

Buddhist Śūnyatā & Western Philosophy

Steve Odin
University of Hawaii at Manoa

Introduction

In this paper I explore the notion of Buddhist śūnyatā (*ku*)^a or “emptiness” as a trans-cultural theme for East-West comparative philosophy and Buddhist-Christian interfaith dialogue. Here I endeavor to show how the concept of śūnyatā, without question the central idea of Mahayana Buddhism, has been translated/interpreted in terms of live key notions which have emerged from major currents in the Western philosophical tradition, including: (1) the *epochē* of ancient Greek skepticism, (2) the *kenōsis* of Christian theology, (3) the “openness” of Continental phenomenology, (4) the *différance* of French deconstructionism, and (5) the “relativity” of Whiteheadian process metaphysics. It is my contention that each of these five key notions from Western philosophy may be regarded as either a possible translation of, or a functional equivalent to, the category of śūnyatā in Buddhism. In such a manner the present essay aims to provide a brief yet wide-ranging overview of Buddhist śūnyatā as illuminated from a variety of diverse Western philosophical perspectives.

(1) Śūnyatā as Epochē in Buddhism & Skepticism

One of the most fascinating currents of Western philosophical thought which has been employed to interpret the Buddhist philosophy of the Middle Way based on the principle of śūnyatā or “emptiness” is that of ancient Greek skepticism in the tradition of Pyrrho (c. 360–275

B.C.) as preserved in the extant writings of Sextus Empiricus (fl. c. 200 A.D.). As has been clarified by Jay L. Garfield in his article "*Epochē* and *Śūnyatā*: Skepticism East and West" (1990, 285–307), the functional equivalent to Buddhist śūnyatā in the tradition of ancient Greek skepticism is the notion of *epochē*. The ancient Greek term *epochē*, meaning "suspension of judgment," essentially refers to a *non-positional* attitude of neither affirming nor negating. By this analogy, both the śūnyatā of Buddhism and the *epochē* of Greek skepticism are salvific insofar as they are directed toward the removal of human suffering by liberating the mind from its obsessive attachment to dogmatic assertions through suspension of judgment.

Skepticism and Buddhism have both often been erroneously conflated with the position of nihilism. However, like Buddhism, the ancient Greek skepticism of Sextus Empiricus is in fact a *healing* tradition based on the *medical* conception of philosophical inquiry as having a primarily *therapeutic* function. For Sextus, skeptical inquiry was not a nihilistic assault upon our cognitive life, but, as he conveys through various medical analogies, a mode of philosophical therapy, to cure us of our metaphysical afflictions caused by dogmatic assertions and extreme views. Sextus introduced the therapeutic model of philosophy into the Western intellectual heritage, thus initiating a profound tradition of skepticism culminating in the philosophical therapy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who expresses the curative function of linguistic analysis in *Philosophical Investigations*, asserting: "The philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness" (1953, 255). Sextus explicitly describes the therapeutic function of skeptical inquiry in the tradition of Pyrrho through a series of medical analogies. In the words of Sextus:

The Sceptic wishes, from considerations of humanity, to do all he can with the arguments at his disposal to cure the self-conceit and rashness of the dogmatists. And so just as healers of bodily ailments keep remedies of various potency, and administer the powerful ones to those whose ailments are violent and the lighter ones to those with light complaints, in the same manner the Sceptic too propounds arguments ... capable of forcibly removing the condition of dogmatist self-conceit (Hallie 1985, 128).

Buddhist scriptures like the famous *Lotus Sutra* (*Myōhō-rengyō*) portray the Buddha as the excellent physician whose teachings are all *upāya* (*hoben*) or "skillful means" functioning like medical remedies for different kinds of illness. R. Birnbaum's work *The Healing Buddha* (1979) is a good source text of scriptures describing various

healing buddhas and bodhisattvas, accompanied by a historical account of Buddhism as a therapeutic system of psychosomatic healing. Starting with his first sermon, the famous *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*, the Buddha set forth his analysis of the cause of all human "suffering" (*dukkha*) and the means to its removal through the "four noble truths," which may be characterized in the form of a medical prescription as follows: (1) problem: suffering; (2) cause: attachment to dogmatic views; (3) solution: tranquility (*nirvana*); and (4) the way: non-attachment to dogmatic views by following the Middle Path [of *śūnyatā*]. Just as the Buddha was the "excellent physician" whose approach to religious salvation was based on an analysis of the cause of and solution to all human suffering, likewise, Sextus Empiricus was by occupation a medical physician in ancient Greece who understood skepticism as a therapeutic mode of inquiry leading to the diagnosis and cure of human illness. In Greek skepticism, a parallel formula can be similarly expressed, again taking the form of a medical prescription: (1) problem: mental perturbation; (2) cause: attachment to dogmatic assertions; (3) solution: mental tranquility (*ataraxia*); and (4) the way: non-assertion through *epochē* or suspension of judgement. It can thus be said that both the Buddhist philosophical tradition based on the principle of *śūnyatā* and ancient Greek skeptical tradition based on the notion of *epochē* are to be understood as a mode of *philosophical therapy*, whose aim is to cure the philosopher of his addiction to dogmatic assertions.

Similar in purport to the well-known Buddhist metaphor of discarding the "raft" once the *upāya* or "expedient means" of the Great Vehicle of Buddhism has delivered one to the golden shore of nirvana, Sextus likewise uses the metaphor of discarding the "ladder" by which one has escaped from the dangers of dogmatic assertion, a metaphor which later reappears in the *Tractatus* of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Moreover, Sextus repeatedly uses the medical metaphor of the laxative that purges itself together with the ill it aims at curing. The prescribed medicine for our metaphysical-epistemological ills caused by attachments to dogmatic assertions and absolutist cravings for extreme views is the pill of skeptical inquiry. But when the poison is purged, the skeptical inquiry is no longer necessary. This medical metaphor also frequently appears in the Middle Way tradition of Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika Buddhism. Candrakīrti quotes the *Ratnakūṭa sūtra*: "One for whom, in turn, the absence of being itself becomes a dogmatic view I call incurable. It is, Kāśyapa, as if a sick man were given a medicine by a doctor, but that medicine, having removed his ills, was not itself expelled, but remained in the stomach The absence of being is the exhaustion of all dogmatic views. But the one for whom the absence of being itself becomes a fixed belief, I call incurable." Hence, in the Middle Way tradition of

Buddhism, śūnyata or "emptiness" (= absence of being), defined here in epistemological terms as *the exhaustion of all dogmatic views*, is only a medicine, which like the laxative metaphor of Sextus, must be itself expelled together with the illness for which it is the remedy. It is for the purpose of healing our addiction to the medicine of śūnyata itself that the Prasāṅgika-Mādhyamika tradition established by Nāgārjuna prescribes yet a more potent remedy: namely, śūnyata of śūnyata— the emptiness of emptiness.

