

Tantra and Zen Buddhism

Part 5 of 6

Franklin Merrell-Wolff

July 3, 1974

That which has just been read into the tape is one form of the *Prajna-Paramita*, which, it is said, constitutes an esoteric instruction of the Great Buddha. This introduces us to the conception of *shunyata*, which has been translated into English as “emptiness” and “voidness.” This conception has given a good deal of difficulty and has produced a feeling that Buddhism taught a kind of nihilism. However, if we translate these words *shunyata*, emptiness, voidness as meaning devoid of substance, then we have a clarification. Being devoid of substance implies a point of view which I have pointed out before—implies positivism, phenomenalism, and nominalism. It does not mean, necessarily, nothing-at-all-ness. The suggestion may be given that if we consider a one-sense hallucination, we will have an idea consistent with the meaning of *shunyata*. A one-sense hallucination involving, say, the visual sense, could be the appearance of a snake in the rope, or in any other sinuous object as a stick lying on the ground. One may have, as I have had, the experience of seeing very clearly a snake, which quickly vanishes, and then one sees another object that is sinuous in shape. Where did the snake come from? I had the opportunity of observing this. In that I saw where it went. It went back through my eyes, indicating that it was simply a projection. Nonetheless, it had a certain factuality, and it was capable of producing an effect. Thus, it caused me to feel shock and to jump immediately upon seeing it even though within a fraction of a second it vanished back through my eyes. Clearly I projected it.

Now, this hallucination is not the same as nothing at all. It had a certain factuality, though it definitely lacked substance. If I had had an experience of snake involving all the senses, particularly the kinesthetic sense of something that had solidity, which would have taken effort to move it, I would have then been inclined to say here was something substantial. That is our ordinary usage, but in the Buddhist usage the combination of the testimony of all the senses as to an existence is not to be viewed as implying substantiality. Factuality is not denied, and therefore it is not an assertion of absolute nothing-at-all-ness. We get here, then, an affirmation of the position known as positivism, phenomenalism, and nominalism as I formerly presented these conceptions.¹ I shall presently reread the *sutra* making certain substitutions for two words in it, namely, the words ‘consciousness’ and ‘voidness’, which may help to clarify the meaning here. But one point I wish to make at this time is this, that the very notion of emptiness or voidness or *shunyata* is like all other conceptions, a polar conception. It is a conception that is subject to the law of all dualism, which governs all sense perception and all conceptuality. In other words, there can be no validity of a greater order attached to the notion of voidness than to its complementary opposite, the notion of substance. What the Buddhist philosophers in this case are doing is to produce a formulation in terms of one

¹ See the audio recording “Tantra and Zen Buddhism,” part 3.

of a pair of opposites; in strict logic, therefore, since this is a polar conception and not a nondualist conception, there is implied an equal validity with respect to the polar opposite conception of substantiality.

There is a certain article in the early numbers of *The Theosophist* which has introduced this idea, namely, that Buddhism and the Vedanta are two complementary presentations of an ultimate truth, that these two sides, as it were, of that ultimate truth have always existed in formulation. The Buddhist position is contrasted to the Vedantist position, and in general the Vedantist position may be said to represent a more substantialistic point of view in that it treats both the subject to consciousness and the object of consciousness, in their ultimate sense as being the self and the divine entity, as being the substance behind all things. There is implied an intermediate view, and it is said that *The Secret Doctrine* emanates from such an intermediate view in which there is an orientation to that which is ultimately nondualistic. In the strict sense, in so far as Buddhism is an orientation to the *tertium quid* which lies between all pairs of opposites, it is not correct to say that any polar conception affords an adequate formulation. The value of this formulation might be psychological, as it certainly would have the effect of breaking attachments to any particular point of view in the dualistic sense.

Now, I shall proceed to reread the main body of the *sutra* making the following substitutions. For the word ‘voidness’, I shall substitute the word ‘consciousness’, to be understood in the sense of Consciousness-without-an-object-and-without-a-subject, or in the sense of Consciousness as *Rig-pa*, which is Consciousness that is not aware of phenomena. And for the word ‘consciousness’ as it appears in the text, I shall substitute the word ‘awareness’, to be understood in the sense of subject-object consciousness, or relative consciousness, or consciousness as *shes-rig*, which is consciousness that is aware of phenomena. We now reread a portion of the text beginning with the reply by Avalokiteshvara:²

[THE REPLY BY AVALOKITESHVARA]

(7) Upon this being asked, the *Bodhisattva*, the Great Being, Arya Avalokiteshvara, made reply and spake thus to the son of Shari-Dvati:

(8) ‘Shari-Putra, any nobly-born one, [spiritual] son or daughter, desirous of practicing the profound teachings of the *Prajna-Paramita* should comprehend them in the following manner:

(9) ‘The Five Aggregates are to be comprehended as being naturally and wholly Consciousness.

