

# 2004-01-19 All Empty

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

empty, monastery, doors, monastic life, monk, echoing, voices, abbot, feeling, left, story, meditation, despair, life, radiant, person, emptiness, gates, thought, happy

## SPEAKERS

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I don't know how to what what you're supposed to say today, but something like happy Freedom Day. And I take it as a very good sign that the Iowa caucuses happen on martin luther king day. So may it be a good sign things to come. And so I would like to do something a little bit different this evening. And I'd like to just tell you a story and Zen story. And I'd like you to listen to the story carefully. I'm sure you are going to listen carefully, but the way that imagine that you're the character in the story, or somehow try to kind of become the story or listen very carefully. Kind of in kind of Imagine like your role playing something and listening to see what have you like if this was you what it would be like to go through this, these events that I'll describe. So the Zen monk His name is motion and lived for many, many years in a Zen monastery in Japan. And he was recognized source often recognized as the most radiant, happy, joyful monk in the monastery. People who met them often were set at peace and felt quite joyful and contented to have met him inspired. And it was remarked that he never seemed to want anything at all. However, he had this knack, they always seem to be in the right place at the right time to offer people help if anybody needed anything. He also didn't seem to be bothered by anything at all. And However, his monistic job was to be the cook. And his job was to put up the he was the head cook to put out the food and, and food if the if the cooking went well if he didn't go well, he did his job very well and very thoroughly but never seem to be bothered by how was going whether people liked his food or not. And he just was always radiant and at peace, remarkable person. So that's you. And so, in this story, there's a description of him like this, and then there's a person who's narrating says that because he always seemed to be at ease. We asked him if this was always it's always been the case for him if he'd always found monastic life, such an easy thing to do. So Is it such a wonderful thing to do and, and they take to it naturally. And this is what he said. He said, Oh, no. monastic life was very hard for me was hard for me when I first came to the monastery. And in fact, I came to the monastery because I had, I was young man. And I had reached a point of great despair. I had encountered a lot of suffering in my life. I didn't feel like I can handle the suffering anymore. And I considered very seriously taking my own life. But I came to the monastery instead in the monastery was the end of the line for me last chance for me. And I came to the monastery and had an entrance interview with the habit. And the abbot asked me many questions. And I told them things that I never told anybody before. He asked me more questions. And I told him about myself and what I wanted to do. And my despair. And then the abbot said, After listening for a long time, he said, welcome to the monastery. You can you can stay here and we'll see how it goes. And then as I was leaving, I said, Well, now that I'm going to be living here in the monastery, I suppose as a novice monk, first, you have any instructions from me of how I should practice. And the abbot looked that me the stories within the first person, this point, so he looked at me with great compassion and great confidence. And I was

sure that he was going to give me some very personal pertinent or powerful advice. And the boss said to me, he said, always go through the doors completely. Always go completely through the doors. Well, I didn't know what to make of that. So I thought was kind of strange. So I went, I was happy to be in the monastery. And for the next day I thought about this little advice that he'd given me and, and, you know, he was an old habit. Maybe he was senile or something or maybe I misheard him or something, go completely through the doors. And so the next the next day I woke up, and there was a strange thing happened that every time I walked through a door in the monastery, I heard a little whisper and at first I couldn't make it out. But I listened to all day very carefully. And finally I could tell first, I could tell that every door said the same thing. And then finally, I could hear whisper a little bit thankfully what it said. And as I went through each door, each door said it All empty. So they went to the other monks and said, You hear those doors they speak? And they said, No. And I explained to them that they keep saying it's all empty. What does that mean? And they just shrugged and as if they didn't have a clue and just walked away. So I had listened to this. Every time I went through the doors, a lot of doors in a monastery. It's all empty. And after a while, I thought, Oh, yeah, this is referring to the life that I left behind before it came to the monastery. This life of that the trouble of difficulty of ambition and pursuit and womanizing and possessions, status and fame that I was all seeking and you know, all these different things. All that is empty. And it's great. I felt so happy to be at the monastery and be able to leave all that behind. And I was being reminded of what I was being left behind, he was so happier, so good, good to be reminded of what I would be left behind was all empty. But the voices persisted. It is all empty. So I didn't know quite what to do. But I threw myself into monastic life. Because that was the contrast of life I left behind, and I was so happy to be there. And I engaged full wholeheartedly the monastic life and for years, tried to go through the ranks and kind of saw myself becoming a better better monk. And was very ambitious about kind of moving up through the ranks of different positions in the monastery. But these voices were always kind of nagging me every time I walked through a door. And the voice said, It is all empty. And after a while, I began to think well, maybe there's all these positions and work that I do in the monastery. All the status that I'm acquiring is a good month. Maybe it's all empty. There is no purpose to it. And so feeling a lot of despair. If life outside the monastery had no purpose, it was empty. Where I knew it. Now the life within the monastery is empty, what's left? And my oldest spirits are to come back. And I thought, Oh, well, it's the monastic positions is trying to get a position, the monastery status, that's all empty. It's kind of vain. I've kind of taken the wrong turn, I'm here for spiritual enlightenment, I should I should pursue the inner life. So I threw myself into meditation practice, I would go sit from the zendo more than any other monk so deeply into my meditation practice. And, and I started feeling you know, really holy, really, like really special and, you know, and like, I was probably the holiest person in the monastery because everyone else wasn't meditating as much as me. And I feel quite good about myself was really great. You know, I had I had some good access my meditation and just kind of add it to my sense of confidence that Yeah, I was becoming a spiritual person. But those voices kept following me every time I went through a door in the monastery, it's all empty. It's all empty. And after a while, I realized once again, I've been caught by the entity and by self identity and pride, conceit. And all that is empty. So I let it go. But my meditations were still very good. So I kept meditating a lot. And it was really great. I had great spiritual experiences. Every time I left, the meditation hall, the hall, the meditation hall door would say, it is all empty. And it kept saying that it's all empty. And I started thinking, what about these meditation experiences and having are they empty? What does it mean that they're empty? And maybe this is the wrong way to go. So then I heard that in Zen Buddhism, one of the great teachings is the teachings of emptiness. So I decided to go to the library. And I read and read the great books about the empty philosophy of emptiness, about everything is essence has no essential, intrinsic nature, how everything because it's empty, everything arises independence and other things.