Sextus regards skepticism as not simply an academic discipline of philosophical analysis, but as an *agoge*, a way of life. Hence, just as Buddhism is regarded as a *marga* (*tao*; *do*) or way to enlightenment, similarly, ancient Greek skepticism in the Pyrrhonic tradition of Sextus Empiricus was considered to be an *agoge* or way leading to peace, wisdom, and happiness. Just as the *marga* or way of Buddhism aims toward the supreme goal of tranquility in nirvana, so the *agoge* or way of ancient Greek skepticism is ultimately directed toward the realization of *ataraxia*, "mental tranquility" or "imperturbability." The mental tranquility of *ataraxia* in turn produces *eudaimonia*, "happiness." Sextus describes the skeptical path leading to the state of mental tranquility as follows:

[T]he Sceptic's end, where matters of opinion are concerned, is mental tranquility [*ataraxia*]; in the realm of things unavoidable, moderation of feeling is the end Upon his suspension of judgment [*epochē*] there followed, by chance, mental tranquility in matters of opinion He does not exert himself to avoid anything or seek after anything, and hence he is in a tranquil state (Hallie: 1985, 41).

In the Prasāṅgika-Mādhyamika tradition of Buddhism established by Nāgārjuna, forceful arguments are applied against extreme views, thereby leading to nirvana or tranquility through attaining the wisdom that cognizes the medicine of śūnyata or emptiness, understood in epistemological terms as the exhaustion of all dogmatic assertions through cessation of judgment. Similarly, the tradition of ancient Greek skepticism established by Sextus proceeds through the method of "equipollence," which employs a series of *tropes*, arguments of equal force leveled against pairs of dogmatic assertions. Through this method the skeptic opposes to every dogmatic proposition another proposition of equal strength, thereby leading to the balanced condition of "equipollence" (*isostheneia*), meaning "equal force on both sides." Equipollence then leads to *epochē* or "suspension of judgment," the non-positional attitude of neither affirming nor negating. The achievement of *epochē* in turn results in the state of *ataraxia*, "mental tranquility." For example,

consider an opposing pair of dogmatic views such as "God exists" and "God does not exist." Arguments of equal strength are applied to both dogmatic assertions, leading to a condition of "equipollence," followed by *epochē* or suspension of judgment, finally culminating in the ultimate state of *ataraxia*, mental tranquility. Hence, similar to the Prāsangika-Mādhyamika Buddhist tradition which adheres to a Middle Way between all extreme views, so the skeptic aims to achieve moderation with regard to all matters of opinion, thus adopting a *via media* between all opposing pairs of dogmatic assertion.

Just as Buddhism aims to achieve the tranquility of nirvana through śūnyatā or the exhaustion of all dogmatic views, so the Greek skeptic endeavors to realize the tranquility of *ataraxia* through *epochē*, the suspension of judgment. In this context, the non-positional "suspension of judgment" involved in both the *epochē* of skepticism and the śūnyatā of Buddhism signifies "emptiness" in the sense of what Zen Buddhism calls the state of *mushin*² or "empty mind," as well as the state called *fushiryō*³ or "not-thinking." A lucid example of how the *kōan* meditation of Zen parallels the method of equipollence whereby the Greek sceptic achieves *epochē* and *ataraxia* can be seen in the famous *kōan* of "Mu!": "A monk once asked Master Joshu [Chao-chou], 'Has a dog the buddha nature or not?' Joshu said, 'Mu!'" In his thirteenth-century commentary, the Chinese Zen master Mumon (Wu-men Hui-k'ai) clarifies that this "Mu!" is not to be understood in its literal sense as "No!": He writes: "The dog! The buddha nature! The truth is manifested in full. A moment of yes-and-no: Lost are your body and soul" (see Kasulis 1981, 10). In this case, reflection on the paradoxical *kōan* results in what Zen master Mumon calls "A moment of yes-and-no." This is precisely the condition which Sextus calls "equipollence" (*isostheneia*), "equal force on both sides," leading to *epochē*, suspension of judgment, and *ataraxia*, tranquility. In Zen terms, "A moment of yes-and-no" represents the state of "not-thinking" (*fushiryō*), the non-positional attitude of neither affirming nor negating, as contrasted to both "thinking" (*shiryō*),⁴ the positional attitude of either affirming or negating, and its opposite, "not-thinking" (*hishiryō*),⁵ the positional attitude of only negating (see Kasulis 1981, 72–73). Terada and Mizuno in their edition of *Dōgen* regard the difference between not-thinking and without-thinking as the difference between mere negation and the Buddhist doctrine of śūnyatā (*ku*), "emptiness," stating: "Without-thinking is emptiness" (see Kasulis 1981, 72). Hence, just as the Greek skeptic uses the method of equipollence to achieve the non-positional attitude of *epochē* or suspension of judgment, thereby to realize the ultimate state of *ataraxia* or mental tranquility, so the Zen Buddhist process of *kōan* meditation leads to the state of "not-thinking" (*fushiryō*), the non-positional attitude of neither

affirming nor negating (otherwise known as śūnyatā or "emptiness"), thereby to realize the ultimate state of satori, enlightenment.

To sum up: just as Buddha, the excellent physician, prescribes the great medicine of śūnyatā as the remedy for all human suffering, thus to achieve the tranquility of nirvana through an exhaustion of all dogmatic assertions, the ancient Greek medical physician Sextus Empiricus prescribes the pill of skeptical inquiry with its medicine of *epochē* as the cure for all mental perturbation, thus to realize the mental tranquility of *ataraxia*. But in accord with the medical metaphor of the laxative which expells itself along with the poison for which it is the remedy, likewise, the medicines of both śūnyatā and *epochē* must themselves be ultimately purged, together with the metaphysical disease of obsessive dogmatic assertion for which they are the cure.

