

ARTIGOS

THE ‘TWO TRUTHS’ DOCTRINE (SATYADVAYA) AND THE NATURE OF UPĀYA IN NĀGĀRJUNA¹

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RESUMO *O objetivo deste artigo é contribuir para a compreensão da doutrina das “duas verdades” (satyadvaya), tal como presente no Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (“Os versos fundamentais do caminho do meio”) (XXIV.8-10) de Nāgārjuna. Argumentamos, para tanto, que a doutrina das “duas verdades” constitui o fundamento estrutural básico para a funcionalidade operacional do upāya (lit., “meios hábeis”), que é, talvez, a noção epistemológico-pedagógica mais importante do budismo Mahāyāna.*

Palavras-chave *Nāgārjuna, Budismo Mahāyāna, upāya, satyadvaya.*

ABSTRACT *The objective of this article is to contribute to the understanding of Nāgārjuna’s ‘two truths’ doctrine (satyadvaya) as presented in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (“The Fundamental Verses of the Middle Path”) (XXIV.8-10). For that purpose, we argue that ‘two truths’ doctrine*

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the basic structural framework for the operational functionality of upāya of upāya (lit., 'skilful means'), perhaps the most important epistemological/pedagogical notion of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Keywords *Nāgārjuna, Mahāyāna Buddhism, upāya, satyadvaya.*

I Introduction

The objective of this article is to contribute to the understanding of Nāgārjuna's 'two truths' doctrine (*satyadvaya*) as presented in the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*³ ("The Fundamental Verses of the Middle Path") (XXIV.8-10, pp. 331-3) by arguing that it constitutes the basic structural framework for the operational functionality of an *upāya* (lit., 'skilful means'), perhaps the most important epistemological/pedagogical notion of Mahāyāna Buddhism. My interpretation of the relevant passages of the MMK takes the support of canonic *sūtras* – both the *pāli* as well as the Mahāyāna *sūtras* – and post-Nāgārjunian commentarial tradition with emphasis on Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa. As a methodological principle, I'll adopt an insider's perspective, more apologetic rather than juridical, trying to reconstruct Nāgārjuna's internal logic as a meaningful and coherent articulation between the 'two-truths' doctrine (*satyadvaya*) and his overall philosophy of emptiness (*sūnyatā*).

II The critical context

As Walser has convincingly shown (2008, pp. 224-63), Nāgārjuna's contextual intervention is directly related to the major developments that followed the Buddha's death (*mahāparanirvāna*) and the major split that took place within the *saṅgha* between the Mahāsāṃghika school and the Sthaviravāda school. Though the primary divergences seems to be related to matters of *vinaya* – i.e., the rules of monastic discipline –, subsequent developments show the proliferation of various subschools upholding specific hermeneutical readings of the Buddha's words (*sūtras* or *buddhavacana*) and consigning them into specific *abhidharmas* – the in-depth and systematic reflections on the *sūtras*. One of those hermeneutical developments, closely associated with

3 From now on, to be referred to by the abbreviation MMK. I'll basically refer to the Sanskrit text included in David Kalupahana's *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*. (1991) and, complementarily, to Raghunath Pandey's edition "The Madhyamakaśāstram of Nāgārjuna" (1988-9).

the Mahāsāṃgika school, is the Prajñāptivāda subschool who seems to have been one the first systematisers of the two-truths doctrine within the Buddhist tradition, being a sort of embryonic cell of what was latter called Mahāyāna and the proper partisan context of influence inherited by Nāgārjuna (Walser, 2008, p. 234). The Prajñāptivāda subschool sustained that all composite phenomena as well as all elementary *dharmas* – i.e., the elementary conceptual constituents of experience systematized by the *ābhidharmika* tradition in the line of the Buddha's teachings on aggregates (*skandhas*), links (*nidānas*), etc. – were mere conceptual constructions (*prajñāpti*) having no substantiality on their own (Ramanan, 1998, pp. 62-3). The world as one's mundane experiences meant to satisfy egocentric designs and anchored on seemingly independent subjects and objects, is said to constitute *saṃvṛti-sat(ya)* or *prajñāpti-sat(ya)*, i.e., conventional truth; whereas the (meta-linguistic) realization of their fundamental interdependent nature as (mere) conceptual and conventional constructions, otherwise known as *nirvāṇa*, would constitute *paramārtha-sat(ya)* or *dravya-sat(ya)*, i.e., the ultimate truth.

The oppositional context of Nāgārjuna's intervention, on the other hand, is represented by the Sarvāstivāda subschool, an offshoot and dissidence of the Sthaviravāda school (*pāli*, Theravāda) (Baruah, 2000, p. 44). Building on the alleged transforming capabilities of analytical procedures that allegedly established the elementary *dharmas* as ultimate non-analysable factors of experience, the Sarvāstivāda school goes on to entrust these latter with an unexpected ontological dimension. In sharp contrast with the lower level of reality represented by one's phenomenal world of physical and mental composite constructs, these pre-empirical elementary conceptual *dharmas* are declared to pertain to the highest level of ontological existence as substantive, real and permanent entities, endowed with intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). From here emerged the Sarvāstivāda's revised version of the two-truths doctrine: the elementary *dharmas* are declared to constitute *paramārtha-sat* and one's phenomenal experiences are declared to constitute *prajñāpti-sat*. In other words, *paramārtha-sat* or *dravya-sat* was to be understood as a discursive positive postulation of ever-lasting conceptual realities having intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), i.e, existing in all three times and, as such, immune to any sort of determination by extrinsic factors and causes (*apratyayahetu*) (Walser, 2008, pp. 208-12).

It's interesting to note that the Sarvāstivāda position seems to be an extreme development within a framework of possibilities open up to the *ābhidharmica* traditions. In fact, the highly sophisticated systematization of instrumental concepts – the elementary *dharmas* (*skandhas*, *nidānas*, *āyatanas*, etc.),

originally aiming at deconstructing the composite and interdependent nature of all phenomena – posed an eminent risk of having them (i.e., the instrumental concepts) either being mistaken for or actually understood as ontological conceptual reifications. In fact, though for the majority of the *ābhidarmika* traditions, most of the *dharmas* have a momentary and conditional character (*saṃskṛta dharmas*), being therefore (mutually) dependent on causes and conditions (*pratīyayaḥetu*), some of them – an unfoldment of the basic notion of *nirvāṇa* – were classified as being ‘unconditional’ (*asaṃskṛta dharmas*). An ‘unconditional dharma’, even if conceived to accommodate the unique state of *nirvāṇa* and understood as a matter of realisation rather than conceptualization – as it was the case among the Mahāśāṃgikas (and, therefore, among the Prajñāptivāda school) (Walser, 2008, pp. 214-8) – may easily be suggestive of a transcendent and eternal realm, i.e, an eternal *dharma* beyond *pratīyasamutpāda*. Sarvāstivāda’s intervention seems, therefore, to constitute a radical exploration into the eternality of *a saṃskṛta dharmas*, by positing that the constitutive and recurrent character of the elementary *dharmas* in general – both *saṃskṛta* and *asaṃskṛta* – would justify their being invested with an ontological dimension. In short, if the idea of eternal unconditional *dharmas* is in itself quite problematic, the idea of eternal conditioned *dharmas* seems to border contradiction. Accordingly, the Sarvāstivāda school strives hard to reconcile the idea of momentary appearance (*kṣāṇikatā*) of *saṃskṛta dharmas* with the idea of their eternal existence (*svabhāva*) (King, 1995, p. 100).

