Śūnyatā as a Study Field
Modern scholars who studied Madhyamaka philosophy and the presentation of śūnyatā concept by Ācārya Nāgārjuna appear to have been rather shocked and stunned by it. It was totally a new revelation for them.

These scholars boldly declared that śūnyatā to be a totally new concept, not heard of in the Buddha’s teaching found in the Pāli Sutta’s.

Theodore Stcherbatsky said:

“…. that the whole edifice of early Buddhism was determined and smashed by this new doctrines of śūnyatā put forward by Ācārya Nāgārjuna”

(Central Conception of Buddhism p123)
T.R.V. Murti said:

“Madhyamaka philosophy claimed our attention as the system which created a revolution in Buddhism and through that in this whole range of Indian philosophy”

“The entire Buddhist thought turned on the śūnyatā doctrine of the Madhyamaka,”.

He further said; “considering the role and the importance of the Madhyamaka, I have ventured to appraise it as the central philosophy of Buddhism.”

*(Central Philosophy of Buddhism 123p)*
He declared: “The Copernican revolution in Indian philosophy was brought about by the Madhyamaka”.

Murti was indirectly saying that the whole of early Buddhism was turned upside down.

It is with the Copernic's theory that the planets, including the earth moved round the sun that the whole of old astronomical science took a new turn.

Murti’s declaration, therefore, suggests that the whole of early Buddhism has to be discarded because of śūnyatā theory.
W.S. Karunaratne, who criticized these views (The Theory of Causality) pointed out clearly that the views of both Stherbatsky and Murti are wrong. Regarding Stherbatsky’s statement he says;

“The literal and philosophical senses of this terms are already clearly attested in Pāli texts”.

“The original meaning of Suñña (skt.śūnya) is not philosophic and has the sense of ‘empty’, ‘uninhabited’, ‘useless’ ....Because Suñña means empty and void it is frequently used in the sense of ‘devoid of’(this or that quality or character).
‘Suññata’ in Hīnayāna : Pāli Buddhism

Lokasutta of the Saṃyuttanikāya

This developed philosophic meaning is found in this sutta.

“Thus this Venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed one .... and said to him; ‘Venerable Sir, it is said; ‘empty is the world, empty is the world’ In what way Venerable Sir is it said; empty is the world?” (Suññoloko suññoloko’ti bhante vuccati. Kittāvatānuko bhante suññoloko’ ti vuccati ?).

“It is Ānanda, because it is empty of self and of what belongs to self that it is said; ‘empty is the world’. (Yasmā ca Ānanda suññam attena vā attanīyena vā tasmā suñño loko’ ti vuccati).
This usage of Suñña is very clearly philosophic in meaning and brings out the most earliest feature of the early Buddhist world-view that there is nothing independent, discrete, self-existent, uncaused or permanent.
Mogharājamānavapucchā sutta of the Suttanipāta.

More clear usage of the term Suñña in this profound philosophical meaning is found.

Mogharāja asked Buddha: “.... Him that looks the world in which manner, does the king of death not see?” (Kathāṃ lokaṃ avekkhantaṃ mucceṣṭhe na passati)
Answering this profound question the Buddha says;

“Mogharāja, being ever mindful, look upon the world as void having rooted out, the dogmatic view of the self – thus one would cross over death; him that looks upon the world in this manner, does the king of death not see.”

(Suññato lokaṃ avekkhassu Moghrājā sadā sato attānudiṭṭhim ūhacca, evaṃ maccutaro siyā, evaṃ lokaṃ avekkhantam maccurājā na passati)

This is a purposeful use of the word Suñña to convey the idea that there is no substance in anything that is in the world. The whole world is devoid of any kind of an entity
‘Suññata’ as a meditation

Cūḷasuññatasutta (121) of the Majjhimanikāya

“Pubbe cāhaṃ, Ānanda, etarahi ca suññatāvihārena bahulaṃ viharāmi”

“Formerly I, Ānanda, as well as now, through abiding in (the concept of) emptiness, abide in the fullness thereof”
The Post canonical and commentarial literature

The use of the term Suñña comes into more prominence.

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* uses the term Suñña in almost twenty-five different contexts in the section called “Suññatā Kathā” occurring in the “Yuganaddhavagga”
Visuddhimagga explains Suññata as a universal doctrine, applicable to everything in the universe. Then it uses the concept of Suññata in a twofold way to show that everything is devoid of any kind of substance (atta) or anything substantial.
The Suñña concept was quite developed in Pāli Buddhism before it found reference in Mahāyāna and Madhyamaka texts.

Thus the same professor, W. S. Karunaratne observes that;

“This list also tells us something more to confirm our view that Theravāda teaching on Śuññata is considerably well developed and that the śūnyatā of Madhyamaka does not, therefore, represent a development that is altogether new in the history of Buddhist thought”.
‘Śūnyatā’ in Mahāyāna : Sanskrit Buddhism

Aṣṭasāhaśrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra

To denote this view the term used in Mahāyāna texts is ‘śūnya’ or ‘śūnyatā’. For instance, in Aṣṭasāhaśrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra it is explained as “Monks, the form is void” (rūpaṃ bhikkhave śūnyaṃ).

