**Sunyata (Emptiness) in the Mahayana Context**

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**Sunyata (Emptiness) is the profound meaning of the Mahayana Teaching.**

Two thousand five hundred years ago, the Buddha was able to realise "emptiness" (s. *sunyata*). By doing so he freed himself from unsatisfactoriness (s. *dukkha*). From the standpoint of enlightenment, sunyata is the reality of all worldly existences (s. *dharma*). It is the realisation of Bodhi — Prajna. From the standpoint of liberation, sunyata is the skilful means that disentangle oneself from defilement and unsatisfactoriness. The realisation of sunyata leads one to no attachment and clinging. It is the skilful means towards enlightenment and also the fruit of enlightenment.

There are two ways for us to understand this concept of sunyata in the Mahayana context. One way is to try to understand the explanation about its true nature. The other way is the realisation through practice. What we are going to discuss now is about its true nature.

Mahayana teachings have always considered that the understanding of sunyata is an attainment which is extremely difficult and extraordinarily profound. For example, in the Prajna Sutra it says "That which is profound, has sunyata and non-attachment as its significance. No form nor deeds, no rising nor falling, are its implications."

Again in the Dvadasanikaya Sastra (composed by Nagarjuna, translated to Chinese by Kumarajiva A.D. 408) it says: "The greatest wisdom is the so-called sunyata."

This sunyata, no creation, calmness and extinction (s. *nirvana*) is of a profound significance in the Mahayana teachings. Why do we see it as the most profound teaching? This is because there is no worldly knowledge, be it general studies, science or philosophy, that can lead to the attainment of the state of sunyata. The only path to its realisation is via the supreme wisdom of an impassionate and discriminating mind. It is beyond the common worldly understanding.

**The Significance of Sunyata and Cessation**

The Buddha always used the terms void, no rising and falling, calmness and extinction to explain the profound meaning of sunyata and cessation. The teachings of the Buddha that were described in words are generally common to worldly understandings. If one interprets the teachings superficially from the words and languages used, one will only gain worldly knowledge and not the deeper implication of the teachings. The teachings of the Buddha have their supra-mundane contexts that
are beyond the worldly knowledge.

For example, sunyata and the state of nirvana where there is no rising nor falling, are interpreted by most people as a state of non-existence and gloom. They fail to realise that quite the opposite, sunyata is of substantial and positive significance.

The sutras often use the word “great void” to explain the significance of sunyata. In general, we understand the “great void” as something that contains absolutely nothing. However, from a Buddhist perspective, the nature of the “great void” implies something which does not obstruct other things, in which all matters perform their own functions. Materials are form, which by their nature, imply obstruction. The special characteristic of the “great void” is non-obstruction. The “great void” therefore, does not serve as an obstacle to them. Since the “great void” exhibits no obstructive tendencies, it serves as the foundation for matter to function. In other words, if there was no “great void” nor characteristic of non-obstruction, it would be impossible for the material world to exist and function.

The “great void” is not separated from the material world. The latter depends on the former. We can state that the pro- found significance of sunyata and the nature of sunyata in Buddhism highlights the “great void’s” non-obstructive nature.

Sunyata does not imply the “great void”. Instead, it is the foundation of all phenomena (form and mind). It is the true nature of all phenomena, and it is the basic principle of all existence. In other words, if the universe’s existence was not empty nor impermanent, then all resulting phenomena could not have arisen due to the co-existence of various causes and there would be no rising nor falling. The nature of sunyata is of positive significance!

Calmness and extinction are the opposite of rising and falling. They are another way to express that there is no rising and falling. Rising and falling are the common characteristics of worldly existence. All phenomena are always in the cycle of rising and falling. However, most people concentrate on living (rising). They think that the universe and life are the reality of a continuous existence.

Buddhism on the other hand, promotes the value of a continuous cessation (falling). This cessation does not imply that it ceases to exist altogether. Instead, it is just a state in the continuous process of phenomena. In this material world, or what we may call this “state of existence”, everything eventually ceases to exist. Cessation is definitely the home of all existences. Since cessation is the calm state of existence and the eventual refuge of all phenomena, it is also the foundation for all activities and functions.

The Amitabha Buddha who was, and is, revered and praised by Buddhists around the world, radiates indefinite light and life from this “state of cessation”. This state is a continuous process of calmness. It will be the eventual refuge for us all. If we think
carefully about the definitions of calmness and extinction, then we can deduce that they are the true natural end-points of rising and falling. The true nature of the cycle of rising and falling is calmness and extinction. Because of this nature, all chaos and conflicts in the state of rising and falling will eventually cease. This is attainable by the realisation of prajna.

