

Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity

ESSAYS AND EXPLORATIONS

edited by

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and

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Buddhist Shūnyatā and the Christian Trinity: The Emerging Holistic Paradigm

Michael von Brück

Paradigm shifts are fundamental changes in a cultural pattern. Today we are in the midst of a paradigm shift. It is characterized by the emerging awareness that life is a whole and that terms, or words, cannot convey this wholeness. Words are only fragmented images which usually allow only a fragmented experience. The current paradigm change seeks to overcome fragmentation on all levels of reality, precisely at the moment when the results of fragmentation are becoming disastrous.

Presuming and affirming this concern to offset fragmentation, I shall try in this essay to look back into history in order to find situations, expressions and symbols that might help us understand and promote the present paradigm shift. My approach will be cross-cultural and interreligious, and in four main parts:

First, I will discuss the paradigm shift from Hinayana to Mahayana in the history of Buddhism, and compare it with the emerging paradigm shift in the modern West;

Secondly, because it is only in symbols that we perceive reality creatively, I will examine the symbolic representation of reality with respect to these paradigm shifts;

Thirdly, I will explore two traditional symbols that can provide the needed help to overcome fragmentation and promote the wholeness that is central to the emerging paradigm shift: the Buddhist *Shūnyatā* and the Christian Trinity;

Fourthly, using the symbols of *Shūnyatā* and Trinity, I will offer a

holistic image of reality that describes the Whole as interrelatedness and resonance.

Paradigm Shifts

Buddhism

It is difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at a clear picture of the paradigm shift in Buddhism that led to the systems of Hinayana and Mahayana.¹ We are simply unable to reconstruct original Buddhism. Nevertheless, what has emerged as the two great systems—or better, paradigms—is well documented. In order to show how a paradigm shift did take place in Buddhism, I would like to focus on a few points of difference between the two systems.

Hinayana represents a rationalistic paradigm (Conze, 1962: 28ff). The basic attitude is psychological, and the means of investigation are the classical *pramānas* (ways of knowing) which are regarded as more or less valid (Stcherbatsky, 1978: 2:43ff; Conze, 1962: 28). Mahayana, on the other hand, represents a supra-rationalistic paradigm. The basic attitude is metaphysical, or even cosmological, insofar as a universal salvation is the focus of practice. The *pramānas* are not valid concerning ultimate realization, which is attained only by means of a transpersonal intuitive experience (*prajñā*).

In Hinayana one seeks to overcome suffering. In Mahayana one takes on suffering for the sake of all sentient beings (Govinda, 1979: 45). This, essentially, is the difference between the Arhat (the Hinayana ideal) and the Bodhisattva (the Mahayana ideal).

In Hinayana, Stcherbatsky says, we find an ontological pluralism. The independent *dharmas* (the immediate constituents of all reality) are real. They are structured elements of empirical reality that do not have any further cause. Reality is the network of phenomena constituted by the mutual conditioning of the *dharmas*. In Mahayana we find, according to Stcherbatsky, a kind of monism, or a *cosmotheistic* model, that transcends any differentiated ontology. Reality is one. Differences are epistemic—based on the way we know reality. While Hinayana explains the basic problem of causality by denying causality and affirming a coordination between the independently existing elements, Mahayana follows the middle way of “neither-nor.” One has to transcend the very concept of causality, for it is based on the duality of cause and effect. For the enlightened mind, cause and effect are one. That is why in Hinayana

anitya (impermanence) is the crucial point, whereas in Mahayana it is *shūnyatā* (emptiness) (Murti, 1960: 86).

These abstract differences lead to more practical and more significant conclusions. In Hinayana, nirvana somehow has an existence apart from the *dharmas*—i.e., from the finite world. This implies a kind of dualism. In Mahayana, nirvana is not at all different from samsara—that is, the phenomenal world: the difference between nirvana and samsara is epistemic, not ontological. Mahayana, therefore, represents a shift from Hinayana toward a holistic paradigm. The basis for this shift is the Mahayanist equation between *pratīyasamutpāda* (the dependent coorigination and interrelatedness of all reality) and *shūnyatā*, which implies the equation between nirvana and samsara.

The Modern West

This sketch of the paradigm shift in Buddhism should be sufficient to illustrate the similarities between it and the paradigm shift in our contemporary world. Since this modern shift is still in process, it escapes full and adequate description. Yet some of its basic qualities can be clearly and profitably focused. They are amazingly similar to the shift from Hinayana to Mahayana.

Some of the most important aspects of the emerging paradigm are the following:

1. science is limited and it itself is becoming aware of its limits;
2. the universe is an interrelated wholeness;
3. the observer plays a crucial part in the process of knowing.

According to the emerging paradigm, “matter” and “consciousness” no longer seem to be essentially different. This opens a new avenue for understanding consciousness. One of the most challenging dimensions of this deeper understanding is the question of whether altered states of consciousness offer us a valid, perhaps more comprehensive, picture of reality. Different levels of consciousness disclose different levels of reality. To limit knowledge only to the products of the rational mind—which is the rationalistic-scientific paradigm that emerged in the seventeenth century and has since dominated Western culture—is nothing else than a form of reductionism, though an extremely successful one from the point of view of technology.

As is evident, the emerging paradigm offers an arena for a dialogue between mysticism and science. David Bohm, speaking as a sober and balanced scientist, claims that if one takes the findings of the new physics

to be reliable, one has no justification for a fragmented worldview. Bohm is not claiming that physics can or should prove that the claims of the mystics are true (which is impossible since mysticism and science are working on different levels of reality). Yet, in urging the overcoming of fragmentation, both scientists and mystics are advocating one of the clearest and most important aspects of the emerging paradigm.

The Symbolic Representation of Reality

In order to understand the mystery of reality, we need not only reflection or thought, but vision—the vision of the whole. This, however, is not possible without imagination, the ability to re-create reality in the image of our deepest experience. Without this creative faculty, our mind is only a weak reflection of fleeting sense-impressions. Creative imagination is the motor, the moving power; reason is the steering and restricting faculty, which distinguishes between the potential and the actual, the probable and the possible (Govinda, 1981: 4).

