

Emptiness Teachings – the middle way

Who Realizes?

Coming from other nondual contexts, we may ask, “Who is it that realizes emptiness?” This question is a show-stopping scandal for some teachings. It removes their ability to even talk about what happens!

But this is no problem for the emptiness teachings. They draw a working distinction between the inherent self, which is falsely thought to exist, and an everyday conventional self, which depends on a label applied to pieces, parts and functions. It is the everyday, conventional self that realizes its emptiness. Of course, this is a casual way of speaking that can't be taken 100% seriously. If it were regarded as 100% seriously, it would not make sense. But it is enough to work with.

It is very important to realize the emptiness of the self. But we can't stop there. We have to realize the emptiness of the components, relations and attributions that go into the construction of the self. This is because we can't give our tendency to cling and exaggerate any place to hold onto. When we keep meditating with great focus and intensity, we end up realizing the emptiness of everything all at once. This is earth-shattering and lovingly freeing.

Emptiness and Suffering

In the classic Buddhist presentation of the emptiness teachings, the suffering of beings is based on reification, that is, on taking things as existing in an exaggerated, inherent, objective, independent way. Taking things in this way makes us cling to the things we want, and be averse to the things we don't want. It's almost as if we attribute the desirability or uselessness as an actual property inherent to the things themselves. We feel that something is really there. Or really not there.

But things aren't like that. So it's inevitable that we suffer, since things we feel really should exist seem to fade away after a while (like our lives or other things we like). Or things we really feel should not exist seem to appear on the scene (like pain, affliction, poverty, disease, death and being criticized on the internet!).

The clinging, grasping and aversion are very deep-seated. According to the Buddhist teachings, they are based not understanding how things are. It's like we think that the things we like are really, truly there. Things we don't like are really truly not there. We are then repeatedly surprised by the flux of experience.

The Fruition of Emptiness

When we deeply experience things as empty of true existence, we are freed from this reification. The more deeply we understand and experience emptiness, the less we experience these deep-seated afflictive states of mind. We become freer and freer. Our selves and all things are experienced as self-liberating at the very moment they arise. They are empty, which is the exact reason they can seem to



come and go as they do. They feel light, free, luminous and kaleidoscopic. The heart breaks open towards other people and things. It is a closer-than-close intimacy and a loving, non-referential joy.

This is the only purpose of “emptiness.” It is not a view to cling to as “true.” Instead, it solves an urgent practical problem.

Emptiness and Compassion

In some nondual teachings, there is not very much emphasis on how we interact with others. It is common to hear that “there are no others.” I have heard many times that if we sincerely care about others, this is proof that our understanding is not very deep. After all “there are no others.”

“No others.” “No self.” This is very old news to the emptiness teachings. Somewhat paradoxically, the emptiness teachings acknowledge that there are no others in just the same way that there is no self. This is exactly why the conventionally-designated self and others can find happiness. The emptiness of self and others is what permits me to feel compassion towards myself and extend it out to others. If we were truly existent as we feel we are, we could not change or interact with others.

So in the classical emptiness teachings, compassion is encouraged. It is even taught in a person’s Buddhist education before one receives the emptiness teachings. The current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso once said,

If you want others to be happy, practice compassion.

If you want to be happy, practice compassion.

Compassion in this sense is the wish that others become free of suffering, and that they be well and happy. This kind of compassion not explained exactly like it is in Western psychological terms as “feeling” (passion) “with” (com). It is more holistic and integrated, and includes a deep wish that other beings become free of suffering, along with a sense of intention to help them towards this freedom, just as we would like help too. There is a deep motivation to actively help others too.

The more deeply we have this motivation, the easier it is to see things as empty. And the more we see things as empty, the more deeply we feel this motivation.

What does it mean to practice compassion in this sense? In these teachings it is a process of extending my insights, motivations and actions from myself to others. I can extend the wish that I be happy to other beings. I can extend the intent to help free myself from unhappiness to others. And I can include others as recipients of the benefits of my actions.

One way to get into this is to do the “metta” meditations. You can do a google search for “metta meditation” or “loving kindness meditation”. It is wonderful way to feel yourself as empty and radiate this to others. This movement of the heart is possible exactly because all this is empty.



It's Global

It is not just the self that is empty. Everything is empty in the same way.

