The Buddhist Concept of Sin and its Purification
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In Buddhism there are various terms analogous to the Western term *sin*. These are, however, conceived slightly differently from that for the following reasons.

Buddhism, being non-dogmatic, admits different concepts and interpretations of its terminology. Being an empirical and affirmative religion, Buddhism has combined with the indigenous cultures of such different countries as India, Tibet, China, Japan, South Asian Countries. It has entrenched to produce in each case a unique form; its forms often differ in philosophy. Buddhist conscience, thus, is not aware of the guilt-feeling of western man, although it acknowledges human misconduct. Oriental people do not confess before the Sacred. The Buddhist conception of sin and guilt is outlined in the following historical and terminological analysis.

We have various terms equivalent to sin in ancient philosophy, too. In the Veda, for instance, we can find *pāpa*, *pāpman*, *pāsa*, *amhas*, *enas*, *āgas*, *hedana*, *anṛta*, *viloma*, *kivisa*, etc. All of these terms, however, indicate a type of sin which refers to external offence such as physical actions or ritual mistakes. An offence against the highest god can be removed by the prayer for forgiveness, as the *Rgveda* remarks:

"If we as magisters cheat at play, if we have done wrong unwittingly or a purpose, thou, O Varuṇa, cast all these sins away like loosed fetters and let us to thine own beloved" (V. 85).

In the Brāhmaṇas also, sin refers to the external sacrifice (*yajña*) and its magical efficiency. Sin indicates here the ritual misbehaviours. But these sins can be consequently removed simply by a ceremonial confession or by a public declaration (*nirukta*).

Sin in the Brāhmaṇas and the Vedas, as indicated above, refer to something physical and external rather than moral and internal. It is simply a stain which can be taken away by prayers or even by water (*Rg*, 23.22) or fire (X, 164.3). The transgression of divine law or sacrifices are more important than the internal awareness of human nature.

Further, with the growth of the Upanisadic idea, the interpretation of sin in India has been turned into a philosophical one. Sacrifice has become secondary, losing its primary significance. The ultimate purpose of the Upanisads is the realization of the unity of Brāhmaṇ and Ātman. Sin (evil) means any obstacle to the realization of this unity. Sin is considered as *avidyā* (ignorance), *kāma* (desire) and *karma* (action or deed). Neither offences against Varuṇa nor mistakes in sacrificing are considered as moral transgressions. What then is important? To attain perfect knowledge or the unity of Brāhmaṇ and Ātman. Hence, where perfect knowledge exists, there is no notion of sin. Man who has attained perfect knowledge, has been freed from sin, from impurity and doubt. He becomes Brāhmaṇ. The difference between good and evil seems to have been destroyed. The emphasis on this transcendence is accurately expressed in the following passages:

"He is not followed by good, he is not followed by evil, for then he has passed beyond all sorrows of the heart." (Bṛhad-Aranyaka Up. 4.3.22).

This passage points out that sin can be reduced to a consequence of ignorance. Every action, whatever good or evil, becomes deprived of the absolute value. What is valued is knowledge. The Upanisadic sin can be said intellectual. This Indian intellectual genius has been taken over by Buddhism.

*Hinayāna Buddhism – anātman –*

With the development of Buddhism a concept of sin came to denote demerit (*pāpa*). A term *pāpa* is one of the Buddhistic terms representing a sin concept. In view of sin we have a set of terms in Sanskrit literature. They are:
The terms of sin can be classified into two types in view of human psychology. The first type is a reaction to external standards. That is, when one violates the Buddhist precepts, he is said to commit vipatti (moral failure). But this vipatti can be removed simply by changing his behavior. This kind of vipatti is described in the Vinaya Pitaka as follows:

"The four offences involving defeat, the thirteen offences entailing a formal meeting of saṅgha (monks) – this is a moral failure; An offence of expiation, an offence which ought to be confessed, an offence of wrong doing, an offence of wrong speech – this is a failure of right conduct; a wrong view taking up a false view – this is a failure of right conduct." (Vinaya.I.171; V.98).

