

# SUÑÑATĀ – EXPERIENCE OF VOID IN BUDDHIST MIND TRAINING

**Mirko Frýba**

(Università degli Studi di Roma “La Sapienza”, 17th November 1984) <sup>1</sup>

*Suññatā* means the voidness of all phenomena. As such, it is an important part of the doctrine of *anattā* or non-self which is central and also unique to the Buddhist teachings as conveyed by all the various schools.

Buddhism is a practical teaching, basically a method of mind training and mind cultivation. Its highest disciplines of mind training (*adhicitta-sikkhā*) have as the goal liberation from all forms of oppression and suffering. This goal is usually characterized as enlightenment, awakening, and emancipation through insight into the emptiness of all that is subject to suffering and unsatisfactoriness. The final emancipation through the meditative realization of *suññatā* is to be reached by each wise individual in his own experience (*paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*).

Such experiential verification of *suññatā* was practiced by the historical Buddha and his fully accomplished contemporaries, Sāriputta, Moggallāna, Kassapa, Ānanda, and other *theras* (elders) who used the Buddha's methods of mind training for this original purpose. With the centuries, the experiential realization of *suññatā* has dwindled down to speculative interpretations of this doctrinal term by later Buddhist philosophies. Nevertheless, some of the ancient records of the practical methods leading to the experience of *suññatā* are available in literature as well as in an unbroken tradition of mind training practice.

As a psychologist, I shall focus on *suññatā* as it is to be experienced (*veditabbā*) through the practical methods of the highest mind training. Without involvement in philological interpretations, these practical methods shall be analyzed from the psychological viewpoint.

In order to clarify the broader context of our topic, at least the following historical facts should be briefly mentioned.

Both the practice and study of the Buddha's teaching were introduced from India to Sri Lanka in the third century B.C. during the reign of King Asoka. Asoka's pillar inscriptions and the books of the Theravādin *Tipitaka Canon*, written down in Sri Lanka during the first century B.C., are the oldest available records; they are basically included in the teaching of all Buddhist schools which developed later. The younger literary traditions of the Mahāyāna, whose first records are rather poetical and devotional, in their later more philosophical scriptures, also include the descriptions of practical methods which are essentially the same as those in the *Tipitaka Canon*. Thus the highest disciplines of Tibetan Vajrayāna refer to the methods of Abhidharma as the supreme, and the Japanese Zen has as its most reliable manual of mind training the Chinese magnum opus *Gedatsu Do Ron*, which is identical with the *Vimuttimagga*<sup>2</sup> of the Theravāda. All the later commentarial literature of Theravāda, Zen and Vajrayāna can be useful for didactic purposes but has little relevance for the analysis of the canonical significance of *suññatā* which we are going to explore. Moreover, the validity of whatever materials from the *Tipitaka Canon* – the *Vinaya-Pitaka* (Discipline), the *Sutta-Pitaka* (Discourses), and the *Abhidhamma-Pitaka* (Systematization) – is not questioned by any school of Buddhism as the differences among the schools are due solely to later developments. An overview of the three divisions of the *Tipitaka Canon* shows that the experiential and practical aspects are best conveyed by the *Sutta-Pitaka*.

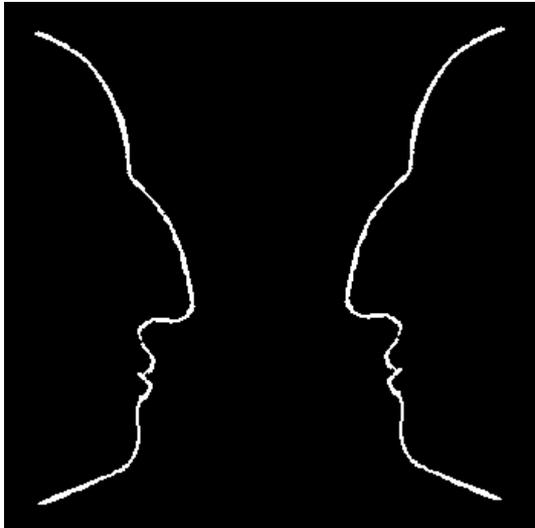
The sutta materials relevant for the understanding of *suññatā* are found in *Majjhima Nikāya* (suttas 43, 121, 122, 151), *Samyutta Nikāya* (IV pages 54 ff.), and *Khuddaka Nikāya* (*Cūla Niddesa* II, *Patisambhidāmagga* I, para. 45, 91; II. para. 36, 48, 177). These suttas refer to *suññatā* as an experience; they treat *suññatā* neither as a concept nor as an issue of philosophical speculation. The *Sutta-Pitaka* records many different approaches of mind training leading to final emancipation; those which are specifically important for gaining an understanding of *suññatā* shall be referred to. Through an explanation of the *Cūla-Suññatā-Sutta* (*Majjhima* 127), it shall be shown how the Buddha employs both concentration (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) as the means for liberation through the experience of *suññatā* in meditation.

