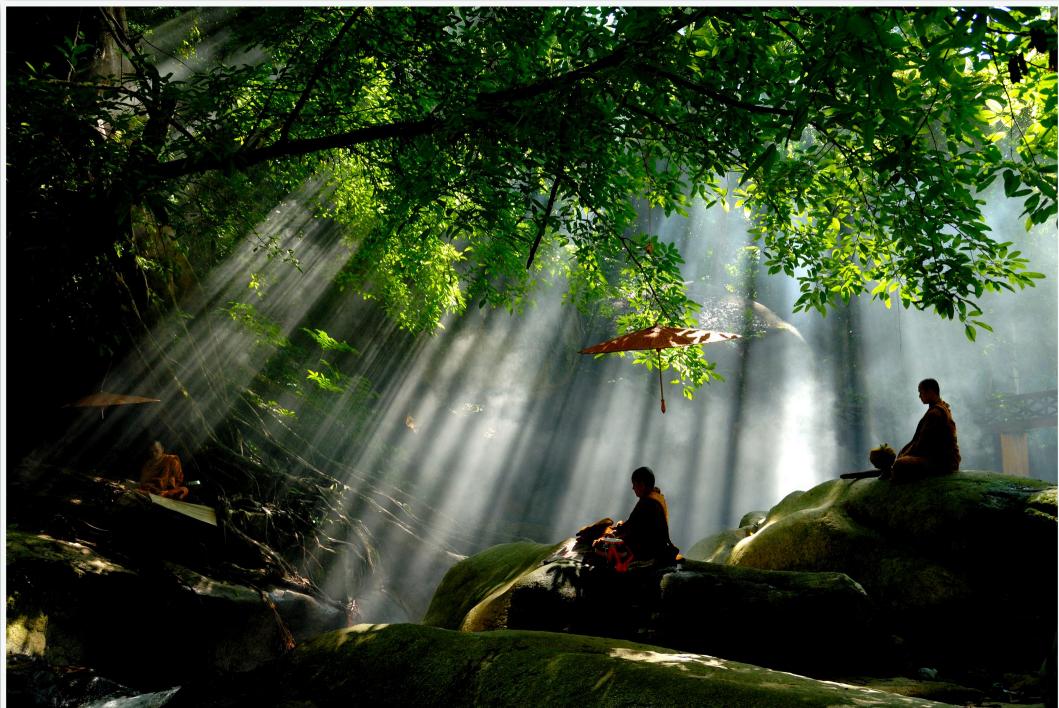


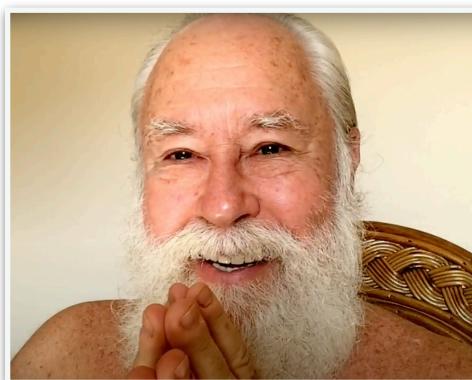
Emptiness

Cūla-suññatā-sutta:

The Lesser Sutta on Emptiness



—by—
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—Editing and Commentary by—
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Introduction

This is where I'm supposed to impress you with my vast learning and deep insight. And of course, while doing so I'm expected to be very, very serious. Sorry, ain't gonna happen! This Emptiness business is too much fun. If you look for mistakes and imperfections herein, you will certainly find them. But if you seek the Truth, all blessings upon you!

This book is to help you get comfortable—cozy, even—with Emptiness. Emptiness is profound, beautiful, immeasurable and beyond understanding. Because of that, it terrifies most of us.

But what if I told you that you experience Emptiness every night during deep sleep? What if I told you that it is our very nature, as inseparable from our being as consciousness and life itself? What if I told you that the principal cause of suffering is that we cover up the exquisite beauty and matchless comfort of Emptiness with layers of human-made garbage?

You already know Emptiness. We all experience it regularly, in the form of deep sleep, to restore our energy and enthusiasm for living. But then we give it up and plunge back into the world to suffer more. To one who is Self-realized, this is the supreme irony.

The Emptiness attained in sleep is covered by ignorance. Conscious, deliberate attainment of Emptiness through meditation is the penultimate stage to Enlightenment, *Nibbāna*, Self-realization.

In the potent *Cūlasuññatāsutta*, the Buddha takes us step-by-step from ordinary consciousness of the world to realization of Emptiness. This is the Path leading to cessation of suffering. If you can understand and practice this to completion, there is no need for any other *sādhana*.

Like any *yogik* method, practice of Emptiness meditation requires both specific personal qualifications and an undisturbed environment. Not everyone is so fortunate as to possess both. But the good news is that with determined practice, one can develop the qualifications and also come to deserve the peaceful environment required for the practice.

For the meditations and conceptualizations described herein are like a mine overflowing with precious jewels of good fortune. Though one may try the practice and fail a thousand times, each time brings one closer to the goal. This progress may not be visible but it is very certain. The only failure, then, is in giving up. So don't give up!

All the best to you. May you acquire a taste for this exquisite Emptiness that leads to the end of suffering!

Ādyāśakti Svāmī Bhagavān
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Emptiness: the Goal

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Namaste  The series before last was about [Dependent Arising](#), the process of becoming. The process of becoming is the trap that causes us to be stuck in duality. But it's also the process of enlightenment, because we have to turn that process on its head and use it to become free. We showed how the descent into duality, when it's uprooted, and when the process of becoming ceases, then the Eightfold Path and the four Path fruits manifest automatically.

Then in the last series we showed how there is a very deep, high-level ontological alignment between the four paths and the Śaṅkarāchārya's *catur-darśanam*, the four views. Starting from duality, that's *dvaita-vāda*, then conditioned duality, *viśiṣṭādvaita-vāda*, then there's the appearance of the world, *vivartha-vāda*, and finally the unborn, *ajata-vāda*. These four stages exactly mirror the process of enlightenment given by the Buddha. And what is the goal, or what is the object of that process? Emptiness.

Now, I know, Westerners are terrified of emptiness, and not only Westerners. One of the reasons why emptiness is not better known is within the Buddha's followers themselves. Let me read this prediction by the Buddha:

"In times to come, monks will lose interest in the deep *suttas* that deal with transcendence; they will not listen to those *suttas* that have to do with emptiness, *suññatā*. They will not think it even worthwhile learning or pondering over the meanings of those *suttas*."
— [Ānisutta](#) (SN 20.7)

And of course this is exactly what happened. What happened was Buddha's teaching was originally for people on the levels of *ajata-vāda* and *vivartha-vāda*, who had come to terms with the ultimate nature of emptiness, and who

were willing to meditate to attain it. But later on, the Buddhists divorced themselves from Vedic culture, and they had to substitute their own levels of *dvaita-vāda* and *viśiṣṭādvaita-vāda*. Thus the monks became preoccupied with preaching to the broad multitudes, instead of the highly-qualified minority that the Buddha had concentrated on. They stopped teaching and preaching about emptiness, they stopped teaching the practices, and they concentrated on the precepts only.

This was actually a debate that took place in the Theravāda order about 1,500-2,000 years ago in Sri Lanka, that the scholars were saying, “No, the practices don’t matter as much as the philosophy.” And unfortunately the scholars won, and so in modern-day ‘buddhism’ the commentaries and philosophical discussions have assumed more importance, the moral rules and so on, the precepts have assumed a dominant role, and the practices are very much subordinate to them; in fact, they’re very rare, almost unknown. Only in the isolated forest monastery traditions have these practices continued. Of course my teachers were all from the forest monastery tradition, and we look upon the populist Buddhism as merely a dualistic religion, which it is. But because of that, the Buddhist society culture has lost track or lost sight of *suññatā*, emptiness, as the ultimate goal. This is a great tragedy, because actually this emptiness is the key to enlightenment.

“...when the discourses of the Tathāgata—deep, deep in their meaning, transcendent, connected with emptiness—are recited, [the monks] listen, they lend ear, they set their hearts on knowing them; they regard them as worth grasping and mastering. And when they have mastered that Dhamma, they cross-question one another about it and dissect it: ‘How is this? What is the meaning of this?’ They make open what isn’t open, make plain what isn’t plain, dispel doubt on its various doubtful points. This is called an assembly trained in cross-questioning and not in bombast.”

— *Parisavagga* (AN 2.46)

Bombast means dogma, Bible-pounding fundamentalism. This kind of fundamentalism has taken over the Buddha’s teaching unfortunately, and because of that now when we talk about *suññatā*, emptiness, or *paṭiccasamuppāda*, Dependent Arising, or really any of the advanced topics of spiritual life, *catur-darśanam* and so on, we get very, very few questions that

lead to interesting discussions. People are inclined to either accept on faith, or reject on doubt, and they don't really take the effort to inquire into things, and look into them and question them, and bring them out the way the Buddha describes here. The few that do tend to be very advanced on the path, and of course they're the people that I want as friends. I want to be surrounded by very intelligent, very advanced, very strong people, who have their own views, and the ability to research the traditions, to explain them and defend them, and to also be strong enough to have a dialogue and submit their views to cross-questioning without fear. That's our position, or that's our standard, and we're hoping that more people will come to that standard in time.

The practice of *suññatā*, the practice of emptiness, is not really as scary as it seems. Let me read you another quote from the Buddha:

“Suppose a monk sits down in an empty place at the root of a tree and well contemplates bodily form as being impermanent, being of a nature to wear away and to fade away. In the same way he examines feeling ... perception ... *saṅkhāra* ... and consciousness as being impermanent, being of a nature to wear away and to fade away. Examining those aggregates as being impermanent, of a nature to wear away, to be unstable, and to change, his mind is delighted, purified, and liberated. This is called emptiness. One who contemplates in this way, even though not yet able to be free from conceit, purifies his knowledge and vision.”

