



LION'S ROAR

Deep  
Dive *into*  
Emptiness



LION'S ROAR

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**What is emptiness?** A Zen master might whack you with his stick for asking such a question, never mind what he'd do to us for trying to answer it. Nonetheless, here goes. Emptiness is the central insight of Buddhism, and what makes it unique among religions. According to Buddhism, neither we, nor other beings, nor any phenomenon in the universe, has a permanent, separate, and independent core, soul, or identity. Another way to look at it is interdependence: all relative phenomena are purely the product of external causes. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, the entire universe is present in a single flower, except for one thing—a self.

There are some traditional contemplations you can do to investigate this. Choose any object, say a chair, and see if you can find the one essential thing that makes it a chair. You can do the same thing with concepts themselves: is there an independent thing called “good,” or does its existence depend on “bad”? Another view of emptiness is that what things are empty of is our

projections on them, from “chair” and “me” all the way up to “existence” and “nonexistence.” In the end, of course, emptiness has to go beyond intellectual understanding to direct experience. As the Tibetan yogi Milarepa sang, “Emptiness no longer intellect’s realm, what relief!” The *Heart Sutra* says, “When there is no obscuration of mind”—when we are no longer confused by our external projections and experience the wisdom of emptiness—“there is no fear.” That is why emptiness is so important—it is the antidote to suffering.

—Melvin McLeod | editor-in-chief, Lion’s Roar



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## Emptiness and Existence

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**The Dalai Lama** takes us step by step through the famed logic of Madhyamika, the Middle Way that defeats all extreme views of reality.

TO GENERATE the type of love and compassion that motivates you to seek buddhahood, not for yourself but for the sake of others, first you must confront suffering by identifying its types. This is the first noble truth. From the time we are born to the time we die we suffer mental and physical pain, the suffering of change, and pervasive suffering of uncontrolled conditioning. The second and third noble truths lead us to understand the causes of suffering and whether or not those causes can be removed. The fundamental cause of suffering is ignorance—the mistaken apprehension that living beings and objects inherently exist.

We all have a valid, proper sense of self, or “I,” but then we additionally have a misconception of that “I” as inherently existing. Under the sway of this delusion, we view the self as existing under its own power, established by way of its own nature, able to set itself up.

However, if there were such a separate I—self-established and existing in its own right—it should become clearer and clearer under the light of competent analysis as to whether it exists as either mind or body, or the collection of mind and body, or different from mind and body. In fact, the closer you look, the more it is not found. This turns out to be the case for everything, for all phenomena. The fact that you cannot find them means that those phenomena do not exist under their own power; they are not self-established.

Sometime during the early sixties when I was reflecting on a passage by Tsongkhapa [founder of the Gelugpa school to which the Dalai Lama belongs] about unfindability and the fact that phenomena are dependent on conceptuality, it was as if lightning coursed within my chest. Here is the passage:

A coiled rope's speckled color and coiling are similar to those of a snake, and when the rope is perceived in a dim area, the thought arises, "This is a snake." As for the rope, at that time when it is seen to be a snake, the collection and parts of the rope are not even in the slightest way a snake. Therefore, that snake is merely set up by conceptuality.

In the same way, when the thought "I" arises in dependence upon mind and body, nothing within mind and body—neither the collection which is a continuum of earlier and later moments, nor the collection of the parts at one time, nor the separate parts, nor the continuum of any of the separate parts—is in even the slightest way the "I." Also there is not even the slightest something that

is a different entity from mind and body that is apprehendable as the “I.” Consequently, the “I” is merely set up by conceptuality in dependence upon mind and body; it is not established by way of its own entity.



The closer you look, the more [a self] is not found. This turns out to be the case for everything, for all phenomena.

The impact lasted for a while, and for the next few weeks whenever I saw people, they seemed like a magician’s illusions in that they appeared to inherently exist but I knew that they actually did not. That experience, which was like lightning in my heart, was most likely at a level below completely valid and incontrovertible realization. This is when my understanding of the cessation of the afflictive emotions as a true possibility became real.

Nowadays I always meditate on emptiness in the morning and bring that experience into the day’s activities. Just thinking or saying “I,” as in “I will do such and such,” will often trigger the feeling. But still I cannot claim full understanding of emptiness.

A consciousness that conceives of inherent existence does not have a valid foundation. A wise consciousness, grounded in reality, understands that living beings and other phenomena—minds, bodies, buildings, and so forth—do not inherently exist. This is the



wisdom of emptiness. Understanding reality exactly opposite to the misconception of inherent existence, wisdom gradually overcomes ignorance.

Remove the ignorance that misconceives phenomena to inherently exist and you prevent the generation of afflictive emotions like lust and hatred. Thus, in turn, suffering can also be removed. In addition, the wisdom of emptiness must be accompanied by a motivation of deep concern for others (and by the compassionate deeds it inspires) before it can remove the obstructions to omniscience, which are the predispositions for the false appearance of phenomena—even to sense consciousness—as if they inherently exist.

Therefore, full spiritual practice calls for cultivating wisdom in conjunction with great compassion and the intention to become enlightened in which others are valued more than yourself. Only then may your consciousness be transformed into the omniscience of a Buddha.

## Selflessness

Both Buddhists and non-Buddhists practice meditation to achieve pleasure and get rid of pain, and in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist systems the self is a central object of scrutiny. Certain non-Buddhists who accept rebirth accept the transitory nature of mind and body, but they believe in a self that is permanent, changeless and unitary. Although Buddhist schools accept rebirth, they hold that there is no such solid self. For Buddhists, the main

topic of the training in wisdom is emptiness, or selflessness, which means the absence of a permanent, unitary and independent self or, more subtly, the absence of inherent existence either in living beings or in other phenomena.

## The Two Truths

To understand selflessness, you need to understand that everything that exists is contained in two groups called the two truths: conventional and ultimate. The phenomena that we see and observe around us can go from good to bad, or bad to good, depending on various causes and conditions. Many phenomena cannot be said to be inherently good or bad; they are better or worse, tall or short, beautiful or ugly, only by comparison, not by way of their own nature. Their value is relative. From this you can see that there is a discrepancy between the way things appear and how they actually are. For instance, something may—in terms of how it appears—look good, but, due to its inner nature being different, it can turn bad once it is affected by conditions. Food that looks so good in a restaurant may not sit so well in your stomach. This is a clear sign of a discrepancy between appearance and reality.

These phenomena themselves are called conventional truths: they are known by consciousness that goes no further than appearances. But the same objects have an inner mode of being,

called an ultimate truth, that allows for the changes brought about by conditions. A wise consciousness, not satisfied with mere appearances, analyzes to find whether objects inherently exist as they seem to do but discovers their absence of inherent existence. It finds an emptiness of inherent existence beyond appearances.

## Empty of What?

Emptiness, or selflessness, can only be understood if we first identify that of which phenomena are empty. Without understanding what is negated, you cannot understand its absence, emptiness.

You might think that emptiness means nothingness, but it does not. Merely from reading it is difficult to identify and understand the object of negation, what Buddhist texts speak of as true establishment or inherent existence. But over a period of time, when you add your own investigations to the reading, the faultiness of our usual way of seeing things will become clearer and clearer.

Buddha said many times that because all phenomena are dependently arisen, they are relative—their existence depends on other causes and conditions and depends on their own parts. A wooden table, for instance, does not exist independently; rather, it depends on a great many causes such as a tree, the carpenter who makes it, and so forth; it also depends upon its own parts. If a wooden table or any phenomenon really were not dependent—if

it were established in its own right—then when you analyze it, its existence in its own right should become more obvious, but it does not.

This Buddhist reasoning is supported by science. Physicists today keep discovering finer and finer components of matter, yet they still cannot understand its ultimate nature. Understanding emptiness is even deeper.

The more you look into how an ignorant consciousness conceives phenomena to exist, the more you find that phenomena do not exist that way. However, the more you look into what a wise consciousness understands, the more you gain affirmation in the absence of inherent existence.

## Do Objects Exist?

We have established that when any phenomenon is sought through analysis, it cannot be found. So you may be wondering whether these phenomena exist at all. However, we know from direct experience that people and things cause pleasure and pain, and that they can help and harm. Therefore, phenomena certainly do exist; the question is how? They do not exist in their own right, but only have an existence dependent upon many factors, including a consciousness that conceptualizes them.

Once they exist but do not exist on their own, they necessarily exist in dependence upon conceptualization. However, when phenomena appear to us, they do not at all appear as if they exist

this way. Rather, they seem to be established in their own right, from the object's side, without depending upon a conceptualizing consciousness.

When training to develop wisdom, you are seeking through analysis to find the inherent existence of whatever object you are considering—yourself, another person, your body, your mind, or anything else. You are analyzing not the mere appearance but the inherent nature of the object. Thus it is not that you come to understand that the object does not exist; rather, you find that its inherent existence is unfounded. Analysis does not contradict the mere existence of the object. Phenomena do indeed exist, but not in the way we think they do.

What is left after analysis is a dependently existent phenomenon. When, for example, you examine your own body, its inherent existence is negated, but what is left is a body dependent on four limbs, a trunk, and a head.

## **If Phenomena Are Empty, Can They Function?**

Whenever we think about objects, do we mistakenly believe that they exist in their own right? No. We can conceive of phenomena in three different ways. Let us consider a tree. There is no denying that it appears to inherently exist, but:

1. We could conceive of the tree as existing inherently, in its own right.
2. We could conceive of the tree as lacking inherent existence.

3. We could conceive of the tree without thinking that it inherently exists or not.

Only the first of those is wrong. The other two modes of apprehension are right, even if the mode of appearance is mistaken in the second and the third, in that the tree appears as if inherently existent.

If objects do not inherently exist, does this mean that they cannot function? Jumping to the conclusion that because the true nature of objects is emptiness, they are therefore incapable of performing functions such as causing pleasure or pain, or helping or harming, is the worst sort of misunderstanding, a nihilistic view. As the Indian scholar-yogi Nagarjuna says in his Precious Garland, a nihilist will certainly have a bad transmigration upon rebirth, whereas a person who believes, albeit wrongly, in inherent existence goes on to a good transmigration.

Allow me to explain. You need a belief in the consequences of actions to choose virtue in your life and discard nonvirtue. For the time being, the subtle view of the emptiness of inherent existence might be too difficult for you to understand without falling into the trap of nihilism, where you are unable to understand that phenomena arise in dependence on causes and conditions (dependent-arising). Then for the sake of your spiritual progress it would be better for now to set aside trying to penetrate emptiness. Even if you mistakenly believe that phenomena inherently exist, you can still develop an understanding of dependent-arising and apply it in practice. This is why even Buddha, on occasion, taught that

living beings and other phenomena inherently exist. Such teachings are the thought of Buddha's scriptures, but they are not his own final thought. For specific purposes, he sometimes spoke in nonfinal ways.

## **In What Way Is Consciousness Mistaken?**

Because all phenomena appear to exist in their own right, all of our ordinary perceptions are mistaken. Only when emptiness is directly realized during completely focused meditation is there no false appearance. At that time, the dualism of subject and object has vanished, as has the appearance of multiplicity; only emptiness appears. After you rise from that meditation, once again living beings and objects falsely appear to exist in and of themselves, but through the power of having realized emptiness, you will recognize the discrepancy between appearance and reality. Through meditation you have identified both the false mode of appearance and the false mode of apprehension.

Let us return to the central point: All of us have a sense of "I" but we need to realize that it is only designated in dependence upon mind and body. The selflessness that Buddhists speak of refers to the absence of a self that is permanent, partless, and independent, or, more subtly, it can refer to the absence of inherent existence of any phenomenon. However, Buddhists do value the existence of a self that changes from moment to moment, designated in dependence upon the continuum of mind and body. All of us validly have this sense of "I." When Buddhists speak of the

doctrine of selflessness, we are not referring to the nonexistence of this self. With this “I,” all of us rightfully want happiness and do not want suffering. It is when we exaggerate our sense of ourselves and other phenomena to mean something inherently existent that we get drawn into many, many problems.

## Summary for Daily Practice

As an exercise in identifying how objects and beings falsely appear, try the following:

1. Observe how an item such as a watch appears in a store when you first notice it, then how its appearance changes and becomes even more concrete as you become more interested in it, and finally how it appears after you have bought it and consider it yours.
2. Reflect on how you yourself appear to your mind as if inherently existent. Then reflect on how others and their bodies appear to your mind. ✿

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## Beautiful Snowflakes

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It can be a long and challenging journey to seeing that nothing is “real” in the way we normally think it is. But, Zen teacher **Norman Fischer** says, there is joy and freedom in realizing that we and our world are as passing—and beautiful—as falling snowflakes.

FROM THE FIRST TIME I encountered the word in English, I liked the sound of it: emptiness. Some would find it chillingly abstract, even scary. But I took to it immediately. I chanted the *Heart Sutra* (“*form is emptiness, emptiness form ...*”) alone and with sangha every day for years before I ever bothered to find out what the great teachers of the past meant by emptiness. It didn’t matter to me what they meant. I knew what emptiness was.

Of course I had no clue. But intuitively I knew. I remember once, at the beginning of my practice, wandering in the woods during a blizzard, drifting snow piled two feet high, chanting the *Heart Sutra* over and over again. In the snow, with trees, bushes, and ground covered in white, white, white, and the sky white with whiteness falling down, the sutra’s meaning was perfectly clear.

It wasn't until much later that I plunged into the vast philosophical edifice of Mahayana Buddhism, from the *Diamond Sutra* and Nagarjuna on, that elucidates this saving and elusive teaching.

The logic of emptiness is wonderfully airtight. Like all simple truths, its clarity is immediately self-evident: we are. And there is no moment in which we are separate and apart: we are always connected—to past, to future, to others, to objects, to air, earth, sky. Every thought, every emotion, every action, every moment of time, has multiple causes and reverberations—tendrils of culture, history, hurt, and joy that stretch out mysteriously and endlessly.