These failures, however, will be removed by converting one’s mind and behavior. The second type is a reaction to an internal awareness of human nature. Ignorance (avidyā), as considered sin, is opposed to knowledge (vidyā). Both ignorance and knowledge concern the intellectual, but not the offence against any kind of external law. Because knowledge means, according to Buddhist view, a religious insight. That is an insight to see things as they are, which is termed yathābhūtaṁ pajānāti (‘to observe things as they really are’). In contrast, avidyā points out the unawareness of things in reality. This is the fundamental basis of defilements. Moreover, defilements are not to be purified by others, but by one’s own self. The Buddhist view acknowledges neither absolute good nor absolute evil. The two are relative. Human beings exist in a world of good ‘and’ evil action, but not good ‘or’ evil actions. Buddhist thinkers in India did not say much about the conflict between the forces of good and evil. Thus, knowledge (vidyā) is a recognition of reality and the non-recognition is termed ignorance (avidyā).

Mahāyāna Buddhism – śūnyatā –

With Mahāyāna Buddhism we have a second type of sin, an internal awareness of human nature, emphasized and extended to its limits. In Mahāyāna Buddhism also, two fundamental trends of thought can be distinguished.

The first trend of thought is to equate human defilement (sin) with its purification. This idea is expressed by the famous passage Chandrakīrti’s. That is ‘samsāranirvāṇayorvīsesasyābhāva’ (the identity of the life-cyle and the Enlightenment. Cf. Prasannapāda, p. 535, ed. by L. de la Valéee Poussin).

This Mahāyāna idea of the unity of the absolute (nirvāṇa) and the relative (samsāra) is not found at the early stage of Buddhism. The early Buddhism separates the two in a dualistic way as do all other Abhidharma Buddhist sects. How is, then, the unity of the two considered possible? What is the process from the early Buddhist idea to Mahāyāna Buddhist conception?

Samsāra (life-cycle) is, in view of Early Buddhist conception, transitory (anītya), suffering (duskha) and egolessness (anātman). Through a long span of history the former two, transitory and suffering, have been remained without changing significance and content, being accepted by Early Buddhists as well as Mahāyāna Buddhists. The latter, namely, egolessness (anātman), has largely been expounded and amended by Mahāyānists, having finally become synonymous with śūnyatā, the super-natural experience. This concept of śūnyatā is in Mahāyāna Buddhism nothing but nirvāṇa (Enlightenment).
Egolessness (anätman) originally meant a negation of substance. At the time of Early Buddhism there were many heretics which insisted on a reality of substance. In their views a substance originates without leaving its own nature. This kind of substance is represented by such concepts as Brähma, vedagü, dravya, prakṛti, etc. Permanent is the essential characteristic of a substance which remains unchanged in any conditions, viz., origination and decay. A substance in any sense of the word is to be denied by the Buddhists, for it is that which binds us to this world and which we cling to. The negation of a permanent substance, this is a liberation of mind from the bondages. Thus, the negation of substance, viz., anätman, is the relative negation, which requires something to be denied. In other words, this negation is to deny the already known or to deny the realm of the experimental.

With the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism the significance and the content of egolessness (anätman) have been expounded in a wider aspective. It has been provided with the following expressions: sünyatä (emptiness), avitathatä (not untruth), dharmadhātu (totality of things), dharmasthiti (substratum of things), tattva (the essence), ananyatahatatä (uniqueness), aviparyasatathatä (irreversible), paramārtha (the absolute), acaintyadhātu (incomprehensible substance), suprasānta (perfectly calm), advaya or advaidhiśkāra (non-separable or non-divisible), nirvikalpa (an-discrimination), nirvrtti (disappearance), nirodha (cessation), nirvāṇa (enlightenment), tathatä (suchness), tattva (truth), svasiddhānta (self-realization), anupatti or anupanna (unborn), anirodha (non-destruction) and others.

