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Emptiness and Joyful Freedom

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EMPTINESS AND JOYFUL FREEDOM
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BUDDHIST AND WESTERN SOURCES OF THE EMPTINESS TEACHINGS

INTRODUCTION

"Wow, I'm an illusion!" The Tibetan lama was laughing as he walked down Fifth Avenue addressing a student's earnest question about the emptiness of self.

We – Greg and Tomas – were part of the small group that guided the lama around Manhattan during a break in his teaching schedule. He had been giving a class on the emptiness teachings. Out on the street, he was feeling animated. As he walked, his arms were moving with an energy all their own. "Not having a self is not depressing at all," he continued. "**That's** the way to walk down the avenue!"

A radiant smile played across his face. "Knowing you're an illusion is actually a source of great joy," he went on. We were smiling too, feeling this same animating wonder. As we walked, our little party passed the Cartier boutique and, a few blocks downtown, Saks Fifth Avenue. The sidewalk was crowded. All around us were New Yorkers in designer apparel, and tourists wearing sport Rolexes. But many of these A-list pedestrians seemed to exude a somber heaviness that formed an obvious contrast to the joyful lightness that we were experiencing.

We wondered, could this have something to do with *emptiness*, the very thing we were talking about? Could these solemn vibes around us come from the strong beliefs people have about the existence of their own self? Can you actually have a better time as an empty person in an empty world? Or is it preferable to live as the solid self we usually think we are?

Of course the thought may leap to mind, "If I am empty, and the world is empty, isn't this just a dreadful big meaningless abyss? How can it be a source of obvious delight?"

Buddhism has an ingenious insight here. It makes an important distinction. Phenomena are not real enough to be experienced as serious trouble, but nevertheless they are real enough so that you can still enjoy a rich, beautiful life full of meaning, while deeply caring for others, animals and the earth we live on.

Let's make this concrete! Have you ever had an experience where something happened to you that made you highly resentful? Let's imagine being overlooked for a promotion. It may feel like you personally had been wronged? You brood for hours. And then a friend comes in and provides a bit of perspective, "Don't take it personally. It has nothing to do with you." In that moment you see the world differently. Your anger dissolves and you

suddenly realize that you weren't targeted at all – it was just some unrelated back-office politics.

We all know the felt difference between how we respond emotionally when we take things personally, as really about us, compared to how we respond when we don't take them personally. According to the emptiness teachings, nothing is personal in this way. This is one of the central claims of Buddhism – that being free from an exaggerated sense of self can reduce suffering.

> *[T]his emptiness is not like the emptiness of an unfilled cup, a vacant room, or worse, an empty pocket. It's not like that. When we have a genuine experience of emptiness, it actually feels good. Rather than being depressed or anxious, we suddenly feel utterly carefree.*
>
> Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche (2011)

This Book in a Nutshell

The goal of this book is to introduce the reader to "emptiness," which is the pinnacle of Buddhist understanding of reality. To realize something as empty means to realize that it does not exist in the solid, self-contained way that we attribute to it. This insight about how things exist often seems abstract or inconsequential at first, but it is surprisingly profound. It can entirely transform how we experience ourselves and our place in the world. In fact, realizing emptiness is closely linked to achieving "enlightenment," which for Buddhism is the ideal outcome of human development.

The benefits of understanding emptiness, even partially, include a deep sense of freedom and connectedness with the world. This deep sense overcomes the alienation that many of us (post-)moderns feel. When we understand emptiness, we experience an unshakable ease and lightness in life. For thousands of years, these benefits have inspired people to take up the study of emptiness.

The most significant challenge to understanding emptiness is practical. The emptiness teachings can be hard. They proceed by taking a very precise look at our experience. They identify and correct the errors we make about things. This process is a subtle, often demanding undertaking. The main reason we have written the present book is to make the emptiness teachings and their benefits more accessible. We approach this by creating meditations based on modern Western culture, that is, on ideas which you may already be familiar with. Some of these meditations might also be called experiments, investigations or analyses. Using Western material to teach emptiness is the major innovation of this book. By

presenting emptiness outside of its traditional cultural packaging, we hope to make its profound benefits also relevant to people who may not consider themselves to be Buddhists.

We hope that through reading this book you will:

1) understand what the emptiness teachings are about,

2) taste experientially what emptiness is like,

3) discover how these teachings can help you live a more satisfying life,

4) learn how to use some powerful Western meditation tools to deepen your insight.

A Quick Taste

We all have tastes of emptiness, even if we don't study this teaching. A taste of emptiness is an experience in which we realize that something doesn't exist in the exaggerated way we had thought. As a result, the thing seems much lighter. It seems sweeter, more flexible, more alive and richer with possibilities.

The University

Let's take the example of a university, borrowed from the writing of the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle. He wasn't actually trying to talk about emptiness, but we find it to be a wonderful example, and it can give us a quick taste.

> Imagine that you are a foreign student visiting Oxford University for the first time. You are taken on a taxi tour around all the buildings and colleges of Oxford University. After a while you ask your guide, "OK, now can you show me the university itself?" Of course, there is nothing to Oxford University other than its buildings, quads, fields and other structures.
>
> Let's take a closer look and try to find the university:

- Imagine the physical structures. Can you point to any building, office, field or other physical object that is the university?
- Imagine the people teaching, attending classes, and doing administrative, housekeeping and security work. Can you identify any particular person or group that is the university?
- Imagine the activities related to the university. For example, the

faculty teaches classes and publishes research. The administration charges tuition and grants degrees. Is there any activity that is the university?

No matter how closely you look, you cannot find the university in any object, person or activity. When looked for in this detailed way, a solidly existing university is not found to exist. In other words whatever the university is, it is "empty" of that solidness.

And yet, it makes no sense to treat the university as utterly non-existent. In an everyday sense, we can designate various structures, people and activities as a university. Thus designated, the university can serve the purpose of education. Professors can teach; students can learn. We can do all this in the full knowledge that the university as a concrete, solid entity is not actually there to be found.

This is the emptiness of the university. Seeing such a solid and substantial institution in this way can bring freshness and lightheartedness to experiencing it because it is now a more open and fluid entity. Seeing it in this way could even give rise to new creative, perhaps even enthusiastic ways of interacting with it. And you now have a tool for a new way of seeing a familiar object...

Of course Oxford University might not be very relevant to your concerns. But you can try a similar inquiry on other things, such as a corporation or a country. You can try it on your own "self" as well. Is there anything physical or psychological that you can point to that is exactly the self? No. But at the same time, we can still designate a group of phenomena as the self as a kind of shorthand or convenience. We can enjoy the expansive sense of ease that comes from this way of seeing ourselves. (Chapter 10 will cover this in more detail.) Seeing your self in this empty way lightens the whole experience of your life.

This is the beautiful, freeing razor's edge of emptiness. Emptiness does not fall to extremes. It allows us to avoid the extreme of affirming things as solid, self-defined or objective. This opens a sense of spaciousness to engage with things in new ways. At the same time, emptiness allows us to avoid the extreme of denying things altogether. We are thereby still able to enjoy things and what can be done with them, while avoiding the angst, despair and frustration that come from seeing them as utterly nothing. Because emptiness avoids both extremes, it is often called the middle way. All of this will become, of course, clearer as you work through the present book.

Benefits From understanding the Emptiness of the Self

There are several benefits from understanding the emptiness of the self, even if you don't do the many meditations we suggest. But as you can imagine, any benefit from a theoretical understanding is much more powerful if you take time to do the meditations. Understanding can turn into realization.

First, you'll receive several intuitive, no-nonsense ways to think about yourself and life that can help reduce suffering. The reduction of suffering applies to everything – from everyday office politics all the way to the existential anxieties surrounding our certain death. Experiencing your own self in a less exaggerated, distorted way will help you feel a joy that can't be found in the luxury stores on 5th Avenue. This joy is a precious jewel that can't be purchased at Tiffany's. You'll be able to learn something genuinely new from these teachings which can dramatically enrich your life experience.

Another benefit from understanding the emptiness of the self is freedom. When you understand yourself as empty, you don't feel as though you have a fixed nature. You are freed up for the infinite possibilities of personal exploration, growth and transformation. This may sound paradoxical. "So, how can I grow if I am an illusion?" What is an illusion is the self as we usually conceive it. The illusion is the self as a unique, solid, substantive entity. This self does not exist. By doing the meditations in this book you will experience this with the same clarity you see now that the sun doesn't truly "rise."

Whatever remains of your sense of self is light and flexible. It is freed from the many rigid beliefs that we tend to construct around ourselves. This light sense of self can't take seriously beliefs such as "I am not good with people," or, "My place in life is to be an accountant." When you are unburdened by these beliefs, you are open to take a whole new look at your life. You can follow your heart.

For me (Tomas), writing this book was a form of deep meditation and a surprisingly profound experience. As I immersed myself in its meditations for several months, I was breathing this material and exploring its ramifications in new ways. The writing time felt like a retreat, in which the perspective of emptiness swept through my life with full force. That brought great ease, as well as connecting me more deeply with other people and the world.

This interconnection ties in with another benefit of the emptiness teachings: they help liberate you from alienation and isolation. Normally, when you feel as though you exist in a fixed, rigid, independent or inherent way, you feel separate and disconnected from everything else. The liberating insight is that you don't exist in this rigid way, and neither does anything else. The result is a lived sense of lightness, freedom,

openheartedness and enthusiasm that opens you to other people. There is also an intimate relationship between this insight into emptiness and a sense of love and compassion, in which you sincerely care about others and wish that all beings be free from suffering.

There is a further interpersonal benefit as well. When we begin to understand the emptiness of the self, we begin to intuit the many ways we all depend on each other. Not only do we work and live together, but we share elements, resources, concerns, thoughts, language, histories, and much more. We become more attuned to each other, perceiving less and less of a wall between self and others. We get out of the way and become more motivated to act for the benefit of others, seeing less and less essential difference between them and ourselves.

Seeing into the emptiness of the self transforms things in such wonderful and mysterious ways that we even come to think of abstract notions like "truth" and "realization" as having close connection with the benefit of others.

Non-Dualism with a Difference

In many Eastern and some Western traditions, non-dualism is the high-point of insight into the nature of reality. Usually, non-dualism is associated with an experiential realization of the oneness of the universe. That is often considered a transformational experience.

This book presents non-dualism with a difference. It's about a flourishing, open-hearted liberation that doesn't land on a position of one or many, existence or non-existence. There is no clinging to dualistic extremes such as good or bad, natural or unnatural, etc. This liberation is non-dual by dissolving dualistic extreme positions.

These dualistic extremes are responsible for how we carve up the world into inherently separate entities (Earth versus Sun, good people who think like me versus bad people who don't). And so when we dissolve these extremes through emptiness meditations, we are open to a more holistic experience of the world, in which things are interrelated in the most amazing ways. Things are not reduced to "one"; nor are they separated into "many." Not landing in extremes is a kind of non-dualism most commonly based on the Buddhist *shunyata* (emptiness) insight, in which the self and the world are empty. This book is a Western, modernized contribution coming out of that tradition.

It Began as a Class

The central contribution of this book is a practical exploration of how powerful Western resources can be used to perform Buddhist-style

emptiness meditations. These resources come from Western philosophy, science, therapy and popular culture. It is an everyday exploratory guide, not a scholarly examination. Our motivation is practical. That is, we are presenting these tools for the purpose of helping you experience things in new and liberating ways. Many of the insights and arguments come from academic, philosophical or scientific sources. But the know-how involved (using arguments as meditations to relieve suffering) comes from Buddhism and Hinduism.

