

EMPTINESS

Possibly as early as the 2nd Century BCE and as late as the 2nd Century CE a whole new group of writings emerged within Buddhism, the Mahayana Sutras. Though the Shakyamuni Buddha, that fellow Sidhartha Gautama who was enlightened 2500 years ago and called himself the Buddha, appears as the main character it is unlikely that these Sutras faithfully record his teachings though the writers had the confidence to write as the Buddha. The fact that these authors had little trouble either intellectually or ethically placing themselves in the role of the Buddha speaks to the different nature of their understanding of Buddhism from those who held Shakyamuni Buddha in such esteem that they would only accept the Sutras, the Pali Suttas, that could be directly traced to Shakyamuni through the aural tradition.

Today the Mahayana Sutras, along with the Pali Suttas form the foundation of the Mahayana Buddhism while only the Pali Suttas form the foundation of Theravada Buddhism. This does not mean that the realization of these later authors was in some way different from Shakyamuni's realization, only that Shakyamuni's realization was not exclusive and that others were bound to have equivalent, and possibly deeper realizations and naturally develop and refine Shakyamuni's teachings.

The very impunity that the authors of the Mahayana Sutra had in writing as though they were the Buddha is only natural to their own Enlightenment and the Enlightenment of Shakyamuni. In which they all came to identify themselves as Buddha. We can understand this by looking at what Shakyamuni taught. Though he primarily taught a path to happiness and Enlightenment the end result of the path the actual nature of his realization as he explained it was the denial of a personal self in a world where everything is in constant change yet interconnected in a web of "Interdependent Origination." This is a vision of non-duality, in which all Buddhas become one Buddha.. In fact everything becomes the one Buddha. The teachings of a single Enlightened teacher cannot be viewed with the non-dual understanding as the teachings of a single individual, for no actual individual exists, rather they are the teachings of the one Buddha as it manifests in one place and time. From this perspective it is quite natural that the Mahayana Sutras should arise written in the voice of the Buddha.

The Mahayana developed a certain liberality of language which we see throughout much of the Mahayana tradition. We see it in the Sutras in the fantastic descriptions of the Buddha's assemblies. We see it in the Zen koan and the writings of Dogen.. It exists in the Pure Land sects. It exists in many of the schools of the Mahayana. Though some of the more philosophic schools try to capture Buddhist understanding in language, the nature of the Buddhist experience of non-duality resists this. Language is based on the perspective of duality. Language parses the world up into individual things. My teacher Shodo Harada Roshi told me, "This experience (the Enlightenment experience) can only be expressed through poetry.." Words can lose their exact meaning in poetry so that the poem can express a deeper meaning. Certainly poetry is of immense importance in the Chinese and Japanese expression of Enlightenment..

Certainly when we try to understand the language of the Mahayana we cannot rely on the fixed meaning of words and the logic of these fixed meanings.. Ultimately an understanding of the Mahayana must stand on the experience of Enlightenment , a vision of non-duality, the True Dharma Eye.

The Mahayana developed the teachings of Buddhism in many ways. It developed the ideal of the Bodhisattva. It introduced the concept of Buddha Nature, but in this essay I am going to look at the concept called Sunyata. Sunyata is a Sanskrit term that has come to be translated as Emptiness. The word Emptiness may not be an exact translation of Sunyata, and since I don't speak Sanskrit I have to trust that it is close. And as a Buddhist practitioner I have found it suitable. Yet if we are going to understand Emptiness as a Buddhist term we must not assume it means exactly what we think the word

emptiness means with its normal denotations and connotations. To properly understand Emptiness as a Mahayana term we must approach it with a liberal and open mind and as I hope you will come to see it has many meanings within the practice of Buddhism.

Emptiness is a difficult concept. In the Heart Sutra we read, “That which is form is Emptiness. That which is Emptiness is form.” What does this mean.? I know many Buddhist practitioners who have been struggling to understand this for years. The Heart Sutra exhaustively lists all the categories that thinkers in ancient India used to describe the attributes of a human being and declares them to be Empty. Emptiness as a word is used both as a characteristic of these attributes and also as equivalent to these attributes. And then the Heart Sutra goes on to state that from the perspective of Emptiness none of these characteristics even exist. How are we to understand Emptiness?