As with us, so with everything: all things influence one another. This is how the world appears, shimmers, and shifts, moment by moment. But if things always associate with and bump up against each other, they must touch one another. If so, they must have parts, for without parts they couldn't touch (they'd melt into one another, disappearing). But the parts in turn are also things in their own right (a nose, part of a face, is a nose; an airplane wing, part of a plane, is an airplane wing) and so the parts must have parts (nostrils, wingtips), and those parts have parts and so on: an infinite proliferation of parts, smaller and smaller, clouds of them. (This is true of thoughts and feelings as well as physical objects.) If you look closely enough and truly enough at anything, it disappears into a cloud, and the cloud disappears into a cloud. All is void. There is no final substantial something anywhere. The only thing real is connection: void touching void.

This simple but profound teaching is delightful. As a way of thinking and understanding it is peerless, impossible to confute because it proposes nothing and denies nothing. Appearances remain valid as appearances, and there is no reality beyond appearances, other than the emptiness of the very appearances. So there is nothing to argue for or against! In being empty, everything is free of argument. Lighter than air.

“ The logic of emptiness is wonderfully airtight... there is no moment in which we are separate and apart: we are always connected—to past, to future, to others, to objects, to air, earth, sky.

But it is the taste of emptiness in the body, spirit, and emotions that has meant the most to me. Knowing that what happens is just what happens. My body, my thoughts, my emotions, my perceptions, desires, hopes, actions, words—this is the stuff that makes up my life and it is never desperate because I feel its cloud-like nature. That cloud is all I am: it is my freedom to soar, my connection to all. I can float in it, and watch it form and reform in the endless sky.

This doesn't mean I am disconnected from life, living in a Buddhist nirvana of disassociation. Quite the contrary, I know there is no way not to be connected, no person or place that is beyond my concern.

When I practice meditation I rest in emptiness: my breath goes in and out, a breath I share with all who have lived and will live, the great rhythm that began this world of physical reality and will never cease, even when the Earth is gone. It's nice, in the predawn hours, to sit sharing that widely, knowing that this zero-point underlies all my walking and talking and eating and thinking—all activity—all the day through; in fact, it is it.

They say that wisdom (the faculty that cognizes emptiness) and compassion are like the wings of a great bird. Holding both in balance against the wafting winds allows you to float, enjoying the day. Really, though, the two wings are one wing. Where you can appreciate the flavor of emptiness on the tongue you know immediately (without mediation) that love is the only way, and that everything is love and nothing but love. What a pleasant thing to hold in mind! All problems, all joys, all living, and all dying—it's love.

Traditionally, emptiness refers to the fact that phenomena have no “intrinsic existence.” This means not that phenomena don't exist, but that they don't exist as we think they do, as free-standing, independent, solidly real entities. This is as true of us as it is of the world around us: everything is contingent, not solid, ceasing the moment it arises, moment after moment. Everything is like space, real in its own way, and absolutely necessary, but not something you could put your finger on.

We, of course, don't know this. We are, according to the emptiness pundits of Buddhism, deeply ignorant of the one thing we should not be ignorant of: the real nature of ourselves and the world we live in. "Ignorance," unfortunately, doesn't mean we don't know. It would be better if we didn't know. Ignorance means we know something very firmly, but it is the wrong thing: we know that things are solid and independent and intrinsically existent. But they actually are not. So ignorance is not not-knowing; ignorance is a form of knowing, but it is a mis-knowing. And spiritual practice is the process of coming to see our mis-knowledge and letting it go: to begin to experience, accept, and live the truth about how we and the world actually are. When we begin to understand and to live in this way, there is a great decrease in the fear and dread, so common in human experience, caused by the huge gap between our expectations and the way things actually are. With an appreciation of the empty nature of things, there are no more foiled expectations. There is a lot more joy, peace, and love.

The Buddhist literature on emptiness, the Prajnaparamita, is vast. It includes many sutras that run to many thousands of pages. On top of that, the commentarial literature on the sutras is also vast and intricate, as are the scholastic treatises on the subject. So many words to discuss the voidness of all phenomena—and the fact that words do not actually refer to things the way we think they do! Why so much talk about all this? For most of us, who are simply trying to live our lives with less suffering, all this

complicated philosophical discourse is really beside the point. The Buddha said, in so many words, I am not a philosopher; I am a doctor, and the purpose of my teaching is not to explain the nature of reality but simply to offer a path that will lead to suffering's end. Why then did the later Buddhists feel the necessity of producing such vast quantities of metaphysics?

Well, it turns out that it is naive to think that we can treat the human illness without having an accurate view of how things really are. Whether we are aware of it or not, we are all philosophers; we are all living our lives based on philosophical assumptions, however unexamined or even unconscious they may be, and this unconscious mis-knowledge is the root cause of our anguish. This mis-knowledge is not mere doctrinal incorrectness; it really matters to our lives.

In Buddhism, suffering means suffering of the mind, suffering that comes from the way we take things. Physical suffering is not preventable: if there is illness or injury there will be pain, and even the Buddha suffered pain. But pain is not suffering. Mostly what we call suffering is suffering of the mind. Even most of our seemingly physical suffering is mind-caused. It is emotional suffering, suffering due to our complaining and our disappointment and feeling of being cheated and ruined because we are experiencing pain. This suffering is worse than the physical sensation of pain, though we mistakenly think it necessarily goes along with the sensation of pain. Suffering is afflictive emotion—anger, fear, regret, greed, violence, and so on. When we exercise these

emotions, no matter how justified they may feel, we cause suffering in ourselves, and that suffering has a way of spreading out all around us. But what's the root of these afflictive emotions? How do they arise in the first place? They arise out of clinging—clinging to the self and to our opinions and to all that is external to us that we identify with. We take all of this as intrinsically existing, and so are naturally—spontaneously and convincingly—upset when any of it is threatened. But the truth is that nothing can be threatened, because it doesn't exist in the way we think it does. Free of intrinsic existence, everything is free of all threat. When we really know this, through and through, down to the bottom of our souls, then the afflictive emotions don't arise. Instead there is peace and there is affection, even in tough situations. There is no sense of fearing or hating or desiring what is intrinsically nonexistent, empty.

“Emptiness refers to the fact that phenomena have no “intrinsic existence.” Everything is like space, real in its own way, and absolutely necessary, but not something you could put your finger on.

That things are empty doesn't mean, as I have said, that they are unreal or that they don't exist. Here I think we can trust our common sense: we know that things are, we know that something is going on. We go to the movies, we read or hear stories of

various kinds, and these matter to us. They are, in their own way, real, but we know the difference between stories or images and real life. The emptiness teachings are not telling us that things don't exist or that they are unreal. They are just telling us that things exist in a mode other than the one we think they exist in.

In Zen practice we are fond of not knowing. The not-knowing mind is the mind that knows that all phenomena, in being empty, are unknowable. Which means that all phenomena are marvelous, connected, magical. To see things in this way is to wake up from the dream of intrinsic reality: to walk out of the darkened movie theater into the light of day. In the dream, in the movie, various solid and menacing separate independent monsters are out to get us. When we walk outside, we see that this was never really true. We have awakened to the connectedness and indescribable meaning that is and has always been our real life.

The emptiness sutras speak of these things in magnificent ways and promise fabulous rewards once we become enlightened to this truth. In Zen practice too there's an emphasis on the experience of enlightenment, which is, more or less, the immediate experiential recognition of emptiness—seeing emptiness with your own eyes. All the things that are said about this in Zen and other forms of Buddhism are extravagant and idealistic. This extravagant idealism is perhaps helpful: it gives us some faith and enthusiasm. After all, if we stick too much to the so-called real world, to being mired in identity and all our emotional and physical problems, that's no fun, is it? Although all this is taken



for granted as life, in fact it is a kind of narrow-minded and naive metaphysical assertion we could do without. On the other hand, to take literally all this talk about enlightenment and emptiness, about becoming omniscient buddhas (omniscience is a key concept in the emptiness sutras) may be going too far, especially if it causes us to be frustrated with our progress in practice or to imagine that other people have become enlightened and that we should therefore abrogate our personal responsibility and listen to what they tell us about our lives.

Practically speaking, there's a progression in our appreciation of the emptiness teachings. In Zen practice, we begin with some modest, everyday experience. We sit. We practice zazen. Maybe even one period of sitting is enough. When you sit, something always happens. Maybe you don't know what, maybe you cannot identify it, or you barely notice it, but something does happen. You can feel that sitting is real, powerful. I travel here and there and sometimes I go into a room in a hotel, or some other institutional setting, maybe with doctors or businesspeople, not faithful sutra-reading Buddhists, and I say, "Breathe and sit up straight and be quiet," and in a few minutes something happens; something always happens. So there is some experience. What it amounts to is a faint glimmering that the world one has always assumed to be the world, the only world, the whole world and nothing but the world, may not be as it seems. The mind, the self, may not be as it seems. So our appreciation of emptiness begins with something that is really very common. It's common not so much because

sitting is a magical practice but because it really is the nature of the mind to be empty of intrinsicity. So if you give it even a small chance it will sense that, even if only a little bit.

The appreciation of emptiness begins there. Then you sit some more and experience it repeatedly. Possibly you sit long sessions and retreats, experiencing it more deeply and more frequently. Then you hear teachings and reflect on them, and little by little you become more and more convinced that this is really how it is. You may begin to notice—maybe with some frustration—that you persist in giving rise to afflictive emotions anyway, that you persist in seeing being as intrinsic. But still, you are beginning to know better. You are beginning to see how unsuccessful, how painful, that old knee-jerk way of living is. And so in this way you are beginning to train yourself in emptiness.

Then you might work directly with afflictive emotions, trying to let go of anger and greed and jealousy and so on, to begin to reduce their grip on you. Meanwhile you continue with your sitting and your study of the teachings and the verification of the teachings by your own experience. Someday you may or may not have a powerful experience of seeing directly, immediately, and powerfully that indeed things are empty, that they are like smoke or mist, like space, like the blue sky, like the movie, the dream: free and non-different from yourself. This would be lovely and it is certainly possible. But even if you don't have an experience like that, you continue to study and learn and experience; you apply the teachings of emptiness, of selflessness, of love and

compassion, to your daily experience and to your relationships; and you see the results of this: that there is more peace, more affection, more happiness, more clarity in your life.

You probably still experience confusion and afflictive emotion, but after a while it doesn't bother you so much. You are not tempted to be caught by it because you know that just leads to suffering and you have gotten over your long-term love affair with suffering. So in this way, little by little, you develop an understanding of and a grounding in emptiness. You don't need to call it emptiness. In fact, it's better if you don't. "Emptiness" is just a word you can repeat to yourself in a blizzard. But you know how things are and you are happy to live in accord with them. ❄️



## The Heart Sutra: The Fullness of Emptiness

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Emptiness is not something to be afraid of, says **Thich Nhat Hanh**. The *Heart Sutra* teaches us that form may be empty of self but it's full of everything else.

IF YOU ARE A POET, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. We can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. “Interbeing” is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix “inter-” with the verb “to be,” we have a new verb, “inter-be.”

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. So we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to

the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also, so we can say that everything is in here in this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything coexists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. To be is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is. Suppose we try to return one of the elements to its source.



The word “emptiness” should not scare us. It is a wonderful word.

Suppose we return the sunshine to the sun. Do you think that this sheet of paper would be possible? No, without sunshine nothing can be. And if we return the logger to his mother, then we have no sheet of paper either. The fact is that this sheet of paper

is made up only of “non-paper elements.” And if we return these non-paper elements to their sources, then there can be no paper at all. Without non-paper elements, like mind, logger, sunshine, and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.

But the *Heart Sutra* seems to say the opposite. Avalokiteshvara tells us that things are empty. Let us look more closely.

## Empty of What?

The Bodhisattva Avalokita,  
while moving in the deep course  
of Perfect Understanding,  
shed light on the five skandhas and  
found them equally empty.

*Bodhi* means being awake, and *sattva* means a living being, so *bodhisattva* means an awakened being. All of us are sometimes bodhisattvas, and sometimes not. Avalokita is the shorter name of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Avalokita is neither male nor female and sometimes appears as a man and sometimes as a woman. In Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese, this bodhisattva’s name is sometimes translated as Guanyin, Quan Am, Gwaneum, and Kannon, which means “the one who listens and hears the cries of the world in order to come and help.” Avalokiteshvara also embodies the spirit of non-fear, as he himself has transcended fear. The *Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* is his wonderful gift to us.

According to Avalokiteshvara, this sheet of paper is empty; but according to our analysis, it is full of everything. There seems to be a contradiction between our observation and his. Avalokita found the five skandhas empty. But empty of what? The key word is *empty*. To be empty is to be empty of something.

If I am holding a cup of water and I ask you, “Is this cup empty?” you will say, “No, it is full of water.” But if I pour out the water and ask you again, you may say, “Yes, it is empty.” But empty of what? Empty means empty of something. The cup cannot be empty of nothing. “Empty” doesn’t mean anything unless you know “empty of what?” My cup is empty of water, but it is not empty of air. To be empty is to be *empty of something*. This is quite a discovery. When Avalokita says that the five skandhas are equally empty, to help him be precise we must ask, “Mr. Avalokita, empty of what?”

The five skandhas, which may be translated into English as five heaps, or five aggregates, are the five elements that comprise a human being. These five elements flow like a river in every one of us. In fact, these are really five rivers flowing together in us: the river of form, which means our bodies; the river of feelings; the river of perceptions; the river of mental formations; and the river of consciousness. They are always flowing in us. So according to Avalokita, when he looked deeply into the nature of these five rivers, he suddenly saw that all five are empty.

If we ask, “Empty of what?” he has to answer. And this is what he said: “They are empty of a separate self.” That means none of these five rivers can exist by itself alone. Each of the five rivers has to be made by the other four. It has to coexist; it has to inter-be with all the others.