The positive counter-part of anätman, as enumerated above, is tathatä, paramārtha, sünyatä and nirvāṇa. The concept of anätman in its implication does not merely mean a negative side of the truth. On the contrary, it points out the absolute, ultimate essence. That is also sünyatä. Sünyatä represents the positive content, i.e., the realm of super-experimental, religious experience, but not simply ‘emptiness’ as it is usually rendered. An English term ‘emptiness’ literally means a lack of substance, a negative side of the truth, which is the Early Buddhistic connotation, but not the Mahāyānistic.

The Mahāyānistic conception of sünyatä has been developed into tathatä (suchness) or the positive aspects of the truth, which can be called a mystic truth. Suffice to quote a passage from the Laṅkāvatāra sūtra. It runs:

"When erroneous views based on the dualistic notion of assertion and negation are gotten rid of, and when the viññās cease to rise as regards the objective world of names and appearances, this I call ‘suchness’ (tathata). Mahamati, a Bodhisattva-Mahasattva who is established on suchness attains the state of imagelessness (nirabhäsagocara) and thereby attains the Bodhisattva-stage of Joy (pramuditä).

The implication of this passage is that all things existing in this world are essentially of the same nature, for they are all devoid of their own entities (sünyatä).

The Diamond sūtra developed this conception of sünyatä into nirvāṇa and made no distinction between sünyatä and nirvāṇa. The sūtra states:

"As far as any conceivable universe of beings is conceived, all these should be led by me into nirvāṇa, into that realm of nirvāṇa which leaves nothing behind."

Linguistically speaking, the positive implication of a term sünyatä, as expounded by Mahayanists, is contained in its own etymology. Śūnyatā is derived from the root śvi, to swell. The root śvi, according to Dr. Conze, seems to have expressed the idea that something which looks ‘swollen’ from the outside is ‘hollow’ inside. Sünyatā, whatever hollow or swollen, is interpreted by Mahāyānists as possibilities to be filled up, to be realized in full. It is the totality of things as they are (dharmadhātu), the
substratum of things (dharmasthiti) and the self-realization (svasiddhānta); it is not simply the voidness or the emptiness anymore; instead, it is something positive and super-experimental in content.

In the life-cycle (samsāra) there is no entity permanent (anātman), as mentioned in Early Buddhism; at the same time, life-cycle is full of possibilities to be filled up (suniya-ta), as interpreted by Mahāyānists. In other words, anātman or the relative negation of entity has been evolved into the absolute negation or a mystic truth (nirvāṇa). Thus, between samsāra and nirvāṇa does no distinction exist anymore. The evolution of anātman—suniya-ta corresponds to that of the relative—the absolute negation. With the basis of terminological evolution the thought of the samsāra-nirvāṇa unity has been expounded and developed in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

**Japanese Buddhism – karma**

The first trend of thought is, as discussed above, to equate human defilement (samsāra) with its purification (nirvāṇa). In contrast to that, the second trend of thought has been developed in China and Japan in a form of the Pure Land Faith. This is a thought in which defilement or sin originally is the fact of paradoxical human nature as such.

In this respect, Shinran (1173–1262 A.D.) made an original contribution to Buddhist philosophy with the interpolation of faith between samsāra and nirvāṇa. The Pure Land Sect retains Indian devotionalism, and provides it with a Buddhistic foundation of compassion (maitrī-karunā). In contrast, Buddhism in India concentrated on wisdom (prajñā), which, had in view of Shinran, few effective means of saving less well-endowed human beings. Shinran’s belief was that perfect intercommunion of the Absolute (Amitābha) and all sufferers and, thus, the salvation of all could be achieved through the mere calling of the name of Amitābha—a symbol of intercommunion—.

This faith is motivated by the self-awareness of the root of all human existence. In his view, the root is a mist of paradox. Shinran calls it the karmic existence; karma in here denotes the paradoxical human existence, but not merely means a man’s treason against his action. Karma in an Indian sense is the object of moral judgement, being divided into three differences, good, evil and indeterminate.