It is in symbols that we perceive reality creatively. The symbol, therefore, is the meeting point of experiencing consciousnesses; it is the place where reality becomes aware of itself, mirrors itself, and injects its own reflection back into the sea of reality. By the power of symbols we share in the creative process of reality.

If we want to understand the wholeness of reality, we have to search for a symbol that re-presents and participates in this wholeness.

In Mahayana Buddhism, especially in the Madhyamika school, the key to understanding reality is the symbol of *shūnyatā*—usually translated into English as Emptiness. *Shūnyatā*, as Buddhists announce and Westerners often fail to hear, has nothing to do with nihilism. Nor is it a concept, for it is not meant to determine anything. *Shūnyatā* is a symbol of non-determination. It does not denote some form of observation but is, rather, the very essence of a specific experience. The experiencer and the experienced become one in a state of mind and state of reality called *shūnyatā*. Because of this oneness and the participatory act of establishing *shūnyatā*, we have to call it a symbol.

One of the most talked about symbols of reality being proposed by modern physicists is David Bohm's *holomovement*. It is much more than a scientific term or definition, for it is not definable. It stands for the mystery of reality that underlies all our possible observations and expressions of reality. Drawing a distinction between the implicate and explicate orders, Bohm states:

To generalize so as to emphasize undivided wholeness, we shall say that what “carries” an implicate order is the *holomovement*, which is an unbroken and undivided totality. In certain cases, we can abstract particular aspects of the holomovement (e.g., light, electrons, sound, etc.), but more generally, all forms of the holomovement merge and are inseparable. Thus, in its totality, the holomovement is not limited in any specifiable way at all. It is not required to conform to any particular order, or to be bounded by any particular measure. Thus, the *holomovement is undefinable and immeasurable* (Bohm, 1981: 151).

Through the powerful symbol of the *holomovement*, therefore, modern science is referring to a reality that is beyond all determination. What we see and know is only the explicate order. The explicate, however, is like a condensation of a vast sea of energy. The explicate is *in* the implicate like the ripple in the ocean or the cloud in the air. Thus, metaphors like air and ocean are used to point to reality that is as it is: undeterminable.

To solve the problem of how the ripple or the cloud can be explained, some scientists speak of a formative principle or a formative energy. Both physicist David Bohm and biologist Rupert Sheldrake suggest a formative energy that might be responsible for the multiplicity on the explicate level. They use the image of a radio that receives its energy from the wall socket. The tiny amount of energy from the radio wave *forms* this vast basic energy (which would correspond with the sea of reality—potentiality on which the ripple is a formation). For Bohm this is how the more subtle implicate energy field acts upon and forms the gross explicate phenomena (Bohm and Sheldrake, 1982: 44). But it is not a form imposed on something from the outside; it is “rather an *ordered and structured inner movement that is essential to what things are*” (Bohm, 1981: 12).

Reality, we can summarize, is a whole and, as such, undifferentiated. It has the principle of formative differentiation in itself. All of this can be expressed or suggested only through symbols.

Another symbol for this same holistic insight into reality is offered by the Madhyamika notion of *shūnyatā*.

Like the philosophical insights of modern physics, the Madhyamika philosophy can be seen as a new interpretation of reality—i.e., different both from Vedantic substantialism and the pluralism of earlier Buddhism (Murti, 1960: 121ff). Though early Buddhism did deny perma-

nence and continuity in the debate on causation, it stressed a coordination of being and becoming of separate *dharmas*. This was a permanent principle and was therefore denied by the Madhyamikas. Nagarjuna, the principal philosopher of the Madhyamika school, insisted on total relativity and therefore criticized all substance-views as well as model-views. He identified *shūnyatā* with *pratīya-samutpāda* (dependent co-origination): all forms were empty—emptiness was all forms.

This means that reality *is*, but is also beyond all possible constructions of our mind. Thinking falls into contradictions when it tries to approach reality as a whole. The real is devoid (*shūnya*) of determinations—that is, it is not accessible to reason. It is—using our rational terms—neither existent nor non-existent. It has to be expressed in symbols.

According to the emerging holistic paradigm, we are part of reality. When consciousness operates and discloses something, there is a change in reality. In other words, *knowledge is a creative act*, epistemologically as well as ontologically (in the final analysis, the two cannot be separated). It is in symbols that such creative or transformative knowledge is available and communicable. Symbols indicate our creative participation in changing reality. But to work this way, symbols have to be reexperienced and reinterpreted according to the present “habit-structure” or “karmic” circumstances or new paradigms. That is why I now want to focus attention on the central symbol of Mahayana Buddhism—*shūnyatā*—and of Christianity—the Trinity.

Shūnyatā and the Trinity

Shūnyatā

The Madhyamika texts use the term *shūnyatā* in two different senses, which have to be distinguished though not separated (Ramanan, 1978: 253ff). First, *shūnyatā* refers to the interrelatedness of reality. Here it has the same meaning as *pratīya-samutpāda* and is primarily a matter of phenomenological observation and interpretation. As we have seen, science, especially the new physics, gives evidence that all phenomenal reality is actually a net of causal connections or total interrelatedness. (Physics is thus contributing to a new ecological paradigm.) Nothing exists independently or can have existence on its own (*svabhāva*). In other words, everything is empty of self-existence—that is, everything is *shūnya*.

Second, *shūnyatā* also refers to a level beyond all phenomenal reality. It points toward the transcendent mystery of reality. It is total *beyondness*. The interrelated whole as sum of all parts is not the Whole. The Whole is of a different quality altogether. All potentialities, as well as all actualities, of reality are not *nirvāṇa* or *shūnyatā*, which is precisely beyond the differentiation into potential and actual, or part and whole. *Tathatā*, nirvana, *shūnyatā* do not mean only interrelatedness, but beyondness.