Emptiness” means empty of a separate self. It is full of everything.

In our bodies we have lungs, heart, kidneys, stomach, and blood. None of these can exist independently. They can only coexist with the others. Your lungs and your blood are two things, but neither can exist separately. The lungs take in air and enrich the blood, and, in turn, the blood nourishes the lungs. Without the blood, the lungs cannot be alive, and without the lungs, the blood cannot be cleansed. Lungs and blood inter-are. The same is true with kidneys and blood, kidneys and stomach, lungs and heart, blood and heart, and so on.

When Avalokita says that our sheet of paper is empty, he means it is empty of a separate, independent existence. It cannot just be by itself. It has to inter-be with the sunshine, the cloud, the forest, the logger, the mind, and everything else. It is empty of a separate self. But, empty of a separate self means full of everything. So it seems that our observation and that of Avalokita do not contradict each other after all. Avalokita looked deeply into the five skandhas of form, feelings, perceptions, mental



formations, and consciousness, and he discovered that none of them can be by itself alone. Each can only inter-be with all the others. So he tells us that form is empty. Form is empty of a separate self, but it is full of everything in the cosmos. The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

***Long Live Emptiness***

Listen, Shariputra,  
 form is emptiness, and emptiness is form.  
 Form is not other than emptiness, emptiness  
 is not other than form.  
 The same is true with feelings, perceptions,  
 mental formations, and consciousness.

Form is the wave and emptiness is the water. To understand this, we have to think differently than many of us who were raised in the West were trained to think. In the West, when we draw a circle, we consider it to be zero, nothingness. But in India and many other Asian countries, a circle means totality, wholeness. The meaning is the opposite. So “form is emptiness, and emptiness is form” is like wave is water, water is wave. “Form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form. The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness,” because these contain each other. Because one exists, everything exists.

In the Vietnamese literary canon, there are two lines of poetry by a twelfth-century Zen master of the Ly dynasty that say:

If the cosmos exists, then the smallest speck of dust exists.  
If the smallest speck of dust doesn't exist,  
then the whole cosmos doesn't exist.

The poet means that the notions of existence and nonexistence are just created by our minds. He also said that “the entire cosmos can be put on the tip of a hair,” and “the sun and the moon can be seen in a mustard seed.” These images show us that one contains everything, and everything is just one.

Because form is emptiness, form is possible. In form we find everything else—feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. “Emptiness” means empty of a separate self. It is full of everything, full of life. The word “emptiness” should not scare us. It is a wonderful word. To be empty does not mean to be nonexistent. If the sheet of paper is not empty, how could the sunshine, the logger, and the forest come into it? How could it be a sheet of paper? The cup, in order to be empty, has to be there. Form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, in order to be empty of a separate self, have to be there.

Emptiness is the ground of everything. “Thanks to emptiness, everything is possible.” That is a declaration made by Nagarjuna, a Buddhist philosopher of the second century. Emptiness is quite an optimistic concept. If I am not empty, I cannot be here. And if you are not empty, you cannot be there. Because you are there, I can be here. This is the true meaning of emptiness. Form does not have a separate existence. Avalokita wants us to understand this point.

**Happy Continuation**

Listen, Shariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness.  
They are neither produced nor destroyed.

*Dharmas* in this line means “things.” A human being is a dharma. A tree is a dharma. A cloud is a dharma. The sunshine is a dharma. Everything that can be conceived of is a dharma. So when we say, “All dharmas are marked with emptiness,” we are saying, “Everything has emptiness as its own nature.” And that is why everything can be. There is a lot of joy in this statement. It means nothing can be born, nothing can die. Avalokita has said something extremely important.

Every day in our lives, we see birth and we see death. When a person is born, a birth certificate is printed for them. After they die, a death certificate is made. These certificates confirm the existence of birth and death. But Avalokita said, “No, there is no birth and death.” We have to look more deeply to see whether his statement is true. What is the date on which you were born, your birth date? Before that date, did you already exist? Were you already there before you were born? Let me help you. To be born means from nothing you become something. My question is, before you were born, were you already there?

Suppose a hen is about to lay an egg. Before she gives birth, do you think the egg is already there? Yes, of course. It is inside. You also were inside before you were outside. That means that before you were born, you already existed—inside your mother. The fact

is that if something is already there, it does not need to be born. To be born means from nothing you become something. If you are already something, what is the use of being born?

So, your so-called birthday is really your continuation day. The next time you celebrate, you can say, “Happy Continuation Day.” I think that we may have a better concept of when we were born. If we go back nine months to the time of our conception, we have a better date to put on our birth certificates. In China, and also in Vietnam, when you are born, you are already considered one year old. So we say we begin to be at the time of our conception in our mother’s womb, and we write down that date on our birth certificate.

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Do you think that a cloud can be born out of nothing? Before becoming a cloud, it was water, maybe flowing as a river. It was not nothing. Do you agree?

But the question remains: Even before that date, did you exist or not? If you say “yes,” I think you are correct. Before your conception, you were there already, maybe half in your father, half in your mother. Because from nothing, we can never become something. Can you name one thing that was once a nothing? A cloud? Do you think that a cloud can be born out of nothing? Before becoming a cloud, it was water, maybe flowing as a river. It was not nothing. Do you agree?

We cannot conceive of the birth of anything. There is only continuation. Please look back even further and you will see that you not only exist in your father and mother, but you also exist in your grandparents and your great-grandparents. As I look more deeply, I can see that in a former life I was a cloud. This is not poetry; it is science. Why do I say that in a former life I was a cloud? Because I am still a cloud. Without the cloud, I cannot be here. I am the cloud, the river, and the air at this very moment, so I know that in the past I have been a cloud, a river, and the air. And I was a rock. I was the minerals in the water. This is not a question of belief in reincarnation. This is the history of life on Earth. We have been gas, sunshine, water, fungi, and plants. We have been single-celled beings. The Buddha said that in one of his former lives, he was a tree. He was a fish; he was a deer. These are not superstitious things. Every one of us has been a cloud, a deer, a bird, a fish, and we continue to be these things, not just in former lives.

This is not just the case with birth. Nothing can be born, and also nothing can die. That is what Avalokita said. Do you think that a cloud can die? To die means that from something you become nothing. Do you think that we can make something a nothing? Let us go back to our sheet of paper. We may have the illusion that to destroy it, all we have to do is light a match and burn it up. But if we burn a sheet of paper, some of it will become smoke, and the smoke will rise and continue to be. The heat that is caused

by the burning paper will enter into the cosmos and penetrate other things. The heat is the next life of the paper. The ash that is formed will become part of the soil, and the sheet of paper, in his or her next life, might be a cloud and a rose at the same time. We have to be very careful and attentive in order to realize that this sheet of paper has never been born and it will never die. It can take on other forms of being, but we are not capable of transforming a sheet of paper into nothingness. Everything is like that, even you and I. We are not subject to birth and death.

One autumn day I was in a park, absorbed in the contemplation of a very small but beautiful leaf in the shape of a heart. Its color was almost red, and it was barely hanging on the branch, nearly ready to fall down. I spent a long time with it, and I asked the leaf a lot of questions. I found out the leaf had been a mother to the tree. Usually we think that the tree is the mother and the leaves are just children, but as I looked at the leaf I saw that the leaf is also a mother to the tree. The sap that the roots take up is only water and minerals, not good enough to nourish the tree, so the tree distributes that sap to the leaves. The leaves take the responsibility of transforming that rough sap into refined sap and, with the help of the sun and gas, sending it back in order to nourish the tree. Therefore, the leaves are also the mother to the tree. And since the leaf is linked to the tree by a stem, the communication between them is easy to see.

We do not have a stem linking us to our mother anymore, but when we were in her womb we had a very long stem, an umbilical cord. The oxygen and the nourishment we needed came to us

through that stem. Unfortunately, on the day we call our birthday, it was cut and we received the illusion that we are independent. That is a mistake. We continue to rely on our mother for a very long time, and we have several other mothers as well. The Earth is our mother. We have a great many stems linking us to our mother Earth. There is a stem linking us with the cloud. If there is no cloud, there is no water for us to drink. We are made of at least seventy percent water; the stem between the cloud and us is really there. This is also the case with the river, the forest, the logger, and the farmer. There are hundreds of thousands of stems linking us to everything in the cosmos, and therefore we can be. Do you see the link between you and me? If you are not there, I am not here; that is certain. If you do not see it yet, look more deeply and I am sure you will see. This is not philosophy. You really have to see.

I asked the leaf whether it was scared because it was autumn and the other leaves were falling. The leaf told me, “No. During the whole spring and summer I was very alive. I worked hard and helped nourish the tree, and much of me is in the tree. Please do not say that I am just this form, because this leaf form is only a tiny part of me. I am the whole tree. I know that I am already inside the tree, and when I go back to the soil, I will continue to nourish the tree. That’s why I do not worry. As I leave this branch and float to the ground, I will wave to the tree and tell her, ‘I will see you again very soon.’”

Suddenly I saw a kind of wisdom very much like the wisdom contained in the *Heart Sutra*. You have to *see* life. You shouldn't say, *life of* the leaf, but *life in* the leaf, and *life in* the tree. My life is just Life, and you can see it in me and in the tree. That day there was a wind blowing and, after a while, I saw the leaf leave the branch and float down to the soil, dancing joyfully, because as it floated it saw itself already there in the tree. It was so happy. I bowed my head, and I knew that we have a lot to learn from the leaf because it was not afraid—it knew that nothing can be born and nothing can die.

The cloud in the sky will also not be scared. When the time comes, the cloud will become rain. It is fun becoming rain, falling down, chanting, and becoming part of the Mississippi River, or the Amazon River, or the Mekong River, or falling onto vegetables and later becoming part of a human being. It is a very exciting adventure. The cloud knows that if it falls to the earth it might become part of the ocean. So the cloud isn't afraid. Only humans are afraid.

A wave on the ocean has a beginning and an end, a birth and a death. But Avalokiteshvara tells us that the wave is empty. The wave is full of water, but it is empty of a separate self. A wave is a form that has been made possible, thanks to the existence of wind and water. If a wave only sees its form, with its beginning and end, it will be afraid of birth and death. But if the wave sees that it is



water and identifies itself with the water, then it will be emancipated from birth and death. Each wave is born and is going to die, but the water is free from birth and death.

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If a wave only sees its form, with its beginning and end, it will be afraid of birth and death. But if the wave sees that it is water and identifies itself with the water, then it will be emancipated from birth and death.

So you see there are many lessons we can learn from the cloud, the water, the wave, the leaf—and from everything else in the cosmos, too. If you look at anything carefully and deeply enough, you discover the mystery of interbeing, and once you have seen it you will no longer be subject to fear—fear of birth, or fear of death. Birth and death are only ideas we have in our minds, and these ideas cannot be applied to reality. It is just like the idea of above and below. We are very sure that when we point up, it is above, and when we point in the opposite direction, it is below. Heaven is above, and hell is below. But the people who are sitting right now on the other side of the planet must disagree, because the idea of above and below does not apply to the cosmos, nor does the idea of birth and death.

So please continue to look back and you will see that you have always been here. Let us look together and penetrate into the life of a leaf, so we may be one with the leaf. Let us penetrate and be one with the cloud or with the wave, to realize our own nature as water and be free from our fear. If we look very deeply, we will transcend birth and death.

Tomorrow, I will continue to be. But you will have to be very attentive to see me. I will be a flower, or a leaf. I will be in these forms and I will say hello to you. If you are attentive enough, you will recognize me, and you may greet me. I will be very happy. 🌸

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## New study suggests meditating on emptiness might be better than mindfulness

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In a recent study, meditating on emptiness led to a 24 percent decrease in negative emotions.

**Haleigh Atwood** explains.

EMPTINESS MEDITATION may be more effective at improving wellbeing than mindfulness meditation, according to psychologists at the University of Derby, UK.

Led by psychologist and lecturer William Van Gordon, an international research team conducted the first-ever study to investigate the impact of Buddhist emptiness meditation. A central Buddhist insight, emptiness is the understanding that neither we nor any phenomenon in the universe — sentient or otherwise — has a permanent, separate, and independent core, or soul. “Mindfulness and other contemplative techniques are very useful for creating mental calm and space in which to explore the mind,” Van Gordon said. “But one has to go a step further and undermine

the emptiness of self and the emptiness of all phenomena — that’s very consistent with the Buddhist teachings across most traditions.

“In the last few decades, we’ve seen a significant increase of scientific interest in investigating contemplative Buddhist approaches. This really started with a first phase of investigations concerning mindfulness about 20 or 30 years ago. About 10 or 15 years ago there was a second phase concerning compassion and loving kindness. What we’re seeing now is a third phase of investigation focusing on wisdom, emptiness, and non-attachment.”

In order to have a complete understanding of Buddhist techniques, Van Gordon believes science must cover all three phases: mindfulness, compassion, and emptiness. He wants to see an increasing focus on the relationship between emptiness and wellbeing.

The University of Derby study compared emptiness meditation to mindfulness meditation in a controlled condition with 25 participants, including Buddhist lay practitioners and monastics. To be considered for the study, participants were required to have a daily meditation practice that spanned an average of 25 years. Furthermore, Van Gordon and his team interviewed each potential candidate to explore their understanding of emptiness before inviting them to participate.

Participants engaged in a practice of emptiness meditation on their own time. The emptiness meditation consisted of an initial phase of concentrative meditation, followed by a phase of investigative meditation. This two-stage process involved searching for an existing self and examining the underlying nature of experience, and then transcending conceptual boundaries—such as space and time—in order to obtain a universal, farsighted outlook rooted in compassion. While experiencing emptiness, participants retained control over the duration and content of the meditation and awareness of their physical body and environment.

Within the same month, they also practiced a mindfulness meditation that didn't involve any emptiness components. Before and after each meditation, participants filled in a series of psychometric tests, which were analyzed by the research team to compare the effectiveness of each meditation approach.

