



---

## A Comparative Study on the Notion of Nothingness in Early Buddhism and Sartre's Existentialism

Manhai C.S.

Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

---

### ABSTRACT

*The term "Nothingness" has been ordinarily regarded as the absence of persons or things. Nevertheless, it has been recognized from the internal perspective which is consciousness rather than the external perspective which we contact through the senses. According to Buddhism and Existentialism, the realization of nothingness is the main goal to free oneself from this world. Jean Paul-Sartre states that nothingness must be given at the core of Being to apprehend the particular type of realities. In his being and nothingness, he says, "nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being – like a worm." Sartre does not reject the Husserlian idea of transcendental ego, but he slightly changes it. Since this was not part of the experience reflected on, he refers that it is the transcendent ego constituted by reflection rather than a transcendental ego that underlies all experience. As a result, consciousness becomes independent, and it is described as a lack or nothingness. Without the ego, consciousness has no contents and thereby nothingness. In Buddhism, nothingness or void is considered as dependent origination. It cannot grow by itself unless it is nurtured by craving (taṇhā) and action (kamma). So, consciousness is not annihilated, but it is interdependent. It always includes "five aggregates" (pañca-khandha), "eighteen-elements" (dhātu), twelve sense faculties (āyatana), and "dependent-origination" (patticcasamuppada). Therefore, the consciousness cannot be isolated from these factors. There is a different comprehension of nothingness in Buddhism and Existentialism. For Buddhists, human beings live in the world of sufferings. Hence, Buddhist contemplate nothingness on everything to attain Nibbāna in this life. For Sartre, Human existence is regarded to be absurd. So, he must apply his freedom which is nothingness to give a meaning in life. The objective of this paper is to explain the similarities and dissimilarities of nothingness in Buddhism and Existentialism.*

**KEYWORDS:** Existentialism, Buddhism, Consciousness, Nothingness, Suññata.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term “Nothingness” has always been regarded as the absence of persons or things. It has been recognized from the internal perspective which is consciousness rather than external perspective which we contact through senses. In the modern times, Buddhism and Existentialism view that nothingness is the main goal to free oneself from this world. But they lead to different meanings of nothingness and destinations. For Sartre, nothingness is the fundamental goal to attain the mundane freedom, and for Buddhists, emptiness is the most significant goal to attain the supramundane freedom (*nibbana*). The destination of nothingness leads them to different paths.

In Existentialism, the term nothingness is one of the most important concepts to annihilate the being. Nothingness is synonymous to consciousness. According to Sartre, Nothingness must be given at the heart of Being to apprehend the realities. So, he distinguishes two types of beings: Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself. Both are interrelated internally and defined each other negatively. The for-itself is what it is (nothingness) and what it is not (being). The in-itself is what it is (being) and what it is not (nothingness). What the being-for-itself lacks is being-in-itself. Thus, consciousness is defined as nothingness. Without consciousness as nothingness, the notions of freedom, temporality, and desire cannot be accounted. Consciousness is said to be freedom because it is not regarded to be

subject to any laws of causes. Consciousness is temporality because it can exist in the past, present and future simultaneously. Finally, consciousness is said to be desire because it lacks being. We have seen that the notion of nothingness is closely connected with the other three notions.

In Buddhism, the term emptiness is one of the key signifiers for finding liberation or *nibbana*. This emptiness can be understood by analyzing two kinds of truths: conventional truths (*sammuti sacca*) and ultimate truths (*paramattha sacca*). When we call entities such as ‘person’ (*puggala*), ‘living being’ (*satta*) and ‘self’ (*atta*) it is defined as conventional truths. When we call entities such as ‘impermanence’ (*anicca*), ‘suffering’ (*dukkha*) and ‘selflessness’ (*anatta*) it is called the absolute truths. However, the term emptiness should not be understood in the sense of nothingness. Sartre’s view of consciousness is nothingness which is independent, whereas the Buddhist concept of consciousness is emptiness which is interdependent. So, consciousness always includes five aggregates, twelve sense faculties, and dependent origination. This is how consciousness is closely tied with other factors. Because they are empty of self, they are called emptiness. Here, the term ‘*suñña*’ is understood as similar as ‘*anatta*.’ Nonetheless, when consciousness is described as ‘void’ or ‘empty’ (*suñña or śūnya*), it indicates an *anatta* (no-self). Thus, consciousness is regarded to be empty as it is always empty of a self. As we contemplate ourselves as a subject of

emptiness, we strive for the life of purity to attain *Nibbana*.