This quality of beyondness is often forgotten by those who try to relate Buddhism and modern science. Ken Wilber warns against the prevalent mistake of identifying the interrelatedness that physics has discovered with the beyondness expressed by *shūnyatā*. The implicate order is not the Absolute or God. It is just the interrelatedness of phenomenal reality. What religions call “God” is beyond this duality of implication and explication and is devoid of such determinations (Wilber, 1982: 251).

But what about Nagarjuna’s famous equation of nirvana and samsara? This identification can be properly understood only on the basis of the fundamental epistemological principle in Madhyamika philosophy—the distinction between a relative viewpoint (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and an absolute standpoint (*paramārtha-satya*). From the relative or phenomenological standpoint, samsara is of course not nirvana. The equation is valid only from the absolute viewpoint that transcends all distinctions. But such an insight is not possible on the basis of rationality alone. No rational argument, therefore, can affirm or deny this point of unity. It requires *prajñā*—insight into reality as it really is, without the limiting and conditioning defilements of the mind.

So, although *shūnyatā* in no way intends to affirm non-existence, it does deny the dogmatic affirmation of or knowledge of existence (Murti, 1960: 97). It denies essentialism. Things in their real nature are devoid of essence (*niḥsvabhāva*). The entities making up the world are related by nature and not just by accident. They are *tathatā*, beyond both transitoriness and immutability. Nagarjuna does not deny reality, he does deny the accessibility of reality to reason (Murti, 1960: 126).

Nagarjuna’s insights must be considered a real paradigm shift. He did not simply correct or clarify previous views. Rather, he denied the accessibility of the Real to reason and proved it by his dialectical method. This does not mean that he became an agnostic. He found a different level of knowledge—*prajñā*—that gave an empowering insight and new way of “knowing” reality.

So far, we have only said what *shūnyatā* is not. It is much more

difficult to state what it is. To do so adequately is impossible since statements have to obey rationality—and *shūnyatā* by its very nature pierces through the rational level into the beyond.

I would like to try to point toward (not describe) the positive nature of *shūnyatā* by quoting an extraordinary and profound statement by D.T. Suzuki:

It is not the nature of *prajñā* (mystical intuition) to remain in a state of *shūnyatā* (the void) absolutely motionless. It demands of itself that it differentiates itself unlimitedly, and at the same time it desires to remain in itself. This is why *shūnyatā* is said to be a reservoir of infinite possibilities, and not just a state of mere emptiness. Differentiating itself and yet remaining itself undifferentiated, and thus to go on eternally in the work of creation . . . we can say that it is creation out of nothing. *Shūnyatā* is not to be conceived statically but dynamically, or better, as at once static and dynamic.³

This is probably the deepest insight into reality one can have and express on the basis of Madhyamika—and even on the basis of Christian experience, as I will try to explain later. In transcending the concepts of voidness and fullness, Suzuki unifies them in experience—that is, in the experience of reality as a dynamic pattern, as a uniquely differentiated wholeness.

Shūnyatā is, as Lama Govinda calls it, *plenum-void* (Govinda, 1979: 36). It is the nature of all things, oneness in differentiation. “Differentiation is as much an expression of reality as oneness, and form is as important as emptiness” (Govinda, 1976: 52). *Shūnyatā* is the unified awareness that comprehends and transcends both oneness and differentiation. Govinda therefore translates *shūnyatā*, simply yet appropriately, as *transparency* (Govinda, 1976: 51). This translation fits amazingly well into David Bohm’s model of reality: *shūnyatā* is the nature of the holomovement, for the explicate order is transparent to the implicate order and the other way around. The following step may be taken though Bohm himself does not take it since it is beyond the reach of science: Ultimately both orders point toward a transcendent ground and are therefore transparent in a continuous process of “transparentiation,” which implies our perspectives or cognitive processes as well.

In Buddhist terms, all this means that nirvana does not add anything to *saṃsāra* but is its very nature; yet on the level of sense-perception and

rationality, we do not realize this identity (Murti, 1960: 162). The difference between nirvana and samsara is not ontological; it is, rather, a difference in our way of looking, a change of perception, an *epistemic difference* (Murti, 1960: 163). We must remember, however, that in the final analysis the epistemic process is itself a movement in the Whole, thus *paramārthika* (from an ultimate point of view)—there is not difference at all between the ontological and epistimological realm.

Interestingly, T.R.V. Murti adopts, in a slightly less comprehensive sense, the terminology of David Bohm to describe the Buddhist view of reality, before Bohm formulated the terms. Murti explains that the Absolute is *implicate* in all things:

The Absolute, it is true, is not known in the way that particular phenomena are known. As their reality, however, it is known as the implicate, the norm of all things. The absolute does not possess any attribute of its own; but its presence can be *indicated* even by an ascribed mark (*samāropāt*) (Murti, 1960: 231f).

Like Bohm's implicate order, the Absolute for Murti is implicate in the explicate order. The Absolute is the Reality of the real (*dharmāṅām dharmatā*). It is the Being of being.

The classical text for this universal viewpoint is *Madhyamika Kārikā* XXV, 9. Stcherbatsky's translation brings out the point most clearly:

Coordinated here or caused are separate things.
 We call this world phenomenal
 But just the same is called Nirvana,
 When viewed without causality, without Coordination
 (Stcherbatsky, 1978: 206).

We already referred to Murti's explanation of this text above when we discussed the problem of perception.

A fundamental problem is how to disregard causes and conditions in order to arrive at the Whole. Can the Being of being or the implicate order be, as Murti claims, the Absolute, *shūnyatā*? If the Absolute is the norm of all things, it is not all things. Hence, it is beyond the differentiation between being and the Being of all beings, or between norm and its actualization. Murti's explanation, therefore, does not adequately express

the *beyondness* of *shūnyatā*, which, by virtue of its beyondness, can and does include the phenomenal world. I am afraid that Murti reverted back to Vedantic reductionism regarding the relation between the Absolute and the finite.

If the Reality of the real, as an implicate order, is identified with the Absolute or *shūnyatā*, we would still be caught in a subtle duality between the Reality of the real (implicate) and the phenomenon as expression of this reality (explicate).

