



Hi Everyone!

I'm happy to be sending out the first of what I hope are regular, or at least seasonal newsletters! The Buddhist Prison Ministry has expanded from the West Coast of California, east to Texas, and then some! I am thrilled to have students in a few women's prisons, too. That was one of the first hopes from one of the men on San Quentin's Death Row when we envisioned the correspondence course-that it be available to incarcerated women as well as men.

Many generous people have supported this project, too many to list-as well as a generous grant from the Khyentse Foundation. I am hoping the support continues, as the growth of the correspondence course is quick. I have drafted out the second workbook "Texts, Prayers and Practices" and will do my best to get a copy of it ready to go by early winter 2022.

This newsletter packet includes a few of my favorite articles about the elusive topic Emptiness- by scholars who have written on this complex topic in accessible language. But first:

Some Buddhist Related News and Links:

-*The Introduction to Buddhism* workbook has been edited and updated! Page numbers even! Many thanks to SZ from Texas for the incredible edits. HUGE GRATITUDE to MH and Professor Donald Lopez for correcting some of my Buddhist School Comparison chart mistakes.

-*Buddhist Prison Ministry* is thrilled to work with the Inner Liberation Prison Sangha to support the spread of Dharma in Texas Prisons. We are coordinating a survey of Buddhists in Texas Prisons with the hope of encouraging the administrations to acknowledge Buddhism as a valued tradition, make it easier to hold Buddhist Services and truly allow the Dharma it's place in the kind of hard transformation that Dharma is about, that prison is about!

October 27th is Lha Bab Du-Chen: It is not just a tradition in Tibetan Buddhism, it is celebrated by Buddhists everywhere. The name "Lhabab Duchen," literally means the great occasion of divine descent. Lha: divine; Babs: descend, like rain falling; Du-Chen: the great occasion, or great time. The celebration of this day may include mantra practice, lighting butter lamps and perform positive actions of generosity and service. **According to Buddhist tradition, is one of the "Multiplying Days" so be especially aware of putting a lot of good vibes out that day!**

The Human Kindness Foundation is leading a weekly "Together Apart" meditation for everyone to join no matter where you are. I guarantee you will feel more 'together' than 'apart' if you join. The meditation is from 7:00-8:00 PM on Wednesdays. Sita Lozoff doesn't mention the time zone, just 'join whenever you can'-also, if you haven't yet, sign up for their "*A Little Good News*" newsletter. It is a beautiful offering, free to the incarcerated- Human Kindness Foundation/PO. Box 61619/Durham, NC/27715

Compassion Works For All Newsletter: A beautiful Buddhist-oriented newsletter from the East Coast. Sign up a P.O. Box 7708/Little Rock, AR/ 72217-7708

Lionheart.org. Houses of Healing/Making Time Count: Self-Study courses in Self-Exploration: P.O. Box 4145/Dedham, MA/02027

Theme for this Newsletter: Emptiness in Buddhism

Why Emptiness? My Wandering Thoughts

I've been thinking a lot about Emptiness lately. Maybe because over the past few years my studies have included a deeper look at the Upanishads, as well as immersion with the wonderful prayer known as the King of Aspiration Prayers aka Samantabhadra's Prayer of Good Conduct, The Supreme Worship, and many other names. Also, I never stray too far from Taoism. "The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao." LOVE that. Upanishads brought me closer to the term non-duality, a term I am very comfortable with-one that points directly the realm we live in, that of this and that, us and them- our dualistic world. The King of Aspiration Prayers is FULL of words like that try to define that which is unlimited, non-dual, beginningless and endless...

And

...then there is Emptiness. I have a whole shelf in my Dharma library of thick scholarly books that try to define Emptiness. Every index of every dharma book has many mentions of Emptiness. The perfect practice of the paramitas depends on one's understanding of Emptiness. A realization of Emptiness is one of the 3 aspects of the path in Tibetan Buddhism: Renunciation, Bodhicitta, and a realization of Emptiness. OK, we get it is important. But how can we begin to grasp it?

Who Is the "I" that...

