

Studia Orientalia Tartuensia
Series Nova
Vol. I

**STUDIES IN THE
AṢṬASĀHASRIKĀ PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ
AND OTHER ESSAYS**

by

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Tartu 2003

This publication was funded by Estonian Science Foundation,
grant 5256.

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Graphic design: Aivo Lõhmus

ISSN 1736-115X
ISBN 9985-4-0370-3

Distributor: Centre for Oriental Studies, University of Tartu:
tel. + 372 7 375 589

Printhouse: Greif Ltd.
Kastani 38, 50410 Tartu
Estonia

A Possible Approach Towards Understanding *Śūnyavāda*

0. The dialogue between East and West that has reached synthesis makes us try to understand what it is that the Orient can tell us, so that we can use its achievements as an important component of our own culture.

0.1. The researchers of Eastern cultures have so far applied two different concepts (I am not considering the discourses alleging that the achievements of the East are incomprehensible or inferior).

0.1.1. Occidental and Oriental cultures have developed parallel to each other (either affecting or not affecting each other) and in strict compliance with each other. All significant cultural events have taken place in the cultural areas of both of them in the same historical era (whatever this may mean). The proponents of this axiom usually draw such parallels as Buddha – Christ, logic of Aristotle – *nyāya*, Lao-zi – Socrates, etc.¹

0.1.2. According to the second concept, both East and West have reached the same results but not necessarily at the same time. This hypothesis enables such comparisons as Kant – Śaṅkara, *śūnyavāda* – 20th century relativism, Buddhism – dialectic materialism etc.²

0.1.2.1. I think that the second concept has clear advantages over the first one: the recognition of the fact that cultures do not necessarily develop in the same way, already implies the active role of Eastern cultures. However, one can also immediately see the main drawback of the second concept: its proponents believe that achievements of the East necessarily have analogies in the West and that these have emerged, at the latest, during the lifetime of the proponent.³ The new facts that are discovered about Eastern cultures concern only details since all the main points are seen as the Eastern analogies of Western phenomena.

0.2. It seems that this is also true for the first proposition in the sense that it sees Oriental phenomena as a convenient playground of scientific viewpoints developed in the West. Buddhism is a good ex-

ample: different scholars call it a religion, atheism, nihilism, materialism, idealism, rationalism or dialectics.⁴ Each of these tends to negate the others. This approach, however, seems to have exhausted itself. The term 'paradoxical' used in recent works shows that a new approach to the East has developed.⁵

0.3. This approach is based on the understanding that the world's civilizations have developed relatively independently from each other. Eastern phenomena can no longer be adjusted to Western schemes. This, of course, does not mean that there may not be certain parallels but if they are not constructed artificially, they unexpectedly crop up at new levels. It is also obvious that achievements by the East are unique in many areas of culture.⁶

0.3.1. Oriental studies should therefore attempt to create models enabling a new approach to the understanding of Western phenomena.

0.3.2. At the beginning this seems to be rather difficult since we are immediately faced with complicated methodological problems, where the solution at first glance seems to depend only on intuition. As far as Buddhist studies are concerned, we should first create central meta-concepts which can be used to describe Buddhism in strict compliance with original ideas of the East. The first link of a new string of concepts could be the term **lysiology**.⁷

1. Lysiology is the doctrine of the liberation of a lysiological person (a lysiological person can be both an individual and a group), whereas liberation means reaching a new level which is higher than the initial level. A teaching can be called lysiological if it contains three components.

1.1. The first component is the description of the initial level, the central point of which is the assertion that it should be overcome. The description should not necessarily conform to reality and a lysiological person does not even have to understand it. The main thing is that it should contain negative judgements (but only such negative judgements that imply the existence of a positive opposite), using which lysiological persons can assess their situation.

1.2. The second element is the determination and description of the final level. Since lysiological teachings prefer to use maximally

opposite concepts, the definition of the final level tends to be maximally opposed to the initial level.

1.3. The third element of lysiological teaching is a way. By this term I mean consequent methods needed to take a lysiological person from one level to another. A way is normally described as a process that is opposed to synchronous levels. However, a way is normally divided into a finite number of levels.

1.4. There are a number of lysiological teachings both in the East and in the West. Lysiological teachings may include fields such as medicine, psychoanalysis, different social sciences as well as mystical teachings and yoga. As far as lysiological persons are concerned, Easterners often tend to take the role of an individual lysiological person and Westerners become a collective lysiological person. This difference may be explained by the fact that Easterners have better developed aspirations regarding realization. Westerners, on the contrary, are quite happy with a pleasantly presented theory.⁸

1.4.1. Lysiology has developed as a theoretical and practical science only in the East (particularly in India). Thanks to India, we have detailed theories that could become a basis for a European lysiological theory. All six *darśanas*⁹ as well as a great number of other teachings, including the teachings of the *śramaṇas*, the contemporary to Gautama Buddha, are lysiological teachings.

