

## UNDERSTANDING EMPTINESS IS CRUCIAL

As we saw in the previous chapter, understanding emptiness is crucial to our liberation from cyclic existence. The *8,000 Verse Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* (*Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita*) takes emptiness as its main subject matter. Throughout this sutra, and particularly in the chapter entitled “The Complete Transmission of the Teaching,” it is said that the Buddha himself considered the realization of emptiness paramount, so much so that before passing into parinirvana, he went to great lengths to emphasize its significance by conferring the responsibility for this teaching to his attendant, Ananda.

*Ananda, therefore, I bestow upon you this profound perfection of wisdom...  
You should hold the perfection of wisdom and not forget it;  
if for some doctrine other than the perfection of wisdom  
you were to forget a word and make some mistake,  
I will not hold you at fault;  
but if for the perfection of wisdom, you forget a word and so forth,  
I will fault you.*

Clearly, the Buddha cherished the teaching on emptiness and wanted others to do so as well. In fact, all the buddhas have gained enlightenment by depending on the wisdom realizing emptiness. As it says in the *Heart Sutra*:

*All Buddhas who perfectly reside in the three times,  
relying upon the perfection of wisdom,  
become manifest and complete buddhas  
in the state of unsurpassed, perfect and complete enlightenment.*

All the buddhas in the past who have attained enlightenment, all the buddhas in the present who are attaining enlightenment, and all the buddhas of the future—including ourselves—will attain enlightenment by depending on the perfection of wisdom.

Meditating on emptiness purifies a great deal of karma, even before we have realized emptiness directly. We may wonder—isn’t bodhichitta just as strong a method, if not stronger, to purify destructive karma? In *Engaging in the Bodhisattva’s Conduct* (*Bodhisattvacharyavatara*, 1:6), Shantideva says:

*Thus, virtue is perpetually ever so feeble,  
while the power of vice is great and extremely dreadful.  
If there were no bodhicitta,  
what other virtue would overcome it?*

This quote indicates that bodhicitta has the potential to purify very heavy destructive karmas. But it can only do so when it is reinforced by the wisdom realizing emptiness. Its power is derived from that wisdom.

The wisdom realizing emptiness is so effective in purifying karma and eradicating afflictions because it apprehends phenomena completely opposite to the way ignorance apprehends phenomena. Thus, it meets ignorance head on and can inflict harm on ignorance directly, not indirectly as other virtues such as love, and compassion do. For example, if we must go to court, many people may advise us what to say and do when we get there. But what we really need is someone who stands up in court and proves to the judge and jury that what our adversary says is wrong. Similarly, the virtuous qualities such as compassion, fortitude, and concentration assist us on the path to enlightenment, but only the wisdom realizing the emptiness of inherent existence can prove without a doubt that the root of cyclic existence—ignorance grasping inherent existence—apprehends phenomena in a mistaken way.

Ignorance and the wisdom realizing emptiness take the same object as their focus—a table or a person, for example. Ignorance grasps this object as truly existent, as existing from its own side. That is why it is called the *true-grasping mind*. The wisdom realizing emptiness, however, realizes the absence of true existence; it knows that the object does not exist from its own side at all. The wisdom realizing emptiness realizes that the very same object that ignorance believes to be truly existent is completely empty of being truly existent. For this reason, wisdom is said to oppose ignorance head on and to harm it directly.

The practices of bodhicitta, love, compassion, and so on are a great help in overcoming ignorance, but they do not confront it directly. By themselves, they do not understand that phenomena exist completely opposite to the way ignorance believes them to exist.

When we are sick, we can treat our symptoms with a variety of medicines that correspond to the diversity of symptoms. But if we want to treat the fundamental

cause of the illness, we have to identify it exactly and then take the medicine that opposes it directly. This medicine will cure all the symptoms. Similarly, we may oppose hatred by meditation on love and counteract attachment by meditation on impermanence, but to root out all afflictions, we must eliminate their common cause, the self-grasping ignorance. This can be done only by meditating on the wisdom realizing that the self that ignorance grasps does not exist in the least.

