

From Foundation to Fabrication:
How Madhyamaka Exposes the Incoherence of Buddhist Reductionism

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RELIGST 116: Buddhist Philosophy

March 18, 2026

Introduction

Both Abhidharma and Yogacara present themselves as the true philosophical heirs of the Buddha's teaching on non-self. Each school dissolves the conventional person into something more fundamental, *dharma*s or pure cognition, and claims that this dissolution is what the Buddha really meant when he taught *anatman*. Yet, in performing this dissolution, each school quietly reinstates the very thing it sought to eliminate: a foundation that exists from its own side, independently of causes and conditions.

In the midterm paper, I argued against the Buddhist doctrine of non-self from the outside. This essay shifts the lens inward: can Buddhist reductionism survive critique from other forms of thinking within its own tradition? I argue that it cannot, and that the Madhyamaka critique developed by Nagarjuna is sound. Both Abhidharma dharma-theory and Yogacara mind-only doctrine are ultimately incoherent because they smuggle in a notion of intrinsic existence (*svabhava*) that directly contradicts dependent origination: a principle both schools claim to uphold.

The Reductionist Gambit

The Abhidharma and Yogacara schools share a common intellectual strategy. Both accept that the conventional self (*pudgala*) is not ultimately real. The disagreement is about what lies beneath the conventional designation.

For the Abhidharma, ultimate reality consists of irreducible *dharma*s: momentary, property-particular events, each with its own intrinsic nature. Dunne explains that the Abhidharma criterion for ultimate existence is irreducibility: if something cannot be further analyzed, it is ultimately real.¹ The conventional person dissolves into aggregates, the aggregates

¹John D. Dunne, "Buddhist Philosophical Traditions," chap. 14 in *Invitation to World Religions*, ed. Jeffrey Brodd et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 186.

into *dharma*s, and the *dharma*s stop there. They are the physical “things” at the bottom of the ontological stack.

Yogacara pushes the analysis further. Asanga and Vasubandhu argue that irreducible material particles cannot exist: any particle with spatial extension has parts, so something *part-less* cannot combine with others to form the objects we experience.² What remains is the flow of consciousness or cognition-only (*viññaptimatratā*).³ The “physical thing” at the bottom of the ontological stack is now mental rather than material. Both schools depend on a distinction between conventional and ultimate truth. The conventional is real enough to navigate by; the ultimate is what is really so. Madhyamaka will attack this very architecture.

The Dharma That Cannot Stand Alone

Nagarjuna’s critique of Abhidharma targets what Carpenter calls its “foundationalism”: the assumption that *dharma*s enjoy explanatory priority over the conventional wholes they constitute.⁴ The critique operates at two levels: logical and soteriological.

At the logical level, the argument is direct. If *dharma*s possess *svabhava*—if they exist independently—they cannot be produced by anything outside themselves.⁵ But dependent origination, accepted as truth across Buddhist schools, requires precisely that things arise in dependence on causes and conditions.⁶ A *dharma* with intrinsic nature would be causally self-sufficient: it already has everything it needs to be what it is. Nagarjuna even grounds his entire

²Dunne, 186.

³James Duncan Gentry, “Unit 6 Yogacara” (class presentation, Stanford University, February, 2026), 5.

⁴Amber Carpenter, *Indian Buddhist Philosophy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 91.

⁵Carpenter, 82-83.

⁶Nagarjuna, *Nagarjuna's Middle Way: Mulamadhyamakakarika*, trans. Mark Siderits and Shoryu Katsura (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2013), 24.16-19, p. 267-68. Hereafter cited as MMK (S/K) by chapter, verse, and page number.

argument against this at the opening of the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*: “Neither from itself nor from another / Nor from both, / Nor without a cause / Is anything ever generated anywhere.”⁷

There is a further difficulty concerning the concept of *prajñapti* (conventional designation). Abhidharma uses this concept to distinguish real *dharma*s from imputed entities: the chariot is a *prajñapti*, but the wheel is substantially real.⁸ Nagarjuna’s counter is that the wheel is also a *prajñapti*. When you look for the “wheel” in the wood, you find only further parts, and those parts are further parts, and so. Everything, including the most “fundamental” *dharma*s, exists only as a convenient label for a cluster of relations.⁹

The soteriological stakes are equally damaging. If *dharma*s have fixed, intrinsic natures shaped by the ignorance of *saṃsara*, it becomes impossible for the karmic process to produce anything outside *saṃsara*, and the elements are permanently locked into what they are.¹⁰

Mulamadhyamakakarika 24.39 makes this explicit: “If things were not empty, then conduct aiming at attainment of nirvana would also make no sense.”¹¹ By positing *svabhava*, Abhidharma inadvertently closes the door to liberation. The Buddha’s teaching was a raft to be used for crossing the river, not for carrying afterwards; Abhidharma mistakes the raft for the destination.

