

Understanding Śūnyatā: The Buddhist concept of Emptiness



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*“buddhaṃ ca dharmaṃ ca gaṇottamaṃ (saṅghaṃ) ca,
yāvāt hi bodhiṃ śaraṇaṃ gatosmi ।*

dānādi-puṇyais ca kṛtair mayābhiḥ, buddho bhaveyaṃ jagato hitāya ॥

-Bodhicaryavatara Chapter-3, bodhicittaparigraha

“I go for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. I take refuge until enlightenment. By whatever merit I have accumulated through meritorious deeds and virtues, may I become a Buddha for the benefit of the world.” (x3)

With deep reverence, I bow to the Master of gods and men (śāstā deva-manuṣyāṇām), the God of gods (devādideva), the Yogi of yogis. Going under refuge with a humble heart, I attempt to set down only what little I have been able to gather, reflect upon, and perhaps partially understand. If there is any error, distortion, or fault in these words, I attribute them entirely to my own ignorance and defilements, and I ask forgiveness for them. Whatever is mistaken is mine alone. But if even the slightest goodness, clarity, or truth is found here, it does not belong to me in the least. All excellence (śreyas) I offer at the feet of the gurus, the bodhisattvas, and the greatest teacher, the Tathāgata Buddha himself, from whom all light and wisdom arise.

Introduction

The concept of sunyata (emptiness) is one of the most profound central ideas in Buddhist philosophy. The philosophical foundation of sunyata is systematically explained by the great Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna through the doctrine of dependent origination, which means no phenomena possess

a self-existing essence. To understand the śūnyatā (emptiness) by the general people, we must first ask what sunyata is and why it is called śūnyatā. Generally, people are interpreting śūnyatā as vacant, hollow, unoccupied, blank, or nothingness. Because of this, it is often misunderstood as mere “nothingness,” and this misunderstanding has shaped many definitions. In South Asia, where

Buddhism and Hinduism developed side by side, there has been a long history of philosophical debate (śāstrārtha). During this time, many Hindu philosophers interpreted śūnyatā in ways that Buddhists consider incorrect, and such interpretations are still found today.

Therefore, the real question arises for sunyata of what, and why sunyata is. In our everyday experience, one does not need to have studied philosophy. Whether one is highly educated (vidvān) or the (unpadh) uneducated—sometimes stereotyped in Nepal as a “gawār” villager (a term that is both inaccurate and derogatory) whoever it is, we all tend to believe that what we perceive truly exists in the way it appears. For example, we naturally believe that we ourselves truly exist as independent.

In the Madhyamakavatara, Chandra Kriti explained that this deeply ingrained tendency is called sahaja ātmagrāha, which refers to an innate grasping at a truly existing self. “Sahaja” means easy or innate, “grāha” means grasping, and “ātman” refers to the idea of a true, independent self (Chandrakriti....). To understand it further, we can look at how Adi Shankaracharya defines Ātman. In Advaita Vedānta, Ātman is described as sat–cit–ānanda svarūpa. In this formulation, sat refers to truly existing or permanent, cit refers to

pure awareness, ānanda refers to bliss, and svarūpa refers to essential nature. (Radhakrishnan....)

From a perspective of sunyata, the guru Ratnasri defines the aspects of awareness (cit), bliss (ānanda), and essential nature (svarūpa) as may be acknowledged at a conventional level. However, the key issue arises with the claim that the self truly exists or is permanent, which is false and not accepted. As we deepen our understanding of śūnyatā, this notion of true self-existence is critically examined and ultimately refuted. So, one should keep in mind that Tathagat Buddha and all the great Buddhist masters say śūnyatā is not about saying that nothing exists. Rather, what we take to exist truly and independently does not exist in that way. Through this insight, the mistaken grasping at a self begins to dissolve, and other incorrect views are simultaneously refuted.

Delimitation

In this discussion, focusing only on (pratīyasamutpāda) and (niḥsvabhāva), other doctrinal and interpretative dimensions of Buddhist philosophical teachings are intentionally excluded due to the constraints of word limitation and the focused scope of the present study. The discussion, therefore, is limited to examining how these two concepts together articulate the Madhyamaka understanding of sunyata.

Discussion and Analysis

After laying out this foundation, let us understand what Chandrakirti taught. He was a great scholar of Nālandā in the 6th–7th century and wrote a commentary on Nagarjuna’s work by *sapta nyāya*, or sevenfold reasoning, to analyze *śūnyatā*. This is also known as the Sevenfold Analysis (*Saptanyāya / Saptapadārthī*). While his texts focus on the broader Madhyamika view rather than a rigid breakdown of this reasoning, it aligns closely with what he was trying to teach about the wrong view of the existence of the self.

The sevenfold analysis examines the self as follows:

1. The self is not the same as the aggregates (*skandhas*).
2. The self is not different from the aggregates.
3. The self does not possess the aggregates.
4. The self is not dependent on the aggregates.
5. The self is not the basis of the aggregates.
6. The self is not separate from the aggregates.
7. The self is not the absence of the aggregates.

