

The Journey of Shunya from Early Vedas to the Panchasakha Era

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Abstract

This paper traces the history of *Shunya* (emptiness) from its ancient Vedic roots to its unique transformation by the medieval saint Achyutananda. Originally, the concept began in early Indian thought as both a mathematical zero and a spiritual space. Over centuries, classical schools fiercely debated its meaning, turning it into a strict philosophical choice. On one side, early Buddhist thinkers used *Shunya* to describe a world without any permanent essence. On the other side, orthodox Hindu traditions focused on *Brahman*, the ultimate fullness of the universe. For generations, thinkers viewed these two paths as completely opposite. However, this rigid divide dissolved during the medieval period through regional spiritual movements. The peak of this shift appears in the philosophy of Achyutananda Dasa in Odisha. He boldly combined these clashing ideas into a single concept: *Purna Shunya*, or the "Full Void." By identifying the absolute void directly with *Brahman*, Achyutananda stripped the divine of restrictive names, physical forms, and social castes. Yet, instead of leaving an empty abyss, he reframed the Void as a fertile, creative womb. It became a quiet canvas where the material world plays out as a joyful, divine game. By tracking this evolution, this paper shows how a concept that once meant absence turned into a symbol of infinite potential, bridging the gap between intellectual emptiness and deep devotion.

Keywords: Shunya, Purna Shunya, Vedic philosophy, Buddhism, Utkaliya Vaishnavism

Introduction:

In Sanskrit, the ancient Indian language that shapes India's cultural, historical, linguistic heritage, "shunya" (शून्य) translates to "zero" or "void." Its significance in both Sanskrit and Indian culture is profound and multifaceted. Shunya has profound philosophical meaning in Indian philosophy. Emptiness, or *shunyata*, shows that life is temporary and constantly changing. Understanding this idea is necessary to see reality clearly and reach enlightenment. Shunya' is a Sanskrit word meaning 'zero', 'empty' or 'void'. It is derived from the root meaning "hollow". It is the root word for the term 'sunyata', which means "emptiness" or "nothingness". Aryabhata, a great astronomer of the classic age of India was the one who invented the digit "0" (zero) for which he became immortal. 0 (zero) is a number representing an empty quantity. Adding 0 to any number leaves that number unchanged. In mathematical terminology, 0 is the additive identity. Multiplying any number by 0 has the result 0, and division by zero has no meaning in arithmetic. Shunya defines to the formless, shapeless, abstract, omnipresent, invisible, eternal, transcendental and immanent form of ultimate reality or God in Hinduism.

Etymology

The etymological derivation of *śūnya*¹ from the root $\sqrt{śvi}$ (or *śū*) appears in foundational Madhyamaka commentaries, Abhidharma glossaries, and authoritative Sanskrit grammatical treatises.

The Grammatical Construction

The word is built in three stages:

1. Root: $\sqrt{śvi}$ (Action: to swell)
2. Adjective: *Śūnya* (Quality: hollow/empty/void)
3. Suffix: *-tā*

So, *Śūnyatā* structurally means "hollowness" or "the quality of being void."

Latin: It is linguistically related to *cavus* (meaning "hollow" or "cave") and *cumulus* (meaning "heap" or "swollen pile").

Greek: It shares a lineage with *kyos* (fetus/swelling) and *koilos* (hollow).

The etymological derivation of *śūnyatā* from the root $\sqrt{śvi}$ (to swell) is prominently featured in Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* ("Clear Words"), specifically in his commentary on Chapter 24 (Examination of the Four Noble Truths) of Nagarjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. In the *Prasannapadā*, Candrakīrti takes up the definition of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in order to repel the accusation of nihilism. He uses the grammatical derivation from the root $\sqrt{śvi}$ (or *śū*) meaning "to swell," "to expand," or "to increase." Candrakīrti transforms a dry grammatical fact into a vivid philosophical metaphor. He argues that worldly phenomena are not "non-existent" (like a rabbit's horn) but rather deceptive like a hollow swelling. Candrakīrti uses this to explain that dharmas (phenomena) "swell" into appearance through causes and conditions (*pratītyasamutpāda*). They look real to the ignorant mind, but the wise understand that this "swelling" is ultimately hollow (*śūnya*) of any permanent, independent self (*svabhāva*)².

