

Tuesday Dharma Talk – Emptying, Empty, and Emptiness

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Sitting here, I'm reminded of a piece of advice: if you can't improve on silence, don't speak. At the very first insight meditation retreat on which I was a teacher-trainee, the way it worked was that all the regular teachers left at supper. They were gone for the evening; they went home (it was close enough to their homes). I was the only teacher left for the evening. Jack Kornfield instructed me, "Well, in the evening you should bring some Dharma reading to read to them during the sitting." I found something and had it in front of me in the hall. The book was open, but I couldn't get myself to speak in the middle of the meditative silence of people. To speak felt almost sacrilegious – I felt as if it would ruin something precious.

So I know that this time is meant for a Dharma talk, but I feel a little bit hesitant. But don't worry. I will talk. I am talking. You know, if all of us decided to speak in normal voices at the same time in this room, even with the speaker system you probably wouldn't hear me. But there's enough silence in this room that if I speak, most of you can hear me.

If we had ten times as many people in this room as there are now, it might be hard to get in. You might be stuck outside, or have to squeeze between people to find a place. Maybe it would be standing room only. We need the space to find our way. We need enough empty space to find our way in the world. I think it was John Cage who said that the most important part of his music is the silence between the notes. I'm very fond of sitting with people in a circle. I don't know if it's the most important thing, but the empty space in the middle of the circle is pretty important. Something can happen in a circle that is very different from other ways in which people gather.

To some degree, we need silence. To some degree, we need empty space. Sometimes, silence is an ugly weapon, but sometimes silence is divine. Sometimes a lot of empty space is lonely. But sometimes it reveals the preciousness of what's in it. In Japanese homes, sometimes they have a *tokonoma*, which is a little alcove in the wall. They'll have a very carefully arranged flower arrangement in that special little alcove, kind of like an altar, with one flower. That flower stands out clearly for what it is. It's very different from a bouquet, where the explosion of colors doesn't highlight the individual thing.

In the same way, the silence of the mind is really necessary if we want to hear something deep. The incessant chatter of discursive thinking drowns out the profound thinking, profound contemplation of the *yoniso manasikara*, a place where wisdom floats up. I think that in English, saying someone has an empty mind is sometimes derogatory. But without some emptiness of the mind, everything is bunched together and you can't really see. Then you can't really move in the mind and through the mind. It's hard to find how to move freely or find freedom in relation to what the mind does.

Things like silence and emptiness are not ordinary objects. You don't ordinarily take empty space as an object to look at, because there's nothing for your eyes to land on or focus on. You can't do a lot of thinking if you want to hear the silence in the mind. You can't really think mental silence into existence any more than you can talk really loudly to make the room quiet. If you describe to yourself what a silent mind is like, then maybe it's not so quiet. We're used to having subjects to think about. We're used to having the mind concerned with something. Whatever the mind is thinking about, it's thinking *about* something. We too easily live in the world of aboutness, which is a little bit removed. Sometimes this world of aboutness is a world that we construct, we make up.

The Buddha likened the production – the reproduction – of the bundles to a skilled painter painting a picture of a person on a canvas. The bundles are constructs about who we think we are. So we're living a step removed from just letting the thusness just be – allowing ourselves to be who we are rather than painting a picture of who we are. But there's no real canvas on which we paint the pictures.

I love the story that Jack Kornfield told me once. He was asked to be the guest editor for Tricycle Magazine or some magazine like that. Then he had a dream that he had watercolors and he was going to paint a picture on a flowing river. As soon as he put the brush down in the water, it had already run by. He woke up and thought to himself, "Oh, being a guest editor of Tricycle is just like that. All this effort just kind of washes downriver." So he said, "No."

I don't know if the image of painting with watercolors in the running river is the best analogy for being an editor of Tricycle. At least an artist has a canvas. We're trying to paint on something that's not even a river. I mean, take your watercolors and brush and go into the space in the middle of the room and try to paint something. The air won't take the paint.

What are these constructions and ideas – these bundles – that we live in that are *about* things? There's a famous poem in the *suttas* on the insubstantiality of the bundles. They are insubstantial because they're just ideas, they're constructs of the mind.

Appearance is like a lump of foam, feeling like a water bubble. Recognition is like a mirage. Mental constructs, like a plantain trunk...

[Plantains don't have a core in the trunk, just a lot of tight leaves that are wrapped up in a bundle. So mental constructs are just all this wrapped-up stuff that has no essence or core.]

And cognition, like an illusion. Practitioners with energy aroused should look upon the bundles thus.

