

# The Buddhist Notion of Emptiness and its Potential Contribution to Psychology and Psychotherapy

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A growing number of psychologists now have their practices and theories informed by Buddhist meditation practices. These practices, however, are themselves deeply informed by the Buddhist notion of *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*). This Buddhist concept offers a rich vein of possibilities in informing psychology and psychotherapy. The present paper examines the development and potential of this concept for influencing these and other areas.

In his first book, *Thoughts Without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective*, Epstein (1995) beautifully encapsulated within the title's first clause a potentially innovative contribution to modern psychology. Within this intriguing statement are hints of the Buddhist concept of *emptiness*, including its possible benefits, prospective applications, and impact on psychotherapy. For if there really is no thinker, who precisely is caught up in the snares of psychological illnesses? Elaborating on this question, Epstein has said that "this emphasis on the lack of a particular, substantive agent is the most distinctive aspect of traditional Buddhist psychological thought" (p. 41). He also suggested, correctly, that this Buddhist notion of a lack of "self" may point us toward a new understanding of consciousness.

The Buddhist answer to this question of who suffers might be posited as follows: *the attachment to the sense of a thinker is the ultimate source of our illness*, and therefore, upon release from this confining fixation, our illness will subside. Yet to whom does this attachment or fixation occur? Our very use of a language that requires subjects and objects, referring to essential entities and things, becomes problematic from a Buddhist standpoint because what is being pointed at is said to be insubstantial, possessed of an ineffable nature. The potential contributions this notion might offer to the world of psychology and psychotherapy are therefore significant.

While the accumulation of material goods and the ever-increasing filling up of our lives with more invasive forms of entertainment and communication accelerates at seemingly breakneck speed, few would

suggest that our collective lives have become more whole. Even with an abundance of easily available psychotherapeutic modalities, hardly any would say we have become happier or less neurotic. Who can dismiss entirely the tongue-in-cheek title of a book co-penned by Jungian analyst James Hillman (Hillman & Ventura, 1993), *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse?*

Since Buddhism argues that grasping onto the notion of a self is at the root of the most essential existential human problem, Buddhist critiques of this notion of the self might helpfully address the narcissistic emphases of psychology. These critiques are salient because, as Epstein (1995) stated, the overwhelming dis-ease of the human condition is narcissism, which he defined in part as "the inability to tolerate unpleasant truths about oneself" (p. 48). According to Epstein, "the Buddha was articulating a vision of a psyche freed from narcissism" (p. 41), adding that, "all the insults to our narcissism can be overcome, the Buddha proclaimed, not by escaping them but by uprooting the conviction in a 'self' that needs protecting" (p. 45). Few concepts seem as eminently suited for such a task as the central Buddhist concept of emptiness. This concept directly challenges the very notion of an independent, inherently existent self and therefore offers an initially uncomfortable but possibly groundbreaking palliative to some of the most pressing psychological difficulties in the human condition. The positive interpretation of emptiness allows for a philosophically deconstructed yet healthily adaptive self that responds to psychological challenges with neither narcissistic myopia nor dissociative fragmentation.

It is the purpose of this paper to briefly define and describe the ramifications of adopting this Buddhist idea into the realm of psychology and thereby hopefully contribute a bit to its understanding and possible use.

### Emptiness

The English word, emptiness, is universally agreed upon as a proper translation of the Sanskrit word, *śūnyatā*. *Śūnyatā* has been defined as, “the ultimate nature of reality which is *the total absence of inherent existence and self-identity with respect to all phenomena*” (Coleman, 1993, p. 304 [emphasis added]). It is further characterized more specifically as “empty and void of Permanency, of true Happiness, Personality, and Pleasantness” (Nyanatiloka, 1952, p. 132). Thus, “being devoid of any phenomenal characteristics, ‘void’ or ‘the indescribable’ is the real nature of things” (Grimes, 1989, p. 354).

The word *śūnyatā* is made of two parts: *śūnya* or “empty” (its root *–svi* refers to being swollen, as in a belly, and this lends itself to the image of a swollen belly, presently devoid of any contents, but laden with possibilities) and *–tā*, describing the quality of being ascribed to the former part of speech (i.e., equivalent to the English suffix *–ness*): thus, empty-ness. Since within most Western languages this writer is familiar with the notion of emptiness is understood as pejoratively negative, describing the absence of *any thing* (*nihilism* in Buddhist terms), it might be less misleading and more helpful to follow the broader Buddhist development of this idea as Buddhism moved from India to Tibet, China, Japan, and Korea.

