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A STUDY OF SUNYATA (EMPTINESS) PERSPECTIVE ON ANATTA WITH REGARD TO FIVE AGGREGATES IN BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT:

Sunyata in Sanskrit (Pali: Suññata), pronounced “shoonyataa’, translated into English most often as emptiness is a Buddhist concept which has manifold meanings depending on its doctrinal context. It is an ontological feature of reality, a meditation state, or a phenomenological analysis of experience.

In Theravada Buddhism, suññata often refers to the non-self nature of the five aggregates of experience and the six sense spheres. Suññata is also often used to refer to a meditative state. In Mahayana Buddhism, Sunyata refers to the tenet that “all things are empty of intrinsic existence and nature,” but may also refer to the Buddha nature teachings and primordial or empty awareness, as in Dzogchen and Shentong.

The concept of Sunyata as “emptiness”, states Sue Hamilton, is related to the concept of anatta in early Buddhism. Over time, many different philosophical schools or tenet-systems have developed within Buddhism in an effort to explain the exact philosophical meaning of emptiness.

KEYWORDS: Emptiness-sunyata- suññata, anatta, aggregate, Buddhism.

INTRODUCTION

The English word, emptiness, is universally agreed upon as a proper translation of the Pali word, *Suññata* and Sanskrit word, *Sunyata*. *Sunyata* has been defined as, “the ultimate nature of reality which is the total absence of inherent existence and self-identity with respect to all phenomena. It is further characterized more specifically as “empty and avoid of permanency of true Happiness, personality, and

pleasantness”. Thus, “being devoid of any phenomenal characteristics, “void” or the indescribable is the real nature of things”.

In the Theravada Buddhism, *suññata* often refers to the non-self (pali: *anatta*, Sanskrit: *anatma*). Consequently, in this article, I had a desire to express *Sunyata* (emptiness) as a *Anatta* (non self) with respect to Five *khandhas* (five aggregates). The Buddha denied any conception of self, ego, or soul. All phenomena is *Anatta*, non-soul-ness. We cannot find any what we call self, ego, or soul. “*Anatta* means Non-ego, not-self,

Absence of soul-essence”. The word *Anatta* is used to convey the following three interpretations:

1. *Asarakatthena Anatta*- on account of not being without essence or substance it is called *Anatta*.
2. *Asamikatathena Anatta*- on account of not having any owner or over lord it is called *Anatta*.
3. *Avasavattanatthena Anatta*- on account of it’s not yielding to another does will it is called *Anatta*.

Hence, for Theravadians, the belief that exists sour is a kind of wrong views. Apart from *Nama-Rupa* (materiality-mentality), or the five *Khandha*, there is nothing

which can be called soul. The notion of self as a permanent entity is nothing, but an illusion. The Buddha declared: "Therefore, *Bhikkhus*, whatever matter (or feeling, perception, or mental formation, or consciousness) there is, be It past, Future or present, Inward or outward, Gross or subtle, Low or lofty, Far or near, Matter (or feeling, perception, or mental formation, or consciousness) of all kinds, should be as regarded as they really are, by right wisdom, "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not the self for me."

With reference to empty, in *Samyutta Nikaya*, Ananda asks the Buddha why people use the expression "The world is empty." He Replies: "It is because it is empty of self and of what belongs to self that it is said, 'the world is empty.' And what is empty of self and of what belongs to self? The eye, Ananda, is empty of self and of what belongs to self. Forms are empty of self and of what belongs to self. Eye-consciousness is empty of self and of what belongs to self. Eye- contact is empty of self and of what belongs to self... whatever feeling arises with mind-contact as condition- that too is empty of self and of what belongs to self." "Emptiness" refers to absence, and specifically the absence of "self and what belongs to self." Emptiness refers to a quality or mode of experience. According to Theravadins, there is nothing can be called the self or soul; beyond the five *khandhas*, or aggregates, nothing soul can be perceived.

