

L'ambivalenza del Nulla, tra negazione dell'umano e apertura al divino

***Samadhi* (Hinduism) – *Sunyata* (Buddhism): experience of 'bliss without form'**

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Introduction

The intent of this short essay is to offer an explanation of the concept of “Nothingness” in Hinduism and Buddhism. I shall attempt to offer an understanding of “Nothingness” as elaborated in the Upanishads and in the two most important schools of thought, viz., the Advaita Vedanta of Sankaracharya (Hinduism) and the Madhyamika of Nagarjuna (Mahayana Buddhism). We will find out that “Nothingness” is an experiential reality or ‘realization’ rather than a concept. The experiences of *Samadhi* (Hinduism) and *Sunyata / Nirvana* (Buddhism) are both experiences of self-realization, illumination and liberation, both mystical experience of ‘bliss without form’, without the ‘self’, “I” or “me”. These experiences are apertures and affirmations of the Divine (*Atman / Sunyata*) and they do not deny the human. In conclusion, we would like to find out if these two experiences / understandings, seemingly opposed to each other, reconcilable?

1. “Nothingness” / *Samadhi* in the Upanishads (Hinduism)

The Upanishads (between 800 – 300 B.C.) contains in substance all that is profound in the Indian philosophical and religious thought. They are not systematic treatises of philosophy, but are intuitions of various ancient sages and mystics of various centuries. They present religious experiences and philosophical insights regarding vital and existential problems.

The Upanishads are the intuitions of sages who tried to find answers to the following question: what is the ultimate and unitary principle in the multiplicity of experience? Which is that realty knowing which all other things can be known? They tried to find a fundamental reality behind and within the multiplicity of objects of the universe. They believed that knowing that reality (unitary and fundamental) would bring about tranquillity and peace of intellect and mind.

To understand the doctrine of the Upanishads it is necessary to explain two technical terms: Brahman and Atman, which constitute the quintessence, the two pilasters on which is constructed almost the entire edifice of vedantic philosophy. Brahman means the fundament of the universe or the source (fountain) of every existence: that from which the universe is born or emanated, that which appears as the universe, or the Supreme Reality that includes everything. Atman means the ‘Self’ or the soul: the most profound reality within man; it means also the One or the fundamental Reality that comprises all (everything).

The greatest discovery of these sages was that these two are not two realities but are one and the same thing: Atman is Brahman. In fact in the Upanishads these two terms are used as appositions and are considered synonyms. For example, the *Chandogya Up.*, presents as follows the central question of its research : “What is atman? What is Brahman” (*Chand. Up.*, IV, xi, 1). What then is Brahman and Atman or what does it mean Atman is Brahman or vice versa? Can we really know Atman and / or Brahman? Atman-Brahman is the Real and the only “Being”, but we can “know” it only through what “It is not”, and that through an experience (*Samadhi*) of “Nothingness”.

1.1 Brahman

Brahman is the fundamental reality and the ultimate end of everything that exists around us human beings. Brahman is not a single divine creator and the governor of the universe, but is the only Reality that is the source of the entire universe, of everything that exists. To consider this one, unitary reality as a divinity was not satisfactory enough and so they tried to find out what really would this Reality be?

According to the sages, Brahman is the source as well as the origin of everything that exists, that power which controls everything; and this ‘something’ they called Brahman. “Brahman is that from which all creatures are generated, that in which they exist and that into which dying they return (*Taitt. Up.*, III, 1). These sages were convinced that this basic / fundamental ‘reality’ ought to completely transcend all our experience and therefore it was to be above every sort of adequate definition with expressions taken from human experience. Hence they tried to define it with negative terms, indicating that which it ‘is not’ rather than what it positively ‘is’. Thus, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* states that it can be defined only by stating that it is ‘*neti, neti*’ (not this, not this), underlying the fact that Brahman cannot be determined with categories of human thought. The *Mundka Upanishad* describes Brahman as: “That which is invisible, unconceivable, without family, nor caste, without eyes, without ears, without hands, nor legs, permanent, all-pervading, omnipresent, most subtle, immutable, which the sages consider as the fountain (source) of all beings’ (*Mund. Up.*, I, i, 6).

The Upanishads propose also some positive descriptions of Brahman as well. The negative assertions together with positive ones offer a more clear idea regarding it. Thus, for example, Brahman is *satyasya satyam* (“The Real of the real”) (*Brih. Up.*, II, i, 20); *vijnanam anandam Brahma* (Brahman is conscience and beatitude) (*Ibid. III*, ix, 28); *styam jnanam anantam Brahma* (Brahman is reality, conscience and infinite) (*Taitt. Up.*, II, 1).

In fact the Upanishads distinguish two types (modes) of Brahman: *Apara Brahman* (Inferior Brahman) and the *Para Brahman* (the Supreme Brahman).

