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Anatta to Śūnyatā

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Abstract

The long history of Buddhism is a brilliant authoritative witness of gradual trend of change that took place in the dissemination and development of Buddhism. The doctrine of *Anatta* (no-soul) is one of such concepts, which in course of time resulted into the concept of *Śūnyatā* (emptiness). The concept of *Anatta* rejects the then prevalent theory that there exists a permanent soul (*atta/ātmā*), the essential factor for the existence of a human being, and it transmigrates from one body to other, when the body decays. In course of time this very concept of *anatta* developed gradually into the concept of *Śūnyatā*, as propounded by Nāgārjuna. From the perusal of the texts, throw light on the this development, it could be marked that from Buddha to Nāgārjuna, it developed gradually in five stages – the views of Buddha, the Sarvāstivāda, the Mahāsāṅghika, the Prajñāpāramitā and Nāgārjuna. To highlight these aspects the present paper, entitled “*Anatta to Śūnyatā*” aims to delineate the concept of *Anatta* and its gradual development into *Śūnyatā*, adopting the research methodology of literary analysis.

Keywords: Buddhism; *anatta*, *dhamma*, *śūnyatā* etc.

Introduction

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha with the attainment of his Enlightenment (*Sambodhi*) i.e. the knowledge of absolute truth, he understood external as well as internal aspect of the world. As a result two kinds of perceptions dawned upon him – one, related to the ‘external aspect’ i.e. Buddha’s phenomenological aspect, and second, related to the ‘internal aspect’ i.e. Buddha’s ontological perception. But as a matter of fact, the time and the social circumstances in India at that time as indicated by the Buddha himself ^[i], allowed him to preach the doctrine only by his phenomenological perception. He hesitated in revealing his ontological perception to the mass as the people under the effect of attachment and hatred were either indulged in sensual pleasures or self-mortification. There was least possibility to be understood by such people the ontological aspects of the Buddha’s realization. This is why he preached his phenomenological realization through ‘Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*)’ in his entire life, dealing chiefly with ‘Suffering (*dukkha*)’ and its cessation (*dukkha-nirodha*) ^[ii]. *Dukkha* refers to the state of *saṃsāra* (world/mundane) while ‘*Dukkhanirodha*’ connotes the state of ‘*Nibbāna*’ (Sanskrit terminology of which is *Nirvāṇa*).

Explaining the various aspects of suffering, such as birth, disease, decay, death, etc. that appear in one’s life; the Buddha laid special emphasis on the concept what is called ‘Three-fold-doctrine (*trilakṣaṇa*)’, namely; ‘All conditioned state are impermanent (*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*)’, ‘All conditioned states are suffering (*Sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*)’, and ‘All states (conditioned and non-conditioned) are egoless (*Sabbe dhammā anattā*)’ ^[iii]. According to him these three characteristics are inherent features of the world. Because of being unaware of these characteristics one fosters desires to enjoy pleasant things to please ones sense-faculties, and also indulges in performance of sacrifices to get a better life. Such desires cause nothing, but only suffering. Further, he described the principle of ‘Twelve-linked-chain of causation i.e. Dependent Origination (*dvādasā-nidāna pratītya-samutpāda*)’ as cause of the recurrence of suffering in various forms. He also pointed out the ‘Path leading to the cessation of suffering (*dukkha-nirodha-gāmini-paṭipadā*)’ by enumerating the ‘Eightfold Noble Path (*Ariya-atthaṅgikamagga*)’ but he did not try to explain the ‘Cessation of suffering (*dukkha-nirodha*)’ or in other word ‘*Nirvāna*’ fully and well, as according to him, it is realizable not describable. *Nirvāna*, though, bears a negative sense, yet it suggests an ontological idea. And if the Buddha had tried to deal minutely with this point, just in the same way as he did with the other three points (suffering, its cause, and the path leading to its extinction), he would have to explain fully his ‘Introspectional Perception on Ontology’, which, however, was not favourable to the time and the social condition, then existing. But, after him his learned disciples attempted to elaborate in detail the state of *Nirvāna* along with phenomena as *śūnyatā*, *tathatā*, *dharmatā* etc.

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In this background, the following presentation aims to show that *Anatta* and *Śūnyatā* are the most important aspects of Buddha's teachings, representing both the phenomenological and ontological perception of the Buddha.