(2) Śūnyatā as Kenōsis in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

The kenōsis / śūnyatā motif has emerged as a major theme in recent Christian-Buddhist interfaith dialogue of Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) and the Kyoto school of modern Japanese philosophy, including Tanabe Hajime, Nishitani Keiji, and Abe Masao (see Odin 1989). By this view, the counterpart to Buddhist śūnyatā or "emptiness" in the tradition of Christianity is the ancient Greek notion of kenōsis, literally meaning "to make oneself empty" or "to make oneself nothing." The *locus classicus* for kenotic theology in the West is the second chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, which propounds that we must have the mind of Christ, who "emptied himself," or as it were, "made himself nothing" (*heauton ekenōsen*), thereby to become a servant who gave his own life for the sake of others. To cite directly from the kenōsishymn of Philippians 2: 5–11: "In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus. His state was divine, yet he did not cling to equality with God but 'emptied himself' to assume the condition of a slave" According to Nishida and the Kyoto school, the Christian idea of kenōsis is the Western concept which most clearly approaches the notion of emptiness (*ku*) or nothingness (*mu*)^a in Japanese Zen Buddhist theory and practice. The "mind of Christ" is defined as kenōsis or making oneself empty out of the self-giving love of agapē, just as the "mind of Buddha" is defined as śūnyatā (*ku*) or emptiness of self by virtue of the compassion of *karuṇa* (*jihi*).^b Moreover, for both the Christian kenōsis and Buddhist śūnyatā traditions, self-emptying is regarded as the pattern of true discipleship. Just as for Christianity salvation is achieved by making oneself empty in imitation of Christ, for Buddhism enlightenment is realized by making oneself empty in imitation of the Buddha. Therefore, both the Christian kenōsis and Buddhist śūnyatā traditions un-

derstand divine human/divine perfection, not as the "self-sufficiency" of Aristotle and the medieval scholastics, but as "self-emptying," i.e., the pouring out of self for others. Consequently, both traditions reject the notion of self as "substance" with independent own-being and argue for a relational, social, and interdependent view of selfhood. Moreover, both the Christian kenōsis and Buddhist śūnyatā traditions identify emptiness with fullness. Just as for Christianity kenōsis or "self-emptying" is identical with *plerōsis* or "self-fulfillment," for Buddhism śūnyatā is the boundless openness of absolute nothingness wherein emptiness is fullness and fullness is emptiness. Both traditions thus articulate the absolute paradox of salvation / enlightenment, whereby to become empty is to become full, just as to abase oneself is to exalt oneself, to make oneself poor is to make oneself rich, and to abandon the self is to find the self.

The source of this kenōsis/śūnyatā motif for Christian-Buddhist interfaith dialogue in the Kyoto school tradition of modern Japanese philosophy is Nishida Kitaro's penultimate essay, *The Logic of Place and a Religious Worldview* (*Bashōteki ronri to Shūkyōteki sekaikan* 1945). In the context of describing the concept of self-negating emptiness according to the Buddhist notion of śūnyatā, Nishida then makes direct reference to the Christian idea of kenōsis, writing: "A God who is simply self-sufficient is not the true God. In one aspect God must 'empty Himself' through kenōsis. A God that is both thoroughly transcendent and thoroughly immanent, thoroughly immanent and thoroughly transcendent, is a truly dialectical God. If it is said that God has created the world from love, then God's absolute love must be essential to the absolute self-negation of God and is not *opus ad extra*" (1965: NKZ, Vol. XI, 399). For Nishida, both God and self, both the Buddha and all sentient beings, are wholly kenotic or self-emptying in nature. God is only God when He empties Himself out of *agapē* in the divine act of creation, thereby to pour out His transcendence into immanence as the fullness and immediacy of the absolute present. Similarly, the human self achieves enlightenment or salvation only by "making oneself empty" in kenōsis so that self-negation is the necessary precondition for self-realization.

In *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (What is Religion? 1961), now published in English translation under the title *Religion and Nothingness* (1982), Nishitani Keiji further develops Nishida's use of the self-emptying motif as a foundation for Buddhist-Christian dialogue as articulated within a Zen Buddhist framework of emptiness or absolute nothingness. The major problem raised by Nishitani in this work is that of "overcoming nihilism" as described by the existentialism of Nietzsche. Nishitani argues that nihility (*kyōmu*),¹ or relative nothingness (*sōtaiteki mu*)¹ can

only be transcended by being radicalized to emptiness (*ku*), or absolute nothingness (*zettateki mu*),⁸ as is realized by both the Christian kenōsis tradition in the West and the Buddhist śūnyata tradition in the East. According to Nishitani, the eternalistic standpoint of "being" (*u*)⁹ is represented by the dualistic philosophy of Descartes wherein God, the subjective ego, and objectified matter have all been reified as substance with independent existence. The nihilistic standpoint of "relative nothingness" (*sōtateki mu*) is represented by such existentialist thinkers as Schopenhauer and Sartre, who define human existence in terms of its relation to the category of "nothingness," but still cling to a negative view of the nothing. For Nishitani, Nietzsche's superman who overcomes nihilism by affirming the present moment in the innocence of becoming, and Heidegger's notion of authentic existence as being held out suspended into nothing, both approach the Zen standpoint of absolute nothingness. But among the various currents of Western thought, the Zen standpoint of "absolute nothingness" (*zettateki mu*), in its positive sense of śūnyata or emptiness, is truly attained only by the Western *via negativa* tradition of apophatic Christian mysticism represented by Meister Eckhart, wherein the self must be emptied into the Godhead of absolute nothingness, and the closely related tradition of kenotic theology based on Philippians 2: 5–11, wherein both God and self are defined in terms of kenōsis or self-emptying into nothingness. The Christian tradition of kenotic theology realizes a positive concept of emptiness or nothingness in that the self-emptying of kenōsis is equated with self-fulfillment of *plerosis*, just as for Zen Buddhism śūnyata is the boundless openness of absolute nothingness wherein emptiness and fullness are the same.

