



# REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631(UIF)

VOLUME - 13 | ISSUE - 2 | NOVEMBER - 2023



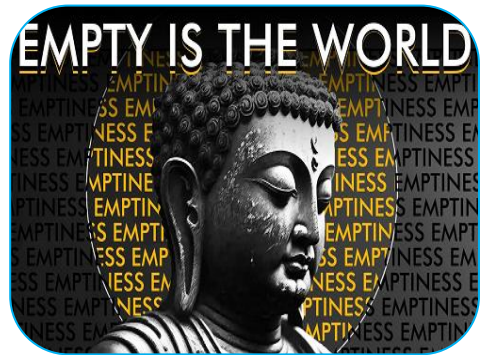
## EMPTINESS IN BUDDHISM AND THE LIFE

**Luong The Loc (Venerable Phuoc Hanh)**

**Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Mahayana Buddhist Studies,  
Archarya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, A.P., India.**

### ABSTRACT :

*Emptiness in Buddhism is basically a philosophy, but sometimes not a philosophy as you ever expected. It is not a metaphysical speculation at all. It is not a negation of existence. So what is it? Is it a religion? No, It is not a religion. What religion does it belong to? It does not belong to any religion. Who does it belong to? It does not belong to anyone. It belongs to you to investigate an exciting new matter. Where does it belong? It belongs to this right miracle life. What does it describe? It is a description of reality of life. Please do not use a sword of perception to cut reality in two. Let Emptiness lead your way! Do you believe it? I believe that you will not be disappointed in this article. Please go ahead to read it now!*



**KEYWORDS :** *Emptiness, Buddhism, philosophy, metaphysical speculation, religion, negation of existence, reality of life.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism has a profound doctrine of “Emptiness” that was preached by the Buddha Sakya Muni over twenty five hundred years ago. The doctrine of Emptiness has been written in Tripitaka dispersedly. There are two pivotal traditions in Buddhism: Therāvāda and Mahāyāna which both have emphasized the its importance for people who were, are, will be vowing to practice in daily life to liberation. Theravāda Buddhism has two core Sūtras that are concentrated to Emptiness: The Greater Discourse on Voidness and The Shorter Discourse on Voidness<sup>1</sup>. Mahāyāna Buddhism also has key doctrines (sūtras) that are concentrated to Emptiness: Maha Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, Diamond Sūtra; and some sutras in Samyukta Agamas ect. In the second century (150 – 250 CE), there is an Indian famous Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna who is an author of the valued treatises (śāstra) on applied Emptiness that are the Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way – Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, the Mahā – Prajñāpāramitā – Śāstra and so on. A system of Emptiness doctrines is very colossal. Are you nervous on it? Please do not be nervous on it! Emptiness is a versatile key that can help us open a happy door, in particular, to achieve great success in life. How? Please try your best to apply Emptiness in your life! Please do not postpone!

<sup>1</sup> Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya, Page 965 and 971, Wisdom Publication, USA, 2015.

## II. CONTENT

### 1. Definition

Empty is translated from a word of Sanskrit “Śūnya” and a word of Pāli “Suñña” as an adjectives. Emptiness is translated from a word of Sanskrit “Śūnyatā”, a word of Pāli “Suññata” as a noun. Suñña and Suññata are used frequently in the Suttas of the Pāli Canon, the Southern Schools of Theravāda Buddhism. Śūnya and Śūnyatā are used frequently in Sutras of the Agama Canon, the Northern Schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Emptiness means “Ultimate nature of reality”. In Buddhism, Emptiness is radically considered as a basic concept of ontological voidness – Śūnyatā.

### 2. Types of Emptiness

There are main three types of Emptiness as follows:

2.1. Emptiness of Self: All sentient beings are interconnected and dependent on causes and conditions. They do not have an independent self or a separate self.

2.2. Emptiness of All Phenomena: Not just sentient beings, but all phenomena lack a “self” or independent existence.

2.3. Supreme Emptiness: Essentially – “Nirvana” – which is beyond duality of existence and non – existence which does not abide in either.

The term “Emptiness” has a deep connotation in Buddhism.

