Wisdom Academy

Emptiness: A Practical Course for Meditators

Lesson 1 Reading: Introduction, Chapters 1 & 2

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EMPTINESS

A PRACTICAL GUIDE *for* MEDITATORS

GUY ARMSTRONG

Foreword by JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

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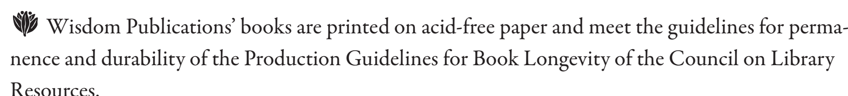
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To the teachers who kindly pointed me toward emptiness:
Joseph Goldstein, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, Christopher Titmuss,
and of course Gotama Buddha

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You should train yourselves thus: "When those discourses spoken by the Tathāgata that are deep, deep in meaning, supramundane, dealing with emptiness, are being recited, we will be eager to listen to them, will lend an ear to them, will apply our minds to understand them; and we will think those teachings should be studied and mastered." Thus should you train yourselves.

—The Buddha, Samyutta Nikāya 20:7

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INTRODUCTION

When emptiness is possible, everything is possible.
Were emptiness impossible, nothing would be possible.
—Nāgārjuna[1]

EMPTINESS IS AN ODD TERM for the central philosophy of a world religion. It certainly lacks the emotional appeal of Hinduism's bliss and devotion, for instance, or Christianity's love and charity. It is not a word designed to attract newcomers. More than just austere, it sounds a little off-putting. Who would gravitate to a way of life based on what sounds like nothingness?

In fact, the insights pointed to by emptiness are deeply liberating and bring great happiness. They transform how we understand ourselves and life in profound ways. Many of those who have practiced the Buddha's teaching on emptiness regard it as the greatest gift he offered the world. Nonetheless, it is not an easy subject to approach.

When I first became interested in the concept of emptiness in Buddhism, I read a hefty volume with a respectable pedigree that defined emptiness as "the lack of inherent self-existence." I didn't doubt the author, but that definition didn't mean much to me at the time. Other works couch emptiness in terms of dependent origination, which is also intellectually challenging. The fact that so many books have been written about emptiness points to both the richness and the complexity of the subject.

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Mingyur Rinpoche is a bright young Tibetan lama who, not too long ago, returned from a four-year personal retreat wandering the Himalayas. On his first visit to California in 1998, I had a chance to visit with him and show him around Marin County. As we drove I tried to strike up a conversation. "How do you find the West?" I asked. "Square and clean," was his reply. "Do you think Tibetans are happier than Westerners?" "Yes." End of conversation.

We reached our destination at the top of Mount Tamalpais and were walking along the trail around the summit, an asphalt track about six feet wide, when I thought I'd try again. "What is the difference between the Dzogchen view and the Madhyamaka view?" I asked, referring to two schools in Tibet that are considered to have different understandings of the nature of reality.

"Ah!" he said, now interested. "To understand that, you have to understand that there are eighteen different kinds of emptiness!" He sat down on the path right where we were and talked animatedly about the two views, concluding by saying something to the effect that the Madhyamikas think that the Dzogchenpas believe that something exists that doesn't actually exist, but that actually the Dzogchenpas don't believe that. Or something like that. The eighteen different kinds of emptiness went by quickly, but in any case it was a delight to listen to the young rinpoche.

I wondered at first if our word *emptiness* was a weak translation of some lofty ideal that had many rich overtones in the original ancient dialect, but that turned out not to be the case. In Pali, the Indian language in which the earliest teachings of the Buddha are preserved, the root word is *suñña.* (Please see the glossary for the pronunciation of non-English terms.) The Sanskrit is *shūnya.* Both words literally mean "empty." A line of advice frequently given by the Buddha to his disciples was, "There are these roots of trees, there are these empty huts. Meditate now, lest you regret it later." The word for "empty" here is *suñña.* As in English, it becomes a noun by adding a suffix: *suññatā* (Skt: *shūnyatā*), giving us "emptiness," the quality of being empty.

Over many years the word *emptiness* has taken on a number of meanings in Buddhism. The quality of something being empty is perhaps the simplest meaning. It is helpful to remember that when a noun is derived from an adjective, as *emptiness* is derived from *empty*, it doesn't mean that the noun refers to something that exists independently as an object on its own. It only means the noun is

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denoting the quality pointed to by that adjective. Just as it is not possible to find wetness apart from something that is wet, we don't expect to find emptiness as a thing that exists on its own. We could also talk about the roundness of a snow globe or of a pregnant woman's belly, but we are only saying that the objects are round. Emptiness here just means the quality of something being empty, like a jar, a desert, or the sky. With this meaning, *emptiness* functions, in a certain way, more like an adjective.