Shunya in Vedic literature

The philosophical genealogy of *Shunya* does not begin as a sudden rupture in classical Buddhism, but rather traces its earliest conceptual echoes back to the cosmogonic speculations of the Vedic and Upanishadic corpora.

In the earliest layers of the Vedas, *śūnya* is used primarily as an adjective for a desolate or empty physical state, rather than a philosophical concept.

Rig Veda (Physical Emptiness): The term appears in verses like RV 3.33.1 and RV 1.105.3. Here, words like *śūnam* or *śūne* describe a "lack" or "void"—such as a lack of rain, a desolate place, or an empty house. It denotes an absence that causes distress, distinct from the later blissful "void."³

¹ Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), s.v. "śūnya," 1085.

² Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā* (commentary on *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.7), ed. Louis de La Vallée Poussin (St. Petersburg: Bibliotheca Buddhica IV, 1903–1913), 492–494.

³ Rig Veda 1.105.3: "*mā somyasya śambhuvaḥ śūne bhūma...*" ("Let us not, devoid of Soma's delight, remain in the void/want"). Here, the locative *śūne* explicitly denotes a state of painful absence or lack. *Note on RV 3.33.1*: In this verse ("*śūnam ā aratām...*"), the term *śūnam* is etymologically related but often translated as "gladly" or "swellingly" (referring to the river's flow), deriving from the same root $\sqrt{śvi}$ (to swell). The transition from "swollen" (prosperity) to "hollow/void" (emptiness) is a key philological evolution discussed by Yaska in the *Nirukta*. See: *The Hymns of the Rig Veda*, trans. Ralph T.H. Griffith (Banaras: E.J. Lazarus & Co., 1920), 1.105.

The concept of shunya appears in the famous Nāsadiya Sūkta (RV 10.129). It describes a primordial state before creation that was "neither existent (*sat*) nor non-existent (*asat*)," often interpreted by later commentators as the Great Void (*Mahāśūnya*) which holds the potential for the universe⁴.

Upanishads (The Full Void): The Upanishads generally prefer terms like *Pūrṇa* (Fullness) or *Brahman* to describe the Ultimate. However, later Upanishads (like the *Maitrāyaṇī* or *Tejobindu*) begin to integrate *śūnya* into yoga practice. They describe the ultimate state of consciousness as a "void" because it is empty of thoughts and ego, yet full of the Self (*Ātman*)⁵.

Vishnu Sahasranama (Vishnu as the Void) - In the *Vishnu Sahasranama* (The Thousand Names of Vishnu) found in the *Mahabharata*, Name #743 is *Śūnyaḥ*. Adi Shankaracharya explains that Vishnu is called *Śūnya* not because he is non-existent, but because he is devoid of all limitations, attributes, and definitions. To the human mind, which grasps only forms, he *appears* as a void, but he is actually the underlying reality⁶.

Shunya in Buddhism

The concept of *Shunya* underwent a radical, systematic transformation with the rise of Mahayana Buddhism, reaching its classical zenith in the *Madhyamaka* (Middle Way) school founded by the 2nd-century philosopher Nagarjuna. Moving away from the cosmogonic speculations of the Vedas, Nagarjuna repositioned *Śūnyatā* (Emptiness) as the central pillar of Buddhist metaphysics and epistemology, formalizing it through the concept of *svabhava-shunyata*—the total lack of intrinsic, independent, or inherent nature in all phenomena. Nagarjuna's brilliance lay in his application of the *Pratītyasamutpāda* (Dependent Origination) doctrine.

In the *Madhyamaka* (Middle Way) school founded by Nāgārjuna, the word **śūnya** (and its abstract noun **śūnyatā**) is not looked at as a "void" or "nothingness." Instead, it is a technical term for relational existence. The central pillar of Nāgārjuna's thought is that Emptiness and Dependent Origination are exactly the same thing. This is a radical redefinition: *śūnyatā* is not a separate realm "behind" reality; it is the very way reality functions. If a thing had a permanent "self-nature" (*svabhāva*), it could never change, grow, or interact. Because things *do* change and interact, they must be "empty" of that fixed nature. In his magnum opus, Nāgārjuna famously declares: "We state that whatever is dependent origination is emptiness. That is a dependent designation; that itself is the Middle Way."⁷ Nāgārjuna strongly warns that misunderstanding *śūnya* is highly dangerous. People often confuse it with nihilism, thinking that nothing

⁴ Rig Veda 10.129.1: "nāsad āsīn no sad āsīt tadānīm..." ("Then was not non-existent nor existent..."). This "void" is not empty but potent (*tamas* covered by *tamas*). See: Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda: An Anthology* (Penguin Classics, 1981), 25.

