirage is something which looks real but it does not really exist, and an illusion is something which can be seen and heard but it does not exist in the same way that our senses perceive it. Each of these similes manifests one part of the concept of the world, which is both impermanent and unsubstantial.[29] The reason that *suñña* was used as a replacement for similes such as a lump of foam, a water bubble, or a mirage, to construct the concept of the world was due to the fact that the Buddha wanted to illustrate something that exists without substance, instead of something that is swelling or that there is nothing there.

In the early Buddhist texts, *suñña* is the feature that those similes share in common. After the Buddha used the five similes to construct the concept of the world, he continues to explain, "One may ponder it (each of the five *skandas*) and carefully investigate it, it appears but hollow (*suñña*) and void when one views it carefully." [30]The text reveals that if one carefully investigates the phenomena of a mirage or illusion, one will find that they are impermanent and unsubstantial. The five similes all share the feature of hollowness (*suñña*). Buddha used the term *suñña* was regarded by the Buddha as the best choice to fully convey the different parts of the concept of the world because it encompassed the features of the five similes.

In the process of replacing the five similes with the metaphor *suñña,* it can be seen that there was a tendency in early Buddhism to reduce various metaphors or similes into one dominant metaphor. Certainly, the employment of one dominant metaphor possesses

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[29] Yin-Shun, 空之探究 *(Kongzhitanjiu / The Investigation to Openness)* (Taipei: Zenwun, 1985), 90.

[30] *Bhikkhu Bodhi,*952.

both negative and positive aspects. Regarding the negative aspect, a dominant metaphor potentially hides many aspects of reality. Just as Lakoff and Johnson have pointed out, single metaphors highlight a certain aspect of one concept and hide others.[31] Regarding the positive aspect, a dominant metaphor prevents confusion and disorientation created by too many metaphors. In the present case, the use of *suñña* as a dominant metaphor to understand the reality of the world theoretically hides some aspects of reality. However, the only reality that the Buddha wanted to convey is that all phenomena exist without substance. Hence, a dominant metaphor was a necessary tendency in early Buddhism, and this tendency also continued in the later development of Buddhism.

In short, *śūnyatā* is used in two different ways in the early Buddhist texts. On one hand, it is used literally wherein it means 'empty' or 'nothing.' On the other hand, *śūnyatā* is used as a metaphor to construct a Buddhist concept of the world, wherein it means 'hollowness' which is the best choice to illustrate the concept of impermanence and non-substance. Due to these views, *śūnyatā* became a necessary dominant metaphor and was increasingly promoted in the later development of Buddhism.

The metaphorical language of *śūnyatā* continued to be a dominant metaphor in Mahāyāna Buddhism. In fact, by the time of Mahāyāna Buddhism, *śūnyatā* was extremely developed especially in the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* (hereafter *PPs*). Due to the promotion of the *PPs*, *śūnyatā* came to represent the main teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The most obvious development was the new metaphorical use of *śūnyatā* to refer to ultimate reality.

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[31] Lakoff and Johnson, 221.

The basic purpose of the *PPs* was to understand everything from the perspective of *śūnyatā*. Y. Kajiyama argues that the *PPs* deny all claims of substantiation from a fundamental view of existence, especially the theories of substantial existence in the sectarian schools. [32] According to him, it cannot even be claimed that the central focus of the *PPs* in Mahāyāna Buddhism, *śūnyatā*, has substantial existence. On the basis of the claims of non-substantial existence, the *PPs* attempted to return Buddhism to the original doctrine expounded by the Buddha.

