FAITH MEETS FAITH

An Orbis Series in Interreligious Dialogue

Paul F. Knitter, General Editor

In our contemporary world, the many religions and spiritualities stand in need of greater intercommunication and cooperation. More than ever before, they must speak to, learn from, and work with each other, in order to maintain their own identity and vitality and so to contribute to fashioning a better world.

FAITH MEETS FAITH seeks to promote interreligious dialogue by providing an open forum for the exchanges between and among followers of different religious paths. While the series wants to encourage creative and bold responses to the new questions of pluralism confronting religious persons today, it also recognizes the present plurality of perspectives concerning the methods and content of interreligious dialogue.

This series, therefore, does not want to endorse any one school of thought. By making available to both the scholarly community and the general public works that represent a variety of religious and methodological viewpoints, FAITH MEETS FAITH hopes to foster and focus the emerging encounter among the religions of the world.

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not from the outside of God, but from within God? Again, is it not that God faces me within God even if I turn my back on God? the God who faces me and whom I address is God as subject. However, the God within whom I address God and within whom God meets me is not God as subject but rather God as predicate. Or, more strictly speaking, that God is neither God as subject nor God as predicate but God as Nichts. In God as Nichts, God as subject meets me even if I turn my back on God and I can truly address the God as Thou. An I-Thou relationship between the self and God takes place precisely in God as Nichts. Since God as Nichts is the Ungrund ground of the I-Thou relationship between the self and God, God as Nichts is neither subject nor predicate but a “copula” that acts as a connecting or intermediating link between the subject and the predicate. This entails that God as Nichts is Nichts as God: God is Nichts and Nichts is God. And on this basis we may say that God is love and love is God because Nichts is the unconditional, self-negating love. This is the absolute interior of God’s mystery which is its absolute exterior at one and the same time. We may thus say,

God is love because God is Nichts:
Nichts is God because Nichts is love.

Here, both human longing for salvation and the deepest mystery of God are thoroughly fulfilled. Here again, the event of the cross in God’s being is understood in both trinitarian and personal terms most profoundly.

God as subject who meets one and whom one can address as Thou is incompatible with the autonomous reason peculiar to modern humanity, and is also nowadays challenged by Nietzschean nihilism and atheistic existentialism. The notion of God as Nichts, however, is not only compatible with but also can embrace autonomous reason because there is no conflict between the notion of God as Nichts (which is neither subject nor predicate) and autonomous reason, and because the autonomy of rational thinking, however much it may be emphasized, is not limited by the notion of God as Nichts. In the konic God who is Nichts, not only are modern human autonomous reason and rationalistic subjectivity overcome without being marred, but also the mystery of God is most profoundly perceived. God as love is fully and most radically grasped far beyond contemporary atheism and nihilism.

All this is implied when I stated earlier that God is not God; precisely because of this, God is truly God. And, as I also emphasized before, this statement of God cannot be properly understood without our own parallel existential realization that “Self is not self, and precisely because it is not, Self is truly Self.”

**DYNAMIC SUNYATA**

Sunyata as the Buddhist Ultimate

Now I turn to Buddhism and discuss how Buddhism can overcome scientism and Nietzsche’s nihilism, and can also open up a basis for dialogue with Christianity.

