

South of Sanchi. Although the early Buddhist monuments at Sanchi, when discovered in the nineteenth century, were in a fairly good state of preservation, the same cannot be said of the monuments at Bharhut.

There, the *Stupa* had completely disappeared leaving only the traces of its base and pieces of the main gateway had been removed by the villagers at the time the first archaeologists visited the scene. Thus only a number of fragments of the railings and some pillars were found and preserved. The available pieces of railings are filled with beautiful carvings and also provide the names of benefactors who contributed to defraying the cost of the constructions. These pious people had hailed from different places of the sub-continent such as Karahakota, and Nasik in the Deccan, Kausambhi and Pataliputra in the east and Vidhisā from central India suggesting that Bharhut had acquired a wide recognition as a Buddhist centre by the Sunga times.

The railings at Bharhut had been carved with bas-reliefs depicting various episodes connected with Buddhism. These include scenes from different *Jātaka* stories and events from the life of the Buddha. An unmistakable characteristic of these art works is the absence of the Buddha image. Instead the Buddha is depicted in symbolic forms such as a vacant seat, foot-prints, the *thri-ratna* symbol, Bodhi-tree, the wheel of Dhamma or a *stūpa*. The subject matter of the carvings included scenes from the life of the common people and the nature. Motifs of different kinds of birds, animals, serpents, fruits, flowers and plants are also exquisitely carved in these bas-reliefs. The pillars found at Bharhut and their decorations are unique in that they depict large-size standing figures of *yakṣas* and *yakṣinis* and *nagas* which betray the unmistakable influence of the folk-art traditions of the pre-Mauryan times. Thus the art of Bharhut has aptly been described as "the vigorous expression of a mass movement compared to the imperial court-art of the Mauryas with its classical qualities, this indigenous folk-art appears archaic". It is significant that if there is any architectural or art work that can be called Sunga art or architecture undoubtedly it all belongs to the Buddhists.

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ŚŪÑNĀTĀ See ŚŪNYATĀ (1)

ŚŪNYATĀ(1), or its Pāli equivalent *suññatā*, is a term pregnant with meaning and of central significance in all Buddhist traditions. In order to exhaustively deal with this important subject, it will be discussed in two separate articles. The present article will focus on its implication from the perspective of the Pāli canon, while a different article will treat *śūnyatā* from the perspective of the *Mahāyāna* tradition.

Suññatā is an abstract noun formed from the adjective *suñña*, which means 'empty' or 'void'. It is noteworthy that in the Pāli discourses the adjective *suñña* occurs with a much higher frequency than the corresponding noun *suññatā*. This is not a matter of mere philological interest, but points to an emphasis in early Buddhism on qualifying phenomena as 'being

empty' rather than on an abstract state of empty-ness'.

The word 'empty' (*suñña*) occurs often in a straightforward and simple sense to qualify a place or location to be empty in the most common sense of the word. A typical example for this is *suññāgāra*, an 'empty place', which due to being devoid of people, noise, distraction etc. is a place suitable for meditative seclusion (*D. II, 291*). To find delight in the seclusion afforded by such an 'empty place' counts as an important requirement for one gone forth (*A. V, 88*). The same quality, however, renders such an empty place less suitable as a resort for gathering alms (*M. I, 519*) or for proclaiming one's teachings (*D. I, 175*).

Suñña can also be predicated of a group of people, in order to specify that they are bereft of a certain quality. For example, the members of a particular group of ascetics are 'empty of' going to heaven, in the sense that none of them will be able to gain a celestial rebirth (*M. I, 483*). According to another usage of a similar type, as long as there are those who undertake the noble eightfold path, the world will not be 'empty of' *arahants* (*D. II, 151*).

Though qualifying a place or a group of people as empty of something may at first sight appear to be far from the deeper connotations of emptiness, the two senses are actually intertwined. To speak of 'emptiness', as far as the Pāli discourses are concerned, is necessarily to speak of a particular phenomenon as 'empty of' something. Hence even the peak of emptiness, the realization of full awakening and unsurpassable mental freedom is 'empty of'. Empty of what? Empty of lust, anger and delusion (*M. I, 298*).

