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¿Es el Cristianismo una Forma Simplificada de Budismo?
podría ser ... pero ¿agápē no se origina donde se origina
śūnyatā?

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Abstract: The Buddhist concept śūnyatā, often translated as “void” or “emptiness” — and understood as the supreme state of spiritual liberation — is possibly the concept of the doctrine most discussed by both specialized commentators and scholars in the West. That said, the idea is quite often misinterpreted to imply “nothingness” and/or “nihilism”. The present essay seeks to shed some light on this matter, by discussing and contrasting the Buddhist term with one central notion in Christianity, namely, agápē. The overarching claim is that the confusion regarding the meaning of śūnyatā only obscures some of the most basic and important points of contact between the teachings of the Buddha and those of Jesus of Nazareth in the Gospels. The methodology adopted is the textual interpretation of authors from different areas, such as philosophy, theology, among others, as well as the interpretation of religious texts. As a result, it might be suggested that agápē originates where śūnyatā originates.

Keywords: Śūnyatā, Agápē, Budismo, Cristianismo, Niilismo.

Resumo: *A noção budista śūnyatā, frequentemente traduzida como “vazio” ou “vácuo” # e entendido como o estado supremo de liberação espiritual # é possivelmente o conceito da doutrina mais discutido por comentaristas especializados e estudiosos no Ocidente. Dito isso, o conceito de śūnyatā é muitas vezes mal interpretado como “nada” e/ou “niilismo”. O presente ensaio procura lançar alguma luz sobre este assunto, discutindo e contrastando o termo budista com um conceito central do cristianismo, a saber, agápē. O argumento geral é que a confusão a respeito do significado de śūnyatā apenas obscurece alguns dos pontos de contato mais básicos e importantes entre os ensinamentos de Buda e os de Jesus de Nazaré nos Evangelhos. A metodologia adotada aqui é a interpretação textual de autores de diferentes áreas, como filosofia, teologia, entre outras, bem como a interpretação de textos religiosos. Como resultado, poderia ser sugerido que agápē se origina onde śūnyatā se origina.*

Palavras-chave: Śūnyatā, Agápē, Buddhism, Christianity, Nihilism.

Resumen: El concepto budista śūnyatā, a menudo traducido como “vacío” o “vacuidad” — entendido como el estado supremo de liberación espiritual — es posiblemente la noción de la doctrina más discutida tanto por comentaristas especializados como por eruditos en Occidente. Dicho esto, el concepto a menudo se malinterpreta por “nada” y/o “nihilismo”. El presente ensayo busca arrojar algo de luz sobre este tema, discutiendo y contrastando el concepto budista con un concepto central del cristianismo, a saber, agápē. La afirmación general es que la confusión sobre el significado de śūnyatā

solo oscurece algunos de los puntos de contacto más básicos e importantes entre las enseñanzas de Buda y las de Jesús de Nazaret en los Evangelios. La metodología adoptada es la interpretación textual de autores de diferentes áreas, como filosofía, teología, entre otras, así como la interpretación de textos religiosos. Como resultado, se podría sugerir que agápē se origina donde se origina śūnyatā.

Palabras clave: Śūnyatā, Ágape, Budismo, Cristianismo, Nihilismo.

1. INITIAL REMARKS

Śūnyatā,[1] often translated as void or emptiness — and understood as the supreme state of spiritual liberation — is possibly the Buddhist concept most discussed by both specialized commentators and scholars in the West. Yet, it is all too often misinterpreted to simply imply nothingness and nihilism. This is, however, a misapprehension of the idea; and one task here is to shed some light on the matter. Why? For one, I reckon the confusion regarding the full meaning of the śūnyatā realization only obscures some of the most basic and important points of contact between the teachings of the Buddha and those of Jesus in the Gospels.

First things first, though: in the present writing I do not feed the illusion of presenting a comprehensive account of the principles of Buddhism and/or Christianity here; I just think some points of contact, and not the differences, are worth exploring more — and the present discussion, divided into four further sections, is my attempt to move the debate in this direction. For our purposes, then, this essay will be divided thus: Section 2, considers the notion of śūnyatā as it is understood by some Buddhist scholars as well as some of the main Sutras in the Buddhist canon, and considers how this understanding differs drastically in both motivation and content from what is commonly perceived as nihilism. Section 3 is concerned with some of the points of contact between the teachings of the Buddha and the teachings of Christ. Section 4 ponders further points of contact between Buddhism and Christianity, as the discussion in the previous sections raises some important questions.

Then, in Final Remarks, we summarize some lessons learned regarding the overarching question of this paper, namely: Doesn't the realization of the truth of agápē — understood as the covenant love of God for humans as well as the human reciprocal love for God that necessarily extends to the love of one's fellow humans (and which is best summarized as Christ's two great commandments: Love God with all your heart, and your neighbor as you love yourself) — appear as a genuine fulfillment of the truth of śūnyatā, that is, the total emancipation of the mind by the process of emptying the heart from material (and even spiritual, one could argue) desires? In short: the fundamental question here is: Doesn't agápē originate where śūnyatā originates?

2 ON ŚŪNYATĀ

Characteristically, śūnyatā (emptiness) is part of the Buddhist doctrine, in general. The concept has, nevertheless, been employed in different

ways by different Buddhist schools of thought through history. It is, for instance, a most fundamental concept within Mahāyāna Buddhism – a later school of Buddhism that arose out of the early Buddhism tradition –, been often used as a heuristic tool (in the process of moving the mind beyond the sense of duality). Roughly put, the centrality of śūnyatā within this tradition indicates that (to them): all dharmas are empty – and, thus, the notion is used often throughout this school as a synonym for nirvana – i.e., liberation from suffering, desire, self, and so on – (CHOONG, 1999, p. 1).

This is also to say that, although the concept of emptiness might be far less central to early Buddhist schools, it is, however, original to the teaching of the Buddha, as Bhikkhu Bodhi (2014) tries to demonstrate in his lecture on the Shorter Discourse on Emptiness. Bodhi suggests that the Buddha himself might have come up with the notion of emptiness in response to some traditional ideas going on at the time within the Vedic tradition, particularly in relation to the Upanishads – a large group of texts (and one of the later parts of Vedic scriptures) constructed by Brahmic seers in search of new ways of interpreting the Vedas.

