

INTRODUCTION TO THE EMPTINESS TEACHINGS

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Quick Overview

Here is a précis of this long article.

- Emptiness teachings are widely held to be transformational and liberating.

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- These teachings are found mostly in Buddhism, but analogous teachings exist in the West as well.
- Emptiness means interdependence or relationality. In Buddhism, the self and all things are said to be empty. But empty of what? Empty of inherent, self-sufficient, objective existence. Empty things don't exist inherently or objectively. Instead, they exist by depending on other things, including our means of interacting with them.
- Emptiness is also empty. This is because it too depends on other things. For example, the emptiness of the cup depends on the cup and on the conceptual designation "emptiness."
- Emptiness does not mean non-existence; it means interdependent existence.
- Emptiness meditations do not refute everyday, conventional existence. They refute inherent, objective existence. The result is that everyday life is clarified and freed from the false conceptions of inherent existence.
- Emptiness and compassion work together. They are interdependent. Compassion promotes the realization of emptiness, and realizing emptiness promotes compassion.
- Emptiness meditations usually work like this: You choose something to meditate on, such as the self. You try to get a very clear sense of the inherent existence of the self. You use an emptiness meditation to look very deeply for the inherently existent self. You fail to find it; you find its absence instead.
- ***Finding the absence of the inherently existent self is realizing the emptiness of the self.***
- The experience of emptiness is light, free, open, vibrant and joyful.
- There is nothing intrinsically superior about emptiness teachings. Many other teachings also provide a light, free, open, vibrant and joyful way of life.

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- It doesn't have to be called “emptiness.” Yes, this is a traditional term, but what it attempts to communicate is a view and a way of life in which the self, others, and phenomena do not have fixed, rigid, independent essences. There are many other words for this, such as *sūnyatā* (Sanskrit), *anātman* (Sanskrit), *anatta* (Pali), *stong-pa nyid* (Tibetan), *kōng* (Chinese), *kū* (Japanese), *gong-seong* (Korean), *voidness*, *patīccasamuppāda* (Pali), *pratītyasamutpāda* (Sanskrit), *rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba* (Tibetan), and *yuánqǐ* (Chinese pinyin). English-language equivalents include dependent arising, interdependence, dependent origination, conditioned genesis, dependent co-arising, interdependent arising, anti-foundationalism, anti-essentialism, and freedom without foundations.

Why Emptiness?

Emptiness is another kind of nondual teaching. Emptiness teachings demonstrate that the “I,” as well as everything else, lacks inherent existence. The notion of lacking inherent existence has several senses. In one sense, empty things **lack essence**, which means that there is no intrinsic quality that makes a thing what it is. In another sense, empty things **lack independence**, which means that a thing does not exist on its own, apart from conditions, relations or cognition. When you study the emptiness teachings, you start to see how these two senses of “lacking inherent existence” relate to each other.

Emptiness teachings are found mainly in Buddhism, but there are some surprising parallels in the work of Western thinkers such as Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 535–475 BCE), Protagoras of Abdera (480–411 BCE), Gorgias of Leontini, Sicily (485–380 BCE), Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360–270 BCE), Sextus Empiricus (c. 160–210 AD), Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE), Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (c. 35–100 AD), Michel de Montaigne, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, W.V.O. Quine, Wilfrid Sellars, Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty, Nelson Goodman, Richard Lanham, John D. Caputo, Richard Bernstein and many others.

This Intro will be primarily about Buddhism, because this is a very good place to start one's emptiness study. You get a very clear picture of how realizing emptiness can lead to freedom and peace, and you learn about the importance of compassion. Once the connection to peace and the importance of compassion are in place to serve as guides to your study of emptiness (in addition to any teachers you may have), you can combine Buddhist meditations, if you wish, with a huge variety of Western insights.

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Some Buddhist sanghas are even beginning to combine Western insights into their own emptiness teachings. For example (these will open new browser windows), www.shambhala.org, www.nalandabodhi.org and theidproject.org. This East-West combination seems quite natural, since no one tradition has a monopoly on peace of mind. There is more information about Western approaches to emptiness towards the end of this article and in many other places on this site.

According to Buddhism, when emptiness is realized, peace ensues. One's experience is transformed so that the self, other beings and the world no longer seem like intrinsically compartmentalized objects, distinct and separate from each other. The self and all things are experienced as free.

If the selflessness of phenomena is analyzed
and if this analysis is cultivated,
It causes the effect of attaining nirvana.
Through no other cause does one come to peace.
—*The Samadhiraja Sutra*

How Is Emptiness Nondual?

The most common connotation of “nonduality” is “oneness” or “singularity.” Many teachings state that everything is actually awareness; those teachings are nondual in the “oneness” sense in which there are no two things.

But there is another sense of “nonduality.” Instead of nonduality as “oneness,” it's nonduality as “free from dualistic extremes.” This entails freedom from the pairs of metaphysical dualisms such as essentialism/nihilism, existence/non-existence, reification/annihilation, presence/absence, or intrinsicity/voidness, etc. These pairs are dualisms in this sense: if you experience things in the world in terms of **one side** of the pair, you will experience things in the world in terms of **the other side** as well. If some things seem like they truly exist, then other things will seem like they truly don't exist. You will experience your own self to truly exist, and fear that one day you will truly not exist. Emptiness teachings show how none of these pairs make sense, and free you from experiencing yourself and world in terms of these opposites. Emptiness teachings are nondual in this sense.

Plus, when emptiness is directly realized the way it is explained in some of the Tibetan-influenced sources (such as Jeffrey Hopkins's **Meditation on Emptiness**), at that moment there is an absence of the sense of a subject/object gap in one's experience. This is a notion of nonduality more similar to that found in awareness-style teachings.