Not surprisingly, the Sarvāstivāda school drew considerable opposition among Buddhist circles, being accused of being directly influenced by Vedic realist schools of Sāṃkhya and Vaiśeṣika and, as a consequence, they were expelled from the Buddhist community (King 1995, p. 91). The Sarvāstivāda school’s support of ultimate substantial realities – the elementary *dharmas* – as ontological constituents of an otherwise interdependent world marked by dependent co-origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*) seem to constitute a clear violation of the Buddha’s words in three basic senses: (i) it brought the idea of an ultimate truth under the preview of propositional sentences, something proscribed the Buddha, notably in the *pāli Kaccānagottasutta* (Sansk., *Kātyāyanagotrāsūtra*) where he sentenced: “Kaccāna, one extreme is: ‘Everything exist’. Another extreme is: ‘Nothing exists’. While avoiding both the extremes, the Tathāgata (i.e., the Buddha) teaches that the *dharma* is the middle way.”⁴; (ii) it suggested that a certain level of objective reality was,

4 “Sabbamatthīti kho kaccāna, ayameko anto. Sabbaṃ natthīti ayaṃ dutiyo anto. Ete te kaccāna ubho ante anupagamma majjhena tathāgato dhammaṃ deseti” (*Kaccānagottasutta*, 2015, Samyutta Nikāya 12.15).

so to say, immune to *pratītyasamutpāda* and to the principle of impermanence (*anitya*); (iii) and, finally, while severing one's reality between conventional and non-conventional levels, the teleology of *nirvāṇa* as a means to overcome suffering would end up in a sort of meditative state focused on the latter – i.e., the non-conventional primary elements (*dharmas*) –, i.e., a transcendent state beyond *pratītyasamutpāda* and one's phenomenic experiences.

To Nāgārjuna, the Sarvāstivāda's stand represented an extreme development of an otherwise problematic *ābhidharmika* tradition which brought together two incompatible ideas: on the one side, the idea of *asaṃskṛta* and its Sarvāstivāda's corollary as *nityasaṃskṛta* (eternally conditioned) and, on the other, the idea of *dharma* (Sharma, 1996, p. 66 & King, 1995, p. 113). Those tendencies would amount to an actual dualism, i.e., to an ontological rupture between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* and, as a consequence, to a rejection of the Buddha's Middle Way (*madhyamāpratipada*), its epistemological dimension – i.e., the need to refrain from metaphysical declarations ('is' and 'is not') – as well as its praxiological dimension – i.e., the need to neither be egoistically in the world nor abandon it. Finally, they circumvented the fundamental idea of the whole pervasiveness of *pratītyasamutpāda* as the Buddha's essential teaching. In *Mahāhatthipadopamasutta* (Sanskrit, *Mahāhastīpadopamāsūtra*; or *The Great Sermon on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint*), the Buddha says: "Whoever sees *pañiccasamuppāda* (sanskrit, *pratītyasamutapāda*) sees the *dhamma* (sānskrit, *dharma*), whoever sees the *dhamma* sees *pañiccasamuppāda*."⁵ In other words, *nirvana* is the realization of *pratītyasamutpāda* rather its evasion.

Nāgārjuna's critical intervention presents a higher degree of radicality. Aiming at purging the *ābhidharmika* tradition from the dangers of reifying the Buddha's analytical discourse by claiming ontological substantiality and permanence to elementary soteriological concepts, Nāgārjuna brings into the picture the fundamental idea of 'emptiness' (*śūnyatā*) as a means to clarify what *pratītyasamutpāda* ultimately stands for. It's a fact that the idea of emptiness never reaches a technical sense in the *pāli* canon and in the *ābhidharmika* tradition – being therefore intimately associated with what we call Mahāyāna. Still the spirit of the adjectival sense of the word *śūnya* and its derivative

In the MMK, Nāgārjuna makes an explicit reference to this sutra: "While admonishing Kātyāyana (*pāli*, Kaccāyana), the Buddha rejected both the theses, viz., 'everything exists' (*astīva*) and 'nothing exists' (*nāstīva*) [*Kātyāyanāvavāde caṭṭi nāstīti cobhayaṃ / pratīdham bhagavatā bhāvābhāvavibhavinā*]" (MMK XV.7, p. 232).

5 "yo pañiccasamuppādaṃ passati. So dhammaṃ passati. Yo dhammaṃ passati. So pañiccasamuppādaṃ passati" (*Mahāhatthipadopamasutta*, 2015, Majjhima Nikāya 28).

śūnyatā as the ‘condition of being void of essence’ (*nairātmya*) is presented in many of the *pāli* discourses, as it’s the outstanding case of the *Suññalokasutta* (sanskrit, *Śūnyalokasūtra* or *The Sermon on the Empty Universe*) where the Buddha proclaims: “Ānanda, empty (*suñña*) is the world. It is empty because it is empty of essence and of everything that belongs to it”.⁶

Therefore, the contextual emergence of *śūnyatā* in the Buddhist tradition and the paramount role of Nāgārjuna’s MMK target a very specific goal. The main objective is to hold *śūnyatā* as a razor sword meant to eliminate any attempt of Sarvāstivāda type to entrust any kind of substantiality to the major *ābhidharmika* elementary concepts (*dharmas*) – even if they are assumed as mere analytical concepts of a pre-empirical/experiential nature. One by one, in a sharp and systematic way, Nāgārjuna unveils the interdependent nature of each and every Sarvāstivāda’s elementary *dharma*. He shows that, inasmuch as any other empirical phenomena, the elementary concepts are equally amenable to further analysis and dependent on further causes and conditions (*hetupratyaya*). For example, in MMK IV, titled “Skandhaparīkṣā” (“Examination of Aggregates”), Nāgārjuna analyses, systematically, the interdependent nature of the five basic *dharmas* or aggregates (*skandha*). The constitutive or construed character of all concepts as ‘concepts of reciprocity’ (*anyonyaprajñāpti*)⁷ imply an ultimate dialectical interdependence between every subject and object, agent and patient, preventing the possibility of any substantialized entity (*svabhāva*).

Nāgārjuna’s radical support to the interdependent and conventional nature of all phenomena and all *ābhidharmika dharmas* constitutes a reinstatement of the eminent character of reality as *prajñāpti-sat* and the consequent rejection of Sarvāstivāda’s *dravya-sat*. This opens the way for the consolidation and further clarification of the actual content of Mahāsāṃghika’s (and Prajñāptivāda’s) original two-truths doctrine as the epistemological counterpart of the newly explicative term of ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*) as a pedagogical and prophylactic concept. Rather than a dichotomy of reality – impermanent/permanent – the pair *saṃvṛti-sat(ya)*/ *paramārtha-sat(ya)* acquires, in Nāgārjuna’s critical context, the character of a dichotomy of meaning that co-exists in the same phenomenal reality. In his *Mūlamadhyamakāvatarbhāṣya*, Candrakīrti is unequivocal: “It has been shown that each phenomenon (*bhāva*) has its

6 “Yasmā ca kho ānanda, suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā, tasmā suñño lokoti vuccati” (*Suññalokasutta*, 2015, Saṃyutta Nikāya 35,85).

