

Sunyata, Emptiness And Self-emptying, **Kenosis**

Dr. Rewata Dhamma

Buddhist -Christian Dialogue, London , 27th March 1993

There are two main schools of Buddhism- Theravada and Mahayana. If one studies these two schools it may appear as though the fundamental teachings are the same, just different interpretations, approaches and practices. However, if one studies them in greater depth one may find that they are very different one to the other and may not recognise that both come from the same teacher. When we are discussing Sunyata-emptiness of Buddhism and Kenosis-self-emptying of Christianity, these two principles are very, indeed, important and based on a profound philosophy. We need to study them deeply and to have dialogue one to the other. I would like to talk about Sunyata as explained and understood by the Mahayana Buddhists. Whatever the Buddhist terms used here such as:- *Buddha, Dhamma, Tathagata, Sunyata, Prajna* etc. these do not have the same definition or meaning as understood in the sense of Theravada Buddhism.

The Theravada Buddhism stemmed from the basic teachings of the Buddha and have an *Abhidhamma*, a metaphysical system, much earlier than the Mahayana school. Theravada teaches the Truth or reality that is within oneself, it is not mystical. One must investigate oneself to understand fully the truth of suffering and practise to remove the origin of suffering. It is accepted aggregates, elements and bases as existence or phenomena (*dhamma*) and find out how they really are. This kind of understanding is regarded as the discursive knowledge or dualistic wisdom, though it has non-dualistic wisdom which one can realise or experience at the state of enlightenment; nevertheless one does not discuss or talk about it, because it is beyond our understanding and there is no word or language that can express the Ultimate Truth of Nibbana. Sunyata is defined in Theravada, as emptiness of self. i.e. Nibbana. The Truth will understand fully through direct experience. According to Theravada suttas Buddha never wanted us to become involved in any philosophical speculations such as the origin of the world, creator God, life after death etc. These are nothing to do with overcoming of human suffering. The Buddha said that if you are wounded by an arrow, the first thing you must do is to remove the arrow. If you investigate to know who shot it, from where and what kind of arrow, then you will die before you understand all these questions.

Mahayana literature came into existence between the 1st century BC and 2nd century AD. Some of the vast literature exists in India in the original language of Sanskrit. Due to the disappearance of Buddhism from India many centuries ago,

these teachings remain as a philosophy of high esteem. It is impossible to find out Buddhist religious experiences in India. Since 3rd century AD Mahayana Buddhism flourished and developed in China, however, because of communication and language problems we know very little of Chinese religious experiences. Tibetan Buddhism, generally, is regarded as Mahayana Buddhism, but truly speaking, it is not a pure form of Mahayana. Tibet received both Hinayana and Mahayana, and developed the very highest philosophy with Tantra. It is, therefore, more accurate just to say Tibetan Buddhism. Japan and Korea are the only countries that received and developed from China a pure form of Mahayana Buddhism. Their religious experiences are totally based on the Mahayana teachings.

In this century, there have been some great thinkers in Japan who speak about religious consciousness and experiences and they have also made an extensive study of Christianity. I, therefore, would like at the end to talk briefly about their philosophies and understanding of Sunyata - emptiness and Kenosis - self-emptying.

Buddhism. Since its conception, has strongly encouraged the people to understand the Truth, it is, therefore, not sufficient for Buddhists to simply follow the ethical demands of their religion if they have not understood their justification or if their own conviction is not involved. The Truth must be realised with direct experience. Just as art does not need to prove its value with science, so too, religious experience has no need of confirmation by science, because science cannot reach the state of wisdom which one experiences through religious investigations.

Nagarjuna (2nd AD), who created an age in the history of Buddhist philosophy gave it a definite turn. He propounded the *Sunyavada* (theory of emptiness) which is also known as

Madyamika school of Mahayana Buddhism. A greater dialectician than Nagarjuna the world has never seen. His great philosophical works were translated into Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese and Korean languages. His greatest work "*Madyamika karika*" is the ground work of his philosophy. He admitted that it is an epitome of the teachings in Mahayana sutta of **Prajnaparamita** and exposition of teachings based on the law of dependent origination (*paticca-samuppada*). It displays rare insight into the science of logic and unsurpassed flights of daring thought.

