

2010-11-21 Teachings On Emptiness-1

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SPEAKERS

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For my talk this morning, I'd like to offer you a topic which has been in my mind for much of the last week. I just came back Thursday from Spirit Rock right? Co-taught a retreat and study, meditation study retreat on the topic of emptiness. And many people have teased me about how could you have a whole week you know, enough to talk about for a whole week on the topic of emptiness. The emptiness is a very central teaching in Buddhism. It gets a lot of attention in the Mahayana tradition, that Buddhism of Tibet and China and Japan where it's coming. It has to be one of the central philosophies. And it's a very rich, multi valent word. It's kind of like it's a word that lends itself to a lot of different meanings. And so Buddhists have taken it in many different directions. And so there's not just one teaching and emptiness, but there's many, some of them are even contradictory. And even given that the emptiness is such an important topic in Buddhism, it hasn't always been Buddhist haven't always agreed and that's, sometimes Buddhists have great credit critical of the teachings of emptiness and have offered other teachings. So it's a it's a rich area of exploration. And, and because of the maybe the word is maybe a little, the way the Buddhists use it is foreign to many people in the West. Some people when they hear that Buddhism, that emptiness lays at the heart of Buddhism, they get quite a lot. Armed because they associated with nihilism, with the kind of, you know, emptiness you know something's empty means it's kind of vain or has no value, or if you feel empty, and you know, if you go tell your therapist how empty you feel. They wonder whether you're depressed. You could tell a Buddhist teacher how empty you are, and they'll say, Oh, that's nice. Though, if you're using you know, if you're missing each other's reference points, meanings of the words you might miss or misunderstand what you're talking about. So, maybe given the many different meanings of emptiness and how rich it is in association. Let me read you a story.

The janitor was one of the most radiant monks in the monastery. He was peace and joy inspired everyone who met him, never seeming to want anything. He had a knack of being in the right place at the right time when others needed help. He was always thorough and doing his job, and no one had ever seen him bothered by anything. One day he was asked if monastic life at every month difficult. This is what he said. Before coming to the monastery, my life was very hard. I considered ending my life because my suffering was so great. For me, the monastery was the end of the road. I saw it as my last chance. When I first arrived, I had a long interview with the Abbess she asked me lots of questions. I told her things about my life I had never revealed to anyone. At the end of the interview, she welcomed me to the monastery. As I took my leave, I asked what sort of spiritual practice I should undertake the Abbess looked at me with such compassion and confidence that I thought she was preparing me preparing to tell me something very important. But all she said was always walk completely through the doors. For the rest of that day, I wondered if I'd heard correctly. How could walking through doors be helpful advice to someone as despondent as me? Perhaps the old woman was becoming senile. The next day, to my surprise, the monastery doors started talking to me. Every time I went through a door, I

heard a faint whisper. At first I thought I was imagining it, so I didn't give it much attention. But when the whispering kept reoccurring, I strain to hear what was being said. Finally, I was able to make out the words it seemed each door was whispering the same thing. It All empty. I asked the other monks and nuns, if they, too heard the voices, but none did. I asked them if they knew of. I asked them if they knew the meaning of it is all empty. They just smiled and shrugged their shoulders, as if they didn't have a clue. Pretty quickly I decided that the voices were a reminder of the life I had left behind. All my possessions along with the endless pursuit side run after the birding drive for recognition, the insatiable womanizing, all of that was indeed empty. The whispering doorways seemed to be seemed to be reassuring me that I had made the right decision and coming to the monastery. They were reminding me that no longer Was there anything outside the monastery walls for me to go after. So at first the voice the voice has made me happy. Convinced, convinced that the world I had left behind was shallow. I threw myself wholehearted into the monastic routine. What a delight it was to have finally found a meaningful life. But as the doorways continued to whisper, it is all empty. I began to have doubts about monastic life as well. Was this life also hollow meaningless. Adding to my concerns, the voices started to grow louder. Before long, I felt as much despair about monastic life, as I had about my previous life, trying to find something that would give meaning and purpose to my life. I decided to vote, to devote myself to go with more time to meditation and thereby develop my inner life. Certainly, the pursuit of real spiritual attainments would be meaningful. The meditation practice seemed to lighten my despair. And when and when my meditations were deep, I was filled with confidence. I began to feel quite happy, even happy go lucky. I found the key to to happiness and was convinced that I was surpassing all the other monks in holiness. But every time I left the meditation hall, the doors whispered again, it is all empty. After a while this began to grate on me. I became increasingly angry because the voices seemed to suggest my newfound identity as a deeply spiritual person was empty. When the anger became too much to bear, I was forced to admit that I had been caught in pride and that my vanity too, was empty. Once the anger passed, I carried on with my meditation practice. After all, nothing else seemed to make sense. Then the voices started commenting on the meditation itself. I heard again, it is all empty. Did this mean that meditation itself was meaningless?