— Saṅyuktāgama 80

By contemplating on impermanence, the mind is delighted, purified and refreshed! It's not scary; it's beautiful! The beauty of emptiness is something I've been talking about on this channel for a long time, but very, very few people can grasp it; only those who have really done the work, and advanced to the point where they realize it for themselves. It's too bad, because emptiness is the universal solvent that dissolves the process of being and becoming, and leads to freedom from entanglement in manifestation. So this is the key actually. If you learn one thing from this channel, learn emptiness. Learn how to approach it, learn how to contemplate it, learn how to see that all things that are manifest are impermanent, and the only thing that's lasting is emptiness.

**"Look upon the world as void,
Mogharāja; being mindful at all times,
Uprooting the lingering view of self,
Get well beyond the range of death.**

**The king of death gets no chance to see
Him who looks thus upon the world."**

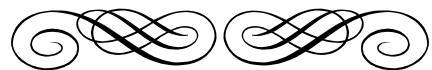
— *Mogharājamānavapucchā* (*Sutta-nipata* 5.16)

Mogharāja had approached the Buddha, and he was asking for a way to get relief from the anxieties of managing his kingdom. This is the reply, a beautiful answer from the Buddha, to look upon the world as void. What is that wonderful quote from the Bible? "This too shall pass." All these 'things,' this 'stuff' all these beings, all these manifestations, all these conditions and situations will pass away. Including ourselves, this self, this being, this identity, this I, and especially this 'mine,' all the things that we're identified with as possessions or extensions of the self will all pass away. So we should not get entangled with them, we should not get attached to them.

That doesn't mean that we necessarily give up everything and go live in a cave; what it means is that we give up the attachment to them. We give up being a slave to our possessions. This is tough advice to give a person in the 21st century, because everyone is so much identified with their possessions, their social status, their income, their professional position, their position in their community, spiritual or social community or whatever, and they think that "This is me, this is I, this is my self." But realize that all those things will pass away, in time. Like I used to say, "Die now—avoid the rush!" Instead of having to give all these things up by force at the time of death, give them up now by relinquishing the attachment to them. Then it will not be so painful, it won't be so difficult, and it will be gradual.

Buddha's teaching is based on the acceptance of emptiness and timelessness, now. If you accept these things now, even theoretically, then you will gradually be able to approach emptiness without difficulty. That's why we favor the Buddha's approach over the Vedic approach. Because the Vedic approach encourages a more and more subtle identification, until one is actually identified with Brahman, and having to give up that identification in order to actually attain emptiness is very difficult. It feels like death, it's very

scary—ask anybody who's been through it. But on the Buddha's path, one deals with that early and gradually, and so it doesn't become like a big stumbling block at the highest level of the path, and one's progress is smooth and certain, and comes to the same conclusion, but with much less difficulty and trauma. This will be continued in the next episode.



Emptiness: the Gate

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You might think that: “Well, what is there to know about emptiness?” I mean, how much can I say about emptiness, right? Well, it’s like name-and-form. I looked up all the *suttas* having to do with emptiness, and there’s maybe a thousand of them. So emptiness is actually a very important topic, and we haven’t even started to cover it from the Vedic side.

Emptiness is a big deal. Why is it such a big deal? There’s nothing to it! But the point is when we attain the realization of emptiness, that stops the creation of *saṅkhārā*. The Buddha created a gradual series of meditations called the *jhānas*—more and more subtle, and finally leading to complete emptiness. So, is that *Nibbāna*? No. Listen to this:

“Since *Nibbāna* is called the stilling of all preparations, *saṅkhārā*, *sabbasaṅkhārasamatha*, one might sometimes conclude that the attainment of the cession of perceptions and feeling, *saññāvedayitanirodha*, is in itself *Nibbāna*. But it is upon rising from that attainment, which is like a deep freeze, that one makes contact with the three deliverances: the signless (*animitta*), the desireless (*appanihita*), and the void (*suññatā*).”

— Bhikkhu K. Nāṇananda, [Nibbāna the Mind Stilled](#)

Bhikkhu Nāṇananda, no less an authority than he, says that actually emptiness is not *Nibbāna*. How could it be? Because emptiness, or focusing on emptiness, or residing in emptiness, or dwelling in emptiness is conditional. What happens when you reach emptiness is that the whole world shows up in it. See, there’s just something about emptiness that’s so creative. It becomes like a mirror that reflects the entire creation. Emptiness is really a powerful state. It’s a state with great potential. It’s like you have a pendulum with a heavy weight, hanging by a chain let’s say, like a wrecking ball, a really heavy weight, and you push that weight all the way to one side. It takes a tremendous effort. But then what happens when you let go? It swings to the other side.

Emptiness is an extreme. We never encounter emptiness directly in our ordinary everyday experience. Why? Because it's an extreme. It's such an extreme that if you could attain it even for a second, when you come out of it everything is different—it has such transformative power.

I kind of cheated a little bit on the last video, I called emptiness the goal. Well, it's not exactly the goal; it's the gateway to the goal. If you can pass through that gateway, then *Nibbāna* is yours automatically, without any further effort. Why? Because when you come out of that state of complete emptiness, you can see the phoniness of things. That's why he says the signless deliverance. 'The signless' means one does not take things at face value anymore, but one can understand that every 'thing' that 'exists,' that has 'being,' is a result of *sankhārā*, is a result of making, of compounding, cause and effect. There's nothing natural about it; it happens as a byproduct of our trying to attain individual existence.

Coming out of emptiness, we can see this, it's very clear: everything is phony, everything is bullshit! You think the news is phony? Ha! Even the person giving the news is phony! Everything is phony! Everything is *sankhata*, compounded, fabricated, made, constructed, built, caused. And because it's caused, because it's the effect of a cause, as soon as the cause changes, the effect also changes. So everything is impermanent. We don't believe in its absolute existence—that is the signless deliverance.

Then, because these things are basically worthless, we don't desire them anymore. We see that [singing] "It's only a paper moon, sailing over a cardboard sea." And it is make-believe. Whether we believe in it or not, it's still phony. What is the only real thing? Emptiness, nothingness, *Nibbāna*, the uncaused.

And finally, the void. We see that all these phenomena are actually void. What does that mean? They have no intrinsic beingness. They are simply an appearance in awareness, a mirage. And if we look into the mirage, we can see the whole physics behind it, and realize that "Oh, this is phony." It's like the magic show. Bhikkhu Nāṇananda likes to talk about a magic show, the mind as a magic trick. Everybody knows, on some level, when a magician does a trick that it's phony, right? There really isn't a rabbit sitting in his hat;

the rabbit is someplace else, and it just appears to come from the hat, or whatever trick the guy does. Because it's phony, the game is guessing, "Well, how did he do it?" That's actually the attraction of the magic show, like "How did he do that? How did he guess that card? Well, he didn't guess it; the whole thing was a setup.

In the same way, this reality, this so-called 'reality' that we live in is a setup. And if we buy into it, if we believe in it, if we think that it's real, then we're a sucker and we get trapped, we get exploited. Our whole existence is taken away from us by engaging in different useless pursuits. And people profit from that, businesses profit from that, that's how they make their living: they're exploitative.

We don't buy it, we don't accept it; we think it's all void, *suññatā*. That doesn't mean that we're nihilists. Nihilists say that there is nothing. No, there is something: when we see a mirage in the desert, it's a real mirage! But it pretends to be something that it's not, that's why it's a mirage. In the same way, this world pretends to be real, it pretends to be permanent, it pretends to have actual substance, actual meaning, but really it doesn't—it's just a comedy.

One who sees this, sees that the real reality is emptiness, nothingness. Here's a verse spoken by the Buddha:

**"Hard to see is the Endless,
It's not easy to see the truth,
Pierced through is craving,
And nothing for him who knows and sees."**

— *Dutiyanibbānapatisaiyuttasutta* (*Udāna* 80)

All these objects that we are led to desire and crave are actually nothing. Well, they're real—yeah, they're real mirages. Like this body: this body comes into existence in a very painful way, and then it exists, with lots of suffering and disappointment, for a limited length of time, and then it dwindles and degenerates and disappears—and that's life. And yet we guard this life so jealously, we're so attached to it. But it's not endless, it has an end. Anything that has an end is suffering. Because as soon as we get attached to it, when it changes and disappears, then we suffer.

Try to understand: detachment, piercing through craving, seeing that the objects that we crave are but illusions, means that those who know and see realize that this world is nothing. The world beyond is the real world. And how do we attain that? Listen again to the Buddha:

“Consciousness—which makes nothing manifest, infinite and all-lustrous—does not partake of the earthiness of earth, the wateriness of water, the fieriness of fire, the airiness of air, the creature-hood of creatures, the *deva*-hood of *devas*, ... the Brahmā-hood of Brahmā, the radiance of the Radiant Ones, ... the overlordship of the overlord (Íśvara) or the all-ness of the all.”

— *Brahmanimantanikasutta* (MN 49)

This is unconditioned awareness. Although he calls it consciousness here, *sañña*, it's not really consciousness; it's something more than consciousness. It's consciousness which has no quality, which has no object, is unconditioned. Because consciousness becomes conditioned by its object. It's like a mirror: if you put something red in front of a mirror, the mirror turns red, and the same with any other color. The mirror becomes conditioned by whatever you place in front of it, and the same with awareness. But once awareness disengages from all its objects, it becomes unconditioned. This isn't consciousness anymore, or awareness which is only aware of itself; this is objectless awareness, because these so-called objects are actually the subject. If you meditate on this, you'll become very blissful.