⁵ Maitrāyaṇīya Upanishad 6.23: explicitly describes the mind's dissolution into a "void" (*śūnya*) when freed from sloth and distraction, leading to the supreme state. Tejobindu Upanishad 1.43: Describes the *Ātman* as "*śūnyāśūnya-vilakṣaṇaḥ*" ("distinct from both the void and the non-void"). See: *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, trans. Robert Ernest Hume (Oxford University Press, 1921), 438.

⁶ Adi Shankaracharya's *Bhashya* states: "*Sarva-visesha-abhāvat śūnyavat*" ("Because He is devoid of all specific attributes, He appears as a void/emptiness [to the ignorant], though He is the essence of Reality"). Source: *Sri Vishnu Sahasranama with the Bhashya of Sri Sankaracharya*, trans. R. Ananthakrishna Sastry (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1927).

⁷ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.19: *hi svabhāvo bhāvānām pratyayādiṣu vidyate | avidyamāne svabhāve parabhāvo na vidyate ||* ("For there is no self-nature of things found in conditions, etc. When self-nature is absent, other-nature is also not found.")

matters. This wrong belief can cause people to give up their morals, ethics, and kindness.⁸ We often think "emptiness" means nothing exists, which sounds depressing. Nāgārjuna argues the exact opposite! If things were not empty, they would be frozen solid and unchangeable. A seed could never grow into a tree, because its identity as a "seed" would be fixed forever. He uses *śūnya* to describe how things work in everyday life. He means that nothing in the world is completely separate, rigid, or unchangeable. Because everything is open and fluid, life, growth, and change are able to happen.

Panchasakhas and Shunya

The Panchasakhas ("Five Friends") of 16th-century medieval Odisha—Balarama Das, Jagannatha Das, Achyutananda Das, Yasobanta Das, and Sisu Ananta Das—revolutionized the concept of *Shunya*. Unlike the Madhyamaka Buddhist view (where *shunya* is a logical deconstruction of self-nature), the Panchasakhas personalized the void. For them, *Shunya* was not an abstract state of "emptiness," but a living, conscious, supreme entity they called the Shunya Purusha (The Void Person). The Panchasakhas accepted the Buddhist premise that the Ultimate Reality is void of material attributes (*nirguna*). However, they argued that this Void is not "nothing." It is a sentient, divine Being. Shunya as Shunya Purusha/Brahman: The Panchasakhas conceived God as *Shunya* (emptiness/void) but personified as *Shunya Purusha* or *Shunya Brahman*. This principle signifies a transcendental reality beyond human conceptualization, often identified with Lord Jagannath. They described the Ultimate as Shunya Purusha or Shunya Brahman⁹. This Being is "empty" because He has no shape, no color, and no material limitations, yet He is the "Person" from whom all avatars (like Rama and Krishna) emerge. This bridged the gap between Nirguna (Formless God) and Saguna (God with Form). To them, Krishna/Jagannath is the visible form of the invisible *Shunya*. The Panchasakhas identified Lord Jagannath of Puri as the physical embodiment of this Shunya Purusha. The Panchasakha philosophy, or Utkaliya Vaishnavism, combines three major Indian traditions:

- Buddhism: The idea of Emptiness (*Shunya*).
- Vaishnavism: Devotion (*Bhakti*) to Krishna or Jagannath.
- Tantra: Using yoga, body energy, and mantras to find this Emptiness inside yourself.

The concept of Śūnya (the Void) is one of the most profound ideas in Indian philosophy. While the word remains the same across traditions, its meaning shifts from a cosmic source (Vedas), to a logical description of reality (Buddhism), and finally to a personal, living Deity (Panchasakhas).

