

Shunyata vāda

Dear Sayadaw,

I have a question about Emptiness. I am really confused about what does Emptiness really mean in Buddhism? What does it mean to have an Emptiness? Does Emptiness mean things are lack of inherent characters? Could you explain me more about Emptiness?

Aye Chan

Emptiness

The word Emptiness is a translation of Pali word *Suññata* (Skt. *Shunyata*). Emptiness here means non-substantiality, void, latency, and relativity. This idea belongs to *Madhyamika* (The Middle Way) School of Mahāyāna Buddhism. This concept of emptiness was systematized by Nāgarjuna who founded the mentioned School in the 2nd century A.D..

It is said that Nagarjuna received the doctrine of Emptiness (*Shunyata*) from dragon's king beneath the ocean. *Sahharma Pundarika Sutra* and the *Prajnapāramitā Sutras* are the texts of this school.

In his small book *Madhyamika-Kārika*, Nāgarjuna proved that everything is void. According to him, a living entity, being not more than a temporary union of the five aggregates, cannot be said to have an absolute self which is unchanged, and that because the *dharmas* or elements of existence arise through dependent origination, they have no unchanging self-nature too.

The practical implications lie in the rejection of attachments to transient phenomena and to the egocentricity of one who envisions himself as being absolute and independent of all other existences.

The Heart Sutra

There are forty Sutras that constitute the *Prajnapāramita* group of Sutras. One of the most important sutras is the Heart (*Hridaya*) Sutra. Here you can taste the original idea of Emptiness as stated in this Sutra:

Iha sariputra rupam sunyata sunyataiva rupam, rupan na prithak sunyata sunyataya na prithag rupam, yad rupam sa sunyata ya sunyatā tad rupam; evam eva vedana-samjna-samskāra-vijnānam.

Here, O Sariputra, bodily-form is voidness; verily, voidness is bodily-form. Apart from bodily-form there is no voidness; so apart from voidness there is no bodily-form. That which is

voidness is bodily-form; that which is bodily-form is voidness. Likewise (the four aggregates) feeling, perception, mental imaging, and consciousness (are devoid of substance).

Iha sārīputra sarva-dharmah sunyata-laksanā, anutpannā aniruddhā, amalā avimalā, anunā aparipurnah.

Here, O Sariputra, all phenomena of existence are characterized by voidness: neither born nor annihilated, neither blemished nor immaculate, neither deficient nor overfilled. (*Sutra Translations*, p. 34)

Empty World (*Suññataloka*) Sutta

In Theravada tradition, there is a Sutta called *Suññaloka* (San 2, p. 279). According to this Sutta, once Ananda asked the Buddha, "Venerable Sir, it is said, 'Empty is the world, empty is the world.' In what way, Sir, is it said, Empty is the world?" Then the Buddha answered,

"It is, Ananda, because it is empty of self and of what belongs to self that it is said, 'Empty is the world'. And what is empty of self and of what belongs to self? The eye, Ananda, is empty of self and of what belongs to self. Forms are empty of self and of what belongs to self. .. Whatever feeling arises with mind-contact as condition -- weather pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant -- that too is empty of self and of what belongs to self." (*Sanyutta nikaya translation*, p. 1163)

Here the Buddha means that there is no self, nor anything pertaining to self in this world. Therefore, the world is empty (*suñño loko*).

Analysis

From the carefully study of the two original Suttas, the Emptiness doctrine given by Nagarjuna is closely linked to the *Suññataloka Sutta* of Samyutta nikaya and to that of Dependent Origination (*Paticcasamuppāda*). It is said that the Madyamika-vadins extended their doctrine into Māyā (opposite of essential absolute which is the Dharmakāya) and Tantric idea (which later becomes Tibetan Buddhism), and they have developed it into a deep psychology and philosophy.

It should be noticed that Madhyamika (the Middle Way) here means the concept which is free from the two extremes of neither existence nor non-existence, neither soul nor no-soul, and so forth while the Theravada's Middle Way means the two extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgent. The difference between the two is that the former deals with the concept and the latter with the practice. □