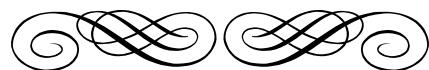
By the way, notice that in this verse the Buddha mentions both Brahmā and Śiva, Íśvara. This is another proof that actually the Buddhist philosophy is based on the Vedic culture, the Vedic scriptures. But it's a reinterpretation, a reimagining, a new expression or a new formulation, using negative logic.

There's one more verse I want to share with you, out of the thousands that I've found pertaining to emptiness:

“Then there is the case where a monk, with the complete transcending of the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, enters and remains in the cessation of perception and feeling. And, having seen [that] with discernment, his *saṅkhārā* are

completely ended. Even this much is described by the Blessed One as the attaining of an opening in a confining place, without a sequel."
— [Nibbānasukhasutta](#) (AN 9.34)

What does this mean? Emptiness is the ultimate escape. People are trying escape through sense enjoyment, through drugs, various forms of intoxication, various forms of material welfare, political schemes, etc. So many different plans. People are trying to escape. What are they trying to escape? Suffering. So, in the *sutta* from which this verse comes, the Buddha lays out a gradually-ascending progression of escapes, that each one is an opening from a confined space, leading to a condition of less suffering. But there's always a sequel, there's always another escape, because that space becomes also too confining. But once one reaches the complete cessation of perception and feeling—well, that's nothingness, that's emptiness. Then the *saṅkhārā* are completely ended, there's no more being and becoming, and because of that, there's no more suffering. Try to understand this. It's not that emptiness is the final goal, but it's the gateway through which one must pass to reach the final goal. Which is indescribable, ineffable, non-conceptual, transcendent—*Nibbāna*.



Emptiness: Wilderness

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So far, we've been dipping in the ocean of emptiness, just a little bit. Although it's only a dip, it seems like the deep end of the pool, right? Well, now we're going to stop messing around in the pool, and we're actually going to go out in the ocean. This is taking a deep dive into the source material, the Buddha's *suttas* on emptiness.

I remember one time I went out in a boat with some friends from the island of Guam, beyond the coral reef, out into the ocean. And there's a shelf, the Marianas shelf, then that drops off into the Marianas Trench, which is the deepest part of the ocean in the whole world, 36,000 feet or something like that, and basically it's just like a cliff; it goes straight down. I remember diving off the boat and going down the cliff wall, and we were looking for shellfish and whatever, and feeling the immensity of the Marianas deep. I mean, it was just such an awesome feeling. I think it had a lot to do with the sound. Just like you can hear if somebody puts a lot of reverb or something, it sounds like a big space. Well, this was the biggest space I ever heard—just awesome. And I looked up, and there was a whole school of barracudas swimming over my head! “I think I want to see some daylight here!”

Anyway, for those of you who are allergic to emptiness, you should tune out right now! This is going to get really deep, and there are lots of barracudas... But for those who have an appetite, who have a taste, then this is going to be wonderful, because we're going to go through the whole *sutta*. And even though it's called The Lesser Discourse on Emptiness, it's actually quite long, and it goes step-by-step, by degree, to introduce you to the concept of emptiness; the apophatic teaching. Instead of the positivist teaching of being in the *Vedas*, it's going to be the apophatic teaching of emptiness. So, here we go: check your tanks, check your regulator, blow all the water out of the breathing tube, and let's jump in!

I have heard that one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in the Eastern Monastery, the palace of Migāra's mother. Then the Venerable Ānanda, emerging from his seclusion in the evening, went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat on one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One: "On one occasion, when the Blessed One was staying among the Sakyans in a Sakyān town named Nagaraka, there—face-to-face with the Blessed One—I heard this, face-to-face I learned this: 'I now remain fully in a dwelling of emptiness.' Did I hear that correctly, learn it correctly, attend to it correctly, remember it correctly?"

— *Cūlasuññatāsutta* (MN 121)

Venerable Ānanda is asking the Buddha to confirm what he heard, "Did I really get that right?" Why? Because it's such a profound statement, it's such a deep and important statement. That the Buddha is not living in this body, he's not even living in this world; he lives in a dwelling of emptiness. Now, some people try to contextualize, or re-contextualize this, and say, "Well, he really means the meditative state, or the meditative practice of emptiness." I don't really buy it, especially looking at the original Pāli: he says, "I live in a dwelling, in a house of emptiness." It's right there, as plain it could be.

I don't want to re-contextualize the Buddha, I don't want to second-guess what he's saying: he lives in emptiness. How could he, after attaining Enlightenment, teach for 50 years—walking here and there, everywhere, all over Northern India, teaching thousands of disciples, and converting thousands of people to his views—without being fully enlightened, number one; and without ever leaving that state of Enlightenment? For that was his power. Well, we have a contemporary example in Rāmaṇa Mahārṣi: even though he attained spontaneously at an early age, he never really left that attainment, he never really came out into the world; he always spoke from that dwelling of emptiness. And so the Buddha is the same way, and now Ānanda is trying to verify this, to confirm it. So the Buddha replies:

"Yes, Ānanda, you heard that correctly, learned it correctly, attended to it correctly, remembered it correctly. Now, as well as before, I remain fully in a dwelling of emptiness. Just as this palace of Migāra's mother is empty of elephants, cattle, and mares, empty of

gold and silver, empty of assemblies of women and men, and there is only this non-emptiness—the singleness based on the Saṅgha of monks; even so, Ānanda, a monk—not attending to the perception (mental note) of village, not attending to the perception of human being—attends to the singleness based on the perception of wilderness. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, and indulges in its perception of wilderness.

I have to laugh, because only a month or so ago I was in the wilderness, I was in the middle of a huge forest reserve in Sri Lanka. It's a different world, and in that world it's very easy to remain in emptiness, it's not difficult at all. Because, as the Buddha says, it's empty of elephants, it's empty of assemblies of people, and horses and cattle and this and that. That emptiness leaves a certain space, and you can feel that space, just like I felt the space of the Marianas Deep. That is emptiness: the lack of thingness, the lack of becoming. One of the important differences between emptiness and nothingness is that in nothingness you can still have becoming. No-thingness can turn into thingness very easily. But emptiness? No, it can't. Because emptiness has no scope for change: it's uncreated, it's unborn, it has no past and future; it only exists in the present, because there's no change—emptiness is always emptiness.

To dwell in emptiness means to stop all change, to settle, to relax into a no-thingness, non-objective consciousness, or unconditioned awareness, awareness of awareness—that is Enlightenment. So the Buddha, although he may walk here and there, and meet with so many people and speak and so on, his awareness of his awareness never changes—that is emptiness.

One more thing: notice he says, “The mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction in this awareness of wilderness of emptiness.” Emptiness is not this terrible, scary thing that people mock it up to be. It's actually beautiful, it's actually wonderful, and very pleasurable. Let's continue:

“He discerns that ‘Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of village are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of human being are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the perception of wilderness.’ He discerns that ‘This mode of

perception is empty of the perception of village. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of human being. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the perception of wilderness.' Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: 'There is this.' And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, and pure.

It's not too difficult to understand how it conforms to actuality. But what does "It's undistorted in meaning" mean? Because the monk in the wilderness is not projecting 'I am in a village,' and all the busyness and stuff and nonsense that goes on in a village: children running around, women talking nonsense, men working on material stuff. All that's gone. There's only the perception of wilderness, emptiness of all of that. So he's not projecting even being a human being.

One time, just after his Enlightenment, the Buddha was walking, and a Brahmin came up to him—attracted by his aura, his energy—and he said,

"What are you? Are you a *deva*, a god?"

and the Buddha said, "No, I'm not a *deva*."

"Are you a *gandharva*, a heavenly angel?"

and the Buddha said, "No, I'm not a *gandharva*."

"Are you a *rākṣasa*, a demon with magical powers?"

and the Buddha said, "No, I'm not a *rākṣasa*."

"Well, then are you a human being?"

and the Buddha said, "No, I'm not a human being."

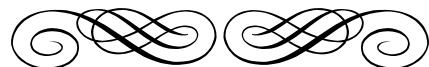
Finally the Brahmin, who was out of ideas, said, "Well, then what are you?"

and the Buddha said, "I am awakened." What is he awakened to? Emptiness, *Nibbāna*. — [Donasutta](#) (AN 4.36)

Remember, emptiness is not equal to *Nibbāna*. Emptiness is the state just before attaining *Nibbāna*. Why is that? Because *Nibbāna* is characterized as *sabbasaṅkhārasamathā*, the stilling of all *saṅkhārā*. No more attempts to be or become anything, no more determinations to be somewhere or go somewhere, or change this or that, or own something, or even perceive something. All those desires are let go. Does that mean that you're like stuck in the nothingness, in nowhere? No, no. You can still come out and walk around and do stuff and talk to people or whatever you want. But you're not

attached to it, you don't own it anymore, you don't desire it anymore: it's just like "Oh, whatever happens, cool." And it's not that you are nihilistic: "Oh, this world terrible and awful. I don't want to be here." No, no. That's just another form of whining about not getting what you want.

The Buddha is past all of that. He is always in a dwelling of emptiness. That is the supreme position. That's why he's called the Blessed One, Bhagavān, and anyone who attains that space is also Bhagavān. Because he has attained the highest that is possible for any being, and that is *Nibbāna*.