Analyzing this analogy, just as Chandrakirti asks, “Where is this self?”—when we examine the

aggregates and begin to dismantle them, we see that there are only different aggregates arising together, supporting and flowing with each other. This gives rise to the illusion that “I exist.” Through this analysis, Chandrakirti shows that the “self” cannot be found, thereby demonstrating its emptiness and refuting mistaken views. If we truly try to understand, analyze, and examine carefully, we do not find the “I” or the self that we strongly believe is there. So, if someone asked, does the self really exist apart from the combination of aggregates? This question offers one way of understanding *śūnyatā*.

Ultimate approach to understanding Sunyata can be found in the teachings of Nagarjuna, the second-century Mahasiddha traditionally regarded as the founder of the Madhyamaka school within Mahayana Buddhism. His philosophy centers on the idea that all phenomena are empty (*śūnya*) of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). He equated emptiness with dependent origination, arguing that because everything arises in dependence on causes and conditions, nothing possesses a fixed, independent, or permanent reality. The major principles of his works on *Mulamadhyamakarikā* are as follows:

- The Middle Way: Avoiding both nihilism and eternalism.
- Dependent Origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*): Everything

exists relationally.

- No Inherent Existence (niḥsvabhāva): Nothing has an independent essence.
- Soteriological Goal: Ending suffering by removing attachment and wrong views.
- Emptiness is Empty: Even emptiness is not something to grasp.

His main work, the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, uses logical analysis to show that all concepts are empty of absolute reality.

Now, pratīyasamutpāda (dependent origination) and śūnyatā are like two sides of the same coin; they are not two different things. That which is pratīyasamutpāda is śūnyatā, and that which is śūnyatā is pratīyasamutpāda. (His Eminence Sridhar Rana Rinpoche himself quotes these teachings, and I am referring to whatever I have heard and learned from the teaching he has provided on sunyata, given in retreat. And the relationship between the two Sides of the Same Truth, Nagarjuna teaches that these two are not separate doctrines:

- Whatever is dependently arisen (pratīyasamutpanna) is empty (śūnya)
- Whatever is empty is dependently arisen

Understanding śūnyatā, according to Nagarjuna, from the teaching of niḥsvabhāva, which translates

to (no inherent nature). Taking his terminology, it also reflects the teaching of Gautama Buddha, who taught non-self in the Pali Canon (for example, in the Paṭisambhidāmagga). The term niḥsvabhāva can be understood as: ni refers to not or no, sva refers to self, and bhāva refers to existence or inherent nature.

Interrelation of Dependent Origination and Non-Inherent Existence

Pratīyasamutpāda (dependent origination) and niḥsvabhāva (no inherent nature), as explained in Buddhism and developed by Nagarjuna, together form the definition of śūnyatā. Dependent origination shows that everything arises through causes and conditions, while niḥsvabhāva shows that nothing has an independent or fixed essence of its own. When we put both together, we see that things do exist conventionally, but only as dependent, changing processes, not as self-existing entities. So śūnyatā is not nothingness, but the understanding that everything exists only in dependence and is empty of its own inherent nature.

Conclusion

When all of this is carefully examined, we begin to see that our avidyā (ignorance), not knowing, and saṃskāra (mental conditioning), which are again causes and conditions interdependent with each other, have been flowing from countless

lifetimes, keeping us in samsara. Through practices of Vipassana, taught by the great compassionate Buddha, this understanding will not merely be intellectual; it becomes experiential. Slowly and persistently, we begin to see that nothing exists in the true way we once believed. The deeply rooted habit of grasping begins to loosen. What once felt ME, the sense of “I” and “mine” and all dharmas, starts to dissolve under careful observation.

Almost coming to an end, briefly touching the fifth key tenet: the emptiness of emptiness, even emptiness is not something to grasp. There is an analogy used by the Buddha, just as one crosses a river using a boat, one does not carry the boat on one’s back after reaching the other shore. In the same way, once śūnyatā is understood, even the concept of sunyata itself is not to be clung to. It must also be remembered that what we are discussing here is still largely an intellectual understanding. It is not yet a direct realization. If śūnyatā is truly seen as it is, it gives rise to avikalpa-jñāna, non-conceptual direct knowledge, free from mental constructions. This is the level of realization of the first Bhumi Bodhisattvas, at which one is known as, or becomes, a pratham bhūmi bodhisattva. Then a deeper question naturally arises: why hold onto something that was never truly there? In that moment, śūnyatā is no longer a concept to be debated; it becomes a

direct insight. Not a denial of reality, but a liberation from illusion. Not emptiness as nothingness, but emptiness as freedom from false projection. And in that liberation, the path naturally opens—not toward despair, but toward clarity, compassion, and awakening for the benefit of all beings.

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