

FORMS OF EMPTINESS: PSYCHODYNAMIC, MEDITATIVE AND CLINICAL PERSPECTIVES

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In my efforts to synthesize Buddhist and psychodynamic psychologies of mind, the inner experience of emptiness has emerged as the most beguiling and yet the most treacherous subject common to both fields. There is confusion within psychodynamic theory about what constitutes emptiness, there is confusion within Buddhist theory about what constitutes emptiness, and there is certainly confusion among psychodynamic psychotherapists about what Buddhists mean by emptiness, and confusion among Buddhists about what psychotherapists mean by emptiness. The word is applied to such an array of states of mind that its meaning has become virtually impossible to grasp. Yet a careful examination of the various forms of emptiness does much to illuminate the special contribution of Buddhist thought to contemporary understanding of the nature of the self.

Experientially, emptiness has been invoked to explain almost every possible alteration in the experience of self. Thus, it can refer to the confusing numbness of the psychotic, the "despairing incompleteness" (Singer, 1979) of the personality disorders, the depersonalized state in which one aspect of the self is repudiated while the observing ego becomes hyperaware (Levy, 1984), identity diffusion, in which the self seeps out and fuses with whatever surrounds it, existential meaninglessness and Buddhist ultimate reality. The word used to describe these states is the same, but the experiences are all quite different.

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While the emptiness that grows out of Buddhist meditation can be difficult to describe, it is often seen as holding great promise for those afflicted with the more pathological emptinesses described above. At times attributed to Mind, in its larger sense, and at times to the self, the experience is said to be "intangible," "like a mute person tasting sugar" (Kalu Rinpoche, 1986, p. 111). At other times adjectives like "clear, open, and unimpeded" (Kalu, 1986, p. 33) are used to convey its sense. "There is just the **omni-present** voidness of the real self-existent Nature of everything, and no more," (Blofeld, 1958, p. 50) said Huang Po, a ninth-century Chinese Zen teacher. "All these phenomena are intrinsically void and yet this Mind with which they are identical is no mere nothingness. By this I mean that it does exist, but in a way too marvellous for us to comprehend. It is an existence which is no existence, a non-existence which is nevertheless existence" (Blofeld, 1958, p. 108).

The Tibetan Mahamudra texts describe several possible experiences of emptiness:

... Some may feel that all things become empty, or may see the void nature of the world; others experience all things as devoid of self-entity, or that both body and mind are non-existent; while yet others really understand the truth of Voidness (Sunyata)" (Chang, 1963, p. 41).

How can we understand this? Let us first return to ostensibly firmer ground.

From a structural perspective, in terms of the "postulated unconscious psychic organizations" (Lichtenberg, 1975, p. 45) that are so essential to psychodynamic thought, emptiness has been explained in the following ways: 1) as a deficiency, 2) as a defense, 3) as a defect in self/object integration, and 4) as the result of inner conflict over idealized aspirations of the self (Singer, 1977a; Levy, (984). Let us look at each.

The deficiency model posits emptiness as the internalized remnant of "emotional sustenance" not given (Singer, 1977a, p. 461). Whether it be from "loss, rejection, unavailability or ambivalence" (p. 461) the essential point is, in the words of Winnicott, to "think not of trauma but of nothing happening when something might profitably have happened" (Winnicott, 1974, p. 106). The narcissistic parent who treats the child as if he or she does not exist (Giovacchini, 1972, p. 377) or the "deserting but desirable" (Guntrip, 1971) parent set up in the child a condition in which "object representations" and "outer world" manifestations are excessively clung to while deficient

attachment develops to self-representations which take on the "split-off negative value" of the unavailable object (Singer, 1977a, p. 462). What results is an "emptying of the self" with concordant fears of being swallowed, extinguished, imprisoned, absorbed or lost in a "vacuum of experience" (Guntrip, 1971, p. 291).