### 3. The Meaning of Emptiness

Emptiness is a central connotation in order to develop a practitioner’s insight in Buddhism. When we state Empty, Empty of what? Empty of a permanent self, an unchanging self, an independent self (non-self/ no-self). The Buddha taught that all phenomena, such as humans, are conditioned and impermanent. Based on the truth of “Dependent Origination”, all phenomena are established. It’s important to note that the understanding of Emptiness is a nuanced and complex topic within Buddhism, and interpretation may vary among different Buddhist traditions. Emptiness is often approached through meditative practices, contemplation, and the study of Buddhist texts to deepen one’s understanding of this profound concept. Emptiness is a skillful means which help practitioners disentangle themselves from defilement (klesa) and unsatisfactoriness (dukkha). The realization of Emptiness (Śūnyatā) leads practitioner to non – attachment and clinging. The Buddha gives us two methods to reach a good result of Emptiness in this life – not tomorrow. The first method is to try to understand his teaching on its true nature. The second method is the realization through practice constantly.

### 4. The Significance of Emptiness

When I had become a Buddhist novice at the temple, I have been advised to memorize the Heart Sutra to chant and recite daily in the Sangha community. Initially, I tried to study every single sentence and continue to recite the Heart Sutra everyday. One day, I have memorized it automatically. I have already memorized it but I still do not understand a profound content of the Heart Sutra. I do not understand the whole its meaning because I do not recognize how significant it is.

As we know, the Prājñāparamitā Heart Sutra was created around 100 BCE – 150 CE. It is believed that the Astasahasrika Prājñāparamitā (Eight Thousand-Verse Prājñāparamitā) is the best – known work from this period. The first work was translated into Chinese in 179 CE. In Prājñāparamitā Heart Sutra, there is a very interesting passage that makes me to think about it: “The Bodhisattva Avalokita, while moving in the deep course of Perfect Understanding, shed light on the five skandhas and found them equally empty.”<sup>2</sup> So we see that the significance of Emptiness (Śūnyatā) is at the perspective of inter to be, inter-dependent relationships. This is a profound teaching of Buddhist Emptiness.

<sup>2</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, The Heart of Understanding, Page 7, Parallax Press, Berkeley, California, 1988.

## 5. Emptiness as the Greatest Wisdom

The concept of Emptiness (Śūnyatā) is often considered one of the highest or deepest forms of wisdom. It is a key teaching in the Mahāyāna tradition, particularly in the Prajñāparamitā (Perfection of wisdom) sūtras. Emptiness is not a nihilistic or negative concept; rather, it is an understanding that all phenomena lack inherent, independent existence. This wisdom involves recognizing the interconnected and interdependent nature of all things. Here are a few reasons why Emptiness is often regarded as the greatest wisdom in Buddhism.

5.1. Understanding Interdependence: Emptiness emphasizes the interdependence of all phenomena. Because nothing can exist in isolation, and everything is connected to each other and influenced by everything else. This understanding can lead to a more compassionate and empathetic way of relating to the world.

5.2. Overcoming Attachments: Recognizing the Emptiness of phenomena helps to break attachments to fixed or rigid views of reality. When one understands that things lack inherent existence, it becomes easier to let go of attachments and the suffering that can arise from clinging to impermanent and ever – changing phenomena.

5.3. Transcending Dualities: Emptiness transcends dualistic thinking, such as the dichotomy between self and other, good and bad, or existence and non – existence. This non – dual perspective is seen as a higher wisdom that goes beyond conventional conceptualizations.

5.4. Freedom from Suffering: The realization of Emptiness is considered a path to liberation from suffering (dukkha). Understanding that the nature of reality is dynamic and interconnected allows individuals to navigate life's challenges with greater wisdom and equanimity.

5.5. Ultimate Reality: Emptiness is often described as the ultimate nature of reality. While conventional realities exist and function, they are ultimately empty of inherent essence. This realization is considered a profound insight into the nature of existence.

## 6. Application of Emptiness in the Life

### 6.1. Emptiness in Anger

Have you ever investigated your anger yet? Nobody spends time to study an anger. Nobody also likes one's own anger. We know that anger is bad, malice is evil, anger makes me to get angry etc. However, why do people usually get suffering because of their anger? This is a big problem in our life. So anger is very important for our daily life. If anger is not important for us, why do we get defilement because of it? In this article, we must study the anger under the light of Emptiness particularly.

