

Emptiness in the Cuḷasuññatāsutta and the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā

Emptiness, or śūnyatā in Sanskrit (suññatā, Pāli), has become a core teaching of the Great Vehicle (Mahāyāna). The Pāli Canon of the Theravāda gives it no short shrift either. This essay analyzes and compares two discourses essential to awakening a view of emptiness in both traditions. The Cuḷasuññatāsutta of the Majjhima Nikāya records a course of training given by the Buddha which makes use of certain conditioned states of perception to attain a “real, not mistaken, pure and unsurpassed entry into emptiness” (M. 3.109). We arrive at this fruit with descriptors similar to those of nibbāna (nirvāṇa, Skt.). Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, or the Root Work on the Central Way, puts forth arguments that, with Candrakīrti’s Prasannapada, took form as the foundation of the Prasaṅgika-Madhyamaka school. There he asserts that emptiness is dependent arising. Both these teachings bring clarity to the other, and together they offer useful guidelines for seeing emptiness for what it neither is nor is not.

Early teachings of suññatā in the Cuḷasuññatāsutta

The Shorter Emptiness Discourse, also translated as the Lesser Discourse on Emptiness (by both Horner and Thanissaro), synthesizes oft-taught meditations on the formless (arupa) bases with the practice of seeing the emptiness present at each stage. Ānanda, as in many suttas, prompts the teaching with a question. “Once, Bhante, the Blessed One stayed among the Sakyans in the Sakyan town named Nigaraka. There, face to face with the Blessed One I heard, face to face I learned, ‘I dwell full of emptiness.’ Bhante, did I hear that right, learn that right, pay attention right, remember that right?” (M. 3.104) The Buddha answers that he has and goes on to guide him into that same emptiness. The apparent contradiction—I dwell full of emptiness (suññatāviharena bahulaṃ viharāmi)—anticipates how inadequate words are to describe the experience. The trance begins with evoked images of crowds, the perception of the palace of Migara’s mother, where the discourse takes place, as “empty of elephants, cattle and mares, empty

of gold and silver, empty of assemblies of women and men, being just this not empty—the unity grounded on this group of monks” (M. 3.104). Two important points arise here. First, to see emptiness we proceed by seeing what is not present. Next, that unity (ekatta) appears at each step of the approach. Far from being a descent into chaos, the teaching guides us from diversity and multiplicity to oneness.

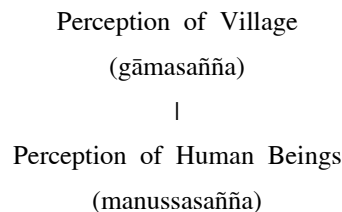
What follows are specific mind-made perceptions that serve as signposts on a path that enters into suññatā. In order to understand what these point to we need to clear up what sañña, in English normally translated as perception, means. The prefix sa- gets used extensively in Sanskrit and Pāli to imply conjunction and completeness (Rhys-Davids). The particle -ñā has roots in the Sanskrit -jñā, to know. Awkward English might render sañña then “together knowing.” So when the sense of the color blue in eye-consciousness (cakkhuvīññāna) comes together with what we know to be blue in mind-consciousness (manovīññāna), the perception of blue (nīlasañña) arises. This is near to what semiotics refers to as a sign, the representation of a thing. Sañña also has the meaning of signal, the Latin signum tracing back to a common Indo-European root. So nothing abstract is meant by the term. Just as we might follow an ordered succession of cities to drive from New York to Boston, with Providence coming after New Haven if at all, this succession of saññas guide the way into emptiness.