Shūnyatā is not the first of two orders (implicate/explicate)—although this is implied. In the first meaning we quoted above it is *also* the principle of “???” and in this sense the implicate. But it is more. *Shūnyatā* must be emptied of all duality. It is beyond differentiation into implicate and explicate. It is beyondness. It is emptied emptiness. This, of course, does not mean that it is spatially or temporally beyond phenomena. It transcends spatiality and temporality in such a way that it includes them. If this were not so, we would not have a real *advaita* (non-duality), or a genuine polarity constituting oneness. This, by the way, is the problem with Shankara’s view of the many as *māyā*—that is, as an illusion. He views the phenomenal many as less real than the Absolute Brahman and as not taken up into a higher order of dynamic oneness. For this reason, Shankara has problems intelligibly explaining the relationship between *māyā* and *māyin* or between *nirguṇa Brahman* (the formless Absolute) and the realm of *māyā*, as I have argued elsewhere.

I think that Nagarjuna solves this problem of the relation between the Absolute and the finite in a much more genuinely *advaita*-way. I would suggest that for him, *shūnyatā* is a relationship in itself, devoiding itself constantly of essentiality of substance as it constitutes itself as universal relationship. This interpretation is actually a reflection of Suzuki’s central statement quoted above; we will explore it further below. However we try to conceptualize the non-dual nature of the Absolute, the fact remains, as Murti reminds us, that we know the Absolute in a non-dual intuition, *prajñā*. In fact, “It (the Absolute) is this intuition itself” (Murti, 1960: 236).

An etymological perspective on this problematic nature of *shūnyatā* can be helpful and revealing. *Shūnyatā* comes from the root *ṡvi* or *ṡva*. The verb derived from this root is *ṡvayati*, which means “to swell, grow, increase.” As far as I know, Stcherbatsky was the first among recent scholars to refer to this interesting horizon of meaning (Stcherbatsky, 1978: 206). There is another famous Sanskrit root with the same meaning “to grow, or increase”—*ṡbrh*, from which Brahman, the Hindu word for

the Absolute, is derived. Etymologically, the root meaning of *shūnyatā* and *Brahman* are identical!

Such considerations throw confirmatory light on the interpretation of *shūnyatā* we have been suggesting. *Shūnyatā* is a potential in actuality, an energetic process. *Shūnyatā*, therefore, does not imply that there is no absolute reality, but it does mean that this reality is *not* an essential sameness. It is a process that requires distinctions, i.e., growth.

Similarly, *anātman* (not-self) does not mean that there is nothing ultimate in the human being. It does mean, though, that this ultimate reality is not a static sameness, but growth. Moreover, *anātman* was introduced by the Buddha probably because the *ātman* or “self” concept of Hinduism at that time meant the ego. *Anātman* therefore means egolessness. Vedanta’s later mystical identification of atman-Brahman developed along very similar lines, but with opposed conceptual expressions (Govinda, 1979: 39).

Of course, different schools of Buddhist philosophy interpreted *shūnyatā* in quite different ways. This is only normal, for *shūnyatā* is more than a defined concept. It is a symbol. It is not possible or necessary to enter into the details of this rather complex history of interpretation.

We can summarize the main content of the symbol of *shūnyatā*. Nagarjuna’s Madhyamika philosophy suggests the equation of *shūnyatā* and *pratītya-samutpāda*. This implies two conclusions:

First, reality is a non-dual continuum—that is, the Absolute and the phenomenal are perspectives or aspects, and not separate ontological realms.

Second, this one reality is an interrelated Whole, something like a continuous process or self-movement.

Trinity

The symbol of the Trinity has its roots in a dual experience. On the one hand, persons have experienced the presence of Jesus Christ as incarnate Ultimate Reality. In an overwhelming way, Christ represents to his followers the really Real. On the other hand, there is the experience of this presence as an *empowering* presence; it does not allow persons to be observers but empowers them to rise to a higher level of reality themselves. This is what they have called the Holy Spirit. Since both these experiences convey the Ultimate, they have been interpreted as experiences of God the Father (in Jewish terminology). Hence, we have a Trinitarian pattern and symbolism for the interpretation of Christian experience.

Persons discover the Spirit of God as their innermost being. Dwelling within them, the Spirit of God is not, however, to be confused with the empirical ego, which arranges and usually defiles all psychic and mental faculties. The Spirit raises persons beyond their ego, as He dwelled *in* Christ enabling Him to be *in* the Father and the Father *in* Him. All beings share *in* this oneness as they are one among themselves *in* the Father and Son. I will later urge that this advaitic “in” of John’s Gospel is significant for both a proper holistic interpretation of reality, as well as for a clear understanding of *shūnyatā*.

An approach similar to the one we suggested for interpreting *shūnyatā* can help us grasp the depths of Trinitarian symbolism. This approach stresses (1) the interrelatedness of reality and (2) the transcendent mystery beyond reality.

Before applying this approach to the Trinity, we must bear in mind that this two-level framework points up a paradox within all language that tries to express the nature of the Absolute. As Ken Wilber expresses it, God is at the same time and under the same conditions both the *ground* and *goal* of reality (Wilber, 1982: 254ff). Reality might be compared to a ladder of cosmic evolution. The Absolute would be both the highest rung as well as the material out of which the ladder is made, including its formative pattern. The Absolute or God would be both the highest level of reality (goal) and the true nature of every level of reality (ground). In the strictest sense, this is a paradox.

In Buddhism, a similar paradox occurs in trying to understand the Buddha-nature. Already and all the time, we *are* the Buddha-nature, and yet we have to *realize* it through practice. This was Dogen Zenji’s great problem of original enlightenment (*hongaku*) and acquired enlightenment (*shikaku*); Dogen finally solved it in a practice based on original enlightenment (*Shōbōgenzō*, “*Bendōwa*”).