The defense model sees emptiness as a more tolerable substitution for virulent rage or self-hatred (Giovacchini, 1972), a "defense against recognition by the hidden critical agencies of the actual presence of the (so-called) bad mother" (Singer, 1977a, p. 468). While at first this emptiness may in some sense seem preferable to the direct experience of that against which it is defending, the resulting fear of emptiness can become virtually intolerable. Thus, this fear can begin to represent "the evil, tantalizing and unspeakable torturing potential of the uncontrolled, unencapsulated, freed, bad and empty object starving, like the self, within" (Singer, 1977b, p. 478).

The defect model sees disturbances in the development of the sense of self, an inability to harmoniously integrate diverse and conflicting "component groups" of self and object representations, as the underlying mechanism behind the experience of emptiness (Singer, 1977b, p. 472). Here, the lack of a cohesive self, a failure to navigate Mahler's rapprochement subphase of infantile development such that good and bad impressions can be tolerated with regard to the same object, predisposes to feelings of emptiness. Emptiness here is seen as the "loss of the normal background feeling tone guaranteed by cohesiveness of internalized object relations" (Levy, 1984, p. 393) or as the result of opposing ego identifications in which one part of the ego is "repudiated or eliminated as being dead or unreal and is observed by the intact part of the ego" (Levy, 1984, p. 392).

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Traditionally, there are said to be three component groups of self-images that must be blended and balanced (Singer, 1977b, p. 472) in order to protect against this kind of emptiness. They are (1) "self-images based on body experiences associated with instinctual need gratification" (Lichtenberg, 1975, p. 461), the so-called "body-self," (2) "self-images that emerge as entities having discrete differentiation from objects" (Lichtenberg, 1975, p. 461), the result of separation/individuation and the un-coupling of all-good and all-bad self/object representations, and (3) "self-images that, by virtue of idealization retain a sense of grandiosity and omnipotence shared with an idealized object" (Lichtenberg, 1975, p. 461). These latter self-images derive from "archaic fantasies" that originate in early life in the state of primary narcissism or "total mother-infant merging"

(Lichtenberg, 1975, p. 461) and which are of two types: (a) grandiose, omnipotent images of the self, the so-called "ideal ego" (Hanly, 1984), and (b) idealized images of the parents which have both self and object qualities (Lichtenberg, 1975, p. 464), the so-called "ego-ideal" (Hanly, 1984).

The fourth model, that of conflicts over idealized aspirations, is really a subset of the third, with particular emphasis on the idealized self-images. In these cases, emptiness is felt when internalized, unconscious, idealized images of the self are not matched by actual experience, producing a sense of unreality or "estrangement" (Federn, 1952, p. 61). There is a kind of disavowal here of the actual self, or the actual experience, under pressure from the ideal ego, which has become, in essence, a functional aspect of the super-ego (Hanly, 1984). With this disavowal, this inability to "measure up" to the internalized standards of unconscious fundamental beliefs, comes a sense of emptiness. Because we retain a grandiose image of ourselves, rooted in archaic fantasy, as solid, deep, firm and, in some sense, immortal, when our actual experience does not correspond, we cannot relinquish the idealized image, but we are stuck—confused—we experience a loss of meaning, a sense of emptiness, that suddenly seems very real.

Let us now return to the Buddhist view of emptiness, to some more precise definitions of just what this experience represents in order to see whether it has any relevance for what has already been described.

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According to the Buddhist scholar Herbert Guenther (1974), "sunyata," or emptiness, is the experience which "serves to destroy the idea of a persisting individual nature" (p. 207). It is not an end in itself, but is only meant to "crush the belief in concrete existence." This is a crucial point, emphasized also by the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master, Dagen. "Originally," he said, "the various 'emptinesses' were needed to break through existence. But once/since there are no existents, what 'emptiness' is needed?" (Cleary, 1986, p. 19). The contrast with the aforementioned Western experiences of emptiness is immediate; emptiness is not something real in itself, not a "vacuity of nothingness" (Hopkins, 1987, p. 200), or an "annihilation of everything" (p. 44), but a *specific* negative of inherent existence. As Nagarjuna wrote, "Emptiness has been said. . . to be the relinquishment of views, but. . . those who hold to the view of emptiness are incurable" (Cleary, 1986, p. 19).