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For those who encounter emptiness teachings after they've become familiar with awareness teachings, it's very tempting to misread the emptiness teachings by substituting terms. That is, it's very easy to misread the emptiness teachings by seeing “emptiness” on the page and thinking to yourself, “Awareness, consciousness... I know what they're talking about.”

Early in my own study, I began with this substitution in mind. With this misreading, I found a lot in the emptiness teachings to be quite *IN*comprehensible! So I started again, laying aside the notion that “emptiness” and “awareness” were equivalent. I tried to let the emptiness teachings speak for themselves. I came to find that they have a subtle beauty and power, a flavor quite different from the awareness teachings. Emptiness teachings do not speak of emptiness as a true nature that underlies or supports things. Rather, it speaks of selves and things as essenceless and free.

What Does Emptiness Mean?

What are things empty of? According to the Buddhist teachings, things are empty of inherent existence. Being empty of inherent existence means that there is no essential, fixed or independent way in which things exist. Things have no essential nature. There is no way things truly are, in and of themselves. We will investigate the notion of inherent existence in more detail below.

Different Buddhist schools or tenet systems have different ways of characterizing emptiness; they have different ways of helping students reduce suffering. My characterization of emptiness as taught in Buddhism follows somewhat the Tibetan Gelug-ba school of Prasangika or “Consequentialist” Madhyamika. This is not the only tenet system in Buddhism that discusses emptiness. There are other schools with slightly different interpretations of the emptiness teachings. I prefer the Tibetan Prasangika interpretation for pragmatic reasons. It has a greater number of publicly available supports for studying and meditating on emptiness than I have seen in other Buddhist schools. It makes it easier than other varieties of Buddhist teaching to actually **use** the teachings. The term “Prasangika” is Sanskrit for “consequence.” The “consequence” designation comes from this school's method of debate and refutation, which follows Nagarjuna's style in his *Treatise*.

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How Can Emptiness Help with Suffering?

Buddhism is emphatic about the connection between the emptiness teachings and the alleviation of suffering. But how does this work? To answer this question, I find the Buddhist legend about Gautama leaving home to be quite instructive. The legend helps us understand what Buddhism means by suffering, and how emptiness teachings can alleviate it.

According to the legend, which is a beloved part of the Buddhist teachings, Gautama was a sheltered prince in India who grew up in a palace where the only people he came across were young, healthy and attractive. He grew up, got married and had a son. One week, on four successive days, he went hunting and saw four things he had never seen during his entire life. An old person. A sick person. A corpse. And a *sramana*, which is a yogi or renunciant who dedicates his or her life to investigating spiritual questions.

Gautama was deeply shaken, and was motivated to become a *sramana* in order to investigate the matters pertaining to life and death. He came to liberation, and out of compassion for others, shared his discoveries.

Two Insights

There are two points about this legend that help pinpoint what Buddhism means by suffering.

1. Gautama's life was already going well before he ever began seeking. According to the legend, he was royalty. The legend doesn't mention any sufferings related to food, shelter or interpersonal relations.
2. The issues that upset Gautama had to do with human impermanence and mortality. Being a member of the royalty was perhaps an easy, pleasant life, but it was not enough to counteract these existential issues.

Of course, after a few thousand years, Buddhism has developed activities and practices for virtually every facet of life, and like other forms of spirituality, Buddhist activities can make life beautiful. But these two points about Gautama help us understand the point of his own search. It was about the big stuff, the existential issues surrounding life, impermanence and death. Gautama's search was about how upsetting and shocking it can be to regard one's life as fixed in some way and then see it start to come to an end. If we regard events to have an objective meaning for our life (and vice-versa), and if we regard our life to be metaphysically independent and governed by the self-same identity through time, we'll cling to life and protest as we notice changes we don't like. We'll

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regard life as something that we think ought to really and truly be there, and maybe forever. In the midst of this clinging, we will be painfully shaken when we confront evidence of life fading away and ending. And through time, the evidence gets stronger and stronger.

Suffering is said to come from conceiving that we and the world have fixed, independent and unchangeable natures that exist on their own without help from anything else. We expect that there is a true way that self and world truly are and ought to be. These expectations are unrealistic and prevent us from granting things the freedom to come and go and change. We like pleasant things to abide permanently, and unpleasant things to never occur. We experience suffering when we actually encounter comings, goings and change. Suffering often takes the form of anger, indignation, existential anxiety, and even a sense that, as they say in TV sitcoms, “something is wrong with this picture.”

One of Gautama's liberating discoveries was that one's life (and indeed all other things) are pervaded by impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and no-self. Things are pervaded by **impermanence** because they don't last forever. Things are pervaded by **unsatisfactoriness**, not only because pleasant things come to an end and unpleasant things begin, but more profoundly because if our happiness depends on objects or states that come and go, we will not be able to find deep satisfaction. And things are pervaded by **no-self** because under even extremely close examination, there's no evidence that anything has an inherent nature or an objective existence.

The Emptiness Antidote

The emptiness teachings serve as an antidote to this existential suffering by inspiring peace, and freedom from clinging to changing objects. Peace can be experienced in the midst of flux. Sometimes this may sound like bad news. One may think, “So, emptiness teachings are gonna make it easier to die? How depressing!” But the emptiness teachings make it easier to live. They remove suffering by removing existential clinging, which is caused by the deep-seated but false demands for permanence, pleasantness and self-identity. If we're OK about the big stuff, we'll have ways of transforming the small stuff as well. Emptiness teachings do not deny life; they transform life in a way that makes it light-hearted, joyful and vibrantly alive.