We – Tomas and Greg – met for the first time in January 2006 in Greg's philosophical consulting office in Manhattan. Greg had been studying Western philosophy and various Eastern spiritual traditions for decades. He had a name as a teacher in non-dual circles. Greg had been running a monthly Nondual Dinner as a gathering of friends in Manhattan for a number of years. Tomas had been a student of Buddhism for about five years, and had a number of burning questions about non-duality, oneness, emptiness, and enlightenment that Greg patiently answered. We decided to work together and have been doing so now for a number of years. That meant thousands of emails and scores of long Friday night discussions at New York diners over sandwiches, salads, and endless coffee as the nights went on.

Eventually Tomas, who is a working scientist with a Ph.D. in mathematics, found some of the traditional Eastern examples too arcane and irrelevant for his contemporary tastes. They were hard to read. And perhaps due to a hefty dose of my (Tomas') Western intellectual arrogance, they seemed unconvincing.

And then came a turning point. One day, Tomas asked Greg whether one could study emptiness with Western philosophical sources. He hoped that they would be easier to grasp. Greg, who had been trained as a Western-style philosopher, answered: "It sure can be done!" Greg was actually delighted that someone would consider using Western material for this purpose.

With immense personal delight, curiosity and passion, we read broadly across the Western tradition discussing our respective favorites with each other. For example, among others, Greg likes Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida, the ancient Greek skeptics, and the literary and rhetorical tradition. Tomas is a fan of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, positive psychology and science. The upshot was that Tomas found the Western material to work quite well as a tool for gaining spiritual insight into emptiness.

We even encountered academic East-West comparisons between Nagarjuna, who is generally credited as being the leading Buddhist philosopher, and various Western thinkers. Most frequently, the comparisons mentioned Derrida, Wittgenstein, and Sextus Empiricus.[1] In

spite of these cross-cultural similarities, we had never found anyone using Western material in emptiness meditations. Could this work? We wanted to try!

And that is how this book began – as a class on the emptiness teachings at a Tibetan dharma[2] center in Manhattan. We were surprised to find that many people in the class, including Buddhists and non-Buddhists, were also very enthusiastic about the Western approach. We have subsequently given more of these classes. The topics included "Experiencing Emptiness in Everyday Life" and a seminar on emptiness in science, art and sexuality. The Western approach seemed relevant to today's concerns and maladies. It seemed to address these issues with a focused, laser-like directness. This directness is similar to cognitive therapy. If I feel unlovable or incompetent, I can dissolve the strength of these self-assigned attributes by seeing how they are empty of any inherent truth. The emptiness teachings use the same techniques towards a slightly different end – unconditional freedom.

We noticed that the copious class notes and handouts came to as many pages as a short book. After receiving more and more requests for these notes and posting them on the internet, we decided to reformulate them as a real book.

Emptiness Teachings, Buddhism and This Book

Studying emptiness the traditional way can be tough sailing. Working your way up from the early Buddhist philosophical schools to Madhyamika (where full-fledged emptiness is explained) usually takes years. It is like mastering a new language. The traditional path is undoubtedly beautiful and rewarding. It will teach you much more about Buddhism than just emptiness. We highly recommend it to those who feel drawn to it.

This book, however, takes a different approach and teaches emptiness directly. This becomes possible through leveraging the intuitions, logical training, cultural background and common personal experiences that contemporary Western people already bring to the table. In short, by using Western resources we hope to make the liberating insights of emptiness easily accessible and available to a much wider audience.

A Note About Our References

This book contains references to a great deal of external source material. Our sources fall into two categories. One category is called "Readings from Buddhist and Western Sources." This includes books, articles and other sources that we feel might be helpful if you decide to continue learning about the emptiness teachings. These sources are gathered together at the

end of the book, and are divided into Buddhist and Western sub-categories.

The other category of source material includes works with particular quotes or insights that we've found useful in our presentation, even if the works in their entirety might not be so helpful as to be included at the end of the book. These sources are listed in the References section at the end of the appropriate chapter.

So when you encounter a reference or citation in the text, it will look like "Huntington (2007)" or "Nagarjuna (1995) 24:14." To find the work thus referred to, look at the end of the chapter containing that reference. If the work is not listed there, it will appear at the end of the book.

You Don't Have To Be a Buddhist

> *Before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you've depended on more than half the world. This is the way our universe is structured, this is its interrelated quality. We aren't going to have peace on Earth until we recognize the basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.*
>
> Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (quoted in: Nichtern 2007)

In this multicultural world emptiness is in the air. Physics tells us that matter isn't as solid as we thought. We see widely diverging views from different cultures on TV news programs. The Sunday newspapers inform us that, according to neuroscience, no such thing as a self can be found in the brain.

We think that studying emptiness will come naturally to most readers. It doesn't require that you subscribe to any particular religious or spiritual viewpoint. You don't have to become a Buddhist. You don't even have to be particularly "spiritual" to benefit from these teachings. Many of the Western thinkers whose material we use certainly haven't considered themselves to be spiritual.

If you can meditate in an unreligious way for 20 minutes to calm your mind, you can probably study the emptiness teachings and benefit from them. You may have your own framework to which the teachings can be added. For example, if you are an environmentalist, the realization of the interdependence of things at a very deep level may provide new directions in your work. You don't need to have the official Buddhist ideal of perfect enlightenment or the ending of suffering for all beings. Smaller, local motives are fine too. Actually, if we were to state a set of prerequisites for studying emptiness, it would probably be sincere curiosity about the world and life, an open mind and the willingness to think for yourself.

This book takes a first step by presenting emptiness disentangled from

many of its religious origins and commitments.

You are free to explore the emptiness teachings in your own way. You are free to write, create websites, portals and online communities. We ourselves have a website (www.emptiness.co) and a Facebook group that discusses these teachings. We teach at local dharma centers. And we try to encourage those who are better qualified to do the same.

The Fruition – Joyful Irony

"Joyful irony" is how we describe in non-Buddhist terms the result of having done many of these emptiness meditations. Joyful irony is the lightheartedness you feel when realizing that your self, your views and the world are not as solid as they seem. As a joyful ironist, you realize that none of the things you say point to any objective truth. Although it seems counterintuitive, this is actually a great delight. It's the basis for wonderful freedom.

Irony in this sense is not meant as sarcasm or the occasionally negative verbal trope in which you say something nice ("our most wonderful worker") but actually mean the opposite ("laziest guy in the office"). Rather, irony is life lived with no landing, no foundations. As in poetry, your thoughts, words and language take on a new meaning, which is different from the literal and habitual interpretation.

Held in emptiness, even common human predicaments, such as current suffering, worries about the future and death, are not the same anymore. The openness and non-solidity of phenomena give rise to hope, because you know deeply that bad things are never intrinsically so, and they don't have to stay the way they currently are. They can change, and very often you can make things better.

Joyful irony is thus an antidote to helplessness, hopelessness and the victim mentality. Joyful irony is certainly not non-dual quietism, passivity or escape. An empty world is neither dull nor bleak. On the contrary, it is experientially rich, full of meaning(s) and a source of continuous wonder and beneficial activity.

Love and Compassion

Studying emptiness is never just about you. It radiates outwards, to others. Actively cultivating an attitude of love and compassion is an important part of any successful emptiness study project, whether you are using a traditional approach or looking at the way we present it here. The more love and compassion you develop, the easier and more joyful will be your emptiness realizations. It's as simple as that.

And when the illusory walls that kept you trapped inside your skin dissolve, then your heart will naturally open towards other living beings with a greater sense of caring, benevolence, love and compassion. In a significant way they are you, and you are them. For most people, the times when they are deeply filled with love are high points. Similarly, a major source for the joy of the joyful ironist is the love and care you feel. Realizing emptiness multiplies this. You realize that a better life is not just a possibility for you, but, at least in principle, for all other people. And it is often a highly practical, achievable possibility. In many cases, you will not just contemplate positive change, but also be sincerely motivated to act on it. Joyful irony is thus open, loving and engaged.

Joyful Irony Starts at Home

One the most important insights along this Western path is to realize the emptiness and ultimate unfoundedness of your own most cherished beliefs. The hallmark of a joyful ironist doesn't consist of seeing that other people's views are not ultimately grounded in the nature of things. Rather, it is a global insight about emptiness that sees through the structures that make inherent, objective truth and falsity seem possible in the first place. The most radical and meaningful effect of this realization comes about when you see that even your own beliefs are not objectively grounded. They function, but they are empty of inherent existence and truth.

This realization is another way that love and compassion are fostered by the emptiness teachings. You realize that you do not occupy a position any closer to the absolute truth of the universe than anyone else. There is a great tenderness and humility that comes with realizing how similar we all are in this respect. Being an ironist about your own views tends to work wonders as a self-correcting device.

We will have a lot more to say about joyful ironism throughout the book, especially in the final chapter.

This Book – and How To Read It

We have organized this book into several parts. In Part 1, we present the emptiness teachings in some detail.

In Chapter 1, "Discovering the Joy of Emptiness," we tell a few stories about how various kinds of emptiness teachings have shown up in our lives.

Chapter 2 presents a prominent Buddhist approach to the emptiness teachings, which we find to be a helpful organizing principle.

Chapter 3, "Emptiness in Western Philosophy," discusses various Western philosophies and teachings and explains why you can see them as

emptiness teachings.

In Chapter 4, “How Do I Go About Studying Emptiness?” we suggest a few ways that you can study the emptiness teachings in further detail.

In Chapter 5, “The Interplay Between Emptiness, Compassion And Happiness,” we discuss how adopting a compassionate, caring attitude can help you realize emptiness, and also how realizing emptiness fosters an open-hearted caring attitude.

Chapter 6, “How Not to Misunderstand Emptiness,” discusses how to avoid nihilism, which is the most probable and most dangerous way to misunderstand the teachings.

Chapter 7 lists some important questions that have come up when we have taught emptiness in dharma centers and other venues.

Part 2 is experiential. We suggest a variety of meditations based on Western science, philosophy and psychology. Unlike the classic Buddhist emptiness meditations, the exercises in Part 2 utilize Western ways to isolate and deconstruct the conception of inherent existence.

“Readings from Buddhist and Western Sources” is a two-part bibliography of the works we have found most helpful in our own study.

> It is probably best to read the Introduction first. After that, you can skip right to the meditations that interest you, or read through the section that sets forth the source material.

More on the Meditations

Joyful irony arises from a global insight into emptiness. To cultivate this insight, you usually have to analyze and deconstruct the self and many other targets. Our prior beliefs are too entrenched to be shaken loose with a few meditations only. In this book we have covered many kinds of targets, including the self and labels we apply to it. We also cover other targets, such as perception, truth, fixed beliefs and spiritual teachings.

The chapters may be thought of as falling into four different groups, which cover what we often take to be the pillars of our life world. The groups are:

- Self
- Culture
- World
- Spirituality

Investigating targets in all of these groups is important in realizing emptiness. Taken together, these meditations provide an excellent basis for a global realization of emptiness. Let's look at them in detail.