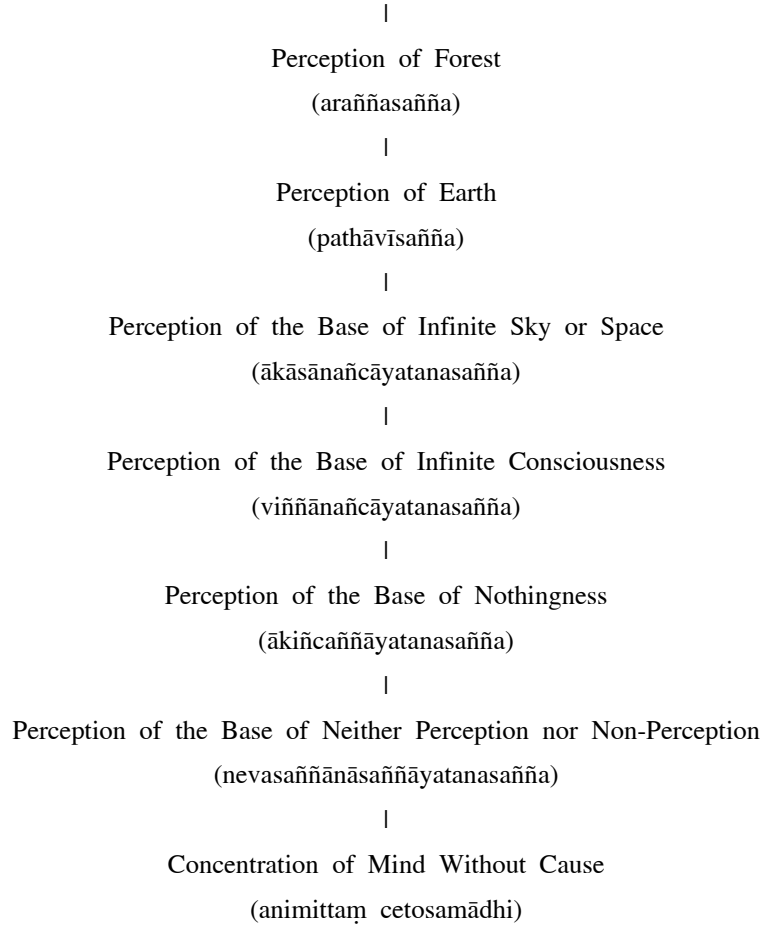
The trail opens in the mind made one grounded on the perception of forest (araññasaññaṃ paṭicca manasi karoti ekattam) (M. 3.104). The Buddha underscores this and all following stages by pointing out the two former perceptions we have now passed and to which we no longer give our attention (amanasikarivā, lit. “not having made in mind”), namely, the perception of a village and the perception of people. Beyond these two “the mind becomes satisfied, pleased, settled and freed” grounded on the perception of forest (M. 3.104). At the outset of training or cultivation (bhāvanā) then, we have dispensed with two of the main mediums of stress and anxiety experienced in common life: the disturbances grounded on the perception of village and the disturbances grounded on the perception of human beings. The Pāli word darathā comes from the Sanskrit root dṛ used to convey bursting, breaking asunder or splitting open. So these

disturbances are not mere distractions but cataclysmic ruptures in the fabric of consciousness. This is clear to anyone who has searched for permanence in either of these two perceptions.

Next comes the specific act of knowing that takes place when only the unity grounded on the perception of forest remains not-empty (*asuññatā*). “Now as to what is really not there, that he sees as empty, but as to whatever there is left he knows, ‘This being, that is’” (... *taṃ santamidaṃ atthīti pajānāti*) (M. 3.104). Having bypassed the ruptures grounded on the former two perceptions, we see what remains to be dependently arising. The phrase given here is a concise version of, “This being, that comes to be; this arising, that arises; this not being, this does not come to be; this ceasing, that ceases” (*imasmim̐ sati, idaṃ hoti; imassuppādā, idaṃ upajjati; imasmim̐ asati, idaṃ na hoti; imassa nirodhā, idaṃ nirujjhatī*) (M. 2.32), the standard formula for *paṭiccasamuppāda* (lit. grounded arising, as in this arises grounded on or dependent on that.) The pith of this is that in emptiness we see clearly dependent arising. This holds true whatever the this or that referred to refers to, be it a squirrel freezing to death because its body is too old to keep warm in winter, or be it an acorn putting out a root and sprout when mild air, sunlight, rotting plant matter and moisture are present. Given that all things are interdependent, there is nothing which is not the causes or conditions, in some way, of something else. “This just so, Ānanda, a real unmistakable, pure and unsurpassed entry into emptiness (*suññatāvakkanti*) comes to be (M. 3.104). So knowing, ‘This being, that is,’ we go into emptiness.

As this practice is self-consciously conditioned, the above formula repeats itself, continuing through six further stages until conditioning itself is abandoned. The diagram below traces the path into deeper levels of emptiness:





The first four give way to the four formless bases and then, before doing away with fabricated states, the concentration of mind without cause. In a sense, by undergoing this training we peel away layers of an onion, seeing clearly the cast-off skin of which we are now empty, to penetrate the thusness of what remains.

The perception of earth is of earth devoid of hindrance. “Just as a bull’s hide is stretched free from wrinkles with a hundred stakes, even so—without attending to all the ridges and hollows, the river ravines, the tracts of stumps and thorns, the craggy irregularities of this earth—he attends to the singleness based on the perception of earth” (Thanissaro, M. 121). This would seem an abstraction for those accustomed to varied or rugged terrain. This practice, then, would make the mind one grounded on that which

can be passed over, not that which impedes. We could compare it to the distinction between the hopelessness arising at the sight of a steep, high mountain pass that need be crossed and the gradual practice of finding only the next rock on which to step. If we see the mountain we see hindrance, if we see a path we come and go freely.