What might be understood as empty and what is it empty of? Let us begin by asking what it means to be a human being. Most people imagine that individual human experience revolves around a self, a notion that appears in our language through the terms *I*, *me*, *my*, and *mine*. Prior to careful investigation, we assume that the term *I* refers to an entity that can be found. The Buddha, however, discerned that our human experience is empty of a self. This is the liberating teaching of *not-self*. In this example, emptiness is more or less synonymous with the absence of a "self." This was one of the early meanings of emptiness in Buddhism.

Later Buddhist schools used the term *emptiness* to emphasize the lack of substance in the world. Just as twentieth-century quantum physicists exposed the lack of solidity in matter, the Buddha and his followers perceived this directly through meditation nearly 2,500 years earlier. This lack of substance is pointed to in the earliest Buddhist teachings and was explored more fully in succeeding centuries.

Another early usage of the word *emptiness* refers to a refined meditative state in which perception is greatly simplified. In a usual moment of experience, the many objects we perceive—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, and images—lead to thoughts and feelings about them. We hear a person's voice and imagine she is talking about us. We see a treasured possession and dwell on how it came to us. When perception is simplified so that we simply notice, for example, sound or sight, we are able to be present in a balanced and peaceful way. The full development of this approach was described by the Buddha as "abiding in emptiness."

A more colloquial use of the word *emptiness* evolved that points to the quality of mind when we are in touch with the present moment and not preoccupied with wants, needs, or issues of past or future. This mind is said to be empty in that it is not filled with extraneous thinking. Such a mind is attuned to the present

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with openness and receptivity. An empty mind moves easily to joy and contentment and moves slowly to reactive emotions like fear and anger. We might understand this as a less refined, everyday example of "abiding in emptiness."

There is a common misunderstanding about emptiness that I would like to dispel as we begin. Emptiness does *not* mean vacancy, nothingness, or the absence of conscious experience. As we've seen, emptiness is a property or characteristic of things that appear in the world. It is found within our human, conscious experience. There is a subtle meditative state called "the base of nothingness," which denotes an absence of sense contact. It is a significant achievement in concentration, but it does not bear in a central way on the meaning of *emptiness* as presented here. For the purposes of this book, emptiness is primarily understood as a property of things that appear in our world. Understanding emptiness brings freedom to our experience as we live consciously in the world.

Notwithstanding these definitions of emptiness or the eighteen kinds that Mingyur Rinpoche pointed to, we might say, simply, that emptiness means that the things of this world, including me, are not truly solid or substantial. In the beginning we are mostly unaware of the solidity we attribute to our self and the rest of the world, so even this description requires investigation. In fact all the definitions of emptiness have broad implications, because they go against fundamental assumptions we have of ourselves and the world, assumptions so pervasive and unexamined that we hardly know they are assumptions at all. Here is a brief summation of some of these implications.

We hold on tightly to things in an attempt to find security, but because the world is always in flux, this effort is ultimately unsuccessful. The thing we've clung to changes, and the clinging to what no longer is becomes a source of frustration and insecurity. Clearly seeing the fact of impermanence undermines our tendency to hold on, because we recognize that things will inevitably change. As we get older, for example, if we continue to wish that our bodies would stay as they were when we were twenty, we will suffer with every new wrinkle and pound. When we understand that change is inherent in the nature of the physical body, we can be much more graceful in accepting the aging process.

Seeing emptiness acknowledges this and takes it a step further. We also see that there was nothing solid to hold on to in the first place. It is not actually

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possible to cling to reality, because change is so rapid and universal that a graspable *thing* cannot be found anywhere. All that we can cling to is the memory of something fleeting. We understand, for example, that aging is going on in our bodies even at the cellular level. If cells are constantly dying and being recreated, how can our skin be expected to be constant for even one year? Moreover, within most cells, rapid chemical interactions are constant, as mitochondria burn the nutrients delivered to them. These bodily processes cannot be stopped or frozen even for a second.

When we see that this is true in every facet of life, it changes us deeply. We become less bound to the past and able to live more in the present. The heart can let go of what it has tried to store up. This shift comes as a great relief. We feel lighter, freer, and happier.

We explore emptiness not to construct another ideology but to bring greater freedom and contentment into our lives. The aim of all the Buddha's teachings is to convey a path out of suffering in all its many forms and into the greatest possible freedom, which he called nibbāna. The Buddhist path is different for each person, but there is a common trajectory for most of us, a series of steps in the seeing of emptiness and an accompanying series of releases. It is these insights and the resultant freedom that I do my best to describe in this book.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

One could talk about emptiness in a way that is highly philosophical and analytical. Instead, this book aims to be introductory and practical in nature, inviting you to discover the truth of emptiness in your direct experience. I offer pragmatic approaches that I have found helpful for myself and for students I've worked with in thirty years of teaching Buddhist meditation.

