

## Dharmette: Emptiness (4 of 5) Full Emptiness

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So, good morning or good day. And now we're on the fourth talk on the topic of emptiness. The last two days have been oriented around two of the three aspects of emptiness. First is how things are empty. The primary thing that the tradition sees is that they're empty of self, empty of the solidified, essentialist, permanent, ongoing, fixated, or stuck way around there being a self here, projected onto the world, projected onto oneself. Things are also empty of our projections in and of themselves.

If we just live in the projections, in the ideas, in the concepts the mind makes, those are just concepts, ideas, projections, which are empty of solidity, substantiality, of a certain kind of real existence. They are and are not. They don't have inherent essence or inherent continuity, except by how they are manufactured or caught in the mind. Then there's the emptying, the emptying of our attachments, emptying of our projections, our concepts, our concepts of self that we overlay and impose on ourselves and the world. This idea of emptying—meditation is a lot about emptying of all the complications we have, all the ways in which we make things much more busy, involved, complicated than they have to be. It's a process of simplification.

As things are simplified, tension disappears, stress disappears, agitation disappears. And there's a place by calm, by peace, by subtleness. The more that the mind is stress-free, the more the heart is free of agitation, the more there's a feeling of space and silence and stillness and openness and emptiness, empty of all those things. So we're emptying ourselves. Then there's emptiness. Emptiness is an abstract noun, meaning it doesn't point to anything concrete.

It points to something that, in ordinary English, an abstract noun is something which is more like a concept. In Buddhism, emptiness is certainly a concept, but that's just this kind of the

surface concept, or the kind of abstract idea of it, but it's not exactly something that is or is not. It's an absence. And it's not the absence of meaning or purpose or that is depressing, the ordinary English idea of "I feel really empty" and someone could be saying they're feeling depressed. They're feeling an absence of meaning or purpose or absence of what in the past has filled their life and made it wonderful. A lot of people feel empty—spiritually empty, emotionally empty, interpersonally empty, all kinds of ways which are debilitating.

So that's not what the Buddhists are talking about. In a way, they're talking about something almost the opposite. Almost as if the ordinary ways that we might feel empty in a discouraging, depressing kind of way is because we're still caught in the world of concepts and ideas and that things have to be this way, and now they're not the way they're supposed to be, and therefore I'm discouraged. But to really begin loosening up and letting go of a life based on concepts, based on ideas, based on emotions, meaning and purpose—not to reject all those by any means, some of them have important parts of human life—but to discover that the mind can be empty of the activity of signifying, making things, holding on to things, relating to things as if they're so important that nothing else is important. There's a way in which the mind can soften, relax, open. One of the ways that, a deep way in which this becomes very clear is that there's a world of difference between...

This bell, as I hold it, it has some weight, and right now it feels cold, and parts are smooth, and parts are a little bit rough. It has a certain substance and weight that's there. I mean, I'm not going to argue that the bell doesn't exist, but it exists in some way. But if I close my eyes, my memory, my idea of the bell, my concept of the bell, I can think about the bell when I'm not in this room. The concept, the idea, the memory, the thought, that is empty of that inherent existence. This bell can melt and no longer exist.

I can still have the idea of the bell. If I was really attached to the bell, that attachment can be triggered by the memory. Or I could be aware that it's only a memory, it's only a thought. The thought itself has no real existential existence. It's empty of existential existence. So do I want to hold on to something that is empty of existential existence?

What does it mean to hold on to it when there's nothing there to hold on to? It means that there's a lot of tension around nothings, a tightness grasping around in a kind of way nothing. So it's kind of like a hologram in the mind. You put your hand into a hologram and you end up with nothing. All these thoughts and ideas are empty, but what's important is not that they're empty. What's important is how that teaches us how to be aware without clinging, without holding on.

In the Theravāda tradition, in the early teachings of the Buddha, emptiness has two primary

meanings, or reference points. It's always to do with deep, mature meditation of practice. One is emptiness is a mind that is empty of... Deep *samādhi* is called the *samādhi* of emptiness. The deep *samādhis* are always a feeling of tremendous well-being, of unification, of connection, and wellness. So we're talking about not a philosophy, not reading a book and understanding something, but a deep, unified experience of *samādhi*.

The *samādhi* of emptiness is a *samādhi* where the primary reference point, the primary kind of characteristic of the state, is a state that does not refer to anything as a self, does not involve in the whole project of self, does not involve in debating and arguing about self, or defending or asserting the self, or concern in any kind of way with this concept idea, this hologram of ideas and concepts we have about self. It's radically empty. That emptiness is almost akin to emptiness of all clinging, all attachments. The second reference point for emptiness is the emptiness of the mind free of all attachments, all clinging, where emptiness, the state of emptiness, is equivalent to liberation itself, full awakening, full liberation, which is defined as the radical, complete, thorough absence of greed, hate, and delusions, absence of clinging and craving, and not just the absence of self-preoccupation, but something deeper. So two kind of very deep states of emptiness.

In the Mahāyāna tradition, emptiness has other meanings. There are many, many kind of things that the word emptiness refers to. In Mahāyāna tradition, the most common is that emptiness is the teaching that nothing has inherent existence. Nothing exists in some kind of inherent way that is continuous, permanent, solid, inherent. In the early Buddhist tradition, that's kind of, you get to the same, and that Mahāyāna idea then helps the mind relax, let go, not cling to anything, and have a kind of intimacy with life, a very deep connectivity to life, because there's no ideas and concepts that somehow get in the way of a kind of intimacy to all life at the moment.

In the Theravāda tradition, that experience is more, comes from something called not emptiness, but signless, absence of signs. What this means is the absence of signification. So the mind takes something in to recognize what it is. If I pick up this striker for the bell, there's something about its being a shape, its color, it's covered by a kind of a discolor of leather for hitting the bell. There are certain things that signify that it's a striker. There are times when the mind is so still and quiet, it's not assigning signification, it's not using memory to look for the things that tell me this is what the thing is.

It leaves things radically alone and without this extra work of signification, looking for a sign, fixating on the sign of what something is. Things have inherently in themselves are not the sign or not the signification. Again, the mind loosens up, lightens up. So the emptiness, the

signlessness, this idea of letting go really deeply, where does that leave us? It leaves us with freedom. Emptiness and liberation, emptiness and freedom.

Where does that leave us? This is not like leaving us with nothing whatsoever. It leaves us without the attachments, the solidification, the reifications that interfere with being fully present in here for this experience now, the fullness of our life. I think there's a deep kind of faith, understanding, experience that both Mahāyāna Buddhism in its emptiness teaching and Theravāda Buddhism in its emptiness teaching share: that there is this deep human functioning still going on, functioning of the heart, functioning of the depths within us, in which there can be love, in which there can be compassion, in which there can be care and kindness and goodwill. Not because we have to, not because we should, not because we're practicing to do it, but because when all attachments are released, at least enough, at least temporarily, the best of the non-conceptual world of who we are shines forth. So emptiness, empty, emptying, and emptiness.

And then we have one more talk tomorrow. So thank you very much, and look forward to emptying out maybe all I have to say on this topic tomorrow.