7 The notion of *anyonyaprajñāpti* was originally formulated by the Prajñāptivāda school and corresponds to the Nagarjuna’s expression *prajñāptir upādāya* (vide MMK XXIV.18, p. 339) (Walsler, 2008, p. 260).

own two natures (*rūpa*): a conventional (*saṃvṛti*) and an ultimate nature (*paramārtha*)". (cited in Tsongkhapa 2006, p. 483)⁸ *Samvṛti-sat(ya)* points to the level of meaning that hides – or at least does not reveal – the empty nature of reality, i.e., their interdependent originated character. It is marked by a subjective disposition to attribute the status of ultimate reality to (mere) conventionality or, in other words, to perpetrate 'metaphysical phantasies', i.e., to erroneously project substantiality into insubstantiality, essentiality into non-essentiality (or conventionality), and permanence into non-permanence. It has practical efficiency as it enables the realization of egocentric designs but, in the long term, on account of its being grounded on ignorance, it is the cause of endless suffering. *Paramārtha-sat(ya)*, on the other hand, points to the level of meaning that realizes (mere) conventionality as such – i.e., the all-pervasive character of *praṭīyasamutpāda* or emptiness of all phenomena – being, therefore, of the nature of a metalinguistic realization. Accordingly, Candrakīrti concludes: "Whatever is ultimate (*paramārtha*) for ordinary beings is merely conventional (*saṃvṛti*) for the *āryas* who are engaged with appearances. The essence of conventional phenomena, which is emptiness (*śūnyatā*), is the ultimate for them" (cited in Tsongkhapa, 2006, p. 484).

The Mahāyāna's renewed understanding of the 'two truths' doctrine in accordance with their cluster of specific *sūtras* and the words of Nāgārjuna brings the fundamental teleology of *nirvāṇa* under specific jurisdiction of *bodhi*, i.e., the 'realization' of the profound implications of ordinary reality rather than an experience of any extraordinary reality. In other words, if *saṃvṛti-satya* is to be understood as the level of meaning that hides conventionality as such, *paramārtha-satya* or *bodhi* is the level of meaning that reveals it. "*Paramārtha-satya* says Dan Lusthaus, is the clear seeing of the actuality of *saṃvṛti*, i.e., *saṃvṛti* made transparent" (Lusthaus, 2002, p. 231). Accordingly, "this means that there are not actually two truths but merely a single truth in its presentation" (Matsunaga, 1974, p. 61), this being perhaps the precise meaning of the expression *satyadvaya* (lit., "two levels of truth"), widely used by Candrakīrti in his commentary on the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* titled *Prasannapadā*, understood as the ultimate explanation of Nāgārjuna's

8 This and other quotations from Candrakīrti's *Mūlamadhyamakāvatarbhāṣya* are taken from Tsongkhapa's Tibetan commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* titled *rTsa she ſik chen rigs pa'i rgya mtsho /Tsashay tikchen rikpeh gyatso* (Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*). In the sequence, Tsongkhapa adds: "Each of the internal and external phenomena has two natures: an ultimate and a conventional nature" (2006, p. 483). Tsongkhapa's modern commentator Dungen further explains: "(in Tsongkhapa), the basis of the division is not two levels of reality, but two *objects of knowledge* defined as the two epistemic isolates (or 'natures') of a single given phenomenon. Ultimate reality is not "higher" than conventional reality, but merely a *property* of every possible phenomenon" (2012).

“dve satye” (lit., “two truths”).⁹ As a metalinguistic dimension underscoring every propositional and conceptual expression, *paramārtha-satya* is the silence behind each and every word. Therefore, the postulation of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) as a soteriological clarifying technique makes only sense because there a recurrent existential error which tends to superimpose (*samāropa*) the substantial (*ātman/svabhāva*) onto the insubstantial (*śūnya*), this (i.e., the superimposition) being the proper meaning of *samvṛtti*. Therefore, in Nāgārjuna’s understanding, the Buddha’s words do not contemplate any instance of denial of the world. As Dungen puts it, echoing the teachings of Tsongkhapa, “the object of negation (Buddha’s teachings) is not the world of conventionality as such, but the erroneous substantialization of the phenomena or, what is the same, the lack of (realization of the) interdependent origination of (all) phenomena and the belief in their independent and autonomous existence, endowed with self-nature (*svabhāva*)” (2012). Accordingly, the Buddha’s teachings are meant to prompt one to sublimate one’s *samvṛti* perspectives (*prapañcopaśamam*) (MMK I, p. 101) – both the mundane ‘metaphysics’ that shapes one’s routine attachment to the objects of the world and also the sophisticated metaphysics of doctrinal philosophers – because there lies the ultimate root-cause of suffering (*duḥkha*).

III The two truths doctrine and the Buddha’s teachings

Though Nāgārjuna’s general contextual intervention in the MMK could be described as an attempt to rehabilitate a rather epistemological perspective to the two-truths doctrine, the specific sub-context in which the explicit mention to it occurs, suggests an important additional element that may, perhaps, have been decisive for the consolidation of what came to be known as the Mahāyāna or Śūnyavāda current of Buddhism. In fact, Nāgārjuna’s appeal to the two-truths doctrine appears in a dramatic moment of the MMK. After having forcefully sustained the emptiness of all phenomena and more specifically of all elementary *dharmas*, Nāgārjuna is asked by the opponent, late in the Chapter XXIV (out of 27) titled “Āryasatyaparīkṣā” (“Examination of the [Four] Noble Truths), if the all-pervasiveness of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) as

9 A suitable translation in terms of western philosophy would be Heidegger’s distinction between ‘Being’ (*das Sein*) and ‘beings’ (*das Seiende*). He says: “Being is essentially different from a being, from be-ings... We call it the *ontological difference* - the differentiation between being and beings” (Heidegger, 1982, p. 17). The forgetfulness of this distinction (between ‘Being’ and ‘beings’) – otherwise called “the ‘forgetfulness of Being’ that... occurs in the course of Western philosophy” (Korab-Karpowicz, 2007, p. 301) – is perhaps responsible for the contemporary western divorce between philosophy and soteriology.

a descriptive understanding of dependent co-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) would not completely obliterate the Buddha's teachings and, more specifically, the (Four) Noble Truths (*āryasatya*), for the simple fact of their being made of words and concepts, i.e., of 'mere' conventionalities. In other words, the Buddha's *dharma*, the truth of truths would itself risk belonging to *samrvtti-sat* instead of *paramārtha-sat*. In that case, how could there be any possibility at all of *nirvāṇa/bodhi*?

Nāgārjuna's answer touches the core of what emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and the Mahāyāna actually mean. He accuses the opponent of not understanding the intended meaning of *śūnyatā*. In fact, says Nāgārjuna, the opponent understands *śūnyatā* in the same spirit of any other propositional statement taking it as declaration of non-existence. Glossing Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti states: "Thus, emptiness destroys the one who takes it to mean the non-existence of things (*abhāva*)... Your allegation derives from wrongly foisting the meaning of non-existence (*abhāva*) onto the idea of the absence of being (*śūnya*). But we do not declare the meaning of non-existence (*abhāva*) and of absence of being (*śūnya*) to be the same; rather absence of being (*śūnya*) has the same meaning as dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*)".¹⁰ In other words, the opponent thinks that, different from his own postulation of permanent elementary *dharmas* that would ensure the relative reality of composite phenomena, Nāgārjuna's postulation of the non-substantiality of all *dharmas* and phenomena would imply that phenomenal reality was just an illusionary world, of which the Buddha's teachings were also irremediably a part.