It should be noted at the outset that the Buddha made clear his determination to keep the interpretation of his teachings away from the two extremes of what he called nihilism and *eternalism*. The former position, nihilism, would argue that nothingness is the natural conclusion derived from analyzing the nature of self as empty. This lent itself to the rejection of any Ultimate Reality and denial of the possibility of apprehending anything beyond our senses. It had potentially disastrous consequences morally as well, for if no ultimate standard for moral behavior exists, it could be argued that no restraints on moral behavior are necessary.

The latter concept of eternalism was akin to Vedantic beliefs in (1) the soul, an eternal, transmigrating entity possessed of an inherent identity, and (2) God, the Ultimate substratum of Reality representing Reality in its truest sense. With regard to this sense of a personal

self, “it seems that human dispositions...tend to move... in two different directions...the first is in the direction of absolute negation...the other is in the direction of making it a permanent and eternal reality” (Kalupahana, 1987, p. 40). Neither position was correct according to the Buddha, and both represented distortions of his own “Middle Way.” This said, it should be noted that, “both Madhyamaka and Advaita Vedanta deny that ultimate reality can be understood *in a dualistic manner*” (King, 1995, p. 135 [emphasis added]).

The effort to translate religious or spiritual terms from one language to another is always fraught with difficulty. It was no different in the transition from the literary, spiritual languages of the Indian subcontinent, Pali and Sanskrit, to East Asia, where many of the languages adopted the Chinese ideographs (known in Japanese as kanji) as the whole or part of their own writing systems. These ideographs were able to visually contain a wealth of information, deposited as it were within each sub-section (called a *radical*) of the character, from which literally tens of thousands of compounds with multiple meanings could then be made. The languages themselves (Chinese in particular, certainly Japanese as well) were quite comfortable with ambiguities and subtleties, differentiating them from the precision and definitive clarity of, say, Sanskrit. The ideograph adopted to represent this word, *śūnyatā*, is *ku* [空], which means, “sky, [to] make/be unoccupied, empty” (Hadamitzky & Spahn, 1997, p. 92). Its significance in this discussion lies in the traditionally *dual* expositions of its value as a synonymous reading for *śūnyatā*.

The reasoning of the first reading went as follows: as the sky is not a thing but rather, a space, it can be said to be without solidity, empty of *things* and *thingness*. It only hosts, so to speak, all passing phenomena, remaining without inherent identity or substance (a bird, for example, in the literal sky image, and thoughts, for its application to objects of consciousness). So too with *śūnyatā*. This was the *negative formulation*. “It does not mean that things do not exist but rather that they are *nothing but appearances*” (Schuhmacher & Woerner, 1989, pp. 330-331 [emphasis added]). Traditional Zen imagery, the moon’s reflection in a dew drop for example, capture somewhat the essence of what mistaking the image for the reality might be like.

There remained however another *positive formulation* most emphasized by various Tibetan schools, which asserted that, while the sky itself is empty of substance,

it might also be characterized as a self-luminous background to all phenomena, mental or physical, and pregnant with infinite possibilities. “While emptiness is indicated in traditional Madhyamaka by saying what it is not, in Mahamudra and Dzogchen it is viewed in positive terms. *Śūnyatā* here becomes ‘openness’ that is inseparable from clarity (luminosity)” (Schuhmacher & Woerner, 1989, p. 331).

This positive aspect might be of most interest in modern consciousness studies and its practical applications within the realm of psychotherapy. By way of example, the patient who is offered a positive, open-ended vision of their full potentialities, beyond any and all aspects of their presenting conditions, will be empowered far more than the one offered a more constricted sense of self by the therapist. As well, changes in consciousness associated with positive mental states have been examined quite a bit of late, including promising research involving the Dalai Lama whose interest in these matters has proven helpful to scientists studying their relationship.

### Emptiness, Language, and a Psychology of Self

Western psychology is rooted in an understandably Western view of individuality: *a separate self, relating to a world of separate entities*. This view might also be alternatively described as a Judeo-Christian model with regards to *soul* and a Cartesian-Newtonian model with regards to *matter*. All of which together represent the foundation of most of what is characterized as Western thought. The interaction of these separate entities forms dynamic relationships, which, through those interactions, can positively or negatively affect each of the entities in relationship. For example, when internal views about the entities outside or the internal components of the individual become distorted or inappropriately focused upon, then psychological difficulties may occur.

By contrast, Eastern psychologies (if we may use that word in this context) are thoroughly informed by ideas predisposed towards a more *collective* view of what constitutes an individual and the world around one. “A sharp distinction between individualism and collectivism...characterizes important analyses of Western versus Asian approaches [to psychology]” (Rao, 2002, p. 265). A brief examination of the Japanese understanding of individuals might be helpful here.

