

Chapter I

Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance of the Problem

Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Buddhism is an issue of interest among Buddhist scholars. There are a lot of arguments regarding the concept of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in what context it means according to Theravada or Mahayana. Only the knowledge on the development of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Buddhism will pave the way to understand the concept of Śūnyatā (Emptiness) in different context of each tradition in Buddhism along the period of time. Thus the study of the development of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Buddhism in this thematic paper will trace back to the Early Buddhism first to find out the concept of emptiness or any thought that has led to the development of Śūnyatā (emptiness) on the later schism in Buddhism. As for Theravada, the concept of Śūnyatā (emptiness) and all other teachings remains unchanged from the Early Buddhism whereas Mahayana's teachings especially the concept of Śūnyatā (emptiness) have been greatly developed from Early Buddhism to Sarvāstivāda and Mādhyamika respectively. And from Mādhyamika, its philosophy has become a giant step forward to late Mahayana holding the concept of Śūnyatā (emptiness) as the core teaching along its development in sects and schools until the present time. Therefore the study of the development of Śūnyatā (emptiness) here will be focused on the Early Buddhism, Sarvāstivāda and Mādhyamika.

The teaching of emptiness, however, exists in both early Buddhism and early Mahāyāna Buddhism, where it is connected with the meaning of conditioned genesis, the middle way, nirvana, and not-self. The word “emptiness” in early Buddhist texts is not used as a special term for a central teaching, in contrast, Mādhyamika emphasizes emptiness as a central teaching, repeatedly stating that “all dharmas are marked with emptiness”¹ It seems that the meaning of emptiness in early Buddhism centres on practice and experience rather than idealistic and systematic theory. Therefore Early Buddhism focuses on observing the nature of life as “impermanent” (anicca) and “suffering” (dukkha), in order to realize that phenomena are “not-self” (anattā), and thus attain nirvana (nibbāna). Anyhow the development of Śūnyatā (emptiness) from Early Buddhism to Mādhyamika, Sarvāstivāda might be a viewpoint of variation in between. Thus upon the development of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Buddhism, the study in this thematic paper will also pay attention to the concept of Śūnyatā (emptiness) as well as any thought and theory in Sarvāstivāda as well so that one could understand more clearly how the concept of Śūnyatā (emptiness) has been developed in Buddhism.

The present thematic papers is expected to find out the clear picture of the concept and development of Śūnyatā in Buddhism; Early Buddhism, Sarvāstivāda and Mādhyamika. Thus the research will be an analytical study to find out the concept and development of Śūnyatā (Emptiness) in different context of each tradition above to discover the essence of emptiness regarding the Buddha’s intention and highest goal.

¹ Christmas Humphrey ed., **The Wisdom of Buddhism**, (London : The Buddhist Society, 1987), p.114.

1.2 Objectives of the Research

1.2.1 To study the concept of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Early Buddhism, Sarvāstivāda and Mādhyamika.

1.2.2 To study the development of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Early Buddhism, Sarvāstivāda and Mādhyamika.

1.3 Statement of the problem

1.3.1 What is the concept of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Early Buddhism, Sarvāstivāda and Mādhyamika.

1.3.2 What is the development of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Early Buddhism, Sarvāstivāda and Mādhyamika.

1.4 Definitions of the Terms Used in the Thematic Paper

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Development of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Buddhism is referred to the development of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Early Buddhism, Sarvāstivāda and Mādhyamika.

Early Buddhism is referred to the period of Pre-sectarian Buddhism lasted until about 100 years after the parinibbāna of the Buddha.

Svabhāva (Skt.) is rendered into ‘self-nature’. Things in the phenomenal world are transient, momentary, and without duration; hence they have no self-nature (self-entity) or individual substantiality. However, ordinary beings cling to the idea of existence or being (bhāva). This clinging is called clinging to self-nature or self-entity.

