

10 Emptiness

In the last session I talked about ‘insubstantiality’ or ‘anatman’, the third characteristic of conditioned existence.

When we say that things are ‘insubstantial’ we mean that they do not exist completely independently of anything else. They are interconnected.

There is nothing in our experience that has a fixed and independent or separate self-nature.

The Buddha taught that everything in our experience exists in dependence upon conditions which are impermanent and changing.

This is the central teaching of the Buddha; pratitya samutpada (Sanskrit) or paticcasamuppada (Pali), dependent origination or conditionality.

Deep reflection or meditation upon insubstantiality leads to the gateway to liberation known as ‘sunyata’ or ‘emptiness’.

Much of what is taught in Buddhism about ‘sunyata’ or ‘emptiness’ comes from teachings by the Indian Buddhist teacher Nagarjuna who lived in the second century.

Nagarjuna is often described as the ‘Second Buddha’, because he was the first person after the death of the historical Buddha to present the Dharma in a voice of his own.. He’s the founder of what’s called the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism. His most important work is called ‘Madhyamakakarika’, or ‘Root Verses on the Middle Way’.

Nagarjuna recovered the key liberating insights of the Buddha’s teachings and articulated them in an original and compelling language.

In particular he took the notion of conditionality or pratitya samutpada and explored it through the notion of emptiness or sunyata and gave it new life.

So, what is this emptiness or sunyata?

In one sense it conveys the idea of a something mysterious and elusive: there but not there.

For the first five hundred years after the Buddha’s death the Buddha was remembered as an emptiness. It was only when the Greeks arrived in Afghanistan and India that representations of the Buddha started to appear, influenced by the form of the God Apollo.

Before then the Buddha was represented by an empty seat, or by a tree with no-one sat underneath it, or by a pair of footprints.

The Buddha was called the ‘Tathagata’, ‘one thus gone’.

He was described as the ‘trackless one’, like the track left by birds as they fly through the sky.

Stephen Batchelor gives us a second sense of emptiness or sunyata.

He describes it as:

“The terrifying and fascinating emptiness that quivers beneath the threshold of common sense”.

It’s the sense of an abyss below our feet, of a crevasse covered by a thin layer of snow, of deep water visible beneath a thin layer of ice on which we’re standing.

Batchelor writes:

“If we can glimpse this emptiness, this sublime state, then the opposing forces of fear and fascination cancel each other out, leaving one suspended in a state where the habitual chatter of the mind is stilled. One is left in silence, incapable of finding words or images to convey the awesome intensity of the moment. This pure awareness may only last a few moments, but it seems to linger in eternity.”

So, emptiness or sunyata can be a sense that is mysterious, elusive, terrifying and fascinating.

But how is it expressed in more rational terms?

For Nagarjuna, the notion of sunyata was inseparable from, and was directly linked to, the Buddha’s teaching of conditionality or pratitya samutpada.

The teaching of pratitya samutpada tells us that everything in the universe is a process, which exists in dependence on, and in relation to, other processes or conditions. Every ‘thing’ is in a process of change. Nothing is permanent.

As conditions change so do those things dependent on those conditions.

We do not inhabit a universe of permanently existing objects that arise by themselves. We inhabit a universe of interdependent processes that are forever changing.

Because nothing exists that is permanent or fixed, and nothing exists or arises independently of conditions, then we can say that everything in the universe, including us, is ***empty of fixed and separate self-nature***.

In terms of being a person, this is what the notion of pratitya samutpada, and the notion of sunyata, means:

To have become the person you are now, means you have emerged from a complex matrix of genetic, psychological, social, cultural, and material conditions.

You are unique, not because you possess an essential metaphysical quality (a soul) that differs from the essential metaphysical qualities of everyone else, but because you have emerged from a unique and unrepeatable set of conditions (some of which have been set by your own past actions!).

You as a person are therefore not fixed. You do change, and you can change. You and I are empty of fixed and separate self-nature.

And the same analysis applies to all things or processes in the universe. Everything is empty of fixed and separate self-nature.

How is it that we don't see things in this way? Why do we not recognise the emptiness of all things?

Because in order to make sense of life and to engage practically with life, we do need to 'fix' things in our mind.

And, a sense of life as composed of fixed, or separate bits and pieces, is deeply rooted in the structure of the languages we speak.

To survive we are compelled to break our experience of life down into separate objects and chunks of time.

Take the example of the acorn and the oak.

We tend to see the acorn and the fully grown oak tree as two separate things. But if we were to pay careful attention and watch the whole process by which the oak emerges from the acorn, we would realise that there is no precise point at which the acorn has ceased to exist, and the oak tree has begun.

Take the example of our breath.

When does the breath that you breathe in, cease to be air that is separate from you, and become part of you?