In the course of explaining this methodical progress, also two contemporary sources of empirical data are utilized, namely, the meditation experience of the author and his observations made during two decades of teaching Buddhist methods of mind training. Drawing upon these sources, some misconceptions shall be exposed in order to demonstrate how meditation can be distorted by speculative interpretations that are incommensurate with the emancipated experience of reality.

Let us next examine some quite common misconceptions of the term *suññatā* which are caused by various types of misunderstanding. One is the conception of *suññatā* as a blank state of consciousness in which awareness of any phenomenon is absent. Such a blank state of consciousness may arise in a beginner's meditation, but it may also be quite a common experience in prolonged practice by a not very skilled meditator who manages to quieten his mind by diminishing his attention and mindfulness. Another type of misconception is due to what might be called the “petrification” of perceptual emptiness, e.g. a perception of the empty space of a vessel, an empty window, a blank sheet of paper. Such an experience of emptiness becomes solidified into an entity and through wrong understanding gets assigned the ontological status of “the thing”. Then, instead of meditatively experiencing any reality, the person thinks of that thing in a concentrated manner and believes he is meditating on *suññatā*. Still another type of misunderstanding is to take *suññatā* for a mere idea or a concept which has neither ontological reality nor any experiential anchorage. Such a concept is then treated as a content of thinking, and as a pure thought is processed logically within a system of philosophical or religious beliefs. *Suññatā* is then misconceived as an abstraction, even if it is concretized through verbal signs, symbols or meditative visualizations (*nimitta*) which subsequently become objects of consciousness on their own. Most of the misconceptions of *suññatā* which appear quite frequently in modern literature on this subject are caused by the above mentioned three types of misunderstanding.

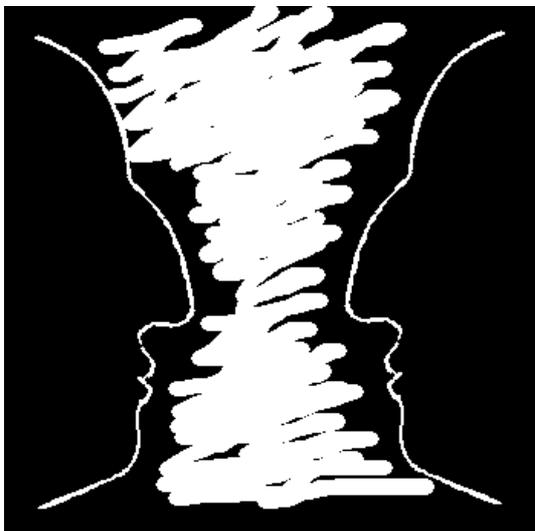
However, some misunderstanding may also arise due to a failure to discern the various usages of the terms *suñña* (adjective) and *suññatā* (noun) in the original texts. On the one hand, these words are being used as exactly defined technical terms in a canonized absolute sense (*paramattha-sacca*); on the other hand, they are sometimes used as conventional expressions (*sammuti-sacca*; Skt. *samvrti-satya*) in similes, illustrative metaphors, conversational passages and clarifying descriptions which are mediated in colloquial non-technical language. Sometimes it is even the case that experiences and processes of meditation are depicted in colloquial phrases, especially in later post-canonical literature. When colloquially used, *suñña* applies most often to a change of situation or a change of perception, e.g. a room may be at one time full of people and at the next moment void of any person; or there are now trees, rocks and hills to be seen in the window, while after a change of the viewer's position, only the sky is seen through the empty window. These are instances of void and emptying which are mind changes in reference to the perceptual contents; they have nothing to do with the principle of *suññatā* as an experience of the fundamental truth in the absolute canonical sense.

Nevertheless, intellectual grasping of perceptual changes. or in other words, understanding the changes of consciousness which are based merely on emptying the contents of perception, can also be employed didactically in instructions for meditation. Something like this was actually done by the Buddha in his discourse, the *Cūla-Suññatā-Sutta*, *Majjhima* 127. Let us try to demonstrate also in this very situation here, how to go similarly through several steps of changes of consciousness. can be: When I draw with white chalk these two curves on a black background(see Picture 1), they can be seen as two heads facing each other.



Picture 1

The empty space between the two heads of the Picture 1, can be completely whitened. That is, let us emphasize its emptiness by making it all white (see Picture 2 and 3).