Here I would like to present Sunyata-emptiness relevant to the Christian concept of the four dimensions of **God's Kenosis**:- Its relation to creation, its dynamic of love, its relation to the word of God and its trinitarian structure. According to Nagarjuna, Sunyata is not nothingness, but it is truth or absolute reality of things or suchness (*tathata*) of the universe. Sunyata-emptiness is not being as distinguished from beings, nor is it a transcendent God distinguished from

this world, nor is it a nothingness distinguished from the somethingness of ordinary life. It is not to be found outside oneself, nor it is to be found inside oneself. If it were any of these things, or if it were found in any particular place, it would be a relative emptiness, not ultimate reality. Let us see what St. Paul wrote to the Philippians:

"Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of man; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself becoming obedient even unto, yea, the death of the cross".

Buddhism has been a religion of practices than of grace. It changed from the radical pluralism of Hinayana to the absolutism of the Mahayana. There was felt the need for a mediating principle between the absolute and phenomenal being. Buddha is that mediator. In **Prajnaparamita**, as non-dual knowledge, it is equated with Tathagata and as prajna he is identical with the absolute; but as a human being subjecting himself to all limitations, he is at once phenomenal. Relation of the Tathagata to the absolute (*prajna-sunyata*) is one sided; the former depends on the latter, and not vice versa. It is a free identity; metaphysically, the Tathagata is a principle of lower order than Prajna. The Buddha Gotama is just one of those innumerable manifestations in the past and the future. Nor is Buddha different from other beings. In essence they are identical with him. Every being is a Buddha in the making. The Buddhas were subjected to a six-fold process of evolution, they are multiplied, immortalised, deified, spiritualised, universalised and unified.

In Christianity, one can also say that we all have an original union with God, given the creative kenosis of God at the ground of our being, and that we can obtain a realisation of this fact through a redemptive union with God. But there is a major difference here between Buddhism and Christianity. In Buddhism one can become a Buddha in the realisation of emptiness. But in Christianity, one cannot say that one can become a Christ in the realisation of the redemption. Rather, this Christian realisation is a participation in Christ's redemptive kenosis. Therefore one does not become a Christ in the same way as one can become a Buddha.

Prajna is not merely intellectual intuition or a non-dual wisdom but freedom as well. When, Prajnaparamita, the absolute is identified with Tathagata who is its freely phenomenalised aspect, essentially a fact of religious consciousness, it is viewed not merely as the reality of all beings (*sunyata or bhutakoti*) but as a person endowed with all divine qualities and powers. The Tathagata serves as the principle of mediation between the Absolute (*sunyata*) and phenomenal beings. This is the logic implied in the admission of the Triple *Buddhakaya*.

There can be no religion without the consciousness of a being that is transcendent. There must be a relationship between worshipper and worshiped which provides not only fundamental unity but also the point for the differences

that are relative. This aspect of relationship is emphasised by Mahayana Buddhism and Vedantic Hinduism. There is no difference between God and man. How can religious consciousness obtain without difference? The difference, however, need not be that of one thing and another differing eternally in kind, but one of states or stages of the same being.

The Tathagata is a personal manifestation, the individualisation of the absolute or sunyata or prajna in Mahayana Buddhism, likewise individual soul or atman in Vedanta philosophy. As this is a free phenomenalisation, there is no conceivable limit to the number, form and occasion of these manifestations. All beings have also the Buddha nature. Gotama Buddha is not the only instance of man attaining perfection. This is why the Mahayana Buddhism is exemplified the Triple body of the Buddha (*Trikaya*). Thus, the dual nature of the Buddha, as one with the Absolute (*Sunyata*) and the other actively pursuing the welfare of beings, supplies the philosophical basis for conception of *Trikaya theory* in Mahayana Buddhism.

