

NĀRJUNA'S ŚŪNYATĀ AND ITS IMPLICATION TOWARDS VIPĀŚYANĀ MEDITATION

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Abstract: This paper tries to explore Nāgārjuna's śūnyatā and its implication towards vipāśyanā meditation or insight perception. All the mundane objects of this world are full of suffering. Nāgārjuna was the systematic propounder of Mādhyamika philosophy. He emphasizes middle view and avoids all extreme or absolute "ism" (void). From the Mādhyamika point of view śūnyatā, nirvāṇa, saṃsāra, madhyamāpratipadā and pratītyasamutpāda have the same meaning because everything in this world depends on something that's why they are conditioned as well as pratītyasamutpanna. This pratītyasamutpāda implies relativity and relativity refers to śūnyatā and this śūnyatā is non-conceptual and non-conventional and highest wisdom. This highest wisdom can be realized by the practice of vipāśyanā meditation. So, in this paper there will be a humble attempt to show the need of vipāśyanā meditation to achieve the concept of śūnyatā.

The entire thing in this Phenomenal world are, impermanent and these things of phenomenal world happened due to our wrong knowledge about this object, that's why the bundle of suffering, sorrow in human society and in man. But the true pathfinder of happiness discovers the way out from this predicament. Lord Buddha was such kind of ethical teacher who prescribes the real remedy for to remove suffering from every human being and established the principle of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *prajñā*.

According to historical view Gautama Buddha was died at the age of eighty. He established a *saṃgha* (association) before his death, and this *saṃgha* was purely based on democratic principle. But two hundred years of passing of the Buddha his association was divided. There are mainly three phases of Buddhism: 1) *Ābhidharmic* phase; 2) Development of Esoteric teachings; 3) Development of Tantra.¹ In this way the development of the different sects of Buddhism are emerge.

Nāgārjuna is the first systematic expounder of Madhyamaka philosophy and the followers of this schools are known as *Mādhyamika*. *Pratītyasamutpāda* is mainly a causality principle of Buddhist philosophy. It is actually a combination of two term that is - *pratītya* and *samutpāda*. The term *pratītya* means "depends on another" and

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¹ The Abhidharmic phase from the Buddha's death to 1st century A.D. This was the realistic and pluralistic phase of Buddhism. The second phase considered of the development of the esoteric teachings of the Buddha which were current among the Mahāsaṅghikas period of the *Mahāyāna* System. The third phase was the Tantra. This lasted from 500 to 1000 A.D. The main Tantric schools were *Mantrayāna*, *Vajrayāna*, *Sahajayāna*, and *Kālacakrayāna*. Theodore Stcherbatsky *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa*, page-2 -3.

samutpāda means ---- “condition co production or interdependent origination”.² For the *Hīnayāna* point ‘*pratītyasamutpāda*’ mean “temporal sequence of real entities between which there was a causal relation”.³ *Mādhyamika* have their own opinion about *pratītyasamutpāda*. *Mādhyamika* holds the meaning of ‘*pratītyasamutpāda*’ that implies relativity⁴ which means everything in this world are depends on another and one is from empirical point and another is absolute point. From the point of view of empirical or phenomenal reality everything is depend on something. So, everything is *śūnya*. That is why *Saṃsāra* is *svabhāva śūnya*. Things are mainly appearances. According to *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* “A toy elephant (to use an image of this sutra) does not possess the own nature or *svabhāva* that is supposed to possess or that it professes to possess. Similarly, the everyday world it is argued does not embody the *svabhāva* or essence it professes to embody. It falls short of the ideal of *svabhāva* and in this sense it is unreal.”⁵ But from the absolute standpoint everything in this world is inexpressible in human language. No thought category can be applied to it. So, both the phenomenal and the absolute point everything is *śūnya*. So, everything in this world which is *pratītyasamutpanna* is *śūnya*.

Pratītyasamutpāda advocates the law of dependable origination of thing . According to Nāgārjuna –*Yaḥ pratītyasamutpādah śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe* (MK 24.18).⁶ That’s why *pratītyasamutpāda* and the term *śūnya* are same. The term ‘*Śūnya*’ has come from the root *śvī* which means ‘to swell or to expand’⁷ and it has various signification like ontological, soteriological, axiological etc. Ontologically it means void which indicates fullness. Axiologically, it indicates that the worldly things are anitya. But due to our wrong knowledge we are attached so much in this thing. But once the realization of *śūnyata* happens, all ignorance vanishes. Soteriological significance of *śūnyatā* means the realization of *śūnyatā* which leads one to the wisdom of *prajñā*; *śūnyatā* does not lead us to the concept of nihilism. It does not negate all reality, but it shows that reality is neither *sat* nor *asat* and this reality is unattainable in our thought.