The ultimate reality for Buddhism is neither Being nor God, but Sunyata. Sunyata literally means “emptiness” or “voidness” and can imply “absolute nothingness.” This is because Sunyata is entirely unobjectifiable, unconceptualizable, and unattainable by reason or will. As such it cannot be any “something” at all. Accordingly, if Sunyata is conceived as somewhere outside of or beyond one’s self-existence, it is not true Sunyata, for Sunyata thus conceived outside of or beyond one’s existence turns into something which one represents and calls “Sunyata.” True Sunyata is not even that which is represented and conceived as “Sunyata.” In Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhyamaka-karika, Sunyata, which is dimly perceived, is likened to “a snake wrongly grasped or [magical] knowledge incorrectly applied.” Throughout its long history, Mahayana Buddhism has strongly rejected such a view of Sunyata—that is, Sunyata represented and thereby attacked as “Sunyata,” as “Sunyata perversely clung to,” as a “literal understanding of negativity,” or as a “view of annihilation nothing-ness.” Instead, Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes that “Sunyata is non-Sunyata (asunyata): therefore it is ultimate Sunyata (ayatana-Sunyata).” Sunyata not only is not Being or God, but also not emptiness as distinguished from formlessness or fullness. Just as the attachment to being must be overcome, the attachment to emptiness must also be surmounted. Accordingly, however important the notion of Sunyata may be in Buddhism, following Martin Heidegger, who put a cross mark “X” on the term Sein, thus rendering it as Sei, in order to show the unobjectifiability of Sein, we should also put a cross mark “X” on Sunyata, and render it Sunyata.

What has been said above indicates that Sunyata is not self-affirmative, but thoroughly self-negative. In other words, emptiness not only empties everything else but also empties itself. Sunyata should not be conceived of somewhere outside one’s self-existence, nor somewhere inside one’s self-existence. True Sunyata is neither outside nor inside, neither external nor internal, neither transcendent nor immanent. Sunyata completely empties everything, including itself. That is to say, the pure activity of absolute emptying is true Sunyata. Hence, the well known passage in the Prajnaparamita-hridaya-sutra—the Heart Sutra:

Form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form; form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness; whatever is emptiness, that is form.”
As the Heart Sutra clearly indicates, the realization that “form is emptiness,” however important and necessary it may be, is not sufficient; it must be immediately accompanied with the realization that “the very emptiness is form.” And these two realizations are one, not two.

“Form” should not be grasped and attached to as something substantial but should be emptied as nonsubstantial or formless. We should not become attached to such discriminations as “mountains are mountains; water is water,” but should awaken to the nonsubstantiality or emptiness of such discriminations by realizing that “mountains are not mountains; water is not water.” At the same time, however, “emptiness” should not be grasped and attached to merely as something nonsubstantial or formless—formless emptiness must itself be emptied and grasped in terms of form. Thus, we must realize discrimination through non-discrimination—that is, “mountains are really mountains precisely because mountains are not mountains; water is really water precisely because water is not water.”

Accordingly, although the Heart Sutra states, “whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form,” this does not indicate a static or immediate identity of form and emptiness. Nor does it signify an identity of form and emptiness, which are set forth and represented before one’s eyes. It is a dynamic identity that is to be grasped only in an unobjectifiable and pre-representational manner—through the pure activity of emptying. In the realization of true Sunyata, form is ceaselessly emptied, turning into formless emptiness, and formless emptiness is ceaselessly emptied and forever freely taking form. This total dynamic movement of emptying, not a static state of emptiness, is the true meaning of Sunyata. If we conceive of this total dynamic movement of emptying as somewhere outside us or some time beyond our present self-existence, however, we fail to realize Sunyata. Sunyata is not outside us, nor are we outside Sunyata.

In one sense, we are right here, right now, in Sunyata. We are always involved in the ceaseless emptying movement of Sunyata, for there is nothing outside it. And yet, in another sense, we are always totally embracing this ceaseless movement of Sunyata within ourselves. We are Sunyata at each and every moment of our lives. For true Sunyata is not Sunyata thought by us, but Sunyata lived by us. In this living realization of true Sunyata, self and Sunyata are dynamically identical. That is to say, true Sunyata is nothing but the true self and the true self is nothing but true Sunyata. Apart from the absolute present—right here, right now—this dynamical identity of self and Sunyata cannot be fully realized. Again, apart from the nonobjectifiable and pre-representational standpoint, the absolute present, and the dynamical identity of self and Sunyata cannot be properly grasped. And this dynamical identity of self and Sunyata is equally true of everyone and everything throughout the universe. Consequently, although the term Sunyata or emptiness may sound negative, it has positive, soteriological meanings.