For something to be empty is for it to depend on other things (which are also empty). My “self” doesn’t stand alone. It depends on a body, a mind, and on being labeled as a “self.” Apart from all these things, there is simply no self to be found.

And like turtles, it goes all the way.

Rocks, trees, bridges, planets, sentient beings, bodies, minds, thoughts, emotions, memories, truths, standards, certainties, pain and suffering, joy and happiness, afflictive and enlightened states of mind. None of it is truly there. The more closely we look, the more we don’t find these things. And yet I can go to the store, pay my bills, talk to others, and hug my wife!

Do I Have to Be Buddhist?

You do not have to follow Buddhism to benefit by the emptiness teachings. Of course Buddhism has ready-made contexts for working with emptiness. But you can combine the various insights and realizations with your own path. By working with the emptiness teachings, you end up not taking things as solid, fixed, and separate. Things are free to move and float.

You don’t need to adopt Buddhist imagery, role models and meditations, though they are there in case they can be of service. There are plenty of analogous Western teachings that critique the same targets that the Buddhist emptiness teachings critique: skepticism, pragmatism, social construction, deconstruction, epistemological holism and many others. The book I have written with Tomas Sander, called “Emptiness and Joyful Freedom,” is like a tour guide to these Western paths.

Emptiness in Context

The emptiness teachings say that nothing stands on its own. This includes the emptiness teachings themselves. To realize emptiness most deeply requires a compassionate heart, and a steady, intensely focused mind. The emptiness teachings are powerful and effective even without these other aspects, but with them, your realizations are taken from the conceptual to the non-conceptual. This is altogether more earth-shattering and far-reaching.

So there is some work involved, but for those who resonate with this approach, it pays off billions of times over.

Avoiding Eternalism and Nihilism

The classic Buddhist emptiness teachings do not affirm existence or non-existence. To affirm existence would be to claim that things exist on their own, without help from anything else. The self doesn’t have existence. It doesn’t have non-existence. It doesn’t have both. And it doesn’t have neither.



To affirm existence is to fall to the extreme of eternalism. It would be to affirm that the self (or other things) is really, truly, objectively there. To really be there, it would never have been able to come into being. And it would never perish. The self would have to exist without help from anything else. It would then be unable to change or respond to conditions. It would be fixed and frozen in place. I wouldn't be able to go to the store. I would be right there, the way I exist, unrelated to other things.

To deny existence is to fall to the extreme of nihilism. If the self utterly lacked existence, then I also couldn't go to the store. There would be absolutely no "me" and no store.

The emptiness teachings go the "middle way," without falling to either extreme.

Emptiness and Awareness

Emptiness is not a synonym for global awareness. There is not just one overall emptiness. Things don't arise from emptiness or subside back into emptiness. Instead, emptiness is the mode of existence that things have. It means that things cannot be found when looked for closely. Emptiness is not applied to things. That is, things aren't empty because of something big called "emptiness." Rather, to be in the first place is already to be empty.

Emptiness and awareness are separate teachings. There are cases, such as Dzogchen and Scott Kiloby's Living Realization teachings, where they are combined. But this is not always done.

What I find interesting is that either one of these paths, awareness, and emptiness, can function just fine without help from the other. Neither one needs the other. Neither one can be reduced to the other. Neither one requires an external standard that reconciles them. They don't need to be reconciled any more than French and German need to be reconciled.

Awareness paths tend to show how everything is awareness. They take sort of a reductive route, showing how things that seem to be separate are just awareness. Nothing is separate and objective. That which knows = that which is known. In this knowledge there is no beginning or end, no fear or death.

Most awareness teachings do not treat awareness in a way that the emptiness teachings would consider to be "empty." In many awareness teachings, phenomena depend on awareness, but awareness doesn't depend on phenomena. Whether phenomena are present or not, it is said that "Awareness is."

There is no notion like that in the emptiness teachings. There is nothing in the emptiness teachings that is said to be able to stand on its own.

For example, in the emptiness teachings, awareness is empty because it depends on other things. It depends on the object it is aware of. It depends on a previous moment of awareness and its own temporal parts. It depends on a sentient being who has the ability to be aware of things. So in the emptiness teachings, one doesn't reduce everything to awareness.



Things depend on awareness, and awareness depends on things. Speaking of awareness as the seer, Nagarjuna says:

If it can abide
Without the seen, etc.,
Then, without a doubt,
They can abide without it.

