

An Inquiry into Nagarjuna's Sectarian Identity: Mahayana Tradition vs. Early Buddhism

Li Ying Ying¹

Introduction

Nagarjuna is one of the most influential figures in Buddhist philosophy, best known for his work, the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* (**MMK**), which established the doctrine of *Sunyata* (Emptiness). While he is traditionally revered as a foundational figure of the Mahayana tradition, a critical examination of his primary texts and terminology reveals a complex relationship with both early Nikaya Buddhism and the emerging Mahayana schools of his time,.

Research Problem

Despite his traditional association with Mahayana, the MMK—his most authentic work—contains no mention of Mahayana sutras by name, nor does it employ standard Mahayana technical terms such as *Bodhicitta* (the aspiration for enlightenment for the sake of all beings) or *Upaya-kausalya* (skillfulness in means). This absence leads to a significant scholarly debate regarding whether Nagarjuna can be definitively categorized as a Mahayanist.

Objectives

To investigate the presence or absence of Mahayana-specific influence and terminology within the MMK.

To analyze the relationship between Nagarjuna's philosophy and the early Buddhist teachings found in the Nikayas and Agamas.

To examine Nagarjuna's critique of the *Svabhava* (intrinsic nature) concept as advanced by the Sarvastivada school,.

Discussion

The sources indicate that there is no strong evidence in the MMK to prove Nagarjuna was a Mahayanist. He lived during a period when *Prajna-paramita* literature was already developing, yet he chose not to quote these texts, focusing instead on fundamental concepts like Pratityasamutpada (Dependent Origination) and the Four Noble Truths, which are central to the early five Nikayas.

¹ MA Graduate student, Department of Religious Studies, University of the West USA. 376930246qq@gmail.com

Nagarjuna's primary philosophical project was to rectify what he saw as a "wrong direction" in Buddhist thought, specifically the Sarvastivada doctrine of *Svabhava*. He argued that if things possessed an unchanging intrinsic nature, then change, cause and effect, and the path to liberation would be impossible. By demonstrating that all things are *Sunya* (empty) because they are dependently arisen (*pratityasamutpanna*), he sought to restore the original meaning of the Buddha's middle way. While the *Mahaprajnaparamita-upadesa* is attributed to him in Chinese tradition, modern scholars like Lamotte question its authorship since it lacks support from Indian or Tibetan sources.

Conclusion

Nagarjuna appears less as a sectarian Mahayana leader and more as a rigorous Buddhist reformer dedicated to protecting the Buddha's core message from the philosophical errors of "intrinsic nature". His work serves to bridge the gap between early teachings and the profound insights of emptiness.

Keywords - Nagarjuna, Mahayana, Sunyata (Emptiness), Svabhava, Mulamadhyamakakarika, Pratityasamutpada

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