1.5 Literature Review

Vishwanath Prasad Varma, in his writing “**Early Buddhism and Its Origins**”, states that the ancient Upaniṣads are a vast corpus of philosophical views. On the problem of the human self it is possible to point to at least four different kinds of views in them. The most important philosophical standpoint of the Upaniṣads is an absolutistic spiritualism which inculcates the identity of the human psychic entity and the immanent cosmic and trans-cosmic brahman. The Upaniṣadic texts like tattvamasi regard the self as a spiritual principle which, although it energises the human body, is not a separate independent entity but is only a particularization or delimitation of the supreme spiritual real. Some of the schools of Indian philosophy like Sāṃkhya-Yoga, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Jain-Mimāṃsa accept the multiplicity of selves but according to the Upaniṣadic spiritual monism, only the one supreme brahman is real and in its inmost essence the human being is identical with that. Some interpreters of Buddhism like Ananda Coomaraswamy say that in, his discourses Buddha does not refer to this absolutist view but I think that it is possible to allude some reference to this monistic view in the Tripiṭakas.²

Takeuchi Yoshinori, In his writing “**Buddhist Spirituality : Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, and Early Chinese**”, states that after the Saṅgha split up into some twenty factions, several of the more important ones engaged in abhidharmic studies, and consequently formed

² Vishwanath Prasad Varma, **Early Buddhism and Its Origins**, (New Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1973), p.140.

themselves into schools with distinctive ontological, psychological, and soteriological theories, eventually building coherent systems of thought with their full complement of precise terminology. We do not know how many of these schools produced a literature; what is extant comes, by and large, from two schools only. In Pāli sources we have the Theravāda Abhidharma-piṭaka and the ten or so post canonical treatises. In the Abhidharma section of the Taishō edition of the Chinese Tripiṭaka are found twenty-eight texts in translation, of which all but one belong to the Sarvāstivāda school. In addition, the Tibetan Tripiṭaka contains a distinct collection of nine treatises of the same school. The Sarvāstivāda literature, which exceeds that of Theravāda both in the number of texts and in volume, allows us to distinguish three stages in the development of Abhidharma : (1) an early stage of explaining, organizing, and classifying the terms in the sūtras; (2) a stage in which the distinct doctrinal theories evolved; and (3) a late stage of doctrinal systematization.³

Hsuch-li Chen, in his writing “**Empty Logic : Mādhyamika Buddhism from Chinese Sources**”, states that various meaning of emptiness are exemplified in the successive stages of Mādhyamika negation. On the first level, emptiness means that commonsense things, which appear to be real, are not really real. He expressed this as the denial of being. But emptiness in this sense may be misinterpreted as non-being or nothing. People distinguish between beings and non-being, existence and non-existence, permanence and impermanence. Samsāra (the cycle of

³ Takeuchi Yoshinori ed., **Buddhist Spirituality : Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, and Early Chinese**, (New York : Crossroad, 1994, p.67.

life and death) and nirvāṇa. All these are svabhāvicly construed (the attached way of thinking and should be regarded as extremes.

On the second level, emptiness is employed to revoke dualistic thinking. The term empty means that both native realism and nihilism are unintelligible and their description of the world should be discarded. Here the doctrine of emptiness is expressed as the denial of both being and non-being. However, at this stage one may still be attached to conceptualization and to a monistic view of the universe.

Because any conceptualization is an extreme, on the third level emptiness implies that monistic as well as dualistic and pluralistic views of the world are untenable. It is the negation of conceptualization, stated as a denial of both duality and non-duality. At this stage, one is supposed to be free from all attachments. If this occurs, emptiness means non-attachment.⁴

Gadjin Nagao, in his writing “**The Foundational Standpoint of Madhyamika Philosophy**”, states that all theories of nothingness, being or some indeterminate state between non-being and being, inasmuch as that their standpoint is one of existent essence, are termed realism (*vastu-vāda*). However, if the advocacy of the absence of essence is to go beyond realism, it must be contextualized in the structure of the two truths as absolutely other. This allows for a valid establishment of worldly convention in which transcendence is identified with reengagement in the world and the restoration of logical reason. The validation of worldly convention became an important point with the later Mādhyamika thinkers but, it would appear the Chinese lineage of

⁴ Hsueh-li Cheng, **Empty Logic : Mādhyamika Buddhism from Chinese Sources**, (Delhi : Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt.Ltd. 1991), pp. 52-53.