The results showed that—even though participants already demonstrated high levels of wellbeing and spiritual insight—meditating on emptiness led to a 24 percent reduction of negative emotions, 16 percent increase in compassionate feelings, and 10 percent reduction in attachment to themselves and their external experiences.

Findings also showed that participants experienced emptiness as an underlying fabric of the mind and reality. In other words, they felt that the nature of reality is not as concrete as people generally think.

While emptiness meditation was shown to be more effective than mindfulness for improving wisdom and wellbeing for these participants, Van Gordon says this needs to be tested on relatively inexperienced lay meditation practitioners. Van Gordon plans to conduct further studies on emptiness meditation to explore its impact on new meditators.

If further studies suggest that emptiness is a scientific truth of existence, says Van Gordon, then it may be necessary for scientists to reexamine how they interpret psychological and physical phenomena. ✿



## Reality Isn't What You Think

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Unlike most religions, Buddhism says our big problem is not sin but ignorance—our fundamental misunderstanding of reality. Contemplative practice, says **Andy Karr**, is a good way to analyze whether things are as solid, separate, and lasting as we habitually think they are.

DO THINGS REALLY EXIST the way we see them? Do they exist as the separate, independent entities we usually take them to be? “I” and “mine” certainly seem to exist. This world with its mountains, rivers, oceans, and cities seems solid and reliable. Past, present, and future seem to be three different things. That’s how things seem to most everybody most of the time. But it turns out that if these things were ultimately real, we would be completely stuck, because liberation from the painful confines of this reality—the main promise of Buddhism—would be impossible.

If things existed the way we see them, all our fears would be well-founded and all our hopes would be worth struggling for. The inexorable cycle of birth, old age, sickness, and death would be

the final truth. The Buddha would be wrong about ego because it would truly exist and egolessness would be impossible. Buddhism would be a delusion.

There seems to be a contradiction between the reality we expect and experience on a daily basis and the reality described by the Buddha. This is because the way things appear to us is not the way things truly are. There are two ways of seeing everything. Whereas we see a world that is limited, confining, and solid, buddhas experience the world as open, spacious, and relaxed. What we experience as suffering, buddhas experience as great bliss. How could that be?

Investigating the difference between the way the world appears to us and the reality proclaimed by the Buddha is a key practice in many Buddhist traditions. This practice of “contemplation” involves using our everyday thought process to help us discover how things are, and how they are not. This process gives direction to meditation practice and is also supported by it. Once you get the hang of it, contemplation not only leads to insight but also is enjoyable. It inspires us to go forward on the Buddhist path.

Contemplation invites us to question what we experience. The Buddhist tradition tells us that what we ordinary beings see are our own confused projections. Our seeing is obscured by basic ignorance and the delusion arising from that ignorance. This is what is called apparent reality. It is not the way things really are;



it is only the way they appear to us. It is like the delusion that takes objects in dreams to be real when we don't realize we are dreaming.

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If things existed the way we see them, all our fears would be well-founded and all our hopes would be worth struggling for.

Buddhas and bodhisattvas who have overcome ignorance and delusion see ultimate reality. These realized beings see emptiness—the true nature of things. This is like recognizing a dream to be a dream. How can we transform seeing apparent reality into seeing the ultimate? The answer is found within us. It can be unlocked through careful contemplation. Contemplation can be done alone; it can also be done in a group and with the aid of a teacher. In any case, we need material to contemplate, and the Buddhist tradition provides ample choices. In this essay, we will take a step-by-step approach to contemplating emptiness. While contemplation takes effort and is sometimes frustrating, it is much more rewarding than just speculating about what emptiness is, which often just generates more concepts that obscure what the buddhas see.

## Cultivating Insight

The contemplative process of transformation depends on cultivating insight. To do this, we need to look closely at our experience. Normally, when things appear to us, in the second moment we project concepts onto them and think the appearances are what we conceive them to be. For example, we see these black lines on the page and think they are letters and words. It is only because we are deeply habituated to reacting to these shapes in this way that sounds and meanings arise in our minds. We can't see letters and words. We can only see shapes and colors. The process of projection happens so quickly that we don't even notice it.

We constantly project our version of reality, this seemingly solid world. These projections are handy when we want to ask for some cinnamon on our cappuccino, but to realize ultimate reality we need to distinguish appearances from our own projections. Here are some simple contemplations that illustrate this. They are meant to be experiential rather than intellectual. Please try to approach them in as childlike a way as you can.

Think about this planet. No doubt it seems like you are on the top, but what about people 10,000 miles away from you? They feel equally that they are on the top of the world. If people in each location point "up" at the same time, they will be pointing in completely different directions. Up and down don't truly exist either.

Next think about two people: one you like and one you find difficult. Think about a third person who doesn't get on well with the person you like but gets on well with the one you find difficult.

If you contemplate this state of affairs for a little while, you will understand that pleasant and unpleasant don't truly exist either. If the first person was truly pleasant, everyone would see them that way, and if the second person was truly unpleasant, everyone would see them that way.

All qualities are like these: large and small, up and down, pleasant and disagreeable, beautiful and ugly, hot and cold, good and bad, light and dark, old and new, mine and yours. No one can deny appearances, but whatever appears is empty of whatever we conceive it to be. Ultimate reality, the true nature, is free from all conceptual fabrications. This is the meaning of emptiness, or shunyata, as it is called in Sanskrit.

## Seeing Mirages

Basic ignorance is not recognizing the emptiness that is ultimate reality. It is the root cause of delusion and the bondage and suffering that come from it. It's as easy as one-two-three. First, we don't recognize the nature of what appears to our minds. Next, we generate desire, anger, or stupidity toward our projections, as if they were external objects. Finally, we make decisions, act, and react to what we have merely imagined.

To return to the dream example, when we don't know we are dreaming, we might dream of being attacked by a snake, experience great fear, and try to escape from his fangs and writhing

body—all without realizing that the snake was only made of dream stuff. If we can realize we are dreaming, fearsome images have no more power over us than a painting of a snake in a museum.

It is like the experiences and emotions we have while watching a movie. Even though we know we are sitting in a theater or watching TV, we still believe we see real people in real situations on the screen. We sit there thinking, “He’s going to fall in love with her.” “Don’t go in there!” “They’re all going to die.” It is nothing but colored light coming from a screen, but the illusion of a well-made movie is completely compelling.

Dreams and movies are good examples of what happens when we don’t recognize the true nature of appearances, and what happens when we do. In our daily life, when we think about someone we like, we don’t recognize the nature of what is appearing to our minds and think about that person with attachment, failing to see that we are thinking about our projection of a person rather than an actual human being. If someone we don’t like comes to mind, anger arises. It’s the same with jealousy, pride, and stupidity. All confused emotions arise in relation to our projections. In turn these emotions give rise to confused actions.

When a person happens to be right in front of us, we see or hear them, and in an instant project a concept on to what is merely a sight or a sound. Next, emotions arise toward the projection, and confused actions arise in response to that. This happens so quickly that we don’t even notice we are doing it. Our actions then give rise to new appearances, which give rise to new

projections, emotions, and further actions. These chain reactions go on constantly. As the great Tibetan yogi Milarepa said, “Mind has even more projections than there are dust-motes in the sun.”

When we begin to recognize the nature of our projections, it is like waking up from a dream, or recollecting that we are merely watching a movie. Gradually, as we do this more and more, we start to experience freedom from our claustrophobic imagination and begin to experience the spaciousness and relaxation of emptiness.

## What Emptiness Is

Sometimes when students of Buddhism first learn about emptiness, *shunyata*, they get frightened or angry, as though emptiness was something that would suck all the warmth from life, the way a black hole sucks in light. Emptiness sounds a lot like nothingness, which is clearly not what ultimate reality is. Shantideva, the great Indian practitioner and teacher who lived in the eighth century, made it clear in his classic *The Way of the Bodhisattva* that nothingness is not the meaning of emptiness nor the intention of teaching it:

It's not indeed our object to disprove  
Experiences of sight or sound or knowing.  
Our aim is here to undermine the cause of sorrow:  
The thought that such phenomena have true existence.

Sometimes people think that emptiness is a Buddhist philosophical concept, but the Buddha did not create emptiness; even if the Buddha had never appeared in this world, the nature of phenomena would still be emptiness. We teach emptiness to remove the suffering that comes from clinging to fabrications. It is not presented to destroy appearances. What the teachings on emptiness destroy is delusion, and the suffering that arises from it. Shantideva goes on to say:

Whatever is a source of pain and suffering,  
 Let that be the object of our fear.  
 But voidness will allay our every sorrow;  
 How could it be for us a thing of dread?

What we really need to be afraid of is ignorance and delusion. These are the causes of suffering. Recognizing emptiness is the antidote for suffering. It is what we need to embrace.

Emptiness is not easy to realize, because it is not an object for the conceptual mind. What does recognize emptiness is *prajna* (Skt.), which translates literally as “highest knowing.” It is usually rendered as “wisdom,” “insight,” or “knowledge.” *Prajna* is basic to our makeup, but it is covered over by veils of concept and emotion. We need cultivation to bring it out. There are three ways to cultivate *prajna*: listening to the teachings, contemplating their meaning, and meditating. These three form a natural sequence.

Listening is straightforward. It includes both hearing teachings and studying them. We study such topics as suffering and its cause, the cessation of suffering, the nature of apparent reality,

the nature of ultimate reality, and the general workings of samsara and nirvana. The prajna that arises from listening removes our coarsest misunderstandings about reality.

Contemplation takes the understanding that arises from listening and starts to mix it with our personal experience. There are many ways to contemplate. The simplest way is to reflect on what you have studied and ask yourself how it applies to you. Is all your experience tinged with suffering, for example, or not? What does emptiness mean? Is it something you vaguely understand, or is it clear to you that all phenomena are empty?

Another way to contemplate is to use questions that arise from your studies to investigate your experience, such as asking yourself, What is the nature of the enemy I'm thinking about? Is it really my friend arising in my mind, or is it a projection?

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Emptiness is not easy to realize, because it is not an object for the conceptual mind. What does recognize emptiness is prajna.

A third way to contemplate is to use logical analysis to clarify your understanding. You can ask yourself such questions as, Is this body one thing or many things? It must be one or the other, or else it does not truly exist. When you see the body is made of parts, you understand it is not one thing. And since the parts can also be broken down endlessly, at that point you can realize that its nature is emptiness.

Sometimes practitioners have doubts about the validity of contemplation. Since many teachings on meditation emphasize non-conceptuality, they feel it isn't kosher to practice with concepts. This is an overly simplistic understanding about how to work with conceptual mind. Genuine freedom from fabrications comes from seeing through the delusion of concepts, not from suppressing them. If we don't use concepts to develop prajna, we will have no way to develop it. Contemplation plays an essential role in transforming dharma from mere theory into personal experience. Through repeated contemplation, we develop confidence in the meaning of the profound teachings and confidence in our understanding. Gradually, we develop certainty about the meaning of prajna and shunyata.

Meditating transforms the intellectual understanding developed by contemplating into realization, or direct experience. Intellectual understanding only approximates ultimate reality. The genuine ultimate reality is beyond the intellect. It is inconceivable and inexpressible. We say that ultimate reality is emptiness, for example, but the genuine ultimate is even empty of anything called "emptiness."

Nagarjuna, the great second-century master whose teachings refuted all extreme views of existence and nonexistence, described the characteristics of the ultimate (calling it the precise nature) in the *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*:



Unknowable by analogy; peace;  
Not of the fabric of fabrications;  
Nonconceptual; free of distinctions—  
These are the characteristics of the precise nature.

Because it is beyond the reach of the intellect, ultimate reality can only be realized through meditation. There are two main aspects to meditation: resting and looking. These are sometimes called cultivating peace and cultivating insight. In the beginning, resting is emphasized, because first we need to pacify mind's wildness. There is not much point trying to look around inside a whirlwind. As mind begins to settle, the emphasis shifts to investigating the nature of experience. At this point we alternate resting with investigating. This is the way to develop prajna through meditating.

It is worth mentioning that some people feel they need to practice resting meditation until their minds are completely still before they can move on to developing insight, and others feel that if they settle their minds enough, they will be freed from suffering and disturbances by that alone. Both of these approaches overestimate the role of resting meditation. It is insight that liberates, because it is insight that sees through ignorance and delusion.

## Starting to Investigate

In apparent reality, such things as outer objects and inner mind; past, present, and future; me and mine; self and other; all seem to truly exist. In ultimate reality, there are no such distinctions. To understand, experience, and finally realize ultimate reality, we need to investigate apparent reality thoroughly so we can see that whatever we cling to is empty. Prajna doesn't have just one thing to accomplish; it must accomplish many things.

There are countless ways to investigate. To give you a feeling for the process, here is a series of investigations that proceeds from what we discussed before, the emptiness of outer objects.

The outer environment seems solid and dependable because we always carry our projections with us the way a snail carries its shell. As the 1980s cult-film sage *Buckaroo Banzai* said, "Wherever you go—there you are." While we are deeply habituated and cling tightly to our projections, they're relatively easy to see through. We can begin by investigating what we think of as "home."

Home appears to be as reliable as the earth, but when we look closely at our experience of home, all we find are glimpses of our front door, cooking smells, the sounds of people's voices and flushing toilets, the feeling of snuggling into bed, the sight of the TV and perhaps pictures on the wall, and so on. We never find "home," because home is merely a conception.

This is something we should contemplate. To do this, ask yourself, "Where precisely is this thing called 'home'? Is it in the walls, floors, and ceilings?" If you think that is where it is,

investigate each of them in turn to see whether they are anything other than collections of glimpses and tactile sensations held together by concepts. Investigate gradually. Look at all the experiences that seem to make up your home. By investigating in this way, you will find that home is in fact emptiness! The experiences conceived of as home do appear, but they are empty appearances. They have no base or support, no fixed, durable foundation.