Some Buddhist scholars believe that *śūnyatā* is a theory. But *śūnya* or *śūnyata* is not itself a theory. Actually, it is the real knowledge of the understanding of truth. *Mādhyamika* philosophers are accepted the two concepts theory of truths. These are *saṃvṛti satya* (empirical truth) and another is *paramārtha satya* (absolute truth).

² Eng Trans by Jaideva Singh in Introduction of the conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa by Theodore Stcherbatsky, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, p-22.

³ Ibid p-23.

⁴ All dharmas are relative (śūnya) but they are grounded in the absolute (śūnya). Relativism is not the absolute truth. The relative is the way to the absolute, which cannot be attained without the help of relative. Nirvāṇa cannot be attained without knowing the absolute. MKVPP-445, 491, 500, 539 and *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* by Jadunath Sinha, Sinha Publishing House, 1963. p-118.

⁵ Bimal Krishna Matilal. *Philosophy, Culture, and Religion: Mind, Language and World* (edited by Jonardon Ganeri) Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002.

⁶ “That we call śūnyata which is pratītyasamutpāda.” *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa* by Theodore Stcherbatsky, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, p-39.

⁷ Ibid -36.

Candrakīrti in *prassanapadā* explain *saṃvṛti* in the following way.⁸ *Saṃvṛti* is that which covers all round the real nature of things. It is *ajñāna* (the primal ignorance). It is the primal ignorance as because it is cover over reality. *Saṃvṛti* is *vyavahārikā satya*. It is *upaya* for reaching the reality (*upeya*). Nāgārjuna focused on the importance of *saṃvṛti* in attaining *paramārtha*. *Paramārtha satya* is absolute reality. It is devoid of completely free thought construct. *Paramārtha satya* is indescribable in word. In this sense it is *śūnya*. So, *paramārtha satya* is *prapañcha śūnya*. *paramārtha satya* or absolute reality is *nītārtha* (primary or direct) the ultimate goal of life and *saṃvṛti satya* is *neyārtha*. (secondary or common sense)

Besides these two kinds of truths to understand *śūnyatā* there are also twenty types of *śūnyatā*. It is described in the *pañcavimśati* (one of the important *sūtras* of *prajñā parāmītā*) and T.R.V Murti *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*.⁹ These twenty types of *śūnyatā* are: 1) *adhyātma śūnyatā*; 2) *bahirdhāśūnyatā*; 3) *adhyātma bahirdhāśūnyatā*; 4) *śūnyatā śūnyatā*; 5) *mahā śūnyatā*; 6) *paramārthaśūnyatā*; 7) *saṃskṛtaśūnyatā*; 8) *asaṃskṛtaśūnyatā*; 9) *atyanta śūnyatā*; 10) *anavarāgra śūnyatā*; 11) *aravakāraśūnyatā*; 12) *Prakṛti śūnyatā*; 13) *Sarvadharmāśūnyatā*; 14) *lakṣaṇaśūnyatā*; 15) *anupalambhaśūnyatā* 16) *abhavāśvabhāvaśūnyatā*; 17) *bhāvaśūnyatā*; 18) *abhāvaśūnyatā*; 19) *Svabhāvaśūnyatā*; 20) *parabhāvaśūnyatā*. So various types of *śūnyatā* are accepted in the area of Buddhism. But from Nāgārjunas point *śūnya* means which is not describe in word – that is why it is indescribable (*avācya*).¹⁰

This kind of realization is possible by the stage of highest wisdom or *prajñāpāramitā*. *prajñāpāramitā* means- ‘perfection of wisdom’. *Prajñāpāramitā* is actually combination of two words *prajñā* and *pāramitā*. *Prajñā* means Wisdom and *pāramitā* indicates -perfection. There are six types of *pāramitās*.¹¹ That is - *dāna* (charity) *sīla* (moral Conduct), *khānti* (forbearance), *vīrya* (enthusiasm and exertion) *dhyāna* (concentration) and the last but not the list the main *pāramitā* is *prajñā*. All the five *pāramitās* have only one aim that is to purify the mind and to prepare for the attainment of highest Knowledge. *Prajñāpāramitā* is the chief of all other *pāramitās* and that is why it is called as the mother of all other *pāramitās*.¹² *Prajñāpāramitā* is a highest kind of knowledge which is free from everything and which is non-dual, transcendental Knowledge. It has no origination or beginning and also it has no decay or death. It has neither existence nor non –existence. It may be compared with space

⁸ Samantādvaraṇam saṃvṛtiḥ Ajñānamhi Samantāt –sarva (MMK P-492).

