

The Three Doors of Liberation

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Emptiness

The Three Dharma Seals¹ are the keys we can use to enter the Three Doors of Liberation - emptiness (*shunyata*), signlessness (*animitta*), and aimlessness (*apranihita*).

All schools of Buddhism accept the teaching of the Three Doors of Liberation.²

These Three Doors are sometimes called the Three Concentrations.³

When we enter these doors, we dwell in concentration and are liberated from fear, confusion, and sadness.

The First Door of Liberation is emptiness, shunyata. Emptiness always means empty of something. A cup is empty of water. A bowl is empty of soup. We are empty of a separate independent self. We cannot be by ourselves alone. We can only inter-be with everything else in the cosmos. The practice is to nourish the insight into emptiness all day long. Wherever we go, we touch the nature of emptiness in everything we contact. We look deeply at the table, the blue sky, our friend, the mountain, the river, our anger, and our happiness and see that these are all empty of a separate self. When we touch these things deeply, we see the interbeing and interpenetrating nature of all that is. Emptiness does not mean nonexistence. It means Interdependent Co-Arising, impermanence, and nonself.

When we first hear about emptiness, we feel a little frightened. But after practicing for a while, we see that things do exist, only in a different way than we'd thought. Emptiness is the Middle Way between existent and nonexistent. The beautiful flower does not become empty when it fades and dies. It is already empty, in its essence. Looking deeply, we see that the flower is made of non-flower elements - light, space, clouds, earth, and consciousness. It is empty of a separate, independent self. In the *Diamond Sutra*, we are taught that a human being is not independent of other species, so to protect humans, we have to protect the non-human species. If we pollute the water and air, the vegetables and minerals, we destroy ourselves. We have to learn to see ourselves in things that we thought were outside of ourselves in order to dissolve false boundaries.

In Vietnam, we say that if one horse is sick, all the horses in the stable will refuse to eat. Our happiness and suffering are the happiness and suffering of others. When we act based on nonself, our actions will be in accord with reality, and we will know what to do and what not to do. When we maintain awareness that we are all linked to each other, this is the Concentration on Emptiness (*shunyata samadhi*). Reality goes beyond notions of being and nonbeing. To say that the flower exists is not exactly correct, but to say that it does not exist is also not correct. True emptiness is called "wondrous being," because it goes beyond existence and nonexistence.

When we eat, we need to practice the Door of Liberation called emptiness. "I am this food. This food is me." One day in Canada, I was eating lunch with the Sangha, and a student looked up at me and said, "I am nourishing you." He was practicing the concentration on emptiness. Every time we look at our plate of food, we can contemplate

the impermanent, nonself nature of food. This is deep practice, because it can help us see Interdependent Co-Arising. The one who eats and the food that is eaten are both, by nature, empty. That is why the communication between them is perfect. When we practice walking meditation in a relaxed, peaceful way, it is the same. We step not just for ourselves, but for the world. When we look at others, we see how their happiness and suffering are linked to our happiness and suffering. "Peace begins with me."

Everyone we cherish will, someday, get sick and die. If we do not practice the meditation on emptiness, when it happens, we will be overwhelmed. The Concentration on Emptiness is a way of staying in touch with life as it is, but it has to be practiced and not just talked about. We observe our body and see all the causes and conditions that have brought it to - our parents, our country, the air, and even future generations. We go beyond time and space, me and mine, and taste true liberation. If we only study emptiness as a philosophy, it will not be a Door of Liberation. Emptiness is a Door of Liberation when we penetrate it deeply and we realize Interdependent Co-Arising and the interbeing nature of everything that is.