NĀGĀRJŪNA'S CHALLENGE TO ANCIENT BUDDHIST HERMENEUTICS: AN INQUIRY INTO EVOLVING EMPTINESS (ŚŪNYATĀ) DOCTRINE IN BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

The term 'Buddhist Hermeneutics' is used often for those Buddhist exegetics who had been engaging to exegesis the subtle teachings of the Buddha, encompassing notion of translations from Pāḷi and śanskrit language, and interpretations from the sixth century B.C.E to tenth-eleventh century C.E. The tradition of hermeneutics was started immediately after the Buddha's passed away, especially the period when the first Buddhist council and the second Buddhist council were held respectively. However, after the Buddha's demised (Mahāparinibbāna), it is scholarly believed that Buddhism was spitted into eighteen sects, which are compiled into four main schools regarding the popular Buddhist doctrinal dispute: how the mind comes into existence. The four developmental Buddhist schools are namely, Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika, Vijñāṇavāda and Madhyamaka or Śūnyatāvāda. Among the aforementioned four Buddhist schools, the Madhyamaka as a systematic philosophical tenet among the four great Buddhist Schools , arose in the second century C.E. with the figure of the great saint Ācārya Nāgārjuna . Despite Madhyamaka School has had a continuous history of its development, it was established by means of subtle doctrinal exposition of emptiness (skt. śūnyatā) that was marvelously presented by Ācārya Nāgārjuna.

The notion of emptiness, however, is greatly played an important role in the sense of developing Madhyamaka School. Emptiness doctrine was widely evolved by Nāgārjuna during his lifespan. Initially, Nāgārjuna's main purpose was to prompt the emptiness doctrine for establishing Madhyamaka School through negating Ābhidharmika interpretation, i.e., dharma-theory. Subsequently, Nāgārjuna started to preach emptiness doctrine in removing traditional dogmatic belief with using its skillful method (upāya kauśalya) by means of establishing the Buddha's secret teachings. For instance, Nāgārjuna states śūnyata as the remover of all types of view (Pāli: diṭṭhi, skt. dṛṛti). Hence, Venerable Nāgārjuna addresses, "Sarvadṛṣti prahānā Śūnyatāṁ tāṁ pracatsmahe", which means "śūnyatā is thought to eliminate all views".

The objectives of this research paper is to delineate Nāgārjuna's encounter to ancient Buddhist hermeneutics who were dealing with Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika and Vijñāṇavāda Buddhist Schools, by applying metaphoric term emptiness (śūnyatā) along with depicting the evolving of emptiness (śūnyatā) doctrine.

Keywords
Buddhist hermeneutics, Nāgārjuna, Madhyamaka, emptiness (śūnyatā).

INTRODUCTION

The term 'hermeneutics' is considered as a philological discipline of rational interpretation based on traditional canonical or commentarial sacred scriptures; this term is mostly using in religious community in the sense of collecting various scriptural interpretation. The notion 'Buddhist Hermeneutics' is used often for those Buddhist exegetics who had been engaging to exegesis the subtle teachings of the Buddha, encompassing notion of translations from Pāḷi and śanskrit language, and interpretations from the sixth century B.C.E to tenth-eleventh century C.E. The tradition of hermeneutics was started immediately after the Buddha's passed away, especially the period when the first Buddhist council and the second Buddhist council were held respectively. However, after the Buddha's demised (Mahāparinibbāna), it is scholarly believed that Buddhism was spitted into eighteen sects, which are compiled into four main schools regarding the popular Buddhist doctrinal dispute: how the mind comes into existence. The four developmental Buddhist schools are namely, Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika, Vijñāṇavāda and Madhyamaka or Śūnyatāvāda. Among the aforementioned four Buddhist schools, the Madhyamaka as a systematic philosophical tenet among the four great Buddhist Schools , arose in the second century C.E.

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The objectives of this research paper is to delineate Nāgārjuna's encounter to ancient Buddhist hermeneutics who were dealing with Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika and Vijñāṇavāda Buddhist Schools, by applying metaphoric term emptiness (śūnyatā) along with depicting the evolving of emptiness (śūnyatā) doctrine.