The emptiness teachings examine the supposed inherent self; they allow you to realize that there isn't one. But the teachings are not limited to examining one's self. They also examine the entire range of other beings and objects. The reason for such a broad spectrum is this. We may have realized that our self is empty. But if there is anything we

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still regard as inherent, self-natured or objectively existent, our sense of inherency is not gone. We can always use those other things that we still regard as inherent as a pretext to return to thinking that we ourselves are also inherent. And suffering can return. So there is nothing that the emptiness teachings say not to investigate.

Even **emptiness** must be investigated sooner or later, because not even emptiness is inherent, self-natured or objectively existent.

The Dialectical Approach

The Consequentialists do not argue for substantive positions, but proceed dialectically. They argue by drawing out the unwanted and unexpected logical consequences entailed by their interlocutors' positions. The Consequentialist style of refutation is as follows: while in debate over metaphysical issues with an interlocutor, the Consequentialist refutes the interlocutor **not** by negating the interlocutor's statement with a counter-statement (e.g., that matter exists, not Mind), but by finding an inconsistency or incoherent assumption buried amidst the interlocutor's statements. This allows Consequentialism to be positionless with respect to issues, most notably on questions of existence and non-existence.

Imagine a philosopher coming up to a man who is sitting quietly against a tree, and telling the man that the tree truly exists because it is truly independent of the mind that cognizes it. Our sitting man is a consequentialist. He doesn't have an opinion on the existence or non-existence of the tree, and doesn't wish to convince the philosopher of a contrary position; he's just sitting there. So he **won't** offer a counter-claim or argue that the tree **really doesn't** exist independently of cognition. Instead, he will draw out more statements from the philosopher until the philosopher is obviously involved in a contradiction or other difficulty. Or he might show that the philosopher's assumptions entail an absurd, unwanted conclusion. Then he'll go back to sitting against the tree.

The Consequentialist school is the most thoroughgoing of the Mahayana schools in its rejection of any kind of intrinsic nature. Even though it is the school of His Holiness the current Dalai Lama, most of the Dalai Lama's public teachings are about other topics of wider interest. Emptiness teachings can get abstract and subtle, and not everyone is interested in them. But if you do find books in English on emptiness, most of them are likely to be written from the Consequentialist standpoint. You will find a list of these books in the **References** section below.

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The Buddhist World

According to the Buddhist emptiness teachings, the world is made up only of things that are “selfless” or empty. Even non-existents are empty. Non-existents would include round squares, the hairs of a turtle, etc., as well as *inherent existence*. Existents are divided into two classes, compounded things and non-compounded things.

Compounded things are said to disintegrate moment-to-moment, in a way analogous to aging. They are impermanent in this sense. Compounded things have pieces or parts and are produced from combinations of other factors. Compounded things include physical objects, colors, shapes, powers, sensations, thoughts, intentions, feelings, persons, collections and states of being. These various things fall under the categories of Form, Consciousness and Compositional Factors. Form includes components of the physical world, the body, the physical sense organs, and colors and shapes. Consciousness includes mental phenomena, sensory functions and thinking processes. Compositional factors include volition, decision, intention, thoughts, ideas and opinions. It also functions as a catch-all category that includes “everything else that exists but is not permanent” (see *Translating Buddhism from Tibetan*, Joe B. Wilson, p. 147).

Non-compounded things do not disintegrate moment-to-moment. In this sense, they are said to be “permanent.” There are two kinds of “permanent” existent. There are “occasional permanents,” which come into existence and go out of existence. These include, for example, the space inside the cup and the emptiness of the cup. Even though the cup is compounded and consists of parts (such as the rim, the handle, the walls, etc.), the space inside the cup and the emptiness of the cup are not compounded and do not consist of parts. Also, the emptiness of the cup and the space inside the cup stop existing when the cup stops existing. There are also “non-occasional permanents,” such as emptiness in general and space in general. These are the referents of general concepts, and exist as long as any objects or relations exist.

For the student of emptiness, it is not important to remember or utilize this scheme or employ these categories in one's day-to-day use. What is important is to learn the lessons taught by this scheme:

- Everything is said to be empty, even emptiness
- For each thing, there is also the corresponding emptiness of that thing, because to exist is to be empty
- ***Inherent existence falls under the category of non-existent things***

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This last point is especially important when it comes to meditating on emptiness. When you meditate on emptiness, what you actually look for is inherent existence. Instead of finding inherent existence, you will find the **lack** of inherent existence. This lack itself is emptiness.

Emptiness and Dependent Arising

According to the Mahayana paths of Buddhism that emphasize the notion, emptiness is what the early Buddhist sutras were pointing to when they presented the notion of *pratītyasamutpāda* (Sanskrit) or *paticcasamuppāda* (Pali), namely “dependent arising”:

There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones notices:
When this is, that is.
From the arising of this comes the arising of that.
When this isn't, that isn't.
From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that.
— *Anguttara Nikaya X.92; Vera Sutta*

Centuries later, Nagarjuna (2nd century C. E.) became the preeminent expositor of emptiness teachings. His *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*Treatise on the Middle Way*) is today considered the most profound and sophisticated exposition of emptiness in Buddhism. The text provides scores of arguments for the conclusion that to propose any kind of inherent existence or metaphysical essence involves the proponent in logical contradictions and incoherence. Chapter 24 actually contains two specific verses that characterize the notion of emptiness itself:

Whatever is dependently co-arisen,
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way. — (*Treatise*, 24.18)

Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist.
Therefore a nonempty thing
Does not exist. — (*Treatise*, 24.19)

In verse 18, Nagarjuna sets up a three-way equivalence:

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emptiness = dependent arising = verbal convention¹

and identifies this equivalence with the Middle Way. The Middle Way is a form of nonduality that is free from the dualistic opposites of essentialism and nihilism. Even emptiness itself is characterized as being empty. It is empty because, instead of having the inherent nature of being dependent arising, it is merely “explained to be” dependent arising.