Picture 2



Picture 3

If we make effort to white out all the originally empty space, then a white vase on the black background can be seen, i.e. we can believe that “the thing” we have now is “the emptiness” This game of figure and background is certainly recognizable as familiar to you for it appears in countless psychology textbooks. However, we are not here concerned with the laws of psychology of perception. Let us try to overcome the conditionings forced upon us in our studies of psychology. Do not objectively scrutinize the pictures. Do not cling to the perceptual contents out there while ignoring the subjective experiential shifts. Instead, try to be

introspective: notice how the attention moves, how the consciousness alters, what are the changes experienced within your mind.

Unlike the science of modern psychology, Buddhist methods analyze the changes of mind, of its subjective side, and develop the skill of changing the mind at will. For this training and analysis, there is a necessary precondition to be fulfilled: the discovery of hitherto unnoticed inner phenomena by means of bare attention. This most fundamental method of Buddhist mind training is best described in *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* by Nyānaponika Thera (1962). This discovery works through mindful noticing which discerns the sense experience, the feeling, the state of consciousness, and the contents of consciousness as these mental phenomena come and go without any interventions.

As a starting point for the methodical practice of noticing, the mindfulness of natural inbreath and outbreath is usually chosen, but you can try noticing the four aforementioned foundations of mindfulness (*satipatthāna*) even now: What is being felt within the body? Is the present experience pleasant or unpleasant? Is the mind peaceful, excited, bored, averse, curious or even greedy? What are the mind's contents right now?

Instead of just reading, hearing, and thinking *about* Buddhist methods from second hand sources, get first hand experiences of them and start to understand them technically. Even a short trial of two minutes may be worthwhile. Can you feel your body's position now? What would you say about your state of mind now? Noticing and naming that, this is the basic principle of Buddhist mindfulness meditation. You can know your mind and body by means of direct experiencing.

There definitely have been some objectively detectable processes in your physiology as you have been now going through various moves of mind. Indeed, there are significant measurable changes during meditation. The events of meditation and the personality changes effected by Buddhist mind training can certainly be scrutinized under the application of scientific methods. Yet, while scientific research in the fields of transpersonal psychology, education, physiology, etc., can be very interesting and also useful, it can never fully explain the phenomena of Buddhist mind training, nor can it substitute for the traditional Buddhist teachings; it can just complement them.

Scientific theories elicit their truth from the conspicuous phenomena, making thus the extremes criterial for the outcomes; the Buddhist practice promotes the middle way aiming at equanimity and peace. However, there are some extreme experiences encountered by long term meditators, which may be very spectacular, intense, and unusual. Some very advanced meditators experience supreme bliss, free from any emotional changes and void of conceptualizations and images. Such states of mind are sometimes connected with an intense experience of clear light. Those Buddhist traditions which are rather philosophically inclined tend to interpret this clear light as the *suññatā* (remember the third of the above mentioned misconceptions), because they are preoccupied with conceptual speculations and have lost the direct technical approach to the processes of meditation. The philosophical writers and religious interpreters who lack the experiential knowledge of the progressive stages of meditation are not able to diagnose the perversions of meditation at its higher stages. In the original tradition of practical insight meditation, these extreme experiences are called "imperfections of insight" (*vipassanā-upakkilesā*).

It is my hypothesis that the scientifically measurable physiological changes are most pronounced in connection with these extreme experiences which are subjectively so impressive and overwhelming. A properly instructed meditator does not cling to these experiences and is eventually able to recognize for himself that even the most sublime effulgence of light (*obhāsa*) connected with heightened awareness of peace and bliss is just an imperfection (*upakkilesa*) which obstructs real progress to final emancipation (see *Upakkilesa-Sutta*,

*Majjhima* 161). This experience is sometimes referred to as pseudo-nirvana. The clear light is definitely *suñña*, it is void also in the absolute (*paramattha*) sense; nevertheless, it is *not* the experience of *suññatā*.

Open-mindedness and soberness are the very characteristics of pristine Buddhism. The Teaching instructs us to accept open-mindedly whatever reality is experienced and to understand it for what it reality is, soberly, without being too impressed by even the most spectacular occurrence. This Buddhist attitude can also be characterized as empirical realism in so far as the experiential verification of any given phenomenon has a higher cognitive validity than the results of reasoning and measurement of the hypothetically constructed variables which are characteristic of science. The scientific approach is indirect and can grasp only the outer aspects of the phenomena. Thus we should not be misled to believe that meditative experiences can be understood through biological and psychological interpretations of the phenomena produced within the organism. The biological and psychological organism is barely a vehicle of experiencing. The scientific reductionist attempts can be compared to the naive hope of understanding a poem by analyzing the chemical and physical properties of the book, the recording tape, or the sound, which are only vehicles of the poem's meaning. This much must be said to illustrate the limits of psycho-physiological research on meditation. In a similar way, the psychology of perception can be expected to bring only limited understanding of the phenomena of the meditative process. Nevertheless, the research on meditation being carried out here at the University of Rome<sup>3</sup> is very interesting, and despite the limitations inherent in the scientific approach, very useful. After all, no meditation progress and no emancipation is possible unless we understand and use properly our biological and psychological vehicle.