To refute those allegations, Nāgārjuna is forced to be more precise about the actual status of the Buddha's teachings. First, he reminds the opponent that, throughout the dialogue, he sustained that reality and its recurrent processes of appearance and disappearance of phenomena could only be admissible if things were devoid of self-nature (*svabhāva*). In other words, emptiness was a pre-requisite for the reality of the world and not otherwise. The opponent's postulation of self-existing entities, instead, would obstruct the possibility of a world-given experience. Second, and that's the core of his rebuttal, Nāgārjuna states that having declared the emptiness of all *dharmas*, there is no possibility of understanding emptiness – and consequently all the Buddha's teachings – as ultimate ontological doctrines about reality. This amounts to the emptying of emptiness by which Nāgārjuna seeks to free its conceptual

10 "evaṃ tavadabhāvena grhyamāṇā śūnyā grahitāraṃ vināśayati... abhāvārthaṃ hi śūnyatārtham adhyāropya prasaṅga udbhāvito bhavātā | na ca vāyamabhāvārthaṃ śūnyatārthaṃ vyācakṣmahe, kiṃ tarhi pratītyasamutpādārthaṃ | ityato na yukta metat śūnyatādarśanādūṣṇam" (Candrakīrti, 2015, XXIV.13).

dimensions from any ontological claim. In other words, Nāgārjuna's position is clear: *śūnyatā*, as much as the Buddha's fundamental teachings, such as the *pratīyasamutpāda*, are not ontological statements about reality, they are not (ontological) doctrines (*dr̥ṣṭis*). Instead, they function as a major instrument to eliminate all the *dr̥ṣṭis* (*sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇa*). In three major passages of the MMK, Nāgārjuna shows an uncompromising posture on that:

The Victorious Ones have announced that emptiness is the relinquishing of all views (*sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇa*). Those who are possessed of the view of emptiness are said to be incorrigible.¹¹

'Empty', 'non-empty', 'both', or 'neither' – these should not be declared. It is expressed only for the purpose of communication (or teaching) (*prajñāpty arthaṃ*).¹²

We affirm that the interdependent origination (*pratīyasamutpādaḥ*) is (what we call) emptiness. Now this (viz., Emptiness) is (also) dependent on convention (*prajñāptir upādāya*). This is the Middle Way (*madhyamā*).¹³

We have now reached a climax in Nāgārjuna's argumentation. How to classify the extraordinary character of the Buddha's words and teachings which are not a *dr̥ṣṭi* (ontological doctrine), and how do they actually operate so effectively to lead men to *nirvāṇa/bodhi*?

The answer to first part of the question is the word *upāya*, usually translated as "skilful means", or "skilful strategy/pedagogy", as a timely and appropriate form of teaching suiting the specificities of each one's suffering and ignorance. In this case, however, the Buddha's proficiency in skilful or pedagogical means (*upāya kauśalya*) is not to be understood as an introductory discourse for the sake of later definitive one. There is no definite discourse about reality. Therefore all the Buddha's teachings, may be simpler or indirect (*neyārtha*) or more sophisticated and direct (*nītārtha*), are to be considered *upāyas*. In other words, notwithstanding the dissimilarity with regard to the ultimate nature of reality, *upāyas* are unavoidable tools to realize it. In the Pāli canon, as Richard Gombrich rightly points out, "The exercise of skill to which it (the word *upāya*) refers, the ability to adapt one's message to the audience, is of enormous importance" (2006, p. 17). Accordingly, the expression *upāya*

11 "śūnyatā sarvadṛṣṭīnāṃ proktā nihsaraṇaṃ jinaiḥ / yeṣāṃ tu śūnyatā-dr̥ṣṭis tān asādhyān babhāṣire" (MMK XIII.8, p. 223).

12 "śūnyam iti na vaktavyam aśūnyam iti vā bhavet / ubhayaṃ nobhayaṃ ceti prajñāpty arthaṃ tu kathyate" (MMK XXII.11, p. 307).

13 "yaḥ pratīyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tāṃ pracakṣāmahe / sā prajñāptir upādāya pratipat madhyamā" (MMK XXIV.18, p. 339).

kaśālyā appears already in some the Pāli *sūtras* with the peculiar sense of a pedagogical proficiency. For example, in the *Kimbilatheragāthā*¹⁴ and in the *Dhamma (nāvā) Sutta*¹⁵ the expressions *upāyakusalena* and *upāyaññū kusalo* are used, respectively, to describe the Buddha's attribute of skilfulness in means.

But it's only in the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, mainly in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-Sūtra*, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*, the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* and, above all, in the various Prajñāpāramitā *Sūtras* – among which the *Upāyakauśalya Sūtra* stands high – that the expression *upāya kauśalya* emerges as a technical term to designate a *pāramitā*, i.e., a perfection or virtue of a *bodhisattva*, particularly associated with the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara.¹⁶ As regards Nāgārjuna, the exercise of skilful means is extensively seen throughout his works,¹⁷ though the word *upāya*, in a technical sense, is not explicitly mentioned in the MMK. In other works, we can find explicit explanations of its meaning and implications, and a close association with the notion of *yukti* – an argumentative device – whereby *upāya* assumes the unequivocal sense of a rational means. In *Bodhisambhāra(ka) Śāstra (The Treatise on the Provisions Essential to Enlightenment)*, Nāgārjuna echoes the growing importance, in Mahāyāna tradition, of *upāya kauśalya* as a major *pāramitā* of a *bodhisattva*. He eloquently states:

Prajñāpāramitā is the mother of Bodhisattvas, skill in means (*upāya*) is their father, and compassion (*karuṇā*) is their daughter... Attracting with gifts, teaching the Dharma, listening to the teaching of the Dharma, and also practicing acts of benefit to others — these are skillful means (*upāya*) for attracting [others]. (Nāgārjuna, 2015, Verses 6 & 17)

The answer to the second part of the question above – the structure and operationality of an *upāya* – bring us back to the MMK. It's my contention that in Chapter XXIV, from verses 8 to 10, Nāgārjuna describes precisely the operationality of an *upāya* by resorting to the two-truths doctrine. Let us start with verse 8 that reads as follows:

14 "upāyakusalenāhaṃ buddhenādiccabandhunā / yoniso paṭipajjitvā bhava cittaṃ udabbahinti." ["But with the help of the Buddha, the Kinsman of the Sun, so skilled in means, I practiced wisely, and extracted any attachment to being reborn from my mind."] (*Kimbilatheragāthā*, 2015, Theragātā 158, Kuddaka Nikāya).

15 "piyena'rittana samaṅgibhūto / so tāraye tattha bahūpi aññe / tatrūpāyaññū kusalo mutimā." ["As one who, having boarded a boat firmly equipped with oars and a rudder, and knowing the method, is skilful and wise, by means of it he causes many others to cross over."] (*Dhamma [nāvā] Sutta*, 2015, Suttanipāta 323, Kuddaka Nikāya).

