

On the Meaning of Voidness

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This tape will be a discussion of the subject of the Voidness.

As one peruses a certain class of Buddhistic *sutras*, he occasionally runs across the statement, this is not the Voidness of nothing at all. To introduce the subject, I'll note this fact. There is a class of Buddhistic *sutras* which are oriented to the words '*shunya*' or '*shunyata*', which are generally translated into English either as *empty* and *emptiness* or *void* and *voidness*. It is to be noted that not all Buddhistic *sutras* are oriented to *shunya* or *shunyata*, but approach the Ultimate in other terms. There is a class that is definitely called *ashunya*. But this class is to be found typically among the Mahayana Buddhistic *sutras*, and it does bring up before us a basic difficulty. The idea which is conveyed to us by the English words void and empty is a condition of complete absence of anything whatsoever, an absence not only of all substance, but of all value, but of all effects upon consciousness. Actually, the dictionary definition of both the word empty and emptiness and void and voidness gives the impression of a complete absence of everything, a state of absolute nothingness. So when we meet the statement in the *sutras* to the effect that this to which they are referring is not the voidness of nothing at all, we are faced with a difficulty. There is at once the implication that there are two kinds of voidness, a voidness which is nothing at all and a voidness which is not nothing at all.

As this distinction is hardly allowed by our English dictionaries, there is the implication that the words *shunya* and *shunyata* are not exactly reproduced in their meaning by these two words in our language. In other words, that these Buddhistic conceptions are of a different sort from our equivalents, for we could hardly say that there is a voidness which is not nothing at all and use the word correctly in the light of our definitions. There is the problem, therefore, of trying to derive what the Buddhistic writer has in mind when he speaks of the *shunya* and the *shunyata*. One thought is this, that it is a simple denial of the existence of substance. This leads us into certain lines of thought that have been developed in the stream of Western philosophy and may help to produce a clarification.

In the stream of Western thought, there are philosophic systems that make a distinction between appearance and substance behind the appearance, or between appearance and reality as in the case of Bradley, or between the phenomenon and the noumenon. On the other hand, there are lines of thought that do not make this distinction, but deal only with the apparent. Thus, there is the philosophic point of view of Auguste Comte which is called Positivism. There is also those lines that are purely phenomenistic or nominalistic. In the case of the Positivism of Auguste Comte, the development was out of determinations by empiric science. Science does not deal with a substance behind appearance, or with a noumenon behind the phenomenon, but deals simply with the phenomenal play that is evident to us through the senses. Auguste Comte generalized upon this basis and developed a philosophy that dealt only with this play of

appearance. If this is taken in a rigid sense and generalized the implication would follow that there is no substance, reality, or noumenon behind the appearance.

Now, if we turn to the contribution of Northrop in his *Meeting of East and West*, his analysis led to the conclusion that Eastern man, particularly the far Eastern man, was primarily positivistic, phenomenistic, and nominalistic. In other words, that his orientation was to the aesthetic component in things without the assumption that there was a noumenon behind that appearance. He oriented to, first of all, the “determinate aesthetic continuum,” the play of images before us which were determinate objects, and that his goal in yogic Realization was to achieve the “indeterminate aesthetic continuum,” a state that was not concerned with theoretical development or with the conceptual side of things at all. Now, if the orientation is to a surface play alone with the assumption that there is no substance behind that surface play of sensible appearance, we could think then of this play as being empty, that it was only a surface action without any depth whatsoever, without substance, underlying reality, or soul. Now, this is a possible interpretation of the meaning of the *shunyata* type of Buddhist philosophies. There is a certain justification for it in the case of a certain statement that are related to the Blessed One himself—that when he analyzed fire, he said fire consists of heat and light, and there is no substance behind the fire which we could call an entity of which the manifested qualities were heat and light; on the contrary, that heat and light is all that there is in connection with fire. Thus we would say that since there is no substance behind the appearance, therefore, the fire is empty. This is a possible explanation.

Now, here’s another one more related to my own thought. It is fundamental to my own philosophy that Root Consciousness is the ultimate nature of all things, and that there is no non-conscious existent called the world or the cosmos which enters into relationship with consciousness but is essentially independent of all consciousness. Therefore, if we affirm that all that is consists simply of the stuff of consciousness, we might very well say that it is empty. But there is here not a complete absence of everything. In either case, whether we conceive of the ultimate as being of the nature of consciousness, or of the nature of the indeterminate aesthetic continuum, there is the play of appearance. There is the impact of the objects before us, their emotional value, and their meaningful value. We could not say that they are completely void because they are a fact of our experience. They are not nothing at all. They do affect us, therefore there is a somewhat involved; though it may be a somewhat that has no substance behind it or has no non-conscious existence behind it. This might be the explanation and might clarify the problem for us.

There is a *sutra*, said to be Buddhist, which employs the conception of voidness in a way that is more helpful for illuminating our understanding. This *sutra* is *The Voice of the Silence*. In this small volume, one will find the phrase, “study the fullness of the seeming void and the voidness of the seeming full.”¹ This statement reminds one immediately of the formulation which came from a personal Realization. That was formulated in the form: substantiality is inversely proportional to ponderability. The meaning here is that that which is ponderable before our

¹ H. P. Blavatsky (Los Angeles: *The Voice of the Silence*, The Theosophy Company, 1928, 61: “. . . study the voidness of the seeming full, the fullness of the seeming void.”

consciousness as all the objects in the world and the cosmos is relatively empty, whereas, that background, as it were, of seeming emptiness, like our empty space, is full or at least relatively full. The idea here is that the objects before our consciousness which we call the world are really essentially, in greater or less degree, an absence of fullness. Empty space is a plenum, not a void. It's empty to our ordinary consciousness, but a plenum to the realized Consciousness. Just as in the case of dreamless sleep, as Shankara has noted, we then experience Brahman with fullness because there is no object, like a dream, which draws our attention. We become aware in the empiric sense by a relative absence of fullness, not by the presence of a real fullness.

We might illustrate this by assuming a field, let us say in two-dimensions, as a space delimited by a certain zone which is luminous. Then take and form upon this two-dimensional space a series of configurations made of material that is more or less opaque. If the material is highly opaque, then we have an experience as of darkness, and when it is less opaque, of diminished light; but, surrounding these objects there would be the clear luminousness of our two-dimensional field. The two-dimensional field of light symbolizes consciousness. It's full of value. It is a plenum. The opaque objects, or objects that are more or less opaque, would represent a diminution of that field of consciousness. These represent all the objects before us that form our empiric world. Our empiric world, thus, consists of relative emptinesses. That which seems a void to us when moving in the empiric world is a plenum, or fullness. Realization is a process of reversing the valuation. The experience of Brahman is an experience of the field which is full and is not concerned with objects. This reverses our normal valuation, which consists of giving value to the apparent objects before consciousness, whereas, the real value lies in the luminous domain not obscured by the presence of objects. Perhaps this will suggest the idea to our consciousness.