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emptiness (shunyata)

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Beautiful discussion of emptiness in Norman Fischer's review of Thunderous Silence: A Practical Guide to the Heart Sutra. In English the word Shunyata is normally translated emptiness which has associated meanings of bleak, nothing inside, meaningless, despairing. But the word Shunyata means something entirely different. It is good news, joyful freedom and liberation.

Empty, but of what? "Empty of separate self, weightiness, burden and boundaries." Shunyata is the Chinese character of sky. Sky evokes that same boundlessness. Empty of all limitation or boundary, open. The Heart Sutra ("Form is emptiness, emptiness is form") does not deny the world exists. It "denies the basis of the world's sticky intractability." It does not "deny the physical, it redefines it. Things do exist - only not in the way we think they do. And when the sutra lists and negates basic Buddhist teachings, it doesn't mean the teachings are false or unreal. It means that they are true in a freer, more expansive, less literal and substantial way than we thought."

"The Heart Sutra showed me (Fischer) that from the start that I could hold the practice of Buddhist teachings in a light flexible open handed way. I didn't have to become pious. Piety is empty, the heart sutra says. Buddhism is empty. and that is what liberates us."

"The other side of emptiness or one could say its content is connection - relationality." When I am separate I must protect myself. "And when there is openness, no boundary between myself and others....the love and connection is easy and natural."

"The Zen practice, zazen (sitting meditation) is training in emptiness. The practice is simply resting alertly in the feeling of body and breath. Letting everything come and go without denying or latching on. Sitting in this way day after day...practitioners learn to hold lightly: respecting...appreciating...letting go as they naturally will - because they are empty. Time is empty, everything comes and goes. Sitting, you feel the truth of this as you experience your own body and breath. Emptiness teachings internalized become a way of being fully present with what is passing, flowing, empty ongoing stream of living and dying."

Our volunteer that comes from the Austin Zen Center likes to read a selection from the Tao de Ch'ing which talks of emptiness as the open space in a bowl where we put the food. Without the emptiness the bowl would not be useful. Emptiness is the blankness of the canvas for the artist to fill with creation. The truly great artists continue to see the emptiness even as they fill the canvas with paint. My own practice is to learn to see the undeterminedness of every moment. Creating acts of being liberated from the closed off boundaries. Swim in the flow of life's undetermined essence.

Shunyata reminds me that every moment waits to be filled with creation. Not with things or stuff, but connection or relationship. The more I focus on the conditioned, limited, boundedness of my experience - the more separate, closed off, isolated and defeated I become. The more I connect with those around me who are in the flow of life's river, the more alive, creative, liberated I feel/am. The surprising thing to me was how easy it was to find others with similar goals and temperament to connect too in prison. My biases about who was in prison were destroyed long ago. May I see the emptiness of each moment as it arises.

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