The Positive Meanings of Sunyata

The positive, soteriological meanings of Sunyata may be summarized in five points.

First, in Sunyata, regardless of the distinction between self and other, humans and nature, humans and the divine, everything without exception is realized as it is in its suchness (in Sanskrit, tāvākta, which may also be rendered as “is-ness”). The realization of the suchness of everything is an important characteristic of the dimension of Sunyata. This does not, however, indicate that in Sunyata the distinctiveness of everything is eliminated. On the contrary, in the locus of Sunyata the distinctiveness of everything is clearly and thoroughly realized without being reduced to any monistic principle such as Brahman, Substance, or God, and yet everything is equally realized in its as-it-is-ness or suchness.

In the realization of Sunyata in the light of suchness, both distinction and equality, distinctiveness and sameness, are fully realized. For example, in the locus of Sunyata you are thoroughly you as you are and I am thoroughly I as I am—with our distinctive individuality and without ending in a single ultimate principle—and yet you and I are equally sharing the same-ness in that both you and I are equally realized in terms of being-as-we-are. This is true not only of you and me, but also of the self and any other, the self and nature, and self and the divine. The self is the self, nature is nature, and God is God, all with their distinctiveness, and yet they all are equal in terms of “each is as each is” or “as it is.” Accordingly, in the realization of suchness, there is no difference between human beings and nonhuman beings (nature and supernatural entities).

This emphasis on there being no difference between human and nonhuman beings in the realization of “suchness” should not, as is often the case, be misunderstood as signifying a disregard of the particularity of human (and divine) personality.

Like Christianity, Buddhism is primarily concerned with human salvation—that is, the deliverance of human beings from suffering. Unlike Christianity, however, Buddhism does not take the personalistic divine-human relationship (I-thou relationship) as the basis of salvation, thereby regarding impersonal nature as something peripheral, but instead takes as the basis of salvation the transpersonal, universal dimension common to human beings and nature. This is why in Buddhism the clear realization of impermanency or transience common to everything, including humans and nature, is the turning point from saṃsāra to nirvāṇa. In this transpersonal, universal dimension, everything, human and nonhuman, is equally and individually realized in its as-it-is-ness.

Furthermore, unlike Christianity, which talks about God as the ruler and the savior, Buddhism does not accept the notions of a transcendent ruler of the universe or of a savior outside one’s self. A Buddha is not a supernaturally existing being, but is none other than a person who awakens to
the dharma, the truth, the suchness or as-it-is-ness of everything in the realization of Sunyata. This means that it is by a person—by an awakened one—that the suchness of everything is realized. But suchness thus realized by a person encompasses everything in the universe, including human beings, nature, and the divine—the secular and the sacred.

For the elucidation of the issue, we should make a distinction between salvation as such and the basis of salvation, that is, between the problem of what salvation is conceived to be in a particular religion and the problem of what basis that salvation is understood to take place. The realization of the “suchness” of everything as the basis of salvation entails the awakening of one’s original nature together with the awakening of the original nature of everything else, and the emancipation from attachment to the self and others.

Second, Sunyata indicates boundless openness without any particular fixed center. Sunyata is free not only from egocentrism but also from anthropocentrism, cosmocentrism, and theocentrism. It is not oriented by any kind of centrism. Only in this way is “emptiness” possible. Accordingly, in Sunyata there is no fixed dominant-subordinate relationship among things in the universe. Humankind is not simply subordinate to Buddha, nor is nature simply subordinate to humankind. In this boundless openness everything without exception is dominant as subject over everything else, and at the same time is subordinate to everything else. Such a dynamic, mutual dominant-subordinate relationship is possible only in the locus of Sunyata, which is completely free from any centrism and is boundlessly open. This is a complete emancipation and freedom from any kind of bondage resulting from discrimination based on any kind of centrism.