My despair returned with a vengeance. I Try hiding in my room so I wouldn't have to go through any doors. I took the climbing through windows whenever possible. If I did have to pass through a door, I ran through it trying to distance myself from the voices. By now the voices had grown very loud. As I ran down the halls the phrase, it is all empty echoed after me. After a while every thought I had every wish I hoped for, and every effort I made was assaulted by it is all empty, resonating throughout the monastery. I couldn't take it anymore. I ran toward the front gate of the monastery and tending to find a tall mountain cliff and throw myself off. It no longer made any sense to keep on living if life was going to be so hard. But as I came to the front gate The doors are loomed large and To me, I was too frightened to pass through them. I felt I couldn't survive one more voice telling me that it is all empty. I stood there frozen for a long time. But then I remember the practice of the old habits the old habits had given me on my first day in the monastery, always walk completely through the doors. The instructions seems so useless The first time I heard it. Now it seemed monumental. Still, I could not manage to get myself to pass through the front gate. inside my head, voice kept repeating. It is all empty. It is all empty. My mind couldn't find any object to rest on because when it did, I was reminded that it was empty. My mind, my mind became increasingly contracted, turning in on itself and kept pulling away from everything. Until all that was left was the frightened mind itself. Then, one last time, a voice boomed out, it is all empty. And with that, I let go of my mind. Since that day, the voice is stopped, and I've never again worried about the meaning of anything. Neither despair nor hope is relevant for me. Happily, emptiness penetrates everything permeates everything. So, you know, so I wrote this story, it's in my new book called The minette Monastery within and when I wrote it, the intention was to have the phrase, it is all empty. These be said really neutrally. There was no value, no judgment. Just it's all empty. And then let this

poor monk cope with that phrase, and so this is the way he cooked or didn't cope with it. So for some people the idea, it's it is all empty is frightening. It seems like everything is meaningless. In Buddhism, it's actually a teaching that's supposed to give a lot of hope. It's actually in some ways gives meaning to life in a way that hopefully you'll see by the end of the talk. In, in the Mahayana, Buddhist tradition, emptiness is seen as a central philosophy. And you can study fantastic works of philosophy that go into tremendous detail volume after volume, around the philosophical meaning of this term emptiness. In the Theravada tradition, the early tradition that we're part of here at IMC its emptiness is not really used as a word to refer to a kind of overarching philosophy. And so it doesn't get emphasized a lot or talk too much. Because rather than a philosophy, it's meant to be a realization it's meant to be something gets revealed and understood as practice deepens. And so, in the ancient meditation manuals for example, they talk about emptiness, but they only do it for people who are attained some deep level of insight and concentration. And then they make sense to talk about this emptiness. And then the Buddha himself talked about emptiness. And he talked about sometimes abiding and emptiness and some of his monks talked about abiding and emptiness. He said, he was asked once, how should I view how should we view the world and the Buddha said, you should us view the world as being empty. And, and if you do that, then death will not frighten you, death will not bother you.