The book is divided into four major parts: Self, Phenomena, Awareness, and Compassion. Each part explores a key area of the implications of emptiness. Those familiar with the history of Buddhism may recognize that the first three sections parallel the evolution of Buddhist thought in India.

Buddhism began with Gotama Buddha's awakening and first teachings (ca. 445 B.C.E.) and the formation of the original Sangha (community of

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practitioners). After the Buddha's death (ca. 400 B.C.E.) some philosophical disagreements emerged, and over the next few hundred years, the Sangha splintered into about eighteen schools, including the modern tradition we know as Theravada, "the way of the elders." I will refer to these eighteen as the schools of Early Buddhism. Despite their differences, the eighteen schools all agreed on the central teachings of the historical Buddha, which emphasized the emptiness of our conditioned notion of self.

The Mahayana ("great vehicle") schools emerged around 100 B.C.E.–250 C.E. based primarily on the Perfection of Wisdom texts (Skt: *Prajñāpāramitā Sutras*) and the works of a teacher named Nāgārjuna. The teachings of these schools emphasized the emptiness of all phenomena, that is, the emptiness of objects as well as of self.

The Yogācāra ("practice of yoga") school, a branch of the Mahayana founded about 350 C.E., looked closely into the nature of awareness itself and found that it too was characterized by emptiness. This understanding became the basis for many later schools of meditation.

The first three sections of the book correspond to the emphases of those three schools. The fourth section of the book, Compassion, is relevant for all Buddhist schools—and indeed to anyone looking to live a life guided by kindness and wisdom.

SUPPORTIVE TOOLS AND PRACTICES

The Buddha's teachings are called the Dharma, a term that means "truth" or "law" or "the way things are." Traditionally there are three avenues to learning the Dharma based on what activity the understanding springs from.[2] These three avenues generally have differing degrees of power in their ability to transform us.

1. *Understanding from hearing.* This learning comes from hearing someone talk about the way things are or, in the modern day, reading about it. This gives us new information and leads to a certain kind of conceptual knowledge, but its effect is usually limited.
2. *Understanding from reflection.* We deliberately consider and think about the new information to see how it might apply to our own life and expe-

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rience. We are still in the thinking realm, but we're reflecting under our own guidance in a way that feels new and direct. We might say that the first two avenues fall under the approach of rational inquiry.

3. *Understanding from meditative insight.* This way of learning occurs through the arising of an intuition that reveals a new way of seeing the world. While meditative insight will eventually express itself in words, it first emerges as a flash of pure seeing. Insight is essentially nonconceptual and has the greatest power to transform us. The primary style of meditation taught in classical Buddhism is called insight meditation (Pali: *vipassanā*) because of its emphasis on this third kind of understanding. Meditative insight can't be willed, ordered, forced, or commanded. It blazes forth when the conditions are right. An essential part of conditions being right is that we have previously seeded the ground with the two avenues of rational inquiry: hearing (or reading) and reflection. Meditation then adds the qualities of stillness and presence, which lead to fresh and creative ways of understanding. When the time is right, insight arises as this third kind of learning.

In a public talk a few years ago the Dalai Lama explained succinctly how these three avenues work together. He quoted an old Tibetan master talking about his own practice: "When I meditate, I bring to bear my study and critical reflection. When I study, I bring to bear my meditation and critical reflection. When I reflect, I bring to bear my study and meditation."[3]

We need all three avenues of learning to fully understand the truth of emptiness. This book can itself be a source for study, and I will also recommend other readings. In these pages you will find some reflections to carry out on your own. You will probably form your own ideas and questions to consider further. Reflection will greatly strengthen your confidence in your understanding and lead onward to insight.

Some of the explorations in the book will be most accessible to those who already have a Buddhist meditation practice. We encourage you to take up a meditation practice, if you haven't already, that will foster the kind of intuitive realizations that can most deeply free the heart and mind. Simple meditation

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exercises suitable for new meditators are included in this book, but because this is not primarily a meditation guide, we recommend that you find either a teacher who can provide detailed guidance or a book specifically about meditation practice.[4]

The inquiry into emptiness is not a one-day or one-week adventure. Most of us find that new understandings keep coming over a lifetime of study, reflection, and meditation. With them comes an ever-growing sense of freedom and ease in life, as well as more heartfelt connections with other people, creatures, and physical nature. The entire process, which we might describe as the awakening of wisdom, is possible only because of the vast, inherent richness of your heart and mind. If you sincerely want to understand, and you pose the right questions in a sustained way, the mind with its profound intuitive powers will respond with wisdom and insight. The keys that unlock the mysteries are observation, inquiry, and reflection.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Among the eighteen schools of Early Buddhism, each had its own canon of texts that included monastic rules, discourses of the Buddha, and a psychological schema. From all these schools only one entire canon has survived to the present day, that of the Theravada School. It has come down to us in Pali, a language of ancient India similar to Sanskrit. Much of the Pali Canon is purported to be the authentic words of Gotama Buddha from almost 2,500 years ago. While this is impossible to verify, recent work comparing these texts with fragments of other canons found in China and Tibet support the view that the Pali Canon does include the essential components of the Buddha's teachings from his lifetime.