Kasulis (1981), in *Zen Action, Zen Person*, expounded on definitions of self in Japanese Zen and their relationships to related Western ideas. In Japanese,

several words are used in speaking of a person: the terms *kojin*, *ningen*, and *hito* are all used in different contexts. However, as this is a great deal due to Buddhist influences upon the language and society he noted that,

when the Japanese see someone as an “individual” (*kojin*), they see him or her as one object among many, but when they see someone as a “human being” (*ningen*), they see that person *in a context*...While the ‘individual’ (*kojin*) is a real entity, one most fully becomes a ‘human being’ (*ningen*) when one is in relationship...The individual becomes meaningful insofar as he or she is an outgrowth of the relationships established by the operative context, not vice versa (pp. 6, 9; emphasis added).

We should note that this notion of emptiness, or at least a set of analogous concepts or positions, has been tested or touched upon and essentially rejected by Western thought: Heraclitus, with his image that everything flows and that you cannot step in the same river twice (Russell, 1984), is one example. Hume, with his empirical observation that self, other, cause, effect, and more are all merely habits of mind and concepts overlaid on the bare world of experience, is another. Daniel Dennett, with his notion of the mind as having no continuity or unchanging self (see Rao, 2002) would be a third. So why has the West run screaming from this idea? How is it that Buddhism approaches non-self in such a way that is less terrifying in the East than in the West? In fact, what the Buddha posited was that instead of a solid, inherent self, there was only “a changing stream of becoming...constantly fed by perceptions,” which “does not represent a static entity to which everything belongs” (Kalupahana, 1987, p. 38).

We may further understand the importance of emptiness by looking at its relationship to another important Buddhist idea, *dependent origination*, or *pratitya samutpāda*. This notion, described by some as *interconnectedness*, was sometimes utilized to justify the nascent influx of emptiness into later Buddhist thought. Since interconnectedness was regarded as an early Buddhist teaching and therefore considered authoritative, its general thrust contained seeds for a new way of viewing self. By saying that there exists no *thing* whose full identity, arising, sustenance, and eventual passing, was not due to elaborately intertwined matrices of relationships to other things similarly entangled, it implied that nothing therefore existed as an inherently independent unit. “Pratitya samutpada is...the principle

of...the *essential dependence* of things on each other, i.e., the unreality of separate elements” (Murti, 1980, p. 7 [emphasis in original]). This concept could then be extrapolated to characterize the nature of all existence as emptiness—empty of substance, of properties that suggest solidity in identity, and of definitive characterization.

It was Nāgārjuna, writing in the 2nd/3rd cent. CE (Murti, 1980), with his collected aphorisms and dialectic analyses, who ingeniously revived a then-moribund Buddhist movement by putting forth his middle path, or *Madhyamaka*. “The function of the Madhyamika dialectic is not to bring about a change in things but in our mentality” (p. 233). Nāgārjuna did not deny the existence of things as phenomena, but declared their absence of *essence*. “Thus it is false to say that things exist or that they do not exist. The truth lies in the middle, in emptiness” (Schuhmacher & Woerner, 1989, p. 238).

“Nāgārjuna endeavored to undermine Indian (non-Buddhist as well as abhidharmic) arguments about causality by proving the relationship between cause and effect to be neither absolute nor unparadoxical” (Kasulis, 1981, p. 20). For Nagarjuna, “concepts are *samvriti*; they literally ‘cover’ or ‘obstruct’ the way things are actually experienced” (p. 23). Releasing ourselves from the propensity to conceptualize, and therefore, to reify the objects of our experience, we liberate ourselves from the most ensnaring of human propensities associated with our minds. This is the inevitable and invariant grasping after the objects of experience, traditionally delineated as 1) the desire to get those things we want, 2) to avoid the things we do not wish to be near to, and 3) to cling to the memory of things lost.

One can easily see the areas in which such a perspective might be put to use in psychology. It is possible to suggest that most psychotherapy clients, at least those in non-psychotic or extreme dissociative conditions, are involved in one way or another with some fixation of at least one of these three conditions. A person affected by compulsive gambling, obsessively avoiding cracks in the sidewalk, or grieving inconsolably from the traumatic memory of parental loss might all respectively be specific examples of these three afflictions.