1.2 The Inferior Brahman:

The idea of inferior Brahman implies the affirmation that it is the all-inclusive fundament of the universe, of that exists; that the entire universe and everything that exists emanate from it. It is the so-called a ‘cosmic’ and a ‘qualified’ vision (*saprapanca*) of Brahman. “In truth this whole world is Brahman” (*Chandogya Up.* III xiv, 1). All beings have their origin in Brahman, they exist in him and are absorbed in him. The texts teach: as flame arises from fire, as web comes out from the spider, as grass germinates from the earth, as hair grows on the body, in the same way all creatures emanate from Brahman” (cf. *Mund. Up.*, I, i, 7; II, i, 1). According to the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the whole universe constitutes the body of Brahman which is its soul. It is immanent in all things and sustains it from within (cf. *Brih. Up.*, III, vii, 1-23).

1.3 The Supreme Brahman

The *Para Brahman* instead underlines its absolute transcendence. Human intellect can never offer an adequate idea of it. It is an acosmic (*nishparapanca*) and non-qualified (*nirguna*) vision of Brahman. “This which the sage adores is imperishable, o Gargi: neither masculine, nor subtle, nor short, nor long, nor red, nor ardent, without shadow, without obscurity, without air, without space, without relation, without taste, without smell, without eyes, without ears, without word, without spirit, without light, without breath, without mouth, without measure, and without either interior or

exterior; does not eat anything nor is eaten by anything” (cf. *Brih. Up.*, III, viii, 8). This verse stresses the fact that it transcends completely every possible human concept. “It is conceived by the one from whom it is not conceived. One by whom it is conceived, does not know him (cf. *Ken Up.*, II, 3). In other words, only the one who knows Brahman as indescribable, as above all human conceptions, only he knows the true nature of Brahman; the one who instead pretends to know him adequately, does not know him at all. The best form of describing him is in the negative, stating that *he is not this, not this (neti, neti)*. In short he is the Absolute which is above any sort of relational concept!

2. Atman

Some upanishadic thinkers tried to find an answer to the question of the fundamental nature of man. Who am I ultimately? What am I in my profound existence? I am Atman. Who or what is Atman? How can I know it as (my) ultimate nature? In order to give an explanation of it, The *Taittiriya Upanishad* refers to the doctrine of sheaths (*kosa*) according to which atman is that subtlest reality that exists within a quintuple sheath (cf. *Taitt. Up.*, II). The most exterior sheath is that which is formed by food, viz., the physical body (*annamaya kosa*). Within the physical body exists the strata of breath or the vital spirit (*pranamaya kosa*). Within this third sheath exists the mental sheath (*manomaya kosa*). Within the profundity of the mental sheath exists intellect or conscience (*vijnanamaya kosa*) and within the sheath of conscience is the sheath of beatitude (*anandamaya kosa*). All these sheaths taken together constitute the empirical house of the atman.

According to the *Kena Upanishad* atman is the most fundamental, basic, reality within man; it is that which directs the eye to colour, the ear to sound, the intellect to knowledge (cf. *Kena Up.*, I, 1-3).

The *Mandukya Upanishad* teaches that atman finds itself in four different states of existence: the state of vigilance (*jagara sthana*), the state of dream (*svapna sthana*), state of profound sleep (*sushupti sthana*), and the state of *turiya* or *caturtha*. In the state of vigilance the soul finds itself outside of itself, lost in the objects of the senses; it lives on the material level. In the state of dream instead, atman is less tied to the body; however it is aware of the body. It lives on the level of imagination and of the mind which functions without the help of external senses. In the state of profound sleep, instead, atman liberates itself completely from every external contact, both material and mental, entering inside the sphere of beatitude. It remains as a mass of consciousness, as “happiness that enjoys happiness”, without the duality of the subject that enjoys the object. Then there exists a fourth state in which this fruition of peace and tranquillity becomes permanent and that state is called *turiya* or *caturtha*. It is a state of total illumination or self-consciousness which transcends every conceptual description. It is that state in which atman realises its intimate essence. The text states that in that state atman “is not neither internally nor externally conscious, nor conscious of the two ways: neither conscious nor unconscious;...its essence is to be an absolute... such is the condition of the fourth state...” Atman is the true, eternal and immortal fundament of existence, and that it can be realised or directly experimented only by those who are able to transcend every sort of identification with the false ‘self’.

3. The Identification of Brahman and Atman

The exciting discovery of the sages was that atman is not different from Brahman, that there is only one Supreme Reality, that there is no difference between the Supreme Subject (Atman) and the Supreme Object (Brahman); the supreme subjective and supreme objective reality are One and the Same thing. It is enough to know the ‘self’ in order to know all. “In truth all this world is

Brahman...Source of every activity, of every desire, of all perceptions of smell and of taste, embraces this whole world, silent, indifferent, is this 'self', which is within my heart – this is the same Brahman" (*Chand. Up.*, III, xiv, 1-4).

In the *Chandogya Upanishad* there is a famous episode that presents this teaching in a marvellous way. Uddhalaka instructs his son Svetaketu on the Supreme Reality, stating that he (Svetaketu) himself is the Supreme Reality. Svetaketu did his normal studies for twelve years and for another twelve years he studied the Vedas. After studying for twenty-four years he thought himself to be very educated and was arrogant, and presumptuous. Then his father tells him: "My dear Svetaketu, I see that you are very content with yourself, proud of your knowledge and fully satisfied. Have you ever searched for that teaching, which is not heard as if it is heard, which is not thought of as if it is thought of, which is not known as if it is known?" Svetaketu asks how could such a teaching exist? And his father responds: "My dear, it is as if from a piece of clay can be known all regarding clay; the diverse modifications are nothing but distinctions of name and of language regarding the one and only reality, viz., clay. Which signifies that the variety and the plurality of the objects of experience are only clothing (vestition) of the one and unitary reality which is their fundament. The teaching of the father arrives then at its climax: this subtle essence animates all things; it is the only reality; it is atman. You are that, o Svetaketu (*tat tvam asi*). Thus the subtle essence that animates the universe, that is Brahman, is identical with atman; and svetaketu is that. The father repeats '*tat tvam asi*' for nine times.