In this book I will use the texts of the Pali Canon for quotations attributed to the Buddha. When a phrase appears here such as, "the Buddha said," it means that such a statement can be found in the Pali Canon as representing the words of Gotama Buddha. While errors have certainly crept into these texts over the years, I take the discourses (Pali: *suttas*) of the Pali Canon to be as complete and reliable a guide to the teachings of the historical Buddha as can be found today.

In Mahayana texts like the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutras*, statements are often presented as having been spoken by the Buddha himself during his lifetime. Many of

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these statements represent deep spiritual wisdom. As to their authorship, however, I follow Edward Conze, a scholar who translated many of these texts into English, in his assertion that the Mahayana texts were created by other authors hundreds of years after the Buddha's death.[5] The consensus among Western scholars agrees with this assessment. Conze suggests that the words were put into the mouth of the Buddha to give the later texts the same authenticity as the original discourses.

Similarly, it is clear that Nāgārjuna's works and the key texts of the Yogacarins were created long after the Buddha's time. This does not make them any less powerful or diminish their value for the sincere practitioner, but it can be helpful to recall that they are not the actual words of Gotama Buddha.

A NOTE ON TERMS

The ancient languages of Pali and Sanskrit were very precise in their descriptions of the human mind and meditative experience, much more so than English is today. Western culture unfortunately has little understanding of many of the states that the Buddha was pointing to. We can expect that over decades some of the ancient words will migrate into English, as they have into modern Thai and Burmese—though we are not there yet (notwithstanding a perfume named Samsara, and the like).

Good translations are helping us read more accurately in English what the Buddha meant. I will generally try to use a single English word throughout this work to translate a single Pali word so that we can develop a more precise English vocabulary for these teachings. Unfortunately, sometimes the full meaning of a Pali word cannot be adequately conveyed by one English word. For example, the Pali term *dukkha* is usually translated as "suffering," but it actually indicates the entire range of the uncomfortable experiences in life, from intense suffering to pervasive insecurity to mild discontent. Other English words bring in connotations that are not present in the original Pali term and so can be misleading for English speakers. For example, "concentration" is the generally accepted translation of the Pali *samādhi.* However, concentration connotes an exclusive focus of attention, a sense that is not present in *samādhi.* An English speaker who wishes to understand the Dharma will still benefit from learning some of the classical terms.

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When a Pali word is used in this book, it will generally be in italics and will also appear in the glossary, where its pronunciation will be indicated. As for diacritical marks, which are key to the correct spelling for scholars, we will follow a middle path. For Pali or Sanskrit words that have passed into or are passing into English (e.g., Theravada, Mahayana, nirvana, samsara, and the word Pali itself), we will not use diacritical marks at all or treat them in italics. For words that are not widely used in English, we will preserve the diacritical marks (such as those that indicate a long vowel) that an English speaker will need to pronounce the word in a more or less acceptable manner, but otherwise phoneticize those words. For example, while the word for "emptiness" in Sanskrit with full diacritical marks is *śūnyatā*, for ease of pronunciation by a general reader, we will be rendering this as *shūnyatā*.

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PART I:

SELF

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1. THE WORLD IS EMPTY OF SELF

All yogas have only one aim: to save you from the calamity of separate existence.

—Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj[1]

WE LIVE IN AN AGE when concern for the self has risen to unprecedented levels. Families and communities are disintegrating, and with them go our nearest opportunities for generosity and service. The social contract to care for one another is under attack. The planet's environmental health is in crisis, while many remain oblivious or indifferent. Materialism is widely honored and rampant. Compromise is becoming a distant memory. In our culture now it sometimes seems that all that matters is *me: my* wants, pleasures, needs, opinions, and rights.

Excessive self-concern is, of course, not a new phenomenon. It has always been a destructive aspect of human nature. But social structures that once limited its expression are now breaking down, and we are left more and more to face the naked manifestation of this force. There was once a time when no one would have dared to say, "Greed is good," but now this expression is seen as little more than the frank admission of a common ethic.

Buddhism views excessive self-centeredness as the primary source of suffering, causing us to act in ways that harm ourselves and others, from infidelity and dishonesty to murder, terrorism, and war. The habit of self-concern creates pain in our closest relationships, gives rise to greed and hatred, and torments our

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hearts on a daily basis. There is no way to a true and lasting happiness without seeing into and eventually overcoming this force.