Take, for instance, the famous Shanti Mantra (Peace Chant) that opens the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, which famously states: “That is Full, This also is Full, from Fullness comes that Fullness, taking Fullness from Fullness, Fullness indeed remains.”[2]

While it might take some unpacking – as it is often the case with (ancient) religious texts – to understand this passage (and no interpretation will satisfy everyone), the most basic idea is this: our own eternal and everlasting souls are identical to Brahman – the underlying, universal principle. Thus, according to the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, fullness is the sort of thing that lies behind our perception of the world; it is the real that lies behind the manifestation of the phenomena that surrounds us. And, as one reaches spiritual liberation, we may be able to pierce through the veil of illusion and see the truth from which the appearance of reality arises – to finally come to the understanding that the two are ultimately one and the same. It would appear that, in his earlier teachings, the Buddha argued against this view. One possible interpretation of the original notion of śūnyatā might, then, have worked as an antidote to the notion of Fullness of the Upanishadic tradition, since the Buddha did not (or so it seems) believe in an eternal soul underlying everything.

In addition, Choong indicates that emptiness may also have originated as a metaphor for the process of retiring the mind from worldliness in meditation. In this context, then, emptiness means “emptying one’s mind from the ordinary cares of mundane life, and entering into a more spiritual state of mind”. In this case, again, we might say that “all forms of meditation” – including Christian meditation – are a kind of emptying, simply because all spiritual practices involves a kind of renouncing, of emptying ourselves out of our ‘old’ selves – including spiritually undesirable states of greed, hatred, lust, spiritual ignorance, delusion, and so on. Moreover, throughout his study Choong argues, convincingly, that

“the notion of ‘emptiness’ arises from the early Buddhist sutras, though it is not initially a central theme of the teaching. The central theme of the teaching in early Buddhism is ‘conditioned genesis’, this being the principle of the four noble truths of not-self, etc.” (1999, p. 88). It is, indeed, this notion of *śūnyatā* as conditioned genesis that matters to our overarching approach in the present study. Hence, a note on the concept follows.

Pratītyasamutpāda (Sanskrit) can be alternatively translated as dependent origination or dependent arising – and it is closely related to the “Buddhist teaching of impermanence” (GOMBRICH, 2006, p. 8). Thus, it is another key concept shared by all schools of Buddhism. In its fullest statement, the crux of the matter of dependent arising or conditioned genesis is this: if x exists, y exists; if x ceases to exist; y also ceases to exist. That is: “all phenomena are conditioned, hence impermanent and liable to change” (GOMBRICH, 2006, p. 109) – because it is ultimately devoid of any inherent essence. In sum, according to Gombrich, conditioned genesis was Buddha’s way of “replacing process for substance” (GOMBRICH, 2006, p. 112).

All that is to say that, for our purpose here, we do not need to resolve the problem of interpretation of *śūnyatā*. For one, this is unquestionable: however one may interpret *śūnyatā*, it certainly differs quite radically from the ideal notion of happiness fed by Western culture and traditional Christian theology, which turns crucially on the understanding of a heavenly realm as the highest possible state of happiness; this is also the promised paradise, the locus of eternal life, of angels, of the Throne of God, etc.: the ultimate domain to which believers are eventually admitted after death.

Justifiably, from this perspective, the Buddhist understanding of *śūnyatā* as the highest form of spiritual achievement possible may come across as too cold, abstract, or impersonal – even miserable, perhaps. However, likewise, to a (neophyte) Buddhist mind, the notion of happiness just described above portrayed by Christianity in general might as well sound strangely soppy, and even immature. Thus, it appears that different cultures foster different views on and attitudes towards life. To the Christian believer, in general, spiritual perfection implies eternal life in Heaven; and this comes as a prize for one’s repentance, faith, and determination. While in Buddhism, true happiness requires the practice of *nirodha* or ceasing to create sufferings (*dukkha*), precisely by removing the causes or origins of those sufferings (*samudayas*). This is why a sincere Buddhist practitioner must seek ultimate liberation through *śūnyatā*: through the total emancipation of the mind by the process of emptiness, as the realization that “[...] this world is empty (or void) of self or anything pertaining to self.” (ÑĀNANANDA, 2016, p. 189).[3]

With that said, one point that seems to go missing in this typical understanding of the motivations behind *śūnyatā* is its historical context; the fact that the doctrine is partly shaped as a movement of reformation of orthodox Vedic culture, in a time when this tradition was undergoing some serious crises, mainly due to its almost great number of divinities

and seemingly mutually exclusive theological and philosophical doctrines – different forms of monism, dualism, and pluralism – professed by different sects and philosophical branches. It is within this particular context that the Buddha eventually adopted a negative way of affirming his spiritual teachings, basically with the aim of purifying traditional Vedic culture from its usual stress on forms of intellectualism and animism (i.e., the belief that natural phenomena, objects, and the universe itself have souls). Thus, Buddha's ultimate doctrines of no-self (anattā), no-being (sunya), and no-gods.

In other words, by stating the precepts of anattā, sunya, and no-gods, the Buddha held an apophatic view, or the via negativa approach towards spirituality, as opposed to the cataphatic or affirmative theology of traditional or orthodox Vedic culture. This tradition turned crucially on the notion of Ātman or permanent self, affirming therefore the essential identity of the self, vis-à-vis Brahman,[4] i.e., some Ultimate Essence.[5] In affirming anattā or no-self, Buddha thus negates the orthodox view of permanent selfhood, teaching that: the ultimate reality is śūnyatā or emptiness, and that all the aspects and features that comprise this world and everything in it are mere aggregates or skandhas; i.e., they are the parts that accompany the self in its trips around saṃsāra, the wheel of birth and rebirth.

Literally, skandhas means: heap, pile, bundle or mass. However, as #hānissaro Bhikkhu – the American Theravada Buddhist monk – explains that the Buddha gave a new meaning to the word khandha:

Prior to the Buddha, the Pāli word khandha had very ordinary meanings: A khandha could be a pile, a bundle, a heap, a mass. It could also be the trunk of a tree. In his first sermon, though, the Buddha gave it a new, psychological meaning, introducing the term “clinging-khandhas” to summarize his analysis of the truth of stress and suffering. Throughout the remainder of his teaching career, he referred to these psychological khandhas time and again. (BHIKKHU, 2016, p. 49).[6]

Still, we might want to look at Buddha's so-called via negativa approach as a kind of artifice or trick employed in order to overcome some of the theological, doctrinal and sectarian prejudices within orthodox Vedic culture at the time.