Yin Shun explains that although the *PPs* propagated the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, *śūnyatā* also possessed the dual meaning of the ultimate = *svabhāva śūnyatā* (自性空/empty is the self-nature) and the conventional = *abhāva-svabhāva-śūnyatā* (無自性空/empty is lack of intrinsic nature). The so-called *svabhāva śūnyatā,* according to the *PPs*, was a synonym for *nirvāṇa* which is the ultimate goal of Buddhas and *arhats*. The *PPs* observes all dharmas from the perspective of ultimate reality, which transcends all conventional realities such as names, features and distinctions, and thus, they explain that all dharmas are undifferentiated, that compounded dharmas and uncompounded dharmas are non-dual and that *saṁsāra* is equal to *nirvāṇa*.[33]

Other than presenting the ultimate reality, *śūnyatā* refers also to the 'unreal' or 'no self-nature' (*niḥsvabhāva*/無自性).[34] When the Buddhas and *arhats*, from the ultimate perspective, observe all conventional phenomena, another result can be found. That is, all phenomena are unreal, and all substantial existences are absent. For example, in the *PPs,*

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[32] Kajiyama Y., "般若思想 (Hannyashisō)", in 講座・大乘佛教 (*Kōza ・Daijōbukkyō / Lecture・ Mahāyāna Buddhism*).vol.2 (Tokyo: Shunjusha, 1995), 60~61.

[33] Yin- Shun, 147 and 155~156.

[34] Ibid. 174~178.

it says, "Because all dharmas arise by means of composition, they lack self-nature."[35] Due to the reason that all dharmas are composite, they are not substantial existences; hence, they are *śūnyatā*. Such kind of *śūnyatā* is called *abhāva-svabhāva-śūnyatā*.

The Japanese scholar, Hideo Masuda classified the meanings of *śūnyatā* in the *PPs* into two kinds: absolute *śūnyatā* and relative *śūnyatā*. Absolute *śūnyatā* is beyond any denial such as the denial of self-nature, of names, and of distinctions. On the contrary, relative *śūnyatā* possesses the meaning of denial and is offen related to *pratītyasamutpāda*.[36] Although there are many other different meanings of *śūnyatā* in the *PPs*, all of the meanings are summarized into the two main kinds: *svabhāva śūnyatā* (absolute *śūnyatā*) and *abhāva-svabhāva-śūnyatā* (relative *śūnyatā*).

Between the two different concepts of *śūnyatā* in the *PPs* discussed above, the idea of the so-called relative *śūnyatā* is inherited from the metaphorical usage of *śūnyatā* in the early Buddhist texts. As mentioned, *śūnyatā* was a metaphorical term used to construct the concept of the world in the early texts. The concept refers to the idea that the world exists impermanently and unsubstantially. The world is like this because everything exists by means of *pratītyasamutpāda*. According to Kajiyama, Yin Shun and Masuda, relative *śūnyatā* in the *PPs* is related to *pratītyasamutpāda* and it means non-substantial existence; hence, the *PPs* absorbed the concept of metaphorical *śūnyatā* from the early texts, which later evolved into relative *śūnyatā*.

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[35] *Da Pin Po Ruo* 大品般若 No.7(T 8, 269a), also No.21(T8,369), No.23 (T8,378a).

[36] Masuda, Hideo. "佛教における "空" の検討:般若経・龍樹を主として" (Bukkyō ni okeru Kū no Kentō: Hannyakyō・Ryūju wo Shutoshite), 宗教研究 (Shūkyōkenkyū), 1986, 171.

In regards to absolute *śūnyatā*, it is a new development which is not found in the early texts. The most important feature of the absolute *śūnyatā* is that it is used as a metaphor to convey the ultimate reality. Salline McFague in his book *Metaphorical Theory* suggests that the nature of religious truth is such that it can only be conveyed metaphorically.[37] This assertion can be supported within Buddhism by answering the following question: how is the term *śūnyatā* related with ultimate reality?

According to Yin-shun's research in his book *the Investgation of śūnyatā, svabhāva śūnyatā* is a synonym for *nirvāṇa*.[38] *Nirvāṇa* (涅槃) refers to the ultimate reality in early Buddhism. Because the ultimate reality is beyond descriptive language, it is necessary to apply metaphorical language to indicate religious truth. The best example is the term *nirvāṇa* which is itself a metaphor. The Sanskrit *nirvāṇa* is derived from *nir-√vā*, which means 'to blow' or 'to extinguish' (such as a lamp or fire).[39] *Nirvāṇa* was a term used to describe the state in which all desires are extinguished. The text states:

> *Nirvāṇa* is that the greed is eternally exhausted, the hatred is eternally exhausted, the ignorance is eternally exhausted, and all of the various defilements are eternally exhausted. This is called *nirvāṇa*"[40].