Let us now return to the experiences undergone while following the perceptual shifting between the figure and background in the pictures. You are bodily present right now. You have been seeing. There was a certain state of mind when your awareness was visual while perceiving the two faces on picture 1. and there was another state of mind while perceiving this interspace as a vase in picture 2. There was still another state of mind when you found the perception change pleasant, and still another when you became greedy for the pleasant perception. You may even have had insight knowledge of the dependent origination of these states of mind, had found them all unsatisfactory, and had turned your mind away from it all. Then, you may have experienced a moment of emancipation. You may now feel that all these thoughts and objects of mind are not fulfilling at all, and suddenly you are voiding your mind....

We are now getting closer to the canonical notion of *suññatā*., our minds are being tuned to understand the Buddha's "Smaller Discourse on Voidness", the *Cūla-Suññatā-Sutta*.

Just now, without theoretical explanations or doctrinal descriptions as found in books on Buddhism, we went through some important preparatory work which will help us to follow the Buddha's discourse as practical instruction. What you have been exposed to during the guided meditation on figure-background – all that preparatory work – has been an application of skilful means (*upāya-kosalla*). Skilful means is a teaching technique which takes into account the present state of mind of the meditators, their background, and the concrete here-and-now situation. The Buddha uses similarly skilful means at the beginning of his discourse on *suññatā*. The discourse takes place in the Palace of Migāra's Mother. Inviting the Buddha to speak on *suññatā* takes the form of this question (transl. Nānamoli Thera):

"... I heard and learned this from the Blessed One's own lips: 'Now I abide much in the void abiding.' Venerable sir, was this well heard by me?"

This question refers to a past event which is acknowledged by the Buddha in his reply; nevertheless, he then brings the mind of the questioner to the present situation:

“Certainly, Ānanda, that was well heard by you... As formerly, so now too, I abide much in the void abiding.”

In the palace there are no visual objects of pictures to be voided, but there would have been a gathering of people and elephants ornamented with silver, etc. Before elaborating step by step towards *suññatā*, the Buddha uses as skilful means a reference to this concrete situation in the palace:

"Ānanda, just as the Palace of Migāra's Mother is void of elephants, void of gold and silver, void of the foregathering of women and men, and there is only this... single state of non-voidness dependent on the presence of the community of bhikkhus, so too, without giving attention to perception ...."

Then the Buddha proceeds to give meditation instructions which are at the same time detailed operational definitions of *suññatā*. He describes the operations of mind changes leading to the experiential realization of the “Highest Suññatā.” This is obviously instruction for concentrative meditation (*samatha*) starting with outer seclusion in the forest and proceeding to the inner seclusion (*viveka*) which leads to the unification of mind (*cittakaggatā*). In *samatha*, the mind is being withdrawn to ever more sublime realms in which its analytical functions used for *vipassanā* (insight meditation) cease to operate. The goal of *samatha* is to reach the peaceful ecstasy of *jhāna* which is void of the disturbances caused by the proliferation of mind. The Buddha describes in the *Cūla-Suññatā-Sutta* very precisely – this particular passage will be extensively analyzed later – the mechanism of voiding and unifying which brings the mind to ever higher meditative attainments of *jhāna*. As each higher state of *jhāna* is void of some aspects inherent in the lower one, the ever higher *suññatā* is thus used as the criterion for the meditative progress in the concentration of *samatha*. Nevertheless, the Highest Voidness (*anuttara-suññatā*) is to be reached only by averting the concentrated mind\_ to the insight of *vipassanā* which enables the meditator to realize experientially the conditioned nature of the sense bases (*āyatana*) upon which depends all experiencing (vedanā, even that of the meditation object (*nimitta*) in the highest concentration of *samatha*.

