

WBU SUNDAY FORUM: The Concept of Sunyata in Buddhism

Date & Time : July 10, 2554 (2011), 12:00 – 13.30 : P.M.

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Dr. Pathompong first mentioned about the Vedic period as one of major milestones in the history of India in order to understand the concept of Sunyata in Buddhism. It is estimated that the Vedic period in India lasted from 1300 - 500 B.C. This period brought about a multitude of changes in the lifestyle of people. The religion in early Vedic period revolved around nature worship. People in the early Vedic period worshipped different forms of nature as god like sun, earth, moon, wind, rain, and other natural phenomena. Since there were no scientific explanations for natural phenomena like rain, thunder, wind, etc. people feared them and thus worshipped them.

The later Vedic period saw the religious practices refined and worship of Gods in the form of idols called pluralism or polytheism. Nature worship gave rise to new beliefs and new Gods. There were the 3 great Vedic gods: 1) Indra : the God of thunder - the king of gods. 2) Agni : the God of the sky - guardian of the word and giver of eternal life. 3) Surya : the sun God. There are many other deities, God of rains, God of sky, God of trees etc. Chanting of prayers and hymns were a common practice to invoke the gods and it was normal to sacrifice animals in the name of religion. Rites and rituals were organized differently in different villages to different gods. Yet, most people believed in Indra. They composed many hymns dedicated to Indra in particular.

Afterwards, the Brahmins, worried about the stability of the Brahmanical society, proposed to combine all the religious traditions together forming monotheism. According to the Brahmins, all the Gods, although different in many types, were actually incarnation of one and the same God i.e. the Supreme God or Brahma, the Creator, also given other names: Hiranya Garbh or Prajapati as the Father of all creatures in the universe. There was no specific name for the Supreme God in the Vedic period. In the Buddha's time, the Supreme God was Brahma. In the modern time, the Supreme God is named variedly depending on the sects or sub-sects. For Saivism, the Supreme God is Shiva. For Vaishnavism, the Supreme God is Vishnu. In Brahmanism, Brahma is the creator of everything. While Brahma was meditating upon what course he should pursue, his own form divided itself, one half became man and the other half became a woman. From the union of them sprung mankind. In the laws of mankind, society is divided into four main castes (varnas)-Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (nobles), Vaisyas

(merchants and farmers) and Sudras (manual laborers, peasants and servants). Far beneath the Sudras are the 'untouchables' (Harijans) who are rejects from the social order altogether. Each of these divisions determines a certain status and duty in life.

After monotheism came into existence for quite some time, monism was developed. This is the basic theory of Sunyata, explained in details in the Upanishads, which are very important philosophical texts in the Vedic period. It is believed that the Buddha studied the Upanishads before he founded Buddhism. This is one of the greatest contributions made to the thought of the world. The world is not created by the Supreme God at all. The ultimate reality is actually the universal immortal soul called Brahman or Paramatman. He is indescribable just like Tao or Nirvana. Precisely, of paramount importance in grasping the Upanishads are Brahman and Atman. The Brahman is the universal spirit and the Atman is the individual self. The Brahman is the ultimate, both transcendent and immanent, the absolute infinite existence, the sum total of all that ever is, was, or shall be. The Atman refers to the immortal perfect spirit of any living creature, including trees etc. The Atman has its final destination in merging with the all-pervading Brahman or Paramatman. Atman and Brahman are one and the same.

In the The Bhagavad Gita, at the start of the battle at Kurukshetra, the Pandava prince Arjuna hesitates when realizing that his enemies are his own relatives, friends and teachers. He turns to his charioteer and guide, Krishna, for advice. Krishna counsels Arjuna on the greater idea of dharma, or universal harmony and duty. He begins with the tenet that the Atman or soul is eternal and immortal. Any death on the battlefield would involve only the shedding of the body, whereas the soul is permanent. Through detachment from the material sense of ego, one is able to transcend his illusory mortality and attachment to the material world and enter the realm of the Supreme. In this sense, Atman is identical with Paramatman.