We in the Zen school recite the Heart Sutra multiple times a day in monasteries and during retreats. It was only natural for Shodo Harada Roshi to be asked during a question and answer session, what is the meaning of the Heart Sutra? He responded that it was a description of the state of mind that made a Bodhisattva a Bodhisattva. As Zen practitioners we should approach all the Buddhist teachings through the eyes of zazen (meditation). The Heart Sutra should not be approached first as a philosophic diatribe but rather as a description of something to be experienced through zazen.

In the Theravada tradition meditative absorption is broken down into four levels. The fourth and deepest state of absorption is described as “equanimity”, not just serenity but equanimity. Equanimity is that state of mind in which everything is equal. In Zen we say “add nothing, subtract nothing.” This saying is telling us not to add ideas and emotions to sensation and not to ignore any sensations that are not pertinent and bothersome. Just let everything in, without discrimination. In this state of mind everything becomes equal. This is equanimity and it is also one meaning of Emptiness. In the depth of meditation our minds become empty of discrimination and the sensations experienced become empty of meaning. Without adding meaning to sensation there is no form, no feeling, no perceptions, no impulse, no consciousness, no eyes, no ears, no sound, no taste, no touch, etc. In this “no” we are not saying that there is nothing “out there” in the physical universe which we can call eyes and ears etc, only that in a psychological sense, in a state of equanimity all sensations and by extension objects of sensation are empty of all the emotions and ideas that we usually add to sensations. In equanimity everything is Empty.

Here we have two ways of understanding Emptiness. One, is the psychological Emptiness practiced in meditation which is empty of ideas, emotions, and discrimination. In the Paranirvana Sutra the dying Buddha tells his disciples, the future teachers of Buddhism, to teach by not affirming any ideas or opinions nor affirming the opposite ideas and opinions. Is this world eternal? It is neither eternal nor is it not eternal. Is there reincarnation? There is neither reincarnation nor is there not reincarnation. In this way the mind is steered away from taking ideas and opinions. The Middle Way of Buddhism is to steer a path between the extremes of ideas and opinions. This is very different from the affirming of opposites such as saying that for example, the world is both eternal and not eternal. With affirming opposites we are asked to think about each opinion, though very flexibly. By not affirming we are asked to not think, to not discriminate, to enter an empty state of mind. This is the Emptiness of meditation.

The second way we can understand Emptiness is the quality that objects of perception take when we have stopped discrimination during meditation. In this state of mind both our internal world and the external world become just phenomena like a dream. But even to call it just phenomena or a dream is to take a position. Things are empty in our simply not taking any position. This quality of Emptiness that the world takes on in deep meditation is “tathata” in Sanskrit which has become translated as “thusness” or “suchness.”

This is just the beginning of the many meanings of Emptiness. One of the foundations of Buddhism as taught by Shakyamuni Buddha is the non-atman doctrine. In the Hindu tradition the atman is thought to be the individual's soul, that part of the individual which is divine, in some way

unchanging, and eternal. It is what reincarnates in one body after another through an almost infinite sequence of lifetimes until in some way it is purified so that it may rejoin Brahmin the Hindu conception of God.. This non-atman or no-soul doctrine of Shakyamuni, that there is nothing permanent, fixed, and eternal in the human being was revolutionary in its time, setting Buddhism apart from Hinduism, and today sets it apart from most religions. This doctrine places man firmly in the physical universe, stripping away any idea of personal specialness.. No part of the human is divinely created by God or a god. Man as an individual being is the result of the same “physical” processes from which all other things arise.

