Śūnyatā (Emptiness)

Śūnyatā (शून्यता), emptiness, voidness, vacuity, spaciousness. From *śūnya,* void, nothing, negation, zero (from the verb root sū, svā, svi, to swell).

It is safe to say that no other civilization has problematized the meaning of absences, nonentities, emptiness and lack (*abhāvas*) as thoroughly as Indian civilization has (zero was discovered by Hindu mathematicians). Often misunderstood by the West and interpreted as a nihilistic absolute, *śūnyatā* should not be interpreted as a substance or an absolute ("Nothingness is not a thing."[1]), but rather as the nature of what is (*tathatā*, thusness), the ultimate nature of reality. Giving so much importance to *śūnyatā* can strike the western reader as difficult to understand, since Western philosophy, since its inception in ancient Greece, has focused on seeking out the ultimate constituents of matter, and defending the inherent existence of the Platonic Forms and the soul made in the image of an autonomous, unchanging God. Western philosophy has come to accept something similar to *śūnyatā* only in the postmodern period with philosophers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lévinas, Derrida, Whitehead, Deleuze and movements like Actor-Network Theory to name only these, all of which deconstruct the subject/object divide of Western philosophy as being based in the reification of essences understood apart from their relations and inter-dependencies.

Because *śūnyatā* is arguably the most important concept in the Buddhist tradition and it is this tradition that has most thoroughly developed a philosophy of emptiness, this entry will concentrate on Buddhism. For a discussion of the role of non-being and nothingness in Asian thought more generally, the reader can consult the entry "Nothingness in Asian Philosophy." The idea of emptiness was developed by the Buddha as a negation of the Hindu conception of Selfhood (*Atman*), which was understood in classical Brahmanism as absolute, and hence separate and independent from the world of immanent contingency. So the philosophy of *śūnyatā* explains that human nature (later generalized to all of nature) cannot be understood as existing autonomously, cut off from causes, conditions, attributes, and alterity. Accepting emptiness entails no longer reifying as autonomous something that is interdependently co-originated, and made up of parts. It is because all of existence is interdependent (*pratītya-samutpāda*) and impermanent (*anitya*), caused by other entities, and of the nature to change, decay and die, that everything is "empty" of inherent unchanging existence.

Other Buddhist schools however, particularly those influenced by Daoism, will emphasize emptiness as a soteriological experience beyond negation, and thus as full rather than empty (*śūnyatā* understood as *tathatā*, thusness). As an ineffable experience however, it cannot be named or categorized, and thus whenever it is described in language, Buddhists have resorted

to negation in order to avoid reifying the experience of emptiness as "something" (this tendency can be compared to the apophatic tradition in the West).

Early Buddhism

In early Theravada Scriptures, *śūnyatā* is used to explain the nature of the subject as a non-self (*anatman*). Being constituted by the five *skandhas* (heaps, aggregates) the self is said to be "empty" of inherent existence, and reducible to its parts. A classic example of such thinking is given in the Abhidharma Literature, where we read the famous teaching that Nagasena gives to King Milinda on the nature of the Self. When asked his name, Nagasena replies that he is known as Nagasena, but this name "is only a generally understood term, a designation in common use. For there is no permanent individuality (no soul) involved in the matter."[2] When faced with the bewilderment of the king, Nagasena asks the king to explain to him the ontological status of the chariot he was travelling in. Is the chariot the axle, the wheels, the framework, the ropes? When the king responds in the negative, Nagasena tells him: "Just as it is by the condition precedent of the co-existence of its various parts that the word 'chariot' is used, just so is it that when the *skandhas* (five heaps constituting the self) are there we talk of a 'being'."[3] There is no chariot separate from the parts, and because particulars are not instances of universals (universals are mere linguistic reifications in Buddhist epistemology), only the particulars make up what the chariot is. In the Abhidharma literature, however, these parts do have inherent existence (*svabhāva*), so the self is empty because it is dependent on causes to which it can be reduced, but any entity that cannot be further reduced does have inherent existence. The aggregates have *svabhāva* and are thus freed from causal law, the person does not. According to this reading, ultimate truth is defined as irreducible. So the chariot exists conventionally (it is just a name, a collection of parts), but its parts exist ultimately (*bhāva*). Thus reality is made up of ultimate truth (*paramārtha-sat*), which has inherent existence, and conventional truth (*samvrti-sat*), which does not have inherent existence because it can be reduced to its irreducible parts (*dharmas*).