The identity of atman and Brahman is expressed in various passages of the Upanishads. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. refers to the interior governor (*antaryamin*): that which inhabits within everything, which the creatures do not know, to which truly appertain all bodies and organs of the creatures, he is the interior motor; he is the immortal soul, yours and mine, and of all things" (cf. *Brih. Up.*, III, vii, 15). "In truth that great atman: not born, not decadent, non-perishable, immortal...is Braham" (*Svet. Up.*, *Up.*, I, 16).

4. Two Types of Knowledge

By having only an intellectual comprehension of this teaching (*tat tvam asi* = you are that) one is not able to know the Supreme Self. The Upanishads make a distinction between two types / grades of knowledge: inferior (*apara vidya*) and superior (*para vidya*).

The inferior knowledge indicates our ordinary knowledge which presupposes a duality of subject and object, the knower and the known.

The superior knowledge instead refers to the imperishable which indicates Brahman or Atman. It is that knowledge through which that which is never heard is heard, that which has never been thought is thought of, that which has never been understood becomes understood (cf. *Chand. Up.* VI, i, 4). This knowledge transcends the duality of subject and object, knower and the known. This knowledge refers to Brahman or atman, which is the Supreme Subject, and which can never become an object. As a consequence, it cannot be known in the way in which other objects of the world are known (inferior knowledge). Rather it ought to be 'realized' directly or intuitively in the experience of auto or self-illumination.

5. Yoga : Samadhi

One cannot reach the superior knowledge, self-illumination, neither through logical discussion, nor through profound erudition, nor through the study of the scriptures; instead through a rigid and persevering self-disciple in order to purify ones actions and sinful tendencies, for controlling ones

senses, desires and passions, to be detached from worldly things and to establish in oneself peace and unperturbed tranquillity. This, one realizes through the exercise of meditation, which is proposed in the Raja-yoga, through which one is immersed in the reality of Brahman or atman. Here one does not feel anymore as a distinct individual, but as one and only thing with the Supreme Reality. That is self-illumination in which the identity of atman and Brahman shines by itself, that is, the Supreme Reality reveals itself.

The term yoga derives from the Sanskrit word *yuj* which means 'to unite'. Yoga has as its scope 'to unite' the individual soul with the Supreme Spirit. It also means *marga* (way) and is one of the 'ways' proposed by sages to reach this union of the soul (atman) with the Absolute (Brahman). The classical yoga is Raja-yoga proposed by Patanjali (also known as Patanjali yoga or *Ashtanga* yoga – yoga in eight steps). Patanjali defines yoga as "the suppression of the modifications brought about by the 'knowing faculty' (*citta*). The knowing faculty comprises all that is sensible and psychic in the individual: senses, intellect, mind, etc. It is also the principle that conserves all the images, impressions and tendencies of the numerous reincarnations of the past. The *citta* undergoes various modifications in the process of knowing. It is a product of the *prakriti* (material nature); it is non-conscious by nature. Only the spirit (*purusha*) is conscious; it is in fact pure consciousness. Pure consciousness takes place when modification done by the *citta* is suspended and this takes place only when it is illumined by the reflection of the *purusha*. When *purusha* realises intuitively that it is a spirit absolutely distinct from the products of *prakriti*, then it does not anymore identify erroneously with its reflections.

Now, how can *purusha* realize intuitively that it is a spirit and that ultimately it is but the 'ultimate reality' (atman is Brahman)? Patanjali proposes eight practical steps to arrive at this ultimate reality: (i) *yama* (negative ethical discipline: control of the passions and instincts by practising ahimsa = non-violence, *satya* = truthfulness, *asteya* = non stealing, *brahmacharya* = celibacy, *aparigraha* = non-avarice); (ii) *niyama* (*sauca* = cleanliness), *santosha* = happiness, *tapas* (penitence), *svadhyaya* (study of the scriptures), *isvarapranidhana* = recalling and meditation on God); (iii) *asana* (physical exercises proposed especially by the *hartha yoga*; (iv) *pranayama* (control of the breathing process); (v) *pratyahara* (bring about perfect control of the mind); (vi) *dharana* (concentration); (vii) *dhyana* (meditation); (viii) *Samadhi* (the culmination of yoga for which all the previous stages are just preparation).

