

SAṂSĀRA IS NIRVĀNA  
— A KEY TO BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

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Within the rich and voluminous literature of Mahāyāna Buddhism there is reference, in both the Pāramitāyāna and the Tantrayāna teachings, to an alleged relationship of identity holding between *Saṁsāra* and *Nirvāna*. This amounts to saying that Samsara — understood in Buddhism as the level of mundane or everyday existence, characterized by the cyclic and suffering phenomenon of rebirth and in which all persons, if they understand themselves to be unique and individual things, are immersed — is indistinguishable from Nirvana, by which is meant the joyful liberating and enlightening level of being beyond all suffering (*duḥkha*) experienced only by those who have fully Awakened, that is, the Buddhas. For example, the Tibetan poet-saint, Milarepa, writing out of the tantric tradition, declares:

The non-differentiation of manifestation and  
voidness is the Dharmakāya,  
In which Samsara and Nirvana are felt to be the  
same.  
It is a complete merging of Buddha and sentient  
being.  
These are the sign of the Stage of One-Taste,  
As many have declared.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the Indian sage Nāgārjuna, expositor of the Mādhyamaka philosophy, states in his root text, the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*:

There is nothing whatever which differentiates the  
existence-in-flux (samsara) from nirvana;  
And there is nothing whatever which differentiates  
nirvana from existence-in-flux.  
The extreme limit (koti) of nirvana is also the  
extreme limit of existence-in-flux;  
There is not the slightest bit of difference between  
these two. (vs. 25.19-20)<sup>2</sup>

No doubt this is baffling at first sight, and I wish, in this paper, to shine light upon this and other identity relationships said to hold between the path and the goal, between the pure (*sukha*) and the impure (*asukha*) and between form (*rūpa*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*). I hope also that at least a little light will reflect onto the identities said to obtain between wisdom (*prajña*) and skillful means (*upaya*) and between emptiness (*sunyata*) and compassion (*karuṇā*), though these specific identities have scope enough to be dealt with individually in future papers. That such assertions of identity are of central importance

cannot be underestimated. As Kenneth Inada, in an introduction to his translation of the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* has remarked: *the understanding of the above identities is the constant challenge and the most profound feature of the Mahayana if not the whole of Buddhist philosophy.*<sup>3</sup> Thus, to cast at least some light upon the understanding intended by textual assertions such as the above, is to help demystify and dispel or, rather, dissolve a number of inter-related misconceptions which are held by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike and which surround the spiritual endeavour when viewed from a Mahayana perspective.

### Levels of Experience, Truth and Understanding

In order then to make simple any meaning and truth that may be conveyed in the *sutras* and *sastras* of Buddhism which contain such assertions, one must at least have a glimpse of the experiences of which such assertions are said to be expressions. This means one should keep true to the characteristically experimental and empirical nature of all Indian religious philosophies, by seeking out those experiences which underpin, in the sense of being the basis for and cause of the most fundamental linguistic expressions and doctrinal assertions of the varied traditions.

What is required then in order firstly to understand and secondly to make judgment upon the truth content of what at first glance are clearly false statements of fact, is a basic willingness to experiment to see whether in fact there are experiences to be had which do result in an understanding whereby statements such as *Samsara is Nirvana* are rendered true. This means that in order to make a proclamation about the truth or falsity of such identity relationships, one must know the conditions under which any particular claim for truth is made, whether or not this truth claim remains the same in all possible conditions and also, if it does not remain constant, then which conditions more reliably result in truth. For example, to determine if and when the assertion *Samsara is identical to Nirvana* is true or false one would need to know the following:

- a. Under what conditions, i.e. in the light of which experiences, is this statement false?
- b. Is it false for all possible experiences? If not, then —
- c. In the light of which experiences is it true? And, most importantly —
- d. If this statement can be both true and false under different experiences, then can any preference be made in favouring one or other of these differing truth claims as being *more true*.