Roughly, Gautama Buddha taught that genuine enlightenment or awakening could only be achieved through one's own individual spiritual experience and meditation; whereas the Vedic tradition usually refers to the figure of the guru or the spiritual master as the authorized guide towards God. Thus, finding and accepting a guru capable of imparting transcendental knowledge (vidyā) is one of the pre-conditions for spiritual illumination in Hinduism (in general). This is precisely why, in the Bhagavad-Gītā Krishna instructs his cousin and disciple Arjuna thus: “Learn this by submission, full inquiry and service to a spiritual master. Knowers will teach you knowledge for they have seen the Truth. Thus, knowing, you will not return to illusion, for by this knowledge you will see that all living beings are in the Self – that is, in Me” (VYĀSA[7], 2015, p. 167, our translation).[8]

Of course, this sort of devotion to a spiritual master or guru Krishna speaks about in this passage becomes – or should – somehow alien to a Buddhist: the Buddha seem to have rejected the authority of the Vedas, and thus emphasized that people should find their own way of enlightenment rather than trying to please gods and gurus.

But let's return to the skandhas. One may suppose the Buddha was aware that, by definition, the aggregates had necessarily to be aggregated around some actual thing – since they simply could not be grouped around a no-thing, or floating freely in and around space. If the skandhas were not amassed around something, around some aggregating element, they would no longer logically be called aggregates – but perhaps disaggregates. Therefore, one could reasonably ask: what aggregating element could this possibly be but the soul or the ātman?

Again, notice that the Vedas — the oldest scriptures in the Vedic tradition — in both its forms of Śruti (what is heard) and Smṛti (what is remembered) hold a very similar idea; although in the Vedas the notion is conveyed through traditional cataphatic manner, i.e., in affirmative theological terms: hence the powerful — and sometimes simply incomprehensible to the Christian/Western mind — aphorism 3, 14.1 from the Chhândogya Upanishad,[9] which reads:

All This is Brahman [Spirit]. Everything comes from Brahman, and everything is sustained by Brahman. One should therefore quietly meditate on Brahman. Each person has a mind of his or her own. What a person will in his or her present life, S/he becomes when s/he leaves this world.

One should bear this in mind and meditate accordingly (SWAMI, 2017, 3. 14. 1. Our translation).[10]

Brahman is a complex metaphysical concept that encompasses something similar to a mixture of both the Heraclitan flux-principle and the Parmenidean oneness of Being into one single binding unity, out of which everything emanates at the moment of creation, and to which everything returns in the form of energy at the moment of destruction of the universes. However, and that is what matters here, to state that 'everything is Brahman' is also to say that the ātman cannot exist independently from Brahman since, in the end, the self can only exist as a manifestation of the ultimate principle 'Brahman', the ultimate unity of all that there is. In some important sense, then, what the Buddha is saying (that everything is ultimately an illusion) is not far-off from what the canonical Vedic scriptures are saying, is it? In that case, this raises one fundamental question: if this sublime teaching can be delivered through either/both cataphatic and apophatic discourses, what would actually be the whole point of the via negativa approach to spirituality as professed by the Buddha?

In short, one of the main advantages of Buddha's approach, of course, is to discourage a sense of arrogance and self-importance so common among priests (and monks and philosophers) – and the brāhmaṇas (priestly cast) in this particular case – who all-too-often become puffed up with their own level of knowledge, understanding, religious ranks, honors and so on.

Moreover, Buddha also tried to avoid the fixation of the mind upon prejudices about and towards any form of some Ultimate Essence, as well as one's own salvation. Needless to say, care must be taken when introducing spiritual teachings through the apophatic way, since this could easily lead a neophyte, immature mind into an abyss of indifference, despair, and nihilism. On this picture, then, Buddhism, in general, could be said to be one of the most mature religious doctrines known to humanity. The teachings of the Buddha are directed to the old souls — as it were, who are already tired of turning round and round in the wheel of samsāra (the cycle of birth and death).

Broadly, then, Buddha taught that nothing could ultimately be said about a supposed highest reality lying over and beyond space and time: this reality only could be experienced through constant meditation — and no amount of conceptual prejudice or knowledge could lead one's mind to its full realization. Therefore, the Buddha's primary concern was to point to a rather profound ethical existence on earth, within which one may actually experience spiritual joy in his or her pursuit of liberation, in the very act of being ethical in the path of liberation. This experience — rather, this process — may be called the mindfulness of thinking and being: the process of being present, as a whole; of being aware of what is happening around us, our emotions, our body, and the Other — our neighbor.

And here we might want to bracket some important remarks: in Buddhism in general one can neither talk of a radical split between subject and object, as it seems to have happened at some point in Western metaphysical thinking, nor can one talk of a radical split between being and being-in-the-world and being and being-with-others — and, definitely, one cannot speak of being within a Buddhist framework without realizing that being is always a being-towards death. This, of course, might explain, for example, why Japanese scholars love digging Heidegger over and over.[11] And, while this might be another matter, it still brings us to a crucial distinction within the core of the teachings of the Buddha: the distinction between faith and enlightenment. The mind of the immature believer strives on faith on a better life, if not in this life, at least in a paradise beyond; consequentially, it strives on the ideas of the immortality of the soul and eternal salvation. Enlightenment, in Buddhist term, should be a concept beyond salvation and immortality: the enlightened mind simply wishes nothing; hence it doesn't wish its own salvation; and thus the idea of immortality is utterly inconsequential to a Buddhist.