⁹ TRV Murti The Central Philosophy of Buddhism p -351.

¹⁰ Anirodham anutpādam anucchedom aśāsvatam

Anekārtham anānartham anāgamam anīrgamam (MMK).

It is (1) anirodham ,beyond destruction 2.anutpādam beyond production 3.annucchedam beyond dissoiution 4.aśāsvatam,beyond eternity .5.anekārtham-beyond oneness 6.ananartham – beyond plurality .7.anāgamam beyond in gress .8.anīrgamam –beyond egress .The conception of BuddhistNirvāṇa by Th ,stcherbatsky .Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, p-41.

¹¹ T. R. V. Murti, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, Routledge Library, p-222.

¹² *esā hi prajñā-pāramitā saṅṅāmparamitānām pūrvaṅgamā nāyikā parināyikā saṃdarśikā anayitrī dhātṛi*, ASP, p-398.

or *ākāsa*. *Mahāyāna* Buddhism is based on several *sūtras* and *prajñāpāramitā* is one of the most important *sūtras* of *Mahāyāna*.

The term *Śūnyatā* or *śūnya* has played an important role in the context of *prajñāpāramitā*. In *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* used the term *gaṃbhirā* (Deep) as the synonym of *Śūnyatā*. There are other several terms used as synonyms for *gaṃbhirā* or *Śūnyatā*. These are *ānimitta* (signless), *apraṇihita* (wishless), *anutpāda* (unproduced) *ajāti* (un birth), etc. In *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā...* text also says that-- '*rūpaṃhi subhūte gaṃbhirām 'rupa is Śūnya* and similarly *vedanā* (feeling) *Samjñā* (perception) and *saṃskāras* are also deep. In this context Lord Buddha said Subhuti (great disciples of Buddha) that '*Sarvadharmāṇāmśūnyatā*'.

In the stage of *prajñāpāramitā* all kinds of ego consciousness, feeling, and experiences vanish. So, it is also a kind of *Śūnya* stage.¹³

Śūnyatā leads one to the highest goal of life which is *prajñāpāramitā*. In 'Heart Sutra' which is the heart or the main essence of *prajñāpāramitā*, where we also found important conversation between Avalokiteśvara [one of the ideal of *Bodhisattva* and a *Bodhisattva* is an important part of Buddhahood] and Sariputra (the great disciples of Lord Buddha) about *Śūnyatā*. These *śūnyatā* ultimately help one to the achieved supreme knowledge which is *prajñāpāramitā*, which is also *śūnya*. Here Avalokiteśvara describes to Sariputra that if any one tries the meditation of *prajñāpāramitā* then it seems to him or her that all the five *skandhas* are empty. So, the nature or the *svabhāva* of the five *skandhas* are empty. That's why everything like *rūpa*, *saṃjñā*, *Vedana*, *samskāras*, *viññāna* constituted by five *skandhas* are also empty. Whatever is empty that is form, and whatever is form that is empty. There are no differences between emptiness and form. There is no eye, no body consciousness, and also there are no sounds, smells, tastes, touchables or objects of mind. There is no ignorance and so forth. There is no suffering, no origination, and no stopping. The Heart of the *prajñāpāramitā* finally came to the ends with this *mantra*. That means --- gone from everything like conditioned (phenomenal world), unconditioned (*nirvāṇa*), beyond from both conditioned and unconditioned, and even *śūnyatā*, then in fact realizes enlightenment - the eternal bliss.¹⁴ Therefore, the actual meaning of the *mantra* is ----- When you have awoken, when you are a Buddha, well everything is completely auspicious, all is well.¹⁵

Here *Bodhisattva* gives the way of Buddhahood or Buddha. *Bodhisattva* is a combination of two terms *bodhi* and *sattva*. The word *bodhi* means ---- the way of all buddhas. The word *sattva* means ---- the individual. According to Lord Buddha, *Bodhisattva* is a great being and an enlightened being. *Bodhisattva* has two qualities i.e. *bodhicitta* and *pranidhanabalā*. *Bodhicitta* has another two aspects --- *prajñā*

¹³ The prajnaparamitas revolutionised Buddhism in all aspects of its philosophy and religion by the basic concepts of "sunnyata" (T. R.V. Murti. *The Central Philosophy Of Buddhism*, Motilal Banarasidass Publisher).

¹⁴ "Gate Gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svabha" (Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom: The Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra*. Ruskin House: London. 1958. p-103.

¹⁵ Wisdom Beyond Words by Sangarakshit. MLBD: Delhi. 2006. p-32.