For reason alone, this unity is difficult to grasp, yet it is clearly experienced when in actual practice the ego-subject is overcome and filled by *the* Subject (God, Buddha-nature, Christ in us, the Spirit): my spirit is taken up into the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit reflects and merges into my spirit. The two become totally united, but according to Christian experience, they do not become a lifeless identity. This *unifying process in the Spirit through the Son toward the Father* is the Christian Trinitarian experience. It is what Christians could call enlightenment as a process of participating in the Divine.

First of all, the Trinity means *the interrelatedness of reality*. What is implicate in the Father becomes explicate in the Son and unites in a

process of creative resonance in the Spirit. Insofar as God is the ground of the universe, this Trinitarian pattern expresses the dynamic oneness in diversity or *advaita* (non-duality) of individuation and unification expressed and manifested on *all* levels of reality. It mirrors also the spiritual path that is the realization of the return to the source in a transformation of being. God is above (*epi*), through (*dia*) and in (*en*) all (Eph 4:6) in a *perichoretic union*.

Perichōrēsis is the dance, the continuum of self-movement or the dynamic self-existence of this interrelated Triuneness. John of Damascus finds this metaphor a most appropriate description of the threefold inter-relatedness within Divinity (*De Fide Orthodoxa*, PG 789-1228). God is not a monistic principle, but a differentiating unity—therefore, always differentiated as a continuum of oneness. What we experience as the phenomenal or created world participates in the divine interrelatedness, i.e., in God's knowledge and love.

The way *to* or *from* the source *through* the transformation of the individuated reality *in* participating in the mystery of the divine dance can perhaps be illustrated like this:

TO/FROM

(Father, Source, Ground)

THROUGH

(Son, personal trust)

IN

(Spirit, mystical participation)

Each moment of the process implies the other two. The three persons of the Trinity relate to each other in perfect *kenōsis*. Each empties itself into the other. The symbol of the *cross* is actually the expression of the inner relationship of the Trinity. Each person *is* only insofar as it is relationship and self-emptying.

This relational oneness is most clearly experienced in love and knowledge, both of which depend on the merging of two into one consciousness without collapsing into identity. Consciousness becomes aware of itself only when it realizes what it is conscious of. Although it is unified in itself, it is so only on the basis of a distinction. Even pure consciousness, insofar as it is awareness, has this dynamic, relational aspect.

This is also the case when two consciousnesses meet and share each

other in a perfect union of synchronized and united activities. They are individuated *and* include each other not only as the other's object, but as subjects of each other's identity. This relationship is realized and felt in deep experiences of prayer and meditation, as Beatrice Bruteau has convincingly shown. She observes that "this entering into, and sharing the consciousness of, another self is the most characteristic act of a self. Dualism has passed over into nondualism, by the very intensity of its own dualistic energy. By desiring the other more and more, one has obliged ultimately to enter into the very life of the other" (Bruteau, 1983: 306). It is an entering into the other's rhythmic pattern, a being in phase with him/her, as it were, a real *perichōrēsis*. Dr. Bruteau also applies this pattern of contemplative prayer to the rhythmic unity of the Trinity in order to explain Trinitarian distinctions:

This distinction arises from the existential reality of the autonomous acts of knowing and loving which also constitute the unity. So the plurality and the unity are both referred to the same act, and that act is characteristic of the highest conscious selfhood. If Ultimate Reality is of the nature of selfhood, it must be a complex unity of this sort. . . . This distinction is not due to a distance between Creator and creature, but is the same kind of distinction that prevails inside the Godhead itself (Bruteau, 1983: 309).

If, then, the Trinity is first of all the interrelatedness of reality, then, secondly, this inexpressible inner-Trinitarian relationship is also a *trans-phenomenal unity which includes the explicate manifestation*. As this unity it is always beyond any possible phenomenal state, since the phenomenal would be defined by what it is not. First we saw that the Trinity is the ground of reality (the material out of which the ladder is made). Now we see the second point: the Trinity as the goal of the universe (the highest rung). Whatever reality is, it is not yet what it is, because the Trinitarian perichoretic movement is creativity. The explication of the source in the incarnate Son and its reinjection into the ground through the Spirit is an evolution or graded manifestation of awareness. It is the realization of the Trinitarian *perichōrēsis*. The Trinity is the very nature (or pattern) of consciousness that realizes reality is not outside reality but is the highest level of reality itself. Because this is so, any conscious act is a self-realization of reality. It is a manifestation of the ground of Being that

explicates being as a creative insight into itself. This, then, is why spiritual awareness, as achieved by individuals and by humankind in general, is of utmost importance: it is a participation in the divine dynamism.

As Paul Tillich maintains, the nature of such participation of the creature in Trinitarian life can be understood only in some kind of non-dual model or context (Tillich, 1969: 70ff). To participate implies both identity and non-identity. A part of the whole is not identical with the whole, and yet the whole cannot be what it is without the part. Tillich, therefore, attempts to think not in terms of substances but of dynamic being that is shared by all individuals (Tillich, 1969: 73). The identity implied in participation is grounded in this dynamism of being. In this way, the dynamism of the individual is a realization of the dynamism of all that is not this individual, and vice versa. This is exactly what the *perichōrēsis* of the Trinity expresses. The complexity of reality is the divine dynamism in a continuous process of unification; and this process is constituted by the power of consciousness.

I can summarize these remarks on the non-duality of the Trinity⁴ by pointing out three basic insights that the Trinitarian symbol seeks to express:

1. The Ultimate is at the same time both *beyond* as well as *in* all experiences. The realization of this paradox depends on the intensity of one's awareness of or participation in God. The Absolute is *in* all experiences because there is nothing that is not an explication or manifestation of what we call the Absolute. It is *beyond* any possible experience since, as the goal of all reality, it transcends both the conditioned and the unconditioned, and all other possible dualities that make up experience. The Absolute is never the sum of all partialities but the unification of part and whole in a dynamic process.