In some passages the Buddha used the expression 'empty' in both a common and a deeper sense, for example when he employed the image of an empty village as a symbol for the six sense-bases (*S. IV, 173*). Though the primary sense of *suñña* here is clearly to be physically empty, in the sense that this village has been deserted by people, the Buddha brought in the deeper notions of *suñña* by explaining that when a wise person investigates the senses he or she will find that they are empty (*suñña*), void (*ritta*) and vain (*tuccha*). In this way the 'empty' quality of the village, representative of the village being devoid of people,

finds its equivalent in the 'empty' nature of the senses, highlighting that the senses are devoid of a self.

A similar nuance can also be found in a set of similes for the five aggregates found in the *Pheṇa Sutta*. Though the *Pheṇa Sutta* does not use the term *suñña*, it does employ the two terms used as near equivalents of *suñña* in the above simile of the empty village: void (*ritta*) and vain (*tuccha*). According to the *Pheṇa Sutta*, closer inspection will reveal each of the five aggregates to be vain (*tucchaka*), void (*rittaka*) and insubstantial (*asāraka*). The same discourse offers a set of similes illustrative of the manifestation of this void and vain nature of each aggregate individually: the insubstantial nature of material form is similar to a lump of foam carried away by a river, feelings are like the impermanent bubbles forming on the surface of water during rain, perception is as illusory as a mirage, volitions are devoid of essence like a plantain tree (since it has no heartwood), and consciousness is as deceptive as a magician's performance (*S. III, 142*). The *Pheṇa Sutta* concludes with a verse envisaging eradication of all fetters and attainment of the final goal as the outcome of contemplating the void and insubstantial nature of the aggregates in this manner.

A lead over from the empty nature of a location to deeper aspects of emptiness as a step by step meditative development can be found in the *Cūḷasuññatā Sutta*, the 'smaller discourse on emptiness' (*M. III, 104*). This discourse begins with Ānanda inquiring about an earlier statement by the Buddha, according to which the Buddha often was 'dwelling in emptiness' (*suññatāvihāra*).

In order to show Ānanda how to achieve such dwelling, the Buddha directed Ānanda's attention to the immediate environment where they were staying. He pointed out that the place was 'empty' of the human hustle and bustle of township. Giving attention to this absence as a type of emptiness experience yields a unitary perception of the forest. Based on such a unitary perception of the forest, the Buddha continued with a meditative deepening of emptiness that proceeded from a unitary perception of earth, through the four immaterial attainments, to signless concentration of the mind (*animitta cetosamādhī*).

Each step of this meditative deepening of emptiness requires a clear awareness of what has been transcended at each point, of what the present experience is 'empty of'. When, for example, the perception of earth has been transcended by developing the perception of boundless space, this experience of boundless space is 'empty of' any perceptual experience of earth.

The meditative deepening of emptiness described in this discourse requires at the same time a clear awareness of what is still present. Thus when one has proceeded from the perception of earth to the perception of boundless space, this experience of boundless space is 'not empty' (*asuñña*) of perception of space. It is precisely this 'non-emptiness' that needs to be left behind in order to proceed further. Leaving behind the 'non-emptiness' of the perception of space then leads on to the next experience, to attaining the perception of boundless consciousness. This step, then, is 'empty' of space perceptions. Yet this same experience is 'not empty', in so far as the perception of boundless consciousness is still present.

Properly undertaking this genuine, undistorted, pure and gradual descent into emptiness, the Buddha declared, will lead to the destruction of the influxes. Once the influxes have been left behind and one's experiences are forever 'empty' of any perception coloured by these unwholesome influxes, the supreme and unsurpassable peak of emptiness has been reached.

This presentation in the *Cūlasuññatā Sutta* has several important implications and thus well deserves to be reckoned outstanding among those discourses that are 'connected with emptiness' and therefore worthy of special attention (*S. II, 267, S. V, 407, A. I, 72 and A. III, 107*). No wonder that this discourse has remained of continued interest to later Buddhist traditions, and the Chinese and the Tibetan discourse collections have each preserved a version of the *Cūlasuññatā Sutta* which corresponds closely to the Pāli version.¹

One of these implications is that the *Cūlasuññatā Sutta's* treatment shows the early Buddhist concept of emptiness to be a qualification, not an entity. This can be inferred from the recurring refrain, according to which the meditating monk considers what has been transcended as 'empty of', and what is still there as 'not empty of'.

In fact, the *Cūlasuññatā Sutta* introduces the Pāli term *suññatā* only once the peak of realisation through the destruction of the influxes has been reached. In contrast, the description of all the preceding stages merely employs the adjective *suñña*, 'empty'. This indicates that the *Cūlasuññatā Sutta* reckons only the destruction of the influxes as 'emptiness', furthermore qualified as 'unsurpassable'. The preceding stages are only the *suññatāvakka*, the 'entry into emptiness', but nothing short of total freedom from the influxes deserves to be reckoned as 'emptiness' true and proper.