The Buddha’s discourse is addressed to listeners who are familiar with certain features of his teaching, in particular, with the doctrine of *anattā*. Thus for the sake of better understanding, we also have to grasp, at least roughly, the principle of *anattā* and some other technical terms, before we turn to extensive quotations from the *Cūla-Suññatā-Sutta*. As a doctrinal term in the Theravāda Canon, *suññatā* refers exclusively to the *anattā*-doctrine. In meditation practice, *suññatā* and *anattā* are inseparable: “Contemplation of not-self and contemplation of voidness are one in meaning and only the letter is different”, states Buddhaghosa (*Visuddhimagga*, Ch.XX, p.628)<sup>2</sup>. In enlightened experience of reality, *anattā* is the wise knowledge (*vijjā*) that there is no self; *vijjā* is wisdom which is void of ignorance (*avijjā*) splitting reality into I and not-I, mine and not-mine. Unenlightened persons identify various parts of reality with the self, cling to them, and consequently, suffer due to the frustration of such delusional identifications. The enlightened view of reality, which is characterized by *anattā*, pierces all things which may be conventionally (*sammuti*) conceived as identities and sees them ultimately (*paramattha*) as an interplay of conditions, as an interaction of different aspects, as a change of context, as a dynamic evolution of arising and ceasing – all this as originating in profound interdependence and void of any persisting core. The enlightened view of reality is void (*suñña*) of any identity clings triggered by conventional concepts. There are no longer delusional percepts of stable identities; whatever exists is clearly seen as void of self (*suññaṃ attena*) and as dependently arisen (*paticcasamuppannam*).

*Anattā* means that there is no self, no core, no unchangeable identity to be found in anything. Such a self (*attā*) is a purely mental construction which has a justification within the system of language. However, such a mental construct is misleading, for as soon as it is taken for real, it

produces false thoughts and wrong beliefs which are divorced from reality and sustained only by concepts. Buddhist meditation principally uses three approaches as means for overcoming the delusion of self: first and most important is the mindful analysis (*satipatthāna*) of components of seemingly compact things and events; second is the clear view or insight (*vipassanā*) that whatever exists arises dependent on impermanent conditions and has to dissolve and pass away; third is the direct experience of one's powerlessness to master (*avasavattana*) the passing phenomena.

The insightful realization of *suññatā* and *anattā* is not only a remedy for the frustration of wrong belief, it is also a prophylaxis and emancipation from any suffering which would arise due to possible self-identification in the future. The delusion of self is apt to arise in any person who is exposed to difficult life situations, unless the enlightened wisdom of *anattā*- has been cultivated and firmly established. The emotional identification with whatever we perceive as supporting essentials (*upadhi*) of our life is not necessarily at a conscious level so as to allow an explicit formulation of the self-view (*attānuditthi*) as a rational belief. This self-delusion causes us to identify with our body, our habits, our titles, our bank account, our preferences, etc. in a pre-rational experience of the conceit "I am" (*asmi-māna*; *māna* is a product of perception which tendentiously conceives: *maññati*) .

For ignorant beings enslaved by the delusion of self, the struggle to maintain a self-identity is only all too real. Those wrongly believing in identities cannot perceive reality as it is; they can react only to the concepts which purport to represent the identities of things and of the self. They are victims of ignorance (*avijjā*) as they cannot see reality as it is. This has pathological consequences on several psychological and social levels which grow from wrong views and prejudices. When our self-habituated perceptual processes once assign to a person an identity of, say, "the psychotic", "the policeman", "the thief", "the teacher", we continue to treat that particular person just as a psychotic or a policeman, etc. We no more bother with his actual behaviour on later occasions – whether the policeman acts psychotically, or the teacher steals – because our perception and reaction are led by the belief in an identical self of that person. The experience from clinical and corrective institutions illustrates what a great hindrance the self-belief is for the progress of healing and betterment.

We can also misjudge our own person as an unchangeable self or as an assembly of identities which we conceive of as components of our self. Thus we can deny all the living changes and become alienated from the flow of feelings, the arising and passing away of perceptions, the ongoing alterations of consciousness. Pathologically, we can proclaim conceptual thinking to be the only reality and completely suppress the truth of *anattā* on the psychological and physiological levels. While ignoring the direct experience of the ever-changing mind and body, we can speculate about the cellular processes, neural synapses, and chemical movements at molecular and atomic levels – and stay only within the realm of concepts. This would not be wise experientially, for direct knowledge of *anattā*, as we already know, is empty of conceptual identities.

The above excursion on *anattā* should not leave you with the impression that the original Buddhist teachings do away with concepts altogether, or that they eschew theoretical analysis. The theoretical, philosophical and conceptual analysis is, however, employed only as far as it is conducive to progress in emancipatory mind culture. The Buddha himself accomplished an exhaustive analysis of the wrong usages of concepts which lead to an addiction of views. As the scrutiny of this theme would lead us too far away from our topic, I wish to refer here to the detailed analysis of the theme in the book *Anattā and Nibbāna*<sup>2</sup> by Nyānaponika Thera which exemplifies the uses of theory and philosophy in a manner relevant to Buddhist emancipatory practice.