Mādhyamika thinkers but, it would appear that the Chinese lineage of Mādhyamika thought did not pay sufficient attention to this validation of worldly convention and reengagement, nor to the examination of the basically rational structure of the two truths. Since emptiness and dependent co-arising are immediate and contemplative, not rational, in order to enunciate emptiness and dependent co-arising, one must consider them within the structure of the two truths. Otherwise, like the unskilled snake handler who is liable to get bitten, the tongue that speaks emptiness will get burned in its empty fire.⁵

A.M. Padhye, in his writing “**The Framework of Nāgārjuna’s Philosophy**”, states that Pratityasamutpāda, which is the principal teaching of the Buddha and which is also instrumental in freeing us from bewitching platonic world-view is commonsensically enormously misinterpreted at the hands of the scholars, no matter whether hailing from the Buddhist camp or not. They mistook Pratityasamutpāda for a theory of causation or a theory of emergence of the things in the world or a theory of their dependent origination. Our claim is that as a true teaching of the Buddha it only points out the way things in the world truly are and stand related to one another. It is, thus, an ontological model explaining not necessarily emergence and perishing of things in the world but rather their presentation unto us conjunctively or sequentially. It further tells us that the continuity which we feel is perhaps the functional feature of the world. That we feel it and cognize it is not a matter of discovery. Nor could continuity, perhaps, be regarded as the structural feature of the world. Continuity, perhaps, is our name for things being

⁵ Gadgin Nagao, **The Foundational Standpoint of Mādhyamika Philosophy**, tr. by John P. Keenan, (Delhi-India : Sri Satguru Publications, 1990), p.141.

connected. Things may, as a matter of fact, be discrete. They may be given to us sequentially. They may even be related with one another; they may not be related in this way. But merely from the fact that things are related, it does not follow that continuity is the structural feature of the world. We experience sequence and this sequence no feature of the world. We experience sequence and this sequence no doubt gives us an idea of connectedness (No one should deny it nor does the Buddha deny it.) But, this connectedness should not be mistaken for causal connectedness, which further implies that sequence also should not be mistaken for consequence. This is the true import of Pratityasamutpāda. But unfortunately the disciples of the Buddha and also scholars of his thought took Pratityasamutpāda for causal connectedness. This being the case, Nāgārjuna makes an honest attempt to understand Pratityasamutpāda correctly as a theory about the nature of the things in the world and their being connected with one another.⁶

Phramaha Somboon Vutthikaro (Phanna), in his dissertation **“The Cittamātra of Yogācāra Buddhism: An Analytical Study Based on the Concept of Citta in Early Buddhism”**, states that the interpretative ways of the Cittamātra of Yogācāra Buddhism from the past to the present by studying the Cittamātra in Yogācāra scriptures and the Citta concept in Early Buddhism Scriptures which serve as the foundation of the Cittamātra and appraising different interpretative ways of the Cittamātra to propose a new interpretation based on the concept of Citta in Early Buddhism. The study has found that the Cittamātra of Yogācāra Buddhism has been interpreted in at least six different ways by

⁶ A.M. Fadhye, **The Framework of Nāgārjuna’s Philosophy**, (India : Sri Satguru Publications, 1988), p.129.