By *more true* I am not meaning that certain experiences may be capable of rendering a greater number of truths than other experiences, but rather that certain expressions may be *truer* in their representation

of reality if they are the product of certain experiences rather than of others. That some of our experiences picture reality more accurately than others, with the expressions of such experiences being truer to what is real, would seem beyond dispute. On a trivial level we all, for example, would regard very lightly a blind man's assertions about the colour of some physical object and we would do this precisely because he cannot have had the requisite experiences upon which to base truthful assertions. His experiences can afford him no understanding, or at best a very shallow understanding of what colour is and hence his talk about colours would tend to be *less true* rather than *more true* when in comparison to ours. Similarly, but less trivially, most would agree that persons display more and less understanding, in the sense of wisdom, about themselves and others. It follows that what those with more understanding may say, is a more accurate depiction of what is real about the universe than what others with less understanding may say and that at least one of the factors contributing to this understanding is just that they, the wise, have been the subject of certain types of experiences lacking in the less wise. In part this is why the old are generally wiser than the young; they simply have had more time for wisdom-producing experiences to occur. There are grounds, then, for wanting to make a metaphysical distinction between different orders or grades of truth in regard to what in this universe is real and which talk about it is true.

It is for reasons similar to the above that the Madhyamaka philosophy permits such a distinction in its metaphysics, it being made very precisely in the formulation of a doctrine of *two truths* (*satyadvaya*).<sup>4</sup> The two levels of truth accounted for are :

- a. the level which has been variously rendered as conventional, world-ensconced, relative, expedient, empirical and phenomenal truth (*samvṛtisatya*) which is held to apply to everyday/ commonplace reality and –
- b. the level which applies to the absolute or transcendental reality of Buddhahood (*paramārthasatya*).

(That these renditions for *samvṛtisatya* are not equally adequate is a question I will look at in the closing stages of this paper).

Into this dual system of truth all the philosophical and religious truths of Buddhism find a place as also do the more common 'facts' of everyday experience. The consequence is that certain of the philosophical premises of Buddhism are held to be true when seen in reference to the reality of *samvṛtisat* – for example, the doctrines of karmic cause and effect, the related doctrine of interdependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*) and even, as should become clearer shortly, the doctrine of *two truths*. Other propositions however are false in the discourse of *samvṛtisat* but true in the transcendental reality of *paramathasat*. The case in point, that *Samsara is Nirvana*, whilst plainly false under those conditions readily accessible to all of us, namely, *samvṛtisat*, is said to be rendered a true statement of fact about *paramathasat*.

## Sūnyatā as the Realization of Absolute Truth

The query now is: are there conditions, i.e. experiences, in which, for example, *Samsara is Nirvana* is true? And, if the answer is *yes*, then what are the required conditions? In other words, what experience is it necessary to have or to be immersed in, for Samsara to be Nirvana?

That such experiencing is possible is the claim of Mahayana Buddhism, citing the evidence that numbers of practitioners are said to have actualized the requisite and enlightening experience of Sunyata and then gone on to explicate a Sunyata theory – a philosophy-cum-psychology of Sunyata. There are, it is claimed, a series of Sunyata realizations – sometimes up to twenty in number are accounted for<sup>5</sup> – all culminating in the realization of *Atyantā-Sunyata*. This latter is generally translated as full or thorough emptiness and is said to be a necessary realization for the attainment of the pure enlightenment of Buddhahood. It is in the reality known through the realization of *Atyantā-Sunyata* (which from now on is what I will be meaning when using the more general term ‘Sunyata’) that all spiritual paradoxes and inconsistencies are said to be dissolved and where the truth that *Samsara is Nirvana* dawns.

Now whether such experiencing is possible or not and whether the theory of Sunyata is true or false is a matter to be tested through empirical study. What I will attempt to show here, by the use of argument, but primarily by the use of example, is that Sunyata theory is true and that the actual realization of full or thorough Sunyata – and hence Buddhahood – is possible.