2. The Ultimate is expressed in and through all material as well as spiritual processes. The Unity of the Trinity suggests a non-dualistic relationship of *sistence* (Father), *ek-sistence* (Son), and *in-sistence* (Spirit); this threefold divine process integrates all partial processes occurring on different levels of reality. Since the ground of reality is self or consciousness, we can infer that all manifested reality shares in this quality of the ground, of course in different degrees. Any dualism between matter and spirit therefore becomes meaningless. We should instead see reality as a graded manifestation of consciousness. The degree of interaction between "parts" or "individuals"—that is, the degree of "being-one-in-another"—marks the degree of realization of consciousness.

3. The Ultimate can be known through the act of participating in its

very nature. This nature is *perichōrēsis*—that is, union in diversity, or the process of unification of complexities. In this process, the Godhead has its oneness. Godhead, therefore, is beyond time; it never collapses into a motionless sameness. Different beings participate in different ways and degrees in the Trinitarian movement—that is, they are on different levels of realization of their true nature. Their true nature is kenotic—a process of constant self-emptying and being filled by other beings. As finite beings become aware of their true nature, they tune into the Trinitarian dance or resonate with the dynamic nature of the Trinity.

Reality as Interrelatedness or Resonance

Shūnyatā and Trinity

To relate, as we have done, the emerging holistic paradigm to the symbols of *shūnyatā* and Trinity is to explore more clearly and more challengingly the meaning of what is presently going on in the spiritual history of humanity. The multidimensional symbols of *shūnyatā* and *Trinity*, if properly interpreted and communicated, can work as powerful agents in overcoming the fragmentation that threatens our modern world.

The modern situation calls for a cross-cultural effort to grasp and live the meaning of *shūnyatā* and Trinity. We might say, using a simile from acoustics, that the two symbols *resonate* with each other. We can imagine our effort to relate *shūnyatā* and Trinity as a matter of placing one symbol in the vibration range of the other and of observing its resonance. The resonance pattern will enable us to know the specific kind of interrelationship we are exploring. This image of resonance is not merely a personal whim or preference of mine; it is a key symbol used by Dogen Zenji to express the meaning of *shūnyatā*—i.e., the interrelatedness and transcendence of Reality.

We have already heard Suzuki's extraordinary statement on the nature of the experience of *prajñā*—that is, the experience of Ultimate Truth. He stated that *shūnyatā* remains in itself, though in a process of differentiation. *Shūnyatā* is the reservoir of infinite complexity comprehending all actual and possible manifestations. Therefore, it creates out of nothing in a process of differentiation, while remaining beyond differentiation. Beyond the distinction of static and dynamic, it includes both. *Shūnyatā* therefore can be termed both static and dynamic, one and multiple—or *perichōrēsis*.

I cannot imagine a more profound philosophical interpretation of the Trinity. The Trinity is this reservoir of infinite possibilities, differentiating itself eternally in three persons, and yet remaining one. It is a differentiated oneness—not monism, but *advaita*. *Advaita* is a category transcending logical distinctions, therefore out of the reach of concepts and neat definitions. So we have to create paradoxes in order to point toward *tathatā* or to express the experience of participating in the Trinity. The Bible and Christian mystical literature are full of such paradoxes, and in Zen Buddhism they are deliberately used as propaedeutical aids.

Using John Damascene's image of the dance (*perichōrēsis*) again, we can acquire a feeling for what these symbols convey. The dance is a dance only insofar as it retains the same structure or form. But this oneness or sameness is differentiated. It brings forth differences constantly, in the creativity of its movement. The dance is a totally interrelated wholeness. In other words, each movement of the dance has its meaning and form only insofar as it realizes itself in the continuous explication of the different "steps."

In later Buddhist philosophy, the dynamic, mutually interrelating aspect of *shūnyatā* was beautifully extolled by Dogen Zenji (1200–1252), especially in his investigations into Buddha-nature (Sanskrit: *buddhatā*; Japanese: *bushhō*) (Kim, 1980: 160ff). In Dogen's time, Buddha-nature was understood as some kind of potentiality for sentient beings in the six realms. Dogen had to modify this view when he discovered that *bushhō* is absolute inclusiveness for all beings or for whatever is generated by the functional interdependence of conditions and forms in the universe. In this way, Dogen overcame an anthropocentric or biocentric viewpoint, and avoided the implication of a subtle dualism of actuality and potentiality.

Buddha-nature is therefore not a receptacle that contains everything. Each form, rather, is perfect in its suchness and in no need of being contained in anything else. Really, then, *tathatā* (suchness) is identical with *buddhatā* (Buddha-nature). Dogen could say that all sentient beings are the true body of the entire universe (*Shōbōgenzō*, "Sengai-yuishin"). In this view, the Buddha-nature is not permanence as opposed to an impermanent world of forms. In transcending each existence, the Buddha-nature bears the negative within itself. This aspect of the non-existence of the Buddha-nature (*mu-bushhō*) is not an antithesis to existence, but one of the poles in a non-dualistic structure. It points to the "liberating and transcending powers inherent in the Buddha-nature

which liberate fixation and the particularities of existence” (Kim, 1980: 169).

Dogen’s *mu-busshō* recognizes a dynamism in the Ultimate that expresses an experience similar to that which a Christian might call *kenōsis* or the Cross. It is an intuitive experience of personhood that realizes that one gains one’s identity by totally devoiding or desubstantializing oneself onto the other. This is the mystery of love!

Furthermore, “The Buddha-nature actualizes itself not in such ways as from potentiality to actuality, from the not-yet to the already, from the lower to the higher, from the hidden to the manifest, but coeval and coessential with what persons act out in their activities and expressions” (Kim, 1980: 179).

In Christian terms this is the experience of the *anthropos pneumatikos*, the spiritual person, whose spirit resonates with and in the Spirit of God (as opposed to the *anthropos psychikos*, the ego-centered person) (1 Cor 2:14; 15:44, 46; Jude 19). This resonance in the Spirit is a unification not only of wills but also, and especially, of awarenesses, a unity that transforms one’s whole being. One becomes aware of a primary and cosmic truth—that *love*, as symbolized in the innertrinitarian relationship, is the ultimate nature of Reality.

