

Dharmette: Emptiness (3 of 5) Emptying

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Hello and welcome to this third talk on emptiness, the amazing teaching of emptiness. In somewhat paraphrasing the Buddha, he said that when the deep teachings of emptiness are forgotten, the Dharma will start to be forgotten. So the idea of emptiness is well worth trying to make sense of, even though what's the value of the hollowness or the voidness? I think in Buddhist English, the word emptiness has this very rich and inspiring connotation, but maybe it's something that's learned over time, being with those teachings. The comparable word, void or hollow, is reserved for things which are not so wonderful and inspiring. To avoid sometimes is more emphasizing the absence of something that maybe is important.

Whereas emptiness is an absence of something which is glorious. And so in Buddhist practice, there are two major forms of practice or categories of practices. There are those that emphasize awareness and those that emphasize emptying, letting go. Both have importance; they both support each other. When we can let go of our distractions, we can be more aware. When the mind is not crowded with thoughts, there's more space for a kind of broad, open, receptive awareness.

The more we're aware, we recognize where the weeds of the mind are. We recognize where there's activities in the mind that diminish us or divide us or prevent this glorious kind of presence that leads to liberation, to freedom. So these two forms, and so the emptiness teaching focuses, mostly it focuses on the second category, the practices that involve emptying. I like the expression emptying sometimes as being maybe preferable to letting go, because letting go maybe sometimes in my mind involves too much doing. Whereas emptying sometimes, it's like emptying the bathtub of water by pulling the drain plug, and it just naturally flows out. So there's a way of practicing where when we're full of ourselves, sitting and practicing is kind of pulling the drain plug.

Of course, all that full of ourselves will drain. Being empty of ourselves in that kind of negative way, that full of ourselves kind of means that we're conceited or arrogant or too excessively proud. Excuse me. The emptying practices of Buddhism are things like avoiding causing harm in the world, letting go of that. Many of the precepts, the primary precepts for lay people, are all about not doing the things that's going to harm other people and maybe also harm ourselves. So the act of restraint, the acts of letting go, the act of emptying ourselves of those actions that are going to harm others is paramount in Buddhism.

The emptying of a kind of preoccupation with objects in the world, whatever it is. Not that we let go of the objects, but we let go of the preoccupation. The way the Buddha talked about this is letting go of clinging to the signification of the object. It's not the object, but how it signifies something important for us. So, you know, this bell, I'm really proud of the bell because it shows that I'm a wonderful Dharma teacher. This bell signifies something really important of what it means to be a Buddhist teacher.

So it's not the bell that I'm clinging to, but what it signifies. The Buddha talked about not getting caught up in the signification, letting that go, and being careful when you see, hear, touch things, careful not to get caught in the signification that we add on top of it. The Buddha talked about contentment, which I see as a kind of... He offered it as kind of foundational to practice, and also involves a kind of emptying ourselves, letting go of discontent, desires and aversions which keeps us agitated, letting go of the hindrances and the... emptying ourselves of the hindrances. Hindrances are those forces of the mind that keep us divided, keep us from being fully present, keep us from seeing the emptiness of the moment, keep us from seeing the freedom that's available right here now.

In deep meditation, there is an emptying of our tensions, our pre-attentions, our distractions, our spinning mind. Slowly there's a progressive process of simplifying and simplifying as we get emptied, as the being full of ourselves drains out of the meditation bathtub. So the idea of emptying. In this emptiness teaching, there's how things are empty: empty of signification, empty of our projections, empty of permanence, which is seen as a projection, empty of self, which is seen as often a projection onto things, things within us, for example, and seeing how things are empty. Then that highlights noticing how we get caught in thinking things are real or substantial or that prevent us from seeing the glorious emptiness of things, that they're empty. Because the very act of clinging, of holding on, is the opposite of seeing how they're empty.

And so there is a process of emptying. I'm suggesting there are many, many practices of letting go, of restraint, of contentment, of letting things be sometimes as a form of letting go.

Even just a clear awareness is simultaneously a kind of emptying of whatever was clouding over the awareness. So there's many different forms this emptying takes. What they all have in common is an emptying of how we take things to be permanent, how we take them to be the solution for our happiness. This is what's going to do it. This is what's going to create me. Empty of how it signifies something about ourselves. We build up this self around a whole series of significations that we project onto things and make into things. So emptying ourselves so that we can be radiantly aware.

As I said the first day, Sāriputta came out of meditation, radiant. The Buddha said, what meditation were you doing to be so radiant? Sāriputta said, I was abiding in emptiness. The emptying ourselves doesn't leave us with nothing. Emptying ourselves leaves us with the radiance of awareness, with the fullness of presence, of attention, of stability, of unification. *Samādhi, sati*. Leaves us with the phenomenal faith or confidence that this is good. Leaves us with a delightful engagement with the process of being free. Leaves us with wisdom, leaves us with a clear ability to discern and to see what is valuable and what isn't, which is the same way of saying where we suffer and where we don't suffer, where we diminish the fullness of our life and undermine it and shortchange ourselves and where we benefit and grow and develop. Right?

And so, this emptying. So you might, over this next day, see if there's some appropriate way that you can empty out from awareness, from your presence, from your real attention and being here in the moment, all that takes you out of the moment, all that makes the moment more complicated than it needs to be. Maybe do it in small steps. Maybe do it at times when your day is relatively uncomplicated. Maybe there's a little break. Maybe you're standing in line at a store. Or maybe you have just parked your car and you don't have to rush off right away from the car. Maybe all kinds of little pauses in the day. See if you can empty, empty yourself. Okay.

Let go, let be, and be more fully present in the process. Emptying. Empty, emptying. And then tomorrow, the topic will be emptiness itself, the richness of this wonderful, not just in a concept, but the experience. So, thank you.