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EMPTINESS

Emptiness (or voidness, Sanskrit *shunyata*) is nothingness with a difference. Along with its inseparable companion, awareness, it is one of the two major aspects of enlightened mind and reality. Emptiness certainly has an element of nothingness; after all, it arises from the absence of self and of reality in the phenomenal world. However, the nothingness of emptiness also has qualities.

One quality of emptiness is its limitless spaciousness, which brings a sense of boundless freedom. That freedom is responsible for the bliss inherent in the experience. Emptiness also feels completely restful and peaceful, because it is what we truly are; no effort is required to be it. Since it transcends the constant interaction between self and other, emptiness also feels serene and free from conflict. It also feels full, with a pervading richness. As well, due to its peace, restfulness, and richness, emptiness brings a natural

sense of kindness and caring for others, probably the most worthwhile of its qualities.

Emptiness is also unmoving. Being everywhere, it has no place to go, although thoughts and emotions do move through it like meteors in space. Over time, these activities in emptiness are also seen to be empty just like the space they move in, an insight that will become very important further down the path.

Lastly, the void is eternal. Being uncreated and impervious to destruction, it has always been and will always be, even if there are no humans to experience it. It is the true nature of reality, and as such will never change.

So how do we experience emptiness? First, we should know that it isn't easy. It is possible, though, with the mind's eye, also called the third eye. We can easily experience the mind's eye itself: it is what visualizes our childhood pet, or what we had for dinner last night. It's also what sees emptiness at the time of realization—or, more to the point, it is what sees itself.

The mind's eye apprehends emptiness directly, without concept or logic. As Chögyam Trungpa explains:

At the peak of the shunyata experience, a real glimpse of shunyata, your logic wears out. You

have no logic, no reference point of logic, and you become completely exposed to nothingness or fullness. [It is] a sudden glimpse of aloneness.

The Pocket Tibetan Buddhism Reader, 149.

Note that the quote states that emptiness is full. This points to the truth that emptiness is a feeling, not something intellectually derived, and that a quality of that feeling is fullness or richness. Emptiness being *full* is one of a number of counterintuitive turns that typify emptiness, and realization in general.

I first saw emptiness, without a seer, when the experience of nonduality revealed that egolessness of self and egolessness of other were the same. At that moment, some twenty years ago, I felt a sudden wholeness, like a large part of me had been missing all my life. And it had: I had been dividing the world into this and that, and when they came together, I was finally complete.

At the same time, I also experienced the limitless nature of reality. Years before, I had sat in meditation with the great Nyingma master Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and I heard him let out his breath over his microphone. Listening, I felt a start when the mind following his breath went somewhere rather scary—somewhere my own mind couldn't or wouldn't go.

With the insight of emptiness, I finally realized where Khyentse Rinpoche had gone.

The enlightened reality of emptiness is not of the physical world and physics, but of the world of mind's true nature. Emptiness does share with physics the property of being counterintuitive, however. Just as physics informs us that light is somehow both a wave and a particle, emptiness reveals other paradoxes. One, as mentioned, is that emptiness is full. Another is that emptiness is an experience without an experiencer, which doesn't make sense until we enter the realm of nonduality. As a topper, we also learn that emptiness is form, as described by one of the best-known Buddhist scriptures, the Heart Sutra:

Form is emptiness; emptiness also is form. Emptiness is no other than form; form is no other than emptiness. Thus, Shariputra, all dharmas are emptiness.

What does it mean that *form is emptiness*? For some time after first seeing emptiness, it may seem that form—cows, canyons, cathedrals—appear to be swimming in emptiness, immersed in it. This view led me for a time to feel that the sutra was imprecisely worded, or had been mistranslated through the millennia. Later, the truth dawned, and

I saw that form *is* emptiness, not floating in it, and the sutra was right all along. At this point, it became impossible to view form without also viewing emptiness, confirming that *all dharmas are emptiness*. Dharmas, as used in this sutra, are occurrences in the phenomenal world, and since form is emptiness, all dharmas share that quality. (As for Shariputra, he was a disciple of the Buddha known for his wisdom and teaching ability, and he asked the question that led to the Heart Sutra as an answer.)