Karma in Shinran’s view denotes man’s inability to rid himself of the dualistic notions of good and evil, love and hate. There cannot be determinate, eternal rules of ethical conduct, for all determinate things are transitory. We are living in a stream of paradoxical elements, good and evil, but not good or evil, for any ethical judgement cannot hold at all times for all men under all circumstances. His ethics are admittedly human and relative, not divine and absolute. Shinran said to his disciple Yuien:

“I do not know whether it is good or evil, or which is good or evil. I know neither good nor evil.”

In the light of the depth of human existence, he equates karma as an ethical conduct with sin as the limitation of human abilities. Karmic life-cycle represents the human world of sin (tsumi in Japanese). He states in his Kyōgyōshinshō thus:

“One is an ordinary person full of evil, living in the life-cycle. He is one who, since the beginning, persistently scuttles himself and wanders around, having no means to liberate himself from the karmic world.”

The awareness of karmic and sinful human existence requires the devotional attitude toward the absolute. By and through the vital faith to the absolute (Amitābha) man can attain salvation, overcoming his original sin. Thereby does the awareness of sin precede the leap of faith.
The *karma* doctrine, having been taken as the sin-awareness, has been carried by Shinran, founder of the Shinshū school in Japan, into its farthest extent.

**Conclusion – anātman, śūnyatā, karma –**

Anātman is a negation of permanent entity (*ātman*). But, the judgement of negation, in its turn, would be impossible without the presupposition of an entity of some sort. Early Buddhism took all kinds of permanent things, whatever *Brāhmaṇ, puruṣa, prakṛti*, as entity to be denied. It means that *ātman* is the object of contemplation at the stage of Early Buddhism. Its negation is also logical and relative, as discussed above.

On the other hand, śūnyam, a counterpart of anātman, also points to non-substance. Both concepts, śūnyam and anātman, are considered synonym. This logical and relative negation is represented by śūnyam and anātman. According to Early Buddhist reasoning both concepts of anātman and *karma* are actually a genuine unity. It is just because *karma* usually finds itself involved in the recognition of anatman, which could not appear but through *karma*; *karma* is not separated from anātman, but it is the categorical form of anātman. The thought of anātman can be interpreted as effectively as the concept of *karma*. The basis of *karma* should be deeply related to the anātman conception. We might say that *karma* is the realm, where anātman reveals itself to man; anātman reveals itself to man just because he is aware of *karma*.

With the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism anātman or śūnyatā (not śūnyam in Early Buddhism), going beyond the range of the relative negation, has come to mean the absolute negation, extending further its significance to nirvāṇa.

With Shinshū school of Buddhism *karma*, being deeply related to anātman, has been taken up and emphasized more stronger than anātman. Finally, *karma*, going beyond the ethical judgement, has been taken as sin deeply rooted in the paradoxical structure of human beings.

The Buddhist concept of sin has been evolved into the two trends of thought, external and internal; the former is a reaction to external standards, the latter being the awareness of human nature. These trends, however, have not been left in a state of abstract inaction. Instead, they fit together, making up a great ethics of the human life.

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3. Śūnyatā is used as a synonym of such concepts as praṇītyasamutpāda, madhyapraṇītā and saṃsāra. Cf. Prasannapada, p. 503; p. 535.
5. Yuien (Shinran’s disciple), *Tannishō* (a collection of the Shinran’s oral teachings and critique on the heretic views.), Chapt. 18.
8. The external reaction against sin, one of the types of sin, is also found in Shintoism in Japan. A concept of sin (Jap. tsumi), in contrast to Buddhistic conception, denotes something like dirt accumulated on surfaces of things. This concept of sin includes all malformations and all natural accidents. We have Shintoist terms such as *amatsu tsumi* (sins of heaven), *kunitsu tsumi* (sins of land), *kokutagunotsumi* (miscellaneous sins), *magagoto* (bad things causing annoyance or pain). Shintoist sins are derived from a natural process and no matters to be made into cases for ethical judgement. All sins are, in terms of purification, to be carried off (harai) to the ocean, which is only the way of transforming them into purification. With respect to the comparison between Japanese and Indian tsumi and culture, Cf. G. H. Sasaki, *Social and Humanistic Life in India*, Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1971, pp. 176–180; 219–226.