We find an idea strikingly similar to this mutual dominant-subordinate relationship in Christianity where Martin Luther emphasizes the following two propositions in his treatise, The Freedom of a Christian:

1. A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
2. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

The essential difference between Luther and Buddhism in this connection, however, lies in the following two points: (1) In Luther the mutual dominant-subordinate (lord of all and servant of all) relationship is realized only between human beings but not between human beings and nature. By contrast, in Buddhism the mutual dominant-subordinate relationship is realized not only among each and every human being, but also among each and every thing in the universe including human beings and nature. There is no anthropocentrism as occurs in Christianity. (2) In Luther, the mutual dominant-subordinate relationship is based on union with Christ, sharing with each other the things of God. Faith in Christ, the word of God alone, justifies, frees, and saves people. Without this christocentric and theocentric basis, the mutual dominant-subordinate relationship is not possible for Luther. On the other hand, the Buddhist idea of the mutual dominant-subordinate relationship occurs because there is no centrism whatsoever in the boundless openness of Sunyata.

While the freedom of the Christian is realized through faith in the gospel of Christ, the freedom of the Buddhist is found in the awakening to the nonsubstantiality and the interdependence of everything in the universe. If, in Christianity, as I suggested earlier, not only the kenosis of Christ, but also the kenosis of God is fully realized, and God completely empties Godself, the dynamic relationship of mutual domination-subordination or mutual innomence and mutual transcending between human beings and God, and human beings and nature, can be fully realized. This is possible only by overcoming the theocentrism innate in Christianity.

Third, Sunyata translated by jīnen in Japanese, or svayambhu in Sanskrit, which means “self-so,” “so of itself,” “things as they are,” or “spontaneity.” It also means “natural-ness,” not as a counter concept to human agency, but as the primordial or fundamental naturalness underlying both human beings and nature. It is the least basic original “nature” of things prior to the separation between human beings and nature, between the divine and the human. Accordingly, jīnen is beyond any kind of will, including human will, God’s will, and the will to power in Nietzsche’s sense. jīnen is, however, not a motionless, static, fixed state, but rather a pure activity of the most dynamic spontaneity, because it signifies unconstrained spontaneity realized in Sunyata without any will, whether it be will of self or other, human or divine. God’s complete self-emptying (the kenosis of God) as the absolute self-negation of the will of God must be based on this spontaneity in terms of jīnen. Indeed, jīnen is the dynamic open abode in which everything returns for its final rest, and from which everything and its activity come forth spontaneously.

Fourth, in Sunyata, not only the interdependence and interpenetration but also the mutual reversibility of things is fully realized. This is a natural consequence of the previously mentioned mutual dominant-subordinate relationships among things. Even the unity of opposites is fully realized in Sunyata because Sunyata is the locus of the boundless openness without any center and circumferential limitation. Accordingly, not only can this and that, here and there, up and down, right and left, East and West (in terms of spatiality) be realized to be interpenetrating and reciprocal, but also beginning and end, before and after, past and future (in terms of temporality) can be grasped as interpenetrating and reciprocal. Accordingly, time and history are not simply understood to be linear and unidirectionally moving toward a particular end, but are understood to be reciprocal and even reversible. (See the section below, “Time and History in Buddhism.”) In this way, each and every moment of time and history can be realized as the beginning and the end at once. Furthermore, in the
locus of Sunyata, good and evil, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, and all value judgments, without being fixed in their orders, but without losing their differences, can be realized to be interpenetrating and reciprocal. Hence, there is no supreme good or eternal punishment. Nirvana is realized amid samsara, and samsara, when its nonsubstantiality is realized, immediately transforms into nirvana.