The perception of the first of the formless bases—the base of infinite space (ākāsānañcāyatanasañña)—continues in this vein, though now there is no hindrance in any direction. Ākāsa translates as sky or space, anañca as without end, and āyatana in Sanskrit as place, abode, home or seat (Apte). The current English usage of the word base conveys these all well. In the Vedas ākāsa is the fifth element (dhātu) after air, fire, water and earth, unique from them in that it cannot be displaced. The respective qualities (paramānas) of temperature, color, flavor and odor are actively transmitted by emptiness.pdfthe first four. Sound, being seen not to move, accordingly arrives through space. Buddhaghosa describes this base in the Visuddhimagga as: “‘Unbounded space’: Here it is called ‘unbounded’ because neither its end as its arising nor its end as its fall are made known. It is the space left by the removal of the kasina [meditation object] that is called ‘space.’ And here unboundedness should be understood as [referring to] the attention also, which is why it is said in the Vibhaṅga: ‘He places, settles, his consciousness in that space, he pervades unboundedly, hence ‘unbounded space’ is said (Vibh. 262)’ (Vis. 10.23). Infinite space and emptiness might appear similar, but there are crucial differences. From the view presented in the Pāḷi Canon, in infinite space there still exist the disturbances arising from compounded or conditioned phenomena. So the perception of infinite space is subject to suffering, whereas emptiness, as we will come to see, is unconditioned, and so not subject to suffering. We must be careful, though, not to let emptiness become a thing in itself. It is that kind of thinking that Nāgārjuna works to dissipate. Empty means empty of all conditioned phenomena. It is not yet another conditioned phenomenon.

The next base is that of infinite consciousness, which of all four most clearly shows the pervasiveness of suffering. With no end to consciousness things can’t but be interdependent. This base would seem to be subject to differentiation—the Pāḷi word

viññāna translates literally as “divided knowing” (Rhys-Davids). Without an end to consciousness there can be no I, you, he or we opposed to they, only displacements in the locus and the intensity of suffering. At this point we have passed beyond the perception of infinite space, so even to use terms like displacement and locus is misleading. Buddhaghosa comments: “So having ended his attachment to that [boundless space], he should give his attention to the base consisting of boundless consciousness as peaceful, adverting again and again as ‘consciousness, consciousness’ to the consciousness that occurred pervading that space [as its object]. He should give it attention and review it, and strike at it with applied and sustained thought; but he should not give attention (simply) in this way ‘boundless, boundless’” (Vis. 10.25). He makes two good points here. One, that this infinite consciousness pervades infinite space, and two, that this is not an homage to mere boundlessness.

In the perception of the bases of nothingness (*ākāñcaññāyatana*) and neither perception nor non-perception (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*) we pass beyond having even the abstraction of an object. First “there is nothing” (*natthi kiñcī*) (M. 1.41) as the Buddha describes the base of nothingness on numerous occasions. Though the act of perceiving is still present, there is no object to perceive, not even the undifferentiated wholeness of all things—that is a thing. This is a feat of stillness in the mind that takes much effort to sustain. It is good practice for leaving off grasping—what is there to grasp here? The perception of the base of neither perception nor non-perception surmounts even the act of perceiving, engaging the mind in a paradox through which it abandons all engagements. This is the end-all of transcending dualism: how could one describe through innately oppositional words that which is not perception and not not perception either? Just this?

Buddhaghosa sums these four up as follows: “Of these, the first is due to surmounting signs of materiality, the second is due to surmounting space, the third is due to surmounting the consciousness that occurred with that space as its object, and the fourth is due to surmounting the disappearance of the consciousness that occurred with space as its object” (Vis. 10.58).

Before the complete disappearance of constructed thought brings us even further into a mire of paradox, which, paradoxically, instills clarity, we enter the concentration of mind without cause (animittam cetosamādhī). With this the only things not empty are “the six [sense] bases grounded on this body dependent on life” (imameva kāyaṃ paṭicca saḷāyatamkaṃ jīvitapaccayāti) (M. 3.108). With the realization that even this concentration without cause has been created and that whatever is created is impermanent (anicca) and ceasing (nirodhadhammanti) the mind is freed of the fluxes (āsavā) of sense-desire (kamā), coming to be (bhavā) and ignorance (avijjā). The formula common to the Buddha’s declaration of attaining nibbāna is invoked: “Birth destroyed, the holy life fulfilled, what is to be done done, there is no more coming to be here” (M. 3.108). Thus we are left with the six sense bases grounded on this same body, dependent on life, and the dependent arising discernible there, in a real, not mistaken, pure and unsurpassed emptiness. This is the suññatā taught in the suññatā.