This insight of no-soul is so important in Buddhism that it could be said to be the essential insight of Shakyamuni's Enlightenment. In a famous story this insight is repeated in the Zen tradition with the enlightenment of Huiko the Second Patriarch. Huiko asks Bodhidharma the teacher of Buddhism who has come from India, “Please pacify my mind.” Bodhidharma responds, “Bring me your mind and I will pacify it.” Having practiced meditation for many years Huiko tells Bodhidharma, “I have searched and searched and I cannot find my mind.” Bodhidharma says, “See I have pacified your mind.” At this Huiko experienced Enlightenment.

Both Huiko and Shakyamuni made the same discovery, that there is nothing substantial and unchanging in our inner world of thought and emotion which we can call a soul or “mind.” Our inner world is just a swirl of energy. And, in meditation all this energy can dissipate and then we find there is nothing there.

This realization is the realization of our own personal Emptiness. If we look at the Heart Sutra again we see that all the categories that are listed as Empty are all qualities of a human being. Form, feeling, perception, impulse, consciousness are the categories that Shakyamuni used to describe the qualities that make a human being. He called them skandas which means aggregates or heaps precisely to show that they are just temporary phenomena, a coming together of many other things, and as such humans are also just temporary empty phenomena. The other qualities listed, eyes, ears, nose, tongue, etc., are also just qualities of a human and we know they are no more permanent than the human body. The Heart Sutra is first and foremost pointing to our own personal Emptiness as human beings. This becomes our third understanding of Emptiness.

This realization of our own personal Emptiness is not by itself Enlightenment. One might feel that this is actually a depressing realization striking at our sense of self worth. I think of this realization as “cutting the root.” What do I mean by cutting the root? Our whole self centered and dualistic way of thinking is based upon an attachment we have to our specialness as individuals. With a deep and convincing experience of our own personal Emptiness the root of our whole dualistic way of thinking is cut. Without seeing ourselves as individuals everything else loses its quality as individual. The obvious logical extension of this is to realize that all seemingly individual things are actually embedded in a single non-dual unity. And now when our mind is calm and not caught in our old dualistic way of thinking we can begin to experience this non-duality. Now we may call this Enlightenment. And now we are open to a fourth understanding of Emptiness. Now we see all things as Empty because we see all things as embedded in non-duality.

With the root cut the strangling vine of dualistic thought begins to wither and we open up to a new way of experiencing and thinking about the world. Our meditation deepens as we can now unhesitatingly throw ourselves into the practice. And now we might experience Emptiness in a fifth way as we find it possible to completely drop our discrimination of individual things, stop our habit of seeing, hearing, and feeling one thing at a time, and experience what one might call undifferentiated reality. Individual things only exist because we see them as individual things. The process of discrimination or differentiation divides the one undifferentiated reality into the many individual things, people, animals, plants, mountains, etc.. We do this because it is necessary. How else would we survive as a form? It is our role in the larger process. Yet we can also understand that things are Empty of intrinsic existence, created by our individual minds. We can experience this in meditation by turning

off the process of differentiation and return to the One. I am categorizing this as a different experience of Emptiness because of its depth. In the fourth understanding we experience a tree as we look at it though also see it embedded in the One. In the fifth understanding we no longer even experience a tree.

Many thinkers and teachers of Buddhism think of Buddhism as an epistemological non-duality and not an Absolute non-duality. What do I mean by this? By an epistemological non-duality I mean that we practice not-knowing, that we do not take the position of any dualistic assertion. They would assert that Buddhism is primarily about cultivating that empty state of mind without opinion and going no further. To take a position is to form an attachment and Buddhism is about breaking all attachments. These thinkers would assert that any statement about an Absolute non-duality underlying an epistemological non-duality, as the ground of being, is overstepping the bounds of proper Buddhism. This seems to be true of both Theravada Buddhism and the Madyamika based schools of Mahayana Buddhism.