Buddhism poses this important question over and over. Then there is the Heart Sutra "There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body..." Or the common comparison of a table, when taken apart-is the table leg also a table? Just so, when we parse out the 5 Aggregates of Us: Form, Sensation, Perception, Mental Formation, Consciousness: how is it that they all can operate independently of each other and independently of who we WANT ourselves to be? Or do they?

The wonderful Houses of Healing program (check it out if you haven't already! address above) has as it's core question "**Who Am I Really?**" We list out all the external things we are: father, mother, son, daughter, etc etc- and in doing so, that which is our internal self becomes more pronounced-defined by not being defined. This question enables to see that we are all fundamentally the same. Think Equanimity meditation here- "This person (friend, enemy or neutral) wants health, happiness, safety, just like me...etc." We are all on this plane of existence, the place of this and that-yet somehow, somewhere in the imprint of our consciousness is a memory of a non-dual state. Is it from when we were within the womb? Between lifetimes? That state of One-ness that can be glimpsed in a variety of short-term ways-meditation, sleep, even drugs or sex-and what is the difference between a non-dual state of one-ness and Emptiness?

Can we Cut to the Chase Here? Isn't it all about recognizing our interconnectedness?

I think it partly is anyway. Why? Because when we recognize our interconnectedness with all forms of life we have essentially 'emptied' ourselves of our selves enough to see the common ground of being-the Emptiness of all things- as our essential nature. Emptied ourselves of all the ways we think we are separate from others. All our differences which are composed of all we like or dislike (think 3 poisons here: Hatred (Aversion), Greed (Clinging) and Delusion (Sense of Inherent separateness.) What is left is that which is not dependent on causes or conditions. (aka Dependent Arising.)

Then What?

Well-we mere mortals still need to live in this world. We will continue to have our likes and dislikes. We will continue to experience the sufferings of old age, sickness and death. BUT-Hopefully we won't be pointing the finger outward so much at others. Hopefully the "I" that is us won't take everything so personal. Hopefully we can come to see that suffering exists and is not necessarily "OUR suffering." A recognition, even conceptually, of what we have in common with all of life versus what our differences are will lead to a kinder, warmer heart, more understanding, and ultimately more compassion. Perhaps this is a good goal for most of us.

The Arc of the Transmigration of 'our' Consciousness over LIFETIMES!

If we think of ourselves, today, here and now, as a new garden plot in a much larger landscape, in this new garden (this life) we are planting new seeds, watching some seeds ripen we didn't even know about (karma) and harvesting weeds, flowers and fruit that could well have blown over from other gardens of other times! This is the garden of today in the arc the transmigration of our consciousness-lifetimes and lifetimes and lifetimes, and here we are today. Studying Dharma together, watering seeds of positivity, doing our best as we reap difficult times, and dedicating the merit of our positive acts and harvests.

In Conclusion:

So those are my rambling thoughts about Emptiness! I urge you to branch out in your studies and look into some of the teachings of Taoism, Advaita-Vedanta, and other traditions. See how one-ness is identified, or as in the case of Taoism, that which cannot be spoken of conceptually is the Ultimate Truth. Ramble a bit and send your ramblings back to me!

And now for something entirely different... This is an article I wrote for a newsletter back in the mid-'90s for a little non-profit that supported a small Tibetan Buddhist monastic school for monks in Nepal. The article is about monk's robes-but would apply to a Tibetan nun's robes too. These are random facts, but I still find the intention of every piece of clothing so very inspiring! Speaks to my love of the monastic life. Enjoy!

THE CLOTHES MAKE THE MONK (OR NUN)

Have you ever wondered what and why a Tibetan monastic robes look the way they do? This way of dress has not changed much over hundreds of years. (Except the shoe styles have changed!) For most of us, just knowing that maroon and gold are the colors which distinguish a monastic of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is enough. That said, the saying "there is more to a man's clothes than meets the eye" is very true in this case.

On a deeper level, all monastic activities, even the monk's robes are related symbolically to the Four Noble Truths. Traditional monk's shoes had a curved tip, representing a pig's snout. On both sides of the shoe were two bumps, resembling the upper part of a rooster's wing. The curve from the top of the boot down is like the curve of a snake. In the sutras, these three animals: the pig, rooster and snake, represent the three poisons: ignorance, desire and hatred. The monk wears these on his feet, symbolizing his ability to suppress those poisons, also for a constant reminder of their presence in daily life.