When God’s Spirit works in us and is united with our spirit, and when our spirit is tuned to God’s presence, we know. We resonate. This is another way of saying, as Nicholas of Cusa says of God, that Reality is *coincidentia oppositorum*. It is an attempt to think wholeness which Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity cannot neglect.

To experience and describe reality as both static and dynamic, as does Suzuki, is part of the original core of Buddhism. The early Yogacharins tried to divide the *Dharmakāya*—their symbol for Ultimate Reality—into a polarity that would express its simultaneously static and dynamic character—that is, its *svabhāvakāya* (“essential body”) and its *jñāna-kāya* (“wisdom body”). According to Stcherbatsky, “the first is the motionless (*nitya*) substance of the universe, the second is *anitya*—that is, changing, living” (Stcherbatsky, 1978: 2:195, n. 3). Both are *Dharmakāya*. Change and the unchangeable are one.

The polar dynamism that the Yogachara and other schools of Buddhism find in the Ultimate is also contained, perhaps even more emphatically, in Nagarjuna’s equation of *pratītya-samutpāda* and *shūnyatā*. This equation of Emptiness and process, as proposed by Nagarjuna, Dogen, Suzuki, and others, comes much closer to the Trinitarian *perichōrēsis*

than does the much discussed Mahayana theory of *Trikāya* or the “Three Bodies.”

The three bodies designate different aspects or “levels of appearance” (or “manifestations”) of the Absolute Reality. What “levels of appearance” actually means is subject to controversy in different Buddhist schools. *Dharmakāya* (the body of *dharma*) is without any attributes. It is a oneness comprising everything which all Buddhas have in common. It is absolute beyondness. *Sambhogakāya* (the body of enjoyment) is a subtle realm which can be experienced spiritually. The different Buddhas of meditation have different qualities referring to different aspects of this subtle reality. *Nirmāṇakāya* (the body of manifest being) refers to the historical Buddhas who appear in physical form. Gautama Shakyamuni was one of them. They are incarnations of the Absolute.

The Trikaya doctrine has often been compared to the Trinity; the comparison is warranted insofar as *Trikāya* points to the undivided wholeness that is manifesting itself on all three levels of reality or, better, that is constituting all levels of reality through its self-manifestation. *Shūnyatā*, however, is a more basic, far-reaching symbol and therefore more appropriately compared to the Trinity, for it expresses not only the manifest aspect of the Absolute (something like the economical Trinity), but the very *nature* of Reality as interrelatedness in itself (the immanent Trinity).⁵

Lama Govinda strongly affirms this coinherence of finite and Infinite, one and many. He maintains that individuation (what perhaps can be called the formative principle) is just as important as universal oneness. For him, individuality is one of the focal points of the universe. It is not confined to limits, but “is rather a focal point of radiation which contains the whole universe” (Govinda, 1979: 30). Therefore, individuality is not contradictory to universality, nor is plurality to oneness. Such a view does not exclude a hierarchical interpretation of the Trikaya doctrine (establishing oneness across different levels), but it does affirm the holoarchic model (establishing total interrelatedness within each level) as equally valid. All concepts have to be transcended. Even *shūnyatā* and nirvana as concepts, models, or symbols are open and “allow us to proceed,” as Govinda says. They invite us to participate in emptying emptiness or in sharing in perichoretic love.

This perichoretic love is a continuous integrating of all levels of reality into the Whole. The Whole is, as it were, continuously being built up. Refusal to integrate or to resonate in the rhythm of this unity-in-dis-

tion is what one can call sin. Sin is based on inertia or ignorance. Both are forces of separation.

The emerging paradigm we have been discussing seeks to overcome this history and continued threat of fragmentation. Whether it will succeed or not is the question that frightens and challenges our present generation. A necessary condition for overcoming separation and for building a new, united world is that more and more people tune into and work with Reality as it really is—Reality as differentiated oneness or as the *shūnyatā* of the Trinity or the Trinity of *shūnyatā*. To tune to Reality is to live and promote the dynamism of unity and complexity that mark “the way things are,” or as Dogen wrote about the One and the many:

Though not identical, they are not different.

Though not different, they are not one;

Though not one, they are not many (Kim, 1980: 164).

Holomovement and Creativity

Within the emerging holistic paradigm, David Bohm, Rupert Sheldrake, and others are very concerned about the question of creativity. Just what is the “power” or energy that accounts for the irregular, the novel, the never-before seen or deemed—and for the new and transcausal (or trans-karmic) freedom that bounds beyond the limits of the given?

We must, I think, assume a transcendent suchness that is neither form nor formlessness but both. What makes reality a continuum and gives it its unity is this “orderly series of stages of enfoldment and unfoldment” that cannot be localized but penetrates all that we call space (Bohm, 1981: 184). Bohm explains the continuity of existence as a very rapid recurrence of similar forms, very much like a rapidly spinning bicycle wheel that gives the impression of a solid disc rather than of a sequence of rotating spokes, which would be separate entities (Bohm, 1981: 183). This image comes very close, of course, to the Buddhist intuition of interdependent origination or *dharma* factors. It sees continuity and sameness in a dynamic pattern of relationship, much like the Trinity (the three persons are not separate entities either). A similarity of order is preserved *in* the pattern of the unfolding-enfolding movement. This is also how consciousness works. It is not a mere tuning into the past (memory), nor anticipation of possibilities, but a direct resonance with what is going on on all levels of movement. Since there is no duality, we can describe consciousness as reality and reality as consciousness.

The recognition of an underlying continuity or unity is also found in the Buddhist notion of impermanence (*anitya*). According to the *anitya* doctrine, origination and decay are simultaneous happenings of one movement. They are aspects. There is no continuity without change. But neither is there change that does not repeat the subtle pattern of interrelated wholeness. As the new physics tells us, you cannot observe a particle without changing it—that is, without changing finally the entire universe, for each particle is related to all other particles. But this change of the universe is not chaotic; rather, it responds to an *ordered* underlying structure and form.