16 For the notion of *upāya* in the Mahāyāna *sūtras* see Michael Pye's "Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism" (2003).

17 See John Schroeder's "Nāgārjuna and the Doctrine of 'Skilful Means'" (2000).

The teachings of the *dharma* by the Buddha are based upon two truths: the conventional truth (*loka-saṃvṛtisatya*) and the truth based on the ultimate reality (or, 'the ultimate truth') (*satyaṃ ca paramārthataḥ*).¹⁸

If we recollect the exact context of the statement above – viz., a reaction of Nāgārjuna to the opponent's perplexity over what he considers to be a contradiction between *sūnyatā* and the Four Noble Truths (*āryasatyāni catvāri*) – we are bound to agree that Nāgārjuna's motivation is basically to explain the nature, the status and the operationality of the Buddha's words. If he is not able to do so, all his highly sophisticated rhetoric will fall apart. In other words, the contextual goal of MMK XXIV.8 is not to present the two-truths doctrine as such but, instead, to make the case for a soteriological efficacy of the Buddha's pedagogical discourse by resorting to the two truths doctrine. Let us consider this closely.

Nāgārjuna's critical reinterpretation of the two truths doctrine, in line with the Prajñāptivāda School, is implicitly presented throughout the text of the MMK, right from the beginning till the very end. It constitutes, in fact, a major *leitmotiv* of the whole exercise of systematically rejecting the Sarvāstivāda's postulation of the elementary *dharma*s as constitutive of *paramārtha-satya*. Besides, we should also note that the two-truths doctrine is not an invention of the Buddha, the Abhidharma tradition – be it the Mahāsāṃghika or the Sarvāstivāda schools¹⁹ – or the Mahāyāna tradition. It constitutes, instead, a pan-Indian doctrine that points to a plurality of ontological/epistemological levels wherein the conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) is useful for one to achieve temporary worldly goals but, in the long run, an obstacle for one to realize the ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) which frees one, in a definitive way, from all suffering. One could perhaps trace it back to the Upaniṣads and more specifically to the oldest of them such as the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, the *Chāndogya*, the *Kaṭha* and the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣads* that either precede or are contemporary to the Buddha. In general terms, they reflect the soteriological developments that expanded, in great depth, the ancient Vedic formulation of the soul's two possible paths after death depending upon one's more or less good behaviour in this world: the path of the gods (*devayāna*) and the path of the manes (*pitṛyāna*), respectively. (*R̥g Veda*, 2015, X.xviii.1 & X.ii.7) This

18 "dve satye samupāsīṛitya buddhānām dharma deśanā / loka-saṃvṛti-satyam ca satyam ca paramārthataḥ" (MMK XXIV.8, p. 331).

19 Besides these schools, early Theravāda commentaries on the Kathāvatthu (viz., the *Kathāvatthupparakaraṇaṭṭhakathā*) and Aṅguttara Nikāya (viz., *Manorathapūraṇi*) make explicit references to the two truths doctrine. The former goes as follows: "The Awakened One, the best of teachers, spoke of two truths, conventional and higher; no third is ascertained" (cited in McCagney, 1997, p. 84).

expansion entrusted the two paths with an unequivocal epistemological and teleological sense: (i) the path of rituals (*yajña/iṣṭāpūrta*), marked by partial knowledge or relative ignorance, is constitutive of an initial stage of self-transformation that projects existential change as a better rebirth; (ii) and the path of knowledge (*jnāna/satya/tapas*), marked by the complete elimination of ignorance and the full knowledge of the Non-Dual Reality (*brahman*), is constitutive of the ultimate stage of self-transformation leading to one's definitive overcoming of suffering, here and now, in this very world. These two existential paths or levels of Reality are variously named in the Upaniṣads: *pitṛloka* (the world of the manes) and *brahmaloka/devaloka* (the world of Brahman) in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1983, VI.ii.15-16, pp. 776, 780-1); *pitṛloka* (the world of the manes) and *brahman/devayāna* (the world of Brahman) in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (1983, V.x.1&4, pp. 293 & 298); *preyas* (the path of one's desires) and *śreyas* (the path of one's betterment) and the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (1983, II.1, p. 152); and finally – perhaps the most accomplished epistemological sense – *aparā-vidyā* (lower knowledge/truth) and *parā-vidyā* (supreme knowledge/truth) in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (1983, II.1.4, p. 320).

Therefore, what's at stake in MMK XXIV.8 is not a discussion on the constitutive elements of the 'two-truths' doctrine *per se*, but the way in which Nāgārjuna's reinterpretation of it, in line with Prajñāptivāda school, and, above all, by resorting to the concept of *śūnyatā*, impacts on one's understanding of the operational functionality and soteriological efficacy of the Buddha's discourse. It constitutes a decisive moment in Indian Buddhism leading to a revision of the specific relation that articulates the nature of the Buddha's teachings, on the one hand, and the 'two-truths' doctrine, on the other. It's common to find in some hermeneutical currents of the *ābhidharmika* tradition the expressions *saṃvṛti-sat* (Pāli, *sammuti-sacca*) and *paramārtha-sat* (Pāli, *paramattha-sacca*) being used as designative of two levels of the Buddha's teachings (*deśanā*; Pāli, *desanā*): an introductory or lower level, otherwise known as *neyārtha* (Pāli, *neyyattha*), mostly conveyed by concepts such as 'I' and 'mine'; and a profound and superior level, otherwise known as *nītārtha* (Pāli, *nītattha*), mostly conveyed by the Four Noble Truths and deconstructive concepts such as the elementary *dharma*s (*skandhas, nidānas, āyatana*s).²⁰ In this case, both the levels and, therefore, the meaning of the word *sat* ('truth') itself have a clear pedagogical sense. However, the Sarvāstivāda's intervention

20 See, especially, the commentaries on the *Kathāvatthu* and *Ānguttara Nikāya* (McCagney, 1997, pp. 82-6).

claiming to the ‘the ultimate teaching’ (*nītārtha*) – the elementary *dharma*s – the status of an ‘ultimate (discursive) truth’ (*paramārtha-sat*) prompts, in other circles, a counter reaction. That’s precisely the case of the Mahāsāṃghika – and some of its subschools, such as the Prajñāptivāda – who declared, as discussed above, the conventional nature (*saṃvṛti-sat*) of all discursive reality – including the Buddha’s teaching – and *paramārtha-sat* as a metalinguistic dimension.