The experience of *anattā* and *suññatā* within the context of emancipatory mind training does not exclude the use of concepts as designations for the ultimate realities (*paramattha-dhammā*) seen during that very experience. Nevertheless, any concept carried by a verbal or a visual symbol is nothing more than a sign (*nimitta*) which represents a mind-object: Signs as such are not ultimate realities; while the ultimate realities are designated by a *lakkhana* (characteristic) and not by a *nimitta*. Sign can be an object of *samatha* meditation, whereas *vipassanā* uses the ultimate realities as its objects and is therefore characterized as *animitta*, signless (see e.g. *Papañca Sūdanī* IV,153f).

As a part of the mind-training, one learns to structure the meditative experience in terms of discerning the ultimate realities of sensory bases (*āyatana*) such as visual object and the visual sense organ, sound and the acoustic sense base, odour and the olfactory sense, taste and the gustatory sense, tactile object and the bodily sense of touch, and the two bases of ideation which are represented by the mind organ and the mind object (percept, idea, etc.). All these sense bases are directly, introspectively observable. Their existence is evident to any person who has normal sensory equipment. Therefore no epistemological question regarding the intersubjective validity of ultimate realities such as the sensory bases would be really meaningful for any normal person. However, some training is needed to sustain concentration upon any one of the *āyatanas* – we had a first hand experience to support this statement as we experimented with the figure and background within the field of “visual object”. Then it was even more difficult for us to concentrate for some time upon its subjective counterpart, the *āyatana* “visual sense”. Only a mind well-trained in *satipatthāna* meditation can sustain the attention upon any of these twelve sense bases so as to experience directly that they are impermanent and void of any self.

The meditative analysis of phenomena in Buddhism is counterbalanced by methods of synthesis which reveal the relations between things and their general characteristics (*lakkhana*) such as impermanence, conditionality, voidness, etc. Moreover, this synthetic approach unifies the multitude of phenomena and opens up the coherence of the world to a holistic view. The world can be transcended only by one who experiences its unity and wholeness (*manasikaroti ekattam*) as the *Cūla-Suññatā-Sutta* shows. It should be stressed here that all doctrinal concepts of the Pali Canon – thus also the synthetic ones – are experientially anchored in the ultimate realities; this means they always refer to some specific experiential ground (*yathābhūta*). In contrast to western science, Buddhist thought employs no hypothetical variables, no speculative constructs and no a priori assumptions. For Buddhism the wholeness of the world is neither a product of theoretical thinking nor a belief deduced from some dogma. Such experiential anchorage holds true for the voidness of the world as well, for the Buddha says:

“Void is the world because it is void of a self and anything belonging to a self.”

Similar statements are recorded at several places in the *Samyutta Nikāya* and the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, followed by elaborations of analysis in regard to various sets of ultimate realities designated by such concepts as *dhātu* (elements of experience), *khandhā* (groups of materiality, perception, feeling, formation, and consciousness), *āyatana* and so on. In the *Cūla-Niddesa* of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, it is explained how the visual object and the sense base of the eye meet and eye-consciousness arises. Sound and the sense base of the ear, etc., are also analyzed. Thus attention is guided to the dependent arising of all phenomena. Similarly, dependent on the sensory bases (*āyatana*) sensory contact (*phassa*) arises; dependent on contact feeling (*vedanā*) arises; and so on. These observations are qualified by the statement: “Empty is the eye-consciousness, etc.” in regard to all phenomena up to the highest meditation experiences. Dependent Origination (*paticca-samuppāda*) becomes visible and *suññatā* is experienced in regard to all these phenomena: “... they are void of a self, void of permanency, they are coreless, without a core of permanency, core of happiness, or core of self.”

In the *Salāyatana Samyutta* (S.IV, 54), the Buddha specifies this voidness for each of the outer and inner six sense bases (*āyatana*) as well as for their contact (*phassa*) and whatever pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experiencing (*vedanā*) which arises dependent upon these conditions. The Buddha says:

Eye, is void of self and anything belonging to self, form is void..., visual consciousness is void ..., mind is void ...., mind-states are void ....., consciousness is void .:., contact is void ..., whatsoever pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experiencing which arises dependent upon them is void of self and everything belonging to self. That is why, Ānanda, it is said: “Void is the world.”

Cakkhum suññam attena vā attaniyena vā, rūpa suññā ....., cakkhuviññānam suññam....., cakkhusamphasso suñño..... Yam pidam cakkhusamphassapaccayā uppajjati vedayitam sukham vā dukkham vā adukkhamasukham vā tam pi suññam attena vā attaniyena vā.

Yasmā ca kho Ānanda suññam attena vā attaniyena vā tasmā suñño loko ti vuccati ti.