The constant practice of intense meditation disposes the yogi to this most radical state of yoga. In the phase of meditation (*dhyana*) there still exists a dichotomy between thought and its object, between the thinker and the thought, between the observer and the observed, between subject and object. With progress in meditation at a certain point the mind becomes so immersed in the object that it loses itself in it, and is not any more aware of his/her (individual's) existence. The mind (subject, atman) and object (Brahman) become one. This profound experience is called Samadhi (mental absorption). It is that experience in which the yogi enters into the abyss of his consciousness through the process of interiorization of the object of meditation (atman or Brahman). The mind is so totally immersed in the object that it loses every contact not only with other things but also with oneself, in such a way that the yogi is not anymore aware of his subjective principle. It is therefore a consciousness (awareness) without the 'I' or 'mine'. It is a sort of an intuitive consciousness which does not imply neither movement of the mind, nor a logical process. In this manner the yogi obtains a complete comprehension of the truth concerning the object of absorption.

It is the perfect Samadhi that leads one to reach the scope of yoga (union of the atman with Brahman) by complete suppression of the modification of the *citta*, which leads one to his definitive liberation. Samadhi, therefore, is not the end of yoga, but means or way to reach the final scope of

existence (union of the soul with the absolute, so as to ‘become one’ with the Absolute: atman is Brahman!).

6. Advaita Vedanta

According to Advaita Vedanta (the philosophy and theology of non-dualism proposed by Shankaracarya: 788-838) “Brahman is the only reality; the world in last analysis is illusory; the individual soul and Brahman are not different” (*Brahma satyam jaganmitya, Jivo Brahmaiva naparah*). It is by means of yoga (*jnana-yoga, raja-yoga*), by reaching the state of Samadhi (pure consciousness, ‘nothingness of self’, self-awareness without the self, self-illumination without the self) that one becomes aware / conscious of the one and only reality, viz., Brahman or Atman. Only in that state one becomes aware that this world is nothing but ‘*maya*’ (illusion). The world, including the individual self (body, psyche, intellect, mind), which of course is ‘manifestation’ of the Absolute, is not the Real. The individual self to which we cling on to, thinking that it is real and permanent, is but *maya*. It is *avidhya* (ignorance) of the Real that leads us to hold on to the self as real. *Avidhya* can be overcome only through *vidhya* (truth) and truth is that Brahman is the only one reality and that the individual soul is Brahman.

The classical example that Shankara uses to illustrate this truth (Brahman is real and the world is nothing but *maya*) is that of the illusory exchange of a rope for a serpent. The serpent in argument is an illusion overlaid or projected on the rope, but it would not be possible to project this illusion if first there was not the true rope. The illusory serpent is the result of the ignorance of the true nature of the rope and one thinks that it is real only when one overcomes his ignorance; by discovering the true nature of the rope one discovers simultaneously that the serpent never existed. In the same way the phenomenal world is an illusion projected on Brahman. That is, just as the serpent is an illusion from the point of view of the rope, similarly the same rope and the phenomenal world are an illusion from the point of view of Brahman.

In conclusion we ask: is this experience of Samadhi, self-realization, self-illumination, is this aperture to the divine (Brahman) a negation of the human? Or is it the full realisation of the human? By self-illumination that leads to ‘immersion’ with the divine or the ‘losing of the separate self by identifying with the infinite divine’ the individual actually realizes his true nature, viz., *tat tvam asi*, i.e. his true nature which is the same as the divine nature. The scope of the individual self is to merge itself with the Absolute, by which he ‘seems’ to lose his self-identity, but his true identity consists precisely in ‘becoming one with the Absolute’ (Atman is Brahman). This realization takes place only in the mystical realization, which is an experience of ‘bliss without form’.

7. Sunyata (emptiness) / Nothingness in Buddhism

Nagarjuna is considered the greatest Buddhist philosopher. He founded the Madhyamika philosophy [of Mahayana Buddhism based primarily upon Nagarjuna’s commentary on the *Prajnaparamita-sutras*] or the philosophy of the *Middle Way*. At the heart of the *Middle Way* is the concept of *sunyata*, which is perhaps Nagarjuna’s single most important contribution to Buddhist thought.

The studious and experts agree that the whole philosophy proposed by Nagarjuna can be viewed as different aspects of *sunyata*. His philosophy is an attempt to lay bare the different meanings of this central, the most basic concept, *sunyata*. *Sunyata*, Sanskrit word is usually translated as “emptiness”. The Buddhas teach that everything is “empty” of inherent existence. The teaching of *sunyata* thus denies our mistaken notion of phenomena, and not the phenomena themselves.

The Buddhas (the illumined or wise) also teach *sunyata* as a remedy for suffering.

We shall attempt to bring to light the meaning and import of *sunyata* as exposed in the philosophy of Nagarjuna. The best way, perhaps, to understand *sunyata*, is by explaining the following three points: ignorance, criticism, and knowledge.

7.1 Ignorance

In Buddhist philosophy, the cause of all suffering lies in ignorance. Ignorance consists in ignoring the true nature of things. Ignorance is the original mistake and it consists in taking things to be other than what they really are and then acting on this false presumption. In particular, it is the mistake of misplacing the absolute: taking things in the relative world, which are by nature impermanent and dependent, to have the absolute properties of permanence and independence.

According to Nagarjuna and the Madhyamika school, ignorance consists in clinging on to the relative as absolute and on the error of mistaking the relative for the absolute, the conditioned for the unconditioned. That is to say, we take the “imagined” or “thought” separation as real, the “supposed division” as something real or given.