Self

"Freeing Yourself From Negative Personal Labels" starts out with those things we tell ourselves as though they were truly us. They aren't always friendly, yet nevertheless can be staunchly believed. The good news is that they can be seen as empty quite easily, by adapting techniques from cognitive therapy. By examining these labels and stories, we lessen their hold on us. A breath of fresh air pervades. Our self-conceptualizations become lighter.

"Seeing Through the Illusion of the Self" goes deeper. It takes a close-up look at modern scientific accounts of how the experience of our self happens, along with the unnecessary problems that it creates. Arguments from philosophy of mind, history of evolution, social psychology and neuroscience are mixed into a potent cocktail of meditations that are timely, relevant and intuitive.

Lastly, "Deconstructing Presence" tackles a subtle, yet resilient holdout for "selfing" that affects some spiritual practitioners, namely "presence." The insights we use for this come from the influential continental philosopher, Jacques Derrida. They give you a taste for the classic deconstructive approach that he pioneered. The meditations allow you to see that what seems to be the closest and most intimate aspect of your self is actually dependent on something quite different and other. This realization helps the self open up to freedom, flexibility and the love of others.

Culture

The first chapter that deals with cultural phenomena, "Lightening Up your Social World," introduces the powerful tools of social construction to the emptiness investigator. Targets such as fairness, gender, sexual identity, emotion and science are argued to be socially constructed rather than ordained by nature. Seeing a phenomenon as constructed is one way of seeing it as empty, because a construction lacks a pre-existing, inherent nature of its own.

"Refuting Moral Objectivity" targets the intuition that there are objective moral facts out there which truly determine what is good or bad, right or wrong. It targets the idea that there are objective norms that dictate what all humans ought to do. A joyful ironist is not against ethics per se (certainly we aren't), but against absolutized, non-empty accounts of ethics. These

sort of non-empty, absolutist notions of ethics produce individual and societal rigidity, suffering and intolerance.

World

In "Loosening up Fixed Meaning in Language," the target is inherent atomistic meaning. This is the idea that the meaning of something can be fixed in isolation from other meanings. What does this have to do with emptiness? The stoic philosopher, Epictetus, observed that, "People are not disturbed by things, but by the view they take of them." Thus when emptiness meditations open up the rigid notions of fixed meaning, everything else in your life and world experience opens up with it! Our approach is inspired by an essay by W.V.O. Quine entitled "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," which is viewed by many as the most famous paper in analytic philosophy.

The next chapter, "Recognizing the Myth of the Given," targets the idea that sense data are objectively present and given in a pre-existent way, which then grounds our knowledge of the world. Normally, sense data, such as a red patch or a hard texture, are taken to be an instance of basic, uninterpreted and irrefutable knowledge of the world. This givenness is taken as something objective about the world, and something that exists as non-empty, that is, independently of human concepts and minds. This chapter contains insights and meditations that make clear that what we consider a foundation for knowledge actually depends on other knowledge already! This has been considered a revolutionary insight in twentieth century philosophy.

In "Challenging a Common Notion of Truth," the target of our emptiness investigation is the idea that language and thinking provide an accurate picture of an independently existing real world "out there." We usually think that words correspond to objects, and sentences correspond to states of affairs. It can be a beautifully unsettling experience for you as an emptiness meditator to realize that this way of picturing an external world doesn't make any sense. This chapter is perhaps a little more challenging than the others, but it can be extremely rewarding. The world will never look and feel the same again.

Spirituality

"Liberating Yourself from Rigid Beliefs" targets beliefs – those attitudes and statements that we cling to, defend or staunchly refute. The insights apply to any belief whatsoever, but we have chosen to focus on beliefs about spiritual teachings, for instance: "The highest teaching is emptiness," or "I

am (am not) enlightened". These beliefs are often unnoticed, and yet at the same time, they carry a strong charge for people. Clinging to statements like these prevents a global realization of emptiness. The meditations in this chapter propose an alternative to this clinging, and show you how to withhold assent and live peacefully in not-knowing. The method is inspired by the Ancient Greek school of Pyrrhonism, also known as skepticism. Pyrrhonism is one of the greatest Western examples of philosophy used for human freedom.

In "Living a Joyfully Empty Life," the last chapter of the book, we discuss what life is like after you have done many emptiness meditations. Where does the emptiness journey go? What are the results and benefits? How does it affect your ordinary life? What new possibilities open up? We discuss these and other questions. We say more about joyful ironism, the fruition of these teachings, and present a range of examples for empty lives, such as being a regular person, or an artist, a mystic, a Buddhist, a social activist, or spiritual teacher. Such vignettes are meant to inspire, rather than to privilege any one particular way to be. The emptiness teachings, at least as we are construing them, do depend on a compassionate frame of mind. But beyond that, they do not require a commitment to Buddhism or to any other particular notion of the good life. To grasp this is one way of realizing that the good life is itself empty, open-textured and not universally agreed-upon. This last chapter has many sources, among them the writings of the astonishing anti-essentialists Martin Heidegger and Richard Rorty, as well as the English mystical poet Thomas Traherne.

Do All Our Sources Agree with Each Other?

We are using a wide variety of approaches to what we're calling emptiness. Although they have something important in common – a challenge to certain notions of inherent existence – we don't mean to imply that they agree on everything else. If you look more deeply into the approaches presented here, you'll find differences as well as similarities. You'll find that social construction, neurophilosophy, deconstruction, modern Western analytic philosophy or ancient Pyrrhonism don't all talk about the same things, and where they do, they might disagree. And you'll find some of these approaches resonate with you more than others. This is true for our part as well.

This is perfectly fine. In fact, diversity and variety are part of the openness that one finds in any facet of human inquiry. We are not suggesting that you settle on a view presented here. Rather, we are offering an open-ended toolkit that may be helpful in dispelling certain fixed and rigid views. You may already have an approach to inquiry that these sources can help with. Or you may grow fond of the sources presented

here. In fact, we think that this exploratory aspect is part of the fun.

Jumping to the Meditations Right Away

After reading the Introduction and perhaps "Discovering the Joy of Emptiness," you may wish to move directly to Part 2. This is because there are two chapters, "Emptiness Teachings in Buddhism" and "Emptiness in Western Philosophy," that require a steep learning curve. The Buddhist chapter introduces quite a bit of classic Buddhist terminology and machinery. We include it not because one must be Buddhist to benefit from the teachings, but merely so that we can draw out the similarities between the Buddhist and Western approaches.

> These chapters are not required in order to follow the rest of the book. So, in case you find them challenging or boring, please feel free to skip them.
>
> In fact, you may wish to jump directly to the meditations even now. This is fine. You can always circle back later to the explanatory material.

As for the meditation chapters, we have tried to organize them in an intuitive order. But what is more important is that you resonate with the targets to be refuted. So feel free to skip around as you please.

Enjoy Yourself!

We have greatly enjoyed engaging these life-changing teachings. We have found the process fascinating and freeing. It has also been inspiring to explore what some of the greatest minds on this planet have come up with. Some of the arguments you're going to read about will surprise you. As in a good thriller, there are reversals, where the good guy goes bad and then good again, or where seemingly innocuous details suddenly gain huge significance. You will find all of this and more in the following pages. We sincerely hope you'll have as much fun with these wonderful teachings as we do.

CHAPTER 1 – DISCOVERING THE JOY OF EMPTINESS

Sooner or later, almost everyone realizes the emptiness of something or other. The roots of this kind of realization can be simple. You may discover a creative new slant on an old idea. You may realize that what seemed permanent is only temporary. You may make the discovery that things can be looked at in more than one way. These simple realizations are foretastes, carrying the fragrance of emptiness. They prepare you for the more classical realization that the essence or true nature of selves and things can't be found.

> *We don't need to have a complete realization of emptiness in order for it to be transformative; in fact, it's said that having even a suspicion that emptiness is the nature of things will cut through the root of our confusion. So having even a little doubt about the validity of conventional reality, like thinking, "Maybe the way I've always seen myself is not the whole picture; maybe everything's not as solid as it appears," is helpful. Even that level of doubt can loosen our fixation and shake up our view of the world.*
>
> Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche (2011)

In this chapter, we recount some everyday discoveries of these kinds. We will say much more about the *hows* of emptiness throughout the book. But here we'd like to talk about the transformational power that even small tastes of emptiness can have.

Encounters with Emptiness – Greg Goode

The joy from a taste of emptiness can come from the most unlikely places. And it always opens the heart. This taste doesn't depend on having an intention to be spiritual or to study emptiness. It can happen whenever you see through one of your fixed ways of relating to the world. What felt like

confinement and rigidity comes to be experienced as light, free and open. It feels like having walls come down. You feel intimately connected with things that previously seemed separate and distant.

If you do have an intention to study emptiness, you can focus on different things and realize their emptiness. It can be something that troubles you. It can be something that you cherish. It can be yourself. It can even be everything.

Emptiness is not nothingness or voidness. It is more like **relatedness**. It's how things exist, by depending on other things. It's simply the fact that things, and your self, do not have essences or substances. They don't exist in an independent, self-powered way. Instead, things are interdependently related to everything else in differing degrees, as expressed by the image of Indra's Net.[3]

A Philosophical Security Guard

About thirty years ago, I encountered an emptiness meditation in one of these unlikely places. I was in the Army stationed overseas. I was working 12-hour shifts as a security guard behind a desk. I had plenty of time to read, and for several months it was Brand Blanshard's (1939) monumental midcentury classic, *The Nature of Thought*. I was very curious about thought, and things, and what exactly constitutes things. What is the essence of things? I was surprised by Blanshard's analysis, for he argued passionately about how things have no essence. We often think they do, but they don't.

With Blanshard's help and a lot of contemplation, I looked intensely for the core of things, but never found it. What I did find actually upset me at first, but it later led to a lasting sense of freedom and joy. I found that instead of things having a core, all they have is properties. There isn't even something to hang the properties on. Blanshard helped me to examine the properties and analytically remove them, one by one, in an attempt to reveal the naked core of the thing. And all I found was more properties! When the properties were gone, I found the thing to be gone.

This insight had a profound effect on me, even though at the time I wasn't trying to do anything official like meditating on emptiness. At first, I was unsettled by this no-essence insight. It felt like I was about to fall through the bottom of the world. That lasted a few days. But I noticed that things went on as usual. I didn't fall. The sky didn't fall. After the unsettling feeling left, there was a curious sense of openness and freedom. I felt light, and things felt almost ... transparent. Things no longer seemed to be mysterious or opaque. They didn't seem to have a hidden inner essence. I felt a sense of free expansion towards things, and felt things open up to me.

This new openness changed my relationship to the physical world.

Everything took on a lightness and an unconstrained freedom. The change came in handy, since the Army can get pretty physical and heavy. I started becoming less stodgy and more integrated with my own body. I began to work out at the gym. When I left the Army a few years later, I kept going to the gym and began to ride a bicycle again. This was the first time I rode as an adult. Later, I became interested in riding a fixed-gear bicycle with no brakes. I also learned to do inline skating on the street, also with no brakes. Realizing the emptiness of objects improved my relationship with objects, as well as with myself!

Many years later, I came to recognize the similarities to Chandrakirti's *Sevenfold Reasoning on Selflessness* (Wilson 1983) where you investigate a chariot, and later your self, to find the essential, inherently existent core. You never find it. Realizing emptiness is the discovery of the contingencies pertaining to something that you thought was fixed. It's the discovery of relations constituting something that you thought was self-contained and standing on its own.

Not only are these discoveries thrilling, but they open the heart.