1.5. According to the semiotic model given in section 5, a lysiological process can be described as follows (S – systematic semiotics; T – transformative semiotics):

$$S_1 \rightarrow T(t_1, t_2, t_3, \dots, t_n) \rightarrow S_2$$

In this way this process is actually a change of systems rather than going beyond the sign system as such.

2. Buddhists following the tradition of *Prajñāpāramitā* understood it very well. Here we can quote a passage from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*:

“If thoughts move around ‘form’ (*rūpa*), they move around sign (*nimitta*). If thoughts move around ‘sign of the form’, they move around sign. If thoughts move around ‘form is a sign’, they move around sign. If thoughts move around ‘emergence of the form’, they move around sign. If thoughts move around ‘disappearance of the form’, they

move around sign. If thoughts move around ‘destruction of the form’, they move around sign. If thoughts move around ‘form is empty’, they move around sign. If thoughts move around ‘my thoughts move’, they move around sign. If thoughts move around ‘I am a bodhisattva’, they move around sign, since thus you only reach the thought ‘I am a bodhisattva’.”¹⁰

2.1. This passage is about overcoming an *Abhidharma* system where a way is understood as the change of so-called *dharma*s as objects of meditation.

It shows that each *dharma* (using the example of the form – *rūpa*) is only a sign and that a way from one level to another (for example, from the ‘form’ to the thought ‘I am a bodhisattva’) does not mean that one goes beyond sign systems.

3. Thus Buddhists considered neither a way nor a system as absolute but worked out a new teaching which is so unique that it hardly has an analogy. In Sanskrit this teaching is called *śūnyavāda*, which can be translated as **zerology**. The central idea of *śūnyavāda* is *śūnyatā* (*suññatā* in Pāli) – a term that has created insurmountable difficulties for researchers of Buddhism.¹¹

3.1. Although none of these translations of the word *śūnyatā* is wrong as such, we can see their connection with the concepts that are not free from conventional schemes. But even in this way it is possible to convey the meaning of this word more or less accurately using a suitable interpretation.¹²

3.1.1. At the same time it has long been known that *śūnya* (the abstract form of which is *śūnyatā*) means *zero* in Indian mathematics.¹³ Betty Heimann is one of the few Indologists who have expanded this semantic field to the other areas of Indian culture.¹⁴ She thinks that zero was discovered by Indian metaphysicians, both Buddhists and Brahmanists. Mathematics started using zero as late as in the 3rd century AD and described it in the same way as Buddhists describe *nirvāṇa*. Due to the Arabs who became mediators between India and Europe, zero finally reached the Western world.¹⁵ Although I appreciate the contribution of Betty Heimann, I cannot agree with her attempt to identify Buddhism with Brahmanism and reduce the concept of zero to the monist absolute.¹⁶

3.2. There is another term in Buddhist texts to denote zero, which I even think is a much earlier term – *madhya* (*madhyama*). This is usually translated as ‘middle’. Th. Stcherbatsky has pointed out that *madhya* and *sūnya* have the same meaning.¹⁷

3.2.1. Zero in Buddhism does not mean the absence of something or negation of something but overcoming (or, rather, ignoring) the opposition between a positive statement and a negative statement, “+” and “–”. It means that all interconnections are seen as indefinable.

This trend can already be seen in the earliest Buddhist texts, e.g. in the *Samyuttanikāya*, Vol. II, p. 17:

“This world, O Kaccāyana, depends on affirmation and negation. /.../; ‘Everything exists’ is one extreme; ‘nothing exists’ is the other. Avoiding these extremes, Tathāgata teaches the zero way.”

The same can also be found in the Mahāyāna tradition, e.g. in the *Kāśyapaparivarta*, section 60:

“‘Is’ is one extreme and ‘is not’ is the other. What is between the two extremes cannot be examined. It is inexpressible, undisclosed and unachievable and it does not last. This, Kāśyapa, is the zero that is called the realization of the manifestations of existence.”

3.3. Because it is not yet (or might never be) possible to define the object of zerology,¹⁸ it is reasonable to approach it using three models.