many scholars. The following are the ways of interpretation: (1) Skillful Means proposes that the Cittamātra is not the final position of the Buddha but is a skillful means teaching to pave the way to the final teaching, Śūnyatā; (2) Metaphysical Idealism proposes that the Cittamātra is a concept that denies the existence of physical world and asserts the existence of the Mind-Only as the Absolute; (3) Subjective Idealism proposes that the Cittamātra is a concept that denies the existence of physical world and asserts the existence of various individual minds; (4) Realistic Pluralism proposes that the Cittamātra is a concept that accepts the existence of everything like Early Buddhism, what denied by the Cittamātra is the duality of subject-object caused by discrimination; (5) Epistemological Interpretation proposes that Yogācāra Buddhism's emphasis is epistemological problem concerning the erroneous perception of worldly persons, not metaphysical one; and (6) Practical Interpretation proposes that the Cittamātra is a practical concept to explain the suffering of worldly persons in the Round of Rebirth and suggest the way out of suffering through meditation practice. Therefore, the Cittamātra of Yogācāra Buddhism should be interpreted as: not an idealistic concept reducing the physical world to mind and asserting the existence of the Mind-Only as the Absolute, but is an ethical concept for reducing the suffering of worldly persons in the Round of Rebirth through mind, and suggests the way out of suffering through meditation practice for mind-development.⁷

⁷Phramaha Somboon Vutthikaro (Phanna), "The Cittamātra of Yogācāra Buddhism : An Analytical Study Based on the Concept of Citta in Early Buddhism", **Ph.D. Dissertation**, (Graduate School : Mahachulalongkorn-rajabidyalaya University, B.E. 2551).

Somparn Promta, in his dissertation, **“Being and Non-being in Theravada Buddhism”**, states that there are two metaphysical views on the nature of the world which Theravada Buddhism does not agree with : atthikaditthi and natthikaditthi. Atthikaditthi is the view that everything exists. Natthikaditthi is the view that everything does not exist.

Theravada Buddhism does not agree with these philosophical systems by the reason that they are the extreme views. Theravada Buddhism presents a view on the nature of the world to replace these two views through the three doctrines : The Doctrine of Dependent Origination (paticcasamuppāda), The Doctrine of Three Characteristics (tilakkhana) and The Doctrine of Momentariness (khanikadassana).

The Theravada Buddhist believes that this Theravada Buddhist view on the nature of the world is the middle way comparing with the two extreme views as following:

- a. The world as conceived by atthikaditthi is being.
- b. The world as conceived by natthikaditthi is non-being.
- c. The world as conceived by Theravada Buddhism is emptiness.

According to Theravada Buddhism, “emptiness” (Suññatā) is a middle concept between the two extreme concepts : “being” (atthitā) and “non-being” (natthitā). The emptiness of the world can be viewed by the fact that this world is made up of basic elements which arise and decay momentarily. In such arise-and-decay-stream of the world, there is no any permanent substance.

Conclusion : The world according to Theravada Buddhism is not substantial, nor the idea of mind. But the world is emptiness.⁸

1.6 Research Methodology

This work is documentary research. The research methodology can be divided into five stages as follows:

1.6.1 Collecting data in relation to Śūnyatā from the primary sources in Mādhyamika Literatures and Mahayana Sūtrass concerned; and the secondary sources from writing and literature regarding Mādhyamika and other schools of Mahayana . Due to the scope of this thematic papers, this research will primarily focus on the doctrine of Śūnyatā in Mādhyamika Sūtrass and Mahayana Sūtrass concerned.

1.6.2 Analyzing the raw data as well as systematizing the collected data to give a clear picture of the concept and development of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Early Buddhism, Sarvāstivāda and Mādhyamika.

1.6.3 Constructing the overall outline of the work.

1.6.4 Discussing the problem and controversy encountered.

1.6.5 Formulating conclusions and identifying significant results.

1.7 Expected Benefits

After doing the research, the following advantages and outcomes may be obtained.

⁸ Somparn Promta, “Being and Non-being in Theravada Buddhism”. **Ph.D. Dissertation**, (Graduate School : Chulalongkorn University, 1991).

1.7.1 To clearly understand the concept of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Early Buddhism, Sarvāstivāda and Mādhyamika.

1.7.2 To clearly understand the development of Śūnyatā (emptiness) in Early Buddhism, Sarvāstivāda and Mādhyamika.