

Friday Evening Dharma Talk  
1/11/13

Emptiness: at the heart of the foundations of mindfulness

Emptiness, *sunyata*, is fundamental to Buddhist teaching and practice, particularly in the Zen tradition. It is also mostly misapprehended and feared. This is the result of what Adyashanti calls an *innocent mistake*. There is a tendency, in our culture of excess and abundance, to think of emptiness as a bleak, desolate, lonely, barren, isolated place. As an adjective, it means something is missing: an empty cup, an empty promise, an empty store. Some teachers try to soften this image by turning it into a verb, *emptying*, which may lead us to think of it as a process of “getting rid of.” We can imagine emptying out a closet, but we don’t want to think of the world this way, or our relationships, or absolutely not ourselves. Ultimately, though, *sunyata* is not a noun—a barren place—, an adjective—something lacking qualities or features—, or a verb—a process of removing something or losing something. It’s hard to shake these cultural connotations of the word emptiness, so my preference is to use the word *unborn*, although that too is only an approximation. So I’ll try a little bit to convey a sense of this most misunderstood teaching that is aligned with what we are teaching here.

Consider the zero in mathematics: without which higher math functions (beyond counting on your hands and toes) are impossible, without which we would have no modern civilization (or what passes for civilization, anyway. The Dalai Lama when asked what he thought of Western Civilization responded, “I think it would be a good idea!”); we would have no computers, cellphones, or internet, all of which speak a language of ones and zeros. Think about the importance of holding a space which contains nothing, the operations that depend on the empty place that is held. There is a terrific book by Charles Seife called *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea*. Here’s how it is described: *The Babylonians invented it, the Greeks banned it, the Hindus worshiped it, and the Church used it to fend off heretics. Now it threatens the foundations of modern physics. For centuries the power of zero savored of the demonic; once harnessed, it became the most important tool in mathematics. For zero, infinity's twin, is not like other numbers. It is both nothing and everything.*

My advisor in graduate school trained as a pilot. He told us a cloud is not a “thing.” Its molecular composition is exactly the same as the surrounding sky. It’s just that those molecules have wandered into conditions which render them visible. I said, oh! That’s what we are too!

Of course we “know,” although we certainly don’t act out of this knowledge, that physics has studied what matter is actually made of at the most microscopic levels, and what they keep discovering is more levels of...nothing. Or rather, at more and more quantum levels of *looking*, there is more and more space to discover, and less and less

solidity. First they thought we were made up of atoms, which were solid, then when they looked more closely, what seemed solid was actually composed of smaller “particles,” which seemed like planets orbiting in vast reaches of space. And then as they looked even closer, with more powerful instruments, even these particles were revealed to be made up mostly of space. The rest is vibration, dancing quickly enough to give the impression of solidity. That is what we are made of: space and vibration.

Emptiness in the Mahayana tradition is the ground of compassion when we have become groundless. Emptiness not as barrenness or desolation, but as the unborn. As you are before the question is asked, the question that evokes a response (from where?) out of the unborn, out of emptiness. Everything that comes into being arises out of this emptiness and is permeated by it. When all conditioning, stories, perceptions, emotions, even all awareness of the body falls away, emptiness is the spaciousness that has always been there. Form *is* emptiness, emptiness *is* form. The best you can say is *not two*, as the great Zen master Dogen put it. Emptiness really means *empty of a separate, independent existence*. This is a splendid teaching on *sunyata* and relationality.

Everything arises together, in the midst of emptiness, the Buddha’s teaching on *paticca samupada*, which means mutual dependence or dependent co-arising—*interbeing*, in Thich Nhat Hanh’s term.

Emptiness is pure potentiality. As when we clear out a room like this of all its old furniture, so that it is *ready for* whatever we want to do in it: zazen, inquiry, workshops, Christmas with family. It is free and available. We could easily call this *sunyata readiness*, as when we refer to *relationality*, the capacity and potential for connecting that is always available.

Being together in this intimate, simplified way of living, we can experience this directly in embodied practices, rather than simply hearing about it or thinking about it conceptually.

Our aspiration comes out of the space that we open for it to move.

So, looking back at the foundations of mindfulness we’ve been studying this week, we can consider them from the perspective of *sunyata*, the unborn, openness, spaciousness, potentiality. And we study all of this in the context of our human connection and relationality.

Form *and* emptiness of the body and the breath. Although we may believe in the substance and reality of the body, in truth it is mostly made up of space and dynamic relationships with everything in and around it.

Form *and* emptiness of the feelings of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. What at first is sensed as unpleasant may come to be experienced as pleasant or neutral, what is

neutral may become pleasant. You can certainly think of foods you despised as a child and have now come to love. You can probably remember people you had crushes on in middle school.

Form *and* emptiness of emotions and thoughts. Where is that anger you were feeling yesterday? How solid is that compelling idea about what you need to do tomorrow? Form *and* emptiness of all objects of mind, heart, body, all stories about who I am, who you are, and what the world is. What happened to the whole medical establishment—journal articles, techniques, equipment, training, around bloodletting? My sense of who I am when I was 18, the shift in my model of “parent” between whatever my experience was at age 6 and at age 21?

Everything is continually emptying out and filling back up again, emptying out, and emergence of what wants to happen next, unhindered. Our practice is the release of certainty in the service of improvisation, creativity, and openness to possibility. *Marga*, the Buddha’s teaching about the 8-fold path, as Flint has often said, literally means the part of the river at the center where the water flows unhindered. That is *the free movement of sunyata*. And when we are blocked or hindered, that too is *sunya*, the functioning of emptiness and form in a timeless dance.

Building on last night’s story about Lisa. Do this with a partner.

- Don’t know exercise
- Hand on the back:
  - Stand together in mindfulness. Let yourself become aware of breathing and body. if there were words what would they be?
- Teaching: In a single ordinary moment, a potentially nourishing event, the whole thing unfolds. Body, breath, feelings, emotions, thoughts, concept and story. You don’t need a massive impact to experience this life as vast, incomparably rich, subtle, and profound. Only in the midst of emptiness could everything appear, and it is only to emptiness that everything returns.
- The moment:

### **The Moment**

From *The Good Thief*, by Marie Howe

It was like the moment when a bird decides not to eat from your hand, and flies, just before it flies, the moment the rivers seem to still and stop because a storm is coming, but there is no storm, as when a hundred starlings lift and bank together before they wheel and drop, very much like the moment, driving on bad ice, when it occurs to you your car could spin, just before it slowly begins to spin, like the moment just before you forgot what it was you were about to say, it was like that, and after that, it was still like that, only all the time.