

Norman Fischer
When You Greet Me I Bow
Week Two: “Emptiness”
October 9, 2021



Hi everybody. Today, I want to talk about the emptiness teachings that are so important in Mahayana Buddhism and also in Zen. When I started practicing Zen, believe it or not, there were no Zen centers, Buddhist centers, or meditation places in the United States—at least, not that I knew of, being a small-town kid and not too cosmopolitan. I was not looking for meditation or Buddhism; I was on a philosophical quest. I needed to solve the question of death.

When I was a little boy, I grew up living with my grandmother and grandfather, and my grandfather was always sick. When I was seven years old, he passed away. My family always tried to keep this under wraps. My grandfather was in his bedroom all the time. He seldom appeared, and when he died, no one mentioned it. As a child, I didn't go to the funeral. Death was a hush-hush affair. But I guess it affected me. It seemed so important. But who knows? Maybe even if that hadn't happened, as a child, I would have been obsessed with death and the questions of why do we live and why do we die. It seemed so unfair, so unjust.

When I was old enough to think about these things in any kind of ordinary way, I was studying philosophy and religion. I was very excited to go to college. No one in my family had ever gone to college, and there was no intellectual life in my town. I studied all this stuff intensely, and eventually, through my different studies, I discovered the first books about Zen in English. I remember reading a book probably called *Zen Buddhism* by D. T. Suzuki. There was an introduction to the book by William Barrett, who was, at the time, a professor of philosophy at Columbia University. He was a specialist in existentialism, and I had been studying the existentialist thinkers, who were in vogue at that time.

I immediately took to D. T. Suzuki's description of Zen. The paradoxical teachings of Zen are all based on the emptiness teachings. I didn't know that at the time. Later on, through a series of accidents, I discovered that there was a place to study Zen in America in San Francisco, and I went there to study Zen.

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Every day, in all Zen temples all over the world, the Heart Sutra is chanted. The Heart Sutra is a one-page summary, in effect, of the emptiness teachings. I’m going to read to you from my book, *When You Greet Me I Bow*. The book is a combination of collected essays I had already written and contemporaneous notes about each essay. This is from “Notes on Emptiness.”

People think of the Buddhist emptiness teachings as being abstruse or scary. But to me, they are friendly and light as air. They say that life’s heaviness, and the suffering that naturally occurs because of that heaviness, is a pernicious and persistent illusion. Life isn’t heavy. We don’t need to suffer in the way we think we do.

It’s hard to accept this. Human beings seem to have a long-term love affair with personal suffering. As much as we complain about it and seek all sorts of remedies for it, we come back to our suffering again and again, because It seems so real to us and so important. We are like tragically codependent lovers who can stop coming back to a toxic relationship, no matter how many times it hurts us. I have heard of brain research showing that we’re hardwired to react much more strongly to drama and difficulty than to peace and easefulness, though we think we are trying to avoid the former and develop the latter.

I recently saw a Facebook post about Rwanda that may or may not be true, though it sounds true to me. The post said that in response to the trauma of the genocide that happened in Rwanda, people went outside to spend a lot of time in the sun. They also did a lot of communal singing and dancing. Then the Western therapists came to help. The therapists had them sit individually in small dim rooms and encouraged them to recount, again and again, in detail, the terrible things they had witnessed. The Rwandan people did not see this as a reasonable way to cope, so they sent the well-meaning therapists home. Maybe the people from Rwanda were in denial, I don’t know; certainly in our culture we would say they were in denial. But who knows? Now, don’t get me wrong. This is not to denigrate therapy. I know how much it helps, and I often ask people to go to therapy as part of their Zen practice. It’s not that I don’t see the virtue in the value of therapy. But my point is that the emptiness teachings don’t offer solutions to problems that we have to solve. They’re telling us that these problems are, to a great extent, illusions. This doesn’t deny that you can solve problems, and it



doesn't mean that our problems are trivial or unreal. But it does take the edge off our desperation, which makes a big difference.

The emptiness teachings are extensions of the teachings on impermanence, and impermanence is Buddha. Impermanence is love. Things don't last. They're constantly changing, appearing, disappearing. You could either freak out about this, or you could embrace it and realize that impermanence makes everything precious and everything beautiful.

I'm going to read another short piece from an essay in this section called “Beautiful Snowflakes.”

The logic of emptiness is wonderfully airtight. Like all simple truths, its clarity is immediately self-evident. We exist, and this means that there is no moment in which we can be separate and apart, torn from the fabric of reality: we are always connected to a reality in which we are embedded. There is no us without that. We're always connected to the past, to the future, to others, to objects, to air, to earth, to sky. Every thought, every emotion, every action, every moment of time has multiple causes and reverberations—tendrils of culture, history, hurt, and joy that stretch out mysteriously and endlessly.

This simple but very profound teaching is delightful. As a way of thinking and understanding, it is peerless, and you can't confute it because the emptiness teachings very explicitly say we are proposing nothing and we are denying nothing. There's no doctrine you must adhere to. Ordinary appearances remain valid as appearances, and there is no reality proposed beyond appearances other than the recognition that the appearances themselves are empty. Therefore, there's nothing to argue for or against, nothing you need to believe or not believe. In being empty, all things are free of argument, and they are lighter than air.

But it is the taste of emptiness in the body, spirit and emotions that has meant the most to me. Knowing that what happens is just what happens. My body, my thoughts, my emotions, my perceptions, desires, hopes, actions, words—that's my life, and I feel its cloud-like nature. That cloud is what I am: it is my freedom to soar, my connection to everything. I can float in that cloud as it forms and reforms in endless sky.

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This doesn't mean that I'm disconnected from life, living in some sort of nirvana of disassociation. It's the opposite: I know there's no way not to be connected. There's no place or person anywhere beyond my concern.

When I sit in meditation, I'm resting in emptiness. My breath comes in and out, and I know that I'm sharing that breath with every thing that is alive, everything that has lived, and everything that will live in a great rhythm that began this world of physical reality and will never cease even when the earth is gone. It's so beautiful in the pre-dawn hours to sit sharing this truth widely, knowing that this zero point underlies all my walking and talking and eating and thinking. All activity all day through is this.

They say that wisdom (the wisdom of emptiness) and compassion are like the two great wings of a bird. Holding both in balance against the wafting winds allows you to float, enjoying the day. But I think that the two wings are really one wing. When you really appreciate emptiness, the emptiness of all things, you know immediately that love is the only way and that everything is love and nothing but love. What could be more wonderful than that? All our problems, however serious they may be, all our joys, all our living and dying—it's just love.

That's what I wanted to tell you today. Emptiness means that all things are real. They exist, of course. But they don't exist in the way we think they do. For time to make sense, things have to appear and disappear simultaneously. It's impossible to understand, but it's the truth. And the second thing I wanted to emphasize is that emptiness, as Thich Nhat Hanh has so beautifully taught us, means connection. We do not exist exactly. We are not; we inter-are, as he says. There's only interbeing. No things could exist independently, and that's why emptiness is love, caring, and compassion.

Thank you very much for listening to my talk today. The next talk is going to be about the culture of Buddhism and the transmission of that culture across time and space. Thank you.