(10) ‘Forms are Consciousness and Consciousness is Forms; nor are Forms and Consciousness separable, or Forms other than Consciousness.

(11) ‘In the same way, Perception, Feeling, Volition, and Awareness are Consciousness.

(12) ‘Thus, Shari-Putra, are all things Consciousness, without characteristics, Unborn, Unimpeded, Unsullied, Unsulliable, Unsubtracted, Unfilled.

² See also the audio recording, “Reading of the Prajñā-Pāramitā-Hridaya-Sūtra.”

(13) ‘Shari-Putra, such being so, Consciousness hath no form, no perception, no feeling, no volition, no awareness; no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind, no form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no quality.

(14) ‘Where there is no eye, there is no desire’, and so on to, ‘there is no awareness of desire.

(15) ‘There is no Ignorance; there is no overcoming of Ignorance’; and so on to, ‘there is no decay and no death’, and to, ‘there is no overcoming of decay and death.

(16) ‘In the same way, there is no sorrow, there is no evil, there is no taking away, there is no Path, there is no Wisdom nor any attaining nor not-attaining.

(17) ‘Shari-Putra, such being so—for even the *Bodhisattvas* have nothing which is to be attained—by relying upon the *Prajna-Paramita*, and abiding in it, there is no mental obscuration [of the Truth] and, [there is] therefore, no fear; and, passing far beyond erroneous paths [or doctrines], one successfully attaineth *Nirvana*.

(18) ‘All the Buddhas, too, Who abide in the Three Times, have attained the highest, the purest, and the most perfect Buddhahood by depending upon this *Prajna-Paramita*.

[THE MANTRA OF THE PRAJNA-PARAMITA]

(19) Such being so, *Mantra* of the *Prajna-Paramita*, the *Mantra* of the Great Logic, the Highest *Mantra*, the *Mantra* which maketh one to equal That which cannot be equalled, the *Mantra* which assuageth all sorrow, and which not being false is known to be true, the *Mantra* of the *Prajna-Paramita*, is now uttered:

TADYATHA GATE GATE PARA-GATE
PARA-SAM-GATE BODHI SVA-HA

[Which may be translated as: ‘O Wisdom, departed, departed, departed, to the Other Shore, disembarked on the Other Shore, Sva-ha!’]³

What we have here is really a rigorous conceptual statement concerning Root Consciousness and its essential independence of the presence or absence of subjects to consciousness or objects of consciousness within it. We can come to what may be a clearer understanding of what is involved if we substitute for ‘consciousness’ the notion of a space in which there may be present a cosmos consisting of galaxies involving stars and planets; and if we view this space as independent of the presence of such galaxies, as something that’s unaffected by the presence or absence of such galaxies, as is done in our familiar Euclidean geometry, we will receive an understanding of what is meant. There may be a cosmos or there may be an absence of a cosmos, but in either case the pure

³ W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1935), 355-358.

space is unaffected, or in other words, the pure Root Consciousness is unaffected by this presence or absence. I would add that we are not here dealing with a sequence in time as of a featureless space leading later in time to a space containing galaxies, but rather that we're speaking in terms of a logical relationship in the ontological sense, that we are differentiating a root fact from the derivative fact. One may realize this without the blanking out of the awareness of objects. In fact, it may well be that the process continues indefinitely from the beginningless past to the endless future, but all the while this Root Consciousness, or this fundamental space, is unaffected by it. What is achieved psychologically is that one shifts his orientation to the Root Consciousness, or the absolute space, and from that basis performs or does not perform as he may be led to do in the field of action.

Another feature that is notable in this *sutra* is that there is no employment of any sensible activity whatsoever such as visualization, posturing of the body, breath culture, the use of ceremony and rite; but in place of this we have a reference to the "Great Logic," a noetic entity, a logoic entity, a theoretic entity. And what is then suggested is this, that the part which use of sensible action in the tantric yoga is replaced by the principle of logic, which can be translated as a mathematic, since mathematics is essentially the development of logic in a formal form. This, I submit, marks the very essence of the distinction between the tantric and Zen types of yoga, on one side, and the non-tantric types of yoga on the other.