The term *Anatta* and *Śūnyatā*, in general parlance, appears referring to two distinct concepts, but they are in fact the two aspects of the same conception. Whereas the concept of *Anatta* denies the existence of any permanent essence in the personality of a human being, the concept of *Śūnyatā* emphasizes on the absolute unrestrictedness or transcendentalness of dharmas. The concept of *Śūnyatā* developed on account of the efforts made by the learned *Mahāyāna* monks to make clear exposition of Buddha's introspectional and ontological perceptions.

Available evidences suggest that Buddhism by and large divided into two traditions - '*Mahāyāna* (great vehicle)' and '*Hīnayāna* (small vehicle) in between 1st and 2nd century BCE. It was *Mahāyāna* scholar monks, who strove to systematize properly the concept of *śūnyatā*, the traces of which were, however, in existent in the texts like *Majjhimanikāya*, *Prajñā-pāramitāsūtra* ^[iv] etc. Consequently, the gradual evolution of the concept of '*Śūnyatā*' from the earliest Buddhist concept of *Anatta* (no-self), could be presented as follows.

1. Fundamental Buddhism: Anatta - Pañcakkhandha

The concept of *Anatta*, as enunciated by the Buddha, denies the 'substance view of the soul' ^[v]. As apparent from the teachings of Buddha, recorded in the *Mahāvagga*, a human being who suffers variously is the aggregate productions of five categories of elements – *rūpa* (form/matter), *vedanā* (feeling), *saññā* (perception), *saṅkhāra* (mental disposition), and *viññāṇa* (consciousness); and the formation of these aggregates as a unit or as a human being has always been dependent on certain causes (*hetu*) and conditions (*pratyaya*). The concept of *Parītya-samutpāda* (Dependent Origination) makes us aware of the process of the formation and reformation of these aggregates. In reality, there is no-self either in such formation or in the five aggregates, which constitute it. "Had there been any self in the aggregates of *rūpa* or *vedanā* or *saññā* or *saṅkhāra* or *viññāṇa*, we would have been in a position to call it as 'it is me', 'I should be like this', 'this is my self', and so on. But, we are not in position to claim so" ^[vi]. Therefore, it may be stated that there is no substance in an individual or worldly entity. It is so because all composite things are always subject to an invariable law of change, the law of cause and effect.

2. Sarvāstivāda ^[vii]: Anātma –Sarvāstivāda (Dharma-theory)

After the *mahāparinibbāna* of Buddha, this negative or anti-substantialist attitude remained continued and cherished in the *Abhidharma*, the underlying idea of which was that, whatsoever be designated as a self, an ego, a personality, an individual, a conscious agent and etc., is not real and ultimate. It is only a name, given to the agglomeration of *dharmas*, a multitude of inter-connected elements of existence, categorized as *skandh* (aggregate), *āyatana* (base) and *dhātu* (element). These components (elements) combine together to produce an inter-connected stream (*santāna*). There is a special force called *paccaya-satti* or *prāpti* which holds these elements combined and constitute the experience of a given personality. It operates only within the

limits of single stream and not beyond, having its root in the past existence and continuation in the future. *Sarvāstivāda* ^[viii], was one of the pioneer Buddhist School, which coined this *Dharma*-theory, according to which all cosmic existences are aggregate production of *dharmas*. Therefore, they are always subject to an invariable law of change as well as to a law of cause and effect. So there is no existence of eternal 'Universal Entity' or 'Individual Entity', which creates them. Thus far this opinion of the Sarvastivadins is not different from the concept of original Buddhism. But, this school designed a characteristic opinion to each of the *dharmas*, which constitute any worldly entity. According to this characteristic opinion the *dharmas* exist in the past, present and future, and have their own specific characteristics in addition to the three general characteristics – 'Impermanence', 'Suffering', and 'No-self'. The specific characteristics of the *dharmas* do not ever change, but the composite things, made up of those *dharmas*, are always subject to an invariable law of change. In other words, Sarvāstivāda maintains that though composite things are impermanent, the elements or substance constituting them are themselves permanent ^[ix].

3. Mahāsāṅghika: Anātma-adharmavāda

On the contrary, the *Mahāsāṅghika* school of Buddhism, which came into existence circa 100 or 110 years after the *Mahāparinirvāna* of Buddha, viewed differently the aforesaid concept, and the related opinion of *Sarvāstivādī-s*. The *Mahāsāṅghikas* viewed various cosmic existences, taken as composite things or in their elements all are non-existents ^[x]. As Vasumitra records in his *Nikāyabheda-dharma-mati-cakra-Śāstra* that the original *Mahāsāṅghika* School believed that "There is no existence of cosmic elements in the past and future, but they exist in the present only" ^[xi]. However, one of the *Mahāsāṅghika* sub-school (*Ekavyavahārika*) held that "All mundane (*loka*) and supra-mundane (*Uttaraloka*) existences are simply provisional names. In reality, there is no real existence ^[xii]. Hence the view of this school is known as *Anātma-adharmavāda* ^[xiii]. *Lokottaravada*, another branch of *Mahāsāṅghika* School refers to this view as '*Sunyātma-sunya-dharmavāda*' ^[xiv]. Consequently, it may be stated that the *Mahāsāṅghikas* as a whole, prepares ground for the development of similar doctrine like that of '*Sarva-Śūnyatā*' of *Mahāyāna-Sūtra*.

4. Prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra: Nirākāra sarva Śūnyatā

Following the trend set forth by the *Mahāsāṅghikas*, the *Prajñā-pāramitā-Sūtra* ^[xv], which is regarded as one of the most important set of *Mahāyāna-Sūtras* having record of the Buddha's ontological perception, defined elaborately the view of '*Anātma-adharma*' using the term '*Śūnyatā*' ^[xvi] or '*Śunyapurusa* - *Śunayadharmā*' ^[xvii]. Thus, the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* describes two forms of *śūnyatā* – *pudgala-nairātmya* (*śunyapurusa*) and *dharma-nairātmya* (*śunayadharmā*) ^[xviii]. As Nāgārjuna wrote in his *Prajñāpāramitāśāstra*: "There are two-fold '*śūnyata*; namely *puruṣa-śūnyatā* and '*dharma-śūnyatā*'. *Puruṣa-śūnyatā* has been preached in the *Hīnayāna* while *Dharma-śūnyatā* has been preached in *Mahāyāna*." ^[xix] Hence, it may be said that the doctrines of *Prajñāpāramitā* are actually development of *Mahāsāṅghika* ideas.

In the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* this two-fold *śūnyatā* is again explained under the following heads ^[xx]:

1. *Asamskrta-sūnyatā* (to be applied in the case of noumenal world i.e. unconditioned state).
2. *Samskrta-sūnyatā* (to be applied in the case of the phenomenal world i.e. conditioned state).
3. *Ātyanta-sūnyatā* (or absolute unrestrictedness in the case of both i. e. noumenal and phenomenal world). It should be noted here that, according to these *Sūtras*, all existence in the Universe, either noumenal or phenomenal, is *sūnyata*; therefore, it is absolute *sūnyatā*.

Sometimes this three-fold *Sūnyatā* is explained more elaborately under eighteen heads as we see in the *Maha-Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtra* ^[xxi].

Thus, after making an elaborate description of the *sūnyatā* from different angles, the *Prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra* talks of “*Nirākāra-sarva-sūnyatā*” (all is formless, emptiness) or “*Sarva-dharmānam sūnyatā na sa sakyabhilāpitum*” (All existence is *sūnyatā* and it cannot be explained) ^[xxii]. This view appears exactly similar to the idea of *Mahāsāṅghikas*.

5. *Nāgārjuna: Sūnyatā under two heads - Samvṛti satya and Paramārtha satya*

Nāgārjuna explained the idea of *sūnyatā* of *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* under two heads; namely, ‘*samvṛti-satya* (conventional truth)’ and ‘*paramārtha-satya* (ultimate truth)’ ^[xxiii]. According to *samvṛti* or conventional point of view’ all things exist provisionally because they are covered by the imposition of mind. But from transcendental point of view all things do not exist in reality, as they are relative and this very view is ‘*Ātyanta-sūnyatā*’ or ‘absolute unrestrictedness’ ^[xxiv].

To conclude, Buddhism analyses the world of experience into a multiplicity of basic factors, which began with earliest attempts to explain this situation by analysing it into five *khandhas*, twelve *āyatanas*, and eighteen *dhātus*. In the *Abhidharma* of the different schools of Buddhism we found the detailed analysis of these into 72 or 75 basic elements, technically called *dharma* ^[xxv]. The basic purpose of such analysis is to show that there exists no ‘unity’ or ‘substance, called ‘*atta*’. That is, there is no substance in individuality (*pudgala nairātmya*). The idea of *pudgala nairātmya* goes one step further to its logical conclusion in the analysis of *Mahāsāṅghikas*, *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* and *Nāgārjuna*. They considered that if *pudgala-nairātmya* is established, *dharma-nairātmya* cannot be escaped from the mark of unreality. They are inter-related and dependent and, therefore, unreal (*niḥsvabhāva*). For the *Mādhyamikas*, both the permanent self and the momentary state, which it sought to be resolved, are equally unreal. There is neither self over, and above the mental states nor can the latter cohere together without a binding unity. To think of reality as a substantial abiding self is kind of speculative dogmatism. To deny the reality of such self is no less dogmatic. According to *Nāgārjuna*, the Buddha’s contention was neither *ātmavāda* nor *anātmavāda*, but *sūnyatā*, that is, utter transcendence from all the idle speculations and mental fabrications. The end result of such concept relates to the elimination of ‘ego-centricism’ (as me and mine), the root cause of all worldliness.