Contemplating the Implications of Sunyata and Stillness (Nirvana) by Observing Worldly Phenomena

All existences exhibit void-nature and nirvana-nature. These natures are the reality of all existence. To realise the truth, we have to contemplate and observe our worldly existence. We cannot realise the former without observing the latter. Consider this Heart Sutra extract, “Only when Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva practised the deep course of wisdom of Prajna Paramita did he come to realise that the five skandhas (aggregates, and material and mental objects) were void.”

Profound wisdom leads us to the realisation that all existences are of void-nature. The sutras demonstrate that the profound principle can be understood by contemplating and observing the five skandhas. We cannot realise the truth by seeking something beyond the material and mental world. The Buddha, using his perfect wisdom, observed worldly existence from various implications and aspects, and came to understand all existences.

**In summary, there are three paths to this observation:**

1. We should observe the preceding state and the current state of conditions. (i.e., Observation according to the concept of time.)
2. We should observe existences according to their inter-relationships. i.e., Observation via the concept of space (either two or three-dimensions).
3. We should observe the true nature of all myriad beings. This is like observing the worldly existences of a point, a line and an area. Those with supreme wisdom understand the true nature of all worldly existences by observing vertically the relationships between the preceding and current conditions, and horizontally the interrelationships. Then we can understand the true meaning of void-nature and nirvana-nature.

By observing the preceding-stage and the current-stage conditions, we can verify the Law of Impermanence of all worldly existences. All existences, be they material or mental, be they the material world, or the physical or mental states of sentient beings, are subject to continuous change.

The world may have certain states of beings where they stay static or are in equilibrium on a temporary basis (for example hibernation). But when we observe them with supreme wisdom, we will find that not only do they keep changing on a yearly basis, but also that this change applies to even every briefest moment. After the current state of conditions have ceased to exist, the newly-formed state materialises. This is the state
of rising and falling. The rising and falling of each small moment reveals that all existences are ever-moving and ever-changing.

Conventional scholars have a very good explanation of these ever-changing worldly conditions. However they, including the practitioners of dharma, try to make sense of the reality from the ever-changing worldly existences. That is, they are fooled by the material existences and are not able to understand the deeper truth of all existences.

Only those with the supreme wisdom of the Buddha and Mahabodhisattvas realise and understand that all existences are illusions. They understand that existences are not real from the observation of the flow of changing existences. The numerous illusionary existences may well be diverse and confusing, arising and decaying. But when we look into their true nature, we will find them void and of nirvana-nature.

On the other hand, since all existences are of nirvana-nature, they appear from the perspective of time, to be ever-changing. They never stay the same even for the briefest moment. Impermanence implies existences do not have a permanent entity. This is another implication of the nature of sunyata and stillness.

From observations of existence via inter-relationships, we can conclude that nothing is independent of the Law of Causation, and that everything is without ego. For example, the Buddha explains that the individual sentient being is composed of physical, physiological and psychological phenomena. The so called ego is a deluded illusion which does not exist in reality. Its existence depends on the combination of both physical and mental factors. It is a union of organic phenomena. Thus we call it the empirical ego. It is a mistake to cling to it as an infatuated ego.

The Indian concept of the supreme spirit implies someone who rules. The spirit is the ruler who is independent of is self-dependent and all causes. In other words, the spirit is the one who is free from all primary and secondary causes (for physical and mental aspects). The spirit is the one who has the soul of his own body and mind. This is the ego or supreme spirit that the theologists cling to. From their view point, the only way to avoid physical and mental decay is to be self-determined and self-sovereign. In this way, the supreme being can stay permanent in the cycle of reincarnation, and return to the absolute reality by liberating himself from life and death.

But from the profound contemplation and wisdom of the Buddha and Mahabodhisattvas, we know there is no such reality. Instead, egolessness (non-self) is the only path to understand the reality of the deluded life. All existences are subject to the Law of Causes and Conditions. These include the smallest particles, the relationship between the particles, the planets, and the relationship between them, up to and including the whole universe! From the smallest particles to the biggest matter, there exists no absolute independent identity.
Egolessness (non-self) implies the void characteristics of all existence.