THE NOTION OF 'BUDDHIST HERMENEUTICS'

At the onset the notion of hermeneutics is expressed as a philosophical discipline of rational interpretation in terms of religious scriptures. Scholarly, the term 'hermeneutics' could be expressed as the science of interpretation. Prominent scholar Donald S. Lopez states the term of hermeneutics as thus:

"The term "hermeneutics" is heard frequently today in the fields of Biblical studies, philosophy, and literary criticism. It has been variously defined, encompassing notions of translation, exegesis, interpretation, and understanding. For the purposes of this volume, hermeneutics will be broadly

conceived as concerned with establishing principles for the retrieval of meaning, especially from a text."

The aforementioned statement explicitly provides a framework of Buddhist hermeneutics, which refers to exegetical and analytical Buddhist tradition. Needless to say, the Buddha preached his teachings over forty-five years throughout the ancient India. Most of the teachings from the Buddha are considered as so in-depth and subtle doctrine [in the sense of Paramartha desana (ultimate teachings)] that it needs to be interpreted which were mostly done by the Buddha himself and his immediate disciples. Once the Buddha mentioned about the deepness of his innovated doctrine in the Ariyapariyesana Sutta (The discourse of the noble search) as follows:

"This Dhamma that I have attained is deep, hard to see, hard to realize, peaceful, refined, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, to-be-experienced by the wise. (Adhigato kho me ayam dhammo gambhiro duddaso duranubodho)"

The abovementioned words from the Blessed One refers to the needing of assistance to interpret the Buddha's teachings due to its subtle and deepness. In addition to the Buddha's subtle teachings, his immediate disciples and fellows made huge interpretations within their discourses which are mostly recorded in Buddhist exegetical and Abhidhamma literatures.

However, a final dimension of the Buddhist hermeneutical system is śīla, meaning "morality" or "virtue." Whether sūtra and śāstra works, the hermeneutical system in Buddhism move forward with deep concerning to morality from the Buddha's time to until now.

BUDDHIST SCHISMS AND COUNCILS

After the Buddha's passed away, one of the elder disciple Mahākāssapa proposed that the Buddha's teachings should be collected and organized systematically. The reason of Mahākāssapa's proposed was to protect the Buddha's teachings from misleading, manipulation and rapid declining; more specifically the disrespectful statement made by a monk Subhadha , who conducted ordination in his old age, which are recorded in the "Cullavagga" of Vinaya Pitaka . The living monks who agreed upon the proposal made by Mahākassapa and they decided to have the council in Rajagaha (in Magadha) , as there were facilities for the monks. Further, they agreed that, while they were observing the rainy retreat, the council be conducted in the second month of the season and five hundred Arahat or enlightened monks were participated in this council. The results of the first Buddhist council were as follows:

i.   Defined and arranged both Vinaya as pointed out by Upāli

ii.   Defined and arranged the Dhamma into five Nikāyās as pointed out by Ānanda.

iii.   Arrived at a decision on lesser and minor rules.

iv.   Examined the charges against Ānanda.

v.   Imposed the punishment of Brahmadanda for Channa.

vi.   Entrusted the sections of Sutta and Vinaya to the responsible monks for protection and preservation. Though this is not mentioned in the Cullavagga, Buddhaghosa stated in his Sumangalavilasani that after the recitation of damma-

vinaya, members of the council agreed to entrust Vinaya to elder Upāla and his associates (nissitake), Dighanikāya to elder Ānanda and his associates, Majjhima-nikāya to the Assciates of elder Sariputta, Samyutta-nikaya to elder Mahākassapa and his associates and Anguttaranikaya to elder Auruddha and his associates for recollection and preservation.

Apart from the aforesaid result of first Buddhsit council, minor rules of Vinaya (discipline) also discussed, which was mentioned by Venerable Ānanda informed the Sangha that the Buddha in the eve of Parinibbāna told him 'if the Sangha so desire, the Sangha may do away with the lesser andminor rules after the lapse of me' (ākankhamāno sangho mam'accayena huddānukhuddakāni

sikkhāpadāni samūhaneyya) .

The Second Buddhist council was held after a hundred years of the Buddha's passing away at Vālukarāma of Vesāli with the participation of a thousand Arahants or Enlightened monks with accords to the Cullavagga. Venerable Yasa was headed as president for this congregation.