Nothing is self existing. And I studied and studied and I was amazed how much you could learn about this wonderful philosophy, empty emptiness. I spent a long time in the library. But the library doors and all the doors in the monastery kept saying it is all empty. And after a while, I felt this emptiness philosophy was not helping me was doing nothing. It was all empty. So then I started feeling a lot disappear, I didn't know where to go anymore didn't know what to do. I started hiding my room a lot, because then it wouldn't have to go through any doors. And I even took the climbing out windows to avoid the doors. And then, or I tried to run to the doors, thinking if I ran through the doors, but as time went on this thing happened was the voices got louder and louder. It is all empty. It is all empty, louder and louder. And I'd run through the doors and it started echoing through the hallways after me. And it was you know, I just, you know, an echoing in my head, it's all empty, it's all empty. And I would have any thought I would have would be would be followed by echo it's empty, or any feeling I'd have. Or any perception I had. It's all empty. It's all empty. What does this mean? It's all empty. What does it mean? It's all empty. And if I was just miserable, I had nowhere to go anymore. I had nothing to do I know nothing. Nothing seemed to offer me any hope anymore. I'd come to the monastery because I'd lost all hope. And the monastery was really the last chance for me. And I give it my best and it's all empty, had been deceived by the monastery by Buddhism by the monastic life by the abbot. Where could I go? So I finally decided this is it. I can't take it anymore. These voices echoing over and over again, it's empty. It's empty. It's empty. It's empty just was too much. So I went running out of the monastery was going to go up into the mountains and jump off a cliff. I was really do it now. But then I came to the great big gates, entrance gates, exit gate gates to the monastery. The one last door to walk through and I froze just before going through it. I couldn't get myself to go through it. I stood there frozen. And I kept hearing in my head, it's empty, it's empty, it's empty. Everything that came up in my mind. And then I finally and then I remembered the instructions of the app, but the first day always go completely through the doors. And when I heard those teachings, they seem so empty themselves so meaningfully pointless that they'll teaching. But now that instruction seems monumental, huge and impossible to fulfill. I just couldn't get myself to go through those big entrance gates. Those gates in the monasteries leave. I was so frightened by what was the voices that were echo again as I went through that gate. In my mind, my my, my mind became quite frightened, frightened of anything you could think or see or touch or feel. It was all empty, all empty. So my frightening mind contracted on itself, away from everything pulling away from everything. But the abbot had said, always walk completely through the doors. And there was just one more door to walk through. So I don't know what took over. But something propelled me finally, to step through the gate out to the monastery. And as I did that, there was a huge booming voice that went, it's all empty. And with that, my poor frightening mind, let go of itself. And I turned around, went back into the monastery. And now, hope and despair are irrelevant for me. And now I've been happy in this life ever since. So that's the story. What do you make of that? What is it? What's the teaching of it's all empty? There was no there was no explanation of what this statement supposed to mean. It's all empty. It's all something this monk took on himself. As he went through it is his own interpretations, his own way of seeing different things. Sometimes he saw it as a teaching of vanity. pointlessness. Sometimes you saw it as the great philosopher, physical teaching of Buddhism. Something happened there for that monk. At the end of the story, he was transformed and became that radiant happy monk that everyone was inspired by, who seemed to have no wishes. It was not bothered by anything. You listen carefully. So now I'd like to ask you to gather together with three other people, little groups of four. And if you don't want to do this talk to us, if you don't want to talk to anyone, then you can sit quietly meditate for a few minutes while they talk. And then we'll regroup. But formula groups of four, and then in your little groups of four, discuss the story amongst yourself. Remember, you are the character. So what was it like for you to hear this story and how do you understand it for yourself? Not just in the abstract, but you know, and why was how is

it a monk could be so thoroughly transformed by the voices in the doors. So we'll do that for a few minutes, have your discussion and then ring a bell and we'll come back into a big gathering