OUR EMPTINESS IS OUR INSEPARABILITY

A BUDDHIST TEACHING FOR OUR TIME

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I first encountered the Buddhist doctrine of "emptiness" in a high school humanities class taught by a well-meaning English teacher who, I later learned, had no idea what she was talking about. She presented "emptiness" as void, zero, *nada*, zilch: a common misconception. I wondered why anyone's religious goal would be to achieve *nothing*. Five years later, however, I got a first glimpse into this teaching—a moment that changed my life and set me firmly on the Buddhist path. In the decades since, my understanding has developed, and in my present work as a hospice chaplain who encounters death weekly, if not daily, this teaching comforts and inspires me in the face of my own and others' mortality. It has proven fundamental to my interfaith and anti-racist efforts, as well. Before explaining that last sentence, it seems important to explain some basic Buddhist ideas.

"Emptiness" (*śūnyatā* in Sanskrit) is another way of talking about the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman*, or "not-self." *Anātman* is one of three Buddhist premises about the nature of reality; the others are *anitya* (impermanence) and *pratītya-samutpāda* (dependent origination). *Anitya* means that everything is impermanent; the only constant is that everything changes. Whatever appears solid to us is actually process: transitory confluences of ever-changing events.

The second premise derives from the first: if everything is process, then nothing has any independent, unchanging, eternal existence, essence, or "self": *anātman*. In the Chandogya Upanishad, a Vedic text that predates Buddhism, the *ātman* is said to be one with Brahman, the Ground of Being or Ultimate Reality. An individual *ātman* transmigrates through lifetime after lifetime, in an endless cycle of birth, death, rebirth, and re-death (*samsāra*). One's fate in each lifetime is determined by the cumulative effects of one's actions (*karma*) in previous lifetimes. During the Buddha's life, many people renounced worldly pursuits and became wandering ascetics, devoting themselves to disciplines (yogas) that they hoped would help them realize union with Brahman and thereby achieve moksha, or liberation from samsāra, at death. (Birth isn't so bad, but dying generally isn't much fun.) The Buddha became such a wandering ascetic himself at age 29. When he began teaching six years later, however, he denied that anything has ātman and claimed that attachment to this idea produces *dūḥkha*, or dissatisfaction, even suffering.

An early Buddhist analogy likened the "self" to a chariot that is composed of a frame, wheels, axles, seat, reins, and draught-pole: disassemble these constituents, and there is no essential "cart-ness" to be found in them.[1] Likewise, the human was said to be composed of five *skandhas* ("heaps" or "aggregates"), which are constantly interacting and changing.

1. form (physical, material, tangible body)
2. feelings (positive, negative, and neutral reactions to stimuli)
3. perceptions (inputs from our five sense organs and the mind)
4. mental formations (thoughts, habits of mind, intellectual constructs)
5. consciousness (awareness)

Apart from these, the self (our personhood) does not exist. The skandhas collectively are not the "self"; the *skandhas* do not "have" a self and the self does not "have" *skandhas*; nor is the self "in" the *skandhas*; nor are the *skandhas* "in" the self.

The third Buddhist premise about the nature of reality is *pratītya-samutpāda,* which means "dependent origination" or "interdependent co-arising." This doctrine says that all things arise, abide, and pass away according to causes and conditions in a continuous flow. If the causes and conditions producing a particular phenomenon cease, the phenomenon based on them also ceases. The self (and all apparent phenomena) are intersecting, interpenetrating processes, all the way down. This is true moment by moment, as well as lifetime after lifetime.[2]

Some early Indian Buddhist philosophers explained no-self in terms of a constant flow of *dharmas*—the essential building blocks of physical and psychological reality. Dharmas were seen as irreducible, like atoms in Newtonian physics, or like the subatomic and elementary particles discovered since.[3] Different schools of early Indian Buddhism composed their own "periodic tables" of *dharmas*, with differing numbers of elements. Some referred to physical qualities (taste, sound, fragrance, color/shape, tangibility, vitality, decay), but most were mental, psychological, or emotional (volition, perception, memory, determination, faith, shame, diligence, etc.) Phenomena were the result of *dharmas* continually arising, interacting, and disappearing, moment after moment. Each dharma had only one characteristic, and it was "real" in some essential sense, even though its existence was fleeting. The apparent "self" composed of dharmas was not "real," however. It had no essential, irreducible existence; it was just a compilation in a state of change. This is similar to the skandha theory, but dharmas were seen as more fundamental.

Abidharmic speculation got pretty abstract and obscure. The Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (circa 150–250 CE) launched another evolution in Buddhist thought by asserting that all dharmas are also "empty", viz., that they, too, lack any independent, unchanging, eternal essence, however fleeting. To say that phenomena are "empty" is *not* the same as saying they do not exist. It means that phenomena exist *relationally*. Night and day, up and down, faith and doubt, *samsāra* and *nirvāna* only have meaning, and can only be

understood or experienced, in relation to their opposites. Their existence is thus *relative*, not absolute.