Taking the Prajñāptivāda’s critique to the ultimate consequences, Nāgārjuna’s task in MMK XXIV.8 is to explain the renewed understanding of the correlation between the pair *saṃvṛti-sat/paramārtha-sat* and the Buddha’s teachings. His fiercely attack, throughout the MMK, on the Sarvāstivāda’s elementary *dharma*s brings language, and more specifically the Buddha’s soteriological discourse in both its dimensions (*neyārtha* and *nītārtha*), into the inescapable realm of *saṃvṛtisat*. In other words, departing from the *ābhidharmika* tendency “to consider such words as ‘I’ and ‘mine’ as *sammūtisacca* and the Noble Truth, the Eightfold Path, etc., as *paramatthasacca*, Nāgārjuna includes ordinary discourse, as well as the Buddha Dharma in *saṃvṛtisatya*” (McCagney, 1997p. 86). In MMK XXIV.8, Nāgārjuna is unequivocal about that point: “You can’t teach *paramārtha-satya* without resorting to *saṃvṛti-satya*”.²¹ As a consequence, *saṃvṛti-sat(ya)* and *neyārtha*, on the one side, and *paramārtha-sat(ya)* and *nītārtha*, on the other, cease to be synonymous. And the whole idea of inferior and superior levels of teaching begs itself for a redefinition within a pedagogical/epistemological context that necessarily involves *saṃvṛtisat*. It, finally, proscribes a possible translation or explanation of MMK XXIV.8’s *saṃvṛti-satya* as ‘lower teaching’ and *paramārtha-satya* as a ‘higher teaching’.

IV The Buddha’s teachings as *Upāya*

Given the above considerations, the opponent’s objections in MMK XXIV.8 to Nāgārjuna’s resorting to *śūnyatā* as a critical instrument to denounce the impropriety of the Sarvāstivāda’s elementary *dharma*s, not only seems to challenge the essential teachings of the Buddha – the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path – but also the possibility of any Buddhist teaching at all. Therefore, if in a first moment, Nāgārjuna denounces the opponent’s misunderstanding of *śūnyatā* as an ontological doctrine – or, as state above,

21 “vyavahāramanāśritya paramārtho na deśyate” (MMK XXIV.8, p. 331).

the opponent's misunderstanding of 'absence of substantiality' (*śūnya*) as 'non-existence' (*abhāva*) –, in a second moment, he is compelled to explain in detail how a discourse that keeps no representational relation to Reality can be conducive to the latter's complete realization. In other words, how can a *samvṛti-satya*-based discourse lead to *paramārtha-satya*, if the latter is the spontaneous residue that follows the elimination of the errors of the former?

Nāgārjuna's answer to this fundamental query constitutes the core purpose of MMK XXIV.8 and following verses. Combining the words of verses 8 and 10, it's clear that Nāgārjuna purports the following resolution: the Buddha's teachings are, everywhere, a peculiar combination of *samvṛti-satya* and *paramārtha-satya*, the first reflecting the unavoidable dimension of language and the second, the unavoidable stand from where any act perpetrated by a man like the Buddha – one who has attained *nirvana/Bodhi* – is originated. This combination is precisely what defines the nature of an *upāya*, the fundamental feature of the Buddha's words. In verse 8, the word *samupāśritya* could be invoked as a philological corroboration. In fact, its primary sense of 'based on' – more commonly denoted by the cognate *upāśritya* – when prefix by *sam* could suggest the idea of an 'act of concertation', 'an act of combination', or 'an act of gathering' of constitutive factors. In that case, the translation would run as follows:

The teachings of the Buddhas on the *dharmā* are based on (a joint concertation of) two truths: the conventional truth (*samvṛti-satya*) and the truth (*satya-paramārtha*) based on the ultimate Reality (or the ultimate Truth). (MMK XXIV.8, p. 331)²²

And, in verse 10, Nāgārjuna's stand is the more unequivocal in favouring this interpretation. He states:

You can't teach the ultimate truth (*paramārtha*) without resorting to conventional truth (*samvṛti*). And without the realization of ultimate truth (*paramārtha*), realization (*nirvāṇa*) is not achieved.²³

To admit the soteriological efficacy of the Buddha's discourse within Nāgārjuna's revised version of the two-truth doctrine, understood as a peculiar combination of *samvṛtisatya* and *paramārthasatya*, implies a significant re-evaluation of the *samvṛti* realm. Candrakīrti's gloss of the relevant passage of MMK XXIV.8-10 sets the explanatory tone for that re-evaluation. In addition

22 See note N. 16 above.

23 "vyavāharamanāśritya paramārtho na deśyate / paramārthamanāgamyā nirvāṇam nādhigamyate" (MMK XXIV.10, p. 333).

to the meaning as ‘concealment’ or ‘being covered by ignorance’ which reflects the mundane attitude of projecting substantiality or intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) on that which is eminently unsubstantial or *śūnya*,²⁴ Candrakīrti mentions a second meaning which points to a soteriological and ultimate function that brings forth the fundamental process of “mutual dependence” (*anyonasamāśraya*) or “dependent co-origination” (*parasparasambhava*).²⁵ We could, therefore, state that *saṃvṛti* is, simultaneously, “a closure and a powerful openness to the Other, an openness transversed by language and communication” (Lusthaus, 2002, p. 231) In other words, *saṃvṛti* comprehends a twofold possibility in regard to its relation to *paramārtha*: (i) one which lacks the guidance and inspiration of *paramārtha*, i.e., which ignores the conventional nature of Reality; (ii) and another guided and inspired by *paramārtha* that realises conventionality – i.e., dependent co-origination (*praṭītyasamutpāda*) or emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of *svabhāva* – as such. It’s precisely this latter meaning that peculiarly identifies the Buddha’s teachings. It constitutes, in Candrakīrti’s words, the unavoidable “means (*upāya*) to attain *nirvāṇa*”, just like a “container for someone who wants water”.²⁶ The definitive clarification of this unique combination of the two truths in defining the nature of the Buddha’s words and teachings is, finally, present in Candrakīrti’s *Madhyamakavatāra*: “The conventional truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*) is the means (*upāya-bhūta*), the ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*) is the goal (*upeya-bhūta*)”.²⁷

We are now in a better position to appreciate Nāgārjuna’s reply to the opponent. He states that there is, in fact, a way of speaking the unspeakable and that the words of the Buddha have precisely that character. They don’t speak directly, through propositional cognitive ways, but indirectly by systematically resorting to language that targets the elimination of one’s errors about reality. In other words, the Buddha’s teaching are a language of the ‘unsaying’²⁸ (of

24 He says: “‘The mundane’ (*saṃvṛti*) means being utterly obscured. Again, ignorance arising from the utter obscuring of the true nature of things is called ‘the mundane’”. [“samantādvāraṇaṃ saṃvṛtiḥ / ajñānaṃ hi sa mantātsarvapadārthatattvāvacchādanātsaṃvṛtiritiucyate”] (Candrakīrti, 2015, XXIV.8).

25 He says: “Again, to be reciprocally dependent in existence, that is, for things to be based on each other in utter reciprocity, is to be ‘mundane’ (*saṃvṛti*)” [“parasparasambhavanam vā saṃvṛtiranonyasamāśrayeṇe tyarthah”] (Candrakīrti, 2015, XXIV.8).

26 “This is why the mundane world (*saṃvṛti*), as we have defined it, because it is the means to the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, must, at the outset, necessarily be accepted. It is like a container for someone who wants water”. [“tasmānirvāṇadhigamopāyatvādavaśyameva yathāvasthita saṃvṛtirādāvevābhyupeya bhājanamiva salilārthineti”] (Candrakīrti, 2015, XXIV.10).

27 “upāyabhūtaṃ vyavahārasatyam / upeyabhūtaṃ paramārthasatyam” (Candrakīrti, 2014, 6.80, p. 14).