An understanding of impermanence is necessary for the success of one's spiritual ripening. On each side of the monk's upper garment just under the arm are two maroon strips meeting at a point. These symbolize the jaws of Yama, the Lord of Death-a reminder that for all of us, death can come at any moment.

A monk's lower skirt-like robe is a reminder of his vows, his special chosen path this life. The way it is worn also serves to remind him of Buddha's teachings. The fold on the right faces towards the back, symbolizing that the monk or nun has left behind worldly concerns and has overcome the influence of negativity. The folds on the left face forward,

symbolizing that one has chosen to follow the Buddha's path, and that one should always walk forward towards virtuous activities.

Amazing isn't it? That the monastics of Tibetan wear a daily reminder of the teachings and purpose of their Dharmic Path? Think of the power inherent in that intention!

BUDDHIST PRISON MINISTRY: BODHICITTA BEHIND BARS

AN INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM

A TWELVE-
LESSON
CORRESPONDENCE
COURSE
WITH
HOMEWORK



This workbook "An Introduction to Buddhism" is the first in a series written specifically for the incarcerated population. It is a presentation of the core elements of non-sectarian (Ri'me) Buddhism, teachings common to all schools and sects of the Dharma. Thanks to generous donors and the Khyentse Foundation, this workbook is available free of charge to the incarcerated population.

Tools, skills and practices from the Buddhist tradition written specifically for the incarcerated population.

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Buddhist Prison Ministry/P.O. Box 426/Orcas, WA/ 98280 all rights reserved

Please spread the news about our correspondence course!

Also, if you have any suggestions for topics for the next newsletter please let me know. If you do not wish to receive these mailings let me know. Please pass on the articles to others who might, if you do not find them useful.

With care and prayers that your spiritual lives flourish!

Susan Shannon

Buddhist Prison Ministry/P.O. Box 426/Orcas, WA/98280

Advice for Studying Emptiness

Dr. Alexander Berzin

Voidness (emptiness) is one of the most important topics in the Buddha's teachings and one of the most difficult to understand. But, we mustn't be afraid of voidness. As Shantideva, the great Indian master, explains in his *Engaging in Bodhisattva Behavior*, if we are going to be afraid of anything, it should be our ignorance, our unawareness, which is causing us all our problems. We shouldn't be afraid of that thing, which, when we understand it, will get rid of the causes of our problems. It is like instead of being afraid of our enemies, such as thieves, bandits and murderers in the street, we are afraid of our bodyguard. And although voidness is not easy to understand, that is only natural. Why should we expect it to be easy to understand? If it were, then everyone would understand voidness and nobody would have any problems anymore.

The Need for Building Up Sufficient Positive Force for Understanding Voidness

To understand voidness or reality, we need to build up a tremendous amount of positive force, usually called "merit." This cannot be stressed enough. Basically, positive force is built up by restraining ourselves from acting destructively. Now you might say, for example, "I don't hunt and fish anyway," so how does not engaging in those activities build up any positive force? But the point is, when that mosquito is buzzing around our arm or our face, to restrain ourselves from killing it, to find some other, more peaceful way, a nonviolent way, of dealing with the mosquito. This is obviously much more challenging and it is this refrain from acting destructively when we want to act that way that builds up positive force.

We also build up a great deal of positive force by actually engaging in constructive acts, like going to Dharma teachings, thinking about them, meditating on them and trying to understand them as much as possible. We also accumulate a great deal of positive force by helping others as much as we can, even though at our stage we often do not really know what to do that will be of best help. In addition, we need to try to rid ourselves of as much negative force or negative potential as we can with various purification practices. All of this helps us to be more open and our minds to be clearer and have more understanding. If our minds are closed or obscured with confusion, or we are always acting destructively and not trying to be more constructive, how can we possibly understand something as difficult to comprehend as voidness?