Investigate “this planet” in the same way. You might feel that you know where various geographical reference points are located—Asia, Canada, Kansas, San Francisco. With your mind’s eye, see if you can find them. Are they in the east, west, north, or south? Did you take into consideration the curvature of the earth? How far away are they? Look at your experience of each reference point in turn. Is “Asia” anything more than the memory of a shape on a map? Can you ever find a whole city, or is San Francisco made up of lots of different glimpses the way home is? By contemplating in this way, you will understand that the planet and its geography are also projections. All outer objects can be investigated in this way, and you will find that all are emptiness. Outer objects still appear, but they have no essence.

Next, moving into more intimate territory, we should investigate the object of our self-clinging. The only thing we cling to more tenaciously than the external world is ego, the self. The self is our most precious possession, yet we really have no idea what it actually is. We think “I” and “mine” all the time, but what exactly

are we referring to? If pressed, most people would say that it is their body and mind, although some would say it is something separate and more abstract, like a spirit or soul.

“ We should investigate the object of our self-clinging. The only thing we cling to more tenaciously than the external world is ego, the self.

We need to deconstruct the actual experiences that seem to be “the self.” We see glimpses of hands and feet, clothing and reflections. We experience feelings, emotions, and other perceptions. We see reflections in mirrors, feel pleasant and painful sensations, get headaches and stub our toes. We think a lot, get sleepy, and sometimes feel uncomfortable. None of these is the self, and when we investigate we can't find anything else that holds all of these experiences together.

You may protest, But all these things are part of “me”! If so, then ask yourself, What is it that experiences all these things? Is it something separate from the experiences, like a soul or spirit? Can you find such an entity?

Are thoughts the experiencer? If you think that thoughts experience things, then investigate what produces the thoughts. Can you find “a thinker” as well as a thought? Perhaps the experiences experience themselves. Is that how it is?

Look for the doer in the same way you looked for the experiencer. When you think, “I am going to walk the dog,” will the thought do the walking or the one who thinks? If it is the latter, then they must be two separate things and you should be able to identify both of them. For whatever action you experience, try to find the actor. Is the doer anything more than an assumption?

This is a difficult contemplation to do, so don't rush or push too hard. We have a tremendous investment in the existence of ego, and there is incredible resistance to exposing this illusion. It is easy to dismiss such investigation simply as mind games or word play: it's all semantics. But the Buddhist tradition of investigation is not based on playing games. The proof of the power of investigation has always been the result: loosening the grip of ego. Sensing this possibility, ego is amazingly resourceful at fending off investigation. All sorts of emotions, distractions, and confusion will come up to ward it off. Investigate repeatedly and you will gradually see that the self is also emptiness. It too has no base or root.

At some point you might conclude that there is no self, but there must be a consciousness that is the experiencer of all and the doer of all. If you arrive there, this is what you need to investigate next. The subjective aspect of experience is undeniable, but does this prove that a thing truly exists that is the experiencer? There are many types of consciousness—visual consciousness, auditory consciousness, smell consciousness, taste consciousness, tactile consciousness, mental consciousness, and

self-awareness, to name the main ones. Is there a basis or unifying entity for all of these? Each of these consciousnesses is always conscious of something. Can you find mind or consciousness that is not connected with some specific experience? Can you find the root of mind?

Investigating the root of mind is an extremely subtle investigation. You might reflect on it from time to time to see if it illuminates itself. You could also refresh yourself by studying more, receiving teachings, and meditating. This gives contemplation more power to work on you.

Because there are two ways of seeing everything and we are deeply habituated to only seeing apparent reality, for realization of ultimate reality to develop, everything must be seen anew. Popular literature holds out the hope that this transformation can occur like a flash of lightning, but I am afraid this is wishful thinking.

Understanding, experience, and realization develop gradually through lots of listening, contemplating, and meditating. Meeting ultimate reality is more like exploring a new continent than a cosmic revelation, but the good news is that the journey of exploration itself is invigorating and endlessly rewarding. 🌿



## Into the Depth of Emptiness

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**Master Sheng Yen** surveys the path to enlightenment, explaining how it progresses and where its pitfalls are. Our intellectual understanding, our temporary realizations, even the exalted state of oneness—all must be dropped to realize the deepest emptiness, the highest truth.

WE CAN SPEAK of two kinds of emptiness: the emptiness of the dharma of teachings and the emptiness of the dharma of mind. The emptiness of the dharma of teachings can be understood through analysis and logic. The emptiness of the dharma of mind, however, can only be realized through actual experience. There is a real experience of this emptiness of the dharma of mind, but not all so-called experiences of emptiness are genuine.

Many students of Indian or Buddhist philosophy think they fully understand emptiness. Actually, what they understand is merely a part of the emptiness of the dharma of teachings.

One can arrive at a shallow understanding of emptiness of the dharma of teachings by analyzing the components of the body and mind, which in Buddhism are called the five skandhas. In Sanskrit, *skandha* means “aggregate,” or “heap.” The five skandhas include the material and the mental aggregates; they constitute our life, our being, and what we think of as our “self.” They are phenomenal components organized in time and space through causes and conditions.

In arriving at emptiness through analysis, we look at each skandha and see that none contains an inherent self. We see that what we call our self is actually a composite of these five factors, none of which is a self-entity. Also, we find no self outside of the skandhas.

The skandhas fall into three groups. First is the material skandha of form. Then there are three mental skandhas: sensation, perception, and volition. The fifth skandha is a spiritual component, consciousness. When we are born, we have a complete existence consisting of physical, mental, and spiritual components, but after we die only consciousness remains.

To repeat, as we analyze the five skandhas, we conclude that what we call the self is in fact composed of these skandhas, none of which has self-nature. Since all material and mental components are inherently changing, each skandha is itself empty of inherent nature. We conclude that the self, being made up of the five aggregates, is also impermanent and empty.



Can we say that the self that is composed of the five skandhas actually exists? Yes, in a sense we can, but this is not what Buddhism calls real existence. This self that we get at birth comprises physical, mental, and spiritual components, but when we die, only the component of consciousness remains. Consciousness, in and of itself, does not create karma. It does not think; rather, it's just a mental entity. In order to practice, one needs a body. Consciousness alone cannot do spiritual practice, and it cannot attain liberation. Since the self is composed of these five aggregates and is also impermanent, we say that our self is “false,” or we can say that it is “provisional.” This is also called no-self.

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Can we say that the self that is composed of the five skandhas actually exists? Yes, in a sense we can, but this is not what Buddhism calls real existence.

Thus, through analysis, we can view emptiness from two perspectives. First, we see that the self is composed of the five aggregates, and therefore has no inherent self-nature. The second aspect is seeing the emptiness of inherent nature—that everything is without a nature of its own. The emptiness of inherent nature means that not only is the self empty of inherent nature, but each of the five skandhas is also individually empty. To clarify, if

something had inherent nature, then it would never change, as it would be an ultimate reality. Therefore, anything that changes is empty of inherent nature.

One time, a Westerner, seeing that I was a monk, came up to me and asked, “Master, what is reality?” My response was, “I don’t know.” He looked extremely disappointed and forlorn, and said, “Why don’t you know this?” To which I replied, “Because there is no thing called reality. So how could I know it?”

The emptiness that is arrived at through logic is a kind of dialectic, but different from Western ideas of dialectic. It is the dialectic of the Madhyamaka philosophy of Buddhism. When we apply this special dialectic, we find that there is no left, no right, no middle, no front, no back, no past, no future, no present, and neither good nor evil. However, this dialectic does not give rise to a passive or negative view of the world; it affirms the existence of causes and conditions, but denies the existence of inherent nature. Things are said to lack inherent nature, because logical analysis shows that this is the case. Therefore, the conclusion is that things are inherently empty.

The viewpoint of the Madhyamaka after such logical analysis is called a position of affirming emptiness. It is not a neutral viewpoint, not a kind of middle between two extremes. Because one cannot affirm any place, one cannot affirm the middle either.

Let’s try to make it less abstract. There is a “left” that arises from causes and conditions; there is a “right” that is also made up of causes and conditions, and there is a “middle” that is due to

causes and conditions. Everything is just causes and conditions, whether it's to the left, to the right, or to the center. Why do we not take a stand anywhere? Why don't we affirm any position? We don't affirm any position because each place is without inherent nature. The goal of such logic is not to explain things, but to remind us not to cling to things because everything is changing. Everything exists because of causes and conditions, and everything lacks inherent nature.

## Emptiness of the Dharma of Mind

Now I will talk about the emptiness of the dharma of mind. I will begin with a story from the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng* (Jpn., Eno). When Huineng was still at Huangmei, the monastery of the Fifth Patriarch, Hongren, he worked in the kitchen milling rice. One day, the abbot Hongren, in an effort to find his dharma heir, asked the monks to write a verse expressing their own understanding of dharma. None of the monks were willing to do this except the head monk, Shenxiu, who, when the other monks were asleep, wrote a verse on the wall in the Chan hall. It went like this:

The body is a bodhi tree,  
 The mind is a bright mirror.  
 Always diligently polish the mirror,  
 And do not let dust collect.

“The body is a bodhi tree” means that we use the body as the foundation through which we cultivate enlightenment. The second line, “The mind is a bright mirror,” means that the mind is like a mirror that reflects what is in front of it without adding any self-centered view. If you can imagine it, the mind is like a circular mirror that can reflect everything around it, in 360 degrees. The meaning of the third line, “Always diligently polish the mirror,” is that we should be diligent in using dharma methods to dissipate or eliminate vexations and wandering thoughts. The fourth line, “And do not let dust collect,” means that one should work hard to train the mind so that it does not permit vexations to stain our clear, mirrorlike mind.

So, please, everyone take a guess. Does this poem express a realization of formlessness? Does it demonstrate a true understanding of the dharma of mind? Yes or no? [The participants reply, “No.”]

But does this poem express something good? Yes, of course it does. Practitioners need to behave like this. In any case, according to the *Platform Sutra*, by then Huineng had already realized the dharma of mind after hearing someone quote from the *Diamond Sutra*. Because he was illiterate, Huineng asked one of the monks to read him Shenxiu’s verse on the wall. That night, after hearing Shenxiu’s verse, Huineng had someone help him to write the following lines on the wall, next to Shenxiu’s verse. Huineng’s poem went like this:

Bodhi is originally without a tree,  
 The mirror is also without a stand.  
 Originally there is not a single thing.  
 Where is there a place for dust to collect?

“Originally there is not a single thing” means that there are no real substantial forms called bodhi, buddhanature, or emptiness. Huineng is saying that bodhi is not a substantial thing.

People often think that enlightenment is an experience whereby we can feel a certain thing, or discover exactly what this “thing,” enlightenment, is. This is an incorrect view, because enlightenment, or “seeing the nature,” is an experience of emptiness. It is the experience of phenomena as being empty and insubstantial.

Most Eastern and Western philosophies and religions believe in a highest, or ultimate, reality to which they give names such as “oneness” or “God.” Actually, we enter this oneness when we experience unified mind in meditation. In the West, it may be called oneness, but according to the Chan dharma, we need to put down this unified mind, to let go of it. We do not want to think of this unified mind as the highest, or ultimate, truth.

But how do we get to what is the highest truth? We have to drop everything, and then we will come to the point of formlessness, or nonattachment to all forms. Forms are products of causes

and conditions. As such they are changing and nonsubstantial. They still exist; it is just that the enlightened mind does not abide in them.

This idea of formlessness is different from theories that postulate an original substance or an original cause. Buddhadharma, in contrast, advocates the idea that everything arises because of causes and conditions, and is therefore empty, or formless. Now, let's compare the emptiness of the dharma of the teachings with the emptiness that is actualized in the dharma of mind. The emptiness of the dharma of teachings is arrived at through logical deduction or through analysis. In both cases we are using the mind to reach understanding.

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Having experienced putting down one's mind, one also develops a high degree of self-confidence and will never again lose one's spiritual practice. This experience is like suddenly seeing light for the first time.

However, to actually realize emptiness, we use Chan methods such as silent illumination<sup>1</sup> and *huatou*<sup>2</sup>. Regardless of which method we use, when our mind reaches a unified state, we should not cling to that state. But we cannot just do this at will; we must

continue to apply our method, again and again, until even unified mind disappears of its own accord. What remains is no-mind, or the actual realization of emptiness.

When conditions in our practice mature, and we encounter some kind of acute stimulus—certain sounds, words, or sights—all doubts and questions may suddenly disappear. Or perhaps suddenly we are able to put down our already stabilized mind, and all thoughts instantly disintegrate and shatter. It is as if we have just broken through a silk cocoon in which we have been confined. Not only has the cocoon disappeared, but the silkworm has disappeared. We are free of all burdens. Everything still exists, but there is no self; that is to say, there is no clinging and vexation associated with our self. This emptiness is reached through spiritual practice, and is different from the emptiness reached through analysis or logic.

When seeing the nature, one realizes that all phenomena are insubstantial and that the self has always been nonexistent. At this time, one is able to put down all attachments. However, sooner or later, depending on the person and the depth of the experience, one's self-centeredness and attachments return. Therefore, it is extremely important to continue using methods of practice. For example, when we are practicing huatou at the deeper level called "watching the huatou," we feel at one with the huatou; we have *become* the huatou. At this level, we may experience things like unified mind, dilution of the sense of self, and even emptiness. If we continue to practice at this level, our realization will deepen.

Regardless of whether or not one can repeat the experience, seeing the nature is extremely valuable. Although one still has self-centeredness, many vexations will have been eliminated. Having experienced putting down one's mind, one also develops a high degree of self-confidence and will never again lose one's spiritual practice. This experience is like suddenly seeing light for the first time. Although the light will fade or disappear, the individual will still know what that light is, because he or she has actually seen it. Something like this happens when one experiences seeing the nature, or emptiness. A shallow experience of enlightenment can be called seeing the nature, while a deeper experience of enlightenment can be called liberation.