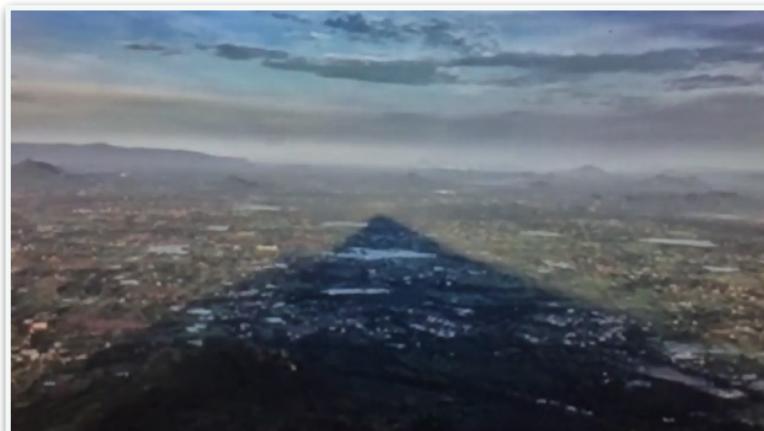


Emptiness: Earth

Video link: [YouTube](#) | [archive.org](#)

Audio link: [archive.org](#)

Good morning! Here's a spectacular view of the sunrise, from the top of Aruṇāchala mountain.



Oh, wait a minute... That's just a photo on my iPad!



Oh, wait a minute, another minute... It's just a reflection in this mirror, on my cluttered desk!



So, what's real?

What was that all about? Well, if you remember from the last episode, the last quote from the *Cūlasuññatāsutta* concludes:

"Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: 'There is this.' And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, and pure.

Our problem is we're not seeing what is there; instead, we're seeing something that's not there. What do I mean by that? Well, in the apparent view of Aruṇāchala from the top, you see the shadow of the mountain going off into the distance. So you're not seeing the mountain; you're seeing the shadow of the mountain. You see? But I bet everybody in their minds thought of Aruṇāchala, and saw Aruṇāchala the mountain.

And then the camera zooms out a little bit, and you see it's actually just a picture on an iPad. See, the apparent perception of the mountain is the conclusions that we draw, the models that we make in our mind, which aren't really there; they're just thoughts. And the picture on the iPad represents the inputs of the senses, which again are just thoughts. Well, you can call them perceptions, but what is a perception? It's just a thought about what is there. And a thought isn't a thing.

Then the camera pulls out even more, and you see that the whole thing is a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror represents awareness. If the picture on the iPad represents consciousness and perception, and the subject-object

duality, the mirror represents the singleness of perception. And the fact that whatever you put in front of a mirror, the mirror adopts its quality.

We think life is all about the contents of awareness, which in most cases is consciousness and its objects; in other words, sense perception. But if we zoom out a little bit more, we see that actually the reality is we're looking in a mirror called awareness. And awareness is so big that the whole universe shows up in it, God and everybody! So how big is awareness, how big of a space are we? See?

And the trick that I'm trying to teach you is not to focus on the *contents* of awareness, but to focus on awareness *itself*. In other words, it's like the mirror reflecting itself: a mirror can't do that, but awareness can. Because awareness is the void, awareness is emptiness, awareness is what always is there, what never changes, what is unborn and therefore deathless. Awareness is you, your Self. Yeah, your Self is an emptiness. And that's why most people are never aware of their Self, they never take their Self into account, but they remain fixated on the contents of awareness, which is consciousness and its objects, the senses and their perceptions.

Remember, the Buddha's teaching is apophatic¹. He doesn't talk about what's there; he talks about what's *not* there! Because of our conditioning we have a hard time computing this. We are so trained up, so conditioned by positivism, that we have a hard time keeping in mind what's *not* there, and we only see what we think *is* there, in our little model of reality. But as we saw, just zooming out a little bit can change that whole model profoundly.

So with that, I want to continue reading in the *Cūlasuññatāsutta*, and the next section is about the perception of earth:

1 apophatic: of or relating to the practice of describing something by stating which characteristics it does not have: 'an apophatic description.' "It was a reactive consciousness, embedded mainly in an apophatic discourse."—Amila Buturovic, *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, Summer 1995.

• especially: of, relating to, or being negative theology: "The deepest truth in all things is numinous, these apophatic masters taught: beyond reason, beyond language."

“Further, Ānanda, the monk—not attending to the perception of human being, not attending to the perception of wilderness—attends to the singleness based on the perception of earth. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, and indulges in its perception of earth. Just as a bull’s hide is stretched free from wrinkles with a hundred stakes, even so—without attending to all the ridges and hollows, the river ravines, the tracts of stumps and thorns, the craggy irregularities of this earth—he attends to the singleness based on the perception of earth. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, and indulges in its perception of earth.

“He discerns that ‘Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of human being are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of wilderness are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the perception of earth.’ He discerns that ‘This mode of perception is empty of the perception of a human being. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of wilderness. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the perception of earth.’ Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains he discerns as present: ‘There is this.’ And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, and pure.” — [Cūlasuññatāsutta](#) (MN 121)

This is beautiful! He is not seeing the earth, with all its craggy irregularities; he is seeing the *element* earth, or rather the state of matter earth. And because he’s concentrating on that, all these other perceptions—perceptions of being a human being, perceptions of the wilderness, all the different details—are not there, and he perceives their lack as emptiness. That’s how we have to train ourselves, to see not only what *is* there, but what is *not* there. When we concentrate on our senses, what is not there is awareness. So our awareness falls into the black hole of emptiness, and we miss it.

To contrast this, let’s look at another quote from another *sutta*, the famous [Mūlapariyāyasutta](#) (MN 1):

"There is the case, monks, where an uninstructed run-of-the-mill person—who has no regard for noble ones, who is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for men of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma—perceives earth as earth. Perceiving earth as earth, he conceives [things] about earth, he conceives [things] in earth, he conceives [things] coming out of earth, he conceives earth as 'mine', he delights in earth. Why is that? Because he has not comprehended it, I tell you."

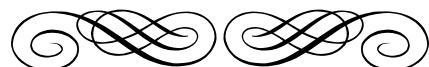
You see the difference? The ordinary, uninstructed man, which is in Buddha's language is called a *puthujana*, does not see what is not there; he only sees what is present. Then he projects all this ego stuff: he conceives of earth, he has an idea about earth, he has a model of earth. What is earth for him? "Oh, maybe it's a piece of land." If he's a farmer, he thinks "Oh, this is a piece of land I can farm." If he's a construction guy, he thinks "Oh, this is a piece of land I can build on." If he's a financial wizard, he thinks "This is a piece of land I could buy and make a profit on reselling," a real estate speculator. If he's a conservationist, he thinks "This is a piece of land that I can use to protect endangered species." And so and so on and so forth, according to his background, his intention, who he thinks he is. And then he starts to project things on it "Oh, I can build this, I can do that, I can turn this into a profit this way or that way or the other way... I could bring people out here and give tours," or whatever.

Then he conceives things coming from the earth "I can get this from the earth, I can get that from it, I can make a profit." And then he conceives earth as 'mine.' Why? Because his bias is he wants to justify the story that 'I exist,' and so to prove the existence of this nonexistent entity called 'I,' which is only a thought, he projects the idea of mine into everything that he perceives. This is nuts. This is a mental disease! We all have it, and it's called ego. The only one who can help us with it is ourselves. We have to do the work to pierce through this self-created illusion, and see the reality.

Compare this with the monk that the Buddha talks about, about whom he says, "Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of human being are not present, or would exist based on the perception of wilderness are not present." This is not present, that is not present... He sees so many things as absent; he sees the emptiness. That's the difference

between a well-trained monk, a meditator, and an ordinary person. The meditator is aware of the negative spaces, of the emptiness. And finally he perceives his own self, in terms of the ego, being absent. "Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there."

You see, this is the value of emptiness: it makes us sane. It helps us stop this disease of ego projection, where we conceive all kinds of imaginary things and project them on what's really there. The monk sees whatever is absent as absent, he sees whatever is present as present. He doesn't try to project anything, or overlay anything, like augmented reality. He only sees what's there; he doesn't make up any stories about it, he doesn't try to claim it as 'mine.' You see, this is the root of all the troubles, all the suffering in the world, and all the problems in life. And if you can stop this one bad habit, you will improve your mental health, your quality of life, your quality of consciousness, and your intelligence far beyond the ordinary, unschooled human being, and you will come that much closer to the ultimate reality of *Nibbāna*.



Emptiness: Space

Video link: [YouTube](#) | [archive.org](#)

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So far we have seen how the monk approaches emptiness by a process of abstraction. First he looked at the wilderness, and of course the wilderness has a lot of detail in it. But then he abstracted the wilderness into the earth element, which of course comprises most of the details, the information in the perception of the wilderness: you have the earth, the rocks, the trees, and so many other things. He took all those earthy things and abstracted them into one perception, the perception of earth. That got rid of the idea of a village, the idea of the palace, the idea of an assembly of monks, and even the idea of the wilderness surrounding them. So now what happens? What's the next step?

“Further, Ānanda, the monk—not attending to the perception of wilderness, not attending to the perception of earth—attends to the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of the infinity of space. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, and indulges in its perception of the dimension of the infinity of space.

— [*Cūlasuññatāsutta*](#) (MN 121)

What does this mean? You have to think about these things. The Buddha is not going to give you your realizations and insights on a silver platter; you have to do some work, you have to analyze it, you have to cross-question it. We quoted that *sutta* before, that the monks who are intelligent cross-question the *suttas*, they discuss among themselves. This is why I'm trying to get you all to make intelligent comments, and cross-question the idea in the *suttas*—don't be lazy, look up the terms! Try to figure out what it means.