Other Pāli discourses also use the term 'emptiness' (*suññatā*) predominantly in relation to realisation experiences. This nuance can best be seen in the *Vinaya*, which counts the claim to emptiness liberation (*suññatā vimokkha*), emptiness concentration (*suññatā samādhi*) or emptiness attainment (*suññatā samāpatti*) among those claims which, if spoken as a deliberate lie, merit expulsion from the monastic community (*Vin. III, 95*). This shows that for a monk or a nun to lay claim to such emptiness experience was equivalent to laying claim to high realisation.

Another implication of the *Cūlasuññatā Sutta* is that the proper approach to a realisation of emptiness, depicted step by step in this discourse and qualified as 'genuine, undistorted and pure' (*yathābhuccā avipallathā parisuddhā*), is gradual. According to the finale of the discourse, all those who have gained the supreme and unsurpassable peak of emptiness, the destruction of the influxes, have in fact followed this gradual approach.

The final stages of this gradual approach described in the *Cūlasuññatā Sutta* lead from signless concentration of the mind to the destruction of the influxes. In order to navigate this important junction, the Buddha instructs to contemplate the conditioned and impermanent nature of one's meditative experience. He in this way indicated that, in order to attain the peak of emptiness, insight into conditionality and impermanence should be developed.

This highlights that contemplation of emptiness needs to be combined with the development of insight into the conditioned and impermanent nature of reality, an insight to be applied in particular to one's present meditative experience. Other discourses confirm this need. They indicate that even the deepest and most sublime states of concentration need to be

contemplated as 'impermanent' and 'unsatisfactory', in addition to being contemplated as 'empty' (M. I, 435).

The need to complement meditation on emptiness with insight into impermanence recurs again in the 'greater discourse on emptiness', the *Mahāsuññatā Sutta* (M. III, 109). The meditative instruction in relation to emptiness delivered by the Buddha in this discourse culminates in contemplation of the impermanent nature of the five aggregates as the means to go beyond the conceit 'I am'. It is remarkable that the *Cūlasuññatā Sutta* and the *Mahāsuññatā Sutta*, whose titles indicate that their main topic is emptiness, both stress the importance of impermanence. The two *Suññatā Suttas* in this way draw attention to the danger of mistaking the relative stability of deep concentrative experience to be indicative of some type of permanency, a mistake that can occur even when the object of such deep concentrative experiences is of an 'empty' type.

The *Mahāsuññatā Sutta* moreover highlights the importance of overcoming the conceit 'I am'. The conceit 'I am' is but a manifestation of ignorance and at the same time the pivotal point for the genesis of craving. The 'I am' conceit thereby stands at the root of the *saṃsāric* predicament, and whatever unwholesome mental states and reactions arise, are but its multifarious outgrowths. The idea of selfhood underlying this conceit is the main target for emptiness meditation. In another discourse the Buddha explained that to qualify the world as 'empty' means that it is empty of a self and what belongs to a self (S. IV, 54).

The notion of a self cannot be changed by a mere change of grammar or language. The task is not to replace 'I' with another concept, even if this should be the concept of 'emptiness'. The task, rather, is to become aware of the sense of 'I' pervading experience, a sense of 'I' that turns the process of experiencing into 'I am' experiencing, and causes experience to be appropriated as 'my' experience.

Returning to the *Mahāsuññatā Sutta*, this discourse begins with the Buddha contrasting his dwelling in emptiness to Ānanda's somewhat undue tendency to socializing. Throwing this contrast into relief, the Buddha went so far as to state that if while abiding in emptiness meditation he was visited by monks, nuns,

or laity, his mind inclined to seclusion to such an extent that he would talk to them in a way so as to dismiss them. A stark statement, which however highlights that to dwell in emptiness inevitably leads beyond the world and its concerns.

According to the *Mahāsuññatā Sutta*, contemplation of emptiness should be applied both 'internally', to oneself, as well as 'externally', to others. The same contemplation should moreover not be confined to formal meditation, but needs to be related to everyday activities. This discourse also indicates how this can be achieved: by staying aloof from desire and aversion while walking, standing, sitting and lying down. In relation to communication, one should avoid useless worldly topics and engage solely in speech related to the practice and the path. To develop insight into emptiness means moreover to leave the three unwholesome types of thought behind and to overcome the attractional pull of the five strands of sensual pleasure. These instructions clearly indicate that a genuine realization of emptiness is not compatible with engagement in sensuality.