[In that way– they're just foam, bubble, mirage, plantain trunk, illusion.]

And one should discard all fetters... [all the attachments to all these bundles.]

I especially want to reread the last line of the poem:

One should discard all fetters and make a refuge of oneself.

Here we're back to the idea of self. Again the word "*atta*" is used positively. And what is this *atta* that is a refuge? It's the absence of the fetters. (That's my vote, to answer my own question.) It's the absence of the constructs.

It turns out that in this tradition we're in, this practice we're doing, absence is really important. This is counterintuitive for a mind that is always thinking about something, wanting to focus on something, wanting to see something, have something, avoid something, judge something, evaluate something, or be someone. The mind wants to create an idea of who we are, defend that idea, assert that idea, judge that idea, or hide that idea and pretend it's not there. Thinking is always *about* all kinds of complicated things.

But what happens when the eyes see empty space, relax, and just gaze into the empty space without focusing on anything, without needing to see anything? It's marvelous what the eyes do. Some of us use our eyes all the time, just looking. The eyes are always about something, seeing something, figuring something out, penetrating something. For some meditators, the habit of using the eyes is so strong that even with their eyes closed, their eyes are engaged in looking at the breathing or at whatever they're mindful of. Their eyes are active.

Instead, we can look into empty space, into the sky, and just let the eyes roam in their own way. Holding the eyes fixed is stressful and not quite natural. By themselves, the eyes roam and move around. It's very relaxing for the body and mind to allow the eyes to roam around and not really look at anything. When the eyes can look at nothing, emptiness, they can really relax.

A similar thing can happen with the inner eye – the way we perceive, feel, sense, and observe the mind – when we're not as concerned with living in the world of about and aboutness. But we also discover that there's vast emptiness inside, vast space. That space is there when the inner life is not crowded and rushing from one thing to another and many things all at once. I think some minds are congested, full of thoughts, reactions, and ideas. We can start to appreciate the space in the mind, the pause, the space between the thoughts, or the empty space beyond the edges of thoughts. Have you ever considered what is beyond the edge of a thought? Do thoughts have edges? They must have some kind of edge because I don't think my thoughts are as big as the universe. I hope they're not as big as this room and oppressing you, bumping into your thoughts, and vying for space in the room.

Appreciate the emptiness in the mind, an absence. Recognizing absence turns out to be a very important part of Theravada spirituality. It's counterintuitive. I've seen my own mind accidentally let go of something that was preoccupying me (that was nice – finally unpreoccupied) and I could see my mind immediately searching for something else to be about. Not even a half-second vacation before it went on to the next thing. I must have a big list of things to think about – next, next.

To appreciate emptiness. What are some of the empty things? What are the absences? This is an absence of something. There can be the absence of clinging, the absence of hate, the absence of delusion, the absence of selfing, constructing a self, evaluating a self, being concerned with a self, and building a self. There can be an absence of telling ourselves stories, an absence of having conversations in our head with people who are not present, an absence of impatience, an absence of striving, an absence of thinking we are inadequate, an absence of conceit, an absence of jealousy and envy, an absence of covetousness and fear, an absence of confusion, or an absence of trying to understand.

It's pretty special to not have the very activities of suffering, the activities that are stressful in and of themselves, crowding the space. Then we can recognize there's something else. In that empty space, there can be peace. If any of you have had the occasion to come into this room when everyone's already sitting, most of the room is empty. Above five feet, at the most, there are no humans. But here, the emptiness is saturated with a certain kind of peace, sweetness, and stillness. It's more still here than most places. Some people get knocked over by this. They have never been in this kind of environment. They're sometimes stunned when they step into a room like this. Some people have to leave; they can't handle it; it's too much. What's happening? Nothing's happening. There's nothing here, just people sitting still and silent, lots of emptiness. But there's something here, something rich and palpable and sweet. It feels like maybe I'm home, or it's safe, or I can just be myself now, or it's a relief. It feels as if I'm being helped to be present because the call for presence and attention is so strong in this empty space here.

On one hand, this practice that we do is an emptying practice. We're emptying our minds of a lot of the preoccupations we have. We're emptying our minds of greed, hate, and delusion in all its different forms. We're emptying the mind of conceit, hindrances, and the constructions of the bundles. We're emptying our minds of

the fetters. Appreciating that emptiness is really valuable, especially if it can be almost imprinted in your heart. Then you can carry it with you because you can see more clearly when you lose your peace. You see more clearly when you pick up a construction, an attachment, or fear, and you know that that's not the only game in town. You know that's not the full picture.