First of all, we can ask a question that "Is anger real or not?" If our anger is real solid, we never improve your cultivating and get rid of our suffering. So our anger is not real, it is impermanent. Our anger is only temporary emotion – not forever. Nothing stays permanent. Your anger passes quickly if you can not identify your anger with you. The anger comes from outside – not inside. If inside, you always get mad with everyone. You look beautiful now, right? That means anger is not within you. Therefore, anger is not you and you are not that anger.

According to the definition of Emptiness, Emptiness means empty of something. Do you remember an above passage of the Heart Sutra? When Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara says the Five Skandhas are equally empty. What are the Five Skandhas? The Five Skandhas - Five Aggregates - Five Heaps, are the five components that constitutes a human being. These five components are flowing like a creek (river) in every one of us. We can name the five rivers: the creek of form (our body), the creek of feeling, the creek of perception, the creek of mental formations and the creek of consciousness. In fact, when Avalokita contemplates deeply into the nature of the aggregates, he suddenly recognizes all these aggregates which are empty. Why? Because these five aggregates are empty of a separate self. This aggregate exists by the other four aggregates. We understand this five aggregates' formula in order to help us overcome all pain in life.

If we can not afford to overcome all pain in this life, we easily get mad with the other people. Living in our family does not feel happy, we hate our family. Working in company does not feel happy, we hate the company. Dwelling in the temple does not get happy, we get mad with the temple. Living in

the society does not feel happy, we hate the society also. Where will we be going to? Nowhere to go? If we cultivate the Buddhist Emptiness correctly, we will see that the anger is not real, impermanent, temporary and the anger can not afford to make us suffering in daily life.

## 6.2. Emptiness in the Family

In your opinion, what is a happy family? How is a happy family? This thing is very important for us. I do not care what your religion is. Real happiness could not be labeled in the name of any name. In the light of the Buddha's insight, Emptiness signifies empty of a separate ego, right? Yes, that is true. You are a member of your family. Your partner is a member of your family. If you take away one from your family, your family is not called a family any more. The family comprises various individual together. In a happy family, both of husband and wife who wish to be happy, first thing, to have to understand each other in order to be one each other, to be in the skin and the bone of their partner, for what? In order to feel the same feeling, to suffer the suffering, to enjoy the same joy; otherwise, you can not really understand the other – your partner.

## 6.3. Emptiness in the Brotherhood

The Buddha teaches in the Saddharma Pundarika Sutra (The Wonderful Dharma Lotus Flower Sūtra) that this is the burning house of the three realms in which you should not take pleasure in dwelling. You do not desire to lust vulgar forms, evil sounds, bad smell, tastes and tangible objects. If you cling to them greedily, you will be burnt.<sup>3</sup> The world is firing, human's mind is being fired up by desire (lobha), hatred (dhsa), delusion (moha). Who is creating the war in Gaza? Why do not people have the life in Gaza? They do not have food and drinking water in Gaza. Every day, there are thousands of people, tens of thousand people leaving their home with embattled north of Gaza for the relatively more secure south of Gaza has increased constant airstrikes and destroying living conditions, without power and drinking water and without food supplies. They are facing the daily evacuation corridors. There is now no life in Gaza. It is horrible cruelty. Who can help them there?

In Buddhism, we have an important great figure. Many Buddhists, in the East, Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam and so forth always pray to him and invoke his name because of their suffering that is Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. Bodhi is enlightenment, sentient being wake up; Sattva is a sentient being; Bodhisattva signifies an enlightened being in this world. A person who is awakened called Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. Avalokitesvara, shorter name: Avalokita, is translated in Vietnamese language as "Quan Am", which signifies "the one who is willing to listen and hear the cries of the world in order to vow to come and help."<sup>4</sup>

It is time for us to invoke Avalokita to save us from suffering and save Gaza's people from the death. Avalokita who gives us a gift of non fear has transcended fear himself. Sometimes we can see Avalokita in a man or sometime a woman. If countries' leaders love their own civilian, listen the cries of their people, did not have the deadly massacre as seen today. According to CNN news, between Oct 07 and Nov 08, 2023, the dead toll is more than 11,915 and around 26,457 wounded people of the assault in Gaza.<sup>5</sup> Gaza strip's population has around 2.3 million people and there are 1.5 million population people have left their home.