4. The first model is the **lysiological** model. At first glance the lysiological trend in Buddhism looks so dominant that it seems to be natural to call Buddhism a lysiological teaching. Indeed, some Buddhist schools emphasize this aspect.

4.1. The lysiological model is based on the fact that Buddhism also sees liberation as a goal (whatever word stands for this concept). It means that we can find all components of a lysiological teaching in Buddhist scriptures.

4.2. The description of the initial level is normally based on the concept of *samsāra* or *duḥkha* (Pāli *dukkha*). These words are usually translated as the ‘phenomenal world’ (which is the opposite of

the absolute) and ‘suffering’, respectively. In this case we are not interested in the interpretation of these terms. Their negative orientation is important. The well-known first Buddhist noble truth can be an example here:

“This, O monks, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, old age is suffering, sickness is suffering, association with unpleasant conditions is suffering, separation from pleasant conditions is suffering; not getting what one desires is suffering.”¹⁹

4.3. The final level is described using several different terms such as *nirodha*, *nirmokṣa*, *nirvṛti*, *nirveda*, etc., among which the term *nirvāṇa* is particularly emphasized. As a rule, these are also negative terms since they are opposed to the elements of the description of the initial level in negative terms: “There is, O monks, something unborn, ungrown, unconditioned and unshaped.”²⁰

4.4. The difference between Buddhism and all other lysiological teachings is that Buddhism sees the way as the zero way (*madhyamā pratipad*) that can be described as an eightfold way for an outsider: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.²¹

4.4.1. The zero way means that the opposition between the initial level and the final level is eliminated and they are seen as identical. Nāgārjuna writes about it surprisingly clearly:

“What is the limit of *nirvāṇa*, is the limit of *samsāra* – there is not the slightest difference.”²²

The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* expresses the same idea:

“Here, Subhūti, a Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva thinks: “I must lead an innumerable number of beings to *nirvāṇa*.” But there are none who are to be led to *nirvāṇa*. Therefore he leads these beings to *nirvāṇa*. But there are no beings who would be led to *nirvāṇa* and there is no person who would lead them to *nirvāṇa*.”²³

“A Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva is going, although he is going nowhere. /.../ Nobody has gone on this “Great Vehicle” (*mahāyāna*), nobody will go or is going.”²⁴

4.5. The lysiological model is therefore in the background in Buddhist studies. The main emphasis is placed on other models.

5. The second model can be called the **semiotic** one. This model implies that there are three kinds of practical semiotics in all spheres of society.²⁵ J. Kristeva has very precisely named them systematic, transformative and paragrammatical semiotics. In Sanskrit they can be named as follows: *dr̥ṣṭi* ('view, theory'), *yoga* ('transformation') and *śūnyatā* ('zerness'). We can find parallels for them in the lysiological model: way = transformative practical semiotics. The Indian tradition often sees the terms *mārga* (*pratipad*, *patha*) and *yoga*, *śūnyatā* and *madhyamā pratipad* as synonymous and interchangeable.

5.1. This model is not hierarchic, i.e. all its components are parallel. Still, Buddhist zerology understands *śūnyatā* as a more real level compared to the two previous ones that are considered to be illusory (*māyā*).

5.2. The semantic aspect of *śūnyatā* turns relations between signs and denotates to zero (*śūnya*):

"We say 'bodhisattva, bodhisattva'. What *dharma*²⁶ does a 'bodhisattva' represent? I cannot see such a *dharma* as 'bodhisattva'. I cannot see the *dharma* 'transcending awareness', either. Since I can find neither bodhisattva nor the *dharma* 'bodhisattva', or transcending awareness or *dharma* 'transcending awareness', what bodhisattva in what transcending awareness should I teach?"²⁷

5.3. The syntactic aspect means that signs are seen as free from determined links and they can form any interlinks:

"“The nature of *dharmas* is deep.” – “Because they exist independently.” – “The nature of transcending awareness is deep.” – “Because pure nature.” /.../ All *dharmas* exist naturally independently. What is the independent existence of all *dharmas*, is transcending awareness. Why so? Tathāgatas understood all *dharmas* as undoable.”²⁸

5.4. The pragmatic aspect shows that a zerological person (*bodhisattva*) does not depend on any sign and can freely operate with any sign:

"But a bodhisattva does not depend on any *dharma*."²⁹

6. The third model can provisionally be named the **psychological** one. It is based on the description of mental activities in three stages.