So, what does this mean? So far he's abstracted all of the earthy elements into one perception, one singularity: earth. And now he's not putting any attention on that; instead, he's seeing the singularity of space. Remember what I told you about the Vedic approach being positivist, and the Buddhist approach being negative logic. Well, here's a perfect example: if you take any object, let's take this bowl, here's a nice little bowl, and you say, “Well, where

is the space around this bowl?" Well, there's space around it, and there's also space inside it. What's the difference between the space around the bowl and the space inside the bowl? Nothing. You cannot tell the difference. If you were to take a pinch of space from outside and a pinch from inside, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference, they're exactly the same. But, if you put together both the space around the bowl and the space in the bowl, they make the exact opposite of the shape of the bowl, the exact complement. Whatever space an object takes up, the space around it forms the exact opposite; in other words, it's the negation of the solidity of the object. Think about that for a second.

If you're in the wilderness, and you see "Oh, there's no people, there's no village, there's so many things that are absent. The only thing here is earth," and then you take that view and reverse it, negativize it... All the information is still there, but it's just been flipped to the obverse, the converse, the reverse. Plus becomes minus, minus becomes plus.

If you take any object, here's a bottle, you take the space around the bottle and simply flip it, now what do we have? We have a vision of space which surrounds the form, the shape of the bottle. It's a simple concept, but it's very profound. Why? It enables us to visualize space as the converse of form. In the *Diamond Sutra* Buddha says, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." What does that mean? It means that form is just the reverse of emptiness, emptiness is just the reverse of form. You see how easy it is to visualize space, which is a kind of emptiness: all you have to do is flip one bit. Positive form is surrounded by negative space; negative space is the opposite of positive form.

Here is where our takeoff roll reaches the rotate stage, and we pull up and we're off the ground. How is that? We have switched from positive logic to negative logic, and negative logic is required to realize emptiness, because emptiness is a negation. A negation of what? A negation of form. A negation of being, existence, being and becoming. In this way we switch from the positivist view to the view of negative logic, apophasis, negative theology. Remember we put up the definition the other day? Apophatic refers to apophasis, apophasis means negative theology, negative theology means saying what God or the Absolute is *not*. What it's not is it's not being, it's not

becoming, it's not even space; space is only partway there. But it's an important step.

"He discerns that 'Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of wilderness are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of earth are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of the infinity of space.' He discerns that 'This mode of perception is empty of the perception of wilderness. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of earth. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of the infinity of space.' Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: 'There is this.' And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, and pure.

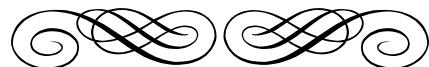
You see, the Buddha is giving us the entry into emptiness! Buddha is giving us a way to convert our thinking from positivist to negative. You see? To understand the Buddha's thinking, you have to realize that any attempt to define the Absolute in positive terms is going to lead to failure. Even the idea of space, an infinity of space, has the problem that space means dimension, dimension means measurement, distance, and that means there can be a here, and a there, and an in-between. That means there can be motion, that means there can be time, and that means there can be change, a change in location, a change in acceleration, a change in mass, a change in time. Past and future. And that brings in all the stuff of being and becoming, the whole *paticca-samuppāda*. Because *paticca-samuppāda* is powered by the vortex between what? *Saṅkhārā*, consciousness, name-and-form.

It's still not completely pure, it's still not complete emptiness; even space is not complete emptiness. But space has one wonderful advantage: if the space is truly infinite, if it's really unlimited, the whole creation can get lost in it without a trace! Off in some obscure corner of infinite space!

You see, this creation, this manifestation, this beingness, this universe is not really such a big deal. Infinite space is a much, much bigger deal. Even though infinite space is not completely pure, it still has the possibility of manifesting phenomena, because it's the infrastructure, it's the cosmos, the

physics required for being and becoming, the space-time continuum, the background, the context required for being and becoming. Which is suffering, which is repeated birth and death—let's not forget—which is ignorance and desire. It's the background, it's the context for *samsāra*, for suffering.

But still, we have taken a big step here. We've gone from the positivist view to the negativist view, and we've created a big enough background, a big enough space, that the whole creation can get lost in it, and we're left with simply infinite space.



Emptiness: Consciousness

Video link: [YouTube](#) | [archive.org](#)

Audio link: [archive.org](#)

In our last episode we talked about infinite space. And what is space really? Space is the complement of matter, it's the reciprocal of objects. We talked about a bowl, and how the space inside the bowl and outside the bowl are identical, and also how the space inside and outside the bowl traces exactly the opposite of the shape of the bowl.

Space is the reciprocal of matter. And what is it about matter? Matter is always limited. Matter always has a beginning and an end, in space as well as time. And when we talk about space, it includes time. Because space has dimension, it has extent, measurement. As soon as you have dimension, you have a possibility of motion, and motion of course makes it possible to change. Change is how we measure time. There is no such thing as just space. There is space-time, and this is because of the possibility of space giving rise to measurement.

But there's another thing about space that's very important here. Matter is limited, it always has a beginning and an end, but space has no beginning or end. Unlimited space, infinite space means just that: no limits, no end to it. But since matter is always limited, that means there is much, much more space than there is matter. Even the whole cosmic manifestation, with all of its galaxies and whatever, is just a tiny, tiny little thing in the expanse of infinite space. So matter disappears in space, matter becomes inconsequential in space, matter compared to infinite space is infinitely small.

You see, the conception of infinite space is the first step in what Buddha calls the divine meditations, *divya-jhānas*. Up until that point, our meditation is within the realm of form, and so it's also limited. But meditation on space is not limited; it's infinite. And it's also a negation, a negation of matter. So this *jhāna* or meditation on infinite space is our first contact with the infinite, the endless, the unlimited, the timeless, and now the Buddha is going to expand that. So let's continue to read from the *sutta*.

“Further, Ānanda, the monk—not attending to the perception of earth, not attending to the perception of the dimension of the infinity of space—attends to the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of the infinity of consciousness. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, and indulges in its perception of the dimension of the infinity of consciousness. — *Cūlasuññatāsutta* (MN 121)

If there is an infinity of space, to be conscious of that infinity of space requires an infinity of consciousness. This is the thing: anything without boundaries is infinite. Space is without boundaries, therefore it's infinite. Consciousness is also without boundaries. Just take a minute and look at your consciousness, look at consciousness in general. Consciousness is unlimited. Consciousness can be focused here on the limited body and senses, but it can also be focused on unlimited space, and in that case consciousness is unlimited. The difference between limited consciousness and unlimited consciousness is that limited consciousness uses a limited object, and unlimited consciousness focuses on an unlimited object. When we become conscious of space—and also time, because they go together—then consciousness becomes unlimited, infinite.

And of course what the Buddha is doing is step-by-step bringing us to *Nibbāna*. He's bringing us first of all from the consciousness of the village to the consciousness of the wilderness, from the wilderness to earth, from earth to space, from space to consciousness itself. Now this is where things get really interesting. Because if you simply contemplate your consciousness in empty space, or consciousness of empty space—and especially unlimited space, unbounded, infinite space—you will get so blissful you'll fall off your chair! Try it! Don't just take my word for it. All these things that we discuss here are meant for practical application. They're not just theory; they're meant to be realized in the here-and-now, and this is for your benefit. So you should try these things as exercises, as practices. It's not just a philosophy, it's not just a theory. Let's go on.

“He discerns that ‘Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of earth are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of the dimension of the infinity of space are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance:

the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of the infinity of consciousness.' He discerns that 'This mode of perception is empty of the perception of earth. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of the infinity of space. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of the infinity of consciousness.' Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: 'There is this.' And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, and pure.

This is wonderful! This is beautiful! This is how we pass from being a human being—basically a bag of meat and bones, plastered to the surface of a planet by gravity—to a free being of pure consciousness. This is something very valuable, this is something very important that you should know and practice, this emptiness. Because the monk discerns the perception of earth is not there, it's an emptiness. He discerns that the perception of the infinity of space is not there, it is also an emptiness.

The monk perceives the *absence* of the things to which he is not paying attention. That's what attending means. He's not paying attention to the earth. Although his body may be sitting on the earth, his attention is not bound by the body. Although the body and the earth and everything may be situated in unlimited space, he's not paying attention to unlimited space; he's paying attention to unlimited consciousness pervading that space. Now this is a whole different game. This is the big game, this is the ocean. We're out of the pool now, no more limits. This is how we get from being an ordinary being stuck in a body, to being a free, self-realized being with no limitations.

The Buddha is giving us the keys here. Because, what are we? We're not an individual, we're not a limited being. We're unlimited, we are the whole: Brahman, if you want to use a positivist term for it. But we're not limited, we're not stuck in a single location. We can be everywhere. Consciousness is everywhere. We may call it the consciousness of God or Brahman or whatever we like, Tao or whatever. But the fact is there is a presence of consciousness everywhere, and the experience of First Path realization is seeing that directly.

The Buddha now is bringing us into the path. The First Path is seeing this consciousness everywhere. You can train yourself to see consciousness everywhere, and it's not 'my' consciousness anymore. Because to get to that range, to get to that state, you have to let go of the idea of being an individual, of being limited, of being stuck in one location, of only having one point of view.

I remember when I was a kid, I had an accident on my bike, and the gearshift... In those days bikes had gearshift on the handlebar, and the gearshift lever went right between my eyes—you can still see the scar I think, if you look at it in a certain way. Anyway, they rushed me to the hospital, and the on-call doctor stitched me up, and he gave me a sedative. Of course this is the third eye, right?

I guess my third eye was activated: I suddenly found myself floating in the air, looking down on the doctor and my mother, while he's stitching me up, and I thought "This is interesting," and so I scooted along the ceiling, and went outside and looked at a couple of different rooms in the hospital, and then I came back to the room where my body was, and my mother and the doctor were talking outside the room.

So I went back in, and I got back into my body, took a little nap and then woke up. And later on I told my mother what had happened, and she said, "Come on, you were asleep. You were just dreaming," but then I told her about her conversation with the doctor outside the room, and what they had said to each other, and she goes "Umm... uh..." She never mentioned it again, and neither did I. But that happened.