Awareness Without a Witness

Yogacara represents a more radical position. The school does not assert that *dharma*s have intrinsic natures. What it asserts instead is that consciousness, the very medium within which all experience takes place, is ultimately real. The three natures doctrine articulates this carefully. The imagined nature is the projected subject-object duality; the dependent nature is the

⁷Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, trans. Geshe Kelsang Wangmo (2018), 1.1, p. 26. Hereafter cited as MMK (Wangmo) by chapter, verse, and page number.

⁸Carpenter, 82-86.

⁹Duckworth, *Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy of Mind and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 42-43.

¹⁰Dunne, 183.

¹¹MMK (S/K) 24.39, 268.

causal flow of experience; and the perfected nature is the dependent nature recognized as empty of the imagined.¹² Ignorance is not primarily a belief in a permanent self but in the sense of an “I in here” confronting a “world out there.”¹³ This is a compelling and sophisticated analysis.

But it contains a hidden assumption Madhyamaka cannot accept: that consciousness, freed of subject-object duality, is itself an ultimate ground. Duckworth identifies the issue by citing Siderits: “the view that ultimate reality is beyond conceptualization is itself a variety of realism.”¹⁴ To say that mind-nature is what is most fundamentally real and immediately accessible is to grant consciousness the status of an independent ultimate, which is just *svabhava* at a subtler register. The logical problem is the same as the one faced by Abhidharma: consciousness arises in dependence on an object, a sense faculty, and prior moments of mind. There is no such thing as a consciousness without content. To suggest a pure, independent awareness that underlies all experience is to introduce something that verges on encroachment of *anatman*. The Madhyamaka verdict is unequivocal: the mind, like everything else, is empty. Yogacara has dissolved the conventional self only to reinstall it, subtler and harder to see, in the basement.

Candrakirti’s Prasangika critique adds a further dimension. Bhaviveka had argued that to establish emptiness, one should use valid inference - for example, “the chair is empty because it is a dependent arising.”¹⁵ Candrakirti objected that such an argument already presupposes a realist ontology: it assumes there is a well-defined logical subject, a real property being denied, and a genuine inferential relation holding between them. This is the method that the Yogacara *pramana* tradition of Dignaga and Dharmakirti employs to validate itself. By using valid

¹²Gentry, 12.

¹³Dunne, 186.

¹⁴Duckworth, 10.

¹⁵Duckworth, 45-46.

cognition (*pramaṇa*) to establish mind as ultimate, Yogacara presupposes the same realism it claims to have transcended.

There are also practical problems. If the entire experienced world including individuals, communities, and the path itself is the ripening of seeds within the basic storehouse consciousness (*alayavijñāna*)¹⁶, there is no truly shared conventional world in which the path can operate. Simply put, this resembles independent video game simulations that each player is operating in. In addition, the Bodhisattva's vow to liberate all sentient beings requires that those beings be real at the conventional level. Nagarjuna is explicit: "Without depending on conventions, / The meaning of the ultimate cannot be taught. / Without realizing the meaning of the ultimate, / Nirvana cannot be achieved."¹⁷ The conventional and the ultimate are not hierarchically ordered, with one more real than the other: they are mutually dependent.

The Road Between the Rocks

The Madhyamaka critique generates an obvious objection that Nagarjuna himself anticipates at the start of *Mulamadhyamakakarika* Chapter 24: if everything is empty, there is no arising and no ceasing, and the Four Noble Truths do not exist.¹⁸ If emptiness dissolves the path along with the obstacles, it leads not to liberation but to nihilism.

Nagarjuna's response is that this objection rests on a misreading of emptiness. Emptiness is not the denial that things exist; it is the denial that they exist with intrinsic, fixed natures. And it is precisely this absence of fixed nature that makes the path possible. *Mulamadhyamakakarika* 24.14 turns the objection back on itself: for one to whom emptiness makes sense, everything—causation, suffering, the path, liberation—makes sense.¹⁹ This is grounded in the Buddha's first

¹⁶Duckworth, 54.