Each object, each moment of our experience, emerges from a ceaseless continuum of conditions. But, to make sense of our everyday life, to negotiate our way through our daily life, we need to name things, to fix things, to pin them down to a specific time.

Sometimes it's said that what we experience as things is an illusion.

The problem, I think, with using this word 'illusion' is that we can easily think that there is nothing there at all.

But as Nagarjuna stresses, it's not that there's nothing there. There's something there, even if it is a process, and we need an agreed language, an agreed method or dealing with these processes in our lives.

Nagarjuna calls this agreed language, this naming of things necessary to live our lives, as partial or conventional truth.

The problem, Nagarjuna points out, is that we take these partial or conventional truths, and turn them into a wrong view of reality.

These partial or conventional truths differ from the sublime truth of *pratitya samutpada* or conditionality and from the sublime truth of emptiness.

Nevertheless, we do need concepts, names and labels, to make progress on the spiritual path. The Buddha gives us teachings through the medium of language and conventional truth to help us to achieve the sublime, wordless truth of *sunyata*.

In our modern, insecure and unpredictable world, it's difficult to contact this sense of emptiness. Instead, we get caught up in what Nagarjuna calls 'fixations'.

Because we find the world such a difficult place, we tighten the grip of fixations.

We fix and tighten our sense of a permanent and separate self. We reinforce our sense of self through the purchase of material things, through fixating on other people.

We do this to try to create an undisturbed, isolated cell, safe from the chaos of the world.

So, where does this leave us?

The first thing to stress is that emptiness is not a void. Emptiness is not a negation of life. Emptiness is the most positive affirmation of the possibilities of life.

Nagarjuna says:

“When emptiness is possible,
Everything is possible;
Were emptiness impossible,
Nothing would be possible.”

Or, perhaps, Guenther’s translation of sunyata as ‘the open dimension of being’ captures this sense of possibility better than ‘emptiness’.

Nagarjuna is not interested in confirming what is safe and familiar. He sets out to unsettle us, to shake us up, to challenge the fixed habits of language and mind.

He wants to leave us with nothing to hold on to.

And the paradox is that when there’s nothing left to hold on to, then anything is possible.

A similar argument was made by the 19th century English poet John Keats. He created the phrase or concept of ‘negative capability,’ an ability that exists ‘when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason’.

Living in the silence of negative capability meant being able to sit with mystery, doubt, questions, and not to reach out compulsively for a quick fix, a quick solution of fact or reason, but to dwell in mystery and amazement.

In this condition it’s possible for the arising of insight into sunyata or the open dimension of being to happen.

And this insight into sunyata does not only change the way we view the world, but also transforms the way we feel about the world.

As Stephen Batchelor says:

“The silence of emptiness allows you to hear more clearly the cries of the world.”

I'd like to finish with some comments on the origin of the word 'shunyata', based on the writings of David Loy (Money, Sex, War and Karma) and Robert Thurman (Wisdom is Bliss).

As I've pointed out, 'shunyata' is normally translated as emptiness.

But the word 'shunyata' comes from the root 'shvi' which means to swell; both in the sense of a balloon as it swells when filled with air, but also in the sense of an expectant woman whose womb swells with pregnancy.

Shunyata contains the sense of a space 'pregnant with possibility'. This, I think, is closer in meaning to Guenther's translation of 'shunyata' as 'the open dimension of being'.

And as Robert Thurman points out (Wisdom is Bliss p.26), living in shunyata means having a deepening understanding of how each of us exists, not as fixed and separate individuals, but as part of a complex set of interconnecting processes together with all other living beings.

Out of this understanding comes love and compassion.

Nagarjuna calls this 'shunyata-karuna-garbham' or 'shunyata as the womb of compassion'.

As the Dalai Lama puts it:

"Through this understanding of interconnected reality, you come to realize that if good things happen to others, you will also benefit, if not immediately, then eventually. If they suffer, you eventually suffer. Therefore, you are better able to empathize with people from very different backgrounds. Compassion for them becomes easier."

Om svabhava shuddha sarva dharma

Svabhava shuddho ham

Om, all things are empty of fixed and separate self-nature

As I am empty of fixed and separate self-nature.

Talk ends.

Note on sources:

First of all, my understanding of emptiness owes a great deal to Sangharakshita, the founder of the Triratna Buddhist Community and Order, and to other members of the Triratna Buddhist Order, especially Dhivan, Jayarava and Sagaramati, whose writings have helped me

particularly with understanding the connections between the original teachings of the Buddha on conditionality, or pratitya samutpada, and Nagarjuna's later writings on emptiness, or sunyata.

The talk also owes a lot to articles written by David Loy, an American Zen teacher and a personal friend, and to a book, especially the introduction, written by Stephen Batchelor on Nagarjuna, 'Verses from the Center'.