At that point I realized "Wait a minute, I'm not limited by this body," and I gradually trained myself to disassociate my consciousness from the body. I got pretty good at it. Anyway, you can train yourself to have a point of view outside your body, you can train yourself to have an unlimited consciousness, you can train yourself to realize the First Path, that everything is due to a cause, and that cause is ultimately consciousness.



Emptiness: Nothingness

Video link: [YouTube](#) | [archive.org](#)

Audio link: [archive.org](#)

We're going to continue with the *sutta* on Emptiness, and this time we're going to talk about nothingness.

"Further, Ānanda, the monk—not attending to the perception of the dimension of the infinity of space, not attending to the perception of the dimension of the infinity of consciousness—attends to the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of nothingness. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, and indulges in its perception of the dimension of nothingness. — *Cūlasuññatāsutta* (MN 121)

We see that this *sutta* describes a series of contemplations, and each step is more subtle than the last, each step is more peaceful than the last. This is called tranquility meditation, *samāna-jhāna*. What this means is that the mind is becoming progressively quieter, more settled, and deeper in a trance of quietude, silence, non-action, and certainly non-identification, non-projection —so many things. The Buddha's process is a negative process, it consists in leaving off so many things that we normally keep active. Like a juggler, with so many balls in the air, our minds are always throwing thoughts around, and projecting different... Well, the word the Buddha uses is *conceits*. A conceit is a conception, but it's a particular kind of conception designed to reinforce the ego. Now, the ego is an expression of individuality, but individuality doesn't really exist.

The ego is a fabrication, it's an imagination. Just like becoming identified with the story on a movie screen or video screen, not realizing that it's just a succession of still pictures, projected on a white background. In the same way, we become identified with the story of this body and its surroundings, and all the other so-called individuals and other imaginary entities in this fictional story. We're not content to simply see what's there; we have to project something on top of it. Of course, the only thing that's really there is the Whole, Brahman; or God, if you want to go down that far. We project this

idea of God on Brahman, on the Whole. We try to give it a personality, that helps us justify our personality. But all such notions are completely fictional, contrived, compounded, conditioned, caused, made, constructed, fabricated! In other words, they're just stories, they're fictitious, science fiction.

And the proof of this is that when we go to sleep at night, the whole thing dissolves—bye-bye, and we're in a different world. A world where there is no ego, there is no control, there is no possession—everything just happens. In many ways, it's a more real world than the one we live in while awake, because at least we're not pretending to be the controller, we're not pretending to own our actions and their results; we're simply the effect of whatever *karma* is being played out in our dreams.

But then we go into dreamless sleep, and this is our actual identity, this is our real nature. This is being one with Brahman. It happens to everybody every night; if we don't, we can't survive. We need this nurturing by the One, we need to experience our identity with the Whole, or we go nuts. Read up on sleep research, and what happens when people are deprived of deep sleep. It only takes a few days before they completely lose it: they start hallucinating. They start dreaming while awake, in other words. But actually, we're always dreaming while awake, it's just that we have socially-approved dreams instead of so-called psychotic dreams, like the dreams when we're asleep.

So anyway, let's go on with the *sutta*:

“He discerns that ‘Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of the dimension of the infinity of space are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of the dimension of the infinity of consciousness are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of nothingness.’”

“He discerns that ‘This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of the infinity of space. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of the infinity of consciousness. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of nothingness.’ Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as

present: ‘There is this.’ And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, and pure.

What is Buddha doing here? He's taking us step-by-step through the progressive meditation of a monk, who's actually him. He's describing his own path to Enlightenment: the step-by-step concentration of the mind on the subtler and subtler realms of existence, which also include the exclusion of the coarser realms. It's just like when you're doing something that you are absorbed in, let's say some kind of work that you really enjoy. For me, it's practicing music: when I'm practicing music, I'm not aware of the room around me, I'm not aware of the cars passing on the street, I'm not aware of the birds or the sky, or even Aruṇāchala right in front of me, because my keyboard is right under the window looking out at Aruṇāchala. But I'm not aware of any of that.

Like the Buddha says, this mode of perception is devoid of the recognition of these other realities, these other presences. What does he say? “Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of those things I’m not concentrating on are not present.” Why? Perception is pain. Perception is suffering. All perception is a disturbance. Why? Because, first of all, it draws a boundary between subject and object, and that’s painful right there. And second, it utilizes the senses and the mind—or I should say the senses, including the mind—and the senses all give a biased picture of what they’re perceiving; the picture is biased in terms of what we perceive as pleasurable and displeasurable.

Most of the time we strive towards pleasurable sensations, isn’t it, and we strive to avoid unpleasurable or displeasurable sensations. And this is work, this is a job! This is effort, it’s very demanding! Between that effort, and projecting our ego and our false identification with some individual ‘poisonality,’ as we say in New Jersey, this is a full-time job. And this why existence is suffering. Because to have existence one has to be a separate individual, and from the very beginning that’s suffering, that’s painful.

What the Buddha is doing here is step-by-step removing all these dualities by putting them out of mind, and just concentrating on one perception, and maybe the absence of certain other perceptions. See? For example, when one is concentrating on unlimited consciousness, he’s not aware of the dimension

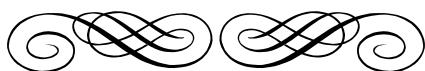
of unlimited space. Why? Because the unlimited consciousness pervades and fills the unlimited space. And similarly here, he's aware of the dimension of nothingness, but he's not aware of the dimension of unlimited consciousness anymore. Why? Because the dimension of nothingness fills the dimension of unlimited consciousness.

All of these states of perception, all of these states of concentration and contemplation are for practice. They're not just a historical record of some ancient sage's meditation; they're for us, for us to experience, for us to explore, for us to benefit from. I can't tell you have pleasurable it is to concentrate on consciousness! I can't tell you, I can't express in words how wonderful it is to perceive nothingness! I can't express, there's no way to express how wonderful it is to perceive the emptiness of form, the emptiness of individuality, even the emptiness of consciousness that's associated with the contemplation of nothingness. Why? Because all these things are a disturbance, all these things are painful, they're all suffering.

And so with each progressive step in this meditation on emptiness, the Buddha is taking us further and further away from suffering, further and further into peace and pleasure. I can't express how beautiful emptiness is! It has a beauty that's so compelling that afterwards one remembers it with great nostalgia, like a night spent with a lover or something like that. There's no way that I can express it, except poetically, by metaphor.

You have to try it for yourself. I've included a link to the complete *sutta*: go read the whole thing, try it for yourself, step by step. Even if you don't make it all the way to the end, that's okay. It's baby steps: you take baby steps, then after a while you can walk, and then after more practice you can run. And by the end you'll be able to fly.

[Cūlasuññatāsutta](#) (MN 121)



Emptiness: Neither-Perception-nor-non-Perception

Video link: [YouTube](#) | [archive.org](#)

Audio link: [archive.org](#)

Welcome to the next-to-last episode of our series on emptiness, where we're going to talk about neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

“Further, Ānanda, the monk—not attending to the perception of the dimension of the infinity of consciousness, not attending to the perception of the dimension of nothingness—attends to the singleness based on the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, and indulges in the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

— *Cūlasuññatāsutta* (MN 121)

What does this mean? Well, you should try it and find out! Nothingness is different from space. I think I have to point this out, because we got a couple of comments from people who are a little mixed up about this. Space still offers a context for becoming. Space is actually space-time, as we know from Einstein, and space-time allows for movement, change, and therefore becoming, being and so on, which leads to suffering. But nothingness has no dimensions, it has no measurement, therefore it has no time, therefore no change, and therefore no becoming. So there is no becoming, no being in nothingness.

Then the question arises “Well, how do I know whether I’m conscious or not? If I’m concentrating on nothingness, if I have removed all other perceptions, and I’m just concentrating on the singleness of nothingness, how do I know that I’m perceiving anything?” and of course the answer is you don’t. It’s neither-non-perception-nor-perception, because there’s nothing to perceive. This nothingness, this is really the emptiness that we’ve been talking about,

the emptiness where there is no opportunity for anything to exist. You see, existence has a beginning, a middle and an end, therefore it's suffering. All perceptions are suffering, because they have a beginning, a middle and an end.

If we want to be completely free from suffering, we have to go into nothingness so that there's nothing to perceive. But then how do we know whether we're perceptive or not? How do we know if we're conscious or not? Well, we don't. And the thing is, this gives us or simulates the conditions involved in complete merging with Brahman. In Brahman there is no consciousness, because there is no second entity to be conscious of. There's awareness, but that awareness has no object, so the only possibility is to be aware of one's awareness. But you still don't know whether you're being perceptive or not, because there's nothing outside of your own awareness to perceive. And I should mention that because awareness in Brahman is a permanent feature—unchanging, boundary-less and infinite—that there is never an end to the perception or the awareness of awareness.

This awareness of awareness is extremely pleasurable. I can't tell you, I can't express in words how wonderful it is, how beautiful it is! And this is the state just before Enlightenment, just before Buddhahood.

"He discerns that 'Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of the dimension of the infinity of consciousness are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of the dimension of nothingness are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.'

"He discerns that 'This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of the infinity of consciousness. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of nothingness. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.' Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: 'There is this.' And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, and pure.

It's pure because there's no disturbance; there's no disturbance because there's no perception. But you can't say that it's non-perception either, because there's awareness of awareness. So this is the most wonderful state: this is the state just before Enlightenment.