Another language feature, known as "negative description", arises from the metaphorical use of *nirvāṇa* to indicate ultimate reality. "Negative description" is used to manifest something by negating another thing. For example, instead of using positive terms such as reality, truth, and ultimate, the texts use terms such as 'extinction,'

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[37] S. McFague, *Metaphorical theory: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 15~29.
[38] Yin- Shun, 142.
[39] Moner-willams, 557.
[40] "涅槃者，貪欲永盡、瞋恚永盡、愚癡永盡，一切諸煩惱永盡，是名涅槃" *Ts* No.490 (T: 2, 101b). VI-38-4

'extinguish,' and 'exhausted,' for example, to describe the ultimate reality.[41] The

connection between the term *śūnyatā* and *nirvāṇa* is that they both possess a negative

connotation. As it was explained on pages 3 and 4 of this paper, *śūnyatā* possesses two

sets of meanings and the second set of meanings refer to 'emptiness', 'nothingness,' and

'non-existence' which could be considered to possess the meaning of negations.

Therefore, the term '*śūnyatā*' was used in a metaphorical way to describe the ultimate

reality. The replacing of *nirvāṇa* with *śūnyatā* provides the evidence for the tendency of

reducing different metaphors into one deminant metaphor in Buddhism.

Following the emergence of the *PPs*, Nāgārjuna was the representational figure

who promoted the teaching of *śūnyatā*. However, his status as main promoter of *śūnyatā*

led him to become the main target of criticism from the sectarian schools. In the 24th

chapter of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (hereafter *MMK*), Nāgārjuna's opponents raised a

series of arguments to challenge Nāgārjuna's philosophy of *śūnyatā*. These challenges are

contained in the passage below:

> If all this is empty (*śūnyatā*), then there exist no uprising and ceasing. These
> imply the non-existence of the four noble truths.// I//
>
> In the absence of the four noble truths, understanding, relinquishing, cultivation,
> and realization will not be appropriate.//II //
>
> In the absence of this [fourfold activity], the four noble fruits would not be
> evident. In the absence of the fruits, neither those who have attained the fruits
> nor those who have reached have reached the way [to such attainment] exist.
> // III//

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[41] The even more profound, difficult to perceive, is said to be the freedom from all attachments, the extinction of cupidity, the non-existence of desire, extinction, [in short] *nibbāna*. The uncompounded dharma refers to not being born, not persisting, not transforming, and not extinguishing. This (uncompounded dharma) is called, Bhikkhus, "the extinction of all suffering — *nibbāna*." "倍復甚深難見，所謂一切取離、愛盡、無欲、寂滅、涅槃。如此二法，謂：有為、無為。有為者，若生、若住、若異、若滅。無為者，不生、不住、不異、不滅，是名比丘諸行苦寂滅、涅槃。" *Ts* No. 293 (T: 2, 83c).

> If the eight types of individuals do not exist, there will be no congregation.
> From the non-existence of the noble truths, the true doctrine would also not be
> evident.// IV//
>
> When the doctrine and the congregation are non-existent, how can there be an
> enlightened one? Speaking in this manner about emptiness, you contradict the
> three jewels, as well as the reality of the fruits, both good and bad, and all such
> worldly conventions. // v// [42]

