Due To Voidness, Awakening Can Occur

This is a review of how the mind can be liberated from Dukkha, through the perspective of Sunnata (soon-yah-tah), one of the Three Jewels of Buddhism—direct experiential knowledge of the transitory nature of subjective experience, which is inherently distressful and confusing, along with the absence of an enduring/autonomous self.

Here is the product that came from asking ChatGPT to describe Buddhist voidness—the absence of an enduring autonomous self:

Buddhist **voidness**—also called **śūnyatā** (Sanskrit) or **suññatā** (Pali)—is a core concept in Buddhist philosophy, especially in Mahāyāna traditions. It’s often translated as **emptiness**, but that can be misleading if taken to mean nothingness or nihilism.

**What does it mean?**

Voidness refers to the idea that all phenomena are **empty of inherent, independent existence**. Things do not exist as isolated, self-sufficient entities; instead, they arise through **dependent origination** (pratītyasamutpāda)—causes and conditions.

* **Example:** A tree exists because of soil, water, sunlight, air, and countless other conditions. Remove these, and "tree" ceases to exist. The "tree" does not have a fixed, independent essence.
* This applies not just to objects but also to concepts, identities, and even the self.

**Why is it important?**

1. **Breaks attachment:** Recognizing voidness loosens our grasping to people, possessions, or ideas as permanent.
2. **Reduces suffering:** Suffering (dukkha) arises from clinging and aversion. If we see things as fluid and interdependent, we relate to them with more equanimity.
3. **Opens compassion:** Understanding that we are deeply interconnected with all beings naturally fosters compassion.

**Different perspectives:**

* **Theravāda:** Focuses more on "non-self" (anattā) and impermanence; suññatā is often about the absence of self.
* **Madhyamaka (Mahāyāna):** Nāgārjuna developed śūnyatā philosophically, showing that **all things are empty of intrinsic nature (svabhāva)**.
* **Zen:** Emphasizes the experiential realization of emptiness as freedom from conceptual thinking.

**Common misconception**

Voidness doesn’t mean that nothing exists. Rather, it’s that things **don’t exist independently or permanently**. They’re like a rainbow: visible and real, but not solid or self-existent.

**Thích Nhất Hạnh** put it beautifully:  
“Emptiness is not the absence of something. Emptiness is the presence of everything.”

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I hope the following comments will clarify questions about voidness and virtue as described by Buddhadasa:

The realization of the liberating potential that comes with study and practice of the Four Noble Truths involves a quality of emotional discipline and cognitive clarity that can be best supported by the cultivation of virtue—Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. If there is an enduring/autonomous self, the possibility of change and growth would be impossible, yet we all misperceive our egos as requiring either gratification or defense. The cultivation of virtue requires the emotional and mental freedom that occurs through direct knowledge of voidness.

Contemporary neuroscientific research reveals a process, neuroplasticity, that supports the absence of an enduring/ autonomous self. First described mid-20th century, there is clear evidence that the complex interactions between multiple neural networks found in different areas of the brain occur creates recognizable patterns of integrated neural activity. Simply put, “Neurons that fire together wire together”. These neural patterns depend on restimulation, “refueled” with glucose and oxygen, to maintain stability. Their function, however, is totally dependent on the potency of emotions and the habitual reenactment of the patterns to endure—they are inherently impermanent, and dependent on repeated activation. The process is marvelously complex, miraculous in a way, and this complexity has no “command control”. Skillful investigation and self-regulation can be increased through training, feeding the neural networks involved in virtue regarding our interactions with each other and the environment.

Virtue benefits society at large and yet we live in a consumer dominated culture that reinforces the drive for gratification and defense of our self-identity and self-worth.

As mentioned in the announcement regarding this talk, I included a quote from “The Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree” by Buddhadasa for contemplation and review. Here is the quote again in its entirety, from pp 20-22:

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“To put it simply, in a moment of voidness, all the virtues are present. There is perfect mindfulness and self-awareness (*sati-sampajanna*); perfect sense of shame about doing evil (*hiri*), perfect fear of doing evil (*ottappa*), perfect patience and endurance (*khanti*), perfect gentleness (*soracca*), perfect gratitude (*katannu-katavedi*), and perfect honesty (*sacca*). And, in voidness, there is the knowledge and vision according to reality (*yathabhuta-nanadassana*) that is the cause for the fruition of the path and the attainment of *nibbana*.