Nāgārjuna also said there are Two Truths: absolute truth, about which nothing can be accurately said, because it is beyond conception or description; and relative truth, which is our ordinary, day-to-day reality. On the absolute level, there is no essential self and nothing exists separately; on the relative level, we experience continuity as a "self" throughout our lifetime, and we walk around inside separate skins, bumping into things that seem solid. Both are true simultaneously, and awakening entails recognizing both at once. Even though phenomena are "empty" of essence, that does not mean they are "unreal" and that one can do whatever one wishes, as if nothing mattered. Despite the absence of a permanent self on the absolute level, our conduct definitely has consequences on the relative level. Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka philosophy became extremely influential in Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese forms of Buddhism.

Nāgārjuna's emptiness teaching was sometimes misunderstood as nihilistic, however. In response, the fourth-century Yogācāra school of Buddhist philosophy developed a theory that multiple layers of consciousness collectively produce an apparent "self," though it, too, is insubstantial on the level of absolute reality. The Hua-yen School of Buddhism developed in China on the basis of teachings in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, which describes no-self in psychedelic or holographic terms. Emptiness is explained there as "interpenetration": the mutual presence of all things simultaneously, everywhere. *Anything* toward which you point contains *everything* else in the universe. For example, a piece of paper is composed not just of wood and chemicals, but of sun and rain and the logger and her chainsaw, and the trucking company and the millworkers and their families, on a planet just the right distance from its sun to sustain organic life, and so on and so on, endlessly. Another simile is a holographic plate that has been shattered, the tiniest fragment of which can be used to project the entire three-dimensional image. Thich Nhat Hanh, a popular modern Zen master from Vietnam, has used the term "Interbeing" to describe this way of looking at things.

Five years after the high school humanities class mentioned above, I began exploring Buddhism again during college. Within a few miles of U.C. Berkeley, a dizzying variety of traditions and lineages are represented, and I visited many of these communities, eventually settling into Sōtō Zen. During the fall semester of 1984, my junior year of college, I lived at Green Gulch Farm/Green Dragon Zen Temple, one of three residential communities run by San Francisco Zen Center. Near the end of my stay, at the end of an all-day meditation retreat, I recalled a riot-geared policeman I had encountered in my job as a reporter for Berkeley's daily newspaper the previous summer, at one of many violent demonstrations against Ronald Reagan's impending re-election to the US Presidency.

Reagan was backed by a coalition of fundamentalist Christians led by Jerry Falwell and Phyllis Schlafly, who dubbed themselves the "Moral Majority." Their self-righteous, exclusivist, homophobic rhetoric seemed profoundly violent to me. So did the rage of protesting groups like the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee, which appeared almost ready to lynch Falwell if they could have gotten their hands on him. And police inflicted brutality on unarmed protesters and volunteer medics. I was devastated by the experience and could not take sides. My timeout at Green Gulch was an opportunity to sift through it all.

I had encountered the police officer I envisioned during that retreat outside a Moral Majority convention, which was scheduled in San Francisco a week before the Democratic National Convention, as a sort of in-your-face to the city's LGBT community. The cop's face behind his face shield was stony, as he shoved unresisting pedestrians onto the sidewalk with his nightstick. He seemed like the antithesis of everything I thought was good, right, and true. And then, for an instant, the boundary between him and me dissolved, and I realized that I was who I was, where I was, doing what I was doing, because (in part) he was who he was, where he was, doing what he was doing. Our lives were utterly intertwined, though we met for only an instant. And I had precisely the same capacity for dogmatism and self-righteousness that I perceived in those I critiqued. In other words, he who seems most "other" than me is inseparable from me; my existence depends on his. The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) conveys a similar teaching. Three years later I formally made vows as a lay student of Sōtō Zen, and sixteen years after that I deepened those vows, receiving ordination as a priest. Since then, I have made my living both as an academic and as a chaplain, serving specifically Buddhist communities as well as hospice patients of any faith or none.

In 2015, I was working as a Buddhist chaplain in Baltimore, which erupted in violent protest after the death of Freddie Gray, who died of spinal cord injuries incurred while in police custody, despite his repeated pleas for medical help. It is part of a long litany of similar tragedies, before and since. At the time, I was leading a group of undergraduates at Johns Hopkins University through a study of the Heart Sūtra, the central scripture of Sōtō Zen. Its key lines are: "Form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form."[4] Another translation says, "form is not separate from boundlessness; boundlessness is not separate from form. Form is boundlessness; boundlessness is form."[5] How could such a text shed light on the tragedy in our own city, just blocks away from the relatively sheltered university campus?