If one were to express the opponents' criticisms of Nāgārjuna regarding his use

of *śūnyatā* into logical form, it could be represented by the following chart:
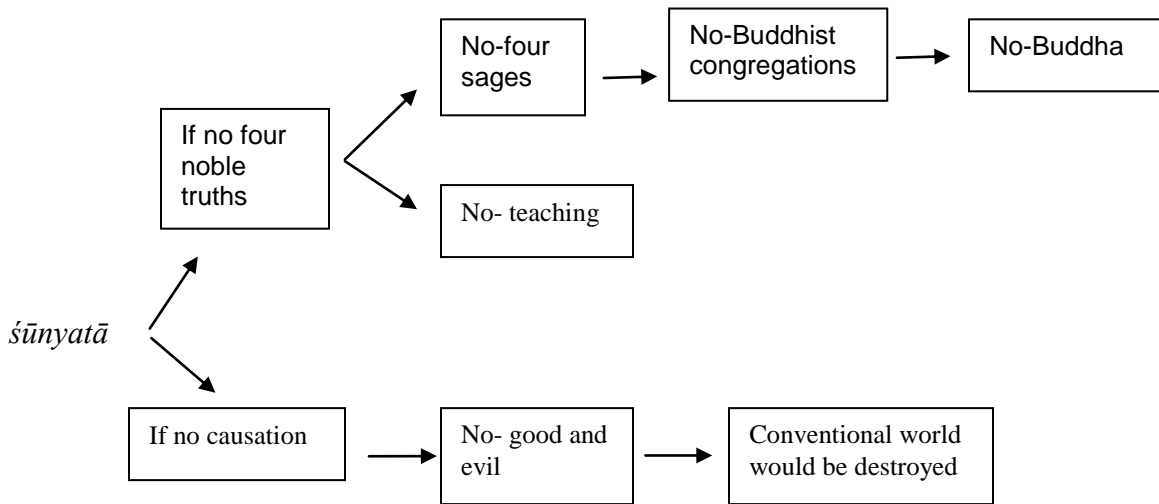
Regarding those who criticized of Nāgārjuna's philosophy, some comentaries

indicate that his opponents were *Sarvāstivādins*.[43] The four noble truths were regarded by

the *Sarvāstivādins* as the central doctrine of the Buddha upon which the *Tri Ratna* −

Buddha, dharma (the teaching), and *saṅgha* (the Buddhism congregation) − were

established. According to the *Sarvāstivādins*, however, *śūnyatā* and the four noble truths

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[42] D. J. Kalupahana, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā of Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1996), 328~330.

[43] Bhāvaviveka in *Prajñāpradīpa* and Sthiramati in *Dachengzhongguanlungshi* referred to the opponents as someone inside Buddhism. *Sarvāstivādins* are the most possible opponents to whom Bhāvaviveka and Sthiramati referred because *Sarvāstivādins* most strong opposed Nāgārjuna.

were contradictory because if *śūnyatā* possessed the meaning of 'emptiness', then the four noble truths cannot be established. In other words, if the theory of *śūnyatā* is accepted then the three jewels, which are considered to be the representational foundations of Buddhism, would not exist. Therefore, the *Sarvāstivādins* rejected Nāgārjuna. Moreover, the *Sarvāstivādins* thought that to have *śūnyatā* and conventional existences is contradictory because Nāgārjuna's assertion of *śūnyatā* negated the conventional world. The *Sarvāstivādins* claimed that if Nāgārjuna's assertion is true, then Buddhism could not exist and even conventional causation could not exist.

In the argument between Nāgārjuna and his opponents, namely the *Sarvāstivādins*, the meaning of *śūnyatā* was a critical point of debate. In the argument above, the opponents of Nāgārjuna criticized him on the basis of *śūnyatā* in the sense of 'nothingness.' However, their criticisms can be established only on the basis of *śūnyatā* possessing the meaning of 'nothingness' became when other meanings of *śūnyatā* are considered, their criticisms are not applicable. In response, Nāgārjuna rebutted his opponent's criticisms by accusing his opponents of misunderstanding *śūnyatā:* "We say that you do not comprehend the purpose of emptiness. As such, you are tormented by emptiness and the meaning of emptiness."[44]

After accusing his opponents of misunderstanding *śūnyatā*, Nāgārjuna explicated and clarified the meaning of *śūnyatā* in the 18th verse of the 24th chapter of *MMK*:

> *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tāṃ pracakmahe / 18.a.b.*
> *sā prajñaptirupādāya pratipatsaiva madhyamā // 18.c.d*[45]

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[44] Kalupahana, 331.

[45] Louis de la Vallée Poussin, ed., "Mūlamadhyamakakārikās de Nāgārjuna avec la Prasannapadā Commentaire de Candrakīrti" *Bibliotheca Buddhica IV* (St-Pétersbourg,1903-1913), 11, line 13-16.