(perfect wisdom) and *karunā* (universal love). *Bodhisattva* has going through by ten stages to attain Buddhahood. These stages are ----*parāmuditā*, *vimalā*, and *prabhākarī*. Buddhahood is the main aim of one's life. This is possible only when one can go through by the stages of *prajñāpāramitā*. This wisdom or *prajñāpāramitā* arises in our mind by the practice of *Dhyāna* or meditation. The term meditation has carried several meanings like *Dhyāna*, *Japa*, *Vipaśyanā* etc. *Vipaśyanā* is a combination of two terms. "*Paśyanā*" implies seeing the Prefix 'vi' means in a special way. So actually, *Vipaśyanā* means seeing in a special manner. Mind is full of anger, pain, hatred etc. It is very difficult to control these inner qualities (like anger, pain, hatred, etc.).¹⁶

Vipaśyanā is a technique that control our mind and washes our anger, hatred, greed, selfishness etc. Meditation is mainly divided into two divisions --- *Samatha* and *Vipaśyanā*. *Samatha* indicates tranquility, Concentration, Calmness, peace etc. Where *Vipaśyanā* indicates --- self-observation or insight perception. *Vipaśyanā* is a technique of meditation which is ten-day's course. The first three days are mainly the practice of breathing control. And to observe the breath as it is (suppose breathing in a long breath). It is called *anapana*. On the fourth day the *vipaśyanā* technique starts. These courses are held in different parts of India and abroad. Anyone to learn this technique should join this course. There is no barrier of any cast and creed. By the practice of this technique one may attain self-actualization, self-observation, self-restraint and also the mental state level can be higher through the practice of *vipaśyanā*. *Vipaśyanā* is a very ancient technique of meditation. Lord Buddha gave introspection during his ministry and several original *sutta* and *nikaya* were found in these occurrences. *Satipattana* (means mindfulness). *Sutta* no 10 in the *Majjhima Nikāya* and also in the *Mahasatipattana sutta* no 22 of the *Digha Nikāya* where briefly discuss about *Vipaśyanā* meditation or mind training process.¹⁷ *Vipaśyanā* is a mirror of self-image. The main tents of *Upaniṣhad* is "*Ahaṃ Brahmāsmi*" - 1.4.10. I am Brahman. There is no difference between Brahman and self. So, to perceive our self. This perception happens only when our mind is control by the practice of meditation. Because meditation is nothing but the art of training to control our mind. Mind is everything.¹⁸ But in India it vanished into oblivion till the advent of Mr. S. N. Goenka. He has revived the technique of *Vipaśyanā*.

By the practice of *vipaśyanā* meditation it will help us to remove our all kinds of suffering, pain, sorrow, anger, hatred, etc. Mental peace, happiness can easily gain by the practice of *vipaśyanā*. So, *Vipaśyanā* is a key for remove all kinds of mental disease and suffering. Once Buddha said in his first sermon that -"Birth is suffering,

¹⁶ Phandanam capalam cittam durakkham dunnivanyam (Dhammapada Verse 33) "The flickering fickle mind difficult to guard ,difficult to control."

¹⁷ Buddha said in Satipathana Sutta that - "There is one way monks for the going down of suffering and miseries for winning the right path for realising nibbana that is to say the four application of mindfulness. What are the four? ---- Contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly conscious (of it) mindful (of it) so as to control the covetousness and dejection of it".

¹⁸ *Manopubban gammā dhammā manosesthā manomaya* (Dhammapada, Verse no 2).

Old age is suffering, disease is suffering, death is suffering ,association is suffering, separation from what is pleasant is suffering, not obtaining what one desires is suffering ”.¹⁹

In present day also we are suffering from all kinds of pain and despair. As because our lives have become more complicated and more competitive. From the childhood this suffering starts. In our childhood when our result was not satisfactory or not up to the mark, we become sad. Every day we are going through this suffering. The attraction of this mundane world is irresistible. The taste of the first food centers such as –KFC, MACDONALD so delicious that we cannot control from eating. Overeating of first food items increases our weight. Overweight is also the cause of unhappiness and suffering.

All these things happen as because we look upon the material things are as nitya. But they are not nitya. *Vipaśyanā* also helps to grow our mental power and this mental power helps to drawn right concentration and to realizes that all the things in this world are a combination of anicca, dukkha and anatta. By the practice of *Vipaśyanā* meditation the eternal law of Buddhist philosophy can be easily realize. These are the law of impermanence and the law of dependent origination.

Here we find certain similarities between science of medicine and science of spirituality. Science of medicine seeks to remove our disease similarly science of Lord Buddha prescribes beautiful remedy to cure our mental disease and achieve mental peace.