This wisdom is very profound, and its object, the emptiness of inherent existence, is not easy to realize. For this reason, the Buddha did not teach emptiness immediately after he attained enlightenment. In his own words, upon enlightenment, he had “discovered this Dharma, which was profound, peaceful, free of elaborations, clear light, and unconditioned.” That is, he had realized the ultimate nature of all phenomena, their emptiness of true existence. It was so profound and difficult to understand that he wondered if he would be able to find anybody capable of understanding it. But eventually—and fortunately for us—he was persuaded to teach emptiness.

We may think, “But the first thing the Buddha taught was the four noble truths, not emptiness.” This is half right. The first thing he taught was the four noble truths, and the first truth, the truth of *duhkha*, has four attributes: impermanence, nature of *duhkha*, empty, and selfless. So, emptiness is included in the Buddha’s first teaching.

Hearing the benefits and importance of understanding emptiness will inspire us and help us to maintain interest in and appreciation for this teaching, especially for those of us who do not have an extensive background in this topic. We will be energized to learn and reflect on emptiness over a long period of time. This also applies to studying love, compassion, *bodhichitta*, and the six perfections. Having faith in and admiration toward these practices will inspire us to become familiar with them. Admiration and confidence in these practices will lead to the aspiration to engage in them. This, in turn, will spur joyous effort, and when we practice with enthusiasm and correct understanding, we will progress on the path.

## THE DANGER OF MISUNDERSTANDING EMPTINESS

Nagarjuna says in *Treatise on the Middle Way* (*Mulamadhyamakakarika*, 24:11):

*By a misperception of emptiness  
a person of little intelligence is destroyed,  
like a snake incorrectly seized  
or like a spell incorrectly cast.*

If someone's wisdom is not sufficiently developed in the topic of emptiness, it could lead to his downfall. Imagine that a person incorrectly thinks that because phenomena are empty, the law of karma and its effects does not exist and thus falls to the nihilistic extreme. This view leads him to be negligent and reckless in his actions, and as a result he creates massive nonvirtues, which leads him to take one unfortunate rebirth after another. For those who are wise, however, the situation is very different. Listening to and understanding the teachings on emptiness will only increase their faith in the functioning of causality.

In fact, whenever we don't know what we are doing, we risk making mistakes. If we try to use a table saw without understanding how it operates, we could lose a finger. Similarly, if we misunderstand emptiness, we place ourselves further from liberation because this realization is indispensable in order to attain liberation and enlightenment.

The Buddha hesitated to teach emptiness because he wasn't sure that people would understand it correctly. If we misunderstand, great damage may occur by falling to either of the two extremes, nihilism or absolutism (eternalism, permanence). Of these two, nihilism is the worst, because it negates the existence of karma and its effects, and it may thus harm our interest and diligence in living ethically. The *Heart Sutra*, for example, says, "There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind." If we misunderstand the intended meaning of this teaching and take these words literally, we risk concluding that refuge, karma, and cause and effect in general don't exist at all. That would be falling into the great abyss of the nihilistic extreme. Because it is easy to make this mistake, the Buddha was initially reluctant to teach emptiness.

The scriptures say that there is no destructive action that cannot be purified by meditation on emptiness. But if someone listens to teachings on emptiness,

misunderstands their meaning, and generates a wrong view about emptiness, that is very dire. Someone could incorrectly conclude that emptiness is worthless because it means that nothing whatsoever exists. Holding such a wrong view about emptiness, the person now lacks a reliable antidote to purify that destructive karma. This is equivalent to a prisoner holding the key to his cell but thinking it is a bomb and throwing it away.

Such an emphatic admonition to be careful in the way in which we reflect upon and meditate on the meaning of a teaching taught by the Buddha is only heard in connection with the teachings on emptiness. We do not hear this warning in relation to compassion, bodhichitta, or other topics that relate to the method side of the path. But misunderstanding the meaning of emptiness may lead us to think that conventional phenomena, dependent arising, and all the qualities cultivated on the method side of the path do not exist. Or we may think that emptiness itself doesn't exist. This is quite dangerous.