Egolessness (non-self) signifies the non-existence of permanent identity for self and existence (Dharma). Sunyata stresses the voidness characteristic of self and existence (Dharma). Sunyata and egolessness possess similar attributes. As we have discussed before, we can observe the profound significance of sunyata from the perspective of inter-dependent relationships. Considering dharma-nature and the condition of nirvana, all existences are immaterial and of a void-nature. Then we see each existence as independent of each other. But then we cannot find any material that does exist independent of everything else. So egolessness also implies void-nature!

From the observation of all existences, we can infer the theory of nirvana and the complete cessation of all phenomena. From the viewpoint of phenomena, all existences are so different from each other, that they may contradict each other. They are so chaotic. In reality, their existence is illusionary and arises from conditional causation. They seem to exist on one hand, and yet do not exist on the other. They seem to be united, but yet they are so different to one another.

They seem to exist and yet they do cease! Ultimately everything will return to harmony and complete calmness. This is the nature of all existence. It is the final resting place for all. If we can understand this reality and remove our illusions, we can find this state of harmony and complete calmness.

All our contradictions, impediments and confusion will be converted to equanimity. Free from illusion, complete calmness will be the result of attaining nirvana. The Buddha emphasised the significance of this attainment and encouraged the direct and profound contemplation on void-nature. He said, “Since there is no absolute self-nature thus every existence exhibits void-nature. Because it is void, there is no rising nor falling. Since there is no rising nor falling, thus everything was originally in complete calmness. Its self-nature is nirvana.”

From the viewpoint of time and space, we can surmise that all existences are impermanent, all existences have no permanent self, and nirvana is the result of the cessation of all existences — the Three Universal Characteristics. But there are not three different truths. Instead, they are the characteristics of the only absolute truth and the ultimate reality. This is the explanation of Dharma-nature and the condition of nirvana. The three characteristics are the one characteristic, and vice versa!

We may cultivate our meditation, contemplating the impersonality of all existences. This will lead us to enlightenment via the path of voidness. Contemplating nirvana and complete calmness leads to enlightenment by the path of immaterial form. Contemplating the impermanence of all existences, leads us to enlightenment by the path of inactivity (no desire).
The Three Universal Characteristics are the other implications of Dharma-nature and nirvana. The paths to enlightenment are also the same cause of absolute reality. All of them return to the Dharma-nature and the condition of nirvana. In short, the teachings of the Buddha start from the observation and contemplation of all worldly phenomena. They are like thousands of streams of water competing with each other, and flowing from the top of the mountains to the bottom. Eventually, all of them return to the ocean of voidness and nirvana.

**Sunyata and Cessation is the Truth (Nature) of All Existences.**

All existences that are recognised by worldly understanding, whether materially, spiritually or intellectually, have always been misunderstood by us. We cling to them as real, physically existing and permanent. Actually, they are only unreal names.

The more precise meaning of the term “unreal name” is “assumption” or “hypothesis”. It is an empirical name. It is formed by the combination of various causes and effects. (These include the effects of mental consciousness.) It does not exist by itself. Everything exists relatively. Thus, what is the ultimate truth? If we investigate existence further, we realise that all existences are empty. This is the fundamental characteristic and reality of all existence. It is ultimate and absolute. But we should not think that empty means nothing. It implies the disentanglement from the worldly misunderstanding of the existence of self, identity, and the realisation of the absolute.

In the Sutras and Abhidharma, the worldly understandings are sometimes referred to as all phenomena (Dharma). Sunyata is referred to as “Dharma-nature”, and hence there is a distinction between “phenomena” and “Dhamma-nature”. However, this is only an expedient explanation that helps us to realise the truth of sunyata through the phenomena of all existences.

We should not think that “existence” and “nature”; or the “phenomena of Dharma” and “Dharma-nature” are something contradictory. They are just concepts needed to understand the implication of sunyata.

We may analyse the expedient explanation of “existence” and the “nature (voidness)” from two aspects:

a) The truth of sunyata is the nature of each individual existence. Each step we make in understanding that each minor form has a nature that is not describable by words, are steps to the realisation of the truth of sunyata. The sunyata of Dharma nature is the same for all, it is non distinguishable. However, from our deluded viewpoint, we assume that it is the nature of each individual existence and not an abstract common nature.

b) Dharma-nature is best described as the characteristic of equanimity of sunyata. It cannot be described as many or one and absolute. (One is relative to many!)