When we reach this stage of meditation—which, by the way, is very, very rare—it's beyond most people's ability to attain because of the deep concentration required. And few people today can put themselves in a situation, or train themselves to have such deep consciousness, such deep concentration that they can actually put things completely out of their mind. The mind remains unsteady, the mind remains untamed.

These states, even in the case of an experienced meditator, can be sometimes only momentary. But just because they're momentary, just because they are fleeting doesn't mean they aren't real. Now, this is something that's brought out by Buddhagosha, who's not one of my favorite people, but he does bring out in his commentary that the states of meditation which occur only momentarily are still valid, and one can claim attainment on the basis of these. In other words, the aim to remain settled in one of these high states is probably unattainable for most people today. But, the attainment of these states momentarily is certainly within the grasp of anyone, any sentient being—that includes you!

We are not presenting these descriptions from the authentic *suttas* as a curiosity, or just for the sake of knowledge, just so that you can brag about knowing about them. "Oh yes, and then there's the state of neither-awareness-nor..." It makes for boring cocktail-party conversation anyway. You're not going to impress any chicks by talking about this stuff! But what you can do is that you can sit down and realize it for yourself. That's why we're doing this: to open a window, to give you an opportunity, to give you the possibility to see something, to experience something that you would not have the possibility of experiencing ordinarily.

This is our aim: we want you to take this information, and actively realize it, implement it, experience it for yourself. All of Buddha's teachings are called phenomenological. Phenomenological means experiential, first-person direct experience. It doesn't do you any good to hear that somebody else has realized these things. Well, maybe it would give you a little more confidence

in approaching it. Because if anybody, just an ordinary person like myself, can experience these things even momentarily, that means it's possible for anybody! You know, who am I? I'm just an old hippie musician that got interested in meditation! Oh, and incidentally I have four *mokṣa-kārakas* in my birth chart!

But that doesn't really matter. You can still approach these states, you can still climb the ladder of meditation, one rung at a time. It might be very slow for you. It was pretty easy for me. Well, pretty easy... If you think of years of struggle as being easy, then yeah, it was pretty easy. But the main problem has been finding a supportive environment. It's very difficult to find a place where you will not be disturbed, and the disturbances are the obstacles. That's why the meditator in this *sutta*, the monk—actually Buddha himself, he's talking about his own experience, indirectly—gradually sets aside each state to attain the next, more subtle state, the next least-disturbing state. Each one is an exit, each one is an escape from the previous one, and they go higher and higher, towards greater and greater tranquility, less and less disturbance, less and less suffering. This should be your aim.

And this isn't the only *sutta* that climbs a ladder like this; there are many of them. I'm not going to go into all of them, because I think the next series is going to shift back to the Vedic context. I think a lot of people are having difficulty following this, because the way of Buddha's thinking is kind of alien to the way we've been trained up. I had to look into the Buddha's thinking, because when I attained stream-entry in 1984 I had been following a Buddhist style of meditation. But I had very little background in the Buddha's teaching, so when I attained I was like "Huh, what? What just happened?!" I didn't understand it. I know what I had experienced, and I knew that it was real, but I didn't understand how it worked, why it worked, and even really what it was.

I had to go into a long detour of studying the Buddha's teaching, before I understood my own experience, which was kind of weird. But that's the way I am: I want to know what's happening under the hood, I want to know how things work, and why they work, and why they're effective, and when they're not effective, *why* they're not. That is the kind of thinking—I would call it engineering mentality, troubleshooting mentality—that will help you attain the highest Enlightenment.

Emptiness: Themeless Concentration

Video link: [YouTube](#) | [archive.org](#)

Audio link: [archive.org](#)

Now, if you've been following this series—which I hope you have, because you'll need the background to understand these last couple of episodes—we're going to talk about the stage beyond neither-perception-nor-non-perception, and the Buddha calls this themeless concentration.

"Further, Ānanda, the monk—not attending to the perception of the dimension of nothingness, not attending to the perception of the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception—attends to the singleness based on the themeless concentration of awareness. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, and indulges in its themeless concentration of awareness. — *Cūlasuññatāsutta* (MN 121)

This is beautiful; this is potent. This is the very, very next stage to full Enlightenment. Why? For the first time he says ‘concentration of awareness.’ We’re not dealing anymore with concentration of consciousness, whether our consciousness is on earth or space or nothingness or emptiness or whatever. For the first time we’re dealing with pure awareness. This is a very significant thing. Why? Because consciousness always has an object. Consciousness is a stick with two ends.

Here’s the stick: on one end you have awareness, on the other end you have the object of awareness. This is duality, because you have two ends: one is the cause, and one is the effect. But it doesn’t matter at this point, because the only thing that’s significant now is that the stick has two ends. And what do you find in the middle? I, my self. “I am conscious of this.” And it doesn’t really matter whether it’s something with form, like a village or wilderness or earth, or something formless, like space, nothingness, emptiness, like that—it doesn’t matter. There is still the question of *who* is conscious of this, and that who, of course the answer is always I: “I am conscious.” But we know that ‘I’

is something dependently arisen. In fact, consciousness is dependently arisen. It depends on what? *Saṅkhārā*, and *saṅkhārā* depend on ignorance—there's a cute little bird outside my window, he's only about this long.

Consciousness depends on *saṅkhārā*, *saṅkhārā* depend on ignorance. But what does ignorance depend on? Awareness. Without awareness there is nothing else. The thing about awareness is awareness is only aware of itself, it has no object. Or another way to say it is that the object of awareness is awareness itself. This is the perfect stage, this is *Nibbāna* itself. This is the aim, this is the goal, this is what we've been working toward step-by-step. One viewer commented "I don't see the need for all these different steps. Isn't nothingness just nothingness?" Well, there's nothingness, and then there's emptiness, and then there's awareness. See? Even with nothingness there's still *somebody* who's conscious of nothingness. If you try this yourself—which I certainly hope you do—you will get to experience this directly.

Everybody is cultivating this conception of 'I' and whether we have a low, gross conception of 'I' as being the body or whatever, or we have a higher, more abstract idea of 'I' being the conscious one, it doesn't matter. It's still duality, it's still a cause of suffering, it still creates *karma* that binds you to the process of birth and death. The only way to get beyond that is to concentrate awareness on itself, and in that case there is no object, it's themeless.

To have themeless concentration means there is no second thing to be an object. You follow? There is only the awareness of itself. Concentration is a beautiful thing, and the reason it's beautiful is that it's naturally pleasurable, it doesn't need any other object. Try it: just concentrate your mind on anything, it doesn't matter what it is. Of course, the best thing to concentrate it on is your self, your own awareness, concentrate awareness on awareness. And this is the idea behind the technique of the Golden Flower, [The Secret of the Golden Flower](#), which we've covered extensively a couple of years back.

But anyway, let's see what the Buddha says about this:

"He discerns that 'Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of the dimension of nothingness are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception are not

present. And there is only this modicum of disturbance: that connected with the six sensory spheres, dependent on this very body with life as its condition.'

"He discerns that 'This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of nothingness. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. There is only this non-emptiness: that connected with the six sensory spheres, dependent on this very body with life as its condition.' Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: 'There is this.' And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, and pure.

This is like coming out the other end. We're coming out of the other side of the process of the virtualization of attention, or the concentration on ever more subtle objects. We are concentrating the awareness on awareness. Does that mean we're not aware of the body? No, the body is there. In other words, we have gone through a series of progressively more subtle objects of concentration. But even after all that, even after experiencing nothingness, we still have to come back to the reality of the body.

Remember, the Buddha's teaching is apophatic, he doesn't say a lot of things. He doesn't say that along the way of this progressively more subtle concentration we have lost track of the ego. He doesn't say that we're no longer dependent on the body for our sense of being, existence. He doesn't say that we have given up all our attachments, he doesn't say we've given up all our possessions, our sense of 'This is mine,' he doesn't say these things. He doesn't say that we have stopped all *saṅkhārā*, he doesn't say it. Why? Because as soon as you grant the mind any existence at all, you give it power, and then it becomes very difficult to give up—in fact, impossible to give up—the phenomena associated with the mind.

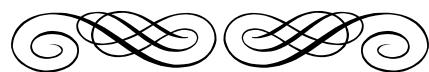
If one thinks "I have to get rid of this ego!" it simply strengthens the ego. If one thinks "I have to stop thoughts!" of course the thought of stopping thoughts becomes a thought, and you can't stop thoughts. If you think "Oh, I have to get rid of this attachment to different objects!" then your attachment to being unattached is just as heavy an attachment as any possession. No.

What's happening is here is that the Buddha... it's like when you go to the doctor when you're a kid, and you're going to get a shot, and he says, "Hey, look at this lollipop!" and with the other hand he's given you the injection! He takes your attention off the thing that hurts. The Buddha is the most expert doctor: he gives you this series of meditations, concentrations, and in the process you have to drop all these other things. But you don't even notice, because your attention is on the object of the meditation! Isn't that cool?

That's apophysis, that is leading the attention away from the mind—just forget about it. Like Nisargadatta Mahārāja says, "At some point, you simply become uninterested in the mind." The mind can't show you anything that has any interest for you, so you just drop it, you just ignore it, you just forget about it. There's no need to make a big effort to stop the mind, to stop the ego, to stop *saṅkhārā* or becoming. The real cure for the mind is in simply directing the attention away from it.

I remember when I was a kid, I was learning to ride a bicycle, and of course at first I had the training wheels, and I was somehow or other riding with the training wheels, but it was very awkward. So my mother said, "Tell you what: we'll go out without the training wheels, and I'll hold the back of the bicycle so you don't fall," so I was "OK, OK, we'll do that." So we went out, and our house was near a hill, so we went up the hill, and then we started coming back down the hill, and I started going pretty fast! And so I was going along, riding along on the bicycle, and I looked back to say, "Hey Ma, I'm doing good, huh?" and I realized "Oh, she's not there!" She had let go! And I was riding without the training wheels, doing just fine.