The emptiness of emptiness in Nāgārjuna

Nāgārjuna’s *Root Work on the Central Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*) speaks from a later vantage point. Here, confronted by convincing arguments which threaten to distort a clear view of emptiness, Nāgārjuna must expose the inadequacies of those who would refute him without taking any one stance that would imply the inherent existence (svabhāva) of any thing. Although śūnyatā is central to the whole of his argument, three of the parīkṣas deal with it in detail: the Examination of the Aggregates (skandha-parīkṣa), the Examination of Compounded Phenomena (saṃskara-parīkṣa) and the Examination of the Noble Truths (arya-satya-parīkṣa).

The final two verses of the Examination of the Aggregates offer skillful releases from the kind of conflicts arguments on emptiness can provoke. The first reads: “When an analysis is made through emptiness, if someone were to offer a reply that reply will fail, since it will presuppose exactly what is to be proven” (Mk. IV, 8). This has a similar movement to the Buddha’s teaching above where we look at what is left not-

empty to see, “This being, that is.” Here, what is presupposed is the disturbance, which equals what is to be proven. A comparison could be made with a delusional farmer tending his fields in a long drought. Though he might refuse to accept that there is no rain, arguing that there is rain presupposes what is to be proven, which is that there is rain. No amount of arguing changes the fact, though the fact changes as all things change. The sky empty of rain is just so, when it rains it is just so, without conflict. Any argument in defiance of this suchness must by definition presuppose what is to be proven. Garfield, whose translation from the Tibetan is the one cited here, argues along similar lines that “anything an opponent would want to demonstrate to be inherently existent would fall prey to the causal paradoxes developed in this chapter” (Garfield, 147). In order to prove inherent existence he must first assume inherent existence, which is again exactly what is to be proven. The next verse mirrors the above: “When an explanation is made through emptiness, whoever would find fault with it will find no fault, since the criticism will presuppose exactly what is to be proven” (Mk. IV, 9). Here rather than analyzing Nāgārjuna speaks of explaining, and of someone who would find fault with that explanation. This would be as if, for example, Ānanda disagreed with the Buddha’s explanation of emptiness above. He might argue that consciousness inherently exists, apparently refuting the statement that the perception of the base of nothingness is empty of consciousness, since something that inherently exists cannot arise and disappear. But for consciousness to exist inherently we would need first to assume that an inherently existent thing (svabhāvadharma) exists. That, again, is what is to be proven.

The Examination of Compounded Phenomena sees those same compounded phenomena to be deceptive and thus false, with only emptiness remaining as true. Just as the abandoning of all created or conditioned states leads to true emptiness in the *Cuḷasuññatāsutta*, here Nāgārjuna argues: “If whatever is deceptive is false, what deceives? The Victorious Conqueror has said about this that emptiness is completely true” (Mk. XIII, 2). A view might arise that there is some thing that deceives, but how could that be if that which deceives is false? A thing proven to be false is empty of

anything that could be designated a thing. So it is emptiness that must be understood if we are to understand what is true. He goes on to say much the same: “All things lack entity (hood), since change is perceived. There is nothing without entity because all things have emptiness” (Mk. XIII, 3). So while there is no entity to be found, there is also no thing lacking entity—that thing would not be empty. The question that begs is, how could there be change if there are no entities? He must show that change does not occur from one entity to another, so he continues: “If there is no entity (hood), what changes? If there was entity, how could it be correct that something changes?” (Mk. XIII, 4). Without entity nothing can be said to change, as change implies not-change or permanence, what would be proper to an entity. If there was such an entity, though, how could anything change? That same permanence would be compromised by a change, and what we had thought to be an entity would in fact be a sham. So we must find ground between these. “A thing itself does not change, something different does not change, because a young man doesn’t grow old and because an old man doesn’t grow old either” (Mk. XIII, 5). The thing itself, here the young man, does not change as the change would uncover what was falsely presupposed to be a thing itself. But it is not so simple as to say that something other than this thing changes, as for the example of the old man. When we call a thing a thing we make a conventional designation, as will become clear in the Examination of the Noble Truths. That thing is not a thing in any real sense. “If a thing itself changed, milk itself would be curd. Or curd would have come to be an entity different from milk” (Mk. XIII, 6). In Kalupahana’s translation from the Sanskrit he renders the first clause of this verse “If change were to be of itself” (84). Herein lies the difficulty of working with such a precise argument. The crux is that somehow we need to find a middle path between seeing milk and curd as the same and seeing them as different.