According to spirit of Emptiness, nothing can exist independently, nothing can exist by itself alone. Emptiness means empty of an independent ego. Each of one has to be made by the others. If we kill all of them, how can we live in the world? We can not exist by ourself alone without them. Who are they? They are necessary factors to support us to exist. So if we destroy all of them, that means we destroy ourself too. The world is being overwhelmed hardship by those who are living in desire (lobha), malice (dhsa), ignorance (moha). For conscience's sake, we are responsible people who can save a humanitarian crisis occurring in the world, specially in Gaza strip. Can we do it? Yes, we can.

<sup>3</sup> Buddhistdoor.com

<sup>4</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, The Heart of Understanding, Page 7, Parallax Press, Berkeley, California, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/07/middleeast/palestinian-israeli-deaths-gaza>

First of all, we should cultivate the “Noble EightFold Path” which are Right Mindfulness, Right Effort, Right Livelihood, Right Action, Right Speech, Right Thought, Right View, Right Concentration. You can go back to read the article “Buddhism and Non – Violence” by Ph.D. research scholar Luong The Loc (Bhikkhu Phuoc Hanh) on website [www.lbp.world](http://www.lbp.world).

There is a famous Vietnamese idiom: Brothers and sisters are as close as hands and feet. Hands are hands, feet are feet. Yet when your hands are cut and your feet are painful and hurt and vice versa. Because your hands and your feet are connected by other factors such as heart, lung, kidneys, blood and so on. Also space (distance) and time. Space is space, time is time. But time and space never break them apart. When we enjoy one product you like, we can look deeply into that product. What do you see inside that product? That product contains many factors and conditions such as American, Vietnamese, Russian, Ukrainian, Palestinian or Israeli engineers, doctors, workers, logger and so on which manufacture that product. Without them no product. Therefore, we always respect each other, not to do harming for other people. Please stop bombing children! Please listen the cries of suffering of people in Gaza today! If your conscience is awakened, you can stop killing people at once, you become an Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva – a great man in the world immediately. You deserve to receive a worship from all religions in the world. Your religion is true religion.

I remember one sentence from Mahatma Gandhi that people wish to live freely only by getting ready to die, if need to be in time, at the hands of his brother, never by killing him. And another one from William Shakespeare said that we were born in the world like brother and sister. Now let’s unite hand in hand, not go alone one before another.<sup>6</sup>

#### 6.4. Emptiness in Science

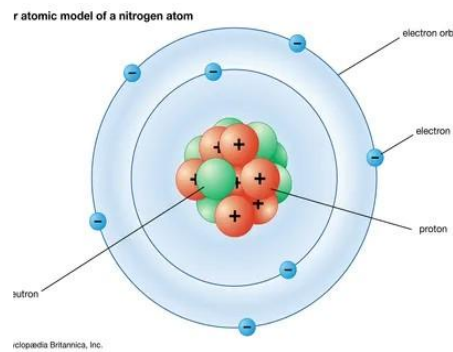
The Buddha has taught in the Discourse of number 10 “Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta – the Foundations of Mindfulness”<sup>7</sup> that we keep an eye on the penetrating way; i.e. we meditate our body in our body, our feeling in our feeling, our mental formation in our mental formation, and our object of the mental formation in the object of the mental formation. A question arises that why does the Buddha use this kind of repetition two time? The answer: if you want to observe and understand our body, feeling, mental formation, and object of the mental formation, you have to step in that area.

Today’s science also say like this. Nuclear scientists say that if you want to understand something about elementary particles, you have to step in the world of particles. If you still stand outside to observe it, you remain just an observer – not participant. According to Niels Bohr (1885-1962) , the Danish Physicist, proposed “Model of the atom of Bohr”<sup>8</sup> stated: The properties of atomic electrons in terms of a set of allowed possible values. Atoms absorb or emit radiation only when the electrons abruptly jump between allowed, or stationary, states. In fact, the material atoms are empty. The atoms contains the Quark and the electron. They can not exist independently. They must co-exist; they have to inter-be with all the others.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.coolnsmart.com/quote-brothers-and-sisters-are-as-close-as-863/>

<sup>7</sup> Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya, Page 145, Wisdom Publication, USA, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/science/Bohr-model>



### Human's Five Skandhas and atom in the same structure

We can take a look the relation between the Buddhist concept of the Five Skandhas (Aggregates) and the Bohr atomic model in the light of Emptiness.

#### 1. Form (Rūpa) and Bohr Atomic Model:

In the five skandhas, “form” refers to the physical or material aspect of existence. In the Bohr atomic model, the idea of electrons orbiting a nucleus provides a structural form to atoms. The electron orbits represent a kind of “form” within the atomic structure.