So, in the early tradition, there are three ways of understanding the teachings on emptiness. And I think it's a very convenient kind of way of dividing it. It's easy to remember, I think, there's empty, emptiness, there's empty, emptying, and emptiness. There's what is empty. There's a process of emptying. And there's emptiness itself. And so what's empty involves insight. Involves seeing in a particular way and seeing if things are empty. Now, as with the teaching on not self, there's often an instruction to see things is not self and that's troublesome for people, how can they be no self? I think it's very useful or meaningful or important not to start with the abstracts, abstract ideas, generalizations. And I don't think the Buddha did that. though. It's very easy when you hear these kinds of teachings to abstract, Make an abstraction from it and you relate to it through the abstraction. And you find actually even Buddha books on Buddhism, start with the abstraction and then try to explain it and often they end up in philosophical quagmires if you start in the abstract realm. So just even to say that there is no self as an abstraction. And so then you end up in trouble. If you say it is all empty, it's kind of an abstraction. And then it's, you know, you have to explain that. There's another approach. Another way to place a start, and that is you begin, not by abstractions, but what you can directly see. What you can actually see for yourself. And if you look carefully at your life, and the world around you, then certain things that you take as yourself as being mine, you begin realizing that they're not inherently yours, not inherently who you are and you begin loosening That grip of self around it. So some of you, for example, used to be I imagine, maybe it's still the case, but many people when they were quite young, had a certain attachment to their body and what they look like and their clothes that tend to tends to decrease as people get older. And, you know, you probably don't care so much most of you anymore. If you if all your friends see you with a zit on your nose, in the way that you might if you're 14 and going to high school, or 15 or something, and you realize that maybe, you know, you know, a zit doesn't define who you are. It's not like your identities around the complexion of your skin in the same way it was earlier. And so you might say, Well, you know, I'm not really my complexion. You know, it's, you know, it's part of who I am for sure, but I'm not organizing a whole sense of self, the self sense of self around that or I'm not really the Clothes I wear. Or you might see that in someone else who's caught up in clothes, he said, Yes, not really clothes, don't make the person and you kind of see that. And then you begin seeing if you look at particular qualities that you have, you might see that your emotions come and go. And you realize that there's some kind of stability of attention of intention, other values that seemed to override the strong identification with emotions. And you realize that emotions are certainly part of me, but it doesn't make sense to organize my sense of self to define myself by the presence and absence of certain emotions. I'll try to be wise with him. And but you know, you know, in a sense, those emotions

don't are not me in some defined way. Or you have thoughts that are coming go. And, and sometimes we identify very closely with our with our thoughts. We're locked in some people think the thoughts are who they are, and so it's very frightening not to think But all kinds of thoughts can come and go. And, you know, after a while you realize maybe you don't identify so strongly with them. One of the little wonderful teachings I received from my father, when I was about 14, he took me aside and said, Gil, as you grow up, periodically, you're gonna have some really bizarre thoughts. And everyone has that. He said, maybe none of you do. But that's what he said. And that's what happens. You know, mine does that. And you know, it's okay. Don't worry about it too much. And periodically, I've had some bizarre thoughts, but that that that little teaching stayed with me and so I didn't identify it and say, Oh, this defines who I am. This is something I have to believe or get involved in or there's something active. Now I have some horrific idea. This is who I am. And so I could hold much more lightly.

Or my wife who Went through temporary when she was about 10. And how old? It mid-30s I think temporary medically induced menopause and took some pills and hormone pills. And for some medical procedures you had to have done. And at some point she said to me, I'm having thoughts that are not my thoughts. Whose thoughts are they? So there's often a strong kind of glue or grip super glue between us and our thoughts, at some point is possible to loosen that up and to see thoughts passing through and there's no need to latch on to them. These are this is defined to me, this is who I am. And there's a whole series of things if you actually look carefully, you realize it doesn't make sense to latch on. This defines me in some absolute way. This these things are these things are not you know, my True, eternal, absolute self, these are all changing and in flux and all kinds of things. And so it's one thing to say, you can't see, as you look around, you can't see something that is yourself. It's an other leap than to say, because of that there is no self. You see that difference? So you look around you can't see in your body, this is my true eternal self, in my feelings is, you know, feelings number two eternal self. My thoughts are not my true eternal self, who I essentially AM. My even my consciousness in Buddhism, as you look carefully you see, it doesn't make sense to identify with that. So it's possible to see that and then you say, well, therefore there is no self or some of myself so therefore, there must be some self that's eternal and permanent. They just can't see you know, some, some some some musical around both both those are kind of abstractions that can't be proved and have no real role in Buddhist practice. You don't need to say there is no self. And you don't need to posit some self that's outside of our empirical experience. What Buddhism is focusing on is not making some claim about what the self isn't, there isn't in some absolute way. It's really saying when you look carefully, what do you see? And you'll see that the things you can actually, you'll notice that you understand that things you can actually see or experience directly. Those in those things, it doesn't make sense to attribute a self for find a permanent abiding self and those things create a permanent binding identity around those things. That's making some sense. Some sense, okay. And so the same thing with with, if you look, then it's empty, these things are empty, of permanent abiding self. So part one of the meanings of empty in the early tradition is insight that this empty of self and work pertains to self in some permanent, abiding essential place. And this is considered a very important insight in Buddhism. And it's not an insight that you have to talk yourself into belief because someone tells you, but as the mind gets concentrated, as the mindfulness gets stronger, and you actually see with greater detail, you'll see that this is the case that it doesn't make sense to, to attribute hold on to something as this is my true eternal absolute idea of who I am. And this to do to do that to see it that way, is very helpful, not because it makes you a good philosopher, but because of the way in which human beings tend to cling to things as being themselves if I cling to my It's lack of zitz. And I get it. I'll suffer like I did when I was 14. I don't want to go to school today, please, this is, you know, mortifying. And, and so I'm not so prone that suffering anymore. I've matured a little bit since then. But when I was 14, that was a big deal. So, but if you can see that these things don't, you know, it's not source of attack, you know, not something to attach to. Then we release the grip that we have on it. And we release that grip, we become freer and happier.