### Sunyata Theory

Before concerning ourselves with the experiential and phenomenological aspects of the Sunyata realization (for one must be equipped with these in order to make any judgment, worthy of a guarantee, upon the possibility of an enlightening experience of the type where *Samsara is Nirvana*) it is wise to spend at least a little time looking into the elements of Sunyata theory. Such a digression is wise for without it the import of the experience fades quickly and also the actual mechanics of the realization fail to be appreciated.

The uniqueness of Sunyata is that it is an awareness, and perhaps *just* that, which is beyond the ordinary subject/object duality present in our commonsense experiencing. Being beyond the subject/object division, it is experiencing of a more unifying, integrating and metaphysically fundamental nature. How such a subject/object dissolution is said in theory to be possible is via a cessation of the ‘I’ consciousness (the ego sense) together with a realization that, from their own side, all objects in the universe, all phenomenal forms, are devoid of (lack) any intrinsic self-existence. What this means is that all forms are in themselves neither individualized nor individualizable. It is only from our side, a distinction which presumes an ‘I’ sense, that forms become individualized phenomena and this through a projection on our behalf of names upon the world. So, coming from our side,

names and consequently forms are mere mental fabrications not inherent in the world. They are nothing more than concepts. For example, *The Heart Sutra*, one of the most refined and concentrated statements of the Mahayana philosophy written largely from the level of absolute truth (*paramarthatasya*), says that in reality, in contrast to our projection onto it,

there is no form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor impulse, nor consciousness; No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; No forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touchables or objects of mind; No sight-organ element and . . . . . No mind-consciousness elements.<sup>6</sup>

All this is to say that in reality there is no you and me, no tables, chairs, trees or clouds, but it is not to say that there is nothing. Reality according to Sunyata theory, is that which remains after ego sense, conceptualized projections and theorizing about reality have been eliminated. Sunyata then is an immediate non-differentiable wholeness, *neither the world nor apart from the world. It is the 'intrinsic' nature of the world.*<sup>7</sup> Such a realization is possible only with the removal of all mind contents, that is, the removal of all those blockages and interferences, such as recollection, projecting into the future, theorizing and other mental fancies which veil reality and give us only a self-centred and distorted picture. Then, beyond the discriminations of *this* and *that*, experiencing only the immediately given present, *The Heart Sutra*, still from the point of view of absolute reality, continues by saying:

There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance; . . there is no decay and death, no extinction of decay and death. There is no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path. There is no cognition, no attainment and no non-attainment.<sup>8</sup>

An intellectual understanding of how *Samsara is Nirvana* should now be clearer as also, by implication, should be those expressions which suggest that *nothing changes in moving from the unenlightened to the enlightened state*, and that *between ourselves and the Buddhas there is no difference*. Karl Potter for example, has characterized the Madhyamaka school as a leap philosophy. He writes that, *when we become free, nothing comes to be; therefore, none of the problems about becoming that puzzle progress philosophers arises for the leap philosophy.*<sup>9</sup> This is because the leap from Samsara to Nirvana, from bondage to liberation, is not an ontic one and can occur only when one ceases treading a path. The change is only a psychological one, i.e. from a filled to an empty mind, which means that reality undergoes no modification, only our conception of it does. That is to say, we move from a conception to no conception. The theory is that whilst engaged in dualistic thought, of the type that discriminates subject and object, path and goal, absolute and empirical, Samsara and Nirvana, one must remain in the ocean of Samsara. Milarepa says: *to cling to the actuality of mind is the cause of Samsara.*<sup>10</sup> And in the

Hindu scriptures it is written *One's own thought, indeed, is Samsara.* (*Maitrī Upanisad.* VI 34), Consequently, to transcend the dualistic mind, to be experiencing a mode of being wherein there is no discrimination of *this* and *that*, Samsara and Nirvana is just to be in Nirvana. The difference between these two, or any other objects of a relationship is not real. It is epistemic-subjective.<sup>12</sup> In reality there is no becoming, only the destruction of wrong views. Any difference between Samsara and Nirvana is only conventionally true; *ultimately they are both empty (sunya) of self-existence.*