All worldly phenomena, including mental and material process, are subject to three characteristics, namely, *anicca*, *dukha*, and *anatta*: all worldly phenomena are composed of *nāma* and *rūpa*; what we called being is also a compound of five *khandhas*, aggregates or groups; peoples wrongly conceive *rūpa* and *nāma* (material form and mental formations) as *atta*, something having living entity, or eternal. "In order to remove this misconception of self and make it clear that there is no such things as soul or living entity in the *Rūpa*, *Nāma* of one's own body or in the *Rūpa-nāma* of others bodies, the Blessed one began the discourse (*Anatta Lakkhana sutta*) with the pronouncement, *Rupam Bhikkhave anatta*- material form, *Bhikkhus*, is not self, soul, nor living entity. Thus, the existence of all beings is composed of five *khandhas*. They can be explained as follows:

1. *Rupakkhandha*- (aggregate of material form),
2. *Vedanakkhandha*- (aggregate of feeling),
3. *Sannakkhandha*- (aggregate of perception),
4. *Sankkharakkhandha*- (aggregate of mental formation),
5. *Vinnakkhandha*- (aggregate of consciousness)

The word *khandha* is understood in the sense of group, mass, or aggregate. The Buddha analyzes a living being into these five groups. In the *suttas* he states: "Whatever kind of materiality there is, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near- this is called materiality aggregate.

According to *Majjhima Nikaya*, all corporeal phenomena, whether past, present, or future, one's own or external, gross or subtle, lofty or lows, far or near, all belong to the group of corporeality; all feelings belong to the group of perception; all mental formations belong to the group of formations; all consciousness belong to the group of consciousness. These groups are a five-fold classification in which the Buddha has summed up all the physical and mental phenomena of existence, and in particular, those which appear to the ignorant man as his ego or personality. Hence, birth, decay, etc. are also included in these five groups which actually comprise the whole world.

(1). *Rupakkhandha*

All worldly phenomena are composed of material qualities. In it, nothing can be called the self, or ego, or soul. Thus the Buddha declared: *Rupam Bhikkhave anatta: Bhikkhus*, *Rūpa*, the material body is not self, soul nor a living entity. But people think themselves and others to be living entities with the self, or ego, or soul in each of them. From the following material qualities, indeed, the foundation for a material form is build. "They are the sensitive part of the eye which enables one to see objects; the sensitive part of the ear which enables one to hear the sounds; the sensitive part of the nose which enables one to smell odors; the sensitive part of the tongue which enable one to sample the taste; the

sensitive part of the body to feel the touch; the material quality of base, that is the seat of consciousness; and the material quality of the life-principle or vital force.

Apart from these sensitive material qualities, such as the sensitive part of the eye, the ear, etc., there is no such thing as soul or living entity. So long as the sensitive part of the eye, the ear, etc., exist, other material bodies, their co-adjuncts and concomitant with them, are also wrongly conceived as self, living entity. Such material bodies are sight which is heard, odors which is smelt, and tangibility (such as *pathavi*, *tezo*, and *vāyo*) felt by the sense of touch which also recognizes indirectly moistness and fluidity of the element of cohesion (*āpo*), and material qualities of sex responsible for masculinity and femininity. We misconceived such material bodies and material qualities as soul or living entity when seen, heard, smelt, etc.

In short, the whole material body which co-exists with the eye etc. is regarded to be a living entity. The usage in the daily life of expressions such as self, or a living entity, is not utterance of falsehood but conforming to the convention of the world; but from the point of view of ultimate, absolute reality, all the material substance of the whole body are not in reality self or individual or a being, but only the aggregates or matter of material qualities. Therefore, the Blessed one had pronounced definitely and explicitly that 'although individuals view the aggregates of material qualities as a living being, a living entity, in reality, it is not *atta* nor soul nor a living entity but merely physical phenomena.

(2). *Vedanakkhanda*

All creatures are made-up of *vedana*. Mahathera Ledi Sayadaw explained that "vedana means feeling, or the faculty of tasting the sapid flavor thus squeezed out by the *phassa*. All creatures are sunk in this *vedana*. *Vedana*, feeling can be classified in to three categories.

1. *Sukha Vedana*- pleasurable feeling
2. *Dukkha Vedana*- unpleasurable feeling
3. *Upekkha Vedana*- equanimous, neutral, feeling, neither pleasurable nor painful.

Although *Sukha vedana* and *Dukkha vedana* are clear and prominent, the *upekkha vedana* is not like so. According to teaching in *Abhidhamma*, there is neither feeling of pleasant nor feeling of unpleasantness at the moment of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting touching, but just equanimous feelings, indifferences. But in the *suttantas* are discourses, which describe how all these *vedanas*, *sukha*, *dukkha*, and *Upekkha* arise at all the sense doors.

There are discourses exhorting to contemplate on these feelings at the moment of seeing, hearing so as to comprehend their true nature. The *Maha Tika* of *Visuddhi magga* has explained how *sukha*, *dukkha*, and *Upekkha vedanas* become evident at the moment of seeing, hearing, etc., in these words. "Although it is said that eye consciousness is accompanied by equanimity, the resultant effect of unwholesome act is in the nature of suffering. The resultant effect of unwholesome act cannot be pleasant. Likewise, although it is state that resultant effect of a wholesome feeling, pleasantness. All moral acts bear good, pleasant fruits.