In verse 19, Nagarjuna states that whatever exists, is in some sense dependently arisen, that is, empty. If something is not dependently arisen, then it is not empty. If it is not empty, then it does not exist. And of course, even things we would normally consider as non-existent, such as unicorns and round squares, are also empty.

Conventional Existence

So how do things exist if they don't exist inherently? According to the Buddhist teachings, things exist in an everyday, non-inherent, dependent way. Our mode of existence is dependent on many things, such as the causes and conditions that give rise to us, the components that make us up, and the ways we are cognized and categorized. According to the teachings, we are not separate and independent entities, but rather we exist in dependence on webworks of relations and transactions.

For example, we can say that a bottle of milk exists in a dependent, conventional way because you can go to the store, lift the bottle of milk off the shelf, pay for it and bring it home. It exists in dependence on its surroundings, its having been manufactured, and in relation to the actions of the store employees and yourself. The bottle of milk is not found to exist independently of these things.

It is taught that all things are empty and dependent like this. That includes people and all other living beings, as well as consciousness and unconsciousness; pleasure and pain; time and space; cause and effect; good and bad; logic and math; language, meaning and reference; art, commerce and science; planets, boulders and bridges; unicorns and Sherlock Holmes; energy, thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. Whatever exists is said to exist conventionally, but not inherently.

¹ This insight is very clearly set forth by Jay Garfield in his *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, pp. 303-321.

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Emptiness Itself is Empty

Even emptiness is empty. For example, the emptiness of the bottle of milk does not exist inherently. Rather, it exists in a dependent way. The emptiness of the bottle of milk is dependent upon its basis (the bottle of milk). It is also dependent upon having been designated as emptiness. As we saw above, this is alluded to in Nagarjuna's **Treatise**, verse 24.18.

Understood this way, emptiness is not a substitute term for awareness. Emptiness is not an essence. It is not a substratum or background condition. Things do not arise out of emptiness and subside back into emptiness. Emptiness is not a quality that things have, which makes them empty. Rather, to be a thing in the first place, is to be empty.

It is easy to misunderstand emptiness by idealizing or reifying it by thinking that it is an absolute, an essence, or a special realm of being or experience. It is not any of those things. It is actually the opposite. It is merely the way things exist, which is without essence or self-standing nature or a substratum of any kind. Here is a list characteristics of emptiness, to help avoid some of the frequent misunderstandings about emptiness, according to the Buddhist Consequentialists:

- Emptiness is not a substance
- Emptiness is not a substratum or background
- Emptiness is not light
- Emptiness is not consciousness or awareness
- Emptiness is not the Absolute
- Emptiness does not exist on its own
- Objects do not consist of emptiness
- Objects do not arise from emptiness
- Emptiness of the “I” does not negate the “I”
- Emptiness is not the feeling that results when no objects are appearing to the mind
- Meditating on emptiness does not consist of quieting the mind

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Inherent Existence

Inherent existence is the kind of existence we uncritically think things have, existing under their own power, without help from anything else. Our sense that things exist in this way is the root of our suffering, according to the Buddhist teachings. We have a sense of this inherence partly due to how we think of language. We think that words are labels pointing straight to pre-formatted, already-individuated things in the world outside of language or cognition. This tendency to feel inherence can even be intensified if we follow essentialist philosophies such as Platonism or materialist realism, which hold that things exist according to their own essential nature, independent of anything else. Our natural tendency to feel this inherence is the root of suffering, according to the emptiness teachings. Actually, being able to locate and isolate this sense of inherent existence in yourself is good news. The more clearly you can grasp the sense of inherent existence, the more powerfully you will be able to realize emptiness when you do your meditations.

What does the sense of inherent existence feel like? We will say much more about this later, but briefly, it feels like something ***is really there, just like that, being what it really is***. You've had a very definite sense of inherent existence if you've ever wondered whether something or someone has been given the "correct" name! Or could it perhaps have been given the wrong name??

According to the emptiness teachings, inherent existence is the kind of existence that things do ***not*** have. Things actually ***lack*** inherent existence, because they exist as dependent arisings. This dependency is the lack of inherent existence which, in turn, is their emptiness.

The relation between inherent existence, emptiness and dependent arising can be seen through the translation of the Sanskrit or Pali terms for depending arising: *pratīyasamutpāda* (Sanskrit) or *patīccasamuppāda* (Pali). The Sanskrit components are individually translated as follows:

Pratīya = Meeting, Relying or Depending +

Samut = Out of +

Pad = To go, to fall

Notice the three English terms for *Pratīya*: Meeting, Relying and Depending. These have been given three different kinds of meanings by the consequentialist writers (see H.H. the Dalai Lama, 2000, pp. 35ff in the References section), so that they will cover

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all the variations of dependent arising. These kinds of dependence are explained as follows:

- **MEETING** - The coming together of causes and conditions in time. In Western philosophical terms, this might be referred to as **causal dependency**. The cessation of cause comes into contact with the onset of effect within a network of supporting conditions. Examples would include one billiard ball striking another, or the sperm and ovum coming into contact at human conception. Because of uncritically thinking that things and people exist inherently, we can sometimes be surprised by the effects of the “Meeting”-style dependent arising. An example would be the surprise at the aging process if we see someone for the first time after a long absence. This is the least subtle of the three types of dependent arising.
- **RELYING** - The way a thing depends on its pieces and parts. In Western philosophical terms, this might be referred to as **mereological dependency**. The pieces and parts of an object are sometimes called its “basis of designation.” According to the emptiness teachings, we would see roots, a stalk, branches and leaves, and based on this, designate the object as a “tree.” These various parts are the tree’s basis of designation. Being a tree is dependent upon the basis of designation. The tree cannot be said to exist if its basis of designation did not exist. For example, if you have a car in the parking lot over a long period of time, and vandals come and steal pieces here and there over several months, there will come a certain point at which there won't be enough parts for you to call it a car. This is how the car depends upon its pieces and parts, or its basis of designation. Even though this seems reasonable if we think about it like this, it's never nevertheless easy to think that the true car exists in a way **apart from** the basis of designation, as though there were a “true car” that existed in an ideal realm of some sort. This sense that the car exists without depending on its basis of designation is the sense of the inherent existence of the car. This is more subtle than “Meeting”-style dependence.
- **DEPENDING** - The way a thing depends on being designated by convention, language or cognition. In Western philosophical terms, this might be referred to as **conceptual dependency**. Did Mount Everest exist before it was named? Did sub-atomic particles exist as such before they were ever thought of? Would a “rose by any other name” still be a rose? We look at the shape, size and structure of a natural formation of the earth, and call it a “mountain.” According to the Consequentialist emptiness teachings, we would say that the basis of designation (formations of earth) existed, but the “mountain” as such did not exist until it was designated by the process of convention and cognition.

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According to emptiness teachings, it makes no sense to say that something exists if it was never designated or cognized. Nevertheless, it seems to us that things are always there regardless of cognition, and that cognition is a process of mere neutral **discovery** of what was pre-formed and present all along. This feeling of independence from designation or pre-formed existence is not only an easy feeling to get hold of, it might even seem like common sense to most people. This is another kind of sense of the inherent existence of things. But the emptiness teachings question this. This critique, this “Depending”-style of dependency (as opposed to the “Meeting” and “Relying” types of dependency) will be familiar to those who have studied Advaita-Vedanta, Mind-Only Buddhist teachings, or the philosophy of Idealism. The emptiness teachings are not themselves a form of Vedanta or idealism (because emptiness teachings posit that physical objects do exist externally and physically), but they agree with the views which hold that uncognized objects do not exist. This is the most subtle of the three types of dependent arising.

According to Buddhism, anything that exists exists conventionally, through the network of dependent arisings, that is through Meeting, Relying or Depending. Even emptiness exists in this way. But we think and feel that things exist without these dependencies. **For something to inherently exist, it would have to exist without any dependencies at all. It would exist without Meeting, Relying or Depending.** It is the job of emptiness meditation to find inherent existence, to ascertain whether it exists as we feel it does.

Other terms for inherent existence, gathered from Buddhist and Western sources, would include the following:

- the reality of the thing irrespective of culture or language or human consciousness
- objective existence
- independent existence
- true essence
- Platonic essence
- real existence
- ontological existence
- the thing as it really is
- the thing in-itself

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- the is-ness of the thing
- beingness
- actuality
- thinghood
- perseity
- self-sufficient being
- self-inclusive being
- essential being
- instantiation in reality
- subject of ontological commitment
- the thing's entitification
- the way it really is, regardless of what anyone thinks
- the reality of the thing as opposed to its appearance
- what science will eventually discover the thing to be
- the way God intends the thing to be
- “it is what it is”
- “it's like that, and that's the way it is” (as the rappers Run DMC used to say)

Compassion and Emptiness

Compassion facilitates the realization of emptiness

Although realizing emptiness is said by Buddhist Consequentialists to be the key to the end of suffering, it nevertheless occurs in context. It is not the first thing one learns. In many Buddhist contexts, there is a teaching emphasis on the importance of developing compassion before learning the emptiness teachings. Compassion in these contexts is explained as the spontaneous and sincere wish to help other beings alleviate suffering. Having this wish not only increases one's own joy, but also the depth of one's insight. Emphasizing compassion early on serves as a preventive measure against two ways to go wrong with the emptiness teachings.

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1. Compassion moves the practitioner beyond a merely memorized or intellectual understanding of the emptiness teachings. Compassion helps one's realization become global and holistic.
2. Compassion is an antidote to learning the emptiness teachings for selfish, egocentric reasons. When one engages in a difficult dialectic like the emptiness teaching for selfish reasons, the result is counterproductive. Emptiness teachings are very subtle. The most common side-effect of misunderstanding emptiness is a crippling sense of nihilism. A nihilistic outlook makes joy, compassion and emptiness very difficult to realize. One doesn't experience an increase in joy and a decrease in suffering. Instead, one experiences a stiffening of the mind and a closure of the heart. But compassion opens the mind and heart. It allows one to "get out of the way." It makes the emptiness teachings easier to understand, easier to realize holistically, and easier to integrate into one's life. Compassion enables the realization of emptiness.

Realizing emptiness facilitates compassion

The effects run the other direction too. A greater understanding of emptiness enables greater compassion. The more strongly one realizes that one's self and other selves are empty of inherent existence, the less one experiences an essential distinction between one's self and another. It becomes harder to place one's own happiness above that of others. It becomes easier to act in such a way that others are benefited, not just one's self.

Contextual clues

There is a clue to this traditional placement of emptiness later in the learning stream. In the various lists of Buddhist spiritual virtues called "perfections" or "paramitas" (Sanskrit), there are 6 or 10 items. The "perfection of wisdom" refers to the realization of emptiness or the lack of an essential self. **But the perfection of wisdom is never the first item in these lists!** It is usually number 4 or number 6. Depending on the list, the perfection of wisdom is preceded by the perfections of: generosity, virtue, renunciation, discipline, patience, tolerance, diligence, and one-pointed concentration.