### The Experience of Sunyata

Now is the time to do some phenomenology with respect to the experience of which the above theorizing is said to be expressive. For even though Sunyata, perhaps best translated as 'Right View' rather than 'emptiness', is strictly ineffable (being beyond the bounds of thought and hence of language), words can nevertheless direct us and help convey at least some of the differences between our usual perceptions and conceptions about reality and that view of reality disclosed in Sunyata. Why the experience itself is of crucial importance is that it, rather than any theorizing, can be the only guarantor that *Samsara is Nirvana*. In order to know of this experiencing one needs to go further into the world of serene silence by gaining some freedom from the ever changing thought fluctuation, that is to say, some respite from ceaseless mental chatter. Concentration is needed to slow the mind down. One must imagine what it is like to experience the changing fluctuations of the phenomenal world, but minus the normal super-impositions of names and forms, and without attachment to the objects of the senses, including one's own ideas, expectations, comparisons, memories and future projections. One must be rid of habitual tendencies to analyze and interpret things and must cease imposing prior experience and philosophical ideas upon experience, for only then can there be experience of reality, of things as they really are. To quote in length from Chogyam Trungpa:

*We have to see the 'isness' of what is, the raw and rugged qualities of things precisely as they are . . . . So first we wipe away all our heavy preconceptions, and then we even wipe away the subtleties of such words as 'empty', leaving us nowhere, completely with what is . . . . Once we have taken away this preconception of the existence of mind and reality, then situations emerge clearly, as they are. There is no one to watch, no one to know anything. Reality just is and this is what is meant by the term 'Sunyata'. . . . Through this insight the watcher which separates us from the world is removed.<sup>13</sup>*

So having freed the mind of all its contents, by making it motionless, there comes a sense of immediacy in the surrounding environment and a feeling that phenomena are less solid and fixed and are just flowing as an indivisible evanescent now. Herbert Guenther

describes this as, *the conateness of the object as the Sunyata and the mind as luminosity itself; in the actual experience it is a free-rising perception of uninterrupted understanding in luminous knowledge.*<sup>14</sup> Then, detached but not removed from sensory stimulation, space is created in which to discover Sunyata, the silence where there is noise, the emptiness where there are forms and Nirvana where there is Samsara. Then one realizes, with the Chinese sage Huang Po, —

*that there is nothing which can be attained is not idle talk; it is the truth. . . . When at last, in a single flash, you attain to full realization, you will only be realizing the Buddha-nature which has been with you all the time; and by all the foregoing stages you will have added to it nothing at all. You will come to look upon these aeons of work and achievement as no better than unreal action performed in a dream. That is why the Tathagata said: 'I truly attained nothing from complete, unexcelled enlightenment.'*<sup>15</sup>

Thus, in Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha is the *Dharmakāya*, neither coming into nor going out of existence, for in reality there can be no such thing as attainment or development. The life of the Buddha, including his birth, enlightenment and *Parinirvana* are viewed as the employment of teaching aids in skillful means (*upāya*).

What then makes it impossible to discover the Sunyata reality right now (for it can never be experienced in the past nor in the future but only in the present), is the constant and self-perpetuating struggle one engages in, both in trying to come to terms with a world believed to be separate from oneself and in wishing to rid oneself of unpleasant experiences whether physical discomfort, disturbing and distracting thoughts, impatience, or just disquiet. The realization required is that, why one suffers, why one is the subject of imbalance is just that one *does*, uncontrollably and habitually, exert effort, in an open or not so open manner, in trying to be relieved of these self-same exertions. There is a failure to realize that in a very real sense one must do nothing, in the sense of giving up doing anything, for this is the fundamental problem and that which keeps one bound to Samsaric existence. The unenlightened keep struggling and fighting to attain ultimate peace, unable to realize that it is just this struggling which is Samsara. One must know, in the words of the Nyingma Lama Mi-pham in commenting on Nagarjuna's *Suhṛllekha*, that *Samsara simply means being frustrated.*<sup>16</sup> And the frustration is always caused by the effort to work out and arrange things in order to be released from these very same struggles; but, being frustrated, there is a failure to see that one just keeps chasing one's own tail, never stopping to see the self-perpetuating vicious circle. The reward comes in giving it up or, in the sweet words of Rechungpa, disciple of Milarepa,