> *Actualization of emptiness dissolves the afflictions of delusion, clinging, and antipathy into insight, non-clinging, and compassion.*
>
> Huntington (2007)

The Emptiness of Rationality

In graduate school, I was enrolled in a Ph.D. program in philosophy. My dissertation was on rational choice theory. One of my core assumptions, which I had acquired from the Austrian School of Economics, was the following definition of rationality:

> (R) For an individual, given the free choice between objects of desire under standard conditions, it is rational to choose a greater amount of the object rather than a lesser amount.

Rationality meant preferring more of something desired, over less. I believed that this was an essential component of rationality. I was still pretty essentialist (we will be looking at essentialism in more detail later) while I was in graduate school. Blanshard's analysis had helped me with physical objects. But with persons, concepts and abstract objects, I still believed that they had a true nature, an inner essence that was somehow hidden deep within them. The essence was non-physical, I thought, but it still seemed to make persons and abstract things what they truly are. Rationality seemed like this too. I thought that we were able to discover the essence of rationality if we looked hard enough in the right way.

So this definition (R) seemed pretty solid. I truly believed it. In the language of emptiness teachings, one could say that I thought that rationality was inherently existent, and that (R) truly described it. In my work, I never sought to defend or justify (R). I merely assumed it because it seemed so obviously true. My advisors in the philosophy department never questioned it either, since it's a common assumption in discussions of rational choice theory, and maybe they believed it too.

Was I in for a big surprise! One day I was consulting with a professor in the economics department about some equations I was writing. He was a young, intelligent, charmingly eccentric specialist in the theory of interest. He wrote mathematically sophisticated papers on how various time intervals affect human choice.

He looked at (R). "What makes this rational?" he asked. "We can create a theory where it's actually rational to prefer less rather than more. Rationality is not something you assume; it is something you define. And we can define it in different ways."

I was shocked! I was speechless for a moment. I got that sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, where my world seemed to be slipping away. I'm glad this kindly professor had patience with me. But I had no answer for him. I couldn't tell him what made (R) rational. I actually saw his point. He was saying that the kind of choice patterns I had regarded as inherent in the nature of choice could be accounted for by agreement – in my case, unreflective agreement. I saw that how one characterizes choice patterns is open to alternatives. Rationality did not need to be something pre-existent and independent of definitions. In other words, it was ... empty.

I saw that most of my dissertation was now invalid as it stood, being based on the assumption that (R) was really true. I gradually recovered from the feeling of being destabilized, and went on to spend the next several months rewriting! This was a transformational insight into the emptiness of something that I had held dear. I was uneasy partly because I suspected that this same insight might apply to other things as well. It might even apply across the board, wherever I looked.

But I didn't seek to generalize the insight as someone would if they were involved in a path of self-inquiry. I had a sense that I'd return to this subject sometime later, but at the time I was intent upon finishing graduate school.

Even so, something was still happening. Something was rumbling. I seemed to be becoming more open. It began with intellectual issues. Without trying to, I began noticing more pointers to the same "it's not inherent" insight.

I no longer regarded ideas as wrong or incorrect or irrational. I warmed up to them instead. I began to open up emotionally and esthetically as well. I became interested in music, art and culture that I had previously ignored or disliked. I had been raised as an atheist, and after attending a gospel

concert one evening, I even found myself warming up to Pentecostal Christianity. After a *kundalini*-like epiphany experience during one particular song, I joined a local church, attended several times a week, experienced some fulfillment of the heart, and even became a deacon. Before that discombobulating talk with the economics professor about rationality, I wouldn't have been able to imagine such a thing.

These are just a few tastes of emptiness. There are many more small stories, and some big ones. You most likely have had encounters with emptiness as well. And the more global the realization, the deeper the joy, the more open the heart. Instead of feeling insecure because of losing your certainties, you feel like you've escaped from jail into an open new world of possibilities.

Realizing Emptiness Globally

One way to describe the freedom that comes from realizing emptiness globally is "joyful irony." This isn't irony in the traditional literary or psychological sense, which is usually a purposeful stance imbued with negativity, frustration or cynicism. It is the liberating realization that your most cherished views and values are as empty as everything else. You realize that your thoughts, words, views and values still obtain, but in a conventional sense only.

The irony, as we're calling it, is the recognition that this is all there is to it, and that it is quite good enough! The old claims of inherency and objectivity have been realized as incoherent, and the yearning for these things has fallen away. This sense of irony is inspired by Richard Rorty's positive sense in his book, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity.* This kind of irony is an open, spontaneous and creative attitude one takes towards cognition, language, meaning and communication.

The joy is the enthusiasm and openness of heart that accompany this recognition. The joy comes from the same heart-opening compassion and openness that assist you in realizing emptiness. In this openness lies the enthusiasm to recreate yourself, and if you wish, to recreate the world. Sure, you may discover limitations, but no inherent ones.

> *Irony is the gaiety of reflection and the joy of wisdom.*
>
> Anatole France, *The Literary Life*

Your recognition also applies to your own spiritual path. It is as though the very ladder you ascended has fallen away. As a joyful ironist, you stop thinking that some paths (including the "pathless paths") get you closer to reality as it is. The various assumptions connected to "as it is" melt away. You feel joy, no longer being captivated by the idea that there's a doctrine, style or model of spiritual enlightenment that is a true descriptor of the way

things are in themselves. This is not because you discover that all paths are equal, but because the notion of "things in themselves" has stopped making sense. Things in themselves would be non-empty things. You have looked for non-empty things in your meditations, but never found them. This leaves you free to pursue any path, activity or goal of life based on your passions and enthusiasms, and the appeal these things have for you. At the same time, the heart opens. Your love for others, and your sensitivity to their love for you, begin to flourish as never before.

> *Epic irony is rather an irony of the heart, a loving irony; it is greatness filled with tenderness for little things.*
>
> Thomas Mann, *The Art of the Novel*

Times Square Is Empty
– Tomas Sander

I was studying with Greg as one of my spiritual teachers and wanted to understand the meaning of concepts such as non-duality, oneness and emptiness. I had an impression that it was from these that so much of the Eastern spiritual magic stems. So I needed to know. I had tried some Eastern emptiness and non-duality sources. I was fascinated and intrigued by them, but I just didn't get emptiness

So being at a loss, I asked Greg if one could study emptiness teachings with the Western philosophical sources, hoping that they would be easier to grasp. Greg said, "Sure," and suggested that I begin with the easier guys. He recommended Richard Rorty. That turned out to be a great choice. Rorty is an anti-dualist (as he calls it) on fire. I can also attest that he's a pleasure to read, even if one doesn't fully understand him. After a few weeks of reading Rorty I was hooked on Western philosophy as a tool for spiritual inquiry.

Rorty throws lots of names around. That made me curious to tackle the guys he said are the most radically deconstructive – the philosophical heavyweights like Derrida, Quine, Sellars, Davidson, Wittgenstein and Heidegger. All the while I received invaluable guidance from Greg as to how to use these texts towards the goal of understanding emptiness: you use their arguments to deconstruct something that you believe truly exists – and I believed that many things truly existed.

Over time, I added constructionism, physics, psychology, neuroscience and logical foundations of mathematics to my reading menu. It still amazes me how helpful these areas can be in understanding emptiness, and how fun they can be to engage with, if looked at with an eye to their pragmatic benefits!

Here is one example that blew my mind: I wrote my doctoral thesis in mathematics. If anything, I thought that the laws of logic were inherently and universally true. These are laws such as: “Every sentence is true or false,” or “A sentence can’t be simultaneously true and false.” At first, I was shaken when, after reading some of Wittgenstein’s work, I realized that even the laws of logic are subject to conventional agreement, rather than being absolutely true. Agreeing with them becomes an option and is no longer a command. This was beautifully freeing for Tomas, the mathematician.

I believe that insights into emptiness have made me more effective as an employee in the corporate environment where I work. A major benefit that emptiness studies offer is an unparalleled mental flexibility. Once I realized that there is no objective, indisputable referent in reality for the things we as humans talk about, contra dictions are no longer a fundamental problem, but to be expected. They simply need to be worked through on a practical level.

Clothed in facts Truth
Feels oppressed;
In the garb of poetry
It moves easy and free.

Rabindranath Tagore

Finding Ease

Through the immersion in these teachings, the rigidness and solidity of seemingly inherently existing phenomena give way to a precious lightness of life and the world. The famous Buddhist writer Shantideva expresses beautifully how our mind comes finally to rest:

When neither something nor nothing
Remains to be known,
There is no alternative left
But complete non-referential ease.

I feel that, as a person who had been seeking truth and ultimate reality, I found a satisfying answer in the realization of the emptiness of all phenomena. This realization comes with a great sense of ease.

Freedom from Rigid Ideas

For spiritual practitioners like me, the rigid attitude of knowing what’s right for everyone is an easy temptation. Spiritual teachings tend to have notions of absolutes, which by their very nature seem to trump everything else, but emptiness meditation demonstrates spiritual grand narratives to be as empty as everything else. None of them can claim to have absolute,

transcendent truth on their side, so all of them need to prove themselves on the level of conventional, ordinary reality. Thus any view is put to the test of conventional reality with practical questions like: "Whom does the view serve and who is being marginalized?" or, "Is the view helpful, compassionate or humane?"

There is also a highly personal dimension to this freedom. After all, many of the beliefs that matter to us are about our self and about our life. How does emptiness apply to them? Things I say about myself, such as "I'm smart," I'm stupid," "I'm handsome," "I'm plain," "It is horrible that I lost that opportunity" or "My life has been a good one," are all empty of any inherent truth.

Seeing the emptiness of rigid, personal beliefs like these also makes space for more positive beliefs.

It's OK To Be Western

Seeing the emptiness of belief in general allowed me to kick the habit of believing that any one way of life is intrinsically superior. For example, I worried at times that I needed to be like a Tibetan realized practitioner. If I didn't become like my revered masters, I feared I would miss out on reality as it truly is. And in that case, my life would be ultimately wasted. It was a wonderfully freeing moment to recognize that there simply is no one way that reality "really" is, and therefore no way to miss out on it.

Consequently, there can be no one absolutely best way of living your life. At that moment, it became completely OK to be my Western self again, rather than trying to emulate what I took to be the Eastern blueprint of an enlightened practitioner's way of life. This was a turning point that gave me freedom and confidence. There were a few weeks of grief as my relationships to my teachers adjusted. I am still devotional, but in a new way. I realized that I can love and admire my Eastern teachers and learn many valuable things from them. But there's no need to discount my Western culture and lifestyle in order to adopt a projected fantasy of Eastern perfection.

The Eastern view of a good life is just as empty as the Western view, so there is no metaphysical reason to privilege one over the other. Are there conventional, practical differences? Yes. Most people would agree that there are different advantages you can attribute to the Eastern and Western models of the good life, but neither model has it all. Even though I started out feeling that the Eastern model was superior, I came to realize that in the end, **it is OK to be Western again**.

On a practical level, being Western can include things that do not often receive praise in Buddhism, and this is not a problem. For example, it is OK to go with preferences I see as Western: self-expression rather than harmony and conformity, or activity and striving over inactivity and quietude,

or high-energy emotions such as excitement and enthusiasm over low-arousal emotions like serenity and contentment.

Even so-called "unspiritual" activities can be part of life's beauty and richness. For example, I don't have to restrict my interests to Sufi poetry. I can also enjoy fashion, interior decoration, and the trance music of Cosmic Gate or Paul van Dyk.