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: SHUNYA PHILOSOPHY IN THE SHUNYA SAMHITA

The theoretical core of Achyutananda's philosophy is codified in the *Shunya Samhita*, where he systematically dismantles the anthropomorphic limitations often imposed on the divine. Unlike the Saguna (with form) deities of popular Puranic Hinduism, Achyutananda's supreme reality is defined by a rigorous negation of sensory attributes. This apophatic theology is most famously articulated in the verse –

⁸ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.11: *vināsayati durdr̥ṣṭā śūnyatā mandamedhasam | sarpo yathā grhīto durghr̥hīto vidyā vā dusprasādhitā ||* ("Emptiness, if wrongly viewed, destroys the dull-witted, just like a snake wrongly seized or a magical spell wrongly executed.")

⁹ **Achyutananda Das and the Shunya Samhita:** Achyutananda Das, known as a *Mahapurusha* and *shunya sadhak* (practitioner of the void), authored the *Shunya Samhita*. In this text, he details the philosophy that the "Five Friends" (Panchasakha) were eternal companions of Lord Krishna who reincarnated in the Kali Yuga to spread this specific knowledge.

"Nahi tahara rupa varna, adarsha avarna ta chinha. Tahaku brahma boli kahi, sunya brahmhati se bolai."

Translation:

"It has no shape, no color; it is invisible and without distinct signs. I call that Brahman; it is spoken of as the Shunya Brahman."

Achyutananda tells us that the ultimate reality, which he calls Shunya Brahman, is way too big for human words, names, or physical shapes. To explain God, he strips away all physical forms (rupa) and colours or social labels (varna). What is left is a reality that is both invisible (adarsha) and completely beyond labels or castes (avarana)¹⁰.

But here is where his idea takes a unique turn. While Buddhist philosophy often stops at saying things have no permanent essence, Achyutananda immediately fills that empty space back up by calling it Brahman. This is a huge shift in thinking: the Void isn't a terrifying, empty black hole. It is actually God itself, just free from any human limits. It is a state of pure existence that is defined by the very fact that you can't define

The "Full Void" (Purna Shunya)

Achyutananda brings in a beautiful concept called Purna Shunya, or the "Full Void." Instead of treating this emptiness like a blank, dead space, his book, the Shunya Samhita, looks at it as a fertile womb where the entire universe is born. He shares a specific verse to help his student visualize this verse:

"Sunyara akara vira sunyara vicara, Sunye thai dekha vira e sacaracara."

Translation:

"Oh Hero, Shunya is the form, and Shunya is the contemplation. Staying within the Shunya, witness this entire moving and unmoving universe."

From this perspective, the Void is both where everything comes from and the lens through which we should view reality. When he says that everything "arises from Shunya and plays within Shunya," he is telling us that our physical world isn't a fake illusion we need to run away from. Instead, it is a joyful, divine game happening right inside the Void.

This idea perfectly builds a bridge between two different worlds: the Buddhist focus on emptiness and the Hindu devotion to God's playful energy. The Void is "full" because it holds the spark for everything that could ever exist. It acts like a quiet, still canvas that allows the vibrant painting of the universe to appear.

The Core Similarities – The Shared Ground

- **Beyond Human Language:** All three schools agree that the ultimate reality (*Śūnya*) cannot be explained by words, normal thoughts, or human senses. It is *Anirvacanīya* (indescribable)¹¹.
- **Rejection of Material Form:** Each tradition uses *Śūnya* to denote something that is completely devoid

¹⁰ Joshi, Dr. Dina Krishna. "Chaitanya's Panchasakha and Lord Jagannath." *Odisha Review*, Information & Public Relations Department, Government of Odisha (June 2014): 115–119.

¹¹ **Vedic/Vedantic:** *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.4.1: *yato vāco nivartante aprāpya manasā saha* ("Whence words return along with the mind, not attaining it"). Achyutananda Das, *Shunya Samhita*, Chapter 1: *akāra varṇa yehu ye arupa anākāra, kete kahi pāribi tāhāra mahimā* ("He who is without the letter 'A', without form and shape—how much can I describe His glories?"). āgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 18.7: *nivṛttam abhidhavatavyaṃ nivṛtte cittagocare* ("When the sphere of thought has ceased, that which is to be designated has ceased").

of material qualities, physical shape, weight, or worldly limitations (*nirguṇa*)¹².