*In the (new-found) realm of Samsara and Nirvana  
Sentient beings and the Buddha are to me the same;  
And so I neither hope nor yearn for Buddhahood.  
At this moment, all my sufferings have become a pleasure.*

*This is my understanding of Enlightenment,  
No longer feel I shame before enlightened beings.*<sup>17</sup>

Then, when Sunyata is discovered, there is no exertion, everything is effortless with no feeling of having to escape to anything else. There is just a complete admission of things as they really are. With this, ineffable peace arises.

### **The Superiority of Paramārthasatya**

Before returning, just briefly as promised, to the question of the adequacy of the various renditions of the term *samvrtisatya* it is worthwhile prefacing any concluding remarks with a statement about the respective status of and relation between the two levels of truth. For though I hope to have shown that there may be a level of reality other than the one we are normally in communion with, there are still the questions of whether this 'other' reality is of a 'higher' order and hence epistemically more fundamental and ontologically more real. To answer very briefly, it must be more fundamental than either inference or perception — the two modes normally agreed upon as furnishing reliably true information about reality — for it is incorrigible and also immediate rather than mediate, in both temporal and causal senses. This is because Sunyata can only be known via an act of direct awareness that is prior to any modifications by either ratiocination or sensory apparatuses. I would also add just two things in passing, for wisdom and knowledge are rarely equated these days. Firstly, those who have access to Sunyata-type experiences claim them to be wisdom-giving, in the sense that just having the experiences brings an increased understanding about oneself and others and secondly, one is surely 'wise' if he chooses an integrated and stabilized existence rather than a fractured and confused one.

Concerning the ontological question as to which level most accurately depicts reality, I will just reiterate what has previously been said, namely, that so long as there is a failure to realize that reality and thoughts about reality are not the same, then one's vision is clouded and reality can never shine through. When reality is seen to be quite independent of views, ideas and opinions about it, then one's vision is precise and clear.

On the relation between the two levels of truth suffice it to say that though from the level of *samvrtisatya* there may be a relation and one that seems to yield contradictory expressions about reality, from the side of the enlightened vision, that of *paramarthatasatya*, there is no relation since there are not 'two truths'. So when one hears of the identity relationship between Samsara and Nirvana one is wrong to conclude that this is a false view. Rather one should realize that when Buddhists talk about forsaking Samsara in order to attain Nirvana they are speaking from the side of *samvrtisatya*, and that when they declare Samsara to be Nirvana that this is from the side of *paramarthatasatya*, though strictly in Sunyata there is no discrimination of Samsara and Nirvana and hence no possible relationship between them. So ultimately, as levels of truth, both *samvrti* and *paramartha*



are not different; the distinction is merely a teaching aid again; and as they are not different, both are equally valid.