I now feel free to enjoy these Western alternatives!

Even Self-Creation Is OK

Some spiritual practitioners believe the self needs to be denied altogether. Consequently, they hold that deliberate acts of self-creation, which transform and work with the self (rather than outright denying it), are counterproductive. Those acts purportedly just strengthen the ego.

For the record, this is not the common Buddhist position. Although Buddhism is known for saying that the self doesn't ultimately exist, it grants the self a conventional existence.

By realizing that the inherently existent self does not exist, one is freed up to work with the *empty* self. This is where the West's abundant resources for creative self-expression can come in handy. You can celebrate and transform the (empty) self, creatively expressing it in ever new ways. The self can even be treated as a work of art.

> *What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects, and not to individuals, or to life.*
>
> Foucault (1984)

Joyful Irony

Joyful irony is our Western way to describe the fruition of the emptiness teachings. You no longer think that your own values and goals are underwritten by the nature of reality. This insight enables a flexible, unattached attitude towards your own views and vocabularies, and fosters respect for the views of others.

For me, Ludwig Wittgenstein has been one of the strongest influences along these lines. His work on the dependence of self upon language and conventional practices has been very important to me. I can even say that these insights have occasionally given me a beautiful, mystical sense of oneness – of being "spoken" by language. Through language I am interwoven with human culture, history, the world at large, and even the future. How unexpected that these insights come about through language, logic and analysis!

Experiencing everything as interrelated through language was not only a mystical experience for me, but it also reduced my tendency to privilege a

particular view or vocabulary. This was a great step towards what we are calling joyful irony.

Wittgenstein also helped me when I was in a phase of negating too much, and landing on negations as if they were truths. For a period of a few months, I was in a heavy deconstructive phase with the Western philosophies and teachings. I was trying to come to the "Truth," thinking that this is what an emptiness student is supposed to do. But all the negating I was doing was kind of an extreme – it certainly didn't feel like the complete non-referential ease that Shantideva talks about.

I had an "Aha" moment when reading Stephen Mulhall's *Wittgenstein's Private Language*, which put this excessive deconstructive habit to rest. Mulhall discusses Wittgenstein's famous treatment of the idea of a private language – a language expressing one's inner experiences and known only to a single person, not shared with anyone else. Wittgenstein shows that there are problems with the very notion of a private language (let's call it "X").

In my efforts to negate things, I was interpreting Wittgenstein's insight as saying "There is *no* X." I was doing this with all my other negations as well.

Mulhall helped me realize a subtle difference. He pointed out that Wittgenstein wasn't saying "There is *no* X," but that *there is a problem with* X. This is a subtle but significant difference. Wittgenstein was saying that there is a private language that can't be given a coherent or satisfactory meaning.

Aha! Wittgenstein and Mulhall nudged me to the next insight. If one side of an assertion is incoherent, then so is the other side. If "There **is** an X" is incoherent, then so is "There is no X." I had been landing on "There is no X" as if it were true. In my urge to negate everything, I had been negating something that was incoherent in the first place, and making a truth out of it. Wittgenstein and Mulhall helped heal my compulsion to do this. I had a good laugh. This insight brought me closer to the ease about which the emptiness teachings talk. Mountains were finally mountains again.[4]

Not landing on negations as true helped me open up to a wide variety of interests and passions. I no longer felt as though I had to forcefully separate myself from the affairs of life. That had not felt free or joyful; it was a guarded, closed posture. Without having to negate things in life and regard the negations as true, I felt free to enjoy my passionate pursuits.

Many visual representations of emptiness depict a calm wide ocean or an infinite blue sky with soft clouds. That captures nicely the ease and tranquility of emptiness. However something is missing – perhaps the exuberant joy and vibrancy that you can find in a place like Times Square in New York City. Empty, yet bursting with life.

Reference

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CHAPTER 2 – EMPTINESS TEACHINGS IN BUDDHISM

Even though emptiness is taught in all forms of Buddhism and in some other traditions as well, our approach is inspired by the systemizations of Nagarjuna and commentaries from Chandrakirti, as well as innovations brought about by Tsongkhapa.

About Our Approach

In the many flavors of Buddhism, such as Theravada, Vipassana, Insight Meditation, Mahayana, Zen, Pure Land, Vajrayana, Dzogchen and many more, you can find teachings on various aspects of emptiness – aspects such as interdependence, impermanence and insubstantiality. Each variation of Buddhism places emphasis on different activities, such as Theravada's emphasis on meditation and Pure Land's emphasis on faith. In this book, we are relying on the variation usually called "Prasangika Madhyamika," and we will say more about it below. But first, a few more general remarks.

In our experience, going by the available books, articles, web-sites, dharma centers and teachers, most of the teachings focusing on emptiness tend to be associated with Tibetan Buddhism. And even then there are varieties found in different Tibetan traditions.

The systems known as Dzogchen and Mahamudra are found in the Nyingma and Kagyü schools of Tibetan Buddhism respectively. These systems approach emptiness teaching as a way to eliminate false notions about the self and phenomena, which opens the meditator to thereby experience "the true nature of mind," which is described to be the union of emptiness and luminosity. And in the Dzogchen system, it is taught that realizing emptiness gives rise to *rigpa*, a kind of clear-light mental state which is free of grasping and suffering.

Occasionally, Western practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism value meditation as a tool for enlightenment but dismiss emptiness teaching as ineffective or, even worse, as a conceptual obstacle. That is clearly not the view that the Tibetan traditions themselves hold. Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, lineage holder in the Nyingma and Kagyü traditions and

prominent teacher in the West, puts it as follows.

> *Sometimes it is said that we, Karma Kagyü, do not place an emphasis on the Prasangika Madhyamika. This is absolutely untrue. We regard the Prasangika Madhyamika as extraordinarily important.*
>
> Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche (2002)

Ponlop is here referring to the Prasangika Madhyamika system of emptiness teachings.

Prasangika Madhyamika

The term Prasangika comes from the Sanskrit *prasanga* or consequence. The term Madhyamika is the Sanskrit term for intermediate, and refers to an intermediate or middle position between extremes. The purpose of Prasangika Madhyamika is to free the inquirer from the clinging and suffering that is based on attachment to various kinds of extremes, such as existence and non-existence, life and death, right and wrong, pure and impure.

The method of Prasangika Madhyamika is based on the philosophical system of Nagarjuna, a second- and third-century Indian philosopher who has become extremely influential in the course of Buddhist thought. Prasangika Madhyamika doesn't seek to promote philosophical views or make claims about how reality is in itself. Instead, it analyzes the claims made by other views, and draws out the various consequences of those views. The consequences include logical contradictions and other results that are often unintended or unwanted by the proponents of the views being examined. A Western example is known as *reductio ad absurdum* or reduction to absurdity. The idea is this: if you learn that a view you hold leads logically to some sort of contradiction or other absurdity, this is a red flag. Logically speaking, something needs to change.

In Prasangika Madhyamika, the idea is that when you are faced with the inevitable and unwanted consequences of your views, you will be able to become free of those views.

The Use of Logic in Madhyamika

Even within the Prasangika system, not all scholars agree on how to interpret the approach to liberation. There have been disagreements at many times in the history of Madhyamika interpretation. One issue that has attracted recent scholarly attention is the place of logic and rationality in Madhyamika. Many of the Madhyamika texts and commentaries contain contradictions and logical paradoxes. Disagreements arise over what to

make of them. Here are several examples.

> *So, the views "I existed," "I didn't exist,"*
> *Both or neither,*
> *In the past*
> *Are untenable.*
>
> Nagarjuna (1995) 27:13[5]

> *By their nature, [...] things are not a determinate entity. For they have only one nature, i.e. no nature.*
>
> Nagarjuna (1995)[6]

Statements like these are of pivotal importance in Prasangika Madyhamika. But how should we understand and utilize them? What do they have to do with the goal of becoming free of views, clinging and suffering? Are statements like these supposed to nudge us towards mysticism or an irrationalist mental state? Are they just bad logic? Most recent scholarship has not favored these three options.[7]

In fact, two other influential interpretations have recently earned the attention of Buddhist scholars. We may call them the logical approach and the literary approach. Both approaches are defended on historical and text-critical grounds. Both approaches are argued to be able to free the practitioner from all views, but the approaches work in very different ways.

Recently, these differences engendered an important and fascinating academic conversation. C.W. Huntington published an article (Huntington 2007b) criticizing the logical approach and advocating the literary approach. Jay L. Garfield replied (Garfield 2008) with a defense of the logical approach and a critique of the literary approach. The conversation actually inspired a three-day symposium at Smith College with over twenty speakers, which we both attended (see Smith College 2010).

We will review both approaches briefly.

The Logical Approach

Garfield argues that Nagarjuna uses logic and argumentation to support conclusions that he endorses. He sees Nagarjuna as upholding inference as one of the means of knowledge in the conventional world. Contradictory statements are important tools of inquiry, and they work in different ways. When we interpret Nagarjuna's texts, we should take contradictions at their full logical strength.[8]

In matters of conventional truth, logical contradictions can help us abandon the notion of essence, which Madhyamika sees as the root of clinging and suffering. For example, when the contradictions pertain to various phenomena such as cause, motion or the various elements of

nature, they can force us to reexamine our assumptions and give up the notion of essence. Contradictions do real work, and they are given strength by our respect for the canons of reason.

In matters of ultimate truth, Garfield sees contradictions as being more complicated. These contradictions are to have a sweeping, global logical force that helps us to abandon all views. He gives this example from Nagarjuna, which we mentioned above:

All things have one nature, that is, no nature.

Garfield regards this statement as a contradiction at the "limits of thought." [9] We are at the limits of thought here because this statement is elucidating the emptiness of emptiness. This statement doesn't stand back and talk about a small category of things. It applies to everything, including itself. It is telling us how everything is. And it is doing so by saying that there is no way that everything is. It affirms exactly what it denies: nature, and for all things.

The way we understand Garfield is that we should take this contradiction at full strength. The idea here is not to tweak our assumptions so that we can lessen the contradictory force, or make one side true and the other side false. We need both sides.

We need the "nature" side because it's not just an accident that things have no nature. It's their very nature to have no nature. To be a thing in the first place is to have no nature. So we can't abandon this side without losing the force of our realization.

We need the "no-nature" side as well. If we abandoned the no-nature side, we would not be realizing emptiness at all. We would be attributing a nature other than emptiness to things. And that was actually where we started before we began inquiring: we thought there were natures to things.

And we can't abandon both sides together. To do this would be to not realize anything about how things are.

Garfield sees Nagarjuna as one of the major philosophers on the world stage, along with Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein and Heidegger. He takes contradictions at the limit of thought quite seriously, to the point of regarding both sides of them as being true. In fact, Graham Priest, Garfield's co-author on *Nagarjuna and the Limits of Thought* (Garfield and Priest 2002), is one of the world's leading proponents of dialetheism, the view that there can be true contradictions.

The Literary Approach

Huntington agrees with Garfield that Nagarjuna uses logic and the force of contradiction as a tool of inquiry. But for Huntington, Nagarjuna is much less serious about logic.[10] He sees Nagarjuna as using logic only in a self-deconstructive, pragmatic way. This kind of use is called *upaya,* or skillful

means, in Buddhism.