These arguments might leave the listener grasping for something to call real, and what seems the only thing left is emptiness itself, but the final two verses of this chapter do not even allow that. “If there were even a trifle nonempty, emptiness itself would be but a trifle. But not even a trifle is nonempty. How could emptiness be an

entity?” (Mk. XIII, 7). With something not empty, that which we call emptiness would be only provisional or conventional, not something ultimately true. Here we must be careful not to get bogged down in words. To take the *Cuḷasuññatāsutta* literally and apply it to Nāgārjuna’s argument, we could say that in the unsurpassed emptiness the six sense bases grounded on this body and dependent on life are not empty, rendering emptiness but a trifle. For this reason, in the Examination of Seeing, Nāgārjuna shows how even the *āyatanā* themselves are empty. To say they are empty is not to say they are not there, nor is it to say they are there. So as not to end up stuck in the view of emptiness he says, “The victorious ones have said that emptiness is the relinquishing of all views. For whomever emptiness is a view, that one will accomplish nothing” (Mk. XIII, 8). Nāgārjuna is not interested in the views of those who cling to emptiness as a thing in itself.

In the Examination of the Noble Truths Nāgārjuna looks at the things that any practitioner of the Buddha’s teaching holds most dear: the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, and the Four Noble Truths. Without straying from what is empty, he thereby overturns the views of those who would, in their view of emptiness, do away with these as well. First he delineates the opponent’s fabricated argument: that in this emptiness there is no arising or ceasing, meaning no Four Noble Truths, no knowledge of the first, no abandonment of the second, no cultivation of the third, no realization of the fourth (as revealed in the *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta*), no fruits of good or bad karma, and so no one to attain those fruits (Mk XXIV, 1-3). Without these there is no Saṅgha, and without the Four Noble Truths, no Dharma (Mk XXIV, 4). In the absence of these, he asks, “How can there be a Buddha? If emptiness is conceived in this way, the Three Jewels are contradicted (*pratibādhase*, lit. pushed away)” (Mk XXIV, 5). Through the compassion of seeing how the opponent is harmed by this view, he presents the distinction that has now become a classic teaching in Mahāyāna practice, namely, that there are two truths: conventional truth (*lokasaṃvṛtisatya*, lit. “truth of the world’s procession”) and ultimate truth (*paramārthatasatya*, lit. “truth beyond meaning”) (Mk XXIV, 8). Their relationship is as follows: “Without a foundation in conventional

truth, the significance of the ultimate cannot be taught. Without understanding the significance of the ultimate, liberation is not achieved” (Mk. XXIV, 10). In the *Cuḷasuññatāsutta* we proceed from the conventional animals, money and assemblies of the palace along a path into uncreate emptiness. Without understanding what the uncreate is empty of we cannot know it to be empty. The intertwining of the two truths is not a mere sideshow but a teaching crucial to understanding the nature of emptiness.

Having clearly exposed the nihilistic tendency of such views on emptiness using the fundamental refuges, Nāgārjuna now proceeds by way of dependent arising. “If you perceive the existence of all things in terms of their essence, then this perception of all things will be without the perception of causes and conditions. Effects and causes and agent and action and conditions and arising and ceasing and effects will be rendered impossible” (Mk, XXIV, 16-17). Just as the Buddha taught that we must know the “this being, that is” that remains at each unfolding of emptiness, Nāgārjuna here gets to the heart of why an inherently existent entity must needs obscure this from view. By now he has shown how this wrong take on emptiness has come to negate all of the most basic tenets of the Buddha’s teaching. Next, then, comes the assertion that has been waiting to be uncovered all along, that has put this work in such a prominent position amongst those who study the Buddha’s teaching: “Whatever is dependently co-arisen, that is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the Middle Way” (Mk. XXIV, 18). This crystal opens wide all the doors to the rooms of distorted views Nāgārjuna has entered in hopes of convincing others of the ignorance of their views. *Pratītyasamutpāda* (above in Pāli, *paṭiccasamuppāda*), though merely a name itself, is emptiness. All else is made, though all that too is empty.

In both the gradual trainings of the Buddha in the *Cuḷasuññatāsutta* and the keen arguments of Nāgārjuna, the same fundamental point remains clear: with deeper realizations of the emptiness of all things, we see with ever clearer vision the uncreate suchness of “this being, that is.” This essay does not intend to gloss over the vast historical chasms between these two texts and the two traditions they represent. It intends only to show how in their basic teaching they are imbued with a deep harmony.