Now, we may return to a consideration of some of the implications of the descent of the Sons of Mind or the *Manasaputra*. As I stated before, this is the introduction of the conceptual order into the sensual entity that had been fully evolved to the level of nascent manhood, and it is only when this descent took place that man *qua* man was born. He is not simply, therefore, another animal of a higher capacity. He is not simply the evolvment of the potentiality of animalness, but he is another kind of entity that occupies an animal nature. It is wrong, therefore, to define man as "a plantigrade featherless biped mammal of the genus *Homo*."⁴ That is a definition merely of his outermost and visible entityhood; but in reality, man is the thinker in the conceptual sense of thought, which is something added onto that which the primary evolution produced. He rides a mammal. He occupies a mammal. But he is not identical with a mammal.

Speaking now in a purely epistemological sense without any moral implications one way or another, animality may be identified with sensuousness, namely, cognition through sense perception; and on the other hand, humanity is identified with conceptualism, or cognition through the concept. Now, as we are both animal, or sensuous, and human, or conceptual, it is possible for us to identify ourselves with one side or the other, and when one faces the problem of yogic attainment it makes a difference when we have one or the other self-identification. If we identify ourselves with the sensuous being, namely, that being which we hold in common with the animal kingdom, then we find it necessary to go through a discipline that breaks that identification, and for that, a methodology is required that is radically different from that which would be required if the identification was with the human, or conceptualistic

⁴ William Dwight Whitney, ed., *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopaedia*, vol. 5 (New York: Century Co., 1911), 3601: ". . . a featherless plantigrade biped mammal of the genus *Homo*."

aspect of the human being. In the end, both identifications must be transcended, but the effective means by which this transcendence is accomplished is radically different; so I submit that for him who has reached the point where he aspires to the yogic Realization, and yet his essential identification is with the sensuous being, namely, this animal organism that we have, this visible entityhood on this plane, then the methods imposed by the Tantra or by Zen Buddhism may be necessary. In fact, I believe that they are. But the case is quite different if one comes to the yogic problem after having broken already the identification with the sensuous entity and has clearly established his identification with the conceptual entity. Then the yoga indicated is a non-tantric yoga. In the first case, the methodology uses art, ceremony, ritual, visualization, body posturing, breath control, and so forth. In the second case, the methods suggested by Sri Shankaracharya are the appropriate ones, where the preparation is preeminently philosophical and employs self-analysis. And this can be fully effective without any of the tantric practices. In my opinion, non-tantric yoga is hierarchically the higher yoga, where in a broad sense, logic, or mathematics, replaces the office of ceremony, ritual, and so forth.

To avoid an error which may easily be made at this point, I shall point out that there is an important distinction between identification with either the sensualistic or the conceptualistic orders and the matter of skill in either direction. There are men who are highly skillful in the working with concepts who, nonetheless, are identified or primarily oriented to the sensualistic order, and it may even be conceivable that there are those who are highly skillful in the sensualistic arts who nonetheless have made their identification with the conceptualistic order. Illustration of this is afforded by different systems of philosophy. In general, the naturalistic philosophies and realistic philosophies, with the possible exception of neo-realism, are oriented to sensual existences. And also in the case of the more epistemological philosophies such as empiricism and pragmatism, the skill in the manipulation of concepts may be of a very high order, as in the case of David Hume, John Locke, and in the pragmatic school, men like Peirce, Dewey, and James—all of them highly skillful in the intellectual sense, yet their reality orientation, which we may regard as essentially identification, is with the sensualistic order. William James, for example, is very explicit on this point. He views the conceptual development as essentially instrumental to a value which is attained in the perceptual order. Another example would be afforded by the highly competent engineer who may be designing a major bridge or a very tall building. He may be able to work with the concepts that are involved with the highest order of efficiency, and he may be completely competent in the pertinent mathematics, nonetheless, he is not concerned with the concepts as ends in themselves. He is concerned with the production of a sensible object which will stand under the stresses and strains of sensible conditions; that means a bridge which is dependable and will perform its function effectively, and a building which will endure and may be used. What is illustrated by this is that the object or terminal value is in the sensible order not in the conceptual instrumentation by which that intelligible construct was attained. The question we would ask in this case is which carries the greater terminal value. If it is in the sensible order, we may say that indicates that for that individual his identification is with the sensible order. If, on the other hand, one took the position of viewing experience, which is always in the sensible sense, as instrumental to the attaining of a terminal value in the conceptual sense, his identification would be with the conceptual order. In that case, the experiential, or sensible factor, would serve merely as the occasion for the attainment of a value which was not sensible but was conceptual.