These Prajñāpāramitāsūtras lays more emphasis on ‘śūnya’ and, perhaps, it caused misunderstanding of ‘śūnya’ as nothingness.
‘Iha Śāriputra: rūpaṁ śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpaṁ; rūpāṁ na prthak śūnyatā śunyatāyā na prthag rūpaṁ; yad rūpaṁ sā śūnyatā; ya śūnyatā tad rūpaṁ. evameva vedanā saṃjñā saṃskāra vijñānam.

Iha Śāriputra: sarva-dharmāḥ śūnyatā-lakṣaṇāḥ,…..
tasmāc Sāriputra śūnyatayāṁ na rūpaṁ na vedanā na saṃjñā na saṃskārāḥ na vijñānam.


(Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra)
“form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form, the same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness”.

“Here, O Sāriputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness ….. Therefore, O Sāriputra, in emptiness there is no form nor feeling, nor perception, nor impulse, nor consciousness;

No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; No forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touchables or objects of mind; No sight-organ element, and so forth, until we come to:”
Śūnyatā, in the prajñāpāramitāsūtra resulted in the two kinds of misunderstanding:

I. Śūnyatā is a Nihilism.
II. Śūnyatā is a view (diṭṭhi).

Further,

III. He denied the theory of Sva-bhāva and emphasized the sva-bhāvaśūnyatā. He also emphasized Dharmanairātmyatā.

Hence, Nāgārjuna denied all these ideas in his book, Mūlamadhyamakakārikā.
Nāgārjuna and Mādhyamika Śūnyatā

Nāgārjuna very cleverly rejects the ‘sva-bhāva’ teaching in his book, Mūlamadhyamakakārikā and highlights the voidness of dhammās (dharmanairātmya), using the term ‘śūnyatā’.

The Mūlamadhyamakakārikā refers to ‘sva-bhāva theory’ of Sarvāstivādins and makes no any reference to the other theories made by Theravādins and Sautrāntikās.
Prajñāpāramitāsūtra and Nāgārjuna preferred to use the term ‘śūnya’ to negate the ‘atta’ or substance in dhammās as well as individual soul. It is known as ‘dharmanairātmyatā’.

The philosophic question in the time of Prajñāpāramitāsūtra was dharmanairātmyatā and in Nāgārjuna’s time of the ‘sva-bhāva theory’ of Sarvāstivādins and also dharmātmyatā.
In response to the misinterpretation of ‘śūnyatā’ as nihilism (nothingness), Nāgārjuna said that ‘śūnyatā’ is not a nihilism.

“Śūnyatā ca na cocchedaḥ”
Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, chapter, 17, stanza, 20.
Śūnyatā is not a view (diṭṭhi)

Śūnyatā is not a view (diṭṭhi)

“Śūnyatāyaṃ na Adhilayaṃ”  Śūnyatā is not an ‘Adhilayaṃ’

Here, ‘Adhilaya’ means taking Śūnyatā as a view (diṭṭhi)
So, Śūnyatā is neither nihilism nor a view (diṭṭhi).

(Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, chapter, 25)
So, How things Exist?

When ‘atta’ was negated the question arose in early Buddhism as to how ‘kamma’ and ‘punabbhava’ exist.

In the same way, when the ‘sva-bhāva’ or substance of dhammās was rejected, the same question arose.

So, the answer given was the same by Nāgārjuna, and he compared ‘śūnyatā’ with pratītyasamutpāda.

Nāgārjuna said “whatever that is dependent arising we say that is emptiness.”

“Yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ - śūnyatāṃ tāṃ pracakṣmahe sā prajñaptirupādāya - pratipat saiva madhyamā”.

(Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, chapter, 24, stanza, 18)
So, interdependently or relatively things exist. If there is no interdependence or relativity, things do not exist.

There is no+thing in the world independently arose. Everything in the world is dependently arisen.

As example : A is inter-related with B

So that things are void(Śūnya) and also there is no real thing in the world.

What we understand as the truth is not the real truth, it is only a relative knowledge.
Through the dependent origination Nāgārjuna explains interdependence of things and reveals the voidness of things. According to Nāgārjuna things have no independent existence so, things are interrelated. As things are interrelated they are void.

Hence, it is very clear that Nāgārjuna proclaims voidness of the things through their interdependence. He said: “saṃsāra is nothing essentially different from nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is nothing essentially from saṃsāra”

“nirvāṇasya ca yā koṭiḥ – koṭiḥ saṃsāraḥṣya ca
na tayorantarāṃ kiṃcit – susūkṣmapi vidyate”

(Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, chapter, 25, stanza 20).
Nāgārjuna, the founder of Madhyamaka, used logic and reasoning. He through his method of argument called ‘Apohavāda’- which shows the internal contradiction of the thesis of other schools- rejects them as self-contradictory and, therefore, ill-logical.
Books of Nāgārjuna

It is not an easy task to say exactly what books were written by Nāgārjuna. Some sources say that he authored over 100 books. This undoubtedly is an over exaggeration. As there had been many Nāgārjunas, it is a problem to fix the true writings of Ācārya Nāgārjuna.


