

The Notion of *Suññatā* in Theravāda and Mahāyāna Perspective

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Abstract

A few centuries after passing away of the Buddha, starting from the second Buddhist council, Buddhism has separated into several sects with their own liturgies, rituals and scriptures. As a result, the formation of various sects has a different method of practicing and interpretation of doctrine.

In the Buddha's teachings, thus, the concept of *Suññatā* developed into controversial and philosophically complex term. Among Buddhist Schools, this concept is defined and interpreted through different interpretations of their perspectives. For instance, "Never to abandon all beings and to see into the truth that all things are empty"¹ are mentioned in *Mahāyāna* text. In terms of *Theravāda*, it is denoted for non-self and sometimes referred to Nirvana and so on. In Tibetan Buddhism, *Suññatā* is used as openness and understanding of non-existence. Therefore *Suññatā* is a critical role and profound concept in Buddhism. In this work, it examines the concept of *Suññatā* from early Buddhism as well as later Buddhist texts of Theravāda and Mahāyāna.

Key words: *Suññatā*, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Non-self, Nirvana

Introduction

The term '*Suññatā*' is *Suñyatā* in Sanskrit, which means emptiness, voidness, openness. The idea of *Suññatā* is often difficult and profound to understand, leading to the notion that it is nothing. In general, *Suññatā* has been understood that the universe is totally devoid of reality, everything is *Suññatā*. Indeed, *Suññatā* is not really void but it is essence of everything. The respective consequently, *Suññatā* becomes deeper and wider term which has been assigned explanations, interpretations and definitions. Etymologically, *Suññatā* is divided into two words: *Suñña* and *Tā*. *Suñña* means empty, void while *Tā* is suffix word which means ness. Therefore *Suññatā* is literally translated as emptiness, voidness, nothingness.

¹ Ddward Conze, Buddhism: Its Essence and Development, Delhi, 1994, p.130

The Concept of *Suññatā* in Theravāda and Mahāyāna

The term '*Suññatā*' (*pali*) is *Suñyatā* in Sanskrit, which means non-self in Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana. Non-substantiality is used for *Suññatā* in early Buddhism as below: "Look upon the world as being non-substantial, *Mogharaja*, being ever so mindful. One surpasses death by uprooting belief in substantiality. Death does not get hold of him who regards the world in this way".²

The term *Suññatā*, on the other hand, refers to *Anatta*, nonself. It is clearly expressed in the *Sumyutta Nikāya* "Void is the world, void is the world because it is void of a self. *Ananda*, it is void of what belongs to a self. Therefore it is said void is the world".³ In the *Visuddhimagga*, the statements are also given by *Buddhaghōsa*: "The penetration of *Suññatā* is the insight into non-self".⁴ "Contemplation of non-self and contemplation of emptiness are one in meaning and only the letter is different".⁵

Etymologically *Anatta* is compound two words: there are *Ana* and *Atta*. *Ana* means not and *Atta* means self. Therefore, soulless and egoless and impersonal are often used for it. But the Buddhist view of non-self has a broad. It is neither seeing self or ego in anything nor seeing that entity as self or ego. The all *Dharmas* are not the Soul. When this is seen by means of wisdom, one becomes disgusted with suffering. This is the path of clarity. All entities are not self.

With regard to *Anatta*, *Mahāyāna* Buddhism recognizes two kinds of *Anatta*, *Puggala-Anatta*, called five aggregates and *Dharma-Anatta*, called void. They said that Theravādins understand only *Puggala-Anatta*, not *Dharma-Anatta*. By understanding the *Puggala-Anatta*, one can destroy only some defilement but there is another defilement which can be eliminated by realizing of *Dharma-Anatta*. For more detail, Non-self of persons (*puggala-anatta*) means that a living entity, being has only temporary union of the five components. It cannot be said to have an absolute self. Non-self of the *Dharmas* (*dharma-anatta*) means that they have no unchanging self-nature as the *Dharmas* or elements of existence arise through dependent origination.

K. Sri Dhammananda remarked that "It is the same *Anatta* doctrine of the Buddha that was introduced in the Mahayana school of Buddhism as *Suññatā* or voidness. Even though this concept was elaborated by a great Mahāyāna scholar, *Nagarjuna*, by giving various interpretations, there is no

² Suttanipata, verse No. 1119

³ Sumyuttanikaya, IV, P. 54

⁴ Visuddhimagga, ii, p. 695

⁵ Visuddhimagga, ii, p. 628

extraordinary concept in *Suññatā* far different from the Buddha's original doctrine of *Anatta-nonsel*f".⁶ In accordance with these points, it can understand that the term *Suññatā* refers to *Anatta*, nonself which is important from Philosophical and Ethical standpoint in Buddhism.

Another interpretation is found in *Cula-Sunyata* and *Maha-Sunyata Sutta*, that *Suññatā* is understood as reality. "We can see *Suññatā* does not mean that all phenomena or all stages of *Jhañnas* are emptiness, nothing, but whatever has appeared or attained, clearly exists. And in the contrast, whatever disappears, does not achieve we must understand it is empty as it is. Here, 'the negation or the affirmation' is of something specific. From this, the Buddha guides us reality. Therefore, *Suññatā* is also considered as reality".⁷

Moreover, the contemporary "Nagarjuna, thinks' and Kanishka are the greatest exponent of the Madhyamika Philosophy, held that the *Samsarā* (world) and the Nirvana (heaven) were both unreal. The Only reality was *Suññatā* (void or emptiness). With great subtlety he argued that in it lay "final immeasurable bliss" that it could be attained by anyone who cared, in his life, in the world".⁸

Nagarjuna, further, explains *Suññatā* as dependant origination. Whatever the teaching of dependent Origination, we call it *Suññatā*. Then he regarded that dependant origination is closely associated with Middle Path. The main philosophy of the Madhyamika School is *Suññatā* but not Nihilism. Madhyamikas arrive at this position by interpreting *pratityasamutpada* (Dependant origination) to refute all theories on causality. It is called Madhyama Pratipada (middle path) for it avoids two extremes of eternalism and annihilationism. According to his view on *Suññatā*, there is no any Dharma that is not dependently originated and there is no Dharma that is not empty. In this case, the concept makes us understandable that nothing exists independently and *Suññatā* is related to dependant origination as well as middle path. It is an especially important concept in Mahāyāna.