## 2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Both Buddhism and Existentialism agree that the idea of nothingness is to free oneself from bondage. Both of them have also analyzed the human existence. For Sartre, nothingness is identified as the for-itself, and the being is identified as the in-itself. The difference between these two is the matter of complete and incomplete. While the being-in-itself is full of everything and complete, the being-for-itself is lack of everything and incomplete. Therefore, the in-itself must be annihilated by the for-itself. What being-for-itself is lacking is the being-in-itself. For Buddhists, *suññata* is recognized as the bare of five aggregates, and being is recognized as the clinging of five aggregates. Unlike Sartre, the difference between these two of them is not the matter of complete and incomplete, instead it is the issue of clinging. While the clinging of five aggregates is potentially subject to biases and clinging, the bare of five aggregates is not subject to biases and clinging. It is a way of how we see the objects instead of what we see them. Although both understand that the human existence is the problem of life, why do the destination of Sartre's nothingness and Buddhist *suññata* lead to different conclusions? For Buddhists, human beings live in the world of sufferings. So, when we reflect nothingness in life, we have compassion for ourselves and others that brings to calm in mind in end of our life. Hence, Buddhists contemplate nothingness

in all things to attain *Nibbāna* in this life. For Sartre, Human existence is regarded to be absurd. So, he must apply his freedom which is nothingness to give a meaning in life. Sartre's view of nothingness is not regarded to have compassion, instead it leads the freedom to take actions. Thus, the main research problem is to analyze the complete freedom of Sartre's nothingness and the interdependence of Buddhist emptiness.

## 3. OBJECTIVES

- i. To analyze the existentialist radical change from a life in bad faith to a life of an authenticity. This radical change affects not only man's attitude towards the world but also his way of life.
- ii. To analyze the Buddhist radical transformation from an ordinary person (*puthujjana*) to liberated person (*arahant*). Seeing the true nature of things, the *Arahant* has a new attitude towards life; his picture of the world (*papanca*) has been destroyed.
- iii. To study nothingness as a fundamental heart of being in Sartre's philosophy.
- iv. To study emptiness as a characteristic of five aggregates in Buddhist philosophy.
- v. To show Sartre's nothingness often leads to existential angst due to the weight of responsibility for creating one's essence.
- vi. To show that the Buddhist emptiness aims to alleviate suffering through the recognition of interdependence and the transient nature of all things.

vii. To study nothingness leading to freedom in Sartre's philosophy and emptiness leading to *Nibbana* in Buddhist philosophy.

#### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper concerns the comparative study of nothingness found in Early Buddhism and Sartre's Existentialism. Being a person coming from the background of the Buddhist Studies, I intend to use mainly qualitative approach to ascertain validity of my research. First of all, it is important to understand the specific factors that come under this topic such as the qualitative methods, discourse analysis, hermeneutics, and interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Qualitative methods are research techniques that focus on understanding phenomena through the collection of non-numerical data. They aim to explore and interpret the meanings, concepts and experiences of individuals or groups. Some common qualitative methods include interviews, focus groups, observations, case studies, ethnography, and content analysis.

Discourse analysis is a research method used to study written or spoken language in its social context. It involves examining how language is used in communication and how it relates to the social and cultural structures surrounding the discourse. This method can encompass various forms of communication, including conversations, texts, media, and more. Key aspects of discourse analysis include: language

use, context, power and ideology, interaction, and interpretation.

Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation, particularly of texts, language, and symbolic forms. It originally emerged from the interpretation of sacred texts in religious contexts but has since then expanded to include a wider array of disciplines, such as literature, law, and philosophy. The term is often associated with the ways in which meaning is derived from written works and the processes through which readers or interpreters come to understand them. Key aspects of hermeneutics include: textual interpretation, philosophical hermeneutics and the hermeneutic circle.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research methodology that aims to explore and understand how individuals make sense of their personal and social world. It is particularly concerned with the subjective experiences of participants and the meanings they attach to those experiences. Here are some key features of IPA: focus on lived experience, interpretative nature, idiographic approach, and dialogical process.

#### 4.1 Sample

This study used purposive sampling, selecting the people who would like to know the dichotomy of human beings. Moreover, researchers who want to understand nothingness in Buddhism and Existentialism can utilize the topic. It also helps the readers coming from Eastern and Western cultures to compare nothingness with their specific philosophical views.