For example, here is a Theravada list from the Pali Canon of Buddhist scriptures:

1. *Dāna*: generosity
2. *Sīla*: virtue, morality, proper conduct
3. *Nekkhamma*: renunciation
4. *Paññā*: wisdom, insight

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5. *Viriya*: energy, diligence, vigor, effort
6. *Khanti*: patience, tolerance, forbearance, acceptance, endurance
7. *Sacca*: truthfulness, honesty
8. *Adhitthāna*: determination, resolution
9. *Mettā*: loving-kindness
10. *Upekkhā*: equanimity, serenity

Here is a Mahayana list:

1. *Dāna*: generosity
2. *Śīla*: virtue, morality, discipline, proper conduct
3. *Khanti*: patience, tolerance, forbearance, acceptance, endurance
4. *Vīrya*: energy, diligence, vigor, effort
5. *Dhyāna*: one-pointed concentration, contemplation
6. *Prajñā*: wisdom, insight

I find it interesting that the Mahayana tradition (Nagarjuna's tradition) places more emphasis on the importance of realizing emptiness, and also locates its paramita **later** in the list, with more perfections before it.

How to Realize Emptiness

So how does one actually realize that all things, self and world, are empty? In a nutshell, the realization of emptiness of an object is accomplished through trying to find and validate that object's inherent existence. One narrows down the options and looks everywhere where the object's inherent existence might be found. What happens is that one fails to find inherent existence. What one finds is the simple lack of inherent existence. This lack is the thing's emptiness.

According to the Buddhist path, one trains to stabilize the attention, abandon harmful actions, take up helpful actions, generate patience and compassion, and meditate on the nature of self and other. These various activities are integrated together to assist the practitioner in generating the insight that things are empty. Emptiness can be realized much more quickly this way than if the person began from scratch with emptiness studies themselves. Realizing emptiness is holistic and not merely an intellectual event. Therefore, a compassionate heart is said to enable the patience, spirit

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of generosity and flexibility of mind, that are required by the very subtle and tricky emptiness meditations.

The form of Buddhism that places the most emphasis on emptiness meditation is probably Prasangika Madhyamika. Once the practitioner has the spontaneous desire for compassion and a yearning to hear the emptiness teachings, then the traditional teacher will begin.

There are several stages in the study of emptiness, which are integrated into much of the Buddhist path itself:

1. **Learn valid establishment** – You learn the conventional ways that phenomena are established, i.e., how belief in things is justified. In Buddhism, this can be done by learning the Buddhist teachings themselves. They can include teachings on cause and effect, psychology, epistemology, karma, interpersonal relations, compassion, the development of attention and analytical skills. In the Western tradition, learning valid establishment comes through learning the natural or social sciences, mathematics or humanities. It can also come from learning one's profession from the ground up, or from a careful observation of life itself. Learning valid establishment prevents the investigator from falling into nihilism, which is the denial of conventional existence along with the denial of inherent existence. Emptiness meditation saves conventional existence and refutes only inherent existence.

Review the relation between emptiness and valid establishment – You reflect on how the emptiness of your self and the emptiness of other beings and things in the world allows all of these existents to move, change and interact with each other. If things had fixed and independent nature, as we often feel they do, then they would not be able to change. For example, if a tree had an essential nature as something containing 106 branches and 2,196 leaves, then if it lost even one leaf, it would by definition not be that particular tree any more. If we, for example, had a fixed nature as a person with just these physical and psychological characteristics, then we could never become happier, more mature or more slender without violating these characteristics and becoming by definition another person.

2. **Ascertain the object of refutation** – You must be able to identify the sense of inherent existence in yourself. This is a pivotal stage in the investigation, for it allows you to properly frame just what it is that your meditations are refuting. If you refute too little, you will leave some aspects of inherent existence unexamined and miss the Middle Way by tending towards essentialism. If you

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refute too much, you will negate some aspects of conventional existence and miss the Middle Way by tending towards nihilism. This alternative is said to be worse for the investigator than refuting too little, since it discourages one from continuing. It can be disheartening and even depressing. Properly identifying the sense of inherent existence allows you to get the target clearly in your sights. Your intended target will be just the right size, not too small or too large.

In this preparatory stage, you familiarize yourself with the difference between conventional existence (which exists, and which is demonstrated by valid establishment) and inherent existence (which we feel exists, but which the meditations prove does not exist). According to the Buddhist teachings, this is the issue in a nutshell, and this is the most challenging stage. Ascertaining the object of entailment can actually require months to get clear about. But the clearer you are on what inherent existence must be, the more able you will be to recognize it should you actually find it in the meditations later, and the more thorough your realization will be. Ascertaining the object of refutation is one of the most important stages in your meditation. For more information, see *The Pivotal Step – Ascertaining the Object of Refutation*.

3. **Determine the entailment** – You familiarize yourself with the overall logic of emptiness meditation. The logic is as follows: “Either things exist inherently or they don't. If things have inherent existence, I should be able to find inherent existence by looking everywhere. But I can't find inherent existence; I find only its absence, its non-existence. Therefore it doesn't exist.”

In the case of inherent existence of my self, the logic would go as follows:

(1) My self either has inherent existence or it is empty.

(2) If my self has inherent existence, I should be able to find it by looking everywhere it could possibly be.

(3) I have looked everywhere the inherent existence of my self could possibly be, and cannot find it anywhere.

(4) Therefore, my self is empty.

4. **Conduct the emptiness reasonings** – These are the meditations themselves. They are called “reasonings” because they involve inference and logical entailment. They involve a form of step-by-step reasoning and are often thought of as a form of “analytic meditation.” You go through the steps of the emptiness

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reasonings in a full-fledged, holistic way, trying to put yourself fully into each stage. There are many kinds of emptiness reasoning. One of the simplest to understand is Chandrakirti's Sevenfold Reasoning. It is easier to learn the stages of the reasoning by applying it to something neutral, such as a car. When the steps are familiar, you apply them to your self, where they are likely to have a greater effect, and the realization will prove to be more intense. The following is an overview of Chandrakirti's Sevenfold Reasoning, as applied to a chariot:

Introduction: If the chariot exists inherently, I will be able to find it somewhere in or around its parts. You ask and look deeply:

Step 1: Is the inherently existent chariot exactly **the same** as its parts? No, I don't find the inherently existent chariot as equal to its parts. Instead, I find its absence, its nonexistence.