Notice, however, that this notion of full detachment, even detachment from one's own spiritual happiness or salvation, is by no means foreign to Christian thought. For one, the French Christian mystic — and author of *The mirror of simple souls* — Marguerite Porete (d. 1310 CE) strongly indicated a view of Pure Love for God much closer to Eastern thinking in general, and thus in serious conflict with dogmatic Christian theology at the time. According to Porete, spirituality necessarily implies that the soul is sincerely full of God's love, and thus one's redemption to such divine

love causes one to transcend all the contradictions of this world, including the hope for salvation. Of this full spiritual state she remarks:

I am God, says Love, for Love is God and God is Love, and this Soul is God by the condition of Love. I am God by divine nature and this Soul is God by the condition of Love. Thus this precious beloved of mine is taught and guided by me, without herself, for she is transformed into me, and such a perfect one, says Love, takes my nourishment (PORETE, 1993, p. 104).[12]

The statement is clear: in her own pursuit of spiritual surrender, Porete's most basic and insistent preoccupation here is with Love, not with Reason – a crucial distinction to which Christian theologians and philosophers often pay little attention.

This is not to say that the idea of the supremacy of love over reason is an altogether alien to the Christian tradition. St. Augustine, for one, clearly confesses: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest on you" (AUGUSTINE, 1999, p. 17). Indeed, to Augustine the primacy of love is such that, as he says somewhere else: 'love is my weight': I am what I love – i.e., [...] a "person's love determines a person's quality. Do you love the earth? You will be earth. Do you love God? [...] you will be God" (AUGUSTINE, 2008, p. 51).

But the more crucial question for us here is: How exactly does the core insight in this passage differ from the Vedic aphorism mentioned above: i.e., Brahman is everything, and all we see are His different energies, material or spiritual? It could be argued that such spiritual achievements – Brahman is everything, and all we see are His different energies, material or spiritual and I am God by divine nature and this Soul is God by the condition of Love — are the result of divine love, not of reason (or even religious sacrifices, charity, piety, etc.): no amount of rational exercise can guarantee this ultimate state of redemption and detachment. Yet, despite its powerful message, we could say that Porete's *Mirror of simple souls* was written for all and for none ... not surprisingly, perhaps, Porete was burnt at the stake in Paris sometime in 1310 for heresy. (More about some of the fundamental points of contact between Porete's understanding of love for God and the ultimate state of *śūnyatā* in Section 3, below.) Still, it is a heresy that shall sound convincing and rather familiar to a Buddhist mind, as it involves some form of emptying.

Is Christianity a 'simplified' form of Buddhism, then? In a way, the question, as posed in our title, is a rhetorical one, and is only pertinent if we foolishly assume that the aim of faith is different from the aim of illumination, and if the aim of Love is different from the aim of Reason; but we may try to consider it indirectly, by taking a closer look at some points of contact between the Buddha and the Christ, between their teachings, personal lives and historical circumstances. To be sure, this comparative approach is not meant to be a comprehensive one.

3 CHRIST AND BUDDHA: SOME POINTS OF CONTACT

On the face of it, if we were to compare the complexities of Buddha's message with the rather simple — tone of Christ's discourse, we might be tempted to stress a conceptual/metaphysical gap between the two Masters.

For one thing, Buddha himself, just after his achievement of perfect self-realization (samyak sambodhi)[13] is reported to have said that such state of spirituality is rather rare and difficult to attain. Indeed, it would appear that the Buddha even considered revealing the truth of samyak sambodhi to no one, thinking people in general were not ready for it.

Meanwhile, Christ is often found speaking to the masses, to the crowd. Of course, it is true that Christ developed two kinds of discourses: one for the masses and another for his inner circle of disciples. However, for our purposes here, we shall have in mind his discourse for the masses. (Besides, it is well known that most followers of Jesus were commoners, i.e., none were 'initiated priest' within the Jewish tradition.) With that said, let us consider some similarities. I start with the personal, biographical ones.

Both traditions often describe the birth or appearance of their Masters as a divine event; and that would include the holy, immaculate character of their mothers and of their births. As the story goes, Siddhārtha Gautama, the Buddha-to-be, was born in a royal family in India, a royal family headed by King Suddhodhana and Queen Māyā — also known as Māyādevī. The supramundane tradition also speaks about a prophetic dream Māyādevī had prior to conception, with some versions of the story even reporting that the Buddha was conceived without sexual activity.[14] (Again, one must keep in mind the diversity of discourses — dependent on whether we are talking of the theological schools or the schools of thought — that in their historical contexts will develop distinct conceptions both about the mother of Jesus and the mother of Siddhartha).

This much of the story of Buddha's birth clearly resembles that of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, according to the Gospels, doesn't it? Consider Matthews (1, 18): "This is how Jesus Christ was born. A young woman named Mary was engaged to Joseph from King David's family. But before they were married, she learned that she was going to have a baby by God's Holy Spirit" (Mt, 1, 18).

Likewise, we should also note the similar paths both Masters had to walk during their search for self-realization and the execution of their missions: Buddha and Christ were both alleged isolated from the affairs of the material world during a period of their lives, during which, supposedly, they acquired spiritual enlightenment; and both had to face demons who tempted them, in vain, with various promises of material pleasures and opulence.

However, and most importantly, it is in the spiritual messages of these Masters that we see some crucial points of contact, indicating a closer brotherhood between both East and West. To see this, let us consider

their first speeches, by briefly sketching their different teachings. And by first speeches I certainly mean the very first reported public deliverance of their teachings.

3.1 Jesus of Nazareth

Jesus of Nazareth is said to have delivered his first speech to a large crowd: the famous Sermon of the Mount – as it is reported in the Gospels of Matthew (5, 7) and Luke (6, 17-49). Roughly, the message was one of hope and comfort, aimed to show that, to live a spiritual life, one needs to cultivate compassion and a heart filled with love. Thus Jesus of Nazareth consoles all who mourn, and are hungry for justice and grace, promising great rewards to the faithful ones who should expected to be persecuted because of their faith in Christ, the Son of God.

It is crucial to remember that Jesus is here speaking to a crowd of disinherited, desolated people: the Children of Israel; a people trampled by Roman dominion on one side (and not to mention the Greeks, Babylonians, and Egyptians before that), and by the inflexibility and arrogance of traditional, orthodoxy Jewish culture and doctrine on the other. It is against this historical background that Jesus of Nazareth urges the children of Israel to cultivate a pure heart and to be merciful, since this would be the only way one could bring peace into an otherwise chaotic, tumultuous territory.