So, form is truly emptiness, but what about the experience that *emptiness is form*? That's a bit trickier. We may think that since form is emptiness, seeing emptiness as form would naturally follow, but it doesn't. We can see how form is changed by emptiness; but we cannot see emptiness being changed into form. Emptiness is not a thing, so it is impossible to experience it as something becoming something else. What the sutra means is that if one conceptualizes or has any idea about emptiness, even so much as giving it that name, it immediately becomes form, something rather than nothing. Concept is what makes emptiness form.

The problem that concept poses to realizing emptiness cannot be overstated. The experience of emptiness is immediately dispelled by identifying with any ideas about its nature. As such, we should be very skeptical of any Buddhist who reports

having realized emptiness through concept. That mistake is very old, dating back at least to a second-century CE Indian philosopher named Nagarjuna, who founded the Madhyamaka (Sanskrit, “Middle Way”) school of Buddhism. Nagarjuna’s writings on emptiness are compelling, until he gives his reason for asserting its existence:

We state that conditioned origination is emptiness. It is mere designation depending on something, and it is the middle path. Since nothing has arisen without depending on something, there is nothing that is not empty.

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, 24.

What Nagarjuna did was take a teaching of the Buddha called “dependent origination,” and use it as the basis for realizing emptiness. Dependent origination asserts that, since all things in the world are made of component parts—for example, a chair has legs, a back, and a seat—they are therefore empty of inherent existence. Being made of parts, they depend on those parts for their being, and hence have no being of their own.

This logic is perhaps somewhat helpful for an intellectual understanding of emptiness; but empti-

ness is an experience, and that experience cannot be arrived at by ratiocination, only by realization. Nagarjuna employed mundane *prajña*—logic—on a subject that required transcendent *prajña*, insight. With those lines, Nagarjuna established a conceptual understanding of emptiness that many Buddhists have confused with actual realization to this day.

Another obstacle to realizing shunyata consists of regarding it as a thing. It cannot be experienced by the senses, such as taste, touch, smell, sight, or hearing, so it is totally bereft of “thingness.” Also, it cannot be found as a creation of mind, because it is mind itself. As such, it is hopeless to look for emptiness at any time, and especially during meditation. The urge is very great to see the void, but the more we try to see it, the further we drift from it, because filling our minds with seeking obscures what we wish to find.

The tendency to look for emptiness remains a problem even after we first experience the insight. Emptiness is very compelling—after all, it changes our entire perception of the world in a very pleasant way. As a result, we look for it. This is a silly thing to do, because once emptiness is first seen, it never leaves. Nevertheless, we do keep trying to see it, and in the process, we objectify it into something outside of ourselves. We then fruitlessly pursue this objectified concept.

This habit may persist for some time. In my case, after first having the insight, I was still beset with wanting—wanting’s power is amazing—and so I relapsed into trying to recreate what I had already experienced. This held me back for some time, until I realized that I *was* emptiness, and that there was no longer any need to search for it.

We can also struggle to experience the void due to a lack of mindfulness, when our attachment to thoughts and emotions clouds the experience. Mindfulness is often presented as an early part of the Buddhist path, but it remains crucial through the highest levels of insight. All levels of practitioners have thoughts and emotions that carry us away from the now, the only place where insight can be appreciated, and only mindfulness can return us to it.

As of this writing, the benefits of emptiness are still unfolding in my life. As a recent example, I find that I am now relying less on seeing form as emptiness as a means to experience emptiness itself. As such, I am less “drawn out” by that realization: although form is still emptiness, it now serves more to remind me of the emptiness I am, rather than of the emptiness inherent in form. The result is that I feel the stability of emptiness more, especially in interacting with other people. I used to abandon emptiness in my commitment to others, while now, being more settled in emptiness and mind, I remain in emptiness, see

them more clearly, and understand them better. I find that I can be of more benefit to them, often just by listening and seeing what is important to them. I attribute my progress on the insight of emptiness in large part to various meditation practices, and to the guru and his lineage that those practices invoke.

To summarize, emptiness is a many-splendored nothing, and the basis of reality. It can change the world into an Eden with its presence, and it is eternal. What more could one ask? Yet, a question remains. How can we know all these things about emptiness? That brings us to our next topic: awareness.