There is also the case where someone has some kind of an experience and then mistakenly believes they are enlightened. For instance, while using the method they eventually reach a point where they have no wandering thoughts. It may even seem for a time that there is no sense of self, and they experience a feeling of being in infinite space. In this infinite space, there is no sun, no moon, and no earth—just space. They may think that this is an experience of emptiness, but actually this is just samadhi—a relatively shallow samadhi, one in a series of stages of samadhi.

There are also people who, while practicing meditation or engaging in daily life, have very strong concentration, and suddenly time and space, as well as the method, drop away. These people are using their brain in a very tense way, and suddenly they enter a vast, empty space that could be filled with light, or



even without light. They may think that they have experienced emptiness. But actually, this is just a case where the practitioner's mind may have become unstable due to too much tenseness in the practice. It is not an experience of emptiness or enlightenment. So, it is essential that we relax our minds and bodies as we use our method.

We have talked about the experience of emptiness via the dharma of mind, in which one uses a practice method to realize emptiness, or formlessness. By using the practice method, one learns to let go of the self and to realize this emptiness. Are there people who are able to actualize emptiness without using a method? Yes, but they are extremely rare.

## What Good Is Enlightenment?

Are you engaged in spiritual practice for yourself or for the sake of others? The idea of practicing for other people might sound very strange. Yet, because we are practicing how to contemplate emptiness, which implies no-self, it would also be strange to be practicing for ourselves. So, are we just wasting time here?

Actually practice is not for the sake of anything. You practice just to practice. These past two days, I have talked a lot about emptiness, about enlightenment, seeing the nature, and such things. I have said that after enlightenment, one realizes no-mind, no-self, and no-form. With all these negations, what can we say is the good of enlightenment?

To answer this, we should remember the line from the *Diamond Sutra*, “Abiding nowhere, give rise to mind.” Abiding nowhere means seeing one’s self-nature. It means not clinging to form, allowing the wisdom of no-self to arise. As this wisdom appears, compassion will also appear along with it. This union of wisdom and compassion is called bodhi mind, or bodhicitta—the wisdom of no-self together with nondiscriminating compassion. So bodhi mind is not just limited to wisdom, as some people may think.

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Compassion has no fixed recipient, and because it is formless, it has no goal in mind—one is not compassionate in order to get something.

We can say that wisdom, or prajna, is *not* three things: it is not experience, it is not knowledge, and it is not thinking. Rather, wisdom is the attitude of no-self. We can also speak of three things that compassion is not: it is not ordinary sympathy, it is not fixed on any object, and it does not seek goals. Compassion is not the same as love. Through compassion, one helps all sentient beings without discriminating between one and the other, and one impartially gives benefit to all sentient beings. Again, compassion has no fixed recipient, and because it is formless, it has no goal in mind—one is not compassionate in order to get something. Compassion is helping sentient beings in just the right way for each individual.

I want to give you a kind of formula that describes wisdom and compassion. I will give you the basic structure of this formula, but you must fill in the blanks yourself. It goes like this: Wisdom is not (blank), not (blank), and not (blank). Compassion is not (blank), not (blank), and not (blank). Can you fill in the blanks? This is very important, for if you've seen the nature, the three nots of wisdom and the three nots of compassion should arise in your experience of enlightenment. If your experience after seeing the nature is not in accordance with these definitions, your experience has some problems.

Please recite: "Wisdom is not knowledge, wisdom is not experience, and wisdom is not thinking." [Participants recite.]

Wisdom is the attitude of no-self.

And now for compassion. Please recite: "Compassion is not sympathy, compassion has no fixed recipients, and compassion is without a goal." [Participants recite.]

Compassion is impartially benefiting all sentient beings in just the right way.

Many people superstitiously or erroneously believe that after enlightenment, they would have nothing left to do, that practice would be all over with. They think that enlightenment is fantastically wonderful, and they also hope that other people can confirm for them that they have seen the nature. But if at the time of supposed enlightenment, no wisdom or compassion arises, if these qualities of bodhi mind do not arise, then this is not actual enlightenment. It is a false experience. So, if you have such an

experience, you can look into it to see if such qualities have arisen. However, I emphasize that you should still consult a qualified teacher who can recognize an enlightenment experience.

I have said that seeing the nature is not the same as enlightenment. After seeing the nature, for several days one will be full of wisdom and compassion, vexations will not arise, and one's self-centeredness will not be so strong. But after some time, vexations will return. However, one's confidence will be quite strong, and one will develop a strong sense of humility. This humility exists because one realizes that one still has a long way to go to achieve liberation, and an even longer journey to buddhahood. So, one will be very humble, and will not be arrogant about this achievement.

From what I have seen, the great practitioners in different spiritual systems are all very humble. They all think that they have insufficient practice and insufficient attainment. Although the Chan masters sometimes used methods such as striking, shouting, and scolding, it was not done out of arrogance. These are methods that, when used in the right way, can give a disciple just the right kind of help.

The great Tibetan lamas I have met, practitioners of high spiritual attainment, are still quite humble. But there are some practitioners who have had a little experience in samadhi, who have not really seen the nature, yet behave arrogantly. This arrogance is a manifestation of their vexations.

Recently I met a great lama, who was the incarnation of Tsongkapa, the great Tibetan teacher. I said to him, “You must be the reincarnation of Tsongkapa, the teacher of the First Dalai Lama. According to belief, this also means you are the avatar of Maitreya Buddha.”

He said, “Well, you know, that is what people believe. I am just a practitioner. It is just that Tibetans believe that I am the emanation body of Maitreya and the teacher of the First Dalai Lama.”

Then I asked him, “Does this mean you are not actually the reincarnation of Tsongkapa?”

He replied, “That’s the belief. I can’t deny this belief, either.” I said, “Are you Maitreya?” And he said, “Well, I practice the methods of Maitreya.”

So, he wouldn’t affirm that he actually was Maitreya. He just considered himself a practitioner and one who learned from Maitreya.

It was the same way with the current Dalai Lama. When I asked him, “Everyone believes that you are an emanation body (*nirmanakaya*) of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva. Are you Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva?” He said, “I am a little bhikshu who every day makes many prostrations to the Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva.”

If these qualities of bodhi mind do not arise, then this is not actual enlightenment. It is a false experience.

So, as we look at people with great spiritual achievements, such as the enlightened Chan patriarchs and Chan masters, we can see that most of them were very much like ordinary monks—in fact, more humble than the average monk. They did not go around thinking, “I’m enlightened, so I’m different from everyone else.” They saw themselves as the same as other people. The difference is that they viewed the world in a different way. They did not impose labels on the world, such as good and evil, or have thoughts such as, “I like this” or, “I don’t like that.”

If they saw a sick person, they would try to help the person get treatment; if they saw the hungry, they would try to give food; if there was war, they knew that war was a very cruel thing, and they hoped to avoid war. If a fire broke out, they would try to find a way to extinguish the fire. However, in the midst of all these activities, their minds would not fluctuate.

So, they did not have extremes of love and hatred, and they did not have all kinds of fears, anxieties, jealousies, and doubts. They just did whatever was necessary. This is indicative of their wisdom and compassion, of their bodhi mind, their bodhicitta.

Huineng’s verse continues:

Yet this gateway into seeing the nature  
Cannot be fully comprehended by the ignorant.

I have talked a lot about emptiness and wisdom and realization, but at the same time, we can also say there is no real gateway to such wisdom, to such knowledge of the dharma, because for the enlightened, the dharma of mind is already present before

them. When one realizes wisdom, one sees that there was no gate to go through, since one has always been inside the gate. This is why Chan is sometimes called the gateless gate. As for the foolish, they cannot even see the gate, much less go through it.

For both the wise and the foolish, this gate is really a doctrine or method to give us a direction; it is a dharma gateway into seeing the nature. But once we see the nature, we realize there was no gateway to go through. That is the meaning of Huineng's "gateway."

Some may think that practice is the gateway to seeing one's nature, but practice is actually a direct way to see the nature. We just practice dropping the self and phenomena, and letting go of all forms. In particular, we have to let go of the unified mind. Many people cling to the stage of unified mind. They feel that since they are unified with the universe, they no longer have a self. While they may no longer have the individual self, they have still taken the universe as their self. There is still an existent self that is at one with a limitless universe. At this stage, they are not yet enlightened and need to abandon this state of mind.

In both the huatou and silent illumination methods, our practice may reach the state of unified mind. In huatou, this occurs when the great doubt arises; in silent illumination, it happens when one feels at one with the environment. If it seems like we are speaking of two kinds of unified mind, that is correct. The

difference is that in the case of huatou, one is not yet in samadhi; one is still grappling with the great doubt. However, both are states of unified mind.

There are some who consider unified mind to be enlightenment, and I do not wish to dispute that. However, unified mind is not Buddhist enlightenment, because there is still a notion of self; there is still an “I” who feels at one with the huatou, or with the universe. For a practitioner of Chan, unified mind is a stage in the practice, but not yet realization. One needs to go beyond unified mind to where the “self” has been totally left behind, and one experiences no-mind. At this point one may actually realize the dharma of mind. And yes, this can be called enlightenment. ❀

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1. In silent illumination, the practitioner focuses on the act of “just sitting.” Silent illumination is similar to the shamatha-vipashyana (insight meditation) of Theravada, as well as to the shikantaza (“just sitting”) of Japanese Zen.
  2. The huatou (Jpn., wato; literally, “head of a thought”) method is similar in most respects to the gong’an (Jpn., koan) practice. The main difference is that rather than meditating on the whole gong’an, the practitioner of huatou continually asks a question that can be taken from a gong’an, or it may be an original question, such as, Who am I? The intent and end result of both gong’an and huatou are otherwise similar.

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© Dharma Drum Publications. This article is based on a talk Master Sheng Yen gave at a Chan retreat in Moscow.





## Understanding Emptiness and Interdependence

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Emptiness and interdependence—they're more than concepts; they're key to realizing real-world benefits in our lives. **His Holiness The Karmapa** helps us put our wisdom into practice.

HOW DO YOU RELATE to this infinite ground of possibility that your life is built on? How can you create a meaningful life within whatever shifting circumstances you find yourself?

Buddhist thought devotes a great deal of attention to these questions. The view that life holds infinite possibility is explored using the concepts of “interdependence” and “emptiness.” When you first hear the term “emptiness,” you might think this suggests nothingness or a void, but actually “emptiness” here should remind us that nothing exists in a vacuum. Everything is embedded within a context—a complex set of circumstances. Those contexts themselves are endlessly shifting. When we say that things are “empty,” we mean they lack any independent existence outside

of those changing contexts. Because everything and everyone is “empty” in this sense, they are capable of endless adaptation. We ourselves have the basic flexibility to adapt to anything, and to become anything.

Because of this, we should not mistake emptiness for nothingness. On the contrary, emptiness is full of potency. Understood correctly, emptiness inspires optimism, rather than pessimism, because it reminds us of the boundless range of possibilities of who we can become and how we can live.

Interdependence and emptiness show us that there are no fixed starting points. We can start from nothing. Whatever we have, wherever we are—that is the place we can start from. Many people have the idea that they lack what they need in order to start working toward their dreams. They feel they do not have enough power, or they do not have enough money. But they should know that any point is the right starting point. This is the perspective that emptiness opens up. We can start from zero.

In fact, emptiness can be compared to the concept and function of zero. Zero may seem like nothing, but as we all know, everything starts from it. Without zero, our computers would collapse. Without zero, we could not start counting from one up to infinity. In the same way, from emptiness, anything and everything can manifest itself.

Anything can come into being because there is no fixed way for things to be. It all depends on the conditions that come together. But this fact that anything is possible does not imply

that life is random or haphazard. We can make anything happen, but we can only do so by bringing together the necessary conditions. This is where the concepts of “emptiness” and “interdependence” come together.

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Interdependence and emptiness show us that there are no fixed starting points. We can start from nothing. Whatever we have, wherever we are—that is the place we can start from.

Every person, place, and thing is entirely dependent on others—other people and other things—as a necessary condition for its existence. For example, we are alive right now because we are enjoying the right conditions for our survival. We are alive because of the countless meals we have eaten during our life. Because the sun shines on the earth and the clouds bring rain, crops can grow. Someone tends to the crops and harvests them, someone else brings them to market, and yet another person makes a meal from them that we can eat. Each time this process is repeated, the interdependence of our lives links us with more and more people, and with more and more rays of sun and drops of rain.

Ultimately, there is nothing and no one with whom we are not connected. The Buddha coined the term “interdependence” to describe this state of profound connectedness. Interdependence

is the nature of reality. It is the nature of human life, of all things and of all situations. We are all linked, and we all serve as conditions affecting each other.

Amid all the conditions that affect us, in fact, the choices we ourselves make and the steps we take are among the most important conditions that affect what arises from our actions. If we act constructively, what comes into being is constructive. If we act destructively, what results is destructive and harmful. Everything is possible, but also everything we do matters, because the effects of our actions reach far beyond ourselves. For that reason, living in a world of interdependence has very specific implications for us. It means our actions affect others. It makes us all responsible for one another.

## Living this Reality

I realize this presentation might initially seem abstract, but emptiness and interdependence are not abstract principles. They are very practical, and have direct relevance when you are thinking about how to create a meaningful life.

You can see interdependence at work by looking at how your own life is sustained. Is it only through your own exertions? Do you manufacture all your own resources? Or do they come from others? When you contemplate these questions, you will see very quickly that you are able to exist only because of others. The clothes you wear and the food you eat all come from somewhere else. Consider the books you read, the cars you ride in, the movies

you watch, and the tools you use. Not one of us single-handedly makes any of these things for ourselves. We all rely on outside conditions, including the air we breathe. Our continued presence here in the world is an opportunity made possible entirely by others.