28 I lent this term from Michael A. Sells’ (1994).

errors), otherwise called '(eliminative) superimposition' (*samāropa*).²⁹ That's precisely what Candrakīrti means when he states:

How can there be teaching (*śruti*) and instruction (*deśana*) of the dharma that is (by nature) inexpressible (*anākṣara*)? It is through (eliminative) superimposition of ideas (*samāropa*) that the inexpressible (*anākṣara*) can be taught and instructed.³⁰

In short, the structure of the Buddha's teachings is invariably a combination of linguistic conventions and an inspiration derived from his having realized the ultimate truth. In other words, as a liberated being, the Buddha's actions can only be sourced in the ultimate truth (*paramārtha*) whereas, while resorting to teaching, he has necessarily to take support of conventional language (*saṃvṛti*). As an extraordinary articulation between *saṃvṛti-satya* (conventional truth) e *paramārtha-satya* (supreme truth), the Buddha's teachings involves a re-orientation, a re-signification, a 'subversion', an expansion of the original meaning of *saṃvṛti-satya*, meant to suit the requirements of the meta-conceptual level of *paramārtha-satya*. And, finally, this extraordinary re-orientation is operationally manifest as a pure eliminative procedure, a pedagogy of (eliminative) superimpositions (*samāropa*) (Tsondu, 2011, pp. 577-8). This eventful character of error elimination constitutes the inner most meaning of *śūnyatā* as a soteriological concept: instead of any substantive 'emptiness', it points to the radical procedure of 'emptying' illicit forms of superimposition (i.e., the superimposition of substantiality (*svabhāva*) onto the world). Accordingly, Nāgārjuna states: "The Victorious Ones (Buddhas) have declared that emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is the process of relinquishing of all views (*dṛṣṭi*). Those who are possessed with the view of emptiness are said to be incorrigible."³¹

This extraordinary concertation between *paramārtha-satya* and *saṃvṛti-satya* is marked by a double fold dynamics: (i) it's a concertation aptly manipulated by a being in the plenitude of self-realization (Buddha/

29 *Samāropa* represents, here, the extraordinary pedagogical meaning of *saṃvṛti* above discussed. It should be distinguished from the mundane sense of the word that points to an illicit superimposition of attributes – the superimposition of *svabhāva* – constitutive of the mundane dimension of *saṃvṛti*. In this case, however, as the Buddha's word, superimposition means, exclusively, an event of error elimination. We should also note that the word *samāropa* is also usually construed in combination with the word *apavāda*, meaning 'removal'. In this sense, the pair *samāropa-apavāda* – superimposition-removal – points to a formally positive attribution followed by a formally negative attribution where both are endowed with an eliminative character.

30 "anākṣarasya dharmasya śrutiḥ kā deśanā ca kā | śrūyate deśyate cāpi samāropādanākṣarah" (Candrakīrti, 2015, XV.2).

31 "śūnyā sarva dṛṣṭināṃ proktā niḥsaraṇaṃ jinaish / yeṣāṃ tu śūnyatā dṛṣṭis tān asādhyaṇ babhāṣire" (MMK XIII.8, p. 223).

bodhisattva); and (ii) it's a concertation that adjusts itself to the specific requirements of the aspirants to *nirvāṇa*. It's precisely this purportful combination of the two-truths doctrine in the context of a soteriological pedagogy, founded in the Buddha's teachings, that constitutes properly the nature of *upāya*. *Upāya* (s) are, therefore, sets of systematic argumentative teachings in which conventional language is entrusted with a unique eliminative capability. They involve a rigorous and, at the same time, subversive use (i.e., systematically eliminative) of the main logical and epistemological instruments, especially the main (empirical) means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*), viz., *pratyakṣa* (perception) and *anumāna*. Instead of substantive reifications, they are forced to expose and unveil the absence (*anupalabधि*) of substantiality (*svabhāva*), the interdependent and empty nature of all one's objects of attachment – i.e., the objects of one's 'metaphysical inventions' on which both absolute existence or eternalism (*śāśvatavāda*) and absolute non-existence or nihilism (*ucchedavāda*) are erroneously superimposed.³² The principles behind this subversive task of turning upside down the traditional instrumentality of (empirical) *pramāṇas* and make them subservient to the main goal of deconstructing one's metaphysical inventions, are superbly discussed in Kamalaśīla's *Mūlamadhyamāka-āloka* (*The Illumination of the Middle Way*) (2004).

The systematic elimination (*upaśama*) of one's obsessions (*prapañca*) (MMK Dedicatory Verse) or 'metaphysical inventions' – viz., the erroneous attribution of *svabhāva* to empty (*śūnya*) entities –, as Nāgārjuna puts it, constitutes, therefore, a rational procedure of apophatic character in strict compliance with the rules of logic and that has two key features. First, it has existential efficacy since it does not pierce mere 'theoretical' constructs, but conceptual constructs that are constitutive of one's being in the world. In other words, the Buddha's eliminative deconstruction targets one's errors about reality that are constitutive of one's attachments. In fact, the ideas of attachment (*kleśa*), on the one hand, and of permanence (*nitya*) or substantiality (*svabhāva*), on the other, are to be understood in a co-extensive way. Even when one 'theoretically' acknowledges the impermanent character of mundane objects, the joy and suffering that underscore our attachment for them are indicative of the subliminal presence of the wrong idea of permanence. Second, the *modus operandi* (of the systematic elimination) may

32 "Exists' implies grasping after eternalism. 'Does not exist' implies the philosophy of annihilation. Therefore, a discerning person should not rely upon existence or non-existence." ["astīti śāśvatagrāho nāstīty ucchedadarśanam / tasmāt astitvanāstīve nāśrīyeta vicakṣaṇaḥ"] (MMK XV.10).

involve positive or negative propositional judgments. In fact, in mundane usage, both positive and negative propositions are 'positive cognitions' while their extraordinary *upāyaka* usage should necessarily involve the elimination of a previous cognition and this can be done with either of the two formal dimension of language. In other words, instead of a propositional judgment, the eliminative deconstruction of errors represents an instrumentalization of language as existential resolution, as existential decision.

The pedagogic alternation, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, between *śūnyata* (formally a propositional negation) and *tathāgatagarbha* or *tathātā* (formally as propositional affirmation), as distinct and equally effective moments of elimination of one's constitutive errors, is an excellence example of how *saṃvṛti* concepts (*prajñāpti*) are used for the sake of *paramārtha*. This sequence of eliminative superimpositions – at time formally positive, at times formally negative – or, in other terms, this balance between positive and negative eliminative propositions preventing any form of discursive reification, has its programmatic principles well defined in the *Prajñā Paramita Hṛdaya Sūtra*'s famous aphorism "Form (*rūpa*) is nothing but emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and emptiness is nothing but form".³³ The *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, on the other hand, presents magnificent descriptions of that systematic procedure. The deconstruction of possible reifications of the seemingly 'negative' concept of *śūnyata* appears, for example, in the following passage:

This [teaching of] emptiness, no-birth, non-duality, and no-self-nature is found in all the sutras of all the Buddhas, and this doctrine is recognized in every one of them. However. Mahāmati, the sutras are the teaching in conformity with the dispositions of all beings and deviate from the [real] sense, and not the truth-preserving statement.³⁴

Conversely, the deconstruction of possible reifications of the seemingly 'positive' concept of *tathāgatagarbha* appears, for example, in the following passage:

And the "No, Mahāmati, my Tathāgatagarbha is not the same as the ego taught by the philosophers; Thus, Mahāmati, the doctrine of the

33 "rūpaṃ śūnyatā śūnyatā rūpaṃ" (*Prajñā Paramita Hṛdaya Sūtra*, 2015, p. 2).