Today’s world is very competitive and mechanical. In this world everywhere we found irritation, agitation, disharmony, anger tension etc. So, if we remove this thing from our society - we can easily lead a holistic life. Holistic means overall development of a human being as well as overall development means physical, emotional, mental and spiritual development.

Spiritual development has played an important part in man’s life. This should be taken in a proper way. It should be holistic one. Holistic means all round development. That’s why physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual development all are included in particular one umbrella that is Holistic. Holistic education should be combined with all these things like physical education should help us to keep the body fit, emotional education should be emphasized to develop the positive human emotion of universal love, compassion. Intellectual development should require for not only the development of the ability to think but also the ability to act independently. Similarly, spiritual education should nourish and purify our mind.

UNESCO also emphasizes this kind of education which actually means --- ‘Learning to be’. Education is nothing but a system which develops our humanity. Our humanity is developing only when our physical, mental, intellectual, and also spiritual development will happen.

Holistic education should be attached with all these kinds of development. So, Modern educational system is mixed up with physical as well as spiritual. To develop our spiritual condition, one must practice *Vipaśyanā*. *Vipaśyanā* is a technique that

¹⁹ Charles S. Prebish. *Historical Dictionary of Buddhism*. New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, New Delhi, 1995.

can develop our human qualities like universal goodwill, kindness, sympathy, tolerance, humility, equanimity etc. In this way we develop our *equality* principle. This is also the inner essence of Vedānta. We found in Isa Upanishad Verse 3 that- *Yastu sarvani, bhūtani āmanyevā nupas'yati; sarvabhutesu cātmānam tato na vijugupsate.*

He who sees everything in himself and himself in everything never hates anything. That is what is called sama-dars'itā or *same-sightedness*. It is possible only when a perfect man making education takes place. Swami Vivekananda, a great monk of India emphasizes on this kind of man making education. This perfect man making education should be possible through Holistic education by the practice of *Vipaśyanā*. But not only Swami Vivekananda there are other various sages and systems equally emphasizing on the practice of meditation. like – Rishi Aurobindo who introduced the technique of Integral Yoga. This yoga can also help to look our inside and that's why he also prescribes to sit in meditation just to observe our mind.

In this present world all stress, anxiety, fear, depression, greed, violence are removed through the practice of meditation. Tibetan Dharma guru Dalai lama also said that meditation is valuable for all of humanity or mankind as because it involves looking inward. Zen (northern Buddhist sects) also practices meditation to discover the real nature of absolute. Once this realization is happened all of miseries, trouble, vanish. D. T. Suzuki says in his book *An Introduction to Zen Meditation* that – “All these spiritual feats are accomplished without resorting to any doctrines but by simply asserting in the most direct way the truth that lies in our inner being.” So, all the religious and noble persons are prescribed the practice of meditation to control our mind to know the inner voice of our soul.

Actually, in this respect, it can be said that *Vipaśyanā* means the way to truth. Truth means perfect. To see the object of this world as they really are, and it also helps to bring the clear idea of real life.

That's why the meditator or the practiser of *Vipaśyanā* meditation knows the real and eternal truth of this world. It is nothing but śūnya. In this way the door of liberation can be opened. Attainment of *nirvāṇa* can be possible by the process of *vipaśyanā* meditation, which is the ultimate goal of our life. So, “*Nirvāṇa* is not something which can be abandoned or acquired neither a thing annihilated nor a thing eternal it is neither destroyed nor produced”.²⁰

Nirvāṇa is śūnya and both are inexpressible. There is no difference between śūnyatā and *nirvāṇa*. They are same in reality. *Nirvāṇa*, the state of consciousness where mind is centered through *vipaśyanā* meditation, realizes śūnyatā in a deep sense and originates in the highest wisdom or *bodhi*. Which is known to us as *prajñāpāramitā*. It is peaceful, and śūnya. In the text of *Aṣṭasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā sūtra* where Sariputra (disciples of Buddha) describes *prajñāpāramitā* to Buddha saying that - “The perfection of wisdom gives light, O Lord I pay homage to the perfection of wisdom, she is worthy of homage. She is Unstained.On account of

²⁰ Mulmadhyamaka karika vritti 3:25 and Eng. Trans by J. Singh in *Introduction of The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa* by Theodore Stcherbatsky, Motilal Baranasisidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, p -55.

the emptiness of own marks. She is the antidote of birth and death. She has a clear knowledge of the own being of all dharmas, the perfection of wisdom of the buddhas, the lords sets in motion the wheel of the dharmas.”

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