> Whatever is *pratītyasamutpāda* that we call *śūnyatā*. It (*śūnyatā)* is a conventional designation based upon (some material). Only this is the middle-path.[46]

The meaning of this verse is: all phenomena, as long as they occur by means of *pratītyasamutpāda,* should be considered to be *śūnyatā*. The term "*śūnyatā"* is only a conventional name designated to express non-substantial phenomena. Hence, the term '*śūnyatā*' is also non-substantial. Owing to this understanding of *śūnyatā*, *śūnyatā* is free from all extreme views such as permanency or nihilism and it is called the 'middle-path'.

Nāgārjuna claimed that *śūnyatā* is a *prajñapti* or linguistic expression only. The Sanskrit word *prajñapti* is derived from *pra+√jñā* (知/to know) and means: 1) 'a manifestation in word', 2) 'a statement' or 'a manifesto', and 3) 'a designation'. [47] The three meanings of *prajñapti* refer to the direct use of language to convey something. For example, a statement and a manifesto is a direct linguistic expression. Therefore, when Nāgārjuna states that *śūnyatā* is *prajñapti* he meant to say that *śūnyatā* was merely a way of explaining things through language. However, language limits what the term *śūnyatā* attempts to convey.

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[46] Nagao has written an article "From Mādhyamika to Yogācāra" in *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra* with regard to the translation of the word "*upādāya*." Here, according to Nagao's research, the word "some material" should be added behind "*upādāya*." (New York: State University of New York, 1991), 189~201. The following are some translations of other scholars: J. Singh: "That we call • ūnyatā which is *pratītyasamutpāda, prajñaptis upādāya, madhyamāpratipat*." Jaidev Singh, *An Introduction to Madhyamaka Philosophy* (Taipei: ShinWun Fong,1990),135. T. E. Wood: "We say that dependent co-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda)* is emptiness (• ūnyatā). That (*sa*) is a conventional, dependent designation. That (*sa*) alone is the middle path." Thomas E. Wood, *Nāgārjunian Disputations：A Philosophical Journey through an Indian Looking-Glass* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications,1995), 296. D. J. Kalupahana: "We state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness. That is dependent upon convention. That itself is the middle path." Kalupahana, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 339.

[47] F. Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1998), 358.

In his theory, Saussure defined language as a primary structure in which order is important, and therefore language is responsible for everything that proceeds and everything that follows. According to his definition, language divides, shapes and organizes the phenomenal world in different ways.[48] On the basis of Saussure's theory, Lakoff also made the claim that metaphors are not only a part of literary language, but they also belong to our conceptual system because they point to the ways in which people understand and construct their concept of the world.[49] Given Saussure and Lakoff's claims about language, it can also be explained that Nāgārjuna used *śūnyatā* as a linguistic expression to shape and organize the phenomenal world. Subsequently, the way in which Nāgārjuna understood and organized the phenomenal world depends on whether he absorbed the meaning of 'hollowness' or 'nothingness' from *śūnyatā*.