Jesus's point is thus quite simple: hatred only breeds more hatred, and in this state there can be no place for kindness, forgiveness, compassion and spirituality. In a sense, the crux of the matter is that, even in the midst of pain, suffering, disturbance and injustice, cultivating a pure and merciful heart – mindfulness of thinking and being– is what will foster strength, hope and triumph. Consequently, the message is this: even on the brink of losing everything, or threatened by death, believers should never forget that there is nothing in this world that compares with the future glory of the Father that will be revealed to them in Heaven. It would appear that Jesus of Nazareth confirmed his own testimony with the holiness of his own life.

3.2 Gautama Buddha

The Buddha also, in his first speech, tried to teach the most practical path towards ultimate liberation. However, instead of appealing to the language of consolation and hope, he made use of more – for lack of a better term – sophisticated arguments. Why?

Precisely because the Buddha was not talking to a politically disinherited crowd, but rather to a well versed and mature handful of sages. Buddha's first speech was supposedly delivered in the holy city of Vārāṇasī, surrounded by five ascetic yogis devoted to practicing some of the most severe forms of religious austerities and penitence. Hence Buddha tried to teach these monks that genuine spirituality cannot

be based on extremes, but rather on the middle path, the madhyamā-pratipad; i.e., on the cultivation of balance or harmony of all things – but even this realization too, whether one rejects it in the end, requires the realization of Brahman and Divine Love as:

Everything is [Spirit],
Everything comes from Brahman,
and everything is sustained by Brahman
(SWAMI, 2017, 3. 14. 1).[15]

The Buddha argued that simply trying to wash away their sins with harsh forms of atonement and penance was a waste of time, if they did not rid themselves from the impurities of their heart, always longing either for mundane pleasures, or for heavenly gratifications or, what is mostly common in such high state of spirituality, longing for reputation and adoration. In Buddha's view, then, the right balance between the material and the spiritual remains a great challenge facing those who diligently seek the path of ultimate liberation and enlightenment.

Nevertheless, it is important to notice that, although Buddha tried to teach those five monks that their extreme practices were ultimately insufficient, he did not completely condemn them; otherwise he would probably not have delivered his first speech to them at all. The Buddha understood that those monks were sincerely seeking for the ultimate truth, by living a life of simplicity, renunciation, devotion and meditation.

So, it would appear that the Buddha lived in a world of fanatical asceticism, while Jesus lived in a place haunted by corruption, slavery, lack of local political sovereignty, injustice, and violence. And these, I would say, is the main reason why the latter tried to teach comfort and hope and spoke against intolerance, while the former chose to speak of right balance and against fanaticism. Of course, there is more about Jesus' discourse in the Sermon on the Mount than just a consoling speech for those in despair; it was, above all else, a program of life (a process) for those who wish to listen.[16] That said, what is important here are the points of contact between the two teachings. In this regard, although the two Masters spoke under different social and political circumstances, the overarching message seems to be similar: Jesus concludes his Sermon (Matthew, 7) admonishing us to make proper choices, Buddha speaks of right choice – both teachings aim at promoting moral, honorable, and peaceful conduct. Both discourses – Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and the Buddha's noble eightfold path were meant to be much more than circumstantial speeches: they were meant to be 'memorized' and serve as a source for constant meditation: one foundation point of meditation that can be found in both discourses is that suffering is universal. But how exactly to summarize the teachings of these Masters for our purpose?

As noted earlier, the Buddha aimed partly at fighting religious and social exclusion in his native India, where brāhmaṇas or priests thought they had total monopoly of the spiritual and philosophical meanings of the Vedas. Much like Jesus of Nazareth, Gautama Buddha also clashed directly with religious fanatics and the priestly caste. And in rejecting their extremism, Buddha proposed the practice of right balance and of

emptiness of the heart of all desires as the only true path to liberation. In doing so, the Buddha also opened spirituality to ordinary people who did not or could not abandon their social or family life to live as a mendicant monk. In sum, then, much like Jesus, the Buddha was more concerned with our very existential problems, and not with too complicated theological and philosophical notions of God (Gods, properly speaking).

4 BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY: SOME POINTS OF CONTACT

So, the Buddha's discourse turned fully around the human element, based on the truths of *nirodha* and *samyak sambodhi*. And remember: this was a totally new language in a world otherwise dominated by the prejudices of a caste system and of religious fanaticism. Against this background, the Buddha's teachings emphasized the principle of *catvāri āryasatyāni* or the Four Noble Truths; i.e., *dukkha*, the truth of suffering; *samudaya*, the truth of the origin or root of *dukkha*; *nirodha*, the truth of the cessation of *dukkha*; and finally *marga*, the truth of the path – the path towards ultimate liberation.

This process is called the Noble Eightfold Path or *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*, a process that involves cultivating: right view, right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right diligence, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Notice: these actions are intrinsically connected. The first three truths aim to prepare the way to the fourth one. And this too can be further divided into three areas of training, namely, wisdom, ethics, and meditation. In this manner, view and understanding belong to the field of wisdom; speech, action, and livelihood pertain to the ethical realm; while diligence, mindfulness, and concentration belong to meditation. In short, then, right understanding involves realizing the truth of attachment, dissatisfaction, karma, *samsāra*, self, justice, emptiness, impermanence, and death. Such attachment forces the person to keep turning around in the cycle of birth and rebirth.

Right intention: may include different techniques that will help the mind to develop a compassionate heart, a crucial step in spiritual practice, and this begins in the ethical realm. And here the lessons are as follows: right speech teaches us the benefits of always telling the truth and chanting of sutras and mantras, or divine verses and songs aimed to purify the mind and the heart; it also teaches us to avoid perjury, false promises and offensive language. Right action: teaches us to act with generosity, not to kill any living being, and not to indulge in unnecessary drinking and sexual intercourse. And right livelihood means we should avoid engaging in social and professional actions that may be harmful to others. Right attitude: finally, at the level of meditation, we must cultivate right attitude, by focusing on the control of the mind and the senses, developing positive thoughts and attitude towards others. All of these practices may require certain meditation techniques such as praying, sutra chanting, correct posture, breathing exercises, as well as practicing humility and

compassion, in order to help the meditator reduce mental agitation and anxiety, right mindfulness.[17]

That being said, notice that the path of impermanence is probably the most difficult one for Western minds to fully understand, for this is the very concept that leads us to the conclusion of śūnyatā or emptiness as plain nihilism. But before we can dig into the question of śūnyatā properly, let us reaffirm that the idea that this world is an illusion might not be such an alien awareness in Christianity.