This is obviously the Buddha's key instruction for highest insight (*mahā vipassanā*) without previous advanced concentration (*samatha*) instructions. The *Salāyatana Samyutta* begins with detailed *vipassanā* instructions for noticing the impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and ,non-self (*anattā*) of all phenomena. These instructions are systematically applied to various sets of ultimate realities and elaborated so as to lead the meditator to the highest goal. As the name of this *Samyutta* suggests, the mindfulness directed to the sense bases plays the central role. This instruction for mindfulness disclosing the emptiness (*suññatā*) and Dependent Origination when directed to the sense bases is also the culmination of the Buddha's instruction given in the *Cūla-Suññatā-Sutta*.

There are specific techniques of insight meditation (*vipassanā*) – explained in the already mentioned *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* by Nyānaponika Thera – for the scrutiny of the phenomena labeled as *ayātana*, *khandha*, *dhātu*, etc. which are the ultimate realities (*paramatthā dhammā*) directly perceptible to the mind voided of concepts and steadied through *samatha* (concentrative meditation). The meditative analysis of the apparently solid identities is an experiential scrutiny which resolves the compact (*ghana-vinibbhoga*) into its elements, in order to make the absence of any self clearly visible. To realize this, the meditator has to go through changes of perception such as experientially discerning the ultimate realities and their mental representations (*nāma-rūpa-pariccheda*); getting their conditional structure (*paccaya-pariggaha*) into view; then comprehending them as suffering in order to get free from desire (*appanīhita*) for them; getting tuned to the stream of everchanging reality (*anicca*) which destroys their only apparent stability supported by signs and opens the experience for the signless (*animitta*). These changes of perception leading finally to the experience of *suññatā* are treated in detail in the book *Progress of Insight* by Mahasi Sayadaw.

The analytical approach of *vipassanā* insight meditation resolves thus the seemingly compact identities, and exposes them as void of self. Wrong views are absent, the mind is empty. And this very emptiness makes possible the full experience of reality as it is. Even though it is not necessary to attain *jhāna* by concentration on *nimitta* for all this, of course the mind has to be well balanced in equipoise developed through methods of *samatha*. Then the purified and nondistracted mind encompasses the dynamic wholeness of the reality and becomes filled with intense joy (*pīti*). Only a joyful, pacified, and concentrated mind can reach complete liberation and enlightenment. The path towards emancipation leads through three different "gateways to liberation" (*vimokkha-mukhā*): the first is the realization of the desireless (*appanīhita*); the second is the realization of the signless (*animitta*); the third gate to liberation is the realization of voidness (*suññatā*) see *Patisambhidāmagga* II. 48.

There are many ways to describe the changes in experience which occur when ignorance (*avijjā*) is dispelled and suffering (*dukkha*) is replaced by the happiness (*sukha*) of

emancipation. In the *Upanisā-Sutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha expounds on how the dependent origination of suffering becomes transformed into the dependent origination of joy and emancipatory happiness. A translation of this sutta together with a lucid explanation of the various sequences of Dependent Origination is in Bhikkhu Bodhi's book *Transcendental Dependent Arising*<sup>2</sup>.

Buddhism gives much attention to happy states of mind, and joy is particularly important as an indispensable factor of meditative absorption (*jhānanga*). *Pīti*, meditative joy, is instrumental for all higher attainments. The significance of the various types of joy in meditation is well summarized by L.S. Cousins in *Buddhist Jhāna: Its Nature and Attainment According to Pāli Sources*<sup>2</sup>. Here it should only be added that the word *pīti* is translated by some as “zest” or “zeal”, which implies joyful interest in the meditation object, and consequently, intensification of the meditation process bringing about a peaceful composure of mind. A similar increase of interest and intensification caused by the joy of success may have been experienced while experimenting with the gestalt picture of figure and background (see pictures 1 and 2). However, the point of that playful experiment was the switching of interest and attention from the changes in object of perception to the process of the mind changes.

Shifts of the experiential levels accompanied by higher degrees of joy and steadiness are characteristic for the progress of *suññatā* meditation. In its climax, the experiential understanding of *suññatā*, *anattā*, and *Paticca-Samuppāda* (dependent arising of ultimate realities) are closely interconnected. They are also motivationally highly rewarding through the enhancement of joy, steadiness, and peace, as advanced meditators attest. In the *Cūla-Suññatā-Sutta*, the Buddha describes the progress to higher levels through the technique of voiding the mind through the following experiential shifts:

1. The meditator perceives all that belongs to his present context,
2. then, having withdrawn his attention from all that (*tam sabbam amanasikarivā*),
3. he grounds his experience on a perception (*saññam paticca*) of the meditation object only,
4. in order to experience its wholeness and unity (*manasikaroti ekattam*). This- is possible because of having voided the mind of all contents belonging to the previous level of experience.
5. Whatever belongs to the wholeness of the meditation object of the previous level is then experienced as a disturbance (*daratha*) for the next higher level of meditation. Its absence is thus noted with satisfaction.