The absolute or the unconditioned, according to the Madhyamika thought, is that which is free from all qualification and distinction. It is the ultimate ineffable nature of all things. It is free from the distinction between the “knower” and “the known”, and hence to know the Absolute is to be the Absolute, and to ignore the Absolute is not to be the Absolute. Instead, the relative or the conditioned is the world of things that exist conditionally and dependently, and hence in relation to other things. The relative is the world of relations and distinctions that is our usual experience. The relative world is characterized by a fundamental division between the “observer” (“knower”) and the “observed” (“known”).

How can one “reach” or “know” the absolute / unconditioned? It is possible only by virtue of self-consciousness, through which one is able to reach ultimately “in the state of Nirvana”, a state in which he/she can have an awareness of the unconditioned, have a sense of the real. But, unfortunately, one who lives under ignorance does not discriminate between the unconditioned and conditioned, causing in him/her confusion that leads him/her to take the relative as absolute. The error of misplaced absoluteness, the seizing of the determinate as itself ultimate, is the root-error.

The most important instance of this error of misplaced absoluteness is with regard to one’s own “self”. The intellect, operating under the shadow of ignorance, wrongly transfers its sense of unconditionedness to itself and considers itself, viz., the “self” as something permanent and as something ultimate. Thus, inherent existence (“self”) is wrongly applied to the mind-body complex and this is due to ignorance. One takes one’s determinate, conditioned existence as unconditioned and self-existent. In this way there arises the false sense of “I” and the belief in an eternal soul as a particular entity. With the positing of an absolute “I” there is the necessary “not-I” to oppose it. The individual is then forever divided from and in conflict with the world. Since this separation is taken as absolute, their relation is inconceivable and there is no hope for reconciliation. In this manner one is bound to a life of continual conflict and frustration.

We take something to have inherent existence when we regard it as permanently and independently existing. Usually this presumption is tacit or unconscious. Thus, for example, one fears death because he/she presumes that the “self” inherently exists in the first place. When it is recognized that there is no inherently existing “self”, then the fear of death vanishes, for what never was cannot be destroyed.

The error of misplaced absoluteness which is the root of all ignorance and suffering takes two general forms: the error with regard to the mundane truth and with regard to the ultimate truth. The error with regard to the mundane truth is, as we have been discussing, to take the conditioned as unconditioned, to cling to the fragmentary as complete. This error results in (among other things) dogmatic views and the false sense of “self” or “I”. The error regarding the ultimate truth consists in considering it as absolute ‘Being’ when it actually is “Nothingness” (*Sunyata*).

The truth is *sunyata* and it teaches the relative nature of all things: all things are impermanent, determinate, and conditioned. They are, therefore, empty of any permanent, indeterminate, unconditioned form of existence. *Sunyata* means that all things, including the ‘I’, are empty of inherent existence. This the mundane truth which is taught to remedy the error of misplaced absoluteness, which takes relative things to have absolute properties; teaches instead the relativity of all things. *Sunyata* is the antithesis to this error as well as the antidote for suffering, because the cause of suffering, according to the teaching of Buddha, is desire or attachment to the “self” / “I”, which ultimately is empty of inherent existence.

But if one were to take this understanding of the emptiness of things as itself absolute, this again would be clinging, viz., clinging to *sunyata*. This mistake is the error not with regard to the mundane nature of things but with regard to their ultimate nature. It is to take the conditionedness of the conditioned as itself unconditioned. Thus one teaches the *sunyata* of *sunyata*: in the ultimate truth even *sunyata* is empty of absoluteness. Ultimately, even the division between the conditioned and the unconditioned is not absolute. Therefore we are not forever bound to our conditionedness because we, as conditioned entities, already are (in our ultimate nature) the unconditioned reality.

7.2 Criticism

Madhyamika is a philosophy of compassion, for its fundamental purpose is to liberate individuals from ignorance and suffering. The school teaches that it is through reflection, criticism and understanding that one is able to discriminate between the real and the unreal, to cancel the confusion of the relative with the absolute, and thus end one’s ignorance and suffering through recognition of *sunyata* as truth. The sense of the real is the basis for this cancellation. Just as the sense of the real leads to ignorance when misapplied, the sense of the real leads to knowledge when guided by criticism in light of *sunyata*. Without the sense of the real liberation would not be possible--but then neither would ignorance.

It is through the practice of criticism, by the sheer force of logical truth that one is lead to overcome ignorance. By repeated application of this method, the relative will no longer be mistaken for the absolute and the true *sunya*-nature of all of determinate existence is revealed. *Sunyata*, as emptiness, means that the conventional world is not, as we fancy to think, composed of substances inherently existing; in truth, these entities are devoid of inherent existence--they are empty.

It is important to point out that what is denied by such criticism is not the conditioned world itself but our clinging to it as absolute, our ignorance. Thus, it is not the views or determinate entities as such which are denied by *sunyata* but rather our clinging to them, our misconceptions with regard to them. *Sunyata* does not deny the conditioned, relative world; it only denies our mistaking it as absolute.