The Buddha was among the denouncers known as shamans or wandering mendicants. The Shaman groups rejected the teachings in Vedism which belonged to the Brahmins. They set up many philosophical schools which are recorded in the Pali canonical text mentioned by the Buddha from time to time. Apart from the various philosophical systems, at least four, before the rise of the Buddha, six famous teachers whose teachings are opposite to what the Buddha taught are pointed out as follows:

- 1) Pūraṇa Kassapa holds on to the philosophy of Amoralism: denies any reward or punishment for either good or bad deeds.
- 2) Makkhali Gosāla believes in Fatalism: we are powerless; suffering is pre-destined.

- 3) Ajita Kesakambalī believes in Materialism: with death, all is annihilated.
- 4) Pakudha Kaccāyana believes in Eternalism: matter, pleasure, pain and the soul are eternal and do not interact.
- 5) Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta holds on to Restraint: be endowed with, cleansed by and suffused with the avoidance of all evil.
- 6) Sañjaya Belaṭṭhaputta holds on to Agnosticism: "I don't think so. I don't think in that way or otherwise. I don't think not or not not."

Many disciples of six masters were later converted to Buddhism after they had debated with the Buddha.

Professor Sujip Punyanubhab explained that there are three aspects of the Buddhist theme in the Pali canonical text: 1) revolution 2) reformation and 3) establishment of new doctrines.

Revolution means that Buddhism, as a new philosophical way of life, emerges as a counter-movement against ethical and metaphysical doctrines of Brahmanism. Buddhism rejects the authority of the Vedas and disproving the Brahma as the Lord of all creatures. This epistemologically entails denouncing the practice of sacrifice as nonsensical and immoral in terms of ethics. In other words, the Buddha rejects all sacrifices, human and animals. He rejects the theory of caste system. He rejects the theory that the world is created by God. He rejects the theory of Atman and Brahman. He rejects self-mortification. And finally, he rejects sensual indulgence.

Reformation means that Buddhism gives new interpretations of old words. The Buddha gives the meaning of Gods. He taught that there is no need to even mention the ideal called God. He offers two mental qualities as the underlying safeguards of morality, as the protectors of both the individual and society as a whole. These two qualities are called in Pali Hiri and Ottappa. Hiri is an innate sense of shame over moral transgression; Ottappa is moral dread, fear of the results of wrongdoing. The Buddha calls these two states the bright guardians of the world (*sukka lokapala*). He also offers a new way to become God with the great innovation in his teaching i.e. to live a peaceful and mindful life through the Four Heavenly Abodes: loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*). This is our true nature and this is our highest calling.

Establishment of new doctrines means that the Buddha introduced the new theories for his epistemology and ethics as follows :

1 The Four Noble Truths - 1. Life means suffering. 2. The origin of suffering is attachment. 3. The cessation of suffering is attainable. 4. The path to the cessation of suffering.

2 The Three Characteristics of Facts of Existence - 1 impermanence 2 suffering 3 no-self

3 The Eight-fold Noble Path is a practical guideline to ethical and mental development with the goal of freeing the individual from attachments and delusions; and it finally leads to understanding the truth about all things: 1. Right View 2. Right Intention 3. Right Speech 4. Right Action 5. Right Livelihood 6. Right Effort 7. Right Mindfulness 8. Right Concentration

4 The Law of Dependent Origination is the central teaching of the Buddha. Through the understanding of Dependent Origination, the Buddha attained Enlightenment. He said, "Deep indeed is Dependent Origination. It is by not realizing this principle that all men have become entangled like a ball of thread, unable to stop suffering and rebirth" It states that all phenomena arise depending upon a number of casual factors. In other word, it exists in condition that the other exist; it has in condition that others have; it extinguishes in condition that others extinguish; it has not in condition that others have not.

For existence, there are twelve links in the chain:

1. Ignorance is the condition for karmic activity;
2. Karmic activity is the condition for consciousness;
3. Consciousness is the condition for the name and form;
4. Name and form is the condition for the six sense organs;
5. Six sense organs are the condition for contact;
6. Contact is the condition for feeling;
7. Feeling is the condition for emotional love/craving;
8. Emotional love/craving is the condition for grasping;
9. Grasping is the condition for existing;
10. Existing is the condition for birth;
11. Birth is the condition for old age and death;
12. Old age and death is the condition for ignorance; back to (1) and the cycle continues...