Throughout the discourse, these five steps are repeatedly applied as the Buddha guides the listener to ever higher experiences of *suññatā* based on the perception of the highest attainments of *samatha* meditation. Nevertheless, the highest experience of *suññatā* pertains to the vision of Dependent Arising of ultimate realities, which is in the domain of *vipassanā* meditation. Obviously the *Cūla-Suññatā-Sutta* is addressed to those familiar with the techniques of concentration and insight.

Now, having become acquainted with the preconditions for realizing *suññatā*, let us conclude with the description of the highest voidness (*paramānuttaram suññatam*) given by the Buddha in the *Cūla-Suññatā-Sutta* (following translation by Nānamoli Thera):

Again, Ānanda, without giving attention to perception of the base consisting of infinite space, without giving attention to perception of the base consisting of infinite consciousness, a bhikkhu gives attention to the single state dependent on perception of the base consisting of nothingness.

His mind enters into the perception of the base consisting of nothingness and he acquires confidence, steadiness, and decision. He understands thus: “Disturbances that would be present dependent on perception of the base of infinite space (and)... the base of infinite consciousness are not present here...”

He understands: “This field of perception is void of perception of the base of infinite space (and) .., the base of infinite consciousness. There is only this non-voidness, that is to say, the single state dependent on perception of the base consisting of nothingness.”

Now this too has been for him an alighting upon voidness that accords with what is, without perversion of meaning, and is pure.

Again, Ānanda, without giving attention to perception of the base consisting of nothingness, without giving attention to the base consisting of neither perception nor non-perception, a bhikkhu gives attention to the single state dependent on the signless concentration of mind.

His mind enters into the signless concentration of mind and acquires confidence, . steadiness, and decision. He understands thus: “Disturbances that would be present dependent on perception of the base consisting of nothingness (and) ... the base of neither perception nor non-perception are not present here, and only this measure of disturbance is present, that is to say, that which has life as its condition dependent on this body with its six bases.”

So he sees it as void of what is not there, but of what remains there he understands: “That being, this is.”

Now this too has been for him an alighting upon voidness that accords with what is, without perversion of meaning, and is pure.

Again, Ānanda, without giving attention to perception of the base consisting of nothingness,' without giving attention to the base consisting of neither perception nor non-perception a bhikkhu gives attention to the single state dependent on the signless concentration of mind.

His mind enters into the signless concentration of mind and acquires confidence, steadiness, and decision. He understands thus: “This signless concentration of mind is conditioned and mentally produced

He understands: “Whatever is conditioned and mentally produced is impermanent and liable to cessation.” When he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of becoming, from the taint of ignorance. When liberated there comes the knowledge: “It is liberated.”

He understands thus: “Disturbances that would be present dependent on the taint of sensual desire, ... the taint of becoming ... the taint of ignorance are not present here, and only this measure of disturbance is present, that is to say, that with life as its condition dependent on this body with its six bases.”

He understands: “This field of perception is void of the taint of sensual desire, ... void of the taint of becoming, ... void of the taint of ignorance. There is present only this non-voidness, that is to say, that with life as its condition dependent on this body with its six bases.”

So he sees it as void of what is not there, but of what remains there he understands: “That being, this is.”

Now this has been for him an alighting upon voidness that accords with what actually is, without perversion of meaning, is pure and is unsurpassed by any other.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The lecture was invited by the Università degli Studi di Roma “La Sapienza” and delivered on 17th November 1984 for general public in Rome. As there were among the listeners also the participants of a previously conducted one week seminar on “Meditation Experience and Paradigms of Buddhist Psychology”, the extensive quotations from the Pali Canon as well as the technical Pali terms are included in this text, originally recorded for the author’s students in Rome. The text of the lecture on Suññatā was then published in a slightly edited version in the *Sri Lanka Journal of Buddhist Studies*, Volume II, 1988 (pages 1 – 19).

<sup>2</sup> See the bibliography references at the end of this article.

<sup>3</sup> This research project is conducted by R. Venturini, Head of the Department of Psychology, Università degli Studi di Roma “La Sapienza” with consultation by A. Solé-Leris.

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Author’s contact:

Dr. Mirko Fryba, Switzerland

web: [www.ayurama.eu](http://www.ayurama.eu)

e-mail: [fryba@gmx.ch](mailto:fryba@gmx.ch)