Interdependence means we are continually interacting with the world around us. This interaction works both ways—it is a mutual exchange. We are receiving, but also giving. Just as our presence on this planet is made possible by many factors, our presence here affects others in turn—other individuals, other communities, and the planet itself.

Over the past century, we humans have developed very dangerous capabilities. We have created machines endowed with tremendous power. With the technology available now, we could cut down all the trees on the planet. But if we did so, we could not expect life to go on as before, except without trees. Because of our fundamental interdependence, we would all experience the consequences of such actions very quickly. Without any trees, there would not be enough oxygen in our atmosphere to sustain human life.

You may wonder what this has to do with the choices we make and how we live our life. That is simple: We all need to take interdependence into account because it influences our life directly and profoundly. In order to have a happy life, we must take an active interest in the sources of our happiness.

Our environment and the people we share it with are the main sources of our sustenance and well-being. In order to ensure our own happiness, we have to respect and care about the happiness of others. We can see this in something as simple as the way we treat the people who prepare our food. When we treat them well and look after their needs, only then can we reasonably expect them to take pains to prepare something healthy and tasty for us to eat.

When we have respect for others and take an interest in their flourishing, we ourselves flourish. This can be seen in business as well. When customers have more money to spend, businesses do better. If we wish to flourish individually and together as a society, it is not enough for us to simply acknowledge the obvious interdependence of the world we live in. We must consider its implications, and reflect on the conditions for our own welfare. Where do our oxygen and food and material goods come from, and how are they produced? Are these sources sustainable?

## Relating to Reality

Looking at your experience from the perspectives of emptiness and interdependence might entail a significant shift in how you understand your life. My hope is that this shift can benefit you in practical terms. Gaining a new understanding of the forces at work in your life can be a first step toward relating positively to them.

My purpose in raising these issues is certainly not to terrify you by confronting you with harsh reality. For example, I have noticed that some people are uncomfortable when they are told that change is a fundamental part of life, or that nothing lasts forever. Yet impermanence is just a basic fact of our existence—it is neither good nor bad in itself. There is certainly nothing to gain by denying it. In fact, when we face impermanence wisely, we have an opportunity to cultivate a more constructive way of relating to that reality. If we do so, we can actually learn to feel at ease in the face of unexpected change, and work comfortably with whatever new situations might occur. We can become more skillful in how we relate to the reality of change.

The same is true of interdependence. Seeing life from this perspective can help us develop skills to relate more constructively to reality—but just knowing that we are interdependent does not guarantee that we will feel good about being so. Some people may initially find it uncomfortable to reflect that they depend on others.

They might think this means they are helpless or trapped, as if they were boxed in by those dependencies. Yet when we think about being interdependent, we do not need to feel it is like being stuck in a job working for a boss that we did not choose but have to deal with, like it or not. That is not helpful. We should not feel reluctant or pressured by the reality of our interdependence.

Such an attitude prevents us from having a sense of contentment and well-being within our own life. It does not give us a basis for positive relationships.

Interdependence is our reality, whether we accept it or not. In order to live productively within such a reality, it is better to acknowledge and work with interdependence, wholeheartedly and without resistance. This is where love and compassion come in. It is love that leads us to embrace our connectedness to others, and to participate willingly in the relations created by our interdependence. Love can melt away our defenses and our painful sense of separation. The warmth of friendship and love makes it easy for us to accept that our happiness is intimately linked to that of others. The more widely we are able to love others, the happier and more content we can feel within the relations of interdependence that are a natural part of our life. ❁

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## A Dive Into Emptiness

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A talk by **Dainin Katagiri Roshi** about the Buddhist idea of emptiness—and, an unusual sport.

EVERYTHING IS EMPTINESS. That is a point that Buddhism always emphasizes. But it's very difficult to understand. Even if you understand it in an intellectual sense, it's very difficult to understand, with your whole body and mind, the truth that everything is emptiness. But this is really true. So today I would like to say something about this.

The other day I watched a show on television, “The World Champions of Sport.” There were many different sportsmen on this program, and their sports were all a little unusual. I was very interested in the high dive, which was different from the high dive you usually see. A man was going to dive into a pool, but there wasn't much water in the pool—just 12 1/4 inches of water. The diver was not young—he was 75 years old. And he was on a high ladder, higher than this building. Can you imagine this situation?

It's clear that if he dives in headfirst, his head will be broken, and if he dives in feet first, his legs will be broken. Then he dived perfectly, with his chest. I was very surprised. When I was a child I practiced diving. I would dive into the ocean headfirst, but one time I made a mistake and hit the water with my chest. I couldn't breathe. But this 75-year-old man jumped from higher than I did and hit the water with no problems.

“ There are three things here: the pool, the diver and also there is another thing. Something makes it possible for the pool and diver to exist, and makes a perfect dive possible. Maybe you can say that this is ultimate truth.

Before the dive, the announcer said, “You are a pretty old man, and the water is 12 ¼ inches deep. I am very scared, so please be careful. It's dangerous.” But the diver said, “I don't understand what you mean by saying it is dangerous. It is not dangerous, it is very natural behavior.” I was very surprised to hear this. Before he dived, he stood at the top of the ladder and took a little exercise, a kind of yoga exercise, bending his body at an angle of 90 degrees and continually glancing at the pool. He glanced at the pool for two or three minutes. Maybe he controlled his breathing, I don't

know, but he continued to keep glancing at the pool and finally he dived. Well, I had been thinking that this was a sport, but it was not sports, it was really human life. If you do a sport just as sport, as something separate from the rest of your life, that sport doesn't teach you anything about human life. But the sport performed by this diver wasn't only sport, it was human life. Through this sport we can learn how to live.

Let's think about this. There are three things here: the pool, the diver and also there is another thing. Something makes it possible for the pool and diver to exist, and makes a perfect dive possible. Maybe you can say that this is ultimate truth. Maybe it's an energy. I don't know what it is, but something helps this old man to exist, the pool to exist and also creates the circumstances around their situation. So three things are surrounding this sport.

First, the pool. Let's think about the pool. This pool has 12¼ inches of water. If you understand the pool as an idea, it doesn't make any sense. How can someone jump into 12¼ inches of water? It seems ridiculous. So, this pool is beyond any idea of pool that you can have. The pool cannot be seen from the diver's usual thinking—not in his human consciousness, not as an idea he has. No. The pool must be seen another way. It must be seen as emptiness. Emptiness means that the pool exists in the universe beyond any idea of pool attached to it. The 12¼ inches of water in the pool

also exists beyond human speculation. You cannot say anything about it. So the water is also empty of concepts. If you continue to have the idea that the pool is something opposed to the diver, that means you are thinking of the pool as having a solid existence. If so, can you say it is possible for the diver to jump into this pool? No. It's impossible because there's no flexibility there. But actually, beyond human thinking, the pool and water are just existence, just being, which is constantly flexible according to conditions. So the pool is emptiness.

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Most people misunderstand emptiness, thinking it means to destroy, or to ignore, our existence. This is a big mistake. Emptiness is not negative.

Next, the diver. If you think of the diver according to common sense, it's physically and mentally impossible for him to dive that way. But he took a little exercise, maybe a kind of yoga exercise, and his body, his bones, and also his mind, became very flexible. He jumped into the water on his chest and his bones didn't break, his stomach didn't puff up and pop—his body and mind were completely flexible. We can try to explain it through yoga, but it still doesn't make sense. Even if you practice yoga, how flexible are

your skin, muscle and bone, really? They are still pretty stiff, don't you think so? This diver was flexible beyond our human intellectual understanding. So the diver is emptiness.

Finally, the ultimate truth. Let's imagine the ultimate truth that makes it possible for the pool and diver to exist. Do you think that the ultimate truth can control the pool's life and also the diver's life? Maybe so, maybe not. But even though you say: Yes, the ultimate truth controls the pool's existence or the diver's existence, this is just your human speculation based on concepts. We can discuss their existence according to the concept of ultimate truth, but where is the ultimate truth, actually? Do you say that ultimate truth is within the pool? Well, if ultimate truth is within the pool, can it help the diver who is not yet in the pool? I don't think so. Do you say that ultimate truth exists within the diver? If that is true, how can it help the pool to receive the diver? Or do you say that the ultimate truth exists outside the pool and diver? If that is true, how can it help the pool and diver when it is completely apart from them? On the other hand, if ultimate truth does exist within the pool or diver, then it loses its own characteristic of existing forever without changing, because the pool and diver are part of the phenomenal world that is changing constantly. So no matter how long we discuss it, finally ultimate truth must be empty.

So all three: pool, diver and ultimate truth, are completely empty. There is nothing to say. Then, from this emptiness, they are brought back into life, which is fully alive beyond any human conception. The pool is ready to accept the diver, and the diver's body and mind are completely flexible and perfectly ready to accept the pool without being confused by any external distractions. Then the diver can dive perfectly. Actually, the diver, pool and ultimate truth dive together in the realm of emptiness. This is interdependence. The diver cannot exist without the pool, the pool cannot exist without the diver, but both are empty, flexible, without any fixed ideas. Then, at that time, interdependent co-origination comes into existence. This is the refreshing life that is called flexibility, fluidity or freedom. Or sometimes it is called *samadhi*.

Most people misunderstand emptiness, thinking it means to destroy, or to ignore, our existence. This is a big mistake. Emptiness is not negative. Emptiness is letting go of fixed ideas you have had in order to go beyond them. Meister Eckhart calls it the desert. In the desert of emptiness, everything dies and then comes back to life. This is really true. Otherwise, you cannot be successful in doing anything at all. When you dance, when you sing, when you walk, when you do zazen, whatever you do, you must be empty first. And then, at that time, your life becomes flexible. Your body and mind must be flexible. Then you can really

jump into painting, dancing, eating breakfast, washing your face, chanting and doing zazen. You can become one with your activity, whatever it is, and do your best.

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When you dance, when you sing, when you walk, when you do zazen, whatever you do, you must be empty first.

But you cannot be blind. That's why the diver is constantly glancing at the pool, using his consciousness, using his body, until he becomes one with the pool. Then, when the time and opportunity were ripe, he jumped. That is oneness. This dive is a wonderful teaching of the interdependence between the pool, diver and ultimate truth. When he jumps into the pool, the diver is not merely a diver and the pool is no longer separate from him. The pool is completely hidden behind his life, and the diver extends into the whole universe. His body and mind occupy the whole universe. How? By his actual practice, which is called diving. When everything is seen in the realm of emptiness, everything becomes lively and interconnected, beyond human speculation. At that time, you can really do something—something more than what you have thought.

If the diver has, even slightly, a common sense idea of the pool, his mind is disturbed and he is afraid. But when all have become empty, the pool is just like a beautiful flower blooming. There is no way to discuss that beautiful flower because it is beyond human speculation, concepts or ideas. All we have to do is pay careful attention to the reality of that beautiful flower as it really is. That is emptiness. Emptiness is exactly the same as interdependent co-origination. This interdependence is not an idea of relationship. It is a chance, a great opportunity, a place where everything becomes alive in a refreshing way. Within emptiness there is spiritual security. Spiritual security cannot be given to you by somebody else—you have to find it yourself, and it can only be found within the emptiness that makes your life alive.

We can apply this to the zazen meditation we do. Buddhism is not a philosophical teaching, it's a teaching of human activity. We are always looking at zazen from our consciousness, with our preconceptions, but true zazen must be completely empty. If you think: I want to be buddha through the practice of zazen, then you and zazen are seen from your idea of buddha and zazen doesn't work. That's why there's the story of Huai-jang, the zen master of Nan-yueh Mountain, who polished a tile. When Huai-jang asked the monk Ma-tsu what he hoped to attain by practicing meditation, the monk said he wanted to be a buddha. So Huai-jang



picked up a tile and began polishing it to make a mirror. Ma-tsu asked, “How can you make a tile into a mirror?” And Huai-jang said, “How can you become a buddha by practicing zazen?”

If you have, even slightly, the idea, I want to be a buddha by practicing zazen, you have already created a conceptual world of three things: buddha, zazen and practicer. You go around in a circle with these ideas: what is buddha, what is zazen, what is practicer. But all you have to do is see buddha from emptiness, see zazen from emptiness and see practicer from emptiness. Just like the diver, you can handle yourself before you are distracted by thinking. You can see zazen prior to the germination of your intellectual sense. So handle zazen like this. Handle yourself like this. Then zazen really works, and practicer really works within zazen because the practicer is blooming in the universe. That is called shikantaza. There is a philosophical understanding behind the word shikantaza, but zazen itself is not the object of philosophical discussion. Zazen is just actual practice, like diving into the pool.

Many things come up and distract us when we practice zazen: our preconceptions, ideas, karma, heredity, personality and many other things. So we have to take care of them continually, not with hatred, but by patting them on the head without being too interested in them. Just pat them on the head. But if I pat my head and say “good boy,” that is not the real practice of patting the head that I am talking about. When I think, “good boy,” that

idea of good boy is coming from an idea of “bad boy” I had in the past. If you see things this way, you are creating ideas, discriminating between the previous moment, present moment and next moment. We usually think that time moves from the past, through the present, to the future. But time cannot be seen as just time. Time must be seen as time and also simultaneously as space. You cannot separate them. In space, time has no before as a previous moment, or after as a following moment, there is only right now, right here, blooming and extending into the whole universe. You must be in time; you must be at the moment where you cannot think about a previous moment or a following moment. That moment is a great opportunity. That is the moment you are you as you really are, prior to the germination of thinking.

If you become a dancer, how can you do this? How can you pat the head of your karma, your heredity, your customs and habits, or your personality? To pat their head means to just practice continually, just become empty and flexible, and just dance. Then this emptiness makes your life alive in the universe. You are ready to dive into the pool. Practice is simultaneously blooming your flower right now, right here. That’s why practice is not merely practice apart from enlightenment—practice is enlightenment itself. ❁

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## Empty Splendor

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To have a genuine appreciation for the world we must see it directly, says the late **Traleg Rinpoche**. The tantric path teaches us how to cut through our concepts and confusion so we can experience reality in its full vividness and clarity.