As an example of the application of the critical method, let us consider the true nature of the “self”. Our first error, it is said, "is the imagination of absolute exclusiveness in regard to the 'I,' i.e., the entity that constitutes the object of the notion of 'I.' Now if “I” inherently exist, then there is an

absolute division between that which is 'I' and that which is 'not-I.' There is then no dependence of one upon the other. Each is independent and self-existent. But without mutual dependence how can 'I' be in any way related to 'not-I,' how can I know or be aware of the world at all? If I exist inherently, I am absolutely isolated and divided from the world with no possibility of experiencing it or affecting it. This is obviously absurd.

By revealing the contradictions that arise in this way from taking the “relative self” as absolutely existent, we reveal the *sunya*-nature, the relative and conditioned nature, of the “self”. We have then arrived at the truth with respect to the conventional world: that all things (in this case, the “self”) are empty of inherent existence. However, having denied the inherent existence of the “self”, suppose we now cling to this denial as itself absolute? In other words, we assert inherent non-existence, we make emptiness or relativity itself an absolute. Now in this case there is an absolute division between the relative and the absolute, the divided and the undivided. But then the undivided is not truly the undivided for it is divided from the divided. This contradiction forces us to surrender our clinging to the conditionedness of the conditioned as itself absolute.

At this point in the criticism we thus come to recognize that emptiness, *sunyata*, is not the ultimate truth. While this conditionedness and relativity of the “self” is its true nature in the conventional world, it is not its ultimate nature. Ultimately, the “self” is empty even of its conditionedness and relativity: it is ultimately empty of emptiness (*sunyata-sunyata*, as it is called). And since the conditionedness of the conditioned is ultimately conditioned, since the distinction between the conditioned and the unconditioned is itself conditioned, the conditioned is ultimately identical to the unconditioned reality.

Since criticism has revealed contradictions in clinging to both inherent existence and inherent non-existence, in the end we can neither absolutely assert nor absolutely deny the existence of the “self”. We are left with the *Middle Way*, passing between the extremes. "This is the unerring sense of 'I,' which comes with mature self-consciousness in which there is not the clinging to the determinate self either as absolutely determinate and therefore totally different from the undivided being or as itself an eternal independent substance." The method of criticism thus functions to cancel all exclusive claims to existence or truth, whether with respect to the mundane nature of things (taking the conditioned existence as unconditioned) or with respect to their ultimate nature (taking conditionedness of the conditioned as itself unconditioned).

7.3 Knowledge

What then is the unconditioned, the Real, the knowledge or experience of which will liberate one from ignorance, from clinging to error, including a permanent self-hood (soul) and reach one’s ultimate realization? The ultimate reality or Truth is *Sunya*, that one arrives at through the experience of Nirvana. Both the Advaita Philosophy (Hinduism) and the Madhyamika Philosophy (Buddhism) are philosophies of liberation of the “self” from ignorance, suffering, attachment, *maya*, etc. and both the schools propose ways to liberation / self-illumination / self-realization, viz., through *Samadhi* (Hinduism) and *Nirvana* (Buddhism).

The undeniable, ultimate reality or truth is *Sunya*, the unspeakable dharma. What then is this Truth, ultimate Reality, or *Sunya*, the unspeakable Dharma? Is it God or Brahman (the Supreme Being) or is it Atman (the Supreme Self) as exposed in the Advaita Vedanta?

The Buddhist doctrine on God, in the sense as ultimate Reality, is neither agnostic, nor vague, but clear and logical. This Reality (*Sunya*), whatever it is, cannot be known by our limited human

intellect. Therefore every attempt to describe it leads to error, not only, but is also useless and a waste of time. For these reasons Buddha himself kept 'a noble silence' regarding the ultimate Reality. If there is a Cause, an ultimate Reality, a limitless Luminosity, an eternal Noumena beyond all phenomena, it ought to be evidently infinite, unlimited, unconditional and without attributes. We, on the other hand, are evidently non-infinite, limited and conditioned by numerous attributes and in a certain sense constituted by them. As a consequence we are not able neither to define nor describe, nor usefully discuss the nature of That which is above comprehension of our limited capacity of knowing. We can indicate it through negations, and describe it indirectly, with analogy and symbols, but in any case they are but ideas that do not actually express the Unknown, the *Sunya*. "The Tao which can be expressed or described is not the eternal Tao".

In the same way Buddhism denies the existence of an immortal soul / atman in man. Buddha states that every form of life has three common characteristics: caducity, suffering (*sabbe sankhara dukkha* = all composite beings are suffering: birth, old age and decay, sickness, death) and the lack of a permanent soul (*anatta* = non-self or non-I) that separates every form from others. There is nothing that is definite or permanent, there is no repose, a permanent ground / being, whatever in the universe but only an incessant becoming and change without end. But, at the same time Buddhism affirms that there is an end to caducity and *dukkha* (suffering); there exists a path to salvation, namely, by understanding and following the Four Noble Truths - contained in the doctrine of *Sunyata*: suffering exists since the world is impermanent; there is a cause for suffering, viz., desire, clinging to the relative 'I' as absolute and real; there is an end to suffering since it is relative and is not ultimate; there exists a way that leads to end suffering, viz., the *Middle Way* that destroys the ignorance of clinging to the relative as absolute.