The 18th verse of the 24th chapter of *MMK* , as cited on page 17, is the best source for understanding how Nāgārjuna used the term *śūnyatā*. Nāgārjuna's use of *śūnyatā* corresponds to the concept of relative *śūnyatā* in the *PPs* because he related *śūnyatā* to *pratītyasamutpāda* in the verse, and claimed that all phenomena were *śūnyatā*. In other words, Nāgārjuna used *śūnyatā* to describe conventional phenomena instead of the ultimate reality. The use of *śūnyatā* in this way can be traced back to the metaphorical usage of the term in the early Buddhist texts. Therefore, *śūnyatā* is better understood as 'hollowness', which means 'non-substance', according to Nāgārjuna's philosophy. So far, most scholars agree that Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā* means '*niḥsvabhāva'* which can be translated as 'no-intrinsic nature' or 'no-substance.' As a result, it should be highlighted
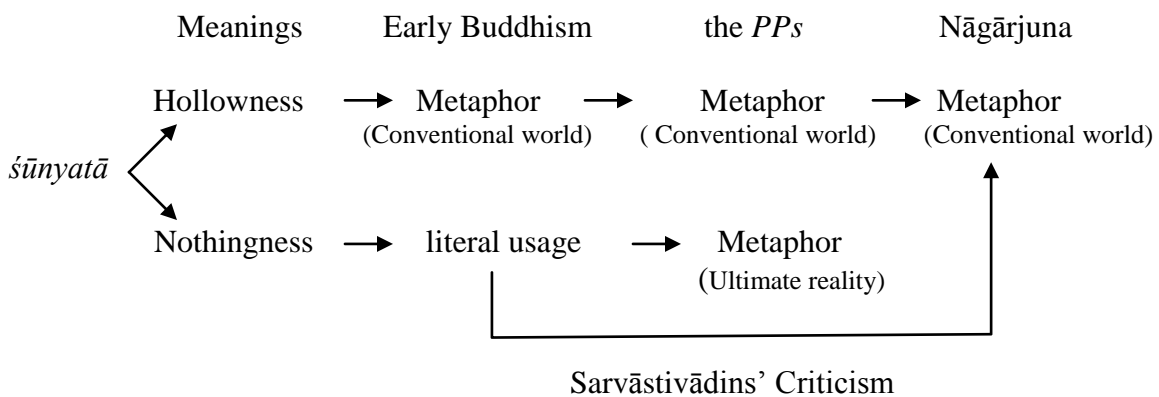
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[48] F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, (London: Fontana, 1974), 120.

[49] Lakoff, 56~60.

that Nāgārjuna did not invent the method of using *śūnyatā* as a metaphor. Rather, it was

absorbed from early Buddhism through the *PPs*.

To reiterate the main argument of the paper, the Sarvāstivādins applied the literal

meaning of *śūnyatā* to criticize Nāgārjuna's use of *śūnyatā*. However, *śūnyatā* only

means 'nothingness' when it is interpreted literally. When *śūnyatā* is used metaphorically

to convey the concept of the world, it refers to 'hollowness' and not 'nothingness.'

Therefore, it is reasonable to claim that his opponents' arguments were invalid (See the

following chart).

	Meanings	Early Buddhism	the *PPs*	Nāgārjuna
	Hollowness →	Metaphor → (Conventional world)	Metaphor → (Conventional world)	Metaphor (Conventional world)
śūnyatā				
	Nothingness →	literal usage →	Metaphor (Ultimate reality)	

Sarvāstivādins' Criticism

Although the Sarvāstivādin's argument against Nāgārjuna has been discussed, the

question of why the Sarvāstivādins used a literal interpretation of *śūnyatā* in their

criticism of Nāgārjuna remains to be discussed. Did Sarvāstivādins engage such an attack

because the metaphorical usage of *śūnyatā* did not entail a coherent system of

metaphorical concept (that is, they understood the term *śūnyatā* in different way) or

because these two sides did not have a cultural coherence regarding the target domain

(the view of the world)? In order for a metaphor to convey a concept successfully,

according to Black, the speaker and the hearer must have a coherent understanding in

regards to what the principle and subsidiary subject is.[50] In other words, both the speaker

and hearer must have the same understanding regarding both subjects of a metaphor and

the coherent understanding is dependent upon culture and stereotypes. In the phrase,

"Whatever is *pratītyasamutpāda* that we call *śūnyatā*," the concept of the world is the

principal subject and the metaphorical use of *śūnyatā* is the subsidiary subject. In order

for both subjects to be conveyed successfully, a coherent understanding of both concepts

must exist.

   In regards to whether there was a coherent understanding of *śūnyatā* between the

Sarvāstivādins and Nāgārjuna, it has been argued in this paper that both sides did not

have a coherent understanding. Regarding the question of whether both sides had a

coherent understanding of Nāgārjuna's phrase 'whatever is *pratītyasamutpāda*,' it is

herein argued that both sides were in disagreement. According to Nāgārjuna, anything

that is *pratītyasamutpāda* must be unsubstantial *(niḥsvabhāva).* Contrary to Nāgārjuna,

however, the Sarvāstivādins believed that anything that is *pratītyasamutpāda* must be

substantial (*svabhāva*).