I’ve come down to basics, saying that there must be mindfulness and self-awareness, shame about doing evil, fear of doing evil, patience, gentleness, gratitude, and honesty—because these are also Dhamma. They too can be a refuge for the world. Even with *hiri* and *ottappa* alone, the aversion and shame towards doing evil and the fear of doing evil, the world would be tranquil with lasting peace. Nowadays there seem to be many callous people who have no sense of fear or shame with regard to doing evil. Being that way, they are able to do improper things and insist on doing them continually. Even when they see that their actions will create disaster for the whole world, they still persist, and so the world is being destroyed because it lacks even this small virtue.

Or, we may take an even humbler virtue, that of gratitude (*katannu-katavedi*). With just this one virtue, the world could be at peace. We must recognize that every person in the world is the benefactor of everyone else. Never mind people, even cats and dogs are benefactors of humanity, even sparrows are. If we are aware of our debt of gratitude to these things, we will be unable to act in any way that harms or oppresses them. With the power of this single virtue of gratitude we can help the world.

It follows that those things that take the name of virtue, if they are real virtues, have an identical nature: every one of them has the power to help the world. But if virtues are false, they become obstructive, a disordered mass of contradictions. When there is true virtue—one that is void of “I” or “mine”—all of the Dhammas and all of the Buddhas can be found in it. All things are present within that one mind which is the true mind, the mind in its true state.

On the other hand, the mind that is feverishly proliferating with “I” and “mine” is without virtue. In those moments, there is no mindfulness or self-awareness. The mind is in a rash, hasty state. There is no forethought and consideration, no restraint. There is *ahiri* and *anottappa*, shamelessness and no fear of doing evil. One is callous regarding evil actions, and one is without gratitude. The mind is so enveloped in darkness that one can do things that destroy the world. There’s no use talking about the clear knowledge and vision of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness. All wholesome qualities are incomprehensible to a mind in such a lowly state.

Thus, we must be aware of these two kinds of mind: void of “I” and not void of “I”. we refer to the former as “void” and the later as “disturbed” or “busy”.

A MIND UNDISTURBED

Here your common sense may say that nobody likes being disturbed. Everyone like to be void in one way or another. Some people like the lazy voidness of not having to work. Everyone likes to be void of the annoyance of having noisy children bothering them. However, these types of voidnesses are external; they are not true voidness.

Inner voidness (*sunnata*) means to be truly normal and natural, to have a mind that is not scattered and confused. Anyone who experiences this really appreciates it. If voidness develops to its greatest degree, which to be actually void of egoism, then it is *nibbana*.

The disturbed mind is just the opposite. It is disturbed in every way—physically, mentally, and spiritually. It is totally confused, without the slightest peace or happiness. In *sunnata* is Dhamma, is Buddha, is the mind’s original nature. In busyness there is no Dhamma and no Buddha, no matter how many times we shout and holler “To the Buddha I go for refuge” (*Buddham saranam gacchami*). It is impossible for there to be Dhamma in the busy mind. For people whose minds are disturbed by “I” and “mine”—even if they take refuge in the Triple Gem, receive the precepts, offer alms, and make merit—there can be no true Buddha, Dhamma, or Sangha present. Everything becomes just a meaningless ritual. The true Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha abide in the void mind. Whenever the mind is void of “I” and “mine”, the Triple Gem is present right there. If it is void for only a while, that is temporary Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. If it is absolute voidness, that is real and enduring Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.

Please keep making the effort to void your minds of “I” and “mine”: then the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha will be present regularly. Keep voiding the mind until the voidness is perfect, until it is absolute. We must take Dhamma, which is simultaneously the cure of the spiritual disease and the antibody which builds immunity, and we must put it into use in our mind, so that there is no way for the disease to be born.”