

THE THIRD DAY

Morning Talk: Emptiness and No-Self

THERE ARE MANY METHODS OF MEDITATION one may practice, but one practices true Buddhadharmā only in the light of correct views. Any method can transport our narrow sense of self to one that is unified with the universe. However, when guided by the correct views of Buddhism, we can go beyond this great self and unity toward no-self and liberation. The principles that should guide our practice are impermanence, emptiness, and no-self. By applying these guiding principles to our practice we can realize liberation. We have already talked about impermanence. This morning, we will talk about emptiness and no-self.

We said before that there is conceptual emptiness and experiential emptiness. Conceptual emptiness is the recognition and understanding that all things are impermanent and lacking in substantial identity. "Emptiness" does not truly convey the meaning of the Sanskrit **shunyata*, or the Chinese *kong*. People may be misled into thinking of it as a void. Emptiness can be understood as meaning "empty of" and "lacking." Empty of what? Empty of permanent, fixed, and substantial reality. Lacking what? Lacking attachment. Hence, the Buddhist sense of emptiness is not mere void but the absence of a self-nature.

All phenomena result from causes and conditions and are subject to change as causes and conditions change. Therefore, phenom-

ena are empty of enduring self-nature. Phenomena exist and coexist, but their nature is transient, lacking inherent, abiding, and unchanging reality. Thus, self-nature is intrinsically empty. Understanding that all things are empty of substantial reality and therefore impermanent, one will naturally not be attached to phenomena. This conceptual understanding of emptiness is basic Buddhadharmā.

Experiential emptiness can be contemplation of emptiness, or it can be actualization of emptiness. There are different ways to practice contemplation of emptiness. A direct method is to let go of the past, not project into the future, not fixate in the "space" between past and future, but maintain clarity and nonattachment of the present moment, free of wandering thoughts. As bodily sensations fade away and one is no longer influenced by the environment, the mind is clearly aware but there is neither method nor form. The mind will not "abide" anywhere.

You can practice to the point where the body-sense falls away and you are free of wandering thoughts. However, if you still feel the presence of the Chan Hall and your neighbors, then the environment still exists for you. If there is something for you to rely on or cling to, that is not contemplation. Since you are still aware of the environment, take it as your body just sitting. As the particulars of the environment fall away and it no longer exists for you, you will be able to enter into contemplation of emptiness.

While this is not actualized emptiness, it is important at this point in your practice. You will likely reach a point where your body-sense falls away, leaving the mind with nothing to attach to. People are so used to holding on to something that they may have problems maintaining this state. Do not become alarmed since contemplation of emptiness is precisely the absence of attachments. Just maintain that clarity. Perhaps you will think, "Where is my body, where am I, what should I do?" If you stir up such thoughts, surely there will be something for you to attach to. But in fact, just

sitting is the most direct method for contemplating emptiness. When you are just sitting, you are focused on the sensation of yourself sitting. But really there is not much sensation anyway, since it is only a general sense of your body that you are aware of, with little or no sensation of the particulars. As your mind becomes calmer and steadier, and your approach is very relaxed and reposed, your body-sense will eventually diminish. At this point you have gained an entry to the practice: the "silence" is the mind free from thoughts of past, present, and future, and the "illumination" is the mind very clear and free of attachments.

CONTEMPLATING EMPTINESS

Contemplation of emptiness is also called "contemplation of the *Middle Way," a later term that was applied to this early practice. The Middle Way neither asserts nor denies the existence of phenomena, since either position would express attachment. This is the genuine way to contemplate emptiness. To begin the contemplation, you rely on immediate experience. For example, beginning with just sitting or any other method, you contemplate that which manifests before you in its immediacy, in the present moment. Stay with that completely, whether sitting, walking, or eating, until you are beyond clinging and being conditioned by the past or the future. When you can experience this manifested realm while letting it go, and when you can maintain this openness and clarity of mind, that is contemplating emptiness. At this point, there is no object of your awareness, nothing that can be relied upon, not even the present. But it is not yet truly actualized emptiness, since you are still relying on this level of bare awareness itself to contemplate emptiness.

In that case, what is actualized emptiness? In his writings on *Silent Illumination* (See parts two and three), Master Hongzhi described actualized emptiness as wide and far-reaching with ever-

present luminosity. Because there is no subject (the self), while the illumination is present, you perceive objects (phenomena) as they really are. At the point of enlightenment you do not experience the production and extinction of vexations, because there is no self-reference. This is the silent aspect—the quiescent extinction of phenomena to enter a noumenal state, unknowable to the senses, of things-as-they-are. This is illumination. Independent of any observer, things exist in and of themselves. For that reason you will not be entangled in the causes and conditions of the external environment, nor will you experience vexation.

What I have said up to now is by way of introducing three basic principles of *Buddhadharma*. I began with impermanence, then talked of emptiness. In terms of emptiness, I have talked about the conceptual understanding of emptiness; then we discussed experiential emptiness as contemplating emptiness and as actualized emptiness.

However, it is more important to be fully grounded in practice without being too concerned about actualizing emptiness. Begin with just sitting, without dwelling on the past or projecting into the future. Be aware of just enough of the body to know that you are sitting there. Strive to gain a sense of the total body just sitting there, as a general understanding and awareness. You will gradually reach a point where the body is no burden either in its totality or its particulars. Your whole-body sensation starts to become formless and fades as your mind becomes more calm and stable. When you reach that point naturally, without relying on the past or future or clinging to manifestations, you will be contemplating emptiness.