The three bodies of Buddha are:- *Dhammakaya*- the cosmical body is his essential nature: it is the one with the Absolute; *Sambhogakaya*- the body of bliss and *Nirmanakaya*- Assumed body. As the Dhammakaya, Buddha fully realises his identity with the Absolute (*dhammata or sunyata*) and unity (*samata*) with all beings. It is through his oneness with the absolute that the Buddha is enabled to apprehend the Truth which is his sacred function to reveal to phenomenal beings. The sambhogakaya is the concrete manifestation to himself to elect the power and splendour of god-head. In furtherance of his great resolve to succour all beings, Buddha incarnates himself from time to time in forms best calculated to achieve this end Nirmanakaya. Dhammakaya is the essence, the reality of the universe. It is completely free from all traces of duality. It is the very nature of the universe and is therefore also called the svabhavakaya. It would not be correct to say that dhammakaya is the abstract metaphysical principle of *Sunyata or tathata*(suchness) but the dhammakaya is still a person and innumerable merits and powers etc. are ascribed to him. The Sambhogakaya, the body of bliss is the reflection of the Cosmic body in the empirical world in a corporeal form, it is the vibhuti-glory of the Buddha. The Nirmanakaya usually translated as an apparitional body, is really a body assumed by Buddha in fulfillment of his resolve to save beings from misery. The manifestation of the body of bliss in the empirical world as Gotama Buddha or other previous and succeeding Tathagatas is the Nirmanakaya of the Buddha.

Here is what Christianity says: "Creation is never from nothing, but out of God himself, creation is an act in which God communicates his own reality. In creation, God gives of himself"

God is present in everything that exists as the fundamental ground of existence. This ground of creation is the Kenotic love of God whose action constitutes the deepest nature of all things. Thus, creation as the product of Kenotic love poured out through the creative Word of God, contains God immanent in all

things. *Kenotic Christology* stated that there is a kenosis within the **Godhead**. The begetting of the Son and the spirit is a kenosis, a process of self giving to the other and this kenosis of love is understood to be mutual in establishing the unity of the Trinity, this is the way Jesus communicates this trinitarian life of divinity to humanity. Most Christian theologians have often given a metaphysical priority to being over non-being. Non-being, understood in Christian theology, is typically held to be an absence of, or a privation of being. God is believed to be Being itself, creation is believed to be an effect of this Being. Apart from this, there is nothing, non-being. In Christian spirituality, these beliefs are substantiated in the experience that insofar as we exist, we participate in Being or God, for it is in him that we live, and move, and have our being' (Acts 17.28). God-Being is also experienced as a fullness that fills all things. *'I fill heaven and earth'* (Jeremiah 23.24). God- Being is understood to be that creative source of all beings which creates, fills and sustains them in being.

According to Christian mysticism, Thomas Aquinas says that God as being creates beings like fire burns. In other words, creation is an ongoing process grounded in divine immanence.. Now God causes this effect in things not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being, therefore, as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it. God is innermost in each thing and most deeply inherent in all things. So one can say- Lord! Thou has wrought all our works in us." (Isaiah 26.12). Thus, Christian spiritual experience is that as we find God more deeply within us, we find ourselves more deeply within God.

A general expression of Christianity is that God is love, he knows us perfectly, and sustains us freely through his grace. They says it is God's presence within us that establishes our transcendental potential for freedom, knowledge and love. Freedom, knowledge and love take us beyond our limit self-enclosure, they are self transcendent. As we are free, know the Truth and are able to love, it is God's original presence. Moreover, we are created in the image of God. That is we are created images because we 'mirror' God and also because we have the potential to reflect back to God this freedom, knowledge and love. We can freely choose him, know him and love him as he has freely given us being, knows us and loves us. As Teresa of Avila says:- 'in the centre mansion in the interior castle of our soul', we find the Lord of the castle, we find Christ, we find in him the love and healing touch of our Father, and we find the life-giving and life-transforming Holy Spirit. In this trinitarian reality, since our centre is the single centre of all existence, we find a deep compassionate unification with everyone and all things in God as immanent Centre and as fullness of being.

According to Japanese thinkers-- In the absolute selflessness of pure experience, one finds the ultimate reality that grounds our derivative experience of subjective selfhood and the objective world. This reality of pure pre-reflective consciousness is characterized by spontaneity, unity and presentness. And all subjective and objective realities of conscious experience are forms of this unified

state of pure experience. The Self is the "point" where this dynamic of expression and unification occurs. At its deepest level, the self is only the "unification" of pure experience. Accordingly the unity of pure experience wherein Buddhism finds the oneness of reality as the true or original Self of all things. In Zen religious consciousness as a self-determination of absolute Nothingness is a point where there is neither self nor God as other, but a point wherein all things are just what they are. (Mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers). Therefore this point (place) is the ultimate point in which all existences, subjective and objective are located. However, this point as the horizon of all things is itself not a thing, nor is it negation of things, a relative nothingness, that is Sunyata emptiness. The Christian concept of God can be understood in different ways- first, God can be conceived of as a 'being', as one of forms of existence, as an object of faith. Or God can be understood as the unity of the universal of truth, beauty and goodness. But in both of these cases, God would be a derivative self-determination of the more ultimate Emptiness. It seemed more similar to the Christian mystical notion of Godhead.