5 The course for studying and developing the mind in order to attain the utmost result in Buddhism has been divided into three groups of practice, called the Three Practices or Trilogy of Training:

Morality - Sila, i.e. good conduct, taking precepts.

Concentration - Samadhi, i.e. meditation, mental development.

Wisdom - Panya, i.e. insight, enlightenment.

The Lord Buddha found out that all beings have three kinds of mental diseases which torture and suffer them in various possible ways. Triple Study is used to free the mind form the three levels of defilements with their different degrees of disasters, and they are :

(1) The transgressive defilements (Vitikkama-kilesa). This is the coarse or rough kind of defilements overflowing through words and deeds. It is composed of three evil deeds, i.e. killing, stealing, and sexual misbehavior, and four kinds of evil words, i.e. lying, back-biting, uttering harsh words, and talking nonsense.

(2) The medium defilements (Pariyuddhana-kilesa). This is the middle kind of defilements that cause uneasiness of the mind due to the presence of mental hindrances (Nivarana) such as lustful inclination towards and longing for sensual pleasures, ill-will (*Vyapada*), or a feeling of jealousy for others, etc. This level of defilements disturbs the mind and prevents the mind from doing good deeds.

(3) The subtle defilements (Anusaya-kilesa). This is a subtle kind of defilement which lies dormant in the mind like sediments at the bottom of a water jar and it is the root of all kinds of defilement, which can be divided into three:

(A) Underlying tendency of lust (Raganusaya). This is the root cause of lust or greed.

(B) Underlying tendency of agitation (Patighanusaya). This is the root cause of anger.

(C) Underlying tendency of ignorance (Avijjanusaya). This is the root cause of delusion

Sila is responsible for subduing the crude form of defilements. Samadhi is responsible for eradicating the intermediate form of defilements. Panya is responsible for subduing the subtle form of defilements. We need to have combination of the three: Sila Samadhi and Panya together. Meditation can be fully developed if we have a very good foundation with morality. There is no concentration without wisdom and there is no wisdom without concentration.

Dr. Pathompong finally mentioned about the concept of Sunyata. Sunyata is literally translated as emptiness. A common alternative form is voidness. Emptiness is a characteristic of phenomena arising from the Lord Buddha's enlightenment that nothing possesses an essential enduring entity. In the Pali canonical text, it is called Anatta. The concept of Anatta is opposite to the concept of Atman and Brahman in Vedism. The point is that Sunyata is part of ethical principle. By Sunyata, we can develop wisdom. Wisdom is used to eradicate the most subtle mental defilements. The realization of emptiness of phenomena is an aspect of the cultivation of insight vipassana bhavana that leads to wisdom. We can develop wisdom fully

if we use Sunyata as an instrument to help us. Try to look at the world in terms of Sunyata. The world is empty of substantiality that is nothing that lasts forever. Everything is subject to change. Every condition is subject to change. Sunyata vipassa means that we have to consider Sunyata from time to time. We have to understand the fact that we are going to be born again and again nonstop. The world is dominated by a very powerful gravity which is mental defilements. We need to have extra power to lead us to go beyond the gravity of the world i.e wisdom. Sunyata is a path of development of wisdom. Things as they are mean that everything is interrelated and mutually dependent. There is no Supreme God who is responsible for creation. There is no immortal soul. There is no individual soul whatsoever. Sunyata emerges from the doctrine of non- existence of the self.

According to the original Sunyata doctrine, Kaccayanagotta Sutta: To Kaccayana Gotta (on Right View), one day the Buddha was dwelling at Savathi, Then Ven. Kaccayana Gotta approached the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: "Lord, 'Right view, right view,' it is said. To what extent is there right view?" The Buddha explained that "By & large, Kaccayana, this world is supported by (takes as its object) a polarity, that of existence & non-existence. But when one sees the origination of the world as it actually is with right discernment, 'non-existence' with reference to the world does not occur to one. When one sees the cessation of the world as it actually is with right discernment, 'existence' with reference to the world does not occur to one. We must not cling to the idea of existence or non-existence."

