



Buddhism as a Solution in the Western World

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Drawing from Buddhist scripture and scholarship, Claire Smith argues that the principle of *sunyata*—or voidness—provides a valuable antidote to the frenzied commercialism and hyperindividualism that pervades Western culture, especially that of the United States. This essay was written for Comparative Religion with Dr. Zachary Simpson.

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, metaphysicians and theologians have tackled the looming, fundamental questions of human existence: What *is* existence? How do we know reality exists? What is the meaning behind it? Religions and schools of thought have brought comfort to people by creating and assigning meaning to the absurdity each of us is trying to navigate. The values and answers Buddhism provides are drastically different from the values that shape Western culture, especially when considering that Western culture has been heavily influenced by the Judeo-Christian traditions. But in the context of the current Western world, Buddhism could be very liberating for people.

We are living in a rapidly changing world, and as we progress in the realm of science, we as human beings often feel more and more insignificant. This world does not exist for us; we only exist within a

small slice of the timeline of life on Earth, floating on a very small speck in the grandness of the universe. With all of this in mind, Buddhism could provide us with solutions for the questions that particularly plague people today.

Many of the values and concepts within Buddhism can be incomprehensible and even shattering for those with Western worldviews. Buddhism focuses on the transience of things. It asks us to detach, as desire and attachment only cause suffering. It asks us to deny the existence of the self and the world as we know it. It suggests to us a nature of reality as described by *sunyata*, or formlessness, a sort of nonexistence of reality. These concepts are radical when applied to Western culture—a consumer culture that feeds on attachment and that defines happiness and success by material wealth.

Our world is abundant with *things*. We attach ourselves to material things because our culture and economy thrive off of them. Manipulative salespeople are successful because they profit off of gullible consumers. We put ourselves in debt because we want the latest car models, even though they depreciate in value as soon as they are driven off the lot. We consume because we worry about other people's perceptions of us; we consume because we think we will be happier if we *own* these expensive material things, though their value is determined by this culture which profits off of our desires.

But Buddhism tells us to strip away these perceptions. Reality is not how we perceive it to be. Taken to the extreme, none of this exists, and this is where we encounter the concept of *sunyata*.

A concept foreign to Western thought, *sunyata* is difficult to define in English. It is often translated as emptiness or formlessness, but it is more than that. It is described as transparency and wisdom and absoluteness.¹ It is a process; it is an acceptance of this voidness;

¹ Mu Soeng, *Heart Sutra: Ancient Buddhist Wisdom in the Light of Quantum Reality*, (Cumberland, RI: Primary Point Press, 1995).

but paradoxically, even the acceptance of *sunyata*, the conceptualization and labeling of the concept, goes against what *sunyata* embodies.

This concept of nothingness is hard to grasp in a world so defined by material things, but this passage by Mu Soeng from *Heart Sutra: Ancient Buddhist Wisdom in the Light of Quantum Reality* describes it well:

The only way to apprehend the dynamic nature of sunyata is through the transitory/momentary appearance of forms. If no forms were to be manifested through it, sunyata would be a dead, static mass but sunyata's function is to infuse the myriad forms. Thus, while sunyata itself is a process, the forms are a manifestation of that process and the process can be understood only through the momentary existence of the forms. It was in this sense of a dynamic, universal energy that ancient Mahayana Buddhism used the term *sunyata*.²

This brings us to the transitory nature of things. Buddhism reminds us that all is impermanent. Every second is fleeting, our lives are fleeting, and Buddhism embraces this. We are, right now, only a temporary embodiment of *sunyata*. The current human civilization that we live in is not the end goal of existence, and that can be hard to remember in an anthropocentric culture. One person's life is not more important than any other person's, or creature's, for that matter. This concept of impermanence can help us to climb down from the pedestal we have placed ourselves upon. It can help us to become more reflective, introspective beings, and to regard others with compassion. The knowledge that even this suffering is temporary in the grand scheme of things can help us live our day-to-day lives with more peace.

² Ibid., 24.

The “Hymn to the Dharmadhatu” of the Buddhist Scriptures is filled with musings on impermanence: “Because of arising dependently and ceasing dependently, not one thing exists as imagined by fools” and “the form of the sun, moon and stars are seen reflected in a clear vessel of water. The perfect nature (of all things) is like that (that is, appearing, but not existent).”³

In the same vein, Zen Master Soko Morinaga writes, “true existence is birth and death, repeating itself, every instant.”⁴ He writes that we become different versions of ourselves—a spouse one instant, a neighbor the next. He suggests that we die and be born again in each moment. Being present in each moment, accepting impermanence and allowing ourselves to die and be reborn, can be very freeing. It eliminates the burden of the past and future, though we can still influence the future by doing what we can *in this moment*. It forces us to focus on the now rather than worry about what cannot be undone or worry about the unknown.