This distinction is important here. I have in mind the matter of self-identification rather than that of skill in the operation with concepts.

To complete the picture, we may list those who may be classified as finding the terminal or relatively terminal value in the conceptual order. We could recognize as an outstanding case of this sort the great Greek philosopher Plato, who found the greatest value in the universals and strongly depreciated the sensuous order. We may add, I think, to this list the rationalistic philosophers of the modern period—men such as Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Christian Wolff. And among the post-Kantians we could identify at once Hegel as being oriented most emphatically to the conceptual order.

There is a further correlation which can be made by a reference to certain conceptions advanced by Sri Aurobindo in *The Life Divine*. I would direct your attention most especially to the chapter beginning on page 58 and is chapter number 8 entitled “The Methods of Vedantic Knowledge.” Here there is a discussion which I shall take up in more detail in the next tape, but it bears upon the functions of sense and of reason. It differentiates between the direct action of the sense-mind and the mixed action of the sense-mind, and also between the direct action of the pure reason and the mixed action of the pure reason. What we have here suggests a correlation as follows, namely, that if one line of development is in terms of the aesthetic form of yoga, he is particularly likely to have a development of the direct action of the sense-mind, whereas, if his orientation is to the non-tantric or noetic yoga, he’s most likely to have a breakout of the direct action of the pure reason. Ideally, the fully developed yogin should have both powers, but there is reason to believe that it is difficult to achieve both in the same embodiment, particularly if the individual is not completely withdrawn from the world. The two types of powers are supplementary and both are valid and important, but as we are now drawing close to the end of our tape, I shall introduce only some limited portions of this subject matter.

I’ll quote something from this particular chapter:

In a sense all our experience is psychological since even what we receive by the senses has no meaning or value to us till it is translated into terms of the sense-mind, the Manas of Indian philosophical terminology. Manas, say our philosophers, is the sixth sense. But we may even say that it is the only sense and that the others, vision, hearing, touch, smell, taste are merely specializations of the sense-mind which, although it normally uses the sense-organs for the basis of its experience, yet exceeds them and is capable a direct experience proper to its own inherent action. As a result psychological experience, like the cognitions of the reason, is capable in man of a double action, mixed or dependent, pure or sovereign. Its mixed action takes place usually when the mind seeks to become aware of the external world, the object; the pure action when it seeks to become aware of itself, the subject. In the former activity, it is dependent on the senses and forms its perceptions in accordance with their evidence; in the latter it acts in itself and is aware of things directly by a sort of identity with them. We are thus aware of our emotions; we are aware of anger, as has been acutely said, because we become anger. We are thus aware also of our own existence; and here the nature of experience as knowledge by identity becomes apparent. In reality, all experience is in its secret nature

knowledge by identity; but its true character is hidden from us because we have separated ourselves from the rest of the world by exclusion, by the distinction of ourself as subject and everything else as object, and we are compelled to develop processes and organs by which we may again enter into communion with all that we have excluded. We have to replace direct knowledge through conscious identity by an indirect knowledge which appears to be caused by physical contact and mental sympathy. This limitation is a fundamental creation of the ego and an instance of the manner in which it has proceeded throughout, starting from an original falsehood and covering over the [truth] the true truth of things by contingent falsehoods which become for us practical truths of relation.⁵

It is further stated that in the direct action of the *manas*, or sense-mind, it is possible to develop all of those powers that are known as clairvoyant or telepathic. Through clairvoyance it is possible to sense, as it were, in the broad meaning of the term, events of the past or in some measure events of the future, to cognize at a distance from the spot in which the organism of the observer is located, or to cognize in sensuous terms events on other planes of being. It is also possible to communicate at a distance by only a mental effort, and this can be received by those who have the power developed to so receive and recognize that it has been received from an external source. There is also a discussion of the two actions of the pure reason, namely, the mixed action, which is dependent upon experience in the ordinary sense, the action of the pure reason as employed in empiric science, which is restricted in its field of operation. It draws conclusions by the methods which are identified in our inductive logic, first formulated by John Stuart Mill. In contrast, there is the direct action of the pure reason, which orients to metaphysical subject matter, and it is also active in that complementary other of metaphysical thought known as pure mathematics, where there is a great independence of the subject matter given through the senses.

But as we are now drawing to the end of the tape, I will postpone further discussion of this material until the next tape.

⁵ Aurobindo Ghose, *The Life Divine*, vol. 18 of the *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centennial Library* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, 1970), 62.