In this context Nishitani reformulates the Christian theological concept of kenōsis or self-emptying out of *agapē* or self-giving love from the standpoint of such non-dual Mahāyāna Buddhist categories as śūnyata (*ku*, emptiness), karuṇa (*jihi*, compassion), and anātman (*muga*,¹⁰ non-ego). Nishitani analyzes the concept of kenōsis in its relation to the Christian idea of *agapē* or non-discriminating love, citing directly from the gospel of Matthew 5:43–48, which disavows the injunction to "love your neighbors and hate your enemy" and instead proclaims: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." In this context, Nishitani writes:

What is this non-discriminating *agapē*, that loves even enemies? In a word, it is "making oneself empty." In the case of Christ, it meant taking the form of a man and becoming a servant, in accordance with the will of God, who is the origin of the *ekkenōsis* or "making himself empty" of Christ What is *ekkenōsis* for the Son is kenōsis

for the Father. In the East, this would be called *anātman*, or non-ego (1982, 58–9; 1961, 67).

In this passage, Nishitani calls for a radical shift from the Aristotelian/scholastic ideal of divine perfection as “self-sufficiency” toward a non-substantialist ideal of perfection as “self-emptying,” or as it were, “making oneself empty” (*onore o munashikusuru koto*)⁸ as espoused by both the Christian *kenōsis* and Buddhist *śūnyata* traditions. Of special importance here is Nishitani’s distinction between the original *kenōsis* or self-emptying of God and the *ekkenōsis* or self-emptying of Christ. *Kenōsis* is the original condition of “having made Himself empty,” which is essentially entailed from the beginning in the idea of the divine perfection of God, whereas *ekkenōsis* or the activity of self-emptying love as typified by Christ and commanded of man is the practice and embodiment of that perfection. Hence the *kenōsis* of God is the source and origin of the *ekkenōsis* of Christ. For Nishitani, the Christian ideas of *kenōsis* and *ekkenōsis* represent the deepest point of contact with the Buddhist notion of *śūnyata* (*ku*), defined in Buddhist philosophy through the correlate notions of *anātman* (*muga*), non-ego, and *karuṇa* (*jīhi*), compassion. Summarizing the relation of Zen Buddhist emptiness to the kenotic self-emptying of Christianity, Nishitani thus writes: “Throughout the basic thought of Buddhology, especially in the Mahāyāna tradition, the concepts of emptiness, compassion, and non-ego are seen to be inseparably connected. The Buddhist way of life as well as its way of thought are permeated with *kenōsis* and *ekkenōsis*” (1982, 288f.).

However, while Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji, and Abe Masao develop the analogy between *kenōsis* and *śūnyata* from the standpoint of the “self-power” (*jiriki*)⁹ tradition of Zen Buddhism, Tanabe Hajime instead works out this relationship from the standpoint of the “other-power” (*tariki*)¹⁰ tradition of salvation through faith and grace in accord with the teachings of True Pure Land Buddhism founded by Shinran (1173–1262). Tanabe Hajime agrees with Nishida that the true self and ultimate reality are emptiness or absolute nothingness. However, against Zen Buddhism and the philosophy of Nishida, Tanabe holds that absolute nothingness can never be grasped in a direct intuition or immediate experience through *zazen* meditation based on *jiriki* or self-power, arguing that true absolute nothingness is the transcendent ground of a transformative grace that breaks in upon the self from without as *tariki* or other-power, which can itself only be grasped through the existential mode of “faith” (*shin*).¹¹ Hence, whereas for Nishida, Nishitani, and Abe, the paradigm of “making oneself empty” is seen in the Zen meditation practice of self-emptying into nothingness as ex-

pressed by Dōgen (1200–1253), for Tanabe Hajime the paradigm of self-emptying is Amida Buddha's self-negating act of descent into the world to save all sentient beings out of infinite compassion. Hence, in an essay entitled "Christianity, Marxism and Japanese Buddhism" (1964: THZ, Vol. 9: 190f.), Tanabe relates the compassionate self-negation represented by the bodhisattva's descent to the kenōsis or self-emptying incarnation of God in Christ. Both Christ and the bodhisattva express *mu-soku-ai*,¹ love-qua-nothingness, through the act of self-emptying love involved in renouncing transcendence and descending into the world for the sake of others. In such a way, Nishida and the Kyoto school have articulated the religious and salvific dimensions of Christian kenōsis in terms of the Buddhist idea of śūnyata, including both the *tariki* or "other-power" tradition of Pure Land Buddhism, and the *jiriki* or "self-power" tradition of Zen.

(3) Śūnyata as "Openness" in Buddhism & Phenomenology.

Another leading school of modern Western philosophy which has been developed as a hermeneutic for interpreting Buddhism is that of existential phenomenology in the tradition of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the continent (see Odin 1981). Scholars of both Indo-Tibetan Tantrism and East Asian Zen have approached Buddhism as a phenomenology of perception, so that śūnyata now comes to designate the concept of "openness," or as it were, the horizon of openness, wherein all phenomena emerge into presence, unhiddenness, and nonconcealment.

The stated objective of Husserlian phenomenology is not to explain or to speculate, but to *describe* phenomena just as they manifest themselves in their aboriginal "presence," after the observer performs an *epochē* or "suspension of judgment" (notice that Husserl uses the same term as Sextus and the Greek skeptics). According to Husserl's method, a full account of phenomena in their presencing involves a description of not only the *noema* (object pole) but also the *noesis* (subject pole). That is, the description of the noematic "content" of experience must be supplemented by an analysis of the noetic "act" of intentionality which *constitutes* that object. At the noematic object pole, all phenomena are described by Husserl in terms of the "core/horizon" or "figure/ground" Gestalt structure of the perceptual field, i.e., what in the phenomenology of William James is called the "focus/fringe" structure of pure experience in the stream of consciousness. As Husserl writes in *Experience and Judgement*, "Every experience has its horizon; every experience has its core" (1973, 132). Husserl describes the phenomenon of a "horizon" as an "indistinct co-present margin which forms a con-