In Western society today, it is more difficult than ever to be present. Having access to news, the Internet, and social media essentially whenever we want is a hindrance to presence. But making the effort to detach from this excessiveness of information can help us to destress. It can help us filter out some of the anger, fear, and despair we sometimes feel from this overabundance of information, and it can remind us to focus on what we can do directly in this moment to help others. And sometimes that means helping oneself first, for we cannot care for the world if we do not care for ourselves.

Focusing on oneself can be taken to the extreme, however, and Western culture, especially within the United States, is highly individualistic. When Americans think of happiness, we tend to think in terms of our individual selves. Funnily enough, we collectively cling

³ Donald S. Lopez, ed, *Buddhist Scriptures*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 469.

⁴ Morinaga, Soko. *Novice to Master: An Ongoing Lesson in the Extent of My Own Stupidity*, trans. Belenda Attaway Yamakawa (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004), p. 134.

to the idea of independence. We worship the ideal of the “self-made man,” and we want to be self-sufficient. We want the government to intervene in our lives as little as possible; we don’t want to pay taxes or pay for social welfare. We like capitalism because we think it gives us independence and we think we find freedom in the endless choices it gives us. We like that we can choose between generic unscented bar soap and name brand high-priced perfumed body wash. These choices allow us to define ourselves. They give us a sense of validation and agency in our lives. Finally, with the advent of social media came the ability to build platforms for virtual selves to exist. We could create a sort of personal brand based on carefully crafted images of a self that we want the world to see.

But this individualism can be lonely, and the plethora of options can be overwhelming. It is easy to actually lose one’s sense of self in this kind of society. We are unique, yet we conform; we feel pressured by other individuals to present ourselves as successful or self-sufficient, etc. We must try to sell ourselves to gain any attention. We start to lose authenticity.

Buddhism asks us to deny the existence of self. This is shown in a quote taken from a conversation between the Buddha and the arhat Subhuti: “The Buddha says that a bodhisattva must vow to lead all beings in the universe into nirvana, with the knowledge that there are no beings to be led into nirvana. ‘If, Subhuti, a conception of a living being were to occur to a bodhisattva, a conception of a personal soul, or a conception to a person, he is not to be called “a bodhisattva.””⁵

This may seem extreme, or hard to understand, but when thought of as an extension of *sunyata*, it is almost relieving. We are all just manifestations of this absolute truth, this emptiness we are trying to achieve. Even though we perceive life through our own experiences, we are equal to every other being as a part of *sunyata*. We are equal to every other being in wanting relief from suffering. In the

⁵ Lopez, *Buddhist Scriptures*, p. 451.

end, each of our lives end in the same ceasing of consciousness, the same returning to earth, to emptiness, to nonexistence. And emptiness, or nonexistence, is the alleviation of suffering.

Buddhism actually coexists quite well with what we know of science and spacetime and life. We know that we are transitory creatures, that in the grand scheme of things each of our lifetimes is but an instant, unnoticed by the vast, ever expanding universe. We know that the universe might end in heat death anyway, meaning entropy will prevail and existence will cease. Time will cease to exist, and without the conditions for life, so will consciousness. All of this will likely end in emptiness. The ancient Buddhists seem to have discovered some of the fundamental aspects of reality through spirituality and philosophy rather than modern science and technology.

We live in a culture in which science and religion frequently clash—from the discovery that the sun does not revolve around the earth to the theory of evolution. Suddenly we are no longer at the center of the universe, and we are but a part of the process of evolution. These scientific findings can cause life to seem meaningless, where religion provides us with meaning. Meaning brings comfort to people—it dispels the uncertainty and angst that stem from the questions of human existence. People feel safe under the control of a supreme being; they feel safe thinking that life has a greater meaning and that their *individual lives* have meaning. We cannot carry out basic functions if we have no reason to continue doing so.

Buddhism presents solutions that I think can lead us to be happier social creatures. It shifts the focus of happiness and achievement from a self-oriented, material sense to a more thoughtful sense of achievement—a broader, altruistic, authentic sense. It can help us to achieve presence and peace. And while religions can sometimes seem bound to the times and places from which they came, Buddhism strikes me as very adaptable. The fact that it is even appealing to Westerners is significant. It applies to every time and place, with little contradiction. The essential questions and experiences of the

human conditions have not changed, and I think Buddhism is a viable option which can provide us with relief in these uncertain times. ▶▶

▶▶ BIBLIOGRAPHY

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