THE FULLNESS OF EMPTINESS

It’s the stuff of legend – and of metaphysics.
Visiting the city outside the palace, a prince named Siddhartha is shaken by harsh scenes. At his birth the king’s advisers noted auspicious signs on his body and predicted he would grow to be either an empire-builder or a spiritual master. Preferring the former, the king surrounded his son with pleasures in a Xanadu in which doubts about his life’s course would be kept out. Now seeing a sick man, an old man, and a funeral, Siddhartha realizes that life and its pleasures are fleeting. The sight of a serene monk prompts him to set out on a search for a way to end misery.

After trying yogic and ascetic practices without fruit, Siddhartha resolves to sit in meditation until he has figured it out, do or die. Fortunately for us, he does, becoming the Buddha, “the One Who Has Awakened.”

The Buddha first enunciates his insights in a talk given to former fellow ascetics, called the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (in Pali, the ancient Indian language likely spoken by the Buddha himself), or “Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Law” (as in laws of nature, of how life works). Here we hear Four Noble Truths. The First Noble Truth notes the fact that life, though it has its times of enjoyment and success, is beset by setbacks, pitfalls, and losses. The Second Noble Truth identifies the cause of suffering. This is our seeking after and wanting to hold on to passing things. Indeed, often the more we have, the more we want. But take heart! The Third Noble Truth affirms that there is a way out of suffering. Pain, hardship, and loss may be inevitable, but suffering is optional. The way to transcend suffering, and the blueprint for Buddhist practice, is, according to the Fourth Noble Truth, cultivation of a proper perspective and ethical awareness. The outcome is Nirvana, an “extinction,” more fully a blowing out of the flame of passion that burns us.

An ancient collection of sayings attributed to the Buddha, the Dhammapada (Pali), or “The Path to Virtue,” characterizes the Buddhist teachings by three marks (meant to distinguish early Buddhism from Brahmanism; see its Chapter 20, “The Way”). The first of these is dukkha, stress or suffering, that in life things don’t necessarily go as we wish, the center cannot hold, we experience dis-ease. The second mark, explaining the one before as the Second Noble Truth elaborates the First, is the concept of impermanence, anicca: nothing stands still; everything we love we will lose. The third mark of Buddhist teaching relates to the second: our own selves change. We, too, are impermanent. We are no-selves, anatman.

Whence then do we come?

Everything in the universe comes into existence as the result of a concurrence of efficient causes and shaping conditions. Everything changes its form or passes away when the chain of causation changes. A person is born through the cause of parentage. One’s body is nourished by food. The quantity and quality of the food are conditions that mightily affect the body’s appearance and health. The mind is molded by teaching and experience. We grow, learn, labor, achieve, sometimes fail, age, and die. We seem to ourselves to be a continuity; in fact, we are always in flux, with no fixed essence.

We are bound in a universal network of causation, physically and even socially. Psychologists have observed how the same person may behave differently in different situations. Rigidly holding to a limited set of behavior patterns may even be detrimental to our emotional and social well-being. We may not be quite like Michael Keaton’s character Riggan Thomson who only seems real when he is acting, and finally is absorbed into the persona of his greatest role, the
Birdman, in the 2014 film of that name. But we may be like the gems at the nodes of the fabled fishnet of Indra, each jewel reflecting the others.¹

Thich Nhat Hanh (from whose book we get the title of our program series, “Living Buddha, Living Christ”) calls this connectedness “InterBeing.” The classic Buddhist term for it is Sunyata, “emptiness.” This does not mean that everything is nothing, but that everything relates to everything else. Nothing is independent and self-consisting. And all is continually changing. The upshot is that the universe is full of potential, of possibilities, of opportunities. Metaphysics matters.

In what ways is emptiness empty as we experience it? How is Nirvana an extinction, a kind of emptiness?

What is annihilated when we perceive and live emptiness and Nirvana is clinging and attachment. The enlightened mind still operates, is aware, observes, weighs actions, makes decisions. We accept the good things that come our way; Buddhists are not killjoys. But the enlightened mind does not label things as “I yearn for this,” “I reject that.”

The eleventh-century Tibetan yogi Milarepa (1052 - c. 1135 CE), from whose poetry we read, tells, from his spiritual seeking, how, laying aside discriminations and conventions, we may move past preconceptions and conditioned feelings that can drive us and confound our freedom of thought and action. We go beyond hope and fear, beyond dread of death and (as Milarepa believed) rebirth, and beyond doctrines and creeds.