### Conclusion

No more than a few words are necessary to put into a correct perspective the function and purpose of *samvrtisatya*, that level of truth variously translated as conventional, relative, phenomenal, world-ensconced, expedient and empirical. Of these some are quite misleading, in particular, 'world-ensconced', for this phrase carries with it an implication that the realization of Sunyata either necessitates a prior removal from the world or that upon its realization one must necessarily be removed from this world; and both these are plainly not the case. Of the above renditions, 'expedient' comes closest to the mark, for this the truths of everyday existence are. The truth of cause and effect, that there is progression and the activities of coming and going, together with the so-called 'Holy Truths' of Buddhism (such as the Four Fold Noble Truth), are examples. And though in an ultimate sense, they have been transcended by one who has realized his Buddha-nature, still, prior to this realization they must in a certain sense be viewed as real and their operations adhered to. In the words of Nagarjuna: *Without relying on everyday common practices, the absolute truth cannot be expressed. Without approaching the absolute truth, nirvana cannot be attained.* (*Mulamadhyamakakarika*, 24.10) But, even though in the Buddhist understanding it may take aeons of rigorous discipline to finally extricate oneself from Samsara and to attain Nirvana, still one should not forget *that even these 'things' do not exist apart from our giving them names.*<sup>18</sup>

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>G.C. Chang (trans. and annotation) *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*. Abridged Ed. 1970. Harper and Row. New York. Quoted from 'The Gray Rock Vajra Enclosure' p.31.
- <sup>2</sup>In F.J. Streng *Emptiness, A Study In Religious Meaning*. 1967. Abingdon Press. Nashville and New York. Appendix A; Trans. of the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*.
- <sup>3</sup>K.K. Inada *Nagarjuna: A Translation of his Mulamadhyamakakarika with an Introductory Essay*. 1970. The Hokuseido Press, Tokyo. p.12.
- <sup>4</sup>The best discussion of two truths in one volume is: M.Sprung (ed.) *Two Truths In Buddhism And Vedanta*. 1973. D. Reidel Pub. Co. Holland. See particularly the contributions by F.J. Streng, M. Sprung and T.R.V. Murti.

- <sup>5</sup>For example see E. Obermiller 'A Study Of The Twenty Aspects Of Sunyata'. — *Indian Historical Quarterly*. Vol.9, 1933, pp.170-187 also E. Conze 'Meditations On Emptiness'. *The Maha-Bodhi*. May 2499/1955. pp.203-211.
- <sup>6</sup>Quoted from E. Conze *Buddhist Wisdom Books*. 1972. Harper and Row. New York. p.89.
- <sup>7</sup>K. Bhattacharya. 'The Dialectical Method of Nagarjuna'. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*. Vol.I, 1971. p.217.
- <sup>8</sup>E. Conze *Buddhist Wisdom Books*. p.89.
- <sup>9</sup>K.H. Potter *Presuppositions Of India's Philosophies*. 1965. Prentice-Hall of India (Private) Ltd. New Delhi. p.236.
- <sup>10</sup>G.C.C. Chang (trans and annotation) *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*. p.30.
- <sup>11</sup>Quoted from S. Radhakrishnan *The Principal Upanisads*. (text, trans. and notes) 1974. George Allen and Unwin. London.
- <sup>12</sup>See T.R.V. Murti *The Central Philosophy Of Buddhism*. 1960. George Allen and Unwin. London. pp.233 and 274.
- <sup>13</sup>Chogyam Trungpa *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. 1973. Shambhala. Berkeley. From pp.189 and 196.
- <sup>14</sup>H.V. Guenther 'The Levels Of Understanding In Buddhism' (a translation of a Tibetan text Rnal. hbyor.mdzub.tshngs.) *Journal Of The American Oriental Society*. Vol.78 1958. p.26.  
N:B: I have omitted Tibetan equivalents.
- <sup>15</sup>Quoted in a most illuminating article by Bhikkhu Vimalo 'The Experience of 'Stream-Entry'.' *The Middle Way*. Vol.XLIX.No.1, May 1974. pp.9-10.
- <sup>16</sup>L. Kawamura (trans.) *Golden Zephyr*. A translation from the Tibetan of Nagarjuna's Suhrlekha and Lama Mi-pham's commentary 'The Garland Of White Lotus Flowers'. 1975. Dharma Publishing. California. p.64.
- <sup>17</sup>G.C.C. Chang (trans. and annotation) *The Hundred Thousand Songs Of Milarepa*. p.116.
- <sup>18</sup>F.J. Streng *Emptiness*. p.45.