The need to apply emptiness to everyday activities recurs in the *Piṇḍapātapārisuddhi Sutta* (M. III, 294), a discourse also concerned with 'dwelling in emptiness' (*suññatāvihāra*). This discourse opens with the Buddha lauding Sāriputta, who had just emerged from emptiness meditation. Proclaiming such dwelling in emptiness to be an abiding of superior men, the Buddha drew attention to the need to combine such meditative depth with everyday activities. As a practical example, he recommended that a monk should stay aloof from desire and aversion in regard to whatever he experiences while begging alms.

The *Piṇḍapātapārisuddhi Sutta* continues by praising aloofness from sensual pleasures. It describes how a monk who is aloof from sensual pleasures overcomes the five hindrances, gains insight into the five aggregates and develops different aspects of the early Buddhist path of meditation. Here again dwelling in emptiness is set within the framework of a comprehensive meditative development that includes both tranquillity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*).

Contemplation of emptiness as a form of *samādhi* leads to removing all lust, hate and delusion (A. I, 299) and thus constitutes the path to the unconditioned (S. IV, 360). Such empty concentration

(*suññatā samādhī*) often occurs in the discourses as part of a set of three concentrations, together with signless (*animitta*) and desireless (*appañihita*) concentration (*D.* III, 219). Emptiness occurs also together with signlessness and desirelessness as the three types of contact experienced when emerging from the cessation of perception and feeling (*S.* IV, 295). These presentations underline the point made already above, namely that *suññatā* as a representative of not-self stands in an inseparable relation to the other two characteristics of existence, impermanence and unsatisfactoriness.

Contemplation of emptiness apparently has some affinity with the third of the four immaterial attainments, the sphere of nothingness, since one of the different ways to reach this deep concentrative experience is through contemplating 'this is empty of a self and what belongs to a self' (*M.* II, 263). From a Buddhist perspective, however, the sphere of nothingness would count only as a by-product of such contemplation, since the real goal to be achieved by contemplating 'this is empty of a self and what belongs to a self' is liberation. As the Buddha told Mogharāja in the *Sutta Nipāta*, by rooting out the view of self and by looking on the entire world of experience as empty, one will be able to transcend even death (*Sn.* 1119).

The same theme, though without explicit use of the term 'empty', recurs in other verses of the *Sutta Nipāta*, according to which the entire world is without any essence (*Sn.* 937), as are all acquisitions and all forms of existence (*Sn.* 364 and *Sn.* 5). These statements find their complement in a passage from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, which defines the 'essence' of phenomena to be liberation (*A.* IV, 339). With a subtle undertone of humour, this discourse introduces a shift or perspective by taking 'essence' to represent what is 'essential', which is - liberation.

The various passages examined so far indicate that to speak of emptiness in early Buddhism is to qualify phenomena as being empty of a self or an abiding essence in them. This standpoint is characteristic not only of the early discourses, but also of the canonical *Abhidhamma*. The *Dhammasaṅgani*, the first book of the *Abhidhammapiṭaka*, concludes each of its examinations of the factors found in any given state of mind with a *suññatāvāra*, a chapter on emptiness. This chapter has the sole purpose of drawing attention

to the empty nature of all factors and phenomena treated in its analysis, apparently intended as a countermeasure to the all too natural tendency of investing the final products of the analytical procedure with an 'essence', however subtle it may be.

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, a work of *abhidhammic* nature but included in the fifth *Nikāya* of the Pāli canon, goes so far as to expound twenty-five types of emptiness (*Ps.* II, 177-184). Conspicuous among these twenty-five types of emptiness is the *Paṭisambhidāmagga's* proclamation that each of the five aggregates is empty by way of *sabhāva*, 'own nature' (*Ps.* II, 178), a statement reminiscent of the beginning of the Heart *Sūtra*.

The *Visuddhimagga*, a commentarial work of central importance in the *Theravāda* tradition, similarly accords a prominent place to emptiness. It makes a special point of declaring that the four noble truths should be considered from the perspective of emptiness. To implement this emptiness perspective requires the understanding that in an ultimate sense there is no one who suffers, just as there is no one who walks the path and no one who reaches the extinction of suffering.² With this injunction, the *Visuddhimagga* applies a thorough going conception of emptiness to the heart of the teaching itself.