Samantapāsādikā of Buddhaghosa mentioned that the council was held over a period of eight months. Vnerable Rewata was headed as the chairperson. King Kalasoka sponsored the entire council. The reason of second Buddhist council was Vajjiputtaka monks, who were living in Vesāli have taken ten points for granted (which are unlawful according to the Buddhist disciplinary code) .

After the second Buddhist council, the sangha was splited into two: Sthaviravada and Mahasanghika. The monks who agreed with the decision of Elder Rewata regarding the monastic discipline proclaimed by the Buddha was known as Sthaviravada. On the other hand, the vajjiputriya monks who didn't agree, they were known as Mahasanghika. They held their own Buddhist council. They were able to invite 10,000 monks and gathered at Pataliputra. There became a great schism of the Buddhist Sangha 100 years after the mahaparinibbana of the Buddha.After the 2nd Buddhist council, 18 Buddhist schools were emerged until King Asoka period.
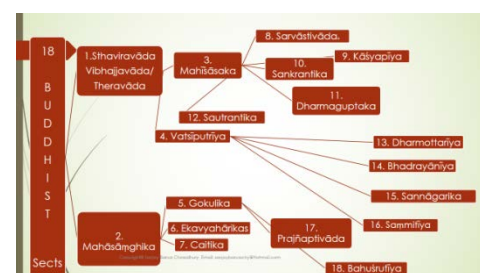

Figure 1: 18 Buddhist Schools

The Third Buddhist council was held in Pāṭaliputra under the reign of Emperor Aśoka after three centuries of the Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha. It was really a council belonging to the Theravāda or Vibhajjavāda Buddhist Order. Therefore, this council represents only a need of the Theravāda Buddhist monks of the day.The reason of third Buddhist council was to reform the Buddhist sangha; Venerable Maggaliputta Tissha was headed the entire congregation and 1000 monks were participated. Kathāvatthuppakarṇa, a treatise of Abhidhamma was compiled by Venerable Moggaliputta Tissa.

FOUR MAJOR BUDDHIST SCHOOLS

The The eighteen Buddhist Buddhist schools subsequently complied into four main schools regarding the popular Buddhist doctrinal dispute on how the mind comes into existence. The four developmental Buddhist schools are namely:
1. Sarvāstivāda,
2. Sautrāntika,
3. Vijñāṇavāda
4. Madhyamaka or Śūnyatāvāda.

In brief, the four great school's philosophical viewpoints are as follows:

(i) Bāhyartha pratyakṣhavāda by Sarvāstivādin or Vaibhāsikan, that means, the external object can be perceived through direct perception.

(ii) Bāhyartha anumeyavāda by Sautrāntikan, that means, external object is inference.

(iii) Bāhyartha apratyakshavāda by Vijānavādins, that means, external object is empty.

Ubhayārtha śūnyatavāda by Mādhyamikans, that means, both external and internal are empty.

NĀGĀRJŪNA AND MADHYAMAKA SCHOOL

Ācārya Nāgārjuna. c. 150 – c. 250 CE) is widely considered one of the most important Buddhist philosophers. The Mūlamadhyamakakārikā is Nāgārjuna's best-known work. The Madhyamaka as a systematic philosophical tenet among the four great Buddhist schools, arose in the second century C.E. with the figure of the great saint Ācārya Nāgārjuna.

ETYMOLOGICAL TERM OF ŚŪNYATĀ (EMPTINESS)