For spiritual practice can itself become a rut, an ego-trap. The Tang Dynasty Chinese Chan (Zen) master Linji Yixuan (his name is commonly spelled “Lin-chi” in English language books; d. 866 CE) tells us he learned the scriptures and Buddhist philosophy and followed the strictures of monasticism,² and found them palliatives, medicines that mask but do not cure the sickness of life. The best practice, he concludes, is conscious, mindful, but un-self-conscious performance of ordinary life. Put on your clothes, eat your rice. Today’s processional hymn, “Bless Now, O God, the Journey,” says that Christ will meet the pilgrim on the road. Lin-chi advises that if we meet the Buddha, to move forward the thing to do is kill the Buddha.³

Our responsive reading, the Maha Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra (Sanskrit), or “Great Heart of Wisdom Scripture,” is a meditation on emptiness. Closely associated with Zen mind-culture, this text is also included in the liturgies of several Buddhist sects. Many Buddhists chant it from memory in Chinese or Japanese. Laypeople write it in formal Chinese calligraphy as an act of devotion.

Here the Buddha speaks to his disciple Shariputra about how the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara⁴ achieved Enlightenment. He did it by recognizing that all the forms, the phenomena, we see around us are empty, having no independent, self-consisting existence. Even suffering, old age, and death are passing, illusory. There is, then, no spiritual path to tread, no end to reach, no distinct “extinction” or Nirvana, for emptiness is itself Nirvana. Living this wisdom as does he, we can pass beyond distress to the shore of peace: this is the meaning of the mantra, Gate gate paragate parasamgate.

In getting to the heart of the Buddhist view of the cosmos and life and Enlightenment, the Heart Sutra is almost subversive in its verdict on practice and piety. Not that we abandon our spiritual practices or truly “Do nothing,” in the words of Lin-chi. Study, chanting, meditation have
their uses. They are *upaya*, “skillful means,” to bring us to understanding. But we know the goal is empty, as practices are – as we are.

If we are empty, no-self, we should not use ourselves, our egos, our wants, as our only reason for being. I am reminded of a cartoon. It is the Dalai Lama’s birthday. He unwraps a gift box. The box has no contents. The Dalai Lama says, “Just what I always wanted – nothing.”

No-self or emptiness of self does not mean we don’t really exist, but that our true identity is to move beyond individual concerns alone to see ourselves as part of the interrelated unity of all beings. We can be like the Buddhist who goes to the hot dog vendor at Wrigley Field and says, “Make me one with everything.”

We are one with each other in the fellowship of spiritual practicers. We each seek to develop our personal practice, but there is strength to be drawn from the instruction and encouragement we receive from others. We, in turn, humbly and skillfully tender others our insights. As Buddhists say, we rely not only on self-power, but on other-power as well. That is why the Three Treasures in Buddhism are the Buddha, our founding teacher; the Dharma, the teaching; and the Sangha, the spiritual community.

Beyond the Sangha, we serve any in need. But to do this effectively we must lay aside preconceived notions and expectations of result or reward. I think of the Empty Bell, a sanctuary for Christian meditation in Northampton, Massachusetts, that is also active in interfaith encounter. Its name comes from the idea that a bell that is full cannot sound. The bell must be hollow, empty, to ring out.

Impermanence – no-self – emptiness means anything is possible. It means we can choose to remake ourselves. We learn from the past, but need not be defined or circumscribed by it. In Zen’s interpretation of the Indian concept of multiple lifetimes, of many incarnations of one being, we can fashion ourselves anew, begin a fresh life, in each present moment. Emptiness, impermanence, which to the clinging mind causes suffering, to the awakened mind is the very means of liberation. Samsara, our day-by-day world of toil and turmoil, is Nirvana, the realm of release.

If we empty ourselves of self, we are unshackled to become the best selves we can be. Space and time open up as we receive completely what the universe has to offer, and give back without attachment or reservation. We can live in ease, in trust, dare we say, in faith?

May you so be filled and fulfilled with emptiness.

1From the third-century CE *Avatamsaka Sutra*, or “Flower-Garland Scripture.”

2In our reading selection this morning, Lin-chi references specifically the traditional three divisions of Buddhist writings: the *Vinaya*, a compendium of rules for monks and nuns; the *Sutras*, biographical accounts and sermons of the Buddha; and the *Abhidharma*, philosophical treatises.


4A bodhisattva is an enlightened being who remains active in the world to help others come to their own enlightenment. In Asian folk religion, bodhisattvas, paradoxically, grant boons to satisfy people’s worldly desires: safety, wealth, health, and long life. Avalokiteshvara, whose name in Sanskrit means “the One Who Hears the Sounds of the World,” in female form as Guan-yin (a
Chinese translation of the name), is the popular East Asian goddess of mercy who hears and answers the entreaties of her devotees.

Seen posted on a bulletin board some years ago at Saint John’s Unitarian Church, Cincinnati.

Thanks to Rev. Steve Van Kuiken of Lake Street Church for telling me about this center and the import of its name.

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