– *Nagarjuna's Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way (Mulamadhyamakakarika), IX:4, Jay Garfield translation*

This verse was pivotal for me in coming to understand emptiness after being more familiar with the awareness teachings. It illustrates how the seer and seen depend on each other.

Whereas the awareness teachings show how everything is awareness, the emptiness teachings show how things are empty by depending on each other. The emptiness teachings don't reduce things to any one basic phenomenon. Instead, they demonstrate that nothing stands objectively on its own, because everything depends on other things. In logical terms,

X depends on not-X

And "not-X" includes a vast array of factors. It includes the parts of X, the relations that X has to other things, the history leading up to X, and the fact of being designated as an X. Because X depends on all these things, it cannot exist in the exaggerated way we think it does. Because of these dependencies, X can never be frozen, solid or fixed. It becomes light and flexible. Everything becomes luminous and self-liberating.

Each of these paths is able to end suffering without requiring you to do the other path as well. Most people are naturally more inclined towards one of these paths more than the other. And it's not always a matter of high-sounding philosophical statements. Most often, it's a matter of heart, resonance, and poetic magic.

Styles of Realization, or "I AM," "I am consciousness," "I am everything"

Ilona asked me to say a few things about these realizations.

It is no surprise that different paths have different realization styles. Because things are empty, there is the flexibility of the realization to depend on the path, just like the path depends on the realization. The emptiness teachings don't posit inherently existent realizations or states of mind that are the same for everyone in all paths. Emptiness is at peace with mutual dependencies. That is, dependencies where paths, states and realizations depend on each other.

For example, I have scores of Buddhist texts on emptiness, and I don't find realizations that are articulated in these terms: "I AM," "I am consciousness," "I am everything." The "I" is not spoken about like that in the emptiness teachings. The "I" in the emptiness teachings is not treated as fundamental, basic or essential. The "I" is very important, since that's where the problems are experienced. And one must realize its emptiness. But in emptiness realization, the "I" does not spread out and become everything. The "I" is not so grand. Not so ... serious.



When we work with the self, the “I”, we realize its emptiness. But the “I” is not the **only** thing we realize the emptiness of. If we stopped inquiring when we reached “the ‘I’ is empty,” then there is the distinct possibility that the “I” could reconstitute itself, coming back in a stronger way, more difficult to detect. This would be possible because we haven’t realized the emptiness of everything, and our tendency to reify things is still there.

So from the perspective of the emptiness teachings, the realization “I am everything” would not be considered a realization of emptiness. Neither would “I AM,” or “I am awareness.” Depending on the details of the realizations, the emptiness teachings may very well consider these realizations to indicate the extreme of essentialism and eternalism.

But that is OK. The other paths don’t have the obligation to articulate their realizations so that the emptiness teachings approve of them! Other paths don’t need to see everything as “empty.” That is the job of the emptiness teachings.

If we took the opposite case, we may see a mismatch as well. That is, from the perspective of an awareness-style nondual teaching, the emptiness-style realization “The self is empty because it depends on other things” would not be considered to be very impressive. It may be considered very weak tea indeed. From the awareness-style perspective, one would think that “realizer” has missed out on the most important thing of all, seamless global presence-awareness.

When we see our path as empty, we don’t feel the necessity that everyone should become free in the same way. We won’t expect our path to serve as the global template for other paths. We won’t expect other paths to be reduced to our path. We won’t expect 100% inter-translatibility.

This is OK too. The only thing that paths need to do is help free us from confusion, affliction and suffering, and help us treat ourselves and others better. Paths don’t need their realizations to literally translate to other paths. There might be lots and lots of common ground and shared vocabulary. But to demand 100% inter-translatibility across paths in states and stages would be to fall into eternalism. It would be saying, “Things are the SAME everywhere.” This demand would be coming from a reification of some mind-state, evaluative standard, or aspect of reality that is being taken as a standard for all views. The emptiness teachings would reply, “Neither the same, nor different, nor neither, nor both.”

The question may arise, “I have realized that I am everything. Do I need to study emptiness?”

If someone were to ask me that question, I would say, “Are you happy and content? Are you kinder than you were ten years ago? Do you love more?”

If they answer “Yes,” then I would say, “No, you don’t need to study emptiness.”