So it's the same way here. Once you go through this whole series of trainings, and get your attention settled on these more and more subtle objects, without any effort you let go of all the things that cause suffering. And then you finally get to the real source of joy, which is when your awareness is concentrated on itself. That's the secret.



Emptiness: Release

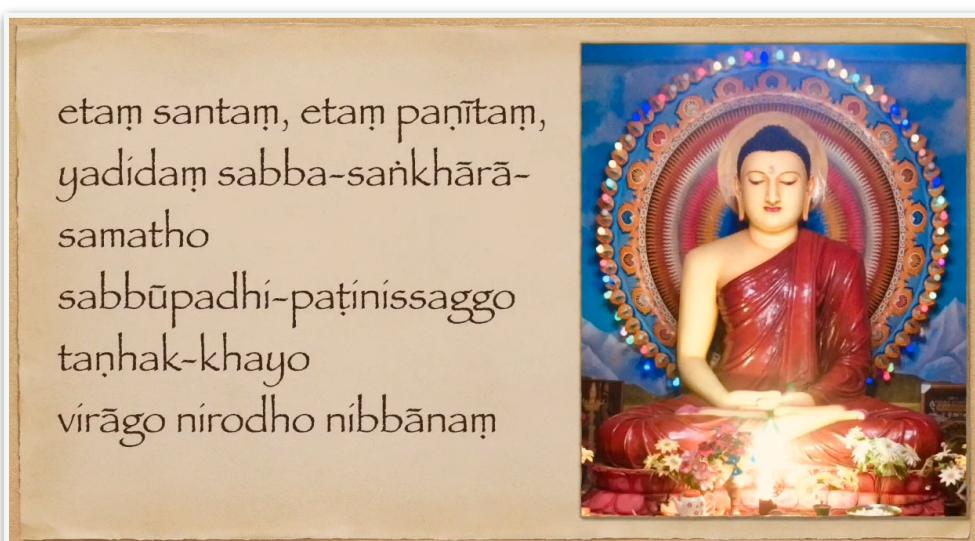
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“Further, Ānanda, the monk—not attending to the perception of the dimension of nothingness, not attending to the perception of the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception—attends to the singleness based on the themeless concentration of awareness. His mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, settles, and indulges in its themeless concentration of awareness.

“He discerns that ‘This themeless concentration of awareness is fabricated and mentally fashioned.’ And he discerns that ‘Whatever is fabricated and mentally fashioned is inconstant and subject to cessation.’ Thus knowing, thus seeing, his heart is released from the effluent of sensuality, the effluent of becoming, the effluent of ignorance. With release, there is the knowledge, ‘Released.’ He discerns that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’ — [Cūlasuññatāsutta](#) (MN 121)

This is Enlightenment: complete, pure, and final. This is the thing toward which we have been striving and progressing for many, many lifetimes, and this is how the Buddha attained it himself. Immediately after this, then he spoke the verse:



“This is peaceful, this is excellent: namely, the stilling of all *saṅkhārā* (fabrications), the relinquishment of all assets, the destruction of craving; detachment, cessation, *nibbāna*.”

— Mahāmālunkyasutta (MN 64)

It's not like he was sitting there trying to stop the *saṅkhārā*. Rather, he was concentrating on these progressively more and more subtle layers of emptiness.

Some people wrongly accuse the Buddha of being a *sūnyavādī* as it's called. *Sūnyavādī* means that emptiness is the truth. But if emptiness was the truth, he wouldn't say that these states of concentration are fabricated and mentally fashioned. Because the truth is not fabricated, the truth is not mentally fashioned; the truth is the truth, and it's always the truth. The question is how do you realize the truth? Because to fight with the mind only makes it stronger. As we pointed out last time, if you sit there trying to stop *saṅkhārā*, or trying to stop desire, or trying to stop egotism, you're only going to make it worse. The mind thrives on attention. So, how do you defeat the mind? Put your attention on something else, something beautiful. Because it has to attract your interest, you have to be sincerely interested in and attracted to the object of meditation.

This sequence of meditations begins from the awareness of earth, as a state of matter, as an element, and then it proceeds through awareness of space, awareness of consciousness, awareness of nothingness, awareness of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, and finally themeless concentration, just indulging in the pleasure of the concentrated mind—it's a beautiful state!

And what do you get from that state? The realization that all pleasure is available within, you don't have to go out through the senses. We talked about this quite a bit in the The Secret of the Golden Flower series, that if you have ecstasy available to you at any time, it changes your relationship with pleasure. You don't have to get your fix by going out through the senses; you can simply reside in a house of ecstasy, in a house of emptiness.

What does emptiness mean to the Buddha? Not exactly nothingness, but rather the absence of the things that we normally give our attention to: the mind, the ego, thoughts, our identity, desire, activities, possessions and so on.

All those positive things do nothing but strengthen the mind. So the Buddha takes the negative path: don't think about that stuff; think about this progression of more and more subtle concentrations, until you finally reach the themeless concentration itself. And then what? You realize that all these concentrations are simply mental fabrication. And as we have sung, "all fabrications are subject to cessation." So because of this they cannot be the ultimate. Even though they may be very long-lasting, very robust, antifragile, still they are not the supreme truth.

That's why the Buddha says here "The heart is released from the effluence." Effluent means a kind of pollution, isn't it? The effluent of sensuality, of becoming, of ignorance... Because of ignorance we think we can counteract the suffering of life by becoming something other than what we already are. But the process of becoming itself creates *karma*, which results in further suffering. Even the religionists' idea of going to heaven means one has to take birth in heaven, and taking birth is a painstaking affair. If you've ever been present at a birth, you know there's suffering involved for everyone concerned. And that which is born must also die. So if there's birth in heaven, there's also death in heaven. And the Vedic scriptures talk about this, that after one's good *karma* has been used up in heavenly enjoyment, one falls down again to the earthly planet, and has to take birth in a human womb.

This is all suffering. How do we end suffering? We end becoming. How do we end becoming? We end desire, sensuality. How do we end desire? We end ignorance. How do we end ignorance? By hearing from the wise. So one should read and hear these *suttas*, not just from anyone but from someone who has realized them, from someone who has gone through these more and more subtle layers of mental fabrication, until he has come out the other side of the process, pure and cleansed.

But what does that mean, pure? It means that he's no longer relying on mental fabrication for his pleasure, identity, and even for knowledge. Rather, he has discovered the key to getting rid of these things. That's why the Buddha never took a position in any of the philosophical debates of his time. He would say that any position, pro or con, is an extreme, and the Tathāgata, the Well-gone One, follows the middle path. What is the middle path? *Paticcasamuppāda*, Dependent Arising, and we've already done a whole series on that.

If you follow the Middle Path, then you will come to this knowledge. By suffering again and again, finally you will take shelter of the wise, and the wise will guide you in the process, the Noble Eightfold Path or the equivalent thereof. And then what?

“He discerns that ‘Whatever disturbances would exist based on the effluent of sensuality... the effluent of becoming... the effluent of ignorance, are not present. And there is only this modicum of disturbance: that connected with the six sensory spheres, dependent on this very body with life as its condition.’ He discerns that ‘This mode of perception is empty of the effluent of sensuality... becoming... ignorance. And there is just this non-emptiness: that connected with the six sensory spheres, dependent on this very body with life as its condition.’ Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: ‘There is this.’ And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, pure—superior and unsurpassed.

This is new: pure, *superior*, and *unsurpassed*. In the other stages he didn't say that. What did he say? He said, “It's undistorted in meaning, and pure.” But now he says, “It's undistorted in meaning, pure, superior and unsurpassed.” What does that mean? That this is the ultimate Enlightenment. This is as good as it gets.

People mythologize the Buddha, they try to make him into some kind of god. The Mahāyanists take it to the extreme, they say that the Buddha is basically Brahman. Which in one sense is true, but at the same time he was an ordinary human being who attained this complete realization of his actual nature. And so finishes the *sutta* like this:

“Ānanda, whatever contemplatives and *brāhmaṇas* who in the past entered and remained in an emptiness that was pure, superior, and unsurpassed, they all entered and remained in this very same emptiness that is pure, superior and unsurpassed. Whatever contemplatives and *brāhmaṇas* who in the future will enter and remain in an emptiness that will be pure, superior, and unsurpassed,

they all will enter and remain in this very same emptiness that is pure, superior, and unsurpassed.

“Whatever contemplatives and *brāhmaṇas* who at present enter and remain in an emptiness that is pure, superior, and unsurpassed, they all enter and remain in this very same emptiness that is pure, superior, and unsurpassed.

“Therefore, Ānanda, you should train yourself: ‘We will enter and remain in the emptiness that is pure, superior, and unsurpassed.’”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Venerable Ānanda delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

And so should we. In other words, emptiness is emptiness. It may seem tautological, but it's true. There's no way to distinguish one emptiness from another emptiness. And since all of us are at the core nothing but emptiness... That's what awareness is: it's an emptiness that simply shows up whatever is put into it.

All of us are emptiness, all of us are the same, all of us are one. There's no difference between our core essence and Brahman. That is the meaning of the Buddha's teaching. That is also the meaning of the Vedic teaching. *Tat tvam āśī*, “Thou Art that.” *Aham Brahmasmī*, “I am Brahman.” That is why we designed this logo, combining the Dhamma wheel and the *āūṁ* symbol, because both of these teachings are talking about the same thing, only using a different language. And we think the Buddha's teaching is more detailed, and therefore more accurate and easier to explain in the higher reaches of meditation, the topmost end of the path.

*Āūṁ tat sat
Budu Šaranai*