Fortunately Buddhism doesn't stop with the diagnosis. It offers a radical therapy for overcoming self-centeredness by questioning the very idea of a self. Throughout his teaching career, the Buddha returned to this point again and again. He said that in our obsession with self, we are like a barking dog tied to a post, running endlessly and fruitlessly around a single point,[2] yet we fundamentally misunderstand what it is. "In whatever way they conceive of self," he said, "the fact is ever other than that."[3]

THE LANGUAGE OF SELF AND NOT-SELF

As we've seen, the self is designated by words like *I*, *me*, and *mine*. This sense of self, or "I," seems unmistakably real, yet when we look for it directly, it is elusive. William James said, "When I search for my self, all I can find is a funny feeling at the back of my throat." The Dalai Lama said that when something seems clear to us but we can't find it, that is a sure sign of delusion. The self is not real in the ways we take it to be.

The Buddha was asked by his cousin and longtime attendant, Ānanda, "Venerable sir, it is said, 'Empty is the world, empty is the world.' In what way is it said, 'Empty is the world'?" The Buddha replied, "It is, Ānanda, because it is empty of self and of what belongs to self that it is said, 'Empty is the world.'"[4]

The world is empty of self. Sometimes this is explained as the Buddhist teaching of no-self. Yet it seems inarguable that someone has written these words and someone else is reading them! What is the meaning of the puzzling assertion of no-self? This is the question I'll try to answer in part 1 of this book. To the extent that we can intuit the absence of a self, as opposed to merely believing in it as a doctrine, we will understand a key aspect of emptiness. The two understandings—(1) the absence of self and (2) emptiness—are mostly used synonymously in this part of the book.

THE CONVENTIONS OF "I" AND "MINE"

As we explore the assertion that the world is empty of self, we need to distinguish between our everyday use of the words *I* and *mine* and the reality these words

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point to. The Buddha did not tell us never to say these words in any type of conversation. He said that a wise person can use these terms without being confused by them.[5] Our speech would sound absurd if we did not use the words *I* or *mine* out of a fear of being "dharmically incorrect." We'd have to resort to cumbersome expressions like "the speaker" or "the one standing here."

It's fine to say "I" and "mine," "you" and "yours," as long you understand that these terms are merely *conventions* of our social contract that identify where an activity is taking place or where ownership is assigned. With these useful conventions, you end up in your home and I end up in mine, after driving our respective cars. Life would be too chaotic without these conventions and the language we use to communicate about them.

Similarly, there is a conventional manner in which we can talk about an individual having a unique way of being that we might call an identity. We all have characteristics of height, weight, age, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and personality that allow us to describe ourselves in meaningful and authentic ways. The teaching on the absence of self does not take away or disregard these useful forms of description. But it does point to the need not to stop at the conventional description and take it as an ultimate truth—because doing *that* will lead to suffering.

The problem arises when we take conventional language to mean more than it can. By repeating "I" and "mine," and describing ourselves as being a certain way, we've come to believe that something real is being pointed to that isn't actually there. Buddhist practice helps us free ourselves from this delusion and see things as they actually are. In the process we find a more expansive and generous way to relate with the world.

NO-SELF VERSUS NOT-SELF

There is a debate in the Western Buddhist world on how to translate this key teaching on the absence of self. Some teachers call it "no-self" and others call it "not-self." The Pali term is *anattā* and could be translated either way: *attā* means "self" and the prefix *an-* is a negation. Those who translate it as "no-self" say this is a pithy expression that directly points to the insight that the world is empty of self, that no self can found anywhere. Those who call it "not-self" are fond of saying (and as far as I know, this is true) that there is no passage in the Pali Canon in

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which the Buddha categorically states, "There is no self." They quote a particular discourse in which the Buddha is asked by a wanderer from another sect whether there is a self or not, and he refuses to answer. The reason he later gives for his silence is tied to a subtle philosophical principle in vogue in his day.[6]

I think these points are interesting but not terribly significant. Philosophically, saying "the world is empty of self" is a clear statement of absence, and so I believe the translation "no-self" is a valid interpretation. However, the most compelling argument for using "not-self," I find, is that it shifts the discussion from a philosophical position ("There is no self") to a point-by-point investigation of one's direct experience ("The body is not the self"). A philosophical position can be taken as something we *ought* to believe, and if we don't we're not good Buddhists.

Buddhism is not particularly concerned with beliefs, because beliefs don't liberate us. The Buddha was interested in having us develop *understanding* to lead us out of suffering. When we consider statements such as "The body is not self" or "Anger is not self," we have specific objects to contrast with what we take a true self to be. That is why I find the "not-self" language more inviting and provocative, and I will use this translation most of the time in this book.