Besides, the concept of *Prajna* (wisdom) is related to *Suññatā*, because they believe that real wisdom is realization of *Suññatā*, not soullessness. Thus to eliminate defilements, attach to *Prajna*, one has to understand *Suññatā*. That is also one of the theories of *Suññatā* in Mahayana. Similarly, in Theravāda, three entrances to Nirvana are mentioned: "the realization of the desireless (*appanihita*), the realization of signless (*animitta*) and the realization of emptiness (*Suññatā*)".⁹

⁶ K.Sri Dhammananda, What Buddhist Believe, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1998, P.119

⁷ Bhikkhuni Gioi Huong, Bodhisattva and *Suññatā*, New Delhi, India, 2004 P. 142-143

⁸ Jayapalan, N, A History of Indian Culture, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2001, p. 141

⁹ Patisambhidamagga, II, 48

Additionally, from stand point of Mahayana, the real meaning of *Suññatā* is swollen. A common alternative term of *Suññatā* is voidness. That means all world including beings is like a swollen balloon. There is nothing important inside the skin. We have to eliminate it. Likewise, all the worlds are swollen. Everything is empty, even the elements should be considered as void.

However, Theravādins do not consider everything as *Suññatā* for they accept some basic elements such as five aggregates, twelve sense based, etc. Theravādins consider five aggregates are real entities. There is no soul in a person. All world, buildings, trees, etc. are not realities but there are only four elements: earth, water, fire and air. The four elements are real. For this reason, Mahayanists criticize that Theravādins eliminate only the concept of personal soul by analyzing the world.

The *Nagarjuna* directed this criticism mainly against the view of independent-existence (*Svabhavavāda*) and therefore his teaching is identified as *Nihsvabhavavāda*. But he was not happy with the idea of being identified with any view as such since attachment to a view is not considered to be conducive for attainment of Enlightenment. *Suññatā*, he insisted, was not a speculative view but a technique to be freedom from all views. *Nagarjuna* does not use *Suññatā* as his stand in criticizing other views. He, instead, used *Prasangasadhana* or *Prasangapadana* technique to show logical inconsistencies inherent therein.¹⁰

In a further view, very often we get the impression that *Suññatā* as a conscious state is a very important aspect of Nirvana itself. It is of course when the *Arahanta Uttamas* calls herself “winner of the emptiness and signless”.¹¹ “Given the literal meaning of emptiness to *Suññatā*, one immediately tells that ākāśa (emptiness space) and *Suññatā* of *Nagarjuna* perhaps have some association. And *Suññatā* being the *paramartha* truth it probably is the nature of Nirvana”.¹² In accordance with, *Suññatā* is also regarded as Nirvana. Nevertheless, Nirvana is not really emptiness or nothingness. It means that Nirvana is so called emptiness or nothingness simply because one cannot perceive it with the five senses.

Hsueh-li Cheng, who has made the most comprehensive analysis of the concept of *Suññatā* gives his view on *Suññatā*. “The term empty or *Suññatā* is mainly a stereological device, a tool of Nirvana or salvation. Psychologically, *Suññatā* is detachment. The teaching of *Suññatā* is to empty the mind of cravings. Morally, the negation has a positive effect, namely, preventing one from doing evils and making one love oneself and others. It is to foster the virtue of compassion. And epistemologically, *Suññatā* is an

¹⁰ Chandima Wijebandara, Development of Buddhist Thought: A Historical Survey, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2010, P.50

¹¹ Therigatha, London, PTS, 1883, P. 46

¹² David J. Kalupahana, Buddhist Thought Ritual, New Delhi, 2001, 39

unattached insight that truth is not absolutely true. It teaches that discursive knowledge does not provide true wisdom and the enlightenment is the abandonment of conceptual thinking. Metaphysically, *Suññatā* means that all things are devoid of definite nature, characteristic and function and those metaphysical views are unintelligible and should be discarded. This is not to advocate nihilism but rather to save or to account for the possibility of empirical phenomena and practical values. Spiritually, *Suññatā* is freedom, Nirvana or liberation from the suffering of the world”.¹³

Conclusion

It is agreed among Theravāda and Mahāyāna that the Buddhist theory of *Suññatā* is based upon the early Buddhist teachings which are non-self and dependent origination. Both of these early Buddhist teachings are important for understanding the significance of *Suññatā*. Therefore *Suññatā* is nothing but understanding fundamental teachings of the Buddha for all different sects of Buddhism: non-self, dependent origination, the four noble truths, morality (*sila*), concentration (*Samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). Hence, we can understand the doctrine of *Suññatā* psychologically, ethically, spiritually, metaphysically. Especially, Both Schools could understand each other and mutual respect and comprehension for the significance of *Suññatā* in Buddhism.

Notes and References

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