In his *Precious Garland (Ratnavali)*, Nagarjuna talks about two errors that people make in relation to the teaching on emptiness. One is when someone from the outset has no appreciation for the highest teaching on emptiness and rejects it outright. This includes proponents of the lower philosophical schools whose understanding of emptiness is comparatively coarse. For example, the Chittamatrins think that dependent phenomena are truly existent, so when they hear the teaching that dependent phenomena are empty of true existence, they dismiss it. The Svatantrikas assert that everything is inherently existent on the conventional level, so when they hear the teaching that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence, they reject it. Both the Chittamatrins and the Svatantrikas mistakenly believe that the teaching on the emptiness of inherent existence denies the existence of phenomena that in fact do exist. Believing that the Prasangika teaching on emptiness is a nihilist teaching, they discard it. Thus Chittamatrins and Svatantrikas fall to the extreme of absolutism, because they reject the Prasangika teaching on emptiness, mistakenly thinking that phenomena must exist inherently.

The other error is made by someone who has faith in the teaching on emptiness yet misunderstands it and thinks that because everything is empty, nothing exists at all. In doing so, the person with faith in emptiness falls to the extreme of nihilism because she mistakenly thinks that emptiness means nothing exists. This person is in greater danger, because she could easily proceed to reject ethical

conduct, love, compassion, and so on, saying that they do not exist at all. Even Buddhists who make the first kind of error will at least continue to observe the law of karma and its effects and to cultivate love, compassion, and bodhichitta. By understanding the error in these two extreme views, we should try to gain a correct understanding of emptiness.

### DOUBT INCLINED TOWARDS EMPTINESS

While the consequences of misunderstanding emptiness are severe, the result of having even a doubt whether phenomena are inherently existent is very beneficial. In his *Four Hundred Stanzas (Chatuhshataka-karika, verse 180)*, Aryadeva says:

*Those with little merit  
do not even doubt this doctrine.  
Entertaining just a doubt  
tears to tatters worldly existence.*

There are three types of doubt: (1) doubt inclined to the wrong conclusion, in this case that things inherently exist, (2) doubt that is equal to both sides, and (3) doubt inclined toward the correct conclusion, that phenomena are empty of inherent existence. The doubt Aryadeva speaks of here is the latter, the doubt inclined to the correct conclusion that phenomena lack inherent existence. Although this doubt does not have even the surety of a correct assumption, let alone an inference or a direct perception of emptiness, it still has the power to ruin the fabric of cyclic existence. Considering that perhaps we have never had even a doubt inclined toward emptiness in any of our previous rebirths, we can get a sense of the tremendous force of such a doubt. It sets our train of thought in the totally opposite direction.

If we leave cloth somewhere for many years, and bugs burrow into it and chew at it, it may look like the cloth is still there, but when we pick it up it falls to pieces. Even if we can pick it up, if we shake it, it disintegrates into shreds. Doubt inclined toward emptiness has a similar effect on samsara. Doubt challenges the ignorance on which the entire heap of samsaric dukkha stands; thus it spoils the foundation of cyclic existence.

Just thinking “Maybe things do not exist from their own side” occurs only to a person who has great merit. Otherwise, he or she wouldn’t even wonder about it.

## THE POWER OF REALIZING EMPTINESS

The full, direct realization of emptiness comes about gradually. Our first realization of emptiness is inferential and occurs by means of a conceptual appearance. This means that emptiness is understood conceptually. At this point, the conceptual appearance acts like a veil between the object—emptiness—and the mind perceiving it, so emptiness does not appear in a totally vivid way to the mind. Although the realization is clear and the mind ascertains emptiness—that is, the mind has reached certainty about the meaning of emptiness through sound reasoning and analysis—we are not yet able to cognize emptiness directly and nonconceptually. Gradually, as we continue meditating on emptiness, the conceptual appearance of emptiness will drop away, and our realization of emptiness will become a nonconceptual, direct perception, and therefore much clearer.

Each level of the path has its own objects to be abandoned, which are various levels of afflictions, so before we go on, it will be helpful to explain the layout of the path. There are three vehicles of Buddhist practice: the vehicles of the hearers, solitary realizers, and bodhisattvas. The aim of the first two is individual liberation from cyclic existence. The aim of the bodhisattva path is full enlightenment in order to guide all sentient beings to full awakening as well. Each of the three vehicles has five paths: the path of accumulation, path of preparation, path of seeing, path of meditation, and path of no-more learning (either the state of an arhat or buddhahood, depending on which vehicle a person follows).