For Dogen, time is the absolute now (*nikon*), realizing past, present, and future in a single event of awareness. Mutual identity of existences and mutual interpenetration (*sosokusonyū*) is his formula for affirming simultaneity as the central expression of the Buddha-nature, which is the actuality of the present. The “present” is not a piled-up past but the awareness of *all* time (*Shōbōgenzō*, “Uji”). “‘Continuity’ in this view is not so much the matter of a succession or contiguity of inter-epochal wholes as that of the *dynamic experience of an intra-epochal whole of the absolute now* in which the selective memory of the past and the projected anticipation of the future are subjectively appropriated in a unique manner” (Kim, 1980: 208ff). Continuity is the dynamism of multi-dimensional time that moves “horizontally” as well as “vertically” (*Shōbōgenzō*, “Uji”). From the perspective of the Ultimate, according to Dogen, there is not evolution but *perichōrēsis* (if we may use a Christian term).

According to both Dogen and Bohm, reality can be seen as a resonance pattern within the phases of unfoldment-enfoldment. I would like to suggest that these “phases” can be interpreted, symbolically, as the “perichoretic steps”: Father, Son, and Spirit.

| | | |
|-------------|-------------|---------------|
| Father | Son | Spirit |
| (Implicate) | (Explicate) | (Integration) |

The Whole is the movement of integration, the “dancing” wholeness that is never integrated but is in the *process* of integrating itself. From this perspective, I suggest that what Bohm is trying to express with his image of “undivided wholeness” might be more aptly indicated by “integrating wholeness.”

The interrelatedness between implicate and explicate in the actuality of resonance allows an infinite interaction; and this is what we can call

creativity. New wholes are generated constantly on all levels of reality. Both Bohm's notion of implicate intelligence and Sheldrake's proposal for "morphic resonance" (Bohm and Sheldrake, 1982: 47) (or a process of learning that allows change of habit) try to image the regeneration constantly taking place in the creative interplay between explicate and implicate orders (and the transcendent ground/goal). The mutual ejection and injection releases creative impulses that take shape in new, concrete acts/events/things/thoughts.

Creativity and stability constitute a polarity. It is necessary to have both openness toward the beyond and relatively fixed forms (the past). The polarity pivots on the need for each generated or ejected thing to become a no-thing again—that is, to be injected once more into the implicate order or the ground. Otherwise, the process bogs down because of inertia, a counter-tendency opposed to creativity; we are talking about sin, or non-response, or non-resonance. The importance of the Cross, what gives it universal significance, is that it points up the necessity and value of becoming a no-thing. The cross symbolizes the devoiding or transcending turn into the other and finally into the Whole.

The Whole is devoid (*shūnyatā*) of determination. There are no "knots" in the Trinitarian net (this would be tritheism). The Whole is more than and cannot be reduced to the evolutionary process, yet the Whole contains an evolutive phase. The phases are beyond any of the orders but are reflected in all possible orders. Thus, the Father is not the implicate order but is manifest in all orders. Likewise with the other persons of the Trinity.

Reality is a process of "differentiating itself and yet remaining in itself undifferentiated" (Suzuki). This is what Buddhism calls *shūnyatā* and what Christianity experiences as the Trinity. We participate totally in this dynamism, which is the Ultimate, God. We are eternally merging into God and God into us, but we are never sucked up into an undifferentiated identity.

We might envision this paradoxical unity of differentiation and undifferentiation as a symphony that unfolds in continuous resonance with itself across and beyond time. The whole is there in each part, but it unfolds in time. Each particular note has its specific meaning and quality from the implicate structure of the whole, and the whole simultaneously *in* as well as *beyond* each musical phrase. A genius (like Mozart, as it has been reported) can hear the whole directly in an intuitive perception beyond the time-bound sequence. And yet, time is contained in the whole; it is implicate. The whole resonates in the parts; and the parts'

suchness is to resonate as the whole. It is the same with dance, and that is why the Trinitarian *perichōrēsis* is such a profound model.

Conclusion

The emerging holistic paradigm seeks to overcome fragmentation. This is its existential concern, one which, today, is vitally important. What I have tried to show is that this new paradigm, with its concerns, has deep, ancient roots. Our creative task is to regenerate the old so as to build the new more soundly and promisingly.

According to Christianity and, if my analysis of *shūnyatā* is valid, according to at least some schools of Buddhism, the deepest, final experience of humankind does not point toward a motionless substance, but toward *creative participation* in the *plenum-void*, which is *resonance* and therefore *perichōrēsis* or *shūnyatā*.

Notes

1. *Editor's note*: Von Brück is here adopting the Mahayana view of Buddhist history. The reader should clearly understand that, despite some superficial similarities, Hinayana cannot be identified with Theravada. Hinayana is an extinct form of Buddhism to which Mahayana sees itself as a correction. Theravada is a living system which continues independently of Mahayana.
2. Two particles separated in space influence each other's spin. If there were a connection understood in the usual terms of causality, the signal would travel faster than the speed of light which Einstein rejected. Hence, the particle seems to "know" what the other one is doing simultaneously. They might refer to a "common ground."
3. D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in East-West Philosophy*, Charles A. Moore, ed. (Honolulu, 1951), as quoted by W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 176ff.
4. For a detailed study of the *advaita* of the Trinity, see Michael von Brück, *Advaita und Trinität: Indische und christliche Gotteserfahrung im Dialog der Religionen* (unpublished *Habilitation-thesis*, Rostock University, 1980); idem, "Advaita and Trinity: Reflections on the Vedantic and Christian Experience of God with Reference to Buddhist-Non-Dualism," *Indian Theological Studies*, Vol XX (1983) 37–60.
5. The problem with the *Trikaya* is that either *Dharmakāya* or even a higher or more abstract principle is often considered to be *tathatā* or *shūnyatā*. But this is questionable since according to Suzuki's interpretation of *shūnyatā*, reality in its interplay within the *Trikaya* should be suchness and nothing else. Otherwise, the door is open to a new form of dualism, a problem not seen clearly enough by Murti (1980: 284ff).