Step 2: Is it totally **different from** its parts? No, I don't find the inherently existent chariot apart from its parts. Instead, I find its absence, its nonexistence.

Step 3: Is it **dependent upon its parts**? (This can also be interpreted as "Is it inside of its parts?") No, I don't find the inherently existent chariot as dependent upon its parts. I also don't find the inherently existent chariot to be somewhere inside of its parts. Instead, I find its absence, its nonexistence.

Step 4: Is it such that the **parts are dependent upon it**? (This can also be interpreted as "Is it outside of its parts?") No, I don't find the inherently existent chariot such that its parts are dependent upon it. I also don't find the inherently existent chariot to be somewhere outside of its parts. Instead, I find its absence, its nonexistence.

Step 5: Is it the **possessor of** its parts? No, I don't find the inherently existent chariot as the possessor of its parts. Instead, I find its absence, its nonexistence.

Step 6: Is it the mere **collection of** its parts? No, I don't find the inherently existent chariot as the collection of its parts. Instead, I find its absence, its nonexistence.

Step 7: Is it the mere **shape of** its parts? No, I don't find the inherently existent chariot as the shape of its parts. Instead, I find its absence, its nonexistence.

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Conclusion: Therefore the chariot doesn't exist inherently. It is empty, existing not inherently, but conventionally only.

For a more detailed look at Chandrakirti's chariot meditation, see [Another Kind of Self-Inquiry: Chandrakirti's Sevenfold Reasoning on Selflessness](#).

The Pivotal Step – Ascertaining the Object of Refutation

This step is pivotal, because until we identify what we're planning to refute, our meditations will be operating blindly. They won't hit the target. We will be refuting the wrong thing, which will lead to either eternalism or nihilism. This step is also very subtle, and can take months.

Ascertaining the object of refutation means to become very clear about our conception of inherent existence. We know from hearing the teachings that nothing actually does exist inherently. But we think things do exist inherently. It's only by focusing on the conception of inherent existence that we can direct our meditations so as not to refute too little (and leave some inherent existence un-refuted, leading to essentialism), and not to refute too much (and refute some aspects of conventional existence, leading to nihilism). Just how does ascertaining the object of refutation work? As follows:

1. We examine our feelings and thoughts to isolate our conception of inherent existence (explained more below).
2. We use our conception of inherent existence as a pointer. This pointer leads us to a sort of claim that the self and other objects seem to be making. They seem to be claiming to exist on their own, independently from everything else. Even before doing the emptiness meditations themselves, we know from hearing the teachings that nothing is supposed to exist in this way. These objects are making a false claim, and now we are able to see this false claim up close and clearly. We have confidence that our meditations will be successful, since the teachings tell us that they have been proven to work for generations of meditators.
3. Armed with our confidence and clear view of the claim of inherent existence, we disprove the claim using the emptiness meditations. We demonstrate to ourselves beyond a shadow of a doubt that the claim is false and unwarranted. This step is the realization of emptiness. It occurs first inferentially, then directly.
4. We experience the aftereffects of the realization, in which our tendency to feel the conception of inherent existence diminishes until it is eradicated. This is the end of suffering.

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The Experience of Emptiness

Experiencing self, other and world as empty is to joyfully experience one's place in a light, free, open-ended, interpenetrating webwork of relations and dependencies. Lightness and joy come from no longer feeling as though reality has or needs a foundation. One no longer suffers from existential commitments, yearnings and anxieties. Life and death are freed up. Nothing seems ultimately stiff, frozen, apart, separate or unchangeable. There are no more conceptions of an inherently existing self that exists on its own yet needs to be defended, propped up, aggrandized and pleased forever. There are no more conceptions of a metaphysical ground underlying existence that can fulfill you if found or frustrate you if not found. Anxieties pertaining to objectivity and ultimacy have ceased. This opens the heart to the radical contingency of all beings, and brings on the sweet, precious desire and commitment to see them free from suffering as well.

Experience becomes holistic and open-textured, like a web with content as well as a periphery. A spider web and Indra's Net are traditional examples. One never stands apart from the web beholding it from somewhere else. Instead, one has a deep recognition of one's self and one's viewpoint as contingent and dependent on weblike aspects and relations. The web changes whenever something new, whether coarse or subtle, enters at any point. The new element enters by becoming contextualized by the web. At the same time, all the elements of the web are recontextualized to at least some tiny extent by the new element. Nothing is experienced as standing alone, granular, lump-like or disconnected from other things.

The experience of self and world as empty deepens over time. One familiarizes oneself increasingly with emptiness and its many effects and ramifications, which include compassion. According to Buddhist teachings, realizing and living emptiness is closely related to the classic spiritual desiderata or “paramitas” (Sanskrit). Specific lists differ, but a common Mahayana list of the paramitas with ten members is: generosity, morality, patience, perseverance, concentration, wisdom, method, wishes, power, exalted or perfect (omniscient) wisdom. Number six in the list is the wisdom of emptiness/dependent arising. This is the insight that neither the self nor anything else has a fixed, permanent, foundational, non-contextual or independent essence. The Buddhist practitioner practices all the virtues. Each one helps deepen the others. Numbers (1) – (5) serve as causes and preparation for (6); and (6) serves as a cause for the deepening of the others. Numbers (1) – (5) prepare the mind to the subtle and powerful realization of (6). Number (6) allows the practitioner to practice (1) – (5) without greed, aversion, clinging or objectification.