And many of you, I'm sure have had that experience in your life. That things that you were latched on to as being yourself your true self, how did what define you? As you as you've grown older, you no longer hold on that way. And what was I thinking of back then?

I'm so glad not to do that anymore to be attached to that being a being who I am and somebody comes naturally with experience with aging and many different things. But certainly as people get older it seems to be the case what Buddhism offers you is premature aging

Yeah, wrinkles are optional. They say that to wrinkles sent to you get fewer wrinkles skin fewer as you meditate a lot. So that that kind of aging, you know, doesn't count but as quickly perhaps, but premature aging in the sense that that maturity that wisdom, that you say no I don't have to pick this self sense of self up and be so attached to it and be so concerned that this is who I really am and or this is you know, I have to be a certain way so people see me this way. You know, as you get older you don't you know, as you mature, hopefully you're freer and freer from concerned with image so in there Tradition, the idea that things are empty had a lot to do with things or empty of self or what pertains to self. It also wouldn't to say that you also see that things, anything that you look at, doesn't have any real essence in and of itself. And everything that exists is arises because of causes and conditions part of a causal chain stream of things unfolding. Things don't exist in and of themselves, they exist independence and other things. And so the insight into emptiness in the early tradition is an insight into one of the inside how things arise and pass because of causes and conditions. And this is considered to be very important, good news in Buddhism, because if things exist because they're there, because independence in certain conditions, if you change the conditions, the things that you want to have go away can go away. And what we want to have go away and Buddhism is suffering If you're suffering had some true abiding essential absolute existence, then you're stuck with it. But because your suffering arises out of conditions, as you change those conditions, your suffering can go away. And the primary condition that Buddhism focuses on in terms of suffering is a clinging and grasping. And you can have some role in decreasing that claim grasping and therefore your suffering. And so to actually see that the things you have been holding on to aren't worth holding on to or aren't capable of holding on to don't qualify as what you thought they were self that helps release the grip. So one of the values of meditation Buddhism is this deeper, settled, concentrated mindfulness, we see things we see through the concepts IE through things that normally we don't see through, we don't penetrate. We're caught up in our ideas and concepts of where they are. So that's the empty side. Then there's the emptying side, this early tradition. And the emptying is the emptying of the mind of X genuis activity of the mind extra things. I mean, I think that we have in English, the expression of emptying your mind. Sometimes if you if you want to start some activity fresh, you want us to make us empty my mind first before I start that I'm so caught up in what happened at work today. I have to empty my mind before I can really be home with my family or before I do something. And so people have various techniques they use to empty their mind. Some people meditate. Some people exercise, some people shower, some people watch television, do something just kind of kind of let normal concerns pass away. And in fact, it's well known now that I think that the primary sources of stress is has to do with the minds preoccupation With his thoughts, and that if anything that can help you stop thinking incessantly about what's stressing you out, will tend to help a person become calm. So emptying the mind of its incessant thoughts and activities. But meditation can go much further than that. So you sit down to meditate, and you first find your mind thinking a lot about things. And I think for many people, when they first meditate, maybe they're thinking mind, you know, doesn't seem like such a big problem because we fall into it so easily. After five minutes, wait, man, I'm thinking. But at some point, as meditation progresses, some people find that at some point, you're so consciously aware that you're thinking in a way that you wouldn't in daily life, we just go from one thought to the other. So meditation is so clear, you're thinking,

and you're aware that you know thinking about this, it's not that helpful. Thinking about this anymore. It's not that Nice events not that comfortable even.