Our misunderstandings around the nature of the self are reflected in and also conditioned by the way we use language. In this section we'll look at some of the ways we use the words *I* and *my* in English that don't make logical sense. We'll also explore what is considered real in Buddhism so that we have a reliable foundation for investigation, and we'll see how the sense of self gets constructed again and again out of these foundational building blocks. We will see why the Buddha said that we don't need to see these basic realities as self and what our experience might be if we stop doing that. When we know for ourselves the emptiness of self that the Buddha pointed to, we will be in accord with the old Sri Lankan monk who said, with great amusement, "No self, no problem!"

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MEDITATION

Mindfulness of Breathing

Here I'll begin to introduce some simple meditation exercises that can help clarify key points in the text. Most of these meditations involve mindfulness, an important factor of mind that we might define simply as "knowing what your experience is in the present moment." This first exercise focuses on the experience of breathing.

- Sit quietly on a cushion on the floor or in a chair. Keep your back fairly straight but not rigid, so you feel alert but also relaxed. Let your hands rest in your lap or on your thighs. Gently close your eyes.
- Feel your body in this sitting posture. You know that this is your experience of sitting in the present moment, so we can call this "mindfulness of body posture."
- As you feel your body, pay attention to what happens when you breathe in. Just feel the body as an in-breath enters. Now pay attention to what happens when you breathe out. Feel the body as the out-breath exits.
- Continue to feel the body as you notice each in-breath and out-breath. If your attention wanders off into a train of thoughts, don't worry. When you notice that has happened, gently return the attention to connect with the next in-breath or out-breath. Continue paying full attention to breathing as you feel it in the body. This is called "mindfulness of breathing."

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2. THE FAULTY LOGIC OF "I"

Of course the bird we see and hear exists. It exists, but what I mean by that may not be exactly what you mean.
—Shunryu Suzuki Roshi[1]

WESTERN CULTURE DOES NOT GENERALLY QUESTION the substantial nature of the self. The self seems self-evident (as it were) and inarguable. We may find it absurd when someone suggests that perhaps the self doesn't exist: there are trees, there are birds, there are people, and there is me.

Buddhism is not disputing the basic reality of the existence of different objects or beings—but there is more subtlety to this question than we may at first realize. In fact significant problems arise if we take at face value the existence of "I" as suggested by our culture. Let us explore what we mean when we use this word "I."

SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Suppose I were to ask, "How old are you?" You might answer promptly, "I'm thirty-seven," or whatever. Then let me ask, "What color are your eyes?" And again the answer comes easily, "My eyes are blue," or brown or green. The answers

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arise naturally and immediately. But if we look at each of these responses in detail, we discover something odd. If you say, "I'm thirty-seven," you really mean this body is thirty-seven years old—don't you? You don't necessarily mean that *all* of you is thirty-seven. Are your thoughts that old? What is the age of the mood you're feeling right now? Perhaps it came on today, an hour ago. So when we say, "I'm thirty-seven," "I" is taken to be the body. This tendency to equate oneself with an aspect of our experience is called *identification*—in this case, identification with the body.

When you say, "My eyes are blue," however, the "I" is not the body ("eyes") but the owner of the body: "*my* eyes." "I" as owner is a different form of identification. Feel into the sense of "I" as the owner of the body—"it's *my* body"—and inquire, "Where is that owner located?" Are you able to pin down an owner? Is the owner inside the body or outside? Is the owner all the space inside? These are some of the questions the Buddha pointed to 2,500 years ago. Which are you really—the body or something separate that somehow *owns* the body? These are two different things. Is it possible to be both?

We can find the same confusion around the mind. If you say, "I am happy," you are equating "I" with happiness, an emotion or a state or mind. A minute later you might talk about "my joys and my sorrows." Now you are the *owner* of the emotions. These are two more ways to self-identify. Are you the emotion or are you its owner? Can you be both?

"I" as the Observer

There is one more place the "I" lays claim. "I" is sometimes felt as the observer of the whole show. It can feel as though there's a small entity located inside the head, a couple inches behind the eyes. This being is the center of everything; it watches sights, hears sounds, smells odors, thinks thoughts, and feels emotions. This "I" seems to stay the same over time through many changing experiences. It appears to accomplish this by remaining separate from what is observed. It feels as though this observing "I" was with us in grade school, is here today, and will be a couple of inches behind our eyes until we die.

The identification here as the observer is, in reality, taking as "I" the activity of consciousness, the faculty of mind that receives or knows the sense impressions

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that arise moment after moment. Consciousness may feel like a permanent, stable aspect of our experience, but the Buddha said that consciousness arises and passes with each new sense impression and that we can verify this through meditative insight. We will return to this type of identification later—because it is perhaps the most difficult to see through. For now we'll simply note it as another way the "I" is equated with an aspect of experience.

We've now found five meanings for "I"—as the body, the owner of the body, the emotions, the owner of the emotions, and the observer. Which are you, really? You might reply, "I'm all of them. I'm my body, and it belongs to me. I'm my thoughts and feelings, and they belong to me. And I'm something apart from them, watching it all. I'm everything you've said all wrapped up in one."