#### 4.2 Data collection

The sources of data collection for the study are the books related to Buddhism and Existentialism. It includes primary and secondary sources. Primary data are collected from early Buddhist teachings and Sartre's original books. Secondary data are collected from academic books, articles, journals, news, websites, and others related to this subject. After collecting both types of data, they were analyzed and categorized into a suitable section.

#### 4.3 Data analysis:

Both Early Buddhism and Sartre's Existentialism believed that being is bondage and nothingness is freedom. According to Sartre, nothingness plays a central role at the heart of being. For him, Phenomenological ontology can stand only when the transcendental ego is rejected. It means, when all being is put on the side of the object, consciousness is nothing. As a result, consciousness becomes independent, and it is described as a lack or nothingness. Without the ego, consciousness has no contents and thereby nothingness. As Sartre takes consciousness to be nothingness, he differentiates the being-for-itself from the being-in-itself.

In Buddhism, nothingness or void is considered as dependent origination. It cannot grow by itself unless it is nurtured by craving (*taṇhā*) and action (*kamma*). So, consciousness is not annihilated, but it is interdependent. It always includes the "five aggregates" (*pañcakkhandha*), "eighteen elements" (*dhātu*), and

"dependent-origination" (*paticcasamuppada*). Therefore, the consciousness cannot be isolated from these factors. Nonetheless, when consciousness is described as 'void' or 'empty' (*suñña or sūnya*), it is understood as similar to *anatta* (no-self). Consciousness is regarded to be empty as it is empty of any self. Hence, Buddhism distinguishes two types of consciousness: the consciousness aggregate (*viññānakkhandha*), and consciousness without surface (*viññānam anidassanam*).

### 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section compares the notion of nothingness in Sartre's Existentialism and in Early Buddhism.

#### 5.1 Nothingness in Sartre's Existentialism

Jean Paul-Sartre, a key figure in existentialism, had a profound view on nothingness, which he explored extensively in his works, particularly in "Being and Nothingness." For Sartre, nothingness is a critical concept that helps to define human existence and consciousness. Nothingness must be given at the heart of Being to apprehend the realities. So, he distinguishes between two types of beings: Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself. The being-in-itself is the being of consciousness, and the being-for-itself is the consciousness itself. The for-itself is what it is (nothingness) and what it is not (being). The in-itself is what it is (being) and what it is not (nothingness). What the being-for-itself lacks is being-in-itself. Thus, nothingness, for Sartre, is recognized as consciousness, not being the object.

It is stated that the notions of freedom, temporality, and desire cannot be accounted without mentioning consciousness as nothingness. Consciousness is said to be freedom because it is not regarded to be subject to any laws of causes. Consciousness is temporality because it can exist in the past, present, and future simultaneously. Finally, consciousness is said to be desire because it lacks being. We have seen that the notion of nothingness is closely connected with the other three notions. As a result, Sartre says that “Freedom, choice, negation, temporalization are all one and the same thing.” (Sartre 1943). Thus, the consciousness as nothingness can be understood as a main principle for the other notions of consciousness.

It is part of reality that there are absences of a friend and things. But, for Sartre, nothingness should not be understood as a mental concept that concludes a negative judgment. For example, Sartre gives an example that he makes a negative judgment that “Pierre is not here.” The place where he has an expectation to meet his friend is consisted of everything such as the patrons, chairs and tables etc. It is constituted as a ground where Pierre is expected to appear. This kind of organization of the place is considered to be “an original negation.” The ground is considered an essential condition for the emergence of the figure, such as recognizing Pierre as a person. Because Pierre is considered to be absent, the ground appears to be his absence, instead of his presence. This is how the negative judgment can be made when his friend is not here. So, it is regarded to

be our expectation for Pierre that defines the idea of his presence and absence. So, Sartre says that “I myself expected to see Pierre, and my expectation has caused the absence of Pierre to happen as a real event concerning this café. It is an objective fact at present that I have discovered this absence.” (Sartre 1947). Here, nothingness is a different notion from what we experience in our daily life.

This example shows that a negative judgment is not defined in terms of things with non-beings. Instead, it is conditioned by non-being. Hence, Sartre contends that our intuition can give to nothingness. When we ask questions concerning ‘Being’, ‘Nothingness’ must be given to exist in the world. Therefore, Sartre names the term ‘negatites’ to experience the reality in this world such as destruction, transitory or something else that the structure of the inner level is “inhabited by negation.” When we refer negatites, a non-being is identified with a thing. For instance, non-existence of a thing is involved with destruction of a thing which is used to exist once. (Barrett 1958). Thus, the thing can be understood with non-being.

