

*Self as No-Self: A Brief Sketch of the Buddhist Notion of  
Śūnyatā*

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**Abstract**

The present article deals with the notion of *śūnyatā* or the lack of the self of the phenomenal world propagated by the Mādhyamika and the Sānlùn schools of Buddhism. According to these two schools, there is no essence or transcendental identity in anything corporeal or imaginable. It is because every phenomenon is inescapably dependent on other phenomena for its existence. For Buddhism, the highest wisdom is to comprehend the dependent origination of the phenomenal world, making the perpetuity of the self of any thing or idea impossible.

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**Introduction**

The notion of the presence of a *self* in everything in the world has been nurtured by religion and culture since the dawn of human history (emphasis added). Self denotes the essence inherent in someone or something. “Essence here refers,” in the words of the Buddhist scholar Zhang, “to what is immutable, eternal, and of independent origin” (2011: 110). According to the traditional belief, it is the essence or the self that functions as the foundation of the entity of anything corporeal or imaginable. The self moulds something (be it a person, an animal, a thing, or even an idea) as what it is by determining how it would meet up with and present itself in a world. In short, the self is believed to endow everything with “individual identity and autonomy” (Glynn 2011: 197).

Though the traditional surmise promulgates the presence of an “individual,” autonomous self in everything, and though our direct experience of the phenomenal world often inveigles us to believe in this idea, Buddhism, especially the Mādhyamika and the Sānlùn schools<sup>1</sup>, has something quite contrary to say. Challenging the popular viewpoint that locates an essence in everything, Buddhism “holds the notion of an independently subsisting self-identical subject to be an illusion” (Glynn 2011: 197). Instead, it propagates an “awareness of the essencelessness of things” (Misra, qtd. in Magliola 1984: 95). Every person, thing, or idea, as Buddhism expounds, is lacking in a self or an intrinsic identity. The apparent self of someone/ something instead of being “immutable” or “eternal” is ephemeral, existing only by “coming together in connection” with other factors (Zhang 2011: 110). Because according to the Buddhists, there can be no persistent self in anything, they claim *śūnyatā*, that is, emptiness or “essencelessness” as the sole reality of the world.

## The Buddhist Notion of Śūnyatā

Nāgārjuna, an illustrious Buddhist thinker of the 2nd century India and the founder of the Mādhyamika school, once famously proclaimed, “nowhere does exist an intrinsic nature of the things, whatever they may be” (Nāgārjuna 2002: 95). The words of the great philosopher point to the fact that nothing in the phenomenal world, be it something corporeal or only an idea, bears an essence. As such, the world we know, the world functioning as the foundation of our knowledge, our concept of reality and unreality, turns out non-substantial. The non-substantiality or non-essentiality of the world naturally indicates the lack of self of every *dhārma* (phenomenon). However, without possessing a self, every *dhārma* becomes *śūnya*, that is, something empty or void. Kumārajīva, a 4th-century Buddhist monk from China, says, “all dhārmās are empty” (Zhang 2011: 111).

According to Buddhism, the lack of essence or the self of the world is the only truth one should strive for. Ji Zang (549 - 623), “the systematizer of the Sānlùn School of Chinese Buddhism,” says, “The ultimate truth . . . is to . . . realise that there is no essence [no self]” (Zhang 2011: 107, 110). Once one succeeds in realising the emptiness of every phenomenon, that is, accepts *śūnyatā* as the only possible truth, one attains enlightenment. In that enlightened state, the person procures the “chance to see through the reality” (Park 2011: 9). However, what does seeing “through the reality” actually mean? For Buddhism, the phrase signifies one’s ability to perceive the fundamental nature of a *dhārma*. Here, however, emerges an obvious question: what reality can there be in a phenomenon when it is *śūnya*? To unearth the answer, one needs to probe into the actual denotation of the Buddhist *śūnyatā*. Quite unlike the conventional significance of emptiness, *śūnyatā* in Buddhism never suggests nothingness.

Instead, the word points to the relative nature of existence that precludes a phenomenon in “actually coming into being.” Zhang states,

. . . all dhármas, though they have empirical validity, are devoid of self-nature and self-identity since anything that comes to be is dependent on another and so is not actually coming into being. (2011: 110)

Without “coming into being” the phenomenon becomes *śūnya* or void. Thus according to Buddhism, a thing is *śūnya*, that is without a self, because of the thing’s relative or “dependent origination” (*pratītya samutpāda* in Sanskrit) (Zhang 2011: 110). In other words, there is no essence or transcendental self in anything, as something for its existence is forever dependent on factors other than itself. So everything seen or known always bears, in the language of the 20th-century French philosopher Derrida, “the trace” or the mark (1976: 75) of “what it is not . . . what it absolutely is not” (1973: 143). The essence or the self of something alters following the change in the nature of the factor(s) it is dependent upon. Thus, “to see through the reality” signifies one’s ability to cognise the ephemeral nature of a phenomenon due to that phenomenon’s dependence on another phenomenon/ other phenomena. To put it differently, one is aware of the truth about the world only when one comprehends that “things are not intrinsically real” as they “exist only in relation to other things” (Mabbett 2011: 26). The “dependent origination” of every phenomenon “is a fundamental concept of Buddhism” (*Britannica*).

The awareness of the “dependent origination” of a *dhárma* that turns the *dhárma* empty unshackles one from the quagmire of attachment to essence, that is, to a transcendental self. The person cognises the mutability of the phenomenal world, and this realisation liberates him or her from all mundane afflictions. The person is liberated because human misery, as Buddhism claims, is always in one way or the other the outcome of an attachment to the essence of something, misconceiving that essence as immutable. To quote Zhang, “Suffering arises because of the very fact that people perceptually ‘cling’ or ‘attach’ to objects or ideas [selves] as if they were essential” (Zhang 2011: 110). The non-presence or alteration of the seemingly perpetual nature of the “objects” and/ or “ideas” of attachment naturally thrusts those “people” to despair. They suffer from a sense of loss, a sense of perplexity. An enlightened individual, conscious about the dependent origination of every phenomenon, is free from all such suffering. Such a person never fails to see that “Identity [self] is constantly in the process of being created without giving us a chance to name it as ‘identity’ [a self]” (Park 2011: 18).

## Conclusion

Across the spectrum of Buddhist teachings *śūnyatā* appears as the profound reality underlying all phenomena.<sup>2</sup> There cannot be a self present in and by itself in anything. A self is always dependent on other factor(s) for its existence. This dependence makes the presence of the self untenable. Buddhism encourages not to cling or attach oneself to the phenomenal world. It is only by being free from attachment to phenomena “that we may be able to peep into a fragment of the groundless ground which we call our existence” (Park 2011:18).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Mādhyamika refers to a tradition of Buddhist philosophy instituted by the ancient Indian thinker Nāgārjuna (150 – 250) in the 2nd century. The Mādhyamika School preached *śūnyatā*, or the lack of essence of things as the only possible truth of the world. The Sānlùn or the Three Treatise School of Buddhism first flourished in the early 5th century in East Asia. The key figures of the tradition include philosophers like Seng Zhao (374 - 414) and Ji Zang (549 - 623). The school carried on and in some places reshaped the Mādhyamika thought of *śūnyatā*.

<sup>2</sup> The sentence was suggested by Simeon Gallu. I am grateful to him for the suggestion.

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