For example, when Nagarjuna enters into a discussion, he'll use logic not because he believes that logic conveys the truth about things, but only because his discussion partner has this belief. The idea is to drive the partner to a contradiction, using the very materials that the partner takes seriously.

And once the contradiction arises, the purpose is not to command rational assent or to reach an endorsed conclusion. Rather, the purpose is to open "a logically indeterminate space between proof and disproof, affirmation and negation, consent and dissent."[11] In this space, you can reach a state of non-abiding that does not land on any of these extremes.

Huntington sees logic as having a deconstructive use only. If we use logic for anything more, "logic can become a dangerous snare." In fact,

> *As the crystallized essence of conceptualization, logic tends by its nature to engender the clinging and antipathy associated with reified thought.*
>
> Huntington (2007)

So where does the connection to literature come in? For Huntington, reading Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (and presumably other Madhyamika texts) in a literary way is another powerful opening to this state of non-abiding. Reading in a literary way helps sensitize us to "the very features of textuality – symbol, metaphor, polysemy, multivalence – that might lead us ... out of the compulsive desire to deal in certainties."[12] Where Garfield turns to the study of logic, Huntington turns to literary criticism and the philosophy of language. He draws on the work of several writers mentioned in the present book, such as Derrida, Rorty and Wittgenstein.

Could there be a powerful emptiness practice embedded in this literary approach that you, the beginning student, could use?

Yes. In fact, Huntington approvingly quotes from Jeff Humphries' book, *Reading Emptiness* (Humphries 1999), that "truth is in the act, not the content, of reading":

> *I would like to argue that literature is a privileged ground for the realization of emptiness. This is true because in reading literature there is no doubt that one is not dealing with an objective reality. ... To the extent that we read texts as collections of signs that can take the shapes and assume the importance of realities when we read, we directly experience the nature of emptiness, just as we do in dreams. As we*

> *realize that texts exist as literature only in the moment of reading, in the same instant in which we come into being with them as readers, we gain a direct experience of the nature of mind according to the Middle Way: the mind is nowhere to be found, neither any one of its parts nor exactly their sum.*

How can this work? According to Humphries, literature counteracts our tendency to reify things, that is, to take them as fixed and inherently existent. Literature does this by blurring categories in our experience that we take to be inherently distinct windows to the world. Humphries explains:

> *Literary reading is a particularly effective means of combatting the reificatory error, the tendency to think of perceived objects as permanent and inherently existing, because it first asks us to deliberately blur the distinction between conceptual thought and sense perception. We are asked to perform the former while pretending to be performing the latter.*

This does not apply only to reading Nagarjuna, but to any text. To get a taste of the transformational power of reading, just pay attention to its conjuring power, which can conjure new realities, with you included! This can be a very powerful way to learn about emptiness.

Our Take on This

Since this book is not an academic, scholarly effort, but a practical guide to the varieties of (what we're calling) emptiness teachings, we will not attempt to adjudicate between the logical approach and the literary approach. We are not in a position to explore which is better warranted historically.

Actually, the way we will proceed in this book uses elements from both approaches. Some of our meditations depend on logic and inference. Others take advantage of the literary, figurative aspects of thought and language, such as imagination, metaphor and irony. We feel lucky to have excellent contemporary scholars like Garfield and Huntington to help us approach these subtle issues.

In addition to the logical and literary approaches, we will be using a method inspired by the Tibetan teacher, Tsongkhapa. This method uses introspection to a certain extent. At the same time, it has a reputation for lending itself to a logically coherent, rather than a paradoxical, exposition of the emptiness teachings.

We'll explain more about this approach later, but for now, let us say a few words about it.

Our introspective approach will focus on trying to isolate precisely the "target of refutation" or the "object of negation" related to some phenomenon. After settling on the target of refutation, we will seek to verify through our meditation and reasoning that it cannot be found anywhere. The target is usually some kind of essence or inherent existence that we believe or feel is there, even though the emptiness teachings tell us that it is not there.

The goal is to refute the target, which helps dissolve the conception we have about it. It's the conception that is said to cause all the clinging and suffering. The most challenging aspect of this approach consists of coming to understand the very subtle difference between conventional existence and inherent existence.[13] Throughout this book, we explore many different ways of clarifying this distinction. The goal is to isolate the conception of inherent existence as it shows up in our thoughts and feelings.

We do not mean to imply that the approach we take here would be endorsed by all the proponents of other Prasangika Madhyamika approaches. We have chosen this method primarily because (as we will show later) it unpacks the notions of inherent existence and dependence in helpful ways, and also because it is supported by a living teaching tradition and a great deal of literature. [14]

As you proceed through the book, we encourage you to try both the logical and literary approaches. Try looking at the arguments in this book as logical arguments. Think through them carefully and reap the benefit of being transformed by them. And perhaps on a separate pass, try reading through the material in a literary way. Experience how it has the ability to conjure up realities and reduce the quest for objective certainties, the way a literary genre can.

We believe this book makes a literary reading easy because it presents so many different arguments side by side. The variety itself tends to offer resistance to being subsumed under one logically coherent framework.

In your own study of emptiness, the approach you take will have a lot to do with your interests and temperament. In the old days, a Buddhist practitioner who was committed to penetrate the deepest secrets of the dharma would often visit different masters and learn what they had to offer. The same seems to be a good approach today.

More on the Various Traditions

With respect to the various traditions, Prasangika Madhyamika, Dzogchen and Mahamudra, there are two things that should be emphasized. One, these traditions and their main realizations are quite compatible, and as forms of Buddhism, they conduct many, if not most, of the same activities. Two, even though these traditions see emptiness as the ultimate truth about

the nature of reality, they don't consider meditation on emptiness to be the sole spiritual activity needed to advance towards the Mahayana goal – full Buddhahood. Instead, meditation on emptiness is conducted within a matrix of other transformational activities. For these traditions, it is the combination of emptiness meditation and other practices that helps achieve their highest goals. That is, it's the combination of activities that allows emptiness realizations to be nonconceptual and transformational. It is the combination that helps bring about the full enlightenment of a Buddha.

Teaching Matrix

When we use the term "Madhyamika" in this book, we refer to the Prasangika system as articulated by Tsongkhapa. This is a convenient designation only, since we are aware that there are other approaches to Madhyamika. In fact, books similar to this could be written from those other approaches as well.

In any case, what we are inspired by in Tsongkhapa's presentation is its user-friendly structure for presenting the teachings. It is like a matrix that contains several elements that make emptiness meditations easy to approach. We have found that you don't have to be a Buddhist to benefit from this approach. You can work it into various other paths.

Here is a quick overview of why we find this system useful.

Conventional and Inherent Existence

> *The foundation of the path is the recognition that emptiness negates not objects but an imagined status of objects.*
>
> Hopkins (1995)

First, this system makes a clear distinction between conventional existence and inherent existence. This helps you know what to refute (inherent existence) and what not to refute (conventional existence). Conventional existence is not a problem. It does not cause ignorance or suffering, as we will show later. It has no essence or self-power. It also provides the tools for liberation; it includes everyday activities, the Buddhist path and the self as mere designation. This inherent/conventional distinction helps keep you on the razor's edge of the middle way, by serving as a guide not to refute too little and not to refute too much.

Conventional existence is usually defined in Madhyamika as something pretty casual and pragmatic. It will be explained more fully below, but here is a quick example. A small vessel that we can drink with can be called a

"cup." It serves a purpose and is able to bear a name. That's all the conventionally existent cup needs. It does not need to be a cup before being named, and it doesn't need to have any true, real or objective "cupness." In fact, a pre-existing, true or real "cupness" is something that we would refute in an emptiness meditation. After the meditation, what would remain is the everyday, conventional cup.

Inherent existence is the kind of existence that, according to the emptiness teachings, we feel things really have. This would be a cup that is truly present in a mind-independent way. Why would it be a cup and not a saucer? It would be a cup because of a pre-given identity or an inherent nature that makes it be a cup. The sense of this kind of existence can manifest in many ways, so there are many kinds of emptiness meditation to address this sense of existence. In the emptiness meditations, we look for the inherent existence that we suspect that things have. And we fail to find this inherent existence. This is the realization of the emptiness of things.

Because Tsongkhapa's presentation is so clear about conventional and inherent existence, it sharply delineates a middle way between them. The middle way is to not refute too little or too much. If we fail to refute inherent existence, we refute too little, and fall into the extreme position of essentialism and clinging. If we refute conventional existence, we refute too much, and fall into the extreme position of nihilism and despondency. The middle way is to refute inherent existence only, which thereby liberates conventional existence.

The Object of Refutation

Second, in helping to clarify the inherent/conventional distinction, Tsongkhapa's system presents a very detailed, close focus on what it calls "the object of refutation." Sometimes called the "target" of refutation, this is defined as the inherently existent self, the inherently existent table, the inherently existent computer. It is what we look for in emptiness meditations and fail to find.

The inherently existent self seems to exist in a self-sufficient, self-powered, independent way, but it does not. According to the emptiness teachings, feeling as though the self and other things exist inherently is a kind of delusion that is the root of suffering. So it is the inherently existent self which is refuted and shown not to exist. What is not refuted is the conventional, everyday self that eats dinner, goes to a show and pays taxes.

In fact, getting clear on the difference between conventional and inherent existence is one of the most important issues in this approach to emptiness meditation. It is sometimes said that to get the distinction perfectly, and not place the border too far to one side or the other, requires one to already

have realized emptiness! So there is abundant clarification on this issue in the teachings.

Agnosticism

Third, this Prasangika approach itself is silent on whether the realization of emptiness simultaneously gives rise to an experience of *rigpa* or the "nature of mind". In the Tsongkhapa-influenced teachings on emptiness that we are focusing on, this matter is not discussed. This allows you to approach the teachings in either way. That is, you can utilize the meditations we present in this book in a Tsongkhapa-style or in a Nyingma/Kagyü style. You can approach the meditations Tsongkhapa-style to realize the ultimate truth of phenomena, or you can approach the meditations in the Kagyü or Nyingma style to help realize the nature of the mind. Both approaches are effective and have proven track records in helping to alleviate suffering.

This emphasis on defining inherent existence, the object of refutation, is strikingly similar to the notions challenged by the various Western non-essentialist teachings. This similarity is what prompts us to call these Western approaches "emptiness teachings" as well. Where the Madhyamikas challenge inherent existence, the Western non-essentialists challenge essence, substance, objectivity, ipseity (individual identity), the correspondence between thought and reality, and similar notions. Several prominent Western philosophies and teachings are examined in this book.

So this is our approach. We think it helps in understanding the emptiness teachings. We use it as an overall teaching matrix even when discussing the various non-Buddhist teachings. For example, we use the term "target of refutation" to indicate the particular versions of essence that these non-Buddhist teachings are refuting, even though these teachings don't use that term.

For Buddhists, the Western philosophies and teachings can be regarded as sources for additional meditations. For non-Buddhists, you can follow Western approaches as an alternative framework. Even though our overall matrix is conditioned by the Tsongkhapa-inspired approach, we recognize that there are many other approaches which can utilize the emptiness teachings. If you happen to be more familiar with another approach, then please feel free to integrate the meditations in a way that resonates with you.

