

## Space and Emptiness

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We frequently find references to space and emptiness in our texts and liturgical practices. ‘Space’ is a metaphor for emptiness, which in Sanskrit is ‘śūnyatā’ (shunyata). Emptiness indicates the lack of inherent nature (svabhāva) in all things. Thus, this view states that there is no inherent nature or essential substance—the ‘essence’ or ‘self’ of several Western and Indian non-Buddhist philosophies (although Buddhists are not the only ones arguing against the existence of such things). The view includes anything: rocks, minds, teacups. Essential natures are permanent, independent and singular (or unitary). Hence, the view we are taught is that when we ‘look’ with prajna we find that nothing is permanent, nothing is independent, and nothing is singular or unitary.

We also frequently find statements that nothing ultimately exists, e.g. “The notion of space indicates the ultimate nonexistence of things and therefore emptiness” (SSA-2 text P\*D, SMR, 2011, xxxiv). This kind of statement indicates a view that is foundational to much of Shambhala and Buddhist philosophy and practice. I think it is vitally important that we understand the meaning of this statement.

I suggest that this use of the term ‘ultimate nonexistence’ is problematic for an understanding of emptiness. We have to unpack it to understand it. And understand it we should: it is all too common in our Sangha to hear about such things, perhaps read or study madhyamaka, then shake heads in mystification, and without understanding simply give up on trying to figure it out. Some people even invoke the idea that it is a koan, that we should just let the question sit and not worry about an answer. I hate such advice, but I have done it anyway. I sit and meditate on the question. But no wisdom arose. I did that for 20 years before I started studying to find the answer. If wisdom arose for you, then stop reading and go back to your cushion.

But that advice ignores the extensive texts, commentaries and words of vajra masters within our lineages who wrote and said that it is centrally important to understand emptiness both intellectually as well as experientially. I have directly heard it said by several Vajra masters that if we don’t fully understand the meaning of emptiness, then it is unlikely that we can fully understand our philosophy and practice vajrayana, and it is questionable whether we can achieve liberation in any lifetime.

And it also ignores what I think is a very simple way to understand it. It’s really not that complex an idea. Let’s look more closely at ‘ultimate nonexistence’.

On the surface of things, it’s clear that *if* we have *any* trust in our senses, then the world of rocks and teacups—and the chair you are sitting on and computer you are probably reading this on—‘exists’, in any reasonable definition of that word. This begs the questions: Can we trust our senses; How do we define that word ‘existence’; What about minds?; and What is the significance of the predicate ‘ultimate’?

First, the view comes from Mādhyamaka, first discussed by the Buddha, written down as the prajnaparamita sutras, formulated by Nagarjuna around the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE<sup>1</sup>, and discussed, contemplated and meditatively practiced by Indian, Tibetan, Chinese and other commentators, philosophers and practitioners to the present time. Hence, this simple reference, ‘emptiness’,

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<sup>1</sup> Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way (Mūlamādhyamakakārikā, MMK)

hides a huge literature involving an interaction between philosophy and practice. No simple explication can possibly do justice to this tradition.

Nonetheless...

So, can we trust our senses? We certainly believe that what we generally experience through them in the mere existence of rocks and teacups, furniture and floors, trees and sky, is by and large 'approximately true'. By this, I mean that in many respects, what we sensually experience is indeed what is. A rock is hard, has a particular shape, and color, and other characteristics. But wait: here is our first opportunity to compare these characteristics with the predicate 'ultimate'. This is in contrast to 'relative'. Those characteristics seem to be relative: there is no ultimate hardness, shape or color, but they only exist in some kind of conventional relationship to other measures of hardness, etc. Here is the first kind of 'relative' or 'non-ultimate' reality. However, while those *particular* characteristics are relative to conventions, the rock still has some level of hardness, some shape and some color. Our labels for the particulars are conventional, and its not as hard as diamond but its harder than a sponge. But *ultimately* there is a rock of certain properties that we can sense through all of our senses (smell? Whoops!) and even measure with instruments. Hence, those characteristics are legitimate properties of the rock, even while there is a convention as to what particular measures we use to label them compared with other things.