Answers can be found in our own bodies and minds, and mine had never felt *Whiter* than it did at that time. I had lived in Baltimore for a year and a half, teaching comparative religion at a Catholic university, and visited the neighborhood that burned for the first time on the day before protest exploded into riot. I had gone there to attend a lecture at a predominantly Black American mosque. On the way home, I drove down North Ave., past block after block after block after block of boarded-up, falling-down, blighted buildings, and people obviously suffering poverty, addiction, and despair. I was dumbfounded and aghast. *How had I not seen this before?* I had managed to travel paths through town that ran through the affluent university neighborhoods where I lived and worked, full of tree-lined streets and elegant mansions. I went on to learn the history of Baltimore, where racist policies like redlining and neighborhood covenants excluding Blacks and Jews were pioneered, then spread across the country.[6]

After the city was occupied by the National Guard and curfews imposed to curb violent protest, my neighborhood and the freeway my high-rise apartment building overlooked were silent. But just over the hills, I could see and hear police helicopters circling all night long. Students in my classrooms who lived or worked in occupied neighborhoods spoke of children there who could not imagine living past twenty, much less having careers. The fact that my White privilege depends on this level of disadvantage and suffering for others is a very clear example of interdependent co-arising: because this is, that is. Seeing the interdependence of things, the emptiness *of* forms, can be blissful, but emptiness *is form* means that conventional, relative reality is true too, and our actions, individual and collective, have consequences in this real world. Our individual greed, hate, and ignorance cause suffering, and so does institutionalized greed, prejudice, and the delusion that we are, or could ever be, truly separated.

Emptiness means we are *absolutely inseparable*. In my hospice work, this gives me comfort because I believe that although things change, and people die, love and relationships endure, and nothing is ever truly lost. Because everything is related to everything else, what I do and how I live has consequences far beyond my individual self. When I die, what remains of me and the relationships I've built will still circulate in the world, and hopefully some of it will bring some benefit here and there. My collaborations with religious "others" also arise from a deep conviction that we are all in this hurting world together and can only heal it together.

If we really understood our fundamental indivisibility, might that not change how we walk down the street and encounter people who seem very "other"? What if we said to ourselves, "That person is not *other than* me?" Might this not improve how we organize our economic systems, our political systems, our legal systems? Might it not influence our responses to the most urgent crises besetting humanity today: structural racism, political polarization, income inequality, immigrant and refugee crises, climate change, mass extinction, war? *What if we really, truly fathomed that our own wellbeing, safety, and happiness are intimately connected to the wellbeing, safety, and happiness of not just other people, but all beings everywhere?* The Heart Sūtra says the one who realizes emptiness has no fear. Fearlessness and tenacity in working for change are necessary to create environments in which no one needs to live in fear. In Buddhism, the most basic practice is not meditation but generosity, which is defined as material aid, spiritual aid, and the gift of fearlessness.

The novel coronavirus, the Black Lives Matter movement, and climate change: all are fierce, compassionate Zen Masters whacking us upside the head with a teaching about how we are all connected. If we have ears to hear and eyes to see, they can help us "get over ourselves," our self-preoccupations, and work together with others to make a better world. In doing so, we must never lose sight of the fact that those with whom we passionately disagree are inseparable from us as well, lest we fall into the very evil we oppose. Form is boundaryless; boundarylessness, form. Our emptiness is our inseparability.

NOTES

1 Vajra Sutra, SN 5:10, Milindapanha, 3.1.1

2 One way to describe the process is the "Twelvefold Chain of Causation."

1. Ignorance gives rise to
2. Impulses/tendencies/propensities, which give rise to
3. Consciousness, which gives rise to
4. Name and form (the act of recognizing and identifying objects, and the five *skandhas*), which condition
5. The six sense fields (the five sense organs and the mind), which make possible
6. Contact (with "the world out there"), which generates
7. Feeling, which leads to
8. Desire, which leads to
9. Clinging, which leads to
10. Becoming, which leads to
11. Birth, which leads to
12. Aging, sickness and death, with their attendant suffering.

Each link in the chain depends on the previous one; the cycle can be described forward or backward (death depends on birth, which depends on becoming, which depends on clinging, etc.). Through meditation practice, one can become intimately familiar with how such processes occur moment-by-moment within one's own body-mind and create the illusion of selfhood. Seeing through the delusion, one can be freed (at least momentarily) from the cycle. This is one description of what "enlightenment" means.

3 String Theory, which is based on mathematics I do not comprehend, suggests that even these elementary particles can be viewed as one-dimensional "strings" of energy that vibrate in different ways to produce phenomena.

4 Sōtō-shū Scriptures for Chanting and Daily Practice.

5 Trans. Joan Halifax and Kazuaki Tanahashi. Italics mine.

6 Antero Pietila, *Not In My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee: 2010).

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