More specifically, emptiness is said to be the "non-affirming negative of the inherently existent I" (Hopkins, 1987). As

described most particularly in the texts of the Gelukpa school of Tibetan Buddhism and detailed most recently by Jeffrey Hopkins (1987) in a treatise entitled *Emptiness Yoga*. emptiness assumes a central function in explicating the Buddhist notions of the nature of the self. The Gelukpas hold that one must use the intellect to prepare the ground for meditative insight, that there must be an element of "valid cognition" (p. 41) in perceptions for meditative understanding to unfold. Without this, there is the danger of going nowhere in meditation, of using techniques to verify a deluded perspective. So this school is very careful to layout an exhaustively analyzed conceptual model of emptiness whose basic tenets hold for *most* of the other schools. Kalu Rinpoche, a teacher of the Kagyu school known for its emphasis on practice and direct experience, nevertheless affirms, "It is said that someone who tries to meditate without a conceptual understanding of what he or she is doing is like a blind person trying to find the way in open country: such a person can only wander about, with no idea how to choose one direction over another" (Kalu Rinpoche, 1986, p. 113).

The first step in understanding emptiness is to focus on the "inherently existent I," to actually find it as it appears. It is a belief, a "false estimation of the nature of oneself" (Kalu, 1986, p. 37), an innate misperception, a "falsely conceived" (p. 56) image of the self that nevertheless appears to us as real. We must find it in our own experience.

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So the first step is to have an actual sense of concrete existence, to "ascertain well the appearance of a substantially existent I" (p. 65), to have a "clear feeling of the object to be negated" (p. 83). Without this, it is like "dispatching the troops with no sense of where the enemy is" (p. 47). This conception can, in the Buddhist view, be quite subtle and deep-seated. In passages that are unusual because of their implications of a dynamic unconscious, these texts assert that "subliminal consciousnesses" (p. 133) passively and continuously accept the reality of a substantially existent I. The point is not to withdraw the mind in meditative absorption from the "coarser conceptions of the self" (p. 120). This is said to be like "reforming a naughty child by removing it from sight." The usual mind that is convinced that a truly established person exists must be relentlessly identified. It is only through this identification that emptiness reveals itself, for the "inherently existent I" turns out to be "analytically unfindable and only nominally imputed" (p. 105); in meditative stabilization emptiness appears only as "an absence of the object it qualifies" (p. 61). "A strong sense of being unable to find what you were formerly sure could be found" (p. 200) comes into being and, in a stage of meditation

termed "inferential cognition of emptiness," the object disappears and only an *image*, a conceptual consciousness, of the negative, or absence, of inherent existence remains.

So emptiness is a finding of the "nonabsoluteness" (Cleary, 1986, p. 36) of things, of their indefinability. It does not mean that they do not exist *at all*, but that they have no *inherent* existence. Emptiness does not challenge the validity of the "conceptually designated dimension of . . . relative phenomena" (Namgyal, 1986, p. xxxiv), of the "conventionally existent I" (Hopkins, 1987, p. 112), but only of its conceived object, the inherently existent I. "The I is not just an illusory figment of the imagination like a rope-snake, but an existent phenomenon; however, we do not know it as it is, qualified by *mere* existence" (Hopkins, 1987, p. 149). So the finding of emptiness strips the I of the habitual misconceptions that permeate our usual *experience* of ourselves.

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The final point is that emptiness is a *non-affirming* negative. Non-affirming means that something positive is not being substituted for the object of negation. Emptiness is always found *in relation to* a belief in an object's inherent existence. It is not a "vacuity of nothingness" (Hopkins, 1987) that has a reality of its own; it is an understanding that the concrete appearances to which we are accustomed do not exist in the way we imagine (p. 200).

With regard to the sense of self, the point is not that some firmly established self is abandoned for a greater "egolessness," but that, in the words of the present Dalai Lama, "this seemingly solid, concrete, independent, self-instituting I under its own power that appears actually does not exist at all" (Gyatso, 1984, p. 70). The understanding of one who has realized emptiness has thus been compared to a person's knowledge that he is wearing sunglasses. "The very appearance of the distorted color induces knowledge that it is not true" (Gyatso, 1984, p. 80).