I say 'we certainly believe' in our senses, because we go about our day as if those things of our world do, in fact, exist. Those 'things' are called in contemporary Western philosophy 'medium-sized dry goods', or what I like to say 'the furniture of our world'. There is good evolutionary justification for this belief. Putting it simply, if our senses were completely fallacious, then we could not survive. We would not find food; we would fall off cliffs or get eaten by tigers. We avoid those fates due to our senses.

Of course, we also know that our senses can be illusory. Here is another possible invocation of the difference between ultimate and relative: Is what we see ultimately the way things are? We know it's possible that we could have eye diseases that cause things to appear that do not exist. Other illusions are possible, or even hallucinations. We look into the hazy distance and see a car—but no, its really a cow! For some illusions, we can determine that those things we think we see do not exist. That's why we react to them as illusions or hallucinations. If we see something odd, we look from another angle. We look again, or we go up and touch it, smell it, taste it. We combine the results of other sensual experiences and find confirmation through help of other people. We may use scientific instruments to verify that it is not our imagination, but that it is a strange optical illusion that the moon rising in the east is so huge. The moon really didn't just double in size from the day before, and its not really shrinking as we watch—something else is going on, and we can find out what it is. We can find out what is real and what is not. There is a *confluence of evidence* from all our senses, unaided and enhanced by scientific investigations, that verify that indeed the world of medium-sized dry goods exist approximately just as we experience it; it is 'real'.

But how do we define that word more carefully? First, we have to understand how our values affect our senses—they really are very much different things. When we see a chocolate cake, it is not yummy, it is just a chocolate cake—okay, maybe a bad example, since a chocolate cake is inherently yummy. Okay, take a sunny, warm day in Halifax—hard to find, and treasured. A lovely, wonderful, beautiful day! But really, the day does not have the characteristic of being beautiful when sunny and warm and ugly when cold and wet. The day can be warm, cold, sunny or rainy, but it is our own mind that imposes upon it some judgment of beauty or

lack. The day has no such thing. But the day has those other characteristics, and many more. So first we must distinguish our value-impositions and judgments from what is really in the object of our senses. Once we do that, we can start to look deeper at essences or their lack.

As suggested, what is meant when we say things do not exist is that they are not permanent, independent, nor unitary, the three characteristics of essential, inherent nature. There are many rational Madhyamaka arguments designed to show how nothing with those characteristics exist. I find many of those arguments contrary to contemporary science, although the conclusions may still be true, but discussing that would take us beyond the scope of this short essay, and now I get to plug my book: (see Paul, 2016). The relevant Cliff note on my finding is that those rational Madhyamaka arguments cannot warrant a belief that is contrary to empirical verification. If their conclusions are contrary, then all they warrant is that those are not good rational arguments. Thus, for example, when Zeno (in his paradox of the arrow) and Nagarjuna (in Chapter 2 of the MMK<sup>2</sup>) argue that the arrow is not moving, they are only saying that there is no good explanation of motion, not that there is no motion. For to deny motion would be both absurdly contrary to experience and also to invite attendance as the main course at a tiger's dinner party.<sup>3</sup>

For now, let's simply take 'ultimate existence' or 'true existence' to indicate those three characteristics. To say that nothing ultimately exists therefore means that nothing with those characteristics exist. However, we know that things exist. So, how do they exist? My answer is that everything exists relationally. This is codependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*). This conclusion is not (necessarily) contrary to contemporary science. Therefore, when we hear or read such statements, e.g. "The notion of space indicates the ultimate nonexistence of things and therefore emptiness", I think it important to immediately unpack this statement to allow meaning by a simple substitution of 'nonexistence' by 'relational existence', or 'relationality': "The notion of space indicates the ultimate relationality of things and therefore emptiness".

Now we have a statement that suggests space as a metaphor for emptiness indicating no obstacles, thus allowing all interactions to occur. In the case of people and minds (going to our last begged question) it means that we have nothing to defend that is 'me'—immovable, permanent, essential, stubbornly defended Popeye style: I yam what I yam and that's all that I yam'. Hence, we can relate with awareness and compassion interactively with whoever and whatever arises. This, I believe, is the proper understanding of emptiness, and one that cuts through the confusion that I perceive around that concept.

## **Bibliography**

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<sup>2</sup> See previous footnote.

<sup>3</sup> See Shimony's tongue in cheek essay in Salmon (1970), also described in Paul (2017).