VAJRAYANA, OR TANTRIC, Buddhism places a great deal of emphasis on the mind and how it works. On the tantric level, we ask what the mind is and how we should view it.

The first thing that is recommended is to ask where the mind is located. We might identify the mind with our neural system or we might locate it somewhere in the heart. If we are sophisticated, we might place more importance on our intellectual activities and think mind is located in the brain.

If we are presented with a puzzle that we cannot solve, we may scratch our head or get a headache. If we are emotionally shocked, we may say, “oh my goodness” and cover our chest, putting the emphasis on our heart. However, tantric logic says that

mind cannot be located in both places. It cannot be in the head as well as the heart. No entity or object can be in two places at the same time. It is either here or it is there; it cannot occupy two spatial points simultaneously.

In understanding mind and what it is, tantric texts identify three aspects: mind is empty, mind is luminous, and mind is bliss.

### **Mind's Empty Aspect**

The tantric tradition says mind is not something that can be grasped. We cannot identify it with brain processes or with the heart. Mind is not something that can be discovered either within or outside our physical organism. This is why mind has the aspect of being empty. We cannot say mind is flat and square and brown, as we would a table. Mind is not an entity or a thing, which is why it is empty.

### **Mind's Luminous Aspect**

Unlike inanimate objects, the mind is luminous. Mind is able to illuminate both itself and other things. The luminosity of mind is not something that is discovered outside our ordinary experience. Our immediate experiences of anger, jealousy, pride, or whatever have a tremendous sense of clarity and luminosity before we put any interpretations on them.

The tantric literature says that we can discover the luminosity of the mind in two situations: when the mind is calm during meditation, like a lake with no disturbances, and when the mind is

mobile or disturbed. Even in the second case, there can be a tremendous sense of clarity and brilliance. The tantric approach says that instead of rejecting the disturbed mind, we should continuously try to identify the mind at rest and the mind that is mobile and disturbed. We should try to see the clarity of both situations without making distinctions of any kind. Then we will be able to see just how luminous mind is.

## Mind's Blissful Aspect

The experience of bliss is associated with ceasing to make any distinctions between our ordinary experiences of mind and our meditative experiences of mental tranquility.

At the Mahayana level, it is taught that buddhanature cannot be embellished or diluted by our neuroses, so it seems as if buddhanature is one thing and neurosis another. On the tantric level, however, we see the neuroses themselves as our own sanity. We do not find sanity outside of neuroses. Sanity is found in the midst of our neurotic tendencies.

Tantrikas have an expression for mind, *thamal gi shepa*. *Thamal* means “ordinary” and *shepa* means “mind.” so the expression means “ordinary mind.”

Within this ordinary mind, the passion, aggression, and jealousy that we continuously experience is brilliance and sanity. We therefore cannot make any distinction at all between the disturbed mind and the mind of sanity. They are identical. It is said, “trying

to look for sanity outside of neuroses is like saying, ‘I don’t like sugar, but I want to taste sweetness.’” if we want the sweetness of sugar, we also have to acknowledge the existence of sugar.

These aspects of mind are indistinguishable, and the experience of bliss and a tremendous sense of freedom arise from that. We no longer have to make distinctions within our own mind, saying, “this aspect is good so I have to cultivate it, and that aspect is bad so I have to destroy it.” When that conflict is resolved, bliss begins to take place naturally. This bliss is not something additional to what already exists; it is discovered as another aspect of our own mind.

These three aspects of mind are indispensable in the tantric tradition.

## The Tantric View of Phenomena

Tantric texts often talk about “the union of bliss and emptiness” or “the union of luminosity and emptiness” when they describe mind. That is the subjective side of the whole thing. On the objective side, when we talk about our perception of the world, it is described as “the union of emptiness and appearance.” Relative and absolute truth can be defined as how things are presented to us and how they are. But the union of emptiness and appearance means we can’t make that distinction between how things appear and how things are. If a tree is present in our visual sense, that is how it appears. But the essence of that tree is emptiness.

We cannot make a distinction between those two.

We tend to underplay the importance of appearance and make a big deal out of essence, thinking the essence is more important than the appearance of things. But on the tantric level, we do not distinguish between the appearance of things and the essence of things at all. That is why it is called “the union of emptiness and appearance.” We do not reject the world as it appears by saying, “it is just an illusion, it is just a dream, it is nothing. There is some kind of occult phenomena behind appearances called ‘emptiness’ and we must strive to attain that.”

Things appear in the form of emptiness. Those two things cannot be distinguished at all. The moment we see that directly is the moment we begin to properly appreciate the phenomenal world as it is. We begin to experience what tantrikas call “sacred outlook.” We see the phenomenal world as it is rather than as we would like to see it. We begin to see the richness and the splendor of the presentation.

The next situation to consider is connected to the concept of union or indivisibility, which is called “one-flavoredness.” We can no longer talk about samsara and nirvana as two poles, or about absolute and relative truths as two realms. No pole is superior to the other. Nirvana is no longer regarded as superior to samsara, and confusion is no longer regarded as inferior to enlightenment. Samsara and nirvana have one flavor, and confusion and enlightenment have one flavor.

The greatest hindrance on the tantric path is fear of our own incompetence. You need to have a sense of healthy ego and healthy arrogance.

In keeping with that, we no longer make a distinction between subject and object. This is not so much because the plurality of things begins to dissolve into oneness but because when we reflect on our own experiences properly, we see things are not really presented to experience as solid entities. And we are not solid entities either. What we experience as “other” and what we experience as “self” are not completely distanced or separate from each other.

To think the world exists separately from our experience of it is the product of some kind of belief rather than fact. Beliefs are just something we believe; they usually have nothing to do with fact. The moment we fall into a belief system, we have fallen into the realm of fiction rather than fact.

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The idea that there is an external world existing as a separate thing out there totally separate from us is a belief rather than a fact.

The idea that there is an external world existing as a separate thing out there totally separate from us is a belief rather than a fact. But because of our preconceived ideas, we don't know how to distinguish fact from our own interpretation of that fact. We mistake the two and no longer recognize fact from fiction. The classic



Buddhist example of this tendency is mistaking a rope for a snake. Our immediate perception of an elongated, striped form lying on the road is a fact, but our assumption that it is a snake is mistaken. To mistake the rope for a snake is a fiction because it has nothing to do with the actual thing that has been presented to us. It has nothing to do with our immediate perception.

When tantrikas talk about the union of the cognizer and cognized—of mind and the phenomenal world—they are talking about our immediate perception of the phenomenal world before any kind of subjective interpretation has taken place. Seeing that striped rope would be the immediate perception, but before we realize it, we have seen it as a snake and may never know that it was otherwise. We just think it's a snake and run away as fast as we can. That kind of misperception takes place continuously in our interactions with the world. A genuine appreciation of the world—sacred outlook—is impossible unless that superimposition of subjective interpretation is cut through.

These are just the basic ideas of the tantric teachings. We could regard these ideas as ground tantra because they are the starting point of the Vajrayana journey. Then there is the path tantra of how we go about the whole thing and how we relate to the qualities we already possess. Finally, there is the fruition stage of tantra. This is what we attain through utilizing our neuroses and passions, which could be expressed as transmuting lead into gold.

## Q & A

*In the Mahayana path, neurosis is seen as giving us an indication of the potential of our basic buddhanature. Here, you seem to be saying that neurosis is actually a manifestation of buddhanature.*

On the Mahayana level, all of our dissatisfaction, despair, and emotional upheavals are some kind of guideline about what we should be doing. We are not managing the whole thing properly, so those experiences give us an indication of the discovery of buddhanature. However, the Mahayana still makes some distinction between our neurotic tendencies and the buddhanature they are trying to trigger.

On the Vajrayana level, the neuroses themselves become sanity. Sanity is discovered in the midst of neuroses—we do not see neuroses on the surface and buddhanature as some kind of basic ground. Neuroses are neuroses because we perceive them that way. The moment we perceive them as something resourceful and wholesome, they are no longer neuroses. They become something totally different. If we use the analogy of the rope again, the moment we discover it is not a snake but a piece of rope, we discover it for what it is.

According to the tantric tradition, neurosis is just mismanagement of our energy. We do not realize what that energy is and mismanage it, so that energy bounces back on us in a self-defeating process.

### *Is emptiness an intelligent emptiness?*

Definitely, because the emptiness aspect of mind is indistinguishable from luminosity, which means it is not a vacuity of some kind. People tend to think of emptiness as a vacuity, especially because both Buddhism and Hinduism talk so much about deconceptualizing your mind. However, emptiness here does not mean some kind of vacuity that renders the mind as nothing. It is more like a no-thing, because mind is not a thing. It is luminous. If it were a thing, it would be a solid mass, like a table, and there would be no intelligence whatsoever.

Emptiness provides the ground for luminosity to take place. Emptiness is the one flavor. It is because of emptiness that we cannot make a distinction between subject and object. There are no distinctions there.

The phenomenal world is also seen as the union of appearance, or presence, and emptiness. “Appearance” is a funny sort of word. It means some kind of surface thing, but with something else called “reality” that is behind it. “Presence” is a much better word. Something is presenting by itself, whose essence is emptiness. What appears is the phenomenal world, but it is empty because it has no real substance.

Some kind of interaction or dance is taking place continuously between the individual and the world. The individual person is not a static thing. We are continuously evolving, spiritually and psychologically, because there is the goal of attaining enlightenment. On the objective side, the world is not a static thing either.

Continuous change is always taking place. It is a dynamic process, and that dynamism is due to the fact that the phenomenal world is empty. Because it is empty, it is able to change and be in a constant flux. Change is not regarded as something pejorative; it has a positive connotation as far as Buddhism is concerned. Hindus talk about *lalita*, or “cosmic dance.” the dance between the phenomenal world and the individual is like that.

Critical analysis of all this is done on the Mahayana level. On the Vajrayana level, we do not need to analyze the phenomenal world at all, in some sense. We just look at the world as it is presented rather than analyzing it so much. In many ways, the tantric approach is very anti-intellectual. In fact, it is totally experiential. If we intellectualize about it too much, we will go into the world of fiction again. We might be able to construct a theory out of that, but we will not see the whole thing as it is.

There is no substance at all as far as the phenomenal world is concerned. We can look at a thing and see that it is changing all the time and has no substance to it. At the same time, the insubstantiality of the phenomenal world is not regarded as something bad. It is just the real nature of the world. It is how the world is. It does not take much of an intellectual exercise to discover that. Even physicists have discovered that a table is not the way it appears. The tantric notion about indivisibility of subject and object is that the world and the subject are not presented to us as subject and object at all. We're the ones who decide where subject ends and object begins. It is a conceptual construction.

### *How real is the rope in the analogy of the rope and the snake?*

We might argue that emptiness is more real than appearance. We might say the table is not real because it changes its form and disintegrates, while the emptiness of that table is more real. But we cannot make that distinction. This is what the tantrikas are saying. The emptiness of the table and the table are indivisible, and if we do not see it that way, it is due to our own ingrained habits. It is merely the compulsive tendency to see a rope as a snake. Normally, if we see the object as something separate from us, we are just creating more fiction. It is very hard to come to any kind of certainty unless we have worked through our conceptual processes completely.

### *Why does emptiness determine luminosity?*

Western philosophy has always discussed mind as a substance. Most of the time, they see two types of substance: matter and mind. This has created many problems. If you conceive of the mind as a substance, you must be able to locate it somewhere. Buddhism has always rejected any notion of substance, and the mind has never been seen as a substance. Luminosity and emptiness cannot be separated, but nor are they identical. They are identical to the extent that luminosity is not a substance, but they are not identical to the extent that the very ground for luminosity to take place is the existence of emptiness.

*You said the mind becomes luminous like the sun, but it doesn't necessarily mean you experience it in that sense?*

That is really an interesting question. Sometimes people call luminosity “clear light.” if you read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, you will find the term “clear light,” but that is only a symbolic expression. It refers to a tremendous sense of clarity where you see things precisely instead of having some kind of foggy mind. It is a tremendous sense of clarity as opposed to dullness and depression. From that point of view, it is luminous.

Luminosity is not something that exists in any dimensional sense, which is why we cannot say that mind is located anywhere. Mind is not confined to any particular spatial or temporal point. It has nothing to do with time and space. Experiences of clairvoyance, telepathy, and so on all take place because mind is not confined to a particular physical organism.

*Why do you equate luminosity with intelligence?*

Intelligence here has nothing to do with the concept of literacy, or with how good you are at mathematics or anything like that. It is intelligence due to the fact that you no longer get so caught up in conceptual processes. The more you go beyond conceptual processes, the more you appreciate the luminosity of mind.

A nonconceptual process, as far as I understand it, does not mean a complete absence of thinking. There would still be thought processes of some kind, but they would not be chaotic.

They would have some kind of orderliness. Psychotics suffer from disassociation because their thoughts are all over the place. Normal people have some kind of orderliness as far as their thinking goes. And if you become a little bit more sane and enlightened—beyond the average kind of sanity—there would be proper management of your thought processes. You would have a lot more control over the whole situation. There would be no problem as far as cognizing your experiences.

*If you recognized the emptiness of mind that experiences luminosity, how would you see objects?*

You would still see objects as solid but you would not believe in their solidity. You would not suffer from any kind of belief system, and you would no longer carry the normal kind of naive assumptions that make you see objects as solid and obtrusive. You would no longer make any distinction between how things are and how things appear. Things appear in a contradictory manner, but you would not disparage that because their very contradiction implies they are empty by nature. You would just see the nature of the things themselves and no longer make a distinction between essence and appearance. ❁

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This article is from a book of Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche's teachings, *The Four Dharmas of Gampopa*, published by KTD, 2013. Reprinted with permission.