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Eastern Philosophy

3 March, 2025

Delusion Dispelled by “Vacuity”

The Heart Sutra says, “The Bodhisattva of Compassion / When he meditated deeply / Saw the emptiness of all five skandhas (the five aggregates that make up an individual’s mental and physical existence) / And sundered the bonds that caused him suffering” (*The Heart Sutra*). Emptiness is a key Buddhist idea which is often misunderstood. In his explanation of *The Heart Sutra*, Thich Nhat Hanh clarifies the idea of emptiness by answering the question, *empty of what?* The answer is emptiness of a separate self or entity that exists apart from the totality of inter-being. In the example of a sheet of paper, one can see how the sheet of paper cannot exist without sunshine to grow the tree; the mill and the logger who cut the tree, the logger’s bread; and the logger’s father and mother, and eventually, the whole structure of the universe. Thich Nhat Hanh says, “This sheet of paper is, because everything else is” (Hanh 1-2). As such, emptiness (of a separate self) is fullness of everything.

In Buddhism, the term emptiness can also be described as voidness, nothingness, or vacuity. This concept has been expanded on quite frequently in popular culture and artistic expression, especially in heavy metal music. One example is the song “Vacuity” by the French heavy metal band Gojira. Coming from humble beginnings as a high-school garage band, now

internationally renowned, Gojira has been known for their progressive, spiritual, and environmentally centered lyrics. “Vacuity” details the fear that keeps humans from understanding the Buddhist ideas, and the struggle (and joy) that comes with the recognition of inherent emptiness. In Buddhism, the illuminating power of the Buddha's teaching is often referred to as the “light” of Dharma” (*Wisdom Library*). In “Vacuity”, Gojira describes the wisdom gained through meditation or a teacher: “I focus on the present, concentrate on what I find / Accelerate the vision high beyond the curse of time / Bring light to my attention, the walls of vacuum fall / This force increases and tells me where to go” (“Vacuity”). Here, Gojira describes the discoveries made by the light of the Dharma as a force which can guide us. The “walls of vacuum” can refer to the sense of self or separation. The Buddha teaches that the sense of self (five skandhas) is only an illusion, and thus becomes dissolved under the light of Dharma. By focusing on the present and with deep concentration / meditation, one can cut through the illusion and understand the meaning of fullness in emptiness.

Further references to Buddhist themes follow: “I feel the change, I see the vicious circle / Finally turned into a virtuous one” (“Vacuity”). The painful cycles of reincarnation experienced by the human being (and the suffering caused by attachment to the skandhas) are here described. Any and all human beings can relate to the seemingly endless trials and tribulations of life. *The Heart Sutra* teaches us to look further, and “[K]now that the Bodhisattva / Holding to nothing whatever / But dwelling in Prajna wisdom / Is freed of delusive hindrance / Rid of the fear bred by it / And reaches clearest Nirvana” (*The Heart Sutra*). The illusional system of samsara, finally exposed by the light of Dharma, transposes itself into an opportunity for freedom. But the knowledge of Dharma isn’t enough to instantly teleport us to enlightenment. Escape from

samsara requires a tremendous inner struggle. To all those on the spiritual path, Gojira offers relatability and motivation with the lines: “But I keep struggling inside to hold this always / Forever there... Is it the fear to fall in space that keeps us from understanding? The only way to find the power is to look inside” (“Vacuity”). We may hear the voice of the Dharma through scripture or popular culture, but to actually listen to it entails an incredible inner struggle and leap of faith - a leap which is entirely in our hands.

Works Cited

Genius, “Vacuity”. <https://genius.com/Gojira-vacuity-lyrics>

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