Similarly, when we want to listen to teachings or try to understand them, if we just sit down and start, it may be hard to make the transition from a busy mind to a clearer mind. To avoid that problem, we first recite the Manjushri mantra "OM ARA-PATSANA DHIH" many times and then just repeat as much as possible in one breath Manjushri's seed syllable "DHIH-DHIH, DHIH-DHIH, DHIH-DHIH." Most Tibetans do this. However, it is essential that we repeat these with the strong intention for our minds to become clearer. On a more advanced level, we can add graphic visualizations to help make our minds clearer. But, if we are not able to visualize easily, there is no point in forcing it at an early stage; just repeating the mantra is quite sufficient.

All these preparations are very necessary to do, but in addition to them we especially need to have developed at least some level of a bodhichitta aim to reach enlightenment to be of best benefit to everyone. If we lack a strong motivation or positive emotion behind "Why do I want to understand this?" and "What do I want to do with this understanding?" then we won't put much constructive energy into our efforts and there will not be much of a result from them. A strong motivation is absolutely necessary. The more open our hearts are to everybody – not to just every human being, but to every insect as well, *everybody* – and the more open our hearts are to enlightenment – the omniscience of a Buddha, which is really vast – the more our minds will be open to being able to understand voidness. We need to let go of tight, limited beliefs that we may have been holding up until now, such as: "I'm incapable of understanding, I'm not good enough." We need to open up our minds to greater possibilities, which we can accomplish through building up this positive force with

A FEW WORDS ON EMPTINESS

Jonathan Landaw

"Emptiness" or "Voidness", a term that appears repeatedly in the *Heart of Wisdom Sutra*, refers to an absence or a lack of something. But a lack of what, an absence of what? When the Buddhist teachings say, "All phenomena are empty" or "The self is empty," what exactly are they saying about "all phenomena" or about "the self"? We have to understand that these teachings are not saying that these things are totally non-existent. Such things as people, mountains, clouds and so forth all do exist. Nevertheless, they are all "empty," meaning they all lack something, or have an absence of something. We have to examine what exactly it is they are lacking.

It is useful to start our examination by contrasting "emptiness," as used here, with the way we usually use this word. For example, after a fire has destroyed a neighbor's house, we may point to the "empty" lot, indicating the absence, or lack, of the house that used to be there. Or we may point to a bottle that has only a little liquid left in it and say, "That bottle is almost empty," meaning that pretty soon there will be a complete absence of liquid in that bottle. In both these examples, we are talking about the absence of something that was once there, that once existed: a house and some liquid. But when the teachings say that all phenomena are empty, they are not saying that phenomena lack something that was once there, that once existed. Quite the opposite! The point behind the Buddhist teachings on emptiness (Skt. *shunyata*) is that all phenomena, ourselves included, are empty of something that never existed, that was never there in the first place.

At this point, you may scratch your head and wonder, "Why all the fuss about understanding that things lack something that they never had?" The answer is that, according to the insights of Buddha and those who have gained deep realizations of his teachings, all suffering and dissatisfaction, without exception, is rooted in our mistaken views of how things exist. We mistakenly believe that things have a concreteness or a separateness that they do not, in fact, have at all. If we wish to eliminate all suffering from the root, we therefore must understand deeply that phenomena are totally empty of all the false views we mistakenly project onto them. One translator renders "*shunyata*" or "emptiness" as "the absence of the fantasized" to underscore the point that what all phenomena are empty of is nothing other than our fantasies and false projections about them.

So how do we meditate on emptiness? We start by identifying the habitual, concrete views we have about people and things, recognizing how limiting and badly informed these habitual views actually are, and understanding how these false views lead inevitably to suffering and dissatisfaction. This allows us to loosen the grip these mistaken views have on our minds so that we can move closer and closer to seeing things as they actually exist, rather than how we misconceive them to exist. As we familiarize ourselves with the wisdom realizing emptiness, we gain greater and greater freedom from suffering and the causes of suffering, until eventually we attain liberation: nirvana.

At the early stages of our development of this wisdom, before we have refined our understanding of emptiness, we deal mainly with the grosser false views afflicting our mind. Eventually, as our wisdom becomes more penetrating and the true meaning of emptiness begins to dawn, the more subtle misconceptions obscuring our minds are removed. For example, we