

# *Emptiness*

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You could fill a book with the different Buddhist teachings on emptiness—“Buddhist” in the sense of all the teachings that have come in the Buddhist tradition, 2,600 years now. But the question is, where does the teaching actually make a difference? Where does it really help? Probably the most useful formulation of emptiness is one of the earliest ones, where the Buddha talks about emptiness being a way of perceiving in which you don’t add to or take anything away from what’s really right here, right now.

We spend most of our lives piling a lot onto what’s right here, right now, or denying what’s right here, right now, creating lots of different world views. This is where philosophy comes from: creating lots of narratives around our experience. Both the world view and the narratives can lead to a lot of suffering, especially the narratives: our stories of what our life has been like up to now, our anticipation of what life is going to be on into the future.

It’s not a question of whether the narratives are true or false. It’s a question of, are they creating suffering for us? That’s what we have to look into. If you see the narrative simply as that—something that the mind is telling itself right here, right now—then rather than thinking of it as a big burden that’s coming in from the past, you can choose to get engaged or not.

As for our world views, there are lots of different ways that we can explain what’s going on in the cosmos: in terms of geology, in terms of astronomy, quantum physics, whatever. But again, which of those world views is really helpful? Which *type* of view is helpful?

The Buddha was very perceptive in seeing that there’s one issue that cuts through all of that, and that’s the issue of the suffering that’s experienced right here, right now. The suffering, the stress: Focus on that without the narratives, focus on that without the world views. Just put them aside. It’s not that you deny them, it’s simply that you put them aside as unimportant right now—because the really important thing is how the mind is creating suffering right now.

Or to put it in even simpler terms: *how* suffering is being created right now—you can watch it happening. You don’t have to ask *who*’s creating the suffering, or who’s experiencing the suffering: Just look at that the phenomenon of suffering, and see what causes it. This way you can cut through an awful lot of the baggage the mind carries around, because without this ability to cut through issues like this, we sit here in the present moment, but we’re also carrying the past and future along with us.

The past has been a *bad* past, we don’t like it. People have been mistreating us. And the future doesn’t look particularly good either. If you have that kind of attitude and you sit here with it in the present moment, you’re just weighing the present moment down with more than it can bear.

Ajaan Lee gives the example of someone who's carrying a pole over their shoulder, and there's a big weight weighing down the front end of the pole, and a big weight at the back end of the pole, and you're standing there in the middle carrying the whole thing. No wonder you feel weighed down, no wonder things are difficult—more than you can bear.

The trick is to put the pole down. You don't have to carry the future; you don't have to carry the past. For the time being, as you're practicing concentration, just carry the present moment. Be responsible for the present moment, and look to see what you've really got going on right here—because when you focus too much on the past and the future, you miss the present.

That's the other side of the emptiness mode: missing out on things that are actually here. Emptiness means seeing precisely what's present, what's absent. So look at what you've got here right now. What would you like to make present? Well, you'd like to make mindfulness, so you just focus on the breath, and keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath.

Don't worry about how long it's going to take to get the concentration you want. Just focus on what you're doing right now. Don't let your anticipations take over; don't let your memories of the past take over. Just be right here, right now.

Notice what you're doing, and try to be very, very meticulous in what you're doing. If you start getting careless, all those extra burdens from the past and the future will start coming in. If you don't give your full attention here, bits and pieces of your attention are going to slip out and start picking up the load you laid down again. So you want to be as absolutely attentive to the present moment as possible.

This is why there's so much emphasis in the training on doing everything you do mindfully—you want it to become a habit—being careful and meticulous in all your dealings. Here at the monastery, there's no great rush to meet our sales targets for the next quarter, because there are no sales targets. It's simply a question of being present with what you're doing, being fully involved with what you're doing. We're here to train the mind, and the focus is on what you're doing right here, right now. You have the time to do it meticulously; you have the time to do it carefully.

As you develop that habit of being careful and intent in all you do, then when the time comes to sit and meditate, okay—you've got that habit already established in the mind. Then you start developing it further, further, as you get more and more involved in the present.

So when you find narratives coming up in the present moment that will pull you back into the past or into the future, just see them as an event in the present moment and let them go. You don't have to check to see whether they're true or false. Just let them go. You don't have to get involved, because they're going to pull you in the wrong direction, away from being as fully attentive to the present moment as you can be.

The texts talk about having mindfulness *immersed in the body*, and that quality of being immersed is important. Just totally jump right *into the body*, right here. Instead of being in some little vantage point, say, up at the back of your head, try to get totally into the body.

Now, many people find that as they do that, they run into narratives from the past about their bodies. You may have to work through some of those narratives, but not right now. Just try to be as immersed as possible; when a narrative comes up, just let it go, no matter how good or bad it may be. Just put it aside for the time being. Allow yourself to get into the body. The more fully immersed you are in your body, the more difficult it is to get pushed back into the past or pushed forward into the future by these vagrant thoughts that come through. It's as if you're going to go into the past or the future, you've got this little tiny tube that extends in either direction, but if your awareness of the present moment is too big, it won't fit.

So try to get totally involved: immersed in the breath. Give it as much attention as you can, being very clear about what's here and what's not here. The past is not here; the future is not here. You may have thoughts about the past, or thoughts about the future, but they're just that: thoughts *about* these things. They're happening in the present moment. They're events in the mind. As far as the meditation is concerned, they're distractions, so you can put them aside.

This is one of the meanings of the word *emptiness*. In other words, you empty the mind of all of its philosophical speculations, you empty the mind of its narratives, leaving just the narrative of what you're doing right now: You're here sitting, meditating, watching out for the question of *what you do* that's causing suffering. *What you can change* so that there's less and less suffering, less and less stress—that's the issue.

When things get boiled down to that issue you don't have to worry about world views or narratives, you see what's happening right here, right now. And this is the big issue: It's not the issues in working out a good world view, or working out your narrative, the issue is working out what you're doing right here, right now. The suffering you're causing right here, right now.

If you ignore this issue, and go running off into other directions you're missing *the important issue* in life. Nothing gets solved... or the few things that do get solved don't get really resolved for very long, because the mind still has this habit of creating unnecessary suffering—no matter what narrative you feed it, no matter what world view you feed it, it's going to suffer. Because it has the habits that cause suffering—the craving and the clinging.

So if you're going to be a responsible person, you've got to be responsible for this: Taking care of the suffering you're causing right here, right now, because it's not just you that's suffering. When you suffer, the waves go out and affect other people around you. The more you burden yourself down, the less strength you have to help other people. The more you try to lean on them for this, that, and the other thing.

So we owe it both to ourselves and to the people around us, to learn how to stand as straight as possible, right here in the present moment. Be very clear about what exactly is hap-

pening, what's not happening in the present moment: what's present, what's not present. And that, in and of itself, eliminates a lot of the unnecessary burdens we carry around.