On the first path, the path of accumulation, a practitioner focuses on accumulating merit, as well as on cultivating serenity and gaining the correct view if these have not been accomplished before. The second path, the path of preparation, is attained when the practitioner gains the union of serenity and insight on emptiness. This is a conceptual realization held by a mind in which analysis of emptiness does not disturb single-pointed concentration. When the practitioner has his first direct realization of emptiness, he passes onto the path of seeing. The direct realization of emptiness, in conjunction with other factors such as the collection of merit, will be able to abandon the objects that are to be abandoned by the paths of seeing and meditation. On the path of seeing he abandons the acquired afflictions. And on the path of meditation, he abandons

the innate afflictions. *Acquired afflictions* are ones that we have acquired this lifetime from learning incorrect philosophies. *Innate afflictions* are much more ingrained and harder to eliminate because they have been present in our minds beginninglessly. All of these afflictions, their seeds, and the karma that causes samsaric rebirth are called *afflictive obscurations*, and someone who eliminates them is liberated from cyclic existence and becomes an arhat.

Practitioners following the bodhisattva path abandon an additional, subtler level of obscurations, the *cognitive obscurations* that prevent total knowledge of all phenomena. They do this in the latter part of the path of meditation, and they have completely abandoned all afflictive and cognitive obscurations upon attaining the path of no-more learning of the bodhisattva vehicle when they become fully enlightened buddhas.

This is the power of the realization of emptiness, what we are able to accomplish when we realize it directly. The fruit of our present willingness to work hard at attending teachings on emptiness, trying to understand them, meditating on what we have heard, and familiarizing ourselves with them again and again is freedom from everything that obscures our mind. At first it is difficult to figure out what all this talk of emptiness is about, but it will become easier and easier until at last we will realize emptiness. That initial realization will become clearer as we apply ourselves repeatedly in meditation, until finally liberation and enlightenment are attained.

The process for generating the precious bodhichitta in our minds is similar. We first listen to the teachings on bodhichitta and think about them until we clearly understand what they mean. Then we meditate on bodhichitta again and again until this attitude becomes familiar and sinks in to our minds. If we don't do this, we will not arrive at the point at which bodhichitta is natural for us. However, if we meditate on it repeatedly, it will arise easily and remain in our minds, influencing our motivations and actions. This is similar to hearing instructions and reading books about how to drive a car. We may think about what we have heard until we have a correct intellectual grasp of the process, but at some point we have to get behind the wheel and practice driving. We have to learn how to handle the car in diverse circumstances and practice in those situations before driving feels natural. No matter what we learn from books, this repetitive process of training is necessary. Athletes put a lot of energy into training their bodies, and we, as Dharma practitioners, need to put a lot of energy into training our



minds. As we do so, we become more and more familiar with the Dharma, and the experience of the Dharma becomes part of us. In every moment we spend meditating on any aspect of the path, we gather a huge collection of merit. Seeing this, let's be eager to learn and practice these precious teachings.

### MORE THAN ONE WAY TO PRACTICE

Sitting in formal meditation posture in the seven-point position of Vairochana is excellent. If we are able to give up everything and just devote our time to meditating on emptiness and bodhichitta, it will be wonderful. But that is not the only way to practice. A practice that combines learning the teachings, reflecting or contemplating on their meanings, and meditating to integrate those meanings with our minds is a complete process. This is the approach of Dromtonpa, the famous emanation of Chenrezig and disciple of Jowo Je Atisha. Dromtonpa would receive teachings on a particular topic then follow up with reflecting and meditating on their meanings. His reflection on a topic was always done on the basis of first having received teachings on it, and his meditation was always done on the basis of having listened to teachings about the topic and reflected on their meaning. Not only did he advise us to practice like this, but also he modeled it himself.