We cannot say that the Dharma-nature is different to existence. But at the same time,
we cannot say that it is equal to existence. All in all, sunyata is the nature of existence. Although the realisation of supreme wisdom may seem to be abstract superficially, it embodies very substantial and compelling ideas.

The Relationship between Phenomena and the Sunyata of Dharma-nature.

From our discussions above, it is very clear that existence and nature cannot be described as the same or different. In the Mahayana teaching, the theory of “not the same nor different” is indisputable. However, in order to adapt to the different spiritual foundations and thinking, the ancient great practitioners have different explanations.

a) The Dharmalaksana Sects emphasise the “phenomena or characteristics of things”. Their theory is, “the appearance of karmic seeds nurtures the rising of things and vice versa.” The Law of Dependent Origination of karmic seeds explains all worldly (mundane) and out-worldly (supramundane) Dharma. When this sect explains impermanence and the rising and falling of all existence, they omit to mention its relationship with the Dharma nature that is not rising nor falling.

According to them, under the definitions of impermanence and rising and falling, “karmic seeds” appear and nurture the rising of things and in return, can be formed. Therefore, the nature of “no rising nor falling” cannot be the foundation of any existence. This school is famous for its detail and careful observation. However, there is a tendency to misunderstand the theory of no-rising nor failing (the eternal Dharma-nature) and the theory of rising and falling (the causative Dharma) as two separate identities.

This is definitely not the intention of the scholars of the Dharmalaksana Sect. This is because as we detach ourselves from the illusion of rising and falling, and the Law of Cause and Effect, we will see the truth of Dharma-nature. We will realise that the Dharma and Dharma-nature are neither the same nor different. This is nature of the individual existence that is beyond description. It has no difference from the Dharma. To differentiate the Dharma from aspects of rising and falling, is to emphasise the difference between “nature” and “phenomena” only.

b) The schools of Tien Tai, Xian Shou and Chan (Zen) emphasise the Dharma-nature. They call themselves the “School of Nature” and the perfect intercommunion of all things is their emphasis. In respect of the equanimity of Dharma-nature, the phenomena of all things are embodied in Dharma-nature. The phenomena of Dharma that is pure or deluded arises from Dharma-nature.

The scholars of Tien Tai called it the “Embodied nature”. (This is the Buddha-nature that includes both good and evil.) The scholars of Xian Shou say, “It is arising from primal nature”, and the scholars of Chan (Zen) say, “It is nature that causes the rising
of things”. All Dharma is Dharma-nature. It is not different from Dharma-nature. Dharma and Dharma-nature are not two separate identities, “Phenomena” and “nature” are also not distinguishable either. In other words, there is no difference between principle (absolute) and practice (relative).

This also implies that there is no differences among practices. The schools that emphasise Dharma-nature do not emphasise differences. However, scholars who misunderstood its implication, always became attached to the principles (an absolute), and neglect the practice (a relative). This is definitely not the aim of the schools of “Dharma-nature”.

c) The School of Madhyamika, which is also called the “School of Sunyata”, explains the truth directly. They say that existence and sunyata are neither the same nor different. According to the School of Sunyata, all Dharma arises from causes and conditions. Therefore the nature of all Dharma is empty. Because of its empty nature, it has to rely on causes and conditions in order to arise.

In other words, all Dharma arises from causes and conditions, and all Dharma is empty in nature. The Law of Dependent Origination (existence) and the nature of emptiness is neither the same nor different. They exist mutually. The truth of “sunyata” and “existence”, and “nature” and “phenomena” are not in conflict with each other. Unlike the scholars of the Dharmalaksana Sect who explain the Dharma only from the aspect of Dependent Origination, or the scholars of Dharma-nature that explain the existence of Dharma only from the aspect of Dharma-nature, the scholars of Madhyamika explain the truth of the Dharma from both aspects. Hence this is called the Middle Path which does not incline to either side.

These are the three main schools in Mahayana teaching. The Dharma and Dharma-nature resemble worldly phenomena and entity, but they are not identical. In Mahayana teaching, the Dharma-nature is the nature of each individual Dharma. There is no entity that causes the appearance of things. Although Dharma (existences) and Dharma-nature are not identical, they are also not beyond Dharma (existences). We should not think that these concepts are too deep beneath or too high above us. By realising the Dharma and Dharma nature from the existence (Dharma) around us, then can the real and profound implications of sunyata be portrayed. (Translated by Lim Yang & Shi Neng Rong, edited by Ke Rong, proofread by Shi Neng Rong (21-9-1996))