tinuous ring around the field of perception" (1975, sec. 27, 102). Husserl's notion of "horizons-phenomena" thus corrects the "natural attitude" in which there is perception of sedimented focal actualities in isolation from their contextual location within a horizon, background, or field. Husserl writes: "It is obviously true of all experience that the focal is girt about with a 'zone' of the marginal; the stream of experience can never consist wholly of focal actualities" (1975, 351, sec. 119). However, as explicated by Don Ihde (1974), the perception of this horizons-phenomenon at the noematic object pole requires a *reversal of attention* at the noetic subject pole, i.e., what is referred to in the Husserlian tradition as a "noetic reversal" from foreground focus to the background field. Elsewhere, Ihde (1974, 28) further clarifies how this Husserlian vocabulary is reformulated in the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, so that the "horizons-phenomena" at the noematic object pole corresponds to the region of openness (*das Öffene*), and the "noetic reversal" from core to horizon corresponds to the non-focal act of *Gelassenheit* or "letting be." Hence, in his *Gelassenheit* essay, as elsewhere, Heidegger (1966) speaks of the "letting-be" whereby phenomena come-to-presence in their primordial truth (*aletheia*) as unhiddenness or nonconcealment in the horizon of openness.

From the standpoint of phenomenology H. V. Guenther attempts to reinterpret the "form/emptiness" distinction of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism as a literal phenomenological description of the "core/horizon" structure of the perceptual field. He abandons all previous translations/interpretations of Buddhist *śūnyatā* (*stong-pa-nyid*) such as "emptiness," "nothingness," or "voidness," all of which convey a negative meaning for the purpose of breaking obsessive attachments to temporary phenomena, for the fresh phenomenological concept of "openness." Guenther argues in philological terms that the translation of *śūnya* by "open," and *śūnyatā* by "openness," best functions to clarify the positive, aesthetic, and experiential aspects of these terms as they function in the context of Buddhist theory and practice. In Guenther's words: "The technical term *shunya*(ta) indicates the 'open-dimension of Being.' The customary translation by 'void' or 'emptiness' fails to convey the positive content of the Buddhist idea" (1976, 150). Guenther then proceeds to articulate *śūnyatā* in its designated meaning as "openness" in terms of the phenomenological concept of a background field or horizon:

Shunyata can be explained in a very simple way. When we perceive, we usually attend to the delimited forms of objects. But these objects are perceived within a field. Attention can be directed either to the concrete, limited forms or the field in which these forms are situated.

In the shunyata experience, the attention is on the field rather than on its contents" (1975, 26–7).

Guenther emphasizes that the horizon of openness at the noematic object pole is always an intentional correlate to an noetic "act" of perception in the mode of *prajñā*: "The perception of shunyata as openness is connected with the development of what is known as *prajñā* Shunyata is the objective pole of *prajñā*, the open quality of things" (1975, 27–30). Through *prajñā* — the enlightened wisdom that cognizes *śūnyatā* — one's gaze is shifted from the determinate form discriminated in the foreground of one's focus of attention to the horizon of openness located in the background of the perceptual field, whereupon the focal object "fades into something which is quite open. This open dimension is the basic meaning of shunyata" (1975, 27). Moreover, using Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the lived body, Guenther further clarifies how the Indo-Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist praxis of visualizing holistic mandalas results in the physical embodiment of the spatio-temporal horizon of openness as a value-laden figure/ground Gestalt environment.

The translation of Buddhist *śūnyatā* in terms of the phenomenological notion of "openness" has also been developed with respect to Zen Buddhism and traditional Japanese aesthetics (see Odin 1984). To begin with, the phenomenological technique of "noetic reversal" or the non-focal exercise of *Gelassenheit* (letting-be) whereby attention is shifted from sedimented focal actualities in the foreground to the horizon of emptiness or openness in the background of the perceptual field, has been clarified by Don Ihde with an illuminating reference to *sumi* inkwash painting in traditional Japanese Zen aesthetics:

A radical shift occurs in a type of traditional Japanese art. In this art some object — a sparrow with a few blades of grass or a simple branch with cherry blossoms — stands out against a blank or pastel background. Our traditional way of viewing would say that the subject matter — what stands out and is dominant in the foreground — is the sparrow or the blossoming branch. The background is merely empty or blank. This is entirely different from the Western tradition in which the background is filled in. *Yet the emptiness and openness of a Japanese painting is the subject matter of the painting*, the sparrow or branch being set there to make the openness stand out. In this, there is a *radical reversal*; the foreground is not dominant, the background is not recessive. To understand such a painting calls for a deep reversal in the noetic context (1977, 129; emphasis added).

A phenomenological interpretation of Japanese Buddhist *śūnyatā* has been developed in greater detail by Western scholars such as D. E. Shaner (1985) and T. P. Kasulis (1981). In his work *The Bodymind Experience in Japanese Buddhism: A Phenomenological Study of Kūkai and Dōgen* (1985), Shaner argues that both the Zen praxis of zazen meditation and the Shingon Mikkyō (Esoteric) praxis of ritualized mandala visualization function to neutralize all mental positings, thus resulting in the achievement of a unified bodymind experience of a background field of infinite empty space, understood in phenomenological terms as an "expanded periphery and horizon in toto." In *Zen Action/Zen Person* (1981), Kasulis employs the framework of Husserl and Heidegger to interpret Dōgen's Zen Buddhist concept of *genjōkōan* as a phenomenological description of the "presencing of things just as they are" in the background field of *kū* or emptiness. Moreover, from within the tradition of modern Japanese philosophy itself such thinkers as Nishitani Keiji (1982), Abe Masao (1989) and others in the Kyoto school have explicitly articulated the Zen concept of *śūnyatā* (*kū*) in terms of the Heideggerian notion of "openness." In Abe's words: "*śūnyatā* indicates boundless openness Only in this way is 'emptiness' possible" (1984, 45). By this view, all phenomena substantialized at the eternalistic standpoint of "being" which have been negated or emptied at the nihilistic standpoint of "relative nothingness" (*sōtaiteki mu*), at last come to presence just as they are in their primordial suchness at the middle way standpoint of "absolute nothingness" (*zettaitteki mu*), i.e., the background field of *śūnyatā*, now understood as the boundless openness of a positive nothingness wherein emptiness is fullness and fullness is emptiness. In this way, then, the Western phenomenological notion of "openness" has been used to reformulate the Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā*, including its variants in both the Indo-Tibetan and East Asian traditions of Buddhism.