If we think that something exists. It exists in what form? Everything is subject to change and decay. The Buddha does not favour either eternalism or non-existentialism or nihilism. There is another school of philosophy which belongs to Mahayana called the School of Madhyamika. It rejects the two extremes. Hence this is called the Middle Way. It does not incline to either side. As of the context during the Buddha's lifetime, it is the middle way between self- mortification and sensual - indulgence. Nagarjuna, the founder of the Madhyamika philosophy, pointed out that there is a middle way between existentialism and nihilism by using the word Sunyata or emptiness to explain. Nihilism means all things are intrinsically already destroyed or rendered non-existent.

Another context, Ananda asked, "It is said that the world is empty. The world is empty, Lord. In what respect it is said that the world is empty? The Blessed One explained that in so far that it is empty of a self, of anything

pertaining to a self, that it is said, Ananda, that the world is empty." The object of the "I" is empty. It is empty of substantiality. Nothing lasts long. The Brahmins explained that in our body, there is what is called Atman. The Buddha said nothing in our physical body can be called atman. We have to look at our physical self in terms of emptiness.

Two kinds of Truth are recognised in the Abhidhamma: Conventional Truth (Sammuti Sacca) and Ultimate Truth (Paramattha Sacca). Conventional or relative truth is the truth that we cling to basically in our daily life. It is not the truth that the Buddha would like us to see. When we use such expressions as 'I', 'you', 'man', 'woman', 'person', 'individual', we are speaking about things which do not exist in reality. By using such expressions about things which exist only in designation, we are not telling a lie; we are merely speaking an apparent truth, making use of conventional language, without which no communication will be possible. But the Ultimate Truth is that there is no 'person', 'individual' or 'I' in reality. There exist only Khandhas made up of corporeality, mind (consciousness) and mental concomitants. These are real in that they are not just designations, they actually exist in us or around us. The Buddha would like us to understand Paramattha Sacca or Ultimate Truth. Four categories of things namely, mind (consciousness), mental concomitants, materiality and Nibbana are classed as the Ultimate Truth; all the rest are regarded as apparent truth.

Only Sunyata, vipassana or wisdom can lead us to understand this kind of truth. How can we develop morality meditation wisdom to the full? It is very difficult. The concept of Sunyata is introduced in order to help us to improve our understanding of the world. If we understand that the world is without substantiality then we will feel detached to the worldly pleasure. The concept of Sunyata can dispel perversion (vipalasa). In Buddhism teachings of self, permanence, stability, immortality and eternity are considered to be incorrect teachings or vipalasa. There are four different types of perversion (vipalasa) which correspond to the Three Characteristics of Facts of Existence (1impermanence 2 suffering 3 no-self):

1 Perceiving, thinking and viewing what is permanent and impermanent.

2 Perceiving, thinking and viewing what is suffering and not suffering

3 Perceiving, thinking and viewing what is substantial and non-substantial

4 Perceiving, thinking and viewing what is pure and impure.

Taking what is permanent as impermanent, what is inherently unsatisfactory as a source of satisfaction and what is without a self to constitute a self, these are the primary ways which distort reality to the profound advantage and disadvantage of others. If we feel strongly attached to

the four Upadana or clingings :Kamupadana (overwhelming sensual desire); Ditthupadana (overwhelming desire for wrong view); Silabbatupadana (overwhelming desire for wrong practices and observances) and Attavadupadana (overwhelming egoistic desire), we can destroy them by the concept of Sunyata. Nagarjuna expanded the meaning of Sunyata to cover emptiness in terms of existentialism and nihilism, which is based on the Kaccayana-gotta Sutta in the Pali canonical text.

In conclusion, there are two types in the Middle ways in Buddhism:

1 The Middle way between self mortification and sensual indulgence explained clearly in the Dhammacakrapavatana sutta in the Pali canonical text. It is founded in early Buddhism

2 The Middle way in terms of existentialism and nihilism. Nagarjuna brought the idea into prominence when he founded Mahayana Buddhism. The original source of Sunyata is the Kaccayana Gotta sutta, which explain the dependent origination. Basically, we can understand sunyata better if we contemplate on Pratitya-samutpada ("Dependent Co-arising"). The flip side of Sunyata is Pratitya samutpada. They are two sides of the same coin. They mean the same thing, but from two different perspectives. To the extent that Sunyata is a negative concept Pratitya-samutpada is the positive counterpart. Pratitya-samutpada is an attempt to conceptualize the nature of the world as it appears to us, not (as with Sunyata) by saying what the world is not, but by characterizing what is.