- **Anti-Nihilistic:** None of the three schools see *Śūnya* as just empty nothingness or total destruction. It is always treated as a profound truth that frees the practitioner from ignorance or suffering.¹³

The Structural Differences

Vedic Shunya	Buddhist Shunya	Panchasakha Shunya
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shunya here means unmanifested background. Before the universe was created, there was nothing else—no stars, no planets, no people. ▪ It was a giant "Void," but it wasn't dead. ▪ It is like a completely blank canvas before an artist paint on it. The canvas looks "empty," but it holds the absolute potential to become any painting. ▪ It is the silent, spiritual source that everything comes out of. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shunya here means empty of independence. Nāgārjuna removes all ideas of a magical creator or a cosmic source. He says things are empty simply because they cannot exist on their own. ▪ A car is "empty" of a single identity because it is just a collection of wheels, an engine, and seats. If you take away the parts, the "car" disappears. ▪ It is a logical rule showing that everything in life is connected, changing, and relies on something else. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shunya here means The Shunya Purusha (The Void Person). The medieval saints of Odisha took the Buddhist idea of the void and turned it into an object of intense love and devotion. ▪ They argued that the Void is actually a conscious, loving God. Because He has no material shape, limitations, or colour, He is called "The Void." But to show love to human beings, this formless Void explicitly takes a physical form as Lord Jagannath of Puri. ▪ It is the formless God who becomes a visible deity so people can pray to Him and love Him. ▪

¹² *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 6.11: *eko devaḥ sarvabhūteṣu gūḍhaḥ ... sākṣī cetā kevalo nirguṇaśca* ("The one God hidden in all beings... the witness, the thinker, absolute and devoid of attributes"). Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā* (on MMK 24.7): Glosses *śūnyatā* as the complete absence of intrinsic, material, or independent essence (*svabhāva-rahitatvāi*). Balarama Das, *Gupte Gita*, Chapter 2: *nāhi tāhāra rūpa varṇa, sehi aṭai nirguṇa* ("He has no physical form or color, He is completely without material attributes").

¹³ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.25: *sa vā eṣa mahān aja ātmā... abhaya vai brahmā abhayaṃ hi vai brahma bhavati* ("This great, unborn Self... is fearless Brahman, and he who knows it becomes the fearless Brahman"—moving away from the distress of worldly void). Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.14: *sarvaṃ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate* ("All is possible for whom emptiness is possible; nothing is possible for whom emptiness is not possible"). Achyutananda Das, *Anākara Samhitā*, Verse 12: *śūnya bhāvanāre yehu thāi, saṃsāra bandhanaru mukti pāi* ("He who fixes his contemplation on the Void achieves complete liberation from the bondage of worldly existence").

Key findings

A critical point of tension in classical Indian philosophy lies in the apparent ontological opposition between *Shunya* (emptiness) and *Purna* (fullness). The Upanishadic tradition broadly establishes the supreme reality as *Purna*—an absolute, unchangeable plenitude out of which the universe emerges, leaving the source undiminished ("*Purnamada Purnamidam*"). In the past, older schools of thought used *Shunya* to show that nothing lasts forever, calling this emptiness the highest truth. For a long time, people thought you had to choose between two opposite paths: searching for the ultimate fullness of the universe (*Brahman*) or the absolute emptiness of the void (*Śūnyatā*).

However, this strict choice broke down during the medieval period. Regional spiritual movements across India began mixing these two ideas together. They created a new view that combined emptiness and fullness, showing that the ultimate void is not just blank nothingness, but a fertile space full of endless possibilities—a "Full Void."

Conclusion

The evolution of *Shunya* from Sanskrit philosophical treatises to 16th-century Odia poetry offers a compelling critique of linear models of Indian intellectual history. Classical narratives often depict Indian philosophy as a series of rigid, isolated systems moving along separate sectarian lines. In contrast, the Panchasakha movement in Odisha demonstrates that philosophical concepts are dynamic, porous, and adaptable across languages, geographies, and spiritual traditions.

Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of studying regional, vernacular texts to fully understand the developments within Indian philosophy. It proves that the evolution of thought is not static or linear, but a continuous, creative adaptation where an ancient tool of negation can become a profound statement of absolute spiritual fullness.

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