If the environment still exists for you, take the environment as your body until environment and body become as one. At this point, do not concern yourself with attaining emptiness, as it will come naturally. You will understand that it cannot be deliberated through words and analogies, nor can it be conceived as existent or

nonexistent. Words cannot describe actualized emptiness—it is simply inconceivable. It is like me pointing to the moon. All you can see now is my finger. Eventually, you will see the moon itself.

Evening Talk: Be Completely in the Present

At the first stage of just sitting, you know very clearly that you are sitting there. You sense your whole body sitting there, and you also sense certain parts of your body. You may have sensations that are obvious as well as others you are not aware of. Nevertheless, you are very clear about sitting there. This clarity is illumination. What about being distracted by sensations like pain, soreness, or itchiness? If you don't respond to them, this is silence. This is just sitting, the beginning stage of Silent Illumination practice. Some may think, all right, I'm itchy but I'm not going to scratch. But if you have a strong urge to scratch, you are already scratching. It is the same with leg pains. "My leg hurts, but I'm not going to move it. Don't react; don't react." That is already responding to the pain. And since you have responded, just scratch the itch, straighten the leg and get it over with. Then go back to just sitting.

To contemplate emptiness while just sitting, be completely in the present. When you are completely in the present moment, your body-sense will gradually fall away; there is no past or present to attach to, and eventually the present will also fall away. Where should your mind rest? The mind should just rest in itself in this clear, open awareness, naked of all thought. This is contemplating emptiness.

If the body-sense falls away but you are still aware of the environment, take it as your body sitting there in its totality. Eventually the particulars will merge and the environment will no longer be a burden. This is another way to enter contemplating emptiness. There is no need to hold on to anything, so release your grasping mind and just be. Nevertheless, this is still not a genuine experience

of emptiness. When you let go of the past, present, and future, what is left? You have placed your grasping mind not on the external environment or your body but on awareness itself, moment after moment. This bare sense of awareness is the continuing present and is very subtle, but the "I" is still there. If even this falls away, that will be actualizing emptiness; that will be enlightenment.

Today someone asked me if it was possible to reach enlightenment through contemplating emptiness. My answer was no, contemplating emptiness cannot lead you to enlightenment. In fact, no-method can lead you to enlightenment. By using a practice method you can settle the mind and be at ease without afflictions. Any method can settle the mind in the present moment, but with Silent Illumination you can be relieved of even the present moment. Just take this attitude: don't worry about the past or the future, and let go of the present too. Just stay in awareness. Chan is called the "gateless gate" because it has no door to enlightenment. The methods fool you into thinking, "Aha, there's a door. Let's find the key." People will look for the key, the right method that will get them enlightened. They search for the door to enlightenment, and not finding it, they may give up. In fact there is no door. But according to each person's practice and karmic disposition or virtuous roots, suddenly he or she may gain entry and become enlightened. In the process of searching, one just walks through the gateless gate.

If there really is a method that will lead to enlightenment, then Ananda, one of the Buddha's most beloved disciples, would have been enlightened during the Buddha's lifetime. Why did Ananda not receive a key to enlightenment from the Buddha? In fact, the Buddha did give Ananda a key, but he did not realize it. After the Buddha entered **parinirvana*, Ananda sought help from Mahakashyapa, the Buddha's Dharma heir, who spurned Ananda's request. When Ananda finally realized that there was nothing outside himself that could lead him to enlightenment, he dropped all seeking and became enlightened.

I am sorry to say that none of the Chan methods I teach will lead you to enlightenment! So, do you think coming to retreat is a waste of time? It is hard enough to get enlightened when you attend retreats, not to mention when you don't. Nevertheless, contemplating emptiness is good training to let go of past, present, and future, and to experience Silent Illumination without relying on anything else. I urge you to also contemplate emptiness in your daily life. Recognize that you are not yet enlightened, that you still have attachments. Be patient, tell yourself, "I am not yet enlightened, but I will practice diligently without expectations." If you do this, you will eventually be enlightened. And like Master Hanshan Dejing (1546–1623), you will suddenly recognize that your nostrils point downward. In other words, you will learn that the possibility of enlightenment was there all along.

THE FOURTH DAY

Dawn Talk: Correct Views and Practice

A PRACTITIONER SHOULD give equal weight to having the correct views and to practicing—the two go hand in hand. If the method is not guided by correct views, the outcome will be different from what the Chan masters taught. Someone holding a non-Buddhist view cannot gain Buddhist enlightenment, because whatever view they are guided by, it is not the Buddhist view. Therefore, the guiding view is very important, perhaps more important than the method. It is already very difficult to practice, but to hold the correct view is even more difficult. When Shakyamuni Buddha outlined the *Noble Eightfold Path, he named Right View as the very first. When you can accept and hold the correct view, you will have already overcome the obstruction of afflictive views. As a guiding principle, one can just accept the Buddha's words, but clear understanding is also necessary because one cannot truly accept what one does not understand. This means replacing your own prior views with the correct Buddhist view. When the correct view is actualized in an experience of emptiness, this is called "seeing your self-nature" (Chin., *kaiwu*, J. **kensho*), which is the beginning of enlightenment. In that moment of realization, erroneous views are completely dropped and you gain a thorough understanding of the correct Buddhist view.

Practice is like sailing a ship to a distant port: you must know

Also by Chan Master Sheng Yen

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