

## Why Realizing Emptiness Is Important

All of us share the wish to be happy and to overcome *duḥkha*. Upon close examination, it is evident that the situation in *samsāra* is utterly unsatisfactory. Its faults—especially birth, aging, sickness, and death, which we undergo without choice—continuously plague us in one rebirth after another. All the seeming pleasures of *samsāra* are transient and leave us dissatisfied. Chasing after them ensnares us in a cycle of excitement followed by disillusionment and depression. When we become fully aware of our predicament in *samsāra* and the danger of it continuing, strong aspiration for liberation and full awakening arises.

Ceasing *samsāra* entails eradicating its causes—afflictions and polluted karma—which are rooted in the ignorance grasping persons and phenomena as inherently existent. To identify this ignorance and the false object it grasps necessitates observing our mind closely, seeing how we easily assent to and grasp as true the false appearance of everything existing under its own power, independent of all other factors. Correctly identifying this self-grasping ignorance that is the root of *samsāra* is extremely important, for without this we will not be able to eliminate it.

Having correctly identified self-grasping and its erroneous object, we must ascertain that such inherently existent persons and phenomena do not exist at all. Doing this involves refuting inherent existence, which is called the “object of negation”, because we need to prove to ourselves that it does not and cannot exist. Through contemplating correct reasonings that refute inherent existence, a correct assumption regarding the emptiness of inherent existence will arise. There are many levels of correct assumption that are gained over time until a correct inference knowing emptiness is gained. This conceptual realization of emptiness is then combined with a mind of serenity to attain the union of serenity and insight on emptiness. Through familiarization with emptiness by meditating with the union of serenity and insight over time, the conceptual appearance of emptiness gradually fades away and profound wisdom increases until it directly perceives emptiness, the ultimate nature of reality.

Again, by meditating over time with the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness, the levels of afflictions and their seeds are gradually cleansed from the mind-stream. Continued meditation gradually removes the cognitive obscurations—the latencies of ignorance and the factor of the appearance of inherent existence—from the mind. When this wisdom is complemented by faith, collection of merit, and *bodhicitta*, full awakening is on the horizon.

Thus, if we seek true peace and if we take the Buddha’s teachings to heart, there is no other choice than to cultivate the wisdom realizing emptiness. Āryadeva’s *The Four Hundred* (CS 135cd–136ab, 288) tells us:

All afflictions are overcome  
through overcoming ignorance.  
When dependent arising is seen,  
ignorance does not arise.  
It is the only doorway to peace;  
it destroys wrong views;  
it [captures] the attention of all buddhas—  
this is called selflessness.

All existents—be they impermanent or permanent—exist depending on other factors. Being dependent, they lack an independent, inherent essence that makes them what they are. These dependent arisings’ lack of inherent existence is their fundamental or final mode of existence. It is the object realized by all buddhas of the past, present, and future; it is the object of the meditative equipoise of all śrāvakas, solitary realisers, and bodhisattvas. Through it, nirvāṇa and full awakening are attained. The King of Concentration Sūtra (Samādhirāja Sūtra) says (MP 71):

If phenomena are individually analysed as selfless  
and what has been analysed is meditated on,  
that is the cause for attaining the fruit, nirvāṇa.  
Through any other cause one does not go to peace.

It is crucial to seek the correct antidote to ignorance. Although a variety of religious practices and philosophies benefit people, not all of them explain the correct view of the nature of reality. I have been to more than one Kumba Mela, a Hindu pilgrimage and festival held every twelve years at the confluence of the holy rivers Ganges, Yamuna, and the mythical Sarasvatī. It is one of the largest religious gatherings on the planet, attended by, among others, Hindu yogis who live in the Himalayas and meditate on the practice of inner heat (candālī). From the Buddhist perspective, although these yogis have great faith in their gurus and have renounced the pleasures of this life, they are not able to cut the root of self-grasping. Similarly, some of my Christian friends’ weep when they speak of their love of God, but they too can’t stop rebirth in saṃsāra.

Although we Buddhists learn and apply the antidotes to specific afflictions—such as meditating on impermanence to counteract attachment and on love to subdue anger—these antidotes alone cannot eradicate self-grasping ignorance. In Clear Words (Prasannapadā), Candrakīrti explains (FEW 37–38):

Among the extensive teachings in nine divisions—discourses and so forth—rightly  
proclaimed by the Buddha,  
based on the two truths and corresponding to the forms of behaviour of worldly  
beings,  
those spoken for the sake of removing attachment do not remove hatred,  
and those spoken for the sake of removing hatred do not remove desire.  
Moreover, those spoken for the sake of removing arrogance and so forth do not  
overcome other defilements.  
Therefore, they are not very pervasive, and those teachings are not of great import.  
But those spoken for the sake of removing confusion overcome all afflictions,  
for the Conqueror said all afflictions thoroughly depend on confusion.

Attachment, anger, arrogance, jealousy, and so forth are problematic in our lives and applying the specific antidotes to them—contemplating impermanence, cultivating love, rejoicing in others’ good fortune, and so forth—subdues them temporarily. However, their seeds remain in our mind-stream, ready to rise in an instant as full-blown afflictions. To cut these off so they can never re-emerge, eradicating them from the root is imperative. The only antidote capable of eradicating self-grasping ignorance (also called “confusion”) is the wisdom realizing the subtle selflessness of persons and phenomena. By realizing emptiness,

we cease to assent to or grasp ignorance's false appearances. At that time, there is nothing that can act as a basis for us to give rise to afflictions such as attachment and anger.

H.H. the Dalai Lama, and Thubten Chodron. *Searching for the Self*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2022