Recall how Pilate was reluctant to incriminate Jesus of Nazareth. So, he asked Jesus to explain himself about all that talk about a kingdom, and about his father being a king. Jesus simply replies: “[...] my kingdom is not of this world.” (Jo, 18, 36). Or, yet, according to Luke, “[...] when asked by the Pharisees where the kingdom of God was, Jesus replied: ‘The kingdom of God will not come with observable signs. Nor will people be able to say ‘Look, here it is,’ or ‘There it is.’ For you see, the kingdom of God is born of you.’” (Lk, 17, 20-21).

Not surprisingly, there are countless interpretations for this passage. However, the koine Greek term used by Luke is *entos humon*, which literally means inside of you. So, Jesus says there is a kingdom of God, but denies it is anywhere out there ... why? And he says it is *entos humon* — inside of you —, again, why? True, Jesus doesn’t seem to say explicitly that this world is an illusion, as Buddhist texts often do. However, we must ask: Why aspire for something that is definitely not out there? I can think of one reason only: what is out there is, ultimately, an illusion or, at its best, ephemeral. One sensible way to understand the kingdom Jesus was talking about is to place it in his own words, his teachings: the kingdom is the *logos*/ and the *logos* is the kingdom — and that is the only ultimate reality.

Even so, it might seem puzzling to say, for instance, as the Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra says: that “[...] everything in the world is lined with illusion.” (YAMAMOTO, 2007, p. 19). And by everything it also means the teachings of the Buddha or any Bodhisattva (the person in the path to illumination), even religiosity itself is lined with illusion. But why exactly does the Sutra say, everything is lined with illusion? Or still, as we read in the Lankavatara Sutra: “[...] the nature of all things are like a vision, a dream, an illusion, a reflection, a shadow, and the reflection of the moon in water.” (SUZUKI, [1932]/(2011), p. 64). Or yet, even more radically stated in the Vajra Sutra: “[...] all conditioned dharmas[18] [i.e., the whole nature of reality] are like dreams, illusion, bubbles, shadows, like dew drops and a lightning flash: contemplate them thus.” (HUA, 2002, p. 203).

Before we try to answer the question What exactly is illusory about reality according to Buddhist metaphysics?, let us note a few points regarding the word *dharma* mentioned above, as this might help us understand the dimension of the illusory in Buddhism in general, especially in relation to śūnyatā.

The Sanskrit term *dharma* stems from the root-verb *dhr-*, meaning to hold, to bear, to support. Hence, *dharma* refers to that which holds or

bears the whole of reality. However, the term is often translated as religion or religiosity or even as justice, piety, etc., depending, again, on the school of thought or religious tradition employing it. Still, the gist of it is: to say there is a dharma, as most Vedic religions do, is to say that there is something primordial that holds the whole of reality – be it religious practice, virtues, a divine power, some transcendental-universal energy, etc.

But, again, the Vajra Sutra is saying all dharmas are conditioned, and that an advanced practitioner should sweep away all dharmas. This is the case because, the Buddhadharma (the teaching of the Buddha) is not fixed (perhaps much like the logos of Christ) — and why be attached to something that is not-fixed, temporal, impermanent?

In plain English: ultimately, the Sutras are all simply stating: be virtuous, practice justice, spirituality, do not kill, do not steal, follow the basic principles of a pious life, cultivate a pure heart ... but, and here is the point that is hard to understand, “[...] you should not be attached [...]” to the fruits or result of these actions (SUZUKI, [1932]/(2011), p. 75); because the one mark [of spirituality and illumination] (whatever mark that might be – i.e., piety, justice, charity, sacrifice, etc.), whatever that may be, is not a mark at all, hence, it is emptiness. It is, however, emptiness with practice, of duties, of justice, equality, sacrifice, piety, etc. That is what the Vajra Sutra means when it encourages the devotee to maintain a wonderful conduct without dwelling[19], meaning that one must not dwell in one’s act. Thus, if I give charity, if I practice piety, if I pray, whatever I do, it is only liberating, in this light, if I do not dwell in my deeds and actions. Again, as according to the Vajra Sutra: “[...] an illuminated soul [Bodhisattva] should not dwell anywhere when s/he practices giving. In other words, s/he should not be attached [...]” to the fruits of his or her actions (HUA, 2002, p. 58).

But, again, that should not be surprising to a Christian mind. Didn’t Jesus of Nazareth say:

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.² Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Mt, 6, 1-4).

Fine! Even our pious acts and pursue of spirituality, according to Buddhism and to Jesus should be done without dwelling in the act or its fruit. But how does that explain the illusory part of reality? It is easier to start with Buddhism since the notion of reality as an illusion is less ambiguous here; even if that does not mean it is not without controversies.

As explained earlier, different schools interpret the notion of emptiness differently. I will just refer to one passage in the Lankavatara Sutra, which summarizes the matter clearly:

Another way of classifying knowledge is known as three Svabhavas in the Lanka. This is a generally recognized classification in all the schools of Mahayana Buddhism. Svabhava means “self-nature” or “self-reality” or “self-substance”, the existence of which in some form is popularly accepted. The first form of knowledge by which the reality of things is assumed is called Parikalpita, “imagined”, that is, imagination in its ordinary sense. This is an illusion, for things are imagined existing really where in fact there are none. It is like seeing a mirage which vanishes as one approaches. Imagined (parikalpita) objects have, therefore, no objective reality (SUZUKI, [1932]/(2011), p. 27).

Risking simplifying the nuances of Buddhist epistemology in this passage, we can still try to understand it thus: there is nothing self-existing in the world. Svabhava literally means both own-being and own-becoming. There is clearly nothing in reality which is its own-being or its own-becoming, is there? Everything depends on something else to come into existence and to remain so. This, I think, is rather incontestable. (It also takes us back to the idea of conditioned genesis/dependent origination as discussed above.) Svabhava, then, implies, ultimately the negation of all forms of pluralisms and dualisms – and that is a fundamental understanding in the path of illumination. Yet, it is not all of illumination, for even that realization is illusory. Once the mind grasp the insight that nothing is self-existing, the idea of self-existence itself must be abandoned.