According to **Nishida** (1870-1945), the Japanese great thinker of this century, absolute, be it emptiness or God, cannot be a particular being opposed to other beings. "Yet when related to that which is objective to it, it is not the absolute, but merely relative as well". What is truly absolute is what is not merely transcendent to everything else. Emptiness can be such an absolute because it expresses itself through self-determination that negates itself as other. So given this kenosis, or self-emptying, emptiness is identified with all of the things of the world, including ourselves, which it contains paradoxically within itself, within its own self-negation, within its own kenosis. Emptiness, therefore is not a being, it is all forms of existence. The true absolute does not oppose the relative, the true emptiness as formless does not oppose its forms; and the true god does not oppose the world, accordingly "*A God merely transcendent and self-sufficient would not be a true God*", in St. Paul's words "*God must always empty himself*". That God is transcendent and at the same time immanent is the paradox of God. This is the true absolute"- said Nishida.

Absolute Nothingness is the ground of a life of true compassion. This emptiness is a matrix of unification in which one finds a religious compassion for, and unity with, others and all creation. There is true compassion lived in the field of the unity of absolute nothingness. In this way compassion of emptiness is not just to be contemplated but lived. Just as emptiness empties itself in compassion, a person grounded in the unity of emptiness can be emptied in compassionate concern for, and identification with others. The word of God is found within the word as a kenotic reality wherein one finds the love of God. Nishida says that we can live a true life of compassion through this love. This love is not something that results from human will, but it stems from the absolute source of our existence through the word of God. Nishida recognizes a parallel to the idea of the word of God in the **Pure Land** Buddhist tradition. In the Pure Land of Buddhism this word of God reality is expressed "*by the name of Buddha*". In Buddhism the name of

Buddha is identified with the Buddha, so too, in Christianity the Word is identified with God. However the Japanese Thinker understood a difference between the Word of God and the name of the Buddha. In Christianity the Word is most often understood as transcendent, personal and carries a sense of judgment, while in Buddhism the name of Buddha always expresses an immanent embracement that is infinite compassion.

The Buddha said *"Who sees the dhamma, sees me; Who sees me, sees the dhamma"* What one sees in the Buddha is the historical self-realisation of the eternal dhamma. The Buddha is the model for the existential realisation of emptiness. He is the realisation of emptiness in the pure clarity of his wisdom, and he is the functioning of emptiness in his great compassion. Therefore the truth of dhamma was realised in the wisdom of the Buddha, given to humanity in his teachings. And the great compassion of this ultimate truth (*dhammakaya*) was realised in the compassionate actions of the Buddha. The Buddha revealed the true-self as the essence of all sentient beings. Everything in the universe is manifest as the dhamma, says who sees me, sees the dhamma. Zen said:- first, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers, then mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers, However since emptiness empties itself and so cannot itself be an object of attachment, dynamic sunyata empties itself out as just the things themselves. So in the end, mountains are again mountains, rivers are again rivers. The late Tibetan master Kalu Rinpoche said: *"You live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is reality, you are that reality. When you understand this, you will see that you are nothing. And being nothing, you are everything. That is all."*

Thus, Sunyata-emptiness is not being as distinguished from beings, nor is it a transcendent God distinguished from this world, nor is it a nothingness distinguished from the somethingness of ordinary life. It is not to be found outside oneself, nor is it to be found inside oneself. If it were any of these things. or if it were found in any particular place, it would be a relative emptiness. The Truth is a condition of the mind, it is not merely an agreement of a religious statement. Even the most profound statements of particular religions are valueless if they do not invoke experiential response. No religion can claim to be in sole possession of the Truth, nor can it claim all human beings are capable of experiencing their claims.

May All Beings Be Happy!