The Reduction of Suffering

In the Buddhist tradition, the cessation of suffering is the principal theme, even from the beginning. Prince Gautama ventured out of his palace one

day and for the first time encountered old age, and sickness and death. He was shocked. He left home, setting out to do something about human suffering. This quest resulted in him becoming the Awakened One, the Buddha. For Buddhism, the key is that the belief in a solid, non-empty self is the root cause of suffering, and the foundation of dualisms like existence/nonexistence, self/other, good/evil.

A non-empty self can easily be threatened, needs to be defended and wishes to aggrandize itself. If we feel the self is solid and truly existent, then we also feel that other beings and objects in the world are the same way. Seeing things in this reified, solid way leads to grasping for the things we like and aversion for those we don't like. Seeing phenomena as inherently existent, we also assume (against all evidence) that they are permanent, or at least permanent enough to be around when we need them. When we see things as permanent, we are at odds with how they change. We are surprised, shocked and perhaps even indignant when change happens. We want the stuff we like to be present, and the stuff we don't like to never arise. We hate it when things don't go this way. We can get indignant at reality itself for giving us a bum deal. Buddhism's goal is to counteract this, and to end suffering for all sentient beings.

A good starting point for how emptiness can reduce suffering is to realize that suffering is an empty concept (as is happiness), and not something precisely definable. Suffering, like everything else, depends on context and our interpretation. Different paths and bodies of conventional truth will define suffering differently. But let's at least consider one possibility. The earliest Buddhists' Pali texts contain the word *dukkha*. This is frequently translated as suffering, but more literal translations include stress, anxiety or unsatisfactoriness. A popular quip about suffering captures this meaning:

> *Pain is unavoidable;*
> *suffering (the objection to pain) is optional.*

According to this notion of suffering, suffering consists of fighting with reality, objecting to the fact that pain arises, taking a stance that pain shouldn't ever happen. Suffering in this sense includes the unpleasant feelings that arise when these expectations are not met.

Seeing things as empty provides a greater openness that allows for change. This softens the blow of the unavoidable unpleasant events in life.

Two important points should be clarified here. One is that realizing emptiness doesn't prevent painful life situations from happening. Everyone, even advanced practitioners and famous role models, may face disease, extraordinary physical pain, the loss of loved ones, homelessness and death. They may also face gossip, insults, infidelity, negative book reviews, and getting passed over for promotion at the monastery, laboratory or

university.

But realizing emptiness profoundly affects how we experience these things. Deeply experiencing the open nature of phenomena influences how we perceive, feel and respond. Recognizing the openness, ambiguity, instability and re-definability of phenomena becomes second nature. Suffering, understood as dissatisfaction, is inevitably reduced.

Indeed, a deep realization of emptiness makes it clear how non-empty things couldn't even function. A body that was inherently, primordially healthy would exhibit health as its nature. How could it ever get sick? And a body that was inherently stricken with disease would carry illness as part of its very being. How could it ever be cured? Only the ability to change gives things the ability to respond to conditions.

Being OK with all this graces us with tranquility, and empowers us to build a better self and a better world. One traditional method for reducing suffering and enhancing our understanding of emptiness is to see the world as an illusion.

> *...we cultivate the recognition of our body as an illusion, our feelings as being like a dream, our mind as being like luminous space, and all phenomena as being like fleeting clouds. ... In this way, we enhance our realization of the inseparability of appearance and emptiness.*
>
> Brunnhölzl (2004)

The Tibetan tradition contains many images and examples to help us tune into the illusory nature of reality, such as magic, mirages, dreams, rainbows and a reflection in a mirror. Jan Westerhoff (2010) gives beautiful Western examples of how these metaphors can help illuminate the empty, illusory nature of reality.

Emptiness and Non-Duality

But there is another sense of non-duality. This is the sense of non-duality understood as "free from dualistic extremes." This entails freedom from the pairs of metaphysical dualisms such as existence/non-existence, essentialism/nihilism, substance/attribute, presence/absence and good/evil. These are dualisms because if you experience things in the world in terms of one side of the pair, you will experience things in the world in terms of the other side as well. For example, when you feel as though you truly exist, you also will fear that one day you will truly not exist. In each case, there will be craving, attachment, rigidity and resistance to life. But through the emptiness teachings, you realize how none of these dualistic pairs make sense. These dualisms drop away, and so do the rigid attachments and

sufferings. Emptiness teachings are non-dual in this sense.

How Does Realizing Emptiness Help?

> *If the selflessness of phenomena is analyzed*
> *And if this analysis is cultivated,*
> *It causes the effect of attaining nirvana.*
> *Through no other cause does one come to peace.*
>
> The Samadhiraja Sutra

> *For him to whom emptiness is clear*
> *Everything becomes clear.*
>
> Nagarjuna (1995) 24:14

Traditionally, the fruits of emptiness realization are usually explained along these lines:

When you realize the emptiness of yourself, you no longer feel separate from other things or other people. The walls that seemed to define the self are seen through, and they come down. In place of the walled-in self, there is a wonderful, open, joyful, loving connection with others. This happens without a central core. It's as though the self as a concentrated essence is transformed into an expansive, luminous web of relations.

Having realized the emptiness of yourself, you can easily transfer your realization to other people, other beings, as well. Other people become more precious too. They become free to change, free of identity and rigidities, for the exact reason that they too lack a solid core or essence. This transforms your personal relationships.

When you realize the emptiness of everything, it is direct and nonconceptual. It is not mediated by any thought, feeling or image. There isn't even the slightest trace of subject/object differentiation. Without your realization being limited by a particular image or concept, there is nothing to which it does not apply. It applies to yourself, your chosen spiritual path and to emptiness itself. This realization cuts through the roots of belief and conceptual elaboration. And because it entails compassion, it helps pacify anger, greed, and their attendant sufferings. Life is freed up from the immobilities of existence and non-existence. It becomes light, clear and joyous, like a phantasmagoria of images that are neither fully present, nor totally absent.

In more everyday terms, one could look at it like this:

Experiencing self, other and the world as empty is to joyfully experience your place in a light, free, open-ended, interpenetrating web of relations and dependencies. Lightness and joy come from no longer craving for permanence or guaranteed safety. Life and death are freed up. Nothing

seems ultimately stiff, frozen, apart, separate or unchangeable. There are no more conceptions of an inherently existing self that exists on its own yet needs to be defended, propped up, aggrandized and pleasured forever. This opens your heart to the radical contingency of all beings and things, and brings on the sweet, precious desire and commitment to see them free from suffering as well.

Experience becomes open-textured. A spider web and Indra's Net are traditional metaphors for this texture, but there are many other metaphors as well. And this is just the point. The very openness of this texture is free from closure and finality. It is free from collapsing into a literal, ultimate determination of what experience is. In this lies great freedom. Fixed and rigid barriers dissolve. The barrier you had thought existed between you and everything else is recognized as nonexistent. You realize yourself as part of the open texture or web, but never as a separate, independent beholder of the web. You realize that you can never stand apart from the web regarding it from somewhere else. Instead, you have a deep recognition of yourself as contingent and dependent on many other things, which are dependent upon you as well. Nothing is left out, and there is an immense sweetness and joy in this realization.

Indra's Net of dependencies is holistic because things are constituted by other things. Nothing stands apart. Things change at least a bit whenever something new enters at any point. The new element enters by becoming contextualized by things that make the net. At the same time, all the other elements of the net are recontextualized to at least a tiny extent by the new element. Nothing is experienced as standing alone, immune, granular, lump-like or disconnected from other things. You experience the freedom of things, which brings great, spontaneous, unexpected joy. You don't expect anything to remain apart or detached.

The experience of self and the world as empty deepens over time. As the heart opens more and more, one becomes more sensitive to the many ramifications of emptiness. Your joy becomes more subtle and more pervasive. Because you no longer experience fixed and inherent barriers between self and others, joy merges more and more with a heartfelt sense of compassion.

> *The Madhyamika is a radically deconstructive, pragmatic philosophy designed to be used for exposing, defusing, and dismantling the reifying tendencies inherent in language and conceptual thought.... All it does is dissolve the old questions, which are seen to have been misguided from the start, leaving behind nothing other than a dramatic awareness of the living present – an epiphany of one's entire form of life. No form of conceptual*

diffusion remains, and no questions begging for answers that reinforce a deep-seated resistance to acceptance that this life, as it is now lived, is the only arbiter of truth and reality...

Huntington (2007)

Inferential Realization

When we first learn the emptiness meditations, our realization is inferential. It is conceptual. It happens through the medium of concepts and imagery. It is like coming to the conclusion of a logical proof. We've learned how the meditations examine things. We've learned how the meditations are structured, and how they exhaust all the logical possibilities for where inherent existence could possibly hide. So when we get to the conclusion of the meditation, it is like coming to the end of an inferential chain.

Let's take an example. Let's say that we want to investigate the emptiness of causality. Finding the emptiness of causality consists of looking everywhere possible for inherent causality, and finding its absence instead of its presence. This specific absence of inherent causality is the emptiness of causality.

We can use the "Diamond Slivers" meditation to structure our search. The Diamond Slivers meditation looks for causality by dividing the field of possibilities up into four:

1) The cause is identical to the effect.

2) The cause is different from the effect.

3) The cause is both identical to and different from the effect.

4) The cause is neither identical to nor different from the effect.

These four possibilities cover all the logical bases.

We will run through the Diamond Slivers in a more detailed way below. But for now, we will look at how the Diamond Slivers can produce an inferential realization. During the meditation, you go through each of the four possibilities.

1) "Ah! The cause is not there, in the effect."

2) "The cause is not anywhere outside of (or different from) the effect."

3) "The cause is not both."

4) “The cause is not neither.”

When you realize that the cause is not in any of the four possibilities, while feeling confident that the meditation covers all the logical bases, you are forced by the power of inference to realize that the cause is nowhere to be found.

Aha! The cause is not anywhere!

This is the realization of the emptiness of causality. Even though this realization is conceptual, it is nevertheless helpful and freeing. You can meditate on it again and again, strengthening the realization. Some people who realize the emptiness of causality feel lighter and more expansive around the question of free will and determinism. It may become less of an issue. And at the same time, realizing the emptiness of causality has not removed our ability to observe everyday regularities, such as that we eat when we are hungry.

You may have noticed that some of the texts and teachings on emptiness are formatted as dialogues. Dialogue is a very direct, immediate and powerful form of communication. Some of Nagarjuna’s dialogues are actually like small debates.[15] In the Tsongkhapa-inspired Gelug tradition, debate is a significant part of emptiness teachings and of monastic education in general. Georges Dreyfus tells us more about this. Born in Switzerland, he spent fifteen years in a Tibetan Gelug monastery, becoming in 1985 the first Westerner to receive the *Geshe* degree, which is roughly analogous to a Western doctor of philosophy degree. Dreyfus writes about how one of his teachers uses debate as a skillful teaching method.

> *Gen Nyi-ma would use debate as a way to undermine the students’ attempts to stop the investigation and fasten on any one answer, especially the traditional one. In this way, he was illustrating the full potential of the [debate] practice as a mode of inquiry, not just a useful pedagogical tool.*
>
> *It is not inappropriate to speak of a wisdom acquired through the practice of debate. ... Debate develops the ability to explore ideas and take a stance while keeping in mind the fragility and uncertainty of those ideas.*
>
> Dreyfus (2003)

There are many different kinds of emptiness meditations, both in Buddhism and in the various Western approaches that we discuss in this book. These meditations focus on different targets. They all proceed inferentially at first and they are all helpful – sometimes a little bit, and sometimes a lot! The

insights that they convey can become direct realizations of emptiness.