Luckily I am a Zen Buddhist and am not limited by the opinions of others, only my own realization as experienced through meditation. Even Shakyamuni was not completely adverse to making statements about the Absolute. In particular he made two observations which I find particularly important. He noted that everything is in constant change and that all things arise through a process of "interdependent origination." These may not seem to be statements concerning the nature of the Absolute, but this is not true. There is a progression of realizations that arises naturally from the non-atman discovery. As I have already shown from non-atman arises the eye of non-duality. The Absolute as we experience it in meditation is not something somewhere else like the Judea-Christian view of God. The Absolute is what is in front of us right here right now. Because of our distorted and dualistic view we may not recognize what is in front of us as the Absolute, but with clear eyes it is all just the one life energy and this includes everything.

The discovery of our own personal Emptiness is also a discovery of how we truly function. Humans are faced with essentially two choices for understanding our own personal behavior. We all know that to some extent our behavior is influenced by experience but many if not most of us choose to believe that we have a Will that is to some degree free and can step outside the bounds of the physical universe of cause and effect. In this view we have an attribute called the soul which is not of this physical world but in some way connects us to another realm, the spirit realm, or maybe the divine realm of God. The nature of the idea of the soul is a very complex subject because the beliefs surrounding the soul are extremely varied depending on culture and religion, but they all have in common that it is in some way outside the normal bounds of the physical universe. This belief in the soul now becomes the underpinning of our belief in free will. And the belief that we humans somehow stand outside the physical world of cause and effect.

The other choice for understanding our selves and our behavior is to believe that we are a totally natural creature bound by the same processes of cause and effect that run everything else in the Universe. This is the side that Buddhism falls on. The discovery of our own personal Emptiness is the discovery that we as individuals are nothing else but completely natural creatures. We may separate ourselves from the natural world in our thoughts but that is our illusion. The Physical Universe as it is is the Absolute, though we must now think of the Universe, non-dualistically, not as a collection of individual things in interaction but as one thing, the Absolute, in process.

When Shakyamuni Buddha stated that all things are in constant change and that this change results from a process of interdependent origination he was describing basic characteristics of the Absolute and clearly placing his understanding as "naturalist." His view is not only the logical extension of the non-atman doctrine but also the perspective from deep within meditation.

Now we come to the sixth meaning of Emptiness. This is also the textbook definition of Emptiness from the Buddhist philosophic tradition. In this view all things are Empty because all things are Empty of permanent "self nature." This is really just an extension of the non-atman doctrine to all

things. But, what this also means is that all things are undergoing a process of constant change and have no permanent underlying nature, that all things are constantly becoming something anew through the process of interdependent origination.

This is not the end of my list of meanings for Emptiness. For I have heard and read Zen teachers use Emptiness in two more ways. I have already explained Emptiness in multiple ways in regard to our personal psychology and meditative experience. I have written about our own personal Emptiness as we discover in meditation. Now if we extend this understanding we can think of our own personal Emptiness as giving our own psychology a sort of fluidity which allows it to respond with infinite variety to the stimulus of the outside world. It is because of the mind's underlying Emptiness that it is not fixed in its potential. It is because of the mind's underlying Emptiness that the mind can perfectly reflect the exterior world in the various sense fields. It is because of our underlying Emptiness that we can freely respond to the stimulus of the world.

In a similar way it is thought that Emptiness is the essential underlying nature of the Absolute, the Universe, not only in its whole but also in its parts. We can again think that it is because of this Emptiness as giving the Absolute the ability to manifest in its infinite variety of form.

In the Heart Sutra there is an equivalence stated between form and Emptiness. "That which is form is Emptiness, that which is Emptiness, form." Here we see Emptiness as not just a characteristic of things but rather as their essential nature as manifestations of the Absolute. No matter what form manifests it cannot be separated from Emptiness.

On a bright sunny day I look at a blade of grass blow in the wind and think how it is just a temporary and fragile manifestation of energy. If it is cut from its roots and thereby cut from its constantly renewing source of energy it will quickly wither and in a few weeks completely disintegrate. All living things are like this though the time scale of disintegration may be different. Even non-living forms are impermanent always changing, reacting, eroding, evolving. In the Diamond Sutra it says:

Thus shall we think of this fleeting world:
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.