   The belief in which anything that is *pratītyasamutpāda* is substantial (*svabhāva*)

stems from the fundamental doctrine of the Sarvāstivādins expressed by their statement,

"dharma substance exists eternally." This meant that, the Sarvāstivādins divided all

existence into two levels: the experiential phenomena on the first level and the so-called

'dharmas' which are the essences of experiential phenomena on the second level. The

Sarvāstivādins constructed their theory of dependent co-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*)

based on the idea of substantial existence (dharma). They thought that due to the fact that

dharma (substantial existence) is unchanging and eternal, the dharma itself does not

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   [50] Black, 41.

possess any causal relationships. Furthermore, each of the dharmas has a unique feature which is called self-nature (*svabhāva*).[51] The dharmas have the capacity to become experiential phenomena when the self-nature of the dharmas is manifested. When the dharmas become experiential phenomena, each of the dharmas functions in mutual relation to each other. When the dharmas function in mutual relation to each other, causal phenomena is established.[52] Thereby, the Sarvāstivādins correspond the experiential phenomena in the first level to the teaching of impermanence and no-self in the early Buddhist texts.

On the basis of the dharma theory, not only did the Sarvāstivādins have a different understanding of *śūnyatā* but they also had a different concept of the world compared to Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna thought that all phenomena in the world are unreal because they did not possess any substance. Hence, *śūnyatā* was the term used to refer to the world in terms of the metaphoric meaning of 'hollowness' conveying the idea that the world is something that seems to exist substantially on the outside but it is empty inside. In distinction, although the Sarvāstivādins thought all phenomena were unreal on the outside but there were substances behind the phenomena. Because the concept of *śūnyatā* undermined the basis of the Sarvāstivādins' teachings regarding the idea that there is substantial existence, it violated the Sarvāstivādin philosophy. It is for this reason that the Sarvāstivādins challenged the concept of *śūnyatā*.

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[51] Take example, the *pathavīdhātu* earth-element, whose self nature is "hardness" (*AKb*,T29, 3a); *vasanā* (feeling), its nature is *vedayate* (receiving feeling); *saṃjña* (thinking) takes conceptualization as its self-nature (*AKb*, T29, 19a).

[52] See my Master thesis. C. Y. Hsu, *The Eight-negations of Pratītyasamutpāda in Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Calgary: Department of Religious Studies, the University of Calgary, 2007), 27~39.

In conclusion, although *śūnyatā* possesses a dozen of different meanings, it can be categorized into two main concepts: 'hollowness' and 'nothingness.' When *śūnyatā* was used as a metaphor to view the world in early Buddhism, it referred to 'hollowness.' In contrast, when *śūnyatā* was used literally to describe physical things, it meant 'nothing' or 'empty.' In the *PPs*, both meanings of 'hollowness' and 'nothingness' were used metaphorically to express *śūnyatā*. The meaning of 'hollowness' in the *PPs* was used to metaphorically to express conventional reality, and the meaning of 'nothingness', due to its function as a negative expression, was used metaphorically to express the ultimate reality. Nāgārjuna inherited the metaphorical use of *śūnyatā* from early Buddhism and through the influence of *PPs*, he established his famous assertion, "whatever is *pratītyasamutpāda* is called *śūnyatā*." Because the teaching of *śūnyatā* goes against the fundamental doctrine that "dharma substance exist eternally" of the Sarvāstivādins, the Sarvāstivādins criticized the concept of *śūnyatā*. However, their criticisms of Nāgārjuna are considered to be invalid for two reasons: First, the Sarvāstivādins failed to consider the metaphorical uses of *śūnyatā* and secondly, they used the literal meaning of 'nothingness' to attack the metaphorical meaning of 'hollowness' on which Nāgārjuna's teaching of *śūnyatā* is established. Moreover, from the long development of the teaching of *śūnyatā*, it can be concluded that there is a tendency to reduce various metaphors into one dominant metaphor in Buddhism as discussed in the case of *śūnyatā*. *Śūnyatā* is an appropriate metaphor because it clearly conveys the idea of non-intrinsic nature, which was the only reality that the Buddha wanted to highlight; meanwhile, it also prevents the potential confusion and disorientation caused by the use of multiple metaphors.

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