Direct Realization

The direct realization of emptiness goes beyond inferential realization. Like the inferential kind of realization, the direct realization of emptiness is a cognition of the absence of inherent existence, but this is now a nonconceptual realization. With the direct cognition of emptiness, the power of inference is not operative, and there are no concepts at play. At the moment of realization, there is no concept or experience appearing. There is no mental image of the object about which you were meditating, and no conceptual filter that limits the absence of inherent existence to just the one object with which you began your meditation. There is not even any appearance of subject or object.

In the Prasangika Madhyamika teachings, direct realization is described as like water being poured into water. Because the realization is not accompanied by any conceptual or imagistic grid, it is said that direct realization is not limited. Your realization includes the emptiness of all phenomena, even emptiness itself.[16]

There are aftereffects of the direct realization of emptiness. Whereas before such a realization, the much-discussed distinction between conventional existence and inherent existence was hazy, afterwards, it is much clearer. It's almost as though you now see that the very idea of inherent existence doesn't make sense, no matter what it supposedly applies to. Things may still appear as though they exist inherently, but you know that they do not exist in this way. Things become kaleidoscopic, illusion-like.

Enough direct realizations of emptiness are said to remove all the artificial conceptions of inherent existence, along with their accompanying afflictions. Artificial conceptions of inherent existence are the ones that have been picked up from teachings and philosophies which state or imply that things exist inherently. You no longer assent to these ideas, and the world becomes lighter.

There is further to go in this path, however. This is a Mahayana path, so the meditator is a bodhisattva, who vows to keep working until all sentient beings are free from suffering. The bodhisattva vows to attain omniscience and skillful means in order to better assist sentient beings in becoming free from suffering.[17] There are also said to be innate misconceptions of inherent existence. For example, even the objects of the senses are said to appear to the senses as though they are inherently existent. These appearances are abandoned only by a fully realized transcendent Buddha, who at this point is also said to be omniscient.[18]

What makes direct realization of emptiness possible? Direct realization is said to be the union of calm abiding and special insight (which is emptiness realization). We discussed emptiness realization above. Calm abiding (*shamatha* in Sanskrit) is a special kind of meditative stabilization that produces mental and physical pliancy, in which the mind and body feel light, flexible, and able to be used for virtuous purposes. [19] Calm abiding requires one to be able to hold the mind in an alert but non-jumpy way on the same internal object over a prolonged period of time. Calm abiding is devoid of sleepiness and mental scattering.

You can use many different kinds of objects to help develop mental stabilization and calm abiding. Sometimes it is better to begin with objects that are easier to keep in mind, such as the breath, candle light or some other physical or mental object that is helpful in your general practice. But in order to cultivate a direct cognition of emptiness, your object must eventually become emptiness itself.

Getting to the point where you can calmly abide in emptiness is developed like this: once you have developed the separate abilities to calmly abide on an object, and to realize emptiness inferentially, you then combine them in the same meditation. When your inference hits its conclusion, you stabilize on the conclusion. You draw it out as long as you can until you lose the force of the realization. Then you apply the inference again, until the force of the inference presents the conclusion again. Then you stabilize on the conclusion again, using your skills at calm abiding. You alternate back and forth between analysis and stabilization, making sure that (i) you don't remain in the machinery of the inference but in the conclusion, and that (ii) the object of your calm abiding is the result of the inference, and that you haven't turned the mind to some other subtle object, such as nothingness or blankness.

When you are able to calmly abide on emptiness strongly enough without wavering, the imagistic, conceptual component fades away. This imagistic component was the absence of what you looked for in the meditation. It was the specific absence of inherent existence of the self or whatever object you began the meditation with. When this image or concept fades away through calm abiding, you are still realizing emptiness, but all defining limitations have faded away. The result is that you are realizing emptiness in an unlimited and nonconceptual way. You are realizing the emptiness of your self and of all things.

It Sounds Hard, but There's Good News!

It sounds difficult even to begin! According to this quite traditional explanation, both the inferential and stabilization aspects are very

specialized and involved. In addition, both these aspects presuppose a full spectrum of other Buddhist practices as well. Getting to fully enlightened, omniscient Buddhahood is an immense task. It is said to require many stages. Countless rebirths may be necessary.

But there are two kinds of good news about this immense task.

One kind of good news about inferential and direct realization of emptiness is this. Not everyone accepts all the traditional, orthodox elements of Mahayana Buddhism. Yes, the complicated explanation of calm abiding and the direct realization of emptiness are part of the traditional, orthodox field of Mahayana Buddhism. This orthodox field includes the doctrines of rebirth and bodhisattvas as transcendental entities. But not everyone accepts all these details. As Mahayana Buddhism comes to be taken up by Western practitioners and interpreters, certain orthodox and traditional aspects of the teaching begin to drop off. Stephen Batchelor's *Buddhism Without Beliefs* is a well-known example.

A more relevant case in point is Jay Garfield's essay entitled "Nagarjuna's Theory of Causality" (Garfield 2002b). In this essay, Garfield reports not accepting the doctrine of rebirth. He accepts a broadly physicalist philosophy of science, and even argues that the doctrine of rebirth is incompatible with the emptiness of the self and the emptiness of causality. What is interesting about this is how Garfield argues that the emptiness teachings are deeply transformational, but he does not accept all parts of the orthodox, traditional teaching. Similarly, in *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk*, Georges Dreyfus (2003) tells of his fifteen-year course of study to become a fully qualified Tibetan Gelug monk with the *Geshe* degree. He reports differing in significant ways from his Tibetan teachers. In a nutshell, Dreyfus reports being skeptical about transcendental entities known as "dharma protectors," whereas his teachers had traditional beliefs about them.

These are small indications that you can embrace the teaching and benefit by it, without assenting to all its traditional, orthodox details.

The other kind of good news about inferential and direct realization of emptiness is this: you don't even have to worry about the inferential/direct distinction. This is because any kind of emptiness realization can rock your world. This is time-tested, and it works to de-substantialize the self-feeling, while permeating life with a luminous clarity. Each single realization is a move towards sweetness and lightness. I (Greg) still feel the effects of realizations that happened decades ago, in childhood through college. Even replaying old realizations is thrilling and uplifting. And even small realizations leave positive and therapeutic aftereffects. The benefit is instantaneous, and it can be felt quite tangibly. The self and the world become more open and expansive and loving.

So as far as we are concerned, you can proceed with the meditations

without worrying about the hundreds of details set forth by the traditional path. But of course because the whole path is empty and flexible, you are also free to embrace it in an orthodox manner if you are so inclined!

Emptiness Realization: Who Realizes?

This is an important question for some non-dual teachings. But for the emptiness teachings, it is almost a non-issue. If there is realization then there is a realizer. But these things are only conventional designations, not objective truths. So it is the conventional self who realizes its own emptiness. The entire Buddhist teachings are conventional only. Even a fully realized Buddha is nothing more than a conventional being.

What allows this question to be no big deal? It is the democratic nature of the emptiness teachings. It is the fact that the teachings refute the inherent status of everything across the board. Because of this equality, nothing is set aside as more empty than anything else. Of course it is most helpful to realize the emptiness of the self. But everything else is empty in just the same way. And the more you realize the emptiness of one thing, the more your realization picks up, snowballs and generalizes. So there is no need to pick on any one particular thing, such as the self, and make it the only empty thing or the most empty thing. There is no reason to talk about realization and then seriously say, “It was realized by no one.” Things are simpler than that. As far as our ability to use words in a conventional way, no nouns or pronouns are outlawed. They can all be used. This ties in to the insight that mountains and rivers are mountains and rivers. Just not inherently so!

Emptiness Realization: How Is It Done?

In Buddhism, you proceed by doing the emptiness meditations. Emptiness meditations are like a treasure hunt. In the meditation you look in a systematic and detailed way for the inherent existence you have been projecting upon things. And in the meditation you fail to find this inherent existence. What you find instead is the absence of inherent existence. **Finding the absence of inherent existence is realizing emptiness**.

The meditations have several stages, which are as follows:

1) **Generate compassion** – This is sort of a background condition in your life which prepares you for the meditations. And then right before you do the meditation it helps to generate a strong feeling of compassion. You can do this by performing a *metta* or loving-kindness meditation.

2) **Identify the object of refutation** – You clarify what you are looking for:

inherent existence of the object whose emptiness you are meditating on. If you are meditating on the emptiness of the self, then you try to identify the inherent existence of your self. In traditional teachings, this stage of identifying the object of refutation can require months. This is because it is not easy to distinguish the fixed and rigid "inherent existence," which doesn't exist, from the free and flexible "conventional existence," which does exist.

3) **Determine the entailment** – You familiarize yourself with the overall logic of emptiness meditation. This is a way of gaining confidence that the meditation really works. If you can't find what you're looking for, you can be confident that it doesn't exist. This way, you won't feel that there are loopholes in the process.

4) **Do the meditation itself** – In doing the meditation, you are searching for the inherent existence of some object or phenomenon. It could be your own self or some other object. You are not looking for the conventional nature of this object (which you do not seek to refute). Instead, you are looking for the inherent existence of the object (which you do wish to refute). During the meditation, you will search in every place the object could be hiding, and you will fail to find it. This failure is your realization of emptiness, which is the realization of the absence of this inherent existence.

The First Stage – Generating Compassion

The first stage of an emptiness meditation is to generate compassion. In this section, we will offer a very simple method to open the heart. You may find it easier to do this simple visualization with your eyes open or closed. Either is fine.

For a more detailed discussion of compassion, love and caring, please refer to Chapter 5, "The Interplay Between Emptiness, Compassion and Happiness." Chapter 5 also contains tips on some traditional ways of generating compassion.

For now, we will try this simple method. It is an abbreviated version of the well-known loving-kindness meditation, which is also available in Chapter 5.

Meditation – Loving-Kindness (Short Version)

> Bring to mind the sincere wish that you be well, happy and free of suffering. Stay with this wish for a while.


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never return to thinking that the target of refutation really is inherently existent after all. After you gain familiarity with the meditations, you gain a greater and greater realization that other things are empty as well. You can use the force of generalization to apply the results to a wider and wider scope of objects and phenomena. At first this generalization takes place through inference and analogy. But as you proceed with the meditations, they become characterized by greater and greater subtlety. Your realizations become less and less dependent upon a chain of reasoning, until at some point the realization of emptiness becomes spontaneously global, with nothing left out; even emptiness itself is not left out. The Buddhist teachings state that it is at this point that you have become free of the six root afflictions[21]:

- Attachment
- Aversion
- Pride
- Ignorance
- Doubt
- Wrong view

According to Buddhism, compassion has by now become one of your overall motivations. Because of this, you continue to meditate on emptiness. You will realize emptiness more and more deeply and from more angles of approach. Not only will your own realization and joy deepen, but you will also become more skillful and adept at helping other beings become free of suffering.

Emptiness Teachings and the Dalai Lama

The 14th and current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, has been studying the emptiness teachings, in conjunction with Mahayana Buddhism, for decades. The following passage from his book *How to See Yourself As You Really Are*, beautifully portrays the power and vastnesss of the emptiness teachings.

> *When I was about thirty-five years old, I was reflecting on the meaning of a passage by Tsongkhapa about how the "I" cannot be found either within or separate from the mind-body complex and how the "I" depends for its existence on conceptuality. Here is the passage:*


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