QUESTIONING THE LOGIC OF "I"

We've now arrived at the conventional understanding of the self. In this culture, when we talk about what "I" am, it's this whole package. This is what we mean by "a person," and it's what we mean by "I." We've now arrived at a place where, upon looking closely, the absurdity of conventional understanding becomes apparent.

How many selves are you? Are you a self as the organ of your liver and also as the emotion of compassion? Are these the same "I" or different? Are you a self as your political view and also as the consciousness that hears a birdcall? Are these the same "I" or different? Are you a self who is changing every moment, as the body does with its pulses, respiration, and digestion; or are you an ongoing self who is the stable observer of the changes? Are these the same "I" or different?

When we look into these questions what we find are little more than collisions of unexamined language habits around "I" and "my." One is reminded of the famous comment by Ludwig Wittgenstein that the self is only a shadow cast by grammar. We have found these terms useful to distinguish one person from another in social dialogue and to establish social guidelines around possessions. But by not examining the terms closely, we have stretched the idea of self so far that it does not actually make sense.

Just consider the sense we have that the body is me. I cross paths now and then with a friend at the gym who is also a meditator. One day he told me that he'd

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recently had an outpatient procedure at a clinic. He was fascinated by being able to watch his heart on an ultrasound monitor during the procedure and surprised to see his own heart beating in a perfect, steady rhythm.

At that moment he had one of those realizations that sometimes come in times of great openness. He said he looked at that beating heart and knew for a fact, "That's not me!" He'd had nothing to do with creating it or making it act like that. It was a part of the body simply doing its own work according to its own ways. The feeling he described on seeing this was a combination of excitement and relief.

It is not a problem to adopt a social convention that says that we will use the terms *I* and *my* when we speak to one another in order to distinguish where an experience is taking place. But it becomes problematic when we are lulled into the belief that these terms actually refer to some real thing that exists.

THE FLAWED ASSUMPTIONS OF "I"

The belief in a self carries with it four flawed assumptions that we have adopted unconsciously: continuity, independence, control, and singleness.

CONTINUITY

Continuity means that we take the self to be an entity that continues over time in some unchanging way through a multitude of changing experiences. We imagine the "I" wakes up each morning, eats breakfast, goes to work, comes home, eats dinner, and then goes to sleep. This "I" was born from our mother's womb and at some point will die from illness or injury.

Because we cherish the self, we find it frightening to consider that it will end at death. The anxiety we feel around our mortality is sometimes mild (if we are young and healthy) and sometimes acute (if we are old or ill—or Woody Allen). The assumption of continuity necessarily leads to the fear of death and thus involves some degree of suffering.

Of course there is some kind of continuity when a being exists over a span of years, but when we look closely, can we find a single thing that endures? In our belief, the self should be that thing, but locating such an entity is not easy.

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INDEPENDENCE

When I referred earlier to the sense of "I" as observer, I noted that the observer seems to be lodged behind the eyes and feels separate from experiences that are being observed: "I" am seeing, "I" am hearing, and so on. This may begin when we are young as simply the way English grammar works, but when we tell stories like this for twenty or thirty years, it comes to represent reality for us and not just a convention of language.

My first year meditating, I practiced a kind of insight meditation based on a body scan. In this approach one systematically moves the attention through every area of the body, focusing for a while on each part and simply feeling without judgment the sensations (or absence of sensations) that are present. I sometimes engaged in this practice for ten hours a day several weeks at a time. I had ample time to investigate the details of every nook and cranny of the body, and I never found an observer anywhere. Later meditations showed that there is no such center to our experience. This "observer" is only a concept, an assumption not borne out in reality. There is no "I" standing apart from our experiences.

J. Krishnamurti, the Indian philosopher and sage of the last century, was fond of saying, "The observer *is* the observed."[2] This can be interpreted in a few ways, not all of which are accurate, so for our purposes I might paraphrase it as, "The observer does not exist apart from the observed," or "While observing, the observer is made up in part by that which is observed." When we are observing anger, we are, at least in part, that anger. When we are observing love, we are that love. What is in our experience is in us. We do not stand apart from the experience.

When we think that what we really are is separate from what we experience, we create an auxiliary entity that doesn't exist. We have to keep creating this "I" over and over to sustain the fiction of its reality. This requires constant effort that prevents the heart and mind from ever fully relaxing. Moreover, the identification with this entity that stands apart leads to a detached relationship with our experience that prevents us from feeling fully alive.

CONTROL

We believe that the self can exert a considerable degree of control over at least this body and mind, and we sometimes wish that the control could extend to

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others and the world. Many of the tantrums of a two-year-old are due to the frustration of this attempt to control the world. Our tantrums as adults are not so different.