¹⁷MMK (Wangmo) 24.10, 16.

¹⁸MMK (Wangmo) 24.1–2, 14.

¹⁹MMK (Wangmo) 24.14, 17.

sermon, where he identifies the origin of suffering as “this craving which leads to renewed existence.”²⁰ By identifying suffering as a dependently arisen state fueled by craving, the Buddha implies that it is not a fixed essence, thus making its cessation possible. The Geshe Kelsang Wangmo translation of *Mulamadhyamakakarika* 18.8 captures the non-nihilist intent with clarity: “Everything is real; and everything is not real; / Both real and unreal; / Neither unreal nor real. / That is the Lord Buddha’s teaching.”²¹ This is not incoherence but precision: things exist conventionally and function causally, but none of it is locked into a fixed, unconditioned essence.

Reductionism tries to locate the “real” as a physical or mental “thing” with intrinsic nature (“Existence 1” for simplicity). It preserves conventional truth (“Existence 2”) as a lesser but functional reality. Madhyamaka essentially argues that Existence 1 is incoherent beyond *sunyata* and that what reductionism calls Existence 2 is, properly understood, all there is. Things exist as dependent designations embedded in an immersive web of relations without remainder. Duckworth captures the positive vision: emptiness does not simply mean nothingness, but refers to the fact that “things are intertwined...or superimposed upon, a dynamically entangled and inexpressible matrix.”²² This is existence that makes sense all the way down.

Mulamadhyamakakarika 24.40 provides a core teaching: whoever sees dependent origination sees suffering, arising, cessation, and the path.²³ The Four Noble Truths are not undermined by emptiness; they presuppose it. Suffering arises dependently, which means it can cease dependently. Only because nothing is locked into a fixed essence can transformation and

²⁰Buddha, “Setting the Wheel of the Dharma in Motion (The Dhammachakkappavattana Sutta),” trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, in *The Buddha’s First Sermon*, 861.

²¹MMK (Wangmo) 18.8, 7.

²²Duckworth, 11.

²³MMK (S/K) 24.40, 288.

liberation be possible. This is the Middle Way: not a compromise between bad options, but the recognition that the entire search for an “ultimate thing” was the mistake.

Conclusion

Abhidharma and Yogacara are not fully coherent to me not because they abandon the Buddha’s insights, but because they stop halfway. Both schools dissolve the conventional self but then grant their chosen residue (*dharma*s or consciousness) the intrinsic nature they just dissolved. They answer the question “what really exists?” with a positive ontological claim. Nagarjuna’s insight is that this very question, posed in that way, already contains the error.

What Madhyamaka proposes is something more demanding and liberating: dependent designation is not a second-best substitute for intrinsic existence but the only way anything has ever existed. *Mulamadhyamakakarika* 22.11 names this with precision: “We do not state ‘Empty.’ / Nor do we state ‘Not empty.’”²⁴ Even emptiness is empty. The raft must be let go of, too. Liberation runs not through finding the right foundation but through releasing the demand for one. And the Bodhisattva path, with its vow to remain in the world for the sake of all beings, becomes possible only when one recognizes that the world, empty of intrinsic nature, is exactly where the work of compassion must be done.

Afterword: A Note on Method and Open Questions

I selected sources that would give Yogacara and Abhidharma a fair hearing: Carpenter for philosophical rigor, Duckworth for bridging Tibetan and Yogacara perspectives, and Dunne for broad orientation, before turning to Madhyamaka. I chose the Dhammachakkavattana Sutta and *Mulamadhyamakakarika* to go deeper rather than wider, immersing myself in Nagarjuna’s voice. I initially used Wangmo’s translation of *Mulamadhyamakakarika* as my

²⁴MMK (Wangmo) 22.11, 24.

outside source to access chapters beyond the Siderits/Katsura selection of Chapter 24, but I also found its rendering of chapter 24 was at times simpler and more immediately coherent, making it a useful parallel lens rather than merely supplemental coverage.

The evidence supports the thesis that Madhyamaka's critique of intrinsic existence is deeper than I appreciated, and that emptiness as dependent designation is not a nihilism but a liberation from the demand for foundations. The most pressing questions this inquiry raises are not academic but personal: how does one actually live out *sunyata* as an ideal? And is the Bodhisattva path available to a layperson, or does it require institutional structures I have not yet entered? These feel like the right questions to sit with next.

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