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 a fragment 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, Kausambi and Pataniputra in the east and Vidhisa 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 thiri-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 nāgas 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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SUṆṆĀTA See SUṆṆATĀ (1)

SUṆṆATĀ (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 suññatā 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' (suññha) 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 suññha tiya, 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).

Suññha 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 suññha 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 suññha by explaining that when a
wise person investigates the senses he or she will find
that they are empty (suññha), void (ritta) and vain
(tucchha). 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 Phena Sutta.
Though the Phena Sutta does not use the term suññha,
it does employ the two terms used as near equivalents
of suññha in the above simile of the empty village: void
(ritta) and vain (tucchha). According to the Phena Sutta,
closer inspection will reveal each of the five aggregates
to be vain (tucchaka), void (ritiaka) and insubstantial
(asrāka). 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,
voltions are devoid of essence like a plantain tree
(since it has no heartwood), and consciousness is as
defceptive as a magician's performance (S. III, 142).
The Phena 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 Cūpasuci
atā Sutta, the 'smaller discourse on emptiness' (M. III,
104). This discourse begins with Ananda inquiring
about an earlier statement by the Buddha, according
to which the Buddha often was 'dwelling in emptiness'
(suññatābhiviha).

In order to show Ananda how to achieve such
dwelling, the Buddha directed Ananda'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 cetosamanāhā).
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' (asuṭṭha) 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 Čūḷasaddhatā 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 Čūḷasaddhatā Sutta which corresponds closely to the Pāli version.¹

One of these implications is that the Čūḷasaddhatā 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 Čūḷasaddhatā 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 Čūḷasaddhatā Sutta reckons only the destruction of the influxes as 'emptiness', furthermore qualified as 'unsurpassable'. The preceding stages are only the suññattāvattaka, 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 libration (suñña atā 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 Čūḷasaddhatā 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' (vattiṭabhuccā avipallattā pariniruddhā), 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 Čūḷasaddhatā 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 impermanence’, the Mahāsūnatā 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 concept ‘I am’. It is remarkable that the Cūlasūnatā Sutta and the Mahāsūnatā Sutta, whose titles indicate that their main topic is emptiness, both stress the importance of impermanence. The two Sūnatā 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 Mahāsūnatā Sutta moreover highlights the importance of overcoming the concept ‘I am’. The concept ‘I am’ is but a manifestation of ignorance and at the same time the pivotal point for the genesis of craving. The ‘I am’ concept 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 concept is the main target for emptiness meditation. In another discourse the Buddha explained to the monks to use 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 Mahāsūnāthā Sutta, this discourse begins with the Buddha contrasting his dwelling in emptiness to Ananda’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 Mahāsūnāthā 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 Piṭakaṭapārisuddhi Sutta (M. III, 294), a discourse also concerned with ‘dwelling in emptiness’ (sukhāsātiyihāra). 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 Piṭakaṭapārisuddhi 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 (samma-vipassana) and insight (vipassana).

Contemplation of emptiness as a form of sammāthi 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
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(suññattā samādhi) often occurs in the discourses as part of a set of three concentrations, together with signless (anānata) and desireless (appānāhita) 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 suññattā 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 Moggallāna 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. 397), 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 emptiness as one of the early Buddhist 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 Abhidhammatthañjāna, concludes each of its examinations of the factors found in any given state of mind with a suññattā nibbāna, 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 Paññabhāṣaṁñāṇa, 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 Paññabhāṣaṁñāṇa’s proclamation that each of the five aggregates is empty by way of suññattā, ‘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. 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, 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 (suññattā nibbāna) 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.¹

Bibliography:


See also ANATTĀ, EMPTINESS, SAKKĀYADĪTTIHI.

Anālayo

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¹ The Chinese version is Madhyama Āgama discourse no 190, found in vol. I p 736 of the Taishō edition. The Tibetan version has been edited by P. Skilling: Mahāyānas, PTS 1997.

² Vism. 513: Dukkham eva hi, na koci dukkhitu ... atthi nibbuti, na nibbuta puna, maggam atthi, gamaka na vijjati; cf. also Vism. 602, which makes a similar point in regard to karma and its fruit.

³ Dhp 93: saraṅkato anumitto ca, vinokho yassa gocaro, iḷāke va sakuntānaṁ, padaṁ tassa duramayaṇaṁ.

Śūnyatā(1) Śūnyatā(2)

Śūnyatā “Emptiness”¹ or “voidness”, as some prefer to translate the term, has many meanings depending on the context in which it occurs (for instance śūnyatā 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 Abh. 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 (saṅkhata) and likewise, the text continues, ...existence (bhava) should be contemplated and the round of rebirths (saṁsāravatta as a term for paṭiccasaṅgupatā). 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 (sukhamittamukkhatā) inducing and actually being tantamount to one kind of liberation (vinokkha) 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 (pudgalasamudaya) but of all phenomena, facts or factors of existence
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