Fifth, and most importantly, Sunyata contains the two characteristics of wisdom (prajna) and compassion (karuna). Positively speaking, Sunyata is wisdom in the light of which the suchness of everything is clearly realized in terms of its distinctiveness and sameness. And, in the light of wisdom, the aforementioned jinen is also clearly realized. Accordingly, in the locus of Sunyata, by virtue of wisdom, all things including the natural, the human and the divine, regardless of their differences, are each equally affirmed in their suchness and jinen. This is, however, not an uncritical affirmation of the given situation. On the contrary, it is a great and absolute affirmation beyond—and thus not excluding—any critical, objective, and analytical distinction. This is because the absolute affirmation realized in Sunyata is established through the negation of negation; this is the negation of non-distinction, which is in turn the negation of distinction in the ordinary sense.

This wisdom aspect of Sunyata is inseparably and dynamically connected with the compassion aspect of Sunyata. Sunyata is compassion in the light of which the dominant-subordinate relationship among things in the ordinary and relative sense is freely turned over, and moral and ethical judgments in terms of good and evil, right and wrong on the human, historical dimension, are transcended in the ultimate dimension. Through compassion realized in Sunyata even an atrocious villain is ultimately saved, even evil passions are transformed into enlightenment. In contrast to the ordinary statement—"Even an evil person is born in the Pure Land, that is, can be saved, how much more so a good person"—Shinran, the founder of Pure Land True Buddhism, declares: "Even a good person is born in the Pure Land, how much more so an evil person."93

Zen, too, emphasizes the same reversal of moral order in the deeper religious dimension by saying that: "The immaculate practitioner takes three kalpas (eonos) to enter nirvana, whereas the apostate bhikku (monk) does not fall into hell." Such transmoral compassionate activities and universal salvation are possible because they come spontaneously out of the unfathomable depth of Sunyata and because they are based on the great affirmation of all things realized through wisdom.

In the above five points, I described the positive meanings of the Buddhist notion of Sunyata. In our times, however, because of these characteristics of the Buddhist principle of Sunyata, the Buddhist cannot escape at least the following three criticisms often raised by Western and Christian friends.

First, if the realization of the suchness and jinen of everything, a realization which is beyond the critical, objective, and analytical distinctions, is essential to Sunyata, how can human reason and intellect, so important in the modern world, work in the context of Sunyata? Are they merely to be disregarded? What is the relationship between Buddhism and science, Sunyata and rational thinking?

Second, if value judgments, including the distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, are completely reciprocal or reversible, how can human ethics be established? In particular, how is the problem of evil to be understood in the realization of suchness and jinen?

Third, if past and future are completely interpenetrating and reciprocal, how can history be understood to take place? How can we talk about the novelty of things in history and the direction and end or outcome of human history? In addition to this criticism, Christian friends often make the following point:

Christianity also, to some extent, talks about the interpenetration of past and future, for example, in terms of the eternal creation and the realized eschatology, and talks about the reversibility of value judgment, for example, as we see in Jesus' words "I come not to call the righteous, but the sinner." In Christianity, however, Jesus Christ as the Messiah and God as the ruler of history provide a criterion of ethical judgment and the aim of history along with the sense of novelty. How does the Buddhist principle provide a criterion of ethical judgment and the aim and direction of human history?

My response to these criticisms requires both some further basic considerations about Sunyata and some critical reflections. First, there are two basic considerations about Sunyata that need to be elaborated. (1) Sunyata should not be understood as a goal or end to be attained in Buddhist life, but as the ground or the point of departure from which Buddhist life and activity can properly begin. Sunyata as the goal or end of the Buddhist life is Sunyata conceived outside one's self-existence, which, as I mentioned earlier, is not true Sunyata. True Sunyata is only realized in and through the self here and now and is always the ground or the point of departure for Buddhist life.

(2) Sunyata is fundamentally non-Sunyata—that is, Sunyata with an "X" through it, (Sunynetsu). That is the true and ultimate Sunyata. This means that true Sunyata empties not only everything else, but also empties itself. Through its self-emptying it makes everything exist as it is and work as it does. In other words, through its self-emptying the realization of Sunyata reestablishes a dualistic view and value judgment clearly, without being limited by them. Sunyata should not be understood in its noun form but in its verbal form, for it is a dynamic and creative function of emptying everything and making alive everything.