In Buddhist terminology these stages can be denoted by the terms *avidyā* ('ignorance' or conventional mind), *viññāna* ('discriminative knowledge' or ability to create new signs) and *prajñā* ('awareness, wisdom'), a synonym of which is *sarvajñatā* ('omniscience'). This model is designed as hierarchic, whereas the aim of the development of the mind is seen as reaching the level of *prajñā* through *viññāna*. The *prajñā* level contrasts with the others in that it is transcending (*pāramitā*).

6.1. At the *prajñā* level there are no logically determined links between concepts, and persons may or may not create sign situations themselves. The observers who are at the *avidyā* or *viññāna* level cannot define this process (i.e. they can find no logical justification for the behaviour of a person who is at the *prajñā* level). However, since some *prajñā* situations may coincide with the model of an external observer, they are to a certain extent describable.

6.1.1. It means that each level has its own relationship with logic. I think that the *avidyā* level corresponds to prelogical thinking, the *viññāna* level to logical and the *prajñā* level to supralogical (although it in fact has quite different logic) thinking, which can be denoted with the formula

$$A \circ B.^{30}$$

This logic can be illustrated by the tetralemma described in my paper "The Zero Way" and the following passage from "The Diamond Sutra":

"Tathāgata has talked about beings as non-beings. Therefore we say "beings, beings.""³¹

A is A because it is \bar{A} (non-A).

6.2. The *avidyā* and *viññāna* levels are constantly interchanging:

"*Dharmas* exist so as they do not exist. Their non-existence is called ignorance (*avidyā*). Foolish uneducated common people depend on them and create non-existent *dharmas*. Creating *dharmas*, they strive for the two extremes and do not understand or see *dharmas*. That is why they create non-existent *dharmas*. Creating *dharmas*, they depend on the two extremes and therefore create *dharmas* of the past, *dharmas* of the future and

dharmas of the present. Creating them, they depend on the name and form and create non-existent *dharmas*.”³²

6.3. This constant interchanging where *avidyā* becomes *vijñāna* and vice versa is the state that the lysiological model considers as *samsāra*. Transition to the *prajñā* level (which should not be considered as *nirvāṇa*) does not take place intentionally, i.e. it is not possible to determine the point in time and space where the mind reaches the *prajñā* level. We can even say that *prajñā* comes by itself.

6.3.1. The intention of Buddhist zerological texts is to teach people how to recognize the *prajñā* state (this state has a parallel in the semiotic model: paragrammatical practical semiotics as *sūnyatā*). Sophisticated methodology has been developed for this purpose, the description of which goes beyond this article.

7. Zero was invented as a concept of zerology and then transferred from zerology to mathematics. Europe accepted zero as a mathematical concept. Is it not now time to find a profounder implementation for it?

7.1. Still:

“It is not zero that makes *dharmas* empty. *Dharmas* are empty.”³³

Notes and References

The Zero Way

1. I appreciate the assistance provided by Mr. M. P. Danilov.

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1. This is the viewpoint mostly represented in the works of the orientologists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

2. See number of works by S. Radhakrishnan, primarily his *Indian Philosophy*, vol. I-II, 1923; as well as the book by Th. Stcherbatsky, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa*, Leningrad, 1925. M. Roy in his book *The History of Indian Philosophy* (in Russian: *История индийской философии*. Москва, 1958. ; the original was published in Bengali) considers the Buddha as the founder of dialectic materialism.

3. Agehananda Bharati suggests that we do not use 19th century terminology for Indian philosophy and replace it by the newest philosophical and philological terminology. See Bharati, A. *The Tantric Tradition*. London, 1965, p. 13. Works by Herbert V. Guenther are also interesting in this sense, see *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation of sGam.po.pa*, London, 1959 and *The Life And Teaching of Nāropa*. Oxford, 1963.

4. See the abovementioned works and Conze, E. *Buddhism*. Oxford, 1951; *Buddhist Thought in India*. London 1962; Lamotte, É. *Histoire du bouddhisme indien*. Louvain, 1958.

5. Nikolai Konrad (1891–1970), a prominent Russian sinologist and philosopher of history has written: “We apply in the evaluation of the philosophical ideas of the East terms that were evolved in philosophical science in Europe: for example, materialism, idealism, rationalism, intuitiveness, mysticism, criticism, monism, pluralism and all the rest, never pausing to consider seriously if these terms are applicable in general where we want to apply them. Would it not be better to make use of the terms and characterizations evolved by scientific thought in the East? Do not those terms correspond far more closely to the nature and content of the phenomena to which they have been applied?” Konrad, N. I. *The Classical Oriental Studies and the New Problems. West – East. Inseparable Twain. Selected articles*. Moscow, 1967, p 26.