If they answer “No” to all these questions, then I might ask, “What happens when you hear the word emptiness?”

If they said, “I feel an eerie chill of excitement and a sense of unstoppable curiosity,” then I would say, “Give it a try!”



Before and After Realization

In some nondual paths, there is not a whole lot to say about “after the fact.” The teachings may very well stop at that point. They have no words for what comes after. If you tell someone that you realized the Truth of nonduality, and that you are now meditating on something, they will think, “Greg is deluded. If he had realized, then he knows there is no one to meditate. This means he has not realized.”

But the emptiness teachings are much different. You can realize emptiness conceptually, which lightens your life and your sense of self tremendously. If you cultivate calm abiding, it can come together in a union with the emptiness teachings, and you can also realize emptiness directly in a non-conceptual way. This kind of realization is global. It is a nondual experience, and includes the realization of the emptiness of all things simultaneously. It eradicates your conceptual confusion forever. You won’t ever believe again that things exist on their own, or that they utterly lack existence.

And even after that, you can still meditate on emptiness! Things just get better. It can be part of a fascinating, thrilling, heart-opening way of life, even though your own suffering has been left behind a long time ago. At that point, you are primarily motivated by your wish that others become free of suffering. So you keep on going.

How can it work like that?

It is because of what emptiness is. It is non-findability of stuff that functions in an everyday way. When we realize that something is empty, we are realizing how it is related to other things. There are infinite ways to realize this. And the more you do it, the richer, sweeter and more flavorful it gets. It’s not a chore or an obligation, but one of the most fascinating and delightful things in life.

In fact, in the orthodox Buddhist emptiness teachings, it is said that we continue to meditate on emptiness (with our other practices) until we reach fully enlightened, omniscient, post-human Buddhahood. It takes many lifetimes, even periods of being reborn as transcendent bodhisattvas.

One practical take-away lesson I get from that narrative is this — there is no reason to stop, and no reason to become conceited and superior about our own “attainments.”

Emptiness, Thought and Language

One of my favorite things about the emptiness teachings, Buddhist and Western, is their non-literalist, non-referential understanding of thought and language. Thought and language are not understood as referring to fixed objects that pre-exist in a world outside language. This is because those things can simply not be found. (Neither can language!)

So the meaning of a word, sentence, or a spiritual teaching is not a literal correspondence between word::world. That very word::world distinction stops carrying weight, stops making sense. Meanings arise from the interactions among speakers.

When this is deeply realized, I call it joyful irony. The irony is in the realization that “literal” meaning is nothing more than a literary style. The joy consists in the emancipation from “the myth of given”, where we used to think that words must correctly represent things outside words. We are freed from



thinking that even our own dearest spiritual teaching is “true to the facts that already exist.” Existence, non-existence, things, words — none of these things can be found to be truly there in an objective way.

This makes it impossible to cling to a teaching or to haggle over other people’s ideas or interpretations.

Emptiness is Empty Too

Whatever is dependently co-arisen
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.

– *Nagarjuna’s Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way (Mulamadhyamakakarika), XXIV:18*

This verse from Nagarjuna cleverly shows how emptiness is empty. In line 2, we see that dependent co-arising is explained to be emptiness. Emptiness, like other things, is dependent upon being explained, designated, or defined. It is not taken as something independent from its explanation. Emptiness is dependent upon its function, which is to help free us from suffering. Emptiness is also dependent upon its “basis of designation.” That is, the emptiness of the cup depends on the cup. The emptiness of my self depends on my self, conventionally speaking.

It is of course humanly possible to treat emptiness as an absolute, and make it a new God-term. But if we do, we will not have gotten rid of our tendency to reify and exaggerate things.

The victorious ones have said
That emptiness is the relinquishing of all views.
For whomever emptiness is a view,
That one will accomplish nothing.

– *Nagarjuna’s Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way (Mulamadhyamakakarika), XIII:8*

Sometimes you will read that last line as “That one will be incurable.” Realizing that emptiness too is dependent, we find it harder to cling to emptiness as if it were an absolute. We won’t be like the naïve customer who went to buy something:

- **Shopkeeper:** “I have nothing to sell you.”
- **Customer:** “Please sell me the nothing.”

But when we deeply experience that all things are empty, including emptiness, we have no place to land. Especially, we don’t land on having no place to land. Sometimes this is called “positionless.”