Scientists tell us that solidity is an illusion. Most of what we think of as a solid object is just space. What we feel and see as solidity is just the results of energy fields. The deeper scientists investigate in this realm of the sub-atomic, the more difficult it is to separate matter, energy, and space. Einstein's famous equation $E=mc^2$ states an equivalence between mass and energy. From this we can think of matter as some sort of concentration of energy. And now physicists are playing with the idea that on a subatomic scale the building blocks of matter are just a sort of concentration of space.

Ancient and modern Buddhist practitioners have had insights into the equivalence of matter, space and energy through meditation, though certainly not in the detail of the physicist. When all preconceived notions are dropped in meditation, including all notions of individual thingness then the mind becomes free to see reality in a completely different way. This goes beyond just being free of opinions and ideas. This is the experience of the world as something other than we normally experience it, and in this new view the world is not without characteristics. Though difficult to explain this non-dual view resulting from long periods of meditation does have a certain logic.

I had been practicing meditation for 14 days, the two back to back retreats were over and now as I attempted to partake in everyday life everything had changed. The world seemed to be charged with an intensity of color beyond my normal experience. I watched people walk down the street and read their emotions and thoughts on their faces. My mind was absolutely quiet, without any inner dialogue and yet I could still interact and talk and direct attention. And when I did direct attention the attention would hone in like an arrow and the intensity was so strong it was a bit scary. Yet beyond these

somewhat surface changes, though I could see individual forms and hear individual sounds, I had this overwhelming recognition that all this was functioning within one body. This was not just an intellectual recognition but it was the way the world looked. Normally we focus on one thing at a time and see that thing as separate from everything else. Separated by the space.. But I didn't see space as empty but rather as having substance. Things appeared as imbedded in space rather than separated by space. Nothing could be separated I was looking at one thing, one body, that included everything. Sometimes this view is likened to an Ocean. In Zen this view is sometimes called the Great Buddha Sea and experienced from a state of mind called Ocean King Samadhi. The modern Zen teacher Katagari Roshi wrote how we can not separate the ocean from the fish and the fish from the ocean. What the Ocean is depends on the fish and what the fish is depends on the ocean. In the same way we cannot separate space from objects. This is not an intellectual idea this is an experience, a realization, the view from non-duality.. And when the world is seen this way it all, space and matter, seems to have this quality of not being quite real, but still we cannot call it an illusion. It is like a fluid in constant change.. Things are not seen as in motion against a background of space The whole thing is just fluid in flux. It is all seen as, to use our modern vocabulary, energy.. But the ancient term Sunyata or Emptiness is maybe a better term. Form is energy and energy is form. Form is Emptiness and Emptiness is form . The ancient Buddhist mystics saw Emptiness as the essential nature of things, of the world ,of the absolute.

This word Emptiness can be understood in a variety of ways but most of all it connotes the mystery of it all. There is no real understanding that we can grab a hold of, nothing substantial that can be said..beyond the recognition of this Oneness. and the constant change within that is in front of us all the time. The view from non-duality changes everything. All dualistic ideas are gone; no good, no evil, no birth, and no death. Even our cherished understanding of cause and effect breaks down as we cannot separate cause from effect. Hakuin Zenji the 17th Century Japanese Zen Master called it “the oneness of cause and effect.” In some strange way the whole thing the entire Universe is working to create whatever is created..

But what is even stranger is that as soon as we become conscious of this Oneness then we also become aware that this consciousness of Oneness is actually the self consciousness of this Oneness and that this Oneness is our true self. It is like the Universe has woken up from the dream of being a human and looked at itself and become self aware. The Universe awoke in the body of Siddhartha Gautama of the Shakya tribe and became Buddha. The Universe has awoken in countless human bodies throughout the 2500 years since Shakyamuni Buddha. This is simply being Buddha. The Universe may also be awakening in non-human bodies throughout the Universe.. I don't know.

Shakimuni started with a quest to understand how to be happy, a very human quest. This is still the starting point for most practitioners of Buddhism. He taught us how to liberate ourselves from the ideas and attachments that cause our suffering But ultimately what he discovered is liberation from being human, which we might say is being truly human.