(4) *Śūnyatā as Différance in Buddhism & Deconstructionism.*

A more recent wave of Continental philosophy which has been applied to Buddhism is the movement known as post-structuralism, post-modernism, or deconstructionism (see Odin: 1990). In this context Buddhist *śūnyatā* has been reformulated in terms of the *différance* of Jacques Derrida, so that Zen Buddhist philosophy comes to be understood as a deconstructive enterprise which leads to a radically decentered view of both self and reality. Jacques Derrida, the foremost philosopher of French post-structuralism, has developed a critical mode of thinking called "deconstruction." Derrida endeavors to critically deconstruct all substantialistic notions of "self-identity" or "self-presence" which have

arisen as correlates to the dominant category in the *episteme* of Western culture: "being." Derrida's strategy is to demonstrate that anything regarded as having substantial "identity" is in fact characterized by *différance*, an endless play of differences/defferals. Derrida's differential logic is influenced by the semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course on General Linguistics*, which argues that language is a system of differential or relational signs in which the meaning of a sign is defined only by virtue of its relations to other signs constituting the system. The deconstructionism of Derrida (1978) involves a critical strategy of "decentering," i.e., what he describes as the stated abandonment of all reference to a center, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin, or to an absolute archia. According to Derrida, in the Western philosophical tradition such notions as God, ego, subject, consciousness, matter, substance, being, and the present, have all functioned as a Transcendental Signified, i.e., as an absolute metaphysical center having "self-identity" or "self-presence," and therefore all need to be critically deconstructed through the notion of *différance*, the differential play of signs and signifiers. Derrida works out his deconstructive approach in critical response to the Husserlian phenomenology of presence. For Derrida, what is fundamental is not "presence," but *trace*, i.e., a dynamic interplay of identity and *différance* or presence and absence. As differential trace all absolutized metaphysical centers thought to have self-identity, including the transcendent God of theocentrism and the individual subject of egocentrism, are placed "under erasure" (*sous rature*), i.e., written with a cross mark X, thereby to signify a presence which is at the same time absent and an absence which is at the same time present.

The thesis developed by Robert Magliola's *Derrida on the Mend* is that the *différance* of Derrida is to be understood as a functional equivalent to Buddhist śūnyata. Magliola writes: "I shall argue that Nāgārjuna's śūnyata ("devoidness") is Derrida's *différance*, and is the absolute negation which absolutely deconstitutes but which constitutes directional trace" (1984, 89). According to Magliola, the *différance* of Derrida, like the śūnyata of Buddhism, represents a critical deconstruction of the principle of "self-identity" characterizing the notion of being, substance, or presence, i.e., what in Buddhist discourse takes the form of deconstructing all substantialist modes of "own-being" or "self-existence" (*svabhāva*). Through deconstruction, all metaphysical centers understood as a mode of absolute self-identity are disseminated into a network of differential relationships in which there are no substantial or positive entities. Magliola asserts that the differential Buddhism of Nāgārjuna with its radical deconstruction of all fixed metaphysical centers reaches its culmination in the tradition of Ch'an/Zen

Buddhism. In this context, he criticizes all forms of "centric Zen" wherein "the Buddha-nature thus understood becomes an infinite Center" (1984, 103), arguing that "differential Zen, like Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamika*, disclaims 'centered' experience of any kind" (1984, 104).

But the absolute negation of *différance* also signals the emergence of differential "trace" which is simultaneously absent yet present, present yet absent. In this context, Magliola argues that *différance* as the interplay of identity and difference or presence and absence, functions similarly to Nāgārjuna's Buddhist notion of *śūnyatā* in that it constitutes a middle way between the "it is" of eternalism and the "it is not" of nihilism (1984, 88). He further asserts that this middle way between eternalism and nihilism is best seen in the aestheticism of Japanese Zen, whose various art forms have the status of Derrida's differential "trace" as the interplay between presencing and absencing:

Buddhists in the Nāgārjunist tradition can function as productive, often outstanding members of society They can savor and create the exquisitely esthetic (think of Zen painting, ceramics, gardens, poetry); yet, I argue, they are doing all this as trace, as indeed, Derridean trace! (1984, 89)

It is precisely this correlation of acentric Zen Buddhist *śūnyatā* with Derrida's *différance* which underlies the French post-structuralist vision of Japan as a decentered text wherein the absolute self-identity of each sign is deconstructed into a ruptured semiotic field, thereby to be emptied into a fluid and ever-shifting network of differential traces and floating signifiers without end. A book entitled *Empire of Signs* by the deconstructionist literary critic Roland Barthes understands Japan as representing the living cultural embodiment of a fully decentered view of self and reality. Against the background of Saussure's semiology, Barthes interprets Japan as an "empire of signs" wherein the signs are all *empty* — without closure, without an origin, and without a privileged center. In Barthes' words: "Empire of signs? Yes, if it is understood that the signs are empty and that the ritual is without a god" (1982, 108). Barthes regards the art, literature, theater, and other sign systems of Japanese aesthetics as designating a fractured semiotic field of empty signs devoid of any fixed metaphysical center, including both the absolute God-center and the ego-center of Western substance philosophy, thereby reflecting the Zen deconstructive metaphysics of *mu*, nothingness, or *ku*, emptiness. For example, in his semiotic analysis of Zen haiku poetry as a decentered field of empty signs, he writes: "The *haiku* ... articulated around a metaphysics without subject and without

god, corresponds to the Buddhist Mu, the Zen satori ... without there every being a center to grasp, a primary core of irradiation" (1962, 78).