In order to introduce nothingness into the world, nothingness can be reliable upon the consciousness, and consciousness can be reliable upon the being-for-itself. The absence of Pierre in the café happened to be aware as we have expectation that he is supposed to appear there. Sartre made a division of two types of non-existences: one relies on consciousness, and other does not. In the café, there are many

people that are regarded to be absent. However, all these are only the thought in the mind that they are absent. The absence of Pierre is considered to be experienced. (Priest 2001). This is how Sartre concludes that consciousness can be prior to nothingness.

Therefore, Sartre points out that Nothingness cannot annihilate itself; instead, it is annihilated. Sartre says that "There must exist a Being of which the property is to annihilate Nothingness, to support it in its being, to sustain it perpetually in its very existence, a being by which nothingness comes to things." (Sartre 1947). The being is introduced into nothingness to things. So, being is regarded to be human reality. Because man is the being, nothingness arises in this world from this being. Because being must be its own nothingness, human reality is turned out to be its own nothingness. It defines that consciousness is identified to be nothingness as the term 'human reality' is used as a similar term for consciousness.

Thus, Sartre's view of nothingness is that nothingness is an essential thing to cause the fullness: As the in-itself is full of itself, it does not allow any negative element. As a result, nothingness should be brought to things by the being to eliminate fullness. This is why Sartre mentioned that nothingness can exist through this matter. The relation between being-for-itself and being-in-itself is to ask each other. By bringing nothingness into the world, consciousness does not annihilate the being of things, but changes its relation to it.

## 5.2 Nothingness in Early Buddhism

In Buddhism, the term nothingness is not the same meaning when we compare with emptiness. According to Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Emptiness is regarded to be a mode of perception which is a kind of experience. It neither adds nor takes away anything from the physical and mental events. We view events in the mind without thought to enquire anything lying behind them. (Bhikkhu 1997). Like Sartre's being-for-itself and being-in-itself, Buddhists distinguish *lokiya* (mundane world) and *lokuttara* (supramundane world). *Lokiya* refers to being such as man, woman, dog, etc. whereas *lokuttara* refers to emptiness such as consciousness, mental factors, and materiality.

It is not as the same term as Sartre's idea of nothingness. For Sartre, consciousness is nothingness whereas for Buddhists, consciousness is interdependence. Consciousness always includes five aggregates (*pancakkhandha*), eighteen elements (*dhātus*), twelve sense faculties (*āyatana*), and dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*). In the five aggregates, consciousness constitutes feeling (*vedana*), perception (*saññā*), and mental formations (*saṅkhāra*). In the eighteen elements, consciousness arises from the contact between the sense-faculties and their objects. In the twelve dependent origination, consciousness arises before name (*nāma*) and form (*rūpa*). This is how consciousness is closely tied with other factors. Because they are empty of self, they are called emptiness. Answering the question of Ananda for the reason of empty world, Buddha says, "It is,

Ananda, because it is empty of self and what belongs to self that it is said, ‘Empty is the World.’” (S.N. IV. 54).

The main issue of emptiness is to eradicate the idea of self in Buddhism. As a result, the idea of emptiness is also the synonymous of wisdom. As we understand the nature of emptiness, we gain the wisdom to cut off the roots of defilements. The self-illusion must be dispersed to free ourselves from all defilements and sufferings. To cultivate the ways of emptiness, Bhikkhu Bodhi has described two methods to eliminate the idea of self: (i) analysis of aggregates as arising and passing, (ii) relational of aggregates with its objects (Bodhi 1984).

The first is the analysis of aggregates as arising and passing. It is the ways of experience that none of the aggregates can be taken as a self. The method of analysis can be applied of the clinging of the five aggregates (*pañcupādānakkhandhā*): form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. The disciple dwells to contemplate the five aggregates, their arising and passing: “The disciple dwells in contemplation of phenomena, namely, of the five aggregates of clinging. He knows what form is, how it arises, how it passes away; knows what feeling is, how it arises, how it passes away; knows what perception is, how it arises, how it passes away; knows what mental formations are, how they arise, how they pass away; knows what consciousness is, how it arises, how it passes away.” (D.N. 22). So, it

means whatever arises and passes do not belong to us. And whatever is not belonged to us cannot be said as ‘I’ or ‘mine’ which leads to complete emptiness.