The word 'śūnyatā' is the Śanskrit term, which generally is translated into English as 'emptiness,' 'nothingness', 'devoid' or 'voidness'. Śūnyatā is renown as suññata in Pāli language, which refers to the same meaning as Śanskrit term related to many remarkable Buddhist words, such as 'sññagārā', 'suññatānupassanā', 'suññatāsamādhi', suññatācetovimutti', 'suññatā-vimokkha', 'suññatāvihāra', etc.. Etymologically, the word 'śūnyatā' derives from the adjective śūnya (Śanskrit grammar), suñña (Pāli grammar), śūna (Vedic grammar) . The Śanskrit word 'śūnya' emerges from the root ($\sqrt{}$) 'śvi' meaning 'to swell'. Literally, śūnya means 'relating to the swollen' while the root ($\sqrt{}$) 'śvi' seems to have expressed the idea that something which looks 'swollen' from the outside is 'hollow' inside . On the other hand, Sir Monier Williams defines the term of 'śūnyatā' in his dictionary 'A Sanskrit-English Dictionary' as 'loneliness', 'desolateness', 'absence of mind', 'non-reality, 'emptiness', 'illusory nature' or nothingness'. Additionally, Indian subcontinent languages like Hindi, Nepali and Bengali, the word 'śūnyatā' refers to zero (similar meaning to the mathematical term '0'). It has to be noted that Śanskrit term of 'śūnya' is subsequently impacted to many Asian languages to enriching its mathematical-language, such as, Thai people pronounce as 'ṣūnẏ'(in terms of Thai Phonetic), Bengali people pronounce as 'Śūn'ya' (in terms of Bengali Phonetic), which are sounding similar meaning of the English term 'zero'. Buddhist scholars, however, commonly translated the term 'śūnyatā' as emptiness due to its linguistic benefit for clarifying the essence of its subtle, profound, metaphysical and metaphoric meaning as well as its ontological explanation.

NOTIONS OF EMPTINESS IN THE EARLY BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

The notion of 'Emptiness' (śūnyatā) is widely appeared in the early Buddhist teachings. Evident from the Pāli Canonical texts explicitly proved that the Buddha himself used the term 'emptiness' many times for expounding his subtle and profound teachings towards the disciples and fellows. Referring to the Maha-suññata Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya, the Buddha clearly explained the notion of 'emptiness' (śūnyatā) when Venerable Ānanda asked his master (the Blessed One) in what respect is the world so-called empty. Having heard Ānanda's question carefully, the Buddha replied, "suññam idaṁ atteva vā attaniyena vā", which means "insofar as it (the world) is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self, thus it is said, Ānanda, that the world is empty" . The Blessed One admired to those practitioners (yogi) who are obtaining the stage of emptiness. Hence, on one occasion the Buddha addressed to Venerable Ānanda that the wise one who contemplatives, enters and remains in an emptiness that is undeniably pure (parisuddhaṁ) and paramount (paramānuttaraṁ) .

In addition to the early Buddhist literatures, the notion of 'emptiness' (śūnyatā) is focused from threefold perspectives, namely, treating it (śūnyatā) as a meditative dwelling, as an attribute of objects, and as a type of heedfulness-release. These three types of explication are considered as the foundations of the 'emptiness' concept in terms of Canonical (Nikāya) texts.

First, according to the sermon, 'The Lesser Discourse of Emptiness' (Cūḷa-suññata Sutta), a clear statement could be found from the Buddha's word on emptiness when Venerable Ānanda wanted to confirm of his earlier hearing whether the Blessed One's joyous meditative dwelling of nothingness (suññatāvihārena) was correct or not. Having heard this question, the Buddha precisely illustrated to his attendant Venerable Ānanda that whatsoever he (Ānanda) heard, it was totally correct (sussutaṁ suggahītaṁ) and he (the Blessed One) is remaining fully in a dwelling of emptiness as before (Pubbepāhaṁ ānanda, etarahi pi suññatāvihārena bahulaṁ viharāmi) . This statement makes a clear notion that the Buddha used the term of 'emptiness' (śūnyatā) for ascribing peaceful and joyous meditating dwelling stage.

Second, with reference to the discourse 'Conducive to the Imperturbable' (Āneñjasappāya sutta), we can observe how the Blessed One used the notion of emptiness for his disciples as a type of attribute of objects and as a type of heedfulness-release. In this discourse, the Buddha advocated to the monk for going to the forest (araññagato), going to the root of a tree (rukka-mūlagato) and going to an empty place (suññagāra-gato), sitting cross-legged, holding the body straight, setting mindfulness in front of him, and mindfully breathing out . The aforesaid statement explicitly implies the Buddha's observation of the term of emptiness (śūnyatā) that can be used as an object of mindful meditation in order to remain the

mind at lucid, imperturbable, peaceful and edge from mental-proliferation and defilements.