An individual can 'become' Buddha, illumined by the interior principle of Spiritual Illumination (*Nirvana*). The spiritual illumination, however, which is incised in life does not belong to any particular form of life. All that is proper of man is mutable and mortal, the Immortal does not appertain to anyone in particular. It is nothing but becoming that which we already are. It is the developing of one's own fullness in the inborn Spirit of Buddha, by destroying the illusion of the 'I' ('self'), due to ignorance and maintained by desire, which bind us to the chain of reincarnation (*samsara*), to the eternal Wheel of Becoming. Becoming Buddha is becoming what one actually is – that is realized in Nirvana, the state of Illumination. In this state of Illumination the individual self 'looses' itself in the eternal Illumination / eternal *Sunyata*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to ask: is it possible to reconcile the alleged difference between Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism regarding the nature of the "self" and its 'realization'?

On the metaphysical issue of the "self" (soul or atman) Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism (Madhyamic school) are at loggerheads with one another. Advaita Vedanta affirms the existence of Atman (soul or self) as the core of every human individual (a realist philosophy). Buddhism instead denies the existence of any self or soul substance (*Anatta* = *Anatman*) (anti-realist philosophy). This is a radical ontological antinomy.

When Buddhism and Vedanta are thus juxtaposed in a comparative perspective, the two systems present themselves as mutually exclusive and opposed to each other. An affirmation of the existence of Atman would presuppose a negation of the reality of *Sunyata*. Conversely, identifying reality of *Sunyata* would entail a denial of the existence of Atman. So, either it is Atman without *Sunyata*, or it is *Sunyata* without Atman.

But despite such an ontological antinomy the two systems have a common “metaphysic of transcendence” or a “transformative theology”. In the sense that both of them are proposals and affirmations of the possibility of ultimate enlightenment and liberation. For Advaita Vedanta the ultimate liberation is *Moksa*, for Buddhism it is *Nirvana*. Both of these notions are similar: attainment of salvation or final liberation from all forms of human bondage, including ignorance and *karma-samsara* (transmigration). How to reconcile the fact that two systems share a basically similar metaphysic of salvation with the fact that they are arch opponents on the issue of the ontology of the self?

Buddhism and Vedanta with their opposing ontological commitments nevertheless converge on the issue of salvation. This means that *Sunyata* is no impediment to ultimate liberation. And if the reality of *Sunyata* leaves no room for Atman, then it follows, by implication, that the non-existence of Atman is also no impediment to ultimate liberation. There is no doubt that here the metaphysics of ultimate liberation is severely underdetermined by the ontology of the self. But is the question of the self---its existence or non-existence---so very neutral with respect to the possibility of liberation?

No doubt that the question of the self is crucially related to the issue of ultimate liberation. The perplexity is that both the realist (Vedanta) and anti-realist (Buddhism) about the self are convergent on the idea of the possibility of ultimate, self-transformative liberation. Both of them propose a common theology of salvation not-with-standing both the parties hold on to the radically divergent ontological positions of self-denial and self-affirmation.

The Buddhist position claims the possibility of liberation without admitting any self-same, enduring bearer of the emancipatory experience. Ironically, self-extinction rather than self-existence is said to be a necessary condition for the possibility of emancipation.

Are these two positions reconcilable in some way or are they totally opposed to one another? To answer this question we need to have a closer look at what we have said regarding Atman which is identical with Brahman or the Absolute or the only Reality and it's only through an experiential, intuitive knowledge, one is able to realize this Truth and only in that state of mystical experience (Samadhi) one is able to enter into the state of realization or liberation. Buddhism, instead, is metaphysically oriented to Nothingness or Emptiness, (*Sunyata*), as we have mentioned above, so much so that Absolute Reality is identified with Absolute Nothingness and one's self-realization or liberation consists in attaining Nirvana, the state of “Nothingness” (*Sunyata*) or the state of enlightenment / illumination. Is there any substantive difference of specific content between a metaphysic of Being and a metaphysic of Nothingness, when both systems subscribe to an ultimate reality conceived in equally metaphysically absolutist terms? The metaphysical "sphere" of absolute Being may coincide with that of absolute Nothingness, and there may not be "internal" content-specific difference between the two.

Such a reconciliatory philosophical reconsideration of the ancient debate between Buddhism and Vedanta would yield a picture in which the two systems would be seen as being complementary to each other. In fact, through a process of logical analysis we can affirm that the concept of Atman is compatible with that of *Sunyata*.

As we have mentioned above, the position of the Upanishads and of Advaita Vedanta is that the ultimate Reality is Atman or Brahman, rather. Atman is Brahman. Atman does not refer to the individual entity or individual soul (*jiva*). It has no relationality except its relation to Brahman, which is, after all, a relation of identity characterizing the non-duality between the two. Atman cannot be described in terms of any attribute apart from its most general characterization as

something of the nature of pure consciousness, as we have mentioned above (*tatvam asi*). It is pure consciousness without any specific features. It is beyond description, it is attributeless. It is consciousness absolutely purged of all factual specificities.

If Atman is attributively free pure consciousness, and attribute-free consciousness entails consciousness not centred on any ego-specific point of view, then it is a "decentred" self inhabiting a "centreless" world. Consciousness decentred is also consciousness universalized; it is a perspectiveless consciousness empty of all contents, including the self. It is not an ego-centered consciousness. In this sense we can say that the Buddhist concept of emptiness (*sunyata*) is the idea of the self's emptying itself of accumulations of inner traits born of ego-specific consciousness.

