

Ethan Nichtern  
Week Three, *Overcoming Spiritual Bypassing*  
May 18, 2015  
“Recognize Emptiness, Experience Wonder”  
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So, welcome back everyone; this is our third session of the "Overcoming Spiritual Bypassing" series for *Tricycle Magazine*. I'm Ethan Nichtern. This time I want to take our discussion of ultimate and relative truth a little bit further. Again, as I mentioned last time, there are many different ways that we can think about and talk about emptiness. Sometimes people think that Buddhism is one philosophy, but actually if you look at the history of Buddhism there's all different philosophical systems that have grown up within different Buddhist practice systems and in different Buddhist traditions at different periods of time.

Different philosophical systems kind of, you could say, created the backbone of the practices, ethical teachings, philosophy, and psychological teachings and meditation practices that that tradition proposed. So when you're talking about emptiness you're not talking about just one thing. In general, you're talking about the idea that there's some notion of reality that we are holding on to. That reality itself actually lacks or is empty of. So that's a really interesting point is whenever we say phenomenon are empty of something, so like empty of independent existence like I talked about last time or you could also say phenomenon are empty of the concepts that we apply to them.

You know, like, for example, when you call something an apple, the apple doesn't know it's an apple. It doesn't have that label for itself. It is empty or it is without the label conceptually that we apply to it. Whenever you're calling something empty, you're acknowledging that it does exist as a process, as an entity in more relative and permanent terms. So that's an interesting thing is that emptiness is actually the study of phenomenon. It's not saying that phenomenon don't exist, and when we're trying to bypass our experience you could see if you go back to the examples, the hopefully humorous, but maybe resonant with our experience, examples that I read from *The Road Home* the last time.

You can see that there's always this sort of tendency and confusion in spiritual bypassing to say that phenomenon don't matter, but when you really look at how emptiness is established in any of these different Buddhist philosophies, it comes from really deeply looking at phenomenon, so it comes from, to use that example that may or may not be personal to you, of that envelope that has our credit card statement on it. Emptiness isn't saying that these are just numbers, it's saying "Let me really deeply look at this phenomenon that I have in the present moment." Let me really deeply look at the experience I have right now and see how I apply conceptual labels to that. But in order to understand emptiness we have to look deeply at phenomenon. We can't avoid phenomenon and call that emptiness. So I think that's an interesting distinction that emptiness is something that we understand more and more when we look deeply at an experience of our life.



It's not something that comes from saying that the experiences of our life don't matter. So in one of these ancient philosophical traditions they talk about, and I like this way of phrasing it that comes from a modern day Buddhist philosopher who wrote a book called *Contemplating Reality*, named Andy Carr, and he talks about one of these philosophical systems, looks at the difference between a specific perception versus a general concept. So here's an example of a specific perception. Here, I'll use my watch. You can see when I hold up the watch that there's an individual watch that I have here. This watch, actually, your eyes are relating to it. Your mind is holding it as an object right in the present moment. From the standpoint of this ancient philosophical system, which is sometimes in Sanskrit called *sautrantika*, they would say this watch actually exists because it's something we can perceive and we can really look at deeply in the present moment, but if I take the watch away, we say all watches are blank.

Let's say I'm mad because my specific watch just broke, and we do have a tendency to do this, and I say every watch I've ever owned is a piece of crap. Well, that's not really true, that's a generalization and that's a conceptual generalization based on probably an angry and kind of faulty memory, and so what they would say is that is a confused truth when we conceptually generalize. When we specifically perceive this watch we are seeing accurately according to this system. We're seeing directly the nature of reality if I'm talking about this watch in the present moment, but as soon as I start generalizing about every watch I've ever owned I'm really avoiding looking at reality in the present moment. I've really actually started to bypass the uncomfortable situation of the feelings that are arising in my being because my watch broke because I had to experience the sadness and disappointment of that experience.

It's similar, I think we notice this a lot in relationships, here's something you may say. Let's say you have a roommate or a flatmate or a housemate or a partner, you live with someone, you live with another human being, and let's say you go home tonight and there are dishes left in the sink and you don't think that those dirty dishes were your creation. You think they were from housemate's or your partner's forgetfulness or lack of decency or just distractedness. It's their fault, so your mind could say if it's looking at the present moment experience accurately, “Oh, right now there are dishes in the sink,” but we often notice a tendency to conceptualize and over-generalize. I don't know if you've ever been there, but you might confront your housemate or partner about the dishes in the sink and say, “You always leave your dishes in the sink, you always do this.”

From the standpoint of this ancient philosophical tradition, reality is empty of always. That is a false truth; that is a confused belief about reality. It's quite possible that you know somebody



who has a habit, a recurring habit of not doing dishes in a timely manner or some other form of distractedness, but it's impossible that it's an always statement. We can further start to see how these generalizations really start to create bias and subtle biases as well as more pronounced biases. I think oftentimes we progressive thinkers and contemporary thinkers and Buddhist thinkers, we can use the examples and talk about the examples of when generalizations create very gross or obvious biases.