Whatever pleasurable or un-pleasurable *vedana*, it is not self; it is not one's *atta*, or living entity, or soul. If *Vedana* were the self, the inner substance of the body, then *vedana* would not tend to afflict or distress. And one should be able to say *Vedana*, "let *vedana* be always unpleasant; let *vedana* not always unpleasant. It should be possible to influence *vedana* in this manner as one wish; and if *vedana* were self, it should not cause distress to oneself, because it is not in the nature of things to afflict one-self; and it should be possible to manage *vedana* as one wish.

Actually, *vedana* is not the self, a living entity, but only phenomena that arises and vanishes as conditioned by circumstances. Thus the Buddha declared: " Bhikkhus, *vedana*, feeling, is not the self, or one's inner core; if *vedana* were self, *vedana* would not tend to afflict or distress, and it should be possible to say of *vedana*, " Let *vedana* be thus (always pleasant): let *vedana* not be thus (always unpleasant). It is not possible to influence *vedana* in this manner.

(3). Saññakkhandha

Saññakkhandha is aggregates of perception or remembering. “*Sañña* means perception, or that the act of perceiving. All creatures become wise through this perception. If they perceived things are with sufficient clearness in accordance with their own ways, custom, creed, and so forth.”

Sañña is six fold in kind:

1. Perception born of eye-contact,
2. Perception born of ear-contact,
3. Perception born of nose- contact,
4. Perception born of tongue-contact,
5. Perception born of body- contact,
6. Perception born of mind-contact.

When an object is seen, or heard, or touched; or smelled, or known, generally we think of that it is “I” who perceives, and that objects are perceived and remembered by “Me”. On seeing a sight, it is remembered or known as a man or woman, or as an object perceived at such and such a time, at such a place, etc. Likewise, with regard to objects of sound, of smell, of taste, etc., This process of perception or remembers or it is I whose memory is excellent. In fact, it is a wrong view. That, indeed, there is nothing individual or personal in the process of remembering; no living entity involved, just unsubstantial phenomena; it is of the nature of *anatta*, non-self.

(4). Sankharakkhandha

According to *Khandha Vagga, Samyutta Nikaya*, “that which brings about physical, vocal and mental activities is *snakhara* (of *sankharakkhadha*). Thus, *Sankhara*, in this aspect, means one of the five aggregates, namely, mental formations or mental activities which condition things and produce kammic efforts. Here we should explain about the meaning of *Sankhara*. *Sankharas* are of two kinds. The first is conditioned things, and the latter, conditioning things. Conditioned things are usually known as four *Niyamas*, namely, *Kamma, Citta, Utu* and *Ahara*. In the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, *Sankhara* means conditioning things as mental formations: *Mahathera Mahasi Sayadaw* briefly explains the two kinds of *sankharas*.

“The conditioned things are those aggregates that have arisen through such causes as *kamma* (volitional activity), mind, climate (seasonal conditions) and nutriment. Immediately after the rebirth consciousness, mental and material phenomena arising as resultant of *kamma* spring up. *Vipaka* types of consciousness with its concomitants and *Hadaya rupa* together with *Kamma* produced *Rupa* such as eye, ear, nose, tongue and body spring up in this way. They are all conditioned things, resultant effects of kammic activities and are called resultant *Sankharas* as conditioned by *Kamma*. Likewise mind produced *rupas* and also resultant *sankharas*. Physical changes innovated in acts of bending, stretching, moving, going, standing, sitting, talking, smiling are examples of such resultant *sankharas*. Being born of thoughts generated by a person, they are known as resultant *sankharas* conditioned by mind.

With regard to mind and its concomitants, they are both mutually conditioned and conditioning and we have thus *sankhara* as causal agents as well as *sankharas* as resultants. *Rupas* produced by climatic conditions are resultant *sankharas* conditioned by climatic conditions. *Rupas* that arise through intake of food are resultant *sankharas* conditioned by nutriment. Finally all the succeeding mental states with all their concomitants are resultant *sankharas* being dependent on the preceding mental conditions and their concomitants for their arising. All such aggregates which arise because of *kamma*, mind, seasonal conditions; and food are resultant *sankharas* as conditioned by their respective causes. This is summarised in the famous formula: *Sabbe Sankhara Anicca; Sabbe Sankhara Dukkha*. “All things conditioned by respective causes are impermanent; all things conditioned by respective cause are suffering, *dukkha*”.

