

## Dharmette: Emptiness (5 of 5) Emptiness of Awareness

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Hello and welcome. So the topic for this week is emptiness. And it's a topic which has received a lot of philosophical analysis. There's a big, very good book about Mahāyāna emptiness where you get a sense of the philosophy and the complexity, perhaps, of this kind of teaching. The book is called *The Emptiness of Emptiness*. And there's been many interpretations of it, and some of it is interpretations that posit kind of absolute statements about the nature of reality.

So in philosophy, that's called ontology. And there's some that point to the deep experiential ways in which emptiness is an expression of some profound natural capacity we have for awakening and liberation. In a Theravādan world, the emptiness is a topic that's closely related to practice, awareness practice, mindfulness practice. And that gives us a clue that it's not meant to be philosophical or about the nature of reality, but is much closer to how we experience things. It's not exactly about the nature of awareness, which is back to this kind of philosophy or ontology, the reality of awareness. The reality of anything is not that important.

But what's important is the immediate present moment experience of it that helps us to see and understand how we get caught, how we suffer, how we become free, how we thrive with the wonderful inner life that can grow. And so in this regard, emptiness in this Theravāda tradition is really pointing back to ourselves, to experience, not to reality, not to philosophy. In later Buddhism, there were some people who, some schools of Buddhism, that posited that the fundamental building blocks of reality, that they called *dhammas*, had some kind of inherent nature, essential, permanent, lasting kind of substance in the middle of them. And that became the later Buddhism. Mahāyāna critiqued that and said, no, nothing has any essential nature. And then they assumed that all the earlier schools had this belief.

And so our Theravādan school has been critiqued for having this belief that we don't really have the deep understanding of emptiness because we don't have this belief that all things, all *dhammas*, have no inherent essence. Self-nature, sometimes it's called. But we just talk about it in different ways. And to critique our early tradition by vocabulary that was born hundreds of years after it began is to kind of take inappropriate concepts and assume that because it's not there, it's somehow missing. In the Theravāda tradition, the word that they talk about is heartwood. There's a word *sāra*, which means it's a heartwood of a tree.

But it also can mean the essence of something. And the emphasis in the Theravāda is that nothing in our direct experience, nothing of the way we experience things, has any heartwood, has any essential nature. So rather than saying there's no essential nature, we say there's no *sāra*. The essential, as you know, the later word is *svabhāva*. In the early tradition *svabhāva*, *sva* means self, *bhāva* means kind of like nature. And so in this tradition of ours, the primary ways in which we get attached to self, the way we construct the self, the way we construct, kind of the constructed experience, has to do with these five bundles.

Appearance is how things appear to us, not how they are, but how they appear to us is something different than what they are. We often assume they're the same. How songs are sensed is not just simply innocent kind of sensing. We participate in the world of sensing in some kind of way with values and attachments and interpretations that magnify or diminish or affect what we sense. What we recognize, recognitions of things, we're not innocent bystanders, so just everything we see accurately. We interpret all the time what we see.

We have to. We see a green light, and at the intersection of streets, we know that it means you can go, and a red light means to stop. Other places, red lights mean something very different. A red light flashing on the car behind us suggests to us that it's a police or an ambulance or emergency response vehicle. And so we interpret it contextually, what it is, and we recognize it. But that recognition is a learned phenomenon.

And we're not just innocent seeing things as they are. We're bringing in our memories, ideas in order to recognize it. And then we have stories. We tell ourselves stories about life. We tell stories about ourselves, story of what happened to us. Humans are story makers.

Story lovers. We live in stories. And we live in some amazingly abstract stories that are built story upon story upon story. And these are the mental fabrications, the mental constructions that we are capable of making that sometimes are more real than what's actually happening in the world. And certainly I've been succumbed to making up a story, an interpretation of what I think happened or what might happen, and find out later that it wasn't true. But at the time, I believed it was true, and that was to my detriment, and maybe sometimes to others

as well.

And then there's cognition. Moments of cognition that when we string them all together, give the illusion, give the sense that there's maybe a permanent, ongoing field of consciousness that's available to us. So the Buddha talked about all this and said each of these five bundles, five areas, are empty. And he used three different words for empty: *tuccha*, *rita*, and *suñña*. So empty, hollow, void. And then he has this poem.

Appearances are like a lump of foam. Sensations like water bubbles. Recognition is like a mirage. Mental fabrications like a banana trunk, banana tree trunk. And cognition, consciousness is like a magic show.

Appearances are like a lump of foam, and you use an analogy of a lump of foam floating down the Gaṅgā River. There's the river, but then there's that which is insubstantial, even more insubstantial than the water, the foam that's on the top of it. And how things appear to us has something to do with how we construct, how we select, how we interpret, how we understand. And appearance is this extra thing that the mind does. And the extra thing the mind does is like foam. It has no substance.

Sensations are like water bubbles. I think with the water bubbles, what they're talking about here is the rain falling on the surface of the water, lake, and little bubbles, little puddles, little wailets that get formed. They come and go very, very fast. And they don't last much. There's no permanence there. Recognitions are like a mirage.

So when we recognize something, we're actually often projecting and overlaying something on top of it. And what we overlay on top of it, the projections we have, is a little bit like a mirage. We're making it into something that sometimes is practical and useful, but it's our kind of projection onto it. The mind creates it. And when a whole society participates in that, it can seem like it's real, real. But actually it's more like a useful interpretation, useful idea about what this thing is.

So we all participate. But it's still kind of like a mirage in how it's created by the mind. And mental fabrications are like a banana tree, plantain tree. And what that trunk, the trunk of a banana tree, is not really a trunk. It's wrapped around leaves that are wrapped around very tight. And if you cut it, it's hollow in the middle. It has no heartwood.

And so these stories we live in, they might be fascinating, they might be useful, they hold up the whole, all the bananas that we produce, all the stories and ideas and many values that we hold on to are our byproduct of this banana tree that we have in the mind making stories. And they can get so tight and wrapped around these stories, but in essence, the stories,

story-making mind, these fabrications we make have no solid core. They just hold themselves up. All the stories hold themselves together until they don't. And finally, it's cognition or consciousness is like a magic show. And the magic show is the way in which individual moments of cognition, when strung together, when happening quickly, give the magic illusion of there being a field of permanent consciousness, broad consciousness, ongoing consciousness.

And sometimes people get attached to that. They make grand philosophical and religious conclusions based on that. But it's kind of like a magic show. What we do with moments of cognition. So what all these have in common is that the Buddha is saying that not that the world is empty, but what's empty is how the mind constructs it and holds onto it and interprets it and holds it. And what the mind does with it, that is empty.

And the amazing thing is it's amazing, shocking, difficult, inspiring thing about the teachings of emptiness. It's pointing out that, yes, it's possible to experience the emptiness of awareness, the emptiness of cognition, the emptiness of how we know and experience things, that there's no heartwood, there's no substance there, there's no... And there we can find our freedom. There is no statement about reality being empty that dismisses its importance, says that it's not valuable to be present and caring and involved in the world. It's a teaching that how we know the world, we can know it in a way that's free. We can know it with ease and peace, because the construction of the reality that we have in the mind, that is empty.

So loosen up, lighten up, soften up, that's free. So that is the grand conclusion to this week on emptiness. So I hope this has been interesting for you, and maybe for those of you who have some background in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Maybe you can see some resonance or some overlap between these traditions. And maybe it suggests to you that maybe the big divide between Mahāyāna teaching emptiness and Theravāda doesn't have to overcome so that we're actually sharing this profound teaching experience. So, thank you. And I look forward to being back on Monday. And thank you.