I mean, why do I you know, it's tiring? Why should I keep thinking and thinking about the same thing over again, it's kind of like getting old now. In a way you would never reflect on almost never maybe in daily life where we don't we just we just go on thinking, you know, without even thinking we're thinking who don't reflect on it is one thing after another. And it's really quite something and meditation to get a little different perspective on the thinking mind. And then perhaps realize this is enough. Enough of this. This is not so useful anymore. And you know, I'm sitting here at IMC meditating, I don't have to think about what happened at home or at work in my neighborhood anymore. Let me let go of this. And if you're lucky enough, and maybe you can let go of those thoughts, and if you do, keep developing the concentration. Other times in other places, thinking about the past and future elsewhere, just falls away and you kind of quite remarkable too feel like you're really here, you just here in this place here. And it feels kind of special to have the mind kind of stop all its other turnings. And you just hear in a full, airy, full, viscerally full way. But then at some point, as you get more still and concentrated, the idea being here at IMC the sense of the other people in the room in the building and their location kind of falls away from the mind. Because that's also involves the mind perceiving or conceiving of a place and people in the room. And though it's accurate enough, that activity the mind is not really needed if you're going to get really peaceful and still, and so people some people find that as they get more concentrated in meditation. They kind of lose touch with the rim around them, they no longer thinking about it, no longer focused on it, longer perceiving it. And so we say in Buddhism that the mind then becomes empty is empty is emptying itself. of The environment, the thoughts, conceptions of what's going to run around. And then it can feel very precious to be here in this body, and you feel very close, very intimate. And you feel your body feel your presence, you feel really in the present moment, in a very, very powerful, strong way. And it feels usually quite peaceful and happy or contented, because of general forces that make us discontent are no longer present in their mind. And so we're here It feels very nice to be so intimate. But then as the mind gets more concentrated, the sense of being here in a body falls away. Because the have a sense of having a body is a conception is a perception the mind creates and makes that is innocent enough, but it's still an activity of the mind. And as the mind gets quieter and quieter, quieter, it lets go of what's coarser, more disturbing, not disturbing in a conventional sense, but disturbing for the deepening Peace. So you let go of that happens naturally. Then as you get more concentrated, you even let go of, you know, the sense of being in a body. And sometimes people report that their sense of body disappears. I want to open my eyes and meditation. Because I was concerned, I disappeared. Where am I, you know, I'm not here anymore in any way open my eyes. In fact, I was here. I hadn't gotten anywhere. I hadn't become invisible. And, and so then, so there's emptying process continues. And so after a while, there's just sensation in the body. And if the mind gets more concentrated, even sense of the sensations of the body without a body being there, falls away. And the mind gets simpler and simpler. And as it gets simpler this way, the mind gets more happy, more peaceful, more joyful. And it's really sublime and beautiful. That sense of well being in peace can come in Come when the mind is not churning, getting actively involved in the conceiving of our world and our reality as it usually is. And there's a beautiful process of the, of the thoughts and our emotions and feelings, our sense of body becoming thinner and thinner, more transparent, more translucent, just thinner, more wispy or for and in the sense of getting thinner and thinner, and you can feel the process of thinning out thoughts become thinner, more space between our thoughts. The thoughts don't no longer seem to have a lot of substance, nothing. There's not much grip, we know no grip or thoughts or thoughts don't have us in a grip. And this kind of thinner and thinner and the thought might arise and the image in Buddhism is like just a wispy cloud and endless sky. And so the mind becomes awareness feels like this big, open, spacious expanse and a thought just arises and, you know,