#### 2. Sensation (Vedana) and Quantum Behavior:

Vedana refers to feelings or sensations in the Buddhist framework. In the Bohr model, electrons exhibit behavior that is probabilistic and not fully predictable, similar to the probabilistic nature of quantum mechanics. The sensations or experiences of particles in quantum events may be metaphorically related to Vedana.

#### 3. Perception (Sanna) and Interaction of Electrons:

Sanna involves perception and recognition. In the Bohr model, electrons interact with each other and with the nucleus, influencing each other's behavior. This interaction can be metaphorically related to the concept of perception in the sense that the presence or state of one electron may influence the state or behavior of another.

#### 4. Mental Formations (Sankhara) and Quantum Fields:

Sankhara involves mental formations or constructs. In the context of atomic models, one might draw a metaphorical link to quantum fields and their influence on the behavior of particles. Quantum fields represent dynamic, ever – changing aspects of the quantum world, somewhat analogous to mental formations.

#### 5. Consciousness (Viññana) and Quantum Observer Effect:

Viññana refers to consciousness in Buddhism. In the realm of quantum physics, the observer effect suggests that the act of observation can influence the behavior of particles. This could be metaphorically related to the idea that consciousness plays a role in shaping or influencing aspects of reality.

These connections are metaphorical and don't imply a direct correspondence between the two frameworks. Buddhism and quantum physics operate in different domains, and these comparisons are merely attempts to find conceptual parallels that can aid understanding without suggesting a one – to – one equivalence.

### III. CONCLUSION

We have defined the technical term of Emptiness, explained the meaning of Emptiness, analysed the significance of Emptiness, studied the philosophy of Emptiness, the comparative Emptiness etc. The topic, the ideas, definition of Emptiness are only the topic, the ideas, definition of Emptiness.

In Buddhist philosophy, Emptiness (Śūnyatā) is a profound and nuanced concept that goes beyond a simple understanding of nothingness – void. It is not an absence of everything but rather the lack of inherent, independent existence. Emptiness is often described as the absence of a permanent, unchanging essence or self in all phenomena.

The idea is that things exist in dependence on other things, and their nature is relational and interdependent. Emptiness, in this sense, is a way to describe the interconnected and ever – changing nature of reality. It's not about negating the existence of things but recognizing that their existence is contingent upon a web of relationships and conditions.

Now, whether Emptiness can be considered a “grounding of life” depends on how one interprets and applies the concept. Some interpretations might suggest that understanding emptiness provides a foundation for living a more compassionate and open – minded life. Recognizing the interdependence of all things can lead to a sense of interconnectedness, empathy, and a reduction of attachment to fixed ideas or identities.

The most important thing is how to apply the Emptiness into our society today. Everyone likes a good conduct. Everyone praises a personal ethics. Every single religion dignifies own moral philosophy. Nobody emphasizes the brotherhood's ethics. But Buddhism dignifies own the brotherhood's ethics. If you understand your partner, embrace your partner's problems, you are a moral person. You are in your partner and vice versa. Here is a valuable Emptiness in this life – not metaphysical philosophy as you talked about.

In summary, Emptiness in Buddhism can be seen as a grounding of life in the sense that it provides a perspective on the nature of reality that emphasizes interconnectedness and impermanence. However, the personal and philosophical implications of this concept can vary widely among individuals.

### REFERENCES

- Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha*, A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya, Wisdom Publication, USA, 2015. [Buddhistdoor.com](http://Buddhistdoor.com)
- Garfield, Jay L., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamādhyamakakārikā*, Oxford University Press, London, 1995.
- <https://www.britannica.com/science/atomic-physics>
- <https://www.lionsroar.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/DD-Emptiness.pdf>
- Jan Christoph Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka – A Philosophical Investigation*, [westerhoff@cantab.net](mailto:westerhoff@cantab.net), United Kingdom, October 2007.
- Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*, Commentaries on the Prajñāparamitā Heart Sūtras, Parallax Press, USA, 1988.
- Ven. Pategama Gnanarama Ph. D., *Essentials of Buddhism*, Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc., Singapore, 2000.



**Luong The Loc (Venerable Phuoc Hanh)**  
**Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Mahayana Buddhist Studies,**  
**Archarya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, A.P., India.**