After Nāgārjuna, many Indian teachers of Mādhyamika tradition developed śūnyatā concept.

They are:

i. Āryadeva and Nāgabodhi
ii. Buddhapālita and bhāvaviveka
iii. Chandrakīrthi
iv. Sāntideva
v. Śāntarakṣita and Kamalasīla
Āryadeva and Nāgabodhi

Āryadeva
However, the next source considered is Catuhśataka of Ācārya Āryadeva who is supposed to be a Sri Lankan as well as the immediate disciple and successor of Ācārya Nāgārjuna. His works deal very minutely about the absence of a substance (nihsvabhāvatā). The first part of the work is about the religious discipline presented by the refutation of opponents’ philosophical views.

Nāgabodhi
Tathāgatabhadra = He has written commentary to Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, it is ‘Pañcavinśat sahasrikā mahā prajñāpāramitā’.
Buddhapālita and Bhāvaviveka

Commentators began to interpret Ācārya Nāgārjuna’s teaching in different ways. Two of the main exponents were. Ven; Buddhapālita and Ven; Bhāvavieka (Prajñāpradīpa).

Their expositions resulted in two traditions of interpretation namely, Prāsāṅgika. School of interpretation started by Buddhapālita and Svatāntrika school of interpretation started by Bhāvaviveka. Of these, the former became very popular, specially due to the work of Ven: Candrakīrti.
Prāsāṅgika. School

Buddhapālita (Prāsāṅgika) (470-540) (theory: no own views-only refute the opponents’ views). This system only refuses the opponent’s views pointing out the self-contradictory of the opponent’s argument.

Buddhapālita is the author of Mādhyamakavṛtti.(not available in Sanskrit) He is considered as the foremost exponent of the Prāsāṅghika system of Madhyamaka.
Svatāntrika School

Bhāvaviveka (Svatāntrika)(positivists)

Bhāvaviveka’s commentary is called the Prajñāpradīpa and he presents the svatāntrika method of interpretation of Madhyamaka.

This school holds that refuting the opponent view is not enough and there should be a view that Nāgārjuna presents. While it is true that a Madhyamaka cannot have view of his to present in place of the views he refutes, Madhyamaka philosophy becomes meaningless if we assume that it presents no view.
Dedicatory Verse of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

Anirodham anutpādam anucchedam aśāśvataṁ, anekārtham anānārtham anāgamam anirgamaṁ, Yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaṁ prapañcopaśamaṁ śivaṁ desayāmāsa saṃbuddhaḥ taṁ vande vandatāṁ varam.

“ I salute him, the fully enlightened, the best of speakers, who preached the non-ceasing and the non-arising, the non-annihilation and the non-permanence, the non-identity and the non-difference, the non-appearance and the non-disappearance, the dependent arising, the appeasement of obsessions and the auspicious.”

This introductory verse appear to be equivocal and therefore, could account for most of the conflicting views in the two major Madhyamaka Traditions.
Chandrakīrthi

Prāsāṇgiakas comment on this verse - refute the views of their opponents Svatāntrikas- all these term in accusative case(Dutiya) refer to one doctrine, namely, dependent arising (pratītyasamutpāda) So, Chandrakīrti wrote the Prasannapāda by emphasizing the significance of dependent arising (pratītysamutpāda)

Chandrakīrti’s other books

i. Mādhyamikāvatāra
ii. Catuśsatakatīkā
iii. Śūnyatāsattatitīkā
iv. Mādhyamikaprajñāvatāra
Śāntideva

Another note worthy interpreter of Prāsāṇgika method was master Śāntideva (691-743).

Two of his most important works are *Bodhicaryāvatara* and *Śickṣāsamuccaya* The 9th chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is specially important for any study of the Madhyamaka philosophy and śūnyatā.

The *Śickṣāsamuccaya*, on the other hand, is a handbook on the practical aspect of Madhyamaka.

After Chandrakīrthi, Śāntideva developed the Madhyamika tradition.
Śāntarakṣita and Kamalasīla

Śāntarakṣita, *(Tatva Saṃgraha)*,

Kamalasīla and Śāntarakṣita and Kamalasīla (8th century) was influenced by the development of Buddhist ‘idealism’ the Yogācāra of Cittamātratā tradition.

So, their philosophy is a mixture of both Yogācāra and Madhyamaka. They said Madhyamaka philosophy emphases the Negativism while Yogācāra philosophy emphasis Positivism.
Though śūnyatā concept and its main exponent Ācārya Nāgārjuna as well as his Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā faded away from India, mainly due to the absorbing of śūnyatā concept by Mahāyāna, it continued to survive very vibrantly in China and Tibet.
Thank You

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