In the Kyoto school of modern Japanese philosophy running through Nishida Kitaro, Nishitani Keiji, Abe Masao, and others, śūnyatā or emptiness is understood as the boundless openness or absolute nothingness devoid of any absolute metaphysical center. Each metaphysical center, including the transcendent God-centered standpoint of theocentrism and the man-centered standpoint of egocentrism, must be emptied out into a differential play of forces at the standpoint of emptiness or absolute nothingness. Combining the deconstructionism of Nietzsche and Heidegger in the West together with the deconstructive element of Zen Buddhism in the East, Nishitani Keiji describes the kenotic self-emptying of both the "theocentric" (*kami-chūshinteki*) and "anthropocentric" (*ningen-chūshinteki*) standpoints in the ultimate standpoint of śūnyatā: "Thus, it can be said that the theocentric standpoint, as represented by Christianity, and the anthropocentric standpoint of secularism both find themselves at the brink of mutual elimination" (1961, 250; 1982, 228). Along similar lines, Abe Masao writes that the "locus of śūnyatā ... is completely free from any centrism and is boundlessly open" (1984, 40). Again, he asserts: "Śūnyatā indicates boundless openness without any particular fixed center. Śūnyatā is free not only from egocentrism but also from anthropo-centrism, cosmocentrism, and theocentrism. It is not oriented by any kind of centrism. Only in this way is 'emptiness' possible" (1984, 45). Hence, post-structuralist thinkers in the West and Japanese philosophers in the East have both come to a deconstructive understanding of Buddhist śūnyatā as *différance*, a differential or relational play of forces, thereby arriving at a fully decentered interpretation of Zen and its embodiment in traditional Japanese culture.

(5) Śūnyatā as "Relativity" in Buddhism & Process Metaphysics.

The Western philosophical tradition which best articulates the metaphysical dimensions of śūnyatā is undoubtedly the American process metaphysics formulated by Alfred North Whitehead (see Odin: 1982, 1985). From the standpoint of Whitehead's organismic process metaphysics, Buddhist śūnyatā designates the concept of "relativity." The massiveness and complexity of Whitehead's speculative framework discourages any effort to give a systematic presentation of his entire categorial scheme within the present context. Hence, the discussion will be confined to brief consideration of Whitehead's "principle of relativity" as it pertains to the translation of śūnyatā by "relativity" in Buddhism.

In his cosmological masterpiece entitled *Process and Reality*, first published in 1927, A. N. Whitehead formulates an organismic process metaphysics which articulates the relational and temporal structure of actuality. Whitehead's philosophy of organism thereby represents a paradigm shift from a dualistic metaphysics based on the notion of "substance" to a non-dualistic metaphysics based on the primacy of *relationships*. Whitehead argues that the concept of "substance" is itself an abstraction from the concrete facts of immediate experience: namely, "actual occasions," or interrelated space-time events arising through a process of creative synthesis. Hence, the first principle governing Whitehead's categorial scheme is what he calls the principle of creativity or creative synthesis, otherwise termed the category of the ultimate. This principle is defined as follows:

Creativity is the principle of novelty. An actual occasion is a novel entity diverse from any entity in the "many" which it unifies. Thus, "creativity" introduces novelty into the content of the many, which are the universe disjunctively.... The ultimate metaphysical principle is the advance from disjunction to given in disjunction (1978, 21).

According to Whitehead's principle of creativity, then, an occasion is a center of relationships which emerges into actuality through the creative synthesis of manyness into oneness, multiplicity into unity, or disjunction into conjunction, so that each new space-time event both contains and pervades its whole universe as a microcosm of the macrocosm.

In Whitehead's categorial scheme the principle of creativity is alternatively stated in terms of the "principle of *relativity*," or as it were, the "principle of *universal relativity*." The principle of relativity states that each actual occasion can be defined only by virtue of its causal relationships to other occasions. Whitehead describes the principle of relativity as signifying "that the potentiality for being an element in a real concrescence of many entities in one actuality, is the one general metaphysical character attaching to all entities, actual and non-actual" (1927, 33). Hence, like the principle of creativity, the principle of relativity designates that all facts are included in every concrescence or process of becoming whereby the many become one in the production of a novel and aesthetic togetherness of relationships. Furthermore, the principle of relativity is similar to the principle of creativity in that both function in the categorial scheme as an ultimate metaphysical principle or the highest possible generalization. Just as the principle of creativity is "an ultimate notion of the highest generality at the base of actuality" (1978, 31), so the principle of relativity is "the one general metaphysical

character attaching to all entities" (1978, 33). Whitehead further defines his principle of relativity as follows: "It belongs to the nature of a 'being' that it is a potential for every 'becoming'" (1978, 22). That is to say, according to the principle of relativity, to be is to be in relation to other beings, a potential constituent in their process of becoming. The principle of relativity asserts that "every item of the universe including all the other actual entities, are constituents in the constitution of any one actual entity (1978, 148). Again, the principle of relativity stipulates that "every item in the universe is involved in each concrescence" (1978, 22). According to the principle of relativity, then, by means of concrescence or the process of becoming an actual occasion, an event arises through its causal relationships to every other event in the cosmos. The principle of relativity is therefore an alternative expression of the principle of creativity in that it signifies a process of emerging into actuality by synthesizing a multiplicity of causal relationships into a novel unity with aesthetic value. Whitehead's principle of relativity involves the explicit rejection of Aristotle's notion of "substance" in its meaning as separate, independent, permanent, and simply located existence, for the alternate notion of interconnected spatio-temporal events or actual occasions which momentarily arise through their causal relationships with every other event and therefore include each other as elements within their own internal constitution. He writes:

The principle of universal relativity directly traverses Aristotle's dictum: "A substance is not present in a subject." On the contrary according to this principle an actual entity is present in other actual entities Every actual entity is present in every other actual entity. The philosophy of organism is mainly devoted to the task of making clear the notion of "being present in another entity" (1978, 50).

The principle of relativity thus functions in Whitehead's categorial scheme as a universal principle of organic interrelatedness, or as it were, a generalized metaphysical category expressing the interconnectedness, interdependence, and interpenetration of everything in the universe.

The Buddhist notion of śūnyata has been translated as "relativity" and even "universal relativity" by the pioneering Soviet Buddhologist Th. Stcherbatsky. In his work entitled *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa*, first published in 1927, Stcherbatsky explains the basis for his translation of śūnyata by "relativity" and śūnya by "relative," stating:

The central conception of Mahayana was their relativity (śūnyata). Since we use the term "relative" to describe the fact to something

else, and becomes meaningless without these relations, ... we safely, for want of a better solution, can translate the word *śūnyatā* by relative or contingent, and the terms *śūnyatā* by relativity or contingency (1927, 42).