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ⁱ “*Kicchena me adhigatam, halam ‘dāni pakāsituṃ.*

Rāgadosaparetehi, nāyam dhammo susambuddho.

Paṭisotagāmiṃ nipuṇaṃ, gambhīraṃ duddasaṃ aṇuṃ.

Rāgarattā na dakkhanti, tamokhandhena avuṭṭ’i.” – Mahāvagga. 1.5.7, p.

5

ⁱⁱ “*Pubbe cāhaṃ bhikkhave, etarahi ca dukkhañceva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodham.*” – Majjhimanikāya.1.3.2.248, VRI.1.194

ⁱⁱⁱ Dhammapada, verse nos. 277-279.

^{iv} According to the Mahāyāna tradition, Mahāyāna-Sūtras like *Prajñā-pāramitā-sūtras* etc. were kept hidden in the palace of Nāga king before *Nāgārjuna* who brought them from there before us; made their contents public; and systematized those contents, popularly known as the concept of ‘*Sūnyatā*’. But, this view is not entirely correct, as the traces of *sūnyatā* were present even in the Pāli Text *Majjhimanikāya*, as apparent from its suttas, known as ‘*Cūlasuññata*’ and ‘*Mahāsuññata*’. Of course *Nāgārjuna* may be credited as systematizer of the philosophy of *Mādhyamika* school of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

^v Encyclopedia of Hinduism Vol., p262.

^{vi} Mahāvagga -1.10.23.p.29

^{vii} This school is known so because it believes in the existence of all (Dharma) in the past, the present and the future.

^{viii} It is a branch of Hīnayāna tradition of Buddhism, which separated itself from the main body (*Saṅgha*) about 200-250 years after the Buddha’s *Mahāparinirvāṇa*.

^{ix} R. Kimura, p. 75

^x *ibid.*

^{xi} *ibid.*

^{xii} Paramartha’s commentary *Nikāya-avalambana-śāstra*, as quoted by R. Kimura.

^{xiii} Named so by R. Kimura. – *Ibid*

^{xiv} *ibid*

^{xv} Paramartha’s commentary on *Nikāya-avalambana-śāstra* of Vasumitra refers to the presence of *Prajñā-pāramitā* and *Avataṃsaka-sūtras* within 200 years after the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of Buddha. However, these texts were used by the *Mahāsāṅghikas* as *Paramārtha* inform us. Of course, those *sūtras* would not be in the same form then as are at present. There was, however, certainly some original nucleus. It was, in fact, *Mahāsāṅghikas* who manifested Buddha’s introspectional and ontological doctrines, which were embodied first in the Mahāyāna-sūtras, and ultimately came to be known as Mahāyāna Buddhism.

^{xvi} Many Buddhist scholars are apt to express the term ‘*Śūnyatā*’ in Mahāyāna Buddhism as ‘emptiness’. But it is a wrong rendering. The meaning of ‘*Śūnyatā*’ as explained in the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra and other Mahāyāna Sūtras may be translated as ‘absolute unrestrictedness’.

^{xvii} *Suvikrāntavikarami-piṭṭhā* of the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra.

^{xviii} From a statement of Paramārtha, we also come to learn that the Mahāsāṅghikas, too, upheld both the doctrines of ‘*Anātma-adharma*’ and ‘*Śūnya-puruṣa-śūnyadharmā*’.

^{xix} Prajñāpāramitāśāstra (quoted from R.Kimura, p.77)

^{xx} R. Kimura, p.78

^{xxi} For detail see R. Kimura, p. 78

^{xxii} Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, p.348, (quoted from R.Kimura, p. 76)

^{xxiii} R. Kimura, p. 79

^{xxiv} Ibid.

^{xxv} The *Abhidhamma* of Theravada School lists 72 *dharmas* while the *Abhidharma* of *Saravāstivāda* School lists 75 *dharmas*.

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Note: All the references related to Vasumitra, Paramartha, Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, Prajñāpāramitāsūtra etc. have been quoted as mentioned in the book of R. Kimura.