Atman thus depicts the self as consciousness without any substantive content of empirically delimiting attributes. This picture seems to be akin to the Buddhist idea of "Nothingness" or *Sunyata*. Atman-consciousness is a kind of consciousness-as-nothingness inasmuch as it is empty of the attributes of ego-specific subjectivity. Transcendence from the life of a *Jiva* to that of Atman requires that the self render itself into emptiness (*Sunyata*) as far as the perspectival subjectivity of the former mode of life is concerned. It would therefore be no travesty of Vedantic truth to say that there is a great deal of *Sunyata* in the inner constitution of Atman. The Vedantic self is nourished by metaphysical nothingness. It is therefore no wonder that Sankara, the greatest protagonist of Advaita Vedanta, has been described as the Buddha in disguise.

What, on the other hand, about the alleged non-substantiality of ultimate reality as "Nothingness" or *Sunyata*? It would be equally wrong to overplay the negative connotation of the metaphysic of *Sunyata* to the point of losing sight of any affirmative connotation concealed behind that metaphysic. For one thing, the admission of the potentiality to attain and experience Nirvana is a clear indication of the substantiality of *Sunyata*-based existence. In this sense *Sunyata* evidently has an ontic import; and it even suggests an ontology of self akin to that of Vedanta. Buddhistic ultimate liberation - the attainment of Nirvana - is a substantial unitary transition from the unenlightened condition to the state of enlightenment. The possibility of this transition bespeaks of the substantial presence of a shadowy self in the metaphysical vacuum of *Sunyata*.

Furthermore, it must be stated that *Sunyata* is not *abhava* or non-existence, but held to be the ultimate ground of everything, the utmost original condition of reality prior to all conceptualization and phenomenal distortion. It is characterized as pregnant emptiness, vibrant void. Cast in terms of consciousness, *Sunyata* is a state of pure consciousness that one would revert to if one were able to empty oneself of any illusory constructions or impressions of an unchanging or permanent reality, whether of things or persons. This reversal to original subjectivity, which also has an ethical import, may be interpreted as one's "becoming" *Sunya* or empty. But "becoming" *Sunya* does not mean going out of existence. Rather, one can truly be oneself, or become truly self-aware, only by "becoming" *Sunya*. Otherwise, one continues to be in an un-awakened state---to be under the spell of *Avidya*.

Can we not say, now, that the Buddhist awakening in "the field of *Sunyata*" is most akin to the Vedantic realization of the ultimate identity of Atman with Brahman? And is not Brahman---the absolutely indeterminate (*Nirguna*) Ultimate Reality---itself more like a "field of *Sunyata*," the original ground of everything? It seems, therefore, that these speculations about the "complementarity" between Vedanta and Buddhism are on the right track. For such a reading of these two systems of thought helps us make more coherent sense of either position than what they seem to mean individually. What, then, is the complementary light of Buddhism on our understanding of Vedanta? It is essentially this: *Sunyata* is the only ground reality for the life of Atman. Atman without *Sunyata* would be like motion without energy.

In a similar vein, it can also be said that "becoming" *Sunya* or being in (the field of) *Sunyata* is virtually the same thing as being or "becoming" Atman. It is important that we recognize the negative overtone of *Sunyata* and its cognate *Anatman* has, as its counterpoint, an affirmative undertone. There is the negation of the un-awakened self---the self centred in an individualized field of consciousness and shackled to the perspectives tied to it. This negation forms the basis for a spontaneous affirmation of becoming awakened or enlightened---becoming a decentred self. In essence, consciousness-as-*Sunyata* manifests itself in the form of consciousness-as-Atman.

What transpires from the above discussions is a thesis that is better characterized in terms of convergence of Buddhism and Vedanta than in terms of their complementarity to one another. Of course each is a complementary perspective to the other in so far as our making coherent sense of either position is concerned. What we gain from such a complementary understanding of the allegedly incompatible juxtaposition of these two ancient systems of thought is that their apparent difference betrays a profound underlying unity. We have intimations of a "hidden" Atman of Buddhism on the one hand, and of the "silent" *Sunyata* in Vedanta on the other.

Main sources utilized for this article:

1. *Samadhi* (the school of yoga) and Advaita Vedanta (the school of Sankaracharya), cf. D. Acharuparambil, *Induismo, vita e pensiero*, Roma, Teresianum, 1976, pp. 83 – 118.
2. The exposition of the understanding of *Sunyata* is a summary of the article by Thomas J. McFarlane, "The Meaning of Sunyata in Nagarjuna's Philosophy", 1995, cf. http://www.integralscience.org/sacredscience/SS_sunyata.html, visited on 22.12.08.
3. The conclusion (possibility of a reconciliation between the experience of *sunyata* (Buddhism) and the experience of *atman* (Advaita Vedanta) is a summary of the article by Bijoy H. Boruah, "An attempt to reconcile the alleged difference between Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta on the nature of the Self", cf. http://www.thaixotictreasures.com/atman_of_vedanta_and_the_sunyata.html, visited on 22.12.08.

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