Mahasi Sayadaw explains again *Sankhara*: “*Sabbe Sankhara dukkha*” *Sankhara* means resultants aggregates produced by conditioning circumstances. It does not mean “activities” or “effort” to make

good deeds. All *sankharas* as conditioned things are to be contemplated on as impermanent and suffering. It is wrong to interpret “*Sankhara*” in this context, as meritorious activities. What is required here is to observe and note carefully all the conditioned aggregates in one’s own body until their real nature is seen and dispassion developed over them. Most of people think of that *sankharas* are of the self. It is, indeed, the aggregate of *sankhara* which is responsible for physical, vocal, or mental deeds such as going, sitting, standing, hearing, smiling, seeing, thinking, etc. The wish to go, stand, sits, or sleep is expressed by the *Sankharas*. All the three kinds of physical, vocal, mental activities are instigated and organized by this *sankhara*.

In fact, these *sankharas* are mental states headed by *cetana*, volition. There are, for theravadins, fifty-two kinds of mental states. Apart from the two states of sensation and perception, the remaining fifty mental states constitute as *Sankharakhandha*, the aggregate of mental formation. These mental formations are responsible for all kinds of activities, such as sleeping, sitting, smiling, speaking, eating and so on. These actions are being carried out as directed and motivated by the *Sankharas* which also instigate and directed. Mental activities such as thinking, are seeing-consciousness, hearing-consciousness. Thus, according to Theravadins, there is no self; we only think of mental formations as our own self or soul. In fact *Sankharas* are not the self, not one’s inner core; they are of the nature of unsubstantiality occurring in accordance with their own conditions and circumstances.

(5). *Viññānakkhandha*

Viññānakkhandha is the aggregate of consciousness. Here, *viññāna* or consciousness is of six kinds, namely; eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, touch-consciousness, and mind-consciousness.

“Consciousness is name according to whatever condition through which it arises; on account of the eye and visible objects arises a consciousness and it is called eye-consciousness; on account of the ear and sound arises consciousness and it is called ear-consciousness; on account of the nose and odors arises a consciousness and it is called nose-consciousness; on account of the tongue and taste arises a consciousness and it is called tongue-consciousness; on account of the body and tactile objects arises a consciousness and it is called tactile (body) consciousness; on account of the mind and mind objects arises a consciousness and it is called mental consciousness. For example, a fire may burn on account of wood and it is called fire. It may burn, refuse; then it is called splinter fire, cow dung fire, etc. In a similar manner, consciousness is named according to how it is conditioned.”

Thus *Viññāna*, consciousness is not substance, self, soul. Consequently, the Buddha taught that consciousness is not self; were consciousness self, it would not tend to afflict and it should be possible to say of conscious, “Let consciousness be all wholesome; Let consciousness be not all unwholesome. Consciousness, for Theravadins, it is not the self. For this reason consciousness tend to afflict and it is not possible to say of consciousness, ‘let consciousness be thus all wholesome; let consciousness be not thus all unwholesome; and is not manageable at will. Thus, all *Nama Rupa* components of the five aggregates are non-self. Briefly, as Buddhgosa said that all worldly phenomena is *nissatta-nijivata*, that is, non-entity, or non-substrate, or non-soul-ness.

The Buddha, as we have seen, denied the existence of any permanent substance, neither mental nor material. In fact, the worldly phenomenon is a state of flux (*anicca*). Everythings is changing from moment to moment with fearful rapidity. As all phenomena, objects, consciousness, etc., is in a state of flux, the belief in substance is nothing, but a figment of our imagination; thus that belief is in vain, and merely waste of time.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, everything is emptiness and it is impossible to live or exist without using language. Notwithstanding, language cannot express reality. With reference to five aggregates there is no *atta* or soul. Theravada Buddhists deny the existence of any permanent substance; there is neither material nor mental substance. The whole universe is in a state of *Anicca* (Flux); everything is changing from moment to moment; nothing, thus, can stay fixed. Everything including perceptions, feeling,

passions, emotions, objects, etc., is in the state of flux. The belief, thus, that there is substance is nothing, but a mere figment of our imagination; that the belief of substance, material or mental, is a kind of wrong view.

To my knowledge, it is impossible to understand Anatta (non self) without understanding *Paticca Samuppada* (dependent origination). It can be assumed that *Paticca Samuppada* expresses the nature of *Anatta* (non self).

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