there's no tendency to latch on to it or Hold on to it or do anything with it. Just watch it come and go kind of wispy and thin. And, and as things pan out more and more, it can see that it's, it's feels so satisfying to enter into this deeper and deeper states of peace and well being. It's a phenomenal sense of happiness. And so the process of thinning and thinning just seems like a welcoming thing because it just leads to greater peace and things of thinner and thinner the mind, thoughts, emotions, feelings body thinner and quieter, thinner and quieter. At some point, there's just a very small filament left. So the mines emptying itself all this stuff and just a filament left of and at some point, it just feels like you know, the best thing could possibly happen is even that last filament dissolves or breaks and then that also gives away and total emptying of the mind And then it says that a person experiences certain kind of liberation or freedom from that. And one of the freedoms from that is quite remarkable is to have it a kind of visceral, immediate experience of feeling peaceful, happy, safe, contented, meaning, tremendous, meaningful experience. Where the mind is not focused on anything. It's not obsessed about anything, not caught up anything, not defining anything, not conceiving anything, not even perceiving anything. I like to refer to it as the heart has settled on itself. The heart is at peace with itself, as opposed to a heart which is searching and wanting and trying to get something. And so then with this, this final kind of thinning out, the most important and significant aspect of this emptying process that goes on in the mind, is the emptying of the mind of greed, hate and delusion. Which is considered kind of the route for all the unskillful unhelpful states of mind that can bubble up inside of us. And so they have a visceral experience of the mind completely free of greed, hate and delusion makes it You're much less likely to pick up greed, hate and delusion when you come out of that deep meditation. And so maybe it's not going to operate as strongly you're not so entranced or addicted to the forces of greed, hate and delusion, they don't have you so much. And so that experience of the mind which is completely empty of greed, hate and delusion is called a mind which is abiding in emptiness. So I said, there's what's empty. There's a process of emptying and there's the state of emptiness. We realize that everything is empty in a particular way. They're empty of any enduring permanent inherent intrinsic sense of self or idea of self or identification with self. They're empty of eternal process, eternal kind of substance. Everything's in process. And because everything's in process comes together because of causes and conditions, we can get involved in that process and change the flow of the process, change the direction it goes and make a difference in our lives. And one of those differences that we can make is we can begin emptying the mind of all this stuff that we do in the mind, which is extra. And in when you're sitting in meditation, there are things which are not extra when you're at work, what you have to do, which are extra here, when you're sitting, meditating, and so you'll learn slowly to let go of the grip, the attachments that keep all kinds of concerns going when they're not necessary, they have those concerns operating and so to the process of empty, empty, empty and empty and when the mind is reached the ultimate capacity of emptying for full emptying. Then It's said to be abided emptiness. And when and then if a person comes out of this full emptiness, experience of emptying completely, and are no longer prone to operating from greed, hate and delusion, then the tradition or the tradition says that this is the unsurpassed emptiness. The unsurpassed emptiness is when you can operate in the world around us our partner world without having greed, hate and delusion as an underlying motivate, motivating force for how we think and how we live and how we act in the world. So they're really tradition talks about what's empty, talks about emptying as a process and

talks about the state of emptiness when the mind is attained a certain degree of purity or freedom As Buddhism developed, this pragmatic focus on teachings of emptiness sometimes tend to be lost. And instead of being so pragmatic, they tend to be more philosophical. And you develop certain schools of Buddhism, certain schools of Mahayana Buddhism, increasing emphasis on the philosophy of emptiness and, and, and sometimes it seems to me it misses the point. It's interesting in itself, but and so I offer that to you today and if you have Mahayana friends it's a common thing for the Mahayana

people to say, well, you guys have you know, teach but the empty you know, the emptiness of self, but we have real emptiness. You guys never talked about emptiness you talked about not self. And now you know that this early tradition that we're part of actually does talk about emptiness does emphasize it has a role for it, and actually does it in different ways. And so now we can you know, stand tall on the Buddhist stage. We have emptiness to look at us how special we are. We Yeah, we are we're this special, wonderful kind of emptiness. People who were completely empty of self. Nothing were attached to but you should know there were emptiness through. So, isn't it terrible. You do this Buddhism stuff and, and Buddhism doesn't give you much to hold on to. So I hope this talk made enough sense for you and enough sense at least to realize to appreciate that this is important teaching and perhaps as your practice deepens some of this will come back and oh Gil's talked about this. I see this is how it works. Thank you very much.