Like one example would be racial profiling where an individual human being gets shot because somebody with a gun overly-generalized that they are part of a racial or ethnic or class-oriented group of people. So, that might be an example of kind of a gross generalization that leads to real harm, but we also do this subtly all the time, and sometimes we don't even notice how we are over-generalizing about our experience. To go back to the credit card example that we've been using, we just know it's bad news. I have a lot of friends who won't even open a statement because they just know it's a lot, it's bad, and I don't even want to look because it's a lot, and a lot means I'm in a big hole here and I'm kind of screwed. A lot is a generalization.

If we're going to be mindful, we should open that statement and know exactly what number is written on the page. That's what having a specific relationship to the present moment means, right? If we're going to be mindful with another human being, rather than saying, “Oh this seems like a gay person,” or “This seems like a straight person,” or “This is a Buddhist,” or “Oh, this is a Shambhala, but if Ethan's a Shambhala Buddhist, I know those people,” or “This person's a yogi, I know what yoga practitioners are like.” If we're going to be mindful, we need to really pay attention to the present moment, and that's often a very uncomfortable thing to actually step out of our generalization and say what's happening now, what's happening now. How do I relate to the individual experience or the individual human being that's in front of me now?

And so a lot of these teachings on relationships in the Mahayana tradition really hems on this notion of contemplating how we express ourselves, how we sort of relate our experience to another human being, how we speak truthfully, but also kindly, and I've really tried to make it a practice of noticing my tendency to over generalize and to really when I'm trying to state mindfully what I believe is happening in the present moment to speak specifically, so to say, “I think you left your dishes in the sink,” rather than, “You always leave your dishes in the sink.” By the way, in my household, it's quite often that I'm the one who left the dishes in the sink, so I'm definitely not claiming any dharmic superiority here, but to really speak specifically, and I think this specific sort of attention to what's happening now is one of the main keys to

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overcoming our tendency to avoid difficulty by just generalizing it, because usually the way this works is generalizations create an avoidance.

It creates a sense of if I already expect that I know what that experience is because I can generally categorize it as a concept then I don't have to do the difficult and sometimes very vulnerable work of actually staying present with it. If I know that what's on the credit card statement, to use that example, is bad and it's just bad news, I won't have to actually see how bad it is, and often when we see how bad it is, it's actually quite workable. At least we know what we're dealing with. So I think we really do need, and this is where my tradition talks a lot about bravery and fearlessness, which is why we use the example of a warrior, one who is brave, we need to be brave enough to really look individual moment by moment experience in the face, which is exactly what we're training for when we meditate.

When we meditate, whatever technique we're working with, but especially if we're working with a mindfulness of body or a mindfulness of thought technique, we're really trying to return our mind to the kind of investigation of what's happening now, “Okay I'm breathing. But, you know what? I've never breathed this breath before. What's happening now? Okay, I heard the sound from construction outside in New York City; they're always doing construction. This moment of sound is unique, it's specific.” They are not always doing construction, it's now, and it's that willingness to actually hear the somewhat annoying sound of construction that actually brings me back into this sort of nontranscendent space of appreciation, this space where I'm not bypassing experience and, as we'll talk about next time, this is really, I think, what allows us to become more skillful in the moment by moment human relationships we inhabit.

It's when we're willing to look specifically that we really get to know ourselves and others much better because we're not avoiding them within the vagaries of categorization. In the vagaries of categorization, I don't even know what the sounds of construction sound like anymore because I'm not really paying attention. I just say they're always doing construction. So this is what I would urge for you, and this might be, in my experiences is actually a really—this is a very pervasive experience, meaning it happens a lot, but just notice as you are in your life and maybe as you're meditating when thoughts arise or when you find yourself expressing something that is an overgeneralization, that is a statement of always, or all those people are this way or all those experiences are this way or this person always does that or I am always bad at meditating, and see if you cannot dismiss that thought, but see if there's a way to reframe it as a specific expression of what's happening now. “Right now there's construction and guess what? The construction just stopped, so it's not always happening. Now, there is silence.”

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So that's what I would urge for next time, because it's really when we can meet reality specifically that we start really moving into what I think the Buddhist path is meant to do in the 21st century world, which is prepare us for human relationships, for nontranscendent availability in our human relationships. So that's what we're going to talk about next time and we'll also do a brief meditation called Tonglen, which some of you may be already familiar with, sending and taking meditation, which is a specific meditation that bridges the gap between ultimate truth and relative expressions and cultivations of compassion. So thanks so much for watching and I'll see you next time for our fourth and final session together.