From a psychodynamic perspective, there is a rather remarkable parallel between the Buddhist view of a subliminal tendency to see the I as inherently existent and the psychoanalytic notion of an unconscious "ideal ego" that conceives of itself as perfect, permanent and immortal, as "vouchsafed a state of perfection" (Hanly, 1984). It is this ideal ego, derived, as we have seen, from the grandiosity of primary narcissism, that is responsible, from a metapsychological perspective, for denying the ego's true nature (Epstein, 1986). Compare this ideal ego with the Buddhist definition of the "self of personality" that is exposed by the realization of emptiness. "(It)

consists of the innate consciousness that assigns to itself, as its own nature, an eternal, independent entity and thereby clings to the notion of 'I' or 'self'" (Namygyal, 1986, p. 55).

The emptiness of the Buddhist practices, then, is in some ways the converse of the emptiness that is produced by conflict over idealized self-images, and this is why, I believe, it speaks to that emptiness in some intuitive way. Rather than succumbing to the inevitable gap between actual and idealized experience of the self by disavowing the actual self through a numbing sense of hollowness or unreality, the Buddhist approach seeks to uncover the distorting idealizations which are at their root groundless, based on archaic infantile fantasy. So meditators troubled by a sense of emptiness must not mistake this for Buddhist emptiness; they must go inside it, investigate it, expose their beliefs in *its* concrete nature, just as they must do for their more elusive, but not necessarily less tenacious, ideal egos. The result is not an attachment to emptiness as a thing, in itself, not an identification with emptiness of the sort that characterizes *all* of the pathological forms of emptiness described above, but a mere absence or negation of belief in a persisting individual nature.

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Throughout the Buddhist tradition it is recognized that even this understanding of emptiness is precarious, that it, too, can be distorted by the need to identify *something* as existing in its own right. In the words of the 4th Zen Patriarch,

The practice of bodhisattvas has emptiness as its realization: when beginning students see emptiness, this is seeing emptiness, it is not real emptiness. Those who cultivate the Way and attain real emptiness do not see emptiness or nonemptiness; *they* have no views" (Cleary, 1986, p. 19).

Those personality types prone to pathological emptiness who begin Buddhist meditation practices designed to uncover Buddhist emptiness face several potential pitfalls. In the borderline personality, for instance, what is most lacking is the synthetic or integrative capacity of the ego to consolidate and maintain multiple, conflicting self/object representations. The relationship of the self with internalized object relationships is distorted by the defense of splitting, in which all good and all bad representations of the same person cannot be integrated. Similarly, splitting can persist between the grandiose, idealized self/object and the "deflated, debased" self/object (Lichtenberg, 1975), and the ideal ego may remain fused with primitive all good object representations, rather than separating off into the superego. Now, the mindfulness practices actually strengthen the synthetic capacities of the ego (Epstein, 1988) by training

the observing ego to attend to whatever arises without clinging or condemnation, thus allowing conflicting images to present themselves just as they are. So the mindfulness practices can actually be very helpful in decreasing a borderline's pathological emptiness. *However*, if the insight practices into the emptiness of the ideal ego are attempted prematurely, there are real risks of the loss of the good self images with which it may be fused, with the preservation and exacerbation of the all-bad, destructive images provoking the borderline's characteristic defensive flight into depersonalization or identity loss. This would undoubtedly be absolutely terrifying and this kind of scenario is not uncommon among populations of Western students who undertake intensive practice.