Aside from Buddhism, most other Indian schools of thought still accept the notion of a deeper substratum of individuality, one that is *more self* than the provisionally understood individual “self.” When we look at Sāmkhya or Vedānta, two dominant philosophical trends still surviving within the various strands of

Hinduism, then we see the utter reliance upon this notion of a deeper substratum of existence. This substratum may also be described as the sense that beneath, or, better put, beyond the phenomenal world we experience lies a *more real* Reality. However, emptiness according to Buddhism undercuts this notion as well, arguing that any imputation we ascribe to existence remains an imputation and little else. Thus, the intellectual and linguistic precision normally used in stripping language of its propensities to reify concepts is here brought to bear on considerations of religious import. This process may be subsequently applied to a psychological context and in so doing, might illuminate a new angle for addressing other age-old problems. These problems are related to the ontology, epistemology, and phenomenology of being, of consciousness and human life itself.

Kasulis (1981) has written, “since language can never leave its own constructs and internal rules, it cannot serve as a vehicle for philosophical *truth*” (p. 22 [emphasis in original]). One might add as well that language presents no vehicle for psychological truth, for the same limiting reasons Nāgārjuna has so amply demonstrated (Murti, 1980). But the search for philosophical Truth is not generally considered the driving motivation in psychological practice. Insights, cures, solutions, reasons, suggestions, therapies, counsel, answers, and directions are more along the line of what is sought. Here again we are presented with emptiness’s unusual utility, for it squarely confronts the ultimate inadequacies of all these and directs the pursuer back to the fluidity of experience itself. In so doing it begins to peel away, layer after layer, the errant presumptions in all our questioning, leading toward a state of unknowing. While one might initially approach anxiously, with context and guidance this unknowing can prove as liberating as realizing the sky’s immeasurable potentiality versus its insubstantiality.

We have already suggested that the Buddhist notion of emptiness can provide an excellent series of ideas that may inform the therapeutic encounter. “The suffering of the false self derives from attachment to the two extremes of self-sufficiency and emptiness. By bringing awareness to those very attachments, they can be released” (Epstein, 1995, p. 67). It is not too hard to imagine (and Epstein provides concrete examples of such) psychotherapists utilizing insights derived from meditation or the contemplation of emptiness in order to assist clients in loosening the seemingly intractable grasp many have on their problems. This effort, in fact, has

been explored in a number of areas. For example, both Fenner (1995) and Wilber (1997) have said some interesting things about its possible application in psychology. In addition, there have been efforts to incorporate Buddhist mindfulness practices with cognitive behavioral therapies (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Linehan, 1993a, 1993b; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). Therapies incorporating mindfulness alone (Germer, 2005) or programs utilizing variations of Buddhist mindfulness-based meditation for group counseling (Tirado, 2007) are also becoming more common.

Epstein (1995) wrote, "the true self experience that has come to preoccupy Western analysis is achievable most directly through the appreciation of what the Buddhists would call emptiness of self" (p. 72). This self, a more fluid, less centralized (non)entity may be compared to an ever-flowing sea whose waters can roll over any obstacle and whose depth belies any notion of its insubstantiality.

### Conclusion

We might summarize the Buddhist perspective as saying that, once firmly convinced that our nature is occluded by a number of delusions (most important of which is the delusion that we have a "nature" or a fixed, inherent self), only then might we begin the therapy that relieves not only our psychological illness, but our existential anxieties as well. We may actually come to *experience*, rather than simply intellectually *conclude*, that, "disturbing thought patterns and their corresponding emotional reactions are baseless, or lack any foundation," and that therefore, "the problems themselves [become] impotent or incapable of drawing mental attention and energy" (Fenner, 1995, p. 166).

But the great challenge to traditional Western psychology may be less disruptive than the implications of what a more interconnected, less centrally placed, separate individual might mean to an entire culture built upon selfishness and narcissistic materialism. Any such challenge is bound to disturb the philosophical underpinnings of so much of our distinctly Western cultures so that novel ways of constructing our societal relations may be required, with implications for our social economic structures. While the influence of Buddhist ideas such as interconnectedness or emptiness has not necessarily tempered consumerist or material excesses in Eastern societies, there remain many areas from where the West can learn.

While the initial reaction to any therapeutic use of the notion of emptiness might be a frightening sense of identity loss, a separate internally more positive movement may also occur, that is, one of recognizing a different self differently conceived and differently constructed. This self, acknowledged as an empirically verifiable, practical but *ultimately provisional* concept, can be utilized to reach potentially new heights of human integration. We might further state that any insights emptiness has to offer may suggest modification to our current models of consciousness. For example the positive aspect of emptiness, which has been described within later Buddhist traditions as the *tathāgatagarbha*, literally the "Buddha-womb," is also the womb of unfettered possibilities. This notion comports quite comfortably with the humanistic and transpersonal movements in psychology and their goals for ennobling the human condition.

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