The advantage of Stcherbatsky's translation of *śūnyatā* by "relativity" is that it functions to underscore the relational character of Buddhist metaphysics, according to which every event is constituted by its causal relationships to other events, and is utterly "empty," "void," or "nothing" in itself apart from these relationships. The translation of *śūnyatā* by "relativity" also functions to underscore the basic philosophical meaning of *śūnyatā* as *pratītya-samutpāda*, which has variously been rendered as "dependent co-origination," "interrelational existence," "relationality," and other such terms designating the interconnectedness of things. This definition of *śūnyatā* as *pratītya-samutpāda* has become standard in Buddhist philosophical discourse since its initial formulation by Nāgārjuna in a celebrated verse from his *Fundamentals of the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamika Kārikas*, 24:18), wherein he propounds: "The 'originating dependently' we call 'emptiness'" (Streng 1967, 213). In the next verse (MMK 24: 19), Nāgārjuna goes on to declare the universal applicability of *śūnyatā* to all dharmas or events whatsoever, stating: "Since there is no dharma originating independently, no dharma whatever exists which is not empty" (Streng 1967, 213). Thus, in its critical, negative aspects as *anatman* (non-ego) and *niḥsvabhavata* (non-substantiality), the universal relativity of Buddhist *śūnyatā* designates the total abandonment of "substance" with independent existence, while in its constructive, positive aspect as *pratītya-samutpāda* (relationality), it signifies the interrelational character of all dharmas without exception.

Indeed, Whitehead's organismic process metaphysics based upon the "principle of relativity" at once bears a deep structural resemblance to the Buddhist metaphysics based upon the principle of *śūnyatā* in its translation by "relativity" or "universal relativity." The principle of relativity underlying Whitehead's speculative framework especially functions to illuminate the Buddhist category of *śūnyatā* in terms of its standard definition as *pratītya-samutpāda*, "relationality." The Japanese Kyoto school philosopher Abe Masao remarks on this striking parallel between Whitehead's principle of universal relativity and the Buddhist notion of *pratītya-samutpāda* in his *Zen and Western Thought*:

Whitehead's idea of the relatedness of actual entities is surely strikingly similar to the Buddhist idea of *pratītya-samutpāda*, which may be translated as "dependent co-origination," "relationality,"

"conditioned co-production" or "dependent co-arising".... It is not hard to see a parallel between Whitehead's principle of universal relativity and the Buddhist idea of "dependent co-origination" (1989, 152–153).

Whitehead's principle of relativity, like Buddhist śūnyatā and its correlate principle of *pratītya-samutpāda*, asserts that an event can only be defined by virtue of its causal relationships to other events, and is meaningless apart from these relations. Both Whitehead's principle of relativity and Buddhist śūnyatā thus function to establish the primacy of *relatio* over *substantia* at the metaphysical level of discourse. In other words, both signify a fundamental shift from a substance metaphysics based upon the notion of independent and permanent existence, to that of an organismic process metaphysics which underscores the relational and temporal structure of reality. Also, just as in Buddhism the causal interrelatedness of impermanent and nonsubstantial dharmas is directly experienced through *prajñā*, the wisdom cognizing śūnyatā, so Whitehead argues that the causal interrelatedness of events arising and perishing in temporal process is immediately experienced through what he calls perception in the mode of "causal efficacy" (1978, 178). Moreover, both Whitehead's principle of relativity and Buddhist śūnyatā lead to a pluralistic event ontology wherein all occasions arise through a dynamic process of interpenetration between the many and the one, such that each perspectival event both contains and pervades the relational web of nature as a microcosm of the macrocosm. Like the Buddhist metaphysics based on the notion of śūnyatā, Whitehead's organismic process metaphysics based on the principle of relativity establishes a naturalistic theory of causal interrelatedness which overturns all dualistic models of transcendence, thereby resulting in a complete dialectical interpenetration of the sacred and the profane. In the final analysis, both Whitehead's principle of relativity and Buddhist śūnyatā reveal that the locus of the holy is not to be found in a transcendent beyond, but precisely in the sacred interconnectedness of everything that is in the present moment of actuality.

Conclusion

The Buddhist concept of śūnyatā has now been elucidated from a multiplicity of diverse Western philosophical perspectives, both ancient and modern, including the *epochē* of Greek skepticism, the *kenōsis* of Christian theology, the "openness" of continental phenomenology, the *différance* of French deconstructionism, and the "relativity" of American process metaphysics. No claims have been made for the inclusive-

ness of these five terms, for no doubt the list can be extended. For instance, one might consider the possible translation of *śūnyatā* by "inexhaustibility" (or "complexity") as it functions in the metaphysics of Justus Buchler (1966), who abandons the substantialist notion of ontological simples for that of *natural complexes*, which are characterized by their inexhaustibility, complexity, relationality, and ontological parity (see Odin 1982, 128–134). Again, the principle of "sociality" in George Herbert Mead's (1932) intersubjectivist communication paradigm of the social self is one of the very most profound functional equivalents to Buddhist *śūnyatā* (see Odin 1992). In this essay no attempt has been made to evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of these alternative hermeneutic frameworks for the translation/interpretation of Buddhist *śūnyatā*. While some of these approaches might ultimately prove to be of greater value than certain of the others, all of them nonetheless function to illuminate another important aspect of *śūnyatā* as it operates in various contexts. Achieving mental tranquility through suspension of judgment with the medicine of *epochē*, the self-emptying love of *kenōsis*, the letting-be of presence in "openness," the deconstruction of substantial identity with the hammer of *différance*, and the realization of sacred interconnectedness through "universal relativity," are thus all aspects of the Buddha's teachings revealed in the inexhaustible and multi-dimensional notion of *śūnyatā*.

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Glossary of Sino-Japanese Characters

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|---------|-------------|
| a. 空 | k. 絶対的無 |
| b. 道 | l. 有 |
| c. 無心 | m. 無我 |
| d. 不思量 | n. 己れを空しくする |
| e. 思量 | o. 自力 |
| f. 非思量 | p. 他力 |
| g. 無 | q. 信 |
| h. 慈悲 | r. 無即愛 |
| i. 虚無 | s. 現成公案 |
| j. 相對的無 | |