6. “The greatest obstacle, however, to mutual understanding is the provincialism of Westerner himself. Beneath a popular façade of being the

world's classic example of an open society, Western people are tribally oriented in a grand but unconscious way." Jacobson, N. P. *Buddhism. The Religion of Analysis*. London, 1966, p. 15.

7. The term is derived from the Greek word λύσις, the meaning of which is equivalent to the Sanskrit word *mokṣa*. Αγαιολογία is thus the equivalent of *mokṣadharmā*.

8. I realize that this viewpoint may cause strong objections. Still, it is not so easy for a European to become a *yogi*. It is much more convenient to discuss why such a weird phenomenon as *yoga* is possible.

9. The word *darśana* is usually translated as 'philosophy'.

10. *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. Ed. by P. L. Vaidya. Darbhanga, 1960, p. 6.

11. M. Monier-Williams's *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, gives the equivalents of *śūnyatā* on p. 1085: emptiness, loneliness, desolateness, absence of mind, distraction, vacancy (of gaze), nothingness, non-existence, non-reality, illusory nature (of all worldly phenomena); Pāli Text Society's *Pāli-English Dictionary* (p. 717): emptiness, "void", unsubstantiality, phenomenality; *The Cultural Heritage of India*. Vol. I, Calcutta, 1958, p. 506: non-existence; Stcherbatsky, Th. op. cit., p. 242: relativity.

12. "The doctrine of emptiness has baffled more than one enquirer. As a theoretical proposition it gives little sense, and seems to amount to a mere assertion of nihilism. The teaching of 'emptiness' does not, however, propound the view that only the Void exists. It is quite meaningless to state that 'everything is really emptiness'. It is even false, because the rules of this particular logic demand that also the emptiness must be denied as well as affirmed. /.../ The destruction of all opinions also includes the opinion which proclaims the emptiness of everything." Conze, E. *Buddhist Thought in India*, pp. 242-243.

13. See for example: Monier-Williams, M. *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, p. 1085.

14. Heimann, B. *Facets of Indian Thought*. London 1964.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 110 ff., 128 ff.

17. Th Stcherbatsky, op. cit., p. 241. It is interesting to note that in common language the word *śūnya-madhya* was used instead of *śūnya* (see Betty Heimann, op. cit., p. 122) and that *mādhyamika* is a synonym of *śūnyavāda*.

18. Buddhists themselves consider silence to be the only sign of this.

19. *Vinaya-piṭaka*. Vol. I, London, 1964, p. 10.

20. *Udāna*. London, 1948, p. 80.

21. The eightfold way (*aṣṭāṅgika mārga*) should by no means be understood as an eight-stage path where each subsequent element is a higher degree of the previous.

22. Nāgārjuna. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*. XXV, p. 20.
23. *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, p. 10.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
25. See Kristeva, J. Pour une sémiologie des paragrammes. – *Tel Quel*, 29, 1968, and the article “Zero Way” in this volume.
26. *Dharma* in the Indian tradition is a term that is difficult to translate adequately. In the semiotic model, *dharma* means a ‘sign’, or, rather, something that should be considered as a sign.
27. *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, p. 3.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 95-96.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
30. See J. Kristeva, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
31. Conze, E. *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā*. Rome 1957, p. 49.
32. *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, p. 8.
33. *Ratnakūṭa*, (quoted publication: Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*. Publiée par L. de la Vallée Poussin, *Bibliotheca Buddhica*. IV. St.-Petersbourg 1913, p. 248).

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1. Suzuki, D. T. *Studies in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. London, 1931.
2. See Conze, E. *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*. 's-Gravenhage, 1960, p. 9.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 9 ff.
4. Lamotte, É. Sur la formation du Mahāyāna. – *Asiatica*. Leipzig, 1954, p. 386.
5. Murti, T. R. V. *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*. London, 1955, p. 83.
6. Robinson, R. H. *Early Mādhyamika in India and China*. 1967, p. 63.
7. Conze, E. *Selected Sayings from the Perfection of Wisdom*. London, 1955, p. 16.
8. See the article “A Possible Approach Towards Understanding *Sūnyavāda*” in this volume.
9. See particularly chapter III of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā (Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā)*. Ed. by P. L. Vaidya. Darbhanga, 1960, p. 25–47; hereinafter *AP*).
10. *AP*, p. 29.
11. E.g.: I-Tsing. *A Record of the Buddhist Religion*. London, 1896.
12. *AP*, p. 29.
13. *AP*, p. 52.
14. *AP*, p. 36.
15. *AP*, p. 28-29 ff.