Sometimes illness is felt as a great insult, because we see that we are not able to control even our own body. The Buddha was once challenged in debate by Saccaka, a follower of Jainism who vowed to refute the teaching of not-self. In reply the Buddha asked Saccaka if his body (here called material form) was under his control: "When you say thus: 'Material form is my self,' do you exercise any such power over that material form as to say, 'Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus?'"[3] When Saccaka would not answer, so the story goes, a spirit appeared above him holding a thunderbolt, ready to split the Jain's head in two. Saccaka finally agreed that he could not control his body and so could not actually regard it as his self. His head was spared.

We can discover this same lack of control any time we feel embarrassed about our body. How often have we felt ashamed that we aren't better looking or taller or finer boned or more athletic? Yet all these characteristics are beyond our choice or control. If we take responsibility for them, we have fallen under the false belief of controllability. This element of control also explains why for many people, the hardest place to accept the truth of not-self is in the area of volition or decision making. Surely if a decision is being made, we reason, there must be a decider, a controlling agent or entity.

SINGLENESS

The fourth assumption behind the notion of a self is that it is a single, unitary thing—not plural or manifold. Generally speaking, each of us feels that we are one person, not two or three or more. Those who believe otherwise are quickly medicated. Moreover, we believe this one person is unique in the world, perhaps in the whole universe.

When we take ourselves to be the body, the owner of the body, the mind, the owner of the mind, and the observer, we are trying to be many different things: eye, consciousness, liver, compassion, toenail, thoughts, anger. This might be all right if we feel that we are constantly coming and going, as all these things do by their nature of impermanence. But we combine the belief in singleness with the assumption of continuity. Is there an object that meets both these criteria?

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APPLYING THE ASSUMPTIONS TO OUR EXPERIENCE

Earlier I described six ways we can identify with parts of our experience: as the body, owner of the body, emotions, owner of the emotions, observer, or all of these. We must now ask if these six ways align with the four assumptions about the self: continuity, independence, control, and singleness. If a way of identification with our experience is not in alignment with an assumption about the self, then we cannot accept it as a valid definition of the self.

The body might appear to continue, but close inspection reveals constant change, aging, and eventual death and decay. It lacks independence, as it is built from air, food, and water. It is clearly out of our control, as even Saccaka attested. And it is not a single thing but a collection of manifold, quite dissimilar parts.

Emotions have even less continuity than the body, often changing by the hour. They generally arise in response to the immediate situation or a memory, so they are not wholly independent phenomena. Most of us are vulnerable to fear, anger, and jealousy, and so cannot control our emotions. Many different emotions come and go, so there is no singleness here.

The owner of the body, the owner of the emotions, and the observer cannot be clearly found, thus violating the assumption of stable continuity. Nor is the supposed owner or observer able to exert the desired control of experience. The owner or observer may feel to be independent and single, but if they cannot be located, we have to conclude that there is no owner or observer there.

The self as the assemblage of all the aspects of body, mind, owner, and observer is the notion most of us carry, but it fails all the assumptions: the assemblage changes moment by moment, is dependent because it is affected by outside conditions, is not in our control, and is not unitary but many different things.

Through this analysis we see that all our usual ways of identifying—of defining the "I"—don't quite make sense. How is it then that we keep having such a firm sense that this "I" is real? To see how this happens, we can start by looking close to home, in our direct moment-to-moment experience of body and mind. This examination takes us into the territory of meditation, so we will continue with simple instructions on mindfulness of body sensations and emotions.

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MEDITATION

Mindfulness of Sensations

Begin by following the instructions in chapter 1 for mindfulness of breathing. Once you have connected to the experience of breathing in and out, then move your attention to notice other sensations in the body. For example, you might notice the touch of your palms against each other or your clothes, or the pressure where your buttocks rest on the chair or cushion, or some tension around the eyes or shoulders, or the beating of your heart in the chest.

Let the attention go wherever it is drawn in the body. When you notice a new sensation, just feel its physical nature in the body. It might be pulsing, tingling, vibrating, warm, cool, pressure, or lightness. It might be pleasant or uncomfortable. All of these are fine. Mindfulness knows the experience by feeling the sensation in the body, just as it is. You don't need to judge or change anything. Just know what it is you're experiencing.

Mindfulness of Emotions

As you're paying attention to the breath or to sensations, you might sometimes notice that you're feeling some mood or emotion. It could be sadness or anxiety, happiness or irritation, affection or dislike. When you notice a mood or an emotion, let the attention stay with that experience for a while. Allow yourself simply to feel that mood or emotion.

It is helpful to name the emotion you feel: anger, joy, contentment, and so on. You don't need to judge the mood or emotion or to change it. When you feel the emotion directly and know what you're feeling, this is mindfulness of emotions.