Third, the discourse 'The Greater Set of Questions-and-Answers' (Mahāvedalla Sutta) delineates the term of emptiness (śūnyatā) as a type of heedfulness-release. This sermon describes that when a meditative person has gone to the wilderness, to the root of the tree or into an empty dwelling place, he should aware of the mind for considering this as thus: 'This is empty of self or of anything pertaining to self' (suññamidaṃ attena vā attaniyena vāti) . Venerable Sāiputta called this aforesaid noble consideration as emptiness heedfulness-release (Ayaṃ vuccatāvuso suññatā cetovimutti) .

Based on above descriptions, one can observe an explicit notion of emptiness in the early Buddhist teachings where the Buddha and his disciples delineated an optimistic approach to its (emptiness) and skillfully used the term of emptiness for ascribing meditative stage, as an object of mindfulness and as a type of heedfulness-release.

THE CONCEPT OF EMPTINESS IN MADHYAMAKA SCHOOL AND ĀCĀRYA NĀGĀRJUNA'S CHALLENGE TO ANCIENT HERMENEUTICS

The Madhyamaka as a systematic philosophical tenet among the four great Buddhist schools , arose in the second century C.E. with the figure of the great saint Ācārya Nāgārjuna . Despite Madhyamaka School has had a continuous history of its development, it was established by means of subtle doctrinal exposition of emptiness (skt. śūnyatā) that was marvelously presented by Ācārya Nāgārjuna.

The notion of emptiness, however, is greatly played an important role in the sense of developing Madhyamaka School. Emptiness doctrine was widely evolved by Nāgārjuna during his lifespan. Initially, Nāgārjuna's main purpose was to prompt the emptiness doctrine for establishing Madhyamaka School through negating Ābhidharmika interpretation , i.e., dharma-theory . Subsequently, Nāgārjuna started to preach emptiness doctrine in removing traditional dogmatic belief with using its skillful method (upāya kauśalya) by means of establishing the Buddha's secret teachings. For instance, Nāgārjuna states śūnyata as the remover of all types of view (Pāli: diṭṭhi, skt. drṛti) . Hence, Venerable Nāgārjuna addresses, "Sarvadṛsti prahānā Śūnyatāṃ tāṃ pracatsmahe", which means "śūnyatā is thought to eliminate all views" .

Moreover, Nāgārjuna introduced his fellows the Madhyamaka as the doctrine of 'Middle-Way' (madhyamā-pratipad). Literally, Madhyamaka means, 'one who holes to the middle' . Nāgārjuna in his remarkable text Mūlamadhyamakakārikā clearly states that the doctrine of Śūnyatā itself depends upon and follows the middle way position. Therefore, Nāgārjuna says, "Yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe, sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā", which means "whatever is dependent arising that is emptiness, that is dependent upon convention, and that itself is the middle way" . This stanza clearly reveals that the four key terms śūnyatā (emptiness), pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination), upādāya-prajñapti (designation or derived name) and madhyamā-pratipad

(Middle Path) are expressly declared as synonyms. Among the four key terms, the concept of emptiness is the foremost heart term which is dealing with the rest three terms in ascribing the philosophy of middle way (Madhyamaka School) as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Eminent Nāgārjuna's encounter to ancient Buddhist hermeneutics who were dealing with Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika and Vijñāṇavāda Buddhist Schools, by applying metaphoric term emptiness (śūnyatā), along with depicting the evolving of emptiness (śūnyatā) doctrine. Nāgārjuna did not accept any kind of dogmatic concepts, but clearly explained in logical way and demonstrated to the people not to grasp in attachment as the Buddha advices. The śūnyatā (emptiness) doctrine of Nāgārjuna is the teaching of the Buddha as a par excellence.

As examined above, the early Buddhist teaching describes the notion of 'emptiness' (śūnyatā) from threefold perspectives, namely, treating it (śūnyatā) as a meditative dwelling, as an attribute of objects, and as a type of heedfulness-release, whereas Madhyamaka and Yogācāra Schools used the concept of emptiness as a skillful means for understanding doctrinal expositions, such as the dependent nature (parikalpita-svabhāva) among the three natures' (trisvabhāva), ascribing middle way (madhyamā-pratipad), using as remover of all wrong views (drṛti).

Based on above considerations, one can conclude that the doctrine of emptiness like a lamp which could be used as an object to understand the central Buddhist teaching of dependent origination along with ascribing the Buddha's doctrinal diversity.

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