Mahayana Buddhism

It is in the *Prajnāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) Sutras that the general philosophy of emptiness is first laid out and we find wisdom defined as a state of consciousness "that understands emptiness (*śūnyatā*), the absence of self or essence, even in *dharmas*."[4] In the Mahayana tradition, all *dharmas* are subjected to the same reductionist analysis as the self, and because of the nature of interdependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*), found to be empty of inherent existence. In the Heart Sutra, we read for example: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." Because form and emptiness cause each other and depend upon each other, they cannot be understood as having inherent existence. Attachment to either will lead to reification and craving, and is thus understood as a hindrance to reaching enlightenment (*nirvāna*).

Madhyamika Buddhism

This argument will be developed into its most sophisticated form by the philosopher Nāgārjuna, considered to be the founder of the Madhyamika school, who will claim that not even his claim that all entities are empty of *svabhāva* can be ultimately true, since it is also empty of any absolute truth. "The victorious ones have said that emptiness is the relinquishing

of all views. For whomever emptiness is a view, that one has accomplished nothing."[5] In such a reading, things exist only conventionally without any ultimate ontological reality outside of their relations. Things are real in and of themselves, conventionally, but not independently and absolutely. In scholar Jay Garfield's words, "to exist is to exist conventionally, and ultimate existence is in fact an incoherent ontological fantasy."[6] Nāgārjuna is not asserting that we cannot know the true nature of reality, but rather that true knowledge consists in understanding that entities exist without *svabhāva*.

Nāgārjuna proposed a particular form of logic called *catuscoti* or tetralemma, as a "medicinal cure" for the tendency to cling to inherent existence. This fourfold logic, which he used in both positive and negative form, is as follows:

The Positive Tetralemma	The Negative Tetralemma:
X (affirmation)	Not x
- X (negation)	Not -x
(X + - X) (both)	Not (x and -x)
- (X+ - X) (neither)	Not (neither x nor -x)

If we use the self as an example, the positive logic would lead to the conclusion that the self cannot be said to exist by virtue of its own essence:

The self is real (conventionally true)
The self is not real (ultimately true, i.e., it has no *svabhāva*)
The self is both real and not real (conventionally real but ultimately unreal)
The self is neither real nor not real (neither ultimately real nor completely nonexistent)

Likewise, an example of the Negative Tetralemma will show the non-validity of all philosophical assertions understood as standing on their own:

"śūnyatā exists."
"Śūnyatā exists" should not be asserted.
"Śūnyatā does not exist" should not be asserted.
"Śūnyatā both does and does not exist" should not be asserted.
"Śūnyatā neither does nor does not exist" should not be asserted.

The negative tetralemma denies the validity of an absolute truth existing separately from a conventional truth. The emptiness of emptiness is thus the claim that absolute truth and conventional truth themselves have no inherent existence, and thus no ultimate reality. As Nāgārjuna puts it in Chapter XXV of The Mulamadhyamakarika: "There is no distinction between samsāra and nirvāna." As Mark Siderits explains: "The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth!"

Such a strong position has led certain scholars to accuse Nāgārjuna of nihilism (Matilal 2002; Wood 1994)). The nihilist argument claims that if everything is empty, the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism are also empty, and in consequence all of Buddhist dharma. Nāgārjuna would reply that since everything is dependently co-arisen, existence as an independent entity is possible only conventionally, hence everything that exists absolutely, is empty. As he puts

it in Chapter XXIV of the Mulamadhyamakarika: "Whatever is dependently co-arisen, that is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the Middle Way. Something that is not dependently arisen, such a thing does not exist. Therefore a nonempty thing, does not exist." Such a truth is not stating that existence is empty (nihilism) but only that intrinsic existence is empty.

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[1] JeeLoo Liu/Douglas Berger, (eds.), *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy,* 2014, NY: Routledge, xii.

[2] *Milindapanha*, "The Questions of King Milinda" cited in *Lakkhana Panha*, "The Distinguishing Characteristics of Ethical Qualities," ch. 1, cited in http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/sbe35/sbe3504.htm

[3] Ibid.

[4] Paul Williams *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 1989, London: Routledge, 43.

[5] Jay Garfield (ed./translator), *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*, 1996, Oxford University Press, ch. XXVII.

[6] Jay Garfield "Madhyamaka, Nihilism, and the Emptiness of Emptiness" in *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*, opus cité, pg. 44.