



# Editorial

## THINKING EMPTINESS, EMPTYING THOUGHT

Pensar la vacuidad, vaciar el pensamiento

*Lina Marcela Cadavid Ramírez\**

*The perfect way is without difficulty,  
for it avoids picking and choosing  
(Attributed to Sengcan, Chan pathriarc)*

Emptiness has been little thought in the Western world; quite the contrary, Western philosophy has little thought emptiness as a possibility to cognitive and ethical opening to reality. In other words, when the Western world thinks about emptiness, they stop the ghost of the nihilism. Having said that, this text will not discuss these assertions widely, they are more a reader provocation and at the same time an invitation to reason about the vacuity on the Far East thought, specifically on the Zen tradition.

To the comparative attitude – alternative that is used when people try to outline the difference – I would like to oppose an impersonal attitude, as Ramon Panikkar (2002) states. This impersonal attitude is put into practice through a dialogue that allows the mutual

---

Translated by: Mabel Cortés-Martínez on Curriculum and Instruction. Universidad Católica Luis Amigó. Facultad de Educación y Humanidades. Grupo EILEX. Línea de Investigación CILEX. Email address: mabel.cortesma@amigo.edu.co

\* Master on Philosophy (graduated with honors) by University of Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia. Member of the Research group on Philosophy and Critical Teology, Fundación Universitaria Luis Amigó, Medellín, Colombia. orcid.org/0000-0002-4537-1564. Email address: lina.cadavidra@amigo.edu.co

fertilization, in an attempt to let yourself being known by the other one, but most of all to be willing to learn from the other one – in contrast with a kind of dialogue that confronts since only one of the sides shows the appropriate sphere of exchange of ideas–thus, from the impersonal attitude it is possible to establish a mutual confidence, since the dialogue with the other one (the others or the other one) is just an adventure to the unknown. Therefore, my proposal is to sketch some lines about the vacuity topic on the Zen Buddhist thought to try to think ourselves from a place that does not belong to us, in several fields: cultural, religious, individual.

*sūnyatā* (vacuity) is from Buddhist origin. It came to China through Taoism, since the monk Sêng Chao, who was first Taoist and then Buddhist, introduced it. His interpretation of the concept nothingness or emptiness “brought a huge influence on the rise and the development of Zen in China” (Izutsu, 2009, pp. 19-20) However, the concept in Buddhism refers mainly, to Buddha teaching about the conditioned origin of everything: These to be conditioned among them are empty of any essence. So that, the soteriological aim of Buddhism can be understood as the breakdown of this conditioning that is achieved through nirvana.

In the *Mahyānā* subsequent Buddhism, mainly with Nāgārjuna, this notion is intensified to make of it that is conditioned the reality that can not be overcome, so that freedom will be in how to understand the irrepressible nature of the conditioned reality, so Nāgārjuna will become equal to nirvana and conditioned reality (Arnau, 2005). Toshihiko Izutsu states Zen seems to agree about it since “according to Zen, in reality there's nothing beyond the phenomenal world or besides it” (2009, p. 33), meaning, there's no a transcendent or supersensible reality that supports things. However, all the philosophical and metaphysics framework that fosters an understanding of this conditioned origin is somehow absent in the Zen, and it is replaced by the importance of the posture, it means, “sit in meditation with crossed legs” (2009, p. 34)

As Arnau states (2005), we arrive to *sūnyatā*, according to Nāgārjuna, by a tough deconstruction of language, it means, by a dialectics activity in which, without pros and cons, the instructor teaches that words lead us to grasp

an imaginary essence of the things that at the end it is unreal. On his behalf, Izutsu explains, that for the zen, practicing the posture is the only means to “experience with the whole being the epistemological-metaphysical state of Nothingness” (2009, p. 35) Now then, in the zen, *sūnyatā* will be understood from that that flows, so that the one who meditates can contemplate how things flow in each other, since they have lost the delimitation that the discriminatory mind sets and “being no longer obstructed by their own ontological limits everything flows into one another, reflecting each other and being reflected by each other in the limitlessly vast field of Nothingness” (Izutsu, 2009 p. 39). This last statement takes us to the field that “no fixed essence is established” that is why “each thing can be a total manifestation of the whole reality” (Izutsu, 2009, pp. 100-101)

On the other hand, in his book *Philosophy of Zen Buddhism*, Byung-Chul Han has characterized the emptiness from that that is open, opposite to the substance that is closed. In this sense, to the Western World, the substance has not only been what identifies what is proper of one thing, but also that that divides it from others, as the Korean philosopher declares “substance rests on separation and distinction. It separates the one from the other, maintains that in its own self in the face of this” (2015, p. 58). So that, *sūnyatā* is opposed to the substance, but it does not replace it in its transcendent and basis nature. It means, vacuity does not keep, either preserves, either affirms things, that is why “emptiness does not mark any ‘transcendence’ that is placed before the things that appear” (Han, 2015, p. 59). The Korean philosopher also expresses about emptiness in terms of what flows, and in that flow, he says, things that shines: it is not a substantial nature, but in its presence nature, emptiness livens up the flame since its presence is not the mere appearance of an absence.

Through practice (zazen), then, the field of substance is abandoned which closes the experience when it discriminates and opposes the things, and it let them be in the continuous exercise of not being imposed on them. When we do not discriminate neither oppose, things flow passing one through the other (Han, 2015). This experience turns out to be astonishing from the field of substance in which one thing cannot become the other one. However, from vacuity, one thing does not become the other one, it is more that its flows

“represents a daily vision of the emptiness” (Han, 2015, p. 64) This vision cannot be confused with one of a substantial unity in which fused together, but it refers to the experience of the ‘substantial rigidity’ dissolution (Han, 2015, p. 67) that is imposed. In this way, emptiness avoids that the things obstruct one another, it better allows them dwell one in the other; so that the one who meditates, as Han states “the exercise of Zen Buddhism makes the heart fasts, so to speak, until it becomes accessible to another being, a being that ‘is’ without appetite” (2015, p. 85)

## Reference

- Arnau Navarro, J. (2005) *Language against Emptiness. Philosophy of Nagarjuna*. México: Fondo de cultura económica.
- Byung-Chul, H. (2015) *Philosophy of Zen Buddhism*. Madrid: Herder
- Izutsu, T. (2009) *Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism*. Madrid: Trotta.
- Panikkar, R. (2002) “The intercultural question”. In: *The intercultural discourse. Preface to an Intercultural Philosophy*. Rodriguez Arnaíz, G.G (coord.). Spain: Biblioteca Nueva.