

Dharmette: Emptiness (1 of 5) Introducing Emptiness

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November 03, 2025

Keywords: *suññatā*, *śūnyatā*, *samādhi*, Heart Sūtra, Theravāda, Zen, Sāriputta, attachment, clinging, mindfulness

Oh, and warm greetings on this Monday. I'm happy to be back here after being gone for a week, teaching a retreat, happily teaching a retreat at the Insight Retreat Center. And perhaps I'm inspired by the retreat, who would like this, for the theme for this week, to be emptiness. Emptiness is the concept of it, the idea of it, the practice of it, the experience of it, is often celebrated in Buddhism, in some schools of Buddhism more than others. *Śūnyatā* is often known as *suññatā*. And emptiness.

And some people have had some contact with this concept and can be quite inspired by it. For other people, it's perplexing. How can an absence be so valuable? And so I want to talk, at least for this week, something about the concept of emptiness. It's an important part of... Excuse me. It's an important part of all forms of Buddhism.

Okay. In the school of Theravāda Buddhism, the emptiness is more of something that happens in deep practice. It's relevant for people who are quite experienced in practice. And so usually it's not a beginner's topic. Whereas in other schools of Buddhism, like when I was studying Zen, people would often hear teachings of emptiness as a beginner. And they were often taught and emphasized quite a bit throughout the practice.

And in fact, in Zen, there was a very famous, very common chant. We chanted every morning called the Heart Sūtra. And that emphasized this teaching of emptiness and this powerful beginning where it says, form is empty, emptiness is form. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. All things, everything is empty. And this chant goes on and has all these negating statements that when you chant over and over again, something gets kind of dropped away, drop, drop, drop.

And even if it's very subtle and certainly not reflective, not like you think about it, and they say no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind, no state of mind consciousness,

and it goes on, no, no, empty, empty, empty. And if you memorize the chant like I did, and it resonates or it carries echoes through the day, it's a powerful way of not clinging. Of just kind of letting go, of the kind of taking things as being substantial, real, or solid, that is almost required in order to become attached to cling. The Theravāda school doesn't emphasize it that much, but doesn't emphasize it until it becomes relevant in people's practice. And when the absence, which is emptiness, begins standing out in the highlight for a practitioner. So it's not really often offered as a beginner.

In the ancient texts and the teachings of the Buddha, there's a marvelous story, very brief little encounter that I delight in, where the Buddha's disciple Sāriputta comes out of meditation. And apparently he's quite radiant. And the Buddha points that out, says your features, your face is shining. In what meditation were you dwelling? And Sāriputta says, I was dwelling in the *samādhi* of emptiness. I was dwelling in emptiness.

And so here, the word is emptiness, which can be off-putting and feel like it's nothing. And how could emptiness be any value at all? But for Sāriputta, it provided him with a glow or radiance that even the Buddha recognized enough to ask him, what meditation were you abiding in? So this experience of emptiness... And in Theravādan Buddhism, this Buddhism I'm teaching from here, emptiness is less a philosophy. It's less a philosophy of reality.

This is what the nature of reality. Reality is empty, and the emptiness teachings emphasize the emptiness, kind of the non-reality, the non-substantiality, of all things, or emphasizing that everything is interdependent, interconditions. Nothing exists alone without arising in dependence on other things. There's nothing that's essential. It's kind of a non-essentialist teaching. But it's kind of a generalized view of everything, so it's kind of a philosophical metaphysics of sorts.

The earliest Buddhism tends not to make these metaphysical broad statements about reality, but rather keep focusing on what's happening here with us, our direct experience. And for there, in Theravāda, emptiness then is not a philosophy, but it's an experience. And so I'll talk about more as we go along. And in the early texts, there's two related topics. There's emptiness itself, which is often presented as an experience. And then there's the insight.

And the insight that things are empty. Things are empty of attachments. Our state of mind becomes empty of attachments. Not clinging to anything at all. And that is fantastic. To have a mind that is not hindered, a mind which has no obstacles, a mind that's not been hijacked by anything, a mind that is completely free, open, flexible, relaxed, ready to respond to the world, ready to be intelligent and be creative, but is not caught in anything that interferes with that openness and that clarity.

And one of the... So there's a teaching about how certain things are empty and how they're empty. And then between teachings about what things are, what's empty, the empty teachings. There's also this teaching on emptiness. In between those two, there is the practice of emptying. And the path of Buddhism, the early tradition, has two elements, two kind of distinct ways in which the path of practice deepens and unfolds over time.

One is through awareness practices, becoming more aware, having insight, having mindfulness, having seeing clearly what's here. The other is the process of emptying, emptying out, emptying out the projections, emptying out the views, the beliefs, the ideas of self that interfere with freedom, interfere with seeing the freedom, seeing the phenomenal, wonderful emptiness that makes someone radiant. So there's a kind of a delusion and ignorance by which we see that that delusion falls away. And so that's the emptying process. So there's what's empty, there's the emptying, and there's emptiness. Yes.

So in the next three days this week, I'll go through each of those and then have something to say on Friday, tying it all together with the mindfulness practice that we do. But for today, I would like to highlight that emptiness, empty, emptying, emptiness, what they all have in common is absence. Absence. And there's an absence might seem to have no value at all, and that, you know, what's valuable is things. Absence of money is not as good as having money. Absence of having a relationship is not as good as having a relationship.

You know, so we always want something, and that's what the mind gets caught by. But the absence of it doesn't mean that they don't exist for us, but it means that the mind is absence of preoccupation, being caught in it, being constricted and narrowed by it. The mind becomes spacious. The absence of fear, the absence of greed, the absence of hostility, resentment, the absence of confusion and doubt and doubt. So there's this absence. So I'll give you an example of how an absence might be quite significant, so that you might give some orientation to absence this week, and how they could be quite helpful for you and meaningful and maybe even profound.

If someone spends a long time in jail, in prison, I visited people who have been in prison for a long time, and visited them in prison. I met a man once who spent 25 years in solitary confinement. He was a remarkable man. He had been transformed in some powerfully good way during that time. I think he'd found a practice. But in any case, people can stay a long time in prison.

And now always behind bars, always behind locked doors, always inside the walls of the prison. And then one day maybe they're paroled and let out. And in the next week, months, maybe years, rest of their life, when they walk down the street, they might look to other peo-

ple just like an ordinary person, nothing special, just a person. And it's just an ordinary day, and people who see you might see the prisoner who's been released, might stay up preoccupied in their thoughts and what's next and what they have to do and their suffering or whatever. Right? But the former prisoner who's walking down the street, the absence of jail, the absence of being confined, is ever present.

It's so wondrous. It's so amazing. It's so clear that now there are no bars, no doors, no walls. And so that absence might stay present for the rest of their life. It's really there. It's right next to them. They appreciate it. And in the same way, the absence of attachment, the absence of clinging, the absence of being caught, the absence of suffering, to have that drop away in a significant way can be as significant for you as coming out of prison can be for a prisoner.

The possibility of a transformation of letting go, of emptying out, can be so full and so clear it stands in dramatic contrast to what it's like to be, if you may be hopeful you'll forgive me, absence of being full of yourself. Being empty of yourself is not a loss. It's not a loss. The loss comes from being full of yourself in all the negative ways that's used. That expression is used in English. A kind of conceit that is actually a disconnection. There's a profound emptiness, empty of self, which is a profound intimacy with oneself and life. So emptiness, the topic of this week. Thank you.