

Reflections on Emptiness

Happiness depends upon seeing our deep connections to other beings. We suffer unnecessarily because we have a persistent sense of ourselves as existing independently, by way of our own private essence.

Emptiness is the utter nonexistence of any intrinsic nature or real essence. Emptiness does not mean nothingness or meaninglessness. It means that things exist *only* interdependently, lacking any independent nature.

Knowing emptiness frees us. Our current limitations and faults are not locked into our nature; our minds are open even to radical transformation.

The path to the perfect happiness of a buddha requires (1) wisdom understanding that there is no essential existence and (2) compassion seeking to free all beings from suffering. These two – caring for beings and seeing that all is empty – work synergistically to bring about enlightenment.

Wisdom involves not only seeing the ultimate reality – emptiness – but also making careful distinctions at the conventional level about how best to practice, how best to help others.

To develop profound wisdom knowing emptiness, first study scripture and carefully reflect upon its meaning – guided by a qualified teacher. Study is itself a form of practice. Meditation is deep familiarization with something one has studied and come to understand.

Happiness flows from virtue; all virtue derives from reflecting on facts with an undistracted mind. Thus, the path to buddhahood involves both stabilizing the mind in perfect nondistraction and training in analysis that leads to meditative insight.

The path to enlightenment involves logically refuting in meditation the sense of an essentially real self.

Of the three trainings on the Buddhist path – ethics, meditative stabilization, and wisdom – the first two are similar to many non-Buddhist teachings. What is unique in Buddhism is wisdom, born of analytical meditation, which penetrates the nature of ultimate reality.

To prepare for this, one must study and reflect on definitive scriptures such as the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras that teach the final nature of reality as emptiness. To understand these texts, we can rely on Madhyamika interpreters such as Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, Buddhapalita, Chandrkirti, and Shantideva.

Wisdom eradicates the ignorance or delusion that is the root of all misery. This ignorance is a mind that superimposes intrinsic nature, when in fact all things are devoid of such. This "intrinsic nature" or "essential nature" is also sometimes called "self".

This utter lack of intrinsic nature in persons is "the selflessness of persons"; the utter lack of intrinsic nature in other phenomena is "selflessness of phenomena". Neither selflessness is more profound; they are the same quality, emptiness, considered in relation to different things.

Source: I am deeply grateful to Guy Newland for these profound, liberating thoughts. The reference, which I highly recommend, is as follows. Newland, Guy. *Introduction to Emptiness: As Taught in Tsong-kha-pa's Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path*, revised edition. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2009. (Pages 114-115: Appendix: The Quintessential Points Chapter by Chapter.)