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In the Mahayana schools of Buddhism, one continues this process until full Buddhahood is attained, which can take eons. According to the Tibetan Gelug-ba tradition, there are levels and layers, which one is able to pass through primarily by meditating on emptiness. It is possible to reach freedom from suffering in one lifetime, but full Buddhahood takes longer! The levels begin (i) when emptiness is first studied, and continue (ii) when emptiness is first realized inferentially. This is a watershed point. In meditation the practitioner experiences that the object of meditation does not exist inherently. One becomes suspicious and begins a healthy doubt that the world exists the way one's existing essentialist views claim. One feels that self and world might not exist as they have seemed to, and one wishes to investigate further. Already there is a certain light, decentered feeling that inspires one to meditate further.

After more, a lot more meditation one gets to the point at which (iii) emptiness is realized directly. This is another watershed point. At this point, the realization is a nondual experience unaccompanied by words, images, argumentation, inference, or a felt split between subject and object. The target that one sat down to meditate about actually loses its distinctness during the meditation; there is no imagery dividing one's putative meditative target from other things. When one rises from the meditation, one need only turn the mind to any object to know that it is empty. These objects include the self, thought, language, all aspects of the path, the Four Noble Truths, and even emptiness itself. One needn't investigate all objects in the world to know that they are all empty. That would take a very, very long time. And it is not necessary, because the insights generalize in unexpected and transformational ways.

After realizing emptiness directly, one may continue to meditate on emptiness in order to enrich insights into the variety and subtlety of the dependencies and interrelations among things. For many people, this is a part of their deepest life's interest, for others it is an ongoing part of the spiritual path they feel drawn to. But the sense of metaphysical anxiety – is gone. The sense of feeling alienated from a reality existing as though across a chasm – is gone. The sense of a solid, substantial, unified separate self (as well as other objects) existing on their own without relying on conceptual posits – is gone. The puzzle one might have felt about whether there were exceptions to the emptiness dialectic (“Are **all** things empty or are there exceptions that maybe I don't know about?”) – is gone.

At this point, all the sufferings and existential anxieties coming from clinging, aversion and essentialist views of self and life come to a peaceful halt, their causes having ceased. According to the Tibetan Gelug-ba scheme, one does not stop here! As one lives life, one continues to meditate on emptiness. Why? There is a further goal. It is said that

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even though the obstructions to freedom from suffering have ceased, the obstructions to omniscience have not ceased. Objects still appear to the senses as though inherently existent even though the mind knows better. One's senses are not undeceived yet, but one's mind has an irreversible peace and clarity that the self and objects in the world are empty, arising dependently. According to the Tibetan Gelug-ba scheme, the practitioner meditates on emptiness and practices the other parts of the path until (iv) one by one, she advances through the Ten Bodhisattva Stages until (v) with omniscience and perfect development of all the paramitas, full Buddhahood is attained.

Western Teachings

When “emptiness” is understood as a kind of conventional, relational, interdependent existence rather than an objective, independent existence, then the field opens up. Buddhist sources are not the only sources that can assist in this kind of seeing.

In fact, Western sources can be very helpful. As far back as ancient Greece, and at many subsequent times in history, there have been Western thinkers who investigated similar questions: objectivity, independence and essence. These thinkers, who were often in critical dialogue with the objectivist metaphysical tradition from Plato (429–347 BCE) to Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), came down on the side of interdependence. In fact, several of these thinkers lived before Plato, and some scholars suspect that many of Plato's arguments were actually a defense against various types of anti-foundationalism that were already on the ground.²

There are now many Western critiques of the claims of independence and inherent existence. They include anti-realism, anti-essentialism, anti-representationalism, anti-foundationalism, fictionalism, pragmatism, holism, Pyrrhonism, skepticism, constructivism, deconstruction, hermeneutics, discourse theory, liberal ironism and others. Approaches can be borrowed from alternative logics, art of all kinds, chaos theory, feminism, film, game theory, historiography, linguistics, literary criticism and theory, literature, math, philosophy, photography, physics, poetry, psychology, sociology and many other areas. They can all be helpful, and there will be pointers from as many of these approaches as possible.

There is one big difference, however, between Buddhist and Western approaches. It's not that Buddhism “takes you further,” but that Buddhism has a very effective, time-

² For example, see G.B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, Cambridge University Press (1981); Susan C. Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured*, Southern Illinois University Press (1991); and Ugo Zilioli, *Protagoras and the Challenge of Relativism*, Ashgate, 2007.

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tested “soteriological” context in place. That is, Buddhism has sanghas, teachers, meditations and other supportive means that greatly emphasize the liberating effects of this investigation.

With Western approaches, on the other hand, the links with liberating effects are there, but they aren't presented front and center. One must read carefully into the texts and practices. One must try them out and see. But they are there. I know – I have done different kinds of them myself for decades. My friend Tomas actually had more success with Wittgenstein than he had with Nagarjuna. In the West, many of these investigative approaches are practiced mostly in academia, where there is very little official emphasis on the transformational effects of one's research! But if you read a book like Kenneth Gergen's *Invitation to Social Construction*, you get a very tangible sense of how this new non-essentialist approach revolutionized his own life and work. His enthusiasm comes across very clearly!

In fact, for those interested in exploring a Western approach, Gergen's book could be the best place to start. He refers to many other writers in many areas. You also get an idea of what free and open vistas await you when you no longer think of yourself as having a particular fixed nature. You can combine this pursuit with Buddhism (or with any other path you are already on), or you can do the Western thing on its own. Those alternatives are an example of the many freedoms that lie in store.

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