The second is the relational of aggregates with its objects. An examination shows that the aggregates depend on the conditions for their existence. There is nothing that has absolute independent factor to define as “I.” Any factors are found to be dependently arisen in the body and mind. The body arises from the union of male and female and body relies on solid, liquid and air. The three factors such as, feeling, perception, and mental formations rely on the body with its sense faculties. These factors can require an object, the correspondence of consciousness, and the contact of the object with the consciousness. Consciousness depends on the sensible organism and the co-arisen of the mental factors. In short, body arises from nutriment, feeling, perception, and mental formations arise from contact, and finally, consciousness arise from body and mind. (S.N. 22.56). This whole process of becoming inherits kamma of the past experiences. Thus, there is nothing that can be found to exist independently. Instead, all conditional things in this world are existing interdependently.

The above two steps eliminate the idea of self and explain that it belongs to emptiness. It is stated that the idea of non-self cannot be isolated from dependent arising. (Karunadasa 2015). So, it should not be misunderstood when the idea of emptiness arises. During the time of the Buddha, a monk named Sati misinterpreted



the teaching on non-self. He thought: "So, it seems, materiality is non-self, nor are feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Then what self, will the action done by the non-self, touch?" Then the Buddha admonished him on his ignorance and craving by ignoring the doctrines on dependent arising. (MN. III 18). Thus, the combination of non-self and dependent arising explains the notion of emptiness in Early Buddhism.

Hence, there are statements in the early Buddhist discourses such as, "all things are non-self" (*sabbe dhamma anatta*) and "all things are empty" (*sabbe dhamma sunna*). Here the term, "All things" (*sabbe dhamma*) describe the idea of both the conditioned phenomena (*sankhata*) and the unconditioned reality (*nibbana*) (AN: II 34). Thus, both worlds such as mundane (*lokiya*) and supramundane (*lokuttara*) describe that they are an empty world.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Thus, the term Nothingness, in the general sense, is understood as an absence of objectivity. In modern times, scholars believe that nothingness is to be recognized from the view of subjectivity of being. It is stated that human finitude is considered as the presence which is not in the being of man. Finitude can be defined in relation to human beings having the matter of limitations. And human beings cannot do anything about these limitations. Nevertheless, it cannot be described as only the limitations of human beings. Instead, the

finitude of human beings emphasizes the center of individual. In these situations, all the existence of positive and negative aspects can coincide. It is interpenetrated that man's lightness with his darkness, his right with his untruth, his being with his nothingness.

According to Existentialism and Buddhism, the notion of nothingness is to free oneself from bondage. It is the egoless consciousness which can be emptied of permanent self. However, there are different destinations and interpretations of nothingness. For Sartre, nothingness has the desire to be something that it is not. For Buddhists, emptiness is free from desire to be something and dissolved within it. Moreover, Sartre views that meaning of nothingness is the final goal to find freedom in life, and Buddhists view that the meaning of emptiness is the ultimate goal to find *nibbana*. The destination of nothingness leads them to different paths. Thus, both Buddha and Sartre show the paths of authenticity by becoming true to themselves which is nothingness and emptiness.

## REFERENCES

- Barrett, W 1958, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*, Doubleday Anchor Books, New York.
- Bhikkhu, T 2011, *Noble Strategy: Essays on the Buddhist Path*, Metta Forest Monastery, California.
- Bodhi, B & Nanamoli, B 1995, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New*

*Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy.

Bodhi, B 2000, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*, Wisdom Publications, Boston.

Bodhi, B 2012, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Anguttara Nikaya*, Wisdom Publications, Boston.

Bodhi, B 1984, *The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy.

Garcia, A 2017, *Buddhism and Existentialism: Not self, Nothingness and Being*, Xlibris, US.

Kuhn, H 1949, *Encounter with nothingness: An essay on existentialism*, Henry Regnery Company, Illinois.

Karunadasa, Y 2015, *Early Buddhist Teachings: The middle position in theory and practice*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy.

Medidhammaporn, P 1988, *Sartre's Existentialism and Early Buddhism: A comparative study of selflessness theories*, Buddhadhamma Foundation, Bangkok.

Nanajivako, B 1983, *Studies in Comparative Philosophy, Vol. I*, Lake House Investments Limited Book Publishers, Colombo.

Priest, S 2001, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*, Routledge, London and New York.

Sartre, JP 1943, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Editions Gallimard, Paris.

Walshe, M 1987, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikaya*, Wisdom Publications, Boston.