But doesn't that mean nihilism, or nothingness? Not really – as it has been discussed in the opening paragraphs of Section 1 (ON ŚŪNYATĀ). Still according to the Lankavatara Sutra there are seven progressive stages of śūnyatā or emptying. The passage above talks about one form of emptying in particular, the emptying of self-nature, realizing that nothing is self-existing; nothing is its own-being and its own-becoming. However, this is just the second stage of spiritual comprehension. If we fast forward to the seventh stage, we get to emptiness of mutuality, which means abandoning even the idea of negation. It is non-duality taken to its ultimate consequence. Clearly, what the Lankavatara Sutra is saying is that, if one finally realizes that light and shade, long and short, black and white, etc. are all illusions (following the logic of svabhava), that illuminated mind will also have to understand that even Nirvana (liberation) and Samsara (the cycle of birth and death) must be abandoned, as it is stated: “[...] as Nirvana and Samsara are, all things are not-two. There is no Nirvana except where there is Samsara; and there is no Samsara except where there is Nirvana.” (SUZUKI, [1932]/ (2011), p. 65-66).[20]

Thus, ultimate śūnyatā is emptying of emptiness itself. However paradoxical this may sound, I still think it is a common denominator at the core of every serious spiritual path we have considered thus far. But let us compare it once again with what Love says to Reason in Porete's The mirror of simple souls:

“Reason,” said Love, “I certify you that the souls guided by pure (Fine) Love regard shame as worship, and worship as shame; and poverty as riches and riches as poverty; and torments of God and of His creatures as comforts of God and of His creatures; and to be hated and loved and loved as hated; and hell as paradise

and paradise as hell ... This is to say ... that they [the soul who has achieved pure love for God] neither will nor not-will, any of these prosperities nor any of these adversities; for these should have no will but [for the] thing that God wills (SOBRENOME, 1927, pp. 44-45).[21]

In short: for Porete, the ultimate understanding of divine will, which (still according to her) is only realized through Love, leads the loving soul not only to a form of emptying of all dualities (riches-poverty, hated-loved, shame-worship, torments-comforts, etc.), but, also, boldly, to the emptying of the duality paradise-hell. On closer inspection, then, Porete's understanding of Divine Love through her understanding of Jesus of Nazareth doesn't sound much different from the realization of the bodhisattva who has achieved the seventh state of illumination, as discussed about the Lankavatara Sutra above, for whom nirvana-samsara is the final form of duality to be abandoned.

5 FINAL REMARKS

Like the Buddha, Jesus too transformed his own time and place, partially by opposing mainstream religious practices and doctrines. For one thing, old Judaism, much like traditional Vedic culture, involved its own share of excessive emphasis on rituals, methods, and theoretical knowledge that were supposed to be the privilege of few priests — the Pharisees or scribes. In this context, not without controversies, Jesus will thus radically simplify Judaism, reducing its large array of laws, prophecies and rituals to a single principle: “[...] love the lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. [...] and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mt, 22, 37-39).

Notice that the logic behind the first part of this commandment, love God with all your heart, implies, of course, a type of devotion that may lead the believer to places no human effort or reason alone can reach. This is a sort of devotion that is grounded on hope and love, and, in a sense, it can be said to be the highest form of devotion and realization of God. The level of devotion suggested by this command involves the kind of condition of Love that is at the core of Porete's argument.

And, as mentioned before, Christ's life was itself a testimony of this type of devotion too: It is obviously only by loving God truly with all one's heart that one can sacrifice his whole life, his own body, and his honor to a multitude otherwise deprived of honor and hope. But love for God is not enough, for it might lead the individual into either isolation and/or, more commonly, selfishness. Consequently, according to both Jesus and the Buddha, the message is rather simple: better to be a worthless, wretched individual who, at least once in his or her life, reaps fruits to the hungry or comforts those in despair, than to be a great sage or priest or scholar or philosopher, and yet spent one's whole life hiding in a cave or behind a façade. Thus, the Christ's second great commandment: Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Needless to say, to love oneself doesn't mean vainglory and narcissism; rather it shows that one should always do what is best for oneself insofar as one takes spirituality to be part of one's

own life — and that requires, again, mindfulness of thinking and being. So, for the Buddha as well as for Jesus of Nazareth, one must have the right discernment between what is real and what is illusory. If a person spends his or her entire life working hard only to build material comfort, without any regard to others and to the essence of what one truly is, that would not, according to both the Christ and the Buddha, be a sign of loving oneself since that would be a type of love solely dedicated to impermanence or illusion; to something that will at any moment become food for worms.

It appears that a better understanding of the most basic points of contact between the teachings of the Buddha and those of Jesus of Nazareth promotes a hermeneutic which rejects religious intolerance, for one. Like Gautama Buddha, Jesus of Nazareth too summarized his teachings around the idea of a life of spirituality where one should think of this world as temporary — the kingdom of my father is not in this world. In fact, both the Christ and the Buddha can be said to have taught the same basic lesson: this world is empty of self or anything pertaining to the self. Is this conclusion forcing Jesus' thought to indicate that he takes this world to be empty of self? I don't think it is. For one, let us remember that emptiness is not an abstract idea in Buddhism — and that has been the overarching interpretation of śūnyatā I have been attempting to portray thus far. In both doctrines, the fundamental impediment to spiritual maturity is the concept of an individual ego, "a subject for whom his/her self-awareness is absolutely primary." True, it could be argued (as THURSTON does) that "The Christian self-empties to be filled with Christ. The Buddhist self-empties to be Empty" (1985, p. 347). But this does not invalidate the original claim of this paper: that agápē originate where śūnyatā originates. That is: while the goal of both teachings might be distinct (again, it could be argued otherwise), they both appear to start from the same point of contact: both doctrines agree in their understanding of man's present condition as empty of true self. Jesus himself sees his own obedience to God as pointing himself away from himself. Or at least that could be one way of reading John, 10, 30: I am the Father are one.