If we think that Dharma practice occurs only when we are sitting in formal meditation posture, we will miss out on many opportunities. The great yogi Milarepa described himself as having attained enlightenment by meditating at all times. We have to properly understand what this means. When he ate, he meditated; when he walked, he meditated; when he sat down, he also meditated. This is an excellent way to make good use of every moment of our lives to cultivate Dharma understanding and realization.

This resembles the advice that the Buddha gave to his disciple, King Bimbisara. Since the king had so many responsibilities to his subjects, he could not give up his kingdom, go to a secluded place, and spend all his time in formal meditation. The Buddha told him nevertheless he could make his life rich and worthwhile by continually meditating on bodhichitta while remaining involved in the activities of the kingdom. In other words, the king should use whatever circumstances he was living in to practice bodhichitta. He did not give up on practice simply because the ideal circumstances were not present.

If we think about it, when will the ideal circumstances for practice ever appear? If we wait for the perfect situation, our lives will go by and no inner transformation will take place. We want to get out of cyclic existence because cyclic existence is not satisfactory. So how can we wait until cyclic existence is satisfactory in order to practice to get out of it? It's impossible. We must practice in whatever situation we find ourselves.

Of course, if we can devote our entire lives to listening, reflecting, and meditating on the Dharma, that is wonderful. If we can assemble all the conditions to go off to an isolated place and do serenity meditation, that is fantastic. But that doesn't mean that if we can't do that, we cannot do anything. We should practice and meditate during the time and in the situations available to us.

Sometimes we might be undisciplined or distracted and not get around to practicing. Those are situations we can do something about. In addition, we can combine our daily activities with Dharma practice, doing more serious practice and formal meditation when we have time. The effect of doing this over the long term will be very good. Our Dharma experience will grow gradually, like a large container is filled drop by drop. A tiny drop may not look like much, but eventually the whole container is full. The point is to do whatever we can without lamenting the lack of perfect conditions and to rejoice and give ourselves credit for whatever we do without berating ourselves.

### CONFIDENCE

Worldly people are attracted to objects and people they find beautiful and desirable. They feel greatly drawn to them, yearn for them, and think about them a great deal. As Dharma practitioners, we cultivate a similar feeling about emptiness. We want to understand it and think about it as much as we can. When we hear someone say, "the wisdom realizing emptiness," we smile inside and feel so happy, just like a worldly person does when he hears the name of the person he is attached to.

Another attitude we want to cultivate in relation to the understanding of emptiness resembles that of a person with a well-paying job. This person does not give up her job because she sees its benefits. Even if she has to work hard and undergo many difficulties, she does so happily. Similarly, Dharma practitioners feel so happy to learn, think, and meditate on emptiness that they

don't want to stop. They are happy to bear any difficulties that might arise in their endeavors because they see the benefits.

We cultivate great confidence by understanding that the realization of emptiness will enable us to uproot ignorance completely and thus cut the root of cyclic existence that has caused us to suffer for beginningless lifetimes. We feel joy at the idea of forever banishing ignorance, afflictions, and the contaminated karma that causes samsaric rebirth. Our lives have a deep sense of purpose, so that no matter how difficult, we will not give up our efforts to try to understand and realize emptiness.

When we meditate on bodhichitta, we make the strong determination, "I myself am going to lead all beings to enlightenment." Will we actually be able to do this, even after we become a buddha? Probably not, because some sentient beings have stronger karmic connections with other buddhas. But even if we are not able to actually lead all sentient beings to enlightenment by ourselves, there is no disadvantage in cultivating that determination. Having such a determination makes all the activities we do motivated by it—the practices of purification, accumulation of merit, the six perfections, the four ways of gathering followers, and all our virtuous activities—much more powerful.

For example, a medical student may make the strong determination, "I am going to cure all the illness in the world when I become a doctor." Even if she is not able to do this, all her activities of caring for the sick will be more powerful because she has this intention. In the same way a warrior who vows to wipe out all enemies no matter what it takes will put everything he has into the fight due to his powerful intention. Similarly, with strong compassion and bodhichitta for all sentient beings, our ability to progress along the path and work for the benefit of others will increase dramatically.

Tegchok, Khensur Jampa. *Insight into Emptiness*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012. pages 33-43