The *Visuddhimagga* not only treats emptiness from a philosophical perspective,³ but also emphasizes the importance of emptiness from the perspective of meditative development. In its detailed account of the progress of insight towards stream-entry and the higher levels of awakening, the knowledge gained through contemplating emptiness (*suññatānupassanāññāpa*) constitutes the culmination point of the meditative progress. The position and detailed treatment accorded to contemplation of emptiness at this point reflects the important role emptiness has to play, once a meditator is on the brink of the decisive break-through to gaining any of the four levels of awakening.

At this point, according to the *Visuddhimagga's* instruction (*Vism.* 653), one should proceed by contemplating all conditioned phenomena as empty, followed by undertaking a two-fold emptiness contemplation, followed by a four-fold, a six-fold, an eight-fold, a ten-fold, a twelve-fold emptiness and finally a forty-two-fold emptiness contemplation. These various emptiness contemplations are intended

to make sure that one's understanding of emptiness covers notion of self-hood as well as of ownership, that emptiness is applied to oneself and others alike, that emptiness is related to central categories such as the six sense-spheres, the five aggregates and the twelve links of dependent arising, and that emptiness is combined with insight into the impermanent and unsatisfactory nature of reality. This broad set of contemplation modes proposed in the *Visuddhimagga* reinforces insight into emptiness from different perspectives, ensuring that the Buddha's penetrative teaching on emptiness will be thorough and comprehensive, and thereby capable of leading to the liberating insight for which it is designed.

The Buddha's penetrative teaching on emptiness has not only been of central importance in the Pāli discourses, the *Abhidhamma* and the commentaries, but has also found eloquent expression in early canonical poetry. An example for such poetry, inspired by the profound implications of emptiness, occurs in a verse in the *Dhammapada* (*Dhp.* 93). This verse takes those who have reached the acme of emptiness by destroying the influxes as its theme. Such accomplished ones, the verse indicates, have emptiness as their resort or pasture. The implications of having such an 'empty' type of pasture, the verse draws out in the following manner:

Those whose pasture is liberation,
empty and free from any mark,
their path is hard to track,
like that of birds in the sky.³

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See also ANATTĀ, EMPTINESS, SAKKĀYADIṬṬHI.

Anālayo

References

1 The Chinese version is *Madhyama Āgama* discourse no 190, found in vol. 1 p 736 of the

Taishō edition. The Tibetan version has been edited by P. Skilling: *Mahāsūtras*, PTS 1997.

2 *Vism.* 513: *Dukkham eva hi, na koci dukkhito ... atthi nibbuti, na nibbuto pumā, maggam atthi, gamako na vijjati*; cf. also *Vism.* 602, which makes a similar point in regard to karma and its fruit.

3 *Dhp* 93: *suññato animitto ca, vimokkho yassa gocaro, ākāse va sakuntānaṃ, padaṃ tassa durannayaṃ.*

ŚŪNYATĀ (2). *Sūnyatā* "Emptiness" or "voidness", as some prefer to translate the term, has many meanings depending on the context in which it occurs (for instance *sūnyatā* in a mathematical sense). Here only the philosophically and soteriologically relevant meanings pertaining to Mahāyāna Buddhism will be considered.

It can be maintained that already in early Buddhism in the Pāli texts "emptiness" occupies a key position even though it is not found in the canonical texts as frequently as in the Mahāyāna discourses and treatises. Here a case in point is *Sn.* 1119. and in *Nd.* II. commenting on this passage, it says that the five aggregates should be contemplated as being 'empty', non-self, as being without essence (*asāraka*)... and conditioned (*sañkhata*) and likewise, the text continues, ...existence (*bhava*) should be contemplated and the round of rebirths (*saṃsāravatṭa* as a term for *paṭiccasamuppāda*). Furthermore, at *Ps.* II p. 67 for example, "emptiness" is shown to be one of the soteriologically most important terms designating "insight knowledge through emptiness-contemplation (*suññatānupassanāññāṇa*) inducing and actually being tantamount to one kind of liberation (*vimokkha*) realized by means of supramundane insight.

The origins of Mahāyāna are generally associated with the creation of the earliest texts of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature (ca. 1st cent. B.C.). According to this tradition an adept, aspiring after the perfection of wisdom (*prajñā*), should realize not just the emptiness of a self or an individual (*pudgalanairātmya*) but of all phenomena, facts or factors of existence

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