34 atha khalu bhagavān punarapi mahāmatiṃ bodhisattvaṃ mahāsattvametaadvocat-etaddhi mahāmate śūnyatānutpādāvayaniḥsvabhāvalakṣaṇaṃ sarvabuddhānāṃ sarvasūtrāntagataṃ | yatra kvacitsūtrānte'yamevārtho vibhāvayitavyaḥ | eṣa hi mahāmate sūtrāntaḥ sarvasattvāsāyadeśanārthavyabhicāraṇī, na sā tattvapratyavasthānakathā II.137.

Tathāgatagarbha is disclosed in order to awaken the philosophers from their clinging to the idea of the ego.”

An exemplary corollary of this fundamental pedagogical posture, that brings definitive centrality of the concept of *upāya*, is the Buddha’s judicious usage of the words *ātman* (self) and *anātman* (non-self). In each and every concrete situation, neither *ātman* nor *anātman* are the object of any ontological declaration. Instead, they are resorted to as instruments of elimination of one’s ontological phantasies towards one or another. In ultimate analysis, one should avoid both the reifications, which are deemed to be the root-cause of one’s suffering: the attachment for ‘positive metaphysics’ or eternalism (*śāśvatavāda*) as well as the attachment for ‘negative metaphysics’ or nihilism (*ucchedavāda*), respectively. When a final truth is sought within the propositional discourse itself, the Buddha’s answer is the silence. That’s the magnificent lesson he delivered to Vaccagotta in the well-known *Atthattasutta*: “‘Now then, Venerable Gotama, is there an *ātman* (Pāli, *atta*)?’ When this was said, the Blessed One was silent. ‘Then is there non-*ātman* (Pāli, *anatta*)?’ A second time, the Blessed One was silent.”³⁵

V Conclusion

In synthesis, instead of ontological doctrines, the Buddha’s words, as a peculiar combination of *saṃvṛti-sat* and *paramartha-sat*, are a continuous and systematic process of unsaying, of emptying one’s erroneous conceptual attachments. The plurality of linguistic events that constitute a soteriological dialogue between masters and disciples do not have validity *per se*, having the status of instrumental concepts to be ultimately discarded. Their final purportfulness is *nirvāṇa/bodhi*, i.e., the realization of the empty nature of all phenomena, the realization of conventionality as such. In other words, the final conclusion (*pratijñā*) of the argument does not occur in form of propositional language, but of a transformed being. Different from the causal and productive character of (empirical) means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*), the Buddha’s teachings, as an *upāya*, are deemed to possess the character of a *pramāṇa* on account of their extraordinary results. Candrakīrti states: “The wise men state that the words of the Buddha and of all those enlightened

35 “kinnu kho bho gotama, atthattāti. Evaṃ vutte bhagavā tuṅhi ahoṣi. Kiṃ pana bho gotama, natthattāti. Dutiyaṃpi kho bhagavā tuṅhi ahoṣi” (*Atthattasutta*, 2015, Saṃyutta Nikāya IV).

ones, are, in their entirety, a means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*).³⁶ The same idea is pregnant in Buddhist logicians such as Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. The first designates the Buddha's words as *pramāṇabhūta* – i.e., “words that (have the power to) become a *pramāṇa*” – and the second designates them as being endowed *pramaṇatā*³⁷ – i.e., ‘intrinsic authority’ (Ruegg, 1994, pp. 305-6) In short, the unique peculiarity of the Buddha's words lies in their being entirely committed to truthfulness on account of soteriological efficacy, which is nothing else but the removal of the existential blocks that prevent Reality to shine as it ‘really is’ (*tathāgata*). That's the gist of Nāgārjuna's insightful gloss of the *Prajñā Paramita Hrdaya Sūtra* recorded in the MMK:

There is no difference whatsoever between (the state of) realisation (*nirvāṇa*) and the mundane world (*saṃsāra*). There is no difference whatsoever between the mundane world (*saṃsāra*) and (the state of) realisation (*nirvāṇa*).³⁸

The Buddha never talks about the un-describable Truth or Being, to use a term from Western metaphysics. But contrary to Wittgenstein's recommendation in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (2015) – viz., “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” –, he does see this as reason to be silent. Much to the contrary. The Buddha shows us that there is cognitive and, above all, soteriological functionality of language much beyond the suspension of its propositional functionality, i.e., much beyond the phenomenological ‘suspension of judgement’ (*epoché*).³⁹ To go beyond it, means that ‘suspension of judgement’ has to necessarily be followed or has to necessarily involve – if understood as a process, rather than an event – by a systematic and logical deconstruction of subjectivity, the ultimate false ground of all ontological judgements.⁴⁰ Congruent with the Buddha's teachings, Nāgārjuna unleashes a rigorous logic that seeks to reverse the constitutive

36 “Ata eva buddhānāmeva bhagavatām vacanaṃ pramāṇamityupavarṇayanti vicakṣanāḥ” (Candrakīrti, 2015, XV.6).

37 “tavat pramāṇaṃ bhagavān abhūtanivṛttaye / bhūtoktiḥ sādhanāpekṣā tato yuktā pramāṇatā” (Dharmakīrti, 1964, p. 134).

38 “na saṃsārasya nirvāṇātkimcidasti viśeṣanam / na nirvāṇasya saṃsārāt-kimcidasti viśeṣanam” (MMK XXV.19).

39 Understood as a mere event of self-decision, ‘suspension of judgement’ risks to promote the reification of transcendental subjectivity as it appear to the case of Edmund Husserl (1964, pp. 32-3).

40 The ancient Pyrrhonist scepticism as reported by Sextus Empiricus (2015) and also Diogenes Laercius (2015) seems to subscribe to this ultimate procedure as part of its radical inquire (*skeptomai*) into the so-called ‘ten modes’ or ‘tropes’ (*poiroi*), among which the notions of ‘relationness’, ‘circularity’, ‘mutual implication’ and ‘convergence of opposites’ come remarkably close to the Mahāyāna's concepts of *pratīyasamutpāda* and *sūnyatā*.

path of one's erroneous cognitions, the primary cause of one's attachments and suffering. This prophylactic intervention of reason, exclusively committed to error elimination, is all that needs to be done for the realization of *nirvāṇa*, the ever present *paramārthika* dimension of Reality.

This unique deconstructive role of language – or perhaps better, of conversational or dialogical language – as *upāya* is certainly something difficult to digest for a western modern tradition that has, by and large, crystalized reason as propositional analytical judgments. But there are exceptions and counter-current philosophical episodes. One of those is German philosopher Hans-George Gadamer who, in his commentary on Paul Celon's poetry titled "Who Am I and Who Are You?", gives the closest description in western modern philosophy of what an *upāya* stands for. He says:

The language of philosophy is a language that sublates itself, saying nothing and turning towards the whole at one and the same time. (Gadamer, 1997, p. 42)

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