In sum: Jesus of Nazareth commanded his followers to love God and their neighbors as they loved themselves. The Buddha taught his followers the importance of seeking genuine happiness through śūnyatā: through the total emancipation of the mind by the process of emptying the heart from material (and even spiritual) desires. Again, the Christ preached devotion and humility; the Buddha stressed purification and detachment. And with all that said, here is one fundamental question that challenges both, Christians and Buddhists alike: How could anyone love God with all one's heart and their neighbors as one loves oneself, if that heart is continuously filled with selfishness, greed, contempt for others, bacchanalia, irritation, anxiety, fear, betrayal, revenge, remorse, grief, traumas, and arrogance?

While this might not mean that the self is empty of reality, or that it is an illusion; it indicates, however, that there is a True Self to be restored, as

St. Bernard of Clairvaux would put it: “He [Christ] gave me Himself, and by that gift restored to me the self that I had lost” (1987, p. 11). Indeed, it could be argued that that before that True Self – which is nothing before it is restored – is also voided of self, still following St. Bernard’s meditation: “What then shall I give the Lord for all that He has given me (Ps, 115, 2)? I own myself in return for myself, twice over” – created first and then restored (Ps, 115, p. 186). The crux of the matter here is simply this: according to the teachings of Christ, there can hardly be love of God or of others without the cultivation of right view, right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right diligence, right mindfulness, and right concentration – meaning that emptiness is much more than an abstract concept. As Williams & Tribe (2000) put it: “Buddhism from the very beginning had used the terms ‘empty’ (*sunya*) and ‘emptiness’ (*sunyata*) to apply to the truth discovered by the eye of proper understanding [...], the eye of the Buddha” (p. 134).

Again, this idea of false ego-identity dissolution through the process of spirituality is by no means alien to Christianity. Doesn’t St. Paul clearly states: “I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians, 2, 20)? The overarching (perhaps hidden) point is this: if there is any True Self to be discovered in Christianity, it is discoverable only through a process of self-emptying – “I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me” ...

If this is the case, a better understanding of the most basic points of contact between the teachings of Buddhism and the teachings of Christianity also promotes a more profound self-understanding. Upon returning to our initial question: doesn’t the realization of Christ’s two great commandments appear as a genuine fulfillment of *śūnyatā*? Or the other way round: doesn’t *agápē* originate where *śūnyatā* originate? Indeed, it appears that a closer examination of the concept of *śūnyatā* – as the one I have attempted in this paper – calls the very idea of *agápē* into question ... and vice-versa. In sum: we can hardly escape the conclusion that both concepts (*śūnyatā* and *agápē*), as spiritual realizations, require some form of emptying as a process – both paths require the total emancipation of the mind by the process of emptying the heart from material (and even spiritual) desire... or so it could be argued.

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Notes

- 1 In Pali it spells suññatā.
- 2 Sanskrit: Om Puurnnam-Adah Puurnnam-Idam Puurnnaat-Puurnnam-Udacyate | Puurnnasya Puurnnam-Aadaaya Puurnnam-Eva-Avashissyate || Cf., for one, Swami Madhavananda's translation of The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad with the commentary of Shankaracharya (Mayavati, Almora: Advaita Ashrama, 1950). Available at: [Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad.pdf](http://www.holybooks.com/Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad.pdf) (holybooks.com)
- 3 “[...] suññam ida# attena vā attaniyena vā.”
- 4 The meaning is quite literal. It is a term derived from the Sanskrit root verb bṛh, meaning to swell, to grow, to evolve; while Brahman is that principle which swallows spirit or souls (SANSKRIT DICTIONARY ONLINE, 2021).
- 5 I say some because there is simply no agreement regarding the nature or number of such ultimate essence in Indian religion and philosophy.
- 6 It is important to note that, much like Plato and Aristotle, for instance, the Buddha also had to invent or reinvent concepts, phrases, and metaphors in order to express his ideas fully, comprehensibly, and in a new light.
- 7 Authorship unknown, although transcription is traditionally attributed to Krishna Dwaipayana Veda Vyāsa. Translation has been slightly altered.
- 8 [...] tad viddhi pran#ipātena. paripraśnena sevayā. upadekṣ#yanti te jñānam. jñāninas tattva-darśinah#. yaj jñātvā na punar moham. evam yāsyasi pān##ava. yena bhūtāny aśe#ān#i. drakṣ#yasy ātmany aho mayi.
- 9 Chhāndogya Upanishad is part of the Sāmaveda (c. 1200 BCE), and author is unknown. That said, there are plenty of translations available in English. See bibliography for details on the versions cited here. I have altered the translation slightly.
- 10 [...] Sarvam Khalvidam brahma tajjalāniti śānta upāsīta. Atha khalu Kratumayah puruso yathākraturasmim#lloke puruso bhavati tathetah pretya bhavati sa Kratum Kurvīta.
- 11 May I suggest the following anthology: Japanese and continental philosophy: conversations with the Kyoto school by Bret W. Davis, Brian Schroeder and Jason M. Wirth.
- 12 If interested, the reader may wish to carefully read Porete's whole distinction about reason and love to the end – Chapter 21 of The mirror of simple souls.
- 13 Notice: samyak sambodhi is the highest state of liberation according to Mahāyāna Buddhism (originate in India). But other Buddhist schools might regard nirvāṇa as the ultimate goal of enlightenment. Of course it is not just Christianity that had its various schisms and divergencies.
- 14 Again, one must keep in mind the diversity of discourses (depending on whether we are talking of the theological schools or schools of thought – that in their historical contexts will develop distinct conceptions both about the mother of Jesus and the mother of Siddhartha. I thank my reviewers for this clarification.
- 15 Sarva# khalvida# brahma tajjalāniti śānta upāsīta.
- 16 Once again, I thank my evaluators for this reminder.
- 17 See, for example, Thich Nhat Hanh, The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: transforming suffering into peace, joy, & liberation, part II, The noble eightfold path (London: Random House, 1999), pp. 51-113.
- 18 Dharma: yet another tricky Sanskrit term employed differently throughout Indian religions and philosophy. For most Vedic religions, it has a positive meaning; in Buddhism, however, in general, even dharma must eventually be renounced.

- 19 This is indeed the title of Chapter 4, pp. 57-60 (HUA, 2002).
- 20 Chapter 27, On Emptiness (śūnyatā), No-birth, and Non-duality.
- 21 Division III, Chapter 15.