What's so valuable about that single flower in the alcove in the wall is the empty space around it that contextualizes the flower. Empty silent space in the mind contextualizes the thought of conceit arising. "Wow. I'm hot stuff because I probably walk down the steps here better than anyone." We see the conceit arise but it is seen in so much space. We see the mind picking it up; we see the possibility of peace, and we're not fooled by it. There it is. But if we're congested with lots of conceits and constructions and it's all going on at once, we don't see the conceit come up. We're just in it.

It might take years or decades for some people to see the thoughts, constructs, and attachments they're living with. There are people who live a whole lifetime with no idea they're doing this. It's invaluable to finally see this, and also see there's an alternative: you don't have to stay involved. You can be free. You don't have to be defined by these things. In fact, you don't have to be defined by anything. The mind doesn't have to be defined by anything. The heart doesn't have to be defined by anything. It's still a mind, still a heart. Oddly enough, an empty mind is a much more intelligent mind, much more capable of finding our way in the world. An empty heart can feel so much more and love so much more.

As practice continues, start having some level of appreciation of emptiness – empty of these things, space that's empty of constructions and empty of projections. This whole teaching that the world is empty of self – the aggregates are empty of self; the eye, ear, nose, and tongue are empty of self – means that we're no longer projecting a self onto it. In Mahayana Buddhism, they say that there's no essential nature, no permanent abiding nature in anything. It's empty of essential nature. This is a fancy philosophical way of saying it's empty of our projection of essential nature – our assumption that there's something like a self there. The idea is to free the world from our projections.

So to start appreciating this emptiness and trusting it's okay to not think so much, so we're not always chasing the next thing, wanting the next thing, and filling the mind with the next thing. Probably we will still be thinking, but if the mistrust is there – "I have to think, I have to figure out," then we will. But trust we don't have to think so much, just trust that it's okay to not do so much, trust it's okay just to be.

If we do anything, we deconstruct, let go, and let be, in such a way that we start perceiving the silence, the space, the emptiness, the spaciousness, and the stillness. Then everything that we see becomes the single thing in the alcove, the single thing on the altar. With each single thing, just let it be, let it be. Don't dismiss anything, but don't construct anything. Don't diminish the value of anything, but don't project value onto it. Let the mind, the heart, settle on itself, so that it's not reacting to whatever happens.

Then there's space in the mind for things to happen. A sound happens – a dog barks. The mind doesn't waiver. No waves are formed in the mind, no agitation, no for or against. Whatever happens, happens without a reaction in the mind, except recognition, an awareness of it.

The mind that doesn't react becomes clear, stable, and amazingly sweet and peaceful. It is amazing to have a non-reactive mind with no agitation, just peace, just stillness. And nothing is needed. There is no concern about attainment, acquiring anything, or being anything. Maybe like the Buddha, we're just "the one who is thus." We allow ourselves to be our organic whole, without divisions and without constructs.

And then, at some point (it doesn't have to be exactly this way; these are my words) the mind lets go of itself. The mind lets go of its last attachments. The mind becomes the emptiness. And there's no mind, and there's no

emptiness. At some point, as we do this practice, there is the experience of letting go, the experience of release, the experience of things just dropping away. And then, they say, the bottom of the bucket drops off. Then that person knows how thoroughly and completely it's possible to not cling. They know the full absence of non-clinging. Knowing that total absence provides an amazing reference point for the heart – not just the thinking mind, but the heart – the deep mind, the *yoniso manasikāra*. Something deep inside of us recognizes that suffering is optional, that clinging doesn't have to be.

It not only knows that but there's also a palpable reference point, a feeling. Space has been created in the mind, or space has been created in the world. That space is always there reminding us that there's freedom. That freedom then begins to help us question all the things we're still holding on to.

The radical absence of clinging does not leave us blank. It's best understood as just the absence of clinging. It creates lots of space for something new to arise, to flower, to come to fruition, to grow, develop, and become whole. That's a topic for another time.

The topic for today is emptiness, emptying, and silence, where we give the heart and mind enough space that it can begin to let go. Giving up its stories. Giving up its constructs. Giving up its projects, judgments, and conceits. May whatever degree of silent awareness, quiet knowing, and soft seeing that you have as you do this practice be reassuring enough to help the mind relax and let go. And in the quiet mind may you hear the deep request to let go of clinging, grasping, and holding on. What the heart, the *yoniso* most wants is to let go. And we can allow it to do so. Thank you.