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The narcissistic personality is a different story. According to Kernberg's (1982) formulation for severe narcissistic disturbances, between the ages of 3 and 5, all of the positive representations of self and objects are put together along with the idealized representations into a structure that he terms the pathological grandiose self. All of the negative aspects are projected onto others and aggression is expressed as devaluation of others. Ideal ego representations are incorporated into this pathological grandiose self, leaving only the "aggressively determined components," which tend to be dissociated and projected, in the superego (p. 134). Emptiness in the narcissist is a result of the internal void that is created in the internal world of object relations through the constant devaluation of others (Kernberg, 1982). This is a pervasive feeling that can be temporarily interrupted only by admiration from others (Kernberg, 1975), which tends to be all that is sought in intimate relationships. It is extremely difficult for the narcissistic personality to uncover the sense of inherent existence embodied in the ideal ego because of its fusion in the pathological grandiose self. Narcissists are much more likely to subvert the notion of "non-self" or "egolessness," incorporating that image back into their ideal egos, becoming arrogant about their special understanding and using Buddhist veneration of emptiness as justification for their paucity of meaningful relationships.

The schizoid personality tends to feel emptiness as an "innate quality" (Kernberg, 1975) of their being that makes them different from other people, who they can see have feelings of "love, hatred, tenderness, longing or mourning" (p. 215) that they find unavailable within themselves. The schizoid stance has been seen as a defense against feeling longing for "emotional supplies from a good object" (Steward, 1985) or as the result of "destructive impulses turned from the object towards his own ego" (Klein, 1946, p. 19). In either case, these

people feel disintegrated, rather than anxious, unable to experience emotion, unable to contact others, and most in touch with a "soothing" (Kernberg, 1975), "amorphous experience of indefiniteness and weakness" (Guntrip, 1971, p. 97). Successful meditation for them involves a gradual process whereby contact is first made with the ego ideal through the concentration practices, providing a sense of ontological security to counter their pervasive insecurity and allowing the soothing emptiness to be gradually relinquished. At this point the mindfulness practices can begin to uncover the emotional traces that have been unattended to. The obvious mis-use of meditation here is as a validation and reinforcement of the schizoid view of "no feelings" as an absolute truth. The Zen chant of "No eyes, no ears, no mouth, etc." can readily serve as a schizoid defense when incorrectly apprehended.

In the depressive personality, emptiness functions as a kind of one step beyond loneliness. Not only is the loved object missed and longed for, but there is an internal void and a feeling of an incapacity for love. There may be a deeply felt sense of unworthiness that attributes the loss of the other to the person's own badness (Kernberg, 1975); thus the depressed person comes to feel that they do not deserve to be loved or appreciated. The therapeutic value of meditation for these people lies in the establishment of contact with a valued internal object through the concentration practices that release feelings of love, joy, contentment, and oneness. This is not a substitute for establishing intimate relationships, but it does reveal to the depressed personality that they are capable of feeling what they thought themselves incapable of.

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The major psychological issue for those with conflicts over their idealized self-images is often a kind of shame, or unworthiness, that arises when the discrepancy between actual and idealized self is too great (Singer, 1977a, p. 463). This unworthiness can block access to good internal *self*objects, creating a sense of being "cut off" from love, of incompleteness. Without a working through of this incompleteness, which can be facilitated both by meditation and by psychotherapy, the pre-existing sense of emptiness may never be fully abandoned. There is a real danger, in these personalities, of never progressing beyond the concentration practices, of resting in a state where the sense of unworthiness is being off-set but where the fundamental misconceptions of an inherent self are not examined.

This is *also* the fundamental danger for the rest of us in progressing on the path of meditation. We are all prone to ignore the falsely conceived self by dwelling in the tranquil

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stabilization that meditation practice offers. These states, which can become ineffably sublime, offer experiences of oneness far removed from our usual personalities that can be mistaken for emptiness by an untrained practitioner. Yet the ultimate purpose of Buddhist meditation is not to withdraw from the falsely conceived self but to *recognize* the misconception, thereby weakening its influence. "Without disbelieving the object of this (misconception)," said Dharmakirti, "it is impossible to abandon (misconceiving it)" (Hopkins, 1987, p. 137). There is a deep, tenacious resistance to this disbelief, a kind of clutching that occurs, a fear of an emptiness that is conceived to be as real as the inherently existent I. In the words of Huang Po, "Men are afraid to forget their minds, fearing to fall through the Void with nothing to stay their fall. They do not know that the Void is not really void, but the realm of the real Dharma" (Blofeld, 1958, p. 41).

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